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A More Perfect Union

A THESIS

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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A More Perfect Union is a realistic novel set in contemporary Oklahoma City and follows Elijah McClure, a young poker pro who wishes to ask the First Daughter of Oklahoma, Kathryn Cook, to marry him the night her father gets elected president. Eli's plans of proposing to Kate are interrupted, however, due to the assassination of Kate's father. In order to take their mind off of his tragic death, Kate and Eli vacation in St. Thomas where Eli finds the courage to propose. Kate accepts, and Eli learns that Kate may have an addiction to painkillers. His suspicions turn out to be founded as Kate struggles with addiction, causing Eli to ill-advisedly decide to not burden Kate with his own troubles, namely that he has gambled away all his assets, leaving him with tens of thousands of dollars in debt. Both characters' degenerative psychological spirals continue until Kate calls off the wedding, Eli sleeps with another woman and pawns Kate's engagement ring, Kate seriously injures others in a drunken driving accident, and Eli, having come to believe that his troubles all began with Kate's father's assassination, decides to kill the President of the United States as retribution.

A More Perfect Union explores the pursuit of happiness in America. For many in their twenties, happiness has become increasingly defined by popular culture, reality TV, number of friends on Facebook, designer clothing, and other status-icon symbols. Eli is a character study of such a young person, his happiness dependent on instant gratification, and fame and fortune. Because of his narrow and selfish view of happiness, he is doomed to failure, becoming so obsessed with this idea of happiness that he suffers from delusions of grandeur by the end of the novel. In so doing, I hope to make my readers feel uneasy about their own selfish ideas of happiness and also to reinforce their more healthy views. In developing this theme, I was influenced most profoundly by David Foster Wallace, Hubert Selby Jr., Irvine Welsh, Yevgeny Zamyatin, José Saramago, George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley.

The thematic message of the difficulty of obtaining happiness is one that is universal, but the definition employed by Eli—making his professional mark in the world, becoming notable and desired and envied, and instant gratification by almost any means necessary—may be more relatable for a young man or woman in his or her twenties. Despite Eli's flaws and selfish actions, I believe this demographic will find an empathetic intimacy with Eli, one where my reader will be forced to reexamine and reassess what it means to be happy.

A More Perfect Union

By the time the general election watch party began, I was suffering from a severe case of sleep deprivation. That night was the first time Kate and I would reveal to her father, the governor of Oklahoma and Republican nominee for president, that we'd been dating for about a year behind his back—I'd wanted to tell him sooner, but Kate had refused, citing what my career as a professional poker player could mean for his campaign—and I hadn't been able to sleep for nearly 72 hours straight fearing his reaction. Compounding this fear, unbeknownst even to Kate, I had an engagement ring locked in my safe at home and planned to ask possibly the next President of the United States if I could have his blessing to marry his daughter. I'd faced countless frightening propositions being a professional gambler, having tens of thousands of dollars, my entire bankroll, on the line and out of my hands, down to the luck of the final card, yet this was the most frightening thing I would ever have to do. Bar none.

I was so tired I had to chug Red Bulls in order to stay awake. I was on my fifth in two hours and was so jumpy I flinched at people laughing or snaking their way through

the crowd or even if someone looked in my direction. Twice I'd almost caused a waiter to drop a tray of champagne because I hadn't seen him and nearly fell over because he'd startled me. I paced to keep from shaking, eyes locked on the projection screen and the eight-foot-tall Wolf Blitzer as he read off exit poll numbers. The younger demographic—eighteen to twenty-five with zero to some college education—overwhelmingly voted for the President.

Kate was making the rounds with her father, so I tried to stay to myself, but this proved difficult. More than five-hundred people attended, and they all roamed throughout the Skirvin Centennial Ballroom like lost children. Socialites with hair pinned up and oil and gas executives wearing ill-fitting, rented tuxedos. There was the campaign staff, about fifty-five in all. Legislators. Oklahoma Supreme Court Justices. Senators and lobbyists and governors. Anchormen and women conducting interviews. The catering staff carrying champagne, Secret Service, overpriced and nauseating perfume, roast beef, diamonds, an ice sculpture of Lady Liberty, a fifty-piece big band. The place practically swarmed with people.

This was the first time I'd seen Kate work a room at a political function. Since we'd kept our relationship a secret, I'd never been invited to one of these events before. I'd often heard, however, how she hated them, calling the people who attended parasites sucking her father dry. Yet she performed to perfection, the epitome of a smiling and young politician's daughter.

The sound tech turned up the election coverage volume. Blitzer held his finger in his ear, listening to his producer, as he stood in front of an electronic map of the United

States. He turned toward the camera. “CNN can now make the first predictions of the night. Virginia and South Carolina will be won by Republican Governor Cook, giving him twenty-one electoral votes. The President has won New Hampshire and Vermont which totals seven electoral votes.”

The ballroom erupted into cheers and hugs and toasts. These first results were a good sign, but it was too early to be celebrating. Anything could happen with presidential politics. The election probably wouldn't be decided until early in the morning; every poll conducted, even Kate's father's, had shown this would be a tight race. The last had shown him two points ahead with a margin of error of three percent. But it was a national poll, only good for the popular vote and didn't take into consideration the Electoral College. The Governor had strongholds in Texas and Pennsylvania, and the President in New York and California. If the Governor had any shot at all, he would have to take Florida and Ohio.

I continued pacing, drank the remainder of my Red Bull, dodged the groups of three or four here and there talking about what needs to be accomplished as soon as Cook gets into office, “eliminate capital gains taxes,” “take a harder stand against Tehran,” “Like Cook said, ‘find a Secretary of Defense with a trigger finger that works,’” and headed for the concession table, chomped a few cheese cubes, not that I was hungry, but I hadn't eaten a decent meal for days, grabbed some champagne, drank about half and poured some Red Bull into it. Tasted like a mimosa sort of. I had never been much of a drinker, but tonight I needed something, otherwise I would go crazy. Too much stress. Too much sugar. Too exhausted.

A hand gripped my shoulder, gave it a squeeze. Turning around, I found Governor Cook smiling at me. “Adam, right?” he said.

Kate stood next to him, smiling and willing me to say something with her widening eyes.

“Elijah actually.” I didn’t know what to do with my hands I was so nervous, so I placed them behind my back, which caused me to inadvertently spill a little of my drink. I could feel it dripping down the cuff of my pants. “Most people just call me Eli, though. But if you prefer Elijah, or even Adam I wouldn’t—”

“Eli’s fine,” he said. Kate looked like she might burst out laughing at any moment, and I felt as though I might puke. “I’ve seen you around the office here. You volunteer, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

He was an intimidating figure, the Governor. Large in stature, yet he had this gentleness in expression that endeared him to everyone. A dimpled chin that despite his fifty-seven years gave off the appearance of youthful vigor. Hair that he oftentimes neglected to cut and sprouted over the edge of his ears, like tiny roots spreading. Deep, cavernous grooves in his forehead that gave him a thoughtful air.

“I’m glad you could make it,” the Governor said. “And I really do appreciate all your hard work on the campaign, but I must admit, though; I’m a little surprised to see you here.”

“Sir?”

“Volunteers don’t usually—I mean this is an invitation only soirée as it were.”

“I—I,” I was waiting for Kate to jump in at any moment, explain that she’d invited me, to save me from this embarrassment, but she simply stood there, smiling as I squirmed. “I snuck in. Sorry. I could leave if—”

“No, no, no, that won’t be necessary.” The Governor chuckled. “I admire your honesty, but I think I will have a conversation with security. Excuse me for one moment?”

I nodded, and the Governor disappeared back into the crowd, leaving Kate by my side.

“You look like shit,” Kate said as she straightened my lapels and bowtie. “Like Ted Kennedy after a trip to Vegas. And this jacket,” she laughed, “the sleeves are like an inch too long.”

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“That! Leaving me for dead out there, Jesus.”

Kate laughed, covering her mouth, a habit formed because she was embarrassed of the dimpled chin she’d inherited from her father. “Oh come on; that was funny.”

“That certainly was not funny.”

She held her thumb and index finger a centimeter apart. “Maybe just a little?”

“I thought we were going to tell him tonight?”

“Relax,” she said. “We will. Just afterward, all right? When all of this nonsense is over.”

“Okay, whatever you think is best.”

“I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have—” Kate peered over my shoulder. “Oh God, please no.”

I looked behind me, and here came Donna England, the perky blond from Channel 5, the local NBC affiliate, heading our way with her signature red lipstick and microphone leading her to us like a tractor beam. We tried to slip away, but her cameraman flanked us.

“Kathryn Cook, how does the Governor view these early results?”

“You should ask him, Donna, not me. I must be going.”

“Please, I only have a few questions.”

“I’m just his daughter, Donna, you know that. Go find Barry. He’ll gladly give you a sound bite.”

“I would, believe me,” she said. “But I can’t break through the perimeter.” She motioned toward the Governor’s campaign manager in the middle of the ballroom. He was surrounded by reporters, TV cameras, and microphones.

“Fine,” Kate told Donna. “But just a couple.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” She motioned for the cameraman to start rolling, patted her pinned up hair, and said, “You there,” meaning me, “Get out of the shot.” When I moved, she faced the camera and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Kate. “Standing with me now is Kathryn Cook, the First Daughter of Oklahoma. I so appreciate you taking a few moments out of this momentous occasion to speak with us Ms. Cook, and I know our viewers do as well.”

“I wouldn’t dream of disappointing them, Donna. Or you for that matter. Not in a million years.”

Donna hesitated, sensing Kate was being sarcastic despite her tone seeming sincere. “Ms. Cook, your father has enjoyed some early victories. How do you see the election going from here?”

“I think it’s a long way from over, Donna. It’s been a tough, hard-fought campaign on both sides. All we can do now is sit back and let the voters decide.”

Now it was my turn to get amusement out of Kate squirm. Although she didn’t show it, I knew she hated every second of being in front of the camera. I didn’t quite understand her disdain myself. I would’ve loved to have been in her position. I mean, almost everyone in the world knew her name.

Kinsler, Kate’s image coach, stared at Kate from across the room, careening his head around like an ostrich, trying to see around random socialites and donors and all these other kiss-asses. He was an irritating man, tall and gaunt with sunken cheeks and oily hair, hired by the Governor because Kate had been seen as a liability by Barry. She had been known to enjoy a glass or two or three of beer, to talk, to laugh, to be, sometimes, cutthroat honest. She’d once been quoted as criticizing Democrats for taxing the pants off of small business owners and in the same breath damning Republicans for telling her what she can and can’t do to her own womb. I’d admired her for it, her brazenness, one of the reasons I’d been attracted to her. But, in terms of campaigning for the presidency, her personality, according to them, wasn’t ideal. So Kinsler taught Kate etiquette, to enunciate with eloquence, to say the right thing, to give poignant, yet

adequately reserved interviews. He'd taught Kate to be a pageant girl, a model politician's daughter, to want world peace but have no idea how to achieve it. And Kate had endured it, had performed perfectly despite the fact she hated the idea of what she had become.

Kate finished her interview with Donna and turned to me. "So you never told me why you look like Teddy on a binger. You're going to meet my dad for the first time as my boyfriend, and you look hung over. Not a good first impression."

"I'm not hung over. I just haven't been sleeping well."

The giant Wolf Blitzer interrupted us. "Georgia and Alabama go for Cook, but the President wins Massachusetts, Maine, and Delaware. Florida is too close to call. Cook's lead is getting a little bit smaller, and if the President wins Florida, he would even take a slight lead over the Governor."

"Damn," Kate said.

"Don't worry," I said. "Your dad'll win Florida and Ohio, and Texas is in the bag. It's all over after that."

"I hope you're right."

"I am."

Behind Kate I saw Kinsler watching us as he pretended to be interested in some random socialite's banter. He didn't even try to hide the fact that he was staring at me and Kate. He knew about our relationship, the only person on the campaign who knew that I was aware of, because of a mishap while on a trip to Miami. I'd been there for a poker tournament for the WPT, and Kate had been there campaigning with her father.

She'd met me at the Delano hotel around one in the morning, when she thought she could slip away from her security detail, but they'd noticed her missing, called it in, and then her father started blowing up her cell phone. Of course, Secret Service being Secret Service, it didn't take them long to track her down, by what means I had no idea, and Kinsler had tagged along with them when they burst into my hotel room. Kinsler had never told Kate's father, for what reason he'd kept our secret, I had no idea.

Kate opened her yellow clutch and pulled out a keycard. "I know what might make you feel better."

I placed my hand on the keycard and pushed it back down to her clutch. "Are you crazy? Everyone would see us."

Kate chewed the inside of her mouth and sucked in her cheeks so her lips puckered, like she was pouting. I could smell her perfume, a subtle scent, jasmine and ginger, with a faint twist of strawberries. She bounced her head between her shoulders, glanced around the ballroom. Kinsler, standing not fifteen yards away, kept staring at us. The guests laughed and blew their blow outs and made toasts, dedicating the evening to our soon-to-be next president. Wolf Blitzer speculated different scenarios if the President won Ohio but the Governor won Florida, vice versa, how everything depended on those couple of states. Everyone was a little drunk, a little preoccupied, a little abuzz with the momentous occasion. I imagined the way Kate's body would feel next to mine, like cream between silk sheets, the thrill of secret sex in a strange hotel room. It'd been so long since we'd seen each other, been able to touch or kiss without someone seeing us.

She'd been traveling the country and campaigning, giving stump speeches and granting interviews, while I'd been left behind here.

“Okay,” I said. “We have to hurry, though”

Kate grabbed my wrist, and we hurried toward the exit, but Kinsler peeled himself away from the socialite and barred us from the door. “Now is not the time, Kate,”

Kinsler said.

“Kinsler,” Kate said, “I've wanted to tell you this for months now. Why don't you go fuck yourself?”

I couldn't believe it. Kinsler looked appalled, eyes bugged out of his head, as Kate pushed him out of the way, and we walked into the lobby at the Skirvin. The hotel remained unchanged since opening in 1911. Mahogany archways, white marble floors, ornate Persian rugs, red velvet drapes, gold tassels, buttoned lounge chairs and chaises. Over a hundred years had passed, and no one would have been able to tell if it wasn't for Kate clacking away on her Blackberry, texting a girlfriend back in Norman where she was a senior at the University of Oklahoma studying journalism and film, a fact which turned out to be a huge selling point to the public: You can't call the Governor an elitist, his own daughter goes to a state-funded, public university.

“This place is haunted, you know,” she said as she hit the elevator button.

“Hold on a second. You do realize you just told Kinsler to go fuck himself, right?”

Kate shrugged. Her bare shoulders gleamed underneath the dim lighting. “He's had it coming.”

“Your father will flip out.”

“Kinsler won’t say a word.” She put her cell phone back into her purse. “He likes his job too much to tell my father.”

“Good point.”

“You’re not listening to me.” Kate pushed my shoulder. “I said this place is haunted.”

“Uh-huh, I’m sure.”

She slapped my shoulder playfully. “I’m being serious. Mr. Skirvin knocked up a maid back during prohibition and locked her and the baby up in a room on the fourteenth floor and didn’t let them out for years. The maid went crazy and jumped from the window.” Kate pulled out a pocket mirror from her clutch and checked her make up. “She’s been haunting this place ever since.” The elevator doors opened, and we went inside. She hit fourteen, and I shot her a smirk. “Just kidding.” She hit twelve and smiled at me as she pulled a strand of loose hair from the corner of her glossed lips.

“What was the maid’s name?”

“Effie, but that’s not even the best part. Some men have said that they were sexually assaulted when they stayed here by a woman they could see through. They were raped by a ghost, ha!”

“I’m sure.”

“I swear! There’s even proof. In 1936 one of these guys ran out of here naked and screaming. There was a big write up in The Oklahoman about it. I’m thinking maybe I could make a film out of it.”

The doors opened, and we stepped out onto Kate's floor.

"You're so lying."

She put three fingers up in the air and covered her heart with her other hand.

"Scout's honor, Eli. Call me Honest Kate."

"I'd rather not."

"What? You don't think I'd look hot with a beard?"

We entered her room, a small one, probably rented with her own money, earned from a measly work-study stipend toiling graveyard shifts at the university library, rather than her father's, a strike of independence she daily craved. An unopened box of chocolate strawberries sat on a corner table, little baguettes and some sort of creamy white cheese next to it, and a bottle of cheap champagne chilled in an ice bucket on the kitchenette. She had been planning this reunion, to come and steal me away from the watch party after everyone was a little too tipsy to notice. Perhaps. Purple sweatpants lay in a chair in the corner, the comforter was bunched at the foot of the bed, pillows were strewn across the room, batteries separated from the TV remote, and the place reeked of burnt coffee from that morning. If I didn't know Kate the way I did, I would've thought there had been a fight, but Kate lived this way, like a slob, and, as far as I could tell, she enjoyed it. She refused to clean, refused to pick up, to organize, claiming she does her best work amidst clutter, a trait that unnerved her image coach, the dreaded Kinsler, to no end. But, if she had planned our rendezvous, I was a little hurt she hadn't at least let housekeeping straighten the bed and put down new linens. We hadn't seen each other in months; I thought that maybe she would've put forth a bit more effort.

Kate wrapped her arms around my neck and pushed her lips against mine. They tasted like ChapStick and menthol cigarettes, a sometimes nauseating combination. In the past, after her daytime photo ops and studying and classes ended, she would often find a little bar and unwind with a drink or two, to Kinsler's dismay, and come find me afterward, a little drunk and smelling like an ashtray, and I would ask her to brush her teeth before we had sex. But I didn't care at this point. We hadn't seen each other in so long. We moved toward the bed, and she untied my bowtie and took off my jacket and threw them on the floor as I fought with my belt buckle. I kicked my pants off, and she pulled off her dress and pushed me onto the bed and started to tug at my socks.

"Wait," I said.

"What?"

I went down on my hands and knees and put the batteries back in the remote and turned on the TV and surfed the channels until I found CNN. Wolf Blitzer and John King were showing the audience an interactive, digital map, zooming in to different counties in Florida, showing how Miami and the surrounding areas had been voting strongly for the President while the more rural and especially the panhandle had been voting for the Governor. It would be a tight race, seventy-five percent of returns had been counted, and the candidates were basically even at this point, separated by only a few thousand votes.

"You have to be kidding me," Kate said.

"What?"

"That is so not cool, Eli."

"I've started to get interested in this stuff, give me a break."

“No you’re not,” she said. “The only reason you volunteered was so you could meet me.”

She was right of course. I’d been heading to an underground poker club in Bricktown, my regular high stakes game in the city, when I’d seen her crossing the street and head into her father’s campaign headquarters. She’d looked so gorgeous, those freckles and her perfect, fair skin. It wasn’t love at first sight or anything stupid like that, but I knew I had to meet her, introduce myself, maybe ask her if she’d like to grab a cup of coffee. Never in a million years would I have guessed that she was the First Daughter of Oklahoma, but once I’d found out, volunteering had seemed like a good way to impress her. And although I’d been horribly mistaken, she’d actually laughed in my face when I divulged that tidbit of information, I’d stuck it out, stuffing letters until my tongue bled from licking envelopes, and the whole political thing started to grow on me a little bit. It was awe-inspiring in a way, to be that close to so much power and fame.

Kate exhaled out of her nose, folded her arms underneath her breasts. “Can you not wait fifteen minutes, Eli? Not even that. It’s been so long you probably won’t even last fifteen minutes. More like five. Or even three.” She smiled to show she was just joking around, although the little jab did bruise my ego somewhat, and ran her manicured fingernail around my nipple, causing the tiny, blond hairs to stand on end.

“Maybe we should just wait until after the results.”

She shook her head and glared at the ceiling, exasperated. “Absolutely not.” She scooted closer to me and dug her nose into my neck and softly kissed me. I could feel

myself starting to get aroused, so much so that I didn't even notice her grab the remote from my hand and turn off the television.

After we made love—I didn't last long exactly as Kate had guessed—I turned the television back on just as Wolf Blitzer placed a finger in his ear and turned away from the camera like he was listening to a producer. “We're getting word that Governor Cook has just won Florida.” Wolf Blitzer explained the wide lead the Governor had now, how that it was still possible for the President to retain his office, but the odds of a second-term were unlikely, his deficit almost insurmountable, and I felt my eyelids begin to droop.

“Wake up. We've got to get back down there or my dad will know something's up.” Kate already had her dress back on and stood in front of the mirror, pinning loose strands of her hair with bobby pins. She took out an orange prescription bottle and popped a small white pill into her mouth. “They called Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas for us while you were out,” she said. “We're only eight electoral votes away.”

“What's that?”

“We're only eight votes away.”

“No, what you just took.”

She shrugged. “Pain meds. Back's been acting up.”

I sat up, rubbed my eyes. My vision was blurry, head groggy. I felt disoriented and somewhat dizzy. “How long was I asleep?”

“An hour maybe.”

“What time is it?”

“Just get dressed and let's go. This thing's almost over.”

I got dressed, and we left, and Kate pushed the button to wait for the elevator. I rubbed my hands together, my jaw ached, and my head pounded. I needed more sleep. Going back to bed sounded enticing, but Kate was right. We had to get back downstairs.

“Are you okay?” Kate asked. “Your hands are shaking.”

To keep from becoming dizzy, I counted the numbers when they lit up as the elevator car approached from the ground floor—1, 2, 3—and focused on steadying my fingers. As soon as I got back to the ballroom I planned to drink another Red Bull; I had to stay awake to speak with the Governor about me and his daughter, but the chime of the ascending elevator echoed like a church bell and the twisting patterned carpet slithered like earthworms after a spring thunderstorm. I felt like I was walking through an anesthesia induced daydream. “I’m fine. Only exhausted. I’m sorry about falling asleep earlier.”

“It’s okay. I understand. My dad can be an intimidating guy, but I promise you everything will go just fine. Maybe after tonight you’ll even be able to rest.” She rubbed my back. The elevator doors opened, and Kate pressed the lobby button. “Maybe you could make it up to me, though. Stay with me for a little while after tonight. We could lock ourselves in and sleep until noon and watch Seinfeld reruns.”

“What would your father think about that?”

“Would you let me worry about my dad? Besides, he’ll be too busy getting ready to move to D. C.”

The elevator doors closed, but the car didn’t move. Kate hit the button again.

“But you’re still his daughter. What kind of PR would he get if it gets out that his college-aged daughter is living with some random guy? A professional gambler at that.”

“You’re scared of him, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not scared.”

“So you just don’t want to then?”

“No, I want to—it’s just...no, I can.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Yes I’m sure.”

I reached out and grabbed her hand as the elevator lurched, and we moved up. Kate tapped the lobby button again; it remained illuminated, the others dark. The doors opened on the thirteenth floor, one of the few remaining thirteenth floors in the country, and I heard a housekeeping cart squeak down the hallway. Kate hit the lobby button again, the doors closed, and we moved up to the fourteenth floor.

“Okay,” Kate said. “This is starting to freak me out.”

“It’s probably just broken. Let’s take the stairs.” The stairs circled the elevator shaft, and Kate’s heels clicked against the wood floor as we hurried. We reached the thirteenth floor, turned the corner, heard the elevator chime, and saw the doors open. No one was there. It was just the empty elevator, just as we’d left it a floor above. Frightened now, Kate kicked off her heels, and we sprinted down to the twelfth floor where the elevators opened again. It was like the elevator was chasing us, trying to lure us back in, like perhaps Kate’s story about the ghost, Effie, was indeed true. Perhaps this place was haunted.

We kept sprinting down the spiraling staircase, and on every floor the elevators opened as we crossed in front to reveal no one standing inside, timing us perfectly no matter if we ran harder or slower, as if it was sentient. I wanted more than anything to get out of that elevator shaft, back to the ballroom, back to the hundreds of others so that I wasn't alone, wasn't just with Kate with this ghost chasing us. When we got down to the lobby Kate ran into a man, and she fell backward onto the floor. Dozens of people stared at us as if we were crazy.

“Are you okay?” the man asked. He wore a blue shirt and a name-tag that said “Robert” and a tool belt. He worked in maintenance.

“The elevator,” she said. “The elevator’s chasing us.”

“It’s what?” he asked.

“Chasing us, it’s chasing us.”

“It’s electrical, been on the fritz all day.”

“I’m telling you,” Kate said. “That wasn’t electrical. She was chasing us.”

“The elevator?”

“No, Effie!”

“Who?”

“The ghost, the ghost.”

Those in the lobby stared at us now with concern as I helped Kate back to her feet. Kate’s hair looked wild, thick strands curved up and drooped down like blonde candy canes.

“Let’s just go back to the party,” I whispered to Kate, and she grabbed my arm and nodded.

We composed ourselves as best we could and returned to the watch party. Everyone—guests and donors and advisors and the media—watched the projection screen as Wolf Blitzer listened to his earpiece and stared down at the ground. There was silence. No one moved, or spoke. I had never heard such silence before. It was resounding, so absolute, it almost seemed as if time had stood still. The band rested their instruments in their lap, the waiters had set their trays on white tablecloths, champagne flutes floated underneath half-opened lips. In the middle of the room stood the Governor, and as the doors slammed shut behind Kate and me, he turned to us and smiled. Kate grabbed my hand, caressed my finger with her thumb, the first time we’d ever shown any intimacy in front of her father. The Governor smiled even wider, waved us over, and while we approached Wolf announced that the Governor had won Ohio and Pennsylvania, “Jacob Cook is the next President of the United States.” The red, white, and blue balloons dropped from the ceiling and filled the room like a pixilated American flag. The crowd hugged and cheered and chanted the Governor’s name and the band played “Hail to the Chief.” I lost sight of the Governor amidst the cheering and hugging crowd as Kate and I made our way through the celebration to the Governor, punching balloons away from us and laughing. We forgot the ghost, and we were happy. We truly were. Our life was perfect for a few, glorious seconds. Then three shots rang out.

I knew they were gunshots right away. Kate released my hand, and she covered her terror-stricken face. She turned so pale; it was like I could see all the blood drain

from her face. I didn't know what to do, so I grabbed Kate's wrist and shoved our way through the panicked mob to get to the Governor. Once the balloons settled to the ground, we spotted him. He lay on the floor, a hole the size of a fist in his forehead. Dark blood cascaded out in bursts, timed with his heartbeat, and pooled around his head and shoulders. Kate released my hand and collapsed beside her father, cradled his head in her lap, and cried for him to wake up, please, daddy, wake up. But he wouldn't. Too much blood poured from where his forehead had exploded, and bits of brain lay next to his still smiling lips. Kate tried to put his face back together just as Jackie Kennedy had done with JFK fifty years before. She picked up skull fragments and pressed them against the bleeding wound like putting together a puzzle, pleading with her father to breathe again, please, breathe. But I knew he wouldn't. The Governor's wounds were mortal.

2

The Governor's funeral procession befitted a president. Tens of thousands of people from across the country flocked to Oklahoma City to follow the flag-draped coffin being carried to St. Paul's Cathedral. Downtown had been completely shut down. Businesses were closed. Restaurants empty. Office buildings dark. No music played. No cars honked. No one cheered in celebration like so many Americans had hoped, had anticipated would happen only a few days before when the Governor had won the election. Instead, the attendees heard muffled sobs and the roar of thousands of feet stepping in unison. If seen from above, I imagined the city would've looked like it had been flooded by a current of black ink.

Kate walked close behind her father's casket with her right arm wrapped around some young woman's elbow, a friend I hadn't met, instead of mine. Her steps were more confident than I'd anticipated. She was an orphan now. Her mother had died from cancer when she'd been a child. No extended family to speak of, no aunts or uncles, her

mother had been an only child, her father's brothers dead, grandparents all gone. I'd imagined she wouldn't have been able to participate in the march. After the assassination, once Secret Service and federal agents had begun conducting interviews, recreating the crime scene, launching their investigation, Kate had been in shock, unable to speak. I'd thought she would wait at the cathedral for the procession to come to her and then leave after the service to be alone. But here she was, marching alongside close friends, her father's advisors, members of the Governor's cabinet, and thousands of strangers. She didn't clutch a tissue. She didn't shed a tear that I could see. But she wouldn't look up. I couldn't really tell if she cried because I watched the march on television from my hotel room at the Skirvin.

Kate had asked me not to attend the funeral. Since her father's death we'd only spoken once in fact. Our conversation had occurred the day after the watch party. I stopped by her house early in the morning and found reporters and news vans and black sedans and Secret Service agents posted outside. The place was a madhouse. I approached security, and they asked Kate if she would like to see me, and they granted me access. It was the first time I'd ever been inside Kate's house. She appeared to be strung out—face pale and paunchy eyes—and I was surprised to find her alone.

“I don't think we should see each other for a little while,” she'd said.

“Wait, why? What'd I do?”

“Please. It's nothing you did—I just want to be alone right now. I can't handle us and everything else that's going on. Please, just understand.”

And I hadn't argued with her. She needed time and space to grieve, and I would give her that. I kept telling myself that we weren't over, that that's not what she meant, but I had my doubts. After our conversation I just came back here to the room I'd rented for the election night and hadn't left. I wasn't really sure why I came here instead of going back to my apartment. Perhaps it was a symptom of an extended period of shock, not wanting to change anything for fear of the consequences. But for whatever reason, I stayed put, charging the expensive room to my credit card, and hoping maybe Kate would call me and tell me she had changed her mind and that she wanted me to be with her. For the most part, though, I'd been unconscious, breathing the stale air over and over. When I had been awake I ordered room service and gorged on pâté and Cuban paninis and LaCroix sparkling water. I'd amassed an amazing collection of empty bottles now piled up in the corner. In the bathtub I had built my own interpretation of the Survivor Tree with a cardboard box and some Crayola markers I had the concierge bring up. I didn't really know why I did it, but I'd found the exercise soothing.

Someone knocked at my door.

"Go away," I yelled.

Another knock.

"I said to fuck off."

Another, louder this time.

I got up and looked through the peephole. I expected to find a maid and to throw open the door and tell her to leave me alone, but it was my younger brother, Alex, nine-

hundred miles away from where he attended school at Grinnell College in Iowa. He'd probably come down for the funeral and had somehow found out where I was staying.

"You should be studying for finals," I said through the door.

"I know. Mom made me come."

"How'd you find me?"

"When I saw you weren't home, I called every hotel until I got lucky."

I opened the door. Alex came in and placed his backpack on the bed and looked around the room. He'd shaved his head since the last time I'd seen him, nearly three years ago when I had helped him move into the dorms his freshman year. It made him look sickly. His bald head gleamed with a dull pallor like wet, grey paint. He was taller, too, but as scrawny as that eighteen-year-old kid I remembered. Bones protruded from his flesh, ball joints shown in his wrist, thin flesh stretched taut across a flimsy frame. It looked as though he hadn't eaten a decent meal in weeks.

"You know, it's kind of morbid you're still staying here."

"What do you want, Alex?"

"You're living worse than I am."

I shrugged and closed the door.

"You do know I live in the dorms still? And this is a four-star hotel?"

"What do you want, Alex?"

"I'm supposed to send a report back home, let Mom and Dad know if you're dead or alive."

"I'm alive. You didn't have to come from Iowa for that."

“If you would’ve answered one of their four-thousand calls, I wouldn’t have had to.” He picked up an empty sparkling water bottle, turned it over in his hand like he was studying it, and threw it back onto the pile. “And you could’ve saved three-hundred bucks.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re paying for my plane ticket.” He looked at the television as the pallbearers carried the Governor into St. Paul’s. “You were there when it happened, weren’t you?”

I didn’t bother to answer Alex; he already knew I had witnessed the assassination. He was the only person I’d told about Kate and how we were going public with our relationship that night and how I’d planned to ask her to marry me. He’d always asked rhetorical questions, even as a small child. Growing up, I’d thought it was so annoying, and still do. He was into science, always had been, and would ask me questions he already knew the answer to, what is the rate of gravity, conversions to the metric system, the age of the universe, the rate of evolution around the sun of specific planets. It was a way for him to show off to his older brother. Then the questions turned into habit, Alex the constant questioner.

CNN returned to Wolf Blitzer and John King in the Situation Room—cameras weren’t allowed to film the service—and the two pundits provided commentary about today being a momentous historical occasion. They drew comparisons between the Governor to Lincoln, to JFK, to Bobby, to Martin Luther King, tenuous ties between all politicians and activists who had been gunned down because of their belief systems.

“Conspiracy theorists are already on their soapboxes,” Alex said. “Some say Devorak worked for some terrorist liberal group, others that he was CIA.”

“I’m sure they are.”

“Did you see him? Devorak, I mean.”

“No.” I turned off the television. “It was chaotic.”

That wasn’t true. I had seen Devorak as Secret Service had pinned him to the ground just feet from the dying Governor. Red, white, and blue balloons had surrounded him, a waiter’s tray and broken champagne flutes inches from his head. He wore the white shirt and black bowtie of the catering staff, and I had found it odd that he didn’t struggle, lay on his back as one man pried the gun from his hand, and smiled. He had the whitest teeth I had ever seen.

Alex pulled out his cell phone from his backpack. “Call Mom.”

“Why are they so worried?”

“I told them you were there.”

“Why would you do that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It just kind of slipped out.”

“I’m not calling her.”

He scratched his forehead and sucked his teeth, an exasperated reaction he had used for as long as I could remember. “Later then.” He put the phone away, took a look around the room, at my bottle collection in the corner, at the stack of room-service trays, and at the opened miniature peach jelly jars. “We need to get you out of here.”

“And go where?”

Alex popped his knuckles. “Let’s get drunk.”

“It’s one in the afternoon, Alex.”

“Then watch me get drunk.”

We went to TapWerks, a narrow two-story bar located in Bricktown, and sat upstairs so Alex could smoke. I didn’t even know he did. For a Saturday afternoon the place seemed busy, almost every seat was filled. The majority wore black suits and dresses, all of whom, I assumed, had come straight from the Governor’s funeral march. The place reeked of stale tobacco smoke and spilt porter ales and bourbon. The bar was sticky and the stools wobbled and the mirror behind the bar had drink specials written in black dry-erase marker. I ordered the Mickey’s Irish Stout, \$2.50 a pint during the funeral. Although I hadn’t spent much time in pubs during Saturday afternoons, it was expectedly quiet.

The only noise came from the television. John King and Wolf Blitzer still commented on the implications of the Governor’s death. John King explained that the Constitution does not specifically spell out the succession to a president-elect who dies before the Electoral College casts their votes in December. Now, instead of being obligated to vote how their respected states had, the Electoral College get to choose the next President of the United States. Only once has this happened before. In 1872, Horace Greeley, the newspaper editor who had founded the *New York Tribune* and the Liberal Republican nominee for president, went mad and died just a few weeks after the election, but that fact hardly mattered since he had lost in a landslide anyway. The electors who had pledged for Greeley were able to pick whoever they wanted, some even

keeping their vote for Greeley. No precedent had been set, and Grant went on to easily win his second term. Every single person in the bar was glued to the television, raising their glasses to sip their drinks.

“Crazy,” Alex said. “For the first time in history, the voters won’t get to choose the president.”

“If you believe that, then you are terribly naïve.”

“It’s just so—entropic,” Alex said.

“It’s what?”

“You don’t know what ‘entropic’ means?”

I glared at him.

“Entropic. It means that nature tends to go from order to disorder. We elect a president, order, the president-elect immediately dies, disorder.”

“But the system is designed to correct itself. A new president will be elected.”

“True. But in a way that was never intended by the founding fathers.”

“When did you become such a sophist?”

“I’m a physicist. We’re all like this.” He slurped his beer, lit another cigarette, and exhaled a deep, blue stream out of his nostrils. “I got into M.I.T.”

Alex wanted me to congratulate him, but I refused to do so. He was old enough now to achieve success without having to hear how he pleased someone else. I turned to him and watched his cratered acne scars blush pink. He wasn’t used to not being praised. He’d always been my parents’ favorite; they’d always rained showers of praise on him

every time he got an A on a test or graduated valedictorian and on and on, and it annoyed the hell out of me.

“Let’s play a game,” I said. “Every time Blitzer says ‘Electoral College,’ ‘tragedy,’ or ‘assassination,’ we have to drink.”

It didn’t take us long to get drunk. Gabriella Schwarz began an analysis of what would happen from here, “after the tragedy of the Governor’s death,” one drink, the “Electoral College would now pick among the president and whoever Republican leaders pick as their new party nominee,” another drink, “the likely choice being Susanne Noakes, three-time senator from Maine and the Governor’s running mate.” After every beer we added more words to our list. President. December. Cook. Soon Alex’s teeth stained brown, and a blister formed where he had burned his finger with the lit cherry of a cigarette. Smoke twirled around his baby face, and he sang John Denver songs out of key. It wasn’t even three o’clock yet.

I had never seen Alex drunk before. But the way he exhaled smoke from his nostrils as he drank his beer, the inside of the tilted glass halved by the blue smoke and the black liquid, made me believe this had turned into common practice for him. Too much had changed since we had lived back home. Or maybe not. Alex had always had a wild side. The last time we had been alone together was on his 17th birthday, more than five years ago. We had driven out to Blue Stem Lake to noodle catfish—his idea, of course—and I had refused to get in because I couldn’t see below the surface of the water. But despite zero visibility, Alex had done well. From one hole he had pulled out three catfish; let them flop until they had died; cleaned them; cut the underside; and spilled the

wet, red, and purple entrails out onto the bank. They'd smelled awful, like spoiled oysters, the same as the inside of Cook's head. I'd almost vomited, but Alex only asked, "Dare me to eat one?" before dropping a raw filet into his mouth. After he'd swallowed, I wasn't surprised. That was Alex. And I didn't doubt for a second he would do it again.

"The service is over," Alex said. "Call Mom."

He was right. The television showed the guests pouring out of St. Paul's Cathedral. The shot zoomed in on Susanne Noakes. Her face puckered like she had eaten sour candy, and the lines around her mouth ran deep and dark. I searched for Kate, but she was nowhere to be found. She probably still sat in the church with her father's body, waiting for the pallbearers to take the Governor to the hearse so she could ride with him to their family's plot in Resurrection Memorial Cemetery. I should've been there for her, not here in a bar, drinking with my little brother. I wondered if she thought of me at all during the procession.

Alex handed me his phone, the number already dialed, waiting for me to press "send." I didn't look forward to this conversation. My parents had never supported my decision to be a professional poker player. They couldn't understand why I didn't want to go to college and become some banker or lawyer or doctor. And, being Southern Baptist, they considered gambling a sin.

"Fine. But only because I'm drunk." I pressed "send," and my mother picked up on the first ring.

"Alex?"

"No, it's me."

“Elijah? Thank God. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Then why didn’t you answer when I called?”

“I threw my phone into the canal.”

“You did *what*?”

“Mom, stop yelling. I’m messing with you.” She paused, and I thought I could hear her fighting to hold back tears, a choked throat, heavy breathing. “I’m sorry I didn’t answer. It’s just been—it’s just been crazy here.” I could picture her, standing in the kitchen, one arm folded across her stomach, propping up her other that held the phone. Her face would be scrunched and red, brow wrinkled and her nostrils flaring with each inhalation.

“When can I see you?” she asked.

“Next week.”

She paused, expecting me to renege already. “Really? You promise?”

“I promise.”

She didn’t respond, only breathed faintly. She probably held her hope in check. So many times I’d promised to visit the past few years, so many times I’d made arrangements, but I could never make myself go. I just couldn’t handle their judgmental faces and their pleas for me to go to school, for me to be more like my little brother.

“I really have to go now, Mom.”

“Okay. I love you, son.”

“I love you, too.” I hung up and handed the phone back to Alex.

“You’re not going home, are you?”

“Probably not.”

We ordered another round and resumed our game. By this time CNN showed clips of the President declaring Governor Cook’s death to be a national tragedy, and Alex and I chugged the rest of our beers because the President had used three of our buzzwords.

We drank until the bartender cut us both off and called us a cab to take us back to the Skirvin. It was dark outside, which surprised me. The day had been so sunny, only wisps of clouds had flown by, but now I couldn’t see one solitary star, only a swath of infinite black. The clouds hung low, and I could see them slide across the tops of the Chase Building and Devon Tower, dark, charcoal gray, thick like smoke, reflecting the dim, orange glow of the streetlights. I stuck my head out the window and peered up and let tiny rain drops fall on my face and the winter breeze chill my lips until they went numb. The cold felt good. My head had been spinning since we’d left the bar, the entire city swirling by as if on an axis, and I couldn’t keep any of my thoughts straight in my head. Right before we’d left, I’d wanted to call Kate and tell her something, but I couldn’t remember what, or why it was so important. It’d seemed so urgent at the time, but I’d lost it and then became angry with myself for not being able to hold myself together. It’d been so long since I’d been drunk. The drinking game at TapWerks had made me feel full and nauseous, so I just concentrated on my short breaths and let the

breeze dry the sweat that had been clinging to my hairline and sliding down my temples until my skin felt grainy and wet, like soggy sandpaper.

The Skirvin looked menacing as we approached. Most of the windows were lit, illuminating the dark sky and tan brick in an orange mist. It seemed so out of place, planted in between a parking garage and the Chase Tower, one a grey concrete monstrosity, the other a black and sheen skyscraper. A relic of a former time, the Skirvin is a fossil, a caricature almost, calling to mind rich cattleman and oil barons, cigar smoke and spurs and chaps. For some reason a picture of Kate's father popped into my head, cigar in mouth, a ten-gallon black cowboy hat propped back on his head, and a denim vest with a five-pointed star sheriff's badge on his chest. I burst out laughing; I couldn't help myself, and Alex joined in despite the fact he had no idea what I was thinking.

The cabbie turned in the driveway and dropped us off out front, and Alex and I stumbled inside. Alex still laughed, and I held onto him and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other as we stepped around the large coffee table, the red velvet chaises, and the dark oak pillars, trying not to look drunk. But our act was useless. The bell hop, concierge, and attendants stared at us, embarrassed for us, but not concerned. The Governor's funeral had been today; I was sure we weren't the only guests who had sauntered by reeking of alcohol and having a hard time walking. The elevators had an "Out of Service" sign posted, so we were forced to take the stairs. Halfway up, I lost Alex and puked into the pot of an azalea tree.

When I was finally able to locate my room and slide my keycard into the electronic reader, I found Kate sitting on the bed staring at my cardboard Survivor Tree.

She'd dyed her hair since the funeral, a jet black. It made her skin look paler than usual, ghostly even. It was such a drastic change that it surprised me. I had the urge to go to her, run my fingers through the strands just to make sure I wasn't imagining things, and ask her why she would do such a thing. Her hair had been so beautiful. But, yet, I didn't move, ashamed she found me stinking drunk.

She stood as I walked in and picked up my Survivor Tree, folded it in half, and placed it underneath her armpit. Her eyes puffed red, and I could see where tears had dried along her cheekbones and where her nose had been rubbed raw from tissues. I was surprised to see her. I was starting to think I'd never see her again.

"What're you doing here?" I slurred.

"Are you drunk?"

"A little. How'd you find me?"

"I had Secret Service track you down."

It seemed I couldn't hide from anybody. I was feeling a little dizzy, so I sat down on the bed and held in a burp. "I thought you wanted to be alone?"

Kate sat in the corner chair, my Survivor Tree still in hand. She laid her hands on top of the cardboard, and slid them across as if flattening it. "I do. I still do. But I just felt bad how I left things the other day. I thought you deserved a better explanation."

Alex burst into the room, knocking his shoulder into the door and nearly tripping over his own feet. Kate flinched at the noise. Alex'd startled her, any little surprise would startle her after the watch party, and he ambled up next to me, rested his elbow on

my shoulder to steady himself. I could smell the stale cigarette smoke clinging to his collar, the malt and hops of the beer he'd been chugging back at the bar.

Not really knowing what to say, I introduced my brother.

"Oh my God," he said. "You are...you...you're," he snapped his fingers, trying to recall her name, "Caitlin Cooks, Governor Cook's daughter, aren't you?"

"This is Kathryn Cook, Alex."

Kate gathered her purse and slung the strap over her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I should've called first. Have fun tonight."

She tried to get past us, but Alex blocked her path.

"I'm sorry," Alex said, "don't leave. Stay, stay. Please."

"Alex, please, could you give us—"

"Want a drink?" Alex asked. His eyes were red slits.

"Seriously, Alex. Could you fuck off for a second?"

"What, man? I'm just trying to show a little hospitality."

"You're being an asshole."

"No. It's okay," Kate said. "One wouldn't hurt."

"See? I told you," Alex said.

He dialed room service and ordered a bottle of bourbon and sat on the bed. Kate slouched into the chair in the corner, and I just stood in the middle of the room, unsure as to what to do with myself. An awkward silence filled the room. I was desperate to fill it with something but couldn't bring myself to spark some banal conversation. Kate had just lost her father, she wouldn't appreciate us discussing Alex's good news of getting

into M.I.T., or our parents' plans for Thanksgiving, or how Alex wanted me to go back home for the first time in three years.

Alex coughed. It sounded chunky, like little pockets of phlegm clogged his throat. Kate pulled her knees up to her chin and her sweatshirt sleeves past her hands. She resembled a turtle hiding in its shell. She didn't really want to be here, I could tell, but the prospect of a drink enticed her enough to put up with us for a little while longer. We stayed silent, which I appreciated. I was glad Alex kept his mouth shut. He'd always been a person with a low threshold of empathy, sometimes provoking people when they were hurting just to see if he could get a rise out of them. It was like an experiment to him, a side effect of sorts from his inquisitive and scientific mind. Once, when we'd been young, growing up in Bartlesville, a town bordering Kansas, our next door neighbor's dog had been ran over, maimed horribly, three legs broken, and his parents contemplated euthanasia, a concept we'd barely grasped at the time. We understood what "put him down" meant, knew that it meant death, that it was permanent, yet we'd no notion of how this could be viewed as a *good* thing. So Alex researched it, read numerous articles on Kevorkian, on the practice in Europe, how it was performed in veterinarian clinics here, what they would do, how they would do it, how it was believed the dog wouldn't feel a thing, but admitted that no one could really tell because of the paralyzing drugs given the animals. And he'd explained all this to Keith, our next door neighbor, in excruciating detail, until the boy could hardly breathe between his tears. I didn't think Kate would be able to handle Alex right now.

After a few minutes, the bottle arrived. Alex filled our glasses, and Kate asked, “What should we drink to?”

“To the death penalty,” Alex said. “May Devorak’s heart explode by lethal injection.”

I cringed at Alex’s remark, despite it being more subdued than I’d feared. But Kate didn’t seem to notice, or at least to be affected by it. We touched our shot glasses together and drank, and it burned all the way down. After two more, Kate grabbed her purse, pulled out a scarf and wrapped it around her neck and even her mouth, a disguise I assumed, so people wouldn’t harass her, give her condolences when all she wanted was to be anonymous, to be alone, and mourn on her own terms. I didn’t blame her for that. Perhaps that’s why she’d dyed her hair black.

“You’re leaving?” I asked.

Kate nodded. “Thanks for the drink.”

“Ah, don’t go,” Alex said. “We got damn near the entire bottle left.”

Kate stopped gathering her things, putting on the last touches of her disguise, a large balloon-shaped wool hat so that she could tuck her hair inside, and stared at the bourbon. Wild Turkey Straight Kentucky Bourbon, Special Reserve, aged ten years. It’d tasted smooth, of rich oak, with hints of maple and smoke. The burn settled reassuringly in the stomach, fuzzed thoughts, and made that empty feeling the Governor’d left behind not so noticeable, the pain behind your eyes ache just a little less. I could tell Kate was tempted. She smacked her lips, chapped and dry and void of any gloss or lipstick, one of

the few, if not the only, occasions I'd seen her without makeup. Her cheeks sucked in as if in anticipation of another drink, how it would feel sliding down the back of her throat.

Kate placed her purse back in the chair, retrieved her shot glass from the nightstand, and held it out for Alex to pour her another.

"There we go," Alex said. "I knew you wouldn't quit on us so soon."

We took down shot after shot, Alex and Kate doing most of the talking, getting acquainted with one another. Mostly small talk, I scolded myself for worrying about the impression he would make with her. He had grown, wasn't that teenage kid anymore always demanding attention, asking pointless questions, and saying the most absurd things just to see others' reactions. Instead, they discussed superficial, whimsical things: college football, OU's chances of winning the national title, if Kate had season tickets. She did. She in fact had always thought the quarterback cute, enjoyed watching him run around in those tight white pants, and both of them would laugh, and Alex'd pour her another shot, and she'd drink it down until she'd turned red in the face, her eyes barely open and bloodshot, her tongue fumbling over consonants. I stayed quiet, in the corner, only adding to the conversation when directly spoken to, when Kate was asking about me as a child, what I was like growing up, if I'd always been so concerned with gaining people's approval, like I'd been with her and her father.

"Oh God, yes," Alex said. "He literally was that kid who brought fruit for his teachers."

Kate burst out laughing, her hand covering her dimpled chin. "I can so see that."

“I was not.” I slung the last few drops of bourbon from my glass onto Alex, and he just stuck out his tongue as if he could actually catch them in his mouth. “You were the valedictorian, for Christ’s sake.”

“So? I didn’t bribe my teachers with fruit baskets.”

“Neither did I!”

“What do you see in this guy?” Alex said as he poured each of us another shot.

Kate rolled onto her back, three pillows propping up her head, her black hair splayed around her like she was floating in water. A sly smile spread across her face. The alcohol had made her freckles become darker, almost like little brown specks of dirt had dried on her skin. She looked gorgeous. I wondered if I had ever told her that before, that she looked beautiful instead of just nice, or pretty, a passing remark in public so as to not arouse suspicion that we’d been sleeping together. I couldn’t remember if I ever had.

“I don’t know,” she said. She reached out her index finger, twirled the tip against my knee. “I really don’t. But it’s nice not to know sometimes.”

3

The next morning Alex woke me up. He was showering, and steam poured from underneath the bathroom door. Kate still slept in the bed, and I sat in the corner chair. My neck ached from sleeping in such an awkward position and I had a terrible taste in my mouth and my head felt like it had been squeezed in a vice. The place reeked of cigarette smoke and bourbon and matches. Chairs were turned over, the lamp shade set atop the television, which was on, Bugs Bunny was running from Elmer Fudd, the volume muted, cold air rushed through an open window, the curtains bunched on the ground underneath the sill. I tried to remember how this could've happened, the events that took place that caused all of this destruction, but I couldn't. The last thing I remembered was us calling room service again, but what we'd ordered I had no idea. Remnants seemed to be plastered against the wall, dried and crusted red sauce, noodles trapped as if glued. Someone'd ordered spaghetti, that was plain enough, but it didn't look like it had been eaten. Instead, it looked like we'd had a food fight. My clothes

were covered in spaghetti, the bed, the carpet, even Kate's hair. I never wanted to drink again.

The bathroom door opened, and out came Alex, fully dressed. Steam from the shower pushed past him like he emerged from some otherworldly place. He grabbed his book bag and crammed his few belongings in there: his shirt from the day before, one sock, the partner of which seemed to be missing. "I got a plane to catch," Alex whispered. "You're still coming to Thanksgiving, right?" I didn't remember agreeing to this, but Alex didn't give me time to answer. "You should bring Kate with you. She's a blast."

"I will."

Alex froze, a pair of rumpled jeans in his hand inches above his bag. "Is this a real promise or an Eli promise?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He looked at me as if to ask if I was seriously asking that question, then returned to packing. "I'll see you both there, then," he said. "Maybe you could bring potato salad or something." He shot me a weak smile, obviously not believing I would actually go.

"Sure. We could do something like that."

Alex and I shook hands, and he patted me on the shoulder and left without another word. I hopped in the shower and cleaned all the caked spaghetti sauce from my neck and ankles and hands and watched the red water swirl around and disappear down the drain. But no matter how hard I scrubbed, I still didn't feel clean. Grime still coated me, hair greasy, dirt lodged underneath my fingernails and lining every crevice of my flesh.

Not really, of course. But I felt horrible. My head throbbed like a kick drum. My body ached to the point I couldn't twist my torso or my neck around. I just had to stay in one spot; only then was the pain bearable. I tried to tell myself it was just a hangover, that I'd just slept awkwardly in a chair, that I was dehydrated and sleep-deprived, but it didn't seem as though I would ever return to feeling normal.

When I was drying off, the phone rang, so I tied the towel around my waist and ran for the phone before it woke Kate, but I was too late. She rubbed her eyes and sat up in bed and stretched.

"I need coffee," she said.

I answered the phone.

"Kathryn Cook, please," a man said. His voice was monotone and stern.

"May I ask who is calling?"

"No."

I held the phone out to Kate, and she didn't look surprised. "For you."

Kate took the phone, said "What?" then didn't say another word. It was Secret Service, I was sure, annoyed again that she'd slipped past them in the night. "Great, goodbye," she said and then hung up.

"Your security detail?"

She nodded. "Yesterday was their last day."

"Really, why?"

“Since Dad’s no longer a presidential candidate, it would take an executive order for them to keep watching me. And apparently the President doesn’t see my safety as a necessary concern.”

“Is that a good thing?” I asked, knowing she’d always hated the Secret Service.

“I hate that man.”

“Who?”

“The President.” Kate stared at the comforter, but I could tell her gaze wasn’t focused on anything in particular. “It’s his fault, you know, that my dad died.”

“What?”

“My dad wouldn’t have run for president if it wasn’t for him.” She made a sucking noise with her lips and teeth and then shook her head. “How does breakfast sound?” she asked.

I checked out of the Skirvin, and then Kate and I went to the grocery store to pick up some eggs and bacon and biscuits. I had tried to convince her to go home and let me take care of it, but she had refused, “I’m not helpless.” She was headstrong, just like her father.

Wal-Mart was huge, aisles upon aisles filled with frozen pizzas and Twinkies and heads of lettuce and center-cut round steak. I hadn’t been grocery shopping in so long I had forgotten what it was like. Being a bachelor, I ate in small diners, little hole-in-the-wall burger joints, barbecue, anything fried and that turned napkins clear. I’d never cooked—a trait I’d inherited from my mother—and only stepped into the kitchen to use the microwave to warm up leftovers and the coffee pot. And what I noticed, about the

grocery store anyway, was that people did not make eye contact or greeted each other at all. In fact, they went out of their way so they didn't have to. College kids wearing OU hats and senior citizens in motorized wheelchairs and young mothers with two or three kids in tow all zoomed past with eyes locked on the linoleum floor or scanning the different types of Chilean coffee beans or stain remover.

On the first aisle, I piled in anything that looked appetizing. Fresh oregano and basil and rosemary. Apples, oranges, bananas, and grapefruit. Tomatoes and cucumbers and a sack of potatoes. Just in produce I almost filled an entire basket.

"You planning a feast?" Kate joked.

We both pushed the cart, our hands inches apart, like a real couple, not two people who'd waited until two in the morning to sneak into each other's room for a quickie. Before the election, we'd hardly talked about us, about the future, even about the past really, since the prospect of a real relationship had been so removed from the realm of possibility, due to her father's campaign of course. It wasn't that I hadn't wanted to be a couple; I had. That's why I'd made Kate promise me we would tell her father on election night, that's why I planned on asking her to marry me. But this was the first time I'd ever felt like we were in a real relationship.

"Maybe I am planning a feast," I said. "Thanksgiving is coming up."

"We could invite all my friends from school over. You've never got to meet them."

"And I could entertain them with magic tricks and hypnosis."

Kate laughed so hard she snorted, turning a few heads. A woman at the butcher's counter turned and stared and cocked her head like she might've recognized Kate. Kate wore a disguise of sorts, her now black hair tucked up inside her large hat so that her head resembled a mushroom, big green sunglasses that covered half her face, the lens shiny like a bug's eyes. But she still looked like Kate Cook, the unmistakable dimpled chin, the freckles, the way she walked, one foot directly in front of the other, like she was on a balance beam. She always had a gracefulness about her, learned from years of ballet lessons her mother had put her through but fell to the wayside once she'd entered high school at Casady, the private school in the Village just outside the mansions of Nichols Hills. But all the girls had grace there; the offspring of money and power, these children carried themselves like ballerinas and royalty, because they were, and had been told so their entire lives.

“And where exactly did you learn magic?” Kate asked.

“You pick up quite a few things on the poker tour. Do they sell rabbits here? Where's the top hat aisle?”

We turned the corner, past the butcher's counter, past the cured ham and pounds of chuck and New York Strip and filet mignon and pork loin and lamb shank, and down the deli meats, thinly cut turkey and salami and roast beef, when a woman stopped us short and placed a hand on Kate's forearm. She wore a ring on each finger, silver bands with blue and turquoise gemstones, some the size of quarters, and chained charm bracelets made with hearts and four-leaf clovers dangled around both wrists. She sounded like a wind chime as she walked. A long shawl drooped from her shoulders to

mid-calf, a red basket in hand, its handle draped over one arm like Little Red Riding Hood. She wore a motherly expression on her ashen face, the arched eyes and slightly ajar mouth of concern and an overabundance of sympathy. I could tell she just wanted to pick Kate up and take her home with her.

“Darling,” the stranger said as she shook her head. Her droopy jowls swayed like sails in a breeze. “Darling, darling, darling. It’s just a shame. You’re daddy was such a good man.”

“Yes,” Kate said as she smiled. “He was.”

“Let me help you two.” The woman shooed us both away from behind the cart, and she grabbed the blue handle and started pushing like she was on a mission from God. “My name’s Beth,” she said.

“Thank you, Beth,” I said. “That’s very kind, but we can manage.”

“Oh nonsense.” Beth pushed our cart down the aisle a ways. “Everybody needs a little help now and then.”

I looked at Kate, and she just shrugged.

Beth grabbed a full-sized ham and placed it into the cart. “You’ll need plenty of food. You got a good start here but no protein. After what your two have been through, you’ll need plenty of protein.”

We followed behind Beth, not knowing what else to do. We couldn’t necessarily tell her to stop, that we were fine. Kate and I didn’t want to cause a scene by demanding to be left alone. So we obliged her. Or perhaps we simply obeyed; she was so domineering, like a school teacher. This thought annoyed me, how presumptuous it was

that we needed her help, a perfect stranger's, but she was also reassuring in some odd way. It was like she would take care of us if we just allowed her to.

"I've met you before," Beth told Kate. "You were such a tiny thing back then, no bigger than a little dog." Others started looking at us as we continued shopping, casting sideways glances at Kate as Beth talked nonstop. "I met your daddy back in '84 when he was running for District 85," Beth said. "I worked on that campaign and worked hard, thank you very much. Fingers to the bone, I tell you. And man, was Jake a hoot back then. He could smoke a slab of ribs like no one I ever knew before or since. He ever cook for you like that?"

"Sometimes," Kate said. "He was pretty busy."

"Yeah, well. That ain't no excuse." She pointed a long, bony finger toward Kate. "And I would've told him that, too."

Beth continued to talk, her voice booming, about the Governor back in the eighties and early nineties, how he once fled the House by crawling out the window in order to stall a piece of legislation, "some just thought he was plain crazy," and how he said that if he ever met Michael Dukakis face-to-face, he'd punch him square in the gut. She was so loud that the other shoppers began to take notice of us. As Beth piled a couple loaves of wheat bread into the basket, two women started to point at Kate, whispering and trying to figure out if Kate was actually Kate. Some even tried to follow inconspicuously, snapping photos with their phones while they tried to play it off like they were checking a text message as Beth grabbed canned green beans and corn and fire roasted tomatoes. Had these people no compassion? I had a feeling this would end up on

YouTube, and Fox News and MSNBC and CNN talk-show pundits would have a field day. The late Governor's daughter goes grocery shopping despite grief. Does she even mourn for her father? They would purport crackpot theories of why Kate was changing her appearance, why the green fingernail polish and the black hair, how she was now having an identity crisis, or some other hogwash. I wanted to punch each and every one of these gawkers, steal their cell phones and burn them, but that would just make the situation even worse.

Beth continued to talk to Kate as if nothing was happening, dreamily discussing the younger Governor, how he'd been so naively indigent and righteous in his positions, that he couldn't debate with opponents because he would become so angry at them, not understanding how they didn't simply agree with him, it was just so obvious that he was right, "It was his biggest flaw to overcome to win that first race," she said. "He was just one stubborn ass." Kate nodded along, not adding anything to the conversation, but I could tell she took notice of the shoppers staring at her. She pinned her chin against her chest and stared down at the linoleum floor. It wasn't like the other shoppers crowded around us, snapping photographs, or yelling out questions like the paparazzi or anything. They continued to select food, pushing around their squeaky carts. Cash registers still dinged, young kids ripped open cardboard boxes, stocked shelves with dog food and toilet paper, old ladies with hairnets handed out free samples of hot dogs and bratwurst on toothpicks. But their eyes lingered on Kate, enamored with the little spark of recognition, the shock at seeing her in their store, the one they'd been working at or shopping at for years, the disbelief that Kathryn Cook was there, too. Kate was not handling the attention

very well. Her cheeks turned red, her shoulders crept up towards her ears, embarrassed by all the stares and finger pointing and whispers. She chewed on the inside of her cheeks, adjusted her sunglasses, twirled a strand of black hair in her fingers. I had to get her out of there. She looked as though she were on the verge of breaking down into tears in the middle of the aisle, surrounded by canned goods and strangers, without her father, with only me to comfort her. I wasn't sure that I'd be able to because, although I hated to admit it, I sort of enjoyed the attention.

“I think that's enough for now,” I said to Beth. “If we need anything else, I can stop back by.”

“Nonsense,” Beth said. “We haven't even got any cheese or condiments yet.”

“We've got some at the house.”

Beth noticed the staring others, finally, and nodded. “Right. You're right. Follow me.”

Beth barreled through the onlookers toward the cash registers, both of us close behind. Kate grabbed my hand and planted her fingers in between mine, gripping so hard her knuckles turned white. I thought I could feel a slight trembling in her hand, see a quiver in her throat, and hear her breathing become short and hurried. It looked like she might have a panic attack at any moment.

Beth unloaded the items onto the conveyor belt for us, still rambling the entire time about how she had walked ten hours straight one day while campaigning for the Governor, knocked on more than a hundred doors and won Cook dozens of votes. “I missed him terribly after I had to quit the campaign,” she said as we waited for the

cashier to tell us the total. She was taking such a long time, grabbing one item, turning it over and over, trying to find the barcode, sliding it across the sensor steadily as if she were afraid it wouldn't scan. I wanted to grab the items and ring them up myself. "He kissed me once. And that was all it took. Never saw him again. For years I wanted to knock on his door and just ask him how he was doing. But I never had the courage to." She looked at Kate for the first time since she commandeered our cart, a petrified expression frozen on her face. "Oh my God. I'm *so* sorry. I should've never told you that."

Kate waved away her apology with a flick of her hand, but I could tell she had been affected by the woman's stories. She had rubbed her elbow raw and was biting on a piece of dead flesh on her lip.

"The totals \$177.87," the teenage cashier said, blinked her eyes at all three of us, wondering who was going to pay. I handed her my card, and Beth smiled at me as if I was such a good sport.

We said our goodbyes to Beth, thanked her again for her help, and Kate grabbed my elbow and hurried outside, passing by the stares of strangers. Once out in the parking lot Kate said, "Get me out of here. Right now."

"Breakfast is ready," I yelled to Kate in the bathroom. I didn't hear a response, so I turned the television off and knocked on the door. "Kate?"

Still no response. Kate'd been in bad shape on the car ride home from the grocery store. She hadn't said anything, just leaned her head against the window, single tears

sliding out from underneath her large sunglasses. I'd never been in that position before, the pacifier, and had had no idea what to say to comfort her. So, wrongly or rightly, I hadn't said a word because that was what I would've wanted if I had been in her situation. But now she wouldn't answer me, and I worried that I had made the wrong decision. I listened through the door, trying to hear water splash, the squeak of her leg rubbing against the tub, anything to let me know that she was still in there, awake and alive.

I knocked louder this time.

"What?" Kate yelled through the door. Her tone was curt and short, but I was just relieved to hear her voice.

"Breakfast is ready." I opened the door. Her eyes were closed, and she had her head tilted back on the edge of the tub, ear buds from her iPod in. "You okay?"

Kate took one bud out of her ear. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You've just been quiet, that's all."

"It's just that woman today, she—I don't know. Unnerved me." I sat on the edge of the tub, unsure of what to say. "Did you know he cheated on my mother?"

I shook my head.

"He did. Several times in fact. When she was sick, too."

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

“Everyone thought he was this perfect guy. And he was in so many ways. But in others he just flat sucked.” Kate raised her head and took the towel off her forehead.

“Did you know he never once, not once, in twenty years of marriage, danced with my mother? And she loved to dance. Who does that to someone they love, completely take away their favorite thing to do?”

“Maybe he was just embarrassed.”

“He just made me so mad sometimes.”

Wanting to change the subject, I slipped in behind her and splashed water all over the bathroom. Kate laughed as I put my arms around her and held her against my chest. Water soaked my jeans and shoes and socks, but I didn't care. I had to get her mind off her father somehow, and mine, too. I could not get the picture of her father out of my head, his brains splattered all over the floor at my feet. It haunted me every time I closed my eyes.

Kate leaned back against me, and I cupped water with my hands and cascaded little pools down her shoulders. As the water slid down and her skin dried, tiny goosebumps formed, and barely visible blond hairs stood on end.

“I need to get out of here,” Kate said. “Out of Oklahoma. We could take a vacation. Go to some island in the Caribbean and just hide.”

“Yeah right.”

“I'm serious.”

“And how would we afford that?”

“Daddy's money. We have enough to last us a very long time.”

I released my hug and rested my chin on her damp shoulder. “Maybe we should wait a little while.”

“Why?”

“Just for a little bit.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. It might look bad.”

She sat straight up and rotated to face me. Sweat dripped from her chin, and a piece of black hair draped over her eyelashes, but she didn’t brush it away. “For whom?”

I wanted to say for her, that a vacation on her assassinated father’s money a week after the murder would look bad for her. It would be the political equivalent of the Menendez brothers. But all I could muster was, “I don’t know.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “I saw my father get murdered right in front of me, and you’re worried that you’ll look bad. You’re unbelievable. You know that? That’s exactly something my father would’ve said.”

She slammed the door and left me shocked and speechless, soaking fully clothed in the tub.

I stayed out of her way for the rest of the morning, not that I really had a choice in the matter. She locked herself in her bedroom, so I cleaned the house to stay busy. The house had been in terrible shape. A layer of dust covered the floor and furniture and dirty clothes hung from cast-iron candelabras and stale food crumbs littered the leather sofa, so

I vacuumed and dusted and lemon-oiled until the place smelled like disinfectant and shined like a senator's smile.

All the while I thought about what Kate had said; that I'd reacted like her father. I did understand her point to some degree; worrying what the media would think was a bit of a political move. And she'd grown up with politics all her life, had been defined by it, by her father's achievements. When anyone thought of her, they immediately associated her with her father, asking her if she planned to go to law school like he did, if she wanted to be a public servant herself. In the beginning of the campaign, before her father had hired an image coach for her, she'd been brutally honest, wittily saying "Absolutely not. He has too many bosses telling him how wrong he is every moment of the day. The people are just too damn fickle for me." This changed, of course, after Kinsler coached every word that came out of her mouth, how she would wear her hair, her makeup, even her posture. She wasn't allowed to make a single decision on her own. In the public eye, you are made by others, not by your own character. Kate wanted to form her own identity, make her own life, and to disappear from where everyone knew her. There wasn't anything wrong with that.

As I finished scrubbing the grout in the bathtub with a toothbrush, the doorbell rang, and the mailman handed me a large tote bag full of letters. "This wouldn't fit in your box," he said.

"What are they?"

He shrugged and tipped his hat and walked away.

I took the bag to the couch and opened it up. Inside were hundreds of envelopes. Condolence letters, I supposed. The handwriting varied from the looped letters of a teenage girl to the deep black lines of a grown man to the shaky alphabet and misspelled words of a child. Return addresses ranged from Norfolk, Virginia, to Anchorage, Alaska, to Austin, Texas. Most envelopes weren't even sent to the correct address, just had Kate's name and Norman, Oklahoma, on it, but yet they arrived as if by magic.

I remembered reading once, in a Times article I believed, or maybe Newsweek, that following the assassination of JFK, Jackie Kennedy had received thousands of letters from a nation in mourning, and I couldn't help but compare the two. Only last week Kate had been on hands and knees trying to fit her father's skull back together like a puzzle piece just as Jackie K. had done five decades earlier. The author had quoted Jackie in the article as saying that she almost died herself because of Jack's death, that if it wasn't for the outpouring of a shared grief from common citizens she would have.

I opened one, from a Helen Vida from Kansas City. It was handwritten instead of typed and penned with expensive stationery, the paper heavy and thick.

Dear Kathryn, it began. I've never been one for writing letters, nor have I ever been overtly political. I've spent so many years, not in ignorance I would say, but wrapped in abject apathy to the goings on in Washington, and in government in general. It never seemed to matter who or which party held political office; not much, if anything, ever changed because of an election. They all said whatever they could to get elected, then did whatever they wanted once they got the job. Taxes are always too high, or too low, small-business operators getting regulated to death by the Federal Government, or

the corporate machine keeping the working man down. Same reality, as far as I'm concerned, just different slogans.

Not to say I have never voted. Sometimes I did. I voted for a young Kennedy because I thought him handsome, and I was young with a schoolgirl crush. I voted for Reagan, twice actually, because of his reassuring nature after the troubling seventies. I voted for Al Gore because Bush, the younger one, seemed a little dumb. I voted for your father, too. And the reason seems so silly now. Throughout the campaign he'd seemed so sane to me, that I thought that maybe if he was elected, D.C. wouldn't just be politics as usual. I thought perhaps some sort of reasonable discourse might commence. I thought that maybe some of the unrest would waver, cooler heads prevail, voices shouted not so loudly. I thought surely things would change. Yet how dearly was I wrong? Perhaps after seventy years I still am just a naive little girl.

I will keep you in my prayers, Kathryn

“Throw it away, please,” Kate said after I'd read it to her.

“Kate?”

“Just throw it away.”

“Why?”

“Please, Eli. Just throw them all away. I don't want to read them.”

I crumpled the letter and threw it in the wastebasket and returned. “It's gone now.”

She didn't respond.

“Will you come out, please?”

I'd been talking to her through her locked door. She wouldn't come out when I'd knocked, told her what the mailman had delivered, saying that she would look at them later. But I was convinced this would do her some good, just like Jackie, so I'd read her Helen's letter. I thought it would help her cope, to realize how wonderful her father was, how he'd meant so much to so many people across the country, the world even. That he wasn't all bad. That he wasn't just an adulterer. That he wasn't just a poor husband. I knocked again. "Please let me in, Kate." The lock clicked, and she opened the door a crack.

"Let me show you something." I picked up the bag and dropped the contents out on the comforter in front of her.

"I told you I don't want to see them, Eli." Kate started to pile all the letters back into the tote bag, grabbing handfuls at a time and stuffing them with such force that corners got bent, envelopes ripped and torn.

"People care about you, Kate." I picked one from the pile and handed it to her. "Just read one."

"They don't care about *me*," she said. "They don't even know me." She grabbed the envelope and ripped it several times, until just bits of paper lay at her feet. "They didn't know my father. We weren't real to them. We were these fake little dolls to them. Puppets that danced around for them on television." By the time she finished, the color had been flushed from her cheeks, her hands trembled, and her breathing became labored. "Thank you," she said. "That actually did make me feel a little better."

She grabbed another, ripped it in half, and threw the paper down on her bed. I couldn't believe it. These strangers had taken time out of their lives to send their condolences to Kathryn Cook because they mourned for her, felt compelled to reach out to a perfect stranger in her time of grief and pain, yet Kate didn't even have the courtesy to read one. Instead, she destroyed them as though they were meaningless, even laughed while she did so.

"Here," she said as she held out an envelope toward me. "Try one."

I took the envelope from her. It was from Dallas, a writer that took the time to print out an envelope, the paper thin inside. A short letter from Edmund Meekum. Kate looked at me, urging me to rip it up.

I felt guilty about it, but I did it anyway. I shredded Mr. Meekum's letter until it was just a dozen tiny pieces on her comforter. And Kate was right. It did feel good.

We stayed in and watched a movie that night, The Graduate, a classic. Kate sat close to me, her legs tucked underneath her, and her head rested on my shoulder so that her hair tickled my cheeks and neck. It was such a domestic scene; a first for Kate and me, the realization of which caused me to pay hardly any attention to the movie. Instead, I constructed a fantasy of us as a married couple. This was our routine and had been for years, classic movies on Sunday nights, just the two of us, one couch, one cashmere blanket, one bowl of buttered popcorn. We would nostalgically talk about the days of our youth, travelling the country for poker tournaments, for her documentaries on new eco-urban planning or the Tulsa race riots, going to minor league baseball games. Those days

long behind us, just a retired couple now, with all our time dedicated to each other. Then we'd stroll up to bed, kiss each other goodnight, and fall fast asleep, side-by-side to wait until morning together.

"Could you ever see yourself with an older woman?" Kate asked. She twisted her body into me.

"With Mrs. Robinson, of course."

"Oh yeah, sure, that's a given." Kate ran her fingernails down my forearm and circled the bones in the back of my hand. "I'm being serious, though. Say you met a cougar in Vegas wearing a leopard print dress and drinking cranberry vodkas. Would you go for it?"

"No. God, no. She'd have to at least be a scotch drinker."

She pushed playfully against my shoulder. "Seriously. You never once hooked up with anyone while I was away all that time, or when you were on the road for poker tournaments?"

"Are you asking me if I cheated?"

"Well, it wouldn't really be cheating, would it? It's not like we were serious then."

My stomach dropped as soon as she said this, like an airplane hitting a pocket of turbulence; I thought we'd been serious. Her engagement ring was still at my apartment, waiting for the right moment. "Then why ask?"

"So, you did."

“No, I didn’t.” I unwrapped my arm from around her shoulders and ate some overly salty popcorn.

Kate rolled over and sat up straight and pulled the blanket up so that it covered her shoulders. “Sorry. I don’t even know why I brought it up.”

I knew why, and so did she. Her father’s infidelities had been on her mind. She’d accused me of acting like him. She wanted to know if I was like her father, if I would treat her the same way he did her mother. But she couldn’t come out and say that, so she asked a loaded question, one with undercurrents of accusation. Politicians did it all the time. Her father had been a master at this tactic actually.

“No, I’m sorry,” I said. “I understand. After what that woman said about your father today at the grocery store, I don’t blame you for wondering.” I took her hand and squeezed. “I never hooked up with anyone since we’ve been together. Just you.”

She smiled and thanked me for being so understanding and laid her head back onto my shoulder. The weight of her body against mine felt like it belonged there. She seemed more content, and we continued to watch the movie in silence.

Eventually Kate fell asleep, and I continued to watch the movie until the middle when Hoffman is getting seduced by Anne Bancroft and I noticed an odd glow behind the cream curtains covering the bay window. Tiny orbs seemed to be floating above the front lawn. But they flickered, like mirages above hot pavement in summer. I tried to slip out from underneath Kate without waking her up. She moaned and grabbed a pillow and pulled her knees up to her chin, and I pulled the curtains back. Outside, dozens of

people, perhaps a hundred, long stemmed candles lit in hand, stood with heads bowed in reverence toward Kate's house.

It was an amazing sight really. Children stood in the very front, their parents behind them, university students intermixed, all silent, all bundled up to fight the cold, all with pained expressions etched onto their eerily illuminated faces. A few even cried, their wet cheeks reflecting the candlelight where the tears had streaked. I was taken aback, unable to do anything except stare. I had never seen so many people gather with a single, selfless purpose before.

"What's going on?" Kate asked from the couch. Her voice sounded clogged, like her words stumbled over rocks.

I stepped back so I wouldn't block her view. She walked over to me, one foot in front of the other like she walked across a tight wire, and looped a finger through one of my belt loops. I could feel warm moisture on my shoulder where her head lay. She was crying, a soft purging. She didn't shake or sob or whimper, just glared out the window with a blank stare. I knew right then I had to get her out of here. If we stayed, she would be constantly reminded of her father.

"The Caribbean does sound nice," I said.

Kate didn't respond. She didn't need to. She just leaned against me as if we had been married for years.

4

We touched down on the St. Thomas tarmac early the next afternoon, six days after Cook's assassination and just a few weeks before the special election. Traveling with the Governor's daughter did have some perks: no stand-by, half-price first-class tickets, no cost for luggage, free champagne, just a quick thirty minute layover in San Juan, escorts to get us from one gate to the next, all in about ten hours notice. If Kate had minded attention in the supermarket, the looks of endearment and pity as we shopped for groceries, she didn't mind this attention at all. She allowed airport staff and flight attendants to pamper her and cater to her every whim, bringing her sandwiches and peanuts, extra pillows, and refilling her drink every ten to fifteen minutes. Kate had two bottles of 2002 Dom Perignon, a ten year vintage, by herself. It was a different type of attention, sure, but her behavior seemed a bit hypocritical to me. Tearing up condolence letters and not addressing the candlelight vigil outside her house seemed incompatible with taking advantage of peoples' and companies' good will. Both stemmed from sympathy. Yet, who was I to judge? I'd torn up a letter, left the vigil out in the cold, and

sipped on champagne just as Kate had. Besides, a vacation would do us some good. Her father had just died. Perhaps that entitled us to behave in this manner, a bit selfish, if only for a little while.

When we landed, I could hardly believe the view. The clearest water I'd ever seen, coral growing up from the deep like a brain, and lush mountains covered in palm trees bending in the breeze like they were eavesdropping on our conversation. Sailboats gleamed in the harbor like bobbing diamonds, and little stucco houses sprouted from the rainforest canopy, green and orange and red, brilliant and shining under the sun. Lizards baked in the heat, meandered past us, and ate Triscuit crackers right out of our hand. The entire island smelled of coconut and salt, and in the baggage claim they played reggae music and handed us frozen rum punches. We took ours and sipped on the sweet, citrusy drink as taxi drivers called to us from the street out in front of the airport, pointing and asking if we needed a lift to our resort.

We climbed into the back of a truck with about a dozen or so other tourists, and headed out of the airport and into paradise. It really was a bustling place, full of shopping centers next to the bay, Yacht Haven and Charlotte Amalia and Havensight Mall, advertising jewelry and Louis Vuitton and perfume and BCBG and booze and Coach and Dior. Kids hawked sunglasses and watches on the side of the road. Produce stands and newspaper boys. Tie-dyed T-shirts and board shorts. There were beach bars and sushi joints and white-table cloth fine dining. Tourists caked in Coppertone 60 and head covered in visors strolled around, arms outstretched pointing at a pelican flying overhead, an iguana, or a para-sailor, Coronas and Caribs and Bushwhackers in hand.

At the resort, the Elysian, we were greeted by a slew of young women clad in bikinis, handing us even more booze along with our keys, pamphlets offering boat and Sea-Doo rentals, spa appointments with massages and facials. The halls were lined with white tile, and the breeze filtered in through open windows. It was the most relaxing, beautiful place I'd ever seen. It was as if I melted into the environment, the stress and worry and anxiety of the past few days just oozed out of me, like a tire leaking air. And Kate felt the same way, I could tell. In the room we took a shower together and made love for the first time since election night. Then we took a short nap, and by six o'clock, we sat at a beachside restaurant, The Old Stone Farmhouse, built out of the ruins of a 19th century sugar plantation and sipped on 1860 Grand Marnier, distilled the same year Lincoln won the presidency.

As Kate drank, I played with a ring box in my pocket, trying to decide when I should propose. Before we'd left for the airport in Oklahoma City, I'd debated whether or not I should still ask. With the loss of her father, I didn't know if Kate would be able to handle a proposal right now, but I ended up talking myself into it. I loved her, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her regardless if her father had died or not. Perhaps she would even rather I proposed now, I thought. She was alone, an orphan, with very little extended family left, and our wedding would mean she wouldn't have to be. So I packed the ring with the plan of proposing on our first night here, a pre-wedding honeymoon. But the thought of proposing in this restaurant in front of all these strangers made me nervous. What if she did say no?

The restaurant's decor reminded me of the 19th century, and it was packed. Wooden hurricane doors bolted shut by cast iron barricades. Oxidized chandeliers housing tea lights hung from the stone ceiling. Candle-lit lanterns illuminated every table. Yellowed stone walls and arched doorways and crimson brick floors. The waitress informed us the stone and brick were original, while the rest had been restored to be as true to its original design as possible. Kate looked gorgeous in this setting. Floor-length black gown, pale shoulders aglow with orange candlelight, her freckles granting her expression a mysterious tinge, like she was the heiress to the plantation. She'd dyed her hair again, a deep auburn this time, and she wore smoky eye shadow, making her seem almost dangerous.

"Did you know," Kate said between bites of her crab cake, "that Kennedy had a secretary named Lincoln and Lincoln had a secretary named Kennedy?"

"I think I've heard that before."

"And Kennedy told Lincoln not to go to the theater, and Lincoln told Kennedy not to go to Dallas." She pointed her fork at me. "How weird is that?"

"And Lincoln was shot in the Ford Theatre, and Kennedy was shot in a Lincoln made by Ford."

"Oh my God," Kate said with a laugh, an echoing snort actually, her hand covering her mouth to keep me from seeing her food but doing nothing to quiet her outburst. "I didn't even think of that." She slurped down the rest of her Grand Marnier and waved the empty glass above her head to get the waiter's attention.

“It’s been a long day,” I said. “One more and you might not be able to make it through dinner.”

The patrons at the tables around us began to stare, but Kate didn’t seem to notice. She swung her left leg over her right and bobbed her foot, puckered her lips and made a sucking sound as her eyes narrowed on me. “We’re on vacation. Loosen up a bit. And don’t tell me when I’ve had enough. You sound like fucking Kinsler.” The waiter brought another glass, and she flashed a smile and cocked her head, ear to shoulder, flirting. “Oh,” she said to me after she took the first sip of her refill, “I got some more. John Wilkes Booth was known by threes names made up of fifteen letters, and so was Lee Harvey Oswald.”

“And John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln in a theater and fled to a warehouse, and Oswald shot Kennedy in a warehouse and fled to a theater.”

“See? I told you that there was some crazy stuff going on. I wonder if there’s anything like that with Dad.”

“I don’t know.” I was getting worried by Kate’s remarks. She’d been going on for several minutes now about assassinations, how Robert Lincoln, Abe’s son, had been present, or at least in the same vicinity, during three presidential assassination attempts. He’d been at the White House visiting his parents when his father was shot. He’d been at the Sixth Street Station when Garfield was shot. He’d been at the Pan American Exposition when McKinley was shot. Kate also said that fourteen out of forty-four presidents had assassination attempts made against them, fifteen if I counted her father, and some even more than once. In fact, just after Kennedy had been elected, some nutjob

had staked out his family mansion in Florida and packed his entire car full of explosives, waiting for JFK to leave so he could ram him with his car and blow both of them up. A suicide bomber before there was suicide bombers. Only thing that stopped him was that Jackie and Jack Jr. had been with Kennedy when he left. A normal conversation for anyone else, but, considering the context, I worried Kate was becoming obsessed. But, then again, she was drunk. Perhaps I was blowing this conversation out of proportion.

One of the other patrons caught my eyes as I looked around the room, and when he was certain I had noticed him, he motioned for me to lean toward him.

“Booth didn’t go to a warehouse, son,” he said. “He went to a tobacco farm, got himself killed in a barn.”

“Oh ho,” Kate said with a mouthful of crab. “I guess you don’t know everything, do you?”

“Yes, thank you,” I said to the man.

Kate polished off her third drink, and as she did, she reminded me of her father in an odd sort of way. Not so much in appearance, but in the manner in which she held herself, so sure that she was right.

“I knew that,” I said to Kate as she sawed into her prime rib and dipped a bite into a truffle horseradish.

“You knew what?”

“That Booth was caught in a barn, not in a warehouse.”

“Sure you did.” She cocked her head ear to shoulder, mocking me, and chewed with her mouth open.

After dinner I suggested we take a walk on the beach in front of our resort. I hadn't been able to summon enough courage to propose at the restaurant, so I'd suggested the walk as a last ditch effort for the night. The whole walk-on-the-beach thing was a cliché, I knew, but I had this fantasy of Kate and me, strolling hand-in-hand down the white, sandy beach, the Christmas trade winds blowing her hair around like dandelions, and our laughter in sync with the rhythmic waves crashing into the shore. At least we'd be like those other couples at the restaurant, carefree and in love, blindly happy. I understood this wouldn't make Kate forget about her father, how he had looked on the floor, his head blown to pieces, brain and skull fragments splattered against the hardwood floor. I knew it wouldn't bring him back or fill the void she felt by his absence. I wasn't delusional by any means. But I had this hope, this small glimmer of hope, that if we pieced together enough tiny, happy moments, eventually we would be, and all her despair would wash away in the surf.

But life isn't that convenient. Instead of a storybook walk-on-the-beach fantasy, a story to tell friends back home about my romantic proposal, Kate hiccuped and used her thumb to rub out a horseradish stain on her black dress as she zigzagged from surf to sand, complaining about the ungodly amount of seaweed left by high tide. Strands of wet, green moss clung to her sandals, and she dragged plants behind her like a person with toilet paper stuck to her shoe. She'd gotten quite drunk at dinner, three glasses of wine and Grand Marnier a piece. Before her father's death, I'd never seen Kate drunk. In the past few days, though, I'd seen her become inebriated twice, once in my room at

the Skirvin, although that night I had blacked out, too, and now tonight as she tried not to fall down from walking in the unsteady sand.

“You could switch me sides,” I said. “There’s no seaweed up here.”

“But I like to feel the water against my feet.”

“Why don’t you take your shoes off then? You’re ruining them.”

“Jesus, will you please stop worrying so much? I’ll just buy some more.”

“I’m just saying. I know you like them.”

“And I’m just saying that you’re sounding like my dad. Or worse, Kinsler.”

I shut up knowing I wouldn’t be able to argue with a drunk. Having spent the majority of my adult life in smoke-filled poker rooms where whiskey on the rocks and thousands of dollars in play were as common as chairs and light fixtures, I’d encountered alcoholics and users on an almost daily basis and knew that when under the influence I wasn’t dealing with a person any longer but a substance, and the substance doesn’t budge.

“Maybe tomorrow we could do some sightseeing,” I said. “There’s a Danish fort built in 1671 somewhere in Charlotte Amalia. It’s the oldest building in the USVI.”

“Oh my God, that sounds so *boring*. I want to go,” Kate hiccuped, “parasailing.”

“We could do that, too.”

“We can do that *first*.”

“Sure. Of course. Whatever you say.”

The moon reflected in the waters of the horseshoe-shaped bay, the Caribbean Sea in motion like a bed of floating diamonds. Mountains sheltered us from the bustle of the

island, the clubs and restaurants that made up the nightlife, just empty sailboats and the endless sea on one side, our resort built into the rock on the other, and sporadic room lights glowed like spectators. Save for a small gathering on the other side of the beach, I could spot no other evidence of people. There were only a few of them sitting around a bonfire, and I could hear faint drums beating just audible over the wind and surf. As we walked toward the ambient drumming, Kate bumped into me every few steps. Intentional or alcohol induced, I didn't care; the heat of her body felt comforting. I grabbed her around the waist and held her close as we walked, and I could smell the salt in her sweat, in the air, the hint of wine on her breath, feel bits of sand clinging to her forearm, and I started to become aroused. Her auburn hair had come loose and fluttered in the trade winds, blowing behind her, strands getting caught next to her smoky eyes. I took a deep breath, pulled the engagement ring out of my pocket.

“You know I love you, right?” I asked. It was the first time I'd ever said I loved her, and it was in the form of a question. Kate didn't even respond, and I felt so stupid.

I stopped walking and pulled her close. Kate bit her bottom lip and peered around us, then stuck her hands on my chest and fluttered her fingernails against my jacket's lapel. A piece of her auburn hair stuck to the shiny gloss. I pulled her closer, kissed her, and began to drop on one knee, but she grabbed the lapel of my coat and then shook her finger at me like she was scolding a child.

“Nuh-unh,” she said. “Not yet.”

Kate pushed away from me, her lips puckered now, cheeks sucked in as she snaked away from me and began to dance, her arms raised above her and tangled like a

corkscrew, hips gently rocking from side-to-side. Adrenaline rushed through me. My stomach churned with anticipation of her in my arms, the way her smooth skin would feel against mine, her touch, her salty taste, the smell of the sea and sand as we made love.

“Come here,” I said as I reached into my pocket. “I want to say this.” She continued to dance and held out her hand for me to take it. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Kate. I love you so much, and I need to ask you a question.” I grabbed her hand and was about to drop on one knee again when she pulled away, smiled mischievously, and dashed into the water.

“Come get me,” she yelled.

“That’s not funny, Kate.” She kept running, kicking beads of water up behind her, then dove into the dark water. I immediately lost sight of her. “Kate?”

I scanned the ocean, searching for her hair, her arms, her hands, her head, anything, the water churned by someone struggling. Panic set in. Kate was too drunk to be swimming, but I couldn’t just jump in blind. I’d never be able to locate her once I was in the water. Visibility was too low, my swimming too weak. I had to spot her first, then go straight to her. I started counting in my head. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, trying to remember how long someone can hold their breath before suffering permanent brain damage, the worst possible scenarios popping into my head, Kate was trying to commit suicide in front of me, not trying but succeeding, some sick twisted suicidal fantasy, so she drug me out here on a faux-vacation to get drunk enough to have the courage to pull off her sacrifice, yes sacrifice, to punish me, to teach me a lesson, for what I didn’t know, so that I would swim out to her, lungs overflowing with seawater and

body bloating from exposure and bring her back to shore where I would stand over her dead body just as I had done with her father when after eight seconds had lapsed, I spotted two arms flailing above the water like windshield wipers, a little moving bump, her head, slowly making its way to deeper waters. Panic, a feeling I knew well, flooded through me; my fight-or-flight response jumpstarted. I ran after her, pumping my knees high so my shoes wouldn't get stuck in the sand. I ran with abandon, so engrossed in the chase that I ended up falling off the sandbar. Water shot up through my nostrils like a fountain as soon as I couldn't touch ground, and I swallowed saltwater. I kicked my legs and thrashed my arms and broke through the surface and spit and gasped for air, my nostrils and throat burning from the seawater.

“Kate? Where are you?” Silence. “Answer me!”

I swam to where I'd seen her, toward the key as hard as I could, a pain seared through my side almost immediately, my throat raw from the salt and screaming, my lungs burning from the little air I sucked through in little panicked bursts. I felt fatigue settling in, my limbs tingling, going numb, just dead weight extending out from my torso until I had to stop and tread water. I looked over the coal-black sea to find Kate's head or arms break the surface, but I couldn't locate her. A feeling came over me like an electric current, like every molecule of blood cascaded down the linings of my veins to my feet. I just knew she had drowned. I was certain of it.

“Kate?” I spit out water until I could scream. “Kate, please! Can you hear me?”

I continued on, fighting to catch my breath, to feel my feet kicking behind me, churning my shoulders and arms forward, pulling myself through the turbulent sea, until

my knee collided against coral. The tendrils sliced through my linen pants, and I could feel my flesh tear, little knives stab my nerve endings as the salt grated against the wound. The pain was terrible, so I floated on my back, exhausted and frightened.

“Eli? What’re you doing?” She was screaming and a ways off.

“Kate?” I treaded water, swiveled my head. “You’re alive? You’re alive! Thank God! Where are you? I can’t see you! Where are you?”

“Yeah, stupid. I’m over here.”

She was standing near the beach, waving her arms above her head to get my attention. I had never been so grateful. I hadn’t lost her. She hadn’t drowned. She wasn’t dead. Ecstatic, I followed her voice until I could touch sweet earth again. Kate stood, midriff deep, her arms wrapped around her shivering body.

“Jesus, are you guys okay?”

We were only about fifteen yards from the bonfire, and the six people—three guys and three girls—walked cautiously toward us. The one who had spoken, a young kid around Kate’s age wearing board shorts and a V-neck shirt, brought two towels with him and handed one to Kate and one to me.

“What in the hell were you doing out there?” he asked. He and his friends were obviously drunk. They wobbled in the sand as much as Kate did. “Don’t you know that shit is dangerous?”

“Swimming,” Kate said.

“Yeah, I got that.” He waved us over. “But why?”

Kate shrugged. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

We walked toward the fire. I couldn't put any weight on my leg, and with each step, more blood oozed down my shin and soaked my already wet socks. The heat of the fire felt good, though; despite the perpetual 85 degree temperature, the water was cold, and stepping out and drying slowly even colder.

"Looks like you got a little beat up out there," he said as he pointed to my leg.

"Hurt?"

"It's killing me."

"I could help out with that, but I don't think you'll like what I have to say."

"How's that?"

"I whip out my sea turtle and spray it." The man grinned.

"Seriously?"

He nodded.

"I thought that was for jellyfish stings."

"It's for both."

The man stared at me, straight-faced, Kate stared at me, and so did all the others. He didn't seem to be joking. The others didn't look alarmed. And my knee throbbed as if it had been stabbed by a thousand needles.

"I don't know."

"It hurts, right?"

The cut hurt worse than I could've ever imagined. It wasn't deep, but it felt like fire ants burrowed inside my flesh and muscle tissue. I shifted my weight to my right

foot, but nursing the wound did little good. Blood poured down my leg and had soaked my pants and sock, and tiny bits of coral ran the length of the cut like an organic zipper.

“Okay.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, okay.”

He walked toward me and pulled his penis out through the hole in the front of his swimming trunks. This was the first time I had experienced anything remotely like this, and with the fire behind him, the man looked menacing, a black shadow against the inferno.

“The name’s Alfredo by the way,” he said. “Should be first name chums, now, right? Sit.”

I did, and he kicked my ankle out so that my left leg extended straight, and he let go a stream of piss right onto the wound. As soon as the first drops landed, it felt like my leg burst into flames. Everything flashed red, then white. I couldn’t hear the fire crackle, couldn’t taste the salt on my lips, couldn’t feel anything but the hot iron scolding every cell from ankle to hair follicle. The man burst out laughing, a deep guttural crow, and so did everyone else. Including Kate.

“Never let a stranger pee on you, man. Your mom never taught you that?”

My only response was a scream. I ran out into the water and cupped my hands and splashed the wound until the burning cooled and my vision stopped flashing like a torn 15mm reel.

“I’m sorry, man.” Alfredo walked out toward me, arms outstretched and palms up as a sign of appeasement, or perhaps supplication, I couldn’t tell which. “That was not funny. Come. Come. Join us. What’s your name?”

“Jesus Christ, why would you do that?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Tell me your name.” He continued to flash his smile at me, and his eyes lit up orange with flames.

“Let’s go, Kate.”

She pulled the towel tighter around her shoulders and sat in the sand in front of one of the drums and began to beat on it. “I don’t want to go yet.”

“See. She’s having fun. How come you don’t want to have any fun?”

“You just peed on me, man.”

“In all fairness you said it was okay. And I already apologized.”

“Come on, Kate. This isn’t funny.”

One of the other men, a beard down to the middle of his chest and thick dreadlocks pulled back into a ponytail, leaned next to Kate and began hitting the drum, showing her a few beats and then letting her copy. She looked unsteady as she concentrated on his slender hands. Her chin drooped to her chest and her lip hung low and her eyes were slits. I started to walk toward her, but Alfredo blocked my path.

“Listen, I’m sorry I did that. It was stupid, and she’s fine, man. In good hands. Have a seat with me over here. Have one drink. At least until you’re dry.”

For a moment I considered leaving Kate here—I knew I wouldn’t be able to convince her to leave with me—but decided against it. I didn’t know these people, and

while they didn't seem dangerous, they didn't seem all that friendly either. Alfredo had just pissed on me.

"One drink," I said. "Then we have to go."

I took a seat next to Alfredo and sipped on a beer he handed me. Kate continued to beat on the drum with the dreadlocked guy, and he started to dance a little next to her. Kate smiled and drummed with a little more enthusiasm. Despite the circumstances, it was good to see her smile.

"Vacation, huh?" Alfredo asked.

I nodded.

"That's cool, that's cool. That's how I ended up here. Came on a vacation three years ago and never left."

I reached into my pockets so I could pull them out and have them dry by the fire when I noticed Kate's engagement ring was missing. "Oh shit." I stood, panicking.

"No, no, no."

"What dude, what?" Alfredo asked.

"Fuck, where is it?"

Everyone stared at me, including Kate. They all looked confused, except for the girls. They were laughing at me as I continued to check my empty pockets, hoping beyond hope the ring would materialize as if by magic.

"What's your problem, man?"

"I lost it."

"What'd you lose?"

Kate had stopped drumming and was watching me, an odd expression on her face, like she was embarrassed of me. “Nothing. Nothing. Nevermind.”

“Here,” Alfredo said. “I got something that’ll make you forget all about it.” He reached into a backpack that was on the towel we’d been sitting on and pulled out an Altoids can. “This will make all your problems disappear.” He opened the tin. Inside were six pills of all different colors.

“What’s that?”

“Your problem solver.”

“Seriously, what is this?”

“MDMA, man. X. What you’ve been looking for.”

“I’m fine. Thanks.”

Kate hopped up and stumbled over to us. “Ecstasy, huh?” She grabbed one of the pills and examined it under the firelight. It was blue and about 100 milligrams, and it had some pink writing on top of it, but I couldn’t make out what it said.

“What’re you doing?” I asked. I reached for the pill, but she swiveled out of my way.

“What?” Kate said. “We’re on vacation. Lighten up a bit.” She popped the pill into her mouth and chewed it like candy. This would make the drug release quicker into her bloodstream.

“Atta girl,” Alfredo said. “I knew you guys were cool as soon as I saw you.” He held the tin up to me. “Eh?” he said as he shook it back and forth, like he was enticing a toddler with a pacifier.

Drugs had always scared me. I'd had friends that snorted coke in order to stay at the poker table longer, sometimes going on twenty hour stretches, doing bumps off their house keys in the bathroom, sometimes having to do so much so as not to cool their hot streak that their noses started to bleed. I never wanted to be like those guys, the burnouts who took too many chances, until they ended up broke and homeless and an addict begging for someone to bankroll them so that they could get in the next tournament, telling whoever would listen that they had a win in them, they could feel it. But one time wouldn't make me like them. Not if I just did it this once, with Kate. Maybe she was right; maybe I did need to lighten up.

It didn't take long for the drug to take effect. First my flesh began to tingle, then the feeling intensified so that it felt like my skin moved in waves. Every sensation intensified. The sand on my bare feet felt wonderful, like a thousand tiny fingers massaging me. I had the overwhelming sensation to dance, to hug everyone, to tell them that I loved them. I felt so close to Alfredo, to Kate, to the rest of them, like they were my closest confidants. The dreadlocked guy, his name was Frank, beat on the drums as the rest of us danced around the fire, laughing and twirling one another and having the best time of our lives.

After awhile, I wasn't sure how long, Kate and I collapsed next to the fire. My body, I knew, should've been exhausted, legs sore from stomping around the beach, but I wasn't. I was so ecstatically happy and felt so wonderful. My body still tingled, and everything, the fire and stars and palm trees vibrated as though they felt just as I did.

I loved Kate so much in that moment, more than humanly possible. I held her close to me, and she rubbed her hand down my bare chest.

“I love you,” she said.

This was the first time she’d ever said this to me. She could’ve said it because of the drugs, but I didn’t care at that moment; I was going to finish what I’d planned to do when the night started, ring or no. “Kate,” I said. “I love you, too. I know this is kind of a weird time to ask, but will you marry me?”

Kate smiled. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. I’m totally serious. I was going to ask earlier, but then you took off swimming. What the hell was that all about anyway?”

She laughed. “Hell if I know. I thought it might be fun and romantic. Midnight swim under the stars. But it was pretty stupid, huh?”

“Yeah. I lost your ring out there.”

She pushed me. “Shut up, you did not.”

“I did. It’s gone.”

She laughed so hard she snorted. “So you lost my engagement ring and you got peed on. Great night so far, huh?”

“Well, what’s your answer?”

“You’re really serious, aren’t you?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Okay,” she said. “Sure.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. Yeah. Sure. Why not? I’ll marry you.”

5

The next morning we went ring shopping. We found a jewelry store in downtown Charlotte Amalia called Ballerina's, a narrow place that rose slightly up the mountain. The slant was difficult to notice, but a child spilled a red, syrupy drink as we walked in, and the liquid slid down the grooved grout toward the sidewalk. The young mother shook the boy's wrist and scolded him and the boy's cheeks puffed red and his chin quivered and the father kept trying on gold pinky rings. The young child sniffled and moaned, and the mother said, "you be quiet right now," and the boy continued to cry and the woman lifted the boy into the air and spanked his butt, saying "sorry about this," to the man behind the counter as the father asked what type of stone was located in the middle of the ring on his finger.

I smiled at the passing mother and scanned the engagement rings near the entrance. An Indian man wearing a white gold chain around the tufts of his chest hair approached. He had a friendly face, well-fed and jolly with a bushy mustache like a broom framing his smile. By the way he looked at me I could tell he was sizing up the heft of my wallet.

“Ready to pop the question, huh?” he asked. “That’s a big step. Mighty big step.”

“Oh he’s already asked,” Kate said.

The man looked at us oddly. “You asked without a ring?”

“It’s a long story.” Kate looped her arm around mine and rested her head on my shoulder.

There were so many rings to choose from. Yellow gold. White gold. Double bands. Platinum. Princess cut. One carat. Two carat. Three.

“Congratulations are in order then.”

“Thanks,” Kate said.

A hundred rings must’ve been encased there, each of them unique in one way or another. Some had diamonds embedded in the bands, and some had rocks as large as marbles, and others looked as small as the head of a needle.

“Do you see any you like?” the salesman asked.

Kate scanned through the case, moving slowly from left to right. She examined each ring carefully, putting her sunglasses on top of her head and squinting as she studied each one. She was much more particular than when I’d picked out her ring a month before. I really had no idea what I’d been doing. I went to Zale’s at the mall, and a lady old enough to be my grandmother helped me. She informed me that I was supposed to spend the equivalent of three month’s salary on a ring. Being a poker player, that formula didn’t really apply. Some months I could score big, take home ten grand or more, sometimes I would go months without even breaking even, like lately. According to the

tradition, that would've put my range anywhere between zero and \$30,000. I ended up picking out a simple ring, a white gold band with a one carat princess cut diamond.

Kate pointed out five different rings to the salesman, and each one varied wildly from the one I'd lost in the ocean. While each of them was white gold, the resemblance ended there. The rocks on each one were huge with diamonds across the bands so that the light refracted against them and shot rainbows out like an optical effect. Each had a little white sticker looped around the bands, the price tag.

She tried the first one on and held her hand up to examine it. "What do you think?" she asked.

"You want something that...gaudy?" I asked.

"This is not gaudy," she said. "It's gorgeous."

"It really is," the salesman said.

"I don't know," I said.

"We make all of our rings right here. You won't be able to find these anywhere else." The salesman shook his finger at me, much like the way Kate had the night before just before she sprinted out into the sea.

"That's great," I said.

"The clearest stones around."

"How much is it?" I asked.

"That one? Let me see here." He took the ring from Kate, and peered at the tag.

"This one here is \$8,000."

"Jesus Christ."

The salesman pulled out a calculator. “Now we may be able to cut you a little deal.”

Kate grabbed my hand. “Is that too much?”

“No. No, not at all,” I lied. “I was just surprised, that’s all. I heard jewelry was cheaper here.”

The truth was that I didn’t even have that much in my bank account. I’d been getting cold cards lately at the table, had lost upwards of \$15,000 the last three months, and then Kate’s last engagement ring had put me back a couple of grand, leaving me with only about \$6,000 left. I would have to buy the thing on credit, which already had a hefty balance on it because of my extended stay at the Skirvin. But I couldn’t bring myself to tell Kate the truth. I didn’t want to seem like a cheapskate or, worse yet, completely broke.

The salesman finished calculating. “We could do this ring for \$7,200. That’s ten percent off.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Still seems a little steep.”

“You won’t find a better deal on the island.”

Kate peered up at me as if pleading. This was the ring she really wanted, and I knew she wasn’t used to being told no. Her father had always bought her everything she wanted—a car, a nice house, thousands of dollars in clothes and jewelry—and I wanted to be able to do the same for her.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll take it.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Kate jumped up and down, wrapped her arms around me, and planted a wet kiss on my cheek.

When we walked out of the store onto the narrow cobbled street, all the tourists and shopkeepers had turned their eyes to the sky. I was confused at first; everyone seemed so frightened. Jaws hung open like doors ripped from their hinges, hands covered mouths to stifle screams, children clung to their father’s legs for protection. Hundreds of people stood frozen, fingers pointing overhead as though a jumper stood on the windowsill of a skyscraper, one-hundred floors up, flames licking the air behind her. I didn’t want to look. But I couldn’t stop myself. An orange, dirty fog drifted low from the southeast, like smoke, blocking out the sun and approaching us like the coming of the plague. I expected to hear the buzz and screeches of locusts, lepers to be marching underneath in pain from boils, frogs to rain down from the clouds, but after a few seconds of it lazily sailing in the trade winds, the fog erased the clear blue of the sky and drops of ash like snowflakes fell upon us.

Montserrat, a British owned island located a few hundred miles east southeast from St. Thomas, had erupted, sending volcanic ash up into the stratosphere like a mushroom cloud. The trade winds carried the ash to St. Thomas, and the streets and roofs were soon covered, our balcony at the Elysian blanketed, the sea turned a murky mauve. Sunlight like seen through a screen door filtered through, and the periodic rain showers turned the gutters into sludge, the sidewalks and beaches swathed in a slimy film. It coated my lungs and made me choke on grimy, brown phlegm. It was miserable.

Most of the tourist activities had been closed or shut down. The fort I'd wanted to visit, all boats that we could charter, the sky lift that took us up to the top of the mountain. So Kate and I sat at a beach-front restaurant having lunch and sipping on bushwhackers as she examined her ring with a huge smile on her face. Besides when inebriated, this was the first time I'd seen Kate truly happy since her father's death. I wanted to remember this moment, so I reached into my pocket and grabbed my digital camera.

Kate covered her face. "Don't you dare," she said. "I look terrible."

"You do not. Stop it." She did look a little haggard. She was hung over and sleep-deprived. We'd partied with Alfredo and his friends until sunrise and then crawled our way back to our room and passed out fully-clothed. "One picture, please."

"No. Absolutely not."

"All right fine. It's away. You can uncover your face now."

She did, and I snapped the picture. She picked up a handful of French fries and threw them at me. "You asshole. Delete that right now."

"Never."

She stood and tried to wrestle the camera from my hands, laughing the entire time, but she wasn't able to budge it loose. "You're such a butthead. You better not show that picture to anybody. Ever."

"I won't, I won't. I promise."

She sat back down, fished around in her purse, pulled out a prescription bottle, and dropped a pill into her hand. It was the same white pill I'd seen her take the night her father was murdered.

“What are those?”

“Pain meds,” she said. “I've already told you that. For my back.”

“I know. But what are they? Tylenol 2. Percocet. What?”

She shrugged and put the bottle back into her purse. “Something my doctor gave me.”

“How'd you hurt your back anyway?”

“What's with the interrogation?” She slurped down the last of her bushwhacker and held the empty up to get our waitress's attention. “You're starting to sound like Kinsler, and it's really starting to piss me off.”

“I'm not trying to act like Kinsler. I was just wondering. Christ.”

Kate rolled her eyes and then peered out the window toward the bay. The scene had changed drastically in just a day. Instead of a shimmering paradise, the bluest ocean, sandy white beaches, piercingly green rainforest, and brightly painted stucco buildings, the entire island looked like a disaster area. Brown ash and sludge covered everything. Locals took the volcanic eruption better than the tourists, of course; they'd seen this before. But in the red faces from the upper forty-eight, I could see a tinge of fear in their eyes, as if condemning themselves for taking this trip, giving in to temptation, to gluttony, to lust, as if they themselves, their sins, had brought about the end of days. That was the problem with some people. They over-inflate their ego, turning themselves into

some sort of demigod whose simplest actions, taking a vacation for instance, could possibly alter world events. They can't seem to realize their own unimportance in the world.

"I slipped and fell, okay?" Kate said. "At some stupid thing for my dad. He'd been so mad at me because I'd messed up one of my speeches, and I'd tried to get out of there as fast as I could, and I was running in heels, and I fell. Doctor gave me Percocet."

"May I see it?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. You just seem kind of defensive about it."

"You think I'm lying?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I mean you went for a swim and danced for hours last night, and that didn't seem to bother you."

"My back is bothering me, Eli. That's why I'm taking the freaking pill. God, is this how it's always going to be with you? One minute you're all sweet, the next you're accusing me of lying?"

"I'm just saying it's not adding up is all."

"I got to go to the bathroom."

Kate threw her white napkin onto the table and stormed off, and I immediately felt guilty. The few others that were in the restaurant, all tourists like ourselves, shot me curious glances from their peripherals. I was sure they'd recognized Kate despite her change in hair color. They were probably judging me, thinking that I was an asshole.

Her father had just died for Christ's sake, and here I was haranguing her for simple prescription pain medication.

Kate returned after a few minutes. She appeared paler than when she'd left, her cheeks and lips even a tinge bluish. She'd probably been crying.

"I'm sorry, Kate," I said. "I really am. I'm really sorry for that."

"Don't worry," she said. "I've already forgotten it."

Our waitress had informed us that there still was an attraction open if we wanted to try: The Atlantis Submarine. So Kate and I stood amongst twenty others on a pier in Grand Harbor waiting for a boat to shuttle us to the submarine about a hundred yards out into the bay. Ash still fell like snowflakes around us, spotting the water like soot after a fire. The flakes got in my eyes and mouth and tasted like dirt and salt. It was such a dull day; much like a winter in Oklahoma, grey and windy and unusually warm. Kate leaned against me, a big floppy straw hat on despite the lack of sun.

"Can we just go back to the room?" she whispered.

"Let's try to have some fun, okay?" I slipped my arm around her shoulders and noticed she was shivering a bit. Without the Caribbean sun blaring down on us, the temperature had dropped to the mid-seventies, but she shouldn't have been shivering that much. "I don't want this damn volcano to ruin our vacation."

"But I'm really not feeling well."

"You'll feel better once we got on the submarine. I promise. You'll be having so much fun, you'll perk right up."

The boat returned, and it was our turn to get shuttled. Kate and I got in and sat near the front. Most of the others who joined us were couples like us, many of whom were young with small children. The kids were having a blast in this weather, clapping at the falling ash flakes and some even sticking out their tongues to catch them despite their parents' protestations. All the adults appeared annoyed, much like Kate, having spent thousands of dollars on this vacation only for this to happen. I couldn't blame them. I was sure if I had a mirror, I would find that my expression was exactly the same.

The captain got us loaded and zipped out against the surf at a much higher rate of speed than I'd anticipated. Each of us jarred at the acceleration, causing us to slide on the rubber seat pads so quickly that a small lady at the end nearly crashed to the floor. The ash and wind whipped past us, and Kate's hat caught flight and flew off into the harbor. She grabbed her head, turned, and watched her hat bob in the waves.

"Looks like I'm not the only one who's lost something in the ocean this trip," I said.

"What?" she yelled.

"I said it looks like I'm not the only one who's lost something."

"I can't hear you!"

"Never mind!"

We slowed and anchored near another pier. The tip of the submarine protruded from the murky water, its fin and slender, cylindrical hull covered in ash. One at a time we climbed atop the hull and then down a ladder into the cabin. Inside was one long bench with seven circular windows on each side. We spread out as much as we could,

but we were cramped shoulder-to-shoulder. Kate and I were in the middle of the group, children on either side of us. The captain who drove us over shut the hatch, and we could hear the lock twirl in place with a jolt.

“Good morning, adventurers!” a voice boomed over static-y speakers. “Thank you so much for joining us today, and we hope you have a good time. Soon we will submerge to a depth of 100 feet and you will be witnessing live sharks and stingrays in action. The trip takes about 45 minutes altogether and please turn off your flashes if you plan to take pictures. Enjoy!”

The submarine lurched forward, then downward at a slight angle. As soon as we broke the surface, the cabin went dark. There were no lights inside, and no lights outside. The sun couldn't penetrate the ash floating atop the surface, leaving us in total darkness. I could already hear whimpers and calls to Mommy from the smaller children, a few others gasped. Once we were at a certain depth, though, lights flashed on outside the hull, sending beams of yellow out into the water. I couldn't really make out anything at first, but then coral and fauna came into view. It was a startling sight, really. Seeing only a small portion, like roaming dots of sea life, cast an odd feeling over the scene. The ocean seemed even more mysterious witnessed like this, and a little more frightening.

Schools of tiny fish, their scales reflecting the light from the submarine like darting kaleidoscopes, shot in and out of view. One moment they'd be there, the next gone, almost as if they'd disappeared. I wondered what they thought of the light, if it scared them, or simply attracted them much like a fly or a moth to a porch light. I imagined the latter because they kept coming back into view. If they were scared, they

would've darted off, their fight-or-flight instinct taking hold. Yet they didn't. They kept appearing and then disappearing over and over as if they couldn't quite decide if they wanted to stay in the light or not. Then again, I couldn't be certain that these were the same fish. They all looked the same to me.

The children on either side of us were so excited they kept pushing their way up to the windows and putting their hands on the glass, but their parents would grab them and make them sit down in the darkness once again. But since we'd gone underwater, the cabin had turned quiet. The only sounds were faint breathing and the occasional click of a camera.

"This is amazing," I whispered to Kate.

She didn't respond.

Soon we came up on a shipwreck. The announcer told us it was a Spanish ship that had crashed in the late 19th century and had been carrying a cargo of sugar, molasses, and gold coins, payment for their exports such as horses and furniture and fashion for the gentry. The wood had rotted over the last century-plus, giving the ship a ghostly air. Many of the boards were missing, and the mast had been snapped in half, the mermaid on the bow armless and faceless. It was a sad and eerie sight.

Then, within the ship's hull, I spotted movement between missing boards. It was just a flash, but I saw it clearly: a tail and back fin, slits of gills. It had been a shark. I leaned closer to the window, hoping to get another look. We circled the bow, the armless and faceless woman peering back at us, then we turned the corner. A gaping hole greeted us on the other side, and there, floating and facing us, was a giant shark.

Even the adults gasped. It had to have been 13 or 15 feet long, and its eyes spanned two feet apart. We crept further away from the hole, and the shark followed us, staying in the spotlight the entire time. Turned to us like this, its eye looked as though it peered at us, as if studying us, wondering exactly what we were and what we wanted. I'd never experienced anything like it before or since, a predator not preying, only curious.

We left the ship behind us, the shark still following us until the coral and reef came into view again. We then broke the surface, the dull grey of the day filtered through the windows, and we could once again see inside the hull. Sitting next to me, her head resting against our neighbor's child's shoulder was Kate, passed out cold.

I was able to wake Kate and, with the help of the Atlantis' staff, lift her out of the submarine. She slept during the shuttle back to land and leaned against me as we walked the wooden pier to hail a cab. The whole trek back to the street, Kate could hardly keep her eyes open or take any steps. She drooled a little onto my shirt, leaving a dark pool where the ash collected. The other Atlantis patrons stared at us, shot me weak smiles as if to apologize for my having to take care of a drunk, and I smiled weakly back, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

"How many Percocet did you take?" I whispered to her, hoping no one else heard.

Kate didn't respond, only moaned. She'd had three drinks during lunch. I tried to think if only one pill would have this effect. Kate was a small girl, only about 5'3" and a hundred pounds, and the bartender had made our drinks so strong that they could've been

classified as a fire hazard. Add that on to the night before and Kate being unconscious wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

Kate and I climbed aboard an open cab to take us back to the resort. Many of the Atlantis patrons joined us in the bed of the truck, filling the four rows of benches so that we were packed in tight. Next to Kate and me sat a young couple. The woman was so tan she looked orange and leathery, her husband or boyfriend was overweight, and I could smell the sweat cascading out his pores.

“Is that Kathryn Cook?” the lady whispered to me.

“I'm sorry?” I said.

“Oh, excuse me. How rude. I'm Janice. This is my husband Dave.” We shook hands to formally meet. “Isn't that Kathryn Cook?”

I looked down to Kate. Her head rested against my shoulder, mouth open. Bits of ash clung to her moist lips. She was beginning to scare me. She wasn't responding to anything; she was just dead weight having to be carried.

I smiled to Janice and her husband. “No. She gets that a lot, though.”

“The resemblance is just uncanny. Except for the hair of course.”

I chuckled, trying to seem calm and unworried. “I think she actually did that so she wouldn't look so much like Kathryn.”

“Oh,” Janice and Dave both laughed. “Well, in that case.” Janice acted like she zipped her mouth shut. “Is she okay?”

“Oh yeah. Just a little too much to drink and too little sleep I think.”

“Well,” Dave said. “That sounds like every vacation I've ever been on.”

The cabbie dropped Kate and I off in front of our resort, and I told Dave and Janice goodbye, thanked them for the offer to help carry Kate, but told them I could handle it back to the room. I carried her as if we were crossing the threshold across the parking lot and up the three flights of stairs to our room. Once I was able to get the door open, I plopped Kate onto the bed and checked her pulse. Her skin burned, and I couldn't find her heartbeat. I started to panic. I slid my fingers up her neck, from one side to the next and back, but felt nothing. I checked her wrist, still nothing. I placed my ear next to her nostrils. Breath. Faint, and too slow. But there. She breathed, thank God. But her skin had turned a pasty pallor beaded in sweat, almost like a clear paper cup covered in condensation.

Kate needed help. An ambulance. A doctor. Somebody other than me. Kate could die. Kate's skin turned pink, like the first signs of sunburn. I placed my palm on her forehead. Fever. A terrible fever.

I picked Kate up and put her into the bathtub and ran the coldest water, cupped my hands underneath the spigot and splashed water onto her face and shoulders, yelling, "Kate, wake up. Can you hear me? Kate, please, wake up." I sounded so much like she had when her father had been shot. And just like the Governor, she offered no response. Her tongue hung loose from the corner of her mouth. Did it look purple? It did. It was purple and swollen with globs of white spittle sticking to it like tiny threads of cotton.

I walked back into the bedroom, trying to get my bearings, to think of what I would do next. If Kate died, I'd be the one forever linked to her death. I'd turn into a conspiracy theory. Present at the Governor's death. Present at his daughter's death. I'd

become a Wikipedia entry. I'd become the modern day Robert Lincoln. He'd been at the White House, just down the street from the Ford Theatre, when his father was shot. He'd seen Garfield get shot at Sixth Street Train Station. He'd been at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo when McKinley died.

Water seeped from the bathroom and spread across the tile floor. At first I was confused. Why would there be water? But then I realized I'd left the water running and Kate, unconscious, inside the tub. Her head was completely submerged when I returned, and tiny air bubbles leaked to the surface. I turned off the faucet and grabbed Kate and pulled her back up to air. In my panic I'd almost killed Kate. Oh my God, I'd almost killed my fiancée. I wasn't able to handle this.

I was about to dial 911 from the room phone when from Kate's throat I heard a noise like water stalled through a clogged drainage pipe. Green bile oozed out of her mouth and dribbled down her chin, and she started to choke. She wore no expression, only the soft spot of her neck convulsed, and the green bile flew in chunks from her mouth and nose against the tile wall and my face and in her hair. I leaned her forward and beat on her back and dug my finger into her mouth and scooped the chunks out so she wouldn't asphyxiate. I was so scared, so petrified beyond belief, Kate was going to die right here, overdose on drugs and die in my arms, the second person in the matter of just a few days, my heart pounded in my chest so hard I thought it would burst through my ribcage, and I was screaming in my head for Kate to wake up please, but Kate was still puking so much, just green bile and chunks of lunch we'd eaten only an hour or two before, the chunks floated in the water, and more and more of the sludge drained out of

her like she was throwing up the dissolved remains of all her organs. But when she started to cry, I realized she would be okay.

6

Kate woke panicked about 4 in the morning, sweat-drenched and flailing her arms around, demanding to know where she was.

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” I grabbed her arms and held her tightly, trying to get her to calm down. “We’re in our hotel room. We’re on St. Thomas, remember?”

Kate gasped for air and slouched over so that her hair hung and shielded her face. She wheezed with each breath, like a person who has smoked for decades, yet I knew it was caused by the ash from the volcanic eruption.

“My head is killing me. Will you get me some water? Tylenol if we have any.”

I grabbed a glass and filled it from the bathroom faucet. It was tepid, but it was the best I was going to do. Kate gulped the entire glass, reached it back out toward me, and asked for more. After she drank the second glassful, she pulled her hair back and peered up at me. She looked confused and a little frightened.

“I don’t remember a thing,” she said.

“You scared the crap out of me. That’s what happened.”

“The last thing I remember was picking out my ring.” She grabbed for her hand and noticed that her engagement ring was missing.

“It’s in the bathroom. Don’t worry.”

“I feel like I’m on fire,” she said. “Like someone poured gasoline on me and lit a match.”

“Sssh.” I placed several pillows around her to keep her warm. “We’ll get through this together.”

“You’re so good to me,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Just go back to sleep.”

We lay there for a second. Both of us were quiet. I stared up at the ceiling, watching the fan blades lazily twirl. I doubted Kate would be able to go back to sleep; she’d already slept for close to fourteen hours. But I was exhausted. I’d stayed awake for as long as I could, watching Kate breathe, her chest move up and down, making sure that she didn’t stop, making sure she didn’t roll over to her back and vomit again. I’d been too petrified even to blink, until about three hours before when I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer, and I drifted off to sleep against my will.

“Can we leave tomorrow?” Kate asked. “I really just want to go home.”

Kate and I left St. Thomas later that morning, my lungs aching from breathing in so much ash, and landed back in Oklahoma City with less than a month before the Electoral College would cast their votes for the next President of the United States. Kate still didn’t feel well, so we kept a low-profile for that day and Friday. We took the phone

off the hook and watched reruns of Seinfeld and ate spaghetti and slept until noon and reminisced about her late night escapades slipping past her Secret Service detail until I got cabin fever and needed to get out of the house and play some cards. It had been over three weeks since I'd last played, and I felt an itch in my fingertips to feel cards in my hand, the felt as I raked in chips.

“Can't you just wait one more day?” Kate asked. “Go tomorrow. Just spend tonight with me, and then you can go out tomorrow night.”

“I would, but the games are weak on Sundays. Tonight the pots'll be huge.”

Kate pulled her knees up to her chin and grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch. “What time will you be home?”

“I don't know. Late probably.”

“Don't be too late, okay? Is midnight good?”

“Sure,” I said and kissed her on top of her head. “Midnight it is.”

My regular game was at a loft in Bricktown. It was a large room with red brick walls, ten poker tables, and no windows. The place never closed, and on any given night there could be upwards of a hundred grand in play. It was an illegal joint ran by a guy named Roland Spitzer, a gargantuan Hungarian that fronted his poker house and bookie business by a drycleaners downstairs. It wasn't the most original of fronts, but it worked, kept the police off his back. He was a good guy, too, always laughing, always supplying us with free booze or water or soda, always telling jokes, clean ones, like the ones found on bubblegum wrappers. That night he greeted me at the change station with a big bear hug and lifted me off the ground.

“Eli, you little shit. You’ve been gone too long.”

“I have Roland. I have.”

“Listen here,” he said. “I have a joke for you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah it’s funny, too.”

“Well, let me have it.”

“A dentist, a nurse, and an army general are flying. The dentist decides to drop a tooth brush out of the plane. The nurse drops down a medical kit, and the army general drops a bomb. They land the airplane and see what happened. First, they found a guy looking for his false teeth. Next they found a guy bandaging his wounds. Third they found a young boy laughing his head off. They ask him what happened, and he said, ‘My grandfather farted and blew up the house!’”

“That’s a good one, Roland.”

“Eh, not my best, but you know.” He scratched his bald head. “So how much you playing for this night?”

“Five.”

It was nearly my entire bankroll, but I couldn’t sit down at this place with any less. If I did, I would’ve just been pushed around by the biggest stacks, forced to play small-stack poker, and rely more on luck than skill. With as little money as I had to my name, I couldn’t take that risk.

I sat at the third table with a few familiar faces: Jackson, Bryson, and Haman. The other six at the table were strangers to me. Although I knew those three, they didn’t

really acknowledge my absence the past few weeks. We weren't buddies here at Roland's place, but we weren't enemies either. We were more like acquaintances, or colleagues in an office, cordial while here, but we'd never invite one to our backyard barbeque. Once we sat down we were clocked in, and we were nothing but business.

"Good to see you, Eli," Haman said. "I've been missing your money."

"I bet you have, Haman."

He was a large guy, not muscular, but built like a pear. He wore sunglasses, some sporty Oakley's, at all times despite the fact the lighting could be called dim at best, and his face had a canine appearance to it.

"Thought maybe you found Jesus or something and quit on us."

"Not yet, Haman. I think I misplaced him years back. Not even looking anymore."

The cards were dealt. The game was Omaha Hi-Lo. Each player gets four cards face down, two of which can be used in conjunction with the five community cards in the middle to form a five card hand. The top hand and the worst hand lower than Jack high, if there is one, split the pot. I had a pretty good hand: ace of hearts, jack of hearts, ten of clubs, and nine of clubs. I had flush, straight, and high pair possibilities. The blind, the amount of ante in order to play, was \$25, and Haman raised to \$125. It was a large raise; the average is only three times the blind. I called, and we saw the flop: seven of spades, jack of clubs, king of clubs. The flop treated me well; I had an up and down straight draw, four cards to a flush, and a pair of jacks.

“So I guess you’ll be at the WPT Thanksgiving Tournament at the Bellagio then,” Haman said.

“I want to. Ten large buy-in is pretty steep, though.”

I’d been planning to play all year, even had the date circled in my calendar at home. It was the biggest fall tournament in the world, only rivaled by the WSOP held every summer, the one where I’d gone home broke and busted without a single payout. All the big names were going to be there, and ESPN planned to televise it in weekly installments over the winter. A deep run guaranteed massive amounts of exposure, the possibility of an endorsement deal, and maybe even a fortune. The winner took home seven figures plus. I’d been salivating at what that could mean for me, oftentimes fantasizing late into the night of all the sports writers crowding in, snapping photographs of my smiling face as I held up my championship bracelet and my mound of cash. It would be the greatest feeling in the world. But I had to find the money to enter first.

Haman was the first to act. He played with his chips, doing tricks so that he shuffled them like a deck of cards one-handed. He grabbed two yellow chips worth \$200 each and splashed the pot. Another large bet, \$400 into a \$300 pot.

“Why so big?” I asked, trying to dig for information.

He didn’t answer, just sat there like a marble bust.

His big bet could mean several different possibilities: he could be throwing out a continuation bet, meaning the flop didn’t help so he’s throwing money at money trying to bluff me off the hand; he could have a draw, like me, so he’s trying to win the hand early by scaring me off with a big bet; or he may have a monster, hoping to get as much money

as possible. No matter what he held, though, it was a tough call. This was the first hand I'd played in weeks, and a call would already be 10% of my stack.

“Raise,” I said. I needed information, and the best way is to test your opponent.
“\$1200.”

Haman sighed and leaned back in his chair and pulled his sunglasses off his head. I'd never seen him do that before. He was either truly riled or he was acting, but Haman was no Oscar contender. But he wasn't one to let his emotions get the better of him at the table either, confusing me even more.

“Call,” he said.

The turn came: 2 of diamonds. It missed me completely, but couldn't have helped Haman either.

“Check,” he said.

He was riled. He was on a draw and missed with that card. I could take it down with a bet, I thought. “\$3,000.”

“All in,” Haman countered without hesitation.

I began to feel sweat forming around my brow. Everyone around the table stared at me, waiting for my next move. I'd already bet the majority of my stack, and it looked like Haman had set a trap, and I'd walked right into it like a fish. All my money gone in one hand, vamoosed, drained dry. I only had \$650 left, not enough to compete if I folded. If I called, though, I'd be broke. Yet I was pot committed.

“Call.”

We flipped our cards, and I was right. I was behind. He had the king of hearts and the king of diamonds, giving him three of a kind to my pair of jacks and a flush and straight draw. Yet I had outs. With the draws, I was actually ahead statistically. My breathing returned to normal, the dealer flipped the last card: 4 of clubs. I smiled, jumping up and down ecstatically inside but acting like I'd done this hundreds of times before outside, and raked in my chips, a cool \$10,000, enough for my buy-in at the WPT.

Kate was sitting up in bed when I opened the door, red and black throw pillows bunched around her like a fortress, and was telling someone goodbye on the phone. She looked like she was feeling a little bit better than she had the night before. A towel wrapped around her head, a white bathrobe on like she'd just taken a shower. Her skin appeared a tad jaundiced, though, the color of olives, her fingernails were jagged from being bitten, and her elbows had been scratched raw. And she looked pissed.

“You didn't come home last night,” she said.

“I know; I'm so sorry. I couldn't leave, though, I—”

“I don't want to hear it.”

“I know, I know, but I got some news,” I said as I sat on the corner of her bed.

“Great news in fact. You won't even care when—”

“We're having company tonight,” she said.

“Oh. Who?”

“A friend.” She unwrapped the towel around her head, revealing bright, almost neon green hair. She lay her head down, and her alien hair splayed out on the pillows like

silk drapery. “Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked as she grabbed her wrist like she desperately needed to, otherwise she would do something she would regret.

Blood lined the fingernail of her pinky finger.

“When did you do that?”

“Last night. Since you weren’t here, I occupied myself.” She picked dirt and dried blood from underneath her fingernails, rolled the residue into a ball, and flicked it onto the comforter. “Why? You don’t think it’s cool?”

“Cool?”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Do you not approve, *Kinsler*? Is this not what a politician’s daughter should look like?”

“Don’t call me that.” I reached out and grabbed her hand. “No. I like it. It’s just different.” Her skin was so dry, cracked and flaky, like reptile hide. “Who’s your friend that’s coming over?”

“You’ve never met her.”

“I’ve never met any of your friends.”

Kate had changed since we’d returned from the Caribbean. She’d used to be so energetic, compassionate, fun. I couldn’t blame her for being so short and agitated; after what she’d been through, she should be allowed to act however she wanted. And I didn’t want to be another *Kinsler* for her, always telling her how she should dress, how she should speak, what she should say, who she could associate with. I wanted to be her partner. But I missed the old Kate. I did. The one who used to surprise me in my hotel room naked with a chilled bottle of champagne and send me love notes while she was

away with her father. I missed the way she would touch me whenever she thought people weren't looking, steal a soft kiss on my neck, her breath tickling my earlobes when she thought there was a chance we could be caught. I missed that Kate, the spontaneous Kate, the loving Kate, the one that took risks and just simply had fun.

I waited for her to respond, but she didn't say anything, looked at the wall past me.

"Where's your engagement ring?" I asked.

"It hurt, so I took it off."

I scanned the room for it, but I didn't see it on her nightstand or her dresser or vanity. The bathroom light was off, so I couldn't see if it was on the counter in there. I didn't want to seem snoopy, smothering, or overzealous, so I tried to forget about it.

"I didn't throw it out," she said. "It just doesn't fit right, that's all."

"Okay. I didn't think you would've thrown it out." I put my hand on her leg. She hadn't shaved in awhile; hairs like a wire brush poked my flesh. "I won a lot of money. \$25,000. I was thinking maybe we could go on another vacation. Do it right this time. To Vegas. Stay at the Bellagio around Thanksgiving."

"No vacations."

I felt the blood drain to my feet. Now that I had the money, I really wanted to play in this tournament. It could make my career, be everything that I'd ever dreamed about. "You seem to be doing better." I rubbed her shin, and she flinched away from me.

"You did invite guests over tonight. And I—"

"Not guests. A friend is coming over."

“It could be good for us. Get us out of the house for a little while.”

Kate curled underneath the comforter, turning paler each second that ticked by, and pulled the blanket up to her chin even though sweat beaded around her hairline and cascaded down her temples. She looked like she would vomit at any moment. She kept swallowing repeatedly and breathing deeper and harder and she grimaced like she was in unbearable pain. A trashcan on the floor by the bed appeared empty, so she hadn't puked yet, or at least had cleaned it up to where I couldn't even smell it. But she felt bad enough to prepare for it. Yet she could go to Vegas with me. She could. She just needed to party a little less this time.

“It'll be fun,” I said. “I promise.”

“You didn't even want to go on the last one.” She hugged a pillow like a lover. “You just want to go out there and gamble. You don't need me to do that. If you want to go, just go. Didn't stop you last night.”

Although she was right, I didn't want to admit that just yet. She was already pissed off at me as it was. “Just think about it, Kate. Please. It would mean a lot to me.”

“Fine. I'll think about it.” Kate closed her eyes. “My friend will be here at seven for dinner.”

She showed up at 7:45. Her name was Melissa, and she was willowy and taller than I'd expected. Much taller. She looked down to me, could've placed her chin on my head in fact, and I hated her right away. As soon as she walked in the door, she squeezed Kate like they hadn't seen each other in years and sucked in her cheeks and patted the

back of Kate's head to comfort her. Kate gripped her tightly, wrapped her arms around Melissa's waist like she would never let go. I didn't know why this bothered me so much. I should've felt glad Kate had someone other than me as moral support, but I didn't. I wouldn't have called my disdain for Melissa jealousy, although it was close. There was just this familiarity between them, a selfless mutual tenacity about their relationship that made my bones feel sandpapered.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "Please, don't hate me. My boyfriend—you know how it is."

Kate flicked away Melissa's apology with her wrist. Another reason to hate Melissa: Kate forgave her so easily.

Melissa reached out and brushed the back of her hand through Kate's hair. "What have you done with your hair?"

They sat at the table while I brought in food from the kitchen. During the meal they caught up on old times as I watched on as a silent spectator. They gossiped about girls whose names I'd never heard before, about Denise who has yet another boyfriend, the fifth in two months, about Dr. Nitski, how he was leaving school after the semester ended because he had a script green-lighted by IFC, how Doug had been arrested for public drunkenness while trying to cut through campus back to his apartment. Neither one of them ate the meal I'd cooked. Kate didn't even feign interest in it, kept her hands below the table the entire time, bounced her knee up and down like she was nervous about something. Melissa pushed around the noodles with her fork after every other sentence or so, even speared a piece of penne a few times but never brought it to her

mouth. They both drank glass after glass of wine, and Kate chewed her hair and kept pushing her plate a little farther away from her every few seconds like the smell of something I had cooked made her nauseous until the plate was in the middle of table and she couldn't reach it anymore. Melissa rambled about an essay she was writing about sentimentality in Casablanca and how she suspected her boyfriend of cheating on her. Kate scratched and cringed.

“So what about you?” Melissa asked Kate. “Do you think you'll return to school next semester?”

“I don't think so. Not yet.”

Melissa nodded in understanding, but I wanted to ask why and for how long and what're your plans once you graduate, but I couldn't bring myself to. Speaking with her old friend, Kate seemed genuinely happy for the first time since we'd been back from St. Thomas, and I didn't want to do or say anything that might jeopardize that. Besides, since we'd been together, the important questions we eluded, because, I thought, we had been each other's escape from our pressing lives. With her I didn't have to worry about my cold streak at the card table or how I was going to get enough scratch to enter the next big tournament, and with me she didn't have to think about school, finals, papers, how her life would change if her father won the presidency, or if he lost. We hadn't ever spoken of building a life together or how we would make us work once she graduated and found work in New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. We hadn't spoken of two-and-a-half kids and a dog and a white picket fence. We had been this tucked away secret that gave our relationship a flare, a spark of criminality that was all our own. Now that we

were engaged that dynamic changed, of course. We needed to discuss our plans with each other; our lives were no longer separate but equal. They were unavoidably conjoined.

“So I take it the film’s on hiatus, then?” Melissa asked.

“What film?” I asked.

“My senior capstone,” Kate said. “The film Melissa and I’ve been working on for the past year-and-a-half. I told you about this.”

Of course, yes, she’d told me about the film, before her father had been murdered, about Governor Haskell and the true story of the great seal caper, how the myth had grown over the years from a legislative referendum to an actual theft, fueled by the bitter jealousy and hurt felt in Guthrie.

“About the State Seal being stolen from Guthrie and moved to Oklahoma City in the middle of the night?” Kate said. “The change of the capitol city?”

“Yeah, of course. Sorry,” I said.

Her expression showed she didn’t believe that I remembered; her eyebrows furrowed, and her mouth puckered like she was biting her tongue.

“Seriously,” I said. “I forgot for one second.”

“Anyways,” Kate turned back to Melissa. I don’t know. I want to keep working. Maybe it would help me take my mind off of everything that’s been going on. Plus, it’s not fair to you. You need it to graduate, too.”

“No rush,” Melissa said. “Anytime you’re ready.” An awkward vibe settled over the table. Melissa opened another bottle of wine, the third already, and topped off each of

our glasses. “I can’t believe this is the first time I’ve gotten to meet you, Eli,” she said in an obvious attempt to change the topic. “Kate’s told me so much about you over the past, well, how long have you two been together now?”

“I don’t know,” Kate said with a shrug and perfunctory animosity toward me. “A while.”

“A little over a year,” I said.

“But that was mostly just sex, apparently. It’s not like you listened to anything I had to say.”

“Kate!”

“What? I don’t hide anything from Melissa.”

Melissa hunched her shoulders and stared into her merlot, took a couple of quick drinks, and tried to appear smaller, like she was hiding.

“We’re getting married,” I said.

Melissa squealed and clapped her hands together and pumped her knees like a child on Christmas morning. She embraced Kate, like the life-altering decision had occurred between the two of them and not between Kate and me.

“Okay, okay, okay spill it,” Melissa said. “Have you set a date? Oh, can I be a bridesmaid? Where’s it going to be?”

“We haven’t really talked about it yet,” Kate said. “It’ll probably be a long engagement. Late next summer at the earliest.”

“This is so excit—”

“I was thinking we could get married right away,” I said. “The sooner the better.”

“Don’t you think that’s something we should discuss privately?” Kate asked.

“But the sex remark is fit for anyone to hear?”

“Don’t start with me, Eli. Not right now.”

“Fine.”

I grabbed their plates—they weren’t eating their food anyways—and took them to the kitchen to wash. The food I tossed down the garbage disposal, and the whirring of the blades drowned out the conversation from the other room. Before I said anything I regretted, I needed to retreat and calm myself. Kate had just experienced traumas that would’ve broken most people. We both had. Her father had been murdered right in front of us. The image of which, the gaping wound, the crimson blood as thick as syrup, bits of brain like ground beef, replayed itself in my mind like a looped reel. And I was sure Kate saw that scene, too, every time she closed her eyes. She needed space and time to grieve, to process what had happened to her, and I needed to respect that. I needed it, too. I hadn’t always been respectful of others, especially when I felt wronged by them. As I scrubbed crusted marinara sauce, I remembered years before, right before my father’d kicked me out of the house, my mother had found and accidentally bent the corner of my signed copy of Ace on the River by Barry Greenstein. The book was priceless, and I had worked eighteen months at a flower shop to afford it, buy it from a rare book collector who had hit hard times. Mom, feeling terrible of course, told me right away, adding that she didn’t approve of the book since it was about poker but that I could keep it. I didn’t speak to her for days. I felt bad about it; she looked so sad during that time, like she had

been convicted to death for a crime she didn't commit. I don't even remember now if I ever apologized. But I knew I didn't want to hurt Kate like that.

I walked back into the dining room as Kate tilted her head back, a glass of wine inches from her lips, and swallowed. An orange prescription bottle sat on the tablecloth between Melissa and Kate, but before I could see what it was, Melissa stuffed it back into her purse and smiled, a toothy, crooked grin full of guilt.

"Maybe," Kate cringed; the pill must've gotten caught in her throat, "you could tell Melissa some poker stories."

The pill could've been anything from a prescription pain reliever like Tylenol 2 to methadone. I had no way of knowing unless I forced Melissa to show me the bottle. But I didn't want to fight with Kate any longer. I was too tired, downright exhausted in fact. So I did the only thing I could think of: I sat down and told Melissa about the time I'd bluffed Phil Hellmuth, the greatest living Hold 'Em player in the country, and the time I bet a friend he wouldn't live in the Caesar's bathroom for a week (he'd only lasted four days, winning me a grand) and about the time when Kate surprised me outside of Austin, Texas, when I'd been down there for a tournament. She'd found me at a buffet line and was flirtatious that entire afternoon. Every opportunity that arose she would touch me. Put a fingertip against my wrist, loop her arm around mine when I offered to grab a plate of food for her, wipe potato salad from the corner of my mouth with her thumb. I told Melissa that I had known from that moment on I loved her. And probably always would.

To Melissa's credit, she was attentive during my stories, even engaged, asking me questions to clarify, smiling sweetly when I spoke of Kate. If she hadn't been, Kate's

behavior would've been too much for me to bear. I reminisced for an hour at least, and the entire time Kate chugged her merlot until Melissa and Kate had downed two more bottles of wine. By the time I finished Kate's eyes fluttered and her head rested on her forearms and the bags underneath her eyes looked purple and paunchy, like if I took a needle to them they'd leak fluid like a burst dam.

Melissa thanked me for the dinner, brushed Kate's green hair to the side, and squeezed the back of Kate's neck.

"If you ever need anything," Melissa said, "anything at all, don't hesitate to call me. I'll be over in a jiff to help Kate." She took her hand back from Kate's neck. Kate didn't even notice. She was passed out cold. "Or you. You're practically family now."

"Are you okay to drive?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "You might want to take her to bed, though."

And then she left. I didn't even ask what Kate had taken, what Melissa had given to her and had tried to hide from me. To be honest, I wasn't sure if I wanted to know.

As I carried Kate to bed, her arm dangled so that her nails scraped the wooden floor, rocked with each step like the ticking of a metronome. Every breath she took she snored, and her eyelids parted so that I could see the bloodshot whites. If it wasn't for the phlegm vibrating in her throat or the intermittent rising and falling of her chest, she could've passed for dead. Once in her room, I dropped her onto her bed and stripped off her shirt hoping that it would allow her to breathe better. She lay on the sheets, and for the first time since we'd come back from the Caribbean she didn't look distraught. She didn't hug herself or curl up into the fetal position or dig her face in between her

knees. The color had even returned to her cheeks. Except for the bags underneath her eyes, she looked healthier, not frail to the point I thought I could snap her bones by blowing on her a bit too hard. Serene. I would've called her expression serene, like she'd made peace with losing her mother all those years before, her father's faults and indiscretions, and her father's murder in one swift, momentous instant.

7

Having not slept due to my all night poker marathon, I didn't wake until about 4 in the afternoon. I found Kate in the living room. She sat on the floor, six giggling girlfriends surrounding her, with a pair of scissors in hand and dozens of pictures of wedding gowns and cakes and flower arrangements cut from magazines splayed out on the floor and coffee table. Kate didn't have her mother to help her plan the wedding, so it looked like she'd enlisted her closest college friends to help select a dress, favors, decorations, venue, and band. Kate'd dyed her hair again, a muted blond this time, the fourth or fifth time since her father had died. Her hair looked damaged from all the color treatments, dried and frizzed so that she nearly looked like a woman balding. She appeared to be so happy, though, that I decided not to tell her about the poker tournament; she just had too much on her mind for me to bother her with it. I would tell her soon, though, I told myself. This is what married couple's do. They discuss together, protect what is important to them individually, compromise.

All six of Kate's friends were young, really young, nineteen, twenty, maybe twenty-one, laughing and semi-drunk, probably Kate's school mates. They looked like clones, blond hair, deep tans despite it being November, black eye-liner and pink lip gloss, crimson boy shorts and University of Oklahoma hooded sweatshirts, outfits that were supposed to be comfortable and appear effortless, but that had probably been agonized over for the better part of an hour. Girls who latched onto Kate because of her father, because of her fame, because of the money and the limelight and the attention it brought them. *I am friends with the Governor's daughter*, they would say. *Let me call Kathryn Cook, the Governor's daughter. Yes, I know her. Yes, I have her number right here.* I knew their type. I'd despise them if I wasn't a bit like them.

The only one I recognized was Melissa—she waved with stiff fingers and smiled with her lips sucked in between her teeth when I walked in—the rest were complete strangers. They laughed and pointed at a particular picture of a dress, passed it around, commenting on the hue and the cut of the train and the pros and cons of strapless, but as soon as they noticed me, they went silent.

"This is him," Kate said as she climbed to her feet and wrapped her arms around my neck. "This is my beautiful fiancé Eli." Kate appeared happier than she had in months. She smiled. A genuine, teeth-bearing, joyful smile. "I love you. I love you. I love you. I'm so glad you're awake." She peppered my cheeks with kisses, then wiped them away with her hand before presenting me like a prize on a game show to her friends.

She also smelled of booze. Her words were slurred and her eyes were bloodshot slits, and the sun hadn't even started to set. An ice bucket with an open champagne bottle chilled on the coffee table next to a tray overflowing with cantaloupe, apples, grapes, and bagels. At least she was eating. Condensation pooled underneath the bucket, soaking a few magazines, *Brides* and *Martha Stewart Weddings* and *Bridal Guide* and *Wedding Style*. Pages were open to brilliant white dresses with long trains and poofy skirts, old-fashioned behemoth things that seemed to have jumped out of the Harding or Coolidge era. Veils that looked like fishnet. Six-tiered cakes. I scanned the room for prescription pill bottles even though I doubted I would find any. Kate would be more careful from here on out, make sure there wasn't any way that I could catch her.

She led me to the middle of the circle, and I had to step over bare feet and plates of fruit and champagne flutes. Kate knocked over a brimming glass of bubbly, soaking a stack of pictures, but she didn't even seem to notice, or at least didn't care, and introduced me to the group: Ashley, Nicole, Jade, Morgan, Arlie, and of course Melissa. They were going to be her bridesmaids, Kate explained, the wedding party, so I better think of suitable men to walk them down the aisle. Cute men. Handsome men. Gentlemen. And rich if I could swing it. Melissa would be her maid of honor, and Kate reached down to give her a hug. Melissa looked out of place with all these bubbly, sorority-types. She wouldn't make eye contact with me, even Kate, looked everywhere else: the hardwood floors, the dirty fireplace, the fingerprints on the stem of her crystal. She twirled her curly, brown hair around her finger like twine, like she wanted nothing more than to bolt.

“He’s just so good to me,” Kate slurred. “Oh, darling,” she said theatrically, “won’t you have a drink with us?”

Kate bounded over the girls toward the kitchen, and they held their hands up to keep her from falling. I flushed red, embarrassed, stepped outside the circle, and scratched the back of my neck. Kate’s legs were bruised, deep and purple, splotched like a cow’s hide. I had no idea how that could’ve happened. She had stayed in bed or on the couch since we’d returned from the USVI. The only explanation I could think of was that she had fallen on several occasions when I hadn’t been looking, or had been drunkenly walking into furniture and the walls like a pinball. But I decided not to worry; I hadn’t seen her this cheerful since dinner at the Old Stone Farmhouse on St. Thomas.

I smiled at the girls, and they smiled back. It was awkward. I didn’t know what to say to them, or they to me. They’d known Kate much longer than I had; she’d probably told them all sorts of things about me while I was on the road and she was back here going to school, that I volunteered for her father in order to impress her, that I was older, that I was a poker player, that I would do anything she wanted because I was afraid of the Governor. Who knew what all she had said? Not that I really minded. And yet I had never heard one single detail about these girls, not Jade or Arlie or Melissa or whatever the others’ names were. It was almost as if Kate had kept her two worlds separate, one with me, the other back in Norman.

I decided to not let it bother me, the tension that hung over the room. Kate felt and looked better than she had in days, was surrounded by her fiancé and her closest friends in the world. We were planning our wedding. This was supposed to be a happy

time, exciting, exhilarating even. I wouldn't ruin it because she'd kept this part of her life from me since we'd been together or that she was drunk before five or hiding that she was taking pills behind my back. She was young. That's what young people did. They partied. Especially when they were getting married.

"Here's what we've decided," Kate said when she returned, two new bottles of Moët in hand. "It's going to be a spring wedding. April, maybe May."

Kate popped open one of the bottles, the cork rocketed across the room, and the girls laughed as the champagne spewed. We each filled our flutes and sipped on the champagne.

"That sounds perfect," I said.

"And you are not going to wear a stuffy tuxedo, no siree. You're going to wear a cream colored suit, and the wedding colors are going to be baby blue and white. Bits of yellow as an accent color. I was thinking the flower could be..." she trailed off, tapped her tooth with her nail. On the enamel was a spot of red lipstick. "What are those damn things called?"

"Delphinians,"

"Right. Delph-delph-whatevers." Kate took a long pull from her drink.

"And calla lilies."

"Right. And those."

"And gerbera daisies."

"It'll be outdoors," Kate said. "We were thinking we could speak to," she hiccuped, "the new governor and have it at the mansion. Daddy would've loved that."

“Yes, he would’ve,” I said.

This felt good. Even if Kate had kept me separated from her life in Norman, she was letting me in now. The other girls started chiming in, having a red carpet blanketed by white roses, little garden lights lining the aisle, a pergola that we would stand under. They asked me questions: how many groomsmen did I plan on having, who would be my best man, was he cute, single? I told them about my brother, that he was their age, and single as far as I knew, going to M.I.T. next fall to study cosmology.

“Like, makeup and stuff?” one of the girls said.

I burst out laughing. I couldn’t help myself. The champagne started to make me feel a little lightheaded and giggly as well. But I was having fun.

“No, stupid. Like astrophysics,” Melissa said. “General relativity, not Maybeline.”

“A smart guy, huh?” Jade said. “I like the nerdy types.” She shrugged, smiled wryly. “I’d give Erkel a chance. Who knows, could be good in bed.”

“You slut!” Kate said, playfully hitting her with a pillow. “But Alex’s fun, too. Likes his bourbon.”

“I can’t stand bourbon,” Melissa said.

“He’ll drink anything. Give him turpentine, and he’ll take a shot,” I said.

“Especially if you dare him. I’d never seen the kid turn down a dare.”

Kate leaned back and put her hand behind me like she was propping herself up, but I felt her hand reach up my shirt, a finger tickle the lower part of my back. I glanced toward her, but she continued in on the conversation like nothing was happening. The

girls gossiped about Melissa's last boyfriend, some musician, a burly bassist that played in some classic rock cover band, dishing out Tom Petty and Lynyrd Skynyrd tunes night after night in dingy bars, Friends and Wolftrap and Edna's. They joked about his chest hair and acne scars and how he tucked in his polo shirt to his jeans while Melissa defended him as a sweet guy, and Kate, all the while, ran her fingertip down my spine, sending chills throughout my nervous system, to the point I started to feel aroused. This was the Kate I remembered, flirtatious, spontaneous, and fun.

"I'm sorry, guys," Kate finally chimed in, her voice lower than usual, a bit sultry, "but I'm going to have to call our strategy session adjourned."

The girls gave each other knowing looks, but I didn't mind. After they had left, Kate and I stood next to the door, the mess of magazines all around us, with my arms wrapped around her tiny waist. I could feel her hip bones more than usual; she must've lost weight. Kate placed her foot next to mine and slid her bare toe against my ankle, making the hairs on my leg stand on end. Her hands slid down around my waist, and against my neck she placed her lips. She kissed and nibbled softly, her breath moist and warm.

"You don't have to do a thing," she whispered.

Kate pushed me, and I fell backwards onto the couch. She unzipped my pants, and we made love for the first time since the Caribbean. She straddled me, and pressed her body against mine so that I could feel her breasts against my chest. Our bodies moved in rhythm, in sync, like one flesh, and I closed my eyes and silently recited the

moves of the final hand in last year's WSOP Main Event when Jonathon Duhamel pounded John Racener in order to hold off my release.

Afterward we held each other. The TV was off, the room black; just faint sunlight streaked through the closed blinds of the bay window. A sweet cicada and cricket song our soundtrack, the beating of each other's hearts, our soft breaths. She rubbed her fingertips up and down my forearm and didn't tremble or become nauseous or say she needed a drink. She was content. Comfortable. She was peaceful for the first time since her father's death. I was scared to move, to suggest we get food, dinner, even if we cooked, lest this should end. It was as if finally, after all those moments hiding our relationship, after the tragedy of her father's murder, after the scare in the USVI, we could settle into a rhythm all our own, only answerable to ourselves. We could, if we wanted, spend the rest of the evening in this spot, unmoving, until we fell asleep in each other's arms.

We had never lain like this before, after sex or otherwise. Used to, she had to scurry back to some political function, some fundraiser for her father, some Republican Party platform dinner. We had never stayed at each other's house so the Governor wouldn't become suspicious. We had never held hands or kissed or flirted in front of others. I had never told anyone about her, with the exception of my brother. We'd been this provocative, dirty little secret. And I'd found that exhilarating, like I was a spy, or a senator or congressman or governor having an affair. It made me feel important. Only once had we slipped. The moment we had returned from her room at the Skirvin on election night, had walked into the ballroom, and heard that the Governor won the

presidency. She had grabbed my hand and caressed her thumb with mine, a gesture reserved for lovers, and the Governor had noticed, smiled, and beckoned for us to go to him. He looked like he welcomed Kate and I being together. I had to admit, the exposure had disappointed me somewhat. To be open and accepted eliminated the thrill of Kate and me. We weren't a secret any longer. We weren't dangerous or provocative. We were a couple. Then the Governor's brains had been blown all over the guests and floor.

"I promise never to do that again," Kate said.

I laughed. "I hope not. I really enjoyed what we just did."

She slapped me on the shoulder. "What happened on St. Thomas, I mean." She turned and nuzzled her dimpled chin into my clavicle, and I could feel warm, granular beads of sweat, like sand, rub against my bare flesh. "I'm just so sorry I did that to you, Eli. I'm going to be sober. From now on, no more pills."

"I know. It's okay. You don't need to apologize. I understand you needed an escape." I rubbed her smooth shoulders. "But you scared me."

"I'm sorry."

She rotated and peered up at me. Her green eyes seemed brighter than normal, the irises in motion like a nebula.

"And I promise to love you. And be good to you. And consider what you want."

She smiled and stuck out the tip of her tongue. "Sometimes."

I smiled back. “And I promise not to stay out all night.” I put my thumb on her chin, covering the same dimple her father had had. “Maybe I can bring an egg timer or something to the table.”

She gripped me tighter and pressed her cheek against me, and her strawberry smelling hair tickled my lips. “I love you for doing that for me,” she said. “But I know you love it. And I can’t ask you to not be apart of the game. It’s your job.”

I kissed the top of her head.

“Just not *all* night, okay?” she said. “I don’t think I can handle being alone right now.”

We lay for awhile without talking, and it was the happiest I had been since election night. It was as if Kate and I had finally arrived.

We woke early Monday morning and began to scout wedding venues just in case we wouldn’t be able to hold it at the Governor’s mansion, which I was starting to think would be a bad idea. I knew Kate had her heart set on having it there, but too many memories would be flooding both of us, especially Kate, when she had been a little girl, playing kickball in the lawn, or whatever she had played. The entire place would be one constant reminder that her mother was not there to give her something old, something borrowed, or something blue, to make sure her hair looked perfect, that her father could not walk her down the aisle. Our wedding would have to compete with their memory. And that wasn’t fair. Not to me. Not to our guests. Least of all to Kate. I couldn’t bring myself to outright forbid the idea; Kate still seemed too fragile for that, too prone to

hitting up Melissa for pills, to get so drunk she couldn't stand up. So I simply suggested we look around just in case. And, to my surprise, she'd agreed without the slightest protest.

On our first stop, we checked out the Chesapeake Boathouse off the Oklahoma River. The wind skipping over the mercuric water blew stiff, cold, painful air. Water chopped, and the flags snapped, and the air smelled strong of cedar smoke, like a smoldering fire had, moments before our arrival, been extinguished. Ominous clouds whisked by overhead, threatening rain. But despite all of this, Kate and I were in cheerful moods, back to our old selves, excited and deliriously happy. She clung to my arm, her wild, pale blond hair whipping my face, with a quick cackle and a bright smile on quick draw.

Carolyn, the lady showing us around, gave us a tour when we arrived. It was a beautiful place. White palisades planted next to floor-to ceiling, curving glass windows gave the walkway the illusion of a Greek temple. A spiraling, marble staircase. The morning light bounced off the water and reflected in the windows, causing the entire structure to feel submerged and constantly in motion, like we were in an aquarium, or a glass submarine. And the shape spear-headed like a sailboat, so that when the sun was at just the right angle, you felt like you were zooming to uncharted worlds.

"We could make this beautiful," I said. I walked up to the window that overlooked the river. "We could stand up here, on a little stage. Our wedding party, the preacher. There could be flowers, maybe a little pergola or something."

"Yeah," Kate said, drawing the word out. "We could, I guess."

“What’s wrong with it?”

She cupped her mouth and moved in next to my ear, and Carolyn smiled and cocked her head as if to ask “Really?”

“Remember me telling you about Barry and the roast beef incident?” she asked.

How could I have forgotten? The episode was already political lore. Governor Cook, right at the beginning of the campaign, had hosted a fundraiser here, and invited all the heavy-hitters from Oklahoma. Bank of Oklahoma executives, Midfirst board members, Chesapeake, of course, Devon, Sandridge, the Thunder ownership group, a basic who’s-who of Okie businessmen. The wife of Bank of Oklahoma’s CEO, the wealthiest man in the state, had brought her dog with her, a silver Labrador named Maggie, who was rumored to trust her dog’s impression of people more than her own instinct. And whoever his wife liked, the CEO liked as well—perhaps so his life would lose just an ounce of stress, I would imagine. Barry, in order to win over the pooch, carried around a briefcase full to the brim with roast beef. The dog wouldn’t leave his side, of course, followed Barry around like white on rice, licking its chops, nudging the briefcase with its nose for at least an hour before the pup gave up on niceties and chomped down on Barry’s wrist. Barry yelped like Howard Dean on the 2004 campaign trail and dropped the briefcase, and it popped open, and the dog just went to town. Funniest thing I’d ever heard.

“I don’t know if I’d be able to keep a straight face,” Kate said.

“What’s that?” Carolyn asked.

“Nothing.”

We laughed and continued the tour. Carolyn spouted off statistics about the number of guests that could attend, that we had several options on food and bar menus, that we could, if we wanted of course, have the wedding outside, overlooking the river, then move inside for the reception.

“Are you wanting a small wedding, or a large one?” Carolyn asked.

We stood next to the glass, the river ran right below us, and sprinkles began splattering the windows. A storm brewed. Out of the west, dark, charcoal-colored cumulus nimbus clouds loomed large and approached. Soon, thunder would roll over the plains, and lightning would light up the sky with electric veins.

“Small,” Kate said.

“Really? I was hoping to have a big one,” I said.

“You just want to invite all your gambling buddies,” Kate said.

“Maybe,” I said. “Depending on if they owe me money or not.”

“Number wise, can you give me a range?” Carolyn interrupted.

Thunder echoed. The clouds to the west reminded me of the ash storm that had swept in and blanketed St. Thomas in only a few hours. Dark, fuzzy, its dimensions constantly changing, growing larger, more menacing.

“Anywhere between thirty and three-hundred,” Kate said.

Carolyn didn't look amused. In fact, she seemed perturbed, her patience worn thin, like she didn't know who Kate was. But that had to be impossible. Kate had been the First Daughter of this state for eight years, nearly the First Daughter of the country. If one of the Bush daughters or even Chelsea Clinton had been planning their wedding here,

I bet she wouldn't have that exasperated look stretched out all over her face, just screaming *I have better things to do right now than mess with you*. She'd be groveling, praying that we'd have our wedding here.

“For an outdoor wedding on our property between the boathouse and the water, I'd recommend inviting less than one-hundred.”

“Are you saying you wouldn't be able to accommodate us?” I asked.

“I'm saying I wouldn't recommend a larger guest list.”

“You do realize people from across this state, across the country even, will be vying for an invitation?”

“Eli, please—” Kate said as she placed her hand on my chest.

Her touch calmed me some. But Carolyn continued to smile, a smug, teeth-hiding grin as though her little slight and my being restrained by my fiancée was some sort of victory.

“Right, sorry about that.” I patted Kate's bony fingers. “I'm sure we could trim the fat on the invitation list. If we choose your venue, of course.”

“Of course.”

“We'll be in touch, then,” I said as I led Kate to the exit.

Outside, mist fell, and lightning illuminated bulbous pockets in the charcoal clouds like anti-aircraft rounds. We sat in our car watching the approaching storm. Kate turned the heater up and held her hands against the vents. A discussion of the upcoming presidential debate rambled in the background. The two radio personalities provided dry

points of policy debate—defense spending, economic sanctions against Tehran, the blockade in the Gaza Strip—but Kate clicked the radio off.

“You really want a big wedding?” Kate asked. She revved the engine, trying to heat it up.

“That’s how I always pictured it, yeah.” I held my hands in front of the vents, hoping to warm up. “But not here. That woman was a bitch.”

Kate nodded her head in agreement. Thunder erupted to the west as Kate put the car in gear and exited the parking lot. Street corners were dotted with campaign volunteers holding signs urging people to attend the debate that night, to contact their Electors and inform them that they wanted their vote to go for Noakes. There wasn’t a single sign for the President. But that was hardly a surprise. This was Oklahoma. Cook’s state. Not a single county went for the President. But I was sure his supporters were looming somewhere. In hotel rooms, small offices rented just for this event, buses driven from Massachusetts and Vermont and California, the bluest of the blue, so they could be seen by the cameras. Ratings experts predicted this single broadcast would be bigger than the Super Bowl.

“I can’t wait for this thing to be over with,” Kate said. “I’m getting so tired of it.”

“What thing?”

She pointed to one of the perky volunteers jumping up and down with a “Noakes for President” sign. “I hope the President loses just so I don’t have to hear that bastard’s name ever again for the rest of my life.”

“Oh.” I swallowed. My saliva tasted like iron, like I had bitten my lip and drawn blood and didn’t even realize it. I placed my finger to my lip. Dry. “I thought you meant the wedding.”

“Oh, no, no, no. Not ready for that to be over with at *all*,” she said with an odd tone for a bride-to-be. It first sounded like she was trying to reassure me, but by the end it seemed laced with a little bit of sarcasm, but I wasn’t sure why. Did she mean she hoped the wedding experience would linger because it was joyful? Or did she mean she wished our wedding never to come, longed to postpone being married to me for as long as she possibly could?

“Who were you thinking about inviting?” I asked.

“Close friends. The family I have left. About twenty in all.”

“But so many people would love to come.”

“I don’t really care if the Queen of fucking England wants to come, Eli,” she said. “It’s not about them. It’s about us. Got that?”

Her anger shocked me. Lightning bolted off in the distance, little droplets of rain splattering against the windshield, soaking the volunteers holding signs along the roadway. Kate and I’d been doing so well the last couple days, laughing and joking like we had the weeks before the election. Before everything had gone to hell. Now, here she was, angry, acting just like her father.

“You’re right,” I said. “I just thought it would be nice, that’s all. But you’re right.”

Kate tapped the steering wheel with her thumb and stopped at the red light just before turning onto highway 77 back to Norman. The blinker ticked in sync with Kate's thumb. I saw the muscles in her face relax somewhat, her jaw unclench, eyes soften.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to yell at you. I just don't want a bunch of strangers there." Kate grabbed my hand. Hers felt like ice despite the heat blaring through the vents. "We'll compromise. That's what marriages are all about, right? You give me a nice, small wedding, and I'll take another vacation with you."

"Really?" She nodded, and I leaned over and kissed her on her cheek. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. And," I paused, considering if I should ask or not. "Can I go play poker tonight?"

She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. She had both hands on the wheel, and I could see her grip tense. "Yes, but you have to promise me you'll be home this time, even if you're winning."

"I promise."

She returned the kiss on the cheek, and a car honked behind us because the light had turned green. "After what I've put you through, I can give a little bit." The car honked again, and Kate turned around in her seat and flipped the driver the bird. "But you have to do something else for me."

"Name it."

"I want to go to your folks' house for Thanksgiving."

8

I sat down at the felt with \$15,000 this time, much more than anyone else. It was a packed table, all ten spots taken, totaling about \$85,000 in play. Haman sat two seats to my left, and across from me, for the first time in I couldn't remember how long, was Roland. He usually didn't play at his own club, opting instead to frequent the casinos owned by the Indian tribes—Riverwind and Kickapoo and WinStar. Those of us that were patrons of his club busted his chops for this; the casinos were full of tourists and guys looking to blow off steam with a few free drinks on payday and didn't pose a challenge. We called it a fish fry because once we sat down, it was all we could eat. We'd rather play here. While the money was what we were after, bragging rights and respect as the best were the top prize.

I'd just arrived, had about 5 hours to go before my curfew—Kate had gone out for a girls' night with Melissa, and we'd agreed to meet each other at home around midnight—so I'd been feeling the table out, folding a lot, seeing how the action was rolling. It'd been a pretty loose table thus far with Roland and Haman controlling most of the action,

betting large amounts and pushing the rest of us off our marginal hands. The game was Texas Hold ‘em tonight, a game we didn’t play that often anymore due to its overwhelming growth in popularity the past few years. Playing Hold ‘em in an underground club just seemed hypocritical in a way. But there was a reason the world championship was decided by Hold ‘em every year; it was the Cadillac of poker, the granddaddy of them all, made famous by the greats: Brunson and Moss and Unger.

“So after the debate tonight,” Haman said to Roland, “you going to change the odds?”

“Meh,” Roland muttered and threw out a bet, \$800. “We’ll see how it goes. Did I ever tell you the one about the three fish?”

“Yes, Roland. You have. Several times in fact. Call.”

The dealer flopped: two, five, six, rainbow. Both checked.

“What’re you guys talking about?”

“The three fish,” Roland said. He held out three fingers. “There was a momma fish, a daddy fish, and a son fish, and they each slept in a different place—”

“No, no, no. About the odds after the debate.”

The dealer turned: 4 of diamonds. Four cards to a straight were now on the board. Haman checked, and Roland bet \$1,350.

“You know, Eli. I know you haven’t been coming around so much no more, but you should know, never interrupt a man telling a joke. Timing is everything.”

“Sorry. Go ahead.”

“No,” Roland said. “Joke’s ruined now.”

Haman folded his cards face up, slamming them down in disgust. Pocket queens. “Goddamn board,” he said. “Finally get a hand against you, and that shit pops up.”

Roland burst out laughing, threw over his cards, ten of diamonds and eight of diamonds. He bluffed Haman and raked in his pot as Haman muffled under his breath. No player likes to be bluffed, and no player especially likes to be bluffed and then shown the bluff. But Haman couldn’t do much about it; this was Roland’s club.

“We’re betting on the election,” Roland said to me as he stacked his new chips. “Right now the line is five-to-one Susanne, even for the President. Might change after the debate, though. How much can I put you down for? Minimum’s a grand.”

The dealer dealt, and the action started with a raise and a re-raise under-the-gun and under-the-gun-plus-one. Since they were the first two to act, I knew they must have had big hands.

“I don’t think I can get into that one,” I said.

“Oh why the hell not?” Haman said. “It’ll be fun.”

“Don’t tell us you got all moral on us, Eli,” Roland said.

The action turned to me, and I peeked at my cards. Pocket kings, a monster hand in Hold ‘em. I could feel the excitement build in my stomach, a nervous anticipation of how the chips would feel as I slid them toward me against the felt.

“Nothing like that, fellas. I’m actually engaged to Jacob Cook’s daughter. Might be a conflict of interest.”

I winked at them, trying to play it cool, but everyone, not just Haman and Roland, even some at the other tables who overheard, erupted into uncontrollable laughter.

“If you don’t have the money, Eli, just say so,” Haman said. “No reason to lie about it.”

“I’m serious. I’m not lying.”

“I’ll have to remember that one,” Roland said. “Best joke I’ve heard in long time.”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment, and a little anger. I checked my cards one more time. “Raise,” I said. “\$1,100.”

The laughter stopped, and the table turned serious after my bet. I’d just triple-raised the pot with Roland and two others still to act. \$1,660 was already in the middle, and we hadn’t even seen the flop yet.

“Call,” Roland said.

The initial better folded, but the second raiser called, leaving three in the hand. The flop was king of spades, ace of clubs, 2 of spades. I hit trip kings. I began to salivate, but I stayed as still as possible, trying not to reveal my big hand through any tells and thinking over my options. I was second to act, and the initial raiser checked. Two cards to a flush were on the board, so either Roland or the other guy could have a flush draw. If I bet big, I could get him to fold. The ace almost assured me action because of the pre-flop raises, so I grabbed some chips, glanced at my opponents who were trying to stay as stoic as me, and gently placed \$5,000 out in the middle. Roland hesitated, sized me up and counted my chips. After his hand with Haman, he’d become the big stack, but not by much, only having about \$500 more than me. He

smooth called my bet, and the initial better folded, leaving only Roland and me in the hand.

The dealer flipped the turn: Ace of spades. I almost jumped out of my chair. This was the perfect card for me, landing me a full house, and no matter if Roland had the ace or the flush, he made his hand, guaranteeing me more money because I had the better one.

“Check,” I said.

I decided to set a little trap for Roland. This check would make him think my last bet was a continuation, a bluff so as to push others off their hand. And since he made his, he would bet out a feeler, stringing me along to the river.

“\$5,000,” he said.

The pot was growing now, up to nearly \$19,000. The whole room had crowded around our table, stopping their games to see this large hand materialize. I felt as though I was at the World Series of Poker, hundreds of thousands of people watching from the balcony and at home on television, like I was about to win the gold bracelet and become world champ. I leaned back in my chair, acting a little hesitant, anticipating my stack growing to a cool \$30,000 in just a few seconds. I couldn't help but think of Kate's face when I told her, how happy she'd be, of how I now had enough scratch to pay off her engagement ring and my ticket to the WPT tournament.

“All in,” I said.

A smile spread across Roland's lips. “If you have no money for presidential bet, you definitely don't now. I call.”

I knew his cards before he even turned them over. Pocket aces. Bullets. He busted me by bullets.

Downtown was packed for the debate, and I had to scurry through them to get back to my car. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled and rain began to fall. Not too hard, but a shower, the first hints of a coming storm. I was quickly soaked, my wool coat heavy with water, my skin soggy, turning into a wrinkled prune. My socks were wet, and I could feel my heels rub against my shoes. I knew I would have blisters, but I didn't really care at this point. I'd just lost \$15,000 dollars in a matter of minutes, and I couldn't help but replay the hand over and over, as if on a looped reel, thinking what I could've done differently. I shouldn't have been so greedy. I should've known he had a monster, the pot had been triple raised, and he had just smooth called. I shouldn't have overplayed my hand. I should've folded. But I hadn't.

I squirmed my way through the crowd. Despite what I'd assumed earlier in the day, the President's supporters rivaled Susanne's. Since the debate was being held in Oklahoma, I'd expected the Republican numbers to dwarf the Democrats, but I'd been proven wrong. They had come out in throngs. They wore sweatshirts with Susanne depicted as Hitler and wearing the robe of the Ku Klux Klan. They had signs listing Susanne's largest donors painted in red: Goldman Sachs \$1,500,000.00, Bear Stearns \$1,275,000.00, and Halliburton \$1,115,000.00. They called her a corporate puppet. Some even dressed up in costume, one as Uncle Sam, big white beard, blue suit, stilts and all, another as the devil, wearing a wig that resembled Susanne's hair.

A black man stood on top of a make-shift stage in front of me and spoke through a megaphone. He was young, either still in or fresh out of university, and fiery. He was tall and gaunt, the skin pulled tight around his cheek bones, a shaved head that glistened underneath the rain. His fist raised, he called for another four years of the President, to right the mistake of November, to keep America on a path of retribution for the poor man. The people who gathered around reached their hands up to him like they believed if they touched him, he would save them, like the young man spoke the Gospel. He did bring the pulpit into his cadence, the rising energy of a preacher. The low grumblings and promises of salvation, the high building emotion of the Promise Land.

The attendees began to arrive, pour out of the Cox Convention Center, and darted, heads down, across the street toward the entrance of the Ford Center. Mobs on both sides of the barricades rushed the walkway, climbed atop the bottom rung, pointed and chanted and entreated the men and women just trying to get inside and find their seats. Police pushed back with clear, polymer shields, one hand gripping batons, but the onslaught was nearly too much for them to bear. The weight of the entire pissed off electorate bored down on them. The young, black man egged on his followers, encouraged them to cram and berate and harass. Chanting through his megaphone, "Don't tread on me," and riling the crowd. These poor people, interested in only seeing the debate, the most historic election they would ever see in their lifetime unfold in person, so they could tell their children and grandchildren and if they're lucky their great-grandchildren *I was there. When that debate happened I was there. I heard the President speak those words. I shook Susanne Noakes's hand. I was there.* Instead, they were the subjects of undeserved

anger and vexation, as though their interestedness alone came with a mandatory public humiliation.

On the other side of the barricade, a man climbed the steps to a makeshift stage and towered above Noakes's supporters. He surveyed the crowd and seemed to suck the attention from the demonstrators nearest him. They ignored the attendees and fell silent once they had noticed him. His arms straight out at shoulder height, he showed his white palms to hush the crowd. His followers obeyed like they had been hypnotized, compelled to abide by his every whim.

The rain started to fall even harder, and I was soaked as I pushed my way through the crowd toward the parking garage. The man on Susanne's side still hadn't started to speak. He swept his head from side to side like he was searing the crowd into his memory. All eyes were fixed on him, mesmerized, waiting for him to speak. I had only seen one other person with that same ability, to hold the attention of hundreds or even thousands of people without ever saying a word, Kate's father. A once belligerent and angry and eardrum-busting crowd had turned eerily silent. The President's supporters still chanted and thunder still rumbled and the rain continued to fall, but none of Noakes's people gave the opposition or the storm any notice.

I squirmed my way through, only ten or fifteen rows away from breaking free so that I could go home. I didn't look forward to telling Kate how much I'd lost. She wouldn't understand that with poker came ups and downs, that I'd be right back in the middle of it in no time, raking in huge pots again. But it would be a little while before I

could do that. I still had to pay for her engagement ring, and that would only leave me about \$2,000 grand in my pocket, not enough for the tournament after Thanksgiving.

That hurt more than anything. I had this feeling, an instinct really, that this was my time, that this tournament would be the breaking point in my poker career. I'd been having dreams lately, vivid, lucid dreams where I was standing on a stage being interviewed by Norman Chad, surrounded by mounds of cash and TV cameras. When I awoke every morning, my wrist even felt heavier, like I'd been wearing the championship bracelet. But now it looked like I wouldn't even have the chance.

The man on stage was not an intimidating figure. Bones protruded from his wrists, wispy hair fluttered in the breeze, his neck so thin I thought it amazing it could hold up his head. But, despite his physical limitations, his voice boomed, as if it grew in volume inside his diaphragm and expelled with rocket fuel.

Before I could make it out of the crowd, I heard swelling screams behind me, back where the attendees shuffled into the Ford Center. Turning around, I saw a riot breaking out, a panicked mob. At first I was just curious. I tried to figure out what had caused everyone to become so hysterical. People ran and dispersed, and above the heads of the frantic throngs batons flew up and down, hammering. The police were beating anyone who was near them. I heard the sound of the baton hit skulls, a solid, yet almost hollow thud. It made me sick to my stomach. I became nauseous. Someone must have provoked a policeman, taunted him, maybe pushed him in the chest, then the tension escalated exponentially. One swung a baton, then the next, then another, until all were flailing against these people, these protestors, the attendees, anyone that came near them.

I became scared. The metal walkway had been toppled over, protestors climbed over attendees and vice versa, everyone just searching for somewhere dry and safe. People fell and were trampled. And I could see the panic rippling toward us, like a wave, each row becoming frenzied as dominoes fall, one person at a time, starting in the center and moving outward, like a stone cast in water. Then it reached me.

I was horrified. My mind shut down to simple imperatives and nouns. Push and pull and one foot in front of the other fallen spectators hands tiny bones crunching underneath my wet feet screams and thunder lightning, just a wall of scared, frightened, horrified people. Every time thunder cracked, I flinched, convinced the explosions were gunshots, that I would start seeing victims falling, blood splattering, death all around me. When I looked to the top of the Ford Center and the surrounding buildings, the snipers had rifles drawn, but no smoke billowed from their barrels. They hadn't started shooting.

Wait it out. Just wait it out. I climbed onto the hood of a parked car next to the curb and stepped onto the roof. An alarmed group clamored toward me, reached their hands up begging for me to pull them to safety, as though if I reached down I could save them from this violence, but I kicked their outstretched hands, their shocked and panicky faces, to preserve my high-ground. Air horns rang and thunder exploded sirens blared and gunshots echoed and I cowered and rain soaked me to my bones and I could smell smoke, a trashcan had been set on fire, a dark grey cloud drifted up, but the rains extinguished the flames, and whistles, the buzz of a taser only a few feet away, the shaking face, the whites of his eyes, just the whites rolling back into fluttering eyelids.

The man's muscles went rigid, and his neck was stepped on as the cop who had tasered him leapt on top of the writhing man, turned him over, and handcuffed him. I tried yelling to get the cop's attention, but he couldn't hear me over the screaming crowd, the roar of the storm, explosions. Gunshots? On top of the Ford Center, the snipers fired into the crowd, and sprays of red mixed with the rain pouring down upon us, and I just wanted to scream Who is in control here, please tell them to stop firing, cease fire, stop, stop, please God stop.

I was trying to force myself to jump down to help this man, pleading with my hands and arms and legs to act, just act, be brave for once, but I froze. I cringed and made myself as small as possible and clung to the roof of the car and swiped and slashed at anyone who came near me. I didn't move as the man was pulled up from the pavement by a policeman. I didn't move as he stood mere feet from me, his head bobbing on his neck like it may snap and roll off. I didn't move as he was pulled away and disappeared into the panicked, screaming mob. I didn't do anything to help him at all. Instead, I stayed on top of the car, kicking anyone who came near me, until the storm quieted, the crowds dispersed, and the guns ceased firing.

When the dust finally cleared and the riot had quieted, I peeled myself off the roof of the car and stumbled through the streets, unsure as to what I should do, where I should go. Cops still patrolled, on guard for anyone to assault an officer or even approach the Ford Center. Strangers shuffled by, baffled, turning one way, taking three steps, and then turning around and walking in a completely different direction. No one seemed to know

what to do. Bodies lay unattended, men and women battered, bleeding from noses and lips, meandered through the streets. So did the cops. They blinked at the carnage around them, unsure as to what they should do. Tend to the hurt? Extinguish fires? Stop looters? Direct people to safety? No one seemed to know. A voice spoke through a loudspeaker for civilians to seek shelter, medical aid, and to stay out of the streets. But there was no shelter, there were no doctors, no ambulances, only the streets. Soaked papers and pamphlets littered the wet pavement. A few corpses lay on the street, black plastic pulled over them. Their stink already permeated the air, decomposing even faster from being drenched by the storm. I was in shock still, body aching from straining my muscles for so long, from fighting off anyone who had tried to climb up on top of the car with me. It was a miracle the police had left me alone, that I wasn't pulled off and trampled to death.

I couldn't believe what I had done. That I was capable of doing such things. I tried to convince myself that my actions were due to a survival instinct, fight or flight, but I still felt as though I'd failed. When I could've helped, I instead worsened the problem. Anytime anyone had come close, I'd hit them. They weren't trying to hurt me, only to get above the fray, to keep from being trampled, to get away from the police who were beating anyone who came near them. Yet I had just kept kicking. One man, he'd worn a red zip-up, hooded sweatshirt. He'd been middle-aged, a graying goatee and a chiseled face with deep, cavernous wrinkles. He'd looked so scared. The only crime he'd committed was being pushed up against the car. He hadn't tried to pull himself up to the roof or pull me down. Still I kicked him. I could feel his nose shatter underneath my

heel. The blood jetted out like a water balloon popping. He had gone down. I was sure of it. I'd lost sight of him; he'd dropped almost instantaneously. But after everyone had dispersed, when everything finally calmed, he was gone. I had no idea if he was okay or not. I hoped he was. I hoped he crawled underneath the car and had somehow escaped to safety.

My first impulse was to find Kate. I knew she had to be downtown somewhere, at some club or bar with Melissa. I hadn't asked which one, fearing she would think I was being controlling like Kinsler or interrogating her like the Secret Service. I called her, and she answered on the first ring, told me that she was at City Walk, a club around the corner and across the street from Bricktown Ballpark.

Kate stood off to the side from the crowd, chewing on her right index cuticle. I didn't even recognize her at first. Black skirt and black tights tattered. Skin tight pink tube top smeared with brown mud. Knee high boots, laces dragging the ground. Black eyeliner thick like goggles. Kate had dressed like one of those emo, punk girls.

"Hey." I gave her a hug. She smelled like rum and perfume. "What happened?"

"Melissa's hurt," she said. "Melissa's hurt bad."

"What happened?"

"We've got to go. We got to go now."

"Wait, hold on, tell me what happened."

"They wouldn't let me ride with her. They said I couldn't. We got to go. We should be going!"

Kate was rambling, not making any sense, and looked like she'd been beaten. She had bruises on her face and her arms, and her bottom lip was cut and swollen. Before I could ask again what had happened to her, she took off down the street toward OU Medical Center. I followed Kate down the street, jogging so that I could catch up. She glanced back as I approached, but didn't slow down. Her bare shoulders had turned a bluish hue from the cold, and her breath puffed out like smoke signals and reflected the morning light.

I reached out and grabbed her shoulder and told her to slow down. She didn't at first, but then she became winded and stopped altogether. "Take my coat," I said. "You're freezing." I unzipped my coat and took it off and held it out to her, half-expecting for her to refuse it and ignore me, but she took it and put it on.

"Thanks," she said.

"Tell me what happened," I said.

"We were outside. When everybody came, and they were running, and we were pushed around, and I lost Melissa, she was standing right next to me one second, and then the next she wasn't. She was trampled and hurt really badly."

Others started to emerge from high-rise apartment buildings. Cops and tow truck drivers. Sanitation department workers with brooms brushing broken glass. Everyone worked silently, a shell-shocked expression on their faces, much like the pictures of survivors from the Murrah Building bombing back in '95. This city had seen its share of tragedy, knew how to swallow the angst and the anger, heal, and move forward. We'd be able to recover. It would take time, I knew. Yet, I couldn't help but notice the striking

difference between then and now. Then we had an enemy, two faces, McVeigh and Nichols, we could turn to and say You are at fault, You shall pay, and We shall have justice. But now we were the perpetrators. We were an angry mob who had turned on each other. There wasn't a group or persons to demonize, no good versus evil, just the confusing, muddling grey area, in which we all resided.

"I'm sorry, Kate." I tried to grab her forearm to keep her from walking, but she wouldn't stop. "I'm sorry I wasn't there. Were you hurt?"

Kate didn't answer, didn't even change expression. She was intent on getting to her friend. She sniffled and wiped her nose with her thumb and forefinger, and I noticed that she still wasn't wearing her engagement ring.

"Will you answer me, please?"

"What do you want to hear, Eli?"

"I want you to just talk to me. You're scaring me. Just say whatever you want."

She stopped walking and faced me. Her freckles mixed with the mascara that had stained her face looked like an abstract expressionistic painting.

"Why do you want to marry me?" she asked. "And don't give me any bullshit, politician's answer like you love me or that I'm funny or beautiful. Tell me the truth."

"But I do love you."

"This is what I'm talking about, Eli. No one's ever completely honest with me. I never know why you do anything, whether or not it's some calculated manipulation."

"What are you talking about? Where did this come from?"

Kate pulled a string of hair away from her dry and cracked lips. Her fingers looked like prunes, like she'd been soaking in a tub for hours. "Are you marrying me because of who I am? Grab some of the spotlight because of my name, who my father was?"

"That's insane, Kate. Absolutely crazy."

"I'm not crazy, Eli. Don't tell me I'm crazy. You're using me. You are. Admit it!"

"I am not using you."

Kate released a high, shrill scream, turned, and stormed off down the street. A large sweeper truck inched toward us, cleaning debris from the roadway. Kate moved to the sidewalk, and I followed a few feet behind, shocked at her outburst. I couldn't quite understand what had precipitated this. The riot had been chaotic. She couldn't have expected me to find her in the middle of a riot, could she? I'd done my best to get out alive myself. We passed by retail shops with busted windows, broken merchandise strewn throughout, even onto the street, metal shelving twisted and bent, trashcans turned over, McDonald's wrappers and banana peels and aluminum foil sailing in the breeze. Kate didn't even try to dodge these. She stumbled over a small, wooden statue of the University of Oklahoma's Sooner Schooner and put her arms out to balance herself.

"I'm trying to make us work, Kate. Don't give me this line about our engagement being some type of attention grabber. I don't love you because of who were father was. I love you, Kate. I do." I grabbed her by the arm and turned her. "Talk to me, Kate."

"Stop. That hurts, Eli."

I didn't let go. "What else do I have to do to prove to you that I love you?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I'm just so confused right now."

I was glad there weren't a lot of people on the streets. The ones that were minded their own business, either hurriedly walking past or cleaning up the damage from the riot. They kept their heads down and avoided eye contact with everyone else. Kate didn't seem too stable. The partying, the drugs, the booze, the paranoid thoughts that I was using her, the death of her father, our engagement all weighed down upon her. At any moment I feared she would snap, go on a binge of such a magnitude that she wouldn't be able to recover.

What Kate needed was some quiet. A little relaxation. Get some distance from the immediate concerns of her life so that she could gain some perspective. Hide someplace safe. I'd promised that we'd go to my parents' house for Thanksgiving tomorrow. Perhaps that would level her out.

"Let's go see if you're friend is okay. Okay?"

Kate nodded. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. Her eyes darted back and forth like a person in a REM dream state, a mixture of sleep deprivation, confusion, and paranoia just behind them.

"I don't really know what's going on anymore," she said. "I just get these ideas in my head. Everything's just, just—"

I hushed her and wrapped my arms around her. "I know. I know. Everything's going to be all right."

"You promise?"

“I promise.”

Melissa was asleep when we found her hospital room. Her leg was propped up on a couple of pillows. A white blanket covered her, so I couldn't see the extent of her injuries. She had an IV hooked up, probably for hydration, or perhaps pain medication; I wasn't sure. She didn't look like she was in pain. Her mouth slightly ajar, breathing regularly, the muscles in her face relaxed. If it wasn't for the slight rise and fall of her chest, though, she could've been mistaken for dead.

I hated hospitals. The smell of disinfectant faintly masking the scent of urine, excrement, blood, and vomit. The cold and uncomfortable beeps of machines. Knowing that somewhere in this building multiple people were dying, that the last sight they would see would be sterile white walls, tubes coming out of their body, a stained tiled ceiling. It was such a macabre and lonely place to die. Even if family surrounded the deathbed, the dying would find little comfort in this place. Kate's father had been lucky in that respect. He'd at least been at a party held in his honor, dying after learning that he'd been elected the 45th President of the United States, his daughter coming to join him in his reverie. He'd at least been happy when he passed.

“Maybe we should come back later,” I whispered.

“No, Eli. I need to talk to her.”

“Let her rest. She needs sleep. We need sleep, too. We can come back by tomorrow to see Melissa, then head to my parents' house for Thanksgiving.”

“You don't understand. I need to talk to her now.”

I decided not to argue. It wasn't worth it. Kate sat on Melissa's bed. She moaned softly, frowned, and rolled over, clutching at the pillow underneath her head. The IV was probably pain medication. Melissa seemed groggy, a bit woozy, intoxicated even. Whatever the doctors had given her was powerful stuff. Morphine maybe.

Kate petted and ran her fingers through Melissa's greasy hair. I felt uncomfortable in here. Out of place. I wondered where Melissa's parents were at, if they were called, if they were on their way. It seemed odd that they weren't here.

Kate comforted Melissa, telling her that she was safe now, that no one would hurt her, that she'd be here for her as long as she needed her to be, and I couldn't help but think that I wanted nothing more than to flee. Melissa finally opened her eyes and fixed her gaze on Kate. Kate smiled, continued to pet Melissa's head. They were an odd sight to behold. Two young women comforting one another, both of whom looked as though they had aged twenty years overnight. The bags under their eyes looked like ash. Deep lines creased their foreheads. Dark shadows deepened their cheekbones. They looked ghostly, like they were wilting.

"Thank you for coming," Melissa said.

"Of course, sweetie. Of course."

I hadn't really known Melissa before, but Kate's appearance was such a stark contrast from before her father had been murdered. She'd been a glowing young beauty just a few weeks ago, a fresh-faced twenty-two, smelled like Dove soap, and smiled at the slightest provocation. Now she constantly looked terrified, as if she would die just like her father at any moment. She would be jumpy and jittery at times, then defensive and

quick to anger, then nearly comatose, sweating profusely and the color of spoiled lemons. I was beginning to fear that there might be something terribly wrong with her, both physically and mentally. I wanted to blame her recent behavior on the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Yet I couldn't neatly describe her as being in one or another. I'd seen her angry, then I'd seen her depressed, then I'd seen her angry again. She'd had no consistent mood or physical appearance since her father's death.

"How're you feeling?" Kate asked.

"Better. Tired. But better."

I leaned against the wall near the bathroom door and the entrance, feeling too awkward to move any closer. Melissa seemed too vulnerable, and I didn't know her well enough to see her so unguarded. Melissa coughed into her hand, scooted up to a sitting position. Kate held her hands near her like a spotter.

"Have you seen the doctor?" Kate asked.

Melissa nodded. "No major injuries. They want to keep me overnight, though."

"I could stay here with you."

"No. No. You don't have to do that."

"You shouldn't be by yourself. Not after what you've been through."

"My mom's coming. I'll be fine." Melissa took Kate's hand. "Could you do me one favor, though?"

"Of course."

“Could you go to my house and grab a change of clothes for me? I don’t really want to have to leave here in my club gear.”

Kate nodded.

“And one more thing.”

Melissa and Kate spoke in hushed tones, trying not to let me hear. I stayed put, not wanting to seem like I was prying, but I was interested in what they were discussing. I hated thinking this because she was Kate’s best friend, but I didn’t trust Melissa. Even though she’d been hurt, that still didn’t change who she was and her relationship with Kate. She was a bad influence. Kate right now was very impressionable, searching for anyway in which to calm her mind, ease the grief and pain and terror she felt. And Melissa’s answer to Kate’s problems seemed to be drugs, partying, and booze.

“Of course,” Kate said to Melissa and then patted her hand. She put up a finger, indicating one moment, stood, and motioned for me to join her out in the hallway. Nurses ambled by checking charts and carrying tubes of ointment and antibiotics and full IV bags. An elderly man was being wheeled down the hallway in a bed. He kept trying to rise up to a sitting position, or maybe to get out of the bed altogether, but the orderly would place his hand on the man’s chest, and he would fall again.

“I’m going to stay,” Kate said.

I expected this to happen. Kate stood there with her hand on her hip, still looking like she’d been through a natural disaster. She needed to wash the streaking makeup from her face, change out of those torn tights, wash the grime and dirt that caked her pale flesh and blond hair, get some rest, some respite from everything that has been

happening, not be bedside with Melissa. But I knew I wouldn't be able to talk her out of this. Her mind was made up, and she was just as stubborn as her father.

"Fine. I'll get us some coffee."

"No," she said. "You're not listening to me. *I'm* staying."

"I heard you."

"No, you didn't. You're going home."

Kate pulled her hair behind her ears and cradled her jaw with her hands. Dirt and grime lined her fingernails, and her hands were still dry like prunes. A door shut behind her, and she jumped, startled at the noise, closed her eyes, and trembled.

"What did Melissa say to you?"

"What does it matter?"

"Talk about a politician," I said. "Answering questions with questions. That's exactly what your father would have done."

"Do not—" Kate cut herself off. A doctor strolled by, nodding to each of us. His stare lingered on Kate for a briefer moment than necessary, probably trying to place this young woman's familiar face. In this state she didn't exactly resemble the former first daughter of Oklahoma, but there were similarities. The freckles, dimpled chin, the fiery disposition of a stubborn girl used to getting her way. Once the doctor was out of earshot, Kate continued. "I can't have this conversation with you right now. I'll be home later. Then we can go to your parents' house for Thanksgiving tomorrow. I just need to be here for Melissa. Will you please just go? For me?"

I relented, as I always did. I hugged her and told her that I was sorry about Melissa, again, even though I wasn't. Kate, of course, smiled and told me she loved me and thanked me for understanding, but I couldn't help but suspect that there was an undertone of resentment hiding just underneath her cordial farewell, laced with insincerity. What had her and Melissa wanted to keep from me? What had they whispered before Kate ordered me to leave? Just like with politics, there's always an inner-circle and an outer-circle. And even though I was Kate's fiancé, I was most certainly on the outside in this scenario. I kissed her head, and told her that I loved her, too.

Kate still hadn't made it back from the hospital yet, so I sat on her couch, our couch I should say, and looked around Kate's living room. This was the first time I'd ever been alone in this house, our soon-to-be marital home. Sitting here, surrounded by pictures of Kate with her friends, Kate as a young girl, the Governor, and her mother who I'd never met felt awkward, much like I'd felt in Melissa's hospital room, almost as if I was unwanted. I'd only been staying here three weeks, but I was still living out of suitcases like I was at a hotel. My toothbrush I kept in a Ziplog baggy that had long ago been stained chalky white by Crest Whitening with Tartar Protection. And this just didn't seem right to me. I was a stranger at what was supposed to be my house, too.

Deciding that I wouldn't be a stranger any longer, I headed to Kate's bedroom, pulled out my suitcases, a couple of old blue canvas American Touristers my parents had bought me when I'd been in high school, from underneath the bed and displayed them on

her bed. My wardrobe was pretty standard, mostly white oxford shirts, white V-neck undershirts, solid-colored ties, solid colored T-shirts, nondescript chinos, black slacks, black jackets.

Kate's clothes took up the entire closet. And she had a nice sized walk-in, about the square-footage of some of the dingy hotels I'd stayed in the past couple of years. On one wall hung a full length mirror, framed on both sides by cubby holes full of shoes. Pumps. Boots. Sneakers. The other two walls had floor-to-ceiling clothes. Dresses. Jeans. Skirts. T-shirts. Sweaters. Camisoles. Blouses. Lacy, see-through tops. Lingerie. Leather jackets. There wasn't one spare inch of room in which to fit my belongings. Kate had hundreds of items in here. She could've opened up her own retail store if she wanted. I shouldn't have been surprised, though. Her father had bought her anything she'd ever wanted. A cute, little BMW. This 2,500 square foot house that easily cost \$200,000. Kate had been Daddy's little girl. But now Daddy was gone.

I cleared a spot for my clothes, tossed her camisoles and tank tops onto the floor, and hung up my couple of suits and pants and shirts. Next to her hundreds of clothes, I couldn't even really tell that my stuff hung there. It was just swallowed up, devoured by the reds and blues and greens of her dozens of silk and cotton and wool garments. But there they hung, even if they weren't noticeable. I'd cleared a little room for myself. At least I'd done that.

9

Mom answered the door. She'd aged terribly since I'd seen her last, nearly three years prior. She seemed shorter, bent a bit like she was getting osteoporosis prematurely, thinner. Her hair had started to grey, some places had even turned white, and her skin hung loosely from her skeleton, like she'd lost all elasticity. But her face beamed when she saw Kate and me. Her eyes lit up like Christmas lights, and she clasped her hands underneath her chin, unable to hide her excitement. The last time I'd seen her had been right after I'd won my first major tournament in Vegas, and on the way back into town I'd stopped by to see my parents. We had dinner at this sports bar in Bartlesville, and I didn't even stay the night, saying that I wanted to get down to Oklahoma City that evening, making some excuse that I didn't even remember. I hadn't seen them since.

Mom stood on her tiptoes, wrapped her arms around me, and dug her face into my chest as if she wished to absorb me whole.

"Hey, Mom," I said. She smelled like she'd been baking pumpkin pie, which was odd. My mother never cooked. "Meet Kate."

Mom finally pulled away and noticed Kate for the first time. Kate had returned to her campaign look rather than the emo, punk girl she'd been sporting the night of the riot, mostly at my bidding. She hadn't said much since returning from the hospital, only that Melissa was doing okay enough to leave, and then she'd stayed quiet most of the two hour drive to Bartlesville, cranking up her Neko Case album and staring out the window. I could see her reflection in the passenger side window and noticed that she'd chewed her lip to the point she bled.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your father," Mom said. "He was a good man."

Kate twirled her hair in between her fingers. She'd dyed it again last night; she was a brunette now. This was the third or fourth time since her father'd died. The ends were beginning to fry, become damaged and worn. In order to hide this, Kate started to wear her hair curly. She'd also lost about ten pounds since her father died, only eating once per day if that. She looked ill, like she was dying. Her cheeks sunk in, skin still an ashen color, her foundation not mixing well so that she looked like she wore pancake powder. Mom probably didn't even recognize her as the same girl she'd seen on television with her father during the campaign. But Kate, the training from Kinsler, her image coach, still intact, smiled a big toothy grin and hugged my mother. This would make my mom's day. My mother had always wanted a daughter. She'd even picked out a name just in case either Alex or I wound up being a girl, Ivy Elizabeth. Instead, though, she'd raised three boys: me, my brother, and my father. Perhaps that was why she'd prematurely grayed and hunched over at 57. We were all so busy trying not to grow up that she had to be the adult for all of us.

A gunshot resounded from the backside of the house. Kate, still hugging Mom, flinched at the noise.

“Jesus Christ,” Mom said. “It’s your brother and your damned father out back. Tell them to knock that off out there and come inside, will you, Eli?” She patted Kate on the back. “You want a cup of tea, sweetheart?”

“Tea, yes. That sounds great.”

Mom motioned for me to go around the house instead of through while she took Kate in to get a warm cup of tea. It would just be Instant Lipton’s. My mother’d never really known her way around the kitchen, her specialty had always been Hamburger Helper. So if it wasn’t instant or could be made within three steps, it wasn’t getting made. She’d much rather jump in her Broncho II and head to KFC rather than figure out how to read a recipe. But she’d kept us fed. I gave her that.

I made my way out back of the house, nervous about my dad’s reaction. He’d been the one that had condemned my choice of profession, had told me during my last visit not to return until I’d quit, and had basically shunned me. We hadn’t spoken since, and from what Alex had told me, his feelings hadn’t changed.

We lived up on Circle Mountain outside of Bartlesville, Oklahoma. It’s not really a mountain but rather a large hill overlooking the town. The view surrounding our little perch was amazing. Price Tower dominated the skyline, the only skyscraper ever designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Green and black and tan colored, Mr. Wright had always said he’d plucked this tree from the Manhattan skyscrapers and planted it in the prairie. Out back Dad had years ago built a makeshift shooting range complete with fake

animal targets and stacked hay bales with targets painted on them. There I found both Alex and Dad who had his Colt Defender .45 in hand. They'd always had this in common, this shared love of the outdoors, hunting, fishing, and whatnot. I'd always been more of a homebody compared to them, never really learned my way around firearms. Just basic safety lessons.

Dad, in fact, had turned his love for hunting and photography both into his living. After shooting an animal, a deer for instance, he'd track it, then photograph it as it was fleeing, and eventually lay dying. Animal rights groups had protested his work from the beginning, calling him inhumane and a murderer profiting off of animals' suffering. But the notoriety had made him a mildly successful artist, enough in order to make a good living, send my brother to private college. A few years back, he'd even had a show in New York, but I couldn't remember the gallery's name.

"The prodigal son returns," Dad said. He strolled toward me, long legs swinging nimbly. He hadn't aged at all. His goatee had turned a little grayer, but he still was quick to scowl, and he moved as a man thirty years his junior would. "Your mother said you'd be coming this year, but I wasn't going to believe it until I saw it for myself." I reached out to shake my father's hand, and to my surprise he took it and gave me a firm shake. "You need to eat, boy. You'd have to stand up twice to cast a shadow."

I didn't respond.

Dad released my hand, and Alex ambled up next to us as if shy to see me. He looked the same as he did the day the Governor'd been buried. Still scrawny, like me, shaved head. But he didn't have that cocksure swagger he had back in Oklahoma City.

And he didn't smell of cigarettes, either. Twenty-two and a soon-to-be college grad and PhD student at M.I.T., and he couldn't bring himself to smoke in front of his parents. Not that I blamed him. I probably wouldn't have been able to, either.

"Glad to see you made it out of the city alive," Alex said.

"Me too," I said. "Mom said to knock off the shooting."

Dad groaned. "Ah hell, that woman."

"I'd appreciate it, too." I couldn't bring myself to make eye contact with my father. "I got Kate here, and she's, well, she's—"

"Kate's here?" Alex asked. "Inside?"

"Yeah." I pointed back at the house with my thumb. "With Mom. Why?"

"Oh nothing."

Dad burst out laughing. "You got a little crush on Eli's fiancée, Alex?"

"No." Alex stuttered. "I just, I'm, I'm surprised he brought her. That's all."

"All right. All right," Dad said. "Don't go off with your pistol half-cocked."

He grabbed us both by the neck and led us back to the house. "You could've given us a heads up you were planning on getting hitched, though, son. Your momma was pretty pissed we haven't met the girl yet."

"Yeah, well. It was kind of a spur of the moment type of thing."

Back inside, the house hadn't changed at all since I'd moved out seven years earlier or from when I'd visited a couple of years back. They still had the same floral printed couch. The color of the thread had faded over the years, the reds and greens and blues not as brilliant and vivid as in my childhood memories. Above us the fan wobbled

a little more than I remembered. But the same childhood photographs still lined the walls and bookshelves and coffee table. There was me at a debate meet, Alex at the science fair in seventh or eighth grade. Old family portraits where my brother and I wore these awful sweaters that made us look like Fruit Stripe gum. The only difference was that instead of the clunky media cabinet and the old TV, now there was a large flat screen. My father's doing, more than likely.

Kate and Mom sat in the living room nursing cups of steaming tea. Mom, of course, was talking incessantly as Kate nodded and stared into the green liquid. They were discussing my parents' wedding, how she had no say in how it went, the venue or decorations or her dress. Her parents had dictated every choice in the matter.

"It was like what I wanted didn't even matter," Mom said. "My mom just kept telling me that the marriage was for us and the wedding was for them."

"I guess I won't have that problem, huh?" Kate said.

The room went quiet. Mom stared at her lap, looking embarrassed that she'd droned on and on about her parents and wedding. Dad grasped his hands in front of him, rubbing them together as if searching for something to say in order to change the subject but coming up with nothing. Alex simply stared at Kate, a sympathetic look on his face, like he wanted to go over and hug her. I was in disbelief. Kate'd never really shown any inkling of self-pity since her father had died. This was unlike her, especially amongst strangers, even if they were my family.

"Where's your bathroom?" Kate asked Mom.

Mom pointed down the hallway to the little half-bath underneath the stairs, and Kate excused herself and disappeared. Standing, Mom smiled at each of us, her boys, like nothing had happened, as was her way.

“Well,” she said. “Kate tells me you won’t be staying the weekend with us.”

“What?” Dad said. “Why?”

They both looked hurt, but not surprised. “No,” I said. “We have to catch a plane early Saturday morning.”

“To Vegas. For a *vacation*.” Mom used finger quotes, knowing fully well that I was going there to gamble.

“Mom. Stop. Let’s just have a nice time, okay?”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea, right now? After what she’s just been through?”

“Mom, please. Just stay out of it.”

“She’s not in any condition for a vacation right now, Eli.”

“Mom, stop. She can probably hear you.”

Mom raised her hands in surrender. “I’m just saying.”

The door clicked open, and Kate returned with her hands in her pockets. She looked a little embarrassed for her comment earlier. Her cheeks were a hint red, and little beads of sweat gleamed on her brow.

“I’m Elijah’s father, by the way,” Dad said. He approached Kate tentatively, but Kate just waved, so he stopped. “Nice to meet you.”

An awkward silence filled the room. We each just stood there. This was not how I hoped Kate's introduction would have gone. On the drive up here, I had these images of Kate, the old Kate, the Kate on the campaign trail, witty and glowing. She had once been so personable. I remembered watching a town hall meeting once in Tuscaloosa where the Governor had just taken a beating, and Kate had single-handedly transformed a hostile crowd into a sympathetic one. It was as if she'd turned into the entire crowd's granddaughter. She had entreated to their nostalgic sensibilities, making parallels between this time and the era of the Greatest Generation, saying that a great country knew when to make sacrifices. She had said how she hoped to have children one day, a large family, and she couldn't fathom making our lives easier so that theirs would be much harder. Of course, these were lines that her image coach and her father had given her. But she'd presented them so beautifully and eloquently that all those in attendance couldn't help but warm to her. That was the Kate I'd hoped would have shown to Thanksgiving, so that she could win over my parents so much so that my professional life wouldn't even have been brought up. Wishful thinking, I knew, but I had hoped.

A buzz came from the kitchen. "Pies are done," Mom said with a smile.

"You're cooking?" I asked. "Thanksgiving dinner?"

"A lot of things have changed since you've been gone, little boy," she said and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Mom had cooked a spread. Turkey. Cranberries. Stuffing. Mashed potatoes. Gravy from scratch. Corn on the cob. Sweet potatoes. Green bean casserole. Deviled eggs. Pumpkin pie. Pecan pie. Coconut cream. We even ate in the dining room, which I can never remember doing. Usually we'd sat in front of the television while we ate, each of us vying for what we would watch. Alex would want the Discovery Channel, Mom some sitcom on ABC or NBC, Dad some boxing match on HBO, and I'd want to turn it to ESPN. Mom had even decorated for this occasion. White tablecloth. Long stemmed candles. She'd even gone so far as pairing the meal with some chardonnay from France that I couldn't even pretend to pronounce. I'd never seen Mom do anything remotely like this. And all of it was delicious. The turkey was moist and succulent and tender. Not greasy by any means. Just perfect. I was astonished really.

"I've been taking classes," she explained as she sipped from her wine glass.

"They've been paying off, huh?"

"I'd say," Alex said. "I wished you would've done this years ago."

"Yeah. Me too," Dad said. "Maybe we'd have a couple of linebackers instead of a scientist and a gambler."

"There's nothing wrong with our children's chosen vocations," Mom said.

"The hell you say. Season tickets to the Cowboys would've been nice."

"The Cowboys suck, Dad," Alex said. "The Chiefs are where it's at."

Kate wasn't chiming into the conversation at all. Instead, she stared at her plate and pushed around her little bit of food. She'd take a sip of her wine, put her glass down, spear a green bean, then take another drink. Not that Mom and Dad and Alex didn't try

to include her. They asked her questions about school. What're you studying? Film and journalism. When will you graduate? Not sure. Taking a break. What do you want to do once you graduate? Make documentaries. Oh yeah? Are you working on one right now? Yes. Every few minutes she would excuse herself so that she could go to the bathroom, and each time she came back she looked a little more tired. The last time she'd washed off all her makeup. Now she appeared ill, like the smell of the food was making her sick to her stomach.

“Let's just be thankful our children found work that makes them happy,” Mom said. “It is Thanksgiving for Christ's sake.”

An awkward silence fell over the table so that the only noise was the sound of us chewing. I knew this would come up sooner or later; my father especially would never let it go, just couldn't understand why I hadn't turned out the way he wanted.

“I think I need to lay down a moment,” Kate said. “I'm not feeling well.”

Kate had grown pale during our conversation. Her words slurred and her eyelids fluttered and her head seemed uneasy on her neck. She nearly looked like she did back in the hotel room on St. Thomas, just after she'd vomited and was on the verge of passing out. Kate tried to stand, but she stumbled. Alex and I stood at the same time. I took Kate by one arm, and he the other so she wouldn't fall.

“I'll show you to bed,” I said. “Alex, help me take her upstairs?”

He nodded.

“You okay, honey?” Mom asked. She was halfway out of her chair, unsure if she should stand or stay seated.

“Yes.” Kate swallowed. “I’m sorry. I just feel—I’m dizzy all of a sudden.”

“Do you need help?” Dad asked. “I could—”

“We got it,” I said. “Thanks.”

With her arms around our shoulders, Alex and I took her upstairs and lay her in my old bed. Alex left us alone, and Kate peered up at me. Her pupils swam in her head, like stones floating atop a murky pond. She was having a hard time keeping her eyes open. I took her boots off, helped her with her sweater, got her a light blanket, and wrapped her in it. She lay on her back, her head tilted up by two pillows.

“Your room is cute,” she slurred.

Mom hadn’t changed my room since I’d moved out. Perhaps she’d always hoped that I would return. There were still the poker books I’d bought with my own money, Doyle Brunson’s Super System, Harrington on Hold ‘em, and, of course, my signed copy of Barry Greenstein’s Ace on the River. When I’d been kicked out, I didn’t have any time to pack, and I’d never returned long enough to take my stuff with me. The World Series of Poker insignia poster hung above my bed. I was surprised my father had allowed for it all to remain. But, knowing him, he hadn’t set foot in here since I’d left, and as far as he was concerned, out of sight really was out of mind.

“How’re you feeling?” I asked.

“Better now that I’m lying down.”

She didn’t look any better. Around her neck Kate had broken out in a rash, little red bumps that resembled the texture of a basketball. She sweated, but her skin was cool to the touch.

“Are you cold?”

She shook her head. “I’m burning up.”

I was afraid she’d taken something, prescription medicine, drugs, something during her several trips to the bathroom, but I didn’t know how to broach the subject. I didn’t want to seem accusatory, but memories of that night in St. Thomas kept coming back to me, how her throat had thrashed each time she gagged on her own vomit, how she could’ve died, and how I had no way of helping her. If she had taken something during dinner, I wanted to be prepared.

“Do you think you’re sick?” I asked. “You might be running a fever.” I placed the back of my hand on her forehead. It was cool to the touch. No fever as far as I could tell.

“No. I don’t know. Maybe.” Kate kicked the blanket lower so that it wasn’t covering her above her waist.

“Are you feeling nauseas? You didn’t eat much at dinner.”

“A little. Dizzy more than anything.”

I dabbed at the beads of sweat on her brow with the sleeve of my shirt. Her eyes closed, fluttered back open, then closed again. I pinched her arm, not hard, just to see if she would react, but she didn’t. She was beginning to scare me a little. The pinch wouldn’t leave a bruise or anything, but I expected her to flinch, make a face, tell me to stop. But she didn’t. It was like she was completely numb, or too tired to react. More than anything I hoped that she just had a cold, or a bad reaction to the turkey, or the wine, even the flu. Anything except drugs.

“Were you feeling any symptoms last night? Or on the drive up here?”

Kate didn't respond. Her head tilted back and to the left, and her mouth was slightly open. On the tip of her tongue was a white residue. Perhaps saliva, perhaps the remnants of a pill that she hadn't swallowed or digested. Or maybe I was being paranoid. I shook her, afraid what might happen if she passed out. She stirred, opened her eyes.

“What?” Kate asked. She looked about her as if confused, as if she didn't remember where she had fallen asleep, or how much time had elapsed.

I repeated my question.

“No. No. Just during lunch.”

“Did you take anything?”

“I just need sleep,” she said. “Just a little while.”

“But did you take anything?”

“I'll take something later.”

She thought I'd meant for her symptoms, like Tylenol, not drugs to have made her this way. Perhaps, I thought, that was a good thing. If she had a guilty conscience, then she would've become defensive, not assumed that I meant medicine. Perhaps I was being a little paranoid. Perhaps all she needed was some sleep like she said, and everything would be fine in a few hours. I hoped so. We had to fly out tomorrow for our trip to Vegas and the tournament.

Kate rolled away from me and faced the wall. Her shirt had become soaked with sweat, so I reached up and turned on the ceiling fan, hoping she would cool down some.

“Yell for me if you need anything.”

I turned toward the door to leave. But I stopped and took one more look at Kate. She seemed out of place in my old bed. Any girl did, for that matter. I had never been very popular with girls in high school, or afterward, my career had always come first and left little time to date. I had been on some in my twenties, flirted with a girl here and there, lost my virginity a month after a tournament in Biloxi. But nothing like this. How did I get so lucky? Kathryn Cook. The Governor's daughter and me. The almost first daughter of the United States. Just didn't make much sense. I closed the door as quietly as I could so that Kate could get some sleep.

Downstairs Alex and Dad and Mom were cleaning. The water ran in the kitchen, and I was sure Alex was in there scrubbing away at pie filling on Mom's good China. Dad was scooping leftover potatoes into Tupperware and dinner rolls into Ziploc baggies. Mom oversaw the whole operation, ordering Dad what to bag next, what Alex should clean. It was quite funny to watch actually, and filled me with a nostalgia I hadn't felt in years. To be home again. It was a strange feeling. It was like finding bullets in the hole with action in front of you and chips to play. Despite my dad's remarks about my profession, it just felt good.

Mom noticed me standing at the threshold where living room met dining room. "Is Kate okay?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "She'll be just fine."

After we cleaned up, the three of us gathered around the television to let our food digest. Dad had turned the channel to a football game, Cowboys versus the Bears. The

Cowboys were killing them 27-7 in the second quarter, but Dad refused to change the channel, citing that it was un-American not to watch football on Thanksgiving. Mom dozed, her feet propped up on Alex's lap on the couch, I sat squished into the armrest on the other side of Alex, and Dad lounged in his recliner, his shirt un-tucked and his boots underneath his footrest. He chewed on a toothpick and twirled it in his mouth, a habit he had had for as long as I could remember.

I tried to remember the last time we'd all been under this roof at the same time. When I'd visited after winning that tournament in Vegas, Alex had been away at school, volunteering to do some lab research over winter break. It must've been two Christmases before that. That seemed so long ago now. I remembered my parents had gotten me a suit and tie, you know, for job interviews, and for Alex they had gotten a new laptop. But for the life of me, I couldn't remember what I had gotten my family. It hadn't been anything big. I'd hit a cold streak at the time and didn't have much loose change. But I had gotten them something. But what was it?

Before I'd left for good I'd bought them a record player that digitized their album collection into MP3 files, a GPS unit for their car, re-mastered copies of all The Beatles albums, a new stand for Dad's Nikon. But what about that last year we had spent Christmas together? And then it came to me. I'd bought them little trinkets I'd found at a Love's Country Store. My mom a magnet listing 10 clues if a person is from Oklahoma, my father a Route 66 T-shirt, and my brother a flimsy dreamcatcher. And I hadn't bought them anything since. I hadn't even called the past couple of Christmases. Last year I'd been in St. Paul. Weather conditions had grounded all planes. I'd been

stuck at the airport on Christmas, shrouded in a static world of white. Not that I had been planning on heading home. I was actually planning to fly to Niagara Falls where there was a Razz tournament. So I spent Christmas with my feet propped up on plastic blue chairs in terminal E at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.

The first half ended; the Cowboys were up 34-10 at this point. Troy Aikman and Joe Buck provided commentary on the first half, lauding the Cowboys pass protection and their ability to convert third-down plays. Dad had started dozing in-and-out. Every few seconds he would snore. Only Alex and I were awake at this point, so I grabbed the remote from the side table and surfed through the channels. Dad popped up as soon as the channel changed, inching his way up so that his back was straight, like he'd been awake the entire time.

“What’re you doing?” he asked. “I was watching that.”

“It’s halftime, Dad.”

“What’s the score?”

“I thought you were watching it?”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

I told him the score, and he relented control of the remote for now, saying that I’d have to turn it back at the start of the second half. I was flipping through the channels when we passed by a poker game. I tried to keep going, but Dad told me to stop there. They were replaying the heads-up world championships held a few weeks back. Andy Bloom was playing Daniel Benson in the quarterfinals.

“So that’s what you do?” Dad said. “Sit around a table and bet money you didn’t work for. I don’t see how you can stand doing that sort of thing, son.” Dad pointed at the television with his toothpick. “The whole lot of them should sit down with their preacher.”

“I don’t think most of them have a preacher, Dad,” I said.

“You bet your ass there’d be a lot less of them out there if they did.”

“I don’t know, Dad,” Alex said. “The Bible doesn’t say anything explicitly about gambling.”

“Jesus, guys. What does the Bible have to do with anything?”

“How can you not see that?” Dad said. He tilted his head to the ceiling as if addressing God. “My son. A poker player.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Where did I go wrong?”

Mom stirred, rolled over to her side. “Will y’all shut up? I’m trying to sleep here.”

Dad chewed on his toothpick, and Alex scooted toward me, trying to get more room, but Mom continued to lay on him.

“I’m not saying you’re not good at what you do Eli,” Dad said. “You may be a millionaire for all I know. I just can’t trust a gambling man.”

“With all due respect, Dad, you’ve never given one a chance.”

“And with all due respect, son, Jesus said ‘where your treasure is there will your heart be also.’ What do you think that means for someone that lies and gambles to make money.”

“What are you trying to say?”

He shrugged, moved the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other with his tongue. “Just saying, that’s all.”

“Are you saying that I can’t be a good person because I play poker?”

“Maybe. Explain that to me first, and I’ll tell you if that’s what I meant or not.”

“Hey.” Mom sat up. “Wait a second here. Why are you guys fighting in the first place?”

We both went quiet. Alex stretched out his legs now that he had some room. Dad didn’t even move. He just put his hands behind his head and lounged back even further in his recliner.

“Dad’s throwing around accusations about things he knows nothing about.”

“When did you turn so sensitive?” Dad asked. “You about to walk out on us again?”

“You’re the one that kicked me out, Dad. Remember?”

“Now wait one goddamn second here—”

“I think I’m going to get some leftovers,” Alex said as he got up and left the room. I heard the back door open and shut a moment later.

“Okay then,” Mom said. “Let’s have it out.”

“What do you mean, ‘let’s have it out’?” I asked.

Mom scratched her forehead and turned toward my father. “Say what you got to say. Let’s have it out.”

For some reason this felt like an intervention, like I'd been trapped into this conversation, them planning this out for days before Kate and my arrival. Weeks maybe. Months. Even years.

"What?" I said. "What do you have to say?"

"We think you should find a new profession," Dad said.

Mom held up her hand to stop Dad. "*You* think he needs to find a new profession."

"We talked about this, Julia."

"We talked, yes. But we did not come to the same conclusion."

Dad grunted, a sound similar to a dog's muffled bark, kicked his leg rest down, and sat forward in his chair. He ran his fingers through his thickening goatee, and I could tell he wanted to say something else to my mother, but he was restraining himself for reasons I didn't quite understand.

"What makes you think you could make me quit, Dad? I've been doing this for years without your blessing already."

"Look, son," Dad said. He began to count off on his fingers. "You never come home anymore. You hardly ever call. You never let us come visit. We never know what city you're in. You've lost about twenty-five pounds since the last time we saw you. You look decades older than you are. You look haggard. You're getting married to a girl we've never met. Didn't even know you were dating in fact." He had run out of fingers by this point. "Do you even know what you're doing anymore?"

I didn't know what to say. To be honest, I had expected this. But it wasn't what I'd hoped would happen. I'd hoped my parents would be smitten with Kate, so happy to see me that we laughed and ate and told nostalgic stories of when Alex and I had been children. They telling me it wasn't important what I did for a living. Plans for the future. Promises to see each other more often. Their understanding if things didn't necessarily turn out that way. Perhaps my hopes had been naïve, and as proof here they were, both my parents staring at me with judgmental eyes. My father had taken his toothpick out of his mouth and twirled it in his fingers. Mom rubbed her hands as if stricken with terrible arthritis. Her veins were more prominent than I'd ever seen them before, like purple fault lines crisscrossing her hands.

"I have everything under control," I said. "Sometimes life doesn't go as planned, but I have everything under control."

"Honey," Mom said. "You don't."

Her tone irritated me. It had this calm, even assuredness to it that got under my skin, like she knew my life better than me despite the fact she hadn't seen me in years.

"I appreciate your concern, Mom, Dad, but I assure you that I do."

"We just want you to take better care of yourself," Mom said. "Eat better. Get more sleep. Talk to us more. Come see us every once in a while."

"Find something else to do," Dad said.

"Frank," Mom said. "Please. You're not helping."

"What? You feel the same way about gambling as I do. You just don't have the courage to say it."

I changed the channel back to the football game. The second half had started. Cowboys had possession at their own twenty yard line.

“There you go, Dad. Game’s back on.”

The quarterback hiked the ball, threw downfield to his wide receiver, but a defensive back for the Bears picked him off and returned the interception for a touchdown. As the Cowboys sauntered off the field, the Bears celebrated wildly.

That night I couldn’t sleep. Kate hadn’t come back downstairs for the rest of the day, slept from lunch all the way to when I went to bed around ten. She didn’t even stir when I crawled into bed and pulled the comforter over me while she still slept on top of it. Her breathing was normal, and her complexion was better. Perhaps that was all she needed, hours of sleep. Perhaps she would be the old Kate again in the morning. I hoped so.

It was now after midnight, and I’d been staring up at my popcorn-like ceiling for hours. Kate and I were to leave first thing in the morning, and I couldn’t wait. Coming home had been a mistake. After my parents’ so-called intervention, we’d spent the rest of the day as if nothing had happened. Or at least they did. Alex returned from wherever he’d been, somewhere outside, having escaped moments before my parents’ show as if he’d known it was going to happen all along, and we played Monopoly and 100 Dumb Things and Cranium. Then we’d played dominoes, ate some left over turkey and stuffing, watched more football, all the while those three jokingly taunted each other and laughed like we were having the best time in the world. I had felt like an outcast.

Isolated from my own family, like a stranger amidst very close friends not privy to their inside jokes. So I decided that we would leave as soon as Kate awoke.

My old room was dusty. In the dim moonlight, I could see tiny particles floating around like a school of swimming jellyfish. Mom hadn't cleaned in here in years more than likely. She probably hadn't even stepped foot in here. It did look almost identical to when I'd left. And all of it was coated in thick dust, which clung to the back of my throat, making me terribly thirsty.

I crept out of bed as quietly as I could, careful not to wake Kate, and then tiptoed my way down to the kitchen. The house was dark, and except for the floorboards squeaking underneath my feet, there wasn't another noise in the house. Everyone else was asleep, Alex in his room, my parents in the master. But when I turned the light on to the kitchen, I noticed my mother sitting on the back porch, smoking a cigarette. I'd never seen her smoke. It was like I didn't even know who she was anymore. She turned when she noticed the light, brushed the smoke away from her face like she was swatting at gnats. I made myself a glass of water and then opened the door and popped my head outside.

"Couldn't sleep?" I asked. Mom nodded, took a long drag from her cigarette. The cherry burned orange under the starless night, making her cheeks and forehead glow underneath the flame. "When'd you start smoking?"

"About the time I took up drinking," she said. "About the time I started cooking, too."

I sat next to her and took a gulp of water. The coolness felt good against my raspy throat. Mom's cigarette didn't help, though. I always hated the smell of cigarette smoke. It reminded me of stale, burnt bread. "Alex started, too."

Mom exhaled a long stream of blue smoke above her head. "I know. He thinks I don't, but I do." She asked at her feet. "You want one?"

"No thanks."

"Smart move."

"Yeah."

I took another drink of my water. The moon, or at least the dim, smoky light of the moon behind a wall of gray clouds, perched high in the sky. Every time I took the time to watch the moon I thought of JFK. The brass on that guy. To stand up in front of the world and make the claim that the U.S. would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. That was a leader. A great orator. Too bad he never got to see his dream come to fruition. He would've been so proud. Not only of his administration, but of his nation. But just like the Governor, he'd been shot down before given the chance to make his administration great. It was a shame really. Not only were they robbed of their life, but we were robbed of them.

"How's your girl doing?" Mom asked.

"Good. Still sleeping."

Mom lit another cigarette with the cherry of her first and inhaled deeply, letting the smoke fill her lungs. "She slept for quite awhile."

"She needed it. She hasn't been sleeping well."

“Hmmm,” Mom said. The wind picked up, and she pulled her bathrobe tighter around her body. “How has she been doing? Losing her father like that, I couldn’t even imagine.”

“It’s been tough.” I finished off my water in one long gulp.

“I bet it’s been rough on you, too.”

I didn’t say anything, just stared at my empty water glass. It was so dark outside the glass didn’t even reflect any moonlight. Only the occasional firefly lit up the yard, flying lazily through the fall breeze. I brought my knees to my chest and put my arms around my legs to stay warm. The wind was brisk tonight, only slightly blocked by the trees to the north. Being on top of Circle Mountain, it was always much colder up here than down in town.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Mom asked.

“Not really.” I went to take a drink of my water, forgetting the glass was empty. “I think I’ll take one of those cigarettes, actually.” Mom handed me one, and I lit it. The taste was jarring at first. It tasted like it smelled, like smoldered toast, and the smoke scratched my throat to the point I nearly coughed, but I didn’t. My heart raced with the first injection of nicotine into my bloodstream, and I felt the nerve endings in my brain fire with the release of serotonin. Despite the flavor, I enjoyed it. It was like a shot of adrenalin.

Mom reached into her bathrobe pocket and pulled something out. It was small, and she held it in-between her thumb and index finger. “I found this in the bathroom.”

She held it out to me like she wanted to give it to me. I reached out, and she dropped it into my hand. It was a pill. White and oval with “OC” etched through the top of it and “80” on the other side.

“Oxycontin,” Mom said.

“I don’t want one of these.”

“I’m not giving it to you to take. I’m saying I found this on the floor in the bathroom. The downstairs bathroom. The one Kate went to several times during lunch.”

“You trying to say this is Kate’s?”

Mom peered at me, smoke dancing around her features. “Well, is it?”

I looked at the pill. It was so small. 80 milligrams. But it had put Kate on her back. I hoped she’d only taken one. Oxycontin was powerful stuff. Pain medication given to cancer patients. From what I’d heard, it was like legal heroin. It provided a sense of numbing euphoria, like being weightless and surrounded by down. But it could also easily kill if too much is taken. I thought about going back upstairs to check on her but decided against it. It had been hours since she had gone up to bed. If she was going to overdose, she would’ve already.

“You should get her some help,” Mom said. “Addiction’s no joke. Believe me.”

“She’s not an addict, Mom.” I took another drag of my cigarette, letting the smoke fill my lungs until I thought they would burst. “She’s just coping. It’s a temporary thing.”

“Addiction is never a temporary thing. And living with an addict, boy, you just have no idea.”

“And you do? You and Dad have never dealt with anything like this. Your marriage has been solid. Always. Just one big happy family.”

I was getting tired of my parents prying. I was an adult now, not some thirteen-year-old child still living underneath their roof. They had no right to tell me what to do professionally or in my relationship with Kate.

Footsteps could be heard off in the distance. This late in the year, it was probably a deer, some young buck attracted by the lit cigarettes. Or perhaps a coyote. A few had used to patrol around our house when I'd been growing up. Occasionally we would find mutilated rabbits or squirrels around the edges of our property line, bones cracked by sharp teeth and the grass stained red with their blood. At first, especially when I had been really young, these carcasses scared me. But as I got older, they began to spark my imagination. Natural selection. The survival of the fittest. It's a fact not limited to living organisms. It's evident everywhere. From corporate power struggles to the tallest plant reaching the sunlight. I'd always tried to remember this at the poker table. The strong will survive, the weak perish.

Mom scoffed. “Your father and I have had problems just like any other couple. You don't get through a thirty-year marriage without them. Some are small, sure. But others are life-shattering. We just tried not to parade them out in front of you and Alex. Hell, we still have problems to this day.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

Mom stamped her cigarette out on the steps of the porch, leaving a black smudge of ash. She flicked the butt out into the yard, and the wind carried it away like tumbleweed. “You really want to know?”

I nodded.

“I think I need a drink for this.” Mom stood and opened the back door to go into the kitchen. “You want one?”

“What’re you drinking?”

“I got white wine. Or I got scotch.”

“I’ll take the wine.”

Mom disappeared back into the house, leaving me outside by myself. I could still hear the footsteps off into the distance. Leaves crackled underneath the animal’s weight. The occasional twig snapped. It was taking slow, deliberate steps, as if pacing out there, just beyond the visible area cast by the light from the kitchen. It had to be a coyote. A deer wouldn’t be this brazen. A deer would’ve bolted by now. I squinted, trying to see if I could catch a glimpse of its eyes reflecting the kitchen light, but I saw nothing. Just the fireflies and the small illuminated circle that extended about ten feet from the edge of the porch.

I was a little nervous as to what Mom was about to disclose to me. I’d seen her drink before. Sometimes she’d have a glass of wine with dinner, perhaps a beer on the Fourth of July. She’d always stop at one, though, careful never to get even close to drunk, even buzzed for that matter. Not that she planned on getting drunk out on the front porch with me that night, but I’d never heard her say that she *needed* a drink before.

Either the news she was about to unfold was catastrophic, or she'd successfully hidden a habit that I'd never known existed.

Mom returned with two glasses in hand: a wine for me, scotch for her. No ice, no water, just straight dirty, brown scotch. The smell made me a little queasy, sweet caramel with notes of nut and oak and turpentine. She sat back down next to me, took a swig of her drink, and ballooned her cheeks out to let the liquid rest in her mouth as if soaking in all the flavor she could before swallowing.

“Okay,” she said after a long, satisfied sigh. “Where were we?”

“You were—”

“Right, right. Me and your father. Where to start?” She took another cigarette out of her pack and lit it. “Well, we’ve been having a falling out lately, that’s for sure.”

I’d forgotten about the cigarette in my hand, and when I looked down, it had burned out, the filter having turned a yellowish brown. My mouth tasted like an ashtray, so I took a swig of the warm wine to mask the flavor, but it didn’t help.

“Falling out how?”

“Did you notice he went to sleep in the guest bedroom?”

“No. I went to sleep before you guys did.”

“We’ve been sleeping in different rooms for about a year now.”

“Are you going to get a divorce?”

“I don’t know, maybe.” She swirled the scotch in her highball glass, raised the glass to her lips but stopped. “Probably.”

My stomach dropped. I couldn't picture my parents divorced, or even mad at each other for some reason. Thinking back, I didn't remember them even fighting. Never had I heard screaming in the other room, music turned up so as to drown out what they were arguing about. Voices had never been raised in my house.

"What happened?" I asked.

"He had an affair. Several actually. For years and years. Decades even. One woman after another. I'd known for a long while, but I never had the courage to do anything about it. And then, about a year ago, to get back at him, so did I. My first therapist and then the guy I took cooking classes from. But your father doesn't know that part." Mom tilted her head back and gulped the rest of her scotch and cringed. "Besides my newest shrink, you're the first person I've told that to."

"Jesus, Mom."

"Turns out your father is a sex addict. Ha. Who knew?"

I tried to digest this information. My father, a sex addict. My father living this duplicitous life behind our backs. My mother having two affairs out of revenge. The idea I had of my home life shattered. It was nearly too much to take.

"I think I need another cigarette," I said. Mom gave me one, and I inhaled the reassuring nicotine and exhaled with one large breath, pushing out with my entire body. The animal's footsteps out in the darkness quickened, as if it was trotting now.

"So all I'm saying is don't let Kate's addiction get out of hand. Years from now. Months. Weeks. Even days, it will blow up on you. If you repress something, if you ignore it and just hope it will go away on its own, it will always blow up in your face. At

least, that's what my therapist says." Mom stamped out her cigarette and flicked it out into the yard again. "I'm going to bed, honey. Sweet dreams." She kissed me on the head, hugged me, and went back inside.

As I sat there alone, nursing my cigarette and wine and mulling over what my mother had just confessed, the animal inched into the realm of light, not ten feet from where I sat. I had been right; it was a coyote. It stopped its approach and stared, its beady eyes fixed on me. I should've been afraid, but I wasn't. Instead I was calm, convinced that it wouldn't come any closer. And I was right again. It simply licked its chops, yawned, turned, and trotted off into the darkness until all I could hear was the pitter-patter of its footsteps trailing off into the woods.

The next morning Kate and I said our goodbyes, promising that we would be back to visit soon. It was cold outside. Our breaths puffed up like smoke, and our hands turned pink under the wind. Kate looked better, though, more chipper this morning than she had been in several. Sleep had done her well.

We stood out on the front patio, bags in hand, Mom and Dad and Alex still in pajamas, shivering and teeth chattering. We hugged and promised that they would be included in the wedding plans, each of us laughing, smiling, acting like yesterday hadn't happened the way that it had. Which was fine with me. I wanted to forget it had ever happened at all and return to my life with Kate. But after Kate had gotten into the car, citing the cold as an excuse, Dad asked if I could have a word with him alone for a

moment before I took off. Dad blew into his cupped hands to keep them warm, and I told him sure.

When Mom and Alex had gone back inside, he turned to me and lowered his head and peered up into my eyes as though he could read my thoughts. “I want you to know that despite what I said yesterday about how you should find another job, I am still proud of you, son.”

I wanted to tell him that that really meant nothing to me now. Not after what Mom had told me. When I’d been younger, my father had been a superhero. Bigger than life. Infallible. Up until last night, he’d remained that way. Perhaps it was the same way with all sons and fathers. Until that one day when the son grows up and he sees his true father. Flawed and, oftentimes, a liar. An adulterer even.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I just wanted you to know that.” He gave me a hug, patted me on the back. He smelled of sandalwood and aftershave. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

He pulled away. His eyes watered, but I couldn’t tell if it was from the cold and wind or if he was crying. “Don’t freak out, but I put the .45 in your bag.”

“Wait, what? Why?”

He looked past my shoulder at Kate. Her head was down, probably messing with her iPod.

“I don’t see any Secret Service with you,” he said. “And her father—you just never know.”

“That doesn’t mean someone is going to come after Kate. You’re being ridiculous, Dad.”

“Just humor me, please.” Dad’s face hardened. His eyes still watered, and his cheeks had turned red, but his jaw was set, and his neck had tensed from flexing.

“No, Dad. This is stupid. We don’t need a gun.”

Dad shook his head like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Shit hit the fan the other day at that debate down there, and knowing you, you were right in the middle of it. Weren’t you? And I bet she was, too.” He pointed to Kate who still stared down at her lap.

His reasoning didn’t make any sense, but I was tired of arguing with him. “Fine. But if you ever want it back, you have to come to the city to get it.”

“Fine,” Dad said. “I will.”

“Fine.”

I turned and walked to the car. Kate waved goodbye to my father as I approached and got in. Before I slid it into gear and pushed down on the gas pedal, though, I turned once more toward my childhood home, but Dad had already gone back inside, the door shut behind him and more than likely locked.

10

Kate and I stayed at the Bellagio. Since she'd paid for the St. Thomas trip, and since this trip had been my idea, I bought the suite, on credit of course. I'd enough left in the bank for my buy-in to the tournament, so cash had been out of the question. Kate still didn't know about the tournament yet, though. I hadn't told her because of her reaction the night I hadn't come home, because I feared I'd have to come clean about all the money I'd lost and about all the debt I'd incurred. She wouldn't understand this tournament was the best chance for me to break even, or maybe even turn a profit. Not only was I afraid of her reaction, I was also ashamed of the hole I'd dug myself into. I'd always practiced budgetary constraint, weary of those fly-by gamblers that had no limitations. But now I was acting like one of them. Yet, I thought, if I could get into the top ten percent and at least into the money, I'd be able to get out of debt and bankroll my games back in Oklahoma. I'd be able to get back on a steady beat. And if I was able to somehow make the final table, well, we'd be set for life.

The room was huge, larger than any apartment I'd ever lived in, and let in so much of the desert light that I had to squint. Kate was unpacking her suitcase, hanging black cocktail dresses and shiny skirts and open-toed heels in the closet—she'd brought three bags for a five day trip—and seemed to be in good spirits. She'd been smiling since we'd left my parents, and she seemed healthier, almost like the Kate before her father's death. Because of that I hadn't the heart to bring up the Oxycontin my mother had found in the bathroom. But despite her good mood, I couldn't postpone telling her about the tournament any longer; it started the next morning at eight.

“What do you think I should wear to dinner tonight?” Kate asked as she held up one black dress and one silver. With the silver up to her skin, her ashen complexion became more pronounced, making her look sickly.

“The black.”

“We're going to the Eiffel Tower restaurant, right?” she asked.

I heard cash registers dinging in my head; that restaurant didn't have an entrée under \$60 or a bottle of wine under \$100. I knew we wouldn't get out of there for less than five bills, not with the way Kate'd been drinking lately. My card would be maxed out by the end of this trip; I was sure of it.

“Whatever you want, sweetie. Hey, listen, I need to tell you something.”

“Sweetie?”

“Tomorrow morning there's this—”

“Why'd you call me 'sweetie'?” She lowered the two dresses she was holding.

“Are we using pet names now?”

“I don’t know. It just sort of slipped out.”

“Oh. Slipped out. I see.” Kate returned to unpacking.

“Is ‘honey’ better? Or maybe ‘biscuit’?”

“Oh God no. None of them. Or any others.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“I’m not the pet name type.” She grabbed a white belt and wrapped it around the black dress I’d picked out hanging in the closet, stepped back, and inspected it. “It just seems so patrician. *Oh, honey! Oh, darling! Oh, sweetie!*” She cradled her face in her hands and bobbed her head from side to side as she said this, mocking me. “It reminds me of all those people that used to kiss my dad’s ass, that’s all.” Kate finished unpacking. She’d filled the entire closet with her wardrobe, leaving me no room to hang my clothes whatsoever. “So you ready to go shopping or what?” she asked.

We went to the mall at the Venetian first, and Kate loved it so much she could’ve moved in there. She bounced around Coach and Louis Vuitton and Tiffany’s and Ann Taylor and Marshall Rousso and Herve Leger. She bought purses and diamond necklaces and sunglasses and dresses and earrings. Within two hours she’d spent over \$5,000, all charging it to her credit card, thank God, never once asking me to buy her anything. But her spending worried me. Would this be her habit from here on out? Exactly how much money had she inherited from her father? How would I be able to sustain her standard of living? With each slide of plastic and the addition of more paper bags, I felt weighed down by more than just silk and cotton and gold and diamonds and leather, but by what our life would be like once our finances were combined.

As I followed her around I felt more like her personal assistant than fiancée. My job was to hold the bags and wait for her outside dressing rooms to give my opinion on her outfits. The employees helping her would bring me water with a cucumber slice hanging on the lip of a glass and a knowing smile—I was sure they'd seen men do this very same thing since they'd worked there—and I would sip on the water, mounds of boxed merchandise displayed around me like a fortress.

I was sitting like that in Kenneth Cole when a familiar face strolled in: Haman. A lump in my throat the size of a baseball formed; he was most certainly here for the tournament, and if he noticed me, he would certainly bring it up. And Kate was only about fifteen feet away from me behind slotted doors trying on a pair of jeans. In order to hide from him, I grabbed a catalog that some young girl had jammed into an oversized bag at one of the dozens of stores we'd already visited, and flipped through photos of models posing in extravagantly priced clothing and jewelry on cobblestone streets and suspiciously deserted subway stations when the door unlatched and Kate strolled out.

“What do you think?” she asked.

I didn't move the magazine. Haman was looking at some black leather jackets not but fifteen feet away, facing our direction.

“They look great.”

“You're not even looking.”

“I am too. They look great.”

“Seriously. I'm over here.”

I turned and looked at Kate. She did look good in the jeans. They were a dark denim, a deep navy, and had been cut so tightly that they could've been considered a second skin. Kate kicked one leg out. She was barefoot, and she arched her foot so that only the tip of her big toe touched the carpeted floor. Then she twirled and stopped with her back to me.

“What about my ass?”

She pushed it out and slightly bent over. I glanced over to Haman out of my peripheral, and there he stood, staring at my fiancée behind. If the jeans hung any lower on her hips, I would've been able to see her crack. Kate must've not been wearing any panties.

“They don't make it look too big, right?” Kate asked.

“No, not at all.”

“Will you stand up and actually look?”

“I'm looking!”

“You are not!”

“Fine.”

I stood and checked out my fiancée's ass, along with Haman. “It looks fine.”

“Just fine?”

“Eli?” Haman asked. “Old buddy, old pal, old fish. Funny running into you here like this.”

All my organs felt like they instantaneously dissolved, and my legs went weak. He approached, and Kate stood, a little touch of red in her cheeks, embarrassed that she

was sticking her butt out like that when someone I knew was standing only a few feet away.

“Yeah, funny. Haman, meet Kate. Kate, Haman.”

They shook hands.

“So you weren’t lying, were you?” Haman asked as he backhanded me in the chest.

Kate looked confused, furrowed her brow and bit her bottom lip. “Lying about what?” she asked.

“None of us believed he was actually dating you,” he said. “We laughed in his face, actually.”

“We’re engaged,” I said. “Actually.”

“And he told you this where?” Kate asked.

“Well, I really can’t tell you where,” Haman elbowed Kate playfully and winked, like Kate had any idea he meant an illegal gambling operation in Bricktown. “If I did that I’d have to kill you.”

Kate’s jaw dropped, and she blinked as if she couldn’t believe he’d just said that. I couldn’t believe he’d just said that either; didn’t he realize her father had just been murdered? He was betting on the upcoming special election because of it for Christ’s sake.

When Kate didn’t respond, Haman turned back to me. “So I take it you scrounged up enough cash for the tournament tomorrow? Even though Roland cleaned you out the other day?”

Here it was. My face caught fire, burned so much I knew I'd gone completely red.

"The poker tournament, yeah," Kate said. "Of course he's playing in the poker tournament. Why else would we come to Vegas? We came for the poker tournament."

"All right," Haman said as he slapped me on the shoulder, completely oblivious to Kate's sarcasm. "See you on the felt then."

Dinner was a tense affair. We sat near the window at a white-clothed table overlooking the strip. It was just past sunset, so the sky was striated purple and a dull orange and red and the neon lights burned the night air. Kate wore a new dress she'd bought, some sheen silver thing that looped around her left shoulder, her right shoulder bare, and she'd applied so much purple eye shadow that she nearly looked clownish. Kate hadn't allowed me to explain myself after she'd learned of the real reason behind this trip, stopping me mid-sentence everytime I began to talk, telling me she couldn't handle it right now, not yet, that we'd talk about it later, until I gave up completely and she'd locked herself in the bedroom as I watched television in the suite. When she'd finally emerged dressed and ready for dinner, her eyelids drooped, and she took slow and deliberate steps on four-inch heels. I was sure she'd taken something, Oxy or Percocet, one of the two. But I hadn't said a word, knowing full well I had no moral high ground to stand on.

"So who exactly was that guy?" Kate asked.

“Haman. I don’t know his last name. Just some guy I play cards with every once in a while.”

“Uh-huh. I see. So when did you plan on telling me about the tournament?” Kate asked. She sipped on some wine, a \$200 bottle from Australia, a syrah of some sort that tasted of pepper and blackberries and that would cost me around \$250 with interest unless I made the money in this tournament, assuming Kate let me play of course. “On your way to the casino?”

“I’ve tried to tell you.”

“How? With smoke signals?”

“It’s just been crazy lately. I tried to tell you when I found out about it, but you had all your bridesmaids over. Then I was going to tell you at Mom and Dad’s house, but you were sick, and then—”

“So it’s my fault that you didn’t tell me?”

“No, that’s not what I meant, I—”

“Excuse me.” An older lady with white hair pulled back into a bun and her husband who pushed a walker approached our table. “I don’t mean to intrude, but you’re Kathryn Cook, aren’t you?” She had pink lipstick on her teeth, and the man braced himself. He smiled, and I noticed little brown spots on his gums.

“Yeah?” Kate said. “Can I help you with something?”

“We just wanted to come by and say that we are so sorry for your loss. We both admired your father a great deal.”

Kate dabbed at her mouth with her napkin, placed it neatly on her lap, and rested her forearms on the table as if addressing a small child. “Can’t you people see I’m trying to eat dinner here? I don’t come up to your table while your trying to have a private conversation and ruin your evening, do I?”

The older couple looked aghast, and surprised. This wasn’t the young lady they’d seen and heard and respected while campaigning with her father. “I’m sorry,” the lady said. “We’ll be going.”

“Goddamn people,” Kate said as they walked off, easily within earshot.

“What the hell was that all about?”

“Don’t change the subject,” Kate said. “When were you going to tell me about the tournament?”

“That was the rudest thing I’ve ever seen you do.”

“Tell me about the goddamn tournament, Eli. When were you going to tell me about it?”

Kate looked like she wanted to hurt me. She held her fork and steak knife out in front of her, and I could see the blade and tines tremble under her tense grip.

“When were you going to tell me about the Oxycontin, Kate?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t act coy. My mom found some in the downstairs bathroom during Thanksgiving, just before you felt *dizzy*.” I did finger quotes; it was now my turn to mock her.

“I’ve never taken that stuff before in my life.”

“I held the pill in my hand, Kate.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t. I’m saying it wasn’t mine. Maybe it was Alex’s. I haven’t taken a pill one since we left St. Thomas.”

“You’re lying! I know you are. You took something this afternoon. I can tell; you look like you could pass out any second. You’re addicted to painkillers. Just admit it.”

Kate let out a stilted, shrill scream and stabbed her steak with her fork. The dishes rattled on the table, and the guests nearest us all jumped, startled by the noise.

“Jesus Christ, Kate! What’s your problem? You’re acting crazy.”

“Fuck you, Eli. I’ll fucking howl like a dog if I please.”

Everyone in the restaurant, patrons and staff alike, stared at us now. Kate was up on her feet with a finger in my face. How this entire scenario played out depended on my next reaction. If I flipped out, I would most certainly go to jail, maybe even Kate, too. So I needed to calm the situation, placate Kate and get us the tab without incident.

“Say something, you asshole,” Kate said.

“Please, Kate, you’re—”

“Don’t even try and turn this around on me.”

“Ma’am, is this man bothering you?” a waiter asked. He was big, wore black eyeliner, and had shoulders built like the fins of a fifties Buick.

Kate stared me down, a smug expression on her face. She had the power over me, had the choice of whether I would be hassled or left alone. I had no say in the matter, and

this sense of control delighted her more than she had been in the past few weeks. For once, she was in charge.

“Have you been bothering me?” Kate asked me. She could barely hold back her smile.

“Ma’am?” the waiter asked.

I didn’t speak. This was a lose-lose situation, so I decided to plead the fifth. I would not help Kate garner so much pleasure out of torturing me, nor would I aid in causing a scene because of some stupid and childish pride struggle.

“So what will it be, Eli?”

I remained silent, and the waiter started to look annoyed. His mouth hung open and his head tilted to the left and his eyelids fluttered. Apparently this wasn’t the first time this had happened to him at this restaurant.

“Answer me, Eli. Please.” Kate’s voice lost some of its urgency, was half-pleading with me to just acknowledge her reprieves. But I still kept my mouth shut.

The other guests’ interest waned and returned to their crab cakes and scotches and wine. Kate was just a beautiful young woman, not too uncommon in Vegas, deriding some anonymous fellow, also not uncommon in Vegas. If this was all there was going to be, no one cared. The fracas Kate had hoped to cause quickly diminished in potential energy, and Kate knew it. The waiter just shook his head and told us to keep it down, “or I’ll have to ask you to leave,” and walked away.

Kate looked like she might explode. Her nostrils flared with each breath like she wanted to pounce on me. She sat back down and pulled her fork from her steak. The tines were red from blood.

“I hate you sometimes,” she said. “Do you know that?”

Back at the suite Kate threw all of her clothes and jewelry and purses back into her three suitcases. She was having a hard time of it because she was not folding her jeans and dresses and camisoles; instead, she jammed as much as she could into the bag so that her clothes ballooned out so far she couldn't get the lid to shut and zip.

“What're you doing?” I asked.

“I'm finding a cure for cancer.” Kate jumped onto her bag, but it still wouldn't close. “What does it look like I'm doing?”

“Will you stop for one second so we can talk about this?”

“There's nothing to talk about. I'm going home.”

Kate gave up on fitting everything and started unloading some of her clothes onto the floor so that she could close the bag. She strewed bras and panties and shorts and bikini bottoms until the clothes were even with the bottom and she could shut the lid. The neon lights from the strip down below us shone through the windows, giving the room a peculiar ambience, almost as if we were acting in a play rather than being in a real fight. Yet I knew that to be delusional.

“Please stop, Kate. Please don't go.”

She grabbed each of her three bag's handles and began to pull with little luck. Every time she took a step, one would knock into her heel or tip onto one wheel so that she couldn't make it very far without stopping and rearranging. To get them into the room, we'd tipped handlers, both at the airport and at the hotel, and it didn't look like she'd be able to make it out of the room, down the hallway, and to the elevator with all three of them.

"Then don't play in the tournament."

Kate stared at me, all three bags still in hand. She looked so much like her father as she stood there, waiting for me to respond. The same stern jaw. The same dimpled chin. It was scary, really. Like she could channel him.

"I need the money."

"You need the money?"

"Yes. I need the money. I'm so far into debt I can't see the end of it. I just lost \$15,000 the other day, and this is my best shot at turning this cold streak around."

"You lost *how* much?"

"I'm really in a bind here, Kate."

I sat down on the bed, and Kate stopped struggling with her suitcases. She looked odd with the blue and green and red neon lights flashing against her face. They made her look menacing, her cheeks sunken in, deep shadows around her eyes and chin, so that she resembled a skeleton.

"What're you saying?"

"How about this; if you give me the money, I won't play in the tournament."

She scoffed. “An ultimatum. I knew it. You want to marry me so I can bankroll your gambling addiction.”

“This is my living, Kate. It is not an addiction.”

“So you don’t deny it. I should’ve known.” Kate laid one bag onto the floor and opened it up. “I have an idea. You need money? Why don’t you sell this?”

She grabbed a card from an inside pocket and threw it at my feet. I picked it up and opened it. It was a white card, blue cursive script inside, inviting one person and a guest to the upcoming debate for the special presidential election between Susanne Noakes and the President.

“You can probably play a few hands with that,” Kate said. “I was planning on doing it myself, even have an appointment with a rare book store tomorrow. Figured making a profit off that would’ve been bad, but you selling it for a buy-in at a poker tournament? That’s just fucking priceless.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, not at all. Oh!” Kate pointed at me. “I know what.” She took off her engagement ring and tossed it at me. It bounced off my chest and landed in my lap. “Sell that. That should solve both our problems.”

Kate resumed her escape, this time leaving all her suitcases behind. As she left, I asked her to stop, saying “Kate, please, don’t do this.” They were sincere, but they were half-assed attempts. I didn’t get up off the bed. I didn’t follow her. I didn’t beg and plead or get down on my knees. I just let her go. And, to my surprise, the feeling in the

pit of my stomach didn't hurt nearly as badly as I thought it would when I heard the door click shut.

The poker room at the Bellagio was massive. Over three-thousand people entered the tournament, all of whom were dreaming of winning fame and fortune. The room filled with the sound of chips clacking against each other and laughter and the low hum of conversations like static electricity. Three-hundred tables packed into the room, and television cameras lined the walls adorned with banners boasting the pictures of famous players: Daniel Negreanu and Phil Ivey and Greg Raymer and Joe Haschem. I wondered what my face would look like twenty-feet tall and towering above a poker room. I wondered how it would feel as fans parted for me as I made my way to the table, asking for my autograph, and fearing me because of who I am, because of my name alone. I imagined there wasn't anything better.

As I moved my way through the mass of people, I noticed a lot of those heavy-hitters, those poker greats who were so good I sometimes wondered if they could exercise mind control: Mike Matusow and Gus Hanson and Sammy Farha to name a few. I felt a nervous anticipation growing in my chest. This was the first major tournament I'd played in months, and this one was on the biggest stage.

I entered a lot of tournaments, all poker pros did because that's where the television and website endorsements and the fame all derived from, even though that wasn't where I made my living; that was at the cash games at Roland's place back home, or, sometimes, when I was really hurting, I'd go fish frying at one of the local casinos.

But if you needed to score big quickly, upwards of the six-figure range like I did, the tournaments were the only place you could go. If you scored big and made the final table, your life would change forever. The first tournament I'd ever won had been held at Caesar's Palace, a little \$750 buy-in Stud Jacks or Better tourney during a satellite event for the WSOP. I only took home a little over \$30K for that one, but I'd gotten noticed by some of the bigger names out here; Gavin Smith, the notoriously talented and notoriously hard-drinker, had even bought me a drink. At that time I'd really thought I'd made it, that I would soon be a household name much like Gavin and his pals, my idols, the icons of the game. Some had even tried to get me to move out to Vegas, but I hadn't, deciding to remain in Oklahoma for a freckle-faced college student who I desperately wanted to ask out. What a mistake that had turned out to be.

I sat at table 274 in seat six, took a deep breath, and tried to clear my mind. Kate's departure and our rocky engagement had been affecting me, so much so I'd gotten very little sleep the night before, maybe only minutes perhaps, worried that I wouldn't be able to patch things up with her, worried that she would stick with calling off the wedding, worried that she didn't love me anymore, so that I felt the way I had during the election night watch party: worried, anxious, and so sleep-deprived I heard and saw everything as though I was encased in a glass bubble. I chugged a red bull and stacked my \$10,000 buy-in in front of me, letting the repetition and uniformity of a clean-lined chip tower soothe me.

Doyle Brunson, the Godfather of poker, stood in the middle of the room, microphone in hand. “Shuffle up and deal,” he said, and the tournament was officially underway.

Day one of a tournament is a day of attrition. Your only goal is survival by any means necessary. Fold a lot, even monster hands, and only put your chips in the middle when you are certain you are ahead. Unfortunately, certainty is a difficult thing to come by in poker.

I didn't recognize any of my tablemates; these weren't people I'd played against—I never forgot a face at a table—so they were either tourists knocking off another notch on their bucket list or online wizards that made their money sitting behind their computer monitors rather than at the felt. While talented, I couldn't respect the latter poker players, always hiding behind anonymity as they tried to take your cash. If you want respect, you need to be able to sit across from your opponent and keep your smiles to yourself as you raked in his chips or your agitated outbursts if he was raking in yours.

However, taking his seat a little ways from me was Andy Bloom, a Dubliner card shark most famous for his Buddhist conversion and his enigmatic blowup during the Main Event a few years back. He'd owned about 70% of the chips in play with only eleven people left in the field and then proceeded to bluff off all his chips in a matter of five hands and thirty minutes. It was the saddest thing I'd ever seen at a poker table. Andy'd shaved his black goatee and his head since I'd last seen him on television during the heads-up poker challenge so that he looked like a baby-faced Paul Giamatti.

The action was on me, so I checked my cards, nine-four offsuit, and my cards went into the muck. This was how most of the day would go I was sure, and it did for awhile. Andy Bloom worked off his reputation and steamrolled the table, doubling up within the first couple of hours, the rest of us forfeiting our blinds and folding marginal hands so that we could pick a better spot until about three hours in I got hole cards I couldn't ignore, a nine-ten of diamonds, suited connectors. Having played so tightly to the vest thus far would let me sneak-in with a hand like this and catch the over-confident Andy by surprise. Since I folded for nearly three hours straight, he would figure I'd only be raising with a monster, A-Q or better, and if I got him to stick around on a low-flopped board, I could string him along making him think he could get me to fold on a bluff.

The blinds were at forty-eighty, so I grabbed a few yellow chips and splashed the pot. "\$240."

Andy smooth called, the rest of the table folded, and the dealer flopped: 8 of clubs, jack of diamonds, ace of spades, the prettiest card in the deck. I had four cards to an open-ended straight, giving me about a 30% shot of making my hand. Andy had position on me, so I was the first to act. The ace on the board scared me; I had raised, and he'd called, so there was a good chance he'd landed his ace and cracked an early lead and a bet wouldn't scare him off here. He'd probably smooth call, stringing me along since it would take runner-runner for a flush, and I knew he wasn't putting me on the hand I had. If I checked, he would most certainly bet, and I wouldn't get any information from him since he'd been betting and bullying all game long. But, then again, this was the kind of flop I'd been hoping for.

“\$400,” I said as I tossed four chips into the middle.

Andy stared me down. This was the first time anyone’d really challenged him at the table.

“Call,” he said.

This was what I was afraid of. He was going to be stringing me along, setting a trap so that I bet right into him. The dealer turned: 2 of spades. No help to me and probably not to him either. I had no idea what to do here. My instinct told me he had the ace, which called for a check/fold, especially on day one. I’d only thrown in a little over \$600, so I could still get away relatively cheap, but for reasons I couldn’t really articulate, I didn’t want to give up on this hand. It was as if I’d committed just enough to where I couldn’t abandon it.

“\$1000,” I said.

My bet didn’t even register on Andy’s face, no concern whatsoever. “Call,” he said.

The dealer rivered: nine of clubs. While it did pair my nine, it wasn’t the best hand; I was sure of it. \$3,400 was now in the pot, and I was starting to get nervous; I only had about \$7,800 left, having lost 20% of my stack already with one more round of betting to go. I looked up at Andy. He stared me down, waiting for me to act, unshakeable and confident in his hand. This was the biggest pot of the table so far, and everyone had tuned in, putting down their iPods and their books and their fruit salads to see how this hand turned out.

“Check,” I choked out, irritated I’d gone this far with this hand, for chasing down a straight draw against a player the caliber of Andy freaking Bloom. I wouldn’t go far playing like this.

Andy reached for chips, laying out two orange stacks in front of him, lining them up with his fingers, and then pushing them into the middle. He didn’t even call out his bet. He didn’t need to; we all knew how much he’d wagered. \$2,000.

I peeked at my busted hole cards once again, hoping they’d be different, but they weren’t. They were still the nine-ten of diamonds, and they were still a losing hand. My only shot at taking down this pot would be a big raise here, enough to push him off his aces. If he called, I lost, but if he folded, I would be over \$15,000 and in the top 20% of the field. I didn’t know what to do. Better sense told me to fold, my conscience screaming at me to lay this hand down and pick a better spot, but, if I wanted to win this thing, I would have to gamble.

“All-in,” I said and pushed my remaining stack into the middle.

Andy still didn’t move, just stared at me from across the table. My only chance of getting out of debt, of getting a bankroll to fund my living, of being able to go back home with any chance of convincing Kate to still marry me rested on his next decision. Call and I was ruined. Fold and I still had a shot.

Andy sighed and flipped his cards face-up, folding and showing an ace. “Nice hand,” he said, which is poker speak for “You’re a rat bastard,” and I reveled in how the felt scraped against my hands as I raked in my monster pot.

That night I got drunk to celebrate. After day one I was amongst the chip leaders, sixth to be exact, with over \$45,000. I called Haman, and we went to some club called Tryst and pounded SoCo shots and drank expensive imported lagers until I felt bloated and unbeatable. I danced under the blue lighting without inhibition as Haman spoke to young ladies who were much too good looking for him. Blonds with legs as long as the strip and tits so perky we could've played cards on them. Somehow he'd convinced a couple to join us at a corner booth as house music bumped so loudly we could hardly carry a conversation.

The girls' perfume mixed around my head and made me nauseous, but Haman kept ordering drinks for the table, and we toasted each other and the tournament and Vegas in general until all four of us could barely speak any longer, and that's when I felt a leg brush mine underneath the table. She peered at me and flicked her manicured nails on my kneecap as I tried to remember the girl's name. Alexandria, Amber, Erica, I had no idea.

She said something that I couldn't hear, and I nodded because I couldn't think of anything else to do. Leaning in she licked my earlobe, and said, "Let's get going then."

I was so drunk I stood and followed her as she led me out of the club. Outside the concierge hailed us a cab, and as we got in the cabby asked, "Where to?"

The girl, whatever her name was, looked to me, and since I had no idea what she'd said in the club, I hadn't the faintest idea where we were going. Everything was swimming: the flashing lights, the pedestrians, and the old hippy cabby staring at me

from the driver's seat. I swallowed to keep from puking whiskey all over myself and closed one eye to keep from spinning.

"You okay, hon?" the girl asked me. She had a mole above her lip that I hadn't noticed before. It looked weird, like someone had tagged her with permanent marker.

"You ain't looking so hot."

I nodded again.

"Why don't you take us to my hotel," she said. "Bellagio," she said. "And quick."

Somehow we made it to her room; I must've passed out because the next thing I remember I was stripped down to my underwear and socks sitting on her bed as she danced for me, only wearing white laced bra and panties.

"Kate," I said, trying to get her to come closer. I reached for her hips, but they were just out of reach.

"What in the hell did you just call me?" the girl asked.

"Huh?"

"You just called me Kate."

"Huh?"

"Ah fuck it," she said as she straddled me. She smelled like oranges and grapefruit, and I noticed how hungry I was. I really wanted some runny eggs and pancakes. "You better be able to get it up." She kissed me, sticking her tongue all the way into my mouth so that she was licking my teeth.

We ended up having sex. I wasn't proud of it. I wasn't. I felt so guilty in fact I called Kate as soon as I got back to my room. She didn't answer of course, but I left a voicemail. It was just me repeating, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," over and over again, and I meant it, too, even though she had no idea what I was apologizing for.

11

I woke up an hour late for the 8 a.m. start time for day 2. By the time I got to my seat, I'd been blinded down nearly a \$1,000, and I felt like I could throw up at any second. All my organs felt like mush and demanded a concentrated effort just to work. I was so hungover I had to force my lungs to breathe. My liver had been damaged; I was sure of it, a rotted pit of black deteriorating as I sat there. Worse yet, I was no longer in the top ten in chips.

As luck would have it, Haman had been assigned to the same table, lucky number 44, and he didn't even seem phased. "Vitamin B12, a pint of apple juice, four Tylenol, and five pints of water, my friend," he said. "Right as rain."

I couldn't even concentrate on my cards. The letters and numbers and suits moved every time I tried to locate them—the room appeared to be spinning at mach three—so that I took to folding for the first hour or so while just acting like I'd looked at my cards. I could've thrown away pocket aces two or three times for all I knew.

"So how was Elizabeth?" Haman asked. "I bet she could wrap her legs around you two or three times, huh?"

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” I said.

“Too bad your girlfriend didn’t stick around, bro. Might’ve swung a ménage à trois last night.”

“Fiancée.”

“Your fiancée lets your sleep with other women?” some lady in seat three asked. I recognized her; she’d been on the cover of Poker Player for winning the European WSOP main event in London the past year, granting her so much fame that a thirty-foot profile of her hung on the wall behind her, yet for the life of me I couldn’t remember her name.

“It’s complicated,” I said.

“Complicated as in you cheated on her?” she asked.

“Not exactly.”

“You either cheated on her or you didn’t. Which is it?”

“I told you; it’s complicated.”

“I don’t think it’s as complicated as you think,” she said. “Raise to \$750.” She threw in her chips, the other player folded, and she won the pot, her third in a row.

I ended the round and broke for lunch without playing a single hand, losing about ten percent of my stack in the process and dropping to seventy-second place. Over 1,200 people still remained in the tournament, so I was still on a good pace to make the money, but I wasn’t nearly in as strong as shape as the night before.

Haman and I ate lunch together. The Bellagio boasted several restaurants from fine dining to casual, and each was packed with the tournament’s contestants. We had

two hours before the next round began, so we roamed a bit, trying to find a place where we didn't have to wait. It felt good to be walking. With each step my hangover seemed to wane some.

“What about The Jasmine?” Haman asked.

“Nah.”

“The Picasso?”

I shook my head. “I just feel like a sandwich or something. Or the buffet.”

“The *buffet*? You got to be kidding me. We're in Vegas, man. Some of the best chefs in the world are here, and you want to eat at the buffet?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“No. No. No. That's not going to happen. The buffet, Jesus Christ. What's wrong with you, man?”

“I'm having a little cash flow problem, Haman. I can't afford one of those places.”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Okay. Shit. I didn't know.”

I ended up not eating anyway. The buffet was filled with orange chicken and Hunan beef and chopped brisket doused in this sugary and honey smelling barbecue sauce. Just the sight of all that food made me nauseous. I grabbed a plate but pushed around the meat and broccoli and carrots and peas wondering if this was how Kate felt after a night of binge drinking and pill popping. I wondered what she was doing right then, if she was still in bed, as hungover as I was from partying with Melissa. I didn't

doubt it; I was sure she was self-medicating just as I was. I wondered if she had gotten my voicemail, if she had even listened to it, or if she'd erased it unheard.

"I'm in bad shape, Haman," I said.

He chewed with his mouth open so that I could see a mashed green paste against his tongue. "I can tell, man. You look like shit."

"That's not what I'm talking about." I pushed my plate away from me and took a drink of water. It tasted funny, like it was full of iron. "I messed up bad with Kate. She gave me the ring back."

Haman put down his fork. The sunlight coming through the windows glinted off the tines and shined right in my eyes. "Luck's on your side then. Good thing, too. Field's getting smaller with each hand."

"I don't feel too lucky right now."

"Yeah, you probably don't see it that way right now, but I'm telling you," Haman picked at his teeth and pulled out a stringy piece of meat, "you dodged a bullet. Take it from a guy who's been married three times. Our line of work doesn't mesh well with married life. It just doesn't. I know there're guys out there that try it, and some couples might even make it work for a little while. One time I was married damn near six years. But it doesn't work out in the long run, and then she walks away with half your bankroll and your favorite chair."

"She was different, though."

"Oh yeah? Let me ask you this then: what were you guys fighting about just before she took off?"

“Good point.”

“Let me give you one piece of advice. If you’re going to marry, you got to marry your own kind. A priest and a crackhead might love each other, but that doesn’t mean they should get married. Find a poker broad. Nola kind of likes you, I can tell.”

Nola, that was her name, the girl who’d won the European WSOP. “Oh yeah. She was really attracted to the cheating thing, I could tell.”

“Hey, it ain’t cheating if she ain’t got no ring.”

“Maybe your right,” I said. “Maybe getting married was a mistake.”

“It was. Believe me.”

I got on a roll after the break. Cards just kept coming, pocket kings, A-K suited, the big slick, hitting trips with pocket sevens, the sailboats. I could do no wrong. I bluffed people off pots. I strung them along to the river getting maximum value. I piled chip after chip until I could barely see over my stacks. After a while, my hands had been rubbed raw from raking in so many chips. And by the end of day two, I sat atop the leader board, first place with only 700 remaining in the tournament, and \$275,000 to my name.

On day three, I was placed at the feature table. Cameras surrounded us, four in all, and about 300 spectators watched from the gallery. I’d never played poker in a situation such as this. It was all a bit nerve racking, and even before the first hand was dealt, I became self-conscious of every move I made. I didn’t know if I should rest my hands in my lap or if I should place them on the felt, if I should stack my chips

differently, or if I should've worn sunglasses or a hat or a hoodie to keep from showing any nervous tells. The room was unbearably hot, and despite the fact I only wore a thin cotton shirt, I sweated profusely, so badly I could feel the wetness glide down my back.

My interview with Norman Chad before play started hadn't helped either. Being the chip leader, I'd become the talk of the town. And Norman, the wiry poker commentator for ESPN who's a bit of a rounder himself, albeit not a very successful one, sat me down in a makeshift studio in a corner of the poker room. The set had been simple, a white wall emblazoned by a neon WPT insignia and a modern leather chair.

"A couple of years ago when you won that WSOP satellite stud event a few thought you were going to breakout and become a household name," he said, "but then you flat out disappeared. What happened?"

Never having been interviewed before, I'd shifted in my chair, making the leather squeak awkwardly. "A girl happened actually."

"Ah, women," Norman had said. "I've gone broke more times with women than I ever have at the poker table. So after your big victory you went back to Oklahoma City to chase a girl? How'd that go?"

"Yeah. I think she's out of the picture now."

"I wouldn't go to Oklahoma City unless it involved a court order, a lap dance, or a really, really good bowling coupon."

That had been basically the interview: me giving short, cryptic answers, and Norman Chad filling in the dead air with annoying one-liners. I wouldn't have been surprised if ESPN decided to cut the entire segment.

But despite my nervousness, I was enjoying every second of this, the attention, the theater, the fear and admiration that some of my fellow poker players had attributed to me. Phil Ivey, widely regarded as the best poker player in the world, had even been quoted as saying that I “was playing big time poker in a big time tournament,” and that he was “surprised we hadn’t heard more about this kid before. He’s got the goods.” This was everything I’d always dreamed about. Here I was, the man of the hour, the king of Las Vegas, the man with the most chips, with the name on everyone’s tongue. I just hoped I didn’t fuck it up.

At the table I decided to nurse my big stack and let others drive the action. The risk was low but the reward little, which I was okay with for the time being; easing my way into the money was good enough for me, then I would make my move to earn a spot at the final table. While I did have dreams of taking home the golden bracelet and the millions of dollars and worldwide poker fame, my main priority at the moment was simply getting back in the black ink, so I planned to fold my way into it. I laid down good suited connectors, pocket face cards, and forfeited blinds in order to do so, all the while being bombarded with boos from the galleys. No one likes to see the chip leader muck cards for hours on end. They want to see the big pots and money exchanging hands on a dime. But poker is a patience game. If you want to win a living and glory, you pick your spots and your battles carefully.

By the time we came back from lunch, only 385 remained in the tournament, six eliminations away from the money, and I’d dropped to 14th in chips. The new chip leader remained at the feature table, Young Nguyen, an elder statesman of a poker pro from

Vietnam and former world champ. He was a dangerous player. Standing at only 5'2" and maybe hitting 110 lbs if soaking wet, he didn't appear to be a cutthroat gambler, but the guy was a downright shark. Years of smoking Marlboro Reds gave him a raspy voice, and he smiled as he stole your chips. But, despite all that, he was a hell of a nice guy at the table.

Within the first hour after break, five had been eliminated, and we stood at the bubble, the next guy eliminated would go home empty-handed, but the remaining contestants would at least double their buy-in, a cool \$20,000. I checked my hole cards: pocket queens. I was in the dealer position, and everyone had folded in front of me. Everyone, including me, had been playing conservatively so as not to be the bubble boy. Only the small and big blind remained, so I decided to bump the bet a little, take down their blinds, and move on to the next hand. I splashed the pot, a small \$1,200 raise.

I didn't take into consideration Nguyen in the big blind spot.

"My blind, baby boy? You try to eat my blind, baby boy? You can't take the Prince of Poker's blind. You should know this by now." Nguyen was a talker, and he shot out words like a Gatling gun, making him difficult to understand. "I raise your raise. \$5,000."

He'd been pushing around the table with his large stack, etching upwards of half-a-mil by this point, so I was a little intrigued to say the least. Convinced I'd the best hand, I decided to see a flop. I hadn't played a hand all day and had plenty to push past the bubble.

Jack-queen-seven rainbow. I nailed trips. Cameras swarmed the table; a big pot on the bubble always generated attention. Some of the other players who weren't in hands at the moment crowded in until the featured stage grew so thick with spectators I couldn't see past them. We were packed in so tightly the temperature seemed to notch up a few degrees with the body heat, and I could feel myself start to sweat again.

The action was to Nguyen, and he studied the table, then me, then the table again. This was all a charade. Nguyen was usually a quick-draw player, knowing what he's going to do two or three betting rounds in advance, but when the cameras' bright lights shined upon him, he slowed down his play to a crawl, building drama. The pros call it stoking the TV pot. After a few seconds, he reached out and tapped the felt twice, checking the action to me.

Not wanting to string this hand along any longer than necessary I bet out \$20,000, a huge over bet to get Nguyen to fold. Flustered, this broke him out of his performance for the cameras.

"Why you go and do something like that for? Huh, baby boy? Don't you know who you playing with here? Young Nguyen. Prince of Poker." Nguyen shifted in his chair and appeared to be pissed off by me pushing him off his hand. Established pros like him aren't used to getting railed, and he made it plain as day. "Goddamn amateurs. Why so big, man? Why so big?"

I remained silent, trying not to show the amount of amusement I was getting out of making Young squirm.

"Get him Nguyen!" someone yelled from the galley. "Raise him all in!"

“Raise,” Nguyen said. I couldn’t believe it. I stood without even realizing it I was taken so aback. “\$100,000.”

I had the nuts. I did. He couldn’t have a hand that could beat me at this point. Yet I was dumbfounded by this move. He could have a straight draw, but there was no way he’d risk this much on a hand he hadn’t made yet. He’d just bet nearly a quarter of his stack. The cameras pushed even tighter around the table. The entire room, all thousand or so people hushed to complete silence. No chips clacked together, no dealers dealt cards, nothing. The only noise was the sound of our collective breaths. And then I realized why he’d made this move. It was a bluff. It had to be. A big move in front of the big audience to add to his reputation and lore, the world champ Young Nguyen, the Prince of Poker.

“All-in,” I said.

“Call.”

He flipped over his cards. Pocket sevens to my pocket queens. I pumped my fists in the air as the crowd gasped. No one could believe it. The Prince of Poker had been outplayed by a no-name cash game specialist, Elijah McClure from Oklahoma City. I could hear the snaps of cameras flashing and the loud buzz of disbelief circling the room. I would be the chip leader once again, miles ahead of second place, and the front runner to take down the championship.

The turn card flipped over, two of diamonds. No help to Nguyen, and I was still way ahead. The dealer placed the card on the board, tapped twice, then grabbed the river, the final card. He didn’t turn it over right away. Instead he slid it to its spot on the board,

taking his time so as to build suspense for the cameras, and then flipped. The seven of clubs. I could feel all the blood in my veins pool at the bottom of my feet as all one-thousand people in the room erupted into a raucous cheer and Young sat motionless in his chair, a smile spread wide across his lips. Only two cards could've helped him in the deck, and he hit one of them. A world champ had sucked out on me.

“I told you not to mess with the Prince of Poker,” he said as he collected the remainder of my chips.

I shook Nguyen's and my other tablemates' hands as the remaining contenders continued to cheer. The tournament director took to the microphone and congratulated the players still with a chip and a chair, “All of you have now made the money,” and the players cheered and clapped even louder, hooting and hollering and screaming from joy and I exited the room as the most popular player who had entered the tournament. I was the bubble boy. Broke and busted.

I didn't know what to do, so I walked the strip, delaying my return to my hotel room and that bill. My bank account was negative, my credit card damn near maxed out, I owed more than \$10K, and I still hadn't even paid for the suite. Despite being November, it was 72° outside, and the sun glared down as if magnified by the atmosphere. I passed by street performers dressed as Spiderman and Batman and the Predator and Elvis, past the M&M store and Planet Hollywood, walking from one end of the strip, turning around, then walking to the other, all the while trying to come up with my next move.

I felt dejected and lonely and robbed. One card. That was all I needed to fall my way. He had a 5% chance of hitting that seven. 5%. That was it. He was dead in the water. I'd outplayed and outsmarted Young Nguyen, one of the greatest poker legends to ever sit at a card table. 95 out of 100 times I would've beaten him. 95 out of 100 times I would've been the chip leader and the faraway favorite to make one of the nine spots at the final table, guaranteed at least a \$250,000 payday and a cover shot on Card Player Magazine and endorsement deals. Instead I walked the street, the bubble boy, keeping my legs busy enough so as to not veer over to the Wynn or the Venetian or the Mirage and take the elevator to the top floor and leap to my death.

I passed the Flying Circus and entered the old strip where Mexicans clacking cards advertising call girls stood on every street corner. Hot, thirty, and exhausted, I stumbled into a street casino called Marshalls, a little rundown place filled with slot machines and video poker and waitresses with varicose veins wearing sheer and see through tops. This was where the gambling addicts found themselves at 5 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon, shoddy and destitute and a cup full of quarters. To pass the time I checked the ticket printers on the slot machines to see if someone had accidentally left some winnings but to no avail. I left a trail of white paper behind me as I veered up and down the aisles, each printed on it "\$0.00."

I stopped at the bar and ordered a water, but had to give it back when the bartender found out I didn't have enough money to pay. Then I got kicked out. The sun began to dip below the horizon, and the neon lights blazed and the wind whipped dust and prostitute cards into my face. I sat down on a bus bench. Blisters had formed on my

heels and toes so that I didn't think I'd be able to make it back to the Bellagio on foot. But I didn't have enough money for the bus either. Then, from across the street, an orange sign flickered on: Doug's Discount Pawn Shop.

Digging into my pocket I pulled out Kate's engagement ring. I'd carried it on me since she'd left, perhaps too afraid to keep it out of my sight for long, fearing that I'd lose it like I'd lost the first one, or how I'd lost Kate. Or perhaps I thought that if I carried it with me, I could still carry hope that she would take me back. The answer didn't really matter. Both ideas were ridiculous.

As I held it in my hand, the diamonds sparkled underneath the neon lighting so that it looked like tiny laser beams shot through the stones. In order to eat, to start anew, I would have to pawn it. I really had no other choice. Kate would understand. When I told her why I did it, she would forgive me.

The pawn shop was a cluttered place that smelled of baking soda and mold. Guitars hung from the ceiling. Amplifiers were stacked in corners. A stuffed mountain lion loomed near one wall. Guns and jewelry were displayed behind glass cases. Cast iron bars separated the front to the back of the counter, and a small, clean shaven man sat on the other side, reading a Scientific American. In a way, he sort of reminded me of my brother.

"How much for this?" I asked as I plopped the ring onto the counter.

The man put up a finger indicating that he would be with me in a moment and continued to read his magazine article. After a few moments, he placed a bookmark to keep his spot, then practically skipped over to the counter, as happy as could be.

“How may I help you, young man?” he asked. I nodded toward Kate’s engagement ring. “Oh wow. I see. This is one large rock we have here.” His voice was high-pitched, squirrely even. From underneath the counter he grabbed a loupe and a green velvet cloth and studied the diamond. “And where did you get this?”

“Bought it.”

He put down the loupe and stared at me through the cast-iron bars. “You sure about that? Selling stolen merchandise is a felony. You could see three-to-five in Nevada, maybe more for a piece like this.”

“Positive. How much?”

“For this one here?” He moaned as if pulling the number from some deep cavernous hole within himself. “I’ll give you \$500.”

“Are you kidding me? I paid \$8,000 for that ring.”

“Depreciation is a bitch, my friend. It truly is.”

“I’ll give it to you for a grand.”

He checked the ring again. “You sure you didn’t take this from some rich bitch’s hand?”

I nodded.

“Jumped some woman outside Planet Hollywood or something?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“Took it from a bedroom before you realized it wasn’t your bedroom?”

“I’m just in a bind, man. I just need some cash quickly.”

He laughed so hard he snorted and slapped the counter, causing the glass to shake. “We’re in Vegas, son. Everybody’s in a bind. A bind! Hell, I’m in a bind!” He paused until he stopped laughing so hard and caught his breath. “That’s priceless. In a bind. Listen. I’m not going to be able to go over \$500 for this. I’d be surprised if I’ll even be able to sell it. End up probably having to take all the diamonds out, kick them over to some jewelry store and sell the gold separately. Five’s the best offer you’re going to get anywhere. Believe me. If you need cash quickly, it’s a good deal.”

The guy screwed me, but I did it. I didn’t have any other choice. So I headed back to my hotel room, five pristine hundred dollar bills in pocket that wouldn’t help me at all.

12

When I made it back to Oklahoma, Kate wasn't home. I'd brought her bags with me and let myself in by the extra key she kept underneath a flowerpot on the back patio. She'd never given me a key to her house even though we'd been engaged, so I pocketed it. Perhaps she never had because she didn't think we'd actually go through with the marriage. Perhaps she planned on calling off the engagement all along. She had been on ecstasy when she'd accepted my proposal and perhaps she didn't have the heart to tell me differently afterwards, until our fight in Vegas of course.

It was an odd feeling being in her house alone after our falling out. It was like I was an intruder even though just a few days ago I'd been living here. Some of my clothes were still in the closet. In fact everything still looked the same. Pictures of wedding dresses and cakes and floral arrangements still spotted the living room rug and coffee table. An empty plate set next to a stack of bridal magazines, covered in what look to be bread crumbs. At least she'd been eating. Or was that a plate I'd eaten off of before we left for Vegas? I couldn't remember.

I looked for clues to where Kate might be, but since the house was in such disarray, it was difficult to come to any definite conclusion. In the bathroom I noticed a hair dryer and straightener still plugged into the outlet. Makeup littered the counter along with hairspray and a box of hair color. Kate had dyed her hair again, this time red. She would look good as a red head, I thought. She had the complexion to pull it off.

Kate was probably out with Melissa, partying away her problems, so I decided to wait for her. I needed to talk to her. I wasn't ready yet to give up. I still loved her. And I knew, if she would just hear me out, that she could still love me. I sat down on her bed and contemplated calling her but decided against it. She wouldn't have answered. Besides, what we needed to discuss had to be said face-to-face, not over the phone. I was convinced that if I could just speak with her, explain why I had done the things that I did, that she would understand that I did them for her benefit. If I would've told her about my debt, if I would've told her about the tournament, she would've become even more distraught than she already was and would've delved even deeper into her addiction. I was looking out for her; she would have to see it that way. So I waited for her to return from wherever she was at, trying to stay awake, but I was too tired from travelling, from not sleeping, and despite my best attempt, I closed my eyes.

When I awoke the next morning, the bed was untouched. The pillow fluffed and cool to the touch. The comforter pulled taut and still tucked underneath the mattress. My first thought was that Kate was passed out in the bathroom, or on the living room floor, or in her car in the driveway, too messed up to make it all the way into bed. But the

bathroom and living room and garage and driveway were empty. Her car was still gone. The house quiet, undisturbed.

Panic, like the first surge of adrenaline, rushed through me. Kate could be anywhere, with anyone, with all sorts of drugs and chemicals burning her insides. She could have overdosed, be dead in a hospital morgue, in a cheap motel room, some random man's trailer. She could have been shot to death, stabbed, murdered in an alleyway as she walked back to her car from the club, only wanting to get home to her fiancé and bed, but had been recognized, or simply killed for the contents of her purse, the few dollars stashed away in her wallet.

I tried calling Kate's number, but it went straight to voicemail. It had died or she had turned it off. Or someone else had. I closed my eyes and tried to think, but behind my eyelids I saw images of Kate lying in a pool of blood, a hole the size of a softball in her skull, bits of brain next to her pale cheek, the same position her father had been in. Yet she wasn't dead; her eyes were still moving, rolling back and forth and side to side, as if searching for something just outside her peripheral. But the irises appeared lifeless, glazed over and dull, like she was in fact dead, but neurons were still firing in her brain, causing her eyes to move, much like a chicken that can run in circles after it has been decapitated.

I had to find Melissa's phone number. I destroyed Kate's office. I tore out drawers. I scanned every little slip of paper. Most were notes for the film she was making with Melissa, documenting the date the capitol moved from Guthrie to Oklahoma City, copies of the voter records for the state referendum, a Xeroxed copy of Governor

Haskell's proclamation setting up the interim capitol at the Huckins Hotel, a long antiquated letter detailing the "theft" of the state seal. I searched for an address book, a roll-a-dex, something. But found nothing.

Kate could be in bed with a strange man, legs bruised from sex she doesn't remember.

In the bedroom, I pulled out all her socks and bras and panties and gym shorts and camisoles, searching for a receipt, a post-it note, a birthday invitation, but still nothing. I emptied her toiletries, her toothbrush and hairbrush and perfume and nail polish, but found only dust and dried red paint.

She could be bleeding internally, beaten so badly her kidneys will burst from excess blood.

I even emptied the pantry and cabinets, tossed pancake mix and Griffin's Maple Syrup and rooster sauce and canned adobe peppers and green beans to the side so that the cans bounced against the tile floor.

She could be enjoying a cup of coffee while another man makes her breakfast, happier than she ever would've been at home, with me.

Outside I heard a car engine and brakes squeal. I ran to the window. A van parked across the street, ADT, the alarm company, and two men sat in the cabin, both in uniform. They didn't get out of the van. Instead, they spoke and then disappeared into the back. I'd never seen ADT on this street before, nor had I seen ADT signs in the front yards of Kate's neighbors.

I rushed back into the bedroom, emptied jewelry boxes, dug deep into the closet, pulled out bikinis and board shorts, trying to find Melissa's number so I could get in touch with Kate, tell her to come home, that we needed to talk until, wrapped in aluminum foil and zipped up in a plastic bag, I found a glass pipe burnt black and yellowed from resin and four prescription bottles full of pink and yellow and white pills.

Stunned, I held the pipe in my hands, turning it over, then the bottles. The prescriptions were new, dated only the day before and from different pharmacies. The names on all the bottles were different, too: Kathryn Mullens, Meghan Koch, Tori Everett, and Lindsey Woolf. Inside a smaller plastic baggy was a block of weed.

The front door opened and shut. I zipped the drugs back into the plastic bag and wrapped them in the aluminum foil and jammed them underneath clothes.

"What're you *doing*?" Kate asked. "What're you doing here?"

"Nothing," I said, turning around like a guilty child. "Just trying to find something to wear."

"Are you kidding me?" Kate pushed me so that I fell into her hanging clothes.

"How did you get into my house?"

"Our house," I said, trailing off, hoping that she would agree with me.

"You're crazy, Eli! Get out! Get out! Get out!" She grabbed me by the shoulder and tugged.

"Will you please just listen to what I have to say?"

Kate screamed that she hated me and hit me with balled up fists. Tears streamed down her face, but I could tell that they weren't tears of sadness. They were

uncontrollable gasps of frustration and anger and maybe fear. She was scared of me. I'd made my fiancée scared of me.

I grabbed her and held her as if hugging her, but she resisted me. She squirmed and kicked and bit my chest so hard that I could feel the skin break and droplets of blood soak my shirt.

“Ow! Fuck, Kate, that hurt!”

She grabbed a lamp from her dresser and swung it around. “Come any closer, and I'll hit you.”

“Why are you doing this, Kate? I love you. I still want—”

“Don't you say that. Don't you dare say that. I want you out of my house right now, or I will call the cops.”

She was serious. I'd frightened her somehow, and she would hurt me, she would call the cops on me. There was nothing I could say or do that would change that. Not then anyways.

“I'll go,” I said. “I'm sorry. I'll go.”

I left out the back door so her neighbors wouldn't see me and hopped the fence into a wooded area. The temperature had dropped drastically since I'd stepped off the plane from Vegas. The wind whipped through spindly branches, and the first snow of the year fell, collecting a fresh powder on the hard Oklahoma clay. It was odd weather for Oklahoma in November. Usually it didn't snow until somewhere around the first of the year, so I found myself ill-equipped for the unseasonably cold. Without a coat I was

freezing. My nose ran so that snot coated my nostrils. I shivered. My teeth chattered. My bones ached.

A creek wound through the dead oaks. The trunks looked thin, branches leafless and brown and brittle. I followed the trickle of water downhill, sprinting as fast as I could, unsure as to where I was going or what I was doing, but it felt good to be moving, feeling the crisp wind against my face and neck. It helped quell this terrible fear pervading my circulatory system so that my lungs didn't hurt quite so bad, and my veins began to numb so I wasn't so aware of the blood rushing through me.

Eventually I came to a hill bottom, a sort of valley, bookended by slightly sloping knolls, that offered some protection from the howling wind and a comforting feeling of isolation from the outside world, as if I could pack my entire existence into this small area of patched woods, populated only by a trickling creek and yellow, dead grass, spindly oaks, brittle leaves and powdered snow that made the clay turn a dark brown from moisture. It was a reassuring feeling. And I surprisingly felt relaxed and calm. I sat down here, Indian style, and ran my fingers through the grass and snow. I wanted to stay here forever. I wanted to build a lean-to and stock up on canned peas and corn and carrots, hunt rabbits, and learn to make a fire from rubbing two sticks together.

It also oddly reminded me of camping when I'd been younger with my father and brother. We'd used to go frequently during the spring, summer, and fall months out in Osage County, somewhere outside of Blue Stem Lake. The excursions were meant to be bonding experiences, of course, probably instigated by mother since my father was gone a great deal to art shows and tours and hunting trips and guest-lectures at M.F.A.

programs, but I remembered there had been little to no conversations during those extended weekends holed up in a single tent, and I tried to ride out the trips as quickly as I could so that I could get back home. As a result, the memories of these trips are fragmented and kaleidoscopic, never really fitting into a linear narrative, causing me to sometimes doubt if my recollections of them are even close to what had actually occurred. One memory does stick out in particular, though. The three of us had been standing atop a hill that overlooked the lake. The sun was at such an angle that it bounced off the green opaqueness of the water so that it looked like a murky mirror. Alex had something along the lines that the scene was quite striking, and my father remarked, “Everything looks perfect from far away.”

I wished it was as warm here as it had been that day by the lake. My hands and feet and ears had gone numb by this point, but I didn’t want to return home, afraid of what Kate would do if I did. My jaw ached from flexing it, and I couldn’t keep from thinking about the wind and the snow and the warning signs of hypothermia. To keep my hands busy, and in hopes of warming them, I collected twigs and piled dirt and snow, mindlessly hoarding these materials, in order to keep my thoughts away from the freezing temperature and my inability to feel my legs.

I had to get my mind off of everything that was going on, calm myself, keep my hands busy, and building had always done that. As a child I’d found solace piecing together models of airplanes and cars, and now I did the same. It was a form of self-medication. The snow I clumped together and made little snowballs and set them to the side, sorted the sticks from the leaves, built a mound from the dirt, and surveyed my

supplies. First I needed to know what I was going to construct. I picked up the sticks. They were of all different lengths and widths. I rolled them in between my hands, and they clicked together like baseball cards in bicycle spokes. When I opened my hands, they rolled toward the middle of my palm. Bunched together like that, they sort of looked like a tree trunk.

A brilliant idea came to me, so genius I could hardly contain my excitement. I untied my right shoe and took out the lace and tied a tourniquet knot around the bundle of sticks. The snow and mud mound I mixed together and plunged the sticks into the middle so that they stood straight up. I then grabbed the dead leaves and carefully poked a hole through the center and slid them down the bundle of sticks, spaced the leaves out evenly so that they looked like branches. When I stepped back, I couldn't help but feel pride for my quick work. I had my Survivor Tree back, planted here so that it would be safe and sound. Unharmed. Untouchable. Planted in isolation so that nobody could come find it and destroy it.

Yet it looked lonely out here. It needed something else, something to complete the picture, make it whole, a self-contained work of art. It needed the rest of the Memorial. I replenished my supplies. I scooped more snow and more dirt and gathered more twigs. Then, to the side of the Survivor Tree, I laid out a rectangle of the darkest mud, flattened it as best I could, and squared off the edges until it resembled the reflecting pool. To build the gate I stacked and molded snow into a square and then with the end of a stick etched 9:01, the time the bomb had detonated, killing 168 people. The chairs that represented the victims would be the most difficult to reconstruct. They were

small for one thing, and they were more intricate than simple rectangles like the reflecting pool and the gate. I could have made them completely out of snow, but the small backs of the chairs wouldn't have had enough support to stand for long. The same was true for the mud. But then the answer came to me, and I laughed so loudly I startled myself. The solution was so simple, so elegant I couldn't help but laugh for not thinking of it immediately. I used snow as the base, snapped the thinnest twigs into one inch pieces, and plugged them into place as the backs. Underneath the snow, the replica of the Memorial looked absolutely beautiful.

There were problems of course. Instead of 168 chairs, I only made six. And the proportions were all wrong. The Survivor Tree stood taller than the gate and the trunk was almost as thick as the width of the reflecting pool and the chairs were half as tall as the gate. But I had made it. I had built something from nothing as proof that I had been here.

I wondered what someone would think if they happened to come across my replica, if they would know what it was. Would they see the tree and the gate and the chairs and put it all together? Or would they have no idea what this was supposed to be? Would they wonder about me as a person? Why someone would do such a thing, build these weird objects out in the middle of nowhere? Would they think I was a child simply having fun? Would they think I was crazy? Or would they just walk on by without ever even noticing it?

I must've fallen asleep. When I awoke, I was covered in snow and my flesh had turned a deep red from the cold and I couldn't stop shivering and the sky had darkened into a deep black. I couldn't even see any stars overhead, just the faint glimmer of ice crystals clinging to branches above me. To my right, my Memorial had been covered in the snowfall, only the top of the Survivor Tree poked through the fresh powder. The leaves that were supposed to be the branches had fallen underneath the weight and had either crumbled or had been blown away by the wind. I picked up some more leaves and made them into branches and carefully brushed away the snow until I could see my Memorial before walking back toward Kate's house. I didn't know where I was going to go. My apartment I supposed, the one I hadn't been to in weeks.

The walk was so serene, so peaceful. A crescent moon hung overhead, the only noise the clack of limbs hitting each other in the gentle, winter breeze and the crunch of the fresh snow underneath my sneakers. I wished I could've just kept walking forever. A lone pilgrim trekking an endless path. Just me and the moon and the snow and nothing else.

But that was wishful thinking. Within minutes I passed back by Kate's house and back to reality. The house was dark, and by the sheer quiet alone I knew Kate was nowhere to be found. She was out partying again, filling her body with poison. If she kept this up, I knew she would soon be dead like her father. Despite what she'd said earlier, she needed me. Even if she didn't see it. Someone had to save her, and it would have to be me. So, too tired to do anything else, I let myself in, determined to stage an intervention, and waited for her in her bed, fully clothed and soaked from the fallen snow.

I didn't sleep the rest of the night, waiting for Kate to return home from wherever she had been. She never returned, though, and with each passing second I became angrier, angry that she was doing drugs, that she was lying to me, that she was staying out all night without letting me know that she was okay, still alive, not beaten to a pulp, or overdosing. The sun had been up for an hour or two by this time, but a power surge during the night left the red, digital numbers on the alarm clock flickering 12:00 back at me, so I had no idea the exact time. Not that it mattered. I didn't have anywhere to be. No pressing appointments. No money to work. Only an absent and druggie fiancée and thousands of dollars of debt.

Kate wouldn't answer her phone, so I resumed yesterday's search for Melissa's number or address or email account, but the search appeared to be useless; I didn't even know her last name. But I tossed the house anyway. I kicked through Kate's clothes and trashed the living room and her office. I tore the drawers from Kate's desk, scanned and tossed bits of paper and opened and empty envelopes and notes to the side. I fired up her laptop, hoping she had a contact or address list or something stored there, but the log-in screen popped up. She had her system locked. She'd always been so distrustful of people, even of me. I had no idea what her password was, so I started entering in random words and phrases: her name, the Governor's name, the name of the sushi joint we had had our first date at. I tried strings of numbers, her birth date and our anniversary and the date of her father's death. But nothing worked. I tried to think of what Kate treasured more than anything else in her life. The only thing I could think of was her documentary.

She had told me what the title of the movie was. I knew she had on several occasions, but for the life of me, I couldn't think of what it was. Jesus, God, what in the hell could it be?

The Great Theft?

The Stealing of a Capitol?

The Great State Steal Caper?

I knew it was something along those lines. But the exact title escaped me. It had to be on one of these documents I'd thrown about the room the day before. I got on hands and knees and searched through the papers, through copies of old letters by Governor Haskell, memos by Secretary of State Bill Cross, pictures of the old Huckins Hotel and the Logan County Courthouse.

And then I caught a break. I found a grant proposal to the Oklahoma Arts and Humanities Council, a five-page application and statement of intent. On the top, in all capital letters, was printed Melissa Von Feldt's address, 9612 Summerdale Ln. Two blocks over from here.

A nervous and exhilarated anticipation filled me like a balloon about to burst. I'd found her. I found Melissa. I could now save Kate and our marriage and everything I'd worked so hard for.

I was about to leave when I stopped, my hand on the door knob. I had no idea what to expect at Melissa's house. Images of dozens of people passed out half-naked on a dirty living room carpet, legs and arms tangled like a human pretzel, tattoos, cracked and bleeding knuckles, bowie knives, pipes and needles and weapons, semi-automatics

and assault rifles and stores and stores of ammunition flashed through my head like a streaming newsreel. These were drug addicts I was going to save Kate from. Criminals capable of things I couldn't even fathom. I needed to be prepared. I needed protection.

Back in the bedroom I pulled out my sock drawer and dumped the contents out on the bed and stared at my father's Colt Defender .45. The steel barrel and black-plated handle were warmer than I'd expected. In cliché crime novels, they're always so cold. The metal is compared to ice, so cool to the touch, like the contact alone was alien and menacing. But not in real life. Nestled between my socks for the past few days, it had absorbed the residual heat, like it had been nesting. It felt inviting in my hand, a comforting weight, like it belonged there, like the embrace of a favorite blanket wrapped tightly around my body.

I jammed the gun into my waistband and grabbed a coat to conceal it and walked to the garage and got in the car and started to back out, but the street was filled with people. To the north and south as far as I could see and from curb to curb, people streamed through the street like they were a river flowing downstream. It was the most bizarre thing I had ever seen. Ten a.m. in a college town, a few days after Thanksgiving no less, and the streets were filled with a city-wide parade. It was a small miracle.

I got out of the car since there was no way I was going to be able to drive through this. The noise was unbelievable, the crunch of snow underneath hundreds of feet, like a giant hand sliding against a rubber mat. They were chanting as they walked north, "Mr. President, don't you tread on me." Their fists pumped with each syllable, hands clapped,

air horns blared. They had been organized, knew exactly what they were doing, a single motivated organism on a mission.

“What’s going on?” I asked a man walking by the driveway.

“We’re marching to the capitol,” he said. “Haven’t you heard?” He kept walking backward away from me. “They rescheduled the presidential debate for tonight!”

I pushed through the crowd and headed south against the current. It was tough moving. The snow had been trampled into slush, and the people were packed in almost shoulder-to-shoulder. They protested as I walked against the flow of the march, calling me an asshole or a jerk. But I ignored them. Too much depended on finding Kate; my entire future hinged on getting her sober. Eventually I made my way down a block and over onto Summerdale where the street was empty. The marchers were a block east of me, but I could still hear their chants—“Mr. President, don’t you tread on me”—air horns and their feet fighting the elements.

Melissa’s house was in a cul-de-sac and nicer than I had expected. I’d imagined a broken down washing machine in the front yard, an Oldsmobile on cinderblocks. Instead, though, a pear tree collected snow out front. Newly painted shutters. An orange-leaved wreath hung on the door. This wasn’t a drug addict’s house. This was a librarian’s house, a grandmother’s house, a house someone took pride in. I was so stunned I almost lost my nerve. But I knew what I had to do. I had to confront Kate, drag her home, and lock her in her room until she no longer wanted to take drugs, no longer had the urge inside of her; it was the only way to get my life back.

No one came to the door when I rang the bell. I knocked. I knocked again. But no one answered. I placed my ear near the red door and listened closely, trying to make out any noise on the other side, muffled whispers, the glide of bare feet against tile floor, but all I could hear were the marchers a few blocks over, heading toward the Ford Center, chanting their frustrations. I walked around the front of the house, peered through the windows, but I couldn't see anything, just a dark living room, an old couch, a club chair, an empty cup on a glass coffee table, yellow flowers that appeared to be wilting, an open magazine. The gate to the backyard was unlocked, but the backdoor wouldn't open. I knocked again but was greeted with only silence. The windows were black. No movement inside. Kate wasn't here. No one was here.

I sat down on a dry patch of concrete, my back against the door. The gun pressed uncomfortably against my stomach, so I took it out of my waistband. It glistened under the gray morning light. I tilted it like a seesaw, and a sliver of light moved up and down its barrel as I tried to come up with my next move. I couldn't remember any of Kate's other friends' names. Her bridesmaids didn't have any faces in my memories, just blank slates of flesh. I didn't have any phone numbers, no way of finding out where they lived even if I did. I had to think. Where could she be? How would I be able to find her? How would I bring her home? I rotated the gun in my hand, wondering if I even had the courage to point it at someone if need be, the ability to pull the trigger if the situation called for it, wound a man, kill someone if necessary, when I heard faint singing coming from inside the house.

It wasn't a radio or anything like that. Melissa was singing a slow, soft song inside. Her voice was faint, melodic, mesmerizing, like the lull of a tide lapping the beach. I had never heard anything quite so beautiful. I closed my eyes and rested my head against the door. My muscles relaxed, and the gun hung loosely in my fingers. Melissa's mellifluous voice felt like the most comfortable bed, piled high with mountains of quilts, dozens of down pillows. I could feel myself drifting off to sleep. I could feel myself entering those few seconds as your mind seems to step off the sandbar's edge and be sucked away by the current of your dreams when the back door opened and I jerked back awake and a woman screamed.

She tried to slam the door shut, but my head was in the way. Pain slammed through my skull and neck and down into my chest. I turned around and saw Melissa running away from me. She was barefoot and wet and wearing a terry cloth robe.

"Melissa, wait!" I yelled. "It's me. It's Eli!"

She ran into the bathroom and shut the door, and I heard the click of the lock. I stood outside the door and knocked.

"I just want to know where Kate is, Melissa. That's all."

"I'm calling the cops," she said. "I got my phone in here, and I'm calling the cops."

"Don't do that." I tried turning the doorknob, but it wouldn't budge. She'd locked herself inside. "Just hear me out. Please." I thought I could hear sobbing, but I wasn't sure. I knocked lightly, trying to calm her. "Don't call the cops, Melissa. I'm not going to hurt you. I promise."

“Please,” she said between wet, mucous-filled wails. “Please just go away.”

I put the gun back into my waistband. Through the door I could hear beeps like the tones of a phone’s keypad. “I put the gun away. It’s away. Please open the door.” If I could just see her face-to-face, I could convince her that it was okay to tell me where Kate was at, that I didn’t want to hurt anybody, that I just wanted to help her, get her clean, that’s all I wanted. Why couldn’t she understand that? I knocked again, softly, trying not to sound dangerous, but every time my knuckles rapped against the door, Melissa sobbed.

“Please,” she said. “Please, please, please, just go away!” It was like she was praying.

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” she yelled. “I don’t know where she is. Please just leave me alone.”

“I know you know, Melissa. Don’t lie to me.”

“Hello?” she said. “Oh thank God. There’s a man with a gun in my house.”

I slammed my fist into the door this time. It was instinctual; I couldn’t believe she would call the police on me. I’d always been so nice to her despite her influence on Kate, despite her giving Kate drugs, despite getting Kate so hooked on pain killers and booze and weed that she no longer even came home to sleep.

“Just tell me where she is, Melissa!”

Melissa screamed at the sound of my voice. “Please hurry,” she sobbed. “He’s right outside the door.”

I slammed my fist into the door one last time and ran. I sprinted out the gate and back into the street and down around the block until my lungs hurt so badly I couldn't breathe any longer. My legs and feet were soaked from the slush, and the sweat pouring out of me froze. I couldn't stop shivering, and I had to get off the road. There was going to be an APB out on me, cops looking for me, that was for sure.

In the distance, I could still hear the demonstrators marching toward downtown, chanting "Mr. President, don't you tread on me." I could hear the fog horns blaring, and their feet trampling through the wet slush. That was where I needed to be, in the middle of them, hidden by a sea of angry protestors. The cops wouldn't be able to find me there.

Sirens blared a few streets over, uniformed officers heading to Melissa's house, I assumed, so I cut through people's yards and jumped fences, peeking my head over to make sure no one would spot me. I kept running, hopping fences, looking out for dogs and cops, until I hopped a fence and found the parade still going strong. I mingled into the crowd, greeted by a few warm smiles and a pat on the back, welcomed by a common sense of community, purpose, and outrage. For some reason, I felt right at home.

I scanned the crowd searching for any police but didn't see any. I would be safe here until I could come up with my next move. Many marchers carried banners or American flags or posters with a picture of the President sporting a Hitleresque mustache. There were other posters, too. The most common it seemed was of Kate's father at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, his head lowered and his hand reaching out to touch the Survivor Tree. It was a remarkable photograph, one he had used repeatedly during his bid for the presidency, and underneath, printed in large red letters, were the words WE

SHALL NOT BE DEFEATED. The slogan was new. But brilliant. It had the ring of puritanical commandments to it, the rhythm of the King James Bible, and the urgency of a battle cry.

“What’s your name?” a woman next to me asked. She wore a red scarf with crosses stitched into it. She had glasses and red cheeks from the cold and a smile spread across her face.

“Elijah.”

“I’m Janey.” She reached out a mittened hand to shake. “This is great, isn’t it?”

“It is. I can’t believe it actually.”

Janey nodded. “Me neither. It just came together so fast.”

“I didn’t even hear about it until this morning.”

“Shut up. Seriously?”

I nodded.

“Wow. That’s crazy.”

“Getting an entire town to march to the Ford Center. It’s quite a feat.”

“Oh, it’s not just Norman,” Janey said. “People are coming in from everywhere. There’s even a group that started walking yesterday from Tulsa.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Nope. This is going to be the biggest thing Oklahoma has ever seen!”

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Janey started chanting along with her fellow marchers, and I tried to hide my face as much as possible. The worst thing that could happen to me right now would be being recognized. Muffled by the chants, I could still hear the sirens of the cops a street over, patrolling slowly, the red and blue lights creeping between the houses. Overhead I heard a churning noise. A police helicopter approached from the north.

“I’m really cold,” I said. “You mind if I borrow your scarf for a while?”

Janey looked at me strangely, then in a sympathetic way, like I was a hurt dog. “Of course, sweetie,” she said. “You must be freezing.”

I wrapped the scarf around my neck and over my mouth so that it rested just underneath my nose. Janey had sprayed it with perfume, a mixture of jasmine and sugar. It was such a domestic scent that it surprised me. In the middle of an angry mob, I had found a strange whiff of a garden.

A police car was parked at the upcoming intersection. If I had to make a run for it, I would be at a considerable disadvantage. Snow seeped through my sneakers, soaking my socks and feet and toes. I could feel blisters forming on my heels and the balls of my

feet, hurting so badly that I couldn't help but limp. Not only would the condition of my feet hinder me; the cops also had eyes up above. The helicopter hovered above the parade and followed us north. They would be able to track me without problem, and I would be in custody and in jail, facing a breaking and entering charge, at the very least, in addition to an unlawful possession of a firearm, more than likely. If caught, I was looking at many years in prison.

The patrol car was only a dozen or so feet away from me now. I kept my hand near the handle of my gun—praying that I wouldn't have to use it, but my fingers close just in case—my eyes on the cop behind the wheel. He scanned the parade, his head darting back and forth, looking for anyone suspicious, looking for me. I had to figure out my next move. Eventually I would have to turn myself in, but not until I could locate Kate. She wouldn't be at the Ford Center. She would be as far away from the debate as she could. But if I broke from the march, I would be caught. For now I had to continue as I was, trekking along with the protestors. After the debate, the crowd would disburse, and that would be my opportunity to resume my search.

We passed the cop car, and I was able to breathe and lower my hand. Janey elbowed me, chanting "Let the people vote, Let the people vote, Let the people vote!" She looked so happy to be here. She clapped her hands and bounced in rhythm with the chant. So young, with such a bubbly and optimistic and hopeful demeanor, she didn't seem the type to be involved with politics.

We were north of Moore now and continued at a good pace. Cops still followed us: several cars and the helicopter, and some even joined in on foot, bookending us on

both sides of the street like they were our escorts. I became very self-conscious of the bulge in my waistband, pushing out my thin University of Oklahoma sweatshirt I had taken from Kate's closet. Paranoia set in. I was convinced that the cops on both sides of the streets had spotted me, and they were waiting for the right moment to attack and place me under arrest. I still had Janey's scarf over my face, but Melissa had seen me and could've described what I was wearing to the police. Because of the others' dress—patriotic shirts emblazoned with the Statue of Liberty and Uncle Sam and the Governor and Susanne and the American Flag—I stood out. I buttoned my coat and crossed my arms over my shirt, hoping to at least impair the police's ability to recognize me by the large OU logo imprinted across the front of my sweatshirt.

As we continued, more people clamored out of their houses and joined us. Every few streets or so, it seemed that we picked up a hundred or more protestors. Our mass was growing exponentially to the point our chant was a force drowning out all other noise. I could no longer hear the helicopter above. Two more had even joined it, news channel 4 and another I couldn't make out, just a nondescript white chopper circling overhead like a vulture about to dive in and gnaw on its prey. I couldn't even hear the calls of birds or the cars driving down Broadway Extension less than a mile away. All I could hear were our steps and voices ringing together as one.

“Hey hey, what do ya say? It's Revolution Day,” the crowd chanted. Our voices rose like a sonic boom. It was deep and guttural and intimidating, and I knew we could be heard for miles, one large mass organized and trampling toward the center of the city, like an army come to liberate. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

“I wish this could last forever,” I said to Janey.

She smiled and took my wrist and lifted our hands above our heads and pumped them with each syllable we chanted.

“Hey hey, what do ya say? It’s Revolution Day!”

We were getting closer to our destination, so close I could start making out details in the skyscrapers—Devon Tower and the Chase Building and the Renaissance Hotel. I could even see the Skirvin, the hotel where the Governor had been assassinated. The place haunted me, like the ghost Effie who patrolled the Skirvin’s fourteenth floor, the one Kate had told me about the night her father had been murdered, the one I had been convinced was following us down the elevator shaft. Sometimes, when I blinked, I could see the inside of the Centennial Ballroom imprinted in the back of my eyelids with the Governor, just underneath me, lying in a pool of his own blood, a piece of brain next to his still smiling lips.

“Hey hey, what do ya say? It’s Revolution Day!”

Janey still had my wrist clutched in her hand, and she was trying to get me to keep chanting. I had stopped without even realizing it. My feet were starting to go numb from all the wet slush in my shoes, my hands throbbing from the cold, but my face was still warm. I wanted to find a fireplace, a cup of cocoa, some hot stew, a bed, but I still had nowhere to go. The cops continued to escort us and were too close for me to isolate myself. They broke through the edges of the parade for the first time and started shuffling their way through the crowd, searching, radioing each other to try and find me, the crazy man with the gun who had broken into a woman’s house an hour or two earlier.

I wondered where Kate was at, if she had made it home, if Melissa had told her what I had done earlier. I assumed she had. Kate would be angry, and she would be so stubborn she wouldn't give me time to explain. Breaking into Melissa's house with a gun may have been a stupid idea, but I acted out of concern for her. She would have to understand that. She would have to.

A cop approached us, walking the opposite direction of the parade. I could see his face pockmarked with acne scars, his broad shoulders covered in blue, and his badge reflecting the scant winter light that managed to break through the thick, snow clouds. My right hand I kept near the Colt's handle just in case I needed to draw it and defend myself if necessary. I imagined what I would do if the policeman identified me: I would pull out my gun, grab Janey and take her hostage, shoot the cop in the knee, and run as fast as I could. The idea seemed ludicrous, insane even. I wouldn't get far. I'd be hunted down, charged with shooting a police officer, attempted murder even. Defending myself and escaping was a fantasy, plain and simple. If I was recognized, I would have to give myself up. I would have to drop my gun and get down on my knees and raise my hands in the air. I would have to surrender. I would have no other choice.

The cop continued closer. His face emerged now, his eyes darting back and forth, trying to process all the people around him, to cross-reference their identifying marks with what the APB listed on me. He was heading right for me. My hand clenched the handle of the gun despite my better judgment, knowing I would, if recognized, try to escape, despite the fact I knew I would never make it, that the cop would be able to disarm me, that even if I did get free from his grasp somehow, my fellow protesters

would turn against me, they would transform into a mob and neutralize me, the threat, by severe force if necessary, but my fingers clenched the handle anyway, the bottom hem of my sweatshirt barely containing the gun. Janey continued to chant and egged me on, “Hey hey, what do ya say? It’s Revolution Day!” and then the cop burst past the people directly in front of me, looked right at me, stared in fact. Since I had been watching him, this was the first time his head wasn’t on a swivel.

“Officer,” Janey said. “Why don’t you join us?” She pulled a button from her purse that pictured a profile of Paul Revere riding a horse and holding an American Flag.

I could feel the blood drain from my face as panic set in. My fingers trembled against the gun handle, and I was screaming silently for Janey to let him pass, please just let him keep walking and stop drawing attention to yourself.

The cop put his hand up and took his eyes off of me. “I can’t accept that, ma’am.”

“Oh, come on. You know we’re on your side, right?”

Janey was flirting with him, reaching out and gently laying her fingers on his forearm, smiling, and looking up to him with pouty eyes.

“I sure do appreciate that, ma’am. I do.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“What?”

“Ma’am’. It makes me sound so old.”

I wanted to bolt, but I couldn't. I had to resist my fight-or-flight instinct as best I could. I had to keep my feet walking forward, I had to keep chanting, I had to release the gun tucked into my waistband.

“What should I call you then?” the cop said. “Miss?”

“Nah. I like ‘darling’ best.”

“Hey hey, what do ya say?” I screamed. “It’s Revolution Day.”

Step with one foot and then the other, I kept telling myself. Calm your breathing, just keep looking at the man’s head in front of you, his balding head, the smell of crisp and cold air, the sound of feet pushing through all this slush, the rhythmic and pulsing sounds of hundreds or even thousands of voices chorusing in unison. Don’t look at the cop, don’t acknowledge the gun on his belt. Don’t even think about it. Otherwise he will know, and you will never find Kate, you will never be able to save her, you will never be able to stop this nightmare and get your life back to where it should be.

“Well, darling, it’s been fun talking with you.” The cop held a piece of paper in his hand. What did it say? Was it a warning? It couldn’t be. Janey had no idea what I had done. “But there’s very dangerous people out here I need to get back to protecting you from.”

“Oooh, sounds dangerous.” Janey winked, I couldn’t believe it. “Call me soon.”

She had given the cop her number. I was so relieved I almost laughed. I chanted harder, louder than I had since I’d joined the parade. “One, two, three, four, the Founding Fathers wanted more. Five, six, seven, eight, don’t allow Elector-Gate.”

Janey smiled at me, embarrassed, shrugged, and nestled her cheek into her shoulder. “Sorry about that,” she said. “I’m a sucker for cops.”

We were on the outskirts of downtown now. Skyscrapers surrounded us, making it more difficult for me to keep an eye on the helicopters. Cafes and delis were open but had zero customers. Snow had been pushed toward the sidewalks and lined the curbs like barricades. The streets had been barred off from the general public. It was such a strange sight, the lack of pedestrians. News vans parked alongside curbs, and journalists filmed us as we walked past, some darting forward and asking questions to those on the fringes of the march. But otherwise there were just us and the police and the helicopter above us. They knew I was in here somewhere; they were just waiting for me to be recognized, to do something stupid.

Underneath our chants, like a tucked away radio, I could hear the faint grumblings of something else. I couldn’t quite make out what it was, but it had a certain beat to it, much like our chants, but just out of sync with us. We continued on and our echo grew louder against the skyscrapers: “One two three four, the Founding Fathers wanted more more more more. Five, six, seven, eight, don’t allow Elector-gate gate gate gate.” I was sure we were being broadcasted live around the country. Our voices were so loud we were going to be heard from L.A. to Bangor, Maine to Tallahassee, Florida. I felt a surge of pride flow through me, but I didn’t know why. I had absolutely nothing to do with this parade, the organization of it, the planning, the execution. I had simply used them to hide from the authorities. Yet I couldn’t have felt more pride. Like this parade was somehow an extension of me.

We turned, and the Ford Center was in front of us. A sea of people had already gathered around the arena. They were screaming and chanting and blowing air horns, and a regiment of police stood in formation and kept the angry protestors from charging and storming the building. But I was so happy to have made it. My feet ached from blisters and the cold to the point I limped with each step. My ears rang, and my throat felt like it bled from screaming in such thin, harsh air. But I was here. I was safe. I still had a chance.

As we approached, I noticed that along the other two streets leading up to the Ford Center two more marches converged with ours and with the people who had already made it. It was astonishing, the scope of this thing. From every direction people flooded the city. It was a giant exodus, a pilgrimage, as if the center of the city had acted like a magnet attracting everyone within a fifty mile radius, like together we were forming one giant ball of electricity that would, at any moment, gather so much mass and energy nuclear fusion would begin and we would threaten to detonate.

The snow had finally stopped falling, and the clouds had started to break somewhat. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun dared to peek out from behind the blanket of clouds it had been hiding behind all day, like it had wanted to see what we were up to all morning long but hadn't, until now, been able to work up the courage to do so.

Moving through the crowd was difficult. People crammed in as close as they could so that everyone touched everyone else. If a giant hand pushed from any side, all of us would have come crashing down like a giant Domino set. I squeezed past, inched my way toward the middle, sliding my hand between shoulders and pushing through until

they gave away. I started to feel claustrophobic the longer I stayed in the middle. My lungs shrunk, air passages collapsed, my pupils' dilated, and all the colors of the world blended together into one spiraling mass of black and white and grey, like static on a television screen. I choked on my own spit and my tongue swelled and I could taste the individual salt grains in the sweat that froze in the corners of my mouth. I stopped and raised my arms above my head, trying to make my air passages larger, feel the breeze trickle past my fingertips, calm myself.

Then I noticed her. A boy in a red stocking cap crammed in and blocked my view, but that was her. That was Kate. I pushed my way past, lowered my shoulder, and jolted anyone that was in my way. Women protested me, and men called me an asshole and grabbed my sleeves, but I barreled through anyway. There she was again, a profile shot this time. The thin lips and dimpled chin, the faint freckles. It was Kate. I had found her. And she was okay. She wasn't strung out somewhere laying in a gutter. She wasn't dead. Or with another man, bruised from sex she didn't remember, from sex to score some drugs. She was here, sober, and coherent. She was okay. Thank God she was okay.

More helicopters gathered overhead. They hovered so low the drone of their blades competed with the demonstrators. The marchers chanted louder and with more urgency, directing their energy toward the riot police. I tried to avoid the edges of the crowd so as not to be seen by the cops, but I had to get to Kate, tell her that I loved her and that I was sorry and that everything would be okay in the end. That she would get sober, that I would find work. That everything would be even better than before. That

we belonged together and that was what the Governor would have wanted. I was absolutely sure of it now.

Kate stood next to a Hummer and looked around. People kept getting in my way, brushing past and pumping their arms so that I could never lock eyes with her, get her to notice me. I screamed her name now that I was closer, hoping that she would hear me, look in my direction, recognize me and smile and come to me. But she couldn't hear me. Not over the crowd and the helicopters and air horns. More than anything I wanted to go to her and put my arms around her and bury my nose in her hair and just take in one big pull of air, just smell her scent up close. But I couldn't. I couldn't break the perimeter of the crowd. A policeman held a piece of paper and showed it to another on the other side of a cruiser from Kate. It had to be a picture of me. The policemen were going to search until they found me, until they had me locked up for breaking and entering and the illegal possession of a firearm, until the man with the gun was locked behind bars.

“Kate!” I yelled. “Over here! Look over here!”

“When, in the course of human events,” the demonstrators began to recite the Declaration of Independence, “it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another—”

“Please, Kate!” I jumped up and down and waved my arms as best I could, but the tight fit kept me from getting more than a few inches off the ground. “It's me. It's Eli! Please look at me!”

“—and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the

opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation—”

I couldn't stand it anymore. Kate recited alongside the crowd, reading from a piece of paper she held, a raised fist in the air. She wasn't going to hear me. She wasn't going to see me. I would have to go to her despite the cops. I pushed through and made my way to the edge of the demonstrators and toward Kate.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

I stood only a few feet from her now. I pushed past the last person in my way and stood directly in front of her.

It wasn't Kate. It wasn't her. It was some other person, some other young girl who had the dimpled chin, fair complexion, slight freckles with a reddish tint, but Kate's eyes were just centimeters wider, a tinge brighter green, her face a fraction of an inch slimmer, her complexion a tiny shade paler. I was only inches away from her now, and she continued to recite the Declaration: “That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” It was like she was a moving, living replica of my Kate. She was a wax figurine who could walk and talk and interact with people, but, if you looked just close enough, wasn't actually real.

Kate was still out there somewhere, drugged out of her mind, and I'd felt as though I'd been punched in the stomach, as if I'd lost my most important and valued

possession and had no recourse to ever regain it. I felt cheated, and more than anything I wanted to curl up and cry and give up, just lock myself in a room with no windows and be placed in an induced permanent coma so that I wouldn't have to live with this feeling of loss and regret and shame any longer when I heard "Hey! There he is!"

A cop had spotted me, pointed in my direction, and glanced at the flyer he'd been studying. I stared at him a moment, relieved that this whole ordeal was almost over. The cops pushed their way through the crowd. They were only thirty or so yards from me and gaining ground. In a few moments this would all be over, I told myself. A feeling of resignation rushed over me, like being washed clean by a tidal wave of Baptismal waters. I could almost feel a smile spreading across my lips.

But Kate was still out there, alone somewhere, in dire trouble. She wouldn't be able to continue like this, never sleeping, taking drugs all night. She would die. Just like her father, she would die.

I had to lose them, get lost back into the crowd as best I could, become anonymous once again so that I could slip away. I pushed my way through the crowd, and the policeman behind me screamed for me to stop as the thousands of protestors continued to recite the Declaration, "That when any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

No one seemed to notice the chase. The mob was so thick, so cumbersome, so tightly packed into such a small square that not a single person realized that a guy was

being chased, that armed men were running through them until we had come upon them and barreled through. But even then, no one scrambled to leave, they just bitched and continued to recite, mistaking me for some troublemaker who had riled up the authorities, said something I shouldn't have, taunted them until they decided to end it, not some man who had, just a few hours before, broken into a woman's house with a gun in my hand demanding where the former Governor's daughter was at and who she was with and what she had been doing the night before when she hadn't come home.

I hoped she was okay. I hoped she was home, oblivious to what was happening to me, oblivious to what had I had done earlier in the day. I hoped she was happy, the television off, listening to music, conducting research for her movie. I hoped she sipped on some warm tea with her feet up, enjoying the first snow of the year, the way the light glinted off the packed ice crystals, the smell of clean, cold air wafting through an open window. I hoped she regretted not coming home last night and longed dearly for me to return.

“Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.”

I glanced back and could only see the tops of their heads, the blue police caps. I decided to veer left, hoping they wouldn't notice and continue straight ahead through the sea of people unknowingly chasing no one. When I did, I slowed and politely asked people if I could squeeze by with a wide and cordial smile, and the cops still seemed to

struggle in the same direction, their orders for people to move out of their way became more distant, the grunts of people being slammed into further away until I could only hear the crowd and the low buzz of helicopters overhead.

14

Anonymous once again in the crowd, I stayed in one spot, just one person amongst thousands. The helicopters still thumped overhead, and I could see swat and Secret Service snipers stationed on the roofs of the surrounding buildings. With the choppers and the agents having high-ground, it was just a matter of time before they spotted me, if they hadn't already. If I stayed here, despite the immense protest, I would be caught. They had binoculars, they had scopes, and they would scan every face until they found the man with the gun. They couldn't take a chance to lose another presidential candidate.

I tried to think. How could I disappear for a little while? Where would they not expect me to be? And then it came to me. I reached into my pocket, hoping that I hadn't thrown it away or removed it. I checked each coat pocket, and, to my great relief, found it, the invitation to the debate that Kate had told me to sell. I'd forgotten about it right after our fight; otherwise, I would've probably have sold it. This would've fetched a hefty price at that rare bookstore. But after the tournament, selling it had never even crossed my mind. Now it would serve as my savior, and, ironically, I had to thank Kate

for it; when I was trying to save her, she saved me. I couldn't help but laugh at this notion.

During the last debate, I remembered, the attendees had gathered in the Cox Convention Center across the street from the Ford Center. Because of the way the last debate had turned out, though, I worried the city had instituted a new plan, and regardless if I had an invitation or not, I wouldn't be able to get inside.

I made my way toward the edge of the crowd so that only two people stood between me and the sidewalk where orange wooden barriers lined the Cox Center. Armed policemen were stationed about every ten feet or so, surrounding the perimeter of the Cox Center, their gazes surveying the crowd for anyone who might act out of control. Walking toward the building would most certainly get their attention. I wouldn't be able to just stroll right up; they'd probably heard the APB, they probably knew to be looking for a man that fit my description. But since the Cox Center was heavily guarded, the attendees had to be congregating inside. Up on the roofs the snipers still scanned the crowd for me; it was only a matter of time before I would be spotted. I really had no other choice; I would have to break the orange barriers and approach the Cox Center calmly and try not to draw too much attention to myself. My only chance would be to show them that I belonged in there before they could recognize me. I had to appear not to be a threat. I had to calm my heartbeat and take a deep breath. I had to remain composed. I counted to three and then broke free of the crowd.

I held the invitation in hand and walked toward the nearest door of the Cox Center, my peripherals locked on the policemen nearest me. Neither moved at first, but

as I neared the orange barricades, both broke from their posts and approached me, both with one hand up and the other near their gun holster. I raised my arms, expecting to be handcuffed at any moment and for them to find the gun in my waistband, and held the invitation up high enough for them to see it all the while repeating “I have an invitation. I have an invitation. I’m supposed to be in there.”

The cop who reached me first took the invitation from my hand. His nametag read “O. Blitski,” and he was shaped like a pear and sweated underneath his riot helmet. He looked me up and down, and so did the other. The other officer was much fitter and younger, probably new to the force. I could see how nervous he was. Despite the cold his face was covered in beaded sweat, and his eyelid twitched as if he’d drank too much caffeine.

“How’d you get this invitation?” Blitski asked.

“It was mailed to me.”

He looked me up and down, from my ragged sport coat to my mud covered sneakers. “You just don’t look like the kind of person who would get an invitation.”

My flesh began to tingle, and I could feel the adrenaline pumping through my body. I should’ve known this wouldn’t work. I’d overplayed my hand, and now I was going to get busted. “I worked on Governor Cook’s campaign.”

“Oh yeah? Doing what?”

“Well, I was more of a volunteer, really. Odd jobs here and there.”

“And they gave you an invitation?”

“Listen, I don’t mean to cause any trouble or anything, I just wanted—”

Officer Blitski raised his hand to quiet me and studied the invitation again. He showed it to the younger officer who just shrugged at it. This was it; I'd gambled and lost. I would be caught and thrown into jail, and Kate would still be out there, alone, killing herself slowly.

"You're at the wrong place," Blitski said. "It says right here to meet over at the western entrance." He pointed. "That way."

I couldn't believe it. "Thank you. Oh my God. Thanks!"

He looked at me oddly, like I'd just said the stupidest thing a person could say in that situation. "Here. I'll take you. You don't got enough time to fight through this mob here."

Officer Blitski led me behind the orange barricade. It was all I could do to keep from laughing. I had an APB out on me, a warrant for my arrest, yet here was a police officer personally escorting me into the presidential debate. A few protestors tried to get the cop's attention, acting like they would breach the orange barricade, motioning like they would grab me, and every time the cop would push the protestor back, grab his baton, and warn the person not to come any closer and to leave me alone. Me! A wanted suspect in a crime, so that he could get me in close proximity to the leader of the free world. He even opened the door for me and ushered me into the Cox building and told me to have a good day. It was so unbelievably ludicrous I did laugh a little. I just couldn't help myself. Officer Blitski smiled politely, and I bowed as he left to go back to his post.

Inside I stood out from the rest. While I wore a sport coat, I also donned jeans and a dirty OU sweatshirt and wet running shoes. The rest of the attendees sported suits and floor-length gowns and diamonds and shoes so polished that the black reflected the fluorescent lights above us. But even though I looked differently from the rest, I felt safer in here. There was no way the police could assume that the man they were looking for had a ticket to the debate and waited patiently to be allowed inside.

Hundreds were crowded in the lobby section, milling around, waiting for word that they could move across to the Ford Center. The angry mob outside was muffled so that their chants and exclamations seemed to come from underwater. As I watched them an egg smashed against a window, leaving remnants of the white shell and the yellow yolk to slide down the water-spotted glass. Several of us inside jumped at the noise, and memories of the last debate came back to me. The riot had started as the attendees attempted to shuffle from the Cox Center to the Ford Center. Why would the organizers instill the same plan? It didn't make any sense. It seemed like the city was just asking for another tragedy. Another egg was thrown against the window, and even more of us gasped.

Outside, a police officer grabbed the offender from the crowd and dragged him by the back of his shirt collar to the sidewalk mere feet from the glass separating us from the mob. He was a young kid. If he was old enough to drink a beer legally I would've been surprised. He struggled with the policeman, ill-advisedly, and earned his face getting smashed into the pavement. We could see his nose bust and blood squirt so that a few drops even stained the window.

“If I could get everyone’s attention please,” a woman’s voice said over a microphone. She stood on a stairwell in front of us and wore a gray pantsuit and looked haggard, like she hadn’t slept in days. “In a few minutes we will be making our way to the Ford Center. For everyone’s safety, we ask that you follow these specific instructions.”

The policeman pinned the kid’s neck to the ground with his knee and cuffed him and pulled him up to his feet.

“We will need you to line up in two single file lines,” the woman said, “and walk at a brisk but continuous pace.”

It looked as though a red paintball had exploded on the kid’s face. Blood spiraled outwards from his nose, gluing his hair to his forehead.

“Riot police will be on either side of these lines. Please keep your hands by your sides and out of your pockets and keep facing forward. At no time should you reach outside the police escort or should you make eye contact with the crowd.”

As I looked at him, the kid stuck his tongue out at me and then smiled. It was the most bizarre thing I’d seen. It sort of reminded me of Devorak, how he’d smiled just after murdering Kate’s father.

“If you would, please begin to line up.”

The attendees began to shuffle around, lining up in two rows. Police surrounded us, and the woman who had given us the directions opened the doors. Roaring chants welcomed us, accusing of us supporting a broken electoral system. People threw tomatoes and cabbage and lettuce and apples and eggs, and we began to march through

the barrage like an army. As soon as the first of us entered the barricaded walkway, the entire mob seemed to rush toward us. The police pushed back, using their polymer shields for leverage, but it was all they could do just to hold their ground. The entire pissed off electorate bore down on them, screaming, chanting, accusing us of being puppets of the state. It was a frightening prospect, walking through there. At any moment this place could erupt, and a repeat of last debate's riot could break out. Atop the roofs, the snipers had rifles drawn, and I just waited for someone to pull the trigger. It seemed like it was just a matter of time. I exited the Cox Center, and as I did an apple landed hard against my cheek, causing it to throb under the cool weather.

As we got closer to the Ford Center the doors opened, and riot cops ushered the first of us inside. I was in the middle of the group in the left hand column, about fifty or so people back. Just within the doors I could make out metal detectors, and I panicked. As I'd waited to get inside, I'd completely forgotten about the gun in my waistband. I glanced around to see if I had an opportunity to drop the gun at my feet, but we were packed in so tightly, too tightly for me to be discreet, and a cop stood mere inches from my left shoulder. Even if he didn't see me dislodge it from my waistband, the people behind me would step on it, and they would alert the cop next to them, and then I would be caught. I had nowhere to run either. Dozens of cops surrounded me, then metal barricades, then more police, and then an angry mob of thousands. I was trapped.

A policeman tapped me on the back with his baton, and I almost took off running. I was so scared. "Keep your eyes forward."

I would be put in a cell next to Devorak. Sneaking into a presidential debate with a loaded gun would land me in prison for life. I would be treated as an enemy of the state, a terrorist even, sent to rot in Guantanamo or some other secret prison no one has ever heard of. What was I thinking?

The line kept parading forward, and I was only fifteen people back now as the attendees checked in through security. A little further into the building policemen were looking into purses and clutches and making men open their jackets for a visual inspection. No pat downs that I could see, but that didn't even matter; I wouldn't get that far. As soon as the metal detector sounded, I would be searched, and I would be arrested.

I began to accept that fact, and my panic subsided somewhat. At least all doubt and uncertainty would end, where I was going to get the money I needed, how I would pay off my debts, how I would get back at the poker table, how I was going to convince Kate to take me back. I would just have three meals, four walls, and time, I thought, as a man leapt over the barricade and flew on top of the attendees as if he was crowd surfing.

The attendees panicked as the police descended upon the man. People behind me in line began to push and more of the mob rushed the line as the police tried to hold them back. The attendees began to scream Help, Oh My God, Get inside, and we started running, and I pushed the people in front of me, jarring them in the back so they would move faster, screaming at them to please hurry before a baton nailed us, before we were taken down and trampled, before the police opened fire. Whistles blew and more produce flew and my shoulder was nailed by a man jumping on top of me. He fell with a thud on the concrete below, and despite the panicked screams from the attendees and the

angry chants of the protestors I could still hear the bone snap as he made contact with the ground, but I didn't care; I just kept moving, even stepped on his shoulder and twisted my ankle, just churning forward with my safety as my only concern until I was able to push my way through. As I entered the Ford Center the metal detectors sounded, but no one stopped, not the cops or other attendees or security guards inside. In the confusion no one knew who activated the alarm. The attendees kept piling in, and the cops were too busy fighting off the protestors. No one had even noticed the alarm.

Not wanting to take any chances, I kept moving until I made it inside and stopped at the bottom of the roped-off escalators, not knowing where to go. The riot police still fought with the mob outside and continued to usher in the remaining attendees as we gathered out of breath and confused and covered in food and bruises. We crowded in shoulder to shoulder, bloodied and looking at each other for some type of answer, but no one offered any. Through the doors we could see some of the protestors being beaten with batons and with clear polymer shields, some being tasered, all who had leapt over the barricade being arrested as order returned slowly. Chants could still be heard, repeating "election fraud, election fraud, election fraud." But no shots had been fired. No one had died. And we were safe inside.

The same woman who had instructed us in the Ford Center got our attention again and ordered that we begin taking our seats inside the arena. It was dark in there, but dim lighting had remained on so that we could see. Only floor seats were available, the others throughout the arena from the first level to the mezzanine had been covered in black tarps, and shadowy figures were stationed in the aisles. The most light centered on the

stage. Two podiums stood in the middle in front of a blue backdrop with a faint cursive script running across. I couldn't make out what it said, though. Above the stage was a giant banner of an eagle holding an olive branch and thirteen arrows and draped by the American flag. My seat, being Kate's, was near the front, row two in the center section and on the aisle.

Sound guys and technicians worked on stage, preparing the final touches for the debate to begin. As I sat in my chair, the handle of the gun bulged into my stomach, and I wondered if I'd remembered to put the safety on. I didn't want to get this far and then accidentally shoot myself in the leg. I couldn't remember if I had but couldn't check now. A middle-aged married couple were already seated next to me, and hundreds of people milled around the arena, taking their seats and discussing the craziness outside, "I didn't think we were going to make it," and "I've never been so scared," and "I hope it's not like that when we leave." So I scooted as far back as I could in my chair and buttoned my jacket, hoping no one noticed the bulge sticking out of my shirt.

Soon, everyone seated, and the workers had finished preparing onstage. The lights dimmed even further so that it was difficult to identify the person sitting next to me. The stage illuminated to an almost blinding degree, and the moderator stepped to a podium. I recognized her; she worked as a journalist for CNN, Middle Eastern descent, dark hair, olive skin. She was quite beautiful, but I couldn't remember her name.

"In a few minutes we will begin the only presidential debate for the upcoming special election," she said. "It will be airing live, so please adhere to the following rules. Anyone who breaks these rules will be escorted out of the arena and face possible arrest."

My cell phone rang.

The moderator laughed, prompting the crowd to laugh as well. “That, of course, corresponds to one of our rules. Please turn off all electrical devices including cell phones, tablet computers, and all camera equipment. No pictures will be allowed during the live broadcast, and anyone caught doing so will have their equipment confiscated.”

Embarrassed I pulled out my phone from my pocket, carefully so I wouldn't divulge the gun in my waistband, and was about to silence it and turn it off when I noticed it was Kate's cell phone calling me. I stood and rushed toward the exit as the moderator announced, “again, another one of our rules, once the debate begins please do not leave your seat. If you need to get up for any reason, please do so now because you will not be allowed to leave during the broadcast.”

I answered and hurried up the aisle, “Hello?” I whispered.

“Eli?”

“Kate? Oh thank God. Where are you?”

“I didn't know who else to call.” Her words slurred, and she sounded as though she'd been crying.

“What's going on? Where are you?”

“I messed up,” she said. “I messed up real bad. I need you to come get me. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.”

“Where are you?”

“There’s a 7-11 over there, and...and—I don’t know where I’m at. I don’t know. I’ve never been here before. They just came out of nowhere. I swear. They just came out of nowhere.”

“Who came out of nowhere, Kate? What happened? You’re scaring me.”

“That car, Eli. That car came out of nowhere, and now they’re not moving. They won’t move. They won’t, Eli, they won’t. They haven’t moved at all.”

“Are you hurt? Are you okay?”

“Oh God I can see blood,” she said. “Oh God, what happened?”

“Just stay calm, Kate. Tell me what else is near you.”

“The cops are here. They’re telling me to hang up, Eli. They’re telling me I got to go.” I heard knocking through the phone and muffled voices and more knocking.

“I’ll be there, Kate. I promise. I’m on my way.”

“You are?”

“Yes. I’m on my way.”

“Please hurry,” she said. “I need you.”

“I’ll be there soon, Kate. Two minutes, and I’m there.”

“They’re telling me I got to go. Please hurry. Please.”

“I love you, Kate. I love you.”

“I got to go now, Eli. Goodbye.” And she hung up.

I stopped near the back exit and stared at the phone in disbelief. I replayed the conversation over and over, having to convince myself that it had actually happened. Kate had called me when she was in trouble. She had asked me for help. She hadn’t

thought of Melissa. She thought of me. She didn't know about me breaking into Melissa's house. She didn't know what I'd done. There was still a chance to get her back. I still had a chance. I was almost deliriously happy. When she was in trouble, she turned to me, her fiancé.

The moderator interrupted my thoughts as she announced that the debate would be starting in two minutes and that we needed take our seats. Up on stage, she sat near the front right so that the audience had a profile shot of her. The audience quieted to a resounding silence, and near the front, a camera's light turned red, and the moderator greeted the viewers at home. After the greeting, Susanne Noakes emerged onstage to wild cheers from the audience. People stood and clapped and chanted her name as she waved to the crowd, smiling and blowing kisses to her supporters.

Then reality settled in. I wouldn't be able to help Kate. I was still wanted by the police. Kate would go to jail. She would be booked. She may have killed someone. We would not be able to get married. No matter how much we wanted to be together, it would be impossible. Both of us would be in prison.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States of America.”

Trumpets rang as “Hail to the Chief” played. He made his approach now, all smiles and waves but deep down he was on guard. His head was on a swivel, looking for anyone who had a gun in hand, a barrel pointed at him, an explosion so he could hit the deck, let some guy who has been following him around for years now die in his stead. It was so unfair. The President, a man guilty of turning this country into a shitbag, had an entire brigade surrounding him so that nothing, not even a paper cut could happen to him

without prompt medical attention. Someone willing to take a bullet for him. Kate might have killed someone, and he would live. The Governor had died, and the President may get to keep his job.

It wasn't fair. It was criminal even. And Kate had been right. Everything was his fault. If he hadn't been president, Kate's father wouldn't have ran and he wouldn't have been shot and he wouldn't have died and Kate wouldn't be addicted to painkillers and she wouldn't have caused a wreck and she wouldn't be going to jail and she wouldn't have hurt people. She wouldn't have hurt me.

"Hail to the Chief" ceased, and the crowd took their seats, a clamor of metal hinges squeaking and the resounding hush of thousands of people going from cheers to silence. Both Susanne and the President were up on stage now, an entire arena full of people surrounding them.

"Ladies and Gentleman," the moderator said, "each candidate will have five minutes of opening statement, and then we will proceed with the debate. First will be the Senator from Maine and Republican nominee for President of the United States, Mrs. Susanne Noakes."

There was applause, and I walked back down the aisle to my seat. It was so dark in there. The only light in the building concentrated on the center stage. All I could see was the walkway outlined by tiny floor lights like in a movie theater. Susanne smiled and had her elbows cocked out and her hands flat on the podium in front of her. She seemed uncomfortable, tense, and nervous. It was as if I could see her eyelids spasm from the neurons firing in her brain. And the President, he looked so smug up there, tall and gaunt

and half-turned toward Susanne as if he could sense her weakness, knew exactly where to strike in order to destroy her.

“In just a few days,” Susanne began, her voice ringing, echoing in the arena, “a few anonymous electors will make one of the most important decisions in our nation’s history, and by recent accounts are threatening to completely disregard your voice and your wishes. I find this to be a remarkable tragedy. When you, the people, overwhelmingly voted for Governor Cook to be your next president, you weren’t just voting for a man, you were voting for a set of values. You were voting for a way of life. You were voting because you believed our great country was heading in a catastrophic direction under the current administration. Now, the powers that be are trying to repudiate the people’s voice and reestablish a regime in this country that has dictated their agenda upon you against your will.”

Susanne pointed at the President, and he continued to bear down on her, stare down that long nose unafraid at her allegations. He had the Electors already in his back pocket. He would be elected president again. He knew it. I knew it. Everyone knew it. This debate was grandstanding, saving face, a political mirage to be held to benefit the people, try to keep them riled up and energized. The President would be president again. It didn’t matter the people voted him out of office. It didn’t matter that people had voted for Kate’s father. It didn’t matter that the person I loved most in this world suffered because of it.

“This we can not and will not allow. We can still right our wayward ship, we can plug the leaks from which we are drowning, we can save ourselves and this nation from brimstone.”

We could, and it would take an act of martyrdom. I was halfway down the aisle now, everyone faced forward, silent, reverent, not paying any attention to me. I would save this country and me and Kate yet no one knew it. I was no one. I was invisible. I took out my gun.

I continued to walk down the aisle at an even pace, the gun held down by my side. I would wait until I could see the whites of his eyes, then I would raise my arm, take aim, and kill the President of the United States.

He looked so smug, so smug, that half-smile, that relaxed posture, not worried one bit by his opponent, convinced that he could do whatever he wanted to this country, to us, and get away with it. He thought he was untouchable. I could see it in his eyes.

“I’m here to tell you, America, that we shall prevail!”

The crowd erupted into a standing ovation, and I raised the gun and aimed, placed the President’s head so that I separated it from his body with the sight. Two more steps and I would change history. One step. My finger tensed around the trigger.

I felt the bullet rip through my chest before I heard its sound. I was on my back and people screamed and fled in terror and I could hear feet racing toward the exits, everyone in complete panic. I felt warm blood leaking from the wound and pool near my torso. I started to feel dizzy and faint, but I had to fight to keep my eyes open; I didn’t want to miss what happened next, so I refused to blink, stared straight up toward the roof

and waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. My pupils dilated, finally, just as the first Secret Service agent arrived and wrestled the gun from my hand. It was then that I noticed directly above me, held up by a giant net, red, white, and blue balloons ready to be dropped.

December 25, 2012, 10:50 A.M., U.S. Penitentiary Florence ADMAX

Since I've been in here, I've had more than a dozen requests for interviews, for the rights to my life story, for documentaries and books and feature-length films. I've become a hot commodity. It was all a little surprising at first. I have had no way of communicating with the outside world, so it's been the prison psychiatrists that have brought it to my attention. "How does that make you feel?" they keep asking me. They tap their pencil eraser against their legal pad propped up on their knee and gaze at me as if my answer to their question will reveal why I tried to murder the president. And I want to look right back at them, grinning a gleaming smile, and say, "It makes me feel good. It makes me feel really good." But I don't. I look at them and blink and try to mimic the best remorseful expression I can muster, and I say, "It's a shame this is what I'll be remembered for."

A guard stops in front of my cell. "You have visitors," he says.

I know I do, I want to say. I've been expecting them.

The visiting room is large here. A giant room with green cinderblock walls and long plastic picnic tables and bright, buzzing florescent lights and armed guards. My

father and mother and kid brother are the only civilians in the room, the place cleared for their first visit to the would-be presidential assassin.

They wear smiles like Halloween masks. I know they're fake. They stand as I approach. I have ankle shackles and handcuffs on, and they will not be removed during the visit. I have been placed on suicide watch, so shackles must stay on at all times.

Prison policy.

I hug my mother and shake my father's and brother's hand. We sit and stare at each other because no one wants to be the first to say something. So I break the silence.

"Who won the election?" I've been in isolation for the better part of my stay here, and the prison administration has still not allowed me to watch television or read a newspaper. I think it qualifies as cruel and unusual punishment, but being on suicide watch and a political assassin they have justified their decision as vital in not provoking any suicidal thoughts.

I can see sadness in their faces when I ask this question. I'm not sure if their expressions are caused by the result of the election or by this being my first statement to them.

"The President was reelected," Alex says.

I nod, not surprised.

"How're you?" Mom asks. "Are they treating you okay?"

I nod, not surprised at her concern. "I'm eating better."

There's a tension hanging over us, keeping us from saying what we really want to say.

“How’s Kate?” I ask.

“Last we heard she’s in a rehab clinic in North Dakota. She’s doing well.”

“Good,” I say. “I’m glad to hear that.” And I am.

We sit in silence for a long while. Mom picks at her fingernails. She’s been biting them; I can tell. Dad looks like he’s trying to swallow his tongue. His jaw clenches, Adam’s apple moving up and down his throat. He wants to say something. I wonder if he’s still cheating on Mom. I want to ask him but decide against it. Alex looks like he wants to shrink away. His chin is in his chest, and his shoulders are perched near his ears. They are all confused, and scared, and sad. I know I have caused this. I want to console them in some way, let them know that everything is going to be okay, that I am okay and do not regret anything. I got to change history, if just a small part. I helped in determining the outcome of this presidential election. And my name would be recorded in history books. It’s not quite being a world champion poker player. But it’s something. People know who I am. I am an American somebody.

“Times up,” a guard says as he lifts me up by my arm and takes me away.

“We’re staying nearby,” my father says as I am being led away by the guard. I turn my head around to look at them before being pulled through the door. “We’ve rented a house nearby, and we’ll be here every week to check up on you,” he says. “We promise.”

And then they disappear behind the green, steel door.

As I’m being led back to my cell, I wonder what the title of my movie will be called and who will play me. I like Jesse Eisenberg. He’s a good actor. Or maybe

Joseph Gordon-Levitt. I wonder if the prison will let me visit the set while it's being filmed, meet the actors, share with the director exactly what was going on in my mind, why exactly I did what I did. I would hate it if they fictionalized any part of it. But Hollywood will. They'll blow everything out of proportion and make things grandiose for entertainment purposes. Turn it into some conspiracy story, like I'd planned to do it all along. Well, so be it. Maybe they will make my story even better, and it could get nominated for an Oscar. I could go even. That'd be great. I could wear an orange jumpsuit and be shackled and have a private box up above everyone else in the balcony. It wouldn't even matter that I couldn't raise my hands to accept my award. It would be enough just to be there at the theater, and have all my admiring fans wave up at me.