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Man of the People

a novel



by Giano Cromley
BA Dartmouth College, 1995

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
The University of Montana
May 2000

Approved by:

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Chairperson

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May 20, 2001
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Chapter One

I am the chief of staff for a member of the United States House of Representatives. That is my day job. The one that provides a pay check. The one for which I have business cards in my wallet. The one to which I wear a suit and tie almost every day. And I'm good at it. But I've never considered that my true calling. Never seen it as my life's work. It's more like my front, my alter ego, my Clark Kent. No, my real job is fighting chaos. Combating it whenever it arises in my life, which, given my day job, is actually quite frequent. In a strict Manichean world-view, one that consists of only good and evil, you have on one side me, Ethan Pascal, and on the other side, you have the nefarious forces of chaos. We are locked in mortal combat.

Chaos goes by many names: Anarchy, Entropy, Confusion, Disorder. And it comes in many forms and guises. Sometimes, when I'm in a particularly literal mood, I imagine it as a black cloud, a poisonous gas, that seeps in through the weather stripping, steams through the keyhole, drifts in over the transom. Its serpentine tendrils wend their way along the floorboards, searching me out, hell-bent on wreaking havoc in my life.

When I open my eyes, though, and look around me, I realize I've been caught in another one of my hyperbolic, metaphoric, mental joyrides. A daydream. I see that I'm actually sitting in the coach section of an unmoving 757. Window seat, aisle number high enough that I'm catching a mean scent coming off the crapper at the back of the plane. After a few more minutes of thought, I remember we're waiting on the tarmac in Minneapolis St. Paul. And if my clouded memory serves me correctly, we've been waiting a long time. Like over an hour. The air conditioner vent overhead blows a stream of hot, dry, b.o.-laden air across my face. I'm not sure if the b.o. is coming from the airplane itself or if it's coming from this tired suit I'm wearing. We are late. All the passengers are seated, the door is closed, and the gate has periscoped back into the terminal; the plane, for all intents and purposes, is ready to take off. But we continue to wait.

A quick glance at my watch tells me it's almost certain we will not arrive in DC in time to hit the 11:30 window wherein planes can land at National Airport. Because National is so close to the city, late night flights get diverted out to Dulles, thirty miles

outside the District. All of which means I need to figure out a ride to my apartment in Arlington. I'd like to use the Airfone embedded in the seat back in front of me. But two female flight attendants are standing in the aisle directly to my right engaged in a terse conversation that feels like it's about to spill over into flat-out argument. The typewriter clack of their voices trumps any possibility of having a decent conversation on the phone right now. So I pivot in my chair to take advantage of this front row seat to the catfight.

Both flight attendants have competent, though generous makeup, tightly wound hair, decent-looking figures that are mostly obscured by the sack-like dresses that pass for their uniforms, and both of them exhibit an overall demeanor that seems to be a mixture of professional indifference and downright antipathy toward their fellow human beings. The only visible difference between the two is that one has short blonde hair and the other has slightly longer blonde hair. They look like they might be before and after versions of the same person, though I couldn't tell you who exactly is before and who is after.

"I really resent this whole attitude you've been giving off today," the long blonde-haired one says.

"What attitude is that? I don't know about any attitude."

"Don't know about any attitude?" Long-blonde says incredulously. "What about your snapping? You really snapped at me on that last flight."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you back there. It's just that I have this zone." Short-blonde draws an imaginary circle around her waist about the size of a hula-hoop. "And whenever someone comes into that zone, you know, gets too into it, I just kind of lose it." She cocks her hip toward my head and I can hear the satiny sound of one panty-hosed thigh rubbing against another.

"I'm sorry," Long-blonde says. "I guess I just didn't know I was getting into your zone." She bites at the pink frosting of her lipstick.

"No, there's no way you could have known. I'm not blaming you for *that*."

"I already told you, I'm totally sorry for whatever it is."

For some reason, Short-blonde is unready to accept Long-blonde's apology, and it is then that I realize this argument is not vastly different from the kind of arguments Lily and I have been having lately. Circular, chronic, relatively lacking in focus or meaning,

painfully public. I wonder if this is why I'm so enthralled by the fight unfolding in front of me: it's an opportunity to see how Lily and I look to everyone else around us.

"See, the problem is you're all telling me what to do," Short-blonde says. "You're all like, 'Did you order the wheelchair for the terminal in Duluth?' 'Did you stow the bev cart for landing?' 'Did you do seat back and belt check yet?' And I'm all, more laid back." She pauses here as if she's thinking of a pithy way to summarize what she's just said. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, it's your analness that gets into my zone." Those last words ricochet off the walls of our pressurized cabin until the seatbelt light illuminates and a resounding DING! fills the space after her words, as if they finally hit an imaginary tin can somewhere. The two attendants look around with wide, blinking eyes.

"Maybe we should talk about this later," Short-blonde says in a low voice.

Instantly, they are smiling and going about their pre-flight routine with the icy cheerfulness we all expect from our flight attendants.

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Once the plane reaches altitude, the captain's voice comes on over the intercom and tells us that due to "mechanical issues" in Minneapolis, we won't be arriving in DC until 11:45 and that, due to "city ordinances" our landing will be diverted to Dulles. A collective groan rises up from my fellow coach class refugees. I feel like jumping up and shouting: *You morons! Why are you acting like this is a surprise? I could have told you this would happen over an hour ago.* But I manage to restrain myself. Which isn't easy. Sometimes it's hard being right all the time.

I pull the Airfone off the seat back in front of me. Of all the various kinds of phones in the world, these rank up there in my top two or three worst types to use. And I've been using a lot of phones lately. Enough to call myself some kind of expert. Normally, I pity the fools who try to use these Airfones. Unfortunately, today I'm one of those fools. I need that ride into the city. And in order to get it, not only am I willing to use this Airfone, I'm about to call Dewey, Lily's younger brother. I have considered calling Lily herself. She would be the natural choice. After all, she is my girlfriend of

three years, the woman I live with, pretty much the love of my life. But we haven't spoken since I left on this trip two weeks ago, and those last words were not kind ones. They were part of a nasty fight, though I can't quite remember what it was about, or what – if anything – we determined when it was over. So asking Lily for a ride back from Dulles at midnight on a Sunday might be requesting a bit much from the depleted reserves of our relationship. Of course I could call someone from my office to pick me up, but I don't feel like being reminded of work right now. And friends, well, I'm just not what you'd call a friend person. The people I would call friends, would be the ones most people refer to as acquaintances. They wouldn't even make most people's wedding invitation list. So Dewey it is. Though that decision is not without some peril. Dewey is four years younger than Lily; he works in a coffee shop and plays in a band whose name I can never quite recall. Over the years that Lily and I have been dating, Dewey and I have honed a fine and mutual dislike for each other. He plays the role of the mistrusting, over-protective brother, and I oblige him by being the cocky, patronizing boyfriend. While I presume these roles are mostly for show, sometimes I think Dewey plays his part a little too well. Sometimes, in fact, if I didn't know better, I'd say he actually hates me.

When Dewey picks up the phone his voice is low and coarse, the sound of a cement mixer tumbling. "Who would be dumb enough to disturb me at this hour?"

"Dewey, it's me," I say cheerily.

No recognition. Or possibly simulated non-recognition.

"Ethan Pascal," I say. Pause. "Your sister's long-time boyfriend." Another pause. "Practically your brother-in-law." While this last title is highly debatable, it does the trick.

"You wish, prick," he grumbles.

"Guess where I'm calling from, old buddy?" I ask. If I'm going to weasel a ride out of Dewey, I know I'm going to have to use my own special brand of delicate tenacity. "Take a guess."

"I'm sure I don't have the slightest idea, Ethan."

"Aren't you even a little curious?"

"Not really."

“Well, it’s funny you should ask. I’m now currently somewhere in the skies over Wisconsin, on my way back to DC.”

Dewey doesn’t say anything. He’s good. He knows I’m trying to set him up and he’s not about to let me.

“Yep,” I continue, “been traveling the state on business for the past two weeks.”

“That’s fantastic,” he says. “I’ll expect a gift when I see you.”

“Say that’s a nice thought, Dewey. And, since you brought it up, when do you think I’ll get to see you again?”

“Whenever it is, Ethan, it won’t be soon enough.” I can tell he wants to get off the phone with me. I can feel the haste building in his voice.

“Dewey, I’ve got a question for you.”

He breathes a long sigh into the receiver. “What is it?”

“Do you think I’ll be able to catch a cab at Dulles when my plane lands at 11:45 this evening?”

If the stupidity of my question registers with him, he doesn’t let on. “Yes,” he says deadpan. “You shouldn’t have any problem whatsoever.”

“And how much do you think cab fare might be to my apartment in Arlington?”

Dewey makes a tired grinding noise at the other end of the connection. “All right, prick, I’ll do one drive-by outside Baggage Claim at 11:50. If you’re not there, tough shit.”

“Oh, wow, you’re such a doll.” Dewey doesn’t respond to this bit of sarcasm, so I decide to get off the line before he can change his mind. “I’ll see you there,” I say.

“Unless of course my plane goes down somewhere over the Great Lakes.”

“Well, now,” he says, “I guess there’s always something to hope for. By the way, Ethan, why didn’t you call Lily for a ride?”

Damn, he’s *really* good. I switch the receiver from my right ear to my left. I glance quickly around the plane. Short-blondie is working her way down the aisle with the bev cart. “Darndest thing,” I say. “I haven’t been able to get a hold of her.” This is only a partial lie since I haven’t actually *tried* to get a hold of her.

“Uh-huh,” Dewey says in a way that tells me he knows a lot more about it than I would have expected. “I just wanted to see if you’d admit you fucked up again.”

“Ouch, Dewey. Isn’t that a little personal?”

“Yeah, I thought you’d say something lame like that. Listen, prick, I’m doing one pass at baggage claim. That’s it.”

I sit forward from my seat back and pull the receiver close to my mouth. “You know what, Dewey,” I say. “Your analness is really getting into my zone.”

The receiver clicks as Dewey hangs up on me. Short-blondie looks up from a bubbling glass of ginger ale as if she can’t quite believe what she’s heard: some asshole passenger stealing her best material.

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Dewey is waiting at the terminal with all the other greeters when I step off the plane. He’s got one hand in his jeans pocket and the other one is holding a bouquet of flowers. I see he’s not above playing along on a joke, and the sight of him standing there, trying his best to look annoyed, warms my heart.

“Flowers, Dewey? You shouldn’t have.” I throw my arms wide to hug him.

“Actually, I was hoping for a plane crash.” He shoves the flowers into my gut. “These were for the funeral.”

Dewey’s hair is crude oil black. It’s pressed in and up as if he’s been sleeping on the left side of his head. He’s wearing a dusty black trench coat and matching motorcycle boots.

“What’s with the get-up?” I ask.

“Band’s got a gig tonight. We’re playing at Strange Plaza.”

Lily hates Dewey’s band, so I’ve only seen them a few times, but as near as I can tell, their two main influences are Iron Maiden and Andrew Lloyd Webber. They play small clubs that most people in DC have never heard of. Their shows are elaborate productions with plots and acting and pyrotechnics. The story-line of each show usually revolves around a young woman being kidnapped and a young man going on a quest to save her. Inevitably, everyone ends up dead; the stage is strewn with a Hamlet-like number of dead bodies. The last song of their set is always a slow rock ballad with lots of “weeping” guitars. Dewey occasionally plays the young hero in these productions, but

his large size and generally thuggish appearance more usually land him the role of the villain. In general, I like Dewey better as the villain; it fits in better with my overall view of the world.

As we stand together at the luggage carousel, I look at my watch and figure Dewey's probably due to be on stage in an hour. I'm momentarily touched that he would take the time, and go so far out of his way, to pick me up. I consider mentioning this to him, but this is the kind of intimacy I'm fairly sure we've tacitly agreed to avoid. Instead, I say, "So what's the name of your band this month? Death Monkey, or something like that?"

Dewey gives me a deflated look; his left eyelid seems to droop slightly, but I'm not sure if this is just an illusion caused by the asymmetry of his hairdo. "We haven't changed the name of the band in six months," he says. "We're still called Death Maarch, with two A's."

"You mean the A in Death and the A in March? Those two A's?"

Dewey is uncertain about this question. I can tell he's fairly sure we've been over this before, but he's not positive. I know he wants to answer the question. His band is his Achilles heel. It's the only thing that makes him vulnerable, because it's the only thing he cares about. And he's pretty sure I'm not above using that fact against him. "Two A's in Maarch really emphasizes the word Maarch, you know," he says. "It makes you look hard at the labor, the effort. Really brings that to the forefront." As he speaks, his voice rises until it's verging on the edge of an awkward falsetto. "In a way, it's kind of symbolic of the struggle we all face. Whether it's as an artist, or a writer, or a worker, or a single mother. Or... Well, you know." He reins himself in, but not before I can see the sincerity in his eyes, the earnestness of his passion, his absolute belief in this stupid band.

I consider a thousand things I could say about Death Maarch – with two A's – and I end up picking the nicest thing that comes to mind. "I kind of like the sound of Death Monkeyy. With two Y's."

My bag has swung around on the luggage carousel. Dewey lifts it easily and slings it over his shoulder. The bag looks small, now that it's in such close proximity to Dewey, and I realize just how big a boy he is. A few inches taller than my six one. And

bulkier, the kind of build you'd see on a bouncer at a rough bar. He mutters the word "prick" under his breath as he turns and heads toward the parking lot.

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Dewey is quiet on the ride into town. I watch as the distant lights of the city and the greenish glow of the dashboard play across his face. I never noticed before that – like his sister – both his chin and nose have a slight upward swoop to them, a momentary defiance of gravity that gives him a faint trace of aristocracy. This is the kind of observation he probably wouldn't want to hear, the kind that would definitely lose him some cache with the Death Maarch crowd. So I keep quiet. He doesn't look at me and he doesn't say anything. As the silence between Dewey and me yawns wider, I manage to scratch out an idea, a short-term game plan. When I get home I will burst into our apartment, surprising Lily, who is most likely asleep in the bedroom, and I will throw myself at her feet. I will beg for forgiveness. I will tell her I'm sorry for all the shitty things I've done, not the least of which was not calling her for two weeks after we had that fight. Maybe we'll cry together for a bit. Maybe we'll hold each other and shake our heads in some sad way that says we're sorry for all of our fuck-ups. Then maybe we'll promise to be better to each other. After that's all taken care of, we'll drink wine and eat saltine crackers with sardines packed in cottonseed oil. I think there's a tin on the shelf over the kitchen sink. And maybe these will be the events that put us back on the right path. Maybe this will be the thing that puts the chaos of our relationship back into a neat, tidy bundle. For good. Sitting in the car right now, I can feel it all coming together.

I smell the sharp scent of cigarette smoke. Dewey's lit one up and it dangles between his fingertips over the steering wheel. I sit back in my seat and try to whistle something quietly.

A few minutes later, we pull up to my apartment building in Arlington, and I get my bags out from the trunk. Dewey has unrolled the passenger side window and is leaning over to watch me on the sidewalk.

"Thanks for the ride, Dewey," I say. "I really owe you one."

"It's nothing."

“Good luck with the gig tonight.”

“Thanks,” he says, his face unmoving.

I lean over and spot the bouquet of flowers Dewey brought to the airport. They’re angled against the parking brake handle. I reach in through the window and pluck them from their spot. “May I?” I ask.

“Absolutely. By all means.”

“Thanks. It might help smooth things over with, you know, inside.”

Dewey says, “Yeah, somehow I don’t think that’s going to help you much.”

And that’s when I see it. A slight flicker that seems to start in the stiff forest of his gelled-up hair, that works its way through his eyes and finishes as a slim grin tugging at his lips. It’s a spasm of delight. A hiccup of pleasure. It’s the kind of look that tells me I’m not in control of anything, that whatever cosmic rug I had been standing on has just been pulled out from underneath me. I suddenly need to see Lily, to confirm my world and my existence in it. I turn on my heel and bound up the stairs to the building. In the hallway, I slide past a row of cardboard boxes and place my key in the lock to our door. It doesn’t turn. I jiggle it twice and try again, twisting harder. I feel the cheap key metal warm and warp in my fingers.

I knock on the door. Nothing. Not only nothing, but less than nothing. The apartment echoes with the sound of a place abandoned, the sound of a tuning fork pitched to a hollow flat note. I call out Lily’s name. The same kind of anti-nothing is all I hear.

I look around me thinking maybe I have the wrong apartment. That’s when I actually notice the cardboard boxes stacked against the wall to my left. They’re each inscribed with Lily’s fine script: neat but not ostentations, almost masculine in its blockiness. She’s written my name on each box and an itemization of its contents. *Ethan Pascal: desklamp, reference books, classical CDs. Ethan Pascal. Work files, underwear, dress socks.* My entire life is contained and accounted for in eight cardboard boxes lined up against the hallway wall. Eight standard-issue moving boxes. Four across, two high. There’s something so symmetrical about them, so contained. So puny. I’m thirty years old and these are my life’s possessions. I feel like lurking somewhere in that observation is a sad commentary on my life.

And then the thought occurs to me what the apartment must look like without my stuff in it. Probably a lot better. It was Lily's apartment before it was our apartment. My moving in only meant less room for Lily's stuff. No matter how hard we tried, no matter how much rearranging we did, my stuff never fully assimilated to the new surroundings. It was as if my tchotchke was constantly at war with her tchotchke, never able to cobble together even a fragile truce in the name of good Feng Shue. In fact, right now, I'm fairly certain Lily's stuff is breathing a deep sigh of relief at having her apartment all to itself again.

All right, Ethan. Enough. Pull yourself together. Try breathing. Good. What to do next. Fix on the immediate. Focus. Okay. Sleeping. You'll need to sleep somewhere tonight. That's good. Find a place to sleep.

I drop the bouquet on the now-ironic Welcome Mat in front of our door and I jostle my way past the boxes of my life, back outside the apartment building. Dewey is waiting chauffeur-like in his car, smoking a cigarette, staring straight ahead as if he doesn't expect me back for hours.

"How long did you know?" I ask, squatting down at the passenger window.

"Couple days. I helped her box your shit up. She's staying at our parents' place in Delaware for a while."

"How bad is it?" I ask, though the changed lock and boxed items have already supplied a pretty good answer to that question.

"Worst I've seen," Dewey says. He leans over to look at me now. His eyes are slate gray. "You keep fucking up, Ethan. What did you expect? You were gone two weeks."

"Now, wait. Technically, I was only gone twelve days."

"Whatever."

"And I was busy. It's not like I'm on vacation when I'm working on the road."

Dewey ashes his cigarette on the floor of his car. "I don't know why you're telling me this," he says. "I'm sure you have your reasons for what you did. But it really doesn't matter to me, now, does it?"

I shrug my shoulders because there's not much else for me to do when Dewey is right about something.

“I suppose you need a place to stay for the night,” he says.

“Well, I do. But.”

“Throw your shit in the car. I’ve got an extra bed at my place.”

“I don’t want to trouble you, Dewey.”

He jerks his thumb toward the back. “Shut up and get in. I’ve got a concert in forty minutes.”

Reluctantly, inexplicably, and against my better judgment, I do what Dewey tells me.

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Dewey shares his place with at least five other people, none of whom seem to be home at this hour. His apartment has no hallways; it’s a labyrinth of rooms that all open in on each other. Each has a similar-looking mound of clothes on the floor, overflowing ashtrays and warped, loose-sprung couches. About the only way to distinguish one room from another is by the movie posters on the walls. Each room has a different theme: Western, Teen Comedy, Kung Fu, Horror.

“This is Piper’s room,” Dewey says as he opens a door and tosses my bag on the floor. “Piper’s gone on business for a few days. You can crash on his futon.”

“Thanks,” I say. I scan the futon mattress for any obvious stains. Finding none, I sit down and test its give.

When I look up again, I’m surprised to see Dewey still standing in the doorway, regarding me with a bemused expression.

“Thanks, Dewey. You can get to your show now. I’ll be fine.”

Dewey steps into the room and sits down on the armrest of the futon. He reaches into his coat pocket, fishes around a moment and pulls out a tightly-wrapped joint. He twists one end and wets it with his lips.

“Pot, Dewey? Really?”

“You got a problem with it?”

“No. I just didn’t know people actually still smoked pot. I didn’t know it was still a *thing* people did.”

“Well, it is.” He lights the joint, takes a crackly hit and holds it out to me. “And given everything you’ve been through, this might be the best thing you can do right now.”

“Thanks,” I say. “Probably help me get to sleep, right?” I take the joint and inhale the sharp, hot smoke into my lungs. Then I hand it back to Dewey.

On the wall opposite us is an enormous *Apocalypse Now* poster. It’s the only poster in this room. The picture is of Marlon Brando’s face. But not exactly his face. It’s a stylized version with graffitied rings of barbed wire that cut across his mouth and face and stretch around into the background. It looks as if someone had made an attempt to eviscerate the face, wipe it out entirely. The text on the poster, other than the title, is written in a loopy, Asian script.

“What’s that all about?” I ask, trying to hold down the bubble of warmth that’s rising in my throat.

Dewey’s eyes widen and he lifts his eyebrows in a quick double-pump. “That is an extremely rare poster. The Stradivarius of movie posters.” He tries to hand me the still-burning joint, but I hold up my hand and shake my head. “It’s the original from *Apocalypse*’s theatrical release in Vietnam,” he says.

“What?”

“I shit you not, man.”

“Dewey, there’s no way they released that movie in Vietnam.”

“Then how do you explain the Vietnamese writing?” He points at the poster with his joint.

“That could be *any* language. I don’t know if it’s Vietnamese. And I highly doubt you do either.”

Dewey shrugs. “Fine, don’t believe me.” He licks his fingers and pinches the joint out. “Either way, I’ve got a show to get to.” He stands up, slips the joint back into his pocket and rubs his hands together.

“Thanks for helping me out tonight, Dewey,” I say as he’s walking out the door.

He gives me his best menacing smile and says, “Hey, I wouldn’t have missed that scene back at your apartment for the world.” Then he’s gone.

As I lay in the futon with the lights off, the music from a bar down the street thrums a nervous tremor through the apartment. My eyes feel screwed up and wired. Looking at the wall, staring at the poster, Marlon Brando's eyes blaze back at mine. They loom. Even when I close my eyes, I can still see his, unblinking behind the gag of scribbled barbed wire. The poster is trying to communicate something to me. Like a ghost who's come to deliver a message. It speaks to me in an ominous prophet's voice. *Ethan, you're at the top of a steep downhill. Hang on or bail out.*

What the fuck is Marlon talking about!?

I pry open my eyes, climb out of bed. I slide a chair over to the *Apocalypse Now* poster. I stand on the chair so my face is a few inches away from Marlon's. Four silver thumbtacks hold the poster tight to the wall. The surface of the poster is lightly wrinkled, covered with a thousand interlocking leaf veins. The paper is warped with water damage. There's an inch-long tear on the lower right edge. The corners are stippled with a field of piercings from previous hangings.

I dig my thumbnail under the hood of the upper right tack. I jimmy the tack as if I'm on autopilot, as if it were a scab I couldn't stop picking. Eventually it pulls out of the sheetrock and falls silently to the floor. It isn't until I work out the second tack that I have any idea what I might be doing. When all of the tacks are out, and Marlon is free of the wall, I roll the poster into a tight tube. Then, as if bidden by the forces of chaos itself, I hide the Stradivarius of movie posters in my suitcase, beneath a pile of my own dirty clothes.

When I lie back down, I feel liberated, free from the burden of worry. Free to ignore the currents of chaos that are swirling around me in this very room, at least for one night. My mind reels down comfortably like a heavy flywheel until I drift off into the dark underworld of slumber.

Chapter Two

The next morning, I roll myself out of Nappy's futon. I manage to shower, dress and leave for work without seeing Dewey, or anyone else in the apartment, and I figure that is a good sign.

The street out front is deserted. Fandango is closed up with an iron grating across the windows. Black spots of gum dot the sidewalk and are already softening in the sun like overripe fruit. The Adams Morgan crowd, being more of a nocturnal one, ensures there won't be much activity here till later this afternoon. And just as I reach for my car keys I realize my car is parked out in Arlington on the street near what is safe to now call my former apartment. My car is a beet red '85 Honda Accord, affectionately known as The Beefeater. She has traveled with me across the country several times in the ten years I've known and owned her. She has survived blizzards and heat waves and even a hailstorm that threw down great chunks of hell on her and left her red body dimpled like a golfball. What she lacks in beauty, she makes up for in character. She's a trooper, and I take comfort in her solidity. Right now the Beefeater is probably sitting quietly under some shady tree, just waiting for me to slip behind the wheel and fire her four cylinders into thunderous life. I would go to hell and back for that car, but not today. Right now, I've got to get to work.

Still, a paper might be nice. I see a dispenser on the corner and I fish around in my pocket until I find a quarter. I drop it into the machine and pull it open. The papers are all dated from Friday. I reach in and take one anyway, in case it rains. A cab pulls over and I tell the driver to take me to the Canon House Office Building. This anarchist is going to work.

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I love my job. I am the Chief of Staff for Congresswoman Cynthia Mahoney from Montana. I'm the youngest Chief of Staff in the U.S. House of Representatives. Actually, I should qualify that: I *was* the youngest. Two months ago Republican congresswoman from Minnesota Shelley Korellis hired a 28-year-old named Clay Tarcher. Cynthia hired me when I was 29. So for about ten months I was the youngest Chief of Staff in the U.S. House of Representatives. It's the kind of distinction only Clay

and I would probably make. But I will confess to a small bit of annoyance when I found out he was younger than me. It's not that I'd lost my job or that anything had drastically changed, it just reminded me that, in this town, there's always someone nipping at your heels. And that can be an unsettling thought.

Of course in the end, it doesn't matter who's the youngest. It matters how well you do your job. And I happen to do mine very well, if I do say so myself. The Chief of Staff job involves many different operations and requires innumerable skills. Some chiefs are good at passing legislation. Some are good at fund-raising. Some are good at networking. There's a lot that needs to be done. But in the end, the good Chiefs of Staff do one thing very well: win elections. And that's why Cynthia Mahoney hired me.

How does a chief of staff win an election, you might ask? How can one person make a difference in the final outcome? There are essentially two keys. For the first key, you have to understand a little something about chaos theory and a little something about political campaigns. Scientists can demonstrate chaos in a closed system using only three nonlinear equations. Three! Now think about a wisp of smoke as it rises up from a lit cigarette. At first the smoke goes straight up. Then it wavers slightly as two subtle breezes in the room have an effect on it. Maybe it spirals, maybe it zigzags. It's still predictable. By the time the smoke is a few feet above the cigarette, and enough wind currents have had their way with it, there's no predicting where the smoke will be at any given time. That, my friends, is chaos. Now picture this: You are me, a chief of staff trying to win a congressional campaign in Montana. Your closed system includes twenty-five professional staff, forty campaign staff, 10,000 yard signs, 10,000 square miles, and just under one million voters. You can imagine the kind of chaos a system like *that* could generate. Suffice it to say, even the most well-oiled of political campaigns is about as organized as a trailer park after a tornado. In order to negotiate that kind of wreckage, in order to get anything done under those circumstances, you need someone who thrives on disaster. You need a Master of Chaos, an Anarchist Extraordinaire. And that would be me.

The second key to winning elections (and this one is even harder for people to understand) is to not give a shit. That is, you have to be willing to do whatever it takes to win. I know we'd all feel better if we could say we ran clean elections based on the

issues. Blah, blah, blah. To that I say: BULLSHIT! Politics is a dirty business. It's not for the weak or the timid or the shy or the thin-skinned. If you any of those things, do something else. Let me give you an example. When I was just out of college, I got the opportunity to run a campaign for County Commissioner in New Hampshire, where I grew up. It was a conservative county, and when I took over the McCormick campaign, my candidate was down by twenty points to a Republican legislator named Shaw. It was the first campaign I'd ever run, and the fact that they hired me, at age 22, shows either how desperate or how hopeless they were.

With two weeks to go in the election, I siphoned money out of our war chest and put it into an account for an independent advocacy group called Citizens for Cleaner Government. This group then sent out to every voter in the county what has now become an infamous direct mail piece. On the front, it had the word "WIFEBEATER" in plain black letters. On the inside, it had a nice-looking photo of our smiling opponent and the transcript of a 9-1-1 call his former wife had made, while he was beating her.

McCormick, my candidate, could honestly say that he had no idea who sent the piece out, because I never told him who did. He was smart enough to not ask questions. The day before the election, the two candidates were in a statistical dead heat. We'd made up twenty points in two weeks. It was the biggest comeback in New Hampshire political history. In the end, we lost by 23 votes. It was also the closest commissioner race in New Hampshire political history. And the last election I lost.

Now, some might say we were out of line to send out that mail piece. And I suppose I can understand that... No. Wait. I can't understand that. He *beat his wife*. If he was embarrassed by that, he never should have run for office. It's true that that mail piece destroyed Shaw. What was once a promising political career would now top out at one term in a county commission seat. And you know what? I'm okay with that. I don't want a wife-beater moving on to higher elected office. Those are the people we should be weeding out.

Okay, deep breath. I think I've gone a little overboard there. I'm not some incredible hardass or anything. In all other facets of my life I'm a cream puff. And you'd be amazed at how many other facets there are to my life, aside from politics.

Especially considering that politics is my job. Which I love, and still happen to think I'm pretty good at.

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The cab lets me off in front of the Canon Building and I file in through the metal detectors at the door. When I get to the office and walk in the front door, our receptionist, Eric Wright, looks up and I see a note of fear in his eyes. He's been nervously biting his lips and they're raw and purple-looking like he's just been sucking on grape candy. Eric has been working in the office for three months now and still hasn't gotten past the very formal stage in dealing with me, despite my best efforts.

"Easy-E, how's business?" I ask. Eric, with blond hair the color of polar ice caps, has the uncanny ability to remain unflinching, to show not even a blink of irony, when I call him Easy-E.

"Fine, sir." He nods and looks around the room nervously.

"Anything to report while I was away, Easy?"

"Nothing in particular, sir." He scratches the side of his head with a pen. "I could give you a break down of constituent calls for the past week."

Eric is a good kid. He's learning the ropes and seems eager. At times, I think he reminds me of me, when I first started out in this business. But then he goes ahead and offers me a break down of constituent calls for the past week and I have to wonder: A young Ethan Pascal would never be organized enough to offer such a thing to his boss.

"No," I say. "Thank you, though." Then I see a look of disappointment mingle with the fear in his eyes. "Maybe save it for when the Congresswoman gets back. I'm sure she'll be interested in seeing it."

"Excellent, sir."

"In the meantime, I've got a project I'd like you to work on for me."

Eric leans forward over his desk. "What is it, sir?"

"This is important, Easy. And I need you to be hush-hush about it for a while."

"Absolutely."

“I need you to find out if *Apocalypse Now* was ever theatrically released in Vietnam.” Eric blinks once, twice. I can tell he’s waiting for me to laugh or even smile, some clue to let him know I’m not serious. “Can you do that for me, Easy-E?”

The truth is, Eric’s nervousness is so intense it makes *me* nervous. I could tell him to relax, but that would just mean he’d wear a tie with flowers on it once a week. It’s my hope that this assignment will teach him some deeper lessons. Namely: that life is a series of meaningless quests; that your superiors aren’t always as smart as you are; and that sometimes you just have to make up answers to life’s hard questions.

“Yes, sir,” Eric says. He looks down at the notepad in his hand and begins writing down my request with a furious scribble. “Any suggestions on where to start looking?”

“Nothing comes to mind,” I say. “But I have faith in you.”

Eric looks up and smiles. “I won’t let you down, sir.”

His seriousness has me worried. I’m not so sure if this assignment will have its intended effect. I can tell now that the poor kid might actually drive himself crazy trying to find out if *Apocalypse Now* was released in Vietnam.

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In back, the first person I see is Brooke Perry. Brooke has been working for Congresswoman Cynthia Mahoney since she first got elected to Congress three and a half years ago. Brooke is the office scheduler, which, if you know much about congressional offices, means that she’s the most important person in the joint. She determines who gets the sit-downs with the boss and who gets the autographed picture and a handshake from one of our legislative aides. Brooke wields her considerable power with ruthless precision. She never forgets a slight or a favor. And she’ll make sure you know which it was. As almost an extension of her work persona, Brooke has a sharp widow’s peak of black hair that is accentuated by the fact that she pulls her hair back into a tight bun. It makes Brooke look like a gorgeous vampire, someone capable of seducing you into giving up your own soul. I would gladly give up my soul to be seduced by Brooke.

While she has her shit in a pile professionally, personally she does not. For about as long as I've been dating Lily, Brooke has been seeing this obnoxious guy named Vince who works for the Science and Space Committee. I'm not exactly sure what it is about Brooke, but the veneer of invincibility she wears around the office somehow vanishes when she's with Vince. She once admitted to me that he's cheated on her more than a few times, and even during his bouts of faithfulness he's a pretty first-class asshole – at least that's how I interpret it. But of course, I'm biased.

Listening to Brooke talk about him is hard enough on its own, but it's made worse by the fact that I secretly love Brooke. That is, I love her in a very safe way – like a sister, securely in the platonic zone. Brooke watches out for me and I watch out for her. And really, that's about the best kind of relationship you can hope for in this business.

When Brooke looks up at me this morning, her eyes narrow. Icy blue right now, they seem devoid of emotion. They are the eyes of an assassin. “You look like shit,” she says coolly.

I look down at my clothes. This is the third wearing for this shirt, and I plucked the suit straight from my suitcase this morning. “I've been on a road trip for two weeks,” I say. “I got into Dulles late last night. You *could* cut me some slack, Ms. Perry.”

“Acquaintances cut you slack,” she says dully. “Friends tell you the truth.”

She might be getting at something with that statement, or it might be an invitation to flirt, but this morning I don't much feel like deciphering coded statements from anyone, so I move on. “Speaking of friends,” I say, “when does our friendly Congresswoman get back into town?”

“She's wheels down at National at 3:30.”

“Is she coming into the office after that?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you want.”

“Good. Send her home.”

I grab a copy of the *Washington Post* from Brooke's desk and turn toward my office.

“Where do you think you're going with that?” she shoots at me.

“With what?”

“That paper.”

“I plan to take it to my office and peruse it so I can stay abreast of current events. And, hence, do my job better.”

“It’s my paper,” she says.

“Correction, my dear, it’s the office paper.”

“Actually, no. It’s *my* paper. The office copy hasn’t arrived yet. I paid for this one so I could read it and stay abreast of current events. And, hence, do *my* job better.”

She smiles smugly with the knowledge that she’s caught me, at least for the moment. One of her lower teeth is slightly crooked, a snaggletooth. And it upsets the otherwise perfect symmetry of her mouth. I love that tooth; it adds a layer of humanity to Brooke. And it grounds her beauty in a reality that I can almost begin to comprehend.

“All right,” I say. “How about the Classifieds? May I take the Classifieds from *your* paper?”

“One dollar.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Brooke, the *Post* costs a quarter. You can’t charge me a dollar for the Classifieds.”

“Finder’s fee.”

I reach into the paper and pull out the section I need. “You’ll just have to put it on my tab.”

“I will, Ethan,” she says as I walk into my office. “Don’t think I’m not keeping track.”

Just before I close the door, I turn and face her. And because I have nothing else to lose, I decide to throw it out there. “You know, Brooke, your analness is really getting into my zone.”

In politics we have something called the Puke Test. When a candidate is trying to stay on message, you want to talk about an issue just slightly longer than it takes to make you puke. Right now, I’m not sure if my analness line would pass the puke test.

Our eyes meet like two bulls locking horns and I hypnotize Brooke. Or at least, I try to hypnotize her. I am crawling inside her mind and willing her to laugh. Just as I think I'm about to succeed, her phone rings and the spell is broken. "Congresswoman Mahoney's office," she says with an odd half-smile on her lips, her snaggletooth winking in the light. Results of the puke test: Inconclusive.

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In my office, I look at my phone and see my voicemail light lit. This is most certainly a message from Lily. A message I'm not quite ready to take. So instead I open the one piece of the paper I was able to steal from Brooke. A quick scan of the Classifieds yields nothing. But then, as my eyes pass back over the pages, one ad seems to stand out. I look at it more closely. It appears to be in a slightly different font than the other ads.

*Wanted: Roommate to
live in a four-bedroom house.
Applicants must be famous.*

That's all it says. It's laughably incomplete. Doesn't mention the cost or amenities or anything really. Yet, there's something so intriguing about that last sentence. Are they serious? Famous in what way? I'm fairly certain it's not legal to discriminate on the basis of fame. The DC Fair Housing Board would pitch a fit if they knew about this. Still, would I qualify? I've appeared on a few late night political talk shows, and once on C-SPAN's Morning Edition. But that hardly qualifies as fame. I wonder if I'd make the cut. So, more for the sake of curiosity than anything else, I dial the number.

An answering machine picks up and a hollow voice says, "You've called about the room. Leave a message telling us why you should get it." If I'm not mistaken, I can hear organ music playing in the background. Then the beep.

"Hi. My name is Ethan Pascal. I'm interested in the room you've listed in the *Post*. I think I'm reasonably famous, at least by Washington standards. If you could give

me a call back, I'd love to set up a time where I could show you my work." Then I hang up the phone.

I never know about the phone messages I leave. Are they thoughtful? Coherent? Does anyone note the nuggets of irony I try to leave on their machines? Or are they lost pieces of digital information slipping inexorably into some vast communication vacuum? Those are heavy existential questions, and probably a good warm-up for what's next on my agenda.

The first message, as expected, is from Lily. It's long and she's crying throughout much of it.

"I don't know why you do this to me," she says. "I don't know what I mean to you anymore. I know that sounds strange to say to someone you've been with for so long. But it's true, Ethan." There's a pause and I can hear a siren in the background on her end. "You're a selfish shit. That's all I can come up with. And I can't live my life this way anymore. It's not that you were gone for two weeks and didn't call once. At least, that's only part of it. It's that I can't depend on you anymore, for anything. I mean, I can't believe I'm saying this, but what if we got married? That's a huge commitment. And I honestly don't think you'd live up to your end of it. I guess I thought I could change you. And maybe it's my fault for thinking that way." She pauses again, this time to blow her nose. When she's back on the line her voice is fragile, like a vase that's been broken and glued together too many times. "I wish I could say I cared for you still. But really, right now I just feel numb. Anyway, I'm going to be gone for a while. I need to sort out some things in my life. And maybe this will be a chance for you to do the same. I think it's best if we don't talk for a while. If you have any respect for me at all, you won't try to call. I'll get in touch when I get back into town." And then she hangs up.

Lily and I have had trial separations in the past, but this time, it feels different. I can tell by the way she ends this message. No hope, no regret. No possibility for an eventual reconciliation. It was the voice of a woman who has made up her mind.

For all intents and purposes, Lily is the love of my life. For at least the first half of the three years we've been dating, I was sure that she was the one, that we were destined to spend our lives together. And then, very slowly, those feelings began to change. All the things in our relationship that only marginally bothered me, began to

move to the forefront of my mind. Her tendency to nag over little things; her growing dissatisfaction with all my foibles; her inability to ever be completely satisfied. Once that change had taken place in my mind, it was probably inevitable that we would break up. But I'm an optimist. And I think I always held out hope that somehow things would change. I believed I would wake up one morning and see everything clearly, and all our problems would be behind us. This epiphany never came.

The night before I left on this trip, Lily and I fought hard. We both said some nasty things. And that's why I didn't call while I was gone. How do you put things back together over the phone? It all seemed so hard, so complicated, so beyond my capabilities. I couldn't force myself to make the call. Lily is right to be mad at me for not calling. It was a dicky thing to do. I have no defense.

Whatever my subconscious machinations may have been, I know I'm not quite ready for this: the actual leaving of Lily, the changing the locks, the eight stacked boxes, the finality of the message she left. It's suddenly all very real to me. And the empty space that's left inside of me feels cosmic in scope. Desperately, I press nine to save Lily's message when it's over.

Then an electronic voice tells me there's another message.

"Ethan, this is your mother calling. Why don't answer the phone anymore. I keep calling and cal—" I press nine to erase the message.

Another one starts up immediately.

"Ethan, this is Suzanne. Where the fuck are you? We've got major problems with the cam—" I hang up the phone and lay my head down on my desk on top of the outspread Classifieds. It may have been a surprise that I was not ready for the message from Lily, but I'm certain that I'm not ready for a message from my mother or from Suzanne Huntington. Suzanne is the campaign manager in our reelection bid. I hired her two months ago because she's smart, she's a hard worker, and she knows how to run a campaign in Montana. And while she, too, is a Master of Chaos, she's not quite as advanced as this particular Master. She can handle all the shit that goes along with running a campaign, she just doesn't know that yet. And she feels a need to call me frequently with minor cases of chaos eruption. Suzanne has essentially two emotional

states: panic, and nervous breakdown. And either one of those is certain, this morning, to give me a righteous headache, which is something I don't need.

There's a knock at my door. "What?" I shout with my head still lying on the desk.

"Ethan, I was wondering—Oh my god!"

Brooke has come into the office and the sight of me lying on my desk has obviously shocked her. I pick my head up, lean back and prop my feet on the desk.

"How can I help you?" I ask.

She puts her hands on her hips. She's not buying the act. "Ethan, what is wrong with you?"

I start to put my hands behind my head, but catch myself. I'm not certain of the condition of the armpits on this skanky shirt, and I don't want to risk it in front of Brooke, no matter how securely we may be in the platonic zone. "Nothing's wrong. Nothing at all."

"Cut the crap. You come into the office looking like shit, or at least more like shit than usual; you only take the Classifieds off my desk; and now this."

"You only *let* me take the Classifieds."

"Yes, but you didn't even *try*."

She's staring at me with soft eyes. The icy blue of a few minutes ago is warm bathwater now. There is a world of sympathy and forgiveness in this woman standing before me. Even if most of that world is reserved for Vince, it's nice to know that at least a few acres are reserved for me.

"Lily left me," I say.

"What?"

"She kicked me out of the apartment."

"Oh, Ethan." Her shoulders slump and she drops herself into a chair next to my desk. "I'm so sorry. Are you doing all right?"

"I'm managing."

"Where are you staying?"

"Lily's brother let me crash at his place."

“Oh my god. That creepy kid in that band? I can’t imagine his apartment is, well, livable.”

“In general, it’s not. But I don’t plan on spending much time there.”

“Good. That’s the last thing you need right now.” Then she looks me over again, slowly, with a sad sideways motion. “I’ve never seen you like this before,” she says.

“Like what?”

“So upset. Believe it or not, Ethan, you don’t usually show it when you’re stressed out. You just get this smart-ass look and crack a joke or something.” She pauses for a second as if she’s considering whether or not to continue. Then, “I’m not saying this to be mean or anything. It’s just that it makes people think you’re not serious or something. Or just not deep. Like you don’t really care about anything.”

“What if I *don’t* really care about anything?” I ask.

Brooke doesn’t laugh at this, which was the reaction I was looking for. Instead, she shakes her head slowly and turns herself sideways in her chair. “Well,” she says, then nothing. Finally she stands up. “Listen, why don’t we get a pitcher of margaritas after work tonight. My treat. Help drown your sorrows. Plus it’ll keep you out of that shitty apartment a little longer.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” I say. Brooke nods her head approvingly and leaves my office. I wonder if Vince will be joining us for this pitcher of margaritas, or if it’ll just be Brooke and me. I know this is a foolish thought. Brooke and I are beyond that stage, too far gone to ever start dating each other. And, to be honest, I’m not even close to dating after this Lily thing. Still, just the thought, a fleeting daydream of splitting a pitcher of Margaritas two ways, has me smiling, and I realize I haven’t done that in a long time.

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I manage to pass the morning by reading the e-mails that have gathered in my inbox over the past two weeks. Most of them are pointless banter among our legislative staff. For example, there’s one e-mail strand regarding a fisheries bill. Five different people have forwarded the message with their comments attached to the bottom. *Should*

we get on this bill? Yes, it's a good idea. No, the guides are opposed to some of the restrictive language. What does the White House think? And on and on. Reading these e-mails is like reading a particularly dense Beckett play.

I entertain myself this morning by responding to various of these e-mailversations with nonsensical nonsequiturs. My addition to the string on the Fisheries bill? *The chainsaw just stopped running.* On a somewhat heated e-mail chain regarding a gun bill that may or may not come up before the election? *Hi everybody. It's really good to be back. Slideshow in my office at 6:30.*

As I expect, no one responds to my assertions. I manage to chuckle as I picture them scratching their heads, wondering what the hell is wrong with me. In general, I think I do my best work when people are wondering what the hell is wrong with me. It ensures me the element of surprise.

As I finish typing out another response, I notice I've got a new voicemail on my phone. I can't remember hearing the phone ring and I wonder if, at some point during the course of the morning, I've entered the mystical zone that professional athletes speak of in reverent tones. Of course it would have to be *that* zone. Certainly not the platonic zone. Nor the zone into which the intrusion of analness is a Cardinal Sin among flight attendants.

"Hello, Mr. Pascal. We are responding to your query regarding the house in Cleveland Park." It's a male voice, smooth and mellifluous, like something you'd hear on an old-time radio show. "We received your message and we are very much interested in speaking with you a bit further about your candidacy. Let's say eight o'clock tonight. Address is 325 Garfield. And feel free to bring any supporting materials you think might be necessary – references, head-shot, what have you."

I hit 9 to save the message. I don't know what to make of this. It is arguably the strangest message I've ever heard.

Then there's a beep and another message starts. "Ethan, you prick." It's Suzanne again. "Quit avoiding my calls. This is serious." Then she hangs up.

I press 7 to erase this message and then dial Brooke's extension. "I'm going to have to take a rain check on the Margaritas," I say when she picks up.

"Why?"

“Apparently I have an interview for a place to live.”

“An interview?”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“I suppose that’s all right. Vince couldn’t make it anyway. We’ll reschedule for later this week.”

“Great,” I say. “That sounds great.”

“By the way, I know it’s early, but Vince said there’s a cute girl that just started in his office.”

“I’ll bet he did.”

She ignores this comment and keeps going. “And, well, we’ll just take our time. But maybe, when you’re ready, we could fix you up. Maybe even double-date.”

“Yes. Definitely. That sounds great.” I have to say, I’m a little bummed out at the enthusiasm Brooke is showing at fixing me up. Though I’m sure when I’m in a better mood, and my vision of splitting a pitcher of margaritas with her has evaporated, I’ll appreciate her efforts more.

I pass the lunch hour waiting for responses to my nonsequitur e-mails and ducking calls from Suzanne. Around two my intercom rings and it’s Eric. His voice is breathy, scared.

“Ethan, I’ve got the Congresswoman on line one, pick up.”

“That’s super, Easy-E. What does she want?”

“Man, she wants to talk to you.” He pauses for a second, waiting for me to act. Then, “She sounds pissed.”

“Okay, I s’pose I’ll pick it up.”

“Wait. Are you going to pick up the line, or do you want me to transfer it to your personal line?”

“Oh, why don’t you transfer it to my—”

“Because there’s a bigger chance I could accidentally lose her if I attempt a transfer.”

“Okay, Eric, I’ll just pick it up.” I briefly consider stressing him out further by asking how our Apocalypse project is going, but he sounds like he’s already on the edge of a steep cliff. “Thank you, Eric.”

I pick up line one, take a deep breath to compose my voice. Talking with the Cynthia, I've decided, is a lot like talking with my mother. And I find myself struggling to hit the right tone of seriousness and exuberance. "Hello, Cynthia, how are you doing?" I say.

"Not too damn well, Ethan." The Congresswoman is a tough lady. She's a widower who comes from a cattle ranching family that goes back four generations in Montana. As a politician, she's a girl after my own heart. She knows that it's tough being a woman in a man's job, and she's not afraid to roll up her sleeves in order to do it. In fact, my only real complaint with Cynthia is that sometimes she's not quite sure I'm on her side. She's skeptical, not of the job I do, but of the person I am. She seems to be under the impression that I'm constantly kidding around with her, which couldn't be further from the truth. I mean, yes, in general I'm kidding around a lot of the time, but never around her. In fact, those are the few times when I'm one hundred percent deadly serious.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Things are all fucked up here."

"Tell me about it," I say as confidently as I can.

"I'm goddamn serious, Ethan."

"I *was* serious."

"We're on the tarmac in Minneapolis and the pilot just got on the horn and told us we were twelfth in line to take off."

That's all she has to say. I know what she wants. "I'm on the job, Congresswoman."

"Good. It's hot as piss on this plane right now, and you know they don't turn on the air conditioning till we get in the air." I think she's about to hang up and then I hear her voice come back to the receiver. "By the way, how are you doing?"

Now this *is* a shock. "I, I'm doing fine. Thank you. How are you? I mean, other than the waiting on the plane?"

"I'm good, Ethan. I think this was a good trip overall. Could be better, obviously, but real solid. We'll discuss it when I get back."

“You know, Cynthia, I went ahead and had Brooke clear your schedule this afternoon so you can go straight home from the airport and rest. Freshen up for the week ahead.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s a good idea. Yes, that’ll be nice. Good then. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“In the meantime, I’ll see what I can do about the batting order on the runway.”

“Thank you very much.” She hangs up the phone.

I take a moment to review the exchange. It felt as if we made a real connection there, aside from the initial bit about being serious. But we got past that. And she didn’t *have* to ask how I was doing. That was extra, and good. My answers had been confident. Smooth. I feel like she’s really beginning to trust me.

Personal differences aside, Cynthia and I both need each other. She needs me because her numbers are in the toilet. Before I came on staff this office was adrift. No legislative agenda, no fundraising, no campaign strategy. I’ve spent the last year just trying to right the ship, but the honest truth is she’s running for her third term in Congress and she’s still in serious danger of getting her ass handed to her. I need Cynthia because I need this victory. This is my first really big race. And winning a House race is one of the hoops you have to jump through on your way up. A victory here would be vindication that I’m not too young, that I’m ready to run with the big boys. So, whether we like it or not, Cynthia and I are bound together by some very strong ties. We don’t necessarily have to like each other. But it might be nice if we did.

It amazes me how much I analyze my relationship with the Congresswoman. It occurs to me that if I devoted nearly as much time to my personal relationships as I do to my professional ones, I might not have just recently been dumped and evicted from my apartment. But it’s best not to dwell on these things, so instead I look up the congressional relations person for Northwest Airlines.

This task that Cynthia has asked of me is not unusual. In fact, it falls squarely in the realm of most of the things I do for her. Don’t get me wrong: it bugs me that I have to bust my ass just so someone can be treated better than everyone else. It sucks, in a way. But it goes along with everything else I do. The legislation, the press, the campaign – those are all great. But in the end, I work for a public person, and I’ve got to

expect she's going to want a little extra handling. And that's what I do. I *handle* the Congresswoman. This call I'm making may or may not make a difference. This guy I'm calling very well may tell me to take a flying leap when I tell him my situation. But what's important is that Congresswoman Cynthia Mahoney knows someone is *handling* it. Or at least trying to.

As it turns out, I get lucky on the plane issue. The guy at congressional relations says there are two congressmen in the plane behind Cynthia's and their staff has already called to complain. He assures me that these two planes would get bumped up the list shortly.

Not too bad, Ethan, I think as I hang up the phone. A job well done.

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For the rest of the afternoon, I read a series of briefing memos and I go over the Congresswoman's schedule for the week. Montana is a state where retail politics rules the day: You really do win elections by shaking the most hands and kissing the most babies. And people expect to know their representatives on a first name basis. And right now, with the last poll showing Cynthia and her opponent neck and neck, and with a little over a month to go before the election, any time she spends in DC actually doing her job, is not time well spent. Ross Claiborne, Cynthia's opponent is the former governor. He's independently wealthy. He's got nothing to do but campaign at the rodeos, the picnics, the state fairs, the pig roasts, and the homecomings. All of it. The bottom line is: we need to get Cynthia back out to Montana as soon as possible.

At 6:30 I stand up and throw on my suit jacket. I shut down my computer and head for the exit. The office officially closes at six. And, though I've tried to encourage people to stay later, the place is empty. But, just as I reach for the handle of the side door exit, I hear a voice. "Sir?"

It's Eric. His fine blond hair looks wild and his face is splotched red. "Do you have a minute I could talk to you, Sir?"

I look around the darkened office and then back at the wild-looking man before me. "Sure, Easy-E. Why don't you walk out with me?"

“Great,” he says and rocks forward on his feet. I can tell he’s been nervously working on his lips all afternoon because they’re purple and bee-stung.

“Do you want to get your suit jacket?”

“No, that’s okay. I just leave it here; that way I don’t have to bring it into the office in the morning.”

“That’s my Easy. Always thinking.”

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We’re outside now, walking in front of the Library of Congress. It’s a beautiful fall evening in DC and I’ve got some time to kill before my interview, so I’ve decided to walk to the Union Station metro stop. I haven’t mentioned this to Eric and I’m not really sure where he’s going, but I figure he’ll peel off when he has to.

“What’s on your mind, Easy?”

“Well, I don’t want to sound like a downer or anything.” He’s looking at the ground as he walks. “But I’m really worried about the election. I mean, we’re dead even and there’s only six weeks to go. And we’re the incumbent. That’s like, really bad.” He buries his hands in his pockets. “You’ve got a plan, right?”

Eric’s question catches me off-guard. I’d been expecting something to do with our top secret Apocalypse project. Not this angst-ridden testimonial. “That’s a good question, Easy. And I understand where you’re coming from. Let me try to paint the picture for you.” I take a deep breath. “Right now, we are up on the air with TV ads in every major city in the state. Now, we can’t compete with Claiborne’s war chest. He’ll out-advertise us pretty easily. But we’ve got Cynthia spending more time out there than she has in the past three years. And we’ve got one of the best campaign managers in the state running her election. From here on out, we’re going to out handshake, out yard sign, out lit-drop, out door knock, and flat-out out hustle the Claiborne campaign, who’s planning on simply buying a shitload of TV ads at the end with all his money.”

Eric’s face still looks cloudy. He doesn’t seem to be buying my rap, so I decide to let him in on a secret. “We’re doing a poll this week. No one knows about it. We’re

going to get a good feel for where we really stand in the state. And my gut's telling me we're going to be pleasantly surprised."

"Really?"

"I've usually got a good grasp of these things. I think we're going to find that we've really moved some numbers in the past two months. I wouldn't be surprised if we open up a five to eight point lead."

Eric's face looks overjoyed. "Do you really mean it?"

"Absolutely I mean it, Eric." I notice that talking about the poll has put a bounce into my step. "But that's not all. Somehow, accidentally of course, we leak the results of this internal poll to the state papers and TV stations. Story comes out Monday or Tuesday. How does this headline sound? *Mahoney Pulls Into Comfortable Lead Over Claiborne*. Or: *Mahoney Cruises Ahead*. You like that sound of that?"

"Not too bad, sir." Eric is smiling and it makes me glad to see him so happy.

We're at Union Station now, and I'm about to step on the escalator leading down into the subway station. "Where are you headed?" I ask.

"Oh, I'm just going to walk home."

"Where do you live?"

"On the Hill here."

"Yes, but *where* on the Hill."

"Kind of back there." He gestures vaguely with his hand. "Well, actually, basically, right behind Union Station there."

I'm getting a bad feeling in my stomach. "How *far* behind Union Station, Easy?"

"Um, about five blocks or so."

Pretty much everywhere behind Union Station is a shitty neighborhood, and it gets worse every block further behind it you go. Five blocks, where Eric lives, has to be something like living in the Gaza Strip. "Why in the hell are you living there, man?" I ask, even though I know I don't want to hear the answer.

"I'm getting a really good deal on rent," he says cheerily.

That's exactly what I didn't want to hear. I'm the one who oversees the office budget; hence, I'm the one responsible for salary decisions. As a receptionist, Eric doesn't make a lot. Okay, he could almost apply for food stamps. I know this. But

that's just a sad fact of starting work on Capitol Hill. Everyone started out making nothing. Even me. Still, the fact that Eric is living in such a shitty place in order to save money is at least partially my fault.

“Tell me you're moving soon,” I say. “Please.”

“Well, I just moved in there. And the apartment itself is really nice. Great sunlight.”

I look at my watch and realize I need to get to my interview. “Eric, we're not done discussing this. You're going to move if I have to move you myself.”

I step onto the escalator and watch, as Eric watches me sink lower, smoothly, into the subway station.

Chapter Three

I spend the thirty-minute Metro ride staring out the window into a black tunnel, whose concrete walls shoot by at what seems to be light speed. I'm mentally preparing myself to not get this apartment. An apartment search is supposed to be a grueling process – one that involves weeks of round-the-clock vigilance and tireless footwork. Modest highs followed by incalculable lows. It is to be an experience that teaches you about the corruption inherent in your fellow man, the forces in life that exist merely to thwart the well-intentioned. So for me to think that I could ever find a place on my first try – on my first phone call – is downright arrogant. It could be months before I'm comfortably moved into some place. I have to get used to that fact. I console myself by pointing out that I'm lucky enough to have a place to stay, as long as Nappy's out of town. And then maybe I could hit Brooke up for a stay on her couch for a while. Now that's always a possibility, and not a terribly unappealing one at that. Hell, maybe I don't want this apartment after all. If worse comes to worst, I could even move in with Eric for a while. Maybe I could become a professional squatter, a full-on nomad, moving from house to house, insinuating myself into a new one each week just as my welcome at the old one grows wafer thin. Now, how's that for openly embracing life's chaos? I'd do it, too. I swear to god. It's just that I do happen to have a pretty full plate at the moment, and adding this new lifestyle twist might not be exactly what I need right now.

It is probably worth noting that, in contemplation of my housing future, the prospect of moving back in with Lily crosses my mind only at the very end of the Metro ride. And even then, only in passing – to acknowledge that moving back in with her is not a possibility. Clearly, that means something, but before I can get too deeply into it, the doors of my subway car whisper open and it's time to leave the train.

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Garfield Street, it turns out, is only a few blocks off Connecticut Avenue, one of the main arteries into the District from the wealthy suburbs north of the city in Maryland. But the quiet lane, lined with stately elm trees, couldn't be further from the bustle of the daily commute. And as I walk toward number 325, I feel like an intruder into a different time and place. Garfield Street seems distantly removed from things like rampant crime,

crumbling streets, boil orders on the tap water, and the Marion Barry Administration. Garfield Street exists at a time when people walked the city in safety. The men wore top hats, monocles and spats, and the women held parasols in the crooks of their arms. The occasional jingle from a passing carriage barely disturbed the placid air that was so full of gentility it would be enough to make you puke. I have no idea if that's what Washington was really like back then, but it's the image that comes to mind as I stroll down the sidewalk. And the house itself, number 325, does nothing to upset this carefully constructed image.

The front yard is enclosed in a brick fence with wrought iron detailing at the top. Inside, a thick garden is alive with flowers and trellises and vines. As I walk up the steps to the front door, I look at my wrinkled and possibly odorous suit and suddenly feel underdressed. I don't know what spats really are, but I think I'd feel more comfortable if I had some right now.

There's a stained-glass inlay on the front door, so I knock on the wood paneling until I see a doorbell button. When I push it, I hear a distant ring to the tune of Big Ben's chimes. I wait. Nothing. Knock again. This time, there's the sound of movement somewhere behind the door. And presently, it swings slowly open.

A man steps into the doorway. He's wearing a form-fitting black sweater and black pants. As the light hits his face, I can see that he's roughly my age. He's got thick black hair that falls to the bottom of his jaw line. His face is striking, pale and handsome. His nose and cheekbones are prominent enough to be distinctive. Yet overall, he's only good-looking in a generic kind of way. Handsome like someone in a catalogue: momentarily striking, but ultimately forgettable. He regards me a moment the way one regards a vacuum salesman or a Jehovah's witness, and then smiles.

"You must be Ethan Pascal," he says. Then he holds out a hand. "Jasper Blades." He says this with a sly grin, as if he expects me to recognize him. I don't.

"Nice to meet you, Jasper." We shake hands and he ushers me into the house with the formal bearing of a butler.

"Welcome to our abode. Why don't I give you a little tour of the place first, and then we'll conduct the interview. My housemates will be joining us shortly."

I follow him through the foyer and into the living room. It has a dark parquet floor with light-toned octagonal rugs. There are two matching leather couches and two wing-backed Victorian-looking chairs. The walls are lined with built-in shelves lined with old-looking books. There's a chandelier that hangs down and a dim light filters through the glass crystals.

"This is amazing," I say, though the look on Jasper's face seems to say he already knows this.

"We're quite proud of our place. As you can imagine, we've cleaned it up a bit for the interviews. Usually not quite this clean. But we like to keep the house looking presentable. Would you say you're a generally neat person?"

Aha! The first question and the interview hasn't even officially started. Step lively, Ethan. But be cool. "Oh yes. Definitely," I manage to say. Neat for an anarchist, which is a breed not generally known for neatness. I think that, but don't say it.

"Good then. Let's head upstairs and I'll show you the bedrooms." He leads me to a staircase and we start climbing. I notice that Jasper has a slow way of moving, as if every action, every muscle movement, were part of an a prescribed program. This gives him the appearance of doing everything purposefully, like a robot carrying out orders. "So, Ethan, what's your line of business anyway?" he asks.

"I work on the Hill," I say. "I'm a chief of staff on the House side."

"Well, now," he says. "That's something, isn't it?" He pauses on the stairs and turns to look at me as if he needs to reevaluate some earlier judgment he'd made. "We've never had anyone in our house who works in politics. Though we've been talking about branching out in that direction."

He shows me two bedrooms on the second floor, each of which is tastefully decorated with modern art prints that I can't quite identify. One of them is Jasper's room, which has a decidedly minimalist feel to it, and the other belongs to a woman, at least that's what I infer from the pastel sheets and rug. On the third floor there are two more bedrooms, one of which is empty.

"This one is the open room," Jasper says and throws his arms out as if presenting a work of art. I walk into the room. It's big and wide, with an ocean of wood floor. The ceiling is slanted cozily and there's a skylight overhead through which I can see a

delicate-leaved branch hanging near the glass. A breeze outside catches the branch, and it bobs and sways like a playful pet, waving to me, welcoming me. I notice a glass door on the far side of the room.

“Where does that lead?” I ask.

“To the deck.” Jasper walks toward the door. “Admittedly, it’s not the best situation in the world, to have your room be the main entrance to the deck, but we’re all rather polite about it. I think you’ll find that it isn’t too much of an intrusion.”

As we walk through the room, I realize I’m already feeling possessive of it. I feel a primal urge to urinate in the corners, to stake out my territory. My wood floor, my closet space, my skylight. My entrance to the deck. Mine, mine, mine. Fortunately, I am able to push down this urge and follow Jasper outside.

The deck overlooks what seems to be the entire city. Lights sprawl out into the distance, mapping and punctuating the gentle contours of the District. Washington isn’t that big of a city, but from up here I’m filled with the sense that it might go on forever beyond the last visible rise. At the same time, I feel like I’m above it now, transcending the day-to-day turmoils that make up life and the lives of every other person in this unknown city. The Washington Monument lies in the distance, it’s red beacon light at the top blinking slowly and deliberately. The skyscrapers of Virginia rise up on the other side of the Potomac like forgotten tombstones. All of these things seem to mean something right now, but I’m not sure what it is.

The deck itself is massive, extending twenty feet and then dropping down a few steps to a second tier where I can see a 5x5 brownish lid recessed into the floorboards.

“That’s not a—”

“The hot tub hasn’t been operational for a while, but we just had the heat pump replaced today. Takes a while for the water to get up to temperature, but it should be online in a few days.”

“Very nice,” I say, though my internal reaction is more along the lines of: “Holy shit!” I’ve never lived in a place with a hot tub. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I’ve lived in a place with a bathtub I’ve wanted to use. My old apartment only had a stand-up shower, and that was pretty dingy besides, so there wasn’t a lot of quality time spent in the bathroom there, and certainly not in a tub of any sort.

Not that I had any doubts before, but seeing the hot tub, resting quietly, secretly heating its water, I know I have to live here. This house, this room, this entrance to the deck and hot tub, must all be mine. I will do whatever it takes to make this happen. And, let me assure you, I can be a fairly dangerous man when I make up my mind in such a fashion.

There's a breeze on the deck and the warm air of the city brushes by my face. For a moment, Jasper and I stand on the edge and look out over the city. "What's the deal with this place, Jasper? I mean, how did you guys get to rent a house like this?"

"The house is owned by this high-powered lawyer couple that had to move to New York for work about three years ago. I've been living here since they first moved out. Almost all the furniture, everything, is theirs. They keep saying they plan on moving back to DC when their run is done up there, but I have my doubts that that'll ever happen."

"So how did you get in on the deal?"

"Deal? You don't know the half of it. Each housemates' share of the rent is three hundred bucks a month."

I tear myself away from the view of the city. "Is this a joke or something?"

Jasper seems pleased by my incredulity. "I shit you not, man," he says and claps me on the shoulder. "I completely shit you not." He lets out an abrupt laugh that the thick night air grudgingly absorbs. "That's pretty much it for the tour, Ethan. Why don't we head down to the dining room and get that interview out of the way."

I feel like Jasper and I have formed some sort of bond during this interlude on the deck. Not much, but perhaps a foothold. And, as I said, I will do whatever it takes to live here. "So, Jasper, how seriously are you guys looking for someone famous? That was a joke, right?"

He turns around quickly and looks me up and down; it's a cold appraisal out of the corner of his eye, and I wonder if I've over-estimated our bond. "We're quite serious about it, actually. That should have been perfectly clear."

"Oh sure. Crystal clear."

"Good. Because I'd hate to have a misunderstanding on that point." He turns and continues walking toward the stairs. Clearly, that last question lost me whatever foothold

I may have had. Let's try a softball. "So what is it you do for a living, Jasper?" I ask to his back as he begins descending the stairs.

"I'm involved in films. Independent stuff."

"Oh really? I didn't know there was an Independent film scene here in DC."

"There is. It's just extremely independent." He says this without turning to look at me and with no inflection in his voice, and I begin to feel the house, and everything that comes with it, slipping out of my grasp. Maybe I should have pissed in the corners of the room. At this point, it probably couldn't have hurt.

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The kitchen is white, all of it. White tile floor, white Formica countertops, white appliances. It looks like the set of a TV cooking show. And it is then that I realize this house is nicer than the house I grew up in. I guess I'd assumed I'd never live in a place better than that home. I never even aspired to exceed those comfortable, yet humble beginnings. It's an odd feeling, thinking about living in a place better than your childhood home. It's as if you've suddenly turned a corner into adulthood, and achieved the American ideal of exceeding your parents. And that is an unsettling thought, the kind that spawns questions like: *What else do I have left to accomplish in my life? Or, Is it all down hill from here?* Of course, all of this speculation is academic if I don't ace this interview, because I'm a few bad answers away from a nomadic lifestyle, or a life spent on Nappy's futon.

Off the kitchen is a dining nook set in a huge bay window. A man and a woman are sitting at the table with their hands resting on top a few inches apart. It's a strangely ambiguous hand position because the closeness would indicate a degree of intimacy, yet because they're not actually touching, it's impossible to really say.

"Ethan, I'd like you to meet my housemates Miranda Lovett and Spenser Hillary. Kids, this is Ethan Pascal."

We all shake hands, and they point me to a chair at the table. It's a round table. We're all equally spaced around it like points on a compass.

Spenser, to my left, is a rotund person; not fat, just curvy at every point on his body. With his tight curly hair and bulging eyes, he reminds me of a cross between a grownup Campbell's Soup Kid and the Pilsbury Dough boy. He's the kind of person who makes you want to use phrases like: cute as a bug's ear, knee high to a grasshopper, and fuzzy wuzzy was a bear. And though I am not a violent man, nor even a physical one, I have to fight back an urge to reach out and poke him in the stomach, in the hopes that it might cause him to emit a short, girlish giggle.

Miranda, directly across the table from me, is a study in contrasts with Spenser. She is rail thin, with straight, stringy black hair. Her hands, still on the table next to Spenser's, are nervous and twitchy, with the nails bitten down to the quick. Her face is drawn tight, and has the look of someone who is perpetually scared.

Neither Spenser nor Miranda says anything after I sit down. In fact, they seem to be waiting for some cue from Jasper. I'm getting the impression that Jasper is running the show in this house. After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Jasper clears his throat. "I don't think any of us here go in much for these types of interviews, so let's just get right down to it." He puts his hands on the table along with Spenser's and Miranda's and I get the impression that I'm supposed to do the same. All of us sit there, hands resting palms-down on the white tabletop, like we're conducting a séance.

"As you've probably inferred from the ad in the paper, this is not your typical Washington household. Not by a long shot. What we have here is a simple proposition really. Each of us, in one way or another, is famous. We're all rather comfortable with this label and we want a household that embraces that kind of success. If you know what I mean." Miranda and Spenser nod. I nod.

Jasper continues. "I, for example, was Jasper in the band Boys of Summer." This name rings a bell somewhere back in my junior high or high school years. If I remember correctly, they were a boy band, the kind that gets featured for several months in magazines like *Tiger* and *Teen Beat*, before dropping off the face of the earth.

"Really," I say. "I think my sister had one of your albums." This is a lie. I don't even have a sister. But I'm in full kiss-ass mode right now, and nothing, not even the truth, will stop me.

The ploy works too. Jasper grins sheepishly. “Well, we did have our fans. Two gold records, you know.” But then he catches himself in this moment of indulgence and looks over at Spenser.

Spenser points to his chest with two pudgy fingers. “I was a model. Baby model, actually.” His voice is preternaturally high, as if the ravages of puberty never got hold of his larynx. He smiles and his face makes fat little wrinkles and I can see why he must have been so perfect as a baby model. “I did Gerber’s when I was one. And then a fairly lengthy campaign for Huggies when I was a little older.” He nods slowly as if to indicate just how proud he is of all this, and I can’t for the life of me figure out how to react to this statement. Baby model? How does one respond to a man who has just bared his life’s work and it contains only semi-nude baby pictures taken over twenty years ago? At a certain point, a man needs to move on. Right? Then it occurs to me that Spenser’s baby pictures are probably something akin to my eight boxes of life possessions. That somehow there’s a connection there, which speaks poorly of us both. And I am certainly not one to talk.

These ruminations must register on my face because Spenser shoots forward in his chair and the smile slides off his face. “I *am* working on a few different opportunities right now,” he says, defensive now. “It’s just tougher when you get type-cast at such an early age. There’s some new Energizer commercials coming out that I’m probably going to do. And some creative work.”

I nod vigorously, because saying anything right now would probably only indict me further. And fortunately, Miranda clears her throat to take the floor.

“My real name isn’t Miranda. Or, it is now, but my first name used to be Meredith. Merry for short.” She smirks at this as if she herself recognizes the irony of such a dour-looking person possessing that name. And even this simple expression of humor looks out of place on her tight face. “During the summer of 1974 I fell down a well in a vacant lot near our house in Wichita. I was trapped in it for four days. Pretty soon, the media were all over the site and it became one of those nation-wide death watches.” Miranda takes her hands off the table and wraps her arms around herself. “I still get people who tell me they remember those days and how they prayed for me. Or they remember how John Denver, when he heard I loved his music, flew out to Wichita

and spent the last day talking to me and keeping me company. He actually wrote a song about it called 'Baby Merry.' He never released it or anything. But he wrote it for me.

"Anyway, they finally were able to lift-out the cement blocks that had me trapped and they pulled me to the surface on the Fourth of July." Her hands are shaking more visibly now, and I can tell she's reliving whatever personal hell she must have gone through in that well. The wet darkness, the clench of claustrophobia, the eerie echo of John Denver's voice calling down to her – all of these things seem to be permanent features on her etched face. "It was a pretty big deal," she continues. "When I got out, it was like a national celebration."

"So you're the original well-baby?"

"That's right. I," she says, and pauses for a second as if whatever she's going to say next is something she's thought about and wrestled with for a long time, "was a well-baby." Then she looks up as if she's relieved to get that off her chest. "Not the original well-baby, but probably the first one to get that much exposure. You'd be surprised how many kids fall down abandoned wells every year."

"I'm sure I would," I say with hushed voice.

There's a general pause around the table as if we're observing a moment of silence to remember all the babies that fall down wells every year, and maybe – if we're so inclined – to say a little prayer for those who aren't as lucky as Merry. During this moment, I breathe my own silent petition. God, please let me get that room upstairs. And the deck. And the hot tub. Amen.

Jasper folds his hands together and begins again. "See, we've all had some brush with fame. We find that each of our unique situations has placed certain demands that other people can't quite understand. And our house goal here – or perhaps our house *mission* would be a better word for it – is to create at 325 Garfield a comfortable environment for those of us in our unique position." Jasper looks up at me now. "So, why don't you start off by giving us your credentials, Ethan."

In general, I am not a vain man. I've never been concerned about self-aggrandizement or any of the trappings of power that my job might happen to bring with it. However, I'm not a totally *not* vain man, and I've never claimed to be. I can be seduced by the possibilities of power and fame just like the next guy. And perhaps

because of this, I do happen to have what I call a Vanity File. It's a folder I keep at the very back of the very bottom drawer of the file cabinet in my office. It's nothing really, I swear. Maybe a guilty diversion at the very worst. But the file does happen to have a few videotapes that happen to contain recordings of the political talk shows that I happened to appear on over the past year. And, if I'm going to be totally honest here, I will tell you that I also have a copy of a photo with Clinton and me in the Oval Office. It was taken pretty much without my knowledge by a White House photographer after a meeting Cynthia had there. I didn't even ask for the picture. They just happened to send it over to me at the office, so of course I just slipped it into my Vanity File. And as for the newspaper articles that I'm quoted in, well, I just threw those into the file to round it out. I mean, as long as I happened to have the tapes and the photo, I figured I might as well be thorough about it. So really the existence of my Vanity File is a matter of me just being thorough, and not a matter of me actually being vain. Per se. I think.

Anyway, while it may be almost completely coincidental that I have a Vanity File in the first place. I can say quite confidently that it was not at all a coincidence that I happen to have said Vanity File in my bag, which, at this moment, is sitting at my feet. Just before I left the office that evening, an inner voice warned me that maybe the ad was serious about the required famousness of its candidates. And at the last minute, I listened to that inner voice and slipped my Vanity File into my bag. However foolish my inner voice seemed at the time, the tone of this conversation at the table makes me glad I listened to it earlier. I make a mental note to listen to my inner voice more often.

Then I dig through my bag and pull out the videotapes and the picture and the articles, and I set them on the table before me. "Let me start by saying that I am the youngest Chief of Staff in the U.S. House of Representatives." It's a small lie, but it sounds so good, so natural in my mouth, that I can't bring myself to correct it. "And, while my job is to promote my boss and her agenda, my position has afforded me a certain amount of notoriety." I look around the faces at the table, I make eye contact with each of them, and I can tell they're picking up what I'm putting down. "These are some tapes of a few of the shows I've appeared on. Crosstalk, Q & A, Morning Edition." I clear my throat. "I can leave these tapes here with you so you can view them at your leisure. Of course, if you wanted further proof, I could tell you the relative merits of each

network's green rooms. CNN's for example, has horrible coffee." Jasper laughs at this and the others follow suit. I join them. This is going better than I'd hoped. I'm on a roll. I'm smooth as ice. I'm in the zone. The good one.

Jasper reaches out and picks up one of the tapes. He reads the label, nods and passes it to Spenser.

"I've also been quoted in the *Washington Post* a number of times regarding specific legislation. And the Capitol Hill newspaper *Roll Call* did a lengthy piece on young staffers which featured me in the lead." I hand the clippings around the table.

"Those are what I would call the external symbols of my fame. They are the most obvious indicators of it. Of course, there are the intangibles." I pause a moment to let this sink in. "The intangibles are the elements of power and fame that aren't immediately obvious. And I'm sure you understand what those are." I look at each of them for a moment until they each nod in agreement, saying yes, they do understand these mysterious intangibles, which, if they do, is impressive, because I certainly don't.

I set my hands flat on the table again to indicate that I'm done, because I figure it would probably be a good idea to end this before one of them has the nerve to ask me what the intangible elements of fame involved in my job *are*. Jasper, Spenser and Miranda exchange glances and nod. "Very good, Ethan. Definitely impressive. We'll review these tapes and get them back to you as soon as possible." Jasper asks me a few more questions about my living habits, and I respond with the lies I know he wants to hear. But I can tell none of the people at the table care about anything except that first question. The rest of it, like so much in life, is just a charade.

When the interview is over, all of us stand up. "Thanks for coming by," Miranda says, and I realize it's the first time she or Spenser has spoken without being prompted by Jasper.

"It's been my pleasure," I say, taking her tiny, shaking hand. "Absolutely my pleasure."

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Back at my temporary home, I find Dewey sitting on the futon in Nappy's room. He's sipping a glass of some kind of whiskey and reading what looks to be the autobiography of Bo Jackson.

"Band not playing tonight?"

"Negatory. Got coffee shop duty tomorrow morning, though." He's wearing a ratty bathrobe and a pair of black penny loafers.

"What's with the book?"

"Nothing. I just found it at a used bookstore and I thought it looked funny. I like playing a game with these things where I have to decide if it's ghostwritten or not. Sometimes it's hard to tell."

"I'm going to guess that Bo had a little help on his book."

"I don't know, man. He's a pretty bright guy."

"Are you trying to tell me Bo knows writing?"

"Yeah right," Dewey says. "Ha. Ha." He gets up to find another glass, and when he does, he pours it half full of whiskey. I realize I'm beginning to really enjoy these late night tête-à-têtes with Dewey. And I don't really know what that says about me. Or him for that matter.

"How did you sleep last night?" he asks as he hands me the drink.

"Like an innocent man on death row."

Dewey nods. "About the same for me."

"Show go all right last night?"

"Yeah. It's getting a little boring, though. I think we're going to have to change the format soon."

"That, or change the name. You know how I feel about that."

Dewey grumbles and looks at the back of his Bo Jackson autobiography.

I've intentionally avoided bringing up the topic of Lily so far, assuming that no news is, well, no news. But I'm dying to ask Dewey and finally I can't contain myself any longer. "How is she?" I ask.

"Wow, so maybe you actually *do* care. I was beginning to wonder about you, man." Dewey takes a gulp of his whiskey and rests his glass on the futon armrest. He tops off my glass with the nearly-empty whiskey bottle. "She's doing all right. Talked

to her today. She was glad you called me from the airport. Glad you had a place to stay.”

“Is there any way I could get in touch with her? She told me not to call.”

Dewey moves his lips sideways and thinks for a moment. “Not sure I’d recommend. Right now I think you want to keep a low profile. For now.”

“Fair enough. Will you tell me when it would be a good time to get in touch?”

“Probably,” he says, nodding thoughtfully. “Though you’ll probably just fuck it up again.”

We sit and stare at Marlon Brando, drinking our whiskeys, until Dewey finally drains his glass. “Well, early call tomorrow at the coffee shop.” He stands up and walks to the door.

“By the way, Dewey, I interviewed for a place tonight, so I might be out of your hair pretty soon.”

“Thank god.”

“My motto is the less time spent on Nappy’s futon, the better it is for everyone.”

“Nappy?” Dewey says as if he’s never heard the name before. “Oh yeah. Yes. I agree.”

And then it occurs to me that this may not be Nappy’s futon at all. Several clues emerge from our conversations until they’re glaring, screaming something I probably should have picked up on much sooner. “Dewey, is this your room?”

He taps the edge of the futon with his toe. “Yeah, I guess you could call it that.”

“So where are you sleeping?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got a sleeping bag.”

Now this is something. Dewey actually gave me his own bed and slept on the floor? He did that for me, and didn’t even mention it? This is starting to get touching, and I realize I wasn’t ready for such unbridled compassion from Dewey. The whiskey has gone straight to my brain and I feel a ridiculous urge to tear up. “That’s really great of you, man. Seriously. To let me crash on your bed. I appreciate it.” And then, because I don’t have anything else to lose, I say, “You know, you’re not such a bad guy after all.”

Dewey rolls his eyes and heads for the door. “Jesus H. Christ. Don’t make me feel like I have to say something nice about you now. That’s the last thing I need.” Then, just as he’s about to leave, he looks over his shoulder at me. “And don’t get any come on my sheets.”

Good old Dewey. Rescuing me from my maudlin. I was in danger of slipping over the edge there for a moment. And an anarchist like me has to be sharp, unsentimental, rough. Ready to fight chaos whenever it erupts. But as I stretch out on the futon, I don’t feel rough at all. I feel tired. I drowse and I feel myself sinking, as if into a subway station, slowly into sleep.

Chapter Four

Somewhere in the night I hear a distant bell, the tinkle of an approaching ice cream truck, the chirp of a cheery cricket in the grass. Then the sound grows. It elides with itself until it forms a series of lengthy rings interspersed with equally lengthy pauses. And then the ring becomes more intense. The sound isn't a chirp any longer; it's a biblical swarm of locusts. It pierces the air around me with an intensity I've never felt before. And finally, reluctantly, ever so slowly, I open my eyes.

My cell phone is ringing, and I can't for the life of me remember where I last had it. Whoever is calling is persistent; they aren't hanging up. So I feel like I have little choice but to track down this ringing object and launch it out the nearest window. This thing – this whining, annoying thing, this destroyer of sleep – must be stopped. I follow the ringing, stumbling blindly over dirty clothes and coffee tables, in a twisted version of Marco Polo. The phone rings once, I listen and move to where I think it's coming from. It rings again, and I move to another spot that sounds more like where it's coming from.

At last I isolate the phone in the bag I have not yet unpacked from my trip. I dig through my clothes, flip open the phone and put it to my ear. It is only after I do this that I remember my initial plan of throwing this obnoxious thing out the nearest window. I momentarily consider going back to plan A; it's a really serious, no-shit urge. But now that I've gone this far, I have to admit I'm at least a little curious as to who in the world would want to talk with me so badly.

"Hello?"

"You little prick." It's Suzanne. Her voice is hoarse as if she's been smoking more cigarettes than usual, which is a hard thing to imagine if you know Suzanne.

"Mom? Great to hear from you."

"Very funny. I'm not your mother, fucker."

"What do you want, Suzanne?"

"I'm surprised you had the balls to finally answer."

"Believe me, if I'd have only known it was you..." I let the rest of my sentence hang out there, thinking the implied threat is more powerful than anything I could come up with right now.

“Quit fucking around, Ethan. This is serious.”

Again, someone has to remind me that they’re serious. First Cynthia and now Suzanne. This is starting to piss me off. “Suzanne, I know you’re serious. I know because if it wasn’t serious, you wouldn’t dream of calling me at—” I pause to look at my watch, “at five in the MORNING!”

“Don’t forget, it’s only three here in Montana.” She pauses and I can hear her inhaling on a cigarette. “This is part of my normal workday.”

It’s true. Suzanne puts in amazing workdays. She’ll think nothing of working 18 or 20 hours at a clip, sleeping for four hours, then coming back for another day at the office. While that kind of dedication is something I have to commend, there is something forced about Suzanne’s work ethic. She makes sure you *know* what kind of time she’s putting in. She reminds you of it every chance she gets. I’ve always been suspicious of people who so obviously self-promote. I find it creepy.

The fact is, though, more than anything, I’m just pissed she’s called and woken me up at five in the morning. That’s fine if she wants to have an exemplary work ethic, but there’s no point in dragging me down with her.

“Suzanne, what do you want?”

“We’ve got a problem with the yard signs.”

“They’re not going up for another two weeks. Don’t you think this could have waited until tomorrow?”

“Partially correct. They *were* going up in two weeks. But there *is*, however, the little matter of getting them printed up on time. A task which I was hoping to have completed last weekend until I found out there’s a problem with the printing shop.”

“What’s the problem?”

“We’ve always used Smith & Brown in Billings because they’re union. But they can’t do it this year.”

“Can you tell me why they can’t do it?”

“You’re really going to love this one, Ethan.”

“I’m sure I will.”

“They can’t do it because they’re on strike.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. The printers. The guys who run the presses. Someone in the union printing shop is on strike, so they can’t print our signs.”

“Wow,” I say. “That really is a good one.” And I mean it. I pause to savor the irony of this moment.

Democrats, because of their position on labor issues, absolutely must have all their materials printed by union printing shops. It’s like a commandment handed down from God himself. Unquestioned and unquestionable. If a Democratic candidate sent out anything that didn’t have the little “union bug” seal at the bottom, it would be political suicide. It’s one of those things like sticking your tongue to a flagpole, or beating off too much. You’re not exactly sure what’ll happen if you do it, but you’re certain that, whatever does happen, there’ll probably be hell to pay. Seeing as how union printing shops are generally more expensive than non-union shops, not to mention slower and generally less flexible, this commandment can be a real pain in the ass for Democrats. And seeing as how this shop’s right to strike – which Cynthia fully supports – is now the reason Cynthia won’t be able to have her signs done on time, I’d say that commandment is a colossal pain in the ass.

But in order to understand the magnitude of the situation, I think it would be helpful to measure where it falls on the Messina Political Scale. James Messina was one of my early mentors in politics. He’d been around New Hampshire politics all his life. He’d run JFK’s primary in New Hampshire. He’d pretty much seen all there was to see in the political realm. A warhorse. He taught me most of what I know about campaigns. He also taught me this scale for rating campaign disasters and calamities. A one on the Messina Scale was the equivalent of a slightly bad newspaper report, or maybe a small issue with a campaign check. Something you could easily ignore. A ten on the Messina Scale was an extinction level event, something from which no candidate can recover, ever. In this case, with the signs, I’d say this ranks as a four, maybe a five on the Messina Scale. Definitely a bad hit. Definitely something I’m going to have to fix. But ultimately something we can get past. With a little work and some luck.

“Suzanne, just order them through an out of state union shop,” I tell her in a tired voice.

“I checked on that. The nearest one that can do it on time is in Spearfish, South Dakota.”

“There you go. Problem solved.”

“But they’re going to cost more.”

Cost – the true third rail of American politics. “What are we talking about here?”

“About twenty-five percent over budget.”

“Ouch,” is all I can say.

“Two twenty-five per sign. Plus we lost our deposit on the signs we already ordered and won’t be getting.”

“Fucking beautiful,” I say. “What about non-union shops? Can they do our order?”

The question catches Suzanne mid-inhale, and she responds on the other end with a surprised cough. “I, I wouldn’t know.” There’s a silence. “What are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything. It’s no big deal. I’m just saying we should check and see if they could do it. Or something.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Eth—”

“Forget it. You’re right,” I say. “It was a stupid idea. I’ll handle the signs, though. I’ll talk to some people out here and see if they can put me in touch with a good printing shop around here.”

“I hope you’re not—”

“I’m not.”

“Fine,” she says. Then she’s quiet for a second. “You know, you didn’t have to snap.”

I didn’t think I had snapped. But I’m in no mood for semantics right now, so this time I really do put some snap in my voice. “You didn’t have to call and wake me up at five in the morning.”

“If you would have taken my calls during the day, I wouldn’t *have* to call you now.”

She has a point. And, though I’m sure somewhere in the hazy corridors of my mind I too have a valid point, I can’t seem to find it right now. And I’m too tired to even try. “I’m going to bed, Suzanne.”

“Fine,” she says, as if wanting to sleep were a sign of weakness, a flaw in my genetic code.

“I’d suggest you do the same,” I say.

“Thanks, but I think it’s best if at least one of us worries about winning an election in November.” Her voice is caustic and it penetrates the film of sleep that has already begun to coat my brain.

“Ouch,” I manage to say before I hang up the phone. It occurs to me that Suzanne might be serious about me not taking this election seriously. Is that what she really thinks? Because if it is, she’s sadly mistaken. Isn’t she? I make a mental note to think on this question more fully tomorrow.

Chapter Five

While I'd like to think I went back to sleep for three more hours of much-needed rest, it just doesn't work out that way. Suzanne's comment about me not working has really stuck. Way more than most of the insults that come flying at me. For thirty minutes I lie on Dewey's futon, perturbed and unsleeping with my eyelids fluttering over my eyes in a grotesque mockery of the REM condition. Do people really think I don't work hard? I'm not lazy, am I? Of course I care if we win. This is really fucking important to me. I know I'm not the type of person or personality that exactly inspires people. And I'm not the type to make a big show of my work habits either. Still, I've always thought my competence would be enough to encourage loyalty, if not outright devotion.

In politics, people will often say things like: That guy really gets *it*. Or, She really understands *it*. Or, no one gets *it* better than that guy. In all of those cases, *it* is supposed to represent this fundamental knowledge of politics, yet, at the same time, *it* is something that's fundamentally impossible to define. Whether or not you actually have *it*, is impossible to know. Usually just a matter of opinion. Ever since I've been in politics, people have said to me that I get *it*, that I understand *it*, that *it* and I are one and the same. But the truth is, I have no idea whether or not I have *it*, or get *it*, or would even be able to recognize *it* if I saw *it*. In fact, most of the time, I'm fairly sure I don't have *it*. And the people that have said I do, don't know anything about *it*. Or me.

I guess I'm trying to say that it's entirely possible that I'm incompetent. Christ! I can't take this anymore. No use pretending to sleep. I get up and get ready for work, and by the time I've showered and dressed, it's still only 5:30 in the morning. A nice early start to the day might be just what the doctor ordered for this crisis of confidence.

It's dark outside and warm, like clothes that haven't quite finished in the dryer. The sun hasn't risen yet and small groups of people still stagger along the streets and sidewalks. They sing drunken songs, or shout slurlily to each other across the way. Young men and women – boys and girls practically – still involved in the latter stages of the seduction dance. As they go about these early morning movements, they do it with the conviction that the night will never end, as if this extended adolescence is a

permanent state of being. In a few minutes, when the sun cracks the horizon, these people will look blearily around and wonder what happened to this perfect drunken world that they thought would go on forever. I feel sorry for them. Though I know we're all fooling ourselves somehow. We all labor under delusions of a permanence that can never last. The entire second half of my relationship with Lily would be a good example of that. Or maybe a bad example of that. It depends on your point of view, and I, quite frankly, haven't decided on my point on view on the issue yet.

I hail a prowling cab and, after we've started winding through the streets toward the Capitol, I kick myself for not picking up a paper, even if it had turned out to still be a stack leftover from Friday, it looks like it might rain.

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I'm right about the rain. A few sprinkles when we turn onto Constitution Avenue build into a torrential downpour by the time we pull up to the office. Lacking a paper, I make a run for the door, and I'm still soaked by the time I make it inside. I leave a trail of water and make squishing sounds with my feet as I walk down the hallway to the office.

When I reach the office door, I check my watch. Six AM. Not too bad. Chalk one up for Ethan Pascal in the "Hard Work and Job Dedication Column." Inside the office I hear the peaceful sound of the building's central air conditioning as it gives off a deep, resonant hiss. You can only hear it when the office is deathly still, like it is right now. It's a comforting sound, tranquil, yet powerful, like the chant of a Buddhist monk.

I sit down in Eric's empty chair in the front office and meditate as best I know how. The hiss strikes a chord in me like the vibrations of a tuning fork. After a moment – and well before I reach anything remotely resembling inner peace – I begin to pick up the sound of a voice embedded deep within the hissing. At first I only hear fragments of words, but then I catch two words strung together, three. Isolated patches of words, none of these snippets make sense to me. I get up from Eric's chair and follow the voice with my ear, the way a bloodhound follows his nose. I walk into the back office and toward the trailing voice all the way to Cynthia's private office. Her door is slightly open. I can

hear her now. The congresswoman is reading her stump speech, the five-minute number that she delivers at almost every campaign stop. I know the words to the speech by heart. I didn't write it all. But by now it's probably as much my speech as it is anyone's. I penned the conclusion, which I consider to be the heart and soul of the speech. Cynthia's just reaching that part now, so I wait.

"I'm here to ask you today to do your part. To do your part for better schools, higher paying jobs, and a cleaner natural heritage for our children and grandchildren. Your part is easy, though. It doesn't take much. All you have to do is reach out your hand. Because that's what it's there for. And I'll reach out my hand, because that's what I'm here for. And together we can make a better Montana. Together we can shape a better future. And we can help fulfill the American dream for our children and our grandchildren."

Okay, I said I wrote that part, but it's more like I stole it. The source – and no one knows this – was the song "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Band," by Neil Diamond. Maybe I didn't exactly steal it. It's more like I cribbed it. Borrowed it. Riffed on it. Whatever the legal term, it wasn't my proudest moment. I was suffering from excruciating writer's block at the time. And Neil was just there, in my CD case. Waiting. Practically begging me to use him. Of course, I realize that basing a campaign on the writings of the man who penned most of the Monkees' greatest hits displays a certain emotional, if not spiritual, bankruptcy. I know this. And maybe if I were a more "together" guy, or even just a stronger person, I would have thrown that speech away and started from scratch. I would have written something myself and made it count. Made it real. Of course it's a little late to say that now. I put the finishing touches on the "Neil Diamond" passage thirty minutes before Cynthia delivered it for the first time. To go back now and change it would be a major breach of Cynthia's confidence. She thinks it's perfect because we told her it is. If she knew that Neil Diamond wrote the conclusion to her speech, she'd lose her shit. No, right now it's best to let this one lie. Besides, it's easy to say something lacks an emotional core, it's quite another thing to give it one. I haven't written a campaign speech on my own in over four years and, to be honest, I was never very good at it in the first place. I don't see why I should think I've now picked up

some latent speech writing ability, or some hidden emotional reservoir deep inside me. If it ain't there, it just ain't there.

"Thank you. Thank you very much," Cynthia says with a mock-Elvis twang. It sounds like she's finished, so I knock gently on the door and ease it open.

"Good morning, Cynthia. You're in early."

"So are you, Ethan. Quite early."

We both face each other for a moment, basking in the glow of a fellow insomniac. At one time Cynthia was an attractive woman. But a lifetime lived on the ranch has tanned her skin and steeled her hair to a point where the first word that pops into my mind when I look at her is: gristle. She's also a big woman. Tall and strongly built. I'm 6'2" but I feel small next to Cynthia. And though they look nothing alike, I can't help but feel like I'm talking to my mother when I'm with Cynthia. I have to resist the urge to start my sentences with "Mom."

"I couldn't sleep," I say, breaking the silence with the obvious.

"Me neither," she says. She shuffles the pages of her speech and places them in a distant corner of her desktop. "You know, I saw Wingate at the airport in Minneapolis yesterday. He says he's going to bring his gun bill up for a vote before we recess." Her eyes seem sad as she says this. Sad and tired.

As a Democrat representing Montana, gun control is a particularly nettlesome issue for Cynthia. Guns in Montana are considered a birthright. For a politician to tell the average Montanan that he supports gun control, it's the equivalent of telling him he just fucked his wife last night. After that, it's pretty much open season. So it's a terrible bind for Cynthia, and therefore us, every time a gun vote comes up. We'd like to do what's right, we'd like to stick with our party, but there's a certain amount of political fallout every time we do. And, to be honest, with Cynthia's already shaky numbers, there are those who would observe that she couldn't take a hit like that and survive.

As she stares at me from her desk, it's obvious none of this has to be said. Cynthia and I both know that her political realities are my political realities. "Cynthia, I don't think the bill will come up."

She places her fist softly on her desk. "He told me he would. He said it was as good as done."

“I’m telling you, it doesn’t make sense for him to do it. I think he was playing with you.”

She levels a stare at me through deadened eyes. “Well let me see what you had to say about this *yesterday*.” She swivels her chair to face her computer screen and she double-clicks on an e-mail message. “Let’s see, here it is: ‘Hi everybody. It’s really good to be back. Slideshow in my office at 6:30.’”

Whoops. A smarter Ethan Pascal would have checked to see if Cynthia was on that recipients string before he hit reply. Bad, Ethan. Bad.

Cynthia turns on me now. “Is this the expert advice I’m paying you for? Is this why I brought you on board?”

“I was just... I was just trying to raise staff morale.”

She cocks her head to one side and keeps her eyes fixed on me. “I don’t know, Ethan. I think you mean well. I just don’t know anymore.” The tone in her voice has suddenly gotten more ominous than I expected. It is the voice of serious misgiving, heavy, soul-searching doubt. She busts this voice out on her fellow Congressmen when she wants to make a threat. She uses it the way a hit man uses a silencer. And while I’ve seen her use this tone often enough, it frightens me that she’s now using it against me. Clearly this conversation needs to be steered in another direction.

“Listen, Cynthia. We can’t afford to be sitting here with our thumbs up our asses, worrying about whether someone is going to bring a gun bill to the floor. That’s stupid. And pointless.”

Cynthia seems pleased with the tone I’ve adopted and she shifts in her seat with enthusiasm while her face cracks into an ancient smile. “Now you’re talking,” she says. “I can live with that. That’s why I hired you, Ethan. You’ve got the fighting spirit. At least sometimes you do.”

“You want to get a coffee?” I ask, as long as I’ve got this momentum.

She nods. “That might be nice.”

When she stands up, I get a chance to see the outfit du jour. Denim skirt, flowery blouse, and a pair of low-heeled, lace-up cowboy boots. Awful. Actually, I think I’d call this one a combination of strange *and* awful. And that’s what I’ve come to expect from Cynthia. One of the most distinguishing achievements of her four-year stint in Congress

has been that she won the Worst-Dressed Member of Congress award from *Washingtonian Magazine*. The fact that Cynthia won this award during her first term in congress – and held onto it during her second term – shows just how bad a dresser she really is. The kind that turns heads. Big bright shirts, lots of denim, swoopy colorful scarves, arts-and-craft vests, and a seemingly endless supply of “creative” cowboy boots. Each day is a new and awful combination of mismatched, out-of-date, hickabilly clothes. Yet somehow, I find this trait endearing. It’s kind of a *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*-thing. Maybe you’d call her movie *The Cowgirl Goes To Washington: The Musical*.

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On the way to the cafeteria, Cynthia talks about the trip she’s just gotten back from. It was a swing through Northwestern Montana. Easily the most conservative part of the state. She picks apart each meeting, each event, everything. What worked, what didn’t. But she’s fair in her assessments. And she gives praise where it’s due. For my part, I nod and listen. There’s not much to it.

After we get our coffees, we stroll leisurely down the hallway toward the office. Talk turns toward the poll that should be finished this weekend. I mention how I think we’re going to be pleasantly surprised by the results. I tell her my five to seven point prediction.

“I’m not so sure about that, Ethan,” she says with a kind of slowness to her voice.

“What do you mean, you’re not sure? We’re doing great! We’re just hitting our stride.”

“You haven’t seen what I’m seeing. I’m getting a bad vibe out there on the trail.”

“I’m sure it just feels like that because you were up north. It always feels bad in that part of the state. You’ve got to trust me on this one.”

“I suppose I do.” She says this in a way that’s sure to let me know that she doesn’t really trust me on this one.

“Pardon me for saying this,” I say after we take a few strides in silence. “You’ll have to excuse my being forward here...”

“What?”

“You seem off.” I work my tongue over my teeth for a second. “I’ll be honest with you, you seem scared.”

She stops walking and looks around to make sure the hallway is deserted. “Yes, Ethan. I am scared.”

I only nod, because it feels like there’s more she wants to tell me. After she stares into her coffee for a moment, she continues. “When you get to be my age, you start caring about a lot of things that seem beneath you. What will people think of me? How will I be remembered? It’s the legacy thing.” Another long stare into the coffee cup. And then,

“You know I only got started in politics when Earl passed on. Taking care of him and the boys was a full-time job. And I needed something to do with my time after he was gone and the boys moved on to start their own families. Politics seemed like a fun thing to try. I never thought I’d get this far.” She looks around at the walls as if they’re from a movie set and she expects these flimsy surroundings to come crashing down around her.

“And then when I did get here, I thought one term would be enough, and that I’d want to go home.” She shakes her head. “It’s not the power, Ethan. That’s not what’s driving me. It’s partly about being able to help people. I do like that.” She shakes her finger at me as if she needs me to believe her. “But I’ll tell you something else. It’s also about the ego. That’s no lie. I want to go out on my own terms. I want to end this my way. You know, I announced my reelection campaign eight months ago now, two months after you started working for me. And since I made that announcement, not a day’s gone by that I don’t regret it.” She holds her coffee down by her hip. “I could have retired. I could have called it quits without losing. And now look at me. I’m dead-even with that peckerwood Claiborne. And he very well could beat me. Me – an old lady. I’d rather retire and move back to the ranch. Watch my grandkids get old. You know what I mean? Do you know, Ethan?” The makeup she’s wearing looks thin, and the skin underneath is patchy and sagging. I’ve never seen her look this old before.

“Maybe you’re just too young to understand what I’m talking about,” she says in a stilted whisper.

“Congresswoman, what you’ve said makes perfect sense. But I need to clear something up. Are you saying you don’t want to run in this campaign? Or are you expressing self-doubt?” Cynthia is standing up straighter now, and I can see a renewed toughness permeating her body. She’s waiting to jump over what I’m saying. She wants to correct me, but I’m going to push this advantage a notch further while I have it. “Because self-doubt is human, and I’d probably be scared if you *didn’t* have some. But if you’re telling me you don’t want to run, then let’s get that out in the open now and save each other a lot of time and misery. Self-doubt I can handle. Lack of desire I cannot.” I take a sip of coffee to let her know I’m done. Cheerleading is not my long suit, but it’s in the job description. And I’ll pick up the pom-poms if I have to.

“Ethan, you know I want this more than anything.” She grabs me by the arm and I can feel the strength of her talon-like grip. It’s a hand that has milked countless cows and birthed hundreds of calves. It has plucked thousands of eggs from chickens’ nests, and it has deftly wrung the necks of those chickens that wouldn’t lay. It is a powerful hand, and I can feel that in its touch. “I wouldn’t have brought you on staff if I didn’t want to win,” she says. “Because I think you can help me do it.”

In the history of my life, this ranks as one of the top six or seven most unequivocally positive things anyone has ever said to me. And I have no idea how to react. I nod quickly and look at the ground and keep nodding until the moment has passed and Cynthia begins walking toward the office again.

We get to the door and I leap ahead to open it for her. She thanks me and we step into the office. Eric is sitting at his desk looking over some notes on a pad of paper. When he sees us – the Congresswoman and the chief of staff, the two most powerful people in his life – his face blanches and he looks like he might immediately, discreetly puke on his desk.

“Eric!” Cynthia says thankfully remembering his name. Then she looks at her watch. “Seven o’clock. Great to see you’re in so early. I like that kind of dedication.”

Eric’s face reddens now and he smiles with the eagerness of a pet dog. It *is* impressive that he’s in so early and I figure it might be nice to throw him a bone. “You know, Congresswoman, Eric has a project he’s been working on for you.”

Eric shoots me a look of scorn as if he senses imminent betrayal. His jaw hangs open and he stares for a moment and then asks, "Apocalypse?"

Not exactly what I meant, but I understand why he's confused. "Actually, I was referring to your breakdown of constituent phone calls."

Eric throws his head back in relief. "Oh yeah. I mean, yes, of course."

"Eric has been compiling them for the week you were gone, Congresswoman."

Cynthia takes a sip of her coffee. "Thank you, Eric. I'd very much like to see that. Bring it to my office when it's ready, please." She walks into the back office and Eric stares after her with a bemused smile on his face, as if he has a painful crush on the woman who's just left the room. I can tell he's glowing on the inside right now. I know this because it's a sensation I felt when I was his age doing something similar to what he's doing. Whenever I did something my boss was pleased with, I felt like I'd burst with joy, like my body was filling with laughing gas before ascending to heaven. It's an unmatched feeling, and I still get it every once in a while. It's just a little harder to come by the more you do this stuff.

"Thanks for mentioning the phone call break-down, sir" Eric says. I'm glad to see he recognizes when someone has done him a favor.

"No problem, Easy. You deserve it. You work hard, and Cynthia should know that."

Eric nods and then looks nervously about the room. I recognize this gesture now as my cue that he's run out of things to say, so I leave him to his business in the front office. I'm sure if he had any information on the Apocalypse Project, he'd let me know.

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At my desk, I see my voicemail light is lit and I spend a moment placing bets with myself whether it's Lily or Suzanne. I don't actually place bets, but I do waste a fair amount of time calculating the odds. The way I figure it, the smart money would be on Suzanne. It's still too early for Lily to call. That'll take at least a week, maybe longer, depending on various factors that I can't even begin to fully calculate right now.

As it turns out, I was wrong on both counts, the message is neither from Suzanne nor Lily. It's from Jasper Blades.

"Good morning, Ethan. I'm calling to let you know we were quite impressed with your presentation last night and, after looking at your tapes, we've decided you'd make a great fit in our house. We'd like to extend an invitation for you to join us. Call us back at your nearest convenience and do let us know your decision."

Well now. First a positive exchange with Cynthia and now a new place to live. This is turning out to be a pretty damn good day. The chaos that had been my life on Sunday is starting to find order. And it's only 7:30 in the morning on Tuesday.

I call back and get the answering machine with the same hollow sounding voice and background organ music that I got yesterday. But the greeting itself is different. "Hello. You have reached Prometheus Productions. Please leave a message and we'll contact you immediately."

After the beep, "Hello, this is Ethan returning your call. Great to hear I got the spot in the house. I definitely accept the offer. In fact, I'd like to move in tonight, if that would be all right with everyone. Um... Okay, I'll see you later. Thanks again." Unable to contain my boundless joy after hanging up, I leap into the air and reach for the ceiling with my hands. It's a primal moment, and I feel the need to both celebrate and expend the first waves of energy that the coffee has sent pulsing through my veins. I do a little shadowboxing as I bound and skip around my office. Never having thrown a real punch in my life, I can only imagine how stupid this looks. But I don't really care; I just found the best place to live in Washington, DC! Does anything else really matter right now?

At some point during my bout, Brooke has walked into my office, though I'm not sure exactly when, because it isn't until I'm punching my imaginary foe near the door that I see her standing there with her leg cocked to one. She is the picture of malevolence. I freeze.

"Well, this is certainly an interesting turn of events," she says, clearly not amused by my celebratory dance.

"Brooke, you're not going to believe it. I just found a place to live! And what a place. I hope you're ready to be jealous because you're not going to believe it. I've got a hot—"

“Ethan! The eight thirty staff meeting started fifteen minutes ago – at eight thirty.”

Where did all the time go? I must have slipped into some kind of zone again. Perhaps while I was boxing. Or maybe while I contemplated my voicemail. It really doesn't seem possible that I would lose track of that much—

“Ethan! We're waiting.” Brooke stomps her foot and, embarrassed as I am for spacing out yet again, I somehow find that pouty gesture cute.

“Thank you, Brooke,” I say. “I was just finishing up in here. I'll be there in a minute.”

“You know, I'm Cynthia's scheduler. Not yours. You should get a day-planner or something.”

“I said I'll be there in a minute.” If I didn't know better, I'd say Brooke is genuinely mad at me. She slams the door and I can hear her stomping off toward the conference room. I grab a piece of official-looking paper and dash down the corridor to the conference room where a seat at the head of the table is waiting for me.

In theory, our staff meetings are to last thirty minutes. A quick in-and-out get together designed to convey the maximum amount of information the smallest amount of time. In practice, they've been known to bloat into three and four hour events, that require ironman-like endurance to survive. Unfortunately, when I arrive at this morning's meeting, I haven't missed much. We're still in the initial stage of the meeting where we go around in a circle and everyone has a chance to air their thoughts, which are usually grievances, and which usually at least tangentially involve me. Being loved by my staff is a pipe dream I gave up on long ago, though I have to admit I wouldn't mind a little adoration now and then. I mean, it's me. What's not to love?

To understand the phenomenon of my staff disliking me, one needs to understand a few things about the standard congressional office. The first thing is that the overriding mood of any office on Capitol Hill can best be summed up by one word: discontent. It is the zero line, the stable state of existence when everything is normal. And whenever discontent is prevalent, people look to the top in assigning blame. They look to the guy who's making the day-to-day decisions that affect their lives. Me. So in their eyes, the chief of staff is the sole cause of all office discontent. He is its manufacturer, its

distributor, its purveyor. He imports it, he exports it. He revels in it. He eats, drinks and digests it. The chief of staff is a discontent monger. Now all that just comes with any chief of staff job. To understand why my staff hates me in particular, throw in that: a) I'm younger than half of them; b) I'm not from Montana, whereas most of them are; c) I'm seen as hired political thug, someone just brought on staff to win an election and then disappear into the night, an agent of everything that's wrong with politics today; and d) I am an anarchist in an office that does not want to believe its own overriding tendency is toward anarchy. And really, those are just the first few reasons that come to mind. There are plenty of others out there, a few of which I'm hearing right now as each staff member "airs their thoughts."

"I think staff needs to take e-mails regarding pending legislation more seriously," Steve Kotek, our aide on natural resources, says as he twiddles a pen between two fingers. The head of everyone in the room swivels just slightly in my direction. I nod and pretend to write this down on the piece of paper before me. It's only after the first word is done that I realize I don't have a pen in my hand. Eric, who is sitting next to me, slides his pen across the gap between us and I take it without looking at him. Now, with pen in hand, I finish pretending to write Steve's comment down.

The rest of the "thought-airing" session progresses similarly and slowly. Though I do note gratefully that Eric passes when it's his turn to gripe. And forty-five minutes after I've sat down, we move on to the scheduling portion of the meeting. Brooke clears her throat and begins ticking off a list of meetings, hearings and briefing sessions that Cynthia will be attending in the coming week. She is quick and curt in her way as she works through Tuesday and then Wednesday. Just before she begins reading through Thursday's schedule, though, I put my pen down and interrupt.

"That'll be all, Brooke. Thank you very much."

There's an audible gasp among the staff as Brooke looks up from her schedule and stares around the room, incredulous that someone has dared to interrupt her while she's executing her job. "I haven't finished yet, Ethan," she says at last.

"Actually, you have. I want Cynthia back on a plane to Montana Wednesday night." There is silence in the room and for the second time today I can hear the deep

hiss of the building's central air-conditioning. This time the hiss is ominous, like the sound of a lit fuse.

"Ethan, we have a full schedule on both Thursday and Friday mornings. We've made commitments. We have obligations."

I shake my head. "I don't care. We've got an election to win and Cynthia's not going to win it if she's here in Washington. She needs to be in Montana talking to real people."

Brooke has yet to look at me since I interrupted her, and now she's staring at the papers in her hand with the white-hot intensity of a thousand suns, shaking with rage. "If we miss these appointments, people will be angry with Cynthia," she says through closed lips.

"Correction, people will be angry with you. You're the scheduler; it's your duty to make sure no one blames Cynthia when she can't make these appointments. Tell them it's your fault. Tell them anything. Just as long as they don't blame Cynthia." I look around the room at the group of white faces that have been bouncing between Brooke and me like we're engaged in some kind of tennis match. "When you're in a tight election, you always have to be ready to fall on your sword for your boss. That should be our mentality every day." My beloved staff stares back at me, unable to believe that I'm actually lecturing them.

"And what about the votes on Thursday. If she misses those, they go on her record," Brooke says.

"I know," I respond calmly. "I've looked at them and it's my opinion that we can afford to miss them. I'll be talking to Suzanne today and asking her to put together a full campaign schedule for Thursday in addition to the rest of the weekend."

"Well," Brooke says, setting her papers down on the table. "I guess you're the boss." She pushes her chair back, stands up and leaves the room. The rest of the staff, until now shocked into paralysis by my sudden show of force, begin making nervous movements followed by prolonged stares at their laps. When I say, "Meeting adjourned," they spring as if one body for the door.

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I'm in my office for about an hour before I get the visit I'm expecting. And, as I also expected, when Brooke comes calling she doesn't bother to knock. The door swings open, she storms in and the door slams closed without an exchange of words. She stands there a moment and pants as if she's been chasing me for miles and only just now tracked me down.

"I think I at least deserve an explanation," she says at last. The top two buttons on her blouse are undone and I have to catch myself from staring too deeply at the darkness therein.

She's right. She *does* deserve an explanation. And I have one. At least I should have one. I've been spending the last hour thinking of one. The truth is, my display in the meeting had a practical purpose. As I said, I don't need my staff to love me. It's irrelevant what they think of me personally. However, it does matter that they at least respect me. They need to know I'm in charge here. So by putting my foot down on Brooke, I showed them exactly who is calling the shots. I also hope I shocked them into realizing that Cynthia truly *is* in a fight for her political life. Until today, they've been fairly complacent about this election, acting as if it were a minor inconvenience that would simply disappear in a few months. Today I served them notice that they might not have jobs at the end of this year if we don't start running like we mean it. As for why I chose to drop the hammer on Brooke, I can say there were a few factors involved. First of all, she just happened to be in the way. It was the schedule I had a problem with, and she *is* the scheduler. Second, for the staff to see me taking on the all-powerful Brooke means a lot more than if I'd pounced on, say, Eric. And third, I picked on Brooke because she's the only member of our staff who is likely to ever forgive me. Though I would say that, judging from the murderous look in her eyes right now, I won't be forgiven any time soon. The platonic zone is a distant memory and I'm now somewhere in a zone so distant and remote they don't even have zoning laws for it.

"Brooke, you have to understand, that wasn't about you."

"Fuck you, Ethan. That was totally about me. You embarrassed me in front of the entire staff."

"No. I merely pointed out that we needed to alter the schedule."

“And you had to do that in front of everyone?”

“No, but...” I consider pointing out to Brooke the multi-layered reasoning behind what I did, but I’m not sure it would make sense. And if it did, I’m still not sure it would be excusable, at least not in Brooke’s eyes. “You’ll just have to trust me,” I say. “The staff needed to hear that. They’ve got to know we’re trying to win a campaign here.”

“And that gives you *carte blanche* to be an asshole?”

“Brooke, when can you honestly say that I’m *not* being an asshole?”

I can tell she’s surprised by this Socratic response, and it steals at least part of her thunder. Still, she maintains a fierce look that tells me one cute line is not going to let me weasel out of this one. “This isn’t some game, you know,” she says. “I take my job very seriously.”

I can see where this is heading and I’m not about to let the third person in less than twenty-four hours accuse me of not being serious about my job. “Brooke, I know what I’m doing here. Please accept that. Now, occasionally, I will do a few things that don’t immediately make sense. To that end, I would ask you to give me a little leeway. I’m sorry if I stepped on your toes. I truly am. But believe me when I tell you it was for good reason.” I’m shouting by the time I finish, and I realize that at some point I’ve stood up from behind my desk.

She blinks at me with the look of someone who’s had the rug pulled out from underneath her. “Wow,” she says in a hoarse whisper. “You just, like, tapped into some kind of real emotion.” She sticks out her lower lip and narrows her pretty eyes. “Maybe you actually do care about something.” She turns and slips out of the office. Just before she closes the door behind her, she peeks back inside. “I assume you don’t need the Classifieds today.”

I give her the thumbs up. “Roger that.”

“You know you still owe me a buck for yesterday’s,” she says and closes the door. And I know this is as close as Brooke will ever come to actually saying she forgives me.

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I spend the rest of the day pricing out the cost of printing 10,000 yard signs, and planning Cynthia's schedule for her extra-long weekend. When I tell Cynthia she'll be missing votes in order to campaign, she is skeptical. But I manage to convince her that going to the state is what she needs and that a handful of votes in Washington will be trifling compared to the voters she'll talk to in Montana. She eventually admits that she agrees with me.

When Suzanne finds out that I've carved out an extra day for Cynthia to spend campaigning in the state, she's ecstatic.

"I could kiss you, Ethan," she says. "Absolutely kiss you."

"That won't be necessary. Why don't you just put together a good campaign schedule for the weekend so I can run it by Cynthia and Brooke? You do have things you can schedule for her, don't you?"

"Does a fat baby fart?" There's a pause while she takes a drag on her cigarette and I contemplate this elegant turn of phrase. Then, "Hey, I take back what I said about you last night."

"What did you say last night?" I ask, as if it hasn't been weighing on my mind every minute since she said it.

"You're not as big a loser as I thought."

"You called me a loser last night?"

"Not in so many words. But the sentiment was there." Another lengthy pause. "You get the point."

"I definitely do, Suzanne. Definitely."

At about 5:30 in the evening, I decide to call it a day. Everyone is still working, and I feel momentarily guilty about leaving before the troops, but at least I've got a good reason. This anarchist is moving into a new home.

Chapter Six

I'm remembering this time six months ago when some friends were in town for the weekend. Actually, they were Lily's friend from college and her fiancé, neither of whom I knew very well nor liked very much. Pat and Pauline were their names, the alliteration of which they reveled in to such an extent that impersonal pronouns such as "us" and "we" were superceded by the longer, but cuter "Pat & Pauline." This moniker – like a brand name, Pat & Pauline Inc. or Pat & Pauline Enterprises – was only one among many reasons I had for disliking them. Pat & Pauline lived in New York and seemed to be living a life so exciting and thrilling that Pat & Pauline needed to constantly speak about it in order to remind us just how great it was. Every anecdote they told, every well-polished phrase they turned, seemed to further the argument that Pat & Pauline were a vastly more advanced version of Ethan & Lily. Hell, our names didn't even start with the same letter! Of course, none of this was made better by the fact that I truly *did* believe Pat & Pauline's lives were better than ours. Pat & Pauline were earning more money than us, working at cooler jobs than us, and vacationing in better, warmer, sunnier places than us. Worse of all, Pat & Pauline were clearly more in love with each other than us.

By Saturday night of Pat & Pauline's weekend visit, I was in a ripe mood. The four of us had gone out to a Brazilian restaurant earlier that evening and when I offered to get the check, Pat didn't put up a fight. After dinner, we went to a bar called Cities because, as Lily said, it had a "New York feel." Though oddly enough, the gimmick at this bar was that every month they changed the interior décor to depict a different world capitol. This month was Havana. I didn't like Cities much – either as a Havana bar or a bar with a "New York feel" – but I didn't let that stop me from drinking as much as I could get down from the moment we got there. Three times I left the table ostensibly to use the bathroom and instead went to the back bar where I ordered a shot and downed it before returning to hear more of the Pat & Pauline story hour.

After my third trip to the bar, Pat & Pauline had finally gotten to their richest vein of conversation: wedding-planning stories. These were the stories I found to be the most self-serving of Pat & Pauline's numerous self-serving stories. They were also the most

embarrassing and awkward for Lily and me because they so clearly underscored the fact that Lily and I – two plus years into our relationship – were nowhere near marriage.

“So, the caterer all of a sudden sends us this letter last week and says he can’t do the salmon.” Pauline jabbed a straw into her drink to emphasize the point. “Right. And I’m all, what the fuck? And when I call him he just says, ‘Sorry, but, uh, no way.’”

“My God,” Lily said and shook her head. I knew Lily didn’t enjoy these Pat & Pauline visits much either. But she said she felt obliged since she and Pauline had been friends since their freshman year in college, and more recently, Pauline had asked Lily to be in the wedding ceremony. Looking back on it now, I know I ought to have respected the way Lily patiently entertained our guests. She would listen to Pat & Pauline’s stories and give them the approval they were seeking. And she never complained. Even when I would do things like sneak away three times in the span of a half hour to secretly get shots at the bar. But that night, when I returned from my third trip to the bathroom, only to hear Pauline pour her heart out about the dastardly wedding caterer, I was so blinded by a deadly combination of rage and boredom that I could no longer contain myself. Not even for Lily’s sake.

“I don’t know how you do it,” I said, leaning heavily and sloppily onto the table.

“Do what?” Pat asked.

“Make this commitment to each other. You know, marriage. It’s a major life commitment.” I could feel a foot brush against my shin and I knew it was Lily’s, sending me a message, a warning: Tread lightly, Ethan.

But I couldn’t hear her. Or I refused to hear her. I don’t know which.

“Well, you know, Ethan,” Pauline said dreamily. “I don’t even look at it as a commitment. When you love someone as much as I love Pat, it just... it just makes sense.” Pat grabbed Pauline’s hand, Lily let out a coo, and I became even more thoroughly disgusted with that whole shitty weekend. Even my sarcasm was falling on deaf ears.

“Oh sure,” I continued. “It’s easy now. But it gets a lot harder when you think that neither one of you will be able to fuck another person for the rest of your lives.” Silence. Then a slight breathing in of air that isn’t quite a gasp. I continued. “My dad left home when I was eight years old. I talked to him twice in my life after that. You

know, he never said it, but I'm pretty sure he left because he couldn't stand fucking the same pussy for the rest of his life."

Pat & Pauline were motionless, frozen in suspended animation. That look, those horrified, petrified faces – it was priceless, even though I knew I would eventually have to pay for it. Lily, either because she saw this coming and knew she couldn't stop it, or because she wanted to play my comments off as some kind of joke, let out a loud witchlike cackle. She was grabbing onto the edge of the table so hard I could see the white bones of her knuckles through the skin. When the last sound was out of her mouth, the table was left in silence again. And just to make sure Pat & Pauline didn't fall for Lily's feint, I decided to hammer the point home.

"I'm serious. That's an amazing vow of celibacy – fucking the same person for the rest of your lives. But I do have a question. Does phone sex count as cheating? Because I don't think it should. I think if you talk on the phone and jerk off, it's legit. I think it could be an out-clause." I took a quick sip of my drink and set it softly on the table. "Have you guys discussed that yet?"

Lily let out another wicked laugh, shrill and breathy like a badly played clarinet. And I could tell that Pat & Pauline weren't falling for her cover-ups.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Ethan?" Pat asked quietly, trying to breathe some dignity into the moment.

"Nothing's wrong with me. Or at least, nothing out of the ordinary is wrong with me. I just thought since you guys liked to talk so much about yourselves, why not at least talk about something interesting."

I think Lily's second shrill laugh was her final attempt to save the situation, because now she stayed silent. She relinquished her claw-like grip on the table edge and she sat back calmly in her chair. It was Pauline who finally stepped up to the plate.

"Really great questions, Ethan. Not very original, but at least ballsy I'd have to say. Especially for a pussy like you." I'd never known Pauline could dish it out like this, and my measure of respect for her increased infinitesimally. "That's right. You're a pussy. Not to mention, you're a deadbeat. Frankly, I've never understood what Lily was doing with a loser like you. But up until now, I figured it was her choice." Pauline stood up from the table and jerked Pat up by the forearm. "We are leaving now. Lily, I hope

we'll see you again soon." Then she lowered her eyes to the level of my forehead. "You, however, I hope we never see you again."

Pauline left our table and walked out of the bar without taking her eyes off my forehead.

"Pat really is a lucky guy," I said to Lily, hoping a little humor might quell whatever particular brand of hatred she must have been feeling toward me at the moment.

She didn't respond to the humor, which was to be expected. But she didn't launch into a full-scale assault either. She lifted her napkin off her lap, and folded it carefully and set it on the table. She didn't look at me or speak a word as she stood up and exited the restaurant, leaving me alone to contemplate my sins.

I was fairly certain Lily's departure from the bar was meant as only the initial phase of some grand punishment she'd cooked up for me in the moments after the incident. And I was also fairly sure she intended for me to follow her out into the night to take the rest of my punishment like a man.

When I found her outside, she was waiting in line at an ATM machine.

"Lily, what are you doing?"

She leveled her gaze at me as if to say, you've got to be joking. "I'm getting money for a cab. I'm tired and I'm going home."

"I know you're mad at me, Lily. I know you're upset."

"Mad? Upset?" She caught herself on the edge of yelling and lowered her voice after the man punching buttons at the ATM turned to get a look. "You disappoint me, Ethan, because you obviously have no idea what I'm thinking right now."

"Maybe you should tell me what you're thinking."

"I would, but I'm awfully tired." The man at the ATM finished his transaction and Lily stepped forward. As I watched the flickering screen reflected in her eyes I wondered if I knew her PIN number. I was fairly sure I once had it memorized, but for the life of me, I couldn't recall it then. I wondered if this could be seen as some measure of my commitment to this relationship. Would a good boyfriend know his girlfriend's ATM number? Should it be locked away in his brain near the part that remembers similarly important numbers like his girlfriend's birthday, their anniversary, and the approximate date of her next period?

“Good-bye then,” Lily said as she walked toward the curb to hail a cab.

I followed her. “So why don’t you tell me what you’re feeling, if I’m so off-base,” I said.

“Believe it or not, Ethan, I’m not upset that you insulted our friends. I know you’ve never liked them. And to be honest, I don’t like them much either. You’re right that they’re annoying and self-involved.” She said all this without turning to look at me. She was focused on the street with her hand raised in a hailing gesture, even though there were no cabs in sight. Her back and neck were straight and her passive face had aura of cool, impenetrable dignity.

“Okay, so why don’t you tell me what you *are* pissed off about.”

“I’m upset. Not pissed off. And if you must know, I’m *upset* because of your attitude toward marriage. Because you really do look at it as fucking the same person for the rest of your life.” Her eyes started tearing up and she rubbed at them with the hand she wasn’t using to hail a cab.

“Lily—”

“No. Don’t try talking your way out of this. I know what you’ll say. You’ll say it was a joke and that you really didn’t mean it. But I saw the way you were in there. I saw the way you said it. And I know you meant it.” Her voice was well into the realm of hysteria by now, and people walking by were starting to rubberneck. I felt myself becoming very conscious of these onlookers. My attention split between them and Lily, and I found myself unable to maintain whatever righteous indignation I may have been feeling.

“Lily, there’s no way I meant what I said in there. I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

But Lily was beyond listening to anything I could say at the moment. She was on a roll. “And that line about phone sex. I mean, how disgusting can you be? Have you ever called one of those numbers?”

Rigid adherence to the truth has never been one of my weaknesses, but in that moment, consumed by an over-abundance of emotion and distracted by the presence of several annoying spectators, I neglected to think of an artful lie in time. “Once,” I said resignedly. And it was then that Lily finally turned to look at me.

“Oh. My. God,” she said.

“It was a long time ago. Before I even met you.”

“I thought I knew you. I thought I knew who you were! And then this. It just shows how naïve I’ve been.”

“Lily, I didn’t even enjoy it. The lady was dumb. I hung up after one minute.”

“You sick-o.” Her voice sounded like she’d been possessed by a demon. “I suppose you got your jollies off of sticking your dick into a telephone receiver.” A few of the people in our gallery let out guilty chuckles at this.

“That’s not exactly how it works,” I said, lowering my voice to a menacing growl.

“Oh. Well you’ll have to show me how you like to do it sometime.”

I was about to formulate a response to this last line when, miraculously, a taxi glided up and stopped next to Lily. She climbed in and slammed the door hard behind her. The cab merged with traffic and took off. And slowly, the people who had gathered to watch our little spectacle broke off and drifted into the orbits of their own lives once again.

It wasn’t until three o’clock that morning that Lily and I reached some kind of understanding, that I was able to convince her this was not what I thought about marriage, and that, should we get married, I would not look at it merely as fucking the same person for the rest of my life.

When we were done talking, and our voices were hoarse from the drama, we expired into a dreamless sleep on top of Lily’s bed. No part of her body touched mine. While we’d held the demons of our relationship at bay, I think both of us knew they had not been slain. And they would rear their ugly heads again. And we would do this all again, sometime not too far off.

That was about six months ago. We’d had worse fights during the course of our relationship. Some of them were more her fault, some of them more mine. Some of them shook the very foundations of our relationship, and some passed by barely noticed. On the sliding scale of blame between Ethan’s Fault and Lily’s, I’d say this one was skewed slightly toward my end. But taken in the cosmic scheme of our entire relationship, that fight was pretty much right down the middle of the road. A garden-variety fight. Not terribly notable other than the fact that Pat & Pauline haven’t spoken to

me since then, and I wasn't invited to their wedding in Fairfield that summer. But, for some reason I can't quite figure out, it is this one rather unremarkable fight that keeps playing in my head as the cab I'm in takes me to Lily's apartment in Arlington to pick up my eight boxes of possessions, to take them over to my new home at 325 Garfield.

As the cab slows to a stop in front of the apartment, I realize I'm crying. Actually, I'm more than crying, I'm bawling. I am the Mount Vesuvius of emotion. And much like that fateful event, this seems to have come from nowhere. No amount of oracle-consulting or entrail-reading could have clued me in to it. Tears well up from deep inside and roll down the canals of my crumpled face.

What have I done? What kind of a dick am I? How could I push away the one person on this earth who I had even a remote chance of loving for the rest of my life? Or is there still hope? Can I still redeem myself and right the wrongs that I've committed?

I try to imagine the extreme lengths to which I must have driven Lily to cause her to move out my stuff and change the locks. I can see her struggling with her slight frame to lift my boxes, sobbing while she explains to the locksmith what she needs him to do, calling her parents in Delaware to tell them she'll be staying with them for a while. Those are the mechanics of breaking up, the stage directions of falling out of love. And I can see her following them unwillingly, but with the certitude that she must, to preserve whatever is left of her own well-being.

I hope to god that Lily is still out of town and that this is an encounter-free pickup. I'm not ready to face her right now. I can't be sure what would happen if I did. I'd much rather quietly, anonymously, go about the business of collecting my things and get out. I'll take care of the emotional issues later. When I'm more ready. When I'm stronger. When I'm not a blubbing mess in the back of a taxi.

The cab driver turns to look at me. He must have heard me crying earlier and tried to ignore it until now. But the ride is up and he needs his fare. He has no choice. I can tell by the look on his face that playing counselor to a weeping thirty-year-old man in his back seat is not the role he was looking for tonight. But he still manages an at least tolerant-sounding, "You okay, buddy?"

Seeing as how "Yes" would be a blatant lie, I decide on, "I'll manage."

He's a big man, and he lays a massive forearm across the seat divider. "You sure? You don't look like you can manage."

"I'll be fine. How much?"

"Forget it, guy. It's on me."

"Do I really look that bad?" I ask as I try to compose myself.

The cab driver moves his eyes left then right, as if he were watching a pendulum without moving his head. He opens his mouth to say something but catches his words in his throat. Clearly, answering my question has posed a bit of a problem for him, and I regret putting him in such an untenable position. I regret dragging him into this at all, and I'm sure he feels likewise. I pull out my wallet and, despite my watery eyes, manage to locate a twenty. The cab driver tries to push it away, but I drop it on the seat next to him and he sighs like this is the last thing he needs tonight.

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The apartment building looks well lit and fully occupied. There seems to be a light burning in every window, and I'm fairly certain that's a dull glow coming from our old living room. I decide I'm going to try and stealth this one. Lily did say she didn't want to talk to me until she was ready, so I'm going to honor that wish and try to sneak these boxes out to the Beefeater without tipping her off, if indeed she is in the apartment.

The hallway inside is brightly lit and has the too-sterile feel of a mid-range hotel. This makes my efforts to escape detection seem hopeless. Every footstep, every floorboard creak, is amplified until I'm convinced my efforts are causing an orchestra of pops and cracks. I place my ear to Lily's door, and only hear the swishing sound of the ocean. Results are inconclusive. She may or may not be in. At this point, with all the noise I'm making, speed might be my only ally in this endeavor. I roll up my sleeves and start moving my boxes.

They're heavy. Lily must have packed them well and then had Dewey move them outside. I wonder what that project must have been like. What role did Dewey play in all this? He's been a pretty decent guy to me since the breakup, but I think I'm still justified in not quite trusting him. After all, he did take some amount of pleasure in

seeing me discover the boxes in the hallway. And he's always been pretty much a dick to me, other than the past two nights. Though I have to admit I've done nothing to cause him *not* to be a dick in the three years I've known him. Of course this is probably all irrelevant speculation on my part. It doesn't really matter what Dewey thinks of me. Perhaps now that I've moved off his futon, Dewey will fade from my life just as easily as the cab driver who helped me through my recent breakdown. Somehow, that thought leaves me feeling sad. I'd like to know about Dewey. Even if it's only for my own records. It's always good, when push comes to shove, to have a pretty good list of the people who are on your side, and those who aren't. You never know when that'll come in handy.

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I'm down to the last box now and I've worked up a pretty good sweat. My shirt is clinging to me and I feel a cold sliminess all over my skin. This last box, number eight, is going to be a stretch. The Beefeater is loaded to the gills right now and it's very nearly bottoming out as is. Still, making another trip back to this apartment building is not an option. This one trip tonight has already caused me to have a breakdown in the back of a cab. God knows what another trip could do to me. No, I'll just have to make number eight fit. I'll even drive with the box on my lap if I have to.

I bend down to pick up number eight and I feel my pants cling at the thighs. This one reads: *Ethan Pascal: Books, CDs, Etc* right under my nose. And, though I don't know what the *Etc* includes, I'm quite certain that it's the *Books* and *CDs* that are making this box so incredibly heavy. I can feel my lower back twitch as I lift the box off the ground. My hands feel slick on the cardboard. As I bring the box to my chest, I breathe in and get a nose full of dust, which had formed a fine layer on top of the box. A drop of sweat trickles down my forehead, hangs precariously at the dam of my eyebrow for a moment, then plops squarely into my eye. My back feels like it's about to give, my nose itches, and now my eye burns. It's time to leave this apartment for good.

As I stagger toward the front door, I hear a door open behind me and a cheerful voice chimes, "Hallooo." Before I turn around, I know it is our neighbor Odette.

Odette is an old lady, but her body is thin and spry. She has long white hair that she wears over her shoulders and down her back. She walks the hallways of our building wearing ratty, loosely tied robes that reveal too much of her white pachyderm skin. She is the self-appointed caretaker of the building. She's always leaving orange peels and cloves in the corner of the hallway, or setting out seeds for the birds and squirrels – actions which have won a great deal of disapproval from the building's Condo Association which strongly disapproves of that kind of vigilante housekeeping. A month after I moved in, Odette trapped me for an hour in the laundry room, telling me stories in her crazy French accent. Thereafter, it was a surprise if I did my laundry and Odette didn't stop by to talk with me. She would tell me stories from when she was a teenager and the Germans occupied her hometown in France. Or she would tell me about her latest run-in with the Condo Association. During our laundry room sessions, Odette would often compare the Condo Association to the Third Reich. "They say I cannot place my air fresheners in the hallways. But they do not know who I am. I survived when the Nazis de-destroyed our ballet theater. I will survive this Condo Association." She would raise her fist over her head as if her next line was going to be: "Vive le France!" Instead, she usually finished with something like: "I will triumph over these stupid bastards!"

Naturally, I came to have quite an affection for Odette. And it was rare that I wasn't in the mood for her stories of oppression at the hands of the Nazis and the Condo Association. However, tonight is another story entirely. I can feel my disks slipping and sliding around in my back, and I pray to god that Odette doesn't have a new story for me tonight.

"Hallooo, Mr. Ethan," she cries. "I am so sorry that you move out now."

"Yes, Odette. I am sad too." Whenever I talk with Odette, I have to fight an urge to mimic her French accent.

"But why? Why do you leave us at this time?"

"I leave because of problems with," I nod toward the door to indicate Lily.

"Ah yes. Love problems. I see and understand." She nods deeply and slowly.

"But will you not move back?" she asks. "In the future, no?"

"Perhaps, Odette."

“Do not just give to me the perhaps. You must take the love and make it yours.” She slams her fist into her hand for emphasis.

I feel my hands slip on the box and a flash of pain spasms up from the base of my spine. “Maybe that is a good idea. I don’t know.” But I realize I *do* know. I won’t be back. It has long past the time that I could take the love and make it mine. That has ceased to be an option somewhere along the line. This realization causes another tide of emotion to rise up in me, and I can feel my eyes misting. “Who can really know love?” I ask with a twitch of my shoulders. It’s a line that Odette would use, and she seems to recognize this with a look of momentary confusion. Then,

“Yes. To know love is to be God.”

“I know I don’t know love.”

“This makes me very sad, Mr. Ethan. I like for you to hear my stories from me.”

I nod. “It makes me sad as well, Odette. More sad than you could—” and then it finally gives. The slick sweat, the crushing weight, the cramping muscles – their combined influence finally becomes too much.

From the instant box number eight slips out of my hands, I expect a loud noise. A primary thump followed by perhaps a secondary, not-so-loud thump as the box falls onto one side. The noise that actually does occur when the box hits is something vastly different from what I expected. All the contents of the box shift and collide with each other at once. The *Books*, the *CDs*, and the *Etc.* The cumulative noise of each of these small collisions is amplified by the box itself so that the actual sound that rushes forth upon impact is more of a shockwave. It blasts past me, and flies up and down the hallway, rattling the doors on their hinges like a restless ghost.

Odette, a woman who has seen her fair share of destruction and mayhem in this life, clasps her hands to her ears and shrieks something in French. Former neighbors all along the hallway begin unsliding their deadbolts. Their doors inch open nervously.

“I must go now, Odette,” I say as I scramble to pick up the box again. I can feel the suspicious eyes of the entire building on me now. Their fingers are probably poised over their speed-dials, deciding whether to call the police or the Condo Association. They know there are rules about moving boxes at night, they just don’t know if breaking that rule is enough to get me arrested. I hate this fucking building. I turn on my former

neighbors in a wild pirouette. “Go ahead and report me, you fuckers! I’ve got my boxes now.” I still can’t see any faces behind the doors. “You won’t have to pretend my boxes aren’t there anymore. You bastards won’t see them again.” Silence is the only response I get from my audience. Which isn’t the worst response in the world; maybe it’s for the best. I notice that Lily’s door has not opened and I can only presume that she is not back in town yet; that, also, is probably for the best.

My moment is over now. It’s time to leave. In my agitated state I can’t seem to gain purchase on number eight, so I’m forced to slide it out the front door.

“Farewell to you, Mr. Ethan,” Odette shouts to me from inside and waves some kind of French-looking hand gesture.

“Farewell to you, Odette,” I shout back and, summoning whatever dignity I still possess, I snap my best military salute.

Box number eight fits in the Beefeater only by balancing it delicately in the trunk and leaving the trunk door open. It’s an uneasy arrangement, but I drive slowly, and check my mirrors often, and it works. I pull up to 325 Garfield with all eight boxes of my possessions securely in tow.

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“Ethan! My man,” I hear Jasper call out from the kitchen as I open the front door. “What’s cooking?”

When I enter the room, Jasper stands up from the table to welcome me. But just as he reaches out to shake my hand and gets a good look at me, I see a look of bewildered fear cross his face. He jerks his hand back instinctively. “Uh,” he pauses for a second as if searching for the most diplomatic way to express himself. “You look like shit,” he says. Jasper, on the other hand, is wearing a thin leather jacket and his black hair is smooth and glossy like an oil spill.

“Why thank you,” I say. “From the runways of Paris and Milan, straight to 325 Garfield. I call it Essence of Moving.”

“I see,” he says and then chuckles. “We were all going to a new club that just opened on U-Street. Supposed to be the real thing. The others are upstairs getting ready.”

He looks me up and down again. “We were just heading out. But if you wanted to go, we could wait for you to shower. Or something.” I notice a dimple on Jasper’s chin that I could have sworn was on his right cheek the first time I met him. Or was it his left cheek? It occurs to me that his good looks are so generic that it’s hard to remember his face from one minute to the next. First he’s got a cleft chin, next he’s got a mole to the left of his nose. He’s like a human Mr. Potato-head. It strikes me as some kind of tragedy to be so good-looking, and yet so easily forgettable.

“You know what,” I say. “I think I’d better finish moving my stuff. I could stand to get a good night’s sleep, too. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No. Of course not. By all means. In fact, would you like some help moving your stuff?” He’s made the offer, but the look of distaste on his face says he really doesn’t want me to accept it. I toy with the idea of saying yes, just to watch him squirm, but decide now is not the time to test the limits of my new housemates. There will be plenty of time for limit-testing later on.

“Actually, I don’t have too much stuff. It shouldn’t take long. Besides, I think only one of us needs to sport this fashion tonight.” I gesture to my dirty, sweaty clothes, and Jasper makes a clucking sound out of the corner of his mouth.

“Alrighty,” he says and runs his hand through his hair. “By the way, we’ve decided to throw you a housewarming party this Saturday. Make sure you invite your friends from the Hill.”

I hear the sound of Spenser and Miranda bounding down the stairs. They burst into the room just as Spenser is finishing a high-pitched laugh that really does sound like the Pillsbury Doughboy. But this Doughboy is wearing a black sweater and black pants. I’m getting the impression that black is popular in this household, and I’d better think about investing in more of it if I’m going to fit in.

“Hello, Ethan,” Miranda says in a bubbly voice. “Are you ready to hit the town?” She walks up to me and air-kisses me on both cheeks before I have a chance to react.

The familiarity, the forwardness, of her gesture is momentarily arousing. She's wearing a tank top and her slender shoulders stick out gracefully like a bird's.

"Actually," Jasper says before I can respond, "Ethan is going to move his stuff in tonight, so we'll have to do without the pleasure of his company."

Miranda looks at me as if to confirm this statement and then she screws her face into an exaggerated frown. "Well that's positively pooppy. Do you think he's going to be a stick-in-the-mud for a roommate?" Her buoyant demeanor tonight couldn't be more different from the impression she gave at the interview.

"I think we can cut him some slack this once," Jasper says.

"Fine then. Just this once." She hugs me good-bye as if we're old friends. They all file out of the kitchen.

"By the way," Jasper calls out to me from the living room. "There's some furniture in the basement that no one uses. You can take some of it up to your room if need be. Whatever: None of it's ours anyway." And then, with a slam of the front door, they're gone.

A few minutes later, I walk out to the Beefeater and begin to move in my eight boxes with a feeling that I'm unpacking a new life.

That night, while I lie in bed and hang on the cusp of sleep, I have a vision that must be the nearest thing to a dream you can have while you're still awake. I see order in everything around me. Confusion becomes complexity; complexity becomes simplicity. I see my life as a mobile, all the different pieces hanging delicately in their own balanced orbits. It has an elegant beauty that I am able to admire from afar. While at the same time, I know that this beauty, this balance, is an illusion. It will not last. Like the proverbial butterfly's wings, one flutter, one slight whispering tremor, will cause it all to crumble. Such is the nature of chaos, and my life.

Chapter Seven

I'm getting myself ready for work, putting on, at last, a suit that hasn't yet been subjected to multiple consecutive wearings, when I begin to detect the smell of breakfast wafting into my bedroom. Eggs, bacon, hash browns; the scents commingle into one big stinking breakfast smell. I was a cold cereal kid. Grew up on Cheerios. So I've never seen the need for those orgiastic, greasy feasts that are American breakfasts.

There are two Seminal Cooked Breakfast Moments in my life that have colored my impression of that meal ever since. The first such moment occurred when my mother cooked breakfast for me the morning she told me my dad had left us. I was eight and she'd tried to cook banana pancakes. They didn't turn out well, burnt on the edges and runny in the middle. I sat at the dining room table poking my miscooked food with a fork and absorbing the news that this man called my father would not be coming back. My mother incorrectly assumed that I didn't eat my breakfast because the shock of the news was so great, and not because I didn't like the breakfast itself.

In fact, she must have assumed that her banana pancakes had helped to cushion the blow, because it wasn't until my senior year in high school that she attempted her banana pancake recipe again. On this occasion, my mother cooked breakfast in order to ease delivery of the news that she'd agreed to marry Roy, the guy she'd been dating for over a year, and of whom I only vaguely disapproved. This time, as before, it was the horrible banana pancakes, and not an overwhelming sense of dread, that caused me not to eat. Though I think my mother thought it was a similar dread because, to this day, she thinks I hate Roy. When really, I only still mildly disapprove of him. Either way, the smell of breakfast cooking has since then always put me ill at ease. It has filled me with the sense that, at best, something mildly bad will happen, and, at worst, my world will be pulled out from under me.

Downstairs, I find Jasper and Spenser cooking in the kitchen and shimmying to some salsa music that's playing over a boom box on the counter.

"One, two, three, four, one-two. One, two, three, four, one-two," Spenser sings as he shakes his hips left and right. He's wearing a tight white undershirt with sweat stains

around the armpits, and his round little belly is bouncing along to the beat. He's still wearing the black pants he had on last night.

"Ah, Ethan. Good morning," Jasper says in round celebratory syllables when he sees me. "You're just in time for breakfast."

"Juevos Rancheros," Spenser says with a flamenco flourish of his hand.

I sit down at the dining room table feeling no more at ease than I did when I first caught a whiff of this breakfast upstairs. "Maybe just a coffee if you have it."

"Of course, my good man," Jasper says. Then, "Cha-cha-cha-cha. Cha-cha," as he saunters forward with the coffee pot.

"We just got in and decided to finish the night off with a proper breakfast."

"You guys were out all night?" I ask, genuinely impressed.

"Yeah. There was a fantastic after-party in Chevy Chase. You really should have been there. Gorgeous women as far as the eye could see."

"Where's Miranda?" I ask.

"She needs her beauty rest," Spenser says. "We'll wake her up when the food's ready." He lowers himself into a chair across from me and thumbs through the newspaper. He pulls out the Classifieds and buries his face in them.

"You know, Ethan, I've been thinking," Jasper says with his back to me. He's standing at the stove, slowly stirring the eggs and turning the bacon. "I've got a part in my new feature that might be perfect for you."

"Feature?"

"Yeah. The next project I'm working on. *Wheels of the System*."

"A part for me?" If Jasper was trying to play toward my inherent vanity, I'd have to say: Well played!

"It's not huge, but you'd be perfect for it. The scene for your character takes place on Capitol Hill." He turns from the stove to face me and snaps his fingers. "Come to think of it, that scene really needs to be shot on the Capitol grounds. Maybe you could help us get the cameras set up and everything."

"Gee, I'm not sure about that," I say. Actually, I *am* sure. There's a congressional rule that movie cameras can't film the Capitol without the permission of the Sergeant at Arms. A congressional office can file requests for permission on behalf

of certain groups, but the Sergeant at Arms office almost always denies these requests. We couldn't even get permission for Cynthia to film her own campaign commercials at the Capitol. "I think there might be some kind of law or something against filming the Capitol," I say casually over the rim of my coffee mug.

Jasper nods. "Yeah, I've heard of it. I just thought maybe with your connections..." He turns back to the stove. "No big deal. We'll probably just write that scene out if we can't get a location. It'd be too bad, though. You'd really be perfect for the part."

"I'll see what I can do," I say before I have a chance to stop myself.

"Oh man! That would be great." He says this as if it's a promise he doesn't intend to forget. He piles a heap of yellow eggs onto a plate and sets it on the table in front of me. "I'll show you the script later. Maybe you could even help with some of the political verbage in the script." I roll the eggs around my plate with a fork; my stomach heaves a familiar feeling of distress. Jasper carries two pieces of bacon over on a spatula and slides them onto my plate. "Of course, we're not shooting it yet. I'm trying to finish this short first. Then maybe I could score some financing for this next one. Know what I mean?"

I nod my head, as if I'm all too familiar with the plight of the independent filmmaker.

"With the internet and all, you can get a lot of exposure for your short films these days," he says.

"I'll bet so."

I nibble on an edge of a piece of bacon because that seems like the thing least likely to make me feel any worse. I should have said no to filming at the Capitol right away. I should have said it was impossible. Instead I've left the door open. And now I don't know how to close it.

Jasper sits down and rests one arm across his knee. With the other hand, he jerks a thumb at Spenser who's still reading the Classifieds. "Spenser here has a pretty meaty part in the short." I look at Jasper's face to see if he was making a play on words at the expense of Spenser's husky build. His countenance betrays nothing.

Spenser, however, hearing his name, rolls forward in his chair and looks over the edge of the paper. “Did you say something?”

“I was just mentioning how you have a part in the short. And how you’re also in the feature.”

Spenser nods his head. “Why are you telling me this? Like I don’t know?”

“I was telling Ethan here. And I was mentioning how I think there’s a part in the feature he’d be perfect for.”

There’s a look of realization on Spenser’s face. “Oh yes. The Capitol scene. Will he do it?”

“He’s looking into it for me.” Then Jasper gives me a quick wink. “He’s going to use some of his connections for me.”

“Splendid,” Spenser says in a perfunctory way and then goes back to the paper.

“What’re you reading?” I ask, eager to change the subject.

Spenser folds down a corner of the paper, and gives me a stare that asks: Is this guy fucking serious? Instead, he says, “The Classifieds,” and I can’t tell if he’s deadpanning it or not.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” I prod.

His face breaks into a smile and he looks like he’s answered his original unspoken question with: Yes, this guy *is* fucking serious. “I can’t believe you don’t know about the Personals, Ethan. I get all my news from them. They’re like all the entertainment you could ever need.”

“Are you fucking serious?” I ask.

“Way serious.” Spenser lets out a giggle. “All my friends talk to each other through the Personals.”

“Come on.”

“Let me show you.” He sets the paper down on the table and points to an ad in the Personals Section. “This one here: ‘Terrier—Wherefore art thou? Breaking hearts is always easy for you, but you became an even bigger shrew on Tuesday. Shall I give up the ghost?—Garfunkel.’ See, that one’s from this guy named Art who’s been dating a girl name Terry. Looks like she stood him up on a date at the Shakespeare Theater Tuesday night.” Spenser shakes his head slowly. “I’m not surprised. I never really

thought that one was going to work out. Art was always much more communicative than Terry.” Then he points out another one with his pudgy finger.

“Check this one out. ‘LOVETT—CRIME DRAMAS ARE PASSE STOP BUT IF YOU INSIST I’VE GOT A DOOZY FOR YOU STOP WAITING FOR GO-AHEAD STOP—EVEREST’ Guess who that one’s from.”

I shake my head. “I’m sure I don’t have a clue.”

“Come one. Guess.”

“Everest?”

“Just guess.”

“Okay. Um... You?”

Spenser’s eyes bulge cartoonishly. “Very good.”

“What are you saying in it?”

“I’m trying to get a hold of an associate of mine named Lyle. We work on television pilot concepts. And I’ve got a new—”

“You write television pilots?”

“I don’t write the pilots. I just think up ideas. Pitches. You know. Kind of the bare-bones outline. And then we sell those.”

“So you’re saying you have a new idea for a TV show?”

“Sure. I’ve been studying all these new crime dramas that are on TV these days and it seems like they’re all headed down this certain slope. So my show kind of beats them all to the bottom of that slope. It’s called: *Rape Squad*.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it’s about an elite group of special law enforcement agents who only investigate sex crimes.”

“Spenser, that sounds awful,” I say, momentarily forgetting propriety.

“Why would you say that?”

“Don’t you think it’s a little morbid and sick to write shows about all that stuff.”

“Yes, but I’m not *writing* the shows. I’m just thinking up the ideas. Besides, all those crime dramas are pretty much about that crap now anyway.”

“Maybe you have a point.” I take another sip of coffee. I feel bad for attacking Spenser. After all, he’s right: it *is* only an idea. It’s not as if he’s actually writing the show. “Have you had any other ideas that made it to TV?” I ask.

His face brightens. “Yeah. Have you heard of *Seinfeld*?”

“Are you kidding? That was *your* idea?”

“Not exactly. But it was my idea to have a show that was named after a person’s last name. I had an idea for a show called *Johnson*. It never made it past the pilot stage though. Then a year later, *Seinfeld* comes out. I would have sued, but they say you can’t copyright titles and names.”

“Hmm,” I say because, once again, in talking with Spenser, I have no idea what else to say.

“Anyway,” he continues, folding the pages closed, “people really get into the Personals. Remember the ad for your room?”

“Sure.”

“I placed that one.” He taps his chest proudly. “Did you notice anything special about it?” I can tell he really wants me to notice whatever was special about it, but I’m drawing a blank. I shrug.

He narrows his eyes. “It was a Haiku, dude.”

“Now that you mention it, I do remember something different about it.” A small lie, but Spenser seems heartened by it.

“Yeah, it’s a subtle art form. Haiku, that is. It works on the senses in ways that aren’t always obvious.”

“The good ones anyway,” I say. We both nod for a moment and I look down at the pile of eggs, which are still cooling, untouched on my plate.

“Classified communication is really ingenious. It’s a whole counterculture thing. A real underground movement. Know what I mean?”

I wink cautiously. “I think I totally know what you mean.”

Spenser nods. “I’ll show you the ropes later. The finer points and all.”

Later. A good point. It’s well past time for this anarchist to end breakfast and go to work.

“Aren’t you going to eat your eggs?” Jasper asks as I stand up from the table with my plate still full.

“Going to have to pass this morning, chief,” I say as I walk out of the kitchen and try to leave the scent of that cholesterol-rich breakfast behind.

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“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” It’s Brooke and she’s caught me red-handed. When I got to the office, she wasn’t at her desk, and the *Post* was just sitting there, waiting to be plundered. At the exact moment Brooke asks me what I’m doing, I’ve parted the paper and I’m withdrawing the Classifieds from their rightful spot between the Sports and Health Sections. I freeze when I hear Brooke’s cool voice.

“Nothing. I’m not doing anything.”

“That’s funny because it really looks like you’re doing something. I mean, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you look completely like you’re doing something. And that something completely involves *my* newspaper. Again.” She walks up to me and swats at my hands until I drop the Classifieds back onto her desk. “The Classifieds?” she asks when she sees what I was holding. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“It’s not what you think. I just wanted to...” nothing’s coming to mind.

“You just wanted to what?”

“I’m doing a little research.”

Brooke closes her mouth and adopts a smug look as if she’s savoring a butterscotch candy. “I see,” she says. “Like real scientific and all.”

“I’ll have to explain later.”

She moves in on me until her face is only a few inches away from mine. “Oh sure. Later,” she says. Her voice has dropped into a husky lower octave. “Everything’s later. What about now? Nothing’s ever now. A girl like me’s got to wait forever until it’s later.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d say Brooke is flirting with me. “What’s got you in such a good mood?” I ask. Brooke straightens up and clears her throat as if she’s shaking herself out of a trance.

“Nothing,” she says. “I’m just excited because we’re going to have margaritas at Tortilla Coast tomorrow after work.”

“We?”

“You, me, and Vince, silly.” Then she rolls her eyes in a girlish way. “Duh.” The way she says it, *Duh* has three distinct syllables.

“You know, it might be nice if you actually consulted me on this. Did you ever think I might actually have plans already?”

Brooke puts a hand to her stomach in an exaggerated chortle. “Now that *is* a good one. Priceless, Ethan.”

On that note, I turn and head for the door with the Classifieds under my arm. “By the way,” Brooke says after me, “that’s two dollars for the Classifieds today.”

“Two dollars?”

“Inflation,” she says. “It’s a bitch.”

I turn to look at her after she says this because I can’t quite believe I actually heard her use the word *bitch*. It’s so unlike Brooke to let the line of formality that she toes at the office slip so far. When she sees me staring at her incredulously, she puts her hand to her mouth as if she’s just let out a tiny, but audible burp. “Well?” she says defensively. “It is.” I choose not to continue this discussion and instead pull my office door closed behind me.

On my voicemail, as expected by now, is a message from Suzanne. “Hey, Loverboy, Cynthia’s coming out this afternoon but I just wanted to check on what you wanted to do about ordering those signs. Let me know, Sweet Thing.”

Loverboy? Sweet Thing? The thought of Suzanne being civil to me is disturbing enough. But *this*, this is positively petrifying. It’s too much. I press nine to erase this message as fast as I can.

I’m picking up some strange vibrations today, like the noise when the load in the washing machine starts to get out of balance. Things are starting to spin wildly around me; their axes are getting loose. Life’s mobile is heaving. Chaos is lurking. Everyone I know seems to be not what I thought they were. It’s like I woke up in some alternate universe. And, to be honest, I blame that goddamn breakfast Jasper and Spenser cooked this morning. That was the harbinger, the bringer of this anarchy.

Okay. I need to calm down. Maybe this is all in my head, the product of some demented paranoia fueled by a little bad bacon. Perhaps what I need right now is a little quiet time. A chance to relax. To that end, in the privacy of my own office, I start reading the Personals. Scanning them at first, and then actually reading them and losing myself in them.

Reginald—I keep looking for you at our intersection. The stuff you bring me is beyond compare. Let me know if there's trouble at home or abroad—T-Square

Hmm... What's the intersection? What stuff does Reginald bring? Drugs? Maybe.

SH—Where have you been? Our pet dog has stopped eating his kibbles. And you are nowhere to be found—RM

Is pet dog a metaphor? If so, what in the hell are kibbles?

Anna—I long to see you again. I know, I know, I know I owe you another moustache ride—Rainey

Okay, that one seems pretty self-explanatory.

It occurs to me that these pages are something close to approaching chaos. Literally hundreds of voices speaking about hundreds of different things. And the chance of being heard depends on so many uncontrollable variables. What if someone misses the paper one day? What if someone reads it, but doesn't understand the code? Each day is a new listing of Babel. So many languages. So little understanding.

I've never looked at the world quite this way before. And doing so now, I'm feeling a few distinct sensations. One: I feel the voyeur in me tingling deep down in my intestines. That thrill you get when you walk by someone's house at night, and – even just for a short glimpse – you are privy to a part of their life. Two: I feel a distinct hollow

of sadness forming in me like a bubble. I never knew there were so many people who talked through something so tenuous as this. All these people, so desperate to communicate, yet all they can do is rely on the fallibility and impermanence of smudgy ink on daily pulp. Three: I'm feeling an emotion I've never quite felt before. It's something beyond prurient, voyeuristic interest. More like a desire to act, to be heard. The need to reach out and touch the flow of thought and words and ink.

Before I really know what's happening, I'm acting on this third mysterious emotion. The phone is in my hand and the line is ringing.

"Post Classifieds," a clipped voice says on the other end.

"Personals please."

"Hang on." There are a few clicks and a lengthy pause before another voice comes on the line.

"Okay, shoot," it says.

"My former white flower—I miss you," I quote to the voice on the line. "Is there no chance for us? Truce? Talk?—Anarchist"

The guy takes my credit card information and hangs up without commenting on my message. I hang up. I can't believe I just did that. And I can't figure out why.

For a good portion of the rest of the morning, I try to ignore the chaos that is building outside my office. I try to transform my little room into a den of serenity. And I lose myself in the world of love, hate, sadness, loss, joy and carnal delight that is the *Washington Post Classifieds*.

Chapter Eight

My love life thus far can best be described as a series of happy endings followed by lengthy prologues that always turn out badly. My relationship with Lily was filled with endings where you could just say *stop* and finish with, ...*and they lived happily ever after*. What about the time we first kissed and she hadn't been expecting it and our teeth clinked; we laughed before kissing again. Or maybe after the first time we made love, and I realized it was the first time I didn't feel guilty after sex, and I knew that meant I was probably in love. Or perhaps our ending wouldn't have been so obviously staged. Maybe it could have been after a fine dinner, or a great conversation. Those would have made perfectly acceptable endings too. Unfortunately, there was always more to our story. And the story always got worse. Until it got to the point where we stopped having those endings altogether. After we reached that point, there was probably no hope for Lily and me.

I'm having a new ending moment right now. It's Thursday evening after work and I'm sitting across the table from Brooke on the patio of Tortilla Coast. The sun is slanting into the east but a few hot rays still linger and dance across the tabletop. Just a second ago, the waitress brought us a frosted pitcher of margaritas and set it between us. Brooke and I both reached for it at the same time and our hands momentarily glanced. We each laughed and told the other to go ahead. She poured the glasses full, we clinked and drank just slow enough to avoid a frost headache. Now that's a pretty damn good ending if you ask me. The end. Cue the music. Fadeout. Roll the credits.

Of course that's not the ending. Far from it. Sure, right now anyone walking past the outdoor patio could easily mistake us for a couple sharing an intimate evening fueled by some icy alcoholic sweetness. But the truth is, we most assuredly are *not* that couple. We are co-workers. We are friends. And we are waiting for the real boyfriend, Vince, to arrive. So you can see this scene is no happy ending. It's not even some kind of beginning. It's just a mushy middle ground. Soupy, like the pitcher of margaritas between us which is slowly melting, giving up its icy state to the warm Washington night.

“So tell me about the new place.” Brooke says this the way someone might say: *How about that weather*. She’s looking past me at the line of people filing past us on the sidewalk. I know I’m not the one she’s here for. For some stupid reason, she has chosen to give her love to Vince. And I can’t compete with that.

I wait a second to answer, to let Brooke know that I know she’s not listening. Finally, she turns back to me. “I’m so sorry, Ethan. I *am* listening, it’s just that I’m not sure if Vince can see us here.”

I’d like to say something, but I know I have no right to comment on that aspect of her life. Besides, I’m just happy to be back in her good graces after the staff meeting on Tuesday. I’ll take the Platonic Zone if that’s what she’ll give me.

“Perfectly all right, my dear,” I say. I take a sip of margarita. I can feel the comforting bite of tequila underneath the ice and sour mix. “The house is fantastic. I mean, you’re really not going to believe this place.”

“Like what?” she asks. She leans forward and rests her elbow on the table. Her jet-black hair looks golden-streaked in the sun.

“It’s three stories. And fully furnished, but I mean real adult artwork and bookcases. Not some crappy dorm room arrangement. And then – here’s the capper – it’s got this deck off the third story with a hot tub.”

“A hot tub?” She leans back in her chair abruptly.

“I’m not kidding.”

She scrunches her face. “This sounds like the Playboy Mansion. I’m going to have to start calling you Hef and offering you massages.”

We both laugh and drink our margaritas half down. Brooke picks up the pitcher with a steady hand and tops off our glasses. “And the roommates?”

This is a tougher question. It’s easier to summarize a house than it is a person, let alone three of them. Still, it surprises me how little I have to say about them, how few judgments I’m ready to make. They’re generally good people, I assume. Odd. But good. Definitely shouldn’t mention the fame thing yet. Or the movie thing. Or the Classifieds thing, now that I think about it. Don’t forget about the TV pilot thing; definitely don’t want to bring up *Rape Squad*. Okay. Maybe I shouldn’t say anything. They’re really just too weird.

“They’re some pretty odd ducks,” I say. “I’ll let you decide when you meet them. I don’t want to bias your opinion.”

“When do I get to meet them?”

“If it was up to me, never. But now that you mention it, they’re throwing a house-warming party for me this Saturday. You’re most definitely invited.”

Brooke looks at me and waits, as if she knows I’m not finished. “And Vince,” I say. “He’s obviously totally invited too.”

“Great,” she says. “I’ve always wanted to see the Playboy Mansion. And I’m sure the odd ducks will be entertaining as well.”

Somewhere during the last bit of conversation I’ve managed to half-drain my glass again, and Brooke fills it back up to the top. If I didn’t know better, I’d say Brooke is trying to get me drunk.

“When’s the poll coming out?” she asks.

The question comes from nowhere and catches me mid-margarita-sip. “Hmm?”

“The poll. For Cynthia. Isn’t that going to be done soon?”

The poll! I’m a little surprised that Brooke knows about it. It was supposed to be a tightly held secret between Cynthia, me, and the firm doing the poll. I guess I did mention it to Eric, but I highly doubt he talked to anyone about it. As far as I know, Eric doesn’t talk to anyone in the office, about anything. That’s part of why I like him so much. He has good taste. But I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised that Brooke knows about the poll. She knows about everything else in our office, usually well before I do.

The truth is, I’d actually forgotten about the poll until this moment, and now that Brooke has mentioned it, I feel a flicker of anticipation race through me, like the feeling you get as a kid the night before Christmas. “They should be done sometime this weekend. We’ll probably get the results on Monday,” I tell her.

“What’s your prediction?”

“These things are hard to read, Brooke.” I say this the way an old man starts to tell a war story. “But if I had to guess, I’d say we make a pretty good jump. I’d say we open up a five to eight point lead. If I had to bet.”

“Oh, goody,” Brooke squeals. “I can’t wait.” She claps her hands lightly. She’s no longer a grown woman; she’s no longer a professional. She’s a girl who is taking

sheer delight in the anticipation of something long-promised, like a pony. I have to fight the urge to lean across the table and kiss her.

As if in response to my improper urge, Brooke's glance slides past my shoulder and her face lights up even brighter. "Vince!" she says and stands up, nearly toppling her chair over backwards as she does so. "Oh my gosh! There he is."

Please, as if she really didn't expect him to come.

A former Indiana University basketball player and occasional model, Vince has the aura of someone who knows that all eyes in the place are on him. He strides toward our table like the Alpha Male he is. He leans across the table and they kiss for longer than necessary, and I wonder if one of them is trying to prove a point. Vince is the kind of guy who makes everyone, and I mean *everyone*, feel ugly. So, in that regard, I can see why Brooke is so ga-ga over him, and why she's able to overlook his philandering and overall assholishness. It makes pure animalistic sense. But still, it peeves me when I see her fawning over him like this.

Trailing Vince, just at his elbow, is a woman who, unbelievably, seems to hold her own with Vince. When they walked in, they looked like two hot supermodels walking down a runway in the latest his and hers business attire.

While Brooke and Vince are kissing, the supermodel he came in with stands there with her tan legs crossed and her silky-looking arms dangling uselessly at her sides. As a fellow marginalized member of this margarita party, I throw my hand out to her. "I'm Ethan," I say.

"My name is Nicole," she says. Her accent sounds vaguely Southern. But good Southern. Not country-fried. "I just started working in Vince's office."

"I work with Brooke in Congresswoman Mahoney's office." As I say this, I turn to look at Brooke because I've just realized that this is a setup. I feel a warm surge of anger toward Brooke. Manipulating demoness! How could you pull this on me?

"Oh, Nicole, I'm so glad you could join us," Brooke says in mock surprise. She hustles past me to welcome this "unexpected" guest. "Ethan and I have already gone ahead and started working on a pitcher. But it shouldn't take you guys long to catch up."

I can see a note of uncertainty in Nicole's eyes as she looks around the table and sees there will only be four of us. Clearly, she didn't know this was a setup either. But

still, that look, that slight deflation of her body posture, the way it silently registers disappointment, cuts right through my self-esteem. A beautiful woman is disappointed to discover she's been set up with me. That's not an ending to any kind of story *I'd* like to read.

As Nicole sits down she slides her hand behind her dress to keep it straight. It's a delicate gesture that she does effortlessly, flawlessly. Her skin is olive-colored. Her face has a Mediterranean flair, narrow and strong like an old-time Italian movie actress.

"So you work on the Science and... um" the rest of the committee name is slipping my mind right now.

"and Space Committee. That's right." She nods and takes a sip of her margarita.

"And what do you do there?"

"I just started," she says blankly. From her vacant, shark-like stare, I can't tell whether she's stupid or just fucking with me. Either way, I can play that game.

"So what do you think you'll do when you finish starting?" I ask.

She exhales upwards and her frosted bangs flutter stiffly. "Mostly clerical shit. I'm an assistant to one of our legislative aides."

That's a little better. "So you haven't been working on the Hill very long then."

"No. I just got to DC a month ago. I just graduated, like, this past winter."

Oh man. She's young. How young exactly is open for debate. Her face looks like it's seen some wear, but now that I look a little closer, I can see some hints that she might be on the very early side of her twenties. Her posture is slouchy, as if she's used to the relaxed atmosphere of classrooms and keg parties. And her toenails, which I can see through her sandals, are painted a red so dark it's almost black. And while this is at once sexy, it definitely belies a certain youthfulness.

"So, Ethan, what is it you do in Brooke's office?" Nicole asks as if she's finally given up on the hope that I might ever ask an interesting question.

"I'm the chief of staff," I say. Nicole's eyes widen slightly in an expression of surprise that may or may not be a practiced reaction. Brooke, hearing me mention my job, leans into the space between Nicole and me.

"Well you two seem to be chatting up quite a storm. Don't you think so, Vince?"

Vince nods and leans forward so that it looks like the four of us are praying over our margaritas. God, please make Brooke stop doing this. I love her, but I might have to never speak to her again if she doesn't shut up! Amen.

"So how did you become a chief of staff? At your age?" Nicole asks with a note of what I take to be genuine interest.

I start off on a long explanation that includes too much detail and too much self-serving autobiographical information before I realize I'm about to lose her, so I sum up with, "Basically, you can't be afraid to piss people off."

"That's pretty fucking good advice," Nicole says. She takes another long swig of her margarita and licks the slush off her lips. Her tongue is deep red like her painted toenails.

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After the second pitcher is killed and before the third pitcher arrives, I slip away from the table to use the restroom. As I stand at the urinal, swaying slightly on a nice buzz, I see a guy at the sink staring at me through the mirror as he washes his hands. At first I return my gaze to the safe zone you're supposed to stare at when using a urinal, but a second later, I look back and he's still watching me. I don't recognize him. He's wearing a suit and tie. A pretty decent suit and tie. Better than mine anyway.

When I finish going, the guy dries his hands but doesn't leave. I zip up and head to the sink. As I turn on the faucet, I see him reaching his hand toward me. I turn on him quickly, expecting him to produce a gun or a knife, and then demand my money, my credit card, my keys, certain liberties. I don't know, something!

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I say back.

"You that guy sitting at that table on the patio?" He shifts his body awkwardly as if the floor just moved on him and he leans his hip against the counter.

"I'm not sure what—"

"With Nicole Titian."

"I guess so. Her name is Nicole."

“You are one rat bastard, dude.” He leans his hand in a pool of water on the counter. “I’ve been lusting after her since she moved here.”

I square my shoulders and get ready for him to spring on me. “Okay?”

He nods slowly as if he’s appreciating the taste of something. “Dude, can I shake your hand?” He folds my hand in both of his own cold, wet hands. “I don’t know how you do it, man,” he says. “But you totally scored. A guy like you scores, it gives me hope.” Then he turns on his heel and leaves without saying another word and without looking back. I wash my hands with soap before leaving the bathroom.

I find Brooke standing against a wall outside the bathroom. She’s staring back out at the patio.

“Aren’t you the little trickster,” I say before she sees me.

Brooke breathes in sharply, then touches her chest. “Oh my gosh. Ethan, it’s you.”

“You *should* be scared. There’s a lot of weirdoes in this place.

She looks at me for a second. “What’s that supposed to mean? You don’t like her?”

“Nicole? No. Of course I do. I was talking about... Forget it. I like her. In the future, though, would it kill you to give me some advanced notice before setting me up?”

“Oh, Ethan, you’re such a doll. That makes me so happy that you like her.” I can see she’s fighting back an urge to hug me.

“I wouldn’t mind knowing exactly how *old* she is.”

Brooke bites her lip. “You know, I’m not sure. But you know what? You need to date someone younger for once. You need to date someone who’s fun for once.”

“Are you saying Lily wasn’t fun?”

Brooke looks back out at the patio again. “No, of course I’m not saying that.” When she fixes her gaze back on my eyes, squarely on me, I feel a tilt of vertigo, like I’m falling toward her. “It’s not Lily, it’s you. You’re different. You’re...”

“Handsome? Charming? Handsome?”

“Weird.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No, but good weird,” she says. “*Charming* weird.”

I feel very strongly like kissing Brooke right now. The full force of my attraction to her is pulling and I can't help myself. I lean in closer and she holds her ground. "What would I do without you, Brooke?"

She grabs hold of my hand and squeezes. "Hey, that's what friends are for," she says. Then she looks back out at the patio, and I see a panic-stricken tremor cross her face. She drops my hand.

Outside at our table, Vince is leaning in close to Nicole and she's laughing at something he says. They seem so natural together, like two models in a pod. Both so gorgeous, a perfect fit. They make Brooke and I look like a pair of old shoes. It is then that I realize Brooke's desire to set me up with Nicole has an ulterior purpose. Certainly my happiness is a consideration, but getting the beautiful, leggy Nicole off the market is the real prize. The temptation of having a single Nicole working with Vince would be too much for the wayward boyfriend. Clever, Brooke. Yet sad too. It pains me to see Brooke so vulnerable. She shouldn't have to worry about things like that. If she were dating me she wouldn't have to. But don't get me started on that. I am a man who knows his place. She has chosen to love Vince. And as long as that is the case, this friend will be there for her.

Brooke turns back to me with a pleading look and she doesn't have to say anything. I nod. We walk back outside and take our seats at the table. And I proceed to be as charming as I know how.

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The rest of the evening goes well enough. Nicole fluctuates between mild interest and complete disdain, and by the time it's over, she, along with Brooke and Vince, will be coming to my housewarming party on Saturday. All things considered, I'd say I did pretty well for myself. And for Brooke.

As Vince drives me home, Nicole's hand slithers around the backseat, finds mine and grabs hold. Her hand twists and squirms in mine until it feels like two snakes mating on the seat between us. I know I certainly don't understand this fickle, unpredictable woman. But I have to admit it's enjoyable trying.

When Vince pulls up to my place I can feel Nicole shift ever-so-slightly away from me. Obviously there will be no good-night kiss. Maybe she's trying to tell me she isn't easy. All part of the dating game, I suppose. I open my door and plant one foot outside so that Nicole knows it's safe, and she slides back to a more friendly position on the seat.

"Is that your house?" Nicole asks, leaning almost into my shoulder now.

"I rent it with some housemates," I say.

"Still. That whole house?" she asks.

"Yep," I say, getting fully out of the car just as my desirability quotient is reaching a new peak. Oh yes! I may have just broken up with my girlfriend of three years, but I still know how to play these little games, sweet Nicole.

"It's really spectacular-looking," Brooke chimes in from the passenger seat. "At least from the outside."

I squat down so I'm eye-level with the car. "I assure you it's even better on the inside," I say with measurable pride in my voice.

I wave goodnight and Vince's car pulls slowly away.

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I lie in bed for a minute or two before I begin to pick up the sound of voices in the dark. I hold my breath to hear more clearly, unsure if the sounds are margarita-induced hallucinations or true visitors from the spirit world. Perhaps it's the ghost of relationships past coming to haunt me for this whole Nicole thing.

Then very clearly I hear a woman's voice cry out, "Oh shit!" I throw on a t-shirt and walk out onto the deck where I can hear the sound of the hot tub motor bubbling and Jasper talking.

"Hey there, roomie," he says and makes an exaggerated wave when he sees me. His mannerisms are loose and I think he's either drinking, or on something. His left arm is draped over a woman who looks like she stepped straight out of a cocktail dress and into the hot tub. Through the miasma of percolating hot tub water, I think I see a nipple and I'm trying to figure out if she's wearing anything at all. "Sorry if we bothered you,"

Jasper says. "But Celine here dropped her champagne glass in the hot tub. Luckily no breakage, though." He overly accents the *i* in her name, as if this is one of her more important human attributes.

Celine's makeup has started to slide down her face like some kind of scale model of environmental erosion. Tiny black rivulets stream down her cheeks and plink into the water.

"Nice to meet you, Celine. I'm Ethan." I reach down to shake her hand.

She turns to Jasper. "Is he joking?"

Jasper lets out a laugh that sounds like a hoot. "Ha! Isn't she great, Ethan? And she was telling me earlier that she isn't funny. Can you believe that?"

"I definitely can't believe that," I say.

Jasper and Celine laugh into their pruny hands. I'm getting the feeling there's more to this conversation than I'm getting. There's some inside joke I don't know about, and somehow I'm playing right into the butt of it. This makes me think there are a lot of conversations lately that I'm not understanding. Perhaps everyone is having some kind of big laugh behind my back. Nay, right to my face! And I'm too stupid to notice it. This sensation, coupled with the intimidating fact that I'm now fairly sure Celine isn't wearing anything, makes me think it's time to get some sleep.

"By the way," Jasper calls out over the roar of the hot tub motor. "I set the *Wheels of the System* script on your desk. Did you see it?"

"No. But I'll check it out tomorrow."

"Fair enough," he says and his hand disappears below the surface of the water. "Oh, by the way, you got a phone call tonight. Someone. A Marigold, or Iris. Or Lily. Said for you to call her when you get a chance. Said you'd know the number."

I raise my hand and wave to let Jasper know I heard him, but I don't say anything. I can't say anything. I am physically incapable of uttering one word. My throat is dry and my mind is blank. I stumble back into my room and throw myself onto my bed. Almost instantaneously I fall into a zombie-like, dreamless sleep. I don't even hear Jasper and Celine pad back into the house, as they surely must have done at some point during the course of that black night.

Chapter Nine

My cell phone starts ringing just as I'm walking out of my bedroom. There are many reasons why I should probably *not* pick it up – namely that every time I *do* pick it up, something bad happens. Still – call it a death wish – I grab the phone and pick up.

“I hope I'm not bothering you, sir. This is Eric Wright, from the office.” He says this as if he expects me not to remember him.

“Hey, Easy. What's up?”

“Yes, well I was just calling to say that I might not make it to your party tonight.”

“Is it because you hate me, Easy?”

“No, sir. That's not it at all.”

“Then, why? Why, why, why!?” I can already tell Eric isn't taking my feigned histrionics the right way.

“Well, sir, it's kind of... Um, okay. It's because I kind of have a date.”

“Hey, that's fantastic.” I'm so surprised to find out that Eric actually has a date that I forget to pretend to be hurt.

“You're not upset?” he asks.

“Obviously I wish you were coming, Easy. But a date is a perfectly good excuse to not come.”

“I see.”

“Take note, Easy. Sometime in the near future you and I are going to get drunk together.”

I hear the smacking sound of Eric chewing on his lips as he tries to digest what he's just heard his boss say to him.

“Do we have a deal, Easy?”

“I suppose so. It's a deal, sir.”

The fact is I would like to chat with Eric over a few drinks. I really like the kid, and I'd like to give him a little guidance, the kind of help you can't administer in a state of complete sobriety. I'd explain the lessons that the Apocalypse Project was supposed to teach him, and which I suppose are not sinking in.

“Good. Then have fun on your date, Easy. And, hey! Wear a rubber for Christ’s sake!” There’s only a dial tone after I say this and I wonder if he hung up before I said it, or if Eric, unable to account for his boss’s extremely bizarre behavior, hung up on me.

When I realize he’s gone, I can’t help but feel a little depressed. Eric is about the only person from the office who I’d actually hoped would come to this party. At the last minute on Friday I sent out an e-mail invitation to the entire staff, kind of a digital olive branch. From the second I clicked *send*, I regretted it. I regretted it because I realized that, for the first time in a while, my personal and professional lives were about to come face to face. Normally I keep these two facets of my life clearly discrete. Lily rarely came to office functions, and she only knew a few people in the office, like Brooke, in passing. And that was the way I preferred it. I guess it’s a matter of not wanting to mix anarchies. My personal life is chaos, and my professional life is chaos too. If I were to combine those two chaotic systems, god knows what kind of shit I’d be in.

The looming prospect of my coworkers showing up at my house is just adding to the general state of unease I’ve felt for the past few days. I know on paper it seems as if things should finally be settling down for me. But I can’t shake that nervousness I’ve felt since Jasper and Spenser cooked breakfast on Thursday. Everything I’ve seen these past few days has been like another sign that bad shit was on the way. It’s like living through your own personal Book of Revelations.

The first floor of the house is already starting to fill up when I walk downstairs. Pockets of people are chatting and laughing in the corners of the rooms. I make my way around the house, drifting from group to group, listening in on conversations without participating, and then moving on after a few minutes. No one knows who I am, so no one expects me to say anything. I enjoy this anonymity, the ability to be a chameleon. I can observe. Bear witness.

Right now I’m standing in a group of four people and one guy is half-way through telling a story about the making of some movie. The story-teller has a smug jollity about him, as if, given a high-quality cheese and a good Bordeaux, he could be happy anywhere. He has an effete pudginess about him that he wears proudly as he talks.

“So Copolla was like, Oh my god, how am I going to finish this fucking movie when all my actors are going seriously fucking crazy. Like clinical crazy.” He’s waving

his hands wildly at his sides and the people listening are laughing. “So he’s like, All right, let’s just go with it. I’ll film them being crazy.”

I step forward, for the first time asserting myself into the story circle. “Hey, do any of you know if *Apocalypse Now* was theatrically released in Vietnam?” My voice comes out louder than I would have liked. Much louder.

The members of the circle look at me as if I’ve just passed bad gas. Then they look at each other. No one says anything for a while. Finally the chunky story-teller resumes his wild arm flapping. “Anyway,” he says, “the rest is film-making history.”

I take this opportunity to leave this circle of people. But it strikes me that that was the fourth time in four separate conversations, where four different people told an anecdote that ended with, ...*and the rest is such-and-such history*. In the place of such-and-such, they used the following words: *marketing, movie, television* and now *film-making*. It seems odd that so many anecdotes would spontaneously end that way. And for the briefest second the thought occurs to me that I could be drunk or hallucinating. Even though I know I’m neither. Quite simply, this phenomenon is the product of the *kind* of people at this party. They are the *kind* of people who end stories like they’re Paul Harvey, which makes me very glad that I generally don’t associate with this *kind* of people.

“There you are, hoss.” It’s Jasper. He’s caught me before I have a chance to float into my fifth conversation. I was really looking forward to the fifth one to see if I could keep the ending streak alive. But he grabs my shoulder and seems to want to chat. He hands me a martini, then surveys the room in a predatory way. “What do you think of the fiesta so far?”

“Definitely loco,” I say. I take a sip of the martini and it makes me shiver. “No question.”

“Loco. Ha! You kill me, man.” When he laughs, his forehead creases down the center in a vertical line. Another trait I never noticed before, and probably won’t notice again. “So, did you get a chance to read the script yet?”

Shit, the script! “You know what, man. I’ve been totally swamped at work. I’m planning on reading it tomorrow.”

“Relax, dude.” He rests his hand on my shoulder. “It’s no big thing. Like I said, you have some time before we start shooting.” He’s smiling now, but he has one of those hurt-looking smiles that’s so easy to see through.

“How long before you start on the next one?”

Jasper gets a far away look and then swirls his martini glass once. “Tough to say. Right now, the magic eight ball says: The future is unclear.”

“Are you two talking movies?” Spenser says, sidling up to us.

“Just slightly,” I say.

Spenser is holding two martinis and he hands me one. I now have one in each hand. Is there a martini factory somewhere around here that I don’t know about? I throw back my first one and set the empty glass on a coffee table.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say old Ethan here doesn’t like *Wheels of the System*.” Jasper playfully cuffs me on the shoulder as he says this. Spenser looks at me as if I’ve pissed on a sacred relic.

“I haven’t read it yet. That’s all. It’s been a hell of a week.” I know my voice sounds too defensive, but I can’t help it. “I’ll read it tomorrow.”

“I’m just teasing,” Jasper says. “Giving you a hard time. Hazing the new guy. The circle of life and all that crap.”

“I’m sure I’ll love the script. When I read it.”

“Oh, you definitely will. No question whatsoever.” He waves a feathering gesture with his hand and part of his martini spills on his pants.

Then Jasper leans in close as if he’s about to tell me a secret. “With my reputation, you know, from the band and all, that carries some truck with the boys at the studios. I can’t afford to attach my name to any old bullshit product.”

I nod gravely. “Definitely not your garden variety bullshit product, anyway.”

Jasper and Spenser look slightly confused for a second before going back to scanning the crowd. Then Jasper snaps his fingers. “By the way, Spenser, we need to talk about shooting tomorrow.”

Spenser’s pudgy face withers and it looks like he might start crying. “Are you joking me?”

“No. We need to re-shoot the mall scene.”

“The mall scene? That’s the one scene I never wanted to have to shoot again. I thought we had it in the can already.”

“We did, but the lighting turned out all fucked up.”

“Again? Man, when are you going to get it right?” Spenser’s face is red and beads of sweat are shining on his cheeks. I stare deeply into the bottom of my martini glass. I’m really wishing I could be at another conversation right now. Even if that meant hearing another story with a Paul Harvey ending.

Like a wish coming true, Miranda materializes from somewhere and steps between the two combatants. “All right, boys. Time to hit the showers.” She puts her arm around my shoulder. “Ethan and I are practically ready to be embalmed listening to you guys jabber.” Miranda’s face looks pinched, but it has a regal air that strikes me as sexy. She hands her glass to Spenser. “You could be a dear and get me another drink.” Then she turns to Jasper. “And you’d be my hero if you’d go change the music. This CD has played through twice and people are starting to talk.”

Jasper and Spenser accept these errands with humility and disappear into the swelling crowd. Miranda turns to me and makes a wide sweeping gesture of her hand. “I love those boys, but Jesus Christ, they can be annoying.”

I figure it’s best not to get lured into trashing my housemates at this juncture, no matter how much I may agree with her. So instead I make a noncommittal gesture and say, “What are you gonna do?”

“I suppose so,” she says.

“Do you have a part in the movie, or the short, or whatever they’re calling it?” I ask.

Miranda snorts a laugh and looks at me. There’s a feral quality to her mouth. I can see it now; her teeth are sharp, dangerous-looking. “Don’t tell me you’re serious.”

“Why would I not be serious?”

“Listen, I put up a good show. And I can be a trooper if I have to be. But I don’t buy into this fame shit. Jasper’s got this idea we’re like the Superfriends or something. Each of us with our own special fame-power. He can daydream and fuck around all he wants, but that’s all it is.” Miranda must read something on my face because she touches

my forearm and softens her voice. “Don’t get me wrong, they’re sweet guys. But you have to admit there’s something pretty fucked up about their mentality.”

“So why are you here?”

“Have you looked at this house we’re living in? Let me assure you, there is no better deal in all of DC. Besides, those two clowns are fun to be around.” She looks around the room to make sure no one is listening. “Trust me, if you can at all help it, don’t get roped into helping out with Jasper’s movies. It’s a huge waste of time.”

“I think it’s too late,” I say.

“He already got his hooks into you?”

“Maybe.”

“Looks like you’re up shit creek without a paddle, my friend.” She laughs as if she’s already at the I-told-you-so stage.

“Well, I guess this is a little bit of a surprise,” I finally say.

“Don’t kid me, Ethan. You should have known better. I only voted for you because I thought you were smart enough to see through their bullshit. God knows you weren’t even close to making it in on your fame alone. At least not in my book.” She jabs a finger into my gut the way you’d poke the Pillsbury Doughboy. And I can’t tell if it’s playful, or flirtatious, or some kind of warning.

I have to say I’m a little put out by her insinuation. I have more of a claim to fame than she does. All she did was fall down a damn well. A long time ago. How hard can that be? Certainly no harder than juggling chaos and winning elections. Not by a long shot. I consider wading into that argument. But what’s the point? What would I gain? I’d just as soon stay in Miranda’s good graces. After all, she’s shaping up to be the most normal housemate I have.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Brooke making her way through the crowd. She sees me and waves.

“Friend of yours?” Miranda asks.

“Coworker.”

“Check.” She smiles her feral smile, which I still can’t quite interpret. “She’s cute,” she says.

“I suppose so. If that’s the way your tastes run.”

Brooke finally breaks through the crowd and puts her hand on my shoulder. “Ethan, have you seen Vince?” she asks.

“No. He’s not with you?”

“He was. And so was Nicole. And now I can’t find either of them.”

“Well, I’m sure they’ll turn up,” I say. “In the meantime, Brooke, I’d like you to meet Miranda.” I hold my hands out to each of them. “Housemate, meet coworker. Coworker, meet housemate.” They nod curtly and look in other directions. Somewhere I can hear the sound of my worlds colliding, planets smashing together like wrecking balls.

“Looking for your boyfriend?” Miranda asks.

“Hardly,” Brooke mumbles. “If he wants to show, he’ll show.”

“Maybe you should try a leash,” Miranda says. I think this is an attempt at humor, but it’s clear Brooke doesn’t get it.

“Thanks for the tip,” she says coolly. “I’ll remember that.” She gives a sarcastic half-smile then drops it quickly so Miranda knows it’s fake.

“Well, on that note,” Miranda says, exhaling, “I think I’d better get another drink. Or at least figure out where my last one disappeared to.” She turns stiffly and leaves me alone with Brooke.

“What the hell is *her* problem?” Brooke asks, still scanning the crowd for Vince.

“You know you didn’t have to be so rude to my new housemate.”

“Oh, what? Now you’re going to take *her* side?” she says and jabs me in the gut with her finger.

This is exactly why I didn’t want these two worlds in the same house. Brooke and Miranda don’t hit it off and suddenly *I’m* the asshole. Now that’s fair. “I’m not taking sides, Brooke. I’m just—”

“Listen, Ethan. I don’t have time to chitchat. Vince and I got into a fight tonight and now I can’t find him. Or Nicole.” She shows me those icy-blue assassin eyes that tell me this is the Business-Brooke, the professional, the woman who isn’t fucking around, not one bit.

“Do you want some help or something?”

“Forget it. I’ll find him myself.” She walks into the crowd, scanning the faces.

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Eventually, Brooke does find Vince. She finds him and they make up and by the end of the night, they're leaning into each other and talking baby talk with their mouths two inches apart. I suppose there is something empowering about the fact that Brooke can bring this specimen of pure manhood to the brink of such public humiliation, but to know that he can so easily wipe out that illusion of power infuriates me. Vince has brought Brooke to her knees before. And he will again.

Nicole eventually shows up too. She's distant for most of the night and then finally leaves around midnight.

"I think she's not feeling well, Ethan," Vince says after Nicole leaves.

"Yeah, you definitely shouldn't blame yourself," Brooke chimes in. "I think she really likes you. Isn't that right, Vince?"

"Oh hell yes," he says.

I'm feeling rather ambivalent about Nicole at the moment. I tried half-heartedly to make conversation with her for the first half hour or so, but finally gave up when she kept responding with one and two word answers. I tried playing a game where I'd see how long both of us could go without saying anything. To her credit, Nicole is impervious to uncomfortable silences. Not once did she break it. It was always me that snapped first. Once we went as long as fifteen minutes staring at each other, saying nothing. I honestly think she could have gone the whole night without saying a word to me. Now *that's* endurance. Or something like endurance. I guess.

When she finally left, it was a relief. I was glad to see her hot ass leave. Brooke and Vince left about a half hour after Nicole. I was glad to see them leave too, as their newfound lovey-doveyness was really starting to chafe.

The party is winding down now; a few people still linger, their talk rich with alcohol. I slump into one of the wingback chairs in the living room. It occurs to me that no one from the office, other than Brooke, showed up tonight. I can't say I'm too surprised, nor do I care for that matter. Still, my housemates probably think I'm the least popular person in this city. If I had more energy, I'd probably care about that as well. But I don't. Not now anyway.

As I sit there, I stare across the room at a bookcase. There's a book on the shelf whose title stands out from the others. It catches my eye. I stand to get a closer look.

My Own Damn Way: The Tom Arnold Story.

The other books on the shelf are leather-bound copies of reissued classics. On one side of Tom is *The Great Gatsby*. On the other side is Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Now there's a literary threesome.

I pull Tom off the shelf and heft him. He's heavy; at least two inches thick. The picture on the cover is a waxy portrait of Tom. And, oddly, he's sitting in a wingback chair remarkably like the one I was just in. He has a queer smile on his face as if the chair thing is a joke he's playing on me and enjoying.

I wonder if he really wrote this book himself. I'll bet Dewey would get a kick out of guessing that one. Good old Dewey. For some reason, I'm missing him right now. Even if he *does* hate me. I bet he'd have some choice things to say about my new housemates. I'd let him drink a little whiskey or smoke a little dope and then just let him hold court. That would pick up my spirits. Come to think of it, I should probably give Dewey something for letting me crash on his futon. It's the least I could do. I glance around the room to see if anyone's looking. Then, acting on some primordial impulse, I shove the book into my shirt and head past the few remaining guests at the party.

I open the door to my bedroom upstairs, and I'm greeted by a thick cloud of cigarette smoke. There's someone standing near the door to the deck.

I hear, "Jesus Christ! What took you so long?" My stomach implodes on itself.

"Nicole? Is that you?"

"Yes, of course it is. Didn't you get my signal?"

"Uh."

"I gave you a nudge. You were supposed to ditch Brooke and Vince and meet me up here. You were nodding like you understood." Her southern accent seems to come and go. "What did you think, I was just staring at you down there?"

"Kind of."

"You are a daft one, I swear."

"I think I just missed all the signs. Altogether."

“No shit, Sherlock.” Nicole drops her cigarette butt into a glass and the embers sizzle before they snuff out. “What do you got there?” she asks, pointing to the boxy bulge in my shirt. “You shoplifting something from your own house?”

“Something like that.” I slide the book out of my shirt. There’s something about having Nicole alone in my room that has me profoundly unsettled. I think when we’re together with Vince and Brooke, it all feels much more tame, controlled. But this, this could actually lead to something.

Nicole walks slinkily across the room and takes the book out of my hands. “Tom Arnold. He’s a pretty funny guy. I love that movie, what was that? *True Lies*.”

Before I think, I speak. “I hated that movie.”

“Oh?”

“Seriously, in addition to being stupid, it was racist and sexist. And stupid.”

“Well excuse me for living.” Nicole tosses the book back to me and rolls her eyes like a teenager angry with her father.

Oh great. Think, *then* speak. Bad, Ethan. Bad. Try again. “I mean, you know, it did have some good action scenes.” Nicole wanders over toward my bed and looks up at the skylight.

What to say now? Something. Some-thing. Anything. “Have you had a good evening?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Not bad. Went out to dinner with Brooke and Vince earlier. *That* was a treat.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, first of all, Vince totally wants to fuck me.”

“Have you?” It is some jealous impulse that makes me ask it, no matter how out of line it is. Nicole seems nonplused.

“Fuck no. I mean. No, I haven’t.”

Whatever flash of jealousy I just felt, abandons me quickly. I suddenly feel bad for accusing Nicole of sleeping with Vince. I should be commiserating with her, I should be the good listener. “He seems like the type,” I say, hoping she’ll just agree with me.

“And then there’s the whole issue of dealing with Vince and Brooke together,” she says. “Those two are like hot and cold. One minute they’re sucking face, the next minute they’re ready to poison each other’s water glasses.”

“I see.” I try to imagine this picture. The three of them sitting at the table, the manic Vince and Brooke vacillating between bliss and utter hatred. The bored Nicole caught in the middle. “Must’ve been awful,” I say.

“You don’t know the half of it.”

We face each other in silence and I realize I’ve run out of things to say. There is not one thing on this earth that I have left to say to this beautiful woman in my bedroom. Thank god we had those silent contests at the party or we would have exhausted our cache of talk even earlier. Come on, Ethan. What do guys talk about when they have beautiful girls alone in their bedrooms these days?

“So what restaurant did you go to?” I ask.

Nicole sits down on my bed and tucks one leg up under her. The other leg dangles off the edge and she swings it in a slow arc. “Some new place in Georgetown. The Seven Seas.”

“Good?”

“Well, I love seafood.” She giggles at this as if seafood were a guilty indulgence. “So I’m fairly picky. But it was definitely in the decent range.”

“You love seafood, huh? I got a question for you. Everywhere I go, I see this Chilean Sea Bass on the menu. What I want to know is how they can tell the sea bass is actually from Chile. Maybe it’s a Peruvian sea bass that just happens to be visiting relatives off the coast of Chile. Or what if they catch an Argentinean sea bass in international waters? Do they throw it back? Because I’ve never heard of Argentinean sea bass before.” God, please help me. Please give me a massive aneurysm that kills me immediately before I can be any stupider. Amen.

Nicole, for her part, does a fairly good job of pretending to be genuinely perplexed by my question. “I’m not really sure how they gauge it,” she says. Then she uncreases her forehead, leans back on the bed and pats the space next to her. “You know, Ethan, you’re kind of a funny guy?”

“Really?”

“Funny in a weird sort of way. And daft. Don’t forget daft.” I sit down next to her so our hips are touching. She drapes her hand across my thigh and we both pretend it’s not there. It occurs to me that we have now reached a point where what we say to each other is irrelevant. We are too far along in this process for any of this banter to matter. I could say anything right now and it wouldn’t stop what’s happening.

“So you say I’m funny,” I say. “Like, I’m really funny?” I want to hear her say it one more time. This gorgeous woman, in my bed, inches from my face, and I want to hear her flatter me. Now that’s fucked up!

“I’d say funny,” she says through her teeth. “With a high weirdness element.”

“Same with you,” I say, just before leaning in and kissing her.

She responds to my kiss. She has strong lips that grapple with mine for dominance. It occurs to me that Lily never kissed this way. Her kisses were soft and tender. Thoughtful. I loved kissing Lily. Even toward the end, when things got really bad, that was something I could always look forward to. But it would be wise not to think of that right now. Correction, I would have to be *crazy* to think of that now.

What does cross my mind is the complete irrationality of this coupling that is taking place. I’m no dummy. The equations speak for themselves.

Nicole = Really Gorgeous Girl + Just Starting Out on Capitol Hill

Ethan = Okay-looking, Gawky Guy + Chief of Staff With The Ability To Hire Those Just Starting Out on Capitol Hill

The numbers don’t lie. And I’m not fooling myself either. This is a unique position, one that I’ve never been in before. And, if I ever had imagined being in this kind of situation, I would have guessed that I’d have a lot more moral misgivings than I have right now. Because, frankly, I have none. I know I’ll feel bad later. But right now, I can only feel the smooth contours of Nicole’s body as I run my hand down the outside of her dress.

Nicole pushes me down onto the bed and stands up. She doesn’t say a word. She slides the straps of her dress off her shoulders and lets it drop. Then she wriggles out of

her panties in a compulsory way, as if a nurse just told her to strip because the doctor would be in to see her in a minute. Her dark bush is trimmed into a neat little V of a landing strip.

Nicole climbs on top of me and straddles me with her long brown legs and begins working at my pants. And the rest, as they say, the rest is sexual history.

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Nicole is weird, insisting on bizarre little games of foreplay. Easing, coaxing, petting, and then stopping. At points she seems to enter mystical trances where she chants a rhythmic stream of invective. “Fuckin’ A Do That Shit You Dirty Dog.” Being with her is like being with something I can barely control, like trying to reel in a fish that’s too big. By the time we finish, expired and lifeless, it’s nearly 4:30 and I’ve rounded the corner, past tired into wide-awake. Nicole is an unmoving shell in the bed next to me, and if it weren’t for her shallow rabbit-like breathing, I might have guessed that she was dead.

I reach out and touch Nicole’s body. Her skin is hot to the touch, but soft like a leather car seat. I slide my finger down between her breasts and spread my palm flat across her stomach. I tap my fingers and it makes a hollow drum sound. Then something in her gut shifts. I hear a gurgle, feel a tiny tremor ripple under my hand. And with the force of a punch on the chin, it hits me that all her internal organs are churning away in there, and I – stupid, stupid, stupid me – did not wear a condom. What was I thinking? Like a stupid guy, I didn’t even ask, I just assumed she was on the pill, or had one of those devices tucked up inside her, or something. What if she isn’t, or doesn’t, or didn’t? What then, Ethan? I feel a sick cramp in my own gut. I pull my hand off her stomach and double over in pain. I’m now face to face with her belly. I see little blonde wisps of hair on her skin.

I remember reading somewhere that each sperm was once thought to be a tiny fully formed man, a Homunculus, which would eventually grow into a child. As I peer at Nicole’s stomach, I try to envision her inner workings, to see my sperms swimming in pearled-drop formation through the plumbing of Nicole’s reproductive tract. I can

picture them, my little Aquamen, decked out in scuba gear, using their fishy telepathy to communicate, to organize, to find the egg.

Another wave of cramps hits me, and I roll out of bed and onto the floor. I lie there, forcing myself to breathe deeply, trying to put these thoughts out of my mind. But instead they take root and grow. Guilt. Terrible wracking guilt that rivals the cramps for sheer pain. I want to cry, cry to my maker. This is not what I wanted for my life. I didn't want to be some kind of dirt bag who takes advantage of his position in order to fuck a girl who wouldn't have anything to do with him otherwise. And to top it off I leave her with a little Ethan Pascal to remember me by. Great, dude. Fucking great.

Okay, get a hold of yourself, Ethan. You need a mantra, a phrase, something you can say to put your mind at ease, to let yourself know it's going to be all right. You need perspective. As if in response to this plea, my cell phone starts ringing. And, desperately needing some kind of diversion, I pick it up.

"I hope I didn't wake you." It's Suzanne and I can tell by her voice she actually hopes she did wake me.

"I was already up."

"Really?" She sounds surprised. "What for?"

"The usual. Contemplating my sins. You know."

"Are you sitting down?"

"I always sit down when I'm doing my heavy contemplating."

"Because the poll results are in."

I don't say anything and Suzanne seems to understand that the fucking around is over.

"We dropped," she says.

"What?"

"A lot."

"What?"

"Forty-five to forty."

"What?"

"I'm not kidding, Ethan. I wish I were. Claiborne's numbers climbed a little and ours fucking tanked."

I am a balloon popping. I am the Hindenberg exploding.

“Are you there?” she asks into the growing silence.

I grunt incoherently by way of response.

“I couldn’t believe it either,” she goes on, “but I went back and checked the figures.”

“Of course you did,” I say.

“So what do we do now?”

“What do we do now? How about polish up our resumes,” I say. “That’s about all we *can* do now.”

“Ethan, it’s not over yet. There’s more than a month left until the election.”

“Suzanne, you’re a smart woman. You should know what this really means. An incumbent falls behind like this, this late in the game, it’s over. Especially with the money we have.”

“Well, that’s a really fucking great attitude!” she shouts into the receiver. “What a bold leader you’ve turned out to be.”

“Listen, I’ve got to go right now, Suzanne,” I say. “We can talk later if you really think there’d be some point to it.”

“So that’s it? You’re just going to turn tail and run?”

“Yes,” I say. And before she can ask any more annoying questions, I hang up the phone.

A second later, it rings again and I pick up.

“By the way, we got a ton of boxes sent to headquarters yesterday. They’re addressed to you and they’re from some printing company in Maryland.”

My stomach clenches, and another set of cramps rips through me and down my bowels so that I seriously think I might shit my pants. “Don’t touch them!” I shout over the phone. “Don’t even move them.”

“What do you want me to do with them?”

“Nothing.”

“I can’t just leave them where they are now.”

“I’m coming out there on Monday. Tomorrow. I’ll take care of it when I get in.”

“Fine,” she says. This time it’s Suzanne’s turn to hang up on me. I put the phone down on the floor next to me.

Then I hear Nicole stirring in the bed. She sits up and lifts her arms in a feline stretch. “What are you doing on the floor, silly?” she asks.

“Oh, you know, contemplating my sins. The usual.”

Just as she’s leaning down to kiss my forehead, the phone rings for the third time that morning. “What is it now?” I huff into the mouthpiece.

“First of all, fuck you for that attitude!” You would think that it’s Suzanne calling back for the third time. But if you did think that, you’d be wrong. This voice is familiar, one that I haven’t heard in a while. “And second of all, fuck you for not calling me back after *I* reached out to *you!*” And now I’ve got it. It’s Lily. The first time I’ve heard her voice live in over three weeks. “I just don’t understand why you have to hurt me so badly. I deserve better than this. But at least now I know who you are. I used to chalk this kind of thing up to you being forgetful, or me expecting too much from you. But now I see it’s just that you’re the most self-centered, egotistical, refuse-to-grow-up person I know. You are the King of Dickheads.”

She’ll get no argument from me on those points. Yet the fact that I didn’t call back is a little more complex than that. When Jasper gave me the message, I put the idea that she wanted to talk into a box and I left it on a back shelf somewhere. And it sat there. It’s not that I didn’t think about it. I did! A lot. It’s just that every time I *did* think about it, it wasn’t the right time to call, or I wasn’t quite ready. Deadlines kept getting pushed back until, here we are: Sunday morning, and I’m the King of the Dickheads! It all seemed much more innocent before this morning, I assure you.

“Lily, I’m so sorry. I really—”

“You know, Ethan, I have to admit, I thought there might have been some small chance we might get back together. Especially after I saw your message in the Post. But now, now, I don’t ever want to see you again as long as I live.”

She hangs up the phone, and it takes a second for me to set mine down on the floor again. Well, this morning’s just been a kick in the balls, hasn’t it?

“What was that?” Nicole asks.

“Nothing. Everything.”

It is as if the last sign of the apocalypse has been spotted, and pure chaos – in all its fury – has been unleashed upon me. I can feel the tethers that had held me snap. They fall away. And now unmoored, I see myself being tossed upon the swells of a sea whose currents and intentions I cannot know.

[Note: In second draft, more will happen at party. Officemates will show up and wreak havoc, highlighting the distance between Hill people and non-Hill people in DC.]

Chapter Ten

It's Sunday afternoon and I'm hiding out in my office because it's the place where the people who are most likely trying to find me are least likely to be looking. It's lonely here at the office, but at the moment, it's better than the alternatives. I need to think before the harpies find me, before the shit splatters off the fan blades.

As much as I regret my polish-the-resume comment to Suzanne, it wasn't far off the mark. Facing a five-point deficit in a congressional race is *never* a good tactical position. But when you're an incumbent, with a month left in the campaign, you're as good as done. The problem is, as an incumbent, people already have had a few years to figure out what they think of you. Either they like you or they don't. Ideally, they like you and think you did a good job and want to keep you around for another term. But if they're already pretty sure they hate you, then whatever you say in the last month is hardly going to change their minds. Any undecideds at this point almost always end up breaking for the challenger. This all makes it extremely hard for an incumbent to actually gain support as the election goes on. Which is what we need to do now. No, we are most definitely in an unenviable place. If I had to put this somewhere on the Messina Scale of political scandals and distasters, I'd say it ranks somewhere around the seven region. The simple fact is, something out there is eroding Cynthia's support. Something out there is turning the voters of Montana off. And I have no idea what it could be.

I pick up the phone on my desk and dial Eric's home number. "Easy, my man. How are you doing?"

"Fine enough, sir." His voice is still hoarse with sleep.

I look at my watch. It's eleven in the morning. "I hope I didn't wake you up," I say.

"Not unless you count the fact that I was asleep, then no, I was awake." He sounds genuinely annoyed with me, and I wonder if there's no way I can do right by anyone today. Perhaps I'm destined to fuck everything up.

"Well, I'm sorry if I did." There's a silence as both of us waits for the other to say something. "Hey," I say, just remembering, "how was your date last night?"

"Listen, sir. If you don't mind my saying, I think I know why you called me."

“Why is that, Easy?”

“You’re calling because I haven’t completed your requested research on *Apocalypse Now*. I understand that you’re upset, sir. But you have to know it’s been very difficult.” His voice is like a flood now, an unstoppable force of nature. “I’ve isolated the dates when it was released in Poland, not that that’s very helpful, I know. But I’ve also determined that it was released in Thailand, India and Laos.”

“Laos?”

“Yes, it’s a small country near Vietnam. But the point is that it’s very difficult to get these things nailed down. I mean, there’s no real database for that kind of thing. And if there is, I certainly don’t know about it.”

“Eric.”

“What I’m trying to say, sir, is that I fucked up.” He takes a deep, audible breath and holds it in.

“Eric.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you for telling me that. But I wasn’t thinking about the Apocalypse Project.”

“Sir?”

“Easy, I’m calling to see if you have any plans for this week. If you have any commitments you couldn’t break if you had to.”

“Nothing comes to mind, sir,” he says quickly, formally, as if responding to a drill sergeant.

“Good. What do you say about taking a road trip? With me?”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. I need to take care of some campaign business in the state. I could use your help.”

“Sounds good to me. But I do wonder why you want me.”

This is indeed a good question, though the fact that Eric actually asked it about himself tells me that he could use a confidence boost, which, alone is a good reason to take him. But, even deeper, why, after receiving such cataclysmic news, was Eric the first person I wanted to talk to today? Why is he the first person I called? The answer is

a selfish one. I think it has something to do with the way he reminds me of myself a few years back. Ethan Pascal eight years ago. He represents a version of me that I wish I were now, without the influence of all this shit. Before everything seemed to go off kilter. Before the damage was done. I think that's what it is. And that's why I'm glad to be talking to him now.

"Easy, I'm asking you because you're the only person I can trust," I say. This is also true, also part of why I asked him.

"When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow. I'll book us on the 10:00 AM out of National."

"And when do we come back?"

"The magic eight ball says: The future is unclear," I say.

"That's cool. I don't have any plans or anything. I guess you'll get someone else to answer the phones at the office."

"Don't even bother going into the office tomorrow. Just meet me at National." I'd like to spare him the dispiriting sight of Cynthia Mahoney's office tomorrow, should news of the poll get out.

I can almost hear the click on the line as he reads my mind and the next question pops into his head. "Hey, did you get the results of the poll yet?"

"The magic eight ball says: Try again tomorrow."

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I'm off the phone with Eric now. And there's another call I need to make. Lily. I owe it to her. It's the least I could do after all I've put her through. Yet something in me, some resistant core, is preventing me from calling. Most likely, it's guilt.

Earlier this morning, after Lily hung up on me, I still had to deal with Nicole. She kept saying she wanted breakfast, she wanted breakfast, she wanted breakfast. Oh, dear god, not a hot breakfast, that was the last thing I needed. I wanted to take her home so I could begin to face the day, forget about last night, assess the damage in the poll, patch things up with Lily. Everything. But Nicole would have none of it. She playfully pouted in my bed until I promised to take her to a diner. After I finally gave in to her demands,

she jumped up on the bed and then hugged me. “Oh, goody. Ethie’s taking me to breakie,” she said. It was like a big game with her. Nicole playing the role of the cute, bratty vixen. Maybe if I’d been in the right frame of mind, it would have been endearing. As it was, I was disgusted. Probably more with myself than with her. But I allowed it to color my mood, a brackish cloud of annoyance, anger jangling at a static pitch just below the radar. She could do nothing right. Even the stuff she *did* do right was wrong. Though, truth be told, she didn’t do a lot of things right.

When we got out to my car, and she saw my piece of crap Honda, the beloved Beefeater, she let out a coughing laugh.

“Is that your car?” she asked as I tried to jimmy the rusted lock with the key.

“You bet,” I said.

“Are you sure?” She narrowed her sleep-swollen eyes. “Your car?”

“Deadly sure,” I said and yanked the petulant door open.

At breakfast, she ordered a tall stack of pancakes. When they came, she loaded them with syrup. Dripping, sopping waves of the stuff cascaded over the top of the pancakes. She ordered a side of bacon and soaked it in the syrup too. She blinked at me over the peak of her breakfast.

“You sure you only want coffee?” she asked.

“Deadly sure,” I said, choking a nauseous burp back down my throat.

Nicole devoured her breakfast, bite after gigantic bite. Yet somehow she managed to speak constantly throughout the meal. She told me tedious stories of her life growing up, the high school years, the college years, her brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. It was awful – even worse than the silent contests of last night, which were hard to top.

And as I sat there, watching her eat her breakfast and listening to her talk, I was filled with a distinct type of loathing. I hated this person in front of me with the white hot intensity of a thousand suns. And this hatred I felt for Nicole was reflecting back on me. I was with this girl last night. My tongue was in her mouth, where those drippy pancakes are right now!

I always thought when I reached age thirty, some kind of maturity would be bestowed upon me, like a title. But there I was this morning, hung-over and hating every

second that I was forced to be in the general vicinity of some girl I fucked the night before. That's not maturity. Not even close. And look at me now. My station in life has not significantly improved in the last hour or so. I'm hiding out in my office, hoping that my boss won't be able to track me down here because I'm afraid of what she'll say if she does. To top it all off, I'm about to call Lily while I can still smell Nicole on my hands, my face, my chest. Fuck! I'm a walking come bucket!

Okay. I'm obviously not quite ready for this phone call. I make some calls to the airline to arrange the flights for tomorrow. The delay offered by the airline's electronic phone answering service and generally incompetent operators proves a welcome respite. When I'm finally off the phone with the airline, I'm in a much better frame of mind. I dial Lily's number.

The line rings. I cringe. It rings again. Then again. And then her machine picks up. This is not what I'd expected. I had assumed Lily would be at home, stewing about my not calling. Fuming in silence. Patiently awaiting the call of the penitent. Considering whether to give him an audience or cast him aside. Apparently this was not the case.

Caught flat-footed like this, I stammer for a few seconds before I collect myself enough to leave a message that I think is suitably humble and apologetic. I tell her I'm sorry for not calling her back and that I think we need to talk. I also tell her I'm leaving town and won't be back for a while. I say I'll try to call her from the road. While I'm leaving the message, I am the most genuine I have been in days.

On the way home that evening I stop by Dewey's apartment in Adam's Morgan. I park in front of Fandango which is mostly deserted on this Sunday night except for a group of five men who are laying bets on a football game and arguing in loud, jovial voices. They seem so happy, so wrapped up in the joy of their own moment. The reassuring scent of beer comes wafting out on waves of cool air. I have to resist the urge to go in there and join them. Maybe I could hang out and talk about the old days when Fandango used to be called The Root Cellar. Then again, they'd probably just look at me funny.

No one answers when I knock on the door to Dewey's apartment. I wait for a while, then knock again, hoping he might be groggily lifting himself out of some

nocturnal sleeping habit. Perhaps he's in a daze, admiring the bizarre picture of Marlon Brando staring down from his Vietnamese poster.

For some reason, I really want to see Dewey right now. The honest truth is I want to explain to him why I didn't call Lily. I want him to understand that I'm not really a bad person. At least no worse than the next guy. I know it makes no sense. I shouldn't care what Dewey thinks because Dewey most certainly doesn't give a rat's ass about me. The person I should really be explaining myself to is Lily. Still, for some reason I want Dewey to understand. I want him to somehow approve. I want to tell him why I didn't call Lily and why I fucked Nicole and I want him to say, "Hey, we've all been there before, dude." Or something like that, in his oddly low, but reassuring voice. I can't explain why this is so important to me at the moment.

As I stand there knocking, I imagine what I must look like from a distance. One lonely figure pounding away at a door that no one answers, refusing to give in to the obvious. Maybe that's what the guys in Fandango are thinking as they look up the steps at me. Maybe they think I'm fucking crazy.

When I'm sure no one is coming, and that Dewey is indeed not home, I set the autobiography of Tom Arnold between the front and screen doors. *My Own Damn Way*. Dewey'll really get a kick out of that one. I feel around in my pockets for a pen. I don't have anything to write a note with, but I figure Dewey's a pretty bright kid. He'll know who it's from.

Chapter Eleven

When I got home last night, my new roommates had taken a series of messages and left them in a pile outside my bedroom door. They were from: Suzanne, Cynthia, my mother, Suzanne, Cynthia, Cynthia, and Cynthia. In that order. Lily did *not* call. And I did not return any of the messages that had been left for me. So, all in all, I made it through the rest of Sunday relatively scrape-free.

This morning, however, will be another story. Conflict is imminent. I'm waiting to file through the metal detectors at work. I need to take care of a few things before I meet Eric at National. As much as I didn't want to come into work today, I knew I had to. And as the line slowly files into the building, I gird myself for battle. Surprisingly, I got a great night's sleep last night. Best I've had in a while. Even more surprisingly, I woke up feeling rejuvenated and even somewhat eager. I'm in my element now. This is chaos. This is what I live for. You can't just go around saying you're an anarchist. You can't just sit back and be some kind of anarchist poser. You've got to love it. You've got to live it. You've got to chew it up, spit it out, and pick it from between your teeth. That is not to say that I have a long-term plan yet. That's still a little ways off. But I do have a short-term goal, and that is to survive this visit to the office, which, if successful, will be one hell of an accomplishment.

A large woman at the front of the line wearing heaps of silver bracelets is trying to slip through the metal detectors undetected. The buzzer shrieks and she shrugs as if she hasn't a clue what might be setting the over-sensitive thing off. Her bracelets clank every time she moves. She walks back out and tries to slip through again. Another buzzer shriek. I'm wishing hateful shit on that woman right now – not death or disfigurement, that's a bit overboard – but something close to it.

“Ethan Pascal, how the hell are you?” a voice says from behind me.

I turn. It's Clay Tarcher, the current youngest Chief of Staff in the U.S. House of Representatives. The guy who took my title from me. He's smiling too widely. His face reminds me of a combination between Kermit the Frog and a vampire. Either a greenish vampire, or a fangy frog – I'm not sure which. “Oh, hi, Clay. I'm doing fine. How are you?”

“Fan-ta-stic.” He draws each syllable out way too long. “Could not be better,” he throws in to make sure I get the point. The metal detector line trudges forward and I try to use it as an excuse to turn my back on him, but he seems intent on prolonging this conversation. “So how’s Cynthia’s race going?” he asks in a too familiar way.

“You know. It’s going,” I say, letting my voice drift higher to sound a vaguely optimistic tone.

“That’s good,” he says. “‘Cause I heard things aren’t going so well for you guys. Numbers-wise and all.”

I’m suddenly very wary of this fanged frog. There’s more to this conversation than a chance meeting in the metal detector line. There’s no way he could know about the poll. No way I can think of. He’s fishing. He must be.

“Actually, Clay, things are going great,” I say, placing my bag on the conveyor belt and tossing my keys into the plastic bowl. “Cynthia’s pretty much in control right now.”

“Phew,” he says, and pretends to wipe his brow. “That’s great to hear. I mean, we’re on different sides of the aisle and all, but us young guys, we got to stick together. If there’s anything I can do,” he says, letting his voice trail off.

Then, because I’m through the detector and finished with this conversation, I look Clay Tarcher full in the face. “Clay,” I say, “Fuck off.”

The people in line behind Clay halt for a second, and even the guards at the metal detectors do a double take, to make sure they heard me correctly. Whatever charm Clay had been oozing before is now dried up. His face contorts into an acidic grimace. I leave before he has a chance to respond.

Usually I’m not so abrupt with people as I was with Clay. That’s not my style. I prefer a little subtlety; it confuses them more. But I made an exception in that case. One, because I couldn’t think of anything else to say. And two, because I really wanted him to completely fuck off at that moment.

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One of the interns is answering phones in the front office. I can't quite remember her name. Chippy or Dolly or Skyler. Something happy-sounding that matches the gleamy look she has about her. When she picks up the phone lines she can't quite get through the phrase, "Cynthia Mahoney's office, how may I help you?" without a few catches and stumbles. She giggles like she has the hiccups between calls. I nod when she looks up at me, and head to the back office.

The rest of the office is nothing like the effervescent Chippy. It's more like the ninth circle of hell. There's a pall about the place, an aura of muted agony. Brooke looks up. Her eyes are red-rimmed, then further outlined by large black circles. "Oh, Ethan," she says when she sees me. "It's awful."

I usher her into my office and shut the door. "How did you find out?" I ask.

"Everyone knows," she says. Her crying is like a dam breaking and tears start to roll down both cheeks. The only times I've seen her cry like this are when Vince and her fight. Even then, it was never this bad.

"How does everyone know?" I ask, while trying to sound soothing at the same time.

"How?" she asks as if I'm the one who's being dense. "It's in *Roll Call*. It's the lead story in the Congressional Roundup." This sentence sets off another wave of tears. She holds the paper up and I see the headline. "Mahoney Loses Ground To Claiborne."

I snatch the paper out of her hand. Skim the lead. It says that an internal poll conducted by the Mahoney Campaign had her losing by double-digits. It quoted a pundit as saying the race is as good as over.

I've seen bad before. I know bad pretty well. This is worse than bad. Yes, I'd planned to leak the results of the poll, but only if they were *good* results. When people see this, they'll give up on Cynthia altogether. The money will dry up. The endorsements. Everything. No, I'd say I could have done without this particularly bad news item, thank you very much. Definitely bad enough to push this poll up another notch on the Messina Scale. I'd say we're hovering somewhere around a solid eight right now.

Brooke is dabbing ineffectually at her eyes. "So what are we going to do?" she asks.

“Do?” Probably best that I don’t use the polish-up-the-resume line. That one didn’t focus group so well with Suzanne yesterday. “Brooke, I’m honestly not sure. But right now, I’m going to go on a road trip.”

“What, like a vacation?”

“No. To Montana. For work.”

“What for?” A note of optimism has crept into her voice.

“The magic eight ball says: That’s classified.”

Brooke withers visibly in her chair. “You know, Ethan, you had me going a while ago. I really thought we were turning things around. You had me convinced we were going to win.” She’s staring accusingly at me now.

“It’s my fault! Is that what you want to hear? Does that make you happy?” I’m shouting at her and she flinches as I spit the words out. When she’s sure I’m done, she starts crying again and I feel awful. I’m frustrated, but that doesn’t mean I have the right to lash out at her. I’m worse than Vince. Because truthfully, this *is* my fault. Something has gone wrong in the state; something has caused Cynthia’s numbers to tank. And I should have foreseen that something.

I squat down next to Brooke and I put my arm around her. I squeeze her lightly, securely, and she looks up at me. Her face is splotchy; her nose is raw-looking. “Brooke, I’m going to do what I can. But I need your help.” She blinks a few times to clear her eyes. “I’m going to disappear for a few days. I’ll need you to cover for me. If people are looking for me, make sure they get sidetracked. Tell them whatever you have to. I’ll be checking in with you once in a while to make sure there are no emergencies.” I realize I’ve grabbed Brooke by both arms now and our faces are only inches apart. “Get it?” I ask.

She nods her head slowly. “I think so. I’m not sure I understand why though.”

“And you won’t know why. I’ll explain later.”

“When are you leaving?”

I look at my watch. “Fifteen minutes.”

“What about the staff? Can’t you just say a few words to them? Like a pep talk or something? They’re walking around back there like the living dead.”

I know a real leader would try to rally the troops. He would call them together and tell them that it's going to be all right and that there's a way to overcome this temporary setback. I know that's what I should do at the moment. Unfortunately, having a heart-to-heart with my staff is in the top five things I *don't* want to do right now. I know I would fold under the scrutiny of one of their "thought-airing" sessions. Especially since one of their "thoughts" would most likely be to lynch me.

"I can't do it right now," I say. "Eric is waiting for me at the airport. I've got to get out there."

"Eric? The receptionist?" She screws her face into a mask of surprise. "He's going with you?"

"Yes. I need his help. That intern, Chippy, or whatever, is going to answer phones for the next few days."

"Sunni. Her name is Sunni." Brooke is not amused. But at least she's not crying anymore.

"Bingo," I say and shoot at her with my index finger.

Just as I'm stepping out of my office and thinking that I might make a clean break from this place, Cynthia steps through the front door. She's wearing a loud, checkered skirt and a denim shirt with a scarf colored like a cockatiel. She sees me, but her eyes barely register recognition. She looks like she's all skin, as if she's been flayed and then draped over a fire hydrant.

"Where are you heading?" she asks without emotion.

"Actually, I'm headed to the airport right now. Brooke can explain."

Cynthia waves her hand nonchalantly. If I didn't know better, I'd say she's drunk. "You think I care? Do whatever you like."

"It sounds like you've seen the *Roll Call* article."

"Oh sure," she says. "Got a copy faxed to me this morning. Of course I already heard about the poll yesterday. And of course I coincidentally couldn't get a hold of you all day. No matter how hard I tried!"

"So what are you doing back in DC?" I ask, ignoring her last point. "You weren't due back until Tuesday."

“Well, when you were nowhere to be found. I just said, ‘Fuck it! Why should I care if Ethan doesn’t?’”

She’s starting to piss me off now. Her point is getting tiresome. She’s made it, let’s move on. I’m not going to take the bait. I’m not. “It also sounds like you’re not taking the news well,” I say.

Cynthia looks around the room and then nods noncommittally. “You could probably say that.” Then she points an accusing finger at me. “Of course you wouldn’t know what it’s like to be publicly humiliated like this. It’s not *your* name in the headlines. You’re not that one they’re laughing at.”

“You know, Cynthia, if you understood how we all felt – all of us who work for you – you’d never say that.”

“Whatever. Go run off to your vacation, or wherever it was you were going,” she says. She dismisses me with a casual wave of her hand.

Members of Congress are usually given a free pass in the way they treat they’re staff. Because of the pressures of the job, because of the superhuman stress we put them under, we allow them a certain nastiness, even meanness on occasion. But this time, Cynthia’s gone too far.

I draw myself up to my full height. I step up to her face and point my finger at her nose. She tries to follow my finger with her eyes and she loses her balance slightly. “Listen to me, dammit! I am going to leave right now because I am going to win this election for you. God knows why, because you certainly don’t deserve to win. Do you understand me?” I didn’t intend to lose my temper like this. And it dawns on me that I’ve just said I will win this election for her. In general, it’s not good to say things like that. And in this case, considering our current situation, what I just said was probably downright stupid.

Cynthia does a strange kind of grunt-smirk, making it clear that she doesn’t believe what I just said either.

“And if you care about anything,” I say, “you’ll get back on an airplane and start running for office.”

Her face is wooden. I can’t tell if she’s absorbed anything I’ve just said, and I don’t have time to figure out if she has. I’ve got a plane to catch. I walk around her,

leaving her facing nothing, empty space, the spot where I used to be standing. Even after I'm gone, and I'm at the door, she stands there as if I haven't moved, still looking through unfocused eyes at an imagined me, or a phantom me, unable to fathom that right now, I'm leaving her.

In the front office, Sunni is still answering phones, but she's no longer doing it in her bubbly manner. It's clear she's heard the argument between Cynthia and me. She probably comes from a happy home, unused to the cold edged voices of domestic fights, adults going at it with real venom. I've scared her. I wish I hadn't. If I ever get through this, I'm going to name one of my kids Chippy. I really like that name. It makes me feel good.

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At the airport, Eric is standing in the front of the ticket line letting people pass by. His eyes are darting across the vast, oily-smelling room that houses the ticket agent lines at National. He's worked his lips over until they're purple and pulpy, like smashed grapes.

"Easy, good thinking to get in line," I say, sneaking up on him.

"Oh sir. They've already started boarding. It might be too late."

"Nonsense, my boy. We'll get her done." I'm so happy to see Eric that I have to catch myself from hugging him.

"You know, Easy," I say as we walk through the concourse to our gate, "you're going to see a lot of things on this trip that you'll never be able to talk about with anyone."

"What do you mean, sir."

"We're about to do some campaign work which is technically illegal, simply because we're senate staffers. But beyond that, even if we weren't senate staffers, I don't think the FEC would smile on our actions."

"So it would be fair to say we'll be doing questionable activities," he says, smiling eagerly.

“Questionable. I like that sound of that. I think it definitely might be questionable.” We hand our tickets to the person at the gate. “But it most certainly will be moral,” I say. “At least mostly moral – depending on your point of view.”

Eric rubs his hands together greedily. “Oh boy, real campaign stuff.”

“Yep. The whole big fat real stuff, Easy.”

Chapter Twelve

Have you ever wanted to run away? Have you ever thought about how easy it would be to just disappear? I have. Quite a bit in the last hour or so. I could have gotten in my car and just driven. I could have told Eric the trip was canceled and then booked a flight anywhere. Vermont. Paris. Iowa. Peru. I could have just lived in one of those places for a while. Existed. Forgotten about the life I currently inhabit, and maybe even started a new one. I've got a credit card. I've got a little savings. I could have done it. Talk to Cynthia, or my staff, they'd say I probably *should* have done it.

But I didn't. And now I'm on a plane hurtling through the sky toward the eye of the storm. I'm headed into the shit. And I'm going to hit it head-on. I don't know if that's bravery or stupidity. Of if, by going to Montana, I've simply chosen a more secluded place to fall apart.

On the plane I occupy myself for a while by reading the *Wheels of the System* script. It's a strange thing. I've never really read a movie script before, so I don't know how they normally strike a person, but I find myself engrossed in it. By the time I'm done, I'm convinced it's either a work of rare genius, or the dumbest thing I've seen in my life. Like the bravery and stupidity thing. It could go either way.

Wheels of the System is a story about a dyslexic bike messenger in DC named Sly. All his life it's been Sly's dream to be the best bike messenger in the District, like his father before him. Also like his old man, Sly delivers packages by his own rules – disobeying traffic laws, cutting through bad neighborhoods, you name it. But he's one of the best, biking and delivering packages on instinct, raw skill, and sheer determination. Eventually Sly's rebellious delivery ways ruffle management's feathers. He's got a patchy relationship with authority figures of all stripes. He finally gets to prove himself by delivering an important videotape to CNN on time when no one else at the company could have possibly done it.

On the script, Jasper scrawled the word "YOU" next to the part he has in mind for me. It's the part of a Hill staffer who receives a package from Sly. One of my lines is: "I got deliveries from his old man; he was one of the best, until he bought it over on P Street. Metrobus accident. Worst I've ever seen. This kid might be even better. But

there's something I don't trust about him. It's like he's delivering against a ghost." As I reread those lines, I have in mind exactly how they should be delivered to make them most effective, just the right inflections to bring out the comic elements.

Of course, the thought has crossed my mind that Jasper may not mean any of this in an ironic way. He might have written this script seriously. I don't even want to think about that. There's no way he could mean this to be taken seriously, is there? It's got to be a joke. Right? Just to be safe, I make a note to not broach the topic with Jasper until I'm sure.

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Eric is curled up in his seat with his head leaned against the window. He's sleeping soundly and breathing lightly. With his almost translucent skin and fine fair, he looks like a fetus floating in amniotic fluid. He doesn't know about the poll yet. Of course, I'll have to tell him. He'll have to find out sooner or later. But for now, he rests in a cocoon of ignorance. I envy him that. I wish we could all be like that, at least some of the time.

I carefully pull the Airfone off the seatback in front of me. I really fucking hate doing this, but again I'm left with little choice. I call Lily's number, just to see if maybe she's back. Again, no answer. I don't leave a message this time, hanging up before the beep sounds in my ear.

I dial the Post Classifieds. I ask for the Personals.

"White Flower – I'm sorry I left you high and dry. You must know I did not mean to jilt you. Will you forgive? Ever? I wait on you. – Frome"

I'm not sure about that one. Where *am* I going with this relationship? Lily keeps saying she never wants to speak with me again, and I keep trying to get a hold of her. Do I really want this to continue? Or am I done with it? Right now I'm drifting in some kind of break-up limbo, wherein I hurt Lily only slightly more frequently than I did when we were still going out. How did I let this happen? I need to decide which direction to go so I can start nudging things the right way. Yes, I will definitely sit down and figure that out. At some point.

I pull out the Airfone again and this time I dial 325 Garfield.

“Prometheus Productions,” a somber female voice says on the other end.

“Miranda? Is that you?”

“Yes.” Her voice is resigned, as if I just caught her committing a crime red-handed.

“And here I thought you were the one who said not to get involved in Jasper’s movie business.”

“Um, yeah. I guess I’m the one who told you that. But things happen. Appearances must be kept up, dear Ethan. You know the routine.”

“I do now,” I say and allow myself a little laugh at her expense.

“By the way, where are you calling from? None of us could find you Sunday. We took a shitload of messages for you.”

“I got them, thanks. I’m actually on an airplane right now. Things came up with work and I had to get out to the state pretty quick.”

“Oh yeah, the poll,” she says. “We heard about that.”

Is this a joke? Is there anyone out there who *hasn’t* heard about the poll? There was a time when it was a secret. “How?” is all I ask Miranda, even though I know the how is hardly important at this point.

She clucks her throat into the receiver. “Jasper heard it from a friend and mentioned it to me. It’s pretty common knowledge. You know, you really should have kept it quiet. It can’t be good for your campaign.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say.

“So what’s your strategy? You got something figured out?”

“So far my strategy has mostly been moment-to-moment survival.” The stony silence on the other end of the line would seem to indicate that Miranda doesn’t appreciate this comment. “Hey, I was calling to say I really like that script, *Wheels of the System*. It’s really”—what’s the word I’m looking for? Funny? Brilliant? Entertaining?—“it’s good,” I say.

“I’ll mention that to Jasper. He’ll appreciate the feedback. But I have to be honest with you, Ethan. I’m really shocked you read it. Shouldn’t you be worried about

the election and all? Don't you have other things slightly more important than that stupid movie?"

"Well, I had—"

"I mean, if you lost this election, that would significantly hamper your coolness."

Funny, my coolness has never been a job motivation before. "I'm doing what I can, Miranda."

"Good. That's all we can expect," she says, as if she's pleased to hear my dedication to the effort renewed. "Did you hear the good news here?"

"Not that I know of."

"Spenser sold the rights to *Rape Squad*."

"Are you kidding?" I almost shout. Eric murmurs lightly and kicks with his foot and then goes back to sleep.

"I was as shocked as you," Miranda says. "Fifty-thousand bucks. Can you believe it?"

I am not a materialist. I work for the government, therefore I can't afford to be a materialist. But fifty thousand bucks for *Rape Squad*? There seems to be no justice in this world. "I absolutely cannot believe it," I say.

"Well, we're throwing a congratulations party on Friday. Do you think you'll be back for it?"

"The Magic Eight Ball says: Maybe." Again, I get no response from Miranda and I think maybe the Magic Eight Ball quote has finally failed the puke test. Time to hang that one up for a while.

"Well," Miranda says at last, "keep in touch, Ethan."

"I'll see what I can do. But I'm going to be pretty busy out here."

"Good."

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Eric doesn't wake up fully until the plane is about to touch down in Helena. He looks around like a hunted animal until he sees me and remembers where he is.

The Helena Airport is a lot like every other airport in Montana. One vast room divided up with quirkily angled walls to make it look like more space than it actually is. Most rooms have diorama display windows that contain various faux- western artifacts like fake arrowheads, dream catchers, and turd birds. In one far off corner is the smoking section that always seats a few leathery cowboys that smoke, and talk about the way the airport was before they expanded or remodeled it. I've been to Helena four times since I started working for Cynthia, and the airport never fails to disappoint me. Today is no exception. Cue the lame window displays. Cue the wistful cowboys. And action.

"So what's the plan?" Eric asks as we're de-boarding the plane.

"We're going to get right to work, buddy boy," I say, hitching my carry-on higher on my shoulder. "First we requisition ourselves an appropriate vehicle."

Eric does a quick flutter step to catch up with me. "My uncle works for Avis, sir. I've got a card that let's me get like twenty percent off car rentals."

"That's very good, Eric. But we won't be renting any normal car."

"We won't?"

"No sirree. We're getting a U-Haul."

"A what?" Eric stops walking on the jetway, then starts again when he sees that I didn't have a similar reaction to him.

"Did you know," I continue, "most U-Haul trucks come standard with air conditioning *and* tape deck?"

"I see."

"Yep. It's one sweet ride. It's what I call a rural assault vehicle."

"Great," he says. I can tell he's still confused and I'm starting to feel bad about toying with him.

"Also, we're going to be hauling some big shit around," I throw in.

"Gotcha," Eric says. He points a finger at me and squeezes off an imaginary round.

"Does it bother you when I fuck around with you like that, Easy?"

Eric looks off at the wistful cowboys in the smoking section for a second then turns back to me. "Actually, yes. Quite a bit. It's like the thing people would do in high school, or junior high even." His voice is curt but not angry. "When you do it, I usually

just play along because I figure you'll eventually get tired of it and give in." Eric looks at a window display of a ratty buffalo hide.

Ouch. I don't know which Eric this is, but I definitely like the quiet, unassuming, respectful Eric a hell of a lot more. I'm being lectured on maturity by someone almost ten years younger than me. I think I'm done talking with *this* Eric for a while. I grunt lightly and start walking faster to register my disapproval.

We catch a cab to the U-Haul dealer and rent the second biggest truck they have – the twenty-four foot mover. The back of the truck is about as big as a smallish family dining room. If my guess is anywhere close, we're going to need all the space we can get. I use a separate credit card to pay for the truck.

By the time we roll up to campaign headquarters, it's nearly four in the afternoon. I park out front next to a mountain of at least 40 good-sized cardboard boxes. I ask Eric to start loading them into the truck and I head into the building. Campaign headquarters is located in a section of a single-level office condominium that was built in the seventies, just before Carter's energy crisis hit home. It has the low-flung, careless look of a tropical bungalow. Even on non-breezy days, you can feel the air freely circulating through the cracks in the walls. Our section of the building used to house a tanning parlor. And, despite all the free flowing air through the walls, the place still reeks of coconut oil, sweat and burning flesh. With the smells and the breeze and the overall look of the place, one gets the feeling one is stepping onto the set of a mid-budget porno movie. At least that's the feeling I have right now.

The outer office is deserted. Or rather, it looks like a quickly-multiplying race of political pamphlets has taken over the place. They lie in stacks and in boxes on almost every flat surface in the place. In one corner, boxes of pamphlets are stacked to form a makeshift table, on top of which are more pamphlets. The pamphlets have staked their claim in the office. And by virtue of their overwhelming numbers, they don't look like they're going to give up without a fight. I can smell a dense cloud of smoke coming from another door and I follow it.

"Ms. Suzanne Huntington, I presume." I make an overly formal bow.

"You presume correctly, Mr. Ethan Pascal." Suzanne stubs out her cigarette in an overfilled ashtray, and then lights another. She lifts the ashtray as if to empty it, but

quickly sees that the garbage can in the corner is also overfilled and she sets the ashtray back on her desk.

“So what brings you to my neck of the woods?” she asks.

“Came out to see if I can do something on this damn campaign we’ve got here.”

“Oh?” she says. “I would have guessed you’d be too busy working on your resume.”

Suzanne has a way of sucking the oxygen out of the room. And it isn’t just a function of how many cigarettes she smokes. She’s a big woman, with an even bigger personality. To be around Suzanne is to be engulfed by her. If her mood is good, everyone around her is in a good mood. If her mood is bad, watch out. Today, she seems to be somewhere in the middle.

“So what’s your plan, Pascal? Thirty words or less.” She exhales her smoke upwards and throws one foot up on her desk.

“First of all, I owe you a shitload of yard signs.”

She nods quickly. “I figured those boxes out front have something to do with that. And I also figured you’re up to some kind of bullshit, which I don’t want to know about. Do I?”

“You definitely don’t want to know about the bullshit that I’m up to,” I say. “But in order to get up to that bullshit, and give you your signs, I need a big space where I can do some work. Somewhere I don’t have to worry about people popping in.”

“What, some place to make phone calls?”

“No. I’m talking like manual labor. I need to do some painting.”

Suzanne gives me a look that says she doesn’t want to ask the questions that are flashing like warning signs in her head. When I don’t oblige her by freely giving the answers to those questions, she takes a deep drag on her cigarette and looks at the ceiling. Then,

“You could always use the basement of the Labor Temple. No one’s ever down there, and they let the campaign do what we want down there.”

“Are you sure? Is that the only place you can think of?”

“Like you’re in a position to be picky now?” she says.

“I suppose not. It’s just that I’m going to—” Suzanne holds up a finger to shush me, to let me know she really doesn’t want to know any more than she has to.

“All right,” I say, standing up. “That’ll have to do.” I start walking toward the door.

“So what’s your great strategy after you get the yard signs done?” she asks. “How are you going to save this campaign?”

I can’t remember if I’ve used the Magic Eight Ball line with Suzanne yet. Either way, I’ve retired that one, at least temporarily. So, for lack of anything better, I throw up my hands and say, “Suzanne, your analness is really starting to get into my zone.”

She aggressively stubs out her cigarette in the overfilled ashtray and several bent butts pour out onto her desk. “Is that the best you can do?” she asks. I’m not sure if she’s commenting on my line or my lack of strategy.

“At the moment, it is,” I say, thinking that that should cover my bases either way.

“What about the signs? When do I get them?”

This one I can at least try to give her a hard target on. “Tomorrow. Maybe,” I say back to her as I wade through the Pamphlet Kingdom out front.

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By the time I get back outside, Eric has moved about five of the boxes into the truck. He’s struggling to delicately lift them as he coaxes each one into the back of the truck. With his skinny frame, the boxes actually look bigger than him. Like those documentaries where a tiny ant is carrying a huge chunk of leaf. He’s sweating and cursing under his breath. I should have told him the boxes weren’t fragile, but I figure letting him suffer on his own is a fair punishment for the maturity lecture he gave me at the airport. Though I realize this thought actually validates his comments in the first place. When he sees me start kicking and sliding the boxes without concern for their well-being, he starts doing the same. It takes forty-five minutes for us to move the rest of them onto the truck.

“So do you mind explaining what it is we’re doing with these boxes?” Eric asks once we get into the truck. I can’t read his voice, can’t tell if he’s mad or not.

I know the time has come to level with him. He's doing this project; he's got to know it all, even the not-so-pretty truths, the truths that might not paint me in the world's greatest light. "Easy, let me first start out by saying that I did a bad thing."

"Granted," he says a little too quickly.

"You see, we reached a crisis where the Union printing shop in Montana couldn't get our signs done on time because they were on strike." Eric frowns and nods glumly as the cab of the truck bounces down the street. "So I had to somewhat circumvent the union shop we usually use for races in Montana." Again, Eric nods.

"Have you heard of the Union Bug?" I ask him.

"Isn't that the seal at the bottom of brochures and stuff?"

"Exactly. The signs in back of this truck are lacking that all important little feature."

"Because the usual print shop—"

"Because I needed the signs fast and cheap, and I didn't use a union printing shop."

"I see," he says.

"Now, I'm not sure if you realize it or not, but if those signs don't have a Union Bug on them when we put them in people's yards, we're in a lot of trouble."

"I figured."

"So that's what we're going to do."

Eric sits on his hands and looks straight out the windshield. He bites the inside of his cheek. I wonder what's going on inside that head of his. I wonder if he thinks less of me because of what I've brought him here to do. Have I punched another hole in his rapidly disintegrating image of me? "So how many signs do we have to do?" he asks.

"Roughly ten thousand," I say.

"Roughly?"

"Well, more like exactly. Exactly ten thousand."

Eric nods again then wipes his index finger through a layer of dust on the dashboard. "And where are we going to Union Bug all these signs?" he asks, almost too innocently. If I didn't know better, I'd say he already knows what my answer will be.

"In the basement of the Union Hall," I say, quietly, under my breath.

Eric bites his lower lip thoughtfully and nods his head slowly. I know there are lots of things he could say right now, lots of them funny, lots of them harsh and true. But instead, he sits on his hands and chirps a quick, "Cool." And he doesn't say anything else. And I'm very glad I brought him along with me.

Chapter 13 – Sign Work

The Union Hall in Helena is a proud sandstone building that goes largely unused ninety percent of the time, and now primarily serves as a gravestone more than anything else. Whatever scraps are left of the local unions still meet here. And there's a bar on the second floor where you can still get a cheap glass of beer. But that's pretty much it. As the mining and timber jobs dwindled in Montana, so did the influence of the unions. The building has the feel of a place that's had the very life sucked out of it, both literally and figuratively. I walk around the ground floor looking for someone, anyone. I knock on dimly lit office doors and poke my head into dusty storerooms, but there seems to be not one life form present in the building. After fifteen minutes of searching, I give up and drive the truck around to the rear entrance. Eric and I unload the boxes and drag them down to the basement.

The basement is a creaky old space with red and white linoleum squares that alternate like a checkerboard. The basement has served as a cafeteria and has definitely seen more than its fair share of potluck dinners. Bits of petrified food are stuck to the ancient ceiling tiles. The scent of potato salad still lingers in the dark corners.

After we rest for a moment, I slice open the top of one of the boxes. Signs accordion out like a Jack-in-the-box. They fly up as if they couldn't breathe in the box and were finally, just now, getting to take a deep breath. And it is only now, after seeing the full number of signs in each box, after seeing the physical representation of their numbers, that I realize the immensity of the task before us. This will not be pretty.

Eric riffles a few of the signs between his thumb and forefinger, and lets out a low, slow whistle. He doesn't say anything, but I can tell he's thinking what I'm thinking. I take one sign off the top of the stack. I line up a union bug template that I X-acted on a piece of cardboard when I was hiding out at the office yesterday. (See! I wasn't completely screwing off yesterday!) Cynthia's signs are fairly simple: a blue and white color scheme framed by a black border. The union bug fits perfectly at the edge of the black border. I spray a mist of white spray paint over the template and pull it back to look at my handiwork.

“That’s not too bad, is it?” I say to Eric, who is leaning up close to the now union-bugged sign.

He shakes his head slowly. “Are you sure that’s going to pass muster, sir?” He squints at the sign and then at me.

“Come on, Easy. No one looks at these things that closely. We just need *something* there.”

“But that *something* looks like a white blob.”

He’s right. I mean, it looks a little like a union bug, but it could also probably be confused for a cloud. Either way, I don’t have many other options. I’ll have to bank on the fact that most people barely stop to notice something they think they’ve seen before. What other choice do I have?

“We’re just going to have to make it work.” I spray another one to show him how well it works. “Isn’t that easy, Easy?”

“Whatever you say, sir.”

And so we start. Eric and I – armed with templates, spray paint, and mixed feelings – begin the task of union-bugging the signs for Cynthia Mahoney’s reelection campaign.

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I once read an article about the lengths people will go to in order to set world records. There was this stenographer in Laos who typed for so long without a rest that she developed stress fractures on four different fingers at almost the same instant; they said she reached some kind of typing barrier, which the human body cannot surpass. In that same article, they talked about a guy who stood on his feet for twenty years straight and then died of a heart attack five minutes after he sat down for the first time to watch a soccer game. Once, when I was in junior high, my friends and I tried to play quarters with Dr. Pepper. I lost so badly and drank so much that I threw up after fifteen minutes of playing. Dr. Pepper, man!

Each of these little, let’s call them vignettes, has a very profound significance to me at this very moment. I don’t know how long we’ve been union-bugging. Five hours,

easily. I only know that I've reached some kind of union-bugging barrier. I've pushed the limits of what the human body can endure. Like the man who stood up for twenty years, I think I might have a heart attack the second I stop; or like the little Ethan Pascal, I could just excuse myself and quietly puke my guts up in a toilet.

I'm afraid to count how many signs we've done so far. It would be too depressing. My hands are aching and swollen. The fingers on one hand are raw and cut from handling the cardboard edges. The fingers on my other hand are crusted with a thick layer of white spray paint. They're sticky and leathery as if a crustacean shell is forming on them. The chemicals from the paint are starting to seep into my skin and I feel an alarming tingle creep through my index finger.

The funny part is, it's none of those obvious things that are what's causing the real pain right now. It's the repetition. The *grab sign, position template, spray paint, throw sign onto finished pile*. Those few instructions – completed over and over and over – that's what's really killing me. The directions are so simple, easier than shampoo's *wet hair, lather, rinse, repeat*. How could they be so painful? I ask this, even though I know the answer already. It's like Chinese water torture. No single drop actually causes pain; it's the accumulation of drops, the infinitude of them, that causes you to lose your senses, causes each drop to feel like it's going to shatter your skull. That's real pain.

Right now, I am staring into the abyss of infinitude. And in that darkness, I see... a vision. I see Cynthia's signs. But somehow they're not Cynthia's signs. They are morphing into pieces of French toast. Wet sticky pieces of French toast. And my white spray paint is no longer paint. It's powdered sugar. I'm powdering each piece of toast and then passing it down the line to the customers. More and more pieces keep coming. Some are wet and eggy. Others are golden brown and perfect, at least perfect if you're the type of person who can stomach the stuff.

Powdering. Light. Heavy. Keep powdering. Great dustings of the soft white stuff. We must have powdered sugar on our French toast! We've got to keep the customers happy! If we don't, the waitresses will revolt and then were would we be? I don't know and I don't *want* to know. I keep powdering the toast and sending it down the line. Don't ask questions.

Suddenly, I hear a crash that awakens me from my breakfast ministrations. Signs are everywhere. Eric has opened a box that sent a load of signs dashing across the floor and he hasn't picked them up yet. He's stumbling around, chasing the signs blindly, as if they're unruly chickens that won't be corralled.

It's time to call it quits for the night. That much is clear.

Eric and I hide our work as best we can and head back upstairs into the cold Montana night. It feels strange to be back in some kind of real world setting, on the sidewalk, outside the Union Hall. People walking past us step quickly, and I feel as if I'm moving in slow motion, pushing my way through water. The temperature has dropped since we first went down into that dungeon, and neither Eric nor I is wearing a jacket of any sort, which heightens our disassociation from this strange, cold world. Eric is standing next to me, shivering. I'm not sure if he's shivering from the cold or the sheer enormity of the task that we've only begun. He is either unwilling or unable to talk to me. I grab him softly by the shoulders and steer him toward the U-Haul.

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That night, I lay in a motel bed, frozen in a state of rapid thought. Eric is sleeping silently in the other bed. All the things that I've been pushing deeper and deeper into my subconscious are floating up tonight, like coffins in a flooded graveyard. I can see them, swirling before me. Lily. Cynthia. Brooke. Nicole. My housemates. *Wheels of the System*. They're all there.

I wonder if this isn't caused by the isolation I've put myself into this week. So much is happening right now. The life I left in DC is turning over and I'm powerless to do anything about it. Initially, I'd been relieved to have the excuse of these signs to get away for a while. But right now, as I lie sleepless in this motel bed, I find myself wishing it were different, wishing I were in DC. Doing something. Anything that might actually mean I'd have a say in the outcome. At the same time, I know I'm doing something important here. Without these signs, we don't have a campaign. We don't have anything. No, I'm not ignoring all the other shit in my life. I'm just taking on one task at a time. At least that's the spin I'm going to use for now.

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I wake up around six and leave the motel room to pick up breakfast for Eric. Egg McMuffin, hash browns, orange juice. If he knew how much I hated this stuff, I'm sure he'd really appreciate the effort. As it is, he wakes up, sees the breakfast I've laid out for him, and pulls the covers up over his head. I'm fairly sure his reaction is based on the fact that my presence means he'll have to go back to work, and not because he hates breakfast like I do.

"Easy, it's time to get back to business," I say, trying to sound chipper, trying to sound as if this "business" is not the nearest thing I can think of to a slow, painful death. It's not easy to affect this tone.

"What if I said I didn't want to, sir?" His voice sounds as if this might be a serious question.

"Nonsense, my boy. This is the real campaign work you wanted to do. This is how elections are won."

"I thought campaign work would be different," he says. His blankets are still pulled up over his head. "I thought it would be more like hanging around and coming up with ideas. And not so much like working in a sweatshop."

"See. Now you've learned something, Easy. Working on a campaign is a *lot* like working in a sweatshop."

"Are you sure this campaign is like other campaigns?" he asks.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just that, this campaign, the things we're doing seem a little... unorthodox." He peels the blankets off his face. "It seems like you're making things up as you go."

He's being earnest. I can tell this. Hell, Eric wouldn't know how to be anything *but* earnest. I therefore have to swallow an urge to be angry with him. Whatever images of campaign life that he's conjured, the last few days have obviously shattered them. I need to understand that.

"Easy, when you're behind in the polls the way we are, you have to be flexible," I say.

“Behind in the polls? What do you mean by ‘behind?’” His voice is wavering into a higher octave.

I realize I forgot to mention the poll results to Eric, and I wonder if that oversight was somehow intentional, if I wasn’t trying to shield him from the harsh reality that’s been confronting me. “We’re not doing so hot, Easy. I wish I could say it was different.”

He doesn’t say anything. I know he wants to hear a number, and that is all.

“The poll had us down by five points.”

“Five points!” Then he mouths “five points” again without making a sound. “You said we were going to be *up* at least five points! Maybe more.” He pulls the blankets back up over his head.

I feel like I’ve had this conversation before. Or at least one strikingly similar. And I don’t want to repeat it. “I got breakfast for you, Easy. You should eat before we head back to the signs?”

“Signs! That’s your answer?” His voice is wild now, and the blankets shiver with each breath he exhales. “That’s how you think we’re going to win this election!”

“I’m working on the rest of it, Eric. Campaigns are chaotic by nature. We have to be more ready to work with that chaos. When it comes up.” Even as I’m saying it, I can tell it sounds evasive, and stupid. It all makes so much more sense in my head.

“Tell me you have some kind of plan,” Eric says. “Or something.”

“I told you I’m working on the rest of it,” I say. I hold my empty hands out as if to prove I have nothing.

Eric remains unmoving on the bed. The blankets cover him like a death shroud.

“Eric,” I say.

He doesn’t answer.

“Eric, it’s time to do the signs.”

Again, no response.

So I do something that surprises even me. I leave. I walk out on Eric, the one person I actually trust and like. The person who reminds me of a younger, albeit now-disillusioned, Ethan Pascal. I slam the door on him and drive the U-Haul the eight blocks to the Union Hall.

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In the basement, I take stock of last night's progress. I see that we actually got more done than I would have guessed. A little less than half the signs are union-bugged. Which is more than I'd expected. But now, with the prospect of finishing them on my own, the task takes on a new perspective. At least twice as much time as it took last night. Plus, when you factor in hallucination time, and sheer physical exhaustion, it might be late tomorrow before these fuckers are ready to see the light of day. Though frankly, it's not the signs I'm worried about, nor is it the time. I'm now quite concerned that I may lose a piece of myself in this effort.

By my records, every election I've been involved in has caused me to lose at least a small piece of myself, a fragment of my sanity. Some of them have been worse than others. And this one, right now, is looking like it'll cost a bigger piece of my sanity than I can afford right now. Especially if last night's vision of French toast was any indication of what's to come. So as I look around the basement, I'm forced to confront the fact that these signs might send me over some kind of edge that I can't come back from.

I kick a few of the signs around the basement in an effort to stall for a while. I pick some of the bigger globs of paint out of the template. I bite at a hangnail that's particularly annoying. I'm absorbed in these tasks when I hear a heavy set of footsteps coming down the stairway at the far end of the basement. The wooden stairs strain and whine under the weight of use, as if they'd retired long ago and now resent being called into service again. I'm hoping the footsteps are Eric's, though they don't fit the profile. These are slow, plodding. They sound like they bear a heavy weight. Definitely heavier than Eric's fragile, bird-like bulk.

I stare into the darkness, willing my eyes to adjust. A massive shape appears in the shadows of the basement and pulls itself across the checkerboard floor toward me. It's Jack Ward. I can tell by the size of him. He's one of these old time labor guys who used to work at the Aluminum plant outside town. Years of staring down troughs of molten aluminum have left his face looking red and leathery, like one big hickey, everywhere except around his eyes. A set of union-mandated goggles left Jack Ward a raccoon's mask of normal skin surrounded by the hickey.

I met Jack a few months after I started working for Cynthia. He's a type I've run across often in my political travels. A political dinosaur. An old time Democrat from back when the only people who were Democrats were union workers and, well, union workers. The new Democratic Party, the party of choice and diversity and free trade, is something Jack Ward doesn't quite understand. Something that he thinks is going in the wrong direction. Jack exhibits this disenfranchisement with a constant look of confusion that he wears on his masked face. And because I'm not a Montanan, and because I live in Washington, DC, Jack sees me as the poster boy of the culture that has left him behind. He made all this clear to me in that first meeting. He has since then made no secret of the fact that he also regards me with that same cool suspicion. In this case, today, his suspicion is definitely well founded.

He makes his way up to me and scans the signs on the floor. In the grand scheme of things, Jack is meaningless; he's a political speck who thinks he's more important than he is. However, he's smart enough and loud enough that if he were to find out what I'm doing here, he could make things very bad for me. I step sideways to shield the signs the best I can.

"How the hell you doing, Jack?" I ask as if I'm glad to see him.

"Oh, you know. The usual. Stopped by the campaign office. Talked to Suzanne."

"Great," I say.

"Yup. She said you were over here doing some work."

"Oh. She did. That's super great." I make a mental note to slit Suzanne's throat the next chance I get.

He scratches the side of his hickey-colored face. "So I asked myself what the chief of staff for Cynthia Mahoney would be doing that was so important over here." He kicks at the ground with his dusty work boot.

"Just doing the campaign thing, Jack. You know me. Top secret stuff and all."

Jack tilts his head as if he might be able to smell what I'm doing. "As central committee chairman, you know I'm liable for what goes on on the premises, Ethan. I don't have to tell you it's technically illegal for you to be doing any campaign stuff on the premises." Jack has been inching his way in on me, trying to intimidate me with his

bulk. One of his masked eyes has a milky tint to it and he fixes that one on me now. His forearms, which he's folded across his chest, are bulbous, like Popeye's.

"Jack, I know you're not going to give me any of that legal mumbo jumbo," I say, affecting a good old boy attitude. "I mean, you and me both know we got an election to win."

"Win. Ha! Not if that new poll is right." He takes a small step back and grabs his belly and laughs as if this is the funniest thing he's heard all day.

It's time for a new strategy. I move in close to him. "You know what, Jack. I'm sick of talking about polls. And I'm sick of all the usual Helena ass-scratchers who sit around pulling their puds talking about how they'd do it if they were in charge. They're *not* in charge, and if they were, we'd be doing a lot worse than we are right now." My intention is to scare Jack. Not physically. But maybe if he thinks I'm crazy, like certifiably out of my gourd, he might just back off and leave me to my own devices. It's worth a shot anyway.

I can see a deepening of the red hickey that is his face. He folds his Popeye arms back around his chest. "So what is it you're doing down here that's going to win a campaign for Cynthia?" He goes back to scanning the floor and I'm starting to think that Jack isn't going to give up on this one. I begin calculating the fallout if he were to discover what I'm doing down here. Or if I tried to level with him and win him over to my side. Or if I just killed him now and got it over with. Though each of those options has a particular upside, they are not without serious drawbacks. And the fact that I'm actually considering them, I take as a bad sign.

Just then, I hear another set of steps tapping down the far staircase. These footsteps are lighter, quickly moving, more along the lines of what I'd expect to hear from Eric. Jack Ward breaks his concentration and turns to face the new visitor.

Through the darkness I can make out the skinny, pale figure of Eric Wright. He's moving quickly and he's out of breath. I step forward to introduce him to Jack, thinking any distraction is a good distraction, but Eric immediately jerks his thumb over his shoulder and says, "Do either of you guys own a white Chevy half ton?"

Jack takes a step toward Eric and says, "Here."

"Because," Eric says panting, "I just saw it rolling down that hill out front."

“What are you talking about, son?”

“No shit! Rolled right down and smacked into a Mercedes.”

Even the skin around Jack’s eyes, the skin that never took a direct blast from the molten aluminum, turns a deep, wine-colored purple. “Fuck me!” he shouts. He leaps straight up into the air, then sprints toward the exit. The stairs sound like thunder as he charges up them.

When Jack Ward is gone, Eric stops breathing heavily and shakes his shoulders in a quiet, contained laugh.

“Can you explain to me what just happened, Easy?” I ask.

“It wasn’t too hard to figure out, sir.” He puts his hands in his pockets and kicks at one of the yard signs. “I’ve taken enough phone calls from Mr. Ward to know he’s an asshole.” Eric looks up at me quickly. “If you don’t mind my saying, sir.”

“Easy, I absolutely don’t mind,” I say, trying to stifle my enthusiasm.

“So when I saw him parking out front, I knew he was bad news, what with the signs and all.” He looks around the basement slowly, taking in the clutter of signs on the floor. There is a slight blush on each of his cheeks. “And when I was coming down here and I heard him, I figured you needed a little help.” Eric goes to pick up a pile of signs as if he’s done with the story.

“So?” I press.

“And if you were from Montana, you’d know that no one locks their car doors in downtown Helena.”

“So?” I say again.

“So?” Eric looks up at me with a confused face. “Didn’t you say there would be some things we’d be doing here that might be questionable?”

“Indeed I did.”

“Well, do you think flicking off the parking brake of Mr. Ward’s pickup could be considered questionable?” His face is a perfect deadpan.

“Definitely questionable, Easy,” I say. Then I add, “But certainly moral.”

Eric takes a template and sprays one of the stray signs. “Hell,” he says, “I’d settle for *mostly* moral.” He tosses the union-bugged sign onto a pile and picks up another one.

Eric gets *it*. No question. If anyone ever got *it*, Eric does. At this moment, I'm almost choked up with emotion. It's difficult to believe what Eric has just done for me. If you had a child, and that child went on to win an Olympic gold medal, or to win the World Series, I imagine the feeling you would have at that point would be part of what I'm feeling right now. I have so many questions for him, so many things I want to say. Yet this moment has a certain beauty to it, a beauty orchestrated by Eric, and I am loathe to interrupt it, loathe to intrude on this thing he has created. I pick up a template and start union-bugging Cynthia's signs.

After an hour of work, with my hands sufficiently cramped, I look up. "Is there any way I can thank you, Easy?"

Eric sprays another sign as if he hasn't heard me. Then just before I repeat myself he clears his throat. "How about this? The next time I ask you what we're going to do to win this campaign, make sure you have a real answer."

I nod and go back to my signs.

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Working on the signs is still awful. In some ways, it's worse than last night. Yes, everything hurts. And yes, the blue and black signs again begin to look like slices of French toast. But knowing that Eric is with me helps. And after a while, we begin to see progress. We get down to five more boxes of signs. And our mechanical pace, aided by a visible end to the infinite, begins to quicken like a truck rolling downhill. I am a printing press. I print union bugs.

The finished signs are stacked in neat piles that reach nearly to the ceiling and cover nearly every square inch of the basement. As we slice open the last box, and Eric and I greedily grab at the signs, I almost feel a twinge of regret, as if I'm sad to see this labor lost. When the last one is done, Eric and I sit with our backs to a pile of signs and admire our handiwork. For a while we don't say anything, we just scan the room as if we expect some non-union-bugged signs to leap out from the others and threaten us.

Finally Eric picks up the template he's been using. He holds it like it's a dirty Kleenex. He says, "I suppose now would be a good time to dispose of the evidence."

“I like the way you think, Easy.”

“I’ve been looking forward to doing this for the last four and a half hours,” he says. He takes the cardboard, gobbled with sticky white spray paint, between his fingers and tears it down the middle. He halves it and tears again. He keeps doing this until it’s too small and too thick to tear. He does all this with the kind of look you see on a kid who’s burning ants with a magnifying glass.

“You want to do that to mine?” I ask.

“Absolutely.” He takes mine and does the same.

It’s almost four in the afternoon and it’s time to get moving, but I’m not ready to leave this hall of triumph just yet. I feel like lingering a moment longer. I dig out my cell phone which, until now, I’ve kept turned off.

“Suzanne, this is Ethan,” I say when she picks up the line.

“Great to hear from you. We were just starting to miss you,” she says in a kittenish voice. She’s playing the part of a vixen. She’s obviously on one of her emotional upswings.

“Two things,” I say. “One, if you ever sic Jack Ward on me like that again, I will fire you.” Suzanne is so quiet it sounds as if the line’s gone dead. “And two, your yard signs are done. You can have your campaign people pick them up at the Union Hall basement. Get them distributed around the state and up in yards by this weekend.”

“Uh,” she starts to say and then stops. It is truly a rare moment for Suzanne to be caught speechless. I’m not sure if she’s shocked by item number one on my list or item number two.

“Sound good?” I ask, hedging my bets either way.

“I guess so,” she says.

“Good. Eric and I are going to do a little political recon. We’re going to be incommunicado for a few days.”

“Okay.” She says this as if she’s just now waking up from a fog. “By the way, Cynthia’s back in the state,” she says. “I’ve got her hitting a full schedule for the rest of the week.”

“Well then, that’s two pieces of good news in one day,” I say. “I think that’s what they call a roll.”

“Maybe so.”

“We’ll talk in a few days,” I say. “Hopefully I’ll know something by then.” I hang up and switch off the cell phone again.

Eric is rolling the balled-up remains of the templates between his two hands. “Don’t you think you were a little harsh?” he asks, looking up from his task.

“Not really. That was idiotic of her to tell Jack Ward where I was. If you hadn’t come along, we could have been royally fucked.”

“Maybe so,” Eric says nodding.

“As it was, you had to... well, you had to do what you did.”

“Agreed,” he says cheerfully.

“By the way, how badly did his truck hit that Mercedes.”

Eric tosses the template ball to me like he’s shooting a free throw. “Bad enough that I was pretty sure he’d forget what we were doing in here.”

“Fair enough,” I say.

I heave myself up from the floor and give Eric a hand. We throw the cans of spray paint in the dumpster outside and climb into the empty U-Haul. Before I start the truck, I notice a white rectangle of paper wedged under our windshield wiper. I unroll my window and pluck the paper from the wiper. It’s a glossy brochure for Claiborne. On the front cover it has a smooth-looking black and white. His wide smile shows off his glowing teeth. His eyes have that perfect TV twinkle and his hair has the oiled-up look of someone who’s a little too proud of the fact that he has a full head of hair. Below the picture a caption reads: *Ross Claiborne: Montanan, Family Man, Man of the People.*

“What’s that?” Eric asks from the passenger seat.

“The devil’s calling card.”

Eric leans over to get a better look at the brochure. “Isn’t that overstating it just a bit?”

“I don’t like your attitude, Easy.”

I flip open the brochure, feeling the slickness and weight of the paper between my fingers. This is expensive stuff. And, looking at the bottom, non-union. Inside is an invitation to attend one of a series of town hall meetings Claiborne will be giving over the

next few weeks, at various towns along the Hi-Line, including our next destination, Havre, Montana.

“Let’s save this, Easy,” I say, handing him the brochure. “It may come in handy some day.”

Eric dutifully folds the brochure in half and jams it into his back pocket. On the way out of town, it looks as if every parked car in the streets has a Claiborne brochure tucked under its wipers.

Next stop: Havre, Montana.

Chapter Fourteen

I'm trying to think of famous road-traveling duos, literary antecedents for Eric and me as we barrel north on Highway 87 towards Havre. Sal and Dean from *On the Road* come immediately to mind. But, let's be honest, they're way cooler than Eric and me. What about Steinbeck and Charley? That one would have to be predicated on one of us being a dog. Thelma and Louise? Pass. Huck and Jim? Better, but still not right. Perhaps we are wholly original. Eric "Easy-E" Wright and Ethan "The Anarchist" Pascal, The Political Twins. Hauling ass in their U-Haul of Justice. That's more like it! Two adventurers seeking out political points at the far corners of the state of Monta—

"So," Eric interrupts after a silence that's obviously gone on too long. "How are we going to win this election?" We're cresting a rise in the highway and the engine kicks into a whiny overdrive, the truck shudders as if it's about to break apart. I've been expecting this one from Eric for a while now.

"You heard me talking to Suzanne didn't you?" I say.

"Yeah, but I didn't understand what you said."

"Political reconnaissance, Easy. This is big."

"Sounds like the Navy SEALs or something, sir."

"I'd like to say you're close. But you're not. At all." I drape my hands over the steering wheel like I'm driving a milk truck. "Here's the deal. For some reason, Cynthia's numbers are dropping. And no one, not our pollster, not our consultants, not our campaign staff, and definitely not our DC staff – literally no one – has any idea why."

"And you do?"

"No, I do not," I say, holding up an index finger as if here – here at last – is the crux of my notion. "But I *do* know that the best place to find out what is going wrong with a candidate's campaign is always that candidate's hometown."

"What, like to see what's in the papers?" He asks this so innocently that I wonder if he isn't just humoring me, playing the straight man, tossing me softballs so I can launch them out of the park.

“Of course not the papers. We see those every day. And they’re all useless. No, we’ve got to take the pulse of the guy on the street. We’ve got to find out what Bobby Bag-O-Doughnuts is saying.”

Eric snaps his head back as if he’s just received an electric shock. “Who?”

“Bobby Bag-O-Doughnuts. Joe Six-Pack. Gail Grocery-Bag.”

“Okay.” He’s smiling and nodding slowly as if he’s beginning to catch on.

“What about Travis Tire-Iron? Or Stacey Stop-Light?”

“Absolutely. We need to find out what they’re thinking too.”

“I think I get what you’re getting at, sir.”

“See? This ain’t rocket surgery, Easy.” I bite at a piece of white paint that’s still clinging to my hand like a piece of dead skin.

Eric looks out the side window for a moment and then turns back to me. “I should point out that you’re using less and less English the more we do this stuff.”

“That’s the whole point, Easy,” I say. I shake my head slowly, as if he’s got a lot to learn. “Deep cover. From here on out we speak only in code.” I bob my head and weave, as if I’m a super-spy or secret agent. Eric laughs and grabs onto the door handle.

The fact is, it’s rarely one thing that’s affecting a candidate’s numbers. There is no political magic bullet, or silver bullet, depending on your point of view. It’s usually a hodge-podge of things that are going wrong, a panoply of missteps, a series of small mistakes made by many which all add up to a fallen candidate. I realize that. But right now we need *something*, any little thing. If we can find it, maybe correct it, work it into our advertising, get Cynthia on that message, it might start moving some numbers in our direction. It could give us some momentum. And that’s really all we can hope for right now. There’s no point in explaining this all to Eric right now. He gets *it*. I’ve already determined that. He probably understands all this. Besides, restating these hard facts would just deflate him again. And I definitely don’t need that. I need him with me.

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--That’s the problem with Cynthia Mahoney representing hard working Montana families in Congress. She’s got no values. Worse than that, she’s got the wrong kind of

values. She represents amoral, insidious values brought to you by the liberal establishment in Washington, DC.

Pause, during which the only sound is the crackling of the weak AM station that our truck radio is pulling in.

--Let's go to a caller. Bert from Winnett, you're on Bert.

This is the only channel we can get out here in the no man's land between Helena and Havre. Believe me, I've checked. It's the Sott Alsenos Show. He broadcasts out of a tiny station near Three Forks, but he gets picked up by most translators, so there's nowhere in the state that doesn't get his show. Politically, Sott is a couple miles to the right of Jesse Helms. Though his beliefs also tend more toward the paranoiac. His talk show ends up sounding more like a riot manifesto. Needless to say, the Sott Alsenos Show is extremely popular in Montana. Sott is a good-sized constellation in the Montana celebrity galaxy. Listening to the show, for me, is an exercise in tolerance. How long can I take it before I snap? How much right-wing bullshit is too much for Ethan Pascal? Good questions. Let's find out.

I look over and see that Eric is sleeping with his head pinned against the window. His fine hair is sticking statically to the dark glass in a blond halo. I reach out and turn the volume higher, just a touch, so I don't wake him.

--Yeah, Sott, major kudos to you. This is Earl up near Scobey.

--Hey, Earl. How goes it?

--I'm a bit concerned, Sott. I'd heard through the grapevine that our very own Cynthia Mahoney engages in practices that are strictly forbade by our lord and savior and all moral code that moral culture that has handed down since Caesar.

--Amen to that, Earl. Not only does she not represent our Montana family values, she does not represent our Montana industry values. Such as agriculture, and extraction. She never met a tree she didn't want to hug. Or a hardworking Montanan she didn't want to tax.

Sott has a way of talking hick-talk, wherein he stresses odd syllables on long words and breaks them up unnecessarily: agriculture becomes a-GREE-culture; industry becomes in-DUSS-try; extraction becomes X-traction. It makes him sound dumber than

he is. It's his way of connecting with the people, and it's maddening how well it works. Listening to this show, I'm reminded of how much I hate being in this fucking state.

--My friends, four years of Cynthia Mahoney's reign of terror is enough. She has time and time again supported ceding U.S. sovereignty to the United Nations. That's right. If it were up to Cynthia Mahoney we wouldn't be a state anymore at all. We'd be annexed by the U.N. and the wolves and all the other endangered species would have more rights than you and me. This is all true, people. Look at the voting records. I'm not—

And suddenly, I know exactly how much right-wing bullshit is too much. "Shut the fuck up!" I scream and pound my fist on the steering wheel.

Eric tears his face from the passenger window and blinks widely at me. "Was I talking in my sleep, sir?"

"No, Easy, no. Sorry. Were you listening to any of this?"

"What?"

"This Sott Alsenos idiot."

"I've heard of him before. My parents sometimes listen to his show. Is he that bad?"

"That bad? That bad?"

"Well, I mean, is he just bad or is he evil?"

"Worse. He's worse than evil. Because he's stupid."

"Hmm."

"How do they decide that a guy like that should have a talk show?" I ask, not yet ready to drop the topic.

"I don't know. Does he have a pleasant voice?"

Eric's question catches me off guard and a laugh slips out of my mouth before I can think of a good reply.

Eric fiddles with his door handle, testing the play between his fingers. "It does go to show you, though," he says. "People listen to this guy. That's at least part of why we're behind right now."

“Yeah, the people who listen are fucking idiots, just like him,” I say. “Sometimes I think this state deserves what it gets. They deserve some shithead like Claiborne; Cynthia’s too good for them.”

Eric nods and sits on his hands. He’s moving his bottom jaw back and forth as if someone just punched him in the chin.

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Havre, Montana, can roughly be defined as the one-mile stretch where the speed limit on Highway 2 drops down to thirty-five from the usual seventy. During that one-mile stretch, Highway 2 is better known as Main Street. And everything you need to know about Havre can be easily ascertained from a quick pass of Main Street. After one such pass, I decide to get a room at a place called the Wagon Wheel Motel, because it’s the only place I see with the price listed on the sign out front. It’s a sad-looking one-story dump, but it’ll do. I’m not looking for comfort here; I don’t plan on staying long. Eric throws his bag into a corner of the room and flings himself face down onto his bed. I’d love nothing more than to call it a night, get some solid sleep. But I’m getting anxious about getting back to DC. The floating coffins have not yet been reburied.

“Easy, don’t go to sleep,” I say.

He lets out a sustained, agonized groan.

“Seriously, we need to start our reconnaissance mission tonight.”

Eric rolls over on his bed. “Yeah, I don’t quite get what you mean by that. What exactly did you have in mind, sir?”

“Have you ever worked a bar, Easy?”

Eric scrunches up his face as if my question actually had a bad taste. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“Get ready to learn a lesson in retail politics, Easy.” I walk back to the sink outside the bathroom to get myself a glass of water. I’m watching Eric in the mirror; he sits up to listen. “For a politician, working a room is when you go in some place and don’t leave until you’ve shaken everyone’s hand, made some kind of meaningful connection with the voters. In a state like Montana, where people expect to know their

representatives, being able to work a room is invaluable. Cynthia's okay at it. I wish she were better, but she'll do."

Eric nods his head then looks around the room as if he's searching for a notebook to write this all down. I fill up the plastic cup that comes with the room and then shut off the faucet.

"Now, for a congressional staffer," I continue, "working a room is something entirely different. When you work a room as a staffer, you're trying to pick people's brains. The point is to be as subtle and unobtrusive as possible. It's like you're a wildlife photographer; you want to observe the subject in its most natural state. Because you're trying to get inside their heads. You want to get a feel for the pulse, for what the people are really thinking."

"Don't we have focus groups or field polls for stuff like that?"

"We do, Easy. And they cost a lot of money. And they're mostly worthless." I hold up the glass of water and regard the strange, whitish appearance of it for a moment. "Think about it: would you tell someone who you don't know your views on abortion, or the death penalty? Of course not. People tense up when they know someone's asking them questions. You have to finesse them if you want to get to the real person underneath." I gulp down my water. It tastes chemically, or rusty. I'm not sure which. "Never trust focus groups, Easy. They just tell you what you want to hear."

"Are they the ones that told you we'd be ahead in the polls right now?"

His question catches me mid-gulp. I think he's being serious. Though I'm not sure. He may be actually fucking with me, which I would take as a good sign.

"Shut the hell up, Easy." I say, hedging my bets either way.

He laughs and slaps the bedside table with his hand.

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The Broken Barrel Saloon on Main Street in Havre is one of these mythical bars that most Montanans have heard of and very few have actually set foot in. It's been around longer than the actual town of Havre. Its clientele list is limited to hard-bitten locals, people so strongly tied to the land, they might as well be made of dirt. The

Broken Barrel is the kind of place the wistful cowboys from the airport like to go at night to get a good drunk on. I'm sure growing up in Havre, Cynthia's probably logged her fair share of hours drinking with the locals, of which she used to be one. Tonight, we're going there too.

Two sounds – a country music juke box, and yelling – seep through the front door of the Broken Barrel Saloon. The windows are tinted too dark to see inside, but it sounds like a rowdy night. A pink neon sign says “Beer” as if that's all we needed to know. And I suppose, on some level, it is. Before we actually go in, as we're standing on the chipped sidewalk outside, I give Eric and myself a quick inspection, a visual once-over. I'm wearing the outfit I pack for this exact type of occasion on my Montana trips: faded jeans, work boots, wrinkled flannel shirt. Pretty much *de rigueur* for the Broken Barrel crowd. Eric, on the other hand, is wearing a blue oxford, khakis, and a pair of shiny brown loafers. Definitely not appropriate. This kind of attire in Havre is pretty much black tie. Not the kind of attention you want when you're trying to work a bar.

“Let's go in separately,” I say.

“Why?” His voice sounds panicky.

“I don't know. It's easier to work a room in singles; people feel like you're trying to pull something when there's two.”

Eric shrugs and looks off to the other side of Main Street. I can tell he's upset that I'm making him do his part alone. But I really don't want him fucking this up either. “When you come in, you can stand near me. Listen to how I work it before you strike out on your own,” I say, almost apologetically.

Eric nods and puts his hands in his pockets. He's already sucking on his lips, getting ready to give them a good once-over as he waits to come in.

“Give me five minutes,” I say as I pull open the door to the Broken Barrel.

It's warm inside, like a bathroom a few minutes after someone's taken a shower. Sawdust and peanut shells sit in piles on the floor and I step through them as I make my way to the bar. It turns out the noise I'd heard from out front was deceptive. The bar is a quarter full, mostly small groups of people who hang in pockets, leaning tight over their beer mugs, or throwing darts along the far wall. No one seems to notice me.

There's a tough looking dude shooting pool at the table in the corner and, after getting a beer at the bar, I let myself drift over in that direction. I set two quarters on the table and he nods. He says, "You rack." Then he jerks a thumb at his chest. "I break."

All things being equal, I'm a decent pool player. Maybe even better than decent. But as the dude leans over the green felt and draws the cue crookedly back, I know I will have to lose this game. People are more likely to talk to you when they're winning.

"I'm Ethan," I say, holding out my hand after he breaks.

"Name's Snuffy," he says, and then grunts approvingly after we shake a too hard handshake. Snuffy looks like a guy fresh off the range. He has an enormous soup-strainer moustache that extends all the way down to his jaw line. And his cowboy hat is pulled on tight and low. When he's not shooting, he twirls the corners of his moustache in his fingers. When he regards me, he's got a look of mirth in his eyes that seems caught somewhere between disdainful and openly genial, like someone who's trying to decide if a joke is offensive or funny. "The hell kind of a name is Ethan?" he asks as I lean down to line up my shot.

"Don't know," I say. "The kind my mother gave me." Then I shank my shot into the bumper.

Snuffy nods as if my answer was better than any real one I could have given, which leads me to believe that Snuffy might be the first person I've met in a long time who really appreciates what I'm all about. Scary.

We continue to shoot and exchange small talk. I keep missing and Snuffy plays a little better than average. After a few minutes, I notice Eric walk into the bar. He looks around the place, uncertainly. It strikes me then how young he looks. Slender frame, pale, clean face, nervous, hunted eyes. Seeing me, he looks away and sidesteps his way toward the pool table and finally takes a seat at a barstool nearby. It seems so obvious what he's doing, so peculiar, that I'm surprised when no one in the bar points at him and starts laughing. I mean, he looks ridiculous. But maybe I'm being hypercritical. Because no one *does* notice him. No one gives him a second thought, except me.

"What's with the white shit on your hand?" Snuffy asks when when I'm drawing my cue back for a shot.

"Painting. Had a painting gig a few days ago," I say.

Snuffy nods. "Good work. If you can get it." I make good contact with the cue ball but the shot misses the pocket by a few inches.

"So, Snuffy, what's your line of business?" I ask casually. It's the best line I know of to get into a political discussion.

"I tell you, Ethan. I've lived a hell of a life." He leans on his cue and adopts a far away look. "Yessirree. They ought to write down my story. It'd make one fine book. Hell, it'd make three or four fine books. People might think I'm just some dumb old ranch hand. But I'd say I'm more of a poet-philosopher-Zen master-toreador." Then he looks at me as if I'd just said something to interrupt him. "You interested in writing down a book for me?"

"I don't know." I scratch my chin. "Can't say as I ever have done something like that."

"It wouldn't be hard, brother. No lack of material." He moves in closer to me so that I can see the brownish teeth behind his moustache. "You know something, Ethan? I've had moments of synchronicity that would make Carl Jung roll over in his grave."

"I'll bet you have," is all I can say.

"No kidding." He breaks his concentration momentarily to pick at something caught in his moustache. Then, "Do you read the I-Ching, Ethan?"

I scratch my chin again. "Can't say as I ever have before." I slip away from Snuffy and take a shot that misses badly. It's clear that I have lost control of this conversation. And my brand of subtle overtures toward politics will be lost on Snuffy. Time to try a different approach, "So what do you think about these elections coming up?"

He's bent low over the table to shoot, but he looks up at me with one eye from under the brim of his hat. "Which election in particular would that be?"

"Oh, any of them," I say. "Isn't that lady, what's her name, Mahoney, from around these parts?"

He shoots and misses everything on the table; the cue ball caroms uselessly from bumper to bumper. "That's what *they* tell me," Snuffy says, as if he's not telling me everything that *they* tell him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“Well, all these Bozos say they’re from here, but once they get out to Washington, DC, and once they start shaking their ass in front of everyone, they might as well be from Liechtenstein.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” I say, holding back an urge to defend Cynthia to Snuffy, to explain that she is *still* a Montanan and that she *still* has the interests of her constituents at heart. Instead, I shoot and miss again.

He sinks two stripes before he talks again. “That Mahoney’s a good example,” he says. “She grew up here, raised a good family, made an honest living. Hell, I even helped her family around branding and calving time. But now look at her. Big head and all. And then she turns around and starts playing for a different team.”

I’m shooting as he says this and it catches me off-guard so that I accidentally make the shot. “What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask, trying to mask the edge in my voice.

“Means she’s Lebanese, brother.” He smiles. “She likes the ladies a little too much, if you need me to spell it out for you.” Then he shakes his head disgustedly.

“Snuffy, congratulations,” I say, putting my hand on his shoulder. “That is officially the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard in my life. Or at least in the past few weeks.”

“I ain’t shitting you, man. My cousin seen a picture of her making out with some other old lady. And I don’t mean any fancy-ass hello-kiss. I’m talking making out.”

I’ve heard about all I need from this poet-philosopher-Zen master-toreador. Definitely enough crazy for one night. The only question I have is, why did it take me so long to figure out this guy was nuts? That job description line should have told me all I needed to know. When Snuffy finally sinks the eight-ball, I set my cue on the table.

“Ain’t we going to play again?” he asks, his voice strangely fearful. “Don’t seem fair the way I cleaned your clock that way.”

“It does hardly seem fair, Snuffy. But I’m meeting someone soon.”

“Suit yourself,” he says, rolling my cue back and forth on the table between both hands.

I spend the rest of the night trying to work the bar, but find myself getting nowhere. The people I talk to either blow me off, or start talking on tangents even more divergent than Snuffy’s synchronicity crap. I’ve really lost the touch. There was a time

when I could work any room you put me in. Meatpacking plants, used car lots, funeral parlors. And I could get any information I wanted. People trusted me with their deepest fears, their guiltiest memories. Shit, they told me stuff they wouldn't tell their priest, their doctor, or even their lawyer. I'm not kidding, I was that good. But by the end of this night, the only information I've managed to find out is that four beers is enough to get me fairly drunk. And by closing time, I realize I've spent the last hour watching Eric work the room, watching him timidly approach people, talk with them for a while, then slink off to another corner of the bar. Though I know it's doubtful, I hope he's had more luck than me tonight.

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"So how did it go tonight?" I ask Eric as we walk toward the motel. It's after two in the morning now and even the act of walking seems like a Herculean task.

"I met a lot of interesting people," he says.

"I'm sure they were fascinating people, Easy."

"Seriously. I met one guy who writes cowboy poetry. And I met a lady who's trying to get through dental hygienist school so that she can get a good job to support her kids." Eric slides his hands into his pockets. "So that was cool," he says.

It amazes me how serious he can be. He actually *enjoyed* meeting all these people. Somehow I find that information so depressing. Not for what it says about Eric, but what it says about me. How callous I've become to the lives of other people. How little I regard them. This is not the way it used to be. Back when I could work a room like nobody's business, I used to care about something deeper. It used to matter more to me. Now it's such a labor even to *pretend* to care. Have I used up my life's caring quotient? Am I destined to fake it for the rest of my life? These are not the questions I want to be asking myself right now. Or ever.

I realize Eric is still talking. "But as for real information, I didn't get anything solid," he says.

"I'm sorry, Easy. What did you say?"

"I was just saying that no one told me much of anything to really go on."

“Nothing?” I ask sadly, as if he’s somehow failed me. “Not one thing?”

“Well, not nothing entirely,” he says. There’s a squirrely edge to his voice. “Just nothing useful.”

“What did you get that *wasn’t* useful?”

“Well, they just said they didn’t like Cynthia.”

“Oh?”

“Actually it sounded more like they didn’t like *any* politicians. Or anything having to do with the government.”

“Welcome to Montana, Easy. Your cowboy poet probably gets an NEA grant every year. And your dental hygienist-in-waiting probably gets government student loans. Of course, they’ll tell you the real problem is they need less government. Isn’t that beautiful?”

“I guess so.”

“These people are idiots, Easy. Don’t forget that.”

Eric doesn’t say anything and we continue to walk in silence for a while. Then, I say, “Don’t feel bad, though. I didn’t get anything useful either.”

“Are you sure?”

“Complete strikeout.”

“I thought I heard that cowboy guy say something though.”

“You heard the lesbian thing?” I ask.

It’s clear the boldness of my question makes Eric nervous. He fiddles with his hands in his pockets. “Um. Well, yeah. I did.”

I stop walking and Eric stops too. “Tell me you don’t believe that, Easy,” I say.

“Well I. I don’t know. I mean, no. Of course I don’t.”

I start walking again. “Easy, you realize there’s probably never been a woman who’s run for office in Montana who *hasn’t* been accused of being a lesbian.”

“Is that true?”

“Actually, I take it back. I don’t think there’s ever been a woman in this *country* who’s run and not been called a lesbian at one point or another.”

“Maybe so.”

“Of course so, Easy. I’ve seen it happen all over the place. Even in states that *aren’t* as backwards as Montana.”

“I guess I should be relieved by that, huh?”

“Cynthia was married for over thirty years. She has two sons. If that’s not heterosexual, I don’t know what is.”

“Really?” he asks.

“Definitely really.”

I look around us and don’t recognize where we are. We’ve somehow missed our motel. We’re standing on Main Street still, but we’re now on the outskirts of town, where Main Street turns back into Highway 2. We are on the edge of darkness. A few lights from town wink at a distance, like an oasis that’s just out of reach.

“This is amazing,” I say.

“What?”

“We’ve somehow managed to get lost in Havre, Montana.”

Eric looks around us, at the dark ahead, and then at the city behind. “Yeah,” he says. “It kind of feels like that.”

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, I wake up and it takes me a few minutes to remember where I am. It's a moment of cold, wide-awake panic, which isn't exactly quelled by the facts, once I realize them: I'm still in Havre; I'm still in Montana. I suddenly feel a need to check in on my life in DC, a need to reassure myself that I'm not neglecting something huge. I fixate on this need in the gray morning light until I finally throw my sheets off and dig up the cell phone that's buried at the bottom of my bag. I make a mental agreement to listen only to the first few words of my office voicemail messages, just to see who's been trying to get a hold of me in my absence. That might help put these fears to rest, at least for a while. This arrangement somehow feels like a suitable compromise, though if you were to ask me, I couldn't tell you why I'm compromising at all, or with whom.

I hold the phone close as I punch in the numbers. And I hold my breath as I scan the messages. As long as no one sounds terribly panicky I figure I'll be okay and can continue this quest that I'm currently engaged in. I hit save so I can listen to the messages in full later on, when I'm back in DC. The following people have left messages in my absence: Cynthia, sounding slightly apologetic; Brooke, sounding somewhat frustrated; Nicole, sounding bored; Vince, sounding mildly annoyed; Lily, sounding conciliatory; my mother, sounding... like my mother; Cynthia, sounding slightly less apologetic than she did the first time; and Jasper, representing Prometheus Productions. I determine there's nothing there that can't wait. I flip the cell phone closed and lean back against the headboard of my bed.

"What's going on?" I hear coming from the bed across the room. Eric's voice is taut, suspicion-filled, as if he woke up in the same state of panic I just did.

"Nothing, Easy. Just checking my messages." With those first spoken words of the morning, that first vocalization, comes the rushing current of a hangover. My temples throb and I can feel my blood thicken to a chemically sludge. I consider getting out of bed to get a glass of water and then remember the rusted taste the water in this sink had yesterday. Not worth it.

"Any emergencies?" he asks.

“None that I know of,” I say, wincing, then resting my head back on my pillow.

“So what are we going to do today?”

“More recon, Easy. Last night was worthless. We’ve got to get something we can use.”

“Does that mean we have to go to more bars?” he asks. There’s a catch in his voice as if the prospect of going to another bar might make him gag right here and now.

“Not necessarily. Not right away. Let’s get breakfast,” I say, recognizing a similar catch in my own voice, this one over the prospect of logging hours in a greasy spoon diner.

“Do you mind if we wait a few minutes,” he asks, rubbing his forehead with his fingers.

“I definitely do not mind at all,” I say, doing the same with my own forehead. For the next hour, we both lie in our respective beds, trying our best to heal.

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The Kit Kat Café is the main greasy spoon in Havre. There is also The Silo, Paul’s Pancake Palace, and Ruby’s. But those are considered nouveau by Havre standards, more recent establishments that are not to be trusted by natives. The Kit Kat Café is the only place to go if you’re local, if you’re a real Montanan. No question. The wistful cowboys come here after they’ve hung out in the Broken Barrel all night and before they go to the nearest airport to hang out all day. Quite a life those guys lead. Anyway, it’s the place to be if we’re going to do more recon.

Eric and I go into the Kit Kat separately, and we take positions at opposite ends of the breakfast counter. I pick up a newspaper and begin idly thumbing through it. Before I can get to the Personals, a tired looking waitress with bags under her eyes leans across the counter.

“What you suppose you want?” she asks without looking up from the pad in her hand.

A voice from behind me says, “Brains and eggs, Val. Make it two.”

Snuffy slides into the stool next to mine. He's wearing the same clothes he had on last night. And he smells like he made the transition from the Broken Barrel to the Kit Kat just a few minutes ago.

"You ready for a good old fashioned breakfast, amigo?" He claps me on the back. Snuffy is probably the last person I need to talk to right now, seeing as how I've already tapped his store of information and it's proven useless. I look around for another open seat at the counter, but can't see one at the moment.

I turn my coffee mug over so Val can fill it. "Not really, Snuffy," I say as he settles himself into position on the stool next to mine.

For some reason, Snuffy finds those three words extremely funny. He makes a long, repeated hooting sound and hits the counter with the meat of his fist.

"You think that's funny, Snuffy, you should hear my good material."

Snuffy keeps on laughing and I can't help but join in. At first I'm laughing at how hard he's laughing. But soon I forget about the reasons I'm laughing and just keep doing it. What the fuck! I've got nothing else to lose. Then Snuffy coughs a few times to clear his throat. His laughing is done now and it takes me a few seconds to realize this. When I look at him next, I see he's regarding me with cold, blue eyes. His droopy moustache hangs low and makes it look like he's frowning deeply.

"So I think I got it figured out why you're here," he says. No follow-up laughter. Just a slight twitch as he licks the bottom edge of his moustache.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"Don't be fucking with old Snuffy. I may look like some dumb cowhand, but really I'm a—"

"Wait! Don't tell me. You're a cowboy-poet-philosopher-Zen master-toreador," I say. Snuffy doesn't react at all. His face is cracked steel. Apparently, laughter doesn't live here anymore.

He slowly taps his finger near my coffee mug. "With them questions you was asking last night. I see you got yourself an agenda."

"Agenda?" I say. I can't think of a funny line about agendas, so I play it straight. "What are you talking about?"

“You and that young, skinny fella on the other end of the counter.” He jerks his thumb toward Eric, who looks to be engaged in a conversation with a young woman who’s got a baby thrown over her shoulder.

“That kid?”

“That’s right. You and that fella was in the Broken Barrel last night. And now I see you both here today.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Snuffy,” I say, though I’m not sure how believable I sound anymore.

“I think you do,” he says and curls back his hairy lips to show me his brown teeth. “You and the boy are some of them Mormon missionaries.”

My face doesn’t waver, doesn’t break one way or the other, and Snuffy takes this as some kind of admission. “Aha!” He slams his meaty fist down on the counter again and laughs. “I knew it.” Val looks up quickly, then goes back to the kitchen.

“Snuffy, you’re a pretty amazing guy,” I say. “Your powers of perception are acute.”

“You thought I wouldn’t pick up on how you were talking about family values and political business. But that’s the first step to the brainwashing, ain’t it?”

I nod. “It’s the first *big* step. There are a lot more subtle steps before that that no one picks up on.”

“Well, I’ll be!” Another Snuffy fist counter slam. “You are one sneaky son of a bitch, ain’t you?”

“Definitely sneaky. Among other things.”

Val finally comes out from the kitchen with our plates and sets them down in front of us. Each one has a pile of Yellow No. 5-colored scrambled eggs, with mushrooms sliced into them. Or at least something that *looks* like mushrooms – grayish and gelatinous. The steamy smell rises up into my face. This is far worse than runny banana pancakes. I’d definitely take my mother’s banana pancakes over this. What did Snuffy call it? Brains and eggs? You don’t think it really could be... My kingdom for banana pancakes!

I have to look away, focus on something else.

“Ain’t you going to eat?” Snuffy asks. His own fork is poised over his plate, as if he doesn’t want to start until I do.

“Oh sure,” I say. “I was just getting to that part.” I pick up a fork and prod the yellow and gray blobs without looking at them. This small action seems to be enough to let Snuffy start work on his own meal. He dumps ketchup onto his eggs and mixes it in until his plate looks like the remains of a bad car accident. *Death on the Highway!*

“They say the brains make you smarter,” Snuffy says. He elbows me in the gut. “Then again, you Mormons’re already a pretty smart bunch.”

“We sure are. Smart and holy.” I’m on defense right now, lost, confused, and trying to hold it together. Snuffy shovels his brains and eggs and ketchup into his mouth with a quick, round motion of his hand. By the time the fork gets back to his mouth, he’s just finished swallowing the previous load. I can see the food working its way down his throat. I finish my coffee and look around for an emergency exit.

“You know what I’m thinking,” Snuffy says after a few moments. He’s leaning his head on the hand that still holds the fork. He looks mostly like a philosopher right now, and less like a cowboy, poet, Zen master, or toreador. “I told you last night how I believe in the I-Ching, right?”

“Yes. We Mormons also believe in the I-Ching.”

Snuffy doesn’t seem surprised by this information. “Then you know the part that says that nothing happens in this life by coincidence.”

Val finally comes up and fills my coffee. “That’s my favorite part,” I say.

Another Snuffy fist counter slam. “You see what I’m saying! There’s something to me and you meeting. It ain’t just coincidence.”

“Okay,” I say because I don’t know what else to say anymore.

“I think me running into you again is a sign. Something I’m supposed to take meaning from.” Snuffy is leaning in close now and I can see brown flecks of chewing tobacco in his teeth, like coffee grounds.

“So?” I ask, almost fearing the answer.

“I’ll admit I’m feeling a little lost these days. How should I put this?” He looks down as if he’s asking his brains and eggs for guidance. “Can you make me into a Mormon?” he says at last, and looks up at me. He’s deadly serious. I can tell this from

the steady gaze, the unwavering face, the sudden stoppage of the brains and eggs shoveling.

I breathe out a long, stale breath, and push my plate away from me. “Snuffy, I can see you need to be saved. You’re obviously a lost soul. Very lost.”

“I knew you could see that about me. I had a feeling. See? You and me are simpatico.”

“Here’s what I’m going to do, Snuffy.” I pull a paper napkin from a silver metal container in front of me and I fish a pen from my back pocket. “Why don’t you give me your number and I’ll have one of my fellow Mormon brothers call you.”

Snuffy gives me his number. I fold the napkin and put it in my pocket. But when I stand up to leave, Snuffy looks like he might start crying.

“That’s it?” he asks. “I just wait for a phone call?”

“I can only gather the lost souls, Snuffy. I can’t convert them. We leave that work to the heavy hitters.”

Snuffy grabs my arm. I can feel the strength of desperation in his grip. “I can’t get no kind of on-the-spot conversion?”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way.”

I can see fear in Snuffy’s eyes now. They are wet with tears and I suddenly feel bad about fucking with him like this. Snuffy is weird, yes. But does he really need some thirty-year-old asshole toying with his religious beliefs? Probably not.

“Listen, Snuffy, here’s my phone number,” I say, taking another napkin and jotting down my own number. “Feel free to call me if you have any crises of confidence. Or faith, I mean. We all get them from time to time. Even me.”

Snuffy seems slightly more reassured by this. He smiles so I can see the tobacco grounds in his teeth again.

I put a ten dollar bill on the counter and turn to leave. Snuffy points at my full, but now cold plate of brains and eggs. “Ain’t you going to eat your breakfast?” he asks, incredulous.

I lean in close to Snuffy as if I’m going to whisper one of the deep dark secrets of the I-Ching. “I would. But it’s against my religion.”

Snuffy nods as if he understands this all too well.

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There's another Claiborne town hall brochure on the U-Haul windshield when I get back to the Wagon Wheel. Same as the one we got in Helena. I pluck it off the car and throw it onto the bureau in our motel room. Waiting for Eric to show up, I kick myself for getting stuck in two conversations with Snuffy, and for not getting an ounce of good intelligence. Pretty poor effort, Ethan. Two wasted days and I'm no closer to figuring out what the hell is going wrong for Cynthia out here. Though it is worth noting that I may have converted a lost soul to Mormonism. Somewhere there's got to be a chart where I get points for that, right?

I lie down in bed and flip on the TV. Near as I can tell, we get exactly four channels here. And one of those channels seems to be devoted entirely to fishing programs. Although the program that's on now isn't exactly a fishing program, at least not in the strictest sense. It's actually more like a fish *wrestling* program. Catfish, to be exact. Three guys are sitting on the edge of a flat-bottomed boat dangling their feet into water that looks like it's from a sewage runoff reservoir or maybe a feedlot collection pool. When one of them feels a catfish with his feet, he leaps into the water. The water goes silent and I feel a kind of sick tension building up in the pit of my stomach. Suddenly, the guy resurfaces holding a catfish the size of a full-grown German Shepherd in his arms. The gray fish thrashes violently, its whiskers whipping at the man's face. His buddies on the boat make Deliverance-style catcalls until the guy heaves the wriggling mass of fish onto the boat and hauls himself back on board.

This is without a doubt the most amazing television program I've ever seen. What kind of people: a) would have ever thought to do this; b) would have ever thought to televise this; c) would ever actually watch this. Okay, with question c) I guess I'd actually fit that category. But that's different isn't it? I'm not really watching this, am I? I turn the channel quickly just as one of the other guys jumps into the greenish water in search of another catfish to wrestle.

Eric comes into the room about twenty seconds after I turn the channel. I push the sound on mute.

“What are you watching?” he asks, sitting on the corner of his bed.

“Nothing. I was watching the news.”

Eric nods and looks around the room uncertainly.

“What do you know, Easy-E?” I ask hopefully.

His skin looks particularly pale. He sits on the corner of his bed and rubs his hands together. “I don’t know anything more than before. I ended up mostly talking to that lady with a kid. She was nice enough and all. She’s married to a guy named Jack who works as a hand at some of the local ranches here. When I got her to talk about the congresswoman, she actually said the same thing that cowboy was saying to you last night.”

It is only now that I realize I’m mad. And for some reason, I’m mad at Eric. Maybe it’s that constantly earnest tone of his. Usually I like it. It reminds me of some pleasant, unadulterated state. But right now, with him going on about these people, it’s pissing me off. Eric would probably say Snuffy is a really “neat” and “interesting” guy if he met him.

“I hope you know how stupid you sound,” I say. Eric shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “Meeting these people should really show you how backwards this whole state is.” Eric’s face starts to bloom red. “They can’t handle the idea of a woman being in a position of power, so they tear her down the easiest way they know how. You should know better.”

Eric looks like he might be near tears. “Who said I *believed* them? I’m just repeating what I heard.”

“No. You’re not. I can see it in you. You think it might be true. You *want* to believe these fucking idiots.”

“Why do you have to call these people fucking idiots, sir? You might be able to learn something from them.”

“Easy, the only thing we’ve learned is that this state is full of fucking idiots, and there’s no point trying to reason with fucking idiots because they’re fucking idiots. By definition, you can’t reason with them.”

“What does it say, then, that I’m trying to reason with you, and you’re not listening to me?”

I'm in no mood to admire Eric's little rhetorical snare right now. In fact, his flip attitude is only serving to piss me off even more. But instead of raising my voice, I bring it down to a low-level, condescending pitch. "Eric, I don't expect you to understand. You've got a lot to learn. Some day, you'll realize how stupid these people really are."

"You *do* know I'm from Montana, sir," he says. It's as if a dam burst and these words are what it was holding back.

The truth is, I'd forgotten that Eric was from Montana. I think I'd gotten so hung up on the idea of Eric being like me that I'd inadvertently filled in his biographical information with my own. "Of course I knew that, Easy. You're from a backwards state."

Eric stands up now. "I don't see why you have to constantly trash the place where I'm from." His slender fingers are wrapped around each other to make two small, bony fists. Then he takes a deep breath, as if he's about to say something he's wanted to say for a long time. "That's what I don't get, sir. Why are you even trying to win this campaign? You don't care about this state. In fact, you hate it."

"Eric, I don't—"

"No! This is important," he shouts. "It really pisses me off, sir. Because if you don't care, I don't see why anyone else should." Eric begins moving around the room, picking up his clothes and throwing them into his duffel bag. He's doing it quickly, but awkwardly, as if he were walking on stilts.

"Easy, I'm sorry you feel that way," I say. I can't summon much in the way of sympathy or empathy or any other emotion that might soothe his feelings right now. "There's a lot of pressure on me, believe it or not." When I say this, he bristles, and then goes back to the business of packing.

Fuck him! This road-traveling duo is now officially disbanded. The Political Twins are no more. I set about packing my own stuff and go out and wait for Eric at the U-Haul.

On the way back to Helena, and then DC, both driving and flying, we say as little as possible, as if we both have inexplicably lost the ability to speak. I know it's childish. And, frankly, during the entire trip, I expect something to happen, some funny encounter, some hilarious incident, hell, even a momentary scare on the plane ride, that would allow

us to laugh, or even just giggle, as if that moment could show us just how ridiculous we are being. That moment never comes. The drive to Helena and the subsequent plane rides are positively boring. And I get so used to not talking to Eric, I begin to wonder if I even could do it anymore.

When we arrive at National, we stand next to each other at the baggage claim carousel. Eric's duffel bag comes around. He shoulders it, the heavy weight tugging his body down on one side, and then he takes off toward the Metro station. He doesn't say good-bye. He doesn't wave. Nothing. It isn't until he's gone, and this boy has slipped down out of sight on the escalator, that I realize I can't remember why we were fighting in the first place.

Chapter Sixteen

My bag comes around the baggage claim conveyor belt a few minutes after Eric has left. When I pick it up, it feels wet, as if something inside it has broken. It isn't until I get into a cab, with my bag sitting next to me, that I realize it wasn't something *in* my bag that broke. Rather, it was something in someone *else's* bag – *next* to mine – that broke. And to be even more specific, the thing that broke was a bottle of someone else's very cheap aftershave. Skin Bracer, or English Leather, or Brute, though I can't be positive, at least of the kind. The only thing I *am* positive about is that whatever kind of cheap aftershave it was that spilled all over my bag, it's the same kind that my mother's husband Roy wears. That would be Roy of the Banana Pancakes Incident Part Two.

"Man, what's with all the perfume," the cab driver says over his shoulder as he goes to roll down his window.

"What, you don't like it?" I ask, because it seems easier than trying to explain the truth.

The cab driver inhales deeply and shakes his head. "Maybe when it comes to shit like that, call me a minimalist."

"See, that's where we part ways," I say. "When it comes to cheap cologne, I'm more of a maximalist."

The cab driver mumbles something I can't quite hear and plants his foot more firmly on the gas. I don't have a very good angle on his face. I'm sitting directly behind him. But I have an odd feeling that this is the same cab driver who dropped me off at Lily's apartment the night I picked up my boxes. It looks a little like him. It *could* be. But frankly I'm sick of these half-coincidences, these truths that always seem a step removed from comprehension. What if it *is* the same guy? Would it make a bit of difference? Like the classifieds, I'd almost rather not know about the mysteries contained in them. Knowledge like that is dangerous, like a gun you're not sure is loaded. I'll bet Snuffy would have something to say about that. Something about these odd moments of synchronicity. Good old Snuffy. I should call him sometime to see how he's doing. Even if he is single-handedly responsible for my failure to gather any real

intelligence. I can't hold that against him. Yes, I'll definitely call him sometime soon. I unroll my window and put my head out into the cold autumn evening.

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When the cab pulls up to 325 Garfield, I see candles burning in the windows. As I stand outside my front door, I can hear the sound of voices, many voices talking, various conversations going on at once, mingling to create the sound of happiness, the sound of a party. Then I remember Miranda telling me something about a party in honor of Spenser selling the idea for *Rape Squad*. What night did she say that party was? What night is it tonight? I honestly don't know the answer to either of those questions, but I'm guessing right now the answer is the same for both.

I push the door open with my shoulder and weave my way through pockets of people who I vaguely recognize and who are all standing around talking, sipping from wine and martini glasses. I get a few stares, this rumpled looking traveler with the bag that smells like a gigolo. I don't blame them for staring. I probably would too, if I were ever on that side of things. But I never am. It always feels like I'm on *this* end, the end that's out of place, the end that's askew from everything, the end that's always fucked up. I finally reach the stairs and hike up to my room, where the first thing I do is throw myself headlong onto my bed. I lie there, with my face buried in my pillow, for what seems like five minutes. Unmoving. Unmovable.

Then a knock. A light rap followed by the squeak of my door being pushed open. "Sorry to bother," a voice says.

I roll over and see Miranda standing in the doorway. She has one hand propped against the doorframe, shoulder-high. "I'm so glad you made it back in time for Spenser's party," she says. "I was worried you wouldn't make it."

"What day is it?" I ask.

She laughs. "Oh Ethan, we've missed you." Apparently, she thinks I was joking. She walks across the room and stands near the door to the deck. She's wearing a long black skirt that hangs just above the floor. There's a slit in the dress that goes up above

her knee, revealing a crescent of skim-milk white leg. She cocks her hips to one side.

“Wait, you really don’t know what day it is?”

“Judging from the party downstairs, I’ll guess Friday.”

She points a finger at me. “And you’d be right. Give that man a prize.” She’s silent for a moment and I sit up in bed. Then her face clouds over and she sniffs at the air. “Are you wearing some kind of cologne?” she asks.

“Actually I’m wearing a *lot* of some kind of cologne.”

“Yikes,” she says and opens the door to the deck.

“That’s a little too much macho for me right now.” She waves the door open and closed to get some fresh air circulated into the room.

“So how was your trip to Montana?” she asks. She giggles lightly and puts her hand to her mouth. “I love saying that: Mon-tan-a. I mean, who actually goes there? I have a roommate who goes to Mon-tan-a. That sounds so weird.”

“Sometimes I have a hard time believing it myself,” I say. “As for the trip, I’d have to say I had moments of synchronicity that would make Carl Jung spin in his grave.”

Miranda’s face doesn’t waver. Her eyes are fixed on me in a tight focus. She’s not biting. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” she finally asks.

Good question. “The trip was fine,” I say. “I finished about fifty percent of the things I wanted to accomplish.”

Miranda shrugs. “I guess that’s good.” She holds her head outside the deck door a moment then pulls it back in when she seems to have caught her breath. “Well, even though you didn’t plan on making it to the party, I still hope you’ll join us.”

“Give me a minute to pull my life together.”

“No problemo,” she says as she crosses my room. Then, just before she leaves, “No offense but you might want to tone down the cologne a notch or two. Or three.”

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Downstairs, the first person I see is Jasper. He's wearing glasses I've never seen before and this time his face looks somewhat Latin, like a not-quite-as-good-looking Ricky Martin.

"Ethan, my man." He grabs my hand and shakes it in both of his, which strikes me as a very politician thing to do. Hell, it's practically part of the politicians' handbook, if such a thing actually existed. "How was your trip?" he asks.

"Good enough," I say. Then, to get off that topic, I ask, "So how about our boy Spenser?"

"I know, it's pretty darned impressive," he says.

"Dang true," I counter.

"The personals have been almost a full column longer than usual from all the congratulatory notes."

"I don't doubt that." I look around me, trying to spot where I might get a drink. As if by magic, Spenser arrives at my elbow with a martini in each of his pudgy hands. He gives one to me.

"Good to have you back in the fold," Spenser says.

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss your party for the world." Spenser and I clink the rims of our glasses and throw back a swallow. I think I'm actually starting to like the taste of these martinis. I swirl the clear liquid in the glass, watching little pieces of ice bridge across the surface.

"So. *Rape Squad*. I know it's going to be a huge hit," I say at last. It's a small lie. Actually I don't think *Rape Squad* will ever see the light of day. Not if I'm still living in the world I think I'm living in. But then again, Spenser got *paid* for the idea. How much did Miranda say? Fifty thousand dollars? For *Rape Squad*? That right there might be proof of my complete overestimation of this world I live in.

"Thanks," Spenser says. "That's really great of you to say that." His face is red and round. His forehead is glossy with a thin layer of sweat. "My sources have told me Jimmy Smits is potentially very interested in the project."

"Fuckin' A," Jasper shouts in my ear. "Smits would be great for that. Plus he needs the work."

Spenser shrugs his shoulders up to his ears. "We'll just have to see."

I drain my martini and lean in close to Spenser. He senses that I'm about to say something important and tilts his head toward my mouth. I can see through the tight curls of his hair to the bone-white skin of his scalp. "Just promise me you won't let all this fame go to your head," I say.

Spenser pulls back and looks at me through the nervous corner of his eye, as if he's trying to figure out a long division problem in his head. Then he breaks into a wide smile and reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. "Dude, no worries," he says cockily. "You know me. I'll always keep it real."

Keep it real. Hmm, very nice. It occurs to me that Spenser's response has potential to be a pretty good one. If I thought more of him, I'd say he was coming right back at me with a little irony of his own, pulling an Ethan-Pascal move on Ethan Pascal. But, to be honest, I don't think he was being ironic. I think he was being embarrassingly earnest. That dopey look of artistic pretension pasted on his face confirms this suspicion for me. It says, in no uncertain terms: *I fully intend, once my fame grows, to fully KEEP IT REAL.* Oh well. Good for Spenser, I suppose.

"What are we doing just standing here, man?" Jasper finally says. "We need to get old Ethan another drink before we go out."

"Out?" I ask, as we walk into the kitchen. "What about the party?" But even as I ask this, I look around and see that most of the people have left, as if some secret fire drill has taken place without my knowledge.

Jasper is pouring vodka into a cocktail shaker but he looks up contemplatively. "I wouldn't call this a party so much as a moveable feast." He puts the lid on the cocktail shaker and tosses it up in the air like a juggling pin.

Spenser closes his eyes and purses his lips like he's about to kiss the air. "Moveable feast. Ooh, I like that. I'll have to remember that one."

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In DC, the bars get cooler proportionally by how close they are to dangerous neighborhoods. It's a simple equation. Observe:

Georgetown = the biggest threat comes from the sedate hobos who panhandle on the sidewalk = not a terribly cool place to hang out;

Or,

Adams Morgan = about a one in five chance of getting your car broken into if you don't park in the secure lot which costs fifteen bucks a night = a fairly cool place to go out at night.

Tonight, we're going to a new spot, or at least it's new to me. Lily and I didn't go in much for clubs, so I certainly haven't been on what you'd call the cutting edge of DC nightlife. Still, I'd overheard conversations about the U-Street corridor. I'd heard how people got knifed on the way to their cars all the time, or how apparently there was a drive-by on a group of people standing in line for one of the clubs. So it stands to reason that the U-Street corridor is at the frontier of cool, the cusp of where it's at, the place to which my roommates are hell-bent on moving their moveable feast tonight.

The four of us are crammed into a cab heading down streets I've never seen before. We pass blocks of storefronts that are either abandoned or closed, with heavy metal grating stretched across their windows and doors. The sides of the street are glinting like there's been a light dusting of snow, and it takes a while for me to realize that the phenomenon is caused by broken glass reflected in the headlights of the car. Jasper is in the passenger seat with his window down. He's singing a song, and I have to admit he's got a pretty decent voice.

"Girl, you know I want you. And all things that you do. Because my love is true, true, true." He taps his hand on the side of the door for a measure. *"Oh, why don't you see it? Don't you know that I need it?"*

I'm not sure if it's the effect of the martinis, or the thought of going out to a new place, or the overwhelming sense of goodwill that I'm feeling toward my housemates, but whatever it is, I'm feeling high right now. I'm feeling positively liberated. Maybe it's just nice to be back in DC. I feel like I have a better grasp of the rules here. Or maybe I just feel less compelled to follow whatever rules there *are* here. I want to sing along with Jasper, but I don't know the words. So instead, I tap my feet and rock back and forth, my head bobbing instinctively and, I'm sure, dorkily, to the beat.

Miranda, who's sitting in the middle of the backseat, has her knees twisted into my left thigh. It's not a painful pressure, but it feels too strong to be incidental. At least I think. Occasionally, the cab hits a pothole and her knees dig deeper into my leg. She's smiling at me, showing me her feral teeth, as if she knows how badly this hurts, or as if she's trying to communicate something without saying it.

"I can't see you one more time; until I know you're mine, mine, mine," Jasper croons from the front seat.

The cab pulls up to what looks like an arbitrary block on this street, and my housemates begin piling out of the car. Once we're assembled on the sidewalk, I look around for something resembling any type of place I'd want to be. A quick scan reveals nothing. Dirty gray buildings with dark windows. Then I pick up the sound of drums, followed quickly by the thump of a bass, coming from the building behind us. The front window is tinted dark, and a tensing kind of panic hits me as a dirty neon sign hung crookedly in the window flickers into luminescence. *The Broken Barrel Bar.*

"How long has this place been here?" I ask, unable to hide the kind of exhilarated hysteria that's rising up in me.

"A few months," Jasper says. "Used to be a place called the Larval Stage."

"Why do you ask?" Miranda asks, perhaps picking up on the odd tone in my voice.

"No reason." I look at the ground and kick at a piece of glass that's resting near my foot. "It's just that I have a strange feeling I've been here before."

"You have?" Spenser asks. "Isn't it great?" The effort of belting out these questions almost tips him over onto his back. He staggers and then regains his balance.

"Actually, I think I liked it better as The Larval Stage," I say.

My housemates seem to ignore this comment and we head into The Broken Barrel Bar. The place is long and narrow, the shape of a place that could house exactly two bowling lanes side-by-side. The décor is predictably dark and dingy with fluorescent paintings on the walls. Behind the bar is an animated neon sign of a maggot wriggling back and forth – clearly a holdover from the days of The Larval Stage. The whole place is pungent with the odor of puke, which is possibly also a holdover from the days of The Larval Stage.

Looking around the bar, I can't help but feel somewhat cheated. I'd been expecting *this* Broken Barrel to look like *Havre's* Broken Barrel. Kind of an East Coast doppelganger. Proof that truly strange and evil forces are at work in my life right now. Proof that I'm the normal one, and that it's actually this world around me that's so fucked up. That would have been a nice reassurance. As it is, it's just another strange coincidence in a long line of strange coincidences, which are all starting to grate on my nerves right now.

On the stage at the back of the bar, a band is violently cranking out music. The letters on the bass drum say: WE ARE SASSHOLE. It's a four-woman band, though this is not immediately clear because all the band members are wearing wigs that look like they were borrowed from male department store mannequins. The music is punkish. Loud, messy guitars; strong bass; inaudible lyrics that consist mostly of screams. The lead guitarist holds her instrument so it points out from her crotch. She moves it around, thrusting and playing, so that it looks like an enormous phallus. A small knot of people sways listlessly at the foot of the stage and cheers half-heartedly at this gesture.

Jasper suddenly materializes holding four shot glasses. He hands one to each of us. "To Spenser's success," he says and we all touch glasses before downing them.

Things go on like this for some time. Jasper periodically appears with drinks, then disappears again. My housemates seem to know a number of people here because they're all engaged in various conversations with people I vaguely recognize from my housewarming party. But I don't really mind. I'm buzzing pretty heavily, and not unpleasantly. I kind of enjoy the fact that I don't feel compelled to communicate. It's an overrated thing: communication. Overrated and annoying. Something I could generally do without. So for the next half hour, I stand in my own space watching Sasshole perform and letting my body be jangled by the harsh sounds of their music.

The lead singer is kind of hot. Or so I guess. It's hard to say with that red-headed mullet wig she's wearing. What would it be like to date a girl like that? Interesting to say the least. At least that would be one relationship where I'd be the *normal* one. And maybe that would make for some good chemistry. It would certainly be different chemistry than Lily and I had. How could it not be?

“Ethan fucking Pascal. Now I *know* this place is going downhill.” I recognize the voice immediately, even though it takes me a moment to snap out of my Sasshole reverie.

“Dewey, what the hell are you doing here?” I ask before my eyes can focus. My first reaction is to hug him. After all, how long has it been? But Dewey and I were never really at that hug level. Plus, I’m drunk, and a hug seems like a drunk thing to do. So instead, I reach out to shake his hand and that ends up feeling more awkward than the hug.

“We’re playing tonight, man.” He gestures to himself, as if his appearance should explain this fact to me. It does. He’s wearing lots of black leather, or maybe that’s vinyl, and his hair is gelled up into one large spike like a unicorn’s horn. He has thick eyeliner below his eyes, which makes him look either really tough or really hungover.

“Oh, of course. I knew that,” I say, covering. “Death Maarch. Live in concert. With both A’s.”

Dewey smiles appreciatively for a moment, impressed that I actually remembered the name of his band. Then, “Hey, thanks for the Tom Arnold book. That guy is something else.”

“So do you figure he wrote it himself?”

Dewey squints one eye. “At first I thought, no way. But now I’m pretty sure he did.”

“That’s a relief,” I say.

“He’s actually a pretty smart guy. You know, street smart.”

“Yes, well we can only hope that his genius is recognized in our time.”

Dewey nods. I nod. Then we stumble. Maybe it’s not so much a stumble as it is a sudden lack of movement. My initial excitement over seeing Dewey has evaporated, and now I’m left with the fact that the only reason I know this man is because he’s my ex-girlfriend’s brother. I wonder if he knows that I didn’t call her when she’d called. I wonder if he’s standing there in front of me thinking I’m the biggest fuckup he’s ever met. Screwing with his sister’s mind and not even having the decency to call her back.

“I’ve been away. I just got back to town a few hours ago,” I say, recognizing the defensiveness in my own voice, and recognizing that Dewey has officially done nothing to provoke this defensiveness. “I’m going to call her tomorrow.”

Dewey nods again. This particular nod tells me a few things. One: it tells me I’d been right. He *did* know about me not calling her back. Two: it tells me he *had* been wondering why I was in town and hadn’t called his sister. And three: there’s a glibness to his nod which tells me that, while he *does* understand my defense, he doesn’t necessarily believe it.

“Ethan, who do we have here?” Miranda slides up to me and puts her arm around my shoulder. Dewey registers the intimacy of her gesture with a slight nervous flicker of his eye.

“Aha,” I say, because I’m not sure what else to say. Then, “Dewey, I’d like you to meet one of my new housemates.” I perform a small sidestep so Miranda’s arm falls off my shoulders. “Miranda, this is Dewey.” I think for a moment about what he is to me, what is the boilerplate explanation for our relationship. “Dewey is a friend of a friend,” I say, even though I know this is a pretty crappy way of putting it.

“Nice one,” Dewey mumbles as he smiles and reaches out to shake Miranda’s hand.

“Ethan,” Miranda says in a kittenish voice, “you don’t have to introduce Dewey Chambers, the lead guitarist – and most talented member of Death Maarch – to me.” She has a wide smile on her face and she holds her left hand to her mouth to keep from giggling. “I’m honored to meet you, Mr. Chambers.”

Dewey stops mid-handshake and turns the back of Miranda’s hand up. He leans down and plants a soft kiss just above her knuckles. “I’m honored to meet *you*,” Dewey says. He looks ridiculous, unicorn spike in his hair, thick makeup, black leather. But there’s something about that smile, some charm I’ve never noticed before – or maybe I just never *wanted* to notice – that makes Dewey seem positively attractive right now. Who knew? Even more amazing is the fact that Miranda is eating this up. Her normally pale face is flushed. When she talks, her right hand flips forward and touches Dewey’s forearm as if they’re old, flirtatious friends, or former lovers.

They're talking still, but I haven't been paying attention to what they're saying; I've missed some thread of the conversation and I feel like it's leaving me behind.

To regain my purchase on the situation, I say the following: "Miranda is the original well baby!" I say it loudly. Too loudly. I don't know what exactly I was trying to accomplish by saying this. They both shoot me annoyed glances before resuming their conversation. And I notice, slowly, baby-step by baby-step, they are moving away from me, slipping out of my sphere of influence. I decide to let them go. No point being a *complete* asshole. After all, I was enjoying myself a moment ago. Without either of them.

A few minutes later, Sasshole finishes their set and I see Dewey go backstage to get ready for his show. Miranda goes with him, holding his hand. Before I can react to any of this, Jasper and Spenser are at my elbows. One of them pushes another drink into my hand, which is probably the last thing I need right now. But I'm in no mood to fight it either. I take the drink.

"So, Ethan," Jasper says, "do you mind if we do a little shop-talk?"

"You mean you want to talk shop?"

"See?" Jasper says to Spenser, "I told you he was a smart guy."

"Please. You're too kind."

Jasper looks down and then back up at me, as if he's now ready to quit fucking around. "Did you get a chance to go over *Wheels of the System*?"

I feel like Jasper and Spenser are too close, too in my face. "Yes," I say, taking a step back. "I honestly enjoyed it."

"And did you get a chance to review your part?"

"Absolutely. Checked her out. Tried her on. I like her."

"So what do you think?" he asks.

"Didn't I just say I liked it?"

"No, I mean when do you think we can film it?" He takes a sip of his drink, and then moves another step in. "With Spenser's sale of the *Rape Squad* property, Prometheus Productions is suddenly quite flush. And it's always best to capitalize when you're flush. Am I right, Ethan?"

“Flushness is good.” Though I wouldn’t have thought it possible, I feel like he’s moved in even closer.

“I’d really like to get your capitol scene in the can as quickly as possible for promotional shit,” he says.

“The can?” I ask, at this point just playing stupid to see where it gets me.

“In the can. Shot. Completed. Ready to go.”

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at.”

Jasper flashes an annoyed glance at Spenser. He’s onto me. I’m definitely testing the limits of something right now. “So what do you say we schedule a shoot for later next week some time,” he says. “I’m thinking maybe outside on those front steps there.” His voice is dreamy and his eyes are looking at something far off. “A nice, sunny day. Maybe a light breeze blowing. Not too strong though.”

I try to envision the nightmare of scheduling a filming session at the Capitol. I haven’t even bothered to ask the Sergeant at Arms office, because I know they’ll have none of it. Besides, I *am* a little busy right now: My priorities aren’t quite ready to accommodate the making of a movie, let alone one shot illegally on the Capitol grounds.

“You see, Jasper, I do have this thing called an election. Don’t forget that I have my fame on the line here.”

He nods gravely. “Absolutely, and the fact that you’re willing to help means so much more because of it.” He’s not letting up. He’s not going to let it go. “So when would be good for you?”

“I just don’t know if it’s going to work out, Jasper.”

Jasper shoots a quick look at Spenser. He jerks his head toward the bar. Spenser nods politely and leaves us alone. When he’s gone, Jasper turns to look at me full in the face. I’m expecting a look of utter scorn, complete ferocious anger. Real mean ugly shit. That’s not what I get. What I get is something else entirely. He looks broken. Previously unseen wrinkles score his handsome face. His eyes are watery and his mouth quivers lightly. He reaches out and grabs my arm by the bicep.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Ethan. This is huge. Huger than huge. I’m at the end of my rope, the end of my line. The end of something,” he pauses for a moment because his voice has suddenly risen into an unregistered octave. He holds his non-

clinging hand to his mouth for a second before continuing. “Ethan, I need you on this one. If we don’t get this scene in the can, no one’s going to take this project seriously. You can’t say no. You can’t.”

In my limited contact with Jasper, I’ve assumed him to be a pretty smarmy guy. Now, I’m not suggesting that he’s *not* a smarmy guy. It’s just that I’ve never suspected him capable of such genuineness. He’s being completely earnest here, painfully honest. Embarrassingly so. And this throws me for a moment. It leaves me stumbling for words. I’m considering ways to let him down gently, ways to ease the blow, when a series of green strobe flashes goes off from the stage, and the whine of an electric guitar comes on so loud it feels like feedback. I put my hand on Jasper’s shoulder. It’s not an unfriendly gesture, but I give him a little push to back him up. “Why don’t you have your people call my people. We’ll work something out.” Then, stepping past him, I say, “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’m friends with the band.”

It is only after I get up to the front of the stage that I realize my last comment to Jasper could be taken one of two ways. He could correctly look at it as a sarcastic comment, which would mean that there was no way in hell that I will help him. Or. Or, he could look at it in a completely straightforward manner, which would mean that, yes, he should literally have *his people* contact *my people* to work something out and actually do this thing. I’m honestly not sure which way he’ll take it. And, to be honest, I’m kind of curious to find out which way he will.

The stage is empty except for one solitary figure whose features are lost in a dark silhouette. He has a guitar strapped on, but he’s motionless, impassive. The audience has swollen since Sasshole was on stage and they now applaud nervously, waiting for what will happen next. The guitar whine has died down, and the narrow room is tense with an odd silence, an absence, a vacuum. Then the figure on stage moves. Slowly at first, as if each part of his body, from his knuckles on up, is just beginning to function. He reaches out and grabs the microphone. As his fingers touch it, a pale, bluish spotlight centers on Dewey’s face. There is a throng of about ten girls who are surrounding me at this point, and they all emit shrill, ear-splitting screams.

Dewey leans in close to the microphone. He parts his lips, but nothing comes out. Then, finally, after the tease is nearly too much for the screaming girls around me to take,

he leans into the microphone. "I'd like to dedicate tonight's show to the biggest fuckup I know." The shrieking girls halt for a second, a momentary spasm of confusion where they exchange unknowing *huhs?* before picking up where they left off. "This one's for you, Ethan-man," Dewey says and raises his fist.

Death Maarch's stage production has changed since I last saw them. Tonight's rock-u-drama appears to be about a young man (played by Dewey) who is setting off to make it in the music business. He reaches enormous heights very early on, but then falls in with the wrong crowd. His managers and handlers, those he most trusts, bamboozle him and eventually leave him penniless and broken, a shell of his former self. All of this is demonstrated on stage through liberal use of props, particularly signs that say things like: MONEY, or THE WRONG CROWD, or MISMANAGING MANAGER. Miranda does a brief appearance as a FEMME FATALE, who takes his MONEY, and pushes him to use ILLICIT DRUGS. Eventually our hero rediscovers what it was that initially drew him into the business: THE MUSIC. And the night's production ends with a triumphant power ballad called, "Show Me the Time of My Life."

The beautiful part of the show is that it's so perfectly tongue-in-cheek that you can't help but laugh. Yet everything is so good. It's not some half-assed production. The songs, the acting, the signs. It's all perfect. It feels like you've just watched a high opera on steroids, and maybe a little speed thrown in for good measure. I've been watching the show right in the middle of the throng of shrieking girls. Occasionally, I sense one or two of them staring at me. I'm initially flattered by this attention, until I meet the stare of one of these girls and see a look of mortal teenage fear. As if she's just looked up and seen her father dancing in a mosh pit. I don't look that old, do I? I feel like telling these girls I'm friends with the lead guitarist. Hell, they dedicated tonight's performance to me. They're practically playing it for me. I could mention that Dewey and I go way back, and that I've even slept on his futon. Maybe I'd mention our game with the autobiographies. Then again, Dewey and I have not always been simpatico. That would probably come out. I'd probably also have to tell them about the Lily situation too. How could I not? Okay, on second thought, I'd better keep my mouth shut, which is probably good advice for me in almost any situation. But definitely this one.

When the show is done, the overhead lights in the bar come up. It's bright now, and I can see all the disgusting things in the bar that poor visibility had hidden. Puddles of dirty beer, discarded barrettes and soaking wet accessories like scarves or hats or gloves. Everyone in this new light looks sweaty and grimy, as if they've just put in a hard shift at the aluminum plant. In my experience, this is the point in the night where everyone goes home, the point where you either couple off, or head to bed alone. But no one does either of these things. People just mill about, talking and sipping on the last of the drinks they hold in their hands. While I still recognize a few faces from my housewarming party, I don't see my housemates anywhere. I have a pretty good idea where Miranda might be. But Jasper and Spenser, God knows. Wherever they are, I'm pretty certain it's not in here anymore. Maybe they're waiting for me out front. I wind my way outside the Broken Barrel Bar. Once I'm standing on the sidewalk out front, everything about the bar seems distant, as if it's part of a past I can't quite recall, a memory I can't quite tap into anymore. And I feel a need to put it all even further behind me, like a sober man trying to forget his youthful days of frivolity. I look around for a cab, but see nothing. The streets are empty, their glass-lined gutters shimmer under the light of the occasional streetlight. The abandoned storefronts seem to be saying something: *Go away. Leave this place. Now.*

I know a smart person would go back inside and find Dewey, see if he could give me a ride home. Or maybe use the pay phone inside to call a cab. But I feel like going back into the Broken Barrel is not an option anymore. It's something I just can't do, like going back on a promise. So I execute a crisp turn, sink my hands into my pockets and start walking home.

I realize how foolish this is. I recognize stupidity when I see it – even in myself. But something in me wants to seek out the danger that lies all around me, something in me wants to instigate peril. I pull my jacket collar up around my neck and pick up my pace a touch.

I venture past houses where fights are raging from the windows. I see a boy, no older than thirteen, pounding out a beat with drumsticks on an overturned recycling bin. Someone shouts at him from a car and the boy flees like a dog that's expecting to get kicked. I pass men who sleep sprawled over steam vents, their clothes dewed with white

beads of water. I see a garbage can with a fire burning in it, and it isn't until I'm right next to the can that I see a family of four holding their hands up to the flame. I don't feel threatened by any of these things. I feel like I'm walking within a force field, an impervious bubble. This city I see is pretty close to a third world country. Yet this revelation does not affect me. It does not depress me. It does not remind me of some key essence that holds some secret meaning to life. These images are inconsequential sights, like something you'd see in a diorama. When I was a boy, I used to cry at the smallest thing. The thought of someone teasing a seeing eye dog, or the sight of a retarded person waiting at the bus stop. Now, nothing.

It takes me two hours to get home. I'm in bed by three. And it is only after I'm warm under my covers that I can admit that I'm depressed. Not by the scenes I saw on my way home. But by the way none of it really seemed to matter.

Chapter Seventeen

I'm sitting at the white dining room table, skimming the Post, waiting for a pot of coffee to finish brewing. Looking at my watch, I see it's almost eight right now, which means I suffered through five hours of feverish sleep before finally giving up and coming downstairs. I've been putting off looking at the Personals by fighting my way through a front page article on the possibility of a gun vote before Congress recesses for the year. The article is stupendously dull, so it is a fight I know I will eventually lose. And now that I've reached the point where the article jumps to the back page, I give up this quixotic struggle and take up the Classifieds.

As soon as I get to the Personals, I'm surprised by how easy it is for me to read them, to understand their meanings, as if my vision suddenly came into focus upon looking at this newsprint. The Personals are still filled with congratulatory notes for Spenser.

SH – It'll be bigger than US steel.

–MR

Tight-Curls – The world needs this show.

–Long-Blonde

I'm also surprised to realize that, as I scan the pages, I'm actually looking to see if there are any notes for me. To see if anyone had something they wanted to communicate to Ethan Pascal. When I finish the pages and conclude that there were no hidden message for me, I find myself feeling annoyed. Funny. Why should I be annoyed that there were no messages for me? I wasn't expecting anything. And even if I were, they'd probably be nasty messages. Angry ones directed at the incompetence of my management style in one aspect of my life or another. So not getting any messages in the Personals should be a blessing, right?

When the coffee machine makes a long drawn-out grinding sound, and I look up expectantly, I'm forced to admit to the true source of my annoyance. On the way

downstairs this morning I couldn't help but notice through the open door to Miranda's bedroom, that her bed was empty and still made. I wasn't spying, it was right there in my line of vision. Nothing I could do to avoid it. Seriously. So there we have it! The true source of my annoyance is the fact that Miranda has spent the night with Dewey. Which, again, is no real reason for me to be annoyed, a fact which only serves to make me more annoyed than I was in the first place.

I turn back to the gun control article, and try to force myself to glean the pertinent facts. But after the first paragraph, I'm lost again, reading without comprehending. It is at this moment that I hear the scrape of a key in the front door. I set the paper down, lean back in my chair, and rest my hands behind my head. For some reason, a wave of self-satisfaction passes through me, as if Miranda's slinking in at 8:20 somehow justifies my initial annoyance with her and Dewey.

"Well, well, well," I say when she appears in the kitchen doorway. "Look who we have here."

Miranda leans on the doorframe as if she needs to steady herself. She looks awful. The hollows of her face are shaded dark and ashy. Her clothes from last night are wrinkled and dull.

"Ethan, you're up early," she says as if she's barely noticed me. "Mind if I get myself a cup of coffee?" She goes to a cabinet and pours herself a cup. She holds it in both hands, close to her chest as if it's the warmth of the coffee she's really after.

"Looks like you had a hell of a night," I say, beaming a completely false, and shit-eating grin.

She blows on her coffee slowly. "You could say that. I guess."

The fact that she doesn't rise to the bait pisses me off further, pushing me into a zone that I usually never reach. I think I'll call this the Pat & Pauline Zone. And now that I'm here, I realize I've been here a lot lately. Too much, really.

"So how was Nappy's futon?" I ask. I'm fairly sure she won't get the Nappy reference. And I doubt she'd appreciate it if she did.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" she asks, glaring at me over the edge of her cup.

"Just a little inside joke," I say, waving her off.

“No. Seriously. What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. It’s just that you seemed awfully friendly with Dewey last night. I never took you for a rock and roll groupie.”

She sets her coffee cup down on the kitchen counter and plants her feet on the white tile floor. “And I never took you for a first-class asshole.”

“Then I’m glad we had this chance to get to know each other better,” I say. “We’ll have to do this more often.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Ethan. Dewey told me plenty about you last night. I already have a pretty good idea about Ethan Pascal. I know what you did to your last girlfriend, what a dick you were.” She’s pointing at me, jabbing her finger so forcefully I can almost feel it through the five feet of air that separates us. “And you think you’re so pure. Huh? What about that shit with your bitchy secretary’s slutty friend? Don’t think *that* went unnoticed. I heard you two fucking all night.”

“Brooke is not bitchy,” I say, though I know that’s not the point. “And she’s not my secretary.”

“Fine,” she says. She picks up her coffee and takes another sip. “Whatever.”

I’d like to think of a good response. But I’m thrown by the fact that Miranda pointed out my dalliance with Nicole. I don’t know why that should be so unsettling to me. But it is. Very. I haven’t given up on a good response, though. My brain is whirring away at top speed, pushing words around like it’s a code I can crack if I could only get the tumblers to fall into place. Just when I think I might come up with something good, something that makes an oblique reference to Dewey and his relative standing in society, perhaps even a second reference to Nappy’s futon just to confuse her, the phone in the kitchen rings.

The ring is a shrill bell, like an old fashioned rotary dial. And we both jump reflexively. It rings again and neither of us moves for it. We hold each other’s stares, fuming, unblinking. On the third ring, Miranda turns away from me and answers the phone.

“Hello,” she says gruffly into the receiver. She stares murderously at the floor for a moment, and then, “Hold on a sec.” Miranda sets the receiver on the counter. “It’s for you,” she says without looking at me, so that for a second I wonder if she’s even talking

to me. She takes her coffee and sits down at the table and begins leafing through the Style section.

It occurs to me that I have no idea who would actually have this number. I don't think I gave it to anyone at work. This makes for a perplexing, though not particularly interesting mystery. Still, my stomach tenses in anticipation.

"Hello?" I say cautiously.

"Ethan, it is so good to track you down." It's Lily. Though her voice sounds strangely forced, as if someone has a gun to her head and is telling her what to say, exactly what to say. "You'll never guess who is here right now. At *our* place."

The mystery deepens. "Lily, is this really you?"

"That's right. Your mother and Roy."

"What the fuck?"

"I know, isn't that exciting? That they're here at *our* place?"

"Lily, I'm confused."

There's the sound of a muffled conversation in the background and then Lily comes back on the line. "Your mother says that you are to come home from work this instant. *Home*. To your *home*. *Here*."

I've figured out at least part of what's going on and I see no point in drawing this out any further. "Lily, tell my mother that I'll be *home* in a few minutes." I hang up the phone and stare for a moment at the silent coffee maker on the counter.

"That sounded interesting," Miranda says without looking up from the Style section.

"I think it was."

"So now you're just going to run off? Just when things were getting interesting here?"

"That's the plan," I say, shrugging my shoulders as if to say I have no choice.

"Yeah, I figured that's the way things would go down."

"We could take a rain check on this discussion if you'd like," I offer.

"No question. Of course we will," she says and takes a sip of her coffee.

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As a child, I had a relationship with my mother based largely on mutual threats regarding my future living arrangements. If, say, I wasn't allowed to do something I wanted, I might threaten her with something like: "Fine, I'll just go join the circus." To which my mother would reply: "Don't be ridiculous, Ethan. The circus would never *take* you." Or if, perhaps, my lobbying for something went too far, she might say: "If you don't be quiet I'll sell you to the gypsies. Do you want to go live with the gypsies?" To which I would reply: "Great! Living with the gypsies would be better than living here." It was understood that these mutual threats would never actually take place, but I think it said a lot about how much each of us tired the other out.

It's true what I said that night to Pat & Pauline, that my father left home when I was eight. And now that I think about it, maybe it was the trueness of my comments that kept Pat & Pauline from seeing the real humor in them. Maybe my comments were too autobiographical; they cut too close to the bone. As a rule, people don't like it when you bleed on them; it's just not very funny. Anyway, it was *not* true, as I said to Pat & Pauline, that my father left home because the thought of fucking the same person for the rest of his life was too much for him to bear. At least I assume that wasn't the cause. It's probably much closer to the truth to say that we – my mother and I – simply tired my father out.

It's also true to say that my father was a crook, which helps explain his quick departure during the middle of my first year of Little League. He'd owned a construction business with a guy named Foley. When my father left, he took all the assets of the company and disappeared cleanly into the cool New Hampshire night.

One day, years after my father had left, I was back home in Keene from college for Christmas break. I'd gone to a local bar to get a drink with an old high school friend. We'd been sitting at a table for a half hour before I noticed a man at the bar staring at me through the mirror behind the bar. Eventually, the man came up to my table and asked if he could have a word with me in private. I joined him at the bar and he bought me a beer, which he paid for with a wadded up twenty. His hands shook a little as he sipped his drink. I spun my glass around on the bar, waiting for him to speak.

"So you're back from college," he said.

I had no idea what my father looked like, but I was fairly sure that this man was not him. I nodded and took a sip of my beer. “Yup,” I said, adopting the lingo of my hometown.

He turned to me and looked me up and down with cold, blue eyes. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “I always wanted to buy a drink for the son of the man who ruined my life.”

“Yes,” I said. “That would be my father’s M.O.” Foley didn’t say anything, so I said, “His M.O. – ruining people’s lives.”

Foley nodded, but I still don’t think he got the joke.

“You seen your father lately?” he asked after a few minutes.

It was a stupid question. He had to know the answer. Still, I felt compelled to oblige him. “Nope,” I said.

“You know what I’d like to do to him if I ever saw him?”

I nodded. Of course I knew. How could I not? “Take a number,” I said, and finished my beer.

My mother and I laughed about this encounter when I told her about it later that night. Poor Foley. Unable to just let it go. A mutual and fine hatred for my father was the one thing my mother and I actually shared. But we also knew there was a time when you just had to give it a rest.

As I’m driving out to Lily’s apartment in Arlington, it occurs to me that I’ve gotten several messages from my mother in the past few weeks that, if memory serves me, I’ve promptly ignored. It is likely that one or all of these messages were regarding this surprise visit, which, if I’d been paying attention, wouldn’t have been a surprise visit at all. Making it even less of a surprise – in hindsight – is the fact that since retiring from her job as a social worker, my mother has been saying that she and Roy were planning on traveling more. Which – again in hindsight – makes this visit almost seem logical. Or at least plausible.

Lily and my mother get along with each other far better than I probably get along with either of them. When they’re together, they both adopt a conspiratorial attitude toward me, as if only they know the secrets of Ethan Pascal, only they have any idea what makes me run. Whenever they’re together, they swap stories that seem to somehow

confirm their suspicions of me. It's maddening and gratifying at the same time, because it's true. The two women in my life, the two women I'm closest to in this world, really *do* know me better than I know myself. And it was probably armed with this secret knowledge that one of these women, Lily, has asked me not to be part of her life anymore. And the other of these women, my mother, doesn't yet know about this latest move of Lily's.

Odette is standing out in front of the apartment building refilling a contraband bird feeder that hangs from the maple tree in front of her window. The bag of seed is enormous, some kind of bulk purchase, and it dwarfs her old, thin body as she tries to lift it over her head to fill the feeder. When she first sees my car pull up, she drops the bag of birdseed and looks around as if she might bolt. Then when she recognizes me, she waves a cheery hello and goes back to her illegal activities.

"Mr. Ethan, you have returned," she says when I approach her.

"Yes, Odette. I have returned." Seeing as how I'm not eager to jump into the hot zone that awaits me inside, I feel compelled to linger a moment here, to reacquaint myself with Odette.

"This is a good thing, no? Love has returned to you." A slight breeze passes through her long white hair.

"Not exactly, Odette." I reach up and take the bird feeder down so she can more easily fill it.

"Then why is it that the mother of Mr. Ethan is here to visit?"

"That's a good question," I say. Odette stares blankly at me as if to tell me that she expects a real answer to her question. "I think there's been some confusion, Odette. My mother doesn't know what happened. With me. And Lily. And the love."

Odette breathes in sharply. "Oh, my no. This is most not right." She stops pouring the birdseed into the feeder. "It seems you do nothing, Mr. Ethan. If you want the love, you must make it yours. But if you do not, you must put a stop to the love. Leave it alone, like a bad cat."

I'm not sure that I comprehend Odette's well-turned simile. I guess some things don't really translate well from French to English. But I do have my suspicions as to

what she's getting at. And, to be honest, I don't feel much like a lecture right now. Not from Odette.

"I think I have things under control, Odette," I say. "I know what I'm doing here."

She laughs at this. It's not even a pleasant laugh. More like a sneering laugh, the kind she'd unleash upon the Condo Association when it's proving itself to be the ineffectual bureaucracy that she suspects it to be. "That is very funny, Mr. Ethan. Very funny at all."

Just then I hear a light tapping on one of the windowpanes of the apartment building. I look up to Lily's window and I catch a quick glimpse of someone who's knocked and then quickly moved away. I know this is a sign directed at me. I've put off this hour long enough. I know it's time to face the two women who are both disappointed in me, for two very different reasons. So I set Odette's bird feeder on the ground.

"I must go, Odette," I say.

"Yes. You must," she says as I slowly mount the stairs to the building.

Pull it together, Ethan. Deep breath. Just knock on the door.

The door sweeps fully open with my hand still poised to knock, revealing the emaciated figure of my former girlfriend. This sudden vision of Lily – her thin, pale face, her hair down at her shoulders, dark spots under her eyes, her mouth caught on a greeting – brings up a flood of feelings I had expected, yet somehow not prepared for. I feel like I've just woken up from a bad dream. I immediately want to hug her, to hold her, to feel her in my arms, as if the physical presence of her body next to mine might somehow reassure me that this dream has slipped softly into my unconscious.

"Lily," I say, because it is the only thing I can say at this moment. And then, perhaps reaching further, or perhaps frightened by the look of nonrecognition in her eyes, I say, "Lily," again.

Lily is still holding the doorknob in her hand and when I step toward her she takes a panicked step backwards, almost closing the door in my face.

“Ethan,” she says slowly, “it’s so good to see you.” Her voice is strangely heightened, overstressing her words. She opens the door again, and this time lets me enter this place that used to be my apartment, my home.

The first thing I notice is the overpowering smell of Roy’s aftershave, the same kind that spilled on my bag last night. Roy and my mother are standing at the window overlooking the front, both of them engrossed in the spectacle of Odette filling the bird feeder. I wonder why I hadn’t seen them from below. My mother looks stooped. She’s holding her arms tightly across her chest. Roy is thick, with his hands dangling down at his sides.

“Mom,” I say.

My mother turns from her view out the window and spends a moment regarding me from her position on the far side of the room. “Son?” she asks as if she isn’t quite sure it’s me.

I have this feeling that something’s been going on behind my back, that familiar sensation of Lily and my mother being in cahoots. Yet somehow, this time it’s not a reassuring feeling. It’s as if the things they’ve just shared have made them question the man I am. And now they are both judging me under the scrutiny of this new-found knowledge.

“Yes, it’s me. Your son,” I say. “Ethan.”

My mother shakes her head as if she’s snapping herself out of a spell and she walks across the living room toward me. We hug. We hug harder than usual. And I feel reluctant to let go, as if my grip on her is the only thing keeping me from falling off a steep cliff. When we finally do split apart, she takes another step back to look me over once more. The look on her face is the kind you expect to see when someone is viewing a friend who’s been ravaged by disease.

“You look awful, Ethan. Have you been drinking?”

“Mom.”

“I’m serious.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you got in,” I say.

“Yes. Well, I suppose it would *kill* you to return your mother’s calls,” she says. My mother has a sharp, beaklike nose that gives the impression of someone who’s

judging you, someone who's obviously a lot wiser than the person she's sizing up. I've been told that I have a similar nose, though I tend to doubt that mine has the effect of implied wisdom. "I thought Roy's and my visit would be a surprise, but not *this* surprising," she says. She turns to point out Roy, as if I hadn't seen or smelled him yet.

"Ethan, it's so good to see you," he says. He eagerly shakes my hand in his. Roy is built like a barrel, short and dense and strong as hell. His hand crushes mine, though I'm fairly sure he means this gesture in a friendly way. I think my mother has him convinced, as she herself is, that I disapprove of Roy, because he always seems eager to please me. After we shake hands he punches me in the arm and says, "We were worried about you, kid. Your mom and me."

"And I've been worried about you two, too," I say, rubbing my bicep.

Roy turns quickly toward my mother, wondering if something may be wrong that he doesn't know about.

"Ignore him, Roy," my mother says in a bored voice. "My son has always thought himself to be funnier than he really is."

And then I hear a sound that I thought I'd never hear again. The sound of Lily laughing. It's a short, guilty laugh, and she stifles it quickly like a hiccup.

"Mom, you know me too well," I say.

"Son, I whole-heartedly agree." The room falls silent after this comment.

Lily has evidently set some water on the stove because the kettle in the kitchen takes this moment to let out a shrill whistle and we all jump. Lily rushes to take it off the stove, and this momentary flurry of action seems to take the edge off the atmosphere in the apartment.

"I like the way you two have redone the apartment," my mother says.

"That was Lily's idea."

"Well, I like it. It looks more like a real home now."

"Mom," I say, initially planning to finish that sentence by leveling with her, by telling her that Lily and I have broken up and that my life is shit right now. Hell, I even plan on telling her about the campaign, and Eric, and all the other stuff that's making my life awful. But I don't say those things. She's turned to look at me now and her gaze is

sad, as if she doesn't quite know where she went wrong with this son of hers. "How long are you guys in town?" I ask.

Her already sad look worsens. I realize I've once again misjudged my mother, and this may actually be the worst thing I could have said at this moment.

"We'll be out of your hair tomorrow when we join back up with our tour group," she says coolly. "We just thought it would be nice to spend some time with you while we were passing through."

"Tour group?"

My mother huffs angrily. "The Civil War Battlefields Tour, Ethan. Honestly, I told you all this in the messages I left."

"Sorry. Of course."

"Are we really that big of a nuisance?"

"Of course you're not a nuisance. Don't be silly."

"Well," she says, leaving the rest of what she might have said up to my own vivid imagination.

"Let's all go have lunch downtown," I say, choosing to ignore what I imagine my mother would have said.

"It's nine thirty in the morning, Ethan. Shouldn't we have breakfast first?"

"Whoops. Scratch that. Let's go see some of the city. Then we'll have lunch downtown." I turn to face the open door to the kitchen. "Honey," I call out to Lily who I can hear rummaging around in the other room, "what do you say we take in some sights and then grab lunch downtown."

A small crashing sound emanates from the kitchen. It's the sound of a cup falling a few inches onto a counter, the sound of shock. I'm pretty sure it was caused by my use of the word "Honey." To be honest, I hadn't thought much about it. It just seemed so natural, the name I've always used for Lily when I don't call her Lily. It's such a familiar word to me, it comes so easily to my lips, that it isn't until I hear that crashing sound and the subsequent silence that I realize how out of place that appellation really is.

"Great," Lily says from the kitchen. "That sounds really great."

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We've spent the rest of the morning downtown. We went to the National Gallery so my mother and Roy could see an Impressionists exhibit. That soaked up a good three hours, all those fuzzy Renoirs and Monets. I swear, I don't get it. I mean, is one of those supposed to be better than the others? They all look the same to me. Still, I'm thankful for the diversion.

During our time in the museum, the four of us have not been separated. I haven't been alone with either my mom or Lily. And, while the protection that our herd provides me from having to engage in serious conversation has been like a nice stay of execution, the *lack* of those conversations has weighed heavily on my mind like, well, like a stay of execution.

We're now going to lunch on the roof of the Hotel Washington. That's the plan. But parking downtown is a bitch and I keep circling the same four blocks, vainly waiting for something to open up.

"Why don't we drop some people off to get us a table while you park," Lily says. She's sitting in the passenger seat. My mom and Roy are waiting patiently in the backseat.

"Good idea," my mother says. I wonder if this is a ploy to get me alone for at least one of the conversations that needs to take place.

The next time we pass the front of the Hotel Washington, I pull the car over. Lily immediately opens her door and steps out. My mother gets out, too, and they wave as I pull back into traffic with Roy in the backseat. Roy looks back at them nervously, as if to ask why he was the one who got stuck with me.

"You know what, Roy? I think I'll just suck it up and pull into a parking garage."

"How much you think that'll run?" he asks.

"Shouldn't be too bad. Maybe ten bucks."

He lets out a low whistle. "City parking's a real pain in the keester."

"You can say that again."

Mercifully, he doesn't.

When we finally find a spot on the bottom floor of a parking garage, Roy and I lock the car and begin hiking up the sloped concrete ramps to the surface.

"I'm glad I got this chance to talk with you, Ethan," he says as we walk. The effort has him winded and he has to stop and breath when he speaks.

"Are we talking, Roy?" I ask, because we haven't said anything to each other since discussing the cost of parking.

"You know what I mean. I just worry that sometimes you and me don't always see eye to eye on everything."

"I wouldn't say that, Roy," I stand up straight to highlight the height difference between us.

"Well, I know what I know," he says.

"I guess so."

"Your mother is a great lady."

"She is?"

He ignores my gentle question. "I hope you know she's really worried about you."

Out of all the people I'd expected to have a serious conversation with today, Roy was not one of them. But I'm nothing if not flexible. "Oh really?" I ask, now genuinely interested in what he will say next.

"Oh sure," he says. "We've been talking and we wonder if you're not maybe a little in over your head with all this."

"All this what?"

"Oh, you know. The campaign and such. I know it doesn't seem like it when you're in this town, but life doesn't all revolve around politics."

I nod and keep walking.

"You got to remember there's other things to life."

"Like what things, Roy?"

"Not to sound corny or anything, but happiness is important too."

"Yeah... Happiness. What is that again?"

"Ha. You're a real funny kid, Ethan. I really like that about you. But there's times where funny isn't always going to cut it."

The truth is, I think Roy is right. At least in some abstract way. Even still, I don't really understand what he's getting at. "I think I see what you're getting at," I say.

“Good,” he says as we walk out of the garage and into the sun. “I don’t want to be coming down here and telling you how to live. I just want you to be happy.” He looks relieved, as if he’s gotten something painful off his chest.

“Thanks, Roy.”

“No problem, sport.” He punches me in the arm and it stings a little.

“So you’re saying I need to be happy. Is that it?”

His face clouds for a second as he assesses my assessment of what has just transpired between us. “Yeah, I suppose that’s the most of it.”

“Good. Just wanted to make sure we’re square on that one.”

“Oh yeah, also, if you ever need anything from us. From your mom and me, that is, just let us know. We want to help you.” He says this with his hands in his pockets, looking at the ground, as if he’s embarrassed to even be bringing it up. And this touches me. This man I’ve never really known, yet who has made my mother a happy woman, offering help to me.

“Thank you, Roy,” I say. “I think I need help more often than I let on.”

“In my experience, that’s always the case,” he says. “Almost always.” He reaches out to punch me in the arm again, but I step sideways and he misses.

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The Hotel Washington has a restaurant on the roof that overlooks the entire city. From this spot you can see the gray, rather plain-looking roof of the White House. And in the near distance you can see the tower of the Washington Monument rising into the DC skyline. Easily the best view in the city. For some unknown reason, this restaurant has gone largely unnoticed by the tourist crowds, who, if they did know about this place, would overrun it like a swarm of locusts. Hell, most people in DC don’t know about it. Whenever I take people here I feel like I’m letting them in on a secret, sharing something vital with them.

When Roy and I get to the roof, we see Lily and my mother huddled closely over a table on the White House side of the restaurant. I can’t help but wonder what secrets they might be sharing with each other at this moment, what Ethan stories they’re in the

middle of swapping. I wonder if any of them are stories that paint me in a good light. Perhaps a story that shows I'm not a totally bad guy, or even one that shows I'm a bad guy who wants to be better. That might be nice. God knows, I could use someone on my side right now.

"Careful what you talk about ladies," I say, intruding on their moment together. "Rumor has it the Secret Service has the saltshakers bugged."

They both look down at the White House roof below them, at the plain gray tar, the snarl of antennae and satellite dishes that crowd together over the West Wing.

"I can't believe how normal it looks from up here," my mother says. "Roy, can you believe how normal it looks?"

"No, I can't," he says, taking a seat and picking up a menu.

"Yes, well a lot of DC starts to look pretty plain when you look at it from the right angle," I say.

"I suppose that must be true," my mother says.

"So what were you guys talking about?" I ask.

"Lily was just telling me about the article she's working on for the City Paper."

"Oh really?" I say, looking at Lily.

"It's nothing really. Just a small article about beach resorts along the Delaware coast." Lily is flushed and she shifts uncomfortably in her chair. She's always downplayed what she does. Whenever someone asks her about her articles, she acts like they're a collection of blurbs and puff pieces. The truth is she's a great writer, a fantastic journalist. The City Paper is lucky to have someone as good as Lily. For her part, Lily is surprised every time she gets her paycheck from them, as if it's a shock that someone actually pays her for what she does.

"My that must be a lot of work to do an article like that," my mother gushes.

"It's not too bad really. I've gotten a chance to do a lot of research up in Delaware lately." Lily shifts uncomfortably again, and this time I know it's for a different reason.

"Well, I'm sure it will be a fantastic article," my mother says. "I'll be fascinated to read it. You know Roy and I are always looking for new places to visit. Aren't we, Roy?"

Roy nods behind his menu.

"I'll be happy to send you the article when it comes out," Lily says.

My mother smiles and begins picking at a breadstick she's pulled from the basket in the center of the table.

"So, Ethan," my mother says after a short pause. "Tell us about this campaign you're working on."

"Well, technically, mom, I'm not working on the campaign side of things. As a chief of staff, I'm not legally allowed to do official campaign business."

"Oh really?" she asks.

"Technically. But actually, it ends up being a little more blurry than that."

My mother nods her head as if to say she expects things I'm involved in to always be a little blurry.

"And the truth is, it's not going so great."

This time it's Lily's turn to be surprised. "Oh really?" she says.

"Yes, really. Cynthia's numbers are dropping and I don't know why."

"So what will you do?" my mother asks, her beak-like nose angled to that judgmental, wiser-than-you angle. "To fix things, that is."

"It's not that easy, mom. You can't just fix a campaign."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a lot of pieces that don't necessarily add up to a whole. It could be any number of things going wrong. You change one thing and it could be something else. There's no repair manual for these things."

"Honestly, Ethan, sometimes you can be so ambiguous." She draws that word out: *ambiguous*. As if it's supposed to hold some important significance for me. "I think that's something you should work at," she says. "Trying to be less ambiguous."

"Is that it, mom? I should be less ambiguous? That's a great idea." I throw up my hands as if to say, why didn't I think of that.

My mother sits up, surprised by my sudden show of anger. "Well..." she says, and lets the rest trail off into the realm of all her other unspoken warnings, and threats.

A waiter appears at the table and takes our order. Roy and I get a hamburger and Lily orders crabcakes. My mother, after asking for several recommendations from the waiter, settles on a garden salad.

For the rest of lunch, I keep my mother occupied by asking her about the various projects she's undertaking for several charitable organizations in Keene. She's raising money to restore the Keen Community Playhouse, which is in a sad state of disrepair. She's organizing an Adopt-A-Pet program so that stray dogs and cats don't have to be put to sleep by the Keene Humane Society. And she is the chairwoman of a city council committee to establish a recycling program in Keene and the outlying communities. She explains all these activities in a nonchalant manner, revealing few details but basically indicating that things are moving along slower than she'd like, but moving nonetheless. I can picture my mother advancing these causes doggedly, with the patient determination of someone who will not take no for an answer. Hell, it was this very determination that enabled her to raise one cantankerous and unappreciative anarchist all by herself. And I don't think she did *that* bad of a job, did she?

When the check comes, Roy's hand deftly waves to pick it up. I try to protest. Then I offer to pay half. But neither Roy nor my mother are budging.

"Well," Lily says, pushing her chair back from the table. "Mrs. Pascal, Roy, it's been lovely spending this time with you this morning."

"You're leaving?" I ask before she can finish what she's saying.

Lily turns to me now. Her face is stony and passive. "I've got a lot of work to do on the Delaware beaches article. Besides, I think it would be nice for you to have some time alone with your mom and Roy."

When Lily's gone, I feel her absence like a gaping loss. I think my mother and Roy must feel her departure as keenly as I do, because none of us say much once she's gone. The three of us linger on the roof of the Hotel Washington long after lunch is over, as if we're all silently admitting to a profound lack of ambition.

After the waiter comes around for the third time to ask us if we'd like anything else, my mother looks up from her water glass. "I noticed that *The Fantasticks* is playing at Ford's Theater tonight. Do you think we could get tickets?"

“Definitely,” I say, feeling as if my mother has somehow saved us all, at least for a few more hours.

Chapter Eighteen

I've seen *The Fantasticks* one other time in my life. I must have been eight or so because it's one of those half-formed, embryonic memories. If I'm not mistaken, it would probably have been a few months after the Banana Pancake Incident Part One. My mother took me to the very same local playhouse in Keene that she is now raising money to renovate. One thing I remember clearly from that production was the nasally voice of the female lead. I remember her squeaky notes and off-key pitches swirling around the dusty theater. The only other thing I remember from that production was my mother holding my hand tight the whole time. Her hand was sweaty, which was strange because her hands were normally cool and dry. As the show went on, her grip on my hand got tighter and tighter until it was like a vise, squeezing my fingers together. I remember that this scared me.

The production tonight at Ford's Theater is better than I'd expected. The actors who play the young lovers are beautiful, and perfect for their parts. The girl, in particular, has a look of complete vulnerability and a sad lilt in her voice, as if she knows full well, even when she is most in love, that things are going to go horribly wrong.

During the show, I can see that my mother is holding Roy's hand, and the pained expression on her face tells me that whatever thoughts this musical instigated so many years ago in that playhouse in Keene, she is feeling them again, at least as strongly. I wonder if this play reminds her of my father, and the way he left us. I wonder if, as in *The Fantasticks*, she still expects him to come home, perhaps a little more worldly, yet humbled, and ready to assume his place in our family once again. I wonder if tonight, the play reminds her of the hope she once held.

After the show, the three of us shuffle outside Ford's Theater. A wind is whipping down 10th Street and we all hold ourselves in our arms. Standing on the sidewalk, I feel as if we have a lot to talk about, as if the air around us is heavy with the things that are yet unsaid. I look closely at my mother and see that she is crying lightly, her eyes and nose red, her eyelids moist and heavy. It is only then that I recall her crying after that *Fantasticks* show so many years ago. It must have been winter because we

were walking home quickly, the New Hampshire cold stinging our faces. It was foreign to me then, and foreign to me now, that one show could have such an effect on a person.

Roy is standing slightly away from us and I'm thinking that he probably is as thrown by my mother's display of emotion as I am. He, too, is confused and wondering what to do to make it better. And for some reason, the thought pops into my head that my mother doesn't really love Roy. That he is a companion for her, and someone for her to share her life with, but not someone she could ever fully commit to. I don't know why this all occurs to me, but it does. And it makes me frightened, just like I was the first time I saw *The Fantasticks* so many years ago.

"So what's your pleasure?" I ask, blowing into my hands to keep them warm.

"What do you mean?" my mother asks.

"Well, do you want to get some coffee? Maybe some dessert? Or do you want to head to your hotel?"

"Hotel?" my mother asks, as if she's unfamiliar with the term. Roy shifts uncomfortably on his feet.

"Yeah. Your hotel."

"Ethan," my mother says, "we don't have a hotel. In my messages, I asked if we could stay with you and Lily on your foldout."

"But what about your tour group?" I ask.

"They're in Philadelphia tonight, son. We're ahead of them. We meet up with them tomorrow."

"Oh boy," I say.

My mother pulls her coat tighter around herself. "Honestly, Ethan, I didn't know it would be such an inconvenience for you. I'm sure Roy and I can find a hotel room tonight. We'll just find a taxi and that will—"

"Mom. Stop. It's fine. I'm sure it won't be a problem at all."

"No, really, Ethan. Your hospitality is overwhelming."

"Mom. Enough. Let's just please get in my car and go home."

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There is a problem with this arrangement, my mother and Roy staying at the place I no longer call home. I know I should just tell them everything. Come clean. But that's not as easy as it seems. Not now. I'm in too deep. I've lied and misconstrued so much already – hell, I even have Lily complicit in this – that to change now seems foolhardy, idiotic. Sometimes the best thing to do is keep lying.

So we drive out to Arlington, to Lily's apartment once again. We are silent, each of us caught up in our own meditative worlds. I am thinking about the immediate, that which most directly confronts me. How will I explain my key not working on Lily's door? What will Lily's reaction be to Ethan and his family showing up, once again unannounced, at her door? Will she, upon seeing us, insist that I tell the truth, explain the break-up and everything I did to cause it? Or will she tell them everything herself, convinced that I could never come close to achieving such a moment of clarity on my own?

We pull up to the apartment and we take our time getting out of the Beefeater, as if some form of arthritis has settled in during the drive. We mount the steps to the building and walk down the brightly lit hallway where, up until a week ago, my eight boxes of possessions had sat. Before I knock on the door, I try the doorknob. It turns. The door opens. Lily is a fastidious door-locker, so I know the door being open can't be an accident. In the living room, the foldout couch is opened and made up with fresh sheets. Lily, it would seem, has thought of everything, including my inability to tell my mother and her husband the truth. And it is then I realize that it's possible to know someone too well for your own good. And theirs.

After my mother and Roy assure me they have everything they need for bed, I wish them good night and slip into Lily's bedroom, where it is expected I will sleep. It's dark in the room, the numbers on her alarm clock shedding only a dull red glow. I use my visual memory to find my way around. I use the sound of Lily's breathing to orient myself. There's a wicker chair in the corner of the room, which I'm planning to sleep in. I sit down and kick my legs out and try to position myself as comfortably as possible.

"You can sleep in the bed if you want," Lily whispers. I jump at the sound of her voice. "If you stay on your side," she adds.

"Lily, I'm sorry."

“Don’t be,” she says. “It just makes me feel worse when you say that.”

“I meant to tell her.”

“Forget it. You’ll tell her when you tell her.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

I strip down to boxers and a t-shirt and I slip under the sheets on my side. Lily and I used to have this thing where at night, when we first went to bed, she would always be freezing right away, and I would always be too hot. Then mysteriously, through the course of the night, I would somehow lose my heat and Lily would somehow gain it. By morning, the transferal would be complete. I’d be shivering under the comforter and she would be sweating and kicking the covers off. We used to joke and say things like our thermostats are misaligned. Or I’d say she stole my heat. But most times, I think it annoyed us that we were so perfectly out of synch with each other.

Tonight I can feel her coldness from my side of the bed. I can feel the chill in her limbs, the freeze inside of her. I want to hold her. I want to sacrifice my heat for her, make her warm again. I’d gladly give that to her. But I know my place. I know the limits of what is expected of me tonight. My side. Stay there. Lily doesn’t need any more confusion than what I’ve already given her.

“Can I ask you one thing?” Lily asks. Her voice is high and distant, as if she’s speaking from the edge of a dream.

“Of course, Lily.”

“Why *didn’t* you tell your mother we’d broken up?”

I think about this a moment. I ponder the intricacies of her question, and the various ways my answer could be interpreted. It’s dizzyingly complex.

“Why do you ask?” I answer.

“Never mind,” she says. She edges away from me. “I guess it’s not important anymore.”

Lily falls asleep a few minutes later. I can tell she’s asleep because her breathing slows into a deep, calm cycle that is at once familiar and foreign to me.

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I wake up when I hear the sounds of movement outside the bedroom. As usual, I'm freezing, with the comforter piled on top of me. Lily's legs and arms are splayed out at odd angles, her hair is a ratty nest that hides her face. I can still hear her sleep-breathing, still caught in that slow circadian rhythm. She is a mess right now, this woman next to me. This night with me has left her ravaged in a way that I can't even fathom. But there is something beautiful about her resilience, her ability to make this sacrifice for me. I don't know that I will ever be able to repay her.

I can hear my mother saying something to Roy and I know I need to go out there. But first, I take one last look at the sleeping Lily. She doesn't stir. I push the tangle of her hair off her face, which is red and moist from the heat she's accumulated during the night. And then I kiss her. Softly. On her forehead. I inhale the unmistakably human smell of sleep. And then I get out of bed, shivering from the cold. I get dressed and go out to my mother and Roy.

They are both dressed and wearing their coats. They are sitting in chairs facing each other in the living room, their bags at their feet. They are ready to leave, like school children awaiting the dismissal order from their teacher.

"Ethan," my mother says when she sees me, "we didn't mean to wake you."

"It's fine, mom. I wouldn't want you to leave without saying good-bye. Besides, do you even know where you're going?"

"We were going to walk to the subway station. We're meeting our tour group at Union Station. The train leaves in an hour and a half."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'll drive you to Union Station."

My mother tries to put up a fight, but it's obvious Roy is wanting the ride, so after a few minutes it becomes clear to my mother that she will not win this argument.

"I can't believe my own son thinks I'm too old to ride on the subway with my husband," my mother says at last, gracelessly giving in to my appeals.

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When they shoot movies in DC, somebody thinks of everything. Traffic is always going the right direction to get that perfect shot as the actors drive up somewhere. Or the

locations of certain monuments are suddenly right next to each other to make for seamless transitions from one shot to the next. For instance, there's a set of steps along the Potomac that goes nowhere; it connects two rarely-used sidewalks. Yet every time you see someone leaving the White House, these are the steps they're using. My favorite, though, is how the crowds are conspicuously absent whenever something important is happening so we always get that great dialogue without the sound of kids crying or parents scolding. It's all choreographed so that the scenes are perfect. Which is almost never the case for me. Certainly not today. The streets in front of Union Station are ones I theoretically should know well, since they are what I have to negotiate every day when I go into work. But now that my destination is altered by just a few blocks, the city becomes a labyrinth of one-ways and divided roads, that thwarts me every time I try to get close to Union Station. To top it off, traffic is bad, especially for a Sunday morning. There's some kind of organized protest on the mall today. Throngs of people walk along the sidewalks carrying hand-lettered signs and placards. The streets are choked with motorbuses that lumber along the lanes, blocking me out, making the task of actually getting to Union Station that much harder.

"Goddammit!" I shout when I realize I've missed a turn that would have taken me to the front of Union Station.

"Ethan, watch your mouth."

"Sorry."

"Honestly, we can just walk. We'll be fine. I can practically see the station from here."

"Mom, I've got it."

Roy is silent, but I can tell he's edgy. He keeps looking nervously in my blind spots and he's holding tightly to the door handle.

After several more passes, I negotiate my way to the inner ring of traffic that circles Union Station. It's not the closest spot, but it's only a fifty-yard walk from here. I pull into the nearest lane and put on my flashers. My mother and Roy are out of the car the second I've stopped.

Roy's got the suitcases. He holds them in his arms and they tug his thick frame toward the ground.

“Are you sure you’ve got those, Roy?” I ask.

“Don’t be silly, kid.” He looks at his taut arms as if he wishes he had a free hand he could use to punch me in the arm. Instead, he shrugs and smiles. “Thanks for everything.” Then he turns and starts walking toward Union Station.

My mother looks at me now. Her nose is turned in a way that somehow diminishes that judgmental angle of hers. I realize that this moment is the first time we’ve been alone together on this visit.

“Ethan,” she says, “you don’t look well.” Her voice is soft, comforting.

“Mom, I’m not.”

“I know,” she says and rests her hand on my shoulder.

“Lily and I are broken up. I’m not even living at the apartment anymore. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

My mother nods and closes her eyes. “I had my suspicions,” she says. “But thank you for telling me that.”

Having said those hard words, I suddenly feel a need to say more, a pressing urge to tell her everything. “It was my fault, mom. I drove her away. And now this work thing is going bad too. Everything’s going bad. The job, my new roommates, Lily. Everything is a complete mess. I’m losing my grip.”

Her hand squeezes my shoulder lightly. “No you aren’t, son. You’re going to be all right.”

A loud horn honks and I turn to see that the Beefeater is blocking a lane of traffic, and a line of three buses is stacked up behind it. The driver of the lead bus is gesturing for me to move my piece of shit car.

“How is everything going to be all right, mom?” I ask, frantic now. “How?”

“I don’t know how, Ethan. Only you really know how. But can I tell you something?” She bites her lip and she looks as if she might start crying.

“Mom, I feel like I’ve disappointed you. Or myself. Everyone.”

“You could never disappoint me, son.” Her voice flutters lightly as if she might lose control of it at any second.

“Mom, stop.”

“No, Ethan. I’m your mother. You have to allow me to get sappy every once in a while. I think I’m entitled.”

I look down at her feet.

“That’s more like it. Now do you know why you could never disappoint me?”

“No.”

She pauses a second, as if to collect her thoughts into a cohesive sentence.

“Because I believe in you.”

This wasn’t exactly what I wanted to hear. I was hoping for some impossible advice that would illuminate my path. Something that would give me step-by-step directions on how to put everything back together, to make the pieces fit.

My disappointment must register on my face because my mother gives me a quick, hard glance. “Did you hear what I said?” she asks. “I believe in you. And I don’t believe in just anybody. I don’t put my faith in everyone I know. I pick and choose. And right now, you’ve got it, mister.”

The bus driver honks again. Then the pneumatic door whooshes open and he unleashes a profanity-laced tirade.

“Really?” I ask my mother.

She smiles. “Of course, Ethan.”

Then more honking. Three bleats, followed by a long sustained blast.

“Hold on one second,” my mother says to me. She pulls herself up to her full height, an inch or two shorter than me, and she steps quickly over to the open bus door. I can see the judgment creep into the angle of her nose. “Do you see that young man over there?” she asks the bus driver as she points at me.

“Lady, I don’t give a rat’s ass if that’s the president of—”

My mother holds up her index finger. She makes this gesture so forcefully, so quickly and frighteningly, that the bus driver catches himself mid-sentence and swallows whatever else he was going to say. The sight of this lady challenging him was obviously more than he’d expected this morning.

“I’m asking you, sir, do you see that young man over there?”

“Yes,” he says solemnly.

“You should know, sir, that I believe in that young man. I believe in him one hundred percent.”

The bus driver nods and stares at my mother, his mouth hangs open, still caught in a state of shock.

“And another thing: do you really think it would kill you to be a little more polite?”

The man shakes his head again in disbelief.

When my mother drops her finger and turns back to me, the bus driver sets about backing his bus up and steering his way around my car.

“Sometimes, Ethan, the direct approach is the best one,” my mother says to me as we watch the line of buses snake past my car.

We both laugh for a few minutes. And then we know it’s time for my mother to join Roy and the rest of the tour group. We hug and I can feel her arms holding me tight. I watch as she makes her way to Union Station where Roy is patiently waiting, still holding their bags a few inches off the ground. My mother waves to me before they enter the station and I wave back.

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Back at Lily’s place, there’s a note on her door.

Ethan,

I’m not here right now. I actually do have to finish that article on the Delaware beaches. I really don’t think you’re an entirely bad person. Not entirely. Let’s talk in the future. When you can.

Love,

Lily

I take the note off the door. I fold it and put it in my pocket. And I leave her apartment building for what seems like, again, the last time.

Outside, I see that the bird feeder Odette was filling yesterday is lying in pieces on the ground. It's wood frame is torn apart, like it's been run over by a lawn mower. The seeds Odette had carefully placed in it are scattered throughout the grass, tossed in careless, sad-looking piles. I wonder if this was the work of vandals, a random act of violence. Or if this was perhaps the work of the Condo Association, a sign they've escalated their campaign against the charitable acts of Odette. Either way, she doesn't need to see this destruction. I gather the pieces together and give them a quick burial in the dumpster behind the building. Then I climb into the Beefeater and head back into DC.

Chapter Nineteen

Sunday was a wash. I spent it catching up on all the messages that had accumulated during the course of last week. There were about twenty. The trick is, I called everyone back at their work numbers. It being Sunday, I knew I was certain to get their voicemail. That's the strategy. I managed to avoid talking with anyone in person. Instead, I left snippy messages that implied that I was frustrated they weren't there, working on a Sunday. I implied that if they were as dedicated as me, they'd not know the meaning of the word rest.

Now it's Monday, and I know I won't have the luxury of vacant offices and automatic voicemail pickup to get me through the day. Bummer.

Waiting to file in through the metal detectors this morning, I spy the wraith-like figure of Clay Tarcher, the current youngest Chief of Staff in the U.S. House of Representatives, and now the person who I openly consider to be my arch-enemy on Capitol Hill. Watching him in front of me, his bony frame, his amphibious face, I can see how correct I was in thinking he looked like a fanged frog. My initial instinct is to bolt. After all, the last time I talked to Clay, it's safe to say I was more than a little rude. But at least I said what I meant. Besides, I think I acquitted myself rather well last time. Certainly nothing to be ashamed of.

"Well, well, well," I say. "If it isn't my good buddy Clay Tarcher."

Clay turns on his heel to face me as if he already knows who it is. He looks tired and haggard today, as if he's in desperate need of someone's blood to suck. Or, at the very least, a good shave. "Oh, Ethan Pascal. What a treat."

"You know, buddy, I was wondering. How is your boss's race going? What's her name again, Kelly Trellis?"

"Congresswoman Shelley Korellis," he says, his voice blank. "And things are going great. Just great."

The line eases forward a few feet. Clay tries to face front, but I refuse to let him off that easy.

"Is that so?" I say. "That's great to hear. Because I heard one of my Demo friends talking the other day and he said her race was tightening." This is a flat-out lie on

my part. But it *is* true that most races tighten at least a little in the last month before the election, so it might be better to call my assertion an educated guess.

“Well, you heard wrong,” he says, trying to muster a smile. His lips peel back from his sharp teeth and it looks more like a grimace.

“What a relief. I mean, seriously. That’s really great to hear.”

Clay seems unready to absorb such a large dose of irony this morning. He tries to laugh, but it comes out more like a nervous wheeze.

He’s at the metal detectors now, and I can see that he feels the need to say something sharp, something that will at least leave him with an illusion of power, something like the send-off I gave him last time we saw each other. The growing look of confusion on his face tells me he’s not coming up with anything good. “Well, if you... Why don’t... Fuck off, Ethan,” he finally blurts out once he’s through the metal detector.

I shake my head to register my disappointment. “Not very original, Clay,” I say.

The defeat registers on his face before he can turn and scurry down the hall.

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Eric is sitting at his desk in the front office. He’s hunched over a book on his desk, but he glances up when I sweep through the front door. When he sees me, his eyes dart back down and he goes back to reading. No hello. No nothing.

“Good morning, Eric,” I say emphatically, trying to draw attention to his snub.

“Hey,” he says without looking up.

He looks so young there, his thin blond hair hanging limply over his forehead, his hands hidden under his haunches, his feet tucked back under the chair. Yet there’s something so resolute, so powerful and dignified about his anger. It makes me feel awkward, as if I were the only person in the room not wearing clothes.

“Well then,” I say. “This has been awfully pleasant.”

Brooke is on the phone when I go in back so I’m able to slip by her without a protracted conversation. She holds a limp up hand to wave and I nod back. I slip into my office and shut the door behind me. On my desk is a piece of paper, lying centered on my computer keyboard.

*To: Chief of Staff Ethan Pascal
From: Staff Assistant Eric Wright
Re: Apocalypse Project*

The film Apocalypse Now was scheduled for theatrical release in Vietnam on August 30, 1978, eight months after its initial U.S. release. However, after heavy promotion, public outcry in Vietnam boiled over. Protests raged in the streets. Several credible death threats were issued for Director Francis Ford Coppola. Movie houses refused to run the risk of showing the film. It was eventually determined that the best course of action would be to cancel the release of the film in Vietnam. To this day, Apocalypse Now has not been released in Vietnam, though bootleg videocassette copies of the film are readily available on the street corners of most major Vietnamese cities.

I, Eric Wright, herewith submit this memo as completion of heretofore assigned project. I wash my hands of it.

What an amazing document! I'm dying to know if this is true, or if this is some elaborate fiction Eric has concocted. And I'm not even sure which of those options I'd prefer. I pick up the phone with the intention of intercomming him, but then I remember the reception he gave me this morning, and I think better of it. Something tells me this memo wasn't intended as an apology. Rather, it was meant as a way of getting me off his back.

There is a knock on my door and I see the handle of the door twist to open. I set the receiver back in its cradle and shove Eric's memo into a desk drawer. Brooke pokes her head inside the office.

"Are you busy?" she asks.

"Never too busy for you, Brooke. Besides, I need to debrief on last week and find out what I missed."

Brooke slips in through the door and shuts it behind her. "Good. I need to talk."

I don't like the way she says this, but her tone gives me no clues as to what exactly I won't like about what she has to say. She sits in the chair in front of my desk

and scoots it forward a few inches toward me. Her face is drawn. The makeup around her eyes is heavier than normal. Her widow's peak looks unusually severe.

"Vince and I broke up," she says. There's a firmness in her voice that I wouldn't have expected from her when delivering a statement of this enormity.

"Like really broke up? Or are you just having a hard time?"

"I think it's real this time." She looks around the office and shivers lightly.

"God, it feels real."

"What happened?"

"Well, this might involve you a bit. I mean, at least tangentially."

"What?"

"Vince slept with Nicole."

I was nodding before she said this, and now that she has, I'm frozen.

"Last week. He flat-out admitted it to me. Like it was a meeting he went to or something."

"Jesus Christ, Brooke."

"I know. It's even more shocking since I thought you and Nicole were really hitting it off."

"Well, I wouldn't say we were—" I catch myself before I completely try to defend myself. "Are you okay?" I ask instead.

She rests her elbows in her hands and hunches over onto her lap. "I think so. I guess so."

I step out from behind my desk and sit in the chair next to hers.

"I mean, I should have seen this coming, right?" She looks so scared right now, like a child who needs some kind of reassurance.

"No way. There's no way you should have seen this coming. Not unless you knew that Vince is the biggest idiot in the world, because it is quite clear to me now, that he's got to be the absolute biggest idiot to ever walk the face of the earth."

She smiles a little, just a slight twitch at the edges of her thin lips. "Really?"

"Oh my god, Brooke. Are you kidding me? This guy is like below idiot. He's brain dead."

"Thanks," she says quietly. Her head is hanging below her shoulders.

“No question. I’m just surprised you’re only finding this out now.”

She looks up at me from her slouch. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing, it’s just that, well, he’s not always been the best boyfriend in the world. I think we both can agree on that. Can’t we?”

At this, Brooke finally starts crying. It’s a soft cry with her forehead resting in her hands. “Oh god. Have I wasted the last three years of my life on this guy?” she asks.

I want to hold Brooke. I want to hug her and hang my head over her shoulder and tell her that Vince’s love could never come close to the love I would have for her. This is a very strong temptation right now. It’s an urge I feel to my very core. But I also know this gesture would not be completely altruistic. I know there are selfish impulses wrapped up in that gesture. Selfish impulses that probably don’t embody the best interests of the already-confused Brooke. So I choke that urge back down. I fight it with every fiber of my being. For both our sakes.

Instead, I say, “You haven’t wasted these years. Did you learn something? Do you think there might be a lesson for you in all this?”

She doesn’t answer for a second, then finally, “Maybe.”

“See? And that will become clearer as a little time passes.”

“Really?”

“Definitely.”

“But I *loved* him. I really loved him, Ethan.”

“Brooke, you’ll have to pardon me for saying this, but you are way better than Vince. *Waaaaaaay* better. And, to be honest, he probably deserves a loser like Nicole.”

She smiles again at this. She snuffles and dabs at her eyes. “How did you get so smart when it comes to relationships?”

Now that’s a surprising question? I don’t think in the illustrious history of Ethan Pascal that anyone has ever accused him of being smart when it comes to relationships. Nope, never.

“I think I’m only smart when it comes to other people’s relationships, Brooke.”

“Aren’t we all,” she says wistfully. “Aren’t we all.”

We both stare for a few minutes at the empty chair behind my desk, neither of us saying a word.

“So, did I miss anything at the office while I was gone?” I ask, finally breaking the silence.

Brooke regards me for a moment with a sad look on her face, as if I’ve somehow missed saying something important while we were still on the topic of her love life. It seems like she’s about to say something, something caught in her throat, but then she shakes her head and crosses her legs purposefully.

“Nothing huge,” she says. “I mean, you know there’s always something big going on out here. Always one emergency or another. But nothing that couldn’t resolve itself.”

“Too bad,” I say. I prop one of my legs on top of my desk.

“So how was the trip? Did you get anything done?”

I look at my fingernails. There’s still some white flecks of paint buried deep in their crevices. “Not really,” I say. “I was hoping I could figure some things out. Find out what we need to do to win this campaign. But it was pretty much a waste.”

“Well, did you learn anything? Because, as you said, if you learn anything, it wasn’t a complete waste.”

“Unfortunately, the few things I *did* learn aren’t going to help us at all.”

“Sorry to hear that.” She arches her eyebrows in a quick gesture that at once makes me feel worthless. “So not only did I lose my boyfriend of three years, I’m about to lose my job too.”

I nod, because to say anything now would only be underlining the obvious. I wish I could say something that might give her hope, something she can at least hold onto, but even if I *could* think of something, it would be a lie. This is one of the hard realities of political life: you’re never really safe; job security is a delusion we can’t afford to keep. It’s really too bad, because Brooke is really good at what she does here. Hell, we all are. Except maybe me.

“So what do you think you’ll do next? A Senate job?”

Brooke shrugs her shoulders.

“Needless to say, you’ll get a sterling recommendation from me. Not that I have a lot of credibility around here anymore.”

“I think I’m leaving the Hill, Ethan.”

“What? No way.”

“I’ve got to get out of here. Get onto my real life.”

“Real life?”

“Yeah. Look around this place. It’s run by a bunch of children. Working on the Hill is like being in suspended animation. Or better yet, suspended adolescence.”

What Brooke is saying is making sense. I’ve never felt like a grownup, despite my age and my current position. “That’s not a bad point,” I say. “Maybe I’ll have to get out of here too.”

Brooke looks up at me quickly. “Are you kidding? You won’t leave the Hill, Ethan. You’re perfect for this place. You’re like, made for this business.”

I think she’s trying to pay me a compliment. I’m fairly sure. “Who knows. I don’t think I’ll have many job prospects once this race is over.”

“Just give it some time,” she says. “You can’t be responsible for losing in a state like Montana. It’s way too conservative to reelect a Democrat. No one really expected you to win this one.”

“But...” I don’t really have anything else to say to her. I’m tapped out.

Brooke sighs heavily. She uncrosses her legs and stands up. “Well,” she says, “back to work, I suppose.” She walks to the door to my office and turns back around. I can hardly tell she was crying less than five minutes ago. Her face is as composed as it always is, reassembled into the visage of the professional she is. “Cynthia will be back in DC tonight,” she says. “There are some votes scheduled for tomorrow and the House will probably recess by the end of the week.”

“Good, we’ll be able to send Cynthia out to the state full-time after that.”

Brooke huffs a dry laugh. “You really think there’s much point in that?”

“We can’t just fold up the tents now, Brooke. We at least owe it to ourselves to keep it close.”

She huffs another disdainful laugh. “Whatever you say, boss.” She turns and leaves me alone in my office before I can reply.

After a few minutes, I glance at my phone and see that my voicemail message light is lit. I don’t remember hearing my phone ring. I pick up the receiver to check my messages.

“Ethan, this is Jasper. I’m calling regarding the filming of your scene in *Wheels of the System*. We’re juggling a lot of things here, but looking at the shooting schedule, it looks like Friday afternoon is going to work best for us. So why don’t we go ahead and say Friday at 3:30.”

I’ve got to hand it to Jasper, he’s persistent. Annoyingly so. Still, maybe there’s a way I can do this. If nothing else, it might be fun to try. What else do I have to lose? I hit 9 to delete the message.

The second after I hang up, the phone rings. And, more for sheer entertainment value than anything else, I pick up.

“Ethan Pascal here.”

“Ethan, I’m glad I got a hold of you.” The voice is slick, like a radio disk jockey. And I don’t recognize it in the slightest.

“Then I’m glad you got a hold of me too.” There’s a brief pause, then, “Who is this?”

“This is Zak Andersen with the Soda Manufacturers and Bottlers Association.”

A lobbyist. That would explain the oily, perfect-pitched phone voice. “Have we met before, Zak?”

“Sure, we met at that House fundraiser at the Building Museum last year. You were with your girlfriend, what’s her name? Lily, right? How’s she doing, Ethan?”

“Actually, Zak, we broke up a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, I, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry. It wasn’t *your* fault. Or was it?”

“Quite right. Yes, of course. Still, sorry to hear it. She was a great girl.”

“What do you need, Zak?”

“Well, I’m calling to follow up on a letter we sent you a month ago. Have you had a chance to look at that yet?”

“You know, Zak, I’m sure I read it. But maybe you could refresh my memory.”

“No problemo, my man. We are asking your boss to be the lead Democratic cosponsor of a bill to add soda and soda-related products to the USDA Food Pyramid.”

“Food Pyramid?”

I can tell he's bummed because it's now obvious that I have not at all read his letter. As if he could have expected otherwise.

"See," he says, "the USDA issues these Food Pyramids that help people understand what foods are nutritious and what categories they should try to consume more of in their diets. They hand them out at schools, among other places."

"And you want to include soda on these Food Pyramids?" I ask, sitting up in my chair. I'm suddenly enjoying this conversation quite a bit.

"Soda and soda-related products, yes."

"And just out of curiosity, Zak, what category would you like the USDA to classify soda and soda-related products under?"

"Fruits and Vegetables," he says, deadpan.

"You don't say."

"See, as it is, the USDA already includes fruit juices in the Fruits and Vegetables Category."

"Because fruit juices consist mostly fruit and fruit-related products."

"Correctamundo," he says as if we've both just hit on some mutual epiphany. "Now don't forget, Ethan, that many soda products contain some amounts of fruit juice."

"How could I forget that?"

"In addition, many fruit juices are absolutely chalk full of sugar. Do you know what I call apple juice?"

"I'm sure I don't have a clue."

"The junk juice." He laughs lightly in a practiced way. "Seriously, because that's how much sugar it has. It's almost junk."

"That's funny. Do you know what I call apple juice, Zak?"

"Um. No."

"The ass juice." I take this opportunity to try out my own practiced laugh on Zak. "But I never call it that to its face."

The line is silent for a second and I'm pretty sure he's finally caught on. "We'd like Cynthia's support on this one, Ethan," he says in a measured tone. "As you know, the Soda Manufacturers and Bottlers Association has been very generous toward Cynthia and her campaign in the past."

I may not be the smartest man in the world, but I recognize a threat when I hear one. “Zak, I hope you don’t take offense at this, but do you have any clue about anything?”

“I’m afraid I don’t—”

“Zak, this Congress is almost out of session for the year. And Cynthia’s going to lose this race! I hope you’ve given money to our opponent because you’re going to need his help now.”

“I see.” Zak’s voice is cool now. “And what’s his name again?”

“Claiborne.”

“Great. Thanks for your help, Ethan. And by the way, have fun finding a new job.” Then he hangs up the phone.

Well, it turns out that conversation didn’t cheer me up as much as I’d hoped. And if that one didn’t do it, it’s probably safe to assume that nothing will.

Chapter Twenty

Most of the rest of the week is relatively boring. It might be easier if I just summarized. The following are the things I *do* during the course of the week:

1. I *do* take out two ads in the Personals:

Lilian—

Your understanding moves me beyond words. Are we really done?

Something in me says, no. We need to talk. Obviously.

Eden—

And,

Nicolina—

I don't really care what you did to me. But you should think about what you do does to others. Karma's a bitch!

Chilean Sea Bass—

Initially, I call to only take out the ad for Lily. But the guy at the Personals desk informs me that this week they're running a two-for-one deal at the Post. So on a whim, I take out the ad for Nicole. I don't really mean anything by it. I mean, I'm not trying to scare her or anything, and I'm not at all sad or jealous that she would so easily leave me for Vince, but she should know what it is she's doing. Someone needs to tell her. And it does make me feel better to leave it.

2. I *do* receive and listen to and delete five voicemail messages from Prometheus Productions. The messages all entail miniscule changes to the *Wheels of the System* script, or minor alterations in the shooting schedule. At the end of each message, Jasper asks things like: *That OK with you?* Or, *Let me know if*

that works for you. Surprisingly timid statements for someone who like Jasper. I can tell he's not sure if I intend to actually help him shoot the Capitol scene; he too found my remark at the Larval Stage to be enigmatic. So I think the act of leaving all these messages is actually just a ruse to get me to call him back and confirm that I'm actually going to be a part of this movie.

I don't return any of his calls. And as the week progresses and his plans get more shifted around, Jasper's normally hollow phone voice grows strangely agitated. By the time I get the last message, all the various changes that have been made throughout the week have been changed back to their original conditions.

"So," Jasper says in the final message he leaves for me, a few hours before we're to begin shooting on Friday. "Everything's back to normal. I guess. For now anyway." He pauses for a second as if he needs to think about this. "Then. So. I guess I'll see you in an hour."

3. I *do* log numerous hours on conference calls with Cynthia, Suzanne, myself, and a bevy of pollsters, consultants, media people, and various hangers-on. At least fifteen individuals on each call. I'd say I average five to six hours each day on these conference calls. The main topic of discussion throughout the week is advertising. We are trying to choose which ads to run for the rest of the race. Like most campaigns, we taped about twenty different ads in a DC television studio several months ago. They're already *in the can*, to borrow an expression from Jasper. The topics of these ads range anywhere from Social Security, to Gun Control, to Morality & Family Values. The problem is, none of the various factions on the conference calls can agree over which of these pre-recorded ads we should run. The pollsters are solidly behind Morality & Family Values; they say that's what people in Montana are concerned about. The consultants are voting for the ads reassuring Montana voters that Cynthia isn't *too* strongly in favor of gun control. The media people want to run these fluffy bio ads that talk about where Cynthia grew up and how great a person she is. And the various hangers-on, well, they're not behind any one issue in

particular; they're not what you'd call a solid voting block. They're Independents, who scatter their votes among the three main factions.

I, of course, do not agree with any of the three main factions. I'm voting to go negative. Big time. We taped several ads that discuss some shady business deals that Claiborne negotiated when he was governor. And there was this case where he wrote a personal letter to a judge asking for leniency for the son of a wealthy contributor to his campaigns. My philosophy is this: You've got a whole quiver of arrows, why not use your biggest, most lethal arrow? It might at least make this race interesting. But then, you have to expect that attitude from me. Hell, I'm the guy who called Shaw a WIFEBEATER. And I'd do it again if it would make this race closer. But no matter how vociferously I push to go negative, I'm invariably shot down by one or more of the various factions on the conference calls. They say things like: *We don't want to stoop to their level.* Or, *Polls show that 62.5 percent of Montanans don't want to see negative ads in this race.* Or, *Negativity focus-grouped very poorly in two-thirds of Montana counties.* Hell, even the hangers-on disagree with me. All of which makes me more firm in the conviction that I'm right.

As we talk on these calls, I sense that Cynthia is torn. I think she really wants to agree with me. She wants to roll up her sleeves and make a brawl out of this thing. She's a fighter on the inside; it may be buried beneath layers of self-restraint and proper judgment, but it's in there somewhere. Still, every time it looks like she might be swayed to my corner, one of the factions on the phone mounts a serious charge to pull Cynthia back to their side.

When the calls are finally done, and we reach some kind of conclusion, Cynthia has decided to run ads on almost every issue we've taped, except the negative ads. She tells me she thinks this is the best compromise. I let her know how disappointed I am in her decision by refusing to talk with her unless absolutely forced to, a gesture which so closely mirrors my normal office routine that she manages to miss the subtle shadings of my protest completely.

4. On Wednesday I *do* hold another staff meeting/thought-airing session. As I could have predicted, public sentiment in the office has not gotten any more favorable toward me in the past two weeks.

After an hour and forty minutes of thought-airing, when it's clear that everyone has had their chance to berate me fully, I give a speech to the troops. It's supposed to be a morale-building speech, one that reignites their belief that we can win. Rah, rah, rah. I tell them stories of other campaigns I've seen where a strong comeback saves the day. I tell them that we're in the final weeks now, but all hope is not completely lost yet. I'm not sure how convincing I sound when I say this. Then I tell them that sacrifice is going to be crucial, that we're all going to need to give something extra, maybe a lot, if we're going to win. I'm halfway through the sacrifice section of my speech when I look up and realize that I've lost these people. They stare across the conference room table with looks of utter hatred, fully unmasked. I think perhaps they've misinterpreted the word *sacrifice*, as if I've just said that *they* are the ones to be sacrificed, that eliminating *them* is the answer to our problems. I don't know how this miscommunication arose. But now that I think about it, I'm not really sure what I *do* mean when I use the word sacrifice. What, indeed, am I asking these people to sacrifice? And what good, in god's name, would that do anyway? I don't know the answers to these questions. And it is certain my staff doesn't either. I end my speech early, just after the sacrifice section, and I adjourn the staff meeting just short of the two-hour mark.

Okay, those are the things I managed to *do* this week. Now here are the things I *do not* do this week:

1. I do *not* talk to or apologize to Eric. Each morning, he snubs me when I enter the office. And each morning, I try to point out that snub before going back to my office. It's a strange kind of Kabuki dance that we perform, so regimented

and stylized that, at some point, we've both lost the significance of these actions. Still, each morning, after we've done our routine, as I make that walk from the front office to my own office, I can't help but feel chastened by Eric, even if I'm not exactly sure why.

2. I do *not* talk to or apologize to Miranda. This is one I don't have much control over, because she's never at home when I am. I'm not sure if she's staying at Dewey's place or what. But I do recognize now that it's none of my business. As I lie in bed each night, my ears are pricked, waiting to hear the sound of her coming home, the sad shuffle of her feet on the stairs. I'd really like to apologize. I just haven't had the chance.
3. I do *not* ask Suzanne about how the yard signs are holding up. I've checked the weather reports around the state, and so far there hasn't been any significant precipitation. So that's *some* good news. And I figure if something *had* come up, she'd let me know. Believe me, I'm not going to be the one that broaches that topic, with anyone.
4. I'm fairly sure there's something else I've *not* done this week. Knowing me, there's got to be. I just can't remember it right now off the top of my head. So I'm going to leave this category open and reserve the right to add something else later on.

Items of interest from this week:

1. An e-mail note I receive from Brooke on Monday afternoon, a few hours after she first told me about her break-up with Vince.

Ethan,

I thought it was customary when one of us is having relationship troubles, for the other person to invite that person to margaritas at Tortilla Coast. Maybe it's just me. But I'm fairly certain that was our arrangement.
Brooke—

2. An e-mail note I send to Brooke in response to the one she sent me on Monday.

B,
I can't believe how badly I dropped the ball, sister. Allow me to remedy the situation promptly. How does next week strike you?
E—

By week's end, I do not hear back from Brooke. I'm not sure if she's gotten my note, or if she's ignoring me, or if she's just playing a little game with this and making me sweat it out. All of which are things I feel she's entitled to do. Given the circumstances.

3. A book I find wedged between the screen door and front door at 325 Garfield: *All Politics Is Local: The Autobiography of Tip O'Neil*. There's no note attached to it, but I'm smart enough to recognize this as Dewey's handiwork. By week's end, I'm fifty pages into it. That Tip was a pretty bright guy. Maybe his genius doesn't quite rival that of Tom Arnold, but he was pretty smart all the same. I still haven't determined if Tip himself actually wrote the book himself.

Anything else noteworthy about the week:

1. Congress finally goes out of session on Thursday afternoon. They pass a mammoth Omnibus Appropriations Bill and adjourn before the President even

officially signs it. House and Senate Members flee the city for their home districts in order to campaign for reelection full-time.

2. There was no gun vote before Congress adjourned. I feel somewhat vindicated by this fact, since I've been maintaining all along that this vote would never come up. Cynthia even grudgingly acknowledges this prescience on my part. She admits that this is a stance I've held for a long time now. And I'm thankful for that. It shows I have at least *some* clue as to what's going on here, even if it was just a lucky guess. I'll take what I can get at this point. Knowing that competence is an illusion you have to sell to those around you, I'm not too proud to claim even the smallest of victories.

3. Cynthia goes back to Montana on Friday morning. Barring any unforeseen circumstance, she'll be there until the election is over. When she finally leaves the office Friday morning, I've even managed to convince her that she still has a chance to win this election. I'm able to foster this belief in her by pointing out that I haven't lost an election since that first County Commissioner's race almost ten years ago. And I tell her I'm not planning to lose one again. When I say this to her, she looks at me with a sideways glance, as if she's not so sure about this. I have to admit that I may have used this line on her at least once before. But somehow, I'm able to hold that stare of hers and deflect it back on her. She finally cracks a slight smile and says, "If you insist. Maybe it *is* possible." Then she's gone, left for the state. Confidence, like competence, it would seem, is an illusion you have to sell to those around you.

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That's pretty much it for the week. It's now around three o'clock Friday afternoon, and I'm sitting in my office waiting to hear back from the pollsters. They've been doing a tracking poll this week and they've promised me the results before the close

of business today. My hope is that they'll say there was a glitch in the last poll, some freak of random sampling, and Cynthia's actually doing a lot better than we thought. That would be the ideal scenario. Best case. But if not that, then maybe just the same numbers we had last time. That would be at least something.

My phone rings and I leap for the receiver. Before I can pick up, though, I see it's my intercom line that's ringing. Not the pollsters. Nevertheless, I pick up.

"Hello, sir."

"Oh. Hi, Eric," I say, adopting a flat tone. "What do you need?"

"There are several gentlemen here who say they have an appointment to see you."

"Who are they, Easy?"

"One second." There's a muffled sound on the other end. Then, "They say they're with Prometheus Productions."

"Go ahead and send them back."

"Okay, sir."

"Just out of curiosity, Easy, how many gentlemen would you say there *are* out there?"

"I don't know, sir." Slight pause. "Maybe fifteen. Give or take."

"Yikes," I say.

"Yeah. You're going to have to see this to believe it." Then he hangs up the phone.

A second later there's a knock on my door. I turn to my computer screen and pretend to be typing something important. "Come in," I say, pounding the keyboard authoritatively.

The door swings open and a large group of people saunters into my office. The first thing I notice is that everyone is wearing dark sunglasses. Everyone. In addition, they all bear grim, business-like faces, so I'm struck by the fact that these movie people could easily be mistaken for mafia hit men. They line up against the walls, and when they finally all pack into my office, it feels as if there is a shortage of oxygen in here.

"Ethan, my man," Jasper says. He's at the front of the group. He steps forward and takes my hand in both of his. In addition to the sunglasses, he's wearing a tan fishing vest with dozens of bulging pockets and several mechanical devices and meters hanging

from straps on his shoulders. He's very official looking, though I'd be surprised if he knows what they're all for.

"I could turn the lights off, if it's too bright in here for everyone," I say, tapping near my eyes, which are the only ones in the room not concealed behind dark lenses.

Jasper throws his head up in a mock laugh and then says, "You're beautiful, man. Just beautiful." Then he steps back and sizes me up. "The suit works for me, but that tie isn't going to cut it. I need more of a bureaucratic look." He fishes around in one of his vest pockets, and pulls out a plain-looking red and blue striped tie. He tosses it to me. "Try that one on for size."

"So who *are* all these people?" I ask, loosening my own tie.

"Jasper waves his hand across the group of people in my office. "This is the crew, man. Too many names to get into. But this fellow here," he pulls one person out of the group. "This is Bert Arlund; he's playing the role of Sly, the dyslexic bike messenger." In addition to the requisite dark sunglasses, Bert has on a burgundy bathrobe that comes down to the middle of his thighs.

Bert nods at his robe. "I'm in costume," he says. "Underneath, of course."

"Of course, Bert." I nod at the new tie I've just put on. "So am I."

Jasper claps his hands together and rubs them back and forth as if he's trying to keep them warm. "All righty, then. Should we do this thing?"

"Yes. Let's," I say, and I feel my stomach turn over.

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Contrary to what you might guess, I *have* been thinking about this. I *have* pondered what it might take to actually pull off this illegal film shoot. While I've never done anything quite like this before, I do have an idea what it might take.

One night six months ago, back when Lily and I were still together, the two of us had eaten dinner downtown and then decided to go for a stroll. We walked along the Mall and eventually arrived at the Capitol. We walked up the back steps and sat on the concrete railing that extends the length of the back of the Capitol. It's a beautiful view from those steps. The entirety of the city is laid out before you. From that vantage point,

everything in the city appears to have an elegant symmetry. Streets are nicely aligned on either side of the Mall. And the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, and Arlington Cemetery are all squared up in a straight line. This was back when Lily and I had just started having problems in our relationship. But I remember that that night we'd been able to put our fighting aside. We both sat there on the concrete hand-railing, basking in the glow of at least an imagined perfection.

"I can't believe we live in this city," Lily said. Her voice was soft, as if she was afraid even a loud noise might disrupt this serenity.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's like you see these things all the time in movies or on TV, but you never really believe they're actual places." Her face was bluish from the spotlights that illuminated the Capitol at night. Her eyes looked black, with a touch of gold reflecting from the lights of the city before her.

"I suppose not," I said.

"I hope I never get tired of looking at these places," she said. "Seriously. I hope it always feels this important."

I nodded my head and looked back at the city.

Just then a set of brisk footsteps came tapping up behind us. "Do you mind telling me what you two think you're doing here?" It was a Capitol Police Officer. He was shining in our faces, so I had to hold my hand up to see him.

"We're just looking at the city," I said, unsure of what we could possibly be doing wrong.

"Yes you are, Mister. And you're also sitting on that hand-railing, aren't you?"

I looked down at the hand-railing we were both sitting on. "You would appear to be correct, officer."

I could tell he was parsing my statement carefully, looking for even a shred of sarcasm which might warrant an escalation in his approach tactics. "And do you mind telling me what that sign over there says?" He pointed with his flashlight at a sign about ten yards from where we sat.

Lily stood up from the railing instinctively, but I stayed where I was and squinted over at the sign. “You know, officer,” I said innocently, “I can’t read it from here, where I’m sitting.”

“Well maybe you better check it out, Mister. It says there is *absolutely* no sitting or standing allowed on that hand-railing.” Through the bright glare of the flashlight, I could see that the cop’s other hand was poised over his holstered gun. Seeing this ridiculous man, drunk on his own authority, made me more infuriated than I can even say.

I got up and walked over to the sign. I bent down towards the sign and read it. “You know what, officer? It just says here that there is no sitting or standing on the hand-railing. But I don’t see the word *absolutely* anywhere. Not once.”

The officer grimaced, and I could see his flashlight beam quivering from the rage he was holding back. “You look like the type who’s got a real problem with authority, Mister.” He stepped toward me. And his non-flashlight hand reached quickly for his hip. I flinched right then, because I wasn’t sure what he was pulling out. I imagined it might be his gun, or maybe a nightstick. Lily, who had been quiet until now, gasped audibly. The Capitol Police officer produced a walkie-talkie and held it up to his mouth. “Four-one-niner. This is four-one-niner requesting back-up. Please send back-up to the south front steps of the Capitol.”

As much as I would have loved pushing that cop’s buttons further, I figured it probably wasn’t a good idea. Not with Lily there. Not when it seemed that things might be going well for us again. It just wasn’t worth it. Besides, I couldn’t risk an arrest, not with my job, and the campaign just getting into full swing. Lily and I left the cop while he stood there waiting for back-up. He didn’t try to stop us, which made me think he’d been bluffing. But when I tried to go back, Lily grabbed my hand and stopped me. She said she was tired and that she wanted to go home.

Later that night, Lily and I got into another argument. She said I’d been ridiculous and that I never should have been such a smart-ass to a police officer like that. She said I hadn’t been respectful of her. I claimed that she was missing the point and that my actions were more along the lines of civil disobedience. At least that’s how our argument started out that night. As with most of our fights around that time, it quickly

became something else, a referendum on our entire relationship. And it lasted well into the night before we finally fell asleep, exhausted. Like I said, that was still the beginning of the bad times between us.

Anyway, the points of that story are these: 1) I'm fairly sure that there is only one Capitol Hill Police Officer assigned to the back steps of the Capitol. 2) Whoever that Capitol Hill Police Officer might happen to be, there's a good chance that he or she is a cross somewhere between a Keystone Cop and The Terminator. And 3) I have the general, vague feeling that my business with the Capitol Police is not yet finished. Like that encounter with Lily was only the first round of something that's going to go the distance.

But I've also thought of a way around this potential snare, as it relates to this film shoot. And, as usual, this way will require the aid of an accomplice. Up until today, I had been planning on asking Brooke to help me. But now I've changed my mind and decided Eric is the person for the job. Even if he's still not speaking to me, at least I can trust him when it comes to things like this. And that's something I still value. Besides, he might actually enjoy this. I know a younger Ethan Pascal most certainly would have.

I pick up my phone and intercom Eric.

"Yes," he says when he picks up after the third ring.

"Easy, what does your schedule look like this afternoon?"

"Oh, brother."

"What?"

"It's just the last time you asked me that, you took me to Montana. And we all know how *that* turned out." I can hear Eric's actual voice echoing through the thin walls of our office as we continue to talk on the phone. It seems so silly to keep talking on the phone when we can hear each other just fine without it. But neither of us acknowledges this, preferring to keep up appearances.

"Well, Easy, I'd like to say this afternoon's task is going to be different, but I'm afraid it's not. It will mostly likely be depressingly similar."

"More questionable activities, sir?" I have to appreciate the fact that Eric doesn't even consider the possibility of disregarding one of my orders. Or if he does, he doesn't say so.

“Definitely questionable,” I say. “And probably not all that moral.”

“Yeah, I figured that was the direction we were heading.”

“Remember what I said at the staff meeting about sacrifice?”

“I guess so.”

“This might be the kind of thing I was talking about.”

“Oh brother,” he says again.

“Easy, why don’t you come back here and we’ll discuss what I need you to do.” I look around my office, at the fifteen or more crewmembers from Prometheus Productions, all of whom are still wearing their sunglasses, and I think better of that last request. “On second thought, why don’t you meet me in Cynthia’s office. We’ll discuss it there.” If possible, I’d like to save Eric from the corrupting influences of Prometheus Productions. Besides, if he *does* get into trouble doing this, the less he knows the better.

“Do you have any sunglasses with you, Easy?”

“No. It’s not even sunny outside.”

“Let’s see if we can borrow a pair from Brooke.”

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“The ambient light is no good at all,” Jasper says from where we’re lying on the ground on the back steps of the Capitol building, hiding behind the very same concrete hand-railing that got Lily and I into so much trouble six months ago. Normally, this posture we’ve adopted would attract the attention of some random staffer, but with Congress out of session, and the elections only three weeks away, the Hill is deserted. Not even a stray tourist snapping a photo of the dome. A ghost town.

“Unbelievable,” Jasper goes on. He’s looking up despondently at the sky and shaking his head. The rest of the *Wheels of the System* crew are lined up behind the hand-railing as well, waiting for the order from Jasper to spring into action.

I hold my finger to my mouth to get Jasper to shut up. I’m peering through the columns on the handrail at the green lawn below. There’s a large pine tree out front that they decorate every year with Christmas ornaments. Whoever’s in charge of the decorating this year they haven’t started yet. Probably won’t be until Thanksgiving that

they get around to that. But a Capitol Hill Police Officer is standing near the tree, examining it closely, as if he's unsure if the tree has the proper clearance to be standing where it is.

Jasper huffs angrily beside me, like a child throwing a fit because his parents are ignoring him. "Honestly, we might as well not do it with this lighting." He fishes out some kind of electronic meter device from his vest and holds it up in the air. Then he looks at the gauge on the meter. "Are you kidding me? This is shit!"

I wrap my hand around Jasper's hand, which is still holding the meter. When I speak, my voice is low and surprisingly powerful. "This is a one-shot deal, Jasper. Make it work. I don't care what you do, just as long as you know there aren't going to be any second takes."

Jasper snorts and puts the meter back into a vest pocket when I let go of his hand. "You know you were supposed to get permission for this," he says. "You were going to use your connections."

"And what would I tell them, Jasper? 'Oh yeah, I'd like to give my bozo friends a chance to film at the Capitol. Oh, what's that? You turned down Spielberg, but you'll let the huger than huge Jasper Blades do it? That's great! Thank you so much.'"

"You don't have to yell," Jasper says in a deflated voice.

Just then, a person approaches us from behind. I see a dark shadow fall over me before I turn, expecting that a Capitol Hill Police Officer has somehow gotten wind of our scheme and is ambushing us before we can set our scheme into motion. When my eyes finally focus, I see that it's not an officer. Not even close. The first thing I notice is a set of blood-red toenails peeking out of the tips of a pair of sleek sandals. Then my eyes move up to a set of tan, smooth legs a few feet from my face. Finally I take in the full, lovely figure of Nicole, wearing a smart-looking black suit. She's standing tall above us with her hands on her hips.

"Nicole! What a lovely surprise," I say.

"I got your fucking message in the Personals, Pascal," she says. She seems oblivious to my crouching position, or the fifteen or so crew members lined up next to me. "Or should I call you Sea Bass?"

“Oh. That,” I say. “I can explain. It was a two-for-one deal at the Post. I hope you didn’t take that the wrong way.”

“Wrong way! How the fuck was I *supposed* to take that? I may not be the smartest person in the world, but I know a threat when I see one.”

“Really, you don’t understand. I was just trying—”

“I think you need to mind your own business, you prick.”

“Listen. I don’t know if you’ve been keeping score here, but it was at least *partly* my business.”

“Wrong. Who I fuck is my business, Ethan.”

“Even if I happen to be one of those people you fucked?” I ask.

I thought this quick reply might throw her, a quick jab to rock her back on her heels. I was wrong. “Is that what you’d call what we did?” she asks. She shakes her head and laughs, as if I’m the one who’s being naïve. Then, when I don’t say anything, “What the hell are you doing down there?”

It is at this point that Jasper chooses to inject himself into the conversation. “Hi there. Jasper Blades with Prometheus Productions.” He reaches up to shake her hand, a gesture she accepts reluctantly. “You see, Nicole, is it? We’re shooting a film here. Independent project. It’s called *Wheels of the System*.” He nods toward the rest of the film crew, who nod back. “At least, we’re *going* to be filming here, in a minute. And if you don’t mind my saying, I can see that you have *it*. And by *it*, I mean camera presence, baby.”

Jasper’s smarminess is palpable now, like a greasy aura. And it seems to be having its intended effect on Nicole. She cocks her head to the side, as if to say: Keep talking.

“It’s not currently in the script, but would you consider standing in on the scene we’re about to shoot?”

“A movie?” she asks.

“Yes. It’ll be a small role, but I think you’ll really be able to flesh this part out.”

A smile cracks Nicole’s beautiful face. “I think I could do that, Jasper,” she says.

“Great. Glad to have you aboard.”

“What do I do?” She holds her hands out at her sides as if she hasn’t a clue what to do.

“First of all, get down here.”

Nicole looks around to make sure no one’s looking, and squats down between Jasper and me. Jasper begins explaining the scene to her. And I resume my watch of the Capitol Christmas Tree. It is at this point that I spot Eric walking toward the tree. As per my instructions, he’s wearing Brooke’s sunglasses. Black plastic frames with a distinctly feminine curve to them. These are mostly for effect, but I think they lend him an appropriate air. Also, as per my instructions, he’s carrying a massive cardboard box that – in his arms – is almost as tall as he is. And finally, as per my instructions, he’s walking awkwardly, like he could trip at any moment, though I know the box is heavy, and I’m fairly sure he doesn’t have to act too much to make it look real.

“Get ready to go,” I say to the film crew. “On my mark.” The cameramen heft their cameras, and Bert takes his bathrobe off to reveal his skintight biker shorts and shirt.

Down below, Eric staggers toward the cop, who’s still examining the Christmas tree. When Eric gets to the tree a few feet from the cop, he drops the box. He doesn’t just drop the box, though. He lets it go fully. I mean that thing just falls apart. A stream of white papers starts trickling on a light breeze. Then the trickle turns into a torrent. And Eric begins frantically running about, trying to gather the errant papers. The cop turns quickly on Eric, at first unsure what to do with this sudden and unprecedented turn of events, possibly considering a call for back-up. Eric cries out for help and the stunned cop finally lurches into action, chasing the papers, which have begun to spread across the Capitol lawn.

“Let’s do it!” I say to Jasper. Jasper holds his fist in the air, then drops it, and on that signal, the crew for *Wheels of the System* springs into action. It’s like watching one of those fast-forward tapes of a building being assembled. Everyone runs around wildly, with no discernible order, but slowly it begins to take shape. Jasper pulls out his electronic meter and begins calling out numbers to the cameramen, who make the appropriate adjustments to their equipment. They snap their tripod legs into position with reassuring metallic clicks. Someone else produces a spray bottle and begins applying a sweaty sheen to Bert. Nicole and I take positions, along with a third actor who has taken

off his sunglasses, at the top of the steps. The whole thing takes less than thirty seconds to set up.

Jasper holds his fist in the air again and everyone quiets down. I review my lines mentally, and consider one last time how I should play them. I'm still uncertain as to how Jasper intends this whole movie to be taken. Serious or ironic? That is, indeed, the question. I realize we're only going to have one shot at this, and I suddenly feel nervous. This has got to be just right.

Jasper slowly lowers his hand. "And... Action!"

There's silence for a second, and then everything springs to life. The cameras start whirring and Bert springs up the stairs three at a time. When he gets to the top, he stands before us with his chest heaving, and produces a thick manila envelope. He makes a slight bow as he presents the package to me.

"I believe the President wanted you to have this delivery, sir," he says.

"Thank God! Not a moment too soon." I take the package and hand it to the third actor who's standing to my left. Then I turn to regard this bike messenger who's still standing before me. "I hope you know, young man, that you may have saved your country from going to war. What you did today might have just held this country together." It is after I deliver this line that I realize I'm playing this scene straight. I'm acting as if this is the most genuine moment I've ever experienced in my life. And it feels pretty good.

The bike messenger nods as if this is all pretty much run of the mill for him. "I just deliver packages, sir. If that happens to save hundreds of thousands of lives, so be it." He stands up straight and clacks his heels together smartly. "Now, if you don't mind, I've got another delivery to make." Then he turns and dashes back down the steps.

I stare wistfully out over the steps of the Capitol for a few seconds, really milking the scene. "I remember his old man," I say at last. "He was one of the best bike messengers around. 'Til he bought it over on P Street. Metrobus accident. Worst I've ever seen. But this kid. He's got something. Something special. He might be even better than his old man. He just might be." I turn to Nicole, who nods in agreement. "Now let's get this to the Senator as soon as possible and put an end to this crazy war."

We turn and walk off in a brisk, business-like manner. When we're out of the camera shot, Jasper yells, "And... Cut!" He rushes up to us. "That was beautiful. Just beautiful. I really felt the emotion, man. It was palpable. Totally palpable. Now what I'd like to do is run through it one more time. Just to make sure we get the best angles. It'll help with the editing."

It disturbs me to say this, but I actually enjoyed shooting this scene. A lot. I liked the fact that, at least for a few minutes, everyone was waiting on what I had to say. And I'm tempted to run through the scene again, to make sure it turns out all right. But just after Jasper makes his request, reality sets in.

"What in the Hell's going on up there?" a voice calls out from far away.

Everyone freezes. I spin and see that Eric and the police officer have just fished the last of the papers from a fountain at the far edge of the Capitol lawn. The police officer now seems to be scrutinizing us the same way he scrutinized the Capitol Christmas Tree a few minutes ago.

"Jasper," I say, "as much as I'd love to run through the scene again, I'm afraid that first take will have to do."

"I couldn't agree with you more, buddy." Then he looks around at the members of the film crew, who are starting to get anxious. "So what should we do?" he asks.

"Well, if I were you, I'd run."

"Really?"

"I'll try to stall this guy out."

On that note, the film crew for Prometheus Productions, with the grace of a veteran guerilla force, disbands. They pack up their gear and scatter in all directions. In a matter of seconds, they're gone. And I'm left standing alone with Nicole. The Capitol Hill Police officer is running across the lawn towards us. He's got Eric by the elbow and he's dragging him along. Eric is limply striding behind the cop; he looks like a troubled teenager being taken to his parents' house after a night of wilding.

"I didn't know you were connected to the film business," Nicole says. She's standing close to me, hanging at my shoulder like one of those bad angels who's trying to convince you to do the wrong thing.

"Yes. It's true. I'm fairly involved with the independent film scene in DC."

“I didn’t know there *was* an independent film scene here.”

“Oh, there is. It’s just very independent,” I say. The cop is almost on us now, so I turn quickly to Nicole. “You’d better run along now, Nicole. You don’t want this kind of trouble.”

She makes a clucking sound with her throat, as if she’s disappointed at my response to her friendliness. Then she turns and leaves.

As the cop climbs the last of the steps, I can see Eric wincing in pain from the cop’s vise-like grip attached to his elbow. Brooke’s sunglasses hang crookedly on his face. I’m suddenly feeling very bad for getting Eric involved in this. I didn’t expect the cop to be smart enough to suspect Eric was involved in this scheme. I figured he’d see us filming and forget about Eric. Not so. And now Eric is in this way deeper than he needs. Even a young Ethan Pascal would have a hard time stomaching this much trouble.

For some reason, I recall the speech I gave – or at least tried to give – to my staff earlier this week. I think of the sacrifice section. I remember how no one – including myself – understood what I meant by the words I spoke, as if I’d been momentarily possessed by some spirit and spoken in tongues. Funny, how my own words seem to make so little sense even to me. Funny, or sad.

“I don’t know what you two clowns are up to, but I sure as hell know it’s *something*,” the cop says when he arrives at the top of the steps. He shakes the hand that’s holding Eric’s elbow and Eric sloshes back and forth like he’s turning to mush.

“You better tell me what’s going on here, and I mean fast, mister,” the cop says, pointing the index finger on his free hand in my face.

“Officer, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say.

“Bullshit. I saw them cameras up here and I saw how this young man,” he points at Eric with his thumb, “tried to distract me while you were up to your shenanigans.”

I look squarely at Eric, at his confused young face. “Officer,” I say, “I’ve never seen this man in my life.”

“Is that the story you’re going with?” he asks, clearly not buying my rap.

In one smooth motion, I turn and sit my ass on the concrete hand-railing. This move serves to further bewilder the cop, seeing as how he now has another rule infraction to deal with. And, in that confusion, he lets Eric’s elbow drop.

“You better get down from that hand-railing right now, Mister,” the cop says, pointing his threatening finger at me.

I ignore the cop and look at Eric, I try to see through the dark lenses of Brooke’s glasses, to his eyes, barely visible behind them. “Sir,” I say to Eric, “you can leave now. I’m sorry this confused police officer has brought you into this.” I say these words slowly, deliberately, because I want Eric to understand the meaning behind them.

The police officer steps in toward me. “Oh no, he ain’t going anywhere. I need to hold him as evidence.”

And suddenly, as that last word rings in my ears, I get an idea. It strikes me as potentially the best idea I’ve had in months, and possibly the noblest idea I’ve had ever.

I shoot Eric one last hard look and make a quick snapping motion with my neck. I’m trying to silently convey a message: *Get out of here. Now!* Then I look back at the police officer. “Evidence?” I say. “I love that word: Evidence!”

“Four-one-niner. This is four-one-niner requesting back-up on the south front steps of the Capitol. Please send back-up.”

“Do you know what that word makes me want to do?” I say, my voice building in a steep crescendo.

The police officer shakes his head but doesn’t say anything. I can see Eric take one quiet step backwards.

“Evidence makes me want to get up and DANCE!” Upon saying that word, DANCE, I do something I consider to be preposterous, even by my own strict standards for that word. I leap up so that I’m standing on the concrete hand-railing, and I spread my arms wide over my head. I hold that pose for a brief second before springing to life. I imagine Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly or someone else I’ve seen in a musical somewhere. I dance a little soft-shoe with lots of arm flailing. And I sing an impromptu song, the lyrics of which, I make up on the spot. “*Evidence, makes me want to dance. Because it’s obvious. That this is a loss. Cannot win, so I try to spin.*” Admittedly, the lyrics are the weakest part of my routine, but it’s the overall effect I’m going for; a larger aesthetic is my goal. And as I spin and dance on that foot-wide concrete hand-railing, I notice that Eric, as I’d hoped, is drifting away from this spectacle.

Shortly after Eric has slipped completely out of sight, and just as my song enters its third verse, I feel a slice of cold metal at one of my wrists. Then someone grabs my other wrist, twists it around to my back, and I feel the hand-cuffs clamp down on my other wrist. Two police officers yank me down from the hand-railing. They grab me under both armpits and drag me toward a police car that's pulled up to the bottom of the Capitol steps.

It's clear that these people believe I'm a man who has lost all grip on sanity, which may or may not be true. Either way, I figure it's best to play into their beliefs. It might help with my defense, whatever that might be.

"This is how most revolutionaries are treated!" I yell to the cops as they drag me down the steps. They say nothing, staring grimly ahead. "We're never appreciated by anyone in our own lifetime!"

"Nobody is, kid," one of the cops says before throwing me into the back of the police cruiser.

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All things considered, it's pretty boring at the police station. I mean, yes, there is a part of me that gets a *huge* thrill out of the whole thing. After all, I've been arrested! Cuffed and stuffed. Just like on Cops. Sure they didn't print me, and of course there was no unsavory mug shot. Those would have really brought the whole thing together nicely. But they *did* put me in a cell. Okay, *kind* of a cell. Maybe it would be safer to call it a room. But still, it's a small room. And very poorly decorated, at that.

I sit in this room for thirty minutes before anyone comes in to talk to me. I am eventually questioned by an officer who introduces himself as Chuck. His hair is parted so neatly on his head, so razor-straight, that I wonder if it could possibly be his real hair. I don't ask him about it though, even though I'm dying to know. Chuck has a rosy gin blossom spreading across his nose, which initially gives me the impression that he's a pleasant enough fellow. But as the questioning goes on, he becomes more and more agitated. For my part, I bombard Chuck with equal parts stupidity, sarcasm and flat-out condescension. Finally, exasperated, Chuck throws his hands in the air and says, "I don't

know what to do with you, Mr. Pascal. I honestly don't know what to do." Then he gets up and leaves me alone in my cell. For the next five minutes, I'm left to quietly contemplate my current situation.

I do take some satisfaction in the knowledge that I was probably somehow destined to end up here. The shit I've been pulling lately was bound to have consequences. And now that I'm facing those consequences head-on, I feel some measure of relief. Still, there are bound to be unpleasant ramifications. For example, it would be surprising if there weren't a story in Roll Call next week. After all, it's not every day that a chief of staff gets arrested. On Capitol Hill, no less. But, considering all the other shit this campaign is dealing with, this doesn't rank too high on the Messina Political Scale. Maybe a five or six. And the last time I checked, we were facing down a seven or eight, I believe. So a puny old six is hardly the issue. Still, Cynthia would be hard-pressed to not fire me after this. Hell, *I'd* fire me if it were within my power. Which leaves me with the question of whether or not it was all worth it. I suppose the easy answer is no, it wasn't. But, on another level, I did what I did to save Eric. He has a bright future ahead of him. Getting into this kind of trouble is about the last thing he needs right now. When I look at it that way, it was definitely worth it. A clear victory, though perhaps a pyrrhic one. Still, a victory. No question.

Chuck comes back into the room a few minutes later. His face is redder than it was before, though that seems almost impossible. "You're outta here, Pascal." He says this so angrily, with so much vehemence, that I'm not sure if by *outta here*, he means to a real jail or what. He sets a meaty fist on the table in front of me. "Your boss called and got you out." Then he jabs a finger in my face. "Technically, we don't have anything on you. Not technically. But we're watching you, Pascal. We got our eye on you. And believe me, we have ways of making life pretty uncomfortable for you. We're gonna be on your ass, like..." He pauses, unsure of the kind of simile he wants to draw.

"Like hemorrhoids?" I offer, because I honestly just can't help myself.

The hair along Chuck's razor-sharp part quivers menacingly. Obviously this was not the image he'd envisioned. "Get outta here," he says in a quiet voice. "Now."

It's dark when I step out of the Capitol Hill police office, but I can make out the thin form of Eric sitting on a bench under a tree, swinging his legs a few inches over the

sidewalk. He looks lost in thought, immersed in a world very different from the one I currently occupy. I try to imagine what a criminal looks like when he gets done with a long prison stay, and I try to adopt that posture as I approach Eric.

“You the one who sprung me, kid?” I ask.

Eric looks up, not particularly surprised to see me. “Oh, I get it. Is this the part where you act like some kind of felon or something? That’s very clever of you sir?”

I step back, not expecting this kind of sarcasm from Eric. I say, “I just wanted to thank you for getting me released, for getting Cynthia to call to get me out.”

Eric stands up from the bench and throws a satchel over his shoulder. “It wasn’t Cynthia that called. It was Brooke. I asked her to impersonate Cynthia.”

“You did that for me?”

“Yes,” he says. The word is short, clipped.

“Oh, well. Thanks for doing that.”

Eric shakes his head slowly and bites at the corner of his mouth. “Honestly, I don’t know why I even bothered.”

I take another step back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that it seems like you’re always getting me into trouble for the dumbest fucking things, sir. It’s like, ‘Whoopee! Here’s another prank for Easy to do. Isn’t this fun!’” His face is screwed up into a tight mask, his eyes are thin slits I can barely see in the fading light.

“Eric, I was just trying to...” I stop there. I don’t know what I was trying to do. I don’t honestly know why I got Eric involved in this in the first place. Did I think he’d enjoy it? Did I think he’d learn something from it? I don’t know.

“It doesn’t matter what you were trying to do,” he says as if he’s reading my mind. “I’m not going to be involved in any more of your stupid shit. No more Apocalypse Projects, no more hare-brained road trips, no more dumb movie schemes.” As Eric enumerates this list of offenses his voice gets higher and more nasally. He slices the air with his hand. “If you want to fire me, that’s fine. If not, then I’m just going to do the job I’m supposed to do, for which I’m already underpaid to begin with.”

“I see,” I say, still reeling from the outburst of this new, though not necessarily improved, Eric. I don’t know what to make of this person before me. My intentions had

been so honorable at the beginning. I really thought there was something I could teach this kid. I thought I was helping him.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to go home, sir.” He holds out his right hand in what looks to be a handshake gesture and I instinctively reach mine out towards his. Then I notice Brooke’s sunglasses dangling between his thumb and forefinger as if they’re a pair of dirty underwear. “Why don’t you take these. I know I won’t be needing them anymore.” He drops them into my open hand and turns on his heel and begins walking slowly down the sidewalk toward Union Station.

I feel like I need to say something to him, something that might make him realize that I’m not such a bad guy, and that I really do care about him. “Are you still living in that crappy neighborhood?” I call out to him, but he either doesn’t hear me or he chooses to ignore me, both of which seem equally likely at this point. I watch him disappear as he jog-steps across the street and continues to make his way around Union Station.

Looking at my watch, it’s seven o’clock. Definitely need to see if the pollsters called with the new numbers. I’ve got to put this Eric thing out of my head for now. I’ll deal with him later. I start walking back toward the office.

When I get to the entrance to the building, I fish around in my pocket for my keys and cell phone. I set these objects in the tray, but before I can go any further, a voice on the other side of the metal detector arch stops me.

“Hold on there, big fella.” There’s a Capitol Hill police officer standing across my path with his arms folded across his chest. “Lemme see your staff ID a second. He’s peering at my face closely, scrutinizing my features. I pull out my ID and hand it to him. He takes the ID and shuffles behind a desk without taking his eyes off me. He picks up a piece of fax paper and looks at it and then at my ID again.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Pascal, but we’re under orders not to allow you onto Capitol grounds until further notice.”

“Are you kidding me? I work here. This is my place of business.”

“Apparently not until further notice it isn’t.”

“There’s got to be some mistake. You can’t just *not* let me go to work.”

The cop pokes at the fax paper in his hand. “It says here you’ve lost your Capitol privileges because you’re under suspicion of criminal wrongdoing.”

“Then can you please tell me how I’m supposed to do my job?”

The cop smiles smugly and runs his tongue over his yellowing teeth as if he’s really savoring this moment. “If you ask me, it doesn’t look like you’ll have to worry about your job much longer. *Especially* if you can’t get into your office.”

“Well this is really fucking beautiful.” I throw my hands up at my sides. “Fucking perfect!” A quavering edge of lunacy creeps into my voice, a hint of hysteria.

I can see the cop flinch slightly as I say this and it looks like he might make a move for his walkie-talkie. But instead he holds my ID out to me. “You can have this back if you want. Might make a nice souvenir some day.” I’m not sure if this gesture is meant as a peace offering, or if he’s just dragging this already-unfunny joke out even further.

I snatch the ID from his hand and decide to press my luck. “What do you say you let me in this once. For old time’s sake,” I say as if we’re old friends. “To get my coat and personal effects.”

The look on his face is one of actual, unadulterated pity. “I’m sorry, Mr. Pascal, but I can’t let you pass through this metal detector.”

“So that’s the way it’s going to be, huh?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“All right then, if I can’t go any further, surely you won’t have any objections to me checking my voicemail from right here.” I reach into the tray next to the metal detector and scoop up my cell phone. The cop does another walkie-talkie flinch but stops short of calling in backup. I stand as close as I can to the metal detector arch without actually breaking the plane. And I ceremoniously dial the numbers on the phone. The cop shifts his weight in a flustered way, clearly unsure if this is within the rules, and the sight of him pushed out of his comfort zone feels like at least a small victory.

As the phone rings, I tap my foot aggressively. “You don’t even know who you’re fucking with,” I say with one hand over the mouthpiece.

“Actually, I do, *Mr. Ethan Pascal*,” he says.

“No, I mean, you don’t know who I—” before I can get any further, the voicemail picks up and the voice of one of our pollsters comes on the line.

The voice says the numbers are now at 39 to 45. Six point gap. One worse than last time. I flip the phone closed and the cop watches me warily, ready for what I might do next. I stare back at him for a moment, then slide the phone into my jacket pocket.

“That will be all,” I say, turning sharply on my heel.

“I hope so,” he says to my back as I leave the building from which I’ve been banished until further notice.

Chapter Twenty-One

No one is home at 325 Garfield when I get there. I wander around the house calling out names into the emptiness. No Jasper. No Spenser. No Miranda. On my bed upstairs, I find a note typewritten on Prometheus Productions letterhead.

Ethan—

Thanks for the help today, old man. The footage turned out great. Despite the crappy light! Who knew? By the way, we never discussed salary. Can't do much in the way of payment right away, but I can give you points on future sales. We'll discuss later. We're off shooting now, tight schedule for the next week.

*Hope you didn't get into too much trouble with the authorities. Even still, it gives me an idea for my next picture: a cross between *The Fugitive* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Naturally you'd get the lead. But I digress...*

Anywho, thanks a mill. We'll chat soon.

Ciao,

Jasper Blades, Producer

Prometheus Productions

I fold the note into quarters and set it on my bedside table. This is highly disappointing. I'm not exactly sure what I was expecting, but definitely more than this. After all, I've probably sacrificed my job for this guy. Would it be selfish to ask for a little more than a half-page note? How about a drink? A firm handshake? A pat on the back? I'm not asking for a hero's welcome. No need for a ticker-tape parade. I mean, I didn't win the Gulf War or anything. But something more than this, this empty, silent, deadly-still house.

So here I am, alone. With nothing to do. No one to talk to. It's unnerving, this negative time. It's as if this time doesn't exist somehow. It doesn't count. Like the sound of a tree falling in the woods. Which leads me to contemplate a frightening question: Do my actions only count if they're somehow in relation to other people? If this is true, then it would seem that, without others, it becomes impossible to actually

exist. And, by extension, the only way to truly exist is through others. Which is all frightening news for a man in my predicament. It seems so tragic to me. Pathetic... Hold it! Wait a minute. Is this loneliness? I feel like I'm feeling lonely, though I can't be sure. And if I am, why haven't I felt it before?

All right. I am highly displeased with where my thoughts are taking me right now. Definitely have to change that. ASAP. I need to talk to someone. Quickly. I spend the next few minutes wandering from room to room trying to think of who I might be able to call. I end up in the kitchen and, after a little scrounging, I pull together the fixings for a martini. I mix a cold one the way I saw Jasper mixing them at the last party. I then decide to call Eric. Maybe I could apologize to him, straighten things out. I could try to explain that everything I've done was for his own good, lessons in politics, or something like that. Yeah, that sounds like a pretty good idea. I dial his number. The phone rings. And rings. And rings. No answer. I hang up.

I wander the house for another few minutes before finishing my martini and mixing up a new one. I decide to call Brooke next. I could thank her for impersonating Cynthia to get me released from the cops. I owe her that much. Definitely. I dial. Same result as before. Doesn't anyone have answering machines?

After Eric and Brooke, I try calling the following people: Dewey, Lily, my mother, and Suzanne. No one is home. I get their machines but don't leave messages. It's as if tonight the world is going on without me. Everyone is occupied with their own lives – doing their jobs, talking to friends, participating in this ritual of living in a way that I can't even begin to fathom right now. There's that loneliness thing again.

On a whim, I decide to call 1-800-PSYCHIC. Cleo answers the phone, and *she's* at home. Or rather she's at work. Cleo tells me that my Shakra points are misaligned and that someone I know is in great peril. She says this very dramatically within the first thirty seconds and then plays coy for the next ten minutes to jack up the bill on me. For my part, I throw out misleading names of people I don't know just to see what she has to say about them. She plays some weird transcendental music in the background and tells me the future is unclear. On the humor scale of one-to-ten, Cleo ranks at about a three. But I let it go on for twenty minutes before I hang up because I'm seriously that desperate.

When I'm finally done talking with Cleo, I pull out my wallet and find the folded up paper napkin I wrote Snuffy's number on. I straighten it out and set it on the dining room table. I stare at it a few minutes. I'm not sure exactly what Snuffy and I would talk about. Probably not *Wheels of the System*. And I'd try to steer him away from Mormonism if I could. But beyond that, who knows. It's wide open. I mean, My God! It's Snuffy! We could talk about anything. And I think that's what's so appealing to me right now. I dial his number. After a few rings a machine picks up.

"Howdy, you've reached the desk of Snuffy Wentworth, cowboy-poet-philosopher-Zen Master-toreador. I can't get to the phone right now, but I know in my heart we're meant to talk. So leave a message and we'll talk. Real social like." There's a fumbling sound and then the voice comes back. "And if you'd like to transmit a fax, hit the send button now." I hang up after the beep. No point bothering him tonight. He's probably back at the Broken Barrel Saloon trying to scare up a pool game; he's probably forgotten all about me.

I wander the house a little more, thinking of who I could call next, thinking of a way to escape this gloom that's settled over me tonight. I end up in the kitchen again, and between my second and third martinis, a revelation hits me, followed closely by an idea. At least part of me is waiting for that inevitable call from Cynthia. The call where she says she's heard about my "incident" and she's going to have to let me go. That call is bound to come in at some point this weekend. It's just a matter of time. The subsequent idea that hits me is so unique, so out of the realm of what Ethan Pascal would normally do, that it can't *not* be a good idea. I'll call Cynthia myself and tell her what happened. I'll offer my resignation. Beat her to the punch. She'll never expect *that*. I haven't worked out all the ramifications, but for some reason, this seems like such a great idea that I unilaterally decide to act on it.

I dial Cynthia's cell phone and she picks up after the second ring.

"Hello?" she says. Her voice sounds tired, like it's the end of a very long day.

"Cynthia, it's Ethan," I say haltingly, with the knowledge that her day is about to get a little bit longer.

"Well, well, well," she says as if she possesses the same knowledge I do.

"Have I interrupted anything? I mean, do you have a minute to talk?"

“Of course, Ethan, I was just heading to the hotel. I was wondering if you’d call.”

“Why is that?”

“I think you know why.”

“You heard?”

“Yes. And I heard that I also allegedly called to get you released from custody.”

“Oh. That too?”

“Yep. Pretty much everything,” she says. There’s an awkward silence before Cynthia speaks again. “You actually *danced*?”

“It was a little soft-shoe. Nothing much.”

“And you *sang*?”

“Now that part I’m truly embarrassed about. My voice isn’t what it used to be. And the lyrics were admittedly pretty shabby.”

“And is that *all* that happened, Ethan?”

“I’d say you got a pretty accurate report.” There’s another awkward silence. Then, I say, “So. How are things in the state?”

“Ethan Pascal, are you trying to change the subject on me?”

“Probably. Yes.” There’s a slight pause where neither of us speaks. “I mean, no. I’m not trying to change the subject. I’m calling to say that what happened was entirely my fault. I take full blame. And I’m also calling to offer my resignation.”

Cynthia sucks in her breath sharply. “Well,” she says. “I guess I wasn’t expecting to hear *that*.”

“I figured I’d spare you the torture of actually firing me. Less emotional agony. You know.”

Cynthia laughs on the other end of the line. “My you certainly are a considerate one,” she says. “So generous of you.”

“It definitely won’t look good when this comes out. Besides, I’ve been banned from Capitol grounds until further notice. I couldn’t even get into the office if I wanted to.”

“So you’re saying you want out then?”

“Cynthia, look at it this way. I’m not personally going to make much difference when it comes to the campaign. I’m one man, who obviously has shown he’s not up to the task. Why not promote one of the legislative aides on staff? Give someone else a chance to hold the reins for the last three weeks.”

“That might be a good idea,” she says. Then she pauses so that I can hear the static hiss of our connection. It’s the kind of pause you have when someone is trying to recall someone’s name or some obscure fact. “Yeah, I don’t think I’m going to accept your resignation.”

“What?”

“I’m not the type of girl who switches horses midstream.”

“You’re not?”

“Definitely not,” she says.

“Cynthia, I don’t think you’re being rational about this.”

She clucks her throat admonishingly. “Actually, Ethan, I think I’m being hyper-rational. Or, if not that, then I figure I’m at least taking an even bet.”

“I don’t follow.”

“See, Ethan, I hired you because there was something different about you. Believe me, there were plenty of other candidates with more experience. I could have hired one of them. But I picked you because you had this strange kind of cockiness. You had a confidence that said you were going to win this election no matter what. You would see us to victory if need be, on the sheer strength of your will alone.”

I’m a bit floored by this statement, but I manage to blurt out a quick, “Uh-huh,” before she goes on.

“Now, you may have lost that edge temporarily. God knows, it looks like you’re pretty much floundering right now. But I think it’s still even money that you might snap out of it yet.” She breathes in deeply for a moment. “I’ve picked my boy. And you’re it. I figure I’ll let you sink or swim with me regardless of what happens.”

I suppose I should be flattered by her confidence in me. If that’s what you’d call it. At least it’s something resembling confidence, with healthy doses of pity and masochism thrown in. I nod my head, but I don’t say anything.

“Just one thing, Ethan,” she says. “What the hell *were* you doing out there?”

"I'm not really sure, Cynthia. If I had to guess, I'd say I thought I was doing something noble."

"Hmm," she says, as if for the second time in this conversation I've said something that's surprised her. "Noble is good," she says. "But it sounds like there was a whole lot of stupid mixed in with it."

"You're probably right."

"Of course I'm right," she says with a slight laugh.

I never thought this conversation would turn out this well. Not in a million years. But as long as I've got Cynthia on the phone, and she's in a somewhat amenable mood, I figure I might as well push my luck. "Cynthia," I say, "I'd like you to rethink the decision to not go negative in the ads. It's really the only way to pull this thing off."

"Never, no way," she says without hesitating. "I'm not going to do it, Ethan. I'd rather lose than pollute the airwaves with those filthy ads. If you don't respect the voters, you can't expect them to respect you."

I consider telling Cynthia what the good people of Havre are saying about her right now, about the overwhelming respect they have for her. I could mention the rumor that's out there, and how it's not going to disappear because that's part of the problem of being a woman in a position of power in a state like Montana. I could point out that the only way to fight dirt is with a little dirt of our own. *Make* them respect you. But I decide against saying these things. There's something noble about Cynthia's no-negative stance. Something refreshing. Even a guy like me has to appreciate that. Even if I happen to disagree with her on it. Completely.

"I see your point, Cynthia. Just thought I'd give it a shot."

"Well, now you know where I stand. You'll just have to think of some other way to win this election."

We go on to discuss her upcoming schedule for the week and I give her advice on how to handle a couple of the bigger events. After about a half hour, we've run out of things to say to each other.

"Good luck, Cynthia," I say before hanging up.

"You too," she says. And then she's gone.

And I'm alone in the house again. There's no one else I could possibly try calling at this point. And I'm sick of drinking martinis. So to celebrate my continued employment, I walk down to a deli on Connecticut Avenue and buy a six-pack of cheap beer. Why not? I probably deserve it. When I get back with the beer, I figure it's time to finally christen the much-bally-hooed hot tub. I drink the beer, soak in the hot tub, and read another fifty pages in the Tip O'Neil autobiography. He's no Tom Arnold, but I'm pretty sure he wrote this one himself.

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Perhaps inspired by Cynthia's confidence in me, or perhaps inspired by the ghost of Tip O'Neil himself, I go into the office both Saturday and Sunday. Security is a lot looser on the weekends, but I still have to sneak in past the guards. I do this by wearing a red baseball cap and Brooke's sunglasses. While I'm in the office, I look over the numbers from this most recent tracking poll. I draw on every possible idea, concept, and campaign tactic I've ever heard of. I ponder ways to go negative on Claiborne without violating Cynthia's no-negative policy. I even tinker around with the wording on a dream-negative ad, the one ad I would run, if I could use only one. The desert island negative ad. It seems to me, the ideal negative ad would be the kind that no one actually knows is negative, something that slips in below the radar screen, catches them completely off-guard. These musings are not particularly helpful, but they represent something positive at least. Even if I'm not sure what that something is. And while no significant breakthroughs emerge, I have to admit that it feels pretty good to go through the motions.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Monday morning, Brooke is typing on her computer when I enter the office.

“Well,” she says glancing up, “You’re looking spiffy this morning.”

“Spiffy, I like the sound of that.” I take off the red baseball cap I wore to get past the Capitol Hill police, and I unwrap the scarf I’d worn high up over my ears.

“Are those my sunglasses?” Brooke asks, regarding me now through the corner of her eye.

“I’m afraid they are,” I say, taking them off and setting them on her desk.

“I was wondering where those were.” She takes the sunglasses and slips them into her desk drawer.

“So,” she says, and then just stares at me with an expectant smile on her face.

“So,” I say back, unsure of what she’s expecting.

“Do you want to see the article?”

“Roll Call? About the arrest?”

“Bingo. And bingo.”

“Great. Just great.”

Brooke lifts a copy of today’s Roll Call from her desk and flips it open to the fourth page. “Thought you might want to see how famous you’ve become.”

Actually, the article is pathetically small. Three quick paragraphs and a tiny picture, which looks suspiciously like the one they used when they ran the story about me being the youngest chief of staff. They must have it on file. Looking at that half-toned image now, tiny and pixilated, I try to imagine if it’s even an approximate representation of me. Is that brash, smiling face still the one that I present to the world? It’s hard to say anymore. The article says simply that I was detained by the Capitol Police for participating in potentially illegal activities on Capitol grounds. It quotes Capitol Hill police chief Charles Baxter: “Mr. Pascal is not formally charged with anything, but his Capitol Hill privileges have been suspended until further notice. Pending further investigation.”

The worst part, though – the absolute kicker – is the lead. “Ethan Pascal, chief of staff for beleaguered Congresswoman Cynthia Mahoney (D-MT), was detained by

Capitol Police Friday afternoon for violating unspecified Capitol Hill rules.”

Beleaguered. I can’t believe they actually used that word. What a bunch of assholes! They didn’t have to throw that in there. Completely unnecessary. And completely over the top. They’re doing that just to piss me off. That much is for sure.

I close the paper and calmly hand it to Brooke, trying to hide my rage. I say, “So, does it intimidate you that I have a record now?”

She takes the paper and tosses it casually onto her desk. The paper slides across the wooden surface, hangs for a second on the edge, and then tumbles onto the floor.

“Oh, yeah, Ethan. I’m really impressed. You’ve definitely outdone yourself this time.”

“You know, I tried to call you this weekend,” I say, trying to take the conversation on a different tangent. “I wanted to thank you for getting me released from custody.”

“Yeah, well. It’s one of those things I’m not really sure why I did it.” As she says this, she reaches out to her keyboard and saves the document on her screen, which, until now, I haven’t noticed.

“What’re you working on there?”

“Resume,” she says nonchalantly. “Figured it was time I cleaned it up. Don’t you think?”

I’m not exactly sure how to react to that last question. I’m fairly sure she’s fishing; she wants me to say something positive about the campaign and our chances of winning. But for now I think it’s best if I’m honest with her. “Good idea,” I say.

Brooke deflates visibly. She leans back in her chair and shakes her head slowly. I spot her copy of the Post on the far edge of her desk and I lean across it to pick out the Classifieds. Brooke keeps shaking her head while I do this. And when she sees me pull the section out, she holds up three fingers. “That’s what it’ll cost you today, Pascal.” When I start walking toward my office without responding, she adds, “Do you want me to put that on your tab?”

By now, I’m used to Brooke’s usury, so I wave a hand over my shoulder and say, “Whatever.”

Just as I’m about to shut my office door, Brooke leans forward on her desk and says, “Pascal,” in a barking way that makes me stop.

“What?”

She smiles so I can see that one snaggle-tooth of hers winking at me. “I just don’t want you to think the margaritas you’re buying me tomorrow are going to count toward your newspaper tab.”

She still hadn’t responded to my e-mail from last week, so it takes me a minute to catch her drift. When it does, I smile back at her. “Of course, darling. I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Brooke goes back to her typing and I close the door to my office. It is only after I do this that I think to ask how she’s doing with Vince, if they’ve gotten back together, if she’s even talked to him since the break-up. But I figure I’ll hear enough about him tomorrow over margaritas. So I figure it can wait.

I spread the Personals across my desk and scan them. I’m starting to pick up on the conversations that are taking place, the give and take of this form of communication. Things are starting to look continuous, there is flow from one day to the next. After fifteen minutes of close examination, I conclude that there are no messages for me.

There are, however, several messages on my voicemail, all of which are regarding my recent arrest and the subsequent Roll Call article. I erase all of the messages as I listen to them until I come across a message from my nemesis, the fanged frog himself, Clay Tarcher.

“Hey, Ethan,” he says, his voice is the sound of uncontrollable glee. “I read the article this morning and wanted to pass along the old thumbs-up. Very impressive.” He takes a moment to laugh, then he comes back to the receiver a little breathless. “Also, I just wanted you to know that we have an intern position opening up in our office, in case you might be looking for a new job anytime soon. As I suspect you will be.” He laughs a little longer and then hangs up. I hit 7 to save this message. What a dickhead. What a complete, full-on, unadulterated prick. I make a mental note to fuck with that guy hard the next time I see him.

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The rest of the workday passes without too much incident. Cynthia calls twice to ask about an editorial board meeting she has with the Billings Gazette that afternoon. I find that I'm having a much easier time talking to her than I've had in the past. I dispense advice cleanly and even manage to sneak in some genuine insight regarding her message, her points, her demeanor toward these people who will be deciding whether or not to endorse her candidacy. Hell, she even laughs at my jokes. It's almost as if my arrest has gotten us past some critical stage in our relationship, lifted us to a new level of intimacy. Admittedly, I would have liked to have reached this point a little sooner in my tenure, like maybe at a point when it actually would have done us some good. But still, I'll take this change as a positive sign, and leave it at that.

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I take off around eight. I feel somewhat guilty for leaving at this hour, but the place is already deserted when I leave, which pisses me off. We are three weeks out from an election. This office should be populated twenty-four hours a day. It should be humming with ideas and energy and activity, people striving to find a way to revive this beleaguered campaign. I make a mental note to e-mail my staff about working longer hours tomorrow. Maybe I'll even splice in sections of my sacrifice speech, which I never ended up giving.

325 Garfield looks dark and empty when I pull the Beefeater up front, and I gird myself for another night alone. Once inside, though, I see a light coming from the dining room. Miranda is writing furiously at the table. She's absorbed in what she's doing and she doesn't notice me. About fifty 3x5 note cards are spread across the white surface of the table. When she finishes writing on one of the cards, she slides the others around, rearranging them as if they're puzzle pieces that she can't make fit, no matter how hard she tries. I set my bag down on the floor with a thump. Miranda looks up from the cards. "Ethan Fucking Pascal," she says, the words slipping viscously past her lips.

"Miranda Lovett. My long lost roommate."

She smiles quickly, then lets it drop.

“Where have you been?” I ask, because I’m genuinely curious, and not because I’m trying to pry into her social life again. Clearly, this distinction is lost on Miranda.

“Haven’t we already had a conversation about this?” she asks.

I take a seat across the table from her. It occurs to me that this is the same seat I sat in during my interview for this place. How long ago was that? It seems like ages.

“That’s not what I meant,” I say.

She rests her elbow on the table and leans her head onto her hand. “Oh really? Then what did you mean?”

“‘Where have you been,’ is a commonly used English expression which means, ‘Hey, good to see you,’ or ‘Gee, I haven’t seen you in a while but I’m glad to see you now.’”

She shifts her head on her hand. “Well, since you did ask where I’ve been, I can tell you that I was getting a little space for myself.”

“Listen, Miranda,” I say. “I’m sorry about last week. I’m sorry I pried. I’m sorry if I pushed you away.”

“Easy, big fella,” she says holding up her hand. “My absence had very little to do with you. I just have to get out of here sometimes. Too much social life. Too much time spent in Never-Never Land with the roommates. I just needed some time alone. You know what I mean?”

“Not exactly. It’s been more like the opposite around here lately. Too fucking quiet.”

“Hmm,” she says and glances back down at the note cards in front of her. “I would have thought the real quiet times would have been when you were in jail.”

“You know about that?”

“Of course, Ethan. I may not work on the Hill, but I have my sources.”

“Does Jasper know?”

“I’m not sure. Probably not. He and Spenser have been tied up with the movie. It’s impossible to get a hold of them.”

I catch Miranda glancing down at her cards again and I see a slight flicker of nervousness work its way through her body. “What’s all this?” I ask, gesturing to the expanse of note cards spread across the table. “If you don’t mind my prying.”

“There’s a WABA meeting in town this week and I have to give the keynote address.”

“Wait a second. WABA?”

“Oh, I thought you knew. The Well-Baby Association of America.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I know, it’s a little awkward that we call it WABA, when technically, it should be WBAA. But it’s like, how do you pronounce WBAA? You can’t. So everyone just calls it WABA. You can’t be a slave to acronyms, Ethan. You just can’t.”

“Actually, Miranda, I think my incredulity stems from something a bit more fundamental here.” I let out a slight chuckle, which, if I’m being really honest with myself, could be interpreted as patronizing.

Miranda pulls her black sweater tighter around her thin frame and leaves her arms wrapped around her body. “What are you implying, Ethan?”

“I’m just implying that I’m a little surprised that there’s actually an association for well-babies. I mean, what? Are they going to lobby for tougher well control laws? More baby-lifting cranes at local fire houses? It’s at least *kind* of funny, don’t you think?”

“We’re a support group,” she says blankly. “I take my involvement very seriously.”

“And you,” I say, “I thought you were the one who said this fame thing was all bullshit. You were supposed to be the skeptic.”

Nothing from Miranda.

“I’m not making a commentary here,” I say. “But I *do* think you have to admit this is at least a *little* ironic. Don’t you think?”

Have you ever told a joke to a group of people, a joke you thought was absolutely hilarious? And only after telling it, you looked around and saw that no one got it? Or, even worse, they got it, and not only didn’t find it funny, but actually found it offensive? That’s the feeling I have right now. And that feeling only deepens as Miranda gets up from the table and half-runs out the front door, all the while still holding herself in her arms. When the front door slams shut, the impact causes the doorbell to give off a

hollow kind of half-ring or anti-ring. It's a sound of emptiness that resonates through the entire downstairs. And I'm alone in the house again. Great job, Ethan. Fucking great.

Now that she's left, I'm not exactly sure what to do. She was only wearing a thin sweater, so she's not going far. I'm wondering if I should follow her. An odd sort of *deja vu* creeps over me. I realize that all my life I've wondered what to do when women leave the room. Am I supposed to follow? Am I expected to make a peace offering? Or am I supposed to let them go? Am I supposed to assume their departure was borne out of an honest desire to not be near me? I don't think there's one answer to these questions, and I'm fairly sure I usually get it wrong anyway.

I stand up from the table and walk cautiously to the foyer. Looking through the glass pane in the door, I can see Miranda standing on the porch outside. She doesn't turn around when I go outside, which leads me to believe she'd been expecting me to follow her. So maybe I did make the right choice after all.

It's cold outside; the temperature's dropped since I got home a few minutes ago. I can see an occasional white snowflake flutter down between the tree branches overhead. Miranda's gaze seems fixed on some invisible point just above where the horizon would be if we weren't hemmed in by city. Her face is caught in shadow and all I can see are two piercing points of light where her eyes are.

"We'd been playing tag in that vacant lot for hours," she says as if she's barely aware of my presence. "We always played there, all the neighborhood kids, every day after school. It was dusk. In a few minutes, my mother would be calling us in to dinner. Wednesday, Meatloaf night. I split off from the others to go hide behind a cluster of trees. I didn't see the hole. I didn't see anything."

I can see Miranda's shoulders shaking and I think it must be from the cold because I'm shivering too.

"One second I was in the real world with daylight and grass and tag and meatloaf. The next minute, all of it was gone. My world became two feet wide, surrounded by slippery, moss-covered bricks. My legs snapped and folded under me."

"Miranda, I'm sorry I didn't mean—"

"I'm not done, Ethan," she says, holding a hand up over her shoulder. "You need to hear the rest of this." She turns to me now and drops her arms at her sides. "I want

you to hear the rest of it.” She looks vulnerable now, exposed. Her skin seems so thin that I can see the bony structure of her skull, the ridges of her cheekbones, the hard edges of her jaw. “It took my friends an hour just to find me. And before it turned into an event, into a show, before the media and John Denver showed up, there was nothing.”

I can see Miranda’s sharp teeth through the darkness as she speaks. A few snowflakes fall past her waxy face.

“That first night, my dad kept me company by talking down into the well. He was a good man, he meant well, but he eventually nodded off. And I was alone. Completely and utterly alone.” She takes a step closer to me. “Do you know what that’s like, Ethan? To be alone like that?”

Miranda’s eyes are pleading. She wants an answer.

“No,” I say. “I don’t know what it’s like.”

“Let me tell you,” she says. “It’s worse than anything else you can experience on this earth. In some ways, I wish I’d died down there. Because once you’ve been alone like that, you’re never the same. You’re always at least a little alone for the rest of your life.”

A light dusting of snow has settled on her eyelashes, and it tumbles onto her cheeks when she finally blinks.

“Miranda,” I say, looking straight into her eyes, “I’m sorry. I can’t say it any more plainly than that.”

She smiles lightly and shakes her head. “I know you are, Ethan. I know. I’m just... I’m just fucked up. That’s all.”

“We’re all pretty fucked up,” I say. “In one way or another.”

“No, I mean, like clinically fucked up.”

“So do I,” I say. “Most definitely clinically.”

Then Miranda does something I didn’t expect. Not in the slightest. She hugs me. It feels like such an odd thing coming from Miranda, so foreign. Her thin arms catch me around the ribs and the bulges of her elbows stick me in a way that hurts. Her shoulder falls well below my chin. I stand there, taking the hug in my own loose arms. The snow starts falling a little thicker now, big snowflakes that crumple when they come into contact with anything solid.

After a few minutes, I pull back. "You know, I wrote a few speeches in my day."

She looks up at me as if she's just waking up. "You did?"

"Yeah, I actually used to be pretty good at it."

"You don't anymore though?"

"Not in a while. A long while."

"Too bad."

"I guess so," I say. "But maybe I've got a little of the old magic left in me. What do you say I help you out with your WABA speech?"

"That sounds pretty good to me," she says. She smiles so I can see her feral, pointed teeth as the snow falls past her face.

We go inside and work together on her speech for the WABA convention. Miranda already had a good start on it, but it's obvious she needs some emotional core to it. Something that will allow her to engage the audience on a personal level. As I help her, I resist the urge to offer her lines from "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Band." And, in fact, I'm able to assist her without using any lyrics from any Neil Diamond songs. I consider this to be a major accomplishment. Basically I tell her to use the same story she told me on the porch. And by the time we finish, she actually looks pleased with the final product.

She runs through the speech once while I sit at the dining room table. She delivers the speech with confidence and even something bordering on self-assuredness. When she's finished, I applaud madly and give her a standing ovation.

"Thank you so much, Ethan," she says. "This is pretty good stuff."

"It *is* pretty good stuff. But I don't think I helped you much."

She shuffles through her notecards and then squares them on the table. "Well, it's getting late..." she says, trailing her sentence as if it's not quite complete.

"Yeah, I think I'll head up in a few minutes."

"All right then," she says almost shyly. "Good night, Ethan."

She silently walks out of the dining room and slips upstairs to her room. I walk around the first floor for a few minutes, looking at all the pictures on the wall, examining the books in the bookcases. It all seems so foreign to me, this house, these things. None of them are mine. They're not even my housemates' things. They're the things left over

from the couple who left this place for New York three years ago. These things are the detritus of other lives. They are things we have picked up and worn as if they were our own. Yet despite that, this is our home. It is where we live. I try to calculate all the actions and inactions that have led me to this place, all the permutations of life choices that add up to my exact situation. It's all rather stupefying. And humbling.

But before I can dwell any longer on this, and before another bout of melancholy can sweep over me, I mount the stairs for my bedroom. At the second floor landing, I notice a light seeping from underneath Miranda's door. I can hear her rustling around. The sound of clothes moving against clothes and skin.

Her light snaps off and I jump, frightened by the power of my own musings. I quietly climb to the third floor. And I fall powerfully asleep the moment I hit the bed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DC is weird when it comes to snow. Two inches fall and the place goes ape-shit. The town is paralyzed, schools close, grocery stores sell out of bottled water and navy beans, cars – of their own volition – skid out and roll over median strips.

Whatever authorities are in charge of plowing DC's streets most certainly hadn't been ready for a dumping like this, in the third week of October. Sure, DC gets one pretty good snowfall per year, but that's usually around January or February, the only truly wintery months in DC. This has to be a surprise. A fucking shock.

It looks like a foot has fallen during the course of the night. It sits on the roads in a wet, slushy coat, like something that's supposed to be new but isn't quite. And it's slick. Slicker than a dog's dick in springtime. Wait a minute. Is that something Snuffy said? Or am I just imagining that's something he *would* say. It sounds like Snuffy. I sure as hell hope I didn't just make that up.

As it turns out, this unexpected cold is too much for even my beloved Beefeater. The starter chugs a few times then stops trying altogether. I have to resist the urge to say foul things about the Beefeater. So instead, I jack open the door and begin skating down Garfield. My shoes are already soaked through; the black leather is dull and cracked-looking. I'm not eager to entrust my life on these roads to a cab driver. But under the circumstances, a cab seems to be my only option.

Connecticut is deserted, as I'd feared it would be. The city is shut down. It's as if a nuclear explosion has cleaned everyone out, and I somehow am the only one who survived the blast. I pull up the collar on my coat and begin the slushy walk south toward downtown. This snow, this layer of pristine whiteness, will be pretty for about one hour.

I've been walking for about fifteen minutes when I hear the sound of a car struggling to gain traction on the road. The driver periodically guns the gas, causing the wheels to spin wildly and then immediately slams on the brakes causing the car to skid perilously close to the line of parked cars along the street. It's a cab.

I step off the curb and practically into the lane the cab is trying to stay in. I wave my hand and the cab skids to a stop several yards beyond me, narrowly missing the rear fender of a gray Jaguar.

I open the passenger side door and lean my head inside. The cab driver's eyes are bulging and darting nervously between me and the dashboard. He looks like he's on speed.

"Hey, man," he says. "You trying to get me killed?"

"I think you were doing just fine without me."

"The fuck you want anyway?"

"I need a lift to the Capitol. Canon Office Building."

The cab driver looks at me for a moment as if he weren't in a cab and he can't quite figure out why I would make such a ridiculous request. Then he says, "Double-charge."

"What?"

"Double-charge for snow driving."

"I've never heard that one before."

"Yes, yes. Company policy."

"Are you even *with* a company?" I ask, sticking my head further into the cab and peering around at the dirty interior.

"Hey, buddy, I don't need grief today. Keep walking if you want."

I stand up and look out at the deserted street. No cars moving in either direction for as far as I can see. Fuck it. It's official. I'm desperate. I climb into the backseat and grab on to the door handle as the cab begins its herky-jerky drive into my office.

"Federal government's closed, buddy," he says over his shoulder. "Said so on the radio."

"That's not surprising," I say.

"So why you going into work, my man?"

"Because I have an election coming up in a few weeks. I can't afford not to go into work." I'm not sure how convincing I sound when I say this.

"Hey, good for you, bro. You're real dedicated." I can't tell if he's fucking with me or not, but I decide to operate under the assumption that he's not.

When we finally skid to a stop in front of the office, I realize I have nothing to wear as a disguise. No hat, no sunglasses. I look around me. Nothing. I lean into the

front seat and I look around. There's a dirty straw cowboy hat sitting on the seat next to the driver. It has a ring of white around the band where sweat has crystallized.

"Hey, I like your hat, buddy," I say, trying to sound as friendly as I can.

"You like, huh? Thirty dollars."

"Thirty bucks? For that? It's ancient."

"Double-charge for snow."

"Hold on. You're going to charge me double for the hat because of the *snow*?"

"No. Double-charge on hat for sentimental value. Double-charge on ride for snow. Fifty dollars total, hat and ride."

It seems for a second time today that this cab driver has caught me in a desperate circumstance. I fork over the last of the cash in my wallet, reach over the seat and don the oily-looking cowboy hat. "So long, pardner," I say as I step out of the cab and onto the curb.

Because of the snow, practically no one is around, which makes getting into the building a little trickier than usual. I pull my newly acquired cowboy hat down low over my eyes and I pretend to talk on my cell phone in an outrageous southern accent. Without really thinking about it, I assume the identity of a cow guy. I say things like: *cattle futures*, and *branding a hundred head* and *roping doggies*. The police officer at the metal detector points to my cell phone, I make an exasperated face and hand it to him while I pass through the arch. When I take the phone back from him, I resume my mock conversation about cattle things as if I don't have time for his shit. The cop shakes his head and sits back down near the metal detector.

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The office is as empty as the rest of the city. Except for Brooke, who's sitting at her desk tapping away at her computer keyboard. Doubtless, the rest of my staff heard that the Federal Government was closed and figured they had a play day.

"Good morning," I say to Brooke. She jumps slightly as if I've woken her from a good dream and turns to me.

"Good morning to you," she says. Then, "Nice hat."

“Where is everybody?” I ask, mostly to avoid a protracted discussion of the hat.

“Government’s closed. Where do you think they are?”

“I don’t know, but I know where they *should* be.”

Brooke clicks the file closed that she’s been working on, which, by now, I recognize as her resume. “Do you really think it matters anymore? At this point?”

“Fuck yes!” I say. “It matters a lot.”

“Are you sure you’re not just pissed because you’re here and they’re not?”

I think about this a moment. Then I shake my head. “No. That’s not it at all.”

Brooke raises her sharp eyebrows in a way I can’t quite read. “Well,” she says and then breathes out slowly.

“Well someone should do something about it.”

She raises her eyebrows again in that enigmatic way. “Well,” she says.

“I’ll do it,” I say, and head toward my office.

“Are we still on for margaritas tonight?” she asks.

I turn slowly to face her again. “Don’t margaritas seem a little out of place? Given the snow and all?”

“Maybe we could get them to heat them up. Hot margaritas.”

“Now you’re talking.” I reach for the door to my office. “Say seven-ish?”

“You’re on.” She shoots me quickly with her index finger.

“By the way, thanks for coming in this morning,” I say. “I respect that.”

“Oh, that’s me: Miss Dedication.”

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I spend the first hour of the day calling everyone on my staff and ordering them to get into the office immediately. I try to use the word sacrifice at some point during each of these conversations, but even when I do, no one seems to pick up on its significance. I thought that calling up my staff and chewing each of them out individually might help me blow off a little steam, but this is not the case. In fact, with each of these conversations, with each new sleepy voice I talk to, I feel myself growing more and more angry. By the

last call, I'm positively piqued. Eric's number is the last one on the list and his answering machine picks up.

"Eric," I say, "you're probably still in bed right now and I have to say I'm disappointed in you. You should know better than to play hooky when we have a fucking election in three weeks. You know, I used to think you had something, some kind of drive that made you different from the others. But I have to say that now I just don't see it anymore. Come into work if you want to. If it matters at all."

As soon as I hang up the phone, I feel guilty. That message was far nastier than any of the other calls I made this morning. And Eric probably deserves less of a chewing out than everyone else on our staff. I think it might be residual anger spilling over from last week. But whatever it is, I wish I could take that message back after I hang up the phone.

Shortly after I've completed the calls, my phone rings and I pick up.

"Ethan Pascal, it's so good to hear your voice."

"Suzanne, the feeling is extremely mutual."

I hear the raspy sound of her inhaling on a cigarette. "We've got problems, Ethan. Big time."

"You're telling me this like it's news?" I say, though I'm genuinely curious as to what problem – or problems – could possibly be bad enough to distinguish themselves from the myriad other problems we've already identified and categorized.

"No fucking around. You know how that union printing shop went on strike before they could print our signs?"

"Yes."

"Well, it turns out that we actually paid them for the signs they didn't print."

"We didn't stop payment on the check?"

There's a silence on the line that could be attributable to Suzanne exhaling cigarette smoke or it could be attributable to Suzanne actually being at a loss for words. Then, "No."

"No we *did*? Or no we *didn't*?"

"No. We didn't stop payment on the check. All right? I didn't stop payment on the check. And they say they're not giving us the money back. Something about a

contract, blah, blah, blah. I told the fuckers we'd sue their asses and they said go ahead and try. But either way, it's not helping us with our current situation."

"And what exactly is that current situation?"

"Well, god knows how, but you got the signs done for thirty thousand. So, basically, that means we're thirty thousand bucks over budget. We can't even cover this last ad buy."

"I see, Suzanne," I say in a surprisingly formal tone. "You've certainly laid out the problem in a clear, cohesive way."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I hear the flick of her lighter on the other end. She must be chaining those things and it's only, what, six thirty Montana time.

"It doesn't mean anything," I say. "Not one thing."

"So what the fuck are we supposed to do?"

There's a pen on my desk and I roll it back and forth between my hands. One end of the pen is fatter than the other end and I watch as it rolls in a proscribed arc, left, then right. "Ethan, are you mad at me for not stopping payment on the check?" Left, then right. Left, then right. "Ethan, say something goddamnit!"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to say what we should do. I want you to tell me this is going to be all right."

"Oh, it'll be all right, Suzanne. It should be just fine."

"So what should we do?"

"I think it's time we start shaking the money tree."

"That's what I thought you'd say. And by *we*, I assume you mean *me*."

I think about this for a second and watch the pen roll left then right a few more times. "No. I mean you and me." I hear a sharp inhale of surprise on the other end. "You will call the big donors in state. See if you can't get a list from the DNC. And I'll call the PACs who haven't maxed-out yet. See if I can't cop a feel from some of them."

"Do you think we can do it?"

"It'll be tough. They'll be stingy with our numbers so low. But try making up some shit. Try being creative. At least that's what I'm going to do."

"Beautiful," she says.

“I agree. Beautiful.”

When I hang up with Suzanne, I dial Brooke’s intercom extension. “It’s an emergency, Brooke. Can we bump back margaritas till later tonight?”

“How late do you want to bump them?”

“I’m thinking eight-ish. If I’m lucky.”

“Okay. But not *too* late.”

“Fine by me.”

“What’s the emergency?”

“The usual.”

“That’s what I figured.”

+++++

One of the things I like about working on the Hill is that you never really know what you’ll be doing from one day to the next. This perfectly suits my anarchist nature. Sure, you can make plans, form a schedule, but that’s no guarantee that that’s what you’ll actually be doing. In fact, it’s usually a guarantee that that’s what you *won’t* be doing. Some chiefs of staff I know have day-planners and palm pilots and all sorts of gadgets for keeping track of that shit. Me, I don’t even bother. I mean, what’s the point? One day you were planning on doing the run of the mill campaign shit, and the next day, you’re making calls to Political Action Committees trying to sell vacuums. Not only that, you’re trying to sell broken down vacuums that probably won’t even work.

Selling vacuums: the divine secret to all of politics. It’s my catchword for almost everything you do in this business. At every level of the game, you’re basically trying to get someone to buy a bill of goods. Whether you’re trying to get a voter to vote for you, or you’re trying to convince some reporter to write a favorable article, or you’re trying to get some PAC to give you money when your poll numbers are in the toilet, you’re still just selling vacuums. And if you can imagine the kind of luck you’d have selling vacuums from cold calls on the phone, you’ve got an idea of the kind of luck I’m having trying to get money today.

Most of the PACs I call just laugh at me and say I must be joking. They tell me they've seen the poll numbers and that they don't think it would be a wise "resource allocation." For my part, I tell them the polling data they've seen is unreliable and that we have it on good authority that Cynthia is actually surging in the polls. Then I tell them how we're fighting the good fight and how our opponent is running a nasty campaign. They usually counter this last argument with something like: "Welcome to politics, kid," or the even blunter, "Tough shit!"

But not everyone. A few groups listen, mostly smaller PACs, ones who usually get overshadowed in the big-money game that is DC politics. After I give my spiel, they promise small amounts of money. A couple hundred here and there. A few even pledge a thousand. Drops in the bucket, so to speak, but I'll take what I can get at this point. On a whim, I call the WABA. I tell them about my close personal friendship with their national spokesperson. Then I tell them that Cynthia Mahoney has a long history of fighting against open and abandoned wells, and that she's thinking about sponsoring a bill to supply life-saving equipment to firehouses across the country. The woman in charge of their lobbying says she's glad to hear of Cynthia's interest in their issues and says she thinks she'll be able to convince her group to give five thousand dollars to Cynthia's campaign.

When we're done talking, I hang up the phone with an authoritative slam. Five thousand bucks! That's right, Ethan! Maybe you still *can* bring it with the big boys. Maybe you still *do* got it.

"What's that you still got?" Brooke asks from the door to my office. I look up, embarrassed. Did I just say that out loud? I was fairly sure I only thought it.

Confused, I hold my empty hands out at my sides as if to prove that, indeed, I got nothing.

"Are you all right, Ethan?" Brooke asks.

"Of course I'm all right. Why do you ask?"

"Well it's almost three o'clock and you haven't come out of your office once today."

I look at the clock on my wall as if I need to double-check Brooke's time-keeping. I can't believe it's three. If you'd have asked me, I would have said it was eleven, at the

latest. “Everything’s going great, actually,” I say, still looking at the clock.

“You haven’t had any lunch. Do you want me to get you something?”

“Thanks. But no. I’m really doing quite well.”

Though it doesn’t matter much if Brooke knows this, what I’m doing today is technically illegal. Surprise, surprise. Technically, you’re not allowed to raise campaign funds on government property. It’s a pointless rule, but it’s the reason every Member of Congress has some small cubby-hole office just off the Hill. They’ll sneak off between committee hearings and floor votes to do the dirty work of the political process. But since I don’t happen to have such a satellite office, and if I *leave* this office, there’s no guarantee I’ll actually be let in again by the Capitol police, I’ve chosen to ignore this rule today. And while Brooke has surely seen far worse rule infractions in her day – hell, she impersonated the Congresswoman last week – I’d just as soon spare her the burden of obtaining anymore dangerous knowledge, no matter how slight.

“You didn’t even try to steal my Classifieds this morning,” Brooke says, as if this indeed is proof that something is not right.

“Yes, well I’m sorry to disappoint you,” I say, scanning the directory for another PAC I can hit up.

Brooke leans against the doorframe to my office and stretches out one leg in front of her. She’s wearing these knee high leather boots that I have to admit are extremely sexy. “I just thought you might like to know that most of the staff is here now, and they appear to be doing actual work.”

“That’s great, Brooke,” I say as I spot the number for the Head Trauma Survivors Association.

“Well,” she says, pulling herself off the doorframe. “I can see you’re busy.”

“A little,” I say.

“Are we still on for margaritas?”

It strikes me as odd that Brooke would feel the need to ask me about this yet again. Could it be she has a new Vince revelation for me? Maybe she got back together with that guy and wants someone to tell her it’s a good idea. For the time being, I choose to ignore whatever might be implied by her repetition. “The Magic Eight Ball says: Most definitely.”

Brooke smiles and closes the door behind her, and I go back to selling vacuums.

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By seven thirty, I've gotten twenty-three thousand and change. A monumental sum, given the circumstances. No one is answering their phones anymore, so there's not much more I can do. I figure it's time to check on Suzanne to see how she's faring. With any luck, she'll be at least close to putting us over the top. Besides, I'm more than a little proud of myself for the effort I've turned in today. Twenty-three thousand in twelve hours is bordering on Herculean. Suzanne has to at least appreciate that, if nothing else.

"Tell me something good, Pascal," she says when I call her.

"You want good news, eh? How does twenty-three sound?"

"Twenty-three *hundred*?"

"Twenty-three *thousand*, baby. And change."

There's a long, slow exhale that almost sounds like a whistle. "Damn," she says. Then, "Sometimes you just have to say, Damn." She draws out that last word as if she's pleased with the sound of it.

"How did you do?" I ask.

"Not *that* good. But I thought I was doing all right."

"What did you come up with?"

"Ten five."

"Ten thousand?"

"Affirmative," she says with a distinctive chirp to her voice.

"So we're over the top."

"That would be correct. Who would have thunk it?"

"Indeed," I say.

"Seriously. Who would have ever believed you'd come through like you did, Pascal?"

"Well, I would have believed it. You just have to have a little faith in me, that's all."

Suzanne laughs at this as if faith in me is asking a bit much from her. “The jury’s still out on you, Pascal. I’ll give you that much.”

“At least they haven’t made up their minds yet. That’s *something*.”

“I suppose it is.” She lights up a celebratory smoke on her end of the line.

“And now,” I say, “if you need nothing further of me today, I’m going to get a drink with Brooke.”

Suzanne is quiet for a second. Then, “What’s up with that?”

Though her question is nonspecific, I think I understand what she’s specifically getting at. “What are you getting at, Suzanne?”

“Nothing. I just don’t want to see you fucking up anyone else’s life.” At that she laughs hard into the phone. She laughs so loudly I have to hold the receiver away from my ear while it passes through her system. The laugh is long enough that when it’s done, I don’t feel particularly compelled to respond to the original statement, which is good, because I don’t know how I would respond to it, if I were really put on the spot.

“Good-bye, Suzanne,” I say.

“Toodle-oo, Ethan,” she says and hangs up the phone.

I punch the intercom button and dial Brooke’s extension. I tell her I’m ready to go and she says she’ll be ready shortly. A few minutes later, Brooke is standing in my office with a black wool coat wrapped around her. She has a gray scarf flung across her throat and she’s wearing the sunglasses that both Eric and I have worn in the past several days.

“You must have a big head because these things are all stretched out,” she says, testing the play of the sunglasses on her face. She shakes her head, then slides them back up the bridge of her nose with a slender finger.

“Big enough to fill out my ten gallon hat,” I say, donning the cowboy hat I purchased at double-charge from the cabbie this morning. “Now let’s git.” I toss a few folders and my cell phone into my bag and throw my coat over my shoulders.

“I have to admit that hat looks pretty good on you,” Brooke says.

“You think?”

“Yeah, I think. Kind of an urban cowboy look.” She nods for a moment. “Now let’s git the fuck outta Dodge, pardner.”

“Yes. Let’s.”

Just as Brooke is passing through the plane of my office door, and just as I’m rounding my desk to follow her out, my cell phone rings. We both stop, instinctively, as if we’re not sure whose responsibility this ringing object is. I hesitate as it rings a second time, considering letting it just ring on, or even considering just turning the damn thing off. That would be the easy thing to do. And it certainly would be par for the course in terms of things I’d expect Ethan Pascal to do. But I’m caught in an odd moment where I’m feeling rather saintly. I’ve just done more than my fair share of work today, and to let this one go would feel like I’m somehow ending on a low note. So I reach into my bag for the phone after the third ring.

“Ethan Pascal here,” I say. Brooke turns just outside my office and shoots me an impatient look.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” a voice on the other end says. “I finally tracked your ass down, brother.”

“Hello?” I say.

“Is that all you have to say to your old buddy Snuffy?”

I freeze for a moment, caught in a whirl of memory, trying to piece together fragments of the Broken Barrel Saloon, synchronicity, the I-Ching, and brains and eggs.

“Snuffy?” I say.

“Hell yes, brother. Snuffy from Havre.”

“Hold on one second, Snuffy.” I put my hand over the phone and look up at Brooke. She’s regarding me with narrowed eyes. “Brooke, why don’t you go ahead. Get a table and order the first round. This’ll take a few minutes.”

Brooke huffs noisily. “I can wait if you want.”

“No. Go ahead. I’ll literally be five minutes behind you. I promise.”

“Fine. But don’t make me wait forever,” she says and turns to leave.

I sit back down behind my desk, letting my free hand dangle off the armrest.

“Snuffy, how the hell are you?” I ask.

“I’ll bet you’re wondering how I got your number,” he says.

“Actually, I think I gave you this number after our last conversation.” I tip the brim of my cowboy hat as if this is a gesture he can see through the phone line.

“Oh, that’s right,” he says, clearing this throat. “But I’ll bet you’re wondering how I figured out that you ain’t no Mormon missionary. But instead you’re the chief of staff for none other than Havre’s own Cynthia Mahoney.”

“Um. Yes. Yes, I would wonder how you figured that out.”

“Ha!” I can hear him slam his fist down on whatever flat surface he has at his immediate disposal out there. “I got an article here from the Havre Daily News about a fellow named Ethan Pascal who happens to have lost his squash up there at the Capitol last week. You any relation to that fellow?”

“Always glad to see the watchdogs of our democracy are on the job,” I say into the receiver.

“I also bet you’re wondering why in sam hell I’m calling you right now.”

“Once again, you’re right on the money, Snuffy.”

“Shoot! I love it. Let’s start with a hint. It has to do with a conversation you and me had.”

I’m not at all prepared for a battle of wits right now, even if my opponent happens to be Snuffy. But the fact that he’s figured out my occupation gives him a strange sort of leverage for the moment, and I feel compelled to play along. “Is it about the I-Ching?”

“No.” He draws the syllable out in a playful way, as if he’s talking to a first grader.

“Does it have to do with your conversion to Mormonism?”

“Nope.”

“Brains and eggs?”

“See, now, you’re disappointing me, Ethan.”

“Okay, does it have to do with Havre’s own Cynthia Mahoney?”

“That’s more like it! Keep going.”

I’ve had enough of the game now. I sit forward in my chair and hold the phone closer to my mouth. “Snuffy, why don’t you just tell me what this has to do with Cynthia.”

“All right, if you’re tired of playing I suppose I’ll just spill it. You got a fax machine there in your office?”

“Of course.”

“Then give me your number and I’ll *show* you what this is all about.”

I give him the number and he grunts as he writes it down. “All right. I’ve got to hang up to send this. But call me right back once you got it.”

Snuffy hangs up the phone and I walk over to the fax machine near Brooke’s desk. A few seconds later, the machine beeps and its cooling fan whirs to life. The first page is a cover letter that says “From the Desk of Snuffy Wentworth” at the top. Below that, in a handwritten scrawl somewhere between cursive and print, it says: “I told you so.”

Told me what, Snuffy?

The second page, when it squeals out of the machine, answers my question in black and white.

The second page is a picture, slightly grainy, but the image itself is distinct, unmistakable. Two women sitting on a chair. One woman is sitting across the other’s lap. They’re kissing each other as if it’s the tail end of the kiss, that split second before they each pulled back. One woman is cupping her hand under the other woman’s exposed breast. But these aren’t any normal women, or at least they’re not the kind of women you might expect to see in this type of photo. They’re older-looking, much older. And I’m quite certain that one woman, the one sitting across the other’s lap, the one who’s cupping the other’s breast, is my boss, Havre’s own Cynthia Mahoney.

I look away from the picture for a second and then back, as if I expect the ink molecules to somehow miraculously rearrange themselves while I’m not paying attention. This miracle does not happen. I can even recognize the sweater Cynthia’s wearing in the picture; it’s one with several badly-stitched smiley-faces across the front of it. It’s one of her worse sweaters; and most distinctive. Those smiley faces are now grinning lewdly as if they can’t believe the action they’re seeing right now. Or maybe they’re just making fun of me.

All I can think of is the number 10. 10! An honest-to-goodness 10 on the Messina political scale. This is it. The Extinction Level Event. I can honestly say I never expected to actually see one of these in my political lifetime. And now, here it is, staring me in the face with the blank intensity of the nipple on the breast that Cynthia’s cupping.

I realize I'm sweating. The leather band on the inside of my cowboy hat feels slick and cold. My first instinct is to tear the fax up. Shred it. Destroy the evidence. As if Snuffy doesn't have an exact duplicate sitting on his own fax machine right now. And who knows where he got his copy. They're probably everywhere. These things are probably being leaf-dropped as we speak over the entire state of Montana. Blanketing the state like a fucking snowfall. I'm sweating harder now, as I pore over the picture. A drip of sweat slips off my nose and plops onto the nipple of the exposed, cupped breast. The fluorescent lights above me seem to be flickering like an old black and white movie. Their hum feels like a physical presence in the room. I wipe the sweat drop off with my thumb and fold the page in half. I slip the paper into my jacket pocket and I stagger out of the office.

I walk past a dozing capitol police officer and weave my way down the slushy sidewalk toward Tortilla Coast. The white, deserted world I'd left behind this morning has now altered. The snow lies in brown piles at the edges of the streets, and salt granules crunch under my feet. The city has come to life with a vengeance, as if making up for lost time this morning. Cars honk and skid, and people walk in a long steady stream down the sidewalks. My cell phone starts ringing but I don't fish it out of my pocket. I don't think I'd be capable of talking at this moment, even if I wanted to. Everything has begun to refreeze; a black, icy surface has formed below the dirty, melted snow.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tortilla Coast porch is closed for the winter. Columns of plastic lawn chairs are stacked and chained together in an icy corner like a distant memory someone is trying to forget. Inside, however, Tortilla Coast is fully operational. Through the steamy windows, I can see walls of bodies squeezed around tables or clustered near the bar. It appears as if, since the Federal Government is closed today, every single Hill staffer has decided it would be a good idea to go get bombed. And a good many of them have chosen Tortilla Coast as the site for their debauchery. People stagger around with icy margaritas in their hands slapping each other on the backs and laughing sloppily into the moist indoor air.

My entrance into the bar is a notable one. Though there's some mariachi music playing in the background, the sound of my cell phone ringing manages to eclipse all other noise. People stop their conversations and swivel their heads in my direction. Their faces regard me angrily, as if I just marched in and told them to remain calm because I've got a bomb strapped to my chest.

With whatever few rational brain cells I have left at my disposal, I can admit that I at least fit the visual profile of your garden variety bomb-carrying terrorist. I slipped twice on the walk over so I'm covered with splotches of slushy brown snow, and the knee on my suit is ripped out. Plus, I'm still wearing that hat I bought from the cab driver this morning. So I stand defiantly before them, this raggedy urban cowboy, with his cell phone ringing incessantly. And possibly with a bomb under his jacket. After several rings, it becomes apparent to everyone watching that this interloper doesn't intend to answer his phone. And this fact seems to only amplify their rage, prolong their stares.

For my part, I hold my ground, scanning the crowd for Brooke. I don't know why exactly I'm looking for Brooke right now. I guess I'm just looking for someone. Anyone I can talk to and who might understand the significance of the paper that's folded and nestled in my jacket pocket.

After a minute of scanning, I spot Brooke. She has a table in the far corner of the bar and she's waving me over. I weave and pardon my way through the long room, ignoring the glares I get, which range between fear and accusation. When I pull up to

Brooke's table, I stand over her. There's a pitcher of greenish margaritas on the table and her glass is half empty. She looks up at me with a bright smile.

"I'm so glad you could make it. I was sure you'd— You know your phone is ringing?"

"Brooke, we need to talk."

"What is it?"

I look around me, at the drunken people at the tables next to us, at the glossy-eyed staffers standing near the bar. "Let's go outside."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Brooke. It's a fucking 10!"

"Ethan, it was hard to get this table and I don't know what you're talk— Why won't you answer your goddamn phone?"

I take a deep breath and look her square in the face. "Brooke, I need to talk to you. Outside."

I turn and begin weaving my way back through the revelers.

"This better be good," Brooke mutters behind me.

Then a voice somewhere in the crowd yells, "Hey cell phone guy, why don't you just fucking answer it!" A few people near the voice guffaw, and applaud his sentiments.

I pause a moment, caught in my tracks, waiting for their backslapping and high-fiving to finish. Then I spin in a mad flourish worthy of a truly deranged terrorist. I don't have the energy or the wits right now for subtlety.

"And why don't *you* just fucking FUCK OFF!" I shout, in a voice so loud that it draws a deep silence from the room. I resume my trek out of the bar, and this time people fall over themselves to get out of my way.

By the time we get onto the icy sidewalk outside, Brooke's temperament has evolved from confused to angry. She stands implacable, with her hands akimbo, her jaw set low and square.

"Would you please just answer your phone?" she says.

"Brooke, it's not important now. I have to show you something."

"Please, Ethan, it's really annoying me."

"Annoying! You think this is annoying? I'm talking about political death here."

I'm talking about staring into the black hole of a fucking 10! And you're worried about being annoyed?" I dig in my pocket until I come up with the phone. I hold the ringing object in front of Brooke's face for a second and then I toss it overhand, over her shoulder. I watch the hunk of plastic and metal arc through the air, end over end, until it finally sinks with an icy thud into a slushy snowbank near the curb. "How's that?" I shout at her. "Is that less annoying for you?"

The tweeting of the phone is muffled by the snow, so that it sounds like the distant chirping of a cricket. The effect of my gesture on Brooke is far stronger than I would have expected.

She lowers her forehead and her widow's peak edges menacingly downward, as if it's moving into attack formation. She pulls her bottom lip under her upper teeth, and her eyes narrow so that I can hardly see them. The next thing Brooke does catches me completely off-guard. With one deft motion, she reaches up and slaps me across the cheek. It's not a hard slap, more of a cuff. The kind of shot that makes you stop for a second and ask yourself, Did I just get slapped?

Before I can answer my own rhetorical question, she says in a low, mechanical voice, "Ethan, pull yourself together. You're acting like a fucking asshole. And I won't talk to you until you *stop* acting like a fucking asshole."

Something about the way she says this, some combination of her voice and that look and that slap, manages to break through the haze that's enveloped me since receiving Snuffy's fax. I'm not shaken back into full reality just yet – that much is certain – but I *do* take a step back from the brink of full-on, raving lunacy.

Brooke jerks a thumb over her shoulder toward the snow bank in which my still-ringing phone is embedded. She holds her hand there, stiff, motionless. I take a cautious step past her toward the snow bank, keeping my eyes pinned on her hand, as if any second I expect her to launch another slap assault. I bend at the knees and sift through the dirty pile of snow until I recover the phone. I wipe off the excess slush and hold it to my ear.

"Hello?" I say unsurely. Of course I'm expecting it to be Snuffy, since I didn't call him back as he'd requested. But I've long since learned that these assumptions

almost always turn out to be incorrect. And again, this one turns out to expectedly defy my expectations.

“Hello? Mr. Ethan Pascal, please.”

“Speaking.”

“Really? Great. I’m glad I finally tracked you down. You’re not an easy man to get a hold of, Mr. Pascal.”

“Intentionally so,” I say. An icy rivulet of slush trickles down the inside of my ear.

“Right.” He pauses to clear his throat, and when he starts speaking again, his tone has changed to a formal monotone. “This is Doctor Greg Ekklund with Georgetown University Hospital. We admitted a John Doe to our ER last night and we have reason to believe he might be someone employed in your office. You *are* the Chief of Staff for Congresswoman Cynthia Mahoney, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“Good. It looks like this fellow was a mugging victim sometime between eleven and one AM last night. It wasn’t reported until around three and by that time he was hypothermic from the cold last night.” I think the doctor’s dreary voice is intended to have the effect of lulling the listener into a false sense of security. But in my case, it unchains a cold, dark suspicion that is just beginning to creep around at the back of my head. “Anyway,” the doctor continues, “his wallet was stolen so we’ve got no ID, but he’s mentioned Congresswoman Cynthia Mahoney once or twice during the moments he’s regained consciousness.”

At this point, I jump into the conversation, not waiting to see if the doctor is finished. “That doesn’t sound right at all, doctor. See, even though the Federal Government was closed today, my entire staff was in the office. We have an election coming up, so we can’t afford to take the day off. See?” The words are tumbling out of my mouth uncontrolled, unstoppable. “There’s no way someone from my office could have been admitted last night.” I look up at Brooke for confirmation, since she was the one who told me our staff had come in after my round of calls this morning. But Brooke has heard what I said to the doctor, and she is now shaking her head.

“What?” I ask her, covering the phone with my free hand.

“There was one staffer who didn’t come in. Eric never made it in.”

I pull the receiver back to my mouth. “Doctor, could you please describe this patient?”

The doctor sighs a long breath. “Let’s see. His face is pretty beat up, lots of swelling still, so I can’t tell you much from that perspective, but he appears to be in his early to mid-twenties. Five ten, or eleven. Thin, probably a hundred forty-five pounds. Blond hair.”

I don’t say anything in the silence that ensues. The doctor breathes out slowly again and says, “I know this hardly sounds professional, at least from a medical standpoint, but he looks even younger than he probably is. You know what I mean? He looks, well, like a kid caught in an adult’s body. You know what I mean?”

“Yes,” I manage. Whatever cold suspicion had been lurking in the dark corners of my mind has now exploded into full presence.

I am an ancient glacier.

I am an iceberg in the Arctic.

I am nuclear fucking winter.

“I’ll be right there,” I whisper, though I can’t be confident I *actually* say anything.

I hang up the phone and put it back in my pocket. Brooke has obviously read whatever it is on my face that there is to be read, because her eyes are looking pleadingly at me now, as if they might drown in their own blueness.

“We need to get to the hospital,” I say.

Brooke seems to seize on this tangible information. Her swimming eyes lock onto mine and she nods. “I’ll drive,” she says. All business, no questions.

“That would be good,” I say, because that’s all I’m capable of saying at this moment. We set off walking down the icy sidewalk toward her car.

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In my limited hospital experience, I’ve noticed that there are two types of visitors. One is the kind that keeps their emotions contained, concealed. They betray no weakness

except perhaps the slightest chink provided by a sad-looking nod in the elevator, or a lilted hello in the hallway. The other type of hospital visitor is the kind who doesn't care what anyone sees. They are a walking, dripping ball of pure emotion. Every thought, impulse and feeling is given full voice and action. They are, in every respect, a mess.

Until this evening, I would have thought myself to fall firmly in the former category. Strong, silent, holding it all together. Apparently, that is not the case. I am definitely in the latter camp. And the emotion that I am feeling, the emotion that is on full display, is rage – pure uncut rage.

The hospital hasn't re-classified Eric as a real human being yet, so it takes a good twenty minutes to explain to the front desk nurse who it is I'm there to see. During these negotiations I end up talking to three different "administrators" before I'm finally able to track him down. They tell us Eric is in Room 1213 as if they are revealing classified state information.

Then, as Brooke and I are making our way down the hallway on the twelfth floor toward his room, we pass a nurse's desk where another administrator stops us.

"Can you tell me where you're going?" she asks with an aloof, bureaucratic air.

I stop mid-step and turn to vent my rage on her. "We're here to see the patient in Room 1213," I say with an appropriately snippy tone. "You people have him classified as a John Doe. But his actual *human* name is Eric Wright."

The woman looks at a computer monitor on her desk. She idly taps a few keys. Then, "I'm sorry, but you're not allowed to visit Mr. ... er... the patient in Room 1213."

"And why can I *not* visit Eric Wright in Room 1213?" I shout this at her from across the quiet, stale hallway.

"Because," she says with reinforced quietness, as if I'm supposed to follow her good example with regard to volume, "that person was admitted under criminal circumstances. He was mugged. And we can't allow visitors aside from family until the police have had a chance to question him."

"And when will the police question him?"

"Sir, there are a lot of crimes to investigate in this city. That probably won't happen until tomorrow afternoon."

“Well I *am* family!” I shout again, jangling whatever last pockets of quiet that remained in the hallway.

“Oh really?” she asks. “And what relation are you to the patient in Room 1213?”

I look at Brooke, who’s standing slightly behind me. No way we’ll pass for parents. It occurs to me I don’t even know if Eric *has* parents. Or if he has family of any sort. “I’m his brother,” I say, stepping toward the nurse in a challenging way.

She looks down at the monitor on her side of the counter again. “I’ll have to see some identification, sir,” she says.

“Fine,” I pull out my wallet and hand her my Senate ID, thinking the words “U.S. Senate” might make her snap to attention, at least a little.

She stares at the ID a moment with dull, shark-like eyes. “Mr. Pascal, didn’t you just say this patient’s name was Eric Wright?”

“He’s my *half*-brother!” I shout again, incensed that she would have the gall to push me this far.

She harrumphs once and shifts her weight in her chair. “Very well,” she says after another minute. “You can visit the patient. But you’re little friend there,” the nurse points a doughy finger at Brooke, “she’ll have to wait.”

I feel like protesting this point, but Brooke lightly touches my shoulder. “Go ahead, Ethan,” she says. “I can wait.”

There are times when you should protest. And there are times when you have to let the bureaucracy have its victories. This is a time to acquiesce. I recognize that. I understand these limits. So I nod to Brooke and I start past the nurse, who shakes her head disapprovingly at me, which I take to convey – along with general disgust – the sense that I should take better care of my brother, even if he is only my half-brother. This is perhaps the one sentiment of hers I happen to agree with.

A sign on the door to Room 1213 says: *John Doe* in black grease marker. I push the door open slowly.

Eric looks bad. I know I’m not a doctor, and I know if I were, I might understand that his condition isn’t as bad as it looks. But to my untrained eye, in that first glimpse, he looks like absolute hell.

He's almost unrecognizable. The right side of his face is swollen like a grapefruit. The flesh around his right eye is purplish, with tinges of yellow around the edges. There are cuts all over his face. One of his legs is elevated and casted. There are thick bandages around his chest. An IV bag is hooked up to his forearm. His hair is matted with blood and pressed tight to his scalp. His lips are gray and tiny hangnails of skin dangle from them as if they're waiting for Eric to wake up and start gnawing at them. His eyes are closed and they stay closed when I enter the darkened room.

The sight of Eric embedded on the hospital gurney, surrounded by tubes and machines, has a deep and scarring effect on me. It's the kind of sight where – no matter how prepared you are – you can't help but let out a quiet, but audible, "oh."

"Someone there?" a disembodied voice asks from some space not far away. I look around the room and notice a thick beige curtain where I'd assumed there was a wall.

"Just me," I say quietly, as if I'm responding to the voice of a god.

"You with the hospital?"

"Not even close," I say.

"Good," the voice says and then hacks a deep phlegmy cough. "Can't stand those hospital fuckers."

I walk over to the curtain and pull back a corner. On the other bed a man with a filthy gray beard is lying on his side and resting his head in his hand. His hair, which still has a few traces of the original red, is pulled back in a thick Willie Nelson braid.

"You visiting your little friend there?" the man asks.

"Yeah, he's my brother," I say, instinctively now.

"Good," the man says. "He's a tough little guy. But he looks like he's had a pretty hard time."

"His name is Eric," I say, pulling the curtain back a little further. "I'm Ethan."

The man regards me suspiciously for a second and then leans back in his bed. His body looks thick all the way through. "The name's Murray," he says. "Murray Hopper. But don't tell that to nobody with the hospital."

“Why not?”

“Cause I’m a bit of a drifter, see. And the hospital don’t like to give beds out to us drifters much. They treat us better when they don’t know our names.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Once they get your name, they check out your records. Maybe they find out a fellow checks into hospitals whenever it gets cold out. They aren’t so keen on giving out warm beds to drifters like me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say.

“Don’t fret, amigo. It’s just life.” He launches into another series of hacking coughs, and I can see his whole stout body shudder under the white hospital sheet. “Anyway,” he says after he collects himself from the coughing fit, “I’m glad this little guy has someone to watch out for him.”

“I guess so,” I say, suddenly feeling guilty. We both regard the frozen, broken boy in the bed next to us. We stare at the thin outline of his body under the white bed sheet. Then Murray hack-coughs again. “That doesn’t sound good, Murray,” I say. “You going to be all right?”

“Oh, I’ll be fine,” he says. His great bearded face crunches into a smile that consists of hundreds of tiny wrinkles. “I’ll try and make this one last a few more days. Shove off after it warms up a little outside.” Then he looks at me as if a new idea has suddenly occurred to him. “Say, what’s the temp like right now?”

“Pretty cold still, Murray. I’d wait a while before you go back into the world.”

“Fair enough,” he says, then he rests his head back on his pillow and closes his eyes. “Fair enough.” He lets out a deep, rattly breath and he folds his hands across his chest. In this exact moment, I’m struck by how much Murray reminds me of Snuffy. They don’t *look* alike, exactly. But there’s something about the beard and the face that I can’t quite place. Some kind of deeper, inexplicable resemblance.

“Snuffy,” I say, turning the word over in my head as if it’s a strange foreign artifact. Then, “Murray.”

“Yes,” he says with his eyes still closed.

“You don’t have to worry,” I say. “Your secret identity is safe with me.”

“Oh, I know that, kid,” he says without stirring from his restful state. “I can tell just by looking at you you’re one of the good guys. Yessiree. One of the good guys.”

Good guys. I like the sound of that, even if I’m not so sure that I *am* one of the good guys. I consider asking him what he means by that phrase, how he can be so sure I deserve that title. But without anything really happening, without any visible or audible clues, I can sense that Murray has slipped into a deep, warm sleep.

I go back to the waiting room where Brooke is sitting, staring viciously at the administrator on guard duty. There is palpable, icy hatred in Brooke’s blue eyes. I can almost see the hate rays shooting across the room at her target. When Brooke sees me, though, those eyes soften again into tepid tap water and she even manages a weak smile.

“How is he?” she asks.

“All right,” I say. “I mean, he looks bad. And he’s not conscious. But I think he’ll be all right. After a while.”

Brooke nods slowly. “So what should we do?”

“I don’t know,” I say, sitting down in the chair next to hers. “I don’t know if he has any family or anything. I don’t know what people are supposed to do in these situations.” I pause for a moment, as if I’m trying to piece this whole night together in my mind. “Why don’t you go home. I’ll stay here tonight.”

“Are you doing all right?” she asks. She sets her hand on top of mine, which is resting on the armrest between our chairs. I can see the white half-moons of her cuticles, the sickle edges of her fingernails. I stare at them a moment.

“I don’t think I’m the one we should be worrying about,” I say.

“I know, but you were really freaked out back at Tortilla Coast. You were going to tell me something.”

“Oh, that. That was nothing, Brooke. Nothing that can’t wait for a while anyway.”

Brooke squints her blue eyes at me and leaves her hand on top of mine.

“What about you?” I ask. “You seemed like you wanted to tell me something over margaritas.”

She smiles a quick half-smile that seems more like a frown. “Nothing that can’t wait for a while,” she says. Then she lets out a long, tired sigh that even the nurse on guard duty notices and looks over for.

“You know,” Brooke says, “this was not how I envisioned this evening turning out.”

“Brooke, nothing in my life ever seems to work out the way I envision it.”

Brooke lets out a short laugh. “Yeah, I noticed that about you, Ethan. I don’t know what it is, but I’ve noticed it.”

“It’s probably genetic.”

“Yeah, probably.”

Then Brooke lifts her hand off mine and stands up from her chair. She brushes at her black wool coat with the hand that had been resting on mine. “Well, I’m off then. Will we be seeing you at work tomorrow?”

“I honestly have no idea,” I say. “I guess it depends on what happens here.”

I don’t stand up from my chair until the dark figure of Brooke disappears at the far end of the hallway. When she’s gone, I return to Room 1213, and resume my vigil of my battered half-brother.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I sit with Eric through the night. There's a plastic chair in the corner of the room, which I drag to his bedside and use as my headquarters for this vigil. Eric is unconscious most of the time, though his sleep is fitful, marked by random mumblings and occasional jerky flails of his arms and legs. Every hour a nurse named Sylvia comes in, peels back Eric's eyelids, and shines a penlight in his eyes. She says this is standard procedure for concussions. Sylvia seems like a nice lady. Each time she comes in, she tells me my brother's going to be all right. Eric's nose is running in slow clear trails from both nostrils and Sylvia gives me a box of Kleenex to use to keep him clean during the night.

Between Sylvia's visits, I talk to Eric. I whisper so that I don't bother Murray's slumber, though I'd wager life on the road has conditioned him to sleep through just about anything. I start by telling Eric about Lily. I tell him how we first started dating three years ago. I tell him how things just started to go wrong for us, almost inexplicably. I tell him how, at a certain point, we stopped functioning as a unit. Both of us. Simultaneously. As if some spell had been cast upon us that took away our ability to get along. I tell Eric how, when I actually allow myself to think about it, when I contemplate the dark void of her absence, it scares the ever-loving shit out of me. Not the not the not being with Lily part, but the falling out of love part.

Eric, for his part, does nothing. He lies there unmoving, unaware, his body silently healing itself. This talking I'm doing feels good though. And the more I talk, I find the more I have to tell him. It's as if I'm revealing all my deepest secrets, my own personal confessional.

At about two in the morning, I break the news about Cynthia. I realize he's the first person other than me to receive this information. I tell him about the fax I got from Snuffy. I tell him how all those Montanans he talked to in Havre were actually right about Cynthia being a lesbian. I tell him that this is it; this is the reason our numbers have been tanking. This is the 10 on the Messina Scale, the thing from which you can't recover. Eric receives this information the same way he's received everything else I've said.

At about four in the morning, I nod off. When I wake up, it's still dark out, and there's a blanket draped over me, which Sylvia must have seen to. My watch says it's 6:30. Murray is awake now. I can hear him coughing and muttering on his side of the curtain. I pull back the curtain. Murray is sitting up in bed and reading a newspaper that's yellowed and wrinkled with age.

"Good morning, sunshine," he says to me over the edge of the paper.

"Good morning to you."

"You stay here last night?"

"Yeah, I hope you don't mind."

"Hell no. It's nice to have the company. You can probably guess I don't get many visitors."

I nod at this and I wonder how many other patients in the hospital don't get visitors. "I think I'm going to grab a bite at the cafeteria. You want anything?"

"No, sir," he says with a smile. "I'm all set here." He shifts his weight back and forth as if to more firmly plant himself in his bed.

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I'm starving by the time I get to the cafeteria, but they're only serving breakfast, so I get a couple pieces of toast and a cup of coffee. I also pick up a copy of the *Post* from a pile they have near the cash register, though I find when I sit down that I don't feel the slightest desire to read it myself. Not even the Classifieds. It seems as if nothing in this paper has anything to do with the world I currently inhabit. Like I'm living in this sterile bubble of the hospital right now, and nothing outside it has anything to do with me; it's part of a former life. Strewn around the cafeteria are several white-faced people who sit alone, like me. They stare vacantly at the walls as they sip their coffees or eat their food. Fellow hospital zombies. I feel a strange kind of brotherhood with these people. We all share something in common, some sad thread that has brought us all to this place, at this time.

As I lean forward in my chair to take a bite of toast, I feel a crinkle of paper in my jacket pocket. I pull it out, unfold it and lay it flat on the table next to my coffee cup. It's

still the same picture I saw last night. Cynthia's still kissing that woman. And her hand is still cupping that exposed breast. But for the first time, I notice something about the other woman. There's something vaguely familiar about her face, caught in black and white, three-quarters profile. I feel like I've seen her somewhere. Like she's some passing acquaintance I once knew or met. Not that it matters much. And, to be honest, I'd almost rather *not* know who it is. It all seems so fucking embarrassing, like I'm a voyeur of something I don't want to see.

Obviously, I'm going to have to call Cynthia and tell her about this. But what will I say? Shame on you? Hardly. Cynthia can do whatever the hell she wants. Still, it might have been nice if she'd told me about this a while ago. It's always best to know your political liabilities from the outset. And this definitely qualifies as a political liability. Then again, what would I have done with this knowledge if I *did* have it? I would have spent the last eight months worrying myself sick about exactly this type of thing happening.

Because the fact is, this is exactly the worst way for this to be out there. I'm guessing Claiborne knows about this picture and he's orchestrating it perfectly. He knew there was no way he could have taken this to the press. If he did that, it would have made him look bad. And even if he'd had an intermediary do it, it's the kind of thing that might ultimately generate sympathy, cause a backlash that'd bite him in the ass. No, this is the kind of information that's best used in a whisper campaign. Make sure enough people have the picture so that it's an undercurrent. It's a shadow lurking in the background. Cynthia being a lesbian is the thing that everyone's *heard* about; they know someone who knows someone who saw it with his own eyes. In a small state like Montana, where everyone knows everyone else, a whisper campaign like this has a devastating effect. Our poll numbers are testament to that. Yeah, I'd say old Claiborne is playing this one like a finely tuned violin. Bra-fucking-vo!

What's strange, though, is that in this moment, while these thoughts are floating around my head, there is one person I'm not really thinking about. Myself. I would normally expect Ethan Pascal to be devastated by this, at least on a professional level. After all, this is the election. This is the death knell on my career. But somehow, oddly, inexplicably, that's not what I really care about.

I *do* feel bad for Cynthia. Christ, what a thing to have out there. She was worried about her legacy. This picture will certainly take care of that. And how the hell am I going to tell her about this? I've had some hard conversations with her in my day, but nothing on this order of magnitude. This is well beyond the hard-conversation zone. There's no name for this zone. Hell, this zone doesn't even exist; it hasn't been invented yet. I refold the picture and place it back in my pocket. I'll talk to Cynthia soon. But not yet. I'm just not ready for it.

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When I get back to the room I give Murray my copy of the *Post*.

"Thanks, buddy," he says, his eyes alight with excitement. "What a treat. You want a section of this?"

"Think I'll pass for now, Murray. Enjoy."

Murray sets about carefully dissecting the paper. He plucks out the advertising inserts and sets them on the floor next to his bed. Then he reassembles the paper section by section. When he opens the front page, he does so with delicate fingers, taking care not to wrinkle the paper.

I'm sitting in my plastic vigil chair watching Murray read the paper when I hear a murmur come from the subject of my vigil. One of Eric's eyes flutters open, the left one. His right eye is still swollen so that he can only manage to pry it open enough that I can see a sliver of light reflected in it. He immediately sets to work nibbling at his dried out lips. He looks to his right, toward Murray who's still reading the paper. Then turns his head toward me. He opens his mouth and says in a crackly, atrophied voice, "Whoa, dude."

When Murray hears Eric's utterance, he laughs from behind the Metro Section. Murray's laugh is deep and booming, punctuated by the remnants of the phlegmy cough I heard last night. I can't help but laugh along with him.

Eric blinks widely, as if the strangeness of the things he's seeing might be enough to make him slip back into a bleary unconsciousness.

"Where am I, sir?" Eric asks as if he's still wary of his own reedy voice.

Though he's awake and coherent, at least marginally, he still looks beat. His one open eye is sunken so deep in his skull it's hard to tell what color it is. And his cheeks have a hollow, anorexic look to them.

"You're in the hospital, Eric," I say. "You've had a pretty rough couple of days."

"That explains some things, I guess." Then he looks back at Murray, who's folded his paper in half and is now twisting his bulky body to regard Eric. Eric stares at Murray, as if he's some larger than life figure that requires a few minutes to absorb and comprehend. I can see him looking at the long, matted beard, the gray braid of hair snaking across the pillow.

Then in a confidential whisper, Eric says to me, "Is that God lying on the bed next to me?"

"Not as far as I know, Eric. But Murray's a pretty good guy in his own right."

Eric nods once, as if this explanation is all he really woke up for. "If it's okay with you, sir, I think I'll go back to sleep for a while."

"Be my guest. I'll be here when you wake up," I say, but I'm pretty sure he doesn't even hear the end of my sentence before he's out cold again.

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Eric sleeps for another three hours. When he wakes up this second time he looks better – he's able to open both his eyes now – but he seems to have forgotten our last, brief conversation, because he scans the room with a look of confusion before his eyes finally rest on me.

"I think I'm going to need a little background, sir."

"Background?"

"Yeah, like where I am, and how I got here. For starters."

I tell him what the doctor told me and Eric nods as if he's hearing this all for the first time. "You remember any of that, Eric?"

"Not really. The last thing I remember was getting you out of jail." Then he pauses a moment and looks sheepishly around the room. "As I recall, I wasn't terribly pleasant with you." He rolls his eyes and I notice a bloodspot that's pooled in the white

of his right eye. I've seen people with this happen after they've been in a fight, and I know it doesn't actually hurt after it's there, but I can't keep my right eye from watering in sympathy.

"Don't think about it another minute, bro. You didn't say anything I didn't deserve. In retrospect." I dab at my eye with one of the Kleenexes Sylvia gave me. "Besides, getting the crap kicked out of you pretty much gives you blanket immunity for all sins. Retroactively."

Eric nods once. "Well, I'm still sorry," he says in a subdued voice.

"*I'm* sorry, Eric. I'm sorry for all the shit I put you through."

Murray clears his throat from the other side of the newspaper. "Well ain't that sweet. I love to see family burying the bad blood."

"Family?" Eric asks, raising a ragged eyebrow.

"Long story," I say quickly. "Very long story."

"Well, as long as I'm awake, you want to tell me what I've missed? With work and all?"

My hand reaches nervously for the folded piece of paper in my pocket. I take one corner and roll it back and forth between my thumb and forefinger. "Let's see," I say. "Where to begin? Well."

"Sounds like this is going to be bad news."

"Pretty much, yes. But I *can* say I have a pretty good idea what may be going wrong with our campaign."

"What's that?" he asks, his enthusiasm audibly growing.

"You know what, you've been through a lot in the last day and half. Maybe it's best if I let you rest before we talk politics."

Murray snaps his paper shut and looks across the room. "Ah, come on, man. Just tell us."

Eric and I both look over at Murray who's leaning over the edge of his bed toward us. He runs a twitchy hand through his long matted beard. "You're killing me over here," he says.

Eric looks back at me. "Yeah, you're killing me over here, too."

“Well,” I start to say, then stop because I have no idea how I intend to finish that sentence. I pull out the dreaded fax and unfold it. I regard the picture for a moment. For the first time, I see something definitive in the image of the woman with the exposed breast. My eyes trace the strangely familiar shape of her face. And then something happens. Some kind of order emerges from that chaotic jumble of pixels to reveal a discernible shape. Suddenly, there is a quiet, coalescing reason to this picture. And the truth behind this reason is so shocking that my hand seizes up and I drop the paper onto the linoleum floor. I sit back in my plastic chair and stare up at the ceiling tiles. “Holy shit,” I breathe slowly, more to myself than anyone in the room.

The woman whose lap Cynthia is sitting on, whose exposed breast Cynthia is cupping so gently in her hand, is Congresswoman Shelly Korelli. The first term Republican from Minnesota. The employer of the current youngest Chief of Staff in the U.S. House of Representatives, my arch-nemesis, the fanged frog, Clay Tarcher.

I blindly retrieve the paper from the floor with shaking hands to reconfirm this revelation. It’s true. The ink has not shifted. The image is still there. So clear now that I wonder how I didn’t notice this before.

“Could you please just tell me, sir?” Eric says, almost whining. Silence. “Earth to Ethan. Come in, Ethan.”

I look up from my picture. “What did you just say?”

“What?”

“Ethan. You just said my name.”

“So?”

“So, that’s the first time you’ve ever said my name.”

“No it’s not. I use it all the time.”

“I don’t think so, Eric.”

“Well if it’s such a big deal, I won’t do it anymore.”

“No! It’s good. I like it. Keep up the good work.” I then go back to looking at the picture in my shaking hand.

“Are you going to tell me or not?”

I hold my finger up without turning from the picture. “Hold that thought a minute, Eric.” I stand quickly, shooting my plastic vigil chair back against the wall. “I

just remembered I've got a call to make." I swoon for a moment under the effects of a sudden head-rush. Then I turn to leave.

As I'm walking out, I hear Murray say to Eric, "He is a strange one, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Eric says casually. "But you get used to it after a while."

I walk swimmingly down to the waiting room on wobbly legs, which still feel weighted with my own blood. The waiting room is deserted, but it feels too public for the conversation I'm about to have. I get in the elevator and go down to the basement. Finally, I come across an old style row of phone booths in some dingy, dimly-lit corridor. I grab the heavy-handled receiver and fight the shakes as I punch in Cynthia's cell phone number. It rings once. Twice. Three times. Four.

"Hello?" Cynthia's voice sounds annoyed, as if I've caught her in the middle of something important, which I probably have.

"A fucking Republican?" I say breathlessly, the sound of my own beating heart audible in my voice.

"Ethan, is that you?" she asks, her annoyance-level increasing. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm a pretty open guy, Cynthia. But I really cannot believe you'd stoop to dating a Republican."

The line goes quiet, so quiet that I'm thinking it might have gone dead. Then I hear a slight wheeze as if the person on the other end is having an asthma attack.

"Cynthia, are you all right?" I ask.

Another solid minute of silence. Another short wheeze. Then, "How did you find out?" Her voice is strangely pinched as if she has something caught in her throat.

"I have a picture, Cynthia. Let's call it a compromising picture."

"Jesus H. Christ," she hisses. More silence. Then, "Well, isn't that just like taking a bite of a big old shitburger?"

"Um. Yeah. I guess so."

"I suppose you want an explanation," she says.

"Not really."

“Well, I’ll tell you. My husband, bless his soul, was a shithead. I was young when we married and that kind of thing wasn’t even talked about in Havre when I was growing up.”

“Well they talk about it *now*,” I say, though I know that this comment doesn’t help either of us out much.

Cynthia ignores my interruption and continues. “So when the kids were growing up, I buried that part of me. And then Earl died and here I was in Washington, DC.” She breathes out a slow, jittery breath. “Ethan, I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you. I’m so sorry you had to find out like this.”

“Cynthia, don’t apologize. There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

“So I guess I should plan to see this in the papers. I should probably tell the boys about it before they see hear it from someone else.”

“I wouldn’t worry about the media. Claiborne’s playing this one and he’s only going to be as loud as he absolutely has to be.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“So what do we do?”

“First of all, you can tell me what possessed you to date a Republican,” I say. “I thought you had a little more taste than that.”

Cynthia can’t help but chuckle at this, which makes me a little happy to see that she at least hasn’t lost her sense of humor. “We all make mistakes, Ethan. Shelly and I are broken up now, if that makes you feel any better.”

“Marginally.”

Neither of us says anything for another full minute. “So,” she says at last, “I assume you’re avoiding telling me the ultimate conclusion, which is that we are now officially fucked.”

I contemplate this ultimate conclusion, this inexorable fate. But something about what Cynthia said, or perhaps something in the tone of this entire conversation, sets off a chain reaction in my head, a string of random intuitive leaps. Little, wild idea molecules are beginning to cluster together in some dark corner of my brain. I don’t know what to make of this hazy halo of particles, but I’m smart enough to recognize it as *something*.

“You know what, Cynthia? Up until about five seconds ago I would have agreed with that conclusion unequivocally.”

She breathes in sharply. “But?”

“But something in me is preventing me from saying that just yet?”

“What are you talking about, Ethan?”

“Well, I have this scale, see. And on that scale a 10 is utter political disaster, right? The Extinction Level Event, if you will.”

“And this is a 10?”

“True. But think about this. When that Extinction Level Event strikes – maybe it’s the giant killer comet or maybe it’s that big-ass volcano – but whatever it is, it kills everything right?”

“Right.”

“Wrong. They want you to *think* it kills everything, but it doesn’t. The cockroaches survive. Oh sure, the cockroaches get through it just fine.”

“Ethan, why does that sound like we’re going to do something I wouldn’t approve of?”

I think about how to answer this question. “Relax, Cynthia. You yourself will not do anything you’d disapprove of. Hell, you’re one of the good guys.”

She clucks her throat. “I know *I’m* one of the good guys, Ethan. It’s *you* I’m not so sure about.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Murray says I’m one of the good guys too. It’s just that different good guys do things in different ways.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Cynthia, stay on your schedule. Let’s pretend this conversation never took place. Hell, it *didn’t* take place as far as I’m concerned.”

“I guess I can live with that. But what *are* you going to do?”

“I’ve got a lot of work to do on this end.”

“Okay?” she says, as if she can’t quite believe this conversation is over, as if she can’t quite believe how optimistic I’m sounding despite the news I’ve just given her.

After I hang up the phone, I contemplate my next course of action. First off, I need to talk with Eric before I go back to work. I need to make sure he knows I’m not

abandoning him again. It seems important that he understands this; and it feels important that I get his approval before I re-enter the cold, outside world.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When I get back to Room 1213, I find both John Does sleeping. They breathe in long, synchronous snores that resonate like waves crashing on a beach. Their room has the quiet, sanctuary-like air of a church during a weekday. I sit down in my plastic vigil chair, listening to the sonorous background noise, contemplating my next few moves. For the first time in a long while, I actually see some order taking shape in what lies ahead. It's like I'm standing over a chessboard and I'm able to see all the pieces lined up. I can visualize moves, strategies, plots, schemes. I can almost see the future, though that future only consists of the next few days, no further. Still, even foresight beyond the next few minutes is a welcome thing. At this point.

"At this point of *what*?" Eric murmurs from the bed next to me.

Eric is staring at me intently, his bottom lip folded under his teeth. It occurs to me that my thoughts had me so distracted I lost track of how long I've been sitting here. Nor was I aware that I was thinking out loud, which, by my count, is the second time this has happened to me in as many days. "How long have you been awake?" I ask.

"Just a few minutes. You looked pretty intense."

"I'm a pretty intense thinker," I say.

"Who knew?" He smiles momentarily. Then, "Are you ever going to tell me what you found out that's making us lose this campaign?"

It's not that I think he can't handle it. In fact, I'm sure he can. It's just that after talking with Cynthia, I realize how personal this whole thing is. How real it is for her. And I have to respect that. No matter how much I trust Eric, and no matter how much he actually deserves to know, I can't tell him. "Eric, I would love nothing more than to tell you. But..."

"But?"

"But this is the kind of thing that might be like the union bugs. You'd almost rather not know."

"Whatever," he says. Then he looks across the room and makes a pained sound like he's trying to clear his throat.

“Listen, Eric, I’ve had you do a lot of – how shall we describe them? – marginally legal activities in the past few weeks.”

“Marginally legal? How about straight-up *illegal*?”

“You’re probably correct there.”

“So why stop now? Is it because I’m injured? You don’t think I can handle it now?”

“Relax, Eric. Please. I’ll still be making you do illegal shit. More so than ever.”

“Really?” His smile stretches his chapped lips taut.

“Oh sure. Illegal, and this time maybe even productive.”

“Hey, there’s a new word. *Productive*.”

“Yeah, I just thought of that. *Productive*. It has a nice ring to it.” We both stare off at the far wall, enjoying the sound of that word in our ears.

“So wait,” Eric says, looking around suddenly as if he’s just realized he’s lost something. “What are you still doing here?”

“I wanted to make sure you were all right before I took off,” I say, which is at least partially true, but avoids going into the full-on emotionally-mushy details.

“Are you kidding me?” he asks.

“Uh. No.”

“Holy crap, man!” he says, slapping his thigh with his left hand. “Get out of here. Now.”

Then from behind the curtain, Murray chooses this moment to pipe up. “Yeah. Holy crap, man! Some of us are trying to get some sleep while it’s still cold outside.”

So, as any good actor would do, I sense that my time on stage has come to a close. “On that note,” I say, dipping into a formal bow, “I take your leave.”

“Ay-ay, Ethan,” Eric says. He tries to give a mock salute, but his IV-ed hand can’t quite make it around the tubes. So instead, he nods his head gravely.

In the hallway I check my watch and see that it’s now four in the afternoon. Not much point going into the office for what I need to do next. Besides, I have no convenient disguise to get past the Capitol Police, assuming I’m still banished from Capitol grounds, which is probably a safe assumption at this point. So I take the elevator back down into the bowels of the hospital and I wander around until I find the bank of

phone booths I used this morning to call Cynthia. This time, however, when I dial, my fingers are steady and confident across the buttons.

“Congresswoman Shelly Korelli’s office,” a receptionist chirps in a perky voice. “How can I help you?”

“Yes, I need to speak with Clay Tarcher, please.”

There’s a slight pause, and then, “Mr. Tarcher is in a meeting right now, can I take a message?”

Chiefs of Staff have a certain set of buffers when it comes to random incoming calls. Standard operating procedure is to say the Chief of Staff is in a meeting or that he’s just stepped out of the office. That deflects the bulk of the stray calls into the voicemail bin where they’re vetted and then either returned or discarded. But, being a Chief of Staff myself, I know there are ways to circumvent these piddling defenses. It’s like knowing a secret handshake.

“Actually, this is a rather urgent call,” I say. “Could you please take a note into the meeting?”

The receptionist’s voice catches a moment, unsure how to deal with this request. Then, reluctantly, “I suppose I could do that.”

“Please tell Clay that his old friend Ethan Pascal needs to speak with him right away. Please explain that I understand he’s busy and that I would only interrupt him because I need to discuss a matter of *utmost* importance.”

The receptionist puts me on hold and I listen to their twangy hold-music for a few minutes before she comes back on the line.

“Hang on one second, Mr. Pascal. I’ll put your call through now.”

A series of clicks before the line rings once and Clay Tarcher picks up. “This better be good, Pascal. Because I’m not in the mood. At all.”

“Clay! Wow! Thanks for taking my call, man. It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“What the fuck do you want, Ethan?”

“I was just thinking it’s been ages since we last spoke. You know, young guy to young guy.”

He lets out an exaggerated huff. “I don’t have time for this, man,” he says. “Some of us have campaigns we’re actually trying to win.”

“Please, Clay. Your attitude is a little coarse, don’t you think?” I’m just playing with him now. Pushing his buttons. And I have to say I’m enjoying it immensely.

“I’m hanging up now, prick. You know, you’re lucky I even *took* this call.”

“Actually, Clay, I’d say *you’re* lucky you took this call.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because I have something here I think you’d be very interested in seeing.” This is the critical juncture. I don’t want to tip my hand just yet. The element of surprise is going to be one of my biggest weapons, and I’d like to hang onto it as long as possible. But I still need to get Clay to meet me somewhere. I’ve got to play this part delicately.

“Ethan, I highly doubt you have anything that would be of *any* interest to me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, buddy boy,” I say, forcing the most condescending tone I can muster. This sudden tone shift stops him short. He doesn’t say anything for a brief second. So I dive headfirst into that silent space, “Let’s just say I have a piece of paper. And let’s just say, for the sake of clarity, that this paper is a compromising one.”

“What the fuck are you trying to say?”

“The way I see it, we have two options, Clay. I could either meet with you tomorrow to discuss the paper in question. Or I could make a call to the political reporter over at the Minneapolis Star-Tribune. It’s up to you.”

“What are you getting at, Pascal?” he asks. A twitch of curiosity creeps into his voice. I know I’ve got him. The hook is set. As I stand in the phone booth, I can feel my face flush; I place my hand against the glass door pane for balance.

“How does noon tomorrow sound?” I ask, though it’s more a statement than a question.

He doesn’t say anything, but I can almost hear the sound of his helplessness on the other end of the phone.

“Let’s meet at Fandango,” I say.

Muffled sounds. Then, “Where the hell is Fandango?” His voice betrays a panicked edge as if he’s afraid I might hang up before telling him.

“Adams Morgan.”

“I don’t know where— ”

“Used to be a place called the Root Cellar.”

“Okay. I’ve been there before.”

“Great! Then it’s a date.”

I hang up the phone before he can think to ask me any more questions. And I trace the outline of the imprint my sweaty hand left on the phone booth door.

I know if I were actually billing my hours today, it would only come out to five minutes of actual work. Still, you can’t judge an artist by how many paintings he paints. You have to look at quality. And I can’t help but feel like that conversation, on its own, constitutes a good day’s work.

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At home that night I’m lying in bed, trying to sleep and not doing a very good job of it. If I were being completely honest about it, I’d say I’m nervous. I mean, now that I’ve got some idea of what lies ahead, there’s actually some pressure on me to produce. I haven’t felt that in a while now, and it feels strange, like I’m wearing a someone else’s suit. I toss around in bed, trying to find a position that lends itself to a calm mind. But, as I said, I’m not having much luck.

After a half hour of staring at the ceiling, I begin to hear voices again. I try to remember the last time I heard mysterious voices in bed. And when I finally *do* recall that incident, I realize the voices are coming from the deck outside my room.

The deck timbers are wet and cold on my bare feet. A steam cloud hovers over the hot tub like an isolated weather event. Jasper is in the hot tub again and it isn’t until I’m standing at the edge of the tub, and the steam wafts clear for a moment, that I see the face of Nicole Titian cozied up next to Jasper’s. I can’t help but smile. Here at last, I think, is a match made in heaven. These two are absolutely perfect for each other.

“Ethan, my man,” Jasper cheers over the bubbling of the hot tub jets. “How the hell are you?”

I’m assuming he knows little or nothing about Nicole’s and my sordid past, and I see no reason to tell him now. Just as I see no reason to mention Jasper’s last late night hot tub paramour. What was her name? Celine? With an accent over one of the e’s, or maybe the i? The point is, neither of these facts seems worth mentioning at this moment.

“Jasper, Nicole,” I say smiling broadly, “it’s so great to see you both.”

“Likewise, amigo,” Jasper chirps. “What’s doing?”

Nicole drifts away from Jasper slightly, apparently embarrassed by my sudden materialization in the fog.

“Not much.” I try to nod to Nicole to let her know there are no hard feelings, but I’m not sure she picks up on my subtle gesture through the steam.

“I hope you didn’t get into too much trouble over the film shoot,” Jasper says, his voice bordering on true genuineness.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.” I bend down and test the water with my fingers.

“How’s the filming going?”

“Excellentè. We just wrapped yesterday. You’re not going to believe how well it turned out.”

“I’m sure I won’t believe it.”

“And Nicole, here. She turned out to be a major talent.”

Nicole coos demurely and slides back over to Jasper. “I couldn’t have done it without an excellentè director,” she says.

“This is all great news,” I say, trying to be buoyed by their optimism.

“What about your campaign, man?” Jasper asks. “How’s it looking?”

I flick the water lightly with my finger. “We might be in the middle of a development. I’ll keep you posted.”

“It’s about time!” Jasper claps his hand across the surface of the water, spraying Nicole in the face. “That’s fucking superb.”

Then all three of us fall silent for a few seconds and I know my time out here has expired. It’s time for me to leave this stage now, but I feel strangely compelled to linger, like I haven’t delivered all my lines, and I can’t quite remember them either.

“So,” I say at last, “is there going to be a wrap party? Now that you’re done?”

“Let’s not put the cart before the horse, old-timer. Still got the editing to do. Plus we have to mix the sound. Oh wait!” Jasper stops himself mid-fantasy. “I meant to ask you, do you think you could get your friend from Death Maarch to let us use one of their songs on the soundtrack?”

“I’m not sure if Dewey would...” I start to say. “I mean. Sure, why not? I’ll talk to him.”

“Sweet ass!” Jasper cheers. “I think this could be the kind of partnership that’s mutually beneficial for both parties. Death Maarch *and* Prometheus Productions.”

“Oh sure,” I say. “It’ll be a regular old synergy thing.”

“You got it, buddy,” Jasper says, as usual, either oblivious to or ignoring my sarcasm. “And then, *then* we’ll have a wrap party the like of which ye have never seen.” He waves a pruny hand across the horizon as if he needs this physical gesture to truly capture the enormity of the event.

“And of course, you’ll be one of the guests of honor, Ethan. You and Nicole are my secret stars of this film. Definite scene-stealers.”

“*Scene-stealer*. I kind of like the sound of that.” I finger the water one last time and I stand up and pull my bathrobe tighter around me. I wave goodnight to this strangely perfect couple and I lightfoot it back over the cold deck to my bedroom.

I fall asleep immediately this time. And, as with the last time Jasper was in the hot tub with a late night paramour, I don’t wake up when they come back inside.

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When I walk into the dark of Fandango a few minutes before noon, I’m pleased to see that the only person in the place is a surly-looking bartender who’s standing behind the bar, but looks like he’d be equally at home at the door as a bouncer. His eyes follow me as I walk through the gloom as if any second he expects me to stop short and ask him for directions. I set my jacket on a stool at a table in the farthest, darkest corner of the bar. When I order a vodka martini from him, he grunts noncommittally and sets about mixing my drink.

I’m sitting at the table, one hand on the stem of my martini glass and one hand in my pocket fingering the corner of Snuffy’s fax, when the wraith-like figure of Clay Tarcher slips soundlessly into the bar. He stands in the door frame a minute, letting his eyes adjust to the dark. Then, when he sees me, he saunters up to my table with a composed air of nonchalance.

My earlier appraisal of his appearance has proven accurate. His complexion is sickly-green; his face has the unformed look of a premature baby. His teeth are sharp-looking, as if the only thing they'd be good for is ripping and tearing flesh. He's wearing a sharp navy suit and a crisp white shirt. His striped tie is knotted tight at his throat.

"Don't you want a drink?" I ask, tapping the edge of my glass.

He smiles at me. "See, that's the difference between you and me, Pascal," he hisses. "I'm actually *serious* about my job. I can't afford to get drunk when I know I have work to do."

"Clay, I think you should reconsider. You really ought to have a stiff one for this. Hell, I'll even buy." I nod over toward the bartender/bouncer.

"Good old Ethan," Clay says. "Everything's a big joke to him." He whisks his tongue across his teeth. "Oh well, I can play along if you like." Clay walks over to the bar and orders a screwdriver. When he sits back down, he takes an unsteady sip and wipes his upper lip with his index finger. "Now can we get this over with?" he asks impatiently.

I decide to dispense with any more formalities. I've gotten him into position. Everything's line up. Now it's time to drop the hammer. I take out Snuffy's weathered fax. I unfold it delicately. I set it on the table in front of me.

"Before I show this to you, let me assure you that copies of it are sitting on my fax machine as we speak. They're *in the can*, I guess you could say." I push the paper across the smooth, black surface of the table to my arch-enemy. Clay slides his screwdriver out of the way with the back of his hand and picks up the paper. "Let's see what game tired, old Ethan wants to play now," he says through his fangs. He holds the fax to the light and hunches over to study what I've just given him.

The initial shock hits Clay Tarcher in the form of a tremor that starts just below his waist, as if some mysterious hand has reached out, grabbed his balls, and squeezed. Twenty seconds later, his eyes bug. I shit you not. They actually bug out, like a frog who's run out of breath. Without taking his eyes off the picture, he dumbly grabs for his screwdriver and drinks it halfway down in a desperate gulp. Little pieces of orange pulp ring the glass as a reminder of the former level of his beverage.

Then Clay leans back slightly and his nose twitches as if he's trying to decide whether to sneeze or throw up. "Oh god," he whispers, with a slight gag in his voice. He sets the picture on the table and looks around the bar unsteadily. Then, seeing the dimly-lit restroom sign, he bolts for the men's room. The ensuing noise from within that room lets me know he's decided against sneezing, in favor of throwing up. Long chundering wretches, followed by dainty coughs and plaintive *oh god's* emanate from behind the door marked *Men*.

The bartender/bouncer shoots me a cautionary glare, as if Clay's condition is somehow my fault.

"Kid has a hard time holding his liquor," I say, throwing back the last of my martini.

"I don't want any trouble here, pal," the bartender/bouncer says.

"Of course not. No trouble here." I order another martini and ask for a glass of ice water. I tip him an extra dollar and this seems to placate him, at least for the moment.

When Clay finally emerges from the restroom, he's dabbing his lips with a wad of toilet paper. And his face – if this is possible – has taken on an even deeper shade of green.

"I got you a glass of ice water, Clay," I say, sliding the glass toward him. Clay takes it and gulps it down. He sets the glass back on the table and holds it pinned there as if this gesture might somehow also have a steadying effect on his mind.

"What are you going to do with that thing?" he asks, pointing an accusing finger at the paper on the table between us.

"That's a pretty good question, Clay. I mean, this is already out of the closet – so to speak – in Montana. So it would seem that you have a lot more to lose from this than me."

All Clay can do is stare witlessly at me and grind his sharp teeth, so I shift my weight in my stool and continue.

"But I'm a pretty good guy, I think you'll find. So I'm going to leave it up to you what we should do with this."

"What do you want?" he asks. His voice croaks weakly.

“There *is* one thing I’d like from you.” I take a swallow from my fresh martini and set the glass back on the table. “I want names. Lots of them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“GOTV lists. Republican voters in Montana. I know the RCCC has a pretty extensive database. And I’d like to get my hands on it.” This is a shot in the dark, somewhat. The Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, like its counterpart, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, has voter ID lists. Just how extensive the RCCC’s lists are is open to debate. Right now I’m *hoping* they’re very extensive, which isn’t out of the question.

“How do you expect me to get my hands on the *Montana* voters list,” he says, his voice rising to a new panic octave. “Shelly’s district is in *Minnesota*. No way they’ll let me have the Montana list!”

“Clay, Clay, Clay.” I shake my head like a disappointed parent. “Come on now. I’m sure a weaselly guy like you can find a way to weasel those lists. It can’t be *that* hard.”

Clay breathes out a long bilious breath that makes his cheeks puff. The game is over. He’s broken. Not one more ounce of fight left in him. He sits in his chair like a piece of de-boned meat. So I figure now that he’s down, why not get in one last kick while I still can.

“I’d like the lists delivered to the apartment directly above this bar by close of business tomorrow.” I say this as if it’s an item I’m checking off my grocery list.

“Close of business tomorrow?! No fucking way!”

Out of the corner of my eye I can see the only other witness to this meeting stiffen behind the bar, the bouncer aspect in him nascent, readying itself for trouble.

“Relax, Clay. I have faith in you. Yesiree!” I take another sip of my martini. “I believe in you. One hundred percent.”

“Close of business tomorrow,” Clay repeats, this time without a hint of protest.

“You got it, old buddy.”

I retrieve the fax paper from the table, fold it and slide it back into my pocket. “Well, I think this meeting is finished,” I say, looking at my watch. “And look at that. Just under twenty minutes.”

Clay looks morosely at his half-finished screwdriver, as if he really wishes he had the stomach to hold it down.

“Don’t look so gloomy, Clay,” I say, clapping him hard on the shoulder. “We’ll see each other again some time tomorrow. Before close of business, of course.”

Clay regards me with burning eyes of hatred. I can tell he’s trying to think of something to say. Anything. He’s wracking his brain and coming up with nothing. Poor Clay. If he were a little more astute, he might try telling me that my analness is getting into his zone. That would at least salvage him *some* measure of dignity. But Clay’s a young guy, after all. At least a few months younger than me. And a comeback like that is something you can only learn through experience. So I leave him there, sulking over the remnants of our meeting, in Fandango, which used to be called the Root Cellar, way back when.

Maybe it’s the two martinis that are now coursing through my bloodstream, or maybe it’s the exhilaration of sheer victory, but as I walk out, I can’t help but feel that I’ve once again shown that I know how to steal a scene.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

In Chaos Theory, it is understood that to make predictions is a wasted effort. If you knew what was going to happen and when, well, it wouldn't be chaos. At least that's what people thought for a long time. That was the commonly held assumption. But slowly, over time, observers of chaos, began to notice something odd. Peering into the hazy depths, they began to see a mysterious phenomenon that cut through the heart of chaos and changed the way we understand it. An example: Say you have a closed space with molecules flinging themselves this way and that, with no discernible order. Each one buzzes along its own path without regard for any of the other millions of molecules around it. At first blush, everything is random, everything is arbitrary. But when you stare more deeply into this chaos, when you begin to observe it in greater detail, you start to see patterns develop. Maybe those individual molecules tend to cluster around one point. Maybe they form an amorphous, shifting pattern, but a pattern nonetheless. Maybe those molecules start to fall in line with the dictates of some unknown, unseeable force. It's like one of those Magic Eye posters. After a while, with the right perspective, you begin to see layers of uniformity. Delicate patterns. Subtle repetitions. You see chaos willed into order by forces we can't begin to explain. This phenomenon, these inexplicable forces are known as Strange Attractors. They are the ultimate fighters of chaos.

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"Can you please explain to me why you're having these lists delivered to *my* apartment?" Dewey asks as he dumps milk over the bowl of cornflakes he's just poured for himself. Death Maarch had a gig last night, so Dewey's hair is wildly pillow-slicked. He's wearing a white t-shirt that says "Underachiever" in black letters. I'm not sure if the shirt is a prop left over from last night's show, or just a general statement of fact.

"It's all part of a delicate plot I'm weaving," I say, taking a sip from the cup of coffee I've just brewed in Dewey's coffee machine.

“That’s not a real answer, Ethan.”

“Oh, you wanted a *real* answer?” I say. “You have to be more specific next time.”

“Nice,” Dewey says, sitting down at a card table in the kitchen and digging into his cereal with an oversized spoon.

“Okay, I’ll level with you, Dewey. I’m blackmailing a Republican staffer – who happens to be my arch-nemesis – into illegally giving me the names and numbers of every Republican voter in the state of Montana. I couldn’t very well have these lists delivered to my office. And in case something goes funny – which it won’t – I couldn’t very well have them delivered to my house. So I needed a place that has absolutely no connection to politics.” I hold out my hands in a gesture that indicates that this place, this mess of an apartment, is exactly what I was looking for.

Dewey has stopped mid-bite, with his milk-dripping spoon poised over his bowl.

“Plus,” I add, “it’s all part of a delicate plot I’m weaving.”

Dewey shakes his head and resumes his slurpy breakfast. When he’s done, he tosses his spoon into the bowl with a rattly clang.

“I’m not sure I completely follow why you want Republican names in the first place,” he says, as if this is something he’s been thinking about for a while now. “I mean, what good could that possibly do you?”

“Good question, Dewey,” I say, because it is. “I’m actually still working on the *why* part right now.”

Dewey nods as if this is the most sensible thing I’ve said all day.

We spend the afternoon hanging out in Dewey’s apartment. He’s reading the autobiography of Geri Haliwell, aka Ginger Spice. Every once in a while he’ll let out a sharp chuckle and then turn the page. I occupy myself by getting more and more nervous as the hours pass. Every few minutes, I ask Dewey if he thinks Ginger wrote this book herself. He responds to my questions by saying it’s too soon to tell and then going back to his reading. I admire his concentration. I wish I could focus on something like that right now. I’d kill to read an autobiography at this moment, even if it was Geri Haliwell’s, and even if it was ghost-written.

I wander the various dirty rooms in the apartment and stare at the movie posters on the walls. When I come to Dewey's bedroom, I see the face of Marlon Brando staring down at me with eyes that seem strangely benevolent to me now.

"Hey, you know I did a little research on *Apocalypse Now*," I call out to Dewey who's still in the other room.

"Oh yeah?" he asks, curiosity apparent in his voice for the first time today.

"Yeah. You know it was never actually released in Vietnam."

"What?" I can hear him set his book down; a second later he walks into the room.

"Yeah. They were going to release it. But there were all these protests and death threats. Right?" It occurs to me as I relate these facts to Dewey that I'm basing all this on Eric's memo, which may or may not be true. "It turns out they had to yank the film just before the release. And it's still never been officially released there."

We stand in front of the poster, both of us with our arms crossed, regarding the poster as if it were a priceless work of art, which at this point, may be true, if what Eric told me is true.

"How did you find that shit out?" Dewey asks still staring at the poster.

"I've got my sources."

"I'll bet you do."

"You know, Dewey, you should really look into appraising that thing."

He shrugs noncommittally. "Yeah, well, next time the 'Antiques Roadshow' comes to town, I'll be there with bells on."

Just then the doorbell rings with a two-note, off-key clang. Dewey and I both freeze, our arms still folded across our chests. We swivel our heads to look at each other.

"You get it!" I say, panicking. "No. I'll get it. Wait. Yeah. I'll get it!"

I scamper through the bedroom and the kitchen and I jerk Dewey's front door open. A bike messenger stands before me. He's wearing ankle length tights, a biking shirt and headphones. He bobs his head to the beat of the music – which sounds like some kind of thrash metal – as he digs through the oversized satchel slung over his shoulder. Eventually he pulls out a brown-wrapped parcel the size of a shoe-box.

“I’ve got a delivery here for a Mr. F. Wad!” the bike messenger shouts over the music in his ears.

F. Wad. Good old Clay. That salvages him *some* dignity. And I’m glad for him; he’s entitled to a little dignity. I sign *F. Wad* on the delivery sheet and I take the package from the bike messenger’s hands. I try to hold his gaze for a moment.

“Young man,” I say in my best stage voice, “you might have just saved this country from going to war.”

The bike messenger looks at me as if I’ve just broken some unspoken rule of etiquette. “What?” he says, pulling off one of the earphones and craning her ear toward me.

“I said, ‘Thank you very much.’”

“Oh,” he says, his voice lowering to a conversational decibel. “You’re welcome. I guess.” Then he turns and clacks down the front stairs. I stare after him until he’s pedaled down the street and out of sight.

Inside the brown wrapping paper, I find a note.

As per our conversation, please find the enclosed. Don’t even dream of fucking me, you prick!

Love, Clay.

The shoebox contains twelve CD’s, each blank except for a few letters, A-C, D-F, and so on, in a clean, nondescript hand-writing. I finger my way delicately through the CD’s as if they’re ancient relics.

Just as I reach U-Z, Dewey comes into the kitchen wearing a dirty smock that says *Java Junkyard* on it.

“You get what you wanted?” he asks, pouring himself a cup of coffee from the pot I brewed earlier.

“Dewey, I dare say it looks like I’ve struck gold.”

He leans over me to look at my CD’s a minute then shrugs, unimpressed. “So what are you going to do with them now?”

“I dare say I’ve got some ideas, old buddy.”

Dewey drains his mug of coffee and sets it on the card table. “Well, let me know when you’re ready to share.” He ties his smock behind his back. “In the mean time, some of us have work to do. Lock up when you leave, will you?”

“Check,” I say, putting the lid back over the CD box. “Hey!” I call out, stopping Dewey before he can open the door to leave. “I meant to ask you if we could use a Death Maarch song in the movie I’m part of.”

“And what movie would this be?” Dewey asks, clearly finding the fact that I’m involved with a movie to be a humorous – if not startling – revelation.

“Well, my housemates have a production company studio called Prometheus Productions, see. And they’re making this film called *Wheels of the System*, which is about a dyslexic bike messenger named Sly.” I choke the words off there, suddenly aware for the first time in a while of exactly how stupid this whole thing sounds.

Dewey cocks his hip to one side. “So is it any good?”

“Well. *I’m* in it,” I say. “And I’m told I stole my scene.”

“And that’s supposed to be an endorsement of some kind?”

“Oh right. I forgot who I was talking to for a minute.” Then, when he doesn’t say anything, “So? Can we?”

“Well, I can’t just say yes or no like that. I’ve got to talk with the band. And I should probably meet these bozo roommates of yours.”

“Fair enough,” I say.

“Now, if you please, I really have to get to work.” Dewey starts to turn for the door, but another quick *Hey!* stops him short again.

“Do you mind if I use your phone?” I ask.

“Why don’t you use your cell phone?”

I stare at him with an annoyed air, as if to say I’ve already explained this when I explained why I needed to use his apartment in the first place.

Dewey, bless his heart, picks up on the implication in my stare. “Just don’t make any long distance calls,” he says, jabbing a finger at me. “And no 900 numbers either, prick,” he adds. Then he shakes his head as if he can’t believe how permissive he’s becoming – especially toward me – in his old age.

Dewey leaves and slams the door behind him.

A quick dial on the phone. Two rings.

“Hello, DCCC,” a voice says with an official air.

“I’d like to speak with Sheila Woodworth.”

“Who’s calling?” the voice says, suddenly suspicious.

“Ethan Pascal.”

There’s a pause followed by a few clicks that sound like something’s being punched into a keyboard. Then the line transfers and rings again.

“Ethan Pascal, fancy hearing from you after all this time.” Sheila’s voice is warm and rich and immediately puts me on guard. It’s the kind of tone someone uses when they’re holding a baseball bat behind their back.

Sheila Woodworth is the DCCC’s point person on Western U.S. House races. She’s the person you talk to when you need something done. Anything. She’s the kind of person who could be your best friend in the middle of a campaign when you really need a favor. In fact, now that I think about it, do you remember when, a while back, I said I reserved the right to add anything else to the list of things I did *not* do last week? Well, calling Sheila would definitely make that list. Because, the fact is I haven’t spoken to her in months, which was a big mistake on my part; and one that is guaranteed to place me far outside the zone of her good graces. Still, she’s actually accepted my call, so that’s a positive sign.

“Yes, well, I *meant* to call, Sheila. It’s just that, you know, I’ve been fairly busy.”

“Busy?! How could you be busy? You’re getting your *ass* kicked in that race!”

Okay, so she’s a *bit* mad. “Sheila, let’s not overstate things—”

“Jesus Christ, I could have maybe helped you two weeks ago. But now? Shit! Now there’s barely two weeks before the fucking election.”

“Sheila, I understand. It’s just that, well, some unforeseen things have come up recently.” Though, to be honest, I’m not even sure of what particular unforeseen things I’m talking about anymore.

“So explain to me exactly *why* you didn’t call when these unforeseen things came up.”

“Because I thought they were best handled in-house.”

“Ha! I really can’t believe this shit. It’s like a fucking game to you, Ethan. Do you realize it isn’t just *your* ass on the line? Do you realize *I’ve* got to produce? And a whole line of people ahead of me are counting on this. This isn’t some fucking city council race. This is bigger than Ethan Pascal! Fuck, it’s bigger than Cynthia Mahoney!”

That’s quite enough, thank you. I’ve taken the abuse I probably deserved. I’ve sucked it up. And now I’m done sucking it up. When I next speak, my voice is a low growl. “Sheila, I’m going to say this once, so please listen.” The tone of my growl stops Sheila mid-rant, so I proceed into the ensuing, artificial silence. “I’ve got some information. Lots of it. And now I need phones. Clean phones.” Clean phones are phones routed through untraceable watts lines. Free long distance, and they don’t come up “Unknown Caller” on caller ID screens – telemarketers would kill to get clean phones. The DCCC always has some set up in DC for last-minute campaign needs.

Sheila, upon hearing me use that term, sucks in her breath sharply, then lets it out in short bursts with a staccato pursing of her lips. “How many clean phones are we talking about?”

“As many as I can get.”

“That could be quite a few, Ethan.”

“That’s what I was hoping.”

“No, Ethan, I’m talking like *eighty*. I could get eighty clean phones. If I thought it was worth it. If I were convinced they’d make a difference.”

“Sheila, I can’t go into the why or the how, but I can assure you, without qualification, that these phones will not be wasted.” I realize I’m holding the receiver too tightly to my face and I can smell other people’s bad breath on the mouthpiece.

“Eighty? Are you sure? How are you going to put bodies on all those phones? Do you have some pot of money I don’t know about?”

“No. We won’t be outsourcing these calls.”

“You’re going to get volunteers? For eighty lines?” I know she’s posing these thoughts as questions, but the tone of her voice tells me she isn’t planning to believe my answer.

“You’d be surprised at what a popular guy I am, Sheila. Seriously. I’m a regular man of the people.”

She cackles into the phone so loudly that I have to hold the earpiece away from my ear. “Man of the people. Ha! That’s the best one I’ve heard in weeks.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d appreciate that,” I say.

There’s a pause on the line and I can tell Sheila’s making up her mind. She’s weighing her options, the consequences of giving me those phones. She’s determining whether or not our beleaguered campaign is worth this kind of commitment. And in this moment, it occurs to me how, in life, you can only do so much. You can only work and scheme and struggle so far. And then, at that point, you have to hope for a little luck, and the kindness of those around you.

“Okay, Ethan. You got it.” There’s brief silence in which it sounds like she’s already regretting this decision. “You said you had some information. What is it?”

“Sheila, I can’t get into it.”

“I figured.” Her voice sounds morose.

“You won’t regret this decision,” I say, trying to boost her spirits.

“You know, this is probably going to cost me my job, Ethan.”

“This is politics, Sheila. All of us are one loss away from losing our jobs.”

Sheila grunts at the trueness of this point. “The phones will be ready by Friday afternoon,” she says abruptly as if waking up from a daydream. “I’ll call you later with the location of the phones. And, as usual, we never had this conversation.”

I say, “Sheila, you wouldn’t believe how many conversations I haven’t had in the past few weeks.”

But it seems she’s already hung up before I could finish that statement, because all I can hear is a click and the lifeless sound of no one on the other end of the phone line.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Friday morning. I'm driving down Florida Avenue in the Beefeater, which has finally started now that it's warmed up a little outside. With the snow melted, the city is left with a fine dusting of sand on all the streets and there's an overall brown, dead look to the place. But I don't have time to pay attention to the scenery. Not now anyway. I'm heading to the hospital and I just got a hold of Brooke on my cell phone.

"Where have you been, Ethan?" The staticky connection makes her sound like she's talking underwater.

"What? You know I've been at the hospital with Eric."

"Yes, but don't you think you should have checked in? Or answered your cell phone? Or at least come into the office once in the past week?"

"I've been on a vision-quest," I say, gunning the gas to scoot through a yellow light.

"A vision-what? Where is that?"

"Never mind, Brooke. I need favor. I need you to set up a staff meeting for me."

"A staff meeting?" she asks, as if Ethan Pascal requesting a staff meeting was about the last thing she expected to hear this morning. Which it probably was. "I don't know if that's such a good idea, Ethan."

"Why's that?"

"Let's just say the natives are restless," she says. "You haven't been in here in a while. And, well, I tried to cover for you, but they're about a blink away from outright mutiny."

"Nonsense, my dear," I say, sliding the Beefeater into the right hand lane, cutting off a cab, which honks angrily at me.

"Ethan, I wish I were kidding. But they're about to burn you in effigy."

"Well, at least they're fired up about *something*."

"It's not good, Ethan," Brooke says, her voice leveling into a flat, frank tone.

"Staff meeting. Ten o'clock this morning," I say, matching the tone she's just taken with me.

“You realize that’s in forty minutes?”

“Yes, I do,” I say as I pull into the hospital parking lot. “Get the troops assembled. I’ve got a battle plan.”

“Are you sure about this, Ethan?” she asks, but I snap the cell phone off without replying, hoping that the abruptness of this gesture might show her just how sure of this I am.

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Eric’s door is open a crack, and through it I can see him sitting up in his hospital bed, staring out the window on Murray’s side of the room. He’s fiddling his hands on his lap and working his lips over with his teeth, alternately biting at them and licking them with this tongue. They shine purple and bright.

“I get out this afternoon,” he perks when I push the door open and sweep into the room.

“Yeah, me too,” Murray chimes from his bed across the room. “Looks like it’s warming up pretty good outside. Right, captain?”

“It’s definitely warmed up, Murray,” I assure him.

“Good, good.” He leans back in his pillow as if he intends to get every possible minute of sleep while he’s still in here. “Yep, it’s time for me to get back on the road again,” he says through a deep exhale. Eric and I watch him for a moment, drifting into what will be his last warm sleep for a while.

Eric points at the black case I’m carrying under my arm. “What’s that?” he asks.

“A laptop.”

“What’s it for?”

“This is the part where I put your lazy ass back to work.”

Eric’s breaks into a grin. “I’m ready to go, Ethan,” he says. His face has healed up nicely. The bruised traces of his black eye are almost gone now, and the cuts have withered into tiny scabs. The only real evidence of his injury is a faint line that circles beneath both eyes, slight shadows that make him look vaguely older, a touch more world-weary. These markings look out of place on this young person lying in bed before me,

like a kid with a cigarette in his mouth. But I figure these markings are something he'll grow into, over time.

"What's the plan?" he asks, his voice crackling with excitement.

"Okay, pay attention because this is going to be a little confusing." I clear my throat carefully. "Persuasion calls."

A crack of disappointment creases Eric's face. "That's it? Aren't persuasion calls pretty standard stuff?"

"True enough. But not like this. See, Cynthia has maintained for some time now that she does not want us to go negative in this campaign. She wants to keep it clean. She's been *adamant* on this point, despite every objection I could possibly raise."

"Check."

"But she's said nothing about not running a positive campaign," I say, holding up a finger as if this is an important distinction I'm making.

"Isn't that what we're already doing?"

"What you have to realize, Eric, is I'm not just talking about some regular old positive campaign here. I'm talking about a *really* positive campaign. *Ridiculously* positive. *Insanely* positive."

Eric cocks his head to one side, still unsure of where I'm going with this line of thought.

"Here's what I'm thinking: What would happen if your average Joe Hunter Republican in Montana got a phone call from, let's say, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, endorsing Claiborne?"

"What!" Eric shouts. "PETA endorsed Claiborne?"

"Good god, no. But what if this person got a phone call from PETA ordering him to vote for Claiborne?"

"I'd bet Joe Hunter Republican would be pretty confused."

"Yes. And then after that, he might get pretty pissed off."

Eric leans forward in his bed. I can almost see his mind making the next intuitive leap. "And they might think twice about voting for Claiborne," he says as if he can hardly believe what he's saying.

“Exactly. They might not vote at all. Or they might vote for some third party candidate. Or they might even vote for good old Cynthia Mahoney because at least she isn’t lined up with those freaks from PETA.”

“Holy shit,” Eric breathes through his worked-over lips. He leans back onto his pillow.

“Holy shit, indeed. Because all of those options mean good things for dear old Cynthia.” I pause there for a dramatic inhale. “Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“I guess so,” he says, biting at his lower lip. “But PETA? I mean, come on, isn’t that a bit hard to swallow?”

“That’s where you come in, my friend. PETA is an example I thought of off the top of my head. Your assignment is to write up as many fake phone scripts for as many different organizations as possible.”

A bolt of nervousness shoots through Eric’s eyes, and I can almost see him squirm under the newly-realized weight of this responsibility.

I reach out and set my hand on his shoulder. I feel his thin, bird-like bones through the blue hospital gown. “Eric, I know you. I know what you’re capable of. Everything you’ve done with me so far has prepared you for this.”

He nods gravely. “How many scripts do you think we’ll need?”

“More than you’ll be able to write in the next two weeks. So a conservative estimate would be infinity.”

Eric swallows hard.

“Do you think you can do that?”

“What about you? Why don’t *you* do these? Or at least help me with them?”

“I’d love to, Eric, but I’ve got to find enough people to fill eighty phones, fourteen hours a day, for the next two weeks.”

He whistles. “Wow, I’m not sure whose job is worse.”

“I’m not sure either, old buddy. But if I have some spare time I’ll help out.” I set the laptop across his lap. “By the way, your first shipment of scripts is due this afternoon by two.”

“By two?”

“At least twenty of them.”

He looks up at me unsteadily, his blond bangs falling boyishly over his nervous eyes. But I can see something else in him. Perhaps it's the lines of wear that this hospital stay has delicately etched below his eyes, or perhaps it's something else entirely, but I can see a kind of resoluteness in this kid. A determination. A will. And it gives me hope to see this.

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In the Beefeater, now parked at the Capitol, I change into today's disguise to get past security. This morning I found the costume for Sly the Dyslexic Bike Messenger at 325 Garfield. So that's who I'll be today. A faceless, sweaty bike messenger, the most overlooked and ignored of Capitol Hill denizens. For most people, bike messengers are right up there – or down there, rather – with drifters like Murray, hardly worth a second glance. The ultimate disguise for a fugitive like me infiltrating our nation's Capitol grounds.

Once I'm spandexed up, I throw Sly's satchel over my shoulder and cross the street to the Canon Office Building. These clothes are a bit tight in several spots, making me look like an out-of-work superhero. But I know that now is not the time for critical self-analysis.

There's a long line of staffers waiting in line at the entrance to the building. It takes ten minutes before I'm even close enough to see that the hold-up is due to the metal detectors not working today. The Capitol Police are checking each bag by hand. Opening them up and feeling their way through them. The people in line in front of me grumble and curse under their breaths with every shuffling step they take toward the entrance.

I'm fifteen minutes late for the staff meeting by the time I finally reach the non-functioning metal detectors and hand my satchel to the police officer on duty. The cop unbuckles Sly's canvas satchel and sinks his hand into it, as if it's a cereal box and he expects to find a prize at the bottom. He's a youngish cop, the youngest member of the Capitol Hill Police force I have yet to encounter. His hair is spiked rigidly in a

militaristic crew cut that makes him look like a bristling hedgehog. He looks like he takes his job seriously. Too seriously. He feels around in my bag for a few seconds and then gets a strange kind of look on his face. He pulls out a handful of clothes. Specifically *my* clothes. Ethan Pascal's suit and tie, which I'd been planning on changing into before the staff meeting.

"You got clothes in here?" he asks, clearly expecting to have found the usual bike messenger's documents, envelopes, packages and pager. He regards the grayish fabric of my suit and then looks up at me as if he's trying to fathom what possible connection a bike messenger could have to this formal attire.

"I got a job interview this afternoon," I offer. But I can tell he doesn't hear me. His eyes are locked on my face. They hold my stare in a vice-like grip. He's flirting at the dawn of recognition. His bristles are standing on end.

"Hold on one second," the young cop says, shaking a loose finger. He moves toward his desk, which I'm guessing contains a fax with my picture and a caption that says something like: *banishèd until further notice*.

And that's when I know I need to bolt. I stuff my clothes back into Sly's satchel, and grab it by the shoulder strap. I take two cautionary test steps, then launch into a flat-out sprint, my satchel flapping behind me like a comet's tail.

Running in these biker's shoes is harder than I would have imagined. They've got this plastic toe-piece that I guess is supposed to lock you into the pedals, which probably makes for efficient biking, but which also makes for pretty crappy sprinting. I feel like I'm running in tap shoes. I'm twenty yards down the hallway when I hear a shout, a crackle of a walkie-talkie, and a desperate, breathless call for back-up.

With my non-satchel-bearing hand, I grab at a door leading to a set of service stairs and I clamber down into the basement of the Canon Building. The bowels of these office buildings are twisted and confusing, and they're probably my best bet for eluding capture. It's the kind of place where, at every dark turn, you expect to find yourself in Freddy Krueger's boiler room. It's hotter down here too, as if this one floor below the surface is sufficiently closer to hell to make a noticeable difference. I take a few rights mixed with a left or two down the dimly-lit, cement corridors – enough to get myself sufficiently lost – before I figure it's safe to walk.

Okay, Ethan. Deep breath. Figure this out. This isn't funny anymore. That's for sure. This is way beyond funny. God knows how many cops are looking for me right now. Prowling the halls, weapons drawn, searching for the intruder in these hallowed hallways. If they catch me, I am fucked. Royally fucked. Maybe it was a mistake coming back here again. Perhaps I pushed my luck a touch too far. But the things I need to do have to be done in person. The damage I've caused has to be repaired by me. I have no choice. Looking at my watch, I'm now thirty minutes late for that staff meeting.

I hear footsteps hollowing down a new corridor, and I freeze. I try to blend into one of the concrete walls, which doesn't work so well, considering my neon spandex biker's outfit. The footsteps tap off down another unseen corridor and drift out of earshot. It's time for me to adopt a new persona. And, given my limited options, I figure why not try the persona that's so obvious, so in-their-faces, it might just be the only persona that could actually fool them at this point: Ethan Pascal, Chief of Staff. I find the darkest hallway I can and huddle myself into a corner and begin changing into the suit that started this latest debacle. The spandex doesn't peel off easily, and my already-sweaty state doesn't get any less sweaty. Which doesn't make it any easier to re-dress once I've peeled the spandex from my body.

Just as I'm pulling my suit pants up, I hear the clank and creak of a dungeon door opening behind me. I turn toward the door, a placating smile plastered on my face for the arresting police officer, perhaps even welcoming the sting of a stun gun, or the bite of a bullet. Instead, a woman with an enormous beehive hairdo and thick pancake makeup staggers through the open door as if she's just woken up from a forty year sleep. She sees me and freezes in time for me to complete the zip-up of my pants. She waits there, uncertain, trying to remember which one of us is supposed to apologize, or perhaps determining if now would be a good time to scream. Her thick make-up gives her the isolated look of an albino, someone who's never seen the light of day, doomed to forever wander this subterranean world.

I say, "Man, is it ever hard to find a restroom in this place."

The woman pulls back her make-up laden face in an exaggerated scowl. "Eeeew," she says. She turns away from me in disgust and staggers down the dark hallway toward wherever it is she's going. I follow her shaky steps and her wobbly

beehive with my eyes until she's out of sight. I stash Sly's satchel in the hallway and locate another set of stairs so that, in this new disguise, I can head back up to the surface to attend my staff meeting, to take care of business.

I walk the brightly-lit halls of the Canon Office Building with my hands in my pockets and my stare fixed on the marble squares of the floor. Two different shifty-eyed cops prowl by me heading the opposite direction, but it's clear the dragnet is still looking for Ethan Pascal as Sly the Dyslexic Bike Messenger, and not Ethan Pascal as Ethan Pascal, Chief of Staff. They walk past me without giving me a second glance.

When I get to the office I blow past Chippy the intern who's still answering phones in Eric's absence. "If the cops show up, I'm not here," I say to her just as I'm pulling the back office door closed behind me. I don't wait to hear her response. In fact, I realize my appearance in the front office was brief enough that I managed to not even put a dent in Chippy's effervescent demeanor. My presence was more like a hiccup she didn't expect and whose actual existence she is now left to question.

By the time I throw open the doors to the conference room, I'm a full forty-five minutes late for the staff meeting. During my absence, a kind of playful mirth has descended upon my staff. Our natural resources aide, Steve Kotek, and our mail sorter, Jesse Panoni, are playing table-top football with a folded-up paper triangle. The others are leaning back in their chairs chatting and watching this football game as if it's Sunday morning at Wimbledon. But the unexpected thunderclap of the conference room door snapping against the doorstep causes my staff to instinctively and collectively claw at the top of the conference table and rigidly fix their attention on me, their leader. I sustain this air of authority over them for a few seconds before a familiar brand of hatred seeps back into their eyes. They have a focal point for their rage now. They turn their ugly stares on me full-blast.

But I don't feel them. Or, if I do feel them, it is only to notice them, and nothing more. I am impervious to their hatred. I step into the conference room and up to the table, assuming my position at the head. It occurs to me I haven't prepared anything to say. I've got no speech to work from. Not even an outline.

"People," I say, holding my hands in the air like I'm some kind of televangelist. "I know you have a lot of complaints. I know you rightly are probably wondering where

the hell I've been, and what the hell I've been doing." Some head nods, a few stone-faced stares, and one quiet, anonymous "*Duh.*" I look carefully around the room, making contact with every set of eyes. "Let me tell you, I have not run away from you. Or if I did, it was for a good reason. And the reason I'm here now, is that I've come to ask for your help. It is true that the last poll taken had us down six points to our opponent. And that is not an easy deficit to come back from. Not in *any* election. Certainly not in the two weeks and three days that we have left before *our* election. But I've come to tell you that there is a way. Yes, a way. No guarantees, obviously. But I know how we can possibly win this election. It won't be easy. Certainly not. And if we are to succeed, it will require something you haven't had to do in a long time."

Then I launch into the sacrifice portion of the speech I tried to give at our last staff meeting. This time, though, I know what I'm talking about. I'm delivering my message with confidence, and – dare I say – competence. And my staff is listening to me. Intently. Gone are the faces of hatred and rage. They actually seem interested in the words that come out of my mouth. I realize part way through this speech, that I'm not even following the outline I'd prepared last week. I'm making this up. Riffing on my own ideas, bridging them with points and arguments I've never thought of before. Occasionally, a head nods at the trueness of something I've just said. And Brooke, throughout the speech, is smiling – a great, wide, proud smile that reveals everything about her right down to the snaggletooth that winks at the corner of her mouth.

When I'm done talking about sacrifice, I tell my staff that we're transferring all our operations to the warehouse where the DCCC has our clean phones set up. The intern out front, Chippy, will stay here to deflect all calls, meetings and inquiries in their absence. I tell my staff that we will be engaging in *Operation: Clean Campaign* from now until the election. Making phone calls will be the entirety of their responsibilities for the next two weeks and three days. When I'm done saying all this, I sit down in my chair and slump across the table, exhausted. It isn't until this point that I realize – with a sureness I'm not accustomed to in this life – that that was it, I was in the zone. *The zone.* The one Michael Jordan talks about. The one Buddhists strive for. That place where the mind is complete emptiness, complete stillness.

And in the stunned silence that follows my oratory, there comes a few disbelieving claps. No shit! It's a smattering of applause. More confused than anything. And probably started by Brooke. But applause nonetheless. And I'll take that. Yes, I definitely will.

But before I can really bask in the glow of this victory, I hear agitated voices coming from the front office. Chippy is arguing with someone who has a low, official-sounding voice. I hear my name mentioned once followed by some muted pleading from Chippy. So they've finally figured out that Ethan Pascal, no matter who he's disguised as, is probably here, at Ethan Pascal's office. I applaud their sleuth-work. Very impressive. And now I know the time has come for me to flee.

I am Zorro. I am Robin Hood. I am the Incredible Hulk. I do good deeds, and then I must resume my life on the lam, my life lived at the margins.

The staff sitting around the table have all heard the argument broiling out front, and they've begun to rubberneck over my shoulder to get a better ear directed toward the action. I scan their faces one last time, pulling them back into my orbit, and I say, "On that note, I'll see you this afternoon for *Operation: Clean Campaign*." I wave my hand across my chest with a flourish. "And if anyone asks," I say, "we never had this conversation."

They nod their heads stiffly and watch as I slip out of the conference room. I then slink into Cynthia's office and slide through the side door which leads into the hallway. Once there, I walk casually among a group of foreign tourists until I get to an exit. It occurs to me, as I walk back out into the day-lit world, that I'm getting pretty good at this cloak and dagger stuff. Scary good.

But, while I'd love to stand here and gloat or strut or whatever, I realize even with my entire staff making calls, I've only booked about fifteen phones full-time. That still leaves sixty-five empty. And that's going to be a tall order to fill. Even for me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The warehouse is located just west of Union Station, next to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, down the street a few blocks from the CNN building. From the outside, the warehouse looks like just about every other nondescript, anonymous building in this city. It could house some forgotten branch of some obscure governmental department, or it could just as easily be a low-income apartment complex. In fact, I have a peculiar kind of *dejavu* about this place, as if I've actually been here years ago for computer training or a campaign meeting or something. Of course I could be wrong; all these buildings look the same: gray, low, and boring. And yet this place seems like as good a place as any to make my last stand.

Inside, the warehouse is gutted, stripped down. Four long rows of black telephones are lined up on fold-out banquet tables. Bare bulbs, hanging from the ceiling by extension cords, shed a shifty light over the center of the room. In one corner a computer hums crankily on a card table. Wires and cables run in thick tangles along the floor into mouse hole-sized openings in the walls. The shape of the room is long and rectangular, not unlike the overall shape of the Broken Barrel Bar, the one in DC, the one that used to be called the Larval Stage. The place has a makeshift, temporary feel that seems very appropriate for our cause. Hell, *every* campaign has a makeshift, temporary feel. It's just that ours – this one in particular – seems more so.

My staff will be here in forty minutes. I sit down at the first phone on one of the rows of banquet tables and I pull out my "Lovely Puppies" address book [author's note: this item will appear several times earlier in the novel]. The spine is broken and distended like a snake's unhinged jaw when it's trying to devour a rat. Scraps of paper and business cards stick out on all sides. One of the lovely puppies, the one who's sitting inside a white roller-skate shoe, stares out at me with its pug nose wrinkled up to the bottom of its eyelids. A sprig of black and brown pig-tailed hair grows straight up off its head like a weed.

"What are you looking at?" I ask of this particular lovely puppy.

It doesn't answer, but continues to stare out at me from its nest inside the white roller skate shoe. Spurred more by the impulse to stop looking at this image than anything else, I open the book and start to scour through it.

So here I am, selling vacuums again. No matter what I do in politics, I'm still just selling vacuums. This time the only difference is I'm selling them to friends. Or acquaintances. Or at least people I've met before. I don't know if this fact makes what I'm about to do easier or harder.

Lily:

"Ethan, it's been a long time," she says after I've introduced myself a touch too formally.

"Yes. It has."

"How are you?"

"You caught me in an hour of need, believe it or not."

"Wait a minute. *You called me.*"

"Oh, right," I say. "So I guess *I* caught *you*, in an hour of *my* need."

"Hmmm," she says, as if this small exchange confirms a number of suspicions she's held for a long time. "What do *you* need?"

"I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important, Lily."

"That's part of the problem, Ethan," she says, her voice threatening to betray some buried but unforgotten anger. "Maybe if you bothered me with things when they *weren't* important, it would have made a difference a long time ago. Maybe if you'd opened up when you had a chance." She pauses there, collecting herself. "Do you see what I mean?" Her voice sounds tired now, no longer angry.

"I think I know that now, Lily."

"Do you? Do you really?"

"Yes."

"Good," she says quickly. "Then maybe our relationship wasn't a total waste."

We both pause there, absorbing this give and take, trying to understand what it means in terms of our shared history.

"Lily, I think I can win this election," I say at last, daring to move on.

“Really?” she asks. Her voice sounds genuine, even upbeat.

“Yes. But I need help. I need volunteers.”

“How many volunteers?”

“Lots.”

“Well, I’ll help you,” she says. “I still want to see you do well, believe it or not.”

She pauses again, as if she’s writing something down on her end. “Wait a minute. Why don’t I talk to the staff at the *Untamed Shrew*. [Author’s note: this is the underground newspaper Lily works for. It will be brought up several times earlier in the next draft.] They’re militant enough they’ll want to help out a congresswoman. Even if *you* happen to be her Chief of Staff,” she adds, apparently unable to resist this last dig.

“Listen, Lily, I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have called. I don’t want to put you in a weird—”

“Stop, Ethan. Stop. Don’t worry. This is good. It’s a good step for us.”

And I suddenly find myself overwhelmed by Lily’s generosity, her magnanimity. This woman I’ve hurt in so many ways, who can still find it in her heart to help me in my hour of need. I blubber for a moment and then finally manage to get out, “Lily, you’re the best.”

“I know,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Hey,” she says, “what are friends for?”

Dewey:

“You want me to help you by making phone calls? *You?*” he says, as if Ethan Pascal requesting a favor from him is about the funniest thing he’s heard all week.

Which it probably is.

“That’s the gist of it, Dewey.”

He makes a sound like he’s cracking sunflower seeds in his mouth. “Give me one good reason why I should help you out.”

“Because if you help me out now, I’ll never hit you up for another ride home from Dulles for as long as I live.”

“Not good enough.”

“Okay. How about because even your sister said she’d help me out.”

“Getting warmer. But still not there.”

So I think about this for a minute, staring up at the bare light bulb swinging gently above me. “Because, Dewey,” I say. “Because I *love* you.”

There’s an abrupt spitting sound on the other end, followed by a long, sustained peal of laughter. When he finally collects himself, he says, “How about this? I’ll make those calls if you promise to never say those words to me again.”

“It’s a deal.” There’s a pause for a moment where neither of us knows quite what to say next. “By the way, Dewey, what do you think the rest of Death Maarch has planned for the next two weeks and three days?”

“Goddamn, you *are* a weaselly prick.”

Jasper:

“We’re almost done with the editing, old buddy,” he says.

“That’s good news! I can’t wait to see the director’s cut.”

“Well, that’s not all. Listen to this. I’ve been talking with a producer friend of mine who seems pretty interested in distributing *Wheels of the System*.”

“Even better,” I say, though I’m not sure I’m quite ready to join Jasper in this far-flung realm of fantasy-land.

“Yeah, we’re definitely getting some good lovin’. I hope you’re ready to be famous. And I mean *really* famous. Like rock star famous.”

“Jasper, who’s really ever ready to be *that* famous?”

“True, true...” he says as if he’s thinking he might actually be ready to be that famous.

“So now that you’ve pretty much wrapped things up there. What do you think the rest of Prometheus Productions’ staff is up to?”

“What do you mean?” His voice is suddenly suspicious now that I’ve pushed the conversation outside his particular realm of fantasy-land. “Wait, why is it you called again?”

“Well, I’m guessing they have some free time now that production on *Wheels* has finished.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I mean, before we get rolling on our next project, of course. Why do you ask?”

“Very good question, Jasper. See, I need a little favor.”

Spenser:

“Phone callers?” he says, his voice rising into a thin-air crescendo. “That’s easy, man. Just put out an ad in the Personals. That’s the best way I know of getting people mobilized. A buddy of mine once organized a whole march to protest the use of MSG in fast food products using only the Classifieds.”

“Really?”

“Shit, *you’ve* read them, man. Those people don’t have real lives. Most of them have nothing better to do than help out a fellow Classified Communicator. Most of them, it’d probably be the most fun they’ve had in years.”

“You think?”

“Shit, man, I’ll do it myself. I’ve got a bunch of favors saved up with those guys.” Spenser thinks about it a minute hums to himself as he jots down an ad on a piece of paper. He reads the message out loud when he’s done.

Doughboy Requests: Get out of your basements! Shut down your computers! Mobilize to the sound of the clarion call of a good cause. Help a fellow in need. Call for details. –Doughboy.

“I’ll talk to some people who know some people,” he says after he reads me the script he’s hashed out. “I’ll see if I can’t get it placed tomorrow morning.”

Miranda:

“My speech went over well at the WABA convention,” she says.

“I knew you’d be great. It’s an easy crowd. Just focus on the wells.”

“Well, let’s just say I owe you one.”

“Funny you should say that, Miranda.”

“Oh?”

“The way I see it, WABA has already made a monetary contribution to Cynthia’s campaign. Why not—”

“Yeah, I heard you called and hit us up for money on Tuesday.”

“You did?”

“Sure. The only thing I couldn’t figure out was why you hadn’t done it sooner.”

“Well, Miranda, I think I know a good way to make up for lost time.”

Mother:

“You see, mom, Roy even said that if you guys could help me out at all, I should ask.”

“When did he say that?”

“We had a talk when you guys were here.”

“You did?” She sounds both surprised and pleased to hear that Roy and I had a moment of intimacy that neither of us mentioned to her.

“It was the kind of bonding moment only a son and his mother’s husband could have.”

“Well that *is* good to hear,” she says with a slight hum in her voice.

“And I think we can both agree that, as a son, I haven’t asked for much. Until now.”

“That is true. You’ve always been the self-sufficient type. Too much so sometimes.”

“Mom, I figure you do so many good deeds with all the charitable organizations and committees you head up in Keene, why not take on just one more very good deed here in Washington?”

“Yes, but we’d have to come all the way down to Washington for that, dear. That’s not an easy trip for Roy and me.”

“I know that, mom. But you should think of it as an educational tour. This is your chance to see how politics really works. On a grass roots level.”

“Well...” she says.

“Hell, you should talk to your Civil War Battlefields tour group and sell them on this. I bet they’d jump at the chance to be part of a real campaign.”

“Well...” she says again.

“Mom, I’m begging you. I know we don’t always understand each other. And I know you don’t always approve of what I’m doing. But I’m seriously on my knees here, begging you to help me. You can’t turn your back on your only son now, can you?”

I’m expecting her to respond to this last overture with something like: *Don’t try guiltting me into this, Ethan. I wrote the book on guilt.* But instead, she answers only with another soft, measured, “Well...”

I don’t say anything to this latest *Well...* I’ve said all I can. The rest is up to her. I listen to the fuzzy silence that builds between us.

“Let me talk to our travel group,” she says at last. “Maybe we could take the train down from White River Junction on Sunday.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear, Mom!”

“And would it kill you this time if you picked us up at the train station?”

+++++

During the course of my phone calls, I have been only peripherally aware of the buzz of activity that has convened in the room around me. Eric showed up a little before two with a stack of scripts he’d written up this afternoon. My staff showed up at two, and the quiet empty warehouse began to fill up with the sounds of voices calling Republicans in Montana. Everyone did all these things without the slightest bit of direction from me, as if they were robots who’d already had their mission hard-wired into their circuitry. By the time I got off the phone with my mother, the warehouse was ringing with activity, brimming with life and energy. In the span of a few minutes, this warehouse became a nerve center, a command post. A War Room.

Enthralled by this transformation, I’m now wandering the War Room, glancing over the hunched shoulders of my staff. I linger behind each of them just long enough to pick up snippets of conversations, long enough to know that they know what they’re doing. Then I step back and take in the sounds of their calls as a whole, let the individual

noises elide into a kind of sweet music. It sounds pretty good. Pretty good indeed. But if I'm honest about it, this music is the sound of a chamber quartet. Not a full symphony. Not yet. My staff takes up enough spaces to occupy one row of banquet tables. The rest of the phones lie in their cradles, inert and useless. My newly-acquired recruits haven't begun to show up yet. And they probably won't be here in force until tomorrow. So what better way to do my part than to do a little calling myself. I grab several pages from the voter ID lists Eric has printed out. I pick up a script and take a seat at the banquet table with my staff.

"I have a suggestion, if you don't mind, sir," Eric says before I can pick up the phone to dial the first name on my list.

I shoot him an angry glance to let him know I'm not pleased with his back-slide on the *sir* issue.

"Right," he says, acknowledging my look. "What I wanted to say was I was wondering if you thought we might need a few more people on the phones."

"What do *you* think, Eric?" I gesture to the empty tables behind me.

"Because I was talking with Murray this morning before I left the hospital and, well, he said he and some of his drifter friends could help us out. If we wanted."

"If we wanted? Of *course* we want."

Eric rubs his nose sheepishly with the back of his hand. "Well, he told me where I could find them. If we wanted."

"Go, Eric. Get anyone you can find. Be the pied piper of drifters." I jerk my thumb toward the door. "And then get back here and write more scripts."

Eric grins as if I've just told a dirty joke then leaves on this latest errand.

+++++

"Hello. May I speak with Lucius Claymore?"

"Speaking," the voice on the other end says. It's an old, raspy voice. Old and cranky.

“This is Evan Hart with the Montana Labor Council and we believe that only one candidate in the upcoming election will put the needs of Montana’s workers ahead of the needs of small businesses. That candidate is Ross Claiborne.” My voice is bold and fast.

“What’s that now?” he asks, struggling to get his oriented.

“Yes, Ross Claiborne is the only candidate who has the courage to tell businesses that we won’t let our workers be exploited any more.”

“Wait a minute, Sonny. Do you mean to tell me you’d rather let good businesses go under for the sake of workers?”

“That is correct sir. I’m saying that our organization has compared the records of both Cynthia Mahoney and Ross Claiborne, and we feel Ross Claiborne best represents the interests of Montana’s workers.”

Slight pause as this all sinks in. “Well that sounds like a bunch of hooley. I *own* a small business and I think we ought to be doing more to support businesses and bringing new ones into the state!”

“Well, sir, I hope you’ll keep in mind the interests of Montana’s workers, as we believe Ross Claiborne does, and remember this endorsement when you go into the polls to vote.”

“You can bet I will, Sonny.”

“Have a nice day, sir.”

“Good day to you!”

So that’s call number one. Not too bad either. A nice touch that he happened to own a small business. A stroke of luck. Perhaps a good sign. Made the call that much more effective. Before I pick up the phone to dial a new number, I try to imagine how many more of these calls I’ll be making in the next two weeks and three days. I can’t even begin to wrap my head around the figure.

Chapter Thirty

Watching people make their first persuasion calls is a didactic exercise in personality profiling. How a person goes about making those first few calls tells you a lot about them. Some people start off timidly, their first calls like tentative steps on a tight-rope. They check and double-check the phone numbers. They stammer through their scripts in an out-of-breath kind of way. And they let themselves get flustered and bullied by the angry voices on the other end of the line. Lily and the rest of the *Untamed Shrew* staff fall into this category, as do Spenser and most of the Classified Communicators who responded to his ad in the *Post*. Then there's the type of caller who whips through their lists, speed-dialing voters like they're strafing an unsuspecting village. My staff falls into this category, as do about half of the twenty or so drifters Murray brought with him Friday afternoon. Dewey and Death Maarch also fall into this category. Then there is the category of people who linger over each call, milking it, making connections, forming short-lived friendships for as long as the call lasts. Jasper and the rest of Prometheus Productions fall into this category. They're slick on the phone. They eat their calls like they're expensive chocolates. The Well-Baby contingent divides itself up evenly amongst all three categories, not falling into any one more than another. Apparently, it isn't just one type of person who can get stuck at the bottom of a well.

But no matter what type of caller you start out as, everyone eventually ends up the same way. Everyone settles into a succinct, rhythmic pattern of dialing, talking and moving on to the next call. They become immune to the screaming and whining and complaining of the voters. They refuse to get sucked into long conversations, and they refuse to be put off by those who don't want to listen. The calls become uniform, no more simple or complex than they absolutely have to be. And this is when they're most effective.

+++++

“Hello, I’m a volunteer caller for the National Organization for Women, and I want to tell you that Ross Claiborne is the only candidate in this election who will stand up for the feminist agenda. He is the only candidate who we believe will support *all* the goals of feminism in Washington, DC.”

+++++

“Things are going smoothly out here,” Suzanne says over a crackly cell phone which is currently located in an Elks’ Club parking lot somewhere in Central Montana. “When are you coming out to the state?”

“I don’t think I am, Suzanne.” Just then, over the din of voices making calls, I pick out Odette’s shrill voice arguing with someone on her phone – “Don’t be stupid, you must vote for Claiborne...” – and I have to fight the urge to carry on the rest of this conversation in a thick French accent.

“Isn’t it, like, tradition or something for the Chief of Staff to spend election night with the candidate?” Suzanne asks.

“Maybe so. It’s just that we’ve got our work cut out for us over here.”

I hear the sound of a lighter snapping and Suzanne inhaling sharply. She says, “So is that political-speak for: I don’t want to be around when the ship goes down?”

“Actually, no. We really are engaged in something out here. And besides, I’m the one who’s always maintained we have a chance to win this election. And I stand by that statement.”

“Yeah right,” she says snorting into the receiver. “Isn’t this the same guy who told me a few weeks ago to polish up my resume?”

Okay. She has me there. So maybe my confidence hasn’t *always* been as unwavering as I would have liked. “Listen to me now, Suzanne. We still might win this election. You can quote me on that.”

Suzanne picks up on some kind of intensity in my voice because she blows her smoke out in a long, drawn-out exhale. “You really must believe that, Pascal. And you must’ve gotten Cynthia to bite on that bullshit too.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s been a machine on the campaign trail these past few days. I mean really working it. I’ve honestly never seen anything like it. I can hardly keep up with the old lady.”

I tilt my chair back, balancing on the back legs, barely touching the floor with my toes. “Well, she just needed a little motivation. That’s all.”

“Either way, kudos to you for getting her out of her shell. That’s not something you can put on your resume or anything, but you *should* feel good about it.” She stops there, as if she doesn’t trust the solidity of her own voice.

“I’ll take any victory I can get, Suzanne.”

She pauses here to light another cigarette. “One more thing, Pascal.” Her voice is back to its usual gruff self now. “Who is this Snuffy Wentworth guy?”

My legs crumple underneath me and my chair goes crashing forward, almost spilling me onto the banquet table. “Snuffy? Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just that, out of the blue, this guy who looks like he just got done branding cattle comes into headquarters in Helena and says he doesn’t care about sexual orientations, he’s ready to go to work for Cynthia’s campaign.”

“He did? Snuffy?”

“Yeah, and he says he’s close personal friends with Ethan Pascal.” She waits a second to see if I’ll claim friendship with Snuffy. “Is this guy like some gay activist I don’t know about?”

“Perhaps,” I say. “And yes, he is an old dear friend.” I look around the warehouse with a quick back-and-forth glance. “So what did you do with him?”

“What do you *think* I did? I put him to work. I filled up the back of his truck with pamphlets. And he said he was going to lit-drop the Hi-Line. The *entire* Hi-Line, Ethan. Do you know how many little fucking towns there are along the Hi-Line?”

“I think I have a pretty good idea.”

“So what’s the deal with this guy? Can we trust him?”

“Apparently we can.”

“Honestly, Ethan, where do you come up with these people?”

“Honestly, Suzanne? You’d be surprised who you run into when you’re open to meeting new people,” I say, enjoying the syrupy feel of those words in my mouth.

“I guess so,” she says, then clucks her throat as if she’s got a bit of tobacco stuck on her tonsil. “So are you going to tell me what it is you’re doing in DC that’s so important?”

“I can tell you it’s called *Operation: Clean Campaign*. But the particulars of this operation, I’m afraid, are classified on a need to know basis.”

“And you’re saying I don’t need to know?”

“That. And you probably don’t *want* to know.”

“I figured. Just thought I’d check. Hmm. *Clean Campaign*. Sounds ominous. Should I be afraid?”

“Definitely ominous. Definitely be afraid.”

“Well, I suppose that’s a good thing.” A quick exhale. “Listen, Ethan, Cynthia’s about done with this event. I gotta jump. Any messages for the old lady?”

“Yes. Tell her I told her to keep on keeping on.”

“Keep on keeping on,” she repeats as if she’s writing it down. “Got it.”

Eric is hanging at my elbow when I snap off the cell phone, and I wonder how long he’s been standing there. “What do you need, Eric?”

“Well, I figured something out about these voter lists. And I think you might be interested.”

I follow Eric over to the computer that’s humming more quietly now that the rest of the warehouse is full of the sounds of callers.

“See, by clicking on this issue field, we can sort these voters by issue.” Eric takes the chunky computer mouse in his slender fingers and sweeps the cursor across the screen. Two clicks and he calls up a list of voters who identified themselves as anti-pornography voters. Another two clicks and up pops a list of voters who identify themselves as anti-tax voters.

“You can break down these lists any way you like. By any issue you can think of.”

“Do you know what this means, Eric?”

“I think so, but maybe you should tell me anyway, just to make sure,” he says without looking up from the screen.

“It means a good thing just got a hell of a lot better.”

“That’s what I thought it meant.”

“It also means your script writing job just got a hell of a lot harder too.”

“I thought that also,” Eric says, his face strangely illuminated by the pixels of the screen in front of him.

+++++

“Good evening, sir. I’m making volunteer calls for the First Amendment Action League because I wanted to tell you there is only one candidate in this race who will stand up for the right to free speech at all costs. Ross Claiborne understands that defending our right to free speech sometimes means taking courageous stands, including those occasions when he’s stood up for pornography, gay rights, flag-burning, and other questionable issues.”

+++++

My mom and Roy show up Sunday afternoon. I meet them at Union Station, along with four other couples they’ve brought with them for this educational tour. My mom, this time, has seen fit to make reservations at the Hays-Adams Hotel downtown. She says Lily’s fold-out was murder on her back last time she was in town. Though I’m pretty sure this is her own polite way of saying she doesn’t want to entrust her welfare to my hospitality again.

+++++

“Good evening, sir. I’m calling because I represent the Medicare Preservation Society and I believe there is only one candidate in this race who will protect Medicare over tax cuts. Even raising taxes if need be in order to pay for it.”

+++++

By Monday, the sound of calls has blossomed into the full-throated music of a complete symphony. In fact, we have more callers than we have phones to call with. Which is a luxury I could not have expected. We start working in shifts. Two hours on the phones followed by a half-hour break. Those who aren't calling run lists and fresh scripts to those who are. The whole operation begins to take on the steady constancy of a perpetual-motion machine, or a self-contained ecosystem, a biosphere.

I busy myself by making persuasion calls when I can. Other times I help Eric with scripts. We collaborate on some, though Eric comes up with the ideas for most of them. His script-writing evolves as the days wear on. He is getting more creative, more daring with the texts. He's pushing the boundaries of anything I've ever seen in persuasion call scripts. He's fucking good at this, which gives me some measure of vindication, since I'm the one who thought he could do this all along. I squeeze a little more vindication from the fact that I manage to dream up a few scripts on my own, with generally good results. It's always reassuring to know Ethan Pascal has at least a *little* originality left in him.

Occasionally, when I'm between tasks, I find myself wandering the length of the warehouse, weaving my way through the rows of callers like a silent shadow. During these moments, I marvel at the collection of people in this room. This strange assortment of bodies. Our roster of callers reads like a Who's Who of my life. And here they all are, together, before me. It makes me feel both weak and strong at the same time. And I'm left to wonder, in these moments before I undertake whatever it is that needs to be done next, I wonder why these people are here. Why they would be so generous as to spend these two weeks in a dark warehouse, helping me. *Me* of all people. Do I deserve this loyalty, this devotion? Probably not. Not that I know of. But I will take it. I will accept it gladly. Even if I don't understand it. Even if I *never* quite understand it.

+++++

"Hello, sir. I'm calling from the Montana Land Reliance because Ross Claiborne is the only candidate for Congress who has vowed to make ranchers pay their fair share on the grazing lands they lease from the U.S. Government." Pause. "Oh. No, I was not aware that you leased grazing lands. But Claiborne is only advocating raising the lease

payments so they're comparable to private leases. He believes that everyone will profit by that arrangement." Pause. "You don't think *you'd* profit from that kind of arrangement? Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you, sir. Please keep this endorsement in mind when you go to the polls."

+++++

By next Saturday, a week and two days before the election, I can tell my callers are getting tired. They've been at it now for over a week. But the sheer number of calls we've made is now reaching significant proportions. We're starting to reach some kind of critical mass. I can feel it. And at this point, it seems as if we're all being sustained by the strength and force of momentum alone.

+++++

By Friday, I catch myself trying to calculate how many calls we've made, how many we'll be able to make in the three days that remain before the election. I've never been great at math, and every time I try to scratch out the numbers and multiply them in my head, I lose a zero or I add an extra zero. The figures I come up with are either astronomically large, or embarrassingly small. Neither of which gives me much comfort.

Some people have reached the end of their lists. So I give the order to start calling voters a second time. These secondary calls are intended to be flat-out annoying. No one wants to get a political call the first time, let alone the second or third. I'm becoming more and more convinced that annoyance may be our best weapon in *Operation: Clean Campaign*. And while this technique may technically violate Cynthia's no-negative rule, I decide to let it go. What she doesn't know can't hurt her. And in this case, it actually could help her. Possibly.

+++++

Saturday. Sunday. Monday. We fill these days with phone calls, but time accelerates to a blur. Time slips away from me like water down the drain.

Chapter Thirty-One

I didn't want to spend election night like this. 325 Garfield is packed to the gills for what Jasper insists on inappropriately calling a Victory Party. He stands at the door greeting everyone as they walk in, welcoming them to the "Victory Party" with those oozing good looks of his.

"Jasper, do you realize calling this a Victory Party is like spitting in the face of fate itself?" Jasper just stares at me, dumb-founded. "You're defying every jinx there is, man."

"Okay, then we'll call it a Wrap Party for *Wheels of the System*," he says as if he's being generous. A minute later I catch him welcoming Murray and a few of the drifters to "Cynthia Mahoney's Victory Party."

It's not just Jasper's blind snubbing of the gods that has me on edge tonight. In the past, I've always spent election nights alone. I would make up an excuse that I needed to do some last-minute work at the office, or I'd just slink out of sight and await the news alone. But tonight is different. I feel obligated to hold this party for a couple of reasons. First of all, after making so many calls, I figured I owed my callers something. They needed a change of venue, a reward for all their effort. And second, I sensed a kind of camaraderie developing between the disparate factions of our group. People seemed to enjoy sharing the suffering brought on by two weeks in the trenches of the War Room. They bonded. And I was reluctant to let them all drift away, disperse like individual molecules into their normal lives, without one last night of celebration. Why not prolong this companionship a little bit longer?

Moving through the crowd has become impossible, and I've been relegated to a corner near the kitchen. From this spot I can see the martini-drinking crowd before me. Jasper and the Prometheus Productions crew are joking with Dewey and the Death Maarch crowd. No doubt they are discussing the synergy of getting these two unlikely teams paired up on the soundtrack for *Wheels of the System*. My mom and Roy are chatting amiably with Lily and the *Untamed Shrews* crowd. Spenser and the Classified Communicators mingle with the WABA folks. Murray and the Drifters add a touch of inelegance and a smattering of salty language to each of these groups. In my corner, I

stand with Eric, Brooke, and the rest of my staff. We speak nervously, swapping stories of various notable calls we made in the past two weeks, looking at our watches, trying to ignore the fact of why we're all here tonight.

At 8:45 my cell phone rings and everyone in the room falls silent, straining to hear at least my end of the conversation.

"Ethan," Suzanne says, her voice a harsh whisper. "Have you heard anything yet?"

"Suzanne, this is the third time you've called, and this is the third time I'm telling you I haven't heard a thing."

"Oh. Just checking."

"You understand, right, that we only have national coverage out here. So you're going to know everything there is to know before I do."

"I know, I know. I just thought maybe you might have heard something. Or something." I can hear the snap of her lighter and a long wavering inhale. "You know."

"I *do* know. And, Suzanne, you should really stop smoking. That shit'll kill you." My mother happens to be standing near me when I say this and she grimaces at my egregious use of the word *shit*.

"Don't start now, Ethan," Suzanne says. "Don't you dare even start."

"Tomorrow then. You can quit tomorrow."

"If I thought it'd do any good, I would."

"Call me when you hear something."

I snap the cell phone off and look at the blank faces staring at me. They've heard the conversation. They know I didn't learn anything. But they still stare, waiting for me to confirm what they already know. "No news," I intone over the crowd. They reluctantly return to their conversations and leave me to my waiting.

Eric is sipping a glass of wine. I can't tell if his lips are more red tonight from the wine or from the biting, which has reached a new level of intensity.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck..." he mumbles under his breath.

"You know, Eric, you really shouldn't swear so much," I say.

“I know, Ethan.” He looks up at me through his blond bangs. “It’s just that I keep thinking of good scripts I should have written. Really good stuff, you know? Stuff that maybe would have made a difference.”

I rest my hand on his shoulder. “It’s politics, kid. You just have to put it behind you now.”

“I suppose so,” he says, but I can tell he has not yet mastered the art of putting things behind him. And who has really, now that I think about it. Who really has?

By ten o’clock Eastern Standard Time, we get the first returns. The TV we’ve set up in the living room flashes the numbers across the ticker at the bottom of the screen. Cynthia leads Claiborne by six points – 46 to 40. Everyone cheers these results. Loud boisterous whooping. Pats on the back. Hugs. It heartens me to see how important this election has become for these people. It reminds me of what politics used to be like for me when I first started this business. What does *not* hearten me are the actual numbers. Unlike everyone else in this house right now, I know how votes are counted in Montana. The first returns come from the cities, which always tend to vote more Democratic. The later returns are all rural votes – Eastern Montana, Northwestern Montana and the Hi-Line. I’ve heard stories of ten point Democratic leads disappearing as the later returns trickled in. I was hoping these first results might have us up by double-digits, that would have made me feel a lot better than I do now.

“Great news?” Brooke chimes as she passes me on her way out of the kitchen.

“I guess so,” I say, trying to smile.

“You don’t sound so happy, Ethan.”

“It isn’t over yet. Lots of votes to count still.”

Brooke shrugs. “You’re such a pessimist,” she says, and drifts back out into the living room.

At eleven o’clock we get the next returns. Cynthia’s up by two points – 48 to 46. There is considerably less cheering when these numbers scoot across the screen. Everyone seems to have figured out, as I did a while ago, that Cynthia is now in the unenviable position of trying to hold back the tide.

By midnight, the race is dead even – 48 to 48. People are milling about the party restlessly now, talking less, drinking more. But no one seems tired. No one leaves. We wait around for the next bit of news, as if we are awaiting word of our own shared fate.

With all these bodies in here it's hard to move around. And it's become oppressively hot. I haven't worn a suit and tie for the last two weeks. Tonight I've stripped down to jeans and a t-shirt. I'm still sweating. I have to get out of here. Now.

I slip upstairs to my room and out onto the deck. It's almost one in the morning now, and I can see the entire city stretched out before me. I remember the first time I was up here, six weeks ago, interviewing for a position in this house, which now holds just about everyone I know in this world. It's colder outside than it was that night of the interview. But everything else seems strangely similar. I can still see the Washington Monument illuminated in a floodlit halo. I can still see the skyscrapers of Virginia rising up like headstones across the Potomac. It feels like the city should be different, changed somehow. I know *I* am. I know *I'm* not the same person I was six weeks ago. Shouldn't everything else have changed as well?

I don't notice the cell phone the first time it rings. I hear it, but I don't react to it, as if it couldn't possibly be for me, as if the person calling is most certainly looking for someone else. By the second ring, I drift back into reality. I shake my gaze loose from the lights of the city, and I fumble in my pockets until I find the cell phone.

"Ethan here."

"Ethan Pascal." It's Suzanne. Her voice is low and formal.

"I don't have any news, Suzanne. What is this, the sixth time now?"

"They called the race, Ethan. You'll probably see the results on TV in a few minutes."

"All right," I say, finding myself physically unable to ask for the results. I put my hand on the wooden railing of the deck to steady myself.

When Suzanne realizes I'm not going to actually ask, she begins speaking again. "Ross Claiborne, this evening, lost his upstart bid to unseat two-term Congresswoman Cynthia Mahoney."

"What?"

"You fucking heard me, Ethan! We fucking won!"

“Well,” I say, because I don’t think I’m capable of saying anything else at this moment.

“Are you there? Ethan? Ethan, say something.”

“I, I don’t know what to say.”

“How about Congratulations! How about Who would’ve believed it! How about Anything!”

My hand feels numb at the fingertips. I shake it to get the feeling back. “Okay. Anything,” I say.

“Gees, you turned out to be a real party pooper. I expected a little more than that from a cocky son of a bitch like you.”

“I’m sorry, Suzanne. I’m just. Kind of—”

“Speechless?”

“Yes. That.”

“Well you better figure out something to say because there’s a certain third-term Congresswoman here who wants to talk to you, buddy.”

I feel like I’m breathing too quickly to talk right now. “Suzanne, can you tell her I’ll call her back in a minute.”

“What?”

“I need to take care of something really quickly.”

“All right, weirdo. But call us back. This is too fucking good to miss out on.”

I hang up the phone and heft it in my hand, feel its familiar weight in my palm. Why do I feel so weird right now? I guess I’m just not quite ready to absorb this news. I haven’t prepared myself for this outcome.

“You’re not ready for what?” a voice behind me asks.

I spin quickly and see Brooke standing near the door to my bedroom. She’s holding her hands stiff at her sides and shivering lightly.

“Who were you talking to?” she asks.

“Myself. Just now. But to Suzanne just a minute ago.” I walk toward Brooke and don’t stop until I’m a foot away from her.

“Any news?” she asks, as if she doesn’t expect that there is.

“Yes,” I say, nodding casually. “We won.”

Brooke frowns slightly as if she's deep in thought. "You don't say," she says.
"Yeah, I think that was kind of my reaction too."

We both stand there, our faces that close, and try to think of what we should say to each other.

"So," I say.

"So."

"What do we do?"

"Well, you could kiss me."

"What?"

"You know, for congratulations. That's it." She shoots me a strange warning glance.

I am a man who doesn't need to be asked a thing like this twice. I lean in, slowly at first, then picking up steam the closer I get, and I pant one on Brooke's red lips. Not a great kiss. I mean, there have been better kisses in the course of human events. But it's a solid one. Very solid. A good start. Brooke smiles when I pull back. "Now let's go downstairs," she says in a breathy whisper.

Before going in with Brooke, I take my cell phone and place it delicately on the wooden railing of the deck as if I were putting something to bed. The black hunk of plastic balances there, unmoved by the light breeze that's swaying the trees overhead. I take one last panoramic sweep of Washington. And I follow Brooke back inside.

Walking down the stairs, I can hear that they just called the race on TV. There's a roar of excitement from down below. A cacophony of voices and screams and hoorays and whoopees. And then I hear a few voices asking where I am. A questioning murmur that spreads through the room and undercuts the sounds of celebration, as if the election results aren't official until I'm there to certify them. I stop five steps from the ground floor. Everyone turns to see me, expectant smiles plastered across their faces.

"It's official," I say in a loud voice. "We won."

This must be what rock stars experience when they walk out onto an arena stage for the first time. A swelling of goodwill that's so intense it's like nothing else in the world. It's a palpable feeling, like sunlight. You could get addicted to this if you aren't careful.

“Speech, speech,” some people start calling out. The chant gets picked up by everyone in the room. People start stomping their feet until I can feel the stairs shaking under me, a low-level Richter Scale event.

I hold out my hands until the noise subsides. But before I speak, before I say whatever it is I’m going to say, I look out at the gathering of people before me. I look out over this wash of faces. I see a woman who raised a child she barely understands, yet still manages to love in her own way. I see a woman who used to love me and maybe still does, but knows that sometimes love alone is not enough. I see a man, the brother of the woman who loved me, the leader of a band, who, against his better judgment, thinks I’m a pretty good guy. I see the beautiful face of a woman who works with me, understands me, and, despite all that, even manages to appreciate me. I see the face of a drifter, who managed to know, instinctively, that I was one of the good guys. And finally I see the face of a boy, a younger version of myself, but his face is different too. It’s a wiser face, smarter, as if the owner of that face might not have to go through the same shit I did in order to reach this point, on these steps, looking out at these faces.

I stand there, overwhelmed by this swath humanity. And I think of what I will say next.

Epilogue

So that was it. That was the story of that one tiny part of my life, my struggles against chaos.

The post-mortem write-ups on Cynthia's race called her victory nothing short of a miracle. None of them had any good explanations as to how we actually won one of the closest races in Montana election history. Several reporters called me to ask what our secret was, and of course, I told them nothing. Still, the mystery of our victory was the source of much speculation in political circles. And, needless to say, my fame levels shot through the roof in those first few weeks after the election. I actually got job offers from four prominent Democratic Senators, an offer for a high-level position with a mid-level presidential campaign, and even a plum assignment at the DCCC.

Upon returning to Washington, Cynthia was able to get me reinstated on Capitol Hill. The Capitol Police grudgingly agreed to drop all investigations into my alleged illegal activities. But none of this really mattered much to me anymore. I kept thinking about a conversation Brooke and I had. She told me working on Capitol Hill was like being in a state of suspended adolescence. And I had to agree. I stuck around long enough to make sure Eric got a sweet job as a Deputy Press Secretary on the Senate side. So far, his biggest challenge has been getting used to a job that doesn't require as much illegal activity as answering phones in Cynthia Mahoney's office did. It's a tough job, but it's the kind of thing he'll grow into. Once I'd taken care of Eric, though, I knew it was time for me to get out of there. Get on with my life, whatever that means.

But I wasn't without resources. I got a victory bonus from the office. Did I mention this before? Oh well. It's pretty standard stuff. Ten thousand bucks. Enough to start a little nest egg, anyway. Plus there was the money I got when Jasper found a distributor for *Wheels of the System*. That's right. He actually sold that thing. For no small amount, either. If you ask me, *that* was the real miracle. Far more miraculous than Cynthia's electoral victory. Anyway, Jasper gave me a little remuneration for my acting, plus a little consultation fee for my help on the Capitol scene.

So with a little money in my pocket, I decided to make a clean break from politics, leave it all behind, start something completely new. And here's the part you're

really going to love. I packed up my six boxes of personal items, loaded them into the Beefeater, left DC behind. And where did I go?

To Montana, of all places. I decided to embrace my demons. Embrace that which I most fear. I didn't move to Havre, which might have been a really daring thing. Havre was just a bit *too* small. But I *did* move to Helena. And that's a start, I figure. That's *something*.

For now I keep busy by writing. There was another conversation I remembered, my first conversation with Snuffy. He told me he'd lived enough lives to fill at least a couple books. So I took him up on the offer, if that's what it was. I'm trying to write Snuffy's life story. And it's pretty damn interesting, if I do say so myself. Of course, I'm trying to fit it all in one book. And that is a challenge. I'm realizing that this cowboy-poet-philosopher-Zen Master-toreador doesn't always focus as well as I'd like. But we muddle through. Some days I'm convinced that this is a wasted effort. But other days, we get along great and even have moments of synchronicity that would make Carl Jung roll over in his grave. If I ever do publish this book, I haven't decided yet if I'm going to try publishing it as Snuffy's autobiography, or if I'll put my own name on the cover and call it a plain old biography. There's definitely something appealing about being a ghost-writer.

It does get lonely out here in the hinterlands, from time to time. But I'm working on that as well. I keep in pretty close touch with Brooke. We talk about once a day on the phone. She's still working for Cynthia, and she's still getting over her break-up with Vince. I haven't gotten a chance to improve on that kiss I gave her on election night; and I'd like a shot at it. I'm trying to get her to come out and visit. And who knows what might come of that. Hey! You can't blame a guy for dreaming. Right?

So here I am. Life is simpler, so far away from Capitol Hill. Definitely a lot less chaos to fight. But that's okay. I was getting tired of that fight. And I realize, now, there are a lot better things to do with your time. And these are the things I'm trying to focus on now. But I still keep my skills sharp. I still have that edge. Who knows when the need might arise to pick up the sword and bear the armor again, to do battle with the forces of chaos.