

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Kathryne M. Tafolla Young for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
presented on August 2, 2004.

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Abstract approved:

Keith T. Scribner

Ellis, a booming mid-sized town in California's Central Valley, is packed with farmers and commuters, and plagued with a dwindling sense of itself and its history. Set against the backdrop of a failed murder-suicide, a secret affair and a wealthy local mogul's attempt to develop the town into something it's never been, West of Ellis tells the story of four individuals from different walks of life: a desperate, fallen actor who's written his own suicide opus, a scientific young teacher trying to escape her past, a passionate Buddhist who's fallen in love with a co-worker, and an alcoholic defense attorney who can never possess the only thing in the world he really wants. In Ellis, these four characters find their lives intertwined with the town, with history, and with each other. When Ellis's precarious identity is threatened, each character is forced to decide what matters most. This novel examines themes of human desire, the significance of place, and the meaning of identity.

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West of Ellis

by

Kathryne M. Tafolla Young

A THESIS

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Kathryne M. TafollaYoung, Author

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Chapter One

Ian Ramspott was filled with a strange peace as he stepped off the BART train that evening, a peace that sprang from knowing that the failed portion of his life would be sealed off for good in a matter of hours. It reminded him of the peace he felt spending a first night in a new apartment, or realizing that a rainstorm had stopped, or driving through one town on the way to another and knowing that beyond the homes and pale, shuttered shops, thousands of people were ticking out their lives oblivious to his curiosity, to the filthy puffs of exhaust his ancient Volvo coughed into their streets.

No child dreamed of becoming a dramaturge. It was a job for failed actors, fallen drama professors, graduate students from small places—people with too much optimism and too little talent. Shortly into Ian's stint as a dramaturge for the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, he'd stopped believing he was different.

Ian hated wanting; thus, the world's systems were aligned against him. Everything was configured, he'd realized long ago, to subdue people through their own delusive aspirations. The only solution was to halt the wanting altogether, and tonight, in one of two ways, Ian's wanting would end.

"No smoking on the platform!"

He ignored the BART policeman, as the man couldn't possibly understand how much he needed a cigarette. Thick smoke filled Ian's lungs, the heat enveloping his organs in an intimate, practically sexual way. Outside the station, the Rockridge district was already crawling to a hum. And to think that four years earlier, Berkeley had been his grand hope. Gradually the city had failed him, like those before it. The shit of it was, he *relied* on cities. He mapped the world through their bakeries, bars, and newsstands. Sometimes he'd remember a particular tablecloth or texture of bread, then navigate out from it: the paint, the windows, the quality of light, until he remembered which restaurant he'd been in, and then which city.

As he passed the fruit stand halfway between the BART station and his apartment, Ian fought the urge to run—physically *run*—all the way home, throw open his door, and slam his palm onto the "play" button of his answering machine. His hands trembled and he looked at them, slowing his pace. Smooth, pale, lightly veined.

Door Number One for Ian's End to Wanting was the American Conservatory

Theatre. During his audition for the part of Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard*, Ian's eyes had drifted to the wooden rafters. The beams met perpendicularly, one longer than the other, to form a cross. Staring into the worm-bitten wood and reciting the lines he'd memorized weeks earlier, Ian had felt a barely perceptible tremor jar his knees, the faintest hint of an earthquake. Ian was not a religious man, but wore symbolism like a shroud. The juxtaposition of cross and earthquake had been too much to ignore. A day later, he'd gotten his first callback in over a year—and from the A.C.T., where any stage actor would kill to work.

In the past week, waiting for the casting call, everything had coalesced: *The Cherry Orchard* was his last chance. If he got the part, the A.C.T.'s prestige would propel him into other roles, and his career—albeit fifteen years late—would be underway. Tonight was the director's deadline.

Door Number Two was an alternate performance, to be carried out immediately if he wasn't called. It was a two-man one-act he'd written a year earlier and stowed in his desk. He'd re-read it after the A.C.T. audition, struck anew by how good it was. The play, *Denouement*, was unfinished. It couldn't be finished on paper, which was its chief brilliance—it blurred the line between stage and street. Actual rehearsals were impossible, but he'd devoted meticulous care to planning out what he could, hoping all the while that he'd be hired by the A.C.T. and that his suicide opus could remain unperformed.

Sweat glistened on Ian's wrist as he turned his key in the lock. He wiped his arm on his slacks and cleared his throat. His apartment, a third-floor loft with a vaulted ceiling, resembled a sparse Pottery Barn showroom: down couch, hanging assemblage of bronze cookware, Guatemalan coffee carafe, several Miles Davis LP's. Not much, but what he had was expensive. Each of his three dress shirts cost a hundred and ten dollars and had been hand-stitched in Milan. He opened the refrigerator and surveyed its contents. Standing on his toes, he rocked to his heels, then rocked back. What did one *eat* on a night like this? Deliberately keeping his back to his answering machine, Ian poured himself a glass of water, swallowed the vitamins he'd set out that morning, counted to ten, then started over and went to twenty. He took a caramel rice cake from its package, broke it into pieces, and turned around. Three crimson blinks.

The first caller was a man to whom his landlady, Frieda, had probably given his number. He could tell from the voice that the man was very Asian and very gay, and he

spent a moment resenting the tendency of straight women to set him up with every homosexual man they knew. Halfway through the man's recitation of his cell number, Ian pressed delete. Wallowing in solitude was preferable, as he'd been doing nicely over Ray for the past three months.

The next message was from a Cal librarian calling about a Harold Pinter interview Ian had been trying to find—no luck in the archives. Ian's life was demarcated by intellectual phases, and Pinter had been his obsession for nearly two years.

Before the final message, Ian hit "pause." He took a long breath, composed himself, rubbed his palms together, went into the bathroom, blew his nose, and came back out. He sat. He swallowed. He pressed play.

There was static at first, then a man cleared his throat. Ian imagined the A.C.T. director holding the phone to his chest, overcome by the sheer affect involved in assembling a new cast. But then it was all wrong. The voice was too deep, too gravelly, and introduced itself as Ian's replacement at the Berkeley Rep. Ian's filing system was eluding him, he said.

No part. Not even an understudy offer, which he hadn't thought he'd take and realized he would have, in a heartbeat.

Ian sat on his couch, chewing viciously on the skin beneath his thumbnail. In the next building, beyond his kitchen window, a teen in a tube top sucked a joint on the balcony. She gazed numbly at the smoke, then rocked to her back and closed her eyes. Ian watched until she finished, then poured a bourbon—Booker's, since he couldn't afford a decent single-barrel. A sad compromise. Another testimony to all he'd left undone. Ray had been right. Ian was immature and ungrounded, he lived in his head, he never interacted with the world. But he didn't know how to change this. He'd been passionate about the stage, had faith he'd once belonged there.

So be it. The A.C.T. didn't want him, but in a few hours he'd stand on his own artistic merit. *Denouement* would be his most beautiful, most memorable performance. He'd give himself fifteen minutes, then leave for Stockton.

It had been Harold Pinter's work that inspired Ian to write *Denouement*, and Pinter had also engendered his departure from dramaturgy. A few weeks into rehearsal for *The Caretaker*, Ian had argued with the new director, a kid from USC who was blocking scenes in ignorance of the filmed version—which Pinter, Ian pointed out, had practically directed. In their final encounter, the director asserted his disinterest in a playwright's intent, and Ian

responded that directors like the kid—Spielberg-fed misfits—were ruining American theatre. A day later, Ian was fired. The letter cited his “outbursts,” concluding: “Dramaturgy does not mean discouraging a non-traditional interpretation.” Ian had scrawled underneath, “But it DOES mean discouraging a juvenile ignorant one,” and posted it on the foyer wall opening night, permanently severing his ties with the Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Opening the top drawer of his cherry wood desk, Ian withdrew *Denouement*. Including stops, it should take two hours to reach Stockton. He gathered his script, his letter, his unsealed manila envelope, and—for luck—Volume Two of Pinter’s *Collected Works*.

Tonight proved his theory about desire. It was a game. People wanted things, rarely got them, and were eventually ruined by whatever they wanted or in pursuit of it.

At Ha Chee Grocery ‘N’ Deli, Ian slid his Visa debit card from his back pocket. He always kept it there; wallets were sometimes stolen, and pants were generally not. Twirling it through his fingers, he noted that the popularity of each item in Ha Chee’s could be evaluated by the thickness of its dust coat. Pork buns, his favorite, steamed in a clean metal bin at the rear of the store, wedged between an aquarium of live eels and a filthy stack of cans containing “Pickled Fish Balls.” The gist, Ian suspected, had been lost in translation. He took several cans to please Ha Chee, knowing he’d never open them, and added two pork buns and a packet of organic wasabi peas to his basket.

Ha Chee was at the counter, contemplating whether he was double-jointed in his left thumb. Ian examined it and voted no. They engaged in their customary discussion about whether the “deli” portion of Ha Chee’s could be improved, Ha Chee holding it couldn’t, and Ian insisting that two wicker chairs and a broken table were an insufficient lure for lunch crowds. Ha Chee pointed out that he *had* no lunch crowds, and a circular conversation ensued. Ian would miss this about Berkeley. He had no friends, but held ongoing dialogues with a hundred absorbing acquaintances.

Next, Ian drove through an ATM and withdrew two hundred dollars. Believability was the crux. Whatever critics ridiculed *Denouement* for someday, they’d never suggest it was ill-planned.

Leaving NYU had been his Big Mistake. There were other mistakes, but none of that magnitude. It wasn’t as if he’d fallen in love or had a revelation or a big break; he’d simply grown impatient, heard there was work in Boston, and left. Then Evanston, Santa Fe, Vancouver. Cities’ details marked him—the texture of their subway tickets, the fetidness of

the air above their sewage grates—which seemed unfair, considering his scant marks on *them*. He'd always wanted to make an impression. A *real* one, not the reality show brand of the nouveau populaire, no start-ups or web cams. Stage actors complained that they weren't taken seriously, but he could have been happy as the off-Broadway darling of an underestimated city. And then, perhaps, a foray into directing, and when he died, one of his protégés would pen a tribute. A university press would pick it up, and his contributions would be known and mentioned by drama professors at small, serious programs throughout the country.

How had he spent thirty-six years accomplishing so fucking little? It boggled the mind. Directors were always wedging him into supporting roles—the villain's sidekick, the imbecilic man's cunning buddy. Then guided—forced—into dramaturgy for his “uncommon expertise,” and fired for the same reason.

Ian stayed on I-580 past San Leandro, past Castro Valley and Dublin, until it turned into the hilly two-lane stretch of I-205, which met I-5 at Ellis. The *San Francisco Chronicle* had done something on Ellis a while back, and Ian recalled concluding that despite the article's cheery slant, Ellis sounded antithetical to everything he appreciated about California. Coasting toward it from the Altamont Pass, Ian saw that he'd been correct. A mall loomed to his left, brightly lit. The adjacent strip of land was crammed with auto dealerships flying colored gussets in medieval burlesque. “Future Home of Greenlake,” a billboard read a few miles later. Then below it, “Bannister Properties: Helping Ellis Reach Its Dreams.” To his right, boxy pastel houses marched snugly to the foothills. It struck Ian as a caricature of progress, as though everything natural was being systematically rubbed from the ground. He finished his second pork bun and lit a cigarette. According to Ray, Stockton was thirty miles farther.

Living with Ray for three years had made Ian acutely aware that his encounters with violence had all been onstage. Ray worked in the legal trenches, steeped in the dirt and blood of people's real lives. And unlike Ray, Ian had kept his sexuality secret until college. Probably as a result, he'd never had his house egged or been beaten in a locker room. Ray had seemed to resent him for it, as if it made Ian less authentic.

Unwittingly, Ray had given him the idea for *Denouement*'s setting. In addition to griping about the commute from Berkeley to Stockton after moving in with him, Ray had complained that the Public Defender's office bordered the most dangerous neighborhood in

northern California. One of his witnesses was jumped two blocks south, in broad daylight, before he was supposed to testify. At night, if police responded to a call there, they made sure a whole group of patrol cars swarmed in together. From everything Ray had said, Ian was certain that provoking the crucial act would be an embarrassingly small trick.

Planned too carefully or too hastily, suicide was no good. It needed the right balance, the proper portion which might not have worked. Though he knew of one public suicide (the famous self-burning to protest Vietnam), he'd never heard of one which both took place in public *and* involved other people. The chance thrilled him—the details left unwritten, the villain's role grabbed up by whoever came along. But the act *would* occur. Pinter knew how it worked: events seemed random and were not. Jewish ghettos of Pinter's youth, interrogation scenes, battles of manhood—all played out on the pages of the Great Man's drama. The more Ian learned about Pinter, the more he understood how people trembled beneath secret knowledge or suffocated under the weight of their own histories.

Stockton's cross-town freeway curved to his right. The courthouse rose to the north, as spotted and brown as a slab of rotten meat, and the Public Defender's office and Pacific State Bank spilled into its shadows. He turned right on El Dorado, away from the government buildings and into a neighborhood whose illumination came only from neon signs in barred windows and a single, cracked streetlight. Ian's heart pounded and he began to sweat, startled by the force of his conviction to carry out the performance.

Farther south, the area became residential. Houses had been chopped into apartments, their windows boarded up with plywood, or secured with rust-bitten iron bars. Tiny homes were wedged uncomfortably together, separated by chain-link fences, old Oldsmobiles and Plymouth Dusters, spilled trash. Twenty yards away, Ian spotted an abandoned lot with a broken fence. Trees etched dark forms onto the dirt and grass, and in varying states of decomposition, four tires leaned against the chain links. Ian stopped his Volvo against the crumbling curb, then turned on his car light and re-read the note he'd written weeks earlier:

To Whom it May Concern:

If you find this I exist no longer. Good riddance to me! If you mourn you are an idiotic wretch. Thirty-six and I've created nary a blemish on the world's unimpressible visage. I don't feel sorry for myself because I knew it all along. But like the rest of you I wouldn't give it up. People are

constantly made sick and pathetic and desperate because it's so hard for them to get what they want. Did you ever stop to think there might be a source behind all this desire? That someone is laughing as you play his game? All I wanted was to act. Some of you want to do the same thing and others of you want a perfect family and others seek infallible wisdom and some of you would just like a car that starts on the first try. I'm tired of WANTING. I hate WANTING and can't stop. Believe that I've tried. I continue to be bowled over by the magnitude of my own insignificance. I long not to long.

As a last request I would like you to go find my murderer. Just because I drove here knowing I'd be killed doesn't mean the miscreant who offed me didn't commit cold-blooded callous murder. A lawyer I knew once taught me that. (Don't flatter yourself Ray—this had nothing to do with you.) I didn't know the killer. He just stole my money and shot me. My sole provocation was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is an act of art not one of martyrdom. But as a bonus I hope to do something good by putting a man who's willing to kill others into jail. Then hopefully he won't be able to demonstrate his aggression on someone who (unlike me) doesn't WANT to be extinguished yet.

I hope whomsoever discovers my body etc. thinks of this suicide as creative. I planned and designed it as a one-act. Performance art if you will. A footnoted script is enclosed herein. In the case of future reenactments improvisation is acceptable and encouraged. Feel free to do something clever with it.

Best to all
Ian Cooper Ramspott III

A touch pompous, but smart and informative. He imagined an annual re-staging with a benefit auction beforehand. Artists would come miles—they'd have to, since he couldn't imagine that any lived in Stockton. He felt a tinge of nerves. He could see what Ray had meant. While Oakland held its share of ghettos, they practically announced themselves when you drove in (Attention: if you make more than twenty-five thousand dollars a year, leave before you get a cap in your ass). Committing suicide in Oakland would have been cheap. Ray said some cops privately blamed victims for entering those neighborhoods in the first place. No, what made this place eerie was its apparent normality, the proximity of public buildings, the way you knew that during the day, bankers and lawyers worked a few blocks away. It was a frightening area and shouldn't be. Every boarded-up apartment and piece of trash on the sidewalk had arrived accidentally. Through fatalistic coincidence, broken buildings and cracked streets had ended up in the same place, and

broken people had moved in and made a broken neighborhood.

The pain only be temporary. Ian had once taken half a day from work for an ingrown eyelash, and had no illusions about his own fecklessness, but because tonight's pain would be so far beyond his experience, he didn't fear it. Comparatively, it would be a small sacrifice.

Ian's real fear, his most serious fear, the fear that had roused him from sleep half a dozen times in the past three weeks, was that his manila envelope would never be discovered. A thousand variables could lead to this: sloppy police work, rain, deliberate removal by his attacker. He'd originally planned to leave it under the car, but weather was too unpredictable. Inside the car, it would at least be out of view during the murder, then discovered when his body was found. They'd run the license plates and see that it belonged to him. He slipped the script and the letter into the envelope and sealed it. He switched off his car light, then hesitated. Groping beneath his seat, he found a Pilot precise extra fine rolling ball and turned the light back on. On the envelope, he wrote, "Read me; I am a clue," and set it in the back seat.

A slew of things he should have felt occurred to him: hesitation, regret, a belated rush of affection for his parents, philosophical wistfulness about the human situation. But Ian felt none of these. He was the epitome of *having no reason to live*, and the proximity of his departure from the world did not alter this. What he did feel, quite suddenly, was a small rush of stage fright, and he dealt with it the way he always had: by counting to ten, then to twenty, and popping a few tablets of Valerian root—it made him terribly groggy in the morning, but this wasn't a side effect he'd be around to deal with. After a few minutes, he got out, locked his doors, and stood against his car, smoking the final cigarette in his pack before striding to his directorial debut.

Theo Lacey was walking to his old lady's house, his breath hot with St. Ides and weed, his mustache infused with the sweet taste of his newest female admirer. JB had taught him the trick: a girl let a man do whatever he wanted after he tasted her. Like everything he'd learned from JB, it was basically true. After he'd gone to it a few minutes, she'd almost always pull his mouth back up to hers, and from there, he was in control. Theo doubted he'd ever be as smart as his brother had been. Sometimes when it was quiet in their grandfather's

apartment at night, Theo heard JB's voice, soft, for just a second. Chilling as hell.

When the whistling started, he thought he was imagining it. Grass liberated his senses, made his hearing so acute that he sometimes picked up things that weren't there. High, he could spend hours listening to the crickets outside his apartment grind music from their tiny legs. The buds he'd smoked tonight were horrible, though. Made him jumpy. He touched his belt to make sure his Glock was beneath it. Cutting through the park at night always spooked him. He stared at the giant walnut tree he'd climbed as a kid and looked over his shoulder. Maybe stress was his problem; he had a lot on his mind. JB had been a master businessman, but kept no records, and everyone blamed the mess on Theo when he'd taken over. He had a reputation as a hothead, after all, which was unfair, because he did everything exactly like JB. When JB smashed Lyle's head with a pipe for a half pound of coke, it got him respect. Theo pulled anything like that, the same guys told him to think his shit through. He couldn't help smiling though, remembering JB kneeling next to Lyle's bloody scalp and whispering, "Need some Advil, bitch?" JB had been known for these touches of class. Maybe Theo lacked style.

The whistling grew louder. He recognized the tune but couldn't remember where he'd heard it, or whether there were lyrics. Junior high, maybe, or one of the hundred Ports games he'd sneaked into. Certain, finally, that the weed wasn't giving him auditory hallucinations, Theo scanned his surroundings. The street was empty and the park seemed to be, too, but a brick wall fenced in its northern edge. He pinned the whistling to whoever was behind the wall, and continued walking—but two steps later, on the other side of the walnut tree, he found himself face to face with a pale, strung-out white guy.

"America the Beautiful" was fast-forwarding through Ian's head, and it had no right to be; the last music he'd heard was in his car on the way from Berkeley: "Dirty Dancing," Phillip Glass's score to *Company*, and Steely Dan's "Live in America."

The man before him was brilliantly cast: huge, wearing a black "13" jersey, tattoos squeezing from the collar, up his neck, culminating in a giant "JB" beneath his left ear—a markedly unsubtle way to proclaim one's gang affiliation—and dots the size of espresso beans inked across his knuckles. Ian was exhilarated. One of the two streetlights shining on the lot fizzled perilously and burned out.

“Who the fuck are you?” the man demanded. He had a voice like a screen actor, saturated in confidence. Ian was staring into the collective face of Individuals Who Did Things He Couldn’t Believe. It suddenly did not seem improbable for a person to spray paint the Caldecott tunnel or lift a fifth of vodka from an unwitting store owner. A different kind of logic was at work in this man’s life.

This revelation was followed by a more forceful epiphany, the latter chastising the former for its juvenility. Of *course* this underprivileged man’s outlook was different. Ian was socially progressive—he *knew* things like this—but in that awful moment, he was jarred by the abyss between his intellectual understanding and the sudden knowledge in his gut.

“Stop the fucking *music*.”

But Ian couldn’t. His latest bolt of self-deprecation quickly vanished, replaced by appreciation for the grandeur of the scene he’d staged. He loved his murderer for being so typecast. A sour tang filled his mouth.

As if on cue, the man raised an enormous eyebrow and stepped forward. Ian stared at the wide brow, the jersey, the FILA high tops splattered indecipherably: chalky, sticky, muddy, maroon. There was nothing to fear; he was onstage. The splendor of death, the sheer tragic irreversibility of it, the iterations in classic drama—all of this washed over him and Ian felt more alive than he had in years.

Theo was genuinely baffled. He wouldn’t have stopped walking if the white guy hadn’t stopped, and if he hadn’t been whistling so goddamn much. It was rare for Theo to see someone like this (lean, white, apparently unarmed) so far from the courthouse, especially this late. “Scuse me,” he said, squaring his shoulders and taking a step around the guy. Instantly, he hated the subservient way that sounded—as if *he* was the one who didn’t belong. So, to even things out, he bumped the guy with his elbow, hard, on his way past.

“Hey.”

Theo ignored him.

“*Hey!*”

He turned around and was struck afresh by the guy’s ugliness. It was as if someone had taken the skinniest horse he could find, starved it, and given it a disease. Then he had another thought. “What are you looking for?”

“You.”

“I’m not JB.” People who’d just seen pictures sometimes mistook him for his brother, even though Theo was taller and fatter and JB had had a big scar across his cheek.

“I’m looking for *you*.”

“I don’t know you.” The guy had to be fucking with him, because he’d have remembered the face if he’d seen it. Or—and this seemed most probable—the guy was looking to score something (meth, or was Theo misreading the eyes?). Which, if it was true, meant he was desperate and had cash lining his pockets like dryer lint.

“Not yet.”

“What makes you think I can help you?”

The white guy smiled knowingly, and Theo’s eyes went to the man’s pockets, waiting for him to pull out the cash, whereupon the plan gelling in Theo’s mind called for him to grab it, push the man down, and run. Opportunity was a moody bitch; he’d be stupid to turn her away.

The man’s hand fell on Theo’s left pectoral muscle and pushed him. Theo stumbled, surprised, and quickly recovered, placing his palms on the man’s shoulders and shoving him back even harder. The man fell onto his ass. “Why you messin’?” Theo demanded. “Come here to get loaded up, then go back to selling insurance?” Until now, he hadn’t noticed the clothes, but looking at them, he realized the guy was rich. Dress shirt, fancy slacks, shined shoes nicer than the ones Theo had borrowed for JB’s funeral. He’d play this right.

The man made no effort to get up, just reached to his pocket. As a precaution, Theo took out his gun, pointed it, cocked the hammer. The man stopped, hypnotized, then held his hand up like he was telling Theo to wait. With his other hand, he took his wallet out and flung his driver’s license into the bushes.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Distributing my identification. So they find it after—you know—after you shoot me.”

Theo frowned and moved the gun forward. It was hard to piss him off when he was high, but this guy was pushing it. It was always life and death with white people. “I never said I was, did I?”

They were silent.

"*Did I*," Theo repeated. He couldn't think of anything more ridiculous than sitting on your ass in a park at midnight waiting to be shot.

"I have two hundred dollars in my pocket," the man said.

"All right. Give it to me."

"You'll have to take it by force."

What was that from? One of the black-and-white war movies his grandfather watched? *Surrender the armory. Never! You'll have to take it by force.* "Fag, just hand it over."

"What did you call me?"

"Fag. Faggot."

"Why?"

Theo called everyone he disliked "faggot." No one had ever questioned him. "Cause you're a faggot, bitch."

"Don't call me that."

The man started to get up, and Theo pushed him down. "Sit, fag."

"How would you like it if I used a pejorative term to describe you?"

Theo didn't know what that word meant. "Faggot," he said again. "Faggot." The word shot out, pleasing and crisp. He said it again, circling the guy, kicking him in the leg. He'd hand over the money eventually, and Theo would teach him a lesson, just a small one. Each time he said the word, the man got angrier, reminding Theo more and more of everyone he'd ever met who thought they were better than him.

"All *right*—" the man cut in after half a dozen "faggots." "I didn't come to be degraded. Just do it."

"Faggot."

"Fine. I didn't want to do this, but here it is: Nigger."

Theo's voice caught in his throat. "What the *fuck* did you call me?"

The guy began repeating "nigger" in the same tone and volume in which Theo had been saying "faggot." Four seconds passed before Theo fully perceived the levels on which the insult was operating, but it only took two for him to uncock his gun and smash it across the man's face.

In the instant before the gun struck Ian's cheekbone, two thoughts lit through his mind. One, he felt a pang of guilt for using a racial epithet. But "faggot" stirred an outrage he hadn't felt since moving to the west coast. And it was especially audacious that this man—with so much in his life clearly gone awry—would criticize Ian. Two, Ian was awed, even *moved* by the hot anger that had flared in the black man's eyes when he'd heard "nigger." The brilliance of it startled him, reminding him of a time he'd acted opposite someone who started crying—real crying—onstage. It was the black man's eyes that made Ian, in the moment before the gun struck his face, regret not only his entire existence, but his suicide as well.

He heard the crack the same instant he saw the blur, and before he felt anything, he thought of lightning—thought for a moment that the crack *had* been lightning, and that in his rush to perform *Denouement*, he hadn't noticed the storm. The split-second theory was supported by a sudden dampness on his face, which he briefly mistook for rain. Blood wasn't his first guess because it hadn't previously occurred to Ian that—save one neat, excruciating bullet through his heart or cranium—he would bleed.

It may have been that Ian was hit again, or that the initial impact transmitted an echo through his skull. Either way, he heard a second crack that couldn't be mistaken for lightning; it held a corporeal softness, like bone splitting, and the pain seared his face like a branding iron. He put his hand to his nose and mouth, trying to remember the line he'd written himself for this point, but could only think of the pain, and of the black man's eyes.

He wanted *time*, he needed to evaluate, for God's sake—it was *his* play. The gun came at him again, this time from the back, cracking across his ear, and he fell to his side, the curl of his figure yielding like warm clay into the grass. He had never felt such pain. Blinded, Ian tried to lift himself. A scream discharged from his throat, louder than he'd known he was capable of, and then the man's shoe connected with Ian's stomach and the sound was flooded by vomit. He wretched involuntarily, each spasm sending a holocaust through his body.

It was, at least, the most interesting suicide in recorded history—a triumph of art over *system*. Those who came after him would vindicate his thirty-six years. He wondered, for just a second, if he might live. It wasn't that he wanted *life*, exactly, but he began searching for a reason. God, God, God. Let someone find his body. Let someone find the note. His mind filled with pleas to an entity in which he had never believed.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Ian heard rustling. The man was going after his wallet, he realized, and upon feeling a hand on his hip, he recoiled in fright. Another yell came out of him, terminated even more quickly by the black man.

“Don’t know when to quit, do you, faggot?”

The man’s voice was higher, angrier. The sounds began again, coordinated with ripping sensations. Ian’s eyes were ablaze with tears, but he couldn’t open them. His limbs went numb. The man’s pupils appeared like a mirage against his closed eyelids.

No, Ian realized. There would be no triumph, no vindication. *Denouement* was neither artistic nor avant-garde. How cripplingly shameful that it had come to this: a racial slur and a fatal beating. And then something jarred inside his head, like a light switch flipping off, and Ian Ramspott, as the world knew him, was gone.

Chapter Two

Dmitri Harris wanted a fag. For Dmitri it wasn't a cigarette, it wasn't a smoke, it wasn't a Marlboro or a Camel or any other brand-name designation; his father had grown up in London and smoked *fags*, and that was exactly what Dmitri did at twelve-fifty-three every afternoon when lunch ended and his preparatory period began. He drove his orange '89 Ford pickup to the field beyond the school gates and smoked a trio of fags, then drove the quarter-mile back to James Madison High School to teach American Literature to eleventh-graders who had elected not to take the honors option. Dmitri had a special passion for students who had elected not to take the honors option. As a pustule-faced sixteen-year-old slaving away at Big O Tires for \$1.90 an hour, he himself had turned down the honors option on the grounds that it was classist, racist, and gave him less time to skulk to the bathroom stalls with Priscilla Lewis, the beautiful, big-breasted Tachi Yokuts girl who rode horses and chewed tobacco. Fag-smoking had served the dual purposes of impressing Priscilla and angering his father (who, in his cockney tongue, would be damned if his son spent all his pocket-change on bloody fags). Even now, after twenty-seven years with Becky, the smoke-break beyond the football field, beyond the suped-up trucks, beyond the stoners' cautious proximity as they ditched classes required for graduation, brought Dmitri back to the glorious stalls at that very same high school.

Easing his Ford over the curb, he stopped it on the grass behind a tree. The position made him less visible to students returning late from lunch and gave him a view of the Greenlake construction in his rear-view mirror. The project, weeks ahead of schedule, was ascending the foothills half a mile away. He'd visited the site again that morning, something he did when he knew it would be deserted.

The smoke dissipated into rings, and Dmitri stretched back in his seat with the motor running, staring in the rear-view mirror. Greenlake was spoiling his best time for meditation. It was against Ellis's nature, its vast beat in time. He closed his eyes again. Lately, combining holy activities had been conjuring unholy visions—Siddhartha Gautama with a Marlboro, for example.

Buddhism had started as an academic interest, then a way to relax, and in the last six years, had become his way of life. Its easy incorporation had surprised him, and so had Becky's lack of resistance. For the most part, she'd been relieved he'd found religion again,

since he'd flirted with atheism after deciding to quit Holy Cross Presbyterian (a decision whose announcement he'd timed poorly, on the heels of their daughter's coming out).

He wondered if she was right that smoking made him tenser. Not only did Becky not smoke, but her repugnance for nicotine was obvious to everyone who met her. Five foot three, with a slender waist and chunky breasts and thighs, Becky's figure smacked of excessive voluptuousness strangled into manageability by Splenda, Pilates, and *Shape* magazine. She was a devoted wife, and the closest friend Dmitri had—which, admittedly, was not saying a great deal. They'd met in a psychology seminar at Fresno State and emerged a year later as inadvertent parents, both teachers, he of English and she of music. Soft gathers had appeared around her neck and eyes since Meg was born, but aside from that she looked the same, the unchanging woman with the unchanging gaze, transfixed in his life, times, and imagination. Becky was not his soulmate—but then, Dmitri did not believe in soulmates. He believed in souls, and the meeting of souls, and the inextricably interwoven nature of people's lives into the lives of others they met, and he believed it in a fierce and obvious way, such that when people talked to Dmitri about the soul, they were ashamed to disagree with him.

He extended his arm out the window, crushed the filter against the truck's exterior, and lit another cigarette. Somewhere between extinguishing the first one and lighting the second, he realized that the smoke he was watching hadn't ceased, and seemed to be ascending from beneath his hood. He finished smoking his second fag as deliberately as he'd smoked it every Monday through Friday in this same field for the past twenty-seven years, and then, with mild annoyance that he would not reach his third, popped the hood to discover that his engine was, as his father would have said, toasted for marmite—a phrase he'd used to describe each malfunction the family's vehicles committed. Though it hardly seemed possible, Dmitri knew less about cars than his father had. His father, at least, had changed his own wiper blades, and once, over fifteen hours, had managed to replace a pair of brake pads. Dmitri wasn't reluctant to dirty his hands, but figured his time was better spent on endeavors to which he brought a modicum of talent.

Collecting his teaching accouterments under one arm (lecture notes, black pen, folder of half-graded essay exams) and his personal accouterments under the other (*Terra Incognita: The San Joaquin Valley*, a Flying Burrito Brothers tape, half a box of Nilla Wafers) Dmitri locked his keys into his truck and hurried off to teach literature to high

school juniors.

His assumption of their interest in the subject matter, Dmitri knew, was a characteristic his students found offensive. As far as many of them were concerned, English was fluff, and no opinion they proffered could possibly be wrong. He did his best to squelch this idea, which was why a lot of them transferred out, but also why some transferred in: the wry, the jaded, the inspired and unathletic. Madison High only sent a quarter of its graduates to college, a fact his colleagues used to excuse their low standards—as if working at the Heinz factory freed a man from his obligation to use semicolons properly.

For October, it was unseasonably warm, and the Mad Russian—as Dmitri's students called him to his face if they liked him and behind his back if they didn't—settled at his desk, trying to remember how many months ago his air conditioning unit had broken. Amazing, how thirty-four frustrated post-pubescent bodies could warm a room.

"I'm aware that it's hot," Dmitri began. "I'm also aware that many of you haven't started *The Great Gatsby*, though we are on Chapter Seven. Try to catch up over the weekend. Today and tomorrow, though, we'll have a brief interlude on the Fitzgeralds' revelry."

His students stared, noncommittal, and Dmitri began delivering the well-timed, well-planned lecture he'd written the night before instead of eating a cheese sandwich and then having sex with his wife or, if she was asleep, masturbating in the bathroom. That morning, he'd awoken at the kitchen table with notes on F. Scott's famous tome stuck to his ear. This suggested a level of dedication that made him feel victorious. His happiest nights, anymore, were those that replicated his college years, poring blissfully through scholars' work, waking in the library to find his face adhered to the print. Now, with Meg several years out of college, Dmitri was rediscovering his old academic self.

Regional history had intrigued him since the summers he'd spent as a reporter for the *Ellis Herald*. But he hadn't pursued it seriously since James Bannister had torn down the Holly Sugar factory to build Greenlake, a commercial center of the worst kind, which—unlike the mall—would be located west of Ellis Boulevard, between the glass factory and downtown. So far, James had signed on sixty stores, all chains. It was commissioned by the same architect who'd designed Hacienda Crossings in Pleasanton—a monstrosity Dmitri loathed anew each time he drove over the Altamont. It throbbed with palm trees, orange stucco, gleaming walkways. A multiplex cinema advertised twenty movies at once.

Amazing, how teenagers' stares could drill into a man. His juniors seemed unintrigued with Zelda's insanity or Scott's alcoholism, the two bits he'd thought they'd latch onto. Their blasé air seemed to mock—even pity—his enthusiasm. Of course, his students couldn't know he'd stayed up until one and risen at five, nor that his engine was smoldering in a field half a mile away, nor that the very delicate, very precarious nicotine-to-red blood cell ratio pulsing through Dmitri's heart and veins and liver had been severely disrupted by the omission of his third afternoon cigarette. The temporary dearth of nicotine was affecting his patience, he knew, and he was also suddenly conscious that he'd locked his keys in his truck.

More than twenty minutes remained of the school day, and his students' bags were packed, pencils stowed, gum popped from wrappers and shoved into mouths.

"Does this interest any of you?" Dmitri asked. "Raise your hands."

The room was eerily silent; competition ensued. On one hand, a teacher, a legendary one, was challenging their allegiance to a system in which they had no say. On the other, there was the stolid, old-fashioned, book-hating peer pressure that ran especially strong in that year's junior class.

Students exchanged glances, smelling a trick. His quirks still caught them off guard. They considered his Socraticism an outrage. To them, literature was inapplicable. Like history, it was all in the past, the shit of their grandfathers, headlines in the memories of stinky old men.

Peer pressure won: hands strained beneath desks, wavering, and dropped. And with no change in his expression, Dmitri told his students they were free to go.

Minutes lapsed. Dmitri cleared his throat and returned to his desk. Luke Pho rose experimentally, GAP book bag in hand. Dmitri didn't let himself look up. Small forward on the varsity basketball team, champion of locker-room fistfights, and owner of a restored '66 Mustang, Luke was the one the class trusted most. He was testing the waters, challenging the system that kept them at school when they could be making six dollars an hour *easy* at Domino's. Luke, academic misfit and social genius, was everything to which the others aspired—and knew it. A quiet departure would have been too modest. As Dmitri pretended not to watch, Luke surveyed his admirers, announced that he would catch them on the flip side, and sashayed toward the door.

Had Luke left humbly or wordlessly, the events that followed might never have

occurred. But Luke did as he did, and the sheer arrogance of it caused an volatile interaction between Dmitri's basic elements. For Hippocrates, the humors of a human cocktail were blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. For Dmitri, these were nicotine, physical exhaustion, snot, and a pervasive sense that everything, all the time, was in a state of chaos. Upon hearing Luke's words, the first two items on this list—which had been festering the entire lecture—reached a sudden apex. Rising, planting both hands on his desk, glaring at his students with all the Russian coldness he'd ever felt, he did something he'd resisted in more than twenty years of teaching: he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Get *out*!"

Walking back to his truck, Dmitri knew he'd made a mistake. But he couldn't have avoided it any longer. He wasn't balanced. He'd been lonelier than usual, distracted from meditation for days at a time. Greenlake was getting to him. Fingering the wooden mala beads around his wrist, he reminded himself that mistakes were part of the chaos of teaching. Until becoming a Buddhist, Dmitri hadn't understood that chaos was natural. Zen embraced contradictions, conundrums, the gorgeous absurdity of life. Operating in the intimate gamut of one's own faculties, it was impossible to predict what cocky utterances of a teenage boy, what falling pebbles, what chance meetings determined the circumstances that fired and shaped an individual. Shunning chaos meant shunning the universe.

Becky, his equalizer, was thoroughly indifferent to this idea. They'd called it "equalizing" playfully at first, then more routinely, to explain why they rarely talked. They were busy growing into complete, healthy beings, realizing their true, opposite selves. While Becky read health magazines, Dmitri read *The Skeptic*.

His chest clenched, his lungs begging him for nicotine. He quickened his pace. He'd never lifted a finger to get in shape, and as such was a near-perfect specimen of the natural effects of aging on a man approaching fifty. And he did not look bad. His eyebrows were dark and friendly, a relic of his Russian roots (though only his maternal grandmother was full Russian—the rest of his blood was British and Scotch and western European cocktail). He remembered novels in which characters had "mops" of hair, but these seemed an exaggeration compared to his own, which looked as though it grew from the center of his scalp directly outward. In college and his early teaching years, it had been a roguish black mop, the kind worn by star mathematics professors or young priests, which usually subsides to become thick and dignified, set off by spectacles and a beard. In Dmitri's case, there were spectacles but no beard, and the hair had subsided, but not to dignity; it had grown thinner,

salt-and-peppery, and hung about the sides like a mangy Yorkshire terrier. His stomach was soft and had grown softer, his hands were hard and had grown harder, and the sum effect suggested intelligence but not grace.

Lighting the third cigarette of the afternoon as he reached the Ford, Dmitri leaned on the door and peered through the unwashed glass at his keys, which rested on the passenger seat. Triple A had estimated an hour wait, and he wondered whether they'd count this as one call or two. Becky would tell him the Ford was finished; he would say it was not. They'd have a conversation. Conversations, never arguments. Arguments without the passion and volume and make-up sex.

His mind was on the Ford, not his wife or his students or his daughter, but ruminating about his truck, resting against it, and lighting a fourth cigarette, when he turned toward the school gate and promptly, without warning, fell in love.

Five seconds earlier, eyeing his imprisoned keys, Dmitri hadn't known that a person is fortunate to fall in truly in love at first sight even once in his life. He might have chuckled, even scoffed, at the cliché—and he saw that he would have been wrong.

She was not objectively pretty, in the popular sense of prettiness, and he rejoiced in this because of the opportunity it might afford him to know her uniquely. He wanted desperately to touch her face, her shoulders, and wasn't concerned with the cause of his desire, only by the absence of a biography to fill in the stunning outline of her physical appearance. He realized that until now, he'd equated love at first sight with intense sexual attraction, a commonplace phenomenon (a task to which pixels on a computer screen, glossy smudged pages, are equal) that bore slender resemblance to his present rapture.

The woman glanced toward him and returned her eyes to the sidewalk. She was neither slim nor heavy. A khaki knapsack was slung across her chest, accentuating her breasts on either side of the strap, beneath a man's lime-colored oxford shirt. But her face, most of all, made him forget his truck, his keys, his classroom blunder. It drew from disparate chronologies; an older woman's nose graced the center, creases starting high in the sockets of her eyes and peaking near her lips—but she had the mouth of a girl, curling without effort, parting as she breathed, two full, warm pockets that might burst if pressed against his own.

“Do you teach here?” he called.

She nodded and kept walking. Dmitri crushed his cigarette against his truck and

dropped it to the ground behind his back. "I'm Dmitri Harris. English Chair. We haven't met." This was what he got for skipping faculty meetings to attend the short make-up sessions with Benji Laida.

Her pace slowed and her lower lip curled under her upper lip, as if she was deciding whether to believe him. "I'm new. I've heard of you. The Mad Russian, right?"

A teacher—thank God—he'd be able to see her again, passing in the hall, glimpsing her at assemblies. She was young, and he didn't care. As he approached, he saw that her eyes were different colors, one blue and the other slightly darker than her shirt. This made her look exotic, even wise. "I assumed it was a public nickname," she said. Sorry if I—

"It is," Dmitri said. "I wasn't offended."

She smiled. "Do all senior teachers get special parking?"

"Oh—ha—my truck's actually just broken down. And while I was—trying to fix it—I locked my keys in the car." He shrugged good-naturedly. What did she mean by "senior?"

"Quite the streak. Anyone coming for you?" Her curves were sharp and angular, and a confidence distinguished her posture, a virility that suggested forestry or construction work. It was the same effortless posture his mother and grandmother had had, Dmitri realized, a bodily certainty older women sometimes grow into but which for Becky had not arrived. Dmitri had never seen it in a woman so young and knew many men would find it unattractive.

"Triple A."

"Good. Sorry—I'm Rika Brown."

They shook hands and Dmitri mumbled about the trials of first-year teachers, though that was many years ago for him (he cursed himself for giving this away, as if she hadn't figured out he was pushing fifty). "Room S-7. Drop by if you need anything."

"I will," she said in a polite tone that he knew meant she wouldn't.

"Are you, uh, settled into your classroom okay?"

She nodded. "Sure am." Of course. It had been nearly a month.

"That's good." Dmitri grappled for something else to say, but as she smiled and started to turn, the hundred questions that shot through his mind would, at the obvious close of their conversation, be too awkward to ask. "See you around."

She raised her hand in a careless wave, not turning to look at him. As she retreated

toward E Street and he continued to observe her contours, the crescendo of an old folk song, Peter, Paul and Mary's "The Coming of the Roads" came alive in Dmitri's ears. He hadn't heard it in years, but it grew more distinct, the old reliability of the acoustic guitars and comfortable voices he associated with Priscilla Lewis. It echoed as the lime shirt and cuffed slacks turned the corner and disappeared from view, echoed as he waited for the tow truck, and echoed as the day's light faded into dusk and the tow truck came and he climbed into the passenger seat and wished, for the first time in a long time, that the next morning wasn't so far away.

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The following morning, with his truck still broken, Dmitri couldn't stop by Greenlake. Instead, he left early and walked to school, arriving at John Riley Bannister's office at seven in order to take the principal by surprise. Johnny avoided conflict; he'd been the kind of kid who waited to be found out, and as an adult, he did the same. Probably how he'd managed to become principal so quickly—and being James Bannister's son couldn't have hurt.

Apart from donning a white cowboy hat to proclaim his dedication to the rural community, Johnny had changed little since his days as Dmitri's student. Neither bright nor persistent, he was eager to please—one of the qualities Dmitri liked least in people. Johnny got it from his father, and like most traits they shared, it resided in James with greater charisma.

"Well, hi, Mr. Harris."

"Good morning, Johnny."

"What can I do for you?"

"You say to come to you right away when we have a problem."

Johnny's chin bobbed in immediate agreement. Though he'd signed Dmitri's paychecks for the past six years, Dmitri couldn't help seeing the same tow-headed sophomore who'd once turned in an essay on *King Lear* with mimeographed Cliffs Notes clipped to the back.

"I dismissed sixth period early yesterday and figured you'd want to see me. I put students in danger and the school at risk of liability." His eyes narrowed at the corners as he

recited the apology. Like his kneeling confessions as a boy at St. Bernard's, recounting tales of comic book hoarding, masturbation, and jealousy, Dmitri admitted his misdeeds with ironic intrigue. He wasn't making fun of his confidante, exactly, but he found the *telling* amusing—a mix of embarrassment and irony that the priests had always mistaken for a lack of remorse.

“Why didn't you wait for me to call you in?”

Dmitri brushed his hair back with his hand. “The incident was terrible judgment on my part. I'd been up all night writing a lecture and then—you know how it goes—no one was listening.” He was aware that Johnny did not know how it goes. His boss's classroom experience consisted of three years of business instruction at Madison's rival high school before getting his administrative degree and doing quick, obligatory stints at elementary and middle schools.

“Like the American flag business?”

“No.” This was Johnny's latest approach, highlighting patterns of behavior. Plucked, no doubt, from his last administrative conference.

“Sort of, though,” Johnny insisted.

“Nope. That was planned. This was not.”

Johnny rolled his eyes. The previous year, Dmitri had taken his class outside and set fire to a poster of an American flag. A few students rushed forward to stamp it out. He'd gotten them into a circle and questioned them. Why had they rushed forward? Why hadn't others? Would it have mattered if it was a real flag? For an hour, they'd debated the nature of symbolism—one of his most engaging lessons ever. But the Board had gotten wind of it and the whole thing exploded into a fiasco that had nearly cost him his job. At the hearing, his students had rallied for him—signs, fliers, testimony. He'd been lucky—George Mitchell and Octavio Pauley, two of the Board's staunchest members, were out with the flu. He'd won four to three.

“Suspend me. I won't appeal. I'll come back in a week and won't put you through this again.”

“Your wild tactics won't make literary critics out of Neanderthals. They don't teach anyone anything—they never have.”

Dmitri cleared his throat. Typical Johnny, friendly to aggressive. He could see his boss's mind ticking slowly, devising a punishment, summoning administrative lingo and

team building strategies. “Madison High depends on you to be a leader—”

“No it doesn’t,” Dmitri couldn’t resist interjecting.

“Yes, it does.”

“I’m no leader. I keep to my classroom, don’t take on extra responsibilities, don’t attend Board meetings unless they involve me directly. Which, I’ll remind you, they only have once. On good days, I think I can be an exceptional teacher. But even on the best of days, I’m no leader.”

Pre-empting Johnny’s speeches were a guilty pleasure. He watched Johnny root around for a follow-up.

“Well, I think you should be. But that’s beside the point.” Johnny sniffed. “You may have heard that I started a mentor program to encourage school spirit.”

Reflexively, Dmitri winced.

“The program’s had some challenges getting off the ground, and I’d like your help.”

“I don’t think I’m a good match for that.”

The principal smiled—the balance of power had been restored. “The program pairs experienced teachers with new ones to facilitate their integration into the Madison community.”

“I know.” Dmitri had been evading Ruth Pritchard, the vice-principal chairing it, for weeks. And then it struck him. “Can I choose the person I mentor?”

“As long as they’re not paired up. Who were you thinking?”

“Rika Brown.”

Johnny frowned. “She’s science. I’m trying to keep departments together.”

“I’ve been trying to integrate certain aspects of my curriculum with the sciences, and this would provide a great opportunity for interdepartmental communication. It would—it would—” he forced himself to choke out some rhetoric “—facilitate integrated teamwork.”

The principal leaned back in his chair.

“But I’d still rather be suspended,” Dmitri added quickly.

“Well. That’s just too bad, Mr. Harris. I need you to be a team player.” Johnny opened a notebook on his desk and scribbled something. “Dmitri Harris, Rika Brown. I’ll have Ruth put the program guidelines in your box. I think you’ll find this a valuable experience.”

“You never know.” They shook hands, and Dmitri tried his best to look sullen.

Walking back to his classroom, it was only seven-thirty, no later than his usual arrival time. The social sciences building sat between the math department and the counseling offices. It was a victim of low, flat-roofed seventies architecture, and its coat of Madison-spirited kelly green, applied over the original orange paint, highlighted this fact more than concealing it.

Dmitri didn't mind. He loved the way Madison mirrored Ellis, the strains and breaks, the constant repairs. Beneath the gleam and uniformity of progress, both were both patchworks, decaying in places and renewing themselves in others, full of hidden secrets and moldering pipes, old farming families and Silicon Valley spillovers.

Madison High's original building had been constructed in 1917, with long dark hallways and the elegant façade of a Spanish mission, the top arching into an oval with a cut-out crucifix. In 1926, the second superintendent commissioned a grounds project which added a row of palm trees in front of the main parking lot, potted zinnias and rhododendrons, and honeysuckle bushes along the sides. Fifteen years later, the flowers were gone and the palm trees had outgrown their young, fuller stage and shot up into rickety blistered sticks. It turned out he'd bought the wrong kind.

Growth had happened quickly. By 1947, forty students were crammed into classrooms designed for thirty. The Board approved a new construction project in 1950, but four years after it was finished, they'd run out of room again. Ellis, as always, was startled by its own growth, its influx of stubborn optimists who were steadfast, above all else, that they'd found a better place.

By 1960, Ellis's farmers and small businessmen, who swore the town would soon grow to 10,000, persuaded the school district to build in the adjacent field. This resulted in a trio of stooped, long structure that included the social studies department.

In the four years he'd been a student at Madison, construction had raged nonstop. More additions were made—piecemeal, never enough—with haphazard piping and poorly tiled roofs, new gas lines laid alongside old ones. The last real buildings had been added in the late 1970's; after that, the district jammed portables wherever they'd fit, lining rows on the edge of the football field, behind the cracked tennis courts, along the fence by the auto shop. These eventually rotted from beneath, and there was never money to replace them, only to board the holes and re-open the rooms by September.

He straightened his desks into rows, sighing heavily. It was un-Zen to care so deeply

about a physical place, but he couldn't help it. He'd lived west of Ellis Boulevard his entire life.

Most of his students hated Ellis, or pretended to, calling it "Hellis" as Dmitri's classmates had done, complaining about its lack of hangouts (one movie theatre, a one-story mall, an ancient bowling alley, and a heavily-policed skate park). "But Ellis is a crossroads," Dmitri liked to tell them. "All kinds of people come here. You never know who will turn up."

And it was true. At any given point since 1960, half the town's population had lived there less than a decade. Ellis pulsed with growth, and liked most of all to equate growth with progress. But up until now, it had been change of a certain type, change which built on the old instead of replacing it. This was the heart of Ellis; this was its point.

At five to eight, Dmitri went to the Copy Center and retrieved his mail: the faculty newsletter, the daily bulletin, a reminder about Golden State Exams. He tossed the pile into the recycling bin and studied the department phone lists. When would it be appropriate to re-introduce himself to Rika? Today might seem too eager. Tomorrow?

For the first four class periods, she was intermittently faceless in his memory—stunning, then gone—reappearing the instant his mind strayed to something else. Near lunchtime, Dmitri felt sick to his stomach. Becky was his friend, his equalizer. Cheating rarely crossed his mind, and he'd always been faithful. He tried to imagine how he'd feel if she met someone else. Stung. Upset. But—betrayed? When had they last really lusted after one another? Theirs was a different kind of love—the kind he'd decided marriage was about, steady and resolute. Nothing would change that. No, he just wanted the excitement of befriending a woman to whom he was attracted, layered conversations that devastated and rejuvenated him. He'd accept the sacrifice of wanting and not having. But he wanted to want.

Most lunchtimes, Dmitri didn't leave his classroom. He locked his door and read local history over a cheese sandwich, or played chess against the ostracized intellectuals of the junior class. Today, though, both options gave him an out. Without a firm social commitment, he might be tempted to seek out Rika, and he wanted to wait. Delayed gratification built strength, cultivated self-knowledge, refined desire; Buddhism encouraged restraint. Fingering his beads, Dmitri thought of the ways he deliberately prolonged his waits: not eating out on weekdays, not buying books in hardback, walking to work until the

Ford was fixed instead of getting a rental. Rituals of restraint prepared him for days like this. His natural tendency was self-indulgence, and he'd tried holding off on other pleasure sources—chocolate, cheese, masturbation—that had proven less successful. But he was trying, and this, his Zen teacher said, was, pre-satori, the goal.

Dmitri dreaded eating lunch with the rest of the English faculty. It was a ritualistic gossip session that he couldn't help dismissing as irretrievably feminine. Hiring two strapping grads from the Midwest hadn't ameliorated this. The department's biological gender balance was 50-50, but its emotional tides ran 80-20 toward the hysterical, estrogen to testosterone.

"We *always* eat in Karen's room," one of the new hires complained. "Mine has more space—"

"Did you hear about Ralph Williamson?" the journalism teacher cut in.

"Suspended?"

"No, they found him at the mall. You seriously didn't hear?"

Everyone pressed forward.

"He took his father's Jeep. They caught him having sex in the parking lot."

"With who?"

"Whom," someone corrected.

Dmitri isolated one of his mala beads on the string and spun it.

"Hannah Gold. Jenny Van Horn told me."

"That girl can't keep her mouth shut."

"Or her legs," the new journalism teacher said, winking to show her ironic self-awareness. She'd graduated from Grinnell with a 3.6, claimed to worship Joyce. Dmitri colored with an orange marker on the edge of his napkin as teachers talked about students, about other departments, about absentee members of their own department.

"Long time no see." Benji Laida moved over to him and withdrew an enormous bagel covered in strawberry cream cheese.

"Shoot me," Dmitri said quietly.

"They're just venting. Maybe if our department chair showed up more often, it wouldn't get so bitchy in here." Benji grinned, giving Dmitri an unsolicited view of his beige teeth. He was a small Filipino man with humongous feet adorned in Vans and black socks, and the person in the department Dmitri respected most.

"I heard you fucked up."

For a panicked instant, Dmitri thought Benji was talking about Rika.

"Is it true? You just told them to go?"

"Oh—yes. Horrible day."

"Ballsy." Two octaves lower, Benji's giggle would have resembled machine gun fire. "Bet it shook them up. What'd Johnny say?"

Dmitri lowered his voice to separate their conversation from the rest of the group. "In order to perpetuate Madison's feel-good rhetoric, I'm participating in a project which pairs newbies with has-beens."

"Johnny's mentor program? *You?*"

"Like asking a hermit to attend a co-dependents' convention."

"He's getting creative. What's your plan?"

"It's too late."

"Who's the victim?"

Dmitri coughed. "Some science person. Rika... Brown?"

"I've seen her. Funny eyes."

He felt a defensive pang. In the pause that followed, Karen told the group that Mary Muenster-Frank, the previous year's valedictorian, was pregnant.

"Should I ask what they think of the new Pynchon bio?"

"Ha, ha. I don't know if you're really Russian, but you're—"

"Really, *really* mad," Dmitri finished for him. It was one of Benji's favorite lines. "What do they say about me when I'm not here?"

"Don't anger the crazy man. That was yesterday's gem. The consensus fluctuates; you're either completely nuts or a stick-in-the-mud."

"But you stand up for me, right?"

Benji cocked his head in mock exasperation. "I would, you Russian god-of-a-man, if they weren't so obviously dead-on. But don't worry—they're infatuated, even the ones who don't like you. You're a genius train wreck on legs."

Minutes before the bell, the teachers separated for fifth period and Dmitri headed to the parking lot. Without his truck, he had to improvise. He shooed the potheads back to class and assumed their shaded position among the trees behind the auto shop. Drawing a fag from his pack, he slid it beneath his nose, then lit it. Tomorrow would be too soon to

approach Rika, would seem too unbelievably coincidental. Friday, then. Or Monday—could he stand the wait? Smoke filtered into his lungs, and he felt curiously blissful. The afternoon stretched long, like an unwound nautilus shell with himself in the center of it.

Railroad tracks ran parallel to the fence that marked the school property boundary. The trains that passed Madison were slow and worn down, with gang tagging and obscene propositions illustrated in black and red. Cars were brown or mustard yellow with red lettering, wounded by time and corrosion and occasional bullets. Not the type of train that belonged next to a school—but then, the tracks had been there first. And as Dmitri liked to say, historical relationships were the roots of the present. He'd taken that from his father, who had hoped he'd become a history professor. As a child, Dmitri had historical exactitudes drummed into him, quizzes on Civil War battles at breakfast and totalitarian dictatorships at dinner.

Beyond the tracks, the brick skeleton of the Heinz factory was deteriorating. Two years earlier it had been in operation, raining vinegar on Madison, filling the air with a pungent fog of all things tomato—soup, sauce, paste, ketchup. It glowed alive from four in the morning till late at night, pausing a few hours to rest before firing up again. Many of his students' parents had worked at Heinz as chemists or tasters or custodians, and he wondered where they'd scattered. The railroad yards, maybe. The glass factory. Leprino Cheese. Lawrence Livermore Labs.

Unpredictability. The only consistent measure of his time in Ellis, the sole common thread. And as much chaos as he'd witnessed, so far he'd done a reasonable job avoiding it himself. He was an observer. He'd considered writing a history of the place, but his problem was organization; histories require allocation of facts, events, information amassed beneath chapters and sub-headings. Smoke curled around the branches above him, collecting and releasing against the broken windows and unlit storerooms. Zen didn't require organization. It required ethereal knowledge, the fundamental understanding that the Heinz factory and the Pint Club and Benji's strawberry cream cheese and Dmitri's own left kidney were all torn from the same molecular fabric that wrapped the earth in dirt and rock and ocean. In Ellis, where everything pervaded everything else, Dmitri could understand this. Sitting in zazen sometimes, he felt the entire town pulse through him like a sob.

No, he lacked the makings of a historian. All he'd gotten from his father was the restlessness, the eye for details. Lighting his third cigarette, Dmitri closed his eyes and

counted his breaths, thinking of Rika Brown's sharp curves and bodily certainty and letting the nautilus in his mind unravel into the smoke.

Chapter Three

Russ Dillinger leaned against the chain-link fence, the cheap metal worn through, corroded to brown. Some kid had sawed through it at the bottom and bent it up like a door. Maybe as a shortcut, maybe just for the thrill. Russ fished his inhaler from his jacket and shot two sprays into his throat. Days like this, the cold tried to choke him.

The bell rang. He took out his sketchpad and his father's old Don Tomas cigar box, and snapped the box open. B and H pencils were in separate bundles, bound with rubber bands he'd saved from the *Record*. Since it was overcast, he withdrew a 6B. He needed it dark.

Did people ever notice him here? They probably thought he was just another strange Stocktonite lurking around C. Wright Mills Elementary—though the long hair and sketch pad might throw them off. Not much of a risk—hardly any of the parents around here picked their kids up. Even the youngest ones walked home or took the bus.

Russ's son was one of the walkers. Jackson lived less than a mile away, with his mother, Muriel, and her husband Carlos, whom Russ had never met, and who'd been living with them since Jackson was two. The door of their pink house bore a wreath of the huge, bundled-stick variety Russ thought better suited for kindling. Muriel decorated it for different seasons—pink ribbon and plastic eggs for Easter, orange ribbon and paper pumpkins for Halloween. Russ drove by occasionally to check things out. The pink house wasn't in a combat zone of the type his clients inhabited, but the neighborhood wasn't good, either.

Jackson's perpetual failure to notice him worried Russ. It suggested his son wasn't learning to be observant, and living where he did, observation was key, especially for a bony white kid. Jackson wasn't as pale as Russ, but wasn't as dark as Muriel, either, and had inherited Russ's blond hair. It was too late for a battle over custody, but at least the battle of genes had been a draw.

Russ turned his sketchpad to a blank page and waited. Beyond the fence, beyond Mills Elementary, steam swirled from the silver pipes of the asparagus cannery, a giant industrial tree with its roots in the El Dorado Canal and its branches in the sky. While Russ was growing up, his father had commuted there from Ellis, and after going along on a Saturday shift when he was sixteen, Russ had stood on the street and watched the steam rise

from the mouths of giant pipes, watched the wide languid flow of the canal and the mess of tall brown buildings so different from those in Ellis, and thought: this is a city I could start in.

Beige and brown and black and white faces poured from the main gate, shoes dragging against the pavement, giant backpacks slung over their shoulders. Jackson was one of the last, as usual, one of the only pale specks in the group, short, with one skinned knee.

Shame got to Russ on these afternoons. He hoped it was shame; he feared it was not. He feared it was raw, belated jealousy that Muriel had possession of the only thing in the world that really mattered.

Fundamentally, he knew it was unreasonable for people to hold themselves accountable for things they did as depressives or addicts or, in Russ's case, alcoholics. But he was still sickened by memories of the hate he'd felt toward his son long before he'd ever seen him. To look at the boy now, shuffling through the iron gate, to think of his words to Muriel and how, later, he'd never contested custody or the restraining order, he could scarcely fathom his own godforsaken idiocy.

With his lanky shoulders bent over his pad, Russ began drawing. Lately he'd been concentrating on Jackson's eyes, sketching the dark shine of his pupils, his long eyelashes—both from Muriel—with short, hard strokes.

Every man has a sound he waits for all day, some blend of tones that drowns out phone bills, bank statements, and busted radiators. His father's had been the trickle of Crown Royale into the unwashed glass beside his rocking chair; for his mother, it was her husband's sigh muffling against her shoulder as they fell asleep. As Jackson approached, Russ tucked the pencils and pad under his arm and crossed the street to watch him. This was *his* sound: Jackson stepping on dry leaves, shoes scuffing against the pavement. Humming, shifting his backpack from shoulder to shoulder. Russ listened until Jackson was past, then watched him pick his way down the sidewalk, leaping with both feet over breaks in the pavement.

Russ settled onto the curb to finish his sketch. Someday, he'd rush forward, grab Jackson, and buckle him into the passenger seat of his hatchback. The boy would look at his father, know instantly, and forgive. Hamburgers and fries, then, at the Peninsula Grill. A Ports game. They'd spend Saturdays together, he'd show Jackson the drawings, and everything would uncomplicate itself.

The desperation of these afternoons were less punishment than he deserved. Russ stood. He should get back to work. Even Meg, supposedly his best friend, said he needed to come to terms with the fact that he'd never meet his son. Well, fuck Meg Harris. Fuck Meg, fuck Muriel, fuck the autumn wreath that had appeared on the pink house last week.

From Mills Elementary, it was a short drive back downtown, and he parked in the budget garage on Harlan Street and walked to his office.

The wood plank that swayed from the iron post above his door read, "Dillinger & Associates," but in truth, it was only Russ. Had there been any associates, Russ doubted there would have been room for them in the cramped space. When he'd made the sign, he'd been more optimistic on this point, and had liked the implication that his services weren't a solo effort.

Point Reyes, where he'd found the fallen oak branch, was rife with redwoods and oaks and eucalyptus trees on the trail to the lighthouse. The plank Russ had taken for his sign was unnaturally ugly, burned on the back and knotted on the front. A placard at the trailhead had read, "Collection of Natural Forest Items Forbidden." But it had been the one-month anniversary of the day he'd quit drinking, so he'd treated himself. The hike was part of his self-imposed recovery strategy: something new every weekend. He'd kept it up for months. The week following the hike, he'd tried woodworking—sanding the oak, conditioning it, and staining it walnut before having it professionally engraved.

He'd opened his own practice because after being fired from the Public Defender's office, criminal defense was his sole marketable skill. But for the past two and a half years, sober and with a fraction of the clients, the work had been different. Now he made sure to meet defendants' girlfriends and mothers, to read DNA studies related to their cases, to drop clients who lied to him. All new luxuries. And while a lot of defendants were assholes, a number weren't, and he got a thrill out of being their champions. At the PD's office, he had invested the thinnest possible margin of himself, skating through trials with a bare bones knowledge of the witness statements. With forty open cases, what more had been possible? And one morning, a few days into his second year, he'd shown up drunk, thoroughly unprepared for a hearing he'd thought was set for eleven, but which had actually occurred at nine. En route to court, his division head, Raymond Renard, had intercepted Russ, steered him to the most expensive restaurant in the city, bought him lunch, and gently, over shrimp scampi with cayenne pepper, fired him.

Russ had laughed; this he remembered. He did not, however, remember refusing to leave, hurling his Tom Collins to the floor, challenging the waiter to a fight, nor any of the other unflattering accusations the restaurant had listed in its affidavit.

For six months, Russ hadn't worked. He'd dressed each morning in a shirt and tie and driven to one coffee shop or another, where he'd read the paper, glancing periodically at his watch to suggest that he was waiting for someone. Around two, he'd go somewhere for a burger and a beer and stay until ten, watching television and doling out unsolicited legal advice. Suitably inebriated, he would retire to his apartment and work until midnight on monstrous paintings that he'd later thrown away.

The ritual had continued until one cold morning, when he'd awoken contemplating whether to ask Meg for money. In isolation, this was nothing new; Russ asked people for money all the time, on the theory that if they could afford it, they might as well give it to him. But upon opening his eyes that morning, Russ had been confronted with a second, more pressing dilemma: the sleeve of his leather jacket was entangled in the sewer grate on which he'd slept. His head, having rested for several hours on cold pavement, felt as if someone had tried to perforate it with an ice pick. On top of this, his shoes were soaked and it hadn't rained. He'd tried fruitlessly to unhook his sleeve, and just as he'd decided to abandon the jacket, Russ opened his eyes (until then, he hadn't realized he'd closed them again) and was face to face with a small boy. After a few seconds, he began wondering if he was dead and this kid was an angel—then a voice behind him yelled, “Darn it, Jackson! Don't go away from me like that.” Upon realizing it was Muriel, Russ had taken the only reasonable action; he'd pretended he was dead. She said something in Spanish, and then in English, “Bums are full of germs. Don't want to get sick, do you?” His face, luckily, had been out of view.

Later, he realized he shouldn't have been surprised. The greater coincidence was that they inhabited the same corner of the city and hadn't run into each other earlier. Still, the encounter had shaken him—for one, he'd planned to be dressed in a suit if she ever saw him again, and for another, he'd expected her to have a baby in her arms. This kid, *his* kid, was a boy—not some sexless infant, but a skinny blond boy named Jackson. And this had frightened him more than losing his job, or asking Meg for money, or waking up on the street tangled in a sewer grate. From then on, he'd stayed stone-cold sober.

Russ shook his head, pressing his fingers over his eyes. He tore a sheet from his legal pad, made a list of things he needed to get done, and checked his messages. Just one—

left while he was at Mills. He pressed play: “Hey Russ. I got fucked again. They have me at County. I need your help.” The usual variety, save the man’s omission of his name. Russ scribbled a guess on his legal pad, a client who’d followed him from the PD’s office. Meg would have said the recognition meant he spent too much time at work, but the way Russ saw it, taking note of these things just meant he was less of an asshole than he used to be. He worked steadily until after dark, then locked his office.

Nam’s Vietnamese Cuisine stayed open until midnight, and occasionally Russ ran into Meg there, though never this late. They hadn’t *fought*, exactly, but she’d told him her friendship with Muriel came before him—had, at least, refused to discuss Jackson, which meant the same thing. He ordered rice noodles with chicken and a boiled egg, and Nam gave him the egg for free. Nam was one of his most frequent clients, and had inspired creative strategies for beating charges of misdemeanor marijuana possession. Russ usually let Nam pay in pot or free dinner, and once or twice a month, they sat after closing and discussed Nam’s motley of pet causes: the extension of the draft to illegal immigrants, the versatility of hemp products in construction work, the practical implications of freeing Mumia.

From the window, Russ could make out the lights of Stockton’s port. It had to be one of the ugliest ones on the world. The city was so proud of the thing that its Double A baseball team was called the Ports, maybe to trick outsiders into thinking Stockton had more than one. Pathetic, but at least it wasn’t Ellis.

Russ slurped his soup. The steam rose in swirls from his spoon, and the hot, heavy air inside Nam’s slowed it down, the same way that in the summer, the steam rose slowly from the asparagus cannery’s smokestacks, weighed down by the Valley’s heat. Russ hadn’t been back to Ellis since his father died. He still resented having grown up there, and knew it had held him back. That was one thing he and Meg agreed on.

From the foggy windows, he could almost see the courthouse. Nam made his own noodles, and when the machines ran, the glass steamed up from inside.

A long time ago, Russ had been in love with two things. The first was Muriel, who he’d met the summer before law school when he was pouring concrete for Caterpillar and she was a temp there. She’d carried her rosary in the pockets of her skirts, and though it had usually gone untouched, Muriel seemed to regard carrying it as a form of closeness to God that precluded the need for strict adherence to the commandments. Secondly, Russ had been in love with the idea of himself as a Los Angeles lawyer. His hair was short then, and he

drank wine instead of beer when he could afford it, dreaming of moving south and living by the beach, doing taxes for Kevin Spacey and Gwyneth Paltrow.

. . . .

The bushes by the canal next to Russ's apartment were moving, and not of their own accord. If it was human, it was probably stalking one of his neighbors. A few steps later, he noticed a shoe near the rocks, unattached to a foot. "Hey!" he shouted. Silence. He picked up a clod of dirt and fired it overhand into the plants.

Nothing moved. He picked his way down the side of the canal bed a few yards and knelt to examine the shoe. Expensive, brown, polished. Stockton only had three canals and this one was the most secluded. Cadavers weren't exactly unprecedented, but Russ had never found one. He removed his flashlight and Sig Sauer semiautomatic from his briefcase, tossed the briefcase back toward the parking lot, and kept going. Near the trickle of filthy water, a shoeless balding man was sprawled face-down on the rocks. Shit. Poor bastard, Russ's father would have said, as if it was a movie. Russ wished he had a cell phone. Instead he'd have to go inside to call, and the police would probably ask him to wait with it. "You're dead, right?" he called to the body.

"Yeah," a man's voice grunted against the ground.

"Holy fuck," Russ whispered. The parking lot was unlit, and Russ beamed the flashlight over the bushes to make sure the guy was alone. Shifting his flashlight to his left hand, he removed the gun with his right, and crept toward the canal. His body hummed, alert, and glancing back to the briefcase, he thought of the sketches of Jackson inside. "If anyone has business with this man, just say so and I'll walk away," he called. Nothing.

As he reached the body, Russ wondered if he'd imagined the grunt; as cadavers went, this was convincing. Blood was soaked through an expensive-looking shirt—such good quality the blood hadn't stiffened it—and the man's head was a red-purple disaster that made a lot of autopsy photos look clement. A deep wound stretched across his forehead, the skin held apart by swelling. His nose was a deep shade of burgundy, like a rotted cherry, and the ear facing Russ was so engorged that the aural divisions were indiscernible.

"Hey."

The man's eyes were closed. Russ hoped he hadn't just witnessed a death. "Jesus." He shone the flashlight over the eyelids. "Look at me if you're alive."

Briefly, the man did as he was told, then closed them again. "Bright," he murmured weakly.

"All right, I'm moving the flashlight away. Try to keep them open." Russ returned the gun to his pocket and knelt. "We're going to get you up." Or should he call an ambulance first? He wished he had a cell phone.

The eyes opened, one of them only halfway. From the smell of it, the man had shit himself. How long had he been here?

"Here, I'll roll you over, then we'll get you sitting up." Russ pushed the man's shoulder toward the canal, and he inhaled sharply, wincing. Russ stepped away. "All right—I'm calling an ambulance. Don't move."

"No."

"They'll take you to a hospital."

"Please—please, no." His voice quavered.

"You need a doctor," Russ said.

"No."

"If you don't have insurance, it's okay—there are programs."

The man groaned.

"Are you afraid that whoever did this to you will find you?"

The man didn't answer.

"Look, I understand, but you're safe in a hospital." What was he supposed to do, leave the guy to die? Call an ambulance against his will? "If you can't get up, I've got to call someone."

"Turn me over."

"All right, just—uh—think about the beach or the ocean or something relaxing." Ignoring the pained, throaty exhalations, he managed to roll the man onto his back, then hoist him into a slumped sitting position. He was older than Russ, and the side of his face that had been against the ground was crusted with dirt and mud and God knew what else. Poor bastard. But he was sitting up. "Any pain in your back?"

"No."

"Legs? Arms?"

"Lots—I don't want anyone involved."

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know. I was in a park. Late. Tuesday."

Jesus. "It's Thursday, man. You must have been unconscious. And there aren't any parks around here. Someone moved you." They'd left him for dead.

"My face—how does it look?"

"Well. If this was a movie, the director might say the make-up was overdone." It came out sarcastic, not at all how he'd meant it.

"Or a play." The man smiled, just a little, from one corner of his mouth.

"Can you get up?"

The man put his arm out, and slowly, very slowly, rested his full weight on Russ's shoulder. His pants were soaked with blood at the knees. "My leg."

They began walking. Russ pretended not to notice the smell, but it made him want to vomit. The guy wasn't on his deathbed, at least. Probably Russ was an idiot for not calling 911, but something about the man's tone, that earnest, desperate undercurrent made him hold off. He couldn't help thinking of his own lowest point, waking up on the sewer grate, and feeling sympathetic. It was obvious from the man's clothes—nicer than anything Russ owned, for sure—that he wasn't some street thug. Probably just a random banker or businessman who'd nearly found himself a victim of one of Stockton's eighty annual murders. "Mugging?" Russ asked.

"Yeah. The guy had a gun."

"Did you try to fight him?"

"Uh—yeah."

"That was stupid. Just out for a walk, or what?"

The man paused. "Visiting. I'm from Berkeley."

"It seems like you're breathing pretty well."

"Yes. Are we still in Stockton?" The dried bits of mud were falling off, and underneath, his face was white as a dove.

"Bingo. Land of gangs, factories, a world-famous port—hey, take it slow." The man slipped hard onto one knee. He didn't wince. "Jesus, your whole body's numb, isn't it? Tomorrow you're going to feel like shit. What's your name?"

"Ian."

"I'm Russ. Ian what?"

The man hesitated. "*Pinter*. Ian Pinter."

"Russ Dillinger." They shook hands.

"Thanks for—for finding me."

"No problem." He wished he could just call a cab, but the guy could barely walk. What the hell. "Want to crash on my couch?"

Ian put his hand to one eye, where a brown crust had formed on the lower lid. "I'd be immensely grateful."

The calm in Ian's voice and the tranquility in his demeanor were startling. He stared so intensely, like a newborn baby, so strange and innocent and demanding, that for just a minute, Russ was frightened of him.

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Under the stark fluorescent light, Ian was mesmerized by his reflection. Was this was how it felt to get old, searching in a mirror for some recognizable glimpse of yourself?

He turned the shower handle and began undressing. Disgusting. He stripped off his shirt, reeking of sweat. Russ, thank God, had handed him a clean pair of sweat pants on his way to the bathroom.

Pain shot through his wrist and up to his shoulder. He had transcended the realm of the everyday. A thick scrape ran down his forearm, dark red, the width of a tongue. He eased off his shirt and let it fall to the floor. His torso was covered in marks, in scrapes, in gashes and bruises. Yet, as he unbuckled his belt and let his slacks slide to his ankles, Ian felt strangely proud. Not of *Denouement*, but of the act, of his own survival. He balled his briefs inside his pants, then wrapped his pants inside his shirt and tied his sleeves together. He'd have to throw it all away.

Even in his best roles, he'd never felt this aware of his body. Every inch of him throbbed. His life, suddenly and irreversibly, had been boiled to its essentials. He sensed that he was different, somehow, which was why he'd changed his name. Ian Cooper Pinter, the first and only. Solid-sounding. A chunk of dirt fell from his forehead to the sink, revealing another cut. When he touched it, the pain was terrible, and he realized his shower would be excruciating. After peeling off his socks—a feat frustrated by his blindingly

painful left knee—Ian stepped into the shower. The stinging brought tears to his eyes. Softly, beneath the water, he let himself cry.

He'd never felt so relieved. Months, years, decades, unrolled their magnanimous selves, and time spread infinitely before him. He soaked up the pain like sunlight.

No longer able to support his weight on just one leg, Ian sat on the edge of the tub to lather himself, grimacing at the chemical sting. He drank the warm water, closed his eyes, and remembered his attacker's anger, the searing hate. The black man was real, and he'd made Ian real. The anger was inspiring, purer than Ian's whole existence. When had he last felt such gratitude? The first time Ray made love to him—that was the closest.

Unconscious, Russ had said. That must be right. Nearly two days had passed, and he had no recollection of being moved. The last thing he remembered was realizing he wanted to live, shoving death back at the decisive instant, not letting it swallow him.

It was a sign, nothing less. That wanting was acceptable, even desirable at points, that it could feel as colossally good as ice water on a burn. But it had to be elemental, grounded in the physical world. Up until Stockton, he'd been weak, self-indulgent. His stage nemesis had seen this and doled to Ian what Ian deserved. How gratifying to have feelings so intense. The black man hadn't complicated his life with private schools, tax shelters, art galas. His core was at the surface, his anger instant, governing him. Grimacing as the water burned his face and legs, Ian was ashamed of his old life, of everything he'd ever wanted.

Dirt was still caked in the edges of his cuts, and Ian picked up the Jergens from Russ's soap dish and spread it over himself a second time. Where had he gone wrong? Theatre had let him channel all varieties of emotion, let him feel as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. But it was returned faithfully, he realized now, at each curtain.

He'd resented *wanting* because he'd let it paralyze him. He'd resented the world's impracticable expanse because he lacked a sturdy precinct in it. The burden of existence had dominated him—and as he thought this, the sheer cliché of it struck him. *The burden of existence*—how ungodly pretentious.

His back stung, but it hurt too much when he tried maneuvering his arms to soap it, so he plugged the tub and let it fill, then eased himself into the water. His spine, thank God, felt fine, and he exhaled, relieved to have the pressure off of his legs.

For a long time, Ian didn't move. Then, finally, he looked at his fingers, which were

starting to wrinkle. He touched them with his tongue. Was this the first time he'd bathed since he was a child?

A person exists in details. He bathes, looks at his hands. He tastes a Chianti, listens to Ella Fitzgerald in the quiet of a familiar bedroom, and finds himself in these things. His stage nemesis thrummed in the details of the real, his life imbued with more passion and grief than any actor Ian had known. Words like "fag" and "nigger" were visceral. There was no self-consciousness, no irony for his time, his place, his historiographical situation.

And Ian Pinter could be the same. Ian Pinter didn't exist as anyone's preconception. He had dropped from the sky into a fierce town in a terrible way and was free, now, to slink away from the world's game. He had no desire to return to Berkeley, and *Denouement's* reception no longer interested him. He hoisted himself from the water and stepped onto Russ's bathmat. It would take him weeks to recover, but however improbably, nothing felt broken. Over the next painful minutes, he patted himself with a towel, salved his wounds, and wrapped the particularly grotesque ones in gauze. He didn't know where he'd go the next morning, only that he would sleep peacefully that night.

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Russ was momentarily startled by the shirtless man curled in repose on his couch. Ian something—now he couldn't remember the last name. "Hey," he said.

Ian didn't stir. Russ repeated it, louder. Nothing. "Ian. Man. Wake up." He sighed. Someone could *breathe* in the same room and it woke him. One of sobriety's chief drawbacks. He shook Ian's shoulder.

Ian opened his eyes.

"I've got to go. Want me to drop you off at the hospital?"

Ian grimaced. "No thanks."

Russ went back into his bedroom and undressed. He didn't feel dirty but showered anyway, quickly, not washing his hair. He pulled on his slacks, shirt, tie. Ian groaned in the living room. "Sore?" Russ called.

"Like I've been run over by a carnival."

Russ smiled. "Started re-evaluating your life yet?"

"Why?"

"It happens when I have clients in your shoes. Or who've been let go after a major arrest. They spend a day or two realizing they've taken everything for granted, then go right back to what they were doing before."

"You're a lawyer?"

"Criminal defense."

"My ex was a public defender."

"I bet she turned into an asshole workaholic, so you dumped her. Happens to my kind a lot."

"They dumped me."

"The bitch." Russ went to the kitchen, took two packs of Pop Tarts from the cupboard, and threw one to Ian. If he ever had to, he could live on Pop Tarts. There were eight different varieties. "How long were you married?"

"We weren't. But we lived together three years."

"I know that route," Russ said, though he'd never lived with anyone.

"These sketches are quite accomplished. Do you know the artist personally?"

"Why?"

"You bought the whole series. Though I don't suppose you could get the full effect without it. I was looking at them last night. The boy's captured in transitory moments. Staring at you from different places in his life."

Russ looked away. No one else had ever seen these, and it made him jumpy. He hid them on the rare occasions Meg came over.

"Some younger ones could really round out the series. He looks about five here, maybe seven in the oldest ones. The child as infant is missing. Perhaps at age two or three—"

"I've got to work," Russ cut in quickly. "I'll get you some clothes." He went to his bedroom and picked out a pair of faded black jeans he'd never liked, a yellow Corona T-shirt with holes in the armpits, and—more reluctantly—a clean pair of boxer-briefs. He went back out and set the pile next to his fireplace. "I've got to leave in a couple minutes."

Ian limped into the bathroom and emerged twenty minutes later, handing Russ the sweatpants. "Thanks. My old clothes are sitting in the bathtub. Can I throw them away?"

Sick. "There's a dumpster behind the complex. Is that a credit card?"

"Debit," Ian said, sliding it into the back pocket of his jeans.

“They didn’t take it?”

“Just my wallet. I keep this separate.” He went into Russ’s guest bathroom and retrieved the soiled pile. They were tied up neatly, at least—maybe Russ wouldn’t have to scour the tub.

“Can you give me the names of some towns around here? I might take the bus.”

“There’s a direct route to San Francisco. From there, you can take BART to Berkeley.”

Ian nodded. “What other towns are there?”

“Sacramento’s an hour north. Lathrop and Ripon are small and boring. Manteca’s new houses and strip malls. Ellis is a crappy, mishmashed commuterville.”

“Ellis? That’s about thirty miles east?”

“Yep. I’ll give you a ride.”

“That’s all right.”

“Bus stop’s on my way,” Russ lied. “No big deal.” He didn’t mind, as long as he could open the office by eight. You relied on routines, he’d learned when he was sobering. Let yourself slip, you’re skating toward disaster. The little shit in life was far more important than people let on.

After dropping Ian off and checking his messages at work, Russ called Meg to see if she wanted to meet at Nam’s for lunch. She worked a few blocks north of Russ, and helping Ian had put him in a good mood. Maybe he was ready to forgive her.

Eight-thirty meant coffee, so he wedged his trial binder beneath his arm and walked the three blocks to Nico’s. Every morning through the café window, Russ watched the bus that carried the dockworkers to mid-town, and beyond that, just above the low brown skyline, the steam rising from giant ships. The ships never moved—they seemed to have outgrown the river, become too bright and wide for it. When he was nine, Russ had found a mouse in the gutter, damming up the trickle of water headed to the sewer. He’d tried to revive it by pressing on the chest with his thumbs, but he’d drawn back at its sponginess, then turned it over and seen that its eye was eaten out by bugs. He’d dropped it back into the water and rushed inside to scrub the feel of death off his hands. Ships on the San Joaquin River always made him think of that mouse.

The Nico’s ritual: house blend, black, sipped slowly; potted plants at each table, a Pothos at Russ’s usual; bars on the windows, uncannily comforting. He scanned the affidavit

of the cop he'd question at ten. The suppression hearing was pointless, because the cop would lie, and Judge Mericana was an ex-DA.

The trees outside were going naked already. In Stockton, leaves didn't turn orange and red; they went instantly brown and dropped. The same way people died in the Valley, Russ thought, everything sudden and tragic, then forgotten. There weren't enough trees in Stockton for a real autumn, anyway. Just straight summer to winter. It hadn't always been that way, but the land was razed bit by bit as ethnic swells pushed in from Sacramento and San Francisco—Mexicans to work in the fields, blacks and whites at the port and the factories, and Vietnamese and Chinese and Koreans in the shops. They still came, except now their children spoke English and wanted to fight against the Valley, against the restlessness and contempt it bred with its wind and hot days. Kids are smart. The last thing they wanted to do was develop a consciousness about the place.

Morning was the time Stockton felt most like home. Ellis never had. In high school, his only salvations had been art and Meg's father's class. Once, Russ had written to the *Herald*, complaining that the principal had excluded his work from the school art show. He'd gotten suspended for "undermining the learning environment." When Mr. Harris found out, he'd excused Russ from assignments for a week and lent him books about free speech. Five days later, with the Mad Russian's help, Russ had gotten his record cleared. He could understand what Meg was always complaining about, though—Harris's lack of feeling, having to put up with his Socratic crap all the time. Maybe he wouldn't have wanted Harris for a father, either.

At nine-thirty he went back to his office, re-read the affidavit, popped a palmful of Tic-Tacs to subdue the coffee. In his absence, a single message had been left, and he let the cyclopic blinking hypnotize him before he pressed play.

"I thought you were *with* me in this shit," said the same voice from last night's message. "Hey, if you ain't my lawyer no more, that's cool. There's a million other lawyers out there and I don't need this shit when I'm in County. Come *on*, man—call back." He hung up.

This second message confirmed Russ's guess. He dialed the county jail.

"I'm with Dillinger and Associates. One of my clients was arrested yesterday."

"Last name?"

"Lacey."

“One moment, please.”

Russ waited.

“Jerome Baker Lacey?” the woman asked.

“Theo.”

Five minutes passed, then he heard his client spit ceremoniously. “Fuck you. What took so long?”

“You didn’t leave your name.”

Theo paused. “No shit?”

“No shit.”

“How’d you know it was me?”

“Everyone else leaves his name.”

Theo snickered. “Harsh.”

“What were you picked up for?”

“Murder.”

Russ whistled, low. “Jesus, Theo—don’t say anything else, all right?”

“It’s way different than you think. Some crazy fucker—”

“—Theo,” Russ interrupted. “Don’t say anything else. And don’t talk to the cops.”

“When are you coming?”

“If they ask you anything, say you’re waiting for me.”

“It’s like this—”

“Keep saying ‘lawyer’ or they’ll eat you alive. Remember last time? I’ll be at your arraignment today or tomorrow, whenever they schedule it, but I’ve got to get through this pretrial before I come out to the jail for a full-on meeting.”

“When will that be?”

“About a week and a half.” He hung up before his client could protest.

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Serial lateness didn’t bother Russ. He was never late himself, but understood social arrangements as approximate. He liked to think this was patience, but knew it was a byproduct of the days when he’d welcomed twenty extra minutes for a pre-meeting drink. Either way, his flexibility was a boon to Meg. She arrived at Nam’s her usual half hour late,

wearing a long skirt that showed off her gorgeous hips, and toting a crushed red velvet handbag with Andy Warhol's face emblazoned on it in yellow. "Flea market," Meg said, noticing him eye it after they'd hugged.

"It reminds me of a Lichtenstein cartoon."

"Sorry I'm late. A well-intentioned welfare mother wants to put her kids up for adoption. Says it would be better for them."

"Would it?" he asked. Meg was the only woman Russ knew who managed to look sexy when she talked about work. Maybe it was the way she leaned forward, that strong milky collarbone.

"No. She's just stressed out."

"One of your regulars?"

"Not yet."

Meg counseled at a non-profit that provided stress and anger management to indigent Stocktonites. It was too ironic, she said, that rich people saw shrinks weekly, and poor people only saw them after they were arrested.

"I just realized you look like shit," she said cheerfully. "Bad day?"

"Late night." He considered telling her about Ian, but knew she'd want to spend the whole time talking about it, and Russ would have to defend not dragging the guy to social services, Medicaid, and every other state office in the city.

"Didn't you have a hearing today?"

He nodded, touched that she'd remembered. "I caught the cop in a lie, and the judge still wouldn't exclude the evidence."

"What was it?"

"Acid, barely stronger than the stuff we used to do."

Meg grinned. "Sounds like the hearing got to you."

"Ha—cut it out."

"What?"

"The reflective listening. Go ahead—ask how it *felt* to lose the motion."

She laughed, and Russ felt himself soften toward her. Even in high school, she'd been tough to stay mad at. It didn't hurt that she'd grown into one of the most beautiful women he knew. Somewhere in the course of their friendship, their roles had reversed. Now Russ was the dependent one, the one who called more frequently. The change had started

soon after she'd come out. Maybe she'd sensed he was dying to sleep with her, and being a lesbian gave her the upper hand.

"It took you a while to call," she said. "Was I being punished?"

"For what?"

"Please. You stormed out so fast I thought I'd have to beg you back."

Nam came over to their table. As usual, Meg ordered something entirely different from anything on the menu, and with such grace that it seemed perfectly reasonable. She could go to Applebee's and ask for a leather boot stuffed with artichoke hearts, and the waiter would probably bring it to her.

Russ ordered rice noodles with chicken and a boiled egg.

"I was a little upset," he admitted when Nam left.

"I understand—"

"No, you don't," he cut in, then realized he'd spoken too sharply. "I mean—you can sympathize, but I don't see how you can empathize."

"You don't like me being friends with Muriel, do you?"

He'd told her this explicitly at least half a dozen times. "It's not that," he said. "But I don't like that she comes before *me*." There were codes, rules to be obeyed when they talked about Muriel. Approach it wrong, and Meg got touchy. She acted as if the two of them shared some profound feminine understanding that Russ couldn't fathom. "I'm selfish with our friendship," he said.

"It's okay to be selfish."

"Not when I get in trouble for it." This was good; he was sulking admirably.

"Why do you say she comes before you?"

Russ pulled his inhaler from his coat pocket and held it to his lips. Closing his eyes, he pushed down and took a breath, taking care to execute the gesture in the same humble manner he used at crucial moments in jury trials. Practicing in his bathroom mirror, he'd perfected its voiceless essence: *I am the underdog. I seek only truth.*

"Put that damned thing away." Meg pushed her hand through her short, shaggy hair. It fell immediately back around her head.

"I have asthma," Russ offered lamely.

"That was a pathetic ploy for sympathy."

"See? Desperation. This is what I'm driven to."

“*Driven*, please.”

“Muriel hasn’t spoken to me in seven years. You keep me in the dark. *Driven*.”

“I tell you a lot.”

“You hardly tell me anything. I mean there’s—Jesus—I get *stats* about Jackson’s life—” Russ broke off as Nam set down their plates. “—Thanks, this looks great—” he waited. “I know what school he goes to and when he has a birthday. But I don’t know how his voice sounds. Or how large his vocabulary is. Or whether anyone reads to him at night—”

“They do. I told you that.”

“He’s my son and I know nothing. Every day this eats away at me. Every single *day*.” He plunked his spoon emphatically into his soup, creating a tidal wave of broth which crash-landed on his shirt. “Don’t laugh. I mean it.”

Meg had heard all of this before, which was the problem. He had no clever angles. And she was used to hearing frustrated people use the same arguments over and over; she did it for a living. “So,” he said, more softly. “How’s my son?”

She sighed, which meant she felt bad for him. “He’s fine. It’s not like I see them all the time. But he’s not your son.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Biologically, yes. You spat your sperm, big deal. You had your chance. I’m sorry, you blew it, end of story.”

“I was a fucking alcoholic, Meg.” And if Bill Brandt, that odious ass of a prosecutor, hadn’t hammered him with the maximum for both DUIs, he might have actually had a shot at visitation.

“While Muriel raised your kid.”

“I’m not asking for a medal, I just want to see him.” Meg knew nothing about his trips to the school. She’d be furious.

“So you can have the best of both worlds? Race in on the weekends and scoop him up for a baseball game? Yeah, that’s fair. Come on, Russ. *Every* time we get together. It’s like we can’t hang out normally.”

“Okay, but consider this. When I was an alcoholic—”

“You’ll always be an alc—”

“Okay, back when I was *actively* drinking, I was a horrible lawyer. I hated my clients, you know? I didn’t even prep for trials.”

Meg nodded. She unzipped the Warhol purse and felt around for something.

“But now I win cases, I care about my clients. I use words like *justice* and mean them. I’m so committed it scares me.”

“Point?”

“Fatherhood could be the same way. I was horrible, but that was a long time ago.”

Meg raised her bowl to her lips, sipped, and before she set it down, slid something underneath. “That’s the worst argument you’ve ever advanced. Which is an accomplishment.”

There had been a crack, he was sure. A chink in the armor. “How’s your dad?” he asked brightly.

“Why do you always ask about him when I’ve pissed you off?”

“I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. He’s fine.”

“Sort of fine, or great, fine?”

“Fucking spectacular, fine. My mom says he sits around reading books on Ellis history. She thinks he’s getting more obsessed.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah. He’s convinced some—I don’t know—realtor or something is out to ruin the city.”

“I never figured him for a conspiracy theorist.”

“You never figured him for a lot of things. Can you believe he had the gall to ask me yesterday, after I told him I was dating Susan again, what I thought about the sanctity of marriage? I was like, fuck you, here we go again.”

“I thought he was okay with everything.”

“I thought so too, but apparently he must have talked to my mom, who’s still trying to set me up with every unmarried Christian milksop she knows. Can you believe that about *him*, though? Like he has to rub it in my face that I’m living outside the bounds of the sacredness, the sheer *inviolability*, of the great American family.”

“Maybe he doesn’t get it. It’s not like you ever talk to him.”

"I told you, I talked to him yesterday." He watched Meg wiped her mouth with her napkin, ran his eyes over her face. She had great eyebrows, thin and dark. Spicy. When he looked at her face, he could almost taste cinnamon.

"What did you tell him?" Russ asked.

"That I think marriage is a cross between a prison and a crock of shit. Just to piss him off."

"Did it?"

"Hard to say. There was this awkward silence, then I hung up. I was *so* mad. Just because he and my mom have this horribly boring, perfect, stable existence doesn't mean he has to throw that on me."

"Sorry I asked."

"It's okay." She leaned over the table and kissed him on the cheek. "Next time we'll talk about cheery stuff, okay? No Jackson, no Dad."

"Deal," Russ said.

"Been drawing much?"

"Not really."

"Sketching, even? I still have that one you did of me at Big Sur."

"I never should have parted with it."

"Ha, ha. Do you ever do birds anymore? I was thinking they'd look cool with the other one. A seagull or something. You could do a beach series."

"I'll think about it."

"Cool. I have a client at one, so could you—"

"Yeah. My turn anyway."

"Thanks." Meg stood and slid her purse over her shoulder, leaned to kissed his cheek again, and walked toward the door. "Look under my bowl," she called.

Russ lifted it. Underneath, wavy from the steam, was a photograph of his son. He was wearing a basketball uniform, kneeling on one knee and perching a basketball atop the other, smiling invincibly into the lens.

Chapter Four

Rika Brown sat on the edge of her swivel chair, drinking burned coffee from the staff room and remembering Europe. Dark land had raced past her compartment window, the ocean spreading long and wide, charcoal grey beneath the starless curtain of sky. The dearth of man-made contours had masked the train's speed, and she'd craned her neck beyond the cold glass, cleared her throat, and spat. Limpid despite her cough, the blob had flown from her lips and adhered to the next window. Rika had thought that might happen, but needed to test it. Before settling in Barcelona, she'd spent most of her time in Europe on trains. She spat from trains, began and ended affairs on trains, ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner on trains. Once, she'd gone from London to Florence and back with no overnights on still land.

Twenty minutes to sixth period. She concentrated hard on Europe, determined to surround herself with a cognitive moor before her prep period ended. Her eyes were closed; her classroom lights were off. Squandering this hour would mean staying up later to work tonight, but she'd probably be up anyway, nurturing insomnia. Her head was hollow with fatigue.

Directing her mind more fastidiously, she thought of the men in Spain. Most of them had spoken English, but rarely used it with her, refusing to fill time by pretending to wonder where she was from. They'd offered themselves and she'd accepted them like borrowed jewels. After San Diego, they were what she'd needed, quiet men with hard eyes who treated her body like glass.

Rika had absorbed their warmth, the smell of their skin. If it been easier to get a job in her field without knowing Spanish, she might have never come back. But she'd been feeling better, and had heard Lawrence Livermore Labs had openings, and she'd collected her fears and her belongings, and given California—northern, this time—another try.

She opened her eyes and blinked in the darkness. The roar of the train, the scratch of dark stubble against her cheeks. Spain had been a solace, and even though solace was a far cry from restoration, her time there had taught her how to be lonely without being sad, how to love without obligation, how to make sangria from scratch.

A quarter of an hour later, she was jarred from a dream by the school bell, a dream in which she had never told Todd what Rick had done to her, and in which Todd had gone with her to Spain and they were swimming at the beach in Barcelona. The night in the lab had

still happened—everything in San Diego had still happened—but there was a pleasant haze over it, as if all the parts that had gone wrong had never mattered.

She rose and unlocked the door, flipping the light switch. As her eyes dilated, Rika imagined rods and cones scattering through her retina like startled bats. Students plunked into their desks, finishing hallway conversations before the tardy bell. She dreaded sixth period.

“Who remembers when the Mesozoic Era was?” Rika began when they’d settled.

Students shifted in their lopsided desks. Most of the chairs were missing at least one of their round silver support nubs, and they bumped back and forth in their seats, metal tapping on the floor. She’d filled out a repair request, but hadn’t heard back.

“You’re right—too easy. *During* the Mesozoic Era, where was the Central Valley?”

They were silent. Rika understood that the majority of the fifteen-year-old captives were only there to fill a science requirement. She’d learned this from the students in the Math Club, which she advised. First-year teachers, they said, tended to be fresh from college, gullible, and eager to gain the acceptance of popular students. Played right, the perks were limitless; mid-week parties, cancelled exams, and heaps of extra credit had been negotiated in the past. The president, a guileless foreign exchange student from Brazil, had leaned back in his seat, waved a hand, and said, “See, you act like everyone wants to be scientists or something, and it’s not even an honors class.”

Rika had laughed, but she found their frankness unsettling.

There were, at least, two students in sixth period who *did* want to become doctors, Ty Dawes and Bethany Jenkins, who sat next to each other in the front row, the darkest and lightest-skinned students in the class, respectively. If it hadn’t been for Ty and Bethany, she didn’t know how she would have made it through sixth period. The rest of her students’ eyes were trained on the clock above her head, and she imagined them willing the minute hand toward the twelve.

“Too easy again,” she said. “I’m insulting your intelligence.”

Bethany grinned.

“On the bottom of the sea, right? Covered with water. What was inside it?”

Wade Briggs, carving a disembodied pair of breasts into the cover of his physiology book, pulled his cap down over his eyes. Bethany raised her hand. “Shale.”

“Shale, super,” Rika said gratefully. “What else?”

“Fish bones,” someone offered from the back.

“Marine life, dead and alive—good. Sand. Mineral deposits. You name it, it washed in. The Valley was a gargantuan basin on the floor of the Pacific.”

Wade enlarged the nipples.

After another few minutes of review, she started them on a new lab that was supposed to demonstrate how tectonic plates worked. Some teachers hated group work, but labs were the one time students surrendered the protective chips on their shoulders and occasionally allowed themselves to be amazed.

Minutes after the bell rang, Rika realized that Ty had forgotten the lizard he’d brought in that morning. She went to the back of the room and discovered, horrified, that he’d secured the plastic lid without puncturing air holes. The reptile lay limp on a scant bed of dirt, near what had evidently been engineered as a watering hole, but was now an overturned Pepsi cap covered in mud. Rika possessed great sympathy for reptiles in general and for lizards particularly. Most skilled observers would have declared it dead. Turning the can on its side, she slid the creature onto her palm and held it at eye level. Her close-range vision was exceptional. Her adoptive parents, Mae and Gerard, called it divinity’s compensation for her colorblindness, but Rika had always understood it as simple adaptation—the way blind people have excellent hearing. The cerebrum possesses a finite quantity of neurons; magnified close-range vision was a logical redesignation.

Dust had crusted beneath the spiny scales on the lizard’s neck, and she sprinkled water over it, then filled the lid and set it in front of the animal. Its cream-colored sides moved up a few millimeters, then down. It flicked its tongue feebly, and Rika ran her fingers under the faucet and held them to the animal’s mouth. After coercing it to drink, she couldn’t bring herself to return it to the can. Instead, she nestled it beneath her shirt collar and went back to her desk. Working for the Department of Agriculture in San Diego, she’d rehabilitated an alligator lizard who rode around with her like that for hours a day.

Moving back from Spain, she’d wanted another government job, inspecting plants or testing soil for microbes. But Lawrence Livermore Labs hadn’t been hiring, and neither had Sandia. She’d sent out resumes and cover letters anyway, and was still hoping for a call. Teaching was a stopgap, but one she minded less and less.

“Rika?”

She always classified people by likening them to animals. She kept mental catalogs

of phenotype-personality combinations, and had already decided that the principal was a nudibranch, and that many of the other new staff were finches and peacocks—flitting or jockeying for position. The man in front of her, whom she recognized vaguely, was a grey dog.

“Is this a bad time?”

“No—just entering grades.”

He nodded. Rika waited, but he just looked patiently at her, his hands tucked into the rear pockets of his baggy corduroys. Alone, a dog always looks like he has just escaped. He can be sniffing with angelic curiosity into a bed of rosemary and someone will call animal control. A *cat* can perch atop poorly-constructed fences, leave muddy paw-prints on the hoods of cars, urinate on the sidewalk, and no one says a word. Dogs are punished for the smallest of sins.

Then she remembered. “The broken truck, right?”

He smiled. “Yes. Dmitri.”

“Did you get it fixed?”

“It’s an eighty-five, so they have to go to the wrecking yard for the parts. There are people, it turns out, who pick through crushed cars for a living.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I hadn’t, either.” Suddenly, his eyes narrowed, and he placed his left hand on her desk, stretched his right hand toward her, and began bending forward. “Don’t move,” he instructed, leaning closer, his hand six inches from her blouse.

Rika was frightened. Spending time with cruel men had leavened an instinct that prevented her from trusting anyone who touched her without permission. The instant Dmitri seemed poised to lunge, three thoughts went through Rika’s head:

1. Could I get in trouble for hitting another teacher?
2. What’s wrong with me, exactly?
3. Protect, protect—

She jerked her head back, simultaneously swinging her hand upward to strike Dmitri in the jaw. He yelped, stepping backward from the desk. “I’m sorry—but—something’s crawling on you.” He pointed feebly to her collar.

Shit. “God—I’m so sorry.” She removed the horned toad—thoroughly untraumatized by its brush with peril—and set it on the desk. The creature flicked its tongue.

“What kind is it?”

“Want me to get some ice? I’m really, really sorry.”

“I’m fine, honestly.” Moisture shone in his eyes—the suggestion of tears even strong men get when they’re hit unexpectedly in the face.

Rika controlled the impulse to hide beneath her desk. She searched his face for signs, even mild ones, of anger. Todd’s cheeks had always gotten pink. “It’s a horned toad.”

“Where’s it from?”

“One of my students caught it.” She cupped her hands around its pliant body and motioned for Dmitri to put his hands out.

“Does it bite?”

“Nah, he’s too groggy.” She set the lizard on his palm. “You’re the history chair?”

“English.” He didn’t raise his eyes from the animal. Small eyes. Eyes like a duck-hunting dog. “I don’t know if he’s told you, but Johnny paired us for his mentor program.”

“I didn’t sign up.” She’d thrown away the fliers.

“He puts new teachers in automatically.” Dmitri was still fixated on the lizard, which had begun ascending his shirtsleeve. Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to know him. Perhaps, if she didn’t get a call from Lawrence Livermore Labs and had to re-apply, it would help to have another letter of recommendation.

“What do we do for it?”

“Meet, I think. Talk, resolve crises.”

He seemed nice. It had been years since she’d had a friend at work—and she noticed his wedding band, so maybe she’d get to meet his wife, too.

“Does everyone have to do it, or did you volunteer?”

“Part volunteering, part penance.”

“For what?”

“Oh—I annoyed Johnny. I’ll give you the whole story sometime.”

“All right.” Rika took a pair of scissors from her desk and began punching air holes into the Folgers lid.

“Are you keeping him in there?”

“Just until I get home. I’ll find something else he can stay in till he gets his strength back.”

“Do you live in town?”

"I rent a room down the street."

"Want to take him back?" Dmitri asked. The horned toad had scaled the length of his arm and was nearing his neck. As she lifted it, he exhaled. Not, evidently, a herpeophile.

"How many times do we have to meet for the mentor thing?"

"I'll ask Johnny. Should we schedule—I don't know—a first meeting, at least?"

"Let's make it off campus. I spend too much time here."

He nodded. "Me too. Maybe tomorrow?"

"I haven't found a decent coffee hangout. Do you know a place that serves good, dark espresso?"

"I drink tea, but I'll find out and call you."

They exchanged numbers and she apologized again for hitting him, but he seemed genuinely not to mind. As he left, Rika noticed his belt had failed to go through two of the loops on his corduroys, the kind of messiness she trusted in people.

She hoped she'd been polite enough, with the confusion over the lizard. It angered her how everything from San Diego surfaced like an arsenal when she wasn't pushing it back. Less than two years. It seemed longer. That was the problem with history; what was past was past to everyone but the person who lived through it. Unattended, it raged in the mind like a plague. You had to keep moving forward.

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Damp grass sent a chill through Rika's jacket, but she didn't mind. A jay flew from one of Ruby Phyllis's walnut trees and Rika lost its grey against the sky. In Iowa, at the end of October, it wouldn't have been warm enough to lie in the backyard and watch it get dark.

The roses were reluctant to bow under the insistence of her landlord's thin strong hands. Rika watched Ruby close the hedge trimmer's blades over a stub that had sprouted from the Blue Curiosa. She was often silent when she worked in the backyard, and Rika imagined she was thinking about Craig. Pictures of them together filled the house, and magazines—*California Lawyer*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Psychology Today*, *Health*, and *The American Spectator*—all arrived monthly at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Craig Phyllis.

"Hard day?" Ruby asked. "You look pooped."

"Fair. You?"

“Bill was in rare form.”

Rika smiled. Bill Brandt was Ruby’s rival at the DA’s office. She’d told Rika that her plan was to outlive him so one of the younger, more deliberative prosecutors could take over for her as the head of Stockton’s homicide team. “With that intern again?”

Ruby nodded. “It’s so cliché. Maybe I’d respect him more if he cheated on his wife with a cop.”

“Probably not.”

“Probably not,” Ruby agreed. “My real problem’s his fascist zeal. Justice be damned.” She closed the hedge trimmers over another stalk, then pulled off a glove and wiped her forehead with it. “I’m beat. And my scones are probably burning.”

“I’ll check them,” Rika said. “Take your time.” She went through the back door to the kitchen. With a dish towel, she opened the oven, took out the baking sheet, and slid the scones onto a plate to cool. Through the window, she saw Ruby pull off her other glove, leaning against the base of the walnut tree. If she adjusted her eyes, Rika could see her own face in the light reflected off the window. Steam rose from the baking sheet and she ran it under cold water. The sizzling sound satisfied her, a hot rip like striking a match. Keeping her eyes on the window, she switched off the light and watched her face disappear. The walnut tree scraped against the wind. The screen door opened and Rika switched the light back on.

“Were they charcoal?” Ruby asked.

“They look scrumptious.”

“They’re peach. Want some tea? I’ll make a pot.”

“All right.” Rika left the kitchen and went into her bedroom, picking up the Folgers can. She felt bad about bringing the horned toad in without asking. Ruby’s ad in the *Herald* had read: “Room for rent in quaint, two-bedroom downtown house. No cats, no smoking. Females only. Conservative lifestyle required, conservative politics optional.”

She reached into the can and touched the spikes of the horned toad’s neck. The crickets she’d dropped in were gone. Across from her desk and bed, her train photograph was peeling at one of the corners. She didn’t know what kind of train it was, or when the photograph had been taken. She liked not knowing these things. A train was a machine you boarded, and it took you somewhere else. Trains were what she thought about whenever there didn’t seem to be much mystery left in the world.

In the living room, Ruby had set out tea and scones and was flipping through *Psychology Today*. “I thought Folgers was too weak for your Russian blood.”

“Actually, I was wondering—would you mind if I kept a pet here, for a week or two?”

“What kind?”

“Tabby cats. I’d like to breed them.”

Ruby smiled.

“A horned toad.”

“Can I see him?”

Rika peeled off the lid and held the can to Ruby.

“Looks more like a lizard.”

“Oh—it is. ‘Horned toad’ is what they call it.”

“Prehistoric-looking thing.”

“I’ll let it go soon. I just want to make sure it recuperates.”

“No fur, no foul. Is it okay in that thing? I have an old fish tank.”

“That would be great. I was thinking we could name him after Bill Brandt.”

“Ha.”

“I’ve never had a landlord with a nemesis.”

“Oh, I’d feel bad calling Brandt a *nemesis*. I can tolerate his sloppiness but not his laziness, and his arrogance, but not his relaxation of ethics.” Ruby broke off the corner of a scone and chewed. “He’s more of a—don’t laugh—”

“It’s the way you said it. I love your dedication.”

“Well, work’s all I have.” She set down her magazine. “Did I ever tell you why I decided to rent out the second bedroom?”

Rika shook her head, dropping a sugar cube into her cup. It floated to the surface and began dissolving, spinning in the porcelain as the weight distribution changed from one nanosecond to the next.

“You know Craig died three years ago last July.”

“Yes.” Rika sipped the tea. Black currant was what she’d drank in Russia. She hadn’t had it anywhere else besides St. Petersburg and Ruby’s house.

“*Psychology Today* published a study linking solitary living to a woman’s likelihood of developing Alzheimer’s. I took out the ad a few days later. I need to outlive Bill, after

all.”

“You’re only—what—fifty-eight or so?”

“Sixty-four. Time to worry.” Smiling as if she didn’t entirely believe this, Ruby covered her mouth with her hand, and Rika noticed an age in them that wasn’t visible in Ruby’s face, a chalky thickness to her nails, her veins the color of bruises.

Rika took another scone from the plate and broke it in two, handing half to Ruby.

“Have you always lived in Ellis?”

“Except law school.”

Which was where she’d met Craig. “Did you know you’d end up here?”

“Yes, but I thought so for different reasons. In high school, I met the boy I thought I’d marry.”

“Does he still live here?”

Ruby nodded. “I haven’t seen him in years. I avoid him what I can.” Her eyes were focused on something beyond the window, and she inhaled as if about to speak, then pressed her lips together, shook her head, and went to the kitchen.

. . . .

Lizzie’s was a café of the sort Rika had avoided in San Diego. Among wine bars, French fusion bistros, and designer boutiques that sold glass baubles for half a month’s rent, Lizzie’s would have seemed snobby and complacent. But in Ellis, it was perfect—the kind of place she’d been hoping to find, nestled on Seventh Street between a bodega and an old fire station. Portions of the cement sidewalk in front of the café had been replaced by cobblestone, but the additions were in such arbitrary places that it couldn’t have been done with any overarching design in mind.

She deliberately came late, but Dmitri wasn’t there, so she sat on a sofa and thumbed through *Ophthalmology Review*, mouthing the names of diseases, corneal deterioration that conjured visions, nonsense words: tarsus, blepharoptosis, levator aponeurosis. Navigating specialized vocabulary pleased her, though her attempts at foreign languages had been disastrous—Russian worst of all. She should have had a head start; babies began learning consonant blends before birth, and supposedly always maintained a propensity for their first language. Her own failure to replicate Slavic “R” rolls and deep scoffing “K” sounds

supported Rika's hypothesis that she wasn't really Russian. After San Diego, she'd gone to St. Petersburg looking for answers, hoping for some commensuration of blood and bones and land.

The cold hadn't bothered her, not after Iowa's snowstorms, nor had the lack of cheap palatable food. But she'd left after a week for other, more powerful reasons: women and plants.

Before her trip, Rika had thought she looked Russian. She'd forgiven her own figure for what she thought was its sheer Russian-ness: shoulders that looked like baguettes taken from the oven too soon, the kind that made the sleeves of baby doll T-shirts invariably tight, bunching at the armpits. She'd envisioned a nation of square-statured female women with dark hair and thick, serious brows, and instead found a blond procession of American female caricatures, as whittled and tanned as at any health club in Huntington Beach. There was no way she was one of them.

And then the plants—the dull lack of plants—of trees and shrubs and vegetational variety. Nothing grew—it depressed her. So she'd boarded a train for western Europe, explored for weeks, whittling down her savings, then finally stopped in Spain. Spain, where she'd expected mean, dark men and slender Selma Hayek look-alike women, she found muscled boys with kind eyes, old women in long skirts stitched with petunias, college-age girls with bread-loaf arms arguing politics over calamari. Everyone weighed in about art, about science and history. No one divvied up disciplines like they were picking teams.

She was halfway through *Ophthalmology Review* when Dmitri came in, wearing a checkered shirt with a sweater over it. He looked older in the sweater, the way some men do with too many layers of clothing, bundled like five-year-olds in snowsuits.

"Did you get your espresso?" he asked, and saw she hadn't. They went to the counter and Rika ordered a doppio, insisting on paying. Dmitri took green tea. "Diabetes," he explained. "Green tea is the only thing I can stand without sugar."

"You shouldn't smoke, then."

He shrugged. "I always have."

"Since college?"

"Since seventh grade."

Rika raised her eyebrows appreciatively; the longer people smoked, the prouder they usually were of doing it. Dmitri just shrugged. "Did you figure out this mentoring thing?"

He looked at her anxiously. "How about we meet twice a month? I make sure you're doing okay, get you familiar with the school, the town, the usual anxieties."

"That's it? No report, no conference with the principal?" She was only half joking. Orientation had been packed with colored binders, conferences, litanies of negotiated vocabulary.

He laughed. "Amazing all the administrative crap they come up with, isn't it? And more amazing that despite it, we find time to read the textbook."

"I eke away at each section the night before I teach it."

"Sounds about par. Were you an education major?"

"Biology." Rika considered confessing her lack of interest in the profession until she'd had no other choice, but didn't want to offend Dmitri by insinuating that she was less committed than he. She settled into the couch and watched him sip his tea. It burned his lip and he jerked it away, spilling on the sweater. Definitely a dog. More soppyly mutt-like than anyone Rika had ever met. His hands looked like paws gripping the white porcelain, short fingers, unkempt nails, furry wrists.

"So what are your main worries about teaching?" he asked.

"Are you going to dispel them for me?"

"Instantly." He waited, then spoke again. "One of mine, when I started, was that I was so close in age to my students. I was twenty-three and they were eighteen."

Rika bristled at the implicit question about her age. Dmitri glanced at his watch, and it occurred to her that he probably had better things to do on a Saturday morning. She'd try harder. "I'm twenty-seven. But I know what you mean."

"The boys, particularly, tested me my first year. They're alarmingly adept at rooting out our weaknesses."

"I have one kid, Wade, who pulls his beanie over his eyes and draws breasts on his textbook. He knows I see him, but he's challenging me. He wants me to stop him, so I refuse."

"Wade Briggs?"

"That's him."

"Ha—I suspended Wade last year. He turned in a paper—get this—with a vagina drawn on it. A to-scale rendition of the female anatomy."

"At least he's settled down to breasts."

Dmitri's small, wet eyes shone brightly in their dim corner of the shop. It was impossible not to like him. "He tried to tell me it wasn't a vagina. He was clearly trying to trick me into saying something vulgar. He kept asking, how could I be sure?"

"Maybe he was imitating O'Keefe."

"You like Georgia O'Keefe?"

"Sure."

"I've liked her since I was a kid. I felt like most art didn't refer to the world I lived in."

"Where did you live?"

"Well—here. Ellis. Madison High, Class of '65. But I meant emotionally. I'd never had an artist make me see the world differently. When I was a teenager—" He looked down, grinning boyishly.

"What?"

"Never mind." He sipped his tea.

"Come on. Just between mentor partners." She felt peculiarly drawn to him. He was trying to make her feel comfortable, which was sweet, since it sounded like he'd been forced into the mentor program. Class of '65 made him what, forty-eight? Forty-nine?

"All right. But you'll lose all the respect you might otherwise have had for me."

Rika felt the privileged thrill of being confided to. "I won't. I promise."

Dmitri sipped his tea again, bit his lip, and raised his eyes to Rika's. Only the café they were in, the couch they were sitting on, their conversation, suddenly mattered. "You can't laugh."

Rika shook her head.

"It's ridiculous. When I was a teenager, I fell in love her—with Georgia O'Keefe. When I looked at her work, I felt she knew me somehow. Like she *had* to have, to have painted what she did." He chuckled. "How's that for egocentric?"

"Did you ever meet her?"

He shook his head. "I had pictures."

"Your soulmate, maybe."

"I don't believe in soulmates. It was as if we'd met in some former life and parted too soon. As if something crucial had been left unsaid. Ridiculous. But it convinced me of some connection between certain people. People who, when their presence crosses yours,

you'll never be the same. A tiny corner of the universe's fabric is pulled up for you to look beneath."

His face held no oddities, no signs of religious fervor. "My adoptive father used to describe people as vines. You grow along a wall, your path crosses someone else's, and if they hit you just right, they can ease you along a crack, or give you a little shade."

"Windows to what?" he continued. "Paths to what? As a Buddhist, I think: nirvana. But what does that mean? It gets back to the whole mind-body divide, I guess—" He stopped. "I'm babbling. Time for more tea. Can I get you another—what did you call it? Dorpio?"

She shook her head. As he rose, she noticed he was wearing a bracelet of small, round wooden beads. How had they started talking comfortably about something she never discussed with anyone?

At the counter, Dmitri fumbled in his pockets. Rika turned back to the couch and tried to purge the delight she felt: a friend! Todd had been too jealous for her to bother talking to men in San Diego. Out of habit, she ran her fingers through her hair, as if to draw it into a ponytail, though it hadn't been long enough for years. Long hair, like long skirts, reminded her of Rick. She crossed her arms over her chest, trying not to remember.

He'd gotten her into his office by asking her to go over a report. It was late, but double shifts weren't unusual. The numbers weren't matching up, he'd said. Rika had leaned interestedly over the stack of papers, her hair, which had reached her waist, wisped pleasantly against the desk, shushing across the wood. In retrospect, she'd looked down too long, and that had been her mistake. Or maybe none of it was her mistake, just a thing she couldn't get away from.

He'd turned off the lights, which had made it worse later, because there was nothing visual to remember, and her imagination filled it in. His nails bit into her wrists, the corner of his desk driving into her head as she waited for the hollow pain in the core of her to be over, his hot disgusting breath panting into her ear until she'd stopped fighting back. She'd stopped not because she'd given up, but because in the horrific moment of it she'd known he wanted her to, that he was doing it for the fight.

Her empty cup dropped from her hand to the table, clinking loudly against the wood, then rolled to the floor but didn't break. She swallowed. "Thick cups," she said, bending to pick it up. She turned it over in her hands and set it back on the table.

The woman at the counter nodded, unsmiling. She looked about thirty, with dried, narrow features that suggested an unfortunate number of adult years packed into her twenties. She handed Dmitri a tea bag and tightened the handkerchief around her hair.

"Is she the owner?" Rika asked softly when Dmitri sat down again.

"If she's the Lizzie I'm thinking of, I flunked her husband twice."

Apparently sensing she was the topic of conversation, the woman perked up and walked to the couch. "I know where I've seen you," she said, pointing at Dmitri. "You teach at Madison."

He nodded.

I went to Madison. Never had you, though. What do you teach?"

He glanced apologetically at Rika. "English."

"Ever have Joe Bremkin?"

"Your husband?"

"How'd you know?" She paused, looking him up and down. "You're not that Mad Russian guy, are you?"

"Only on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

Lizzie appeared to mull this over. "I've wondered what Madison is like nowadays. I don't suppose it's much different, is it? See that cobblestone out front?"

They looked to where she was pointing.

"That's what you should teach your students about. Civic responsibility. The city started the project a month after we opened. Set aside money to fix up downtown. This cobblestone and the old-fashioned streetlights in front of the Pint Club, the ones that go off with the automatic timer, that's as far as they got."

Lizzie made Rika think of Council Bluffs, of the girls she'd gone to high school with, the student council devotees, the pep rally planners, the proud wearers of varsity letter jackets. Was this where they ended up, owning shops in town and selling espresso to strangers?

Once it had become apparent that neither Dmitri nor Rika planned to probe further, Lizzie sighed. "I don't call that civic responsibility."

"You rent from James Bannister, right?" Dmitri asked.

"And the bastard's raising rent again, for the thousandth time. Sorry—God knows you probably work for him."

Dmitri smiled. "No."

"You'd think Ellis is getting so big, you wouldn't have to worry about that kind of thing. But of course you do, which me and my big mouth find out all the time."

"Didn't he just raise it in June?"

"How'd you know?"

"I'm a friend of Albert's," Dmitri said.

"James has more money than the mayor," Lizzie said. "More power, too. Now we've got Peet's on Eleventh and they're building a Starbucks across from the new Chevron. Nothing I can do but raise prices. I even started offering *soy*." Her face twisted into a pained expression that suggested that soy was not appreciably different from spoiled milk. Rika closed her eyes.

After it was over, Rick had dressed in the dark while she lay there. By the time she'd made herself go out to the parking lot, hers was the only car left, and she drove home to Todd knowing she'd never go back to work, and that this was what Rick had counted on.

Lizzie finished explaining the problems with soy milk. She retrieved a bottle of spray cleaner and went outside, where she began wiping down the windows.

They watched. "Who's Albert?" Rika asked after a while.

"He owns the Pint Club. Ever been there?"

"No car."

"You walked here? Let me know if you ever need a ride."

"All right."

"I mean it. It's a genuine offer."

"Okay." Rika tried to imagine herself phoning a mentor twenty years her senior and asking him to drive her to a bar. She ran her finger around the rim of her cup, considering how to veer the conversation back toward Georgia O'Keefe.

Through the window, she saw Lizzie pull a Virginia Slim from her pocket and light it, smoking as she cleaned. A moment later, a blue Lincoln Navigator pulled in front of the shop, whereupon Lizzie ground the cigarette hastily against a table. "James Bannister himself," Dmitri said.

"Related to Johnny?"

"His father."

The man slid from his truck and said something to Lizzie. His face was drawn in an

elegant oval, rounded at the chin by an immaculate grey goatee.

“Not much resemblance,” Rika said.

“No.”

“Local aristocracy?”

Dmitri nodded. “He’s been developing here forever. He’s determined to turn Ellis into Pleasanton.”

“Where’s that?”

“Just beyond Livermore. Very successful, increasingly soulless little community. And he’s running for City Council, though I can’t quite figure out why—he controls half the town already.”

“We can act like we’re leaving,” she offered.

He shook his head. “Too late.”

Bannister opened the door. Despite their other physical dissimilarities, Bannister’s eyes, like Johnny’s, were coal black with a charred grey chip on top. He surveyed the café with cheerful proprietorship. Dmitri donned a tight smile and straightened his posture.

“Dmitri Harris!” the man exclaimed, clasping his hands together.

“James, this is Rika Brown, one of Madison’s newest.”

He extended his hand to Rika. “Delighted. You’re lucky to work with Dmitri. He’s a fine teacher. Taught my son, in fact.”

Next to Bannister, Dmitri looked disheveled, pale, his hands improbably small. Bannister was around Ruby’s age, but radiated health. His tanned skin pulled tight around his eyes, and his khakis hung stylishly loose, suggestive of recent weight loss. “How’s the campaign?” Dmitri asked.

“Magnificent. Seen my commercials?”

“On TV?”

“Local cable. I’ve been getting these five-minute spots to introduce my ideas in more depth than the *Herald* will let me. Amazing what you can say in five minutes. Check them out—your vote would mean a lot. We’ve known each other too long to keep disagreeing on small fries.” He smiled toothily.

“Greenlake’s not small fries,” Dmitri said.

Bannister's eyes lit up, and he motioned in the air as if smoothing an invisible piece of cloth. "It's going to be *amazing*—light a fire under Ellis's economy, draw in new businesses—"

"It's the old ones I worry about."

"This'll help downtown keep up with the times. Give it some healthy competition."

"You know it can't handle that."

"I'm not sure you're giving due credit to our local business owners." He winked contagiously in Lizzie's direction, and she ignored him. "Not to mention all the *new* jobs it'll create. Lifestyle centers, Dmitri. They're the way to go, anymore. We're both local boys; I love this place like you do. A decade ago, we were at twenty-five thousand—now we're near fifty. Another decade, who knows? But—" He wagged a finger in their direction and broadened his smile. "We're on the map now, aren't we? We're putting Ellis on the *map*."

"Guarantee the life of our small businesses and small farms, you'll have my blessing," Dmitri said dryly. Rika was intrigued—there was a tension in his voice that hadn't been there before.

Bannister smiled as if Dmitri was a child asking for an unreasonable amount of ice cream. "I don't think anyone can guarantee that, what with economic flux, zoning laws, real estate markets," he said. "But I *can* guarantee you I'll try."

"Well," Dmitri said after a time. "Good luck with the campaign."

"That means a lot, Dmitri, thanks." He wagged his finger again. "And check out those cable spots when you get a chance."

When Bannister reached the counter, Lizzie bent to the couch where Rika and Dmitri were sitting, and pretended to wipe a table. "He never buys anything," she said through her teeth, keeping her eyes on Bannister. She rose, smiling forcibly toward the counter. "How about a nice soy mocha?"

Beneath the cuffs of his khakis, Bannister was wearing the shiniest, least sullied cowboy boots Rika had ever seen. "He reminds me of a Viagra commercial," she said quietly.

Dmitri grinned, running one hand through his hair as he gulped the last of his tea. "Can we do this again? Soon?"

"I'd like that," said Rika, and meant it.

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Twice in the following week, she brought her fruit, crackers, and tuna fish into Dmitri's classroom at noon. Lunches with Grey Dog and his cheese sandwiches. Muenster and garlic brie seemed to be his favorite, wedged between slices of rye. She imagined his house, his refrigerator crammed with breads and cheeses, his cupboards full of green tea, his bookshelves rife with great literature she'd never heard of. At home, he would eat sandwiches and read, then fall asleep in a leather easy chair with a matching ottoman. Sometimes she forgot he was married, forgot he had a daughter. Who could live with a man so erratic and intelligent and self-absorbed? Not self-absorbed in a bad way—more in oblivious intellectual bliss—a bliss of the sort Rika wished she could surrender to more often. When she spent time with Dmitri, this was easier. Hours after their conversations ended, she remained invincible to anxiety over bills or lesson plans or whether Lawrence Livermore would ever call her. She slept better, took fewer walks in the middle of the night.

They talked about school, about Dmitri's daughter, even about Dmitri's wife. Rika had learned that her name was Becky and that she taught music at an elementary school, was a member of *In-Shape City*, and took classes several nights a week. Rika envisioned this woman who balanced Dmitri. Russian—a *real* Russian woman—long and lean, with natural blond hair. At night, Rika supposed, they studied Buddhism together, had Zen monks over for pound cake. On weekends, they walked around the house naked, drinking wine and green tea and reading contemporary Japanese fiction that would win international book prizes in following years. And everything in the house, including the couch frames, would be made of wood.

Chapter Five

Fluorescent blinking woke Ian, and he rose from bed and pulled open the curtains. Outside his window, a dark cerulean sky and a cool mist hovered above Ellis Boulevard, where cars headed west, packed tight along the road. The neon sign beside the motel read “Cote D’Azure.” Letters traded turns fizzling out and lighting again.

He made his bed, tucking the sheets firmly in at the corners, and went into the bathroom. He’d slept naked, his first time doing so alone. Russ’s jeans, Corona T-shirt, and ratty boxers had dried over the shower rod, and Ian pulled them on. The stiffened cloth scraped his wounds.

In the mirror, his face was darker. Bruises were setting in fully, cuts scabbing, swollen regions wizening into puckered yellow patches. He put his hand to his nose and winced. Overall, he felt sorer than he had yesterday, but not nearly as bad as Thursday night had been. As an actor, he’d been trained to develop an awareness of his muscles, and couldn’t help thinking that his biokinetics class at NYU could have been accelerated if they’d just beaten everyone up. Muscles stung in unusual places—inside his thighs, the soles of his feet, along his cheeks and the front of his neck. His knee was worse, engorged and indigo, twice its normal size. If the swelling didn’t go down by Monday, he’d think about seeing a doctor. But for now, he’d avoid hospitals, avoid fees and forms, avoid being recorded administratively or photographically. He ran his hands along his torso and coughed. Everything hurt, but nothing felt broken. Could internal bleeding be intuited? He’d read that people could recover naturally if they cracked a rib, but not if it had snapped all the way through.

He’d spent most of the previous day at the Denny’s by the Stockton bus station, making resolutions. The most important was that he’d control desire. For too long, he’d been sculpted by *want*; now, it would be the other way around. It was also crucial that he overcome his dependence on place. For years he’d obsessed over cities’ details and social fads, their pricey organic vegetable stands, the hum of trendy bars. He needed a town of scant significance about which he held no positive expectations. From all he knew, Ellis was idyllic: twenty-five miles from anything else, packed with chain stores, fast-food, commuters, and subdivisions. The blandest place on the bus route, and he wasn’t going to let

himself leave. He'd root himself there, just as his attacker was rooted to Stockton. Get a job, become grounded and selfless and new.

Fixed on his blighted reflection, Ian coated his cuts with the Neosporin he'd procured from Russ's bathroom. Financial, occupational, and theatrical worries crept into his mind, and he shoved them out. Ian *Pinter* had never dropped out of college, left no failed relationships in his wake, had no use for a down couch or bronze pots.

Outside, he crossed Ellis Boulevard toward Bank of America, twirling the Visa between his fingers. Sheer luck that his old habit had paid off. Having snagged a wallet and two hundred dollars, his stage nemesis hadn't checked Ian's back pockets. Would it still be active? Of course—who would have cancelled it? He slid the ridged plastic into the slot, punched his code, and withdrew his daily maximum. Tomorrow he'd do the same, then the day after, which would empty his account. After that, he'd exist beneath the radar of tracking systems and electronic tallies. Gradually, he'd erect an identity, gather essential documents. His wrists were damp.

In Berkeley, on College Avenue or Shattuck or Dwight, there would have been joggers, crepe cafés with teak tables, Hispanic men walking Swiss Mountain Dogs, transients shuffling used BART tickets, drinking coffee from paper cups. Ellis hosted no comparable panoply. Half a dozen cars were parked in front of an oatmeal-colored bakery, and Ian watched the drivers return, fumbling change and hot cups, clutching bagels and packets of butter. Lingering wasn't en vogue. They shut their doors and sped westward. If he took small steps with his left leg and longer ones with his right, Ian could hobble at half his normal pace. And what was his hurry? The only things he wanted were a mediocre job and a working knowledge of his new city.

The sidewalk was stained with oil and gum, the air redolent with trash and stale exhaust. A cheese brioche sounded scrumptious, gruyere, ideally. Or—he corrected himself—something more moderate. Rustling the bills in his pocket, Ian continued painstakingly down Central, looking for a café with a comfortable place to sit. A pharmacy, deli, insurance firm, two more banks, a Knights of the Templar meeting hall, and Don's Barber Shop—dilapidated, vaguely suggestive of bloodlettings—lined the next block. Hazel's Fashions advertised two-for-one on communion and bridal veils. He grimaced. Berkeley, this wasn't. Farther down, slight improvement: a Mexican market, Thai restaurant, two bars, and Lizzie's Café, whose sidewalk was quaintly bespeckled with cobblestone. He

looked back toward Ellis Boulevard. Only five blocks back, but it felt like he'd walked miles.

An abandoned Chinese restaurant and a liquor store receded toward the railroad tracks and after Sixth Street, Central lapsed into residences. Two men lounged curbside a few doors down, one smoking a cigarette, the other straddling a bicycle, paper bags dangling from their hands. "I tol' him *fuck no*," the man on the bicycle said. He elbowed the smoker and they stared at Ian. He looked hungrily at the cigarette. First coffee, then a convenience store. If he was a full-fledged chain smoker like Ray, the withdrawals would have already killed him.

Except for a man sitting on the couch, the café was empty. Ian walked to the counter and studied the pastry case. Currant muffins, carrot muffins, plain bagels, onion bagels. No scones, no croissants, no cheese brioche. Ian hated currants. His first exercise, then: he stared at the muffin, trying to funnel desire toward the hard-looking, spotted little object. His attacker would probably be grateful for any breakfast at all, Ian reminded himself. The eyes flickered in his mind.

"I'd like a currant muffin," he told the woman behind the counter.

She tightened the lavender handkerchief around her ponytail. "Anything else?"

He considered this. "A soy latte, sixteen-ounce."

"Soy," the woman echoed glumly.

A table by the door gave him a view of the couch. The man was Ian's brand of attractive, scholarly-looking with rough hands. Wedding ring, unfortunately. The problem with so many gay men was their tendency to be fit, wealthy versions of himself, squandering innumerable hours in gyms and law firms. Why were they so bent on proving their capability? Some *need* to demonstrate exuberance in the face of AIDS, of history, of the continued inequalities of which they kept themselves poignantly aware. He resolved, as Ian Pinter, to ignore his historiographical situation.

He rubbed his cheek, so scabbed over that it felt like snakeskin, and glared at his muffin. Currant flavor would pervade the entire body of it. He focused on *wanting* the muffin. Using his fork, he picked out the largest black bits.

Attraction to heterosexual men had plagued him since college. They tended to be rugged—not the contrived kind of rugged common among gay men, who pretended tempestuousness with fly-away pants from Columbia, vitamin gel packs from REI, Subarus

with ski racks. Ray had been authentically rugged—forgotten to shave, scoffed at Ian’s organic yogurt, spent vacations fishing, running, writing death penalty appeals. It occurred to Ian that people’s lovers embodied qualities they venerated but couldn’t muster.

The man stepped outside and lit a cigarette.

Currants lined Ian’s plate like fat ants. Stabbing one with a fork, he brought it quickly to his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. It was less repulsive than he’d remembered, and he ate another one, washing it down with his latte. The soy was burned but sweet, like a scorched marshmallow. Outside, periwinkle clouds, backlit in platinum, gathered to block the hour-old sun. Impulsive hope surged through him.

Leaving the remainder of his breakfast on the table and setting a magazine beside it to convey that he’d return, Ian stepped outside and asked to borrow a cigarette. The man plucked one from his pack and lit it. Warm smoke filled Ian’s chest. Inhaling, he felt as if a strong hand was squeezing his lungs from behind, and he took shallower breaths. Together, they beheld the light trickle pattering onto Central Street. Smoking, standing alongside an attractive forty-something, dropping into a café for breakfast—these were the kinds of blissful details he would learn to savor.

“Meeting someone here?” Ian asked.

The man ran his hand through his hair and leaned to crush his cigarette against the sidewalk. “Already did,” the man said, and crossed the street toward an orange pickup. A labor lawyer, Ian guessed—a union man’s son who’d lived in town his entire life. He had four children and a wife who ran a preschool. He voted Democrat, kept *The Jungle* at his bedside.

For the remainder of the morning, Ian performed unprecedented acts. He went back into Lizzie’s, ate his currents, drank the burned soy without complaint. At the liquor store, he purchased a carton of Pall Malls, along with a Milky Way that he devoured guiltlessly for lunch. At Hazel’s, which turned out to be a consignment shop, he selected Levi’s, four white T-shirts, and some cheap oxfords with button-down collars. The coarse fibers pleased him, as did paying in cash.

One shop, inauspiciously titled “Twelve Monkeys,” intrigued him, and he went in without knowing what it was. Posters of Hendrix, Whitesnake, and Oasis were affixed to the back wall, absent regard for taste or consistency; pen-and-ink designs covered the others. At Twelve Monkeys, Ian did something he’d scorned since adolescence, something for which

he'd refused to date otherwise presentable men. The needle-wielder—*Shane: Apprentice Artist*, his nametag said—didn't question the wisdom of the request. When it was finished, Ian felt soundly emancipated. His upper right arm read, in inch-tall Copperplate Gothic Light, "P I N T E R." Who cared, anymore, if his complexion was flawless? Never again would he obsess about flecks of arm acne or fret over an ingrown chest hair, imagining he might be cast in some shirtless role. His scars, after all, were there to stay.

Back at the Cote D'Azure, Ian's tattoo throbbed beneath the bandage. He wasn't allowed to touch it for three hours. Standing on the bed, he liberated the batteries from the smoke detector and lit a Pall Mall. Terrence Rattigan, he was sure, had smoked Pall Malls.

From the beginning, Ray had accused him of being ungrounded. And one of the things Ian despised most about his former self was his readiness to believe what people said about him, lovers especially, and Ray worst of all. You don't fix your own car, Ray had told him. You don't hunt. You don't exercise. You have no grip on the physical world, which is why you're depressed. Ninety percent of your life takes place in your head.

And after three years, Ray had left. Not on a Friday afternoon, which would have suggested a deliberate attempt to hurt Ian, nor on a Sunday evening, which would have suggested Ray had wanted one more weekend together. No, he'd left on a Wednesday night, which meant Ian's feelings hadn't factored in at all. "I've found an apartment," Ray had announced. And stunningly quick, he'd disassembled his computer, packed up boxes, and given Frieda half the month's rent, while Ian staggered humiliatingly after him. But more humiliating, he'd followed Ray out and tried to climb into the Jeep. Ray had hit the gas, and Ian had fallen.

God, he'd loved Ray. Ian lay on his back, picturing his ex's long nose and rough cheeks. Ray had been right about him. That was why Ian had never succeeded in theatre; the world wasn't visceral enough to him. As Ian Pinter, he'd become the kind of man he presumed Ray had left him for. He'd run, or fish, or do manual labor.

To celebrate being alive, he tried to masturbate, remembering the man he'd seen in front of Lizzie's, the salt-and-pepper hair, granite eyes and rough hands. But after a minute, his chest and limbs hurt too badly to keep going, and he wiped his spittly hand on his shorts and fell asleep.

The smaller a city was, it seemed to Ian, the more closely each of its bars approximated a cross-section of it. Social fragmentation was a luxury. When he entered the smaller of Central Street's two watering holes that evening, it was teeming with all varieties of men. Grease-smearing brows, damp-pitted shirts, loosened ties, mud-crusted jeans. Physical exhaustion hung in the air like a savory fog. The Pint Club was a paradise of working-class heterosexuality; these were the hours between work and wives, between bosses and children, sweat-drying hours devoted to game-watching and shit-shooting. Ian remembered how Ray had smelled after work, the ineffably sensual combination of cigarette smoke, spilled coffee, and ebbing deodorant clinging to his undershirt. He felt a pang of longing.

The television at the end of the bar was turned to a basketball game whose announcer competed with Louis Armstrong trolling "There Must be a Way" from a nearby speaker. The male-female ratio was high enough that anywhere else, it might have been a gay bar, but Ian suspected that announcing this would vacate the Pint Club more quickly than a fire.

The inside walls, all brick, were spotted and devoid of adornment, with the exception of neon beer signs and a framed photograph of Pharaoh Sanders. After a minute, the kitchen door swung open. A black titan emerged with a plate of fries, white rivulets streaked like spilled milk through his beard. He set the plate down and adjusted the antennae before taking Ian's order. When he reached for a bottle of Old Crow, Ian asked if he had anything else.

"Not as far as bourbon. What if I make it two for one?"

"That sounds fair." Ian smiled, causing one of his scabs to rip. He tasted blood. Indigestion, too, from the tofu curry he'd devoured at the Thai Café after his nap.

The bartender ran a napkin under the faucet and handed it to him. "What happened to you?"

"I was attacked."

"Around here?"

Ian dabbed at his lip. "Oakland. Mugged three days before moving to Ellis."

"Hell of a mugging. Are you *from* Oakland?"

"Berkeley."

"Ah. Commuting."

"No, I'm looking for work here."

"Really? A bay area exile who does his drinking west of Ellis Boulevard. I should mark this in my calendar." He extended his hand. "I'm Albert."

"Ian Pinter."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm actually a bartender myself," Ian said impulsively. He wished his sleeves were short enough for his tattoo to show, but his face was impressive enough. Few men could take a beating like his and look for work four days later.

"Serious?"

Ian nodded. "Well—I've done a number of things. Retail, office work... But I prefer bartending."

"Where have you tended bar?"

To be precise, Ian's sole experience was a campus espresso stand at NYU his freshman year. "New York City," he said. "Do you need anyone?"

"My last guy left a year ago and I can't afford a replacement."

Ian nodded. "But I bet it's a lot of work for one person."

Albert shrugged. "Sure."

He could tend bar—his first challenge as Pinter. He wanted this. "I'd be willing to work part time." It was precisely the kind of work he *should* do. Physical, real, an opportunity to appreciate details, no danger of prestige. And the side benefit of rugged clientele. He swallowed a gulp of bourbon, trying not to grimace. "Try me," he said. "Give me an interview."

Albert looked him over, taking in his face, the cuts and raw skin. Trying to look intrigued but not overanxious, Ian swirled his drink, keeping eye contact. "Fine," Albert said after a minute. "What the hell. Come by tomorrow."

"I will." Ian was thrilled. Granted, Side Cars, Tokyo Teas, and White Russians were the only recipes he knew by heart, but Albert probably kept a reference behind the counter. He'd memorize it like a script. After his first bourbon, he drank his free one, then one more. Some of his pain dulled to a tingling.

Half an hour later, in front of the Pint Club's bathroom mirror, a wave of knowledge took Ian by surprise, striking him in the throat like a jab. He'd never appear on stage again. The gash above his left eye would scar; his cheek and chin would scar; his right eyebrow was

hopeless; his nose was permanently misaligned. He'd assumed all this, of course, the instant he'd seen himself in Russ's apartment. But now, staring into the smudged glass, he realized a face like his could never appear onstage. He rubbed the back of his neck. Wet spots the size of half-dollars had emerged under his arms. He felt dizzy, then queasy, and vomited into the toilet.

His tattoo had grown itchier and more painful throughout the evening, and now oozed pus through his shirt. Why hadn't he splurged thirty more dollars for "Tattoo Goo" lotion? He itched it, twice. Blood trickled from the bottom of the "E."

Someone knocked. Ian vomited again, flushing to cover the sound. He splashed water on his cheeks, rinsed his mouth, plucked the newspaper from beside the toilet, and carried it out under his arm to intimate his engagement in that most reputable, least avoidable, of all masculine bathroom activities.

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Ian had always liked newspapers. This simple pleasure, above all others, occupied his mind the following morning as he paged through the *Ellis Herald* and ate a granola bar. He knew, of course, that America had supposedly advanced beyond newspaper. Radio, television, and websites handed down news in small, alarming chunks. Articles decried the death of print media; people wanted information, sex, and dry cleaning quick and easy. But print media *wasn't* dying. Everywhere he went, newspapers paved paths in subways, breakfast shops, and hotel foyers. Landing on porches in twos and threes, they were clipped and affixed to refrigerators. There was something permanent about newspaper, something palpable and trustworthy, Ian knew. It could be smelled and written upon. It smudged fingers in a pleasing way.

For these reasons, glimpsing his own name in a newspaper had always pleased him more than seeing it elsewhere. And this was why—in addition to his assumption that the less dignified parts of *Denouement* were behind him—that a yell escaped Ian's lips as he read his old name in the *Herald*.

The police had arrested someone.

An incipient headache crept up Ian's spine like a leech, settling at the base of his skull. Theo *was* a black name, wasn't it? Like the "Cosby Show?" God—how ignorant.

But *wasn't* it? The blurb was sandwiched in the week's police blotter between a convenience store robbery and a mail fraud arrest:

Lacey, Theo—Police arrested Lacey, 22, in Stockton early Wednesday morning for the fatal assault of Ian Ramspott, 36, of Berkeley. According to police, Lacey confessed and awaits a hearing. The body has not been found. Individuals with information concerning the case should call 466-4200.

Shakily, Ian rolled onto his side. Pus leaked from his tattoo and he dabbed it with a clean section of newspaper. Outside, the Cote D'Azure sign blinked, irregular. Patterns of light permeated the curtains, forming ghostly outlines on the bedspread. He was momentarily annoyed that *Denouement* wasn't mentioned, then realized how self-indulgent this response was, how inappropriate for Ian Pinter.

For the past few days, his life had felt genuine. He'd begun to do what Harold Pinter's plays were getting at: escape the system, eschew ritual. And he'd made good on his resolutions so far. Once more, he read the article. However unwitting, Theo Lacey had been Ian's cicerone into a new, gorgeously textured world, and in some circuitous way, it was Ian's fault the man had been arrested. Didn't he owe Theo this much?

He dialed the number.

As a woman picked up, Ian was stricken by an alternate consideration. He returned the phone to the receiver, clicking it up and down to be certain he was disconnected.

Was the arrest his fault?

Theo had confessed, apparently. And the confession held a number of implications—not only had he surmised that Ian was dead, but had been sure enough about it to admit to murder. He'd dumped Ian's body in a canal, after all.

Living with Ray had taught Ian a few things. A *crime* required a physical act and a criminal mindset. The black man had physically tried to kill Ian, and his mindset had been murderous—so wasn't that equivalent to murder? Theo's behavior wasn't moral just because his efforts had fallen short.

Ian remembered a line from his note: *Just because I drove here with the intention of being killed doesn't mean the delinquent who offed me didn't commit cold-blooded callous murder.* Didn't that still hold true? Was Theo innocent just because Ian had proven resilient?

Coming forward would have its upsides, publicity for *Denouement* among them, but these were Ramspott upsides. He imagined questions, a court appearance, the black man telling his own side of the story. Lying was an option, but the accusation alone would taint him irreparably: Gay Racist Flubs Suicide Attempt. Anonymity would be impossible. Everything he was creating in Ellis, all his resolutions, would be forfeited. He felt suddenly panicked.

But if he didn't call, what would happen to Theo? He thought of the man's eyes, of his anger.

Ian's headache eked upward. He lit a cigarette and inhaled. If Theo was willing to kill him, wouldn't Theo be willing to kill someone else later? Quite possibly, Ian could save a stranger's life by not coming forward. A murderer was a murderer.

Blood leaked from the broken skin at the bottom of his tattoo. The thing was growing a mind of its own, itching, oozing, and bleeding at will. Ian squirted out a thick worm of Neosporin and rubbed it in, christening each letter with a pus-colored glaze. Scarlet semicircles lined the outer edge of his "R." Alien chickenpox. Were rashes normal? Shane had given him a pamphlet, he remembered. After locating it beneath his package of T-shirts, he uncrumpled and read:

The life of your tattoo is dependent on it's first days of care. Leave bandage ON five hours. Moisten if bandage sticks. Pus, blood, and painful irritation are NORMAL to the healing process. Apply TATTOO GOO, do NOT: rub. Rid surface of; dirt, pus, and small debris. Pat lightly to dry. Do NOT: manipulate tattoo directly. Do NOT: apply Vaseline. Do NOT: apply ointment's. Do NOT: scratch.

Ian tore off a few squares of toilet paper and wiped at the Neosporin. Fibrous ivory flecks stuck to the "N" and the "E." He should have listened to Shane. What was it about experts that Ian resented? He was eager for their opinions, then ignored them. To follow their advice would give credence to the interdependency of modern life, he supposed. Experts validated systems.

Lying back on the bed, he noticed droplets on his arms and wrists. He'd never sweated this much before. Stockton had turned on a thousand tiny faucets in the stratum of his skin.

Technically, had he committed a crime? Racial slurs were free speech. And he'd pushed the black man, but not hard. It was Theo who'd beaten Ian until he couldn't move, who'd abandoned his body, who'd confessed to murder. Ian was the victim.

His Visa could be tracked. But if they thought he was dead, why would they bother? He'd charge something expensive to make it look stolen. They'd assume his attacker had sold it.

Not calling the police meant he got to keep his Pinter identity and a murderer was imprisoned. After a few additional minutes of consideration, this seemed not only a defensible position, but the sole reasonable one. Yes. Yes, Ian was practically certain.

Slowly, carefully, he tore out the blotter article and took it to the bathroom sink. He held his cigarette to the newsprint until the paper began to burn. Then he watched the fire consume it, leaving black marks in the sink and the bathroom smelling of smoke.

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When Ian arrived at the Pint Club that afternoon, there was only one customer at the bar. He chose a corner table and tried to get a vibe for the place. Albert was holding a screwdriver to the base of a tap. "Huh," he said, prodding the spigot. He didn't look up.

How was a bartender in Ellis expected to act? One of his first classes at NYU had been taught by Bahi Schraeder, a tiny red-haired Bangladeshi who'd implored them to embody the *essence* of inanimate objects: a guitar string, a bathrobe, a granite cliff. Ian concentrated on embodying the essence of cheap bourbon.

From the speakers, Etta James crooned "Sunday Kind of Love." Albert repositioned the screwdriver, releasing a gush of amber liquid onto the countertop. He cursed, turning it back. The man at the bar turned slightly—the same one who'd loaned him a cigarette in front of Lizzie's. "It only takes a few years to feel like a native," he said to Albert. "They're tirelessly optimistic. They exalt the location. They ignore the shady politics like they ignore the tule fog and the damn heat."

"They'll never oppose Greenlake."

"Well, exactly. It's as new as they are. They look ahead and feel genuinely glad to live in a place that's so progressive."

Albert grunted, plunking the screwdriver down. "Meanwhile, I just wait and see?"

“God, no—that’s the strategy people use in epidemics. Haven’t you read *The Plague*?”

“Shit, Dmitri. You’re going to rally people in the streets?”

The man—Dmitri—sighed. “I don’t know.”

“They didn’t grow up with their daddies working at glass and brick factories. They didn’t turn twenty-one at the Duck. You’d have to bulldoze whole subdivisions to smack some identity into them.”

“It’s not that clear-cut. Plenty of old-timers work for Bannister. Plenty of new ones eat at the Thai Café.”

Albert lifted the tap. Nothing came out, and he raised his head, noticing Ian. “I wondered if you’d show. Come on over.” He turned to Dmitri. “Ian’s a bay area relocatee in need of a job.”

“Ah-ha,” Dmitri said, as if a decision had been made. “And what do *you* think of Ellis?”

“Interesting so far,” Ian said.

Dmitri nodded. “For the present, anyway.” Now that Ian was getting a better look at him, he seemed less rugged. His face was soft around the edges, his shoulders rounded. Smart, though. His eyes glistened with roguish intelligence. “What brought you to Ellis?”

“I needed an adjustment. Cities grew relentless.”

“You wanted a slower life. Something rural. You like open stretches of land, perhaps grew up with them as a child. You want proximity to the city without its claustrophobia.”

Albert chuckled. “Come on, Dmitri.”

Ian smiled thinly. “*You* are a teacher who looks like a labor lawyer. You’ve lived here your whole life, and always thought you’d leave but never did. You have a heightened sense of class consciousness. *The Jungle* is your favorite book.”

“Touché,” Dmitri said. “But *Cannery Row* is my favorite book.”

Ian grinned. This was more like it—exactly what he wanted. To understand Ellis, to sit with a microbrew and joke with men like Albert and Dmitri. Even Ray would have found them authentic. “Were you talking about that new development? I saw it when I was driving over here.”

“On 205?”

“Yes.”

“You probably just saw the mall,” Albert said. “Not the *new new* development. Greenlake’s southwest, past Heinz. You know where the foothills start? Corral Hollow?”

Ian shook his head.

Sliding the screwdriver into a drawer, Albert glanced at Dmitri. “It’s a big business park on some land past downtown. Keep going out Central, turn on Linne, there you are.”

“It used to be farms,” Dmitri said. “Then the Holly Sugar factory.”

“How far along is it?” Ian asked.

“Months.” Dmitri shook his head. “Al and I are just talking. Too late to do anything.”

“Not about the election,” Albert said.

“The election’s a side note. James is just flexing his muscles.”

“Why don’t you want it built?” Ian asked, baiting them.

Albert snorted. “Only a few places downtown closed when the mall opened. Now we’re talking Banana Bauer Republic, Bed Bath and Pottery Barn, Abercrombie and GAP, J. Ethan Allen Crew. I took over the Pint Club in seventy-eight. They’ll have me tapping the fizzy piss they pass off as beer at most of those places.”

Dmitri broke in. “Careful, Al—he’ll raise your rent—”

“Ian’s safe,” Albert said. “And even if he isn’t, I don’t give a damn what gets back to James anymore.”

“Who’s James?” Ian asked.

Dmitri shook his head. “The point is, you control land, you control people.”

“Who’s James?”

“Stanford’s urban studies courses do a unit on Ellis. It’s grown from twenty thousand to nearly fifty in fifteen years. Then you have the old families, the old networks. It’s a straining, beautiful patchwork.” He drummed his hands on the bar. “During World War Two, five servicemen wrote to the City Council then they heard that an old fence they used to sit on was about to be taken down. A *fence*. Now, bones decay in fields paved over with subdivisions. Ask most people about Ellis, they’ll tell you it has an In-N-Out Burger.” He pushed his hand through his hair.

“Sometimes all you can do is focus on the present,” Ian said sympathetically.

“Historical relationships are the roots of the present. I’ve got to go. Al—we’ll talk.”

Dmitri left a few dollars on the bar and walked out.

Albert grinned. "He's been in rare form the past couple weeks."

"Were you guys talking about starting some kind of movement?" Ian asked. "If so, I wouldn't mind being involved. I've been in political organizations before. Suburban sprawl is a serious—"

"Movement," Albert repeated derisively. "You make a lot of assumptions for a man who looks like he fell into a meat grinder. You looking for a job or not? Get behind the bar."

The interview consisted of Albert pretending to be an increasingly inebriated customer while Ian struggled to fill orders.

"How about asking for a Side Car?" Ian suggested after half an hour, presenting Albert with a monochromatic Black and Tan.

"No one's going to order a Side Car."

"It's just... There *are* drinks I can make. But I'm slightly out of practice—"

"*You*," Albert interrupted, "Would be the only one who'd order a Side Car. Bud Light on ice."

"You're joking—people drink that? God. Do we have Bud Light?"

Albert scratched his beard patiently. "Again—the lit up signs are what we've got."

"Wasn't that the tap you were screwdrivering?"

Albert clicked his tongue, looking at the drinks lined up on the counter: Jack and Coke, Vodka Martini, Rum and Coke, Scotch and Soda, Black and Tan. He looked piteously back at Ian. "I can guarantee ten hours a week."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'll give you a shot. See how it works out."

"There's one thing. I don't have a permanent address, exactly. Or a—well—social security number, driver's license. I'm in the midst of dealing with a few things."

Albert stared thoughtfully at him. "Even better," he said. "Tax-free."

Later that day, at Stutz Jewelry on Ninth, Ian bought a diamond-studded gold ring and a self-winding pocket watch with emerald insets. Wearing them was too risky, but he picked up a padlock for the drawer in his motel room. If he needed money, he could pawn them. He snipped the Visa into confetti-sized pieces, which he deposited in four different trash receptacles downtown.

For days, nothing appeared about him in the *Herald*, and Ian concentrated on cultivating his Pinterhood. The role settled into him like a warm meal, and as Berkeley receded, he felt himself being transformed. He'd been right about Ellis. Nothing here would have interested Ramspott, and this made it perfect. Gradually, he was training himself to let go of his old desires and take up new ones, to appreciate the physical reality of breathing, of walking, of his shifts at the Pint Club. He whiled away most of his time there, even when he wasn't working. Dmitri came in often, and they talked about Greenlake or local history, which Ian welcomed first because Dmitri was gorgeous, then eventually because Ellis's weird little sociology began to fascinate him.

According to Dmitri, the city had two bars and twenty-seven churches. Ellis split up to worship and united to drink. The bars, the Duck and the Pint Club, sat opposite each other on Central. The Duck wasn't actually named "The Duck," though in its six decades had boasted a series of other names, including "The Ball and Chain," "Westchester's Pub," "The Flying Bulldog," and currently, "Tony Martini's California Roadhouse Bar." In the 60's and 70's, when street gangs had seeped in from Stockton and racial tension between whites and Hispanics peaked at Madison, a member of the 10th Street Cripps had sprayed his moniker, an eagle, on the bar's façade. He was a terrible artist—unskilled with spray paint—and gave it such a giant beak that it bore an uncanny resemblance to the University of Oregon's web-footed mascot. The city removed it in 1972, following a lawsuit over who should pay for the removal. The hubbub was too much for Ellis's citizens, Dmitri told Ian. They disliked change and adjusted poorly to it, so the bar on the east side of Central Street became, permanently in their minds, the Duck.

At work, Ian cleared tables, washed dishes, and when things were slow, tended bar. In three days, he managed to sell four White Russians, three Side Cars, and a Tokyo Tea. The sales, in fact, of all mixed drinks had risen since Ian started working.

"Coors," a customer would say.

Ian would chuckle, shaking his head.

"What?" the customer would ask.

"Bet you order that every time," Ian would say, setting down the glass and leaning forward, making the most of his scarring face. "You just look like a Side Car man," Ian would explain. "I thought you'd want something stronger."

And the customer wouldn't, not then. But a night or two later, he'd announce it was

time he tried something new.

Musically, Albert's selections generally fell in the John Lee Hooker-Junior Parker range, but occasionally stretched as far back as Count Basie or as far forward as Lenny Kravitz. He possessed an endless stash of African-American greats. When the Pint Club was crowded and the television was off and the music was up, it reminded Ian of a Chicago blues house, an association difficult to achieve with California's draconian smoking laws. Ray would have liked it, and Ian often imagined him stopping in. He'd order Smirnoff and they'd undress each other with their eyes and try to remember why they had broken up.

He waited on migrant laborers, *Ellis Herald* reporters, plumbers, used car salesmen, and everyone else—men who worked long shifts and looked at him with tired eyes and silently calculated the minutes until their time ran out and they had to go home. And sometimes, late at night in the Cote D'Azure, or on days his knee didn't seem to be healing, Ian would look at the mark he'd burned in the sink and think of Theo Lacey sitting in a jail cell, his eyes and his anger, and for a minute, Ian would weaken and start dialing the Stockton police. But then he'd think of his resolutions, and of how Theo had left him to die, and he'd fight it all back again, reminding himself what his life in Ellis meant to now, and how *Denouement* had changed him, and of everything he was learning and becoming.

Chapter Six

Flickering rainbow fuzz illuminated Dmitri's face as he sat up and blinked, trying to ascertain where he was and how he'd gotten there. The living room, and it was dark. Right—he'd been previewing a film for class, but the tape had played to the end while he slept, and the VCR must have clicked off. He pressed a button. Public access television was showing something on Vietnam. He turned the volume up, but the show ended thirty seconds later, and was replaced by James Bannister. At first, Dmitri assumed it was one of his real estate commercials ("Bannister Properties: Helping Ellis Reach Its Dreams"), then heard the opening chords to "What a Wonderful World."

The camera framed him, head to boots, and in the background Dmitri saw James's ranch house, which was visible from the east on-ramp to I-205 toward Stockton, a one-story brown and white sprawler on a hill—the type a down-home benefactor would be expected to have, and which, Dmitri had no doubt, been constructed for this reason. James sat on his front porch in dark jeans and a light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled, one boot propped against the landing. He gazed wistfully beyond his property, and the camera panned over the stretch of yellow fields before returning to James, who glanced into the camera as if he was pleasantly surprised to see it.

"Hello! You caught me looking out at the offerings of our beautiful city. Even after living in Ellis my whole life, this wonderful world takes my breath away." He chuckled, and the music got softer, as if by command. Dmitri wondered whether Albert had seen this. He'd be furious that James used Armstrong. "Even if you don't know me, you've probably seen me around. My father and I founded our real estate business back when Ellis was a little hamlet of just five thousand people. We bought a small restaurant and a few other properties downtown. Through hard work, we expanded."

Ten to one, he'd make City Council. Watching James talk, Dmitri could almost believe he was naïve enough to think he was doing something helpful, that beneath the slick veneer, he believed local businesses would have a chance, that the creation of a thousand minimum-wage jobs was a positive thing.

"Progress," James was saying. He pushed up his sleeves earnestly, staring at Dmitri. "It's something you don't think about in your day-to-day life. You go to work, send your kids to school. And that's exactly what you *should* do. But how do you know there'll be

enough classrooms and school buses? Plenty of safe places to throw a ball around? Fact is, you don't. In a booming city like ours, you need a plan. A vision to make sure Ellis stays the way you like it—top schools, great restaurants, convenient services, and plenty of baseball diamonds.” He flashed a grin and mimed a perfect swivel-hipped baseball swing in mid-air. “I’m running for City Council so I can make it happen for you.”

When Dmitri woke again four hours later, the volume was muted and the television showed static and he wondered, for a minute, whether he’d dreamed it.

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Since Becky hadn’t asked where he was meeting his mentor teacher, it seemed defensible that he was driving Rika around at dusk, looking for a place to deposit her lizard. He was nervous, and talking too much, trying desperately not to look at the Folgers can snugly secured between her thighs. She’d shown up in jeans and a paint-splattered T-shirt, which made him feel foolish for selecting his newest white shirt and khakis, no different from the clothes he wore to work. Did it make him seem stodgy?

What he really wanted was a friendship. He’d reasoned this out. Becky had always managed their social life—she was good at returning calls, arranging barbeques, and Dmitri preferred spending weekends on the couch with a book. But now he’d finally met someone with whom he could conduct a pleasant conversation, and was he supposed to avoid her just because she happened to be female? How archaic—he had to get over that. And it wouldn’t kill Becky, either, to let *Dmitri* bring home a friend, for once. Except he hadn’t brought Rika home. He pressed a little harder on the gas.

San Joaquin County was shaped like Ohio, and sat lazily, like dethroned royalty, on the western side of the Central Valley. Ellis fell somewhere between Columbus and Cincinnati. Farmers and commuters owned the region, the long gold stretches of land, orchards razed for pastel two-stories to sprout from the rich raw dirt, packing freeways, malls, and schools. The land was being overtaken methodically, masculinized, endowed with walls and angles, hardening soft licks and valleys with interstate, soft curves and nipples of dirt with stucco and concrete. Dmitri explained the transformation, driving with one palm while Rika scanned their surroundings.

“Still have it in the can?” he asked, noticing the lid was off.

She held her hand up; the reptile was on her palm. It flicked its tongue against her finger, and Dmitri wished he could take its place for a few seconds, tasting her skin, feeling it along his body. Rika reduced him to this: jealousy of a horned toad. “Want me to put it back?” she asked.

“It’s okay.” He was wary of all non-mammalian animals, but liked watching the tenderness she bequeathed on the scaly creature. “Did it recover?”

“Completely. In just a couple days. I kept him the extra week because I got attached.”

Dmitri nodded, wishing he could offer something interesting about lizards. Rika’s breadth of knowledge amazed him. Once, she’d asked whether he’d ever done anything in front of class that he regretted. Showing off, he’d begun plagiarizing a Hemingway story: “If you’re interested in scars I can show you some very interesting ones, but—”

“I’d rather talk about grasshoppers,” she’d interrupted, finishing the line. “Are you going to be metaphorical or will you really tell me?”

This kind of thing turned him on so thoroughly that he was always blushing in her presence. He realized that his entire life, he’d watered down his enthusiasm for knowledge. Becky loved him *despite* his zest for erudition; he’d never been appreciated *for* it. With Rika, he never had to pretend less passion than he felt—except, of course, for her.

The previous day, Rika had been rubbing a purple lotion into her hands. After work, Dmitri had gone to the mall and smelled lotions for an hour, finally locating the scent—*Evening Lavender*—at Target. He’d bought a tube, hidden it in his sock drawer, and smelled it again before bed. Briefly, he’d considered giving it to Becky, hoping she’d wear it when they made love, but this had seemed, in the next instant, unforgivably cruel.

“Over there looks good,” she said, pointing. See that creek?”

He nodded, coasting the truck to a stop. “We’re not far from the original city site.” As Rika leaned to pick up the coffee can, the seatbelt created a depression between her breasts. “It’s different from snakeskin,” he offered, pretending fixation upon the lizard.

“Soft, tiny scales,” she agreed. “It’s almost surprising he can defend himself.” She opened the door and without waiting for him, walked across the root growths that had hardened into the earth, cracks rippling from their edges like lightning.

The creek bed was forty feet away, and—never attractive during physical exertion—Dmitri didn’t follow. Instead, he pulled his chrome Zippo (a Christmas present from Meg,

selected to anger her mother) from his shirt pocket and leaned against his truck, smoking and surveying the land vaquero-style. Houses had sprung up along the crest of Patterson Pass. Madison's cross-country team used to practice on the labyrinth of dirt roads connecting San Joaquin and Alameda counties through Corral Hollow. He smiled, remembering the Rolling Stones' Altamont concert there the year he and Becky had graduated from college. One of the best days of his life.

So far, Rika had betrayed no interest, and he—the senior teacher, the male, the morally culpable and legally liable—was doing his best to convey that the last thing he wanted was a relationship with this (beautiful, intriguing, disarmingly sharp) woman. As if she'd ever find forty-nine-year-old alluring.

"Is the creek bed always this dry?" she called.

He had a line memorized from the 1863 California Geological Survey: "Goes without water ten months of the year. Practically a desert. Never have we seen an uglier country."

"Depends on the rain," Dmitri called back.

He watched Rika pry off the lid and set the can down lengthwise, allowing the creature to crawl back into the wild of its own accord. He imagined picking his way down to the creek bed, encircling her waist in his arms, brushing his hand up the front of her blouse. She'd yield against him, slip his hands beneath her belt.

Sure, most men would know better than to strike up a friendship. But wasn't it was better to have a small part of something than none of it? Moreover, he was skilled at self-control. (Granted, cheese and chocolate might, in the not-so-distant past, have tempted him more than he could handle, but these were trivial.) What he desired was proximity; proximity allowed him to want her, and wanting her enlivened him.

"He was ecstatic," Rika announced, reaching the top of the hill.

"Great." He ground out his cigarette before finishing it, and opened her door. Did she consider smoking a weakness? She made him want to be smarter, kinder, more romantic. He didn't buy Becky roses or write her name in sand at the beach, but he yearned to do these things for Rika. Had the tangle of history he shared with his wife grown too heavy? No, even in the beginning, he'd never felt like this.

He started the car. "Do you want to keep driving?"

She shrugged. "Either way. It's so desolate here. Amazing that it used to be underwater."

"They've shot movies here."

"Really?"

Flashbacks to miserable scenes in people's lives, mostly. Ellis had stood in as a roadside in the deep south, a depression-era landscape, a bombed-out Vietnam village, and a bus depot in the middle of Kansas. "Sure," he said. "'The Candidate,' 'Take the Money and Run.' Let's see. 'Cool Hand Luke.' 'Who'll Stop the Rain.' Seen all those?"

Rika shook her head. "I've heard of 'Cool Hand Luke,' though."

Twenty-seven. Lord. "We could go to Owens-Brockway."

"What's that?"

"The glass factory. It's not too far. They make bottles for Michelob and Lucky Lager."

"Sure."

The Ford was Dmitri's own bodhi tree, and with Rika in the passenger seat, the sensation was tenfold. Pulling into the Owens-Brockway parking lot, he was filled with a glorious mental weightlessness. The factory emptied by six, but security lights glowed against the foggy dusk, outlining the main buildings in ochre pinpricks. The lights made him think of his new candles, burning them on the kitchen windowsill against the dark. At lunch last week, after Rika mentioned that candles relaxed her, Dmitri had gone to The Fifth Season and bought three. He liked their pear spice, vanilla mint, and sandalwood smells. The sandalwood, which he kept in his classroom, had even soaked up sixth period's pungent boy-sweat odor, a task he'd doubted could be accomplished without the aid of more Febreeze than he could afford.

"It reminds me of the Pompidou Center," she said. "Except whitewashed."

"My father lost a finger there."

"I thought he studied history."

"Oh—not professionally. He didn't even have a high school degree. He came from Britain, with my mother, before I was born."

"What happened to his finger?"

"He was trying to fix a triple-gob former. It shaped glass into three bottles at a time. Bored a hole right through his knuckle."

“Did he have to quit?”

“No, he agreed not to file a worker’s comp claim and they promoted him to inspector, which meant that he looked over the bottles for deformities. He was proud of it. Some badge of immigrant triumph.”

A trail of smoke leaked from the stacks at the top of the factory, glowing orange against the lights upon its escape, then rising and dissipating, mixing with the fog into the darkening sky.

“I’ve forgotten—you’re Russian, right? What fraction?” He hadn’t forgotten. He remembered everything she’d ever told him: her favorite poet (Plath), which month she’d visited Russia (January), the subject of her senior thesis (effects of exercise on the ventricular strength of anemic mice).

“Full, supposedly.”

“Why supposedly?” At lunch, she’d just said “full.”

“I told you I was adopted, right?”

“Perhaps,” he said. She hadn’t.

“Well, supposedly I was born in St. Petersburg, and had a twin brother. Until I was a few months old, everything was normal—here I envision breadlines and bloody revolutions. One night my father was sleeping with one of us in each arm, and he rolled over on my brother and suffocated him. My mother became hysterical. She claimed I’d always remind her of my brother, and wouldn’t talk to my father until he got rid of me. He found an agency that adopted babies to the U.S., and I landed in Iowa.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Would you believe that story?”

“I don’t know.”

“My adoptive parents were sweet people—much older than me, almost like grandparents. I could picture them not wanting me to know my real mother was a crank addict from Chicago.”

“Do they have paperwork?”

“They said so, but I never saw it. They both died of croup my sophomore year in college. First her, then him. Within weeks.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Their siblings—all fourteen live in Council Bluffs—descended on my parents’ house in their efficient Midwestern way. They boxed up some things for me and that was it. The rest was thrown out.

“Do you still see your aunts and uncles?”

She shook her perfect head.

Where did she spend Christmas? Who did she call when she broke up, got a new job, needed help changing her oil? A boyfriend? Ex-husband? Dmitri needed to know. He longed to soap her shoulder blades, cut her grass, help her cook lamb curry (she was the kind of woman who’d stockpile exotic recipes), let her confide secret worries. It was about sexual attraction, of course—yes, yes, it was about sex—how could it be otherwise? But he craved the small familiarities, too.

“I didn’t know people still died of croup,” he said.

“I know. Weird.” She paused. “I don’t care if you smoke.”

“I’m fine.”

“Stop toying with your lighter, then.”

Dmitri looked down. He’d removed it from his pocket and was spinning it on his palm. He slid a cigarette from his pack and rolled the window down.

“So I’ve been wondering about your secret.”

“Secret?”

She touched the heel of her hand against her neck. Dmitri’s chest lurched with desire—was she giving him a signal? If she stayed that way a moment longer, he’d lean and kiss her. No—God. He needed another signal.

“The way you and that Bannister man stared each other down, I figure it has to be serious.”

He swallowed. “Back in the coffee shop?”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

He should have felt relieved—a choice, an impossible choice—had been evaded. But he felt knotted up. “Oh—it’s not a much of a secret. We just disagree about the direction Ellis is headed.”

“Johnny was your student?”

“Well—for a principal, he’s young.”

She smiled. “I just meant that it must be weird he’s your boss.”

“Oh. A bit.”

“What does his father do?”

“He’s a developer.”

“He seemed slick. How many people does Ellis have on City Council?”

“Three.”

“So he has a good shot.”

“It’s really just James against Montgomery O’Brien, *one* of the incumbents. There are two others—Silva, the Athletic Director, and Samuelson, a dentist—but they’re shoe-ins already. Montgomery’s the only maybe.”

“Why are they shoe-ins?”

Dmitri shrugged. “They just are. They’ve been on it for years. Silva is vaguely anti-progress, Sammy is vaguely pro, and Montgomery’s in the middle. People think of him as a wimp. If James is elected, he’ll pull Sammy into his corner.”

“But doesn’t Ellis have a growth plan or something that maps it all out?”

Dmitri smiled. “If you go into City Hall, you won’t see a ten or twenty-year planning projection. They take photographs at the start of every decade, black-and-white aerials they hang side by side. As if the planners themselves are helpless witnesses. They agree to things, then struggle to catch up. There’s no grand scheme.”

“Messy.”

“But I love it, you know? It’s a patchwork city. It’s always shocking itself. Way back when I-205 was proposed, they approved it as long as it would be outside city limits. And it was. But within fifteen years, houses were backed up to the freeway.”

“What’s Bannister’s beef with you, then? Or isn’t there one?”

“He’s been keeping an eye on me since the last summer I worked for the *Herald*. Johnny had just been hired at Madison. I had a regional history beat, wrote about Yokuts Indians, the Southern Pacific railroad, brothels along Sixth Street—”

“*Brothels?*”

“Brothels, bars, and poker halls. Ellis was a heathen’s paradise of a railroad stop, once upon a time. For years, cops looked the other way. It’s always been a little corrupt here, a little haphazard.” Was she leaning toward him? He couldn’t tell. “One day a man came into my office claiming the Bannisters had taken his shops. He was old, and barely

spoke English. Hard to understand. He said he'd owned the Pint Club in the mid-forties. He kept saying, *taken*."

"Did you believe him?"

"I wanted to, but it didn't make much sense. I sent him to Bannister, though." Smoke curled from Dmitri's cigarette, drifting out to meet the fog that cloaked the factory. He recounted his fruitless scour of city records, his attempts to contact the man later, the unlisted address, and how, finally, he'd gone to James, who'd denied the whole story. What had surprised him, Dmitri explained, was James's fury.

"What did he do?" Rika asked.

"Kicked me out. Shouted. I'd never seen him so angry. Then the first day of school, Johnny pink-slipped me."

"After how many years of teaching?"

"A lot. When I confronted Johnny, he acted like it was out of his hands. I took it as James's warning."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Walt Garrett, who runs the *Herald*, was right there. And Albert."

"What was the man's name?"

"Murakami, I think. I have it written somewhere."

They watched the sky darken. Blanketed in silence before his father's old factory, Dmitri felt more serene than he had in a long time. Rika inspired it in him. She turned from the window and watched him smoke. He closed his eyes, listening to the soft rise of her breaths. He could be happy like this, alone with a beautiful woman against his headrest.

As he opened his eyes to tap the ash from his cigarette, Rika moved her hand to his wrist and held it a few seconds before returning her hand to her own lap.

Dmitri's mind raced. He knew that in identical situations, high school males were apt to touch what they shouldn't, or simply combust. How fortunate to be forty-nine with a better grasp of propriety than he'd had the last time he was in this situation (with Becky, in Fresno). He cleared his throat, extinguished his cigarette prematurely, and mumbled something, "Better go" or "Getting late—" he forgot it as soon as he said it.

Though on the physical level, the action had been Rika's, a psychological transgression belonged to Dmitri. He'd wanted it, encouraged it, willed it. Pulling out of the lot, he turned in the direction of his house: they had to meet. Not only would this

introduction underline the platonicism of their relationship (for Rika), but was the moral thing to do, having only described her to Becky as “one of the new teachers.” Not that she’d asked—Becky never asked—but it seemed a matter of fairness. And Rika, for God’s sake, was Meg’s age—how he loathed the absurd age disparities in films, the sensitive grey-haired prune with the peachy blonde—it was grotesque, and really, how was this any different?

Fields shot by them, turning into white houses, pink, beige, houses newly built and waiting for color. Construction sites gave rise to wooden skeletons of homes at various stages of completion.

“Where are we going?” Rika asked.

“I thought you could meet Becky.”

“Okay.”

“Is that all right?”

“Sure—she sounds great.”

“Perfect.”

“You’re playing with your lighter again.”

He shoved it into his pocket and turned down Central.

“Lizzie’s Café is still open,” Rika said. “I’ll have to take Ruby there.”

“Who’s that?”

“My landlord. She says she hasn’t gone out much, since her husband died.”

“Not Ruby *Phyllis*?”

“You know her?”

“I’ll be damned. The lawyer? I haven’t seen Ruby since she and Craig left Holy Cross.”

“I thought you and Becky were Buddhist.”

“She’s Presbyterian.”

They were silent. He considered, briefly, offering to take Rika home, then changed his mind again. He knew he’d replay her touch that night after Becky fell asleep. But this introduction, much as he dreaded it, would clarify everything.

“Are you mad?” Rika asked.

“No.”

“You seem upset.”

“What do you mean?”

"Would you mind slowing down?"

The speedometer read fifty-five. He eased off the gas. "Sorry."

"It's all right. Look, are we friends?"

He nodded.

"Honestly, I'm sitting here worrying you misread me. I'm thinking, 'Is Dmitri upset I patted his hand? Because he flinched as if I was trying to *hold* it, and I was trying to console him.'"

"Console me?"

"You get depressed, talking about Greenlake. I know you're worried about Ellis. I pat my friends' hands when they're grieving, okay?"

"Grieving?"

"Stop repeating me—it's unnerving. If you misread me, I apologize for not examining my gestures' dual meanings."

"It was a bit weird," he said, more softly than he'd meant to.

Her neck flushed pink, which meant she was irritated. "You've got an amazing wife, whom I can't wait to meet. And I know you guys have a whole social circle. This drive, the coffee meetings—far above and beyond your mentor duties. I like hanging out with you. I know you're not remotely interested in anything beyond the platonic, and *I'm* certainly not."

"Okay." Dmitri's stomach churned. Had he really said *weird*? He wanted to rewind, wanted—if not to have kissed her—at least to have felt grateful for her hand on his, to have gripped it back. Grieving. Friendly. Whatever. "I really do enjoy our conversations."

She stared colorlessly at him, then rolled down her window and watched the houses fly past like fat, pale birds. "Thanks."

. . . .

"Mom—seriously. How would I know?"

"People have a sense of these things," Becky told her, adjusting the phone so she could wring out the dish towel.

"Not me. I'm feeling pestered."

"Well, I worry."

"Beleaguered."

"Sweetie—it's okay if it takes a while. Things have a way of coming along."

"Something *has* come along. Susan."

Becky winced. She knew her daughter dated lesbians, but up to this point, she was reasonably certain Meg hadn't slept with any. Susan worried her, though; she was older, she had a PhD, she *knew* what she was doing. "At this stage in your life, everything feels permanent."

"If I go out with him once, will you promise never to set me up again?"

"There are phases in life—"

"I know: Dyke, dyker, dykest."

"Meg!"

"Ha, Mom. Ha. Ha."

Becky sighed into the phone. She felt weary.

"Kidding," Meg said.

"I know, sweetie."

"Lesbianism isn't a cult."

"I know." Becky tried to smile. She'd read in *Self* that people could sense smiles over the phone. Meg's problem, when it came down to it, was that she was too much like Dmitri. Both of them had converted to something because it was exotic and intellectual. Simple Presbyterianism, plain old heterosexuality, hadn't been good enough for them.

Still, after they'd hung up, Becky couldn't help marveling at how well she and her daughter communicated. It was like *Health* said: Openness is central. Whenever she worried, she simply called Meg and told her so. Though the article had been about mother-daughter relationships, she'd wondered if it might apply to her husband. She supposed not. Her complaints about the time he spent at work, his refusal to stop smoking, to get a decent car—all openness, and they hadn't done any good. Every now and then, she had to stop and resign herself to the fact that her husband would never change.

At Bunko Thursdays, not only did her friends agree, but were going through similar things. Women really were the more progressive species. Men had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, a generation behind. Years from now, yoga would be a men's sport, and men would take up spinning and pilates, while women moved on. Women who didn't acknowledge the fundamental differences between the sexes were deluding themselves.

Becky stood in front of her mirror in the bedroom and studied her figure. *She* had made changes, certainly. Forty-nine and she looked better than she had since Meg was in elementary school. Her hips were still bloated with her mother's saddlebags, and her neck had a flap of skin that, if she pressed it, looked like a double chin. The crazy thing was, Dmitri didn't care. He hadn't noticed when she'd lost weight initially, and had remained uninterested when she'd started body sculpting. She'd been in the class for weeks before he figured out she hadn't meant clay.

Recently, he'd seemed more interested—a lot more, actually—and just a few days ago he'd pushed her up against the mirror in her bedroom, taking her and watching himself take her, which he hadn't done for years, though Dmitri had always been extremely visual. It saddened her a little that she wasn't enjoying his newfound passion as much as he was, but she didn't figure it would last.

"When your kids leave, you have to meet each other anew," she'd told her Bunko group. "You have to see if you can fall in love again with this man you've been living with." The Bunko women had been enthralled. But in the quiet of the bedroom she'd shared with her husband for twenty-seven years, Becky had to admit that she didn't know how.

After Meg moved out, Becky had briefly considered a divorce. Dmitri was right where he'd started, but wider, greyer, and more devoted to his work. She'd tried to interest him in hobbies, but her attempts had failed: He showed up to one softball practice to humor her, but quit before the second; he tried assembling a model train she'd bought for his birthday, but mixed up the parts and glued his hand to the smokestack. As a last resort, she'd bought tickets to an A's game. He'd wanted to take Becky, but when she'd refused, he'd sold the tickets for half their value. ("What would I want with an A's game?" she'd asked. "What would *I* want?" he'd asked back. "Because I have a penis I'm supposed to get excited about grown men playing baseball?")

But Dmitri was so doggedly loyal, so committed to her, to his job, that she felt sorry for him. She had the health club, she had her hobbies. She had Bunko on Thursdays, body sculpting on Tuesdays, yoga Mondays, and pilates Wednesdays. Dmitri had none of this, just sat at the kitchen table with his literature books and his Ellis books, lurching around complicatedly in the past.

At least sometimes when she kissed him hello, she could tell he'd stopped for a beer on the way home from school, which neither of them ever mentioned. It was healthy for a man to have a drink after work, and she liked the rough smell of it on his breath.

When she heard the door open, she felt a pang of annoyance for having been interrupted, though she was only paging through *Crate and Barrel* and drinking iced tea. Later she would go to the Women's Ministry group, but wasn't looking forward to it. Two of her closest friends were on retreats with their husbands, and hadn't invited Becky and Dmitri, undoubtedly due to Dmitri's absence from Holy Cross. Maybe she'd sign up for the all-women's retreat that weekend, after all.

Hearing an unfamiliar voice, she looked up from the French torchieres. Dmitri was accompanied by an odd-looking girl about thirty years old. It was the eyes—and the build was a bit off, too. Soft and unbalanced, though not heavy. Probably an old student, stopping by to visit. Should she offer her some iced tea? Becky smiled, hoping Dmitri wouldn't come over to kiss her hello. She knew she shouldn't feel affection-denying impulses, but sometimes he got sentimental in front of strangers.

As much as Dmitri always wanted things driven to their ends, he couldn't fathom what self-destructive mechanism in him craved denouement enough to insist on this particular meeting.

Becky looked annoyed, most likely because he'd come home an hour later than he'd estimated. It wasn't as if she needed him home; she just liked to plan her evenings ahead of time. When they were first married, he'd been touched to read the entries in her planner: *Dmitri home @ 4:30(:45?) p.m., or Dmitri conferences, 5-7*. He should have called.

"Becky, this is Rika Brown. Rika, Becky. Rika's a new teacher. I'm doing a mentoring program, and Johnny assigned me to her."

"Is Dmitri teaching you all his bad habits?"

He cringed inwardly. Why did his wife cobble together clichés whenever she met someone? "Remember Craig and Ruby?" he asked.

"Phyllis?"

"Yes—Ruby's renting a room to Rika," Dmitri said.

"How nice. Were you a friend of theirs?" she asked, as if both of them had died.

As Rika answered, her eyes combed the room. Dmitri watched her in the framed mirror between the foyer and the kitchen. The cornflower-blue French country tile he and Becky had chosen two decades earlier (it matched a china set they no longer owned), seemed gloomy evidence of insipid middle-class subsistence—proof he was every bit as uninteresting as he feared.

He'd always loved the giant womb-kitchens of Italian novels—vast walnut-colored chopping blocks, tomatoes suspended from the ceiling in gold baskets, warm yeasty air that surrounded protagonists like an embrace. But when Becky had wanted to remodel the kitchen, he'd resisted. It seemed mean, now, to have been so opposed. Too expensive, he'd told her—but really, he knew she'd want it cushy. He believed a house should be—not harsh, exactly, but stark. His wife's idea of comfort was fabric: pillows, shams, curtains. Dmitri preferred empty walls.

Based on Rika's facial expressions, he began re-evaluating everything in his kitchen: the spoiled bananas on top of the refrigerator, rye crumbs beside the toaster oven, cheese-slicer out from the night before, coral-colored Centrum tablets, expired coupons, his dilapidated moccasins resting by the entrance to the hallway. He wanted to take her aside, explain that this wasn't *him*, that a house was a series of workings out, of compromises resulting in tame tile and dull wall hangings. He was, at least, grateful she'd noticed the framed O'Keefe in the entryway.

Rika was telling his wife about her broken Bunsen burners, no money for replacements. School funding, good—one of Becky's favorite topics. They'd get along, maybe. Become friends. Rika would be invited to their occasional backyard barbeques. But his wife's expression was too polite, extra-sweet. She touched her glass, then drew her hand away. Dmitri knew this was because she hadn't offered Rika anything to drink and didn't plan to.

"Can we get you some water?" he asked. "Iced tea?"

"A little water, please," Rika said. "I should leave soon."

"I'll take you back."

"It's only a mile. I can walk."

"I insist." He glanced at Becky.

"Nah," Rika said. "Thanks, though."

Turning her magazine over, Becky rose and went to the cupboard for a glass, then to the freezer, withdrawing the plastic tray and twisting it smartly to crack cubes into the glass. The water—right. He'd forgotten. His wife's hands were strong, the veins standing out like little racehorse muscles, and he felt a pang of tender respect. As Becky handed Rika the glass, she glanced at herself in the hallway mirror, and Dmitri saw Rika notice this, her mouth slightly parted, saw her catch his wife alone with her reflection, and then Becky's focus shifted, and the two women's eyes met for an instant before they looked away.

"Thanks," Rika said. And as her eyes moved to Dmitri, he knew exactly what she was apprehending. The two of them had been having lunch together, meeting for coffee, mentoring for weeks. But he had never—apparently not once—mentioned her to his wife. He watched the onset of realization in her eyes, like the atmospheric collection of moisture the instant before it starts to rain. And he waited while the next long moment passed, and when she looked abruptly away, he knew Rika had figured out why he'd been so uncomfortable back in the truck.

"Seems nice," Becky said when Rika was gone. "If a little bewildered."

"New teachers always are. Remember us, our first year?" He studied her face. She was stirring Ragu with a wooden spoon, and the steam from the pot was rising, coating her cheeks and neck with a moist patina. "Want me to put the noodles on?"

"Sure—check the bottom cupboard."

Dmitri knelt. The bottom cupboard was also where he kept his Nilla Wafers. Becky knew they were there; this, actually, was the point. If she thought she'd discovered his hiding place for snacks that roused his blood sugar, she'd assume it was the only one. The arrangement allowed both of them to believe they knew more than the other.

He found the noodles, ripped open the package, and snapped the bundle in half. Shards sprung from the break and pittered onto the tile like petrified straw. While he ran a pot beneath the tap, Becky picked up the pieces of noodle and tossed them into the trash. This was the woman who would take care of him when he got old. This was the woman upon whom he depended.

"How was yoga?" he asked.

"I set my mat in gum."

"I thought you couldn't chew gum in the gym."

"You can't." The sauce boiled over onto the burner, emitting a furious hiss. In a single, efficient motion, Becky plucked off the lid and switched down the heat.

"How was Alex today?" The boy had been suspended a week earlier for telling Becky he didn't fucking care about tuning forks.

"Fine."

"Did he give a fuck this time?"

"Don't."

"I was just being—"

"You can't let a sixth grader get away with that. Whether or not you choose to honor the subjective meaning of arbitrary syllables." She said the last five words in the lofty baritone she reserved for imitating him.

"You're right," he said. But he thought: I have found someone who makes me feel tangible and alive, and I feel terrible it isn't you. "Be right back."

"We're ready in ten minutes."

"Okay."

Inside their bedroom, he opened his sock drawer and slipped the purple lotion into his pocket. He hurried to the bathroom, sat on the toilet lid, unscrewed the tube, and smelled it. He thought of Rika's palm on his wrist, how cool her skin had felt as the surprise of contact surged through him. To hang onto her friendship, he'd pretend disinterest more fervently than ever.

He'd only intended to take in her scent briefly, to recall her, alone, before dinner with his wife—but now, with her sweet floral tang filling the bathroom, he could almost feel her breasts graze his bare chest, could imagine how the lotion would smell tempered by perspiration, her cheek pressed against his shoulder. Unfastening his belt, he glanced at his watch. There was time—there had to be time—and he unzipped, checked the lock, and pushed down his khakis. He squeezed a blob of Evening Lavender into his palm and spread it on himself, his thighs contracting at the lotion's chill—and for a blissful succession of minutes, he was surrounded by Rika.

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That evening, while Becky watched *ER*, Dmitri put together a background lecture on Hemingway, opening biographies he hadn't looked at in years. Once she'd done the dishes and gone to bed, he stashed his outline in his backpack and returned the tomes to the shelf.

Eleven-thirty. He made himself a cheese sandwich, crumbly feta on rye, put the kettle on, lit a candle. The kitchen table was the largest workspace in the house, and he cleared off the placemats and assembled his materials on James Bannister, a mix of newspaper clippings and his own notes, scrawled in thick pen on napkins and legal pads. James had a system, he was sure of it, some method to his shifts in rent, though Dmitri hadn't figured it out. So many transactions—it had to be planned. He'd tried to explain this to Meg, in an openhearted moment of fatherly sharing, and she'd laughed at him. How was it possible that she got along better with Becky? Dmitri was more accepting—Becky still said ridiculous things like, “When I was young, *girlfriend* just meant a friend who was a girl!”

Maybe Meg was right to laugh; maybe he was crazy to track James's deals. But every couple of weeks, he shuffled through it all again, waiting for something to dawn on him. The numbers were advantageous enough to seem vaguely suggestive of conspiracy, but nothing concrete. There was nothing illegal about being rich or garnering power.

The kettle screamed and he hastened to lift it from the burner. Becky slept heavily, but the few times she'd roused to see him awake this late, he'd received lectures about overwork. Once, she'd presented him with a book called *Craving Slumber: Why Men Need More Sleep*. He scooped green jasmine from the jar on the counter, and poured hot water through the mesh filter. There were a thousand ways to brew tea, and this was the best. Herbal flecks sneaked through the wire and whirled to the surface.

Sipping, he closed his eyes. The flame shone faintly through his eyelids. Zen masters sometimes instructed pupils to burn their religious texts—even Siddhartha's writings. It was supposed to illustrate that words were no substitute for experience, that even the wisest books could stand in the way of experiential understanding. He was glad he'd never been asked. Books were sacred—even in high school, he'd worshipped Bradbury. He'd been at Moe's Books in Berkeley when the police tear-gassed Telegraph. They'd fled to the basement, pressed against each other like animals, taken in the protective scent of ancient pages, the sweat of strangers.

What would his Zen master say about Rika, about fidelity, wives? Wasn't the connection between self and other a construct? Wasn't marriage an earthly paradigm? He

swallowed a gulp of tea. Pathetic—he'd become a self-made expert on the elasticity of the Buddhist faith.

Spreading his map of Ellis on the table, he thought of Ian Pinter, of his offers to help if Albert and Dmitri ever managed to start a political movement. If only it was that simple; get volunteers, begin an anti-Bannister campaign. Albert was right. Most people were there for the location—for the *idea* of Ellis, not Ellis itself. You asked them about the commute, they told you in seconds how close their house was to the freeway. You pointed out the traffic, they told you the square footage of their house. Some things, people didn't want to know.

He'd only used the map as a reference before, but now he descended on it, frustrated, drawing circles, marking purchases, denoting real estate adjustments with names and dates. Not only would James win the election, but Greenlake would surge on. Nothing could stop it. Dmitri was no activist. He was a recorder, an interpreter, a witness to history.

He was growing tired, and downed the remainder of his tea, though it was tepid, for the little caffeine it offered. The map had amassed dates, numbers, names. He put his pencil down and crossed his arms, drained.

Suddenly, he saw the pattern. Since his first purchase of Greenlake land, James had bought every commercial holding west of Ellis Boulevard and east of Vernalis Road that he hadn't owned already. In the downtown pocket he'd raised the rent, while keeping it constant or lowering it in other parts of Ellis.

Dmitri stared at the map. Slowly, systematically, James Bannister was driving out downtown businesses. And it was imperceptible unless someone physically marked it out.

All at once, the election made sense. As a developer, James could buy land, sell land, and collect rent. But on City Council, he'd have rezoning clout. Only a landowner could propose using land for something it hadn't been zoned for. The City Council and Planning Commission were required to hold public hearings, then vote. The City Manager chaired the Planning Commission; the City Council could hire and fire the City Manager. James had been sapping money from downtown for years. If he won the election, he'd finish Greenlake, then once downtown was sufficiently crippled, he'd bulldoze it and peddle it to a housing developer—who'd gobble land in such a central location for a ridiculous sum. The election would open all the channels he needed.

In the push of the most recent decade, Silicon Valley had swollen like a volcano, tumbling its precarious hangers-on eastward. Their young children, relative wealth, and programming skills flooded the Valley's fields like a mislaid Nile. They congratulated themselves on having escaped to a windy, orchard-filled Eden. Everyone fancied himself a pioneer. But they wanted the sheen and gleam of progress, the Olive Garden and Chevy's and Wal-Mart they'd left behind in Pleasanton, every bit as much as they wanted the agricultural bastion they thought they'd discovered. They lacked a sense of history, considered it community investment to be a regular at Ellis's oldest Starbucks. To them, the fact that James Bannister's cowboy boots were as immaculate as his Lincoln Navigator didn't mean he was posturing; it meant he was striking a balance between tradition and progress.

Finally, at last, Dmitri would do something. James was a hero, yes. But only to some of them. There had to be hundreds who didn't think so—the downtown business association, for starters. Parents of some of his students, field laborers, people laid off from factory jobs. Not just the poorer ones, either. Plenty of old-time Ellisonians were doctors, lawyers—they'd never had anything to unite them. There was a chance. This was proof. The patterns were obvious. Tomorrow, he'd drop by the Pint Club.

Warm vanilla mint wafted around him and shortly after one-thirty, Dmitri fell asleep, his face pressed dreamily against his notes.

Chapter Seven

Quitting school in eighth grade had sharpened Theo's mind. He picked things up. He knew, for instance, that his skin and his family had made him a certain way, and that he'd be a dumbass to work against it. Already, he'd started thinking through his defense. JB had once beaten a murder rap by pleading self-defense and crying on the stand. Later, he told Theo his secret was a dab of Vicks Vap-O-Rub under each eye. Worked better than onions to get the tears flowing. Theo would use the tears and the self-defense both. JB's self-defense had been physical; Theo's would be mental. Some law said not to call people "nigger," and this was what Theo had defended himself against.

The visiting room was too small, and Theo started to get anxious as he looked at his hands. They seemed big, suddenly, and hard to control. Like they had a brain of their own.

The intercom crackled. "Sending in your visitor," the guard said.

Theo buttoned his collar all the way up and put his comb in his hair because he knew Russ hated it—or at least never let him wear it that way in court. JB said never to trust lawyers, and Theo hadn't—until Russ was assigned to him on an assault charge. He trusted Russ chiefly because Russ seemed to like him—and any man with a degree who genuinely liked him was a man Theo wanted next to him in trial. The door opened.

"Read the paper recently?"

The abrupt relief of seeing his attorney made Theo smile. "'Sup Russ."

"You talked to the cops."

Theo crossed his arms, amused. "You don't trust me?"

"I said not to talk."

Theo scratched his chin. With the dull razors they gave out at County, you might as well shave your face with a slice of bread. He tapped the side of his head. "Got it worked out."

Russ hoisted his briefcase to the table.

"They make you leave your gun?" Theo asked.

Russ nodded. He withdrew a pen, a notepad, and a waxed paper bag.

"Why you pack, anyway?"

"Case I meet you in the park some night." He slid the bag across the table, and Theo opened it.

"The man is a god." He took out a hot donut and sunk his teeth into it. "Got all the DA's shit?"

"Just what you saw at your arraignment."

"Been two fucking weeks," Theo said with his mouth full.

"The swift hand of justice. They set your hearing for two weeks from this Monday."

"Guess you don't know about our defense." He wiggled his eyebrows meaningfully and a few flecks of dough fell from his mouth. The frosting was so sweet that it made him a little sick, but he took another bite.

"You didn't sign anything, did you?"

Theo shrugged.

"You gave a *statement*?"

"Look—look, here's what happened. I let *them* do the talking."

"The cops who arrested you?"

"No, different ones." His tongue seemed thick, and it was difficult to get the words out. With Russ here, he saw, for the first time, how everything might not work out exactly like JB's case. "It's, like—illegal to call someone 'nigger,' right?"

"Why?"

"Just—is it?"

"No."

Theo closed his eyes. "Fuck. They told me it was." He didn't know whether this mattered, but the fact they'd lied made him wish he'd run his idea by his lawyer first.

For over an hour, Russ asked him a thousand questions. Theo wished he had some milk, at least, or a soda. He tried to gauge how fucked he was by watching Russ's face when he gave his answers. "You writing a fucking book?" he asked at last.

Russ looked up from his legal pad. "I'm making a list of motions I plan to file on your behalf." He tapped the table. "You're saying they talked to you for six or seven hours?"

"At least."

"Did you ever ask if you could call me?"

"I don't remember," Theo said. He knew he hadn't, but it sounded dumb to admit it.

"They just kept on talking like I wasn't there. Said to shut up and listen. The big one—"

"Clifton?"

“Yeah. He starts talking ‘bout the electric chair, looking right at me like this.” Theo scooted his chair forward, bugging his eyes out to demonstrate. “He’s like, ‘Your *liver* fries, man, you know that? You could *eat* a man after he’s been in the chair.’”

“That’s when you started talking?”

“Yeah. I had enough of their shit.”

“I don’t understand how you can keep thinking you can talk to cops after everything JB went through. Last time—”

“Fucking leave my brother out of this, all right?” Just because Russ was his lawyer didn’t mean he could say whatever he wanted.

Russ held up a palm. “I apologize.”

“It’s okay.” Theo exhaled, crossing his arms. “Look, they do any DNA tests?”

“I don’t know.”

Theo nodded. He’d changed his clothes before he was arrested, at least. He was through doing things sloppy. He’d been a stupid shit to go back to the park and try to find the guy’s ID after he’d dumped him, that was for sure. They’d caught him with the license in his hand, his pockets stuffed with cash. Five fucking minutes too late. At least he’d been smart enough to kick dirt all over the scene first.

“You told the cops what you told me?”

“I left out the part about thinking I’d rob the guy.”

“You said the victim had a car. What happened to it?”

“I called a friend to pick it up.” Except now he’d never get his cut.

“You didn’t touch it?”

“Nope.”

“Smart.” Russ wrote something down. “Cops haven’t found it.”

“Probably in Arkansas or something by now.”

“You’re positive the victim was white?”

“Yeah. Crazy fucker. Klan member or some shit.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He called me a nigger, didn’t he?” Some things, white people couldn’t get. JB had always said to pick a black lawyer if you had a choice, but the way Theo figured, white was better since white people made up half the jury. Anyway, if he got a black lawyer, he might end up with someone like himself, who white people never believed.

Russ scanned his notes. "You said before that when he called you that, you 'popped' him. What did you mean?"

"Just went off on him. Kicking and everything. Hit him with my gun."

"The one the cops took off you?"

Theo nodded. "I cleaned it good, though, before I went back." Half a cup of bleach, JB's recipe.

"How long did you hit him for?"

Theo cracked his knuckles, feeling the anger. "It went kind of black." He'd been furious. He remembered wanting to wipe the sick grin off that fucker's face for good. "I said he pushed me first, right?"

Russ nodded. "Did he fight back?"

"He tried. He was crazy, screaming and trying to beat on me. I swear to God it was self defense."

"Did you have any marks on you?"

"No."

"Did the police take pictures?"

Aha—fuck, that was smart. "Nope. I guess I might have had some cuts and bruises." This was more like it.

"For what it's worth, I believe you," Russ said, shutting the notepad. "I need to get to the DA's office before it closes to grab your file."

"I'm fucked, aren't I?"

"We'll get you out of this."

It was something Russ always said, but Theo liked hearing it anyway. "That's why I pay you the big bucks. Hey—want to know what I said when I finished?"

"All right."

"I said, *fuck*, this man's gonna need some Advil!"

His attorney smiled weakly, laying a hand on Theo's shoulder.

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Before even opening the file, Russ knew he'd end up telling Theo to plead. If they went for self-defense, Theo would have to testify. Even if the confession was coerced, the

DA would squeeze it in on impeachment. The best Russ could do was call some city shrink and have him tell the jury how easy it was for cops to make people lie. And smoke-and-mirror psychology played poorly with San Joaquin County jurors.

The missing body would add to reasonable doubt, but was common enough that it wouldn't help much. Stockton brimmed with optimal places to hide a cadaver. And worst of all, the deceased was white. A victim's race was the best death sentence prophet. The good news was that lifting DNA from a bunch of dirt and grass on a warm night was next to impossible, though—shit—they'd test Theo's clothes. Had he changed first? Russ wished he'd thought to ask. Worst case scenario, they could stipulate that an altercation occurred, just not to who'd attacked whom.

Tucking the file under his arm, Russ walked to Nico's, inhaling as he crossed the street. Vomit, perfume, stale beer dried on the pavement. It was morbid, the way he liked how this place smelled. He'd done a painting a few years back called "City Contours." Using the watery greys and browns of Stockton's streets, he'd tried capturing the odors, the sultry possibilities they suggested to him at the start of each day. It had been one of his worst paintings. Less familiar subject matter came off better. Painting the Valley was like trying to paint his own thoughts.

One of the bars on the window by his table was partly sawed through from outside, and he wondered why anyone would want to break into Nico's. He thought of the fence by Jackson's school, the chill of rusted metal. One day he'd take his son someplace idyllic. Huntington Beach, San Diego, Malibu.

The day Muriel blurted out that she was pregnant, they'd been standing in the meat aisle. For a full minute, Russ couldn't tell whether she was serious. He watched her shiver, studying a pack of frozen ham hocks. An icy pink frosting of fat outlined the meat. "I'm sure," she'd said.

"I thought you were taking care of that."

She'd stiffened, defensive. "Well, Russell. It turns out—" She cleared her throat, set down the ham hocks, and shoved her hands in her skirt pockets. "If you're on antibiotics it stops working."

Russ's first thought was that they should sue the pharmacist, but he'd known better than to say it. "God—I'm sorry," he'd told her instead. "Stay over tonight. We'll work through your options." It wasn't until years later, talking to Meg, that he'd understood how

cold he'd sounded. *Her* options. In the meat aisle, he'd picked up a rib eye and feigned concentration. White lines of fat and sinew stretched through the muscle. Suddenly Muriel had seemed a stranger he'd met in the supermarket, not the woman he'd been dating for four months. "Have you called a clinic?"

"That's where I got the checkup."

He was silent.

"An *abortion* clinic?"

They weren't even living together. Was he supposed to be happy?

"I didn't fucking ask you to marry me, Russell."

"Could we get out of the meat aisle?"

"Where do you want to go?" Her voice was hard. "Produce? Dairy?"

"Look—I'm not the one who screwed up my meds."

He regretted it instantly. Muriel hated being blamed, and in that second he'd rendered everything unsalvageable. His first stupid fucking reaction.

They'd spoken again, later, and he avoided bringing up marriage, or joint custody. If it had been up to Russ, he would have gotten an abortion. Muriel wouldn't budge. His first DUI came two weeks after the meat aisle. The second was three weeks later.

He swigged a gulp of Nico's house blend and cracked his knuckles. Routines were the key. This coffee shop, this case file, the knowledge that the following afternoon he'd be at C. Wright Mills Elementary sketching his son. He was always vacillating between two visions of himself. In one, he was Jackson's guardian angel—in the other, a deadbeat dad, no better than his clients who'd abandoned their kids for dope or gambling.

Page one was a cover sheet, along with the police report—as usual, the interrogation hadn't been taped. Did the Supreme Court honestly believe anyone below the circuits read its errata? Unsurprisingly, Officer Clifton didn't mention the "nigger" provocation. And DNA? Aha—he scanned the report. He'd been right. Inconclusive samples, nothing usable from the park or the gun, too much contamination even for PCR. Theo would be happy. Who was the DA? He checked the file—Jesus. Bill Brandt. He fingered the edge of the report. Good. Fucking fine. He was overdue for a shot at Brandt. Pulling out the stops, for Theo and for himself, sounded like exactly what he needed. He'd give Theo a Cochran-style defense, set his other cases on the back burner, and show Brandt what it felt like to be crucified in court.

As he started to shut the folder, his hand grazed a square of paper taped to the inside. A grainy printout of a grinning man in a beret, which read underneath, “www.berkeleyrep.org/staff/bios/ramspott.htm.” The face was oval, the shoulders broad but bony. Russ started to close the file, then sharply sucked in his breath—because it *couldn’t* be. He opened to the picture again, pulled off the tape, and held the printout a few inches from his face. The skin was unmarred, the baldness concealed beneath the beret—but he knew the eyes, and mouth, the lips pulled in at the corners, almost square-shaped. Vaguely reminiscent of Klee’s “Head of a Man,” if such a thing was possible in a real person.

“Holy fuck,” he whispered. It was impossible. He extended the picture to arm’s length. No—no way. It wasn’t even feasible. He flipped back to the police report. The attack was placed at eleven on Tuesday. Russ had found the other man—shit, *Ian*, same first name—when? Thursday evening. And he said he’d been mugged Tuesday night.

“God damn,” he said out loud. His first impulse was to call the DA—but no—this was Brandt. It was too beautiful. Why call now? No sane prosecutor would believe a lawyer stumbled coincidentally on a victim in his own case. He’d wait. Brandt would charge murder, and Russ would let him take it a little further before pulling out his ace—that Brandt had been murderously hasty: voila, the victim was alive. He needed rock-solid proof before he took this in front of a judge. Lawyers couldn’t call themselves to testify, and even if Theo got a different one, Russ’s story was too far-fetched to stand alone. Even if his DNA was all over Russ’s apartment, and it probably was, there was no way to prove when it had gotten there.

Russ’s mind clicked through the past two weeks. It hit him that the DNA in the park could have worked to their advantage. “No—he’s *alive*,” Russ said quietly. Forget DNA—all he had to do was track Ian down and explain the misunderstanding—assuming it was the same guy, and he was sure it was. Ian was probably back in Berkeley, oblivious to the fact that a man had confessed to killing him.

. . . .

The next day, Russ called the Berkeley Repertory Theatre for Ian’s address, a feat exacerbated by the fact that apparently no one got to work there until eleven. Ian had been fired in September, they said. No one knew what he was doing now. His number was listed,

and Russ thought about calling. The situation was straightforward enough, and Ian would be thrilled to hear from him, considering Russ had basically saved his life. Wonderful, crazy fucking coincidence. But Russ had a personal rule about seeing witnesses face to face the first time he talked with them, and besides, his afternoon calendar was clear and this was worth it.

Each apartment in Ian's complex was misaligned with those around it. Blocks of stucco balanced against each other as if they'd been stacked by a child, shoved into the side of a hill like an unworkable brainteaser. Russ rang the doorbell, but there was no answer. He went downstairs to the landlord's office and knocked three times before a woman emerged. She hadn't seen Ian since a few days before he died, she said.

"Died?"

"I'm—oh, I'm sorry. You didn't hear. Were you a friend?"

"No, I'm—part of the—investigation."

She stared at him. You guys keep coming through."

So he hadn't come back. Russ pointed at his hair. "I'm undercover. We're separate from the regular police department."

"Oh."

"Did you know Mr. Ramspott well?" he asked, following her back up the stairs.

She shrugged. "I guess."

"Did you interact socially?"

She pushed her key into the apartment lock, shoving her bulky hip against the door. "It sticks."

"I'm looking for contacts. Friends he might have wanted to get in touch with. Did he have a girlfriend?"

"Definitely not. Look, I must have given three statements already. You're like the cops when my husband died."

"I'm really sorry, Ma'am—just gathering evidence for the trial."

She stared coldly at him. "I read in the paper that a man confessed. Why would they have a trial?"

"Well, it depends," Russ said, stepping past her into the apartment. "The legalities are complicated." What if Ian *had* died? What if he hadn't made it to a doctor and had suffered a punctured lung or internal hemorrhaging? Could Russ argue that Ian's failure to

seek medical treatment had proximately caused his death? Was it *his* fault for not calling 911?

As usual, the Stockton police had done a shoddy cordoning job. Russ searched the desk drawers, empty, and crossed into the bedroom. Ian was a man who didn't know how to make his money last, Russ saw. The closet held only a few shirts, the same kind he'd been wearing when Russ had found him. Typewriter, rolling papers, unpaid bills, ticket stubs from gala openings. Under the bed, a book called *I Am a Brick, You are a Tree* by B.F. Schraeder, and three copies of *Bear Aficionado Monthly*, which Russ opened, then shut quickly. Above the bed (hypoallergenic faux-down comforter, no sheets or blankets), the wall was filled with programs and playbills listing Ian Ramspott III as chorus or stage crew. On the opposite side, a bookshelf had been fashioned from bricks and wooden planks. One board was stenciled, "Travel." Two said "Plays," and the bottom shelf, empty except for a thick, army-green file, read "Pinter."

Russ hoisted it onto the bed. He could hear the landlady rummaging in the refrigerator. *Ellis*, he remembered suddenly. When he'd told Ian about nearby towns, Ellis had interested him most. Russ could stop by on his way back.

The file contained Xeroxed sheets, pages handwritten in cramped, toothy scrawl, neon post-it notes. He'd nail Brandt for not giving him a copy of any of this. "Does discovery still apply to the prosecution?" he'd ask the judge. The first page was all about some playwright, Harold Pinter, whom Russ had never heard of. Was Ian related to the guy? He turned another page, then another. Interviews, biographical notes—all about some random old guy from Britain. Nothing on Ian—maybe he was just obsessed with the guy and using his name. There had to be a connection, though. An old boyfriend, maybe? He could have had a lover's quarrel with this Harold character, and run out of the house. Unlikely, but just in case, Russ shoved the file under his shirt, beneath his waistband. He thanked Ian's landlady and headed for his car.

Coasting across the Altamont Pass, Russ found himself wondering who would go through his apartment if he died. Meg, probably—she'd see his sketches of Jackson and fume, sad and furious. Half-drafted motions, Swanson dinners, oil paints and canvasses cracked from disuse, his parents' death certificates. Nothing about Muriel. No remnants of his big recovery. No proof he was Jackson's father.

Russ hadn't been back to Ellis since his father died. Leaving this quicksand-pit town

had been his start to a picaresque existence, he'd once thought. Anywhere else, he might have developed his talent, gotten into UCSB or the San Francisco Art Academy. Growing up, he'd felt an insatiable anger at Ellis that hadn't waned with time. The diminutive shit that passed for culture was mortifying: Dry Bean Festival in August, Homecoming in October, Junior Miss in May—a beauty pageant cloaked as a scholarship contest. Prom queens were recognized at Safeway and Pizza Hut for decades.

Russ turned on the Defense Depot exit and let the acid wash through his veins.

Everything had changed, which was nothing new. A sports complex had sprung up a few miles down Eleventh, with sunken baseball diamonds that probably flooded when it rained. Further down, the city tried to mime the charm of Dublin or Danville. A sign above a shallow fountain read, "Welcome to ELLIS" in iron letters against a mosaic of turquoise and purple squares. Ugly. The thing gleamed like a Day-Glo T-shirt. Russ turned up the radio, but it was difficult to pick up stations from Sacramento or San Francisco, so he settled for Howard Stern on a.m.

A friend from his middle school basketball team, Brian Church, had once lived on Vernalis Road. His house was gone, along with the field that had stretched behind it. It was all pristine streets now, sidewalks that shone. That was the façade, anyway. In truth, the people in these houses were no better off than anyone else, families who sold their shitty duplexes for half a million in San Jose and pocketed the difference.

Whenever crime rose, which was often, the newcomers blamed the white and Hispanic families in the old houses, and the longtime residents blamed the black and white and Asian and Middle Eastern families in the new houses. There was always a feeling that the old was corrupting the new, and that the new was corrupting the old. Incessant, mutually corruptive change was as much a part of Ellis as Heinz and the glass factory, the alfalfa fields, the tar pits, the Duck and the Pint Club, the Opera House Restaurant that had burned down twice, the restlessness, the newness, the sense that everything, all the time, was shifting for the worse. Already, Russ wished he hadn't come back. He'd look for Ian and get the hell out.

Paradise Apartments still stood across from Barker Market, braised in sun and wind, close enough that Russ's parents had made him walk to Madison, but far enough that it had been a pain in the ass. A Mexican flag flew from the balcony of their old apartment, and below it, a giant banner read, *Ya ni en la paz de los sepulcros creo*. A few months after

they'd started dating, he and Muriel had driven to San Francisco for a Day of the Dead celebration, and afterward, he'd memorized some of the sayings to impress her. This one meant, *I don't even believe in the peace of the tombs anymore.*

Jackson's walk, he guessed, was about the same distance as his own had once been. He'd have never let his son walk to school in Stockton. Hell, he'd have taken him from the Valley altogether. Valley children grew up used to the idea of working for other people. Their parents were cannery workers, machinists, low-level management, while their bosses lived in San Mateo and sent their kids to private school. They spent summers on the coast; Valley kids camped for a weekend at Turlock Lake. He'd never leave the Valley without Jackson.

Stockton had suggested the possibility of escape; it had a state and private college, Lebanese food, an orchestra. He'd deluded himself for a while, moving there. But somewhere along the line, he'd realized he'd never own a bungalow in Santa Barbara or a beach house in Newport. Such possibilities were closed to Valley kids. From the beginning, even the mistakes Russ made were the small-town kind. Bankruptcy or cocaine addiction would have suggested a propensity for metropolitan life, hinted at misdirected potential. Instead, predictably, he'd fucked up like the Ellisonian he wished he wasn't—drinking too much and getting a girl pregnant.

The Mad Russian had been right. Russ's junior and senior year at Madison, Harris had tacked a quote above his classroom door: "He who cannot draw upon ten thousand years of history is living hand to mouth." Maybe despite all the time Harris had spent helping him, he'd known from the start that Russ wasn't going far. A JD should have changed this. It had seemed like an ticket into some new, impenetrable class. But being a lawyer hadn't taught Russ how to use the proper fork at fancy conventions, or how to dress like a Los Angeles litigator. It had just divulged how far these things were from his own raw experience.

Russ parked on Ninth. Variety Bargain Store, where his parents had bought his birthday presents when he was a kid, still had its faded green veranda. The Duck had been renamed again, the apartments above the Grand Theatre were boarded up, and the Mexican market Billy Juarez's father owned had been painted yellow, with luminescent pictures of fruits, vegetables, and uncooked meat.

He opened the door and took Ian's picture from his jacket pocket. He'd start at the liquor stores, then expand to the restaurants, the bars, and the supermarkets. If Ian Ramspott

was in Ellis, somebody on Central Street had to have seen him in the last few days.

Chapter Eight

Ellis Boulevard was clotted with cars, and although the traffic had annoyed her at first, Rika was starting to find a dependability in the commuters' homecoming. Ellis was small, but its thin long arms stretched across the valley, across Sacramento and the Bay and the Altamont like a brittle star, arms radiating out each morning and drawing in each night, protective of its own fragile body.

She was twenty minutes early meeting Ruby at Lizzie's, so she withdrew her petri dish from her pocket and knelt on the sidewalk. Using tweezers, she picked up a few grains of dirt and set them on the agar. Cultivating run-of-the-mill bacterium was comforting. It reminded her that places weren't as fundamentally dissimilar as people made them out to be. *Bacillus*, *micrococcus*, *listeria monocytogenes*—these were everywhere. The heartening stratum of the single-cell world.

She thought of what Dmitri had told her about Bannister during lunch, the patterns he'd marked on the map. He'd driven her by Greenlake on the way back from one of their espresso-and-tea excursions, and its sheer size had overwhelmed her. San Diego had shopping centers that large, but it also had hundreds of thousands more residents. She wondered whether Lizzie had seen it.

Strange, this fondness she was developing for Ellis. *Dmitri's* Ellis, complete with shoddy piping and misspelled store window signs, fields that took up miles of land growing crops none of her students could name. Characteristics co-existed in Ellis that would have seemed contradictory elsewhere; it was filthy and quaint, diverse and small-minded. The DMV offered services in twenty languages, but parents banded together to pluck *The Catcher in the Rye* from school library shelves.

They were together than Johnny's mentor program required, she knew. A few times, she'd noticed him looking at her with his lips parted, head tilted, eyes trained contemplatively on her as if he was scared to breathe. Not that she thought he was truly interested—she wasn't as naïve as that—but she suspected she was his occasional daydream about the tabula rasa of fresh intimacy.

It was hard not to be flattered. She liked and admired him and had never dated a man for whom both things were true. He was strangely good-looking, though it had taken a while before she'd known what to look for. The disheveled intellectual bit worked for him.

Even better, he wasn't fazed by her eccentricities. When she'd said she thought of Ellis as a mitochondria (powerhouse, packager, storer of nutrients for the Valley), he'd asked what that was, and when she told him, he'd agreed. No skeptical squinting, no accusation that she was too scientific, one of Todd's favorite criticisms.

She'd never date a married man—would “date” even be the word? In any case, it didn't matter. She wouldn't. And even more firmly, *he* wouldn't, she'd realized after meeting his *Good Housekeeping* model of a wife, with her sweet schoolteacher impatience. It had reminded her that everyone, even Dmitri, craved stability at the core of everything. From the other teachers, she'd learned that he'd been high school valedictorian, and later turned down a Fulbright scholarship and the deanship of an International Baccalaureate school in Switzerland. The Madison faculty was divided; they either admired, resented, or pitied him. “It's the loose conventionality I hate,” a goateed physics teacher from Nevada had told Rika. “He's a poster child for better places. A small-town Einstein who *could* leave but makes a show of not doing it.”

Screwing the top back on the petri dish, Rika glanced at the Pint Club's windows, searching for her reflection. But the angle wasn't right and she could only see the storefronts, assuming a flaxen glow beneath the twin streetlights. When Dmitri mentioned the Pint Club, had it been an invitation?

Ruby had said she might be late, so Rika finally went in, got a doppio, and sat on the couch. The reflection of the hanging lamp shimmered on the surface of her drink, reminding Rika of a lamp she and Todd had owned. She couldn't remember whether it was the one he'd broken, just remembered his fist coming down over a lampshade, the crack of the bulb inside. She tapped the mug and on the surface of her coffee, the lamp swayed, but the image stayed taut, like gelatin.

A starting point was what she lacked. A frame of reference. If only Rick had left the lights on, there would be concrete images in her head to sluice out, images she could replace. But there was nothing definite to begin with. Some days, like today, she believed that eventually she'd be taken back to the beginning of everything, and her life would be explained. Council Bluffs, croup, Todd, Rick, Russia. She would, for instance, learn her birthday.

It wasn't until Spain that she'd hated Todd for leaving her. At the time, she'd just been mad that he wouldn't say why, and that his not saying made it obvious. Violent men were cowards, she'd decided in Barcelona. Before Spain, her hate had centered on Rick.

The bleeding had been off and on, which was why she ended up having to tell Todd at all—it was coming at the wrong times, and heavily. The first day, sitting had hurt; the second, standing had been worse; the third, the pain had gone but the bleeding remained. He'd been boiling noodles when she told him, and the timer had gone off—he always timed his noodles—and he was lifting the pot from the burner when the weight of her words hit him, and he took his hand from the pot handle and brought it to his forehead and whispered, “Jesus, Rika,” and she'd loved him for this, and for ignoring the timer, and she'd been sure, then, that it would turn out all right.

Tapping the side of the cup harder, Rika peered again over the wide porcelain rim. Thick cups. The reflection rocked, but remained in tact. She rose, took a fork from the counter, and returned to her chair. Poised over the cup, she held the fork so that one of its prongs was aimed toward her coffee, then lowered it until the point met the surface. The instant it did, a tremor ruptured the reflection, and the lamp was invisible in the moving liquid, then stilled a second later and the reflection was back. She pulled the tip out and it happened again as the prong broke free, thousands of molecules dancing around each other like refracting light.

At the counter, Lizzie hummed the “X Files” theme. She reminded Rika of the fashionable girls she'd gone to high school with in Iowa. “Fashionable” was what Mae had called them. Privately, Rika had called them other, less complimentary things while trying to crack the lipsticked code that held the secret to her own admission.

Outside, the cobblestone shone under a streetlight, and Rika thought of the sophisticated look it could lend Central if they ever finished. Did Lizzie have any idea that if her landlord had his way, her shop would be transplanted by a cream-colored duplex?

“I'm not a recluse, you know.”

Rika looked up. Ruby was wearing jeans, a silk shirt, and a dark, tailored suit jacket. Her helmet dangled like a hooked salmon from her hand. “No one who saw you on your Yamaha would make that accusation,” Rika said.

Ruby smiled. “I wasn't sure if you asked me here because I'm one of those old women who doesn't get out enough.”

"I have the assisted living brochures in my pocket."

"Funny." Ruby smirked, digging through her wallet for change. "I'm getting some hot chocolate. Need a refill?"

Rika's cup was empty, and she walked with Ruby to the counter. "I'll try green tea," she said.

Ruby paid for both drinks, and they went back to the couch. "Craig and I used to walk downtown sometimes," Ruby said. "Can I smell your tea?"

Rika held it out.

"Seaweed. Possibly rotten. I don't think I could drink green tea." She raised her hot chocolate to her lips. "I like the woodwork here. This used to be a paper store."

"The rent keeps getting raised," Rika said. "Apparently the guy who owns most of downtown is trying to force people out."

"Really? That would be James Bannister?"

She nodded. "A teacher I work with—he knows you—Dmitri Harris. He has a theory."

"Dmitri's wonderful. I haven't seen him in years. Are he and Becky still together?"

Rika coughed a little. "Yeah."

"Good for them. Does Dmitri know James?"

Rika nodded. "They don't get along."

"That doesn't surprise me. Dmitri's against Greenlake, I bet. He's like Craig. They used to talk politics for hours at church dinners. Did Dmitri tell you we used to go to the same church?"

"Holy Cross. Becky still goes there."

"Craig hated James."

"You know Bannister?"

Ruby lifted a hand from her cup and waved it coyly. "Remember I told you I had a high school sweetheart?"

Rika couldn't help smiling. "Wow. I've met him. He showed up here once."

"He was better looking in the fifties, rest assured. The nineteen-fifties, not James's fifties." She grinned. "Those were less stunning. No—I'm one of the only ones in town who knows he wasn't always the well-heeled son-of-a-gun he is now."

"When did you break up?"

Ruby hesitated. Her smile vanished for a moment. “Oh, right after senior year.” She gripped the long grey braid that roped down her back, pull the rubber band off, and skate her fingers through her hair. At home, Ruby kept it in a bun, and the grey settled around her face now to make her look elegantly wild, like an old lioness.

“What made you want to be a lawyer?” Rika asked.

“When I was twenty, I got called for jury duty. It was a bank robbery trial, and I’ve been hooked since.”

“Do you ever get tired of it?”

“Courtrooms are too exciting. A man can go in free and come out a murderer. One of the only places that’s reserved for discovering truth. Cynical as I get, that still manages to inspire me.”

Rika nodded, sipping her tea. It smelled like Dmitri’s kitchen. “Classrooms are like that. I think about truth when I’m teaching. Though I guess when it comes down to it, half of what I’m telling the kids is theory.”

“My whole day is theory,” Ruby said. “It’s frightening, isn’t it, how much power society places in its own hands. How much, at the core of it, the human race trusts itself?”

The reflection of the light shimmered in Rika’s cup. She thought about the Georgia O’Keefe in Dmitri’s entryway, the bland appliances in his kitchen, avocado green. “You were telling me about Craig’s politics,” Rika said. “I interrupted.”

“Oh—well. He just hated James. Craig was on the Planning Commission, and he became convinced James would ruin Ellis. All that supposed vision. Aside from everything James was bringing into town back then—the Safeway shopping center, the car lots by the mall—there was also what we knew about him.”

“What did you know?”

“I shouldn’t tell,” Ruby said mischievously. She pressed her lips together.

“I’m curious.”

Leaning to prop her back against the couch cushions, Ruby reached back and twisted her hair into a lopsided bun. “I don’t suppose it matters,” she said, tapping her fingernails on her coffee cup handle. “With Greenlake going up and that election practically won.”

“Come on.”

“Nineteen forty-two,” Ruby began, obviously glad to have an audience. “I was ten and didn’t know James yet. His father was fire chief at the old station downtown. This

building, and the Duck, and the Pint Club, were all owned by an old farming family. You know anything about dry farming?"

Rika shook her head.

"It's cheap. Ellis used to be mostly dry-farming. Field peas, sugar beets, alfalfa—the Murakamis grew alfalfa."

"Murakami?" It was the same name Dmitri had mentioned, she was sure.

Ruby nodded. "Japanese. They'd been in Ellis three generations, before the war. How much have you read about the internment camps?"

"The *Murakamis*—"

"San Joaquin Valley's not like the bay area, dedicating plaques and erecting memorials to all history's sins and peccadilloes. The Valley's memory is more reluctant."

Rika tried to align the years in her mind. "The Murakamis were relocated?"

"Only the father survived. See, part of this I remember, part I pieced together from my dad. The FBI had already asked the city police to keep an eye on its Japanese. When James's father called with an anonymous tip, that was all it took."

"What happened to them?" Rika asked, leaning forward. Ruby had to know the rest of the story already.

"While the businesses were abandoned, James's father crashed in and started running everything like it belonged to him. He posted signs in the window. *No Japs*—I remember the signs. All people knew was that the Murakamis were taken."

"James told you about this?"

She nodded. In high school. His father told him—picture *that* Tollhouse moment. James and I were—very close, back then." She squinted into her hot chocolate. "Back then, they didn't look like crooks, just opportunists."

"How many people know?"

"To remember it, they'd have to be eighty or ninety."

Rika ran her finger around the cup. Murakami had returned to claim his business, and the tanned Viagra cowboy had turned him away. This would ruin him. "Murakami came back."

"No, the next year, the Chamber of Commerce voted not to let any Japanese return to Ellis until the war was over. I don't know where they went."

"The father came back. He tried."

Ruby raised her head. "What do you mean?"

"Wight or nine years ago." She explained what Dmitri had told her, and Ruby listened, her hands cupped over her knees. For an instant, Rika saw the lines that would sink into her face in twenty years. Hunched and willowy, with strong spindly limbs. She explained Dmitri's map, his theory about the redistricting. It all made sense. Rika felt full with the mystery of the secret, the dark complexity of it.

"If it all came out, it could hurt his campaign, that's for sure. I don't know about Greenlake." Ruby frowned. "No way to prove any of it."

"There's you."

"No, no. I'm through with James. Count me out."

"There have to be records."

"I don't know."

"People would be outraged." When they got back, she'd call Dmitri.

Ruby cleared her throat thoughtfully. "It might just look like a smear. James 'Helps Ellis Reach Its Dreams,' as I'm sure you've heard."

"Dmitri's already been kicking around the idea of a public campaign. Coupled with his map, this could be really strong—do you mind if I tell him?"

Ruby shook her head. "Just keep me out of it. Don't get too optimistic. The Bannisters are popular. His father's poker money practically built the hospital."

"People would stage protests—"

"Protests?" The corners of Ruby's mouth turned up a little. "Oh dear. As much as I admire that, I fear you may have the wrong city in mind."

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Back in her room, at her desk, trying to grade lab reports, Rika kept thinking of Dmitri. Every time she looked up, she was staring straight at her train picture, and got distracted and had to start reading the report over again. It was eight already, and Friday night. Probably he was watching a movie with Becky. The Murakami news could wait. Then again, wouldn't he want to know? He might want the weekend to think about it. She should tell him in person. What if she called and Becky answered? Rika looked at Ruby's

empty fish tank and thought of getting another pet. A tree frog, maybe. *Hydra versicolor*. She went back to the lab reports.

Who cared if Becky answered? She'd invite Becky, too. If you were attracted to a man, you didn't invite his wife. That was what she'd do: call Dmitri, ask if he wanted to meet for a drink, and invite Becky along. She'd grade three more reports, then call.

Her preference, albeit slight, was that Becky wouldn't come. As she admitted this to herself, she felt bad, because it suggested she was interested—though she wasn't. She'd call. She'd interrupt their movie. Becky would hit "pause," Dmitri would rise from the couch, moving his wife's legs gently from their resting place in his lap, and Rika would tell him everything on the phone. Then it would be done, and she'd see him on Monday. She dialed his number. Dmitri answered, and her throat tightened.

"Dmitri—this is Rika. I was—is this a bad time?"

"No, I was reading."

Reading—what she should be doing—bettering herself intellectually rather than getting worked up over moot non-attractions. "I was grading."

"What discipline. How'd your lab reports turn out?"

He'd remembered. "Not bad, so far," she said, though she'd only graded one. "They seem to be catching on."

"Good."

"So I learned something about James Bannister."

"What?"

"Top-secret. If you're not busy I was thinking of taking you up on your offer to check out the Pint Club. We could have a quick drink, and I could tell you about it—Becky could come, too."

He said nothing.

Rika was mortified. She'd made him feel obligated.

"I'm at a good stopping point," he said. How's twenty minutes? I'll pick you up."

"Great," Rika said. "Twenty minutes is perfect."

After they hung up, she went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth. Though she rarely wore eye make-up, she'd put on eyeliner and mascara that morning, and it had darkened under her eyes. Dabbing astringent on a section of toilet paper, she rubbed off the grey, leaving pink blotches she dabbed with concealer. Would he bring Becky? The small

amount of foundation Rika had applied that morning had worn off, and a red circle blemished her cheek. That pimples ceased at the close of adolescence was one of the great American myths. She touched her finger to the concealer, looked at it, then washed it off. This wasn't a date—who cared? She coated her lips with Chapstick, deliberately ignoring her one tube of lipstick, Maybelline Pink Winter Frost.

The shirt she was wearing was no good, though. She needed something clean. Back in her bedroom, she undid the top button, and pulled it off over her head. She was wearing an ugly light bra (yellow?), and remembered how carefully she'd chosen her bras in college, how even meeting an attractive professor for lunch had prompted her to something flowered, or dark lace, partly sheer. It affected her psychologically. This bra made her skin look jaundiced, though, and she didn't care. So much the better.

She slipped on an oxford (lavender, according to the label) that buttoned down the front, like most of her shirts. Tight enough to be stylish, loose enough to show she hadn't chosen it carefully. She went out to the driveway and waited. Seeing him with Becky would help. Little exchanges of affection between them, inside jokes. She'd realize how perfect they were for each other, and her petty ruminations would end.

As his truck pulled up, the porch light glanced off the windshield and she couldn't see inside. Pulling open the passenger door, it was just Dmitri, and pleasure shot through her—she'd be alone with him for a full hour or two. He'd washed his hair, apparently; it was wet and spots had dripped onto his collar. The line of his jaw thrilled her, the cut of his glasses against his profile. If they were going to remain friends, she'd need to get over this, but maybe she could enjoy it, just for the night. "No Becky?" she asked, buckling her seatbelt as he pulled from the driveway.

"She's at a women's ministry retreat."

Rika forced her mind to Becky—the kind of woman who worked hard to maintain her beauty, which probably made Dmitri love her more. "Too bad," she said. "Where at?"

"Somewhere on the coast. She'll be back tomorrow."

She nodded. Just being with him felt a kind of triumph. She wanted to stay out as long as she could, didn't want to think of going back to Ruby's house to brew tea alone in the small dark kitchen, as she had every Friday since she'd moved in.

The Pint Club was three-quarters full when they entered, and Rika immediately noticed she was the only woman, realized this was a bar where men came with their friends,

and that that was why Dmitri had taken her here; she was a buddy. The thought made her happy. It seemed a good, safe place to be.

Dmitri ordered a Guinness and Rika ordered red vermouth, which she hadn't been planning on and rarely liked, but it seemed right for the occasion. Most of the men were seated in threes or fours at the tables, and in the back, a pair of Hispanic men played checkers, arguing in Spanish. Dmitri introduced her to the bartender, who was not Albert, the owner he'd mentioned, but someone named Ian, who looked like he'd been in a knife fight. He had a tattoo on his arm, pinter, which she assumed had something to do with being a career bartender. "Ian's in on everything with Greenlake," Dmitri explained. "I brought the map in here a few days ago—the one I showed you."

"Albert was devastated." Ian had a softer voice than she'd expected from someone so rough-looking.

Dmitri cringed. "I didn't want to tell him."

"I'm glad you did. We need to figure out where to go from here. Excuse me a sec." He went to help somebody at the other end of the bar.

"Do you mind if Ian joins us?" Dmitri asked.

Of course she minded. "Not at all."

"So what's up?"

She swallowed a gulp of vermouth. Pleasantly cinnamony, but it had a medicinal aftertaste. The chemical chill rushed down her throat and into her stomach. Had he changed and showered for *her*? "I was talking to Ruby today. She's known Bannister a long time."

Dmitri nodded, and Ian came back from helping his customer.

"It has to do with that old man you told me about, Murakami." She leaned forward on the stool and placed a palm on each of her knees. The full weight of the secret was on her, and she felt a pleasure in being at the center of things. For this small moment, she was crucial to Ellis. "Murakami used to own businesses here. He wasn't lying. He owned this place, Lizzie's building, and a couple others. I don't know if there are official city records of this—"

Dmitri shook his head. "City Hall burned down in fifty-eight."

Old jazz began filtering from a speaker near the television set, and the set was muted and playing a Midol commercial, which struck her as funny, this commercial in the middle of all these men that applied only to her, and she laughed. Dmitri grinned, reciprocating,

though he was facing away from the television and couldn't have known what she was laughing at.

"During World War Two, Murakami was relocated to an internment camp in Stockton."

Dmitri opened his mouth slightly, took off his glasses, and bit his lip. "Shit," he said. "Are you sure? I had no idea anyone from Ellis was taken."

"They had camps in Stockton?" Ian asked, pouring himself a bourbon. "I thought they were all in the desert."

She watched Dmitri sip his Guinness. A thin line of foam stayed on his lip and she wondered what it would taste like, that mix of beer and Dmitri's lip, and how it would feel, soft and cold. "He was taken there," she said, savoring it, "because James Bannister's father called in a tip. Once Murakami was out, he took over his buildings."

Dmitri's fingers were white from his grip on the glass. Ian took it gently from him, refilled it, and added more vermouth to Rika's, though it was only half empty. "This," Ian said. "Is fucking tremendous."

"So James was just a kid, then" Dmitri said. "But that doesn't matter. He knew what his family had done, he kept it hidden. If this came out..." He shook his head. "Ruby told you all this? Why didn't she say anything?"

Rika took the last sip of her vermouth, feeling a light buzz. "She never knew Murakami tried to come *back*. Do you think he's still alive?"

"He died a month after coming to the *Herald* office."

"Bannister will lose," Ian said, his voice cracking excitedly, as if he'd been holding it in. "Downtown won't be redistricted. It's perfect—"

"There's still Greenlake," Dmitri said. "But you're right. The election would be a heck of a start. It would look like he's driving downtown out to cover up."

The checker players called to Ian, raising their glasses, and as he went over to them, Rika noticed that the back wall looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in months. It was shiny in some places and brown in others, covered in spilled drinks and splattered grease.

"When Murakami came back, James could have done it right—welcomed him into the community, all progress and forgiveness," Dmitri said. "But he'd have to admit having kept it secret. Or claimed he'd never known, which means saying he believed a stranger over his father's integrity."

She looked at Dmitri's hands. Todd's had been long and lean, with nails he forgot to cut. Dmitri's were burly, with giant lunulas. She'd never seen him bite his nails, but he must—they were uneven, the distal edges barely showing. She felt a pang of guilt: had she used Murakami as an excuse to see him? No—she'd invited Becky, after all. "What does Becky think of Greenlake?" she asked.

Dmitri leaned back on the stool, picked up his glass, and began lifting it and setting it down again, creating rings of interlocked circles. "Oh, she's not really opposed. Not what you'd call political."

"I was just curious."

"She thinks I'm a little crazy, staying up all night with my maps and my books."

"Todd—a guy I lived with, in San Diego—was the same way. I'd be at the lab half the night, replicating tests, concocting new ones. He hated it."

"This was at the Department of Agriculture?"

She nodded, watching him, wrestling down the possibilities expanding in her head, the knowledge that Becky was hours away. She swallowed the last of her drink and imagined his hand gracing the side of her face, his lips against her neck. She was used to thin men and wondered whether, with Dmitri, it would feel as if he was crushing the breath from her.

Above the bar, the muted television showed a newscast in which a woman had left her children in a car overnight and they'd gotten hypothermia. Seeing the news without sound made her think of the morning Todd had left. The night before, they'd watched a series video, the first season of some show she'd never seen but that made her laugh. She'd dragged her blue angora blanket, the one Mae and Gerard had given her for high school graduation, to the couch, and they'd sat beneath it drinking Colorado Bulldogs. Afterward she'd wondered whether he'd gotten her drunk to make her sleep late. If so, it hadn't worked. She'd woken early and everything had been in boxes. He was brushing his teeth, watching the news with the sound muted, and when he turned, his eyes were surprised and angry at her for catching him. It had been two months to the day since she'd quit her job at the lab, since Todd had stopped touching her, since she'd stopped sleeping at night.

"What happened?" Dmitri asked.

"Huh? Oh. It didn't work out." She shrugged to convey that she'd predicted this all along, but had fun just the same. "So. What are we going to do about Bannister?"

“What do you think?”

“I think the possibilities are beautiful.” She was feeling more buzzed now, and purposely gripped his wrist. They grinned at each other. Their shared misunderstanding in front of the factory had emerged, finally, as a joke between them. It was her only excuse to touch him, one she’d used before.

“So.” Ian slipped back behind the bar. “We take everything we know, research like hell, and involve as many people as we can. A political action group.”

“I don’t know if that will work here,” Dmitri said. “People are pretty adamant about clinging to a vision of the place they abandoned their old lives for. And so many of the old-timers are indebted to James.”

“Well, the main thing is the accusation,” Ian said. “Point a finger and half your work’s done. Look at O.J.”

Rika drained the last bit of vermouth from her glass. “Ultimately unscathed.”

“We could do it,” Ian insisted.

“Maybe,” Dmitri said. “The three of us. And Albert. Maybe Ruby?”

“Nope, I already asked,” Rika said, thrilled to be included in his count.

“We’ll need a central spokesperson—me, I imagine,” he said.

“No—Johnny’s pink-slipped you once. You’d lose your job,” Rika said.

“If it worked, it might be worth it. The debate—we can challenge Bannister.”

“Challenge?” Ian asked.

“The day before the election, there’s a debate. Anyone can challenge anyone else. It’s a throwback they’ve kept because it’s more efficient than just having everyone up there.”

Ian shook his head. “Well, you need someone with nothing to lose. The accuser’s just the messenger. If the message is solid, well-researched, it doesn’t matter who delivers it. Drat—excuse me.” He left again, to help a man in overalls who’d brought his glass to the counter.

Dmitri moved his eyes in the direction Ian had gone, clicked his tongue, and looked back at Rika. She knew what he was asking: Did she think Ian would make a good spokesperson?

“Long shot,” she said softly. “Charismatic. Soft-spoken.” Didn’t Dmitri notice his face? Wouldn’t people wonder?

“A mugging,” he said, as if he’d read her mind. “He’d have over two weeks to heal. I could see people being drawn to him.”

They didn’t say anything for a while. Dmitri was looking at her in his tilted-head way again, and she thought of his nervousness in the truck, his awkwardness introducing her to Becky. “Well,” he said, looking down. “It’s late. Ready to take off?”

Disappointment filled her; she’d thought they might stay late talking. “Yeah,” she said. As she stepped from her stool to the ground, her knees nearly buckled, and she caught herself. How many drinks *had* she had? Leaving a twenty-dollar bill on the counter, Dmitri steered her out the door, through the parking lot, and to his truck. He opened the door for her, then got in on the other side.

Rika’s body whirled electric as they drove toward Ruby’s. Enunciating with pained effort, she tried to appear less drunk than she felt.

“Seems like the vermouth hit you all at once.”

“It’ll do that.”

“I was thinking I’d go home and write lectures or plan class or meditate,” Dmitri said.

“How enthralling.” Rika drawled the last syllable out.

“Your cheeks are red.”

“What are you implying—that I’ve too much—” She started again. “That I’ve *had* too much vermouth?”

He rolled down the window, grinning, and lit a cigarette.

“This is impatal—argh—impalatable. Why are you laughing?”

“I’m hungry. Are you hungry?”

“Thirsty,” she offered.

“I doubt that.”

“For *water*.”

“Come back to my place,” Dmitri said quickly. “Just for some water.”

A thrill jetted through her. “Agreed. Ruby has an abundance of water, actually, but there’s no need for her to see me in the first stages of inebriation.”

“These are the *first* stages?”

Rika smiled and rolled down her window, ecstatic to be driving to Dmitri’s. The night air streamed in, chilly, and she looked at the half-constructed subdivisions, the gas

stations and unlit shops. Since she rarely drank, it was hard for her to figure how drunk she really was. What if another teacher saw them? The thought delighted her—the idea that somebody might suspect something, even if there was nothing to suspect.

As Dmitri unlocked his door, Rika glowed like a teenager, then reprimanded herself. A glass of water, and she'd leave. She could walk home—she wasn't sure Dmitri was sober enough to be driving, anyway.

“Want me to show you around?” he asked before she could sit.

“I've seen it.”

“Correction: you've seen the living room and the kitchen. That hardly qualifies.”

He was flirting. He'd relaxed a little, or perhaps thought she was too inebriated to notice. She strayed in his entryway, examining the O'Keefe. Alcohol was coursing through her bloodstream. By now the ethanol had inked through the walls of her small intestine, and was choosing which body tissues to settle to by the proportion of their water content. She concentrated on the movements of these molecules. True, she was alone with a married man in his house, but even this didn't mean anything. Married, she reminded herself. She forced her thoughts to Becky at the kitchen table, paging through a catalog, then tried to imagine that Becky had returned early from her retreat, that she was asleep in the bedroom she and Dmitri shared.

“I brought that painting in New Mexico. Ten years ago, at a conference.” He guided her into the living room and showed her the fireplace, which he'd grouted himself, then into the kitchen, where he poured a glass of water and sat across from her at the table. The placemats and catalog were gone, and the counter appeared to have been scoured, which made sense. Becky was the kind of woman who'd clean everything before leaving, then clean it again when she got back.

Rika drank and set the glass in the middle of the table and Dmitri picked it up.

“Usually,” she said, “I am microphobic.”

“Germs?”

She nodded. “Take an immunology course sometime. It'll ruin you. But tonight I'll make an exception.”

“Grand.” Dmitri picked up the glass, rotated it in his hands, and drank. He began talking—something about how Ellis's water supply was full of minerals and practically opaque—but Rika was hardly listening. He hadn't seen her notice, she was sure, but he'd

turned the cup to drink from the same place her lips had touched, where her cherry Chapstick was imprinted on the glass like a kiss.

“I’d like to see the rest of the house,” she announced. There was a dare in her voice, some challenge she hadn’t quite meant until it came out.

He raised his eyebrows, then, as if catching himself, relaxed his face. He put his hand to his lips, scratching the side of his mouth casually. “All right,” he said. “I’ll give you a tour.”

Chapter Nine

In the mirror of the women's bathroom, Ian's face was wan and ghostly. Stubble drew messily along either side of his chin, fading above his upper lip, where he'd never been able to cultivate a proper mustache. He was growing his facial hair so that if his picture eked into the paper, he'd have a smaller chance of being recognized. Hiding gave him a sense of purpose, reminded him that *Denouement* continued—that the scene in Stockton hadn't been his last act, but a curtain rising, that the play spun on in secret. He'd written himself a role he could play as long as he wanted.

Kneeling to retrieve a roll of toilet paper from beneath the cupboard under the sink, Ian was hit with a mossy odor worse than the one in the men's room. Because the pipes leaked, the cupboards were perpetually dank, and a faint smell of mildew clung to the toilet paper even after Ian fastened it into the dispenser and unrolled a few rotations. Rising again, glancing into the mirror, his attacker's eyes flashed angrily at him. He pressed his hand over his eyelids and kept them closed. This had been happening more frequently. The previous night, he'd dreamed he was taking Theo to prison, only the prison was a wooden box Theo had to kneel to fit into, and Ian had hammered it closed with long nails that poked through on the other side. The eyes wouldn't leave him alone.

Ellis was his escape. It was small and real and physical, with peculiar details. Interstates 5, 205, and 580 had all been built between 1965 and 1971, Dmitri had said. A city of people who'd relocated for the access. Looking around the Pint Club, he thought of Murakami. Rika had said downtown, and this was one of Ellis's oldest buildings, wasn't it? If it was true, it put everything in a different light. A son trying to sell his father's stolen buildings. It was too perfect, too terrible. Classic drama, good versus evil.

Ian Windexed the mirror, wiped the sink, and emptied the trash, as he did nightly at nine and midnight. This seemed particularly unnecessary in the women's restroom, which, in a doomed effort to lure female clientele, Albert had painted with pink and purple stripes and adorned with scented soap and a canary yellow hand towel that, as far as Ian knew, had never been washed. Inexorably tacky, but a goodwilled charm clung to it.

Paper towels in the trash, he took a final, satisfied glance at himself in the mirror. His face no longer shocked him, and he liked the way it made people react. Practically

unrecognizable, at least to people who'd hadn't known him well. It gave him a certain authority.

Back at the bar, he washed his hands and collected the bill Dmitri and Rika had left, then cleared a back table. The surface was caked with globs of ketchup and relish, one of which bore a sticky dollar. The smallest tippers left the largest messes, *always*.

"Do the bathrooms?" Albert called from the back.

"Both. And I still say you need a plumber."

"Stop smelling the damned toilet paper."

"I can't help it."

Albert emerged from the back with half of a microwave pizza. "Dmitri take off?"

Ian nodded. "Crazy about the camps, wasn't it?" Albert left the door cracked when he wanted to listen from the back.

"I'd love for it to come out before the election." Albert chewed slowly. "Piss folks off, if they'll believe it. Make James less cocky."

Ian bit into a slice. Totino's were miracles every time, undercooked in the middle but burned on the bottom. He poured himself a half-glass of Old Crow, a taste he minded less and less. "Dmitri needs a spokesperson," he said. "Some spitfire organizer. He's too timid."

"He'd do a good job."

"You should have seen his face pale when Rika reminded him of the time he got pink-slipped."

Albert scratched the side of his face. "It's because he's been in trouble before. Last year he burned an American flag in front of his class. He's on thin ice already."

"What about you?"

"Ha."

"Seriously. Ellis needs someone charismatic. You'd be perfect."

Albert chuckled. "No thanks."

"The Pint Club's your livelihood—what do you have to lose?"

Albert shook his head. "I don't want anything like that resting on these old shoulders." He belched softly, drawing his neatly-clipped fingernails along the milky streak in his beard. "Of course I'll support whatever Dmitri comes up with. And I'll talk to everyone I know downtown, see who's on board. But spokesperson? Let's say James wins

the election and I've put myself at the head of the folks trying to stop him. This place would be first to go."

"If he wins, it'll go anyway."

Albert squinted hard at him. "At least it would be James's own doing."

"It wouldn't be that hard," Ian insisted.

"Yeah, right. *You* try it."

"Watch." Ian cleared his throat dramatically and placed a hand on his chest. He switched to a grave baritone he'd once invented to audition for *Richard II*. "I was shocked to learn our town's noble history is not as unblemished as one of our businessmen would have us believe."

Albert yawned. "Not bad."

"Try."

Albert shook his head. "Nope." He took a bite, looking Ian up and down. "Why don't you do it yourself? Not like you've got a full-time job."

Ian's glass had made a small ring on the bar, and he took a sip of his bourbon and set the glass back on the same circle. Why not? It had crossed his mind, talking to Dmitri. He looked at his fingers, flexed his wrists. His hands were the one part of his body that had escaped Theo's beating. Could he risk being photographed? The idea appeared to him, certainly—his old talents combined with his new identity. *Denouement* almost seemed to call for something like it. It was a grounded thing to do, the kind of tough, ethical action Ray admired. And a lead role. He smiled. "I'm not sure."

"Ah-ha," Albert said. "Your mouth's watering for the limelight."

"I don't know. Would the news go beyond Ellis?"

"Not even Stockton covers Ellis, and they're right next door."

"Maybe."

"I'll call Dmitri tomorrow. Better yet, how about I give you the morning off, paid, to meet with him?" Albert popped the last section of Totino's into his mouth and dusted his hands on his pants. "People like you, I'll give you that. I don't know anyone else who can sell a Side Car to Joe Bremkin."

"Let me think about it."

"All right. Stay out here and think. I'm starting the dishes." Albert went to the back, shutting the door all the way, and after a minute, the stereo clicked from Kid Ory to

Miles Davis. It was the first time Albert had perked up since Dmitri had brought his map to the Pint Club, spread it over the counter, and explained the rent hikes and real estate deals. Setting the dark web of his hand over downtown, Albert had closed his eyes and shaken his head, then gone for a drive and let Ian run the bar for the rest of the night.

Beyond the door, Ian could hear the faucet running. He took a tub from beneath the bar and cleared tables. The place was thinning out, men going home to their wives and children, out to their night shifts or lovers.

Ian felt the Pint Club's history most strongly when it was empty. He could close his eyes and picture it as a poker lounge with a second-floor brothel. Before James's father had owned it, Albert had said, supposedly it was a restaurant, and an unknown owner had used the second floor as a discussion forum on Eastern versus Western religion and matters of the soul. He wondered when the second floor had been knocked out. The unknown owner must have been Murakami, Ian realized. It had to be.

"Ian."

He raised his eyes from the bar, expecting to see one of the checkers players asking for another Black and Tan. Instead, his eyes fell upon someone from—where? Half a second passed before he placed the long blond hair, the tired eyes. He sucked in a breath. Coincidence. He concentrated on decelerating his thoughts, grabbed a towel from the bar and ran it under the tap. Mere coincidence. "What can I get you?"

"I'm here about Theo Lacey."

Ian squeezed the towel, wringing it hard, like dough beneath his hands. What connection Russ had to Theo, he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Wiping the counter in tiny circles, he breathed slowly, counting to ten, and then to twenty. It helped slow the heart. Bahi Schraeder, his acting classes, the miniscule roles he'd landed—all of it had prepared him. He closed his eyes and belched soft and long, like Albert. "Is he a regular? I don't pay attention to names."

"Don't you remember me?"

"Ever come in here before?"

"You slept on my couch that night you woke up in the canal. I practically saved your life. You begged me not to call 911."

Ian was thankful he wasn't wearing Russ's Corona T-shirt. God—if Russ and Theo were friends—if he *knew* what had happened. “Maybe you’ve got me confused with someone.”

“There’s no confusion. Listen to me. You know who I am.” Russ’s eyes narrowed. “I showed your picture around town yesterday. Someone told me you worked here.”

Violence, Harold Pinter said, lurked in the everyday. It was essential to the world, inevitable, manifesting itself in conversation, casual encounters. He’d had yesterday off. Had Russ come by, harassing Albert?

“I want to respect your privacy,” Russ continued. “But there’s something you don’t know. Theo—that’s the name of the man who attacked you. He’s in jail for murder. For murdering *you*.”

“Impossible. I’m right here.”

Russ’s forehead muscles relaxed. “Well—exactly. That’s the mistake. That’s what I came to tell you. It’s a big legal mess right now.”

“No—what I mean is, I’ve *been* here. No one’s tried to kill me in years.” He shrugged, showing Russ a wide, obtuse smile he’d perfected for a failed *Of Mice and Men* audition.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Look—I’ll try to remember. When was this, exactly?”

“Two weeks ago.”

Ian looked squarely at Russ. “I haven’t set foot outside Ellis in a month.”

“Interesting. How’d you know it happened outside of Ellis?”

Fuck. Ian coughed. His knee throbbed and his mouth was dry. What if Russ was recording this?

“Why’d you look up when I called your name?”

“Ian is my name. Ian Pinter.” He pushed up his shirtsleeve, revealing the tattoo, which was almost healed. “Can I get you a drink? What’s your name?”

“You know my name.”

“I don’t think you’ve told me.” Ian feigned frustration and wiped at the counter again, though it was spotless. Russ argued like Ray, fast and lawyerly. He couldn’t let himself get sucked into Russ’s pace. “Midori Sour sound good?”

“Club soda.”

Ian ducked beneath the counter and retrieved a glass from the back of the cupboard, even though there were clean ones on the bar. His breathing was telltale heavy. Bahi Schraeder would have given him a D. “Ice?”

“Whatever.”

Plunking four cubes brusquely into the glass, Ian pretended to pick something from his teeth and wipe it on his shirt. He filled the glass with club soda and pushed it to Russ.

“I went to your apartment.”

Ian swallowed. Had he seen the script? How much did he know? Crossing his arms, he stared impassively at Russ. Violence. Russ was clever and capable of violence. He hadn’t noticed it that first night, but there was a frightening unpredictability in the eyes.

“I talked to your landlord. I went through your bookshelves. I read your entire fucking file on Harold Pinter.”

Ian sighed. He’d give nothing away. “I’m not related to any Harolds, and I don’t live in an apartment. I wish I did, though. I’ve worked here a while, but I never get enough hours to save up for a deposit. Minimum wage, no benefits, and the tips are awful. Some countries take care of their *homeless* better, you know? Have you ever worked as a bartender?”

Russ said nothing.

A triumph. Russ hadn’t expected this kind of composure. “Well, don’t—especially not here. A dollar isn’t a decent tip for three or four Miller Lites, in my book.” He belched again, hoping he wasn’t overacting. Sweat covered his forehead, and he could feel the dampness under his arms. Who knew stage fright didn’t require a stage?

“I’m Theo’s attorney. Strange, huh?” Russ’s voice was dry.

“Not if he’s your client.” So he was—what—investigating a case? What had they found?

“I meant the way things work out. One night, you’re sitting on my doorstep; two days later, my client’s facing a first-degree murder charge for killing you. Bad timing, I guess. For both of you.”

Ian’s mind dashed over everything he’d said to Russ the night he’d stayed over. Had he mentioned any details? No—yet Russ had tracked him somehow. “I think I may have read about this case in the paper.”

“There’s a life at stake and you can do something about it.” Russ sipped his club soda, closing his eyes like it was whiskey. “We could work it out so it won’t affect whatever you’ve got going here. Just you, me, the judge, and the DA. One statement. One afternoon.”

Which was a lie, of course. Ian knew how it worked. Ray said that once you got a witness to admit anything useful, you could subpoena the hell out of him. Ian wiped his damp forearms on the back of his T-shirt. “I wish I could help you. I’d go in and wouldn’t have anything to say.”

“Why don’t you come in anyway?”

No way was he letting Russ question him in front of other people. Cross-examination was Russ’s life. And criminal records weren’t sealed. You didn’t just go in and make a statement—reporters scanned the proceedings, didn’t they? Anything he said would be fodder for the press. Racial slurs, the juvenile revelations in his note. Not to mention how hard it would be to stay in character in front of a judge, two lawyers, and the man who’d tried to kill him. No—*Denouement* meant too much. Ian had a role, and he’d play it to the end. It was larger than Russ, larger than Theo, larger, even, than Ian Ramspott III.

“I’m not whoever you think I am. I don’t know what else I can tell you.” Ian retrieved the tub from beneath the sink and busied himself clearing tables. He forced himself not to look back at the stool for several minutes. When he finally did, Russ was gone. In his place were a dollar and a business card. Ian threw the card in the trash. If Russ had any proof, he wouldn’t be here begging Ian to testify. He knew there were no pictures of himself in his apartment, but the Berkeley Rep had some online. Still, even holding two snapshots side by side, he wasn’t sure that someone who didn’t already know him would be able to say that they were the same person. Sure, there would be a resemblance. But how difficult was it to find an indistinctive, vaguely handsome, six-foot-tall white man?

He took the dishes to Albert, who was rinsing the last of the first stack.

“Your turn,” Albert said. “Anyone left out there?”

“Two or three guys.”

“What’s going on? You’re shaking.”

“It’s just my knee. I’m having trouble standing on it again.”

Albert nodded. “Dmitri come back?”

“No.” Ian cracked his knuckles, letting out a long breath.

"I thought he might."

"I think he and his girlfriend were taking off for the night." Ian winked, but Albert didn't smile.

"The man's happily married—and a friend of mine."

"I was just—"

"Don't even joke." Albert stared at him and went out to the bar.

Ian replaced Armstrong with Miles Davis, and turned up the volume loud enough to annoy Albert. The giant metal sink was divided in the middle, and Ian filled the left side with scalding water, dumping in the dishes from the tub. It was a sauna back there. Steam and sweat soaked his T-shirt. He unscrewed Albert's economy-sized bottle of liquid Dawn, dumped in three capfuls, and started scrubbing. The cotton of his shirt clung like Saran Wrap to his arms and torso.

How had Russ found him? As long as he was the only one who knew, could he do anything? Was there a way to prove a person's identity? For DNA testing and fingerprints, didn't you have to be on file somewhere? A judge had to sign something, too. He'd seen an episode of a crime show where a suspect's DNA had been collected from a cup he'd thrown away, then matched to the crime scene. Ian's blood was probably all over the vacant lot. All over Theo's clothes, too. It might just be a matter of time before Russ proved a match.

His hands gripped a pint glass so hard that it cracked, and he turned off the water and held it up to the light. A crack, but not a break. No blood on his hands. He threw it away and turned the water back on.

When Russ came back, Ian would be ready. He'd get a driver's license, a passport—Shane at Twelve Monkeys handled things like that. And who believed DNA alone? No one who'd seen O.J.

Russ was lying about the ease of giving a statement. But even if the judge believed Ian, would they leave him alone? Probably not. They'd fingerprint him, interrogate him, have Theo identify him.

Theo had been willing to take Ian's life; why should Ian give up his own to save Theo's?

He couldn't go back to being Ramspott, couldn't imagine returning to the stage. What would he play, with his scarred face? The Ghost of Christmas Past? The Phantom of the Opera? No—Ellis was all he had. He liked the rhythms of manual work, filling salt and

paper shakers, washing dishes, replacing toilet paper—they made him a part of the physical world. Grounded, like Ray said. He was a different person, didn't need ambition, didn't *want* anything except to stay in this place and help it out and work. He was keeping his resolutions. He'd stay loyal to Albert and Dmitri, to himself, to *Denouement*.

Harold Pinter had left school at sixteen, fed up and restless. Then he'd been called for military service twice. Both times he'd had tribunals, and both times he'd refused to join the military. Ian had acted similarly: leaving Ramspott behind, refusing to take part in a trial, refusing to accept a life ordered by someone else. Pinter had needed to pursue his writing, his passion, the way Ian needed to pursue *Denouement*. What good would it do to free a murderer? He was still in the process of figuring out exactly what *Denouement's* destiny was, anyway. He was in a state of becoming.

Abruptly, cutting through everything, he saw Theo coming around the tree in Stockton. He saw Theo glance up, the shock registering in his eyes as he was pushed. Ian turned from the sink and blinked a few times, trying to get the eyes out of his head. But they hovered there, in the reflection beyond the glass, and he stared breathlessly, watching them widen as he pictured the jolt of electrocution, the current seizing the man's large body, streaming through his limbs.

Another glass cracked as he brought it from the left side to the right, banging it hard against the sink's metal divider. This time the crack was deeper, running alongside the entire bottom of the cup, and as Ian held it to the light to see whether it was salvageable, the glass broke in two. One half crashed to the floor; the other slipped toward his palm as it fractured, slicing from the start of his wrist to the middle of the thumb. Jaw clenched, he sucked in a breath.

Dmitri's coming in tonight had been a sign. He had to counter the memory of his attacker's eyes, to make *Denouement* something real—something worthwhile—to get them out of his head. He'd been dropped into a place that needed him, precisely when he needed *it*. Countering James Bannister, fighting Greenlake, being their spokesperson—it was his opening. This was no accident. He had the skills, he had the time. Risky, but what wasn't? He had the gusto. He had the drive, an outsider's perspective. After pulling off the ultimate role, he'd know Ian Pinter could do anything. He *had* to pull it off. He wanted it desperately. Yes—he concentrated on this, working himself into it. He wanted it more than

he'd ever wanted anything. Ray would have been proud—but he didn't need Ray; he had Ellis. This bland town, this tiny bar, was his life. He'd do it.

The broken glass fell from his palm into the sink, splashing his shirt with dirty dishwater. Turning the tap to cold, he ran his hand beneath it. The water stung and he thought of the shower at Russ's apartment, the burn of the attorney's soap in the gashes on his face. He'd mentioned Ellis that morning, he realized. Russ had tracked him here. How long had he been looking?

The cut wasn't deep but bled profusely, so he stripped off his T-shirt and tied it over the incision. Using only his right hand, he rinsed the dishes he'd already washed and left the rest in the sink. Albert wouldn't appreciate it if he emerged half-naked, so he sat on the counter in the back, next to the microwave, and opened a window. Cool air chilled his wet chest, but he left it open. The back of the Pint Club opened into the Adams Street Alley, windowless and unlit, and it was too dark to see out. Ian inhaled deeply. Smells of damp gravel, mud, decaying leaves. It had rained. He listened to see if it had stopped, but couldn't tell, and put his hand out the window. Tiny drops, light as mist, fell onto his palm. Walking the five blocks back to the Cote D'Azur, shirtless, would be cold, but as Ian held his palm to his tongue and tasted the rain, he looked forward to the sensation on his skin.

Chapter Ten

Dmitri's study wasn't a room, exactly—more of a closet—precisely the right size for a futon and a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, which was what he kept there. In it, he meditated and sometimes read, but never worked because it wasn't large enough to accommodate a desk. Occasionally Becky suggested turning it into storage space, whereupon he'd use it daily for a week or two, demonstrating its utility.

"Is this where you sit with your maps and newspaper clippings about Bannister and Greenlake?"

"Occasionally," he said. Upon entering, with Rika, the one place in the house that had always been his own, never Becky's or Meg's, he was struck by their sudden, powerful aloneness together. Her readiness to come back with him had, at first, seemed the only hint he'd needed, but now he wasn't sure. Sharing the water, she'd seemed cautious. Watchful. Neither of them, he knew, would be given to impulse.

"What was that book you told me to borrow?" she asked.

"I don't remember."

She plucked one from his shelf, read the back, returned it, and chose another.

"You can borrow whatever you want," he said, watching her openly, registering his full, complete desire as she turned pages. She sat on the futon, gorgeous and red-cheeked on a makeshift bed in his makeshift library. Oh, God—a vital shift in his gut, the firm conviction that at this moment, nothing else mattered.

A hundred contrary ideas pulsed through Dmitri's head as he sat next to Rika and read over her shoulder. One of these was Becky, and as he reminded himself that he loved her, he was struck by the realization that she no longer loved *him*, that on some level he'd known this for years; he impeded her productive, well-adjusted, healthful life. She'd told him that on his deathbed, he would wish he'd spent more time relaxing—ridiculous, of course. But in front of him was something he *could* imagine regretting: having Rika here, alone, and doing nothing. His personal history brimmed with inaction. He hadn't taken the Fulbright, the Switzerland deanship, or even the curriculum development job in Sacramento. But he was taking Rika as fully and completely as she'd let him.

Dmitri placed his hand over the page she was reading, and waited for her to look up. When she finally did, one eyebrow raised—dry or coy or divining, he didn't know—he leaned rashly forward and kissed her.

He'd planned, in the feverish instant he'd spent mapping it out, to meet her lips briefly, then draw back and look at her as if he'd shocked himself. But not only did she let him kiss her, she kissed back, her lips yielding impossibly. The book slid to the futon, then to the floor, and she moved her hand to his chest. About to push him away? No—it lingered—she was feeling his chest through his shirt, her other hand on his cheek.

"Can you do this?" she whispered.

This implied more than a kiss: a full panorama of everything he'd fantasized about since they'd met. He loved feeling her eyes on his face, and could only think to say "Do what?" or "Who cares?" so he said nothing, just leaned hungrily forward. He wanted to cover her with himself, to crawl into her skin and know her softness.

Eyes closed, he held back. The whole night was theirs. Touching her arm, he felt weightless, thought of the glass factory's orange smoke against the midnight sky and traced her lips with his fingers, his own lips, his tongue. They were like reunited lovers—she felt familiar and he needed her and this was right.

They didn't speak. He cradled her, eased her onto her back so she was lying on the futon, and knelt on the carpet at her side. Kissing softly, he touched her arms and shoulders, silently asking permission. She smiled, cupping her hand around his jaw, and he untucked her shirt from her khakis, easing his hand against the bare skin of her abdomen. Impossibly firm, impossibly white. From underneath, he unbuttoned her shirt, stopping to stroke her sides and stomach. Her bra was the color of lemon sherbet, and as she leaned forward, he slipped the tiny wire from its hook—just one hook! Tonight Rika wasn't wearing lotion, and her skin was a combination of baby powder, vermouth, currant tea, spicy food. Bringing his lips to her breasts, his finger graced her cheek—it was wet. He raised his head. One of her hands was over her face and she was shivering.

"Oh, God—what did I—?" Dmitri stammered. He rose and went quickly to his bedroom to retrieve the quilt Becky's grandmother had made the year they were married. Rika had been smiling—what had happened? He'd done something—what? Oh, God. This could be the mistake of his life. He's practically forced himself on her—someone could see it that way.

Back in his study, she had already hooked her bra and re-fastened her buttons. He'd planned to drape the blanket around her shoulders, but kept it folded on his lap, waiting for her to speak.

"I'm so sorry," he said at last.

"For what?"

"Well—making you uncomfortable. Or whatever happened. I wouldn't have taken off your shirt if—"

"I wanted you to." Rika stared at her lap. "It's all me."

"What happened?"

She inhaled deeply, as if she was trying to calm herself. "Some things happened to me before."

Abuse? What? *Talk*, he willed.

She shook her head. "I thought got over this in Spain."

"What happened in Spain?"

"Nothing. Everything bad was before that. In Spain I was with a lot of men, though, so I thought I was over it. Kind of a purge. Maybe that was easier because I didn't really *know* them. I didn't expect anything. I haven't been with anyone since I got back to the U.S."

Dmitri wondered what number constituted "a lot." He hadn't been with anyone besides Becky since the Nixon administration.

"Sometimes it's hard for me to be—physically close. Not impossible, just—"

"It's okay. Really—completely okay. You don't have to explain." A damp grey path stretched down her cheek like a shadow. Eye make-up? He hadn't thought she wore it.

"Could we go for a drive? I want to get out, all of a sudden."

"Whatever you feel like," he said, though the last thing he wanted was to leave the house, and more especially, leave the futon.

They piled into the Ford, blanket and all, and drove. Rika rested her head on his shoulder, as if a decision had been made, and despite his confusion, Dmitri was happy.

She wasn't upset that he was married, he reasoned. Apparently she'd decided to leave that up to him—her single question, his failure to answer. Rolling down the window, he felt a pang of impatience and lit a cigarette. Without knowing why she was upset, how could he muster inquisitive, sensitive thoughts? His mind refused to leave the futon. Rika's

breasts were smaller than Becky's, but rounder, softer. He put his lips around the end of the cigarette and inhaled. "Want the heat up?"

"I'm okay."

He turned it up anyway. "Want to talk?"

"Let's drive awhile."

Smoke spread invisibly behind them. His instinct was to apologize again, and he suppressed it. Rika wasn't much of an apology woman. This was new; Becky collected his wrongdoings—admissions of guilt fueled their relationship better than sex. That was the constant. His apologies and her disapproving gaze. He was always vaguely inadequate, two or three steps behind. And now his wife was in a cabin on the beach, studying Biblical wisdom with half a dozen other women from Holy Cross. She'd be back after breakfast, at ten or eleven. He pictured her in a circle of women, praying and sipping hot chocolate.

"Where do you want me to go?"

Rika shrugged, and he turned at Durham Ferry before reaching Banta. Possums scrambled in a pack along the road. He tried a side-street he'd never noticed before, and in a mile it dead-ended at a sugar beet farm. Finishing his cigarette, he pulled the Ford around in a u-turn and rolled up the window, driving toward Jefferson School and his father's factory. "Will you tell me what upset you?"

She set her hand on his thigh and he swallowed, ecstatic. A promise? Was she asking for his patience?

Owens-Brockway loomed down the road, and it seemed natural, inevitable, as he pulled into the driveway and drove around to the side lot. The factory was deserted, and the dim of the orange light partly illuminated the giant emission-release pipes, etching hazy cylinders against the sky. "This okay?"

Rika nodded. The blanket was tangled around her arms and Dmitri unbuckled, leaning over to arrange it around her shoulders. She shivered, clutching it, and he put the car in park but left it running for the heater. "Wow," she said.

"What?"

"It all struck me with so much force. It wasn't your fault."

"*What* struck you?"

She shifted, slouching in the passenger seat. Dmitri took her hand and held it loosely between his cupped palms. Reassuring, he hoped. Not insistent. "Take your time." He

switched off the headlights and the sudden darkness made him think of another night, in another parking lot, sitting next to Becky. Against his rough fingers, Rika's palm was soft.

"This might sound silly, but promise that whatever happens, you'll be my friend."

"Of course."

"No." She was stern. "I *like* you, Dmitri—promise."

"I promise," he whispered, squeezing her hand. Friends. He'd die if he never touched her again. Maybe his age had struck her, all of a sudden. Please, nothing Freudian. He hadn't asked when her birthday was. He hoped she was older than Meg.

Rika swallowed, hugging the blanket over her right shoulder with her free hand. She began telling him about Todd, the man she'd mentioned before (how old was *he*?) who had muscular forearms that he'd occasionally—not often, she assured him—turned against her.

"He *hit*—"

"Rarely."

"Oh, Rika." Even if he never touched her again, he'd convince her she needed someone who saw her the way he did. "You left him, though?"

"*He* left."

"And..." He smiled weakly. "Not due to a restraining order?"

She shook her head, straightening her spine. "It never got that bad."

He rubbed her neck lightly and told her she was beautiful. She didn't argue, and Dmitri loved being able to compliment her. Rika didn't deny anything he said, didn't question him. Even when they were dating, Becky had never let him get started on these kinds of things. For three straight minutes, he told Rika how gorgeous and sexy and intelligent she was, how much respect he'd felt for her from the start. He'd always wanted to say these kinds of things to a woman. When he was done, he rolled down the window and lit a cigarette. For a moment, he felt powerful and literary.

She leaned against him as he smoked. "There's more. I've said I worked in the greenhouses?"

"In San Diego."

She nodded. "I'd stay after work for hours, redoing tests. "My boss—Rick—was there late a lot, too. He exuded weird vibes from the beginning. I should have known not to work a late shift alone."

Even before she said it, Dmitri knew about the rape. She pulled her body away as she told him, grief trembling in her like a slow earthquake. Swallowing hard, she looked at her hands, then out at Owens-Brockway. Todd had always delighted in the fact that she'd been a virgin before meeting him, she said. After Rick, he wouldn't touch her.

Dmitri pulled her toward him, hugging her hard. She didn't cry, but her breaths were sharp and desperate. Remembering the lizard on her collar, the panicked look before she'd struck his jaw, Dmitri held her tighter, as if his out-of-shape arms and nicotine-ravaged chest could shield Rika from everything that had chased her here. He was filled with rage at the world for failing to keep her safe, for violating her trust in it.

Dark clouds inked across the black sky, their contours scarcely visible. The factory seemed to have dimmed. How strange that men wanted to build structures that outlasted them. Like children who never aged.

Rika closed her eyes, shoulders sagging. "I've never told anyone besides Todd."

"Did you file a police report?"

"I can't live in the past like that."

Which was absurd—Rick deserved jail, pain, death. He bit his lower lip.

"Thank you, Dmitri."

"Whatever happens, we won't ever do anything that makes you uncomfortable. Not you and me." He hesitated—or were they already through? He leaned toward her slowly, giving her a chance to pull back, and kissed her lightly on the mouth.

"I bet you could use another cigarette."

"I'm okay."

"Liar."

Dmitri smiled and shook one from the pack. No, then. She'd let him kiss her to be polite. He folded his hands in his lap.

Sinking back into the passenger seat, Rika sighed heavily. What else didn't he know about? What other recesses of her life would remain hers, alone?

"Do you feel like going back?" he asked.

"Not particularly."

He'd figured the evening was over, and was starting to feel sleepy, but Rika leaned to kiss him and his skin came alive again. Stubbing out the cigarette against the door of his truck, he turned to her. Composure regained, she was strong and exotic and his again, and

her eyes glistened excitedly in the darkness of his Ford. She put her hand on his chest. “Can we try again?”

“God, yes.”

“You’re sure this is okay?”

“Yes,” Dmitri answered. “All of it.”

She stroked his hair and his face. They kissed until Dmitri lost track of minutes, until he felt the power of souls reuniting, time unraveling inside his bones. When he unbuttoned her blouse, he checked to make sure she was all right. He unhooked the lemon sherbet bra, and when he lowered his mouth to her breasts this time, she murmured his name, soft and low.

As he touched Rika in the dark, he was acutely aware of a similar incident, in a similar truck, with Becky in a parking lot years ago—an act resulting in Meg, and his marriage, and in many ways, his life. For all Dmitri knew, the same act with Rika could be just as significant. But he reminded himself that every time history seemed shattered, chaos fit the pieces together in a way he’d never predicted, and with this in mind, with his mouth locked breathlessly into Rika’s, and with his hands on her bare hips, Dmitri surrendered his self-control entirely to the bliss that lay for him within Rika Brown.

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Peter, Paul and Mary hummed from Dmitri’s speakers as he drove along the extended stretch of Ellis Boulevard that ran near Beyer Avenue, not far from Patterson Pass, and continued to the mall. It had been a field four years earlier, and beyond it were farms, canals, and rocky, undeveloped stretches no one seemed to own. Wind roared from the foothills and whipped down their sides, sending hundreds of miles of yellow grass dancing and flaming in ripples toward the valley. A month ago, it had all been brown, and by the election, it would start turning green.

He’d been driving for over an hour. Driving helped him think; he couldn’t concentrate in his house, not after last night. He’d risen at eight that morning, jarred awake by the phone. In the split second before answering it, he’d feared it was Becky, but it had been Ian, wanting to know if Dmitri could meet him at Greenlake.

How long had Rika slept beside him on the couch? She was already gone at eight,

their water glass washed and returned to the cupboard. Not knowing when Becky would be back, she'd probably decided to leave early and hadn't wanted to wake him.

Nothing in Ellis was immune to the wind. On the sides of the old highways north and west of town, sparrow hawks clutched wooden fence posts against it. Fields of alfalfa and strawberries lined the dips and dents in this part of the valley, and it was home, mostly, to Mexican, Portuguese, and Japanese farmers, old-timers whose families had known a hundred years earlier to buy and plant. A few inches in elevation changed the way a field received the wind. No chemical tests performed on the soil, no realtors' appraisals, could compete with the way the farmers sensed the land.

Popping his cassette from the deck, Dmitri put in a mix tape Meg had made him as a birthday present while she was in high school. Her masking-taped label, which read "Teenager Music for Dad," was peeling at the sides. She'd barely been speaking to him—how little had changed in ten years—and he'd been touched by the gift. Her song list insert had disappeared years ago, but Dmitri remembered a few: Soundgarden, Fugazi, the Melvins, Red Hot Chili Peppers. Would she believe he still listened to it?

His hands resting lightly on the steering wheel, watching the wind in the fields, just for a moment Dmitri wasn't a teacher, had no responsibility to his students or colleagues. He wasn't a man cheating on his wife with a beautiful woman who seemed—only seemed—much older than his daughter. He was seventeen with a new driving permit, gunning down the golden foothills of Patterson Pass.

He loved imagining Ellis's first residents, moving their town of eight years to Front Street—now Sixth Street—to be close to the railroad tracks. Living here invigorated him. On the corner of Vernalis and Beyer, a Honda dealership stood where he and his father used to play kickback with a soccer ball. Dmitri's father had insisted on calling it a *football*, and in front of him, Dmitri had done the same.

Before leaving his house, Dmitri had retraced everything from the night before, terrified that when Becky returned, he'd be betrayed by a book or a smell or an out-of-place pillow. Her grandmother's quilt was in the wash and would need to be moved to the dryer. Reading in bed, he'd spilled tea on it, he planned to say.

But he feared she'd look at him and know. Decoding was her specialty. They were both good at it. Marriage depended on codes. A dialectic of consequential glances, phrases repeated like runes. As far as he knew, she'd always been faithful. Early in their

relationship, back when he'd thought more about things like this, he'd expected that if Becky ever slept with someone else, he'd sense it immediately.

Vernalis Road connected to Linne at the northwest end of town, and he took a left, driving south toward Greenlake. Light rain pattered against the windshield, and he thought of something Rika had said during one of their mornings at Lizzie's—that when rain rinsed the mud away, even gravel seemed beautiful.

A street sign on the dirt road leading into Greenlake said, "Lakeshore Drive." This was new. Dmitri stopped the Ford alongside a pile of sandstone chunks and stepped out. No other vehicles in sight.

The problem was, he didn't feel guilty.

He closed his eyes, willing his mind to Greenlake, to his meeting with Ian. The construction work lay exposed beneath the drizzle. Dmitri shoved his keys in his pocket and walked toward it. There were twenty buildings so far. How many would there be when it was finished? Sixty-five, the *Herald* had said? Seventy? Did they actually have a chance to halt it?

He glanced over his shoulder. The road was empty. Yellow tape was rigged around the site's perimeter, and Dmitri lifted it and ducked underneath. He hadn't been back again since the Ford was fixed. Without roofs, shelves, and clothing racks, the spaces looked improbably sprawling. And most of these weren't even the anchor stores.

Driving—stunned, ecstatic, at a loss—from Owens-Brockway last night, he and Rika had talked about Ian. She was reluctant to trust someone she knew little about, and Dmitri didn't blame her. But Albert was enthusiastic, and Ian seemed optimistic, and maybe optimism was what they needed. It would be an uphill battle; Ellis had no record of activism. It didn't anticipate disaster; it reacted. Unlike most cities incorporated in the early 1900's, Ellis had risen to cityhood without even a plan to provide running water to its residents. But this lack of a plan *was* a plan, and this was what Dmitri loved. No artificial grids, no comprehensive overhauls. Nothing like Greenlake.

The rain subsided to mist. The wooden ribs of a wall stood to his left against the purple-grey sky, and through it yellow grass rippled in the foothills. Soft, piney smells, like wet paper, filled the air, and he ran his hand along the glistening planks. Stacks of boards, a sawhorse, paper cups from Burger King splattered with mud. He picked up an abandoned hammer and turned it over in his hands, brushing mud from the handle. Thousands of

minimum-wage jobs. Families commuting from Stockton for five fifty an hour. He thought of the Heinz factory, of Owens-Brockway, imagined Albert peddling Budweiser at Applebee's, working shifts alongside Dmitri's students. He thought of James's commercial: *A vision to make sure Ellis stays the way you like it*, and tossed the hammer disgustedly toward the stack of boards. It fell short, chipping an infinitesimal fragment from the concrete foundation.

"Easy."

Dmitri turned. Ian was perched on the sandstone pile next to his Ford. "Where'd you come from?"

"I walked. When it started raining I tried calling you for a ride."

"I was out, driving. You don't have a car?"

"Nope."

"Why'd you want to meet all the way out here?"

"I've never seen it up close. Figured you could give me a tour." Ian's T-shirt was soaked through, his "Pinter" tattoo visible through the wet cotton. "How big will it be?"

Dmitri pointed out the zoned perimeter, marked on the dirt with orange paint.

"That's what's official so far. All I know's what's in the paper."

Ian whistled. "Fucking enormous. When's it supposed to open?"

"Summer. Right now they're here five days a week, seven to four, when it's not raining. The size of the crews will triple in the spring, and they'll work all week. They do it that way with housing tracts, too."

Ian nodded. "Have you ever worked construction?"

"No. I'd probably saw off my arm the first day."

Ian grinned, lifting the yellow tape and stepping beneath it to join Dmitri. "Don't you think *Greenlake*'s an odd name?" He waved his hand up the hills. "No water in sight."

"They're building a lake," Dmitri said, pointing to a place in the center of the development cordoned off with bricks and chalk. "Right in the middle."

"A man-made lake in the heart of a ring of chain stores?"

"Depressing, isn't it?"

Ian nodded. "And you know what I hate about zoning laws is that they're one of those things that's entirely mysterious to people who don't specialize in it. Neurosurgery should be that way, but not zoning."

Mud had packed heavily into the treads of Dmitri's shoes, and he kicked his soles against one of the concrete foundations. "I couldn't agree more."

Ian nodded. "Anything new on Murakami?"

"You heard everything I heard."

"I figured you and Rika might have kept talking."

Dmitri's jaw muscles tightened. "No—I dropped her off at her house. Straight from the Pint Club, home." He was a terrible liar—could Ian tell? He rubbed his hip, which was starting to get sore from their cramped acrobatics in his Ford. Pathetic. What would Rika think of *that*?

"Where was Holly Sugar?"

Dmitri pointed. "James bought it and tore it down." The *Herald* had done a story that explained the projected increase in jobs per square foot of land. It hadn't mentioned what the thousand workers were doing in the meantime. He sat in a window space to light a cigarette.

"Can I borrow one?" Ian asked, pulling a soggy pack of Pall Malls from his jeans and holding it up. "The rain ruined mine."

He held out his pack and Ian took two, sliding the extra behind his ear. "Lucky Strikes—how rugged. I love smoking after a rain."

Dmitri watched him, trying to imagine Ian in front of a crowd. He had a raw, soft-spoken honesty that might go over well. The scars could be touched up—and for the most part, everything would come out in the *Herald*, so they wouldn't need many pictures.

"Where did you move from, again?"

"Berkeley, most recently. New York before that."

He'd hesitated. "Why New York?"

"Like half the city, I wanted to be an actor."

"Never tried L.A.?"

"I was only interested in stage acting. Film doesn't attract me."

An actor—no surprise; it was consistent with everything he knew of Ian. There was a sense about him—a confident knack for timing. Dmitri watched him blow smoke rings through a window. There was no glass in them yet, and each was outlined in thick black tape that read, *Moistop*. "Did you go to college?"

"NYU for three and a half years. I'm one semester shy of a degree."

“You never went back?”

“Never had trouble finding work without it.” He shifted his weight to the other foot and stretched his neck. “I’ve been thinking about the election. Did Albert talk to you?”

Ian was a dark horse, and James would never see it coming. He’d be baffled that a stranger had launched an opposition campaign. Dmitri could call Walt Garrett, his old editor and old friend—though it had been awkward between them since the flag-burning incident. No—he was getting ahead of himself. “Albert said you see yourself as a possible spokesperson. I’d thought of it, too.” Dmitri ground his cigarette out against a building. It left a tiny charred mark the size of a button against the wood. He regarded it for a few seconds, then turned back to Ian, who was still looking at the burned mark.

“Tempting, I bet.”

“Perverse and shortsighted.”

“Corrupt and pusillanimous to boot,” Ian answered, dropping his own cigarette to the concrete and stepping on it. “I was joking. I’m not a fanatic.”

Dmitri rolled it between his thumb and forefinger to release the leftover tobacco, then slipped the empty paper back into the pack. “I realize that.”

“We’ve got to get started if it’s going to amount to anything. I have plenty of time to spare.” He squared his shoulders and straightened his back.

Dmitri drummed his fingers against the window frame, reluctant to agree right away. According to Becky, his excitement—overzeal, she called it—drove people away. He’d disagreed, then later decided she was right. At Madison High’s first Philosophy Club meeting, he’d assigned fifty pages of Kant; half the students had quit. “Did Albert convince you?”

“No. We sort of came up with it together.”

“Your acting experience would come in handy. So in your mind, what form would all this take?”

“A protest, newspaper articles. A public awareness campaign.”

“Ever run one before?”

“I’ve been involved in activism, sure.”

“James is a great orator. Have you seen his commercials?”

Ian shook his head. “People here talk about him like he’s some kind of aged JFK.”

“Not a bad comparison.”

“Part of the challenge then. No one wants to see the gritty sides of beautiful men. It has to be pointed out gently. You call the shots, teach me everything you know, and I’ll be the campaign’s face.”

Slowly, Dmitri nodded. “If it worked...” He rose from the window ledge and ran his hand through his hair. “But why is Ellis so important to you? I mean, it all sounds good, but—”

“Ellis gave me a fresh start when I needed it. And so did Albert. I’ve been running for a long time—from some personal things I’d rather not discuss. Ellis has changed me.”

Personal things. He thought of what Rika had said. “We don’t have long, either. Two weeks from this Tuesday. The debate would be the afternoon before.”

“Harold Pinter wrote *The Room* in four days.”

“Harold Pinter wasn’t facing James Bannister.”

Ian stepped onto a stack of planks, narrowing his eyes gravely. He cleared his throat. “My name is Ian Cooper Pinter. I’m a local businessman, new to the area like many of you.” His voice was serious, throatier. “Over the past three weeks, evidence has fallen into my lap regarding one of my fellow businessmen. Though it disturbed me greatly, I see it as my duty to share it.”

Looking out over the twenty hollow structures, the marked-out lake where the entrance to Holly Sugar used to be, an energy spread in Dmitri’s chest. Chaos had given him this chance. For the first time since ground broken on Greenlake, for all his hemming and stewing and brainstorming, it was finally starting to feel tangible.

Ian leapt from the planks and bowed. “One question. Do you think this would go beyond local news?”

“I doubt it. The closest TV news is Stockton, and it usually takes a strike or a shooting for them to remember we’re here. Why?”

“Personal reasons.”

“More personal reasons.”

“Same ones. It’s a torturously long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

Ian didn’t say anything. Under the beams of the unfinished building, he looked like a sodden scarecrow.

Dmitri tapped the wood with his knuckles. “I’m sorry to pry, but I need to know.

Beforehand. If it's serious and it comes out, Bannister will slaughter you. We'll lose credibility."

"Fair enough."

Dmitri walked to where he'd dropped the hammer, knelt, and picked it up. The metal was cold. He balanced the crown on a waist-high plank that connected two sections of wall. "Let's go somewhere else. It's freezing out here."

Ian was quiet as they climbed into the truck. Rubbing the back of his neck, he stretched his arms. Dmitri thought of Rika, her back arching against the seat.

"Okay. But you have to promise not to tell anyone. Not even Albert."

"Agreed."

He'd have to explain the structure of City Council, the structure of the debate. As Dmitri steered the Ford back down Lakeshore Drive, he glanced back at the construction in his rear-view mirror and thought, for an instant, that he saw a large flash of navy blue across the dirt road. When he glanced again, it was gone.

The wind lashed down the foothills and whistled across the cleared land, a sound Dmitri could hear even with his windows rolled up. He turned on Linne and raised his eyebrows at Ian. "Well," he said. "I'm listening."

Chapter Eleven

Russ imagined it often, as it must have been. Muriel, her sweat under bare fluorescent medical bulbs, hair streaming, each jerk of her hips raining a black whip of silk on the icy table, just as it had whipped, he remembered, against the sky-colored comforter still on his bed. Meg had been there—he was sure. She said she hadn't gotten to the hospital until the next day, but he didn't believe it. In Russ's daydreams, their hands were clutched together—Meg's and Muriel's—and this was crucial, the passage of the baby from mother to friend instead of mother to father, the perversion of it, the offense to nature. It should have been him.

Once, close to Muriel's due date, one of the PD's brought her newborn daughter to the office. Russ had held it to be polite, but was shaken by its smallness, and by the way it smelled—like sweatshirts from the dryer, or a very early, sunny morning. The smell disappeared, he supposed, when kids grew, but he wondered if something of it remained, some soft powdery relic that never rubbed off, that showed itself when he tripped on a curb or played with a dog. Could parents always sense it?

He took out his sketch pad and waited.

Ian was a thorn, and not just in Theo's defense. Half a dozen times in two days, Russ had caught himself considering the ease of abandoning one life and taking up another if you were willing to leave everything behind. Like a rapture. Ian would never get away with it. You couldn't shed your fuck-ups like a second skin. If that was possible, Russ would have done it years ago.

After three calls to the station, Mike Clifton had agreed to meet him at Nam's that evening. Though Russ didn't trust him, Clifton owed him a favor. Russ glanced at his watch. Plenty of time.

He knew the unscalable heights of Valley walls, the dry melancholic heat that scorched through the body in adolescence like a plague. He didn't want Jackson idling here, growing older and giving up his potential while his father hid in phone booths and behind bushes. He'd been fantasizing, the past two days, about disappearing like Ian. Slipping from his life, his law practice, his failings. Taking his son and starting over. Kidnapping could be easy for someone who knew the law like he did.

He shook his head. Weekends were the worst, and this one had been especially bad. He'd feel better after seen Jackson again, making a new sketch to file away with the others or mount on his wall, just another father keeping a scrapbook.

He despised Ian not chiefly for his lies, but for his audacity, ruining another man's life as a matter of convenience. Russ just needed Clifton to haul him in. Once Ian was questioned on the record, he'd trip up. Even in the short conversation they'd had at the Pint Club, he'd given himself away instantly. It would be easier if he could get a DNA test run, but at ten thousand a pop, minimum, for a positive ID on a pair of samples—assuming the samples were decent to start with—there was no way he or Theo could afford it. He was used to hiring DNA experts, but they just picked apart the county's forensic work—five hundred bucks for three hours, no lab charge. What about a court-ordered DNA test? He'd check out the case law. Usually DNA was the last thing the defense wanted in, but this *had* to have come up in cases before.

Clutching his sketch pad and pencil, Russ listened. Jackson was one of the first today, scuffing his worn sneakers along the cracks in the sidewalk. He was getting bigger—not caught up to the other boys in his grade, but not as far behind as he'd been a year ago. In the basketball picture, which Russ kept in his wallet now, behind his driver's license, Jackson was number thirty-two. He'd scanned the *Record* for stats, but they were only reported for middle and high school games. The elementary playoff schedules were listed, though, so he knew that tomorrow night at eight, C. Wright Mills Elementary was matched against Veblen Elementary in the semifinals. He also knew that if he ever tried to go to anything like that, he risked losing Jackson forever.

On the drive to Nam's, Silverchair came on the radio. The opening chords went straight to his spine, and he remembered listening to this with Heather Withcombe his sophomore year of college, the first time he hadn't had to use art as an excuse to get a girl to take her shirt off.

When he walked in, Clifton was hunched over a glass of pale beer. Clifton was the kind of man who would go for a drink with you one night, then lie to you under oath the next morning. They were on good terms. Recently Russ had passed up a chance to embarrass him in court for botching an evidence collection. Clifton waved to Russ as if they weren't the only two people in the restaurant. "S' going on, counselor?"

"Off-duty?"

“Since four. Chief has me pulling day shifts.”

“Thanks for meeting.”

“Yeah.” Clifton gulped his beer, tapping the menu with the index finger of his free hand. “Nothing I know.”

“Ever had Vietnamese food?”

Clifton shook his head. “What do you get?”

“Thirty-seven with an egg.”

“Do they serve dog here? Don’t look at me like that—it was on Peter Jennings. It’s normal in Vietnam. They had a story about how someone sold a homeless kid to a dog meat company.”

“Was he alive?”

Clifton shrugged and looked back at the menu.

“Twenty-eight’s good, too. Beef, I think.” In the back of the shop, Russ could hear Nam chopping, two knives at a time. He’d seen him do it, one in each hand, skinning and dicing a whole chicken in quick strokes.

Clifton frowned. Even his hands looked muscular. He fiddled with his earring, a gold loop Russ knew he’d gotten during an undercover stint, then decided to keep. Closing the menu, he yawned. “I’ll trust you on twenty-eight.”

Russ nodded. “Talked to Theo anymore lately?”

“Is that what our little meeting’s about?”

“Sort of.” He’d come on too quickly.

“What is it with your clients? Fall all over themselves to spill the beans.”

“Especially when you interrogate them for six hours straight without their lawyers.”

“I talked *near* Theo Lacey, not *to* him. That’s kosher.”

“Unless you say something reasonably likely to elicit—” Russ stopped himself. Quoting case law to a cop never did him any good. “Sorry. That’s not why I wanted to talk. You had to do what you had to do. I just wanted to ask a favor.”

Nam emerged from the back with a notepad and nodded to Russ.

“I’ll have the twenty-eight,” Clifton said.

“With dachshund meat or German shepherd?” Nam asked.

Clifton shot Russ a wide-eyed look, then looked back at Nam. “Jesus, I—”

“He’s fucking with you, Mike.”

“Are you—”

Nam grinned. “I wish I had a picture.” He scratched something on his notepad and returned to the back.

“Jesus.” Clifton shook his head and swigged the last gulp of beer. “They must get off on that. Aren’t you eating?”

“He knows what I want.”

Clifton unbuttoned his shirt collar, causing his mammoth Adam’s apple to bounce beneath his skin like a mouse trying to escape from a sack. “We played this by the book.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t. Look—I’m about to tell you something you won’t believe.”

“Talk to the DA.”

“This is an investigational matter. Your territory. Off the record.”

Clifton nodded, leaning forward. He’d taken off his coat and slung it over the chair next to him. The stiff butt of a gun bulged from the inside pocket.

“The night Theo was arrested, I found a man in the canal by my apartment complex, beaten half to death. He begged me not to call 911, so I didn’t. I let him clean up and sleep on my couch, and he left the next morning.” He paused to let this sink in. Reaching into his coat pocket, he removed his inhaler. “It was Ian Ramspott.”

Clifton raised his eyebrows, frowning. “Then why didn’t you keep him there?”

Russ shrugged, pressed down on his inhaler, and drew in a slow breath. “I didn’t know till I saw the picture in the indictment file. He was already gone.”

“Lots of guys look alike.”

“This is him.”

“We’ve been all over that apartment. No one’s gone in or out but Stockton PD.”

Russ decided not to point out that he’d gone in himself less than a week ago. “I doubt Ian ever went back.”

“Where is he, then?”

“Ellis.”

“Amnesia?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Have you talked to him?”

Russ nodded. “He’s denying everything.” Clifton was hooked.

"Why the hell would he do that? People don't just up and leave."

"I know where to find him. I just need you to go with me."

"Theo confessed."

"Maybe because he really thinks he did it."

"Maybe because he really did," Clifton said. "And maybe you're wrong about this guy."

"I just want you to check it out."

"If you're so sure, why don't you just subpoena him."

"He doesn't have to show—you know that."

Clifton sniffed, scratching the side of his face. "He doesn't show, he gets contempt."

"A fine and a couple days. Big deal. Not to mention that if he asks a lawyer, or—hell, Mike—spends a couple minutes on the Internet, he'll find out all he's got to do is claim his testimony will incriminate him."

"How would this incriminate him?"

"It doesn't matter," Russ said. Clifton knew as well as he did that Ian could make something up—an implied drug deal, anything—and not have to say a word.

"You're serious. You want me to drive all the way to *Ellis* for this?"

"As serious as when I cross-examined you the other day."

"I'm supposed to believe you found your client's murder victim, alive."

"I could understand forgetting *one* signature at the lab, but three?"

"Then that he stayed in your apartment and disappeared the next day?"

Russ smiled thinly. "I'm forgetting—are cops supposed to get their *own* fingerprints on a knife they lift from a crime scene? A civil suit might settle it."

Clifton stretched his neck to the left, then to the right. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Just come with me to Ellis."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"I'm PTA dad in two hours."

"Tomorrow, then. Spend ten minutes with the guy."

Clifton made a clicking sound. He reminded Russ of a Hollywood hit man deciding whether to take a job. The more closely Russ watched people, the more it seemed they were

acting. “Don’t expect anything. The confession’s gold. Then the defendant’s lawyer produces the victim thirty miles away, and the guy’s magically decided to leave his home, his job, and all his friends. You have to admit, that’s a hell of a stretch.”

A minute later, Nam emerged with their food. Clifton ordered another beer and for a time, they ate in silence. Russ was closest to the window and the steam from his soup misted the glass as he spooned the broth into his mouth.

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The parking lot on Central Street was an olfactory stew of urine and sulphur. Disgusting, even for Ellis. Across the street, a For Rent sign dangled from a post outside the window of the apartment above the Thai Café: “Bannister Properties: Helping Ellis Reach Its Dreams.” The slogan was the same as when he’d been in high school, and he remembered wondering, then, what dreams a place like Ellis could have. Russ’s father had talked about how fast the town was growing, how soon it would sprout enough jobs that people wouldn’t have to commute. And there *were* more jobs, Russ knew. But they were at warehouses, plants, factories; PeopleSoft and Hewlett-Packard didn’t flock to the Valley. The government slapped down a defense depot, Lawrence Livermore put in a test site. Everyone treated it like a garbage disposal and Ellis put on its best shit-eating grin and asked for more.

Russ opened his glove compartment and pulled out his disposable camera. He stuffed it into his pocket, then fished in the compartment for something to listen to: Blind Melon, Belly, Violent Femmes—he’d lost all the covers. Pushing “Soup” into the tape deck, he thought of the worn section of fabric under his seat that pulled up if he tugged it hard enough. A long time ago, he’d hidden bottles there, sometimes flasks. Brushing beneath the seat with his hands, he found the place and yanked. The pocket popped open. He groped around: nothing. He felt relieved, and the relief surprised him because he knew he wouldn’t have been tempted.

He clicked open his briefcase and leafed through Theo’s file. The hearing was two weeks from yesterday. Three-thirty—he’d tried to get it moved, since it conflicted with his visit to Mills, but Judge Pastral wouldn’t budge. Earlier that morning he’d gone out to the jail again and Theo had been clear about not wanting a trial—the improbability of his “nigger” defense had sunken in, and he’d told Russ to plead him out, as if it was that simple.

He hadn't told Theo about Ian—until Russ could prove it, the whole ordeal would make a wreck out of his client. The court-ordered DNA test was a dead end, too. *Dubose, Cade, Polk, Husske*—every case on point said DNA funds for the defense only had to be granted if the prosecution used DNA in its case-in-chief. Logical, because otherwise lawyers like himself would use county funds for DNA fishing expeditions, but it also meant that as usual, people who couldn't afford a designer defense got fucked.

Someone rapped on the passenger window, and Russ looked up to see Clifton, uniformed. He turned off the car and got out. "You on duty?"

Clifton shook his head, cracking the knuckles of his left hand, then his right. The veins of his neck stood out as he pushed each of his fists into the opposite palm. "Where's this guy live?"

"We're visiting him at work."

"You expect me to question a man on the job?"

"Nothing illegal about it." Russ locked his door and they crossed the lot.

"Yeah, but—"

"He's a bartender. This early it won't be crowded."

"You're buying, then."

"When you talk to him, question assuming it's *him*, all right? Don't look like you're just feeling him out."

Clifton ignored him.

As they approached the Pint Club, a man with greying hair pushed open the door, and it took Russ a few seconds to register him. His face was older and squarish, more drooped than Russ remembered. "Mr. Harris?"

The Mad Russian stopped, raised his eyes, and smiled. "Russell! I had no idea you were back in town."

Russ shook his hand. "Just for the afternoon." He nodded at Clifton. "We're on business."

"Still lawyering?"

Russ nodded. "I started my own office a couple years ago."

"Meg mentioned that—I get updates sometimes, when she's speaking to me. That's terrific, Russ."

A small pride stirred in him. “Meg thinks you’re great,” Russ said generously. “Sometimes she gets a little—anxious, is all. Hey—you don’t know the guy who works here, do you?”

“Albert?”

“Ian.”

“Oh. Sure. He’s new. Great guy.”

“New,” Russ repeated, to make sure Clifton caught it. “Are you friends with him?”

“You could say so.” Harris pushed his hand through his hair. “Sorry—I’ve got to run off and meet—meet a friend. Good to run into you.”

Russ watched Harris cross Central and walk toward his truck. How long had it been? If someone had asked him five minutes earlier what Harris drove he wouldn’t have known, but now he remembered the orange Ford, remembered riding in it to the DMV, he and Harris and Meg, every time Meg took another shot at her driver’s test. She hadn’t wanted either of them there, but they’d both kept insisting.

“That was my old English teacher,” Russ explained, pulling open the Pint Club’s door. Friends, Harris had said. It would be easy for Russ to follow Harris, already knowing where he lived and worked. Maybe he’d lead Russ to wherever Ian was staying.

“You grew up here?” Clifton asked.

“Sort of. I wasn’t born here or anything.” He didn’t add that the only reason he hadn’t been born in Ellis was that his parents had been on a day trip to Monterey; he’d come three weeks early. Surprising, how many times in your life someone asked where you were born. Saying “Monterey” always set him a cut above the Valley.

Inside the Pint Club, beneath the beer signs, an old Hispanic man played chess with a young white one whose boots were caked with mud. Most of the white kid’s pieces were lined next to his opponent’s beer. Otherwise, the place was empty.

“Ian Ramspott,” Russ said loudly.

Nothing.

“What do you have to do to get a beer in Ellis?” Clifton called.

“Don’t have a fucking coronary,” the old man said. Neither looked up from the game and probably didn’t realize they were talking to a cop. Clifton grinned at Russ; he’d let it slide.

As they sat at the bar, Ian stepped from the back, tying a white apron around his waist. "Sorry—finishing up the dishes before the after-work crowd starts up."

"No problem," Clifton said. "I'd like a Black and Tan."

Ian nodded and raised his eyebrows at Russ. "Back already?"

"Club soda."

Whistling, Ian took two glasses from beneath the counter, flipped them a few feet in the air, and caught them again. He clunked one in front of Russ and squirted in carbonated water. "On the house for the designated driver."

"Been working here long?" Clifton asked.

"Only three weeks. I've been in Ellis since July. Real bitch to find a job here if you don't want to commute."

"Why wouldn't you?"

Pathetic—was Clifton buying it? Hard to gauge. Ian set down the Black and Tan, the line between the colors so clear that it looked as if it had been drawn with a pen. "No car. I'm from Manhattan. Back home, we took the subway."

"Manhattan, New York?"

"That's the one." Ian wiped the bar. Long-sleeved flannel covered his tattoo, open over a white undershirt. He'd heard his name called and thrown it on, Russ was sure. He didn't want anyone to see it, scabbed and spotted as if he'd gotten it yesterday.

"Did you bartend in New York?" Russ asked. He was sure he could get Ian to contradict himself.

"Some. A year at the Dumbwaiter, five at the Caretaker, six months at Old Times. Guess you've never heard of those. Pretty big, back home. Closed now, except for the last one." The slight New York accent was new and not very good. "You guys live here?"

Russ looked at Clifton. "We're on business."

"Oh—want to talk to my boss? I can call him at home. If you're from the Health Department, we're getting the mildew treated Friday."

"Have you ever been known as Ian Ramspott?" Clifton asked. Russ knew the abruptness was supposed to be sly, but it came off sloppy.

Ian shook his head. "Oh—this is that thing you asked me about before?" He looked at Clifton. "*This* guy came in a couple days ago and kept mixing me up with some other Ian."

“Got some ID?”

“Am I under investigation? If so, I’d like to know why.” He took off the flannel shirt and tossed it under the bar. His Klee mouth gave nothing away.

“That tattoo’s brand new,” Russ said. “Look at it, Mike.”

“Of course it’s new,” Ian interjected. “I just got it. Funny, too—everyone thinks it has to do with working here. *Pint*-er, get it? But it’s just my name. New job, finally had a little cash. He shrugged. I got it three doors down. Go ask at Twelve Monkeys if you don’t believe me.”

Blood rushed into Russ’s face. Theo’s life was on the line and Ian was playing games with his goddamned tattoo. “We’ve been to your house. We’ve seen the files. We know exactly why you changed your name. Harold Pinter—”

“Who?” Clifton asked. He removed his notepad from its clip on his belt and held a pen to it.

“Ian Ramspott’s goddamn idol, apparently. Green file in his house, bottom bookshelf.”

“You’re saying I got some *guy*’s name tattooed on my arm? Are you calling me a faggot?”

Clifton held up a hand. “Look. We’ve just got some concerns. A man disappeared. We thought he was dead, but it turns out he might be alive. He meets your description, and his name was also Ian.”

“Jesus, you really think I’m this guy, don’t you? If I show some ID, will you leave me alone?”

“That would be a big help,” Clifton said.

Ian disappeared to the back. Russ strained on his barstool to see where he was going. If he heard a door slam, he’d run around to the back door.

“Trespassing,” Clifton said out of Ian’s earshot. “Brandt will like that.”

“I had to. You guys were holding out. And I thought you said the place was secure.” Russ was annoyed he’d let it slip, but he’d needed to let Ian know he knew about Pinter. That Russ had the upper hand. And Ian’s act had faltered, just for a second.

“Pretty fucking selective about the rules.”

“And you’re paying me back with a half-assed interrogation.” He gestured toward the bar. “Perfect.”

“What did you expect? The man’s not in custody. And I’m not hauling him in. Shit, Russ—he doesn’t even look like our victim.”

“The hell he doesn’t! Look at the mouth.” He took the crumpled indictment file picture from his pocket and flattened it on the bar.

“There’s a resemblance, yeah, but there’s lots of resemblances. You resemble about three guys I’m looking for right now. Should I take you back to the station, too?”

Ian belched loudly from the back.

“And,” Clifton continued, “We found gay porn under the vic’s bed. This guy’s straight.”

“It’s an act.”

“Gays don’t say *faggot*.”

“You’re the expert?”

Clifton stiffened. “My brother’s gay, yeah. What the fuck do you care?”

Stepping from the back, Ian shuffled some cards from a black nylon wallet with *Drakkar Noir* stitched on the front, the kind that came free in gift packs. “I don’t have a driver’s license here and never had one in New York. Most people there take the subway. But I’ve got—let’s see. Library card, Social Security card... I think that’s it. Oh—passport, too, but it’s at home.”

“What about state-issued ID?” Russ asked.

“What about it?”

“You need it to work in California. That or a driver’s license,” Clifton said.

Ian shrugged. “Sorry. Albert probably mentioned it. Is there a fine? I can’t afford—”

“Just do it soon, You’ll need a permanent address.” Clifton handed the Social Security card back over the bar and drained the last of his Black and Tan. “Thanks for your cooperation. Oh—one last question. Have you been to Stockton in the last three weeks?”

Ian looked wide-eyed at Russ. “No. Is that where this thing happened? Stockton’s down 205, right?” He jerked his thumb eastward.

Russ stared. The fucker was taunting him.

“Yeah,” Clifton said. “Don’t worry about it.” He got up from the stool.

“I’m not ready to leave,” Russ said.

“Then stay.”

“Fuck you, Mike.”

Clifton looked at him. “Watch it.”

The older chess player mumbled, “Checkmate.”

Russ turned, pulled his camera out of his pocket, and snapped a picture of Ian before following Clifton out. The sudden cold burned his skin. Breaths caught in his throat, which sometimes happened when he got upset. He took his inhaler from his pocket and squeezed off two pumps. “It’s him, Mike.”

“It’s goddamned creative, is what it is,” Clifton said with exaggerated patience. “I can’t believe I let you drag me to that shithole. I missed my kid’s basketball game for this.”

Anger welled from Russ’s gut into his neck and head. He was seized by an urge to hit Clifton in the mouth. Hitting Clifton would be stupid—he was twice Russ’s size—but that first hit might be worth it. He shoved the inhaler back into his jacket.

“Asthma?” Clifton asked. A faint smile curled at his lips. It was a kid’s disease, the smile said. The kind of thing you faked at fourteen to get out of running the mile.

“I have a viral lung infection,” Russ lied.

“Bronchial Hemagitis? That’s what I had a month ago.”

Russ nodded.

“Ha—I just made that up.”

“Fuck you,” Russ said. He walked back toward his car, leaving Clifton on the sidewalk.

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Lying on his pancake-thin bedspread, Russ felt each individual mattress spring pushing up beneath him like a fist. Sky blue was an ugly color. He rolled onto his back. Dull pain seized his chest, sowed through his torso. At its heart, the world was fundamentally dishonest. He’d known this somewhere in his gut, but it pushed through him now, made him cough and ache. He was getting old already, dying slowly in the acrid Valley air. He thought of Harris, how even with all his intelligence, he hadn’t gone anywhere. When had Harris gotten so old? Maybe that would happen to Russ someday; he’d wake up with a square-shaped face wondering how long ago Santa Barbara had ceased being a possibility. He leaned to his side stand and made a note reminding himself to see

what he could learn from tailing the Mad Russian for the next couple days. He was getting behind in his other cases, but he'd catch up.

His inhaler fit perfectly within his palm, and he pressed down and inhaled. A pump of fresh air permeated his bronchial tubes, and the knot inside them released. Supposedly it wouldn't get worse; his doctor said it was just something he had to live with. But how could he believe this, entirely? A doctor's job was to convince you that you weren't dying. But you were; everyone was.

Stretching his arms beneath his back, then along his sides, Russ breathed in. Respiratory routines were supposed to train his lungs not to tense when his breath was strained. He sat up sharply, got out of bed. Fuck it. His lungs tensed and he ignored them.

On the coffee table, his sketchpad was open to his most recent picture. Jackson had been running today, racing invisible opponents to trees and lampposts. He'd been entertaining to watch, but the sketch had suffered; Muriel's nose, her dark eyes, were all that he'd had time to scratch onto the paper.

Fuck it.

Ripping the sheet from the pad, Russ balled it up and threw it into the kitchen. Indulging his anger felt good, and he shoved the ball of his foot into the coffee table, toppling it onto the floor. Fuck it. Fuck Muriel, fuck Clifton, fuck Ian Ramspott. Ian would be exposed. Russ could devote the next two weeks to it, if that was what it took. And fuck Bill Brandt and his fucking DUIs and restraining order. Rising, he kicked one of the upturned table legs, and it cracked. He kicked again, harder, and the thing flew off, shooting to the wall and leaving a small dent. Good. The knot in his chest unfurled slightly. A person couldn't *leave* like that—just drop out of life. Hell, Russ would have done it a long time ago, taken his son and driven south.

He found the phone and dialed Meg's number; she wasn't there, of course—she'd gone to Jackson's game—and this realization infuriated him anew. But he was calmer now, and in control. Directed properly, frustration could make him sharper, like sex or caffeine. It was all chemical. He felt for his keys and wallet, grabbed a package of Pop Tarts, and headed for the door. Veblen Elementary was only a few miles from his apartment.

Jamming his keys into the ignition, he turned it hard, gripped the steering wheel, and backed out quickly, hitting the curb with his tire. They'd all be there, Muriel and Meg and Carlos, all cheering for his son—*his* son—in the stands. They had no right. None of them

had spent years tortured by two-minute glimpses on a school playground. None of them were his father.

He pulled into the parking lot at ten after seven. He'd never been there at night. Things that were shabby in the daylight seemed dangerous in the dark, the taped windows and graffiti no longer suggesting mere neglect, but crime scene potential. If he was raising Jackson, he'd get him involved in karate, boxing, things Russ never had a chance at. Meg's car was in the parking lot, but he didn't see Muriel's, which proved they'd driven together. Carlos, too. He didn't hold anything against the man, having never even met him. Probably Muriel had told him Russ was an asshole and he'd have no reason not to believe her. At least Carlos was Hispanic; Muriel would never be able to tell Jackson that Carlos was his real father.

School gyms were horrible, grubby places, and as he opened the door to the foyer, the smell of stale, contained children's sweat made Russ think of his own elementary school basketball team. He'd loved practice, but hated games, the things kids said about his height. The worst had been a giant sixth grader from Pleasanton who was guarding him and whispered, "You suck worse than last year." Russ had socked him directly in the nose, his knuckles against the hard bone of it, surprised it wasn't soft like he'd expected. They'd suspended Russ for a week and kicked him off the team, but Russ would have quit anyway.

Instead of going through the main doors after paying three dollars and getting his hand stamped, he went to the side door and peered through the glass. A tall, pretty black woman came out of the adjacent bathroom and Russ craned his neck as if he was trying to find someone.

"You waiting out here?" she asked, smiling.

"My son gets nervous if I'm in the stands."

She grinned, pulling open the side door. "Which one's yours?"

"Other team. You wouldn't know him."

The woman squinted and went into the gym. As the door shut, Russ swallowed hard. He just wanted to see Jackson—it wasn't *wrong*. He gripped the metal knob and looked through the glass again, his face against the door. He couldn't believe he was here. The wood smelled like mildew but didn't move, didn't want to turn his eyes to the stands or scare himself away by glimpsing Muriel. Only half the court was visible from his window, and it was empty, but a few seconds later, the teams scampered back and he searched for number

five, finding him quickly in the maroon uniform, dribbling—point guard, *perfect*, with his size and coordination. Jackson jumped a little with each dribble, and it was so funny, the energy and the too-big uniform and his blond hair sticking messily to his forehead, that Russ laughed out loud, and the pressure in his chest lifted and he felt weightless delight despite the sweat and mildew, despite the residual sting in his foot from where he'd kicked the table. None of this mattered because his son—*his son*—was dribbling past a kid four inches taller than him. Jackson threw the ball toward the hoop—good, using the backboard—and the ball bounced from the rim and landed in his hands. He looked momentarily stunned, and in this opportune instant a sea of boys' arms descended on him. Someone blew a whistle and the boys clambered off to reveal Jackson squatting on the ground, clutching the ball protectively to his chest. He'd held onto it—incredible!

God, this was worth it. No matter what happened, this—Jackson—was worth all of it. Jackson made him invincible. He closed his eyes, smiled for the sake of smiling. To be safe, he scanned the seats. No Meg, no Muriel. They must be sitting on the same side Russ was watching from, and he couldn't see those seats from the window. How easy it would be to push the door open, find an empty spot, and slide in. Maybe if he looked less conspicuous. What if he grew a beard, cut his hair, wore tennis shoes instead of boots? Could he sneak into games unrecognized? Russ coughed and took out his inhaler. The teams ran back to his end of the court and Jackson passed the ball to a tall Asian boy, who flung it heedlessly toward the basket. It went in without touching the rim, and Jackson high-fived him as they dashed from Russ's view.

Invisibility wasn't what he wanted, though. He wanted to be seen, talked to, thought about. He wanted to teach Jackson how to screen a boy twice his size, how to box out for a rebound. His height would catch up by high school; meanwhile, being short was an asset—it would force him to master the fundamentals while the taller kids depended on their size.

The metal of his inhaler was warm from his pocket, and Russ put it back. It was a crutch. His doctors said he could use it as often as he wanted, but Russ didn't believe this. They were creating a dependency; you're not dying, and here's an inhaler to prove it. Rely on *this*. People were always telling each other what to rely on. They let you grow up believing in giant, beautiful notions that filled you like a balloon. Fairness was like that. Equality of opportunity. You practically got lynched in high school for suggesting that people weren't created equal, or that not everyone could do whatever he set his mind to.

Then one day you realize you're full of gorgeous ideas that have nothing but air inside. If fairness really existed, Russ would be in Beverly Hills with his son, adding up some movie star's tax deductions.

A halftime buzzer sounded in the gym, and the Mills team streamed toward Russ's door. He panicked for an instant, thought of darting into the restroom, then realized they were just headed to the locker room for a pep talk. He was safe; it was only the team, no one who'd recognize him. They were running hard, despite having just played half a basketball game, and this lifted his mood again. Stepping back a few feet from the door, he squatted and raised his hand as the boys came through. "Good game," he said. "Way to play." Unhesitatingly, they slapped him five as they ran past, and though Jackson was in the middle of them and it couldn't have lasted more than a second, his hand seemed to connect with Russ's longer than the other boys', and his eyes—Muriel's eyes—met Russ's gleefully, in apparent delight at having an unknown fan. Russ's breath caught in his throat. The remainder of the boys raced by, slapping his hand, but Jackson's touch stayed on his palm, and he closed his eyes to hold onto his son's ephemeral, unjudging glance. He finally rose, his eyes burning, as the coach emerged from the gym. Russ shook his hand and managed to choke out, "Good game," before retreating, overcome, to the men's room.

Chapter Twelve

When Lawrence Livermore Labs had called, Rika's first thought had been what it would mean for Dmitri and her. It was unreasonable to feel this way; there was no "Rika and Dmitri," only "Rika" and "Dmitri," entirely separate, who happened to have slept together—now, as of thirty minutes ago—four times.

She'd told the lab director she needed to think about it, then an instant later had realized she didn't, not about an assistant director position for the Infectious Microbiological Substances Unit. So she'd corrected herself and said she couldn't start until fall semester was over at Madison, after Christmas break. The director had balked, but she was firm; the school needed time to find someone else. And not only had her new boss gone for it, but she'd heard a tinge of respect in his voice. This had been two days ago, back when she and Dmitri had only slept together twice. She'd let him come over again, planning to tell him about Lawrence Livermore, but hadn't.

Once, in Spain, Rika had dreamed she was seeing color. The world's grey had faded and for a flash, something bright had appeared in the center of it, and she'd been sure it was color, but after waking, couldn't remember what it looked like. The light of her lamp on Dmitri's bare back reminded her of the dream. She brushed her fingers against his skin. She was dressed, but he'd fallen asleep like this, bare and lovely. She'd never thought of a man's body as lovely before. Five more minutes, then she'd wake him. Becky got home at six tonight.

This final thought planted the word *mistress* in her head, and for the next few minutes, Rika couldn't shake it out. An ugly, hateful word. And there were variations. Considerate mistress. Young, thoughtful mistress. Turning on her side, she traced faults and plateaus in the wall's pallid texture.

Lawrence Livermore didn't have to be the end. She'd move across the Altamont in January, and if they really wanted to see each other, he could drive up on weekends.

She concentrated on remembering Barcelona. On an old woman soaping clothes in a washbasin on her iron balcony across from the Guell Palace. Clay pots rested at the woman's feet, vines spilling down the wall like ropes, laundry dripping from a string. She'd seemed not to notice the tourists in a line outside the Palace, Rika among them, brushing rain from their leather jackets, glancing at their watches and hoping that inside, they'd be allowed

to take pictures. They weren't, it turned out. But Rika had lagged behind, leaning out the palace windows at each level, snapping pictures of the woman across the street. This was the Spain she'd come to see, the humanity she'd hoped to find in Russia. Even though her camera was stolen that night from a sidewalk café on Las Ramblas, she could still picture the old woman as clearly as a photograph.

"Hey." She touched Dmitri's shoulder.

"I'm awake," he whispered. Stretching, he turned to face her on the bed, and she moved forward, curling into him. It was a surrender, with Dmitri. She wasn't in control like she'd been in Spain, but she didn't mind. She liked the firmness of his lips, the way he rocked over her like a big fragile Buddha when they made love, as if he was trying to save them both from something. He reached to the nightstand for his glasses. "What time is it?"

"Six-thirty."

"When does Ruby get home?"

"Depends."

He nodded, sat up, grabbed his shirt from the edge of the bed and threaded his arms through.

"Would it bother you if she saw you?"

He was silent.

"She wouldn't tell Becky," Rika said, then regretted it. Mentioning Becky relegated their relationship to a series of hidings. It only worked when their time together didn't seem stolen.

He buttoned his shirt and rose from her bed, the moon of his buttocks flashing beneath his shirttail when he reached down for his pants. The sight of his bare thighs delighted her, and she thought of them pinning her roughly against the sheets. What, exactly, was so different about him? Some reliability in the skin, or the way he was part of Ellis, like the alfalfa fields or the freeways that cut out in every direction like scalpels. Maybe it suited her not to be with a man who could take her to movies or hold her hand in a park. She imagined him spreading inside her bloodstream, branching through her organs and arteries, and pushing back up, invisibly, through her skin.

"Ruby would disapprove." Dressed, fingering his wooden beads, Dmitri turned around. His buttons were off by one, pushed through hastily, which seemed to connote a rush to leave.

Rika felt a pang of irritation. "I imagine."

"Should we—clarify things, before I go?" Dmitri asked.

"To Ruby?"

"To each other."

"About us?"

"Right."

"I was hoping not to put us under a microscope yet."

"Well—"

"You think we should acknowledge that we shouldn't, on some level, do this, and we are?"

He nodded.

"A conversation to make yourself feel better, and to make me aware that you're not the type of man who thinks cheating on his wife is a good idea?"

Dmitri was silent.

"Shit. That was awful to say." Rika folded her arms and stared at the carpet. The woolen knots of it were curled thickly over each other, like cerebellum. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

"No." She put her arms around him, and they rested against each other. It was unfair not to tell him about Lawrence Livermore. She'd kept planning out how to say it, then she'd change her mind and re-plan.

She didn't believe in *falling* in love. Didn't believe in the mechanics. Love wasn't falling; it was climbing. It required a willingness of ascent. And the problem with Dmitri was that she was willing. She thought about their first night, in front of the glass factory. One of the rites of adolescence, wasn't it?—sex in a boy's car—but new to her, foreign, and the memory of it made her feel comfortable in her own body.

"I want to see you tomorrow," he said.

"Are we still meeting Ian?"

"How about afterwards?"

"It might be late," she said.

"It might."

What did he tell his wife? Becky took classes most evenings, but sometimes he got back late. What school project did Rika become, what Board meeting? She'd decided she

wasn't going to worry about it—his marriage was for him to figure out—but sometimes her guilt trumped her logic. “Is Ian still game?”

“Game as ever. Albert says he's thrilled.”

“Ian's smart. It's a great plan—the whole spokesperson angle.”

“James won't know what hit him.”

Rika bit her lip and sat back down on the bed. “I don't mean to be suspicious, but do you really believe Ian's from New York? The accent comes and goes.”

“I think his story's largely true.”

“It must be frightening to live like that.”

Dmitri paused bent to lift his socks from the floor. “We'll make sure everything stays in Ellis. It's pretty insular.”

“I've never known anyone in the witness protection program. Does he know you told me?”

“For now, pretend you don't. He's not telling Albert.”

“I wonder if that's how he got his scars. Did he say what kind of crime he witnessed?”

“Drug trafficking.”

“Wow.” She studied him. She'd never been with a man nearly Dmitri's age, and parts of him still surprised her. His patience, for one. The greying hairs on his chest, the salty thickness of his skin.

“He assured me he was just a witness, not—you know—a low-level dealer testifying against a bigger one or anything. He said he was a bystander.”

Rika heard Ruby's key in the front door.

“I'm sorry—really sorry, Rika—but is there a back way out?”

“I'll make sure Ruby's in the living room, then show you.”

“Are you upset?” His eyes narrowed, small and lucid. “I can go out the front if you'd rather. She probably saw my truck across the street, anyway.”

Did he make love to his wife in the giant mirror on the bedroom wall? Rika had seen their room, but only briefly. He'd steered her out as if the space marked a crucial boundary.

“All kinds of people park on the street,” she said. “You'll be fine.”

As she watched him slip through the back door, Rika wished she possessed the gumption to walk him to his truck, or kiss him on the sidewalk, or tell him she loved him.

They'd sit in the Ford and discuss how unfortunate it was that they couldn't spend time together properly. They would be mutually re-assured. It would be a well-adjusted affair.

For the next six hours, Rika graded lab reports, ate chicken apple sausage and butternut squash with Ruby, and tried not to think about Dmitri or Lawrence Livermore.

At one in the morning, unable to make herself lie down, she turned off her bedroom light, grabbed her windbreaker, and left the house.

Nurturing insomnia, if insomnia was what she had, was not therapeutic, she knew. But maybe she harbored secret resistance to a cure. She was enamored with nights. Not evenings, but nights—glorious nights when she could sense sleeping breaths behind the walls of a city as she walked alone in the dark through wet, empty streets.

Farther down Central, the sidewalk dimmed. Aside from the few functioning streetlights, the only glow came through the windows of the Duck and the Pint Club. Both closed at midnight on weekdays, but their neon advertisements stayed lit, letters glowing onto the street in a haze. Micrococcus had germinated in the agar she'd collected in front of the Pint Club, and though she had a fresh petri dish in her pocket, she didn't feel like collecting anything new.

It could only end badly, with Dmitri. Logically, there was no ideal outcome. Either: 1. They would stop seeing each other, or 2. They would keep seeing each other, in which case either: A. Becky would find out, and Dmitri's marriage would be ruined, or B: She wouldn't find out, and they'd keep seeing each other secretly—which would lead to what? These were the options. If she really cared about him, wouldn't she stop? She hated herself for lacking control, for knowing she'd steal every minute she could. It was selfish, it was wrong. But she'd climbed madly, frenetically into love, and her strength was crippled, her judgment wrecked.

What she needed was Lawrence Livermore: a well-paying job with regular hours. She'd be in a lab position with upward mobility, two weeks of vacation each year to spend in Spain, and her own apartment with a balcony. They'd had a balcony in San Diego but had rarely used it. This time, she planned to sit out for hours, watching sunsets and reading Hemingway. This time she would be careful, do things right.

A hatchback passed her from behind, and she wondered whether it would help downtown Ellis to stay open later. Her students complained there was nowhere to go after nine, and they were right. Didn't a lot of downtowns these days undergo renovation and

sustain themselves on teenage and twenty-something dollars? Omaha's Old Market, across the river from Council Bluffs, had done it. Crumbling brick was hip, peeling paint was retro. Urban chic. Then again, the only ones in Ellis with money to spend were middle-aged commuters who went to bed before Letterman. Still, the place had possibilities. She hadn't realized this before, but Dmitri's devotion to Ellis was growing on her. It *was* unique; it *was* a patchwork, and she was sad that she'd be leaving. She'd never felt this much interest in a place—eighteen years and she'd still felt no commitment to flat, grey Council Bluffs. Technically, she supposed, her colorblindness made *everything* grey—but Iowa lacked contrast; it had such a consistent intensity of hue that even if it was the most colorful place in the world, she hadn't been able to see it.

Ellis was different. The previous day, on the back of a napkin, she'd composed a list of things she believed in: "1. Rocks, trees, etc." She'd pressed too hard and the pen had ripped through the napkin, so she'd crossed it out and rewritten, more gently, on the next line: "2. Dmitri Harris; 3. My students (most of the time)." Next, she'd written, "4. Justice," but crossed it off because it seemed too fickle, then, "4. The scientific method," but had crossed this off, too, because it wasn't a *thing*, exactly, and had finally written, "4. The election, to stop Greenlake and Bannister." This had surprised her—until she'd seen it written down, she hadn't realized the force of her committal. Writing it made her happy, and it felt oddly satisfying to be important to a place. She was starting to understand why Dmitri had never left.

As she crossed through the alley behind the *Herald* building and came out on Ninth, the hatchback passed again, then made a u-turn and pulled to the curb thirty feet in front of her. She considered crossing to the other side. Paranoid—she kept walking. Leaving the headlights on, the driver opened the door and stepped out. She looked behind her. They were alone. "Hey!" a man called.

Probably he was just lost and needed directions, but Rika's instinct was to run. He was close. She stopped. If he wanted her wallet—anything—she'd give it up quickly, keep her eyes open, memorize his face. "Hey," she called back, hoping someone might hear them, maybe a reporter working late at the *Herald*. "What do you want?"

His silhouette was slim, and as he turned to the side, she glimpsed a long ponytail. Yelling was useless. Six blocks from Central and everything was closed. She squinted into the headlights, too bright to see him clearly, which—shit—could be why he'd left them on.

When he didn't answer, she started to cross the street. A plan formed in her mind: she'd run to Central, double back to Eleventh, where there was a chance of a passing car.

"Rika?" the man called.

A student playing a trick? No—her mind flashed to Todd. Her chest contracted. But the silhouette was too thin. She thrust a fist into the pocket of her windbreaker to make it look like she was clutching mace.

"I have to talk to you."

"Stay there. Who are you?"

He stepped forward. Terror flashed through her. Her instinct overcoming her reason, air swelled in her chest. She'd fight, scratch, bite—anything to keep him away.

The man reached into his car and switched off the headlights. The sudden dilation of Rika's pupils rendered him formless, replaced by twin bright spots in her vision. As her throat contracted, she pictured her adrenal medulla surging epinephrine through her blood. She poured her fear into her legs, and started to turn, but froze. He'd catch her in an instant. She was overcome by heaviness in her limbs, as if she was up to her neck in water. The petri dish tumbled from her pocket and clattered to the asphalt. She didn't move.

"Jesus, I'm not going to hurt you."

Rika gripped the tweezers inside her pocket. Better than nothing. She'd yell. She'd claw him like a maniac. "Get away."

He held out his hand. "Sorry—I'm completely freaking you out. I'm an acquaintance of Dmitri Harris. I just need to talk to you."

He had an insistent mouth, like an angry child. She didn't trust him. Some lycanthropic throb behind the eyes.

"Here." He held out his hand again, and she ignored it. He was wearing some kind of mackinaw, and clean boots that made her wonder if he was in league with James Bannister. "My name's Russ. I had to talk to you alone. I'm a defense attorney." He opened his wallet and handed her a business card.

"Russ Dillinger, Dillinger and Associates," she read. Her voice was still breathy from the adrenaline, but the blood was slowing in her chest. She handed the card back.

"See?"

He still reminded her of Todd. He had the kind of arrogance that suggested he respected himself more than anyone else. "What do you want?" she asked.

"I represent a man who was involved in an incident with Ian."

The witness protection thing. She was glad she didn't know the details. "What kind of incident?"

"It's a criminal matter. Ian was involved in something illegal. Now my client's life is on the line."

She widened her eyes, trying to appear more overwhelmed than she suddenly felt. Just some lawyer. "You mean the bartender?"

He nodded.

"I don't know how I can help. I've only had a few conversations with him." She bit her lip, trying to make it look obvious that she was going over everything Ian had ever said to her. She glanced back toward Central. Still empty.

Russ—if that was really his name—stepped closer. "Look, I've been watching Ian for the past few days. And I've discovered he sees a lot of Dmitri. And I've discovered that *you* see a lot of Dmitri. See the connection?"

She studied him. A muskrat. "I don't know."

He let out a sound that could have been a chuckle or a cough. "Look—I know about you and Dmitri. He's the last guy I would have suspected of infidelity. Ah—got your attention now. The Mad Russian and I go way back. His daughter's a good friend of mine."

Mad Russian—a former student. She swallowed. The light sweat was drying, itching at her back and below her breasts.

"I have pictures," Russ said cheerfully. "Good ones. And I'm willing to show them to Meg, who barely speaks to him as it is, and who will, I'd assume, show them to Mrs. Harris."

Rika tried to look calm, but her heart was screaming. *Pictures?* The first time, she was sure they'd been alone. The second, they'd been at Ruby's. "I don't—I still don't know anything about Ian."

Russ sighed. "I didn't involve you on purpose, all right? I'm not out to get you. His real name is Ian Ramspott. He's hiding in Ellis to avoid testifying in my client's case. My client is innocent—and Ian's the only one who can prove it. I need him to admit his identity, then testify in front of a judge for about three seconds."

"Have you asked him?"

"We had a discussion. He admitted everything, but won't testify."

“Why not?”

“I have no idea. Selfish, maybe. Or ashamed. He beat up my client, threw out a few racial slurs.”

He had to be lying. “I don’t know anything that could help.”

“Find out. Start asking. I just need to prove he’s not who he says he is.”

“Why don’t you go to the police?”

Russ bit his lower lip and a deep crease appeared on his forehead. “If you don’t want Meg to know you’re sleeping with her father, you have two choices. Convince Ian to come forward, or find out enough that you can testify yourself.”

Dmitri had risked everything to be with her. And in a couple of months, she was off to Livermore. A well of guilt spread in her stomach. “I don’t know if he’ll tell me anything.”

“Start asking. And quickly, because my client’s hearing is two weeks from Monday at three-thirty, and I’ll need the information by then.”

She clicked through the days. One day before the election. The debate. “After Ian testifies, he can go?”

“Right.”

But it wouldn’t be right, because they needed him. Maybe one day wouldn’t hurt. And if Ian had nothing to hide—

“I’ll give you a week,” Russ said. “You can reach me at my office. I’m generally in, with the exception of two to two-thirty every afternoon. And don’t tell Harris. If I get a call from him, my next call is to his daughter.”

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After school the next day, Rika went into Dmitri’s classroom and announced that she was leaving early. “I’d hoped I could drive you home,” he said. He was sitting at a student desk, dividing a stack of books and papers into two piles. Last night weighed on her, and she wished she could tell Dmitri. But she knew he’d try to reason with Russ. Better, far better, to handle it herself.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Today I need to get back.”

“For anything in particular?”

“Nothing exciting. Just errands. I need milk. What are you up to?”

He held up one of the books. *The History of San Joaquin County, 1895 to the Present.*

“Pleasure reading?”

“I’m going through my local history stuff, planning Ian’s crash course. Are you still coming tonight?”

She’d forgotten. The meeting. “Seven o’clock, right?”

“Yep. Or whenever you finish dinner, just come on over.”

“We could grab dinner together.”

Dmitri opened a book, closed it, and set it in one of the stacks. “That sounds heavenly. But—I shouldn’t—”

He’d been getting home late. Becky must have said something. “No big deal.” She tortured herself sometimes by imagining Dmitri having sex with his wife in the morning, eight hours before they were together. Repulsive—he’d never do it. “Are you going to be here a while?” she asked.

“A few hours, at least.”

Perfect. “I guess I’ll take off. Oh—there’s a new leak in my classroom ceiling.”

“Another one?”

“I guess I’m better off buying a bucket than filling out a repair request.” She looked him up and down, wetting her lips seductively. “See you tonight,” she said, catching him grin before she closed the door.

Never before had a man made her crumble like this. Dmitri could break her into pieces, restore her. She was helpless. It was more than love; love was a willingness, and some component of her relationship with Dmitri was involuntary. It was brash and iniquitous on a chemical level.

She knew he worried about their ages, calculating the months and days between hers and Meg’s and reciting them to Rika as if throwing down a challenge. Clearly his way of avoiding the larger fidelity question, but Rika didn’t say this. What good was age, she asked him instead. Growing up, they hadn’t watched the same cartoons—big deal. His favorite band was the Jefferson Airplane; she loved Ani DiFranco. So what? True magnetism was a rarity; quibbling over numbers missed the point.

When she reached the Pint Club, Ian was rinsing glasses behind the bar. "You're three and a half hours early for the powwow," he said.

"I came to talk to you."

"Really?" He leaned over. "I'll warn you—I'm unavailable. Still getting over a bad breakup." He grinned. "Just kidding. Not about the breakup, just my intrigue."

"Something tells me you're not my type."

"You read my mind," Ian said, winking. Dmitri was right—his energy was infectious. He was the kind of man a person liked or disliked right away; he forced a reaction.

"Where's Albert?"

"He had to go out for red vermouth. Someone came by and drank it all Friday night."

"Ha. Dmitri says you've agreed to help with the campaign."

He smiled. "Yep. Want something to drink?"

"Sure, orange juice and seltzer. Is this place always so empty?"

"This early it is."

Without knowing what Russ wanted, it was impossible. Rika didn't know where to start. She tried to think of it as a dissection: feel the animal out, slice through its parts to learn how it worked. She took a sip of the drink Ian had set down. "Your seltzer's going flat, I think."

"We've been having trouble with that thing."

She nodded. "It's fine, though. Thanks." She studied the wall above the bar. A parched strip still remained halfway up, a three-foot ring of brick bleached white where the second level had been. "I wonder when Bannister knocked it out."

"Murakami used the second story as a kind of discussion pit," Ian said, watching her.

Rika nodded. "Matters of the soul. Dmitri told me."

"Imagine someone yanking away your entire life for something you didn't really do."

"Scary. His family died of tuberculosis in the camp."

Ian shook his head. "I wish you could get your landlord to talk to the paper."

"Me too. She won't do it. She says it's too personal." Rika tapped the ice in her glass, watching it sink and rise. "So how committed are you to the campaign?"

“Very.”

“How long have you lived in Ellis?”

“I don’t remember the exact date.”

“You don’t remember when you moved?” she asked.

“Do you remember when *you* moved?”

“August second.”

“This year?”

She nodded. She liked Ian. The aggression felt unnatural. Was his marred appearance related to the crime? She didn’t know how to ask. Clearly, he’d been a victim of something. She’d be furious if someone asked her about Rick.

“I assumed you’d known Dmitri longer,” Ian said. “You seem close.”

“We are. We’re good friends. Close friends. Where did you move from?”

“Berkeley.”

She was flummoxed, terrible at questioning. It felt like dialogue from a bad date. She’d cut to the center, expose what she could. “So are you really in the witness protection program?”

“Dmitri promised me he wouldn’t tell,” Ian said, not missing a beat. “That’s private.”

Rika nodded. “Maybe. But—look—it’s important that if you have anything—any secrets that could come out in the next couple weeks—that you’re straightforward about it.”

“What kind of secrets?”

“Being in the witness protection program, for instance. Or if you’re wanted for a crime. If you’ve done anything illegal.” She shrugged, feeling desperate. “Under some false name.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to get at. Dmitri and I have been over this. I know there’s some long-haired jerk lurking around here spreading rumors, but I swear—there’s nothing.”

She didn’t want to mention Russ’s name, didn’t want Ian to connect her with him. He might say something to Dmitri. “I just wanted to make sure. Before the campaign gets going.”

“Dmitri scheduled me a *Herald* interview for tomorrow.”

He hadn’t told her.

“And there’s that debate, of course, not this Monday but next. Me against James Bannister.” Ian put his arms out, miming a flex.

Hopeless. Rika wasn’t even sure, now, that there *was* anything to find out. She barely knew Ian, and she already trusted him more than Russ. “The campaign’s a big deal to Dmitri. It was a hard decision for him to do it.”

“It’s a big deal to me, too.”

“But for Dmitri it’s his life. You and I are coming in, helping out. But he’s been here forty-nine years. Step into this and you have an obligation.”

“I realize that.”

“What did you do in Berkeley, before coming here?”

Ian looked at her carefully. He worked his tongue around the inside of his mouth. “I am precisely who I say I am,” he said softly. “I feel like I’m being interrogated.”

“Sorry. I’m just being cautious.”

Ian leaned on his elbows, looking at her over the bar. “I know. Look, you and I are the outsiders here. It’s up to us to support Albert and Dmitri. I’m trying my best to do that.”

Rika nodded, swirling the contents of her glass. Tilting it to her lips, she finished off the watery orange juice, straining the pulp out with her teeth.

Chapter Thirteen

“Flair Bartending Part Three: Tricks Behind the Counter” required three shot glasses and two pint glasses, which, with Albert’s permission, Ian had borrowed from the Pint Club. The glass-flipping routine that he’d done for Russ and the cop was tricky. He’d developed it in anticipation of Russ’s visit; he’d needed something advanced enough to suggest that he’d tended bar for decades. And he couldn’t stop now. Russ was as smart as he was volatile. He was probably holed up in his law office, plotting ways to trick Ian into giving up *Denouement*.

“Raise one knee to a ninety-degree angle and poise a shot glass on it,” said Dillon Douglas, the director, producer, and star of the “Flair Bartending” series.

Ian did this, using his right knee. His left was too stiff to balance a glass on, and wasn’t terribly effective at supporting his weight, either.

“Now, with a quick flip of the knee, propel the glass to eye level, performing a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree body turn following the flip of the glass. Complete your turn as you catch the glass in your dominant bartending hand.”

Ian jerked his knee, tipping the shot glass meagerly to the carpet, where it rolled beneath his foot. He realized this the instant before stepping down, but not in time to redistribute his weight, and he slipped to the carpet.

“If you’re not catching on, try the knee flip without turning,” Dillon Douglas suggested cheerfully. He had completed the trick perfectly and was holding his shot glass to the light like a diamond.

It wasn’t the first time “Flair Bartending” had sent Ian to the floor of his motel room, but at least he’d fallen on his hip this time. How did a knee “flip,” anyway? “Dillon, you’re my idol,” he said glibly to the television. “Though as a rule, I distrust men with two first names.”

He got up, switched off the video, and undressed. It was working: since making the decision to dedicate himself to Ellis, Theo afflicted him less and less. No eyes, no guilt, fewer Stockton flashbacks. He was in training for the Pint Club, and for the election, and felt more content than he had in years. Everything was falling into place.

As Ian pulled back the shower curtain and turned on the water, he thought of his drive to Stockton, of the moment he’d realized how much it all counted, everything he’d

done and hadn't, the failures piling inside him like stones. Who'd have thought he could create something new, something not only real, but noble? A legacy people would talk about for years—Ian Pinter's crusade against the local real-estate tyrant. Off-Broadway eminence might be closed to him, but he could be a luminary in Ellis. He was in love with the place, the dark underbelly of it—Bannister, Murakami, Greenlake, the impending election—Ellis was drama at its finest. Ian had always depended on cities, and now a city would depend on him. For once, Ian was not only in a virtuous role, but a starring one. Rika's visit had surprised him—somehow, Russ had gotten to her. Probably showing his picture around. And Rika had a pretty obvious crush on Dmitri—she'd developed a bitchy sort of overprotectiveness. Nothing for Ian to worry about.

Methodically, he washed himself, beginning with his feet. With a thin rectangle of yellow hotel soap, he sudsed his hands and rubbed his fingers between his toes, along his soles, and over his ankles and calves, unhurriedly working his way to his neck and ears. On his face, he used a liquid astringent for oily skin, not because his skin was oily, but because it would dry out his face and accentuate his scars.

Control land, you control people, Dmitri said. And the more Ian learned, the more he understood how right this was. It wasn't just big business versus small—though this was part of it—it was an uprooting, a displacement of Ellis by someone it trusted. James Bannister was committing betrayal, even a sort of murder.

After rinsing, he shut off the water, grabbed his towel, and dried his face—funny detail of life he'd never noticed—did everyone else in the world dry their faces first too? He hung his towel on the rack and walked naked to the other room. Facing the mirror sideways, he gritted his teeth, appraising himself. Scarring was changing his profile more than he'd expected, sharpening the line above his left cheekbone. He'd lost weight—drinking more, eating less. And his recent trip to the barber shop had resulted in a choppy cut, a nicked ear, and sideburns. Should he let the *Herald* take his picture this afternoon?

He fantasized briefly about introducing himself to Ray as Ian Pinter. What would his old boyfriend say? He'd be fascinated, take the new Ian out to shrimp scampi to see what would happen. Conversation would be slow, Ian would volunteer nothing. And later that night, in the quiet of Ray's new apartment, wherever it was, he'd know Ian was back. A fuller, realer, rugged Ian. One who was willing to fish and run, who returned home after midnight soaked in sweat from a day of work. The inexhaustible Ian that Ray had wanted.

In the mirror, he watched himself shake his head ferociously, pushing out the image of Ray standing next to their bed, packing his shirts into boxes, of Ray calmly setting his apartment key on the kitchen counter. If only Ray could see him now.

Below the mirror, the dresser was covered with books and articles Dmitri had bestowed on him at the meeting. Emigration and land use should be his big focus, they'd agreed. Ian took the thickest book from the stack and thumbed through it, then set it down. Emigration and land use, from what he'd read already, *were* the history of Ellis. He pulled out a Xeroxed article:

A History of Reluctant Relocation

In the mid-1800's, at the eastern edge of the Altamont Pass, was a small village called Ellis, a home to one hundred hardworking pioneers.

Ian sighed. The tone of regional historical writing always irked him, such contrived weight and artificial deification. He kept reading:

Later, the Central Pacific railroad line was built fifteen miles from the village, bisecting the only major road that crossed the Altamont Pass. In August of 1878, Ellis's residents loaded everything into wagons and transplanted itself to this new crossroads. This included lifting forty-five buildings from their foundations and moving them whole.

Location, location, location—one of California's great themes. Ian marked the page and set the book on top of the stack. He opened a drawer, plucked out Russ's boxer-briefs, and put them on. They drooped at the waistband, and he regarded them in the mirror, then took them off and put on a newer pair. He'd almost thrown away Russ's clothes, but no one could prove they were the attorney's, and wearing them gave Ian a sense of triumph, reminding him what he'd been through. Since the day Russ had shown up with the cop, Ian had worn the yellow Corona shirt often; it would taunt Russ if he ever barged into the Pint Club again. *Denouement* was too powerful, Ian too smart. Russ needed to be shown that for some people, disguises were as natural as their own skin.

For this afternoon at the *Herald*, though, Ian needed something classy. Picking through his drawer, he chose a pair of Kenneth Cole khakis that made him look straight, arrogantly so, and a white collared shirt he'd bought at Hazel's. If only he could have five

minutes in his Berkeley apartment to gather his old shirts. Cotton chafed his skin, but he couldn't afford anything better. He unbuttoned the collar and rubbed beneath it, remembering the tattoo, *JB*, on the black man's neck, and wondering what gang affiliation it stood for. Thank God, truly, that Ian had found him before he'd debilitated someone permanently.

His tattoo wasn't visible through the sleeve—one benefit of cotton shirts. A tie would have been nice, but having never owned one, he didn't trust himself to choose something appropriate. Next time, he'd borrow one from Dmitri. Rugged men always owned a few.

At yesterday's meeting, they'd sketched out a rough plan for the week and a half leading up to the election. Rika had drawn a tidier version of Dmitri's map that marked out Bannister's transactions. After the *Herald* published Ian's interview tomorrow, Albert would deliver copies of the map to downtown business owners. They'd explained to Ian how the only real contest for City Council was between James Bannister and Montgomery O'Brien, a milktoast politician whose four years on City Council had been remarkably nondescript. They'd let O'Brien know what they were doing, but wouldn't endorse him explicitly, just discredit Bannister. Dmitri seemed to think that the debate was what would top everything off. He'd already started pushing the paperwork through.

It all thrilled Ian—no one, not even Dmitri, had a clue what would happen. They couldn't even agree on whether Ellis was more liberal or more conservative. For all they knew, the accusations against Bannister might be dismissed by Ellis altogether, or light through the city like wildfire. Ellis's population was too inconsistent to speculate about. Only ten thousand people out of forty thousand had voted in the last local election, and in the four years since, five thousand more had moved in. Who knew whether the new ones would vote, or what they thought about anything?

Ian found the *not* knowing—the *chance* of it—intriguing as hell.

He rolled up his sleeves, studied himself in the mirror, then rolled them down again and buttoned them. More professional. Slipping his hands into his pockets, he turned to the side, then faced the mirror squarely. He would read Ellis history for an hour at the library, then pop into the Duck for a sandwich and coffee, and head to his interview. Carefully, he selected the four slimmest volumes Dmitri had loaned him, and zipped them into a cloth satchel he'd bought at Variety Bargain Mart.

As a final touch, Ian spritzed his wrists with Old Spice. He despised cologne, especially cheap ones, but it would help him get into character.

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In the lobby of the *Ellis Herald*, framed front page spreads adorned the wall with less attention to aesthetics than quantity. Thirty were jammed inches apart from one another above the empty receptionist's desk, and fifty more graced the opposite wall, all in cheap aluminum frames. The lobby reminded Ian of chain restaurants, baseball stadiums, car dealerships—other places bedecked as museums to themselves. He dinged the bell and sat on the couch to wait. Yellow foam protruded from a tear in the plaid armrest, and Ian picked at it, then noticed the stack of *Heralds* beside the door. He took one and flipped to the crime section, leaning forward to avoid smearing newsprint on his shirt.

Nothing on Theo, just as there hadn't been yesterday or the day before. Monday, Ian had learned that he—the old Ian—had been declared officially deceased. At the library, he'd meant to check the Berkeley Rep's website to see if they'd done a tribute, donated a few hundred dollars to a charity in his memory, at least. But he'd forgotten, and the forgetting gratified him. He wondered what had happened to his shirts and cookware.

He folded the paper, tapping it against his teal satchel—gauche, but buying teal instead of navy had been one of his exercises in *wanting*—and mentally recounted everything he'd read about Ellis. Dmitri had said there was a lot to learn, but Ian hadn't realized *how* much until he'd begun delving into it at the library. With such little time, he didn't know how much of the chummy colloquialism-ridden texts he'd be able to commit to memory. He let out a long breath, tossed the newspaper back onto the stack, and resumed picking at the foam. Nerves began massing inside him. Dmitri had set up the appointment with some reporter friend of his—how much had he divulged about Ian?

Footsteps clicked nearer from somewhere in the hall, and a parade of stinging ants crawled beneath Ian's skin. It wasn't stage fright. With stage fright you knew precisely what could go wrong. There were parameters. You knew how you'd slipped up in rehearsals, knew what to avoid. No, the nerves that seized Ian now, as he stared down at the khakis—which suddenly weren't his, didn't *feel* like his—was the fear that the potential

catastrophes were beyond his comprehension. Two or three wrong facts would fuck up his credibility. Any waver, any fear or uncertainty, could ruin everything.

A small blonde emerged from the hall. "You're here for Walter Garrett?"

Ian nodded. She clicked forward and opened the low swinging door. Ian trailed her up a series of steps, many of which had been shoddily patched with scrap wood. How long had the building had been here? Middle of downtown, and made of brick, before earthquakes were a concern. Fifty years? Around the time Murakami was being dragged from his home in the middle of the night, taken to an unfamiliar city, unaware that his farm and buildings would be taken, his wife and children killed by tuberculosis. It chilled Ian to think about it.

As they entered the newsroom, Ian's nostrils were stung by the chemical stench of photography development and spilled ink, a combination he'd encountered once before, in a failed interview as an advice columnist for the *Washington Square News*. A double line of cubicles cut through the center of the room, their walls carpeted powder blue. Obnoxiously unprivate, for a profession that housed so many secrets. The receptionist pointed to a gold sign: "Walter R. Garrett, Editor-in-Chief," then clicked back down the stairs. As she left, he caught a whiff of smoke on her dress—Parliaments, maybe—and wished he'd stepped out for a cigarette while he'd waited.

Had Dmitri purposely neglected to mention that his friend was the editor? Editors didn't usually write, did they? Maybe at such a small paper. Clearing his throat, Ian put his hands in his pockets and surveyed the room, collecting himself. The place was practically deserted, nothing like he imagined newsrooms, full of young men puffing on cigarettes and hammering on typewriters. Near the sports desk, a man with a beard to the middle of his chest tapped a radio with a pencil. Ian looked back at Garrett's door, at the gold sign. He unzipped his satchel, pretending to rifle through. His wrists were damp, and he wiped them on his shirt, leaving wet marks. Shit. He'd wait to let them dry. The door opened.

Reflexively, Ian stuck out his hand and forced a smile.

The older man looked at him curiously. "You must be Ian Pinter. Been out here long?"

"Not at all. I thought I heard you on the phone and didn't want to interrupt."

"Oh—well, come in." He moved a copy of the *Herald* from a folding chair and gestured for Ian to sit. "Most of the time I'm just talking to myself."

Ian crossed his legs at the knees, then uncrossed them and planted his unpolished brown wingtips firmly on the floor. Garrett settled himself on an identical folding chair behind his desk. Pockmark remnants lined his jowls. He was enormous—only vaguely overweight, but tall and broad, as if a normal man's body had been enlarged by a third.

"So you're a friend of Dmitri," Garrett said, adjusting his glasses.

Ian nodded, pleased Dmitri had said this. "He's a wonderful man. You went to high school together?"

"Yep, then he worked for me a couple summers, scraping Meg's tuition together. I was always trying to get him to come to his senses and work for me permanently." Walt grinned. "Did he tell you he flunked my son?"

"No."

"Twice. Best thing that ever happened to Jared. Started putting his face to the grindstone, or however the saying goes. He's a sports trainer for the high school now."

"You must be proud," Ian said.

"Sure. Glad he stayed in town, too. So many of these kids run off somewhere after college."

"Absolutely," Ian said, studying Garrett's hair. Not a toupee, but oddly stringy, hanging halfway over his ears like an oversized Kangol cap.

"You have any kids?"

"Not yet," Ian said. He leaned back and rested his right calf over his left knee, accidentally kicking his satchel in the process. He didn't look down.

"Married?" On Garrett's own freckled left hand was a thick gold band, and Ian's eyes went to a photograph on the desk in which Garrett—a much younger Garrett, he guessed, but who looked almost identical to the Garrett in front of him—was exchanging vows with a heavy Asian woman. The frame was inscribed with a verse from Corinthians. "Twenty-six years for Samantha and me last April," he said, seeing Ian notice it. For Garrett, it seemed, marriage went to the core of a man's credibility.

"I used to be married," Ian said quickly. "But it didn't work out." Shit—what would divorce imply? Then again—he hadn't *said* divorce.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Ian nodded, groping for an explanation. He needed to regain his footing, earn Garrett's trust. Evince stability, honesty—Garrett had a finely-tuned bullshit detector, Dmitri

had said. “Actually, she passed away. Pneumonia.” Ian bit his lower lip. Better a widower than a heathen. “I don’t talk about it. Nearly a decade ago.”

“I’m sorry. Dmitri didn’t tell me.”

“We’ve—never talked about it.” Was Garrett buying it? His face held an earnest curiosity. Maybe he was suspicious, wondering what interest an outsider could have in Ellis. How did they know Garrett wouldn’t collect his quotes and run to James Bannister with them?

Garrett removed his glasses and set them on his desk. “So. Been in Ellis long?”

He was sure Garrett knew the answer already. “About a month.” Ian felt himself waning, diaphanous. Garrett could see through him—not just his fabricated dead wife, but Theo and Stockton, his failure as a dramaturge and an actor, leaving NYU, Ray walking out on him—all of it. Ian’s words hung awkwardly in the tiny office. Looking down, he saw that the satchel had toppled over. One of the Ellis books had slid onto the floor, in Garrett’s plain view. Horrified, Ian reached down and stuffed it back into his satchel.

“Reading up?” Garrett asked.

“I was a history major in college, so this kind of thing interests me,” Ian heard himself say. His voice sounded tinny.

“Me too. What was your period? I did Renaissance.”

Ian hadn’t taken history since his junior year of high school. “Modern wars,” he said. “You know, Vietnam. Korea.” He scratched his neck, and as he did, he could feel that his armpits were soaked, probably through his shirt. Deep in his intestines, something lurched. “I’m sorry, but where’s the restroom?” Ian asked, clutching his stomach. “I feel ill.”

“Down the hall, around the corner.”

Ian rose, then on second thought, grabbed his satchel. He didn’t want Garrett looking inside.

The bathroom door was marked with foot-high letters that read, “MENS’.” There was only one toilet, and Ian poised himself over it, vomited a mouthful of bile, and flushed. On the wall, someone had written, “Shit happened.” He lowered the lid and sat on top, trembling. From the beginning, Garrett hadn’t trusted him. And why should he? Ian had been an embarrassment—a fraud. That was why he’d gotten so nervous in the library, he realized—and the desperate, suffocating knowledge of this hummed through his head and

veins. This was more than stage fright; it was the absolute certainty that he *could not handle* what Ellis required of him, what he'd required of himself, what *Denouement* had required all along.

Standing abruptly, Ian struck the stall with the side of his hand and rubbed it, stinging, on his pants. Did he have any business being here, convincing people they could rely on him? He thought of Albert, giving him a job under the table, Albert who'd started his own business and depended on Ian to save it. People *trusted* Ian—why? In Berkeley, he hadn't even gotten callbacks. He remembered yesterday's meeting, the hard lines around Albert's mouth, Rika's serious, mismatched eyes, Dmitri's bitten nails shushing through his hair as he stared at the map. Nothing meant more to Dmitri than Ellis did, and he'd put his trust in Ian. Ian had convinced him he could.

What tenuous threads, the things people told each other. Ian exhaled and sat on the lid, rubbing his wrist on his forehead, which made the sweating worse. Most of the time, what people told you was all you had to go on. People claimed to be suspicious, but when it came down to it, they trusted each other. They had no choice.

He saw it now, more clearly than ever. Ray was right—there was nothing genuine *in* him. No matter how hard he'd tried to change everything by becoming Pinter, he'd been kidding himself. He was a great fucking shell of an individual, and he'd cast himself in the lead and was blowing it. For the first time since the night in Stockton, he wished that Theo Lacey had expended one neat, hard bullet through his head. But—he laughed bitterly—he'd failed there too, hadn't he?

A door slammed somewhere inside the *Herald* building. Ian stood again, quickly, locked the door. Heat filled him, and he felt his heart pumping. He was flooded with anger at all of it, at Theo and Russ, at James Bannister for putting Albert and Dmitri and all of Ellis into this fucking wretched situation.

All at once, he was suffocated by fury, caged in it. The heat pounded a quick beat in his ears and he balled his hand and punched the stall door as hard as he could. Pain shot through his wrist, but he punched again, harder, and this time the blow numbed his entire hand. He punched again, hardly feeling anything, and the layers of pain made him think of the vacant lot in Stockton, how he'd lain powerless on the grass while Theo Lacey beat him. When he'd finally closed his eyes, he'd seen the flash of anger in his attacker's, his rage at being called *nigger*, and Ian remembered how much, right before losing consciousness, he'd

admired the man.

That—anger. That was it.

Sickness grabbed his stomach again and he knelt against the toilet and vomited twice more, convulsing, gripping the porcelain from beneath with both hands.

Anger was what he'd admired most in his attacker. Yet all he'd done since agreeing to head the anti-Bannister campaign was intellectualize. Forget sympathy, forget reason and logic—he didn't feel it. He felt anger. Forget Garrett's small-talk. He could do it. He might have to construct a few details to get his point across, but he could be genuinely angry, and maybe—maybe—it would work.

Raising his head, Ian was dizzy, but stronger. He steadied himself against the toilet and stood. Stinging pain swelled in his hand. He walked to the sink and appraised himself in the mirror. Miraculously, he hadn't sweat through his shirt. The faucet wouldn't issue hot water, so he washed his hands in cold, then rinsed his mouth. Crimson fissures had appeared in his eyes, and he splashed water into them to dissolve the color. As usual, his skin was pale. Ghostly pale. Blue-pale. In eighth grade, his class had gotten a pet albino rat, and a gorgeous, popular boy—a boy, in fact, who'd had a recurring role in Ian's private imaginings—had decided Ian bore an uncanny resemblance to it. The boy had contrived a chant: *Ian the Albino, white as snow, Ian the Albino, go Ian go.*

He held his hands under the drier for a few minutes, then walked back to Garrett's office, opening the door without knocking. Garrett was on the phone but gestured toward the chair. Ian shook his head, crossed his arms, and set his satchel next to the door.

"You leaving?" asked Garrett, hanging up.

"No. I just prefer to stand."

"Are you all right?"

"I was ill. I had the Duck's French dip for lunch. It didn't agree with me."

Garrett winced. "It did the same thing to me once. You've got to tell them no gravy."

"Usually on Thursdays I go to Lizzie's."

"For the turkey cranberry?"

"Right—"

"But she stopped putting cream cheese on them," Garrett said, wrinkling his nose.

"Cream cheese was the whole point of that sandwich."

“Absolutely.” The editor nodded gravely.

Ian’s index finger continued to throb, and he wondered whether he’d sprained it. He uncrossed his arms and eased his hands into his pockets. He studied Garrett’s broad forehead and rugby-player chest. A tiny gap had opened, a space in which the two of them could relate. Ian summoned Theo Lacey’s eyes. Funny, how he could siphon anger, force it to collect inside him. Happiness never obeyed the same way.

“So.” Ian leaned against the door, widening his eyes to signify that he was moving their conversation to a different topic. “What has Dmitri told you?”

“He said you have some hot news on Bannister.”

“Mind if I sit, after all?”

“Go ahead.”

Ian pulled up his pant legs an inch or two by the front of his thighs before settling into the chair, business-style. “Dmitri tells me you’ve lived here your whole life. Like I said, I’ve only lived here a month.”

Garrett nodded.

“In a very big, and I think justifiable way, I feel like a fraud because of this. But Ellis is my life now.” He shrugged. “I can’t stay silent with something this important.”

“Absolutely.” Garrett was gripping his pen between his thumb and forefinger, but he hadn’t written anything down.

Ian paused for effect, studied the deepening hue of his right hand, then looked back at Garrett. “If Bannister wins this election, downtown will be gone in under a year.” He let a silence pass between them. A silence, not a pause. Harold Pinter had established the difference. Peter Hall had once held a rehearsal for *The Homecoming* just to teach actors to tell the difference between a period, a pause, and a silence.

Garrett leaned back in his chair and removed his glasses. “Is this just speculation? I mean, other people have suggested that downtown won’t hold up well after Greenlake opens.”

“It’s systematized,” Ian said. “Once you know what to look for, it becomes clearer.” He unzipped his satchel, withdrew a copy of Rika’s map, and scooted his chair up. “Bannister’s bought all the property along here.” He took the pen from Garrett and circled the numbered streets west of Ellis Boulevard, between Sixth and Tenth. “I’ve marked everything he owns in green. The stars are what he’s bought it in the last three years, since

he bought Holly Sugar. Okay, see these?"

Garrett nodded.

"They're the ones he's raised rent on in the last three years. All downtown."

"Okay."

"Now look at the ones in orange. This is where he's lowered rent."

The phone rang and Garrett pressed a button, shuttling it to somewhere else in the building. "So he's moving downtown out. Deliberately?"

"That's my theory."

Garrett took the pen back and drummed it on his desk, moving his head a little to the idle beat. "But it's his property. If he drove everyone out, there'd be no rent for him to collect. Even if he's looking to sell, no one will buy anyplace downtown if the whole area sinks."

"Unless he rezones," Ian said. "Which only the owner can propose. And only the members of the City Council, and the City Manager they appoint..."

A flicker of understanding crossed Garrett's ruddy face and crept, resplendent, into his eyes. Then, as if he'd caught himself, he leaned back, crossing his arms skeptically. "You figured all of this out?"

Ian looked down. They'd decided he should lie about everyone else's involvement. "Yes."

"Dmitri," Garrett said, smiling. "Ha."

Ian swallowed. "No—"

"Right, *you* did it. Sure, sure—gotcha. Can I keep this?"

"It's your copy."

He raked the tips of his short nails down his face, scratching his pockmarks, then pulled a fresh pad of paper from his desk, popped the cap from his pen, and poised it on the paper. "Heavy." He was getting excited, for as much as he was trying to contain it, wiggling in his seat and playing with the pen cap. "I want to go over all this from the beginning. Ultimately, it still comes down to speculation, but you're getting us started. None of this is off the record, is it?"

Ian let a pause pass. "There's a bit more to Bannister than that," he said.

"Hmm?"

Ian relished the suspense. This tiny, gorgeous place, its very pulse, its little lifeblood

converged on him. Ian let another pause pass. "It's a long story," he said at last. "How much time do you have?" He knew, of course, that it wouldn't matter. Garrett was hooked.

"All afternoon."

Ian nodded, measuring this with his eyes. History seeped into him. Everything he'd learned from Dmitri and Albert, the bits he'd read, and his own anger welled up like a closed, shaken bottle. He was standing in for all of Ellis, and in that small moment, he felt as real as he did washing dishes at the Pint Club. This was a feeling to live for.

"Walt," Ian asked, leaning forward, widening his eyes. "Have you ever heard of Lee Murakami?"

Chapter Fourteen

The variation in Dmitri's waking patterns was another change Rika had brought about. Before he'd met her, he'd opened his eyes each morning at five-thirty (half an hour before the alarm), gone outside, smoked two cigarettes, boiled water for tea, read the paper until the inception of Becky's daily battle with the snooze button, whereupon he showered and dressed, then nudged her awake. Now it differed; sometimes he woke with the alarm, sometimes on his own at a quarter to five. Unbeknownst to her, Rika made him acutely aware of routines, of all the things he'd done thoughtlessly, every day, for years. Small things. Colors, for instance; his toothbrushes had always been blue, his combs black: why? He didn't know, and it was un-Zen, allowing details like this to go unnoticed. Breaks in routine were heightening his senses, making him more aware of each waking action. He longed to become truly awake, constantly aware.

On this particular morning, Dmitri had been awakened by the thin, light thump of a newspaper on his front walk. He rose quietly from bed, taking care not to disturb Becky. Her hair was splayed across her satin pillowcase, her grandmother's quilt bunched around her strong calves. He felt a fatherly tenderness, watching her sleep, and walked to the foot of the bed, pulled off the quilt, shook it out, and tucked it around her shoulders. Last night he'd come back from the Pint Club late, and there had been something he'd needed from Becky, something he'd wanted to demand. Looking at her now, he realized what it was: curiosity. She knew how much time he was spending on Greenlake and the election. He wanted his wife to ask thoughtful questions, admire his initiative. But, then, it was something they'd never asked of each other—it was his fault, too. He reached to the bed, stroked her cheek with his thumb. "Equalizing" had always been their excuse. Did she sense it, too? She'd never considered leaving, but was she happy?

Turning from the bed, he collected his lighter and cigarettes from the nightstand and padded barefoot to the front door, where the *Ellis Herald* and *San Francisco Chronicle* lay in plastic bags on his doorstep. Instead of smoking first, then reading inside as he normally did, Dmitri slid the *Herald* from its wrapping and sat on his front stoop. He lit his cigarette, not letting himself look down yet. When he'd dropped by the Pint Club, Ian had told him that by the end, Garrett was eating out of his hand. Dmitri was dubious; Walt Garrett could make anyone think so, then surprise him in print the next day. He'd done this to Dmitri with the

flag-burning incident. It was one of the reasons their friendship had grown strained. He unfolded the paper.

The *Herald* headline read: *Greenlake to Double Anchor Stores.*

Bringing the cigarette to his lips, Dmitri closed his eyes and inhaled the first nicotine-laden breath of the day. God damn. This couldn't be real—he was misreading. He adjusted his legs into a quarter-lotus and looked again. “Damn it,” he said under his breath. It was a huge article—three columns and a color photograph showing James in a yellow hard hat, shaking hands with bay area businessmen. “Real estate developer secures expansion,” the caption read.

Dmitri tried to breathe deeply, but his chest felt pained and hollow. His doctor said the smoke would carve him out puff by puff until there was nothing left, and maybe this was true. Maybe he was starting to feel it. He read impatiently, scanning the list of stores Bannister had added—Pottery Barn, Borders, Williams and Sonoma, among others. All more upscale than the ones he'd already announced—James must have purposely waited to unveil these near the election. His final plea to new relocatees—who needed the bay area when Bannister could bring it to Ellis?

Dmitri's insides stirred. The bulldozers were practically in his backyard. Didn't anyone understand how tremendous Ellis was, how much it offered? He loved its farms and factories, the old versus new, all its dusty unpredictabilities, the way everything spilled into everything else. Even its traditions were chaotic. The Cinco De Mayo parade, for example—a relic of the days Ellis's population had been over a third Hispanic. Though this percentage had decreased, the celebration was as popular as ever, and despite the rule that participants had to follow a “Mexican cultural theme,” they incorporated whatever interested them: Chia pets (which sell more successfully in Mexico than the U.S., Adrienne Travis had pointed out), boom boxes blaring Kid Frost (who was Mexican, after all), a ten-foot-tall picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. (who would object to *that?*). It was better than the Fourth of July.

He loved the historical relics, the fits and starts, the uneven nature, the lack of planning, the relevance of the past. Plunk Greenlake down and everyone might as well move to Pleasanton, Livermore, Walnut Creek.

He sucked down the last of his cigarette, lit another, and turned the page, scanning for Ian's interview. Was it naïve to think that if they campaigned hard enough, they might

change all this?

He found it on A-5, with a decent headline: “Questions Raised Over Bannister’s Candidacy.” Dmitri calmed as his eyes raced over the print. Three full-page columns, well-written. The quotes were terrific. Ian’s strongest was, “James Bannister’s methodical crippling of downtown to bolster his own real estate holdings amounts to a betrayal of the community who’s made him what he is.” Brilliant—Dmitri couldn’t have done better himself. No map, though, and—he scanned the article again—no Murakami. What had happened? He’d call Walt later.

By the time the alarm clock sounded, Dmitri was in the shower. It was only a minute or two before he heard Becky shut it off; apparently, she’d slept well. What would it mean to return—fully return—to his wife, re-dedicate himself to their marriage? He imagined retiring, traveling together, fixing up the house. But every scenario he tried on was interrupted by memory. He remembered how she’d laughed, not kindly, at a potato salad he’d made (absent mayonnaise, he’d used sour cream). He remembered how she complained, whenever they’d showered together, that he blocked the warm water.

Sometimes, when he was with Rika, he imagined what it would be like to go to work one day and never come back to Becky. Mentally, he’d plotted out the details: he’d use the small green suitcase he’d had since college, and do it on a Friday evening so she’d have the weekend to recover, to call him, for them to meet over dinner, for him to explain that he wasn’t interested in counseling. He’d stay with Rika, at Ruby’s—they’d get an apartment, move in together. He imagined returning each day after work to Rika’s softness, her intellect, her easy ways.

When he went into the kitchen, Becky surprised him by patting him lightly on the rear. “Morning, Hon,” she said.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“I am. I didn’t wake up once last night. You must have tuckered me out.” They’d made love; he’d forgotten. She poured cereal into a bowl for herself. “Want Special K?”

“It’s sort of flavorless.”

“You’ve burned off all your taste buds smoking, is the problem. They have fruit-flavored now. See?” She held up the box, which depicted an attractive shower of raspberries.

“All right.” He hated berries, but today he’d pretend to like a cereal whose featured

ingredient was one of his least favorite foods. "Have you seen the paper?"

"I *have*. Exciting news." She shook hard flakes and disgusting, wrinkled berries into a bowl and set it in front of Dmitri.

"Do you think people will respond?"

"I'm sure of it," she said, nodding.

He drowned the cereal in milk to the brim of the bowl (cereal was the only place his doctor let him drink milk, so he made the most of it), and watched his wife. She ripped open a Splenda packet, poured it over her palm, and sprinkled it into her cereal, biting her lip as she concentrated on getting an even distribution. The soft exactitude of the sprinkle made Dmitri smile, and he was touched, too, that she'd read Ian's interview. He and his wife had been best friends once. After they were married, they'd said so often, reassuring themselves that Meg was meant to be, that they'd have ended up together anyway. He'd believed it, then, and found that some part of him still did. "It was kind of you to read the article," he said. "It really was. I didn't know you were following my anti-Bannister campaign."

"It's no big deal." Becky spooned cereal into her mouth unevenly, making a sucking noise with her lips. "It was right on the front page."

"Ha—I *wish*—it was on A5."

"No it wasn't." She reached to the table and held up the color photograph of Bannister.

"*That's* the article you read?"

"Was there another one?"

"Why did you say it's exciting, then?"

"Don't get all haughty—you're the one always wishing we had a decent bookstore. This Borders is supposed to be even bigger than Pleasanton's. These are some classy stores we're getting—did you see the list?"

He nodded slowly. "And you think people will respond—to the stores?"

"Right." She stopped, studying him. "Was that not what you meant?"

"It was exactly what I meant," he said evenly. "Classy stores."

"Why aren't you eating?"

"Because I hate berries."

"I asked if you wanted it. You said you did."

"I've always hated berries. Why would I suddenly wake up with a predilection?"

"If you don't like them, tell me not to buy them." Her jaw tightened. "Or, maybe you could do some shopping yourself. Then you'd be free to pick whatever damned cereal you want."

"Great," Dmitri said dryly. "Our communication, once again, is flawless." He grabbed his bowl and rose, but it was still full, and a wave of milk splashed onto the table. He dropped the bowl into the sink, and it clattered against the metal, splashing the adjacent cupboards with milk. "Christ," he said to irk her. He turned the water on and pulled a stack of napkins from the table.

"Don't clean that with those."

Silently, he began wiping milk from the cupboard doors with a napkin.

"That's very considerate, Dmitri. Now I get to re-wash everything because it's dried sticky. Thanks."

"And thank *you* for noticing I can't stand berries. For God's sake, twenty-seven years—"

"I guess I'm too busy doing all the shopping, the cooking—"

"And if I didn't work fourteen hours a day—"

"You *choose* to work fourteen hours a day."

"That's not the point."

"Every week I go to the store and buy *exactly* what the doctor says you can eat. You think that doesn't take time? You think I wouldn't rather be sitting around with my friends, shooting the breeze about real estate?"

"*Shooting the breeze?*"

"Oh, I'm sorry—" she transitioned into the lofty baritone that meant she was imitating him. "Assessing the sociopolitical implications of the construction of specific real estate ventures."

Dmitri wasn't done cleaning, but he threw the pile of napkins into the trash.

The misunderstanding was too fundamental. What had made him think it was possible they'd work anything out? She'd never understood what was important to him—she made him feel guilty for enjoying his work, for being involved with the community. Being with Becky suddenly enraged him—it was false. All the time he'd devoted, for what? To be abandoned every night for yoga, art, pilates? There was no point. "We've never really been friends, have we?" he snapped. "Just done a wonderful job convincing ourselves."

She didn't move. It felt good, finally, to come out with something mean. He stiffened his jaw. Her mouth was open, her tongue pressed against her lower lip, and she closed it and walked to the bedroom.

A minute later, he heard his wife blow her nose: she was crying. An apology would let her stop, and he wasn't going to give it to her. He wasn't sorry. Ignoring Ian's article, mocking him about the campaign—he couldn't handle it. More sounds came from the bedroom, and a cold thought occurred to him: this was an advantage of having a wife who cried often. You became immune, built yourself up. He brushed his teeth in the guest bathroom, grabbed his backpack, and left for work.

To calm himself, he drove the long way. Wind thrashed over Patterson Pass, drawing a curtain of shadow over the dusty expanse, bending alfalfa, pulling clouds on threads of pressure, rocking the Ford like a small bright boat. He couldn't remember the last time they'd had a full-fledged argument. What would it mean that he didn't apologize? That he had no plans to?

As he pulled into Madison's back parking lot, he rolled down his window and lit a cigarette, not caring, for the moment, whether any of his students saw. When he'd finished, he lit another, staring beyond the chain-link fence where the corroded brick of the Heinz factory met the sky. One of its smokestacks had crumbled. It must have fallen during the night. Shooting the breeze—*damn* it. How could she say that when he was trying to help the city that had given both of them a stable life, had given them a place to raise their daughter? How could she care so little?

Smoke rose in skyward eddies from Dmitri's cigarette and beyond it in his rearview mirror, the wooden skeletons of Greenlake ruttled upward.

No matter how much everything changed, could he ever leave it? He'd spent his life here, not including living in Fresno for college. His fingerprints lined Madison's walls. Testimonies to his work stood across campus—not just the students he'd encouraged, but physical markers—the tree the Philosophy Club had planted, the wall in the cafeteria designated for student murals, the creation of an honors program. He didn't flatter himself—these things, or better ones, might have happened without him. But he'd made his time useful, devoted himself to incremental change.

He stubbed out his cigarette. Forty minutes to first period. Sometimes he meditated before class, but today, he would think of Rika. Recounting her details calmed and refreshed

him as much as meditation. Strong shoulders, a tendency to liken people to animals (she wouldn't tell Dmitri whether she'd categorized him this way, but he didn't think so), soft thighs, a fondness for buttoning his shirts. It was hard to believe they'd only made love half a dozen times. Most recently, in the moment where, with Becky, Dmitri's lovemaking always quickened and the world drew in while he held her head in the crook of his arm (the moment in which the act turned solitary, dark, private, irreversible), he'd slowed with Rika, wouldn't let himself finish, kept kissing her. It cultivated his knowledge of her, of what it meant for the two of them to be together.

What *did* it mean? It violated several important contracts: the Commandments (to which he generally subscribed), school policy, marriage vows. It wasn't just about the sex, either—though why shouldn't it be? Why shouldn't raw rich wonderful sex be its own beginning, middle, and end? He craved her on multiple levels. With Rika, he felt his strongest, his clearest, his most impassioned about Greenlake and teaching. He'd dropped three pounds, his students' grades were rising, and he was smoking less. Had Becky had picked a fight because she sensed he was changing for the better? Was she jealous?

Exhaling deeply, he slipped off his jacket and put it in the passenger seat. He needed to remember that time measured out unpredictably. Chaos would take over; chaos was in charge. It had found Dmitri and appeared to have little interest in letting him go.

He was startled by knocking, and turned to see Rika at his passenger window. She raised her hand when he looked over, an innocuous, four-fingered wave she might have given to anyone. He leaned over, opened the door, and she climbed in. "Out here setting a bad example for the youth of Ellis?"

Smiling, he watched her settle into the seat. He couldn't kiss her here, of course—couldn't even touch her hand. "I thought I was invisible."

"You are. But I'm magic."

"Thank goodness."

"Did you read the interview?"

He nodded, and a delicious surge of desire passed through his body. He wanted to reach behind her, unlatch her bra, run his hands between her breasts. He could almost see them beneath the sweater, imagine the outlines of her nipples. "Do we have time for a cup of coffee?" he asked, glancing at the dashboard clock.

"Not really. No breakfast?"

He shook his head.

"Me either. But I bet you read the paper. What did you think?"

"Should have been front-page. I'm calling Walt at lunch."

"The byline had a different name."

He hadn't noticed. Was it true? Beneath the cuffs of her sweater, Rika's fingers were pressed against one another, whitening at the knuckles. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine. I just want to talk to you about Ian."

"What about?"

"A few things." She looked down, smoothing her pants with her hands. Benji's white Miata sped past them, and he waved, wiggling his eyebrows. "Does it look bad that we're sitting out here like this?"

"Probably a little." He glanced at the place her skin met the top button of her sweater. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to be with you and not touch you?" He wanted to tell her about his argument with Becky, about the Borders bigger than Pleasanton's, even about the goddamned berries. Some primal desire to unburden.

Rika smiled, but her fingers were pressed nervously against each other again. "I'm not—honestly not sure Ian should be the spokesperson anymore."

"Why not?"

"Well—a few things. For one, he forgot to talk about Murakami."

"I'm sure he told them. Walt just didn't run it."

"I have a bad feeling about the witness protection thing. It seems like you or Albert or I could end up involved, and I don't want that to happen."

"Ian's trustworthy, don't you think?"

She squinted, looking down. "I think so. But having him so... central feels risky."

Dmitri studied her face. Her exotic eyes glistened. Why hadn't she said anything earlier? "Just the witness protection factor?" he asked.

"Mostly. What would we do if he was found out?"

"By whom? The government already knows, because they helped him relocate. And if, like Ian said, he's changed his name and the guys he testified against are back in New York, I don't see how."

"It could still hurt his credibility. You never know who might come through Ellis and recognize him. Like you say, it's a crossroads here."

Dmitri couldn't help it—he checked the parking lot and adjacent building, then reached over and gave her a quick, one-armed hug. How could he *not* be in love with a woman who cared so much about everything that mattered to him? “I know there's a risk,” he said.

“It could turn out that he's an ex-con—don't laugh, I know that's far-fetched—but think how much faith you're putting in him.”

“Ian cares about Ellis as much as we do,” Dmitri cut in gently. “You're right—I don't know everything about him. But so far, he seems like a godsend.”

“I could do it.”

He shook his head. “Not an option. You don't have tenure. Johnny would just conveniently not ask you back next year.”

She hesitated, biting her lip. “It's all right.”

He ran his eyes over her shoulders, her neck and cheekbones. “Not for me.”

“Seriously, Dmitri—”

“You're already doing so much. The maps, the time you're spending—”

“Will you think about it?”

“Sure,” he said, though it wasn't true. “We'll give Ian two more days. If he's just so-so, we'll find someone else.”

“Me.”

“Maybe,” he lied.

“At the end of the semester I—” she stopped.

“What?”

“Never mind.” Rika sighed, pulling her fingers apart. “Look. I love you, okay?”

She'd never said it before. Her tone was so resigned, so laboriously reluctant, that it took a moment to strike him. When it did, he was silent. Should he return it? Desperately, recklessly, he wanted to raise her arms and ease off her sweater, to push himself between her breasts. He swallowed; she was looking away.

The bell rang. Rika opened the door quickly and straightened her sweater. Too late. He grabbed his backpack and they walked toward campus. “Can we talk at lunch?”

“You have Philosophy Club.”

“Oh—right. After school, then? We could drop by the Pint Club, then I could give you a ride home.” This would mean two glorious, uninterrupted hours.

A trio of students passed them in the hall, and one of them raised his chin in Rika's direction. "Yo, Miss Brown."

"Yo, Xavier," she said, smiling. Then she turned to Dmitri and said in a safe teacher-voice, "That sounds fine, Mr. Harris. Have a good Philosophy Club meeting."

"I shall. See you later, Miss Brown."

Without glancing at him again, she opened the door to the science building and slipped inside. What an unbelievable turn-on, pretending they hardly knew each other. Rika was amazing at it—she could look at him like she'd never seen him before. Dmitri, on the other hand, was sure he was practically transparent. More than once, he'd lost a train of thought talking to another teacher while Rika passed them in the hall.

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At one-thirty, after his cigarettes, Dmitri went to the pay phone in front of the school and dialed Walt's extension at the *Herald*. Years ago, teachers spent their prep periods in their own rooms. Now they were pushed out into the library, the computer lab—any unoccupied space—while rovers, usually new math and English teachers, bounced from room to room all day. Benji Laida shot hoops every second period. He'd rather grade papers, but there was nowhere to go. Madison was busting at the seams. The solution was in upkeep. Things had to be patched, expanded slowly. If James Bannister had his way, they'd probably level the whole school and build some tri-level monstrosity.

Walt answered on the fifth ring. "I figured you'd call," he said right away.

"Am I that predictable?"

"More than."

Dmitri smiled. "How depressing."

"Not at all," Walt said. "It's sort of charming."

He felt exposed, talking in front of the school, but he'd needed a place where he could see if anyone was coming. "You know why I'm calling, then."

"I can't run the bit about the Japanese guy without a source."

"You were sitting right next to me when he came in."

"Sure. I wouldn't print it the first time, and I'm not going to print it now."

"You talked to him yourself."

"I did. But his connection to Bannister? It's a stretch. I need a source. A name."

"I can't do that."

"Give me a hint," Walt said. "Male or female?"

"Female."

"Have her call me."

"Walt."

Dmitri heard his old friend sigh on the other end of the line. "How's Becky?" Walt asked at last.

"She's fine. Gotten into yoga recently, so that keeps her busy. How are Samantha and Jared?"

"They're good. Jared's—well, you probably know this. Head coach for wrestling now."

"I hadn't heard. That's great."

"Yeah." A silence passed. Better to let Walt break it. While Dmitri waited, he saw Johnny get out of his Galant and walk to the office. He waved, but Johnny didn't see him. "Look—I know you're still pissed about the American flag business last year. I took you by surprise—"

"You sucker-punched me," Dmitri said, returning his attention to the phone, startled by the force of his own words. He cleared his throat. "But it's water under the bridge. I mean—good thing the Board meeting went the way it did, right?"

"You had a lot of kids stand up for you. That was something else."

"Yeah. Look, it's not worth worrying about."

"I felt bad for months. One vote away from losing your job."

"Thank goodness for flu season."

"If Pauley and Mitchell had been there, you would have been toast."

Dmitri was silent.

"I owe you one. I know I do," Walt continued. "You were right not to come to Samantha's birthday party after that. Put me in my place."

"I had parent-teacher conferences."

"Yeah, well." Walt paused. "So you're pretty involved with this election stuff?"

"I'm helping out."

"How big is this campaign Ian Pinter's heading up?"

"It has a shot at turning the election around if we get the publicity we need. Why skimp on the coverage?"

"Who's skimping?"

"You gave the front page to Bannister's real estate exploits."

"It's news."

"So is this. If people know what's going on, they'll..." Dmitri was silent. He realized why Walt's name hadn't appeared on the byline. "You've got a deal with him, don't you?"

"I love Ellis like you do, Dmitri. The last thing I want is James leveling downtown. We need change, but it needs to be thought out. Planned. These lifestyle centers—"

"You're using his lingo, Walt. Why did the byline have someone else's name on it?"

Walt didn't answer.

"I knew it."

"It's not a *deal*, Dmitri. I'm making sure Greenlake gets coverage—which it would get anyway—and he watches out for the *Herald* after the election. It's a win-win. Gentlemen's agreement. How is that different from what you're proposing?"

"He's agreed not to tear down the *Herald* building. You already knew he planned to rezone."

"No—I swear I didn't know about the rezoning till Ian showed me those maps."

"Which made you realize just how serious Bannister was. Christ, Walt—"

"I can't stand the guy, Dmitri, you know that. But we've all got to hang onto what we can. The *Record* put another bid on us last month. These big corporate papers—"

"And Greenlake brings in the advertising dollars."

"It sure as hell wouldn't hurt."

"It's a *community* paper, Walt—"

"Well, it's not as if it's one man against the city. A lot of people want this. He's got some serious supporters. If we're going to compete with the bay area, we've got to keep shopping dollars in Ellis."

"Do you want it?"

"Hell, no. I'm in your camp. But if it happens—"

"You don't want to be left in the cold."

"I didn't say that. All I agreed to with Bannister was the same coverage I'd be giving him anyway."

"Walt, I've got to go. Do what you can, all right?" Dmitri hung up the phone, feeling weak. He was naïve. Understandings, sly deals cut outside the boardroom. Even Walt felt greasy. No—it wasn't naïveté; Dmitri knew how things worked. He'd just expected more from Walt. He lingered by the empty cafeteria, the edges of his shadow jagged against the dirty glass, and waited for the bell.

Sixth period was surprisingly placid. He'd written a decent lesson, but his execution was poor, his delivery flat. Toward the end, he felt too tired to introduce the next chapter, so instead, he gave a quiz. His students' faces were blank as dolls'. Ten years earlier, would he have pushed himself harder?

Luke Pho sniffed loudly and as Shawn Baker looked up, Luke mouthed something to him. Dmitri cleared his throat, sending their gazes back to their desks. He tried to grade papers while his students worked, but couldn't concentrate. Every minute or two, he turned a page or flipped something over, trying to model productivity even if he couldn't muster it.

At his first Buddhist retreat, Dmitri's teacher had asked him, "What is the moon?" Dmitri had answered with a passage from the *Abhidharma*, and in response, his teacher thumped him on the shoulders with a sawed-off branch. After days in ten zazen, Dmitri had realized the point: knowledge promotes understanding, but *isn't* understanding. Understanding is visceral, pulsing from the gut to the limbs, stirring in the body. Didn't Walt feel this about Ellis? Didn't Becky? If not, how could Dmitri explain it? How do you explain *wet* to a man who's seen water but hasn't felt it on his skin?

After school, he told Rika about Walt. Pulling from the parking lot, he thought: *she* understands. He wanted to apologize for not telling her that morning that he loved her back. He did—he had from the beginning, but to say it seemed more potent. Threatening. A new level of betrayal.

"Sorry I was upset this morning. Becky and I argued."

"About what?"

"I don't know. These days, we can hardly have breakfast together."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"It is in some ways."

And she was right—sure—but only because she was helping him understand so much about himself, speeding along the inevitable.

“Look,” he said. “I love you. Don’t worry about it.” Waiting for the light to change, he pretended to study the patterns in his steering wheel. After cheating once, what was worse about a ninth, tenth, eleventh time? It wasn’t sudden, he supposed—that was the difference. It was plotted out in advance. Sustained, premeditated betrayal. What would it be like, to spend his days with Rika? They’d go to school together, home together. She’d keep an herb garden, read Russian novels.

Rika set her hand on his wrist—their joke—and he smiled.

As Dmitri turned on Central toward the Pint Club, the domed mural of foods that crested the second story of Hacienda Market (still partly charred from a lick of flame that had blown onto it the second time the Opera House burned down) made him think of what Becky had said about grocery shopping. How complicit was he in the procession of small choices that had separated them? Years ago, they’d agreed she’d take care of the house during the week and he’d do weekends. But weekends had become a time for church, for Meg’s softball games, for visiting Becky’s parents in Gault. And maybe he’d let it happen. Maybe he’d wanted it to. Then again, hadn’t it been her responsibility to let him know?

He turned his eyes from the mural to the street, chastising himself for looking away from the road, though he’d had the signal.

“Wow,” Rika said the same instant he saw it, a huge group, two blocks down Central in front of the Pint Club. There were twenty or thirty of them, standing in the middle of the street, facing Ellis Boulevard and obstructing the traffic on Central, yelling and waving placards. A police car was parked to the side and Dmitri recognized Officer Placeres, whom he’d taught ten years ago, looking on and grinning.

Lizzie’s hair was loose, and she gripped her lavender kerchief, waving it above her head like a flag, hooting joyously and, with her other hand, clutching a wooden dowel to which a square of cardboard had been attached, emblazoned in purple marker: “SAVE YOUR DOWN-TOWN!!!”

They all had signs. There was “HONK IF YOU LOVE ELLIS” (Chad Tran, owner of the Thai Café), “BANNISTER = BAD-4-BUSINESS” (Jimmy Carr, son of Reginald Carr, proprietor of the Duck), “VOTE O’BRIEN” (Victoria O’Brien, Montgomery’s teenage daughter), and many more, homemade and bobbing above the rag-tag throng. They didn’t

wear the bitten determination of protestors on television, or the protestors he'd seen in Berkeley, or even the half-assed protestors he'd gone to school with at Fresno State. Instead, Ellis's downtown business owners looked as if they'd shocked themselves by being here—which they probably had. Ian zipped among them, manning a card table piled with dowels, markers, and pieces of cardboard. A roll of masking tape hung from his wrist, and Dmitri watched him pull two pieces off and reinforce Jimmy Carr's dowel.

"Wow," Rika repeated.

Dmitri couldn't answer. It was a dream. As far as he knew, a protest had never happened in Ellis. Elated, he double-parked in front of Hazel's. As he and Rika walked toward the group, Albert—who he hadn't noticed there—rose from a chair behind the card table and went over to him, grinning broadly. "Well, well," he said. "What do you think of our little gathering?"

"This is amazing," Dmitri said. "How did you—"

Albert held up a hand. "All I did was go business to business with your maps—" he nodded toward Rika "—and show people what was going on. They flipped."

"They just came out and started this?"

Albert chuckled. "Hardly. Ian rounded 'em up. Told everyone on Central that everyone *else* on Central had already agreed to a protest at two o'clock. Two o'clock rolls around, they come out to see what's going on, he's got the signs ready to go. Should have seen him riling them up. Yelling and shoving them into people's hands. Convinced them there's safety in numbers. James Bannister can't boot them *all* out, he tells them. Not unless he wins the election.

"This is just—Al, we're *doing* it."

Albert nodded. "Better believe it. And they love Ian. Took him about three minutes before he was best friends with everybody."

"Has the *Herald* been by?"

"I was about to call, but Ian says to wait until there are more people. He says we'll start around two every day, go till five or six. He says we'll get twenty more people every day. If every new person convinces one more person, that sort of thing." Albert lowered his voice. "The guy's a complete fanatic, but you've got to love him."

Two of his students' fathers were in the group, men who'd worked at Holly Sugar before it was leveled for Greenlake, and Manuel Juarez who owned Hacienda Market, and a

waitress from the Opera House. Seeing him, they waved, then got quickly back to the business of protesting, sheepish at their involvement, but excited nonetheless, and resolute. As stunned by their own dynamism as Dmitri was. Irrepressible joy seized him—he felt awake and energetic and slightly hungry. In his mind he was thirty years old and his life was just beginning.

No, he decided, silently counting the protestors—it was more than joy; it was faith. Faith that Bannister could lose the election, even that Greenlake could be halted. Faith, when it came down to it, that it was altogether possible for everything to happen the way it was supposed to happen.

Leaving Rika to talk to Albert, Dmitri went to the card table and penned a sign: “WE CAN DO IT!” It was simple, idealistic. He didn’t attach a dowel to the cardboard, just walked with it to the center of the group, nodding to everyone as they cheered with him, gripping the sign from the bottom with his fingers, stretching his legs upward, standing on his toes, raising the words as high as he could over his head.

Chapter Fifteen

One of Russ's main grievances with the I-5 stretch north from Stockton was that there were only two lanes each way. Despite the number of people who passed between Stockton and Sacramento daily, its congestion levels didn't correlate with rush hour, lunch, or holidays. They seemed random, even portentous, as if cars were placed according to a secret grid. Part of the march toward death, he supposed. All the tricks, like doctors' prescriptions, to make you surrender control. More and more, he felt himself drawn to the lies people told each other, to the cut and swing of them.

Mr. Harris's girlfriend—Rika—hadn't called, but she would. Russ felt bad for frightening her on the street. She was attractive, panicked, easy to read, and she'd eaten up his lie about having photographs. He hadn't even meant to find out—he'd trailed Harris for half a day, hoping to learn something about Ian, and—wham. Right in his lap. In truth, Russ had no intention of telling Meg. She'd be furious at her father, but furious at Russ, too, for snooping into his private life. It wasn't worth it.

Drivers leaned from their windows, craning their heads to determine what offense was causing the holdup, as if they were strangers to this stretch of road and didn't drive it every day. Russ popped Blind Melon from his tape player. The din of the traffic seemed, in itself, a great deal to think about.

For the most part, he felt cheerful. He'd left the basketball game six nights earlier after slapping palms with his son, darting through the back doors upon realizing that at halftime, near the restrooms, he was likely to see Meg, Muriel, or both. He could have come back after the second half started, but he'd wanted to preserve the night exactly as he'd left it.

A mile from the Santa Rita jail, he pulled off at a Burger King and picked up two Rodeo combos with double meat, then plunked change into a payphone and left a message on Meg's voicemail saying he'd be at Nam's by seven if she wanted to have dinner. From there, he took a frontage road to the prison. It ran parallel to the fairgrounds, which were soddy and abandoned nine months of the year. His father had taken him there when he was ten, and Russ had gotten sick on the Ferris wheel, his corndog turning rancid in his stomach. It was an unstrategic location, twenty miles from the center of the city. The permanent stone buildings there, used for bathrooms and ticket booths and concession stands, were as low and stark as barracks. As Russ drove past, only these buildings stood, marking the flat, treeless

expanse at regular intervals, like colossal graves.

Last night, he'd decided it was wrong to keep Theo from knowing about Ian. He'd gone back and forth, finally deciding that his client had a right to know. Since their last meeting, Theo had become more insistent on pleading out; Russ didn't want him giving up. Despite the mountain of case law against him, Russ had drafted an affidavit in support of DNA funds for ten thousand dollars. He'd match Ian's DNA with saliva from an envelope in the Pinter file from Ian's apartment.

The guards searched the Burger King bags as he went in, then put them through an x-ray machine, a metal detector, and made Russ take a sip from each Coke. It was easy to fake sipping, and he did this just to show it could be done; it pleased him that they thought they had everything controlled and did not.

Theo was seated at the visiting room table, wearing his comb again. He seemed to be letting his hair grow out, and the fuzz of it shadowed his face.

"You'll need to cut it before the hearing," Russ said, sliding a bag across the table.

Theo looked inside. "Rodeo Burger."

"Row-day-oh Burger," Russ said. "The luxury version. Double meat."

Theo unwrapped it eagerly, bit in, and closed his eyes as he chewed. "I didn't know you were coming today. When do I see the judge?"

"Week from today, remember? Monday." Russ ate a fry and tried to remember whether Theo had committed any of his felonies before JB was killed. One, maybe. Just breaking and entering. He'd been primed to snap, after his brother's murder.

"Got any ketchup?"

"Sorry, I forgot it."

"How do you forget *ketchup*?"

Russ snapped open his briefcase and set the snapshot he'd taken of Ian on the table.

Theo glanced at it, shoving a trio of long fries into his mouth. "So?"

"Who is it?"

"Looks like the guy from the park."

"The one you killed."

"Yeah. So you got my deal all set up or what?"

Russ unwrapped his burger, bit into it, and chewed. "I just took that picture a few days ago."

“What’s your point?”

“Think about it.”

Theo was silent. “He have a twin brother?” he asked at last.

“No.”

Theo picked up the picture and held it a few inches from his face. He was taking in all the scars and cuts, Russ saw, trying to remember what he’d done to the guy. “You’re fucking with me?” Theo said at last.

“Yeah. I love making this kind of shit up.”

Theo cracked his knuckles, coughed, and looked at his hands. “He was dead when I left him.”

“Close, maybe. You beat him up pretty good.”

Theo picked some meat from a molar with his fingernail and continued to stare at the picture. “You’re serious.”

Russ nodded. Theo shook his head, and Russ watched the realization overtake him. His mouth spread into a grin, and he kept shaking his head. “Holy fuck. This is a miracle, you know that? Cops told me he was dead—”

“They thought he was.”

“He looks different. I had to look close but it’s him. Where was he?”

Russ had decided not to say anything about the canal. Theo would never understand why it wouldn’t work for Russ to simply testify, that no jury would ever believe it. “Total coincidence—I saw him in a bar last night.”

“Thought you were on the wagon, counselor.”

“Meeting a friend.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Theo grinned again, goading him. “I can’t *wait* for my first drink outside. Mmm-*mmm*.” He shoved a few fries into his mouth. “Can’t wait for my free man’s food, neither. *Yeah*.” He stood up, crossed his arms, and began looking around at the walls. “You hear that, you all? You *hear* that? I’m fucking outta here, so all y’all can just go *fuck* yourselves. Russ, if I was a fag I’d kiss you right now. But you’d pr’y like that, wouldn’t you, counselor?” He laughed. “Coun-se-lor, I’m talking to you.”

Russ sighed. This was what he’d been afraid of. He hadn’t seen Theo this happy since his brother had been acquitted. “You finished, Theo?”

“Just getting started.”

"Have a seat."

Theo sat, mock-serious, with one hand on his chin. "I fear you need to relax," he said in the overannounced accent he used to make fun of Caucasians.

"Cute."

"This is great, man. Seriously—thank you, thank you, thank *you*. When's my big day? We still got to talk to the judge on Monday?"

"Theo." Russ sighed again. "The guy's not 'fessing up."

"What do you mean?"

"He's saying he's someone else."

"I don't get it." Theo rapped his knuckles on the table. "You mean he's in *disguise*?"

"Sort of. He's living under a different name, claiming he was never in Stockton, that he's never seen you—"

"No, no—they took all his cards off me and shit. Maybe even his license, I dunno. He had ID all over him."

"He's saying it's not him."

"What about his credit cards? Doesn't want those back?"

"Nope."

Theo leaned back. "What the fuck," he muttered.

"It's strange. I mean—you were exactly right—this guy's crazy. He's abandoned his job, his apartment, his bank account—"

"Can't they get his DNA?"

"It's not on file."

"Doesn't the government have all that shit in their computers?"

"Only if someone's been arrested. But I'm petitioning the judge for DNA funds."

"You can't just—like, start saying you're someone else. That's fucked. I mean, you—"

"I agree. It's completely fucked. I've tried talking to him."

"You sure he's the guy?"

"Positive."

"Well, *fuck*." Theo slouched back in his chair. "You gotta prove he's the guy I killed. You can't just lie about your name. Can't just grow a fucking beard and start saying

you're someone different."

"It's a matter of convincing the cops. I got Officer Clifton to question him and he wasn't convinced."

"That fat *fuck*." Theo shouted, slamming the side of the table with his hand.

A warning came over the intercom. They couldn't hear anything, Russ knew, but there were hidden cameras in two of the walls, and one in the ceiling.

"I'll fucking calm down when I fucking feel like it," Theo said. "Shit, man. Forget DNA. I'll just get on the stand and say it's him. We'll—what do you call it when you make a guy come in and testify?"

"Subpoena. But you've confessed."

"So?"

"So it's your word against his. You'll look like a liar." And Brandt would make it worse.

"No way—"

"Theo, when was the last time anyone believed anything you've said in a legal situation?"

His client was quiet for a minute. "When I said I killed him."

Russ smiled a little. "I guess so."

"Selective motherfuckers."

Watching his client polish off the remainder of his Rodeo Burger, there was no one Russ loathed more than Ian Ramspott. He'd defended other cases about which he'd felt strongly—two in which the State's witnesses testified against his clients for reduced sentences and at least half a dozen in which he was sure cops had planted evidence. But Theo's case surpassed these—and not just because Russ would kill to get back at Brandt. Ian Ramspott went to the core of what Russ hated most about the world: the irrevocability of identity, the fact that a man's mistakes chased him forever. From the day he'd woken up on the sewer grate with Jackson staring down at him, he'd known that all you could do was make the most of everything you'd done. He'd be damned if he was going to let Ian get away with it.

Theo seemed to have decided there was nothing more to say about Ian. He talked about the invasiveness of the guards, the high quality of the weight machines, the carton of Dentyne he'd traded for a carton of Camel Lights. Russ listened to all of it, picking at his

fries and thinking about Ian.

Half an hour later, driving back from the prison, he put Blind Melon back in and sped a little, finally parking a quarter of a mile away from Mills Elementary, letting "Soak the Sin" finish before he turned his ignition off. The steel voices and hard drums kept thrumming through him.

Since the basketball game, he'd felt more connected to Jackson. On some level, the boy had to have recognized him. Probably he couldn't put his finger on it yet; probably he was still confused. Someday, though. Someday soon.

Russ took his inhaler from his pocket. The asthma was getting worse, tying invisible knots in his lungs. He pressed down on the device and breathed in. At least he hadn't come down with bronchitis since he'd quit drinking. Next time would be his eighth. Some kind of lung disease would get him in the end. Bronchitis would give way to pneumonia, pneumonia to emphysema. Incremental suffocation. When he was on his deathbed, would Meg convince Muriel to bring Jackson to see him?

Reaching into the back seat for his sketch pad and pencil box, he wondered whether Jackson was an artist. Did Muriel encourage him, or was she afraid he'd wind up like Russ? His painting had always annoyed her; she'd never understood it when he got up at four in the morning, or left his bed after sex, to work on a painting.

Smug defiance seized Russ. He set his father's old Don Tomas box on his lap and lifted the metal clasp. On the underside of the lid, a piece of masking tape bore his name, "R. Dillinger," and he peeled it off with his fingernail, leaving a white rectangle where the tape had been—the only part of the interior not covered in grey smudges. Then he closed it, pressing down the metal clasp. The corners of the box were chipped and part of the "s" on "Tomas" was flaking off. The black "MADE IN HONDURAS" stamp was readable but starting to splinter. In high school, when Russ had ditched class, he'd sometimes sat on the northern fence of the parking lot and drawn the rich kids' cars. The juniors and seniors in Student Council got reserved spots along the fence, nearest the lockers. Russ remembered penciling the contours of their hand-me down Legends, their new Jeeps and Preludes, their souped-up Mustangs. The Jeeps had been his favorite. Shading the dark lines where the metal panels connected used to make him think of his father, of the deep creases where his chin and jaw met his cheeks.

He opened the car door and tucked the box under his arm, leaving his sketch pad on

the passenger seat. A block away, Russ crouched behind a phone booth with one clear panel that gave him a view of the sidewalk. He held his box to his chest, waiting.

Jackson was one of the last again, and when he was two blocks away, Russ saw that he was wearing new red Nikes that glowed in the sun. Russ swallowed and stepped out, walking quickly across the sidewalk, setting the box down in the middle of it, and turning around only when he was behind a tall bush on the other side. The weight of his heart almost made him cough, but he swallowed it. If Jackson had noticed him, a block and a half away, he didn't show it. Russ breathed out, his eyes on the box. He should be more careful. Meg might recognize it, though Muriel never would. But he wanted desperately to give one thing to his son; what else was there?

When Jackson was half a block away, Russ closed his eyes. The footfalls stopped. Russ swallowed, opening them again. Jackson had the box in his hands, and he turned it over, as if looking for a name, then seeing none, toyed with the clasp until he got it open.

The Art Gum eraser seemed to interest him most. He lifted it out, squeezed it, pulled part of it off, and stuck it back onto itself. He looked down the sidewalk behind him, then ahead, and finally sat on the edge of the grass and dumped the box's contents onto the cement. Lifting a pencil to eye level, he read the side.

Russ longed to sit next to him, explaining the difference between a soft pencil and a hard one, between different weights of paper, different textures. He hoped Jackson would look up and see him. He wasn't well-hidden behind the bush, and he picked up one of his feet and put it down again, hoping, yet not hoping, for a glance. None came. His son tested one of the pencils on a smooth section of cement, then put it away and tried another.

At last, Jackson stood, lowered the lid, tucked the Don Tomas box under his arm, and scuffed down the sidewalk.

When he was gone, Russ knelt on the sidewalk to inspect the cement. A few lines, a circle. A colored-in area that may have been an attempt at shading. His fingers traced the pencil marks.

Back at his office, Russ worked quickly. The extra time he was spending on Theo's case had left him behind. Surveying his stacks of papers, he wondered whether he'd ever be able to afford a secretary. Ideally, one who doubled as a P.I.

"Kettle Whistle" sat next to his CD player and Russ put it on, setting the Lacey file on his shelf next to Thomas Mauet's *Trial Techniques*—his favorite book after Steven King's

Different Seasons. Slogging through paperwork, Russ sent an e-mail to settle an arson plea and a petty theft, then made a call to San Quentin, where he was helping a lifer petition for a DNA test. The insistent rhythm of Jane's *Addiction* was oddly soothing, Navarro's guitar resonating like he was plucking it inside syrup. When the CD stopped, Russ played it again, then once more after that. He prepped for a hearing, wrote a motion to exclude the results of a *Terry* stop, and made half a dozen calls to DAs who were lagging on discovery.

By six-forty, he'd cleared half his desk. Satisfied, productive, he slipped a few unfinished papers into a folder, then slid the folder into his briefcase between his gun and his sketch pad. Maybe after Nam's, he'd stop by Aaron Brothers and treat himself to some new pencils. As he walked to the door, the phone rang, and he hesitated, then picked it up.

"Hello—uh—is Mr. Dillinger there?"

"This is Russell Dillinger."

"It's Rika Brown." She seemed out of breath, and Russ realized she'd purposely called after she thought he'd be gone, hoping to leave a message.

"I thought you'd call."

She didn't say anything.

"What have you been up to?"

"Trying to get Ian to admit *anything*," she said. "But he won't. And I don't know what to ask."

"Does he know what's on the line?"

"He wouldn't care. He's a fanatic. He doesn't have normal get-to-know-you conversations. You can't ask him anything, and he doesn't volunteer it."

Russ frowned. What was she trying to trick him into? "We agreed you'd get me the information."

She sighed. "I've been trying. Yesterday I even got a hold of the little—satchel thing he carries and went through his wallet. But all his ID says Ian Pinter."

"I guess Meg will be interested to see her father engaged in explicit activities with an attractive co-ed."

"Mr. Dillinger—"

"Come to think of it, you might be younger than Meg."

"I know you don't care about me, or about Dmitri, or about anything I'm dealing with. But I've tried to do what you asked. I'll even stop seeing Dmitri, if that's what you

want.” She coughed away from the phone, and Russ realized she was starting to cry. He tapped his desk, feeling awful for bullying her. “Look, just take it slowly. I’m not a jerk or anything. I’m just trying to do what’s right for my client.”

She exhaled heavily. “I know Ian’s from New York. He used to work as a bartender there, apparently, but it sounds like he’s lived a lot of places. Then some crime happened—I don’t know what—and he had to join the witness protection program. He moved to Ellis, changed his name—”

“Witness *protection*?”

“Yes. But I don’t know who he’s being protected from, or how your client was involved, or who he testified against. It’s just... I don’t even know what I’m supposed to find out.”

Witness fucking protection. God damn. “A man’s life is on the line. The DA wants the death penalty.”

“I’m sorry,” Rika said. “Just tell me what to do. Please don’t drag in Dmitri. I’ll—”

Russ hung up. Ian was sicker than he could have imagined. And now what? Rika was a dead end, Clifton was a dead end. If the judge didn’t grant the affidavit for DNA funds, what did he have left? He kicked the leg of his desk, and it hurt like hell even through his boot because his foot still hurt from kicking the coffee table last week. God damn. He needed Ian in the courtroom. If he could just get Ian on the stand and cross-examine him, he’d either crack or contradict himself.

His desk clock beeped. It was ten after seven, and he was late to Nam’s if Meg was meeting him there, which he doubted because she hadn’t called. Before he left, he tried calling her office, then her apartment. No answers.

Nam’s was closer than the parking garage, so he’d walk. He locked the door, unclicked his briefcase, pulled out his gun, and put it in his jacket pocket next to his inhaler. Just a precaution—the route between the courthouse and Nam’s was a haven of petty crime, mostly dealing and purse-snatching. Serious crime was farther north, in Theo’s neighborhood, sprawling east and west from the downtown expressway.

He passed Tommy Joad’s and the Five Frogs, bars he’d visited regularly years ago. It was funny, how there were guys he used to see every couple of days, then after he stopped drinking he never saw them again. That was another kind of vanishing, the people you saw all the time and then didn’t. You changed jobs or quit drinking and realized they were out of

your life.

Nam's was steamed from the inside and peering in the windows as he approached, he couldn't tell whether Meg was there. It looked packed, blurred with clothes and faces, and for a second, Russ had the sensation he was watching a movie in watercolor. He opened the door. Nam was hunched over a table with his notepad, frowning and speaking quick Vietnamese. Most of the people who came for dinner were Vietnamese. People like Russ—except himself, Russ supposed—came for lunch. For dinner they went home to Manteca or Lodi and ate at Chili's or the Olive Garden if they went out at all.

A few tables were empty, but none of them were clean, so Russ stayed by the door. Would Nam have any grass? It would be a good evening to smoke. He liked the humid swelter of the restaurant after everyone had gone, half the lights off, arguing idly over politics at a window table. They hadn't done it in a while, and tonight he felt melancholy and dull, and he also realized, as Nam waved him toward a table and he sat down, that he wasn't hungry.

"How'd you know I was sitting here?"

Russ looked up. Meg was standing next to him, and he hugged her from the side with his free arm. "What's up? How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to eat. Why didn't you call?"

"I didn't know you were coming. No messages."

"Your phone was busy. You need DSL."

"Yeah, and a secretary." And a P.I. and his own personal DNA expert. Nam came over and they nodded to each other, confirming Russ's order. "The first day you've been on time in years and I missed it."

"You come here too often," Meg said.

"You really already ate? It's only seven-twenty."

"Thirty. I've got somewhere to be at eight."

"Where?"

She picked up her spoon and rested it against the bowl. "Look, I came by because we need to talk."

"All right," Russ said, clearing his throat. "But go easy. I had a shitty day." Meg, he knew, showed anger the way her father did. It welled in her shoulders while her voice grew calmer.

She pushed her hand through her hair. "I know you were at the basketball game."

Okay—fuck. He stretched his neck back and looked at the ceiling. Denying it would make everything worse. She'd never believe it was a coincidence—that he'd gone to watch a friend's kid play. He gestured to an empty strip of yellow flypaper hanging from the ceiling. "Does that look old to you?"

Meg glanced up and sighed. "Look, Russ, I don't even know how you found out about it, but you can't pull this shit, okay?"

"*Shit*?" He looked into her bowl. "You should eat the rest of that. What did you get, fish? You're not back on one of Susan's macrobiotic things, are you? What does 'macrobiotic' mean, anyway?"

"Russ—"

"Showing up to my son's basketball game is shit? It's a public gymnasium. The game was advertised in the paper."

"It wasn't advertised."

"There was a schedule. I left at halftime, had some work to do, but in the box scores the next morning, I learned that my son scored twelve out of twenty-two points for his side. Not an especially high scoring game."

"He's not your son."

"I'm tired of this conversation. I didn't even go inside. I sat in the hall like a criminal. How did you see me, anyway?"

"You practically followed the team to the locker room. You can't do this, Russ."

"How the hell did you—"

"Carlos *coaches* the team, Russ. You shook his hand. You talked to him."

Russ swallowed, closing his eyes. Fuck. His stomach hurt. Nam came to the table with Russ's boiled chicken, rice noodles, and egg.

"You didn't know what he looked like, did you?" Meg asked.

He shook his head, disgusted. One game.

"That's what I told Muriel. She was livid. She thought you were harassing them."

"Good old Muriel."

"Russ—"

"No, I mean it," Russ said, surprising himself with his own composure. "It's refreshing to see someone so—*erstwhile*. Those of us with a capacity for change admire

their stability.”

Meg sighed.

“Is this some kind of conspiracy? I wanted to see my son play one damn basketball game.”

Meg sipped her water and looked at her watch. She was headed to Muriel’s, he realized—that was why she hadn’t mentioned where she was going.

“Does Muriel ever talk about me?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“Ever?”

“Occasionally she mentions you.” Meg took another sip of her water. “But she tells Jackson you’re—that his real father is dead.”

Russ was silent. It wasn’t rage he felt. Not exactly. He was too angry for rage. His hands trembled. He looked at Meg. The tip of her tongue was between her teeth—she’d shocked herself by telling him. “That horrible bitch,” he said at last.

“That’s not fair,” Meg said.

“The hell it isn’t.”

“Look—I disagree with her, but she believes it’s the least disruptive way to raise him. That way, he’s not always wondering. He’s free to attach emotionally to Carlos as—”

“He thinks I’m dead.”

“I don’t believe in lying to kids at any age. But it’s—”

“My *son* thinks I’m dead,” Russ repeated. As he said it, something wrenched shut in the pit of his stomach. Lifting the spoon from his soup, his hands felt glacial, and he set them on either side of his bowl.

“He’s not your son,” Meg said. Russ knew she was trying to speak gently, and he hated her for it. “You can’t see him, Russ. You were about five years late. Maybe someday, you’ll have a child of your own. It’s true that Jackson shares your genes—but that’s it.”

“The fuck it is. Stop acting smug.”

“I’m not sure what you’re referring to,” Meg said in her most patronizing therapist voice. “I’m telling you this because I care. I begged Muriel not to get another restraining order.”

“She couldn’t get one if she fucking tried. I’ve been sober for over two years, I’ve opened my own firm—just because I signed everything away when I was twenty-three and a

drunk doesn't mean I'm some asshole who can't be trusted to see my kid." The flash struck him, then, the split-second thought of Meg in the hospital room with Muriel.

"And while you were figuring your life out, she was raising a child. I don't want the Russ Dillinger pity story—it's thin and old and wasn't very good to begin with. I have to go, Russ."

"You were there, weren't you?" he said.

"Where?"

"In the hospital room, the day Jackson was born."

"I told you I *wasn't*."

"But you *were*, weren't you? You were there."

She shook her head and bit her lower lip. "God, Russ. All right, fine. I was there. I held him for three minutes. Big deal."

Russ was silent.

"The midwife needed someone. She told Muriel to call a friend, and she called me. I wasn't planning on it."

Russ could hear his own heart when he sat this still. From the time he was a child, his pulse rate had been exactly sixty. He could time things by his heartbeat. He stared at Meg, letting the betrayal flood him. He spooned some broth into his mouth and swallowed. The restaurant seemed suddenly loud. Humid. Filled with heat and Vietnamese conversation.

"Shit, Russ, I have to go. Say something."

"All right. Your father is having an affair with a teacher named Rika."

"This isn't funny—"

"I'm serious. She's your age. I'm pretty sure they fuck on a regular basis."

"Russ, I don't know what you're trying to—"

"It's true. I wasn't going to tell you, but since we've decided to be honest all of a sudden, there it is." She got up and grabbed her purse, but he kept talking. "Your mother doesn't know about it."

Meg didn't look at him as she walked toward the door, nor as she opened it, nor as it shut behind her. Beyond the steamed glass, he saw the blur of her figure hesitate at the window, then continue down the street.

Chapter Sixteen

Control people, control land, Rika thought. It worked in reverse, too. They'd been protesting for five days, including the weekend. She and Dmitri left right after school right and joined the crowd until Ian halted the action around six. Everyone left, then, to do homework or laundry, to serve dinner at their restaurants, or to watch the evening news and see if they were on it. The trick, Ian said, was to end each day on a downswing, but with enough energy left that people felt like they'd been stopped in the middle of something.

Inside the Pint Club, she sat at the bar with Albert, drinking red vermouth and watching Dmitri and Ian smoking through the window. It was Monday. That so many had returned after the weekend seemed a triumph. The protests made Rika happy on multiple levels: 1. For Dmitri; 2. For Ellis; 3. For a dark, visceral satisfaction she could locate less precisely, and which settled in her stomach like the pit of a peach. This final pleasure was derived from watching something come undone, the same childish joy she got from shredding important papers or smashing a sandcastle. Greenlake's demolition was glorious to imagine—all the wood and concrete hauled off and a field left in its place.

"Look at those two," Albert nodded toward the window. The sky was darkening, and through the glass, they watched Ian gesture excitedly at something Dmitri said. "Heck of a pair."

"Did you count today?"

He nodded. "We topped a hundred."

"Incredible."

"You're telling *me*. And without Murakami." Albert wiped the bar, slung the cloth over his shoulder, and tapped half a pint of Red Hook, which he held to the light. "Cheers," he said, and took a sip.

"Cheers," Rika said.

"Hardly anyone's come in who hasn't mentioned your map."

Walt Garrett had finally relented, printing it on the back of the "Lifestyles" section under the headline, "Bannister Uber Alles?"

"Do you have a copy of today's *Herald*?"

"A bunch of them. Everyone's putting them up tomorrow in our front windows." He reached beneath the bar and retrieved one.

She'd seen it already, but hadn't read the article. There was a picture from Saturday on the front page, cropped just before the edge of the crowd. It gave the fantastic illusion that the protestors went on forever. Ian was on the outskirts, glancing back at the crowd over his shoulder. Had he tried to avoid being photographed? She raised her eyes from the newspaper. Outside, Ian clutched a cigarette between two fingers. If egrets smoked, that would be how they'd look. One of the rare men who made smoking seem elegant. What was he hiding? What did Russ know? If he told her what to say, could she get on the witness stand and lie under oath?

It would ruin the campaign, that much was certain. Ian could foment a crowd, recruit a protester off the street, explain the map of Bannister's holdings so plainly that people felt ashamed for not having figured it out earlier. His scarred, whiskered face belonged on billboards; he had a knack for being loved on a large scale. People clung to this. Ian was the campaign's face. If he dropped out early, or missed the debate, they'd be finished. She'd never do it.

Since hanging up on her two days ago, Russ hadn't returned her calls. His home number was unlisted, but she'd paid an Internet service \$19.99 for his records: minor credit problems, two drunk driving convictions.

"Look, I've been wanting to tell you that Dmitri doesn't think the campaign has a shot without Murakami coming out," Albert said suddenly.

Rika bristled. "He hasn't mentioned it."

"I'm not supposed to tell you. He says he doesn't want you stressing out. He says you've done your best to convince this Ruby Phyllis woman already."

"I have."

"But maybe—maybe since all this protesting started, it's different. Maybe she doesn't know how big this has gotten. He topped off Rika's glass.

"You said yourself that we're doing great already."

"For a bunch of shopkeepers and their friends and kids. But truthfully—and don't tell Dmitri I said this, but—" he glanced toward the window again "—Boo-hoo for small businesses plays great west of Ellis Boulevard, but what's the HP engineer in his big new pink house by the mall thinking? He wants a damn Olive Garden. He's dying to convince his wife she didn't give anything up when they moved from San Ramon."

"And if Ruby's going to make the HP engineer change his mind?"

“He’d think twice about voting for a racist. He might not even think once about downtown going under. You think he’s ever taken his family to dinner at the Opera House or the Duck? Nah—Cold Stone and Baja Fresh, all the way.”

Rika studied the white streak in Albert’s beard. “Maybe I’ll show Ruby the paper tonight,” she said.

Albert smiled. “It’d be icing on the cake. No one ever talks about what’s wrong with this place. It’s just like the old bordello days. People always pretended none of that was happening. The campaign’s opening a floodgate.”

“Did you live here then?”

Albert nodded. “Born here. Left when I was eighteen. Only job a black man could get back then was making bricks.” The door opened. “Done cankering yourselves up?”

“Charming,” Ian said. “Keep it up and I’ll play R.E.M. when you’re not here.”

Albert made a face and tapped Dmitri a Guinness.

“Walt Garrett is my new best friend,” Ian announced. A small sheet of skin, like an onion, was peeling from one of his scars. “I’ve convinced him that change should happen organically.”

“Nah,” Dmitri said. “Walt’s just an opportunist and you’re an opportunity. And stop saying ‘organic.’ People will think you’re a vegetarian. But Rika, Al, get this—Walt’s agreed to run a transcript of the debate in the paper the next morning.”

“On election day?” Rika asked.

“Bingo.”

Ian burped ungraciously, snapped a towel onto his shoulder, and set about cleaning tables. Since she’d questioned him, he seemed to be avoiding her. He’d perfected a raised-eyebrow *phew* look when their eyes met, politely dismissive.

She studied Dmitri’s mouth, thinking of the first night they’d come here together. She wished she could lean over now and kiss his cold, soft, beer-tasting lips. Between work and the campaign, they’d hardly been alone since the night Russ cornered her on the street. Her body missed him.

He began explaining the debate structure to Albert. As he talked, he spread his hands on the table. Fingers thickened as men grew older, the backs of hands widening into mottled plains, the fronts into vast, callused palms. But none of it bothered her. She thought of Dmitri as frozen in time. He’d always been like this; he’d always *be* like this. For an

instant, Rika let her gut swell with the idea that she was suspended, too—that as long as she stayed near Dmitri, Lawrence Livermore wouldn't come, the election wouldn't come, downtown would be fine, and she wouldn't be alone.

But did she want permanence? Commitment? With Todd, she'd failed. She'd been too restless, too uncertain. Sometimes, living with him, she'd felt the way she once had at seven, lost in a department store. No matter how far she'd wandered, she couldn't find her way out of housewares.

"I have to work on some lesson plans," she said as if she'd just remembered it. "Would you drive me home?"

Dmitri checked his watch. "It's getting late."

"Mind if I hang onto this?" Rika asked Albert, lifting the newspaper.

"Sure. Who knows? Might want to show it to someone."

"Who knows," Rika repeated, winking at him as Dmitri fished in his wallet.

Dmitri's truck was parked on Sixth. Everything closer had been blocked by the protest. "Do you really have to work?" he asked.

"Nope."

Dmitri grinned, unlocking his truck. As he pulled from the curb, Rika could see the bottom half of a Bannister Real Estate sign hanging from a window: "—REACH ITS DREAMS."

"Will Ruby be home yet?"

Rika shook her head, though she didn't know for sure. The inside of his truck smelled like hummus and tacos, and she rolled down her window. Outside, someone was burning tires, and the astringent stench of charred rubber made her eyes water. She thought of the gas leak they'd found in the Home Economics building last week.

"Becky will be home in half an hour, and I don't care," he announced.

"Did you make up with her?"

"Sort of."

They'd had sex, then, but hadn't talked anything over. This was how their disagreements often ended, Dmitri had confided. Sometimes Rika tortured herself with images of them in bed—Becky's schoolteacher face buried in Dmitri's neck, his hands clutching her breasts. "If she'll be home, you should go."

He sighed. "I don't want to. And—I'm afraid she knows something. Yesterday she

asked if you were involved with the protests, and I hadn't mentioned you since the day she met you."

"She might have recognized me in the paper. What did you tell her?"

"That I—give you an occasional ride home." He paused. "I told her you were dating Ian." He winced like a kid, terrifically cute. "You ask my advice about the relationship because Ian's ten years older than you."

"And he's gay."

"Really?"

She shrugged. "I don't know for sure. It just seems so." The difference was generational. Someone Dmitri's age might not pick up on small details, the neutral pronoun usage.

"My daughter's gay," he offered. "Lesbian, I guess."

"Does that bother you?"

"No. But she thinks it does. I feel bad. I go back through her entire childhood and think of little comments I made. All the assumptions I had no idea were stacking up against me."

They were quiet for a while.

"Pretty crazy age difference, Ian and me," Rika said.

"Ha."

"I don't know if I can handle it. Does he have hair growing out of his ears?"

"Undoubtedly. And arthritis. He probably uses a cane." He smiled sheepishly. "It was the best I could do on the spur of the moment."

"It's fine."

He pulled to the railroad tracks that cut across Third Street and stopped when the lights flashed. They were silent as the train rolled into view, ten miles an hour. Rika doubted trains existed anywhere that were slower or longer than the ones that crossed Ellis. The cars grinded by so unhurriedly that she could make out every word of graffiti. Eat Shit And Die. Lenny G 187. Don & Karla 4-Ev-R. And perhaps as a joke: Fuck the Kaiser. Succinct, all of it. Kid spittle. She leaned back in the seat. "What do you eat for breakfast the mornings we don't meet for coffee?"

"Toast," he said. "Or nothing."

Her fantasies had grown unsettlingly domestic. She and Dmitri would paint a kitchen together, line their walls with bookshelves, shop for bargains on stereo equipment. Too extreme, she knew. Too uncompromising. But she'd move in with him in a heartbeat. Sometimes she imagined taking him to Spain. They'd go to Guell Park, the Plaza Mayor, the aqueducts in Segovia.

The train inched to a stop, then began creeping leadenly backwards. Dmitri laughed. "I love it when they do this."

"I don't get the point." Would he visit her in Livermore? Would they thumb through thick novels together, side by side on her balcony?

"Forty-nine years in Ellis," he said. "And neither do I."

Rika thought of how he'd sneaked out Ruby's side door Wednesday, as if he'd stolen something. She felt suddenly bothered, remembering it. All at once, she longed to draw. She longed to drive absurd distances without stopping. She longed to smell the necks of handsome men and never look back.

Finally, he gave up on the train and turned the car around, taking the long way to Ruby's and parking a few houses down.

In the kitchen, Rika poured them each a glass of water to let him know she didn't feel like hurrying.

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to wake up next to you," he said.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"I can't handle it. Let's just enjoy our hour."

They went back into the bedroom and she set the *Herald* on her desk and he told her he loved her and she said it back and she knew they believed each other. They lay on her bed. She put her face against his shoulder and listened to him breathe. His shirt smelled of Lucky Strikes and chalk, cafeteria pizza, Old Spice. It was a comfortable combination, corporeal and familiar.

Unbuttoning his shirt, she saw again that the hairs on his chest were the same salt-and-pepper as the ones on his head. The little age markers didn't bother her. They were facts of him, like his truck and the feel of his hands. Dmitri thought about the age difference more, she knew. He'd make self-deprecating remarks about his back or his stomach.

As she unfastened the last button on his shirt, it occurred to her that she never

thought about the bulk of a man, the delicious mass of him, the weight even thin men carried in their bones, until she was in bed with him. She'd thought this about Todd, too, the power in his limbs, his compact muscularity, the way his forearms smelled of laundered cotton. Suppose she hadn't gone into Rick's office that night—maybe everything would have turned out the same with Todd anyway. Maybe there was some inevitability with Dmitri, too, and they hadn't discovered it yet.

Lightly, she touched his belt, slid the leather from the buckle, and he raised his hips a fraction of an inch. Outside, Ruby's Yamaha rumbled to a stop. Had Dmitri heard it? She undid the button of his jeans, eased down the zipper, slid them from his thighs. The front door clicked open. Checking to make sure the bedroom was locked, she nestled, cross-legged, between Dmitri's knees and stripped her shirt off, leaving on her pants and bra. It was the pale bra, ugly, but she didn't care because a kind of freedom was filling her. She bent over him.

It wasn't a thing she usually enjoyed—she believed the jokes—why do brides smile, all of that. But with Dmitri, there was nothing he expected, yet nothing surprised him. She held his thighs in her hands, felt his unyielding fullness. He'd gone to Greenlake again yesterday. When he came back, he'd told her about Patterson Pass, about how Tenth and Central had looked twenty years ago, about Madison High and the alfalfa fields, about how James Bannister had called Ian twice and Ian wouldn't call him back, about the farmers, the sparrow hawks, the old tar pits. Ellis spread inside him like a network of veins. Each shudder in his thighs rippled through her upper arms and the sides of her breasts, and she could sense beneath his skin how he received each millimeter of contact. The strength of him spread through her hands and mouth and she wondered if this was how a surgeon felt. The precision of it. The bodily knowing.

Afterward, she turned toward the wall to regroup, to create some silence for herself. Funny, how men always assumed women wanted to snuggle alongside their heavy chests.

"I wish I knew you better than anyone else does," he said after a minute.

"You do."

"Not better than anyone ever will."

She was silent. Ruby was in the kitchen, steaming water for tea. How was she supposed to answer? You're right, she thought. Leave your wife, move into my little room. Instead, she said, "It's nearly seven."

"I could stay here all night. I wouldn't care what anyone thought."

But of course he cared. If he didn't, he wouldn't sneak out the side door, wouldn't lie to his wife, wouldn't avoid Rika at school.

After he was gone, she stayed in her room, looking at the ceiling. She needed to nap, but couldn't. Fatigue beset her only when she resisted it. She was starting to believe she had insomnia, not just stress or sleeplessness, but something verifiably medical. The first thing doctors would advise was eliminating caffeine. Rika would be unwilling. She adored 3,7-dihydro-1,3,7-trimethyl-1H-purine-2,6,-dione too much to believe it applied to her situation.

Her situation was something else. Something raw and mobile, some naked newborn rat the size of a pinhead scuttling across her tightrope ganglia. History, that's what it was. Raging plague-style because she'd gotten sluggish about moving forward. Inattentive. Because of Ellis and her growing fondness of it, her involvement in the campaign, and yes, too, because of Dmitri.

It occurred to her that her ceiling looked like a violently-frosted cake.

Confident women didn't date married men. She'd read this in one of Ruby's *Psychology Todays*. But supposedly they didn't date abusive men, either. Which just went to show that there were a lot of kinds of abuse and a lot of kinds of confidence.

She rose, made a face in the mirror, appraised her jeans and pale bra. At her desk, she dialed Russ's office number. The machine picked up. "Russ, this is Rika Brown." Was he there now, listening? "I have something that might interest you," she lied. "I don't know if you know this, but—no, never mind. Just call me back if—"

"Hello."

Aha. "You're there."

"Working late. I sneaked out for a cup of coffee, just stepped in."

He didn't lie well, not even over the phone.

"Learned anything that'll help me?" he asked.

"Will you agree not to tell his daughter?"

He laughed, a tired chuckle that made her think of coal miners, assembly line workers.

"Will you?" she repeated.

He said nothing for a moment, then his voice rose. "Yeah, sure," he said offhandedly. "Tell me something useful and I won't tell Meg."

The problem was, of course, that Rika knew nothing useful. But she needed to make something *seem* useful, convince Russ she was trying to help. She glanced down at the *Herald*, methodizing her thoughts.

“What is it?” His voice was edgy. She thought of the DUIs on his record. “Rika?”

She’d tell him about the campaign—make it sound genuinely important, though it was all public knowledge. Living in Stockton, Russ might not have heard. “Ian’s in charge of a political movement here. To stop this guy, Bannister, from getting onto City Council. He has all these people working under him. It was in the *Herald*.”

“Ian’s involved in a political movement?”

“Yes.” Had she told him too much? No—this was all in the paper.

“I fail to see how that could possibly help me.”

Slowly, Rika exhaled. “You said to tell you whatever I found out.”

“Yeah,” Russ said.

“That’s it. So—you won’t talk to Meg? If I learn anything, I’ll call—”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Russ said. “Deal.”

Rika closed her eyes, rejoicing. “Okay, then,” she said coolly, and hung up. Relief rushed into her. Finally—she’d done it. They were safe, Russ would leave them alone, and she’d mended a crisis in her life without screwing it up. She’d go off to Livermore, Becky would never know, and she and Dmitri could still see each other. She swallowed. Her throat felt scratchy. Stress, eroding her immune system. Vitamin C inundation and more sleep. She’d beat it.

A new energy swam through her, and she plucked her shirt from the floor, buttoned it, and went into the kitchen. No Ruby. She looked out the window and saw her landlord silhouetted against the porch light, trimming her rosebushes. Rika pushed open the window and called to her.

“Hi—I’m almost done out here,” Ruby said.

“Want me to put on some water for tea?”

“That’s all right.”

Of course—she’d already had it. Rika closed the window, fixed herself a plate of turkey, orange slices, and sourdough bread, and carried it out to the backyard. Watching Ruby garden was a spectacle. She moved cinematically, a fit teen in an older woman’s body. Rose-grower vocabulary was brilliant, too: Thrips, borers, floribundas, she’d learned from

Ruby. Dead-heading and bud-pinching. Outside, it was drizzling, and Rika sat on the patio below the overhang with her dinner on her lap. Tossing an orange peel into Ruby's compost pile, she was suddenly horrified. The side door, from which Dmitri had made his stealthy exit forty minutes earlier, was easily visible from the rosebushes.

"I love the smell of rain," Ruby said. "I guess it's not the actual rain. It's all the soil and decay the rain sogs up. But I still love it."

How long had Ruby been out here? Rika hadn't considered the possibility—Ruby rarely gardened unless she was home early. She searched Ruby's expression for a clue.

"How was your day?"

"Terrible, which is why I'm out here recovering my mental footing."

"More with Brandt?"

Ruby looked up and nodded, but no eye contact. "Bill's pushing for the death penalty in a homicide with no body."

"How can you have a murder without a body?"

Ruby wiped her forehead with her wrist and started in on the Leonidas. "Well, if the evidence is strong. If there's so much blood, say, that you know the victim can't be walking around anymore. But all Bill's got is a confession. Which tells you it's a murder, but not whether it's first degree, second degree—way too weak, in my book, for the death penalty." She closed the blade over an old stalk.

"You're Brandt's boss, aren't you?" Ruby's back could have been facing the side door when Dmitri had left. If he'd walked quietly, she might not have turned.

"True, but all I'm allowed to do is 'counsel,' and you can guess what good that does. Goes back to all that faith in human institutions." Wiping her forehead again, she looked toward Rika, still not making eye contact. Was she nervous?

"I'm soaked to the bone," Ruby said. "Let's go in."

"I'll grab a towel." Rika opened the sliding-glass door, set her half-eaten dinner on the counter, and retrieved one from the hall closet.

Outside, Ruby was sitting on the cement, scraping the mud from her soles with a screwdriver. Although she owned an extensive, well-worn tool collection, she never limited herself to its intended uses. In the past few months, Rika had seen her use a socket wrench to nail up a picture, pliers to pry open a pickle jar, and a ball peen hammer to prop a window open. "Thanks," she said, taking the towel and drooping it over her head like a burkha.

"How was *your* day?"

"The campaign's going well. Did you see the paper?"

"I only read the *Stockton Record*."

"I brought one to show you. I wanted to ask you a couple things about Murakami."

Ruby set the screwdriver down, picked up both shoes, and walked to the edge of the patio, where she clomped them together.

Rika took a short breath. She couldn't handle it. "Did you see Dmitri?" she asked abruptly. If Ruby asked when, Rika would assume she hadn't and say, "In the newspaper."

She watched Ruby parse the question, turning it over. It was easy to picture her steady gaze gripping jurors' attention. "Yes," Ruby said, stationing her Reeboks beside the door. "But I don't think he saw me. He was moving pretty fast."

This was a woman who had been married for almost forty years and had probably never cheated. She kept pictures of her husband all over her house. She believed in institutions. Government, home, church, country. Rika's embarrassment was pedestrian, her guilt a pittance.

"Don't be sorry. You're a grown woman," Ruby said, switching on the kettle. "Ginger peach okay?" she asked.

"Sure."

Rika swallowed again. No question about her throat. Probably viral. Perversely, she wanted to talk. Now that it was out there, she craved analysis. But there were no words for it. Not "boyfriend." Not "date" or "dating."

Rika felt frozen. Mae hadn't liked this in her, her silences at crucial moments. "Rika's such a sullen little thing," she'd heard Mae confide to the ladies in her sewing circle. She'd located "sullen" in the dictionary: showing ill humor or silent resentment. For years, she'd seethed at Mae for recognizing this in her.

Ruby took a pair of teacups from the hooks in the cupboard. "I saw two glasses on the kitchen counter and your door was closed, so I went out to give you some privacy. The side door didn't occur to me."

"It's all right."

"Well. For one thing, I'm a woman. I can understand."

"He's never cheated on her before."

"I believe that."

She was suffocating. Blood flowed into her face. She could feel it streaming up to color her cheeks, and she rubbed her palm against the back of her neck to suggest candor, stupor, confusion. Turning, she went down the hall and into her bedroom, closed the door, and sat on the edge of the bed, looking at her train photo. She felt defensive of Dmitri, but not of herself—and how could she? She'd done what she'd decided she wouldn't. Instinct had won. In Livermore, she'd start over—again—and she wished she was there already, alone in her apartment with the lights off.

A confused wrongness pervaded it all. Her throat was tight and the train blurred. Maybe she was destined to spend life failing, starting over, failing again. She was overcome by self-loathing, seized by a quick rage. She wanted to destroy things, to hit herself, to bite through steel. Before this, the last time she'd cried was at Dmitri's house. Why was there such shame in Ruby knowing? She felt exposed. Deviant and unsmart. She rubbed a fingertip along the inside corner of each eye, reordered her thoughts, blew her nose, and went back out to the living room.

"I should have—" she started, but her voice cracked. She was exposed again, not only *with* a married man, but lacking the backbone to stand there and admit it.

Ruby set the teacups on the table and threw her arms protectively around Rika. She smelled of soil and sugar, and Rika wished for an instant that she could live here with Ruby forever, or better yet, that she could start over at fifteen or eighteen, or whenever things had started going bad, and she hugged Ruby back as if such a thing were possible.

She opened her eyes, letting go. Over Ruby's shoulder, Rika noticed the framed photograph on the coffee table. She'd glanced at it so often that it had become invisible. Ruby and Craig wore snowsuits, and his hands gripped the puffy sides of her jacket. They were fifty-five in the picture, Ruby had told her once. Their first time skiing, both of them. Was it a freedom or a capitulation, to spend your life with a man?

Rika's chest felt wobbly. She sat on the couch in Dmitri's quarter-lotus position and remembered her unfinished dinner, but didn't feel hungry enough to go get it. "Thanks."

"Don't beat yourself up. We do the best we can."

Rika sagged backward, allowing her spine to curve against the couch. Her body filled with the kind of fatigue she'd gotten in high school after running the mile. "Can I ask you about Murakami?"

"First, tell me how the campaign's going."

Ginger peach tea came in bulk, and Ruby always served it with bits of herb still floating on the surface. Rika dipped her finger in, then pulled it out and sucked the brown specks from her skin. She talked about Ellis. She described her attachment, how Dmitri had taught her to love it, how “commute” meant “transform” in Latin and how that’s what had happened to Ellis over decades, at the arid axis of rivers, then railroads, then freeways. The phone rang and they ignored it. A maudlin expression came onto Ruby’s face as Rika told her about Dmitri’s visits to Greenlake, about Owens-Brockway. In the silences between things they said, the clock in the hallway made a pacing sound, like someone’s finger tapping a stack of paper, and when Rika got around to Murakami and showed Ruby the *Herald*, it was eight-thirty.

Ruby looked at it a long time. “I know a lot of these people,” she said, tapping the picture. “Kids of old friends.”

“Do you already know what I’m going to ask?”

“I do. I do, and I’ll do it. It sounds like there’s a real chance, doesn’t it?”

There was a catch in her voice that made Rika pause admiringly. “You hate Bannister the way you hate Brandt. You hate the injustice of what they did to Murakami.”

Ruby had been playing with her empty cup, and she turned it over in her hands like an egg and set it on the coffee table, next to the snowsuit picture. “I wish. But it’s like everything else. Revenge and betrayal.”

Rika grinned. “Even better—revenge for Murakami.”

They were silent.

“We were eighteen. He had a scholarship to Berkeley and I found out the same week.” She picked up the cup again. “We were careful. I don’t know quite how it happened.”

“How what happened?” Rika asked, then understood. “You were pregnant.”

Ruby nodded. “I mean, I know how it *happened*, but—” she chuckled softly, then set the cup in her lap and folded her hands over it, serious again. “I was willing to get married, but he wasn’t. James arranged an operation, with his father’s help.”

“What about your parents?”

“We were poor, and he was—well, he was James Bannister and his father was Charlie Bannister. My father worked at Holly Sugar, my mother sewed communion veils. They were desperate for me to stay with him. I never told anyone else, except Craig. We

just told people we couldn't have kids. That our bodies didn't work right together."

"But the operation..."

"It was riskier, back then. Illegal. Charlie knew a man." She shook her head. "I did what they told me to. I should have gone to a hospital, afterwards. God knows I wanted to. But James said no, that I'd get him in trouble. He said he'd lose his scholarship."

"I can't imagine you agreeing."

"I was different, back then. More like my mother. When he left for Berkeley, I thought we'd stay together. I sent sugar cookies wrapped in fabric. After a few weeks, I realized he wasn't returning my letters."

"Then you went to college yourself."

"Not right away. I worked at Holly Sugar, with my father. I went to night school. I thought I'd be a nurse. And then one day I got called for jury duty and I sat through that bank robbery trial and realized there was something I wanted in to do in the world after all."

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Later that night, much later, when Rika couldn't sleep and was thinking of taking a walk, she heard rustling down the hall. Ruby was always in bed by ten-thirty, and although Rika knew it was ridiculous, she found herself thinking of all the people Ruby had put in jail. There had to be hundreds. Did they know where she lived? Ruby locked the windows every night. Maybe a cat. Or tree branches. Rising from bed and keeping her light off, Rika took her scalpel from her drawer. She'd confront it quickly, see that there was nothing, then go back to bed. Stepping into the dark hall, her breath sounded jagged. Her chest pounded. She was always doing this to herself. In San Diego, the nights Todd hadn't come home, it was only a matter of hours before she'd become convinced someone was breaking in through a window.

The sound was too irregular not to be human, though. Padding down the hall in her cotton socks, she passed Ruby's room and saw that the light was on, the door ajar half a centimeter, and through the crack she saw Ruby sitting on the side of the bed clutching a white cloth. Rika had never seen Ruby in her nightgown, nor—as far as she knew—without a bra, and at the opening in her gown, Ruby's skin was dry and creased. Her hair hung messily about her head, frizzed at the ends. She must slick it with mousse each day before

braiding it, must lotion her hands and face, line her eyes with tasteful make-up, suck in her cheeks to sharpen her jaw line. The Ruby before her did not look terribly different from the one Rika had imagined at eighty-four. The same lioness, but older, unspeakably vulnerable, with hunched, shaking shoulders.

She realized Ruby was sobbing. A spasm of breath wracked her frame and she released the cloth she'd been gripping. But it wasn't a cloth, Rika saw—it was a man's undershirt. Craig's. The snowsuit picture rested on the bed. Ruby picked up the shirt again and held it to her face, breathing in. In her nightgown, she seemed implausibly thin. Rika understood she wasn't watching an occasion, but a ritual, and felt embarrassed and went quietly back to her own bedroom.

She turned on her light, looked at herself in the mirror. She was never going to be taken back to the beginning of everything. Nothing would be explained. She would never know her birthday. And there was an uncertain peace, wasn't there, in not knowing? In the chaos of it, Dmitri might say. Returning the scalpel to her drawer, she glanced at the *Herald*, then picked it up and unfolded the front page. Maybe a new beginning wasn't what she needed. Maybe it would just mean more of the same—mistakes, failure, another escape. Because right or wrong, she'd end up following her instincts. We do the best we can, Ruby said.

What if she stayed? What if she decided to plant herself in Ellis for a while? There was something hard-won about it. Pithy. And it wasn't just because of Dmitri. She studied the *Herald's* photograph of the protest, traced the faces of Ian and Dmitri with her finger, then of Lizzie and Albert and a handful of her students and Benji Laida, and a hundred others she didn't know. Leaving was easy. Leaving was money, a new apartment, tabula rasa. Staying was a leap of faith, a surrender to a gut-level impulse that, when it came down to it, was the only evidence a person ever had that she was doing the right thing.

Rika folded the newspaper, switched off the light, and climbed into bed. First thing the next morning, she would call the lab director and tell him she'd changed her mind. For now, she was staying in Ellis.

Chapter Seventeen

Ian sliced eight more liquor boxes into fourths, gripping the steel handle of the X-Acto knife and drawing it carefully along the corrugations. Small things mattered more here. Before he'd fully understood Ellis, he'd figured they should go traditional—as colorful and boisterous as the parades he'd helped organize during his stint with the Vancouver's National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. But reading Dmitri's books had taught Ian that the key was convincing the data technicians and computer programmers driving in from the Altamont that this was the anti-rally. No echoes of Berkeley or New York, and certainly not of gay pride. Ian forbade tie-dye and encouraged people to dress in brown and navy. The signs he made were perfect squares, uniform for credibility. Chemical engineers on parade—that was the image.

Setting the new cardboard placards on top of the pile, Ian closed the X-Acto knife and beat a quick rhythm onto the boxes with his hands. Excitement filled him, partly because the debate was Monday and he intended to decimate Bannister, and partly because he was meeting Bannister in thirty minutes at the Duck. The meeting had been Dmitri's suggestion. "Smile a lot," Dmitri had told him. "And listen. Say as little as possible."

Albert popped his head into the storeroom. "Five bucks says you can't sell Joe Bremkin a Midori Sour tonight."

"Done." Ian heard Albert continue to the back and switch on Louis Armstrong. "What a Wonderful World"—Bannister's fucking commercial. Albert must not have seen it, or he wouldn't play this. Ian had caught the commercial late last night at the Cote D'Azur, flipping for something to watch at one a.m. besides "Newhart" and heterosexual dating shows. Bannister's sappy anecdotes and vague "community strengthening" propositions had delighted Ian, and he'd spent an hour afterward jotting down ideas to use at the debate.

For good luck, Ian was wearing Russ's Corona T-shirt. He checked the time. Mornings at the Pint Club were blissful. Ten to noon, he and Albert worked to get the place ready: counting the till, filling kegs, scraping gum from the bottom of the bar with a putty knife. He liked working himself into such a sweat that he was forced to change into one of the spare T-shirts he kept in the back. Ray wouldn't have believed it. He wiped his hands on his jeans and went out to the front, where Albert was struggling with a tap. Ian hoisted an empty keg onto the counter. "Carbonator still giving us problems?"

“Leaking like a faucet, then it stopped coming out.”

“I thought of something last night,” Ian said. Pre-*Denouement*, he’d never been inventive, but ideas came to him now, blueprints for fixing things or making them efficient. He stood behind the bar and tied a length of twine around the handle to hold it back while he worked. Then he loosened the screw with a wrench, pulled off the leather washer, and replaced it with one he’d bought at Mick’s Hardware. Calluses had sprouted on his palms, and he kept his eyes on them as he stuck a screwdriver into the tap and clinked it around. Authentically rugged. Men with pricey health club memberships did not have calluses. He took the screwdriver out. No blockage.

The trick to keeping Stockton out of his mind was making sure Ellis was always at the forefront. Working on the campaign, reading books Dmitri had given him, and chatting up *Herald* reporters kept his attacker thirty miles away, where he belonged. Occasionally, if Ian let his mind wander before he dropped off to sleep, or if he started thinking about his Ramspott life—shows he’d auditioned for, cities he’d lived in—Theo’s eyes flashed across his vision like a camera shutter opening and closing, and he found it difficult to breathe. Guilt, he supposed. Or just fear of being found out. Theo’s legal predicament was Theo’s problem. An odd situation, yes, but one that fit the definition of murder, and whose fault was that?

He needed a lubricant and was certain Albert hadn’t used one, so he went to the back and rubbed some butter onto his finger, then rubbed it onto the leather and fitted it. “I think I got it,” he said.

Albert looked up from the other end of the bar, where he was seated with a calculator. “If all you did was replace the washer, it won’t work. I replaced that one a week ago.”

Ian lifted the tap to demonstrate. Albert had let the draft arm dry out.

“How’d you do that?”

“Can’t tell you. Job security. Go easy on this one, though.”

“Ha.”

Ian belched softly, grabbing his coat from beneath the bar. He’d bought it at Goodwill a few days earlier, an old corduroy that lacked sufficient insulation but was soft enough to remind him of the blanket he’d toted around as a child. Six dollars. The last thing

he'd bought at Goodwill before that was a fur hat for a college play. Amazing, what people threw out.

"Good luck," Albert said, turning back to his rows of numbers.

It hadn't been raining when Ian walked to work two hours earlier, but a drizzle was falling now, small rivers coursing into the sewer grates, giving Central an urgent sort of charm. He hoped the rain would stop by afternoon—it generally did—though he knew the protestors would come anyway, in parkas and garbage bags as if they expected a flood.

Inside the Duck, Ian looked at the "Time for Miller!" clock above the photos of old Madison football teams: it was five after twelve. He should have guessed Bannister would make him wait.

Ray would have liked the Duck. It was much larger than the Pint Club, and the walls were lined with fake wooden panels. Two pool tables were jammed in the far corner, none of the booths were upholstered, and everything reeked pleasantly of cigarette smoke—leftover, he supposed, from the more illustrious days of the California bar scene. But in fierce oppugnancy: daily specials printed on cream-colored cardstock, a well-polished hardwood floor, and an impressive wine list. The gay-straight alliance of neighborhood bars.

Bannister arrived ten minutes later and was wearing exactly what he wore in the commercial, except his hat had a smaller brim. Ian could see right away why people trusted him. His wide, generous eyes suggested skill at navigating local imbroglios—old plots of land, vast mounds of paperwork. Without hesitation, he sat opposite Ian and offered his hand. "I'm James."

"Ian Pinter."

"Like Harold. The playwright."

Ian tried to smile. "No relation."

Bannister laughed. "Sorry—first thing that came into my head. I took a drama class in college."

In one sweeping motion, Bannister removed his hat, placed his napkin on his lap, and glanced imploringly at the waiter. "So," he said blithely to Ian. "You're *him*."

The waiter came over and Ian ordered a burger and salad. Bannister asked for a chicken club with a side of gravy.

Waiting to see whether Bannister had forgotten the question, Ian concentrated on the man's eyebrows, trying to dilute the sensation that Bannister was peering directly into his

skull. The eyebrows were neatly trimmed and a shade darker than his hair, reminiscent of Sam Waterston.

“First off, are we talking personal grudge?”

Ian rubbed his calluses. “I don’t even know you. This is just about Ellis.”

“Well, we have that in common, then.” Bannister smiled cannily. “Though, if I’m not mistaken, you haven’t been here long. Now me, I was born right in Ellis Community Hospital.” He gestured to his side, as if the hospital was located to the left of the ketchup. “Never lived anywhere else.”

“Except Berkeley,” Ian said, to show he’d done some homework.

“College, of course. But then right back to Ellis, where I’ve devoted my life to helping this city reach its potential. Seeing new possibilities. Take the mall. Just ten years ago, bay area developers couldn’t have pointed Ellis out on a map. Now—well.” He shrugged as if his meaning was too obvious for words.

“And Greenlake’s your latest vision?”

“No. Just my best.”

The waiter brought their food out and Bannister dug into his fries. He was the kind of man whose eyes always glistened as if he was about to wink. And it seemed genuine. He was earnest—Ian hadn’t expected that.

Bannister bit the top from a fry and pointed the remainder at Ian like a conductor’s baton. “Ian, Greenlake’s the beginning. It’s a lifestyle center. It’s designed around community. Spaces for social interaction, bookstores and little cafés. As of last year, there were only fifty lifestyle centers in the country.”

“A mall is a mall.”

“But it’s *not*, see.” Bannister was like a preacher, gathering vim as he spoke. “You focus on high-end architecture, high-end but affordable shops. Pier One instead of Wal-Mart, Chevy’s instead of Taco Bell, that kind of thing. And best of all, jobs. You may not know this, but folks have to drive two and three hours to get to work now. You can’t say *that’s* right, can you?”

An artful turnaround. Ian suspected he was being baited. Formidable. The debate might prove interesting. “I’m not convinced, nor did you think I would be. Why did you want to meet?”

Bannister smiled again. The way he held his head, leaning forward, he always seemed to be nodding. It evoked compassion, sprightly concern. Bannister bit into his sandwich. "Mmm—I love the Duck. Here, spread some of this gravy on your burger. Delicious."

"No thanks."

"Suit yourself. Now, I wanted to talk about this map business. I don't know where you dug it up, but I have no intention of leveling Central. None. And I'm willing to sign a public acknowledgement to that effect. In addition to suing you for defamation."

"Would it include an agreement not to redistrict?"

"Until when?"

"Indefinitely."

Bannister raised his eyebrows. "I'd love to say yes. But indefinitely is a long time. Things change. I've got to be able to respond to people."

"And to places, right? To downtown stores that conveniently crumble under high rents you control?"

"I like you, Ian," Bannister said. "You're aggressive. Aggressive isn't bad, but it's rarely thought through. I have an impeccable record in this community. People like me because I like them. I go to bat for them. This—" He waved his hand, dismissing the protest and maps and newspaper articles with one flick of his wrist. "This defamation is upsetting because it's inaccurate."

"Not to me."

"Nor to Dmitri or the folks out on Central every day waving those signs full of lies. Oh, don't look surprised. I know Dmitri's behind this. He lurks at Greenlake most mornings as if he's about to burn the place down. But he won't; he's predictable. One of the reasons I like him so much."

Ian swallowed, aware that this was having the precise effect on him that Bannister intended.

"See, I love this place. That's why I'm running for City Council. Civic duty. I've been confined to the business world too long. You lose touch."

"You seem to think you know what people want already."

"Most, not all."

Ian studied the man's cheekbones, his taut tanned skin and wide eyes. Ian felt, somehow, that Bannister was getting progressively younger. He had a face like a chrysalis. It suggested a graceful peeling back. In fifty years, Ian would be dead and Bannister would be a teenager.

"You may think I'm a gutless developer, but you don't know this place like I do. I dream about it. I break my back for it. Now, the sad truth of it is, I like Montgomery O'Brien. But the man has no head for business. If he's re-elected, these out-of-town developers will start rolling in like you won't believe. And they'll be thinking Costco and Wal-Mart, not lifestyle centers."

"Sounds like less of a threat to downtown."

"For a time, perhaps. For a time. But the thing you don't seem to understand yet, and that Dmitri, bless the man, never will, is that it doesn't matter. I'm just the face he puts on what he doesn't like. I'm the face of progress. Greenlake goes up regardless. And if it didn't, something else would."

The arrogant bastard. Ian wanted to bring up Murakami. Bannister would stop smiling and nodding, then. But Ruby's interview was today, and wouldn't be in the paper until tomorrow. He didn't want Bannister to have a chance to run to Garrett. Ian imagined Bannister's tan fading, wrinkles appearing around his lips. Did he fear the past he'd been trying to cover?

"I like you, Ian," Bannister said as if coming to a conclusion he'd been deliberating over. "There may even be a job for you on the Planning Commission, if you're interested. Heck, the Pint Club may not be around forever. Who knows?"

"Cute."

"Pardon?"

"Cute." Ian couldn't resist. "I'll be sure to mention, during the debate, that you practically bribed me to stop campaigning against you."

"Debate?"

Ian raised his eyebrows. "You'll be there, won't you? I've filed all the paperwork."

Bannister's smile broke into a grin, and a triumph came into his wide eyes. "Only candidates are allowed to take part in the debate. It's in the city bylaws. You were planning on debating me?"

Ian was silent.

“Sorry to disappoint. I’d assumed my challenger was Montgomery.”

Rubbing the callused parts of his palms together, Ian tightened his jaw.

Bannister shrugged good-naturedly, wiping his mouth and tossing the napkin on his plate. “Well, I’ve got to get back to work. Nice chatting with you, Ian. Let me take care of lunch?” He waved his wallet, which he seemed to have produced from thin air, and put on his cowboy hat.

“Suit yourself,” Ian said.

As they shook hands, Bannister’s grip was painfully tight. Ian withdrew his hand and walked out into the rain, leaving Bannister with the empty plates and the bill and the dish of gravy neither of them had touched.

He was breathing hard. In a few minutes, he’d go back to work, but he needed to loosen his nerves. Lizzie’s wasn’t usually crowded after lunch, so he ducked in and ordered a soy latte. Half the tables were full, but no one he knew. When he’d lived in Greenwich Village, he’d spent a lot of time in coffee shops, reading Foucault or Derrida while he looked for someone else doing the same, then began plotting eye contact. Often this had worked. Foucault and Derrida did not interest him, a fact that had made him feel inadequate, but *people* interested in Foucault and Derrida interested him, and on this level he’d been successful. What happened to all that, he wondered. At some point people grew too old for eye contact in coffee shops. You holed yourself up in your own head, fearing others might find you strange. You knew that on some level, you’d believe them.

Outside, it was raining harder. In the storeroom of Lizzie’s, he could hear the leak falling into buckets. She’d patched the roof twice, she’d told him, but couldn’t afford it in the storeroom. No one else seemed to notice the sound, but to Ian it was deafening. He thought of Murakami, pulled from his home, of the secret P.O.W. interrogation building at the Hot Springs Hotel. Dmitri had showed him its old concrete foundation, behind the new high school. Five hundred German citizens had been questioned there, and it hadn’t come out until the seventies. When it did, Dmitri said, people had talked about it for a day or two, then forgotten just as quickly.

Bannister had come thinking he could schmooze, but Ian had given him nothing. Bannister wasn’t used to that, and he’d been angry. He feared Ian. Like a Pinter character, Bannister played out a normal life, all the while scared of the day some dark van would pull up and take him away for the thing he’d done when he thought no one was looking.

Ian finished his latte. Harold Pinter said it was a mistake to care too much about your audience, and that would be Bannister's undoing. Too much kowtowing and jockeying for favor. Lifestyle centers were downright patronizing. No one would buy it. He need to talk to Dmitri about the debate rules.

"Inner City Blues" was playing when Ian went back to the Pint Club. In the back, a young black man in heavy gloves was eating a microwaved pizza. Attractive. Ian decided upon the exact fraction of his next paycheck that he'd forfeit for a night with him: one-fifth. Grease lined the creases in his face, as if several lackadaisical washings had left a residue that had built up over weeks. Ian considered starting a conversation about Marvin Gaye, whom Ray loved, but he couldn't remember when this song had been written, nor what it was about.

Coughing loudly, Albert emerged from the back. "How did it go?"

"Fantastic," Ian said, smiling obliquely.

"What happened?"

"James is scared. He denied he had a scheme for downtown, then when I asked him to sign an agreement, he turned white as a ghost."

"No shit? You dropped a contract on him?" Albert coughed again, then filled a glass halfway with water and drank it in a single gulp.

"Just to scare him."

Relief flooded Albert's face. "Wow."

"Yeah. And get this—he tried to bribe me with a job. Said he didn't know how long the Pint Club would be around."

"Son of a *bitch*. So he's definitely planning on closing us down. It's true."

"You knew it was true weeks ago—don't go glum on me."

The man Ian had been watching finished his pizza, snapped off his gloves, and shoved them into his pockets: wedding ring. Ian was becoming increasingly certain that he, himself, constituted Ellis's entire gay population.

"Not glum," Albert said. "Pissed, but not glum."

"Pissed is good."

"What gives him the right? I mean, for Chrissakes—how long we'll be *around*? Maybe these rallies are too peaceful, Ian." Albert's voice was raised, and the chess players in the back had abandoned their game to listen. "Maybe we need more action."

"Maybe so."

"Did I ever tell you I was in Vietnam?"

"No."

"Well, I was. Put in two years and came back and raised hell with Archie Shepp for the next four."

"The saxophonist?"

"Yeah. I used to play keyboard." He gestured to the door-high poster of Pharaoh Sanders. "Pharaoh, Sam Rivers. Anti-war music all night, and during the day, we raised hell." He grinned. "One time it took four policemen and two dogs to bring me down."

"It sure sounds like something."

"Yeah," Albert said thoughtfully. "Yeah, I guess it was."

Ian waited.

After a minute, Albert took the cloth from his shoulder and began wiping down the bar. "Bathrooms could use a quick once-over," he said, not looking up.

. . . .

"James is only half-right," Dmitri told Ian in the alley behind the Pint Club. The building's height cast a shadow over them, and though the sun had come out, Ian was shivering in his Corona T-shirt. Down the block, they could hear the roar of the protestors, and every now and then, someone would start a song or a yell, and it would gather participants until it rippled through the entire crowd. He could scarcely believe how large the group had grown. Nearly two hundred—as if a full house at the Berkeley Rep had broken loose at intermission and followed him to Ellis. The Adams Street Alley, though, was secluded. "I looked it up. There's a caveat: candidates have the right to appoint someone to debate in lieu of themselves."

"So if Montgomery agrees?"

"The odds are good. I don't know him well, but his daughter was in my class. I'll call him. We just have to get the paperwork through twenty-four hours in advance."

"We should get Montgomery to come to the protest tomorrow."

"I'll ask. Victoria's been showing up."

Ian opened a fresh pack of Parliaments and held it out. Dmitri took one, pushed it between his lips, and lit it quickly, leaning against the building. Gorgeously rugged. He thought of his old second-story apartment in Berkeley, of the neighbors he'd watched on the balcony, of the thin, pot-smoking girl he'd seen before leaving for Stockton. He thought of Frieda, of Café Strada, of Ha Chee and his pickled fish balls.

"Think James is afraid to debate you?" Dmitri asked.

"I hope so."

"What did you think of him?"

"He's confident. Believes people will be on his side no matter what."

Dmitri leaned tiredly against the wall. "It's a confidence of the entitled. It matches the omnipresent smile, the exaggerated hand gestures. He was a drama major in college."

"It shows," Ian said. He flicked a piece of ash from his cigarette, trying to decide whether to tell Dmitri what Bannister had said about him. "He suspects you're involved, I think."

Dmitri nodded. "I figured."

"Does it worry you? I mean, about your job? You could lie low until the election."

Holding his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, Dmitri tamped it gently against the side of the Pint Club. There was a gentility to him. Was it true what people said—that he'd been offered a Fulbright after college and turned it down?

"I guess I'm reaching a point where other things matter more than my job. Ellis, for one. Love." He threw his hand out melodramatically.

Ian laughed. "Beautiful. You know, you should bring your wife here sometime."

Dmitri cleared his throat, turning serious. "So when it comes down to it, all you can do is try to keep yourself centered the best you can. I've been trying to take satisfaction in small things. Burning a candle, watching the wind in an alfalfa field. Have you ever thought how Ellis is like a mitochondria? It's spiritual, this connection."

Albert had mentioned Dmitri was Buddhist, but he didn't seem the type. In Berkeley everyone was always claiming to be Buddhist, especially older white people who had recently realized they'd die someday. Shall we rejoin the masses?" Ian asked.

"You can finish your cigarette."

"Want another one?"

Dmitri shook his head. "I'm trying to smoke less."

“The longer I’m here, the easier it is to imagine the brothels and poker halls.”

“Amazing, wasn’t it? Every time somebody tried to clean it up, they were ousted from City Council.”

“Charlie Bannister’s name comes up a lot. Ian scratched his chin. “But it always starts from the part where he already owned five buildings downtown and donated buckets of money to the hospital.”

“He did. Gambling dollars built most of the additions. And bordellos, thanks to Hazel Price. Ever been to Hazel’s Fashions?”

“That’s not the same Hazel...”

Dmitri smiled, nodding. “Eighty years old, and she still won’t say a peep about them. Ask anyone who lived here then. They act like all those places never existed. Every summer, the heat bakes the slate clean.”

Ian crushed the cigarette beneath his foot and they walked back to Central.

The protestors stretched from Ellis Boulevard to Ninth Street now. Ian loved the pinch and pull of this place. Marching ceaselessly into the floodtide, Dmitri had said.

Ian remembered a time in Carmel when he’d found a dead pelican a few yards from the ocean. He knelt beside it on the wet sand, touched the giant scoop of its beak, and counted the colors. It was the most gorgeous thing he’d ever seen, this creature’s carcass against the pounding surf, and he remembered wanting to embrace it, rescue it from the nearing tide. Instead he’d climbed to a dune and watched the water wash the beautiful dead animal back to the sea. Ellis was like the pelican, he knew—but one he could get his arms around and lug to shore.

A cheer went up from the crowd as Ian and Dmitri rejoined them. Each afternoon, as they came from their homes and shops and schools to rally around him in the street, Ian felt tremendous power. He preferred to stay along the perimeter of the group, keeping an eye on the edges and nodding to the cops who’d been assigned there. The protestors were thickest on the Ellis Boulevard side, lining from Don’s Barber shop to the Knights of the Templar meeting hall, shoving their signs toward the traffic. They’d grown bolder in larger numbers, joined by a contingency of high school students who’d injected a vigor, a fresh solidarity. He watched Dmitri locate Albert in the middle of the crowd and admire his new sign: “BANNISTER—HELPING ELLIS DISMANTLE DREAMS.”

Ian was the protest's guardian. Perhaps he was even a touch overprotective, like any dedicated director. And he had to admit, he was doing a good job, certainly better than he'd been as an actor. He'd wrenched something from nothing, and sometimes, shaking hands and slapping backs along the perimeter of the group, Ian had the physical sensation that they were carrying him.

The group was especially energetic today. They were learning to self-coordinate, to lead each other in yells, to ride on their own inertia. Magnanimity filled his veins as he watched Albert shush them, then lead everyone in a chant about Ellis "belonging to the people." Everything felt visceral and immediate. He was about to pluck a "BLOOD OR BIZ-NESS" sign (illogical, asymmetrical, and slightly gruesome) from a woman in heavy boots, when he spotted Russ Dillinger in the shadowy overhang of Variety Bargain Mart.

Russ's sloped posture and discontented mouth suggested he was sulking, and though Russ seemed the kind of man who sulked often, today's version looked toxic: hands thrust toughly into his jacket pockets, his eyebrows unattractively furled. He was scanning the crowd, and Ian walked toward him, breaking from the crowd. Variety Bargain Mart was only two blocks from edge of the protest. He needed to pre-empt Russ from causing a scene.

"Hey," Ian called.

Russ turned, bristling visibly as he noticed the T-shirt.

"Like it? I got it on a trip to Colorado with my girlfriend," Ian said.

"The hell you did," Russ said. "What are you doing in Ellis?"

"You stole my line."

Russ was silent.

"I'm involved in a campaign to stop a wealthy local landowner from destroying downtown."

"Jesus. Ian, I came here to reason. God knows why you're getting involved in this shit—" he waved a hand toward the protestors, a few of whom had turned away from Ellis Boulevard and were watching Russ and Ian with interest. They were too far away to hear anything. "But it's official—Theo's facing the death penalty. The DA won't plead. He thinks he's got this case wrapped up.

"Go bribe a judge," Ian suggested.

"Fine, Ian. Flout me. Flout the entire fucking system for whatever weird, selfish reasons you've created in your head. What I don't understand is how you can do it when a

man's life is on the line. Either way, *you* walk. No skin off your back—just a couple minutes in front of a judge. I could even arrange a private meeting with the DA.”

If Russ had any real evidence, he would have used it already.

“Monday afternoon,” Russ continued.

“I’m booked Monday afternoon.”

“Between you and me, Ian, what gives you the right to walk into a town you’ve never seen before and plunk yourself in the middle of its politics? Do you just get off on fucking with other people’s lives?”

The protestors who had turned were still out of earshot but watching them openly. Russ’s gall incensed him—coming to the Pint Club had been bad enough. “Leave me alone.”

“A DNA match is all it would take,” Russ said softly.

“If that was true, you’d have done it already.”

“I’m having the tests run as we speak.”

“Bullshit.”

“What I really don’t get is the witness protection business. Ah—now you listen. Interesting. Yes, I know everything you’ve told Dmitri and Rika. I have a source, willing to testify that you’re not who you say you are. So you can make it easy on yourself, testify, and get off scot-free, or you can refuse and get testified *against*.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you.”

He was lying. Ian knew from the way he looked down, the shift in his eyes. A defense attorney should be a better liar. Ray had been wonderful. Russ had overheard gossip, maybe, but he had nothing on Ian.

Russ’s stare made Ian claustrophobic. Sweat prickled on his neck and under his arms. His jacket felt suddenly hot, but he didn’t pull it off, just unzipped the front and let the air chill his chest. “Why do you care so much about this client?” Ian asked. “Why is he worth this?”

“Anyone should be worth this.”

“Noble.”

Russ shook his head and spat on the ground. “Maybe I just have a vendetta against people who fuck with other people’s lives.”

“Then stop fucking with mine.”

"You didn't like how things were going in Berkeley, so you come here and start over. Your career was in the toilet, and one day you just woke up and said screw it, right? Don't look shocked, Ian—it's your fucking life. But you can't wake up and start over."

The interested cluster of protestors, five or six of them, exchanged glances and began walking over. "Ian, are you all right?" Benji Laida called, a block away.

"You think you're helping these people?" Russ looked down, shaking his head, and Ian used this moment to summon the few onlookers over. "Ellis is a fucking dead end."

"You've got to have faith in this place if you want to preserve its integrity," Ian said, mostly to the group.

"The new people will always hate the old people, and in the winter it smells like vinegar and in the summer it smells like shit, and they're never going to finish the fucking cobblestone," Russ said.

No one moved.

"And Ian here, who everyone's following like a sheep, is wanted in Stockton for involvement in a violent felony. Think about it. He got here barely a month ago. His real name is Ian Ramspott. Trust me—I'm a lawyer investigating the case."

Ian felt their eyes on him and he let a silence pass. "Okay, but I didn't want to tell them," he said softly, building suspense. He looked at Benji, at Manuel from Hacienda Market, at the owner of Variety Bargain Mart who'd come out of his store, at two high school kids and Lizzie Bremkin. Ian pointed at Russ. "This man's in league with James Bannister," he announced. "Bannister's paying him to try to infiltrate the protests and divide us before the election."

"Bullshit," Russ said.

"It's true." Shaking his head woefully, Ian gestured to Benji and Manuel. "Would you escort this man away from our gathering? Mr. Dillinger, if I see you back here I'm going to have to get a restraining order."

Manuel looked at Benji, and they stepped forward.

"Don't judge him—he's probably just doing it for the money," Ian said.

Russ glared violently at him.

"We only have *two more days*, friends. Let's keep Bannister out of it. We can do this!" He nodded his thanks to the two men and motioned for the others to rejoin the protest

with him. Lizzie looked at him, wide-eyed as they walked back. Ian saw that someone had furnished Albert with a megaphone. "What do we want?" Albert shouted.

"Ellis!" they screamed.

"When do we want it?"

"Now!" they cried.

Lizzie raised her sign up, and they stood near the back. "That guy you were talking to? I went to school with him. I think he was a freshman when I was a senior," she said.

Ian glanced over his shoulder. Russ had retreated all the way to the railroad tracks, and Benji and Manuel were still in front of Variety Bargain Mart, watching him. "He seems like a deeply troubled man."

Lizzie nodded. "He was always really weird." Then she turned, as if satisfied that her suspicions about Russ had finally been fulfilled, and joined in Albert's chant. Their voices echoed through the alleys, off of the buildings the Murakamis had once owned, and into Ellis Boulevard, where it competed against the din of traffic, the roar of the commuters' homecoming.

Chapter Eighteen

During the night, wind had whipped loose the power line across from Dmitri's house, and upon waking at a quarter to five and going out to see if the *Herald* had been delivered yet—it hadn't—the first thing he saw was the line disconnected from one pole and dangling from the other, its free end stretched across the road. He went back inside, checked to see if his electricity was working—it was—and called the city to let them know. Then, struck by a sudden desire to get out of his house, Dmitri slipped his moccasins over his bare feet, grabbed his coat and keys, and headed for his truck.

With no particular destination in mind, he drove toward Ellis Boulevard, whereupon it became clear to him that he was going to Greenlake. Earlier than usual—normally, he went on the way to school. He rolled down the window and took a cigarette from the pack in his coat pocket. He loved morning air, the brittle chill of it, still as glass. Smoking, he thought of his father. Fort Macon, Bean's Station, Dinwiddie Courthouse, Ware Bottom Church, he remembered. He'd known hundreds of Civil War battles once, had been able to name winners and losers, key cities, death tolls. But a historian needed a logical mind, he'd told his father. You've got one, his father had said, though they'd both known it wasn't true. Even then, Dmitri's mind had been restless. Details lived in his brain like fitful ghosts.

Though Linne Road would have been faster, Dmitri took Sixth Street to Vernalis Road and approached from the north to get a view of Greenlake from the foothills. More land had been cordoned off for the new stores, and they'd started digging the lake. Machines rested along the perimeter like bright, lurid ships. A bulldozer was parked where the entrance to the Holly Sugar factory had been. The factory door had looked like a prison gate, Dmitri remembered, squared off at the top with barbed wire. He'd gone there once, two years ago, to meet with a student's mother who couldn't get time off for parent-teacher conferences. The factory's closing had just been announced, and she'd planned to get a job in the mall's food court, but later, her son had told Dmitri that no one wanted to hire a fifty-year-old woman with two bad knees.

He parked along the dirt road and got out of his truck. The building that had been the backdrop for last week's *Herald* photograph was further along than the others, arched at the top with giant windows. A place couldn't escape history any more than a person could escape chaos. Something of the past always lurked in the soil. He couldn't wait to read

Ruby's interview.

Even before Holly Sugar, the Yokuts had camped there, on the Delta marshland's edge. In the winter they left for higher ground near the foothills. Dmitri knew this from the Holly Sugar break room, where he'd met the student's mother for their conference. A poster on the wall had advertised "Holly Sugar Heritage Day," and explained that a burial ground had been uncovered half a century earlier, while the factory was being built. Dmitri imagined bones beneath his Ford, but knew that any remnants would have crumbled to bits long ago, beneath Holly Sugar's heavy machinery, two stories underground. Now the dust would be turned over again, settling at the bottom of an artificial lake. He thought of Priscilla Lewis, and of her family, how they'd moved to the Santa Rosa Rancheria reservation in Lemoore his senior year of high school, and how he'd wished he could go with her.

He stubbed out his first cigarette and lit his second, setting his coat on a pile of lumber. The election could rectify things, rinse Ellis clean. Walt had realized it—he'd started giving himself bylines on the campaign stories—and Montgomery knew it, too—he'd agreed to let Ian debate in his place.

Inhaling deeply, Dmitri tipped his head toward the sky. He wasn't wearing boxers, just sweat pants, and he liked the way the wind cut through the cotton and surrounded him. The foothills were turning green and the morning sky was just light enough that their outline stood against it, the windmills slicing into the clouds. He was filled with fondness for all of it. Today would be the kind of chilly fall day that lulled him into reflection, made him grateful for the world, tricked him into believing it was March and the start of spring was a few weeks away. James or no James, he was thankful for this place, for its dynamism and the way it had let him grow. He'd taught here for decades, raised his daughter, would live in Ellis until he died—he'd always known this, but felt it powerfully now, its strength rising like steel girders in his bones.

Dmitri climbed back into his truck. Becky would still be sleeping, and for the first time in a long time, he wasn't annoyed at the thought of having to wake her up. When the time was right, he'd leave. Maybe in a week, maybe in six months. But he was finally at peace with his irrelevance to her life, and hers to his. She hadn't loved him for years, and he supposed he'd known this for a long time, but was finally internalizing its raw truth. There had been nothing hasty about his decision, nothing revelatory. He still loved her, yes, but not

as his partner—chaos had spun them apart, just as it had once spun them together. It saddened him to know that although she'd feign shock, his wife would be relieved.

Turning back onto Sixth Street, Dmitri felt for a cigarette and realized he'd forgotten his coat on the pile of wood at Greenlake. It was only five-thirty. He turned the truck around.

As he pulled onto Linne—the quicker way, this time—he thought of Rika, how she could ferret out his weaknesses and make him love her for it. The hours he spent with her were his truest—so much like the time he spent alone with Ellis, the moments in which the town flooded through him and his heart brimmed with so much life that it was difficult to breathe. With Rika, he'd violated his own trust in everything he'd assumed to be true, but it was the best thing he'd done in a long time, and although he felt guilty, he did not feel immoral. His time with her was decent and beautiful and just.

He parked near the lake and left the Ford running as he stepped out to retrieve his coat. The sleeve was caught on the edge of a plank, and as he gave it an insistent tug, there was a rumbling at the Linne entrance, and as the coat pulled free, a blue Lincoln Navigator—James's, he realized at once—drove into view. Dmitri considered running back to his truck and speeding off, but he was in clear sight already. The Navigator pulled around to the side of the lake and parked next to the Ford. Dmitri leaned against the pile of lumber and lit a cigarette, trying to look calm. The worst he could get slapped with was a trespassing fine.

James stepped out holding a Peet's Coffee thermos and a clipboard. At first, he didn't seem to see Dmitri, just strode toward the construction in his spotless boots, looking up. "Magnificent, isn't it?" he asked coolly.

"It's big." Dmitri inhaled, trying to look unaffected. James rarely made him nervous, but he felt it now, caught as wide-eyed and defensive as one of his own students. Foolish, too, in his sweatpants, T-shirt (Chieftains, forest green, complete with Celtic crest), and mussed hair.

"Sometimes I like to get to get to a jobsite early," James said. "I survey everything from the day before, then take off around ten after meeting with my contractors. Tranquil place to be, when it's empty."

Dmitri nodded, expelling smoke from the corner of his mouth. "After your picture in the paper last week, I wanted to come see the progress."

"Yes. I thought you might like the new stores. They'll have more of an intellectual bent, I'm hoping. Borders, the Discovery Store, maybe a sushi restaurant. Highbrow, these lifestyle centers. Read much about them?"

"A bit."

"Ah—of course. Ian and I had a discussion. He seemed well-versed. You've done exceptionally with him."

Dmitri didn't say anything. He hated James's disarming casualness, especially here, now, while he was wearing nothing below his waist but sweatpants and moccasins.

"You *are* working with him, aren't you?"

"A bit."

James brought his hand to his mouth, tracing his bottom lip with his fingers. In the early morning light, his goatee turned metallic silver.

"I should go," Dmitri said. "I know I'm probably trespassing."

"Nonsense."

"Well, thanks—but I apologize. I didn't figure I'd be bothering anyone, coming here this early. I have to get ready for work."

"Read today's paper?"

Dmitri hesitated. "It hadn't been delivered yet."

"Well. You've probably heard it from the horse's mouth."

"Murakami," Dmitri said, and watched Bannister's eyes narrow. An aged JFK, Ian called him. The coy sexuality transcended age.

"He came to you when you were with the *Herald*."

Dmitri nodded. "You remember."

"Sure. I'd never seen him before."

"Your father had. And you knew it."

"Now I see where Ian learns his aggression." He took a sip from his thermos. "In tomorrow's paper, I'd like it withdrawn."

"I'm not even a source. You'd have to talk to Ruby."

The corners of the older man's mouth turned up. "She hasn't spoken to me in years. We were lovers, and I jilted her. She's never gotten over it. The woman holds grudges. She hasn't aged well." He took another few steps toward Dmitri. "The election's Tuesday. I'd

like a full retraction before the debate. A statement from Ian saying I had no part in what my father might have done.”

“But you knew,” Dmitri said. “You’ve increased your net worth a hundredfold from it.”

Bannister took another sip. “See?” he said, as if Dmitri had proven something. “That’s the kind of attitude that stops Ellis from becoming what I know it can be.” He frowned. “You know I’m good for this place.”

“No—”

“You know that if we don’t keep pace with Pleasanton, we’ll be grist for the bay area. Ellis *is* growth. You may not like Greenlake, but without it, what have we got? The city can’t finish its own renewal projects. Madison’s falling apart.”

“I’ve got to go.”

“It’s fortuitous, don’t you think,” James said, chewing on the words, “That Pauley and Mitchell didn’t show up for your Board hearing last year?”

Dmitri was silent. Was James preparing him for another pink slip?

“They’re both part-time real estate brokers for me—but you must know that. They were both pretty fired up about a flag being burned at a public school. You’ve got to admit, that’s pretty controversial.” James smiled, setting his thermos on the lumber pile. “I know a lot of kids spoke up for you, but it’s just such a good thing that two Board members both got sick that very same night. What are the odds? A thousand to one?”

So James had fixed the hearing. He’d trapped Dmitri, indebted him—waiting for something like this. How many greasy rugs had Bannister slipped under him, under others, waiting for the right time to pull them out?

“Ah—you didn’t know. Well, Madison needs teachers like you. Dedicated enough to their ideas to risk it all.”

Dmitri felt naked, exposed, sick to his stomach. And implicated, though he’d done nothing wrong. Sticky, like he’d felt after talking to Walt. This was how James operated—he made people dependent. “How does it feel to bribe a man with his job?” Dmitri asked thinly.

“You’ve put words in my mouth.”

“I think you’re excellent at convincing people that’s true.”

“I’d be careful, Dmitri.”

“Of what?”

James smiled boyishly, deflating the tension he'd built. “History, is all. You've got to make sure it's working in your favor.” He picked up his thermos and clipboard and began picking his way over to the other side of Greenlake.

Dmitri stubbed out his cigarette against the stack of wood, got into his truck, and steered unsteadily up the dirt road toward Corral Hollow.

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Becky hated mornings. *Shape* magazine claimed they were a time for rejuvenation, and maybe this was true for people who lived in coastal Maine and had flawless bodies and rose around nine to squeeze their own orange juice and work from home.

Her thighs were sore from spinning class. Lactic acid pinched through her muscles, and she kicked her grandmother's quilt from her legs. Usually Dmitri had to wake her, but glancing at the clock, she saw it was only ten to six. Midterms were coming up, a time she loathed because the other teachers always forgot that music was still scheduled, so she had to call and remind them to bring their classes to the music room, and then they came fifteen minutes late, the kids riled up from testing. Midterms in middle school—ridiculous. Who'd thought it up? Someone like Dmitri. He'd probably approve of midterms in kindergarten. He ran his classes as if Madison was a college and he was a professor. Even the words he used—“lectures” instead of lessons, “term papers” instead of reports—were college words, and it got on her nerves, as if he thought his own teaching was more important than hers. Ironically, Becky *had* been in love with a college professor once—they'd dated at Fresno, secretly, until she'd met Dmitri. Her professor was adjunct and thirty-five and flawlessly attentive. But that first night in the truck, she'd had a feeling Dmitri was the one she'd end up with.

In the shower, she thought about everything Meg had told her; of course it was crazy, but how was she supposed to stop thinking about a thing like that? “I don't believe it for a minute, Mom,” Meg had said. “Russ was angry at me and just shouted it all of a sudden, and I'm *positive* he made it up. But it felt so weird not to mention it to you.”

Mid-life crisis, robbing the cradle, trading her in for a newer model—none of the clichés fit Dmitri. She knew him too well—had pitied him, even, for his predictability.

Along with Meg and his work, she was all he had. Besides, it was from *Russ*, of all people—making this up was something he'd do to anger Meg. Becky hadn't seen the boy in years, but he'd always been the strangest of her daughter's friends. Once, she'd walked in on them. Meg's shirt and bra had been off and Russ was across the room with a sketchpad, drawing and, no doubt, salivating like a rabid dog. Becky had marched over, torn the drawing from his sketchpad, and sent him home. Later, running her fingers over the charcoal lines, she'd seen that Russ had drawn Meg's breasts withered and scarred. A normal boy *touched* your daughter's breasts. This was creepy. The following morning, pouring herself a cup of coffee, Meg had explained that Russ needed to get shadows right. That was the first year Meg drank coffee, Becky remembered. She'd been moved at the sight of her daughter stirring in cream, like a woman.

She toweled off, rubbed rosemary exfoliant on her dry zones (legs, knees, elbows), and got dressed. Fridays were school spirit days, and though not all teachers wore their purple jaguar sweatshirts, Becky thought it was important, plus it was a good excuse to wear jeans. She found her yellow polo and pulled it over her bra, and then slipped on her sweatshirt. Walking past her mirror, she caught a peripheral glimpse of someone who looked—from the corner of her eye—frumpily middle-aged. She whirled around and stared at the mirror. No—she looked all right. It was the way she'd been walking. She wiggled her nose youthfully and smiled, showing her teeth.

Dmitri was at the kitchen table, reading the paper with his coat on. "You're up," he said. "I was just about to wake you."

"Did you go out?"

"For a bit. There's a power line down across the street."

Becky went to the window. A city van was pulled alongside the curb, and a man in white coveralls and a tool belt was studying the pole. "They're fixing it," she said.

"I called the city."

How long had he been awake? His moccasins were muddy, next to the front door. Of course—he'd stepped out to look at the power line. She relaxed. It was hard not to be paranoid from that conversation with Meg, the details piling in her head. He'd been getting home awfully late—but, too, there was the campaign. And that bizarre tube of lotion she'd found in his sock drawer while she was putting laundry away—but she'd read in *Redbook* that lots of men pleased themselves even when they were happily married. Still, she

wasn't sure if she was imagining it, but was there a distance now, when they made love? Was he keeping something back? No—she was just like the Bunko ladies—paranoid.

"What's happening in the world?" she asked. "You're staring at the paper like it's a riddle."

He didn't look up. "You wouldn't be interested. Just more of my real estate-related socioeconomic pontification, or whatever you call it."

"Dmitri, we talked about that," she said softly. "I said I was sorry."

He cleared his throat and looked at her. "Yeah, I know you did. Sorry—I'm just anxious about the campaign."

"I understand."

"Are you voting?"

"Of course," she said, though she wasn't registered. "I'll vote against Bannister, just for you."

"Thanks," he said. "The debate's Monday, you know." He seemed frightfully tense. She could see it in his shoulders, which were where he kept his stress. Was he still angry? They'd made up—sort of—after their last fight. Of course we're friends, he'd said. You hurt my feelings and I lashed out. But "lashed out" was *her* vocabulary, not his own, which made her wonder if he meant it.

"I bought some of those sugar-free gummy bears when I went shopping last night, if you want to take them to work for a snack," she offered.

"Thanks." He didn't raise his eyes from the paper.

Becky hardened. Didn't it trigger anything in her husband that she'd shopped right after complaining about it during their argument? What was the point of talking, if he ignored what she said? She'd meant it, too—she hadn't apologized for that part. He acted as if helping maintain a household was *beneath* him. He waited until they were down to condiments to go to Safeway. Even in college, he'd never done his laundry until he'd run out of clothes. How free and easy, to care so little—Becky didn't have that luxury. Like her mother said, a home needed attention, or you walked in the door one night and realized you'd been living in a pigsty.

Becky watched him read the paper. She wanted him to look up, smile at her, and fill her in on whatever he found so mesmerizing, but now she was annoyed and wouldn't ask.

Dmitri stood. "It's late. I haven't showered," he said absent-mindedly, stepping toward the hall.

"Aren't you going to put that in recycling?"

"I thought you might want to look at it," he called. "It's about something I dug up with the election—James Bannister's sordid past. Ruby's in it."

But he hadn't thought she wanted to look at it; he *never* put the paper away. Just one more thing she always ended up doing. Irritated, she lifted the strewn sections and dropped them back on the table. "I don't have time. Just put it away."

Dmitri looked at her with heavy eyes. "Christ," he said under his breath.

"What was that?"

"*Christ*," he repeated, glaring. And she should have been angry, but he was staring at her now with such animus that she felt a pang of guilt.

"I'll—read it tonight," she promised, lilting her voice. "But this morning I have to be at school early, to meet with Alex's mother. The 'I don't give an F-U-C-K' kid, remember?"

Without a word, Dmitri folded the paper, tucked it under his arm, and carried it to the backyard, where they kept the recycling bins. The door slammed behind him. Becky knew she'd made a mistake—this whole campaign business was crucial. When he came back a moment later, she wanted to say that she hadn't meant to be harsh. She *did* have a meeting. Surely he didn't expect her to drop everything, reorganize her morning to read the paper—especially, now that she thought about it, since he never lifted a finger to support what *she* was doing: the Columbus Day assembly, the Halloween carnival, and the Fall Harvest Festival, this year alone. It wasn't fair. She wanted to apologize, but couldn't figure out how to do it without giving in, and before she could speak, Dmitri had headed back down the hall and started his shower.

Becky wiped the kitchen counter and ate a dry sesame bagel, feeling hurt. Maybe she was still harboring subconscious stress over what Russ had told Meg. Why didn't she just ask Dmitri? Because it seemed so ridiculous, she supposed, and because Meg, who never gave her father the benefit of the doubt, didn't even believe it. On top of all their other recent tension, this would seem an insult. That teacher—Reeka?—was practically their daughter's age, and weird-looking to boot. Maybe after the election. For Dmitri's sake, she

hoped Bannister would lose. To Becky, the man seemed trustworthy enough—and God knew they could use a Crate and Barrel—but if he won, Dmitri would brood for weeks.

On the way to school, Becky's car made its clicking sound, and she made a mental note to take it to the shop. Machines were supposed to make life easier, but she could see how, in reality, this was rarely the case. Dmitri had suggested this a long time ago, and she'd laughed at it, but later seen his point. This was a recurring pattern; he'd make some crazy assertion that she'd write off as headiness—he was so much like Meg that way—then later, in a more charitable mood, decide she agreed with him.

It wasn't easy being the grounded one. She didn't used to mind. Why did she feel compelled, now, to little meannesses—like not looking at his article? It would only have taken a minute.

No one ever talked about the unkindness that could surface in a marriage. Maybe it only happened when both partners worked. That made sense—*Self* said people were either providers or caregivers, and that it was hard to be both. Maybe she was sick of being both; would they be happier if she wasn't? Financially, they'd do all right. She could devote her time to the house. Maybe she wouldn't feel so split. Maybe they needed to iron some things out.

She pulled the car into her spot, STAFF-36, but stayed in the car, thinking suddenly of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. He'd taken her to the Concord Hilton and they'd eaten cracked crab in the banquet room with a bottle of Chardonnay, and when they were done he'd led her to the dance floor and asked the DJ to play "Through the Years" by Kenny Rogers, her favorite song, and she'd thought, then, with her head against his shoulder, that everything had been worth it, to be with him like this and feel secure and know they'd bought a house together and raised a good, smart daughter, and that when you had all that, there was no point in wanting anything else.

The memory started to choke her up, which caught her by surprise. She opened the glove compartment, took out a tissue, and dabbed her nose. She cleared her throat and put the tissue in the pocket of her jeans. Somewhere, things had gone a little wrong, and it was her fault as much as Dmitri's. Whatever they had to do to get it back, she would. After the election, she'd tell him she wanted to be a better wife, which would make him want to be a better husband, too. She'd offer to quit her job after this year, if that was what it took, or

they could try counseling. Hope filled her, dimmed by regret over the way she'd acted that morning.

This weekend—no, he'd be too tense until after the election—next weekend, *Friday*, after school, she'd pick up imitation crab and a bottle of Chardonnay, and have it ready on their dining table with cheese and crackers, and when he got home she'd apologize—there was so much to apologize for, wasn't there? For both of them. She'd hug him tight and pat his rear and whisper that from now on, she wanted everything to be different.

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"Do you think he's serious? Could he actually deliver on it?" Rika asked.

"I wouldn't put it past him." They were in his classroom, doors locked and blinds down so as not to be disturbed by chess-players seeking refuge from the drizzle. Dmitri unwrapped the sandwich he'd made for himself, Muenster on sourdough. He'd spent the first ten minutes of lunch recounting his morning at Greenlake to Rika, minus the details about his attire. Now, though he hadn't mentioned it out loud, he was thinking of the way Becky had instructed him to put the Murakami article in the trash—how she hadn't even glanced at it.

"I thought it was hard to fire tenured teachers."

"It is," Dmitri said. "Which is why I've mostly recovered from Bannister's threat. You can't pink-slip a fixture without a reason, especially when that fixture is a union member. I'd get a lawyer, which I'd hate doing, and fight it, and probably win. What a mess, though. Meanwhile, I'd be teaching on eggshells." If he told Becky any of this, she'd ask why he didn't just play by the rules. Equalizers. And maybe it had been true, once. He took a bite of Muenster and let it dissolve to salt in his mouth.

"Do you really believe he fixed the hearing?"

Dmitri nodded. "Fully. Tucked it away for safekeeping. James probably does things like that all the time."

"I bet he knew it would get to you. You're politically unsavvy—I mean that as a compliment. You don't think in his terms." Rika pulled a bottle from her lunch bag, and his heart leapt as he caught a peek of cleavage at the top button of her shirt. He saw her notice this. "You know, for a Buddhist, you have an awfully strong relation to the physical world."

"The carnally physical?"

"Ha." She handed the bottle to him. "No, I meant Ellis. The physical reality of it."

Dmitri read the label. "Cold green tea?"

She nodded. "Some new kind of drink. I thought you might like it."

"My interest in Ellis transcends the physical."

"That's not entirely true. You resent stucco."

"Stucco has a negative cosmic meaning."

Rika smirked. Even skeptical, she was stunning. "Drink your drink."

He unscrewed the top and sipped. "It's sweet." Strange, drinking green tea cold. Vaguely chemical, like cotton candy. He sipped again, watching her trace the wood patterns on the desk with her knuckles. She reached a knot and followed its swirls. They curled inward, like a nautilus. "I love you so much," he said softly.

"I love you, too."

"I'm doing it," he whispered.

"Doing what?"

There seemed, suddenly, so much to say. He wanted to explain how Ellis shivered through him, with Rika at the center of it. She needed to know everything—how Meg wasn't talking to him, how the real reason he'd turned down the Fulbright was that he'd read the other winners' bios and realized they were smarter than him, how his first college girlfriend had dumped him for a football player and he'd graffitied "CLICHÉD" on her dorm room door in water soluble paint because he'd been too chicken to use regular. It all mattered—all of it. Cuts and bruises, lies, midnight trips to Safeway for cheese or condoms. The minute blurs of time that made up his life, and they mattered because he was giving it over to her. This was it—the flipped switch, the pulled lever, the point of no return.

"Doing what?" she asked again.

A buzz overtook him. A gentle humming. Chaos had surprised him, and he supposed he'd surprised himself, too. He felt raw and naked, ripe for change. "I'm leaving my wife," he said softly, trying out the words in his mouth. A panic pervaded all of this, the thought of living in a house where he hadn't grouted the fireplace or fought or made love in its rooms.

Rika tipped her head back slightly, mouth ajar. A small, elated glint shined in her eyes before she re-commandeered her facial expression. “Did you have a fight?”

“No.”

“You can’t just—leave her,” Rika said with irritating calmness—didn’t she know what this meant? She removed a container of grapefruit juice from her bag.

“I am,” he said.

“Dmitri—”

“You don’t want me to?”

Rika’s placidity crumbled. “Of course, more than *anything*. I stay up nights thinking about it, you’ve got to know that.”

“Then what?” he asked—but he knew: the age difference. “I’m not asking for your whole life. Just as long as you—as we—” How many years before the math was improbable?

“What are you talking about?”

“In twenty years I’ll be sixty-nine.”

“And I’ll be forty-seven. Who cares?”

Dmitri folded and unfolded the wax paper that had held his sandwich.

“I meant it’s not fair to your life here. We didn’t start seeing each other to break up your marriage.”

“Why, then?” he demanded.

“Because—look, would you be leaving her if you’d never met me?”

“Eventually.” He took another gulp of cold tea, spilling some, and wiped ineffectually at his shirt. “I want to be with you, Rika. I can’t concentrate, I’m thinking about it so much.”

“Me too. But you must have thought all of this about Becky once, right?”

“She got pregnant while we were dating.” As soon as he said it, he knew that this was it. The final betrayal, deeply unfair. Cruel. That hadn’t been their story.

“What will we do?”

“We’ll get a place,” Dmitri said. “A small apartment, near downtown.”

Rika kissed him. She never kissed him at school, not even when the door was locked and the shades were drawn, and it shot, ecstatic, through his body.

"The weekend after the election," he said. "On Friday I'll leave for work and I won't go back home."

"Shouldn't you let her know ahead of time?" But she didn't mean it, he knew. This was Rika's way of assuaging the guilt he'd already gotten over.

She rose and threw away her bottle, and the curve of her hips, of her breasts, of her ankles (ankles that twice, she'd locked around his neck) made Dmitri's breath quicken.

"You're okay with this? You know this is crazy and everyone will hate us?" Rika asked.

"I know what I want. Can I stay with you?"

"At Ruby's?"

He nodded. He couldn't imagine going alone to a hotel, renting a room by himself. "Just this weekend. Then we'll figure it out." The last thing he wanted was to be alone. The technicalities would be crippling—the paperwork, the gossip, the stares and questions, and worse of all, the long wretched process of convincing Meg to speak to him again—she'd take sides, she always took sides. Eventually, though, it would heal. He was strong enough.

"People will see."

"It will be tremendously interesting to them for about a month, then it's old news." He was impatient—they were pretending more caution than they felt—but feigning vigilance seemed right. "What will Ruby say?"

"She'll be fine. What about Bannister?"

"What about him?"

"Isn't this grounds for a pink slip?"

"No. Not if it's consensual, only if I've sexually harassed you."

"Have you?" she asked.

"Well." He grinned. "I'm definitely planning on it."

Chapter Nineteen

Russ tore open a package of chocolate Pop Tarts, ate one, and stuck the other in the microwave. He was pissed, but pissed with a plan. It had coalesced the previous night, once he'd blown off some smoke by spending fifty dollars on drawing pencils at Aaron Brothers, then bombing back on the cross-town freeway at ninety miles per hour, the first time he'd sped like that since his DUIs. He'd forgotten how well his mind worked when he drove fast, the way it raced ahead of him, keen and plotting, to keep track of the turns and corners, the calculated risks. The solution had come like a vision.

His blowup with Meg was Ian's fault; if not for Ian, Russ would have never returned to Ellis, never found out about Rika. Every time he went back, things got worse. He hated each dry bean, each fast-food joint, each shred of alfalfa, and everyone at Ian Ramspott's protest. They'd chased Russ out of his own town, where he didn't even want to be in the first place. Typical Ellis, embracing a fraud.

The microwave beeped and Russ slid his breakfast onto a plate and carried it to the couch. His limbs itched, but scratching didn't help. The itch came from beneath, like termites in his bone marrow. He remembered the *Herald* picture he'd seen the day Rika told him about the campaign. Harris had been in front, with his arm buddy-style around the Pint Club bartender, Albert, waving a sign. Pathetic. That was the kind of thing that happened when you didn't leave the place you were from. You never got any perspective.

Had Meg believed him? Would she tell her mother? The woman hated him with a passion; she had no sense of humor. Still, Russ had been an ass to let it slip—he hadn't meant to do that to Harris.

The top of Russ's coffee table angled diagonally to the carpet where he'd kicked off its leg. A knuckle-sized dent was visible in the wall, and the offending piece of wood was still sitting on his linoleum entryway. He opened his briefcase and took out Theo's file. The Berkeley theatre photo and the snapshot Russ had taken were practically identical, if you knew what to look for. The Klee mouth gave him away: sweet, puckered, square. Coyly German.

He bit into his second Pop Tart. Selective motherfuckers. Theo was right; when it came to believing defendants, the State assumed inculpatory meant true, exculpatory meant false. Such bullshit. Guys like Brandt built careers screwing the underdog. They couldn't

tell the difference between Theo Lacey and a thrill killer. That was the problem with the system; everyone was treated identically, like numbered pieces of shit. And not only had the judge had turned down Russ's affidavit for DNA funds Friday, but he'd admonished Russ in front of Brandt and Theo for breaking into Ian's apartment. That was how he'd put it: *breaking in*.

At ninety miles an hour, the solution had come to him. He was powerless outside the courthouse, not a cop or a P.I. or a forensic expert, just a scrappy, no-holds-barred litigator. Russ needed Ian in *his* domain, lifted from the real world into the courtroom, taken by surprise before he got a chance to worm his way out.

As soon as Ian set foot in the courtroom, the rest would be cake. On the stand, Russ could declare him a hostile witness and question him until he cracked. Worst-case scenario, Ian would try to bolt. A shout to the bailiff would place him in custody for a few minutes, until things got sorted out. When it came to security, judges didn't mess around. For the record, Ian would have to show his ID, and Russ would demand he produce a Social Security number that matched his name. It was a simple request—no judge would risk appeal by turning it down. And Ian's inability to produce one, plus his resemblance to the Ramspott photos, would be a decent start to reasonable doubt. Once he got on the stand, the case would be a lock.

Russ wasn't sure which he'd relish more—exposing Ian as a fraud, or watching Brandt's arrogant incredulity melt to panic. Brandt would be known as the guy who almost put an innocent man on death row, and Russ would be all over the *Stockton Record* calling him bloodthirsty, tainting future jury pools against him.

The entire plan hinged on getting Ian to the courthouse for the hearing—a caveat his revelation in the car hadn't accounted for, but one Russ had chewed on all weekend. The debate was that afternoon at the Community Center, and he knew from the *Herald* that Ian would be there.

Exhaling, he stretched his neck. Eight and a half hours to the hearing. He'd gotten a good sleep. He was adroit. Peaking, even. The itchiness beneath his skin felt electric. When he'd woken up that morning, no dull pain had gripped his chest, no spitwad-sized knots had clotted his bronchial tubes. For the first morning in weeks, he hadn't needed his inhaler.

As soon as he got Ian alone, Russ would show him DNA results from a test—a fake test—with Ian’s name on it. He’d promise Ian that if he testified, the press would never find out. It was flawless, and he had little doubt Ian would believe it. People outside the system thought DNA could be lifted from anything, and that anyone, including private defense attorneys, could run tests whenever they felt like it.

The thorniest contingency, the contingency that scared Russ shitless, was what he’d do if Ian refused to come with him. But so far, Ian had gone to such absurd lengths with the whole Pinter charade that Russ couldn’t imagine he’d let himself be exposed. Testifying at the hearing would guarantee him a lifetime as Pinter, Russ would say.

He’d play it safe. If anything went askew, he’d abandon the plan, jump into his car, and speed off. He was bringing his gun, but he’d empty it ahead of time. He’d park on a side-street so they could leave unseen. If he was left with no choice, he’d show Ian the weapon as extra incentive. He’d stay calm, guide Ian to his car, drive him to Stockton, escort him to the courtroom, let the system do the rest. Afterward, even if Ian went to the police, no one would believe Russ had forced him. Who’d ever heard of a defense attorney bringing a witness into a courtroom at gunpoint? Who’d ever heard of a murder victim running from the law?

As Russ closed the file, his foot brushed against the plastic Aaron Brothers bag of pencils. He needed a new box. He remembered a metal one his father had used for collecting ticket money at Russ’s basketball games, but did it have a secure clasp? He rose. Like most of his old things, it was probably in his spare bedroom. Years ago, the room had been his studio, but except to shove occasional junk into the closet, Russ hadn’t used it since going sober. He slid the closet door open a few inches, trying to avoid an avalanche, and stuck his arm in. His fingers brushed sketch pads, cardboard boxes—then a canvas. He pulled out, surprised. “City Contours.” Worse than he remembered it, the browns running together like sewage. Oils had never been his medium. He felt a pang of fraught embarrassment at seeing his old work, and he heaved it back into the closet. The canvas clinked against something metallic—the ticket box. Awkwardly, he maneuvered his arm toward the sound until his fingers grazed cold metal. He lunged, wrapping his fingers around it, and pulled.

It wasn’t the box. “Jesus,” he said. It was an old silver flask, and he turned it over in his hands. This hadn’t been one of his usual stash sites, which must be why he’d forgotten.

He unscrewed the top and smelled inside. Vodka, full. Must have been towards the end. He smelled again. Sweet. The hype was true; you didn't lose the predilection. Gingerly, he screwed the top back on, carried it into his kitchen, and set it on the counter. He'd clean his closet later. For now, he'd find his new box at a cigar store.

With the hearing at three-thirty, he wouldn't have time to see Jackson that afternoon. Russ glanced at the clock. Half past seven. He'd see him that morning, instead. He threw the flask into the garbage—no—he didn't want it around here. He'd throw it away at work. He plucked it out and carried it to the car with his briefcase.

On the drive to Mills, he was tempted to speed. Impatience gnawed at him, and he felt a frenetic need to act, to run, to carry out his plan before all the nerve seeped out of him. He needed to be patient. He slipped the flask into the old hole in his seat, to get it out of his view—and maybe, just a little, to test himself.

Halfway along Jackson's route, he found a partly hidden, metered spot with a view of the sidewalk. Only seven-forty. He folded his arms across his chest and stared into his rear view mirror.

In forming the afternoon's plan, Jackson had been his sole hesitation. If anything went wrong, it could ruin his chances of knowing his son. Still, *this* wasn't knowing, lurking in his car like a criminal. And it wasn't as if behaving like a Boy Scout would make Muriel to invite him over for dinner. He could win the ABA's National Public Service Award and to her, it wouldn't mean a thing.

"I'm dead," he whispered, cutting off the engine. "Dead to Jackson." Such bullshit, the things people did to each other. He hated Muriel for what she'd told his son, hated Meg for allowing it, and hated her more for having been at the hospital, for holding him in Russ's place. What he'd done to Harris was low, he'd admit that, but after all Meg's lies, how could he regret hurting her? "Jackson Dillinger," he whispered. Strong—much better than "Jackson Lopez." He was probably teased all the time for having two Mexican parents, a Mexican name, and Russ's blond hair. He needed to learn to defend himself.

Around the corner, Jackson came into view. Russ watched him in the mirror, hiding his face with his open hand so Jackson wouldn't see him. His son's size, so tiny for a second grader, struck him for the thousandth time. So natural—so perfect in his athletic gait, halfway between a walk and a run. Russ had been small at that age, too. Scrappy. The red backpack dangled from his son's shoulder, reminding Russ of the giant, disembodied heart in

Jim Dine's painting "Blue Clamp," and as Jackson crossed the street in front of the car, Russ's breath quickened; the Don Tomas box was tucked beneath his son's left arm.

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At work, Russ felt preternaturally alert. Objects hummed. From the corner of his left eye, he kept sensing movement, but when he turned, there was nothing. No spiders on the carpet, no transients in the window. He went to Nico's and got his coffee, which made him calmer. He didn't take his files, just sat next to the half-sawed bars, looking into the street. Through the window, the dockworkers' bus was headed to mid-town, toward the smokestacks and hulking ships. On a windy, cloudless day like this, the river's pale silt kicked up to the surface, turning the water to liquid sandstone that matched the skyline.

A sure serenity blanketed Russ, and he thought of the asparagus cannery. His whole life, Russ's father had been satisfied driving from Ellis to those smokestacks, straightening the green stalks in rows before the blades banged down to chop them into pieces. From his workstation, some of the asparagus was pickled or salted, some packed in mustard or teriyaki or hot sauce, and the remainder canned in spring water like the sardines Russ's mother bought for dinner sometimes. The day he'd taken his son to work, Russ's father had explained the canning process with great patience and tedium, and Russ had known to pretend interest. He'd formulated questions about farming and packing, while pity ballooned in his gut. His parents had been old already when they'd had him, older than other kids' parents, and Russ had only known his father's carrot hair through photographs. In front of the cannery, his father had stroked his bald head and looked up at the smokestacks and said, "It's an honest day's work," as if they were actors in some war propaganda film. Russ remembered how his insides had gone from pity to contempt, realizing his father had never wanted anything better.

Since that day, Russ had yearned to take chances. And he had, hadn't he? Painting, going to law school, starting a business—not things a person did if he was playing it safe. Yet, there was also Muriel, Jackson, Southern California—chances he'd shied away from, one way or another. Who knew—maybe bringing Ian to the courthouse would give Russ some clarity. He'd be known, if only for a month or two, as the defense lawyer who'd saved an innocent man's life.

Other defense attorneys would have given up when the judge refused to fund the DNA test—or sooner. They'd have called Theo to the stand, had him testify that he couldn't say for *sure* the vic was dead, then passed around a few snapshots and called it reasonable doubt—a phrase jurors ignored; even those who understood the burden of proof wouldn't let a guy go who *probably* did it. With anyone else representing him, Theo would have lost miserably. The most dedicated among the others would have filed appeals, and ten years later attended Theo's execution, fuming disconsolate over the world's injustice. Those were the people he'd hated at the PD's office, the ones who confused powerlessness with righteousness. Russ didn't buy the cop-out—that was one of the few things he admired about himself: his willingness to act, to take a chance—so unlike his father and Harris and the people he'd gone to school with.

When he got back to his office, the phone was ringing. He didn't pick up. Clients, probably. He hadn't returned calls for a few days, and planned to come back to the office after Theo's hearing and catch up. "Russ, it's Meg," the answering machine said. "You're at Nico's, I guess." Silence. "Look, we've fought before, but I've never felt this bad and I bet you haven't either. I'm still completely pissed off at you for going to the game and being such a—" She sighed. "But eventually, let's have dinner. I'll be with Susan at Nam's around eight if you want to stop by. If not—just call me when you're ready, I guess."

One of her shorter messages, and in her psychotherapist tone. Russ set his briefcase on his desk, unlatched it, and propped it at a ninety-degree angle so that no one walking by could see his Sig Sauer Compact. He'd trained at a shooting range six months out of law school, shaken up by a robbery victim who'd cornered him behind the courthouse with a wrench. Until then, Russ had never owned a gun. He wasn't afraid of them, but he didn't like them, either, and had chosen the rebuilt nine millimeter because it fit easily in his briefcase, and the guy who'd sold it to him said it was the most reliable small self-defense piece he carried.

Russ shook the cartridges out of the chamber and held them in his palm. It always surprised him how heavy they were. Spitting on a tissue, he cleaned the outside, where dust had started to cake in the gun's contours. Most people took better care of these, he guessed, but he'd resented having to buy it, and sure as hell wasn't going to dignify the thing with expensive oils and rust inhibitors. He hadn't shot it in almost a year. Compared to the guns his clients carried, it didn't look intimidating. But the salesman had assured him that with

hollow point bullets, it had more stopping power than a pit bull. Russ had paid quickly and left. He hated guys whose guns gave them hard-ons.

Still, it would scare the hell out of Ian. And if he didn't think Russ was serious, Russ would fire a warning shot at the ground. He put all but one of the cartridges into the zippered pocket of his briefcase, and stuck the last one in his gun, double-checking to make sure the safety lever worked.

At lunch, when he knew Meg would be out, he dialed her office and got her voicemail. "Remember a long time ago you asked if I ever drew birds? I'm working on a seagull right now to go with your other beach scene. Maybe I'll see you tonight." This would make her feel guilty, and she'd feel even worse when he didn't show up at Nam's. He'd sulk, self-pity, do whatever might help wheedle him some leeway with Jackson. Meg could convince Muriel of anything. He'd start with one basketball game. They'd arrange it ahead of time: he'd arrive early, sit way up in the stands, speak to no one. Bit by bit, he'd eke away at them.

Feeling celebratory already, Russ ordered Chinese food and put on Soundgarden. In high school, they'd been his favorite band—back before grunge had been killed by the media, then gotten its grave jumped on by Staind and Nickelback. He stabbed a piece of sweet and sour pork and lifted it to his mouth, remembering that Meg said Dragon Pagoda used MSG. But in the Valley, he guessed, there was plenty of other crap to kill him first.

Mentally, he ticked through the details. The key was to play it safe, be willing to abandon it in a heartbeat. He drummed his chopsticks against one of the Chinese food boxes. He'd succeeded in distracting himself for most of the morning, but the energy hadn't left him. No one else could have pulled off something like this. Not Carlos, not Renard, not Brandt.

The debate was at the Community Center; Ian would probably be coming from the Pint Club. If Russ could catch him on the way, pull him onto a side street to talk—he'd keep his car close. And if he didn't see Ian by two, he'd head for the Community Center and find him there.

Russ ate his fortune cookie, washed his hands, and opened his file cabinet to get the crucial part of his plan. He thumbed through old client folders—best to use someone deceased—and pulled DNA typing results from the file of a smart, thorough arsonist who'd been killed in a hit and run. He made two photocopies. Then on the computer, he typed,

“IAN RAMSPOTT III” and “IAN PINTER,” printed them, cut the names out, and taped them over “DESHAWN MARSHALL,” whiting out DeShawn’s Social Security number on both photocopies. When it was dry, he made a clean photocopy of each. As a final touch, he folded the papers in thirds, sealed them in an old Department of Justice envelope, and scribbled across the flap. It wasn’t how real results arrived, but it looked official. Russ took a puff from his inhaler and locked the office.

On the way to Ellis, he kept thinking about what Muriel had told Jackson. “Dead,” he whispered over and over. Saying it made him feel strong. Tapping some contrarian impulse, hardening himself against the weight of it. He reached beneath his seat and pulled out the flask. Unscrewing, he smelled it. Sweet, but he could resist. In the beginning, it had helped him, steadying his nerves before a tough hearing. It was excess that led to problems, something Russ no longer feared. He was in control today. He’d prove it. He put his lips around the mouth of the flask and drank. It burned his throat in a way that felt instantly right and familiar. There. He took one more small sip, then screwed the top back on. Nothing to fear. Just a little extra courage, which he could use.

He pulled into the Community Center parking lot and circled the building to get his bearings. Red, bold, waving in the wind, a banner at the main entrance read, “DEBATE TODAY.” The lot wasn’t crowded yet, just city workers’ compact cars and a blue SUV. Russ turned back onto Central and wound through a few side roads before settling on the Adams Street alley. It was perfect—just east of the Pint Club, and a few blocks long. He parked, assessed. From Central, the hatchback wouldn’t be visible.

After making sure he was alone, Russ grabbed his coat from the backseat and opened his briefcase. In one pocket, he put the gun; in the other, the envelope and his inhaler. He slipped the flask into its hiding place in the fabric of his front seat. It felt good to have faced it, to realize, today especially, how much he’d changed. On second thought, he took it out again, and drank another sip. It steadied him. One more. He examined the Sig Sauer again, checking the safety. The design had a good magazine catch that he could get his thumb on without moving his hand. His head wheeled a little when he stepped out of the car, and his hands felt large and rubbery.

The air smelled of corn tortillas and automobile exhaust, of manure and tomato soup. The smells of Ellis never changed. Greasy beef, factory emissions, skunks rotting along the highway, burned out people and businesses, the ripe sweat of men like his father, who drank

and worked too much, spent their lives looking forward to the Cinco DeMayo parade and the Dry Bean Festival. Their wives clipped old prom queens' wedding announcements from the *Herald*, and every Homecoming they sat in the bleachers with their old high school friends, passing around egg salad sandwiches and cans of Miller Lite.

The old acid flooded his blood. His hands were his own again. For a quarter he bought a paper from a dispenser and pretended to read. The sidewalk on Central was as cracked and uneven as the one along Jackson's route to school. Poor kid couldn't skateboard if he wanted to, any more than Russ could have. The bay area snobs didn't have city planning nailed, but at least they fixed their sidewalks. That was one thing he knew. If downtown was leveled for a bunch of pristine houses six inches apart from each other, at least the fucking sidewalks wouldn't kill you.

Downtown seemed unusually empty—all the better for him. A man in a turban walked out of Hacienda Market with a jar of salsa and a six-pack of Jarritos, which Muriel used to drink. It tasted like watered-down Tang. Russ remembered the Day of the Dead proverb: *I don't even believe in the peace of the tombs any more*. Muriel used to say it, usually in Spanish, when something bad happened. Had she said it when she found out she was pregnant?

Keeping his eyes on Central, he pretended to read. And sure enough, twenty minutes later, Ian Ramspott came out of the Pint Club. Calmly, abruptly, in the same manner a judge closed a case file after handing down a prison sentence, Russ folded his paper and set it on top of the dispenser. Ian was a block down Central in a suit and tie, whistling as he strode, digging in a ridiculous turquoise bag. When he was close, Russ stepped from the alley. "I have to show you something."

Surprise registered in Ian's eyes, then irritation. "You've developed a habit of interrupting me at inconvenient times."

Complacent bastard. At least he'd be well-dressed for court. "You'll want to see this."

"I suspect it can wait."

"I suspect you won't want it to."

"Walk with me, then. I have to get to—"

"The debate. I know. You've got time." He approached Ian, setting his hand on Ian's shoulder, and Ian jerked away. The vodka was working its way up Russ's bloodstream,

fighting against the current. He was smart not to have overdone it. Everything was clicking. “Five minutes. Let’s talk there.” Russ motioned to the alley. “You don’t want anyone else to see this.”

“What is it?” Ian’s pants were too short, revealing black argyle socks with purple checks.

Russ took the envelope out. “Department of Justice. See the logo? I came here as a courtesy. You don’t want to know, fine.” Russ shoved the envelope back in his pocket and pretended to start back to his car. The Sig Sauer’s metal was warm against his body.

“Five minutes,” Ian said.

Russ studied him, trying to decide how obvious the physical similarities between Ian and the Ramspott photo would be in court. They might not see it right away. Uneven stubble stuck out all over his face, half an inch long, though he’d shaved his neck. Misaligned nose, a thinner build. But the mouth, the shoulders—coupled with a failure to produce a Social Security Number—no question. Russ worked his tongue thoughtfully around the inside of his mouth, savoring the suspense he was building. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

“Why? What is it?”

“Every time I do, you insult me. Fuck you, you know?” Russ kicked a clod of dirt against the brick wall.

Ian folded his arms. “Well, you’ve been ambushing me in the middle of business.”

“You’re hard to get in touch with. Oddly enough, ‘Pinter’ isn’t in the phone book.”

“What’s in that envelope?”

Russ shook his head resignedly and handed it over. “God knows why I’m doing this.” Bending down, he picked up a rock and threw it against the wall.

“Whose signature is this?”

“Ed Ruscha. Director of the DOJ—Department of Justice—our local bureau in Sacramento. Go ahead. I’ve got plenty of other copies.”

Ian stuck his thumb beneath the flap and began working it open—the most annoying possible way to open an envelope. Russ pretended to sigh impatiently, but he sighed too hard and coughed, then gasped. He took out his inhaler and inhaled two puffs.

“Asthma?” Ian asked, still laboring over the damn envelope.

“Allergies.”

“In winter?”

“It’s the state the alfalfa’s in. I used to use a nasal spray but it gives me nosebleeds.” He took another puff of the inhaler and his lungs contracted, then relaxed. Ian unfolded the papers. Russ’s hate for Ian’s charade, his fucking games, his pinched, petty mouth—all of it welled in him. Ian’s mouth drew tighter as he studied the matching RFLP analyses. “Proves it all,” Russ said.

“How did you get my DNA?”

“I told you I was in your apartment. My lab guy lifted it from saliva on an envelope from that file in your bedroom. And I borrowed a glass you drank from at the Pint Club. Simple.” He stared at Ian’s face, trying to gauge how much he bought. Everything. Ian hadn’t taken his eyes from the paper. “You had a pretty good run, but with a DNA match...” Russ shrugged. “It’ll be all over the paper that you were ready to let a man die.”

Ian swallowed, stuffing the results back into the envelope. He closed his eyes and rubbed his skinny fingers over them. “So why’d you come here?” he asked quietly.

“Theo’s hearing starts at three-thirty. I want you to testify.”

“You don’t need me. You’ve got *this*.” He handed the envelope back.

“True, but testimony’s faster. DNA just proves Theo didn’t murder you. But a judge might still think he’s guilty of assault. I don’t want Theo rotting in jail while they hold him on trumped up charges and keep investigating. We both know you provoked him.”

Ian’s face was as pale as the envelope.

“As soon as the cops learn you’re alive, they’ll put a bench warrant out for your arrest,” Russ continued. “Officer Clifton will realize you snowed him over with fake ID. It’ll be a legal mess—unless you testify.”

“They’ll still find out, though. Even if I go now.”

Perfect. Russ crossed his arms. “But they don’t have to. If you testify today and give the DA the whole, clear story, the one that exculpates Theo, the charges will be dropped right there. I’ll tell the judge I bumped into you randomly in Ellis. You never knew Theo was arrested, Theo never knew you were alive, big misunderstanding. Everything stays in the courtroom.”

“But it’s public record.”

“Reporters don’t read hearing transcripts from dropped charges or routine plea bargains. Hundreds of those things go through every day.”

Ian bit his lip. "The debate's in less than an hour."

"I know," Russ said, nodding generously. "But I asked the judge for a continuance and it was denied. Hard choice. But if you don't come with me—poof—no more Pinter. You'll be known as the guy who called some poor kid a nigger, then wanted that kid to get the death penalty."

Ian's eyes darted left, then right. He rubbed his wrists on his slacks. He looked every bit as scared and confused as he had at the bottom of the canal. The rapture was over. "I'll testify," Ian said. "Right after the debate."

"Theo's hearing starts at three-thirty. The judge won't move it. I'll drive you."

"I'd miss the debate. I'm slotted first."

"Say you got the flu. People believe that. I mean—" he smiled, buddy-style "—we're talking about your life. You've worked your ass off to become Ian Pinter. I won't even tell the judge you were using a false name."

Sweat shone in beads on Ian's face. "If James wins—"

"You think one debate's going to make the difference?"

Ian nodded.

"People have made up their minds by now. Ellis isn't your responsibility. You're helping out. This is *one* afternoon. As Ian Pinter, think how much you could help Ellis down the line, if that's your thing now." He had to pump Ian up, but he didn't want go overkill. "Does your boss at the Pint Club know you call black guys niggers?"

"I'll testify, I swear. After the—"

"After is too late."

Ian wiped his forehead on his sleeve and fidgeted with his satchel.

"Let's go," Russ said softly. "My car's over there."

"I'm not going."

"You want everyone to know about Ramspott?"

"No."

"Then let's go. You'll be back in three hours, tops."

Ian nodded. "I know. But this way they won't find out until after the election."

"Think about it, Ian. You'll be arrested. Officer Clifton won't take it easy on you."

"I know," Ian said miserably. He sucked in his cheeks and shook his head, looking hopeless. "But I'm going to the debate. I guess I'll see you in few days, when they come get me. Thanks for the heads up. I mean it."

Fuck. Who did he think he was, some kind of martyr? What gave him the *right*? Russ's next action was automatic. His hand found the grip and he pulled the Sig Sauer from his pocket.

The fraud stopped, staring at it. Silence—what was there to say? Pointing the gun at Ian, Russ thought of Brandt, of the way people like Brandt had kept him from Jackson, from southern California, from the life he'd wanted since he was a kid walking to school along these cracked, horrible sidewalks.

Chapter Twenty

Classroom lights off, Rika held two fingers to her temple and massaged. She'd suffered migraines as a child, and the sensitivity to light still bothered her, especially at the end of a school day. Her classroom clock read five after two, though it seemed more than five minutes had passed since the bell. Amazing, how quickly students scurried out the door. When she was in high school, hadn't people lingered, chatted with their teachers, shyly curious? Maybe just Rika.

Caffeine, which she'd been tapping with special zest for the past twenty-four hours, helped the headache, too. She gulped the last few drops of her staff room coffee—Yuban, weak and uninspired—and studied the double helix on her cup. She had to get going—Dmitri wanted to be at the debate by a quarter to three, and they were picking up Albert first. She took a quick survey of her piles: lab reports, worksheets, experiment logs, reflections. Nervous ecstasy gripped her, thinking of how Dmitri would come home with her Friday evening, how they'd apartment-hunt over the weekend. Five more days. Before school, he'd come into her classroom and handed her a note. "Packed a suitcase," it said. "Love."

Over the weekend, Rika had studied rental ads in the *Herald*, then concluded that Dmitri wouldn't go through with it. Several clues suggested this: he hadn't mentioned their lunch conversation all weekend, for one. For another, his lovemaking Friday afternoon had been languorous, intense—holding more finality than promise, it had seemed in retrospect. All weekend, she'd steeled herself against this; then Monday morning had come and he'd handed her the note.

A section had fallen from her wall during third period, a large wooden panel with nails sticking out from the back. Her students had rushed for the duct tape and fixed it for her—evidently, they'd had experience. Tomorrow, she planned to file a repair request in person.

She shuffled the assignments into a stack—vertical, horizontal, vertical, horizontal. Sixth period had gone well for the first time in weeks. Her students had done presentations on fault lines, and Wade Briggs had been the star. He was a brilliant artist, Rika told him in front of class, winking—he just needed to find the right subject matter. Afterward, Wade had come up to her and said sheepishly that he'd never gotten an A on a science project

before. Moments like that, it seemed unthinkable she'd almost left them for Lawrence Livermore.

Dmitri was waiting in his truck when Rika went out to the parking lot. "Ian's going to demolish Bannister," he said when she got in, sliding his hand up her thigh.

She smiled. "You've done a great job with him."

"So has Albert. We're planning a party Friday night at the Pint Club, to celebrate the campaign and everything. Is that all right? I know it will be our first... You know—our first whole night together, but—"

"Friday's perfect." What did he think she expected, rose petals in her bathtub? Please.

Rika hadn't talked with Ruby about Dmitri. For now, her greater concern was how Ruby was faring after Bannister's retort in the *Herald*. He'd accused her of harboring a vendetta against him, and admitted to "jilting" her, but—of course—mentioned no details. "Personal grudges have no place in the political arena," he'd said. The whole thing made Ruby sound as if she'd been abandoned on the altar, and Rika was furious that people might think she was some grudge-harboring crone. "Thanks for your note," she said. "That was a coy delivery."

He turned the Ford's ignition. "I was going to put it in a sealed envelope and have a student bring it to you, but I lost the nerve."

"Did you really pack a suitcase?"

"As soon as I got home last night. I needed to take that step. Stowed it under the futon in my office. I felt so relieved, doing it."

"I've been worried. I was afraid you'd changed your mind."

He narrowed his piquant eyes. "I'm all yours, Rika."

She wanted to crawl into his skin, to sleep and dream in the well of him. She watched as he looked out the window, cocking his head like a dog. Then he touched her wrist and she drew in a breath. Did he have the same effect on his wife? When he touched Rika, her blood tensed, as if he'd displaced the space between her atoms and floated through her flesh to the core of her.

"After the debate, let's drive out to Owens-Brockway," he said.

"Okay." He found solace in old factories. They'd look forward to it the whole debate, watching Ian beat Bannister, and the whole time thinking ahead to how they'd recline

the Ford's passenger seat, how Rika would lock her ankles behind Dmitri's back and pull herself tight against him. Anticipatory pleasure quivered through her. Was Dmitri remembering their first night together, too?

East of Ellis Boulevard, the new houses' skeletons were filled with stucco and drywall. Unpainted, unlandscaped, but otherwise finished. She imagined them marching west toward downtown, light-colored houses six feet apart—cream and eggshell and cotton white—window to window where the Pint Club stood now, imagined ping-pong tables, bikes with training wheels, her future students' parents lugging in Nintendos, bath salts, plasma televisions, professionally-laundered curtains.

"The foothills are turning green," Dmitri said. "I wait for it each year and it always comes at a slightly different time. I guess we've had a lot of rain."

They passed the Community Center. The parking lot was already half full. "Debate today," Dmitri read out loud from the banner. "Interesting ambiguity. Think it's a descriptor or an imperative?"

"I'm envisioning everyone in Ellis screaming at each other till the clock strikes midnight."

He chuckled. "I love that you find that amusing." He pulled into an open spot in front of the Pint Club, glanced in the rear-view mirror, and ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm so wound up, you'd think *I* was debating James."

"You look gorgeous," Rika said.

"I'm getting greyer every day."

"Good thing I don't care."

Albert met them at the door. "These two just came in," he said, motioning toward the bar, where two women were sipping white wine. Rika recognized one as the sophomore geometry teacher. "Besides you, Rika, they're the first women here in weeks."

Dmitri smiled. "Your remodeled bathrooms must have lured them in."

"Seriously—a gender balance would double my clientele. I told them I'm closing at a quarter to three. You two go on. I'll make it in time if I take my car. Why don't you walk and I'll drive us all back afterward?"

"Should we be more shocked that he's ditching us," Rika asked outside, "or that two women voluntarily went into the Pint Club?"

“Definitely the women. Actually, it was Donna Mills and her sister—they teach at Madison.”

Donna—that was her name. A ferret of a woman, small hands and nervous eyes. “Is Ian there already?”

“Yep. He wanted to get there at a quarter after two. You should have seen him last night. I dropped back by the Pint Club with some of my ties. Richard—you know Richard’s Men’s Wear?—donated a suit. We went with a red tie. Albert said it looked presidential.”

Rika didn’t bother pointing out that she had no idea what “red” looked like. He’d get used to it. Strange, to think of Dmitri owning ties. She’d never seen him wear one. Soon they’d be hanging in a closet next to her skirts. There was something sexy about the image of their clothes brushing against each other. She imagined them sharing pillows and toothpaste, cooking meals, sipping Shiraz and making love on the kitchen table. Patience would be the toughest part. He’d need time for legalities, paperwork—and she pushed this from her head. It made her remember Becky’s catalog, the placemats, the spotless kitchen counter. She imagined a violent divvying of pots, pans, blankets. She wished she could forget what Becky looked like, but the image stayed—the soft full hips, the schoolteacher cheeks and hair.

Dmitri lifted a dented can and a gum wrapper from the sidewalk and deposited them in a garbage can. Such a tenderness, his care for Ellis. Choosing a thing and committing to it made a person happy. Ruby had justice; Mae had had religion; Gerard had had Mae. Dmitri was her own first faith. She could understand her students, Ellis, the campaign—all through him. Bravely, she touched the back of his neck, brushing the short hair at the nape, in full view of anyone on the street. It would be a long and lovely surrender. Her past would soak through her like rain.

“Are we still early?” Dmitri asked.

She looked at her watch. “Quite. It seems silly to have this in the middle of the afternoon.”

“They used to make sure the debates fell within City Hall business hours.” Dmitri leaned to collect a candy wrapper from the sidewalk. “Maybe they didn’t want to stay late. The debates have always been more of a formality. This is the first year with much promise of an audience.”

“Even if James wins, think how much you’ve heightened Ellis’s political consciousness.”

He pretended to hopscotch across the cobblestone in front of Lizzie’s.

“Consciousness, schmonsciousness.” He made a face and threw his arms to the side.

“I love your giddy nervousness.”

“Who’s nervous?”

“What will we do if James wins?”

“Demand a recount,” he said. “Burn an effigy.”

Would he come with her to Spain? She imagined sitting with him on a flight to Madrid, teaching him the little Spanish she remembered. *Use a condom. And, Please bring more bread to our table.*

Showering together at Ruby’s, the grey in his hair had turned dark in the water and she’d glimpsed what he’d looked like her own age, twenty-two years ago. It had startled her, as if she’d stumbled on something he’d been hiding. She thought of the other time that had happened, the sweet vulnerability he’d betrayed, posing for her against his truck the day she’d let Ty’s lizard go.

As they passed Hacienda Market, Rika noticed a *Herald* on top of the dispenser. “Check this out,” Rika said. “You won’t believe what he said about Ruby. Did you read it yet?” Aware of the bacterial potentialities of an abandoned newspaper, she tried to unfold it using only her thumbs and a forefinger, and as she did, Dmitri called Ian’s name.

Only half of the Adams Street alley was visible from where they stood ten feet from the mouth of it. Several yards in, Ian was perched like a bird in his borrowed suit, his knees bent, his hands out to either side. He stared frigidly ahead, and Rika thought of James Bannister, of the men who worked for him, and tossed her paper down, following Dmitri into the alley.

Only his head and shoulders were visible behind the hatchback. Russ Dillinger. But her adrenal medulla didn’t throb out any fear this time; she’d already beaten him. She catalogued the possibilities. Was he blackmailing Ian over whatever he’d witnessed? She wanted so badly to grab Dmitri’s hand that for a second, she could almost feel the pressure of his fingers against hers.

“You’re supposed to be at the Community Center,” Dmitri said.

“I know.” Ian’s voice was nervy, robotic.

Dmitri glanced toward Russ, then back at Ian. He put one hand on his hip, teacher-style, and slid the other into his pocket. Animalistic—he'd assessed the scene, realized he was its patriarch, and taken control. Sexy. "Well, are you finished with your last-minute prep?"

Miserably, Ian shook his head. Pull yourself together, Rika thought. Russ isn't that awe-inspiring; *I* managed.

"Do you two know each other?" Dmitri asked, referee-style, and for an instant, Rika feared he meant *her*.

"Ian's involved in a case I'm trying." Russ didn't move from behind the car.

"What kind of case?"

"Murder," Russ said, looking at Rika. She thought of Todd, how he'd yanked her sleeve once, mad at something. It was her favorite blouse, one she'd ordered from a catalog because its color was listed as *Cotton Candy*. The fabric ripped and he'd ignored it, grabbing her arm.

"Ian and I are just talking before he goes to the debate. He's a witness in one of my cases—and he's not in the witness protection program. He lied about that."

"Russell—Dmitri began. "Russell, have you had anything to drink today?"

"Thanks for the respect, Mr. Harris. Jesus."

"I'm sorry—"

But he had—a distinct alcoholic smell was emanating from Russ's direction. Dmitri glanced at her: he smelled it, too.

Ian's bag slid from his shoulder and thudded to the street.

"Whatever this is, we'll clear it up after the debate," Dmitri continued. "You should come, Russell, if you have the time. Lots of local history—exciting secrets." He smiled, raising a finger toward the sky. "Remember, he who cannot draw upon ten thousand years—"

"Living hand to mouth, I know," Russ said. Goethe.

"Mr. Harris, you should go. Ian will be there in a minute."

"We don't *have* a minute." Dmitri sighed. "Ian, we'll have to fix you up. Your hair's gone crazy and your tie's all crooked. James will be immaculate." He glanced back at Russ. "Sorry to interrupt you. We've just got to get over there."

From what Rika was standing, it looked like Russ stuffed something into his pocket.

A bottle? She thought of his DUIs. Did Dmitri know that part?

Ponytail swinging, Russ stepped around the car. He looked worse than the first time she'd seen him: his eyes were bloodshot and the scowl lines around his mouth were deeper. The pockets of his brown mackinaw bulged, weighing the coat down. "Wait, Mr. Harris. This will be short. I just have to ask Ian a couple more questions."

"I'm sorry, Russell. You should make your legal appointments ahead of time."

An eerily placidity came into Ian's eyes, as if he was readying for a panic attack.

"I tried," Russ said, his stare openly poisonous. And then he smiled—a smile like Todd's—and Rika knew what he was about to say. "Mr. Harris, why don't you and your girlfriend go ahead?"

On his face, at least, Dmitri took this in stride. He shook his head like a father refusing to indulge an insolent kid. "Russell. Please."

"I'm impressed, Rika," Russ said. "I can't believe you didn't tell him. I followed you, Mr. Harris. And Rika knew."

"*Followed us?*" Dmitri looked at her searchingly at her.

"No—" Rika began. "That's not—"

"You don't have to say anything," Dmitri said. "I trust you. Ian, come on."

"Rika and I made a deal," Russ said. He was fuming, not the least bit collected. "She knew some things about Ian and I knew about you and her. But she wasn't interested in trading."

"He's lying," Rika said.

But a version of it was true, and a flicker of understanding crossed Dmitri's face: had he realized why she'd wanted Ian out of the campaign? Would he think her brave to have handled it on her own?

"Ian, let's go," Dmitri said.

Ian didn't move. His satchel was lying next to his shoe. Dmitri reached down for it.

"I know you're cheating on Mrs. Harris," Russ said. "And I have pictures."

Dmitri cleared his throat. "Does Meg know?" His calm, Rika realized, came from already having decided to leave Becky. Pictures or not, Russ had little on him.

"Give me ten minutes with Ian and I won't show Meg the pictures of you spreading the legs of some girl half your—"

"Don't be vulgar, Russell." But he looked worried—pictures *were* different, and he

glanced at her, looking lost. She wanted to press her nose and mouth against his chest, smell the oils in his hair, the sweat and Pert Plus and Old Spice.

"Pictures," Russ repeated.

"I don't understand what Ian has to do with your case, and what any of this has to do with my personal life."

"Short version," Russ said. "Ian harassed a client of mine, and my client fought him and won. The police think Ian's dead and Ian won't come forward and say he's not, so my client's facing the death penalty."

They were silent.

"That makes no sense." Dmitri shook his head. "Ian's right here."

Russ sucked in his cheeks, pure venom. "He changed his name. He lied. He has—fucking—fake ID with his fake name on it. He doesn't—"

"Russell, *calm down*."

"But Mr. Harris—"

"Ian's coming with us, and we're leaving. Rika, what time is it?"

She glanced at her watch. "Two forty."

"There we go," Dmitri said. "Twenty minutes to show time, and Ian looks like hell. Russell, sorry to walk away like this. We'll be at the Pint Club later. Stop by and I'll—"

"Fuck that."

Dmitri pushed his hand through his hair, gritting his teeth, arching his neck to the sky, then back at Russ. "I have no idea what's happened to you, Russell," he said. "No idea." He handed the satchel to Ian, clapping him on the back. Then he looked at Rika. "We'll be okay," he told her. He reached into his pocket and toyed with his lighter. "Let's go."

Ian shifted. "My knee hurts."

Dmitri nodded. "We'll take it slowly."

They turned toward Central Street and started walking. Rika heard a click behind them and turned.

Something had jarred in Russ. She saw his wolfish stare first, saw his Adam's apple poking sharply from his neck, as if it was stabbing his skin from beneath. He was swallowing hard, repeatedly. For a split second, she pitied him. Then she saw a glint of metal. The visceral fear of it slammed her chest before her brain made sense of the whole—

she'd never seen one before, not a real one, not in person. "Oh, God," she forced out. "Oh God—Dmitri."

He looked back over his shoulder, and she saw it register on his face, his lips parting. The smell of alcohol was strong, and then she saw the empty flask next to the hatchback's tire and the full danger of the scene hit her, hit them both at the same time, and she realized why Ian had been frozen: Russ had had him at gunpoint, he'd heard voices, he'd leapt behind his car and shoved the gun in his pocket.

For a long time, the alley was silent. Why hadn't anyone passed? Right—they were closed for the debate. Russ must have known. The four of them looked at each other, gauging and assessing. Ian looked ashen, Russ bedraggled, Dmitri beatific, herself—Rika didn't know.

Dmitri raised his palms. "Please lower that." They were too far into the alley to run out to Central. She'd wait, listen, follow his cue. It was chaos, he would have said, that brought them into the alley, but Rika couldn't help feeling that the thin thread that sews happenstances together was more ordered, that the earth's tidal pulse had a plan.

"Stay right there."

"Okay—okay," Dmitri said. "No one's moving."

"Just tell Ian to come with me."

Rika's body was granite. She willed Central Street closer and managed to take a step back. She wanted to grab Dmitri and run. The gun wobbled in Russ's hand and he steadied it, gripping with both hands.

"I'm not sure it's wise to make decisions when you've been drinking," Dmitri said, startlingly calm. "Please let Rika leave. She's not involved."

"We're all involved," Russ said throatily.

Dmitri gestured toward the Community Center—changing his approach. Casual, chummy—the fond old Mad Russian. "Ian has the potential to save this whole town. You know what someone like Bannister could do to this place."

"No—"

"Dmitri—please," Rika cut in. "Let him take Ian. It's the smartest—"

He shook his head. "We're an inch away from stopping James. Russell, be reasonable."

Ellis wasn't worth it, not for her. And neither was the election or Greenlake or

Murakami. *Let* twenty Wal-Marts move in across the street from Madison High. She took a careful step toward Dmitri, and took his wrist.

“Rika, no—” he pulled away. “We need Ian. The thing starts in—”

“I have a deadline too, Mr. Harris,” Russ said.

Dmitri had yanked away. This fact chilled her. She drew in a breath, unable to take her eyes from the gun.

“Ian, walk toward me,” Russ commanded. “Mr. Harris, stay there.”

Ian obeyed.

“Russell, listen.”

“Ian, walk slowly toward my car.”

Ian’s satchel slid to the ground.

“Leave it,” Russ said. “Fucking—Mr. Harris, stay *back*.”

Dmitri took another half step forward.

“You’re making your girlfriend cry.”

Dmitri looked at Rika, and she raised her fingers to her cheeks—she hadn’t felt it. Ian raised his eyebrows insistently, trying to make eye contact. What was he saying? Together, the two of them could—what?

Russ’s Adam’s apple jabbed out in a violent swallow. None of them moved. On the nape of Dmitri’s neck, his shortest hairs stood alert. She wanted to raise her fingers to them, feel his sweat, reassure him.

“Remember your *Herald* editorials?” Dmitri continued. “My favorite was the one about how they took your sketch out of the art show. Breasts, you wrote, are a natural part of the human body. Heck, they were probably my *daughter’s* breasts and you convinced me.” Rika thought of Dmitri standing outside Madison with his keys locked away and his engine fried. He’d seemed panicked, even then. How was he acting so calm?

“And remember when we took Meg for her driver’s test? How many times did she fail? We’d go for burgers while we waited, remember? It became a routine.”

Over Rika’s shoulder, Central was empty, and the alley was too narrow for anyone to see in unless they were standing at the mouth. The *Herald* on top of the dispenser fluttered in the wind, then fell. She trembled. Her skin was hot. She closed her eyes and could smell Rick’s vinegar breath on her cheek.

“Russell.” In a few more steps, Dmitri would be close enough to reach out and touch

the gun. Ian took a step toward Russ, too, from the side, and looked at Rika. And then she understood—the three of them would surround Russ while Dmitri distracted him. Move slowly and he wouldn't realize until it was too late. Russ glanced over at Ian, and while he was looking away, Rika stepped toward him.

"Ellis needs Ian," Dmitri said in a low voice. "And I know you need him too." He looked imploringly at Rika, and she nodded: they were working in unison now.

"You could always do the debate yourself," Russ said.

"That's true," Dmitri said, moving up another half-step. "But you have to sign up twenty-four hours in advance. Isn't that the rule, Rika?"

"That's the rule," she said, sounding too sure for her to believe it had come from her.

"I think we need to make a deal," Dmitri said.

Russ's eyes darted to each of them. He was confused, Rika saw—they'd gotten close—he was panicking.

"Dmitri, what kind of a deal do you think might be fair?" Rika asked. She looked at Ian, who blinked twice, comprehending. Fifty feet away, a car bombed down Central, screeching at the lights on Eleventh. The brick seemed to be closing in on them.

"Ian, I'm going to need you to run," Dmitri said. "Run *now*!"

"No—" Russ broke in. He pressed the side of the gun with his thumb and something tiny clicked. He coughed once, then again, wretchedly, and he took one of his hands from the gun and covered his mouth, taking his eyes for an instant off the three of them.

Dmitri propelled his weight at Russ, and Ian did the same. Rika followed, lunging blindly, as Russ's knuckles turned white against the handle of the gun. Something broke in him and she wasn't scared anymore. He was a coward, and she smelled his alcohol, his sweat, his panic. As he jerked back, something exploded, a cannonball crushing her eardrum, and Rika's eyes locked shut and she fell hard, knees banging against the pavement, then her temple smashing into the concrete. She rolled back in pain, a boom reverberating through her skull—from the fall or the sound, she didn't know. And everything was dark for a second, or ten seconds, or thirty, and she opened her eyes and instead of sky, saw the graffiti on the wall: "Suck Me, Fuck You, 187"—her balance was off, her inner ear was gelatin, and she struggled to raise her head. Russ was standing like a skeleton, staring down, the gun dangling from his hand. Rika followed his eyes to the street.

Dmitri's legs were sprawled unnaturally beneath him—blood covered his shirt—then

she saw the gaping hole in his neck. Everything was still; his eyes were open, comprehending.

“Oh God—*Dmitri*,” she choked—something in her heart twisted briskly and snapped. She scrambled toward him on her banged knees. “Go call 911!” she shouted at Ian. “Go—run—then get to the debate!” He hesitated, glancing around the alley, then grabbed his satchel and bolted around the corner.

“I’m okay,” Dmitri said. “I’ll be okay.” Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and ran down his cheek and neck.

“Oh, Jesus,” Russ choked. “Jesus—Mr. Harris—” He knelt and put his fingers next to Dmitri’s throat. Tears welled in his eyes. He coughed, sputtering.

“Get help,” Rika hissed.

Russ looked at her and nodded dumbly, standing. He shoved the gun into his pocket. “Mr. Harris, I—” he said, and got into his car. Before closing the door, he picked up the flask and flung it into his backseat. The car revved and lurched, pulling wildly from the alley and screeching down Central.

Dmitri closed his eyes. “I’m okay,” he repeated. He was breathing steadily, sucking air through his teeth, which the blood had turned pink. It had missed his throat and esophagus, then. His windpipe was fine, but he was losing blood. It seeped in a rivulet from the wound, collecting under his neck and shoulders. It had hit an artery, carotid maybe—oh, God. If that was true, or the jugular, he’d go unconscious. His heart and lungs would flood with blood in under three minutes. Rika whipped off her sweater and pressed it onto the wound.

“You’re going to be okay,” she said, though she had no idea. The neck was full of veins, nerves, and muscle. It was impossible to tell. She wished she knew less about human anatomy. But she wouldn’t panic. As loud as she could, she yelled for help.

“They’re at the debate,” Dmitri said. Was his voice weaker? “Grab the keys from my pocket. After the ambulance comes, follow it.”

“I’m not leaving you, Dmitri.”

“Ian will make it there.”

He meant to the debate, not to a phone to call 911, she knew. Blood seeped through her sweater, and she folded it over again—should she elevate his head? “You’re going to use my lap as a pillow.” As best she could, Rika maneuvered toward his head, her temple

throbbing from the pavement. "Tell me if this hurts you." Gently, as gently as she could, she raised his head onto her lap. It would be too much elevation, with her legs crossed, so she stretched her legs on either side of his arms, resting her left thigh in the puddle beneath him. Blood from the street soaked up through her slacks.

"Thanks."

"Just hang on," she said. "I'm right here. An ambulance will be here any second."

He winced terribly, as if he'd been hit. She couldn't imagine the pain. Keeping her sweater against his neck with one hand, she stroked his face with the other, wiping off his sweat and his blood, touching his cheeks and nose. "I'm right here," she said.

"I love you."

"I love you, too, Dmitri," Rika said.

He sucked in again, gritting his teeth, and she kept touching his face softly, slowly, soothing him with her hands. "Close your eyes and rest. Don't try to talk. Just listen and rest and hang on, okay? Breathe, that's the most important thing."

"I will," he said. She wished she could lean over and put her mouth to his. A tear fell onto him and she hoped he wouldn't feel it—she was controlling her body, not wanting to panic him, not letting her chest shake. Six quarts of blood, it was all people had—how much could the body do without—she couldn't remember. Then Dmitri raised his hand to where her fingers were touching his face, and he gripped her hand and she felt his pulse in his fingers and wrist, and he opened his eyes for a second and closed them again—asking her to talk, she knew.

Rika tried to cradle his body with hers. She held his hand and kept the sweater against his neck and told him everything wonderful she could think of—spitting from trains zooming across Italy, her own passion for him, how courageous he was, about the old woman on the iron balcony across from the Guell Palace, her clay pots and dripping laundry. She listened to Dmitri breathe, angelically calm, and told him over and over that she loved him. Together, they waited.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ian ran. He felt the sweat accumulating, wet and stinging under his arms, imagined it crystallizing like rock salt. He'd known Russ would shoot. He'd known it the split second before Dmitri had lunged, seen the glint of violence in Russ's eyes.

It was Ian's fault. He'd gotten cocky, taunted Russ—the bartending tricks, the Corona T-shirt. In the alley, his mind had frozen with shock, and now it was thawing, catching up as he sprinted from the pay phone on Tenth to the Community Center. Four more blocks. After calling 911, he'd had the sense to take off his jacket and he clutched it as he ran, the tie flying behind his shoulder, his left knee more painful than it had been since Theo Lacey had first kicked it with his hard, stained shoes.

Ian tried to pull his mind from the alley, tried to focus on the debate as he arrived, sopping wet, at the entrance to the Community Center and pulled open its double doors. Dmitri had wanted him here—had needed him here, and Ian would keep his promise to beat Bannister. It didn't feel noble anymore, and he realized he'd stopped acting the afternoon he'd set foot into Walt Garrett's office. The realness of this, knowing it, elated him. And yet—it would all be over soon. Russ had won, Russ had his DNA, and even if Russ was arrested, Ian's identity would come out. Not before the debate, though. Not before the election.

He darted down the hall in search of the prep room they'd assigned him, but couldn't remember the number. The doors weren't labeled. What time was it? He ran to the backstage area, his mouth dry and spongy, as if it was filled with uncooked rice. Why wasn't it crowded back here? Had they started without him? Reaching the door marked "STAGE" he opened it. Two men and three women, some of whom he recognized as incumbents running unopposed for City Council, were sitting in folding chairs.

"Ian Pinter, right?" one of the women said.

He nodded, breathless.

"You're late. We were about to send Montgomery on."

A man in a brown suit and bolo tie, rose from his seat and extended his hand. "Montgomery O'Brien," he said, not concealing his displeasure at Ian's appearance.

"I was in an accident," Ian said. I'm still frazzled. Which one of you's the mediator?"

Everyone looked at each other. “There’s no mediator,” a mustached man explained. “You know the rules, right? They’re in the Council by-laws.”

“Of course.” Shit—right. He needed to calm down.

The man’s face relaxed. “Just stick to those. We’ve never had a problem.”

No mediator. So commensurate with Ellis—things hummed, people got by, and Ian never knew quite how. “Do I have a minute to freshen up?”

“Bathroom’s down the hall,” Montgomery said.

“We don’t have time—” one of the men started.

“Give the guy a second,” Montgomery said. “He can’t go on stage looking like some homeless person.”

Thank God, Ian thought as he ran to the bathroom, that Montgomery wasn’t the one debating James.

“When you’re done, walk right through that first curtain,” a woman called after him.

The combination of the smudged mirror and fluorescent lights made him look paler than he was. He straightened Dmitri’s red tie—it would have been nice to retie it, but he didn’t know how. Presidential, Albert had said. Nothing could be done about the stench of his armpits, but it wasn’t as if potential voters would be close enough to smell him. He unzipped his satchel, took out his hair gel, rubbed some in, smoothed his hair—what was left of it after his last scalping at Don’s—and upon returning it, discovered he’d packed his Old Spice. Excellent: he doused himself with it, lots of it, straightened his collar, and slipped his jacket on. Dmitri, Dmitri. He shook his head as hard as he could. He had to concentrate. That morning, he’d trimmed his beard—sparse, but a full beard like Ray’s, at least, not Bannister’s fashion-conscious goatee. The leftover scars made it patchy.

He dried his hands and face with paper towels, racing mentally through the notes he’d planned to look at before the debate. Dates, Murakami evidence, land ordinances, names and contributions of local historians. Ian knew it all cold.

Striding down the hallway, he heard his name and turned. James Bannister was emerging from one of the prep rooms, and he held out his hand. Ian shook it.

“Hell of a cologne you’ve got there,” Bannister said, his death-grip crushing Ian’s fingers. He wore a double-breasted suit the color of dark malachite, a white shirt, deep grey tie, and the cowboy hat from his commercial. Half progress, half tradition—only Bannister could have pulled it off. Since Ian had last seen him, five years had dropped from his age.

"It's Calvin Klein. My publicist thinks it brings out my pheromones." Ian pulled his hand away.

"Well, it's interesting." He wrinkled his nose. "They're ready for us."

"Lead the way and I'll follow," Ian said, his voice no less confident than he felt, only a hairline fracture at the end of his sentence as he tried not to think of Dmitri sprawled half a mile away.

Bannister pulled open the stage door and they were immediately waved on. Montgomery gave Ian a thumbs-up and Ian shook his hand again, sliding the satchel under one of the seats for safekeeping just as Bannister produced a folder from his jacket. Excellent—notes would look prepackaged. As Bannister parted the curtain and stepped out, Ian trailed behind and let it close. He didn't want to go out *with* Bannister. Applause swelled from the auditorium, much more than Ian had expected. How many were out there? He waited a pause, then a silence, and counted to ten, then to twenty. He took a deep breath. Parting the curtain, smiling broadly, he stepped out to his audience.

Dmitri had said the capacity was five hundred, but from the sound of it, there had to be more. The glare of the stage lights blocked the top half of his vision, so he couldn't see all the way to the double doors, nor where the rows of seats ended. Ian stood in the middle of the stage, stunned by the swell of applause that followed his entrance. Then a cheer went up, and another, and half the crowd was on its feet. He cocked his head sheepishly, took a small bow, and someone cried, "Go get him, Ian!" and he couldn't resist a tiny salute in the direction of the cheer, which made people laugh. He grinned at them: this was it.

Since Ian represented the incumbent, Bannister went first. He was allotted five minutes and used them all, speaking in swift generalities: lifestyle centers, constructive expansion, new schools, planned change, community, community, community. Exactly what Dmitri had told him to expect. Bannister didn't bring up Murakami or the map, which was smart—he'd let the attack come from Ian. By the time Bannister finished, Ian's eyes had adjusted to the light, and he could see that not only was the auditorium full, but that a sizeable throng was standing in the back. Several of them were holding their protest signs: "DOWN WITH GREENLAKE," "ELECT O'BRIEN," and on another, simply, "GO IAN GO!!"

In the silence he allowed to pass before starting his opening remarks, Ian heard a siren. What if it was Dmitri's? It had been a long delay, much too long—but they were less

than a mile from the police station, so presumably sirens were common here. Had anyone else heard it? No one reacted. Oh God, he thought, praying for the second time since his departure from Berkeley, please let Dmitri be all right. God, God, God.

Somehow, with his mind still full of the alley, full of the siren and the gunshot and Rika crying, kneeling over Dmitri, Ian began speaking.

The four of them had collaborated on his introductory remarks, and Ian had rehearsed its pragmatic tone and thoughtful pauses so many times that he felt like he was listening to a recording. The text was edgier than James's. Quickly, tersely, he explained what the map revealed about Bannister's intentions, explained the projected effects of Greenlake on employment—a glut of low-wage jobs, rather than building a self-sufficient local economy—and ended with a brief, impassioned plea about Ellis's role in the Central Valley.

Bannister smiled, nodding to the audience to indicate that he'd already anticipated everything Ian had said. "My first question, Mr. Pinter, is about your opposition to lifestyle centers—"

"Well—"

"I'm not finished. Lifestyle centers, given their role as centers of community, of learning, of commerce and respite, complete with meeting spaces to meet the needs of an individual community."

Ian paused. "Finished?" A few people chuckled, and he stole a glance at his opponent before continuing. "So many things sound lovely in theory. It's true. If Greenlake goes up, it *will* be a community center. But we have to think long and hard about whether we want *Greenlake* to be the center of our community. If fifty or sixty corporate stores roll in, people will go there, no question. But would we rather design a community of people who meet at Starbucks, or people who meet at the local coffee shop?"

"Shall I remind you that Ellis already has two Starbucks?"

Toward the front, a few people laughed.

"No one's denying we've undergone growth, Mr. Bannister. That's not what I'm opposed to. But it's wrong to overhaul Ellis all at once. This city is a patchwork. The layers are part of the beauty. But if you ask most people who've never been here about Ellis, they'll tell you it has an In-N-Out Burger. Is that what you want to be known for? Big corporations from the bay area telling us how to spend our money?" Using Dmitri's words

filled him with sudden emotion.

Someone yelled in approval, and applause broke out in the back of the auditorium.

Bannister smiled. "You must admit, Mr. Pinter, that sounds a little funny coming from someone who *just* moved here from the bay area."

The crowd chuckled again. They were warming up; they liked the competitive ribbing.

"I lived in Berkeley for the same amount of time you did," Ian said. "Then—wisely, I think—we both moved to Ellis." A brilliant response, thanks to Albert, who'd anticipated Bannister's question word for word. "So my first question," he said, before Bannister could start comparing years, "is whether you're prepared to give us all your word, right here, that you're not going to redistrict downtown and sell it to housing developers, *nor* will you continue to drive out downtown by raising rent west of Ellis Boulevard."

As Bannister settled into a complicated explanation of land acquisition laws, Ian scanned the crowd. He recognized a quarter of them by sight—nearly all the protest regulars. From the third row, Lizzie waved her purple handkerchief, five seats down from Walt Garrett, who scribbled on a pad of paper and passed it to a pretty, heavysset woman Ian recognized from the wedding photo in his office. Jimmy and Reginald Carr were there, and Chad Tran, Hazel Price. Victoria O'Brien, older people, younger people, cops, housewives, construction workers, the handsome mechanic who'd come into the Pint Club the other day, a blond man whose eyes looked so much like James's that it had to be Johnny, and Ruby Phyllis, whom he recognized from the *Herald*. In the front row Albert raised his fist and grinned. A rush of panic filled Ian. Had it been safe to leave Rika alone with Russ?

He was aware, suddenly, that Bannister was looking at him. "Sorry?"

"Mr. Pinter?"

Ian looked at Bannister. "Yes?"

"My question."

"Would you repeat it?"

"Certainly. Can you outline the policies of Montgomery O'Brien and how you believe they'll be useful to Ellis in the future?"

He couldn't, actually. In their decision not to promote O'Brien, just to campaign against Bannister, they'd hardly talked about Montgomery. Ian swallowed. "No," he said.

"No?"

“No,” Ian repeated. “Because—and I hope he won’t mind me saying this—but Montgomery O’Brien doesn’t *have* set policies. He’s too open-minded. His greatest strength is his willingness to compromise, to listen to his fellow Ellisonians. Not to squelch the businesses they’ve worked so hard to build up, but to let them be great. To let them be—be giants.” Aha—thank you, Chekhov.

And so it went. The O’Brien question was Bannister’s most surprising—Ian wasn’t sure how it had gone over. They were only allowed five questions each, but both of them slid in follow-ups, quips, asides. Ian was astonished at his own ability to use the facts he’d stored away, invoking details at opportune moments, spinning them properly. Richard Gilman once said Harold Pinter’s use of language could *be* the play, and Ian understood how this was so. He explained how World War Two housing units in Wainwright Village had been used for city offices until the mid-seventies, how corporate streamlining had been responsible for shutting down the Heinz factory, Laura Scudder’s, how Ellis’s dairies used to be run by immigrants from the Azores. He rode on the debate’s internal logic, the pulse of the crowd. The air seemed warm, filled with murmurs of assent. He listened to what made his audience sigh or chuckle or draw in a collective breath. It was divinely symbiotic, this relationship between himself and these people, and he knew that even the American Conservatory Theatre could not have done this for him.

When Ian brought up Murakami and Bannister denied everything, Ruby Phyllis rose from her seat and faced the crowd. She was silent, just stood with her arms to her sides, letting people look at her. No, Ian thought, watching. This wasn’t *Denouement*. Somewhere along the line, he’d stopped acting. The curtain had come down, but he’d already crossed to the other side of it. He hadn’t dropped from the sky—he’d come from Berkeley, from New York, from a lot of failed auditions and a failed relationship and a beating in Stockton that he’d initiated himself. Like it or not, all of it, everything, was his.

He ended his closing remarks with a plea for “Helping Ellis *Keep Its Dreams*”—his own spin on Bannister’s slogan. The crowd rose and the applause swelled inside him. The only two standing ovations he’d ever gotten, and within thirty minutes of each other. He grinned, bowed, and made his exit. Backstage, he grabbed his satchel, shook hands with Montgomery, and darted out through the door marked, “Parking Lot.”

Where was everybody? He’d come out on the side of the building but had expected a few people to be here, waiting. The door clicked behind him: no handle on the outside. Ian

climbed over an illegally-parked Expedition blocking his way around the last row of cars, then made his way to the front of the building. No one. And then he remembered—of course—that there were *other* debates going on, not just his—he'd forgotten. He laughed. Unzipping his satchel, he pulled out his Parliaments and sat cross-legged on the Community Center lawn, smoking. The day had warmed, and he took off his jacket and tie and untucked his shirt, unbuttoned it, and lay looking at the November sky and trying, unsuccessfully, to blow smoke rings. His birthday had passed a few days ago. He hadn't remembered it. He was thirty-seven—and it amazed him, suddenly, how much there was to pack into a person's life, how much he'd gone through in thirty-seven years. It was nearly dusk and the air was thinning and cooling. Half a mile away, he could see cars beginning to clot the I-205 off-ramp, returning from Sacramento, Oakland, San Jose, or from suburban business parks in suburban neighborhoods. They passed the brick façade of Lula's Taqueria, the new homes that were finished but didn't have lawns yet. Toward the freeway, fields receded, alfalfa on one side and sugar beets on the other. Workers bent and moved along the rows.

Oh God—Dmitri. For an instant, the alley had vanished and there had just been the debate. He leapt to his feet. The crushing weight of it was back, and he looked frantically around—should he run back to the alley, or take a cab to the hospital?

The front door of the Community Center banged shut, and Ian turned—Albert—and tried to speak. Albert threw his arms around him. "You were incredible!"

"Are the other debates still going on?"

Albert gave him a punch in the shoulder and let him go. "Yeah, but I figured you might be out here and I had to be the first to congratulate you. All your work sure showed up there. You've got me thinking *you* should run for City Council next. Did you see the way they were cheering?"

"It was something."

"What's wrong? You did great. You couldn't help the question about Montgomery. You kept your enthusiasm, that was the main thing."

Ian looked down, his stomach full of gravel. "Dmitri's hurt. Did you drive here?"

On the way to the hospital, Ian explained what had happened in the alley, that he'd called 911 before the debate. He didn't explain who Russ was, nor exactly how Rika was involved, and Albert didn't ask. The hospital was just a few miles away, but they kept getting cut off—road construction, a crossing guard, a broken stoplight. Neither of them

spoke after the first few minutes. It would have seemed to slow them down. They took heavy breaths and kept their eyes glued to the road. Albert's knuckles were pink against the steering wheel.

At the front desk, they gave Dmitri's name and a woman told them he was on the fifth floor. "But you can't see him," she said. She squinted at her computer screen, punching a key. "It says he's on the fifth floor, room fifty-three, and no visitors."

"Can we go up?"

She shrugged. "Go ahead. But you can't see him."

In the elevator, Ian's knee throbbed. His mind ran in circles. This was *his* fault—he'd put Dmitri here, and if anything happened to him—God, God, God. Please let Dmitri be all right. Whatever happened to Dmitri, it should have been him. His throat tightened as if he was about to cry, then the door opened. At least he was in the hospital. That had meant he was getting treatment, that he had a chance, that he hadn't—in the alley—it was hitting him now, all at once.

"It's okay, man," Albert said, laying a hand on Ian's shoulder. "You're choking. You've got to breathe."

Rika was on a couch in a waiting area near the room. "We can't go in," she said when she saw them. "They won't let us go in." Her face was magenta, her cheeks swollen: she'd been crying. God, God, God.

"Is he—"

"He's in surgery," Rika said, her voice trembling. "They won't tell me anything."

"Is Becky here?" Albert asked, and Ian saw the force of the question hit Rika, her mouth stretching into a sob. She held a tissue over her lips to muffle it. Silently, her shoulders shook. She loved him—and worse, no one knew it.

Ian sat on the couch and rested his palm on her leg. "Take your time," he said.

"She's with him."

For hours, they waited. Albert left to get pretzels from a vending machine and Ian bought deodorant at the hospital store and called the police, who took him aside and asked him to describe everything. Rika had already given them a statement, she said. Other than that, none of them left the waiting room. He and Albert told Rika about the debate, about what Ruby had done, about the giant crowd that had amassed to cheer Ian on. They talked about Greenlake, what to do if Bannister lost, what to do if he won. They talked about how

the text of the debate would look written out, what people would think reading it in the *Herald* tomorrow morning. Each time a doctor passed, they sat up in unison: eager, waiting. Somehow Rika seemed more complicated in the quiet of the waiting room, and also more sensitive, and Ian was quietly pleased that he'd noticed this. He kept thinking of she and Dmitri, sneaking around in love, and for some reason the thought of it made him glad, the idea of intellectual, dependable Dmitri having passion for this woman.

None of them had watches, and the waiting room had no clocks, nor windows. They might have been there for two hours or six. At points, the waiting became surreal, felt so prolonged that Ian would almost forget why they were here, the three of them in this small room, then he'd remember it all over again and be overcome by grief. It was his fault. There was no getting around that. He picked at the armrest of the couch, studied the irises on the wall, framed in pink.

Days seemed to have passed when one of the doctors came out, a startlingly young man, short and Hispanic and bearded, the opposite of everything Ian always pictured about doctors—he thought this guiltily, as if the man could see it on his face—and the doctor stood in front of them with his hands on his hips. “You’re friends of Mr. Harris?”

They nodded, murmuring, and Rika gripped Ian’s hand.

“He just got out of surgery. He’s suffered a Zone Three neck injury.” He touched his own neck in the place Dmitri had been shot. “The bullet grazed his carotid artery, but didn’t go through. He lost surprisingly little blood.”

“He’ll be okay, then,” Rika said, trembling.

The doctor nodded. “We think so. Zone Three neck injuries are difficult to access surgically. We had to manipulate his temporomandibular joint—dislocate his jaw—to remove the bullet.”

Ian sucked a breath in, glancing at Rika. Her face was white. “Dislocate—” she whispered.

“It’s a relatively normal procedure, for this type of injury.”

Rika began to cry.

“Will he be *okay*?” Albert asked.

“We keep post-op Zone Three neck injuries under surveillance forty-eight to seventy-two hours. He’ll have serious recovering to do. But he’s neurologically in tact, which is one of the big dangers of this kind of injury. His vital signs are stable.”

Rika blew her nose. "How long before we can see him?"

"It depends how he's feeling. Probably not for a few days. His wife and daughter are in the ICU."

"Is he awake?"

"The anesthesia will wear off soon, but it may be a while before he's coherent."

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Three miles. Ian chickened out about asking Albert to drive him. Explaining would come, but not now. They'd left the hospital separately, Albert in his Oldsmobile, Rika in the Ford, Ian on foot. The east end of Vernalis Road had no sidewalk, just a thin dirt shoulder and a chain-link fence. Ian walked close to the fence. Cars sped by from the mall or the freeway. He dragged his fingers along the metal until they numbed, then he put them in his mouth. They tasted like iron. He would watch the results come in tomorrow night, but from where, he didn't know. He'd stay in another small motel, tattered pink curtains, stained carpet. These were the kinds of things he was capable of.

At the station, he bought a ticket to Berkeley, round trip with an open return time. In the hour before his bus came, he watched men and woman hurry across the station hauling backpacks, hats, babies, instruments. The air reeked of garlic and urine, of sweat and fresh shampoo. His silk shirts would be gone. He wondered whether Dmitri would forgive him, whether Albert would let him keep his job. When the bus came, he found a seat in the back.

There was nothing for him in Berkeley, but this wasn't why he was going back. He needed to go back only to leave again; if he was going to stay in Ellis, this was how he needed to do it. He'd terminate his lease with Frieda, say goodbye to Ha Chee, explain his filing system at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

As the bus climbed the Altamont, Ian wished he could say for certain that he'd still be planning to come forward about Theo if Russ didn't have his DNA. But the truth was, he didn't know if he was that strong, or that good.

In the reflection of the window, his scars glowed. His beard was getting long, obscuring the smaller scars. What would he say to Theo Lacey in the courtroom? What Theo would say back? I'm sorry for calling you a nigger; I'm sorry for beating *you* to a bloody pulp; I'm sorry for nearly letting *you* go to jail for something you didn't do.

Leaning back against the seat, Ian suddenly laughed. It was a big laugh, a belly laugh, inappropriate for a public bus, but he couldn't help it. It surged from some place inside him, some raw place that knew more than he did, and he wiped his eyes and grinned and held on to the feel of it.

Deodorant had caked beneath his arms and felt crusty. He smelled terrible. At the cuff, his suit had ripped, and he'd owe Richard for it. He flexed his fingers, reached into his satchel, and pulled out his Parliaments. He tested the window: it cracked open, just a bit, and lit one out of the bus driver's view, holding it near his lap. He thought of Dmitri holding the protest sign above his head, shaking it at the cars on Ellis Boulevard, Dmitri standing beside him in the doorway of Lizzie's, looking at the rain.

"No smoking!" the driver yelled from the front, and Ian raised his hand in acknowledgement, but he didn't stub it out right away. Instead he blew a breath of smoke out the crack of the bus window and pressed his nose to the glass, watching it vanish against the Altamont, against the dark green outline of the foothills. The farther he looked, the farther it seemed to keep going, and he imagined it swirling across fields and freeways, across malls and pastel two-stories, across boats and elementary schools, walnut trees and minivans. If he looked hard enough, it seemed to go on forever.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A dull pain throbbed on the left side of Dmitri's neck, some combination of toothache and earache, yet he also felt a tingling that suggested it was numb. He couldn't move his head. His mouth felt dry, and as he opened it to wet his tongue with saliva, a pain pierced his neck like a stab. Then he remembered Russ, the four of them in the alley, the gun going off. Rika had stayed with him. He'd been looking at her upside down, her head over his, and she talked about Spain and they'd heard the sirens and he'd told her to take his keys, remembered feeling pleased he'd had the presence of mind to do that much. And then nothing—he must have blacked out when the ambulance came. It was dark, but he could make out shadows, different qualities of light, some regions of the room blacker than others.

Lying there, he was primarily shocked by the fact of his having *been shot*—what kinds of men *were shot*?—not men like himself. What an anomaly. Chaos. The odds of an inactive public schoolteacher being shot, and on the street, no less, had to be one in a million. Glad to be alive, people said when strange things like this happened. Lucky to be alive. And though Dmitri *was* glad to be alive, he didn't feel especial relief about it, because it hadn't occurred to him, even sprawled in the middle of the Adams Street Alley with a gaping wound in his neck, that he might die.

The headache was probably nicotine withdrawal. He tried tapping into it, assessing it further, and couldn't. Gradually becoming more aware of his body, he could discern pain in different places, settling over him like a blanket. General soreness, in his jaw especially, probably pain creeping in from his neck. Less pain in his neck than his jaw, strangely—they must have given him some kind of anesthetic. How long had he been knocked out? Had he had surgery? Suddenly he was hungry. Ravenous. He craved lamb, sushi, strawberries, hummus.

Police would be looking for Russ. Rika and Ian would have talked to them. He closed his eyes; it was useless to keep them open in the dark and required more effort than he would have expected. But he wasn't tired. He didn't want to sleep.

Pulling the trigger had been an accident, Russ hadn't done it on purpose—this much Dmitri knew. But, then, apparently Russ had followed him, and he wouldn't have believed that, either. It was a mistake he'd made often, confusing the kids he'd known once with the new adults he didn't. He was still surprised when former students, even those he hadn't

connected with, failed to greet him in the bank or the Thai Café. He remembered Russ standing over him, driving off, taking his pictures of Rika and Dmitri with him. Where had he gotten them, and what had gone on between Rika and Russ? Keeping the relationship secret in exchange for what? A moan came from Dmitri's throat, a sound he hadn't planned, scratchy and feeble.

Rustling in the corner of the room. He opened his eyes and tried to turn but was roped to the bed somehow. Tubes—he could make out the glint of them, half a dozen of them in his arms and neck and God knew where else.

“Dmitri, are you awake?”

Becky! A current of gladness went through him at hearing his wife's voice. He said her name, but it came out a jumble, and pain shot through his jaw. He'd bumped into Russ a few weeks ago, outside the Pint Club, he remembered. Russ had asked about Ian. What did it mean?

“Oh God, no, don't talk—the doctors said it would be a few days. Are you okay? Oh, *Dmitri*.” He hadn't heard her get up, but she appeared now in front of him, her face inches away. Pressure, her hand on his forehead. She kissed his cheek and he took in his wife's smell, her combination of baby powder and pasta and her floral mist deodorant. He felt tremendous relief that it was her, this woman he knew and trusted, his oldest friend and no one else. In a burst of gratitude, he tried to speak again—this failed, so he moved his body as best he could. Perhaps in the darkness, she'd see his tubes jostle and sway.

He'd been about to leave her. Friday. He'd mapped it out a dozen times, packed a suitcase. Now it seemed rash. Why? He needed to click through his reasoning again, but he was horribly confused, then angry at himself for not being able to sort it out. What if Becky knew? No, the suitcase was under the futon, and the rental ads were in a drawer in his classroom. Everything he'd done and thought the past week seemed jumbled—his anxieties and memories weren't discrete.

Where was Rika? He missed her. He wanted her here, too, holding his other hand. She must be worried sick—they wouldn't let her in, he supposed. Hospital visitation rules, archaic hierarchal notions about who was allowed to love whom and when.

“Do you remember what happened?” Becky asked, examining his face as if it was a crossword puzzle.

He nodded—could she see the nodding?

“That’s good—the doctors were afraid about memory loss and—” tears welled in her eyes, and she bent over his face, kissing the places that weren’t gauzed or stuck with tubes. He could feel the dampness on her cheeks, the firmness of her thin lips. He admired her. Yoga, reading, shopping, cooking, teaching, pilates—the woman was a wonder. More interesting, more miraculously diversified than he could ever hope to be. He studied her, moving his lips.

“Are you trying to say something?”

“I love you,” he mouthed, and it came out a crackly whisper, but he could tell she’d heard it, and her face broadened with delight.

“I love you, too.”

“The elec—” he whispered, and then his voice was gone again. His jaw felt like someone had struck it from beneath. He hadn’t fallen on the pavement, had he, when he was shot, knocked his face somehow and didn’t remember—

“Oh—no election yet. It’s still Monday night.” She bit her lip and looked away, and he could tell she was thinking of the fight they’d had the previous morning over the paper, of how she’d told him, essentially, that she didn’t care about his campaign. She cared now, he could tell. But she wouldn’t know about the debate. Did she even know it had taken place, that he’d been priming Ian Pinter for the last week and a half? “I’ll bring you a paper tomorrow morning, okay? And I’ll vote. I promise.”

It was kind of her to say this, though he knew she hadn’t been registered in ages—only one voter pamphlet had arrived at their house for the past five years. But the gesture touched him. He was glad he hadn’t left her, and wondered whether he would. He loved Rika, too. He was confused. Maybe he’d just gotten worked up, finally mustered the courage to leave *something*, and his wife had been the most obvious. No—he’d have to reason it all out. When his head felt better.

Becky was looking at him again, and he wanted her to talk, to keep talking, just as Rika had before the ambulance came. He wanted to learn things about his wife he’d never known and couldn’t have imagined. So many things in the world that he didn’t know and longed to find out. He’d hunt them all down, track them one by one. He had time—yes—a great beautiful expanse of it, and he was filled with euphoria at all the brilliant possibilities it suggested for loving and being loved. How could he tell Becky this—through his eyes,

maybe. But she wasn't looking at him now. She was wrinkling her nose, patting his arm. His thoughts felt inanely slow.

"I think your bedpan might need to be emptied—want me to get a nurse?"

Bedpan. How humiliating. He could get up, couldn't he? He tried to move. Too many tubes, but plenty of feeling in his legs, his feet, his chest and arms. *Bedpan*. He sniffed and nodded. Above him, Becky pressed a red button on the wall. "It's okay. They said it's standard for post-op patients."

A nurse arrived, flipped on the light, and took care of the whole disgusting business while Becky, bless her, kept her back turned. "You're monitoring his blood sugar, right?" his wife asked into the wall.

"We're monitoring everything," the nurse said.

"He's diabetic, you know."

"I'm sure his chart reflects that. I wouldn't worry about it."

"He's also a smoker."

The nurse raised his eyebrows at Dmitri, as if to ask whether Becky's questions were always this relentless, and Dmitri felt a surge of annoyance toward the man. But he couldn't speak, so he gritted his teeth as best he could, and the nurse drew back, finished up, and left.

Becky turned back around after the door clicked shut. "What's so funny?"

He gritted his teeth again, and Becky laughed. "Cute," she said. "You look like an angry four-year-old. Did you show the nurse that little face?"

Dmitri nodded, and they laughed together, and it reminded him of their social psychology seminar at Fresno State, how they'd amused each other by passing notes under the table and excusing themselves to go to the bathroom at the same time, like giggly third-grade cohorts. There was so much to tell her. Maybe if she leaned closer, he could whisper without moving his jaw. He made a sound, not trying to give it shape, and it came out prehistoric.

"The doctors said the surgery went well. They got the bullet out."

He made another sound, encouraging her to tell more. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he could see a stack of papers by the window. She'd been here all night waiting for him to wake up. What time was it? And if these tubes were feeding him, why was he so hungry? He thought of muenster, brie, goat cheese—queso de cabre, Rika had said. She'd eaten it in Spain. He felt warm. Feverish.

"I'm sure they'll explain it to you. But basically it just missed your carotid artery. You know which one that is?"

He nodded. In his neck—he'd seen the poster in Rika's classroom. Subclavian vein, vena cava, aortic arch, carotid artery.

She looked away—struggling to stay calm? "Well, it grazed the side and—you're going to be okay. You could have..." She lowered her face to his arm and he saw that her eyes were filled with tears, her mouth stretched wide with a sob.

He could have died. Or another few inches the opposite way and the bullet might have missed him altogether. How many times in a man's life did he almost die and never realize it? Drunk drivers passing on the highway, sharks lurking just beyond the buoy. Becky wasn't just thinking about *him*, but about the overall diceyness of it, the great wretched chaos. Would he be similarly frightened, once it settled in? He wished he could get out of bed, wished he could hold her and stroke her strong calves and tell her she would live forever. She started in on the surgery again and he made another dinosaur groan, telling her to stop—he didn't want to hear, not if it upset her. If he could have spoken, he would have asked whether Alex was warming up to tuning forks.

"Sorry." She straightened up, wiping her eyes and managing a smile. "Do you want to sleep?"

He couldn't shake his head, so he widened his eyes.

Becky smiled. "Yeah, I guess you've been asleep for awhile. It's the middle of the night, but to you it probably feels like morning."

At a loss, exhausted by his own efforts to communicate, Dmitri did nothing. His neck throbbed—was the anesthetic wearing off? It was stiff, too. His head felt full of feathers.

"I figured I'd wait until morning to wake her up, but there's someone outside waiting to see you. She's been here since before *I* have, and she's sleeping on the couch in the waiting room. Want me to bring her in?"

His chest lightened, his heart expanded. He nodded, not too eager, he hoped, and Becky rose and went out. There was so much to explain, and he wondered whether Becky would give Rika and him some time alone, even a couple of minutes. No, he was getting ahead of himself. He'd enjoy this for the present, Becky and Rika in the same room, and himself silently, utterly uxorious over both of them. He hoped, at least, that Rika would hold

his hand. Or pat his wrist—their joke—that was what she'd do. Underneath all these tubes, he probably looked wan and ancient, and he drew his limbs in towards his sides, streamlining himself, ridiculous in his matronly hospital gown and bunched sheets, but he did it anyway.

The door opened and Becky came in, and—Meg. His heart sunk and then leapt again. *Meg* had slept in the waiting room all night? She stood at the foot of the bed. “Hey, Dad.”

Dmitri nodded, seeing now what he'd never been able to see before, how much his daughter resembled him. They shared the same eyes, too small for their faces, the same thick hair, stubbornly straight. She was carrying a purse with Andy Warhol on the side, and she set it at the edge of the bed. He tried to see her the way a boy might see her—no a girl, some passing girl with an interest in his daughter. She was smart, you could tell that right off. And high cheekbones—who knew where those were from. Sharp but soft, though you had to look hard to see the softness. What kinds of girls were interested in his daughter? He had never asked. Had he been afraid?

“Can he hear me?”

“Of course,” Becky told her.

“He's not saying anything.”

I'm *here*, Dmitri wanted to say. Talking about him as if he was feeble only made it worse. He groaned and bared his teeth in an attempt to revive the jocularity he'd created with Becky, but Meg cast a look at her mother. “Are you sure he's okay? Are they taking his pulse and everything?”

“The nurse says so. Why don't you talk to him for a little while?”

Meg lowered her head to his, and—to his surprise—brushed some hair from his forehead. “How are you doing, Dad? I can't believe this.”

Dmitri nodded.

“They're looking for Russ, but he's in hiding somewhere. They're still sorting out what happened. I guess pretty soon you'll be able to tell them. I'm guessing he just went off the deep end. I don't know if Mom told you, but he's been getting kind of insane. I just—God, I mean, what an idiot I am—I'm a *psychologist*, and I didn't, you know...”

He nodded again, but felt impatient. He didn't want to talk about Russ, about the hole in his neck and the gauze on his face; he wanted to hurry along to the details, to learn about his daughter, to show her the mix tape he kept in his truck and ask the titles of the

songs he couldn't remember. He'd sing one for her; he wasn't a bad singer. Suddenly lightheaded, he mustered his strength and whispered, "How's Sooz..." he cut off. He was finding that he could talk if he exaggerated the movements of his tongue.

"How's Susan?"

Nodding, but probably imperceptible. His neck was stiffer. Would she understand that he was making an overture?

"She's good," Meg said. She smiled. "We're thinking of moving in together."

Becky looked horrified—not so much at the news, but at Meg's decision to tell Dmitri *then*, and he laughed. Their daughter had always possessed a knack for dropping startling, unrelated news during crises, and he loved her for it, for all the small bits of her, and he remembered her at thirteen, at her grandfather's funeral, whispering to Dmitri that she had failed algebra.

He hoped he was smiling, but his muscles were hard clay, tough to mold into discernable expressions. A warmth overtook his neck, seemed to swallow his head from the shoulders up, as if he was being dipped in tepid water. Then a chill, a stab of pain on his left side. He winced and wheezed. How he loved his daughter, how much she mattered. Could she and Rika ever be friends? Perhaps so, and perhaps Becky. Maybe they could all—his thoughts were interrupted by a wave of lightheadedness. He struggled to focus. He was chilled and weak and profoundly unsure. Meg took his wrist. "I could—" he forced out. Was it still Monday?

"What, Dad?" She turned. "Mom—his pulse is like five *hundred* or something. And he's kind of sweating." She leaned, touching his forehead. Motherly. Would she ever be a mother? She'd make a wonderful one, like Becky and—didn't they have agencies for that nowadays? Lesbian mother organizations. "Jesus, Mom, he's breathing really weird. *Call* someone."

But Dmitri didn't want a nurse. His body was frozen, numbing further. He had to talk to his daughter; he had to tell her one thing. He blinked rapidly, began to whisper. Meg knelt beside his bed, still holding his wrist, as Becky leaned over, touched his forehead, pressed the red button. "I could have—" he choked out, his breath laborious. He was hot, yet frozen; how could that be? "I could have taken you—to Switzerland, but—I never—"

"I know, Dad," Meg whispered. "I remember when they offered it to you. But it's okay. Too cold there, anyway, isn't it?"

The door opened a few seconds later—he didn't know how long, just that he'd just closed his eyes, then opened them again, and he was vaguely aware of a nurse rushing in, not the bedpan nurse but a different one, a woman, and there were doctors' hands all over him. He strained, trying to force open his eyes again, and got his eyelids up, enough to see the light, the shushing of hands and metal. "Pulmonary," he heard, and "tachycardia," and "swelling," and he didn't know what this all meant, but as he was touched and prodded and measured, he had the sensation he was conversing with the doctors on some fundamental level, his whole body radiating out to them, and theirs toward him, and his chest was seized with pain, but this communication was carrying him, grand and timeless, and as the voices grew softer and fused with one another, he could feel it, feel them, feel Ellis and his wife's strong hands and Rika's lemon sherbet bra and the hum of his Ford in a parking lot, and his classroom at Madison High and the rest of it—the great folding of molecular fabric into itself, rushing through him gloriously and all at once, and Dmitri was filled with wonder at everything he had known.

Chapter Twenty-Three

At five in the morning Russ stuffed his hair under his new knit hat and took the elevator to the lobby of the Hyatt. No newspapers yet. He stared at the empty dispensers, the metal wires like a fence behind the plastic. The *Record* didn't cover much Ellis news, but for a shooting, there would be a blurb. He dumped half and half into a cup of complimentary coffee, carried it back up to his room, and drank it sitting on the edge of the bed. Dark coffee, and grey. Coffee like the sky. Nicest hotel he'd ever stayed in. He removed the hat and his hair fell over his shoulders. A paper bag on the bed contained scissors, dye, and sunglasses, all from the drugstore across the street. He hadn't decided whether to use them.

The Mad Russian, someone truly humane. Jesus. All night, Russ had replayed it. Harris had reminisced about Meg's driver's test, and then—boom—they were all on him and Russ had drawn in, shielding himself, and the gun had gone off. He remembered the pressure of the metal against his finger, but did not remember willing it. Cowardice had pulled the trigger. And that same fear had driven him straight from the alley to the freeway. He hadn't thought about calling 911 until he was halfway to Stockton. More scared he'd be caught than worried about Harris. Sickening.

The vodka from the flask, and the rum he'd bought afterwards to numb everything over, sat in a well of bile at the pit of his stomach. He couldn't make himself vomit, nor eat, sleep, or piss. His body strayed behind him, his mind raced ahead. Russ, the real Russ, whatever was left, was stranded somewhere in the middle. He was petrified, twitchy, ruined. Probably a murderer.

If anything had happened to Harris, involuntary manslaughter—still a felony—would be the least egregious crime he was guilty of. And even if Harris was fine, Russ would be arrested. Assault, reckless endangerment—plenty to keep him in jail. No one would believe it had been an accident. He'd be disbarred. Meg would never speak to him. He'd raised a gun to her father and left him in an alley. Blood everywhere. Russ's mouth opened. If his body had let him, he would have cried. No sound came. Lesser wounds had killed his clients' victims.

He rose and went to the bathroom, where his coat was soaking in the sink with a bar of soap. It had a fancy package, but when he had opened it last night, he'd laughed: Jergens. He wrung out the fabric. The stain was still there. Harris's blood was on his pants, too, from

kneeling next to him after the gun had gone off. Russ reached into the shower and turned the nozzle. While the water warmed, he threw his bottles in the trash. He imagined a lawyer representing him, strategizing that they blame the alcohol. But it hadn't been the alcohol. If anything, the vodka—and just a few shots' worth, before talking to Ian—had steadied him. No more, though. He was through. Yesterday had been an incident, not a relapse. *Relapse* suggested a pattern. There was no pattern.

He turned the water off and sat on the bed again. He didn't want to get clean. Taking the scissors from the bag, Russ cut out the knees of his pants, tracing the stains. Outside his window, the ritziest part of town was waking up. He'd never lived, worked, or gone to school within a two-mile radius of here. There was a Barnes and Noble, loft apartments, cafés that served pizza with pesto instead of tomato sauce, kalamata olives instead of regular. The area was only a dozen blocks long, and everyone who lived here could have afforded someplace else. They had a way out of the Valley and ignored it—these were the ones Russ loathed most.

Putting the two stiff circles into the paper bag, he pulled out the sunglasses. Wraparound. He hung them from his neck and put on the knit cap again. The Hyatt thought he was Brian Church, a ski instructor on his way back from Tahoe who'd forgotten his wallet at the lodge but had enough cash for a room. They'd accepted this without question—another luxury of the rich, being believed.

In the lobby, the dispensers were finally stocked and he bought a *Stockton Record* and shoved it beneath his armpit, trying not to look atypically interested, then poured himself more coffee. *Special Election Issue*, the masthead read. He took the elevator back up to his room and spread the paper out on the bed, jerking his head to his right—he thought he'd seen a spider on the wall, but it was nothing. Sleeplessness playing tricks. No article on the first few pages of the local section—a good sign. He flipped to the police blotters, found his own name, read it, then read it again. Thank *God*. Harris had undergone surgery and would make a full recovery. Russ was wanted for questioning in connection with the incident. *Incident*, his own word. No assumption of guilt. Russ closed his eyes. He felt relief, hunger. He was no murderer. No all-points bulletin would be out on him, just a cop car in front of his apartment complex and another in front of his office.

Harris was alive. The news settled into him like a warm meal as he packed his briefcase. Harris was alive, Harris would be fine. The Mad Russian, for whom Russ had once, long ago, felt genuine affection.

Another spider on the wall? Russ yanked his arm away—nothing. He needed sleep. He drank the rest of his coffee and sat on the bed, honing his mind. What *had* he done? First-year criminal law: mens rea, actus reus. Brandishing a weapon. Reckless endangerment. Would anyone understand why he'd needed Ian to come with him? Would anyone believe it? What a terrible defense—I was trying to force a man into my car at gunpoint after falsifying DNA results, then the gun went off. One of the only cases he could imagine in which he'd rather be tried by a jury of law professors than a jury of his peers. He'd still go to jail.

Ian would probably be halfway across the country in a day or two, armed with a new name and a fresh Social Security card. Meanwhile, Russ would be locked up with his old clients, with their friends and enemies, with men who'd hate him just for being a lawyer. Jesus. He couldn't do it. He'd be demasculinized, debased, abused, degraded. He imagined Brandt laughing over it with the other DAs.

Russ picked up the scissors. Regular ones with plastic grips, the kind kids bought for school. He wouldn't dye his hair unless he was definitely running. Too incriminating, otherwise.

He pushed away his thoughts of Jackson, which he'd been trying to do all night. He was a criminal, a dead one—Muriel had said so, and she hadn't even known she'd been right. He gripped the scissors and went to work. The cheap blades gnawed his hair like a rat. As he cut, he imagined Theo standing before the judge and Brandt, no idea that the one person on his side had nearly committed a murder himself. Russ should never have told him the truth. Better, now, if Theo still thought Ian was dead.

The pile of hair on the tile disgusted him. It was unsightly, disembodied. He touched his head. He'd cut it to a few inches above his shoulders, the shortest it had been since his first year in law school. The ends could be shorter. He leaned over the sink, snipping closer to his head. There was no way to get it straight with the scissors, so he settled for shaggy, just over his ears. He ran his fingers over the back. Chewed and uneven. He cut more. The shorter hairs floated above the Jergens on the surface of the water. He pulled out the stopper and watched the pieces of hair swirl into the drain.

Stay or go. These were the options. The coffee was kicking in now, humming him along, though he felt sick from not eating. Go to jail and never see Jackson, or run away and never see Jackson. The end, either way. He opened his briefcase, took out his most recent sketches, and spread them on the bed. He loved his son as much as Muriel did—he had a *right*. But he felt further from Jackson than he had since the day he'd woken on the sewer grate. Were the sketches even good? Stockton was a lousy place for an artist. He'd never developed the skills to compete somewhere better. No fancy summer oil classes for him. Every year, his parents had signed him up for Beginning Drawing at the Ellis Parks and Rec Center. That was all they offered, year after year. Beginning Drawing, ten dollars, bring your own paper.

Breath collected in his lungs, wracking his chest. Coughing, Russ shuffled the pictures back into the briefcase. Cruel friction scraped the lining of his lungs. Would they send a dying man to prison? Of course. They were all dying. He fished for his inhaler in his coat pocket. It was drenched—he'd removed only the Sig Sauer before washing his coat. Dumb. Raising the inhaler to his lips, Russ pressed down, waited, and breathed in. After thirty seconds, he did it again, hating it. Dependency was lethal. When his lungs felt normal again, he threw his inhaler in the trash, on top of his hair.

Unless. They'd get him *unless*. If he could somehow escape, avoid depending on other people, the emollients and medicines, the technologies and palliatives they crammed down his throat to placate and mend and occupy him, maybe there was a chance at self-direction. But without Jackson, he didn't want it.

Russ turned to the full-length mirror. Bloodshot eyes, bad haircut, and strange holes in the knees of his pants, but not a marked man. Not some coward who'd shot his old teacher. A lawyer, rather. A father. A blond asthmatic with a sturdy jaw.

That was how Ian must have done it. Willed himself out of one life and into another. A man could shed his past like an old shirt, Ian had taught him. Just wormed out, dropped it beside the highway, and drove. If anyone asked, he denied it was his. And Russ was smarter than Ian; he knew the law. He could arrange his own rapture, and his son's.

The bathroom trash bag was opaque, and Russ pulled it from the can, tied it, and threw it in a dumpster on his way out to the parking garage. He could hear the Sig Sauer clink, hitting the bottom. They'd find it, of course, but this wasn't the point. The point was

to get it away from him so he could think. If he decided to stay, he could tell them where to find it. Maybe they'd let him make a deal.

The previous night, he'd removed the license plates from his hatchback. If it was described on the news, he didn't want people calling in his plate number. With Harris doing okay, though, he had some time. A suspect not returning home one night was minor; they'd only start to get suspicious when Russ didn't show up to court that morning.

He started the car. He'd do it right, plot the details. At seven-twenty, he would leave for Mills.

A mile down the street, he parked at a café, went in, and chose a seat facing the sunrise to excuse his sunglasses. Eggs sounded good. A scramble. Sun-dried tomatoes, ham, and escaroles. Russ had never heard of escaroles but ordered them anyway. He draped the cloth napkin low over his lap so no one would notice the holes in his slacks. This was the kind of place he and Jackson would eat at whenever they wanted.

Grabbed by a stranger, Jackson would be terrified. The first few minutes were the most crucial—Russ had to convince him he was safe, then they'd drive to the zoo or a park and talk it all over. Russ wouldn't force him. Ultimately, he'd leave it up to Jackson. After explaining what Muriel had done, he'd propose a vacation. One week with me, then you can decide when to go back. They'd drive to Santa Barbara, buy a tent, camp on the beach. Russ would teach Jackson how to fish, fight, sink a hook shot.

After finishing his eggs, he ordered another cup of coffee, loads of cream, and a Danish with gruyere cheese. He dipped the Danish into his coffee, sucked out the moisture, ate the flaky skeleton. Outside, kids with hundred-dollar knapsacks and fifty-dollar haircuts skateboarded to school.

Eventually, Jackson would want to come back. And if so, Russ would drop him back at the pink house. But by then, everything would be different—his son would know the truth, demand to see Russ again. Muriel would have to work out visitations. Maybe by then, the whole thing with Harris would have started to simmer down. Russ would write him a long apology, explaining how it had all escalated, beg the Mad Russian's forgiveness. Harris was a reasonable man with a soft heart, and maybe he wouldn't even want to testify against Russ. Ian would be long gone. Rika would be the sole witness left, and she might not testify, knowing the affair would come out. The charges could be dropped or reduced. He'd plead out for community service, years of parole.

And even if none of it worked, he was no worse off than he was now.

Disbarment was inevitable. He'd miss being the champion for callous, misunderstood men from squalid corners of the city. Defense work suited him. He drummed his hands on the table. He'd find something else, work construction or give tours in an art museum. He set a twenty-dollar bill on the table and waved off his change. Might as well make the waitress's morning.

In the car, his stomach churned. He'd eaten too much, and too fast. Jesus—he swerved, pulling from the café—a dog near the median? He looked back. Nothing. He wanted a drink, badly. At the corner of Grant and Apache, he passed Glenna's Liquors, gripping the shift, tasting the drink sweet and strong in his imagination, but didn't slow down. An incident, not a relapse.

He should have done this years ago: Jackson, truth, Southern California. Things would sort themselves out—unravel, uncomplicate. Risks, lots of risks, but staying was risky, too, and so was running, and neither of those brought him closer to Jackson.

Jumpy and thrilled, he stopped the car in front of an empty warehouse. Seven-thirty. What would he have done, himself at eight years old, face to face with a strange man he'd never seen who claimed to be his father? He had to be ready—it would be hard on Jackson. At first, he might not accept it.

He turned off the ignition, got out of his car, and waited out of view. Across the street, above a boarded-up mini-mart, he could see the smokestacks of the asparagus factory. Not for him. Not for his son. Wind cut into his pants at the knees.

The scuffling came a few minutes later. Russ crouched next to the hatchback, shaking. This was what the Valley had done—made him scared of his own kid. The sound grew louder. Jumping out like some kidnapper would only scare him. Russ had to be firm, reason with him.

He took a deep breath, blinked hard, and hurried onto the sidewalk as Jackson approached. He stepped forward quickly and grabbed his son's shoulders. They felt smaller, bonier than Russ could have imagined. "Jackson," he said. His voice was hoarse.

Jackson shifted, staring. How frightening, to be confronted by a stranger. Russ was overwhelmed by guilt but kept his grip. He had to. The pencil box clattered to the sidewalk. What could he say to this beautiful boy that was half him and half Muriel? He was panicking, scaring the kid, blowing it.

"You got a haircut," Jackson said, breaking the silence, wriggling his shoulders.
"Ow."

Holy shit. Russ loosened his grip. His pulse throbbed down his arms and collected in his hands, where it throbbed, pushing out. "You *know* me? How?" Muriel had told him—or Meg—they'd found out. Russ felt like a giant, and knelt on the sidewalk, face to face with his son. Their foreheads were eight inches apart. Muriel's eyes through and through. Russ's hair, Russ's jaw.

Jackson glanced down the street. "You gave me those," he said, kicking the Don Tomas box.

"You know who I am?"

Jackson rolled his eyes, throwing his arms to his sides emphatically. "You know I can't *say*."

They shared a private understanding, he seemed to be saying—what? "You've seen me before?" Russ asked.

"Yep."

"When?"

"Going to school."

"Since when?"

Jackson shrugged. "Kindergarten."

Jesus. "Do you know who I am?" Russ asked again. He realized his hands were still on Jackson's shoulders, and he removed them unsteadily. You didn't just grab a kid up. He'd talk first, let his son decide right here.

Jackson rolled his eyes again, pursing his lips and shaking his head—more secrets.

"It's okay, you can tell me." Russ cocked his ear toward Jackson. "Whisper it." He was electric, buzzing, held by the taut miracle of this kid. Jackson had known all along—startlingly observant. Russ felt a swell of pride.

"We pretend we don't see each other," Jackson whispered, so close to Russ's ear that he could feel his breath.

Russ's blood leapt. "Like a game?"

Jackson nodded.

"Are we friends?"

Shaking his head, Jackson grinned—more secrets. He acted as if Russ was trying to trick him into divulging something. Did Meg and Muriel know Russ came here? Did they figure it was harmless?

Jackson sniffed, then rubbed his nose.

“Am I a stranger?” Russ ventured.

“Nope.” He giggled. “You don’t have to pretend.”

“Pretend what?”

“Pretend you’re not... *You* know.”

“Tell me.”

Jackson shook his head.

“It’s okay,” Russ whispered. “You can say it.”

“An *angel*,” Jackson said. He immediately screwed up his face, to show Russ that he’d shocked himself.

“An angel,” Russ repeated. “What makes you think I’m a—an angel?”

Jackson shrugged. “Pastor Murphy says everyone has an angel and they save you from bad people. If you’re good and then you die, you get to be an angel.”

Russ swallowed. “That’s right.” Pastor? He’d figured Muriel was raising Jackson Catholic.

“You’re my real dad and you’re dead,” Jackson continued matter-of-factly. “Mom showed me pictures.”

So he’d pieced things together and come up with this. Jesus. An angel. “Does your mom know you see me?”

“Nope.”

“Don’t tell her.”

Jackson’s eyes widened, and he shook his head emphatically. “Nope.”

“That’s exactly right.” He placed his hands back on Jackson’s shoulders. “Look, I have to tell you something about your mother.”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed and he raised a finger to his mouth.

Russ bit his lip. “Well—”

“Is Mom okay?” Jackson asked, his eyes widening, stricken.

“Oh, no—no, she’s fine. Yeah. It’s just...” Russ swallowed again, taking in his son’s face, his small mouth, the short, curved nose he’d sketched a hundred times. “Look, I

was wondering if..." he stopped himself. Sorry, elated, pathetic, he took one of his hands off of Jackson's shoulders. "Look, when you're playing point guard, you've got to box out. Do you know what that means?" A lump swelled in his throat and he tried to swallow it.

Jackson shook his head.

"After someone shoots the ball, you—uh—you block someone on the other team with your body. Otherwise, the bigger kids will mow you down. You're not—you know—that big, and you'll catch up, but..."

They were silent.

Jackson peered quizzically at him. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I'm sad."

"Why?"

"Because—look, angels aren't supposed to talk to people, but I have to tell you something important. Are you listening?" He turned away, wiping his face on his shirt. "I have to go away for a while."

"Where?"

"On a secret mission." He was barely understandable, he knew, practically choking.

Jackson set his backpack on the sidewalk, unzipped it, and pulled out a paper bag. He took a napkin from it and handed it over. Muriel's flowery handwriting: *Good luck on your science test, Jack-o-Lantern! Love, Mom.* Russ unfolded it, tore down the middle, and handed Jackson back the portion with the note on it. "From your mom." He blew his nose on the other half. "Look, you might not see me for a long time."

Jackson scrunched his nose, thinking it over. "A year?"

"Maybe longer."

"Will you watch me, still?"

Russ nodded. "Yeah, but I'll be invisible. You have to promise to remember me." He touched the side of his son's head. "Right up here, okay?"

"Okay."

"No matter how old you are. Even if you're in high school. Don't forget that you talked to your dad, okay? Promise me. Because some day I'll come back, and when I do, I'll need to talk to you again."

"Promise." Jackson held his hand awkwardly toward Russ.

"What are you doing?"

“Pinky swear.”

Russ wiped his eyes. “Pinky swear,” he repeated, wrapping his own smallest finger around his son’s. “Look, you’ve got to get to school, you’ve got a science test, right? But—” Russ looked up and down the street. “I love you, Jackson. Don’t forget, okay?”

Jackson threw his arms around Russ’s neck. “Okay,” he whispered. “Good luck on your mission.”

Russ closed his eyes, holding onto his son’s small frame. “Thanks.” He let go.

Jackson scuffed down the street in his red Nikes and Russ sat on the concrete, listening. More than anything, he would miss this sound. Where he was going next, there would be nothing to wait for. He raised his hand in a wave, but Jackson didn’t turn. When he was out of view, Russ lowered his hands to his face and stayed like that for a long time.

Heavy-limbed, he climbed into the hatchback and sat behind the wheel. He put the key in the ignition, turned it halfway, and listened to the radio. Traffic and weather, Jane’s Addiction, Everclear, White Zombie. Sleep could take him easily. He imagined pulling onto a side road and curling up in the back seat. Then he imagined being found sleeping in his car. He shook his head hard. His new shaggy hair rustled. He gripped his key and turned it the rest of the way, starting the car. On the clutch, his foot was weak. The thing lurched like a malfunctioning roller coaster. He pressed harder, started it again, and made an immediate u-turn in the middle of the road, toward his apartment complex. Russ drove slowly. Practice for old age. He longed to sleep, to brush his teeth.

Two blocks away, he swung out to an adjacent road that circled the complex. The police, if they were there, would be in front. The back entrance wasn’t obvious; only a very adept officer would cover the back entrance. He put on his glasses, leaving the knit hat in the passenger seat, and parked at the end of the gravel road that dead-ended behind his complex. Grabbing his briefcase, he closed the car door as gently as he could, not bothering to lock it, and headed up the rear stairwell. No cops in front of his door. He turned the key in the lock and pushed it open. Nothing. He’d keep the lights off. Creeping to the edge of the window, he peered through the blinds. Sure enough, one car. A half-assed stakeout. The cop was leafing through a magazine.

Russ placed his briefcase on the table, unlatched it, took out his sketchpad, and set it in the fireplace. Matches were in the junk drawer, and he went to the kitchen and retrieved a book of them, along with a packet of Pop Tarts. Who knew when he’d eat next? He struck a

match, and tossed it onto his sketchpad. It hit the top and went out. He lit another, kneeling, brushing the flame along the edge of the pad. It caught instantly, the flame swelling around the papers, and Russ worked fast, pulling his sketches from the living room wall, easing them in, one by one. Then he went to his bedroom, opened his nightstand drawer, and took out the rest, two and a half years' worth, sorted into folders by month. One at a time, he tossed them in, using the poker to make sure the fire got it all. The sketches curled quickly, doubling over, then freezing, disintegrating to ash. He jabbed through the middle, tossing in another match, making sure it all burned. Meg, despite everything, would probably be the one to go through his apartment. All she'd find of Jackson was the picture in his wallet, the one she'd given him a month ago.

He opened his Pop Tarts, broke off a piece, and put it in his mouth. Nothing in the fireplace, nothing on the walls. His coffee table was still broken. He hadn't touched it since he'd kicked off the leg. He ate the rest of his Pop Tart. In his fireplace, the ashes glowed orange around the edges. Rising, he went to the kitchen, removed the phone from the hook, and carried it back to the couch. He dialed the number for the Stockton Police.

"This is Russell Dillinger," he said when a voice answered. "I accidentally discharged a firearm yesterday and it struck Dmitri Harris, a teacher at Madison High. I want to make a statement to an officer, and I'm in my apartment now."

He hung up the phone and opened the blinds. After exactly one minute, timed by his heartbeat, Russ saw the officer straighten and grab his radio. A few minutes later, two more cars pulled up. They must figure he was armed. The newcomers jumped from their cars and spoke briefly to the first officer. Russ went to the door and opened it a few inches, then returned to the window and watched. Ashes had gotten onto his hands, and he rubbed them on his pants. He wished he'd changed into jeans, but in a minute they'd be here. The officers walked toward the main stairwell, and Russ kept his eyes on them until they were out of view from his window. Another thirty seconds and they'd be in his apartment.

The kick came so hard that it slammed the door against the opposite wall, the kind of thoroughly unnecessary maneuver that often provoked his clients to draw guns. Russ slipped his hands into his pockets. He did not turn. Grabbing the fabric from the inside, he pulled them out to show that they were empty. "You don't need to kick my door," he said quietly. "I called you here, after all." Slowly, he held his hands to the sides, his fingers spread wide,

and turned to face them. Five, in all. Two in the doorway and three behind them. One, a man Russ knew from court; the others were strangers.

He placed his left wrist on top of his right and held them out for the cuffs. Clearly, they suspected a trick. The largest one darted at Russ, grabbing his arms. None of the others lowered their weapons until the handcuffs clicked shut. They turned him around, shoving his arms at the window, banging his knuckles, and kicked his legs apart. Frisking him, they pulled his wallet from his back pocket and tossed it to the carpet. The *Miranda* rights were oddly reassuring, like a rune. He looked at the police cars, the parking lot, the canal alongside his complex.

“Assault? Brandishing a firearm?” he asked the officer who’d been left to guard him while the others searched his apartment.

“What?”

“What charge am I being held on?”

The officer made a snorting sound. “Murder.”

“Murder,” Russ repeated. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. Harris. Oh, God. “What happened? It—it said he’d be fine.”

The officer ignored him and thumbed through Russ’s wallet.

Against his face, the glass was cool. He tapped the window with his pinky. From where he was standing he could see the canal, could almost make out the slow brown trickle of water at the bottom.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Her head was heavy from crying all day. It throbbed in the back, on both sides of her medulla, and her face felt bruised beneath her eyes. Pulmonary embolism. Rika repeated the syllables now, whispering them. Wretched vocabulary, ugly and misshapen. A clot that forms and breaks off of the wall of a vein and is carried to the lung's arteries, where it lodges, blocking the bloodstream, according to her expanded medical dictionary. The hospital had explained this when she'd called them at six in the morning, trying to decide whether to go to work or back to the hospital to wait for Dmitri to wake up, and it had been on the news later that morning, then again in the evening, alongside a headshot of Russ. Dmitri had been gone for two hours before she'd even found out.

On television, the results were coming in. Numbers ticked across the screen in sans serif that seemed retrofitted to the occasion, terse and official. A woman's voice read the names of towns, the percentages of votes. The coverage spanned eight counties. There was a great deal to tick through and Rika was wracked and drained. She hadn't gone to work, hadn't called a sub, and the phone had been ringing all day, police and reporters and Madison High and she hadn't answered or called anyone back.

Light from the television flickered across her hands. It was ten-thirty and all the lamps were off. Ruby had hugged her, asked if she was going to bed, and Rika had said she wasn't. She needed the results, the numbers, to clarify and enlighten. They were the sole remaining tension, the only thing she did not know. Thousands of digits had passed across the screen, but none yet for Ellis. For smaller cities, they didn't keep running tallies like they did for Stockton and Sacramento.

In the dim, Rika's fingers looked like spires. So thin, this connection to others, to the world. She gripped her wrist all the way around, then opened and closed her hand, making a fist, releasing it, making another, releasing it. Her veins pushed upward like mountains growing. She released it and her wrist flattened back to a plain.

She wrapped her arms around herself and sunk her head to her chest, trying to conjure the feel of him. Light moved in shadows against her eyelids. For an instant, she felt her head against his shoulder, smelled his chalk and Old Spice. She opened her eyes and cried. Throughout the day, it had gotten so that she no longer tried to stop it, so that Ruby no longer tried to say much. When it came, she let it gut her. Pain collected in her temple. She

saw the future; there was nothing left but the especial hollow of missing something she'd never really had.

The phone rang and she didn't move. Albert. Through the machine's static, his voice sounded broken. She thought of getting up, but did not. He was checking on her, he said. He wanted her to come to the Pint Club. She didn't move, just closed her eyes and wished she could sleep, yet didn't want to wake up again.

The alphabet of measures and candidates cycled again. Dublin, Fremont, Fresno, then Ellis's were up at last, in gold, which indicated that they were final. Measure 36 had passed, whatever it was, and so had Measure 12, something related to farming. Measure 21, allocating money for structural improvements to Madison High, had failed. The numbers came up far more slowly than was necessary to read them. She leaned forward, squeezing her tissue. The mayor had run unopposed. The mayor pro tem was still the mayor pro tem, by fifty-two percent. And for City Council, the dentist—eighty-one percent, the athletic director—ninety percent, and James Bannister, sixty-three percent.

Rika rose, switched off the television, and sat in the dark. She'd needed to know, but it didn't matter. Had Bannister lost, she would not have felt vindicated, would not have genuflected in awe at the power of Dmitri's sacrifice. Sacrifice was not the point. She had no illusions. He had not given his life for Ellis; he had given it for Russ Dillinger and his dark schemes, or for some idea Dmitri had held about himself. Rika knew only that she did not know anything, except that the point—the only point—was life, and that life was gone.

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Ruby stood over her in a long skirt and fitted sweater, pearls around her throat. "I'm just afraid that if you don't, you'll end up regretting it."

Rika shook her head. "I won't."

"You could stand in back with me. That way, we could leave if you needed to."

"Thanks, but no."

"Either way," said Ruby, "No one would blame you."

"No one knows but you. There's nothing to blame me for."

"Is it your plan to sit in the recliner all day?"

"What would people think if they saw me there, losing it?"

“They’d think you were sad, which seems perfectly natural to me.”

“You look nice.”

“The last time I wore this was to Craig’s.”

When Ruby was gone, Rika went to her room and sat on her bed with the door locked, like a child. She couldn’t go. She opened her desk drawer and took out the box of papers she was compiling. For the past two days, she hadn’t gone to work; instead, she’d gone to the library and found out everything she could about Zone Three bullet wounds and pulmonary embolisms. Necessary, but deeply unsatisfying. Gunshot vocabulary was endless: perforating, penetrating, keyhole lesion, hollow point. She clipped out newspaper articles about the shooting, picked out the vocabulary, did index searches in forensic and medical journals. She needed to get closer to his body.

Going through the papers, Rika longed for more. She had no pictures, no letters, just books he’d loaned her and his note, “Packed a suitcase. Love.” She craved notepads and sweat socks, ballpoint pen refills, mad scribbles, half-used tubes of toothpaste.

The Ford was still parked in front of Ruby’s, and Rika hadn’t driven it. Eventually, she’d take it to his house—to Becky’s—park it in front, leave his keys in the mailbox.

Leafing through the papers, she cried. The past few days, it had all caved in, not just the shock of losing him, but of the months, too, the years she’d have without him, Sunday mornings they might have spent in bed, private guilts and urges they might have confided.

She hoped it would be a closed casket. He wouldn’t want a thousand people staring at his neck, a mortician caking him with make-up so everyone could pretend he hadn’t been shot. Wouldn’t he rather be scattered in an alfalfa field or the San Joaquin River? But both his parents were buried in the Ellis cemetery, and maybe he’d wanted that. Maybe he wouldn’t have cared.

Tears burned her eyes, and she cleared her throat and read her papers. She’d memorized most of the facts, but it was reassuring to see figures resurface in multiple places, to note citation discrepancies and small variations. If she could wrap her brain around its caveats, she felt that in some vital way, she could dislodge the bullet, detect the clot ahead of time. She would learn that scientifically, it couldn’t have happened. Had it formed in his legs? Probably not, since he hadn’t been immobile for long. His neck, then—where the trauma had been. But then, wouldn’t the clot have traveled to his brain, not his heart or lungs? She didn’t know. She read intently, as if preparing for surgery. Diabetes did not

seem to be an aggravating factor, and smoking wasn't listed, either, though she supposed it was; smoking seemed to be an aggravating factor for everything.

More than half a million deaths each year. The breath quickened, the skin turned blue. Detected early, a pulmonary embolism could be stopped. They were extremely difficult to detect, and undetected, a third of patients died. Gunshot wounds made the body especially vulnerable. Infection could set in, septic shock. The real battle for life was not in dangerous streets or beneath freeway overpasses; it was in lily-white hospital beds under bright filtered light, the scrubbed hands of doctors.

Had his neck veins swollen? Had his pulse hummed fast and weak? She'd never know. The human body deserved to be hated for its vulnerabilities. It didn't work logically. Small, weak vessels for uncertain souls. Like something Dmitri would say.

She lay on her bed and stared at her frosted cake ceiling and the picture of the train. What would happen to her? Spitting from the train in Italy, she'd thought: this is it— independence, no ties. But now all she wanted was faith and commitment. Where did Buddhist souls end up? She'd read a poem once that said that everyone ended up exactly where they thought they would. Jews and Christians in heaven, Hindus reincarnated, et cetera. The thought pleased her. She thought of converting, following him.

The mentor meeting at Lizzie's had been their first real conversation. She thought of how he'd shown up late, bundled in too many clothes, and tried to pay for her doppio. He'd told her later that he'd loved her even then, that he'd loved her the day his truck had broken down.

She stacked the articles by type: newspaper, journal, magazine, photocopies from books, then sorted them according to topic: gunshots, pulmonary embolisms, complications of surgery, neck injuries generally. Tomorrow she'd head back to the library and scour the shelves for more. The journals she'd ordered from the Stockton branch might be in. Carefully, she set the stacks into the box, in order of ascending relevance, and slid the box back under her bed. In the bathroom, she took three Tylenols with water and returned to the recliner. She turned on the television and muted the volume.

An hour and a half later, when Ruby got home, Rika was still in the chair. "Was it an open casket?" she asked right away.

"Closed."

"Good."

Ruby's eyeliner was streaked, a crumpled tissue stuffed into her breast pocket.

"Why?"

"Mae and Gerard had open caskets. When I think about them now, that's the first way I remember them. Jicama-skinned. They put make-up on Mae. Mae never wore make-up."

Squeezing Rika's shoulder on her way past, Ruby switched off the television and sat on the couch. "I'd rather be cremated," she said.

"Me too. Make sure I'm dead, scatter me someplace with a view."

"Exactly." Ruby unhooked her string of pearls. "It was a wonderful service."

"Good."

"Half of Madison High's alumni must have been there. They had it at St. Bernard's. It's the biggest church in town, and there still wasn't enough room."

His childhood church. "Standing room only?"

"They even had people in the aisles. Current students, former students. People who'd helped you guys with the campaign. The fire marshal was there and he didn't say a word."

"Did many people talk?"

"His students. And Meg. And someone else who taught with him."

"Benji Laida?"

"That sounds right. Asian man, funny teeth?"

Rika nodded.

"I met Albert. He said he recognized me from the debate."

"He admired what you did there. I forgot to tell you."

"He's worried about you."

Rika shrugged.

"He said to tell you they're still having that party tomorrow."

"We lost the election."

"They're having it anyway. As a celebration of Dmitri—Albert's words. He said everyone's coming and to tell you they're not giving up because of the election. He said the fight for Ellis was just starting. He said Dmitri made him realize that."

"Their fights won't make them feel better."

"They might."

Ruby went into the bathroom and ran the water. When she came back out, the make-up was gone from around her eyes. "I'm going to the party," Ruby said. "And you're my guest."

A fatigued ache had crept into Rika's cheeks since she'd taken the Tylenol. Her stomach and bread-loaf arms felt swollen. "No."

"Yes, I am," Ruby said. "We're leaving at eight. I'll be home from work at six-thirty. You'll make dinner for both of us, and when I get home we'll eat it. Then we'll change clothes, then we'll leave for the party."

"No."

"You'll drive us there in Dmitri's truck. On the way back, we'll drop it off at his house. From there, we'll walk home."

"I don't think so."

Ruby went into her bedroom and closed the door. After a minute, the shower water started.

For three days, Rika hadn't gone to work. Johnny Bannister had left a message Tuesday asking where she was, then an apologetic one later that day, seeing if she was all right. On Wednesday, he asked her to call and let him know when she'd be in. Then today—Thursday—he'd called and explained that he understood it was difficult, since Dmitri had been her mentor. He'd have a sub for her until Monday.

In her room, Rika spent the next four hours trying to grade. If she went back, her students would make her think of him. She could gather her things, purge this, move ahead. She missed him desperately, violently, and took more Tylenol, then Pepto Bismol, Alka-Seltzer, Tums.

Late that evening, the doorbell rang, and a few moments later, Ruby knocked on Rika's door. "I looked through the peephole. It's for you."

"Can you say I'm not here?"

"Not in this instance."

"Tell Albert I don't feel like talking to anyone."

"It's not Albert," Ruby said.

Rika swallowed, raising her head from the pillow. Her throat was scratchy. The virus would get her this time, and she didn't care. She stood. Her hands felt brittle, her feet uncertain. She didn't know whether she'd slept, and tried to remember the last time she'd

brushed her teeth—yesterday morning, maybe. In the living room, she blinked, startled by the brightness of the lamplight, and opened the door.

Jeans and a sweatshirt, muddy tennis shoes. Her hair was disheveled, pulled behind her head, but several strands had fallen around her face, caked white with old gel or hairspray.

“Becky,” Rika said, frozen.

“Hello.”

“Come in.”

Looking down and seeing that Rika was in socks, Becky slipped off her shoes and stepped inside. “Thanks,” she said, looking around. “For all those years we were friends with the Phyllises at church, I don’t think I’ve ever been here. Is Ruby around?”

Rika didn’t have to look. “She’s in her bedroom, curled up with a magazine. Want me to get her?”

Becky smiled timidly, shaking her head. The schoolteacher confidence had drained from her, and if she’d been wearing make-up, she’d cried it all off. After the funeral, she’d probably had a reception at their house. The little veins in her hands and forearms stood out, and she put each palm on its opposite shoulder, hugging herself as if she was freezing, though the heater was set to seventy-five.

“I’m so sorry,” Rika said, knowing Becky had heard it a thousand times.

She nodded. There was nothing else for Rika to say.

In the kitchen, Rika poured them each a glass of water and they sat opposite each other at the table. She looked even emptier than Rika felt, cut and drained, nothing left in her eyes. Still, perversely, Rika was jealous, and hated herself for being jealous, for thinking, *twenty-seven years*.

Becky shrugged, though neither of them had said anything. Was Rika supposed to hug her, pat her hand? She was numbly terrified that Becky had found out, but Rika knew she couldn’t have. She was here for the truck.

“Do you know why I came?” Becky asked.

She didn’t want to linger—she wanted in, she wanted out, and for this, Rika couldn’t blame her. After all, Rika hadn’t even done to the funeral—all Becky knew was that Rika had worked on the campaign. It probably looked heartless not to have gone. “Yes,” she said, and went to her bedroom to retrieve the keys from her desk drawer, wishing she’d pulled

herself together enough to scour the Ford for his remnants, even graded papers, folders of lecture notes. She came back in and set them on the kitchen table.

Becky placed her hand over the metal. "I had to look in the phone book to see where Ruby lived."

Rika sipped her water. She wanted Becky to leave, and yet did not. She was, at least, something of Dmitri, some connection, however thin.

"Isn't it strange, how some places in the world you can be friends with people and never even go over to their house? You can't help thinking it's probably not like that in India or China."

"It wasn't like that in Spain," Rika said. "But I don't know about anywhere else." Becky had assumed a position that suggested a willingness to talk, leaning forward, tapping her thumbnail distractedly against her cup. She saw that Becky chewed her nails. Rika wouldn't have guessed it.

"I've never been out of the U.S. Dmitri didn't like to travel. We went to New Mexico once, for one of his conferences. We made a vacation out of it."

Rika nodded.

"Paris," Becky read from her cup.

"Ruby got it there with Craig. They were fifty." Something in Becky's face made her continue, a certain eagerness. "Every five years, they did something that neither of them had ever done. Skiing, scuba diving. Once, they went to Hollywood and tried to get cast as extras."

"Romantic."

Becky was thinking of Dmitri now, looking down. Rika had prompted something, apparently. Swallowing the last of her water, she set the cup down with a clink, hoping it would suggest a finality that would make Becky think of leaving. She couldn't do this. She imagined Becky at the funeral—allowed, at least, to grieve openly, and felt another pang of jealousy. "Romantic, Dmitri was not," Becky said. "But I didn't care. Maybe he thought I did." She stared at the table, her hand tightening around the keys. "I loved him so much. And you—you did, too, didn't you?" She raised her eyes suddenly—she'd planned this sideswipe. "I have to know."

Rika wanted to agree. She wanted to admit everything, to hash it all out. I loved him, she'd say. I appreciated the parts about him you'd grown tired of. "We were close friends. He took me under his wing."

"But you were—more," Becky whispered. "Right?"

"No."

"I have to know."

Rika shook her head, hating herself and missing him, and understanding how Dmitri had loved his wife, the intensity in her face, her hard, set mouth. She sensed what he'd seen in her, what had brought them together and driven them apart.

"The man who killed him is a friend of our daughter. Before all this happened, he told Meg that Dmitri was having an affair with you. At first, I didn't believe it." She'd rehearsed this, Rika knew. The syllables were even and deliberate, as if she was reading it from an index card.

If there *had* been pictures, Becky would know for sure. But she'd come *here*, which meant she did not. "No."

"Please tell me."

"It's not true," Rika said. She had a flash of Dmitri in the alley, felt herself stroking his face.

"I knew it was true when you didn't come today," Becky said. Her face seemed to tremble, her lips drawing apart.

"No," Rika repeated, leaning to place a hand on Becky's shoulder. "We *were* really close. And I won't lie." She looked down, starting to convince herself. "I feel horrible saying this. I found him attractive. For the first week or so, I hoped something would happen. I'm sorry for ever thinking that. But it *didn't*, and it wouldn't have. Dmitri was committed to you."

Becky shook her head. "No, Rika, I found his suitcase."

She swallowed, rewriting everything. She shook her head "In his study, right? Under the futon?"

Becky was silent.

"Dmitri was planning a surprise trip. He told me it was getting tense between you."

"He *told* you that?"

This hurt her, Rika saw. Just *this* hurt her. “Yes. I’m sorry. He confided in me a lot. I confided in him. He wasn’t sure if you’d like him being close friends with a woman. We clicked. I told him everything.”

Becky studied Rika intently, pursing her lips. “Where were we going?”

“Fresno.”

“Fresno,” Becky repeated. Between them, the air seemed to still. Someone was barbecuing nearby, and the smell of meaty smoke came through the kitchen window. Rika turned her head. Outside, it was dark, and in the glass, she could see their reflections.

“He said he met you there. In a college seminar.”

Becky nodded.

“There was a restaurant. I can’t remember the name. Not a fancy place, but he said you guys used to go there when you wanted to celebrate. Greek, maybe?” Rika raised her eyebrows. *Please*. She’d exhausted her knowledge.

“The Athens Café,” Becky said.

“That was it. Friday he was taking you there for dinner. You’d stay overnight, then in the morning he was taking you on a walk through campus. He said he’d have to avoid the library, because it had been your main competition for his attention.”

“It was,” Becky said, chuckling delightedly. Her eyes were wet. “It *was*.”

Rika was speaking quickly now, for Becky and Dmitri both, reuniting them. “He said you needed to rediscover why you’d fallen in love. He loved you more every day. As time passed, it got harder to show you.”

Becky was crying openly. Rika reached to the counter for a napkin and handed it to her. In the window, the picture of their reflections was idyllic, a young woman handing an older one a tissue across a kitchen table.

“Thank you,” Becky said, getting up. “Thank you for telling me. I shouldn’t have doubted. I’m sorry for coming in and *accusing* you...”

Feeling deadened, Rika rose and hugged Dmitri’s wife. She smelled like a kind of lavender lotion Rika had used for a while but had never liked. Instead of moving toward the door, Becky lingered in the kitchen, looking around as if she’d just woken up. “How old are you, Rika?” she asked.

“Twenty-seven.”

“My daughter’s twenty-seven.”

"I know. A psychologist, isn't she?" Of course, she knew the details. She knew everything, and no one would know.

Becky nodded. "She's staying with me for a couple weeks. She works in Stockton. Maybe you could come over sometime. We could have dinner. Next week."

"I'd like that," Rika said, and they walked to the living room.

"Thank you, dear, for putting up with this visit. Truly."

"Don't apologize."

Becky slipped into her shoes. Keds. Rika had seen them by the door the first time she'd gone to Dmitri's house. Becky in the kitchen, paging through a catalog. Avocado green kitchen appliances. Becky lingered, fiddling with the key chains. "Yokuts Indians," she read from one of them. She turned over another. "Fresno State University, Class of Sixty-Nine." She giggled. "Did he ever tell you about the time we went to the concert out past Corral Hollow, on the Altamont Pass?"

"No."

She held up the key chain. "Same year. I was five months pregnant. The Rolling Stones arranged a concert—like a Woodstock for California. People came for hundreds of miles—the foothills were covered. The Flying Burrito Brothers were there, and Jefferson Airplane, Santana. It was about eight hundred degrees out and that's where Dmitri proposed to me, right smack in the middle of the Jefferson Airplane's first set." She smiled. "Don't cry—I'm sorry. I'm just finding it helps to talk to you. I'm babbling."

"No, you're not."

Becky wiped her eyes and tightened her ponytail. "Look, I hate that silly truck. Do you have a car?"

Rika shook her head.

"Why don't you keep it. I'd spend more to fix it than the couple hundred dollars it's worth." She worked the Ford's key from the chain and dropped it in Rika's palm. "I'll give you the papers when you come over. Dmitri... Dmitri didn't have many friends. A lot of people loved him, especially his students. But not a lot of friends. Thanks for being good to him."

"If there's anything I can do, call me." Rika closed her hand around the key.

Becky nodded and slipped on her shoes, stepping out.

Gently, Rika closed the door. She should have felt like a fraud. Instead, it felt like the first thing she'd done all week that made sense.

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Dropping a fistful of chopped onion into the pan, Rika wondered whether she should have used real butter. The recipe said nothing about margarine. No difference, probably. She stirred it, swallowing the bread she'd kept in her mouth while slicing the onion—she'd seen Mae do it to keep onions from making her cry. It had worked. Warming, the pan sizzled pleasantly. Rika had splurged on saffron rice, along with white wine, and she stirred these in with the onion, wiping a strand of hair from her forehead. Chicken simmered on the adjacent burner, with bell peppers, tomatoes, and two cups of chicken stock. Cooking was scientific and complicated, and she wondered how people managed who did it every day. Her cheeks still felt bruised and her temple throbbed, but for a moment, she was glad she was here, stirring and smelling.

Mumbling along to the syllables on the stereo, Rika turned back to the recipe book, *Authentic Spanish Cuisine—Madrid!* and contemplated “butterfly” as a verb applied to shrimp. The book had no index, and unable to decipher it, she peeled and deveined, then cut it into pieces and sprinkled it in with the chicken. The real challenge would be the mussels, which she hadn't expected to find, and had easily, at Safeway. Who used mussels? She turned on the oven light and looked in. After ten minutes, supposedly, they were going to open. The physics eluded her.

“It smells terrific in here.”

Rika jerked her head up from the cookbook. “Oh—God, you scared me.”

“Probably didn't hear me come in.”

She smiled weakly. “Sorry—you can turn that down.”

“That's okay. What is it?”

“The Jefferson Airplane. I got it today.” She'd already played it through twice, and the only song she recognized was “Volunteers,” which one of her professors had played in the Vietnam unit of her required modern history class.

“You're cooking.”

“You said I was making dinner. You're early.”

“What is it?”

“Paella. It’s Spanish.”

“Did you learn how to make it in Spain?”

Rika tapped the cookbook. “No. Just ate it a lot. We’ll see if it turns out.”

The oven timer dinged, and she knelt again, turning the light on and peering in. They were open—amazing. She took a potholder from the drawer and pulled out the pan. Cooking verbs were odd: blanch, glaze, julienne. She was supposed to “gently tuck” the mussels into the rice when it was finished.

“I’ll shower,” Ruby said.

“Perfect. Give me twenty minutes.”

Once the onions were limp, Rika drained the chicken stock into the rice, stirring. It almost smelled like Spain. “Somebody to Love” came on, and she listened hard to the words, imagining Dmitri standing with his pregnant future wife in the foothills. They’d be barefoot, holding hands, looking out at the dry expanse of the Valley, down Corral Hollow to the glass factory, bobbing their head to the music.

She missed him desperately. It hit her in waves, in stabs of longing. At the library, she’d cried when they said that her journals weren’t in, then again paging through cookbooks, thinking what it would have been like to take him to Spain.

By the time Ruby came out again, Rika had sprinkled on the peas and artichokes, secured the mussels into the rice, and set the table. “Yellow rice,” Ruby said.

“Is it? It’s saffron.”

“It looks amazing. This is what they eat in Spain?”

Rika nodded, scooping paella generously onto Ruby’s plate. “Often. It’s pretty popular. You’ve never been?”

Ruby shook her head, taking a bite. “I should go. My fortieth anniversary is coming up. Craig and I always promised each other that whoever lived longer would keep our tradition going.” She closed her eyes. “This is amazing.”

“It’s not as good as real Spanish paella.”

“I’m impressed.”

They talked as they ate. Ruby was triumphant about Bill Brandt’s latest exploits—his death penalty case had turned sour when the victim had waltzed in that afternoon, alive.

Ruby hadn't gone to the hearing, but had heard that Brandt flipped. He'd spent the rest of the day in his office with the door locked, not answering his phone.

When they'd finished eating, Rika went into the bathroom, undressed, and showered. The time she'd showered with Dmitri, he'd stood behind her, cupping her breasts in his hands, feeling her with his short fingers, his chewed nails. She'd shampooed his hair and soaped his body, lingering between his legs. Toweling off in her room, Rika stared at her train picture, then peeled it from the wall, gingerly removing the tape with her fingernails. She prodded the box of newspaper clippings and journal articles from beneath the bed with her foot, dropped the train on top, and slid the box back.

On the way to the Pint Club, Dmitri's truck smelled like smoke and hummus. A tape was grinding in the player, and Rika turned the volume up, catching the end of a Red Hot Chili Peppers song, then the opening chords to "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Strange, she'd never head him play it. She switched it off.

"Just so you know," Ruby said. "Russ Dillinger was arraigned today."

"What does that mean?"

"It's when they officially charge someone. They've charged him with second-degree murder."

"You're not involved, are you?"

"I explained I had a conflict of interest. The woman who's prosecuting now is wonderful. She'll call you in a couple days."

Rika nodded, stopping the truck in front of Hazel's. She set the parking brake, her old habit from always having driven a stick-shift. "I called Johnny," Rika said. "I told him Monday."

"Good for you."

The Pint Club was busier than Rika had ever seen it, as if the protesters had dropped their signs and marched inside. People talked loudly, reassuring themselves, veiling the place with a manic energy. Everyone seemed grimly determined to have a good time. They stood, not sat; sitting, perhaps, would have suggested low spirits, isolation. They needed to be in groups. Albert and Ian weren't pouring drinks, just pitchers, and Rika some people were drinking beer from wine glasses instead of pint glasses—they'd run out.

"I thought we'd be early," Ruby said, and took Rika's elbow, leading her to the bar.

Albert hugged them both. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't imagine how awful..." It took her a moment to realize he meant the shooting. "Let me know if there's anything I can do. What do you want to drink?"

Rika shook her head.

"Ruby?"

"Oh, I don't really drink beer."

"I'll start you with a River Breeze. My own recipe." He clinked ice into a glass and poured juices into the shaker, mixing, then slid it over. "On the house."

Ruby held the glass to eye level. She sipped cautiously. "Oh—it tastes like cranberry."

Rika touched her arm. "I'm going to talk to some people."

"Just let me know when you're ready. We can leave anytime."

A liquid fluidity churned in the place. People moved freely from group to group. She went to a corner in which Lizzie and Joe were arm in arm next to Hazel Price and Montgomery O'Brien, and they all stopped talking when she came over, and they hugged her and were silent, and she realized they had no idea what to say. She'd seen their friend die, and there were a thousand things they wanted to ask. They wanted details, insight, blood and comfort, and Rika sensed this, and for them, she talked. He'd saved her life and Ian's, she said. He'd fought for consciousness until the ambulance came. He was brave and optimistic. She went from group to group, hugging and shaking hands. They grew bold, leaning in, asking questions. Rika gave them what she could, and when there was nothing left, they told her stories. His prowess as an educator, his good humor and sturdy resolve. Rika found the stories depressing. Hoop Jam, the Bean Festival, the Mossdale Bridge, Holy Cross, bake sales, F. Scott Fitzgerald. She had the sensation she was shrinking. "There Must Be a Way," trolled cruelly from the speakers. Waning, she finally extracted herself, making her way toward Ruby and the door.

"Here."

She turned—Ian—and he hugged her hard and held out a glass of red vermouth, and since she hadn't had anything to drink, she took it.

"I missed you," he said.

"I went M.I.A."

Ian rubbed his scraggly beard. It looked like he'd tried to shave and had cut himself. "Me too. I just came back to Ellis a few hours ago."

"I can't believe we lost," she said more adamantly than she felt, knowing it was what Ian would want to hear.

"Albert's still going forward with everything."

"With what?" Her head was throbbing from the noise. She needed to cry, hide, regroup.

He waved a hand, all-inclusive, over the Pint Club. "There's so much *spirit*. He's talking about proposing an emergency measure to get the downtown designated as a historical site. Then it couldn't be rezoned. Dmitri thought of it. I found a note he'd written himself in one of his books."

"Maybe he was saving it in case we lost." She swirled the vermouth. Burn an effigy, he'd said. He'd hopscotched across the cobblestone, arms out like a child's.

"He loved you," Ian said.

She raised a hand. "Don't ever—"

"I won't. But he did." He raised one hand back to his head, and sighed. "What do you do when the bottom falls out of everything?"

Rika didn't answer.

"You'll read some things in the paper about me tomorrow, and they're true, and you can ask me about any of it."

So his secret, whatever it was, was out. Rika didn't care. She sensed that he wanted her to ask about it, and she didn't. The pieces still wouldn't match up. Nothing would be explained.

They stood, unspeaking, until Rika finished her drink. Everything felt loud. The door opened and more people crammed into the Pint Club. It was crowded, stuffy with life. Rika had to get out. "Excuse me," she said to Ian. "I'm taking off."

He nodded, hugging her again, flooding her nose with sweat and bourbon. Rika snaked through the mass of people and found Ruby at the bar, talking with Albert and Montgomery. "I'm ready," Rika told her.

Ruby nodded. She'd hardly touched her drink. "Did you hear what Albert wants to do?"

"The historical preservation."

“And picketing on the Greenlake site,” Ruby said.

She was desperate to leave. “That’s big.”

“I said to count us in.”

Rika bit her lip. Of course she’d do it. “Absolutely. Look, I need to go—I can come back for you, if you want.”

“I’ll take her home,” Albert said. “It’ll take that long for her to finish her drink. She’s racing evaporation.”

“Funny. What time do you close?” Ruby asked.

“Midnight.”

Ruby shrugged as if she didn’t go to bed every night at ten-thirty sharp. “Okay. Either way.”

Albert wiped the counter nonchalantly, smiling a little.

Outside, the cold was a relief. Tule fog was settling in over the railroad tracks, and Rika climbed into the Ford and drove toward Madison, past the Heinz factory and Leprino Cheese. Instead of heading home, she took a right on Linne. Greenlake was visible in her rear-view mirror, a dark sketch against the foothills, and at the creek where they’d let the lizard go, she turned right again. Owens-Brockway’s giant emission-release pipes came into view. Lucky Lager, she remembered. Triple gob-formers.

The parking lot was deserted. Rika rolled her windows down. On the crest of Patterson Pass, lights blinked from new houses. Stucco and video game consoles. She imagined Dmitri in the foothills, watching his high school girlfriend run in cross-country practice, then she closed her eyes and imagined the Valley filled with the Pacific Ocean, the currents sweeping in like wind. There was a quiet to it, to those lives on the hill. And to all the ones below it, through downtown and along the railroad tracks.

Chilled by the breeze, Rika rolled the windows partway up and opened the glove compartment. She found old lighters, unlabeled tapes, an empty Nilla Wafers wrapper. Half a hard pack of Lucky Strikes was wedged in the center console, and she took one out and smelled it. Reclining the seat, Rika lay back. She tried to recall the warmth of his skin, but there was only a string of stars now, splayed above the factory, puncture wounds in the still, quiet dark.