

THE SECRET HILLS

by

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ABSTRACT  
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*The Secret Hills* is a literary thriller. Kelly Murdoch is crestfallen when her sister Mara fails to attend her documentary premiere. Kelly visits Mara's apartment and finds evidence that no one has been there for weeks. A random shooting occurs across town at the Milwaukee County Zoo. Seven people die.

The zoo shooter, Ibrahim Rohani, had participated in one of Mara's PTSD studies. Kelly tracks down Rohani's friend Nick Miner, a fellow veteran who also participated in Mara's study. With Nick, Kelly drives to Colorado to confront Lorenzo Hills, an independently wealthy rancher who funded Mara's PTSD research. Despite (or perhaps because of) her suspicion that Mara had been romantically involved with Nick, Kelly sleeps with him. While on the road, Nick and Kelly evade an ambiguous agent they call The Patriot. Kelly and Nick search for Mara and Hills in Colorado. The Patriot reappears and abducts Kelly. Nick rescues Kelly and they flee into the mountains. While in pursuit, The Patriot's wheels are shot out and his truck goes over a cliff. Mara Murdoch appears.

Mara takes Nick and Kelly to an abandoned mining settlement called High Fork. The inhabitants – including the secretive Hills – are misfits, but unusually bright, inventive, and observant. With Nick’s help, Kelly learns that Mara’s work with a genetically-modified parasite has activated the “nirvana centers” in the brains of the High Fork residents – but the parasite sometimes activates other parts of the brain, areas associated with rage, aggression, and violence. The first symptom is insomnia, and Nick hasn’t slept for the past three nights...

It’s up to Kelly to save Nick, prevent Mara from distributing her genetically-modified parasite to every grocery store and municipal water supply in America, and heal the family that shattered when Kelly and Mara’s father committed suicide more than twenty years ago.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

## 1. GETTING STARTED: MOUNTAINS, GHOST TOWNS, GYPSIES, BUGS

After our wedding, my wife and I drove across Colorado to reach our honeymoon destination, a former mining settlement called Ouray that had used the local hot springs to reinvent itself as a resort town. The trip took seven or eight hours, and we listened to one of my wife's audio books while I drove. I don't remember the prose and the characters (including a former orphan turned police lieutenant named "Eve Dallas" and a hunky Irish Bruce Wayne of unlimited resources named only "Roarke") embraced type if not caricature, but the function of each scene in the plot's sequence seemed to me particularly clear, and cast into relief the conventions of the mystery genre. There is an unknown—whether a missing person or artifact or an unidentified murderer at large—and each scene finds the detective and the reader one step closer to its revelation, often through confrontations constructed as interviews. Without yet having tried to write a novel, I remember thinking: *I could probably write something like this.*

I would later encounter a book by Peter Brooks called *Enigmas of Identity*, where he suggests that detective fiction may be popular in part because it so clearly depicts "the very process of narrative plotting" (131). I'd read some Chandler and Hammett (and Graham Greene and Elliot Perlman and Donna Tartt), but didn't count myself a devoted fan of the mystery genre, nor had I watched many of the popular police procedural shows like *C.S.I.* or *Law and*

*Order*. My childhood and adolescent reading leaned toward science fiction and fantasy – Heinlein and Saberhagen, Douglas Adams and Roger Zelazny, with dollops of Twain and Dickens and Shakespeare – but my reading tastes since college veered toward the contemporary literary fiction. From Conrad and Hemingway, I found my way to Kerouac and the Beats. There was the summer of John Gardner, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass that turned into a strange winter reading John Hawkes. Undergraduate workshops introduced me to Flannery O’Connor, John Cheever, Raymond Carver, Barry Hannah, Mary Gaitskill, Robert Stone, Lorrie Moore, Richard Ford, and the rest of the workshop canon. As my wife and I traversed the Rocky Mountains on our way to Ouray, my bedside reading probably consisted of Aleksandar Hemon’s *The Lazarus Project*, Denis Johnson’s *Tree of Smoke*, or manuscripts that I was considering for publication with the independent literary press where I continue to serve as publisher and senior editor. My favorite writer at the time – the voice I most tried to imitate in my own writing – was probably Jonathan Franzen.

When my wife and I reached Ouray, our hotel’s night manager told us that we had arrived before the start of the summer season. Aside from a pack of wealthy Germans touring the United States on identical Harley-Davidsons, we were the only visitors. After the motorcycles roared to life the next morning and disappeared on the road to Durango, we had the little alpine village to ourselves. The notion of celebrating one’s honeymoon in near seclusion beneath snow-capped peaks sounds romantic in the abstract, but we learned quickly how

conspicuous it feels to be the only two people eating in any restaurant, drinking coffee in any café, or walking down any street. As the waiters, servers, and bartenders watched silently from their posts, it was perhaps partly out of self-consciousness that we began filling a little notebook with playful descriptions of our own mystery-solving sleuth: a girl named Kelly Murdoch who would never give up, no matter what. She would dislike coffee and love tea. She would be innocent and trusting compared to her closest friends. She would admire the movies of Hollywood's Golden Age, in particular the films of Mae West and Cary Grant. And when she decided to do something, she would not stop until it was done.

After hiking some trails, exploring an old mine, and soaking in a hot spring, my wife and I left Ouray a day earlier than we had planned, and without having concocted the problem that would launch the relentless Kelly Murdoch into action. By the time we'd arrived home in Fort Collins, the notebook that contained all of our ideas had disappeared.

Almost two years later, I prepared to begin my second semester of doctoral coursework at UW-Milwaukee. While driving home one night, I listened to an NPR interview with Karen Abbott, who'd just written a biography of Gypsy Rose Lee. I only half-listened as Abbott described the burlesque performer and captivating wit who'd been the inspiration for the musical *Gypsy* and once received a telegram from Eleanor Roosevelt reading "May your bare ass always be shining." From humble beginnings, Lee's notoriously monstrous stage mother

took Lee and her sister on the road, pitted them against each other, taught them to trust no one but her. Lee's sister became the actress June Havoc, and was the first to achieve fame. Lee's own fame later eclipsed her sister's, and their fierce sibling rivalry intensified. And it would never be resolved. When Abbott asked June Havoc (who died in 2010 at the age of 97) what kind of sister she'd been to Gypsy, Havoc responded: "I was never any kind of sister to her." My ears perked up. That sounded like the most horrible thing imaginable – to be in one's nineties, so near the end of life, and to confess such an irrevocable loss. Since Gypsy died in 1970, I imagined the terrible burden of guilt June may have been carrying for forty years. Crushing.

And so I remembered Kelly Murdoch, and imagined that she had an estranged sister. The trouble that launches Kelly into the role of detective would have to do with her sister, who I decided Kelly would love almost desperately despite her sister's seeming indifference. But what would be the cause of this indifference? Some form of trauma, probably – but what? And where in time would this story take place? Perhaps in the 1930s or 1940s, set during World War II during a period when Lee starred in several movies, produced a play and a musical revue, and wrote a pair of pulpy murder mysteries starring a fictionalized Gypsy Rose Lee. I considered trying to write a noir detective story, something like James Elroy's novelization of the infamous Black Dahlia murder. Maybe Kelly's sister would be found murdered, and Kelly would be driven to find the killer while she grappled with the fact that her sister's death meant she

might never find closure, or even fully understand the gulf that had always separated her from her sister. I made periodic notes while I finished the coursework for my doctorate. I still like the premise of this novel.

In the spring of 2012, a friend who knew I dote on my cat sent me an *Atlantic* article titled “How Your Cat Is Making You Crazy.” The article described the work of a Czech biologist named Jaroslav Flegr, who, according to the article, “began to suspect that a single-celled parasite in the protozoan family was subtly manipulating his personality, causing him to behave in strange, often self-destructive ways” (McAuliffe 36). The parasite, called *Toxoplasma gondii*, is commonly found in a cat’s litter box. Infection with toxoplasmosis can harm a human fetus – which is why pregnant women are often told to stay away from the litter box – but was until recently thought to otherwise have no measureable effect on humans. A third of the human population carries the parasite in its latent form, and as much as seventy percent of the population test positive for the parasite in some parts of the world (Zimmer 67).

For *T. gondii*, the cat is the “definitive host,” the site of its sexual reproduction. And the parasite has developed a remarkable skill to facilitate its delivery into the cat’s reproductive tract: mind control. If the parasite finds itself in a rodent or other intermediate host, it releases cysts in the brain that alter the creature’s “predator-induced response, thereby reducing the accompanying anxiety-related anticipatory defense reactions of a host to a predator” (Berday 1593). The parasite short-circuits the critter’s instinctual fear of its natural

predator – and more than that, it “appears to alter the rat’s perception of cat predation risk, in some cases turning their innate aversion into an imprudent attraction” (Berdoy 1591). When placed in a pen scented in four different areas with the rat’s own bedding, the scent of a cat, the scent of a rabbit, and a neutral area that had been treated with distilled water, the rats infected with *T. gondii* spent almost twice as much time in the cat-scented corner as the uninfected rats. It had become attracted to the thing that would kill it – but only the feline predator that would complete *T. gondii*’s life cycle. Rats remained cautious around the scent of other predators (Berenreiterová 1). *T. gondii*’s manipulation of its host is specific.

It turns out that this kind of parasitic mind control isn’t unique to *T. gondii*. In *Parasite Rex*, Carl Zimmer describes parasites that neuter crabs and trick them into nurturing the parasitic larvae growing on their undersides as if they were the crabs’ own egg sacks. There’s a parasitic wasp that changes how its favorite host, a tobacco hornworm, digests food, making energy more readily available to the wasp. A parasitic fungus that invades mustard plants in Colorado forces the plants to produce specialized leaves that lure bees, accomplishing sexual reproduction for the fungus as the bees fly from plant to plant. A fluke native to Europe and Asia moves from cows to snails to ants, where “they do some parasitic voodoo on their hosts. As the evening approaches and the air cools, the ants find themselves drawn away from their fellow ants on the ground and upward to the top of a blade of grass....Clamped to the tip of a

grass blade, the infected ant is likely to be devoured by a cow or some other grazer passing by" (87), wherein the fluke lives to adulthood and repeats the cycle.

Though humans aren't *T. gondii*'s definitive host, Dr. Jaroslav Flegr claims that toxoplasmosis has several measureable and gender-specific impacts on the human host's perceptions and behavior:

Compared with infected men, males who had the parasite were more introverted, suspicious, oblivious to other people's opinions of them, and inclined to disregard rules. Infected women, on the other hand, presented in exactly the opposite way: they were more outgoing, trusting, image-conscious, and rule-abiding than uninfected women. (McAuliffe 39)

Though most people infected with toxoplasmosis display almost no symptoms at all, says Flegr, the parasite is subtly manipulating how they experience and respond to fear and anxiety, making infected men more likely to be in car accidents because their fear response has been weakened. It may manipulate host hormone levels ("Sex-Dependent Toxoplasmosis" 427). It may activate mental illness or schizophrenia "in genetically susceptible people," or stimulate suicidal thoughts and behavior (McAuliffe 40, 43). "Guilt-proneness," according to one study, increases in both men and women affected with toxoplasmosis, predisposing a culture with high concentrations of the parasite to exhibit a more "masculine" tendency to eliminate uncertainty, generate rules, and enforce conformity (Lafferty 2750, 2753). Considering that the latent *T. gondii* brain cyst is

only slightly larger than the thickness of a strand in a spider's web, the parasite struck me as capable of some fairly heavy lifting.

## 2. EXISTENTIAL PROBLEMS: MODELS, MYSTERIES, AND RESEARCH

I wasn't nervous around my cat after reading about *T. gondii* and other parasites, but I had started to think of ways that I might build a light science-fiction element into Kelly Murdoch's adventure. I've long admired *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, the literary thriller written by Danish novelist Peter Høeg, and in particular I like how it incorporates some fictional, though plausible, science into its narrative bedrock. The story follows Smilla Jaspersen as she investigates the death of a little Greenlandic boy named who lived in her apartment building. Smilla, an isolated and disenfranchised scientist specializing in snow and ice, pursues her investigation from Copenhagen to an arctic ice cave. There the villains, scientists who would seem to pursue scientific discovery (or its laurels) no matter the potential cost to humanity, tend a meteor and the parasitic worm that either arrived with the meteor or was awoken by the inexplicable heat that emanates from it.

As the would-be villains, Mara and Hills have a plan that potentially threatens the peace and security of society. Whatever positive transformations of self may result from Mara's project to reengineer a strain of Toxo parasites (whether or not it actually works as she and Hills seem to believe), in some cases the result is a destructive anti-self. The public shooting at the Milwaukee County

Zoo near the beginning of the novel is allegedly perpetrated by such an unfortunate transformation. Kelly's heroic status in *The Secret Hills* arises in part from her attempt to prevent such a calamity.

When I had a sense of the fictional science that would help to motivate the conflict in *The Secret Hills*, I realized that either Mara or Kelly or both would likely be scientists. After doing some research at The Downer Theater to learn more about the work of an independent theater, I decided that Kelly would work in the world of film. I wanted her to have a specific context woven of her own goals and interests from which she would begin her search for Mara. She began as a cult film enthusiast and theater manager, but I eventually reshaped her character into a filmmaker and documentarian to create a pretext for creativity, analytical thinking, and a certain kind of investigative prowess. Making her a documentarian also makes her a chronicler and recorder, which is her position as narrator in *The Secret Hills*.

To learn more about what I thought might be Mara's work as a research neurobiologist, I went to Madison and toured the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the Waisman Center on the UW campus. Their brain imaging lab together with the Center's wellness- and compassion-based neuroscience research agenda (inspired by a charge from the Dalai Lama to the Center's director, Dr. Richard Davidson), became a model for what I would call the "Center for Awareness, Behavior, and Emotion" in *The Secret Hills*.

Despite the care with which Høeg develops the science of the fictional parasite in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, the story is essentially about Smilla's need to attain justice for Isaiah, the little Greenlandic boy with whom she'd come to believe she had a "comprehensive pact...not to leave him in a lurch, never, not even now" (Høeg 5). In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera claims that "making a character 'alive' means: getting to the bottom of his existential problem. Which in turn means: getting to the bottom of some situations, some motifs, even some words that shape him" (35). To "apprehend the self" in his novels, Kundera argues, is to grasp its "existential code" (29). This self-specific code, says Kundera, is made up of "key words" such as *body, soul, weakness, vertigo, idyll, fidelity, betrayal, music, darkness*, and "reveals itself progressively in the action, in situations" (29-30). The word "snow" appears more than fifty times in Høeg's first-person novel and the word "ice" appears more than a hundred times. It may be that Isaiah is the force that melts whatever it is inside Smilla that is cold, hard, brittle, unyielding, unaccommodating, and impervious.

In *The Secret Hills*, the word "sister" appears seventy-five times. Kelly searches for her sister, but she also wants to understand what it means to be a sister, and to have one. How are two such people the same, if at all? How different, and why might it matter? What are they to do with each other? What are their responsibilities to each other? And what might it mean to lose a sister? Or gain one who may have been lost?

There are many narratives that could accommodate these questions, but the protagonist in *The Secret Hills* seeks out and attempts to rescue someone. Very early in the story's development, this seemed the only shape for the story that I would try to tell. The structure of *Smilla's Sense of Snow* may have had something to do with it. Among the books I read in high school, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was probably the literary novel that impacted me most. Marlow's journey up the Congo River in search of Mr. Kurtz struck me as efficient in form and essentially dramatic in effect: there is a secret, and the main character undergoes a quest to learn it. While discovering the nature of this mystery, the protagonist reveals it to the reader. And I like that the journey to find someone in *Heart of Darkness* is also the journey to understand human nature, as all novels attempt in one form or another.

There were other novels that I reread and turned over in my mind while I worked on *The Secret Hills*. I admired the ways that Colson Whitehead juxtaposed metaphors of elevators and elevation against issues of race in his detective novel, *The Intuitionist*. The book constructs a speculative city that goes unnamed (though the reader should assume New York) where elevator inspectors fall into one of two schools – the Empiricists, who make their inspections based on instrument-verified measurements; and the Intuitionists, who employ an intuitive method of inspection involving visualization and attentive feeling. Racial integration remains a central issue in this society, and the protagonist, an Intuitionist named Lila Mae Watson, is the first black woman to

be an elevator inspector. To get to the bottom of a mysterious and disastrous elevator failure, Watson has to plunge into the secret history of the Intuitionist school and a theoretically perfect elevator that the school's founder called only "The Black Box," which he claimed would build the city of the future.

Ron Hansen's novel *Atticus* influenced my choice in *The Secret Hills* to use a protagonist's wounded love to motivate a journey in search of someone lost. Atticus Cody, a sixty-seven-year old rancher and oilman, goes to Mexico to retrieve the body of his son Scott, a forty-year old artist who's been troubled since the death of his mother in a car accident when he'd been a teenager. Scott had been at the wheel. At her funeral, an involuntary gesture encapsulates the complex grief and loss that shapes the love Atticus has for his son: "Scott fell apart with tears, his hands held up to his face through the funeral, fourteen black stitches above his eyebrow, a hard plastic neck brace on. Their hands happened to touch at the funeral and Atticus never forgave himself for sliding his hand away" (80). This is the same irreparable loss expressed by June Havoc when she claimed to have never been "any kind of sister" to Gypsy, and it's a loss that I tried to explore in *The Secret Hills* – in both the loss Kelly tries to repair in her relationship with Mara and the loss they both endured when their father committed suicide.

In *A Stay Against Confusion*, Hansen addresses the notion of writing as a sacrament. Saint Jerome, Hansen tells us, used the Latin *sacramentum* in place of the Greek *mysterion* when translating the Bible (1). Perhaps writing is an act of

initiation at the same time that it acknowledges and demarcates important mysteries, even if it fails to unravel them. The mystery of human nature in *Atticus* that stands demarcated if not fully unraveled (as opposed to the mystery of human events, which are unraveled) is the love of Atticus for his son, which Hansen modeled on the love of father for son in the Biblical parable of the prodigal son. In the story, says Hansen, “it’s the father who’s most truly excessive, having far more love and forgiveness than his son feels he deserves” (12). Kelly’s enduring love for her sister provides the desire that propels the novel’s narrative – it is this love, or Kelly’s desire that it be reciprocated or contextualized, that leads Kelly from one action to another – but I also wanted Kelly’s love for her sister to be excessive, more than Mara deserves, and potentially the central mystery (and/or miracle, and/or tragedy) in the novel.

The other mystery (and/or miracle, and/or tragedy) at the thematic heart of *The Secret Hills* is the location and nature of selfhood. To frame his book-length exploration of individual identity (“at once unjustified and, to us, crucially important”), Peter Brooks relates in *Enigmas of Identity* Sartre’s allegory for locating authenticity in one’s life: it is as if one has been caught ticketless on a train without any money and, as the dubious conductor frowns, one provides explanations that couldn’t possibly be substantiated. For instance, one is required at the final destination for “reasons that concerned France and all mankind” (1). Later in the book, Brooks suggests via Freud that the final destination itself may be a cause for confusion. If we all believe at least unconsciously that we are

immortal, as Freud has argued, then “there is no place to stand from which we can view our own lives” (*Enigmas* 150). We may lack the critical perspective necessary to narrate our experience and form a stable identity within the narrative.

Most of us have many frames with which we understand our experience, and we multiply our complementary roles within the many narratives that result, weaving them together into a tapestry of personal identity that’s stable more days than not. So the character in *The Secret Hills* most concerned with the problem of identity would likely be neurotic. I first assigned this neurosis to Kelly’s sister, but while shaping the novel decided that it might be wise if Mara’s world-threatening plot had a co-sponsor that she might choose to abandon near the story’s conclusion. The title of *The Secret Hills* refers to a man, Lorenzo Hills, and the secret self he imagines may be buried somewhere inside him. He imagines an authentic and formerly unified self that might be recovered and reinstated in place of some other fragmented and alienated self. The realization of a certain version of this self – one that is attentive, compassionate, aware, enlightened – is the project of Mara’s genetically-engineered Toxo parasites, and one supposes that Hills may have been an early partner in her research, financially at least.

Hills is a character inspired by two people that strike me as fascinating, if remarkably strange: Larry Hillblom, founder of DHL, the first shipping company to challenge the United States postal service, blazing the trail for such other

shippers as UPS and FedEx; and John McAfee, inventor of the first commercial anti-virus software. McAfee fled the pseudo-military compound he'd built in Belize when the authorities accused him of murdering his neighbor – charges McAfee claims were fabricated after he refused to submit to some form of extortion. Hillblom controlled his shipping empire from similarly unconventional environs in Saipan. He disappeared in 1995 when his seaplane crashed. The bodies of the pilot and another passenger were recovered, but Hillblom's remains have never been found. His \$200-million estate was recently divided between four or five illegitimate children sired by Hillblom with as many underage Saipanese prostitutes. Hillblom and McAfee both marshalled their creative energies to achieve complex and productive goals, despite and probably partly because of what we might describe generously as neurotic and self-destructive tendencies.

I tried to use these models as inspiration to construct a Kurtz-like character who may be capable of productive and prodigious contributions to society – “There was the making of an immense success,” says Kurtz's cousin, and “He was a universal genius” (122) – but loses perspective and falls down a megalomaniacal rabbit hole, never to emerge. Finally, then, I created a double-Kurtz in Hills and Mara so that at the end I could divide them, redeeming Mara and fulfilling Kelly's mission while leaving Hills to act as a final sacrifice.

### 3. (CON)STRUCTURE: DRAWING A MAP, LOCATING A POSITION

While outlining the structure of the novel, I planned for three sections corresponding to the three acts of a play or film. Each act takes place in distinct locales with their own landscapes. The first section takes place in Milwaukee, where Kelly's roles as filmmaker and documentarian are established at the Midwest Film Festival, the shooting occurs at the Milwaukee County Zoo, and it becomes apparent that Mara is missing and something is wrong. The second act follows Kelly and Nick on the road to Colorado, where they have to locate Mara. The third act takes place in High Fork, the ghost town and former mining settlement where Mara has tested her strain of Toxo on a geographically-controlled population.

Around the time that I reached the third act of the novel, I was concerned that I'd become overly focused on plot mechanics at the cost of Kelly's more discursive interior life. I'd also just met Dr. Anthony Greene, a neuropsychologist whose work was interested particularly in the hippocampus. At our first meeting, he talked about the role of the hippocampus in epileptic seizures, and I recalled Lauren Slater's fictional memoir, *Lying*, where she attributes her lifelong difficulties with mental health to a fictional epilepsy. It occurred to me that Mara should be epileptic as well. Up until then, I'd had only a vague sense of Mara's abiding sense of loss and the desperation that eventually led to the science-fiction element of *The Secret Hills*, the genetically engineered parasite that would manufacture a nirvana-like consciousness in those it infected. But it occurred to

me that epilepsy would create a more concrete manifestation for her anxiety and feelings of being out of control, much as the condition did for Slater in her book. *Lying* was also written in a voice that projected a kind of strength and vulnerability that I'd always associated with Kelly's character.

After I finished, I checked the library to see what else of Lauren Slater's we had on the shelves, and found a collection to which she'd contributed called *Prozac as a Way of Life*, edited by Tod Chambers and Carl Elliott. The essays in their collection offered me a new way of thinking about what Mara and Hills wanted: to experience a sense of authenticity that had evaded them, to map the precise shape and location of the self and in doing so enhance it, find its path, know its purpose. I found more books written or edited by Elliott—*Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream*, and *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*—as well as Dr. Peter D. Kramer's *Listening to Prozac*. This reading chain helped me think about the ethical questions and implications surrounding Mara's research (and the big-pharm-motivated attempts of our contemporary culture) to control the feelings we experience and the selves that are constructed in some part from these emotional states, their patterns, and the lives, relationships, and societies that result.

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## THE SECRET HILLS

Before the evening was done, seven would be dead in another mass shooting that defied explanation. But while I sat in the orchestra pit next to the organist's box awaiting the premiere of my first feature-length film, I checked my eye makeup in a compact mirror. And then I checked my phone. No texts from Mara, no voicemails, no calls. I wasn't surprised that my sister hadn't come to see my documentary about schoolchildren, but I was surprised at how angry I felt that she hadn't even bothered to call. She really didn't care.

The auditorium was more than three-quarters full and the mood was festive. People circulated across the aisles and turned around in their seats to speak with friends in the rows behind them. The Garnet was one of Milwaukee's oldest theaters, and still had the trappings of a genuine movie palace – a pastoral mural on the ceiling framed by hundreds of hand-painted ceramic tiles, bas-reliefs of Greek gods hanging in lighted wall niches, elevated theater boxes, a crown-style chandelier that Michael bought from an antiques dealer in Montreal.

Michael stood near the bottom of the far aisle, his hands folded in front of him, nodding politely while a drunk actress from Minneapolis gestured enthusiastically, prompting her comrades to rock back and forth with laughter. Michael checked his watch and made a farewell gesture before bounding up four carpeted steps to the narrow stage. He strode to the microphone stand at center,

red curtain fluttering behind him, then unfastened the mike and signaled to the projection booth. The music faded and the house lights dimmed.

“Welcome, everyone, to the second big day of the Midwest Film Festival.” Michael smiled as the auditorium responded with a joyous uproar, which he calmed by patting the air in front of him. “It’s a lot of fun, and it’s important that we gather like this to celebrate the work of actors, directors, writers, and other artists working here in the Midwest. The Garnet is proud to be a part of it. And I’m especially proud tonight to introduce the director of *The Mill Street Millions*, Kelly Murdoch, a personal friend and a talented young filmmaker who I’d like to invite to the stage—”

Michael finished his introduction and my heart rate jumped as I made my way up the steps to the stage. He stepped back as I turned to face the audience, a dark mass that smiled expectantly. Stage lights blinded me to any detail more specific than raw movement—the resettling of wide shoulders, a hand shooting up to the temples to rearrange a stray hair.

“This is my dream,” I said, “to make a movie and share it with others. And more than that, to honor and recognize those who helped me make the best film I could have made. The fine teachers who taught me filmmaking at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee—” There was an outburst mid-auditorium, garbled yelling, and then an isolated pocket of laughter. I placed a hand across my brow as if surveying the horizon, which improved my vision not at all.

Laughter spread across the crowd, giving me an extra thirty seconds to talk before they'd get restless.

"I'd like to thank Michael Markovic for his kind words, his encouragement all these years, and for being the most supportive boss and best friend a girl could ask for." I laughed as Michael gallantly handed me his silk kerchief. More laughter: another thirty seconds.

"And I'd like to thank you all for coming, and for making tonight so much fun." Applause, whistling. "Finally, I'd like to thank the most important people of all – those students and teachers at the Mill Street School here in Milwaukee who opened their classrooms and lives while we worked on this movie together. Please give a warm round of applause to the former Mill Street School students and their teachers who are here with us tonight."

There was a shot of movement; a body rose straight up, and then a howl of surprise. I stepped back and squinted, leaning my head to one shoulder as I tried to see what was happening. Michael pointed to the projection booth and the lights came up, revealing eighteen-year-old Elijah Greene extricating himself from the row behind him, where he'd fallen after trying to stand on his chair.

"Mill Street teachers and students," I said, diverting attention from the pratfall, "please stand and take a bow before we begin."

Nine students, a scattering of parents, and three Mill Street teachers stood and gratefully received their applause. Then the lights fell, the projector beam

awoke near the top of the rear wall, and I climbed down from the stage as the story began.

A classroom appeared on the screen, brick walls painted a faded yellow. Thirty-two desks formed four rows, gray tables attached to metal chairs. The camera moved slowly down the center aisle, past the empty desks to the rear windows. Tree branches wavered out of focus as the center window filled with light then dissolved into blue sky. Girls began to sing somewhere off-camera, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of a rope beating the asphalt while feet jumped and skipped, avoiding the swinging line by millimeters, microseconds.

Loud applause followed on top of the credits. Michael took the stage and announced a post-screening discussion at a bar across the street, and then waved me up for another burst of applause stoked higher by the arrival of the six former Mill Street students who had been in the audience. Elijah raised his hands to encourage more noise, but the other five were blushing and shy to receive so much attention. I suppose I was, too, because I pulled Michael into a closing hug and started moving the entire herd to the steps and out of the stage lights.

#

“That seemed to go well,” Michael said after he’d placed his order with the bartender. He popped the collar on my jean jacket. “Why the hell are you so glum?”

“I thought my sister might come tonight,” I said, returning my collar to its unpopped position. “She didn’t.”

On the other side of the room, a group of college kids passed a glass boot filled with beer. As they took turns trying to empty it, something happened on the basketball game playing on the television, causing the whole table to explode with a shout of celebration. In the excitement, the glass boot fell to the floor and shattered. The bartender hurried around the bar as one of the more prolific boot-drinkers attempted to remove one of the decorative beer steins that hung from the wall.

“This used to be such a nice place,” Michael said. “Hold on—you have a sister?”

“Yeah, an older sister,” I said. “I’m not even sure why I’m so upset she didn’t come. It was never going to happen. I just got myself worked up about it.”

“Why have you never told me you had a sister?” Michael asked.

“We haven’t been close since we were kids,” I said. “Our dad died when we were young, and Mara took it badly. We both did. But I thought she might come across town to see my premiere. It seems like one of those socially-mandated show-up occasions, right?”

“Totally a show-up deal,” said Michael. “And she lives in Milwaukee?”

“She does research for a lab at the medical college.”

“We’ve been best friends for five years and you never bother to mention you have an older sister on the other side of town?” Michael accepted his

cranberry and vodka from the bartender, whose eyeballs were glued to the unruly basketball fans. "You've met my sister, my brothers, probably half my cousins. What other secrets are you hiding?"

"Mara did her PhD at Berkeley and stayed in California after she graduated," I said, squeezing the lime wedge into my gin and tonic. "She came back to Wisconsin last year, but left right away for field research in Tibet. I helped her pack her things into storage and haven't seen her since."

"So your sister Mara is doing medical research in Tibet?"

"Neurology research," I said. "But she got back months ago."

"Keep a tab open?" asked the bartender.

"Kelly Murdoch," Michael said, reaching for his wallet. "A riddle wrapped in a sister inside a Tibetan yurt."

"But perhaps there is a key," I said, handing the bartender my card. "I'll get the drinks."

#

A chandelier made of antlers cast amber light throughout the back room reserved for special events and overflow seating. A pair of stained-glass windows flanked a stuffed pheasant posed in mid-flight. Six people waited for us at the blond wood discussion table, holding beers and cocktails and chatting

amicably. In a wire card holder at the center of our table stood the usual signage:

“Great Film Discussions Start Here!”

“You guys enjoying the Midwest Film Festival?” I asked, taking a seat.

There were smiles and nods of agreement; one overly-enthusiastic “Hell, yeah!”

“Thanks for joining us, Kelly,” Michael said, straightening his tie. “Let’s get to know everyone.”

Our discussion group included three college girls; a mother of two in her mid-forties; a boy in a snowboarding jacket who looked barely old enough to be in the bar; and a bald man named Ron whose close-trimmed white beard, aquiline nose, and khaki sun hat suggested a Roman senator in disguise.

“Could you tell us how *The Mill Street Millions* began?” Michael asked.

“I’d just finished *Badger State*,” I said, “which was about education funding and politics, and I wanted to do something that looked at actual classrooms. Then those ads started to run accusing public school teachers of bilking the taxpayers of ‘millions and millions.’ So I looked for a school that would let me interview some teachers and get a better sense of what all those millions really looked like. The Mill Street School was good enough to invite me to film there.”

“Were you nervous about the neighborhood?” asked Ron.

“I knew there was crime and poverty in Benjamin Heights,” I said. “But *The Mill Street Millions* is about the teachers and students who are living and working without a lot of resources that some of us take for granted.”

I was about to say something about my visit to an apartment where one of the Mill Street teachers lived with her infirm mother, but a slim redhead breezed into the room wearing a metallic blue trench coat.

“Kelly Murdoch,” she said, dropping her white handbag on the table in front of me and outstretching her arms. “Give us a hug, you dirty hooker!”

“Summer Cole,” I said, rising to embrace her. Michael’s expression contorted as he attempted to communicate several urgent questions to me telepathically.

“Summer and I were classmates at film school,” I explained to the table.

“Before we were best friends,” Summer said, jabbing me in the shoulder.

Summer and I had never been friends, but while we’d been in school she imagined that we were locked in ruthless competition. I never once encouraged this illusion.

“We were talking about *The Mill Street Millions*,” I said.

Summer sat in my chair. “Is that the movie you were making in Professor Grossen’s capstone course?” she asked, unraveling a lemon-colored scarf. “Did it really take you six years to finish it?”

This prompted another series of incredulous distress signals from Michael.

I sucked a layer off my gin and leaned against a nearby table. "I shot almost thirty hours of footage during the labor protests in Madison for that capstone course with Grossen. It became a short film called *Badger State*."

"We screened it at the Midwest Film Festival a few years ago," Michael said, drumming his fingernails impatiently on the tabletop. "It was *electric*."

"Naturally," said Summer. "Tell me more about this latest film."

"You didn't see it?" Michael asked.

"I just got in from L.A.," Summer said. "The feature I did with Gil Van Der Plueg's production company is headlining tomorrow night, but I wanted to stop by and say hi."

"You did a movie with Gil Van Der Plueg?" asked Sarah, the mother of two. "I had the worst crush on him when I was in college!"

"Oh, everyone did," Summer assured her.

Michael took a deep breath. "Does anyone have a question about Kelly's film?"

"I'll be *right back*," said Summer. "I just have to grab a quick drinky, but please don't wait on me or anything. I'll be *right back*."

"Why don't you sit down, Kelly?" Michael gestured to my former chair. "It looks like a seat's opened up."

The snowboarder raised his Budweiser. "Did you always want to make documentary movies? Or did you start out wanting to make like real movies?"

We all laughed.

“My dad was a big fan of real movies,” I said. “We watched *The Lemon Drop Kid* on Christmas Eve and *Gremlins* on Christmas Day. We had special birthday movies. My dad used to say that movies are like dreams you can see when you were awake. That sounded like magic when I heard it as a kid. It made me want to make those dreams when I grew up.”

“Assuming you might be a grownup soon,” said Michael, “what sort of dream is *The Mill Street Millions*? Does it have a theme?”

“It probably has several themes,” I said, considering further. “I think of something Congressman Gabel said when he was asked about the public schools that would close in response to the governor’s proposed state budget. He said ‘You can’t save them all.’ The theme of *Millions* is probably a response to this sort of thinking. *Maybe you can save them all*. It might even argue: *You are morally obligated to save them all*.”

Summer burst into the entranceway, her mouth open and eyes wide.

“Why don’t you join us?” Michael asked. “Kelly was just saying—”

“There’s been a shooting,” Summer said. “Just now, in Milwaukee!”

The table exchanged confused expressions.

“Outside?” asked Ron, donning his sun hat.

“It’s on the TV,” said Summer, darting back to the other room.

We gathered our belongings and followed her into the main barroom, where a television hung on the south wall above a pool table. The bartender had cut the jukebox and was increasing the volume on a live news report. A female

reporter provided voiceover as the camera surveyed onlookers and emergency workers striding across the screen in front of a parking lot lined with yellow police tape:

“An unidentified gunman wounded at least fifteen people at the Milwaukee County Zoo earlier this evening in a barrage of bullets that left a terrified group of students and lecture-goers hiding in secluded basement storage areas, where they desperately texted friends and loved ones after alerting the authorities. The suspect was killed in a shootout with police officers just before six-thirty this evening.

“The rampage began shortly after six o’clock, during a lecture series taking place at the Badger Mutual Conference Center built at the Milwaukee County Zoo in 2003. Experts in animal husbandry, marine biology, veterinary medicine, and administrative policy came from as far away as Europe and South America to take part in the four-day conference. Witnesses report that the suspect interrupted a lecture on tracking and monitoring Peruvian jaguars, when he executed the presenter with a nine-millimeter handgun and then began firing indiscriminately into the audience.

“Will Raasch, a student at nearby Marquette University, attended the conference hoping to learn more about veterinary careers.”

The camera jumped to a young man wearing an emergency blanket draped over his shoulders. “I never thought in a million years that I’d see

something like that," he said, red and blue lights flashing across his face. "It was totally unreal, like I was in a video game and couldn't get out."

In the next shot, a woman wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I just froze," she said, her voice cracking. "If someone hadn't grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me to the floor, I'd be dead. And then someone hit the lights and everyone started running for the hallway."

Paramedics pushed a gurney into an ambulance, the black cocoon of a body bag visible on top, as the reporter's voiceover continued: "Police describe the unnamed suspect as a male in his mid-thirties, though it's still not clear what may have motivated the attack. Authorities have not yet released evidence of connections to organized terror groups."

The female reporter held a black microphone, her cheeks and nose red as she spoke somberly into the camera. "The injured have been transported to Froedtert Hospital, where several, including one police officer, remain in critical condition. Authorities will release names of the injured parties after their families have been notified. We'll continue to provide you with updates on this developing story as they become available."

Half the barroom thumbed urgently on their smartphones, and the other half sat stunned on their barstools. A young man in the corner consoled a girl whose face was red-streaked with tears. One of the basketball fans who earlier dropped the glass boot of beer on the floor said: "Fucking shit."

"Jesus," said Summer. "Who else needs a cigarette?"

I regarded her for the first time with unmitigated contempt. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Wrong with *me*?” Summer sputtered, digging in her handbag. “I’m trying to cope with a national *tragedy* here.”

I finished my gin and signaled for the check.

Summer poked a cigarette into the corner of her mouth. “I’m sorry your little discussion group got interrupted, Kelly, but you can make it really hard to be your friend sometimes.”

I looked at Michael. “Is this really happening?”

Michael was scrolling through search hits on his phone. “Hold on—I’m checking,” he said.

“Summer, we have to get back to The Garnet,” I said. “Maybe catch you later.”

“Sure,” Summer said, heading toward the door. “But if you expect me to introduce you to Gil at the reception tonight, you’d better figure out how to lose the attitude, crack a smile, and show a little appreciation when someone’s trying to be *nice* to you.”

#

Across the street, The Garnet released the crowd from the evening’s last show, *The Bluebells*. It was the directorial debut by Kent Simon. He’d been an action star

during the eighties, then fell out of circulation for almost twenty years while he tried to become a professional mountain climber. The media was treating his return to filmmaking as a glorious rebirth, and I tended to agree. I'd seen the film last month at another festival in Chicago, and described *Bluebells* as "a subtle domestic drama that explores the cavernous echoes of private grief" in my review at *Slate*.

The lobby was empty except for staff and Festival volunteers. Freddy modeled a black leather jacket roughly two sizes too large while Miles and Clare admired the comic result. Three volunteers in parakeet-green shirts swept and removed trash bags.

"Have you guys heard?" I asked.

Freddy raised his arms in the air. "Check out Kent Simon's leather jacket—he was here!"

I raised my eyebrows. "Kent Simon was here and gave you his coat?"

"He left it in the auditorium," said Clare, so tall and blonde.

"The blogs say it's his trademark," added Miles. "He leaves it at bars and premieres and stuff. Like *Kent Simon was here*."

"Speaking of the blogs," said Michael, stroking the glossy leather sleeve of Kent Simon's jacket, "have you heard about the shooting at the zoo?"

All eyes popped up.

"Was anyone hurt?" asked Miles, while Clare and Freddy scrolled through their phones.

Clare shook her head. "At the zoo?"

"Last count was fifteen in critical condition," I said. "But they may have updated the numbers."

"Oh, man," said Freddy. "Three died."

"Any word yet on the shooter?" I asked. "He was an unidentified male forty-five minutes ago."

"Still unidentified," said Clare, tapping her touchscreen.

"Unidentified male," said Freddy.

I sighed, more than a little exhausted already. "Any of you going to the reception?"

"Everyone's going," said Freddy. "It's the best part of Festival week."

The others shrugged their agreement.

"I guess you're right," I said, trying to push Summer and her evident successes from my mind. I could feel the dull heat of envy churning in my gut as I waved to Michael.

"Going home to change?" asked Michael. "But this old jean jacket has such compelling *je ne sais quoi*."

I opened my jean jacket like a pair of French doors, revealing last year's Midwest Film Festival promotional t-shirt. "But I'm classy on the inside."

While the others continued to poke the touchscreens of their phones, Michael gave me a big thumbs-up. "See you at the Ritz, Ms. Chanel."

#

I walked to my apartment in less than ten minutes. Because it required no decision-making or careful attention, my stroll to and from the theater was often my favorite part of the day. My mind could shuffle through memory or coast upon sense impressions – the gradual recession of muddy snow banks, a floral scent on the air, the song of the small gray-brown birds that seemed the only creatures to build their nests on the East Side of Milwaukee.

Tonight I wondered at the motives for this man who shot and killed people he'd probably never met. Who are any of these people who shoot complete strangers in public places? They're disturbed, suicidal. Self-loathers. But there are so many ways to die without hurting other people.

Ivy crawled the exterior of my apartment building, a red brick affair four stories high. The Ridgemore. It looked and sounded as if it held historical importance, though I was unaware of any.

The interior of my fourth-story apartment included very old hardwood in the kitchen and hallways, an abundance of dirty drywall, some ash-colored carpet in the living room. A dusky-colored table off the kitchenette doubled as my office and nightly work space. A linden tree dominated the courtyard, and I watched its leaves twinkle in the summer sun as I edited *The Mill Street Millions*.

My bedroom was a burrow, my least favorite room in the apartment. A hill of dirty laundry leaned against one corner. Books and magazines

overpopulated the dresser next to the double bed. I held open the door to my closet, surveying the dresses and blouses that hung inside. I decided on a collarless herringbone blazer with cropped sleeves and enough distress in the gray cotton blend to suggest I had seen one fashion revolution and was prepared for the next. A black silk long-sleeve underneath, because I'm classy on the inside.

#

Instead of driving directly to the reception, I went to Mara's house. It was a long detour, east of Wauwatosa near Washington Park, the original location of the Milwaukee County Zoo. Storefronts north of the park included the occasional hair-braiding salon or refrigerator repair shop, but most were empty and boarded shut. Cops leaned against the hoods of their patrol cars as they questioned a young woman, who waved her arms indignantly. She wore a bright green warmup jacket, high heels, and a denim miniskirt.

The faces of the shooting survivors returned to me from the news broadcast, their shock and fear. The school shooting at Columbine had been a shock fifteen years ago – and then there was a conversation about kids, their social and academic pressures. News reports over the next several days would confirm that the zoo shooter had emotional problems, had been under stress, had suffered debilitating trauma. Something had alienated this human being from

the collective embrace of his species, and this was his last means of communication. *My feelings will be known.*

I parked in front of Mara's bungalow on West Lloyd and mounted the stone walkway to her front door. I'd only visited Mara once before. A graduate student at her lab had agreed to take over her lease for five months while she did research in Tibet, and I helped her pack some things into storage. She hadn't invited me or asked for my help, but I said I'd come by and Mara didn't object. We did two trips in a rented truck to a U-Haul storage unit, and then she said that she had to return the truck and get back to the lab to finish some work before she left the country.

I rang her doorbell and waited without any response. It was just before nine o'clock, which seemed late to be working even for a workaholic like Mara. But maybe there was a deadline of some kind, a journal article that needed its data replicated, or a grant that required last-minute drafting. Maybe that's why she hadn't come to see my film. Or maybe her doorbell didn't work.

I took three steps backward so that I could check the front-facing windows again, and then the windows on the east side of the house. They were all as dark as I remembered a moment ago when I came to the door. So I walked to the back, where a rear entrance emptied onto a small wooden porch. The windows in the back were just as dark as the front, but I knocked on the back door anyway. No response.

I leaned on the porch railing while I considered my options. Maybe she was out of town; or staying with a boyfriend. I'd already texted her earlier in the day and left a voicemail. Maybe she'd get back to me tomorrow. Maybe there'd been an emergency.

A light fixture hung next to the door. I reached inside, and my fingers found a concealed key, just like the extra key our parents hid in a light fixture behind their house.

I unlocked the rear door and let myself into Mara's kitchen.

"Mara?" I called. "You home?"

I could sense in the dark stillness of the kitchen that the entire house was empty. I replaced the spare key in its hiding place and returned to the kitchen in search of a light switch. And then there was light.

The kitchen was exactly as I recalled: neat and spare, like the rest of the house. Mara did not believe in clutter. A stereo cabinet filled with vinyl records served as the living room's focal point, with a large speaker on either side and an expensive turntable on top. I opened the cabinet to browse the record collection, many of which Mara had inherited after our father died. The albums were alphabetized, just like they'd been organized in Mara's bedroom when we were teenagers. I glanced over my shoulder, half-expecting Mara to be standing in the kitchen, furious that I'd invaded her privacy. But I had a claim to those records, too.

I found the Rolling Stones section and pulled out *Let It Bleed*. An enormous record-changer spindle skewered a cake made of unlikely layers: a session tape, a pizza, the face of a clock, a bicycle tire. *Gimme Shelter* was the first documentary I'd ever seen, at a musician boyfriend's place during high school. The images of Meredith Hunter rushing the stage at Altamont and getting stabbed transfixed me because it was real. I'd never felt like such a voyeur, like I'd seen something that I wasn't supposed to see. Documentaries, I learned, are about secrets.

A documentary about my family would begin in our hometown in northern Wisconsin, where retail outlets, medical clinics, and insurance offices surrounded the former homes of timber barons and paper mill workers. Then the *dramatis personæ*: Mara and me and our parents, Doug and Rose Murdoch. The financial failure of our father's tavern, the useless guilt that plagued him. And then Black Monday, 1987, when stock markets crashed all over the world. Because our father died by suicide, the story would explore his compulsions, his love for gambling, his obsession with money, his predilections and predispositions, the holes that he left in us, a different shape in each.

The hardwood floor creaked and groaned as I walked to Mara's worn gray couch, a piece of furniture our parents had given Mara when she moved into her first college apartment. The white walls were blank. A single ladder-back chair stood next to the front door. In the shadows cast by the light from my

phone, its conspicuous emptiness seemed to gaze back at me, and a chill shot up my spine.

The office contained a kitchen table that Mara used as a desk, four identical heavy wooden bookcases that had been painted black. The rows of books revealed several gaps, suggesting Mara had another library in her office at the lab. I ran my fingers over the bindings. There were science textbooks from her undergraduate career at the University of Wisconsin, and a number of the more compelling pop science writers: Asimov, Sagan, Feynman, Lewis Thomas. But also a diverse serving of American, British, and Russian fiction — Dostoevsky next to Stephen King and D. H. Lawrence — along with books on meditation, sutras, The Four Noble Truths, and other aspects of Buddhist thought that Mara encountered while in Tibet or studied to prepare for her research trip.

Mara's bed stood unmade, and one of the dresser drawers hung half-open. A pile of high-heeled shoes crowded one of the corners of the closet. Shirts, tanks, sweaters, and jackets populated a single clothing rod. Several of the hangers were empty, so maybe Mara was out of town. She'd often been away from the house when we were teenagers, giving me ample time to slip into her bedroom to inspect the contents of the closet, the dresser drawers. I never took anything. These clandestine raids were fact-finding missions, investigations into the person my older sister had become. *Band t-shirts, black. Halter tops, cropped tops, various colors. Flared jeans with designs drawn on them with pens, blue and red.*

*Marlboro Lights. LifeStyles condoms. Leather boots, brown and black. Chuck Taylor tennis shoes, lowtops.*

Scarves hung from a hook next to the door molding. I grabbed one and wrapped it around my neck, arranging it within the collar of my blazer while I used the three-quarters mirror hanging on the inside of the closet door to evaluate the results. My pale complexion and sharp chin were framed by the cropped black hair of an Irish peasant, stiff as tarred hay. And then a paisley cashmere scarf that looked expensive, just in case anyone was keeping track.

I checked my watch. The Festival reception had started ten minutes ago.

On a piece of printer paper that I found in the office, I wrote Mara a note and included my phone number at the bottom.

*Mara,*

*Dropped by but you weren't home. Borrowed a scarf.*

*Call me –*

*Kelly.*

#

Green and blue neon stars pinwheeled through Windhover Hall, the central gathering area in the Milwaukee Art Museum. Glowing shards of light scattered over the reception-goers. A mandolin and cello accompanied a woman in a white jumpsuit as she murmured a song, electric colors sliding over her like paint

across a canvas. Outside, a set of giant sail-like wings embraced the building's ninety-foot-high curved glass ceilings, leaving one feeling like a visitor to a postmodern cathedral. The limbs opened to admit sunlight during the day, spreading wide as the wingspan of a 747 and transforming the museum into a scouting vessel from another planet. A bay of windows jutted over Lake Michigan like the prow of a ship, and watching the full moon's sheen drift across the dark water made me wish I knew how to sail a boat, or operate any machine that delivers one into the vastness of the unknown. I told this to Michael as he handed me something blue in a champagne flute. To honor Kent Simon's directorial debut, event coordinators had invented a featured drink for the evening called a "Bluebell."

"You know how to operate a camera," he said, clinking my glass. "You can explore unknown worlds with a camera."

I sighed. "But it's easier to run someone over with a train."

Despite the vaulted ceilings and expansive promenades extending from the reception hall, the Midwest Film Festival felt like a fairly intimate bunch. The director, a storkish gray-haired man with gold-rimmed glasses, swaddled a beer in a bar napkin as he entertained one of the Festival's largest donors, a local restaurant tycoon who poured money into community programs all over town. A local news crew prepared for an interview with a ragged-looking director from North Dakota, bathing him and his tousled tuxedo in their camera lights. A short-film director from Minneapolis held a bluebell in each hand, evidently

trying to locate his plus one. A handful of comic actors from Chicago circled a cocktail table and its contingent of martinis, conversing distractedly as they scanned the crowd for young women to approach.

As in any large family gathering, there were several people that I found offensive or at least fairly dull, but I felt an enduring bond of kinship with them nonetheless. No matter our differences, we all cared about film's power to reveal and construct a way of being in the world, and I wanted to know what every one of them thought about it. Even their bad ideas and failed attempts helped me understand the world and my work in it more clearly. In that sense, we were all in it together, chipping away at the same giant monument that would never be complete.

"Don't look now," Michael said, indicating the triangular serving area at the center of the hall. "But your best friend just arrived."

Summer leaned her broad smile across the bar, her tiara inches from the bartender's face. She wore a silver cocktail dress and a black ribbon choker, her shiny backside wagging at the crowd like the tail of a puppy.

"And can I just say," Michael added, "how mortifying it was when she announced in front of all those strangers that *she's* your best friend?" He sniffed. "You've never even mentioned her before."

"Don't sound so offended," I said. "We both know she's nuts."

"Is she kissing the bartender?"

I shaded my eyes, as if sighting over a sun-soaked prairie. "I think she's telling him a secret."

Michael whispered, "...but the doctor said the rash isn't contagious anymore."

We snorted into our bluebells, smug as piglets. Self-righteousness feels so good, at least until the wheel turns.

Freddy materialized next to Summer, visibly taken with her dress. Every human being who came within six feet was a magnet for Freddy's unquenchable enthusiasm – he loved their jewelry, their band t-shirts, often commented on the shape and position of their cheek bones. Still wearing Kent Simon's oversized leather jacket, he reached out to touch the point of her tiara. Newly alert, Summer's head swiveled to assess this stranger's intentions.

"You don't think she's right, do you?"

Michael seemed to recognize someone in the crowd and patted his tie knot to assure its proper placement. "Right about what?"

"Summer said I make it hard to be my friend."

Michael's jaw went slack as he rolled his eyes.

I shrugged. "Maybe I push people away."

Michael took hold of my arm. "You're a treasure, Kelly. We couldn't live without you. Blah blah blah."

"All right, all right," I waved my surrender. "I'll knock it off. Let's go say hello."

"You're kidding."

"I feel bad about snubbing her at Flanders. This may be her most sincere attempt at friendship."

"The youth group approach," said Michael. "What would Jesus do?"

"Ouch."

"Ask not what your country can do for you."

"Why does it seem like we murder all the nice people?"

"I give up," Michael sighed. "Let's go."

We swam through the crowd and Summer's eyebrows surged with recognition as we neared. She stepped around Freddy as if he were an end table and cocked an arm at her hip. "Kelly Murdoch. Have your fans abandoned you so soon?"

Freddy beamed with surprise, delighted to see his new discovery join with some other part of his world.

"Easy," I said, raising my voice to compete with the band and its speakers, hardly twenty feet away. "I wanted to apologize for being so short with you at the bar. Premiere night jitters or something. It was really nice of you to come by."

Summer pursed her lips, considering my apology. "What is it about you?"

"About me?" I asked.

"That makes it impossible to stay mad at you!" she said, and flung her arms around my neck. The impact slobbered some of the Bluebell onto my wrist, but I stabilized her embrace with my other arm.

“Why don’t we try and find a table somewhere,” I said, disengaging so that I could include Michael and Freddy in the conversation. “We’d love to hear more about your work with Gil Van Der Plueg. Is he here?”

“His flight arrived after mine,” said Summer. “But he should be here any minute. Did you see they released the name of the shooter?”

Michael, Freddy, and I dug for our phones.

“Who was he?” asked Freddy, while Michael and I began extracting our phones.

“Kaspar Rouhani,” Summer said.

“Why would terrorists shoot people at a zoo?” asked Freddy.

Search hits appeared in the palm of my hand and I began scanning the results. “They’re saying the shooting was an act of terrorism?”

“Not a terrorist,” said Summer. “He was a vet.”

“A veterinarian?” asked Freddy.

“A veteran,” groaned Michael. “A soldier.”

I scanned short articles at CNN, MSNBC, CBS. Kaspar Rouhani had been “an Iraq War veteran who returned to the Milwaukee area after honorable discharge from the United States Army, where he’d attained the rank of Specialist. He grew up in West Allis with his mother and two sisters, who were not available for comment.”

So a post-traumatic stress case. The story unfolded in my imagination like a rose. Kaspar finishes his four-year degree and gets recruited after 9-11 for his

native language skills, or else he was ROTC. He's in Iraq early in the war, 2003 or 2004. He's an interpreter, accompanies fact-finding patrols from door to door. The Iraqis he interprets are scared; his fellow soldiers are exhausted, nervous. They get knocked all over the place. Kaspar sleeps three or four hours at a time, sometimes does a couple days on his feet without sleeping at all. Smokes three packs a day, Korean cigarettes like pencil shavings. Marlboros from home when he can get them. Maybe he fought in the bloodbaths at Ramadi or Fallujah, or maybe he watched his best friend explode.

But he makes it back to Milwaukee, and that's when the post-traumatic stress gets really bad. Taking pills to get to sleep; booze and drugs for the nightmares that come when he's awake. Over the next several days and weeks, we'd probably see a series of stories about failures at Veterans Affairs, unforgivable systemic breakdowns as Kaspar and his loved ones desperately sought intervention for a problem that was spiraling out of control.

"This is awful," I said, looking up from my phone.

Summer pointed to the stage. "Something's happening."

The music came to an abrupt halt.

"Ladies and gentlemen—your attention, please."

A man stood in the multi-colored lights, stars dancing across his broad frame as the musicians retreated from stage.

"It's come to my attention that we're celebrating tonight."

It was Kent Simon. He'd grown a beard since shooting *The Bluebells*, where he played a clean-shaven geology professor at Northwestern who falls in love with a colleague and raises a family. Their marriage ends disastrously when she has an affair, but he returns to her side when she's diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's, and he falls in love with her all over again, only to watch helpless as the disease devours her. The story's slow-burning intensity contrasted with the explosion-prone action movies that defined Simon's early career, when he earned his fame playing tough guys and thugs, cops and wise guys, a one-eyed cowboy named "Chick."

"This is a great party," continued Simon. "Who else is pretty wasted?"

The response from the audience was tepid and scattered, most of us suspecting a terrible trap. Simon's tone was furious, and scarier because he was pretending to be nice. About two-hundred of us regarded the Jungian manifestation of all we feared in our fathers: fury, disappointment, rejection, shame.

"Turn on the fucking lights," Simon commanded. "Someone turn on the lights."

Lights awoke in the promenades, pitching half-light onto the reception hall—which now looked like a crime scene, or a basement kegger getting busted by the cops.

"It's important that there's enough light for you to see each other's faces," said Simon, whose rage was amplified by drink. "Look around you, and see if

you can find any sign someone here gives a shit about the fatal shooting that took place tonight, fewer than ten miles from here.”

The Festival director approached the stage. Simon pointed at him and the man froze instantly, as if Simon held a magic wand.

“Don’t worry – I won’t keep you much longer. I just wanted to read the names of the dead, in case any of us forgot they used to be people like you and me.”

“Jesus,” said Michael, under his breath.

Two security guards arrived in the tan short-sleeve shirts that implied nominal authority. Simon raised a finger, indicating that he’d be with them in just a minute.

Then he read five names, slowly, enunciating each syllable.

And then he read a name that I recognized, the name of a girl from the Mill Street School who now must have been nineteen years old: Cherelle Diggs. She turned twelve the first day I filmed at Mill Street, and the whole class sang “Happy Birthday.”

“You there,” Simon said, pointing to Summer, “Princess.”

I saw the tiara and winced in anticipation of what would come next. I considered tackling Summer to remove her from the line of fire.

“I wonder what kind of dress you’d want people to wear the night you found out someone you loved had been killed,” said Simon. “Would you say classic or more fashion-forward?”

Summer scanned the crowd, searching for someone to come to her defense, settling finally on my face. I stepped in front of her as if to protect her from Simon's gaze, but she turned and squeezed through the wall of people lined up next to the bar, disappearing from view.

"When you're all finished congratulating yourselves," said Simon, raising his list in the air, "I want you to go home and think about these names. I want you to think about how you'd feel if one of the names on this list belonged to someone you loved. And then I want you to figure out exactly what you're going to do next to make sure we never see another list like this one ever again."

Simon placed the microphone on one of the amps and turned to leave when he saw Freddy leaning against one of the bar stools. His eyes moved from the jacket to Freddy's face. He frowned, grabbing the jacket material by the shoulder.

"Where'd you get this?"

"I work at the theater," Freddy said, shrinking visibly.

"He found it at The Garnet," I said. "There was an online rumor that you leave jackets at your film premieres."

Simon looked like I'd just spoken a foreign language. "Why the hell would I leave my property somewhere?"

"I loved *The Silver Spurs of Texas*," Freddy said, blinking happily. "You looked so cool with an eye patch."

Simon studied Freddy's face with confusion and revulsion. And then the jacket was off and in Simon's hands. He turned it over, examining it. Satisfied, he donned the jacket in a single circular motion, as if he were tossing a cape over his back. Freddy watched, enthralled.

His property returned to him, the great man strode toward the exit and out of our lives.

The Festival director recovered the microphone and turned it on, thumped it a few times with his finger to be sure it was live.

"We apologize for the disruption, everyone," he said, gesturing for the musicians to return to the stage. "The raffle will begin in ten minutes, so please have your tickets ready. And in the meantime, enjoy the music."

#

The reception didn't last long after Simon finished his scolding. The band started up again as the hall emptied like a gymnasium after a disastrous pep rally. Michael invited me back to his place, but I told him I was tired and would call in the morning.

As I pulled out of the museum parking deck, I turned south on Lake Drive, merging onto I-94 and heading west, past The Domes and Miller Park to the Bluemound exit.

Some police cars in the Zoo parking lot still flashed blue and red, but most of the onlookers and emergency workers had dissipated. A huddle of teenagers with candles sang softly just outside the police line, and two local news vans looked like they were wrapping up their eleven o'clock live updates. A policewoman with a pony tail and an M16 slung over her shoulder approached my window. I'd never been approached by a police officer brandishing an assault weapon. She gripped the handle of the rifle with one hand while the other raised a flashlight. "Help you, ma'am?"

"One of the victims was a student of mine," I said, hoping to avoid more complicated explanations.

"Sorry to hear that, ma'am. But we need to keep the scene clear."

I glanced dubiously toward the candlelight vigil across the parking lot.

"My student's dad is a cop."

The policewoman leaned against the doorframe. "I'm very sorry for your loss, ma'am, but you'll have to move along."

Without warning, my eyes were damp. The big gun and this woman's robotic speech devoid of emotional content had induced a squeezing sensation in my chest, and something slid down my cheek. "Is he here? His name is Officer Diggs. His daughter's name is Cherelle Diggs."

"We can't release any further information at this time."

I wouldn't be able to breathe again unless she said something that wasn't in the official script. "Please."

She sighed. "It's just investigators here. The families are all at Froedtert, but you won't be able to see them. It's restricted access."

I wiped my cheeks and started the engine. "Thanks for your help."

"The best thing would be to go home and get some rest," she said, disappearing into darkness as she lowered the flashlight. "Just go on about your day."

#

During recess one day, I'd filmed a group of Mill Street students playing dodgeball. I tried to hover just out of the game's sphere of focus, but the boys were acutely aware of the camera, competing for best cut-up as they volleyed trash talk back and forth. The undeniable champion of playground cool was the shortest kid in the group. His name was Mike, but the other kids called him Pipes. He laced his trash talk with improvised rhymes, much to the delight of the other boys. *Jameel's the man, but his aim is rough – he spilled his milk cuz he missed the cup.*

Then I relocated to the swings, where a sixth-grader named Cherelle hovered, absorbed in conversation with two of her friends. They looked up as I arrived.

"We have a question," Cherelle announced.

"Is it okay if I set up the camera while we talk?" I asked.

Cherelle glanced at her friend, a seventh grader named Shianne, who nodded bashfully. I set the tripod in the woodchips and hit Record.

“Okay,” said Cherelle. “So we were talking about how you can help us.”

I stepped behind the camera, hands in my jacket pockets. “How can I help?”

“Thing is, we want to make a movie, but we don’t have a camera.”

“So you want to borrow my camera?”

“We have the movie all worked out,” she said. “Just need the camera.”

“What’s your movie about?”

Shianne’s hands shot to her mouth as she doubled over in a frenzy of giggles.

Cherelle coolly surveyed this lack of control. “It’s a romance movie.”

The third friend, Toya, nodded soberly. “It sure is.”

I smiled. “Who are the stars of your movie?”

Shianne exploded with such desperate tittering that she couldn’t remain in her swing. She jumped to her feet and scurried off to the basketball hoop, where another group of girls kept counsel while watching some boys play three-on-three.

“You see Brandon playing basketball over there?”

I swiveled the camera and zoomed as Brandon sunk a jump shot. “Is Brandon going to be the star of your movie?”

Cherelle frowned impatiently. “It’s a romance, so the star has to be a girl.”

“It’s Shianne,” added Toya. “She’s in love with Brandon Taylor, over there playing basketball.”

One of the girls by the basketball hoop whispered to Shianne behind her hand, prompting Shianne to reply in kind.

I smiled. “Do you think Brandon is in love with Shianne?”

“Who knows?” scowled Cherelle. “There’s no telling with boys.”

“That’s true,” I said, though it was just as true for anyone.

The bell rang, prompting a series of whistle blasts from the recess monitors, who began gathering the students into orderly lines. Cherelle and Toya leapt to their feet and rushed past me, our filmmaking collaboration apparently forgotten. But then Toya circled back.

“Forget something?” I asked.

“It’s Brandon,” she said.

“The supporting star?”

Toya shook her head. “He’s not in love with Shianne.”

I suppressed a smile, sensing that Toya had a secret crush on Brandon, and therefore believed that he must be in love with her.

“Who does Brandon really love?”

Toya glanced back toward the school, where the line had begun filing back into the building. “My cousin Willy hangs with Brandon’s older brother, Lamont, and Lamont told Willy that Brandon got it bad for Cherelle.”

“So Shianne’s in love with Brandon, but Brandon’s in love with Cherelle?”

Toya rolled her eyes. “Everyone loves Cherelle.”

#

Two years after initial filming at Mill Street, I contacted Cherelle Diggs and five other former Mill Street students to see how they were doing. The tragedy was a kid named Marshall who dropped out of school when his dad went to jail. His mom slept all day and was often out at night, so it was left to fifteen-year-old Marshall to figure out the household finances and take care of his two younger siblings. He was stoic on camera, but he cried into my shoulder when I turned it off.

It took almost a month to make the appointment, but I finally met with his social worker and she looked worse than he did. She explained for the camera the limits of what her office can and cannot do in a situation like Marshall’s. But with the camera off, she spoke at length to the grim ineptitude plaguing every corner of the social services sector, the months spent carrying double case-loads, the chronic system-wide burnout that was inevitable given the overwhelming lack of resources. They were a corps of the walking wounded, and all around them kids like Marshall.

The other Mill Street kids were in better circumstances. Each was doing well at something – dean’s list, a track team hopeful, first chair saxophone in the marching band. The high point of my followup interviews, though, was my

meeting with Cherelle and her parents. We met at their church in Benjamin Heights, just a few blocks from the Mill Street School. Cherelle was pregnant.

“Good afternoon,” said Mr. Diggs, all warmth and graciousness.

Cherelle’s mother shook my hand like a clerk at the DMV preparing to hear a complaint, as if any humanity involved in this exchange were going to be a laborious pantomime. She’d clearly been roped into something she didn’t want to do.

Cherelle, though, was just as she’d been when I met her three years before – straight-backed in a red wool cardigan, the resolute composure of an opera singer or politician. And carrying her pregnancy like a queen.

I opened with a softball. “Does it feel good to be nearing the end of your first year of high school?”

“We’re very proud of Cherelle,” said her mother.

“We certainly are,” said her father.

“That’s random,” said Cherelle, scowling for her parents. “I like high school because it’s closer to college.”

“Do you want to go to college?” I asked.

“Cherelle has a college *strategy*,” explained her mother.

Cherelle rolled her eyes. “Yes, I want to go to college, if anyone cares what I think.”

Cherelle’s father laughed merrily. The light in his eyes as he looked at Cherelle spoke of extra stories at bedtime, exceptions to the rules, an acute

powerless to refuse her any happiness. I recalled Cherelle's paper birthday crown from years before and saw this man placing it on her head at the breakfast table. Daddy's Special Girl.

"What do you think you'll study when you go to college?"

Cherelle's face was shrewd as a poker player's. "I'm going to be a doctor."

"Did your classes at the Mill Street School make you interested in science?"

"I never liked science until I got to the Mill Street School," said Cherelle.

"Miss Richardson made it interesting. Before that we just learned about volcanoes or whatever."

"What do you remember about Miss Richardson?"

"She was my favorite teacher." Cherelle smiled. "And she snorted when she laughed, which was pretty funny."

"She's been getting good marks in math," said Mr. Diggs.

"Math's my worst class," said Cherelle, clearing her throat, "but I go to the tutor twice a week to keep my grades up."

"She's doing extremely well," said her mother. "The school counselor said she can get a leadership scholarship at UW-Milwaukee and go there for free."

"And there's the medical college just across town," said Mr. Diggs.

"Medical school sounds like a lot of work," I said.

Cherelle shrugged. "Daddy says doctors are better than lawyers because at least doctors warn you before they shove a hand up your —"

Her father laughed loudly, truncating the punchline with real mirth. "A lawyer told me that joke at work."

"What do you do, Mr. Diggs?"

"Milwaukee Police Department," he said, wrapping an affectionate arm around Cherelle's shoulders. "Ten years."

There was a pause while I figured out how to approach the pregnancy issue from another angle, but then Cherelle's mother broached it for me.

"I'm a licensed practical nurse," she said, "and we raised Cherelle so that she'd have choices. She'll choose what she wants to be when she grows up, and this baby is not going to choose for her."

The outburst unsettled both Cherelle and her mother, and their expressions struggled to lock down the emotions it stirred up. Cherelle's father glanced to the rafters for a long pause, as if he'd been waiting for this moment to come. He kissed Cherelle on the top of her head.

"This baby is a blessing for our whole family," he said. "I was working part-time at the Burger King when we found out Cherelle was on the way. You work it out. No job or money or anything else is better than having people to love."

That did it. Both Cherelle and her mother ran fingers under their eyes, trying to keep the tears from streaking their makeup. As Cherelle's mother rummaged through an arm bag for tissues, Cherelle ran the back of her hand across her cheeks and laughed.

“Geez,” she said. “I thought I was the one who was supposed to be hormonal.”

#

I woke with a start, uncertain where I was and afraid I might be late for something. Morning sunlight streamed through the front window blinds, refreshing in a way that I hadn't known I needed. My watch said seven-thirty.

I checked my phone to see if Mara had called, but there hadn't been any activity since the night before. So I showered and changed, and scooped up a bowl of granola while I checked the location of Mara's lab. It was part of the Maxwell Center, a multi-lab research complex on the Froedtert Hospital campus.

Ten minutes later, I was circling the hospital campus. The Maxwell Center was an L-shaped building five or six stories high dominated by slate-colored concrete and aqua-blue trim around the windows and entranceways. It was new enough for its fresh and polished appearance to contrast with some of the older buildings on the hospital grounds.

Windows in the Maxwell Center's lobby were continuous and ran floor to ceiling, about twenty feet high. A man in a security uniform nodded from behind a horseshoe-shaped desk as I surveyed the room, trying to figure out how to get oriented.

“Need any help, ma'am?”

“Um,” I said, trying to remember the name of Mara’s lab. “I’m looking for my sister. She does brain research.”

“No problem,” he said, clicking his keyboard and focusing on activity taking place on the monitor. “What’s her name?”

“Mara Murdoch,” I said. Then added: “Dr. Mara Murdoch.”

He clicked, his eyes scanning the monitor’s progress.

“Well,” he said, eyes flitting left to right. “I don’t see a Dr. Mara Murdoch in the Center directory. Is she a graduate student?”

“Dr. Mara Murdoch,” I said. “I’m pretty sure she’s a regular full-time researcher in the lab that does brain research.”

“Well,” said the guard, offering one of the pamphlets stacked on his desk, “several of the labs and clinics here do neurological research. Is your sister’s area Cerebral Palsy? Pediatric brain development? Autism? Genetics?”

I scanned the list of labs and clinics. “I think it’s this one,” I said, pointing. “The Center for Attention, Behavior, and Emotion. Do they do experiments with Tibetan monks and MRI machines?”

He nodded, pointing to my right. “A-B-E. End of the hall, through the double doors, then hang a left and keep walking until you see the sign on your left.”

His directions took me to an all-glass entrance with *CENTER FOR ATTENTION, BEHAVIOR, AND EMOTION* printed in large block letters on the glass. The space inside resembled an upscale dentist’s office – high ceilings,

indirect lighting, uniform blonde wooden furniture that appeared of Scandinavian descent, and mahogany wall paneling with chrome accents.

A young woman with a head of dark natural curls looked up and smiled as I came through the door. She was probably an undergraduate or a recent grad, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two.

“Good morning. How may I direct you?”

“Thanks,” I smiled. “I’m looking for my sister – she works here.”

“Is she a scientist, graduate student, or staff?”

“She’s a neuroscientist.”

“What’s her name, please?”

“Dr. Mara Murdoch.”

The girl frowned. “Dr. Murdoch doesn’t work here anymore.”

“Excuse me?”

The girl’s mouth hung open a moment, and then shut tightly while she reconsidered her words.

“What do you mean Mara doesn’t work here anymore?”

“I’m afraid that I’m not properly authorized to, um, comment on internal matters with the staff or the personnel.”

“No problem,” I said, noting the nameplate on her desk, “Janice. Please direct me to any person who is authorized to comment on internal personnel matters.”

This stopped her for a long second, and then she had a three-ring binder on the desk and silently flipped through its pages with the exasperated determination of someone who just figured out how to solve a problem and was eager to press the button that would expel the problem from her realm of responsibility.

“Janice – I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

She glanced up, suspicious, and continued to flip the pages back and forth until she arrived at her destination, which she placed on the brushed chrome counter of her reception desk. “All hiring and staffing for A-B-E is handled externally on the third floor of the Miller Fund Research Building. Their weekday hours are nine-A-M until five-P-M.”

“Let’s not worry about internal personnel matters or whatever. Did you know my sister? I’m just trying to get in touch with her.”

“If you have further questions, I’m afraid that I’ll have to refer you to our security officer at the Maxwell Center information desk.”

A young man stuck his head out of an office doorway. “Hey guys. How’s everything going up there? Maybe I can help.”

“Janice was just helping me find someone.” I smiled. “Maybe you know her? Mara Murdoch.”

The young man sauntered over to the foyer and leaned on the reception desk, shaking his head, raising his eyebrows. Apparently quite a request, this Mara Murdoch.

"I'm Spencer," he said, holding out his hand. He was a little younger than me, not quite thirty, but he wore the slim tie and canvas sport coat of the upwardly mobile young professional.

"I'm Kelly," I said, shaking his hand. "I appreciate your help."

"I can help our visitor," he said, addressing Janice with assured calm.

Everything was under control. "Follow me, Kelly."

Janice shot me a wary frown while Spencer led me to his office, which was the same blonde-and-mahogany situation as the rest of the office. A desktop computer with two large monitors was stationed on a long desktop that ran the length of the righthand wall, terminating at a high window covered with several columns of green post-it notes. Tightly-packed bookshelves composed of the familiar blonde wood receded into the lefthand wall. A free-standing utility table contained three neat stacks of alligator-clipped reports, and Spencer pulled a chair from beneath it and gestured that I sit before he dropped with a satisfied sigh into an ergonomic-looking office chair.

"So," Spencer said, nodding to himself, or maybe to the music. "You're Dr. Murdoch's sister."

His frank look of appraisal made me self-conscious, more so than I had been in a long time. "I am, and I'm hoping you can help me find her." I crossed my arms. "What do you do here, Spencer?"

"Oh," he said. "Me? I'm a project coordinator. Lots of projects going on—some of them take years from conception to funding to testing and data analysis.

I'm one of the guys who keep everything on schedule. I worked with your sister on a number of her projects."

"What kinds of projects?"

Spencer's eyes went to the ceiling while he considered. "She worked on a couple of big studies that investigated the neurophysiological impacts of trauma, mostly with vets. She worked with Dr. Jurić on a couple of studies that looked at the relationship between parasite infections and brain physiology. She also worked on several studies investigating how meditation practice impacts things like concentration and emotional resilience, but also things like neural plasticity, immune response, and managing chronic pain."

"But Janice said Mara doesn't work here anymore. Is that true?"

"It's true." He shook his head sadly. "Almost two months ago, back in March."

"Did she quit? What happened?"

Spencer pursed his lips and sighed through his nose. "It was sort of a mandatory leave of absence."

"Mandatory?"

He nodded.

"So the leave was intended to be permanent."

Spencer shrugged.

I leaned forward in the chair, ran a hand over my face. "Was it personal? Mara's always been so committed to her work."

“That was part of the problem – she was over-committed. It wasn’t healthy. It was starting to impact other people.”

“Doesn’t everyone work too much in a place like this?”

Spencer shook his head. “When was the last time you saw Dr. Murdoch?”

“Right before she went to Tibet.”

He nodded. “The longitudinal study, right. It had a big impact on her.”

“What kind of impact?”

Some voices trailed by the doorway and Spencer’s eyes darted, alert. The voices passed and he cleared his throat.

“It’s kind of a long story, and I have to get back to work,” Spencer said, a smile flickering at the corner of his lips. “But maybe we can meet up later tonight.”

I smiled wearily, because these proposals were always equal parts hilarious and exhausting – the veiled fear, the naked desire, the attempt to appear both playful and indifferent. Maintaining membership in the human race was so trying sometimes.

I glanced at my watch, as if it contained my itinerary for the rest of the day, and then stood up so that I could close his office door.

Spencer stood up. “Please keep that door open.”

I touched his shoulder as I sat down, and he returned to his chair.

“I don’t want you to get in any trouble, Spencer, but I’m worried about my sister. I went by her place last night, but she never came home. And now

you're telling me she was recently under stress and lost her job. I need to know that she's okay."

He laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Dr. Murdoch might be crazy, but she's also completely indestructible."

"What do you mean *crazy*?"

He glanced nervously toward the door, but then his eyebrows lifted.

"Have you talked to Glenda?"

"Who's Glenda?"

"If Dr. Murdoch liked anyone here at the Center, it was Glenda. Maybe she's been in contact with your sister."

"Do you have her number?"

Spencer sighed. "I can't give out something like that. Confidentiality."

Some voices passed the door and he stood up.

"What's Glenda's last name?"

"Look," he said. "How about I bring her tonight and introduce you? She'll be excited to meet you."

"Okay," I said, grabbing a pen and a green post-it note from his desk. "But promise you'll give her my number and ask her to call right away if she knows how to contact Mara."

"No problem," he said, plugging the number into his phone.

"So eight o'clock then. Text me the place when you talk to Glenda."

“Perfect – can I pick you up?”

I slipped Spencer’s pen into the pocket of his sport coat and opened the door. “I’ll meet you there.”

#

My legs felt heavier than usual as I trudged up the steps to my apartment. It had been a long day. So I felt extra unprepared and taken by surprise when I crested the stairs and saw a human form huddled in front of my door at the end of the hallway.

It was Summer.

She still wore her silver party dress, but her hair was a tangled nest where her tiara had been. Her back was to my door frame as she leaned against a carry-on case, her feet bare, knees pulled protectively to her chest. I sighed as she looked up from her phone. Her smeared makeup had transformed her into a forlorn raccoon.

“Kelly!”

She tried to get up, but an eruption of new crying knocked her off balance and she slid back to the floor, her pale cheeks flushing. The emotional constitution can be completely depleted and then find itself suddenly restored when the lights from a distant ship break the horizon.

“Summer – what happened to you?”

“Gil!” she cried, the sobs shaking her throat. “We had a fight and he threw me out.”

Stupidly, I asked: “Do you have somewhere to stay?”

Her weeping eyes rolled wildly. “Of course not! And tomorrow’s the screening – I’ll be a wreck!”

I crouched so that our faces were about the same distance from the floor. A burning halo of insurmountable crisis circled her head. There was only one way.

“Let’s go inside,” I said, patting her shoulder as I stood. “You can crash here. The couch folds out.”

Before I could turn the key in the lock, she was on her feet and wiping the tears from her cheeks.

“I couldn’t, Kelly! I’ve been the most terrible friend.”

I entered and held open the door. “Come on. Let’s get you settled.”

She breezed past me into the adjacent living room, parked her carry-on bag next to the couch, and produced a bottle of red wine before I’d even turned the dead bolt.

She held up the wine as she crossed into the kitchen. “This is for you, Kelly – you’re saving my life!”

“It’s really not necessary,” I said. “What are you doing?”

Drawers opened and closed, followed by rummaging noises.

“Do you have any wine glasses?”

I tried to relax the tightness in my jaw. "Right above your head."

Summer handed me a glass of wine. It looked to contain about half the bottle, hers the other half. God grant me serenity and courage and wisdom.

Summer placed her wine glass on the coffee table long enough to embrace my neck, then took a long pull before starting in.

"Can you believe how selfish Gil is? He never would have gotten his stupid coming-of-age schlock produced without me, and now he wants me to feel like excess baggage!"

How to shape this conversation? I sipped the wine, something smoky that tasted like it would have busted my ten-dollar limit.

"The important thing," I began, trying to decide what that might be, "is maybe to imagine things from his perspective."

Summer looked horrified. "You're taking his side? Some asshole dumps his girlfriend on the street and he's the good guy?"

I straightened up. "I don't think he's the good guy. But I've always found it easier to fix something if I know how it got broken."

Summer slumped into the couch. "You're right—I've been acting crazy."

"I didn't say that." Of course.

"No," Summer said, tipping her wine glass to her mouth. "You're right. I'm out of control. But that asshole Kent Simon got under my skin—I lost it."

"What do you mean?"

“After we got back to the hotel, Gil was raving about how I embarrassed him. I embarrassed *him!* And I was like, ‘Sorry some asshole verbally assaulted me. Sorry that was inconvenient for *you.*’ Should I have expected the fucking coward to say something when some stranger makes fun of his girlfriend? *In front of everyone*, Kelly. He thinks *he’s* embarrassed?”

“Gil blamed you for Simon’s ranting?”

She rolled her eyes. “Gil worships that dickhead. You should have seen him texting everyone he knew after the reception, trying to figure out where Simon went next. It was embarrassing.”

“One presumes Simon went to church so that he could pray for us sinners.”

Summer started to cry. I slipped into crisis-control gear, placing my wine on a nearby end table that would remain undisturbed by Summer’s limbs if her anger and sorrow inspired flailing. I moved onto the couch next to her, claiming possession of her wine with one hand while I embraced her shoulder with the other. As I deposited her wine glass next to mine on the end table, her tears and nose erupted onto the shoulder of my six-hundred-dollar Santorelli herringbone blazer. I produced a silent scream of agony as she blubbered.

“Why’s it always my fault, Kelly? You know how hard I work to help people. Is there any thanks?” Her blue eyes glistened, wet with pain.

“It’s late,” I said. “And it’s been a long day.”

Her face contracted with a painful resurgence of weeping, and just as quickly relaxed into a damp red placidity, her eyes emptied by the evening's emotional strains.

"But tonight you have a place to sleep, and tomorrow we'll see options that we can't see right now."

"You're right – we will." She pulled off her jacket and dropped it on the floor next to the couch. "Thanks for being a friend, Kelly."

I brushed lightly at my jacket as I rose. "I'll get you a pillow and some sheets."

#

I woke in the morning with an abrupt click. Fresh consciousness flooded my eyes and lungs and crawled over the tops of my hands and feet. I blinked and stretched my limbs, completed a deep breath.

I had dreamed of Mara. We were swinging at the playground near the house where we grew up in Wauteebenah, but our swings were perfectly synchronized, and we didn't have to move our feet. As we swung back and forth, up and down, Mara reached toward me with something in her hand. It was a ruby the size of a golf ball set into a golden ring.

"It's magic," said Mara.

But we both knew that magic wasn't real, I thought in the dream.

Mara shook her head.

Then she pointed to the sky. The ruby ring was there, but the ruby was the planet Mars, and it was on fire.

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling as I committed the image to memory. Fire raked the dust and rocks of the enormous planet in undulating waves. It was the most beautiful and terrifying thing I had ever seen, and it had come from somewhere inside me. Or else something divine had come to visit me. Whether inspiration or visitation, the image filled me with hope and dread in equal measure – the big things always do.

Thinking superstitiously that the dream had been triggered by a call from Mara, I swept my phone from the bedside table and checked for calls – a purple bubble announced a voicemail message. The list of recent calls declared the last call a blocked number. When I called my voicemail and played the message, a cheerful robot invited me to complete an online survey where I could share my feelings concerning the recent oil change performed on my 2000 Mitsubishi Mirage.

Summer lay on the couch, a t-shirt draped over her eyes like a blindfold. Strange how innocent a sleeping person appears when the mind is free of desire and there is nothing to fear, no need to strive or impress or assail or maneuver. *To sleep, to dream.* Was there any great truth that Shakespeare hadn't already told us? But still we had to find more ways to say them.

I made coffee, the best alarm clock. While the percolator burped and steamed, I exchanged a few text messages with Michael. He had some lengthy meetings in the afternoon but could grab a snack in an hour or so. I filled him in on my overnight visitor, her travails. He replied: *yur best frend can come if she wers the tiara.*

Summer rolled over when I placed her coffee cup on the end table next to the foldout couch.

“You sleep okay?” I asked.

She grunted as if still sleeping, and then pushed into a seated position, rubbing her eyes. “I was hoping I might never wake up.” She pushed back her copper hair, found the coffee mug and brought it to her nose, sipped. “This is good.”

“Locally roasted.” I sipped some of mine, as if making sure. “I already showered, but I made it quick – there should be plenty of hot water left. I put a fresh towel on the sink.”

“You’ve been too nice to me, Kelly.”

“You had a rough night.”

Summer ran a hand over her face, as if trying to erase the memory of last night. Then she swiveled, dropped her legs over the side of the foldout mattress, and stood. I repressed the urge to reach out and steady her.

“I don’t know what your morning looks like, but Michael and I are meeting up at a café in an hour or so. You could come along, take in some views of Lake Michigan.”

She shook her head. “I need to find Gil and see if we can patch things up before the screening tonight. If I wait, it’ll just be harder.”

“Tell me your number and I’ll call you, just in case you need my number in your phone.”

She plugged her number into my phone, and I called it. While we updated our list of contacts, I said, “I have a question.”

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“Well – what’s it like to date a famous person?”

Summer smirked, as if suspecting this were the question everyone longed to ask. “Remember wanting something really badly as a little girl? Like something you wanted for Christmas or your birthday?”

“Sure.”

“And when you got it, you were really excited.”

“Absolutely.”

“And now? Does it matter anymore?”

It was my turn to smirk. “Not the same thing. Those dolls or whatever are in my mom’s attic somewhere. Yours takes you to restaurants and movie premieres and you accompany him to the park when he walks his dog.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How’d you know he has a dog?”

“Aren’t there more dogs in LA than people?”

Summer sighed. “When he’s not like the high-energy characters he plays on TV, I feel sort of betrayed, like it was false advertising or something. But when he’s exactly like those characters, it feels like he’s performing, and it makes me feel sort of sick inside, like all we ever do is perform around each other. And then there are the beautiful women he works with—I assume he’s slept with at least some of them, but I have to put those thoughts in a locked box and bury it in a deep pit. It’s lonely a lot of the time, but I think it would feel even lonelier to actually *be* famous.”

“Does Gil say it feels lonely?”

Summer smiled ruefully. “For Gil to feel lonely, he’d have to recognize that there are people in the world other than himself.”

I raised an eyebrow. “He seems aware of Kent Simon.”

Summer laughed. “Simon’s not a person. When you’re as famous as Kent Simon, you live with the other gods somewhere high above all the *people*.”

#

The Domino Bakery nestled in a hill across from the public marina and the Milwaukee Yacht Club. The owners had repurposed a nineteenth-century flushing station that preceded the city’s more modern sewage sanitation methods, so one could sip coffee and nibble croissant or warm gingerbread while

examining a massive water pump and the 450-horse electric motor that displaced the original steam engine. Michael and I took our cupcakes and coffee to the upper seating area, a rooftop garden that overlooked the brise-soleil shading the ground-level patio and adjoining parking lot. Across the street were the boat masts and the vast blue of Lake Michigan beyond the yacht club's white fence. Tiny white sails hung on the horizon like triangular pocket squares.

"So your friend Summer couldn't make it?"

"She was sitting on the floor in front of my apartment when I got home last night. Gil had thrown her out, she'd been drinking –"

"And the Good Samaritan gave her a bed for the night."

"Something like that."

"In the little town of Bethlehem, there was an inn with room after all."

"Summer's not exactly the Virgin Mary."

"And thank God – imagine the repercussions if Jesus had been a redhead."

"Anyway, she's trying to patch things up with Gil. They have the screening tonight."

"Their movie looks terrible."

I shrugged. "Coming-of-age isn't my favorite genre. They tend to be bad movies for the same reason home-for-the-holidays movies tend to be bad."

"What reason is that?"

“They’re bad because the main character is almost always some innocent struggling under the oppressive weight of the world around him. If I’m going to care about a character and his story, he has to be a sinner from the start. The weight that he carries has to be his own. He has to have chosen it. That’s the human experience.”

“And what weight have you chosen to carry, Kelly Camus Murdoch?”

I sighed dramatically, lifting my eyes to the bright May sky as if searching for answers. “My friends, Michael. I carry them with me wherever I go, like rough-hewn crosses.”

Michael straightened the collar of his shirt and placed his hand on my wrist. “Don’t look right away,” he said. “But look behind you in like five seconds.”

Naturally, I looked over my right shoulder as soon as he’d finished speaking. I registered nothing at first save the three tables at the rear of the rooftop seating area, the tree-covered hill behind them, and the pale brickwork of the old East Side water tower jutting into the sky. Then wind pulled free a curl of brown hair from behind the ear of a man sitting at the center table, and he zoomed into focus. Dark aviator sunglasses; a white oxford unbuttoned to the top of his sternum and sleeves rolled to the elbows; Buddhist prayer beads wrapped around one wrist while the other hand thumbed a cellphone. His companion, meticulously unkempt in a well-worn polo shirt two sizes too small,

spoke nonstop without enticing the man to look away from the cellphone's touchscreen.

"Kent Simon," Michael whispered reverently.

I turned back around so that I could gather my wits. "He shaved his beard."

Michael leaned over the table. "And his face is fatter than I remember."

"I'm having some confusing feelings right now."

"It's like you're coming of age, right in front of my eyes."

"Part of me wants to talk to the famous man, just like part of me wants to touch the pyramid at Giza and kiss the Blarney Stone."

"And there's another part of you that wants to give the famous man a birtwistle."

"And there's another part of me that wants to punch him in the nose for humiliating Summer last night."

Michael frowned. "Why is this ridiculous Summer person suddenly your best friend? She skips your premiere, behaves like a lunatic at your discussion group, and dresses for the reception as if she wanted someone to humiliate her."

"I just can't handle it," I said. "I can't bear to see anyone suffer."

Michael rolled his eyes. "What is it with you lately? Is this because your mom and sister skipped the premiere?"

Now I rolled my eyes. "My mom had bronchitis. Who cares?"

Michael shook his head. "Your sister. You think she abandoned you when your dad died. And now it's your mission to gather up all the lost and bring them back to the flock."

I shot him a look. "You don't know anything about my sister."

Michael raised his palms. "You can't save them all, Kelly."

"I'm going over there."

Michael shook his head. "This is a terrible idea."

"I'm just going to talk to him for one minute."

"Fine – let's do this."

"No – I need to go by myself."

"Okay," said Michael. He rested his hands on the table, preparing to rise.

"One. Two. Three –"

Michael sat down again before he'd fully risen from his chair, so I dropped back into my seat as well. With a tight-lipped smile, he nodded cheerily as Simon and his buddy breezed behind me. I glanced over my left shoulder in time to see them disappear down the stairs.

"Oh, no." Michael pointed behind me. Simon's cellphone lay forgotten on the white café table. I got up and crossed the seating area, picked up the phone – a Samsung, the screen smudged and scratched.

"Hey," said a woman at the next table. She was dressed in leather gladiator sandals and an ankle-length cotton dress that exposed too much cleavage. "That doesn't belong to you."

"I'm about to return it to its owner," I said, slipping it into my back pocket and crossing to the rooftop corner that overlooked the parking lot.

Michael was behind me. "The stairs are the other way, Kelly – if we hurry we can catch them."

I shrugged off my hoodie and handed it to Michael. "Hold this, please." As Michael looked at the sweatshirt, I hopped onto the brick parapet and swung a leg over the decorative white guard rail.

"Kelly – what the hell are you doing?"

"See you in a minute," I said, stepping onto the wide wooden beams of the brise-soleil. It was about fourteen feet to the concrete patio, but three quick steps down the slanting wooden beam made it closer to ten. I crouched, grabbed the beam, lowered myself until I hung vertically, and then dropped the remaining five feet, landing a little harder than I'd anticipated.

"Who are you?" asked a woman in giant sunglasses and a yellow tennis blouse. She shielded her eyes as she looked from me to the wooden beams of the sun shade above.

"Fire drill, ma'am. Know your exits."

I swung around the corner in time to see Simon and his buddy approaching a black Chevy Tahoe. I had also been in love with Kent Simon when I was eight or nine. His first role was in a small Australian film about a boy who gets kicked around by his abusive stepfather. They live on a remote sheep farm, where the boy's only comfort is the companionship of his herding dog. In the

climactic scene, the stepfather drinks himself into a rage, waving a gun with one hand and a bottle of grog with the other, calling out the boy's many misdeeds, and the dog throws herself in front of him just as the stepfather accidentally fires the pistol. Blood mats the dog's fur and her chest shivers as the boy clutches her neck, weeping, and the stepfather collapses to his knees, shattered by the realization that this is the sin that has finally earned him passage to hell.

As a little girl I wanted so badly to be that dog – a blameless creature whose final sacrifice is compelled by love. And then there was the young Kent Simon, his innocent boy arms encircling her neck. Maybe it was my Catholic upbringing, all those Lenten Masses where we followed Christ from condemnation to suffering and death, but I could imagine no greater validation than the tears Simon cried over his dying dog.

"Mr. Simon," I said, fishing the phone from my back pocket and holding it in the air. "I think you left this at your table."

Simon and his companion looked me up and down. Up close, Simon's neck was impossibly thick, though it was accentuated by a slight boxer's hunch, as if he were physically unable to relax his shoulders. Buddy looked toward the ground-floor exit, at the opposite side of the building. "Weren't you up on the roof?"

"I took the elevator."

"We're running a little late," Simon said. "Could I have my phone, please?"

“Your film screened at my theater last night,” I said. “I’m Kelly Murdoch—I work at The Garnet.”

Simon glanced to Buddy, who tossed a protective arm over Simon’s massive shoulder to guide him toward the truck. “Thanks a lot, Kelly—we really appreciate you showing the film. We just have to get to a lunch thing and we’re running a little late. If we could have that phone back—”

“I was also at the reception last night. Your speech really made me think.”

Simon frowned. “Good.”

“It reminded me how much power famous people have.”

“Please return my property,” Simon said, taking a step closer. “Now.”

As he reached for the phone, I lowered it directly between us and then let it tumble over the back of my hand. It landed on one of its corners with a productive cracking sound. Simon’s eyes popped wide and locked with mine. He grabbed my left shoulder. “What the fuck was that?”

“It’s my little princess hands,” I said. “I’m always dropping things.”

Simon took my other shoulder, and my heels lifted off the ground. “Who are you? Carrie What?”

“Kelly What,” I said, looking hard into his pupils.

“Kelly!” Michael called behind us. He was speed-walking across the parking lot, waving my sweatshirt like a flag. A guy in cargo shorts and a baseball hat put his hand on a woman’s back and pointed to us over their

stroller. The woman produced a phone and held it up, preparing to take pictures or video.

Buddy picked up the phone and reached across Simon's chest, gently sweeping him toward the passenger side of their Tahoe. After Simon had been secured in the truck, Buddy rounded the back on his way to the driver's side, drilling a look into me as he passed. "You two best not be here when I get into that truck."

Blood pounded in my face. "Vehicular homicide makes excellent footage, asshole." But Michael and I stepped out of the way as red and white reverse lights came to life and the truck backed into a ninety-degree arc, then jerked forward with an audible screech.

Michael handed me the sweatshirt while we watched Simon's truck exit the parking lot and zoom down Lincoln Boulevard. "What the hell just happened?"

"I told Simon I was his biggest fan. He was about to make out with me when you barged in."

"He looked like he was about to chew on your face!"

I took a deep breath and exhaled forcibly. "I sometimes have that effect on men."

"Kent Simon was about to kick your ass," Michael said, popping me lightly in the shoulder. "You almost got beat up by Madman Chick McGrath!"

“Forget it,” I said, pulling my arms into the sweatshirt and zipping it halfway up. “You’ve seen too many movies.”

#

When I returned to Mara’s place, I found a sticker attached to the mailbox near the front door that I hadn’t noticed the night before. It informed mail recipient at 4713 West Lloyd Street that delivery had been suspended until the present mailbox contents had been removed. All other deliveries were being held for in-person retrieval at the post office on West Vliet.

A woman wearing a Badgers football jersey stepped onto the porch next door. She held a baby against her shoulder as she withdrew envelopes and a magazine from her mailbox. I grabbed the contents of Mara’s mailbox and jogged down the steps and onto the Badger fan’s driveway.

“Sorry to bother you,” I said, holding up a handful of mail. “I’m Mara Murdoch’s sister. She asked me to pick up her mail while she was out of town.”

The Badger fan adjusted her sleeping baby. “Out of town? No wonder it’s been so quiet over there.”

“Right,” I said, flinching. “Mara likes loud music.”

“I’ll tell you what’s hard,” she said, gesturing to the baby. “Keeping a kid unconscious when your upstairs neighbor cranks the stereo at eleven o’clock at night.”

“So I take it Mara didn’t ask you to grab her mail and hold on to it for her.”

The Badger fan was exasperated and amused. “Your sister was never very neighborly. We liked that Gregory, though.”

“Gregory?”

“The guy who took over her lease for a while. She was in China or something.”

“I never met Gregory.”

“Smartest guy I ever met, real good with kids. A keeper.”

“I’ll get out of your hair, but one more thing – I really like Mara’s apartment. Do you know if the management company has any other open properties?”

She shook her head. “No idea. You’d have to check the website or call the company. McFarland Investments. The guy’s name is Andy. He’d help you.”

#

I let myself back into Mara’s house and looked for evidence that she’d returned in my absence, but nothing had been moved since I left. I removed the rubber bands from the cluster of mail that had been jammed into her mailbox and spread it across her office table. Most were credit card applications, coupons for pizza and Chinese food, advertisements for window cleaners and lawn care

services. But there was also a magazine called *Potential* and a bill from Madison Gas and Electric.

I opened *Potential*, which turned out to be an academic journal. The table of contents did not include any articles attributed to Mara. I could decode some of the titles at a glance (“Individual differences in the subjective experience of positive emotions and their neurobiological correlates”), but half were indecipherable even to a girl who had excelled in Advanced Placement science while at high school: “Changes in dopamine transporter binding in nucleus accumbens concurrent with post-traumatic stress”; “Evaluation of NCS-1, DARPP-32, and neurotrophins in hippocampus and prefrontal cortex in rats submitted to chronic systemic inflammation.” The copyright page identified *Potential* as “the official peer-reviewed journal of the Research Association for Interpersonal Neuroscience (RAIN),” whose stated mission was “to promote an awake and compassionate world by advancing the science, theory, and practice of interpersonal neurobiology.”

I dropped the journal and held the utility bill in my hands, divining the concrete data inside. I opened the bill. One-hundred twenty-seven dollars for electricity and gas in the month of March, almost two months ago.

I replaced the bill in the envelope, absorbing the implications of this clue. It would soon be June, and Mara had not collected mail since March bills arrived. I checked the post mark on the envelope: April 11. More than six weeks ago. I sat down, checking my phone to see if there had been any word from Spencer or

Glenda: nothing yet. I wondered if it might be worth trying to collect Mara's mail from the post office on West Vliet. But they'd ask for identification that matched the mailing address. How closely would they scrutinize my driver's license?

Mara and I had the same last name.

I extracted the bill again and located the customer service number on the back. The usual recording of a robotic woman's voice answered. In slow and excruciating detail, the voice chanted the eight menu options that could be accessed via my touchtone phone. A muzak adaptation of Springsteen's "Born in the USA" hummed profanely while I waited for a human being.

"Hi, my name is Jennifer. How are you today?"

"I'm great," I said. "Just wanted a little help understanding my bill."

"Okay," said Jennifer. "Could you tell me your Customer Number? It should be located in the upper-righthand corner of your bill."

I scanned the page until I found it, then told her the number.

"Thanks, Ms. Murdoch. Could you confirm your address, please?"

"I'm at 4713 West Lloyd Street."

"Great. Could you confirm the amount for services on your April bill, please?"

"Actually," I said, "that's why I'm calling. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen a bill for a while—I wondered if my April bill got lost in the mail."

Keys clicked. "Then I'll just need your Personal Identification Number."

"I'm not sure I remember it," I said. "I set up the account a long time ago."

“Okay,” she said. “One moment, please.”

“How about the amount for services in March?” I asked. “I have that bill right in front of me.”

Clicking. “Okay – sure. Go ahead.”

I told her the amount.

“Thanks, Ms. Murdoch. What can I help you with today?”

“I just wanted to be sure that I haven’t missed a payment.”

“One moment while I pull that up,” she said.

How many different screens and reports were necessary for one customer? My eyes wandered to the tinted glass doors of the stereo cabinet, which became a dark crystal ball that contained an image of the room and me in it.

“Thanks for your patience, Ms. Murdoch.”

“I appreciate your help. How’s my account?”

“There’s no balance currently on your account.”

“That’s a relief,” I said. Maybe Mara had some electronic bill pay service set up online? “I don’t recall – which payment method did I use last month?”

“There was no payment last month,” said Jennifer. “The April charges were subtracted from your budget account.”

I scanned the bill. “I see the budget account here on my bill.”

“That was in March,” said Jennifer. “You make the same payment every month regardless of your monthly charges. The extra gets banked during months

with low charges and applied later to cover more expensive months.” There was a coy upturn in her voice. “Or when your bill gets lost in the mail.”

I looked at the bill again. “So there’s one-hundred eighty-one dollars still in my budget account?”

“After April charges, your account has forty-three dollars and fourteen cents.”

I thanked Jennifer and finished the call – more evidence that Mara had been missing in action for weeks. I shuffled the pages of the bill a couple times, hoping another idea would occur to me, but the important numbers had been explained.

I wrote a large note with my phone number saying that I was concerned and asking that Mara call me, and taped it to the tinted glass doors of the stereo cabinet. This reminded me of the ghostly chair at the other end of the room, but upon investigation I found that today it was not haunted, only empty.

I thought of our grandmother’s funeral in Wauteebenah, five years before. The sky had threatened rain all day. Mara wore a green velvet dress more appropriate for a Christmas party, and her dark hair was cut short and parted like a man’s. I soon after cut my hair in similar fashion to see if it would grant me the same haunted aura. Mara was taller than average, and her shoulders were broad. I often felt delicate and fine-boned when I stood next to her. Her calves and ankles were still the smooth, efficient limbs of a long-distance runner. She trained every day during her sophomore year of high school to beat the state

record for the eight-hundred-meter run, and she beat it by two seconds. She ran the three-mile run next to me when I joined the track team my freshman year, and she beat that state record by seven seconds and my time by five. While pacing with my arms on my hips, catching my breath, I watched her douse her face with paper cups of water and thought it for the first time: *My sister will always be better than me.*

We'd stood with our mother next to our grandmother's casket, looking for the last time on the woman who did so much during her life to make the three of us feel loved. As a child, all fear and confusion drained away when I sat next to our grandmother in church. Time stopped or changed direction as we kneeled in the plain wooden pews. Through the stained-glass windows, the world was painted in sacrifice, ascension, resurrection, and forgiveness.

I had thought of these things as we looked on my grandmother because I hadn't wanted to remember my father's closed coffin standing in the same church vestibule, a picture of him posing in a softball uniform at the center of a nearby collage. My mother said she loved how happy he looked. I later understood that it was taken during a time when she was most happy herself, a time when her husband's death must have seemed as impossible and unthinkable as her own. He'd been thirty-years old in the summer of 1976, with sandy curls framing his face, tinted prescription glasses, a moustache in full bloom. "Kingfishers" flowed in white script across his red ball cap.

Maybe we all remembered Dad as we stood next to Grandma's coffin. Then Mara walked back to the pew. Our mother searched her purse for a tissue and I slipped my hand between her shoulder blades. The stained-glass conjured a memory of my grandmother singing "Gift of Finest Wheat" in her reedy alto. Her voice was so clear in my mind that I had to look away, unable to resolve the song in my memory with the woman lying in the casket before me.

That night, Mara and I stayed at our mother's place. Mara quickly turned impatient whenever others waxed sentimental or talked about the past, but she sat quietly next to the fireplace as our mother gathered old photo albums so that we could reminisce. Waterskiers carved the surface of a sparkling lake, men in sunglasses laughed in the shade of a public park shelter, children advanced cribbage pegs in a midwinter tavern while their parents donned Santa hats, preparing to sing.

As children, Mara and I had been neither elegant nor striking – we were of the suburban television generation that grew up eating McDonald's Happy Meals and wearing shoes made of plastic. Our bottle-green eyes had the same hardness about them, a feature that became more pronounced in the stormy years of adolescence. Despite our tendency to brood, Mara had been popular in high school, a deep source of insecurity for me when I first came to high school and she was a junior. She rarely acknowledged me in the halls. I often learned things about her from other people. A friend of mine swore that her older brother's best friend had impregnated Mara and that she'd had an abortion. And

that it hadn't been her first time. I treated the rumor like a dirty secret instead of responding with compassion and concern for my sister – though certainly she would have been angry at my intrusion.

I would have been twenty-six at our grandmother's funeral and Mara would have been thirty, the same age as our father when he drove to that softball field on a sunny day in June, parked the blue Rambler American, kissed my mother, and grinned for the photographer waiting at home plate.

But when Mara was fourteen and I was ten, our father launched the boat at Sunfish Park and motored across Lake Wauteebenah, dropped anchor at the dam, and shot himself in the head with the .38 Smith & Wesson that had been his army service revolver.

My mother had taken me to see a psychologist a few weeks later. He gave me Crayons and asked me to draw a picture of my feelings, so I drew a fat green monster with red eyes and blue claws – a spontaneous invention. I was angry with the doctor for asking me to do such a stupid thing, to draw a picture when I'd just lost my father, when I had to fall asleep at night to the sound of my mother crying on the other side of my bedroom wall. So I drew something that I thought a kindergartener would draw. But the act of creation had created, and so this ugly creature returned to sit on my chest and glide its metallic blue claws over my throat whenever I felt inconsolably disappointed. Especially when I was disappointed in myself.

Since finding my sister felt beyond my power, I called our mother.

She answered before the second ring, responsive as always. "Hello?" Her voice was musical, grounded, and I wished that she was with me at Mara's house.

"Hi, Mom," I said. "Are you feeling better?"

"Oh, I'm fine, darling. I'm sorry that I couldn't come to your movie."

My mother usually fell asleep during movies, and the word she might use to describe any situation involving crowds might be "tacky," but she would have come to my premiere and remained outwardly cheerful if not for illness. The sparse people skills Mara and I had were gifts from our father's end of the gene pool; our mother, a librarian for thirty-five years at the community college in Wauteebenah, taught us to love books and solitude. She may also have been responsible for teaching us an abiding suspicion of others. Or perhaps that was our father's final lesson.

"The premiere was fine, Mom, but here's the thing: I'm at Mara's place."

"Good that your sister made some time for you. Tell her it'd be nice if she returned her mother's phone calls sometimes."

"But Mara's not here."

A light cough. Throat clearing. "She's at work?"

"I can't find her, Mom. Have you talked to her lately?"

"Oh, no. Your sister never answers a telephone."

"But I mean like within the past couple of months. Have you talked to her since March?"

Silence.

“You still there, Mom?”

“Yes,” she said, clearing her throat again. “I’m trying to remember the last time I spoke to your sister. She met me for lunch in February when I was in Madison for the Wisconsin Library Association’s conference. I can’t remember if we spoke in March or April. Not this month. I can hardly believe it’s almost June!”

“I’m sure everything’s fine, but I’m having some trouble tracking her down.”

“I thought you said that you’re at her house.”

“And then I told you she’d not in it. I stayed here last night and she didn’t come home.”

“Now you know how I felt when you were teenagers.”

“Convince me Mara’s okay.”

“Kelly,” she said, her voice gentle and musical again, “you worry too much, dear. Your sister always turns up—usually soaking wet or with some bizarre new hair-do, but otherwise unscathed.”

Mara ran away four or five times in the years that followed our father’s death. I considered telling our mother that Mara had lost her job, but I didn’t have all the information yet and wouldn’t be in a position to answer her questions. And once I learned all the particulars, it might be that our mother would never be cleared for access to the full story. It might be that I’d said too

much already. Children must protect their parents whenever possible from the horrible things in the world.

“Okay – you convinced me. I worry too much.”

“You always did. Do you remember when you told me that your stuffed polar bear was depressed?”

“Okay, Mom – save the stories for your next dinner party.”

“Mom, you said. *Frosty’s sad and I don’t know what to do.*” She laughed brightly.

“Frosty had really sad eyes, Mom. He’d clearly been through something.”

“But we made him feel better, didn’t we?”

“Really, Mom, it’s fine.”

“We sang him a song. Do you remember it?”

I sat on the couch and leaned back, defeated. “Yeah.”

“*Hey Jude,*” she sang, waiting for me to join in.

“*Don’t make it bad,*” I sang.

We continued together: “*Take a sad song, and make it better. Remember to let her into your heart –*” I took a breath. “*Then you can start to make it better.*”

#

McFarland Investments was a small office on the second floor of a gray building near West Towne Mall. A Mexican restaurant franchise occupied the lot next

door, its sign a giant red and green sombrero rotating high on a pole. A discount shoe outlet languished across the street next to a garage that performed oil changes in thirty minutes or less. Browse for some new sandals while they filled her up with 5W-30.

The middle-aged woman sitting at the reception desk was thumbing the screen of her phone as I walked in. I said "Hi," and she smiled without looking up, finished playing with her phone, and then made eye contact.

"I'm here to speak with Andy," I said, hoping the informal use of his name might suggest familiarity. Nothing to think twice about. Let's be easy.

"Sure," she said, clicking her keyboard, glancing at her computer monitor. "Do you have an appointment?"

"My sister made an appointment for me," I said. "Mara Murdoch. She rents one of your properties and loves it."

The woman nodded. "I don't see anything on the schedule, but Mr. McFarland should have an opening in about ten minutes. He's just finishing up with another client. Are you looking for a two-bedroom property? Do you have pets?"

"No pets," I said. "And bedrooms are negotiable. I'm just trying to get a sense of the market right now."

"Okay," she said, clicking. "Last name also Murdoch?"

"Yes," I said. "First name Kelly. Kelly Murdoch."

She clicked. Paused. Clicked again and turned to me. "You're all set for the next spot. You can have a seat. Feel free to grab a cup of coffee."

I smiled, thanked her, and then availed myself of the waiting room coffee mostly to have something warm to hold in my hands. But the aroma of rubber and damp soil persuaded me to store this faux coffee on the table designed for warm beverages, next to the *Golf* and *Yachting* magazines. A man's sun-grizzled face dominated the latest issue of *Tech Stock*, his watery eyes shaded by the brim of a cowboy hat. A salt-and-pepper goatee framed his mouth above a headline: "On the Trail with Lorenzo Hills."

A door opened in the back of the waiting area and two men exited. One was heavysset with splotchy pink complexion and hair dyed a shade of reddish-brown not found in nature; the other was tall, late-thirties, and carrying a stack of manila folders under one arm. They chuckled amiably while making their way across the waiting room and shook hands in front of the reception desk while bidding each other a chummy farewell. The tall man took his stack of folders with him as he left.

"This is Kelly Murdoch," said the receptionist. "Her sister leases one of the West Lloyd properties."

The man held out his hand. "Andy McFarland. Pleased to meet you. Shall we step into my office?"

His hand was cold as a bag of frozen peas. "Great to meet you, Andy."

He ushered me into his office and closed the door, gestured to one of the seats opposite his enormous desk, and then plopped into his leather chair. "So what's up, Kelly? Are we talking about some investments this afternoon?"

"I'm more interested in learning about your properties," I said. "My sister, Mara, rents the house at 4713 West Lloyd."

"Of course," he smiled, leaning onto his desk. "Let's figure out what you're looking for. Do you have pets? Kids?"

"I'd like something similar to Mara's house. Do you have any other properties like hers?"

"Let's see," said Andy, pulling a gigantic white binder from a shelf above his desk and opening to the center. He lifted a page to glance at the next, sifted backward to a grid annotated with pen marks. "We have two brand new units in our Juneau Hill property. Perfect location. Walking distance from the Metro Market, convenient access to downtown bars and restaurants. All the amenities. Barely two-years old – the sticker's probably still on the chrome dishwasher."

"Sounds a little swankier than Mara's place."

"You pay a little more for rent, but there's a complete fitness center on the second floor. And this isn't some basement room with a pair of dumbbells and rubber mat. Panoramic views in all directions. Weights, machines, treadmills, yoga, t'ai chi, Pilates. No more gym memberships. And it's a great way to meet your neighbors."

"What're we talking? Fifteen-hundred a month?"

“It’s eighteen, but that includes a numbered parking spot. Covered parking is a little extra, but you can’t put a price on a warm engine block in February, no ice to scrape off the windows –”

“Anything closer to Mara’s price range? She pays what, a thousand?”

“Three blocks from Washington Park?” Andy frowned gently. “A hop, skip, and a jump from downtown Wauwatosa? She pays twelve-hundred, but that’s just because she’s my favorite tenant. She’d be paying fourteen if we were charging market prices.”

“Mara’s your favorite tenant?”

He smiled, amused. “Why so surprised?”

“The Murdoch girls always got picked last when we played kickball.”

He laughed hard, though I hadn’t expected it. “With spunk like yours?”

“You’d be surprised how rarely it’s appreciated.”

“Well, we appreciate the hell out of a good tenant.”

“Mara must be a reliable – she’s always been organized.”

“Organized, reliable,” said Andy. “And she always pays in advance.”

“Mara likes to stay on top of things.”

Andy nodded. “Six months in advance.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s pretty much the top of the top.”

“Every month, Debbie’s on the phone hunting missing rent checks, and every year I pay a collection agency to shake down deadbeats. Your sister, we just send her a Christmas card every year and put those two checks in the bank.”

“Since she started the lease?”

“She paid in person when she signed, and ever since it’s been a check in the mail every six months. We’d be happy to have another Murdoch on the books.”

I glanced at my phone and furrowed my brow, concentrating as if reading a text message. “I’m sorry, but an appointment just got rescheduled,” I said, thumbing across a blank screen. “I have to be across town in twenty minutes, but maybe I could get your card and be in touch?”

“I know how that goes,” said Andy. “Why don’t we meet early next week? My Tuesday is wide open. I can get some properties lined up in advance and we can do a tour. How’s your portfolio health? Do you have any mutual funds?”

“Tuesday might work,” I said, rising. “My sister speaks so highly of you.”

“And I can’t speak highly enough of her,” said Andy, offering a business card with his left hand and presenting his other to shake mine. “We like to think of ourselves as family.”

I pocketed his card and shook his hand. “That’s how I like to think of us, too.”

#

I blamed film for my sentimental habit of indulging nostalgia. Our father had been a lifelong fanatic of television and film, from the Lone Ranger serials of his youth through Hollywood's Golden Age and into the classic war movies of the 1970s—*Patton*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Wild Geese*. We often observed holidays and special occasions in our home by viewing a particular film. Easter was both *The Ten Commandments* and *The Wizard of Oz*. We watched *The Lemon Drop Kid* on Christmas Eve and *Gremlins* on Christmas Day. Halloween was *E.T.*, and on Mara's birthday, November 1, we watched *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Our mother's birthday was *Brigadoon*, my father's was *Cool Hand Luke*, and on my birthday, August 30, we watched *Stand by Me*.

Wet leaves tumbled across the sidewalk or a strong October wind blew across my neck and I might recall the gloomy fall day when I first watched Darth Vader's imperial starship glide onto the screen in pursuit of Princess Leia's little consular vessel—our mother was baking zucchini bread, and Mara sat on our father's recliner, the skirt of her nightgown stretched over her knees because it was almost Thanksgiving but our mother kept the thermostat at a thrifty fifty-nine degrees. I was in the process of giving my virginity to Chad Stryker the first time I heard "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" skipping along near the end of *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. I'd stayed home from school with the flu and he came over during the lunch period. The song was still playing when Chad

finished. As I watched the dust motes glimmer like microscopic feathers in the light streaming through my blinds, I thought: *Chad loves me so much, he doesn't even care that I have the flu.*

This was the person Gil and Summer's movie conjured for me – a younger self who didn't consider herself idealistic, but nonetheless saw the world through a lens of good intentions that was difficult for my older self to take seriously, except as a source of devastating pathos. The death of such innocence is the sacrifice we all make to gain access to the world beyond our childhoods, but their movie summoned the innocence again, reminded me how real it once seemed, and how real seemed the worlds it projected into the future.

On its face, *Stone Park* was a love story. A girl in her late-twenties named Amber works the register at an auto parts store in one of the "villages" west of Chicago. She cracks wise while smoking with the grease-smearing men who work in the attached garage. It's clear that she's been around the block with a few of them, including her boss, a heavysset man with a wedding band on his finger and a gun rack in the rear window of his pickup truck.

But at a house party, Amber runs into her younger brother and his friend Marshall, who had been a frequent visitor to their childhood home. Marshall, played by Gil Van Der Plueg, annihilates her with a glance. Gone is the cowlicked twelve-year-old with a skateboard under his arm. Overlapping tattoos up and down his arms paint a map of his exploits overseas. He has been to war and returned a young wolf – knowing, vulnerable, dangerous, and irresistible.

Love charges their lives with new meaning. In one of the most heartwrenching scenes, they share their darkest fears while lying on Marshall's twin mattress, tangled in a single sheet while late afternoon sunlight goes gray and they fill an ashtray balanced on a cardboard box. More profound than their secrets is the realization that this stark scene – with its peeling paint and smoky half-light and the mattress that looks like it was once abandoned on a curb – has unlocked the most happiness these two have ever known. They giggle like children, their souls laid open for one another. And we know that now it all must be taken away.

By the end of the second act, Amber's boss rapes her and she quits her job, lays in bed staring at the ceiling all day. After she breaks down and tells Marshall what happened, he launches into the third act, the inevitable confrontation that will seal their fates.

The credits rolled while I sat unblinking, stunned and unsure how I had been led to believe that this would be a watered-down coming-of-age snooze. The crowd was on their feet, applauding, and I stood to join them. Summer smiled professionally as Gil and the actress who played Amber embraced while people near them clapped their backs, congratulating them. As they prepared to take the stage for their well-deserved bows, I flanked the crowd by the far aisle, spilled out the theater doors into the humid night, and made for a bar called The Atom Bomb.

#

“Mara was never one to keep in touch,” said Glenda, stirring her whiskey-and-ginger with a swizzle stick. “But I haven’t seen her or heard from her since she left ABE a couple months ago.”

Peroxide-blonde and cotton-candy pink streaks ran through Glenda’s dark hair, which was pinned to her head with several barrettes. She wore a silver hoop in her left nostril and a gothic tattoo whorled above the neck of her tank top, running just beneath her collarbones. Her left knee touched my right thigh beneath the round cocktail table at the center of our horseshoe-shaped booth. Spencer sat opposite me, gripping his beer bottle and grinning as he looked from Glenda to me and back again. Red pleather cushions with brass-colored hardware made me feel like we were at sea and below deck. Salt and sweat were heavy in the air.

The Atom Bomb was a windowless dive just north of National in Walker’s Point. It was dark, smelled like pot, and hosted a bustling crowd of gutter punks, elderly men, and lurching twenty-somethings who appeared very new to the burden of self-determination. A decorative light fixture hung above our round cocktail table, but it did not include a bulb. Most of the ambient light derived from red and blue neon tubes in the jukebox, some dim track lighting above the bar mirror, and occasional bursts from the hallway in the back that led to the

bathrooms. My father's tavern looked like a summer Bible camp compared to this dungeon.

I tasted my gin-and-tonic. "Any idea where Mara may have gone?"

"Mara did not love to share," Glenda said.

"To sharing," said Spencer, touching his craft beer bottle first to my glass and then Glenda's. He took a swig and leaned back, expectant. Glenda raised her glass to her lips. I pretended to be unfamiliar with the ritual.

"But you and Mara spent time together?" I asked Glenda. "When she worked at the lab? What did you do together?"

"Yoga," said Glenda. "Mara found out that I was a yoga instructor, and she was really into yoga."

"Like Downward-Facing Dog?" I asked. "Warrior Pose? Things like that?"  
Glenda nodded, sipping her drink.

"So she joined your yoga class?"

"Sometimes," said Glenda. "But she wanted to become an instructor. She was very into meditation."

"Ever since Tibet," said Spencer. "She got really into meditation in Tibet."

"Were you part of the team that went to Tibet, Spencer?"

"No, no," he said. "I'm the project coordinator, remember? I'm the logistics guy. I keep everyone on schedule, mostly by sending lots of annoying emails." He laughed merrily.

"What was the project in Tibet all about?"

“There were multiple projects,” said Glenda.

Spencer nodded. “They were collecting data and observations to be used in several different research contexts.”

“Were you there, Glenda?”

She shook her multi-colored head. “I’m just the grad student intern.”

Spencer rotated his beer between the palms of his hands. “The researchers were pursuing the same questions in Tibet that we pursue in the lab here in town. What are the biological and physiological markers of things like concentration and subjective emotional states? How do these things correlate with pro- and anti-social behaviors? How might these factors impact things like immune response and chronic illness predictors?”

“Subjective emotional states,” I said. “Like anger? Fear?”

“Sure,” said Glenda. “But in Tibet, they were more often interested in states associated with emotions like gratitude, or compassion.”

A raven-haired girl skipped to the bar, where she threw an enthusiastic arm over the shoulders of an old man who had been resting his snowy head on the bar. She shook him gently, speaking into his ear until he first raised his head, then jolted to find someone’s face so near his own. Three other girls arrived and they appeared to be coordinating a round of shots for all five of them.

“We work with a lot of Buddhist monks at ABE,” said Spencer. “But these monks are usually already Westernized in a variety of ways. They come to us from temples in Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco. Sometimes they’re in the

middle of a lecture tour. Dr. McKenzie wanted to get data from a population that was more pure.”

“Dr. McKenzie is the guy in charge?” I asked.

Glenda nodded. “He’s the director for ABE.”

“So the trip to Tibet was aimed at studying monks there?”

Spencer scooped peanuts from a paper boat in the middle of the table and deposited them in his mouth. “Yep.”

“And that’s how Mara got into meditation?”

Glenda arched an eyebrow. “The Nirvana Circuit.”

Spencer looked at Glenda, frowning. “Dr. Murdoch thought she found the area of the brain associated with—you know, with like ‘sublime happiness’ or something.”

Now Glenda frowned. “Don’t dismiss her findings. There are dozens of applications that haven’t even been imagined yet. It’ll be ten years before anyone even scratches the surface.”

Spencer held up his palms. “Anyone else need another drink?”

I held up my gin. “I’ll get the next round.”

Glenda slid her empty glass across the table. “Whatever’s cheap.”

I leaned forward on my elbows. “So you worked with Mara on her research?”

“I assisted on the EEG tests with the post-traumatic stress vets.”

“Spencer mentioned the vet project. How did it work?”

“We alternated two milliamps of direct current to their entorhinal cortexes and temporal lobes for thirty-minute periods three times a week for six weeks.”

“Electroshock therapy?”

She waved this away. “No, no – ECT is a lot more juice. Four-hundred times more. Electroconvulsive treatments induce seizures. Our subjects read novels and ate cupcakes and worked jigsaw puzzles while they received current.”

“Was that part of the experiment – cupcakes and novels?”

“We wanted to measure how brain waves responded to sensory stimulation before, during, and after the application of current.”

“Did it work?” I asked. “I mean, what happened?”

“Massive jumps – brain wave amplitude increased five and six times compared to baseline measurements taken prior to the therapy. And these effects were far more durable than we might have guessed – the electromagnetic surges remained stable for an hour or more after the therapy ended. In some cases, the numbers suggested the treatments might even be cumulative. MRI scans indicate that the therapy restructures brain circuits, accelerates neural processing, makes it easier for neurons to organize complex networks.”

“And make vets with PTSD experience...enlightenment?”

“Nirvana?” Glenda said, taking a big sip to recover after her mini-lecture. “Some effects were fairly consistent from subject to subject – expanded capacity for memory, heightened visual acuity, improved concentration while performing

repetitive tasks – and other effects, like shifts in emotional states, varied considerably.”

I smiled. “Just a little baby grad student, huh?”

Glenda laughed. “A little baby grad student getting her doctorate in clinically-based molecular neuroscience.”

“The grad students in my master’s program were just trying to figure out which way to point a camera.”

“You’re a photographer?”

“Filmmaker.”

“Don’t be modest,” Glenda said, dropping her phone on the table next to the peanut dish. “I can’t even work the camera in my phone.”

Spencer set our drinks down using the standard two-handed triangular arrangement for transporting three drinks from bar to table.

“Thanks,” I said, squeezing the lime wedge into the drink. “The molecular neuroscientist here was just telling me about the vet tests.”

Spencer grinned. “The Boyfriend Test.”

“Shut up,” said Glenda.

Spencer took a pull off his beer, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “She didn’t tell you?”

“Glenda met someone during the EEG trials?”

Spencer held a finger to his nose.

“Jesus, Spencer.” Glenda sighed. “It was Mara.”

Spencer rolled his eyes.

“Mara dated a subject?” I asked, a little surprised. “Doesn’t seem like Mara’s style.”

Glenda smiled grimly. “Nick is every girl’s style.”

I watched her face, trying to decide to what degree Nick had been her style.

“So that’s why Mara had to go on mandatory leave? Inappropriate relationship with a test subject or whatever?”

They both looked confused.

“No,” Spencer said. “I mean, it’s not solid ethical practice for a researcher to get involved with a test subject. It fucks with objectivity, introduces confounds, stuff like that. But Dr. Murdoch went off a different deep end.”

My eyes fell on one of the empty chairs at the table next to our booth and my spine tingled as I remembered the ghostly chair in Mara’s living room.

“Which deep end?”

“Mara was always—” Glenda twirled the ice in her drink. “You know. Anxious. High-strung.”

“Your sister was profoundly depressed,” said Spencer, tipping back his beer.

I frowned. “Mara has always been tough on herself. She’s ambitious. She has high standards. She used to have a seizure disorder that had certain emotional side effects.”

Spencer and Glenda raised their eyebrows as they looked at each other, and I wanted to bite my tongue off. I scowled at my gin-and-tonic, which must have been around ninety percent gin.

“Two weeks before she left, Mara told me that she no longer needed to sleep.” Glenda knitted her brows. “She said that she just ‘rested her body’ for thirty minutes twice a day.”

Spencer shook his head. “She was turning into a red-eyed maniac.”

I shot him an acid look, but his beer seemed to have armored him against social judgments.

“Dr. McKenzie got her in touch with University Health,” Spencer said. “She clearly needed rest.”

“I opened the lab one morning and she was already in the meditation chamber,” Glenda said. “When I asked what time she came in, she said that she’d been meditating since the night before.”

I slumped back into the booth. “You didn’t think to tell me that my sister was being treated for some kind of severe mental illness?”

Glenda and Spencer looked at each other.

“Everyone ends up at University Health at some point,” Spencer said. “There’s a lot of pressure to generate good data, get it published, bring in grant dollars.”

Glenda shrugged. “I got on head meds my second year of grad school. I sleep better, feel more resilient. It’s just chemistry.” She sipped her drink.

Spencer held his hands in the air, describing an invisible picture frame. "To put it into perspective, that vet project brought in a little more than four-hundred grand from federally-funded agencies, and there's probably a lot more to follow once this round of data gets written up. Big pharmaceuticals pour cash into studies they can use to scaffold their product development. The parasite trials last spring brought in almost a hundred-thousand from the insurance industry and the CDC."

"Didn't Mara work on some parasite studies?"

Spencer set his empty bottle on the table. "Right – with Dr. Jurić."

"He's sort of a loon," Glenda said, raising her empty glass. "Your round, Kelly?"

I finished off the last of my gin and gathered the glasses and beer bottle. The old man was again engaged face-first with the bar. On either side of the mirror, an assortment of black and red t-shirts hung for sale. Above the famous image of an atom depicted as three electrons in orbit around a nucleus, the text of the shirts read "I Got Bombed." The shirts and this poor old man and the bad lighting in this place awoke murky feelings of sorrow and regret. I collected our new drinks and returned to our corner, where Spencer and Glenda were laughing about something as I slid the drinks onto the table.

Spencer raised his beer. "To DARPA dollars." Glenda clinked his glass and I did this time, too.

"What's DARPA?" I asked.

Spencer winked. "Your tax dollars hard at work."

"Department of Defense," said Glenda. "Sort of."

Spencer chewed another handful of peanuts. "They were primary funding on the vet studies."

"Makes sense," I said, crushing my lime wedge and stirring it into the ice cubes. "The Pentagon wants to cure PTSD, maybe find ways to prevent it."

"Well," said Glenda, "that'd be nice, I'm sure. But they want this tech for training purposes, guaranteed."

"Training?"

Spencer tapped his beer bottle to his temple. "Flight instruction, language acquisition, sniper training, Special Forces stuff you don't even hear about."

I sighed, checking my watch. "I think my evening is nearing an end, folks."

"You're kidding." Spencer looked horrified. "We just got here!"

"You guys do yoga and stuff—I'm way out of shape." I finished half of my remaining drink in one long slurp. "But we should get together again sometime. Maybe I'll convince Mara to join us once I find her."

Glenda and Spencer looked at each other, then broke out laughing.

"Okay, okay," I said. "But before I go, how do I find Mara's hunky boyfriend?"

Spencer made his hand into a gun and shot me. "Confidentiality, my dear. We've been down this road before."

Shocked, I opened my palms to show how empty they were of malice. "Mara's probably staying with this guy. I have to find her and make sure she's safe. And I already know his name's Nick anyway."

Glenda and Spencer looked at each other.

"I'm *her* sister," I reminded them. "You get it."

Glenda leaned forward. "I can tell you one thing."

"Glenda," Spencer warned.

I finished the rest of my drink, and watched Spencer's eyes follow the empty glass as I brought it to rest immediately next to his beer bottle, our knuckles barely touching. I gave Glenda a reassuring smile. "Tell me."

Glenda scanned the dark barroom, as if checking that the coast were clear. "Nick was friends with that guy."

"Which guy?"

Spencer, as subtly as possible, extracted the beer bottle from his right hand with his left so that our knuckles remained in suggestive contact.

"You know," said Glenda. "The guy who just did that shooting."

#

Before the bartender placed Glenda's phone behind the bar for safekeeping, I located the four Nicks in her address book and copied their numbers and last names on the back of a Miller Lite beer coaster. I told the bartender that the

phone was abandoned on the sink in the bathroom, figuring that any molecular neuroscientist worth her nucleotides would check with the bartender before she left, or at some point the next day if it took her that long to figure out it was missing. But who goes one whole hour without checking her phone?

Research began when I got back to my room. I had a can of 7-Up and one last finger of gin, so they joined two ice cubes in the glass next to me as I googled the last name of each Nick in combination with “Kaspar Rohani.” The last names “Armas” and “Bailey” failed to generate anything substantial, but a search including “Nick Durant” produced a substantial-looking article on the U. S. Army’s official website: “Paratroopers pursue Expert Infantryman designation”:

*FORT BRAGG, NC – On the morning of Oct. 16, 2006, hundreds of paratroopers stood in formation at Pike Field, prepared to pursue their Expert Infantryman Badge.*

*Infantrymen assigned to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, began the weeklong EIB testing with the Army Physical Fitness Test and the daytime land navigation course. Paratroopers from 1st BCT also participated.*

*Several different events pushed the paratroopers to demonstrate their skills as infantrymen. Along with the AFPT, in which they had to score at least 75 percent in each event, participants had to complete three combat-oriented lanes, where they were graded on ten different tasks in each lane. Paratroopers had to use basic infantry skills ranging from identifying terrain features, moving under direct fire, loading and unloading, and correcting malfunctions on various weapons systems, performing first aid on various*

wounds, calling for medical evacuation, calling for and adjusting indirect fire support, and sending situation reports to a headquarters element.

*Staff Sgt. Thomas Nowak, a grader at the traffic control point lanes, explained that the Expert Infantryman Badge “proves that a soldier has mastered all the tasks required to protect his team, complete his mission, and defend America.”*

*On the final day of the EIB testing, the soldiers began their final event – the 12-mile foot march. The foot march, which had to be completed within three hours with their prescribed packing list, challenged the soldiers to demonstrate their endurance and grit.*

*Out of 563 Infantrymen who participated, 241 were awarded the EIB, and 37 were classified as “true blue” EIBs. “True blue” indicates infantrymen who earned their badges with a first-time pass in every event.*

An image in the middle of the article depicted a buzz-cut soldier in Army-issue PT shorts and t-shirt as he leaned on a fellow soldier’s feet and screamed savagely while his partner performed sit-ups. The caption read: “Spc. Nick Durant motivates Spc. Kaspar Rohani during the Army Physical Fitness Test portion of the Expert Infantrymen Badge Testing at Pike Field on October 19, 2006. Assigned to 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, both Spc. Durant and Spc. Rohani successfully earned their EIBs. Spc. Durant was further awarded a ‘true blue’ distinction.”

I printed the article and searched the fourth Nick’s last name just to be thorough, but none of the hits were relevant. It was almost one in the morning. My cocktail, like me, was exhausted. So we both called it a night.

#

My phone's message indicator tone woke me the next morning. I managed to sleep through the incoming call, which appeared to come from a Madison number that wasn't in my list of contacts. I hit the callback button without listening to the voicemail message.

"Ryan McKenzie. How can I help you?"

His voice was strong, musical. It took a second for me to place his last name.

"Dr. McKenzie?" I asked. "This is Kelly Murdoch, Mara's sister."

"Yes," he said, his voice lowering perceptibly. "I just left you a message. I was hoping that you might be able to come by the office later this morning."

"Yeah," I said, running a hand over my face and clearing my throat. "I'd like that. Do you know how to reach Mara?"

"I'm afraid not," he said, "but your sister will be the topic of our conversation. Can you be here at eleven o'clock? I have a tight schedule today, but I think it's important that we meet briefly."

"Sounds ominous, if you don't mind my saying."

"I look forward to meeting you," said Dr. McKenzie. "Please be prompt."

#

When it had reached the civilized hour of ten o'clock, I called Nick Durant's number. It went straight to voicemail, where the greeting was curt: *Nick here – leave a message*. It sounded as if he recorded the message while he was driving, or brushing his teeth. I announced that I was Mara's sister. I'd been having some trouble contacting Mara, and could he please call me back at his earliest convenience, looking forward to meeting him, et cetera.

And then I showered and dressed in work pants and a blouse. It never hurts to look respectable when entering someone else's workplace.

A storm gathered as I pulled into the Maxwell Center's parking lot. Gray-violet clouds swirled in the building's polished glass exterior, and the first drops of rain speckled my face as I walked into the front lobby, smiled briskly for the guard sitting at the reception desk, and made my way to ABE. Janice frowned when she looked up and found me trying to appear mild and friendly.

"Dr. McKenzie is expecting me," I said. "Could you please direct me to his office?"

"One moment," she said, picking up her phone. "I don't see you on his schedule."

Thirty seconds later, McKenzie turned the corner and waved me toward him. "Kelly? Thanks for coming – please follow me."

I followed him past a series of cubicles, including one with GLENDA ORT printed on its nameplate. Glenda's back was turned to the aisle that ran between the two rows of cubicles. She appeared to be concentrating on a dense list of numbers, but glanced back as we passed, so I waved. She raised a hand in automatic reciprocation but then frowned, perhaps because she'd come to suspect that I had something to do with her misplaced phone.

McKenzie's office was roughly twice the size of Spencer's. A series of leafy green plants were positioned on top of the bookcases lining the walls on either side of the room, and the bookcase shelves stored several statuettes, pieces of pottery, and other evidence of distinguished travel abroad. The back wall was a single enormous window. He gestured to one of the two chairs across the desk from his, and we both sat. He smiled sympathetically, which is just a grimace full of regret.

"I understand that you're looking for Mara," he said.

"I'm anxious to find her," I said. "She hasn't been to her house in several days – there's some evidence that suggests it's been weeks since she's been home. I was hoping someone here at the lab might know where she is."

"Well –"

"And thanks very much for seeing me," I interrupted. "I know you're busy, and I appreciate your time. I hope my recent visit wasn't disruptive in any way."

He waved this aside. "I understand your concern, and I wanted to tell you in person that I have my own concerns. Mara was not well when she left."

"I heard that she took up some eccentric ideas when she returned from Tibet."

"Tibet was a powerful experience for her – for all of us."

"You were there?"

He nodded. "I've been to Tibet seven times over the past twenty years, and I feel transformed by every visit. I'm never quite the same when I return. And that kind of radical change can be – uncomfortable. Disruptive."

"I take it we're not talking about jetlag."

He was an attractive man, and laughed like one: full of confidence and ease. His light chestnut hair was wavy and there was no gray in it, though he must have been almost fifty to have advanced so far in his field. His complexion said forty, tops, but pictures of him and the Dalai Lama popped up when I googled his name earlier, McKenzie's arm around the shoulders of His Holiness like they just stepped off the softball field. I downloaded his CV from the ABE website and there were more than sixty peer-reviewed articles cited, along with a handful of well-reviewed books. To young research neurobiologists, Dr. McKenzie must have looked like Bono or Keith Richards.

"It's like spiritual jetlag," he said. "Mara had trouble acclimating to her new spiritual consciousness." His face darkened. "I'm afraid she had quite a lot of trouble."

“I heard that she was put on mandatory leave.”

“For her sake, yes. And I’m afraid that Spencer and Glenda don’t know the full extent of it.”

Masking my surprise, I made note that the neurorockstar had eyes and ears everywhere. “What is the full extent of it?”

“Spencer and Glenda and the rest of the staff are only aware of the eccentric behavior that took place here at the lab – her self-induced sleep deprivation, her unhealthy pursuit of deep meditation – but Mara came to my home a couple of months ago and told me that she intended to harm herself.”

My lower lip twitched. *Harm herself. Intention to harm. Suicide. Kill herself. End her own life.* I blinked several times.

I said, “Our father killed himself when we were young,” and immediately wished that I hadn’t. I hadn’t decided yet whether I trusted Dr. Ryan McKenzie, noted researcher, friend of humanity, and personal pal of the Dalai Lama.

“No one else here at the lab knows about this,” he said, “but Mara took pills before she came to my house. She said that she wanted to die.”

*Took pills. Wanted to die.* The words stung my eyes like acid and something wet threatened to slide down my cheek, so I pretended to scratch my eyebrow while I recentered.

Dr. McKenzie reached across the desk to touch my hands and I withdrew them automatically.

“But she didn’t want to die, Kelly. If she’d really wanted to die, she wouldn’t have come to my house. She wouldn’t have told me about the pills.”

“So what happened next? You took her to the hospital? Is she in a mental hospital right now?”

“She was in a hospital for a few days, but I don’t know where she went after that.”

“Where did you take her? I mean: which hospital?”

He found a box of tissues and set them in front of me. “I wasn’t the one to take her, I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was in crisis. She wasn’t thinking clearly. I didn’t want to be in a position where I had one hand on the steering wheel and another grabbing her shirt, trying to keep her from jumping out of a moving car.”

“Why take a bunch of pills and then tell your boss?” My voice sounded foreign, desperate for reassurance, and I hated it.

“It’s irrational. There are unconscious processes at play. It’s a cry for help.” He shook his head, his gaze shuttling out to the storyteller’s middle distance. “I persuaded Mara to let me call for help, but we were in the kitchen and she got hold of a knife—I had to wrestle it from her, but the pills were already in effect and she couldn’t put up much of a fight. By the time police and the ambulance arrived, she’d been unconscious on the floor for almost a minute. Her pulse had dropped into the danger zone. She was shocking out. I tried to

induce vomiting but her gag reflex was already dormant. All I could do was keep her airway open and – “

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I get it – you’re a doctor. But where did they take her?”

“Where?” He composed himself. “Oh – to Journey. Most of the county EDPs go to Journey.”

“EDPs?”

He paused with his mouth open for a second. “It just means a person is in crisis. Mara was in crisis. Journey kept her for assessment and monitoring. She was out a week or so later.”

“So is Journey a mental health jail, like where they send the criminally insane?” I wiped my face again and took a deep breath. “She threatened you with a knife.”

He shook his head. “I told the police she threatened to hurt me if I tried to stop her, but I didn’t tell them about the knife. I wanted to save her any additional grief. She wasn’t herself at the time. I made it clear that I wasn’t pressing any charges.”

I wiped my nose. “And you have no idea where she is now?”

“I visited her at the hospital, and she seemed almost herself again. She was on medication to stabilize her mood and help her sleep; she’d been talking to a counselor. She made it sound as if a cloud had lifted. I was feeling really optimistic, told her that I was keeping her position open at the lab.”

He checked his watch, sighed.

“And I haven’t heard from her since.”

I was emotionally exhausted; breathing slow, deep breaths. My diminishing attention levels felt ready to dive into an anxiety nap. I willed myself alert.

“Can I see her office?” I asked. “I never got to see where she worked.”

McKenzie seemed momentarily confused. “Her office?”

“You said you were holding her job for her,” I said. “So all her stuff is still in her office? I’d like to take a quick look.”

He checked his watch again. “I’m really out of time for today.”

“It’s no problem,” I said, extending my hand as I stood. “I really appreciate your time and everything you did for Mara.”

He took my hand as he stood. “I’m sure that she’s all right, Kelly – your sister’s one of the strongest women I’ve ever met.”

“One of the strongest people,” I said.

“Of course,” he said, and turned to come round the desk but I stopped him.

“I’ve taken enough of your time already,” I said. “Please allow me to show myself out.”

“It’s no problem,” he said.

“You’re absolutely right,” I said, backing into the hallway with my hand on the door. “Thank you so much for your time.”

#

Janice was unhappy to hear that Dr. McKenzie wanted her to show me to Mara's office to collect a few personal items. She didn't call McKenzie to confirm the request, maybe because she was so irritated that I interrupted whatever she was doing on her phone. One more deception abetted by the glittering enchantments of social media.

Janice led me through a staff kitchen and break area with a large round table, a sink and prep counter, and a large chrome refrigerator. Offices lined a hallway on the other side. Mara's door was at the end. Her office was identical to Spencer's: high ceiling, bookcases covering one wall and a work table with computer station on the other, a high rectangular window separating them. Janice disappeared without comment.

I ran my fingers over the spines of the books and picked up a stack of manila folders gathered at one end of the shelf. Janice reappeared holding a cardboard box.

"I have to run downstairs to the MRI station," she said, dropping the box on the floor. "But I'll be back in five minutes. Try to be ready to go by then."

She turned to leave but caught sight of the manila folders. Before I could protest, she snatched them from my hands and opened the top folder. After examining its contents, she clamped the folders under her arm.

“This data belongs to the lab,” she said, scanning the office for any other potential security risks. “Please be sure to collect only personal effects in this box. I’ll check the contents before you leave.”

I saluted her back as she left. Her red power pumps snapped and clicked down the hall toward the kitchen like a very angry pony.

A quick investigation below the work table revealed the computer monitor cable dangling loose against the wall. The tower had been removed.

I opened all three desk drawers to get a bird’s eye view of things: rubber bands, paper clips, some pens and pencils, post-it notes, and other assorted office supplies arranged in shallow containers amidst a diverse collection of strings and sealing wax and other fancy stuff.

Something caught my eye; I swept aside the post-it notes and lifted the paper clip tray to find a day-glo orange drink coaster. It featured a cheerful-looking cartoon character reminiscent of Casper the Friendly Ghost. He smiled drowsily and raised a beer stein above the message “Greetings from the Spook Canyon Boo’ery!”

I reversed the coaster to see what might be on the back and found that it was a postcard. The address field was made out to Mara’s office at the Maxwell Center. Scrawled in sloppy cursive, the message field said: *Doc, check is in the mail. yrs, LW.*

Above the message, a caption addressed the image on the front of the postcard: *The Spook Canyon Brewery was founded in 1988 and continues to produce award-winning ales, lagers, and specialty brews for every palette and all occasions.*

The energetic click-and-snap of heels at the other end of the hallway alerted me to Janice's approach. Although the coaster-postcard clearly fell under the heading of "personal effects," I slid it into the rear waistband of my slacks, where the blouse would further conceal its hiding place.

With less than ten seconds to make my selections, I transferred several random books and journals from Mara's bookshelf to the cardboard box. To further personalize the contents of the box, I grabbed a framed picture of Patti Smith from the shelf and placed it on top of the books and journals. Smith leaned against a blue wall, one arm slung over Robert Mapplethorpe's shoulders and the other holding a cigarette. She wore what appeared to be a torn wedding dress.

"Miss Murdoch," said Dr. McKenzie, his arms crossed unhappily. "I thought you were going to show yourself out."

Janice stood in the hallway, shaking her head incredulously.

"I just wanted to save you the trouble of shipping all of Mara's personal things to her home," I said, handing the box to Dr. McKenzie. "Feel free to take a look before I go."

McKenzie placed the box on the work table without glancing at its contents. I had skipped a serious stone across his Zen mind pond.

“It’s time for you to leave now, Miss Murdoch.”

I took the framed picture of Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe from the box and held it up with both hands. “I’ll take just this for today, but I’ll be back for the rest if it’s not delivered to Mara’s address by the end of the week.”

“We’re happy to have some things boxed up and available for retrieval at the front,” said McKenzie, ushering me into orbit around Janice, “assuming you’re able to produce a legal document naming you custodian of Dr. Murdoch’s property. Until that time, please kindly leave us to our work.”

Janice walked me back toward the kitchen while Dr. McKenzie stayed behind to lock Mara’s office door.

A security guard waited for us in the reception area, hands clasped in front of him. Janice opened the glass door to show us the way out.

“Who are those people, anyway?” she asked, pointing at the picture.

“Oh, this?” I asked, lifting the picture as the guard applied gentle pressure to my back. “This is our parents’ wedding photo.”

#

I once heard that the best way to find someone is to get them arrested. Once they’ve appeared on the back of a milk carton, missing persons almost never return. But cops love to find bad guys. So while clouds to the west darkened with rain, I stood next to my car in front of the tall concrete bunker that housed the

Milwaukee Municipal Court and the District 1 Police Department, and tried to figure out the best way to get my sister arrested.

And then my phone rang.

It was Nick Durant. I tapped the green Answer button. "Nick – thanks so much for calling."

There was a long moment of restless silence before he responded. When he finally did speak, his voice was thick and raw, as if he'd just been woken from a deep sleep.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"I'm Mara's sister," I said, a little impatiently. "Kelly."

Another pause.

"Whose sister?"

"This is Nick Durant, isn't it?" I asked. "Specialist Durant, 82nd Airborne? You participated in a study at the Center for Attention, Behavior, and Emotion."

"I don't talk to reporters!" he barked.

"Wait," I said. "I'm not a reporter!"

"Then who the fuck are you?"

"Mara's sister," I said. "*Dr. Mara Murdoch*. You participated in a study she did a few months ago. I'm her sister and I'm in town for a few days."

"Okay," he said. "Come over then."

"What?" The question pushed me off balance for a split second, but then I jumped onto his non sequitur and kicked it in the ribs. "What's your address?"

He told me his address and disconnected the call.

#

It was just before three in the afternoon when I arrived at Nick's place on West Montana. His bungalow offered a view of train tracks to the north and the soothing sounds of non-stop interstate traffic to the east, and a bulky screened-in front porch from which to enjoy it all. I climbed the three steps to the front door and pushed the doorbell. A minute passed with no movement, which seemed especially odd given the *WARNING ATTACK DOG ON PREMISES NO TRESPASSING* sign posted on the window of the storm door. In my experience, dogs of all kinds respond swiftly and loudly to door bells.

The storm door was unlocked, so I let myself onto the porch, which was covered in the cheap-looking astroturf that one finds in such a place. A faded blue plastic chair appropriate for a high school art room stood watch next to the door. Beside it, an ashtray vomited cigarette butts onto an empty case of Corona that had become a makeshift end table. Dismantled cardboard boxes and other recyclables cluttered the far corner of the porch. On top was a box labeled "Summit 180MAX Climbing Tree Stand."

I knocked on the front door and there was an immediate response – the sound of a chair sliding, footsteps, and a pause while the peephole went dark.

Then a bolt lock pulled free and the door opened a crack. A chain hung securely across the slim opening, and behind it stood Nick Durant.

His face had filled out since his picture was taken for the article about the Expert Infantryman Badge, and his complexion was ruddier. The strawberry-blond hair was still short, but it no longer looked like he'd just stepped off base. It looked like he could use a shower, though. Smelled that way, too.

He regarded me with one bloodshot blue eye. "Who are you?"

"I'm Kelly, Mara's sister." I frowned. "We spoke on the phone less than twenty minutes ago. You invited me here."

His eye swept to my feet and back up again.

"Look," I said. "I'm just trying to find Mara. Do you know where she is?"

He squinted, and then the chain scraped free and he opened the door.

"Come on in," he said.

A mossy brew of stale tobacco and sweat washed over me as I stepped into the small living room. Across from the battered leather couch, a small flat-screen television balanced on a card table strewn with coins, junk mail, matchbooks, and other debris. An infomercial for a kitchen appliance played on mute. Next to the couch, a weight bench stood beside the entrance to an adjoining dining room, where a listless gang of empty Heineken bottles loitered on the table.

Nick locked the door behind us and strode to the dining room table, where he sat down and lit a cigarette. He was about five-foot-nine, with a thick

neck to match his massive arms and shoulders. White wings flanked the iconic orange Harley-Davidson logo on his sleeveless black t-shirt, and tattoos of bones ran along both arms in the anatomically-correct positions: the humerus above the elbows, the radius and ulna beneath. And he was handling a pistol.

I stepped back. "What's the gun for, Nick?"

He squinted through the tendrils of cigarette smoke curling around his face and held up what looked like a heavy-duty black toothbrush. "Cleaning it."

He attached the slide to the frame of the weapon and I winced as he slid it back and forth several times. He snapped the magazine into the handle and placed the gun on the table before draining the remains of a Heineken.

I crossed my arms. "Strange you felt safe enough to answer the door with your gun all the way over here in the next room."

He took a drag from his cigarette and pointed to the living room, where a shotgun hung above the front door.

"Jesus," I said. "Are you under attack?"

He exhaled and crushed the cigarette butt in an ashtray.

"No."

"All right, dude," I sighed, searching the ceiling for inner strength. "This is turning into the longest week of my life, so do me a huge favor and tell me you know how to find Mara."

The steady intensity of his gaze unsettled me, but I regretted it immediately when I glanced downward.

"No clue," he said.

"You have *no clue* how to find Mara?" I asked, cocking my head to signal both incredulity and careful listening. "And yet I hear that you're fucking her."

His jaw muscles flexed.

"So," I straightened, "prior to the fucking, how exactly do you find my sister?"

He stood and went to the kitchen, where a refrigerator door sucked open. He returned with two Heinekens and popped off the caps with a couple turns of his cigarette lighter. He pointed to the chair next to his. "You have the honor of drinking my last beer."

Three-thirty in the afternoon, said my watch. I sat down and crossed my arms again. "So? Mara."

His elbows rested on the table, hands folded business-like around his beer. The eyes were light blue and rimmed with red, beneath blond lashes and eyebrows. It looked like it would hurt if he smiled. I had known soldiers before, but this one was the first to really look like he spent thirty-eight months sleeping in a desert where people were trying to kill him. I wanted to recommend a moisturizer.

"Dr. Murdoch and I never —" He paused to look down at his beer, which I thought endearingly bashful. "We never dated."

"Glenda tells me differently," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "Her I did date, but she said we couldn't tell anyone. As if anyone cares who I date." He took a swig of his beer and wiped his mouth. "Until you came along."

He settled his laser-gaze on me again, and I met his eyes. Maybe war taught him that every encounter is an occasion for challenge, a call to assert domination or be dominated. And maybe that was true. I imagined the palpable heat generated by a meeting between Kent Simon and Nick. Or maybe they'd just get drunk and laugh their asses off.

I smiled and Nick smiled in return, his mouth full of tawny gray teeth. I tried to imagine what Glenda meant when she'd said that this man was "everyone's type."

"So you dated Glenda then?"

He nodded. "Yep."

"So what happened?"

He grabbed a tan field jacket from the back of his chair and pulled it on.

"Let's go," he said.

I frowned. "Where are we going?"

He emptied his Heineken and shoved the pack of cigarettes into his jacket.

"We're out of beer."

#

“We only went out three or four times,” Nick said. “Nothing serious.”

He shrugged for emphasis while lining up a tight bank shot, then caressed the cue ball with an expert’s measured restraint, sinking another solid. While scanning the table for his next shot, he hovered to the other side of the table to re-chalk his cue.

We’d walked to the Pinecrest Tavern, three blocks from his house. He’d set out to buy more beer at the convenience store on 13<sup>th</sup> Street, but I’d managed to steer him into a bar advertising “\$1 POOL” on the pretext that I wanted to see how he handled a cue stick. I did not, though a childhood spent in my father’s bar getting pretty good at the game taught me that certain guys will relax and talk more openly around a pool table, and I surmised that Nick was one of them. Plus I felt more comfortable being in public if he was going to get any drunker than he was already.

The booze didn’t seem to affect his pool game, though—I sunk nothing on the break and he was already three shots along in his first turn.

“Then why did Glenda seem to think you were dating Mara?”

Nick sank his next shot, but put too much on the cue ball and scratched. He grunted unhappily as he straightened and reached for his beer.

“Your sister and I always got along is all.”

I cut the thirteen into the side pocket and rotated to position myself for the next shot. "Mara always got along better with men than with women," I said.

I missed the ten altogether on a cross-corner bank shot. I felt the old shame rise hotly in my cheeks as we watched the cue ball bounce unimpeded from bumper to bumper before it came to rest in the center of the table, positioning Nick for yet another glorious run. He lined up an easy shot.

"The truth is," said Nick, sinking his shot and swiveling to line up the next, "I was attracted to Mara. I told her I liked her."

I watched the table for a beat and sipped my gin-and-tonic, trying to appear less interested than I was while still recovering from my terrible shot.

"And what'd she say?"

"She laughed at me," he said, looking up from his shot. "Told me to sleep it off, something like that."

"I feel like I'm missing some crucial context."

He overshot, scrambling the remaining balls on the table with a symphony of pleasant clicks.

"Look," he said. "Glenda's right that your sister and I went out for drinks a few times, but it was always just friendly."

He gestured to the table with his cue.

"It's been a long since I saw Mara hanging around any of her friends," I said, bending over the table and missing a long straight shot. "She was always so preoccupied, at least when her annoying little sister was around."

"She talked about you."

"What'd she say?" I asked.

Nick drained his beer and held up the bottle. "Another round?"

"I'm good," I said. "What did Mara say about me?"

"Be right back," he said, raising his empty over his head on the way to the bar.

I swallowed half of my cocktail and followed him.

"Looks like I was lower than I thought," I said, sliding my glass onto the bar.

The bartender arrived with a fresh beer and Nick pointed to my glass.

"Another one of these."

"So what'd Mara say about me?" I asked.

Nick raised an eyebrow. "You know. Said you were a movie director. Big future. The world's your oyster. Stuff like that."

"Bull-shit," I said, lightly punching Nick's right shoulder. His deltoid was solid as a regulation basketball.

"Careful," he said, raising that amused eyebrow again. "I sparred with lots of girls in the service."

The bartender slid my overfull gin across the bar.

"What else did Mara say?" I said, and sipped like a hummingbird from the top of my drink.

"I don't know," Nick said. We walked back toward our pool table and Nick lined up one of his last two shots. "The usual stuff. Bragged about how smart you are, how you have it all figured out, stuff like that."

I laughed and it felt great, like music shaking out of my lungs. So I was either getting drunk or Nick's revelations about Mara were having an effect on me.

"But I don't have it all figured out," I said. "I'm still trying to figure out if you and Mara had sex."

Nick looked at me without saying anything.

"What's that look?" I asked. "Bambi in the headlights?"

Nick sank his next shot without responding, and something buoyant in my chest deflated, releasing a certain tension there that I hadn't quite acknowledged.

"So you guys dated," I said. "What's the big deal?"

Nick sank his last shot.

"Another game?" he asked.

"Let's talk some more, Nick," I said, patting the café table next to my chair. "Let's hear some more things Mara said about her kid sister Kelly."

I swallowed another belt of the gin as he leaned against the table.

"She told me you were always pushing her," he said, turning his beer bottle in his hands. "She said you ran a race together in high school, and you pounded her shadow like a machine."

"She didn't say that."

"She said it."

"Mara doesn't even talk like that: 'Pounded my shadow like a machine.'"

"She was pretty drunk when she told me the story," Nick shrugged. "That was the night she told me about your dad."

Heat filled my chest as euphoria turned cold and sour. I had trouble closing my mouth, and Nick was silent for a second while he absorbed this.

"Hey," he said. "I'm sorry – that was stupid to say."

"It's not you," I said, clearing my throat. "It's this week. It's another asshole shooting a bunch of innocent people for no reason. I'd known one of the victims when she was just a middle schooler – you know, when people are their happiest, when everything seems like it's still in front of them. And then I find out all this scary stuff about Mara. And now I can't find her."

"What scary stuff?"

"She lost her job. She was depressed. Maybe she tried to hurt herself."

"Mara tried to hurt herself?"

"Her boss at the lab said she had to go to the hospital," I said. "I was about to file a missing persons report this afternoon when you called."

It would have felt really good to cry, but then I started to wheeze instead. A couple of badly-dressed young women in a nearby booth had begun to stare with interest. One of them wore plastic bracelets that clicked when she picked up her beer.

“Hey,” Nick said, gently gripping my shoulder. “Take a breath.”

“Our father died when we were young,” I said. “He killed himself.”

Nick traced a comforting circle onto my upper back with his palm. “I know, I know. I lost my dad, too.”

“Jesus,” I said, taking a big stabilizing breath through my nose. “You and Mara were even cozier than you let on.”

“Look,” he said. “You want to find Mara? I’ll have some friends at the station run her through the system.”

I frowned skeptically. “You’re a cop?”

“I didn’t make the Academy this year, but half of Milwaukee PD are vets. Same with the Sherriff’s Department.”

“How long does that take?” I asked. “To run someone through the system?”

“We can find out the basics probably by tomorrow morning,” he said, pulling a napkin from the dispenser at our table. “I just need her full name and address. Two or three recent addresses would help for cross-reference. Social Security Number would be ideal.”

“No problem,” I said, leaning toward the girls who had been gawking a minute ago. “Either of you lovely ladies have a pen?”

A confused sort of revulsion bubbled up on their faces.

“An eyeliner pencil would work great,” I said, pointing to one of their purses. “Help a girl out.”

While the two girls scurried toward a table nearer the front of the bar, I wrote down Mara's full name — *Mara Catherine Murdoch* — along with her current address on West Lloyd and the name of the last town where she lived — Emeryville — while she was doing her doctorate at Berkeley. I never knew the exact address.

I went to the bar to settle Nick's tab while he spoke with his cop friends. Then I texted Michael: *Call in 3mins and offer to pick me up at pinecrest tav on oklahoma!*

Nick was just sliding his phone into his jacket when I returned to our table with a pair of Jäger shots.

"Success?" I asked.

"They'll run her through and we should hear something by tomorrow."

"I appreciate it," I said. "I've been really worried."

"They find people all the time like this," said Nick. "Holed up in a motel somewhere, staying with friends out of state."

"I meant to ask you back at your house," I said, intending to point but then touching his forearm, where coarse blond hair glowed above the blue ink outlines of bone. "What's the story with these tattoos?"

I thought he might flinch or look up from under lidded eyes or something, but he watched impassively, as if my hand called attention to an interesting whorl in the greasy table's wood grain. I admired his stillness.

"It was my team in Iraq," he said. "We were the Zombies."

"What's a team?"

"My team was five guys driving around in an armored truck."

"Why were you called the Zombies?"

"There was a firefight in Fallujah."

"What happened?"

"Well." He sipped his beer and posted the bottle on top of the napkin dispenser. "When it was all over, the whole street was on fire and shot to shit, and my buddy Kurt started doing that dance from the Michael Jackson video." He lifted his hands, first to the right and then to the left. "Then we were all doing it."

Nick's hand curled around the shot glass as he laughed softly through his nose.

"I shit you not," he said. "Funniest fucking thing I've ever seen."

I imagined American soldiers in their desert camo, the giant helmets and wrap-around sunglasses, Thriller-dancing through the smoking wreckage of an Iraqi alleyway. Bloody corpses leaning against burning cars.

"Zombies have flesh," I said, and he looked up as I touched the long bone inscribed on his upper arm. "This looks like a skeleton."

Nick raised his shot. "You should see the other guy."

"Kaspar Rouhani," I said, distinctly aware that I would not have said the name if I'd been sober.

Nick furrowed his brow while he examined my face. I was afraid he might do something violent, but then he just downed his shot. So I drank mine.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what came over me."

"We served together," Nick said. "He was a good soldier and a good friend, and then he got all fucked up."

"You don't have to talk about this."

"Fuck him," Nick said, stabbing his index finger into the table. "We did what we had to do over there to protect people over here. That's the job. And what he did fucks all that in the ass. He just fucked every guy who saved his life over there, including me." Nick finished his beer and set it on the napkin dispenser. "I wish he was still alive so I could fucking kill him myself."

My pants started to vibrate and I jumped in my seat, startled until I recognized my incoming ringtone. I withdrew the phone from my jeans and Michael's number flashed on the screen.

"Sorry," I said, gathering my senses. "I have to take this call."

#

"Are you drunk?" Michael asked, glancing at me as we passed the copper dome of the Basilica. "And what are you doing this far south? While I waited for you to come out of the bar, a homeless woman wrapped in a German flag knocked on my window and asked for a cigarette."

“I found a guy who might know how to find Mara,” I said. “And he was only spilling his beans as long as I was pouring him drinks.”

“So where’s Mara?”

“The dude has police friends who are running Mara through the magical police system.”

“A *dude*?”

“He was a soldier involved in one of Mara’s studies at the Maxwell Center. They were also friends or fuck-buddies – I haven’t decided yet.”

Michael raised his eyebrows. “And this guy’s police friends think Mara might be involved in something bad? Like what?”

I frowned. “I think they’re just going to see if her plates popped up anywhere recently – like a speeding ticket or something – or if she’s been treated at any hospitals.”

Michael turned onto his wide, tree-lined boulevard. “She’s probably fine.”

“And the dude,” I said. “He knew the zoo shooter.”

Michael shot me a wide-eyed look. “They were friends?”

“Sounds like they used to be,” I said. “They were in Iraq together.”

“Wow – did he know what happened?”

“He didn’t get into specifics. He was pretty angry about it.”

Michael shook his head. “No shit.”

We got off the interstate at the Lakefront exit, tracing Lincoln Memorial up to Lake Drive and further north until we reached Michael’s long driveway,

which terminated in a three-car garage. He just had the BMW, but the extra space was filled with a small herd of antique furniture pieces that he purchased at estate sales and refinished before selling or giving to friends as gifts. Cans of mineral spirits, stain, polyurethane, and other chemicals crowded a workbench running along the far wall of the garage. I had occasionally been Michael's second pair of hands when I was still in grad school. As the garage door lowered and we walked toward the kitchen entrance, I let my fingers slide over the aged cracks in the surface of a five-drawer mahogany desk.

Michael dropped his keys in a porcelain dish and took a bottle of mineral water from the fridge. "I was just about to order some Thai food when you called," he said, twisting off the cap. "Interested?"

I took a glass from the cabinet and poured some water, took a big slug.

"I could eat."

"I bet," Michael smiled. "Need something to soak up all that interrogation beer?"

"Gin," I said. "It wasn't a frat party."

Michael lent me his laptop and turned on the news while we waited for our curry to arrive. I rested my socked feet on a white leather ottoman and searched the zip code from the postmark on the Spook Canyon Brewery postcard. Michael browsed a men's magazine.

*One in five Americans take at least one psychiatric medication, said a reporter on Michael's giant flatscreen television. Which drug companies will innovate the way*

*we think about mental illness – and wellness – in the twenty-first century? A special report this Thursday on Medline.*

“Do you ever notice a man’s shoes?” Michael asked.

The search showed that the postcard had been sent from Colorado Springs.

“What?”

“Men’s shoes,” said Michael. “Do women have opinions about men’s shoes?”

“I guess,” I said, typing “spook canyon brewery” into the search bar. “But men’s shoes aren’t usually that interesting.”

“Take it back!” Michael shut his magazine so that he could fully attend his shocked indignation. “Them’s fightin’ words.”

A satellite image slid onto the television screen, zooming onto a cluster of small white buildings scattered in a mossy-colored forest clearing. *Report shows majority of new jobs in April and May pay below national average.*

“No offense intended,” I said, scanning my search results and clicking on the brewery’s website. “Your shoes are always exceedingly lovely.”

“Yes, they are,” Michael said, settling his tortoiseshell glasses and returning to his magazine. “Were you attracted to me when we first met?”

I looked up from the laptop. “Say again?”

Michael indicated his shoulders and torso with both hands. “Were you into this?”

I laughed a bitter laugh. "I haven't been into gay guys since high school."

"But you didn't know I was gay."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Come on," he said. "You didn't know."

"What are we talking about here?"

"I just asked a question," he said, the tang of self-pity in his voice. "That's all."

"You hired me on a cold, rainy day in October. I was excited, because I always wanted to work in a movie theater. It was like getting hired to be Cinderella at Disneyland. And I thought you were cool, interesting, smart, and totally hot. I couldn't stop thinking about how it would feel to run my hand over your smooth, naked thighs after just you'd shaved them."

"I'm too gay," Michael said. "I'm way too gay."

"What are you talking about?" I frowned. "I've always thought you were just gay enough."

Michael stabbed his plastic fork into his curry. "I have to use the bathroom."

I found the brewery's number and entered it into my phone.

"Be right back," I called down the hallway, moving toward the kitchen.

"Just have to make a quick call."

While the phone rang, I reviewed the postcard's message: *Doc, check is in the mail. yrs, LW.*

LW.

Barroom noise rushed into my ear as a young man rattled off the brisk greeting: "*Spook-Canyon-Brewery-how-can-I-help-you.*"

"Hi," I said. "I was hoping to speak with a friend of mine."

"Okay," he said. "We're pretty busy – not sure how much help I can be."

"His name's LW," I said.

There was a pause while some cheering crescendoed and then died down again.

"Did you say *Elwood*?"

"No, no," I said. "He goes by his initials: *LW*."

"Hold on," he said, and the bar noise transformed into Vivaldi muzak.

The doorbell rang, and I returned to the living room with the phone wedged between my ear and shoulder while I dug in my wallet for some bills to wave at Michael, who shook his head firmly as he opened the door.

Vivaldi's summer concerto was cut short by the low and throaty voice of a middle-aged woman who stayed up late and smoked two packs a day: "Hello?"

"Hi," I said.

"You looking for Hills?" she asked. "Larry Hills?"

"Yeah," I ventured. "Is he there?"

"He's not here at night," she said. "Call back in the morning."

"What time?" I asked.

Another eruption of cheering drowned out her reply. After it died down, I said, "One more time, please?"

"You looking for one of the hands at the Lazy K?"

"No," I said. "Just LW."

"People only call him 'LW' up at the ranch," she said. "You some old girlfriend or something?"

I laughed because the suggestion's abruptness took me by surprise, but it also gave me another second to think. The memory of something brittle in the bartender's tone guided my choice of tack: "Absolutely not."

"Okay then," she said, and called to someone at the bar: "Be right there, sugar—"

"Hold on," I said. "What time does Mr. Hills come in?"

That brittleness again: "What'd you say this is about?"

"I didn't," I said, scanning the postcard again: *check is in the mail*. "It's about a generous donation that Mr. Hills made to a university research center."

"Uh-huh," she said, bored or suspicious. "Did you say you're with the IRS?"

"There are some documents that require his urgent attention, and I've been having a hard time reaching him."

"Okay," she said, and I could almost hear the weary shaking of her head.

"That's typical."

"So should I call back tomorrow morning about nine o'clock? Ten?"

“You can start trying about eleven,” she said, followed by another rush of voices. “Gotta go, hon – what’d you say your name was again?”

“I didn’t,” I said, “but you can tell Mr. Hills to expect a call from Kelly Murdoch.”

#

“What was that all about?” Michael asked.

When I got back to the living room, Michael had changed the channel to an old Howard Hawks comedy starring Cary Grant and Marilyn Monroe. Something about monkeys?

“To be honest,” I said, chewing thoughtfully on a spring roll while I scanned the laptop screen, “I’m not sure about anything just yet.”

I’d just inputted a search for “larry hills lazy k ranch” and the relevant hits appeared endless – pictures, news articles, editorials, Wikipedia entries, some kind of fan website. Google recommended alternate searches as well: “*larry hills lazy kid ranch*” and “*lorenzo hills lazy k ranch*”.

Michael frowned. “Who was just on the phone?”

I shoveled a couple forkfuls of the red curry into my mouth and shrugged as I went back to sorting the search hits. “It was a bartender in Colorado. Someone sent Mara a postcard from the bar, so I called the bar to find the sender.”

“Good Lord,” Michael said. “I’m going to start calling you Agatha Christie.”

“Don’t you mean *Inspector Poirot*?”

“No,” Michael said. “I think you’d make a much better *Agatha*.”

I made a face. “Doesn’t Agatha mean ‘sheep’ or something?”

Michael took a gulp of mineral water. “I think that’s ‘Agnes.’”

“Hold on,” I said, opening a new tab in the internet browser and initiating a search for these names. “We were both wrong. ‘Agatha’ means ‘good,’ and ‘Agnes’ means ‘chaste.’”

Michael sighed. “Maybe it’s better we stick with *Nancy Drew*.”

“But wait,” I said, raising my fork. “‘Agnes’ resembles the Latin word for *lamb*: ‘agnus.’”

“And that’s just how I think of you, Kellycat—chaste as a lamb.”

“Now I’m getting hung up on the way *agnus* resembles *anus*.”

“Really?” Michael stabbed his fork into his bowl of curry and held up his hands. “While we’re eating?”

“Sorry,” I said. “How much do I owe you for the curry?”

Michael dismissed this question with a wave of his fork before returning to the curry. Cary Grant, meanwhile, drove like a maniac through traffic while Marilyn Monroe tried to flirt with him, at one point kissing his cheek while he sang a song that must have been square and old-fashioned even then. The sequence included several of those disorienting shots where the driver and

passenger are clearly in an immobile prop vehicle that has no relationship to the motion depicted on the screen behind them. Monroe also spoke one of my favorite lines: “Please don’t be mad at me,” a request presuming that any of us is able to reconfigure our emotional responses at will – to feel anger, sorrow, happiness, yearning, despair, or fear whenever it’s most convenient.

Then again, how could anyone’s anger remain unchanged in the face of such irrational hope and vulnerability, such desperation and frightened affection?

*Please...don't be mad...at me.*

“Jesus,” I said, having skimmed the detailed Wikipedia entry describing LW Hills. “The guy who sent my sister a postcard from that bar is one of the richest men in the world.”

“Richest men in the *what?*” Michael set aside his curry and migrated to the couch so that he could read over my shoulder.

I pointed at the “Early Life” section of the entry, moving my finger as I read out loud: “L. W. Hills, born Lorenzo Whitman Gabriel de Hermosilla Hills –”

“Thanks, but I’ve been really good at reading for at least thirty years.”

“I didn’t realize you first learned to read in high school.”

“You’re about to get some curry in your eye.”

“Is that what you told your Swedish graduate student?”

“Do you ever let up?”

I lifted a vintage Polaroid Pathfinder camera from the bookshelf next to the couch. "This thing still work?" I sighted Michael through the viewfinder, and felt the familiar comfort as I transformed into a big eyeball: perceive, apprehend, record.

"Careful," Michael said. "That's old."

I continued to watch him through the viewfinder. "Your words, not mine."

"Seriously – what's your problem?"

I approximated the buzzing sound made by a Polaroid camera as it ejected a photograph, and then removed the imaginary picture and shook it as it developed. "I yearn for dignity but find its achievement fundamentally impossible."

"Okay – I don't even know what that means."

I took another imaginary picture of my friend. "It means that I suspect the human condition may be opposed to dignity, by definition."

"Put down the camera, Ms. Leibovitz. I'm trying to read."

"Is it still a struggle, having waited so long to pick it up?"

"Wow," Michael said, holding up his hands and moving back to his television tray and the recliner.

"Sorry," I said, replacing the camera on the bookshelf. "It's probably the gin."

"Whatever."

“No, really,” I said. “I was being a jerk – I’m feeling exhausted and excited at the same time.”

“Now we know how annoying exhausted and excited are when we combine them.”

“I’ll just tell you about the guy, Hills.”

Michael took a couple big bites of curry. “Your sister eloped with the richest man in the world.”

“Not exactly,” I said. “He’s the son of the richest *woman* in the world. Strange, isn’t it? You hear about the richest men in the world all the time, but how often do we hear about the richest *women*?”

“Rich women are smart enough to avoid gossip columnists.”

Ginger Rogers was in the middle of a meltdown. She and Cary Grant had changed into pajamas after an evening of overly-zealous dancing, and now she was whining and crying, pulling at the childish ribbons decorating her sleeping gown.

I scraped the bottom of my curry container and licked the fork. “What happened to Marilyn Monroe?”

Michael looked at the television. “What?”

“I thought Cary Grant was married to Marilyn Monroe in this movie.”

“No – I think Marilyn Monroe is his secretary. She should have been the lead, though – Ginger Rogers is great, but come on: Marilyn!”

I glanced back to the Wikipedia entry. “The richest woman in the world is named Carlita Gabriel de Hermosilla. She grew up in Sonora, Mexico, the daughter of wealthy cattle ranchers who claimed Spanish noble blood. She married an Australian immigrant named Jerome Hills who made a shitload of money in commercial real estate around Mexico City and Guadalajara, and together they built a telecommunications empire that stretches from Brazil and the Caribbean to the United States.”

“Some Mexican company does not run phone service in the States – no way that’s right.”

“They provide prepaid wireless service in the U.S. or something.” I read some more. “I think this says they own part of AT&T, but just in El Paso and New Mexico.”

Michael laughed. “I don’t think a company can own part of another company in only one state. Or just in El Paso.”

“I don’t know, man – the bottom line is: extremely rich, these people.”

“Sorry, when did you learn to read, again?”

“I never got hooked on phonics, Michael. I’m just looking at the pictures and making stuff up. You should see this house. They’re petting an albino lion in their living room. They might be a family of magicians.”

Michael presented his middle finger.

“See? Pictures are my medium. I feel like I can read your mind right now.”

“So this guy grows up in a mansion on a cattle ranch in Mexico with the richest farmers ever, and then sends your sister a postcard from a bar?”

Cary Grant and Ginger Rogers, having come under the influence of the elixir of youth again, were aggravating a board of directors who wanted to know the secret ingredient. Cary Grant ignored them all, fixing his contented attention instead on a monkey in overalls, while Ginger Roger blew bubble gum bubbles and shot rubber bands at the exasperated men in suits.

I snapped my fingers. “*Monkey Business.*”

“What about it?”

“I just remembered the name of the movie.”

Michael pointed the remote and the image on the television disappeared. “Can you focus, please? Your sister is missing or in hiding while the heir to a Central American cattle-and-trac phones empire is sending her postcards from a roadhouse in the Rocky Mountains.”

“It looks like this Hills guy oversees some family holdings in Colorado,” I said. “The Lazy K Ranch, some meatpacking plants in Pueblo and Colorado Springs.” I scrolled through the image search. “L. W. Hills is not a looker.”

Michael pointed to the screen while he gathered the curry containers. “He has a Tom-Hanks-in-*Castaway* thing going on in that picture.”

“He looks fresh off a desert island in several of these.”

Hills had a thin, narrow mouth framed in every picture by a beard or goatee. In one image, he wore a tuxedo and led an attractive younger woman

through a crowd, grinning self-consciously. He embraced a pair of Dobermans in another picture, addressing the photographer while the dogs snapped viciously at each other. He mounted horses and motorcycles; brandished sunglasses and assault rifles; smoked cigarettes and kissed girls in bikinis. His age was difficult to determine, due possibly to the mixture of pan-European and Latin American genes. His complexion was also tanned leathery, and carved with a network of deep lines that radiated from his eyes and mouth and creased his brow. He might have been a hard-living guy in his late forties, or any sort of guy in his sixties or seventies.

There were at least two mug shots. He could not have been more than nineteen years old in the first one – the only picture where he had no facial hair. Skinny and hairless, he resembled a shaved cat with his thin neck, angular jaw, and wary gray eyes. The other arrest photo was the *Castaway* shot, wild as a character from the Old Testament. His beard nested like an owl on his chest, which was shirtless and smeared muddy. His eyes shone unnaturally, radioactive and dangerously unstable. There was Job in this face, a man who'd seen his humanity torn from him piece by piece. He looked like a man who climbed mountains and crossed deserts – and perhaps committed more sinister deeds – on the authority of voices only he could hear.

“Jackpot,” said Michael, handing me his iPad. “Look at this.”

The article was titled “Maxwell Center Spring Benefit & Silent Auction,” and began “The annual silent auction and fundraiser hosted by The Friends of

the Maxwell Center was held Thursday, August 1, 2013, in the Maxwell Center's Brusca Suite to celebrate the previous year's achievements." The executive director of the Maxwell Center then apparently gave a speech lauding the previous year's research and outlining goals for the next, followed by the presentation of various awards for staff and students.

"Okay," I said.

"Scroll down," Michael said, swiping at the screen.

A series of pictures followed the text of the article, including one where Mara posed with two men. On the left was Hills, whose expensive-looking suit clashed somewhat with his wind-beaten face and watery eyes. He hung an arm over Mara's shoulders in a familiar way that may have been the cause of Mara's tight-lipped annoyance. She wore a wine-colored blouse and gray slacks that suggested the sort of propriety she had often despised, which may have been another cause for the discomfort apparent in her face. The man to Mara's right wore a sport coat over a t-shirt that featured an angry-looking cat. He was bald, though flames of red hair lifted clown-like from his ears and the back of his head. The caption read: "Colorado cattleman and philanthropist Lorenzo Hills meets Maxwell Center researchers Dr. Mara Murdoch and Dr. Drago Jurić."

"Okay," I said, grinding out a fierce yawn. "Now I have a place to start tomorrow when I try to get Hills on the phone."

"You can't be feeling tuckered out already."

I looked at my watch. "Why not? It's after eight. I had dinner. It's dark outside."

Michael shook his head in disbelief. "You have to be kidding me. Who's this Dragon Jurić guy?"

"Drago."

"Sure. And why's the richest man in the world living on a farm?"

"Son of the richest *woman* in the world. And evidence suggests he lives on a *ranch*."

"And what does Kelly Murdoch's sister have to do with these characters? I was just going to open a bottle of wine."

I groaned, but only half-convincingly. Like an invitation.

"I still have some of that zinfandel you liked last time."

"I don't know anything about wine," I said.

"You liked it."

"My sister could be in real trouble."

"You've known her longer than just about anyone else on the planet,"

Michael said. "Do *you* think she's in trouble?"

"I don't know," I said, absorbing the question for a moment longer. "It's hard for me to imagine Mara getting herself into anything that she can't get herself out of. She ran away when we were kids."

"After your father died?"

"Mara disappeared for ten days. She was fourteen."

"Where'd she go?"

I shook my head as if trying to remember, but I was still trying to figure it out. Like maybe I just missed something.

"She never told us."

Michael raised an eyebrow. "She was gone for a week and a half and never said where she went?"

"I was nine." I frowned, running through my memory again. "Or ten. I came home from school and Mara was sitting at the kitchen table with my mother and a policeman. Our mom had her arm around Mara and was looking at her face, like she'd just asked a question and was waiting for Mara's reply, but Mara just stared at the wall. When my mom saw me standing by the refrigerator, she said *Mara's home*. And then she started crying."

Michael said, "That's awful."

"I had never seen my mother cry before," I said. "She cried and hugged Mara, and I guess I was scared or confused, because I started crying, too. And then my mother gathered me up and brought me to Mara so that I could hug her, and she was stiff as wood. It was like hugging a tree. And then it happened."

"What happened?"

"Mara started shaking." I took a deep breath as the memory resurfaced. "At first I thought that she was crying, but when I looked at her face, her eyes were rolled back in her head. She fell off the chair and my mom screamed and

the police officer was trying to hold Mara down. It probably only lasted a minute, but it felt like it just went on and on.”

“Your sister has epilepsy? Or was that her only seizure?”

“It was her first, but they happened more and more often. It isolated her. Changed her.”

I started to tear up and Michael came to me, put his arm around my shoulders.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s hard to see people we care about suffer.”

I shook my head. “But it’s like I did it.”

“Did what?”

“Made her this way.” I looked at my hands. “It happened right when I touched her.”

“Of course not,” Michael said, squeezing me closer as I wiped my eyes. “It was genetics and trauma, the loss of your father – this had nothing to do with you.”

“It’s my first distinct memory,” I said, taking a deep breath, blinking. “I remember other things that happened before Mara’s first seizure, but it’s the first memory I recall with what feels like perfect accuracy – the quality of the light, the smell of the coffee percolating on the other end of the kitchen, and the look on Mara’s face while it was happening – I’d never seen anything like it before, didn’t know what was happening. I was so scared.”

“And she never said where she went?”

“What?”

“While she was missing, where she’d been. Did Mara ever tell you?”

I shook my head. “At first she didn’t talk at all, and later she said she didn’t remember.”

“You’re going to find her again.” Michael squeezed my shoulders. “Kelly Murdoch always does whatever she decides she’s going to do.”

“I think I’ve decided to drink your wine.”

“Hold that thought,” said Michael, who crossed into the dining room to extract a bottle from a wrought-iron wine rack designed to look like the naked branches of a tree. “Be an *agnus* and fetch some glasses from the kitchen.”

“It sounds so much grosser when you say it,” I said, rising to complete the thing that I decided to do.

#

An hour later, we made the questionable decision to open a second bottle of the wine, fueled as we were by our successful research efforts. We’d found and read an article that Mara had co-authored with Drago Jurić—mostly for gist, since our combined educational backgrounds were based firmly in the Humanities—along with an exhaustive series of blogs, news sites, personal webpages, and other online documents regarding Hills.

Mara and Jurić had performed a study with capuchin monkeys who had been infected by a common parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. The protozoan's life cycle was designed to move it from rodents to cats, where *T. gondii* completed reproduction in the intestines, and then back to the rodents. But when the capuchin monkeys became infected, the parasite formed dormant cysts in their brains, leading to changes in behavior. The species was famous for a study where two of the monkeys were placed in adjacent cages; after habitually receiving the same cucumber treat in exchange for a golf ball that researchers gave them, one monkey was given a more desirable grape treat – which the other monkey almost always noted and protested, sometimes by refusing to eat the cucumber treat given to him, and sometimes by flinging his cucumber slice at the researchers who had treated him so unfairly.

But in about sixteen percent of capuchins infected with *T. gondii*, there was a notable change in behavior by the monkey who received the grape. Instead of enjoying his treat, he became distraught. While his neighbor protested the paltry cucumber slices, the infected monkey sulked and pouted, or whistled and cooed consolingly to his enraged neighbor; he stowed the grapes in a corner of his cage and huddled in the opposite; sometimes he stomped the grapes or tried to transfer them to his neighbor through the tiny gaps in the mesh cages. If his neighbor could not be consoled, the infected monkey sometimes became overwrought and collapsed into despondency, slumping against a wall of his cage and wetting himself.

Hoping that Jurić might be able to fill in some blanks, I sent him an email asking if I could come by his office.

The internet offered endless morsels and tidbits concerning the mysterious L. W. Hills. Our unanimous favorite was a long article he'd written for a libertarian blog called TriggerBrain. He argued in favor of unregulated gun ownership, rambled at length about the central place of personal liberty in the American Constitution, and finally constructed a fairly confusing analysis comparing the nineteenth-century railroad to twenty-first-century smartphone technology (both of which Hills claimed were foretold in the Book of Revelation, though he cited no specific chapter or verse). In the accompanying author photo, Hills had painted his face red and applied dark makeup around his eyes, presumably to portray Satan or some lesser devil – a reference accentuated by his choice to twist the tips of his mustache into fiendish twirls. Michael and I agreed that, if not for the glassy-eyed intensity of a machete-wielding sociopath, Hills might have been having a shitload of fun.

The other articles assembled a man who was often reclusive, disappearing for months or years before reappearing again in some new incarnation. After what must have been an incredibly privileged upbringing in or around Mexico City, Hills first appeared in the States as a fixture on the southern Californian surfing scene in the 1970s – the period of his younger mug shot, which we learned had followed an arrest for possession of LSD and cocaine. He was deported to Mexico and disappeared for several years before resurfacing in the

Florida Keys in the early 1980s, where he was naturalized as an American citizen, became a fishing guide of dubious competence, and earned the moniker “Señor Blotto.” This was also the setting for his second mug shot, when he was jailed in Key West for trying to burn down a McDonald’s. Hills disappeared again soon after his case was settled out of court in 1988.

Hearsay and speculation next claimed Hills was present for the toppling of the Berlin Wall in November 1989; others held he moved to Australia, where he worked old family holdings and/or lived with an indigenous tribe deep in the bush, possibly marrying and starting a family or becoming some kind of medicine man; still other rumors claimed he’d gone to a monastery in Peru or a luxury rehab facility near his mother in Mexico City.

Although Jerome Hills had died of a massive heart attack in 1987, it was unclear the effect it had on his son, if any. With the patriarch’s death, control of the family’s wealth had transferred to Carlita Gabriel, but LW’s extensive travels and reluctance to settle in a career suggested that he’d never been without means, or else had found ways to pursue his will without access to funds.

Wherever he’d been in the 1990s, by the turn of the century he’d found his place in Colorado, tending the Lazy K and acting as local proxy in matters concerning the meatpacking businesses. His TriggerBrain article concerning guns, railroads, and the coming apocalypse had posted in early 2002, probably as part of the national furor leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan after September 11. He referred to himself variously as “a steward of the land,” “a key

regional employer in southern Colorado,” “a true patriot of the great American West,” and “an endlessly prolific writer in the venerable tradition of Saint Paul.”

Other than the article posted at TriggerBrain, the treasure trove of epistles written by “an endlessly prolific” Hills was not to be found online, despite our most thorough and enthusiastic searches. During the final and blurriest segment of the evening, Michael and I finished the second bottle of wine while speculating what Hills might have written in his letters, and to whom – if not Philipians, Galatians, or Romans – he might have addressed them.

#

Soft dinging noises woke me, and my first impression was of massive pressure on my face. Dehydration had made the full weight of my skull perceptible. My sinuses felt dense and leaden and lined with tiny sharp objects.

A glass of water on the coffee table saved my life. An afghan covered my lower half and my pants were on the floor next to the couch. I took in these details as I sat up and then emptied most of my water glass, feeling the full assault of daylight streaming through the windows as I did so. My phone said nine-twenty-three in the morning.

Michael entered the living room from the kitchen and placed a steaming cup on the coffee table. He wore jogging pants and a tank top, his dark hair

slicked back with perspiration. "You look like shit," he said, patting his face with a hand towel.

I lifted the coffee mug and then set it down again, nauseated by the pungent aroma. "Don't tell me you're exercising."

"Every morning, need it or not," he said, patting his slim torso. "This doesn't happen by itself, my dear."

"I suppose not," I said, returning to my water glass. "Especially at your age."

He shook his head. "Why do I keep on loving you?"

"You've always had a thing for younger women."

"Given those crow's feet around your eyes, one can't presume you're *that* young."

"I smile a lot."

"You are a portrait of gladness," Michael said.

I showed him my middle finger.

"I'm heading into town as soon as I'm cleaned up. If you want a ride, I suggest you be out of the guest shower in ten."

The shower revived me sufficiently to down half the cup of coffee, and I was nearing full capacity as Michael slowed on St. Jude Court and pulled into the parking lot where my car had spent the night.

"You all set?" asked Michael.

“All set,” I said through the passenger-side window. “And thanks for the research assistance last night.”

“I’m always good for a bottle or two of research assistance,” Michael said. “Did you ever hear back from Dr. Dragon?”

“Drago,” I said. “I have to check my email.”

“*Bonne chance*,” said Michael, “*ma petit chou!*”

“Kiss-kiss,” I said, waving him onward.

#

My watch said ten-thirty. I glanced at Nick’s house, but there was no visible movement. I decided that ten-thirty was a civil hour to knock on someone’s door, so I knocked on his. He answered

The heat trapped in my car assaulted me the moment I shut the door. Intending to blast the AC, I turned the ignition and there followed a deadening click. I did the things one does in such a situation. I reversed the key and tried again, producing another lifeless *click*. I switched on the lights to see if they would operate. They did, but I couldn’t tell in the daylight if they were dimmer than usual. I called Michael, and was sent directly to voicemail, where I did not leave a message because he did not listen to voicemail messages. Finally, I opened the car door with an exasperated sigh. As the heat wafted from the cabin,

I slumped against the seat and wondered if anything in the glove compartment might be sharp enough to cut my wrists.

A knock came from the other side of the car, where Nick waved into the passenger-side window. With his other hand, he mimed as if to open the door. I reached across the seat and unlocked it.

"I didn't realize you were staying in the neighborhood," Nick said, his eyes clear and cheerful. "I would have invited you in for some eggs."

"I just came back to retrieve my car. Any word from your friend at the police station?"

"Not yet," Nick said, exiting the vehicle and coming round to the front. "Unlatch the hood."

I did as commanded, and Nick told me to sit tight while he jogged to the rear of his house.

A minute later, he pulled a large red pickup truck nose-to-nose with my car and commenced with the usual ritual of attaching jumper cables first here and then there. A minute later, he stuck his head around the hood of my car:

"Try her now."

The same lifeless *click*.

"Any good?"

"Still nothing," I said. "Think it just needs to charge longer?"

"Doubt it," said Nick, wiping his hands on his jeans as he regarded my engine. "Probably a bad starter."

I inhaled a noseful of air and blew it out. “Knew I should have renewed my triple-A.”

“There’s a garage three blocks away,” Nick said, withdrawing his phone. “Unless they’re already on a call, they can probably be here with a tow truck in less than ten minutes. Want me to call them?”

“Thanks.”

While Nick was on his phone, I checked mine. The display announced ten-forty-five, but I reminded myself that it was only nine-forty-five in Colorado. A blinking exclamation point indicated new email messages, and at the top of the list was a reply message from Dr. Drago Jurić marked “Out of Office” in the subject line. Opening it, I read that Jurić would be unreachable until the following Tuesday while he, in his capacity as faculty advisor for the university sailing club, supervised renovations of a boathouse on the Lake Michigan waterfront.

Nick gave a thumbs-up. “Help is on the way.”

#

I checked my phone again: eleven-fifty. Ten-fifty in Colorado.

“You really don’t have to wait,” I told Nick.

Most of the mechanic’s waiting room was filled by four plastic chairs the color of creamsicles. Nick and I sat next to each other, an inanimate fern

chaperoning between us. Nick looked up from his well-thumbed issue of *Popular Mechanics*.

“Nowhere else I need to be,” he said. “Probably best I stick with my maiden in distress.”

My phone rang.

I answered, wondering how Hills had gotten my number, but it was Michael.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Had some car trouble, but the dude from last night helped me get to a nearby garage.”

“I’m the ‘dude’?” asked Nick.

I gave him a thumbs-up.

“Do you need a ride or something?” asked Michael. “I need to start charging you for car service.”

“Just waiting to hear about my starter,” I said. “But I have to get off the phone so I can call Hills.”

“Oh, shit,” said Michael. “That’s happening.”

“It’s happening.”

“You have to ask him about the trains.”

“I’ll definitely not bring up the trains.”

“Tell him you read somewhere that ‘Amtrak’ is the name of a demon in the Old Testament.”

“I’m getting off now.”

“Ask him if he thinks Steve Jobs actually died, or just relocated to a crystal palace in the Himalayas where he’s going to preside over Armageddon with Elvis and Hitler.”

“Okay. Bye-bye.”

I disconnected as I stood up, making a conciliatory expression before I addressed Nick. “Sorry, but I have to make another quick call.”

He turned the page of his magazine. “The Dude abides.”

“Thanks, Dude.”

“*Dude-a-rino* if you’re not into the whole brevity thing.”

“Watch out for nihilists,” I said, and stepped outside.

Spook Canyon answered on the first ring. It sounded like the young guy who answered the night before.

“Is Hills there?” I asked. “He’s expecting my call.”

Some jostling followed, and then a pause of about ten seconds before someone coughed directed into the receiver, snorted a quantity of phlegm, and spoke: “Yeah?”

“Mr. Hills?”

“You got it. Who’m I speaking to?”

“My name’s Kelly Murdoch. I think you know my sister Mara.”

A pause. “Don’t think so.”

“You met her at a fundraiser. She was a researcher at the Medical College of Wisconsin. At the Center for Attention, Behavior, and Emotion.”

Another pause. "Okay. What's this about?"

I took a stab: "I got a message from my sister that made it sound like she was visiting you."

More pausing, then: "Nope."

"I've been trying to call her, but can't get her on the phone. Maybe the reception in the mountains is bad."

"Mara's not in Colorado."

"No?" I asked.

More coughing, but muffled. "Who's this again?" he asked.

"Kelly Murdoch," I said. "Dr. Mara Murdoch's sister. You met her at a fundraiser and donated money to support her research. Then you sent her a postcard from the Spook Canyon Brewery, where you now sit."

"I go to a lot of fundraisers and donate a lot of money and send a lot of postcards," said Hills, sucking back another hunk of plegm. "Anything else I can help you with, *señorita*?"

Hills was hiding something, but my faculties hadn't recovered fully enough to produce the question I needed to yank back the curtain.

"Did you know," I said, "that *Amtrak* was the name of an evil spirit in the Bible?"

"Pardon?"

"You know," I said. "Like a demon. A devil."

He was quiet for a second, and then he coughed so hard it sounded like he'd dropped the phone. "Don't know anything about that."

"Weird that they named a railroad after a biblical monster."

"The hell they did," said Hills.

"It's right there in the Bible," I said, quoting fictional scripture: "*And behold! The serpent did fall from the sky, its feathers red and blue and made of fire, belching smoke from one-hundred evil heads, and its name was Amtrak.*"

"The National Railroad Corporation didn't start doing business as Amtrak until 1971."

"And yet the Bible would suggest the name is much older and more sinister."

"Amtrak is just *America* and *track* put together."

"You know your trains."

"It's time for me to go, but I wish you lots of luck."

"Your mother told me you'd know how to find my sister," I tried.

He barked a laugh, but stopped abruptly, as if considering the idea.

"You're telling me you talked to my mother? It's a big fat goddamn lie, but I'm just taking a moment to soak it all in, imagining you talking to my *madre querida*."

It gets so quiet and still at the center of a lie, I had only to reach out and grab anything that whirled by: "I just got back from Guadalajara, where I was staying with a developer friend of mine who made out like a *bandito* in Mexico City residential ten years ago. After he introduced me to your mom, I couldn't

quite figure out if she's so rich because everyone else in Mexico is so mud-sucking poor, or if she's just enjoying her due rewards after a lifetime of dedicated gold-digging."

"I will kill you if you speak one more goddamn word."

"Tell me where Mara is."

Silence.

"Where is she?"

"You Murdoch girls are cut from the same wild-ass cloth, you know that?"

"Where's my sister?"

"You're a couple of real badass *señoritas*," he said. "I like that. I met a badass *señorita* once when I was on vacation in Columbia. It was love at first sight, just like in the movies. We were having sex on a catamaran off the coast of Cartagena one night when a humpback whale breached twenty yards off starboard and sprayed us with Caribbean mist like a goddamn benediction."

"Sounds like the whale was trying to warn her."

Hills laughed until he coughed.

"A week later I woke up in the middle of the night and she was trying to stick a pistol up my nose. I told her to go ahead if that's what she wanted, but she couldn't do it. She started to cry instead. So I took away the pistol."

"Where's Mara?" I asked.

"You badass *señoritas* are all the same," Hills said, sucking back another shot of phlegm. "In the end, you always cry instead."

"Fuck you."

"You have a nice day now, *señorita*."

"Hold on," I said, but he'd already hung up.

#

When I got back to the waiting area, the mechanic was talking to Nick. The mechanic held something in his oil-stained hands that looked like Dr. Brown's flux capacitor crossed with an aluminum coffee thermos. A concerned expression on the mechanic's face filled my chest with warm dread.

"What's this?" I asked, pointing to the object in the mechanic's hands.

"This is your distributor," he said, presenting the thing for my examination as if it were a sick bird. "You'll need a new one."

"Okay," I said, noting Nick's expectant expression. "How much will that cost?"

"Read it and weep," said Nick, who handed me a piece of paper.

I scanned the computer printout until I reached the last number with a dollar sign next to it.

I frowned. "I'm not sure the whole car is worth this much."

The mechanic shrugged. "It's probably right around there. You have to make decisions with a car this old."

I pinched the bridge of my nose as the hangover fatigue began to generate new pressure in my skull.

"I need to drive it to Colorado," I said. "What needs to get fixed just so I can drive it to Colorado?"

"Well," said the mechanic, shaking his head. "If you just wanted to replace the distributor, I was going to recommend you avoid driving this car long distances, or else go ahead and replace the tires and get a brake job." Here the mechanic produced another printout that had been resting on the seat next to Nick. "The tread on your tires is almost completely bald, and your rear calipers are slipping."

"This number is twice as large as the other one," I said, chatting about these numbers in order to avoid the fact that I did not have enough money to fix my car.

"You could probably knock off a hundred bucks if you buy the distributor yourself from a parts store," Nick said, and then addressed the mechanic. "You don't mind if we get our own parts, do you?"

The mechanic pursed his lips before he spoke: "I'll do it this time, but there's not a big profit margin with just the labor."

Nick shrugged. "We could go somewhere else."

Now the mechanic looked pissed. "I said I'd do it."

“Look,” I said. “I appreciate your help. I just have to step outside for a minute while I figure out how this is going to work.”

The mechanic raised his hands. “Take as much time as you need.”

Nick followed me outside and I asked him for a cigarette.

He produced two, offering one to me and lighting it where I held it to my lips before he lit his own. Nicotine flowed fast into those parts of my brain that generated dopamine or whatever. The cars driving either way along Oklahoma Avenue became suddenly more concrete – discrete objects that slid through the world and interacted with other objects to shift their values and be transformed in return: *speed, carriage, status, trajectory, control, compliance, rejection, distance.*

“You need money?” Nick asked, exhaling a plume of smoke.

“Who doesn’t need money?”

“Figure out where Mara is?”

I exhaled from the corner of my mouth. “I think she’s in Colorado, but I don’t know exactly where or why.”

“I don’t have the whole thing, but I could loan you part of it.”

He squinted as he took another drag, but his expression was otherwise one of engaged repose. If his offer was bait of some kind, I couldn’t detect what he might hope to catch: my love, friendship, or esteem; something to do with Mara; something to do with others, alive or dead, from his past.

“You’re an awfully nice guy,” I said. “I can hardly believe you’re standing after how much you drank last night.”

“I did a full chest workout this morning.”

“That sounds weirdly sexual.”

“Bench press, push-ups, dips, dumbbell flys. About a hundred reps in all.”

“You really are a soldier.”

“I learned a lot in the Army,” he said. “But mostly I learned that you can teach your body to do anything.”

“A guy who’s been to war?” I exhaled again, checking the cigarette’s progress between my index and middle fingers. “I’d think you’d be more familiar with the frailty of human bodies.”

“I’ve seen people die – good guys, bad guys, up close, far away.” Nick’s mild expression didn’t change. “But one thing I’m sure of – I’m gonna live forever.”

“No one lives forever.”

“I know it.” Nick dropped his butt on the parking lot and crushed it with his heel. “But I don’t believe it.”

“I bet not,” I said, grinding my cigarette butt into the parking lot.

“I could drive you,” Nick said, shrugging a little too casually. “Driving relaxes me.”

I smiled as I shook my head. “I bet it does.”

#

Something creaked in the forward wheel assembly of Nick's truck. We drove southwest on 151 toward Dubuque, and the setting sun streamed through the passenger-side windows, heating the air in the cab, making it impossible to breathe. I cracked my window.

"Can we turn on some air?" I asked. "At least until the sun sets and things cool off?"

Nick flicked the AC controls. "Okay, Kelly. Favorite television from the 1980s."

I cracked my window some more, creating a violent sucking noise.

"I love it all," I said. "Don't we feel sentimental about all the music and pop culture from our childhoods? Ricky Schroder and *Silver Spoons*, Gary Coleman and *Diff'rent Strokes*. *Webster*, *Belvedere*, *Punky Brewster*, *Reading Rainbow*, *The Muppet Show*. I feel sentimental about everything that reminds me of my childhood. But I don't think anything matters as much as the stuff that was playing on the radio when I was in high school. The hormones locked in all of that stuff."

Nick adjusted his sun visor. "Will you promise not to make fun of me if I tell you what I was listening to in high school?"

"Cross my heart," I said.

"Okay," Nick said. "I totally loved Whitney Houston."

“More proof that hormones make us insane,” I said, rolling up my window now that the temperature had normalized. “But I would have guessed Metallica or something.”

“*The Bodyguard* was my favorite movie,” Nick said, shoving my shoulder playfully. “You can’t tell me you weren’t in love with Kevin Costner when you were in high school.”

“He was the worst part of *Robin Hood*,” I said. “I kept wishing there would be more scenes with Alan Rickman.”

“Your heart will go on,” Nick said.

“That’s not even Whitney Houston,” I said. “That’s Celine Dion.”

“Didn’t Whitney sing ‘I’m Every Woman’?” Nick asked. “Because if she did, it would seem that Whitney Houston in fact *is* Celine Dion.”

“Wait,” I said. “It’s all coming back to me now.”

Nick laughed as I reached for the radio.

#

We retreated into our own thoughts for most of Iowa. Nick wouldn’t let me drive his truck, so I passed out and woke up to a gray ribbon of road zipping into the headlights and beneath the hood. There was no moon. The fields on either side of the road fell quickly into darkness, where the silhouettes of barns and irrigation

equipment stood guard against the dangers lurking in the trees along the horizon.

We crossed into Nebraska around one in the morning, and I suggested we think about crashing for the night – maybe in Omaha or Lincoln.

Nick took a hit from his energy drink. “I was thinking of driving straight through.”

“No way,” I said. “Are you kidding?”

“Go ahead and sleep. We’ll get something to eat when you wake up and be in Denver before noon.”

I gestured to my face. “Beauty like this requires fully-horizontal sleep.”

He finished his energy drink and crushed the can before dropping it in the cup holder between the seats. “Then we’ll find somewhere cheap outside Lincoln.”

“Then we will,” I said.

He opened another energy drink.

“How much of that stuff do you drink on a daily basis?”

“Don’t sleep much,” he said. “So I drink a bunch of them.”

“I think I just figured out why you have trouble sleeping.”

He glanced sidelong at me before looking back to the road. “Since I was overseas. Sleep schedule got turned around and never got turned back.”

“Did you do it for your career?” I asked. “Enlist, I mean.”

He snorted. “What career?”

“In college,” I said. “You were going to law school and then on to politics. Military service never hurt a political candidate’s résumé.”

He shook his head. “I remember the plan, but none of that had anything to do with enlisting.”

“So it was the Nine-Eleven attacks?”

“Nope – enlisted almost a year before Nine-Eleven. As soon as I graduated.”

“Family in the military or something?”

He gave me a warning glance. “Just something I wanted to do.”

“Right,” I said. “And service put you off of politics? You saw what policy looks like up close and it made you cynical?”

“I don’t remember you being so interested in everything.”

I took a sip from his energy drink. “Maybe I wasn’t sure if questions were attractive in a lady.”

“And now you think they are?”

“Now I’m sure they aren’t,” I said, smiling. “So tell me. Why’d you join up?”

Nick sighed. “It’s difficult to explain.”

“That’s my favorite kind of explanation.”

“I was afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of everything.”

“You were afraid of everything, so you wanted a job where people shot at you?”

“That’s right,” Nick said. “And where I was allowed to shoot back.”

“Oh,” I said. “I have to think about that.”

“I told you,” Nick said, and sipped his energy drink. “Difficult to explain.”

“Did it work?”

“What?”

“Did becoming a soldier make you less afraid?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. In some ways.”

“Do you ever think about applying to law school after all?”

Nick finished his energy drink and crushed the can. “You love questions so much, maybe you should be the lawyer.”

“Objection, Your Honor. Argumentative.”

“I don’t think of myself in those terms anymore.”

“Which terms are those?”

“Someone who wears a suit and shuffles a lot of paper.”

“Then how do you think of yourself now?”

Nick pulled his sleeve to the shoulder and flexed, rippling the skeletal tattoos inscribed on his biceps and forearm.

“I’m a Zombie, baby.”

#

Shortly after two in the morning, we pulled into the York Valley Inn just west of an invisible town called Kearney. It had been raining since Omaha. The motel's lighted marquee promised "\$69/N1TE GO0D SLEP HB0." A pale guy with large-gauge ear plugs leaned against a Pepsi machine in front of the office. An awning protected him as he gazed into the screen of his phone and smoked a cigarette, lighted by the office window above him and the blue glow from the vending machine. As Nick parked the truck and killed the engine, the guy dropped his butt onto the concrete patio and returned to his desk in the office.

"Be right back," I said.

Nick crossed his arms, assuming a posture of stable repose. "I'll be here."

I dashed through the rain and into the office. Dry heat slid from my face down my neck as I wiped my damp hands on my jeans. The scent of burned pizza hung in the air.

An entrance behind the registration desk led into a tiny room lit by the bluish glow of a television screen. I assumed that it was showing real-time footage from security cameras, but quickly recognized the first-person perspective of a shoot-em-up video game. I unbuttoned the top of my jacket and addressed the guy, whose eyes were molten with fatigue or THC.

"Any rooms at the inn?"

"Yep," he said. "Queen? Doubles?"

“Two double beds,” I said.

He scratched something on a registration form and handed it to me.

“Fill this out,” he said, and opened a wooden cabinet to withdraw a metal key joined to a green plastic tag imprinted with the number 6.

I wrote my name and address on the registration form while he made a physical imprint of my credit card, and then I signed my name, pledging responsibility for all charges assessed to my room. He gave me the key, and it was as if I’d traveled twenty-five years into the past. A good feeling.

“It’s at the corner out front,” the guy said, making a chopping gesture in the general direction. “North end of the building. Check-out is at eleven. You want a later time, getting in so late?”

“Eleven should be fine,” I said.

#

Nick was thumbing through a document on his phone when I dove into the safety of the truck cab.

“What’s new in the world?”

Nick shook his head. “I was just looking at some satellite images of the ranch.”

“And?”

He shrugged. "Looks like it's near the foothills of a range in the Rockies. There's a tiny stream flowing through the property from northwest to southeast. A lot of brown grass."

"Good work," I said. "So let's get to the room."

Nick looked up in surprise. "You need help with your bag or something?"

"I can carry my bag, but you might as well park in front of our room. It's up there," I said, pointing to the north end of the building.

Nick turned the ignition. "*Our* room?"

"Right," I said. "The room where we will sleep in two separate double beds."

He parked in front of a green door adorned with a large white 6. "I'd planned to nod off in the truck for a few hours, leave you your space."

"The room has two beds. I can't sleep in both of them."

He pursed his lips.

"You can grab a shower in the morning, feel more alert when we get out of here tomorrow."

He shrugged, as if still thinking it over.

"Or stay here and sleep on the steering wheel," I said. "Up to you."

I grabbed my bag from the back seat and opened the door, flinging it shut as I fled the truck in the direction of the luminous 6. Inserting the key popped open the door to my room before I'd hardly even turned it.

The oatmeal-colored carpet was stained and chewed up, like a dish rag that needed to be thrown away. Small bronzed ears of corn provided drawer handles for the night stands and dresser. Pink and blue seashells swirled across the faded bed spreads. A modest flatscreen television was the only evidence the room might be part of the twenty-first century.

I dropped my bag on the bed furthest from the door and moved to the bathroom. To my surprise, it appeared recently renovated. Slate tiles checkered the floor, and an immaculate plastic curtain hung on a shower rod that bowed outward to maximize bathing space. Next to the light switch, a console regulated the floor temperature – beneath it, a clock radio. Impressed, I set the floor temperature for eighty degrees and turned on the radio. Johnny Cash sang about falling into a burning ring of fire – *it burns, burns, burns!* I turned up the volume and turned on the shower.

I inhaled the steam while I scrubbed the road off my skin and washed my hair. Lyrics were harder to make out as the water rushed by my ears, but there was a honky-tonk number about “the lonely, lonely streets that I call home,” and then Bob Dylan sang in the haunting register of those who have lost a love forever.

Wrapped in a towel, I carried my clothes back to the bed so that I could search my bag for clean underthings. I’d located a bra and was about to drop my towel when I noticed Nick lying motionless in the other bed. He’d removed his

boots, but was otherwise fully clothed. He lay on his back, hands knit upon his chest, eyes shut to the world like the guest of honor at a wake.

It was this corpse-like stillness that attracted me to his side. His features were slack, drained of their usual sharpness. His chest didn't even appear to rise.

But my fingers did not press his carotid or seek out a pulse in his wrist. Nick had wondered what this meant, my invitation. I'd wondered, too. Standing above his sleeping body, I knew. I wanted to take something from my sister.

When I reached out to touch his shoulder, he caught my wrist. His eyes were open now, and we regarded each other. It occurred to me that this may have been planned for dramatic effect. He did not look away when I loosed the towel onto the floor.

I grasped his wrist and withdrew my other hand so that I could unbutton his shirt. The skeletal tattoos illustrated his sternum and ribs. A bat hung from the bottom of his rib cage, and something sinister peeked from the place where his heart should have been. Patsy Cline sang "She's Got You" as I unlatched his belt, and then I lay next to him as he switched off the lamp.

#

When I woke in the morning, Nick was quietly grunting out a series of pushups on the floor next to the bed. The clock said just before seven, and the raw sunshine cutting through the blinds suggested bright skies and a clear horizon.

I propped my head up. "You couldn't wait one more hour?"

Nick raised and lowered his body a dozen more times while I watched waves of back muscle ripple across the tattoos of spine and rib cage. He rolled onto his back and assumed crunching position.

"I already waited two hours," he said, thrusting his forehead toward his upraised knees. "Thought you might try to sleep the day away."

"I'm going to wash the sleep away," I said, moving toward the bathroom. "And then I expect breakfast before we get back on the road."

When he continued to crunch without comment, I added, "Because I'm a certain kind of girl."

When he still said nothing, I closed the bathroom door and turned on the radio. It was an advertisement for carpet. The gleeful banjo accompaniment seemed to suggest that everything I ever wanted was ridiculous, so I turned it off.

Nick went into the bathroom as I left, toweling my hair. I was dressed and my bag packed by the time Nick emerged from the bathroom. He was naked except for his jeans. He slicked back his wet hair with his hand.

"I'm heading to the diner next door," I said. "Meet me there in ten?"

"I won't be long," he said. "If you wait, we could go together."

My heart rate jumped as the word *together* bounced around in my chest for a second. I picked up my bag as casually as I could manage.

"I'll get us a good table," I said. "My head is about to explode from caffeine withdrawal."

"Order me some scrambled eggs and toast," he said, poking around in his camo bag. "We should be able to get on the road in thirty minutes or so."

I saluted. "Sir: yes, sir."

He counter-saluted. "Dismissed, soldier."

The walls and vinyl flooring of the York Valley Café were an unfortunate shade of yellow that must have been thought attractive thirty or forty years ago. But I felt cheerful as soon as I sat in the booth despite the décor, or perhaps because of it. My father often took Mara and me to an old diner for breakfast before school. He'd drink coffee and watch us eat our cereal while old men smoked at the counter, hunched over their newspapers.

A ponytailed teenager with an apron wrapped around her waist appeared next to me. "Can I get your drink order?" she asked, smacking gum.

"Two coffees," I said. "And I think I know what we're going to eat."

I put in two orders for eggs and toast, and the waitress zipped through the crowded tables and booths to the back of the room, where a window allowed communication with the kitchen.

"Nothing like scrambled eggs in the heartland," said a guy at the next booth. He speared a clump of egg and raised it in the air. "Makes me feel downright patriotic."

He was bald and wore a gray suit, and his face cracked into a network of well-worn lines when he smiled. He must have been in his fifties, but carried himself like a former varsity football star.

“Breakfast foods don’t usually have that effect on me,” I said.

He sipped his coffee and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Then what does have an effect on you, Kelly?”

“I’m sorry?” I asked. “How do you know my name?”

“Lucky guess,” he said, dropping a pair of tens on the table. “See you ‘round.”

The man rose from the booth and left the diner. He passed Nick in the glass doorway, looking him up and down as he walked out the door. I stood as Nick approached the booth.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, studying my face.

I pointed to the parking lot, where the guy was sitting in a black SUV. “That man,” I said. “He knew my name.”

Nick looked back and forth a couple times while he computed this, then he hurried outside and ran toward the black truck. It roared to life, spitting gravel as it peeled across the lot and onto Highway 30. Nick pointed at me through the window of the diner and gestured for me to get my ass moving. The waitress arrived with the coffee.

“We’re going to need those to go,” I said. “And you’ll have to cancel the eggs.”

#

I held my coffee with both hands, using my arms as shock absorbers while Nick rumbled over I-80 headed west.

“Jesus, Nick,” I said. “Seriously – slow the fuck down!”

“You need to remember everything you can,” said Nick, leaning over the steering wheel as young corn fields sped past. “What did he say *exactly*?”

“I already told you,” I said. “He was talking nonsense about how nothing makes him feel patriotic like scrambled eggs. Something like that. I wasn’t paying attention. And then he asked me a question, but he knew my name.”

Nick passed an eighteen-wheeler and braked hard as he closed on a Subaru’s bumper and slammed the steering wheel. “Motherfucker! Let’s go!”

“Nick,” I said, trying to exude calm. “Please slow down. Even if we catch up to the weirdo, what then?”

Just ahead of the semi, the Subaru slid nervously into the right lane while Nick accelerated. The driver’s eyes were wide as we barreled past.

“I know how to talk to people,” Nick said.

“We all know how to talk to people,” I said.

“I’ve had a little more experience talking to people like him.”

“People like him?” I asked. “What kind of person is he?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out.”

“Come on,” I said, just as Nick accelerated to slalom smoothly through a couple of Hondas and a concrete truck. “Jesus! Stop it!”

“What question did he ask you?”

“I told you. I don’t remember. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Nick glanced at me before looking back to the road. “I think you’re in some kind of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“That’s what I need to ask him.”

“Please pull over. You’re scaring me. This doesn’t make any sense.”

Nick sighed angrily. “Fucker could have pulled off anywhere in the last ten miles.”

“Exactly. Would you please tell me what’s going on?”

Nick jerked the truck onto an off ramp and pressed the brakes. “I have to make a couple of calls.”

#

Rain fell outside the truck stop. Five vehicles were refueling, none of them a black SUV. I sat in a booth in the Wendy’s adjoining the truck stop, chewing on a French fry and thinking about how quickly someone can fall victim to paranoia. Nick appeared next to me, phone to his ear.

“I need your phone,” he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"I need to check something."

I gave him my phone. "You want something to eat?"

"No," he said, and walked back toward the convenience store area of the truck stop.

A black SUV parked in front of the truck stop, but I recognized almost immediately that it was the wrong model. An older guy with white hair and a red baseball hat got out and scampered through the rain toward the Wendy's entrance.

"Let's go," said Nick.

"Where's my phone?" I asked, but Nick was jogging through the rain toward his truck. He'd turned the ignition by the time I slipped into the cab, and he was driving before I'd locked my seatbelt.

"Can you tell me what's going on?"

"We're probably being followed," Nick said.

"Who's following us? And where's my phone?"

"You lost your phone."

"What does that mean?"

"Your carrier will replace a stolen phone," Nick said, accelerating onto the ramp for 183 South.

"All my phone numbers are in that phone!" I said. "And this is the wrong highway. What the hell did you do with my phone?"

"We're making a detour," said Nick. "You'll have to trust me. A friend of mine is working on it."

"I don't have time for any more of your friends," I said. "I need to find Mara."

Nick turned abruptly onto a two-lane county highway and accelerated. "I'm starting to think you're not the only one looking for her."

"Clearly," I said. "So what? We'll take all the help we can get."

Nick frowned. "We don't know what we're into here. And until we do, we're going to fly under the radar."

"When did you start making the decisions?"

"I'm trying to protect you."

"I don't need protecting," I said. "I'm serious. Take me to a car rental place and drop me off."

"Look," Nick said, wiping his hand over his face. "We're still going to the Lazy K, but we'll avoid interstates. I'll check in with my buddy in a few hours and see what else he found."

"Who is this guy? Why can't we just drive to the nearest police station and get it all done with, whatever this is? We haven't done anything wrong."

Nick looked at me. Then we both laughed, but I wasn't sure why. He handed me a map that he must have purchased back at the truck stop.

"Help me watch for 36 East. We'll go through Colorado Springs by way of county highways."

I unfolded the map and found our location. "You realize that anyone who can track phone signals will also have access to satellite imaging. They're getting coffee refills and laughing their asses off while we try to shake a camera that can read the numbers off any mailbox on the planet."

Nick smiled wryly. "I'm betting on it."

"I just want to find Mara."

Nick returned his attention to the road and sobered in a way I didn't like.

"So do I."

#

Cornfields leveled into gray-brown expanses of dry grass as we zigzagged south and west into Kansas. By the time we crossed into Colorado, the trees had receded and disappeared. And then the entirety of the western horizon slowly gave birth to the Rocky Mountains. They emerged blue-gray and white-capped as the sun slipped behind them and the lights of Denver hung like a galaxy of stars in the dusk.

We turned south onto another county highway while I fell into a fantasy where the Rockies were actually a vast elven fortress that concealed waterfalls and misty hidden glens.

"You've seen it," Nick said, "right?"

"The mountains? Only in pictures."

“No,” Nick said. “Behind us. It’s your patriot’s black truck.”

My heart rate jumped as I checked the side view mirror – but it was just the big square face of an RV and its wide-set headlights, maybe a quarter of a mile behind us. And then a dark form pulled out from behind it.

“No way – let’s just pull over and see what he wants.” I turned to look out the rear window. “This is bullshit!”

“Don’t turn around,” Nick said. “We’re going to meet him down the road.”

“Who the fuck cares this much about my sister’s problems?”

“That guy,” said Nick.

Nick accelerated and our tail kept pace with us, closing gradually as we pulled into a tiny town called Limon. The sun had set and the main strip was lit by street lamps shaped like giant candles. No building in view was higher than two stories, and the moon was a bright crescent.

“He’s right behind us,” I said. “I think he knows we can see him.”

“Yep,” Nick said.

And then he blew through a yellow light, careening off the main drag onto a series of short residential streets while the Patriot accelerated to keep us in view. Nick lost him altogether by turning abruptly left and slamming on the gas. The black SUV pulled around the corner behind us just as we flew through a stop sign and pulled into a broad gravel parking lot leading to a low stucco building. Motorcycles formed a long neat line from one end of the building to the

other. Neon signs in the two windows facing the parking lot advertised Coors and Miller Genuine Draft, and flood lights illuminated a large hand-painted sign above the entrance: The Bluebird Saloon.

“Get out and run to the bar,” Nick said, skidding to a stop in a row of cars. “I’m right behind you.”

I popped the door and started jogging toward the entrance, glancing over my shoulder just as Nick pressed a hand on my lower back, hurrying me along. The headlights of the black SUV pressed onto us just as I slipped through the door and into the fragrant darkness of The Bluebird Saloon.

There were maybe twenty people in the bar, most of them men. Half wore black leather jackets with patches and insignia. The other guys were dressed in the standard uniform of rural American working men: hoodies, baseball caps, Dickies and Carhartt jackets. Two women were visible, one of them a waitress. The jukebox at the back of the bar glowed purple and played something in the vicinity of Slayer or Megadeth. In front of the jukebox, a group of the bikers were gathered around a pool table.

“What now?” I said. “We just wait for him to find us?”

“It’s a bar,” Nick said, slipping an arm around my back to guide me. “We get a drink.”

The bartender had a gray beard and wore a black bandana wrapped around his head. He handed us two bottles of Coors. I was about to object, but maybe this bar served nothing but bottles of Coors, and my head was coursing

with adrenaline so I grabbed it and took a big pull just as the guy dropped a key ring on the bar. Nick picked up the keys, and the thirty seconds that followed happened so quickly that I didn't really understand what was happening.

Our tail came through the front door and made eye contact with me. I entertained the absurd impulse to wave him over to join us, but he stepped to his right as if avoiding us and glanced casually around the room. A crash exploded on the other side of the bar and a light flickered. Someone had broken the lamp above the pool table, where a guy in biker leathers held a bald man by the neck with one hand and bashed his nose with the other. I glanced to the front of the bar to check the Patriot's reaction, but he'd disappeared. Nick grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet just as a gun went off somewhere to the left. Two guys were grappling with the Patriot, who struggled to maintain control of a pistol. The Patriot tossed one guy across a nearby table and took a haymaker in the ear from the other one as we exited into the night, a stream of other people pushing behind us, yelling and swearing.

Nick steered me to the left and pointed to the passenger side of a green Chevy Lumina whose wheel wells had been devoured by rust.

"Get in," he said, dropping into the driver's seat.

I sank into the passenger seat and Nick popped the car into reverse, nearly ramming a guy in a white sweatshirt who sprinted behind us, slapping his palm on the trunk and yelling something unintelligible before disappearing into the confusion of bodies, cars, and motorcycles swerving recklessly out of the parking

lot. I ducked when two more gunshots cracked in rapid succession somewhere inside the building. The light from the fixtures flanking the entrance intensified uncannily and the neon signs in the front windows burned throbbing tracers in my vision as Nick pulled ahead of a beige minivan and accelerated into a left turn, blowing through the same Stop sign he'd skipped coming in.

I inhaled two quick breaths as Nick screeched onto the main drag, narrowly missing a guy in a jean jacket who was manipulating his phone as he hurried across the street. Two police cruisers sped past on the other side of the divider, sirens whooping and LCD lights flashing blue and red. Vehicles of all descriptions poured onto the main road and continued east, west, and south as the police lights disappeared to the north in the direction of the bar.

Nick turned south and slowed to the speed limit as the city gave way to the flat brown Colorado countryside. An empty pack of Pall Malls crouched in one of the cupholders of the central console and an open can of Mountain Dew rattled in the other.

"What just happened?" I asked. My voice sounded hoarse and unfamiliar.  
"Did we just steal a car?"

"We bought it," Nick said.

"I didn't see you give money to anyone."

"It's handled," Nick said, grinning. He pounded the ceiling of the car.  
"Fuck, man—I miss that shit! You know how hard it was to split when that whole thing went down?"

“What exactly just went down?”

“We shook our tail,” Nick said. “Certain vehicles exiting that bar are currently en route to Denver, Colorado Springs, Amarillo, and Cheyenne.”

“Which vehicles? Who are these people?”

Nick frowned. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t tell me what to worry about,” I hissed. “What happened to your truck?”

Nick glanced at me sidelong. “Gone.”

“What about my stuff?”

“We’ll get you other stuff.”

“What the fuck!”

“Open the glove compartment. There should be an envelope.”

I opened the glove compartment and withdrew a business-size envelope stained with coffee. A stack of twenty-dollar bills was fastened inside with a rubber band.

“About five-hundred dollars?” Nick asked.

I waved the envelope in his face. “You traded your truck for five-hundred dollars and this piece of shit?”

“I know – I should have asked for at least eight-hundred. But now we don’t need to use credit cards. We’re off the grid, baby.”

“No more plans without my input,” I said, grabbing the fabric of Nick’s shirt sleeve. “I don’t like being driven around and not knowing where I’m going.”

“You can drive next time,” Nick said, pulling down the passenger sun visor, where a key was fastened with a carabiner to a loop of fabric. “Spare key is always up here if you need it.”

I pressed my temples with my index and middle fingers. “How many laws did we just break?”

“None,” Nick said. “We pulled into a bar where an unfortunate booze-fueled altercation took place, and we exited the premises as quickly as possible, along with everyone else.”

A sinister-looking gray prison slid by on the left, enormous flood lights illuminating the yard beneath a tall guard tower. Two layers of barbed-wire fencing defined the perimeter.

“No more dangerous surprises,” I said, pointing out the window. “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a place like that.”

“Limon Correctional?” Nick frowned, adjusting the rearview. “That place is Level IV – inmates beat each other to death with dumbbells in there.” He cracked his window and lit a cigarette, exhaled a stream of smoke. “We’d go somewhere much nicer than that.”

#

We made it to Cañon City in under two hours and refilled the gas tank before continuing northwest to Sinclair, a dusty town in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range. Judging from the several outfitters advertising their wares on Mission Drive, the town's main strip, Sinclair served as a jumping-off point for adventures along river and trail in the mountains that loomed to the west.

We stopped at an outfitter to buy a change of clothes and get directions to the Lazy K Ranch. We arrived there twenty minutes later and parked in front of the main lodge. The double-doors were trimmed with decorative wrought-iron.

The entrance led into an atrium with an enormous hexagonal skylight. A tall woman stood behind the customer service counter. At a table watched over by a portrait of the Dalai Lama, three monks worked on an elaborate mandala made of colored sand.

The cheapest room was four-hundred dollars per night. It was clear we were going to stay at one of the motels back on highway 50.

So we checked into a place called Motel Buenavista near the Spook Canyon Brewery. At the bar, Nick started a conversation with an old Hispanic guy with a cowboy hat.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"I asked him if he knew how to find Hills – he made it sound like Hills is the owner, but no one knows when or if he'll appear."

Back at Buenavista, Nick and I lay in our separate beds.

"I'm totally exhausted," I said.

"Me, too," said Nick.

"Is it just me, or are these beds smaller than regular twin beds?"

Nick sat on his bed and tied his boots.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I just need to get outside for an hour."

"I'll go with you."

"No," Nick said. "I just need to get out and clear my head for a while."

I woke up to a hand on my throat and my senses returned with urgency.

A light turned on. It was the Patriot. The guy standing behind him wore a baseball cap featuring a capital "P." Under the circumstances, sports regalia was particularly confusing.

"Kelly Murdoch," said the Patriot. "We need to take a quick drive."

#

"That was quite a fucking stunt you pulled back in Limon," said the Patriot, rubbing his hands together. "I'd admire all the effort if you hadn't forced me to put some dumb asshole in a coma. Where's Corporal Durant?"

We'd driven for twenty minutes and parked somewhere in the trees off highway 50. The guy in the baseball hat had gone to piss in the woods while the Patriot and a guy with headphones around his neck sat in the back of a van with me.

"Who are you guys?"

Headphones and the Patriot looked at each other, then, having communicated telepathically, back at me.

Headphones smiled. "We're the good guys."

"And good news," said the Patriot. "We think you're a good guy, too."

"I didn't know you guys were in the news business," I said. "Are we going live at five?"

"We're in the Mara Murdoch business," said the Patriot, his eyes wide with emphasis, "and we're pretty sure Mara Murdoch's getting fucked by the bad guys."

"Fucked how?" I asked.

"Seriously fucked," said Headphones.

"Very seriously fucked," said the Patriot. "Without your help, she'll get life in prison."

"Why would Mara go to prison?" I asked.

They exchanged looks again.

"Treason," said the Patriot.

There was a knock on the driver's side. The Patriot's hand went to his holster as Phil pulled open the door and stepped up into the driver's seat, the collar of his blue rain jacket raised against the weather. As the Patriot turned his attention back to me, Phil turned and pressed a gun against his neck. It was Nick.

"Real slow and easy," Nick said. "Kelly's going to open the back doors and step out of the van. While she's doing that, the two of you will be touching the ceiling. Do it now."

Headphones and the Patriot raised their hands above their heads. Nick nodded at me and I opened the back doors, stepped onto the grass.

"The two of you were in some trouble before," said the Patriot. "Now you are both officially fucked. The United States government has no sense of humor whatsoever when it comes to assaulting federal agents with a deadly weapon."

"We'll get to that in just a minute," Nick said, removing a pistol from the Patriot's chest holster and aiming it at Headphones. "For now, I'd like you to remove your sidearm very slowly, place it on the floor, and kick it out of the van."

He did so. I collected the gun, black and heavy, while Nick marshalled them out of the van. He bound their hands behind their backs with zip tie restraints, and took the gun from my hands and put it into the back of his jeans before guiding our captives a hundred yards into the woods. We met with a natural earthen bulwark. On the other side of it, Phil stood against a tree, his arms zip-tied to a pair of opposing branches.

Nick arranged the Patriot and Headphones in a team hug on either side of another nearby tree and zip-tied their hands together, their arms outstretched to encircle the thick trunk.

“Tell you what,” said the Patriot. “Drop the weapons, remove our restraints, and I’ll promise that I won’t jam up every person you know. I’ll kick your ass and make sure you get every second of jail time possible, but you won’t have to live knowing that you’re responsible for ruining the lives of every person who ever knew you.”

Nick slapped the Patriot’s cheek in the familiar way that men at odds with each other find deeply insulting. “You were Marines, right?”

“I once shot a machine-gunner’s arm off at a thousand yards,” said the Patriot. “And while he bled out in the dirt, I shot off the other one.”

Nick nodded. “I thought so.”

“I know every toilet you’ve pissed in since your senior prom and you’re guessing about my service record?”

“I didn’t guess,” said Nick. “Every Marine I ever met has a face like a dog’s asshole and talks like he’s Dirty Harry.”

The Patriot lunged against his restraints, eliciting a cry of surprise from Headphones on the other side of the tree.

“Kelly Murdoch!” roared the Patriot. “Tell your boyfriend to put down the guns and cut us loose, and then we’re going to drive up to Colorado Springs

and have a long talk. Do it now, or you'll make your next movie from the inside of a women's prison."

Nick grabbed me by the hair and put the pistol to my head, cocked the trigger.

"Hey!" I said, grabbing his wrists.

Nick took hold of my hands and pulled them downward, immobilizing them. "This girl's in no position to tell anyone anything right now."

"She's your hostage?" asked Phil, incredulous. "No one's going to believe she was your hostage."

Nick shot the tree eighteen inches above their heads, creating a shower of bark and wood splinters.

"Fuck!" said Headphones, squinting.

Nick held the van's keys aloft with his other hand. "I'm going to hold on to these," he said. Then he removed the baseball cap from his head and tossed it at Phil's chest, where it dropped to his feet.

"The Pirates?" Nick added, shaking his head. "You know Pennsylvania has a real baseball team on the other side of the state, right?"

"What the fuck," said Phil. "This guy has no idea when to quit."

"I just want you to remember," the Patriot said. "I gave you a chance, and this is what it looked like when you threw it away."

Nick pointed the gun at them, and then guided me around the earthen mound and back toward the van.

"I have to stay here and turn myself in," I said, taking a deep breath. "We don't know where Mara is and we don't know what this is all about. I'm in way over my head and so are you."

"These guys aren't federal," said Nick. "I don't know who they are, but they're not who they're pretending to be."

"Then who are they?"

"Private security, private detectives, something like that."

"None of those guys looked like Sam Spade."

Nick shot me a concerned glance. "Sam Who?"

"You know," I said, preparing to do a bad impression of Humphrey Bogart: "*The schtuff that dreams are made of.*"

"Oh," Nick said, uninterested.

When we got to the van, Nick shot the rear passenger tire and the whole machine jerked downward like an animal with a broken leg.

"What was that for?" I said. "Now we're in the middle of nowhere looking at a three-wheeled van."

"I know where Mara is," Nick said, and then he threw the van keys a long way into the forest, where they disappeared somewhere in the leaves of a large birch tree. "And our car is parked a quarter mile in that direction."

"What do you mean you know where Mara is?" I asked. "Where is she? How'd you find her?"

“Let’s head to the car,” he said, pointing as he began to walk. “And I’ll tell you on the way.”

#

Nick had tracked down the old man from Spook Canyon. Marco was a ranch hand at the Lazy K who’d come from Guatemala almost fifteen years before. Nick asked about Hills in a mixture of Spanish and English, but Marco just shook his head. The *jefe* was not always at the ranch. He was a man *muy importante*, and Marco was just some an old *ranchero* they left up at the *campo* because he was too *feísimo* for the visitors.

The green Lumina was parked on the shoulder of a dirt logging road. Nick unlocked the driver’s side and then reached across the seat to unlock the passenger door. I got inside.

“But what about Mara?” I asked, strapping my seat belt.

“That’s the thing,” said Nick, turning the ignition and launching forward with what had become a characteristic jackrabbit start. “Marco knew all about her. Mara started coming out here months ago. He said she lives up in the mountains at *la granja*.”

“What’s a *granja*?”

“Well,” Nick said, “it means *farm*, but I think there was a translation problem. The way Marco described it, the place was more like a camp or

temporary settlement of some kind. He said that he helped transport supplies there last winter.”

“Mara’s camping? Who’s with her?”

“Marco didn’t seem to know what they were doing,” Nick said. “He made it sound like there were some kids or families, but he also used the word *vagabundos*, like ‘drifters.’ He said they were growing food, and also something about *la minería*—*cuenca minera*—like a mine, for coal or something.”

“So it’s a mining operation,” I said. “Maybe Mara’s consulting for a coal or petroleum company.”

“I didn’t have time to follow up on any of this, but there’s plenty of mining in the Rocky Mountains.”

“But Mara’s not a geologist—I don’t see how a background in neuroscience helps with mineral extraction.”

“One way to find out,” Nick said, popping open the glove box. “See if you can find the map Marco drew for us.”

The map was drawn on a scrap of brown paper, seemingly torn from a grocery bag. The lines and junctures were crude, and the identifying notes were in Nick’s handwriting.

“You really think you can follow this?” I asked. “It doesn’t seem extremely clear.”

“It’s what I could get out of him,” Nick said. “I figure there aren’t going to be a lot of well-traveled roads and paths up here, and we might be able to guess or ask around if we get stuck.”

I frowned. “You think there are going to be a lot of people to ask?”

Nick shrugged. “You have a better idea?”

“Why don’t we go back to the pasture and ask Marco a few more questions?”

“I already asked him all the questions I could think of.”

“I might be able to think of a few more,” I said.

We both realized it at the same time. Something in the rearview mirror.

“Oh, shit,” Nick said.

I turned in my seat.

It was the van, kicking up a trail of dust along our dirt road about half a mile below us.

“Are they tracking us?” I asked. “Can we outrun them?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said, pressing on the accelerator, “and I don’t know.”

The trees and rock bluffs sped by my window as we climbed higher into the Sangre de Cristo range. The van disappeared from view as the road turned into switchbacks that hairpinned blind around high stone shelves. The road continued to swerve on cliff’s edge without any opportunity to turn off or otherwise exit the route. There was nowhere to hide.

“Do you think they’re still behind us?” I asked, stupidly.

Nick just frowned at me and sped around another rocky outcropping.

“We’re here,” I said, pointing at the map. “We’re on this line, right?”

There’s eventually going to be a turn to the right. Do we have any idea how long before the turn? Maybe there’s an intersection, something that can confuse those guys.”

“Dude,” Nick said, pulling around another turn and speeding into a long straightaway that climbed for two or three miles. “Just let me drive.”

My eyes danced helplessly between the map, the grim expression of concentration on Nick’s face, and the rear window, where the road leading back to our last turn was empty.

And then the van pulled around the rocky corner, accelerating onto the straightaway.

“They’re behind us,” I said. “They’re still following us.”

“No shit,” Nick said.

A distant crack echoed along the slope of the mountain. And then there were three in rapid succession.

“I think they’re shooting at us,” I said, looking hard at the next turn, willing the car to move faster.

“Get the guns from the back seat,” Nick said. “And start shooting back.”

I said, "Oh, fuck," but felt weirdly calm and sleepy as I retrieved the guns, like I could take a nap. Nick took one from my hand and slid back the thing that slides and gave it back to me. Then he took the other one and did the same thing.

"There's a safety button," Nick said. "Do you see the red button? When you're ready, you click it off and next time you pull the trigger a bullet comes out. I'll tell you when to shoot. It'll look like this."

And then Nick opened the window and pushed his torso through it. While he held the steering wheel with his right hand, he leaned back with his left and shot several times in rapid succession. Our car maintained speed and stayed in the correct lane. My mouth started to water like I was going to vomit, but then Nick dropped back into his seat as several answering shots cracked behind us.

"Give me the other gun," he said, and then something broke behind us. There was a hole in the rear window. Blood colored Nick's right shoulder.

"Holy shit," I said, and dropped the gun on the floor while I reached for Nick's shoulder.

"Knock it off!" Nick yelled, slapping my arms away. "Get your head down and give me the other gun!"

I gave Nick the other gun and slumped in the passenger chair, eyes fixed on the next turn, where the rocks would protect us for a couple minutes. There might be another turn, or some trees. Maybe we could lose the car and climb into the woods, hide, cross through streams, confuse our tracks. I thought of Harrison

Ford in *The Fugitive*. Maybe there'd be a gigantic damn and we could jump into the water pouring down from the lock gates.

Nick pushed my shoulder, and I thought he wanted me to get further down, but he said, "Get the gun! Give me the other gun!"

And then was a series of louder shots – three of them, at even intervals, closer by. Nick's head bobbed as he checked mirrors and other sight lines.

"The van just went over the cliff," Nick said. "But I think there's another shooter above us somewhere."

"The van just went where?" I asked, raising my head to look out the rear window.

Nick grabbed my shoulder. "Stay down!"

Seconds later, we turned the next rocky corner and Nick accelerated into a shady corridor that led upward into a forest of tall pine trees. I pushed Nick's hand off my shoulder and sat up, peeked at the abandoned dirt road behind us, glanced at the maze of pine branches on both sides of us.

Nick pressed the brakes and the car slowed. Alarmed, I checked behind us, but the road was still empty.

"What are you doing?" I asked, and then I saw the fallen pine tree blocking the road ahead of us. The branches underneath had broken and flattened, but the rest sprouted heavenward, blocking view of the road beyond.

Nick swiveled as he checked behind and around us. "I don't like this," he said, putting the car in reverse.

“Hold on,” I said. “Don’t you think we should see if there’s a way around?”

A figure stepped onto the road behind us. He was lanky and tan and wore large black wrap-around sunglasses above a trim beard. His baseball cap was turned backwards and the sleeves of his camouflage t-shirt had been removed, exposing a tattoo on his right biceps. A rifle hung by a strap on his shoulder. His posture was loose as he strolled up the road toward us.

Nick stopped the car and put it in park. “You stay here,” he said.

“Calm down,” I said. “This guy looks like a hunter.”

“This guy looks like he just shot a van off the road,” Nick said, opening his door. “Keep your head down.”

Nick opened the driver’s side rear door and used it for cover while he leveled the handgun at the man, who appeared unconcerned.

“Stop where you are,” Nick said, “and set the rifle on the road, slowly.”

The man, possibly amused, put up his hands but continued to walk toward our car. “You the police?” His accent was faintly Texan, but like a Texan who’d lived a long time in southern California. “Good thing,” he said, “because I just saw an accident on the road back there.”

“Stop where you are,” Nick warned, “and toss the weapon.”

The man stopped and unslung his rifle, which was crowned by an enormous black scope. “I’d rather not throw the rifle,” he said, holding it by the strap at shoulder height. “I’d hate to mess up my sights.”

“Put down the weapon and take three steps backward,” Nick said.

The man presented the rifle for inspection as he walked toward Nick.

“You can have it,” he said. “No problem.”

I startled as Nick fired a warning shot. The stranger stood unfazed. He raised his left hand, palm out, to indicate surrender and slowly lowered the rifle to the road.

“Okay,” he said, raising his hands above his head. “Relax. I’m here to help.”

“Help us how?” Nick asked.

I remembered where I’d heard the man’s voice before and opened the car door.

“Where’s Mara,” I asked, stepping outside the car. “We talked on the phone.”

Nick sidestepped the back door and advanced to the trunk, as if he were going to hurdle the car to get in front of me. “Get back in the car, Kelly!”

“Tell me where Mara is!” I said, feeling kinetic energy building in my limbs, wondering if I was going to rush him. “Shoot him if he doesn’t say!”

“No one’s going to shoot anyone,” he said. “My name’s Hills, and your sister sent me to fetch you.”

#

We unpacked the Lumina and left it in front of the fallen pine tree, which appeared to be a deliberate obstacle. A vintage blue and white Bronco was parked in a clearing a hundred yards beyond. As we loaded our bags in the back, I regarded the bumper sticker affixed to the rear window with a mixture of revulsion and curiosity. Above a pair of sinister-looking monster eyes, the sticker declared *NO FEAR* in letters composed of flame. No fear...of what?

"What kind of place are you taking us?" I asked from the back seat. Nick sat in the front with the pistol in his lap.

"Just relax," Hills said, flashing me a dopey grin in the rearview mirror. "Everything's about to get real friendly."

"I have a lot of questions," I said. "This has been—"

"A helluva trip," Hills interrupted, lighting a cigarette.

"You're a helluva shot," Nick said. "You took out that van."

"I saw it happen," Hills said, tossing a two-way radio like a brick onto the dashboard. "And I called it in. Mara contacted the sheriff. They're on top of it."

"You sure you want the sheriff poking around up here?" Nick asked.

"Sheriff Boon?" Hills said, surprised. "He'll just send a meat wagon to pick up the pieces. Cars go off the road every couple of months up here. Folks need to learn to heed those big yellow Caution signs."

"That wasn't just any van," I said. "And those weren't just any folks."

"You worry too much." Hills smiled, taking a long drag on his cigarette before exhaling in puffs as he spoke: "Worry is bad for your health."

"How long have you known Mara?" I asked. "What kind of place is this you're taking us?"

Nick tensed as Hills jerked his head to the back seat.

"I'm sorry, but Mara said she wanted to fill you in when you got there, so I can't say too much more about it." Then Hills settled back into his seat and glanced momentarily in Nick's direction. "You're gonna have to ease up some—you're about to make me skittish."

A vast sea of pine branches swayed behind us as the road emerged from the forest. We drove into a rocky gorge, flanked on either side by pale stone walls that terminated in high peaks and long ridges framed by a cloudless blue sky.

"Ram," Hills said, and I turned in my seat to check the road behind us.

"No," Hills said, leaning over the wheel so that he could point upward to our right. "Male bighorn up top, checking us out."

A russet-colored animal watched us from a ledge about fifty feet above, his enormous horns curling into substantial half-circles on either side of his skull. He looked less like a sheep and more like a small bull on steroids, some noble monster from the pages of mythology.

"I like your watchdog, but you might need to find him a date," Nick said.

"I can't remember the last time I saw a guy that horny."

I sighed impatiently as the men laughed over this stupid joke. Hills offered Nick a cigarette. Nick accepted it without comment and lit it before returning the lighter to Hills. Then the drive quieted while the road climbed out from between the rock walls, cresting onto the lip of a wide green valley. Several buildings clustered along the main road at the bottom of the valley. Above this town center, a handful of other structures dotted the hillsides, which reached upward into trees until transforming finally into a pair of extensive gray-brown peaks.

“Welcome to the heart of the Sangre de Cristos,” Hills said, tossing his cigarette out the window. “Shit gets me every time.”

“This is it?” I asked, pushing between Nick and Hills to improve my view. A creek had joined our road from the right, where two bleached wooden buildings poked over the trees. “What are those?” I asked, pointing behind us.

“A mill from the old mine,” Hills said. “A lot of folks mined for silver up here around the turn of the twentieth century. The mine went dry and everyone left, I guess. I don’t know too much more about it. Almost all the buildings down in the valley here are original construction, though some of it was rebuilt after a fire. There’s still a lot of fire damage.”

We passed a sign that read: *Welcome to HIGH FORK, pop. 22.*

“The town’s called High Fork?” Nick asked.

“Hold on to this one,” Hills said to the backseat. “He’s sharp.”

“Mara’s down here?”

“Sure is,” said Hills. “And she is gonna be mighty glad to see you.”

The suggestion made me both hopeful and uncomfortable as I weighed the possibility of its relative truth. “Pretty small town,” I said.

“We like to know our neighbors,” said Hills, intending fun. “It was originally called ‘Devil’s Fork,’ but a Christian group made up of miners’ wives had it changed.” Hills pointed to the cluster of buildings ahead of us. “They failed to close the saloon and cat house, though.”

The buildings at the town’s center were in various states of dilapidated age and disrepair. The tallest structure included a decorative if primitive façade emblazoned with *THE LUCKY NUGET* in dayglo orange paint. The painter must have intended a lucky miner’s nugget of gold or silver, though I tasted the sugary goop inside a candy bar. A sign hanging in front of the next building was labeled *ART*. And another, painted in a careful hand: *Supplies Swap*. The others appeared unsigned. Together, they called to mind the sets from movies like *Rio Bravo* and *The Outlaw Josie Wales*, if everyone in town liked to drop acid, make their own sandals, and listen to Neil Young.

As we neared the edge of town, I noticed fifteen people standing very still in rows near the creek. Their absolute stillness had made them invisible from higher up.

And then I recognized Mara.

“Holy shit,” whispered Nick, who must have seen her, too.

“Park over here!” I said.

Hills pulled in front of The Lucky Nugget across the street. "Home sweet home."

I threw open the door and ran across the street, where Mara and the others stood with eyes closed and their arms formed in circles before them, as if embracing invisible tree trunks or hula hoops. A young boy barely four feet tall was the only one to register my arrival by opening his eyes. The others, including Mara, continued their silent meditation.

The boy said, "Hello," and "My name's Justin," and "What's your name?" His eyes were dark and almond-shaped, his hair wavy black. I thought: *You will become a beautiful man.*

The Rocky Mountain sun had tanned Mara's face a dusky gold. Blond streaks wove through her brown hair, which had grown long enough to form a short ponytail. I inserted myself into the space inside my sister's arms and wrapped my own around her back.

"I've been looking for you." My eyes felt hot and I blinked rapidly as relief flooded through my abdomen, but I was angry, too. "I've come a long way to find you. Open your eyes and look at me."

Mara opened her eyes: "Kelly." She sounded like she had just remembered my name. Her eyes traveled behind me, to Nick. "What's he doing here?"

We separated and turned to regard Nick. My hand trailed casually across Mara's shoulder. Then it fell to my side, dejected.

By way of greeting, Nick stated: "Dr. Murdoch."

Hills stood by, playing the part of the curious spectator at our strange reunion.

"This is the man who came with you?" Mara asked, though I couldn't decide if she was accusing me or making fun of me. "How did you find him?"

"She found him while she was looking for you," said Justin, waving away a horsefly. "He helped this lady find you. Is she your sister?"

"I am," I said. "You're a very smart little boy."

Justin smiled handsomely. "I'll be nine in August."

Nick put a hand on his hip. "I think we've earned the right to ask a few questions, Doc."

Some of the other meditators had opened their eyes, but remained motionless. Mara turned to address them.

"We'll continue after dinner," she said. "Be well till then."

"Be well," they answered, resting their arms and hunching over to retrieve water bottles, sweat shirts, and other portable gear. A Golden Retriever that had been lying in the grass on the other side of the creek galloped into the water and up the riverbank to stand next to Justin, panting expectantly. Then it shook suddenly dry, to Justin's enormous delight. Hills carried his rifle in one hand and gathered Justin by the shoulders with the other, steering him across the street toward The Lucky Nugget. When Justin called "Come on, Cyrus," the dog bounded across the street.

Mara walked toward the Bronco. "Let's go."

"Where're we going?" I asked, settling into the passenger seat. Nick climbed into the back.

"That's the question we're all trying to figure out," said Mara. Then she reversed the truck onto the dirt road, changed gears, and sped toward a broad patch of shadow that darkened the hillside above town.

#

In the morning, Mara invited me to go running with her. We ran from her cabin to the town center, past the Lucky Nugget and up the road leading to the mining camp, out of the valley, and back to the highway that passed through the canyon and back to Sinclair.

"So where'd you go?" I asked, sucking the high altitude oxygen through my nose and exhaling with force.

Mara paced next to me in silence for ten seconds. "Where'd I go when?"

"When you disappeared," I puffed. "After Dad died."

Mara swiped her short sleeve across her forehead. "I was having sex with Uncle Rudy."

I laughed, but Mara's stony expression sobered me.

"That's impossible." I said and grabbed Mara's shirt as I slowed to a walk.

"Just keep running," Mara said, pulling me along.

I caught back up and dropped into pace. “Back then,” I said. “You were fourteen.”

“It’s like I told everyone back then,” Mara said, accelerating slightly. “I don’t remember exactly – there’s a lot from childhood that I don’t remember. But there are...flashes.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, tugging her shirt until she was standing next to me on the side of the access road. I sat in the grass so that I could rest my arms on my knees. “Uncle Rudy was...you know, *goofy*. He wore shoes with tassels, told the same three jokes over and over, played the piano at Christmas and made us all sing along to ‘Jingle Bells’ and ‘Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.’ It doesn’t make sense.”

“It happened. And Dad found out.”

“But Dad was already gone,” I said, my voice wavering. I cleared my throat. “So he couldn’t have known.”

Mara looked like she felt sorry for me. “It had been going on for a while.”

I stood so that I could put my arms around Mara. “But what happened?” I asked into Mara’s shoulder. “If Dad found out, what did he do?”

Mara patted my shoulders and took a step backward. “We all know what he did.”

My face contorted as if someone had just pushed a really big hypo into my arm.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “That was because the market crashed. And Dad’s gambling. The tavern was going under.”

“Kelly,” said Mara, “most of those problems disappeared when Uncle Rudy loaned Dad all that money.”

“But when,” I said, trying to remember the timeline. “Not after he found out.”

“I don’t think so,” Mara said. “But I really don’t remember.”

“Did you go to the police? That policeman was with you when you came home.”

“A mall security guard recognized me and called the police,” she said.

“That’s what they told me. I don’t remember.”

“But Mara,” I said, shaking my head, “you were under so much strain—we all were. And then the seizures started. The stress and the seizures could have affected your memory. People have false memories, for lots of reasons.”

Mara stood very still and studied me, as if she were a wild animal deciding whether to attack or flee. “It happened, and Dad found out. It’s because of me that he did what he did.”

“No,” I said, and I tried to hug her again but she stopped me. “None of this is your fault. You were a minor, a child. You’re a victim.”

“I am not a victim of anything,” Mara said.

“You are,” I argued. “If what you’re saying is true, then you definitely are.”

She shook her head. "I knew what I was doing. Even when I finally remembered what happened, I realized that I had known the whole time. But it was like wallpaper that never registered until I really looked at it. It just took a long time to really look at what I did. To accept it."

"It's not your fault," I said, wiping my eyes. "None of it was your fault."

"I made choices," Mara said. "Accepting responsibility gives me power, and I'm going to use that power to fix things."

"Fix what things?" I asked. "You can't bring Dad back." Anger flushed my cheeks and I checked it, because none of this was Mara's fault. I was angry at other people, things that were out of our control.

"I'm working on something up here," Mara said. "Something that's going to improve people's lives."

"Like a new kind of medicine?" I asked.

"Sort of," Mara said. "It's not done yet, but it's already helping people."

I took a deep breath and tried to concentrate, but Mara's revelations had exhausted my emotional reserves and the run and exhausted my physical energies. I wanted to take a nap, black out, switch off.

"That's why the people here are so smart," I said. "You gave them something."

"I gave them something," Mara said. "Something that's going to change the world."

#

Hills was at the cabin when we returned. Justin had been missing for hours. Hills went to gather a search party from the northern camps and cabins while Nick and I spread out to the south. I'd estimated the local High Fork population to number at least twenty-five, and in less than half an hour twenty of them had assembled in front of The Lucky Nugget, sober and alert, ready to get down to business.

Mara explained that Justin had last been seen twelve hours ago, playing with Cyrus in the field across the creek. The dog returned to its owner hours ago, around midnight, but Justin had disappeared.

Hooper distributed whistles while Mara held up a map that had been divided into a grid with a marker. Our strategy would be to move in groups, periodically sounding our whistles to attract Justin's attention, until the grid had been exhausted.

Hooper led half of the search party south along Jackman Creek. Nick and I headed north with Mara and a half-dozen others to ascend the old mining trail. Hills, placid and spooky as ever, loped wolf-like at the front of the line next to Mara.

After searching the burned remains of the original concentration mill at the top of the trail, we fanned east and west to begin eliminating our individual sections of the grid. We'd been whistling like a flock of insane chicks for about

two hours and the Rocky Mountain sun beamed high overhead. I crested a ridge and picked my way through a grove of aspens and pine trees that terminated at the rear of a fallen barn or cabin like so many others strewn around High Fork.

I whistled every five steps or so as I approached the structure, intending to search it before continuing across the field to the end of my row on the grid, and the sudden introduction of human movement in my peripheral vision startled me.

It was Hills. He stepped out from behind the ruins, manipulating something small with his fingers.

"Jesus," I said. "You scared the shit out of me."

Hills glanced up casually.

"Sorry about that," he said, presenting something in the palm of his hand.

"Want a mint?"

"No. Aren't you supposed to be somewhere on the other side of this ridge?"

Hills followed the trees to the top of the ridge with his eyes and blinked several times, as if momentarily confused.

"I think this is where I'm supposed to be," he said, popping the mint into his mouth and crunching it loudly while he withdrew another from a rolled package. "Do you think you might have gotten lost?"

"I think it's the other way around," I said. "Part of the map is going unsearched."

"I don't think so," Hills said, glancing behind him, across the field. "I got to the end of my search route and I'm on my way back." He put the other mint into his mouth and chewed it innocently, awaiting my reaction.

"Whatever," I sighed. "I have to get to that stand of aspens on the other side of the field before I'm done, so I'll see you back at the trail."

"No problem," Hills said, glancing around us, miming attentiveness. "I'll go with you, keep you company."

This was an annoying turn of events.

"Fine," I said. "Let's get moving."

I checked the remains of the barn, two walls propped up by a pile of weather-beaten crossbeams and a charred ladder-back chair with three legs. An image of the empty chair at Mara's apartment in Milwaukee surfaced with surprising clarity and emotional resonance, colored by this strange place where I found her leading a tribe of brilliant misfits.

Hills lit a cigarette as we waded through the weeds and switchgrass. I was relieved to see Nick striding toward a house with a galvanized steel roof about two-hundred yards to the north. He glanced over, whistle hanging from his mouth, and did a double-take when he saw Hills tramping alongside me. I just shook my head and shrugged.

"You're wondering about our work up here," Hills said, exhaling a plume of smoke. "You must be curious."

Nick's whistle chirped away as I considered how to frame my response to this.

"Mara said she's trying to recenter," I said. "Seems like that's what everyone's doing. Isn't that why you're here?"

"No," Hills said, and laughed. "I'll tell you why I'm here."

I glanced to the north and Nick must have gone into the house with the steel roof.

"I was visiting Kununurra, a town near the farm where my father grew up in northern Australia," Hills said, rolling up his right shirt sleeve. "I was cleaning some fish near a muddy watering hole and a crocodile almost took my arm off," he said, pointing to a pink scar traveling six inches along his forearm. "Jumped out of the water like a killer jack-in-the-box. Only reason I'm alive is my dog Dylan was eating the barramundi guts while I worked, and the little bastard barked like a son of a bitch until that croc slid back into the water tail-first."

I think we're at the end of the row," I said, pointing north to the house. "Let's meet up with Nick and we can all walk back to the trail."

"Anyway," Hills said, turning to follow me toward the house. "After a few weeks, I got disoriented. The sun maybe. The unfamiliar position of that continent's place on the planet. Gravity was different there. I could feel my molecules pulling against each other, reorganizing things."

"You were homesick," I said. "Happens to a lot of people when they travel."

Hills took a long drag on his cigarette. "I'd been drinking the night before, really tied one on," Hills said, smoke puffing with each syllable. "That peak to the west – you see it?"

I looked to our left while high-stepping through the switchgrass. "Sure."

"Hombro Peak," Hills said. "That's Spanish for *shoulder*. You read the Bible when you were growing up?"

Focused as I was on reaching Nick, I couldn't tell if I'd missed something or if this was another of the non sequiturs that tangled most thoughts Hills spoke aloud.

"I went to Sunday school," I said.

"Me, too," he said, gesturing mnemonically with his cigarette. "I mean to say: my mother dragged me to church all the time – I never went to school on Sundays."

"We were holiday Catholics," I said.

"We were Mexican Catholics, *por voluntad de Dios!*" Hills said, chuckling as he made the sign of the cross. "You remember the Old Testament story about Abraham?"

"I recall the broad strokes," I said.

"God made Abraham some big promises," said Hills. "God told him *I will bless you and I will bless those who bless you, and All people on earth will be blessed through you.*"

“And then God set Abraham to murdering his own son,” I said. “Isaac probably should have been blessed with some foster parents.”

“I dreamed of a blessing one night in Kununurra,” Hill said. “I saw God make His promise to Abraham. *I will make you a great nation*, He said. That’s when I knew that I was Abraham, and God was talking to *me*.”

I blew twice on my whistle, hoping to draw Nick from the house by magic.

“I could see my sleeping body,” said Hills. “Sweating, beaten, drunk – but hovering over myself, I was a child again. All the circuits in my head were perfect, unbroken, clear – it was like being an angel.”

“Dreams are crazy,” I said. We were almost to the house, and I hurried toward the front door.

Hills grabbed my arm and turned me around. I flinched, because I thought he was going to hit me, but he dropped his cigarette butt and smiled beatifically, tears in his eyes.

“But it wasn’t a dream,” Hills said. “It was the gift of grace that God promised to Abraham and all his descendants – the whole human race. Somewhere inside us, we all have a true self designed according to God’s plan. That was the point of my dream,” he said, pointing an index finger to his temple. “There’s a secret Hills inside of me. But your sister found a way to pull him out.”

“Nick,” I called, pulling away from Hills. “Come out here – we’re heading back to the trail.”

The door opened and Mara appeared on the porch with a shotgun. "It's time we had a talk," she said, waving the barrel of the gun into the house.

#

"Why go through all this trouble?" I asked. "Faking the disappearance of a little boy – we're in the middle of nowhere. You could have kidnapped us any time."

"No one's kidnapping you," Mara said.

"Good," Nick said. "Then we'll be on our way."

"Stop being childish." Mara frowned. "What I'm about to say will be difficult to hear, so listen carefully."

"For Christ's sake," I said. "What's going on, Mara?"

"Nick's been infected with a parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. It's common in animals and people all over the world. But this strain of the parasite is different."

"Parasite infection is treatable," I said. "We'll just drive up to the hospital in Sinclair and they'll give him some pills or something. Why all the drama?"

"Because this strain of the parasite is different," Nick echoed. "Mara tampered with it."

"Tampered how?" I asked him. When he didn't answer, I turned to Mara: "What's he talking about?"

“Like many parasites, Toxo has a definitive host,” Mara said. “It can complete its life cycle only in the intestines of a cat. So when it finds itself in a rat, it does something remarkable – it releases cysts in the rat’s brain that change how it thinks. The rat is wired neurologically to be afraid of cats and to run away from them, but now it seeks them out. When this infected rat smells cat urine, it becomes sexually aroused. The rat has fallen in love with the cat.”

“Gross,” I said. “And weird.”

“And when the rat finds the cat,” Mara said, “the cat eats it, thus reintroducing Toxo into its preferred host. In one form or another, Toxo may have been swimming around in the primordial sludge a billion years ago. Maybe a billion and a half. But imagine how many generations – and how many spontaneous genetic mutations – were necessary before it perfected this elegant and effective reproductive strategy.”

“Still not getting it,” I said, glancing at Nick, who remained quiet and somber. “Are you saying that Nick is going to fall in love with a cat?”

“Scientists have long believed that human infection was irrelevant to Toxo’s survival strategy,” Mara said. “And maybe it is. But once infected, the human host produces an immune response that catalyzes the formation of Toxo tissue cysts in the brain, where the parasite goes into a kind of hibernation. And then we see changes in the human host’s behavior – more subtle than in rodents, but present nonetheless.”

“And this is where Mara tampered,” Nick said.

“That’s right,” said Mara. “I engineered a unique strain of Toxo that produces reliable and predictable transformations in the human host’s perceptions and behavior – social, intellectual, emotional. The implications are staggering. It’s not just the most important breakthrough in treatments for clinical anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, compulsions, and other psychiatric ailments – it shows signs of ameliorating learning disabilities, attention deficit, even pathological stuttering. It’s quite plausibly the next step in human evolution.”

“That’s how you describe what happened to Kaspar,” Nick said. “You plugged him full of hostile microorganisms and he *evolved*.”

I remembered out loud: “Kaspar Rouhani – the Milwaukee County Zoo shooter was infected with this thing.”

“You used him,” Nick said, his eyes darkening. “Did he even know he was a guinea pig?”

“You’re not listening, Nick,” Mara said. “This is the next step. Liberation from rebirth and suffering. Look at this place, the people in it. Look at Justin – he was diagnosed severely autistic and had almost no interactive language the first eight years of his life. Echolalia, he could echo words and phrases other people said and sign a dozen or so words in sign language. Three weeks after introduction of our super Toxo and he was speaking in complete sentences. You’ve heard him – he’s much brighter than other eight-year-olds you’ve met.”

“Because of bugs,” I said, frowning. “You have to know how insane this sounds.”

“Our bodies are mostly microorganisms,” Mara said. “Non-human microbial cells outnumber human cells ten to one. More than ninety-nine percent of the genetic material in our bodies belongs to microorganisms. They’re introduced as we exit the birth canal, and again when we begin breastfeeding, and in some cases while still in utero. Microorganisms are crucial for digestion, for certain kinds of protein synthesis, for the regulation of metabolism and immune function.” Mara held out her hand. “There are more bacteria clinging to the palm of your hand than there are people on Earth. From the perspective of the microbes, humans are little more than the sum total of their social structure, convenient lodging. The important question, then, is this: If our bodies are mostly other organisms, where is the human?” Mara pointed to her head. “Somewhere up here, consciousness is born. And I want to set it free.”

“People died because of what you did to Kaspar,” I said. “They weren’t set free.”

Mara groaned, exasperated. “Revolutions aren’t perfect. Some branches get pruned so the larger plant can thrive. And we’ll all die eventually. But I’m talking about a fundamental shift in what it means to be human, for *posterity*. I’m talking about liberating the human soul.”

“And I’m talking about a girl named Cherelle Diggs,” I said. “She was studying to be a veterinarian. She had a four-year-old daughter named Megan

who doesn't have a mother any more. Because Cherelle suffocated on her own blood minutes after Kaspar Rouhani, who had been your research subject, shot her twice in the chest for no reason."

Mara nodded and regarded Nick. "And that's why we're going to keep Nick safe and secure until we can figure out what's going on."

"You made it sound like Nick is going to transform into Buddha," I said. "You said the changes were *predictable. Safe.*"

"This thing is still in relatively early development," Mara said, withdrawing a hypodermic needle from a metallic case the size of a lady's evening bag. "But we've come to recognize a glitch, and I'm going to need to take some blood."

"Kaspar Rouhani," Nick said with menace, "was not a glitch."

Nick stiffened when Mara inserted the needle. The barrel reddened as she slowly pulled the plunger upward.

"And neither are you. But maybe there's an organic irregularity in your brain physiology, or a developmental anomaly in the parasite's bradyzoitic stage. It's hard to say for certain without an MRI machine, but I can do some initial analysis with just the blood sample."

Mara stowed Nick's blood sample and withdrew a second needle.

"Why draw blood twice?" I asked.

My stomach sank as Mara tied the brown rubber hose around my arm.

"We should test you, too," Mara said.

I was beyond. "You infected your own sister?"

"No," Mara said, lips tightening. "But the parasite can be passed through sexual contact." She glanced back and forth between my face and Nick's. "And I assume you've had sex. Not true?"

I glanced at Nick to gauge his reaction, and saw that he did the same. Did he look guilty for some reason? Like he wanted me to keep my mouth shut?

"What's the worst that can happen?" I asked.

"Kaspar Rouhani's the worst that can happen," she said. "If there's a glitch."

"If there is a glitch," said Nick, "how do we fix it?"

Mara stowed my blood sample with Nick's and fastened shut the case.

"Same way they fixed Kaspar."

"Mara," I warned.

"But who knows?" She shrugged. "Maybe there's an anticonvulsive that blocks the immune response to Toxo's tissue cysts. Maybe something as unlikely as an antihistamine does something productive. We're scientists. We identify a phenomenon, study its nature, and then we add and subtract variables until we've learned as much as we can."

"Real American heroes," Nick said, and then he spit on the floor.

"Every American accomplishment of value in the past five-hundred years was underwritten by soldiers such as yourself who accepted potential casualties as part of their missions," Mara said, crossing her arms. "Not to mention slave-

owners, violent political dissidents, and genocidal land-robbers. So let's encourage the patriots among us to keep an open mind."

#

Three days later, Mara woke me in my cot. It was not yet dawn and the moon still hung brightly in the window. Nick stood by the door.

"Get up," Mara said. "Get dressed."

I felt mentally alert as I lay in my cot, but sleep's ooze swished in my skull as I sat up. I took a deep breath and blinked several times as I tried to locate my shoes and tie them to my feet.

"What's happening?" I asked.

A jolt of adrenaline released when I saw Nick standing in the shadow between the door and the window, and I stood to put my hands on his shoulders. "Are you okay?" I hugged him close, and the sour smell of sweat was in my nose. "You're okay?"

"He's fine," Mara said. "And so are you. Both of your blood tests came up negative for Toxo antibodies."

"Great," I said, running my hands through my hair and taking another deep breath to wake up. "Then can we get out of here? All three of us."

She frowned as she opened the door. "Hills and Jurić have made a stash of Toxo-Z, and I don't know why. We need to take it away from them and destroy it."

"Why don't we just call the police from Sinclair?" I pulled on my jacket and zipped it closed. "Please – let's just get out of here."

Mara shook her head as she opened the door. "They might be trying to move the Toxo to another location – we have to stop them before we leave." She gestured for me to lead the way. "Firepower is next door at the lab. Let's get moving."

#

We stayed within view of the access road, which was lighted by the moon, but avoided detection by keeping to the forest. It was hard to say exactly who might be watching the road, but we decided it would be worth the extra time to assure our invisibility.

After collecting Mara's hunting rifle and the two handguns that Nick and I brought to High Fork, we hiked for twenty minutes through the trees before we reached the old mining site.

Nick pointed to a chute running from the concentration mill to the leaching plant. "I'll be up there with the rifle. If Mara is unable to persuade them to stand down, I'll provide additional convincing. Kelly: we're going to give you

an eight -minute head start. You're a runner, right? You head up to the canyon and back to the car we left on the access road next to that fallen tree. You're going up to Sinclair to send in reinforcements."

"We can all go to Sinclair together," I said, "after we're done here."

"We're going to fix this situation," Nick said. "I'm sure of it—but we need to know that if something goes wrong, there's still a chance the authorities might make it up here before it all goes sideways."

"Let Mara go," I blurted, stupidly. "I'll stay here and help you."

"I'm the best chance we have of talking these guys out of whatever they think they're doing."

I pursed my lips, wondering if they really thought I was going to leave. And then I nodded, the charade decided.

"Synchronize your watches, comrades," I said, pointing to my wrist. "And I'll see you on the other side."

I jogged fifty yards north where the path turned east to intersect with the main road leading up to the canyon. And then I worked south through the trees until I reached a point where I could see Nick and Mara crouching in the shadows against the east side of the concentration mill. A couple minutes later, Mara watched Nick sling the rifle onto his back and climb the permanent scaffolding that supported the transit chute between the two buildings. When Nick had belled up to the opening in the concentration mill, Mara walked toward the front entrance at the south end of the building. I followed through the

trees until she entered the building. Then I sprinted past the entrance, where Hills had parked his blue and white Bronco. I ducked as I ran to stay beneath the windows lining the front of the building. After peeking through the glassless window at the southwest corner and finding nothing but empty darkness, I pulled myself up by the window sill and climbed inside.

Moonlight helped me feel my way along the concrete floor of a storage area or former office. There were two bookshelves, but both appeared empty. As I crawled toward a throughway that emptied into a dark corridor, my hands found a wooden box. Scraps of paper lined the bottom, where I found two solid paper cylinders, each more than twice the length of my fist. As my hands explored these in the dark, I discovered a long fuse on the end of one cylinder. Dynamite.

On her way to a potential gun fight, does Kelly Murdoch pick up and carry with her very old and probably dangerously unstable explosives? I asked myself this question before continuing into the darkness, the two sticks of dynamite cradled against my abdomen. Light spilled onto the end of the corridor nearest the main entrance. I hugged the wall as I made my way toward the light. Around the halfway point, my elbow found a door, and I gently turned the knob. Open.

I entered a half-lit antechamber with high ceilings swallowed by darkness. The righthand wall terminated in a shaft of dim light radiating from the next room, where Mara's low and commanding speaking voice echoed. I ran my hand

along the bricks until I reached the entranceway, then backed into the rear corner of the vestibule so that I could observe undetected.

The room was three stories high. A large portable floodlight and a pair of kerosene lamps exposed part of an extensive network of timber rafters. Three enormous rust-bitten contraptions dominated the chamber. They looked like a series of iron thrones for cyclopean royalty, though they must have been used to refine silver ore. In each case, a pipe around three feet in diameter descended from the rafters and emptied into a twenty-foot tall rectangular vat, which joined another one half as tall. Ladders, gauges, wheels, and smaller pipes occurred frequently.

Hills, Jurić, and Mara were gathered beyond the iron thrones, near the floodlight and kerosene lamps. Mara stood with her back against a pile of dirty lumber stacked as high as she was tall. Her arms were crossed and she held the pistol casually, resting the butt of the gun in the crook of her left elbow. Hills and Jurić crossed their arms as well, Hills pacing a stride in one direction and then turning to pace a stride in the other. Except for the gun, the three of them could have been bandmates negotiating the artistic direction of their next album. Unless they were the Allman Brothers, in which case the gun would have had to be larger.

Hills uncrossed his arms and held open his hands to signal a rebuttal: "But it's already done, Mara, and it's been done for the same reasons we began this work. We're doing what we have to do to advance the science."

“My science,” said Mara. “This is my research.”

Hills barked a vicious laugh. “You said this thing belongs to everyone—”

Mara held up her left hand to stop him. “Don’t lie to me or yourself. The government shares none of our intentions.”

“Whatever our intentions,” said Dr. Jurić evenly, “our research had gone as far as it could under these conditions. We need a dedicated lab, sterile facilities, tests that we can control and replicate. We need certain legal protections. You must have known that this moment was inevitable, Dr. Murdoch. And you’ll remain invested in the process as we move forward.”

Mara directed the business end of her pistol toward Hills and Jurić. “But I’m afraid that we’re not moving forward after all.”

“Everyone take a breath,” said a man’s voice.

Hills, Jurić, and Mara’s heads jerked to regard the newcomer, who must have been standing near the main entrance behind the refining vats. Mara’s center of gravity dropped as she leveled the gun at this man.

“Let him go!” Mara shouted.

The distraction allowed me to slip into the processing chamber and dart behind one of the vats. As I crouched to spy through a knot of pipes, the Patriot marched Nick into their midst. He held Nick by the shoulder of his shirt and pointed a gun at his head. The hair on the back of my neck stiffened as Mara set her gun on top of the stack of lumber and showed her palms.

If Nick's guns weren't with another person, they were probably outside. And I could get them. But even if I were to locate the weapons and return here in less than three minutes, everything might have already been decided. I swiveled so that my back was to the vat and scanned the room to be sure someone wasn't lurking behind me. I squinted as I tried to penetrate the shadows in the corner of the vestibule where I'd hidden. It seemed unlikely that one of the Patriot's buddies was holed up in there, but I raised my middle finger in the general direction just in case.

I aligned the two sticks of dynamite in my hand. As I did, I tried to generate three different plans so that I could eliminate the riskiest one and quickly weigh the other two on a pair of scales, but thinking had evaporated and in its place were my shoes, the dynamite, and a distinct flashing near the periphery of my vision that corresponded to the pounding in my chest.

I removed Nick's Zippo from my pocket and took two deep breaths. Then I ignited the lighter and stepped into the open.

"Everyone stay calm," I said, hoping to convince myself.

They all looked at me, and then Nick said: "Goddamn it, Kelly – now we really are fucked."

"Everything's fine," said the Patriot. "Kelly Murdoch's a good girl. She's going to put down those dangerous explosives and come over here so that we can get this whole thing figured out once and for all."

“Give your gun to Nick,” I said, “and then we’re all getting into a car and driving to the police station at Sinclair. It all stops right now.”

The Patriot shot Nick in the leg. Nick swore loudly as he fell against the lumber pile, gripping his thigh. The Patriot grabbed Mara’s arm and put the gun to her neck.

“This is it,” he yelled. “Put down the explosives and get your ass over here!”

As if in a dream, I watched the Zippo’s flame kiss the tip of the fuse, which sparked to life. I held the dynamite in front of me as I walked forward.

“Put down the gun,” I said.

Now the Patriot pointed the gun at me. “You have until the count of one to yank out that fuse.”

I made eye contact with Nick, who had straightened. Then I tossed the fuseless stick of dynamite toward the Patriot in a high arc. As all eyes went up, I removed the crackling fuse from the other stick and dropped it on the ground to fizzle.

Then several things happened simultaneously: Jurić bolted toward the entrance; the Patriot turned over the table and pushed Mara behind it; Hills stumbled over one of the kerosene lamps as he fell to the floor; Nick retrieved Mara’s gun from the top of the lumber pile as he lurched behind it; and it occurred to me that impact force could probably detonate nitroglycerin.

The stick of dynamite landed harmlessly.

And then the Patriot shot at me. Nick rose from behind the stacked lumber and unloaded three fast rounds into the Patriot, who fell against the wall and slumped on the floor next to Mara. And then my fuseless stick of dynamite rolled too close to the small fire that had consumed the broken kerosene lamp, and I closed my eyes as wind and dust rushed past my face.

#

My ears rang as I sprinted to Mara, a hand over my mouth to block the dust and airborne debris. She sat with her back to the wall, blinking. Carbon scored the lumber pile. The top layers had toppled, and the others were askew. Blood spattered Mara's shirt and the left side of her face was gray with ashy grit. I kneeled by her side and took her wrists, touched her face.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "What's bleeding? Where does it hurt?"

"Stop it," Mara said, leaning against the wall as she tried to rise.

"Don't get up," I said. "We have to stop the bleeding."

"It's not my blood," Mara said, pointing to the Patriot's body where it lay motionless on the floor. "Nick!" she called, wobbling as she rose. "Go find Nick."

Nick's legs protruded from behind the lumber pile. Hills lay on the floor, eyes closed. The blast had chewed his left hand and forearm, as if he'd raised them to protect his face.

I stepped over his body on the way to Nick, whose ginger complexion had drained to white. Two of the beams lay across his chest. I was barely able to heave them to the floor next to Nick's body.

"Mara," I said, glancing behind me, where she was crouched next to Hills. "Can you make it over here? I can't tell if Nick's breathing."

She limped to the wood pile and I helped lower her to Nick.

"He's breathing, but the gunshot wound is bad. He's shocking out." She handed me a pair of keys on a ring and pulled off her flannel, folding it on top of Nick's wound as a dressing. "Position the truck so the back seat is even with the entrance, open the door, and then come back in and help me move Nick."

"These for the Bronco out front?" I asked, taking the keys. "What about Hills?"

Mara shook her head as she pulled out her belt and looped it around Nick's leg, then cinched it tight over the flannel dressing. "You'd better hurry."

#

I floored the accelerator as we departed the canyon and descended into the forest. The fallen tree appeared ahead and I glanced back at Mara and Nick in the rearview mirror. Nick's eyelids flickered. His arm flexed around my shoulder as we hauled him to the truck, but he hadn't spoken. He'd limped like a

sleepwalking child. How many internal organs were damaged when the explosion propelled the lumber into his abdomen?

Mara pressed on Nick's leg with one hand and monitored the pulse at his wrist with the other.

"This is going to be bumpy," I said, slowing as we approached the fallen tree.

"Just hurry," Mara said.

I flinched as the truck rocked into the ditch on the side of the tree and we passed the green Lumina, and thought my heart would explode as I negotiated the switchbacks that led down to Highway 285. We broke ninety-miles-an-hour as rabbitbrush and greasewood blur to gray, lit at the perimeter of the road by our single working headlight. Even at this speed, it was going to take almost thirty more minutes to reach Sinclair. I wished that we had a cell phone. But if we had one, it probably wouldn't have worked. And if it did, who would we have called?

Peaks bared their teeth to the stars east and west of Highway 285. Two utility poles spread their arms atop a hill. I looked again to verify there wasn't a third. It seemed there should have been three.

The headlight cast the road before me, showing me the world I would inhabit a second before I moved into it. I saw the emergency room in Sinclair, the gurney, a nurse holding a bag of fluids like the Statue of Liberty. I saw the

policeman, a pale mustached man who would put a hook in me with his eyes as he surveyed the three of us. I would not escape.

I adjusted the rearview mirror. Was Mara kissing Nick? Or had she turned her cheek to his mouth to feel for breath? It was too dark to see.

After our mother went to bed, Mara and I would sneak into the basement to watch movies – *Willow*, *Night of the Comet*, *The Last Starfighter*, *Tron*. Being the older, Mara would choose the night's story, but our agreed-upon genre was always adventure in another world, one far from the cow pastures and Dairy Queens of our plain Midwestern town, its sturdy churches and thrifty churchgoers, the fishing boats in their driveways covered securely with tarps. We watched the 28-inch Panasonic in our basement with the sound low until our father returned from tending the tavern. He'd scold us before tucking us in our beds, or watch the end of the movie while we fell asleep against his warm chest, our eyelids damp from yawning.

I think of those nights with Mara and my father every time I sit in a theater, waiting for the trailers. The suspense is magical, the longing to begin. And we must begin in the dark. The lamps dim as a hush settles over the auditorium. From somewhere behind and above us, a cone of light. A window opens, revealing movement beyond. A dog runs across a field. Leaves rustle in an autumn breeze, the slate-blue clouds above full of rain. Soldiers, their beaten uniforms caked with dry mud, lie flat against a ridge and aim their rifles toward

the tree line below. Time shrinks to a point as space expands all around us, projecting another universe upon the darkness of our own.

We are finally awake, and the dream has begun.

## DAVID BOWEN

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### EDUCATION

All But Dissertation (PhD expected May 2015)	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee English / Creative Writing
Master of Fine Arts (May 2003)	University of North Carolina-Greensboro Creative Writing (Fiction)
Bachelor of Science (May 2000)	University of Wisconsin-Madison English with concentration in Creative Writing

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### TEACHING & CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Teaching Assistant / UW-Milwaukee / Milwaukee, WI / Aug. 1010 – present

- *Taught first-year writing courses and creative writing workshops*
- *Participated in pedagogy course, focusing research on creative writing pedagogy*

Lecturer / Colorado State University / Fort Collins, CO / Aug 2007 – Aug 2010

- *Taught upper- and lower-division writing and literature courses*
- *Twice redesigned 160-page first-year writing curriculum, including daily lesson plans, major assignment sequence, and assessment rubrics for use by Graduate Teaching Assistants*
- *Co-planned and taught week-long GTA orientation, including sessions on modifying and preparing lessons plans, adapting and applying assessment criteria, and teaching in assignment comments*
- *Mentored GTAs in bimonthly resource training meetings and Professional Internship in English seminars, where I presented on skills ranging from crafting cover letters and CVs to locating and applying for government and nonprofit positions*
- *Served on the Non-Tenure Track Committee, advocating for non-tenure track instructor interests at the departmental, college, and university levels*
- *Served on the Hiring & Evaluation Committee, performing classroom observations as well as reading and evaluating annual review materials*
- *Presented at the 2009 CSU Professional Development Institute, sharing strategies for integrating writing in classrooms across the disciplines*
- *Integrated technology into the classroom through use of CSU's online Writing Studio and online Writing Center, as well applications such as Microsoft Publisher and Adobe Photoshop*

Upward Bound Instructor / Colorado State University / Fort Collins, CO / Summer 2007

- *Designed and taught college-prep English courses for ESL students*
- *Supervised a student newspaper and literary magazine*

Visiting Instructor in English / Guilford College / Greensboro, NC / Aug. 2005 – May 2007

- *Designed and taught first-year writing courses*
- *Served on First-Year Composition Committee to develop composition curriculum*
- *Helped to design and implement a writing assessment instrument used to gauge the success of departmental writing outcomes*
- *Advised independent studies concentrating on short stories, novellas, and songwriting*
- *Arranged and promoted poetry and prose readings by faculty, students, and visiting writers*

Creative Writing Instructor / UNC-Greensboro / Greensboro, NC / Spring 2006

- *Helped to develop curriculum for an adult literary writing certification program*
- *Taught the intermediate level course for the literary fiction track*

Adjunct Lecturer / Guilford College / Greensboro, NC / Aug. 2003 – May 2005

- *Designed and taught first-year writing courses*
- *Supervised an extracurricular creative writing club where students worked on short stories, personal essays, novels, memoirs, and plays*

Adjunct Lecturer / UNC-Greensboro / Greensboro, NC / Aug. 2002 – Dec. 2004

- *Designed and taught first-year writing and public-speaking courses*
- *Designed and taught survey courses in literature and analysis of narrative*

Upward Bound Instructor / Northcentral Technical College / Wausau, WI / Summers 2001/02

- *Designed and taught college-prep English courses for ESL students*
- *Supervised a student newspaper and literary magazine*

English Teacher / Wausau West High School / Spring 2001

- *Taught four sections of Freshman English and two sections of a multi-ethnic literature course*
- *Met with parents to discuss student progress*

## **PUBLISHING & EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE**

Publisher/Senior Editor / New American Press, LLC / Milwaukee, WI / July 2002 – present

- *Co-founded independent press focusing on literary fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and translations*
- *Drafted Articles of Incorporation and filed as nonprofit in Wisconsin*
- *Completed tax-exemption application to attain federal non-profit status*
- *Solicited and evaluated hundreds of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction manuscripts*
- *Managed publication and production of more than 40 books and journal issues*
- *Supervised editorial and design interns (both undergraduate and graduate)*
- *Drafted successful grant proposals*
- *Generated and maintained contact database for marketing purposes*
- *Maintained financial records and filed tax documents*
- *Designed promotional materials and mailings as well as book covers and interior layouts using industry-standard publication software such as Adobe InDesign and Photoshop*
- *Promoted New American authors*

- *online via the New American Press and MAYDAY websites and Facebook accounts*
- *in print via direct mailings and press releases*
- *at AWP via display tables and associated events*
- *on tour via reading events in Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and internationally in Britain, Italy, and Hungary.*

Publisher/Founding Editor / *MAYDAY Magazine* / Milwaukee, WI / Jan. 2009 – present

- *Co-founded arts and literary magazine featuring innovative fiction, nonfiction, poetry, translations, reviews, interviews, and visual art (www.MAYDAYMagazine.com)*
- *Solicited and evaluated work*
- *Coordinated roundtable on the practice of contemporary poetry reviews (in issue 1)*
- *Coordinated showcase of contemporary Asian writing and political art (in issue 2)*
- *Designed, arranged, and uploaded content using Adobe Photoshop and Dreamweaver*

Associate Editor / *Great Lakes Review* / Cleveland, OH / Apr. 2012 – present

- *Co-founded journal featuring fiction, nonfiction, poetry, reviews, interviews, and visual art from and about the Great Lakes region of the United States*
- *Solicited and evaluated work*
- *Coordinated website design*
- *Established and coordinated national poetry contest*
- *Designed promotional materials and cover art*

Assistant Editor / *Cream City Review* / Milwaukee, WI / 2011

- *Read and evaluated fiction submissions*
- *Solicited and conducted interview with novelist and story writer Benjamin Percy*

Content Editor / *Apex Learning* / Seattle, WA / July 2010 – Aug. 2010

- *Edited course content for learner appropriateness*

Content Contributor / *Bedford/St. Martin's* / New York, NY / 2010

- *Designed content and contributed to critical apparatus of *Joining the Conversation: Writing in College and Beyond*, by Mike Palmquist, a textbook that situates writing and literacy as social acts fundamentally changed by technology.*

Co-editor / *The Rhetoric of Green* / Colorado State University Comp Program / 2009 & 2010

- *Selected and edited content for *The Rhetoric of Green*, a course reader*
- *Contributed to a critical introduction*

Literary Director / *American Distractions, LLC* / Greensboro, NC / Oct. 2001 – July 2002

- *Co-founded a company to support and promote literature and the arts in North Carolina*
- *Drafted and filed a charter with the state of North Carolina*
- *Maintained financial records and filed tax documents*
- *Promoted music, stage, graphic arts, and literary events*

**PUBLICATIONS (FICTION & ESSAYS)**

- “A Cool, White Fog.” (Fiction) *Printer’s Devil Review* (Spring 2014).
- “Shibboleth.” (Fiction) *Serving House Journal* (Spring 2014).
- “Las Aves de Dios.” (Fiction) *Flyway: Journal of Writing and Environment* (Spring 2013).
- “Lector ex Machina.” (Essay) *The Convergence Review* (Spring 2012).
- “These Violent Delights.” (Fiction) *Monkeybicycle* (Summer 2011).
- “Discourse of the Firetenders: Considering Contingent Faculty through the Lens of Activity Theory.” (co-authored Essay) *College English* 73.4 (Mar. 2011).
- “Noble Dust.” (Graphic Narrative) *Reconfigurations* (Winter 2010).
- “One More Banana.” (Fiction) *Salt River Review* (Fall 2008).
- “Paint.” (Fiction) *The Literary Review* (Summer 2002).

**PUBLICATIONS (INTERVIEWS & REVIEWS)**

- “1914: Goodbye to All That, edited by Lavinia Greenlaw.” Book Review/Nonfiction. *Colorado Review* (Spring 2015).
- “An Interview with Okla Elliott.” Interview with Okla Elliott. *CutBank* (Fall 2014).
- “Bloody, Damn Sexy, and Very Shakespearean.” Interview with Two Pence Theater Company Artistic Director Tom Wells. *Great Lakes Review* (Spring 2014).
- “*The Biology of Luck*, by Jacob Appel.” Book Review/Fiction. *Colorado Review* (Winter 2014).
- “Serious Stories: Gordon Weaver’s Moral Vision.” Interview with Gordon Weaver. *Great Lakes Review* (Fall 2013).
- “*Meaty*, by Samantha Irby.” Book Review/Nonfiction. *Colorado Review* (Summer 2013).
- “You Lowly Eaters of Bread Will Be Made into Angels.” Interview with Anthony Bukoski. *Great Lakes Review* (Fall 2012).
- “An Interview with Benjamin Percy.” Interview with Benjamin Percy. *Cream City Review* 31.5 (Spring 2012).
- “In the Land of Snow and Crosses.” Interview with Anthony Bukoski. *Main Street Rag* (Fall 2003).

**PRESENTATIONS**

- “Independent Publishing in the Midwest.” Panel. Beloit College. Beloit, WI. (May 2013)
- “Shopping Online: Course Management Systems and the Creative Writing Workshop.” Conference on College Composition and Communication. St. Louis, MO. (Mar. 2012).
- “The Autotelic Writing Classroom: A Pedagogy of Play.” Emerging Compositions. UW-Milwaukee (30 Apr. 2011).

“Two Strategies for Writing Integration: Write-to-Communicate and Write-to-Learn/Engage.”  
Professional Development Institute. Colorado State University. (Jan. 2009).

## **AWARDS & HONORS**

Chancellor’s Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2010)

Graduate Scholar Award, University of North Carolina-Greensboro (2001)

Dean’s List, University of Wisconsin-Madison (May 2000)

Phi Eta Sigma National Honor Society, University of Wisconsin-Madison (1997)

National Catholic Society of Foresters Scholarship (1996)

## **VOLUNTEER SERVICE**

Commodore / Sailing Club at UW-Milwaukee / Milwaukee, WI / Aug. 2012 – Aug. 2013

- *Drafted grant proposals; secured \$13,500 in grants for maintenance and operations expenses*
- *Organized agendas and conducted monthly executive board meetings*
- *Coordinated with Treasurer to design annual budget*

Vice Commodore / UW-Milwaukee Sailing Club / Milwaukee, WI / Aug. 2011 – Aug 2012

- *Managed \$8,000 construction project to replace previous dock storage container*
- *Assisted Commodore in monthly board meeting agenda preparation*

Ski Patroller / Rib Mountain Ski Area / Wausau, WI / 1994 – 1998

- *Completed 100-hour first aid training course*
- *Assisted, transported, and treated injured skiers*
- *Provided instruction during candidate training and annual first aid refreshers*

Eagle Scout / Boy Scouts of America, Troop 409 / Wausau, WI / Awarded 1993

## **REFERENCES**

Dr. George Clark  
Department of English  
UW-Milwaukee

Dr. Okla Elliott  
Department of English  
Misericordia University

Dr. Sarah Sloane  
Department of English  
Colorado State University