The End of Celebrity

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The End of Celebrity

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The End of Celebrity

By

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INTRODUCTION

Celebrity and Conspiracy in The End of Celebrity

Part I: Celebrity as Conspiracy

In Don DeLillo’s novel Libra there is a scene regarding the famous photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald, taken before his failed attempt to shoot General Ted Walker, in which Oswald is holding a rifle and pamphlets in the backyard of his Texas home. In the book, Oswald is telling George de Mohrenschildt about that photo.

“I sent you a picture,” Lee said.
“What picture?”
“It’s the kind of picture a person looks at and maybe he understands something he didn’t understand before.”
“Sound mysterious,” George said.
“Maybe he sees the truth about someone” (Libra 289).

Later, de Mohrenschildt opens his mail and finds the picture. On the front Oswald has inscribed it, “To my friend George from Lee Oswald.” On the back Oswald’s wife has written, “Hunter of fascists—ha ha!!” (Libra 290).

Libra overall—and this scene in particular—is representative of what my novel, The End of Celebrity is about, which is that both celebrity and conspiracy are narrative constructions initially implemented to bring a sense of order to the chaos of reality, but which typically end up becoming real and chaotic themselves and, in doing so, create new realities on their own. This is realized in the book when two conspiracies—one in which an actor becomes a celebrity and another in which the government attempts to influence events to its own advantage—take on lives of their own and unexpectedly change lives and events as a result.

In Libra the photograph of Oswald, with its accompanying scrawled messages, is indicative of how celebrity and conspiracy function as an objective thing that can be viewed
several ways, none of which are objectively true or false. Oswald sees himself as a cold-blooded killer. His wife views him as a joke. De Mohrenschildt, meanwhile, thinks of Oswald as a perfect scapegoat to set up for killing Kennedy. Which of these descriptions is most accurate in describing the real Oswald? The novel itself does not definitively answer that question. Instead, the character of Oswald is left ambiguous. This is because Oswald, in the novel and to an arguably greater extent in real life, has become something more than a person. He has become a cultural touchstone and moreover, an image and an object; a malleable repository of information whose actions and reality are freely interpreted, and even altered, to accommodate the perspective of whomever is describing Oswald for whatever end they envision.

When one becomes a celebrity it is not always, or even often, that one becomes rich, famous, and happy; lives life that way; and dies that way. The achievement of celebrity is often the start of a story, not the end. Similarly, conspiracies rarely start out with a plan that is then expertly executed so that the conspirators then enjoy the results. They also take on a life of their own that brings about a new, and often unforeseen, reality.

Celebrity—or the act of making an individual a celebrity and sustaining them as an exalted member of society—is a narrative construct that functions as an externalization of a culture’s popular wishes, aspirations, and desires. As such celebrity is most certainly a conspiracy in the sense that it is an agreement by a group of people in a given culture to elevate a person that they say represents their beliefs. While the reasons for the public creating celebrities are many and various, it is always dependent on a generalized agreement by the public at large to celebrate that person. This is because without the tacit agreement of the public that that person is worthy of celebration, the celebrity cannot exist. Furthermore, public endorsement of a person elevates that person to representing, and even personifying the culture.
In the United States, according to David P. Marshall, in his book *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*,

Celebrity status operates at the very center of the culture as it resonates with conceptions of individuality that are the ideological ground of Western culture. Moreover, the celebrity as public individual who participates openly as a marketable commodity serves as a powerful type of legitimization of the political economic model of exchange and value—the basis of capitalism—and extends that model to include the individual (loc. 763).

The public, then, imbues individuals with the power to represent them both individually and culturally. This further strengthens the role of celebrity as a conspiracy, and one that extends the influence of the United States, or the “American way of life,” on a global scale. This is because “America's biggest export is no longer the fruit of its fields or the output of its factories, but the mass-produced products of its popular culture—movies, TV programs, music, books and computer software,” according to Paul Fahri and Megan Rosenfeld in the *Washington Post*. As an example, films produced in English by U.S. studios account for between sixty and sixty-five percent of all movies shown in the world (Fahri and Rosenfield).

Of all celebrities, the movie star is perhaps the most culturally powerful. But they also represent the most difficult kind of celebrity to establish or maintain. The reason for this is that, despite agents, publicists, managers, lawyers, and the other various and sundry enablers of any celebrity’s success, movie stars are independently empowered by the public to fill the role of celebrity. In his essay, “Toward a New Definition of Celebrity,” Neal Gabler writes that,

[T]he celebrity narrative as actualized by the process of ‘celebritization’ is the story of the people who have been sprung from the pack in a kind of new Calvinism. We suspect that however much they may protest against the idea of their exceptionality, those who live celebrity are the sanctified, the best, the most deserving. And having conspired in the creation of this new art form as fans, we get the dispensation to watch them, to share them, to consume them, to enjoy them, to bask in their magnificence and to imagine that we might have a narrative of our own some day, allowing us to join them (15).
While celebrities influence the culture, it is the audience that creates, and can destroy, the celebrity.

“What must be remembered about these various constructions of a film celebrity is that they are modalized or operationalized in the audience,” according to Marshall. “The film industry, the coterie of personal agents surrounding the star, and the star him- or her selves are involved in this active building of a public personality. Integrated into that structure is some measure of the response of a public and then the reformulation of that response (in whatever form) into the further cultural production of the celebrity” (loc. 2861).

In other words, despite an industry of people who work the public has to ultimate power to shape and influence the narrative construction of the celebrity, and thus defines the celebrity object/image. It is the public who wields the ultimate power about who gets to be a celebrity, and who does not, and whether a celebrity remains popular or disappears into ignominious obscurity.

To put it more bluntly, the movie-going public is notoriously fickle regarding those they exalt, and those they denigrate. The public will even reject a celebrity, and cast him or her out of popular favor, for reasons that have nothing to do with the actions of the celebrity.

A good example of how much the public controls the popularity of a movie star is exemplified in what happened when movies went from silent films to talkies and, in that process, major movie stars had their careers utterly destroyed. The reasons went deeper than the tone of the actor’s voices, or their ability or inability to enunciate on the screen. The change indicated that the audience, according to Ty Burr, in Gods Like Us: On Movie Stardom and Modern Fame, had more power to determine for themselves, on an individual basis and with less influence from studios, what the star meant because they felt closer to the star (loc. 1572).
An offshoot of this unforeseen rebellion by the public to not passively accept as real the prepackaged personalities shown to them in the movie house—a rebellion which served to not only demythologize the hyper-constructed and grandiose images of “personalities” construed to only exist in the single dimension of the screen on behalf of the movie going public, but also caused that previously docile public to question how, and by whom, and for what purpose, those images were constructed and served up to them in the first place—was that studios, and, to a lesser extent, at first, movie stars themselves, tried to assert greater control of their images, both on screen, and, more significantly, off screen. This heralded an era of greater complexity for how “movie stars” functioned in society as celebrities. A lot of the complexity was marked by failure because of the often ham-handed attempts by celebrities and studios (especially after the dissolution of the studio system in the 1950s and 1960s) to meld the “real” personality of the star and the “portrayed” personality of the star into one package, ostensibly representing the “actual person” diluting the concept of “movie star” into a personality that was, at once, approachable, and remote; real and constructed; actual and false.

According to Marshall:

The film celebrity emerges from a particular apparatus. In its diverse incarnations, the film celebrity represents the building and dissipation of the aura of personality. The filmic text establishes a distance from the audience. The extratextual domains of magazine interviews, critical readings of the films, television appearances, and so on are attempts at discerning the authentic nature of the film celebrity by offering the audience/public avenues for seeing the individual in a less constructed way. It is important to realize that these other discourses that try to present the ‘real’ film star are in themselves actively playing in the tension between the celebrity’s aura and the existence of the star’s private life (loc. 2871).

This deconstruction of the celebrity-making apparatus that started with the end of silent films was, according to Burr, the “initial technological baby step toward giving the audience
control of the machine, the first stirrings of the beast that would become the decentralized, consumer-driven media ‘Omniverse’ of today” (loc. 1765).

The story of Christian Bale is instructive regarding the ways in which the power to influence the popularity of film stars has become increasingly individualized. As early as 1996, Bale became one of the first stars to have a fan establish a website devoted to Bale. That fan eventually became Bale’s personal assistant then left Bale’s employ and gave negative interviews about the star to fan magazines and websites. “Right there is the modern arc of star worship, from reverent distance to active engagement to disillusioned abandonment to the attempts to take stardom for oneself,” Burr writes (loc. 5487).

This is indicative of how celebrity, like conspiracy, functions as a narrative construction. This point is explored in my novel The End of Celebrity, when Russell Dunn, one of the main characters loses his control of the narrative construction of his own celebrity after an incident of domestic violence, thus setting into motion conspiratorial events that take on a life of their own.

Part II: Literary Context

From The Manchurian Candidate to The DaVinci Code, there are numerous novels that explore various aspects of conspiracy. Three novels, however, more specifically explore conspiracy as a narrative construction: Don DeLillo’s Libra; Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49; and Umberto Eco’s Foucoul’t’s Pendulum.

In DeLillo’s Libra, which focuses on the alleged conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy, DeLillo strongly suggests that conspiracies function much like a plot in a novel, and eventually, take on lives of their own. “Plots carry their own logic,” DeLillo writes. “There is a tendency of plots to move toward death . . . it wasn’t a misdirected round, an accidental killing,
that made him afraid. There was something more insidious. He had a foreboding that the plot would move to a limit, develop a logical end” (221).

DeLillo builds his version of the Kennedy conspiracy and makes it believable in large part because of its messy complexity, and because he understands how people function within a conspiracy, and the ways in which knowledge and information flow to create and sustain a conspiracy (as when it does with the creation of a celebrity). In *Libra*, the conspiracy regarding Kennedy’s assassination is born, and grows, and functions as an almost organic entity, and not because some person at the top issued a fiat, then had underlings carry out the dictum, then had everyone agree to lie about it. Such a scenario is overly simplistic. As a narrative construction, a conspiracy can function in many ways. In *Libra*, for example, the conspiracy seeks to give definition and meaning to a past event. More often than not, however, conspiracies are hatched with one idea in mind and, in the course of conducting the conspiracy, new ideas emerge and those ideas change the arc of the conspiracy. In *Libra* the conspiracy begins with an idea to shoot at Kennedy and pin it on Castro in order to generate support to invade Cuba, and morphs into the homicidal shooting in Dallas.

DeLillo makes this abstract idea come to life in many ways. One of them is through the character of retired CIA archivist Nicholas Branch. Branch works curating thousands of bits of information about the Kennedy assassination that could, potentially, unearth the truth behind the killing. He conducts his work in a so-called “room of secrets” and he receives the information from the Curator. And, while this may seem a straightforward proposition, it—like a conspiracy and like a celebrity—evades clear and simple truth; it is never clear. DeLillo writes about this in a scene in which Branch reviews files and other tactile objects that seemingly describe Oswald in
objective detail and, yet, really serve to deepen the mystery surrounding him and the plot to kill Kennedy:

How can Branch forget the contradictions and discrepancies? These are the soul of the wayward tale … Facts are lonely things. Branch has come to see how a pathos comes to cling to the firmest fact.

Oswald’s eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right-handed, he is left-handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud. Branch has support for all these propositions in eyewitness testimony and commission exhibits (DeLillo 300).

Although it is accomplished in a very different fashion, in The Crying of Lot 49, Thomas Pynchon also treats conspiracy as an elastic, mutable narrative construct that obfuscates what is knowable, or “real,” about a person, event, or object. Throughout the book Pynchon, like DeLillo in Libra, is ambiguous about the main character Oedipa Maas. Unlike DeLillo, Pynchon invites readers of the book to more actively participate in the conspiracy by making the “real truth” unverifiable, even by the characters in the book, such as Oedipa. Pynchon makes the conspiracy into a flexible concept rather than presenting it as a rigid construct that is being carried out with a known and predetermined goal that, when reached, signals the conspiracy’s success or failure.

At the start of the book Oedipa appears extraordinary only for her ordinariness in comparison to the rest of the characters in the rest of the book. “One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupper-ware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue …” (Pynchon 1) Pynchon famously starts out. Oedipa quickly finds herself in the middle of extraordinary circumstances, even in the completion of that first sentence: “… to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Prince Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary” (Pynchon 1). The implication off the bat, however, is that Oedipa as a character
is normal. Oedip watches “Huntley and Brinkley” (Pynchon 2) and spends her days “shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn’t she be the first to admit it?) more or less identical…” (Pynchon 2).

Early on Oedipa meets Miles, of the band, “the Paranoids” (Pynchon 19) and she says to him, “You are a paranoid” (Pynchon 19). This informs the reader that Oedipa is in charge of her faculties. Because of this the reader views Oedipa as our guide through odd and strange places, people, and events. She is the compass and the ballast of the book, the one character trying to unravel the secrets and the codes and the messages sprinkled throughout the book.

The character of Oedipa changes, however, as the book progresses. It appears to begin when she’s at The Scope and copies down the symbol for what appears to be a horn drawn on a bathroom wall, but which is actually a Tristero (or Trystero), which is also (perhaps) the name of a secret underground postal delivery service that may or may not still exist after hundreds of years in the present (Pynchon 44). From that point on Oedipa becomes increasingly unmoored from being able to trust, or even impose, her own sense of reality on her own life, to differentiate reality from paranoiac plots and mechanizations outside her control. It gets to the point where she realizes she herself is unknowable, as in a scene toward the end of the book when she’s speaking to herself:

“Change your name to Miles, Dead, Serge, and/or Leonard, baby, she advised her reflection in the half-light of that afternoon’s vanity mirror. Either way, they’ll call it paranoia. They. Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise of life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it” (Pynchon 165).
It is at the end of the book that Pynchon throws the ball to the reader by having the book conclude as Oedipa is at the auction of lot 49 that may, or may not reveal the truth about the Tristero system, to her and to the world. The reader, however, does not find out if the truth is revealed. There is no tidy resolution. There are no dots connected. The conspiracy—if it even existed—is unresolved, just as it is in *Libra* by having Branch’s character fail to clearly resolve, or even define, the conspiracy. Oedipa plays a similar role to Branch in *Libra*. The more she, like Branch, digs to uncover the truth the more the “truth” revels itself to be nothing more than a kind of conspiracy, or a narrative construction.

Unlike *Libra* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, both of which hint at a conspiracy having a life of its own, Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* has the conspiracy literally take on a life of its own and change external events.

In the book, three editors at a vanity press in Milan get fed up with having to read trashy books that have a conspiracy, usually centered around the occult and religion (think Dan Brown and *The DaVinci Code*) at the center of their plots. Out of frustration and boredom the three decide to create their own conspiracy theory, which they call the Plan. They list elaborate and trite conspiracies, alongside mystical occurrences, and feed the list into a small computer that rearranges text at random. Afterward the conspiracy created by the three narrators transforms into a kind of *uber* conspiracy by becoming externalized when (according to the narrator who may or may not be reliable) a fictional group created by the editors as part of the Plan starts killing off the editors. Much of this is rendered as though the book was a thriller, or a spy novel:

> The phone woke me. It was Belbo; his voice different, remote.  
> “Where the hell are you? Lost in the jungle?”  
> “Don’t joke, Causabon. This is serious. I’m in Paris.”  
> “Paris? But I was the one who was supposed to go the Conservatoire.”  
> “Stop joking damn it. I’m in a booth—in a bar. I may not be able to talk much longer….”
“If you’re running out of change, call collect. I’ll wait here.”
“Change isn’t the problem. I’m in trouble. He was talking fast, not giving me time to interrupt. “The Plan. The Plan is real. I know, don’t say it. They’re after me” (Eco 21).

Shortly afterward a shot is heard and the phone goes dead.

Is the conspiracy in *Foucault’s Pendulum* real, or is it in the mind of the narrator? Eco, like DeLillo and Pynchon, is ambiguous about the answer. However, the idea of a conspiracy that becomes a thing on its own is a real literary trope that allows the fictional and the factual to become inseparable.
Part III: The End of Celebrity

My novel, *The End of Celebrity*, suggests that celebrity is itself a kind of conspiracy, and that conspiracies shape events in unexpected and unformulated ways. The novel is about a movie star and his best friend who get enmeshed in an act of terrorism. The movie star, Russell Dunn, and his friend, Eddie Mack are arrested and sent to Guantanamo after a terrorist bomb kills more than thirty people on a ferry in Uganda. Mostly by tracing the evolution of Russell Dunn and his life as an artist and a celebrity, and by examining the relationship between Mack and Dunn, the book explores how they came to be on that ferry, how terrorists took advantage of them to execute the attack and implicate them in causing it, and how the United States government must manage the fact that an American movie star, one who frequently represents the United States in a heroic fashion on screen in movies shown in the U.S. as well as around the world, is accused of terrorism.

In the early parts of the book the movie star, Dunn, is portrayed as committed to his art in a truthful manner. Then at a strategic point, he consciously emulates a particular person to the extent of adopting that person’s personality, in order to win a movie role, thus initiating the construction of a fictional narrative called “Russell Dunn. (O’Meara 180). From that point on, Dunn engages in a falsehood, or, if you will, a kind of conspiracy, by portraying a fictional version of himself in order to become a movie star. Dunn’s construct (and the public’s belief in Dunn) unravel, however, when during a public fight with his girlfriend in which she is hitting him, he punches her. The fight is captured on video by cellular phones and TV stations, and, in the dame moment that Dunn loses control of his own fictional image, or narrative, his career as a movie star and film actor effectively ends.
Afterward Dunn seeks to recapture his career and to once again become regarded as a celebrity. To that end, he devises a plan to go to Uganda, with his best friend Eddie Mack, to pursue and capture the warlord Joseph Kony (O’Meara 300). In doing so Dunn reveals that, like his previously adoring audience, he has come to believe in his own celebrity image; an image he constructed and which is fiction but which he can no longer discern or separate from his own reality.

In the book Dunn embodies America’s political and cultural roles in the world. He represents the importance, on behalf of the government and the public, to spread American culture throughout the world; and the manner in which America is essentially as reckless as a self-obsessed adolescent when it comes to playing a role on the world stage, in the sense that the United States blithely harms and destroys other countries and other cultures because a narrative about American exceptionalism has become a truth that most U.S. citizens will not abandon. Like Dunn’s career, the people of the United States have entered into a conspiracy to believe in an almost scripted myth that America is a classless society on the side of righteousness, freedom, and good.

Dunn’s fictional self, his celebrity image, is portrayed as a walking, talking representation of this American idea. When he is arrested and sent to Guantanamo a guard leads Dunn past two Arab prisoners. One prisoner says to another that he knows Dunn, but he doesn’t know why, or from where. He thinks maybe he is Rambo. Mack, who is in the cell next to the Arab, tells him that Dunn is in fact, John Wayne, to which:

The man turns his face down toward his friend and smiles.

“See! I told you! John Wayne. Yes” (O’Meara 190).
At another point, Russ’s friend, Eddie Mack explains to a friend of his in Uganda that, “Russ is not just very American. He is, for all intents and purposes, America. He’s the walking, talking personification of America” (O’Meara 311).

Dunn is an important commodity to the United States government because he represents the American people to the world. That is an unstated reason (alongside the stated reason that his own administration would suffer in furthering its agenda for the country) why a conspiracy is set into motion and evolved through an organic consensus of the participants, including the President of the United States and other high-level politicians, as well as CIA officials and, eventually, Karen Proe (an interrogator and major character in the book), Dunn, and Mack. This conspiracy starts out with the goal of not having Dunn implicated in the attack but then, like most conspiracies, it takes on a life of its own during the course of the narrative.

Although Dunn comes to a realization that he is at fault for the terrorist attack, he still jumps at the chance to rid himself of blame over his actions when his friend Eddie offers to take the full blame for the attack and let him off the hook (O’Meara 344).

Eddie Mack, meanwhile, represents the power of the individual to make a choice on his or her own and, in doing so, serves to prevent the government from acting secretly for their own limited reasons. Mack saves Dunn out of friendship and, in doing so contributes unwittingly to the government conspiracy, thus reinforcing the idea that conspiracy is a narrative construction.

In the book, like in The Crying of Lot 49, Libra, and Foucault’s Pendulum, the conspiracy of Dunn’s celebrity takes on a life of its own. It changes him in ways he did not foresee. It causes him to live a falsehood, to inhabit a made-up self. That self is endorsed by a majority of the American populace, but they do so because Dunn’s personae has tapped into the American archetype of the strong, silent hero and the American people willingly want to believe
in that myth. But, it’s still false and as such, it causes Dunn to lose his sense of self, both when he assaults his girlfriend and when he goes to extraordinary lengths to win his celebrity back by going to Uganda and indirectly causing the deaths of innocent people.

The other conspiracy, the narrative concocted by Proe, Mack, and the CIA to cover up Dunn’s involvement in the ferry terrorist attack, also takes on a life of its own after the President haphazardly and casually launches it by telling Pro that he does not want Dunn to be blamed for the terrorist attack. The details are left up to Proe.

However, later in the book, Proe is not producing results in a timely fashion. The government comes up with an improbable story about blaming Mack for the attack and saying that he was a terrorist mole for decades. They say that they will make their concocted story public. Proe, however, wants Mack to take the blame organically, and to have Mack exonerate Dunn. She does this because she is opposed to having the government force people to do anything. She’s opposed because she thinks it is inefficient and, more importantly, she believes it is immoral.

Mack eventually takes the blame and exonerates Dunn. He does so not because he is coerced into doing it, but because he knows he is partly responsible, and he knows that to not take the blame would harm his friend, and, in the end, harm him. He makes the choice because it is simply the right, moral choice and one that he can only view as inevitable.

For Mack, the truth is the truth. In this fashion, The End of Celebrity expands on, or updates, the idea of conspiracy in Libra, The Crying of Lot 49, and Foucault’s Pendulum. In those books conspiracy is portrayed as vast, amorphous, damaging, and insidious. My book stands on the shoulders of those ideas and reaches for something new because, at this point in our culture the concept of vast government conspiracies is no longer news, and is not very alarming.
In this new age of instant communication and the Internet our culture is more fixed on the idea of individuals deconstructing government conspiracies rather than being subjugated to them.

The government conspiracy in The End of Celebrity is ultimately made irrelevant by an individual’s need to assert a moral truth. That the individual is the ultimate shaper of society by asserting the truth in the face of power is not a new, or particularly original, idea. It was perhaps most eloquently expressed by George Orwell in his dystopian novel, 1984, when the main character, Winston Smith writes in his diary: “Being in a minority, even a minority of one, did not make you mad. There was truth and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth even against the whole world, you were not mad” (469). Later, Winston falls asleep “murmuring, ‘Sanity is not statistical,’ with the feeling that this remark contained in it a profound wisdom” (469).

This idea sounds trite and Pollyannaish in an era when corporate power, popular opinion, and the seemingly unchecked power of the government in the United States appear to have become like that of a boot stomping on the face of the individual until he or she agrees with, gives up to, or actively encourages the agenda of whatever power is wearing the boot. But the ability to successfully allow a government to conspire is still dependent upon having the basic building block of that power, namely the individual, first agree to having it happen, then taking an active role in maintaining its existence.

The character binding these ideas together is Dr. Proe. Her own moral deliberation, and failure to act morally in protecting a detainee from enhanced interrogation techniques, informs her later actions in the book when she refuses to directly conspire to do something wrong, which is to pin the blame for the attack solely on Mack. Instead, she chooses to place her faith in Mack that he will do the right thing. The fact that Mack does what the government is conspiring to
have him do is wholly beside the point. Mack’s personal decision upends the clichéd concept of government conspiracy and causes it to appear inert. This is exemplified by a discussion between Karen and a CIA Agent after Eddie has taken the blame and is led away.

“Not bad, Dr. Proe,” Steve #2 says. “Not bad. I want you to know your efforts are appreciated. I don’t mean only by myself. I mean appreciated at the highest levels.”

“We got lucky,” she says.

“Luck had nothing to do with it.”

“Next time, we’ll get someone who won’t know the difference between right and wrong. Next time, we’ll get fried for this.”

The CIA agent leaves.
Karen packs her files into her briefcase and hurries for the plane (O’Meara 354).
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THE END OF CELEBRITY
Remember all the movies, Terry, we’d go see
Trying to learn how to walk like the heroes we thought we had to be.

- Bruce Springsteen
Chapter 1

The most hated man in America, steps out of his house and closes the door. Eddie Mack walks onto a rickety, plank porch. It creaks like a platform, the kind with a trap door. He turns the knob to make sure the door is locked. He looks at his reflection in the door’s glass panels. He works his old, stiff fingers to fasten down the unbuttoned left side of his shirt collar. He snaps the wrinkles out of his suit jacket. He pulls the folds from his sweater vest. Lastly, he zips his fly. It’s 11:15 in the morning. He pockets the house key, checks the lock again, and leans his weight on the railing to walk down the loose wooden steps.

“Need to get these replaced,” he says.

He looks up at the weather. The September sky is blue and clear. He stands and looks toward Stuart Avenue, where he’ll walk. This area of town is called the Fan, after the pattern in which the streets extend from downtown. A woman and her tottering child pass by. They tip their chins, they sigh out hellos. He nods a tight grin. There’s a middle-aged man walking his wife’s small dog. He nods toward the man, and says “Hello,” while mourning the man’s lost dignity and remembering he’s seen him before walking the same dog.

A girl nods hello then goes back to glancing at a micro-tablet in her hand. Probably a student from the college.

Eddie looks at his watch while watching her with the tops of his eyes until she turns the corner. It’s a good sign that she doesn’t look back. It took more than a year for Eddie to figure out that everyone in Richmond says hello on the street. It’s empty Southern graciousness, nothing more. But he never forgets it might mean something else. Eddie looks up from his watch then turns around and looks at his building.

3
Is the door locked? he wonders. Did I lock the door?

The woman who runs the pottery shop below his apartment walks out. She’s tilted forward, walking toward Eddie. She’s wide through the hips, and her flat body is coiled in protest.

“Something,” she says, “must be done about the loud, late-night noise from that bar on the corner, Buddy’s.”

“Yes, Eddie says, “the stores on the block should get together and do something about that.”

I turned the lock before I stepped out the door, then pulled it shut, Eddie thinks. Or, did I?

She talks about the rainfall slowing her business. But today is beautiful, so who knows? Even so, maybe she’ll move her studio one street over to Beecham. There’s more foot traffic. Means more customers.

“I’m having a get-together Saturday afternoon,” she says. “Would you like to drop by?”

Why in the world would anyone ask me that?

“Thank you. No.”

Eddie wonders whether she knows who he is. How could she?

She looks at her watch then asks Eddie the time.

“11:17,” he says.

“Every time,” she says, “right on the button.”

Eddie makes a note to change his routine.

She’s been a tenant for five months. When she applied to rent the space there was no one he could call or check with to find out if she might be NSA, or CIA, or part of some other agency
he didn’t even know existed. He had no friends on the other end of any phone after what he’d done. She filled out the application and sat across from him in the chilled, empty retail space, and Eddie sized her up using only his blunt instinct to decide she was all right.

She turns and goes back to sit behind her counter and watch the passing people with a prepared smile on her face. As she has said many times, you have to be ready if one comes in. She waves and smiles to Eddie, and he relaxes. *She has no idea who I am.*

Alone on the sidewalk, Eddie looks at his building. He taps his right pocket and feels the three keys on their ring. *I locked it. I’m sure now.*

He owns the building outright because of a deal he made with the Feds. Every day, for two years now, he wakes up within the building’s walls, brews and drinks his coffee from the mug with a drawing of a cat, then makes his bed, snapping his sheets and blanket back with the fussy precision of the lonely. He keeps his apartment spotless, like someone might be coming over. But, Eddie never even receives phone calls. His habits are from living for twenty-eight years in a special building at the Danbury Federal Correctional Institute. Eddie thought he would die there. He looks at his building and knows that’s where he’ll die.

The brick two-story building sags. He looks at the glass in the six upstairs, street-facing windows. The bottoms of each are crenellated by gravity and time. One day, standing in the very spot he’s standing in now, he saw two boys wearing dresses look directly at him from his living room window. Until the early 19th century, immigrants put their young sons in dresses. Eddie once saw a picture of his grandfather, the son of Irish immigrants, wearing a black dress as a child. It was taken in Minnesota, where they'd lived working timber. Eddie’s grandfather told him that when he became an older boy his parents called the neighbors for a ceremony. It was called breeching. He received his first pair of real pants, britches—some said beeches—and his
first haircut. He was six. The boys that day in the window, Eddie saw their blue eyes clearly through glass that had been lumpy but had turned, for that instant, flat and smooth and new. Eddie didn’t believe in ghosts, but he believed in those two boys.

He doesn’t think they died there. He prefers to believe instead that the boys were close and happy there as children, and because of that, they chose that house as the place they wanted to stay after they died.

Eddie likes to believe that somewhere out west there is a house where he and Russell will show their spectral, happy faces to people after they've been gone for many years. He thinks about when they were friends, before the trip to Africa, before the explosion and the bodies in the water, before he went to prison, and never saw Russ again.

Rent from the pottery shop and a laundry on the first floor pays Eddie’s bills. There are two apartments upstairs. One is empty. The one in the back is Eddie’s. Before the pottery shop the space was rented for a flower shop. Eddie looked forward to the first two weeks in February every year when the piles of roses made his apartment smell like a waiting date.

The bricks that built the building came from Richmond. Eddie thinks about how each was mud-fired after an army crushed the capital town. The rebels fought their war. They lost. They rebuilt. They stoked their kilns, dragged their awls, and started again. The Israelites made their bricks out of clay dredged from the Nile. Formed in captivity, the bricks were set in the sun to dry. Once hard, they used them to build the walls that kept them in. Years later, after wooden forms and presses were developed, a potter improved on the sun. He put fire close and tight to the bricks. Melted and fused together in that heat, the bricks tightened and formed a conspiracy of new strength. They were turned out faster and harder, some say better, than before. It was an
invention that rivaled the wheel. The brick was melted to make something tough enough to make a home for a family. From where Eddie stood, next to the parking lot alongside a Starbucks, the south wall could be seen with its good top header and a stretcher of American Bond arrangement two stories tall. It was good work. Looking at his building, Eddie thinks about the snarling rebels in Richmond who mortared and groaned to rebuild. Each of the bricks in their work, each one in the wall and building, has them here. Nothing disappears forever, not files, not history. Burn this building down again you’ll find rebel fingerprints on every brick. In the heat you’ll see them rise up for a moment through the coals like blisters. Eddie looks down Stuart Avenue, looks around to see if anyone’s watching him, and walks.

Until last week Eddie was sure no one knew who he was. He always been able to explore the Fan boulevards and streets anonymously, content to be an unknown name, number, and entity. In the summer he walks along the expanse of Grove Avenue under an awning of spring elm branches, and for a block or two. In the fall he walks on a carpet of elm leaves, not thinking about Guantanamo, or the time he spent in a twelve-by-twelve-foot square cinderblock box reinforced with chilly steel and a rotation of three guards daily. In winter he walks along Park Avenue, a tight, slender street with a breeze all the time. Today he passes deliberately through the cool shadows cast down by townhouses and mansions surrounded by close-cropped yards. Old money and young families mash together in this coolly southern neighborhood. The Fan is a friendly place in the middle of a mean city listed in the top ten for murders year after year. But it’s so small he’s able to spot anyone out of place. It’s not Brooklyn. It’s not Los Angeles. People can sneak up on you in places like that.

It’s seven blocks to Shields Market. Eddie goes in for a pack of Camel straights and matches. The owner lost his wife a year ago. They’d met in New York where he had a newsstand
on Second Avenue and Fourth Street for twelve years. The owner plays beautiful Indian music on a tape recorder behind the counter. He no longer cries when making change. Eddie sometimes wonders why he doesn’t; was there a moment that caused him to end his mourning. The man tells Eddie he should get the buy-one-get-one-free for the cigarettes. Eddie says, “One pack only. I’m quitting tomorrow.” Every time the owner believes Eddie, because every time Eddie means it.

A mute, crazy man sits crossed-legged on a milk crate next to the door inside the market. He’s a fixture in the store. A relative, Eddie assumes. They never speak, but Eddie likes him. For a time, when Eddie was losing his mind in sweeping degrees, the crazy guy would brighten up, nod and smile at him. The more insane and unmoored from reality Eddie became, the more they shared like that.

One night three weeks ago, a drunken college student went on a nasty, laughing tirade against the mute. There was no reason for it. The owner came from behind the counter with a length of pipe. Together, in the back of the store, Eddie and the owner broke the kid’s left thumb.

Eddie goes across the street to Joe’s Inn. It’s a place where he can step into some distracting noise. It has open acoustics and hard surfaces. Silverware scrapes, and even one or two bar voices, fill the empty space so Eddie can go unnoticed. In Virginia, if you serve alcohol, you have to serve food. It’s a law. Joe’s does both equally well. It’s dark, wood-walled, and wainscoted. It has cheap tap beer and breakfast all day.

Eddie stands for a moment at the door. He looks to see who’s in the room and where they’re standing, snapping his eyes to the old TV in the corner if they catch him. During the day, CNN is on. At night it’s ESPN, and there’s usually a game of some kind. Baseball in the summer. Football in the winter. Basketball in the spring. Pretty waitresses all year. Eddie always
flirts with them in that old man way. He winks his wet eyes and makes the half-expected, impotent effort.

Eddie installs himself into one of the booths. They have wooden benches like pews in churches. The first time he came to Joe’s he was alone. He sat and looked under the table for a hassock. He made a joke to the waitress about being relieved he wouldn’t have to kneel or pray over a cheeseburger. She didn’t seem to understand, but smiled anyway.

“Good morning, Edward,” Barbara, the waitress, says brightly. “What are we having today?”

*They call me Edward, he thinks. I am no longer Eddie. I am seventy years old. Seventy was considered old when I was a child. These days it’s thought of as a young age, and still they call me Edward, an ancient name.*

“The usual, Barbara,” he says.

The waitress walks away. Eddie gazes at the place where her apron opens in the back. Like chaps, he thinks. He puts further thoughts along those lines out of his head. *She’s a kid. She doesn’t even know or remember how in this country thirty years ago they had a system for color-coding the security threat. It went from green, for low risk, to red, for severe risk.* Eddie recalls how, all by himself, he once made that chart jump from yellow, for significant risk, to orange, for elevated risk.

He looks around, afraid that the people at Joe’s Inn will discover who he is because of his thoughts. He switches instead to thinking about his daily To Do list: *The bank. The ABC for gin. Ukrop’s for coffee. He thinks about calling Russ to talk about the new threat.*
Last week the new Attorney General said he would reopen old cases. He said “high profile terrorist elements” living in the United States might have escaped prosecution for “terrorist actions” as part of a deal with a previous administration.

Eddie imagines calling Russ. They will joke about what, exactly, a “terrorist element” might be. Eddie would reassure Russ that he did nothing wrong. He would tell him that if someone knocks on his door he should invite him in, be friendly, and tell him exactly what happened thirty years ago.

What if someone knocks on my door? Eddie thinks. Say what you said then. It was me. It was all me. What can they do to me? Nothing, nothing that hasn’t already been done. What if they threaten me with Russ? They’d be bluffing. Let them.

Barbara puts Eddie’s plate of scrambled eggs and his glass of Pabst Blue Ribbon down in front of him. Eddie snaps out of it, remembering the plea arrangement that he and Russ can never speak to one another again. Barbara straightens and catches Eddie fixating on the crease and curve of where her leg meets her hip. She winks. Eddie immediately looks at the television. He sees Russ on the television. He thinks about telling Barbara that he knows Russell Dunn, that they were best friends.

“You want anything else?” Barbara asks.

He stops himself from flirting.

I’m not some seventeen-year-old looking for a line.

“No thank you,” Eddie says.

He avoids watching her walk away and keeps looking at the TV tucked just under the ceiling of Joe’s Inn. It’s a plasma screen television. Eddie recalls when they first came out. Lately they’ve been remaking them for places wanting a “retro” look. He laughs at the irony. The
volume is off. He squints to decipher the close-captioned words. He reads what the announcer is saying, and the announcer is saying that Russell Dunn, 74, movie star, elder statesman of Hollywood known for his philanthropic work, died at his home in Los Angeles.

“Are you okay?” There’s a man sitting across the table from Eddie, blocking the TV. Eddie sees Barbara leaning on a barstool. She’s looking at him like he did something wrong.

The man in front of Eddie says, “Hey! Are you okay? Do you want me to call someone?” He’s talking in the flat professional tone that doctors use talking to patients, as if they’re recently immigrated or half deaf. The man looks at Barbara and says, “What the hell happened to him?”

She shrugs.

“Who are you?” Eddie asks.

“Billy.”

“Eddie.”

“I own the place.”

“All right,” Eddie says. “Good.”

Eddie looks at Barbara. She nods toward the TV but doesn’t take her eyes off Eddie.

Eddie moves his head so he can look around Bill and see the TV. It doesn’t work. He ends up having to stare at Billy. The two men sit looking at one another in a silent standoff.

“He’s dead,” Eddie says. “Russ is dead.”

“That’s what you were saying,” Billy says, appearing relieved to be having a conversation. “Actually, you were yelling it. Do you remember that? Do you remember yelling?”

“I was yelling?”

“Is there anyone I can call for you?”
“I know him,” Eddie says. “We’re best friends. I was saying that I have to call him later today.”


“I know him.”

Eddie looks at Billy. Billy leans in very close to Eddie. Eddie can see honest concern in his eyes. Eddie has no idea if it’s for his business, for an old man losing his mind as the staff preps for the lunch rush, or for doing what protocol demands.

“Is there someone I can call for you?”

Eddie looks over Billy’s head and can see the TV. Pakistani authorities have approved the use of force on protestors.

Eddie goes to Shields Market for the buy-one-get-one-free cigarettes and some beer to take home. Bad news can be a good excuse to harm yourself.

Eddie should feel relief. The last person who knows what really happened is dead. Russ is dead. He should feel relief, but he doesn’t.

“Watch my store for five minutes,” the owner says when Eddie walks in. “My daughter and her car. You remember we fixed the transmission? Two thousand dollars. Now something else. Always something else.”

Eddie nods.

“Thank you,” the owner says, scurrying out the door.

Eddie listens to the mute stock beer in the cooler at the back of the store. Standing behind the dingy counter in Shields Market in front of the packs of Kents, Kools, and Marlboros, Eddie tries to summon Russell. But he can’t. Instead, all he can see are the blackened bodies floating in the lake. He can feel the sulfur burn bloom on his neck the moment the detonation tripped. He
remembers clearly his first thought at that moment: *I need to get Russ out of here. I need to get him far away from here.*

The mute comes around the corner. He stops ten feet away from Eddie, and stares at him pinch-faced and squirrel-eyed. He hugs a stack of flattened boxes to his body and smiles. Eddie is searching for Russ in his mind and doesn’t notice. So the mute waves. Eddie waves back to him. A customer comes in. Eddie rings him up for a six-pack of Heineken and watches him leave. The door closes, and there is the mute sitting back on his milk crate, with his legs crossed.

Moments later the owner of the store is standing in front of Eddie talking about how bad business is. He doesn’t know where or how he will get the money to fix his daughter’s car. But she needs it for school, so what can he do?

Eddie again witnesses the fireball and the bodies in the water from the exploded ferry. He sees the outside cage in Guantanamo. He can’t see Russ, though. He wonders if it’s shock. He wonders if Russ will come to him later. He wonders if it even matters.

Eddie nods while the owner of the store thanks him. Eddie thinks about how these two people—this storekeeper and this mute—are his closest friends in the world and he doesn’t know their names. *My life is in the past, Eddie thinks, and now no one knows the truth about my past.* The mute on the crate is waving. Eddie is seeing scenes from that party at Steve McQueen’s old house. He is watching Caitlin throw a tray of silverware at Russ and him as they dive for cover. The mute starts waving with both hands when Eddie reaches the door.

Eddie pulls the handle, opens the door, and looks at the mute. He doesn’t know whether he’s waving to get his attention or to say goodbye. Either way, he waves back at him. As he walks down the street, Eddie replays how the mute was waving and looking at him a moment ago. A block later Eddie realizes that the mute had a smile on his face like it was Christmas day.
Dr. Karen Proe finishes reading the four-page file on the ferry explosion in Uganda. A terrorist attack on Lake Victoria killed thirty-eight Americans. All but four of them were missionaries from Tucson, Arizona; young, white, blonde-haired, broad-smiling missionaries. The two suspected terrorists are American: Edward Mack, a journalist, and Russell Dunn, a movie star. Last year Dunn wasn’t only the number one box office draw in the world, he was also named People magazine’s Sexiest Man Alive.

Karen turns and looks at two more files on the seat next to her as she sits strapped into her seat on a vibrating and bucking C-130 cargo plane. Stamped in black on the first is RUSSELL DUNN; the other is stamped EDWARD MACK. In the upper right-hand corner of each, stamped in red, is TOP SECRET/STLW.

Dunn and Mack are on their way to Guantanamo. She sets their files down and watches as each bounces up and down on the seat. It’s like they’re alive and pleading to be noticed. Karen loves files. She raptures bathing in the raw data of a person’s life. In person, during an interrogation, people prevaricate. They fib, stretch the truth or just flat out lie. The file is incapable of such falsehood and pretense. While files contain only a one-dimensional truth, that veracity is untainted by nuance and inference. For years Karen yearned to see her file. She didn’t care if it was her FBI file, her CIA file, her Army file, or a file created by some other department in some cubed cellar under a secure, unmapped mountain. She knows that whatever is inside her folder would most likely contain a perspective on her life that she had not considered. Who, except for celebrities and politicians, get to see their lives laid out in black and white and on paper, by disinterested parties, for the sake of who knows what? That they are secret lends them...
a sexiness; they’re either grossly inaccurate or they are dead-on accurate. Looking at the files to her left, she guessed they would be accurate. But, before she dives in to the flopping files to her left, she takes a moment to prepare.

She closes the thin incident report folder and slips it under the other files bulging with information. The cargo hold of the plane isn’t insulated. It’s cold, loud, and exhausting. She uncouples the straps holding her secure to her webbed seat and stands up. She blows into her frozen hands and rotates her head, cracking her neck. One of her earplugs pops out. It goes bouncing across the floor of the rumbling plane and skitters out of sight beneath an M1A1 Abrams tank, camouflaged for desert warfare. She gets on all fours and spots the earplug ricocheting crazily underneath the tank, out of her reach. She stands up and takes a long look at the black and tan behemoth. She’s spent the last hours sitting five feet away from it, and had spent months around the same tanks in the first Gulf War, back in 1991. Now, she thinks, these same weapons are rolling through Mogadishu and Baghdad again, going after the same guy because some people crashed some planes into some buildings in New York. Sitting down, she wonders dully whether or not the tanks had been repainted green after the first Gulf War but had to be repainted back for the Iraq War, and, if so, who had the job of doing that.

Karen straps herself back into her seat and looks once again at the eager files next to her. She closes her eyes and takes one more moment before cracking them open.

Earlier that same day Karen woke up, made coffee, and stood staring at her television. It was a forty-inch Sony flat screen. She'd plunked down $1,800 for the thing the day before, and she’d done it for one reason: to watch the Detroit Red Wings. After the 2005 season was cancelled because of the lockout, Karen was jonesing hard for the new season. The guy from
Circuit City had installed the thing, but it was so large and took up so much of her living room, she found herself afraid to actually turn it on. Holding her coffee in one hand and clutching the remote in the other, she aimed and with the push of one mere button brought the breadth and configuration of pixels to full-color and stereo life.

The first image that came across the endless space of Karen’s new television was a woman on CNN.

“Reports are sketchy, but it appears that a ferry exploded in Uganda, on Lake Victoria a few hours ago and that on that ferry were at least twenty-five young people from the Christian Fellowship Church, in Tucson, Arizona,” the woman said as next to her a photograph of a burning boat beneath a black plume of smoke sat static and lifeless. “The administration so far has no comment on whether this is an accident or an act of terrorism; however, the national threat level an hour ago was raised from significant risk to elevated risk, from yellow to orange.”

Karen picked up her phone and called a friend.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“You know where I am.”

The man was in the White House Situation Room.

“What do you know about this Uganda thing?”

“Not a lot.”

“What are you guys doing about it?”

“Well, at the moment, we’re watching CNN.”

“Seriously?” Karen said.

“It’s not like we have teams of agents in Uganda, Karen.”
“Listen,” Karen said. “I want to be part of this. Tell whoever you have to tell, but I want this.”

“We’re not even sure this is a thing yet.”

Karen assured him it was going to be a thing. She said she had a feeling. She repeated that she wanted to be a part of it, and she hung up.

Karen congratulated herself for making the call. It was taking a while, but she was learning that, when you’re in business for yourself, you have to be aggressive. It’s not enough to have connections. You have to exploit them. If you don’t remind people how good you are, they’ll forget. The phone is not going to ring by itself.

Five minutes later her friend in the Situation Room called back.

“I just handed someone your number—” he said.

“I knew it!” Karen said.

“—right after they asked me if I knew anyone in Tucson.”

“Oh,” she said, deflated that it was her geographic connection to the crime, and not her skills, that opened the door.

Fifteen minutes later Karen stood on left side of the open sliding doors of her closet. She was sipping from her coffee cup, but the adrenaline from the phone call was spent, so she felt loopy and groggy. She examined the clothes she’d tossed onto the bed for future sorting to pack. The green dress was shimmery and very dressy. Too dressy, so that wouldn’t work. The purple one was prim enough. But it had a Holly Hobby frilly collar. She'd bought it at Cleveland Goodwill for eight dollars. She flipped through the other seven possibilities on the hangers:
Nothing worked. There was not time to get a new dress. The doorbell was likely to ring any second.

She picked up her cat, Kee, who was twisting hungrily around her ankles. She squeezed him tightly, and walked with him to the kitchen to scoop out some cat food for his breakfast.

Another cat came lumbering up behind Kee, and sat down. Singer got her name from purring like a sewing machine. She waited patiently while the food was forked over into bowls. The two cats ate. Karen refilled her coffee cup, then sipped from it while walking back down the hall so she could make the left turn into her bedroom to stare, once again, at the left side of her closet, as though something might appear that she’d missed earlier.

When she made the left turn she saw a man standing in her bedroom.

“Shit,” she said, spilling her coffee and burning her foot. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“Hi,” Jason said. “I heard you talking and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“I was talking to the cat.”

“Was the cat talking back?” he said, stepping forward, planting a kiss on the cheek she offered him, and looking around at the debris of dresses on the bed. “Planning a trip?”

“So, you just came in, heard me talking, and went into the bedroom?”

“Yup,” he said, grinning.

Karen imagined Jason getting off the elevator, then walking down the hall to her door, putting his key in the door and turning it, walking into her apartment without saying hello or calling her name then, upon hearing her talking to the cat, walking down the hardwood floors, going into her bedroom, then turning around to stand facing the open doorway.

“I’m not seeing it,” Karen said.
Jason sat on the bed and ran his palm along Karen’s hip as she passed in front of him to once again stand in front of her closet.

“You’re doing the Jedi mind thing again,” he said.

Karen stood saying nothing.

The “Jedi mind thing” was the way in which Karen interpreted things. She was empathetic to the point of transference. It gave her the odd and disconcerting ability to experience information as though it was an event and she was observing as it happened. If someone told her they had washed their hands Karen would clearly see them washing their hands to the point of being able to count the soap bubbles on each thumb, and picture what their face might look like in the mirror. This quirk of perspective would have been useful if she were a filmmaker, an architect, a fortune-teller, or even a theoretical physicist.

Jason once said she should make use of her skills and become a writer. Karen said it didn’t work that way. It wasn’t something she could evoke or call upon. It was just the way her mind worked.

“That’s what would make you so great at writing,” he said.

“That’s what makes me great at what I already do,” she said. Then she asked him to please stop talking about it.

What she did was interrogate people. When you join the Army at eighteen to escape an abusive marriage and the crumbling city of Detroit you gladly do whatever they slot you to do. Karen tested high in visualization and data management—meaning she could absorb and synthesize a lot of information very quickly—so the Army made her an interrogator. Later on they tacked on the rest of the skills necessary to extract information from a person.
Jason was a defense attorney who was proudly suspicious of any organization, chief among them the United States government. That led him to create a drug diversion program in Tucson that kept hundreds of people out of jail each year. He also liked to ride his Devinci Carbon mountain bike up big mountains and scramble the rocks on small mountains before the sun came up. Karen bought American cars, believed in the President and the government, no matter who he was or who they were, and preferred a bowl of M&Ms and a chardonnay to riding or climbing anything. But, those were sidelines to their relationship. The bedrock was strong enough to support them despite their seeming divides. That’s why a month ago, after nine months together, Karen gave him a key and told him where the cat food was so he could pitch in and help with her life.

Karen’s “abilities” were the only point of friction between she and Jason. She knew it crepted him out.

“Have you seen my blue skirt?” she asked finally.

“It’s in the closet. Left side. The one you said would be the side where I would hang my clothes one day.”

Karen sighed to avoid revealing that she was charmed by his comment.

“Don’t start,” she said. “People are on their way to pick me up.”

“What people?”

“Important people.”

“Where to this time?” he said.

“Hold it,” she said. She slid the left side closed and slid open the right door. A small battalion of fourteen identically blue jackets, blue skirts, and sharp white shirts, all with identical insignia and ribbons, stood at crisp attention on their hangers. She removed one skirt, one jacket,
and one shirt. She laid them on the bed. It looked to her as though this deflated version of her military self would be the right choice. She sat on the bed and ran a hand over the crease in one jacket, lingering on the Distinguished Service Medal and the Purple Heart.

“These will do,” she said. “Remove the hardware, and these will do.”

Her cell phone rang.

“Dr. Karen Proe?”

“Yes.”

“This is the White House Operator. Please hold.”

Singer jumped up on the bed and started meowing. Jason opened his mouth to speak.

“Everybody shush,” she said standing up and listening to the deep and cavernous silence preceding the arrival of an important voice. When she’d started in intelligence work after the first Gulf War, she’d thought it was hysterical the way staffers called ahead for higher ups, as though they were the vocal equivalent of the Secret Service clearing a room for the President. The announcement of the call was big-balls, empty ego flexing. The longer she’d be forced to wait for the arrival of The Voice after a staffer called, the less she’d think of him. Or her. In the military, even the women could have balls. This time, however, she wasn’t holding the wait against The Voice she was waiting for. This time, the wait cowed her.

“Dr. Proe?”

“Yes.”

“Mark Ryan, the President’s Chief of Staff.”

She knew that trick too. The one where the most decorated or honored or respected or well-known person introduces themselves in a humbling, off-hand manner, as if saying, My name’s John. I’m the Pope. Karen, however, kind of liked that trick. She also liked Ryan, or at
least what she knew about him: He was former Navy. He was not a man who dealt in shades of gray. It was black, it was white, and that was that.

“Sir,” Karen said.

“Dr. Proe, you’re flying out for a briefing. Tomorrow at 6 a.m.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ms. Galpino will fill you in on the wheres and whens.”

“Sir. Am I conducing the briefing, sir?”

“I apologize for the late notice on this.”

“Who am I briefing, sir?”

“Ms. Galpino will provide particulars.”

“Sir.”

“Tomorrow, 6 a.m.”

His voice clicked off, but Karen stood in her in the middle of her bedroom with one of her old uniforms staring up at her from her cold bed, with her two cats side by side next to the uniform also staring at her and waiting for some indication of what might happen next, as she pressed the phone to her ear, nervous about hanging it up.

Singer extended her paw toward her, meowed, and tilted her head.

The silence deepened.

“Dr. Proe.”

It was a woman’s voice. It was thickly soft and reassuring. It did not click onto the line. There had been no change in tonal texture. It simply appeared in her ear, as though it had been there her whole life, nestled in the center of her being, waiting for this moment to finally address her.
“Ma’am,” Karen said.

“My name is Rita Galpino, special secretary to Chief of Staff Ryan.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Galpino told Karen that a driver had been sent to take her to a plane that was waiting on the tarmac at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. That plane would fly her to Andrews Air Force Base. From there the driver would take her to Blair House, across the street from the White House, where she would spend the night. At 0-600 the next day, Karen would conduct the briefing.

“Who am I briefing?”

Immediately upon completion of that briefing, Galpino said, Karen was to be returned to Andrews by her driver. From there, she would proceed directly to Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Galpino asked Karen if she had any questions.

“How long will I be?”

Galpino said she only had details about the next day, not beyond. However, expect it to be several days, minimum.

“Understood,” Karen said.

“Anything else?”

“What can I bring? What can I not bring?”

“The driver will inform you.”

“Understood,” Karen said. “And … is it an interrogation?”

“Files pertaining will be provided to you on the plane at D-M,” Galpino said.

“Fine,” Karen said. “When should I expect the driver—”

At that moment her front doorbell rang.
Spooky, she thought.

“Your driver will fill you in. He will accompany you through to Guantanamo. His name is Steve. If you need anything—”

“Steve. Yes ma’am.”

Karen walked into the living room with the phone to find Jason standing next to Steve. She looked Steve up and down. He was a tall, bland man with a corked wire running out of his ear and screwing down somewhere deep within his clothing.

Once again Jason opened his mouth to speak but Karen waved him off.

“Questions?” Galpino said.

“I’m set. Thank you, ma’am.”

The phone clicked off.

The three people in the apartment stood looking at one another for a long moment.

“Honey,” Jason said, “can I talk to you for a moment? In private.”

“Of course, dear,” Karen said. “Excuse us.”

“Who’s the government issued thug?” Jason said in shushed hissed in the bedroom behind the closed door.

“Shhh. He can hear you.”

“No he can’t.”

He can hear everything,” Karen said with a giggle.

“Where are you going?

“I can’t say exactly where but the address starts with 1600 and ends in Avenue.”

Jason sat on the bed.

“How long?”
“No idea,” Karen said.

She stuffed eight uniforms into a bag, slipped into a pair of jeans and a tank top, fastened her desert-camouflaged boots to her feet, and slung the suitcase strap over her shoulder. “I’m all set.”

“So, while you’re out God knows where, for God knows how long, doing God knows what, I’m supposed to sit here and bake cookies until you get back?”

Karen sat down next to Jason and took his hand in hers.

“I have to do this. If you haven’t noticed, the phone hasn’t exactly been ringing off the hook lately. I need this job. It can pay a lot of bills.”

“You mean it could open a lot of doors,” he said. “Which is great, because someone’s got to be out in the trenches waterboarding these poor bastards so we can sleep safely at night.”

“Hey,” she said taking Jason’s face in her hands. “Look at me. You know I don’t do that. Look at me. I have a Ph.D. in psychology. I am the best at getting information from people, important information that, yes, makes our country safer.”

Jason laughed.

“Dr. Karen Proe, Consultant Interrogator,” he said. “You should put a little body count in the corner of your business card.”

“That’s funny. Ha ha.”

She stood up and performed a turn.

“How do I look?” she said.

“Beautiful—as always,” Jason said.

Karen bent down and kissed Jason. She walked to the door then turned toward him.

“Does my breath stink?”
“Yes.”

“The cat food is in the bottom left cabinet next to the sink. Only half—”

“Only half a bowl at a time. Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. Go get ‘em, Dr. Proe.”

She opened the door then turned once again and asked Jason why he decided to come over and surprise her in the first place. He took a small box out of his jacket pocket and looked at her.

“I love you,” she said before turning one last time to leave.

Karen straightened up in front of Steve thinking that the guy was really itching to speak into his cufflink. He wasn’t wearing sunglasses, but he may as well have been.

“Is there anything I am not permitted to bring or have?”

“White House protocol—”

“I’ve been to the White House before. But this isn’t like that, is it?”

“I will be needing your keys, your cell phone, any electronic communications devices you might have, and your passport. Plus, I will need to see your laptop if you plan on taking it along, ma’am.”

“I’m a ma’am,” Karen said laughing. “Dr. Proe is fine with me.”

“Yes ma—Dr. Proe, ma’am.”

“Shall we?”

Steve opened the door and together they walked to the car.
In the setting sun, the flat browns and greens of Tucson’s skinny outskirts stretched out alongside the car as Steve drove. It was a Lincoln Towncar. Karen watched the mashed up, earthen-colored houses flick by on their way to Davis-Monthan. *Will they offer a meal on the plane?* *Would it be that plane-prepped shrunken chicken and those stubby green beans with only a partial soda poured out of a warm can onto flash-frozen, stunted ice half filling a plastic cup, like on any other flight?* *Would it be an MRE—a Meal Ready to Eat? What was going to happen next, and how would the things that were about to happen actually transpire?*

She’d never been in a Towncar before. She closed her eyes, took a breath. She thought about when she’d bought her Chevy pickup. She went to a dealership, and the salesman asked what he could show her. She said she knew what exactly she wanted and walked over to a red and white S-10.

“Great choice,” the salesman said, “and it matches your hair.”

Karen left, and bought her truck at a dealership across town.

Sitting in the back of the Towncar, Karen laughed to herself.

“What excuse me, ma’am?”

“Nothing,” she said, opening her eyes then closing them again.

She thought about that time in Detroit she drove all the way to work in that blizzard and, when she was two blocks away from work, turned around and drove all the way home because she’d left the milk out on the counter. When you were married to Paul, that wasn’t a mistake you made. Her experiences in interrogation were first-hand, but not as an interrogator. She fell asleep in back of the Towncar in less than a minute.

It was a trick a Colonel showed her during her initial deployment during the first Gulf War. She was twelve hours into the eighteen-hour haul to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The Colonel
was doing a walk-through down the aircraft, checking on his troops. Even the crew was sleeping on automatic pilot as the ocean lapped for thousands of black miles in every direction 30,000 feet below the full belly of the warplane. Karen and the Colonel were the only people awake.

The Colonel told Karen it was best for her if she got some rest because once they landed, no one knew the next time she’d be able to get some shuteye.

“Tomorrow’s a big day,” he said.

“With fifteen minutes notice, I left my home and my family to fly into combat and kill people,” Karen said, “Today’s already been a pretty big day.”

“Excuse me, soldier?”

“I apologize, sir. It’s my first war.”

“You’re tired, soldier. You need—need—to sleep. Try to sleep.”

“I am exhausted,” she said. “I’ve been trying to sleep, but I can’t.”

“We give you weapons and bullets. We give you food and a place to sleep. We give you training and instruction and purpose. We can’t give you rest, though. You need sleep almost more than anything, in order to do your job and stay alive and come home safely, and we cannot give it to you. That is the truth. That you have to get on your own.”

The Colonel sat on the arm of her chair and sighed.

He looked around and motioned for Karen to come in closer.

“Let me tell you a secret.”

On a troop ship in Korea for fifteen minutes, he’d stood next to a sleeping corporal. As they were approaching the landing he woke him up and asked how he was able to sleep standing on a ship as they approached a war zone.

“I can sleep anytime, anyplace, under any conditions,” he said.
“Handy,” the Colonel said. “How?”

The corporal said he would close his eyes and picture home, or his wife, or his kids, or grilling steaks in the backyard of his split-level on a fat and lazy June afternoon, or something else he wanted to be near, or missed. He said he would picture the person, the place, the time, or the thing, take a few deep breaths, and he’d be asleep.

“I figure that I sleep because I want to be with them and, when I sleep, I get to be with them,” he said shrugging and shouldering his carbine just as the beach poured its wet sand through the boat’s netted gate.

The Colonel tried it. Seated on a crate of grenades while waiting two blank days for a convoy delayed by Chinese snipers, he imagined his four-year-old daughter’s tea ceremony that Sunday after they’d visited with his mother. He helped his seven-year-old son memorize the multiplication tables. He ran his hand through the long black hair of his stretched out, sleeping wife as a soft, humid Virginia breeze lapped against the cool blue sheets on his bed. Pinned down for thirty-six hours by a small battalion in a squat gray village, he pictured making pancakes on Christmas morning. Once, on a C31 transport flight to Guam, with morphine dripping into his arm to take away the pain from the shrapnel in his chest, he wandered through his house checking on his sleeping family. He sat in his yard, petting his dog and smelling the blossoms dotting the branches of the front elms. Nothing. For two years and ten tries, it never worked. Then, one day, stuck on temporary duty in a Seoul bar, he pictured himself in war. He saw details of functioning perfectly under fire: pulling the trigger and feeling the shells from the machine gun thwack against the wool and canvas of his jacket, bayonetting the enemy, trudging over corpses, clapping fellow soldiers on the back as they slogged through drifts of Soviet snow.
Then the hostess woke him, brought him a cup of sweet Korean coffee, and gently pushed him out the door of the closed bar.

“That’s what finally worked for me,” he said to Karen.

In the Towncar Karen slept remembering that day she drove to work in the pounding snow of a Detroit blizzard to open at Yum-Yum Donuts when she was seventeen. She’d made it two blocks from the shop when she finally relaxed, relieved that the LeBaron had made it without breaking down again. Then she stomped on the brake pedal. *Shit. I left the milk out.*

In the smothering stillness of a 4 a.m. snowstorm, she turned the Chrysler around and drove the eighteen miles home. She'd been right. She’d left a half-gallon of milk out on the counter. If Paul found that … he would have bashed her in the face with his fist until there was blood. Even in her memory, she thought it was weird the way he liked to see blood. She placed the milk in the refrigerator, called her work, and said she would be late—oh, yes, because of the storm. She flexed her five fingers back into her gloves, put her shoulder to the back door, and pushed it open against the dense drift from the last five minutes. She drove to Yum-Yum. When she drove the LeBaron past the exact same spot where she’d remembered she’d left the fucking milk out, then had turned around because if she didn’t put it back, fucking Paul would hit her until she fucking bled because he was an abusive, crazy son of a bitch, Karen decided to join the Army. She had four months until her eighteenth birthday. Her mother could take Bobby. He was twenty months, so he was past that needy stage. Maybe they could make arrangements for single mothers. Maybe … Who cares? She needed to get away and out—out of Detroit, out of the house—away from Paul, away from Yum-Yum, just out and away. So that’s what she did.

“Ms. Proe?”
“Steve,” Karen said, instantly awake at the sound of her name.

“I attended your presentation at Quantico two years ago.”

“Yes.”

“I got a great deal out of it.”

“Thank you, Steve.”

Two years before, in a single afternoon, Karen had helped to change the idea of how interrogations function. She was able to do this because she’d learned from Paul, and others, that hitting someone on a regular basis didn’t yield results. She also did it because she wanted a job. In those days interrogation was newly “enhanced.” CIA and Army interrogators were like five-year-olds with new toys in the backyard, smashing and laughing and trying to outdo one another, pushing concepts to their limits to see how far they could go. At Bagram, Abu Ghraib, and Gitmo interrogation had become as bluntly considered and executed as the thwack of a pipe on the hard and protruding edge of an elbow. It had become the submerged gurgle of the possible last gasp. It was forced nakedness in a cinder-blocked room with no heat, one light bulb, and video cameras trained on the cowering, the confused, the reduced and humiliated. It was multideprivational: No sleep, no food, no letup, no hope, no light. Karen knew that none of it worked.

Steve shifted himself so he was sitting higher in his seat; that way he could see Karen in the backseat. She and he then shared a long moment of staring at one another in the rearview mirror.

“I went immediately from your presentation and switched my concentration to intelligence gathering and interrogation.”

“Is that a fact? How are you liking your decision?”

“I love it.”
Steve spoke about how he had reached his destiny with the CIA. He'd grown up in Ames, Iowa. *Of course you did*, Karen thought. *They have vast farms on the plains of the United States where they hydroponically cultivate blond men and women who are ten feet tall and earnest, just like you. They harvest them and slip them into agency circulation as needed.*

Steve confessed that once he got in trouble for shoplifting when he was seventeen. He'd been given a choice: Go to jail or go into the service. “Best decision I ever made,” Steve said. “I send that judge a Christmas card every year. Let him know how I’m doing and let him know I’m still grateful.”

“Sure,” Karen said. “Of course.”

Steve said he went in on the first wave with a platoon in Iraq.

“How’d that work out for you?”

“I saw some things, ma’am,” Steve said, in a softened, taps-playing tone.

>No you didn’t. No fucking way you saw anything. That’s the oldest trick in the book. The things I saw, man … I can’t … I can’t even talk about it. I never talk about it. You’re not muscle, Steve. You’re a talking doorstop with a driver’s license and a .45 auto in your coat.

Steve said that after his four-year Marine hitch the only thing he knew for sure was he didn’t want to go home to Ames.

“Yeah,” Karen said, “How can a six-foot, three-inch, two hundred-pound ex-Marine find peace and solace in a world gone mad?”

“Ma’am?”

“Nothing. So?”

“I interviewed at GardaWorld.”
“No shit,” Karen said, scooching forward to put her face next to Steve’s. “They as bat shit crazy as I’ve heard?”

“They were spooky. But I needed a job—”

“Why not Blackwater? Or DynCorp? Or Vinnell? Those guys are always on the lookout.”

“I interviewed with those guys, too.”

“Growing boy’s got to eat.”

“Food on the table, yes, ma’am.”

“Is there a missus, Steve? Are there little Steves?”

“No, ma’am. I take care of my mama—my mother.”

Karen leaned back into her seat.

GardaWorld hired him, Steve said. He was slated for eighteen months in Libya when a CIA recruiter visited him in his barracks.

“It was,” said Steve, “a dream come true.”

“How so?”

“It meant I didn’t have to find a way to get myself recruited.”

Steve laughed, and Karen saw his eyes looking at her in the rearview mirror. She became aware that she was not smiling, that her face was taut and serious. She watched Steve’s expression harden.


“No, ma’am. That was all me. Like I said, that was because of you and your presentation.”
Karen said nothing. She inhaled the long, welcome silence. She looked out the window. The flat darkness of the rolling landscape reflected the finish of her brown eyes against the glass. Steve was talking. Karen was nodding, but she wasn’t listening.

She knew why she’d been called for this. It wasn’t because she had a Ph.D. in psychology. It wasn’t because of her experience and her expertise. It wasn’t because of her looks, her red hair, or her legs that went all the way from her ass to the ground, as one old boyfriend used to joke. And it certainly wasn’t because she was in Tucson.

No, the reason she was called was because she never went to work at GardaWorld, or Blackwater, or any of the other mercenary groups that sprang up after 9/11 to become de facto government agencies in their own right. Instead, she was a freelancer—an interrogator who worked for herself, by herself. That position afforded deniability for any government who hired her. If things went sideways, some spokesperson could say, with a straight and honest face, *It was her. It wasn’t us. If we had known her agenda, we never would have … We will examine our hiring policies and make changes so that nothing like this ever happens again. You have our word.*

The other reason she might have been brought on board was so that Abu Zubaydah didn’t happen again.

Abu Zubaydah was the one that made things change for Karen—and for everyone. She first encountered him at Camp Lemonnier, the old French Foreign Legion compound outside Djibouti. When she convoyed into the camp with seven other soldiers, she thought of the movie *Papillion,* of the movie’s dark stone prison structures, of vines and ruin growing up the sides of every surface. They stopped in front of the few whitewashed buildings left standing as American
efforts to civilize a barren stretch of African desert with aluminum buildings and rec centers buzzed in the surrounding square mile. Inside a makeshift conference room, the briefing was short. A single copy of a one-sheet memo signed by Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney was reverently passed from person to person. Enhanced techniques, they called it.

“What exactly does this mean?” one soldier asked.

“These are the specific methods,” the briefer said, handing out another one-page memo. “This is what’s authorized.”

The memo listed waterboarding, sleep deprivation, cramped confinement, stress positions, wall slamming, forced nudity, loud music, hooding, and being placed in a confinement box with insects.

“Insects?” a soldier said.

“He doesn’t like bugs,” the briefer said.

The eight soldiers looked at the floor. The room stayed quiet as everyone in turn looked up and smiled at one another before the briefer stood to leave.

“Have at him,” the briefer said before she closed the door behind her.

The eight of them pulled their chairs in a circle. They each identified themselves and listed their specialties. Karen thought it was like a corporate team-building session. She enjoyed this part of every assignment: the sitting around, the introductions, the boasting about skill sets. It was like the scene in a disaster movie where the members of the ragtag group are first brought together to save the world. It was also the only time on any assignment where she got a chance to measure overall intent and mood. The first sit-down told her whether things would go smoothly or whether it would degrade into a mess of egos and failure. Recently, she'd realized it also told
her how things were likely to go for the subject, which from her seat, and after having read that memo, looked either bad or worse.

“Specialist Karen Proe,” she said, going last. “I’m out of Fort Huachuca. I’m chief liaison, and I’m on notes.”

“Specialist Proe is our eyes and our ears to the almightiest of powers above us—whomever they may be. In other words, the folks that booked this gig,” an older man who was the Colonel in charge of the team and the mission, said. “She’s got the last word. Thusly, my advice to each and every one of you is as follows: Don’t piss off Specialist Proe.”

Everyone laughed appropriately.

“Our subject is a top lieutenant to the man who is still number one on our hit parade, Osama Bin Laden. As such, he is a gold mine of information. He is the most high-ranking member of al-Qaeda that we, or anyone else, have ever had the good fortune to question. Be diligent. Be creative. Be thorough. Most importantly, don’t fuck it up.”

He was naked on a concrete floor in the center of thirty-by-thirty-foot aluminum shed that the Army Corps of Engineers had screwed together two days earlier. There were mattresses tied with straps to the walls. A chain held him to the south side of the shed. On the north side of the shed there were four metal chairs and a large tank on wheels. His hair and beard were dripping sweat. It was 110 degrees in the shed. For the three minutes the medic took putting a stethoscope to Zubaydah’s chest, counting his pulse, peering into his his eyes, and checking the dressings on three wounds—one in the thigh, one in the stomach, and the last in one testicle, all from an AK-47—Zubaydah kept his eyes on Karen.
Is it because of the red hair? Unlikely, Karen thought. Is it because I am an affront? To have a woman involved such a circumstance is an additional form of torture for a fundamentalist Muslim. Perhaps that’s it, she thought, Or does he think I can help him because I am a women and, therefore, filled with compassion for suffering? Who knows? Whatever the reason, it unnerved her.

Once the medic finished Specialist Michael Reed, a thin but powerfully-built man who had been a sous chef in Baton Rouge before joining the Marines on September 12, 2001, dragged one of the metal chairs across the floor and sat Zubaydah down in it. When he patted Zubaydah on the shoulder, the captive flinched as though someone had spark-lit a torch an inch from his face.

“Relax,” Reed said. “Talk to Jesus. Or Mohammad, or Buddah. Or whoever the fuck you get on your knees for.”

The interpreter, was sitting about ten feet away from Zubaydah, in a spot selected by Reed to be a safe distance away. His voice, speaking English, then speaking Arabic, then speaking English again, droned in the background.

Karen wondered whether or not Zubaydah spoke English. There was no word of it in the file she'd read on the plane. There were details about how Zubaydah had been interrogated by Pakistani authorities in the late 1990s. It was an off the hook, free for all that included hitting him with a shoe, stretching his arms out and tying them to a bar so his feet didn’t touch the ground, beating the soles of his feet with a stick, and hitting him with whatever happened to be handy. To Karen, Zubaydah’s experience in Pakistan meant he was, more than likely, seasoned at dealing with hardcore interrogation.
Reed slapped Zubaydah across the face, then he cracked his knuckles and stretched his neck, as though he were warming up before a bout.

“I don’t know, Mike,” Karen said. “This ain’t our boy’s first time out of the chute. Going down this road might be a waste of time.”

“Oh, I don’t expect to get any information out of him. I enjoy it.”

If Zubaydah spoke even rudimentary English, Karen thought as Reed circled the prisoner, then having an interpreter was not only useless, it might even prove detrimental to the interrogation. It created an additional and unnecessary barrier between the subject and the interrogator that could prove—

“Who,” Reed said standing over Zubaydah, “is your handler?”

The Saudi tried to look around Reed, to Karen.

“Don’t look at her,” Reed said. “Hey! Hey! I said don’t fucking look at her. She’s not here to help you. The only one who can help you here is me. You need to deal with me.”

Reed stood in front of Zubaydah, placed his foot on the back of his chair, and pushed until the chair tipped backward.

For twenty-seven days it went like that. Two members of the team quit, simply unable to go on with what they were taking part in and witnessing. The only other person—and the only other woman—taking notes ran from the shed crying on the sixteenth day. That left Karen. She went every day. She wrote everything down; she briefed colonels and generals on progress. On the twenty-eighth day, she was told to gather her files and her gear, and get on a helicopter. The helicopter flew to an airport. A plane took her to Washington DC. After a ride in a Humvee, it was a straight walk through a long underground tunnel where she popped up in an elevator that
opened into the White House. She sat with a military aide in the Situation Room, marveling at how big the room sounded for a place that barely fit eight chairs.

After five minutes, the door to the room opened. Six people came in: The President, the Vice President, the Attorney General, the Head of the Joint Chiefs, the Defense Secretary, and the Colonel whom Karen had not seen nor spoken to since the day of the get-to-know-you introductions.

Specialist Proe is our team liaison,” the Colonel said. “She has been present for more of the interrogation than anyone else on the team. She will be briefing today. Specialist Proe.”

Karen went through the timeline and the results of the enhanced interrogation sessions.

“He did give us the name of his handler, Mahmud Al-Milaiji,” she said, adding that the CIA was now actively working on locating that person.

“What the new methods been as effective as we’d hoped?” the Secretary of Defense asked, leaning forward in his chair.

“We have subjected the individual to the technique of waterboarding more than twenty times in a fifteen-day period,” Karen said. “From that method alone, we have acquired a significantly high yield of new intelligence. However—”

At the word “however,” the room went stone silent. Everyone’s look went cold as they stared at Karen.

Karen was about to say that she thought Zubaydah was, occasionally, faking. She thought that, because of his prior experience with the Pakistanis, he was over-dramatizing the effects of the interrogation. Something about his presence, his attitude, and his actions felt forced and fake to her. For instance, she wanted to say, she researched the name Mahmud Al-Milaiji and
discovered he was a Saudi movie star. Or, at least there was a Saudi movie star with the same name.

She wanted to say Zubaydah was fucking with them.

She also wanted to say that what they were doing to Zubaydah was wrong. She wanted to stand up and scream at them that they were all insane and immoral because of the way this human being was being treated.

But, she knew, the people in the room didn’t want to hear it. Morality was not on the agenda. They wanted to hear that they had done something extraordinary and brave and that their bravery was netting results. She would have to build her case for practicing different methods of interrogation on her own, and it would probably take time. Trying to do it in this room would not work.

“His responses might be questionable because he is on pain medication,” Karen said.

“What?” the Attorney General said.

“He was put on pain medication following an incident during his capture in which he received three wounds from an AK-47,” Karen said. “One to the thigh, one to the stomach, and the other to his left testicle.”

The men at the table sat back. They appeared to be thinking.

“Who put him on pain medication?” the President asked.

Karen thought if prisoners were not allowed pain meds when they were clearly in pain already then enhanced interrogation techniques—the term they’d come up with to describe what was simply torture—would be regarded as piling on.
Two days later, back at Camp Lemonnier, Karen received new orders: Anyone undergoing interrogation was required to be drug free. That meant no pain meds, no opiates, not even aspirin or ibuprofen.

“This comes from the highest levels,” she was told.

She walked to the shed where Zubaydah was still being interrogated. She took her regular seat, then watched and took notes for two hours while a new Specialist practiced on Zubaydah to learn the basics of how to properly waterboard a prisoner.

*This, she decided, is not only wrong, it’s not working.*

“Excuse me, Steve,” Karen said from the back of the Towncar. “I hate to interrupt, but—”

“Not at all, ma’am.”

“Can I have my cell phone?”

“Ma’am?”

“My cell phone. I use it to talk to people who are important to me in my life.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“Can’t return your cell phone.”

Karen sat back in her seat and looked again out the window as the bone yard of old and grounded airplanes stored in the open, rust-free desert air came into view.

“If you give me the number, I’ll call whomever you like.”
“Yes,” Karen said, “please call my boyfriend and let him know that I am seriously considering the offer of marriage he made right before I got in this car. Tell him it’s a high priority for me.”

Steve said nothing.

“Do any of these old clunkers ever fly again?” Karen asked after several moments.

“I don’t believe so, ma’am.”

Steve stopped the Towncar a short walk from the edge of a ramp that dropped from the stomach of the transport plane they’d be flying in. It looked like a ventriloquist’s dummy’s tongue extending an eager, evil appetite—like part of an engineered smile specifically and painstakingly designed by cackling elder scientists charged with making the luring and eating of innocent children easier and more efficient.

Steve opened Karen’s door. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder looking at the plane.

“Will we be the only passengers?”

Steve swallowed and said, “I believe so, but I haven’t seen the manifest.”

They stood watching a real, live tumbleweed go skittering across the runway. A moment later they stood watching a man with files in his hand walking toward them.

“Automatonophobia.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s what it’s called.”

“That’s what what’s called?”

“The irrational fear of a ventriloquist’s dummy. Ever seen the movie Magic?”

“No.”

“Ann-Margaret, Anthony Hopkins, and a super creepy dummy.”
“Like Chuckie?”

“Makes Chuckie look like a stone punk. No, this is seriously weird. The kind of thing that keeps you up for like two years.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s going to be in these files, Steve?”

“I don’t know, ma’am.”

Karen turned to face Steve just as the man in a suit arrived with the files.

“Give us a moment, please,” Karen said to the man, who took several steps back and faced away from the two of them.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Karen said “Something for something. My something is that if I have questions that go beyond what is contained in those files, I expect you to provide answers, if you legitimately have the answers. First, I really need to use my phone.”

“What’s my something?”

“I’ll tell you every mistake you made at my apartment and in the car on the way over here.”

“I haven’t made any mistakes,” Steve said.

Karen cocked an eyebrow at him.

“I can tell you, or I can tell your boss.”

“Fine,” Steve said. “It’s a deal.”

Karen signaled the man in the suit over, took the three files, and put them under her arm.

“We have an electronic version, if you prefer,” the man said.

“Thank you, no.”
Electronic files were becoming all the rage these days. They had a lot of photos and video that posted to myspace and Facebook and were collected by a government program that swept the Internet and collected any smattering of a person’s life. Karen didn’t like electronic files. She preferred to imagine what a person sounded like, or what their mannerisms were. That way, when she got to meet them, she could tell how close she’d come to an accurate portrayal then adjust accordingly for the interrogation. It was also more interesting for her to use her imagination then be lazy and have it all spelled out. Most of all, though, she preferred old school, paper files because it was better to walk around in someone’s head than to give them the chance to start walking around in hers.

Once she was on the plane, she sat down, rubbed her eyes, and called Jason. It went straight to voicemail.

“I’ll be home soon,” she said into the phone, “I’m not sure how exactly how long, but it’ll be soon. I promise. Once I get home you can help me pick out a dress. I love you.”

Karen opens her eyes. She lugs the file marked DUNN onto her lap. It’s a thick, fat, wonderful piece of work, exactly what she expects from the file of an international celebrity. She scans the table of contents, and flips through it so that the breeze from the fluttering pages chills her face. She always does the same thing with magazines before she starts reading. She likes to get a sense of the heft and the content before diving in. She puts the DUNN file aside and drags the file marked MACK out to take its place. It’s also a thick file, although not as thick as the DUNN file, and feels about right for a journalist. She goes through the same flipping routine, and then opens each file to the first page. She stares at them and draws in her breath to get started.
She likes to start at the beginning. She likes to learn about a person’s life the same way the person had lived that life: Start at the beginning and move forward.

“All right,” she says picking up Eddie’s file and keeping Russ’s file close by. “What’s the story with you guys?”
Chapter 3

Eddie walked up Second Street toward First Avenue. He was on his way to be in a movie. *How big will the lights be? Will they be those enormous saucer lights?* He’d seen those huge, swiveling klieg lights, the kind they use on premier nights. Not in real life, but in movies and on television. He’d probably get to see them for real tonight because for the movie he was going to be in, they’d need some truly giant lights. It was a remake of *King Kong*. Everything was going to be big.

Sweat stung Eddie’s left eye. He lowered his forehead onto his stretched palm and wiped the sweat away. He laughed. He laughed over the term “wiping his brow,” and how he’d actually just done that. *Or, Eddie thought, have I, in fact, just mopped my brow?* No, he decided, *mopping is for people like Spencer Tracy in Inherit the Wind. There were a lot of handkerchiefs in that movie, so naturally there was a lot of mopping.*

Eddie laughed at how he had interacted with his brow and how, in doing so, he’d done it like an actor.

*I am*, he thought, *born to be in the movies.*

He laughed harder, putting his hands on his hips, forcing his belly out, and upping the volume. He checked to see if anyone was looking at him. Not a soul noticed. He tried to look casual, and continued quickly up the street.

He wasn’t concerned that no one had noticed. No one ever noticed Eddie. He was so used to being ignored that long ago he’d stopped expecting attention from anyone. Then he stopped wanting anyone’s company. Now, at the age of fourteen, interacting with another person terrified
him so much that when he came into contact with someone he usually clammed up and went as still as a possum on a road until they went away. He had no friends and didn’t want any.

Being invisible carried a few benefits. Eddie knew that he would have no problem with his parents if he stayed out all night at the movie shoot. He couldn’t imagine his father even thinking about where he may or may not be. That was better than when he did pay attention. Last week Eddie was slapped by his father so hard that at the moment of the impact Eddie saw, swear to God, a bright white flash and stars. Actual stars. It was amazing because just two days earlier they were so close.

Eddie was almost out the door late for a game with his mitt in his hand, wearing his baseball uniform, when he stopped to tell his father about how they never played him in Little League. The season was almost over, and the coach had never once put him in a game. Eddie knew he was scrawny. He also knew he wasn’t very good, which is why they stuck him out in right field. But still. He wasn’t the worst guy on the team, and everyone else got to take the field at least once during the season. Eddie told his father he was thinking of quitting the team because he never got to play.

“Uh huh,” his father said, standing at the kitchen counter eating a ham sandwich and flipping another page of the New York Post.

Then the phone rang.

“Get that, would you?” his father said. “If it’s your mother, I’m not here.”

Eddie put his hand over the mouthpiece and said, “It’s the coach. He doesn’t have enough guys for the game today and wants to make sure I’m coming out to play.”

Eddie’s father straightened up from studying the box scores, looked his youngest, son square in the eye, and asked, “Do you want to?”
“No,” he said, “not really.”

“Then tell him to go fuck himself,” his father said.

“Really? I can say that?”

“Sure.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Eddie said before quickly hanging up the phone.

His father, for that moment, straightened and regarded him with what looked like a dense pride. It was the only time Eddie could recall ever truly connecting with another human being. Then his father lit a Kool and went back to reading the Post.

***

It was June 14, 1976, and Russell Dunn had hopes of playing disco. He sat on his hands and knees. His tongue was sticking almost all the way out of the left side of his mouth, and his face was three inches from a mirror. He cocked his head for a better view of the mirror, and a strand of his long, kinky hair reached down onto his tongue, where it got accidently swallowed and tickled his throat. He tried to blow it out, but it kept sticking. He shook his head, and three more tendrils of curly-cues launched themselves from the air down onto his face where they landed directly in front of his eyes.

“Oh, come on,” he screamed. “What the hell?”

He sprang up on the balls of his feet and bounced up and down and shook his head and spit and gagged and dragged his hand through his hair until it was finally all pushed back from his face and out of his mouth. Then he slammed open the door to his room, walked down the hall
to his parents' room, grabbed a pink elastic headband off his mother’s dresser, shoveled his hair into a crown of mad scientist intensity, and snapped it into place with the headband.

“Faggot,” his older brother Bill said, passing Russ in the hallway as he made his way back to his mirror.

“Lard ass,” Russ said under his breath when he got to his door.

His brother stopped at the end of the hallway and turned. Oh, shit, Russ thought, he heard me.

“I can help you with the disco ball thing,” Bill said. “I mean, if you’re having trouble.”

“No,” Russ said, looking at the floor where hundreds of scattered mirror slivers bounced light all over the room. “It’s cool. Thanks, though.”

“Just remember to make sure the surface is clean. And do the pattern before you cut. Did you use a fresh blade?”


“And,” Bill said, “stop being a homosexual, because...”

Russ didn’t hear the rest after slamming his door.

He knelt back down and replaced the blade in the glass cutter. He glanced over at his blackened globe and at the mess black spray paint left on the green shag carpeting from where he hadn’t spread enough newspaper. He’d seen his friend Pete make one of these two weeks before, and it seemed so easy. Get a mirror. Clean it. Draw lines. Cut along the lines with the glass cutter. Separate the pieces with the pliers. Glue the pieces to the globe, and voila!, a disco ball. What could possibly go wrong?
This was the third, and last, mirror he had. The globe, the fifth one he’d tried to prepare, had been liberated earlier that afternoon from his younger brother’s room. After three tries, he’d realized that the new globes with raised mountains and terrain did not work. *The demands of art,* he thought as he cut the final line of the pattern, *demand sacrifice.* But when this globe was finished and they started to play some new music, the effort would pay off. Russ had seen the Sylvans and Silver Convention at separate shows in May pull in what looked like 10,000 people each at Infinity. At $10 a head … he was doing the math when it occurred to him that he needed to put those new strings on his bass. He went over and took out four Ernie Ball strings, threaded the first one through the machine, cranked the peg, and wondered how much the club got and how much the band got for each show at places like Infinity. Was it part of the gate, or did they receive a flat fee? Was that flat fee distributed by player, or did the entire band get the fee, no matter how many were playing? If it was by player, well, Russ had five people in his band, Russell Dunn and the Guns. But usually, clubs around Katonah paid shit, so what did it matter? He’d seen the Runaways and the Ramones at CBGB, and he liked the sound better, but there were maybe thirty people at each show, and he knew for a fact that no one in either band got paid at all. Russ remembered how that one girl in the Runaways played guitar. *She was only sixteen,* Russ thought. *Sixteen. Amazing. Two years younger than me, and already she is amazing. What was her name?* And disco isn’t that bad, not like his friends said. The beat gets people up on the dance floor and moving. *It’s the biggest influence of black music on white commercial music since Elvis Presley,* Russ thought. *I should write that down so I don’t forget it so I can use it the next time Steve starts bitching about KC and the Sunshine Band. Yeah, I know they sound like pop music, but people like it, and hell, you got to give people what they want if you want to get head.*
“Ahead,” Russ said out loud, laughing at his own joke.

He looked at the slivers of mirror and at the strings for the bass on the table and thought,

What am I doing?

He heard his mother’s voice yelling for him.

He walked down the stairs slumping, stooped, and over-acting the part of the put-upon son.

“You forgot, didn’t you?” his mother said.

“Of course not,” Russ said.

He kicked the floor with his boot, looked at the place where he’d kicked the floor, and felt his mother’s stare bore down into the top of his head.

“What didn’t I forget?” he said.

His mother broke out in a laugh and hit him lightly on the arm.

“You forgot that today you’re taking The Belinda to Pier 45. And you said something or other about some movie you might be in.”

The fog in Russ’s brain thinned, and finally broke. Today was the day he was going to run his father’s boat down the Hudson to lower Manhattan so a team of workmen could spruce it up before the Tall Ships procession on July 4. After that, he was going to see if he could get on as an extra in that movie being shot at the World Trade Center.

“Is today Monday?” he asked.

“Yes,” his mother said, handing Russ the keys to the Volvo along with a canvas bag with two turkey sandwiches, a Thermos of coffee, a hat, and a change of clothes: tan pants, a yellow polo shirt, and a pair of Topsiders—clothes he would sooner douse with kerosene, wrap around
his head, and run with through a gauntlet of soldiers perfecting their flame-throwing technique
than ever wear—in case he got wet on the boat.

He took the bag and the keys and turned for the door.

“Wait just a second,” his mother said.

“Oh, of course,” Russ said, leaning in to give his mother a kiss goodbye on the cheek.

“Thank you, son. That was very sweet of you. But that’s not what I meant.”

“What else am I forgetting?”

“Nothing, because I haven’t told you yet.”

Russ rolled his eyes at his mother and said, “Yes, Mrs. Dunn” and smiled.

It’s what he always did when whenever she lapsed into “the tone.” She’d been a fifth-
grade English teacher twenty-eight years before when she’d met Russ’s father, which
permanently affixed a teacher’s crisp and condescending tone to her personality whenever she
had to explain something simple or more than once to her four boys. She lapsed into pointed,
teacher diction most often with Russ. He knew what she thought of him: He was scatterbrained.
He couldn’t focus and keep his mind on one thing for more than a few minutes at a time. He was
the youngest son and the biggest disappointment. He did drugs, chased girls, stayed out until all
hours playing with his band, and would most likely wind up dead in a ditch if he wasn’t careful.
At this point in his life, the only way he’d managed to carve out a place of distinction within the
family was having become the first who wasn’t going to college.

“You are taking Carol with you to the pier,” Russ’s mother said, parodying her teacher
tone as they walked arm-in-arm toward the Volvo.

“Carol? I see what’s going on.”
“Nothing is going on. She has an interview at Columbia tomorrow, and I told her she could ride down with you.”

“Columbia doesn’t take women. Just smart Jewish boys.”

“Then the other one, the college that does.”

“This is a set-up.”

“No, it is not.”

Russ looked at his mother.

“Maybe it is. A set-up. A little. You haven’t seen her in quite some time. She’s a lovely girl.”

“Yes, Mrs. Dunn,” Russ said.

“Now, what are you doing?”

“Taking Carol to the boat, taking the boat to the pier, proposing to Carol and planning a family with her—two sons, one daughter—as soon as possible, but not before nine months after the wedding, dropping Carol off at the pier, and going to the movie. The shoot, they call it.”

“Very good,” she said waving and walking off.

***

Like his father, Eddie’s mother also ignored him. She had been a model. Her picture had been on the cover of *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazar*, and a bunch of other magazines. She was a regular on *The Pat Boone Show* for two years. Eddie’s brother, Michael, was four years older. They lived in the same apartment, but Eddie couldn’t recall having had more than a few conversations with him. Last December Michael was in a coffee commercial. In the commercial
Michael played Peter, who arrived home from college in the early hours of Christmas morning and woke his little sister and his parents by brewing them a fresh pot of delicious coffee that they shared together. Eddie thought the commercial was beautiful. Sometimes he imagined that the coffee commercial family was his own.

Eddie was the runt of the family. It wasn’t only that he was stuck at five eleven while his mother and brother were each more than six feet tall; it was that his brother and his mother had isosceles cheekbones topped by an air that was at once haughty and tragic. Eddie didn’t have that charisma. He was quiet and reserved. People barely noticed him, and Eddie was comfortable with that. He went his own way, happily keeping his own company, never once feeling like he was missing out on anything.

It never even occurred to him to tell anyone in his family that he was going to be in a movie. He thought it would be fun that once having been in a movie—a step up from their professional accomplishments—he could brag about it to his mother and brother.

Eddie turned left at the corner onto First Avenue. His head was down. His left shoulder clipped the right shoulder of a gray-haired man walking a German Shepard.

“Whoa! Where’s the fire, son?”

“Sorry,” Eddie said, waving his raised hand in rushed apology but not missing a step forward on his way.

His left hand was in his pocket, and his fingers were counting and recounting the eight, folded five-dollar bills he’d assembled for the night. He got the money from cleaning his father’s office once a week for two months. It was a moving company, a cramped, rat’s nest of a place that took no time to clean. Eddie could sweep, empty the ashtrays and garbage cans, then take the trash to the corner dumpster. It took a half an hour.
Eddie wanted an RC Cola before he got on the subway. The air conditioning usually wasn’t working, and there would be at least one delay in the tunnels.

He went into Felix’s bodega. He walked quickly down the single shotgun aisle, straight to the cooler against the back wall. The Devil Dogs, Yankee Doodles and all the other Drakes Cakes were on the right, next to the Breyers ice cream. The Wonder Bread and the more expensive Entenmann’s cakes were on the left. Felix didn’t sell a lot of cakes, though. He sold loosies for a dime and cans of Rheingold for a dollar but made most of his money loansharking.

Eddie grabbed the glass bottle of RC, pivoted a half circle, and walked to the counter. He took out his money and flipped through each bill proudly and loudly before settling on the newest five-dollar bill and handing it over to Felix with a crisp, hard snap.

“Mr. Money Bags,” Felix said. “I take it you’ll be wanting your change in small bills?”

“Can you open it?” Eddie asked, pushing the RC across the counter to Felix. Felix put the bottle in one hand while making change with the other. In simultaneous motions he made change, popped the cap on the opener screwed to the wall behind the counter, and placed the bills and change next to a copy of the Daily News open to a story about Thurman Munson and the Yankees’ chances to make the playoffs.

Eddie looked under the cap for a twenty-five-cent prize, a free RC, or the harshness of being asked to “Try Again!” Instead, he stared at nothing under the cap.

“Where’s the game?” Eddie said, sliding the cap to Felix.

“No game with these little bottles,” Felix said. “Only with the plastic bottles. You want to buy one of those?”

Eddie stared at him.
“Maybe you get another one to take. Maybe you have a cold bottle with you and a nice
girl comes up to you, eh?”

Eddie continued to stare back at him, not understanding at all what he was saying or
hinting or getting at.

Felix’s warm smile chilled as he looked at the clueless kid in front of him. The two stood
looking at one another in a blank-eyed standoff of mutual incomprehension.

“I gotta go,” Eddie finally said.

He stood outside the bodega and stopped. He let his mind work on what Felix had said
about a girl and the RC Cola. It took him almost a minute, but then it clicked.

Of course. If he had that cold soda on the subway, and if the air conditioning conked out,
Eddie would be the star of the train. Imagine that, Eddie thought, imagine that. The lights and
the air conditioning and the trains themselves broke down all the time. And when that happened,
Eddie would wish he had a cool drink, while also wishing, perhaps, he was wearing a white
dinner jacket and a half smile on his face that was noticed by the blond woman, the one in the
summer dress, and that his look caused her to walk slowly and deliberately over to him as he
extended his arm to offer her a refreshing sip.

“What is your name?” she would ask in her slightly Spanish accent after finishing her sip
and as the wet soda clung to her lips that were set in a pout of wonder and abandonment.

“Mack,” Eddie would say, “Eddie Mack.”

Eddie stood in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at the pavement. He was smiling at his
fantasy. Then he looked up and saw his reflection in the blue metal Pepsi sign taped inside the
window at Felix’s. Instead of the white dinner jacket of his imagination, Eddie saw he was
wearing a black, Blue Oyster Cult t-shirt, brown Sears Toughskins jeans, and dirty white Pro
Ked high-tops. There was a hole over the big toe of the left sneaker. His hand gripped the half empty bottle of RC Cola. He knew he was thin for his age. He drank shakes and ate eggs, but he stayed scrawny anyway.

“Watch it, kid!”

A man with his arm around a woman bumped smack into Eddie, breaking his boy’s reverie and, almost, his arm.

“What is wrong with you?” the man said as he became tangled up with Eddie and as the woman spun in a circle as the man tightened his arm around her waist.

After an awkward moment, the two of them moved on a few steps while Eddie watched them go down First Avenue.

The man wore a beige linen suit and tan shoes. His date wore a floppy hat, a silk sleeveless shirt, and a miniskirt.

“Fucking kid,” the man said.

“Oh, stop,” the woman said, looking back over her shoulder at Eddie. “I think he’s cute.”

Watching her walk away, Eddie decided he had to get another RC for the train. He turned back to go into Felix’s before heading for the train.

* * *

The Belinda was an Islander 36, a thirty-six-foot, mono-hulled sloop made of fiberglass and wood and named for his mother. Russ found The Belinda easy to sail single-handed. Some nights he would take her out by himself and sail up the Hudson River under a canopy of stars, the water skimming cleanly off the sides of the hull, the smell of soil and trees thick in the summer
air, and no one to around to question him and mock his taste or his smarts or his seeming lack of
drive and ambition. That far up the Hudson River Valley, the houses were the size of schools,
and they were set into sloping lawns on baronial estates that made Russell laugh to even think
about them. He wondered what the people in those houses did to make money. Did they sell
things? Did they invest? Did they have careers and jobs that were vague and misunderstood by
nearly everyone, such as “financier” or “investment specialist,” like Carol’s father? Russ
comforted himself in the midst of these thoughts with the knowledge that his mother had been a
teacher and his father owned an advertising business, so at the very least, he was from a family
that had tangible jobs. Still, he wondered about the inherited estates. Did the sons live in them
their whole lives surrounded by the past and their parents resenting that they were visitors to
their own history, and would never ascend to originator or owner in the truest sense of having
been the initiator, the creator?

He would lower the mainsail and the foresail, drop the anchor, then dive off the stern and
pull himself into the dark depths along the anchor line until the pressure pushed his eyeballs back
into his head and squeezed the insides of his ears until they felt so brittle and cold his whole head
felt differently contoured, reshaped into something horrific and grotesque by the water, the dark
and the pressure, and he would keep going until his head felt like it would split open like a
pomegranate, and that point of self-imposed insanity was frightening and clarifying and peaceful
for him, and when he reached that point, he would go another five or six feet before turning and
releasing his hand from the anchor line so he could sprint upward through water and through the
pain and finally explode into the open air and the dark and the trees and the solitude.
Carol had once lived with her parents just one Mediterranean and two Dutch Colonials down from Russ. His mother’s try at marriage brokering was not only her awkward attempt to revive a childhood relationship between Russ and Carol, but to mend the relationship between the two families years after it had frayed to nothing. Years earlier, Russ’s parents and Carol’s parents, the Gearys, had been friends. The four of them had huddled together in a corner of any given room at cocktail parties and, a few times a year, each couple had the other couple over to the house probably because they’d read about such things in a John Cheever novel and felt obligated to do so. Russ and Carol were the same age. When they were little kids—six, seven, eight—they'd performed plays they'd made up on the fly in front of tipsy party audiences, or anyone in the house, anyone in the yard, or anyone who happened to be passing by on the street in front of the yard. Their first performances were stage adaptations of stories by Dr. Seuss and Richard Scary: raw, yet enthusiastic. By early adolescence they were looking into one another’s smoldering eyes in swooning romances, shooting one another in blazing westerns, and bantering back and forth in saucy detective dramas. They were still raw, but there was an undeniable something, an emotional realness going on between the two. When they weren’t writing, producing, directing, and starring in significant contributions to the American theater, they were side-by-side in one or the other’s pool, or on a boat, or at the beach, or cookouts. In each other’s houses to this day, melted and fused together in chemical clumps, there were stacks of faded Polaroid Square Shooter pictures, time and date stamped from a decade ago, showing them in costumes and mustaches and bathing suits side-by-side in little-kid-through-gangly-youngster bliss.

The pictures of Carol and Russ stopped after age twelve. Carol was sent to the very private Suffield Academy in Connecticut, while Russ went to the very public John Jay Middle
School, in Cross River. Afterward, Carol went to Thayer Academy, in Massachusetts, which was even more private than Suffield, while Russ went to John Jay High School. By then, the Gearys had moved away to a gated community two towns over—far enough to have been on the other side of the moon, but not so far that Russ’s parents weren’t still aware of them—while the Dunns stayed put. The ardor of their swinging Sixties sense of friendship, that may or may not have included martinis and passing out with one another’s wives and husbands, had lapsed into indifference as a result of time, income disparity, and the echoes of screaming recriminations from that July 5, Friday at 3 a.m. by the pool, after which Burt made the decision to check himself into a hospital for two weeks then join a support group for people with problems like his. The one time Russ thought he saw Carol after they were twelve—although nine or ten Ballantine Ales made it a fuzzy memory—was at Bill Stunworth’s party two years before. Russ thought he saw Carol making out with Stan Greenberg in the corner of the downstairs library. Russ was impressed by her sense of rebellion in mingling intimately with someone whose last name didn’t sound like a Boston suburb.

Russ knocked on the Geary’s door. He turned around and looked at the lawn. He wondered who mowed it and how much they paid the person to mow it. Whoever did the work it was perfectly cut and trimmed. He thought about whether or not professional landscapers had special tools to trim the edges of lawns so they stood up and presented themselves at first sight to the world as straight and true as a Marine haircut. He turned back to the door and found himself staring into the slack face of Mrs. Geary. In the seven years since he’d last seen her, Mrs. Geary looked like she’d aged twenty.

“Hello,” Russ said.
“Russell,” Mrs. Geary said. She then turned and walked into the house. He followed. She stopped at the bottom of a flight of stairs and called up to Carol. Russ recalled the staircase at the Geary’s old house that led to Carol’s bedroom. They’d once tried to reenact the Ernie Kovacs Nairobi Trio sketch, using a large stuffed bear for the third part, in her room. They’d made a cardboard TV screen and framed themselves behind it. Russ thought now that probably most kids did things like that. Stupid things. Still, he thought, doing those stupid things with Carol was a lot of fun.

“Carol will be right down.”

Mrs. Geary and Russ stood stiffly shoulder-to-shoulder, staring up the stairs. Russ felt as if they were sharing a sense of practiced expectation, like awaiting the arrival of the debutante who would be kicking off the cotillion but who, they both knew, would never marry well. After a minute of staring at the spot where Carol would appear in any second, Russ turned to Mrs. Geary and asked her how she had been doing.


“It’s been, like, what, six, seven years?” Russ said.

“Yes,” Mrs. Geary said.

“Time sure flies, huh?”

“It does.”

“How is Mr. Geary these days?”

Mrs. Geary cleared her throat and said, “He’s in Danbury … for the foreseeable future.”

“Oh, good for him,” Russ said. “Danbury’s a cool town.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Geary said, turning slowly toward Russ and offering him a Plasticine smile.

“I’ve been told it is. Excuse me.”
Carol appeared at that spot at the top of the stairs. It dawned on Russ that Mrs. Geary wasn’t referring to Danbury the town. She was referring to Danbury the federal correctional facility.

“Idiot,” Russ said.

“Excuse me?” Carol said.

“Nothing.”

She came down the stairs and stood next to Russ. In the intervening years Carol had grown taller than Russ. At six-feet-one, Russ had rarely experienced standing next to a woman who was taller. He looked at her shoes to see if she were wearing high heels. Flats. She had a small, quizzical look on her face as she stared at Russ. He figured she was doing what anyone would: Calculating the time that had passed between them and what changes it had wrought. She wore a floral sundress, daisies on a field of taupe linen. Her brown hair was past her shoulders and parted in the middle, and the only makeup she wore was lipstick in a soft shade of rose. She made no secret of openly inspecting Russ. She started at his black engineer boots, moved on to his black jeans, and finished up at his black t-shirt.

“Nautical,” she said.

“My parrot is at the cleaners.”

“Parrot?”

“Like a pirate. On his shoulder. Arrrgh, matey. Avast.”

“Oh.”

“You’re tall.”

“I am.”

“I mean you’re extremely tall.”
“I am.”

“I feel like an accountant, or something.”

Carol arched her eyebrows and looked away from Russ. She stared at the floor.

Russ lightly punched Carol on the shoulder. “Hello? Just playing with you,” he said.

“Of course.”

Russ looked at Carol for a hint of the eleven-year-old girl he'd known. *She’ll probably show herself when we leave her parents’ house.*

“Who is an idiot?” she said.

“What?”

“I came down the stairs, and I heard you say ‘idiot.’ To whom were you referring?”

“To whom was I referring? You didn’t just say that.”

She looked at him.

“No one,” Russ said. “No one at all. We should go.”

“I’ll be at Uncle Pete’s tonight and back tomorrow on the 12:37, Mom,” Carol yelled to her mother, who waved an arm goodbye while sitting at a kitchen table that hid her behind a wall.

“Thank you, Mrs. Geary,” Russ said. Not hearing any response, he quietly closed the door.

“Whoopsy daisy,” Russ said with a laugh after backing the Volvo out of the driveway too quickly and taking a sizable divot out of the Geary’s lawn.

Carol said nothing.

He pointed the car down the road and hit the gas.
“So, Columbia University,” Russ said to Carol after a long moment of silence.

“No,” Carol said, before spitting her long, brown wind-whipped hair out of her mouth, then pawing it off of her face, then deciding to roll the window up. “Barnard College.”

“That’s right. Because you’re a girl.”

“That is correct,” she said. “I’m a girl.”

Russ told her he was taking a year off between high school and college to try and get some traction with his band, The Gunns.

“Do you think that’s a good name? I’m not so sure. But it’s better than anything else we had. I liked The Dead Beats, but no one else did.”

He told her about disco. He shared with her the idea of disco as a black form of music that should be embraced and performed in celebration and reinterpretation, but with a reverence, in much the same way Elvis Presley performed so-called “negro” music in the 1950s.

“Just because something is popular doesn’t mean it’s bad,” he said. “If you ask me, that’s a kind of reverse snobbery, or something.”

He sang Carol three lines from *Love Me Tender* while stealing glances away from the road to look soulfully into her eyes as he crooned.

She nodded.

“Things take time to develop, right? You have to give new art forms time to mature and find their audience before you start passing all kinds of judgments about how good or bad they are compared to other art forms that have been around for years.”

There was a pothole. Russ veered. The front passenger-side tire hit it full on. Carol bounced out of her seat and hit her head on the car’s ceiling.

“Whoopsy daisy,” Russ said.
She said nothing. They drove in silence.

Russ thought about how different she was. It must be her father’s arrest. Extended shock. The embarrassment, the disgrace, everything lost.

“What are you going to study at Colum … Barnard, if you get in?”

“Law.”

They rode in silence for a minute.

Russ told Carol that he was going into the city that night to check out a club where he was performing in two weeks. Then he was going over to the World Trade Center to be in a movie. He waved his right hand in the air, attempting to signify a grand dismissal of his trifling endeavors, and put an aw-shucks look on his face.

He looked sideways at Carol, who looked straight ahead.

“What are you doing tonight? You should come with me. I know some pretty cool spots.”

“I already have plans.”

“What about after?”

Carol tightened in her seat.

Russ parked the car, and they walked to the slip where The Belinda was docked.

He stepped on board and offered his hand to help her on.

“Thank you,” she said.

Russ waded into the mass of ropes, lines, cleat, winches, halyards, mains, and booms.

“I’m going to set up for sail. Ten minutes and we’ll be underway. There are Cokes and Fresca and beer in the fridge below. Help yourself.”

She came back with a can of Tab. Russ saw her leaning against the cabin and sneaking glances at him as he freed lines, tested winches, knotted ropes, and darted around with what he
imagined was a kind of impressively practiced finesse and casual intensity of concentration that
she had rarely seen displayed.

He told her the Triple X Club on 14th Street is where he would be at midnight, in case she
changed her mind.

“What’s that called?” she said, pointing to the crossbeam running half the length of the
deck.

“That’s the boom.”

“As in ‘lower the’?”

“Yes.”

“And that thing?”

“That’s the mainsail. The front sail, or jib, is up there.”

“What are you doing now?”

“I’m cleating the halyard. Why the hell do you want to study law?”

“Where’s the steering wheel?”

“Don’t have one. There’s a tiller at the stern.”

“A tiller?”

“It’s a stick that controls the rudder. That gets put in place last, though. Are you going
into law because of your father?”

“Are you not going to college because of your father?”

“Isn’t he in Danbury? Your father?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“What’s that pole called?”
“The mast.”

“We don’t talk about Father.”

“Are you going to become a lawyer so you can free him? Will you work tirelessly for years and let nothing stop you to clear his name, to clear the family name, to scrub the taint of ill repute from your proud lineage? Is that it?”

“Yes,” she said, “that’s it.”

“Remember those shows we used to do?” Russ asked.

“Yeah,” Carol said. “Those were fun. What’s this movie you’re going to shoot?”

“King Kong.”

“Didn’t they already make that?”

“It’s a remake. A modern version. He climbs the World Trade Center instead of the Empire State Building. Kong—I can call him that because I’m in the movie—gets taken out by jets instead of bi-planes. You could come with me, be in it too.”

“I’d rather not, thank you.”

“It’d be fun. Like the good old days, only better. It would be a real movie.”

“No,” she said, looking him directly in the eye and wordlessly expressing a cool ferocity that Russ had never seen before. “I would rather not go with you.”

Russ looked down on her from the mast. *What the hell is her problem? A movie! You and me could be in a movie! Together! Today! Mere hours from now! We sail this boat to the city, we get out, have dinner, and walk over to the set, and Bam! We are in a movie! What are you, stupid or something?*

Russ climbed down the mast and went below deck. He came up with a Pabst, cracked the tab, threw the dinky bit of metal into the water, and stood looking at Carol. He pictured them
sailing the boat together, with him showing her how the halyards and ropes and sails worked in harmony with the wind. He pictured the look on her face as she became more and more impressed with the depth of his knowledge and the ease with which he maneuvered *The Belinda* around other boats and in and out of the tight corridors of water off the tip of Manhattan. He saw them at dinner, in the low, dancing yellow light of a candle, talking about their lives, fusing the time before with the present, and, by the time coffee was served, even daring to hint at a future. He could see her in the reflected glow of the lights shining down from the World Trade Center and in the shadows of the swirling klieg lights as she looked up and around and was flattened and dazzled by the spectacle and fun, energy, and possibility of make-believe and pretend and fakery and dress-up and story-telling and entertaining and being together and alive in the fat middle of a movie being made as the events of its making spooled out before them. Shooting would end at dawn, and they would stand at the tip of Manhattan watching the sunrise, orange and black over the water. She would settle against him, her head under his chin, with both of them looking out on the water, and she would murmur softly, saying nothing really, and their previous selves would come out, and she would thank him for reminding her of who she was, of how beautiful and fun she had been and could be again.

“Yeah,” Russell said, taking a last sip of beer, tossing the can, and grinning at Carol. “Those shows were fun.”

“What’s that?”

“Danbury’s not far away. You and your Mom get to visit your dad?”

“Mother does not leave the house.”

Russ slipped the tiller into place. Then, giving it one more stab for old time’s sake, he lifted it back out.
“Care to place the tiller, m’lady?” he said to Carol, presenting the piece of wood while bowing in a ridiculously grand and sweeping gesture.

“Thank you,” she said, “but I’d rather not.”

A bolt of sadness ran through Russ. He pictured the thunk of a lid closing on a compartment of his life. He wondered if his older brothers had heard a similar noise when they stopped wanting to be seen with Russ when girls were around? At what other times does this happen? College? Thirty? Marriage? Jesus, Russ thought, this sucks. This really sucks. I need a beer.

He slammed the tiller into place, ran back below deck, grabbed another PBR, ripped the top off, offered a desultory tip of the can to his guest, and announced, “We’re ready to shove off.”

“Is boating where that term comes from?”

“Yes,” Russ said. “Probably. I have no idea. It’s either that or sex.”

Carol didn’t smile. It was fine, though. Russ had quit expecting her to react to anything he said or did.

Carol remained up front with the wind blowing in her face like she was a dog in a car. Russ leaned against a rail at the back, guiding the tiller and drinking his beer while watching her long brown hair extend in the wind like a flag and thinking about what all of that hair, and what parts of Carol, might feel like against him

I guess Stan Greenburg’s got me beat on that one. Little prick.

* * *
Eddie gripped his RC and walked up the street toward the Second Avenue subway stop, which was actually on First Avenue. He passed the Italian men in the white short-sleeve shirts and black pants playing bocce outside the subway entrance. He watched them in the fading light drinking wine from Dixie cups and rolling the balls from the end of their short, dark arms before powering them down the court with foreign curse words and hip twists until watching them stop where they would have anyway. He thought about how far the game had come to settle on this strip of street in New York City. He thought about the Godfather II and the scenes where Michael Corleone is in Italy hiding out after he kills that cop and he falls in love and wasn’t there a scene of men paying bocce there? Then the woman he loves blows up in a car.

He walked down the cool subway stairs into the darkness of a tunnel with dim and broken lights up high along the ceiling that emptied into a lobby with a token booth. He bought two tokens and put one in the little coin pocket of his jeans so he wouldn’t spend it on something else by accident. He had to push with all his weight against the heavy wooden turnstile coated with splotches of yellow porcelain until it turned halfway around to let him in. Eddie walked onto the platform thinking about how tall the Twin Towers were. When they were being built, the Daily News ran pictures of the crosshatched exoskeleton of orange I-beams and the cross-bar bones of both towers, one 415 meters high and the other 417 meters high—the tallest buildings in the world. Far below the exposed metal was a stretched, tented, black skin wrapping all around the buildings that rose from the ground floor to about half way up. The entire thing looked like two rectangular animals in a pupae stage, shedding their skins so they could mate.

Eddie sat down on a bench completely covered in spray paint and Magic-Marked messages, mostly by someone calling himself TRIKE who, it seemed, along with his name, liked
Kelly-green and sea-foam colored markers very much. About thirty feet away, three boys were balancing on the edge of the platform, pretending to come close to falling onto the tracks.

“The third rail!” one kid shouted as he pushed another balancing boy from behind.

“Zzzzzz. Help me! I’m melting! Melting!”

“I’m frying!” another kid said. “I’m frying!”

“Very fucking funny,” said the kid who’d been shoved, stepping onto the safety of the center of the platform. “What if a train had been coming? Huh?”

“Then you’d be dead.”

“Yeah, dead.”

“You guys are assholes.”

Eddie listened and stole glances at them as they harassed each other and busied themselves out of their summer boredom for a moment. They were older. One was at least seventeen or eighteen. He had a little mustache. The others were fifteen or sixteen maybe. Eddie made sure not to say anything. It wasn’t his place. Plus, Eddie knew that older kids would sometimes pick on younger kids when they were in groups. Eddie slid his hand into the pocket where his money was and squeezed it into his fist.

Eddie sat and stared at the gray square of concrete in front of him. He counted dried discs of bubble gum and wondered if, as one story had it about construction on the World Trade Center, that ironworker on the beam was actually killed on the spot when that metal splinter went into his brain. If so, did he fall immediately from the I-beam and into the atmosphere after he was hit? Or did he have a few seconds to spread his arms in the atmosphere and try to slow his descent? Did he, perhaps, float for a moment in an updraft and have some hope that maybe, just maybe, a gust would lift him back where he’d been and boy, wouldn’t that be a close call and a
hell of a story to tell his kids? It reminded Eddie of the woman in *The Towering Inferno*. She fell from the Tower and died, but she knew what was happening the whole time. In the scene, a woman knocks out a window with a chair, and a fire fueled by the oxygen, envelopes her. She plunges out the window to her death. The woman was wearing a man’s shirt. The man who owned the shirt had died a few moments earlier when he'd tried running for help through the blazing room. He had a towel that he’d soaked in water, and he told the woman he’d return with the whole fire department to save her. He said right before making the dash that he used to run the 100 in ten flat. Eddie supposed that meant he was fast. The man looked back at the woman then made a run for it through a fire-filled room. He barely made it ten feet before he caught on fire. Blinded, he staggered around and went through a window. He fell to his death while burning alive. A few minutes later, she also tried to run but caught fire and dove out the window. Eddie couldn’t think of her name. What was her name? She was probably the sexiest woman Eddie had ever seen, even more than the women in those dirty pictures his brother found in those magazines in the lot over on Fifth Street that day last summer. Eddie remembered how the woman went out the window with her pink shirt on fire and, for some reason, was holding her nose like she was diving into water. Right after that there was a jump cut to a shot of her body falling and falling and falling floor after floor alongside the building. Lorrie, Eddie remembered, her name was Lorrie.

Eddie felt a hand press lightly on the glide of space between his right shoulder and his neck. He tensed.

“How are you doing today?” a voice behind him said.

*Is this a practical joke? Do I know this person?*

Eddie started to turn, but then the fingers flexed slightly.
“Do me a favor,” the voice behind him said, “and stand up.”

Eddie looked to his right. One of the three older kids who were joking around earlier was standing about twenty feet away. He was looking around for anyone who might be nearby, while softly punching his fist into his other hand, like a tough guy from the show *Beretta* or on *S.W.A.T*.

Eddie didn’t know these people, but he knew what was happening. He slid his butt away from the back of the bench, put his hands into his pockets, and put his head down to try and protect himself from anything they might do.

“I said stand the fuck up,” the guy behind him said, clamping his fingers down hard into his neck.

Eddie tried to make himself smaller and tighter on the bench.

“He don’t want to get up,” the guy behind him said to the third guy, who was standing near a trashcan to Eddie’s left.

The third kid shrugged, and looked in the trashcan.

“Maybe,” he said, extracting an empty-quart sized bottle of Budweiser from the trash can, “this will help.”

The kid broke the bottle against a metal pillar and, holding it close to his body at his waist, started coming toward Eddie.

Eddie stood up. His fists were balled in his pockets. His body went numb with a flood of adrenalin and nothing for it to do as he watched the jagged bottle coming closer.

“No,” the kid behind Eddie said in a soothing voice. “No, no, no. Shhhh. We don’t need that. He’s a good kid.”

The kid with the bottle stopped three feet from Eddie.
The kid behind Eddie put his hand on Eddie’s right wrist and gently eased his fist out of his pocket. He did the same with his left hand. Eddie’s hands came out of his pockets, and he flexed his fingers to show, he supposed, that he wasn’t armed.

“See? What did I tell you,” the kid behind Eddie said, wriggling his right, then his left hand into Eddie’s pockets, taking his money and his keys out. “He’s a good kid.”

“I say we stick him anyways,” the kid with the bottle said.

“Yeah,” the other one to his right said, “let’s stick him.”

Eddie closed his eyes. When he opened them a moment later, they were gone. He looked across the tracks to the other platform. There was a woman with gray hair and a large purse. His wide eyes narrowed when she saw Eddie looking at her. She hugged her purse to her side very tightly. Then, at the sound of the rumble, she turned to look down the tunnel to see if her train was coming. But it wasn’t. It was Eddie’s train. The breeze from the F train as it pulled into the station dried Eddie’s cold sweat.

* * *

Russ and Carol were halfway to Manhattan. The whole trip, Russ thought about that time he and Carol were on the seesaw. He fell off the thing from laughing so hard over who knows what. His end of the seesaw had bounced up into the air while Carol was standing on the other side of it. She crashed down but didn’t lose her balance.

What could have possibly happened since then to jam that stick so far up her ass? Is there some way to get through to her? More importantly, is there a way to get her into bed?
Even though Carol was the only thing on Russell’s mind, he forgot she was even on the boat. He extracted a dry joint from his wallet, lit it up, and took a few drags. The cloud of Carol lifted from his mind. The smell of sea salt came to his nose. The light blue sky appeared overhead, as though someone had painted all of it in the moment it took to blink his eyes just once.

He closed his eyes and savored the movement of the boat beneath his feet. He pretended he was riding an enormous surfboard on a tidal wave headed for New York, and that once he arrived atop the tsunami, he would become king of the city. The first thing he would do as king would be to make all the sons of bitches who worked on Wall Street give half their money to the poor families and addicts in Alphabet City and Bushwick and—

“Can I get a hit?”

Russ opened his eyes. Carol was standing next to him.

“What?”

“A hit? Can I get a hit?”

He handed her what was left of the joint. She took a little drag, looking up at Russ and offering up a little smile of apology and connection.

“It’s shitty weed,” he said.

“It’s fine,” she said, still inhaling before coughing her lungs dry.

“I never figured you smoked,” Russ said. “I’ll be goddamned.”

“It makes things easier.”

“I hear that. Same here. It slows my brain down to a nice, manageable hum, that’s for sure.”
Ten minutes later, Carol was steering the boat very badly as Russ cheered her on and said she was doing great.

“Liar,” she said. “But thanks.”

“I’ll take it when we get closer to dock. It gets fucking busy as hell.”

Carol told Russ she’d heard some stories about him over the years: He’d spent months shooting up heroin in some abandoned building on the Lower East Side. He stole his father’s boat and was smuggling drugs into Florida. A kid in the audience of one of his shows was knifed to death right in front of the stage, and the band kept playing. (“That one I like,” Russ said. “Altamont. That’s a good one.”) He’d become a voice actor and was living in Hollywood with Tuesday Weld. (“Tuesday Weld?” Russ said. “Seriously? That’s not bad.”) He’d fried his brain so completely with drugs and partying that his father had to put him in an institution, the same place where the Kennedys put their kid. And the most recent thing she’d heard was that he'd gone into his father’s business and was living on the Upper East Side with his wife. They were expecting a child.

“Stan Greenburg told me that one,” Carol said. “What did you hear about me?”

“Nothing.”

She looked at him.

“I haven’t heard a thing. But, you know, I don’t hang out with your kind.”

“When was the last time we saw each other?”

“The last time I saw you, you were making out with Stan at some party a few years ago. I was going to say hi but, well, you were busy, and I was drunk and … you know.”

They were close together at the stern of the boat. The city was approaching. The boat was half underneath the cool, long, late-day shadows of the skyline.
“So why did you come with me today if you heard all this horrible shit?”

“So why did you come with me today if you heard all this horrible shit?”

“To humor Mother. Plus. I figured you’d have some dope on you. I haven’t been able to get any for a while.”

Russ imagined flexing his fingers over the curve of her dress, feeling the swoop of her hip, the faint friction of her dress’s summer fabric, as he guided her toward him to an embrace where the dissolute years would dissolve into a kiss. He could almost hear the swell of music in the background of his thoughts. He shook his head. *It doesn’t seem like she likes me very much.* Still, fuck it. I got her high. Plus, it’s not a goddamned popularity contest. I should lean over and plant one—just kiss her. That will be the best part. The beginning. The time you open the gate and step through. It will linger between us forever as the height of interest, the height of sex, the height of being linked in and lock-stepped together in desire, the height of feeling the shared possibility of togetherness. To not open that gate, to not step through and start down that path, is as impossible as imagining nothing. Kiss her. I should do it now. We can go below deck. We can fuck on the water with the boat swaying and the sunlight fading and the city lights coming on behind us. Time will stop. Time before the movie shoot and before she has to meet her uncle and before the interview at Columbia and before the 12:37 tomorrow out of Grand Central with stops in Yonkers and Brewster on the way to Katonah—all that will stagger and fall and cease and stop cold for the both of us. Kiss her, stupid. In five minutes, it’ll be too late.

“So, you’re just spending time with me for the drugs,” Russ said, injecting nonchalance into his voice.

“Not only,” Carol said, fixing her eyes on the shimmering water. “I missed you. We were close once. I missed that. I wanted to see how you were doing. I wanted to see for myself how you were doing, what you were doing.”
Russ told her again about his band. She listened without saying he’d already told her
about it. He explained how he was making a mirror ball for a show that would have disco songs.
He said he wanted to act. He said he had to get the hell away from Westchester and Katonah. He
told her about the nights when he took the boat out and swam in the dark thinking about the
people in the big houses and their fathers, their lives, the money they felt they had to make and
keep, and how it made him feel sad to consider the lives of those people. He’d never told anyone
about those nights.

“That’s funny,” Carol said. “You go out alone on a boat that sleeps six and spend the
whole time thanking God that your life isn’t motivated by money.”

Now. Lean over, grab her, and kiss her. Hell, you’re better than Stan Fucking
Greenburg.

They came within three feet of cleaving a skiff. Russ took a tighter grip on the tiller and
told Carol to hold on to something because they might have to maneuver quickly. He checked
the mast, pulled on two ropes to make sure they were knotted, banged the tiller down to make
sure it was securely in place, adjusted his feet on the deck, and told Carol to make sure both
hands were on the rail.

“This is the Russ I know,” Carol said. “The one whose mind is like a pinball. The one
who has a million thoughts every minute. The one who can’t concentrate on anything for more
than a millisecond. That’s what I miss.”

“You don’t get it,” Russ said. “It’s not that I can’t concentrate on anything. It’s that I
concentrate on everything.”

Four minutes later they found the dock. Russ jumped off the boat first and offered Carol a
hand to help her off. He got back on and threw Carol the bowline, then had her wrap it around a
post. He pulled the boat parallel to the dock and spent two minutes securing the stern and bowlines before getting off.

“Well, then …” Carol said.

“Yes?” Russ asked.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

Russ started to lean in toward Carol’s face. His hands went out like he was bracing for a fall. His eyes closed. He didn’t see the hand she extended for a chaste shake. He vanished, leaning into the past. He saw Carol when they were seven years old and on that seesaw. Her small feet were expertly finding the right balancing spot on the varnish of the red, wet wood as she rose into the air. He’d watched her then, when they were children, and had wondered if they would get married, the two of them, in a church before family and friends in front of a preacher with a high collar and close-cropped hair parted in the middle. Later they would go to her parents’ lake house. The canoes would be out of the water and tipped to dry in the late-day sun as the long day cooled. She would have changed into a blue dress that looked like the sky. A moment later, the seesaw crashed to the ground, and Carol kept her tidy balance, and when she landed, she raised her arms up like a gymnast sticking a landing, and Russ thought that was the most amazing thing he had seen, ever. He looked at her and said, “I love you,” and she pretended to not hear him.

Now, on the shabby city dock, Russ leaned in toward her with his lips parted, exhaling, relaxing, but and not finding her where she should be. He opened his eyes. She’d backed one step away from him.

“What,” she said, “are you doing?”
His face registered alarm and embarrassment. He searched in her eyes for the seven-year-old she used to be when they were children together. He came up with nothing but a beautiful, angry, eighteen-year-old woman who looked like her outrage was only tempered by her effort not to laugh in his face.

“Oh shit,” he said. “That was awkward.”

“What the hell?” she said.

“All right. I get it. I apologize. There, does that help?”

“Jesus, Russ, what the hell were you thinking? How could you even imagine for a second—”

“I get it, thank you very much. I’m sorry.”

They stood for one long, silent moment staring at one another. Then she did it: She laughed at him. She doubled over. She held her stomach. She got louder as she went along, trying to pull air into her lungs, air that would fuel more laughter. One man from a group of five older men working a hull on the dock looked over at the laughter. He tapped two of his buddies on the shoulders, and soon everyone’s attention was directed at the emasculation of Russell Dunn.

Russ smiled at the guys. He threw his hands up in a feeble what-are-you-going-to-do gesture and put his right hand on Carol’s left shoulder.

“All right, that’s probably enough now,” he said through a forced casual smile.

Carol straightened up, looked once more at Russ, let out one final kick of a laugh, and then scraped the tears from under her eyes with her forefingers.
Russ squeezed her shoulder a little so they could get closer and speak in private. Carol slapped his hand away. When they saw that, the guys watching the two of them straightened up and started taking steps toward them.

“Don’t,” Carol said.

“Don’t what?” Russ asked. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Just leave me alone, all right?” she said, taking a step away from Russ.

“Hey, I said I was sorry. It’s no big deal,” Russ said.

“Right. Whatever.”

“What is your problem?”

“Hey, buddy, why don’t you leave the girl alone?”

The voice came from behind Russ. It was the biggest of the guys working on the boat. He was a head taller than Russ. It was clear from his tone of voice that he wasn’t asking Russ anything. He was telling him.

“Sure,” Russ said, glancing at the guy, then taking a step toward Carol. “And why don’t you go fuck yourself?”

The guy looked at his friends. They shrugged and nodded in that way of aping, You gonna let him get away with that?

“I said I was sorry,” Russ repeated to Carol.

“Fine,” she said, folding her arms and putting a layer of frost in her voice. “Can you get my purse from the boat. I’d like to get out of here.”

“Why are you acting like some weirdo, Stepford bitch?”

“I said I would like to go.”

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Russ stomped over to the boat, jumped onto the deck, banged his head hard on the lintel, said, “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” looked at Carol who was studiously studying the ground and appeared so tense that she seemed to have swallowed her lips. Russ went below, kicked over a cooler of beer, and threw two pillows, one shoe, and an ashtray against various walls. He found her purse and went above board. He jumped onto the pier, shook the sparkly handbag in her face, and said, “Here’s your fucking purse, your fucking highness.”

Before he could say anything else (he was holding the word “cunt” in strategic reserve, waiting for the moment when he could maximize its effectiveness), his arms were pinned out to his sides, and his head was forced down so all he could see was the sidewalk and the tips of Carol’s god-awful, ugly Earth Shoes. The biggest man from the group had decided to be chivalrous. He came up behind Russ, reached his hands under his arms, laced his fingers together, and locked his hands behind Russ’ head.

“Settle down,” the man said into Russ’ left ear. “Just settle down, buddy. Are you all right, Miss?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

Growing up with two older brothers Russ had learned how to break a half-nelson before his sixth birthday. Russ threw his elbows out to his sides and, as hard as he could, came down on the guy’s right foot with the heel of his boot. Before he turned around, he giggled. He stopped giggling, however, the moment he saw the slab of pissed-off human being coming at him.

At that moment, Russ did the only thing he could do to protect himself: He ran.

He was ten blocks away by the time he stopped running and looked behind him. There was no one. He figured he had time for one, maybe two Jameson’s rocks before making it over to the World Trade Center for the movie. He searched down the long, desolate stretch of Front
Street for a bar sign, but came up blank. There used to be that bar over on Water Street, though. He started walking but only got two steps before looking at the small, sparkly purse in his right hand and yelling “Fuck, fuck, fuck” so loud that he imagined the sonic impact of his words was shaking the chipped cobblestones along Front Street.

He looked inside the purse. It contained her license, $138 in cash, an apartment key, and two condoms.

Carol was squatting and leaning with her back against a small boathouse near the dock where *The Belinda* bounced contentedly on the wakes of passing boats.

Russ squatted down next to her and gazed along in the same direction she was looking.

“It’s beautiful when the sun goes down,” she said.

“Young.

He handed her the purse.

“It clashed with my shirt,” he said. “Is your date still around?”

“He left,” she said. “Thanks for the purse.”

“You want to tell me what the hell that was about?”

Carol looked at him. She smiled.

“I’ve missed you—” she said.

“Funny way of showing it.”

“Will you let me speak? I don’t think of you *that* way. You went to kiss me, and it came from out of nowhere. Kissing you would be like kissing my brother. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“I’m going to say something to you, and it’s not a compliment.”

“All right.”
“You haven’t changed a bit.”

“I’m taller.”

“We did those stupid shows as kids, and it was fun, but that was a lifetime ago. That’s over.”

Russ took out a Marlboro, lit it, and handed it to Carol, who gamely took a drag and coughed slightly.

“These are the same kinds of cigarettes we tried that first time,” she said. “Remember, behind that swing set?”

“I don’t remember that, but it makes sense. My dad smokes these. I must have stolen them from him. I stole this pack from him before I left the house today.”

“And King Kong?” Carol said. “After everything we did and thought, you’re going to be in a movie about a gorilla?”

“What’s wrong with King Kong?”

“Those pictures in the Daily News. It’s faker than a three-dollar bill. It’s a popcorn movie. It’s not art. It’s crap.”

She took the cigarette from Russ’s dangling fingers, inhaled, and did somewhat better at controlling her coughing the second time around.

“Excuse me. Did you say ‘art’?”

“Yes, art.”

“Have you even seen King Kong? Kong’s a badass motherfucker. All he wants is to get away from all these idiots trying to make a buck off him. He wants to hang out on his island and not get fucked over by greedy little people. What’s wrong with a kid, say ten years old, learning
a little of that from this movie? Because it’s not smart enough for you—because it’s not ‘art’—
that makes it stupid for everybody else?”

“I have to go,” Carol said, shaking her head, picking up her purse, standing, and looking
down on Russ for a moment.

“It’s a movie, for Christ sakes,” Russ said. “It’s a movie about a fake gorilla.”

Carol turned and walked away.

“I’m only an extra.”

Russell sat for five minutes looking at the water and smoking a cigarette. An old man
passed by in a coat with a fur collar.

“What the fuck is it with people?” Russ said to him.

“They suck,” he said.

* * *

Eddie stepped onto the F train. He exhaled, looked around to make sure none of the three
kids were there, and sat down. He remembered the token in the little pocket and tucked two
fingers in to make sure they hadn’t got it. He thought about the movie he was going to be in. He
took a deep breath. He was still on his way to becoming a movie star. Eddie imagined this as one
of the last times he would be able to walk the streets without being surrounded. The future, he
realized, will be different. He wouldn’t be able to go to Felix’s to get an RC and shoot the
breeze. On some level, he realized somberly, he would miss these carefree days of youth, before
stardom, these days of having control over his own life without managers, agent, producers, and
girls swarming around him, vying for his attention and money. He looked around the subway car
at the few people staring at the gray floor, at the straps above the seats, at the advertisements where they read them for the seventeenth time and tried to act like they’d never seen them before. Yeah, I’ll sure miss all this. He managed a little grin by the time the train pulled into the next station at Broadway/Lafayette.

After switching to the E train at West 4th Eddie rode the nine stops downtown to the World Trade Center. Nothing prepared him for getting off the train at Chambers Street/World Trade Center. It was another world. The station was new and shiny. It actually sparkled. He rode five escalators up from the subway. Each floor opened into a lightness of unending expanse. He understood why the buildings were assigned their own zip code: 10048. Eddie took the last flight of escalators up into the lobby of One World Trade Center. The biggest American flag he’d ever seen, and flags from more countries than Eddie knew were on the earth, waved down on him as he walked slowly, as though in a cathedral, to a bank of elevators, one of which, he hoped, would take him to the top.

The floors clicked by quicker than seconds on a clock as he rose in the elevator. His ears popped after the number eighty-seven flashed by on the digital readout. The elevators slowed at 106, slowed even more at the 107th floor, and then, after a pause of shared expectation, the doors opened. He walked to the walls of vertical glass and stood in front of one panel. He put both his hands against it and closed his eyes. He pressed the full weight of his palms onto the cold glass. His eyes felt like they were sunk deeper into his head from the height and the view. He became woozy discovering he had a fear of heights. He scanned the thin brown rivers and toy-sized bridges flattened into the arc of earth stretched below. It was a jumble of enormous structures reduced to tiny, abstract objects pressed into hard, cut-up ground. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to arrest his dizziness. In the blackness of his gaze, his feet trembled when, for the
first time, he felt like he was in an actual movie. The image of the woman diving out of the window to her death in *The Towering Inferno* returned to him. *What if,* he wondered, *that was happening right now?* What would it be like if, on this clear, beautiful day, a wall of raging fire was barreling toward him as he stood looking out the window listening to the stilted screams of the consumed and feeling the rumble of the fire itself as it consumed every available molecule of air in this wide-open acre of office space? The rubber seal around the glass would melt. The pane Eddie was leaning against would snap free. For a moment a miracle would present itself. Eddie would ride the glass slightly higher. Then, of course, he would start plummeting. He imagined falling from a great height, from a huge space built where office workers worked a quarter mile high, swirling head over teakettle into a void where he could see the approach of New Jersey and concrete patches grow land-like and open below him before he slammed into the ground beneath.

Then he focused on the top of the rubber on his Pro Keds before walking the perimeter of the floor to look at every possible view. Across the way he saw a crew of men in Tower Two pulling enormous ropes strung from the huge antenna and attaching them to a large brown mass that they hauled to a standing position. He wondered what the thing could possibly be before realizing it was King Kong. He remembered that he was there to be in a movie. On the way down, his ears didn’t pop until the sixty-fifth floor.

** ***

In the cramped Scorpio bar on Water Street, nearly every surface that Russ could possibly come into contact with—floor, chairs, tables, doors, and walls—was wood. And all the wood was worn so dark, smooth, slick, and shiny from decades of glasses and hands being
dragged over it that the place looked wet. Sitting in the bar while it was still light out made Russ feel as lost as Ray Miland.

After his second Rheingold, and halfway through his first Jameson’s, Russ asked the bartender for a napkin, a pen, and another beer. Her long black hair rested in a pile on the top of her head. She wore a Ramones T-shirt, and she smiled as she drew the eyes of Russ and the other three men in the place toward her ass as she walked slowly down the bar to get the Rheingold.

“Uh oh,” she said when she got back to Russ. “Someone’s feeling the urge to wax rhapsodic.”

Russ looked up at her and couldn’t help but smile. He liked her for the way she looked; she looked like a woman it would be difficult to not like, and also like a little bit of trouble.

“Writing a ransom note?”

“No.”

“Note to your girlfriend?”

“Nope.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“I don’t have one of those. Or one of the other.”

“Now we’re making progress.”

Russ took a sip of his beer, a snort of his whisky, and bent back to his napkin. The bartender wandered down the bar and squirted a glass of draft for the old man at the far end. Russ ordered another.

“It’s on me if you let me see what you’re writing,” she said in a breathy voice while leaning over the bar and batting her lashes like a caricature of Betty Boop.

“Do you have a thing for writers?”
“No,” she said, “Just bored.”

“Gotcha. Give me a second to finish this up. I could use your advice, anyway.”

The bartender wiped the bar down and cleaned the glasses in the sink. When Russ finished what he was doing, he motioned her over.

“Before I get to this,” he said, waving the folded napkin in the air, “let me explain.”

“I just love me a preface,” she said.

Russ started to tell her he was a musician. Then he stopped.

“My name’s Russ,” he said, extending his hand.

She shook it.

“And you are?”

“Still bored.”

“Right. I’m a musician, but I’m about to be in my first movie.”

“Really? When?”

“In about forty-five minutes, if that clock’s right.”

“That’s bar time. You have an hour.”

Russell explained that he was standing at a literal crossroads in his life over whether to be a movie star or a rock star. He had been listing the pros and cons of each one on the napkin, trying to decide the direction his life would take, but he remained undecided.

“This is a decision between movie star or rock star, right?” the bartender asked.

“Yes.”

“Not musician or actor?”

“I’m not following you.”

“Well, most people don’t assume the ‘star’ part.”
“Well,” Russ said, “I’m not most people.”

She leaned in close to him to examine the list. She disagreed with him about number four on the rock-star list, and said he should give more weight to number six on the movie-star list. She said that, except for one major factor he hadn’t included, to her the list looked complete, balanced, and thoughtfully considered.

“What,” Russ said, looking down at his list, “did I miss?”

The two of them were so close to one another that if either one of them leaned the slightest bit forward, a kiss couldn’t have been avoided.

She explained that what was missing wasn’t so much a numbered item; it was the gestalt.

“English?”

“You’re missing the vibe, the package, the whole thing in a box with a bow and a ribbon. The *it* of the *it*."

Russ leaned back, extended his arm, and took hold of his whisky. He lifted it to his lips and, not taking his eyes off hers, downed the rest of it.

“How very William Holden of you,” she said, straightening up.

Russ coughed up the last fumes of his drink before taking a sip of beer to try and extinguish the lingering bit of taste.

“Thank you,” he said in a rasp before laughing. “All right. My life will remain forever unfulfilled if I do not ask, in all seriousness, what is the *it* of the *it*?”

“It is the whole thing,” she said. “It’s not just a job or a label. You can own a cool car —”

“A ’72 Mustang Fastback.”

“— and still be a dick. The thing is not the *it*. The, what is it, ’72 Mustang Fastback?”

“Oh yeah.”
“The car is a tiny part of what the it even means. The it is much bigger. The it is much cooler. The it is so cool, it doesn’t fucking care.”

“Steve McQueen.”

“Excuse me?”

“Steve McQueen is it.”

“He’s a movie star. Great. Yes. There you go.”

Russ spent a long time looking at the napkin on the bar.

“What does that have to do with my list?”

“You really are just a whole lot of pretty, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“Let’s try this. Have you ever seen the Oscars ceremony on TV?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Have you ever seen the Grammys?”

“Yes.”

“Which one is cooler?”

“The Oscars?”

“Of course the Oscars! The people on the red carpet at the Oscars make the people at the Grammys look like amateurs. They’re rock stars, but they’re a huge, chunky fucking notch below movie stars. They toil in the netherworld while movie stars, shit, they reign on Olympus.”

“You’re saying I should be a movie star?”

“You are simply adorable,” she said, leaning across the bar and getting close to him again. “I’d eat you up if I had the time.”

“Time.”
“Yes. If I had it, I would.”

“Oh shit, I have to go,” Russ said, throwing eight dollars on the bar and folding up his napkin. “I’m late for my movie.”

“Hey,” the bartender yelled to him once he opened the door and was half out onto Water Street. “When you become a movie star, I want to be able to tell people I discovered you. What’s your name?”

“Russell,” he said. “Russell Dunn.”

“How do you spell that?”

“Simple,” he said. “Two Ss, two Ls, and two Ns.”

Then he smiled at her and took off down the street to be in a movie.

Once he got close to the World Trade Center, Russ felt the mass of the two buildings reduce him. The structures slammed straight up into the clear sky without interruption, without pause. The only interference Russ could see in the sky was the occasional blinking lights of planes heading for Kennedy Airport. He wondered if pilots had special instruments to guide them around the two towers. Standing in the plaza between the buildings, he leaned back as far as he could to see the top of just one of them. He arched his back like a bow. He squinted his eyes. Even though it was night, for some reason he put his hand to his forehead, like he was making shade, to try and see the spot where the building topped out. He couldn’t. He became lightheaded, slightly dizzy. His legs wobbled.

This must be what it’s like for people when they first see the Grand Canyon, or the yawning sands of the Sahara, or the wide expanse of the open sea.
He straightened and saw white and blue spots, the same cathode colors he saw flash when one of his brothers hit him in the head or the face. Once the dull strobes faded, he saw him.

He lay at the bottom of the World Trade Center’s South Tower. The giant mechanical ape looked fake and somehow small in the misty dark, like a big doll made out of wax and plastic. All around him, the pavement was shattered in big chunks, like floes of ice. He was on his back. His lips were parted, revealing his teeth and giving him a tragic grimace of pain. His hands lay at his sides, open and peaceful. About fifty people stood about one hundred feet away. They looked at Kong, saying nothing. A New York City cop with a mustache, who was chewing gum, walked over to the body. He pulled the thumb of his left hand. It bounced back to its original position with a thwang. He did it again. The small crowd did nothing, kept watching. Their sense of awe, the silent reverence for the bloodied, shattered form in front of them, evaporated. The cop went silent too. Then he remembered who he was. In an apparent effort to regain his authority, he stepped toward the gathered people, spread his arms and said, “Let’s stay back, people. Let’s leave some room here so these guys can work.” Two men came over and unrolled an enormous white sheet. They spread it taut between them, then walked the long distance from King Kong’s head to his feet until he was covered. They then placed small bags of sand every six feet or so along the edges of the sheet to make sure it didn’t blow up and reveal the body. In a few moments, the sheet became spotted with fake red blood from the body. An eight-year-old girl turned to her mother and started crying.

“What’s the matter sweetie?” the mother said.

“He’s dead,” the girl said. “He’s dead.”
The mother bent down, wiped the tears from her daughter’s face, and comforted her with a smile. “No, no, no, honey. There’s nothing to cry about. It’s not real. None of this is real. He’s not dead.”

“Not dead?”

“No. It’s fake.”

“Fake?”

“Fake. Like when you play with your Barbies. Everything here, all of it, is make-believe. It’s like what we watch on TV, sweetie. Don’t worry. It’s not real life. It’s all fake.”

“It’s all fake,” Russ said to the cop walking by.

“It’s real to me,” he said.

“Hey, where am I supposed to go? I’m an extra.”

The cop jerked his thumb over his shoulder to a line of trailers at the base of the North Tower and told him to give that a shot because he saw “some actor-looking types” in that area earlier.

Russ walked toward a series of trailers, hoping he wasn’t too late to get in on the movie.

Eddie walked out of the South Tower and straight into what sounded like a city in miniature. The generators. There was a generator running each klieg light. There were at least twenty of the carbon-arc lights, turning and pointing their 1,000 watts of light up, over, and across at the buildings, the sky, and the concrete transforming the night into a kind of hazy day. Each person manning each light wore Foster Grant sunglasses; an orange, webbed vest; a hat turned backward; and heavy, plastic earphones. Eddie thought they looked like the pictures he’d seen of guys at the airport who waved planes into gates. He heard more, and larger, generators when he walked up behind the trailers. There were seven, eight, maybe ten trailers. They were
laid in a line, end-to-end. Each trailer had at least one, sometimes two generators whirring, providing stars and important people with light, air conditioning, and refrigerated drinks. He walked between two of the trailers and stepped out onto the plaza.

A dense crowd stood off to his right. To his left across the Plaza lay the giant corpse of Kong. Its two huge, yellow-and-black eyes stared in a direct line across the two hundred yard distance right at Eddie. Eddie looked back into the cold, still eyes. He walked slowly forward, transfixed and only stopping when his hipbone crunched against the edge of a cloth-covered table.

Bowls, platter, plates, and bottles crowded the table in front of Eddie. Deviled eggs and Devil Dogs, Ring Dings and Rigatoni, Jell-O and gelato, cocktail shrimp and Schweppes ginger ale were spread over four tables set end-to-end, facing the trailers.

Eddie picked up a single Yankee Doodle and beheld it in wonder. He’d never seen one of them wrapped individually, only the ones that came three to a pack. Stamped on the cellophane were the words “NOT FOR INDIVIDUAL SALE.” He put one in his pocket to show off later at school. He opened another and stuffed it whole into his mouth.

“Hey!” said a man with a clipboard standing in the doorway of a trailer behind Eddie. “Hey, I’m talking to you.”

Eddie pressed a finger to his own chest, and the man said, “Yes, dummy, you. Where are you supposed to be?”

Eddie shrugged and chewed, forcing the cupcake down his throat because it seemed likely that, at some point, he was going to have speak.

“Were you not here when they told you that once you got your check, to get your ass over to Tower One immediately?”
Eddie shook his head.

“Did you get your check?”

Since it had worked out so well the first time, Eddie shook his head again.

The man checked his clipboard, descended a three-step staircase that took him from the trailer to the ground, put his hand on Eddie’s elbow, and guided him away from the table of goodies.

“Sally,” he yelled from the bottom of another three-step staircase that led up to the other trailer. “Sally!”

A young, blonde woman with a chain on which tags were hanging and swinging against her t-shirt poked her head out of the trailer. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she wore glasses. She looked out from the door of the trailer to see who had yelled her name. Seeing no one, she looked down. Eddie thought the scene looked like it was out of a Bugs Bunny cartoon. The woman’s glasses slipped off her face, bounced off the forehead of the man who'd yelled her name, and clattered to the pavement.

Eddie sprinted around the man, picked up Sally’s glasses and, standing directly underneath her swinging plastic nametags, handed them up to her.

She looked down and smiled. Then she looked at the man.

“What is it, Stanley?” she said.

“Pay this kid so we can get him over to Tower One for the crowd scene. Those SAG bastards have us running three hours behind.”

The man shoved Eddie up the stairs toward Sally, who put a cool hand on the back of Eddie’s neck and pulled him into the trailer. She handed him a clipboard and a blue Bic pen and pushed him down into a metal folding chair
“Fill out that form,” she said, sitting behind a tiny desk piled with papers, “and we’ll get you right over there. You’re the last one. Don’t forget to include your social.”

“I don’t remember my social,” Eddie said, not knowing what a social was but filling in all the other blank spaces, the ones for name, address, and age, before handing the clipboard back to Sally.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “You look all right. And screw those SAG idiots, anyway.”

She notched a piece of piece of paper into an IBM Selectric typewriter and started tapping on the keys while looking back and forth from the form Eddie had filled out to the paper in the typewriter as she went.

“Yeah,” Eddie said, having no idea what she was talking about, “Screw those SAG idiots.”

Sally looked up, stopped typing, laughed, and shook her head in relief and realization that sitting across from her was a kid; just a kid who wanted to be an extra in a movie.

“You’re all right,” she said. “You’re all right by me.”

She pulled the piece of paper from the IBM, signed it, and handed it to Eddie. It was a check for thirty dollars. It was for his services as a “Screen Actor’s Guild Certified EXTRA” in the “Dino DeLaurentiis Production of KING KONG.”

“Sign this,” Sally said, putting a W-9 tax form in front of Eddie.

“Is that it?” he said.

“One more thing,” she said. She fished in a drawer, wondering out loud why no one in their right fucking mind could keep anything in the right kind of fucking order in this fucking place. She stopped talking when she clamped her fingers down on a red-laminated badge hooked
on a string. She handed it to Eddie. He stared at it like it was a murder weapon planted on him while he slept. He look at Sally in utter blankness.

She got up, put the lanyard around his neck, and explained that he needed to have the badge showing so he could have access to the areas where paid extras were allowed. “Wear it at all times,” she said, “except when the cameras roll on the extras.”

“What happens then?”

“The assistant director will make announcements about when to take the badge off. Just follow along with everyone else.”

“So that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“I’m in the movies?”

“You’re in this thing.”

Sally pressed a button on a walkie-talkie and said, “Extra for delivery from trailer two, Billy. This should be the last.”

A man—Eddie thought it was most likely Billy—squawked back to Sally that he was on his way in five minutes. Sally turned her attention to the assorted files and papers on the desk in front of her, only stopping when she felt the open-eyed stare of Eddie boring down on her.

“Is there something else?” she said.

“No.”

“All right, then.”

“What do I do now?”

“You can wait for Billy outside,” she said.

“OK. Can I have a Yankee Doodle?”
“Absolutely,” she said, getting up from behind her desk, putting a hand on Eddie’s arm, leading him to the door, and sending him with a little shove down the small, steep stairs where he stood again behind the row of craft tables. “Take two Yankee Doodles, whatever the hell those are. In fact, fuck it. Have whatever, and as many of whatever, you like.”

“Thank you,” Eddie said. After she ducked back into the trailer, Eddie went to the craft table and grabbed a Yankee Doodle. He popped the cap to a chocolate Yoo-Hoo and chugged down half of it before his gaze came even with two blue eyes looking directly at him.

“The lady in there told me I could have whatever I wanted,” Eddie said, raising his EXTRA identification card up as though he were a cop showing his badge.

Russ raised his own red EXTRA tag up under his chin and said, “I’m sure she did. I’m not here to bust you.”

Eddie eased his hands down and wiped his mouth with the back of the hand holding the Yankee Doodle.

“There’s this guy coming to take me to where the extras are supposed to go,” Eddie said. “Maybe you could get a ride.”

“Hey, guys,” said a man with a beard and long hair stepping between Eddie and Russ and taking a bottle of Perrier off the table. “Extras. All right. How’s it going?”

Russ nodded at the guy, who strolled away to investigate the other craft tables. Russ scanned the table for something to drink before pouring a ginger ale.

“Did you see that?” Eddie said to Russ in a stage whisper. “I can’t believe that’s him.”

“Who?”

Eddie jerked his chin toward the hippie-looking guy who had been standing between them a moment earlier.
“Who’s he?” Russ said.

“Jeff Bridges.”

“Who’s that?”

“Who’s Jeff Bridges?”

“Yeah.”

“He was nominated for an Oscar for The Last Picture Show.”

Russ shrugged.


“Maybe,” Russ said, watching Bridges pile ham on a piece of rye bread.

“He’s been nominated for two Oscars,” Eddie said. “And he’s, like, twenty-five.”

“What’s he doing here?” Russ asked.

“He’s in the movie,” Eddie said. “He plays Jack Prescott. He’s a primate paleontologist.”

“Uh huh,” Russ said.

“He’s the star of the movie.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Billy’s here for you,” Sally said, poking her head out of the trailer and pointing to a large man in a small golf cart. “Have a fun shoot.”

“Thank you,” Eddie said.

Eddie wedged himself into the sliver of seat Billy was not occupying.

“You coming?” Eddie said to Russ, who was watching Jeff Bridges assemble his sandwich.
“No,” Russ said. “I’ll see you over there.”

“You better hold on,” Billy said to Eddie as the cart suddenly lurched forward, sending him and Eddie darting soundlessly into the nighttime plaza lit like high noon and pullulating with crisscrossing golf carts and tiny-gauge railroad tracks along which cameras dollied alongside workmen, cops, actors, makeup artists, gaffers, electricians, and what looked to Eddie like everyone in Hollywood running around busy and antic at the feet of the cold, hulking presence of the Twin Towers and the still body of a fake ape.

Billy abruptly stopped the cart to allow some people cars, equipment, and other carts to cross in front of them. The sheet had been removed from Kong. The model of his bare torso was twenty feet away from Eddie, off to his right, laying prone, dead, and open-eyed beneath Tower One from where he’d ostensibly fallen to earth from a quarter-mile height after being shot and attacked by helicopters he couldn’t quite reach, flown by men who wanted him dead. Next to the model, Eddie had a clear view as a fire truck’s cherry-picker crane lowered a blond woman into Kong’s opened hand. Once there, she straightened her dress, which had hiked up in the swirling wind. She drew a big sigh and nodded as the four hands of two makeup assistants came to her face and started patting her down with foundation and rouge. The blond woman looked tired, luminous, ethereal, determined, overwhelmed and very small in the big fake plastic and rubber hand. She and Eddie locked eyes, and she twitched out a little shrug, as though she felt silly in her sequin party dress, even though it was nighttime in New York and the place was lit like a premier.

After a long moment of staring Eddie returned her smile, even though by the time he did it was to the back of her turned head. Billy hit the gas. Eddie’s head snapped back. The cart
moved off, and a moment later, when she glanced back toward Eddie, Jessica Lange had missed
his stunned and shy acknowledgment.

Driving away, Eddie heard a repeating, shrill whine. He asked Billy what the weird noise
was.

“Motor,” Billy said. “Palm and eyes.”

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the head and hand of King Kong, inside of
which was a small motor powering the actions of him closing and opening his hand to free
Jessica Lange and to finally, at the end, close his eyes and die.

Russ snuck looks at Jeff Bridges while tapping his fingers on the surface of the craft table
where earlier Eddie had choked down his Yankee Doodle. He lifted a paper cup off a sleeve of
cups stacked for stars and poured another ginger ale.

Look, he said to himself, like you belong.

He pretended to examine the goodies spread out on the tables while rehearsing a bit of
suave conversation that he’d use to make small talk with the nearby movie star so he could ask
him what that movie stardom was like and how, exactly, one went about becoming a movie star.
He took a sip of ginger ale, turned his head, and was jerked into calling upon every molecule of
his strength and every sliver of his self-control to keep from sneezing the drink in his mouth all
over the back of Jeff Bridges’ head, which had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

He swallowed, opened his mouth to breathe, and sneezed down so hard that his teeth
chomped together with a dull thunk then squeaked in a pitch normally reserved for objects being
scraped across a chalkboard. Bridges turned around.

“Hey, man,” he said putting his hand on Russ’s arm, “are you all right?”
“I’m fine,” Russ said before coughing for half a minute. “I’m good, really. Oh shit.”

“What?”

“Shit.”

“Do you need me to call someone?” Bridges said, easing Russ down into a director’s chair that had the name of the director stenciled on the back.

“I’m sorry,” Russ said.

“What are you talking about?”

Russ pointed at an enormous stain of ginger ale that apparently he’d spilled onto Bridges’ shirt.

“Oh,” Bridges said, looking down at his checked, button-down shirt. “Hey, no, man. Not to worry. It’s nothing. There’s people for this kind of thing so, like, whatever.”

“You have people?”

“Not me. Them. They have people.”

“Don’t movie stars have people?”

“Some do,” Bridges said. “Others don’t. That’s the kind I am.”

“Are there not rules regarding movie stars and people?”

“I guess not,” Bridges said, laughing.

Realizing that he’d made a joke, Russ laughed too.

“I’m glad you’re doing better,” Bridges said, turning to leave.

“What’s it like?” Russ said. “Being a movie star.”

“It’s … um, who are you?”

“Russ. Russell Dunn.”

“Yeah, but who are you?”
“I’m an actor. I didn’t mean to bug you.”

“No. It’s fine,” he said looking around. “I got a couple minutes. You want to know what it’s like being a movie star?”

“Yup.”

“It’s good,” Bridges said.

“How do you do it?”

“Excuse me?”

“How do you become a movie star?”

“You study, and you act, and you audition, and you get roles, and then you act more, then you get more roles.”

“Is it everything everyone says it is?”

“Nothing is ever everything everyone says it is. But it’s a good way to make a living, I suppose. I got a nice house.”

“But how do you do it?” Russ asked, sloshing what little was left of his ginger ale out of the cup and onto Bridges’ left shoe. “Sorry about that.”

Bridges laughed and shook his head.

“Well, like I said,” he said, “you study, you audition, you act, you do it some more, and you get better.”

“That’s it? I’ve been acting since I was three years old.”

“That’s not it. Let me finish, man.”

“Sorry.”

“Each time and every time you do what you do, it’s got to be real,” he said.

“Real?”
“Real.”

Russ sat looking puzzled for a moment before gazing into his paper cup.

“I need to get some more ginger ale,” he said.

“You can suck my shirt,” Bridges said.

“Sorry about that.”

“Try this,” Bridges said, getting up and motioning for Russ to get up. “Say sorry to me again.”

“Sorry.”

“Good. Now say it like you just accidentally shot me.”

“Holy shit! Oh, dude, sorry!”

“Good. Now say it like you were the guy fucking my wife.”

“Someone’s fucking your wife?”

“No, no one is fucking my wife. This is an exercise. Say sorry like you were my best friend and you’re having an affair with my wife and I don’t know anything about it and you just accidentally shot me.”

“I’m … I’m …” Russ said, pretending to cry into his hands.

“You have to work on that one. But you have something there. Do you see?”

“I think so,” Russ said from the craft table where he poured a fresh cup of soda.

“You have to work at it. You got to work the basics.”

“Mr. Bridges, I hate to interrupt you, but you’re needed,” a man with a clipboard said.

“Yeah,” Bridges said. “Thanks.”

“What about after?” Russ said.

“After what?”
“After I become a movie star? What then?”

“Keep it real. You need a ride?”

A golf cart with two rows of seats, one facing forward and one backward, was waiting to take Bridges to the set-up for the next shoot.

Russ faced backward as they rolled slowly through the crowds and as the icicle lighting pierced their eyes.

“What else?” Russ said over his right shoulder, directly into Bridges’ left ear.

“Surround yourself with people who are smarter than you and who don’t rely on you.”

“What, you mean like business partners?”

“I mean like a wife, like a best friend,” Bridges said as the cart pulled up at the feet of the gigantic prone Kong in the plaza. “This is my stop.”

Russ started to get up, but Bridges put a hand on his shoulder and told him to stay in the cart—the driver would drive him over to where the extras were gathering.

Russ offered his hand and thanked Bridges. Bridges shook Russ’s hand and asked his name.

“Russell Dunn,” he said. “Two Ss, two Ls, and two Ns.”

“All right,” Bridges said. “Good luck to you. Maybe I’ll see you around someday.”
Chapter 4

Russ is the stronger of the two, Karen thinks. He’s the charismatic, handsome one. Eddie probably latched onto Russ at some point. He’s the glasses-wearing, timid one. But, when did he latch on? she wonders, flipping pages in both folders then stopping at four pages in each folder, each stamped with the words: “THIS PAGE KEPT INTENTIONALLY BLANK” in red.

She looks up from the intentionally blank pages. Steve is standing over her.

“What happened to these pages?” she says.

Steve doesn’t say anything.

“Hello? Where are the pages in these folders?”

“I don’t know.”

Karen stares back Steve.

“That’s an FBI file,” Steve says. “I’m not FBI. You would have to talk to those guys.”

“Don’t you guys speak to one another?”

“Sometimes. Not often. No, we don’t talk.”

Steve kept standing and looking down on Karen for a moment longer.

“Is something on me?” she says, swiping her hands across her face.

“Is something on you?”

“You have that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“That look like my brothers when they put something on my face while I sleep.”

“No,” Steve says. “There’s nothing’s on you.”

Karen fishes for a bottle in her bag, takes a long pull of water, and puts it back.
“Why are you just standing there?” she says.

“We’re an hour out from Andrews. I just thought you should know.”

Karen goes back to her bag, drinks some more water, puts her bottle back in her bag, and looks up to see Steve staring at her.

“What?” she says.

“Nothing.”

“Sit down. You’re making me nervous.”

Steve swings in to a chair next to Karen and straps himself in.

“You want to say something, so say it.”

Steve tells Karen that he’s been going over it in his head, but he can’t find anything he did wrong after he got to her apartment to pick her up. He says he’s been wracking his brain—he has a photographic memory—and he’d really like to know where he screwed up.

“You didn’t ‘screw up,’ in the sense you’re thinking,” Karen says. “You didn’t do anything ‘wrong’ in the sense you did this, or that, or the other thing incorrectly.”

Steve looks confused.

The moment Steve stood in her kitchen, in his Men’s Wearhouse, semi-tailored, gray suit, Karen figured him for a lower-middle-class kid who'd got through school on VA loans, with maybe a weekend shift as a fry cook in the town over from the college so he wouldn’t run into friends. He pledged to a middling frat because they took him. He made a C average and did well on standardized tests. He was a striver, eager for advancement. Nothing earth shattering in that analysis, whether it was accurate or not. What was important was that Steve was not a big-picture guy; he didn’t deal in abstracts and theory. He was a detail guy; he dealt in tactile information he could act upon.
“Almost everything is an interrogation,” she says, leaning in toward him.

Steve looks at her with no expression. She can tell he’s struggling.

“What is interrogation, Steve?”

“Interrogation is a method of extracting information.”

“No, it is not. The word interrogation is from the Latin, *interrogationem*. It means to inquire, to ask, to question.”

“Yes. In order to extract information.”

“No. It means to ask.”

“So?”

“Follow it through logically, Steve. Don’t focus on what interrogation has become. Forget the inference. Think about its essence, its root.”

Steve leans back in his seat. He appears to be thinking. Then he stops.

“I’m still lost,” he says.

“A job interview is an interrogation. A performance review is an interrogation. When your girlfriend asks what movie do you want to see, it’s an interrogation. When a two-year-old drives you crazy asking ‘Why?’ and ‘But, why?’ it’s an interrogation.”

Steve looks at her helplessly. Karen thinks he’s either a very good actor or actually very dumb.

“Never forget that the person doing the interrogation is also revealing themselves to the person they are questioning,” Karen says. “What questions are they asking? How are they asking them? What methods are they using to ask these questions? Information is flowing back and forth, not just one-way. That is why when you interrogate someone you should never lie.”

“I think I get it,” Steve says.
She explains that when you question someone in an interrogation, if you lie, then the information you get is tainted. The person being interrogated will pick up on the lie; maybe not on purpose, maybe not consciously, but they’ll sense it. And once that happens, any information you get will be tainted and unreliable.

“You have to be honest, or it’s all for nothing,” she tells Steve.

“I get it,” he says. “What mistakes did I make at your apartment and in the car?”

Karen tells Steve she knows he didn’t go to her presentation at Quantico.

“I went,” he says, “for about ten minutes.”


“No, I was there.”

“It wasn’t so much what you said; it was the way you behaved when you said it. You said it changed the course of your life. If I were meeting a person who literally changed the course of my life, I would be star-struck. I would be in awe. I would ask a million questions.”

“I’m a bad liar.”

“Everyone’s a bad liar, Steve. In an interrogation no one can lie. Lying sows seeds of mistrust. If you have even an inkling, a sense, a whiff, that the other person is lying, it changes the entire dynamic, and that’s when things start going downhill. That goes for the person being questioned, and, more importantly, for the person doing the questioning. Never, ever, lie in an interrogation if you want it to be productive.”

Steve sits in silence for fifteen minutes while Karen flips back through the file on Eddie Mack.

“Thank you,” Steve says when she closes the file.

“For what?”
“For helping me understand a little better.”

“Well, Steve, if you’d stayed for my entire presentation, we wouldn’t have to have these little talks, now would we?”

“No, ma’am.”

“You’re obviously on the job to make sure I’m not a nut case, or at least that I know what I’m doing. You’re vetting me. It explains the over-sharing. And, that’s fine. I get that. To me, that’s an indication that this is very important and that very important people are being very careful. What can you tell me?”

“Me? Nothing.”

“OK, Steve,” Karen says. “We’ll go with that for now. But remember, you still owe me. I need those blank pages.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Karen flops down on the queen-sized bed in her room at Blair House, across from the White House. *The President’s guesthouse. I am in the President’s guesthouse. I am, then, ipso facto, a guest of the President.*

She stares up at the ceiling, dimpled with the decoration of plaster from a fan pattern in the center, with emanating lines reaching out to the walls, then creasing down to spread and bloom into framed wall cut-outs, in which houseplants grew and prospered despite the apparent lack of sunlight. She wonders about how often they re-plastered and re-painted. *Did they use special plaster and paint? Were these same plants resting and watching in this room when Truman lived here? Is there a protocol for being a guest of the President, even if you’re off the books?*
Karen turns her head. She opens both files to the last redacted page in each. When their stories pick back up, their lives have diverged.

Eddie went to high school in New York, then to college at Fordham, where he edited the newspaper. After college he became a journalist, covering police in Chicago, covering police again in Richmond and Baltimore, politics in Danbury, then Hartford, Connecticut, then back to politics in Washington DC. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for covering a tornado that hit a school in New York, killing three kids. Eddie was married once, when he lived in Richmond, but only for three years. They had no children. His wife left him for a friend of his. In 1991 his stepfather—whom he believed was his real father—died of a heart attack. The next year, Eddie discovered that his actual father lived in Bisbee, a small town in southern Arizona. Eddie moved to Bisbee in 1992 and for the next six years, the file had nothing but gaps.

Karen flips back to a newspaper photo of Eddie standing next to Al Gore at a campaign stop in Chicago. There are other photos: Eddie near Bill Clinton during a press briefing at the White House; Eddie standing with a bunch of cops over a dead body on the south side of Chicago; Eddie with his wife in Paris; Eddie slumped over a typewriter in college. In each photo Eddie looks the same. His hair is to his collar, he wears large, black glasses, and he has high cheekbones. He’s handsome, in a geeky sort of way. Also, in each photo he looks like he doesn’t quite belong with whatever group he’s with, like he’s a square peg and would have preferred to be anywhere else. He’s shy, she imagines, with a quiet voice.

Russ went to Boston University. Then he went to Kansas State. Finally he went to NYU. He never graduated. He started several bands in Boston and New York. One photo of Russ in 1982 showed him wearing kneepads over his jeans and jumping two feet in the air off a stage while clutching a mic. Another showed him in the grime of CBGBs on his back as straggly fans
clamored to touch him. He sang punk, soul, disco, the blues, rock—whatever, it seemed, would land him a gig and pay. He was also acting in plays in Boston, Kansas, New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. He went through four agents in five years, and appeared in at least twenty commercials before landing the lead in a sitcom that took him to LA for two years. His reputation in the industry was that he could be difficult to work with. He considered himself an artist; his acting had to be real, genuine, and honest, or he would demand to do a scene again, and again, and again. He would walk off sets if not accommodated. Alongside his scattershot career he developed a taste for drugs. According to an intake report at a rehab facility in San Francisco, Russ liked opiates, indulging in the occasional heroin binge, but he also used cocaine, speed or whatever else was at hand. He was married in 1989 and had two children, a boy in 1990 and a girl in 1991. None of these events seemed to alter his lifestyle—he was arrested buying coke in Washington Square Park in late 1991, the same year his sitcom was cancelled and he returned to Westchester County. In 1992 his father died when the plane he was piloting crashed. That tragedy seemed to pull Russ out of his tailspin. The father left Russ and his two brothers equal shares in a lucrative, New York-based, direct marketing business. At the age of thirty-four, Russ changed. He moved back to Katonah. He started shopping at Brooks Brothers, and taking his kids to Little League games. He bought a Volvo station wagon. He commuted on Metro North into the city each day, where he was in charge of more than one hundred employees. One of those employees related a story. One day the guy, who was a middle manager, went to Russ for direction on a project. He was talking about the project, when Russ cut him off. Russ told him that he hired the guy because he was good at what he did and he trusted him to do it. That meant if he was right ninety percent of the time that was great. As for the ten percent of the time has wrong, he told the guy not to sweat it. “You can’t live your life afraid,” Russ said to the guy.
This idyllic lifestyle was at least partly a ruse. In 1996 Russ was again arrested in Washington Square Park, this time for buying crack. From there it was a fast and ugly two year slide that culminated in his brothers suing him for money they claimed he embezzled from the company, his wife suing him for divorce and child support, then a judge ruled in her favor and seized Russ’s passport. With more than $2 million in judgments against him and no idea where his life was going except to shit, Russ caught a sliver of good luck when a former girlfriend named Rosanne mentioned she was moving out of New York and asked him if he wanted to come with her. They were crossing the George Washington Bridge in her Chevy when Russ asked her where they were going. Rosanne told him they were headed for an old mining town in southern Arizona that had been reclaimed by hippies and was now an artist’s town. She said it was set into a canyon, only five thousand people lived there, the bars were full every night, and just about everyone smoked pot. Best of all, the nearest town was twenty-five miles away and it was five miles from Mexico. It was called Bisbee.

Karen is still irked about the missing pages from each file, but she’s pleased that Eddie and Russ’s paths have come back together in Bisbee. It’s a small town, and that’s easy to deal with. She sets the files aside, however, to get busy on what’s more immediate.

She looks at her briefing for the President. *Brief is the operative word* she thinks flipping through the five PowerPoint slides. The sixth slide, for conclusions, is blank. She stretches her imagination, but comes up with nothing. *What can one safely conclude about two people from the same area of the world who became friends years later and who end up being on boat together in Africa when it blows up?* She considered that maybe the normalcy was the key. They could be deep, deep moles. *They are Kim Philbys, recruited by some as-yet-unknown radical fundamentalist cell as children and kept waiting until the right time to become activated into the
field. In the meantime, one becomes a successful journalist, the other a major movie star. They are burrowing into the fabric of United States culture in order to rend it to pieces at the precise, opportunistic time and then ... kablooey!

Yes, Karen thinks, I am officially, and for certain, at this moment lying on a bed in the President’s guesthouse across from the White House with a briefing to deliver in two hours and losing my mind. And why is that happening? Why is that happening now? Because Russell Dunn and Eddie Mack planned it that way!

Ugh.

She picks up the phone and dials Jason’s number. When she puts the phone to her ear a woman is speaking to her.

“Hello?” Karen says.

“Yes, Ms. Proe, what can I help you with?”

Karen imagines the voice on the phone isn’t coming from inside the house itself, but is instead coming from the substructure of some secret, vast earthen-and-concrete bunker beneath the Potomac River; the voice of someone working one of two alternating twelve-hour shifts.

“I was making a phone call,” Karen says.

“I can connect you. What number?”

Jason answers groggily.

“Where are you?” he asks.

“I can’t say. They won’t let me tell you.”

“Of course.”

“I’m kidding, Mr. Paranoia,” she says. “I’m in DC. I’m at Blair House.

“Fancy.”
“I have a briefing early tomorrow.”

“Have you eaten?”

“No.”

“You should have something,” Jason says. “You know how you get all wiggy if your sugar goes low.”

“Yes dear,” she says. “What should I have?”

“You’re at Blair House. You can probably have anything you want.”

“I know, but what should I get?”

“Turkalami,” Jason says about Karen’s favorite sandwich of turkey and salami on rye.


“I love and miss you too,” Jason says.

“I’ll be home soon, unless, of course, they won’t let me be home. Not that I know who they are—”

“Goodnight,” Jason says, hanging up the phone.

She hangs up the phone, then picks it up again to speak to the voice from before. She asks for a turkalami sandwich and a Diet Coke.

“Is there anything else?” the voice says.

She thinks about telling the voice talking from under the fathoms of the Potomac that she misses Jason, and that she wants to go to Venice with him to be married there before riding together in a gondola while watching other lovers walk together along the storied catwalks above, and that she wants to smile because it’s Venice and she is there and in love.

Instead she thanks the voice, says that will be all, and hangs up the phone.
She writes the word “journalist” with a Sharpie and draws an arrow to Eddie’s name at the top of the page. She writes the word “movie star” and connects it to Russell’s name with an arrow. She connects both names to “New York City.” Then she draws a long, swooping line to the bottom of the page connecting it to the word “Uganda.” She stares at the blank part of the page between the words. The answers are in there somewhere. Then she scrawls in the middle of the page: “Why these two? Friends? More? Why them?”

She gets up and stretches. She listens to the predawn birds waking and starting to chatter outside the drape-covered windows. If this were a movie, the sounds of the birds would be the tip-off. Karen would look up and emerge from the fog of confusion. A wry smile would come to her as her eyes sparkled, watching the pieces fall effortlessly into place, confirming that she is a genius by revealing to her—and her alone!—the simplicity of the dastardly plot. Karen looks at the clock. She has a half an hour left. She looks at her notes on the yellow legal pad. That’s when she sees it. “Journalist.” “Movie star.”

She hums to herself as she showers. While toweling off she picks up the phone and asks the voice for coffee.

A Marine guard leads Karen through several rooms in the White House, then through two hallways. Halfway down a third hallway he stops and says, “Please wait here.”

Karen stands stiffly, clutching her briefing file, lost in the maze of the White House, unsure of what to do, but certain that she shouldn’t move from where she has been left. On the wall to her right is a portrait of Harry S. Truman. To her left is a painting of an eagle.

Karen visited the Truman library in Independence, Missouri. She’d always been a fan of Truman. He was a seemingly normal man who, through self-discipline and fate, became
extraordinary. The countryside surrounding the library was anything but extraordinary. It was a desolate and bleak amalgam of taco shacks and yard sales. Inside the library, however, it was astonishing. She sat in a replica of the Oval Office behind Harry’s old desk, in Harry’s old chair. She placed both of her hands flat on the desk and in a sharp moment felt the surge of not only history, not only of Harry S. Truman sitting there as the most powerful man in the world, but she felt the presence of the man himself as he had existed in this space and as he had lived in the world.

“Have a seat,” says a man’s voice from behind her as she gazes at the kind, mid-western features of the thirty-third President.

It’s Mark Ryan, the President’s Chief of Staff.

Karen sits down in a chair next to a table. Ryan is on the other side of the table. They both look at Harry Truman.

“Is that your briefing?”

“Yes,” she says, looking at the file as though someone had planted it on her while her back was turned, then thrusting her hand with the file toward the Chief of Staff. “It’s thin. It’s very thin.”

He takes the file out of her hand.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he says, not looking at the file.

Then he gets up, walks down the hallway, makes a left into another hallway, and is gone.

Karen sits for five minutes in the cocooned stillness and thick silence created by the coming together of silk upholstery and thick satin paint on steel-reinforced walls, ceiling, and floors, overlaid by gilded frames on pictures, and a carpet so thick she feels that with each step, she will disappear in up to her ankles. She doesn’t even have a file folder to hold on to. Then a
man walks slowly up the hall toward her, pulls out the chair on the other side of the small table, and sits down.

“I always liked this picture,” the President says. “I walk these hallways some nights, and stroll around, and I look at the pictures as I pass. This one, I have to say, usually stops me for a few moments.”

Karen has met three men who were Presidents, and each time she was surprised and impressed by their height. You expected Ronald Reagan to be tall. He looked tall. He was six one. Clinton is six feet one. The shocker, though, is that the tallest one she met was six feet two inches tall, and that was George Herbert Walker Bush. The President sitting arm’s length away from her was a little over six feet. The man whose portrait looms over them, Harry Truman, was a comparable midget at five feet eight inches tall.

The President and Karen sit in silence for a moment.

“HUAC,” the President says.

“The House Un-American Activities Committee?”

“Un-American. That is some kind of word. Un-American.”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“A lot of people think HUAC was Joseph McCarthy. That is not true, however.”

“No, sir.”

“HUAC was set up in the late 1930s to ferret out the communists in America. It was abolished in 1975. McCarthyism and HUAC are apples and oranges, really.”

“Plus,” Karen says, “McCarthy was a Senator and HUAC was a House committee.”

“The House Un-American Activities Committee went after Hollywood, though. They went after actors and producers. They had people informing on other people. Everyone ratting
everyone else out for being a communist. Chaos. McCarthy picked up on it. By then even the
President, even Harry there, couldn’t do anything to stop it.”

“No, sir, he couldn’t.”

“You get a big fat story like that cranked up, you get everyone thinking Hollywood is
filled with people trying to hurt the country—well, it takes on a life of its own. It can get so big
that even the President becomes helpless. The country suffers as a result.”

“People do tend to believe the conspiracy, yes, sir.”

“If Harry had nipped it in the bud, if he got out ahead of that train and slowed it down
before it started going off the rails, well, that probably would have been better for everybody.”

“Maybe,” Karen says. “But, if a story is so goofy that obviously it couldn’t be true, there
wouldn’t be a problem to start with. I mean, I don’t know, if someone said that Hollywood was
filled with terrorists looking to destroy America, who would believe a story like that?”

“Everyone.”

Karen pictured the words “movie star” just as she had written them on her legal pad. She
mentally she put a check mark next to it. One down.

The President stands up, walks down the hall, makes a left out of the hallway, and
disappears.

Karen crosses her legs and sits looking at the spot where the President had just been
speaking to her. She pictures her legal pad and sees the word “journalist.” If a journalist were a
suspected terrorist, well, that would have every journalist in a tizzy looking under their own
rocks, second-guessing anyone sitting at the desk next to them. Eddie is a journalist. H traveled
to Uganda alone before he and Russ went. There is only one pasty-faced person sitting in a cell
who made the perfect patsy: Eddie.
The Marine Guard returns. Karen follows him back underground to Blair House, where Steve is waiting.

As they walk to the front door, Karen laughs.

The President, she realizes, never said hello to her. The two of them never actually conversed. He spoke. She spoke. But they did not talk. They also didn’t actually “meet,” in the traditional sense of meeting someone. The most that could be said about their encounter was that the two of them occupied space in a White House hallway for less than two minutes.

Steve raises his eyebrows at Karen’s laugh, seeming to implore her to share what was so funny.

“How,” she asks Steve, “did they get there?”

“Ma’am?”

“How do a movie star and his friend end up hanging out one day in Uganda? Why these two? I’m thinking the answers aren’t in those files you gave me.”

“No ma’am,” Steve says opening the door to the Towncar. “Are you done reading?”

“Not yet,” Karen says to Steve once they’re driving toward Andrews Air Force Base, after she’s plopped the file marked DUNN and the file marked MACK onto her lap for the flight to Guantanamo. “Make sure you don’t talk to me. I need to concentrate for the next few hours.”
Chapter 5

They decided to start drunk on the floor together. Eddie sat first, gripping the Jack Daniel’s bottle. He took a big, fat swig and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, the way they do in Westerns.

“Howdy, pard’,” he said.

“Be serious,” Russ said, sitting down next to him.

Russ was smoking an American Spirit cigarette. His right hip touched Eddie’s left.

Their backs were pressed against the wall of the Central School, to the left of four big, clattering school doors. Their legs were straight out, rigid as planks along the smooth, shiny, concrete floor.

It was opening night for True West, the play they were in together, and they were the two leads. There was one scene they still needed to iron out, so they got to it.

“All right, then,” Russ said. “Let’s go.”

Eddie told Russ about the time his father lost all his teeth, about how he lost them one tooth at a time. He woke up morning after morning with a tooth on his pillow, or on the mattress, or on the floor. There wasn’t even a tooth fairy compensating him for his losses. Russ confessed that he had no idea any of this even happened. He was staring at Eddie while he said this, weighing and considering every one of the words as he spoke.

Eddie handed Russ the bottle. He poked the air with his chin toward him, urging him to take a drink. He could use it.

Dad was not one to give in to idle gumlessness, Eddie told Russ. So Dad procured some government money for new teeth and set out hitchhiking to Mexico in search of a cheap dentist.
to restore his bite. After eight days spent with his thumb out, grinning his toothless smile at passing Toyotas and Fords, he landed in Juarez, found a dentist, and got himself a spanking new set of false pearly whites.

Russ passed the bottle back to Eddie. He took it mid-slosh, slammed down a hard swallow, and forced the bottle back into Russ’s hand.

Eddie told Russ that once Dad got his new teeth, he went out to visit the old man out in the desert. Dad took Eddie to a swell dinner at a Chinese restaurant with waist-high porcelain dragons standing guard by the door. After two plates of chop suey, Eddie and his dad got a doggy bag for the leftovers. For some reason, Dad dropped his false teeth in with the leftovers. Eddie was the youngest son; who was he to argue? Then the three of them—Eddie, Dad, and the chop suey—left and hit the bars to meet Dad’s nearest, dearest, and drunkest friends. When they staggered home, they discovered the chop suey, and the teeth, were nowhere to be found. They retraced their steps to each bar and each stool, but they didn’t find anything. After losing his real teeth, he’d lost his fake teeth. It’s what one might call a two-teeth calamity.


Russ handed the bottle back to Eddie. He took another long pull.

“Good,” Russ said, getting to his feet. “That was good. We’re in good shape.”

He went inside and left Eddie in front of the Central School sitting alone with two swallows in the bottle of Jack and his half-smoked cigarette.

***
The first time Eddie remembered meeting Russell Dunn was two years earlier, and he wasn’t Russell Dunn. Not yet. It was a Monday. Eddie was halfway down the fifty-two-step curving set of stairs from his house in Bisbee, Arizona. There was a guy sitting on the steps in the shadows thrown by the B&B to the right and the thrift store to the left. He was on the tenth step up from the street. People tucked themselves onto the stairs sometimes to smoke pot, to take a break from work at the nearby noodle shop and smoke a cigarette, or sometimes to down a few sips from a bottle.

“Hey,” Eddie said when he was almost on top of the guy.

“Oh, hey.”

Eddie stopped and raised his eyebrows, signaling the guy should scooch over and let him pass on the narrow steps.

Eddie didn’t like to tell the people he found on the stairs smoking pot, or drinking beer, or even smoking cigarettes that he lived up the steps. Bisbee was a small town, but it had a high percentage of crazy people. Not the put-a-lampshade-on-your-head-at-a-party kind of crazy, but the cross-the-street-avoid-making-eye-contact-at-all-costs kind of crazy. Eddie didn’t like strangers to know where he lived.

“Sorry,” the guy said, moving over, clamping the joint in his teeth, and offering his hand for a shake when Eddie arrived next to him. “You live up there?”

“Thanks,” Eddie said, ignoring the question and moving past.

“Is this all right?” the guy said once Eddie was on the street.

Eddie turned and looked at him. There was something very familiar about the guy. He recognized him, but he couldn’t place how or where.

“Is what all right?”
“Me being here,” the guy said. “Is it all right? I don’t want to …”

“No. Yes. It’s fine. You’re fine. Do we … do we know each other?”

The guy shrugged and offered his hand again. “I don’t think so. Russell,” he said.

“Russell Dunn.”

Eddie shook hands, shook his head, said he didn’t think he knew him, and told him his name was Eddie Mack.

“Eddie Mack,” Russell said, tapping his head with the hand holding the splinter of joint that remained and sending a few sparks onto his collar and neck. “Fuck! Jesus! That hurt. Anyway. I’m bad with names, but I won’t forget.”

“I’m bad with names, too,” Eddie said. “But I’ll try and remember yours, Gene.”

“Gotcha, Stan,” Russell said tapping his head again. “I got you filed away right here, lock and key.”

“OK, Leonard, see you later,” Eddie said before turning to walk toward the post office to get the day’s mail.

Next day, Tuesday, the same thing happened.

“Hey, Ronaldo,” Russ said as Eddie came down to get his mail.

“Jeremiah,” Eddie said, breezing by.

The next day Eddie was five steps above Russ and heading down when Russ said, “Gustav! Wie geht es dir?”

“Kicking it old school, Colonel Tom.”

When Eddie got next to Russ on the same step, he stopped. The two looked at one another. They both smiled. Eddie sat down next to Russ.

“I know I know you, and I’ll figure it out,” Eddie said.
“I swear to God, she was eighteen.”

You have the whitest, most perfect teeth I have ever seen on a living human being.”

“Metal and porcelain,” Russ said, tapping his teeth. “Only in the front. Strictly cosmetic. The rest are falling out.”

“Vanity.”

Russ told him the about the first time he went out to Hollywood to audition for movies and television. He spent most of his time handing out eight-by-ten photos of himself and waiting for his phone to ring. The feedback his agent received was that Russ was perfect for several roles, he was a fantastic actor, and they would have loved to cast him but … his teeth. So he sold his Volvo and invested the return in an eight ball of coke and new front teeth, uppers and lowers.

“And?”

And nothing. For a long time, nothing. I came closer, though.”

“Closer?”


“Uh huh.”

“And then! Then! I was in a … sitcom!”

“Really?”

“Truly. The Battles of Bob. I played—”

“Bob.”

“Bob.”

“How was that?”
Russ said the critics loathed the show. In a small, punk kind of way, he was proud of the universal hate that greeted the show; in the same way that Andy Kaufman despised his work on the show *Taxi*. He only took offense came when the public stopped watching after two years.

“My mother saw an episode, and she said to me, this is what she said: ‘That show did nothing for me.’”

Eddie and Russ sat quietly, feeling Russ’s mother’s judgment reverberate across the years.

“That might be where I saw you,” Eddie said, “but I don’t have TV, so I doubt it. Oh well, I’ll figure it out.”

He was halfway to the post office when he realized he’d patted Russ on the thigh twice when he told him he didn’t have TV.

*He’s not so bad,* Russ thought, still reclining in the shade of the steps. *Maybe he won’t freak out.*

A week earlier, Russ had started seeing Eddie’s ex-girlfriend, Caitlin. He understood Eddie and Caitlin had become friends—they were close friends—but he also knew seeing an ex start to date someone else can be a blow, and that some people get testy as a result.

Russ had first arrived in Bisbee three weeks before. He'd come out with his sometime girlfriend, Rosanne. They lived together in a rented one bedroom above a small grocery up a long winding street called Brewery Gulch. He made her scrambled eggs for breakfast and brewed weak coffee, just the way she liked it, in the French press. Then he saw Caitlin working on a construction project. Her was dyed so red it was almost orange. White tank top. Tall, long bodied, very striking and with a straight-backed confidence. She jutted her chin to the world as if taunting it, “Go ahead, take a shot. First one’s free.” Most provocatively, though, for Russ, she spoke very fast. Russ hadn’t realized how much he was missing having that kind of tightly-paced
conversation, the kind that was commonplace in New York, feeling that circuit of intensity from another person, until he finally spoke to Caitlin one night at the Grand, a bar on the town’s main street. Most everyone he’d met in Bisbee was so laid back and mellow they put him half to sleep. Caitlin was quick. Caitlin was a tonic. Five days before meeting Eddie, Russ moved out of Rosanne’s house. He did it at 4 a.m. by stepping over the clothes she piled on the floor and opening the door. The day before he had landed a gig house-sitting at a two-room apartment further down Brewery Gulch, over a bar called St. Elmo’s, and dead center in the decidedly sleazy part of town. He’d then got booted from those digs two days before for singing too loudly with his newfound band mates at 3 a.m. To the neighbors and the cops, sleazy apparently didn’t translate to indulgent. And here I thought this was an artists’ community. Quiet artists only need apply, I guess.

“Hey, Mike,” Eddie said to Russ the next day coming down his stairs again.

“Fred.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask, are you working at the noodle shop here?”

“No,” Russ said, taking a swig from his orange travel mug. “I come here because this guy I met sells me weed. I’m slinging gravel at Doug Simon’s place.”

“Who’s that?”

“You don’t know Doug?”

Eddie stood with his back to the street, facing Russ.

“I might know him, but not his name. Like I said—”

“Bad with names. Yeah. He’s a comedian. Doug. Doug Simon?”

“Nope.”

“He’s great. I’ll introduce you guys sometime.”
“All right then,” Eddie said, turning to walk his usual walk.

“Oh, hey,” Russ said. “I’m singing tonight. Come out and hear me?”

“Sure. Where?”

Russ said he was singing at the Stock Exchange Saloon with a band he’d put together.

“It’s cute that they call them saloons here,” Russ said.

“We like it,” Eddie said.

“It’s open mic, but we’re sounding good,” Russ said. “I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Allow me. You’re the struggling gravel slinger.”

“I already got my drink,” Russ said, tapping his traveler cup.

Eddie started to walk away then stopped and turned.

“Do you still audition for things?”

“My gravel money will go for gas to get me to LA for every chance I get.”

“So you’re an actor?”

“I guess I am, when I get hired.”

Later that day Caitlin called Eddie to tell him he should come out to the open mic at the Stock Exchange at seven. She said it’d been too long. She just wanted to see him and hang out.

She said there was this fantastic singer. He was new to town.

“He’s from New York,” Caitlin said. “Just like you! You’d really hit it off.”

“‘Hit it off?’ Guys do not ‘hit it off.’”

“Well, then, you’d get along. Or, butt fuck each other, or whatever it is guys do.”

Eddie hung up the phone and smiled at how his ex-girlfriend was playing matchmaker between him and her new beau.
I can’t do this, Eddie thought after running the scene about his father needing new teeth. He was sitting on the ground of the Central School patio after Russ had gone inside to fret over sound effects, lighting, and seating for the play. There was an hour to go. Eddie looked through a stone archway. The sky was seeping into a bruise of darkness. The evening was getting colder. Once it went completely dark, Eddie thought, he’d like to become a different creature. He’d like to sprout an exoskeleton of girder-sized arms and legs and go on a feral leaping spree across the whole of Bisbee, Arizona. He saw himself swiping down each of the houses that teeter with the stability of empty shoeboxes onto the sides of the town’s deep-cut canyons. It would be laughably simple. Eddie wouldn’t even have to touch them with his enormous monster arms. He could simply breathe near them, and they’d go tumbling head over teakettle onto the canyon floors. The people inside would go ricocheting, cursing, and screaming against the walls, ceilings, and floors until coming to rest on Main Street. If that happened, Eddie thought, if I went around physically mauling the town’s buildings and inhabitants like a road show version of Godzilla, then they’d have to postpone the play.

That bit about Eddie’s father losing his teeth and the bag of chop suey came toward the end of the play. It’s a great bit, Eddie thought. I hope I don’t screw it up. Inside the Jack Daniel's bottle wasn’t Jack Daniel's; it was iced tea. Eddie only wished it was Jack Daniel's. He’d been screwed his lines up for weeks, but especially the scene with the teeth. Russ made him run them every chance he got.

Eddie played Austin, a timid, uptight, screenwriter. Russ played his older brother, Lee, an aggressive, sarcastic drunk who was jealous of his brother’s Ivy League education and small
success. In real life, Eddie was a timid, uptight, writer. He had an aggressive, sarcastic, alcoholic older brother who was jealous of his small success. In real life, Russ was aggressive, sarcastic and usually had five of his ten fingers wrapped around an orange and black travel cup filled with ice, rum, and Coke. Lee and Austin had a father who was a drunk and who abandoned his family to go and live in the desert. In real life, Eddie and his brother had a father who was a drunk who abandoned his family to go and live in the desert. In the play Lee and Austin have a mother who comes home at the end of the play and finds the two brothers have gotten violently drunk, killed her plants, and wrecked her home. In real life, because Eddie’s mother just died, that became the only fictional element from the play that wasn’t reflected in real life. Small favors, Eddie thought.

His mother died four hours earlier in Florida. Timing. It is so important. He’d prefer to not be doing the play on this night because he was nervous. He wasn’t nervous about being on stage and acting. He was nervous about telling Russ that his mother died. He’d been walking back and forth on the concrete porch of the Central School, where they would be going on stage soon. He’d been inhaling American Spirit yellow cigarettes, one after another after another. Everyone in town smoked them. His friend Greg called them the “Marlboros of Bisbee.” They were 100% natural. Eddie wondered if that made them healthier than other cigarettes.

The sun had just gone down behind the Mule Mountains. It was late autumn, a week before Thanksgiving, and it got cold quickly once the sun went down in the desert. Eddie got up. He paced and smoked to keep warm. He would have gone in for his coat, but first he had to tell Russ about his mother.

Not telling him he was lying to him. He trusted Russ. Russ trusted him the same way. That was precious and good. It was good because they were playing brothers. It was precious
because they were friends. Eddie had never had a friend before, so he wasn’t overly familiar with the rules, but he knew keeping important things from a friend wasn’t right. What kind of friend lies to a friend?

“When he comes out again,” Eddie said out loud, “I’ll tell him.”

“Tell who what?”

Caitlin was standing near the tall metal ashtray flicking smoked butts over in the sand to find long ones. Snipes, she called them.

“Tell who what?” Eddie said.

She plucked up two half-smoked butts, put one between her lips, and threw the other in an Altoids tin that she dropped into her purse.

“Got a light?” she asked, tapping her pockets.

Eddie checked himself for his lighter. He stepped toward Caitlin with the green Bic at the end of his fully extended arm.

She grabbed the lighter from his hand and lit her cigarette. She put the lighter in her jacket pocket after she lit her snipe, crossed one leg over the other, and leaned against the wall.

“It was mine,” she said. “You stole it before. What are you telling to whom when they come out again?”

“I need to tell Russ that he needs to relax. He’s been tense all night.”

“Maybe he has a reason,” Caitlin said slowly, grinning as though she were harboring a secret.

“What reason?”

“Maybe,” she said, “his life’s going to change in a very big way. Maybe.”

“What are you talking about?
Caitlin stood with her arms crossed and looked intently at Eddie. She exhaled as they both listened to the solitary noise of her foot tapping against the concrete. She flicked her cigarette away, seemingly bored with the conversation.

“Maybe you should ask him and stop bothering me about it,” she said. “Oh, and you always were a terrible liar. So Russ is inside?”

Eddie nodded.

“See you, liar,” she said and left.

Yup, Eddie thought, that would be me.

***

Two years earlier Eddie sat at the Stock Exchange Saloon with a PBR next to his extended right hand. His fingers were tapping without keeping any resemblance to time, as Russ’s band strummed the soft opening to “Sweet Jane.” Russ stood at the microphone, holding the stand in one hand and the mic in the other, waiting for his time to start as if he was teasing a room of bobbysoxers.

“This guy is fucking great,” a squat, happy plug of a man with a long, gray, forty-five-year-old-beard said from behind Eddie. “Just fucking great.”

“Uh huh,” Eddie said, taking a sip from his can and continuing his random finger tapping.

“I’ve heard tell.”

“How’s your dad doing?” the man said.

I know him, Eddie thought. What is his name?

“He’s good,” Eddie said. “Real good.”
“Tell him I said hey,” the guy said, clapping Eddie on the back.

“I will,” Eddie said, turning his unknowing and open face to the guy.

“Bear,” the guy said.

“Bear.”

He stuck out his hand and told Eddie that he was saying his own name.

“Of course,” Eddie said, getting his paw crunched in the grip. “Bear. How you been?”

“I always thought that was funny, because your dad’s name is Wolf. Bear. Wolf. Get it?”

“Get a lion and a tiger, and you have a song,” Eddie said. “Wolfe’s name has an E on the end, though, so it’s not a wolf it’s Wolfe. W-O-L-F-E. It’s his mother’s maiden name.”

Bear nodded sagely, regarding this information, yet seeming unable to process it.

Then Russ sang. Having gained the full attention of the place, he toyed with it, rejected it, savored it, massaged it, but always held it, through a six-song set of standard Stones, Beatles, and Nirvana covers, then into a lilting and tragic “Ripple,” and closing with a five-minute-long, screaming-his-voice-raw-at-the-end rendition of “Burn Down the Mission.” It was an act he had been performing, in varying incarnations, for more than 25 years, since the age of 18, and by this time he was a pro.

“Thank you,” Russ said, ending after an introduction of the band, whose names no one seemed to note. “That’s our time. We’re The Gunns, and I’m Russ Dunn.”

They packed up while a threesome of standup bass, guitar, and maracas mauled what sounded like a Townes Van Zandt song off to the side. Eddie sat tapping his fingers and flicking his feet to the rhythm of his three-beer enthusiasm.

“Wow, you are white.”
It was Caitlin. She thrust three clutched, rumpled dollar bills past Eddie until her fist landed on the bar.

“Thank you, Angela Davis,” Eddie said.

“Tequila, straight,” Caitlin said. “Who’s Angela Davis?”

Eddie started to explain, then stopped, knowing it didn’t matter.

“Cheers,” Eddie said, clinking Caitlin’s shot glass with his can of PBR.

“Who is Angela Davis?”

“You’re supposed to drink after a cheers. It’s like a rule.”

Caitlin stood, her shot glass held aloft like the Statue of Liberty’s torch, glaring.

“And always, always maintain eye contact,” Russ said, tipping his traveler mug to both Caitlin and Eddie. “Some guy in London told me that.”

Caitlin relaxed, smiled, and downed her shot of tequila in one throw.

“Burn Down the Mission,” Eddie said, tapping Russ’ plastic cup with his aluminum can.

“Incredible.”

“An Elton John fan,” Russ said, kissing Caitlin on the top of her head and speaking to her. “I told you there’s at least one more.”

“Elton John? You’re both gay,” Caitlin said, picking up her purse off the bar and turning to leave. “I’ll see you over there.” Watching her walk out, both men shook their heads and sighed.

“It might turn into one of those nights,” Russ said.

“Oh yeah,” Eddie said.

Russ said he and some friends were going to the Copper Queen Saloon, just up the street.
At the Queen, Eddie sat drinking additional PBRs and watching Russ and Caitlin sit at their table and greet installments of various people who sat and talked, drank, shook their heads, laughed at silly jokes, then pushed off.

After the beers got above a number he could count, and immediately after Caitlin left and Russ was alone, Eddie walked over and sat down at his table.

“She’s great,” Russ said.

“Yup,” Eddie said.

“How come you guys broke up?”

Eddie smiled in relief at the directness of the question. After a moment of drunken distraction, he finally managed to focus his eyes on Russ.

“Where are you from in New York?” Eddie said.

“Westchester County,” Russ said. “You?”

“The lower east side. First Avenue and Second Street.”

Two beers later, Eddie said to Russ, “Drugs.”

“Drugs?”

“That’s why Caitlin and I broke up.”

Standing at the now crowded bar, Eddie told Russ that he’d dated Caitlin for six months. He said she was, indeed “great,” but that her substance problems made her crazy, and that made it difficult to be around her, and that was why he broke it off.

“Crazy how?” Russ asked.

“She used to rob the drop bins at the Salvation Army thrift store,” Eddie said. “We’d break in at two a.m., and she’d slither in through the top slot with a flashlight. She’d throw stuff
out and try it on in the street, then put back what she didn’t want. ‘It’s for poor people, and I’m poor,’ she’d say.”

“She still does that,” Russ said. “It’s funny.”

“I thought it was funny, too, then it stopped being funny.”

Eddie explained that he couldn’t go along with the whole drug scene; the deals, the waiting, the staying up for days on end, the sketchy people coming to the door. So he broke up with her.

“You’re still friends, though, right?” Russ said.

“We’re friends when she’s clean,” Eddie said. “When she’s high she’s difficult to be around.”

In the press of bodies at the bar, a short, old woman bumped into Russ, spilling his rum and Coke down the front of his shirt.

“Excuse me,” Russ said to her.

She looked up and smiled at him.

“Is usually what you say when you bump into someone and spill their drink!” he said, looking down on the top of her head.

She slunk away.

Russ smiled at Eddie, looking like he was enjoying himself thoroughly.

Back at the table, Eddie gave Russ a five-minute version of his life story, explaining that he moved to Bisbee to get to know his father, whom he didn’t know existed before 1991, and to write the great American novel.

“How did the novel go?”

“It was a novel,” Eddie said. “It was American. It wasn’t so great.”
Russ asked what the story with his father was.

“I found out that who I thought was my father wasn’t my father, and that my father was my father and that he lived in Bisbee,” Eddie said.

“I like to think I’m a pretty smart guy,” Russ said, “but even I couldn’t follow that.”

“It must be nice always being the smartest person in the room,” Eddie said, starting to quote a scene from the movie *Broadcast News*.

“No,” Russ and Eddie said in unison, “it’s hell.”

They lifted their drinks and toasted wordlessly.

Eddie said he grew up believing that a man who turned out to be his stepfather was his father. Then, a year after his stepfather died, his mother confessed that his father was actually living in Bisbee, Arizona.

“That’s tough,” Russ said.

“No,” Eddie said. “It was a relief. My stepfather was an asshole.”

“So, you came out here to reunite with your father?”

“Yes,” Eddie said. “Also, I came out here to write.”

“What are you writing now?”

“When I’m not writing terrible novels, I freelance.”

“Like what?”


Russ nodded. The silence put Eddie on the spot. He plowed on nervously talking.
Eddie said he and his real father, Wolfe, got along and that moving to Bisbee was the best thing he ever did. He said Bisbee was the only town he had ever lived in or visited where the people living there had a photo or a painting of the town in their home. They loved the place.

“And you?” Eddie said.

“Need another drink,” Russ said.

Russ came back to the table, sighed, and recited his own life story in a brisk and perfunctory three minutes.

Born and raised in Westchester, as he had already said; moved to LA to become an actor; got a role in a sitcom; sitcom cancelled; moved to New York to join a punk band; played some gigs; got married; had two children, a son and a daughter; went to work for his father’s advertising agency in Danbury, Connecticut, and made a lot of money; developed a nice opiate and heroin addiction; went to rehab; is being sued by his wife for divorce; was sued by his brothers after his father died, and they're still suing him, long story don’t ask; lied about why he came to Bisbee, saying it was with a “friend,” but he was staying because it’s a 12-hour drive to LA and possible auditions; and he and Caitlin were getting along great.

“Must have been some friend to move all the way across the country with her,” Eddie said.

“It was more than that,” Russ said. “It was LA. Ever live in LA? I spent my life avoiding traffic. And the people—everyone’s on the make, everyone’s sizing you up. Fucking tiring. I figure Bisbee’s a good place to lay low.”

“A lot of people here are on the run from something,” Eddie said. “Wives, husbands, careers, warrants. All sorts of things.”
They started talking about their fathers. Eddie said his father at one point was a cinematographer. He worked on *The Wild Bunch*, with Sam Peckinpah. He said his father grew up with Lee Marvin and they were still friends.

“In my father’s phone book, under M it says Lee,” Eddie said. “I could never call him Lee.”

“Me either,” Russ said.

“It’s Lee Marvin, you know?”

“Absolutely.”

“My dad was a hard ass, but he was a decent man, a good man,” Russ said. “When he died, everything went to hell.”

Eddie asked Russ how his father died.

“Plane crash,” Russ said. “He had this little plane, and one day, he was flying, and it crashed. There was a problem with the fuel gauge. He ran out of gas and crashed.”

“When was this?”


“This was in Danbury?”

“In Southbury, yeah.”

Eddie put his beer down, leaned forward in his chair, and searched his fuzzy brain to make sure he was correct about what he was going to say.

“I covered that crash,” Eddie said.

“What?”

Eddie told Russ that he was a reporter for the Danbury *News-Times* and that he'd covered his father’s plane crash. He didn’t tell Russ that the only reason he recalled it clearly was because
it was a moment in his life when he became a mature person. A friend of Malcolm F. Dunn told Eddie that Dunn was a wonderful person. He said he was “very down to earth.”

Eddie laughed at the line, but then didn’t use it in the story. Even though he thought it was funny, he realized it would be in bad taste.

Eddie and Russ sat at the table for a long moment of silence, with the intimate weirdness of this connection settling in.

“I’m sorry—” Eddie said.

“I have to go,” Russ said getting up. “Nice talking to you.”

* * *

Eddie took a cigarette out, his fifth one in an hour. The last thing he wanted was for Russ to ask why he didn’t trust him enough to tell him about his mother earlier than one hour before the curtain went up. *When you tell a lie that makes it worse than the actual crime. Once you go Nixon, there ain’t no coming back.* Eddie searched himself for his lighter then remembered Caitlin took it when she went inside.

Russ came out and lit an American Spirit.

“Forty-five minutes until curtain,” he said. “We need to get inside.”

“Caitlin’s looking for you,” Eddie said. “Got a light?”

“She found me. Here,” he said throwing Eddie’s lighter to Eddie.

Russ started pacing on the opposite ellipses of the circle Eddie had been wearing out in the concrete. There was that shared, pre-show, kinetic anxiety buzzing wordlessly between the two of them as they walked.
True West wasn’t the play they wanted to do. The play they ached to perform was Waiting for Godot. “A high-wire dive into a teacup filled with sharks,” Eddie said about the play after reading the script.

“We don’t know each other well enough yet to do this,” Russ said.

“But,” Eddie said, batting his eyes, “from the moment we first met, I felt as though I’d known you forever.”

They looked for something more accessible but also featuring two characters. Russ called it a warm-up play. Caitlin suggested True West. They read it and went to work. They spent hundreds of hours learning lines. For weeks they got lost in each other’s family thickets. They talked about Eddie’s older brother. They discussed Russ’s older brother and his younger brother—he’s in the middle—and about the ways in which their family dynamics worked and foundered. With metaphorical tweezers and actual highlighter pens, they spent months parsing the philosophy of Sam Shepherd, feeling the geometry and texture of the words. They would have to be on stage together for every scene, every moment. They would share only three short scenes with two other actors. The rest was just the two of them. There was a crew of ten people. The theater only held eighty, but it was sold out for opening night.

This was their third play together, after The Tempest and Zoo Story, and the first they’d produced with their new company, Last Minute Productions. They started working on the play five months ago. That was July, and Thanksgiving was years away. Now there was that feeling in the air—it was time. Except for that one thing Eddie had to confess, they were ready to go.

Russ paced, ignoring Eddie. He left one cigarette burning in the ashtray outside the door to the school and lit another. He looked at the cigarette he left burning and at the one in his hand.

“If you want a cigarette,” Russ said, “there’s one right over there.”
He shrugged, and laughed. He said he was thinking of shaving his beard for the character. He was talking fast, stepping across the short length of the concrete entranceway in full stride. Eddie had seen him do this before, before the opening nights on their other plays. This was good. Then Russ said he decided fuck it, and let the beard stay. Which was good because, from the stress of the play, his skin had broken out under his beard. He laughed again.

“It’s like I’m a fucking kid,” he said.

Now, Eddie thought. I should tell him now.

“Russ,” he said.

Andrew the stagehand walked up to Russ on his way into the school. Russ asked about the water for the onstage sink that Andrew engineered, and about whether it would run properly when they needed it.

“Oh sure, of course,” Andrew said. “And if it doesn’t work, just pretend there’s water.”

Andrew and Russ spoke in a corner. They laughed. Lighthearted, loose, rigid, and ready.

There was forty minutes until curtain. If Russ sensed something was wrong, if in the smallest way he even felt something minutely askew between he and Eddie, the whole thing would collapse onstage in front of a packed house. They were connected on stage, together in every scene. Eddie had to tell him.

***

After that night at the Copper Queen Eddie didn’t see Russ for more than a month. Then, bored and between assignments, he auditioned for a local production of The Tempest.
He opened a door to a room at Central School for the audition and walked in on Russ hunched over, dragging a hand on the ground, walking with a limp and expostulating to the ceiling as Caliban, “I'll swear upon that bottle to be thy true subject; for the liquor is not earthly.”

Eddie sat down, stunned by Russ's transformation into the subhuman troll that is Caliban. It was complete, compelling, mortifying, and thoroughly hysterical. When it was over Russ finished his lines, straightened up, and sat down next to Eddie.

The room was silent.

“Good to see you,” Russ said to Eddie.

After the auditions Eddie was told he would play Stephano, a compatriot of sorts to Caliban.

“Looks like we’ll be working together,” Russ said, offering his hand. “Let’s go to the Queen.”

Eddie bought Russ a rum and Coke. He told him he thought his Caliban was amazing.

“No,” Russ said, “it’s not. It’s an act. Full of sound and fury and, you know the rest. If my agent saw this she’d kill me.”

“You have an agent?”

“Yes, and she’s always telling me to notch it back. ‘Russell, you’re 41 years of age. That’s not a kid anymore. Show the wisdom that comes from your years. Relax. Too much Al Pacino, not enough … I don’t know, Harrison Ford. Notch it back.’”

Eddie laughed without grasping what Russ was talking about. Russ spent one more drink schooling him about acting. Acting, Russ said, must be about honesty. His Caliban was pyrotechnics; it was a show, but it wasn’t from him, it wasn’t a moment of true transformation, only a moment of aping the character, not being the character.
“It’s junk food,” he said. “Empty calories. It looks good. Tastes great! But it has no value.”

“When you say ‘truth,’ do you mean the real truth?” Eddie said.

Russ answered that there was only one kind of truth.

Eddie always thought that good acting meant you convinced yourself of a lie—you made the lie the truth to yourself—and played that. He’d never once considered that the real truth was involved in any way.

He was going to mention this to Russ at the start of the next drink, but decided not to when Russ said the same way one must act is the same way one must lead one’s life, which was utterly, completely, and thoroughly honest.

“Otherwise, what’s the point?” he said. “Plus, you don’t have to keep track of all the shit you said. You don’t have to remember what lie goes where, and what you said to someone that you said differently to someone else. It just makes things easier.”

“Like Kevin Spacey, in American Beauty,” Eddie said. “That was very honest.”

“That was crap,” Russ said. “I knew what he was playing every minute he was playing it. He got onto the track of being a suburban guy and he just stayed there telling us over and over again that’s what he was. It was boring.”

Eddie asked Russ what actors he liked.

“Karl Malden,” he said quickly.

Eddie laughed.

Russ said every character Karl Malden played—Omar Bradley in Patton, Shooter in The Cincinnati Kid, Mitch in A Streetcar Named Desire, and all the others—had one thing in common.
“You never saw him act,” Russ said. “Not once. The guy’s a god. That’s what it’s all about.”

“I never thought about it, but sure.”

“Also,” Russ said, raising his voice and becoming more excited. “Karl Malden worked his way up to become a star.”

Eddie looked at him blankly.

“Look at the guys who hit it big with one movie—Brando in *Streetcar*, Stallone in *Rocky*, Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*—they’re dicks.”

“OK,” Eddie said.

“Malden, he toiled. He worked hard. He’s humble, and that’s why he’s cool. If I had the chance to meet any star, that would be my first choice. Am I right?”

“Amen,” Eddie said. “Amen, brother.”

“And when I get famous, I won’t be a dick. I’ll be like Karl Malden. I’ll work hard and be humble the whole time, no matter what.”

“I’m sure you will,” Eddie said.

Eddie and Russ decided to rehearse *The Tempest* together, along with a guy named Jeff, who was cast as Trinculo, on their own, separate from the other cast members.

“Most of our scenes are together,” Russ said. “It makes sense that we break away and do our own thing.”

Russ said he was meeting Caitlin for dinner. He got up to leave, then stopped.

“Sorry about the night in the bar,” he said. “The thing with my father and you, it kind of freaked me out.”

“No problem,” Eddie said.
“I thought it would be awkward because of Caitlin, and you spring that on me.”

“When Caitlin’s not the problem, you have problems,” Eddie said.

“I’m over it, but it was … weird.”

They made plans to rehearse together, and Russ left.

Eddie sat alone in the bar for almost an hour, turning the idea of honesty over in his mind. He left after he realized he was unable to grasp how it was supposed to work.

* * *

Eddie watched Russ and Andrew talk. He isn’t going to get mad at me because my mother died. He won’t hit me because my mother died. Would he? No, that’s ridiculous. No one in his right mind would do such a thing. I don’t want to tell him because I love him. I don’t want to let him down by having my mother die on opening night.

Andrew went inside. Russ took a drag on his cigarette and asked Eddie if he was ready. Eddie asked if they could speed through the drinking-on-the-floor scene one more time.

“Now?”

“I need to.”

Russ sat down next to Eddie. Their shoulders were touching.

Eddie’s supposed to be drunk in the scene. On stage he starts out standing, leaning against the kitchen sink with the bottle of Jack Daniel’s in his hand. Then he falls to the floor drunkenly. He and Russ worked for weeks on how to do this properly. They’d be out at the Grand Saloon, the Copper Queen Saloon, the St. Elmo, or Hot Licks, and Russ would pull Eddie close to him.
“Listen. Listen to how drunk people speak. Notice,” he’d say, “they don’t slur. That’s a cheap movie thing. That’s a cliché. That’s Foster Brooks and Dean Martin. People, when they’re on their way to getting drunk, are emphatic. They’re louder than usual. They vary their pitch. They speak to themselves. They speak to the feelings and emotions inside of themselves. Because of that, they find what they say fascinating, even if it’s not interesting to anyone else. But they don’t slur. That’s how you have to play it.”

Eddie quickly ran through his lines about his father’s teeth and how he lost them. With his back to the wall, Eddie as Austin offered Russ as Lee a swig from the bottle. Their legs were at a ninety-degree angle to their bodies, stiffened in front of themselves along the floor like Pinocchio’s legs before he became a boy.

Eddie was acting drunk without slurring. He spoke drunkenly and stupidly and described how Dad hitched to Mexico for new teeth. He talked about how they got Chinese food, then they got the doggy bag, then the teeth got lost. Eddie was emphatic. He was sometimes loud. He was spot on.

“Perfect,” Russ said. “That was perfect!” He grabbed Eddie’s face and kissed him on the cheek. “We’re good to go.”

While Russ was holding his face, Eddie said, “Russ, my mother died.”

Eddie said he was eating Coco Krispies and reading the New York Times when his brother called. He said she died in her sleep, peacefully.

Russ’s face was set close to Eddie’s when it went from smiling to slack. Then he recovered his expression. Like Eddie predicted, Russ wasn’t about to say one of the things you say. “I’m sorry.” Or “Oh my God, what happened?” Not even “Are you all right?”
Russ was the only person Eddie told. He was the only person he planned on telling. He was not being heroically stoic about this tragedy. He sincerely didn’t want to march in the instant pity parade that springs up when you drop that kind of news.

It’s not that Eddie wouldn’t have appreciated some sympathy. A hug would have been nice, maybe a few tears shed on his behalf, but now was not the time.

Russ got up and walked a few steps away before he stopped then turned toward Eddie.

Eddie stood up so they were looking at each other eye-to-eye.

“Well,” Russ said, “I never really liked my mother.”

A smile of what looked like relief appeared on his Russ’s face. There was a half an hour until the curtain went up. Eddie said he felt bad for putting Russ in this situation. He said he had to tell him because of how things might have gone sideways on stage if he didn’t tell him. Russ said he did the right thing.

Eddie asked Russ not to tell anyone else. He told Russ he wouldn’t be telling anyone else. Russ nodded and said that was probably best.

“We’ll talk about this,” Russ said. “We’ll get into it. You can tell me everything that happened and let it all out, and I’ll listen, and we’ll cry, and it’ll be great. And there’s something that I wanted to tell you. It’s not bad news. It can wait. Right now, we have a play to do.”

Russ put his arm around Eddie. Eddie hugged him back. Russ dragged Eddie into the school, then up the two flights of stairs, then into the theater.

Early in the play, Lee was irked at Austin because their mother let Austin watch her house but she didn’t trust Lee to watch it. Then they talked about the neighborhood and what it was like when they were kids. While they went over old times and geography, the two circled
one another in the wary way that two brothers will. Austin was timid. He was distant from his older brother. He was straining to avoid getting into a tangle that would lead to a fight because of a thing long buried and better left unsaid. Lee was pushing and taunting and verbally poking at Austin. He wanted to get into that tangle and have that fight.

Russ played Lee pacing with a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in his hand and talking in a surly, slumped-in-the-chair growl. “Yeah,” Russ said about their fictional mother’s antique plates, “just a lotta’ junk. Most of it's phony anyway. Idaho decals. Now who in the hell wants to eat offa plate with the State of Idaho starin’ ya in the face? Every time ya’ take a bite, ya’ get to see a little more.”

The eighty people in the theater didn’t know about the real death and the closeness of the words to the lives of the real people on the stage. They laughed.

Russ and Eddie smiled secretly at one another. Great rolling gales of laughter streamed onto the stage and settled at the feet of the two men. Russ waited for the audience to quiet down so he could deliver his next line. “Yeah, well, personally I don’t want to be invaded by Idaho when I’m eatin’.”

Kabooming explosions of louder laughter went racketing around the little theater with the intensity of dropped ordnance in a munitions factory.

The laughter kicked up a notch, releasing Eddie from the mooring lines of grief. He moved around the stage lightly, as though he were floating.

“Fucking A, brother,” Russ said into Eddie’s ear at intermission. He looked like a saucer-eyed seven-year-old boy who’s just seen a real live naked woman for the first time ever. Eddie went down the stairs and out the back door to the theater. The air from the smoker’s alley chilled
his hot sweat. He sat down on the ground and smiled at the image of Russ wearing that goofy, slack jawed look of joyful trauma on his face.

Eddie laughed remembering when Russ said *I never really liked my mother*. Then he stopped laughing, and sat very still, lost in wondering whether he liked his.

Eddie remembered a time he and his mother went shopping. It was a hazy June day in 1977, the Summer of Sam, in New York.

His mother stood in front of his stepfather’s desk in the tiny, grimy, two-room moving company office for money. She wore a tight, linen dress. His stepfather wore what he always wore, Wrangler jeans and a black t-shirt.

“I have a taxi waiting,” she said smelling of Chanel and playfully sitting at the edge of his desk with one high heel planted on the floor. She rolled her hand open until her palm was fully extended, eradicating all subtlety. His stepfather looked small and reduced below the ledge of her hand. He looked like all he had to live for was a gorgeous wife who was draining the life out of him. He reached into his back pocket for his wallet and extracted cash. He doled the money into her flat paw with a breathy anger, trying to save face by acting the part of a henpecked, comic-strip husband. She stabbed a reluctant kiss onto his bearded cheek and walked out with Eddie trailing behind.

They went to Macy’s at Broadway and Herald Square. Eddie told his mother he wanted a leather soccer ball. It was ten dollars. She said they couldn’t afford it. After shopping Eddie’s mother loaded him down with all but one of the bags from Macy’s, Ohrbachs, Saks, Woolworth’s, and Alexander’s. Eddie vanished under four autumn dresses, three pairs of shoes, a cape from Ulla on sale off-season, two sets of towels, and a set of oil paints with brushes for Eddie’s brother. Next time, she told Eddie, he would get a soccer ball.
She spun to hail a cab. In a store window, a red and gray teapot caught her eye.

“Wait here,” she said before going into the store.

Eddie put the bags down. It was five o’clock. People were starting to fill Herald Square going home. The swell of bodies made the air feel hotter.

She came out and put the box with the teapot in one of the bags on the sidewalk. Eddie stood up so the bags could be re-stacked onto him.

The teapot tapped them out. They had to take the subway. She walked, and Eddie waddled under the bags three blocks to the F train. Eddie, his mother, and their bags took up four seats under the glowering stares of rush hour passengers who were standing and swaying listlessly from the ends of their arms at the end of their day.

One of them, a tall man in a blue seersucker suit gripping a strap right over the two, stared intently down at Eddie’s mother from 28th Street to West 4th Street. Eddie kicked her shoe and raised his eyebrows to clue her in.

“Do you have a problem?” she asked him as the train pulled into Broadway-Lafayette.

He snapped out of his reverie.

“No,” he said. “No problem. Your name isn’t, by any chance, Theresa, is it?”

Eddie watched them cagily figure out whether they knew each other and how. Eddie’s mother relaxed when the man told her he was an assistant for Richard Avedon. He said he worked for him when he shot her for a Vogue cover. He asked if she was still modeling. She said no.

“That’s a shame,” he said, “a real shame.”
His stop was next, Delancy Street. He took out a business card and handed it to her. He said she should call if she decided she wanted to get back into the business. He was shooting catalogs, but he was on his way up.

“You know him?” Eddie asked as the train rolled out of the Delancy Street station, taking them closer to home.

“No.”

Maybe, Eddie thought, *he can shoot some head shots for me. I should ask. I should tell her about King Kong. I’m on my way up, too, and I could use some glossies.*

“Are you going to call him?” Eddie said.

“Please,” she said, dropping the card from her hand like a dime tip. “Catalogs? Give me a break. Besides, your father would kill me.”

The train rocked them back and forth for a few moments. They didn’t speak.

“I was in a movie,” Eddie said.

She didn’t hear him.

“I said I was in a movie,” Eddie said.

She looked at him then jerked her head back in a fake double take.

*King Kong,* Eddie said. “I was in *King Kong.*”

“What role did you play?”

Eddie explained that he didn’t have a specific role. He said he was in the crowd at the end.

“An extra?” his mother said before letting out a dismissive laugh. “You were an extra. That’s not the same as ‘being in a movie,’ sweetie.”

“They paid me.”
“You’re adorable,” she said.

Eddie stepped on the card and dragged it under his sneaker close to him. When she wasn’t looking, he palmed it and tucked it into his pocket.

Eddie sat in the alley behind the Central School remembering that day as it really happened, before memory hardened into nostalgia. It came to him not because it was extraordinary, but because it was typical. She didn’t like me. She gave me nothing. Am I like her? Am I cruel and demeaning? Is her personality hereditary?

He clicked through a list of important people in his life and couldn’t find one that he hadn’t kept an emotional distance from. Is that my mother’s ultimate legacy?

He was running through the list a second time when he saw Russ in front of his face.

“Hey!” Russ said. “Wake up, buddy.”

Eddie snapped back to where he was, and what he was supposed to be doing.

Russ, he thought. He’s the only friend I’ve ever had. My mother did give me something. She showed me the kind of person I don’t want to be. Thank God for Russ.

“You’re not going all goofy on me, are you?” Russ said. He grabbed Eddie’s shoulder.

Eddie put his hand over Russ’s hand, smiled up at him, and said he was fine.

“You’re doing great,” Russ said. “I’m really feeling it. It’s real.”

Eddie blushed and thanked Russ. Then he felt bad because he was faking his way through every line. He was lying, and getting away with it in front of Russ. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Eddie wondered.

“It’s going well,” Eddie said. “It’s a good crowd, a funny crowd. They’re laughing. A lot.”

“It’s a funny play,” Russ said.
“Not that funny.”

“Well, it is tonight.”

Back stage, with five minutes to go, Eddie readied himself for Act II. He resolved to dig deeper for that truth, for reality and honesty. He knew it would work better because he’d seen it work with Russ.

“Your dad’s in the audience,” Russ said from behind him.

“Uh huh,” Eddie said.

“What did he say?”

“About what?”

“About your mother.”

“I haven’t told him,” Eddie said, surprised that it had never occurred to him to tell his father that his mother died. He had never seen his parents together in the same room, much less together as a couple.

“Do you want me to tell him?” Russ said.

“No,” Eddie said. “I’ll do it. Let’s get ready.”

Walking to the wings Eddie tried to recall the last time he spoke to Wolfe. It had been almost a month, since the day Eddie introduced Wolfe to Russ.

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Russ showed up at Eddie’s house asking about guns.

“Do you know anyone who knows about guns?”

“Good morning to you,” Eddie said opening the door so Russ could come in.
Russ explained that he had an audition in LA in three weeks and in that time he had to
learn how to use guns. Eddie asked what kind of guns.

“Guns,” Russ said. “Rifles, pistols, grenade launchers … guns. It’s an action movie
thing.”

Russ had a phobic fear of guns. His father was a hunter. When Russ was 11, on the first
day of deer season, his father quietly came into his room and sat on the end of his bed. Russ
woke up and saw a man decked out in camouflage, with the butt of a Browning A bolt resting
upright on his thigh, sitting on his bed. He screamed for almost a minute before his father calmed
him down. Ever since that jolting, morning surprise Russ couldn’t stand even the sight of a gun.

“Do I know a guy who knows about guns?” Eddie said pouring coffee. “Obviously you
haven’t met my father.”

They found Eddie’s father, Wolfe, at his house getting ready to go out to the post office, a
daily ritual of socializing that had significance in Bisbee because there was no home mail
delivery on account of the steep and twisting staircases leading to almost every house.

Wolfe looked nothing like Eddie, who was decidedly bookish. Wolfe’s face was sun
scaled, the color of aerating tobacco. His hands curled at the end of arms that seemed too long
for his body. He had waxy, old-man lips, and a bushy mustache. From thinking or squinting
against the sun the skin around his eyes was bracketed by gutters of wrinkles. He was light
framed and small, maybe 5’ 6’. He was wearing Levis, a white button-down shirt, a tweed jacket
that looked as old as his 65 years, and a ranch style Stetson that was once cream colored, but was
now more of a mousey gray from sweat and rain. He reminded Russ of the actor Richard Boone.
Either that, he thought, or a second-string Marlboro Man.
“Wolfe, this is my friend Russ,” Eddie said. “Russ, Wolfe. He’s the guy I told you about, the actor.”
Rus leaned over and shook hands from a distance. Wolfe asked what they were up to.
Eddie was smiling the way a person does when they’re introducing two people they want to become friends.
“Russ wants to know about guns,” Eddie said.
Wolfe picked up a holster off the back of a chair in the living room. It held an enormous silver six-shooter. He strapped it around his waist.
“Oh yeah,” Wolfe said. “What do you want to know?”
Eddie clapped his hands and announced he had an article about local painter Peter Young to write, so he would leave the two of them to it.
Russ walked with him to the door.
“He’s wearing a gun,” Russ said. “You’re leaving me alone with him?”
“He always wears that gun,” Eddie said. “Don’t worry. He won’t bite.”
Russ explained to Wolfe that he had an audition to play the part of a bounty hunter. The character not only had a deep and vast knowledge of guns, he wasn’t afraid to use them.
“This could be a big break for me,” Russ said. “But, I’ve never shot a gun in my life. I’ve never even held one.”
“Uh huh.”
“What’s that gun?”
Wolfe didn’t even look at or motion toward the gun on his hip. He said it was an 1876 model Navy Colt revolver. He said it was single action, meaning that you had to pull the hammer back each time you fired a shot.
“Like in the movies, when they have their hand over it when they’re shooting?”

“Like in the movies,” Wolfe said.

“It’s not loaded, is it?”

“A gun’s not worth much if it’s not loaded.”

“I have to tell you,” Russ said. “Guns scare the shit out of me.”

“All right then,” Wolfe said. “Let’s go shooting.”

He took Russ into the middle bedroom of his four-room adobe house. He opened a long metal box and started pulling guns out: another single action Colt, a lever-action Winchester rifle, a Glock automatic handgun, and, finally, an AK-47.

“These are not loaded,” Wolfe said bent over the metal box. He extracted four boxes of bullets and two bandeleros of huge, clanking shells, which he placed around Russ’s neck like garlands.

Russ slung the AK-47 over one shoulder and the Winchester over the other so they rested on his back. He tucked the heavy Colt into his belt on the left and the automatic on the right. He juggled the boxes of bullets, dropping one box of Remington 3840s three times, until he was able to steady his nerves.

Russ walked his weaponed weight behind Wolfe down his eighty-three steps. At the bottom of the stairs he saw Wolfe cross the street and walk over to a beat up 1975 Cadillac. Russ followed, but had to pass through a group of tourists. He made an effort to act nonchalant first as they parted then when the parents embraced their children to protect them.

Wolfe drove three miles to the shooting range on Airport Road. Wolfe explained to Russ three times that you don’t pull a trigger, you squeeze. Russ had no idea what that meant, or what
the difference between squeezing and pulling a trigger entailed, but he nodded in stern agreement each time he heard it.

They arrived at the range, which was just a flat spot of earth with a backstop of a berm in the middle of the open desert. The two of them stood looking into the trunk deciding about the tools for the business at hand. Wolfe said they would use the AK-47, the Glock, and the Colt revolver to start with. He placed two boxes of shells into Russ’s hands.

“This enough bullets?” Russ said.

“Sure.”

Morgan's hands then flowed over the guns in the trunk like water, loading bullets, flicking safeties, checking mechanisms, adjusting sites, and otherwise tinkering them into readiness.

“What do I use?” Russ asked when they were standing looking toward the berm at two old, shot up washers, one television with the screen blasted through, and at what seemed like hundreds of bullet-riddled milk jugs.

“Use whatever you want. The Colt, that's a good one to start with. It’s simple. Now, find something to shoot.”

Russ looked over the litter of plastic jugs, cans, and paper targets pock shredded into new forms of geometry. The weight of the gun made his arm seem withered and insignificant for accomplishing what he was about to attempt.

“I don't know what to shoot.”

“Try for that milk jug. You can hit that.”

Russ spread his legs in a gun-firing stance, and gripped the gun. Wolfe placed his hands lightly over Russ’s to correct his grip, explaining how to hold it to blunt the recoil. He told him
how the hammer was resting on an empty chamber to prevent it from going off if it was dropped, or so you didn’t accidentally shoot your balls off taking it out of the holster.

“How the hammer was resting on an empty chamber to prevent it from going off if it was dropped, or so you didn’t accidentally shoot your balls off taking it out of the holster.

“Now what?” Russ said.

“Pull the hammer back. That's it. Now, aim and squeeze.”

Russ aimed, squeezed, and missed.

“What did I do wrong?”

“You missed, is what you did wrong. Keep firing until you hit it, then shoot something else. Don't be afraid.”

Russ fired. Then he fired again. On his fourth try he plunked a milk jug.

“I hit it!” he yelled. “Did you see that thing jump? Holy shit! I am a bad ass!”

Wolfe fired a few lackadaisical rounds from the AK-47 while Russ reloaded the Colt. He calmly started hitting targets farther away while Wolfe stood off to the side saying nothing.

“This kicks ass.”

"What?"

“I said, I'm really enjoying the whole gun, shooting culture thing. Why didn’t I ever do this before?”

“It's like Goebbels said, 'Every time I hear the word culture, I reach for my pistol.'”

“Yeah. Well, this is fun.”

“Sure it is. Shoot blasting!”

Wolfe readied the AK-47 for Russ, who mentioned how, as a team, they could easily knock over a convenience store.

“Uh huh.”
Russ started shooting with the assault rifle and hit almost every object he aimed at.

“I have found my calling,” he said to Wolfe. “Compared to me Clint Eastwood is a stone punk.”

Russ switched the assault rifle to automatic. He didn't aim at anything in particular, but he still hit everything. Phrases like rebel base camp, The Kid, desperadoes, and lock and load, bounced around in his head as he laid waste to the godless trash and garbage spread before him.

“You see something up there?” Wolfe asked when Russ had ceased wreaking carnage on the inanimate masses.

“Where?”

“I thought I saw something moving up in that hill. Sometimes kids come out here. Be careful to not shoot anyone. People don't like it when you shoot them. You didn't see anything?”

“I wasn't looking but, no, I didn't see anything. Should we stop?”

“No, it's okay. Take it off automatic and aim low.”

As Russ was telling a Coors can to “smile when you say that,” he caught a glint on the hill. He sensed movement. Then he heard a siren and cop tires brushing aside dirt as they came closer.

The cop car skidded to a stop.

“We're busted,” Russ said.

“We're not breaking any laws.”

A police officer stepped boots first, stomach next, gun last from his patrol car.

“Wolfe,” he said.

“Ed,” Wolfe said, trading nods with the cop.

“Been looking for you.”
“Uh huh.”

The two armed men stared at one another.

“I don't know about you guys,” Russ said, “but I'm comfortable with how we've all come heavily armed to share this special moment.”

The two men didn’t bother looking at Russ.

“I got something for you here,” the cop said, his hand disappearing into his tan, cop shirt.

“What's that?” Morgan said, stepping closer to the cop.

Russ wondered if it was an arrest warrant. Was it an order representing seizure of property? A subpoena? Or was it some other kind of innocuous, official, life-changing papers with a judge's red wax seal stamped on the bottom?

“Jesus Christ,” Wolfe said, taking a narrow strip of paper from the cop’s hand. “That's great. Where'd you get these?”

“We were cleaning out some files and I found them behind a drawer. I thought you'd like to have them for your scrapbook.”

"These are great. Here," Wolfe said to Russ, “take a look.”

It was a strip of three smoky, essentially gray photos, like those taken at an old bus station photo booth in Hartford, or some other abandoned city, years ago. In each of them Wolfe’s hair was down to his shoulders. He was clean-shaven. He wore a grin and his long, grimy nails clutched a number.

They were mug shots of Wolfe. He looked drunk or stoned.

“When were these taken?” Russ asked, trying to act casual.

Wolfe shrugged.
Russ stood there holding an assault rifle in Arizona with a cop and his friend’s father smirking over the totems of one man’s criminal past.

Russ noticed in the second picture that Wolfe had a weak profile.

“Those are something else, all right,” Russ said. “What did they get you for, anyway?”

Wolfe fixed his eyes on the photos, attempting, Russ thought, to discern a piece of his past in his mug shot face.

“Hell, I don't know,” Wolfe said. “Drunk, probably.”

“Mopery,” the cop said laughing.

“That's it,” Wolfe said, laughing. “Mopery with intention to gawk.”

“What’s mopery?” Russ said.

The two of them stopped laughing.

“It’s just a made up charge cops in Chicago would run you in for,” Wolfe said. “It’s nothing.”

Afterward, at the Copper Queen, Russ had a rum and Coke while Wolfe nursed an iced tea.

“You don’t drink,” Russ said.

“Nope.”

“But you used to.”

“Yup.”

Russ thought about how Eddie didn’t know his father existed until he was 26, and that he didn’t meet him until he was 27. He’d never asked Eddie about why that was so. Sitting in Bisbee 2,000 miles away from his own children, and not knowing when he might see them again, he didn’t have to ask. So little in life is planned. Sitting with Wolfe at the bar, it dawned on Russ
that whatever happened between Eddie’s mother and father, and between Eddie and Wolfe, 

drinking played a part. Still, he was curious about how much of a part.

“When did you quit drinking?” Russ asked.

“I didn’t quit,” Wolfe said. “I retired undefeated.”

By the time Russ was starting his third rum and Coke he and Wolfe were discussing the 

ways in which people got shot in movies.

“So, let’s say I shoot a guy with the Colt, how far would he go flying back?” Russ said.

“Flying back? What are you talking about?”

“In the movies, the way people go flying back when they get shot.”

“That doesn’t happen.”

“Yes it does.”

“If I were to shoot you in the chest, or the stomach, you wouldn’t go flying back.”

“What would you do?”

“You would fold over and fall to the ground,” Wolfe said.

“What about if I used the AK-47.”

“It would be the same thing. The only way you would go flying backward would be if I 

shot you with a rocket, or a missile, or something.”

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s the same as being punched in the stomach,” Wolfe said. “What happens when you 
punch someone in the stomach? They crumple—”

“Forward and fall down,” Russ said. “Gotcha.”
As Russ contemplated having the cliché from just about every movie with a shot fired utterly ruined for him, the only other man in the Queen, who sat across the bar wearing a white suit and a ten-gallon Stetson, raised his glass and toasted to Russ and Wolfe.

“You fellas sure are interesting,” he said in a thick Texas drawl. “Where y’all from?”

“Here and there,” Wolfe said.

“What is that you boys do?”

“This and that,” Wolfe said, taking a sip from his iced tea and letting the subsequent silence fill the space between them.

“Oh,” the man said as his get-to-know-you smile drooped. “I get ya.”

The man ambled out the door. Wolfe asked Russ what sort of chance he had with his audition. Russ said he probably wouldn’t get the part. He said he was too amped up, too energetic. It was off putting, not only for casting directors, but also for audiences, unless the part was just right. Wolfe suggested that he should perhaps not be that way. Perhaps, he suggested, Russ should be more flexible in his approach to acting.

“But that wouldn’t be honest,” Russ said.

Wolfe squinted at Russ.

“There are other ways,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Well, have you ever thought of acting?”

Russ laughed even though he knew that Wolfe wasn’t joking.
For the next six days straight Russ met with Wolfe to shoot guns and drink drinks. For the first time since he arrived in Bisbee, Russ’s days were filled. He started his days working at Doug Simon’s, spent the afternoon with Wolfe, and ended his day rehearsing *True West*.

After another day’s shooting and drinking Russ rolled over in bed to ask Caitlin about Wolfe. Caitlin, who was 27, had known Wolfe for practically her whole life. Russ asked what he was like when he drank. She said that, to a little girl, Wolfe was loud and scary when he drank.

“When he went,” she said, “he went hard.”

Then seven years ago Wolfe’s second wife died. She lingered with cancer for almost a year and, in that time Wolfe, having to take care of her, sobered up. After she died he didn’t seem to care about drinking. She said he didn’t seem to really care about much of anything.

“I remember he said one time about quitting drinking, ‘If you ate Hershey bars every day for forty years one day you’d get sick of Hershey bars,’” Caitlin said.

“There’s something so cool about him,” Russ said.

“Well, you’d seem cool too if you didn’t care about anything.”

Russ woke up at 3:30 a.m. Caitlin was snoring next to him. He liked that she snored. It made her beauty more real. Russ padded into the kitchen to get some water. He opened the cabinet, took down a glass, turned on the tap and, while waiting for the water to get cold, it clicked.

At Boston University Russ took a film class about method acting and its impact on cinema. On November 8, 1980—the day after Steve McQueen died in Mexico—the professor spent the class talking about the essence of cool, about what it really meant to be cool. He seemed to be speaking more to himself than to the class as he whittled down the reasons one actor or actress was cool, while another was not. The professor, who had studied at the Actor’s
Studio and been in a few movies as a supporting actor, spoke about Lee Marvin, Steve McQueen, Paul Newman, and Marlon Brando. He said those actors, and others, personified cool not because of what they did or the way in which they did it, but because of how they didn’t care; didn’t care in the sense that they didn’t respond to society’s rules the way most people did. They kept the world at arm’s length. And it wasn’t that they were pretending to not care. They truly and sincerely did not care. McQueen had been in boy’s homes as a kid and had gone through terrible times. His attitude when he grew up was utterly dismissive because, hell, what could anyone do to him that hadn’t already been done? Lee Marvin saw heavy action in World War II. What could the world do to him worse than that?

These same explanations applied to Wolfe. He was the essence of cool. Russ realized that in the audition he needed to copy Wolfe.

Caitlin walked in and asked Russ if he was all right.

“Huh?”

“Why are you running the water?”

“Oh, sorry,” Russ said, filling his glass. “Sam Shepard.”

“What?”

“That’s the fake name that Steve McQueen used when he checked into the cancer clinic in Mexico where he died. That’s also the name of the guy who wrote True West. Isn’t that funny?”

“Hysterical,” Caitlin said. “Let’s go to bed.”

Every day afterward when Russ saw Wolfe—shooting, going to the post office, shopping at Safeway, or hanging out at the Queen or the Stock—Russ studied him. When he got home he practiced his speech, mannerisms, and tics. He had a soft and lulling cadence and tone to his
voice. It reminded Russ of when a parent reads a fairy tale for the tenth time to a child who needs to hear it exactly the same as before because that's how he remembers it. Wolfe spoke with measured beats between his words. He was aware of what he was saying because he thought about what he was going to say. He rarely said a lot at once but when he spoke his words had a gravitas, a force. It was the absolute truth of his say so. Once, at the post office, Russ came out from checking his mail and saw Wolfe talking to a guy named John. He spoke to John almost every time that he saw them and, although he’d never heard what they spoke about, Russ assumed they were friends. When Russ came up next to Wolfe he saw that as John spoke Wolfe looked over John’s right shoulder, didn’t make eye contact, and merely said yes or no or uh huh to whatever John said. He was a performance of utter dismissal. Then they said goodbye, Russ and Wolfe walked to the Cadillac, and got in.

“I thought you liked John” Russ said.

“Not really.”

“Why not?”

“He’s not a likeable guy,” Wolfe said.

He didn’t laugh often but when he did it was absolutely sincere. His shirts were always wrinkled, his jackets were always soiled, his hat was a mess, his hair was a mess, and his jeans had stains on the thighs from wiping his hands. None of it detracted from making him an extremely handsome man. He never ever, bragged or talked about himself.

One day, for instance, at the post office Wolfe was excitedly flagged down by a 21-year-old kid named Roberto Esquer, who Wolfe had known since he was born.

“I wanted to let you know that your secret is safe with me,” Roberto said.

“All right,” Wolfe said.
“I flew to San Francisco last week,” Roberto said. “I met Lee Marvin at the Tucson airport. He told me.”

“He told you,” Wolfe said.

Roberto said he saw Lee Marvin sitting in the airport bar and went over and introduced himself. They got to talking, and had a couple of drinks. Roberto said he lived in Bisbee and Lee said, “Do you know a guy named Wolfe?”

Roberto said he did.

“Then Lee Marvin looks right at me, right into my eyes, and he says, ‘Don’t tell anyone, but I’m Wolfe’s father.’”

“Uh huh,” Wolfe said.

Russ looked at Wolfe confused.

“So I just want to let you know that your secret is safe with me,” Roberto said.

“Lee is pulling your leg,” Wolfe said.

Roberto shook his head.

“Roberto,” Wolfe said, “we grew up together. We were kids together in Woodstock, New York. We’re the same age.”

“I don’t believe you,” Roberto said.

“Lee is an actor,” Wolfe said. “He gets paid to lie. He’s very good at it. He’s lying.”

With that, Roberto clapped Wolfe on the shoulder, nodded, put his finger to his lips, turned, and walked away.

The one time Russ saw Wolfe unsure of himself was one day at the Stock when Wolfe asked Russ how Eddie was doing. He said he hadn’t spoken to him in a while.

“He’s great. He’s going to be great in the play.”
“That’s good,” Wolfe said. “That’s good to know.”

Russ saw Wolfe staring at his iced tea.

“Something wrong?” Russ said.

“I worry about Eddie,” Wolfe said. “He seems like kind of a lightweight.”

Russ said nothing for a long time.

“I think Eddie gets it,” Russ said.

“You think so?”

“Yeah, I do. He gets it.”

Wolfe nodded and ordered another iced tea.

“You are not taking my car so you can go out and bang your skanky ass ex-girlfriend whores in my backseat, you fucking perv,” Caitlin yelled at Russ as he stood in the living room of her house asking for the keys to the car for the twentieth time so he could go to his audition in LA. “Why are you even going? I wouldn’t cast you to fuck a goat, and I enjoy goat fucking.”

A week before the audition, Caitlin agreed to loan Russ her car so he could drive to LA on his own. He said he needed time to drive on his own so he could get in character. What he really needed time was to morph into Wolfe and he didn’t want Caitlin around for that.

The morning he was supposed to leave, though Caitlin was high on the remnants of a teener and downing airline bottles of Cuervo. In the midst of her rant Caitlin stopped to go to the bathroom. He pawed through her purse, shoving the two glass pipes aside, and grabbed her keys. As he was pulling away he saw her in the rearview running barefoot down the street yelling that she would report the car stolen and hoping Russ died of syphilis before he got back.
When Russ met with his agent, Syd Swinden, for forty-five minutes the next day he said two words: hello when he arrived and goodbye when he left.

In the audition Russ spoke softly like Wolfe; he addressed the casting director politely, but dismissively like the character might have, and like he saw Wolfe do with John; he handled the guns expertly while barely even acknowledging or looking at them; and after they thanked him, he merely nodded and left.

On the way home he not only knew he’d nailed the audition. He knew he’d found a future in the movies.

* * *

As Austin, Eddie was on stage at the start of Act II, and he was desperate. His agent in the play had rejected his simple love story. His career as a screenwriter is shattering into little pieces.

“I’ve got too much at stake,” Austin told Lee. “Everything’s riding on this project.”

There was laughter. There shouldn’t have been. Eddie noticed though, that it was coming from only one woman. It was one woman, who apparently laughed at anything. She had a gorgeous, lilting, infectious laugh that set everyone else off. Her inappropriate outbursts were making Eddie miserable. The only way to get the play on track, Eddie decided, the only way to make the play successful, was to make that woman miserable.

Fifteen minutes later, Russ and Eddie were on the floor for the drunk scene. They’re drunkenly swapping swigs from the Jack Daniels bottle. Austin was telling Lee all about Dad in
the desert and his teeth and the chop suey. The woman in the audience launched a little laugh, but it got smothered in a concentrated silence.

_Take that_, Eddie thought about the woman whose laugh was dead.

Twenty minutes after that, the crowd clapped and stood while Russ, Eddie, and the rest of the cast blushed, bowed, smiled, and left the stage feeling good about themselves. On his way off stage, Eddie saw the woman with the beautiful laugh stop clapping to wipe a tear off her cheek. _Take that_, he thought, _and choke_.

Backstage, Russ and Eddie hugged. Russ planted his lips and briny beard against Eddie’s cheek, gave him a big smacking kiss, and told him he loved him.

Eddie was soaking from sweat. He changed into a fresh shirt backstage. Russ changed clothes next to him. They didn’t speak. Eddie put his leather jacket on and grabbed his bag. He prepared himself to meet the people from the audience who were gathered in the lobby. He flexed his smile and practiced a bashful “thank you” look. He wanted to get through the crowd as quickly as possible. Like a wheelman at a bank job, he stopped for a moment and planned the most efficient exit. He decided to come from behind the stage, keep his head down, and move quickly. He told himself to smile but keep an overall urgent look on his face, like there was an appointment he needed to keep and he would love to stay and talk if only he could, but he really had to go and sure, maybe I’ll see you out at the bar in an hour or so. He would get past the crowd, tiptoe down the two flights of wide, creaking, school stairs, lean his body onto one of the four school-door release bars, and then he’d be out of the building and set free into the wide, welcoming Arizona night for the three-minute walk home.

“You were amazing.”
Caitlin was backstage talking to Russ. She stood next to Eddie, but faced the opposite direction. She had a rose in her hand. She pushed it toward Russ.

Then he looked at her. She looked warm and open and soft.

Eddie remembered a year ago when he saw Caitlin at The Tempest. He was backstage and was watching the lobby at intermission to get an idea of what the crowd thought.

He saw Caitlin sorting through show programs on a table before picking one up, then dropping it back down. He had only ever seen her in jeans and a t-shirt. That night she wore a skirt, stockings, heels, and a jacket. While she looked stunning, she also looked completely out of place. The programs were only light blue office paper folded and printed with black ink. This was not a Playbill. She stayed at the table, two of her fingertips resting on the programs. She looked around then looked up, unsure of protocol, of what to do. She appeared stricken and uncomfortable.

He stepped out to help her. She said hello and smoothed her skirt.

“Too much?”

Eddie shook his head and said, “You look a little nervous. Are you all right?”

“These are free?” she asked, running her hand over the programs again.

“Yes, take one.”

“Listen, I have to go. Not my kind of crowd,” she said. “Plus, I hate schools. I just came to see you, but I can’t stay.”

“All right,” he said, “but I wish you would stay.”

She turned and left.
That was a week before they started dating, before Caitlin starting doing more and more drugs and before everything fell apart. *No one is all bad,* Eddie thought. *God, she was beautiful that night.*

Russ turned to Eddie.

“We have definite raves from one person so far,” Russ said to Eddie with his arm around Caitlin’s waist.

“You liked it?” Eddie said.

“It was great,” she said quietly. “I really liked it.”

“We’re all going out for a drink at the Queen, if you feel like going,” Russ said.

“Thanks, but I’m probably going to pass,” Eddie said.

Russ said that, of course he understood. He told Eddie he would call him later.

“Oh,” Eddie said to Russ. “You wanted to tell me something?”

“Yes,” Russ said. “But, it can wait. Really. It’s not a big deal.”

“Caitlin said it’s something big. It’s ‘life changing.’”

“Yeah, well,” Russ said, “you know Caitlin. It’s not a big deal. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Eddie backed through the lobby toward the stairs, shaking hands and making false promises to come out for drinks. The play was over, and he wanted the drama to end.

At the doors he turned and saw his father.

“I heard,” Wolfe said. “Russ told me.”

People walked by talking and laughing. One of them yelled to Eddie, “You coming?” He raised his hands in supplication, nodded, and smiled over Wolfe’s shoulder. They were probably on their way to the Copper Queen Saloon down the street. It was, after all, Friday night.

“How did you like the play?” Eddie said.
“It was very good.”

Eddie didn’t know what to say. He hugged his father, who hugged him back.

“I’m going to just go home,” Eddie said breaking from the embrace so he didn’t start crying in front of everyone.

“All right,” Wolfe said. “I’ll come see you tomorrow.”

Eddie took a step then turned back to Wolfe.

“Mom didn’t really like kids, did she?” he said.

“No, not really,” his father said.

“You don’t really like kids, do you?”

“Not really.”

“So, why did you have kids?”

Wolfe shrugged and said, “It’s just what you did back then.”

Eddie was going to laugh but didn’t when he realized his father wasn’t joking.

Eddie’s house was dark. He sat on the couch. He left the lights off. His cat, Lou, jumped into his lap and started talking. He let her out. He sat back down.

It was 9:30. It was Friday night. Eddie opened the door to let Lou back in. She meowed a thank you and walked back into the house. It was 9:32. Eddie didn’t want to be alone. He wanted to go out and have fun. He wanted to see friends. He finally removed his coat but left the lights off.

*Is that knocking?* Eddie woke from a two-minute nap. The knocking was tentative, small. He opened the door.

“It looked like you weren’t home,” Russ said.
“I’m not,” Eddie said.

Russ came in and set a bottle of Moet on the coffee table.

“Let’s celebrate,” he said.

“Are we celebrating the play? Are we celebrating the fact my mother died? Or … are we celebrating something entirely different?”

Russ threw his arms open. He smiled a high-wattage grin, turned the smile off, sat down and said, “Not sure what to do here.”

Eddie looked at him, nodded, and waved his hands in a gesture of *Out with it already!*

“I got a movie!” Russ said. “My agent called, and I got a fucking movie. I’m going to be in a major, like, fucking motion picture.”

“I’m … wow,” Eddie said.

“I hated not telling you. I am so sorry. But I only signed the contract this morning so it was official. Then, with your mom—”

“No, it’s fine,” Eddie said. “When … what … what happens next?”

“Caitlin and I are moving to L.A.”

“What? When?”

“The day after the play closes. After the final bow we finish packing and get on the road.”

For a long time Eddie stared at the coffee table, and said nothing. Russ looked at Eddie. He came over and slapped him on the back.

“Glasses!” Russ said bouncing toward the kitchen and opening cabinets. “Don’t you have champagne glasses?”

“I find them to be gauche.”
Russ filled two water glasses with champagne. They clinked glasses, and Russ offered a muted “Cheers.”

They sat on the couch together, not talking. They just drank and pet the cat.

“You want to—”

“Get out of here?” Eddie said when their glasses were dry. “Oh, yeah.”

“Great,” Russ said, opening the front door. “I’ve had my fill of awkward silences for one night. Let’s get hammered.”
Chapter 6

Russ is clutching a diamond shape of chain link and looking toward Guantanamo Bay. He scans the steep hills on either side of the Naval Base that creates a forty-five-square-mile world tucked away from the rest of the world, while the sea breezes and ocean views caress the body and the soul.

“It’s gorgeous,” Russ says to Eddie. “No one ever talks about how gorgeous it is. I’d love to get a thirty-foot cabin cruiser and head south. That would be fun. Just get away on the ocean.”

Russ breathes the sea air in and closes his eyes.

Eddie is thinking about the deep port, the airstrip, the refueling stations, the underwater gates, and the barbed wire fence with minefields on either side.

“Yeah,” Eddie says, staring at the concrete pad beneath them as they both lean against one wall of their outside, chain-link enclosure. “That’s not in the brochure.”

“Take a look. Come on, take a nice long look.”

Eddie lifts his face and sees the surf. There aren’t any footprints on the pure white sand. It looks as warm and as welcome as a bath.

He turns left. There are two guards with AK-47s hanging on their shoulders walking slowly and glancing at the inmates in the other cages as they pass.

“Yeah,” Eddie says, “hell of a view.”

He goes back to sleep. Russ chuckles.

An hour later, Eddie wakes up. Russ is crying.

“What did we do?” Russ whispers. “I mean, what the hell did we do? Did we do anything? Because, if we did something, I’d sure like to know what it was.”
“I'm sure they'll tell us.

Two guards walk to the gate. One puts a key in a padlock and turns it. He unspools a chain large enough to hold a tanker. They both come into the enclosure.

“Dunn!” a guard says. “Russell!”

The other guard grabs Russell roughly by the shoulder and pulls him to his feet.

“OK, Mr. Movie Star, time to meet your biggest fan.”

The other guard shackles Russ’s feet and handcuffs him to a leather belt around his waist. He then holds onto Russ while the other guard opens the gate, leads Russ out.

While he’s feeding the giant chain back into place, Russ and Eddie look at one another.

“You’re right,” Eddie says. “This is a gorgeous spot. I’m thinking when this is all over, we get some sand between our toes for a week or two.”

“Eddie, I'm scared.”

“No, no, no. It's all right. You haven't done anything wrong. They can't do anything to you if you haven't done anything wrong. Right?

“Yeah. Right.”

“Hang in there, buddy.”

“That’s the spirit, guys,” the guard holding Russ says. “If you did anything wrong—anything at all—you'd be the only one in the place. You’re just like everyone else here. No one here has ever done anything wrong. It's weird. It's like the island of misfit toys for terrorists. Let's go.”

Russ exhales several times and tries to compose himself, but, clanking in his chains, he starts to cry. The guards lead Russ down a corridor of planks, on either side of which are other
chain-link exercise yards. Each one holds two men. Each of those men is dark-skinned, dark-eyed, sallow, thin, and bearded. They watch Russ pass with the look of dogs left at the pound.

One guard laughs.

“Oh, he’s got a case of boo hoos.”

“Hate when that happens,” the other guard says.

Eddie grips the fence.

“You better not fucking touch him,” he yells. “You hear me?”

Russ and the guards walk past one enclosure with two Arab men inside.

Eddie strains to hear them.

“I know him.”

“Yes,” the other man says. “He is a guard.”


_English? How do they know English?_ Eddie wonders.

“The Americans,” the man says to his friend, “they start to make you insane with the cheeseburgers and the Coca Cola.”

“Rambo! He is Rambo!”

“That was not Rambo. Rambo is bigger in his arms.”

“Maybe. But, he shoots guns. In the movies, he shoots guns.”

The man’s friend sits down and ignores him.

“Hey, mister,” the man on his feet says to Eddie while looking at him through the lattice of chain-link.

Eddie points to his own chest, gesturing, _Who, me?_

“Who was that man that just went by?”
“Him?” Eddie says, pointing where Russ walked by with the guards.

“Yes.”

“That's John Wayne.”

The man turns his face down toward his friend and smiles.

“See! I told you! John Wayne. Yes.”

Eddie sits back down. He runs his hands through his hair. He sighs deeply.

There are two stacks of files in the corner of a small room in a Quonset hut. The musty, mildew odor leaking from the files makes the twelve-by-twelve-foot room smell like a root cellar.

The door to the office opens, and Karen is ushered in. Two men who have been sitting in front of a battered old desk quickly get up. The first man is a three-star General. The man standing next to him, with a folder in his hands can only be another CIA agent. What is it about these CIA guys? Karen wonders.

She nods. They nod back. The three stand stiffly until the General steps forward and offers his hand.

“Ms. Proe,” the General says, “I’m General Buell.”

“Dr. Proe,” she says, shaking his hand.

“Dr. Proe, of course,” he says. “My apologies. This is my colleague—”

“Steve,” says the man with the tight, wrinkled suit and the Perma-press hair.

Karen stifles her laugh. You would think they’d get together and share notes on which fake names to use.

“Steve,” she says, shaking his hand. “Of course.”
Karen puts her bag on the floor next to her chair and sits behind her desk. The two men sit across from her.

“You’ve been briefed, Dr. Proe?” General Buell says.

“I have been told that we have a high profile target.”

“What does that mean?” Steve says.

“Mean?”

“To you, what does that mean to you?”

*Now it's just getting silly*, Karen thinks. She shakes her head, grins, and looks at both men. *They don’t think it’s silly.* She erases her grin and affixes an appropriately stern look on her face.

“To me,” she says, “it means that we have a high profile target.”

The CIA agent looks at the General, and frowns. He lets out a long sigh and rolls his eyes. Karen follows his gaze to a water-stain on the drop ceiling. Karen imagines he sees a pattern that reveals a deep truth about national security.

“Do you go to the movies, much, Karen?” General Buell says.

“Sir?”

Steve peels himself out of his chair and leans against the wall behind Karen with his arms folded.

“Have you ever heard of Russell Dunn?” the General says.

“The actor?”

“Yes, Russell Dunn the actor.”

“I have.”
Karen first looks behind her at Steve, then at the General in front of her. She widens her eyes and lets out a breath. She was in a play in the second grade. She played the Easter Bunny and wore tube socks on her hands. She wonders if she did a better job acting then, or now.

“You're joking, right?” she says to their grim faces.

Steve taps the manila folder in his left hand against his open right-hand palm. He makes a grim face.

“There's been an attack. A ferry on Lake Victoria, in Uganda,” Steve says.

With everything in her, Karen wants to stand up and tell them both about the files she'd read on the plane, the meeting she had, about all the information in her head, and how she feels resentful at being treated like a sugar-amped toddler sitting at a table with crystal stemware within her pudgy reach. Instead, she shakes her head in mock disbelief.

_They don’t know that I know. They probably don’t even know that some of this has been on the news. This is a world all its own._

“That’s remarkable,” she says.

The CIA agent puts the folder on the desk in front of Karen. Karen opens the folder and picks up photos showing images from the attack.

“We've had some luck,” Steve says. “The ferry didn't sink.”

“Small favors,” Karen says. She modulates herself to reach the requisite tone of briefing gravitas, a thing as routinized to her as coffee in the morning.

“Events are developing as we speak,” the General says.

“Of course, sir.”

“Everything we have is in the file,” Steve says. “I don’t know what your clearance level is, but I’ve been instructed to share any and all information, so I am doing so.”
An appropriate silence is shared among all three.

“Any questions so far?” the General asks.

Karen takes a moment, making it seem as though she’s metabolizing this shocking—shocking!—information, as well as considering any questions.

“What’s the story with Dunn?”

“We believe him to be an asset—”

“Possible asset,” Steve says, almost shouting and moving to sit back down next to the General. “Again, events are developing.”

Karen looks at the CIA agent, then at the General. They haven’t spoken to one another.

“Define asset.”

“He’s not one of ours,” Steve says. “At least that we know about.”

“So whether he’s a friend or an enemy is—”

“That is what you are here to help us determine.”

“Any other questions, Dr. Proe?” the General says.

“No.”

Karen looks at the CIA agent, then at the General. Who, she wonders, is window dressing for whom? The General for Steve? Steve for the General? Me for both? Them for me? What is the scam here?

“All right, then,” the General says. “If everyone is satisfied, we can move on.”

The two men get up.

Karen stays in her chair.

“I have one more question,” she says.

The two men sit down.
“Yes,” Steve says, affixing a tight, sarcastic smile on his face as though he were a trainee in a middle-management class.

“Guantanamo? Why here?”

The two men look at one another.

“What I mean is, this isn’t exactly anyone’s first, second, or twenty-third choice for a friendly sit-down. Why not some black site, or a stateside prison?”

Steve shakes his head. Karen celebrates having reverted herself back to being a moron in his eyes.

“Well, Ms. Proe,” Steve says slowly, “we put a team of behavioral experts together, from three continents, and they concluded it would be ill advised to bring last year’s number one box office draw, and his journalist friend, to a black site.”

“We want to guard against giving away more information than we might obtain,” the General says. “Now, we had a situation where they were in the general population and were seen by some individuals. But, we’ve remedied that oversight. They are in isolation with two guards assigned to them and them alone. But, the fact remains if—”

“If you brought them to anywhere in the U.S., it would leak. Understood. Thank you.”

“Dr. Proe,” the General says paternally and softly, “this is a delicate situation, as I am sure you can appreciate. But, more than that, it is wholly new. We are quite literally making this up as we go along. We are in uncharted waters.”

“And, instead of bringing in the sharks, you brought in me. Thank you, General, for your candor.”

Steve asks Karen if there is anything else she needs.

“There are pages missing from the files I received,” she says.
The General and Steve look at one another. Steve says he has no idea what files she is talking about. Karen throws the files she had on the plane down on the table, and opens each of them to the missing pages.

The General and Steve look at the files and appear thoroughly baffled.

“If you could get me those missing pages, it would be a great help,” Karen says.

Steve nods and the two men turn for the door. Just before the door closes, Karen says, “General.”

He pokes his head back in, his arm extended, holding the door open.

“Yes.”

“Buell. Are you any relation to General George P. Buell?”

The General blushes slightly, shakes his head, smiles, and straightens his spine.

“Why, yes,” he says. “He was my great grandfather.”

“Interesting,” Karen says.

Once they’re gone, Karen sits behind the desk. She places some papers—she doesn’t even know what they are—plucked from one of the stacked and mysterious files, on the corner of her desk. She breathes and sighs and straightens her hair. She shakes her hands out. She puffs her cheeks and exhales. Before an interrogation, the prep is like for a prizefight. She’d love to shadow box and have someone tape her hands. She wants to smack one hand into the other, like the pre-fight scene in Rocky.

She opens the file left by the second Steve. She flips through a few pictures of bodies in the water. She looks at the charring, the listing of the hull, the bloat of objects bobbing in the murky lake.

Information, she tells herself. Before anything else, get information.
The two guards bring Russ into the room. He shuffles in under the indignity of the handcuffs and ankle shackles. Karen is surprised at his smallness. She realizes she’s only ever seen him thirty feet tall and seventy feet wide; larger, as they say, than life. One guard pushes Russ down into the metal chair.

“Remove the jewelry, please,” she says without looking up from her papers.

“Ma'am, under no circumstances—”

Karen raises her head and stares at the guard.

The guard removes the shackles and handcuffs.

Russ sits down on the other side of Karen and, as everyone always does, rubs his wrists.

“We're right outside this door, ma'am,” the guard says, hulking over Russ.

“Thank you,” Karen says. “You can leave.”

The guards leave. Karen looks at more photos. She moves some papers. She lets the room get heavy. Then she looks up and gives Russ a huge smile.

“Do you know why you're here, Mr. Dunn?”

“Please, call me Russ. I’m not even sure where 'here' is.”

Karen stands.

“You are now being housed at Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, United States Naval Station, Guantanamo Bay.”

“Cuba,” Russ says.

“Cuba is outside. In here … in this room, it's just you and me.”

She means for it to be comforting, but it comes out wrong.

“Just you and me?” Russ says with a light laugh. “What could possibly go wrong?”
“Whether something goes wrong or not depends entirely on you.”

“It was me,” Russ says very softly.

“Excuse me?” Karen says. “What was you?”

“I don’t know what happened out there,” Russ says, “but whatever it was, I did it.”

For ninety minutes, Russ tells Karen how Uganda was his idea. He tells her that he went off the rails, that he went crazy, and that he’s sorry but, somehow, he caused everything. Karen listens more to the way he is saying what he is saying than to the information he’s giving her.

He’s unburdening himself, she concludes. *He’s talking to himself, for himself. This is a confessional monologue.*

By the time Russ’s wrists are snapped into shackles, and he is being led by his arms to baby-step his way back to his cell, Karen is certain of only two things: She needs to speak to Eddie to get the feel of the other side of the coin that is the two of them, and, for the first time in her professional life, she has no idea if everything she just heard come out of Russ’s mouth is pure fiction.

*I just debriefed an actor. The things they don’t teach you in interrogation school.

Eddie is sleeping seated with his back against the fence.

He wakes from the noise of the chain rattling. One guard unlocks the padlock. The other guard walks Russ into the enclosure.

The first guard unshackles Russ and removes his handcuffs.

“Well?” Eddie says.

“I’m so sorry,” Russ says.

“Mack!” the guard barks. “Edward!”
Eddie stands up. A guard shackles and handcuffs Eddie.

“Are you all right?” Eddie says to Russ.

“No,” Russ says, “I’m not.”

“What are we here for, Russ? What’s going on?”

“Absolutely no talking,” the guard says. “Move it out.”
Chapter 7

The door to the interrogation room opens. Karen sits, like she did before, behind her desk with her papers and in her official pose. She thinks about Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. She recalls an interview she saw with Louise Fletcher, who won an Academy Award for her portrayal of the nurse. She said she couldn’t watch the film because of how inhumane and cruel her character was. She also said that she thought Nurse Ratched was sincere in wanting to care properly and well for patients, that she was a good person deep down. *Being sincere isn’t the same as being good*, Karen thinks. *It never is.*

“Mack, Edward,” the guard says.

Without looking up, Karen nods as a signal to remove the shackles and handcuffs. She writes on a yellow legal pad.

Eddie rubs his wrists. Karen flashes on the scene in *Cuckoo’s Nest* where Jack Nicholson does the same thing when he’s first unshackled in the insane asylum. Karen wonders whether Eddie will whoop and holler then kiss the guard. *Wouldn’t that be something?*

A moment drips by; the room gets heavy as she silently asserts her power.

Eddie stares at the top of her head.

“Mr. Mack,” Karen says looking up, “do you know where you are?”

“Disneyland?”

She stares back at Eddie with no expression.

“No, wait,” he says, “Club Med? I mean, that beach out there is amazing.”

She continues to bore into him, trying to decipher how much of Eddie might be reality and how much might be posture.
“Wait!” Eddie says. “I got it. The principal’s office, I am in the principal’s office. The only question is, is it principle with an ‘le’ or principal with an ‘al’?”

_It’s mostly, Karen thinks, posture. Good._

“Mr. Mack, this can go one of two ways for—”

“Really? It can go easy or it can go hard? Are you going to play good cop _and_ bad cop? Did you know that after _The Godfather_ came out guys in the mob started acting like the characters in the movie? Isn’t that weird? Which movies have you watched to act like this?”

Karen takes a long, long look at Eddie. She smiles.

_Did these guys trade personalities at some point,_ she wonders, recalling that Eddie was supposed to be the weaker of the two.

“In this instance, I am neither one. I'm a civilian, like you. I'm here to try and learn what happened to you and your friend.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so? I can help you with that one. Let me see. We were out on a boat. The boat blew up, and the next thing we know, we're in chains.”

On the legal pad, Karen writes a note to herself: _Stay on point._

“Anything else?”

Eddie pantomimes the act of thinking hard. He looks at the ceiling, then at the walls.

“There are no bars on the windows,” he says.

Karen doesn’t move.


Karen puts her pen down on the pad.

“Are you aware why you are in custody?”

Eddie stiffens.
“I don't have a clue.”

“You’re a journalist. You covered cops in Chicago.”

“Yes.”

“What happened on the boat, Eddie?”

Eddie stares at the surface of the desk without looking up.

“What was going on right before the explosion?”

“I was talking to Russ. We were standing there talking.”

“What?”

“About what?”

“Stuff. Nothing. You know.”

“No, I don't know, that's why I'm asking.”

“Russ and I were talking about how great his life is. He's a famous person, he’s in movies, and … and … just fucking talking.”

“All right. All right. Then what?”

“Russ hasn’t been himself lately,” Eddie says. “I knew this woman when I lived in Washington DC. Her friends all told me that when she was young she was vibrant and full of life. By the time I knew her she was overweight, alcoholic, and sad. She was rich. She was the largest single shareholder in American Express. Her father invented the credit card or something. One day, just before she died she said to me, ‘The trouble all started when I got the money.’ You believe that? I could tell she was still in there, she was that vibrant, good person.”

“What happened next?”

“Russ fell apart when he got famous. He became a Hollywood dick, like you’d expect. But he was still in there. He’s still there now. He’ll do great things one day when all this shit is over. I know it.”
“What happened next Eddie?

“Then there was a big explosion, and a whole bunch of people died.”

Eddie starts to cry, then forces himself to stop. Karen offers him a tissue from a box. His hand reaches out and stops. He looks at her and smiles.

“Isn’t that there in your files?” Eddie asks. “The part about all the dead people on the boat?”

“Tell me about after.”

“After. After what? It was insanity. There was blood. A lot of blood. People running everywhere, jumping in the water, screaming. It was a mess.”

Karen goes back to writing on her pad. This time, though, it’s gibberish for show, to portray herself as being in charge and all-knowing.

“Where exactly on the boat were you standing?”

“We were by the railing on the, what do you call it? The port side? Port? Is that left?”

“Yes.”

“We were standing there—”

“Who?”

“Who what?”

“Who was there, exactly?”

“Russ,” Eddie says. “Me. Reverend Bartouk. This porter guy—”

“That name you just said,” Karen says looking up and leaning forward to make it seem like they are truly working together on this puzzle. “Who is that?”

“Some porter. Like a waiter, you know? A guy named Bartholomew Higgins. Believe that? Sounds like a freaking Dr. Seuss character. He got an autograph and a photo with Russ.”
“No, no. Not him. The other one.”

“Reverend Bartouk?”

“Who is that?”

“He's the guy. The guy we met with.”

Karen gets up and walks around the perimeter of the room looking at the floor. She stops and sits back down. She’s stopped acting now. She can feel herself slip back into herself, back to the truth of the effort.

“How have you ever heard of the People's Liberation Army?” she says to Eddie.

“Joseph Kony,” Eddie says, “yes.”

*It's not a secret he’s trying to conceal. Interesting.*

Karen gets up and paces along the back wall of the office. She bites one of her nails. Then she stops and walks two steps, until she is standing directly over Eddie.

“Eddie,” she says, “are you a soldier in, or are you working for, the PLA—the People's Liberation Army?

Eddie laughs. Then he laughs some more. His laughter deepens. He appears lost in it, like a relative suffering a crackup at a funeral. He reaches for another tissue because he’s actually laughing so hard he has tears in his eyes.

“I thought that only happened in movies,” Eddie says, looking at the wet tissue in his hand. “Odd.”

“Eddie,” Karen barks, “are you a soldier—”

“A soldier? Are you high?

“Mr. Mack, I asked you a question. It's in your best interest to answer.”

“Uh oh. We're back to 'Mr. Mack.' This must be serious.”
Karen sits down without taking her eyes off Eddie. She crosses her arms.

“My best interest,” Eddie says, ruminating. “We were at the monastery because … OK, we were working with a group to overthrow the PLA and Kony.”

Eddie nods his head up and down, then stops and smiles nervously. He has, Karen realizes, just confessed something he thinks is important. Karen gestures with her hand for him to continue talking.

“What? That's it. We were working in secret, yes. But, that's it. I have no clue what you're talking about, but that's the truth.”

“Eddie, I understand this is difficult for you.”

“Let’s go back to Mr. Mack,” Eddie says. “I think we’re done here.”

The two stare at one another for a moment. Karen smiles and gets up.

“Let's take a break, shall we? I'm going to get a cup of coffee. Can I get you anything?”

Eddie stares at the wall, saying nothing.

“While I'm gone, I want you to think about what you can do to help me—and to help yourself.”

Eddie softens his gaze, looks at the surface of the desk. A small grin plays across his face.

“And, while you're doing that,” Karen says, “I want you to know there is a way out of this.”

She stares at Eddie, awaiting a further outpouring in the thick silence.

“Oh,” Eddie says, “are we done with the clichés? Damn. I was about to go all ‘Take me back to my cell.’ Then I was going to hit you with, ‘You can talk to my lawyer,’ but you guys don’t have those here, do you?”

Karen opens the door to leave for coffee.
Eddie sighs.

“Cream.”

“Excuse me?”

“I take mine with cream. Just, I don’t like that powdered stuff. So, if it’s not cream, just black.”

“Sugar?”

“Honey,” Eddie says blinking at her with mock affection.

Karen laughs despite herself.

“Do you take sugar?”

“No. Maybe a doughnut? Or, you know, a cake with a file in it?”

“While I'm gone, Eddie, I’d like you to think real hard about what you really know about your friend, Russ.”

She goes down three hallways without seeing a living soul before finding a break room. It’s deserted. She pours two cups of coffee into mugs with the words *Semper fi* emblazoned twice on each. Always faithful. She reminds herself to not fuck this up and walks back toward Eddie.

“So,” she says, sliding Eddie’s cup of coffee over to him, “what brought you guys to Uganda in the first place?”

“I told you. We were going after Kony.”

“I see. You guys woke up one day and said, ‘How about Uganda? And, while we’re there, let’s go after one of the most dangerous warlords in the world!’

“Oh, you mean what made us come to Uganda and go after Kony in the first place?”
“Yes, what prompted you to come to Uganda in the first place?”

Eddie leans back in his chair. He holds his cup.

“This is good coffee,” he says with a smile. “This is some gourmet shit.”

Karen also smiles at the reference.

“Russ was offered a part in Pulp Fiction. Did you know that? Zed. He was offered the part of Zed, the homosexual rapist. He turned it down. That was smart of him, don’t you think?”

“It’s called a precipitating incident,” Karen says.

“Precipitating incident,” Eddie says, clucking the words like lozenges in his mouth.

“They’s a couple a eight-dollar words, there. Are you appealing to my sense of intellect, Dr. Proe? Are you doing this so that we may successfully bond and enhance our relationship? Is this a method of transforming our interrogation into an exchange marked by candid openness and sharing?”

“It’s called—”

“Communicative influence,” Eddie says. “Yes. Speaking in the language of the person whom you are interviewing so that the interview becomes something more meaningful than a mere cross-examination. I’m aware.

Karen gets up out of her chair and sits down on the desk in front of Eddie.

“I’m trying my best to help you, Eddie.”

“My second day as a police reporter—”

“In Chicago.”

Eddie takes a long sip from his Marine mug. He sets the cup down, leans back in his chair, folds his arms, and smiles at Karen.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Please, continue.”
“Thank you. I’m sitting at the press desk in this police station, and I hear a guy getting the shit kicked out of him in another room. A room very much like this one, I imagine. Anyway, this poor slob is screaming bloody murder. I’m new. I’m like twenty-two years old. I don’t know much, but I know this is wrong.”

“What did you do?”

“I went for a walk around the block,” Eddie says with a laugh. “But in my mind, I spoke truth to power.”

“That’s a touching story, Eddie. What brought you to Uganda?”

Eddie runs both hands through his hair. He leans forward and stretches his arms out on the table. He lets out a long groan.

“That’s all linked together. Before Uganda, there was Paris. Then after Paris was Caitlin.”

“Caitlin? Who’s Caitlin?”

“Who does your research?”

Karen knows about Caitlin, but she wants to hear about it from Eddie. Who knows what his version is.
“Before Russell Dunn was Russell Dunn, Movie Star, he was Russell Dunn, struggling actor. Then he met Caitlin. They fell in love. Then they fell out of love. Then it all went to hell.”
Russ sat at his table and stared at his steak thinking about those nights when he took his father’s boat out on the Hudson River all alone. He remembered thinking about the dead souls, living with their dead marriages and ungrateful kids, in those crumbling estates. He was pleased with himself for not turning out like them. Then he saw Caitlin walk across the restaurant and sit down across the table from him. That was the moment he knew he had to break up with her. Instead of saying anything, though, he pretended to be happy.

“Being a movie star,” Russ said, sinking his knife into his Japanese waygu at Spago, “is fun.”

For five years Russ had been in love with Caitlin. She was beautiful, truly beautiful. Not a clichéd blonde. Not tan. Not Hollywood. She was beautiful in a unique way, in the same way as when he met her. The same rough mess. There was no cliché about her. She was not only unlike anyone he had ever met she was unlike anyone he had ever heard about. Russ knew she was the most honest person he had ever known. She didn’t have the capacity to lie, about herself or anyone else.

But, as Russ’s success increased so did his awareness that honesty was not a prized personality trait in Hollywood. Honesty was a liability. And that meant Caitlin was a liability to his career. Caitlin grounded Russ to his past, but was a past he wanted to move away from.

All the reasons he had loved her became the reasons he stopped. Chewing his steak and smiling at Caitlin, he realized that he no longer was in love that way. It had stopped. And falling out of love with Caitlin terrified him because of how she might react.
“Life’s not bad when you consider the options,” Caitlin said, taking a slug from a martini made with Hendrick’s gin and egg white foam. “Holy shit!”

“What?”

“This tastes like ball sweat!” she said, opening her mouth as wide as possible and letting the drink drip out onto the floor. “What the fuck?”

A waiter came over.

“Is everything all right, madam?”

“Everything is great,” Russ said. “She’s a little under the weather. First trimester and all.”

The waiter’s face went slack. He took a very long look at the drink standing high on the stem of a frosted glass in front of Caitlin. Then he recovered his trite smile.

“Of course,” he said, bending down to dab the pool of her spit with a cloth.

Caitlin hit the table with her open palm and laughed.

“That was inspired,” she said to the top of the waiter’s head before raising her glass and offering a toast. Then she looked at the offending glass and placed it on the table at arm’s length. “I’m not so good at going out in public. You know that. We’ll just put it over there.”

The waiter stood. He offered Caitlin a wan grin then turned to leave. Russ and he exchanged embarrassed, eye-rolling smiles as the waiter made his way away from the two of them to return to the solace of the hectic kitchen.

Caitlin asked Russ if he thought that the way the waiter had dismissed her with his haughty look was funny.

“It was fucking hysterical,” he said, laughing a fake laugh that managed to fool her.

“There was this guy once,” Caitlin was saying to Russ from a place very far away across the table covered with a thick cloth on which the lamp sent a twinkle of soothing light to reflect
off the silverware where it settled and shined back at him in her dark eyes. “We were all out at
the reservoir.”

“The reservoir?”

“The one up Zacatecas Canyon.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Russ said.

“Yes, you do.”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“In Bisbee,” Caitlin said. “Zacatecas Canyon. We went hiking up to the old reservoir that
day we did mushrooms and the sun was going down and you said it looked like I had snakes
growing out of my head because of the ocotillo behind me. You called me Medusa, or
Methuselah for like, a month after that.”

“Yes,” Russ said smiling, “I remember. I used to emphasize the ‘Meth’ part of
Methuselah. That was funny.”

“Yeah, fucking hysterical.”

“And it turned out I was wrong because Eddie told me that Methuselah wasn’t the crazy
snake head lady. He was some dude in the Bible, or something, who lived longer than anyone.
Ever.”

Caitlin stared at Russ, waiting with a pursed mouth and squinted eyes for him to finish
his speech so she could get back to her story.

“Anyway,’ Russ said, “what about the reservoir?”

“I was saying that one night we were all up there. We had a fire going …”
Russ figured that he stopped loving Caitlin six months ago. The occasion was marked during a conversation with Eddie on a day when Caitlin was drilling down hard and threatening to leave him for reasons he couldn’t even remember.

“Um, you realize that you’re taking lifestyle advice from an alcoholic?” Eddie said on the phone.

“She’s not an alcoholic,” Russ said. “She drinks, but she’s not a drunk.”

“She drinks a lot,” Eddie said.

“So what? So do we.”

“Fine. She’s not an alcoholic.”

Russ told Eddie that it was possible he didn’t love Caitlin any more.

Eddie confessed that he had no idea how Russ had ever loved Caitlin in the first place. He said he had no clue how he managed to stay with her for more than four years. He asked if he’d told Caitlin yet. Russ said he hadn’t.

“I figured that,” Eddie said. “You sound like you still have all the teeth in your head.”

Russ said nothing to this attempt at a joke.

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Eddie said. “I know this is hard for you. I know you really loved her, and that’s all that matters. I’m here for you. Whatever I can do for you, I’ll do.”

From that day onward Caitlin’s behavior, which Russ used to think of as funny, shocking, and charming, became nothing but annoying to Russ.

“… so this guy just walks up to us while we’re all tripping on mushrooms in front of a fire in the middle of nowhere at the fucking reservoir, and he says he’s a lawyer,” Caitlin said with a laugh that jolted Russ back to being at Spago and back to Caitlin speaking. “And, get this, the guy is wearing a suit!”
“Uh huh.”

“Right? But he hangs out and talks to us. Then he takes off his tie and burns it in the fire. After that …”

That day after talking to Eddie was the start of the faking, the beginning of the lying. Russ sat with his napkin in his lap and pinpointed that moment as when the sticky system binding them together started to come apart.

He sat looking at her, but not hearing her, as she spoke. Who is this woman? he wondered. No, really, who is she? Where did she come from? How did we get here? He started sweating and breathing heavily.

The waiter’s arm reached in next to him and gently refilled his water glass.

“Is everything all right, sir?”

“Yes,” Russ said, opening a button on his shirt. “Everything is fine.”

Am I having a heart attack? No, that’s not likely. A panic attack? Am I having a panic attack? What the hell? I’m sitting across from a woman who might as well be a stranger facing me on a train, who has taken over my life, and I’m having a panic attack. She doesn’t even notice. I’m alone.

He drank some water, pretended to listen to Caitlin for three more minutes, and finally relaxed when he felt his breathing slow down.

By this time the half-lies, the casual editing of his feelings, the wholesale pretending to care, had become second nature to Russ, and he knew it. For weeks now Russ pretended to listen, pretended to be concerned, pretended to laugh and talk and think and be involved in Caitlin’s life as he zombie-walked through each day of his successful career. Each and every day
that he went to work, he was relieved and glad to arrive on set to work as an actor. It meant he didn’t have to pretend anymore.

Russ laughed.

“What?” Caitlin said.

“What?”

“You laughed.”

“Did I?”

“Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that yes, you did,” Caitlin said, leaning back and placing her napkin dramatically on the table. “What was it you were laughing at?”

In deciding to lie, Russ knew he was making things worse. *She can tell*, he thought. *But, what choice do I have?*

“Jack Nicholson,” Russ said. “I was laughing about Jack Nicholson.”

Caitlin stared back at him with an expression urging him to, please, continue.

“You know,” Russ said. “In the movie *Easy Rider*. He played the lawyer who sits by the campfire with Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda? They get high? Didn’t you ever see that movie?”

“No,” Caitlin said picking her napkin up and spreading it on her lap. “But that sounds like what happened to us that night by the reservoir. This guy, though, he was real normal, like, you know.”

“How do you mean?”

“Normal. I mean normal. He was …”

He watched her speak. He inhaled her beauty. He tried to regain his connection to her. But the tether was slack and frayed. He drifted away from her until it felt more comfortable regarding her as someone he simply did not know. A stranger plopped down from the sky. She
was someone he had memories of, but didn’t know, not really. If asked, what would he say about her? She was stunningly beautiful. Absolutely. She had some oddly masculine tendencies. She walked with huge strides, rolling her shoulders and chewing up real estate by yards with each step. At the same time, she walked with her right hand bent out, dainty and girlish like she was imitating Audrey Hepburn.

“… so this lawyer guy says to Zach that he likes him. He says he thinks he’s real smart because Zach hasn’t said a word. Can you believe that?”

“Incredible.”

“I mean, Zach couldn’t spell cat if you spotted him the C and the A. But, this guy…”

Russ had no clue who the hell Zach was. He had no desire to be reminded or learn who Zach was. Most likely, he thought, he was some kid who hung out in the Gulch back in Bisbee. There was a sick crew of those kids staining the street of the Gulch or skulking around Grassy Park. They spent their thin hours playing hacky-sack, smoking weed, cadging beers at St. Elmo, and denouncing anyone who used deodorant as soulless ambassadors of gentrification and destroyers of freedom. Russ had never seen so many arrogant, homeless hippies in one place as he did in Bisbee.

“… just because you’re quiet doesn’t mean you’re smart. I mean who the fuck thought silence was smart? I dated this guy for three months who barely said three words, and even I thought he was a genius. The truth was he didn’t have two thoughts to rub together to even form a fucking sentence. I learned a lesson …”

Russ thought about how every time they went back to Bisbee, the first thing Caitlin did was go to St. Elmo, drink tequila shots until she could barely stand, go to her old house up Zacatecas Canyon, and get high for four days straight. There would be a parade of boys and girls,
each scummier, thinner, and more wretched than the last, crashing on her painted plywood floor and drinking whatever was at hand while Caitlin kept the drugs laid out. The thing was, she didn’t have to do any of it. She could stay at a nice hotel with Russ and enjoy a vacation. But no, she went for the worst part of wherever she was instantly. She gravitated to it. She hung out in the ravines in Tucson and the camps under the bridges in L.A. She liked it. Russ liked slumming like that for a while. But once he got some money and a better life, he didn’t see the need. Caitlin had his money, but it didn’t matter. She loved the scuzzy life.

*Breaking up with Caitlin will be a nightmare. But, it will have to happen. It’s inevitable.

Any fool can see that.*

“… it’s like all that shit with Eddie,” Caitlin said.

“Of course,” Russ said.

“Excuse me,” the waiter said, appearing once again like an apparition to refill the water glasses while keeping himself at arm’s length from Caitlin, who, noticing his defensive stance, growled and snapped her teeth. He flinched. Russ produced his second insincere laugh of the night, only this time he was further numbed to the point where he didn’t even realize he was going through the motions.

“She’s harmless,” Russ said in a low tone to the waiter, who was clearly shaken. “Unless, you get too close.”

Caitlin blew Russ a kiss.

*Holy Christ, Russ thought, this is like being out with Courtney Love.*

“Anyway,” Russ said, “what were you saying about Eddie?”

“Can I get a shot of tequila?” Caitlin said across the table to the waiter who shielded himself from her by standing behind Russ’s left shoulder.
“Certainly,” he said. “Do you know what you would like? Or shall I bring you our tequila menu—”

“Well is fine,” Caitlin said.

“Excuse me?”

“Well tequila.”

“Well?”

“Yes,” Caitlin said, enunciating as though the waiter was slow. “Well. Whatever you have. Whatever you use for whatever drinks. It doesn’t matter. I’ll take it.”

“Don Julio will be fine,” Russ said under his breath. “Lime and salt on the side.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Russ smiled at Caitlin.

“This place smells like white people,” she said. “I need a cigarette.”

“I’ll go with,” Russ said.

They stood by the entrance and shared a Marlboro without speaking.

“So,” Russ said breaking the silence, “what were you saying about Eddie?”

“It really pisses me off,” she said, exhaling smoke and handing the cigarette back to Russ, “the way everyone thinks he’s so smart.”

“Sure,” Russ said.

“He’s not so fucking smart,” Caitlin said under her breath. She said it like a long-withheld disclosure, as though simply uttering the words was an act of disloyalty and treason.

“No,” Russ said, looking out over the lights of L.A. and absently taking the cigarette from between her fingers, as though he were disarming a crazy person with a gun, then taking a gentle drag, “not so fucking.”
Caitlin put her arm around Russ’s waist. She looked off in the same direction as him, at the lights and the expanse of people below.

Apparently she’d been speaking for several minutes before a silence presented itself.

“I’m sorry,” Russ said, “what did you say about Eddie?”

* * *

Three weeks later, Russ called Eddie. He told him a plane ticket was waiting for him at Tucson airport. All he had to do was show his ID, and he was on his way to Paris. The ticket was first class and open for any time in the next week. But, Russ said, he’d like it if Eddie could leave soon.

“What?” Eddie asked.

Russ told him he’d explain when he got to Paris.

“Should I wear a trench coat and a fedora?” Eddie said. “Will you alert me to the password upon arrival?”

“The crow flies at midnight,” Russ said.

“With a scroll in one claw and a Gauloises in his beak,” Eddie said. “You have to give me more than that to get me on a plane.”

Russ whispered that he wanted Eddie to help him rewrite parts of a script for a movie he was shooting—“at this very moment”—under the Arc de Triomphe. He couldn’t say more than that.
Eddie pictured Russ looking furtively around with his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone as gendarmes and French techies in the employ of Paramount or the Weinsteins lurked nearby, hoping to catch a sliver of incriminating conversation.

“I’ll call you from the plane,” Eddie said.

Eddie spread the warm washcloth over his face. He pressed it to his skin, inhaled so he sucked it into his mouth a bit, thought about when he was a child, and wondered if he'd done the same thing in the bath. The flight attendant came by and asked if he needed anything else.

“No thank you,” Eddie said from underneath the washcloth, “I’m doing just fine.”

At 30,000 feet over the Atlantic halfway to France, Eddie opened his eyes to the underside of the washcloth. *The entire world was white and fluffy and gauzed and damp, and planes are time machines,* he thought. *You get on a plane in Tucson, Arizona. It's hot. There are cacti and Linda Ronstadt and mariachi music on the radio and big-bellied men with big-bellied belt buckles digging into their big bellies as they go driving old pickups. There are illegal aliens working in sawdust-floored restaurants serving carne asada and Cerveza Del Sol. There’s a bright sunlight the likes of which no one has ever witnessed in any of France’s twelve time zones spread around the spinning globe by war and empire. Then you sit down, buckle in and get a lecture on descending air masks in case. You unwind, you watch a movie on a tiny screen, and you sip actual champagne. You're polite. You become a temporary citizen of no particular place, no particular time. Relieved of geography, you almost escape gravity. After so many hours, you’ll emerge into a new world, into Paris, France. You’ll see your best friend. He’ll be starring in a movie.*
He last saw Russ a year and a half ago, since he’d become a star. The small movie he auditioned for before *True West* turned out to be a hit, earning $140 million at the box office. With that one film Russ went from doing yard work at Doug Simon’s to fielding offers from Michael Mann and Steven Spielberg. He made five movies in four years, and three of them topped $100 million. None of them were very good. In each one Russ played a variation of the strong, silent, laconic man’s man. There was an action movie, a spy thriller, two dark dramas, and one ill-considered romantic comedy.

“My life is great,” Russ said, trotting out an appropriate cliché in one interview. “Women want me and men want to be me.”

Once in Bisbee, Russ and Caitlin stopped at Eddie’s house before going to dinner at Café Roka, the best restaurant in town. Caitlin sat on Eddie’s couch with her legs crossed and, even though she had a smile plastered on her face, she seemed mad. The only time her lips parted was when she opened her mouth to drink the shot of Patrón Eddie had poured for her. For ten minutes she said nothing until she announced she had to take a piss. With that, she got up, slung her purse over her shoulder, laughed, shook her head at something funny that only she'd heard, and went into the bathroom. The echo of her slamming the bathroom door settled, for a moment, before Eddie looked at Russ and shook his head.

“Um?” Eddie whispered.

“Don’t,” he said.

They walked in silence to Café Roka. The hostess was Rosanne, the same Rosanne that Russ had first come to Bisbee with. She said hello to Eddie and told him their table would be ready in a minute. She didn’t even look at Russ or Caitlin. Caitlin laughed.
Standing at the front of the restaurant, Eddie saw two dozen people turn and look at Russ. They glanced then turned back to their conversation, or to studying their filet of sole. It was the same way people in any restaurant or bar did when someone new entered and they were drawn by uncomplicated curiosity to see who it might be. But then a strange thing, a thing that Eddie had never seen before, happened. Those same people turned back to them again in a slowly realized, crowd-driven, trance-like, double take. And they didn’t turn away. Instead, the restaurant went silent as everyone’s gaze followed Russ and Eddie and Caitlin while Rosanne led them forward holding their menus in front of the walking party as though brandishing a shield against the possibility of significant intrusion. She led them up fourteen steps to the mezzanine and sat them at a table overlooking the main floor of the restaurant.

“Does this always happen?” Eddie said.

“What?” Russ said.

“People reacting. Staring. Watching your every move.”

“You get used to it,” Russ said, shaking out his napkin.

“You get used to it?”

“Sure,” Russ said. “You get used to anything. I remember, a while ago I got this car, a ’55 Thunderbird.”

“Sweet.”

“Right? My dad always wanted one, and then I got one. For years I thought if I ever got the money that would be the car I would drive. And if I got one, it would be a miracle. My life would be complete, and every day it would be an extraordinary thing to drive.”

“A rabid covetousness.”
“Yes, what you said. Two months later, I’m driving my ’55 Thunderbird—red, convertible—down La Cienega to, like, a dentist’s appointment or something. I make a left hand turn, and some guy honks at me. And I’m like, ‘Motherfucker! What the fuck is your problem! I signaled!’ The guy pulls next to me, leans out, honks again, and yells, ‘Nice car, man.’ I’d completely forgotten I was driving this great car.”

“Huh,” Eddie said.

“So, yeah, you get used to being stared at. You get used to anything,” Russ said, looking up at Caitlin, grabbing her hand, and saying to her, “It’s the same thing a beautiful woman goes through all the time, right?”

“Now that’s a fucking line if I ever heard one,” Caitlin said.

Russ kissed her hand.

Even though it was a line, even though she knew it was, it worked. She leaned her face toward Russ’s and they kissed. It was the first time all evening Eddie saw Caitlin smile for real. Russ also smiled.

After a few moments, people got tired of merely looking. They started to come over for visits. Old friends, enemies, and acquaintances, came over and shook Russ’s hand, said hello, and gave Caitlin a peck on the cheek. Eddie was proud to be sitting at the table as the prostrate hoi polloi paid righteous homage to the returned and conquering hero.

“Why are they not bearing sacrifices?” Eddie whispered to Russ. “They should be bringing you their finest meats and cheeses!”

“I’d just settle for decent drugs and booze,” Caitlin said.
An older man named Sam came up to the table. He had gray hair tied back in a ponytail and was wearing sandals. Russ got up to say hello. Sam spent more than a minute shaking Russ’s hand so hard it looked like he was trying to get water out of a pump.

“When are you guys doing another play?” he asked, nodding to Eddie. “Because, I have to say, True West was amazing. You were both so good in that.”

Russ sat back down and put his napkin on his lap.

“I’m not sure,” Russ said.

“That scene where you threw that beer can, and it went through the window and hit that kid down below? That was great.”

“Yup,” Russ said.

He looked at Caitlin, who raised her napkin to her face to conceal her growing laughter.

“So, nothing new on the horizon?” Sam said.

“Well, Sam,” Eddie said, “Russ has been in LA for the last few years, you know.”

“You don’t say. Whatcha been doing there?”

“Movies,” Eddie said. “Making movies, mostly.”

“Isn’t that something?” Sam said. “Movies, you say. Anything I might have seen?”

“Let’s see, in the last four years, um, The Guardian,” Eddie said. “And Basic Intelligence, Final Out, God’s Speed, Turning North. In that one he played a mercenary from Kentucky whose father sells him out to North Korea on behalf of the US government to keep his farm. Russ breaks out of a North Korean prison then comes home to Kentucky where he burns the family farm to the ground. Then he gets mad. It was real popular. You didn’t catch that one?”

“Huh,” Sam said. “No, I didn’t see that one.”
Then Sam stood there. No one said a word as he remained lurking over the table while they waited for their salads. The only noise was Caitlin squeaking her laughter into her napkin.

“Godot!” Sam yelled.

“What?” Russ said.

“Godot. You guys were going to do Waiting for Godot. Who told me that? Somebody. Somebody told me that.”

“Well, Sam …”

“So, when?”

“Russ is a pretty big movie star these days, Sam,” Eddie said, getting up, taking Sam by the arm, and leading him away down the stairs to the main floor of the restaurant.

“So?”

“So we’re probably not going to do that anytime soon.”

“Right,” Sam said. “If you change your mind, be sure and let me know.”

“I will,” Eddie said, shaking Sam’s hand. “I will definitely do that. Thanks.”

On his way back up the stairs, Eddie wondered why he’d felt so protective, so paternal about Russ. Is it his celebrity? Is it like a Stickum you can’t wash off? He got back to the table, sighed, eyed his salad, shook his head, and sat down.

“I love this town,” he said.

“We should do it,” Russ said.

“Do what?”

“Godot. We should do it.”

“Sure,” Eddie said. “Absolutely.”
Eddie bit into his romaine. He looked at the people in the restaurant. He chewed and started to giggle. We’ll do Godot. Sure. I’ll be Vladimir. You’ll be Estragon. No. No, wait. I’ll be Estragon. The fool with the foot and the boot, the one always following, dismissing, and casting renunciations. Russ will be Vladimir. Yes. The one who knows not quite anything. The one who pontificates. The smarter one to the dumber one. The compliment to the complimentary one. 

Vladimir will torch the family farm to force Godot out into the open at last.

“Well,” Eddie said, thinking back to Sam’s hope for another play, “as they say, it doesn’t matter to a billion Chinese anyway.”

“What?” Caitlin said.

She snapped out of her napkin and raised her head of hair, dyed so red it looked almost orange, as though she had been roused by smelling salts.

“China,” Eddie said. “The saying about how one billion Chinese don’t care.”

“Russ is huge in China,” Caitlin said.

“Really?”

Russ nodded, chewing a roma tomato.

“He was the biggest American box office draw in China for the last two years.”

Eddie laughed. Caitlin and Russ shot him a shared look chilly enough to freeze a flame in mid-flicker.

“That’s … amazing,” Eddie said, grasping that Russ and Caitlin took Russ very seriously.

“You’re big in China. Amazing. Who knew?”

In Paris a limousine delivered Eddie to the Hotel Le Meurice. Eddie apologized for not having changed his dollars into euros and tipped the bellhop ten dollars, even though he only had
the one bag and insisted on carrying it himself. A concierge deposited him just inside the door of
his suite. Eddie ran his fingers over the Rubelli and BranquetihanÈ fabrics covering every inch of
the marble-floored room not coated in gilt and lacquered gold. The mirror in the bathroom was
cooled and had frost in the corners.

He shoveled apart the heavy, brocaded drapes and looked out upon the early spring bulbs
emerging in the Tuileries, lit for the night, empty of souls. Eddie had been to Paris once before,
but he’d never been anyplace like this. He found the 1990 Dom Pérignon in the bar fridge. The
Post-It note stuck on the bottle said, “Start without me. I’ll catch up—Russ.”

A knock at the door jarred Eddie from his jet-lagged sleep. His hand was wrapped around
the half-empty bottle.

“Yeah,” he said, swinging his heavy legs toward the floor and off the bed, then falling
flat on his stomach because it was so unexpectedly high above the floor.

The door opened. Eddie saw a pair of shoes walk toward him. He looked up at Russ
standing over him as the concierge waited at the door looking discreetly anywhere but at Eddie
sprawled on the ground with the bottle still in his hand.

“This is embarrassing,” Eddie said to the cold marble on his face.

Russ reached his hand down, and Eddie pulled himself up with it. Russ eased him onto
the bed.

“Didn’t spill a drop,” Russ said, taking the bottle then having a swig of champagne. “It’s
still got bubbles.”

“Ow,” Eddie said.

The concierge cleared his throat.
“Thank you, Jean,” Russ said, darting over and pressing a few euros into his hand. “We’ll call if we need anything.”

“There is a kit for first aid in the bathroom,” Jean said, “under the sink.”

“This,” Russ said, waving his hand toward Eddie, then turning to close the door, “is nothing. Thanks.”

Russ walked by Eddie, nabbing the bottle as he went, and sat heavily into a chair in the corner.

“I could use some … some eau.”

“Eww?”


Russ got up and handed him the Dom Pérignon.

“In Paris,” Russ said, “this is water.”

Eddie took a swallow. Then he then got up, took a bottle of Chateauneuf water from the fridge, and downed it in three gulps.

“All better?” Russ said.

“All better,” Eddie said.

The two men sat in the huge room looking at one another before breaking into stupid laughter, then falling silent. Each of them sat staring saucer-eyed at the carpeting for a long time.

“I told Caitlin that every time I did a love scene, I was thinking of her,” Russ said. “It used to be true.”

They sat together silently for another moment, then Eddie said, “All right. What am I doing here, anyway?”
“You’re here because I need you to fix a script,” Russ told Eddie the next day while they strolled the Tuileries.

Eddie told Russ that while he was flattered to be asked, he was a reporter and a failed novelist, not a screenwriter. He told him he didn’t know the first thing about scripts or screenplays.

“Doesn’t matter,” Russ said, “I trust you.” He plopped a screenplay into Eddie’s hand as they were walking slowly past Auguste Rodin’s sculpture, Le Baiser, The Kiss.

“Look at that,” Eddie said, gesturing toward Rodin’s two lovers entwined in an endless, metal embrace.

“Yeah, nice,” Russ said. “So now that I’ve showed you that you know everything you need to know about writing a script . . .”

“I don’t know a thing.”

“Now that I have showed you that you know as much as anyone else about writing a script, you’ll do it.”

“Tell me in broad strokes what’s wrong with it.”

“It sucks.”

“How about in smaller strokes?”

“Read it, and let me know how it can be better.”

“I hate reading scripts,” Eddie said, flipping the pages of the screenplay past his eyes in a blur as they walked slowly. “You’re not supposed to read them like a book. They’re supposed to be performed, or at least read out loud.”

“Uh huh.”

“Why don’t we just sit down and table-read this thing?”
“What do you mean?”

“Read,” Eddie said. “As in to sit at a table and read the script. Out loud. Like we did for
*True West.*”

“I know what a fucking table read is. But I don’t have time for that,” Russ said.

“Why not? When do you need this?”

“Now.”

“Define ‘now.’”

“Now as in, we’re shooting the movie right now,” Russ said. “I’m due on set in an hour.”

“Great,” Eddie said. “Let me come with you. I can watch what’s going on and read this.”

Russ scowled. It occurred to Eddie that his request was perhaps breaching the walls of Russ’s carefully compartmentalized life, like having your mom hang out when you’re playing video games with your friends.

“Besides,” Eddie said, “I always wanted to watch a real actor work. Until that happens, I’ll settle for watching you. It’ll be fun.”

“I can’t be hosting you and showing you around and all that shit,” Russ said. “You’re on your own. I can’t babysit you. And no matter what happens, stay out of everyone’s way.”

“Like I said,” Eddie said, “it’ll be fun.”

Eddie sat on a small folding chair against a wall just outside 12 Rue Pache, a small street nestled into Paris’ Bastille neighborhood. He had the script open on his lap, but he was more interested in watching Russ walk up a winding staircase that hugged the outside wall up to the second floor of 9 Rue Pache, just across the street. Behind Russ a much shorter man was gesturing and talking to him. Russ was nodding and saying, “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.” Every time
another “yes” came out of Russ, the man behind him grew more upset, more animated and disturbed. At the top of the steps, Russ turned around to face the man. He sighed heavily and mimed listening to the man speaking in a mash of French and English. The man then slapped Russ’s face. It was a tiny tap followed by the man shaking a finger in Russ’s face, but Eddie saw it for what it was intended to be: An insult. Eddie watched Russ clench his hands at his sides.

“Who’s that guy?” Eddie said to a man leaning against the same wall that Eddie’s chair rested on.

“That would be the star of our show, Russell Dunn,” the man said before taking a drag of a Gauloises.

“No, the other guy.”

“Oh, him,” the man said. “That’s Rene Duchamps.”

Eddie looked at the man next to him. It was Michael Dartmouth, an actor who, Eddie recalled, once won an Academy Award for screenwriting.

“Who’s Rene Duchamps?”

“He,” Dartmouth said, flicking his cigarette into the street and starting to walk away from Eddie and across the street toward Russ and Duchamps, “is our Director.”

Dartmouth met Russ and Duchamps at the top of the stairs. The three of them spoke. There was a lot of nodding. Duchamps put his hand gently on Russ’s cheek where he had struck him. Russ nodded some more. Then Duchamps walked down the stairs and sat in a chair facing a large TV monitor. A bell rang. All activity stopped. It was like the kid’s game, freeze tag. The crew of twenty people seemed to inhale at once before becoming still as marble.

Eddie thought about Jessica Lange and *King Kong* and how long ago it had been since he’d seen a movie being made and how a moment being captured on film still delivered, for him, the same chilling thrill.

Russ drew a gun from a holster under his jacket and looked over his shoulder. He looked down the tight staircase, sucked in his breath, and starting running. Dartmouth came into view running at top speed toward Russ. Russ stopped halfway down the stairs, turned and pointed his gun at Dartmouth, who ducked, popped back up, and started taking the steps two at a time. When Russ reached the bottom of the stairs Dartmouth leapt over five steps and landed with both his hands on Russ’s shoulders. The gun went clattering into the street. Then there was an explosion.

A window facing the stairway above Russ shattered outward. Glass rained down on Russ. He ducked and put his hands over his head. The sound of a woman screaming blasted out from the window followed by glass and two streaks of fire. A metal door from that building banged opened. Black, greasy smoke rolled out from the top of the doorway. A man, and a woman holding a child staggered out coughing. Their faces were black and wet with burns and blood.

The woman collapsed. Russ went white. He didn’t move for a long time. When he finally did he deviated from the script by throwing up on the ground.

No one else moved. Russ wiped his mouth, took his jacket off, and darted over to the woman on the ground. He patted her down to make sure any fire on her was out.

“What’s anyone else in there?” he asked the man. The man looked at him stunned in incomprehension. “Oh shit. Il ya que … oh, what the fuck is it?”

Russ looked toward the camera and the crew behind it. He screamed for someone to help.

“And … cut!”

Each member of the crew unfroze and broke into applause.
Print!” Duchamps yelled, clapping his hands then walking over to Michael Dartmouth and Russ and hugging them.

Russ slapped Duchamp’s arm away.

“What the fuck was that?”

The Director laughed. Dartmouth moved away.

“That was planned?” Russ said. “You fucking planned that? What the fuck is your problem?”

Russ started to hyperventilate. He walked over to the building that moments ago he believed had been on fire, leaned against the wall, and threw up again. Then he straightened up, walked toward Duchamps, bumped into him, said, “Fuck you,” and walked away.

Eddie chased after Russ. When he caught up to him he lit a cigarette and put it in Russ’s shaking hand.

“What was that? Edie asked.

“No fucking idea,” Russ said. “I thought that was for real. Motherfucker. Did you see that woman and that kid? I thought they were really burned and—”

Russ started to cry. Eddie put his hand on Russ’s shoulder.

“I’ve never seen anything like that? Have you?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “In Chicago, when I was a reporter.”

“That scared the shit out of me,” Russ said.

“Everything’s fine,” Eddie said. “It’s the movies! Ta da!”

Russ pulled himself together and walked back to Duchamps. The Director, Dartmouth, and Russ spoke to one another in intimate tones. There was a lot of nodding. It appeared that a deeper understanding of what they should be doing was obtained. They shot the scene again.
Then again. Then again. Eddie heard Duchamps despair about losing the light. They shot it again.

Eddie was drinking coffee and flipping through the script when Russ came over to him two hours later.

“How’s the script coming?” Russ said.

“Working on it,” Eddie said.

“By the way,” Russ said, “if anyone asks, you’re not rewriting this script. This stays between us.”

A woman pulled Russ away for a makeup refresh and wardrobe change before the next shot. Dartmouth stood with his back against the wall, smoking next to Eddie.

“That was intense,” Eddie said.

“Fucking Duchamps,” Dartmouth said with a small laugh.

“Yeah,” Eddie said.

Eddie looked at the closed script in his lap.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a script,” Eddie said.

“I can’t believe he went and did it,” Dartmouth said plucking the script off Eddie’s lap and flipping through it. “Son of a bitch. You must be Eddie.”

“Yes.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dartmouth said, throwing the script back to Eddie and sticking his hand out for a shake. “I’m Mike.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Eddie said.
Dartmouth told Eddie about the time two weeks earlier when he had dinner with Russ and Edward Golden.

“Seriously?” Eddie said. “From No Man’s Land and Steel Wheel and—

“What was the one where he played the private eye?” Dartmouth asked. “The sort of noir one?”

“The Longest Kiss,” Eddie said.

“Yes!”

The three of them had dinner at Brasserie Bofinger, just two blocks from where Eddie and Dartmouth were in the Bastille district.

It had been Russ’s idea to bring in Golden for a small part in Duchamp’s movie.

“Russ loves those old school guys,” Dartmouth said. “Nicholson, Bruce Dern, Ernest Borgnine, Karl Malden, all of them. He said if we could bring in someone like Golden of course he’d be fucking great in the role. And, he said, we could get him cheap. But the best part, he said—and this is the genius part—we could learn more about acting talking to him for five minutes than from a year of talking to each other. Turned out he was right.”

At dinner Russ asked Dartmouth if he could rewrite the script for Duchamp’s movie.

“I said no,” Dartmouth said.

“Why not?”

“The movie’s already shooting.”

“So?”

“Actors don’t get to have personal scriptwriters walk around with them. I told him to talk to Duchamps.”
Duchamps and Russ were not friends. Russ couldn’t come to him with objections to the script. Problems between them started up right after filming began. Russ didn’t like his lines, his costars, the way it was being shot, the lighting, the script, and he detested Duchamps personally.

“Why can’t he just drop out?”

“Not a good idea,” Dartmouth said. “Dropping out of movies makes it tough to get work. Although, I have to say, Russ isn’t wrong. The movie sucks and on top of that, Duchamps is a bad director.”

Duchamps was not only directing the movie, he wrote it and was producing it. Russ, however, was the only reason Duchamps was able to get financing for the movie. Without Russ, there would be no movie, Dartmouth said. The two of them were two snakes stuck in the same basket.

At dinner with Golden Russ mentioned his friend Eddie, who was a writer, and he said he might bring Eddie out to rewrite a few scenes the way he wanted them. Once he had them down he would try and talk Duchamps into trying a couple of different approaches in those scenes.

“Why don’t you make the changes yourself?” Golden said.

“Why would I do that when I know a writer who would do it for me?”

Dartmouth and Golden at dinner that night advised him against it. Although he hadn’t had a hit in more than a decade, Duchamps was an Academy Award winner. He had been in the business for a very long time and had a lot of friends. If word ever got out, Russ’s career could slow way down.

“What did Russ say?”

“He got pissed.”
Eddie watched the boyish, handsome, gentle-spirited actor of intense charm and seeming Midwestern humility transform himself into an enraged, chillingly astute, mini-tycoon. As he spoke, Dartmouth’s hands folded into fists, then opened up and spread in mock exasperation, then extended a sharp finger that pointed and jabbed the air in accusation and anger. Finally he stopped. He looked at Eddie and laughed.

“It was pretty scary,” he said.

Eddie looked at Dartmouth. He’d forgotten he was Michael Dartmouth. While they were talking he’d become just another guy, as though Eddie were back at the Copper Queen Saloon killing time sucking back a few PBRs before becoming wobbly and happy enough to play pool badly or smoke cigarettes on the porch.

“Where’s Walter Hill when you need him?” Eddie said.

“Amen, brother.”

Russ, Dartmouth said, thinks he’s more than a person. He thinks he’s a product, a brand. He’s a moneymaker. He doesn’t need to be grateful to every schlub who gives him a role. He doesn’t need to say his lines and hit his marks if he doesn’t like his lines or his marks.

“I’ve only known Russ a couple of years,” Dartmouth said. “And I like him. But, you should know, I’ve never seen him like this. He’s been weird during this whole shoot.”

“ Weird how?”

“Angry. He’s been very angry. I just hope he doesn’t go down that road.”

“Road?”

“Yeah, where he starts becoming a prick.”

“That’s not Russ,” Eddie said. “He’s not the type.”
“Fuck ‘the type,’” Dartmouth said. “It happens on some level to anyone who wakes up one day rich, famous, and adored. Tell me if you won the lottery the same thing wouldn’t happen to you? My friend Ben is going through it right now, and he’s been more famous and richer than Russ for a long time. It happens to the best of us. The lucky ones come out of it and are fine. The others, well, they keep on being pricks.”

“It’s not Russ,” Eddie said.

“Well, he’s definitely doing what he can to take over this movie.”

Eddie looked across the road at the film set. Russ was walking down the street with his hands in the pockets of a coat. A Gitanes was hanging from his downturned lips. A camera on a dolly slid alongside him five inches from his face. From Eddie’s perspective, with the camera at a three-quarter angle to Russ’s face obscuring most of it, Russ looked as though he were a cybernetic future man, an auto-actor programmed to imitate James Dean and coming close, but not quite pulling it off.

When he got to the end of the street, Russ walked back silently to the start of where he began last time and did it again. Duchamps was exclaiming and spitting his frustration in French from a chair in front of a large monitor. Men and women darted around with their glycol-filled heat exchangers inserting puffs of fake fog into the crevices not filled by backlight in the deepening darkness of the tight street.

Eddie thought Russ looked extremely tired and agitated. He thought he looked weary, and not just as a result of the obvious on-set abuse hurled down on him from Duchamps. There was something else.

“Is Russ a good actor?” he said to Dartmouth.

“Come here.”
Dartmouth led Eddie across the street. He stopped so they were standing about twenty yards from the monitor where Duchamps was fuming.

“Wait for him to leave,” Dartmouth said out of the side of his mouth to Eddie.

A moment later Duchamps threw his hands up and starting yelling “Ross, Ross!” before stomping off to counsel Russ.

“Now,” Dartmouth said, sliding up to a man sitting in a tall folding director’s chair in front of the monitor that Duchamps had just abandoned.

“Hey, Eric,” Dartmouth said.

“Hey,” Eric said.

“This is my friend Eddie.”

“Uh huh,” Eric said, not looking up.

“He’d like to see the last two setups, if you could roll it back.”

Eric pried his gaze away from the monitor. He looked at Dartmouth, then at Eddie. He laughed and shook his head.

“The last two shoots?”

“Yeah. You know, Russ walking down the street. The last two shots we just saw.”

“If Rene catches me—”

“Which he will if you don’t hurry the fuck up,” Dartmouth said, bouncing up and down like a kid who had to pee.

“All right, but you owe me.”

Eric hit a few buttons. Then he folded his arms and leaned back in some sort of private triumph. An image of the street appeared on the monitor. The camera panned the puddles and the parked cars then found Russ before zooming in on his face as he walked down the street.
“You asked me if Russ was any good,” Dartmouth said. “Look.”

Eddie barely recognized Russ on the monitor. He looked altered in some way. His face was etched and haggard and concentrated. He seemed to be bearing an age-old burden. The shot lasted fifteen seconds, but it took Eddie’s breath away. The second shot was the same action as the first but, Russ having spoken to Duchamps, his face communicated a deeper, darker concern. Eddie had no idea what the source of the concern was for the character. Instead, he worried that Russ was thinking about Caitlin—that he was envisioning the coming and certainly catastrophic end to their relationship. Then Eddie snapped out of it, realizing the source of the reality meant nothing to the result on camera. And it was on camera that Russ changed.

James Garner once said that Steve McQueen wasn’t much of a person in real life, but you put a camera on him, and he changed into the most fascinating, charismatic man you could ever imagine meeting. How, exactly, did this transformation take place? Who knew? Garner said even he had no idea and, more importantly, he didn’t need to know in order to appreciate that McQueen was a great movie actor. He wasn’t a great actor for his skills, or because he was an expert at pretending to take on other personae. He was, because of the camera, a uniquely great movie actor.

Eddie realized at that moment that Russ, too, was a great movie actor.

Eddie spent four days on set huddled with Russ.

“I feel like we’re carrying out a grand conspiracy,” Eddie said as they ate a baguette and drank café au lait at three a.m. between takes of Russ shooting a double agent on a rooftop in the dark with Paris stretched out behind the scene and Russ and the other actor tumbling across the roof then huddling together between breaks to decode how to fall while also talking about
bringing in stuntmen, but that would mean having to fly them out and Duchamps didn’t want to spend the money, so both Russ and the other actor ended up getting their elbows and knees ripped up by the hot tar and gravel roof surface as they fell and shot and fell and shot and waited to do it again and again and again.

“We are carrying out a conspiracy,” Russ said. “And if you breathe a word to anyone I’ll kill you.”

Russ stopped in mid-chew with one hand clutching bread while the other gripped his coffee and his cigarette smoked itself down between two parted fingers on the same hand. He stared at Eddie.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” Eddie said. “I heard you. Don’t be so melodramatic.”

Russ let out a huge grin.

“I really got you there,” he said.

“Asshole. Are you guys going to bring in stunt people for the roof scene?”

“Nah,” Russ said. “We decided we can make it look better on our own. Plus, all the cuts include stunt guys, I don’t know, it can look really cheesy. Nope, this is definitely better.”

“Duchamps won’t pay for it?”

“The fucker.”

Russ flicked his nubbin of a cigarette off the roof and sent it arcing through the night and down below into the alley between the two buildings where he hoped Duchamps was sitting.

“We’re meeting tonight,” Russ said without looking at Eddie and gathering his bags and napkins. “Are you done?”

“I’m done.”
“Bofinger at 8.”

“I’ll be there.”

Russ slipped into the back booth at Bofinger next to Dartmouth and Golden at seven thirty that night. He was tired from lack of sleep and exhausted from a three-hour phone call with Caitlin. When would he be back? What was he doing? He better not be fucking anyone. He listed reassurances by rote, sometimes not even waiting for the question before answering. He was doing nothing. He was fucking no one. He didn’t know when he would be back. He was miserable without her and, yes, of course, he loved her. She ended up hanging up on him when he fell asleep holding the phone. Or at least he assumed she hung up. He didn’t notice until he woke up twenty minutes later with a cold plastic phone in his hand. He imagined the phone call he could make to apologize. The terse voice on the other end after picking up. He could hear the screaming, with his voice rising into defensive octaves to stave off the made-up, acrid recriminations while her anger came smoldering and exploding from thousands of miles away as he sat and considered whether or not he might have actually committed the sins she listed and spat at him. He didn’t call her back.

“Where’s Eddie?” Golden said.

“I told him to be here at eight. There’s a few things I wanted to get straight before we talk to him.”

“You look like shit,” Dartmouth said.

“Thanks,” Russ said, massaging his temples and blowing the stale air out of his lungs before squaring his shoulders and setting to business.
Russ said he knew that they knew about having Eddie rewrite the script. He extracted a promise that they wouldn’t reveal what they knew. It was important, he said, that as actors they stick together.

Dartmouth shrugged and said it was no big deal to him. Golden mentioned that he was only there to have some dinner.

“This is serious,” Russ said, slapping the table with an open palm and causing the silverware to jump.

Golden smiled and started laughing.

“Do we need to cut our palms with a knife and swear a blood oath at this point?” he said.

Russ leaned back in his chair.

“Sorry guys,” he said. “I am a little stressed out. I apologize.”

Russ checked his watch.

“Before Eddie gets here,” he said, “I want to make sure you guys are not going to forget that when I get up is when you do the thing with Eddie just like we rehearsed.”

“Why are we doing this again?” Golden said.

Russ said he needed to make sure that Eddie was on board and would stay on board. He needed to check his loyalties.

“But,” Dartmouth said, “he’s your friend.”

“He is right now, but things change, right.”

Eddie appeared. The three of them stiffened in their chairs. Eddie apologized for being a few minutes early and pulled out a chair. He clutched the tattered and grimy script to his chest looking like, Russ thought, some sort of idiot savant in the presence of his older, manipulative brother.
Russ’s phone rang. Russ mouthed, “Caitlin.” He rolled his eyes because she was, more than likely calling to say the same things she said earlier.

“How much is Russell paying you for the work you’re doing?”

“Nothing?” Dartmouth said.

“No,” Eddie said. “I am working on this project purely as an unindicted co-conspirator.”

Russ imagined that Eddie was smiling at his own cute comment. Two beats passed, and there was no response, so he imagined Eddie looking down at his plate and wondering what he said wrong.

“So, no credit and he’s not paying you?” Golden said.
“Correct.”

Russ pictured Dartmouth and Golden turning their eyes toward one another and shaking their heads.

“What?” Eddie said. “What’s wrong?”

Russ leaned in closer and heard Dartmouth say to Eddie in a low, serious tone, “Doesn’t that concern you?”

“Concern me in what way?”

Russ wanted them to get Eddie into a corner. He enjoyed hearing Eddie fight his way out of corners. He reveled in how when, at a party once at Doug Simon’s, a bunch of people ganged up on Eddie about being Catholic—“Do you also believe in Santa Claus?”—Eddie came out swinging and frothing and pronouncing and making the most logical arguments for believing in the unbelievable that it was a wonder everyone didn’t convert that night.

“Russ is playing you?” Golden said. “No offense. I know you guys are friends from the place and the way-back time, etcetera etcetera. But, come on, he’s getting your expertise, your work—”

“From which he will benefit financially and professionally,” Dartmouth said.

“From which he will benefit, yes,” Golden said. “And what do you receive in return?”

_These guys are good_, Russ thought.

“We’re friends,” Eddie said.

“Excuse me?” Golden said. “I didn’t, catch that.”

“We,” Eddie said, enunciating, “are friends.”

Golden and Dartmouth laughed.

“Where the hell is Russ?” Eddie said.
“Listen,” Golden said, “friends are great. We’re big fans of friends.”

“Big,” Dartmouth said.

“But just between us, what is it you want?”

Russ knew this is where Eddie would either rise up and defend himself or fold and plead.

“I don’t want anything.” Eddie said. “And I’m starting to get annoyed at these questions.”

“We’re only trying to help Russ—and help you,” Dartmouth said.

“You’re trying to help me?” Eddie said. “And you’re trying to help Russ?”

“Yes,” Golden said.

“You can help me, and you can help Russ, by staying the fuck out if it,” Eddie said.

“Now just a minute—” Dartmouth said.

“Is the concept of friendship so foreign in Hollywood that it’s considered like a virus, like a raging infection? Is it something so unknown that, instead of trying to understand it, you think it should be eradicated and destroyed? Is that it with you guys?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Golden said in an ominous tone.

Then, around the corner from where his three friends were negotiating the ways in which they could make his life better, Russ looked at the ground and heard nothing said for a long time.

“Can I help you, sir?”

The waiter stood very close to Russ. He had a towel draped over his arm and was leaning toward him as though he were addressing an uninvited guest at a party. Russ looked up to see four tables full of people sitting in a silent dining room staring at him.


He walked three steps to his seat, pulled out his chair, and sat down.

“So what did I miss?”
Russ and Eddie walked the Tuileries later that night, occasionally bouncing off one another’s shoulders and hiding the bottle under one or the other’s jackets in an impromptu conspiracy of concealing their public drunkenness.

“I wish I could have seen the look on your face. ‘That’s ridiculous,’” Russ said in a pitch-perfect imitation of a pissed-off Edward Golden.

“Oh,” Eddie said, “that’s good. If he retained even a hint of his long-lost popularity, it would be great at parties.”

“Now, now,” Russ said. “They were just doing me a favor.”

“Anyway, I gave it to him good, though, huh? Try and push me around. Son of a bitch. You should have seen the look on his face when I told him I didn’t like his questions. Motherfucker just collapsed.”

“Notch it back there, Charlton Heston. It wasn’t all that tough.”

“Charlton Heston?”

“Vargas in *Touch of Evil.*”

“Nice. Anyway, explain to me again how they were doing you a favor. I’m kind of fuzzy on the whole good/bad thing.”

For the third time, like he was George telling Lenny about them rabbits and about that place they’d get one day, Russ recounted the plot: Dartmouth and Golden would gang up on Eddie to determine if he wanted anything.

“You mean to determine where my loyalties lay?” Eddie said. “And again I have to say, fuck you. That’s really insulting. Give me a sip before you drink it all. My trust in you is greatly diminished.”
“I only wanted to find out if you wanted anything for all this work,” Russ said, waving the script. “I knew you were too nice to ask, and I didn’t want you to not have something if you really wanted it.”

They walked for a moment, passing the bottle and trading sips.

“I almost believed you just then,” Eddie said.

“Yeah, I felt like I almost had you there. It was good though, right?”

“It was great. You were great. You could perhaps do such things as lying and conniving professionally and for profit one day, you keep at it.”

Eddie handed the bottle of wine to Russ.

“Cheers,” he said.

They walked while smiling and staring straight ahead.

“Don’t glug it, all” Eddie said to Russ as he swallowed large gulps of merlot and veered off the sidewalk before Eddie grabbed him and the bottle back.

“What time do the bars close in Paris?” Russ said as the façade of the Hotel Le Meurice appeared, looking like the sentinel ramparts of a fort guarding a lost river.

Eddie said that as far as he knew, bars closed at eleven, but clubs were open until two a.m. Russ asked if clubs were in fact bars. Eddie said he didn’t believe so. Clubs were more like discos. Bars are like the Grand, or Elmo, places where you go and drink, like men, and then maybe eat then go home and curse at your wife before passing out on a chaise lounge, thus wrinkling your beret and creasing your cheesy mustache.

The two of them stopped and laughed with a back-and-forth intensity that took them a few minutes to get through.

“You want to hit a bar?” Eddie said. “It’s my last night in the big city.”
“Bars close at … then clubs with dancing at two … fuck it,” Russ said. “It’s too complicated.”

They sat in front of the hotel and swapped what was left in the bottle back and forth, just like the scene they shared four years earlier in True West. They each took smaller and smaller sips, making it last. Eddie felt sad that once it was gone, they would go to their rooms and sleep, then Eddie would fly back to Bisbee, and the spell of their time together would end.

“I hope you like the changes in the script,” Eddie said. “It’s self-explanatory, if you can read my handwriting.”

“You’re so ordinary,” Russ said to Eddie while looking at the sidewalk in front of them.

“Thank you.”

“You’re the smartest guy I know, and you’re so ordinary. So normal. Caitlin and me,” Russ said, taking a swig and passing the bottle, “tried to watch Cool Hand Luke before I left.”

“I’m shaking it, boss,” Eddie said swinging the bottle like a pendulum. “I’m shaking it.”

“She stopped watching though, because, she said, she knew how it would end.”

Eddie laughed.

“That’s just her being … being … what’s the word?”

“Obtuse.”

“No.”

“Blankly dismissive so as to appear intelligent.”

“That’s more than one word, but, yeah, that’s it.”

“The suspension of disbelief,” Eddie said, killing what was left of the merlot.

“Exactly. So what if you know how it’s going to end? It’s a classic. It’s a great fucking movie. How could you not want to watch it?”
“You have to watch it. That’s why people go to movies. Not because of what happens, but how it happens.

“That’s why I go to movies,” Russ said. “You’re a fucking genius, and you’re so normal. Maybe your genius is that you’re so normal. Maybe that’s it. I don’t know.”

Eddie slapped Russ on the knee, then stood up before pulling him to his feet. They hugged.

“All right, brother,” Russ said.

“Yup. And hey, this might be the wine talking, but if you need me for anything, at any time, I’m there. I hope you know that.”

“I do.”

They walked silently across the grand lobby to an elevator.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” Eddie said as Russ started to step off the elevator at his floor. “Anything happens, you hold her, I’ll hit her.”

“Good to know. See ya.”

“See ya.”
Chapter 9

Karen had read in the file about Russ seeming unstable during the time before and after Eddie was in Paris. He was pulled over for a DUI on Mulholland Drive one night and it appeared that he tried to punch the arresting officer. Friends who were interviewed said Russ seemed to be distant for about a year after Paris. He stopped going to parties, stopped answering his phone, and even stopped making movies. He was sued by one studio for refusing to do any publicity on the Duchamps movie, which disappeared from theaters after a single weekend and caused a few critics to wonder whether Russ was merely a one-trick, action star pony who had over reached with a vanity project.

“What was Russ like after you saw him in Paris?” Karen asks Eddie.

“He seemed fine to me,” Eddie says with a shrug. “I heard stories about how he was drinking and getting pulled over and everything, but he was never weird with me. Although, I have to say, with most people he was a dick. But, he had to be. He was famous and rich and everyone was coming to his door asking for all kids of strange shit. The walls go up. They need to or you’ll get eaten alive. But he was fine with me.”

“And you guys stayed in touch?” Karen asks.

“Oh, sure. Yes. I mean I visited him maybe twice. We went drinking in LA. He flew me to London once to hang out with Johnny Depp and Simon We stayed close. Mostly we spoke to each other on the phone.”

“What did you talk about?”
“Sometimes he would call and just say he missed me. He did that in Bisbee, too. If we hadn’t talked in a few days, he would call and say, ‘I miss you. How are you doing?’ Isn’t that funny. Guys don’t do that.”

Karen crosses her arms and cocks her head at Eddie.

“Russ was the only person in my life I ever connected with,” Eddie says. “Laugh if you want, but that’s the truth. That was important to me.”


Eddie smiles. Then, after a moment, the smile fades.

“Most of the time he called to talk about Caitlin,” he says. “She was always erratic but, well, Caitlin liked to knock a few back every day. And she enjoyed her drugs.”

“Drugs?”

“Coke, mostly. Some pills. She used to do meth. Russ thought that at least she wasn’t doing that shit anymore, so that was good. But, she was still crazy.”

“Crazy how?”

“Really crazy. She probably would have been crazy without the drugs. Who knows? But Russ loved her. He really loved her. He would say that you can’t choose who you fall in love with.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Karen says.

“Then, one day, he realized he stopped loving her. Then, about a year later, the fight happened.”

“Wait,” Karen says, “I remember this. It was in all the papers and on TV. That was Caitlin?”
“That,” Eddie says, “was Caitlin. Right after it happened he called me. He left a message but I didn’t get it until five days later.”

“Why not?”

“No cell service. I was on safari. In Uganda.”

*He’s doing all right, Karen thinks. He’s giving his version. It’s holding up.*

Karen opens a file on her desk.

“It says here that a year ago, you spent three weeks in Kampala researching a book on clinical trials.”

“Yes. I stayed at the monastery, the same one where we went after the explosion. The place where your storm troopers found us.”

“Sorry about that.”

“The cost of business, right?”

“That was when you met Rev. Bartouk?”

“No,” Eddie says. “No, I met him on this trip. A year ago I went to Uganda to do a chapter on how clinical trials are managed in poor countries. I connected with Father John at a conference and he invited me to spend some time. Great guy. He was studying for his Ph.D. in clinical science. He introduced me to doctors and all these people in the government health office.”

“Wait,” Karen says, “I’m lost. How does this fit in with Caitlin?”

Eddie takes Karen through each step, each permutation, through each and every disastrous rationale starting with the fight with Caitlin and moving forward. To Karen, he seems to be connecting the events for the first time.

“So,” Karen says, “it was Russ.”
“No,” Eddie says. “Coming to Uganda was his idea, but I took it from there. It was me.”
Chapter 10

The first shot hit Russ in the side of the head. He went spinning around and caught his face on the point of a stucco pillar. His glasses flew off his head and hit Caitlin in the face.

“My glasses,” he said, bending down to pick them up.

“Youre glasses? Your fucking glasses?”

He spotted them a second before Caitlin stomped them four times under her shoe, transforming them into useless, glittering flecks of glass and metal.

“Fuck your glasses,” she said.

Before he could straighten up, she caught him under the chin with her knee. He felt a dull clunk in the back of his head from biting his tongue half way through. Blood spewed out onto his shoes. Keeping his face down, he watched his blood spread onto the concrete.

Five minutes earlier Russ told Caitlin he didn’t love her. He was sorry, but he simply had fallen out of love. He wanted to be in love, and was trying to be in love, but he wasn’t. He thought she took it well, as though it was an open secret between them that someone finally had the guts to say out loud. He sensed relief on her behalf.

They sat at the bar at the Chateau Marmot and he asked her whether he should have his glasses on or off for the photographers outside.

“You look old in glasses,” she had said. “Don’t wear them.”

“They make me look smart, though,” he’d said.

Caitlin looked at Russ for a long time. She announced she had to go to the bathroom.

“All right,” Russ said before finishing the last of his rum and coke. “We have to say something to those reporters. Then I want to get the hell out of here. I hate doing promotion.”
“I know you do,” she said.

Then what happened? Russ watched the blood pouring out of his mouth and splashing on the ground. It looked like a scene from a movie. He thought it was happening to someone else. He didn’t feel any pain. It was fascinating.

He felt Caitlin’s fist hit him flat in the nose. He wondered if she broke it. They say that you get two black eyes. Just then, he felt her open hands slapping him in the face and on the back and the shoulders. It was happening so fast, like she had six hands.

“You faggot,” Caitlin said. “You motherfucker. You thought you could get away with it?”

_Don’t, Russ thought, hit back._

He crumbled onto a step at the entrance to Chateau Marmot, tucked his head into his arms, and went fetal trying to cover up.

Caitlin started kicking him. He heard one of her shoes go bouncing off a step. He heard Caitlin screaming. Her naked foot caught him in the head.

Then someone pinned Caitlin’s arms behind her head from behind. The classic full nelson.

“Get your fucking hands off me,” she screamed, flailing with no success at the man behind her. “You’re hurting me. I’m a girl.”

Russ got up.

“I must have passed out,” he said to the man pinning Caitlin.

“I can’t hold her like this forever,” the man said as Caitlin started to loosen from the grasp.

Russ frisked himself for his cell phone.
“Phone,” he said, looking around on the ground. “Where’s my phone?”

“Take mine,” someone said, extending a lit cell phone ready to go.

Russ grabbed it and dialed 911.

“What is your emergency?” the operator asked.

“Cops,” Russ said. “I’ve just been assaulted. Send cops.”

“What is your location, sir?”

“Where are we?” Russ asked the man who offered the phone.

“Chateau Marmot. The front entrance, I think.”

“Do you need an ambulance?”

“You need one,” the man said, looking at Russ.

“Please, yes, an ambulance,” Russ said. “Is there any chance you could not use the sirens because— Hello? They hung up.”

Just then, Caitlin stabbed her stiletto into the foot of the man holding her, broke free, threw her purse over a low wall into some bushes, and ran.

“Get her,” Russ said. “Get her. Fucking get her!”

The man with the cell phone threw his hands up.

Russ staggered a few steps, then broke into a run and tackled Caitlin to the ground.

She kicked and bit and screamed. Russ flipped her over and sat on her chest.

The guy who had pinned her arms came over and held her hands down.

“Get the fuck off me!” You’re hurting me. I’m a girl!”

“Just keep her here until the cops come,” Russ said. He wiped his face and coated his sleeve with blood. He sneered, cocked his fist back, and said, “You fucking cunt.”

“Go ahead, faggot. Hit a girl.”
He held his fist and looked into Caitlin’s eyes. She smiled.

“You’re nothing but a made up suit. You’re a phony. Your whole act is one big, bullshit lie. You—”

Russ drew his fist back and punched Caitlin in the side of the face. The world became dark and silent. All he heard was the crunch of his hand hitting her. He was uncertain if it had actually happened or not.

“Dude,” said the man holding Caitlin’s hands.

Russ looked up. A crowd of about fifteen people had gathered. Several of them had their cell phones out and were pointing them at Russ and Caitlin. Pictures. Video. Evidence.

“You motherfucker!” Caitlin screamed. “You motherfucker!”

An older woman walked over to Russ sitting on Caitlin and said to him, “You should be ashamed of yourself,” then spat on the ground and walked away toward the parking lot.

“Oh Jesus,” Russ said.

He looked up right into the lens of a TMZ television camera.

Caitlin started bucking and fighting just as the first police car lit the scene in a klieg-frieze of yellow headlights, then washed it in a strobe of red and blue siren lights. Two cops got out. They had their hands on their nightsticks.

“Officer,” Russ said.

One cop came up behind Russ, grabbed him by the back of his shirt, hauled him to his feet, and spun him around to face him, at which point Russ bled all over the cop.

The cop said, “Ewww,” and immediately let go of Russ.

Caitlin got to her feet and started walking over to the wall where she’d thrown her purse.

“She hit me,” Russ said, pointing at Caitlin as she walked away. “She hit me.”
“Who called the police?” the second cop asked.

“Me,” Russ said. “I called. She hit me. She beat me up.”

The cop looked at Russ for a second, then turned and said to Caitlin’s back as she slung the strap of the purse she’d retrieved from behind the wall over her shoulder: “Miss? Excuse me, Miss?”

Caitlin started running.

When the cop caught up to her, Caitlin turned on her one remaining shoe and swung her purse. It hit the cop square in the chest.

_That had to hurt_, Russ thought, knowing all the heavy crap Caitlin carried in her purse, like a metal flask, a flashlight, a cell phone, and God knows what else.

The cop slapped the purse to the ground, grabbed Caitlin’s wrist, and pinned her against the low wall.

“All right, Miss,” he said, snapping out his handcuffs.

Before he could get them on her wrists, Caitlin broke free, bounced off the TMZ cameraman, turned and threw her purse one more time over the wall, then turned toward the cop.

“Who the fuck are you? What the fuck are you doing? Help! Help! Police brutality.”

This time the cop spun her around, put his knee in the small of her back, and had her in cuffs in ten seconds flat.

“Wow,” Russ said to the other cop. “This is insane. I mean, wow.”

“It’s pretty normal,” the cop said, shrugging. “You said she hit you?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing!”
“Nothing?
“I didn’t do anything. She’s crazy. And she’s probably high. Check her purse.”
“She hit you with her purse?”
“No. She punched me. With her fists. But check her purse. She threw it over there. Drugs. She probably has drugs in her purse.”
“I know the answer, but I have to ask: How do you know this woman, sir?”
“She’s my girlfriend.”
“So you were both doing drugs and …”

On the way to the police car, the other cop marched Caitlin past Russ. She shifted her wrath from cursing at the cop to spitting at Russ. She kicked her legs out at him, catching him right in the nuts with the foot still wearing a shoe.

He crumbled like a guy who'd just been kicked in the testicles.

“Come on, Miss,” the cop said, pulling her away. “That’s enough of that.”

Russ rolled over on the ground. He sputtered. He held his stomach and his groin. He looked like a movie cliché. When he finally took his gaze off the grain of the macadam, he saw at least ten cameras pointed at him. More police had arrived and were urging people to back up. No one, Russ noted, seemed particularly alarmed. *Why is that?*

An EMT helped Russ to his feet and tried to get him to lie down on a stretcher.

“No,” Russ said, now fully aware of the media and choosing instead to sit down on the stretcher instead of lie down on it.

He looked down at his bloodstained shirt and thought it was dramatic. *I hope*, he thought, *it looks cool.*

“Do you want a towel?” the EMT asked.
“Please,” Russ said. “I think I broke my nose.”

“Let me have a look,” he said, putting his face close to Russ’s face and seeming to look into his eyes to judge whether or not his nose was broken. “Yeah. It’s broken.”

“Shit.”

Russ stared at the ground. He sighed and listened to the air whistle through his swollen nose, which to him felt like a ten-pound bag of wet sand that someone had stuck onto his face.

“I look like Karl Malden,” he said. He laughed. When he looked up, his face was once again a foot away from the tip of a TMZ camera. Two other cameras were trained in his direction from the other side of the ambulance, and five people were holding up cell phones, snapping pictures, and rolling video of the greatest moments of humiliation and pain in his life.

He stood up. He was going to walk over to the EMT and ask if he could go into the ambulance, away from the cameras and the sirens and the gawkers and the serial, multifractalled reduction of self. He took one step. No, he thought, that will only make everything look worse.

A cop came over to him.

“Can’t you make them go away?” Russ asked about the crowd recording his destruction.

The cop looked at Russ as though he’d just beamed straight down from the moon. Russ saw the look and knew what a stupid thing he’d asked. This is LA. This is a company town. This is business. This is the center of the celebrity universe.

“No,” the cop said.

What possessed me to ask such a stupid fucking question? Russ thought. Did Caitlin harm my brain? Did the beating, or, as I am sure it will be labeled, the assault, do lasting, deep damage? Is it that I will take one more step and then collapse in a crumpled heap before lapsing into a coma, then linger for years of court fights and legal motions as the specter of murder
charges faces Caitlin as she strains grain alcohol through a napkin into plastic water bottles so she can raise cigarette money and negotiate an end to the sexual abuse she’s been subjected to at the hands of Teutonic fellow prisoners in prison for spousal abuse and child murder? He pictured her rotting in prison. He even narrated the scene as though he were a newswoman covering his own life. “Caitlin Forrester is rotting in prison as this landmark case winds its way through to our nation’s highest court and as we as a people continue to mourn the loss of a Great American Actor.” Rotting? No. No, not rotting. Languishing! That’s the word they’d use. Languishing. What a great word.

“Hey, Russ, over here!”

“Look over here, Russell!”

“Come on, Russ, give us a smile!”

“Russell! Russell!”

“Russ!”

The man who had held Caitlin’s arms back, who had interrupted the hitting, walked up to Russ. For some reason he had a blanket draped over his shoulders. Russ thought he looked like someone who had just been made homeless by a house fire in some large city.

The man smiled.

Russ looked at him and thought, with genuine surprise, that he was a hero, an honest-to-God actual hero. He stepped in and stopped another person from being hurt. A stranger. He did this at great risk to himself.

Russ looked at the man closely and noticed he was nebbish—small, round.

“Are you all right?” the man said.
Russ eased back a step and nodded.

The man stuck his hand out.

Russ didn’t want to shake it. The cameras. He had hit her. He punched her and this guy was congratulating him for that?

“Here,” the man said, holding Russ’s cell phone out to him.

“Thank you,” Russ said, taking it. “Thank you.”

“Sure thing,” the man said, before turning and walking away.

Russ looked at the phone in his hand.

He dialed Eddie’s number, but it went straight to voicemail.
Chapter 11

Eddie watched from the back seat of the car, counting the seconds until he figured Bishop Albert Shimshasha would plow the Opel head-on into the child crossing the road. When he got to five seconds, he said, “Your eminence! Look out for the kid!”

The Bishop jerked the wheel to the right at the exact same moment a man came to clutch the child away from the road’s faded centerline. Eddie looked back and saw five men and women come to the road on the heels of the child. They were shaking their fists as the car sped off.

“Holy Christ, that was close,” Eddie said, sitting back.

The Bishop and Father John went quiet for the first time since they had left Kampala a half an hour earlier to take Eddie on a three-day safari near the Nile River.

Eddie saw Father John’s eyes looking at him in the rearview mirror.

“Sorry,” Eddie said. “I didn’t mean to take the Lord’s name ... But that was really close.”

“Not so close,” Father John said.

Then Father John giggled, perhaps recalling his warning before they got into the car that Bishop Shimshasha was a terrible driver.

“He drives fast, and he does not pay attention,” Father John had said. “Try to not say anything. He does not like when somebody criticizes his driving skills. He went to one of those car-racing classes. You know the ones? Where you drive the car on a track very fast around and around? Yes. But in those, you do not have cars coming at you in the other lane. No.”

“No,” Eddie said, looking out the window at another plantation that supplied the British with their tea. “Not so close.”
Father John—now he was a great driver. In Kampala, a city of four million people with two stoplights, Father John drove the church van like he was a taxi driver on Dexedrine working for a tip that would save his family. “You need to look them in the eye,” Father John would say, making yet another decision to go or stop at an intersection or at the top of yet another roundabout where the boda boda—boys on motor scooters ferrying one, two, and sometimes three passengers on the backs of the bikes’ thin seats at top speeds with the abandon of NASCAR drivers fighting for the pole—darted in and out of traffic with the precision of mosquitos feeding at sunset. “Look them in the eyes, and they’ll look back, and you’ll know what to do.”

“Can I try?” Eddie asked once. “Can I drive some time?”

“No,” Father John said, “you cannot.”

Sitting in the back of the Opel, Eddie wished Father John had been driving instead of the fat-knuckled, distracted Bishop.

“Perhaps,” Bishop Shimshasha said at last, “it was a little close.”

The two priests laughed.

“Of course,” the Bishop said, “if we had hit the child, we would not have stopped.”

Eddie smiled, thinking it was the set-up for a joke.

“What do you mean?” he said, leaning forward to hear the punch line.

“If we had stopped to help the child,” Father John said, “those people, and all the people in the village, would have killed us.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Father John said, “really.”

Is Russ being chauffeured at this moment back in LA with his life unspooling out in front of him like a fairy tale? Eddie wondered. Is he on his way to spend three days in Marin also in
the back of a car with a maniac driver courting the possibility of mob violence and death at the slightest misstep? If he had been then he would be laughing so hard that he wouldn’t have been able to breathe. No, the most extreme risks Russ ran involved dodging questions about his skill and his age.

Eddie remembered an interview he’d seen with Russ, shortly after he became famous. It was on the U.K. talk show, *Friday Night with Jonathan Lindley* regarding a movie Russ was slated to begin filming shortly.

“So what’s the thinking behind this bit of casting?” Lindley asked.

Russ raised an eyebrow, and sipped from a coffee mug.

“I mean, really, you’re a bit of a codger, aren’t you? How old of a fellow are you?”

Eddie knew that Russ never told anyone his age. It was a lifelong strangeness of his. Eddie was one of the few people who knew the number, but it was possible that even Russ was no longer aware of his actual age.

“I’m old enough,” Russ said.

“I’m certain you are, but you have to admit, that you’re a tad long in the tooth to be pulling guns and all those sorts of things, yes? I mean, why you?”

“Gravitas,” Russ said.

“Gravitas?”

“My age lends me a depth of character, a wisdom. That, coupled with my obvious physical prowess, allows me to fill a void in the culture.”

“A void?” Lindley said with a chuckle. “Fill me in on that void.”

Russ said the generation of actors younger than him then headlining movies seemed bland and interchangeable to movie-going audiences. They were boring.
“I’m not going to name any names,” Russ said. “But they’re lightweights. They wanted someone a little more serious for this movie.”

The audience laughed, as they should have.

“I think you’ll be seeing more of us ‘codgers’ in roles that have more action and drama in them,” Russ said. “Liam Neeson and I talked about this, and he said he might consider doing an action role—depending on how it goes with me, of course.”

That appearance was replayed on cable news, TMZ, and Entertainment Tonight and the reaction from the public was that a new, straight-talking, Hollywood hero had been unearthed.

Four years later Eddie watched Russ explain to Don Lehrman, on The Don Lehrman Show, why he was working for scale in Martin Scorsese’s next movie. He had a supporting role as a loanshark.

“Familiar with the loansharking trade, are you?” Lehrman said.

Russ said he knew all about loansharking from growing up on the lower east side.

He purloined the story from Eddie. When offered an audition for the part he called Eddie and asked if he knew anything about loansharks. Eddie told him about Felix and the bodega around the corner from where he lived. He said Felix collected and set the vig.

Russ asked what a vig was. Eddie said the vig, or vigorish, was the interest a loanshark charged. It could be set daily, but usually it was a weekly interest rate. It was typically around twenty percent, but could be more, depending on the person’s credit history with the loanshark.

Russ not only lifted the lesson to tell Letterman, he boosted Eddie’s life and told it as though he were the one who lived around the corner from Felix. When he did it Eddie stood up in front of the television and offered a toast to Russ in appreciation for stealing his life. He thought it was hilarious.
“For a guy so steeped in the loansharking trade, working for scale is awfully generous of you,” Lehrman said.

“Dude, it’s Martin BEEPing Scorsese,” Russ said. “Who cares about money? If the guy asked, I would have forked over stacks of Hollywood cash just to be in the movie.”

Lehrman asked Russ how much he was paying to be on his show. Russ pulled seven rumpled dollar bills and eighteen cents in change from his pocket, smoothed the bills, counted the coins, and slammed it all down on Lehrman’s desk.

Before going to commercial break, Lehrman said Russ might be back. It all depended on how much more he could raise in the next three minutes.

Bishop Shimshasha stopped the Opel in front of the Mweya Safari Lodge, in Queen Elizabeth National Park. Father John bade Eddie farewell with a hug and reminded him that they would be back for him in three days.

“Try not to get eaten by a lion before we return,” he said.

“I’ll do my best to remain unappetizing,” Eddie said.

After checking in, Eddie was told that all safaris had been cancelled because an elephant had destroyed a Jeep. Five guests from the Netherlands had been crushed. Two of them were killed. Authorities were investigating. In the meantime, Queen Elizabeth National Park was closed to traffic. Then an old, stooped man walked Eddie and his two bags to the front door of his bungalow, where a few feet away, a family of gray warthogs knelt on their hinged joints grazing and blinking with a seeming tranquility. Eddie watched them thinking they had achieved an unknowable state of peace.
In the trees about a hundred yards off, Eddie saw a man in camouflage and a beret put a hand on his AK-47 and look in his direction.

“Tell the militia that I am not a Dutch-crushing elephant,” Eddie said to the man with his bags, who grinned his polite incomprehension before accepting a few shillings for his efforts.

Eddie went into his one-room bungalow and flopped down on the bed under the mosquito netting. He didn’t have a book to read. There was no television in the room. The safari had been cancelled, and he had seventy-two hours to kill. He opened his notebooks from his research for the book he was writing about clinical trials. Then he threw them aside, deciding to take a break from the strain of gathered facts, figures, quotes, and information.

He’d come to Uganda after meeting Father John at a conference in Washington DC about testing cancer drugs. He was working on his Ph.D. in clinical research. When Father John mentioned offhandedly that Eddie should come to Uganda to see how clinical trials there worked, and that Father John would host his visit and show him around, Eddie almost hugged him.

As a journalist Eddie had always wanted to go to a foreign country. Specifically, he wanted to go to a foreign country where there was a war going on. He desired the tough reality of imminent death lurking as he cynically disparaged the folly of war while filing brilliant dispatches on the fly and on the run in the jungle, in the desert, or on the veldt. He wanted to be James Woods in Salvador, or John Malkovich in The Killing Fields, or, even better yet, Mel Gibson in The Year of Living Dangerously. Eddie had wanted a war journalism experience so badly that, when he was a reporter for the local paper in Danbury, Connecticut, he went to the travel office the day the first Gulf War broke out and tried to book a flight to either Iraq or Kuwait. He was told no civilian planes were flying to either country.
Now, thanks to Father John, he was going to a remote, violent country to research a book as a journalist. On the day he left, he put a message on his answering machine that said, “Sorry I missed your call. I’ve gone to Uganda to research a book. Please leave a message.” He got one message from an old friend saying, “You’ve waited your whole life to leave a message like that. Congratulations!”

Eddie strolled the grounds of the Mweya Lodge barefoot, running his toes through the thick, brushy grass and looking up at the sky as it darkened into night. Looking at the groupings of stars from below the equator, he realized he didn’t recognize a single constellation. He went to bed staring up at a white canopy of netting and watching secondary constellations of mosquitos gather, then form and change shapes as they poked their malaria-ridden proboscises through the holes to feed.

The next morning Eddie’s breakfast was served on white china in the dining room. The lodge felt formal and colonial. He ate in silence. He scheduled a massage. The woman rubbed his back and legs with spearmint oil. As her hands worked the boredom out of him Eddie thought about how Russell had been nominated for an Academy Award for his role as a cop in that Martin Scorsese movie. He'd taken Eddie’s advice and gone to the Oscars in a custom-made tuxedo. On the red carpet, he and Caitlin were swarmed and blinded by photographers' flashbulbs. Russell told him later it felt as if zombies were preparing to attack him.

The masseuse asked Eddie to turn over. He chuckled, imagining that Russell, who shortly after the Oscars had been named People magazine’s Sexiest Man of the Year, probably had a masseuse on staff.

When the masseuse’s hand gripped his dick, Eddie sat straight up.

“No?” she said.
“No,” he said. “That’s not necessary. Thank you.”

She rubbed more oil on her hands and reached back between his legs.

“Are you certain?”

He removed her hand, got up, wrapped himself in another towel, paid her, and said, “Thank you” again before walking across the thick lawn back to his room.

*Perhaps I really am living Russ’s life,* he thought.

Five days later, back in Kampala, Eddie turned his phone on. He had a single voice mail: “Come out. Please come. Please. I need you.” It was Russ. He picked up on one ring when Eddie called him back.

“I’m on my way,” is all he said.

Eddie booked a flight and flew halfway around the world to be with his friend without knowing why, but then he learned. On television at the airport, he saw the red and blue spiraling lights at the scene of the fight. He wasn’t surprised. He was relieved that it had finally happened and happened publicly. Caitlin couldn’t dodge her behavior any longer.

Eddie landed at LAX, rented a car, and drove to see Russ. He was buzzed in through the big wooden gate at Russ’s house at 27 Oakmont Drive, in Brentwood. Eddie gasped when Russ opened the door and presented his face with the two black eyes and tape on his broken nose.

Russ hugged Eddie. Eddie dropped his suitcase and hugged him back.

They went in, wordlessly, and sat on the couch in the living room—the only piece of furniture in the cavernous space.


Russ managed a smile and a small laugh.
“Ow,” he said. “It hurts to laugh.”

Russ got up and came back with a bottle of Jameson's.

“I don’t have any glasses.”

Eddie tipped the bottle and took a swig.

“So,” Eddie said, handing him the bottle, “what’s new?”

Russ said two days after the fight he called a meeting with his agent, his publicist, his personal trainer, and his private secretary. He wanted to know what he should do next. His publicist said he could arrange an appearance on any talk show he liked to give his side of the story. He told Russ he was a hero.

“I hit a woman,” Russ said.

“She was beating the crap out of you.”

“So I should go on Oprah and cry and discuss why I should be applauded for decking a girl? Really, is that what I should fucking do?”

His agent told Russ to calm down.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “This a bump, nothing more.”

The long, fat, lingering silence that followed ended when Russ picked up a chair and threw it through a window before telling them to all go to hell.

“You believe this shit? I fucking pay these people a lot of fucking money and that’s what they come up.”

Eddie thought the talk show appearance was actually a good idea, but he kept quiet.

“Since then I’ve lost three roles,” Russ said. “My agent doesn’t call me back. Everyone is staying away. Even my friends don’t like me.”

“But you didn’t do anything.”
“I got beat up. On fucking camera. By a girl. And I hit a woman on camera.”

“Not your fault.”

“Fault? Who gives a fuck about fault? It’s on television. I’m now officially a wife beater.”

“She pushed you to the edge. She pushed you over. You had every right.”

“Do you actually believe that?”

Eddie said nothing.

“I need your help,” Russ said.

“Name it.”

Russ started sobbing. Eddie embraced him.

“Enough of that,” Russ said, breaking free.

“It’s going to be all right,” Eddie said, suddenly not knowing protocol, whether to be serious, glib, supportive, or outraged. “We’ll sit down, and we’ll figure out a way to turn this around. Until that happens, keep your chin up. And maybe keep your left up, too.”

“Ow, fuck,” Russ said, laughing again.

“Sorry.”

“Want to see the house?”

It was enormous. Russ walked Eddie through almost every empty room as their footsteps echoed from the walls.

“I cannot believe I’m actually walking on these floors,” Eddie said as they stood in the kitchen. “Do you know whose house this is?”

“Yes, it’s mine.”

“No, I mean before you?”
“Trigger? Rin Tin Tin? No, wait, Lassie. It was Lassie’s, wasn’t it? That must be why all the doors are so small and close to the floor.”

“This was Steve McQueen’s house. Steve, as in McQueen.”

“You don’t say.”

“Wait, you didn’t know that?”

“Of course I knew it. You’re not the only one who knows things.”

“I stand chastened.”

Russ took Eddie to his bedroom. Aside from the couch in the living room, it was the only room in the house with any furniture, although that was only a mattress on the floor and a lamp. Clothes were piled in the corner of the room.

“I like what you haven’t done with the place.”

“Caitlin’s still got all my shit. Including the other house. And the cars. And my dog. She’s not giving it up without a fight.”

“No pun intended.”

“It’s good to see you, buddy,” Russ said.

“Good to see you too,” Eddie said.

The next day was a Thursday. Before dawn, Russ got into his Mercedes and drove for six twisting hours along Highway 1 to a Marin County lunch meeting with Booker Walsh, the head of Paramount Pictures; the director, Robert Scanlon; and a lawyer from the insurance company that had backed a movie called The Major. Russ had wrapped the movie the previous year, and it was slated for a summer release.
Walsh’s assistant had called two days earlier. When he started to tell Russ what the meeting was about, Russ said, “Thank you,” and hung up. He didn’t want to know what was going to happen. He preferred to believe that he was driving to have lunch with colleagues and friends so that they might comfort him in a time of great personal crisis. He looked at the rolling, boiling Pacific to his left under the warming sky and, thinking about how infinitesimal the possibility was that these people were gathering to offer succor and comfort in his time of pain, considered driving his car directly into the shabby guard rail so that he would plunge into the rocks and surf below like he was in the opening credits of a Quinn Martin Production. He laughed at the odd ways his brain had been working since he got beat up.

“There are no coverages for this,” the insurance adjuster, Sam Gurtz, said eating an endive salad and drinking merlot. Walsh and Scanlon nodded and chewed vigorously to endorse his statement as the four of them sat at a round table in a private room overlooking acres of vineyards rolling out and up in all directions. “There is no precedent. There is no guidebook. We’re in new territory with this, and I am here to tell you that, as it stands, we, unfortunately, cannot cover the losses this film is expected to experience directly as a result of recent events in Russ’s personal life.”

Russ put his napkin down.

“But what if Russ can put those events right?” Walsh said. “What if information emerges and tells a different side of the story? What if it’s a side that not only exonerates him, but improves his profile?”

Gurtz chewed and nodded while appearing to be contemplating this.
“I’m right here,” Russ said, picking up the bottle of merlot, topping his glass off, then drinking half of it down in one gulp. “I’m sitting right here, and I can hear everything you’re saying.”

Scanlon, the director, laughed his British laugh and stabbed a leaf of lettuce. Walsh smiled wanly, took a sip of his own wine, and said, “What we’re saying, Russ, is that, as it stands now, the picture is not releasable.”

“Why not? I mean, are you saying that no one will believe me as a 1970s drug lord who abuses women and kills cops and enemies with impunity because a few days ago, my girlfriend forced me to make a horrible mistake on camera? Because if you’re saying that, then what I have to say is: Fuck you. Who cares?”

“Let’s settle down, Russ,” Scanlon said. “This isn’t personal.”

“Fuck you, Bob. You and your fucking movie.”

“Are you finished with the fuck yous?” Walsh said. “Good. Here is what is happening at this moment as we speak: Because of recent events in your life, the insurance company says they will not initiate the coverage clause. That means we are forced to hold you liable for the cost of the movie.”

“How much is that?” Russ said to the insurance adjuster.

“It’s hard to say.”

“Ballpark.”

“One hundred,” he said, “one fifty, maybe.”

“Thousand?” he joked.

“Million.”

“Million.”
It was then that Russ started laughing. He didn’t stop even as he stood up, clapped each man on the back and shook each of their hands while food flew from his mouth. He didn’t stop when he started choking and coughing, or when he turned the key on his car, fishtailed it onto the road and started for home while promising himself that he would not leave his house ever again.

On Friday, Russ drank a twelve pack of Heineken and ate four bags of Pepperidge Farm Goldfish. He ended his day by watching a standup comedian on television joke that Russell Dunn had probably had his last hit.

On Saturday morning, Russ watched a story on CNN about a poll that said sixty three percent of people said they would not go to a Russell Dunn movie if they could go for free. More than half of those asked said they believed Russ had done something to provoke the attack from Caitlin. The reporter then spent five minutes discussing what some of those things might have been.

Sunday was a day of rest.

On Monday, Russ watched footage of Caitlin walking out of jail while the announcer said that police had discovered drugs in her purse, and also found cocaine in the house she and Russ shared.

On Tuesday, Eddie and Russ sat in stunned silence, unable to find any words, watching a talk show host on Fox News agree with two psychologists that Russ should have gone further in defending himself against Caitlin. To not have done so, the talk show host said, only serves to further weaken the institution of marriage and erode the role of men in society.

On Wednesday, Variety arrived in the mail. Since the fight with Caitlin, they reported, Russ had lost five endorsement deals and his agent “parted company with the star, who remains in seclusion and was not available for comment.”
Russ put *Variety* on the kitchen counter and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“I am a dead person,” he said to Eddie, who sat at the other end of the counter eating Raisin Bran and working on his clinical trials book.

“That sucks,” Eddie said, not looking up.

Russ walked into the living room and sat down. Eddie could hear him crying. He came in and sat next to him.

“My life is ruined,” Russ said. “My life is fucking ruined and I didn’t do anything to deserve it. I was honest with her. I told her I didn’t love her. That happens, right? People fall in and out of love every goddamned day. And what does she do, she ruins my entire fucking life.”

Eddie put his arm around Russ.

“I cannot believe I hit her,” Russ said, crying louder and harder. “You know me. That’s not me. That’s not me.”

The next morning Eddie called Michael Dartmouth. He asked him if he knew anyone who knew Karl Malden. His plan was to bring Russ and Malden together so Russ could begin to appreciate his roots as an actor. He hoped it would revive him, or at least cheer him up.

It turned out that Malden was a bit of a poker player. Dartmouth called Eddie back and said he and Russ were more than welcome to play at Malden’s weekly game the next day.

Karl Malden’s house was five blocks away in Brentwood. It was a two-story, U-shaped monstrosity with a Spanish tile roof cloaked by giant trees on all sides. There was no gate, no buzzer, no security. Eddie parked behind four other cars in the driveway and got out. He straightened up, breathed in deeply, stared at the side of the house where the side door awaited, and breathed in deeply again.
“Whose house is this again?” Russ said.

“It’s a surprise,” Eddie said. “Don’t forget the beer.”

“Got it,” Russ said hoisting two six packs of PBR from the back seat.

Eddie stood next to Russ. Perhaps, Eddie thought, meeting his hero would inspire Russ to ditch his career making Hollywood drivel and return to acting in a serious way, maybe back to New York and to Broadway.

“Nice place,” Russ said.

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “This house is bigger than my high school. But, it’s a friendly game. Seven card stud, hold ‘em, no casino games, very straightforward. Just having a good time. I thought it might cheer you up. Oh, and we’re not playing in the house.”

“Not playing in the house?”

“We’re in the garage. That way we can smoke.”

“Really?”

“His wife hates smoking in the house.”

“Gotcha.”

“Hey!”

Russ and Eddie looked left, toward the garage and the voice that had just yelled.

“Hey,” the voice said again, “in here.”

They walked gingerly up the drive and into the garage. They squinted against the light change.

“We’re playing in here.”
Eddie focused and found the face of Karl Malden. He sat in a large wooden chair at the head of the table. He had a green, plaid blanket over his legs. He was shuffling a deck of Bicycle Jumbo playing cards.

“Mr. Malden,” Eddie said. “It’s an honor. I want to introduce you to my friend, Russell Dunn.”

Russ stood staring at Malden, who showed no reaction.

“Hi,” Russ said.

Eddie walked stiffly over to the man and extended his hand. Malden looked at it, shook it, and put his hands back to shuffling cards.

The garage was busy with rakes, tires, and boxes—like any other suburban disaster area of a garage.

He looked around and saw three other people, aside from Karl Malden, sitting on patio chairs around a round table. Donald Hooper, the rebel actor and filmmaker from the 60s who was a renowned collector of art but still an oddball; Prescott Jennings, a dapper, and usually tuxedoed, leading man with the grace and air of royalty; and Mary Davis, the finest actress of her generation who had won three Academy Awards and who always seemed approachable and down to earth. They all looked up when Russ and Eddie walked in.

“There he is!” Jennings said to Russ, springing to his feet. “Come here, you big lug. You doing all right?”

They hugged while Eddie stood quietly off to the side.


They all waved hello.
“Apologies about the setting, gentlemen,” Malden said in a low, phlegmy rasp. “But my Don Arturo Edicion Aniversarios mean more to me than making sure you’re comfortable as I take your money.”

“Are you the guy from Bisbee?”

Hooper was small. Actually, Eddie thought, surprised at Hooper’s lack of physical stature, he's elfin.

“That’s me, yes,” Eddie said.

Hooper nodded.

Eddie pulled out a chair next to Mary Davis.

“Is it all right with you if I sit here?”

“Fine with me.”

“Thanks.”

Russ sat down. He put the six-packs of PBR on the table in front of him.

Jennings looked at them and winced. Hooper took one, as did Davis.

“Did you bring any cash,” Malden said in a croak, “or are you going to use that crappy beer for money?”

Russ got to his feet, picked up the PBR, and hugged the six-packs to his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t know where to put these.”

Jennings walked over to Russ and gently relieved him of the beer.

“Yeah, Bisbee,” Hooper said. “I’ve been to that town a few times. Neat little place you got going there, man.”

“Thank you,” Eddie said. “We like it.”
Eddie sat down next to Russ, handed him a beer, patted him twice on the shoulder, leaned in, and said, “Relax. Enjoy.”

“I’m fine,” Russ said. “Leave me alone.”

“The games are seven-card stud and hold ‘em,” Malden said, before taking thirty seconds to cough out the smoke from the previous drag on his cigar. “No wild card crap, and no casino games. Ante is twenty-five. Raises are capped at fifty, except for a dollar on the last card. Three raise maximum. Any questions, Russ’ obviously not gay friend, Eddie?”

Eddie tried to hear what Malden was saying, but he caught only scatterings because Davis was telling Eddie the rules as Malden was talking. When he ended, Davis was still talking to Eddie. As Malden glared at them, they became aware that no one else in the garage was talking. They became as mute as churchgoers.

“If you’ve finished rehearsing your segment of the Golden Girls, Mary, can we start playing the game?” Malden growled.

“Really, Karl?” Davis said with a grin. “Golden Girls? Shame on you.”

Everyone at the table, except for Russ and Eddie, took out Crown Royal bags, reached in, and slapped piles of quarters in front of where they were sitting.

“Remember,” Malden said, “maximum raise is one dollar, but only on the last card.”

“I’m sorry,” Eddie said to Jennings. “Did he say a dollar?”

“Yes, four quarters. You need change?”

“I do, yes.”

Eddie extracted his wallet, reached in, and took out a twenty-dollar bill. He was afraid this was part of some prank at his expense.

“Can you change me out?” he said to Hooper.
“I’m light,” he said, mixing his fingers through his small pile of coins. “Anyone got some change for Fast Eddie here?”

“Isn’t this great?” Eddie said to Russ.

Russ rolled his eyes and asked Davis for some change.

Two hours later, Eddie had cashed in another twenty. He was a pretty bad poker player. He was too hopeful. He waited too long through each hand to get the card he wanted. He rarely folded. Today, though, distracted by his concern for Russ, he was particularly awful.

“I don’t think you did anything wrong,” said Malden, who was lubricated with three glasses of merlot, about Russ’s predicament. “You should have hit her. I would have.”

“No, Karl, you would not have,” Davis said.

“It was wrong,” Russ said. “It made nothing better.”

“Who’s talking about better?” Malden said, poking his cigar toward Russ like he was an old time Chicago pol in a back room. “I’m talking about self-defense. She broke your nose. She gave you two black eyes. She put her shoe right between your testaments. Brother, if that doesn’t deserve at least one punch in the head, I don’t know what in Christendom does. Pure, unadulterated self-defense.”

Davis shuffled the deck and dealt.

“I’m going with Karl on this one,” she said. “I mean, fair is fair is fair. OK. The game is follow the Queen.”

“I said no wild card games,” Malden said.

“He did say that,” Hooper said, nodding.

Davis jutted her chin out toward Malden.

“Go ahead, Karl,” she said. “First shot’s free.
Everyone laughed.

“I don’t know, man, smacking a broad doesn’t strike me as a good idea, ever,” Hooper said, spreading his cards in his hands and wincing at the hand he held.

“Every rule,” Jennings said, “has its exception.”

“At this point it’s not about what I should have done,” Russ said. “It’s what the hell do I do now?”

The six of them sat contemplating the situation while Davis laid one card up in front of each of them.

“Maybe you do like a consciousness-raising type thing,” Hooper said. “I mean, violence against men. It’s a big issue. I had a friend whose wife used to beat him like a rented mule every day, man. Become like, a spokesperson for that, or start a foundation or something, right?”

Everyone around the table was quiet.

“That is a great idea,” Malden said, faintly hitting his fist on the table. “The Russell Dunn Pussy Man Foundation. You would be a beacon of light to poor, lost, whimpering simps afraid of defending themselves the world over. Get a headquarters in France. They’re well noted for their lack of violence against anyone who raises a hand against them, too.”

Everyone but Russ chuckled in deference.

“What about the courts?” Jennings said. “Hasn’t she been charged?”

“I’m not going to press charges,” Russ said.

“But,” Hooper said in his signature high-pitch voice that Eddie had been waiting the whole game to hear, “she kicked the shit out of you, man.”

“I hit a woman,” Russ said. “That’s the end of that.”
“The drug charges will send her to jail,” Eddie said. “We were thinking that pursuing assault charges will only drag this out and keep it on TV. It also might look like piling on. None of that helps.”

Everyone at the table nodded and studied their cards.

“I’m sorry,” Eddie said to Hooper, “I didn’t mean to interrupt.

“There is a Queen out, and the card following it is,” Davis said tossing out the last face-up card for that round, “deuces. Deuces are wild. Any chance you and she will, perhaps, reconcile?”

Russ laughed.

“I’m not picking out any patterns or registering anywhere anytime soon.”

Eddie looked at the tabletop and said nothing. Everyone in the room got quiet.

“It’s difficult losing someone you love, no matter how it happens,” Jennings said.

“Yes,” Malden said. “Yes, it is.”

Davis nodded and looked solemn.

“It’ll kick your ass,” Hooper said. “I mean, well, not in the sense that you get your ass kicked — although, you did actually get your ass kicked.”

Air came back into the garage as everyone started to laugh.

“Love!” Malden said in a loud, clear voice. “It’ll kick you right in the nuts, boys!”

Eddie smiled. Russ looked stricken.

Eddie got up for a beer. Malden got up and stood next to him opening a new bottle of merlot.
“Thank for doing this,” Eddie said to him. “I appreciate it and I’m sure Russ does too.”

Malden looked at Russ for a long moment.

“Is it me, or is your friend kind of a lightweight?” he said.

“He’s going through a tough time,” Eddie said. “He’ll come out of it.”

Malden shrugged and sat back down.

“Anyone want anything while I’m up?” Eddie yelled to the room.

“I’ll take a Corona,” Russ said, still looking sad and dejected, despite Eddie’s best efforts.

“I think there’s some pineapple juice in the back there,” Hooper said. “Thanks.”

* * *

It was almost three in the afternoon when Eddie cracked his fourth beer. It was the first time in more than a week since the poker game that Russ acted even mildly happy. He had showered and done his laundry and seemed, for an inexplicable reason, to have turned a corner.

Russ and he were lying on his mattress on the floor of his bedroom watching television. Eddie took the remote out of Russ’ hand and started flipping through channel after channel. The day drinking had taken hold of his concentration and crushed all the life out of it.

Russ said he was thinking of getting some work done.

“Breasts or tummy tuck?” Eddie said.

“Lips. I’m considering getting my lips done.”

“I would advise against it,” Eddie said. “You already got a purty mouth.”

They laughed in a quiet, desultory way that signaled they would not be doing much more for the rest of the day than what they were already doing, which was nothing.
Then, out of nowhere, Caitlin was in the room.

Russ sat up. He grabbed the remote from Eddie and turned the sound up on TMZ’s live coverage of a news conference with Caitlin Forrester.

She wore a conservative business suit and dark glasses. Reporters flanked her.

“Oh shit,” Russ said.

“What?”

“That’s Martin Sugar.”

“Where?”

Russ leaned forward and put his finger on the televised fleshy face of a large man with slicked-back hair wearing heavy-framed glasses, a dark suit, and a yellow tie.

“Who’s that?” Eddie said.

“He’s a lawyer.”

“That can’t be good.”

“It’s not good,” Russ said, leaning back against his pile of pillow. “He’s from Canarsie. He’s a scary motherfucker.”

“Scary how?”

“Imagine a cross between Clarence Darrow and the Marquis de Sade, with a hint of Benito Mussolini thrown in for good measure,” Russ said.

Sugar did not do criminal work, only civil litigation. Everything he touched was preceded and followed by a dollar sign. He rarely got into a courtroom, and when he did, he never lost. His nickname was “Mad Dog Marty.”
Sugar stepped to a podium. The United States and California flags flapped between him and the LA County Courthouse, as though he were announcing a defining moment of truth and justice in the nation’s history. He looked suitably grave and grim. He cleared his throat.

“The accusations leveled against my client, Ms. Forrester, are false, and we intend to fight them in court,” Sugar said. “Mr. Russell Dunn assaulted my client. She has suffered from extreme mental and physical abuse, abuse that can only be characterized as cruelty, at the hands of Mr. Dunn. This has been going on for some time.”

Reporters shouted questions. They were ignored. Singer reached his arm out and gently tugged Caitlin to the podium, then took a step back, ceding it to her alone.

She wore a pair of large, Jackie O sunglasses—the appropriate accessory of the beaten and abused. She took them off to reveal a large red welt on the side of her face.

Caitlin said a few unintelligible words in a shy, soft voice. The reporters became silent.

“I only want to say,” she said, “that the allegations against me are false and I will fight them. I will pursue charges against Russ because what he did should not go unpunished simply because he is wealthy and well known. Thank you.”

Sugar led Caitlin slowly down the courthouse steps to a waiting limousine, and away they went.

Eddie looked at the back of Russ’s head. His nose was three inches from the screen. Eddie imagined he was staring through the pixels without seeing them. He felt that Russ was actually looking at his life collapse into an abstract disaster of smoke and ruin played out for the entire world to judge.

“If you don’t mind,” Russ said, speaking even more softly than Caitlin had just managed,

“I’m going to go out for a while.”
“Where?”

“Anywhere not here. Just out.”

“Want some company?”

“No.”

Eddie kept himself from calling Russ seven times in the five hours he was out of the house. He sat on Russ’s mattress and studied the blank walls and the blank scatter of his friend’s clothing, his books, his cds, his guitar in the corner and, in a small way, tried to feel the same heavy drag of time and despair that Russ must have felt as he sat in that small room without the impetus to decorate or clean or otherwise improve his surroundings.

Eddie left Russ’ room and walked down to the living room. He sat on the couch. The house was dark and depressing. He gazed at the wood planks of the floor, picturing Russ in some bar getting drunker and drunker and getting into a little bit of a shove fest over some disagreement no one cared about before it grew into a fight, a fight with hands missing their targets before they connected into blood and yelling. He pictured authorities being called; sawhorses established to form a safe perimeter; cell-phone video of Russ drunk, threatening to kill and maim anyone who came near him; Russ having had enough. He saw Russ standing on the top of a building with fire department floodlights illuminating his body and glinting off the bottle of Sailor Jerry’s he’d stolen from the bar that he was taking shallow swigs from between screaming threats about how he was going to land full-torso on the first cop below. Yeah, I’m going to take one of you coppers with me before I punch my ticket, see. So don’t go trying any funny stuff. I made it, Ma! Top of the world! Top of the world!

His mind drifted to the night of Russ’s birthday in Bisbee. He and Russ and Caitlin and a lot of friends were on the porch of the Copper Queen drinking and having a lubricated great time.
In the midst of the reverie, Russ heard a soldier from Fort Huachuca say something to his friend Cedric. Cedric objected to whatever had been said. The soldier walked away backward, glaring at Cedric, and sat down at a table. Russ walked up to the soldier.

“What did you say to my friend?” he said.

The soldier looked Russ up and down.

“None of your business.”

“No,” Russ said. “It is my business. He’s my friend. You insult my friend, you insult me.”

The soldier got to his feet, eclipsing the light along with Russ with his height.

“I think you’ve had enough,” the soldier said. “I think you need to back off.”

Russ put his drink down, but it missed the table and smashed on the ground. He bumped his chest against the soldier.

The soldier bumped his chest against Russ. Then the two of them did that a few more times, with the added attraction of hands flying, until Russ was backed up to the door of the saloon.

When the soldier finally tired of the theatrics, he cocked his arm back to hit Russ.

“Don’t give me a hard time,” Russ said. “It’s my birthday.”

“Really?” the soldier said. “Mine was last week.”

“You’re a Pisces?”

The two of them ended up swapping phone numbers.

Eddie wanted to hang out with that Russ. He hoped that was the Russ out on the town tonight. Wanting it don’t make it true, Eddie thought. He fell asleep on the couch to exploding visions of Russ as Jimmy Cagney.
He woke up when he felt someone sit down on the end of the couch where his legs were resting. It was Russ, dressed in the overcoat and baseball hat disguise he’d taken to wearing whenever he left the house. Eddie asked what time it was, and Russ said it must be close to four, maybe even five.

“Where have you been?” Eddie asked.

Russ sat in the dark, looking out the window at the violet horizon as the day struggled with beginning. Then he got up, went to the kitchen, came back with a glass of water, and sat down near Eddie’s feet.

“I was at the supermarket,” Russ said. “I’m minding my own business.”

“Dressed like the Unabomber?”

“I’m checking out the olives—”

“Olives?”

“I like olives.”

“All right. Then what?”

“This beautiful woman walks up to me. She’s tall with long black hair, just stunning. She’s wearing a skirt and a jacket. She says to me, ‘Excuse me, are you Russell Dunn?’

“And you say—”

“Yup. Two Ss, two Ls, two Ns.”

“My boy.”

“And she throws a blue packet at me. It hits me in the chest. I instantly go down like someone pulled a gun.”

“Oh no …”

“Then she says, ‘You’ve been served.’ Bang. Served. But that’s not the end.”
“Of course not.”

“She starts walking away, then turns and says to me, ‘If it had been me, you wouldn’t have lived to see the inside of a courtroom.’”

“Tough day.”

“I’m going to bed,” Russ said, getting to his feet slowly, like a zombie moments after he’s been bitten but before he’s made the leap to lifelessness. “Goodnight.”

Russ spent the next three days in his bedroom. Eddie worked the phone and tapped at his laptop working on a freelance story about men who get abused by women, and how it was common but rarely commented upon. He tried to keep a low profile while also being supportive because that’s what friends do. He ran into Russ twice, and both times, he seemed to float spectrally to the refrigerator, then to the bathroom and back to his room as though the effort of forward movement was causing his skin to burn. Eddie kept his distance, careful to not be heard. They passed one another in the house like an estranged couple radiating intent and need without opening up. Not only had Eddie never seen Russ that depressed, he’d never seen anyone that depressed.

On the fourth day Russ walked into the kitchen where Eddie was working at his laptop.

“What’s up?” Eddie asked.

“Blood pressure,” Russ said.

“That’s good,” Eddie said. “That’s funny.”

“I hold in my hand an engraved invitation, courtesy of our leggy supermarket stalker, from Caitlin and her lawyer. I am to answer charges of mental cruelty in a deposition. A civil deposition.”

Eddie took the paper and scanned it.
“This is bullshit,” Eddie said. “There’s no case here. It’ll get thrown out.”

“Not with Mad Dog Marty.”

Russ laughed, but it wasn’t real, it wasn’t happy. It sounded lonely.

Eddie pretended to be studying the subpoena while sneaking looks at Russ. He looked beat down. He looks, Eddie thought, beleaguered.

“I’m not sure I can go on,” Russ said. “I don’t think there’s a way out of this.”

“I’m sorry, Russ. I wish I could do something,” Eddie said, “but I got nothing.”

Russ buried his face in his hands and began weeping. Eddie put his hands on Russ’s shoulders. Then out of nowhere, Russ looked up and smiled at Eddie. He rubbed his hands together and clapped once.

“Ha!” he said, bouncing to his feet. “Gotcha!”

Eddie looked around the kitchen. Where the hell am I?

“OK,” Eddie said, “I’ll bite. This is good news, why?”

“Let us review, Grasshopper,” Russ said coming over to Eddie and pulling up a stool.

Eddie stared at him and said nothing. He was afraid to. What if, Eddie wondered, Russ has truly and for real become insane? Or, worse still, what if he is close to a deep and abiding insanity, one that he could be easily pushed into with the utterance of a single wrong word?

“Doing nothing is not working,” Russ said. “We have to go on the offense.”

Russ got up, took a beer from the refrigerator, opened it, and handed it to Eddie. He took one out for himself and offered cheers, which Eddie did not return.

“Now, this is the scene in the movie where the music swells and the clouds lift.”

Eddie nodded.
“And why, you ask. That is a very good question. Because I have a plan! Cheers!” he said again, raising his bottle.

A thought entered Eddie’s head that if he touched his beer to Russ’s beer, both bottles would explode.

_Uh oh_, Eddie thought.

“Russ, I need to ask. Are you all right? I mean, really all right?”

With the open refrigerator door between them and Russ’s head inside as he dug in the back, Russ didn’t respond.

_Is he doing drugs? Some prescription thing?_

“Russ!” Eddie yelled.

Russ straightened up.

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Why?”

Eddie watched him for a moment. He looked into his eyes and saw a sparkle, a twinkle, a playfulness that he hadn’t seen in weeks. It wasn’t full on, it wasn’t sparking into a raging fire, but Russ appeared to have returned to the light and away from whatever abyss he had climbed down into.

“No reason,” Eddie said. “No reason.

“Never better, never ever better. Do you know who Joseph Kony is?”

“Joseph Kony? The guy who makes children eat their parents? In Uganda?”

“That’s the one. I want to go after him.”
Eddie got up and moved away to the other side of the kitchen. He often couldn’t tell when Russ was kidding. He was scared that this time he wasn’t. He reacted in the best way he could manage: He laughed.

“You want to ‘go after’ Joseph Kony. Now I know you’ve lost it.”

“No,” Russ said. “Listen. It’s great. It’s a big idea. I’m doing it to save the children. Plus, it’s brave and risky—as in to life and limb.”

“Yes. That’s the definition of why it’s a bad idea.”

“It’s either this or Caitlin and me in a pay-per-view caged match, winner take all.”

“That’s not bad,” Eddie said. “I like that.”

“I’m not saying we go into the jungle and shoot the fucker. We just go after him.”

“Go after him? And how do you ‘go after’ a vicious warlord who terrorizes kids for fun?”

“Here’s the beauty of this. This is why I am a genius. We just hunt him. I’m not saying we catch him.”

Eddie looked at Russ with a blank expression on his face.

“You know people in Uganda,” Russ said. “You spent time there researching that book of yours, right? You must know someone who knows someone who’s trying to get Kony.”

“Let me check my Rolodex.”

Russ got up and paced. Eddie knew Russ was thinking about how, of the two of them, Eddie was the smarter one. Eddie always thought it was a big reason they were friends. Now, Eddie thought it might also be a reason they would become enemies.

“You put out feelers,” Russ said. “They need money. I need … well, I need this.”

“Let me give it some thought.”
“Eddie,” Russ said, “I’ll do this with or without you. There’s this video about Kony that just came out, and it got ninety-nine million hits on YouTube. Ninety-nine freakin’ million! This is a no-brainer. I’m doing it.”

“Is this Russell Dunn talking? Or is it ’Russell Dunn’?”

“I’m doing it.”

Eddie knew if Russ went to Uganda alone something bad would happen. He could be injured, kidnapped, or worse.

Russ drank from his beer. The two of them stood silently in the kitchen.

“I want to move real fast on this,” Russ said. “Because, you know, if I’m in deepest, darkest Africa doing charity work, or something, and I cannot be reached, then that little ol’ subpoena will have to wait, right?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said, “it would.”

Eddie took a sip of beer.

Russ walked out of the kitchen.

“Looks like you thought of everything,” Eddie said to his back.
Chapter 12

Killing Joseph Kony felt forced, strange, dangerous, and wholly insane. Sitting on a stool in what used to be Steve McQueen’s kitchen, Eddie shook his head and figured Russ would snap out of it. He would reconsider what Eddie knew was a stupid idea, in a day or two, and life would go on like before.

The next day, however, Russ had not snapped out of it. Russ came into the living room where Eddie was sleeping on the couch and woke him up. It was seven a.m. Before even making coffee Russ started pestering Eddie with questions about when he would call the people he knew in Uganda, when he would start setting things up so they could go.

“Are you still on this kick?” Eddie said. “Listen, this is nuts. You can’t do this.”

“Oh, Russ said, “I’m doing it. I have to go out for a little bit, but I’ll be back soon.”

An hour later Russ returned to the house and handed Eddie $6,000 in cash. He instructed Eddie to drive to his bank, deposit the cash, then buy tickets for both of them to Uganda—coach, not first class.

“Make sure,” Russ said, “you book the tickets as Edward Mack, not as Russell Dunn.”

“That makes sense,” Eddie said, “since Edward Mack is my name.”

Russ looked at him. Eddie felt the fragile tether holding them together fray a bit.

Two hours after he came back from the bank, Eddie was sitting at his computer pretending to look for flights. Russ came over to help and Eddie shoved him away.

“Let me,” Eddie said. “Fucking let me do this. Go away.”

“Where?”

“Over there. Sit over there.”
From his chair across the room, Russ instructed Eddie to make sure the flights he booked left as soon as possible.

“For all we know, Mad Dog Marty is sitting in his car across the street waiting for me to leave the house,” Russ said.

Eddie nodded and kept pretending to tap away to find flights.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you,” Eddie said.

Russ asked Eddie what his contacts in Uganda had said. Eddie lied and told him he’d gotten the name of a guy who might be able to put them in touch with a group opposing Kony.

“Might be able to? Might? What the fuck does ‘might’ mean?”

Eddie rolled his eyes. His old skill of deflecting to protect himself, honed when he was a kid and his mother and stepfather were arguing, came back to him in an instant. He changed the subject by telling Russ he’d found two flights that left in a week.

“A week is too long,” Russ said.

Eddie turned around in his chair and faced Russ.

“First off,” he said, “I don’t work for you. You do not pay me. Don’t treat me like a servant, or like your stepin fetchit. Second, and this is the last time I will say this, going to Africa to hunt Joseph Kony is a stupid fucking idea.”

“Are you saying you’re out?”

“Out? What does ‘out’ mean? Is that douchey Hollywood talk for something specific, or have you just been in too many bad movies?”

“If you don’t want to help me with this, then you can leave right now. I’m sure I can find someone else who can take care of it.”
“Oh, you mean you’ll ask your other best friend who just got back from Uganda to help you hunt a lunatic, cannibal making, jungle goon because your girlfriend beat you up?”

Russ got to his feet. His right hand curled into a fist, and he leaned toward Eddie from across the room.

Eddie realized he’d been screaming in a high, girly-like pitch. He’d gone numb from the adrenaline of the confrontation. His mouth felt dry. Both his hands were fists, and he stared at Russ from what seemed like miles away.

Eddie considered what a great story this would make in the future: So I’m in Steve McQueen’s living room with Russell Dunn, and we have words because I don’t want Russ to go to East Africa to try and kill a tribal warlord who eats children. And, you know, one thing leads to another, and we start throwing hands. Heh heh.

“Are you going to help me or not?” Russ said, relaxing his stance and looking him in the eyes.

“I’ll do it,” Eddie said. “Of course I’ll do it.”

He sat down and logged into a website for international flights.

Later that day Eddie called Father John, who connected him with an acquaintance named Reverend Raphael Slowsky, in Jinja, a small town near Lake Victoria in southern Uganda. Slowsky had done some work for the group Invisible Children, the organization responsible for the video about Kony that had captured Russ’s attention. Eddie tried for three days to get someone from the group on the phone, but his messages were never returned. When he wasn’t leaving messages, he was busy arranging for him and Russ to stay with Father John at Mamaldi House, a monastery, hotel, and church all in one, in Kampala; chauffeuring Russ to the doctor for
his vaccinations; and researching what exactly they were going to do in Uganda in order to start their trek into the jungles to start their mock pursuit of Kony.

With each bit of progress he made, Eddie paused to think, *I can’t believe I’m doing this. I cannot believe I am fucking doing this.*

On the fourth day they were packed and ready to go. That morning Russ came down for breakfast wearing jeans; a weird, tactical desert-camouflaged vest with every pocket filled with strange gear, including vials and hypodermic needles; and speed-laced Desert Storm boots. Eddie suggested he top the outfit off with a pith helmet and a knife clenched in his teeth. Russ didn’t laugh. He insisted they drive to LAX in a car Eddie rented because, as Russ said, they were traveling incognito. That was why the plane tickets were in Eddie’s name.

During the drive, Eddie quizzed Russ about being prepared for the side effects of his vaccinations for yellow fever, diphtheria, hepatitis A, typhoid fever, and malaria. Russ proudly said he was fully ready for whatever hit him. Russ quizzed Eddie about the same vaccinations. Eddie reminded Russ that he’d come back from Uganda a month before and didn’t need any of those.

The first flight hopped them from LAX to Tucson. The plane was filled with dozens of young, blond people. Eddie looked at them thinking it was weird. Their flight to Entebbe connected in Brussels, where very dark men in berets, camouflaged uniforms, and with low-slung AK-47s dangling at their sides checked their baggage through.

“That was intense,” Russ said, repacking his bag on the other side of the check-in.

“We’re not going to Disneyland,” Eddie said.

At their gate for their EgyptAir flight to Entebbe, with five minutes until boarding, Russ stepped away from Eddie, saying he had to make some calls.
A half hour later, when the door was about to close, Eddie was standing at the gate explaining to the ticket clerk from EgyptAir that his friend would be here in two minutes, two minutes tops, just two minutes. Just then Russ strolled up to Eddie.

“Where the hell have you been?”

“I told you,” Russ said, “I had to make some calls. I was up for a part in a cop drama. But, no go.”

“Gentlemen, please,” the ticket agent said with politesse, his hands on the gangway door.

Russ shrugged and walked ahead of Eddie onto the plane.

Eddie wondered if perhaps Russ thought they would hold the plane for him. How long, he thought, had it been since Russ flew coach on a commercial airline?

The same young, blond people from Tucson were on the flight out of Brussels. Eddie realized they were probably missionaries.

“Behold, your people!” Russ said looking at the missionaries before stowing his bag in the overhead and swinging into the window seat.

“That’s funny,” Eddie said. “Ha ha.”

An hour later an argument between the two of them started bubbling when Russ, for the tenth time, said how stupid and worthless the missionaries on the plane were because they were doing nothing to help people, not in the way he, Russ, was by actually jeopardizing his life by going out to get Kony.

Then, out of nowhere, Russ said to Eddie, “You are the worst Catholic I ever met.”

With time to kill, Eddie bit at Russ’s bait. He explained to Russ, for the umpteenth time, that he was a Catholic but that he wasn’t an idiot. The church was an institution and, as such, was failed and faulty and sometimes they didn’t always do the right thing.
“Yeah, like when priests fuck little boys,” Russ said. “Is that one of those boo-boos?”

Eddie rolled his eyes, took a nice long breath in, then let it out and continued by reminding Russ that the two Academy Awards that Spencer Tracy won were both for portraying priests, so how bad could they be?

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

Eddie channeled his best Spencer Tracy and told Russ that the institution of the church, for 2,000 years, had protected and safeguarded the idea of faith. He compared that to the idea that the United States, while a failed government in many respects, safeguards the idea of democracy and that any institution that keeps such an idea alive is worth supporting.

Russ stared straight ahead for a long time, saying nothing.

“You’re the smartest guy I know,” Russ said, “and you’re a fucking idiot.”

Eddie turned in his seat and put his face two inches from Russ’s face.

“Listen,” he said in a hiss, “we are going to a monastery. We are going to stay in a monastery where we will be graciously hosted and helped by one of the nicest, most intelligent and caring people I have met in my life. And he’s a priest. So you had better get this out of your system now and let me know when you’re done, because I won’t stand for it in Kampala. And neither will they. Do you understand me?”

“Jesus, take it easy.”

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes, yeah, I get it. No church bashing, no priest/altar-boy jokes. I got it.”

Eddie sat back and closed his eyes to try and fall asleep. Russ hummed “America the Beautiful.”

“You’re an asshole,” Eddie said.
Father John met them at the airport. The three of them had lunch in Entebbe before the forty-minute drive to Kampala.

Russ ordered a dish of *ugali*, or cornmeal, and *matooke*, which was mashed green banana. He ate two mouthfuls and spent the rest of the meal toying with his fork.

Back in the van, Russ leaned over to Eddie and told him that the toilet in the restaurant was nothing but a hole in the ground. Eddie said he knew.

During the ride, Father John told Russ and Eddie that, regarding anyone who was working to catch Kony, Reverend Raphael Slowsky was the only person he could put them in touch with. He apologized that he only knew one person.

“What’s the real deal with Kony?” Russ said, leaning forward from the back seat to insinuate himself between Father John and Eddie.

“What’s the real deal with Kony?” Father John asked, looking at Eddie.

“I guess what he’s asking,” Eddie said, “is how is he regarded. What do the people here in Uganda think of him?”

“They think he is very dangerous,” Father John said, gripping the steering wheel tightly. “Very dangerous.”

They continued to the monastery in silence.

At Mamaldi House, Russ got out of the van almost before it stopped. Father John put his hand on Eddie’s arm to keep him for a moment. They watched Russ’s back vanish into the darkened space of the main building.

“You are one of the smartest people I have known,” Father John said.

“I’ve been hearing that a lot today.”
“I respect you. Your work. Your book. I think very highly of you.”

“I think the same of you,” Eddie said, relaxing back into his seat.

“Your friend.”

“Yes.”

“He … I do not know him. He seems very …”

“Very what?”

“American. He seems very American.”

“Have you seen his movies?” Eddie said.

“I don’t see movies very much,” Father John said.

“Russ is not just very American. He is, for all intents and purposes, America. He’s the walking, talking personification of America.”

Father John looked at the dashboard. He pursed his lips and seemed to absorb this information.

“I’m telling you this because I need to.”

“Yes.”

“What you are doing, what you are proposing to do, it is extremely dangerous.”

“We’re not going to actually try and get the guy,” Eddie said.

“No?”

“No. It’s more of a publicity stunt. It’s more of a—”

Eddie saw that Father John wasn’t grasping what he was talking about.

“It’s not for real. None of this is for real. We’ll be fine. Besides, I’m the one in charge. I’m the one calling the shots. Russ is along for the ride.”

“Be careful,” Father John said, opening the door of the van. “Please.”
Eddie got out and came around the van to where Father John had opened the sliding door. They stood together in silence to behold an impressive stack of luggage.

“You packed for a long vacation,” he said.

“Just a few days,” Eddie said, lugging the strap of his one bag onto his shoulder and standing with Father John to stare in wonder at the five pieces of Russ’s luggage.

“Russ,” Eddie yelled toward the main building. “Russ!”

Russ poked his head out the door and shrugged.

“Your stuff.”

“Yeah,” Russ said, “if you could just get that for me. Thanks.”

Father John chuckled.

“It’s not funny,” Eddie said.

Each time he yanked a piece of luggage from the van, it clanked against the others before hitting the soft orange dirt with a dull thud.

Father John and Eddie stood looking at the pile. Father John put his hand on Eddie’s shoulder, smiled, and laughed.

“It’s never easy,” he said, “being the one in charge. It’s a burden to be the one calling the shots.”

Then he helped Eddie take the luggage inside.

Eddie pushed his Visa card to a man behind a small counter then signed the receipt for the deposit on two rooms.

Russ and Eddie shared their dinner of chicken and rice with seven priests, the clerk who ran the hotel, and a washwoman who helped run the hotel by keeping the buildings clean and doing the laundry. They ate under fluorescent light in a large dining room that opened into a
darker room with green carpeting. That was the TV room, where the two dim lamps competed with the blue glow from a large console television, all of which barely illuminated the room.

“This whole set-up looks like it was lifted straight out of a 1970s basement on Long Island,” Russ whispered to Eddie as they sat side-by-side eating.

“Shhh,” Eddie said. “They’re poor. For them to even have a television set is an incredible thing.”

Russ appeared sheepish. Then he cracked a smile while looking back into the TV room.

“Still,” he said.

“Shut up,” Eddie said.

Eddie told Russ that the next day first thing, they were going to go directly to the Kampala office of Invisible Children, the group that made the anti-Kony video, and talk to whoever was there about what they could do next.

“Sounds good,” Russ said. “When do we meet the other priest?”

Eddie looked at Father John for the answer to that question.

“You mean Father Slowsky?” he said.

“Yes,” Eddie said.

“He is in Kampala right now. If you like, I can call him for you this evening and see if we could talk to him tomorrow. Would that be all right?”

“The sooner the better,” Russ said. “The sooner the better.”

The moment of silence that followed was broken by the sound of one of the priests clearing his throat. He then looked intently at Father John.

“Yes,” Father John said. “Father Williams would like to know if you would give him an autograph.”
“I would be happy to,” Eddie said, standing up.

For a long moment, no one got the joke. Then Father John started laughing so hard he had to cover his mouth with his napkin.

“I would be happy to,” Russ repeated as Eddie sat down.

Father Williams handed an old and battered dvd copy of *The Guardian* to the priest next to him, who handed it to another priest on his left, and another, until it finally arrived at Russ.

“Does anyone have a pen?” Russ said.

Father Williams sent a pen down the line to make the trip to Russ in the same communal fashion as the dvd.

Russ tried to scrawl his name, but the pen’s ink didn’t take to the plastic cover.

“Damn,” Russ said. “I think I have a Sharpie in my bag upstairs.”

Everyone at the table sat smiling at Russ and nodding slightly, not really grasping what he was saying.

“Could you get that for me?” Russ said to Eddie in a stage whisper.

Eddie wiped his mouth with his napkin, placed the napkin on the table, pushed his chair back, and walked to Russ’s room. He spent several minutes rooting around in Russ’s luggage before finding the pen. It was in a gallon-sized Ziplock bag with ten other Sharpies and a stack of eight-by-ten color photographs of Russ.

When Father John pulled the van into a parking spot at the Lugogo Mall the next morning, Russ relaxed. The mall was a slice of America in the middle of East Africa. It was the first time he could recall feeling relaxed since they’d departed Brussels and left the guys with the automatic weapons behind.
“This is surreal,” Eddie said, looking out the window at the shiny shops and the fancy cars. “This is truly weird.”

“I like it,” Russ said. “It looks friendly.”

Eddie sniffed and got out of the van.

Eddie walked around the van and spoke to Father John. Russ stood at the front of the van staring at the two of them. Eddie was getting on Russ’s nerves. He was treating him like a child. He was condescending. *What was that little performance when he pushed his chair away from the table when all he did was ask him to please get him a Sharpie so he could sign the guy’s dvd?*

That morning, Eddie had awakened him at seven to make him listen to the choir singing hymns in the church next to the main building. Eddie got this faraway look in his eyes, as though he were being transported back to his childhood of morning mass and eager sacrifice.

“All right, Father Eddie,” Russ said after a few minutes. “I’m alive with the spirit. Now go preach to some new sheep. I have to shower.”

*Then again,* Russ thought as Eddie walked toward him in the parking lot, *maybe it’s just stress. Jet lag. It’ll be fine.*

“Russ,” Eddie said. “Father John’s going to do some shopping. We can check out Invisible Children and see what’s what.”

“Before we do anything, can we get some coffee, Father Eddie? I saw a Starbucks.”

“Yassuh, mistah Russ. Does you want me to get you some a that mochaccino and pour it in your mouth sos you don’t soil your Sunday clothes with a dribblin’ and a droolin’?”

“That’s funny,” Russ said. “Really. In Africa, in a country of nothing but black people, that’s a truly funny thing to say.”
They went to Starbucks, got their coffees, and sat at a table outside. The sun shone on the surfaces of perfect, white, mall-like facades and their primary-colored logos.

“Does your cell phone work?” Eddie asked Russ.

Russ took out his phone, tried it, and got nothing.

“This happened to me last time I was here,” Eddie said. “We need local SIM cards. Cell phones don’t work without local SIM cards.”

They walked to a cell-phone store on the mall’s ground floor.

Once they got their cards installed, and Eddie paid the clerk, he asked where he could find the offices for Invisible Children.

In broken English, the man told him where the offices were, but said no one would be there.

“Why not?” Russ said.

The man spoke very fast in Lugandian then abruptly halted his indecipherable speech.


Eddie thanked the man, gave him some more money, and walked out of the store with Russ.

“I don’t like this,” Eddie said, squinting into the sun and looking around like there might be snipers crouched among the cars.

“You don’t like what? Russ said.

“This whole thing. Something’s not right with this.”

“Not right with what?”

“With any of it. We should go home.”

“Don’t pussy out on me now,” Russ said.
“Oh, great, now we’re going to stand here at the African Mall of America and quote *Reservoir Dogs* to each other. Aren’t you getting the feeling this is hinkey?”

“Well, what does that mean, ‘hinkey?’” Russ said in a pitch-perfect impersonation of Tommy Lee Jones. “That’s not even a word.”

He smiled at Eddie. Eddie grimaced back at him and started to walk away.

“Oh, come on, Father Eddie, don’t be so uptight.”

He caught up to Eddie and put his arm around his shoulder and nuzzled his nose against his neck.

“We’ll go see the Invisible Children people. We’ll get some breakfast. Maybe get us some eggs and toast and something vaguely unhealthy? Maybe some pancakes? You’ll feel better, and everything will be right as rain. You’ll see.”

“Don’t call me Father Eddie.”

“Sorry, padre. I’ll mind my priests and Qs from now on.”

The doors to the Invisible Children officers were locked. Looking through the plate-glass windows, Russ could see they’d been empty for a long time. Papers and office supplies were scattered across the dusty floor. A computer terminal was turned over in the center of the room, next to a chair stacked with papers and files.

“We should leave a note,” Russ said.

“Oh, sure,” Eddie said. “Dear Invisible Children, stopped by to find out how we could capture Joseph Kony. You weren’t home. We’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Russ said, rifling through Eddie’s jacket pockets and extracting the reporter’s notebook he always carried. “We’ll just give them your number and ask them to call you. You’re a reporter, working on a story. Now, sign this.”
“Me? Why me?”

“Because I … am not here,” Russ said.

Eddie signed the paper. Russ folded it and slid it under the door.

“Now,” Russ said, “let’s see about them pancakes. Then we hit up your priest friend, perhaps he directs us to meet with a guy under a bridge who only takes cash—from there we bag Kony, smile pretty for the pictures, and return home heroes.”

When they sat down in their booth at a diner Russ looked at Eddie. A feeling of relief that he could really trust Eddie came over him. He could go anywhere with Eddie. His friend would never let anything bad happen to him. He wanted to ask about Invisible Children, he wanted to ask who they were, but he didn’t want to step on Eddie’s toes. He was in Eddie’s world now. He felt comfortable. He felt confident. What, he thought, could possibly go wrong?

An hour later they met Father Slowsky at a café with a thatched roof. He was a small, gentle eighty-year-old man who reminded Russ of Gandhi—or at least of Ben Kingsley playing Gandhi.

The old priest smiled and nodded almost constantly over coffee and plantain cake as Eddie explained that he and Russ wanted to try and capture Joseph Kony—and that Father John thought that perhaps he, Father Slowsky, would know someone who could help them with that.

Father Slowsky mentioned Invisible Children and how they seemed to be doing a lot of good work in that area.

Eddie said they had left a message for Invisible Children, but that seemed like a dead end.

“Well, I’m not really sure who else there might be,” Father Slowsky said. “I suppose I could ask some people. Where are you staying?”
Russ said they were staying at the Mamaldi House. He told the priest how much he enjoyed hearing the choir during morning mass each day.

Father Slowsky nodded and smiled the same blank smile he’d been wearing the whole time. He said he should know something in a few weeks, then got to his feet.

“We’d like to be able to move on this more quickly,” Russ said.

Russ noticed immediately how Father Slowsky’s smile changed, how his eyes changed. For the first time he saw a reality in his expression instead of a mask.

“You are not in America, Mr. Dunn,” Father Slowsky said. “This is Africa. And you are on Africa time.”

*What in the fuck is that supposed to mean? Africa time.*

He thought about a cop show he’d just been passed over for. He saw himself disappearing as a viable entity from boardrooms and bungalows all over LA and from living rooms and movie theaters all over the world unless he got control of his situation. Russ pictured the face of Mad Dog Marty and the smiling, happy, fuck-you face of Caitlin and clenched his teeth in impotent rage.

“Whatever you can do to expedite things would be very welcome, Father,” Eddie said, getting to his feet.

The priest’s bobble-head nodding started back up. Russ rolled his eyes at Eddie.

“Of course, I will do all that I can,” Father Slowsky said from behind his expression of docile gentility.

“Here’s my number,” Eddie said, extending a card to the priest. “Make sure to give them my number.”
The Father waved the card and slipped it in his jacket pocket. He turned to go. Russ reached his hand out and grabbed the man’s arm.

“Money,” Russ said.

Father Slowsky stared at the hand on his arm then traced it upward to Russ’s face. The priest’s expression was utterly bereft of compassion or joy. He didn’t even bother to summon his dottery, old-man joviality.

Russ removed his hand and apologized.

“What do you mean, ‘money?’” Father Slowsky asked.

“If you know someone who needs money to help in their … efforts. I have money. Lots of it. Thousands of dollars. Also, let them know it’s me. Use my name. Russell Dunn, the actor. Say that, if it will help speed things along.”

“I will,” he said. “I will do that.”

Then he turned and walked away.

Russ looked at Eddie.

“That was stupid,” Eddie said. “Really fucking stupid.”

“Come on. Relax. The guy’s a priest, for Christ sake.”

“What happened to incognito? If it gets out that you’re here—”

“So what? If it makes things happen, then it’s worth it.”

“This is perfect. You’re literally twisting the arms of a priest to help us pretend to try and kill a guy.”

That night Russ took Eddie out in Kabalagala, the red light district of Kampala. Even after three shots of Jameson’s and two beers, Russ couldn’t manage to relax under the glare of Eddie’s evil eye and his terse silence.
“I can do this myself,” Russ said, slurring a bit.

“Shut up,” Eddie said.

“I can,” Russ said, standing but still wobbly from the strong Nile beers. “I don’t need you. I’ll get a car, a driver, and bam, I’m on my way.”

The two sat listening to the thump of disco music and not talking for a few minutes.

“This is nice,” Eddie said finally. “Isn’t it nice that you can go out and not be hassled by people and autographs and photographers?”

“It’s wonderful,” Russ said. “It reminds me of what home will be like.”

Two days later, as Russ and Eddie listened to the church choir, Eddie’s phone rang.

“Mr. Dunn,” a voice said.

“This is not Mr. Dunn,” Eddie said, putting his fingers over his lips to shush Russ, who was motioning and asking for the phone. “I am Mr. Dunn’s representative.”

“Father Slowsky is a mutual friend,” the voice on the phone said. “He explained that we have mutual interests. I’m calling to see how we can discuss those interests face-to-face.”

“That can be arranged,” Eddie said. “Please let me know where, and when, and we can proceed from there.”

Eddie scrawled the location down in his notebook. He wrote four p.m., thanked the man, and hung up the phone.

“Looks like we’re in business,” Eddie said.

“In business how?” Russ said.

“Some road company version of a James Bond villain wants to meet later today in Jinja.”

“Where’s that?”
Eddie explained that Jinja was a town on the shores of Lake Victoria, near the Nile, about an hour south of Kampala. They would need a car.

“Do we have to bring a bag of small, unmarked bills?” Russ said.

“I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“But,” Russ said, “it wouldn’t hurt to have a fat stack on hand just in case.”

Russ went to the closet and took out one of his metal Rimowa bags. He unlocked it, pried it open like he was displaying a gutted animal, and laid it out on the small bed. Inside were eight columns of money in $100 bills. Russ looked at Eddie and asked how much he thought might be enough to bring.

“You’re kidding,” Eddie said.

Russ shrugged and gathered half the money, which Eddie guessed to be $20,000. He shoved it into a canvas bag, which he zipped and sealed with a small padlock.

Eddie looked at the floor and said nothing.

They met the voice on the phone the next day. His name was Reverend Emmanuel Bartouk. They sat down to lunch at a restaurant in Jinja called Marcel’s. It was a faded summer spot with a cracked, concrete floor and a wrap-around patio that gave them a slim view of the Nile. Rev. Bartouk insisted on ordering. Watching Russ obviously pretending to enjoy the soggy bread and sour oysters, Eddie had a flash to when Russ and he were on stage in *True West* and Russ drank PBRs. He only brought the beer to Malden’s as a common man prop. Russ actually hated PBR. He thought it tasted like stale water. But, next to him on stage Eddie watched Russ savor PBR as though it was champagne. *He doesn’t make those efforts any more,* Eddie realized for the first time. He recognized that there was a chasm between who Russ was back in Bisbee.
and who he was now. Is it the money? The fame? Do those things twist a person so out of shape that they disappear? Or is it temporary? Eddie wanted to believe it was temporary, while at the same time he thought he should be prepared for what it might be like if it was a permanent condition.

Bartouk said that he was born in Algeria, but had spent most of his life in Saudi Arabia. He came to Uganda four years ago expressly to capture Joseph Kony. His intention was to have him tried for war crimes in an international tribunal.

The Reverend wore a pristine, gray Saville Row suit and the whitest shirt Eddie believed he had ever laid eyes on, outside of a movie or magazine ad. An enormous gold cross, suspended on a thick, gold rope chain, rested just above the Reverend’s belt buckle. He had pudgy hands and a receding hairline. Eddie thought he looked like Desmond Tutu if he had been a rapper.

Rev. Bartouk finished the story of his travels, in between alternated slurps of oysters and Coca Cola, by saying, “And now I am here in Jinja sitting across from the world-famous movie actor Russell Dunn, and isn’t life an incredible journey?”

He then regaled Russ with a story about having once chased Kony himself across the open desert in a Jeep, only to lose sight of him in a dust storm that rose up over the sands of the Rub Al-Khali expanse as night descended and Bartouk’s hopes for victory slipped like sand through his fingers.

“Talk about an incredible journey,” Russ said.

Eddie knew Russ was nibbling on the line Bartouk was casting. Eddie was not. Laying awake in bed the previous night, trying and failing to fall asleep, he had concluded that it was required of him to be the bad cop to Russ’s good cop. He needed to be the hardened reporter who’d seen it all. He’d been to Africa before. He knew how things worked. Russ, it was
becoming clear, was acting like nothing more than a Hollywood pretty boy so desperate to reclaim his shattered career that he would buy the Brooklyn Bridge from anyone slick enough to slap a price tag on it. Under the white cloud of mosquito netting, Eddie decided he needed to reprise his role in Paris that night he became the attack dog when Edward Golden and Mike Dartmouth were pushing him around.

He played back the scene of him yelling at the two actors that night at Bofinger. He saw himself standing up in indignation. Lord knows what might have happened if Russ hadn’t come back just then and calmed everyone down.

When the plate of oyster shells was cleared, along with the blank pleasantries that typically accompany getting acquainted personally for the purposes of conducting business, Bartouk said to Eddie, “If you do not object, I would like to have a few moments with Mr. Dunn in private.”

“I object,” Eddie said. “In the strongest possible manner.”

He looked at Russ, who gestured with his eyes for Eddie to leave.

Eddie went out to the patio and stood watching the Nile inch by. He turned his head to see Bartouk and Russ laughing. Looking back, he saw a man in a boat that looked like a gondola on the Nile. From almost a mile away, it looked like the man was standing and had his hands raised to his face, as though he was perhaps taking a picture, or aiming a gun. It’s the Nile River. It is a tourist attraction. Then again, the windows on this restaurant are huge.... you get a telephoto lens ... although Russ on his own is a celebrity and, of course, people take his picture. But someone had to know he would be here in the first place in order to take his picture? Who would know to take his picture with Bartouk?
Russ and Rev. Bartouk emerged from the restaurant through a sliding glass door. They stepped onto the porch about twenty yards from Eddie, who watched the two men speak. Bartouk waved to Eddie, then turned and walked away. As Russ was walking toward him, Eddie noticed he wasn’t carrying the canvas bag with the money.

Russ asked Eddie to please go in and pay the check.

“I don’t like it,” Eddie said to Russ once the door to their room at Surjio’s Guest House closed behind them.

“What don’t you like?”

“I don’t like this reverend. I don’t like the fact you gave him all that money. I don’t like how we’re out here alone and we can’t check him out. I don’t like that no one knows we’re even here. I don’t like that we’re going on a boat cruise with this asshole tomorrow. And I sure as hell do not like how you did not discuss this with me before making all these decisions.”

Eddie stood panting, as much from the effort of his pronouncements as from the endorphin rush of asserting himself

“Somebody’s a little grumpy,” Russ said.

Eddie squinted at Russ to show he meant business. Russ came over and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I want you to listen,” Russ said. “You got me this far. You knew the people. You knew the country. You knew how to get here and get around. I couldn’t have done it without you. But this is the next step, and it’s one I had to take. It’s one I was going to take, with or without you.”

*With or without me.*

“What do we do now?” Eddie said.
“Reverend Bartouk is taking me out on Lake Victoria—away from prying eyes—for a little sightseeing. He’s also going to give me the skinny on what’s happening with Kony right now. He says we might even leave tonight for a major move against him into the north. And he says you can come along, if you like.”

“I don’t like it,” Eddie said in a low voice, realizing this would be the last time he could object and maybe get through to Russ. “This has been way too easy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it,” Eddie said. “We make a few phone calls, visit an empty storefront in a mall, then, bam, we meet a guy who says he can catch Kony almost instantly. It’s too easy. Governments can’t catch this motherfucker. But hey, we stroll into town, and all of a sudden he’s served up on a plate? No, that’s too easy. How can that happen?”

“That is happening because of two things and two things alone,” Russ said, standing up to check his hair in the mirror. “Cash and me.”

“Cash and you?”

Russ explained that money was, of course, a big part of why Bartouk went for taking Russ to the head of the line to catch Kony. But, he said, there were certainly others who'd offered money, either the same amount or more.

“What they didn’t have was the name, ‘Russell Dunn.’ Russell Dunn stands for something,” Russ said. “If they have my face on the news as the guy who caught Kony. it legitimizes their cause. It makes them into bigger heroes than they otherwise would be. Don’t you get it? I’m the marquee draw.”

Eddie looked at Russ and recognized he’d only seen his friend wear that smug look on his face a few other times. The first time was right before they'd gone on stage for True West. The
second time was in Paris for the scene in Duchamp’s movie. It was the look an athlete has on the sidelines before the coach puts him in. It’s the look a soldier has after he fixes his bayonet and is about to go charging up a hill. It’s the look a standup comic gets waiting in the wings knowing, without any reason to know, that he will succeed. It was the look of a crazy person.

Right after Eddie recognized the look on Russ’ face, he also realized that this was the worst time for Russ to be experiencing a Norma Desmond confidence rush.

Although it adds up, in a cockeyed way, Eddie thought. The fight, the stress, the desperation. Put the last few weeks into a cocktail glass, shake it up, and it’s not hard to come up with Hollywood crazy on ice. But it’s very inconvenient right now.

“The marquee draw,” Eddie said to Russ. “Well, yeah. Now that I think about it, it does make sense.”

Eddie stayed on the bed shaking his head in apparent agreement. Russ smiled down at him.

“Can I at least go on the boat with you before you head into the jungle to harpoon the great white whale, or whatever?”

Eddie and Russ stood next to one another along the port side railing of the Mutai Queen. They were talking with Rev. Bartouk. Eddie took greater notice of Bartouk as he spoke to Russ. Bartouk was imperial. He was dignified and handsome. His hair was graying at the temples. He was dressed in another Saville Row suit, overlaid with the same two pounds of necklace and cross dangling from his neck. He was jovial and haughty. Eddie wanted to like him so much. He tried. But he didn’t like him because he didn’t trust him.
Eddie watched Russ. His face was expressive and open. He smiled, frowned, and then appeared serious, as though he were carefully and deeply considering every word being said by Rev. Bartouk. Then Eddie laughed.

“What?” Bartouk said to Eddie, waiting with his smile poised so he too could share in the mirth.

“Oh,” Eddie said, waving him off, “nothing. Private joke.”

Russ looked at Eddie. There was a quizzical smile floating on his face as he waited for Eddie to perhaps fill him in on the punch line to that private joke. Eddie waved him off as well, and Russ and the Rev. Bartouk went back to talking.

Was it, Eddie wondered, a performance? He’d never really watched Russ before to try and discern anything in particular. Which Russ was this, the actor or his friend? Had they become one and the same? Had Russ sincerely convinced himself that Bartouk was a savior? And if he had, was that how he did things normally? Eddie decided the sad truth that Russ was a great actor not because of his sincerity. He was a great actor because he was so capable of convincing himself that any false and faulty notion was, in fact, the truth.

Eddie felt like he was watching his wife talk to friends at a party while trying to decipher whether or not she was being unfaithful.

Eddie squared his shoulders. He tried to think of a movie, or a scene from a movie, where the friend became the tough guy to protect his friend. His mind went blank. Maybe, he thought, I just have to do this for real.

“Look at that,” Russ said, pointing to a sign that said The Source of the Nile River in a flat pool of water swirling like a saucer on the surface of Lake Victoria “That’s it? That's the source of the Nile?”
“It comes up under the lake, flows into the lake and then travels north,” Bartouk said.

“Okay.”

Bartouk laughed and said, “What were you expecting, a roaring geyser?”

“No. I was just expecting something … more.”

Eddie saw the Reverend’s face go very dark. It was only for an instant. Then he smiled with his big white teeth.

“In Hollywood they would make it a geyser,” he said to Russ and Eddie. “This is Africa. We have no budget for special effects.”

The three of them laughed.

A man in a white coat came up to them. Eddie saw Bartouk roll his eyes. The man in the white coat, a porter, stood politely.

“Mr. Dunn, sir,” he said, “Is everything to your liking?”

“Oh,” Russ said, “everything’s great. Thank you.”

The porter continued to stand there. All four men stood silently smiling at one another for a moment.

“Is there something else?” Bartouk said, obviously annoyed.

The porter looked at Russ. He smiled and took out a piece of paper and a pen. He held the pen out to Russ.

“Oh, yes,” Russ said. “Of course. Who should I make it out to?”

“Bartholomew. Bartholomew Higgins.”

Russ nodded and took the piece of paper he offered.

“I still can't get used to all the British names here,” Eddie said.

“Every empire,” Bartouk said, “leaves a bit of themselves in their wake.”
Russ handed the pen and the piece of paper back to the porter.

“Here you go, Bart,” Russ said.

“And ...?” the porter said, politely and timidly.

The porter took out a cell phone and gestured with it toward Russ. Russ took the phone and handed it to Eddie.

“I’m not sure you should be doing this,” Eddie said to Russ with a smile stamped on his face as they passed by each other.

“It’s fine,” Russ said. “Just take the damned picture.”

Russ put his arm around the man’s shoulder. The two of them smiled.

“Make sure you get my good side,” Russ said.

“Then turn around,” Eddie said.

Bartouk, Eddie, and Russ laughed while the porter stood looking regal and serious.

“I’ll get a few, just in case,” Eddie said pushing the button two more times before handing the phone back to the porter.

“Thank you,” he said, gazing at the phone as though souls were now encased inside.

“Speaking of photographs,” Bartouk said, “I should make sure we're getting enough pictures. People will not believe you were actually here without the proof.

The porter and Bartouk left.

Russ and Eddie stood side-by-side, looking at the lake and the day.

“I love being on the water,” Russ said.

Eddie asked him what he was talking about. Russ told him about his father’s thirty-foot sailboat and how he used to take it out at night and slip past the hills on the sides of the Hudson and, laying on the deck on summer evenings, watch as the stars emerged from the darkening sky
feeling himself connected to the earth and the sky at the same time in a way that calmed and satisfied him like no drug he’d ever known.

“Sounds nice,” Eddie said.

“They were the happiest times of my life,” Russ said.

Eddie joked that he thought being her with him was the happiest time of his life. Russ smiled a slight grin and looked out at the water.

“Do you ever get tired of it?” Eddie said.

“Tired of what?”

“People asking for pictures and autographs.”

“No,” Russ said. “I love it. I truly do. It is a great, great life.”

“Still, it was a relief when no one was coming up to you before.”

“No,” Russ said, “it wasn’t. It was scary as hell. It—"

Eddie felt it before he saw or heard it. He sensed a shift in air density and temperature, like the earth had, for a moment, been slowed off its orbital speed by the explosion. Then he heard the actual explosion, followed by the cracking and shattering of wood and metal under his feet. On the other side of the boat, almost directly across from them, he saw a fireball rise, then bloom into black smoke. He heard screaming. People started running. Russ and Eddie gripped the rail and stood still.

He looked at Russ, whose face went white and stricken with a fear he’d never seen on another human being’s face.

Eddie’s immediate thought, oddly, was about Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. There was that scene where Butch and Sundance rob a train and blow up the safe using too many sticks of dynamite, and the next thing you see is George Roy Hill’s cameras showing an
explosion of blue smoke and brown, splintered wood and the railcar blown to bits with balsa wood pieces and bank notes raining down on Paul Newman and Robert Redford as Redford says, “Think ya used enough dynamite there, Butch?”

That moment on that lake in Africa, though, didn’t sound anything like that.

It was a dull concussion, a pop and a punch under the water. Eddie thought it sounded like a big burp.

Eddie didn’t know much about boats, or ferries, or Africa for that matter. He’d ridden the ferry when he lived on Staten Island for six months and worked in Manhattan. From that experience, Eddie knew the engine on the boat in Africa was probably in the back of the craft and that the cars were on the bottom and the passengers always came up to stand on the deck where they ate stale food and read newspapers until they arrived on the other side of whatever waterway they were crossing.

When he heard the burp, he looked down and saw smoke coming from under the waterline of the Mutai Queen. They were not far from the shore of Lake Victoria. He turned to Russell, parlayed his shallow understanding of what was happening, and tried to sound wise when he said, “Looks to me like the engine conked out.”

“Does that mean we’ll have to swim for it?” he said.

“I can’t swim,” Eddie said.

Russ looked at Eddie like he was making a joke.

“I never learned,” Eddie said.

“I never actually met anyone who couldn’t swim,” Russ said. “Are you sure?”

Eddie nodded. Then he looked at a wall where a lifesaver was hanging. He prayed it wasn’t decorative.
Russ grabbed the lifesaver and looked over the rail into the water. A body slipped out from the very wall of the boat and into the water. It looked like a foal emerging from its mother.

“We need to get off this thing,” Eddie said. “Now.”

“Just hold on to me,” Russ said. “No matter what happens, hold on to me. I’ll get us out of here.”

Russ and Eddie jumped into the water. For a terrifying moment Eddie found himself underneath the waves. He opened his eyes and saw cars slipping silently into the water from the lighted prow of the Mutai Queen. It was what aliens might look like disembarking a spaceship on a foggy night. Eddie felt himself being pulled up through the misty water until he broke through and emerged into the smoke-filled air.

Russ’s hand was on Eddie's collar, then a second later, his arm was around his chest. Russ’s other arm was through the lifesaver. He was kicking his legs and inching both of them closer to the shore. Eddie closed his eyes as flames singed his face. When he opened them, he saw a woman whose hair and face were burning slip past him in the water. A man clung to the exhaust pipe of an upside-down SUV. The huge thing bobbed up and down in the water, revealing a man and a child slapping their open palms against the sealed windows and obviously screaming before the vehicle disappeared, taking them and the man clinging to its underside beneath the water. Eddie heard screaming from every direction. He thought he heard a woman with a Southern accent praying to God at the top of her lungs. *Why would that be?*


*When did Russ become a seaman?* Eddie wondered before closing his eyes and going limp.
The next thing Eddie knew, Russ and he were lying on their backs on the ground. It was muddy, but there was a manicured lawn a few feet away. It was obviously the edge of a resort of some kind.

Eddie got to his feet. He watched the carnage three hundred feet away in the flaming water.

“We need to get out of here,” Eddie said.

Russ got up.

“What the hell happened?” Russ said.

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

Eddie grabbed Russ by the arm. Russ yanked his arm away.

“We can’t just leave,” Russ said. “We have to help these people.”

Eddie was remembering Bishop Shimshasha in the car on the way to the safari lodge. He remembered him saying that if they had hit that child, they would not have stopped because, if they stopped, they would have been torn limb from limb by the people in the town.

“No,” Eddie said. “We don’t have to help these people. I feel as bad as you do, but if we go back there—if we stay here—we’re dead. They will kill us. Do you understand me?”

“Where do we go?”

“We go back to the monastery. We can call the embassy on the way. The first thing we need to do, the only thing we need to do, is get the hell out of here. Now.”

On the drive to Kampala, Eddie and Russ didn’t say a word. Eddie sweated and kept his eyes sharp for the unmarked speed bumps that loomed like hills in the middle of the road. Russ kept trying his cell phone, but the circuits were jammed. Eddie told him it was probably because
of the explosion on Lake Victoria, like on 9/11 when no one could get a call through to anyone. Eventually, the battery on Russ’s cell phone died. It didn’t matter. There was nothing to say.

Eddie figured that when they got to the refuge of Mamaldi House, they could sit and talk about it and decide what to do next. Meanwhile, the key to their survival was to keep moving.

The gate to the monastery was unlocked. Eddie pushed the two large steel sections apart. He looked at Russ as he sat stuck frozen and expressionless in the passenger seat of the car, then he got back behind the wheel and drove through. He closed the gates behind him and came around to open Russ’s door.

“Come on,” he said, waiting for Russ to get out of the car.

Russ turned his head slowly toward Eddie. He took a moment before wearily jolting his legs and his arms to life so they could move him around. He looked as though he were breaking out from a thin layer of plaster of Paris that someone had sealed him in while he slept, like he was part of a practical joke, or performance art.

The monastery was quiet. No one was laying the laundry out on top of the tall grass in the yard to dry. No one was behind the registration desk. No one answered when Eddie yelled “Hello” four times, each time louder and a bit more desperately.

Eddie and Russ heard voices coming from the TV room. They sounded indistinct and harsh.

Russ looked a wreck. Eddie put both his hands on Russ’s shoulder, looked him in the eyes, and told him to go upstairs and get the bags from both their rooms. He said he would try and find Father John but that, whether he could or couldn’t find him for a ride, they were going to the American Embassy a few miles away.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “They’ll take care of us. We get there, and we’re fine.”
Eddie walked slowly through the monastery. He didn’t feel afraid. He felt empowered and in charge. The feeling that something was wrong, that something was wrong from the start, that many things were wrong with Bartouk, grew inside him. It was like a horror movie where the killer jumps out at the last moment from behind a doorway but you have to travel through five or six rooms before it happens.

Standing in the kitchen, Eddie realized the entire first floor of the monastery had been vacated. Perhaps they went to Jinja to help with the victims, Eddie thought. After all, they are priests.

“The government has closed all roads leading into and out of Jinja,” a voice said from the other room.

Eddie walked in to see that the television was on. A British reporter was describing the death and destruction from the ferry explosion. Behind her, the camera showed bodies covered with plastic yellow tarps, set out on a dock. Then the scene cut to a photo of Russ on the boat. The words “Russell Dunn” appeared under his name. Then the scene changed again. It was shaky video, the kind you see in wartime or a sting operation by the Feds. It showed Russ and Eddie standing by the railing of the boat talking, then the explosion right behind them, followed by the black pall of oily smoke curling into the air above them.

Eddie sat down on the arm of the sofa. The video he was looking at appeared to have been shot by someone on the boat.

The scene shifted one more time to a foreign minister condemning “this heinous act of terrorism” that had killed thirty-eight people, twenty-four of them Christian missionaries from the United States.

The kids on the plane.
“What the fuck,” Russ said from the other side of the room. “Eddie? What’s going on?”

Before he could say he didn’t know, before he could reassure Russ that everything would be fine, the front door cracked open. All he could see were gun barrels, berets, militia uniforms, and angry faces. He was kicked from behind to the ground and landed on his stomach. Someone secured a zip tie around his wrists behind his back. As a hood was placed over his head, Eddie thought about how the men in the room looked exactly like the men in Brussels who'd searched his bags before the flight to Entebbe.
“You’re running out of time,” Steve, the first CIA agent, says to Karen as she sits in the break room drinking instant coffee and eating an ancient Danish bought from the vending machine.

Karen is lost in her thoughts about her next step with Eddie and Russ. She hasn’t noticed anyone even entering the room. At Steve’s voice she covers her surprise with outrage.

“Where are my missing pages, Steve?” she says.

“I’ve been asked to let you know that the clock is running out. This thing is all over the news. We’re losing control of the situation.”

Karen had been suspicious of Steve #1. Steve #2, she knew, was a dupe. He was just the regular, resident agency schnook at Guantanamo, a guy who passed notes back and forth and filled out forms. Steve #1, though, he was sent to keep tabs on Karen and push her in the direction they wanted her to go. She thought it was cute the way he started out all puppy dog deferential in the Towncar. Sitting in the concrete room at Guantanamo and sipping her coffee, Karen no longer thinks he’s cute.

“I’ve had them both isolated for two days,” Karen says, tapping her finger on her cup. “They need a couple more days, then I need at least another day to take one good run at them.”

“I read your report, ma’am,” Steve says sternly tapping a manila file against his leg. “I’ve been asked to inform you that you have twenty-four more hours. I’ve also been asked to inform you that we have generated several scenarios on our own for how to manage the situation, if it can’t be resolved.”

Karen laughs and downs the last of the coffee in her Styrofoam cup.
“You guys kill me,” she says.

“Ma’am?”

“I’ve been asked to inform you that you have twenty-four more hours,” Karen says, imitating Steve then laughing. “Do you ever listen to yourself speak?”

“Regarding the scenarios, ma’am, we’ve settled on one. It’s—”

“Did you know that after The Godfather came out guys in the mafia started talking and behaving like the characters in the movie?” Karen says. “What spy movies did you watch growing up?”

“If you can’t resolve this in a satisfactory manner in twenty-four hours, I’ve been instructed to do so.”

“Play that scenario out for me, Steve.”

“Ma’am.”

“You’ve had all these monkeys in a room typing, and now you have an answer. Tell me about that answer.”

Steve crosses the room and sits next to Karen.

“Eddie, ma’am,” Steve says.

“You’re kidding.”

“We have new information,” he says. He places the file he’s carrying on the table in front of Karen. “These are pictures of the two subjects together in 1976 at the World Trade Center.”

Karen doesn’t open the file. Instead she pushes it back to Steve.

“Seriously?” she says. “King Kong?”

“The thinking is that this is a Philby scenario,” Steve says, referring to the Russian spy who was undercover in the British Secret Service for decades. “There is reason to believe Eddie
Mack has been working for fundamentalist groups specifically to execute this type of mission. We have spoken to individuals who say that Eddie told them that while the movie was being filmed, Russ created a disturbance resulting in the destruction of property and almost ending in a riot.”

Karen can’t get her mind around this new level of fancy insanity. She attempts to speak, but no words come out for several seconds. She looks at Steve, and she can tell he also knows it’s crazy.

“It’s weak,” he says finally. “But I have my instructions. This is the path we’re planning to go down. I’m telling you as a courtesy.”

“Aw, shucks, Gomer, thanks,” Karen says. “You can’t just pin this all on Eddie Mack.”

“Why not?” Steve says, leaning forward to hear what she has to say.

Karen thinks about her briefing on Zubaydah. The pain of caving in back then prompts her to want to say, *Because it’s wrong. Because it’s immoral and wrong.* But she knows, as it was then, it is now. *Arguing morality is never an option, not with these guys, not when it’s a “time of war,” and not when it’s coming from a woman. They want to hear the right tactical rationale. They don’t want to hear about principles or ethics.*

“Russ is not simply saying he did it,” Karen says. “He believes he did it. That’s our immutable starting point. He not only believes he is responsible, he wants to tell anyone who will listen how responsible he is. He wishes to unburden himself, to make amends, to set things right because he sincerely feels like he caused the deaths of thirty-eight people. Are you following me?”

“So far, yes.”
“Now if you put this all on Eddie, you will have yourself a nice, tidy, made-to-order scapegoat. Plus, you’ll let Russ off the hook, and everyone’s happy. The trouble is that it’ll only be a Band Aid on a sucking wound. It won’t stick because Russ will still believe he did it. Then the minute he walks out of here, he’ll contradict that story, and we’ll have a bigger mess than we have now. We’ll have an active government conspiracy, and we won’t be able to control it.”

Karen watches Steve as he appears to be thinking. He lets out a sigh, stretches, and cracks his back.

“There are other ways to have him walk out of here,” he says.

“I’m going to pretend that I didn’t hear that.”

They sit together in silence for a few moments, until Steve speaks.

“Did you see that dispatch yesterday?” he says.

“No. Which one?”

“We got pictures of Kony laughing. It was immediately after he heard the ferry exploded. He started laughing his goddamned head off. You believe that?”

Of course! Kony laughed when he heard about the attack because he didn’t know about the attack. This wasn’t the result of anyone’s master plan. This was a spur of the moment thing, a poke in the eye, an impromptu fuck you from one or two guys. Bartouk probably did it to impress Kony, or just for fun. He’s probably not even in the People’s Liberation Army.

Karen thinks about explaining this to Steve, but she can’t trust him. She looks at and sees him for what he is: He’s an honest, above board representative of the government. The trouble is, he’s from a government that’s completely paranoid. They’re going to manufacture a conspiracy about terrorists to avoid the possibility that someone might imagine there’s a
conspiracy between Hollywood and terrorists based on terrorists manufacturing a story about a Hollywood star blowing up a boat.

Karen caught her reflection in the vending machine glass.

And I’m with them. I’m working for them. If I don’t find another way out of this, I become them. Wouldn’t Jason love to see me now?

“I’ve got twenty-four hours, right?” Karen says.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do me a favor, Steve.”

“If I can.”

“Back off. Tell everyone to back off. Take all the mics, all the wires, all of whatever-the-hell devices you have jacked into my office and get rid of them. Can you do that for me?”

Steve looks at his hands then nods slowly.

“Thanks, Steve,” Karen says getting up. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She walks down the hall and she knows. The key to having Eddie take the blame is to let Eddie simply be Eddie. That’s why she’s had him, and Russ, in isolation for two days. Eddie already believes he did it. All she has to do is get Eddie to convince Russ that it was Eddie, not Russ, who’s responsible.
Chapter 14

Karen asks Russ if he’s had enough time to think. He says he has and that he hasn’t changed his mind.

“Tell me what you did, Russ,” Karen says.

For thirty minutes, Russ tells Karen everything he can recall, starting with watching the Kony video made by Invisible Children until the moment of the explosion.

“Did you know that you and Eddie were in a movie together?” Karen says when Russ is finished.

She hands him a file containing still pictures from *King Kong* in 1976.

“That’s you right there,” she says, “and that is Eddie Mack.”

Karen tells Russ that officials in Washington believe that Eddie has been purposely exploiting Russ for years, waiting for an opportunity to attack the United States, an opportunity such as the one that occurred on Lake Victoria.

She leans back and watches Russ sift through the pictures.

*There’s no way he’ll go for this, she thinks. A child wouldn’t buy this crap.*

Russ starts nodding. Then he nods more vigorously.

“Oh, my God,” he says. “Yes. It makes sense.”

Karen remains motionless. She’s crushed.

*He wants to believe it. He’s convincing himself because it’s convenient. It removes the burden. Son of a bitch.*

***
Eddie sits in his cell.

He hears the guards at the end of the hall speaking. They discuss prepping Eddie to move. They flip a coin to see which of them will shackle him, which of them will walk him, which of them will wait outside the door while he’s “interrogated.” They do it to pass the time. Eddie chuckles at the fact that it’s just plain boring being a guard at Guantanamo.

*We are joined as a cabal of bored, lonely, frustrated functionaries each playing their role so the others can play theirs.*

For two days, he has played out scenario after scenario that might get Russ and him out of the mess they’re in. In each one, he reaches the same conclusion: Both of them are not going to make it out. He pictures the woman on fire in Lake Victoria who floated past him in the water.

In the first six hours of isolation Eddie decided he would take the blame for the attack. He wasn’t so much relieved, as he was ecstatic to be doing so.

*I am Sancho Panza, he thought, and a poor one at that. I am going to hell one way or the other. I might as well make it for something and not for nothing*

It took him the other 42 hours sitting all alone to figure out the mechanics of taking the blame and having it work. He knew the plane tickets, the hotel, the cell phones, and every other aspect of their trip were purchased in his name. That was simple enough.

*It looks like I brought Russ to Uganda, not the other way around. And I brought him because I’ve already been to Uganda. I’m familiar with the country.*

*I made the phone calls to Bartouk and Invisible Children, and to everyone else. That’s pretty cut and dried. Why did I do it though? Why would I have done such a thing, in the first place?*
It took a day to fabricate a story. He spent half of a day trying to not embellish it too much. *If it’s simple, then I can memorize it and not trip myself up,* he thought. *Whatever you do, keep it very simple.*

Once he had his story he spent the rest of his time memorizing it, rehearsing it, acting it out, and nailing it down to the point of utter and complete believability.

*They should give me an award for this.*

“Mack, Edward,” Will, the guard, says from down the hall. *Looks like he lost the coin toss.*

“I’m ready,” Eddie says.
“I’ll be damned,” Eddie says, chuckling and thumbing through the pictures. “Curiouser and curiouser.”

Eddie’s not stupid. Eddie’s not going to fall so easily.

Eddie looks at the pictures of him and Russ during the filming of *King Kong*. He throws the file back at Karen.

Karen goes through the routine of explaining the Philby theory, cringing at each one of her attempts to play it straight.

“You guys need to hire better writers.” Eddie says.

Karen turns away from Eddie.

“I did it,” Eddie says. “I am responsible for it. I don’t know what these pictures are about, but if that’s what you want to hear, I’m sitting here saying it.”

“Tell me exactly what you did,” Karen says.

Eddie goes down a list of activities and reminds her at each one to check: The airline tickets are in his name, the phone calls are from his cell phone, the connection to Uganda was all him.

“How much of a map do you need?” he says.

“The problem isn’t what you did,” Karen says. “The problem is that Russ says he did it.”

“He’s wrong.”

Karen comes from behind her desk and sits one foot away from Eddie.
“Eddie,” she says, “for this to work, I need to believe you. I need to know why. And I also need for Russ to believe, really believe, that he didn’t do it.”

She sees the spark of recognition catch, then spread, across Eddie’s face.

Karen wants to tell Eddie that she respects him. She wants to hug him for restoring her faith in people. But of course, she can’t do those things.

“What can I do for you, Eddie?” she says.

Eddie doesn’t seem to understand the question.

“If there’s something specific you want, I can try and make that happen,” she says, enunciating every word and praying that the bugs were really removed from the room.

“Oh,” Eddie says, smiling, “I get it. I would like a plane fueled and ready to take me to whatever country I decide upon.”

Karen laughs.

“I was thinking of something more reasonable,” she says.

“I want a room with a view, Clarice,” he says, smiling.

Karen laughs again. Eddie’s smile disappears. He stares at Karen for a long moment.

“They’re making you take a walk around the block, aren’t they?” Eddie says.

Karen swallows hard but keeps staring at him, trying to communicate the urgency of what’s going on.

“You want to buy your way out,” Eddie says. “You want to be off the hook, and you want me to help.”

Karen and Edie stare at one another for a long time.

“I want to go to a jail in the States,” Eddie says in a whisper.

“I can do that,” Karen says.
“I want someplace quiet to live when my I get out,” he says.

*He thinks he’s getting out.*

“We can do that as well.”

“Then we have a deal,” Eddie says extending his hand to Karen.

She grips it and shakes it slowly.

“Really?”

“One more thing,” Eddie says, placing his other hand over the two of theirs. “I want Russ to get the credit for turning me in. I want him to be the hero in this story. Actor single handedly exposes terrorist cell, that sort of thing”

“I’m not sure we can—”

“It’s a deal breaker,” Eddie says.

Karen studies Eddie’s face. She has no idea how to make such a thing happen, but, given who is interested in the outcome of this case, she thinks it can happen.

“We can swing that,” Karen says. “We can definitely do that.”

“All right,” Eddie says, getting up and letting go of Karen’s hand. “I guess it’s time to see Russ.”
Chapter 16

The breeze off the ocean at Guantanamo cools the close-quartered sweat from the skin of the inmates walking the yard. They get an hour each day to stroll the forty by forty foot square of poured concrete. Armed guards watch over the yard from squat metal towers that look like stunted versions of the old parachute ride at Coney Island.

A metal door opens. Will, the guard, escorts Eddie out into the yard. Eddie blinks at the bright sun. He is the walking embodiment of how every movie cliché about prisoners emerging from the night of the cell into the day is accurate. He squints and shields his eyes as he steps carefully forward.

“Fifteen minutes, Eddie,” Will says.

“Thanks, Will,” Eddie says, wanting to clap him on the shoulder, but resisting.

Eddie spots Russ across the yard. He looks small, and reduced, after just two days in a cell alone.

*He never would have made it*, Eddie thinks.

Russ walks over to Eddie, hugs him, and starts crying.

“Eddie,” he says, sounding like he’s trying his name out to make sure he remembers it and is getting it right. “Eddie. Eddie. So good to see you.”


Russ looks at Eddie. He laughs, then hugs him one more time very tight.

“We should move,” Eddie whispers. “We should keep moving. Act casual, like I didn’t just slip you a gat.”

They walk shoulder-to-shoulder close together. They look at the guards in the towers.
“Do you think they know how to read lips?” Eddie asks. “Wouldn’t it make sense that they would?”

“I’ve been going over things,” Russ says. “It doesn’t make sense, what they’re saying.”

“I’m thinking that they teach these guards to read lips, for real,” Eddie says.

Eddie looks directly at Russ. He looks grim, then he smiles a slight grin and shakes his head, like he’s preparing to tell an eight-year-old about how babies are made.

“It makes perfect sense,” Eddie says. “If you think about it, it’s brilliant, in its way.”

“We made a movie together,” Russ says with a short laugh.

“Do you remember it?”

Russ says that he had completely forgotten about that day at the World Trade Center until Karen showed him the pictures.

“They wanted to use that to say we were, like, plotting for years to take something down,” Russ says. “Isn’t that ridiculous?”

Eddie says nothing.

Russ wonders aloud what Wolfe would say about all this. Eddie just laughed.

“You have to hand it to Caitlin, though,” Russ says.

“How so?”

“Everyone in the world wants to beat the shit out of their ex. Everyone fantasizes about it. Not Caitlin, though. She just goes ahead and does it.”

Eddie laughs.

The two stand and say nothing.

“No one was supposed to get killed,” Eddie says to Russ. “Things got out of hand. I’m sorry.”
Russ’s mouth hangs open. He stares at Eddie but is unable to speak.

Will the guard signals to Eddie that his time is up.

“T’m sorry,” Eddie says again as Will arrives to take him back inside. “Just know that I’m sorry.”

* * *

Karen sits behind her desk with her hands folded in front of her. Eddie sits in front of the desk with his hands on his knees. He feels light and fine. He realizes things will shift into a higher gear.

“I’ll be famous,” he says to Karen. “Won’t that be something?”

There are several pieces of paper on the desk between them. Two guards and Steve #2 stand in the corner of the room.

Eddie imagines that perhaps someone will throw a switch, or maybe even take a call from a red phone signaling his last-minute pardon.

“Mr. Mack,” Karen says, “by signing this piece of paper, do you agree that you are affirming that you have waived your right to have a lawyer represent you moving forward and regarding all previous acts since your arrest?”

“Yes.”

“I need you to fully acknowledge your understanding of that fact, Mr. Mack.”

“I know that by signing this piece of paper, I am waiving my right to have an attorney represent me, yes.”
“Very good,” Karen says. “This is your statement. I would like you to read it over and, if you agree that it is accurate, please sign at the bottom.”

“I, Edward Mack, am solely responsible for the terrorist attack that killed 38 people aboard the Mutai Queen on September 4, 2006, in Uganda,” Eddie says, reading his handiwork out loud. “Having become radicalized during my previous trip to Uganda, I joined with a group of freedom fighters whose aim is to overthrow the subjugation being experienced in Uganda, and throughout all of Africa, at the hands of missionaries and the governments of the United States and England. It was my intention, and plan, to implicate Russell Dunn in the attack as a means of drawing attention to the racist nature of the American media machine in portraying Africans as helpless, and worthy of exploitation by colonial powers, such as the United States and England. I am making this admission under no duress, nor have I been coerced or manipulated by promises or any other means, into making this admission.”

“I believe that is the last provision,” Karen says.

Before he signs Eddie leans in close to Karen and asks about where he might be living when he got out.

She asks if he has a preference of where he might like to live.

“Bisbee?”

“Somewhere a little more clandestine,” she says.

“I always liked Richmond, Virginia. It’s pretty.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Eddie smiles. He hopes Russ is on his way home. He signs his name and places the pen on the desk.

“So that’s it?” he says.
“That is it. These gentlemen will escort you to Andrews Air Force Base. From there you will be remanded into the custody of the United States Marshals Service.”


“You’re doing the right thing, Eddie.”

“I’d prefer to take a walk around the block,” he says.

He nods at Karen and turns around to the guards. They escort him out of the room.

“Not bad, Dr. Proe,” Steve #2 says. “Not bad. I want you to know your efforts are appreciated. I don’t mean only by myself. I mean appreciated at the highest levels.”

_The highest levels, _she thinks. _I just sent an innocent man to prison. I helped fake a story about how real people were killed so that a bunch of people who tell fake stories for a living, people who make movies, don’t get investigated and upset elected people in power. Fuck the highest levels if this is what you have to do for them._

She stood up and realized she felt physically ill from pleasing the highest levels.

“We got lucky,” she says.

“Luck had nothing to do with it.”

“Next time, we’ll get someone who won’t know the difference between right and wrong. Next time, we’ll get fried for this.”

Steve slides Karen her cell phone and a file.

“The missing pages,” Karen says.

“The missing pages,” he says.

Karen packs her files into her briefcase. As she walks toward the plane she calls Jason and tells him she’s coming home for good.
Chapter 17

Eddie, Russ, and four hundred other paid extras at the World Trade Center spent five hours sitting on the ground, stretching, sighing, groaning, napping, standing up, complaining, telling desultory stories about where they could otherwise be and how much more comfortable they would be if they were in those other places, and questioning their decision to get into showbiz. They occasionally spent a few animated moments on their feet moving gingerly toward King Kong’s prone body and staring intently at it whenever a voice squawked through an assistant director’s bullhorn and instructed them to do so. The second time they all had to stand and assemble to shuffle and gawk at Kong, Eddie saw Russell standing across the plaza. He was talking to some other extras. Eddie thought he appeared to be organizing them. He was.

Sitting on the ground and losing his mind from the grind of doing nothing for three hours straight, Russ had hit a guy sitting next to him in the chest with the back of his hand.

“Did you see that?”

The guy—who had a pageboy, Prince Valiant haircut and was wearing corduroy bell-bottoms and a blue velour, short-sleeved pullover—looked at the hand that had struck him, slowly blinked the boredom from his eyes, and said nothing.

“Tell me you don’t fucking see that,” Russ said, getting to his feet.

Prince Valiant stood up next to him and craned his neck in the same direction Russ craned his. He stood on his tippy toes when Russ stood on his. He jumped up right after Russ jumped up trying to get a better view.

“I don’t see nothing.”

“You don’t see that?”
“What?”

“What!” Russ said, pointing directly at what he was talking about. “That! Fucking that! You don’t see that? A fucking blind man can see that. Stevie Motherfucking Wonder can see that.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?”

Russ took the man’s head in his hands, stood with him cheek to cheek, and guided his gaze to the exact spot where he was looking.

“There,” he said.

“What?” the man said.

“Oh, my God,” Russ said.

He put his hand on the shoulder of another man—dressed in a yellow smiley-face t-shirt and wearing thick Buddy Holly glasses, the kind that hadn’t been popular for fifteen years at least—standing next to them, pointed, and said to him, “Tell me, please, that you do not see that?”

Buddy Holly squinted, ducked, and bobbed his head side to side. “No,” he said.

Russ walked away laughing to himself. The two men joined together trying to decipher what Russ was taking about and what he might have been seeing.

Russ came up behind them, stood between them, shook his head, and put a hand on each of their shoulders, using them to support himself, to keep from falling to the ground and writhing in disgust, resignation, and loss. They looked at him. Russ pointed his chin at the prostrate Kong. The two men looked at one another in mute acknowledgment of their failure to see.

“Tell me you do not both see a gigantic, dead gorilla lying on the ground,” Russ said.
Air escaped from the lungs of each man, making a sound like a pressure valve. They acted as relieved as if they'd just missed hitting a mailbox while driving drunk.

“Of course,” Buddy Holly said.

“Gorilla?” Prince Valiant said laughing. “What gorilla?”

“There is a giant dead gorilla on the ground,” Russ said. “Are we agreed on this?”

Buddy Holly and Prince Valiant nodded.

“Excellent. So why are we not acting like there is a giant, dead gorilla on the ground in front of us?”

The two men shrugged. They turned to the four other people who had risen to their feet to join in on the diversion, to get a break from the hard ground, to see what the thing going on was all about, and shrugged at them as well.

Russ spread his arms as wide as a preacher welcoming the return of the prodigal and put them around two of the newcomers.

“Help me out, guys,” he said, staring at what were now six dumfounded, uncompromising, lost, and slack-jawed faces. “Please, please, please, for the love of Mike, help me out.”

“Was tun wir?” asked a tall, thin smiling man who could have easily passed for the brother of Max Von Sydow.

“Was tun wir,” Russ repeated. “Was tun wir … Ah! Yes! What do we do!”

“Yeah,” the man said.

Russ announced that all seven of them should join together and pretend they were a group of German tourists who have come to see the famous World Trade Center.

“Why German?” Prince Valiant said.
“I took two years of German in high school,” Russ said. “It was the same year twice, but I can look German. Plus, Max Von Sydow over here is German”

“My last name is Rosenthal,” Prince Valiant said.

“So the whole German thing isn’t working for you,” Russ said.

“I am not German,” Max Von Sydow said.

“Not German,” Russ said.

“Swiss. From Baden, in Aargau.”

“All right, then,” Russ said. “We’re Swiss. Or we could be Norwegian. We could be from any place where white people live. It doesn’t really matter.”

Rosenthal broke first. He smiled and apologized for being difficult. He said he was bored and tired and in a bad mood from doing nothing for so many hours.

Russ stood up, clapped Rosenthal on the shoulder, and said, “Then let’s fucking do something!”

“Like what?”

Russ looked at his audience of six and started walking around stiffly, pretending to be a foreigner in a foreign city enjoying the famous World Trade Center. He told Rosenthal that they were enjoying the sights and sounds, going from one tower of the World Trade Center to the other when, wham!, out of nowhere, a giant gorilla slams into the ground in front of them.

“We are shocked,” Russ said to Rosenthal and the five others, who were joined by three more people drawn to the crowd because there was nothing else to do and because at last someone appeared to be doing something. “We are shocked because, you know, it’s shocking.”

By the time he'd made three tours around the Plaza, Russ had gathered a band of thirty would-be extra actors. Standing near the fallen Kong, the group, en mass, copied the way Russ
stared, made his mouth into an O, and widened his eyes in awe such that they all, in effect, appeared stunned at the momentous and surprising events unfolding before them.

Russ admonished a few of them to not point at the giant, dead ape.

“That,” he said, “is overacting.”

Eddie was on his feet, watching Russ lead his growing group in tight laps around half of the Plaza. He thought about joining them, but decided that wasn’t really his thing. Instead he merely watched them go around and around. One time around, he imagined they'd all broken into a conga line. He wished he could organize a following. He wished he could be the kind of person who could do such a thing.

Behind him, Eddie heard two people, and they sounded very mad.

“Those new people are going to fuck everything up,” said an older woman in a peasant skirt and a black tank top.

“No, they’re not,” said a man with fat earphones wrapped loosely around his neck like an ill-fitting brace and holding an assistant director’s bullhorn on his thigh and pointed skyward, as though it was the butt of a rifle settled on a hip for a drinks pause during the hunt. “Just do as I say, and let everyone else know what they should do.”

Eddie turned around. For the first time Eddie saw five thousand people that had been there for hours, standing just beyond the ring of paid extras.

“Those people have been instructed to go no closer to Kong than the outer circle of paid extras,” the assistant director was saying to the woman. “That means you, and these extras, will be the closest to the figure. The others will form a larger crowd farther out. It’s up to you, and
the rest of the paid extras, to make sure this shot goes smoothly. We probably won’t have a
second chance. I’m counting on all of you. Do you understand?”

Eddie looked at the crowd behind him. They had appeared seemingly unbidden in the
night. The hot klieg lights shining from behind the mass of bodies blurred their faces so that they
looked like flat, dumb, masked figures—zombies in the town square, moving side-to-side, foot-
to-foot, silently waiting to make a move.

Eddie shielded his eyes with his hand and squinted into the clump of humanity. He could
discern a few individuals. He saw the silhouette of a coiled, thin woman resting one hand on her
cocked hip and chewing gum as though she were defending her title in a noisemaking contest.
He saw a pudgy little girl hit her pudgier, smaller sister very hard with a closed, hard first three
times until the pudgier girl dropped a Snickers bar slick with her sweat. The pudgy sister
laughed, picked the candy up off the ground, and ate it in two bites while her sister screamed in
bitter defeat. He saw a group of men, some in tank tops and others bare-chested, talking and
gesturing to one another with the urgency of the elected. Every one of them was holding the kind
of cheap beer the furniture movers bought and put in bags at Felix’s.

Eddie studied the spectral figures behind him. Russell passed two feet away from him,
weaving a parade of fifty people through the line of paid extras, now arranged in a ring
protecting the fallen Kong from the blank and stewing furor of the unpaid, unkempt extras
massed to surge forward at the hand-drop of an assistant director.

“Hey, kid,” Russ yelled to Eddie. “This is insane! Fucking nuts! I mean, is this cool or
what?”

Eddie smiled at him. When he looked back to the bigger crowd of people, it had shifted.
Men with bullhorns and earphones wearing tan vests tacked completely with pockets were
herding the unpaid extras into manageable clumps. Once assembled, the ADs were instructing the smaller crowds to look for the signal from a man sitting on a crane. That man was the director. He would signal by dropping his hand from over his head swiftly down. When they saw that signal, they were to move toward King Kong, but they were to not—repeat NOT—pass the ring of people closest to Kong on the ground. The men in the vests finished their instructions and stepped away to the periphery. There were now ten thousand people hoping to be part of movie history at the base of the world’s tallest two buildings on a sweltering June night in New York City.

Eddie looked up. The director on his crane was being lowered into position above the crowd to deliver the signal that would send the horde forward. Eddie could see Russ across the plaza, yelling to his coterie of would-be actors: “Release the hounds! Let chaos reign!” Then he arched his head back toward the night sky, howled like an animal, and tore his shirt off.

From behind him, Eddie felt what seemed like a wall of sound smack him in the head. Growls, whoops, undistinguished and indecipherable talking, feet grinding against concrete, and bodies in movement displacing humid air, pushing the wet oxygen out of the way, squeezing the available space between them and him until it vanished and he felt the first shove. Eddie opened his eyes to watch the crowd converge on the dead fake ape in front of him. Police officers—Eddie wasn’t sure if they were real or fake—tried to forestall the crowd, but they got shoved and upended, going left and right and over and up, until they simply gave up the effort to hold the throng back. Eddie was hit in the shoulders, the back, the kidneys, the head, and the neck as people punched him with their bodies, their elbows, and their outstretched hands rushing by to get close to the prone, dead Kong. There were so many people Eddie could feel the ground undulating. Each impact from behind made Eddie dig his heels in harder. He stiffened his body,
making it a tensile protrusion soldered to its spot. He pictured himself as a rock in the middle of a stream cleaving apart waters, forcing them to deviate to keep flowing.

When Eddie looked up, he saw the first man reach Kong. Once at the base of the ape, the man raised himself up to stand on Kong’s head. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and he was repeatedly beating himself on his own chest with his fists, as though he were a gorilla. He hooted and yodeled and howled. It was Russ.

“Yes!” Russ yelled. “You people are all crazy! This is fucking great!”

Russ bent down and started ripping a tuft of hair from the ape’s head. It took him a full minute to wrench the carpet-thick remnant of scalp free. He brandished it above his own head as a trophy. People nearby cheered and clapped, then rushed to get on top of the ape, joining in the vandalism. The last thing Eddie saw before turning to the almost-empty expanse of plaza behind him was that a man had plucked Kong’s left eyeball free from his head and was trying to keep five other people from grabbing the bowling-ball-sized eye out of his hands.

Eddie walked home as the sun came up. He was exhilarated by the carnage, emboldened by the action, and alive from the chaos he had witnessed. He wanted to be that guy who started it. He wanted to stand at the front of a huge crowd and incite them to a near riot. He wanted that power.

The air was already hazy and thick with the stillness of summer. Before going home, Eddie stopped at the bodega.

“What are you doing up so early?” Felix said.

“Causing trouble,” Eddie said.
“Like those people who beat up King Kong?” Felix said with a laugh, turning a page of the *Daily News*.

“How did you hear about that?”

“It was on the radio. Someone said they gouged his eyes out.”

Felix laughed with a sort of pride at this.

“You know who started it?” Eddie said, leaning in closer to Felix and looking around in conspiracy.

Felix shrugged.

“Me,” Eddie said. “I started it! That’s where I’ve been. I was standing up on Kong’s head and I, I don’t know what happened, but I started chanting and yelling and then the whole place went nuts. Next thing you know, we’re tearing the thing apart.”

“Sure, kid,” Felix said.

Eddie handed Felix the check he got for being an extra in the movie.

Felix snapped it taut. He examined it, looked at Eddie, looked at the check again, said “I’ll be damned,” and opened his cash register.

Felix cashed Eddie’s check for just three dollars, half the normal twenty-percent vig.

*Not bad, Eddie thought. It might just be a good day after all.*
CURRICULUM VITAE

Alex O’Meara is journalist who has worked for the City News Bureau of Chicago, the Washington DC bureau of the *Baltimore Sun; Newsday*; NBC in Tucson; and many other media organizations. He has won the Peter Lisagor Award for reporting, two *Newsday* journalism awards for feature writing, and the Lou P. Bunce Award for creative writing from Long Island University. He was invited to present at the Tucson Festival of Books in 2010 and 2011. He entered the Online MFA in Creative Writing Program at the University of Texas at El Paso in 2012. He teaches English composition at Cochise College and writes for asweetlife.org and Livestrong.org. He is the author of *Chasing Medical Miracles: The Promise and Perils of Clinical Trials* (Walker 2009) and the novel, *Bad Day for the Home Team* (Zumaya 2010.) Originally from New York, Alex lives in Bisbee, Arizona.