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Everyone You'll Never Meet

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EVERYONE YOU'LL NEVER MEET

by

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ABSTRACT

Everyone You'll Never Meet is a multi-perspective mystery set in the fictional southern town of Ransom, South Carolina. It follows a young woman whose boyfriend disappears, a failed megachurch pastor at personal and professional crossroads, and a young father coming to grips with the shape of his life in light of a chance encounter with a murder victim.

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CHAPTER 1

Erin Cash sat opposite the pastor with her legs crossed wide and absentmindedly untied her own shoe. She had met with him once a week for the past month, and she no longer found his office interesting to look at. After the broken engagement, her mother Janet had appealed to the staff at Calvary Bible Church, just outside their small college town of Ransom – two hours from Charlotte, two hours from Columbia, two hours from the South Carolina coast. Janet was a supportive, longtime member of Calvary, and church assistance had appealed to her in lieu of more expensive counseling options (“If you have that much money, how many problems can you really have?”), so it was a point of some small, bittersweet pride that the senior pastor, Doug Townsend, had agreed to sit with Erin for thirty minutes every week. Erin wasn’t sure what they were supposed to be doing, nor when they would have done enough of it to quit, but she figured she had to keep going until her mother told her to stop. Sometimes she wondered if Pastor Doug felt the same way.

He leaned back in his office chair and stretched. “Do you believe in God?” he said, his arms still behind his head, like it had just occurred to him to check. It was the fourth time they had met.

Erin let her hair fall over her face while she re-tied her shoe. When Andrew left she’d cut it into a bob, but already she was tired of fixing it every morning and missed the days when she could just wear a ponytail. It fell messily in several directions, getting in her eyes and tickling her neck.

“Which one?” she said without looking.

Doug thought for a moment. “Well,” he said. “Any of them, I suppose.”

“No.”

“That was much easier than naming them all.”

Erin finished tying her shoe and put her feet on the ground, then shrugged and said nothing. Doug stared out his office window overlooking the church parking lot, mostly empty on a Thursday afternoon, and brought his hands down to rest on his stomach. He was lean but had a small, distinctly middle-aged belly. Every time Erin had seen him he was wearing the same basic outfit: dark khakis and a plaid shirt, sleeves rolled up.

He said, “So what do you think when someone says ‘God’?”

“I don’t really think anything,” Erin said.

“I don’t mean, what’s your opinion of God. I mean, what picture pops into your head? What connotations?”

“I don’t know,” Erin said. “What picture pops into your head when I say ‘Allah’?”

“I suppose, honestly, I think of Muslims I’ve met. Or seen on TV. Is that what you think for God? Do you think of your mom?”

Erin frowned. “No, I don’t think of my mom. She’s just...my mom. If I would think of anyone, I’d think of my dad.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met your dad.”

“That’s because he’s gone.” She said it like a piece of punctuation, and for a second they were both silent. When Erin looked up Doug was staring at her, but he quickly turned back to the window.

“Oh,” he said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know that.”

Erin shrugged. “It happens. I mean, obviously it happens. It’s basically why we’re here, right? To talk about it.”

“It?”

“I mean, people leaving.”

“We can talk about whatever you want to talk about.”

“I’m not afraid to talk about Andrew,” she said. “I just don’t have much to say.”

His name was Andrew Orlando. They had been engaged for ten months. She had not imagined she would change her name, but she did like Orlando. Andrew Orlando, Erin Orlando. Andrew and Erin Orlando. It had a certain rhythm. They would have gotten married on the beach in Hilton Head, but three months ago Andrew sat on his front step with his hands on his knees and said he had changed his mind. They’d been bickering about food, and it was such a non-sequitur that Erin thought at first he was joking, some terrifically misguided attempt at humor. But it was real; he was moving to New York to work in television. His parents had agreed to pay half his rent. (“I’m not ready to give up my dreams,” he had said. “I’m sorry, but I’m not.” “I didn’t realize you were,” she said.) In retrospect the signs had been obvious for weeks – the frustration, the outbursts, the sarcasm, the silence – but at the time Erin was so surprised that she wasn’t even angry, just numb.

“I made a mistake,” she told Doug. “Somehow, somewhere, I made a mistake.”

“I don’t think you made a mistake.”

“Yeah, well, the evidence suggests otherwise. I guess I should be getting used to it now.”

For a long moment Doug was silent, drumming his fingers on his stomach. Erin waited for him to say something: to tell her she was wrong, to find a different meaning, almost certainly to bring God into it. He glanced at his phone.

“So,” he said. “This is probably a bad time to say you need to go? It’s been forty minutes.”

It was like the air had been let from a balloon. Erin snorted. “You’re not a very good pastor,” she said reflexively, then caught herself. It was the first truly rude thing she had said, the first moment she’d let her guard down.

Doug leaned closer over his desk.

“*I know*,” he whispered.

“Sure, I’m depressed,” Erin said the next week. “But I’m not *depressed*. I’m not, like, mentally ill.”

“It would be alright if you were. “

“I know that.”

“There’s no shame in it. Many people experience depression. It’s very common.”

“I know.”

“I’m not exactly a psychiatrist. I’m not qualified for genuine depression.”

“Seriously, I know. Do you *want* me to be depressed?”

“No, I’m just saying it would be good to know if you were.”

“Well I’m not,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Some weeks Doug was late, and Erin would sit outside his door and make small-talk with his assistant. She grew used to the confines of his office and its oversized bucket chairs, its teetering piles of books – Doug had to shuffle sideways to reach his desk – but the rest of the church was too large, empty and sterile, classy like a hotel lobby, and it left her feeling unmoored. Whenever she entered, Erin walked straight to the back office and sat by the door, checking her phone and trying to hide the fact that she didn’t actually go to church. She assumed everyone could tell.

The sixth week, Doug cancelled abruptly. The seventh week he was late again, and he followed her into his office looking grumpy, dropping his phone on the desk and sitting down without a word.

“What’s wrong with you?” Erin asked.

“Nothing,” he said, batting back the question with a wave of his hand.

“Just...things at home.” On his shelves were several pictures of his wife and teenage daughter. He stopped himself from saying more. “Anyway, how are you? What do you want to talk about today?”

“What do *I* want to talk about?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “I mean, I don’t know. How’s work?”

“Work is...” She searched for an appropriate answer. “Work is sweaty.”

Erin lived at home with her mother and manned the desk at a gym called Fitness Revolution. In college she had studied elementary education, but during the past two years Ransom city schools – and the county at large – had been stuck in a hiring freeze, and she hadn't found a teaching job when she graduated. It wouldn't have been as much a threat with a supportive spouse, to say nothing of a wealthy pair of in-laws, but absent them Erin had been unable to use her degree, her tutoring experience, or her semester student-teaching at Joe Frazier Elementary. Unless she left her mother and moved away, or at least until she saved enough to buy her own car, she had to place her teaching aspirations in a drawer and forget about them. She had needed something she could start right away, something she could reach by bus. The gym had called her back first.

To Erin, the whole place had a vague odor of sexual harassment: too much flesh, too much sweat, too many grunts and groans and shouts, too many men stalking the machines in tank tops, hiking up their shorts to check their quads in the mirror. She thought she looked dumpy in the gym-mandated polo and khaki shorts, but a few times she still heard something offhand as she did her rounds, and she had to invent a fake boyfriend to avoid giving her number to a pushy young man with a Breast Cancer Awareness Month headband. At first this had made her feel panicky, like an already bumpy flight hitting more turbulence, but she soon got used to it. Work was something she thought about as little as possible.

“It wasn't my top choice,” she told Doug.

Doug got up from his chair. “Let me show you something,” he said, and he began to shift stacks of books on the floor, piled in front of the bookcase next to his desk, until

he reached behind the row on the bottom shelf to extract a beaten, horribly neon green cowboy hat with a cactus printed on the front.

“Gross,” Erin said.

“I know. When I was in seminary I worked at a western-themed bar in Beverly, one town over. Had to wear this every shift.”

“You were a bartender?”

“I was. And not a very good one either. I basically faked my way into the job and had to figure it out as I went. It was awful... Loud and dark and smelly, and I didn’t know what I was doing. Not as many pretty girls as I thought either. But I had bills to pay.” He put the hat on his head and smiled. “There’s lesson for you here, I’m sure. Let me think.”

“I really doubt there’s a lesson in your crappy bartending.”

“I can say I was crappy; you don’t get to. And don’t be so sure, I’m good at finding lessons. How about, We’ve all worked a bad job, it doesn’t last forever. Maybe someday you’ll look back on it and laugh.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“It is,” Doug agreed.

“That hat is hideous, you need to take it off.” Her eyes followed it from his head.

“What was the name of the bar?”

Doug spun it around his finger. “The Neon Cactus,” he said. “Obviously.”

By their ninth week of meeting, Erin had decided that it wasn’t awkward. In total they’d spent less than four hours together, but the artificial, concentrated space of the

office had accelerated their conversation, and if they still lapsed into silence from time to time, it was now more companionable than weird. Erin didn't know why they kept meeting, and every week she thought Doug would finally end it ("This seems like enough, don't you think?"), but he never did, and she wondered if he was waiting for her to do the same. Regardless she enjoyed the chance to leave the house without going to work, and their meeting was her one inviolable opportunity each week to take her mom's car, a ten year old Camry in geriatric tan. Calvary Bible Church sat on a large piece of land west of Ransom, far enough outside the town itself to attract visitors from several nearby communities, and Erin got into the habit of going two exits further after each meeting to get a latte or iced coffee at the Starbucks right off the interstate, then take a leisurely drive home when she finished. Her mother had to realize how long she was gone, and notice the missing gas in her car, but she said never said anything to Erin.

In the office Erin sat sideways in her chair and looked at the smudges on the window. She was wearing tights and a baggy sweatshirt, her hands hidden in her sleeves.

"Another guy asked me out last week," she said.

"Sorry," Doug said. "It's going to happen, unfortunately."

"This time I said yes."

Doug stopped twirling the pen he held in his hand. "Oh," he said. "I see. When are you going out?"

"We already went out. Technically, we went out twice, though I don't think they both counted as dates."

She had, to her own amazement, met him at the gym. She'd been sitting idly at the front desk, playing free-cell and browsing flights to Australia (three months' wages),

when a young man her own age had come through the door. He was broad-shouldered and tall, with dirty blond hair long enough to cover his ears, and he walked past her without a glance, swinging his arms and bobbing his head, seemingly ready to knock out twenty reps of something in the lobby. Erin said “Card?” and he froze a few steps beyond her, next to a standing banner in gaudy purple and green, his face set resolutely toward the weight room down the hall. When he turned he pantomimed *Me?*, though there was no one else in the lobby. She didn’t answer.

“Card...” he said, patting his pockets as he walked over. “I seem to have forgotten my card. Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Erin said. “We can look you up in the computer.”

“Oh. Right. Wonderful.”

“What’s your name?”

He seemed to think it over. “Joe.”

“Joe?”

“Joe...” He stood with his hands on his hips, frowning, then looked up and saw Erin’s face. “Fine,” he said, dropping his hands. “You got me. Someone told me you could walk in here if you acted confident, and I gotta get back to the gym.” He shrugged.

“It was worth a try.”

“Who told you *that?*” Erin said.

“You already know I can’t make up names, so I’m not even going to try.” He sighed. “My name actually is Joe, that’s probably the worst part.”

“It’s not great.”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“It was never going to work,” Erin said. “Even if you somehow came up with the right name. Everybody gets their picture taken. It’s in the system.”

He shook his fist at the ceiling. “I didn’t have a chance.”

Erin hesitated. “Look,” she said at last. “I’ll tell you what. For today – just for today – I’ll let it slide. Don’t tell anyone.”

He raised his eyebrows and waited a moment, like she was going to take it back, then put his hands together in thanks. “You’re amazing,” he said. “I don’t deserve it, that’s on me. What kindness! You’re an angel.” He started to backpedal away, then changed his mind and came back. “I’m Joe,” he said, sticking out his hand. “Of course, right? Joe Decker.”

“Erin Cash.”

He started down the hall, then turned while he walked. “You’re the best. And thank you again.”

“Right,” Erin said, more to herself than him. “No problem.”

The next day when she came into work, there was a note at the desk for her, written on the back of a promotional flyer:

*Dear Erin (Weight Room Gatekeeper)
I owe you one from yesterday. Come by La Spiazza sometime this afternoon and I’ll settle my debt.
Yours truly,
Joe*

La Spiazza was a coffee shop in Five Forks, a diverse Ransom neighborhood hugging the top of downtown, where the city’s smallest, trendiest restaurants and shops mixed with fashionable bungalows and tired, rundown homes. She had spent a lot of time

there as a student and had stopped at La Spiazza before – it tickled some deep, hard-to-reach place in her that she could have been there while Joe worked, though she had not remembered him, and he had not remembered her, and only months – or even years – later were their paths crossing. She didn't think she believed in God or providence or even fate, but if she had to personify the universe as anything it would be an unruly class clown, a mischievous trickster, and she liked the idea of being in on the joke for once. She knew nothing about Joe, but at least she *knew* that she knew nothing, and she wasn't one to turn down the chance for a free coffee and a few hours killed either. When she worked the early shift her day was over by two, and the open expanse of the afternoon sometimes felt more like a burden than a gift. La Spiazza would be something to do; someplace tangible to be.

He didn't treat it like a date. In fact he didn't treat it like much of anything at all. When she walked into the cramped interior of the coffeehouse he said, "You came!" and she smiled and said, "You invited me, don't act too surprised," and he said "I'm not, I don't know why I said that." But then he made her a latte and she sat in the coffee shop with its few other customers – two men playing chess by the window, a girl on her computer in the back, tucked into the corner like a kitten – while he swept the floors and wiped the tables and caught her eye every few minutes, suddenly coy. When he finally came over they talked for too long about her drink – was it too sweet? too bitter? too foamy? too milky? too hot or cold? – before she said that she really didn't know, she wasn't that discerning, and he said, "Oh, phew, me neither. But don't tell anyone." She began to think the latte was the end of it, no harm nor foul in either direction, and she

finished it with a mixture of relief and disappointment, ready to move on. But then he stopped her before she left the table and asked for her number, and she gave it to him.

Their first date – since she couldn't see how La Spiazza was a date, no matter how hard she squinted – came two nights later, when they ate burgers at Martin's and walked around the courthouse downtown. Their second date they went to the movies, then shared a cupcake from the bakery near La Spiazza. On their third date they went grocery shopping. Joe was an undemanding presence who seemed content to move as slowly as Erin wanted, and since neither of them had money they spent more and more time together doing nothing, taking walks in their neighborhoods, watching TV on Erin's laptop, driving outside the city to eat leftover pastries from the coffee shop on the hood of Joe's dented green Passat. It was such a thoroughly unromantic start that for several weeks Erin wasn't sure if they were truly dating, or on their way to dating, or if they had just become friends, but the tenth time they hung out Joe kissed her lightly goodbye, and she kissed him back. The whole thing lasted a second, but it was real and it was on the lips, and she felt the scratch of his chin, and her nose brushing his cheek. They didn't talk about it afterward. They didn't talk about it later. Neither of them had anything else to add.

Two nights after their first kiss they drove to the Barnwell College campus – a tiny school on the southern edge of Ransom, abutting several mid to lower class neighborhoods where its faculty and staff and not a few of its students lived, including Erin and her mother, and Joe's parents when they still lived in Ransom. Joe and Erin had

been enrolled at the same time, though Joe was a year older, Erin had lived at home, and they'd never met – they spent most of their second date comparing class schedules and intramurals and acquaintances (Erin again wondered how many times she had seen him without knowing: leaving a class, waiting at Barks, walking through the quad). Since graduation she had purposely tried to avoid campus and been back only once, despite how close she lived; she remembered what she thought when an older alum would visit, the superiority she felt to have her future so far ahead of her. It had not taken long to lose it.

Campus was objectively plain, several blocks of squat brick buildings constructed in the 80s, though at certain times of morning the trees would glint and the walkways shimmer, and at night when most of the school had left and darkness hid the bald exteriors and smudged windows, a peace would descend that made everything feel weightier than it deserved.

It was past midnight when Joe parked confidently in front of Traeger, the tallest building on campus, and led Erin to its front.

“Exactly what,” she asked him, “are we doing?”

“I wanted to show you something,” he said. In the dim light his smile reflected off the glass front doors. They had gone to a show in the back of a bar downtown, a jazz band Joe had seen years before, and when it finished he had asked her if she wanted to take a drive.

“I’ve been here before,” Erin said. “I’m sure it’s locked. And I don’t want to make out with you in an empty classroom anyway, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Let’s not rule anything out,” he said. “But that’s not what I was thinking.” He was wearing a jacket they had picked out together, a splurge for him, sleekly black, and Erin could tell he was proud of it, though when the moon went behind the clouds it threatened to disembody his head and hands. From a pocket he took out his keys and jingled them softly.

“So?” Erin said. She had more fun when she didn’t humor him.

“Do you remember what departments are here?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Most of the sciences. Business, I think. It’s a big building.”

“And math,” he said. “Don’t forget math.”

“Math?” Erin waited, but he didn’t say more. “Are those your dad’s keys?”

“They’re mine,” Joe said. “Sure, maybe at one point they weren’t all mine. But now they are.”

Joe had told Erin that his father used to teach in the math department at Barnwell, though he and Joe’s mother had left Ransom and moved to Virginia shortly after he finished school. In college Joe had lived in one of the small selection of dorms, but after graduation he moved home, staying there for several months before his parents called him into the living room and told him they were leaving, that they hadn’t planned to move so quickly but Joe’s father had a job offer that began at once, that his mother wanted to start looking for a new house, that movers were coming next week. It would be easier to sell the house if it were empty, his mother had stressed, and Joe realized they were talking about him.

“Why do you have your dad’s keys?” Erin said again.

“I said they were mine. But fine, if you must know: during that crazy week before my parents left, my dad gave me his keys to the building so I could pick up the last few things from his office, and then he never asked for them back. And I guess the school didn’t either, or if they did he forgot to tell me. And then he was just...gone. For like six months I assumed they wouldn’t work because, I don’t know, they changed the locks or something. But one night I got restless, and I came over here after everything was closed down and I tried them, and – spoiler alert – they still work. Now get inside before anyone sees us.”

Erin followed him through the heavy glass door and into the lobby, faintly purple from the glow of exit signs and emergency lights and the moon. They walked through the dim interior and stepped into a brightly lit elevator.

“The only other door I can unlock is the math department,” Joe said. “On the eighth floor. But unless you want to steal some printer paper, we’re not going there. Pretty much all the other doors are locked. And I should know, I’ve tried them.” He paused. “Maybe I spend too much time creeping around here.”

Erin couldn’t tell if it was a question or not, so she didn’t answer.

“It’s quiet,” Joe said. “And dark, and I know I’m not supposed to do it. Something just feels right.”

“I get it.”

“Anyway, like I said we’re not going there.”

They rode the elevator to the top floor, number eleven, and stepped into a hallway without light. When the doors behind them closed they stood together and swayed in the darkness, their eyes adjusting slowly.

“Some floors are better lit than others,” Joe said. “Like the lights are on 24-7. It seems kind of random to me. But there’s a lot of random stuff here, as you’ll see.”

He led her down the hallway to its end, holding up his phone for extra light.

“The first few times I walked around completely blind,” he said. “Which is half the fun. But since you’re here we can use a light.”

“You’re a gentleman,” Erin said. “Although I’m sure none of this is, you know, legal.”

“No, definitely not.”

In the past this would have bothered Erin, but as they walked she looked around herself, at the hallway disappearing into blackness, the rows of doors hulking in the shadows, and she didn’t feel anything. *Why not?* she thought. *Seriously, why not?*

They stopped in the corner, in front of a door that looked to Erin like all the other doors, an office or a classroom or a storage closet.

“I said *most* of the other doors were locked, because this one isn’t. I don’t know if the lock is broken, or no one’s realized, or maybe no one cares. But this one is always open. Guess where it leads.”

“I really don’t know.”

“The roof.”

Erin laughed aloud. “Jesus,” she said. “This school.”

“I know, right?” Joe was pleased with himself. He opened the door and held his phone higher, exposing a steep, narrow flight of stairs.

“This isn’t going to be one of those situations where the door locks behind us and we spend the night on the roof, is it?”

“Probably not,” Joe said. He put his foot on the first step and beckoned her to follow, the light from his phone bouncing everywhere in the cramped stairwell.

“Joe.”

“It isn’t. I promise.”

Their walk up the stairs was the most frightening part of the night, Joe plunging upward with his phone while Erin followed, holding tightly to the handrail and trying not to tip backward into the dark, but then they reached the top and stepped through another open door – a door that could only be closed with a padlock, missing one – and they were under the moon, breathing sharp night air. Joe twirled once in the open space, dirt and rocks crunching beneath him, then turned and walked to the edge.

“Best view of the city,” he said when Erin joined him. “You know... For what it is.”

They could see much further in the moonlight than Erin thought, and downtown Ransom shone brightly enough for her to make out its few tall buildings – Carolina Health, the Sheraton, the Wells Fargo building – as well as the spire of First Presbyterian and the top of the county courthouse. It looked like a real city to Erin, better than she had ever seen.

“When I was in school I used to hate this building,” Joe said. “And hate the classes here. It’s funny how much I like it now.”

“I thought you studied philosophy,” Erin said.

“Eventually. But I started in business. When that didn’t work I switched to math, because – I don’t really know. My dad, I guess. And when that didn’t work I went to philosophy. It seemed like the opposite of everything I’d done. We were only at Barnwell

because of my dad in the first place, for the tuition break, and that was as different as I could get.”

“Wait – we?”

“Yeah.” Joe glanced at her. “My brothers and I. Have I never mentioned them?”

“No, you haven’t.”

“Huh,” he said. “That’s funny.”

Erin was an only child, and it didn’t always occur to her to ask others about their siblings, but she still couldn’t believe that Joe hadn’t said anything earlier. She was sure she would have remembered.

“Older or younger?” she said.

“Two older brothers. Very slightly older. We were all in school at the same time.”

“So you’re the youngest then?”

He shrugged. “I guess so. We’re not really that close, to be honest.”

It was clear enough to Erin that he didn’t want to say more, so she didn’t press. She realized that she hadn’t pried into his past too far because she didn’t want him prying into hers yet, because she hadn’t told him about Andrew or the engagement, and she wasn’t sure when she would.

Joe put his hands in his jacket pockets and craned his neck to look at the sky.

“What made you want to be a teacher?” he said.

“Honestly,” Erin said. “I can’t really say.”

He smiled at the stars. “I understand that.”

For a moment they were silent, listening to the faraway sounds of the night, then a sudden gust of wind knocked them both a half-step off balance, and they stepped further

back from the edge. Erin shivered. She was wearing her favorite denim jacket, but it was more for look than warmth, and the night was cold. She pulled it around herself, crossed her arms tightly, and scooted closer until she and Joe were touching shoulders. He put his arm around her.

“You know what,” he said suddenly. “We should get out of here. And I don’t mean *here* – though yeah, we should get off the roof – but I mean *town*. We should get out of town. Go somewhere this weekend.”

“Like where?”

“I don’t know, anywhere. Charleston. Asheville. Atlanta. Where do you want to go?”

“I’ve never been to Savannah,” Erin said.

“Savannah...” He said it like the name tasted good. “That sounds perfect. What do you say?”

Erin thought about it and smiled. “I think that sounds perfect,” she agreed.

The problem, she realized later, would be telling her mother. She fretted all week while she and Joe made plans – drive to Savannah on Friday and spend the night. Spend the night on Saturday, come home Sunday. She’d thought it might pacify her mom to be back in time for church on Sunday morning, but in reality she knew it would only bring more attention to herself, only serve to underline her absence the rest of the weekend, and she returned quickly to the original plan. It would be impossible to avoid telling Janet – and she had made up her mind that she was taking the trip, no matter what – but the prospect was daunting enough that she put it off and put it off and put it off.

Before she was ready it was Thursday, she and Joe were leaving the next afternoon, and she found herself sharing her anxiety with Doug in his office. Their relationship was disconnected enough from the rest of Erin's life that she felt she could be honest with him without consequence, like he was her doctor or lawyer or shrink – titles they both would have laughed at – though they'd been meeting for almost four months, and the demarcating lines between them had thinned. They were nearly friends, and the closer she felt to him, the harder it became to share her private thoughts and fears. She would sooner tell a stranger.

Still she sat in his office like usual and told him everything. If she had a close girlfriend that might have been easier, but she didn't, and it was enough to juggle what she told Joe about her past and her mother about her plans without adding someone else.

“Well,” Doug said. “You've really taken it down to the wire. But like you said, you have to tell your mom what you're doing. And sooner or later, by the way, you're going to have to tell this new boyfriend of yours about Andrew.”

“That's really hard,” Erin said. She caught the whine in her own voice.

Doug shrugged like he had nothing else to say. He had a few days of stubble on his cheeks, and Erin was surprised how gray it was – the hair on his head had thinned, but it remained a dark shade of brown, like wet sand, with only freckles of gray at the crown and temples. He sat deeply in his chair with his legs crossed, his face tired and ashy; it reminded Erin of times she had seen older women without their makeup, her aunts or mother's friends, like paler, less-defined versions of themselves.

“In my view,” Doug said. “You can stress and worry about telling Joe for a few more months, and then tell him, or you can just do it now. Either way, you end up telling him.”

In her heart Erin knew he was right, and she had been thinking about telling Joe that weekend in Savannah, though something kept her from saying so in the moment. Some desire not to agree with Doug too readily.

“There’s never a good time,” she said instead.

“You’re probably right. But wait long enough and you won’t have a choice. Like with your mother and this trip you’re taking.”

“I know I said I have to tell her, but now I’m changing my mind. Maybe I won’t; maybe I’ll just disappear.”

“Honestly, if it bothers you this much to tell her, maybe that should tell *you* something. You don’t think it’s a sign?”

“Of what? And no, I don’t. But I am tired of people telling me what to do. I’m tired of having to explain myself all the time; I’m tired of being treated like a child.”

“Nobody is telling you what to do.”

“That’s bullshit, you totally are. And so is my mom. All the time.”

Doug frowned. “Maybe what you see as people telling you what to do, as laying down rules, are actually just older, wiser adults trying to help you.”

“That would be convenient if they didn’t all sound like rules.”

“Trust me, it’s not *convenient*. I’m sure your mother wants what she thinks is best for you. And by the way, you don’t know how she’ll react to the trip. Maybe you’re worried for nothing.”

“My mom is...cautious. She’ll think it’s a mistake. She’ll make *me* think it’s a mistake. And don’t think I won’t have to sit through another lecture about my sex life, despite the fact that I am *twenty-four* and have done everything – ”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” Doug said. “But I take it you don’t feel the same as your mom?”

Erin paused. “I don’t know. But that’s the thing; it’s not about sex or having sex, it’s about being respected and treated like an adult. I made a mistake, sure, a big one, but that didn’t turn me back into a child. I should be able to do what I want.”

“Well,” Doug said. “That’s kind of a childish thing to say.”

Erin flushed but didn’t respond, and the office went quiet. Doug clacked his teeth together softly. It seemed to her like he was about to add something else, to explain or apologize, and she quickly cut in. “I should go, it’s almost been thirty minutes. I’ve gotta talk to Joe about tomorrow anyway.”

He hesitated. “Okay,” he said at last. “I’ll see you next week then.”

She stood to leave, reaching for her phone as she did. Talking to Joe might have been a ready excuse, but it wasn’t just an excuse; she really was waiting to hear from him. They had been exchanging texts the day before, as they usually did, but he hadn’t answered today. She was opening the door with one hand, her phone in the other, when Doug said her name and she stopped.

“Look,” he said. “Let me say one thing before you leave. No, hear me out. Regardless of our conversation, of my opinion or your mother’s opinion or anyone else’s, just remember that you don’t *have* to do anything this weekend – or any other time – that you don’t want. Or that you don’t feel ready for. It really is your decision. I get that.

Though whatever you decide, for goodness' sake make sure it's decided before you're in the moment, or trust me you'll screw it all up."

Erin couldn't stop being irritated with Doug so soon, or embarrassed, but she found his words vaguely comforting anyway. "Thanks," she said. "I never thought I'd end up talking about sex with a fifty year old man before."

"Yeah," Doug said, letting out a breath. "Uncomfortable, I know. And I'm forty-eight."

"Sorry I said 'bullshit.'"

"It's okay."

In the church parking lot Erin tried to call Joe. They talked every day but she had never spoken to him on the phone – the only person whom she actually called, or who called her, was her mom. But he hadn't responded to any of her texts since the night before, and she was already in a bad mood. His last message had been a meaningless one, a joke about her favorite candy sent just before 10:00, and then he had gone silent. Nothing for almost twenty hours. Earlier that day before, he'd told her he was at the drugstore getting something for the car ride, and she had asked him to get some Mike and Ikes, or Milk Duds if they didn't have any. *You know they have real candy here too?* he texted, *like Snickers and Reeses and all*, and she had answered, *I want what I want*. So he had started texting her periodically, out of the blue, interrupting other conversations, teasing her with ideas for more candies he thought she would like.

Should I get some black licorice too?

Would you like a box of raisins?

A Charleston Chew?

Bit O Honey?

Some pixie stix?

I could stop by my grandmas and see if she has any hard candy.

But then at 10:00 the texts had stopped.

Erin listened to his phone ring several times before an automated message told her that his voicemail had never been opened, and she hung up. Probably he was at work, she told herself. Sometimes they still talked if it was slow, but a busy day would explain the silence, and she didn't remember his schedule well enough to think otherwise. She would hear from him soon. Still she changed her plans and made the drive from the church back into downtown Ransom, heading toward La Spiazza. She had planned to go to the store after her meeting with Doug anyway, so she figured she could use it as an excuse to be near, dropping by the coffee shop after she finished without the pretense of checking in. The last thing she wanted to look like – or *be* – was panicky and possessive.

For that reason Erin felt it was important to go to the store first, to carry on like nothing weird was happening. She picked up a few things for the trip, some sunscreen, a travel toothpaste, then walked hesitantly past the condoms on her way back to the front, stopping at the edge of the aisle and pretending to look at tampons instead. She tried to remind herself that it was normal and healthy: she was an adult, adults have sex, no big deal about it. And her mind wanted to agree, but her ego was slow to drop the uneasiness and shame she had wrestled with for years – slow enough, at least, to leave her uptight in public, where everyone could see and know, and she continued to stand several feet off

and side-eye the condoms. Unbelievably they were locked in a glass case, like they were jewelry or razor blades, and it would take a store employee to get them out. She thought briefly of grabbing someone to help her (*I'm an adult, goddammit*) but already it was beginning to seem too complicated. The choices were overwhelming.

It would all make a funny story to tell Joe later, but in the moment it was too much to handle, so she left without the contraception and walked the few blocks to La Spiazza, leaving her car at the store. When she stepped into the dim interior of the shop, however, she didn't see him at the counter, and the barista working the front told her that Joe wasn't there, so she left abruptly, starting to feel the first twinge of genuine alarm, and called him again as she walked back to the car. Again, there was no answer. She had already called twice and texted several times, so once she got home she resisted – with great effort – doing more of either, and instead sat at the kitchen table on her five year old laptop and paged randomly through different sites while her mom made dinner, thinking that it would help keep her from freaking out if she stayed in the public parts of the house. When Joe finally called back it would be embarrassing, she figured, if she'd become too panicky.

She made it through an antsy dinner, then sat in front of the television with her mom watching Janet's favorite shows, saying nothing. After enough time had passed she excused herself and went to bed early, claiming that she felt sick, then lay in the dark taking deep, purposeful breaths, trying to talk herself off the ledge. There were a hundred benign explanations for his silence. Most likely he had lost his phone, or broken it, or something unexpected had come up and he was busy. Really, really busy. When they cleared up the confusion she would feel stupid. It would have been considerate of him to

find another way to contact her, but maybe he was looking for his phone now, or hadn't realized how long it would take to get it fixed, or in a moment of thoughtlessness had simply forgotten. In the morning she would drive to his apartment if she had to, or the coffee shop again, and set him straight. He'd better have a good excuse; it wasn't kind to leave your girlfriend out of the loop. Not in this world.

Though if his phone was dead, she thought, why did it continue to ring?

She sat up in bed and grabbed her cell once more, calling Joe. This time it went straight to the automated message. To be sure, she tried again. No ringing. Now the phone was off.

For several more hours she lay still in the dark, trying to decide if that was better or worse.

CHAPTER 2

They were just sitting down for dinner when the doorbell rang. Ben Ezra locked eyes with his wife Alex across the table, and wordlessly they debated what to do. It was taco night, their five-year old son Dylan's favorite – more than pizza, more than hot dogs, more than hamburgers – and Ben didn't want to ruin his meal, the food highlight of the week. He also hated interruptions during dinner, when he himself was trying to eat, though – to complicate things – he secretly liked when people came to the door at other times. He had always enjoyed surprises, and a knock at the door could be almost anyone: the mailman delivering a package he'd forgotten he ordered; a Girl Scout selling cookies; a neighbor looking to borrow a tool or return one of the kids' toys or bicker about something petty. If it weren't the middle of dinner he would have gone to check straight away, probably racing Dylan – who also liked to answer the door, though at the moment he was busy helping Alex build his taco – but since it was 6:30 he stayed put and waited for the person to leave.

Mormons he mouthed to Alex with a wink. She made a silly face and shrugged, sprinkling cheese on Dylan's plate. To her right their other son, baby Miles, sat in his high chair smearing ground beef on his cheeks.

A second later there came another ring, then a more insistent knock. All the lights in the house were on, it wouldn't be a secret they were home. Still the Mormons were getting pushy if they couldn't take a simple hint, and Ben got up with some annoyance. He heard Alex behind him: "Tell them to go away, there aren't enough tacos."

When he yanked open the door, using more force than strictly necessary, he came face-to-face not with a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness or a neighbor or a Girl Scout, but rather a stern looking black man in his forties with a wide face and short, stiff hair.

"Are you Benjamin Ezra?" the man said.

"Yes..." Ben said. "I am."

The man was wearing gray slacks and a blue collared shirt, tight across his chest and shoulders. Despite the evening chill he had no jacket, but he pulled a wallet from his back pocket and flashed a sizeable police badge with a casual, underhand flick. Ben saw no gun on his belt, no flashlight, no radio, nothing but the belt itself to hold his pants.

"I'm Sergeant Green, I work with the Ransom Police Department."

"Okay," Ben said, because he could think of nothing else.

"Can I come in?"

"What's this about?"

"Who is it?" Alex said from the kitchen.

"The police," Ben called behind him.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing," Ben said. "I didn't do anything. That's not funny." He tried to direct his answers at both the Sergeant and his wife in the kitchen, but gave up and turned back to the visitor. "Sure, okay, just come in. It's fine."

He stepped back and let Sergeant Green into the house.

As soon as Green stepped over the threshold, however, Ben felt uneasy – like he had relinquished the space, and it belonged to the Sergeant now. Green stepped easily into the living room with his hands in his pockets, peering around, and Ben regretted

letting him in without first finding out why, or tidying the relentless mess on the floor. The policeman gestured to the couch and invited him to sit, though Ben remained standing just inside the door.

“We’re kind of eating dinner now,” he said. “Is something the matter?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Green said. “But you don’t need to be alarmed; I just came by to chat for a few minutes. I think it’ll be more comfortable if you have a seat.”

Alex appeared in the doorway to the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” she said to Ben.

“I don’t know.”

“Ma’am, I’m Sergeant Green. I’m just here to talk with your husband for a few minutes.”

“What did he do?”

“I wish you’d stop asking that,” Ben said.

Green looked from Ben to Alex with some subtle mix of impatience and amusement, then sighed and pulled a picture from his breast pocket. “Mr. Ezra, do you recognize this young man?”

Green remained where he was, and the picture was far too small to see across the room, so Ben came forward to take it from his hand. When he did, Green sat in the armchair behind him and gestured again at the couch, facing him from the opposite side of a long, scratched coffee table they salvaged from Ben’s grandmother when she passed. Now that Ben was standing next to the couch he saw no reason not to sit, though he disliked the impression of being ordered around his own home. Alex disappeared into the kitchen, then reappeared a second later, standing in the doorway watching curiously.

The picture showed only a thin face and a pair of naked shoulders, jutting up from the bottom of the frame. The young man was in his late teens or early twenties, with a mop of brown hair long enough to get in his eyes – though it had fallen back in the photo, and his eyes were closed anyway. He was lying down, the picture-taker standing over him.

“Is he *dead*?” Ben asked. At the question Alex came over to look.

“Yes,” Green said. “Do you know who he is?”

“No.” He had an involuntary reaction to the photo, a drop somewhere deep in his gut, and had to suppress a shiver. Before that moment Ben would have said that he had a well-developed understanding of death, as much as any normal adult – he’d been to a handful of funerals in his life, and he watched the news; he read about murders and accidents, he saw the death tolls from hurricanes and plane crashes and terrorist attacks. Still he realized he had almost never seen a dead body – not even a picture – and it was rare enough to unsettle him. For a few seconds he tried to remember the last body he had seen, one that formerly belonged to the living, and couldn’t. “Why would I know him?” he asked.

Green shrugged and rested his elbows on his knees. “Mr. Ezra, where do you work?”

Ben realized that his mouth was partly open, and he closed it. The change in topic threw him, but he clung to its familiarity.

“Um, Zip,” he said. “Zip Marketing. On Third, downtown.”

“Have you been there a long time?”

“Yeah, I guess. Like thirteen years.” He paused. “My wife and I both work there. She writes copy part time, and I work in design.”

From the kitchen baby Miles made a noise, and Alex – who had remained standing next to him – went to check. Ben had taken an art degree and a communication minor from Barnwell to work at Zip, his first job out of school. He had never imagined when he did that thirteen years later he’d be with the same company, let alone still in Ransom, but he had met Alex when they first worked together on a project, and their office romance had budded quickly – helped along, in the end, when they found out she was pregnant with Dylan. Two months later they had a small wedding, hasty and haphazard, though it still managed to charm, and briefly became the crowning achievement of the office. Many of their co-workers seemed to feel like they had played some part in the life changes, beyond attending the ceremony and not wondering too loudly about the timeline, and Ben had to bite his tongue to keep from spoiling their fun (“We’re just not that close,” he’d wanted to say). In truth, the marriage and children had limited his flexibility – both of their flexibilities – and while Zip had been a great first job for him, it wasn’t a large company, and there weren’t many opportunities to advance further than he already had. He had looked around town for other jobs, but Ransom didn’t have many thriving industries, and if he really wanted to change they were going to have to move somewhere else. He had just started to imagine raising the idea with Alex, but there always seemed to be a reason to wait. A detective in the living room was the best one so far.

“What does my job have to do with...this?” he asked Green.

“Well,” Green said, and in lieu of elaborating he reached into his breast pocket a second time and extracted a small square of paper, sealed tightly in a plastic bag. He handed it across to Ben.

It was a business card. One of Ben’s business cards. He’d had the same cards for years and almost never had a reason to hand them out.

“Oh,” Ben said. He flipped the card over and looked at its back. “Right.”

To his own discomfort, he remembered now where he’d met the dead young man before.

Zip Marketing had begun in Ransom fourteen years ago; Ben was one of its first hires, just as it expanded beyond the small group that launched it – founder and CEO John-Thomas Theodore, his wife Mary, and their friend Gerry Kane. For the first year John-Thomas ran the business, solicited and handled clients, and oversaw projects while Mary wrote all the copy and Gerry Kane did the art, though the boundaries at first were porous, and Ben was one of a few brought in to establish specific departments as the company grew. Over the last decade they’d expanded enough to move from their original, cramped office into a larger space downtown, two blocks from the courthouse, above a pizza place called Peppers, and now Theodore employed around twenty people at any given time, though most came and went every few years. Of the original hires Ben was the only one that remained, aside from Mary and Gerry – surprising in its own right, though not as surprising as the other two, considering that Gerry was pushing seventy and had survived a heart attack, and Mary divorced John-Thomas ten years ago. She stayed in Ransom and remained an employee of Zip, though she had at least moved out of their

home – or he had, Ben never asked. Her relationship with John-Thomas was volatile, combative and intimate and – in either form – workplace inappropriate, though she refused to quit and he refused to fire her, unless he was simply afraid to. She was the only person in the office willing to criticize him directly, and he was far meaner to her than he would ever dream of being with anyone else. They didn't shy away from each other; Ben suspected that they liked working together much more than they ever liked being married.

Despite the social upheaval, his job itself had stayed the same, largely unchanged the last thirteen years – the same type of work with the same type of clients at the same sensible pace, and until Gerry Kane retired or dropped dead Ben figured he had gone as far as he could go at Zip. He'd gotten periodic raises for job performance and inflation, but his responsibilities hadn't grown, and the company's own fortunes seemed to have plateaued at its current size. Ben was 35 years old, and he felt like he had climbed whatever small peak he was destined to scale. The rest of his working life stretched out below him.

This was why he'd gone into Theodore's office a day earlier and asked to be moved onto the City Project. He doubted that anything would come of his request, and a part of him was ready for Theodore to flatly refuse – at least Ben would have more ammunition with Alex when he finally broached the topic of moving – but he was tired of sitting back and waiting for Zip to change, and the City Project was the best opportunity he'd seen in years.

It had come as a surprise, even to Zip. By some stroke of good fortune there had been a recent spate of high profile scandals involving Ransom city leaders – a county prosecutor was accused of taking bribes, a prominent VP at Barnwell College had been

caught faking her credentials, and the chief of police resigned after wrecking his city-owned vehicle while driving drunk, then trying to cover it up by wrecking it again the next day while sober. With public approval plummeting, the mayor had solicited outside firms for a city-wide image rehabilitation campaign, and Zip had won the job. Ben was surprised they hadn't gone for a larger organization somewhere else, from Charleston or Columbia or Greenville or even Charlotte, but he guessed that the mayor hoped to gain further goodwill by staying local, or even benefit from a unique, inside-Ransom perspective, though Ben wasn't sure how much differently he thought than anyone else in the state. He also suspected Zip had underbid their competitors.

Theodore was ecstatic, and he'd vowed to personally oversee the campaign himself, with Mary and Gerry Kane at his side. Outside of Barnwell College itself, which did all of its marketing in-house, there was no bigger client to land. And while Ben figured that he'd be conscripted later to help, as the workload increased, Theodore had made no move to include him in the leadership, or the early planning and meetings. Ben had gone into his office with the intention of changing that.

Half an hour later he'd left in frustration and gone to lunch. Theodore had an answer for every point:

"Just because we have this opportunity," he'd said, "doesn't mean we can neglect our other clients; we need someone with experience to keep us on track elsewhere."

"Part of our appeal," he'd said, "is our small size. We were hired with the expectation that I would be involved, and Mary, and Gerry."

"Too many cooks in the kitchen," he said. "Makes for...bad soup, I guess, I don't remember how that ends."

“Your time will come,” he’d said as they parted. “You’re a young man.”

Ben had brought his lunch, but after the meeting he experienced a sudden desire to get out of the building, so he left and walked several blocks to a local café. He could have eaten at Peppers, the pizza place below them, but its smell reminded him too much of work, and he wanted to be alone. He was surprised how much the meeting had bothered him – he’d told himself ahead of time that it was unlikely to change anything, but he realized as he ate that his pessimism had been a cover, that he was tired of doing the same work and being treated with the same level of respect as when he started over a decade ago. He was not, he felt, a young man anymore.

During lunch he imagined, with some satisfaction, Theodore and Gerry Kane falling on their faces, bungling the campaign and getting dropped by the city, wishing too late that they had added a fresh perspective such as Ben’s, and in the moment he didn’t even mind that their poor performance would ultimately hurt him as well. He already felt a little hurt, and he nursed his feelings as he ate. In time he knew that he’d go back to work and forget that he had ever asked (what other choice, he reasoned, did he have for now?) but a little moaning over his food was cathartic. Theodore had ended their meeting by saying that, despite everything, he would consider Ben’s request and let him know if he changed his mind, but there had been nothing in his demeanor to suggest that he would, and Ben wouldn’t waste any more time hoping for a change of heart. His pessimism, once a flimsy mask for hope, now felt like realism.

By the time he started back to the office he was already feeling a little better, if only because he’d had thirty more minutes to accept that his work wasn’t changing, but he was still distracted enough that he didn’t notice the young man in his way until he

nearly ran him over. His head was lowered, eyes on the pavement and mind elsewhere, when a pair of boots popped into his vision, followed quickly by a ripped pair of jeans, a plain black t-shirt, and the thin, scruffy face of a young man, holding up a hand in the universal brake sign.

Ben stopped short, face-to-face with the kid, then took a half step back.

“Hey,” the young man said. He was old enough to have some stubble on his cheeks. A ratty baseball cap with an American flag sat high on his head. “Can you help me?”

If Ben had been paying more attention he might not have stopped walking, but it was too late to start again now.

“What do you need?” he asked. He saw the young man’s eyes looking past him, and he turned his head on instinct to see what the boy was staring at, but there was nothing behind them.

“I’m looking for this place, this address. 180 King St. I’m not around here very much, and I can’t...” He trailed off and shrugged.

“Oh,” Ben said. Relieved. He had assumed the kid would want money, or a cell phone, or worst of all a ride. Ben hated to say no – he hated being the kind of person who said no – but in his experience saying yes was awkward and uncomfortable, and he always left with no idea if he’d helped the other person or not. He looked around.

“King?” he said. “I think it’s...no, I know it’s that way.” Pointing. “Like, diagonal. Go back this way and turn left at the light, and go, maybe three blocks. It dead-ends at the park. Turn right, one block, turn left again, and...you know what, let me write this down. You got a pen?” Pause. “Never mind, I think I do.” He found a pen in his pocket and,

without considering what, pulled a business card from his wallet, flipped it over, and added his rudimentary map. “Here. See what I’m saying?”

“Uh, yeah,” the young man said. “I’ll find it.”

“Well look,” Ben said, “I know it’s small, do you want me to –”

“No, it’s fine. I gotta go, thanks.”

Ben hesitated. Something in the boy’s manner made him ask. “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” he said, and began to walk away. After a few paces he turned, walking backwards, and said “Thanks again,” then was gone. Ben left standing on the sidewalk with the pen in his hand.

In his living room, Ben felt like he needed to explain to Sergeant Green why he hadn’t recognized the young man in the photo.

“He was wearing a hat when I met him,” Ben said weakly.

“Right.” Green nodded. “And what kind of hat was that?”

“It had a flag on it. An American flag.”

The detective had pulled out a small, vertical notebook while Ben told his story, and he added a note to it.

“Was he acting strange when you spoke?”

“Strange?”

“Unusual,” Green said.

“I mean...” Ben said. “I don’t know. I suppose yes, looking back on it, he seemed a little on edge. But that’s knowing...what I know now. To be honest I was kind of

distracted at the time, and I really didn't think much of it. I guess I thought it was weird, but otherwise it was nothing to me."

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Again, I mean, at the time."

"Of course," Green said. He closed his notebook and shifted to put it in his back pocket. "Well then, thanks for your time. I should be going. Sorry to interrupt your dinner."

"Wait," Ben said. "Is that it?"

Green looked surprised. "Was there something else you wanted to talk about?"

"No, I just – I mean... What happened?"

"Unfortunately, at this point there's not much more that we know."

"But who's the kid?"

"That would be one of those things we don't know."

Ben couldn't hide his disbelief. For some reason he'd been expecting a resolution to their conversation, some lead or probable cause. It suddenly occurred to him that, if the police knew what had happened, they wouldn't be in his living room asking him about his business card. He flushed.

"You don't know who he *is*?" Alex said from the kitchen doorway. She had returned, though Ben figured she'd been listening the entire time.

Green frowned. "No ma'am."

"I didn't think that was still possible."

"It's a big country," Green said. "Lot of people in it."

"Ransom isn't that big," she said.

Green stood, adjusted his shirt sleeves, and began to move slowly to the door. He put his hands out in a *what-can-I-do* sort of gesture. “And yet,” he said. “People from all over the country are free to come and go as they please.”

“So you think he’s from out of town?” Ben asked.

“We haven’t ruled anything out. Anyway, I appreciate your assistance. Sorry I couldn’t be more, ah, help myself.”

He put his hand on the doorknob, but before he could leave Ben popped from his chair and came over, driven by a question that had nagged at him since the moment Green flashed his badge.

“Wait, uh, Mr. Green.” He lowered his voice self-consciously. “I was... With everything that happened... Do you think I did something wrong?”

Green shrugged and opened the door. “You would know better than I would,” he said. “We’ll be in touch if we need anything more from you. Goodnight.”

Ben closed the door behind him. That wasn’t the answer he’d been looking for.

In the kitchen their dinner was cold, and the boys were finished eating. Miles was restless in his chair, and Dylan had somehow gotten an extra tortilla while no one was looking; he marched around the kitchen wearing it like a hat. They would have to finish later themselves, so they left their plates on the table and grabbed the kids before they got too wound up. Alex found a rag and began to scrub Miles head to toe, and Ben took Dylan upstairs for a bath. They had recently tried letting Dylan bathe himself alone, but after a few days it became apparent he was sitting in the water for an appropriate amount of time without washing anything, so his baths were back to being taken under

supervision. Ben perched on the closed toilet in silence while Dylan got in the tub and started to play – he insisted on playing before they washed anything – and after a minute they heard Alex walk past the door with Miles in her arms.

“You didn’t tell me that you’d met someone on the street,” she said from the other room.

It was a small matter of pride that they could still talk to each other like adults, even with the kids around, as long as they were careful. It kept them sane. Ben didn’t understand people who could never talk about anything but their children.

“There wasn’t anything to tell,” he said. “Not until he...you know.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I guess I feel like I just avoided a car crash or something. Like nothing has changed, there’s nothing different about me, but there almost was. How do you feel?”

She appeared in the doorway, bouncing Miles. “How do I feel? I mean, it’s terrible. I can’t believe something like that would happen here. I wish he could’ve told us more.”

“Yeah,” Ben said. “You know, I forgot to ask him how the kid, uh, D-I-E-D. Surely they’d at least know that.”

“I didn’t forget,” Alex said. “But it seemed kind of morbid to ask, don’t you think?”

“What’s ‘morbid?’” Dylan said.

“It’s kind of like ‘scary’” Ben said. “And it’s time to start washing, bud. You’re gonna get all wrinkly if you stay any longer.”

“I don’t care.”

Ben scooped some bubbles onto his head. “Yeah, well, I wasn’t asking.”

“I mean,” Alex said. “Obviously it was...M-U-R-D-E-R, right? They wouldn’t go around asking questions like that for an accident.”

“No, I don’t think they would. It’s funny that I never thought to ask, though. I just assumed.”

“Me too. At the very least it would have to be something suspicious.”

“What’s ‘suspicious?’” Dylan said.

“Do you really want to know, or are you just trying to be silly? Start washing.”

“I feel so sorry for his family,” Alex said.

“Yeah,” Ben said. “Whoever he is.”

Ben finished Dylan’s bath and read him stories while Alex worked to put Miles down. When both kids were asleep they went back to their dinner, but Ben felt drained – like the stopper had been pulled in him as well – and he could barely summon the energy to eat. After they cleaned up he put on his pajamas, even though it was still early, and climbed into bed. How long, he wondered, after he met the young man had it happened? How many hours before they found his body? He felt like he was coming off an adrenaline high, though he couldn’t seem to remember the rush itself; all he had left was a faint tingling as it receded, and a single perverse thought that kept running through his mind: *I’m alive.*

It was a cruel moment to think it, like he was taunting the dead, but he couldn’t help himself. Even with his eyes closed, even with Alex moving around the room and his kids asleep down the hall, even in his own head Ben couldn’t stop that one word from

coming. It left him feeling guilty and anxious and even a little exhilarated, and he couldn't stop it. The best he could do was hide it.

I'm A-L-I-V-E, he thought.

A-L-I-V-E.

CHAPTER 3

Doug Townsend had spent the better part of the morning in his office with his eyes closed. Feet on his desk. Electric fan across the room, propped on an old set of Bible commentaries – books he hadn't opened in years. Everything was online now. It was November but he liked to feel the breeze. Liked it cold, liked the droning noise beneath his thoughts. When he was alone he would sometimes catch himself zoned out, listening to the fan – he was never sure for how long, since he was never sure when he'd started. It fluttered pages when it crossed his desk. It rattled each time it reached the end of its arc.

He was supposed to be writing a sermon. It was Thursday. If he didn't start today and finish tomorrow, he would have to find time on Saturday, and even though he had time on Saturday, he would invariably push it to the evening and his conclusion would be rushed and clumsy, a half-baked summation of the passage, every lesson, every takeaway. On the desk his laptop had gone to sleep, his notebook turned to a fresh, blank page. His Bible propped against the breeze, open to Matthew 5, the Beatitudes and the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Earlier in the week, between counseling and staff meetings and events, he'd found enough time to refresh himself on the passage, its language and histories and interpretive quarrels, but now that he was to the point of writing he had nothing to say. He always found it hard to preach on Jesus. Within the year Doug thought he would reach a thousand sermons preached: twenty-two years, 40-45 sermons per. He was getting close. One thousand sermons and he found it hard to preach on Jesus. Paul had always felt more accessible to him, more straightforward –

Paul was word studies and lectures and precise theological disputes. He was human; if you studied enough, Doug thought, you could get your head around him. There was even something comforting about his flaws, his temper and his pettiness, the messy internecine squabbles of a brand new church. They weren't unfamiliar.

Jesus, on the other hand, was different – human, sure, but not familiar. Jesus was parables and sayings and abstruse, esoteric actions, dead fish and lost coins, fingers in your ears and mud in your eyes. He was blessings and woes and a few things that sounded nice – really nice – until you took them seriously, treated them like something more than hippie musings or limp advice. Doug looked at Matthew 5 again: *Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the poor in the spirit. Blessed are those who mourn.* If he was going to make any progress he needed some way to get inside it, an angle or a through line, something to help express himself. The Beatitudes were distorted. They were backwards. They were upside down. Living them was living upside down. Or maybe right-side up. Right side up in an upside down world. That wasn't too bad, he thought. A little clunky, but not bad – though the phrase sounded faintly familiar. Had he heard it before? It was getting hard to say. If he had preached a thousand sermons he had listened to five thousand.

Still Doug picked up his pen to write it down, but someone knocked on his door, then opened it without waiting for a response.

Dallas Goldman stuck his head in.

“Doug,” he said. “Hey. Quick question. Were you planning to come to the meeting tomorrow?”

Dallas was the lead assistant pastor at Calvary Bible. He ran the adult education ministry and preached the ten to twelve Sundays that Doug was off or away. He was young and handsome, with a small nose, a round chin, and carefully messy blond hair. He looked twenty-five, though he had been at Calvary for three years and was closer to thirty-five. His clothes were casual and stylish – thin jeans and vests, or polos, or shirts with the top two buttons undone. When he wasn't preaching or teaching on a Sunday, he liked to join the worship team and play electric guitar – that was initially why he'd come to Calvary, to lead the band. He was a good speaker; he could tell a joke; he could be irreverent without being profane. The church seemed to love him, and there had been a subtle but distinct push for him to preach more often – it came from so many different directions that it couldn't possibly have been coordinated.

Doug put his pen down on the blank page and leaned back. “What meeting?”

“The Revive Ransom meeting at Glendon Baptist. Remember? We're like a week away.”

“Right,” Doug said. “Of course.” The incidents in the news, the scandals that had plagued the city over the last few months – the bribery and deception, the drunken driving – had not escaped the notice of its Christian leaders, though most tactfully refrained from any explicit naming in their sermons. The Reverend Mitchell Laythrop of Glendon Baptist – now the largest church in Ransom – was convinced that the scandals were a sign of deep, public moral decay, and two months ago he'd contacted the senior pastors at the four biggest churches in Ransom to propose an ecumenical show of unity, a multi-church event downtown. A revival, Lord willing, in the heart of the city. Ten or fifteen years ago it might have been Doug's idea, and the others would have looked to

him for leadership (though he had always favored smaller, more personal, more grassroots ministry opportunities, clothing drives or food for the homeless or jobs for ex-cons – the last of which they had actually tried, working with a prison ministry to open a small coffee shop downtown; it closed after several years of insolvency). Now his reach in the Christian community was waning. Calvary had once been large, but over the last decade it had shed members steadily, and several other churches had grown as a result – Doug, at least, believed it was a result, though these churches tended to credit themselves with making new converts.

He was not thrilled with Laythrop's idea for a revival, which seemed more to him like a show of force than of grace, but he believed that God had worked in much stranger ways before, and it was difficult to say no – he would have been the lone dissenting voice. So he went along with it instead.

It wasn't hard to see and understand Laythrop's vision – basically an elongated version of a Sunday morning service, with ten percent more pizzazz: preaching and singing, dramatic readings and video interludes, long prayers with someone playing piano in the background. Despite their denominational differences, all five pastors were generically evangelical, and the overall shape of the service (or the revival, or – as Doug kept accidentally calling it – the rally) was easy to come by, though they haggled over the particulars for several meetings. Doug often stayed silent, and when he spoke it was to raise objections – won't this be too expensive? Too crowded? Too hard to set up? It wasn't a role that he liked (when had he become this person, the lazy pessimist?) and he felt bad after every meeting, but when he was sitting in their church conference rooms,

listening to the other pastors speak, he could never think of anything else to say. It didn't help that he had missed several early sessions.

"When is it again?" he asked Dallas.

Dallas settled against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets and smiled.

"Tomorrow at four."

"At Glendon?"

"Yep."

"Well...someone should go."

"I know, Doug, *I'm* going."

Suddenly Doug understood the tenor of the question. Was he planning to *come* – as in, accompany. When Doug had started to miss meetings, Dallas had gone as his replacement, and he took to the event with far more interest than the senior pastor. Over the course of several meetings, through sheer enthusiasm and good humor, he'd been made an integral part of the plan – if Laythrop would be the de facto keynote, Dallas became the emcee. It had seemed like a neutral choice, since he was not one of the five original pastors, and he appeared genuinely touched to be included. Doug had little to say when he found out, trapped in the amber of his own ambivalence: he didn't want to participate, but he hadn't wanted to get shoved aside either.

He was tempted to tell Dallas something like *Yes, you can go* or *Sure, you can come* with me, but either would have sounded stupid and petty and proud, and from the tone of Dallas's response Doug wasn't entirely sure they hadn't had this exact conversation before. He'd been so distracted lately.

“Right,” he said again. “Of course. Let me, um... check my schedule and get back to you.”

“Sure, no problem,” Dallas said easily. He straightened, and Doug saw his eyes pass over the desk. “How’s the sermon coming?”

“It’s a rich passage,” Doug said.

“Matthew 5?” He nodded. “Heck yes it is.”

Calvary Bible had once been large. Enormous. One of the four biggest congregations in the state, with attendance each week between six and seven thousand. Doug had founded the church at 26, when he was still fresh and optimistic and newly married. He’d been working for a parachurch ministry at Barnwell, but within a year he was tired of the kids – there was no group on Earth less reliable than college students; they were children, in many ways worse than children – and he felt an urge to do something else, something more substantial and permanent. At first they didn’t have a building, and they took turns meeting in each other’s homes and apartments – Doug, his wife Samantha, and five others, three recent college grads and an older bohemian couple that had moved back to the U.S. after years of living in the Philippines. Sam strummed an old guitar for worship, Doug offered a brief lesson or sermon, and everyone stayed afterward for lunch. Somehow they got more people to come, friends and friends of friends, and within three months they could no longer fit in anyone’s home. One of the new members owned a Mexican restaurant and let them meet in its backroom, usually reserved for birthday parties and company outings. When they outgrew the restaurant, they met in the gym at Joe Frazier Elementary, and when they outgrew the gym they

finally had enough money to rent a proper space, an old Lutheran chapel that wasn't being used, though the denomination still owned the property. While they were in the chapel they bought land southwest of Ransom, just outside the city where it was cheaper, and built the first sanctuary, which was later expanded to the second sanctuary, and over a period of years in the early 2000s buttressed by several ancillary buildings for extra office and classroom space.

Doug was as surprised as anyone by his success, and while he was often asked about it by other pastors, at conferences and retreats, he never found a good explanation why. Calvary's growth seemed like simple, unadulterated divine grace – it was, as many people told him, a “God thing,” unmerited and bountiful. This brought him some comfort in the overwhelming early days, when things changed faster than Doug could get used to them, and eventually made it both easier and much, much harder to accept when the church began to decline. Over the years Doug found that most people assumed there had been a scandal, some sin they'd kept private, though it still chased people off. If that was accurate even Doug was unaware of it, and their problems seemed far more pedestrian to him. True, there had a been a few incidents – a popular youth pastor left for another church, and several prominent families went with him; a dispute over worship teams grew toxic and lingered for months, raising questions about practice space, resources, and even church priorities and mission. Neither instance, however – nor any of the smaller conflicts that arose from week to week – were enough to explain the drop, so slow and steady. Instead it seemed to Doug that everything that once worked for him no longer did. His preaching wasn't conversational, it was low energy; his studied approach became boring and didactic. His demeanor wasn't calm and steady, it was distant and

inexpressive. The church's willingness to let everyone participate became unwieldy and impractical, with many events an amateurish jumble of conflicting personalities and visions. Doug had always bristled at the term "megachurch" – there were places in the country with more than 30,000 members; a church in South Korea supposedly got 200,000 every Sunday. He didn't want to have a megachurch. He didn't want to be a megachurch pastor. And now, by any measure, he wasn't. Weekly attendance had dipped to 700, filling less than a quarter of their 2,000-seat sanctuary.

After Dallas left his office, Doug tried to go back to his sermon prep, but he had lost whatever small momentum he had. His laptop hadn't just gone to sleep, but rather seemed – for some reason – to have turned off, so he rebooted it, doodling in his notebook while he waited. The Revive Ransom meeting wasn't something he wanted to attend, but it would be the last session before the actual event next week, and missing it would raise even more eyebrows than he already had. If he stuck it out for one more week, he knew he could be finished with the whole thing – forever, he hoped, though he had started to have fears about it becoming an annual event – and he couldn't deny that he had already played a part, however small, in its planning and execution so far. He wouldn't be speaking himself, but he'd been conscripted to give a special introduction for Laythrop. It would be strange for him to miss the final meeting without a better excuse.

Still, there were even more immediate responsibilities to think of. He had a sermon to finish, and increasingly less time to write it in. It was also Thursday, so Erin would be coming by to meet soon. In theory he knew the sermon couldn't be put off forever, but he would still be happy to take a break for their meeting. He had come to look forward to his times with her; they were the easiest part of his week. She was

undemanding, she didn't pry, and most importantly she didn't seem to know – or care – about his failures at church.

When his computer finished rebooting, Doug opened a blank document and typed *Matthew 5: Living Upside Down*, then stared at the blinking cursor and waited. His office phone rang. It was Linda, his assistant.

“Sam is on the line,” she told him.

“Why would she call you?” Doug said.

“She says you weren't answering your cell.”

“She didn't call my cell.”

Doug reached for his phone but didn't find it in his pants pocket. With his free hand he started searching his other pockets, his bag and his desk.

“That's what she said.”

“I feel like I would've heard it.”

“Maybe it's on silent.”

“Still,” he said. “I think I would've – ” but then he found it on his desk underneath a pile of papers, old sermon notes and church bulletins. There were two missed calls from his wife.

Doug sighed. “Sorry Linda, never mind. Thanks for the heads up.”

He put his phone back in his pocket and switched to the other line.

“You weren't answering your cell,” Sam told him. She had never been very good at speaking on the phone. Something about it changed her demeanor, even with him – like she was self-conscious – and her voice came out monotone and slightly annoyed.

Anytime they had to be apart for more than a day or two wreaked havoc on their marriage. Though Doug had to admit it took less and less to do that now.

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “Sorry. I would have seen it eventually. What’s the matter, is there something urgent?”

“Are you busy?”

“A little, yeah.”

“Well I thought you should know that Emma was in a car accident. Her car got dinged pretty good.”

Emma was their daughter, a sophomore at Davidson, three hours away.

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. Just a little shook.”

She was their only child. It had always been a modest point of contention in the church that they didn’t have more children – nothing was ever said outright, but Doug and Sam had often intuited a slight reservation in others, a mix of curiosity and judgment behind many parishioner’s comments, and Doug didn’t always correct those who assumed they had unsuccessfully tried for more. It wasn’t common for a pastor of his type to have a small family. Dallas and his wife Lauren had three kids under the age of six. Mitchell Laythrop had four biological children in their teens, and two more adopted from Cambodia. For years Doug had waited for a time when it would make sense to have another kid, a moment where their family felt a person short, but it never came. After Emma they were complete.

“Okay,” Doug said. “Maybe lead with that next time.”

“*Obviously* I would have, if she’d been hurt.”

“Okay,” he said again. “Okay, fine. That’s good. The car can always be fixed. What happened?”

“From what she said, I think she messed up and failed to yield. It was on that street right next to her apartment, across from that Di Pestos, or Di Pretos, or whatever it was called. The little café we ate lunch at when we moved her in.”

“I remember it. They couldn’t have been going that fast then.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“She just called you?”

“Yeah. I mean, she texted, and I called her.”

Doug tried not to be put out that Emma hadn’t called him first. It seemed like the kind of thing a father should take care of. He loved her more than he had ever loved another person, but it was undeniable that she was closer to her mother – there was something about their bond that Doug had never been able to crack. Too often he was their third wheel, or worse the reason they couldn’t do something in the first place, the result of a previous commitment, a church obligation, or simply because of the expectations placed on a pastor and his family – a weight that mother and daughter could both resent. If Doug was being honest the expectations were sometimes a good thing, a helpful corrective, a push to be more selfless and caring and centered on God, but they were also a restriction that hadn’t totally been chosen. A yoke to bristle under. Doug was sympathetic – he too felt burdened and frustrated sometimes – but unlike Sam and Emma he had no concrete target for his resentment, and he couldn’t share theirs.

“I’m glad she’s okay,” he said lamely. He knew there were arrangements to make – they would need to call the insurance company, the body shop; they might have to find

Emma a different car entirely – but for once Doug would wait until he was asked. If Sam wanted to take care of everything, he would let her.

Still her next sentence surprised him.

“I’m thinking about driving up to be with her for a few days.”

“Is she really that upset?” he asked.

“No, she’s fine. But I was wanting to go anyway.”

“You never told me that.”

“We’ve been busy.”

Doug stared at his desk, counting days. For some reason his open Bible distracted him, so he closed it. “You would be gone Sunday then.”

“Yes.” She paused. “And probably Tuesday.”

“You’d miss our appointment? Are you serious?”

“Doug, it’s just one. We could make it up if we needed.”

They had been seeing a marriage counselor for months – a result not so much of discord and hostility as distance and disinterest. It had been Sam’s idea, broached in a fit of responsibility, though afterward she’d been as reluctant to follow through as he had. At first their appointments were sporadic, whenever they had a free afternoon and the willpower to use it, but within the last month they’d become regulars every week – a push from the therapist herself – and their sessions had been the reason Doug missed several Revive Ransom meetings. He had counseled many couples himself over the years, and he wasn’t convinced that a third-party was adding anything new, but once they started going and he told others, it was impossible to stop. He’d had no choice but to be forthright with the other pastors in Revive, and most of the staff at Calvary knew as well.

Dallas knew. Linda knew. The executive pastor and office manager, a kindly man named Ed Byrd, knew. But it hadn't spread through the congregation yet, as far as Doug could tell. A minor miracle. He wasn't ashamed of his problems in abstract, but he had no desire to share them.

“So when you said a few days you meant a week?” he said to Sam.

“I meant that I would go for a few days and come back when the time felt right.”

Doug held the phone deep in his palm, like it was heavier than it actually was, and tried to think of something to say. He wanted to remind Sam of the sacrifices he had made, the things he missed so they could be together for their appointments, but he had enough pride not to pretend. They both knew that missing the Revive Ransom meetings was not a sacrifice, and he had been even more reluctant than her to try therapy in the first place. Mostly he was angry that she had brushed him off, that he hadn't beaten her to it.

“It's fine,” he said. “Go ahead, I don't care.”

Sam took a deep breath into the phone.

“Really,” she said. “You don't – I mean, I'm going to see our *daughter*. You don't have to be so snippy.”

“I know, I get it. I'm not being snippy. I said it's fine.”

“There's no reason to fight about this.”

“I'm not fighting,” Doug said. He wanted to come back differently – *Really? There's no reason?* – but he was too entrenched in his position to change. “Who's fighting? We're not fighting.”

There was a knock on his door, and Linda stuck her head in. *Erin*, she mouthed. He held up his hand to wait.

“Alright,” Sam said. “Fine.”

“I know it’s fine, that’s what I’ve been saying.”

“Okay.”

“Good, I’m glad we figured that out.” He stood and waved to send Erin in. “Now I have to go, I’ve got a meeting.”

An hour later Doug stepped out of his office, hands in his pockets, and stood next to Linda’s desk staring at the wall. Erin had left a few minutes earlier.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked without looking.

“No,” Linda said. “Why would I be mad at you?”

“There aren’t that many women in my life, but I’ve made most of them mad at me today.”

“I’ll be sure to tell you if I join them.”

Doug pulled out his cell phone and stared at it, then put it back in his pocket and left the office, walking down the hall to Dallas. If he went to the Revive meeting tomorrow afternoon, it might run late enough that he would miss dinner with Sam, and she’d be gone all weekend, sometime through the next week. He could go to the meeting and still finish his sermon, maybe even have some time to himself. Most of all he wanted that, to sit in a room and be quiet and not think, find somewhere to close his eyes without having to worry about something he was supposed to be doing better. If he could just do that for a moment, he thought he’d come away refreshed. God would refresh him.

He opened the door to Dallas's office without knocking and stuck his head in. Dallas was sitting at his desk across from a young man, someone Doug thought he recognized as a Barnwell student, both of their heads bowed in prayer.

"Sorry," Doug said. "Just wanted to let you know that I'm coming to the meeting tomorrow."

It took Dallas a second to register the comment. Then he smiled. "Great."

More than anything Doug wanted to be alone, but he was tired of being left out. As he walked back down the hall to his office, he thought of Paul in Romans 7. It had come to him often lately.

I don't understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

CHAPTER 4

When Erin woke and looked at the clock, her first thought was that she'd overslept and missed work – a bolt of panic that brought her instantly awake. It was 9:30. She hadn't slept so late in months, not since she started working at the gym. In high school and college she hated to get up early, and her mother had often humored her enough to act like a second – and sometimes third – alarm clock, far beyond what was acceptable for her age, or what she ever would have admitted to anyone else. But now she had to wake up early most days for work – by 4:30, if she was opening the gym – and even on days off she was up by 7:00. She had learned from experience that sleeping any later would create an unpleasant wave that rippled through the rest of her week, a cascading series of sleepless nights and sluggish mornings that lasted until she went back to her routine. In bed she raised herself up on one arm and grabbed her phone, expecting to see a few calls or angry texts from the gym, but there was nothing, and the blank home screen froze her. In a single moment everything came back, a hundred thoughts bobbing to the surface at the same time. Joe had not responded. She wasn't working today, or tomorrow, or Sunday, because she had taken the whole weekend off, because she had intended to drive to Savannah with him that afternoon. Except he had disappeared. She hadn't heard from him in more than twenty-four hours.

It was with a sense of creeping dread, a persistent low level nausea, that she pulled on an old, loose pair of jeans and a long-sleeved top, and quickly made her way downstairs. She could call La Spiazza again, but otherwise she would have to take the bus

to his place and hope for – what? For him to be there, having spent a day ignoring her? She would do it because it was the only thing to do, but any optimism she might have had dropped away overnight. The silence had been too long, too awkward. Something had happened, and she had no other recourse but to wait; no other plans but with him.

When she stepped off the stairs and turned the corner into the kitchen, her mother was there. Sitting at the table in front of Erin’s own laptop. She should have been at work already.

“Mom,” she said, frozen in the doorway. “What are you doing?”

“Honey, come over here please,” Janet said. Her voice was oddly constricted, her words clipped.

“What?” Erin said. She came to the table and looked over her mother’s shoulder at the screen. On it was an article from the Ransom Journal, the headline “Search begins for missing hiker” over a picture of a young man with short blond hair and a silly grin. Despite everything Erin was a step slow, too preoccupied with her own thoughts, and she said again, with irritation, “What?” before she read the first lines of the article and stopped.

A search began overnight for Ransom resident Joseph Decker, 25, after he failed to return Thursday from a planned hike in the Great Smoky Mountains, near Mount LeConte.

The picture was of Joe. An almost unrecognizable, much younger Joe.

...poor weather and dense fog have hampered search efforts, leaving rescuers in doubt...

Park authorities were alerted yesterday by family members after...

“The next twenty-four hours are critical,” said National Park spokeswoman Kerry Templeton.

Erin fumbled with a chair and sat down.

“I’m so sorry,” Janet said.

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I was eating breakfast this morning and I heard something on the news. I’ve been looking for more, but this is all – ”

“It doesn’t many any sense.”

She had her answer, and she didn’t. Joe was missing.

Her mother wanted her to stay and talk. She seemed to think it was necessary, that it would do something, that it was the first proper step in the face of any bad news – sit down, process, regroup, wait. But Erin was already up and looking around for the car keys. She had no fixed thoughts, no reaction, nothing to say that she hadn’t just said, a single sentence running through her head. It doesn’t make sense.

In the kitchen her mother watched while she walked a tight circle, touching the countertops, opening drawers. She poked her head into the living room and back.

“Mom, *where* are your keys?”

“They’re in my purse,” Janet said. “Why? What do you want to do?”

“I’m gonna check on Joe’s place.”

“But sweetie... What for? He’s not there, he’s in the mountains. They’re looking for him right now. I’m sure we’ll hear something soon.”

“I know,” she said. “You’re right. I’m sure we will. He just got lost or something, and they’ll find him. But still, I want to...check. I just want to see it.” She felt an inexpressible urge to move, to react, to do something, and she knew she wasn’t going to accept the news, no matter what it said – not really accept it – until she had personally ruled out the obvious. It was too hard to understand. She saw the uncertainty in her mother’s face; she saw confusion, and sympathy, and a little embarrassment. She held up her hands and looked at the clock on the microwave.

“Look,” she said. “I’m sorry. I’ll be back soon. You’re already late; I won’t be long.”

Janet would have had to block the door to stop her, and she didn’t.

Joe lived by himself in a small studio apartment, rented from a trusting elderly widow named Edie. It was above the garage in Edie’s own house – essentially the livable portion of the attic, outfitted with carpet and better insulation – and Joe paid a discounted rent in exchange for a few chores, plus the relative safety of his presence at night. He mowed her lawn, raked her leaves, and ate dinner with her once a week if he wasn’t working. Erin had been to his place several times over the last month, but usually to meet him and go elsewhere, and she had only been inside twice. It was too small and sparsely furnished to be comfortable, and there wasn’t anywhere to sit but the bed and the floor. He had a bathroom adjacent to his living area – the only private space upstairs, unless he crawled into his wardrobe – and he had a small fridge, a microwave, and a toaster oven. He washed his dishes in the bathroom sink and dried them above the toilet. His place

wasn't dirty – Erin thought he could probably clean the whole thing in twenty minutes – but when she saw it she understood why he'd been hesitant to invite her up.

The house was southeast of downtown in an area called Bar Heights, a once upscale neighborhood that had fallen into disrepair, having been left alone since most of its homes were built in the 1970s. It took Erin ten minutes to drive there, skirting straight across the southside of Ransom. She parked right in front of the mailbox and took a second to compose herself, then got out and marched up to the house. Joe had a private entrance off the garage, a door that led to a dusty, narrow staircase, old and rusted and perpetually unlocked. The only light came from the day outside, illuminating the bottom half of the stairwell. Erin tried to remember if the light above the small square of upstairs landing had always been out, but to her surprise she couldn't. Every other time she'd visited had been with Joe, and she had not thought about it herself. Either the light was on, or he had lit the stairs.

At the top of the landing, standing in the dark, Erin found the actual door to Joe's apartment was locked. She knocked loudly with her free hand, holding up her phone with the other, but there was no response. She knocked again and held her ear to the door. She jiggled the knob softly, then with more and more aggression, but it wouldn't budge. She even tried to peek through the crack beneath the door, but it was impossible to see anything, and she couldn't illuminate the tiny gap and the grubby wood floor at the same time – she didn't like putting her face against something she couldn't see. In frustration she clomped back down the stairs and into the sunlight, irritated that she had found things exactly like they should be. Angry that she'd expected any different.

She walked over to the main house and knocked on Edie's door, but there was no answer there either. It was the first moment that struck Erin as odd – she had never met Edie, but as far as she knew the woman was slow moving and elderly, more liable to sit in her living room and look out the window than head into town herself, and there was no obvious reason she would be gone in the middle of the morning. Maybe, Erin thought, she was asleep, so she knocked louder, using her fist to pound on the door. Still there was nothing. For the first time she became aware of all the other houses around them, all the windows, all the gaps in curtains and blinds, all the possible neighbors standing behind them watching her stomp around and bang on doors. The thought made her even angrier, like they were invading her space, her private moments, more than she was invading theirs, and she looked around accusatorily at the blank faces of the other homes. Down one house across the street a black Honda with dark windows and an inscrutable vanity plate idled next to the curb, its brake lights red, presumably waiting for someone. It must have been there the entire time – she had not heard it drive up – and she stepped self-consciously off the porch and back into the driveway. In a flash her anger rose to the surface and she lifted one hand with her middle-finger raised, in full view of all the windows and doors, all the parked cars, and especially the Honda. Then she walked quickly to her car and left.

By the time Erin got home she was ready to call the police. It was the only other thing she could think to do. First, however, she knew she would have to convince Janet why it was necessary – why, in other words, Erin was so bothered that Joe had been hiking in the first place. Of course she had intended to tell her mother about her weekend

plans all along, and in the normal course of events she would have already done so (and however the conversation went, she and Joe would be on their way to Savannah by now), but since the previous afternoon she had been so consumed by worry and confusion that she'd forgotten her original plans – or more specifically she'd forgotten that her mom didn't already know them – and she was faced with the prospect of doing so now, complicating one moment of tension with another, her feelings already raw and prickly.

When she returned from Joe's apartment and found her mother still home – having decided, almost by necessity, to call in sick and skip work – she sat down again at the kitchen table and tried her best to explain the situation. Despite her own bewilderment, her worry that Joe was missing, her fear that something strange or unexpected had caused him to break his plans, that he had lied to her or been lied to, despite everything, she couldn't bring herself to be frank with Janet at first, and she phrased her initial confession so mildly (“We had been – we were thinking about – maybe doing something big this weekend, like taking a trip.”) that it soon became clear Janet still didn't understand why it was odd for Joe to have chosen to go hiking instead, and Erin was forced to take a deep breath, run her hands up and down the thighs of her jeans, and change tact, try to be as direct as possible. She and Joe were going to take a trip. They were going to take a trip this weekend. They weren't just thinking about it, they were absolutely doing it. They had booked a place to stay in Savannah. Erin was going to tell her last night. It was a certainty, absolutely happening, right up to the moment that Joe stopped responding and disappeared.

Janet took the new information without much reaction, though as Erin talked her face shifted from furrowed concern to something far more blank and inscrutable, her

brow less clenched, her forehead less wrinkled – all of the tension, it seemed, moving down into the tightness of her jaw and the compact line of her mouth. When Erin finished she ran a hand through her hair. “You were going to tell me yesterday?” she said. “That you would be gone with your boyfriend all weekend?”

“Yes. I was.”

“I don’t understand,” Janet said. “I mean, even if that’s true” – Erin started to object and stopped – “why were you waiting until the last possible moment? What if I had needed you here this weekend? What if I had made plans? Why didn’t you want to tell me?”

“Because... Because honestly I knew it would be a whole big thing, and I wanted it to last the shortest amount of time possible.”

“But you were planning on coming back, right?”

Erin made a face. “Of course Mom, it was just the weekend.”

“Then what do you think we were going to talk about when you came home?”

Erin didn’t have an answer, and after a moment she shrugged helplessly and stood, for no other reason than to widen the space between them. She walked to the fridge and opened it like she was looking for something. Her cheeks were hot, and she felt the emotions of the day starting to blossom on her face – the anger and frustration, the helplessness and shame. She stared blankly at the leftovers on the shelves and thought about Andrew, and about her father, long gone. There was no logical reason to hide from her mother – in the past they had cried about both together – but this time Erin couldn’t help herself and ducked her head into the fridge. It was too much already, and more than too much to add the embarrassment of her own deception, her reticence with her mother,

her unwillingness to stand up and take hold of her own choices. She had never wanted to be that kind of person, and she was.

To her surprise Janet made a noise in her throat, something lower than a laugh, more staccato than a groan, and said, “Look, this is...a hard time. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what happened. There’s nothing to do now but pray and wait, to hope for some better news. And that’s all you need to be doing. We can talk about the rest of this later.”

After a moment Erin closed the fridge and straightened up. “Thanks,” she said. “I mean, I’m sorry.” She couldn’t decide what else to say. She looked at her mother’s face and knew without completely knowing why that she was thinking of Erin’s father – something in the way she spoke, the praying and waiting, the hoping, the same words that she had used when they were waiting for news about him, offered in the same tone, more for Erin’s benefit than anything. She didn’t feel much about her dad anymore, but her emotions were frayed enough that everything was testing them, so she put it out of her head and returned, with some reluctance, to the table. It was only late morning but already she was starting to feel tired, and she wanted to stop talking to her mom and do something while she still had the energy. Calling the police was her best option, but with her mother’s olive branch so fresh, the peace between them so precarious, she didn’t think it was the best time to do something else behind Janet’s back, something so serious and public. She was going to need her mother’s support. She had always had it before.

“I don’t understand what’s happened,” she explained. “But I’m worried that it’s not so simple. It doesn’t make sense, right? I have to tell someone. The police, the park rangers, the news. I don’t know. But I have to try.”

“I think I see it,” Janet said slowly. “And I won’t stop you, if that’s really what you want to do.”

“I mean – ” Erin said, and she paused. Confused. Why would her mom say that? “I just think...” Suddenly she realized that her intended implication had backfired, that Janet was under the impression that Joe had done something underhanded, had lied to her, *not* that something underhanded had been done to him. She had met Joe several times, but each had been politely brief, and for the first time Erin realized how little she knew of him, even less than Erin herself. Until now, this had not seemed like such a bad thing.

“Mom,” she said. “I don’t think – I mean, that’s not what I meant. I’m just worried. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

Janet looked like she wanted to say something else, but again she stopped herself. Instead she reached out and took Erin’s hand, turning her wrist so that they were palm to palm – not holding tightly, not interlacing her fingers, but pressing her palm flat against Erin’s, feeling skin against skin. For the first time Erin noticed how wrinkled her mother’s hands were. Her nail polish was starting to chip.

“I’m proud of you,” Janet said at last. “And I trust you. You should always know that. Right now this might seem like more than you can handle.” She paused, then let Erin’s hand fall to the table. “But it’s not.”

Erin preferred to call the police – like she preferred to call anyone, when she had to talk on the phone – in private, so she went up to her room and closed the door. Despite everything it seemed silly to dial 911, so she found a number for the Ransom PD and told

the woman who answered that she wanted to report a missing person. “Sort of,” she added.

“I’m sorry?”

“No, he’s definitely missing, never mind. Just...please. Can I speak to someone?”

She was put through to a desk officer. He listened dutifully as she tried to explain the situation from her own point of view, though she felt herself losing steam halfway into her own story – when forced to convince a neutral third-party it was, she realized, half-formed, heavily reliant on her own intuition and feelings for Joe, cemented in her mind but currently lacking much in terms of hard evidence or points of action. A fact reinforced by the officer’s follow-up questions.

“Ma’am,” the man said. He had identified himself as Officer Rollins. His voice sounded young. “Are you saying that you *don’t* think your boyfriend went hiking? That the park service is wrong?”

“I – I don’t know. I’m just saying that he’s missing, and I feel like I’ve got the kind of information that someone should know about.”

“Sure,” the officer said easily. “And you were right to call. But they’re already aware that he’s missing, correct? And we’re aware as well.”

“I mean, yeah, I guess.”

“If your boyfriend *wasn’t* hiking, do you have any idea where else he might be?”

“Well, no. Not really.”

“Can you think of any reason why he might have disappeared? Did you and he – you know – have a fight or something? Had he been acting strange? Angry or depressed? Did he do or say anything unusual that you can recall?”

“No, but I mean, that’s kind of my point, right? That it doesn’t make sense.”

“Sure, totally,” Rollins said. “Though if you don’t mind me saying, that doesn’t, well, preclude an accident then. As in a hiking accident.”

“Except his hiking itself would be weird and unusual, like I’m saying.”

“It sounds like it would be,” he agreed.

For a moment they sat awkwardly on the line, both waiting for the other to continue. Erin heard her own breathing in the phone.

“So,” she said at last. “You’ll...look into it then?”

“Absolutely. I’ll write up a report, and we’ll liaison with the park service, coordinate, stay in touch as the search progresses. If you think of anything else please give us a call.”

“Great,” she said. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” Rollins said, and Erin hung up before she could say anything else.

Great? Thanks? She hated herself on the phone.

Downstairs Erin found her mother still in the kitchen.

“How did it go with the police?” Janet asked.

“Hard to say,” Erin said. “I think I’m gonna drive up to that state park myself. I’ll need the car again.”

CHAPTER 5

Ben found a story in the Ransom Journal about the dead young man, though it was only a small square on the bottom right that continued for two more paragraphs on C4, far into the locals. There wasn't much to say. On another day it would have been a more dominant storyline, but Ransom was facing so much personal and political scandal – and details of the boy were so scarce – that it barely seemed to register, at least judging by the paper. Ben was one of a few that still subscribed to the physical Journal, and he read parts of it every morning before work – less and less with the children, though he always managed at least to flip through it. He justified the subscription with his job, that it was important as part of a local marketing team to have an understanding of local concerns, but he got much of that online anyway, and in truth his attachment to the paper was far simpler and more sentimental. He had grown up reading it every morning at the kitchen table before school, usually alone in the house after his mother left for work. When he was eight his father picked up their TV and dropped it on the floor during an argument, and for three years the only working television in their home was in his mother's bedroom – the cracked TV sitting on a stand in the living room like a monument to past mistakes. Even after they bought a new one, Ben was so accustomed to his morning routine – comics first, then sports, then arts & entertainment, locals, and the national news if he had time – that he continued to read the paper with his breakfast. He liked that it made him different from his friends, who flipped back and forth in the mornings between *Sportscenter* and their favorite cartoons, and he liked that he could

look for stories about people and places he knew – the teacher of the year candidate, or the new library branch, or the ice cream shop opening a second location. Over the years Ben himself had gotten his name in the paper a handful of times, and even once his picture on the front page of the sports section, an action shot in mid sprint, arms out wide in celebration, shouting something unintelligible, sweat flying visibly from his head – taken during junior year of high school, when he scored the winning goal for the boys’ soccer team and clinched their conference championship. He still had a clipping of it somewhere.

Unlike him, Alex didn’t read the paper in the mornings, especially not with the boys around, though even before they arrived she had not, as far as Ben knew, bothered to try. Anything she learned about the world came by accident, from work or social media or Ben himself. News was something that intruded on her life much more than she ever sought it out. It was therefore something of a surprise, as Ben sat with baby Miles at the table, when she walked into the kitchen carrying her phone and asked if he had heard about the chief of the police and his DUI.

“I did,” Ben said, spreading cream cheese on the second half of his bagel. “That’s one of the reasons we’re working with the city now.”

Alex, who wrote copy part-time for Zip but worked from home, didn’t have anything to do with the City Project. She knew in general that it existed, but nothing more; Ben had not told her about his request to John-Thomas Theodore.

“Right,” she said. “I saw a few of those emails, but I didn’t really understand them. And it didn’t seem worth asking.”

Ben shrugged and took a large bite.

“The news didn’t have much more about what happened,” she added.

Ben nodded. “I know.”

“I guess they found him downtown.”

“Yep,” he agreed. “In Crinkle.”

Crinkle Park – where, the news reported, the young man’s body had been discovered – was across from the courthouse in the center of the city, four blocks from the Zip office, maybe six blocks from Ben’s conversation with the young man. It represented an unofficial dividing line between a few renovated, rejuvenated city blocks, and several more that weren’t.

“There’s a reason we don’t take the boys there.”

Ben could hear Dylan singing to himself upstairs. From his high chair, Miles strained to reach Ben’s bagel. He had Cheerios of his own, but they didn’t seem to be enough for him. Ben thought about the young man and the park where they had found him, and about Zip and the work he was headed to do; he finished his bagel in another bite, though he still had a blob of cream cheese on his thumb. Instead of licking it off he reached over and put the thumb in Miles’ mouth. The baby seemed temporarily satisfied.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’d say there’s a reason.”

If a body had to be found in Ransom, Ben wasn’t surprised that it ended up in Crinkle Park. The park lay just north of Main St. in the middle of downtown, a half-acre of green with a small playground for kids and a single path that looped around a mossy fountain, thin grass broken by occasional pockets of trees. On hot days it often attracted old, homeless men looking for a cool place to rest and find shade. Otherwise it was a

helpful landmark for directions, a rendezvous spot for brave teenage couples, a useful site to buy or sell drugs, if you knew what to look for, and a suitable place to dump a body if you were in a hurry. In a town without a river, there were only so many options. The city's most famous graveyard lay two blocks away, attached to the First Presbyterian Church of Ransom, housing the oldest and most illustrious of its past residents (and also serving as a key stop on Ransom's little-taken downtown walking tour), but the park was its secret graveyard, the one place over the years that seemed to collect the city's darkest secrets – not just its run of the mill drug busts, exposures, and solicitations, all of which people could, with time, come to laugh at, but also the more shameful, sorrowful history that no one cared to speak of, much less joke about. If they even remembered at all. In the early 20th century two young black men, Allen Ethridge and Charlie Davis, were separately accused of miscegenation and lynched from the big oak trees near the park's western edge. On an early February morning in 1936 a baby was found dead beneath a park bench, abandoned by its parents. In 1989 a mentally ill pharmacist poisoned his wife, then shot himself beneath the Confederate statue at the park's south entrance, across from the courthouse. Even the statue itself, of South Carolina war hero and Ransom native son, Brigadier General Pierce Pinckney, chronicled his military service and six postwar terms in the U.S. Senate, but it never mentioned the four illegitimate, biracial children he fathered, nor the reporter he shot and killed late in life when he mistook the man for an intruder.

Ben himself didn't know all of Crinkle's secrets – no single person did – but he knew a few, which was why he wasn't surprised to hear that the young man's body had been found there. The basic fact of the murder surprised him, and his own small role had

baffled him, but if there was going to be a death it made an intuitive sort of sense for the body to end up in the park. He had never liked it. As an elementary student he'd once written a report on Pierce Pinckney, along with half his class, and he accidentally learned about Pinckney's lesser-known sins from an old book at the library (*Is this relevant?* his teacher had written on his paper.). He was also old enough to remember the pharmacist's murder-suicide, which had scandalized the town for months, until enough time passed and everyone decided, unspoken and together, that they would speak of it no more. He was nine years old at the time. It was the same year his parents took him out to dinner and his father waited for the food to arrive before he said, "Benjamin, I have something to tell you. I'm moving to Buffalo."

"But I don't want to move to Buffalo," Ben had said.

"Don't worry," his mother told him. "You're not."

Possibly because of the television incident the year before, when an argument over a late season Braves game and *Roseanne* escalated to the point that Ben's father picked up the TV and tried to hand it to his mother, then dropped it on the floor when she wouldn't take it, or perhaps because of the pharmacist's murder-suicide in the back of his mind, Ben carried with him for many years a sense that his parents' divorce had helped them narrowly avoid a much larger disaster. Now, as an adult with the benefit of hindsight, he knew that his parents' marriage had never been that bad – they disliked each other in the end, but their feelings were closer to distaste and disgust than murderous rage, like the nagging smell of sweaty underwear or rotten meat in the trash. Still Ben associated their divorce, against his conscious mind, with larger violence and tragedy,

and he had to remind himself occasionally that the park had nothing to do with their separation. It always seemed like it had.

With the morning's news in the back of his mind, he got ready and drove to work, acutely aware when he parked in his usual spot – a parking garage near Zip's office – of his position downtown relative to both Crinkle Park and the random square of sidewalk where he met the dead young man. He didn't pass either in his brief trip from the garage to his office, but he felt their presence nonetheless, out beyond the other shops and businesses downtown.

When he reached his desk and opened his email, he had a message from John-Thomas Theodore, sent that morning at 7:30am, an hour before Ben arrived.

Ben, it said. I wanted to talk a little more about our conversation the other day. Come by my office when you get in.

Ben did not feel like rehashing the conversation from earlier, nor listening to any more reasons why he was better suited for other projects – he'd put the request behind him, and after everything that happened yesterday it seemed as distant as his last vacation, like he'd asked months ago – so instead of going to Theodore's office straightaway, he left his bag at his desk and went to the breakroom. The office didn't offer much in amenities, but there was always a ready pot of coffee – it was the responsibility of the one who finished it to brew more – and Ben, who considered work coffee separate from breakfast coffee, drank several cups each day.

On his way in he almost collided with Theodore's ex-wife Mary, who was coming through the door with a full mug of tea in both hands and a graham cracker between her teeth. She had a blanket draped over her shoulders, and with her slippers and her baggy,

fraying sweater and her glasses falling down her nose, she looked less like a senior member of Zip and more like the office cat lady or reclusive bookkeeper, someone who suggested obsession and a slight instability. In fact, Ben knew, she was a sharp, shrewd marketer who understood many things better because she didn't want to be a part of them, and he had always gotten along well with her. Her lack of personal artifice made it easy to tell where she stood, unlike John-Thomas – who still felt like a stranger, though Ben had worked under him for years – and he bonded with her over random interests like horror films and twisted psychological thrillers, things he didn't share with most people, including Alex.

“John wants to see you,” she said by way of greeting, her words muffled by her cracker. Most of Zip's twenty employees worked in a shared, open space – sectioned into cubicles – but she and John-Thomas had real offices on opposite ends of the floor, Theodore's on one side near the bathrooms, and Mary's on the other, beside the conference room and breakroom. Because of her proximity to the breakroom she kept a few snacks there, instead of in her desk like most people, and she could often be seen passing in and out for a single cracker or a handful of M&Ms.

“I'm heading there right now,” Ben told her, which he felt was more or less true. It was only after she walked away that he wondered how she'd known in the first place.

In the breakroom – a glorified office kitchen with a couch against the wall – Ben poured himself a cup of coffee and stood in front of the refrigerator while he waited for it to cool. Most of the magnets on the fridge had been there for a decade, old state mementos that Mary or John-Thomas had brought to add color, then forgotten about entirely – Fort Sumter and the USC Gamecocks and Christmas trees and jack-o'-lanterns.

There was a recent notice about a group of people, mostly creatives, though Ben recognized the head of IT and a woman from accounting, who gathered after work on Thursdays to play board games. And there was a small, magnetic white board near the handle that different people could write messages on: mostly it was used for free food announcements and mild trash talk about local sports, high school or Barnwell College, though every fall it also extended to Clemson and USC; the head of HR liked to post inspirational quotes and encouragement. Today, however, someone had written, in small letters near the bottom: *Be agnostic about everything*. Ben thought he knew who it was, a young graphic designer and amateur philosopher named Jordan, who also used his screensaver for similar musings. He read the quote again while he tested his coffee, then set down his mug and found the marker. Beneath it he wrote *I don't know about that*. Then, feeling somewhat cheered, he picked up his coffee and walked to Theodore's office.

John-Thomas Theodore was a heavy, round man with thin hair who spent almost all his time seated behind the desk in his office. He had short legs and a slow, ambling gait that caused his arms to swing in small circles, no matter how leisurely his pace – though many Zip employees had to work several weeks before they saw him walk for the first time. Once a month he would lead a company-wide meeting, and he made brief appearances at birthday parties and fire drills, but otherwise he was at his desk by 7:00 or 7:30 every morning, before anyone else arrived, and if he wanted to speak with someone they always came to him.

When Ben entered his office he gestured to the hardback chair across from him, then rested his hands on the edge of his desk and leaned back – or tried to, as his rotundity meant that he occupied the whole seat at all times, and Ben only had the sensation that he was leaning from the groan of his chair.

“I’ve been thinking more about our conversation,” Theodore said, “and it has occurred to me that sooner or later Gerry Kane is going to leave us. He won’t be around forever.”

He looked at Ben, as if for acknowledgement, so Ben nodded. Inside he was trying to figure out if “leave us” meant retire or die, and what part of it had just occurred to Theodore.

“He might be getting up there in years,” Theodore continued. “I don’t think that’s speaking out of line – but he still shoulders a lot of responsibility for us, and when he leaves we’ll need other people to step up and fill the void.” He paused. “People such as yourself.”

“I appreciate that,” Ben said. “But I still feel like even now – ”

“I’ve reconsidered my stance. I talked to Mary about it, and we think it would be good for you to sit in with us on some of these initial City meetings.”

“Oh,” Ben said. “I see.” Suddenly he felt like he understood things a little better – Theodore’s summons, Mary’s comment in the breakroom, the quick change of heart. They must have talked yesterday, and somehow she changed his mind. It was not a ringing endorsement from John-Thomas, but regardless – and regardless of whether Ben was leaving Zip or staying in the end – he knew that any involvement with the City Project could be a boon to him.

“Everything that I said before still stands,” Theodore said. “But we’d like you to sit in and observe and learn to start thinking about projects from a different perspective. And in the future, depending on what happens, if there are other opportunities, who knows?”

“Right,” Ben said slowly. “I mean, thank you.” This was coming at an odd time for him, and he didn’t know exactly how to feel. John-Thomas had offered enough qualifications to take the edge off it, though Ben gathered that he was still supposed to be grateful – and a part of him was. He swallowed and looked around the room, cool and plainly decorated. “That’s great,” he said. “I’m thankful for the opportunity, and I appreciate your willingness to, uh, include me.” He was about to say “change your mind,” but caught himself, thinking that it might not be a good idea to draw attention to it, especially if – as Ben suspected – the change had not come entirely from him.

“You’re welcome,” Theodore said. “You earned it. This is a big project for us, so it will be a perfect opportunity for you to learn on something of a different scale.”

“Absolutely,” Ben said.

“But,” Theodore added. “This is also a *big* project for us. We’re all going to need to put a lot of care into our work, and that starts from the beginning. I have high expectations for everyone. In other words, when you sit in these meetings and listen, I expect you to listen carefully, and when you take notes, you should take them carefully. When you write emails, write them carefully. When you think, think carefully, and when you speak, you speak with care. You get the idea, don’t you? I could go on.”

“No, I think I have the idea.”

“Good.” John-Thomas turned his attention to his computer, a sign they were finishing. “You’ll do great, we all believe in you.”

“Thanks.”

“When you see Mary, can you tell her I want to talk to her? She hasn’t answered my email yet.”

After he returned to his desk, Ben sat quietly for several minutes and did nothing. At one point he reached for his coffee and couldn’t find it, then realized that he’d left it in Theodore’s office. It was too late, he judged, to go back and get it, and he pictured Theodore noticing the half full mug in a few hours, hopefully before he knocked it over and spilled room-temperature coffee across his desk. He wondered if his boss would remember that it was his. With any luck, several more people would have passed through the office by then.

He trudged down to the breakroom, poured himself a second cup, and returned to his desk. He should have been excited, or satisfied, but he was neither, and he found it difficult now to start his regular work in earnest. It was a funny thing, in the end, to be joining a project for the city – to rehabilitate the city’s image. It had not occurred to him before, though he had also not expected to join before. And of course he had not met the anonymous young man, or learned about his death, or spoken to Sergeant Green. He thought about texting Alex with the good news, but their last conversation had been about the dead body in the park, and he couldn’t bring himself to change topics so sharply, even if it had been over an hour. He knew in his head he was being ridiculous, but he wasn’t ready, and he didn’t want to forget so easily, and he didn’t want to let it go. If anyone had

asked him, there at his desk, he would have told them that he honestly couldn't, he couldn't let it go, because in the end he had nowhere else to put it. It wasn't past history, it wasn't scandal, it wasn't an accident or homicide or theft. At the moment it was none of those things, or all of them, and he had nowhere to put it, and he knew nothing.

Though it was true, Ben realized, that he knew a few things. He knew the young man's face, and his clothes, and the sound of his voice, and he knew the address the boy was trying to find. For now, at least, he still remembered.

180 King St. At his desk he found a post-it note and wrote the address on it, then stuck it to the inside of his desk drawer where no one else could see. At once he felt a little better, like he had done something concrete, made some piece of evidence real. As he started his work for the day he knew he could open his desk when he felt like it, and it helped. He was moving on to other things, but he didn't want to forget.

CHAPTER 6

The Revive Ransom team met in a conference room at Glendon Baptist. Doug and Dallas Goldman drove together in Doug's dirty white Tahoe, then wandered through the empty halls until they found the right place. It wasn't the first time they had met at Glendon, but the church was oddly structured and tough to navigate, a series of sharp angles and add-ons built into a hill, so you could find yourself looking out a second-story window without ever having gone up the stairs, or get lost in the basement searching for a street-level exit. The church wasn't small, but it was stretching the limits of its space already – the sanctuary overflowed most Sundays – and they were looking for even more ways to expand, though that seemed impossible without picking up and moving elsewhere. For now they were stuck in the space they had, trapped within city limits, surrounded by expensive property that wasn't for sale in the first place.

Calvary had planned for this prospect by building outside the city, an easy grouping of rectangles with plenty of parking on a large, flat lot. It was a bit of foresight that had facilitated their growth – close enough for Ransom residents, but accessible to others – and at its peak they were drawing visitors from two counties over. Now that attendance had declined Doug saw the extra space every week as an insult, and he would have loved a smaller, more distinctive building as much as Glendon wanted room to grow. Maybe, he thought as he walked through their halls, we could just swap.

By the time he and Dallas found the conference room, they were the last to arrive. Mitchell Laythrop stood at the head of a long, polished table, farthest from the door. To

his immediate left and right were two additional Glendon Baptist members, a man and woman whose names Doug couldn't recall. Around the rest of the table were the pastors from the three remaining churches, plus a few more people that Doug – again – did not recognize. He had missed the last meeting, but by his own recollection he had made the one before that. Had all these people been there? He was worried that they had.

“Gentlemen,” Mitchell Laythrop said, extending his arms wide in welcome. “Come in, come in. So glad you could make it.” He was a tall man, dressed with modest formality: khaki pants, white shirt, blue blazer, and round glasses in frames so thin you almost didn't see them until they caught the light. Doug thought that he and Laythrop were around the same age – late forties, early fifties – but he wasn't positive, and he had wasted time in previous meetings studying the Reverend for indications one way or another. The strongest case for old age was Laythrop's hair, which had turned completely white, though it was wavy and long enough to cover his ears. Doug knew for a fact that he'd been in ministry over a decade, and probably longer, but he had a boyish face and the enthusiasm of a younger man, and his glasses didn't seem to be reading glasses, though he would often take them off and forget he wasn't wearing them until he tried to read something. Doug realized he could just ask if he wanted to know, but as the details compounded he found that he didn't. He liked Laythrop more with a bit of mystery.

“Now that we're all here, let me open us in prayer and we'll get started.”

Everyone had taken a seat except for Laythrop, who remained standing behind his chair. He closed his eyes and leaned forward, resting his fingertips on the smooth surface of the table.

“Heavenly Father,” he said. “The Psalmist declares that salvation is near to those who fear You. Help us now to fear You, and to bring fear back into this city – fear that is the beginning of knowledge. Humble us, O Lord, and save us from ourselves. We ask these things in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.”

There were murmurs of assent around the table, and everyone raised their heads. Doug thought about the prayer and tried not to smile. When had he become so critical? He himself had prayed many prayers that sounded just like that, and while he and Laythrop disagreed on plenty – none more than the efficacy of this Revival rally – he felt the man was sincere. Even if his prayer made him sound a little like a supervillain, trying to strike fear in the heart of the city.

“Okay,” Laythrop said, sitting down at last. “We’re almost there! After last meeting I think we have the logistical details in hand, so today will largely be a review of the program itself, plus a chance to address any lingering questions or problems with the schedule. As we discussed Scott will oversee the set-up and tear down, and Sarah Lane will be in charge of water” – here he indicated the pair sitting at his right and left, who both looked down at the table and smiled modestly – “I think Miss Sarah Lane will also make sure those fancy prayer cards are distributed and gathered at the end.”

“Excuse me Reverend,” Dallas said. Doug had been settling in for the long haul and nearly jumped. He couldn’t believe Dallas had something to say already. “Sorry to interrupt, but I don’t think we ever decided what we would do with the prayer cards once they were collected.”

Laythrop frowned and turned his head to Sarah Lane, as if for confirmation. She looked uncertain. “No,” he said. “I don’t suppose we did... That’s a good catch.” He opened his hands to the table. “What do you think?”

There was a moment’s uncomfortable pause.

“Maybe one of our churches could agree to take them?” a young man said. Doug didn’t know his name.

“Sure, I suppose. Would anyone want them?”

It was, Doug knew, an ambivalent prospect. The prayer cards would constitute a list of names and needs that offered real opportunity to meet people, to make new connections in the community, and to help those that were hurting or curious enough to reach out themselves. They were also, undeniably, a potential avenue for growth; Doug thought bizarrely of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and had to suppress another smile: *The leads are weak.... We need the new leads, the Glengarry leads.*

At the same time no one wanted the responsibility of *all* the prayers cards. There could be hundreds of them, and it would take days to sort through and follow-up, by phone or email – a hundred conversations branching off in all directions, a thousand balls to juggle in the air at once. Plus the need to follow-up again with those that did accept the invitation to visit, to catch them on a single, random Sunday of their choosing, in a sea of others. It would take a team of people. There would be meetings and plans, just like they were having now.

“What if all the churches took them?” someone said. A woman sitting halfway down the table. Doug thought her name was Ashley.

“How would we do that?”

“We could make photocopies.”

“It’s...possible,” Laythrop said. Doug was familiar with the tone of his response; he recognized Laythrop’s position, not wanting to shoot down every idea so early, even though they were bad.

“I don’t know,” Dallas interjected. “Then everyone who filled out a card would have all five churches trying to contact them at the same time? Unless we coordinated somehow.”

“No one should take them all,” said Cameron Morrow, and most of the table began to nod at once, grateful that someone had just said it. “It wouldn’t be right.”

“Okay,” Laythrop said. “What other options do we have?”

Morrow, the senior pastor at Bethlehem Baptist, the largest African-American church in Ransom, leaned back and shrugged. He was a thick man with close-cropped hair and a trimmed beard; Doug knew that, from the pulpit, he was a bold, animated preacher, but in conversation he often came across as taciturn and quiet. Everyone looked around.

“We could ask them on the prayer card which church they’d most want to hear from,” someone said. “Sort of like a self-selection thing.”

Sarah Lane shook her head. “The cards have already been printed.”

“Goodness,” Doug said. He couldn’t believe he was participating, and he tried not to sound put out, like they were making him do it. “Just take all the cards you collect and make five equal piles. Give one to each church. Then we’re all free to respond to our own cards however we’d like.”

“But what if someone from a specific church fills out a card? Or someone writes something that’s, like, more appropriate for one person than another?”

It was a comment that invited imagination, and for a moment people all around the table made uncomfortable eye contact with each other. What did the other pastors do well? What did they do poorly? Even if they all disagreed on whose approach was better, it was undeniable that Gordon Fox at First Presbyterian was distinct from Matt Roth at Ascent Church, and both were different from Cameron Morrow or Mitchell Laythrop or Doug or Dallas.

“You could still pray for them,” Doug said. “Any of us can handle prayer requests.” He shrugged. “And look, if someone writes ‘I really loved what that Gordie Fox had to say, can you tell me more?’ then I’ll just send it to First Presbyterian. We don’t have to be dogmatic about it.”

It was a sly, funny example, and even Dallas sitting next to him smiled briefly. Gordon Fox was the longtime minister at First Presbyterian, but like the church itself he was old and semi-retired, and it was hard to imagine anyone being transformed by his preaching. Doug didn’t know how many people still attended the church, but he assumed that First Presbyterian had been included because it was Ransom’s longest running congregation – the church building itself was an historical monument – and not its largest. Also it was located in the heart of downtown, next to the square where Revive would be held, and they were using the church to help with parking.

“Fine with me,” Morrow said.

“Anyone object?” Laythrop said. “Alright, it’s a plan. Sarah Lane, will you be responsible for dividing them up? Okay, good.” He nodded to Doug across the table. “Let’s move on.”

They began to discuss the schedule in detail, and the next thirty minutes passed without incident. Different people suggested small tweaks to the timing of events, or the choreography of the onstage participants, but the overall shape of the service had been hammered out in previous meetings, and everyone knew that it was too late for big changes now. They made it through almost the whole thing – the preaching and music, the drama and poetry; the single interpretive dance (from a girls’ troupe that included two of Laythrop’s daughters) – before they reached Matt Roth’s video. Roth and Ascent Church were producing a short film to be shown in the lead-up to the final sermon; the plan was to clear the stage after the dance, then bring Doug up to thank everyone for coming and introduce Laythrop, then dim the lights and use the video as an arty, engaging transition into Laythrop’s sermon, a rousing, gospel-centered exclamation point – the definitive response to a city in moral turmoil. Most of the other speakers were limited to a few minutes, but Laythrop had given himself fifteen, and he was unabashedly concerned that it go well – for the sake of the whole event, of course, and by consequence the city, though seeing him Doug couldn’t help wonder if the rest of the Revival was an excuse, in his mind, for its final quarter of an hour. Then again Doug didn’t always know what to do with enthusiasm, and he was suspicious of it in any form.

“Matt,” Laythrop said. “Are you ready to show us what you’ve got?”

Matt Roth sat up straight in his chair. There was an attractive young woman sitting next to him, and they exchanged glances.

“Do you mean the video?” he said.

“Yes,” Laythrop said slowly. “I do.”

“Oh,” Matt said. “I don’t have it with me.”

Laythrop looked around the table with a friendly – though incredulous – smile.

“Where is it?” he asked.

“Well, we’re still working on it, actually.”

“It’s not finished?”

“No.”

“Matt, the Revival is this coming week. We don’t have much more time here.”

“I’m aware of that.” Matt looked down at the table and picked at one of his fingernails. He was dressed more casually than anyone else in the room – sneakers and jeans and a faded brown jacket over a tight-fitting t-shirt – and while it fit his overall aesthetic, it only heightened the impression, in the moment, that he was an unruly teen being scolded by a teacher.

“I thought – ” Laythrop said. “I mean, I thought we’d left it after last meeting that you’d bring something in to show us today. That was where we left it, right?” Scott and Sarah Lane, to his left and right, both nodded; most everyone else took the question as rhetorical and didn’t respond. Doug’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he resisted the urge to peek at it. He saw the video as filler, and he didn’t care one way or another if it made it into the program, though he had kept that opinion to himself.

“I remember you saying that now,” Matt said. “And I’m sorry, I thought that was more like a suggestion, or a maybe hope. Not a command.”

“Well I wouldn’t say *command*, I just meant... I thought we had an understanding.”

Matt shrugged. “I’m sorry, that’s on me. I didn’t understand that.”

Doug was surprised how aloof Matt Roth was being. Of the five pastors he was far and away the most creative communicator from the pulpit. He did not, in fact, speak from a pulpit at all, but rather preferred to pace back and forth, or sit on a small, three-legged stool for intimate, serious points. He was known to bring his iPad onstage with him, which he used to cue videos or pictures or gifs, and he liked elaborate, showy props to help drive home a point. For a sermon about Jesus walking on water he preached from within and around a sizeable rowboat, and when he spoke on the wedding at Cana he set up – and Doug did not at first believe this, though Dallas confirmed it was true – a makeshift bar with a real, live bartender right there onstage. When he reached the climactic water-to-wine moment, he got his own glass of wine from the bartender and drank the whole thing in a few gulps (“Yeah, but it was probably just like water with purple food coloring,” Doug said. “No,” Dallas said. “It wasn’t.”). Within the older generation Roth was largely dismissed as a gimmick, but his church was popular and attracted a type of person who would never have visited one of their services. Dallas himself relayed his stories with a heavy dose of eye-rolling, but Doug always thought a part of him was jealous.

Ascent Church – often known as just “The Ascent” – was only five years old. Like Calvary it had grown out of a living room, and now they leased a space downtown that had previously been Ransom’s largest nightclub. The sanctuary was dark and windowless, and the bathrooms were oddly situated near the back, but it could hold a few

hundred people, the lighting had come with the place, and they were able to get creative from Sunday to Sunday with the seating and the stage. Each service at Ascent was a different experience than the last, idiosyncratic and unpredictable. While Doug was surprised by Matt Roth's demeanor in their meeting, he wasn't surprised that Roth would eventually grow frustrated with the Revive planning committee. Ascent was born from a singular vision, and Matt would be used to operating freely, with no oversight or accountability.

“Can you at least give us an idea what you're planning to film?” Laythrop asked.

“We've already shot it,” Matt said. “We just haven't finished editing.”

“Well...that's good. What will it be then?”

“I mean, um, it's still kind of early to say. Thematically we're looking at grace and hope, light breaking into darkness, you know... But it never really comes together until the editing process.”

“It really doesn't,” the woman next to him said.

“But – okay.” Laythrop seemed to realize that getting angry wasn't going to help him. “That's fine. Just remember why we're here. This city is looking at an unprecedented failure of moral leadership, and we *have* to step up and point them in the right direction. These people are dead in their transgressions. Without Christ, we all are. That's the message.”

Matt nodded. “Sure,” he said. “Dead in sin, alive in Christ. You got it.”

After they moved on from Matt Roth's video, Laythrop seemed to lose a measure of enthusiasm. He spent less time fussing over Doug's introduction than Doug had

expected, and he offered only a brief overview of his own concluding remarks – built around Ephesians 2. Most of the practicalities had been decided long ago, and when no one had anything else to add, they adjourned. Sooner than Doug expected.

In the hallway he checked his phone while Dallas said a few goodbyes. He was surprised to see that he'd gotten a text from Erin during the meeting. They exchanged numbers many weeks ago, but it was the first time either had used them.

Something weird is going on, she wrote. I think Joe is missing.

A minute later he had gotten a second message. *Sorry I don't know what you would do about it... I just wanted to tell someone. See you next week.*

Doug stared at his phone. It was the kind of message he sometimes got from his own daughter: brief and dramatic and utterly void of context, asking for attention and pushing you away in the same moment. He had no idea what Erin was talking about. It took him an extra half second to even remember Joe, whom he had never met, though he did then recall the conversation from yesterday, Erin's plan to take a trip over the weekend with her boyfriend. Maybe he had left her? It made Doug feel terrible; she deserved something better.

Dallas finished his goodbyes and they headed out of the building together, Doug reading the messages again as they walked, trying to think of the most appropriate way to respond. He had no idea.

"You millennials and your phones," Dallas joked.

"Sorry," Doug said, and he put the phone in his pocket without deciding on an answer. He'd have to think of something later. "What time is it?"

"You were just looking at your phone."

“I know, sorry. I was distracted.”

“It’s almost six.”

“Almost six?” It was still early. Doug hesitated. “Do you – do you wanna get something to eat?”

By the time Doug got home from dinner it was nearly eight. Most of the lights in the house were off, and he stumbled up the dark front walk using his phone to guide him. When he got through the door he saw a light on in the kitchen down the hall, but the front room and the upstairs above him were quiet. They had a big house – bigger, truthfully, than they needed – and without Emma and her friends and her energy, it often felt like this: empty and still. Doug had begun to consider broaching the idea of getting a dog. He didn’t even really like dogs, but he was thinking about it nonetheless.

He found Sam sitting on a barstool at the kitchen counter, eating blueberries with her fingers and flipping through her tablet. She was already in her pajamas.

“How was the meeting?” she asked.

“Long,” he said. “How was your day?”

“Fine.” She shrugged. “Nothing new to report. Same as yesterday, really. Same as the day before.”

“That’s good, I guess.”

“Did you already eat?”

“I did,” he said, without elaborating. “You didn’t wait, did you?”

“No, I ate.”

“Good.”

“There are leftovers in the fridge if you get hungry again later.”

Doug opened the fridge and looked at the leftovers, to humor her, but he grabbed only a handful of grapes and took them upstairs to his office. His office door sat right at the top of the stairs, and even with it closed he could hear Sam moving around in the kitchen, putting dishes away, watching a video, talking quietly to herself. After an hour he heard her come upstairs and go into their bedroom. He himself should have been working on the sermon, but it had been a long day and his thoughts weren't coalescing. He stared at his notebook for thirty minutes before giving up to browse the internet and watch a show on his computer. When he stopped hearing footsteps and the running of water, he counted off another twenty minutes, then shut down his own computer and walked to the bedroom. He was tired, and even though tomorrow was Saturday, he had a lot to do if he was going to be ready to preach.

When he entered the bedroom, however, he found Sam still awake, reading a book in bed. He paused only a second before closing the door behind him.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey yourself.”

He didn't say anything else while he changed clothes and brushed his teeth, though after he climbed into bed next to her, he leaned over to say goodnight – a rote courtesy, at this point – and his hand beneath the covers brushed her bare thigh. He was about to roll away and turn off his light, but out of instinct he stopped, then brought his hand back so it touched her again, the back of his hand tracing smooth, soft skin, warm and intimate. He lifted the covers slightly and saw that she had taken off her pajama pants.

“I was hot,” she said.

“You’re under the covers.”

“I like being under the covers, but if I am it’s hot with the pants.”

“I’m not complaining.”

Before he could stop himself he touched her again, moving his hand onto the front of her thigh. She still had her book in front of her, but he could tell that she wasn’t reading.

The heat coming from her, and the subtle association of the sheets and the mattress and her skin, drew an instant reaction from him, like stepping into a warm house on a cold day, and he let his fingertips trail up and down her leg, from her knee to the bottom seam of her underwear. She put her book down, though she hadn’t looked at him yet. He didn’t know if there had been a sign. He couldn’t tell anymore.

Finally she turned to him and he kissed her once, and she kissed him back. Her t-shirt had ridden up several inches, and he put his hand on her stomach, and when he did she kissed him harder and shifted on the bed, turning her body to face him more directly, putting a hand on his hip. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and her shirt twisted across her torso. He grew hard. She felt it and moved her hand down to his crotch, touching him through his boxers, and he didn’t think it was possible, but he got harder. In a matter of seconds all of him felt taut, a sensation so powerful and sudden it was foreign, like he was only muscle now, tense and flexed. He felt strong.

He pushed her hips back slightly and slipped his hand down the front of her underwear. She made a noise in the back of her throat, from her mouth to his while they

kissed, but when his fingers found her there was nothing. No response. She was dry and closed.

Against his will he started to go soft, deflating like a balloon, and within a few seconds he knew it was gone for good, lost and not coming back. Her hand was still on his crotch; for a moment they rubbed each other uselessly, trying to catch new sparks, but nothing happened. They stopped kissing. He rolled over and sat up. She straightened her t-shirt and reached for her book on the nightstand.

When he thought about it later, it was picking up the book that hurt him most.

He sat next to her without speaking, trying to think of something to say.

“Well,” he managed.

“I know,” she said. “It’s not working anymore.”

It wasn’t, he agreed. It wasn’t working at all.

CHAPTER 7

She had to wait until the next day before she could drive into the mountains. Fortunately it was Saturday and her mother didn't need the car for work. Erin could tell she thought it was the wrong decision, that Erin was doing nothing but punishing herself, that the proper course of action was to stay home and to *wait* and *pray* and *hope*. But Erin was bad at all three, and unwilling to practice, and even if she couldn't explain what she hoped to accomplish (beyond the fanciful: stumbling somehow, in the expanse of a national park, onto Joe, suddenly understanding what he did and why) she knew she had to try. Her greatest comfort in the first two days was movement.

She left early that morning, just as her mother was coming downstairs for coffee. It took her several hours to drive from Ransom to the park where Joe had supposedly gone missing. The first hour north, outside of the city, ran through the sloping farmland and mild hills that she associated with rural South Carolina, though as she cut farther north and west, skirting Columbia and Greenville and eventually leaving the state entirely, the hills extended up and out and grew into bona fide mountains, long overlapping arcs of dirty green and brown and orange across her eye line, wooded ranges that didn't rise into peaks so much as they spread and piled over each other, a massive race to the horizon. Erin imagined that the late fall colors would sparkle in the sun, though it was hard to tell with the weather so overcast and ungenerous – not as rainy or foggy as the news reports claimed it had been the last two days, but still dull and gray and damp. The clouds were a single dreary mass with no definition, sitting low in the sky, and

the trees lining the road looked defeated, hangdog in the meager light. She left the interstate and cut even farther west, twisting and turning on the narrow roads, driving with one hand while she held her phone in front of her face and navigated with the other. Twenty minutes after her exit she entered the park, and twenty minutes after that she came to a clearing with a faux log cabin welcome center, oddly vacant for a Saturday. She was half-afraid she wouldn't find anyone there, but after she parked near the door and went inside she saw a woman in a ranger uniform and tall brown hat leaning on the information counter with her phone out. The rest of the building seemed empty.

Erin gave the woman a strained smile, and the ranger stood up straight.

“Hi,” she said. “Can I help you?”

Erin started to speak and choked on her own spit, coughing wetly. She hadn't used her voice that morning. “I was – ahem – hoping I could talk to someone about Joe Decker,” she said finally. “The hiker, the one who went missing up here on Thursday?”

“Oh yes, of course,” the woman said. “That was terrible. And, I mean, we're doing everything we can.” She put her phone in her pocket. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I'm not sure, I guess. But I'm his girlfriend.”

The ranger stared at her blankly.

“I just got here,” Erin added, like she had left right away and it had taken two days to arrive.

“Wow, I'm sorry, I guess I didn't... I mean, I'm just here, I don't really know... His *girlfriend*?”

“Yeah.”

“But – I’m sorry – what are you doing here?”

At first the question made no sense to her and Erin couldn’t think of an answer, but as the ranger waited she realized that the woman meant *here*, at her station specifically.

“Oh,” she said, and shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know.”

“You’re going to want to head up to Clingmans Dome. To the station there. Everything is being run through it.”

“Okay.”

“Most everyone is up that way now. I can’t really help you, I’m not...actively involved. Just holding down the fort here.”

“It’s called Clingmans Dome?” Erin said.

The ranger shrugged sheepishly.

“I can call up there if you’d like.”

A second ranger met her at Clingmans Dome, a tall skinny man with a dark mustache named Bryan. The way he said it, Erin wasn’t entirely sure if it was his first name or his last name. There were more people around the station than at her first stop, hikers and a few park rangers and at least one sheriff’s deputy, but it was still far from crowded. Bryan walked with her outside, back through the parking lot and down a short path to the edge of the woods, where they stopped in front of a large, wooden map of the park and its trails.

“We had twenty people out yesterday,” he said. His voice was higher than Erin expected, slow and lazy, and it gave her the impression he had to consciously keep his

tone serious. “We’re up to thirty, thirty-five right now. Chopper’s in the air as we speak. There’s no reason we won’t have some good news soon.”

Erin stared at the web of trails on the board. They cut and crisscrossed and wove themselves through hills and valleys, circled peaks and ridges. Kilometers in every direction.

“He’s already been out there for two days,” she said.

“Well,” Bryan said uncomfortably. “We don’t know exactly when he went missing, it’s possible we’re closer to thirty six hours.”

Erin turned to face him.

“I think something weird is going on,” she said.

“I’m sorry?”

“Joe wasn’t planning to go hiking. He was planning to drive with me to Savannah. But instead he shows up here, out of the blue, and then he disappears?”

“I don’t understand.”

“He wasn’t planning to go hiking. This makes no sense.”

“But ma’am, he *did* go hiking.”

Erin studied the leaves on the ground. “Did he?” she said.

Ranger Bryan started to smile, then caught himself and quickly frowned. “Yes. I mean, we certainly think so. His family reported him missing to us. *They* knew he’d been here. And late yesterday his car was found at a trailhead half a mile east – which is good news, by the way, helps us narrow the search. The county sheriff’s office is involved, and they’ve spoken to police in South Carolina. Plus he hasn’t been found anywhere else, has he?” Bryan opened his mouth to say more, then stopped. After a pause he raised a hand

halfway, like he was going to pat her arm, but at the last moment he seemed to change his mind and brought it to his own face instead. With his index finger he rubbed his mustache. “Look,” he continued. “I know this is difficult. And I apologize, that was abrupt. I’m sorry. But there’s still plenty of reason to think he’ll be found healthy and safe. Probably cold, probably hungry, but unharmed in the long run.”

Erin shook her head. She had snagged on something a few seconds earlier and wasn’t listening anymore. *Joe’s car? His family?*

“Who reported him missing?” she asked.

“His family.”

“Yes, but who?”

“Well...I think it was his brother. One of his brothers.”

“Are they here now?”

Bryan frowned and looked at the trees around them, as if the answer might be there. He shifted restlessly from foot to foot. “They were here at one point, but no, I don’t think they are right now. His parents are around somewhere, they wanted to stay.” He shrugged. “But I don’t know exactly where, I haven’t met them personally.”

“So I guess you’re not, like, in charge?”

“Uh, no.” he said. “I’m not in charge.”

“Could I... Could I maybe speak to the person who is?”

If the ranger was insulted he didn’t show it, though he did take his time replying. “Usually these are situations for immediate family only, so I’m afraid I can’t just do that. Plus he’s busy. We’re all busy. But if you want to stay involved I’d suggest you speak to Mr. Decker’s parents. With their permission I’m sure we can keep you in the loop.”

Erin started to answer and caught herself. Something kept her from admitting that she'd never met his parents, didn't know their names, had no idea how to contact them. It was even possible, she realized, that they didn't know she existed. Joe had not made it seem like he spoke to them often.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll do that.”

Bryan nodded and turned back toward the station, fifty yards behind them. He pulled out his phone and glanced at it. Erin could tell that he considered himself finished.

“Can I see his car?” she asked, before he could leave.

The car was another fact that Erin knew she would never fully accept until she saw it herself. She hadn't believed the news when she first heard it, and even as the story progressed it had never occurred to her that his car would actually be found in the park. A part of her still expected him to show up back in Ransom like nothing had happened. She was ready for him to call at any moment and ask her where she was, tell her they were late for their trip. The most surprising thing about his disappearance was every time another piece of it got confirmed.

His car sat in a small gravel clearing, ringed on three sides by towering trees, thin and shaky. It was a sixteen year old Volkswagen Passat, small and compact and green – a dark, full green that looked almost black beneath the clouds. There was a large dent on the hood, made, according to Joe, when a neighborhood kid ran straight into it on his bike – while it was parked, he said. On the rear bumper was a streak of yellow where he had scraped a lamppost in a grocery store parking lot. It was difficult to mistake for anything else, and Erin walked a circle around it while Ranger Bryan stood behind her with his

hands in his pockets. She placed her palm in the divot on the hood. It was cool and slick with moisture. The tires were caked in mud, and some of it had splashed onto the bumper and up the doors in sharp, uneven lines, like streaks of blood from a slasher film. She jiggled each handle, but they were locked.

“I don’t suppose you have an extra set of keys,” Bryan said.

Erin put her forehead on the front passenger window and peered in. “No,” she said.

If there had been any last, miniscule doubt about the car, it disappeared when she looked inside. Something elusive within the interior bugged her, but she couldn’t deny that it was Joe’s: there was a takeaway cup from La Spiazza in the cup holder, a black umbrella in the driver’s side door. The thin white cord of a phone charger dangled from the cigarette lighter. Nothing was especially distinctive itself, and before she looked Erin wouldn’t have been able to say what she expected to see, but nonetheless each object felt intuitively familiar and cohesive. They were his. The backseat was empty, and she couldn’t say if there should have been something else inside – if anything had been taken out – but she didn’t think so. His car had never been cluttered. It had, however, been *dirty*, and as she continued to stare inside she suddenly realized it wasn’t. There was no visible layer of dust on the dashboard, no dirt collecting in the gear shift. Not enough rocks and gravel in the footwell. She stepped left to get a better view of the floor in the back, and when her angle changed she saw a white plastic shopping bag beneath the passenger’s seat. She put her hands to the glass for a better view. There was candy in the bag, just visible. The candy she had asked Joe to get for the trip. A box of Mike and Ikes. A box of Milk Duds.

“Is everything alright?” Bryan asked, and she realized she had frozen.

She stood upright and stepped quickly away from the car, like it had slapped her.

“Sure,” she said. “Yeah, sure. But I should go.”

By the time Erin got back to Ransom the sun had set, though it wasn't late enough for Janet to have gone to bed. She found her mother in the living room sipping white wine with the television on, a rerun of a cooking show they liked to watch together. It was typically something they did on a Friday or Saturday night – twin recliners in the living room, some show they both followed, a \$7 bottle of wine between them. Since she met Joe there had been more nights missed, but Erin enjoyed the time as much as her mother and hadn't let it lapse completely. Still she had spent last night in her room, and tonight driving home, and she was conscious of the tableau staged by her mom, sans her; she sat in the empty chair to complete the picture. After a moment she realized that she didn't have a wine glass, so she went into the kitchen to fetch one, and returned with the bottle as well.

“Mom, there's something I have to tell you,” she said.

Janet turned so she was sitting sideways in the chair. She had taken off her makeup, and her face was ashy, her eyes wrinkled in concern. “Are you okay?”

“Joe was still planning to leave with me. I'm positive. It wasn't a trick, he wasn't lying. We were going to go. So I don't see how he decided to take some hike in North Carolina on Thursday without telling me. I just don't.”

Janet nodded but didn't say anything.

“And I’m going to figure out what happened. I won’t just sit here and wait. I can’t stand it.”

Janet stayed silent for several more seconds. “Sweetie,” she said at last. “There’s something wrong here, something seriously wrong. I see it. But whatever bad things have happened have already happened. They weren’t your fault. And if you think I’m going to encourage you to run around and chase them, I’m not. It’s just going to hurt worse, and I...I can’t.”

“You don’t know that,” Erin said. “You don’t know anything – I mean, we don’t know anything. That’s the whole point.”

“Sometimes broken things can’t be fixed. In this world, at least, they just stay broken.”

She waited, but Janet didn’t add anything else. Erin had no patience for pronouncements like that. “So?” she said.

“So maybe you can’t fix this.”

“Mom, forget about fixing. At this point I just want to know. I can’t not know.”

Janet pursed her lips. “When your father left – ”

There it was. Erin had been waiting for it to rise to the surface, in one form or another, since she first heard about Joe.

“He didn’t *leave*.”

“Oh, stop it, yes he did.”

Erin let out a breath, sharper than a sigh, softer than a gasp. In the last few years she and Janet had talked about her father plenty, and she didn’t feel like including him here. There wasn’t a connection; there didn’t have to be one.

He'd been a photojournalist. For most of her young life he worked for Reuters, traveling in and out of the country on assignment for weeks – and sometimes months – at a time. He was gone so often, and his time at home so varied and chaotic, that Erin felt like she grew up with multiple fathers – or multiple variations on one father, and sometimes none at all. Eventually she learned to downplay it, to blend in with the other children of harried, working parents, though – at first – it had taken some trial and error. The worst spanking she ever got was in the first grade, from her mother, when she let her new class believe for several weeks that her dad was dead. She'd told everyone he was a soldier.

In the spring of her eighth grade year Reuters fired him. She remembered a series of urgent, hushed conversations at home – she remembered the phone in the kitchen ringing and ringing and ringing – but for once her parents were in lockstep and zealously guarded the truth, shielding their conversations with dogged vigilance and insisting that Erin had no reason to worry – as if that were the same as care – and her life would continue unchanged. And it was true, in the immediate aftermath, that Erin's life itself was no more or less disordered than usual, but post-firing her father transitioned to freelance photography and journalism, and his work took him to increasingly disparate, dangerous places – Iraq and Algeria and Pakistan. In October of her sophomore year he went on assignment in the Sudan, and at some point around Halloween he was killed. The last word they ever got from him was a bland email to her mother, letting them know that he had arrived in Khartoum and was looking for transportation west, that he wouldn't be able to send another message for several weeks.

“Anyway,” Janet said. “When he left, and then when he – when, you know – I wanted to run away. At the very least I wanted to leave the house. I couldn’t stand being left alone with...myself, I guess, and my thoughts. I wanted to *do* something. But it wasn’t possible. And of course I was never really alone; I had you. And I had to think about you, and about our life here – with or without him. In the end the best thing I did was stay home – stay and be still. Our lives have always been in God’s hands, we can’t forget that. Your father’s life was in God’s hands.”

They had never found a body. There was never even definitive proof of death, a clear sense of what had happened. He just failed to check-in, failed to meet his deadline, failed to reappear. About six months after his last email, long after they’d assumed the worst, Janet received a call from another journalist who told her that he’d heard talk of a Canadian photographer accidentally killed by pro-government militia around the time that Erin’s father went missing (“We’re not Canadian,” she said. “I know,” he answered. “But it’s pretty close.”). It was the best and only guess they ever had.

As Erin and her mother gained distance from the immediate loss, Janet did less and less to hide her feelings from her daughter – like it seemed pointless, now that it was just the two of them. She had resented Erin’s father for leaving repeatedly, almost worse than leaving once and staying away, and she refused to give him credit for the one thing he had always managed to offer, financial support (“You don’t think there were any other jobs?” she said once, around the one-year anniversary of his death. “Your father went those places because he wanted to.”). In a way she resented his money most of all, and she got rid of it as quickly as she could. Once the claim was finally collected, his life insurance paid for college, but she also gave twenty five percent to Calvary Bible, and the

rest had been spent on the mortgage and the house. They still weren't destitute – in many ways they were fortunate, an ambivalent fact for Janet – but neither of them bought anything without an awareness of the cost, and Janet would work the rest of her life. Erin thought it was her mother's twisted act of penance, self-punishment for not loving her husband, for having chosen him in the first place. The merger of her faith and her fatalism.

“But Joe isn't in Africa,” Erin said. “This – it's just not comparable.”

“I'm only saying that I understand the urge to move, but sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between running toward a solution and running from a loss.”

The TV was still at full volume, and Erin was glad that her mother hadn't turned it off. The noise gave them a conversational pitch to aim for, and a lighter background tone. It was somewhere else to look, something to do while the other spoke. Turning it off would have been an acknowledgment that Erin didn't want.

“Joe isn't lost.”

“I'm sorry honey, but he is.”

“I mean he's not *lost*,” she said. “We don't know that.”

“No, of course we don't.”

“You don't know what happened.”

“I don't. And neither do you.” For a minute they watched the end of their show in silence. Erin thought the conversation might be over, trailing off into nothing, but as the credits rolled Janet turned like she had just stopped talking: “I just think...you might have to get used to not knowing.”

Erin stood, nearly knocking over the open wine bottle. She hadn't been looking for caution, she'd been looking for support – she wanted someone else to acknowledge the burn in her chest, the heat that kept her moving. In college her close friends had been Andrew's as well, and after school they had scattered – in choosing between her and Andrew, they'd mostly split the difference and ended as mild, indifferent friends to each – so they didn't know that Joe existed, much less that he was missing, and if she told them Erin was already convinced that their concern – and their interest – would be generic. She hadn't realized how much she relied on the few people in her life, Janet most of all.

Her anger sparked, and she turned from her mother to keep herself from speaking. She suddenly wanted to hurt her, to anger her, to provoke something more. *Do you not want me to look because you didn't get to? Or because you never wanted to?*

But in a moment it was gone, and she was glad she held her tongue. It would have been pointless.

"I'm sorry," Janet said, like she had read Erin's thoughts. "I'm trying to help, and I feel like I keep saying the wrong things. I should be better at this."

"It's okay, Mom. Really." Erin started to gather her things – her phone, her empty wine glass. "I'm going to get ready for bed."

Janet turned the TV off. "Tomorrow's Sunday," she said. "Why don't you come to church with me? Maybe it'll help you take your mind off things, at least for an hour or two."

Erin hesitated. Ordinarily the answer would've been an easy no – since Janet had stopped making her go to church in high school, she had been back only a handful of

times, and a Sunday service didn't sound like the kind of distraction she was looking for – but then she thought of Doug, and for once she wanted to go. He still hadn't responded to her text, but he would be another friendly face, a different face, someone who knew about Joe and might listen. Otherwise she would have to wait until next Thursday to see him again, if they were even still planning to meet. She had no reason to think otherwise, but she couldn't help herself. Everything in life felt unsteady, unreliable.

“You know what,” she said. “Sure. I'll go.”

Erin could tell her mother hadn't expected a yes. She left Janet downstairs to lock up and went to get ready for bed. She thought that sleep would be difficult for her again, but after she washed, she pulled off her jeans and fell on the bed without otherwise changing, her mind as blank as she could make it, and within the minute she was out.

CHAPTER 8

Saturday morning, Ben and Alex took the kids to the park – not Crinkle Park downtown, but a smaller one in their neighborhood, ten minutes walking from the house. They lived in a part of Ransom called Kerrytown, straight east of the city center, bordered to the north by the trendy Five Forks, and the south by the neighborhoods of Bar Heights. Unlike Bar Heights, whose homes were, in their size and age, a testament to Ransom's former glory – replaced by the newer, nicer Strawberry Hill – the houses in Kerrytown were simply old, built far enough in the past to be outdated, but neither old enough nor large enough to be considered vintage. Ben and Alex had bought their own house two years ago, shortly after they learned she was pregnant with Miles. Dylan was still a toddler, and with a second child on the way they had come to house-hunting with a special sense of urgency; if they couldn't get settled before the baby arrived, Ben thought, they certainly weren't going to after. So they had found a small, unexciting starter home that was, for the foreseeable future, theirs; Ben wondered if they would both start and end with it, as long as they didn't move.

The clouds of the previous few days had blown away, and the weather was clear and cool – cold, at least, for South Carolina in November, though Ben could get by with a flannel shirt and a light jacket. He would have liked a slower morning – the kind he distantly remembered having, for a few blessed months, when he and Alex were dating and she would stay over – but the baby had them up early every day of the week, and by 9:00am they had run out of things to do inside. As long as the weather held, Alex walked

Miles to the park almost daily, and Dylan would join if he was home from kindergarten. Now that he was getting older he especially liked the playground, and he jumped and skipped his way through most of their walk in anticipation; when they got within sight of the park he took off running toward the larger equipment, light metals and hard plastics in friendly, rounded shapes, garish blues and yellows and greens, and Ben jogged after him while Alex pushed Miles in the stroller, bringing up the rear. A few older men were playing tennis on the nearby courts, but the playground equipment was empty; Ben guessed that they were a little early for the Saturday rush, which would come in the next hour or two.

Though Dylan had gotten bigger and stronger and faster – no longer a toddler, by any definition – he was still a clumsy kid, and as they spent the next twenty minutes weaving through the slides and tunnels and ladders, it felt to Ben like he had to stop every few minutes and pick his son off the ground. Thankfully the boy didn't cry about his spills, and soon he was off again begging his dad to come look at something he'd found, a tennis ball or a caterpillar or a piece of trash, or help him onto the nearest platform or slide. It was mindless work, and Ben – who woke up feeling jittery, and had been as ready to get out of the house as his energetic five-year old – took to it mindlessly. From the moment he had gotten out of bed he was restless, anxious, and frustrated that it was Saturday. He wasn't usually that kind of person, but to him this Saturday represented two days of waiting, two days of not going into the office or starting on the City Project or even understanding his role to begin with, all of which he wanted to cut through as soon as possible. Theodore's directions, when he thought about them later, had confused him; his boss made it sound like he would not be doing much for the project beyond

observing, and yet his work was *important*, and should be undertaken *seriously* and *carefully*, and Ben could imagine a scenario in which he wasn't asked to do much of anything, until suddenly he was. It was all complicated by the fact that he had asked to join the project himself, and therefore felt an extra degree of pressure that hadn't existed before his request, or when he thought he'd been denied. He even considered taking the afternoon to go into the office, which he had done only a handful of times in thirteen years, but ultimately it would've been an empty gesture. He hadn't taken part in any meetings yet, or heard anything about potential strategies, and there was nothing – as far as he knew – to do but wait.

A weekend also meant two days without much news of the mysterious young man, or new developments in the murder investigation – if, in fact, there were any. When he actually thought about it Ben knew he couldn't blame the weekend itself, but this didn't stop him from trying, as he found the truth even more unpalatable: there was no timetable for news about the boy, and no reason to think he would hear anything soon, or possibly at all. He had been involved, but now he wasn't.

Across the playground Alex had taken Miles from his stroller and plopped him in a swing. Ben waved to get their attention, then pointed at himself and at her and circled his arms to communicate, without having to shout, that they should switch places. She smiled and shook her head no, her hair bouncing and catching the light. It was a soft mahogany color that shone brightly in the sun; from a distance it looked much more red than brown. He raised his arms to ask *why not?*, but she had already stopped looking, focused on Miles swinging gently in his seat, forward and backward. From behind him Ben heard Dylan call his name, so he gave up and turned to look for his son, and when he

did he slammed his shin into the nearest slide with a forceful *crack*, hard enough to shake the whole structure. Everything was so low to the ground, he hadn't seen it, and his momentum nearly sent him toppling over the slide's end, but he spun away at the last moment and skipped through the soft playground mulch while pain ran up and down his leg.

"Ow shit," he said. "I mean shoot. That really..." He couldn't think of anything else that wasn't profanity.

"Are you okay?" Dylan yelled.

"I'm fine, buddy, thanks for asking." He bent down and rubbed his shin. "Listen, Daddy has to go sit down for a minute. Just keep doing what you're doing, I'll be watching from right over there."

He limped across the playground toward the other two, turning every few steps to make sure he could see Dylan – and also that he wasn't being followed. When he was little his family had a dog that used to trail him from room to room, to his bedroom or the kitchen or into the bathroom; Dylan could be like that if he wasn't distracted.

By the time he reached Alex the pain in his leg had mostly subsided, though Ben imagined he would have a bruise. Since he was there and still felt like sitting, he continued to limp.

"What happened to you?" she asked, more amused than concerned.

He fell into the full-sized swing next to Miles' bucket chair and made a face at the baby.

"Nothing," he said. "Just a minor mishap. Those slides are dangerous, you know."

"Yeah, I think I see Dill on one right now."

“I meant for me,” Ben said. “He’s a resilient kid.”

Alex slowed Miles’ swing and tickled his belly.

“With a father like you, what choice does he have?”

Ben used his feet to push himself around on the swing. “Ha ha,” he said. “You’re very funny.”

From nearly the beginning, their relationship had been marked by surprise, and Alex had proved herself many times to be patient and level-headed and calm. The pregnancy and marriage had come so unexpectedly that there were no guarantees; they hadn’t known each other as well as they should have, and the fact that she was a sweet wife and mother was – Ben knew – a matter of luck. He couldn’t have been sure ahead of time. He also hadn’t known if *he* would be a good father or not, and it had given him considerable anxiety during the build up to Dylan’s birth. Even five years later he still wasn’t sure, but he comforted himself with the fact that he was, at least, present and involved, which was more than could be said of some fathers, his own included.

“Just so you know, I might have to do some work this afternoon,” Alex said. Often she worked better on the weekends, when he was there to take the kids, than the weekdays when he wasn’t, or evenings when they both were tired. It was her choice to keep working at Zip, even part-time, and if they squeezed they could have made it on a single salary. But it wouldn’t have been easy, and Alex didn’t want to give up her job anyway. As patient and caring and attentive as she was, Ben wasn’t sure she actually liked being a mother. He had asked her once, while they were lying in bed together at the end of the day.

“Sometimes,” she’d said. “Sometimes not.”

“I don’t mean, like, at any given moment. But overall, as a...state of being.”

She’d thought about it. “In the end,” she said. “Do I have a choice?”

“I guess not,” he admitted.

“Then it’s better for me not to dwell on it.”

No one ever asked Ben if he liked being a father, but often it was because many people, including some women he knew, treated fatherhood as something to be put on or taken off, picked up or put down. It was a little insulting to Ben – but mostly, he thought, because it reminded him too much of his own dad, who had shaken off his role after the divorce, and never really put it back on again.

“That’s fine,” he told Alex at the park. “I was thinking of going into the office myself today, but I won’t.”

“Really?” she said. “Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t have a good reason. Just feeling nervous about this City thing.”

“Sorry,” she said. “But you haven’t started yet, have you?”

“No, I think that’s part of the problem.” He shrugged. “I don’t know, it doesn’t totally make sense.”

He had told Alex yesterday about joining the Project, though he still had not – for reasons he couldn’t articulate – told her that he’d been the one to ask first. He hadn’t meant to leave it out, but she had been excited for him, and the conversation quickly moved to the Project itself, or what little he knew of it. He hadn’t wanted to tell her anything until he knew the answer, and now that he did, he had missed his opportunity to fill in the gap.

“I mean,” Alex said. “I’m not on the project myself, obviously, but I’m sure you guys will come up with something.”

She lifted Miles out of the swing and carried him back to their stroller. Across the playground Dylan waved from the top of a short, colorful set of stairs, so Ben stepped off his swing and waved back.

“Amazing!” he said, and turned to Alex. “Yeah, I’m sure we’ll come up with something.”

“Everything that’s happened notwithstanding,” Alex said. “And there’s a lot, I know – it shouldn’t be that hard to sell the town. It has its charms.”

Ben came over to join them at the stroller, shuffling his feet through the mulch. He also hadn’t told Alex that the dead young man still bothered him, as did the address, 180 King St. He knew it was out there, sitting somewhere downtown waiting to be seen. People walking past it like nothing.

“You think so?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said. “In places.”

They waved at Dylan again and began to walk toward him through the playground, bouncing baby Miles on the uneven surface, pocked by hundreds of little feet running and jumping and kicking and wrestling. It had gotten even warmer as the sun rose in the sky, and Alex paused to take off her sweater and tie it around her waist. She was small-boned and slender, even after the boys, and she’d always had a knack for simple, elegant fashion, though these days she gravitated mostly to simple – like Ben himself, who was once a careful dresser and now wore the same few outfits over and over

again. In another life they would be different people, living in Brooklyn or the Bay area, chic and childless.

“Do you think you’d ever want to move?” Ben asked as they walked.

“You mean, leave Ransom?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “It’s hard to say. I guess maybe at some point... But who knows how we’d feel years from now?”

“So you wouldn’t want to do it sooner.” He said it flatly, a mild observation more than a question.

“I mean, how much sooner? Dylan’s just starting school; he’s only going to get more involved. We have our jobs, our friends.” They didn’t have a lot of close friends anymore – for no particular reason, other than lack of effort – but Ben didn’t say that.

“We’re pretty settled,” she added.

He put his hands in his pockets. Dylan saw them approaching and began to climb down from his perch. “Yeah,” he agreed. “We are.”

“We bought a *house*. I figured when we did that were settling.”

“Sure,” Ben said. “I understand.”

“I don’t love working with Zip, but it’s flexible, and I’m pretty good at it. I don’t know that I could really ask for something better.”

“You don’t like your work?” He hadn’t expected her to say that – and if she had, to say it offhand, with such rational indifference.

She shrugged. “No, not really.”

The problem with Alex, he realized – or the best thing about her – was her self-sufficiency. Even with the stress of marriage and two young children and a job, she managed to cultivate other interests and hobbies for herself, from yoga to scrapbooking to poetry. She wanted Dylan and Miles to play the piano when they got older, so she was teaching herself on a small upright they'd found on the internet and purchased from an old woman whose arthritis meant she couldn't play anymore. Even if she didn't love her job, or wasn't wholly satisfied as a mother, Ben knew she wasn't empty.

“To be honest,” he said. “I don't really love my job either.”

“You don't?”

He aimed to match her tone. “Nope.”

They had gotten close enough that Dylan ran to them at a jumping sprint and slammed his hand into Ben's middle.

“You're it!” he said.

“Be careful,” Alex said sharply.

“Oof, watch out buddy.” Ben rubbed his stomach. “I hurt my leg, remember? No running for me right now.” A tennis ball lay on the ground next to a balance beam ten feet away, a stray launched over the fence during a game on the nearest court. Ben stepped over and picked it up. “Here, fetch this,” he said, throwing it in front of them.

“He's not a dog,” Alex said.

“I know that.”

“I thought things at work were going well,” she added. “If nothing else, I mean, with the project and all.”

Ben thought about how much to say. He didn't like telling her half the truth, which made him uneasy, but he was afraid of what she would think if she found out – how he felt about work, or about Ransom, or even how much time he spent thinking about the dead young man, a young man he didn't know, and never would. In the end, though, it wasn't fear that kept him from saying more, but pride, or vanity, or something aspirational yet similar. He had a job and a house and a wife and two children he loved, and no ostensible reason to be unhappy. He wasn't going to lie to her face, but he also wasn't going to complain, not about this.

“We'll see how it goes,” he said.

That night they ordered pizza for dinner. When Ben went out to pick it up, he left a few minutes early and drove downtown. King St. ran north-south through the middle of the city, perpendicular to Main, and in the 100-block it was a narrow two-lane with street parking on either curb, tree-lined and flat – the buildings set back from the sidewalk and pressed tight against each other. Downtown Ransom was intermittently crowded on a Saturday night, but this stretch of King – comprised of shops that closed by five or six, or offices that weren't open on the weekends at all – was mostly empty. Ben drove up and down it twice before he found the right number in the orange streetlight, then parked across from the building and waited, almost like he expected something to happen, now that he'd seen it. There were a few cars on the street around him, including a Blue Mercedes directly in front of the 180 address.

Once he found it and was sitting in his own car watching the blank face of the building, he felt nervous for the first time. It had a glass front with curtains drawn, and a

green door set deeply in the brick. Above it he could see the numbers, nailed to the transom, and on the door itself was a small golden plaque, shining in the gloomy lamplight. After a minute he got out and crossed the street.

Gage & Blotch, Attorneys at Law, the plaque read.

Peering beyond the glass, through the tiny part in the curtain behind it, he thought he saw a light inside – the faint hint of a light, like it was coming from beneath a closed door, though it was nearly impossible to distinguish hints of lights behind the glass with reflections on it, from the streetlamps and the moon and the lights of other windows. And of course it made no sense for an attorney to be in his office on a Saturday night, and if he was, to care that Ben was outside. Ben realized that he *wanted* there to be a light inside, something to observe, something special, some secret, though he knew that what he wanted and what *was* had little to do with each other.

And the door was locked anyway. The office was closed. It might not be locked and closed on Monday, he thought, but for now there was nothing more to see, and if he didn't hurry their pizza would get cold.

He ran a finger over the engraved letters on the plaque, then turned and jogged back to the car before anyone saw him.

CHAPTER 9

Erin and her mother were late to church on Sunday. Erin had woken up on time, but she misjudged how long it would take to fix her hair and make-up – activities that, most days, she put little effort into – and she had to rush the job to get them out the door. Her eyebrows were too thin, her face didn't match her neck in the light, and her throat was scalded from having gulped half a cup of coffee to finish it before she could do her lips, and still by the time they pulled into the spacious Calvary Bible lot, it was five minutes past nine. Erin could tell that Janet was agitated, but since they didn't often go to church together, and Janet made no secret of wanting that to change, she was trying, it seemed, not to ruin the experience. Nonetheless she walked swiftly through the lobby, waving hello to a few other stragglers without breaking stride, and straight into the sanctuary, Erin half-jogging behind her to keep up.

It was a large semicircular space with rows and rows of plushy dark chairs, its occupants grouped into clumps with stretches of empty seating between them. As Erin and her mother took their own seats, halfway up one side, and she looked around the sanctuary with fresh eyes, from the inside, it suddenly occurred to her that it was built around a series of threes. She hadn't spent much time in it since high school, and she'd never paid that much attention to the layout, but once she started counting she couldn't stop: three primary seating areas – left, right, and middle – each divided into three smaller sections. Three portions of the stage, with a long rectangular middle that took up most of the space. Three massive crosses mounted on the wall behind the pastor, facing

the congregation – the largest of all in the center (for Jesus, Erin thought, satisfied that she at least remembered this much). On both side walls were three enormous vertical banners, six or seven feet tall, emblazoned with an artistic stock photo and a single word each: LEARN LOVE LEAVE. It bothered Erin that there were only two video screens, large HD projections high up stage right and left, though in order to have three they would've needed to block the crosses.

Just as she and Janet sat down, the lights lowered slightly, the guitarist onstage strummed his first notes, and everyone rose again for worship – if they'd waited thirty seconds, they could have walked in while people were standing and gone unnoticed. As the rest of the band started playing and the song ramped up, Erin felt glad she hadn't actually intended to sing, because she would have started on the first verse of "Jesus, Messiah" by herself, while everyone around her continued to listen reverently. The worship leader – a handsome guy with blond hair and tight jeans – sang the first verse solo, then by unspoken (as far as Erin could tell) agreement, the congregation joined him for the second verse and the rest of the song, the words projected onto the screens to either side. For a listener it was all pleasant enough, though Erin didn't feel the emotion that those spread out around her seemed to feel, and after five or six songs it was over. When they sat she tried to remember if it had been exactly five or six, and found that she couldn't.

While the rest of the worship band filed offstage, the blond-haired man who led the singing put his guitar away, turned on a separate mic clipped to his jacket – a dark blazer with professorial elbow patches – and began to speak. Erin hadn't expected Doug to be onstage for the music, but it felt to her like they were getting into the heart of the

service now, and she craned her neck to look toward the front, searching for the back of his head.

“Is Doug here?” she whispered to Janet. “Why’s this guy doing everything?”

Janet lifted her finger to her lips and glared, then jerked her head at the stage, and Erin realized the man had just started to pray. She quickly bowed her head. It had been awhile since she’d been to church, but even she could tell that, post-worship, this was the prelude to a sermon, the one part of the service she had counted on seeing Doug, and he was nowhere to be found. Once her mother closed her eyes, she peeked her head up again, but it was impossible to see with everyone else’s head down. The sanctuary was only half full, if that, and because they’d come in late they were sitting behind most people, even though they were halfway to the stage. It was possible he was among the crowd, but this didn’t explain why he wouldn’t be preaching. She’d been sure he would; Doug himself had mentioned in their last meeting on Thursday that he was trying to finish a sermon.

As the young pastor continued to pray, Erin began to regret her decision to come, though it was far too late to do anything about it. It would be difficult to find Doug and speak with him if she couldn’t see him up front, assuming he was even here – she had no reason to think otherwise, but she’d also had no reason to think he wouldn’t be preaching. A part of her had even been looking forward to the service, not because she cared about the content so much as she wanted to hear him speak, to see him in a different light; she had even planned to be on the lookout for some comment or insight she could mention later, if she managed to speak with him, to prove that she’d been listening. Given their

interactions, it was hard to imagine what he would be like as a preacher. Surely, she thought, he'd be more animated than he was with her.

“A few Sundays ago,” the young pastor said. He had finished praying. “I was coming into church here before the first service. It was still early and most people hadn't arrived yet, so the parking lot was mostly empty, but there was another man who had parked at the same time I had, and he was also walking into the building a few steps ahead of me. When he reached the door he turned his head and saw me walking up behind him, and we made eye contact, and he looked at me like we knew each other. And he *did* look familiar, though at the time I couldn't remember his name. Now if you are, like me, someone who's bad at names –” There were knowing chuckles in the audience. “– then this happens to you from time to time. It's even more of a problem when you get to speak and share in front of others, and they recognize your face even when you don't recognize theirs. I wish I was better about this, but I won't lie to you: I'm not. We're all in need of grace! Anyway I knew that I had seen this person before, but I couldn't remember his name. He, on the other hand, turned and smiled at me like we knew each other, and he opened his arms wide and he said ‘Good morning!’ And I thought to myself: Clearly he knows me, and he thinks I know him. I have to go along with this. So I said ‘Good morning!’ and I opened my arms and went in for the hug. And at the exact moment I wrapped my arms around him I realized: He was holding the door open for me. His arms were out because he wanted me to go ahead of him. And he was *very* surprised when I hugged him.” There were pockets of loud laughter throughout the sanctuary. “That's a true story, by the way.”

“Who is he again?” Erin whispered to her mother.

“Dallas,” her mother answered, like this was supposed to mean something. Erin didn’t know why she’d asked. There weren’t many possible answers she would have understood.

“So he’s the pastor too?”

Janet nodded. She had laughed loudly at his story, and as he continued to speak she kept her face turned to him. Erin knew that her body language was meant to convey, without saying anything, that Erin would do better to listen without asking so many questions. Which was, she thought, a bit rich – Janet had no problem whispering at the movie theater.

“Too often,” Dallas said. “We think we understand how things go. We think we know the world and its rules – who wins and loses, who prospers and doesn’t. Work hard. Play fair. Take care of you and yours, and things will turn out in the end.

“But is this,” he asked, “really the case?”

The thing was, Erin thought that Doug could help her. She couldn’t say why, but it was a sense that first came to her on Friday as she left Joe’s apartment, and it stayed – through the blank, dreamless nights, the conversations with her mom, the drive to and from the park. She wanted to know what he thought. With Janet she wanted support – she wanted to be right – but with Doug she wanted ideas. And she wanted to watch him think about it, to see how he’d respond.

Unfortunately he hadn’t responded, still nothing since her message on Friday. Maybe he didn’t text, she thought, though she was pretty sure she’d seen him do it. At the very least she had counted on finding him today, and instead she was getting Dallas and his hair and his smile and his earnest, self-effacing sermon.

“You see,” he said. “Jesus rewrites our story. We’re not blessed by our own strength, or our own skill, or our own righteousness, but by His.”

She had made up her mind to find Joe’s brothers. There was no other option, no one else who could tell her anything useful. It would’ve been nice to talk it over with Doug, to hear him agree, but she would do without it. She had to.

“We’re not blessed when we win,” Dallas said. “We’re blessed when we lose for His sake.”

Erin leaned close to her mom.

“Can I borrow the car this afternoon?” she said.

Janet frowned again. “Will you hush, please?” she whispered.

Erin sat back in her chair and bit her lip until it hurt. Then she took a pen from her purse. It wasn’t like there were a lot of people sitting around them. On the church bulletin, in the box for sermon notes, she wrote *Please?* and put it on her mother’s knee. Janet ignored it for several seconds, then sighed and took the pen.

Why? she wrote.

Errands. Will be quick.

3rd day in a row Janet wrote.

I know, I’m sorry! Good things come in 3s.

Janet took the pen back and tapped it restlessly against her arm, but she kept her eyes on the stage and didn’t respond. She waited long enough that the bulletin slid off the knee of her slacks and onto the floor. When she made no move to pick it up, Erin reached down and placed it back on her thigh.

Finally Janet uncapped the pen. *Fine*, she wrote.

Thank you! Love u.

Love you too.

Nice sermon, Erin wrote.

Janet sighed quietly and leaned over. “I know you’re just saying that,” she whispered. “But it really is a lovely sermon.”

In the end, the alumni network saved her. At first Erin hadn’t been able to find anything about Joe’s brothers. A simple Google search revealed eleven men with their last name Decker in Ransom, but it was impossible to tell which ones might be his siblings, nor if there were more Deckers that had somehow avoided the White Pages, and nothing on any of Joe’s social media accounts – which he updated sparingly – pointed to his family. She knew almost nothing else about their lives, or any other clues she could use to narrow down the search. When she sat down to look after church, she thought it would be easy – who, at this point, didn’t have something about them online? – and in a sense it *was*: she could find names and addresses for Deckers all over Ransom. But she couldn’t tell which ones might be Joe’s brothers. They had not, it seemed, pasted themselves all over the internet.

She was about to start writing Joe’s old college buddies, choosing them at random from lists of internet friends that also went to Barnwell, when she made the connection. Joe was a Barnwell alum. So were his brothers. So was she.

She hadn’t updated her own profile in the alumni network, since she had no desire to share her current job with anyone, but her email and her physical address were available, and when she searched she found seven Deckers that had graduated from

Barnwell in the last decade. Only three still lived in Ransom: Joseph Decker. Daniel Decker. Reuben Decker. For Daniel and Reuben, the same address in the northeast part of the city. They lived together.

After the service at Calvary, she and Janet had eaten brunch at a café back in Ransom called Toast of the Town – a goodwill gesture, perhaps, for attending church, though Erin thought she might have ruined it with the whispers and questions and overall fidgeting. She'd found it more difficult to sit still than she expected. The alumni breakthrough came in the middle of the afternoon, while her mother was taking a catnap in her room, and Erin left before she could wake up and change her mind about the car. It wasn't far from her house to the Decker address, fifteen minutes north around the eastern edge of downtown, through Kerrytown and just above Five Forks. The houses in the area were an eclectic mix of shapes and sizes and conditions, close enough to Five Forks to reflect some of its free-thinking sensibilities, but far enough from the clothing boutiques and coffee roasters and the city's only vegan restaurant to feel less beatnik and more beaten down, poorer and wilder. Its occupants lived there less by choice than necessity.

Erin would've been hesitant to visit at night, but a clear, motivated Sunday afternoon felt different, and she drove through narrow, twisty streets looking for the right address, passing small one-story homes the size of trailers and larger two-story structures, decrepit houses in foreclosure next to modest, well-tended gardens and bright porches. Not every place had a number displayed, and it took her several minutes of searching the same street, up and down, before she found the Decker house and its number, high up on the porch next to the door. Their empty driveway consisted of hard-packed dirt scarred by tree roots and fallen branches, and the street had no curb or sidewalk, so Erin parked on

the side of the road and got out, her tires straddling the line between pavement and dry, patchy grass. She picked her way carefully up the drive to the house.

It was a wide two-story with gray wooden siding and peeling white shutters, and when Erin stepped onto the porch she realized it was a duplex, one side perfectly mirrored with the other – two front doors, ten feet apart, two letter boxes and porchlights, two square windows on the ground-level, two more on the second. The Decker address covered only the right side of the house. She knocked on the door, then stepped back to wait.

Thirty seconds later it opened with some difficulty, rattling the window and the letterbox and the house itself. A scruffy young man stuck his head out looking irritated. His hair was buzzed close to the scalp and he had a week or two of stubble on his face and neck, both of which gave him a darker complexion than Joe, but even so she knew immediately it was him. Or one of them. The resemblance to Joe was just close enough – same nose, same mouth, same green eyes. Still she stumbled over her words like she hadn't expected to find what she was looking for. "Are you –" she said. "Are you Joe Decker's brother?"

He frowned and hesitated, looking her over, then finally nodded. "Yeah."

"Daniel?" she said.

He shook his head. "I'm Reuben."

"Right, Reuben. Hi. I'm Erin." She paused, but he didn't react. "Erin Cash. I'm Joe's girlfriend."

Now his eyebrows went up. "Girlfriend?" he said. "I didn't think Joe had a girlfriend."

“Well,” she said, and after a second she shrugged, flustered.

He had been standing with his body behind the door, just one shoulder and his head peeking out, but now he stepped fully onto the porch and closed the door behind him. He was dressed casually in a t-shirt and cargo shorts, black socks and no shoes, and she realized when he stepped away from the door and stood upright that he was tall, like Joe. Erin was an average height, and he had her by seven or eight inches; her eyes met the middle of his chest.

“We’ve haven’t been together too long,” she added. Inwardly she cringed and pressed her lips shut to keep from qualifying herself any further.

“Well shit,” he said. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay,” Erin said, though he hadn’t technically apologized. There was an awkward pause while she waited to see if he would say anything else.

“Goddamn,” he finally added, shaking his head.

“I’m here because I wanted to talk to you about Joe,” she said. “Do you know anything more? What’s going on?”

He ran one hand over his scalp and down his face.

“I know what we all know,” he said. “He’s lost. They’re still looking. It’s...” He paused and looked beyond her, over the street. “It’s crazy.”

“You really don’t know anything else?” she said, trying not to seem desperate.

“Your parents don’t? Nobody?”

“No, sorry. We’re just waiting.”

She brushed a stray hair off her forehead and thought about what to say next. “But you knew he was going hiking, right?”

Reuben looked down at her closely. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m confused why he was out there at all. He didn’t say anything to me.”

“He didn’t tell you he was going hiking?”

“No.”

Now it was Reuben who paused, who seemed to choose his words carefully.

“What did he tell you then?” he asked.

“Nothing. I mean, that’s the thing, we’d made plans together for the weekend. As far I knew they were still on. He didn’t tell me any different.”

“Plans,” Reuben said. “Joe didn’t mention any plans to me.”

Erin looked away. The porch was mostly bare, rough wooden boards and peeling white paint, but there were two collapsible chairs in the corner, the kind a mom and dad would take to watch their kid play soccer. One of them had a beer can still in the cup holder.

“I don’t understand,” she said, partly to herself.

Reuben must have seen her staring, because he looked behind himself, tugged at his shorts, and wandered over to the chair. He picked up the can and shook it, then walked to edge of the porch and poured the last remnants of the beer over the side. “He didn’t tell you anything?” he said without looking.

“No.”

“Huh.” He leaned over the railing and tried to toss the can into the large trash bin next to the house. Erin heard it hit the side and clatter away.

“What exactly did Joe say to *you*?” she asked him.

Instead of answering Reuben climbed off the porch – sitting on the creaky rail and swinging his legs around to the other side, then hopping to the ground – and disappeared out of sight behind the house. Erin heard him find the can and toss it in the bin.

He returned the same way, stepping easily up onto the porch and over the railing. He wiped his hands on his shorts.

“He just said he was hiking.”

“That’s all?”

Reuben shrugged, the movement quick and jerky.

“He said he was going out for the day, and he wanted to borrow some boots. So I lent him a pair. When he didn’t return them later, and he didn’t answer our texts or calls, we got worried and called the cops.”

“The cops?” Erin asked. “Or the park rangers?”

“The park rangers.”

“Did he like to do that kind of stuff a lot? Like, you know, growing up? He didn’t seem real outdoorsy to me.”

“Sure, I guess.”

“But he didn’t have any shoes of his own.”

Reuben started to say something and stopped. He frowned. “You said your name was Erin?”

“Yeah.”

“How long have you been dating Joe?”

“A few months,” she said, rounding up. In reality they’d been dating six weeks or so – maybe a little longer, if you started from the moment they first met – but Reuben wouldn’t know this.

“I’m sorry Joe didn’t tell you. I don’t get it either. But I kinda feel like I’m being interrogated here, and I don’t appreciate it.”

“I’m just trying to understand what’s going on. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to me.”

“Sure,” he said. “But what do you want me to say? He went hiking, he got lost, he’s out there somewhere in the woods right now. That’s it, that’s all there is to it.” He had maneuvered himself back in front of the door, and he put his hand on the knob. “I’m exhausted,” he said. “I can’t help you.”

“Wait,” Erin said quickly. “I just – I mean – You’re really not going to help me?”

He opened the door. “Help you do *what*? I don’t even know you.”

“Joe knows me.”

“And he’s not here right now, is he?”

“Wait – ” she said again, but he had already stepped inside and closed the door.

Back in her car, Erin sat dumbfounded. She had thought that finding Joe’s brothers would provide some clarity, but it had not. She didn’t know what to think, and she didn’t know what to do.

Though in a way, she realized, this at least made her next move simpler.

She was going to get some help.

CHAPTER 10

It had been over a decade since Doug spent a Sunday morning at home. He missed church if he was traveling, at a conference or a ministry retreat or vacation with Sam and Emma, but otherwise he was there every week, even when he wasn't preaching himself. There had been a time twelve years ago when he'd gotten food poisoning from a cheeseburger at a small Ransom diner – Emma had been eight, and one Saturday night they'd gone to dinner as family, then tried to go bowling. Halfway through the second game Doug realized something was wrong. The church was nearly at its peak attendance, though they didn't know it at the time, and they were in the process of building a new wing for more classroom and office space. Sam called the other pastors from home while Doug sat in front of the toilet on a little pink chair from Emma's room and vomited, over and over again, and eventually they found a preaching replacement – the Discipleship Pastor, a balding, older man named Mark. Mark had been hired in large part for his age, because it felt crazy for Doug and the rest of the staff, mostly in their late twenties and thirties, to oversee a budget in the millions by themselves. A few years later Mark left Calvary and moved to Louisville to be closer to his son and son's family, and a few years after that his position was eliminated, and its responsibilities folded into the job that Dallas currently did. The diner was now a Chipotle, and every once in a while when Doug drove past, he remembered what used to stand there, and he felt some satisfaction to have outlived it.

For most of his career it had required something equally as violent and unexpected to miss a Sunday at church. If he was sick, he would take time off during the week, but he'd preached through colds and fevers and aches before, and he took a muted pride in his resilience. Since Calvary began he had never skipped church when he could – theoretically – have gone. Not since college, or with Sam as a newlywed.

The first thing he did that morning was make breakfast. Doug didn't typically eat breakfast, not much beyond a cup of coffee and a yogurt, or a single piece of toast, but with the unexpected breadth of empty time before him, he needed some new way to fill it – if he didn't make breakfast, he wasn't sure what he was going to do. In truth he didn't really want breakfast, and he padded around the kitchen in sweatpants and slippers for almost ten minutes, trying to make a choice, before deciding in the end on pancakes, something light and sweet that might settle in his stomach easier than a greasy meal of eggs and bacon. It had been several years, however, since he last made pancakes, and he wasn't sure he remembered how to do it; they'd been a staple for he and Emma, when Sam was sick or away or sleeping late, but the last time they made them together was junior high. Still he resisted looking up the recipe, which he knew was simple, and instead lined up the ingredients on the counter – the flour, the eggs, the milk and butter – and went to work.

They turned out well enough, though Doug tested the first one off the griddle and thought he might have used too much salt, or not enough sugar, so he found an unopened bag of chocolate chips in the pantry and added some to the rest. When he'd made a plateful, he took it into the breakfast nook with his coffee, a banana, and his phone. Like most of the houses in Strawberry Hill, they had several choices where to eat each meal –

barstools at the extended kitchen counter, the breakfast nook and its table of four, or a full dining room off the kitchen with seating for ten – though most often, once Emma left for college the year before, they chose none of those and ate in the family room in front of the TV. As Doug started to eat he looked at the time on his phone and guessed that Dallas was halfway into his sermon by now, a sermon he would also preach again an hour later for the next service. He wondered how it was going, given what little time Dallas had to prepare. Now that his pancakes were on a plate in front of him, and now that he was eating them with a fork, bite after bite, instead of picking at them with his fingers while he cooked, he realized that they weren't good, sweet and chalky at the same time. With cream and sugar in his coffee it was too much, so he emptied his mug in the sink and poured a new cup, plain and black. The bitterness, at least, cut against the pancakes. He had sent Dallas his outline and half-written sermon yesterday, and they'd spoken briefly on the phone, but his work was incomplete, and not one of his better efforts anyway. He was curious to hear what Dallas would preach, what he'd do with Doug's notes, though he also knew that any sermon written under such circumstances, good or bad, was going to shame him.

He finished four small pancakes before his stomach started to hurt and he couldn't imagine eating more, so he dumped the rest in the trash and loaded all the dishes in the dishwasher, then went upstairs with his phone and got back into bed. There was nothing else for him to do.

He was reclining on the couch downstairs, his laptop on his chest, the TV playing in the background, when the doorbell rang. Somehow it was five o'clock. The sun was

starting to set. On most lazy days he enjoyed reading, and he had books stacked around the house in nearly every room – novels and biographies, history and theology – every one of which he intended to read some day, when he had time. And he had plenty of time now, though he wasn't in the mood for reading and spent most of the day watching television instead, except for a long break around lunchtime when he cleaned the house, picking up the books he'd scattered, washing laundry left in the bin, running the dishwasher, wiping down all the counters and appliances. A late afternoon football game was on the TV, though he didn't follow the NFL closely and wasn't watching. He had no intention of answering the door; he couldn't imagine who it would be, certainly not who wasn't going to call or text him first, and he had no desire to see or speak to anyone. The doorbell rang a second time and he ignored it again, though when it rang a third time he put his computer down and stood, stretched, and walked slowly to the door. Much slower than necessary. It wasn't too late, he thought, for this person to give up.

Just as he reached for the knob, the bell rang a fourth time, and he opened the door to the sound reverberating behind him through the house.

It was Erin. When she saw his face her eyes narrowed, and he felt an immediate need to explain himself, so he gestured vaguely backward and said, "Sorry I was, uh, running the vacuum." He stopped and dropped his arm from the open door. "Actually," he added, "I wasn't, I don't know why I said that. I did clean up earlier, though. You know what, it doesn't matter. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not," she said.

"Okay," he said. "Good. In that case, hello. This is a surprise."

"Can I come in?"

Doug hesitated and turned to look behind him, sizing up the house, though there was nothing to see and he knew it. When he stepped back to turn Erin must have taken it as an invitation, or the start of one, because she stepped forward and across the threshold. “I don’t –” he began to say, but caught himself when he realized she was already coming in.

He moved back a few extra feet and she stepped past him into the foyer, peering around the walls and up the stairs.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But I really need to talk. I went to church today and you weren’t there. Am I interrupting anything? Is your wife home?”

“Erin,” he said, and stopped again. He was trying to catch up. She’d gone to *Calvary*?

“You didn’t answer my texts.”

“I’ve been a little busy. I’m sorry.”

“I really need to talk,” she said again. “Something’s happened to Joe. Something weird.” She paused and finally looked at him. “Something bad.”

Doug opened his mouth but couldn’t think of what to say. As soon as he thought he’d caught up, she pressed forward. “This really isn’t the best time for me,” he said at last.

“Well Jesus,” she said. “It’s not the best time for *me* either. It’s not the best time for anyone. But I’m losing my mind here, I don’t know what else to do.”

“Erin, my wife and I are separating. She’s out of town right now, and when she comes back she’s going to move out.” He paused. “Or I am. We’ll have to decide. I’m taking some time off from church as well. There’s a lot to figure out.”

For a moment Erin was speechless, her eyes wide and clear. She looked for support and found the banister, and finally she spoke.

“Holy *shit*.”

Doug’s first call had been to Ed Byrd, the executive pastor at Calvary. His second call had been to Dallas. His third was to his sister Susan, who lived in Boulder with her husband and her three girls. After Sam had left – after they had talked late into the night, after they agreed to sleep on it, after he had woken up early and thought and tried to pray and they had talked some more – he made three calls. He didn’t really have a fourth. People would find out in time. Sam left with her bags packed for a week, and he went up to his office and closed the door, even though he was alone, and he tried to pray again, though he found he couldn’t, really, because he had made up his mind, and it was hard to pray with your mind made up. Like it was just a courtesy, informing God of things He already knew. Things that weren’t going to change.

When Doug was finished trying, he went back downstairs and made his phone calls.

Dallas could have been the first, and maybe should’ve been, but he dreaded their conversation in a way that he didn’t with Ed. He wasn’t opposed to telling people – it was unavoidable – but he wanted to start with someone easier, and he knew that Ed was used to having difficult, awkward conversations in a way that Dallas wasn’t yet. Ed hardly ever preached, not more than once or twice in the fifteen years he’d been at Calvary, but he oversaw the budget and the staff and the building itself, and he mediated most conflicts that didn’t rise to the level of the Senior Pastor’s concern. He had come to

Calvary as a steadying force, just after it became clear the church was wobbling, that its rise had petered into a descent, and he remained through many years of steady decline – before their situation began recently to stabilize at a newer, lower level. They’d been forced several times to slash the budget and cut staff, and each time Ed had been, at his own insistence, the one to deliver the news. He was empathetic in a way that Doug – though he tried – was not, and Doug felt guilty that he’d been hired at exactly the wrong time, having never gotten to experience any of the church’s growth, only its decline.

Ed was a few years older than Doug, and he was also a native South Carolinian in a way that Doug wasn’t, having been born and raised in the state, while Doug spent his own childhood in Illinois and didn’t move to Ransom until after college. He had a minor drawl that came out most when he spoke slowly, with purpose and emphasis, and lessened as he sped up, though since he was usually thoughtful, he usually betrayed his accent. When they spoke on the phone, an hour after Sam drove away, he wanted to meet with Doug at once; when Doug wouldn’t agree he insisted on Sunday, and Doug could only put him off until Monday through repeated refusals, to the point of being ruder than he’d intended when he first called, and then again only until Monday. There were few secrets among Calvary’s staff, and they tended to hit hard whenever they came out. Ed had known about Doug and Sam’s troubles, but he hadn’t realized how serious they’d become, and he seemed to want to address it in the only way he knew how: through conversation, and where conversation failed, dogged presence.

Eight years ago Ed’s adult son Ronnie had committed suicide; it had utterly blindsided the family, and at several points in the months after, Doug came over and sat with him in the middle of the night, when Ed didn’t want to wake his own wife, who had

finally fallen asleep, but also didn't want to be alone. Doug had never found the right words to say, but in the end it hadn't mattered, and he and Ed had ended up growing closer, despite the little they had in common. It was why Doug had known that Ed would at least not respond with judgment, and why he wasn't afraid to call.

They agreed to meet on Monday. They also agreed that Doug was in no position to preach, which gave the next call to Dallas greater purpose. The first time he tried there was no answer, nor the second, and Doug was impatient enough that he called Lauren, Dallas's wife. When she answered he asked, sheepishly, to speak with her husband.

He'd been out in the yard with his oldest son, and he came to the phone out of breath. Doug broke the news without prelude.

"Goodness," Dallas said. "I don't.... I knew that you were, well, struggling, but I never – I never thought..."

He didn't elaborate what, exactly, he never thought. In general, Doug had not heard him so baffled before. He'd been afraid that Dallas would be hurt – even though he was 35, even though he was married, even though he had children of his own – Doug still thought of him as young and naïve. Innocent, if he was feeling generous. He'd imagined it like telling a child their dog had died, and to his surprise Dallas's reaction was more bewilderment than sorrow.

When Doug mentioned the upcoming sermon, that Doug could no longer preach himself, Dallas seemed to latch onto the idea. His tone shifted to a new register, pushing past the confusion to something more concrete, a task at hand.

"Of course," he said. "That makes sense, you're in no position. I'll do it. Don't worry about it."

“Thanks,” Doug said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said again. “We’ll talk more soon.” He paused. “I guess we’ll have to talk more soon. Sit down this week and hash it out. What it means for you, and what it means for the church, and your role here.”

From the first moment they had raised the possibility of separating, Doug had known what it would do to his position at church. Still he had not expected it to come up immediately.

“I know,” he said. “I’m going to sit down with Ed on Monday.”

“Oh, okay, that’s good. I’m glad to hear that. I’d like to be there too, I’ll talk to Ed.”

“I’m sure,” Doug said. “Listen, I’ll let you go. I know you’ve got a busy day now, all of a sudden. I’ll at least send you the work I’ve done.”

“Sure, Doug, that’d be fine.”

“Okay then.”

“I’ll pray for you. Lauren and I will be praying. Let’s talk more on Monday.”

“Alright.”

In a way, Doug thought, it was a relief to have Erin as a distraction. The meeting on Monday had sat in the back of his mind all day, while he made pancakes and cleaned the house and watched TV and didn’t go to church. He’d known it was coming – he and Sam weren’t going to be able to separate without Calvary’s involvement, one way or another – but that didn’t mean he felt ready for it. His call to his sister had been the most nakedly emotional of the three: she liked Sam, for one, and expressed the most sorrow

and pity at their separation, like Doug had broken something that would never be fixed – which he had – but Doug still would’ve had that conversation twenty times in a row before he had to have another talk with Ed or Dallas. His sister’s emotions didn’t unsettle him; they would fade with time, and eventually return to normal. Everyone’s emotions would fade. Far more intense were the sentiments that would never fade, or change, no matter how gently they were expressed – Calvary’s commitment to him, and his commitment to them, and their commitment to marriage as an institution and a sacrament. They would be at the same pitch tomorrow, and next week, and next month, and ten years from now. Nothing was going to fade; if they wanted change, something would have to break.

Doug and Erin went into his kitchen. He poured her a glass of water, they sat at the small table in the breakfast nook, and she told him a long, complicated, non-linear tale about Joe and their plans, his sudden hike and disappearance, poor weather and candy and something with Joe’s brothers. Not all of it made sense to Doug, but he understood enough to gather that things were odd. Joe had still intended to take his trip to Savannah with Erin, even as he drove into the mountains. His brothers – or at least the one Erin had spoken to – reported him missing, but they were cagey about the details. It seemed clear to Doug that someone was lying – Joe, or his brothers, or someone else, some other person they didn’t even know was involved – but without more information it was impossible to say who. He didn’t have the connection to Joe that Erin did, and from his vantage point it seemed most likely that Joe himself was the liar, that he had somehow gotten his brothers involved and they were stuck trying to cover for him. It still didn’t add up all the way; there was an undeniable strangeness to Joe’s trip on Thursday,

if he was truly planning to go to Savannah on Friday morning. But most likely, Doug imagined, he thought he'd be back in time, or he changed his mind at the last possible moment.

Of course Doug didn't *know* any of this, and he wasn't going to be the one to suggest it to Erin. She could get there herself.

He wasn't empathetic by nature, which had made his pastoral life more difficult, but he was grateful for the interruption and listened raptly, trying to respond with sympathy where it seemed appropriate. He assumed that Erin had come over because she was feeling especially low and had run out of supportive listeners, so that's what he tried to be, and he wasn't prepared for the request that followed her story.

"I really need your help," she said. "I thought about it on the drive over, and I think the thing to do would be to visit Joe's brothers and try to get something else out of them."

"But you already did that," Doug said.

"I know, I want *you* to go over there. Put some pressure on them."

He paused. "You want me to what now?"

"Reuben wasn't saying something. That's how I felt when I talked to him. But I was confused and I didn't expect it, so I wasn't ready, and it was easy for him to just shut the door on me. And now he knows who I am, so I can't really go back. I kinda blew my chance. But he doesn't know who you are. Plus you're old – older – and if you go over there and act like you're serious, it might be harder to just slam the door in your face."

"Act like I'm serious?"

"I don't mean, like, intimidating. But confident – it goes a long way."

“But Erin... I still don’t understand. *Why* would I go over there? I mean, what would I tell them?”

“Well,” she said sheepishly. “I was hoping you’d go as a pastor. But that was before I knew about, you know, everything.”

“Right.”

“You could still do it,” she added. “We could think of something, I’m sure.”

Doug stared at the glass top of the table. There was a part of him that wanted to say yes for the hell of it, and another part that wanted to help Erin, and to feel helpful. It would not have been accurate to say he was concerned about Joe in the same way that she was, but he wasn’t *not* concerned, and he was also curious what Joe or one of his brothers had done and why. But he tried to imagine how it would look if someone from church found out. Doug Townsend, in the middle of a personal trial, his family in disarray, his job hanging in the balance – for at least a few more days – running around town harassing strangers as a favor to a girl 25 years his junior. It wouldn’t look good. They’d think he was cracking.

“I’m sorry,” he told Erin. “I want to help you, but I can’t do this. I really can’t.”

To his surprise, she didn’t fight him. In fact she seemed to diminish with his answer, and almost immediately afterward she stood like it was time to go. Before he could justify himself any further, before he thought of any encouragement to offer, she was leaving, and he closed the door behind her with the sense again that he had done the wrong thing, though he couldn’t see what his other choices were.

Now that someone had been in it again and left, the house felt empty. It was getting dark outside, and he closed the blinds in the kitchen, then went back into the

living room, where the TV had been playing to no one, and fell onto the couch. He took out his phone and texted Sam.

How are things with Emma?

Within a minute, she replied.

Okay. Ran some errands with her this afternoon. We're going to dinner in a second.

It didn't feel strange to text her. In some ways it felt easier than last week, now that they had made a decision.

Have you told her? he asked.

No, not yet. I don't know that I can tonight. Might wait until tomorrow.

A few seconds later she sent a second message. *Is that alright?*

Sure, Doug answered. *I understand. Tell her I love her.*

I will.

The doorbell rang again. He threw his phone on the couch and went to answer.

It was Erin, back on his porch. She had never left.

"You don't understand," she said, before he could speak. "I've got no one else to help me. Literally."

Doug paused a moment, then sighed and opened the door wider. "That," he said, "I actually do understand."

CHAPTER 11

On Monday morning Ben arrived at work and saw an email from John-Thomas Theodore. There was a meeting that afternoon at 3:00 for the City Project. He'd sent it only minutes earlier. Ben had checked his work email the night before, and that morning when got up, yet he hadn't seen it until he reached his desk and logged in.

Theodore offered a brief explanation: *We'll be pitching a few early ideas to David Tyler (an at-large councilman appointed by the Mayor to oversee the project from their end) and depending on his reaction moving forward with a few. This is a chance for you to get up-to-speed and integrated with the team. Gerry will debrief you later.*

Listen carefully, make a good impression, don't spill anything.

Ben found it wasn't easy to concentrate on his work that morning, not just because he knew the meeting was coming soon – in reality, he thought he'd do little more than observe – but also because he had spent the rest of the weekend thinking about the address, 180 King St. Now that it was Monday, the lawyer's office would be open. It would only be open for a few select hours, business hours, and he worked at Zip those same hours, so it was hard to imagine actually visiting, though he'd begun to. It had started as a fantasy, a lark, but somewhere over the past twenty-four hours he realized he could do it if he wanted. Of course he didn't know what he'd accomplish if he went over and tried to speak to someone, but still he imagined what they knew about the young man that he didn't, the boy who died after – or possibly before – a visit to them. Surely the police would have spoken to the lawyers, maybe even before they spoke to Ben, though

Sergeant Green hadn't mentioned them and Ben neglected to ask, and he was more hesitant to call the police than visit the office.

He had thought that seeing the building would allay something inside him, but it only made things worse.

Partly this was because he searched online for *Gage & Blotch, Attorneys at Law* and all he found was their listing in a series of legal directories and yellow pages, and a simple website with their name and logo – sharp green text beside an emblem, a square with a looping G and B divided like a yin and yang, green on white and white on green – plus the address he already knew, and a phone number. There were no photos, no bios, no references or legal specialties. No sense of who these people were or what they did. Ben considered where he had met the dead young man, on the street several days before, in comparison to the address on King. It hadn't been too far away; the boy could have walked there in ten or fifteen minutes. It seemed likely he had made it to his destination before anything else happened to him.

Ben was getting nothing done at work. His current assignments felt less important than the City Project and the meeting that afternoon, and they paled in comparison to the lawyers at 180 King. The more often he peeked at the time on his computer, or checked his phone for messages, the slower it crept by, and at 11:30 he decided to take an early lunch and leave the office. He wasn't that hungry – he had taken several trips back and forth to the breakroom, and already eaten a Snickers he kept in his desk and an apple brought from home – but he wanted to get out and move.

If he moved quickly enough, he thought, he could make it all the way to King and back.

When he parked ten minutes later, a block down from the address, he saw the same Blue Mercedes in the distance, sitting in front of the lawyers' office. There were many more cars around it on both sides of the street, but it sat in virtually the same spot as Saturday, and Ben wondered if it had ever moved. He dropped a few quarters in his meter, crossed the street, and approached cautiously, like it was wired to explode; there were no tickets on the windshield, though its own meter had expired some time before.

He was standing in front of the door to Gage & Blotch when he realized that, unlike Saturday, the curtains on the front window were open and he was visible from inside, standing dumbly on the sidewalk staring at the car. He turned and faced the window, though because of the glare he still couldn't see more than two or three feet inside.

Before he had time to change his mind, he stepped forward, pushed the door open, and walked in.

The movement into dim light momentarily blinded him, and his eyes struggled to adjust to the cool interior of the lobby – a long, narrow space with leather couches and smooth wood-paneling on the side walls, sparse but classy décor at odds with the plain exterior. The floor was a slick porcelain tile that exaggerated the sound of his steps, though as he walked slowly toward the reception desk at the back – a heavy U-shaped block of distressed wood – the receptionist didn't move or look up or acknowledge the noise at all. Because of the desk's height Ben saw only a head of dark hair, lit like a spotlight by the overhead bulb, until he stepped past the couches with their end tables and solid, square lamps and came closer. The person sitting at the desk was – to Ben's

surprise – a short, thick man with wavy black hair and a heavy beard – so dark and coarse that it seemed impenetrable, like it would catch a bullet. When Ben looked he saw hair first, face second.

The man sat placidly in the low light reading a magazine.

“Excuse me,” Ben said. The receptionist continued reading, though he raised his eyebrows in what was, Ben assumed, acknowledgement, like he was waiting for Ben to add something else before he’d bother to look. Ben hadn’t expected this reception, or this receptionist, and he had no plan for the moment, or any plan at all. In his fantasies he envisioned speaking to one of the lawyers, trying to explain himself to them. “Is Mr. Blotch in?” he asked.

“Do you have an appointment?” the man said. He flipped a page in his magazine. It was the Smithsonian.

“Uh, no.”

“He’s not here.”

“It would only take a second. I just have a question for him about...something personal.”

The man looked up without moving his head. He had a deep, resonant voice, even though he spoke softly. “But he’s not here.”

Ben took a deep breath. “Is Mr. Gage around then?”

“Nope.”

“When will they be back?”

For the first time the man lowered a corner of his magazine. He frowned and looked around the desk.

“I’m not sure...” he said.

Ben came one step closer and placed both hands on the desktop in front of him, trying to will the man’s attention more fully to himself. He found the blatant disinterest maddening, and he wanted to slap the counter and shout *Pay attention to me!* like Dylan when he was trying to read the paper.

“What do you mean,” he said. “That you’re not sure?”

“I don’t usually work up here,” the receptionist said. “Julie’s at lunch.”

And he returned to his magazine.

Ben straightened and looked around, though there was no one else in the lobby. Behind the reception hung an oil painting of a scene from the Old West, three U.S. cavalry officers surrounding a Native American chief in a regal headdress, hands on their hips like they were debating what to do with him. Four swords were jammed upright in the ground behind them; for a passing moment Ben wondered who the extra one belonged to. Next to the painting on each side was a door. He eyed them closely. The whole thing seemed like a prank, or a cruel joke from the universe.

“This is bullshit,” he said quietly, more to himself than the receptionist.

The man shrugged. “Try to live in acceptance, my man. Not expectation.”

“What?”

“It’s a quote.”

“Look,” Ben said. “I don’t have an appointment. I’m in the wrong, I get it. But could you just...help me out here? I’d like to speech to Gage or Blotch or *someone*.” He paused. “Someone else.”

“I told you they weren’t here.”

“Then whose Mercedes is that outside? And it’s the middle of the day, they’re really both not here?”

“It’s lunchtime.”

Ben paused. It was lunchtime, but he didn’t want to admit it. He still felt that things were off, and he wasn’t willing to miss his chance.

“It’s not even twelve,” he said.

The receptionist closed the magazine and put it down.

“Why would I lie to you?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you’re saying I’m lying?”

“I mean, I’m wondering, yeah.”

The man got slowly to his feet. He was short and compact, and every part of him looked solid. Wiry black hair peeked out his sleeves and ran up the backs of his hands.

“You should leave,” he said.

Ben was too agitated to leave. He wasn’t agitated enough to start a fight, and certainly not with this man, but enough to push his luck. “I haven’t done anything wrong,” he said. “You can’t just throw me out.”

The man frowned again. “Sure I can. I don’t deserve this shit.”

Before Ben could reply, one of the doors behind the man – a door leading deeper into the office – opened. An older man in a gray suit poked his head out.

“Hi there,” he said. “Is something the matter?”

Ben didn’t know who this was directed to, so he didn’t answer. The man in the suit moved out from behind the door and came into view, stepping carefully forward.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Nothing,” the receptionist said, his features collapsing inward in irritation.

“Is everything alright?” The man looked with some concern from the receptionist to Ben, standing face to face across the desk.

“Sure, sure, we’re fine. I was deescalating.”

Ben saw his chance. “I’d like to speak to Mr. Blotch,” he said.

The older man looked at him closely, then smiled for the first time. “Mr. Blotch isn’t here right now,” he said. “But perhaps I can give you the next best thing. I’m Thomas Gage.”

He extended a hand, which Ben shook.

“If there’s some sort of problem, I think I can spare a minute,” Gage added.

“Don’t you think so Dwight? I’ve got some room in my schedule.”

“Sure,” Dwight grunted. He didn’t look embarrassed to be caught in a lie, just sullen and angry.

“Why don’t we walk back to my office for a chat?”

“Okay.” Ben nodded and stepped closer to the lawyer, careful to avoid any eye contact with the receptionist.

He had never truly been inside a lawyer’s office before, so Ben followed Gage through the door off the lobby with some trepidation, despite his success so far. Gage led him down a short hallway and into a second, smaller waiting area outside of three closed doors, where he opened the leftmost and beckoned him to follow. Ben expected dark oak and heavy stacks of books, but the office as he stepped inside was surprisingly spare, a

confusing mix of classic and modern. To the left of the entrance against the near wall sat a leather couch, framed by two mounted lights and another oil painting, an impressionistic scene of a ship on stormy seas, the hint of bodies tossed overboard and thrashing in the water. An open bookcase on the right wall held no books, but old photos and plaques, small decorations and potted plants, and Gage's desk itself was not the imposing monstrosity that Ben imagined, but a gently curving glass-top, a sleek parenthesis with a thin laptop and a few neatly arranged stacks of paper.

Gage seated himself behind it and gestured to the chairs across from him. Like the receptionist he was a small man, and much older than Ben, well-coiffed hair almost perfectly matching his suit – gray, with the sheen of expense. He would have been a friendly older man, somebody's rich grandfather, if not for a few undermining details – a small head, a slightly crooked grin, and almost no neck, all of which gave him a mischievous look more impish than warm.

“So,” he said. “What were you and Dwight discussing back there? He wasn't causing a problem, I hope.”

“No,” Ben said. “It was nothing.” He paused. “Though he doesn't seem like a very good receptionist. I mean, no offense.”

Gage furrowed his brow. “No, he certainly isn't. Consider him a...temporary hire for the office. Our regular receptionist is at lunch, she should be back soon.” He shrugged, and returned his face to something more pleasant, if not tilted. “We don't have many people just walk right in.”

“Sorry,” Ben said. “I should've made an appointment.”

“That would have helped. But you're here now anyway. What can I do for you?”

Ben took a deep breath.

“This is going to sound strange,” he began. “But last week a young man was killed here in Ransom. Murdered, maybe. And before he died he was on his way to your office. I mean, I assume you know, or you’ve heard. So I thought maybe you had seen him, or spoken to him, and I really wanted to, well, to know...”

Ben stopped. Now that he was sitting face to face with another person, forced to put himself into words, he found that he couldn’t. It was all too difficult, and too strange, and not a little embarrassing, and a part of him wished he hadn’t come, hadn’t bothered, though he was halfway through his sentence and had no choice but to finish it.

“...I wanted to know what you talked about,” he said lamely.

Gage raised an eyebrow. For a moment – what felt, to Ben, like a very long moment – he said nothing.

“Well,” he said at last. “That doesn’t sound random at all. The police were here on Friday and explained the situation quite thoroughly. But I’m afraid I don’t see how you fit into it. Who are you?”

Ben rubbed the wooden arms of his chair, smooth like plastic. His palms were slick. It was too late, he reasoned, to walk out now. He was here.

“I knew him,” he said.

“I’m sorry?”

“I knew the boy that died. Not...well. But I knew him. And I don’t know, I’m just looking for help. Or answers, or something.”

“I see,” Gage said. “Wow. I didn’t...” He paused. “Would you like something to drink? Coffee, perhaps? Water?”

“Uh, sure,” Ben said. “Okay.” He tried surreptitiously to wipe the sweaty armrests with his sleeves. “Coffee, I guess.”

Gage reached for his phone, then appeared to change his mind and stood. “A moment, please,” he said, and stepped out behind his desk and left the room. For several seconds Ben sat in the quiet office and listened to the lawyer’s footsteps receding down the hall, before he craned his head in his chair to look around. Even though he had heard Gage walk away, he was too afraid of getting caught to stand or snoop with real intent, so he stayed in the chair. The walls were a cool grayish blue, bare minus the painting over the couch. He couldn’t read the papers on the desk, three equal piles stacked side by side, perfectly aligned, and he still couldn’t tell anything about Gage or Blotch or what they did, though he took some comfort from his surroundings nonetheless, the simple confirmation of their existence. They were real, at least. A framed diploma from the Emory School of Law sat propped on the bookcase between a small golden clock and a glass pyramid, engraved in clear, impossible-to-read letters. He leaned closer.

Footsteps sounded down the hall, then the door behind him opened and Gage entered with two cups of black coffee.

“I didn’t realize you knew the poor boy,” he said as he sat back behind the desk.

“I was upset myself, when I heard, as anyone would be. But for you...”

“He looked at Ben as if it were Ben’s turn to speak.

“Yeah,” Ben said. “Of course.”

“It was a tragedy,” Gage continued. “Obviously. But I’m afraid I still don’t see how I can help. You said you had spoken with the police, correct?”

“Yes,” Ben said again.

“Then I don’t know what else to add. When we spoke on Friday, I told them everything I could. Which wasn’t much, of course. Did you have something else in mind?”

“I guess I was just hoping you’d be willing to share what you heard. The police were so...non-communicating.”

There were two drink coasters on the desk, perfect circles that looked like they’d been stitched in some dark leather. Gage used his finger to slide one across to Ben, then sipped his own coffee.

“In theory,” he said, “I would be happy to help. But the truth is I told the detectives virtually nothing, because I know virtually nothing. I never saw the young man. Mr. Blotch tells me he never saw him, and neither did our receptionist Julie. I believe the detectives when they say he was coming here, to this office, but truthfully I have no idea why.”

“You mean he didn’t make it at all?”

“No.”

Ben leaned forward, hands on his knees. “Are you – I’m sorry, but – are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m quite sure.”

“So you don’t even know who he was? Or why he wanted to see you?”

Gage sighed and put his mug down carefully. “I’ll tell you exactly what I told the police: I have no earthly idea who the poor boy was, nor why he would have wanted to come here, though it certainly seems like he was in some sort of trouble, and of course

I'm an attorney, so I think it's reasonable to assume he got it in his head somehow that I could help him. But that's just my guess. I don't see how we'll ever know for sure."

Ben hung his head, and for several seconds said nothing. Through the glass top of the desk he spied Gage's dress shoes pushed neatly against a side cabinet. Sometime during the conversation the lawyer had switched to a downy pair of dark slippers, and Ben hadn't noticed. If Gage and Blotch had nothing for him, he didn't know what to say. He had assumed – in the end, without reason – that they would.

"You know," Gage said. "I've just realized that I never got your name."

"Ben," Ben said. "Ben Ezra."

"Ben Ezra," Gage repeated. "And you said you were friends with this young man?"

"I didn't know him very long," Ben said. It both was and was not the truth. "We were more like...acquaintances. I met him right before he died. It was a strange experience, to be honest."

"I see," Gage said. "If I may be so bold, then, let me offer you some unsolicited advice. In my experience, people respond to death and violence in a number of unusual ways. It's perfectly natural to feel that you should be doing something, that you *must* do something, and yet have no idea what to do at all. It may not be much comfort, but at the very least I can assure you this: If you ignore it long enough, that feeling will pass."

"Thanks," Ben said. "But I'm not sure that helps me too much."

"Just an observation from an old man, that's all."

"I know, I'm sorry. You're right."

“No apology necessary.” Gage pressed his fingertips together beneath his chin and studied Ben closely. “You seem like an interesting fellow. I’m sorry I haven’t been more helpful.”

“I’m not that interesting.”

Gage shrugged. “Agree to disagree. At the very least you’ve done something interesting. Very curious indeed.” At the sight of Ben’s face – halfway between a frown and a grimace – he quickly went on. “I don’t mean that as a criticism. If anything, the opposite. You see, when the police came to my door last week, I was happy to tell them I knew nothing. I was thinking only of myself. But now, with you, I must admit: I feel a little bad. I wish there was more I could tell you.”

“I understand,” Ben said. “You don’t know anything. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Well,” Gage said. “In my case that’s not entirely correct.” He offered a crooked grin. “I would flatter myself to say I have a few connections here and there. Perhaps I can make a few calls. Surely by now the police will know something.”

“Really?” Ben said. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure I can try.”

“I, uh, don’t know what to say. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Gage said. He rubbed his hands together, then pushed back from the desk and made to stand. Ben took the hint and rose from his chair. “I’m afraid I should be getting to work now,” Gage added. “But I’ll walk you out.”

He gestured to the door, and Ben stepped out into the hallway. Gage followed, still wearing his slippers, and closed the door behind him.

“You know,” Gage said, as they moved side by side down the narrow hall, Ben matching the lawyer’s slow steps. “An elderly client of mine once told me a fascinating story about Ransom, and one of the tombstones in the First Presbyterian graveyard. Have you been there before?”

“To the graveyard?” Ben shook his head. “I’ve been past it, but that’s all.”

“Sometime early in the 20th century, one winter, a Chinese man rode into Ransom. He spoke almost no English, and no one knew who he was, or where he came from, or why he was there. But he was sick, and a local doctor named Coleman Butler took him in. Unfortunately for him, his arrival coincided with a few... incidents, shall we say. One of the wealthiest ladies in town lost a ring, an old family heirloom. There was a fire at the post office and a number of important documents were lost. That sort of thing. People got spooked. They started spreading rumors. Finally, a young girl went missing – just disappeared without a trace – and they couldn’t take it anymore. A lot blamed the Chinese man. He was a stranger; no one knew or understood him. I don’t imagine *everyone* felt this way, but enough to march down to the doctor’s house, force their way in, and drag this Chinese fellow from his bed. Apparently – this is how the story was told to me – they got him all the way out into the street before they realized he was already dead. It turned out he’d been ill for some time, and passed away that morning. So everyone just... walked away, and the doctor took his body and paid to have it buried in the graveyard. Since he didn’t know anything about the man, he put the name Arthur Butler on the tombstone, like he was one of the family. It’s still there now; you can see it if you want. I have.”

They had reached the end of the hall. Ben felt like he was expected to say something, but he didn't.

Gage turned and looked at him directly. "What does that mean to you?" he said.

Ben thought about it. "People are usually wrong," he said at last.

"I think it means: in this town we bury our dead. Properly. No matter what."

"Or that," Ben said.

"What happened to that young man wasn't right. So I'm going to help you. Go speak with Dwight, make an appointment, and come back tomorrow. We'll see what we can do."

CHAPTER 12

Monday morning Erin was back at work, 6:00am at the Fitness Revolution desk in her mandated purple polo and khaki pants. She'd been so consumed over the weekend that it hadn't occurred to her until the night before, after she left Doug's house, that she had to get up in the morning and go to the gym, step back into a life that she had – for a moment – stepped out of. The bus she caught was the first of the day, and it was still dark for her ride; the sun didn't rise until the second hour. She sipped coffee from a travel mug at the desk and tried to pass time. Many of the regulars who came through looked just as haggard as she felt.

It had crossed her mind that she should skip, that things were not normal, that this was an emergency (and future skipping was, as far as she was concerned, still on the table), but she didn't want to cause trouble for herself at work, and for a few early hours on Monday she had nothing else to do anyway. Doug had promised to visit Joe's brothers late that morning, before he had to go do other things ("Appointments," he called them, "I've got appointments," though she had no idea what he meant, since he wasn't working), and she was going to stop by his house again later to get the full report. She had not wanted to do it on the phone. If she hadn't been at work she would've wanted to go *with* him to the Deckers' house, waiting out of sight, so it was just as well – even she recognized – that she work instead.

In another lifetime two weeks before, she had started reading a book about Henrietta Leavitt, the groundbreaking astronomer, and with her time at the desk she tried

to return to it. Her boss didn't like them to use the computers much, though everyone browsed the internet occasionally, and if they found themselves at the front with nothing to do and no one to help, he had the antiquated notion that they read – which he seemed to think made them look smart and industrious in a way that staring at their phones didn't. Erin had not been a frequent reader before, and she found her boss patronizing, yet when she first took the job she had nothing but time – and consequently she'd read more books, cover to cover, than at any point during college or immediately after. She liked stories about things that were real, that had happened – more or less – so she gravitated to history and biography and general nonfiction, and only memoir if the person had done something extraordinary, like build a business empire, or destroy one, or cut their own arm off. She liked travel writing too, if it was funny, except even then it always made her think of her dad. Still she read it sometimes. She had never left the country and thought that one day she'd like to.

It was difficult to focus on the Leavitt story, though it did keep her from checking the clock every minute. She didn't know anything about astronomy, not really, and the book was slow, so she wasn't sure she'd finish, but she at least enjoyed how uncompromising and driven it claimed Leavitt was, how weirdly she fit her time period – she was “not disposed to trifling things,” the introduction said, but “seriously devoted to her own concerns: her work, her career, and her family.” Before this, Erin had read a book about a girl leaving a cult, having spent years brainwashed and alienated from her family, and she'd found it more engaging. It was easy to identify with someone who had the rug pulled out from under them – and she felt this even *before* her boyfriend disappeared. She'd talked about it with Doug a few weeks prior, during one of their

meetings, and he agreed that it sounded interesting: “Even if you think the truth never changes,” he had said, “We’re always changing as people, so that... complicates things.” She realized it was something that sounded differently now that she knew about his separation, and she wondered how much in the end would be reinterpreted around a potential divorce. It had surprised her – even shocked her. She’d never met his wife, but in a different time she’d amused herself by trying to imagine what she’d be like – how she dressed, how she did her hair, how she spoke. Now she would never know. And beyond any investment she might have manufactured for herself, she’d come to count on Doug having his life together – it was kind of his thing – and she hadn’t considered that he didn’t, not to that extent. For a moment she’d forgotten that other people had lives with problems.

Thirty minutes before she would leave for the day, Erin sat at the desk playing free-cell – she had given up on reading – when she became aware of someone approaching and looked up to see a former classmate of hers from Barnwell, a girl in her same year named Layla. They had met as freshman and taken a few classes together – Layla also started in elementary education, though eventually she left the major and switched to a foreign language, French or Spanish or something Erin couldn’t remember. They hadn’t kept in touch and weren’t close anymore, but Erin still remembered her, and would always remember her, as one of the first people she met in college.

With Layla was another girl, a tall brunette whom Erin didn’t recognize. They were wearing workout pants and bright tank tops, pink and orange. Layla also had a jacket, though despite the cold her friend didn’t – perhaps, Erin thought, because she didn’t want to cover her arms, which were impressively slim and toned.

“Erin!” Layla said. “Oh my God, I haven’t seen you in forever! I didn’t know you worked here.”

It was too late, Erin judged, to dive under the desk.

“Yeah,” she said. “Wow, hi. Good to see you. I didn’t know you came here either.”

“I don’t! But I’m in town for the weekend.”

“Oh.” Erin hadn’t realized Layla moved away. “Cool.” She also couldn’t imagine going to the gym when she didn’t have to. “Where are you living now?”

“I’m in Charlotte. Working at a nonprofit for the last year or so. But I’ve been back for a few days. Stephanie’s bachelorette was Saturday – you remember Stephanie?” Erin didn’t, but she smiled at the girl anyway, and Stephanie smiled back, standing a few paces off looking friendly but uninterested. “So we spent the night, and yesterday was mostly about, uh, recovering, and I’m sticking around for another day to see some more friends before I gotta go back. Except this girl insisted on going to the *gym* today, so here we are.”

Erin couldn’t really think of anything to say. “Wow,” she said again. “Cool.”

“Wedding’s in a month,” Stephanie said.

“Well you look great,” Erin said. “And congrats.”

“Thanks.”

“But how are you?” Layla asked. “What’re you up to these days?”

“Oh you know... Not too much, really. Working here, and other things.” Erin was still seated and disliked having to look up at Layla, but she was too far into the conversation to stand now. It would have helped, she realized, if she had something else

in her life, another thing she could point to in lieu of her job, anything but a missing boyfriend and a series of unhelpful explanations, but something about the pressure of the moment and she was drawing a blank. She clicked the pen in her hands and nodded, like Layla had said something else. “I’ve been staying busy,” she added. “Really busy.”

“Well...” Layla smiled. “That’s great! Are you going anywhere for the holidays?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so.” For a moment Erin braced herself, like she was about to get an invitation, but then she remembered that Layla didn’t live here anymore – and there was no reason, based on this brief encounter, for her to get an invitation anyway.

“Are...you?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m going home. Stephanie, you’ll be here, right?”

“Wedding prep,” Stephanie said.

Layla shrugged. “You know, this is the first time I’ve been back in Ransom in a year, and it’s so *weird*. Like nothing has changed – like, at all – but it’s also not the same anymore, not like it used to be. Isn’t that funny?”

“It is,” Erin said.

“It just feels smaller, or older, something. Like it’s become...” Layla trailed off, and it seemed to Erin that she caught herself a moment too late, and remembered who she was talking to, and where they still were, and what that meant.

For some reason Erin wanted to let her off the hook. “I’ve actually been thinking about getting out of Ransom myself,” she said.

“Really? You should come to Charlotte!”

Erin had not intended to tell the truth – she hadn't been thinking of leaving – but she was caught by how true it sounded coming out of her mouth. “Maybe,” she said. “I mean, I don't know.”

“You totally should.” Behind Layla, Stephanie scuffed her shoe on the floor, looking down at her feet, and Layla glanced back. “Anyway, I guess we should get going. Do you have guest passes here?”

“Sure,” Erin said. Finally she was able to stand, and she began to search the desk for the appropriate form, a basic admission of liability. Layla turned and said something inaudible to Stephanie, but a second later she spun back and placed both palms on the desk. Her nails were colorfully painted.

“Oh my God I just remembered,” she said. “Did you hear about Joe Decker? That he's *missing*?”

Erin looked up quickly, then just as quickly brought her eyes back to the desk. She hesitated, picked up the stapler and put it down. “Yeah,” she said. “I did hear about that. It's crazy.”

“Completely crazy. I absolutely cannot believe it. I mean, I didn't really know him, but it's a small school, I definitely saw him before. And now's he been lost for, like, several days.”

Erin didn't want to give these girls a full explanation, not here, not like they were all sharing secrets, but she also couldn't bear to let Layla seem like the one with the strongest connection.

“I actually know him too,” she said. “Like, we're friends. So this was, uh, really surprising.”

“No kidding? God... It’s so sad.”

“I took a few classes with his brother,” Stephanie said. She took a step closer to the desk.

“Really?” Erin said. “Which one?”

“I don’t know,” Stephanie said. She shrugged, then inexplicably laughed – a brief, uncomfortable release of air. “I don’t think I ever knew.”

Erin looked down and fumbled with the stack of folders on the desk, then jammed them into the cubby with the pens and flyers and magnets. She couldn’t find the release form; if it wasn’t sitting right on the desk she didn’t know where it was.

“You know what,” she said. “You guys can just go in. Don’t worry about the pass.”

“Aw, thank you. That’s sweet. And hey, it was so good to see you.”

Erin sat back down. “You too,” she said. “Hope the wedding goes well.”

The first thing Erin did when she left the gym was pull out her phone, which she had managed to avoid checking since the morning. There were no messages from Doug, but sometime in the last hour, while she was talking with the girls or soon after, she had missed a call. Two calls, from the same number. She didn’t have it saved in her phone, though it had a local area code. The caller hadn’t left a voicemail, and there were no texts. On a normal day she’d ignore it without a thought – she didn’t usually answer the phone period, much less return a missed call; if someone wanted to talk badly enough they could leave a message – but it wasn’t a normal day, and as she walked to the bus stop she redialed the mysterious number and waited. There was no answer. It rang several

times and went to voicemail – a robotic female voice inviting her to leave a message – so she hung up. It was still early in the day, just after 2:00pm, and she wasn't meeting Doug at his house for a few hours, though surely *he* would've met Joe's brothers by now, if he did what he said he was going to do. She had an image of him next to Reuben – looking small, which he wasn't really, and tired, which he was, and out-of-place, which he would be, with his shirt tucked in and his wristwatch and his brown loafers. She felt nervous, and with her phone still out she stopped to text him: *Hey how'd it go?*

It wouldn't do to wait at home, to travel all the way there and all the way back out to Doug's. Instead of standing at her stop she crossed the street, and when the bus arrived she took it in the other direction.

It was still a familiar route – she rode the bus enough that most routes in Ransom were familiar to her – and she realized as soon as the doors closed where she would get off. It wasn't accurate to say she'd planned it from the beginning, but neither was it an accident. Certainly if she wandered there were only a few places she might end up.

Joe's neighborhood looked the same as it had on Friday, the morning she learned he was missing, except the sun was out and there was no black Honda idling across the street. She walked up the stairs beside the garage and knocked on Joe's door, though she expected nothing to happen, and she was right – nothing did. Instead of leaving, however, she went back outside and over to the main house, and knocked on the door there as well. Joe's elderly landlord Edie had not been home on Friday, and she hadn't had time to try again.

There was no answer for almost a minute, and Erin was just about to step off the porch and reassess when the door opened. Edie stood hunched in the entrance wearing olive green slacks, tennis shoes, and a windbreaker, and she looked apprehensive until she recognized Erin's face. Which was, for Erin, a small relief – they had met a few times, but each was brief, and she hadn't been positive Edie would remember her.

“Oh, hi dear,” Edie said, opening the door wider.

“Hi,” Erin said. “Sorry to bother you. Were you about to leave?”

For a moment Edie looked nonplussed, so Erin motioned to her shoes and her jacket.

“Oh, no, just getting home, actually. I was away.”

“Away, like...out of town?”

“Yes, I suppose. I had a doctor's appointment in Sumter, so my son took me, and afterwards I went and spent the weekend at their house. I have three grandkids – all boys, unfortunately.”

“Is everything alright?”

“With...the children?”

“With the doctor.”

“Oh, I see. Sure, more or less. Would you like to come in? Are you looking for Joseph?”

Erin was about to say yes, but stopped. The question knocked her off balance, and for a moment she didn't respond. What, she thought, was the right answer?

“I assume you haven't seen him?” she said to Edie.

“No, but my son just dropped me off a little bit ago. I haven't been home long.”

“Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Of course, dear, of course. Come in.”

Erin stepped into the house, warm and dark and thickly carpeted, and followed Edie’s slow walk to the living room.

“Would you like something to drink?” Edie said.

“I’m fine, thanks.” She sat on a floral print loveseat and waited for Edie to reach her chair by the window.

“Are you sure? Some water? Lemonade? Tea?”

Erin tried to smile. “I’m fine, really. But thank you.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I will,” she said, as Edie finally sank into her chair. “So when did you leave town exactly?”

“Friday morning,” Edie said. “That’s when my son came to pick me up.”

“Did you see Joe that morning, before you left?”

“No, I don’t think so. Although it was still a little early.”

“When was the last time you saw him then?”

“Well,” Edie said. “It would have been Thursday. Why? Is something the matter?”

Erin leaned forward. “When on Thursday?”

“I don’t know, honey. Sometime in the morning. I saw him walking down the driveway with two other men. It –”

“You did?” Erin said it before she could stop herself. She realized Edie had been about to say something else, and she took a purposeful breath. “I’m sorry, go ahead.”

“That’s alright. I was only saying it was funny. Because I had asked him if he could bring in my papers while I was away, and he said he couldn’t. Because he was going to be gone. But I could’ve sworn he said Friday, which was the same day I was leaving. And yet he left on Thursday and I didn’t see him come back.” She paused. Each statement had been made slowly, with purpose, and it took some effort for Erin to avoid interrupting. “Of course I don’t know, he could have just returned late. Or maybe he said Thursday all along –”

“The two men,” Erin said. She simply couldn’t help herself, though she tried to look apologetic when she did. Edie’s wrinkled brow furrowed even more, though it seemed most like concern – either because she realized there was a problem, or she just hadn’t known Joe was dating someone so pushy. “Did they look anything like Joe? Like they were the same age, or the same height, or had the same hair color?”

“Like Joe? No, I don’t think so. They were both a bit older. Than him, of course. One of them was short, and between you and me he was a little fat as well.”

“A little...fat.”

“Yes dear. They were wearing coats, but you could tell.”

Erin had been sure, when Edie said two men, that they were Joe’s brothers, but it didn’t seem likely one of them would be short and fat. Certainly not Reuben. She tried to think. “Did you see the car they left in? What was it?”

“I don’t know car types very well, I’m afraid, so I don’t know. But it was a truck. Definitely a truck. Maybe green, or gray. I’m sorry, I don’t remember.”

Jesus, Erin thought. For a brief moment she’d assumed she was closer to an answer, but this wasn’t helping at all. Who did Joe leave with, and where did he go?

“When Joe said he was leaving for the weekend,” she asked. “Did he say where he was going?”

“No, not that I recall. Though he did say Friday, I’m sure of it now. It was the same day I was leaving.”

Erin sat back and rested both arms on the chair. “Huh.” She was still wearing her khakis from work, but she had changed into a different top in the gym bathroom, her Fitness Revolution polo stuffed into the top of her bag. It was warm in the house, and stuffy, and already the new shirt felt damp and sticky. When she stepped back outside it would be even worse: damp and sticky and cold.

She realized Edie was still waiting for an explanation, and it left her feeling tired. She didn’t have the heart, or the energy, to posit her theory – what little she had – to Edie. Still she couldn’t leave her with nothing.

“Edie,” she said. “Joe is missing. I haven’t seen him in several days. No one has. Everyone seems to think he went up into the woods in North Carolina and got lost.”

“Oh,” Edie said. “Oh my. That’s awful.”

“I know.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“I don’t really either, to be honest.”

Edie folded her hands on her lap and looked out the window, and for a moment they were both silent. Finally she spoke. “He’s not always the most responsible boy,” she said. “But he can take care of himself. He’ll come back soon.”

Erin looked at the window as well, at the dying lawn and the empty street and the houses facing them.

“I hope so,” she said.

“And when he does you can give him a piece of your mind.”

She nodded. “I will.”

CHAPTER 13

Doug knocked on the door to the Decker brothers' house and stepped back to wait. It was 11:00am. He had no idea if anyone would be home, when or where either of these brothers worked, if they worked at all, and a small part of him had chosen the time because it seemed most likely no one would be there to answer. He was flattered by Erin's request for help – he had not seen himself as having any special standing in her eyes, and it was pleasing to think he might – but the request itself was also strange and uncomfortable and inconvenient, and he didn't have the slightest idea what he was supposed to do with it. And of course the timing could not have been worse – almost to the hour, it couldn't have been worse, though if Erin had asked a few weeks earlier, it was true that he wouldn't likely have had the space in his schedule, and his commitment to Calvary and his pastoral role would've been a ready excuse, and he would've had to say no.

So he supposed, in a sense, from her perspective, the timing could not have been better.

These were the tensions he felt as he knocked on the brothers' door a second time and finally heard footsteps moving somewhere back within the house. It was not a nice neighborhood, in a part of town he had almost no reason to visit, not since Calvary bought its large parcel of land and moved outside the city – bringing the city to them – and as much as he wished for the house to be empty, he was at the same time relieved to

hear the footsteps sounding closer to the door. If no one answered, he only would've had to come back again later.

And it wasn't right to say he didn't want to help anyway, that he was stubborn or afraid. His reluctance didn't come from *laziness*, or from *fear* – he had spent a good deal of his professional life talking to strangers, and it wasn't unfamiliar – but rather from the particular unease he felt about his own role and standing, the outright contradictions in his life. He was still a pastor, and he wasn't; still married and not; an authority figure with no authority, a counselor or a friend or a rube, or one of those things, or none of them.

He was here to do something good, or he wasn't.

He had decided to tell Joe's brothers – whoever answered the door – that he was visiting on behalf of the church. He refused to think of it as *strategy*; on the contrary he had put almost no thought into it at all – the more he thought about it the worse he felt. But he knew intuitively that any perception of himself as an authority figure would make things easier, and best justify his presence at the door. No one else knew he was taking a leave from Calvary, possibly permanent. Certainly not these Decker brothers.

The doorknob jiggled, but for a moment the door groaned and stayed shut. Doug took a half step forward, and as he did it came open suddenly – a bit of reluctance and a quick pop, like the door was set poorly in the frame. A small tremor passed through the front of the house and underneath Doug's feet on the porch, and when it did the letterbox on the wall fell off and hit the ground with a crash.

“Oh geez,” Doug said. He took another half step forward and bent to pick it up, then quickly stood upright, as a shirtless young man pulled the door open wider and

stepped through. He was tall and barefoot and wearing only gym shorts, with a close-cropped head and a broad, hairy chest. “Sorry,” Doug added. He held out the letterbox.

The young man took it and frowned.

“Why’d you do that?” he said.

“Well,” Doug said. “I mean –” He stopped. He hadn’t apologized because it was his fault. In fact he didn’t know why he’d apologized. The young man turned and reaffixed the letterbox to the house, notched to a nail in the siding. A white strip of paper on its front read “Decker.” Beneath it was a second word, written in thick, blocky letters on masking tape: “Smash.”

“Are you Reuben?” Doug asked. “Reuben Decker?”

The young man turned back to face him and frowned again.

“Yeah,” he said. “I am.”

“Great,” Doug said. “Reuben. Hi. My name is Doug Townsend, I’m a local pastor at, uh, in the area.” Doug tried, despite the rocky start, to find a familiar rhythm, though he couldn’t quite bring himself to invoke Calvary by name. “I heard about your brother, and I wanted to come and offer my condolences.”

“Oh,” Reuben said. “Okay. Thanks.”

“I’d love to know if there was anything I could do to help. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Ah, well, no offense but we’re not really that *spiritual*, so...” Reuben shrugged as if that settled it. “Thanks for coming by, though. Appreciate it.”

He moved to shut the door.

“Wait,” Doug said quickly. “Sorry, there was another thing. I just didn’t want to...bring it up right away.” For some reason he felt out of breath, and he paused to let his thoughts catch up with his words. “My church is, you see, thinking of offering a special...donation. To you and your family. In light of everything.”

“A donation?” Reuben leaned his bare arm on the doorframe, exposing a shock of dark armpit hair. He had a small tattoo on his inner bicep, a hammer hitting a nail. “For us?”

“Yes,” Doug said. It took all of his willpower not to cringe. His mouth was dry. “For your family. But you see, the thing is, we’d love to hear a little more about you guys first. And Joe. It would be so helpful for us if we could, perhaps, talk. And hear a little about him. About you guys. We’re all very sorry, by the way.”

Reuben hesitated, still leaning on the frame. Before he could answer there were more footsteps behind him and a second figure appeared in the doorway, blocked by the resting arm.

“What’s going on?” the person said.

Reuben dropped his arm and turned halfway. The second face at the door was a perfect match to Reuben, another young man identical in appearance to the one already standing there, though unlike his twin he was wearing a shirt. He frowned in exactly the same way Reuben had.

“This guy here says his church heard about Joe and wants to help. He mentioned a donation or something.”

“A donation?” the second man said, in exactly the same tone Reuben had used.

For a moment Doug said nothing, looking back and forth between the two young men, mirrored in the doorway.

“A donation,” Reuben repeated.

“This is Daniel?” Doug managed.

“Yeah,” Daniel said. There was a hint of challenge in his voice.

“And you guys are...”

For a moment no one said anything.

“Identical?” Reuben offered, finally.

“Twins,” Doug said.

Reuben gave him a strange look. “Well, no. Triplets actually. Dan and Joe and I are triplets. But sure, just Dan and I are identical.”

“Right,” Doug said. “Of course.”

They were triplets. Joe and Reuben and Daniel were triplets. And, in another sense, they weren't.

Reuben chuckled. “You weren't kidding when you said you wanted to hear more about us.”

Doug swallowed. “Just trying to help,” he said weakly.

“Alright then. Come in, I guess.”

In the living room was a third young man, though thankfully he looked nothing like the other two: shorter and stockier, with scruffy red hair falling into his eyes. The house – their portion of the duplex – seemed rectangular to Doug, deeper and not as wide,

and they had walked down a long, bare hallway to reach the living room, where the red-haired man sat in front of a flatscreen TV playing a video game.

“Come on!” he yelled at the screen, not yet acknowledging the brothers, or the extra person they’d returned with. “Ah Jesus, no! I had – I was right there – I was all over it, come on! That’s some bullshit.”

“Hey,” Reuben said. “Turn that thing off a second, will you?”

The living room was small and cramped with furniture – the couch in front of the TV, two beaten, brown armchairs, end tables and coffee tables and lamps, a foosball table in one corner and what looked, to Doug, like an old record player in the other – though an open floor plan fed right into the kitchen and gave the false sensation of more space. There were beer bottles on the coffee table, laptops and bags in the kitchen, and clothes on or around every surface – t-shirts and jeans and boxers and socks. To Doug it looked like two or three living spaces crammed into one.

Daniel walked straight to the couch and sat, while Reuben put his hands on his hips and continued to stand, still shirtless and not looking like he planned to change. It was at least easy for Doug to tell the brothers apart. If they ever got dressed he’d be lost.

“Does that work?” Doug said, pointing at the record player.

“What?” Reuben said, turning to look distractedly. “No.” He turned back to the couch. “Hey. Shut it off, we got company.”

“I’m kind of in the middle of a game here,” the red-haired player said. “A *live* game, with people all over the world. You think I can pause and come back in thirty minutes and everything’ll be the same?”

“Look left,” Daniel said.

“I see him, I see him.”

“Yeah,” Reuben said. “But we’ve also got a guest, you moron, and you can always play another game later, and another game after that, and another after that. So put your controller down and turn it off, will ya?”

For the first time the young man looked up briefly, enough to take in Doug, then returned to the game. “I didn’t invite any guests,” he said. “Is he selling something?”

“No,” Doug said. “I’m not.”

Everyone ignored him. Reuben took a step closer and lowered his voice, though it was still audible to Doug. “He’s from *church*,” he said. “And he’s here about *Joe*. So show some manners for *two fucking seconds* and stop playing your *fucking game*.”

The young man did nothing for a moment, then put the controller down on the coffee table and raised his hands in surrender.

“You’re not even wearing a shirt,” he said quietly.

“Sorry,” Reuben said to Doug. “We obviously don’t have people over very often.”

“Speak for yourself,” Daniel said.

“It’s okay,” Doug said. “No problem.”

“Anyway, you met Dan already, and this –” He pointed a hard finger at the red-haired man on the couch, who gave a small, unperturbed salute – “is Smash.”

“Ah,” Doug said. “I see. The mailbox.”

“What?”

“Nothing, sorry. It’s, uh, nice to meet you all.”

“My name is Brandon,” Smash said.

Whatever,” Reuben said. He moved over to the couch and joined the other two, leaving Doug to brush off one of the armchairs across from them and sit. “So what did you want to talk about?”

“Right,” Doug said. For some reason he repeated his improvised spiel from the porch, keeping the details more or less the same, though both brothers had already heard it and Smash didn’t look like he cared. It at least bought him another few moments to think. He was inside the house, which was good, and they were talking, which was better, but he still didn’t feel very good about his position. If they were talking under false pretenses the best he could do to salve his conscience was minimize the falseness, though he didn’t know exactly how that would work.

Lord help me, he started to pray, then caught himself.

Lord have mercy.

“So your church wants to...help us or something?” Daniel said.

“Absolutely,” Doug said. The lie was going to make his stomach hurt. “However we can.”

“What church are you from?” Reuben asked.

“Uh, Salvation...Methodist.”

“Salvation Methodist?”

“Yeah.” It was a stupid name, but he was suddenly determined to keep Calvary out of the conversation, and the word “Salvation” had started to come out before he could stop it. In retrospect he shouldn’t have given his own name either. “We’re still pretty new. Just, you know, trying to do some good. We have a few hikers in our congregation, they were especially sorry to hear about...your brother.”

Stop talking he thought, almost like another prayer.

“Okay,” Reuben said.

“Anyway, it would be helpful if you could tell me a little more about Joe. And about yourselves. Something to pass along to the others. How are you guys...holding up?”

“We’re worried for our brother,” Reuben said. “Obviously.”

“And stressed,” Dan added. “We just, like, can’t believe it.”

“But Joe is the important thing here. We’ll make it, we’ve got each other. And Smash.”

“But it’s been tough, with all the worry, and the phone calls, and all the driving. It’s definitely affected our lives and our work and stuff.”

Reuben looked at his brother, briefly. “Sure,” he said. “That’s true.”

“I’m just saying, it’s not like we couldn’t use a little help.”

“Have you heard anything more from the search?” Doug asked. “Has there been any more news?”

“No,” Reuben said.

“Nothing new,” Daniel added, “since Friday, or Saturday, whenever it was they found his car.”

“But we haven’t given up hope. Joe’s always been a fighter.”

“Of course,” Doug said. “And I’m sure this is all hard to process. He paused, but neither brother said anything more, so he continued. “So, can you tell me a little about Joe? Were you guys close?”

“Sure,” Reuben said. “I mean, we’re triplets. We’ve been together our whole lives.”

“He didn’t live here with you two, did he? And Smash.” Smash nodded in acknowledgment.

“No, but we were still close. We’re all in Ransom, we saw him plenty.”

“Had you seen him recently? Before the hike?”

“I talked to him a few weeks ago,” Daniel said. “Like, we texted.”

“And we saw him right before,” Reuben said. “Right before he left, remember? I mean, *I* saw him. He came over to borrow some shoes.”

“Some shoes?” Doug said.

“Some hiking boots.”

“Oh right,” Daniel said. “I just wasn’t there myself, that’s what I meant.”

The three young men sat crammed together on the sofa, looking very much like kids waiting to be let go, released from something unpleasant, though Doug felt none of the authority a parent or teacher might, and their expressions were hard and adult. Doug had to remind himself that Reuben and Daniel had just potentially – or likely, since they were well into day four – lost their brother, because they didn’t look like it. They didn’t look sad.

Still loss was, in Doug’s experience, an impossible thing to judge.

“You spoke to Joe right before he went missing?” he said. “How that does make you feel?”

There was an uncomfortable silence; Doug regretted the question at once.

“I don’t know,” Reuben said at last. “It doesn’t change anything.”

“Sure,” Doug said. “Of course. Anyway, what kinds of things did Joe like to do?”

There was another pause, each brother waiting for the other to speak.

“A lot of things,” Reuben said. “The usual stuff.”

“Did he have many other friends? Was he very social?”

“He liked to go out, sure. He had other friends too.”

“Is there anyone else I could talk to? Anyone especially close?”

“I didn’t say they were *my* friends,” Reuben said. “I don’t know. I wasn’t his secretary or anything.”

“Did he have a girlfriend?”

There was yet another pause, though briefer than the others. Reuben reached all the way across the other two and grabbed his phone from the end table next to Smash, skin and muscles visibly stretching over his ribcage. His answer, once he straightened and sat upright, was casual and dismissive, though he looked at his phone when he said it.

“Nope, no girlfriend.”

“Did he...have any girlfriends in the past?”

Reuben looked up. “Listen, we got some other stuff to do this morning, sorry. We really gotta get going.” Dan nodded. Smash shrugged. Reuben rose from the couch, leaning to scratch his side.

“Oh,” Doug said. “Sorry, of course. Could I maybe come back again sometime and we could chat some more.”

“Look, I’m gonna be honest with you,” Reuben said. “We don’t want to go to your church.” Daniel frowned but said nothing, and Smash shrugged again. “I’m sorry if that affects your charity or whatever.”

“No no,” Doug said, trying to hide his disappointment – though it had nothing to do with Salvation Methodist. “That’s okay, it doesn’t. I appreciate your honesty.”

Now that Reuben had lied about his brother, Doug found that he wanted to stay. He hated the thought of going back to Erin without any better answers – these brothers weren’t telling the whole truth, but he couldn’t yet say why. Maybe they were hiding something of their own, or hiding something of Joe’s, or maybe they just didn’t like their brother and couldn’t handle the awkward position of trying to pretend like they cared. Or maybe something else entirely; Doug had no idea. He had wanted to leave with something better, to tell Erin what he’d found. When she asked him for help she had looked so young – she was small anyway, and she had a round face, and she dressed like a student, and he had always thought of her like one Emma’s friends, and felt the same for her as he did his daughter and her high school clique, before she left for college: some combination of affection, exasperation, and confusion.

Reuben brushed past him and started walking toward the front of the house, and Doug reluctantly began to follow, trying to think of something else to do to prolong his visit, and failing. Inspiration struck at the front door, when to his left Doug saw a stairway leading to a small landing on the second level. Just visible up the stairs was a bathroom.

“I’m really sorry to do this,” he said. “But could I use your bathroom before I go? Sorry to impose. It’s a little urgent. And really, sorry.”

When Reuben turned to look, Doug put his foot on the first step and gestured at the visible toilet above him. Reuben hesitated, but eventually he shrugged and said “Alright” and Doug hurried up the stairs before he could change his mind.

By the time Doug reached the bathroom and turned to close the door, he could see Reuben disappearing out of sight, back in the direction of the living room and the other two. Doug pulled the door shut until it was open only a crack, waited several seconds, and cautiously peeked his head out. When he didn't see Reuben or anyone else at the base of the stairs, he silently pushed the door back open and stepped out, then closed it behind him on the empty bathroom. If these boys had done nothing, and knew nothing, and had truly lost their brother, Doug had no desire to bother them, but something in the house felt off. Before he had time to reconsider, he stepped down the hallway and into the first open door – his heart already pounding in his chest. It was a bedroom, and like the rest of the house it was both cluttered and sparsely decorated. To the left was the unmade bed itself, with a nightstand beside it – a lamp, a box of tissues, and to Doug's surprise a stack of books. He peered closer and saw a few he recognized: a self-help guide to motivation, a 1,000-page fantasy epic. He wasn't sure whose room he was in; none of them had struck him as readers.

Across the room was a desk in front of the only window, piled high with cardstock and other paper. To its left, on a separate stand, was a sizeable, blocky printer; when Doug stepped closer he realized it had a scanner as well. In the middle of the desk was a laptop, and scattered around it were pens and pencils, papers and scissors, a knife, a bendy straw, and a single unsmoked cigarette. Doug shuffled through the papers, many of them blank, though some had drawings and doodles – he saw a crown, a cat, a lightbulb; a series of letters in different sizes and fonts. They meant nothing to him. At the back of the desk against the wall was a stack of envelopes, old mail addressed to Daniel Decker. Most of the pieces looked like advertisements for banks and credit cards and magazines,

and something from Barnwell College, but Doug's eye caught on an envelope near the top that was unaddressed and unsealed, blank and clearly never mailed, though neither was it empty. He pulled it out of the pile and opened it.

Inside were checks, maybe fifteen or twenty, all the official, printed kind with perforated edges, coming from a single payer: a local law firm with an address downtown. Gage & Blotch, Attorneys at Law. Doug had never heard of it. Each was for the same amount, \$500, and they all had the same note on the memo line: *White Light*. He started to count the dates – they went back several months – but before he could finish he thought he heard a noise on the stairs, and he threw the envelope on the desk and nearly ran out of the room, his stomach tingling.

The landing was clear, though Doug was conscious of how much time he had taken, so he hurried back to the bathroom, flushed the empty toilet, turned the water on and off for good measure, and hustled down the stairs. He found Reuben standing halfway down the hall, watching Smash in the living room play the same game he had quit before. Reuben turned and walked him back to the front door.

“Well, it was nice to meet you,” Doug said. “Sorry again.”

“Bye,” Reuben said. He waited for Doug to step outside, then closed the door.

For several seconds Doug stood dumbly on the porch, thinking about their conversation, about everything they'd said, and everything he'd seen.

“A *pastor*,” he heard, or thought he heard, someone say derisively inside the house.

CHAPTER 14

Zip's office had a single conference room, a small rectangular space next to the breakroom into which Theodore had crammed a twelve-seat table and rolling chairs, a projector on one end and a whiteboard on the other. One long wall was entirely glass and looked into the main office floor, though the glass was thick enough that noise didn't pass through either direction, and the other wall had several square windows overlooking 3rd Street below them. Any Zip meeting with more than three people took place in the conference room, though unless it required a sustained conversation, most employees chose instead to crowd around each other's desks and talk quietly. For companywide get-togethers, everyone stayed on the main floor and Theodore just stood in front of his office door and raised his voice.

Ben planned to be early to the City meeting at 3:00, but after the conversation with Gage at lunch he found himself distracted at his desk, and by the time he gathered his things and walked quickly to the conference room, he could see everyone else already seated at the table – John-Thomas Theodore, Gerry Kane, Mary, and a middle-aged man in a shirt and tie but no jacket that Ben took to be the city councilman, David Tyler. It was still five minutes to 3:00, but he felt late – the effect of walking in after everyone had taken a seat – and he tried to enter with the confidence of someone on time. John-Thomas sat at the head of the table speaking in low tones to David Tyler, and he didn't seem to notice or acknowledge Ben enter, though Mary looked up from her phone and smiled, and Gerry Kane – cleaning his glasses with a handkerchief – nodded. Ben chose a seat

across from Mary, leaving two empty chairs between himself and Gerry Kane, and opened his laptop. He didn't know if he'd need it or not, but the others had their computers and it made him look competent and prepared. To complete the picture he also turned his spiral notebook to a fresh page and laid a pen on the table, then sat and waited.

On his way back from the law office, feeling guilty about his midday sojourn from work, he promised himself that he'd be ready for this meeting, though once he returned to his desk he remembered again that there was nothing he could do to prepare, since he knew nothing, and he settled for making sure his laptop was charged and he actually had a spiral notebook with blank pages. The other, lesser projects in his queue felt as unenticing and insignificant as they had that morning, and he'd half-heartedly fiddled with one while rehashing, in his mind, everything that happened over lunch. From his desk drawer he'd found the post-it onto which he'd written the 180 King address, and below it he added *Thomas Gage* and ? *Blotch*, then stuck it back to the inside of his desk. Once he'd done so he felt again that he had made some progress, gotten closer to something otherwise unknowable.

At one minute to 3:00, Dana Rickenmann came scurrying into the office and sat down next to Ben. She was a copywriter several years younger than him, a small woman with a stud in her nose and bright orange streaks in her hair, though she otherwise dressed and spoke demurely. He hadn't realized she was also joining the project.

"Okay," Theodore said. "Let's get started. Welcome, David, to our humble office." He spoke as much to the others as he did the councilman sitting next to him. "We appreciate you taking the time to come in."

“Sure,” Tyler said. His shirt was badly wrinkled, and he didn’t look well – baggy eyes and stubble on his cheeks, a cowlick in his hair. The left button on his shirt collar was undone, exposing the neck of his tie. He coughed. “Happy to be here.” His voice was thick and nasally, though Ben couldn’t tell if he was sick or he always spoke like that.

“I believe you know everyone,” Theodore said, “except for one.” He gestured across the table with a half-turn of his hand. “This is Ben Ezra. He’ll be sitting in on a few meetings. He’s been with us at Zip for many years in the art department.”

For a moment Theodore paused, and David Tyler looked dully across the table at Ben. It felt appropriate to do something, Ben thought, so he nodded in what he hoped was a friendly yet business-like manner, and picked up his pen. He waited for Theodore to introduce Dana as well, but he didn’t, and Ben suddenly realized that he had said “one” – Tyler met everybody, “except for one.” Ben frowned, then caught himself and quickly tried to rearrange his expression back into something studious and open. He looked around the table: Mary’s face was blank and unconcerned, turning mildly back to the head of the table, and Gerry Kane had his eyes down, doodling something on the page in front of him. Beside him, Dana could only be seen in his periphery, though she also faced Theodore.

“If you’re ready,” Theodore said, “We’d like to jump right in. We have several good ideas so far.”

This was the problem, Ben thought, with having Gerry Kane as his supervisor, and Theodore as *his* supervisor. Most likely Mary brought Dana in earlier – just as he suspected she brought him in later – because she kept her eyes open, and her ears, and her

mind. Gerry Kane had years of experience, and truthfully he was fine at his job, but he wasn't going to change anymore. And neither was John-Thomas Theodore.

“We're calling this first idea ‘City Hall Heroes,’” Theodore said.

“That's a working title,” Mary said.

“Sure,” Theodore said. He tapped a key on his laptop and an image appeared on the screen behind him, a grey-toned picture of an average-looking middle-aged man on a street corner. Though the tint was dark and dramatic, an unseen light put the man's shadow on the wall behind him, a shadow that much more closely resembled Superman – tall and muscular and caped, hands on his hips in a power stance. At the bottom of the image, words in white ran along the sidewalk above a URL placeholder: *They walk among us*. It was fine, Ben thought, though he would have increased the font and put the man in motion, not standing awkwardly on the corner doing nothing. David Tyler shifted his chair and craned his neck to see better. “This is just a mockup Gerry put together,” Theodore added. “For the actual campaign we could use real photos of Ransom city employees. But the idea is to create some intrigue, and use ads like these to draw people to a website that highlights the true stories of heroes in the Ransom city government.”

“There are heroes in the city government?” David Tyler said.

“Of course. Did you know there's a city planner who once performed CPR on his daughter's band director, when the guy had a heart attack during a concert? Saved his life. And there's a woman in the mayor's office whose husband has ALS, and she's cared for him faithfully, every day, for the last fifteen years? That sounds pretty heroic to me.”

“Superheroes are big now,” Gerry Kane added.

“These ads could be shared across a variety of platforms – on social media and the web, newspapers, bus stops and billboards. And the best part of the campaign its dynamism – it could always be changing as we add new stories to the website, and post new images online. Who knows, it could even inspire employees to want to *become* City Hall Heroes.”

“Huh,” said David Tyler. “You’re saying there are stories we could use now, if we wanted?”

“We’ve already identified a few,” Mary said. “Like the ones John mentioned.”

“Has anything gone viral?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Did that CPR thing go viral?”

“The incident with the city planner was a few years ago. I think it got some local news coverage, but no – not exactly viral.”

“It would be nice to have something go viral.”

Theodore scratched his chin carefully. “Well,” he said. “It’s certainly possible that one of these stories could go viral, especially as we uncover more and more. I mean, who’s to say they wouldn’t?”

“It’s incredibly difficult to predict what will or will not go viral,” Mary said.

“True,” Theodore said. “But it’s *possible*.”

David Tyler leaned back further in his chair to take in the image on the screen. The room went quiet around him. Even Gerry Kane stopped doodling on the page in front of him. Dana had been typing something on her laptop and stopped, her fingers poised over the keyboard; Ben wondered what she’d been writing. He was scrawling notes in his

notebook, but nothing so far beyond a bare account of the presentation – and that just to stay engaged.

“The picture is kind of dark,” Tyler said.

“We could easily brighten it.”

“Still... I don’t know.”

“It’s understandable to have questions,” Theodore said. “And we have other ideas, of course.”

“I’m just worried – Say we put our focus on someone specific, and then it turns out that person also did something...unfortunate. The whole thing would collapse, wouldn’t it? It just seems like a risk.”

For a moment no one said anything.

“Do you think that could happen?”

“I don’t know,” Tyler said. “Let’s hope not.”

Mary tapped her fingers on the table and looked over at Ben and Dana. For a quick second she raised her eyebrows. “Yeah,” she said neutrally. “Let’s hope not.”

Theodore glanced at his ex-wife, then tapped a key on his computer and the image behind him disappeared.

“We understand,” he said. “Let’s move on.”

It occurred to Ben that Thomas Gage might know some of the people involved in the city scandals – the county prosecutor, for one, or the chief of police. Ben still didn’t know what kind of law he practiced, but Gage had made it seem like he belonged to several elite Ransom social circles nonetheless. Of course he could have been exaggerating, or lying, but Ben had trouble seeing himself as someone worth impressing,

and the proof would come in what he discovered anyway, what he told Ben if – or when – Ben returned.

There was even a possibility, Ben thought, that he knew David Tyler, or for that matter John-Thomas Theodore, small-business owner to small-business owner, though it was hard to imagine Theodore anyplace outside the office, interacting with anyone but a client.

“This one,” Theodore said. “We’re calling ‘Ransom Family Photos,’ and yes –” he held up a thick finger to Mary, who had opened her mouth to speak – “it’s also a working title. The point here, as you can perhaps guess, is to take the images and feelings we associate with family, like meals together, or fun activities like games and movies, or car rides and vacations, and apply them to the mayor’s office.” On the projected screen popped an image of a multicultural group playing a board game in comfy pajamas with blankets and mugs of tea, laughing like old friends, except they weren’t in easy chairs around a fire, they were in an office boardroom – larger and cleaner and better equipped than Zip’s. At the bottom of the image was a single line of text: *Ransom City Government. We’re a family here.*

The concept wasn’t dissimilar from the one Gage invoked as Ben left his office, though the lawyer had approached it from a more oblique angle:

We’re a family.

We’re a community.

We take care of each other.

We take care of our own.

Ben had lived in Ransom for most of his life, but he didn't feel the pull of sentiments like those, not in the way others claimed to, perhaps because to him they always carried with them a sense of demarcation and a hidden threat – *We take care of our own*, the implication went, *so watch out* – and Ben, though he'd joined the soccer team and gone to prom and taken a summer school trip to Italy in college, and of course worked at Zip for over a decade, had never easily belonged to anything. He could not have repeated what Gage said sincerely, and he couldn't take a campaign like "Ransom Family Photos" seriously either, not with its hokey slogan and infomercial-like visuals, brightly lit and artificial. He hadn't been around when the idea was developed, and he didn't have a better one himself, but it – and the previous pitch as well – seemed like the kinds of things borrowed from other, better campaigns.

"Again," Theodore said. "This is just a mock-up. If we decided to head this direction, we would perhaps want to use some of the actual space at city hall."

"I see," Tyler said.

"It's tongue-in-cheek, of course, but it gets at a real truth we want to convey: the intimacy and warmth of local government."

Theodore himself was no one's idea of a romantic, and he must have known the line he gave was silly, but to his credit he didn't crack, not even a little – no movement on his face, no hitch in his voice, not the slightest hint of qualification or self-awareness – and he delivered it with enough earnestness to sound convincing.

"I like the thought," Tyler said. "But won't it just look like the mayor's office doesn't work hard? That all they do is sit around and play games?"

"I think we can trust people to understand the idea."

“You know,” Dana said. “We could always complement each image with another of those same people hard at work. It might make the point even stronger – we work together, we play together, etc.”

Tyler thought about it. “That’d be a little better.”

“We would certainly be able to do that,” Theodore said. “Don’t you think, Gerry?”

“No problemo,” Gerry said.

Ben had not expected Dana to talk, and it irritated him that she was also taking the idea seriously, though of course she was just doing her job, and she was young, and she needed to take it seriously – as did he. It was difficult, however, and he felt out of sorts to be sitting at a table where everyone else was. He had always known that marketing teased the truth, winked at and toyed with it, and he hadn’t cared – uninvested in the work, content with his designs – but now, with the city and this Project, it suddenly felt different, like lying, like everyone around the table, Theodore and Mary and David Tyler and Gerry Kane and Dana and himself, were plotting something sinister. He wondered if that’s what Gage had been doing too: lying. It was hard to know what to think.

Still he had to try.

“What if,” he interjected. “We included some of their *real* families too? Like, we brought in people’s husbands and wives and children – like the mayor’s family, especially. Wouldn’t that make it even realer, and, like, emphasize the family bonds even more? Families and coworkers...” He trailed off as he saw his boss’s frown.

“...mingling.”

Theodore tapped his keyboard, and the screen went black. David Tyler frowned as well, and Mary looked down at the table.

“You know, we talked about that,” Tyler said.

“Yes,” Theodore said slowly. “We did.”

Dana leaned over in her chair. “The mayor’s on his second wife,” she whispered. “His stepson doesn’t like him. It’s a touchy subject. They wanted to stay away from the real family stuff.”

How, Ben thought, did Dana know *that*?

“Or you know...” he said. “Maybe not.”

“We won’t take that direction,” Theodore said to David Tyler, “but I still think there’s a lot of promise with this idea in general.”

David Tyler had pulled out his phone and begun to tap the screen.

“It’s not bad,” he said.

“Well, we have one more if you want to –”

“Sorry,” Tyler said. “I’ve actually got to be going. I’m gonna have to cut this one short.”

“Oh,” Theodore said. “Of course.”

“These are all fine ideas to start. They’re okay.”

“Thanks.”

“Look forward to seeing what else you guys come up with.”

“I –” He paused. “Sure.”

“You think I could make a phone call in here before I go?”

“Of course.” Theodore heaved himself up and jerked his head at the door. There was a brief rustle of pages and closing of computers, then everyone filed one by one out onto the main office floor. Even though no one had spoken, they clumped together outside the closed door like they’d planned it.

“Relax,” Mary said to Theodore. “That was nothing.”

“I know it was nothing,” he said. His breathing was labored, though all he had done was leave the room. “That’s exactly what I was afraid of.”

Ben stared at the floor and braced himself for Theodore and Mary to start bickering, but neither continued, and in another second he looked up and realized that Theodore had begun the slow walk to his office, followed by Gerry Kane a few steps behind. Mary shrugged and turned in the direction of her own office, and now that he was free Ben hurried back to his desk before Dana could say anything to him.

CHAPTER 15

It was still early in the afternoon, but Doug was tired and wanted to go home. He sat in his car outside the Decker brothers' house and thought about it, listening to the generic Christian radio saved on his presets, until he became aware of two older men sitting on the porch of the house across the street, staring at him, and he remembered where he was. The Deckers had only one small front window on their side of the duplex, and it was impossible to tell if they had also noticed – or if they cared – that he was still there, so he started the car and left before he could find out. Instead of going south, however, to his own house in Strawberry Hill, he went north, got on the interstate just outside of Ransom, looped around the city, and headed for Calvary Bible. He had an appointment with Ed Byrd and Dallas Goldman.

It was a trip he'd made almost every day for years, and he let his mind wander while he drove, trying not to think any more about the Deckers, or Erin, or the conversation he was soon to have at church, but rather pleasant, mindless things like the weather, or what he might find for dinner that night. When he was still a few minutes away, approaching his exit on the highway, his phone beeped from the cup holder. It was a text message from Erin. He dismissed it with a swipe – in the moment he didn't feel like he owed her much, and certainly not an immediate response. If anything, after his morning at the Deckers, she owed him.

Before he could put the phone down, however – holding it in one hand and driving with the other – it buzzed again, this time with a call. He answered.

“Are you *kidding* me?”

It was Emma.

“Hi baby,” he said.

“Dad, I just... I don’t... I mean, what the fuck?”

Doug was, for a pastor, a relatively lax parent, but he still insisted on certain rules, and throughout his daughter’s childhood profanity had been strictly off limits. He’d never liked swearing. And it was an old-fashioned thing to say, not something he would even admit, but he especially didn’t like it from women.

“Don’t use that language with me, Emma. That’s not okay.”

“Neither is getting a divorce,” she said, hitting every word.

Doug sighed. Buried in her anger was a point. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know you’re upset. That makes perfect sense.”

“I don’t understand. I mean, *why*? What’s going on?”

“What did your mother say?”

“Nothing that made any sense! How could you let this happen?”

I didn’t let it happen, Doug thought. *It just happened*. But he caught himself; even he wasn’t sure how those were different. “I don’t know,” he said. “I think I’m going to be asking myself questions like that a lot, but right now I don’t know.”

“Dad, surely you can see this is crazy. I mean, yeah, sure, marriage is tough and all, but you can’t keep working at it? It’s been like twenty-five years and you’re just...giving up?”

It had been twenty-three years, but Doug didn’t correct her. He shifted his phone from one hand to the other so he could better turn off at his exit. “We’re not just giving

up, we've worked a lot. Your mom and I went to counseling, we talked to our friends at church. We really tried. But the truth is there's something broken between us. And I don't know, but we can't fix it."

"Did you cheat on her?"

Doug took in a short, quick breath, surprised by the force of the question. "No," he said. "Absolutely not. Did your mother –"

"No, no, she didn't, like, suggest it. But at least that would've made some sense."

"It would make sense," Doug said. "I almost wish it were that simple. I mean, of course I don't really, it's just..."

There was a long pause while he continued to drive, now off the interstate and nearly to the church. He would have thought Emma had hung up if he couldn't sometimes hear her breathing, and even so he checked his phone to make sure they were still connected. A better man would take the lead, he thought, and say something comforting – genuine and reassuring and parental. But a better man might not be getting divorced in the first place.

"Dad," Emma said. There was a renewed tightness in her voice. "I just...can't."

Doug pulled into the church parking lot and waited until he stopped the car to answer. "We've let you down," he said. "It's not fair, and I wish there was something I could do to make it better. But I can't. You just have to know that it doesn't change anything about us, about the way your mother and I feel about you."

There was another pause. "I'm sure that's what you used to think about Mom too. That nothing would change how you felt about her."

"Emma..."

“I’m serious.”

“Marriage is...a choice. Parenthood isn’t.”

“Whatever.”

“I love you.”

“I know,” Emma said. “I know.”

“Okay.”

“I gotta go, Mom’s coming back.”

“That’s fine. We’ll talk again soon.”

Doug hung up, got out of the car, and began the long walk to the church. The Calvary lot was huge, and virtually empty on a Monday afternoon, and he had still parked almost a hundred yards from the entrance.

As soon as he stepped through the doors and into the lobby, he was struck by a strange premonition: *This is my last time inside the church*. It made no sense, of course; even if he were fired on the spot – which he wouldn’t be; he didn’t even think he *could* be – he’d still come back to clean out his office and say goodbye to the staff. And more likely they were about to begin a process, the length and breadth of which was undetermined, though Doug guessed *long*, that would end with his resignation and disinvolvement with the staff and leadership. He would no doubt be coming back to the church often in the next several weeks, though under circumstances he had never imagined.

Nonetheless he was aware that his days at Calvary were numbered. There was no reason he couldn’t still attend the church when he was no longer its pastor – he actually

thought he might be welcomed, in due time, with the appropriate attitude – but he knew that would never happen, and if he were to keep attending church, it would be elsewhere. So while he was surely wrong to think this meeting would be his last time in the building, he wasn't wrong to think his last time might be soon, and it might be unexpected. He hadn't realized he was preaching his last sermon as he did it, but he almost certainly had. He hadn't been aware of his last meal together with his family intact, he and Sam and Emma at the same table, and he hadn't recognized in the moment his last kiss from his wife, the last time they made love. It would have taken a premonition to know.

He stopped in the middle of the lobby, several paces from the door that led back to the offices and meeting rooms, stood in his spot, and tilted his head back to look all the way up the high ceiling. And while it made no sense he couldn't shake the feeling: *This is my last time here.*

Because so much of the staff worked on Sundays, Monday the church opened with only a skeleton crew, and Doug saw few people as he walked back to Ed Byrd's office. He almost visibly flinched at the first hello, from one of the women at the Welcome Desk, and found himself taking a more circuitous route to avoid the one or two offices he thought would be occupied, though none of the people he did see greeted him differently, except to ask if he was feeling better. Doug was sure that neither Ed nor Dallas would have outright lied, but nonetheless there seemed to be the general sense that he hadn't preached because he'd been sick, and he wondered who else – if anyone – knew the truth. He hadn't asked the other two to keep it quiet, but they had.

When he reached the office, both Ed and Dallas were already inside, and they popped to their feet like he'd walked in on them doing something untoward. At once Ed came around his desk and gave Doug a hug, and when he was finished Dallas hugged him too, a quick squeeze and a pat on his back.

"Have a seat," Ed said. Wisps of thin, graying hair stood up from his head like he'd been shocked, and absentmindedly he brushed them down. "We were just talking about the sermon yesterday. Dallas did a very nice job."

Doug's initial reaction was that the sermon wasn't the only thing they'd been talking about, but he felt guilty for thinking it, for impugning them from the start. He took the other chair across the desk, next to Dallas. "Oh," he said. "I'm glad."

"I'm grateful we can all sit down together."

Dallas nodded.

"I know," Doug said. "Me too."

"Before we do anything else," Ed said. "Let me pray."

They bowed their heads. For over a minute Ed prayed slowly, asking God to be present, to guide them in their conversation, and to lead them into truth. To protect His Church, and build it up, and lead it into righteousness, that it would be a light for the world and an expression of His grace, His hands and feet in action. Then he prayed specifically for Doug and Sam and Emma, that they would cling to Jesus and His love and forgiveness, and he prayed for Dallas and his family, and then for all the families at Calvary, those that were hurting and those that weren't. At the end he prayed for mercy, and they raised their heads.

"So," he said to Doug. "How're you feeling?"

Doug straightened in his chair and thought about it. There was no reason he could see not to be honest. “Mostly I feel numb,” he said. “Every once in a while I’ll get a wave of something else.” Even in the truth he didn’t add that this was mostly his own doing, that he had managed to avoid much feeling or emotion by not thinking, and by taking on other tasks – though by its nature he was only vaguely aware he was doing it, a faint thought in the back of his mind.

“I have to say, we were blindsided by your call, both of us.”

“I know,” Doug said.

Ed hesitated, and seemed to choose his next words carefully. “Did something happen?” he asked.

Doug understood at once what he meant, an indirect approach to the same question Emma had asked. *Did you cheat on her? Did she cheat on you?*

He shook his head. “No. It’s been a long time coming.”

“I knew things were serious. But if I had known *how* serious...”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything, Ed. What would you have done?”

“We would’ve been there with you,” Dallas said. “We would’ve worked even harder.”

Doug kept his eyes focused on the ground, then realized what he was doing and looked up at Dallas. “We tried,” he said. “We worked hard.”

“Of course you tried,” Ed said gently. “No one’s saying otherwise.”

“It’s just that this is it,” Dallas said. “This is so...serious.”

Only the fact that Dallas seemed lost for words, that he struggled even to land on “serious,” kept Doug from a sarcastic reply, though it took all his patience to resist. In his

own life as a pastor and counselor he'd been part of many heated conversations, though usually from the other end, and he was at least adept at not reacting right away. When he felt his own irritation building, or had the good sense to recognize that sarcasm would be out of place, he always did a few multiplications in his head to quell the urge. It was the same trick he used to pee at a crowded urinal. Five times six is thirty. Six times seven is forty-two. Seven times eight is fifty-six.

"I know," he said, more mildly than he otherwise would have.

"We all know," Ed said.

"Sorry," Dallas said. "I'm still trying to figure out how to react."

"That makes two of us," Doug said.

"Anyway," Ed said. "Now that we've begun, let me go ahead and say this." It was common of him to do that, to preface his own statements with other statements – "I'm going to get there by starting here." "I'll answer that by saying this." The meetings he led sometimes had two or three beginnings. Doug had, unexpectedly, to repress a small smile.

"We've known each other for a long time," Ed said. "And I was floored when you told me. I know that you and Sam were working at it, and I know you wouldn't do something like this without a lot of thought and conversation and prayer. I wish I could've been a part of that even more, and been with you more in general, but it's done and over now. This is your decision to make. If you're telling me it's finished and there's no going back, I'll respect that and we'll figure out our next steps together. But I also can't possibly move forward without saying this: Please reconsider. Don't do it."

Doug had known this, or something like it, would be coming, and it was still a difficult answer to give. He took a deep breath. “It’s only half my decision anyway,” he said. “But it’s done.”

Ed nodded like he wasn’t surprised, though he looked pained. For some reason Dallas had his Bible on his lap, and he picked distractedly at the top corner.

“Okay,” Ed said. “Let’s go ahead and get into the rest of it.”

Dallas cleared his throat. “Uh, historically the position of the church is that divorce is outside of God’s intention for us. As far as I’ve always known, we were on the same page there. But should we talk about any of the Biblical stuff together?”

Doug didn’t answer right away. He thought back to something he had told Emma on the phone: *Marriage is a choice*. Over his ministry career he’d preached on marriage many times, and officiated hundreds of weddings, and he couldn’t remember ever calling it a choice. He had called it a promise, a commitment, a privilege, a sacrament, but never a choice. It had just come out of his mouth – because it had, in the moment, sounded right. And it wasn’t like he hadn’t always known that marriage was, in one clear sense, a choice, it was that he’d never wanted to think of it that way, or encourage others to, until suddenly he had. He wondered if his beliefs were going to change. He wondered if they would change because it was easiest.

He had no idea, though suddenly he felt a much greater sympathy for the divorced members of his own congregation. He had only been separated two days but already he was questioning what he believed, and just that morning he had lied to several strangers and snooped through their house. It was going to be a weird time.

“Well,” he said. “This, uh, new perspective I’m getting has got me thinking we should take another look at how we minister to the people here who have experienced – or rather, I mean, gotten – a divorce.”

Ed and Dallas exchanged a glance across the desk.

“Sure,” Ed said. “I think that’s fair.”

“But we’re not talking about someone in the congregation,” Dallas said. “We’re talking about *you*. The Senior Pastor. Surely you see the difference. I mean Biblically –”

“I understand,” Doug said. “‘Not many of you should presume to be teachers...’ We don’t have to get into it, I honestly understand. I was just saying.”

Ed leaned back in his chair and nodded. “Alright. Then to be quite frank, Doug, what we’re looking at is a pretty significant moment of, well, *sin*. We’re going to need you to step away from your pastoral role and go through a reevaluation process. You should be prepared for it to take some time. This isn’t to say it’s not possible to imagine, at some point in the future, through prayer and repentance and evaluation, that you couldn’t possibly return to the staff in some role. But it won’t be easy. I’m sure you –”

“Ed,” Doug said. “I know. Which is why I couldn’t, in good faith, go through all that. It wouldn’t be fair to you or Calvary, and honestly I don’t want to.”

“You don’t *want* to?” Dallas said.

Doug shook his head. “No. And it wouldn’t be fair to you guys, don’t forget that.”

For a moment no one said anything. Dallas looked like he wanted to say something else, his brow flexing, but he didn’t – Doug wasn’t sure if he was holding back, or trying to find the right words.

Finally Ed spoke. “What do you think God’s will for you is here?”

Doug sighed. “If I knew that, I would know a lot of things. But I don’t.”

“Would you say you’re having a crisis of faith?”

“If you mean, do I still believe in Jesus? Then the funny thing is no, I’m not having a crisis. Maybe I will later – I mean, I hope not – but maybe. For now, though, this isn’t really about belief, per se, so much as action. As in, what am I supposed to *do*?”

Dallas leaned forward. “I know you don’t feel like you know, but even if you don’t have any particular leading, any sense of God’s will, you still have the Bible, you still have the counsel of other believers, you still have tradition and history.”

“Again,” Doug said. “You’re talking about belief. I’m talking about behavior.”

“I’m talking about both together.”

“Aside from questions of process,” Ed cut in. “Would you say your hope is to stay at Calvary? Or to leave?”

“At this point it’s been two days. I can say I don’t have another job lined up. I don’t even have the slightest idea what else I’d do.”

“It sounds like you’re being a little cavalier about this,” Dallas said.

“It would be cavalier of me to enter into some...process when I wasn’t committed to it.”

They lapsed briefly back into silence. Doug felt like the meeting had hit a wall – a wall of his own creation – and was drawing, unexpectedly, to a close.

Again it was up to Ed to break the silence. “Well Doug,” he said. “I think it’s clear we’re both concerned.” While Dallas had come forward in his chair, perched on the balls of his feet like he was ready to jump up, Ed seemed deflated, and he sat back with his hands clasped in front of him. “I think I’d like our next step be this: You can make

whatever calls you want, but with your permission, Dallas and I will speak to the Elder Board, we'll break the news to anyone you haven't told, we'll get some more input, and together we'll schedule a time that we can sit down with you and figure out the terms of, well, your role here going forward."

"Okay," Doug said. "That sounds alright to me,"

"We can tell everyone on the Elder Board to hold this in confidence, and I'm sure that most of them will, but once we leave here you need to be prepared for this to get out. The rest of the church will know."

"It was going to happen sooner or later."

"It was."

"I'll need some grace," Doug added. He wasn't sure why he'd said it; it made him sound like he was begging, when that hadn't been his intention.

"You will," Ed agreed. "We all will. Though I'm a little afraid that what you're looking for is cheap grace."

Doug moved forward in his seat; like Dallas he was ready to stand. "I understand what you mean," he said. "But at this point I'll take what I can get."

CHAPTER 16

Erin was waiting on the doorstep when Doug pulled into his driveway. After her conversation with Edie, she had taken the bus from Joe's apartment, though there wasn't a route that went through Strawberry Hill, so she had to get off early and walk the final ten minutes. Still she was at Doug's house long before he was, and she sat on his step and looked at her phone and waited nearly thirty minutes. He had not responded to her message earlier, after he said he'd try Joe's brothers' house (*Hey how'd it go?*) and she was more than a little peeved. It wasn't like he didn't see his texts. She knew he saw them.

She was trying to think of the best way to bring it up, something that made her point without sounding whiny and childish, something that might make him feel a little bad, when he got out of the car and walked up the drive, and she saw his face. It was an expression she hadn't seen on him before, not happy or sad, not frustrated or bored or tired, but blank – totally blank. Not neutral so much as empty. It was impossible to read, but her mind went straight to Joe's brothers.

“Hey,” she said. “How'd it go? Did you meet them? Did you learn anything?”

“Hi,” he said, moving past her to the door.

“What's wrong?”

He dropped his keys on the porch, and bent slowly to pick them up. “Nothing's wrong,” he said. “Why don't you come in?”

She was already following him inside.

“Are you sure? You seem off. Is it about Joe?”

“I’m fine,” Doug said. “Just a little...overwhelmed, I guess. It’s not about Joe. Or it’s not just about Joe. I did talk to his brothers today, though I don’t know how much help I was. We can talk about it in the kitchen.”

He moved down the front hall and into the kitchen, and she followed at his heels, though when they got there he made a beeline for the fridge without saying anything else, and when it became clear he wasn’t about to start talking, she wandered restlessly over to the breakfast nook. There was both an open newspaper and an iPad on the table, the one they’d sat at earlier when she asked for his help, and she picked up the paper while Doug searched the fridge behind her. Underneath it was a dirty plate, a pair of glasses, and a butter knife.

“Wait a second,” Doug said, mostly to himself. “It’s not in the fridge.” He paused. “What am I thinking?”

His behavior since he’d come home wasn’t doing much to help Erin relax. She took the plate and knife over to the sink and left them there, then leaned on the kitchen bar with the paper and tried to read. Doug disappeared into the pantry and returned a second later with a bottle of wine, some sort of red.

“I just need...” he said, working a corkscrew into the top. “...a drink. Then I could put up with just about anything.” He popped the cork and tossed it on the counter. “Like I’m in the Old West and a doctor’s about to take my leg off.”

“They used hard liquor for that,” Erin said, flipping pages. “But thanks for the comparison.” There wasn’t anything in the paper about Joe. She checked sporadically online for updates, but there were none. They were reaching the end of any reasonable

expectation for a search, and she found it better not to dwell on it. Maybe he was still out there, waiting to be found. Maybe he wasn't.

Doug poured himself a glass and took the first sip. For the first time since Erin had seen him step out of the car, he smiled – a small, distant smile, bereft of energy. “It wasn't a comparison,” he said. “Would you like some?”

She hesitated. “No thanks.” It was late in the afternoon by now, but still not even six. The November sun was just about to set.

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. Now c'mon, let's sit down.”

Doug turned on a bright, overhead light and they returned to the table in the breakfast nook. He pushed his iPad out of the way and sat, and Erin was struck again by how big the house was, how much empty space it had – she could fit her entire living room in the kitchen and still have something left over.

“The first thing I should tell you,” Doug said. “Because I'm assuming you didn't know, or you would have told *me*, is that Joe's brothers are identical. Like identical twins.”

“What?” Erin said. “Wow, no. I had only met Reuben; I had no idea. That's so strange.”

“Though it's even a little stranger than that,” he added. “They're actually triplets.”

“Wait,” she said. “Who's triplets?”

“The only three people we're talking about. Joe, and Dan, and Reuben.”

“But I met Reuben, he wasn't identical to Joe. I mean, they looked pretty similar, like brothers, but they weren't the *same*.”

“I guess Dan and Reuben are identical, and Joe isn’t. That’s what they said, at least. I don’t know if there’s a term for it.”

“Huh,” she said. Joe had always been reticent about his brothers, but this was another step entirely. Since they started dating she had known only that they existed, and from his evasiveness and general disinterest, she’d assumed they weren’t close, that perhaps they were older and had always been distant. Until the weekend she hadn’t known their names, or that they lived together, and not until Sunday did she learn what Reuben – or, it seemed, Reuben and Daniel – looked like. She certainly wouldn’t have guessed they were triplets. For the first time she felt real anger toward Joe, a hot, stinging spark. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either. They all seem to have an odd relationship.”

“They’re liars.”

Doug raised an eyebrow over his wine glass. “About which part? Being triplets?”

“No, not that. I mean, maybe, who knows? But no, just in general. About Joe.”

She realized she had forgotten to tell Doug about her conversation with Edie, about Joe leaving on Thursday with two older men, so as quickly as she could, she recounted everything new she’d learned – though Doug didn’t know anything about Joe’s living situation, or who Edie was, and after she started once she had to back up and start again.

“Okay,” Doug said. “That’s odd. It’s good in a way, that’s about the most concrete thing you’ve learned so far. But it’s odd.”

“Of course it’s odd,” Erin said. “I know it’s odd.”

“It makes sense,” he said carefully, “to think they might be lying. After meeting them it isn’t that hard to imagine. But then the question becomes *why?* And what did Joe have to do with it?”

“What do you mean?”

“At this point I don’t mean anything. I’m not even going to guess. I’m just saying, it’s worth asking if they’d be lying *for* Joe, or *because* of Joe, or *despite* Joe, or for some other reason completely?”

In the moment Erin didn’t love his tone, and she thought about a sharp reply, but she couldn’t think of one. It was painfully, embarrassingly clear that she didn’t know Joe as well as she thought she did.

Doug stood up from the table and moved to refill his wine glass.

“So you did actually talk to his brothers,” Erin said. “What happened?”

He poured himself a generous glass, then muscled the cork back into the bottle.

“I’ll tell you,” he said. “But first – and I’m sorry – I need to eat something or I’m going to make myself sick. With all the running around today I didn’t really eat lunch.” He reopened the fridge and bent to peer inside. “Are you hungry?” he asked without turning around.

“I mean... A little.”

Erin hadn’t eaten lunch either, and in truth she was starving. The last few days had been especially turbulent, but even on a normal week she skipped meals and ate at weird times. It wasn’t unusual for her to eat four or five times during a day, none of them constituting a meal itself, but neither was it strange for her to eat breakfast at 5:00am and nothing else til 3:00 or 4:00. She wasn’t a good cook, and living with Janet had kept her

from having to get better; she was shamefully reliant on others for her meals – in some ways like an animal, eating when food was available and in front of her, and otherwise starving. It was not, she realized, a very healthy way to live.

Still she didn't want *Doug* to know any of this, and she was wary of seeming too eager – especially since she didn't know what he planned to cook, if he planned to cook, and if she would have to help. She doubted very much that Doug had spent the last twenty years cooking his own meals. She wasn't sure about his wife. Maybe they both had someone cook for them.

As if on cue, Doug stood upright and closed the fridge door. “Okay,” he said. “I just remembered I'm a terrible cook. Let's order a pizza.”

While they waited for the pizza to arrive, they moved into the living room. There was a large leather sofa in front of the TV, strewn with pillows and blankets, and a few plush armchairs on either side. Erin wandered over to a set of built-in bookshelves, where she could look more closely at a family picture resting against a stack of thick, dusty books. There had been a few photos in Doug's office at church, but she'd never been able to study one closely. She always imagined his wife a certain way – put-together and sophisticated, with expensive tastes and pretty clothes – not because Doug was the kind of man who seemed like that mattered to him, but precisely because he wasn't, and he'd always struck her as someone who needed the balance. The woman in the family photo was blonde-haired, and like Erin had hoped, she was pretty, and wearing nice clothes, and she'd done her make-up well – more than usual, yet not overdone. But it was also a

staged family portrait, and nothing about it looked real. Doug's smile was a kind she'd never seen on him before.

There were no other pictures of them in the living room that weren't professionally done – only a few candid shots of their daughter playing volleyball and graduating high school. Erin didn't care as much for those, so she walked back toward the sofa in the middle of the room. Doug placed his wine glass carefully on the coffee table and fell onto the couch, leaving her to pick one of the armchairs.

“The thing is,” he said. “Joe's brothers were definitely being cagey. But I couldn't tell if they were just like that – I mean, I *was* a stranger – or if there was some specific reason. If there was something they wanted to hide – about themselves, or Joe, or something else entirely. The whole thing was... uncomfortable, I can you tell that.” He tipped his wine glass in her direction. “You're welcome, by the way.”

Erin ignored the last bit and thought for a moment. “You know I don't trust them,” she said. “And so far I don't like them either. But in this case maybe they just don't like being around pastors. You guys make some people uncomfortable.”

“Sure,” Doug said. “I know.” He grinned, another small smile with his mouth closed, nothing like the picture. “That's possible. The only thing that gets me is: why the specific lies then? Why tell the truth about some things, but not about Joe having a girlfriend?”

“Do you think they could tell you were snooping on them?”

“I don't know. Maybe. Maybe that's why they were acting weird. Maybe *I* was being weird, and it made them uncomfortable.” He paused. “I'm not sure. How terrible is that? I can't tell if I'm being weird anymore.”

“I’m sure you weren’t weird,” Erin said. She wasn’t positive, but in general Doug was no more or less strange than anyone else she knew. He was a pastor, that was as strange as he got. And maybe he wasn’t even that anymore.

The pizza arrived. Doug went into the kitchen and returned with two plates, a roll of paper towels, and the bottle of wine. Erin waited a second, then stood herself.

“I’m gonna grab a glass of water,” she said.

“Oops.” Doug had just sat down, but hastily stood again. “Sorry. Let me get it.”

“No, I can get it,” Erin said, already walking to the kitchen. “You’re fine.”

“Next to the fridge,” he called. “That’s where the cups are, I mean.”

When she returned he was patting two slices of pizza with a paper towel, and he had poured himself a third glass of wine. They were big glasses, and he was over halfway through the bottle, though other than seeming a little looser, a little more relaxed, he looked and spoke the same. The sun had sunk behind the impressive houses near them, but it wasn’t quite dark yet.

Erin perched on the edge of her chair and took a slice of pizza, and Doug put his plate down.

“I guess to sum it up,” he said. “They weren’t acting like their brother might be dead...” Erin flinched. “I’m sorry,” he added quickly. “I just mean...” He frowned, like he had puzzled himself, and stopped to take a sip from his fresh glass. “They were guarded,” he went on. “They were a little stressed. But they didn’t seem upset. They weren’t *bereaved*.” He paused. “I don’t know, though. I don’t feel like that’s completely fair.”

“There wasn’t anything else?” Erin asked. She tried not to be disappointed, or frustrated that he hadn’t learned more. Mostly she was irritated at herself for having expected something else.

Doug had picked up his slice of pizza, but once again put it down. “Actually,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “There was.”

And he told her the story of his spying, sneaking upstairs into Daniel’s bedroom.

“Wow,” she said when he finished. “Not bad.”

“I know. It just came to me. I feel a little guilty about it, to be honest.”

“You shouldn’t. Do you think he’s, like, an artist or something? With all the paper and the pens and scissors and stuff?”

“I think,” Doug said, “that he might do something artistic, for fun, but I bet he also works remotely, or takes freelance jobs. In design, maybe. Maybe they both do. It would explain why these guys were all home in the middle of the day. Plus the doodles, and the scanner, and the checks...”

“The checks?”

“Oh,” he said. “Right.” He told her about the stack of mail on the desk, the envelope with the checks from the law firm.

“Wow,” Erin said. “Five hundred dollars each?”

“That’s what I saw.”

“So if there were, like, twenty that’d be...ten thousand dollars.”

“Yeah. It’s a lot. But the thing I can’t figure out is why they weren’t *cash*ed.”

Erin looked down and his wine glass was almost empty again.

Jesus, that was fast, she thought. She almost said it out loud but managed to stop herself. They were silent for another moment, until suddenly it came to her.

“Mobile deposit,” she said. “I bet he cashed them on his phone.”

“Oh,” Doug said. “Huh.”

“What did all the checks say again? At the bottom?”

“White Light. Do you know what that means?”

Erin shook her head. “No.”

“I hope it’s not a *don’t go into the light* kind of thing.”

She doubted very much it was, but she was feeling more generous toward him once she heard about the snooping he did. It was something, even if they didn’t understand what. All they needed now was a next step.

Doug reached over for the wine bottle.

“You’ve had a lot of that wine,” Erin said.

“I have,” he agreed. When he was finished pouring he lifted his glass like he was going to offer a toast, and then surprisingly he did. “One thing I learned today,” he said. “Is that sometimes you just have to stumble around until you find something. So here’s to stumbling around until you find something.”

“Sure,” she said.

He took another big sip, then put his glass down and lay back on the sofa.

“All I’ve done today is talk to people,” he said. “And I’m exhausted.”

Erin could tell she was losing him, but she tried a final question – the most important question, the one she didn’t have an answer for herself: “What do you think we should do next?”

“Well,” Doug said in the direction of the ceiling. “We could give those lawyers a call.”

She sighed. “And ask them what? *Hi, can you tell me anything suspicious about Daniel Decker?* I don’t think that’s going to work. Maybe I could follow Reuben...”

“I think I’ll call,” Doug said. He was holding his phone in front of his face, still supine.

“What?” Erin said. “Don’t do that. How’d you get their number?”

He turned his head and looked at her sideways. “The internet,” he said, like it was obvious. He turned back. “I’m dialing.”

“Jesus, okay. Put it on speakerphone at least.”

“Shhh, it’s ringing.”

“*Speakerphone,*” she mouthed. Doug sighed, but he pulled himself to a sitting position and put the phone on the coffee table between them. It rang once more, and a female voice answered.

“Gage and Blotch, Attorneys at Law.”

“May I speak with Mr. Gage?” Doug said.

“Who’s calling, please?”

Doug paused and looked up at the ceiling.

“Tell him it’s Daniel Decker.”

Erin’s eyes widened. *What?* she mouthed. Doug held up his hands and shrugged.

They listened to ten seconds of smooth jazz before a click cut the music short and a man’s voice came on the line.

“You really shouldn’t be calling, Daniel. What have you fucked up now?”

Erin froze. Doug froze. Five silent seconds and the line went dead. They sat in shocked stillness for a long moment.

“Wow,” Doug said finally. “I didn’t expect that.”

CHAPTER 17

It was difficult for Ben not to be cross that morning. He had been a parent through many temper tantrums already, and he knew how annoying and stupid and illogical they were – but he also knew how illogical they were, and there was nothing he or anyone could do to reason their way through one. Still he had tried the night before, and again first thing when he'd woken up, as soon as he saw his own face in the mirror – his own sullen expression, like it belonged to someone else. Sure, the Project meeting had not been great. He had looked uninformed – he had *been* uninformed – and unprepared, and he had broken Theodore's explicit command that he stay silent and observe and not make any mistakes. And Theodore had been angry. But Theodore's anger would pass, and Ben would get another chance, and while he had looked stupid, no one else was going to care or notice as much as he had. It was fine, he told himself. Grow up.

But he had not been able to take his own advice. He wasn't in a good mood; it was that simple.

They ate their breakfast largely in silence, Ben chewing on a bagel and flipping through the paper while Alex managed the kids and their food. If he could have avoided telling her about the meeting at all, he would have, but his mood was apparent from the moment he'd come home the night before, and there was no avoiding at least a cursory overview of his day – though he had, again, left out any mention of his lunch meeting with Thomas Gage. In the moment it hadn't even been a choice; he'd been thinking about the City Project enough that his trip to Gage & Blotch became an afterthought, like

something he had done a different day, and it hadn't even occurred to him to wonder if he should tell her. He just hadn't.

Alex had been kind and sympathetic and generally tolerant of his irritation and silence that evening, but she was showing some irritation of her own now that they had woken up and things were still the same. When Ben snapped at Dylan for standing on his chair, more brusquely than even he intended, she put down her own spoon and glared across the table.

“Jesus, Ben, relax. You're scaring the kids.”

“Sorry,” he muttered.

She leaned over and tugged at Dylan's shirt.

“Daddy's right, though, you need to sit down.”

Ben had returned to the paper, but after Dylan sat he could feel Alex continuing to look at him over the table, alternately spooning yogurt into Miles's mouth, and eating it herself. He ignored her, and for a moment the kitchen was silent, except the sputtering of the baby in his highchair.

“Yes?” Ben said finally.

“Are you going to be like this the whole day?”

“I don't know,” Ben said. He took a long drink of coffee. It had grown lukewarm.

“Maybe.”

“I don't think I can take a whole day.”

“Well I don't think, if I even *am* like this – whatever this is – that your comment is going to help somehow, like suddenly now that I've had it pointed out to me I feel so much better. But thanks, that's good to know.”

It was something he did when they were fighting and he didn't have the high ground – make the fight about the fight itself, not whatever else the fight wanted to be about. At a certain point it had become automatic, a defense mechanism.

“You're going to be fine,” Alex said.

“Of course I'm going to be fine. I'm fine now.”

“You're not fine now.”

Ben pushed back from the table and stood. “Regardless of whether I'm fine now or not, this conversation isn't helping anything.”

“Alright, okay. Can you at least clean off Miles before you go?”

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I have to get work.”

The floor in their kitchen was uneven, and if you stomped – or even walked too heavily – the mugs in the nearest cabinet clinked together. Ben deposited his dishes in the sink and let the chimes guide him out of the room.

There were several things to determine once he got to work.

He felt better leaving the house, and by the time he reached Zip he thought that some reason had been restored to him, and he regretted the way he'd behaved, though it was too late to do anything but send a text to Alex to apologize. The first thing to figure out would be John-Thomas Theodore, and Theodore's own mood, and after that what he could do about the City Project to improve his own standing. He thought there might be another meeting today, some sort of debrief from the presentation to David Tyler, and to his own surprise he found himself hoping so – it would be the best chance to

acknowledge his errant comments and move on. Theodore could hardly blame him for the underwhelming nature of the meeting as a whole, though Ben wondered if he'd try.

The other thing to determine was the meeting with Gage. When he left the lawyer's office the day before he had told the unhelpful receptionist that Gage wanted him to return, and the man had said he should come back at 11:00 the next day, though he hadn't written anything down, or entered anything on a computer, and it was hard to imagine him actually doing his job. Ben wouldn't know until he got there if he still had an appointment, and he wouldn't know if he could get there until he gauged the office and decided whether it would be too hazardous to sneak off for an early lunch. Now that he'd been out of the lawyer's office for almost twenty-four hours, distracted by his work, it felt even more distant, and its strangeness more acute than ever, but he still wanted to go back. Gage had implied – or outright stated – that he had connections, that he could find out more, and Ben imagined today being the day he at least learned the boy's name, or why he had died, though if these things were known they would surely make the news, and either way it wasn't going to change anything for Ben to learn. Sooner or later he was going to have to reckon with this interest of his, the lawyer and the police and the dead young man, and how well it fit within the rest of his life. A certain part of its appeal had always been that it didn't, but this no longer felt like the best time to test his luck.

Things were quiet when he reached his desk, though he could see Theodore on the phone in his office, and Mary at the far end of the room on the computer in hers. When he checked his mail he found a message from Theodore, though it had been sent to everyone on the Project, telling them to meet again that afternoon at 3:00 to rehash the presentation and begin working on a modified proposal. It was straightforward and terse,

and its tone was brittle, but that was no different than most emails from him. Ben wasn't going to be able to assess Theodore's mood unless he went and talked to him, and he wasn't going to do that. The best he could do was work hard – he couldn't go another day neglecting his other projects.

At a quarter to 11:00, Ben raised his head and looked around. Theodore and Gerry Kane were sitting in his office together, and Mary's office was empty – she was in the breakroom, or the bathroom, or she had stepped out herself. Dana Rickenmann was several cubicles away on the other side of the floor. Most of the other employees were working at their desks, or leaned back talking to each other, or standing and stretching. No one, as far as Ben could tell, was paying attention to him, though he felt like he had a spotlight on him when he stood. Nothing about his behavior was demonstrably different from the day before, except everything had moved slightly earlier and he was now, by any measure, going to lunch at a silly time. The weather was cool enough to justify a jacket, but if he put his jacket on it would be apparent to anyone who looked that he was leaving, and he was standing behind his chair debating what to do – leave the jacket, or carry it under his arm – when his cellphone buzzed. He sat back down in his chair and answered, speaking quietly.

“Mr. Ezra,” a familiar voice said. “This is Sergeant Green with the Ransom P.D.”

“Oh,” Ben said. His first thought was that there was, improbably, some news – and even more improbably Green was calling to tell him. “Hi.”

“Mr. Ezra,” Green repeated. “I’m sure you’re busy, so I’ll make this quick. Did you happen to visit the address you had previously given directions to? The one involved in the matter we discussed last week?”

“I’m...sorry?”

“It’s my understanding that you did.”

“I – I might have. Is there a problem?”

“Mr. Ezra,” Green said, and each time he said “Mr. Ezra” there was an added measure of acidity, like Green was using his own name to sting him. “This is an ongoing investigation, and I’m afraid we can’t tolerate any needless interference. There’s honestly no reason you would still need to be involved, is there?”

“I didn’t know it would be a problem,” Ben said.

“I’m sure that’s true,” Green said. “Regardless we’re going to need you to stop.”

“Well, uh... Okay. Sorry.”

There was a pause on the phone. Ben was hunched over at his desk, trying to keep his conversation private, when it occurred to him that he could use the call as a pretext to leave without appearing to leave. At the same time he became aware of some bustle across the room, and he turned to look.

Green must have sensed something in his tone, or read his thoughts over the phone.

“You’re not planning to go back, are you?” he said.

“What?” Ben said. “No.”

A few others were also looking, heads popping over cubicles to watch their boss, John-Thomas Theodore, walking slowly toward the conference room with another man.

Ben recognized his disheveled appearance at once: the councilman from yesterday, David Tyler. He stood for a better look, the phone still pressed to his ear.

“I’d like your assurance that you’ll stay away,” Green said. “Let us do our job.”

Mary appeared in the next row of cubicles, looking his way. *Get off the phone*, she mouthed, and gestured for Ben to follow.

“I won’t,” he told Green. “I promise. I have to go now.”

Before Green could say anything else, he ended the call and walked over to Mary.

“What’s going on?”

“Emergency meeting,” she said. “Something happened.”

He waited for a further explanation, but instead of giving one she turned and walked toward the conference room, and Ben – feeling confused – quickly followed.

CHAPTER 18

Doug pulled up to Erin's house at ten that morning. She was already outside waiting for him, shivering on the front step in a thin coat and a pair of jeans with big holes in the knees.

"Did you tell your mother where you were going?" he asked when she got in the car. "Or with whom?"

"Did *you*?" Erin snapped. "I don't need her permission. And my mom likes you fine anyway, you've got nothing to worry about."

They were on their way to visit Gage & Blotch, Attorneys at Law.

Doug was almost positive Erin had called in sick to work, at the last minute, so she could join him, but he didn't want to ask to confirm. He was already feeling a little guilty. After their phone call the night before, Erin hadn't left as quickly as he wished – instead the call had filled her with restless energy, and she'd paced his living room for another hour, thinking out loud, while he lay back on the sofa with his eyes closed. He hadn't expected it to work. He hadn't really expected anything; he'd just done it. Gage's wary answer ("What'd you fuck up now?") confirmed everything Erin believed, her intuition that she shouldn't like Joe's brothers, or trust them, but Doug didn't really think it told them much, not enough to *know* anything worthwhile. Though he'd had difficulty, lying on the couch after a long day and a bottle of wine, thinking too deeply, and more than anything he wanted to wait until the morning.

So that was what he said, and what they agreed on – he would pick her up the next day and they would try the lawyer.

“In the morning,” she had said.

“The late morning.”

“Fine,” she’d said. “But late morning like ten o’clock. Not eleven forty-five.”

From the couch, he had given her a thumbs up. And when she left he stood, walked to the nearest bathroom, and threw up in the toilet.

Now they were back in the car on their way to the lawyer’s office, and Doug was still not feeling well. It wasn’t fundamentally a bad plan – there was something to be learned from seeing the office, talking with the staff, and perhaps even meeting one of the lawyers (at the very least, Doug figured, what kind of law they practiced) – but it was also reckless, and it had a minimal chance of success, and he was already feeling uneasy. Every tiny accomplishment, each new detail they acquired, seemed to push Erin forward with greater eagerness, but it had the opposite effect on him. They were only going to get lucky so many times in a row. This had never felt like a blessed endeavor.

Perhaps his skepticism had worn off on her, or perhaps she was just nervous, or she’d slept poorly, or perhaps Doug had no idea why, but Erin was not as buoyant in the car as she’d been the night before. Instead she was quiet and tense, and she kept her face to the window, watching small lawns and quaint, cozy houses pass as they left Erin’s neighborhood. With a pointer finger she drew long, slow circles on her knee.

“Do you want to stop and get a coffee?” he asked, once they had pulled onto one of the busier streets leading downtown.

Erin didn't turn from the window. "I've been up since six," she said.

Doug inclined his head toward her, keeping one eye on the road, and tried to see her face, and also have her see him looking – a parental technique that had never worked especially well with Emma, and wasn't working here either; Erin didn't seem to notice. Though it was a small thing, Doug had always hated when his own daughter – or Sam, who was just as guilty – did what Erin had done and answered a question without answering, a passive-aggressive way of making a conversation five sentences longer than it needed to be. For many years Doug had spent so much of his emotional energy at church, trying to be thoughtful and empathetic and kind, and overall a better person than he was by nature, and it had left him with less energy at home, and a desperate appreciation for simple, straightforward interactions. Even when he lessened his workload in recent years, ceding more and more responsibility to Dallas, he found that this didn't leave him with more energy at home – instead his overall capacity seemed to have diminished, and he was left with the same half-empty reserves he had when, as a younger man, he'd worked sixty or seventy hours a week.

Still Erin wasn't his own daughter. In general he found that he humored her much more than he ever would have humored Emma.

"Six?" he said. "That's, uh, pretty early."

She shrugged. "I always get up around then."

Doug tried once more to catch her eye, without success. "So you're saying you've had coffee already?"

Instead of answering Erin shrugged again and started to pick at the nail polish on one of her fingers. A large fleck of purple came off and fell to the floor of the car.

They came to a stoplight at the edge of downtown, a transitional part of the city – before they reached its blocky, commercial center. On the left corner was a square of green protected by a chain link fence – not a park, but an empty lot of patchy grass. On the right corner was a church, a small United Methodist chapel with an old-fashioned sign in front. Doug turned his head to read it, and he noticed Erin look as well.

Trinity United Methodist Church

S.S. 9:45am WORSHIP 11:00am

This church is prayer-conditioned!

Doug had never been inside. He tried to remember their pastor's name and found that he couldn't; they weren't a part of the Revival.

“Do you still pray?” Erin asked.

Doug was caught off guard. It was not the question he anticipated, if he had anticipated a question at all.

“What do you mean, still?”

“I mean with, you know, everything that's happened.”

“Sure,” he said. “I still pray. I try.”

“Did you pray about today?”

“About today?”

“About this,” she said, indicating the space around them, their drive to the office, their thoughts and feelings and actions. Like it were obvious.

The light turned green and they started again. Doug was feeling bad enough about the day before that he didn't want to make it worse by lying, not if he could help it. He

couldn't imagine what, exactly, he would've prayed about today. "No," he said. "I didn't."

"That's too bad," Erin said. "I was just thinking we could use the help."

"I don't think prayer is quite that...transactional. Besides, I wasn't aware you cared –"

"I don't."

"– or thought that it even mattered."

"I don't," she said again.

"Oh," he said. "Okay. I understand." He didn't understand, but it was something to say. The kind of thing, in the same kind of tone, that he'd found himself returning to a lot with Sam as well. *I understand.*

They fell back into silence and Doug continued driving, toward King St. and the unknown lawyer's office.

Street parking on King was three-quarters full, but he found a spot across from the office and a few doors down, in front of a clothing boutique. He put the car in park but didn't turn it off right away.

"Okay," he said cautiously. "What's the plan?"

"Go in there and have a look around," Erin said. "If they let us talk to one of the lawyers, we talk to one of the lawyers. I have questions, obviously. I want to know how they got involved with Joe's brothers."

"Yeah, I'm a little worried now about how that would go."

It took Erin a second to hear it, an implication that Doug himself had not been aware of until it came out of his mouth. He had hoped to build to it more carefully. She opened her mouth to say something, then stopped for a moment and frowned.

“What do you mean *now*?” she said.

What did he mean? Doug shifted in his seat and tried to think of the best thing to say.

“Do you still want to do this?” he asked.

“Of course I want to do it. What are you even talking about?”

“I just think you’re awfully...tense or something.”

“Yeah,” Erin said. “*Obviously* I’m tense.”

“Too tense,” Doug corrected.

Erin unbuckled her seatbelt, but to Doug’s relief she didn’t open her car door. For a moment he thought she was just going to get out and charge in herself. If they had been in an office or a house or any closed setting, Doug would not have been bothered – when he was a young pastor he’d always felt implicated by other people’s moods, like they were his fault, but over time he had learned to let people be unhappy, around him or with him; it was a feature that had both served him well, and clearly hadn’t. He didn’t mind Erin being nervous or edgy, but he didn’t like that it was so public, and he wasn’t going to get out of the car to stop her, not unless he felt like being arrested. He had no doubt she’d make a scene.

“There wasn’t anything in the news about Joe,” she said, more quietly than before. “There wasn’t anything yesterday either.”

For a moment Doug looked past her, at two middle-aged women shopping in the clothing store beside them, and waited for an idea, something good to say. “I know,” he said finally. He hadn’t known, but again it seemed like an understanding kind of response. He had thought the search would be ending soon, if it hadn’t already.

“I don’t care how we do it,” Erin continued. “I’ll go in there and find those lawyers and kick them in the teeth if I have to, I just want to know what’s going on. What did Reuben and Daniel do? Why are they lying?”

“That doesn’t not prove my point,” Doug said.

Erin let out a frustrated breath. “We’re running out of time.”

“I understand,” Doug said. “But I have another proposition: Stay here. I’ll go in and find out everything I can, I promise. But I think it would be more, ah, strategic if I went in alone and we didn’t draw quite as much attention to ourselves.”

She didn’t answer.

“Please,” he said. “I’m not telling you, I’m asking.”

Erin seemed to genuinely think it over. “I won’t,” she said at last.

“Okay, now I’m kind of telling. You need to stay here.”

“*Why?*”

“We don’t have a plan, for one. What are we doing here? Who are we? Why are we together? Did you want to explain it all? We’re kind of an odd couple, I think, and after the phone call last night it’s entirely possible that the lawyer, Gage, might be a little on edge himself. A little suspicious.”

“You made that phone call!”

“I know,” Doug said. “I know. I’m sorry. It worked, but it was...not the best idea.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“Still,” he said. “It’s done, and it did help us, and there’s nothing we can do to change it now.” He hesitated. “Look, I’m sorry, but there are a lot of reasons someone like me, someone my age, might want to speak to a lawyer. There are fewer reasons we both would, especially wearing, you know –” He indicated her clothing, her ripped jeans and old jacket, then quickly looked away.

Erin threw up her hands. “Fine,” she said. “Fine, go ahead. I’ll wait here.”

He hadn’t convinced her, but from the look on her face he had hurt her. For the time being, he was just going to have to live with it.

“Okay.” He turned off the car. “I’ll be quick. Or, I mean, I’ll be as quick as I can while still...you know, being thorough.” He handed her the keys. “You can listen to the radio if you want.”

“Thanks.”

He stepped out of the car and straightened his pants and jacket sleeves – khakis and a navy bomber nearly as old as his daughter – then leaned down again through the open door.

“I’ll be back soon.”

Before she could answer he closed it and started across the street, looking back only once to see Erin turned away and staring out the opposite window, her head against the glass, one leg braced on the dash. When she started to turn back toward him, he spun around quickly and headed into the office.

CHAPTER 19

It was bullshit.

As soon as Doug left, Erin thought about getting out of the car and marching in after him. Walking through the door to Gage & Blotch and finding him, wherever he was, and sitting down next to him and not saying anything, just sitting there calmly daring him to make the first move. By the end of the car ride she'd realized that Doug was treating her like a bomb, primed to explode, and it had taken all of her self-control not to live up to it and react. *Tense?* So fucking what if she was tense? Didn't she have a right to be? She could picture Doug's face if she did it, walking up to him and sitting there like: You think I'm on edge? I'll show you *on edge*. But also like: Do you see me reacting? Am I making a scene? I'm *calm*. I'm *controlled*. She wouldn't even say anything, but sit there and watch his face and think of all the things she wanted to tell him and wouldn't:

Was she helping him, or was *he* helping *her*?

Was Joe *his* boyfriend?

Had this all been *his* idea?

Were they here because of *him*?

She went so far as to step outside and stand beside the car with the door open, but no further. Though the weather was cool, the sun was shining and the interior of the car had warmed quickly. The cold air felt good on her face; her cheeks were hot.

She wasn't going to go inside. She wasn't going to make a scene, and she wasn't going to compromise their only chance so far to learn something about Joe's brothers,

something actually useful. She resented Doug for pointing it out, for making her doubt herself – did she know what she was doing? – but partly she resented him because she *had* woken up feeling different, and she didn't know why. The night before she had felt alive – if not optimistic, or good, at least full of energy and purpose, standing and walking around the room like the call had given her a literal shock. She felt like she'd been asked to solve a puzzle without the pieces, and finally she had found one. And then, this morning, she'd woken up and it was gone. Joe had been missing for four days – or five, depending on when the clock started. They were almost out of time. Maybe they already were. Pretty soon Erin was going to have to ask herself if she would keep going when there wasn't a point anymore.

She didn't know the answer.

From the car she could see the dome of the courthouse in the distance, and across from it a hint of the Pinckney statue – the top of his hat above the other buildings, the tip of his sword striking empty air. Ransom's few taller downtown office buildings were behind her, and toward the courthouse and the park were one and two-story shops and restaurants, diminishing in quality and newness the farther north one went. Erin watched a gaggle of birds – small, round shapes against the blueness of the sky – circling the statue's head, fighting to land on top; in the foreground, several men in gloves and coats worked to replace the front window of a furniture store down a few buildings from the lawyer's office, painstakingly trying to rotate an enormous piece of glass, stopping now and then to renegotiate or bicker. Her jacket was thin, and despite the sun she started to feel cold, and self-conscious standing next to the car doing nothing, so she got back

inside and closed the door. It had only been a minute, but she was bored. Tense, and bored, and not a little irritated. She could have taken out her phone to distract herself, but though she had nothing else to do, she didn't want to. She preferred to stay irritated.

Before the workmen could get their window fully rotated, a black Honda pulled up and parked two spots ahead of her, blocking Erin's view. The car shut off its engine but no one got out, not even to pay the meter. Its back windshield was dark, so dark she couldn't be sure who or what was inside, though peering closer she thought she saw enough light shifting in the tint to suggest two, maybe three heads. She waited another minute but nothing happened. The car didn't move; whoever was inside stayed put.

It had a vaguely familiar vanity plate, one she had seen before, though it made no sense to her: PROCTR. She mouthed the word to herself: Proctor? Procuter? Procator? Productor? She looked around for clues, as if any could be found on the street, but nothing came to her. Everything outside continued as normal. Two joggers ran past the car without a second glance. After another minute a minivan pulled ahead of the Honda and parked; its owner got out, put several coins in the meter, and walked away, behind Doug's car and out of sight around the corner. Across the street, the lawyer's office sat between a barbershop and a leasing office, unbothered and oblivious. Doug was somewhere inside, doing something; she wondered if he was speaking to Gage or Blotch right now. She tried to peer closer, but the contrast with the daylight was too much for her to see inside, and her eyes rested on the front window itself.

“Prosecutor,” she said aloud.

At nearly the same moment it came to Erin where she'd seen the car before – her brain fighting against its blandness, latching onto the plate: Joe's neighborhood, the day she went to check on him. The day he went missing. Technically the day *after* he went missing. Instinctively she ducked down in her seat, though if anyone in the car had looked behind them, they already would've seen her.

Whoever they were, they were watching. They had been watching then, at Joe's house, and they were still watching now. She tried to shift slightly for a better angle into the Honda, but it was impossible without getting out – and getting out would draw attention to herself. If she hadn't already been seen, she would then. There was no longer any movement from inside, not even a hint of shifting shadow or light. The stillness grew more and more unnerving.

Before she could think of anything else to do, her phone buzzed in her pocket.

CHAPTER 20

They trooped together into the conference room, Mary and Dana and Gerry Kane and Ben, all following Theodore and David Tyler. Mary closed the door behind them and turned, the first to speak.

“What’s going on?” she said. “I thought we were meeting at 3:00. And hello David, nice to see you again.”

David Tyler nodded, but he didn’t look like it was nice to be back; instead he seemed even more miserable than the day before – sweaty and tired and discomfited. Ben stood behind the nearest chair and waited for someone to answer Mary’s question. At first it had surprised him; he thought he was more confused than anyone else, but it seemed they were equally in the dark.

“I know it’s not 3:00,” Theodore said. “Please, let’s have a seat. David has something to tell us.”

They all moved around the table, returning to the same spots as their previous meeting. Theodore had his laptop out, and Mary had brought a notebook, but otherwise no one had their materials with them. Ben sat next to Dana and folded his hands on the table, and there was silence for a moment as they waited.

“So,” David Tyler said finally. “Last night Councilman Brabham was arrested. Two police officers found him in his car, parked near Sixth and Wilshire – or, well, actually parked in the middle of the intersection at Sixth and Wilshire. Mr. Brabham

was...inebriated, almost to the point of incomprehension, and he was taken into custody at the time.”

“He was driving drunk?” Mary said.

“It doesn’t sound like he was driving.” This came from Gerry Kane.

“The car was running,” Tyler said. “And he was under the influence of something, that’s all I know. But unfortunately there’s more.” He paused, looking decidedly like he didn’t want to be there. “There was a young woman in the car with him. She was not, obviously, Mrs. Brabham.”

“A young woman,” Mary repeated. His choice of words had caught her, and she beat him to the punch. “How old of a young woman?”

The councilman kept his eyes on the table. “Sixteen,” he said.

“Yikes,” said Gerry Kane.

John-Thomas Theodore said nothing, and his face was a mask, though Ben became aware that he was drumming his pen on the table, an incessant *tap tap tap* that felt unlike him. Theodore was not usually prone to fidgeting, or physical tics, or to moving much at all.

As soon as Ben noticed the tapping, it stopped – like Theodore had just realized himself.

“What did the girl say?” Mary asked. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. The police spoke to her, but they’ve kept everyone else away. I was able to talk briefly with Brabham this morning – we’ve served, you know, we’re on City Council together. He still seemed disoriented, said he didn’t remember much. But he was adamant he’d done nothing wrong.”

“That’s going to be a hard one to sell,” Mary said.

“This is bad,” Gerry Kane added. “Real bad.”

“I’m sorry,” Dana said timidly. “But who is this person? I don’t recognize his name.”

Everyone looked at David Tyler, but his eyes were still down and he didn’t answer right away.

“He was an up-and-comer,” Theodore said, breaking his brief silence. “There was talk he might run for Congress soon. Maybe mayor someday, if that didn’t work out. He had his hand in a lot of the renovations around downtown, cleaning up the city.” He too looked at Tyler, though it seemed to Ben more accusatory than confirming. “Right?” he added.

“Yeah,” the councilman said, finally raising his head. “That’s right.”

“So,” Mary said. “The question is if this changes anything for our campaign. And while it’s obviously upsetting, in the end I don’t think it –” She stopped talking mid-sentence, as soon as it became apparent Tyler had something else to say, slumping forward in his chair with his mouth partway open.

“There was, uh, one more thing,” he said.

Theodore shook his head slowly. Ben shifted in his chair at almost the same moment Dana did.

“This morning, the mayor’s office received a package in the mail. An anonymous package. An envelope full of emails sent between Brabham and the young woman from the car. Many of them were...lewd. There were several inappropriate photos.”

“Jesus,” Mary said. “That’s child pornography.”

“Not of the girl,” Tyler said. “Of the councilman.”

“Oh.”

“There’s a particular page that has us concerned. It was first on the stack, and it had a note attached to it. And really it’s the note that – well, here, just see for yourself. I don’t see why it matters now.”

He took out his phone, pulled up a picture, and passed it around the table – first to Gerry Kane, who handed it to Dana, when then gave it to Ben. Ben took the phone and saw an image of an image, a cellphone picture of a blurry full-page photo, blown up enough that it was pixelated, of what must have been a hairy, naked torso. Over the crotch was a sticky note, onto which someone had written: *This is just the tip.*

Ben slid the phone across the table to Mary. She took one look at it and snorted.

“Sorry,” she said, when Theodore glared at her. “It’s just so...”

“Is the concern, David,” Theodore said, “That you think there are even more photos? Is that what this means?”

“I guess it’s possible,” David Tyler said. “But at this point I don’t see what’s different about ten naked pictures or five. What really has us – the city council, the mayor – concerned is the larger implication.”

He seemed to pause for some sort of reaction, but everyone continued to stare.

“What do you mean?” Theodore said.

“The package wasn’t sent to Mr. Brabham’s office, it was sent to the mayor. There’s some worry that these people, whoever did this, have other things in mind. Other targets, maybe.”

“Whoever *did* this?” Mary said. “Brabham did this.”

“Councilman Brabham didn’t send these photos. There’s something else going on here. As regrettable as his actions were, this city is also being undercut – systematically undercut – and we have to be ready to hit back.”

“*Hit back?*”

“Positively, I mean. With a response.”

“Doesn’t that sound...outside the purview of our project?” Mary looked from Tyler to Theodore to Gerry Kane.

“Listen,” Tyler said, and he sat up as straight as he could. “This is the project now. And we need to be ready to go tomorrow. Or today, today would be nice.”

There was another pause. Ben watched Theodore; his boss leaned forward and put his hands on the table.

“Well...” Theodore said slowly. “We showed you our work yesterday. Any of those ideas could be ready soon.”

“And those were fine,” Tyler said. “They were fine, they were almost there. But they weren’t exactly it. We need something else. Something that’s really going to shift perception – change it, reverse it, you know.”

Theodore studied David Tyler for another second, then rotated his body to better address the table. “Alright then,” he said. “Any thoughts?”

No one spoke – the silence was uncomfortable, and even more uncomfortable without a computer, or a notebook or a pen, something else to look at beyond Theodore and Tyler and the table itself. Ben stared at his hands and thought about the words he’d just heard – *change, reverse, perception*. Unexpectedly, he got an idea. He couldn’t tell if

it was a good idea or not, but it was an idea. An opportunity. This was not how he'd imagined a second meeting would go.

"I had a thought," he said to the room, and he raised his hand slightly off the table, like he wanted to be called on, then stopped himself and put it down. "What if we shift the focus off the city council entirely, off the mayor, and back onto Ransom itself? Or onto its citizens, at least."

Theodore frowned in his seat. To his right Ben felt both Gerry Kane and Dana turn their heads more fully toward him.

"What do you mean?"

Ben was in it now; he focused on a spot next to Theodore's head and continued. "I think maybe we've been putting the emphasis in the wrong place. Everything's been focused entirely on the city leadership and what it does, but maybe – given, you know, everything – we shouldn't do that. Maybe we should try to move the focus *off* the leaders. Maybe we should say: Ransom is about people. Normal, everyday people."

"People," David Tyler said.

"Yeah. So we could still use something like the Family Photos concept, but do it with people in the community instead."

"I see..."

"Interesting," Mary said. "The message would become: We're *all* a family."

"Exactly," Ben said. "And what do families do when things get tough?"

To his amazement, it was Theodore who finished his thought, quietly, like he was moving it around his mouth: "They stick together."

"We could do it quickly," Mary said. "A lot of the work has already been done."

“We could,” Theodore agreed. He thought for another moment, then turned to David Tyler. “What do you think?”

“It’s better,” the councilman said.

“It is better,” Theodore said. “And it’s what we’ve got for now.” He raised his short arms and shrugged. “Okay,” he added, and Ben thought he nodded directly at him.

“Let’s give it a try.”

CHAPTER 21

The lobby to Gage & Blotch was deeper than it looked from the outside, coolly lit and minimally furnished – two leather couches sitting perpendicular to a heavy wood reception desk at the back. A middle-aged woman with red hair and black frame glasses sat behind the desk, her head just poking over it – not, Doug realized as he drew near, because she was short so much as the desk was tall, with a high front counter. She was alone in the room, and as he approached she looked up and smiled, though he'd been concentrating on what he was about to say and only realized when he reached the desk that he hadn't smiled back. So he did. Or did his best to try. Despite what he'd told Erin in the car, he didn't have a plan of his own – a reason he might be visiting a lawyer himself. Soon he would start divorce proceedings, which he'd need a lawyer for, but that idea soured as soon as he thought it – he didn't *actually* want to find an attorney, not here and now, and certainly not this one, someone careless or crooked enough to get involved with Dan and Reuben Decker. He supposed he could always try to keep it vague and tell Gage he was exploring divorce options, if he was even able to see the lawyer. Or he could say something else, depending on what kind of lawyer this one ended up being. That he wanted to start his own business, now that he was out of work. That he wanted to sue the church for wrongful termination.

He reached the desk before he could make up his mind.

“Hi,” he said slowly. “I’m...”

The woman smiled again. “Eleven o'clock?” she asked.

“I – I’m sorry?”

“You’re here for the eleven o’clock?”

For a moment Doug stared at her blankly. She had a streak of lipstick smeared to her large front tooth. “Oh,” he said at last. “Yes. I think so.”

“You’re a bit early,” she said. “So I’m afraid Mr. Gage is still in another meeting.”

Doug looked at his watch. “Right,” he said. “Sorry.”

“You can have a seat and I’ll let you know when he’s ready for you.”

“Okay,” Doug said. “Sure thing.” He pulled his lips back and made a face. “You have lipstick,” he added, through clenched teeth. “Right here.”

“Oh.” Her smile faded and she half-turned her head, running her tongue across her teeth. Abruptly she stood. “May I take your jacket?” she asked, her mouth tight, not acknowledging his comment or his rictus grin any further.

“Sorry,” Doug said. “I shouldn’t have – I mean, you do –” Hurriedly he sloughed off his jacket and tried to return his face to normal. “Here you go.”

“Have a seat please,” she said again. “I’ll go hang this up.”

Alright, he told himself on the couch. New plan. Don’t make that face again. Had he made an appointment? He had not made an appointment. So she thought he was someone else. That was unexpected. New plan: ride this out. It was too late to go back and correct her now. Ride this out, and don’t ever make that face again.

What was wrong with him?

There were two doors behind the reception desk, on either side of a strange, old-fashioned painting – out of step with the other décor. The receptionist had taken his jacket and disappeared through the one on the left, so Doug sat on the couch, alone in the office, and waited. He tried to make himself look normal and relaxed, though he was having trouble remembering how to do it. Any minute Gage was going to come out, and he would have some explaining to do. He fought the urge to shift in his seat, or cross and uncross his legs, or tug compulsively at his shirt. Sitting at all was difficult; he wanted to stand and pace.

When the door opened and the receptionist returned a minute later, Doug jumped nearly to his feet. He had to pretend like he was just leaning to reach into his pocket for his cell. It was impossible to say how well he'd pulled it off, but the woman smiled at him again and took her seat behind the desk. Doug wasn't sure if she had wiped her teeth, or if he was just too far away now, but he couldn't see the smudge any longer. He sat forward on the couch with his phone in his hand for no reason.

Before he could do anything with it, however, the sound of raised voices came through the wall behind the desk – too muffled to make out, though they were clearly some kind of heated conversation. Doug and the receptionist looked uncomfortably at each other, and she tried to smile again. After a few seconds the noise died down and the lobby was silent again. Doug checked his phone, but he had no emails or messages or missed calls, nothing from Sam or Emma, nothing more from the church. Sometime during the day, he expected the news of his separation to break within the congregation, but it hadn't yet. He figured his phone would tell him when, and he was braced for it – a predictable yet unpredictable series of reactions, anything from hurt, betrayal, and anger

to sympathy and love and prayer. Only time would tell how the ratio panned out. He wouldn't hear half of what was said, but he knew he'd hear enough.

Suddenly the voices flared up again. Doug could've sworn he heard the word the word "bullshit," hit with extra emphasis, but through the wall even that was hard to tell. The receptionist stood.

"Why don't you wait back by Mr. Gage's office?" she said loudly.

Doug followed her through the door on the right and down a short hallway, away from the voices, which had again ebbed to a murmur. By the time he took his seat – in a second, smaller waiting area outside Gage's office – they had subsided completely, and he couldn't hear them anymore. From his chair he looked carefully around, watching the receptionist disappear back down the hallway and out of sight. He was sitting in a single leatherback armchair, pushed against the wall next to Gage's office door. Across from him were two more doors, both closed – every door in the office, it seemed to Doug, was closed. To his left was a small table on spindly, curving legs, with an ornate lamp and a wide, thin book on top. To his right was the office door, so close he could reach out and touch the handle. The set-up reminded him of a principal's office, Doug as the student waiting nervously to be summoned inside for punishment. It would have struck him as funny if he thought he could laugh.

He reached over and switched on the small lamp next to him, for no other reason than to see if it worked, then glanced at the book – *Ransom in the Reconstruction Era*. Impulsively he turned to the other side and tried the handle to Gage's office door. It was unlocked.

Gage would be here soon, and there'd be no avoiding an explanation. Doug would have to think of something to say first, something strong enough to keep from getting tossed. Something to acknowledge the intrusion, the impropriety, without acknowledging it too much. Something to set the tone: Mysterious without being threatening. Intriguing, but not unsettling. It would have to be a hell of a line. What, he thought, had possessed him to lie in the first place?

Doug stood and pictured himself delivering it – from the chair, or standing next to the chair, or in front of Gage's office door. His body turned. His head cocked. His expression fixed, perfectly mysterious and enticing.

You don't know me, he could say. But we have something important to discuss.

It's true, Mr. Gage, I haven't been completely honest with you. We need to talk.

Sir, let me explain. A man's life is on the line.

God Almighty, Doug thought. Those were stupid.

He was out of ideas. It occurred to him that the most likely thing to happen – the first thing to happen – would not be Gage arriving, but the person whose appointment he was taking, the person he had tried to impersonate, wondering what in the world Doug was doing. Or the receptionist coming back to ask him why he lied. He wouldn't have a chance. He didn't have a chance. What he needed to do was leave, leave before he made things worse. It wasn't too late.

Except he couldn't bear to go back to Erin having done nothing, not after he had left her there alone. He pictured her in the car, and remembered everything he'd said to

her, and everything she'd said to him. He couldn't go back empty-handed. He checked his phone; it was still ten minutes to eleven.

He took a deep breath, looked up and down the hallway, and opened the door to Gage's office.

CHAPTER 22

Erin jumped. The phone buzzing in her pocket had been like another person announcing their presence in the car, like someone had just sat up from the backseat and poked her. She swore, then quickly checked the Honda like it might have heard. It continued to sit two spots ahead of her, just across the street from Gage & Blotch.

The phone buzzed again.

She pulled it from her pocket, and as soon as she looked she recognized the number, the same number that had called her earlier, two times the day before when she was at the gym. Some local number she didn't have. This time she answered.

“Hello?”

“Erin,” a familiar voice said. “Hi.”

It was Andrew Orlando.

“*Andrew?*”

She hadn't talked to him since they ended the engagement – one conversation the afternoon he told her, another two days later to negotiate some final details, return a few possessions. Nothing else. There had been no attempts to change his mind, and he left town soon after, moving to New York. She unfollowed him on social media, and when she heard his voice she remembered that she'd also deleted his number from her phone – some misguided bit of revenge, or closure, or something. She had never memorized it, and when the number came up again she didn't realize it was him.

“Yep,” he said. “It’s me.” There was a pause, like he hoped she’d respond, but Erin couldn’t think of anything to say. “How are you?” he added.

“I’m actually kind of in the middle of something,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “Sorry. Can you talk for a minute? I just had something quick to, uh...discuss.”

“You’re not back in town, are you?” She realized once she said it that the question could be interpreted hopefully, like she wanted him to be back, and she wished she could have said it again with more disgust.

“No, no,” he said. “I’m still in the City.”

The City. God. It was amazing – and frightening – how quickly her opinion of him had changed. The Honda still wasn’t doing anything in front of her, though it wouldn’t stay there forever and she still wanted to find a way to look inside without being noticed, to see who was watching the office and add yet another piece to her puzzle. She hadn’t given up, as unlikely as it seemed. There was no reason to think they were watching *her*, or else they wouldn’t have pulled right in front of her, so if she could get out of the car without drawing attention she might be able to move to a better angle. Perhaps the clothing store beside them.

Maybe she should just do it. What were the odds they cared about her? Though it was true, if they had seen her at Joe’s apartment on Friday, they might recognize her now, and they might care. They might have already recognized her in the car behind them, staring. She couldn’t make up her mind.

“What is it?” she asked Andrew.

“It’s just a question I have,” he said. “I guess an offer. It’s important.”

“Okay,” she said, and she was pleased to hear the irritation in her own voice. She wasn’t going anywhere yet. “Go ahead, I’ve got, like, a minute or two.”

She knew he would just keep calling if she didn’t get it over with – what it was – like he had called yesterday, and today. He could be single-minded. Even when they dated he had been very particular about getting his way in certain things, like how they studied or the kinds of food they ate. She had just thought it was something couples did. You put up with it.

“Well, okay,” he said, sounding to her like he hadn’t been prepared to rush. “Sorry to call out of the blue, after, you know, everything, but I wanted to talk because of... two reasons. First, I’ve had some time to think about the way things ended, and I feel bad.”

Erin didn’t think she was just going to have the energy, or the focus, for this whole conversation, not sitting in the car waiting for Doug, not with this strange Honda in front of her, but she had enough for one or two responses.

“You feel bad?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I do. Once I realized I felt differently, I just couldn’t...tell you. I tried, but I couldn’t. So I probably wasn’t any fun to be around, and then I waited too long anyway.”

Erin took her eyes off the street for a moment, shifting in the passenger’s seat. “There was never going to be a good time,” she said. “It wasn’t an easy thing to say.”

“I know. And look, I thought about just ignoring it and pressing on, you know. Especially at that point. But you wouldn’t have wanted that either, would you?”

“No,” she said. “Of course not.”

In front of her the Honda came to life. It's brake lights flared red; a few wisps of gray puffed out the exhaust. Erin sat upright, then remembered she was visible and slouched down again. If the Honda left she would lose her best chance at it, and she wasn't willing to do that, not unless Doug came out in the next minute and told her he had solved the whole thing. Maybe not even then.

She realized Andrew had said something else, but she didn't hear what.

"You did what you did," she said, taking her best guess. "It's over now, let's just move on."

"Right," he said. "Well I'm still sorry."

She had the keys to Doug's car, somewhere. After a quick second of fumbling around her seat, she found them on the floor. If the Honda drove away, she was going to follow. It was a stupid plan, she knew, but the kind of stupid that was better than nothing. There was no reason to think they'd be looking carefully behind them. It's not like they were spies. The odds were very low they were spies.

"Okay," she told Andrew. She started to move into the driver's seat, staying as low as possible.

"Anyway, there was one other thing. I know you weren't able to find a teaching job..."

Halfway between the seats with the phone crammed to her ear, the parking brake jabbing into her ass, she almost stopped and told him to mind his own business.

"My aunt is really involved in this charter school that's starting next year, and I know they're looking for teachers. All kinds of teachers. I talked to her, and if you

wanted I think you'd have a good shot at working there. It's in Greenville though, you'd have to move."

Erin fell into the driver's seat. The black Honda continued to idle in its spot.
Greenville? A job in Greenville?

"Wow," she said blankly. "I haven't been to Greenville in years."

"It's nice. And it was just a thought. Or an offer, I mean. It's real."

"Wow," she said again. "That's...Wow. I just don't know --"

The Honda flipped on its turn signal and pulled into the street. She cursed inwardly and fumbled with the keys, nearly dropping the phone.

"Sorry," she told Andrew. "I'll think about it, but I gotta go now. It's -- never mind, I just gotta run."

She heard him start to say something else, but she hung up anyway and jammed the key in the ignition.

CHAPTER 23

Doug flipped on the light in Gage's office and paused for a moment in the doorway, waiting for an alarm or a booby trap, a guard dog, some sort of painful surprise. It was bigger than he anticipated, given the narrow hallway and the tiny waiting area outside. There was a loveseat to his left, the same dark leather as the couch in the lobby, and a bookshelf to his right, though less a proper bookshelf than an open, modern stack of boards for a few photos and knickknacks. Straight across was a desk, clean and well-organized, with a clear glass top. If Doug had more time – if his heart wasn't already pounding – he would have been jealous. His own office was a wreck, halfway between a teenager's bedroom and a grandfather's basement.

He stood in the doorway for five seconds – counting, for some reason, in his head – and when nothing happened, he crossed the threshold and closed the door behind him. Immediately he reconsidered, turned, and opened it again. It would look far worse, he thought, for someone to find him inside with the door closed – though it wasn't going to look good either way, and he needed to quit standing around and hurry. He stepped over to the shelves for a look, but they didn't tell him much – there was a plaque engraved to Thomas Gage, something from the county bar called the Ralph King Stevenson Award. All the photos had a single person in them, the same person, a small, silver-haired man on a series of international trips – London, Paris, Athens, and a few others Doug didn't recognize. There was a diploma and a clock. A plant that Doug touched and realized was fake.

He moved over to the desk and stepped behind it for a better look. At first glance it was crushingly bland, so well-organized that everything aligned with everything else, or met at perfect right angles – the phone to the lamp, the laptop to the phone, the coaster to the stapler. Doug used one finger to open the computer halfway, but it was password-protected, so he pushed it back down. On the far right of the desk was a folded newspaper from that morning, and beneath it an inbox tray made – preposterously, in Doug’s opinion – with leather, or faux-leather, like the tray and the coasters and the couch itself had all come as part of one set. It was empty, but beneath it Doug saw the edge of a page, so he lifted up the tray and found a small stack of papers. At first glance they were as unsexy as everything else – not the salacious photos or incriminating notes that Doug had hoped for. They looked like financial statements of some kind, rows of credits and debits attached to dates. The first several were for individuals, complete with full names and addresses at the top. Doug knew a fair number of people in Ransom, all things considered, but he didn’t recognize these names. Still he felt more guilty snooping on them than he did Gage.

Midway through the stack, Doug found a paper that wasn’t for a person, or a person’s finances, but an organization of some kind. The next one was the same. The one after that was for White Light. Doug recognized it at once, the same name as the one on all the checks from Gage & Blotch to Daniel Decker. It was a business, then, or a nonprofit, or something else that kept financial records that might be shared and printed at a lawyer’s office. There was an address at the top, somewhere in Ransom that Doug didn’t recognize.

He was studying it more closely when a voice spoke from the doorway, a man's voice sounding irritated – more put out, more inconvenienced, than he was shocked.

“Excuse me,” the man said. “What are you doing?”

Doug dropped the papers. He'd been holding them delicately – some notion that he should do his best not to bend them, or smudge them – and the surprise was too much. For a moment he'd forgotten that someone else could enter the office.

The man in the doorway was the same small, silver-haired man from the pictures on the shelf. He looked at his desk and grimaced. Two pages fluttered gently to the floor.

“I am...so sorry,” Doug said, hurriedly trying to gather all the loose papers.

“Please,” the man said. “Just – come over here. Please.”

Doug dropped the papers, more or less a pile again, on the desk, and stepped around it.

The man stayed where he was by the door, studying Doug closely. “What exactly are you looking for?” he asked.

Doug studied the carpet beneath his feet, too embarrassed to look. He assumed this man was Gage.

“I don't know,” he said.

“You've already been caught,” Gage said. “It would be better to tell the truth now.”

“Honestly. I was just waiting, and I, uh, got curious.”

“Waiting for what?”

“My appointment?” Something in his voice broke; he wasn’t brazen enough to keep the hint of a question out of it.

Gage ignored his answer. “Who are you?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”

“Okay,” Doug said. He didn’t think he was going to be able to lie his way out of this one; he simply wasn’t good enough. He had nothing to fall back on but the thing he always fell back on. “I’m very sorry,” he said. “The truth is I’m a pastor, and I was –”

Doug had not been sure how he was going to finish the sentence – despite his intention, when he started speaking, not to lie – but in the end it didn’t matter.

“A pastor?” Gage interrupted. “You’re a pastor?”

“I – uh, yes.”

“Here in Ransom?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you...?”

He trailed off, and for a moment both men waited for the other to finish the sentence. Finally Gage shook his head. “What church do you work for?” he asked.

“Um,” Doug said. He didn’t think his previous lie to the Decker brothers was going to work as well on the lawyer. At this point, he figured, did it even matter?

“Calvary Bible. The big one out by –”

“I know Calvary,” Gage said. He paused. He was short, and old – though it was difficult to tell exactly how old – and during the series of pauses it occurred to Doug that he could just brush past the man and leave if he wanted. He didn’t think the lawyer would even try to stop him. So what if Gage knew he was a pastor? So what if he knew about Calvary?

But he wasn't going to do it. A part of him even wanted to see how much trouble he could get in, just because. Maybe the old man would call the cops.

Instead Gage gestured to one of the chairs across from his desk.

"You should sit down," he said. "I want to talk."

"Okay..." Doug moved cautiously toward the chair.

Gage started to move back behind the desk himself, but as he did there was a noise down the hall – footsteps – and he stopped. In the next moment he stepped back to the door, with more speed than Doug thought possible, said "You wait here," and abruptly left, closing the door behind him.

It was the last thing Doug expected him to do.

He stood in the middle of the silent office again, wondering what to do, then gave up and sat. There was really nothing to stop him from leaving now. It was also true that Gage could hardly blame him if he snooped a little more – he had known that Doug was snooping and still chose to leave him alone in the office. If it was anyone's fault it was the lawyer's, though getting caught a second time seemed like pressing his luck beyond a breaking point. As quickly as he could, Doug leaned back over the desk, found the White Light page within the pile, and took an upside down picture with his phone. Then he sat back in his chair and waited.

Thirty seconds later the door opened again. Gage was breathing hard.

"I don't know why you're here," he said. "But you should go. You're lucky I don't call the police."

"I thought –"

“I’m serious,” the lawyer said. “Get the fuck out of here.”

For an old man, Doug thought, he had quite the mouth.

CHAPTER 24

Erin turned the car on and put it in drive, though when she took her foot off the brake it didn't creep forward, but groaned and stayed put. She hesitated – just enough to keep from slamming the gas anyway. *Shit*. What was wrong with the car?

Someone rapped sharply at her window, and she jumped. It was Doug. He leaned down and peered at her through the glare, then jiggled the door handle. Two blocks ahead of them, the black Honda stopped at a light.

The emergency brake, she realized. She released it and eased her foot off the brake pedal far enough that the car shuddered. Doug tapped on the window again.

“What are you doing?” he called through the glass.

She groaned. It was one thing to leave him inside – the thought had occurred to her, not without some pleasure – but another to do it while he stood at the window of his own car. She would've had to run over his feet to pull out.

Instead, she put the car back into park and opened her door.

“What are you doing?” Doug repeated. “Where were you going?”

“That car,” Erin said. “The one that just drove away. It was watching... someone.”

“What?” Doug said. He peered down the street. The Honda had continued through the light and was nearly gone, growing smaller and smaller as it disappeared down the block. He looked back to her, confused, then seemed to dismiss it with a wave of his hand. “Scoot over,” he said. “We should leave.”

Far in the distance, the Honda's brake lights flashed and it turned out of sight.

“Why?” Erin said.

“Scoot over. I’ll tell you in the car.”

“What did you find?”

“I’ll tell you *in the car*. Let’s go.”

Reluctantly, Erin scooted – the brake giving her one last, ignominious poke on the way.

From the parking spot Doug made a U-turn and headed down the street in the opposite direction from the Honda. At a stoplight three blocks away he exhaled and released the steering wheel.

“So I got caught,” he told Erin.

“What?”

“I was outside Gage’s office waiting for him to show up. There was no one around, so I went inside for a quick look around. But then Gage *did* show up and caught me.”

“Oh my God,” Erin said. “That was so –” *dumb*, she was about to add, but stopped herself. “What happened?”

“It was weird,” Doug said. The light turn greened and he started driving again. “Very weird. He didn’t seem happy, obviously, but when I told him I was a pastor he kind of backed off. I didn’t expect it to mean anything, honestly, but it did. I don’t know why. Maybe he’s a Christian.”

“Maybe he goes to Calvary.”

“*Oh,*” Doug said. He looked horrified. “Oh no, I didn’t think of that. I hope not. I mean, I don’t think so, but ...” He didn’t sound too sure. After a moment he shook his head and added, in a firmer voice: “It can’t be. He wasn’t acting like he knew me, or he was embarrassed. It was more confusing than that.”

“So you still talked to him?” Erin said. She tried to catch his eye but he was driving, and even when he wasn’t driving he stared ahead. She already feared the worst – if the lawyer had caught Doug poking around his office, he wasn’t *then* going to help. They had blown their chance.

“Well,” Doug said sheepishly. “Not really. The funny thing is we still might’ve talked, but then he got interrupted again, and – I don’t know, he basically kicked me out. Like he changed his mind and wanted me gone. I left so quickly I almost forgot my jacket; the receptionist had to chase me down.”

“You didn’t ask him about Joe then?”

Doug made a quick left turn, cutting through a break in the oncoming traffic. They were leaving downtown and heading back toward Erin’s neighborhood. “What?” He glanced over at her. His tone was clear – *weren’t you listening?* – but Erin stared back defiantly. She wanted to hear him say it.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t.”

“You didn’t ask him anything?”

“Not really.”

She should have known.

“But,” Doug said, raising a finger. “I still found something useful.” He paused, then dropped his hand. “Maybe.”

“Maybe,” Erin repeated.

He told her about the papers on Gage’s desk, the White Light report. “I even took a picture of it,” he said, digging out his phone. “It’s upside down, I don’t know how to fix it.”

Erin took the phone and adjusted the screen. She saw the dates, the numbers, the money coming in and out – many more credits than debits – but it didn’t make much sense to her. Not without more thought, more research, a lot more time they didn’t have.

“What does all this mean?” she asked Doug.

He winced. “I don’t know.”

Doug pulled to the curb outside Erin’s house and waited for her to open the door.

When she didn’t right away, he looked over. “So let’s, uh, think about this White Light thing. If you want, we can go by and see what their office looks like.”

“Okay,” Erin said. She opened the door and got out, then bent down and stuck her head back in. “Doug,” she said. “I’m not gonna screw this up.”

Before he could respond, she closed the door and started up the path to her door. His face had been unreadable when she spoke, and she could imagine several different responses, but she didn’t need to hear them. It didn’t matter what he said.

CHAPTER 25

He kept the door to the lobby cracked far enough to watch the pastor leave, then turned and hurried back to his own office. He'd just made it behind his desk when a presence appeared in the doorway, solid and silent and slow-moving. It had become a habit, this materializing from nowhere, not doing anything, not saying anything, just watching – like a compact, hairy ghost haunting the edges of his vision. It had been like this for days. He had no privacy anymore. Gage was starting to lose it.

For a moment, they stared at each other.

“Who was that?” Dwight finally asked.

He tried to keep his voice distant, his tone firm. “You didn’t see?”

From the doorway, Dwight frowned. It was an open question to Gage whether he was quiet because he took everything in, or because it took him so much effort to understand so little. “No,” he said. A bit sullenly. “I didn’t.”

“It was no one. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“Was it the guy from yesterday? The one asking questions?”

Gage leaned on his desk and slipped off his shoes – the right one first, then the left – though he still hadn’t sat. “Yes,” he said. “It was. It was him.”

“So you took care of it?”

“He’s not a problem, if that’s what you mean.”

Gage waited. It was the moment for Dwight to leave, but he didn’t.

“Your papers are a mess,” he said, staring at the desk.

“What?” Gage looked down, then began to straighten them. “Oh, yes. I see. That was me.”

Dwight said nothing. He folded his arms and hesitated, thinking hard. So hard the effort was almost visible – in his eyes, and his mouth, and the tilt of his head.

“I’m gonna call it in,” he said at last. “Just in case.”

CHAPTER 26

Something had happened to their mailbox.

The post was leaning at a forty-five degree angle, and the box itself was gone, like it'd been smashed by a car, though they hadn't heard anything during dinner.

Ben had come home from work feeling good. He would have liked to think his mood had changed regardless, and he would've come home feeling gracious and content whatever happened at Zip, but it was impossible to say. At least he was better now. Even though it was Tuesday they ordered take-out, and ate it together at the table in a jumble of plates and napkins and bags, sauce containers and plastic spoons and sippy cups. When they were cleaning afterward, Alex looked out the window.

"Hey," she said. "Do you see that?"

Ben stepped outside and walked carefully down the drive. He was standing on the sidewalk inspecting the damage when he saw the mailbox some thirty feet away, almost in the neighbor's yard.

As he started to walk over he didn't see the other man, coming out from behind the neighbor's bushes and toward him.

CHAPTER 27

That next morning, the search was called off.

There wasn't anything about it in the newspaper. Erin might not have known if she hadn't looked specifically online, right after she woke, and found a small bulletin on the *Ransom Journal* website, two-paragraphs without a picture or byline. Seeing it pierced her like a needle, so sharp and fine she didn't even feel the prick at first, didn't register anything for several moments, not until the pain arrived – though this also could have been because she wasn't surprised. It had been nearly a week. The rain slowed them in the first crucial hours, and washed away any tracks he might have left, and park rangers and volunteers uncovered nothing of substance since the second day, when his car had been found at a trailhead. If they were going to come across him holed up in some temporary shelter, cold and hungry and disoriented, that would have needed to be two or three days ago. If he was going to wander out of the woods, exhausted and blistered, he should have wandered out already. By any reasonable measure, Joe was no longer missing. He was dead.

His parents were coming into town soon, and there would be a gathering over the weekend, some sort of prayer vigil or service. It was the last thing mentioned in the news bulletin. Details forthcoming. Erin felt an odd, unexpected sense of vertigo at the news, like she had forgotten that other people were involved – that Joe had family outside his brothers, that he had other friends and co-workers. She'd met some of them briefly, but the meetings had been just that – brief – and they hadn't stuck in her mind. During the

last week she had felt so alone in her search, minus Doug, that it was strange to think of joining others in a common cause. Maybe she was meant to take comfort in it (and maybe, she had the sense to think, it didn't matter what she took away) but regardless she had a hard time feeling comforted. Even without the search ongoing, even calling it a prayer vigil, it still felt strange to Erin, a rubber stamp of approval on the official story, a stilted and formal event. She didn't like it. When her own father died they hadn't done anything for months, not until it was certain.

She stayed upstairs in her room long enough to hear her mother leave for work, then came down to drink the rest of the coffee in the pot, which by that point was warm but no longer hot. The night before she had called the gym and told them she was still sick. She'd come home from her time with Doug at the law office – her time in the car outside the office – and done nothing the rest of the day, too lost to follow any other leads, whatever those were, and too frustrated to do anything else – irritated at Doug, who had chosen to shut her out of her own search, and irritated that she was irritated at Doug, when he had also been helpful. Even more she was irritated with herself and what she knew, irritated that they'd found enough to raise suspicion but not enough to know what to do about it. She spent several hours paging slowly through internet search items for “White Light,” but it was an odd enough phrase that most of the results were songs or New Age videos or occasional places to buy actual white lights. She tried different combinations with “Ransom” and “South Carolina” and “Gage” and “Decker,” but nothing popped. Eventually she found a website for an organization or institute or something called *White Light USA*, though it was impossible to tell from the homepage what they actually did – there were several blocks of text, overlaid on images of white

picket fences and rural vistas, that spoke at some length about American prosperity and freedom, with phrases like “the struggle” and “the tipping point” and “the true heart of the country,” though what they meant specifically, was anyone’s guess. It was all buzzwords, like a right-wing campaign ad without a candidate or an election, and the most concrete part of the site was the donation page; anyone was free to join the struggle with a major credit card or PayPal. If this was the White Light from Gage’s office and Daniel Decker’s checks, it was impossible to say what they did or how Joe might be involved or how it would help them get any closer to finding him – or what happened to him – which is what she wanted to tell Doug yesterday and didn’t. Instead she had said, “I’m not gonna screw this up.” At the time she’d meant it, though already she thought she was failing.

It almost would’ve been better just to go work. Her absences was going to be an issue whenever she came back – if they realized she was lying it would be a bigger issue, and maybe enough to get her fired – but even in her frustration, even knowing the trouble that might await her in the future, she found she didn’t care. The gym didn’t scare her; she had at least learned that.

When she tested the coffee it was even cooler than she thought, so she put it in the microwave to reheat. Her most immediate obstacle was not the gym, anyway, but her mother Janet. The day before Erin had lied and told her that she didn’t need to work, and that morning she had purposefully stayed upstairs until she didn’t need to lie again, though she knew it was the most temporary of solutions – they were sure to talk that evening, and Janet was sure to ask how her day had gone. Without meaning to, Erin had moved from craving her mother’s support to actively avoiding it. She hadn’t told Janet

about her visit to Doug's house. She hadn't told her about the trip to Gage & Blotch. She hadn't even mentioned the phone call from Andrew, though the lattermost was only because she hadn't given herself time to think about it either. Any other week and his offer – or his phone call itself, his apology, hearing his voice – would have been The Thing, a magnet drawing all her attention, her emotions and energy, but in the shuffle of cars and people and news coming out of the lawyer's office, she'd almost forgotten he called. It was another conversation she would have to reckon with soon. Did she want to teach? Did she want to leave Ransom? Did she want to leave her mother, leave what was or wasn't here for her?

And perhaps most importantly, did she want to do any of this because of Andrew? Because of something he had given her? If it was given it could be taken away, that was something she had learned. You had to find the real stuff yourself, and hold tight to it.

Without meaning to, she had microwaved the coffee too long, and not only was it steaming but the mug itself was too hot to hold. She didn't have the patience to stand there and let it cool again, so she wrapped a towel around the handle and went back upstairs to her room. Those questions weren't going anywhere yet.

When Janet asked that evening how work had gone, there was something buried in her tone, a layer of caution or reserve that Erin felt compelled, in the briefest moment before she answered, to ignore.

“It was fine,” she said.

“Did you go in late?”

“I went in when I was supposed to. I got scheduled late.”

She was sitting at the kitchen table in front of her computer while Janet made dinner. When Janet worked late she might start dinner herself, but otherwise she sat downstairs and kept her mother company while she cooked – and when they were finished, she cleaned the dishes. Erin would have preferred to stay upstairs, but doing so felt like it would only draw more attention to herself than sitting nearby, despite the many questions it allowed, and she reluctantly stuck to their routine. She was at least sure her mother hadn't seen the notice about the end of the search, or else they'd be talking about it now. As the days progressed with no change in news, Janet had asked about Joe less frequently, but she was attentive to Erin's mood and wellbeing nonetheless, and she wouldn't have let something so significant pass without a mention.

As Erin sat and stared at the computer screen, her phone buzzed beside her. It was a text from Doug: *Hey*, it read. *Can we talk?* For the moment she ignored it.

She and Janet were going to have to talk more soon. Just like she would have to talk to Andrew soon, and answer this text message soon. But Erin couldn't tell exactly how she felt, and she didn't want to find out in front of anyone else. Of course she was sad, but she had already *been* sad, and in a way she had tricked herself out of reacting further – though it was such a trick she hadn't even realized she was doing it. Two or three days ago she didn't need to accept the end of the search, because it hadn't ended yet, and now that it had she could tell herself she wasn't surprised, like she had already dealt with it earlier, when she hadn't. Without intending she had made a perfect circle, a spinning wheel that only stayed upright as long as it kept moving, and the last thing she needed was Janet or Doug or anyone else coming to topple her over.

A minute after the text message, her phone vibrated with a call. It was Doug again. She silenced it, though she could tell that Janet – standing by the stove waiting for a burner to heat – had still noticed the buzz.

“Are you doing anything tonight?” Janet asked.

“No,” Erin said. She wondered if it was trap, but she couldn’t see how. “I don’t think so. I don’t know what I’d do.”

“Hmmm,” her mother said.

“Are you?”

“Doing something? No, no plans.”

Erin was going to have to make up her mind about the prayer vigil, and soon. There was a sense in which it didn’t matter, she knew, but still it was a bigger question than she felt prepared to answer at the moment. There would be no hiding it from Janet – it crossed her mind to try, but she caught herself with a simple question (*Why?*) and stopped there. At some point it’d become second nature to hide her pursuit of Joe, and she had to remind herself that something like a vigil wasn’t part of it. She didn’t think it was going to do anything for her – closure, if it ever came, would come from elsewhere – and a part of her rebelled against the idea of participating in the official narrative, like she too was agreeing that what Joe had done was tragic but normal, when it most definitely wasn’t, and probably he had never done it in the first place. She hadn’t forgotten what Edie told her, Joe leaving with two men on Thursday. At the same time she might be able to see his parents there, and possibly even speak with them, though she didn’t know what she’d say. The problem was that Daniel and Reuben would be there too – she couldn’t imagine why they wouldn’t – and she couldn’t decide, given everything that happened,

and the last day especially, if she did or did not want to see them again herself. She doubted they wanted to see her.

There was a knock at the door. Janet looked briefly at Erin, then put her stirring spoon on the counter and went to answer. A moment later Erin heard the door open, and to her surprise Doug's voice sounded from the entryway. She intuited the risk at once and grabbed her phone, before she even thought to wonder why he was there – so automatic it was like she'd planned ahead, though she hadn't. She typed a brief message to Doug, a single unbroken string of thoughts: *Mom doesn't know what we've been doing so don't mention it please thanks sorry*. After it had sent she took a breath, stood, and walked toward the voices, coming into view of the door just in time to see Doug feel his phone vibrate in his pocket, glance at it, start to put it away, then glance again and read the message. He looked up when he heard her approach.

“Hi,” she said.

He was still holding his phone in his hand, standing in the entryway as Janet closed the door behind him. He put it back in his pocket and smiled at her, though his smile was tight, like he was sucking at his lips, and it didn't extend to his eyes; they flared briefly and returned to normal.

“Hi Erin,” he said. “How are you?”

“I'm okay,” she said. “What's going on?”

Janet turned back toward them. “I don't think we've ever officially had you over,” she said to Doug. “Is this your first time inside the house?”

“I think it might be,” Doug said. “I'm sorry to just drop in like this.”

“It’s not a problem,” Janet said. “Not at all. But let’s go back into the kitchen if you don’t mind, I’ve got something on the stove.”

“Of course.”

Janet moved around them, back toward the kitchen, and Doug looked again at Erin. He cocked his head and extended one hand in front of him, inviting her to go ahead. “Shall we?”

“How are you?” Janet said over her shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

Before Doug could answer she disappeared into the kitchen, and they were forced to follow. Erin led the way back, though it was a short walk through their combination dining-sitting room – a small space at the front of the house that Erin and Janet, being only two, never used. The light switch was on the far wall, and it was off, so they passed through a moment of darkness, moving from the light in the entryway to the light in the kitchen, and it struck Erin anew how dim and ungainly the space was. She came into the kitchen and returned to the table – though she thought it would be rude, or her mom would think it rude, if she sat down again, so she stayed standing and leaned on it. Doug stood awkwardly just inside the entrance and put his hands in his pockets.

“Oh,” he said to Janet. “Well...” Erin could tell he had no idea how to answer, and truthfully she couldn’t read the question either. If Janet knew about his divorce, it wasn’t from her. She tried to communicate that with her face, but it was difficult. She wondered if he was going to believe her.

“All things considered,” Doug said slowly. “I’m okay.”

“Dallas did such a nice job on Sunday,” Janet said. “Even so, I was sorry we couldn’t hear you preach. Erin was there, you know.”

“Mom,” Erin said.

“Oh relax. You guys have been meeting for a while now. I think he knows your attendance has been a little spotty, right?”

Erin rolled her eyes. It was like Janet to do this, put on an air of nonchalance with something she felt strongly about, and so pointedly in front of Doug. Erin wasn’t even sure she’d done it on purpose.

“Yes,” Doug said. “I heard that. About Erin being there on Sunday, I mean. That’s great.”

“Oh, you did?” Janet said.

“Yeah... She actually sent me a message about it. Later.”

Janet looked at Erin. “That was nice,” she said.

“I’m a nice person,” Erin said.

Janet studied her for a moment. “I know,” she said finally, and turned back to Doug. “Anyway, I’m sorry that I had to run back to the stove here. Is there something we can help you with?”

“Right,” Doug said. He looked back and forth between the two women. “As I said I was just in the area – or did I say that? I meant to. Either way, I was in the neighborhood already, and I had sent Erin a message, but she wasn’t, uh, responding, and I wasn’t sure if she had gotten or not. I had something important I needed to tell her.”

“It couldn’t wait until tomorrow?” Erin said. She tried not to make it sound too pointed, but immediately feared she had. “When we’re meeting tomorrow, I mean?”

“That’s a good point – I know we’re supposed to be meeting tomorrow, it’s true, but...the thing I wanted to tell you was actually about that. Something’s come up for me,

and I need to change our meeting time. I'm going to be so busy tomorrow, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get ahold of you. And I know that it's sometimes difficult for you with the car, or with public transportation, and I, uh, afraid that you'd make the long trip out at the wrong time."

"Oh," Erin said.

"That's sweet of you to drop by, then," Janet said.

"Well I was in the neighborhood." He shrugged. It was a good thing, Erin realized, that Janet continued to watch the stove, as she frequently turned her back to stir or add or check something, and it allowed Doug to catch Erin's eye when he spoke again. "I also just wanted to say that I was sorry to change plans like that, so unexpectedly. I hope you'll forgive me."

"It's just one meeting," Janet said. "And it sounds like you had to. I'm sure she understands."

Behind her back Doug gave one of his small, wry grins. From the edge of the table Erin nodded, and despite herself she smiled as well. "I do," she said. "That's a nice thing to say."

"I'm also sorry to be interrupting your dinner, though. That was thoughtless of me; I should go."

"It's really fine," Janet said. "In fact you're welcome to stay and eat, if you'd like."

"No, no," Doug said. "Thank you, but I've got to run."

"Of course, I suppose you'll be eating at home yourself."

“Right.” He paused. “Anyway, let’s reschedule our meeting, Erin, and then I’ll be out of your hair.” In the second Janet turned again, Doug caught her eye and jerked his head to the door. “The only problem is I just realized I left my planner in the car,” he said. “I’ll go grab it.”

She almost didn’t get the message, or the point of it, but at the last moment she stood straight off the table. “I’ll just walk out with you,” she said. “It’s fine. Mom, I’ll be back in a sec. I know we’re almost ready to eat.”

Janet looked at her, and after a moment she shrugged. “Okay,” she said. “That’s fine.” Then more kindly to Doug: “Have a good night; you’re welcome anytime.”

Neither Doug nor Erin spoke again until they had walked back through the house and stepped outside.

“Sorry about that,” Erin said, once she closed the door and they moved a few paces down the walk, toward Doug’s car on the street.

“It’s okay,” Doug said. “I’m sorry too.”

“I know.”

They stood in the middle of the lawn; it wasn’t even seven o’clock, but the sun had completely set and Erin’s neighborhood was dark. When she was younger Janet always complained that they needed a street light. The nearest one was too far down the block.

Doug leaned closer and squinted at her in the darkness, and in his profile, his posture and the outline of his expression, he looked older than she’d ever seen him.

“You need to tell your mother,” he said. “About everything.”

Erin sighed. She was ready to be irritated, like she'd been irritated by so much lately, but this time she wasn't. "You're right," she said. "I just think I know what she's going to say, and I don't really want to hear it yet."

"What's that?"

"That what we're doing is crazy. That I'm just using it to distract myself."

Doug nodded and said nothing for a moment. "I won't speak for you," he said at last. "But I feel like what I'm doing is a little crazy. But that doesn't make it, well, *crazy*."

"It's not us that are crazy, it's everything."

"That's another way to put it." Doug turned back toward his car. "Speaking of crazy, come over here. I need to show you something. There was actually a reason I texted you. And called. And came to visit."

"Yeah," Erin said. "Sorry about that too."

They walked through the dark to Doug's car at the curb; he unlocked it and leaned in. When he stood up straight there was a note in his hand.

"I got home yesterday and found this in my jacket pocket. Someone put it in there at some point; I must have left in such a hurry that I didn't notice right away."

He handed her the note, and she used the light from her phone to read. It was handwritten, scrawled in blue ink, and for a moment she had trouble deciphering the words as anything more than scribbles.

WL → Ransom

Changes next

- AB

"Changes next?"

“Churches,” Doug said. “Not changes. I’m pretty sure.”

She looked closer.

WL → Ransom

Churches *next*

- *AB*

“What does that mean?” she said.

“I don’t know, exactly. And it seems like I should know, right? But I’ve got no idea. At the very least we’re onto something with Gage and Blotch and this White Light business.”

“Huh.” She kept the note in front of her face and read it again, then again once more. Neither of them spoke for a moment. “I want to visit that address,” she said finally.

“The White Light address.”

Doug nodded again. “Sure,” he said. “I mean, why not? Let’s go tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 28

There was a hood on his head. He was in a room. His hands were tied behind his back in a chair in the middle of a room. They had driven for what felt like a long time – thirty minutes, forty minutes, fifty minutes – going fast and slow and turning and not turning and bumping at the end, and then the door had opened and he'd been marched, or half-marched/half-carried, upstairs and put in a chair and left there with a hood on his head.

He remembered it coming down. Being outside his own house and feeling, at the last moment, a presence behind him, and dropping into darkness so fast he didn't have time to do anything but kick out – literally kick – and hit and flail his arms until they were pinned against his sides by someone large, larger than him, and he was lifted at the knees by a second person, and turned sideways and carried a short distance and dumped into a van, slamming both shins against its side. Immediately it had taken off and he kept fighting, thrashing his arms and legs and twisting his whole body, until at last they got his hands behind his back and ziptied – the plastic cutting into his skin – and he stopped. His arms were wrenched backward and there was someone sitting on him and he couldn't breathe very well, and once he stopped fighting he realized he'd forgotten to scream.

And then they had driven, and marched him upstairs to a room, and now he was here.

When they stopped fighting he had tried to talk to the figures in the van, but they didn't talk back. No one spoke at all, not a single word, until they had gotten him inside

and up the stairs and into his chair. Most of the footfalls moved away, out of the room, but a man with heavy steps had come closer and placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered, “Stay here.” Then the steps had moved away, but seconds later they returned and he added: “Or I’ll beat the shit out of you.” And then the steps moved away again, and the door closed and it was quiet.

When Ben shifted in his seat it squeaked and cracked, and he pictured himself alone in the middle of an empty room, a bag on his head, sitting in something cheap and wooden like the chairs in the kitchen at his own mother’s house. He hadn’t thought of his mom in weeks but he did now, and then he thought of Alex, and of Dylan and Miles. More than anything he wanted to talk to them, to tell them where he was – not so they could rescue him, but just so they could know. He felt sick that they didn’t know.

The hood was itchy and hot, and he couldn’t say how long he sat in the dark and sweated and tried to get it off his head. It was loose enough that he could breathe but also damp and clingy, pawing at his mouth and nose like a feeble, clammy hand, and as much as he knew he was breathing he still felt like he couldn’t. Over time he found that if he leaned forward and shook his head he could get an edge up far enough to rub on his shoulder, and if he did that – rubbed his chin against his shoulder over and over and over – he could push the hood up far enough to get it past one ear and feel, finally, a stroke of cool air on his cheek. The tricky part was moving in such a way that it didn’t fall back down, but if he kept his head cocked to the side and stood carefully, his hands behind him braced against the creaking chair, his shoulders stinging, he could stand and lean over far enough that his head was between his knees. Once done he shook back and forth, again

and again, like a dog with its head in a jar, until he worked the hood over his nose and it fell off at his feet.

He nearly stumbled over, then stood upright and looked around the room. He was in a house – an old house – with some kind of office or guest room. There were scratched wood floors and a desk and a bookcase and a giant throw rug, and a single window behind him. He wanted to walk around, to stretch his legs and figure out where he was, but he heard movement from a room next door and remembered what the man had whispered, so he maneuvered himself back into his chair with his hands still ziptied behind him. Getting the hood back on was out of the question; he hadn't thought about that as much as he should have.

Only a few minutes later, as Ben was inspecting the room more closely from his chair, did he hear footsteps outside his door. Then it opened and a man about his age took one step in, saw Ben, and froze – his hand still on the knob. The stranger was well-built, with an open denim shirt over a wife beater, khakis and boots and a wispy blonde beard, looking large and light on his feet and perfectly capable of beating the shit out of someone. He turned and lifted his free hand and started to say something to the person behind him, but before he could get it out a second man appeared. This second man saw Ben's face, saw Ben looking at him, and froze as well. His eyes fell to the hood on the floor.

“Oh Ben,” he said. “I wish you hadn't done that.”

Ben wished he hadn't done it either.

He felt like they could tell he'd been out of the chair, hood notwithstanding, like it was written on his face, and he expected one of them to yell or threaten or hit him right away. But the men were calm, and the first punch – though it came – didn't come right away. The second man who entered, the one who spoke, was middle-aged, with a smooth, angular face and slick hair turned silver at his temples. He wore dark jeans and a tan blazer with elbow patches over a woolen sweater vest, like he was auditioning for the role of Professor in a community theater production, and he stood in front of Ben with his hands in his pockets and said his name was Custer Clayton.

“So you took your hood off,” he said.

“I'm sorry,” Ben said. “I was hot and I couldn't breathe and I...I tried, but I just couldn't stand it. And I'm sorry.”

“Okay,” Clayton said. Not “It's okay.” Just “Okay.” Behind him the other man leaned in the open doorway and crossed his arms.

“I'm a little claustrophobic,” Ben said. For some reason he felt like this made sense to add, like it was something he could tell the man in front of him and it would matter. If it had just been the younger guy in the wife beater he might not have bothered. It also had the benefit, in this case, of being true; he had always been a little claustrophobic. Anytime he felt trapped he almost couldn't help himself from reacting.

“Well it's done,” Clayton said. “At least we can have a conversation face to face now.”

Only when Clayton said it did it occur to Ben that this might be a worse. Something about the way he said “face to face.”

“So,” he continued. “You’ve been trying to cause some trouble for us at a very inopportune time, do you know that?”

“No,” Ben said. “I don’t know that. I don’t actually know what I’ve done, but I can definitely tell there’s been some sort of mix-up.”

“I see.” Clayton glanced behind him, and the man in the denim shirt and wife beater, still leaning idly on the doorframe, stepped forward and punched Ben in the stomach. Ben had closed his eyes and braced himself for something up around the face, and the blow caught him unprepared, its force folding him over as far as he could go with his hands tied behind him. He would have fallen out of the chair, or taken it with him, if the other man had not braced him with a steady hand on his shoulder.

“You’re okay,” he said. “Don’t forget to breathe. I’m Natty, by the way.”

“Do you know that?” Clayton said again.

Ben found that he couldn’t speak. His stomach was a black hole sucking at the rest of himself. The two men waited for an answer, Natty standing over him, Custer Clayton a few steps back with his hands in his pockets, and after a minute Ben managed to raise his head high enough to nod.

“Sure,” he whispered.

When Natty moved and his shirt flared around him, Ben caught glimpses of a gun in a holster on his belt, though Natty never took it out or pointed it or even acknowledged its presence. Instead he used his fists to deliver deep, dull shots to Ben’s arms and stomach and sides – body blows that lasted, aching more than they stung. Ben would have told them what they wanted to hear, but for a while, despite Clayton’s introduction,

they didn't want to hear anything else, and Natty hit him while Clayton perched on the large wooden desk and waited. Neither man showed any special excitement; to Ben they weren't angry or emotional or driven by anything in particular. Clayton looked around the room and paid them little attention. Natty paused between punches for Ben to breathe and worked carefully, sizing up his shots like he was throwing darts at a board. If he had the breath, Ben would have asked them to show some feeling at least.

He didn't know how long it lasted. At one point Clayton caught him staring, and he raised his hand for Natty to stop. "This helps to set the proper tone," he explained.

"You could just..." Ben said. His eyes were watering, and he felt nauseated. "You could just threaten me."

Clayton shrugged. "In my experience this is faster. In the long run." He hopped off the desk and moved in front of Natty, who stepped back and leaned against the wall, shaking out his hands. The wallpaper was faded and matronly, large pink roses in a soft blue sky. "And I want to get this over with quickly. It's about more than just scaring you. It *is* about scaring you, and if you're smart you should be scared – I think we've demonstrated that – but really there's a more important reason. I won't beat around the bush any longer, no pun intended." He smiled at his own joke. "I need you to tell us everything you know. Are you ready to do that?"

There was a pause. Ben wanted to answer but had no idea how.

"That wasn't a rhetorical question," Clayton said. "I don't like rhetorical questions."

He braced himself for another round of pain, but the truth was he didn't know what to say. The beating had not freed his mind so much as fogged it, and he couldn't

have lied if he wanted to, which he didn't. "I don't know anything about anything. I don't know even know what I'm supposed to know. Whatever you think I did, I didn't do it."

Clayton sighed. "Plans have been set in motion, Ben. Important plans. I know you think this is blackmail, but it isn't. We're not after *money*. We can get money. No, this is about –" He paused, then looked back at Natty. "How would you describe it?"

Natty thought for a moment. "The truth," he said. "It's drilling for the truth."

"The truth as we see it," Clayton said. "Yes, that's good. So it matters, is what I'm saying. And for some reason people who don't matter – people like *you* – keep getting in the way. And we really can't...tolerate that."

"I'm sorry," Ben said. He was thinking of his work at Zip, and also thinking – and trying not to think – of the dead young man, of anything he might have learned or done or seen, though he had no answers, and he wasn't going to be the first to bring up the boy. It didn't seem like the appropriate time to mention a murder. "I don't have any idea what you're talking about. I don't think anything. Or I didn't do anything. I swear."

"Why were you snooping around Thomas Gage's office?"

Ben blinked. He wouldn't have called it snooping, but it was true he'd been there. And it must have shown on his face. Clayton rolled his eyes and glanced back at Natty, and Natty – who had taken his old spot and was sitting on top of the desk – shook his head ruefully.

"Okay, yes, I had a conversation with him. But it wasn't *snooping*. And I never learned anything about...anything."

Clayton waved his hand in the air. "I don't mean the first time you talked," he said. "I mean the time you snooped."

“I... I don’t understand. I only went to his office once. I never went back, and I never snooped.”

“Ben,” he said, and exchanged another glance with Natty. Ben had the impression he was about to be hit again.

“I swear, I didn’t go back. Ask Gage. Please ask him.”

Clayton frowned. At that moment there were more noises from the next room, footsteps followed by a thump. Clayton sighed and jerked his thumb, and Natty stepped out. Once the door had closed again, he turned back to Ben and stepped very close, then crouched down so that their heads were near, his slightly lower than Ben’s in the chair.

“But,” he said quietly. “Why would we have heard that you did?”

“I don’t know. I – I can’t answer that. But it’s not true. I talked to Gage about something else entirely, and I didn’t learn anything about bribes. Nothing.”

“Blackmail,” Clayton said.

“Sorry, blackmail. I don’t know anything about it.”

“And it’s not blackmail.”

“Right, sorry. Not blackmail.”

Clayton held his face very close to Ben’s. “Do you think someone else is lying then?”

Ben hesitated; he didn’t like to not know who he was calling a liar. In the end he had no choice. “If someone said I snuck around Mr. Gage’s office, then they’re lying.” He paused. “Or maybe they just made a mistake.”

“Mistakes will be the end of me,” Clayton said. He shook his head. “I hope you’re not lying. You really shouldn’t have taken that hood off.”

Ben spent the rest of the day in the room by himself. They cut his hands free and left him alone; once he could move he thoroughly searched the room, but found nothing useful – nothing to help him escape, if he ever worked up the courage. It didn't seem like Natty or Custer Clayton were going to hurt him any more at the moment, but it hadn't seemed like they were going to hurt him at all until they did, and it had never seemed like he'd be swiped off his front lawn at the end of a day of work. The desks and all its drawers were completely empty, and a dresser by the window was empty as well. The bookcase had some books in it, mostly thrillers and biographies and – disturbingly, to Ben – some children's books at the bottom. He couldn't stop thinking of Alex and Dylan and Miles. There was a closet in the room as well, in the same direction as the noises he kept hearing, but it held only some faded men's clothes – jackets and jeans and overalls – and a few blankets. A chain had been installed on the outside of the door, something to lock him inside; Ben thought he could probably break it if he wanted, but it might take a few tries, and it would make a loud enough racket to alert the whole house. And even if he got free he didn't know where he would go, or how.

The window in the room had frilly pink curtains and two boards nailed hastily across it, but there were still large gaps to look outside, and before the sun set Ben could see they were in the country, an open space with gentle hills and fallow farmland. A road ran south away from the house, and a few hundred yards down the road he could just make out another home, the closest neighbor.

As the sun was setting, Natty came back to his room with some food – a slice of bread with peanut butter, folded in two, and a glass of orange juice – plus an air mattress

and a pump. There was no bed in the room, and Ben had been starting to worry about the night. When he left Ben could hear him move next door. It was an old house and the walls were thin; if someone stepped in the other room he felt it in the floor. He ate sitting in the same frail wooden chair as earlier, and while he chewed he listened to the noises in the other room and thought about what they meant. Whoever was inside had been there all day; Ben had been there all day himself to know. There were sounds of pacing, occasional thumps and scratches, but nothing to suggest this person – whoever they were – had ever left, or ever come and gone.

Natty returned later to collect his plate, and Ben had to suffer the indignity of using the bathroom with the door partway open. The pump for the air mattress was electric, and it made a racket when he turned it on, so Ben self-consciously inflated his bed under Natty's supervision. He hadn't seen Custer Clayton since their conversation earlier.

At last, when it was fully dark outside and the house began to settle, and he judged he was alone for the night, Ben crept over to the closet and stepped inside. He ran his hands along the back wall and imagined what was just beyond it, in the next room. So close he could almost touch it.

As he was standing there he heard another creak, the sound of someone moving on the floor. Quietly – as quietly as he could – Ben rapped his knuckle on the closet wall. *Knock knock*. He held his breath and waited, but there was no response. After a minute he did it again, just a little louder. *Knock knock*.

For a moment still it seemed that nothing would happen, and he was about to leave the closet – it was always possible for Natty, or anyone else, to come in and

surprise him – when he felt footsteps move closer and there came, from the other side of the wall, a soft tap back.

Knock knock

CHAPTER 29

For the third day in a row Doug made the drive to Erin's house, and for the second time found her waiting on the front step. It was Thursday. Exactly one week earlier Doug and Erin had met in his office at church like normal. Joe had not disappeared yet – or maybe, Doug supposed, he'd been in the process of disappearing while they met. Doug himself had still been married. Technically he was still married now, but it didn't feel like it. Sam was coming home this weekend and they were going to plan their next step, though he had exchanged a series of texts with her the day before, and it seemed like their most immediate next step was that she take another week to visit her sister in Florida. They were both good at putting off the inevitable. It was possibly why they hadn't separated earlier. Also why they hadn't dealt with their problems and gone on to live a long, happy married life.

“Did you talk to your mom?” Doug asked, once Erin had gotten into his car and buckled her seatbelt. She grimaced.

“No. But I will.”

He fought the urge to roll his eyes. Life was like this, he knew. Two steps forward, one step back. One step sideways. “Does she still think you're at work?”

I don't know what she thinks,” Erin said, but then she seemed to catch the snippiness in her tone, because she added, in a lower register: “Probably she does. I'll talk to her soon, I promise. You don't have to worry about it.”

Doug said nothing right away. Soon is not a time – was what he would have told Emma, but she was right. This was the benefit of Erin *not* being his daughter. At the end of the day he didn't have to worry about it. What other people did, what other people thought, had been his concern for many years – he'd been unable to separate their opinions from his own job and vocation. But now that he didn't have his job, or wouldn't have it soon, he no longer had anything to be unable to separate them from. Problem solved, he thought, and he almost shook his head, right there in the car.

He had been doing that a lot more in the last week – starting conversations in his head, then responding to them.

“Do you know where you're going?” Erin asked.

He held up his phone. “I've got it here. It's not an address I recognized. Did you?”

“Nope.”

After he had shown her the note from AB – Arthur Blotch, it seemed clear, though the kind of clear that didn't help them much – and they decided to try the White Light address, they had also talked about Doug calling the church. In this case his church, Calvary Bible. But Doug had no idea what to say (“Literally none,” he told Erin) and it would've been difficult to try. In what sense, exactly, were the churches “next”? What churches? How had he come to learn this? And who was he going to tell? Despite everything he would have trusted Ed more than anyone, but he was sure that Ed would interpret what he said as – above all – a sign that he was slipping, cracking in some way, and Doug didn't want to spend the time or energy trying to convince him otherwise.

“It’s like,” Erin had said. “Blotch was trying to tell you something and still say the littlest amount possible.”

“To be fair, it seems whoever wrote this was in a hurry. Or their handwriting is always just terrible.”

“He still could have written something else. I mean, ‘WL → Ransom’? An arrow? What does that even mean? Is White Light *inside* Ransom? Are they *coming* to Ransom? Are they doing something *to* Ransom? Or I don’t know, do they want someone to pay a ransom? It’s so stupid.”

Doug sighed. “You’re right,” he said. “I don’t know this guy, but at the moment I don’t like him very much.”

They had to drive across town to reach the White Light address, northwest of the city center and so far out it almost would have been quicker to take the interstate – the same interstate Doug used to drive to Calvary each day, when he still went. By the time he realized his mistake, however, it was too late to change, so they drove up and around the downtown area, then cut across western Ransom on several wide streets with most of the city’s chain restaurants, fast food, and its busiest gas stations. It was a part of town he spent almost no time in – which was strange, considering that Calvary was west of Ransom as well, though outside the city proper – and once they had gone far enough to leave behind the restaurants and stores, Doug had to admit he didn’t know what else was out there. It didn’t seem like much.

He had his phone out to navigate as they drove, and for most of the drive Erin used hers as well. It buzzed more than once and she typed several replies, seeming to draft and redraft them – long pauses between the sounds of her fingers tapping on the

screen. Doug knew better than to ask what she was doing, or who she was talking to – they were questions that never failed to irritate Emma, and it was none of his business anyway – but after several minutes of silence, just before his map said they’d reach White Light, she looked up from her phone and turned to him herself.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s just another...thing I’m worrying about.”

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Would you believe Andrew called me? I didn’t get a chance to tell you before.”

“At this point I’d believe anything. You mean Andrew, your ex-fiancé?”

She sighed and put her phone down on her lap. “Yeah, that one.”

“What does he want?”

“It’s a long story,” she said. “But basically he called yesterday to tell me about a teaching job in Greenville. I think maybe I could get it if I wanted.”

“Wow. Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“You did study to be a teacher, right?”

She made a face, something just below a grimace, and shrugged. “I guess. I mean, yeah, that’s what I studied. But I don’t know if it’s what I want to do or not.”

They were nearly there. Most of the buildings around them were wide and blank-faced, like private offices and warehouses, and there were few cars on the streets or in most of the lots. It was an industrial part of town, which explained why Doug had never been, and therefore a dirty part of town as well, with cracked pavement and gravel in all four directions. He pulled into the parking lot and cruised along a wide building with cheap metal siding and plain white doors every thirty or forty feet, until at last they

reached the proper number and he parked. The lot around them was mostly empty, with only a few scattered cars in sight. It was difficult to say when they had parked, or where their owners were now – at the very least the area around them was quiet. Two or three hundred yards down the road was a rental truck company, and Doug could just make out a few tiny figures walking amongst a row of moving vans. As far as he could see there was no one closer.

He turned off the car.

“This isn’t the best advice,” he said. “But it’s what I’ve got. Don’t ask yourself what you’re supposed to do with the rest of your life. You might think you’re making that decision, but you’re not. Ask yourself what you should do right now.”

“That’s what you do?” Erin said.

Doug looked over. “I didn’t say it’s what I do; I said it’s my advice.”

She nodded like that part, at least, made sense to her. He decided it had been a neutral question.

“How did you know you wanted to be a pastor?”

“Oh man,” he said. “It’s been a long time. And there isn’t one easy answer. But I took my faith very seriously – I take it seriously – and that was, for me, the clearest way to show it. The other side is I just couldn’t think of anything else to do.”

“I understand that,” Erin said. “I can’t think of anything else right now.”

They were silent for a moment.

“Well have you thought of becoming a pastor?” Doug said.

“I haven’t.”

“I think I know a job might be coming open soon.”

She smiled and shook her head. “No thanks.”

He started to get out of the car and realized his seatbelt was still buckled, so he undid it and opened the door. “Anyway let’s go inside,” he said. “And see what this White Light business is about.”

They got out. Now that he was standing Doug looked around again from the parking lot and saw no one – not in any of the cars, or coming out of any door. He listened and heard almost nothing – only a faint vehicular sound from somewhere behind the building, though given where they were, he thought, it might just be the interstate. They walked up to the door, but neither of them moved to open it right away.

“Should we knock?” Erin said.

“It’s an office,” Doug said. “Not someone’s house.” He stepped forward and put his hand on the knob. “At least I hope so.”

There had been a part of him that expected it to be locked, especially once they saw how empty the place was, but the knob turned and the door opened easily. Doug rapped on it with his knuckle as he stepped inside, and Erin followed after him. It took their eyes a moment to adjust, but once they did he saw something like an office, or an office lobby – with a computer on a desk in front of them, and a hallway disappearing to the right. There was a plastic tree in a pot in the corner and a few folding chairs in the middle of the floor – otherwise it was sparsely furnished and empty. To Doug it had the feel of a portable office or classroom, the kind of thing you could attach to a truck and drive off if you wanted. It was too cheap to be real.

“Excuse me?” he called. “Hello?”

There was no reply. Doug looked over at Erin, and she shrugged.

“Are we in the right place?” she asked.

“It’s the right number,” Doug said. He looked carefully down the hall – it was dark, unlike the lobby itself, lit by yellow overhead fluorescent bulbs – but he could still see to the end, and it was empty. He turned back around and surveyed the space from a different angle, the desk to his right and the door to his left. It was small and sterile, and the walls were wood-paneled. Other than the desk and the chairs and the plant, it was completely empty. *Were* they in the right place? He had expected there to be something. And someone. White Light was real, after all, and they had money – if Gage & Blotch could be believed.

Erin wandered over the desk and jiggled the computer mouse, then began to open drawers.

“Be careful,” Doug said. “I’ve already been caught spying once.”

“Stand guard then.”

He frowned. It was a sensible idea, he had to admit – though he didn’t want to do it. Still Doug walked back to the door and stuck his head outside. Everything looked the same. He had parked right in front of the office – which felt like it made sense a minute ago, when he expected to find a real office, and people in it – but now seemed too brazen and clumsy. He wondered if he should move.

A second later Erin called his name and he turned around, blinking. It was hard on his eyes to move from the bright midday, even in fall, to the dim interior.

“What?”

“I found something.” She held up a stack of envelopes, and Doug abandoned his post to come over.

“What are those?” he said.

“Letters, I guess. Look: *White Light*.”

Doug looked. Inside the bottommost drawer of the desk was a box, and inside the box were letters, most addressed by hand to White Light – different hands, different fonts, different colors. They came from all over the country.

“Should we open one?”

“Wait,” he said. “Let’s think about this a second, before we do something we can’t undo.” He reached into the box for another handful. “At least we’re in the right place.”

“Fine.” Erin held up a letter to the overhead light, then frowned and shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“These are all recent,” Doug said. “Look at the postmarks. Recent like the last couple days.” He grabbed another pile. “These too, look.”

“I really want to open one.”

Doug put the letters down and began to search the rest of the desk. “Did you look at the computer?”

“I had to turn it on,” Erin said. She put the letters aside and moved the mouse again. “Give me a second.”

Doug searched the same drawers Erin had and found nothing else. Other than the computer, the desktop was bare – there wasn’t a phone or a lamp or a pen or even a single paperclip. He started to move away from the desk to take a closer look at the plant, and the chairs, and anything he could find down the hall, but he had only taken a few steps when Erin stopped him again.

“Come here,” she said. “Look what’s on the computer.”

He came back around and peered at the screen.

“It seems almost empty,” Erin said. “But I looked in the Trash and found all these pictures.”

She began to click through them. There were several photos in a row of the same person, a handsome, dark-haired man in his late 30s or early 40s. Bland and inoffensive pictures of the kind someone might share on social media – posing with a woman who looked like she could be his wife, or part of a golfing foursome, or in the stands at a baseball game. After five or six photos the subject changed, and there were several more of an older woman in her 50s or 60s – with some younger children at the park, and having dinner at a restaurant. Erin began to click through them faster.

“Wait,” Doug said. “Stop that. Go back a few.”

Erin did, and Doug found himself staring at a picture of Thomas Gage in front of the Eiffel Tower. He had seen that same picture before, in Gage’s office.

“Go forward,” he told Erin. “But more slowly.”

She began to click through the photos again. After two more of Gage that Doug had never seen, there was another familiar one – Gage at the Coliseum in Rome, and then another travel photo from Greece. As far as he remembered they were identical to the pictures Doug had seen in the office.

“That’s Gage,” Doug said.

“What?”

“That’s Thomas Gage. The lawyer from the office, the one who caught me sneaking around. That’s him in these pictures.”

“Are you serious?” Erin said. “Why? What are they for?”

“I don’t know,” Doug said. He had the feeling none of these people knew their pictures were on a computer in a west Ransom office; he also had a feeling they were there for a reason. And both thoughts together spooked him. He found the office unnerving for its cheapness and its emptiness and its quietness, and also its short dark hallway, and he wanted to leave before anyone showed up. But he also wanted to be sure they had seen everything they were going to see; he didn’t want to have to come back.

“Maybe you should open one of those letters,” he told Erin. “Let me have a quick look over here.”

“Deal,” Erin said. She must have had a letter picked out, because she grabbed one right away and used her nail to begin carefully opening it. As she did, Doug stepped back around the desk and over to the hallway. It was short, so while there was no light in it he could still see to the end; peering closer he spied three doors – two on the right, one on the left.

“There’s a check in here,” Erin called. “Fifty dollars to White Light from some guy in Missouri. And a letter too.”

Doug took a deep breath, then stepped up to the door on the left and opened it. Inside was a bathroom; it was empty.

“What does it say?” he asked, moving to the first door on the right.

“This guy needs to get over himself,” she said, reading. “There’s some stuff about the power of the little guy, the forgotten man, whatever. ‘Thank you for your vocal defense of freedom, and truth, and the true American way.’ That’s kinda repetitive, isn’t it? I don’t know, maybe they are just right-wingers.”

“Oh,” Doug said, his hand on the knob. “*White Light...*”

He opened the door. It was a broom closet, and standing just inside it was a man. He had his arms bent like he was bracing to be hit, and it took Doug a moment to recognize him: Matt Roth, the pastor at Ascent, one of the five Revival churches. Doug hadn't seen him since their meeting the week before.

Erin screamed, and the sound made him flinch. For some reason Doug didn't jump himself – something about the mix of the familiar and the altogether, totally unexpected. He was almost too surprised to jump.

“What?” he said dumbly, though Matt hadn't said anything yet.

“Well,” Matt said. “This is not great.” His arms went limp at his sides, and they stared at each other for another second before he stepped past Doug and out of the closet. He was unshaven and tired, wearing faded, torn jeans and a denim jacket with a fuzzy collar – a man-of-the-woods look that was somehow even more out of place than Doug's customary khaki pants and button-up. He seemed miserable, and on top of his misery embarrassed, like he'd been caught playing with himself in the closet instead of just standing there.

“What are you doing here?” he asked Doug.

“It's okay,” Doug told Erin. She looked halfway between running for the door and running for a weapon. “It's okay, I... I know him.” He turned back to Matt and finally processed his question. It almost made him laugh. “What am I doing here?” he said.

“What are *you* doing here? What are you doing in the closet?” He waited, but Matt didn't answer right away. “Were you *hiding* from us?”

“Did they get to you too?”

It was asked like he knew the answer already. Doug didn't understand, but he didn't need to understand to see that something was wrong – something had happened. This wasn't the same Matt Roth. There was none of the confidence, the borderline arrogance.

“Did who get to me?” he asked. “Did they get to you? Wait, who are they? What are you talking about?”

“Wait...” Matt said. He came more alert and looked at Doug closely, tugging on his jacket and straightening. “Sorry. I'm all...screwed up, it's been a weird day.” He paused. “What are you doing here again?”

“It's a long story,” Doug said. “I'm helping a friend...track down something she lost. We thought there might've been someone here who could help.” He gestured at Erin, still standing by the desk. She was looking considerably more wary now that a strange man had popped out of the closet. “Matt, what's going on?”

“Nothing's going on,” he said. He looked around and took a few steps closer to the desk, Erin's eyes on him. “I don't get why you're here, but I just came by to pick something up, and then I should get going. I wasn't hiding from you, I just didn't want...I guess you could call it hiding. It doesn't matter. I just didn't want to talk. Sorry I scared you.” This last part was directed at her.

“Matt, where are we? What is this place? What kind of business is it?”

“I think it's like a nonprofit,” he said.

“What's going on? You can tell me.”

“Nothing,” Matt said. “It's a long story, I can't explain. I really have to go.”

He stepped over to the desk and yanked a flash drive from the computer, then moved back around toward the door. When he'd come closer Erin flinched, looking startled and a little angry, and Doug felt a pang of guilt that he had brought her here, and put her in a situation where she didn't feel safe, and for some reason neither did he. Matt Roth should have been a friend, but in this setting – wherever they were – he wasn't.

“Okay, fine,” Doug said. He tried to keep his voice even. “Erin, I'd like to leave. Make sure those pictures on the computer are closed, and let's get out of here.”

Matt stopped and turned around. “What pictures on the computer?” he said sharply.

“I don't know,” Doug said. “Just some meaningless photos.”

“Let me see.” Matt had been halfway to the door, but he returned to the computer on the desk, leaning forward and jiggling the mouse so the screen lit up. Erin took a half step backward, though he wasn't paying attention to her.

“Wait,” he said, coming upright. He raised one hand, his head moving from Doug to Erin and back. “Wait a minute. I thought you said you weren't...”

“Goodness, Matt,” Doug said. He was almost shouting. “Just tell me what you're talking about.”

He stepped closer and leaned over the desk as well, until he could see the picture on the screen – one of Gage's photos. Something had spooked Matt all over again.

“Do you know that photo?” he asked. “Do you know Thomas Gage?”

“Thomas Gage?” Matt said. “What do you mean?”

“That man in the picture.”

“That's not Thomas Gage,” Matt said. “That's Arthur Blotch.”

There was a pause, Doug staring at the young pastor.

“What?” Erin said. It was her first word since Matt appeared.

“No,” Doug said. “I’ve met that man. His name is Thomas Gage.”

Matt shook his head. It was all too much. It was too much for Doug, and by his look it was too much for Matt Roth as well. He backed away from the desk again, toward the door, scrunching his face and shaking his head slightly, like there was water in his ear. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know. But I’ve really gotta go now.”

“Wait,” Doug said. “Just tell me: Are you in danger?”

“No,” Matt said. “I’m fine. Honestly. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Before Doug could say anything else he opened the door and stepped out of the office. In the silence that followed Doug realized his heart was pounding. He looked at Erin.

“What’s tomorrow?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, but as soon as the words left his mouth, he remembered.

The Revival.

Churches next, Arthur Blotch had written. Or Thomas Gage. Or Arthur Blotch.

The Revival was tomorrow.

CHAPTER 30

Ben's air mattress had a leak in it. He woke in the middle of the night, every part of his body throbbing, and realized he was almost on the ground. It was cold there, and hard, and in his half-awake state he didn't care if they came in and beat him again – what did matter? what did it really matter? – so he got up and turned on the air pump and re-inflated his mattress on the rug in the middle of the scratched wood floor. At first the noise surprised even him, like the whine of a small jet engine through the quiet upstairs. His arms and stomach and sides ached, and as much as he was afraid he liked the idea of waking them up. He hoped he scared everyone in the house.

Ten or fifteen seconds after he started, Natty came in, fumbling with the chain outside the door and stepping into the light, squinting. He was wearing the same clothes as the day before, though he looked like he'd been asleep.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he said, more bewildered than angry.

“Look,” Ben said, and he jabbed at the mattress with his finger. “Do you want me to use this thing or not?” In a way it would be easier if they hit him again. If his pain was sharper and more abrupt, less sodden and numbing. Less the dull ache that ruined his sleep – not enough to keep him conscious, too much to sleep well. Less the kind of dull that blurred his reality, his sleeping and waking, that left him all night haunted by some dreamlike memory of painful car rides and hard chairs in the kitchen and young men, his own young men, himself as a young man, young men who might one day grow old enough to die. He had too good a life, he dreamed, it was too good for him, and if the

pain was sharper, if Natty hit him right now and he stayed awake, he wouldn't have to think about it. He could just hurt, and he was already hurting so it didn't sound as bad as it had when he wasn't. "It's got a goddamn stupid hole in it somewhere," he said.

"Why'd you even give this to me?"

For a moment, Natty stared at the air mattress and the pump. Ben had turned it off when he started talking. "Alright," he said. "Just relax." He rested one arm behind his head against the door, thinking, his wife beater coming up far enough to show a few inches of white belly. He had taken the gun off his belt. "I don't think we have another one," he added. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Ben said. "Why are you sorry?"

Natty shrugged without answering, and started to move back out of the room. "Run it if you have to," he said. "But not too long. That thing's fucking loud."

When Natty took him to the bathroom in the morning, Ben got a brief glance at the door next to his – enough to see that it was plain brown, like his own, and closed. He had not been sure there was a chain on it; his peek had been shorter than a second, sideways and stolen. He didn't want anyone to catch him looking. Breakfast, when he returned from the toilet, was another peanut butter sandwich and a glass of orange juice. He ate it at the desk.

"We don't have a cook around here," Natty said. "You'll just have to live with it."

Since the night he seemed to expect another outburst from Ben, and his manner was half-irritated, half-apologetic.

“It’s fine,” Ben said. “And when are you going to let me go? I’m the wrong guy, remember.”

Natty left without answering, his face growing hard, and for the rest of the morning Ben was alone – no explanations, no expectations, and no visitors. He knew they weren’t just going to open the door and let him out, not after he had talked to them, but he hadn’t given up hope that something else would happen – they could drive him further into the country, for instance, and leave him; by the time he found help they would be gone. If he saw Custer Clayton again he might suggest it. A part of him thought the man would listen, though it was hard to say if that was just Ben’s hope, or the distraction of his professorial clothes and manner. There was, at the same time, something undeniably off about him.

Ben did his best not to think of the dead young man.

After an hour he worked up the courage to venture back into the closet, and he again succeeded in knocking quietly and getting a return knock, though that was as far as they got. He wished he knew Morse code but he didn’t, nor did he know if the person in the other room did. Once he tried whispering, but the walls – while very thin – were still too thick for that, and he didn’t dare raise his voice any louder. Even in the daytime the house was quiet. His anger from the night before had stuck around, and in the light it was mixed with frustration, anxiety, and a growing desperation. This was his second day away from home; his family would be losing their minds. He could hear footsteps pacing back and forth through the wall, and he thought he felt the same frantic frustration emanating from the room next door.

Eventually he had to move, and he too paced his room, doing laps around the large throw rug in the middle of the floor. That was what he was doing when Natty opened the door – though instead of coming inside and closing it, or bringing more food, he stayed in the doorway and waited, not speaking. Ben stopped pacing at the far end of the room, by the window, and braced himself. A second later Custer Clayton entered, wearing jeans and a gray cardigan. Behind him was the lawyer, Thomas Gage, looking out of place in a crisp, dark suit.

When Gage locked eyes with Ben he stopped, then started to turn around, but Natty closed the door and moved in front of it, sealing them inside together.

“What’s going on?” Gage said. “I thought you were talking about the other one.”

“Well,” Clayton said. “I wasn’t.” He gestured at the only chair in the room, pushed over by the desk. “Have a seat, Ben.”

“You’re a son of a bitch,” Gage said.

Clayton didn’t seem bothered by the insult. He stepped comfortably into the middle of the room and surveyed his surroundings – the desk with Ben’s dirty plate and glass, the air mattress folded in the corner. His eyes passed over the closest but didn’t linger. “Ben deserves to know who’s involved,” he said. “Don’t you think, Ben?”

Ben said nothing. As he watched the three men he thought about staying by the window, but there seemed little point to it, so he kept his eyes on them and stepped closer, pulling the chair away from the desk and sitting. He didn’t know why Gage would come all the way here to confirm the truth, that Ben had not snuck into his office. He didn’t know why Gage would come at all, and he didn’t like it. He should have known better.

“Benjamin...” Gage said, and he looked carefully at Ben. “I had nothing to do with this.”

“That is false,” Clayton said. “Obviously.”

“I don’t understand,” Ben said. “Just tell them the truth.”

“The truth is never quite so simple,” Clayton said. He frowned. “Is that a quote? Who said that?”

Gage looked mad enough to fight, though he was several inches shorter, and many years older, than Clayton. From the doorway Natty shrugged.

“Anyway, it’s complicated.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Ben said. “But you know you could let me go. It’d be easy. Just drive me out a little further and –”

“Ben, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is I’m more and more willing to believe you. The bad news is we’re kind of in the middle of something here, and it simply won’t be possible for you to just up and leave.”

“But –” Ben said. He wanted to stand but felt, with Natty by the door, that he shouldn’t. He held onto his knees for mooring. “My family. I’ve been gone for two days. The police will be involved by now, they’ll be looking for me. You’re... You’re making this worse for yourselves.”

“That’s a problem,” Clayton said. “That’s a big problem.” He looked at Gage. “Our big problem. But unfortunately it doesn’t change anything for you. If it’s any consolation we won’t need to hurt you any further.” He smiled. “You’d do well to keep it that way.”

“What did you do to him?” Gage said.

Instead of answering Clayton stepped over to the side wall, right next to the closet door, and leaned against it. He folded his arms. “Are you a religious man?” he asked.

“What?” Gage said.

“I was talking to Ben here.”

“No,” Ben said slowly. “Not really.”

“Pity.”

“You can’t keep him forever,” Gage said.

“Jesus,” Clayton said. “I know that. Let’s see how tomorrow goes, and we can reevaluate the timeline then.”

Gage took two steps closer and Natty, leaning on the door, straightened, like they were tied together on a string. “You can’t keep doing any of this forever,” Gage said. Ben did not imagine he was used to being ignored, or toyed with, and his tone had fallen somewhere between lecturing and uncertainty. “I mean that for your own sake as much as mine, or Natty’s, or this man’s here. Quit while you’re ahead; it’s the smart thing to do.”

“This isn’t just about *me*,” Clayton said. He brought both hands to his chest.

“Many, many people support what we’re doing.”

“This is entirely about you,” Gage said. “No one has any idea what you’re doing.”

“It’s true that it mostly took the right, oh, keywords, and the right message boards, for things to really spread. But I’m sure you’ve seen the letters now – and the checks.”

“You’re not giving those people anything. They send you money to feel better about themselves. And to feed their own delusions.”

“If that’s true then it sounds like I *do* give them something. I don’t remember it bothering you until recently.”

“I wonder,” Gage said quietly, “why that is.”

Ben could see Natty at the door, following the conversation closely. For his part Ben didn’t understand what was being said, and even so he had grown more and more unsettled. They were talking openly, far more openly than he liked. *I’m not a part of this* he thought. *I’m not a part of this*. He wanted to yell it.

“Look,” Gage said. “Have I told you about the barber who –”

“I don’t want to hear one of your stories,” Clayton said. “Not right now. Ben, do you want to hear it?”

“Sure,” Ben said. Anything to change the subject.

Clayton rolled his eyes. “Well maybe Mr. Gage can find time to tell you someday.” He stepped away from the wall and straightened his cardigan, then moved uncomfortably close to the lawyer, highlighting their difference in height. For a second it was silent; the person in the other room had been still since everyone trooped in together. “Maybe I’ll tell a story,” he told Gage. “About you. Something that just... pops into my head.”

Gage stared at him for a moment, then turned away. “I’m leaving,” he said. “This has been a colossal fuck-up.”

“That remains to be seen,” Clayton said. “But one can only hope.” Gage moved to the door and stood in front of Natty until the larger man stepped aside, and he left.

Clayton said, “Ben” matter-of-factly, and nodded, then he left the room as well, and

Natty stepped out after them. The door closed and Ben heard the chain being drawn, and just like that he was alone again.

The one thing that Ben understood well was that he wasn't leaving. They weren't going to let him go.

He pushed aside the curtains on the window and tried to pull the boards away, but they wouldn't budge, so he stood and watched the fields around the house grow darker through a six-inch slit. Once the sun had fully set, once his dinner had been brought, once he visited the toilet and Natty left him for the night, Ben pulled his air mattress into the middle of the floor and turned on the pump. Then he stepped back into the closet, pushed aside the row of hanging shirts and pants, and put his fist through the wall.

He tore at it with both hands, breaking off three- and four- and six-inch chunks of drywall at a time, punching again when he had to. He figured he had twenty, maybe twenty-five seconds, counting in his head – and another ten seconds in the middle of the night when he re-inflated. At twenty-five he stepped back into the main room and turned off the pump, then returned to the closet and swept as much of the loose drywall as he could under a blanket. The hole, about two or two and a half feet in diameter, could not be covered completely by the hanging clothes, but it was close.

Ben returned to the air mattress and lay down, breathing hard.

He was going to get help. And he was going to get out of there.

CHAPTER 31

Doug wanted to meet her at the Revival for Ransom at 3:00, when it started downtown, so this meant that even after Erin woke, later than usual – though it was happening so much now, she didn't know what was usual – she still had several hours to wait. She ate breakfast and got dressed slowly, taking care with her clothes: a black, long-sleeved shirt and burgundy pants, nicer and newer than the jeans and t-shirts and faded old jackets she typically threw on before leaving. When she put on her makeup, she spent more time than she often did. She couldn't say why, exactly, though it helped to pass the time, and it kept her thoughts from straying too far, and it seemed appropriate for what they were about to do – not because she cared for the Revival itself, or what the people who attended might think, but more because she had woken up believing, somewhere deep in her mind, that something was going to happen today. And when that something happened she wanted to feel ready.

After she finished getting dressed, she still had too long to wait, so she went upstairs to her room and retrieved a blue spiral notebook from the table beside her bed. The night before she had not been able to sleep, and after midnight she'd done something strange – though of course that was increasingly relative as well – and gotten out of bed, found an old notebook with only a few pages used, and started writing. Her intention at first had been to journal. She wasn't good at journaling, and didn't always see the point, but lying in bed she had felt like there were too many things in her head, literally too

many thoughts for her mind to think, and she sensed it might be a sort of relief to get them out. If they went on the page they wouldn't have to stay anywhere else.

She had started by writing about the thing that seemed, on the surface, most heavy in her hands, the single thing that felt like it was her decision to make – Andrew's offer to help, and with it Greenville, and teaching, and the possibility of leaving Ransom. She'd thought at first she might write a list of pros and cons. In a sense this wasn't the best time to think about it, not with everything else going on, but she had never been good at waiting, not ever, and if she had to do it even for a night, or a single day, one way to cope was to be early on something else. She realized soon enough, however, that she didn't want to write a list, and she wasn't, so instead she found herself explaining what had happened, and what might happen next, and how she felt about it all. And she couldn't do this with Andrew's phone call unless she mentioned the car, and the lawyer's office, and the reason they had been there, and before long she was measuring the whole week, everything she had done and not done and thought about doing. It took several pages, and when she had finished she was tired enough to sleep.

Now the next morning, she retrieved the notebook and brought it downstairs to the kitchen. To her surprise it seemed clear enough, in rereading, that she hadn't been writing to herself, or *for* herself – as she imagined a journal to be. Rather she had clearly been writing to someone else. There was too much tension on each page, too much perspective, and too much need. Too much, in other words, at stake.

It didn't seem right to think the recipient was Doug, who she had spent so much time with recently, and who she was about to see again. He knew too many of these things before, and while she had come to depend on him – and then resent him, and then

depend on him again – he was not a central figure in her life, and his acceptance of her, she felt, had come already, reluctantly, and she wasn't going to lose it. She wondered then if she was writing to Joe – the real Joe, wherever he was (and in her heart she believed he still *was*, somewhere), or a Joe she would never meet again, the Joe that had grown in her imagination over the last week, but that also seemed false. There were many, many things she wanted to say to him, but the first several would be questions, and they wouldn't be written. She would sooner yell them at the sky.

Because of how she started writing, and because of his phone call, and her memories of their last, stilted conversation together, she thought the letter might then be for Andrew. One final stroke, one last swing to sever ties with him forever. But in the end that idea didn't sit well either. As much as anything he was a memory already, often painful and unpleasant, but only as powerful as the space she gave him in her head. And unlike some memories, which felt like they had their own life and will, his was waning. She didn't like the idea of taking help from him, but she realized as she looked back over her words – over everything she'd done in a week – that she could. She could if she wanted. He didn't have that hold on her.

This left only one person, and as soon as she thought it, the answer seemed obvious.

She was writing to her mother.

Rereading the pages a third time in this light gave them new force, and once she was finished Erin sat at the kitchen table with her pen and began to write more. There were things she needed to tell her mom and hadn't – things she'd put off for days, or

weeks, and other things she hadn't even realized she needed to say until she wrote them first, and chose her mother second. Things about her week, about her time with Doug, her knocking on doors and asking questions and getting in the way, and things beyond her week, things she couldn't explain because she had never really tried, not with any of her distant friends, and not with Janet either. How she really felt, for example, about Joe disappearing – or how she felt about herself after Joe disappeared, which she knew was selfish but couldn't help. Or how she felt about Andrew leaving. Or how she felt about her father leaving, then disappearing. For many years his death had been her secret, the one she kept to herself – not just that he was dead, and not even that he was a poor father, absent and unfocused before he died, but rather that he was a poor father, and he had often been away, and he was dead, and yet she still loved him and missed him and wished he were here right now, and Janet's dislike of him had kept her from ever fully sharing this, or expressing it. She had taken Erin's ability to mourn, and Erin wasn't sure she'd ever gotten it back.

She wrote several more pages at the table, scratching out lines and trying them again when she needed. And even though she was telling her mother things she had never said aloud before, and even though it felt good, and relieving, and even though she knew it might hurt her mom and she was doing it anyway, because she had to, she still scratched out a few lines at the end and didn't replace them. She couldn't write everything. Janet was a survivor, and Erin realized as she wrote that she wanted to be more than a survivor – and strangely there was no way, no good way, to say that.

At last the clock moved quickly, and when she finished Erin saw it was time to leave. She left the notebook open in the kitchen and went to find her shoes. In a way she

felt silly – it was possible she'd be home before her mother even saw it; it was possible she'd regret the journal as soon as she walked out the door, decide it was too long or whiny or defensive. But she left it anyway. It was also possible that she never come home at all, that she would leave and go somewhere else, drive to Charlotte and stay there, or Greenville. Maybe she would go to California. Maybe she would wander into the woods and get lost.

Of course she knew, in the end, she was coming back.

Her task when she got to the Revival was to find Doug. The bus near her house was late, and by the time she got downtown the event was already underway. A large stage had been erected on the street in front of the courthouse, and people spread out in front of it on the pavement, spilling over the far sidewalk and into Crinkle Park across the street. There were a fair number of people in Sunday clothes – sport coats and loafers, dresses and hats, despite the cool weather – but there were also many people dressed casually in jeans and sweatshirts, t-shirts and jackets and sunglasses. It was an overwhelmingly white gathering, though Erin saw throughout the crowd small pockets of different colors, and there was a surprising diversity in age – gray-haired men and women next to middle-aged and young couples with children, and not a few babies. A pack of teenagers had climbed onto the base of the Pierce Pinckney statue and sat with their legs dangling; to her surprise a nearby police officer ignored them. It wasn't close to the biggest group of people Erin had ever seen, but it was more than she expected – the collective weight of several large churches together. Names she didn't recognize, except for Calvary.

She realized that she and Doug had not, for some reason, picked a rendezvous spot, so she texted him to say she arrived, then approached the edge of the crowd with caution. For the time being she stayed away from Crinkle Park, which she had always thought looked dirty and rundown, though amid the bright sun and happy congregation she had to admit it didn't look as bad as she remembered. There was a worship band onstage, two men and a woman singing behind a full rock ensemble, and most people had their faces forward – many with their eyes closed and hands raised, singing along. They were all too involved, and too happy, and despite the anticipation Erin had felt all day, she suddenly didn't want to go near them. The worst part was that something in her wanted to join, to feel and think and act as they did, but since she couldn't – or wasn't going to – the next best thing, it seemed to her, was to run the other direction.

She didn't have that option, though, and she knew it, so she stepped into the crowd and began to work her way across, looking left and right for Doug.

When she was halfway through, the music stopped and the same man she had seen preach at Calvary – Dallas-something – bounded onstage. He was the happiest and most energetic of all, and he raised one hand high, his voice booming into his mic.

“God is good!” he said, and many of the people around her responded, clapping or hooting or shouting “Amen!”

“When we come together like this and enter His presence,” he continued. “I think we can feel His power among us, rushing like a mighty wind. Let's continue that now with a little more worship from the folks at Glendon Baptist!”

In the second of silence that followed, as Dallas left the stage, Erin's phone rang – a tinny jingle sounding from her pocket. She almost never had the volume up but for

some reason did now, and the noise caused several heads around her to turn. Without taking it out she scrambled to silence it, then, once she had, looked and saw that she had missed a call from Doug. She started moving again and tried to call him back, but the band struck up once more, and it was now too loud to hear.

At the same moment, however – by some miracle, divine or otherwise – she saw Doug far in front of her, at the other edge of the crowd. He was wearing his same jacket with jeans, though he had pulled the collar up and jammed his hands into its pockets, and he was looking around warily, seeming less comfortable, and less like he belonged, than even she did. The image pulled the tension from her, like a heavy coat sliding off a hanger, and she suddenly wanted to laugh. But she managed to hold it in, however, and keeping her eyes locked on his jacket, she made her way through the rest of the crowd toward him.

CHAPTER 32

For some dumb reason, Doug had been early.

In truth he knew why. Sam had returned late that morning from Davidson, after a week with Emma in their daughter's apartment. It had been longer, Doug thought, than she planned to stay, but even so she had to come back sometime, and while they'd texted generally about the plan, he was still caught off guard at the sight of her Taurus in the driveway. He didn't feel prepared to share the house again. They had never talked about whether one of them was leaving for good. He assumed he would transition, at the very least, into the guest bedroom – it occurred to him too late that he should have changed the sheets – but even that had not been discussed. Their conversation, entirely via text, had not descended below the level of days and weeks – this week or that week, Friday or Saturday. It would be much harder to sustain if they were under the same roof, even for a day or two.

Still, it wasn't like they couldn't manage. Their marriage hadn't ended with screaming fights and thrown dishes, it had ended with cool, dispassionate kindness and a growing sense of irritation – and since they had formally agreed to separate, since they had both spoken the words out loud, together, that annoyance had transformed into a sort of sad, stiff cordiality. They weren't going to burn the house down. Nonetheless Doug had been surprised that morning by how little he could tolerate her, and sharing space with her, like the simple fact of his wife had become a heap of burning coals, threatening to singe him if he got too close. After they exchanged pleasantries in the front hall, she

had left her suitcase in the laundry room and gone upstairs to take a shower, and he had wandered through the lower level restlessly, not even willing to venture up the stairs himself. It was ridiculous, he knew, but it was still how he felt, and when she came back down in sweats, her hair damp, he had gathered his things and told her he was heading to the Revival.

“You’re still going?” she had asked.

“Yes,” he said, and he couldn’t think of anything else to add. “I’m still going.”

He could see she wanted to say something more herself, but she didn’t.

He took his time parking, but Doug could tell as he approached the courthouse that the event hadn’t started yet. People from the different churches were still arriving, pouring down the street from both directions – a large number of faces he didn’t recognize, though some had to be from Calvary and would recognize him. It was going to be a good turnout, he thought. Mitchell Laythrop would be proud.

As much as he wanted to be there, and had chosen to be there, he was terrified of running into people he knew, terrified of the conversations he would then have to have – small, and polite, and trying hard to determine if they had heard about his divorce and his job or not. One conversation might be tolerable, but not two or three or four or however many he would end up having if he didn’t keep his head down – it would be death by a thousand paper cuts, unless someone said something outright and ended him. It didn’t even matter if their conversations were positive, or sympathetic, or unbothered. They would still cut.

He'd received a few messages from members of the Elder Board already, most of them kind and concerned without taking a position, one way or another, about him or his decision or his role in the church, so he knew that word was starting to leak. He had not, however, heard much from the congregation, and he was torn between the idea that it was spreading more slowly than he thought, and that a conversation was ongoing behind his back.

He wished he could find Erin. He stood off to the side, up near the courthouse where he could watch people as they arrived, and looked for her, though he had shown up before 3:00, and he didn't expect her to be precisely on time anyway. Several minutes passed – he saw a few Calvary families, but they didn't see him – and he was just about to call her when Mitchell Laythrop himself walked by, on his way to the stage, and Doug mistakenly caught his eye – too slow to turn away. Laythrop's face showed his own surprise, and he changed course at once to come over.

“Doug!” he said. “What are you doing here? C'mon, walk with me.”

It was exactly what Doug had feared – until Laythrop spoke again and made it worse. “Are you ready?” he said, half-turning as they walked.

“Ready for...?” Doug said, and then he realized what Laythrop meant. He had not thought about the Revival at all during the week – not until Matt Roth's comment the day before – but even when he did, he assumed that word of his troubles at Calvary had spread far enough that Laythrop would know. It hadn't occurred to him, not once, not even when he'd shown up early, that Laythrop would still be expecting him to get onstage.

They walked through a gap in the temporary metal fencing and behind a pair of large amps stage left, stepping carefully through a mass of cords to reach a small open area right beside the stage, back far enough that it was nearly on the steps of the courthouse. There was a card table with coffee and lemonade on it, and another piled with papers, song sheets and sermon notes, plus a laptop next to a large soundboard. An older man stood leaning on the board with a cup of coffee, while his younger partner did something intently on the computer.

Laythrop stopped walking and frowned. For the first time he seemed to notice what Doug was wearing. “Are you serious?” he said uncertainly.

“Oh,” Doug said. “No, sorry.” He wasn’t going to have this conversation now. “I’m, uh, good.” It meant he would have to bail – the one thing he was certain of was not getting on that stage – and it made him feel ten times worse, like a coward wearing the guise of another coward. But he also had to remember Erin, and everything else he needed to do. Matt Roth was around somewhere. “I should go finish getting ready,” he told Laythrop.

“Alright,” Laythrop said, though he looked uneasy as he walked away, back to whatever he’d been meaning to do before.

Doug turned to leave the backstage area and ran almost straight into Dallas. The younger man stopped short, and his face also fell into surprise.

“Doug?” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh,” Doug said. “Hi. I’m just here to... watch.”

“Yes, but what are you doing *here*?”

“Well, I was talking to Mitchell and we, uh, walked back together.”

“Okay,” Dallas said slowly.

He had gotten a haircut, Doug noticed – short on the sides, long and messy on top. If he had asked, which he certainly had not, Doug would have said that it made him look younger than he already did, if that was possible. Even Matt Roth had recently buzzed his head and grown a five o’clock shadow.

“You did tell Mitchell,” Dallas added. “Didn’t you?”

“I...” Doug began. Any lie would be discovered; there seemed little point to it.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Goodness, Doug. I just assumed you had. I didn’t think it was my place...”

“Right,” Doug said. “Funny thing –”

“You’re not still planning to present, are you?”

“What? No, no, you don’t have to worry about that.”

The first worship band was praying in a circle by the stage, ten feet away. They broke apart and headed for their instruments – rattling the temporary staircase on their way up and out. Dallas looked at his phone.

“Do you need me to tell him?”

“You have better things to worry about,” Doug said. “Honestly, so do I.”

“Look –”

Doug reached out and grabbed the young pastor’s shoulder. Affectionately, he hoped. “Dallas,” he said, and he tried to smile. “Good luck. I’ll see you.”

As the music started he walked away, back out into the crowd to look for Erin.

“Finally,” she said when they met, squeezing her phone back into her pocket. “I don’t like being here alone.”

“Me neither,” Doug said. “When did you get here?”

“Just a little bit ago.”

They stood at the margins of the crowd, almost in line with the speakers to the left, about halfway back, while the worship band – a different band than had started the show – played another song, slower and more melodic. At one point the volume lowered enough for a pair of readers on the side to begin a series of dramatic Bible recitations.

“So this is it?” Erin said.

“This is it.”

She raised onto her toes for a better look around. “*Churches next*,” she said.

“What are we even looking for?”

Doug craned his neck to look as well, searching the crowd for inspiration. The readers disappeared and a gospel choir filed onstage to join the band. The Revival was largely a gathering of families, supervised by police in the back, American flags on the courthouse behind them, and now that they were here it was hard to imagine anything bad happening. Or anything happening at all.

“I honestly don’t know,” he said.

They waited as the choir settled onstage, then broke suddenly into a rendition of “When I Rose This Morning.”

Erin sighed. “I bet that guy does. Matt-whatever. Have you seen him?”

“Not yet,” Doug said.

“Is supposed to preach or something?”

“No, he was making a video. A short film, I think.”

Doug stopped. It really hadn't occurred to him until he said it, though Erin went there at once.

“A video?” she said, more loudly than before, ignoring the stare of a nearby woman. She stopped scanning the crowd and turned to him. “Was yesterday about his movie then?”

“I don't know,” Doug said. “But it does kind of make sense. It certainly seemed like he was...under duress. I didn't tell you?”

“No...” She paused. “When's this video supposed to play?”

The choir was ramping into the heart of the song. Doug studied the stage and tried quickly to reverse-engineer the schedule in his head. When he had been a part of the planning it felt like the event might last forever, but today they were moving through each piece with alacrity. “I think Cameron Morrow is about to speak,” he said. “Then there's the dance... Someone has to do my introduction, probably Dallas. And then I guess it would be time.” He looked at his phone. “I'd say twenty or thirty minutes.”

“That's not too long,” Erin said.

“No, I guess not.” Doug knew where they had to look first, though it didn't thrill him. “I'm hoping I know where to find him, though.”

“Where?”

“Backstage. I didn't see him earlier, but now... At the very least it's the first place to look.”

He turned to start walking, but Erin hesitated.

“Are they just going to let us back there?”

He shrugged. “I think so,” he said. “What are they going to do?”

CHAPTER 33

Ben was awoken that morning by the chain rattling outside his door. Before he could even sit up Natty had entered the room and clomped over by his head, peering down. The mattress had deflated again, and Ben was sinking inward toward the floor. Sunlight streamed in through the slots in the window; the closet door was shut.

“Get up,” Natty said. “We’re going outside.”

It took Ben a moment to process the instruction, but once he did he sat bolt upright, throwing off his blanket and scrambling to get free of the bed. He stood and looked around. His pants were draped on the desk chair.

“Why?” he said. “Where are we going?”

Natty rolled his eyes. “Outside. I just told you.”

“Yes, but what for?”

He scowled. “Do you need a reason? Put your fucking pants on and let’s go.” He was wearing the same jeans he’d worn the last two days, now with a plain white t-shirt, stained yellow at the collar. The gun was more easily visible on his belt. He crossed his arms.

Ben had been stepping into his pants, but he paused before buttoning them.

“We’re going outside for no reason?”

“I didn’t say that,” Natty said. “I just... I mean, Jesus, you’ve been inside this room for three days. You don’t want a breath of fresh air or something?”

Ben continued to stand, holding up his pants by their waistband. He looked carefully at Natty.

“What’s supposed to be happening today?”

“Huh?” Natty said.

“Yesterday you guys were talking about something. About waiting for something to happen today. What is it?”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with you.” Natty moved closer to the door and waved his hand. “Now let’s go, chop chop.”

Ben thought for a moment longer. At last he finished buttoning his pants, but instead of following Natty to the door, he grabbed the wooden chair and sat. “I think I’d rather stay,” he said.

Natty stared at him. He had one hand on the doorknob.

“Are you being serious right now?”

“I’m fine here,” Ben said.

The bigger man appeared to struggle with his words. “You know,” he said at last. “I could just drag you out of here...”

Ben sighed. “I know.”

“Okay,” Natty said. “Okay. Fine. But see if I ever do anything nice for you again.”

He stepped out of the room and slammed the door so hard the whole house shook.

As soon as he left Ben went back into the closet. Overnight he had made the hole larger, and even now he could pick at pieces of drywall on the edges without making too

much noise. He had run into a stud on one side, and there were a few wires dangling near the bottom edge, but otherwise he'd succeeded in widening the hole until it was approximately three and a half or four feet around – big enough, he thought, to fit a person through, if they maneuvered and stepped carefully. The interior of the wall wasn't deep, and he could reach easily through the empty space to the drywall of the next room. He was so close, he thought. More than halfway there.

The trick would be finding the right moment to break through the wall and into the other room, a punch that could make enough noise to draw attention. Ben didn't think he could wait until bedtime; he had to keep flexing his fingers to keep himself from just doing it. Through the half-inch of drywall he could hear the stranger moving and pacing as well, and once or twice he heard tapping, but now that he had opened the wall he didn't want to come up with another way to talk – he didn't want to do anything until they met, face to face. Despite what he'd said to Natty, the claustrophobia of the room was getting to him. He wanted desperately to see another person, someone who wasn't Natty or Clayton or Gage – someone like him. He wanted to make a plan and get out.

Sometime in the early afternoon, after Ben had taken a break from the closet to stand and stare out the window, he heard voices downstairs – voices that were loud enough, in other words, to be heard from downstairs. Voices in an argument. He couldn't make out exactly what was being said, but he heard enough to know that it was three or four men and someone, at least, was angry. There was a further burst of yelling, followed by a short lull of quiet, and at last another shout – then the house shook as a door was slammed, and possibly banged open and slammed again, and Ben saw from the window several men spill out onto the grass in front of the house. A green truck had been parked

earlier on the lawn, and one of the men stalked over to it and got in. Ben didn't recognize him, though as the others stepped away from the house, and Ben craned to see through the boards across the window, he recognized Natty, and Custer Clayton, and to his surprise Thomas Gage. Clayton seemed as unperturbed as ever, his hands clasped behind his back, and Natty stood a few paces off from him – it was Gage who strode out the farthest, pointing his finger at the man and saying something loudly, his movements jerky and awkward.

He then turned and said something else to Clayton, speaking in the same tone – through the window, Ben couldn't hear what.

The driver waved his hand dismissively out the truck window, then started the engine and pulled around. The others stood and watched him drive away down the gravel road, and as they did it suddenly occurred to Ben what he was seeing. Natty and Clayton and Gage – all three men outside. Not in the house. Ben stepped away from the window and listened; he had no way of knowing if there was anyone else inside, but so far he heard nothing. It was a risk he needed to take; he couldn't wait any longer.

Before the men could come back in, Ben hurried into the closet, took a deep breath, and struck the wall. His fist cut through it like paper, punching a jagged hole the size of a melon. When he pulled his hand away he saw empty space. The other room.

After three or four seconds, a face appeared – two eyes looking alarmed. One of them was yellowed and slightly swollen, a black eye with several days to heal. Ben stepped back so he could be seen.

“We only have a second,” he said. “Help me make this thing bigger.”

The eyes were narrow and distrustful, and for a moment they did nothing. At last they nodded and disappeared.

“Okay.” It was a man’s voice behind the wall. A young man.

“I’m Ben,” Ben said.

A pair of hands struck at the hole, breaking off another piece.

“I’m Joe,” the stranger said.

“Why are you here?” Ben said. “Who are these people?”

He could see Joe’s face more clearly now – he had messy blond hair and a boyish look, though he was also unshaven, and his face was clenched in a tight, wearied expression.

“It’s a long story,” he said. “I don’t even really know.”

Ben almost cried. It was such a strange thing, terrible and relieving, to meet someone else like him. Someone just as lost. Without another word he moved forward again, and together they worked quickly to widen the hole in the wall between them.

CHAPTER 34

There were two middle-aged men standing by the gap in the temporary fence, running out beside the stage, but Erin and Doug snuck down further to the corner and stepped through a different gap – one that Erin guessed was not supposed to be there – then walked behind the speakers to the open, backstage area. The choir had just finished and was in the process of leaving the stage, so the space was crowded with men and women in sweeping robes, plus some of the previous band members and several random people standing around, talking on phones or staring intently at papers. A group of teen and pre-teen girls in tights hovered by the stairs near the stage, looking nervous. No one paid Doug or Erin any attention at all.

Though it had been his idea, Doug at first did nothing, stopping just inside the space to let the choir flow past him, looking through the crowd and the tables and the soundboard with a tense, tight expression. She didn't know what his problem was; he'd been correct that security was lax, and it wasn't immediately apparent who, if anyone, was in charge. To the side she could see a black man with graying hair and a tan suit standing comfortably onstage, gesticulating with his arms as he preached. She didn't see Matt Roth anywhere.

"Excuse me," she said to the nearest person, a young man in flannel and a knit cap, whom she thought had been one of the bassists from earlier. "Have you seen Matt Roth?"

"Nope," he said. "I haven't."

She turned to a middle-aged woman by the coffee table.

“Have you seen Matt Roth?”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “I don’t know who that is.”

She began to pass slowly through the space, stopping to ask whomever she could about Roth. *Is he here? Have you seen him?* Doug followed behind her listening carefully, though Erin noticed that he didn’t ask anyone himself.

She had asked eight or nine people without success when Doug suddenly grabbed her arm, turning them both around so their backs were to the stage.

“What’s wrong?” she said. “What are you doing?”

“*Dallas*,” he said quietly. She peeked over her shoulder and saw the young pastor walking into the square, closer to the stage where the dance troupe was waiting.

“Sorry,” he added. “I just don’t feel like talking to him.”

Now they were facing another edge of portable metal fencing, and standing right in front of them, six or seven feet away, was a pretty young woman about Erin’s age, leaning carefully on the railing with her eyes on her phone.

“Hey,” Erin said quietly. “Do you know if Matt Roth is around?”

The girl looked up from her phone. “Yeah,” she said. “He’s right there.”

She pointed to her right, and they looked up to see Matt Roth sitting by himself on the steps of the courthouse, his folded hands draped on his knees. Erin forgot about Dallas and headed toward him; she felt Doug’s presence following quickly behind.

When they reached the steps Roth looked up, and at the sight of them he rose to his feet, though like he had in the office he didn’t run, but stood there frozen, looking glum and defeated.

Erin remembered what Doug had said about the schedule. She didn't feel like they had much time.

"What are you doing with the video?" she said, as soon as they were close enough to speak.

"What?"

"What's the deal with your video? What'd you do?"

Any resistance left in him seemed to visibly crumble at the question. He was wearing the same fluffy denim jacket as the day before, and his shoulders in it sagged. He shook his head.

"I thought you said you weren't involved," he said. "But goddamnit, here you are again."

"Fine," Erin said. "We're involved. What's going on?"

"You don't get it," he said. "They made me. I'm barely a part of this."

"Who made you? White Light?"

"Good grief," he said. "Not in front of everyone. Come on."

They walked up the rest of the courthouse steps and around the corner. Matt sheltered against the side of the building, and by unspoken agreement Erin and Doug stood on either shoulder, like they were hemming him in.

"So," Doug said, repeating Erin's question. "White Light? That's who you mean?"

"I don't know... I mean yeah, sure."

"What does this have to do with the video?" Erin asked.

“The thing you need to understand,” Roth said. “Is that I was in college. I wasn’t that serious about my faith yet.”

“Matt,” Doug said. “You were in college like five years ago. What in the world are you talking about?”

“I was in a fraternity,” he said. “I thought it was harmless fun, I really did. I mean, the same thing had basically happened to me. But this time it, uh, got out of hand.”

“What did you do?”

Roth pressed on. “When I started Ascent I thought it was behind me,” he said. “I thought I’d been forgiven, you know? But somehow they found out. If I don’t do this they’re going to...release it. They’ll tell everyone.”

“Do what?” Erin said.

“They said they don’t even really want me. They said they didn’t care, they wanted a bigger church. And a bigger person. Someone more established.”

“Wait,” Doug said, alarmed. “Not me, right?”

Matt scowled. “No, not you. Glendon Baptist. Mitchell Laythrop. I told them he’d always seemed like a decent guy to me, but they said it didn’t matter. They said if there wasn’t anything to find, they would just make something up. They said I needed to remember that. And I don’t know... But I think that’s what they did. It isn’t good.”

“What you’re saying,” Erin said. “Is that White Light wanted to blackmail Mitchell Laythrop, so they made up something terrible to humiliate him? And now you’re going to help them spread it?”

“Were you listening? It’s much more complicated than that.” Roth let out a breath. “And it would do more than just humiliate,” he said quietly. “The pictures are...convincing. If they hadn’t said what they said, I’d believe them.”

“Matt,” Doug said. “This is easy to stop. Just don’t play the video. Whatever it is, just don’t play it.”

Matt shook his head. “I already passed it on.” He didn’t meet either of their gazes, but looked out beyond them into the late afternoon sun. “It’s out of my hands, it’s going to play.” He paused. “At the end of the day this is for my church. We’re going to do a lot of good.”

Erin glanced at Doug. There was an expression on his face that she’d never seen before.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” he said.

Roth shrugged and looked at the ground.

“Why are you even here?” Erin said. “If you already passed it on.”

The young pastor straightened and stuck his hands in his pockets, then finally stepped forward and forced them apart. He kept his eyes down. “Good point,” he said, and without looking up he walked away.

They hurried back around the courthouse to see that the pre-teen dance was underway. The waiting area itself wasn’t quite as crowded as before, and Erin immediately saw Dallas standing by the stairs leading onto the stage, one foot resting on the bottom step. He was talking to a tall, white-haired man in a suit beside him.

“When those girls finish,” Doug said. “Someone’s getting on stage, and that video is playing.”

It was like his words had made it happen. No sooner did he say them than the accompanying music faded out, and the dancers moved to leave the stage.

“Oh jeez,” he said. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

It was time for a plan. Erin didn’t have one yet, but she at least knew it was time. Time to act. Time to break something if she had to. She put one hand on Doug’s back and pushed him forward, toward Dallas and the stairs leading onto the stage.

“You need to stall,” she said. “I can stop the video. I’ll figure it out.”

CHAPTER 35

Doug didn't know what to do.

"*Stall*," Erin said again, and she shooed him toward the stage.

He walked forward dimly, and as he did he saw Dallas and Laythrop standing by the stairs, smiling at the dance troupe while they filed past. Laythrop had a mic-pack on his belt, and he paused to adjust the cord. Dallas held a separate microphone in his hand.

Doug walked up to them. When Dallas saw him, his face flushed.

"What are you doing back here?" There was a small note of panic in his voice.

Laythrop looked up. "Doug?" He raised his brow and glanced at Dallas. "But I thought... I'm sorry gentlemen, I'm a little confused. Dallas told me that you had to leave."

"Not quite," Doug said. He looked at Dallas. There was no other choice, really. Not unless he wanted to start a fire or something. "I'm sorry," he said. He reached out and snatched the microphone from Dallas's hand, and before Dallas could respond, before it seemed he even registered what had happened, Doug stepped past him and jogged onto the stage.

He strode all the way to the middle and stopped, looking out at the still full crowd, extended past the entrance into Crinkle Park. A few children on the Pinckney statue were eye level with him over the heads of the rest. He checked to see if the microphone was on, then raised it to his mouth.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “How’re you all doing today?”

There was some sporadic clapping across the street, and one person whistled, but most waited silently for him to continue. Doug winced. Of course he hadn’t prepared, but that didn’t explain why he’d chosen to start like an amateur DJ.

“I wanted to, uh, thank everyone again for coming out today. I have the...pleasure of introducing our final pastor, Mitchell Laythrop of Glendon Baptist Church.”

If they’d been fast enough to cut his mic before he started talking, Doug was sure they would have, but now that he was going he felt okay. He was strangely confident that Dallas didn’t have the guts to pull him offstage in the middle of a sentence. It would look too bad.

He peeked left and saw the upper bodies of several people staring at him from the bottom of the stairs, including Dallas himself, who was watching with one eye while simultaneously leaning over and whispering in Laythrop’s ear. Doug imagined him trying to tell Laythrop the whole story right now, in a single breathless burst, when of course he didn’t have the first clue what the whole story was anyway, and it struck Doug as funny. So funny he had to bite back a laugh – and then it came out anyway, one soft chuckle into the mic.

Hearing his own laugh released something in his chest, and Doug relaxed.

“Before I do that, however,” he told the crowd. “I’d like to say a few words. For those that don’t know, my name is Doug Townsend. I’m the founding pastor of Calvary Bible Church, where I’ve served for twenty-two years. And I think it’s fair to say for most of my working life I’ve been a disappointment.”

He brought his other hand to the mic and studied the tops of the trees in the park.

“I mean, there were seasons where the church was doing really well, and seasons where it wasn’t, but the one consistent thing for me was that I felt like a failure, pretty much the whole time. When things were going great I always felt a pressure to do more, to do better than I was, so I guess by definition that meant I was always disappointing, and when things were *not* going great I felt like I was failing because of all the evidence around me that said I was failing. So it’s been pretty constant, I suppose. At a certain point I just tried to get used to it. I didn’t think a Christian was supposed to feel this way, and certainly not a Christian *leader* – a shepherd, I mean, a guide – but that was just another way I was failing.”

Doug paused. Most of the faces before him looked baffled. Some were clearly concerned. The children in the far back of the crowd didn’t seem to be paying attention at all. He risked a peek to his left and saw that more heads had appeared, though Dallas and Laythrop remained front and center, and it seemed to be working – Dallas was not, as far as Doug could see, yelling at anyone to play the video. At the same time Doug became aware of some movement on the edge of the crowd, more than halfway back, and he noticed three police officers and a fourth man in dress clothes making their way forward, toward the backstage area. If there had been only one he wouldn’t have noticed, but the row of them together grabbed his eye.

He sighed and kept talking. Maybe Dallas had the guts after all. It was hard to say.

“It would be nice if there was a point to this – if I had some lesson in mind – but I don’t. I just wanted to tell you how I feel. If you haven’t heard already, those of you who care will hear soon enough that I’m getting a divorce, and I’ll be stepping down from my

position at Calvary soon. In a crowd like this I'm sure there are many people who've experienced the same – the, uh, divorce, I mean – but it's still a difficult situation for anyone, and an especially awkward thing for a person in my position. I've had to consider a few things I would rather not consider. In the future there might be people who say I've betrayed you, or that I've betrayed God, and the funny thing is I don't necessarily think they're wrong. But there might also be people who say I've walked away from God completely, and in that case they *are* wrong. I don't think God has changed; I'm not claiming my actions say anything new about Him at all. Why would they?"

The police officers had disappeared around the side of the stage. Doug wondered when they were going to drag him off. He peeked left again and saw that even Dallas had disappeared.

"But I guess what I'm realizing," he continued. "Why I said what I said – Is that it might not say anything new about me either. I thought I had become a worse person as I got older, but maybe I haven't. Maybe I've always been the same kind of a person. And this might sound like bad news, but I don't know – at least it would mean I'm the kind of person God already knew about."

Doug became aware of a commotion off the stage to his left. He saw several heads hurry past, and for the first time he heard shouting.

"On second thought," he said quickly. "I do have one takeaway: Your leaders aren't going to save you; we're just going to let you down. Trust in God, don't trust in us, thank you."

With that he hurried off stage to see what the noise was about.

CHAPTER 36

“How long have you been here?” Ben asked quietly. At least one of the men had come back inside the house and was moving around downstairs. They had succeeded in making the hole on Joe’s side of the room almost as wide as Ben’s – most of the excess drywall falling into the space between the two walls – though unlike Ben’s side, which was easily hidden in a closet, Joe’s opened into the room itself and was much more difficult to cover. For the time being he had leaned his mattress over it – a real mattress, though without a frame – and was standing next to it whispering through the crack. If anyone came in, it wouldn’t do much to hide the portal between the rooms. They were going to need a plan, and soon.

“I’m not sure,” Joe said. “Over a week, maybe. Maybe forever. I don’t really remember when I wasn’t here.”

“We’re going to get out,” Ben said. “We’re going to work together, and we’re going to get out. We’re going to get away from these assholes.”

“Sure.”

Ben wished his newfound partner could have shown a little more confidence, now that he had literally broken through a wall to find him, but he didn’t. In a way it worked to trick Ben into growing more confident himself – he had no choice, he felt, but to fill the void.

“So you’ve met Natty?” Ben asked. “The guy with the gun? And who else?”

“The older man. The leader.”

“Have you met the lawyer, Gage?”

“I don’t remember any lawyer. There was another guy, though, kind of like Natty. He’s been around. That’s all I remember.”

“I just saw someone leave,” Ben said. “Maybe it was him.”

“I hope so,” Joe said.

Ben thought quickly. They were outnumbered still, but they at least had the element of surprise. Maybe the two of them would be strong enough to pull the boards off a window, though even then they would be stuck on the second story of the house. Maybe they could hide together in his room, or one of them could create a distraction and pretend to be sick, or injured. Maybe they could just knock the door off the chain and run for it. Though none of these plans would do anything about Natty, or his gun.

“Any ideas?” Ben asked.

“I’m thinking,” Joe said, which Ben at least found encouraging. “Nothing so far.”

Before Ben could answer they heard the sound of a door opening somewhere in the house, and felt the shudder in their feet. It sounded again like extra voices had just come in.

“Shit,” Ben said. “Shit, shit.” He left the closet and moved over to the window. There was a different car in front of the house, parked in nearly the same spot as the truck from earlier. Ben hurried back to the closet.

“Someone’s here,” he said.

“Shut up,” Joe hissed. “Someone’s coming.”

He listened. The noises mingled together, but it did indeed sound like there were footsteps approaching on the stairs. They had no time, and no plan.

“Just... wait here,” Ben said. “I’ll get him to leave.”

“If anyone comes into my room, we’re screwed.”

“Wait here,” Ben said again.

He heard the sound of the chain being drawn on his door, and he rushed out of the closet just before it opened, almost reaching the middle of the room. Natty stepped through the door, looked up, and stopped – caught, perhaps, by how oddly Ben was standing, near the window but not close enough to be looking out, or how sweaty he was, or how guilty he looked. Ben saw his eyes sweep the room, though his head didn’t move. He frowned.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Nothing,” Ben said. He tried to shrug, like he didn’t even know why Natty would ask, but he wasn’t sure he succeeded.

“Well you’re being too loud about it,” Natty said. “Why’re you stomping around the room so much? You’re as bad as – I mean, look, you’re pretty bad.”

Ben realized, with a further shot of adrenaline, that the closet door was partially open, several inches of invitation for Natty to peer through, though it didn’t seem like he had noticed yet. The larger man took another step into the room and closed the door behind him.

“Anyway, keep it down. You need to be quiet up here right now.”

“I will, sorry. I was just, uh, pacing.”

Natty stepped further forward, still looking carefully at Ben. He drew level with the closet door on his left, and his eyes passed over Ben’s shoulder and behind him.

“Were you messing with the window?” he asked suddenly.

“What?” Ben said. “No, I’m not. I wasn’t.”

Natty stepped even closer to Ben and the window, raising a finger. He was past the closet door now.

“If I come back,” he said “And find –” but his words were cut off mid-thought. From out of the closet Joe emerged – having climbed, evidently, through the hole in the wall – and stepped forward, wrapping his arm around Natty’s neck. He had the same tight, dead-eyed expression as before, and he bent Natty backward so far the other man’s feet almost left the ground, squeezing – clearly – as hard as he could. It turned out Joe was a large guy himself, broad-shouldered and tall.

Natty’s eyes went wide and he flailed at the arm around his neck, trying to find leverage or purchase or balance. For a second Ben was too shocked to do anything himself, but just as Natty got his feet under him Ben stepped forward and kicked him in the crotch, and the larger man went down to one knee, his face crimson, Joe still wrapped determinedly around his throat. Ben watched as the color in his forehead deepened, so dark it was nearly purple, and he kept trying to make noise but couldn’t, tried to stand but failed, his limbs getting heavier and slower until at last his eyes rolled back in his head and he went limp. Joe lowered him gently to the ground, and for a moment they listened, expecting more footfalls on the stairs. There were none.

“Sorry,” Joe said. “But I didn’t think you were gonna get him to leave.”

“It’s okay.”

“We have to do something,” he added, staring at the body by his feet. “Now.”

Ben crouched and rummaged quickly through his captor’s pockets – finding a pocket knife, a lighter, two individual cigarettes, and two separate sets of car keys, all of

which he put into his own pockets, even the cigarettes. Joe knelt and took the gun off Natty's belt.

"Want me to hold that?" Ben asked.

"No," Joe said. "It's fine." He must have seen something in Ben's face, because he added: "I'm not going to use it. I just don't want them to have it either."

They crept to the door and opened it an inch. There were voices coming from somewhere downstairs. Ben realized that he didn't know the layout of the house. To their horror Natty stirred behind them, slowly regaining consciousness.

"We have to go," Joe whispered.

"I know," Ben said. "I know." He hesitated. "We just need a distraction or something."

"Let me see the lighter," Joe said. When Ben gave it he stepped back into the room, over Natty, and crouched by the curtains at the window. A second later he returned, white smoke already wafting from them. "I've been here too long," he said, when he saw Ben staring. "Way too long."

Ben had nothing else to add. "Okay," he said. "Let's go, then. Into the...uh, the bathroom."

They left Ben's room and crossed the upstairs landing into the bathroom, leaving the door cracked far enough to see out. The next twenty seconds were agonizing – Ben growing more and more convinced that the curtains had gone out, or Natty had regained enough consciousness to put them out, but at last the smoke starting wafting out of the room and down the stairs. Moments later they heard a shout, an inarticulate squawk,

followed by Clayton's voice, unmistakable, more urgent than Ben had ever heard him:
"Fuck!"

A set of footsteps pounded up the stairs and passed into Ben's room, and the moment they did Ben burst from the bathroom behind them and ran down the stairs, Joe following after him. Ben heard more shouts, but he didn't know if they were from the fire, or from being seen, and he didn't stop either way, coming out of the stairs and into the kitchen, yellow tile and wood cabinets, dishes in the sink, turning left and bursting through the nearest door, onto the back porch, into the fresh air, outside and free, on the grass and still free and running.

CHAPTER 37

Erin had watched as Doug grabbed the microphone and bounded onstage.

She thought he was just going to talk to Dallas.

What he did instead was, at the very least, more distracting, and when he started speaking several other people wandered over to watch. Dallas whispered frantically in the white-haired man's ear, and with a free arm waved for others to join them at the stairs. Erin hung back as more people came near, a cluster growing larger once they heard what Doug was saying, and how he was saying it.

As more people shifted Erin noticed another person who had stayed back, paying no attention to the onstage disruption – a short, compact man with a dark wavy hair and a thick beard, huddled over a computer propped beside the soundboard, several cords streaming from it. No one else was around him. Erin pushed past two older women and stepped closer, close enough to see a flash drive sticking from the laptop's side port. She had no way of knowing if it was Roth's same drive, but there was no other obvious thing to do – and no other place from which to play a video.

If she were right, this man was going to play it whether Doug was in the middle of speaking or not.

Erin headed straight toward him. When she got within a few steps the man looked up, and at the same moment she scuffed her toe on the ground and threw herself forward, both hands connecting with the laptop. It clattered off the table, ripping from its cords, and landed hard on the pavement.

The man took one step back. For a moment he was too surprised to speak.

“What the fuck...” he said at last. The language surprised her. “What did you do?”

Erin’s momentum had carried her past him, and she was nearest to the laptop where it fell. She bent to pick it up. “I’m so sorry,” she said breathlessly. “I tripped, I didn’t know...” She trailed off as she realized the computer was, unbelievably, still functioning. The front edges were visibly scuffed, but it was otherwise intact, and the picture on the screen was clear. There was an open window inside a window, some sort of media player. “Oh,” she said. “Damn.” Before the man could do anything she raised the laptop over her head and brought it down to the ground with all her strength. This time it broke apart on impact. The keyboard flew off; the screen cracked and went dark.

The man put both his hands on his head. Several people turned from the stage to stare at them.

“Jesus Christ,” he said. “What the... Lady, that’s over the line.”

“Sorry,” Erin said. “I couldn’t let you play that video.”

Something shifted in his eyes. “Alright then,” he said.

Before she could react he shot out a hand and grabbed her – roughly – by the arm, then began at once to drag her away. She hit at him, and even managed one, solid kick to his legs, but despite not being much taller, he was significantly stronger and pulled her along with ease. She started to yell.

One of the men who had turned at the commotion came over, and the bearded man shoved him roughly away and tried to speed up. A second person stood in his way and the man, for a moment, let go of Erin to strike out, but she hadn’t been expecting it

and fell to one knee on the pavement. Before she could get her balance he had grabbed her again, and though she was hitting and scratching and yelling she couldn't get free, and she couldn't find anything else to hold onto, and she couldn't see with her head twisting around and her hair in her eyes, and she couldn't hear from all the shouting – some of it hers. She didn't see how this was going to end well, not for anyone.

Someone behind her clipped her heels and she fell, and for a moment she was dragged on the ground. A figure moved past her, then another, then another, and at last the hand that held her let go. She looked up to see her captor being wrestled to the ground by three police officers – one on his legs, two on his back. A fourth man came jogging up – a plain-clothes detective, by his suit pants and the gun on his belt. He watched as the officers fought, and the bearded man finally stopped struggling and lay still.

“I'll be damned,” he told one of the uniformed cops. “You were right. It's him.”

The detective helped her up and led her over to the courthouse steps.

“Ma'am, my name is Sergeant Green,” he said. “I'm with the Ransom Police Department. Do you need a second? Can you tell me what happened?”

“I broke his computer,” Erin said. She was still trying to catch her breath, and in the moment this seemed like the simplest story. Her hands were shaking. “He, uh, got mad.”

“Have you ever met that man before? Do you know him?”

She shook her head. “No... I don't – Who is he?”

The detective looked back at the bearded man, still on the ground with his hands cuffed behind him. “His name is Dwight Allen,” Green said. “We've been looking for

him for several days. It was an anonymous tip, actually, that brought us here this afternoon. Just for him.”

“What for?”

“He’s wanted in connection to a few missing persons cases.” Green had been looking back at Dwight, but Erin saw him glance carefully over. “One death.”

A few missing persons. She massaged her arm, where she could feel a bruise already forming. *One death.*

Doug came into view, fighting his way through the backstage crowd – which had swelled considerably, people talking loudly and taking pictures and craning for a better look. Once he saw them he ran over, ignoring a uniformed cop who yelled at him.

“Erin,” he said. “Are you okay? What happened?”

She stood up and, on instinct, hugged him. “I’m fine,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

After a second they broke apart, and she gestured at the detective. “This is, uh, Sergeant Green.”

“Oh,” Doug said. “Hi.”

“Reverend.” Green nodded. “Weird sermon, if you don’t mind me saying.”

CHAPTER 38

A cool breeze on their faces.

They were behind the house, facing an empty field, and Ben remembered the neighbor he had seen from his window.

“This way,” he said to Joe.

They ran together around the side of the house and onto the front gravel. Smoke was pouring out a second story window – his window. Ben thought he saw flames on the roof, though it was tricky in the late afternoon sun. Regardless the house was old, and much of it was wood, and it was starting to burn quickly now.

Ben was running down the driveway to the road, the house in the distance maybe half a mile, maybe more, when he skidded to a stop. There were two sets of keys rattling in his pocket. A car was parked on the lawn. A plain black Honda with dark windows – so dark they were funhouse mirrors.

“You don’t think...” he said aloud.

“What?” Joe said. “C’mon, let’s go.”

Ben pulled out the first set and pressed the remote, but nothing happened. He tried the second, and the car on the grass beeped to life. Its headlights flashed.

“Unbelievable,” he said.

They rushed over to the Honda and opened its doors, Ben on the driver’s side with the keys.

“Hang on,” he said, just before they got in. “Give me that gun.”

Joe had been carrying it as they ran, but he passed it over the car, and Ben turned and threw it as far as he could into the trees on the opposite end of the driveway. It hit something and went off, a sharp crack echoing around them.

“Yikes,” he said. “Okay, let’s go.”

A minute later they were down the road, breathing like they were still running. Ben wasn’t going to stop until they were far away – much farther than they were. Joe twisted in the seat and watched as the house, now streaming thick, black smoke, disappeared out of sight.

“I thought,” he said. “Maybe I was gonna die there.”

“You didn’t,” Ben told him. “Neither did I.”

Joe straightened in his chair, and for the first time seemed to look around himself in the car.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “Wait.”

“What? What’s the matter?”

He opened the glove compartment and began to rifle through its contents, tossing papers and napkins and straws onto the floor. At last he found what he was looking for.

The registration.

“I know this car,” he said quietly.

Joe put his head down and started to cry.

CHAPTER 39

“If you’re going to do this much longer,” Gage had told them once. “Let me give you a piece of free advice.”

He had often spoke like this, like they weren’t very smart. Like he was having a quiet joke at their expense. It was irritating – it really pissed them off, if they thought about it – but the money was too good, and not something they could find elsewhere, not on any job board, and they made up for it with the way they spoke about him behind his back – about his age, and his prissiness, and the small, roundness of his head.

They never came into his office during business hours, but when he wanted to talk, face to face, they came in after dark and sat across from him and listened – which is what they were doing when he offered his advice. There were three cups of tea on his desk. He had asked them if they wanted tea and they’d both said no, but he brought three cups anyway. Through the steam from his own he had studied them, like he knew what they were thinking, what they said about him while they drove away, and he was choosing, with great effort, to look past it and press on. An air of superiority, they thought, that didn’t help.

“Remember this,” he had said. “If nothing else: Always have a fall guy.”

He had blown on his tea, then put it down without taking a sip.

“Always,” he repeated carefully. “Have a fall guy. Because sooner or later everything falls, let me tell you. And when it does you don’t want it to fall on you.”

It was an idea, they thought later. Despite the old man, it was an idea.

When they were kids, they had always been the twins. The twins and Joe. Not the triplets, not the Three Amigos, not the Three Musketeers, not even three brothers, but just the twins. And Joe if he were around. He wasn't always around, they made sure of that. In grade school he had been smaller than them, and easy to leave behind – which didn't make any sense, they thought, weren't they triplets? Didn't they have, like, the same genes? – and even when his growth spurt came later, when he grew as tall and sturdy as they were, he never acted like it. Had never learned to act like it.

He was too goddamn needy, they thought. In the right setting he could be outgoing and playful and fun, and to a lot of people he would've seemed confident, but they had lived with him and knew. When he told a joke he didn't expect anyone to laugh, but looked around carefully to see if they would, like every smile, every small twitter was important to him. You can't relax when he's around, they told themselves. At least they couldn't relax. And wasn't it okay to spend time without him? Weren't they allowed to *not* be best friends? Did they not, as human beings, have that right?

Sometimes as kids, even when he told a funny joke they didn't laugh, just to prove a point.

Their father was a math professor, though only Reuben followed closely in his footsteps – not math, exactly, but computer science. Dan took the opposite route and studied art, scraping by with a senior project that covered household objects in fake blood and made some point about industry and commodification and something else he had

since forgotten. By the time they graduated they had both come, in their own ways, to regret their decisions – Reuben because he hated programming, it turned out, and there were no jobs he wanted, jobs he could stand to do in an office for forty or fifty hours a week without wanting to slit his own wrists, and Dan because there were no jobs period, and certainly not that gave him the freedom he had found in art – or *fucking* art, as he started to call it. Meanwhile their friend Smash was a happy junior accountant making fifty grand a year, and for some reason had talked his boss into working two days a week from home (“I told them my dad was sick,” he said. “So if anyone calls, that’s who you are.”). They learned, from their mother, that Joe had started working at a coffee shop, but they didn’t see him much anymore. He had gotten quieter, they noticed, the last time they talked to him, at graduation.

A few months after graduation they were at a campus bar when they ran into an old professor – an art historian and aging hippie from England, a man who had, despite thirty years in South Carolina, retained his accent, and his goatee and his long gray hair. A man who asked them slyly, after a few drinks, if they were looking for work – he knew a lawyer in town, he said, who needed something done on the side. Something creative. They liked the sound of a lawyer.

At first the work itself was nothing, though it paid and paid well. They redesigned his website, teaching themselves on the fly – nothing odd or creative about it, except for Gage’s insistence that it contain no real information about himself or his partner. “We get all our business from referrals,” he told them. “This is just a formality. Though it’s still important, I mean, so thank you.” When they had proven themselves – as they came to realize, eventually, that they had done – they were given work around his other cases,

from his actual, criminal clients, and it got harder, and stranger: pictures and videos and emails and notes about infidelities and custody battles, wrongful terminations and workplace harassment. The pay got higher.

“That’s some kinky shit,” Smash told them once, watching as they combed, frame by frame, through a video of an orgy, removing the personal, identifying details of their client (as they thought of him), a man who had been smart enough, in a manner of speaking, to film his more important friends, but dumb enough to do it from his own living room.

Eventually Gage sat them down in his office.

“Gentlemen, I have a new client,” he said. “Who is on the lookout for someone willing to, ah, venture into somewhat murky legal territory – in the pursuit of justice, he assures me. A very unique situation, but one that requires your visual talents. We would all, I think, be compensated handsomely.”

“Murkier than what we’ve been doing?”

“Well in this case the murkiness is more a result of where the material might come from, and where it might be, uh, going. It’s going to require a more fluid understanding, say, of due process. Again we would be well compensated.”

They looked at each other and shrugged.

“We’re artists,” Reuben said. “Not cops.”

“Indeed,” Gage said.

When Joe disappeared later, they’d had a choice to make, sitting miserably in their living room and staring out the back window into the yard. Reuben had kept

standing up and realizing, when he did, how hard it was to pace. Outside it looked like it was going to rain.

“We go to the police,” Dan said. “It fucking sucks, but with everything going on it’s simple. We make some anonymous tip, like a phone call or something. Smash could do it.”

“No thank you,” Smash had said.

“What do you think happens,” Reuben asked, “when the cops do find him? You don’t think that comes back, eventually, to Gage? You don’t think it comes back to *us*?”

“We didn’t do anything,” Dan said. Unlike his brother he stayed on the couch, hunched forward like he was shielding his own stomach.

“We didn’t do any of *this*, no, but that doesn’t mean we didn’t do anything at all. The cops get involved and we’re finished too. No way we call them.”

“They’re already involved.”

“Not with Joe they’re not.”

“Jesus,” Dan said. “I know, but still...”

There was a pause as no one spoke, Dan starting to rock, ever so slightly, backward and forward. Finally he broke the silence.

“Alright,” he said. “Fine. No police.”

“Dude,” Smash said. He was sitting with his legs propped on the coffee table, his computer on his lap. Listening with one ear. “Somebody else is *definitely* gonna call the cops. You don’t think he has, like, friends?”

“Goddammit Smash,” Dan said.

“Okay here’s the thing,” Reuben said. He had been standing again, pacing small circles like a dog in a cage, but when he said this he stopped. “It’s not a big deal for everyone to look,” he said. “If they’re looking in the wrong place.”

“What are you talking about?”

He had his back to his brother, staring out the window. It was just starting to rain.

“We would need his car keys.”

Their brother’s apartment was locked, so they had to push themselves onto the roof of the garage and climb in through the window. It took a full wet, harrowing minute, but they kept themselves out of sight of the main house, and the rest of the neighborhood – a series of blank, dark homes in the rain – seemed quiet. They almost couldn’t find his keys, and in the middle of his unlit room they started to panic, a mad, resentful panic, despairing of the fact that his keys were probably in his pocket, wherever he was, and their plan – which had been brilliant – wasn’t going to work, and maybe it was stupid instead. At last Dan found some keys in the top of their brother’s tiny dresser, a thin ring with two spares – a single car key, a single house key. It was their first bit of good fortune, and they took his car and drove it straight to the state park going ninety, Reuben in the lead. It had been Smash’s suggestion, in the end, to go so far – a big enough park that it would take a long time to search. When they were finished they drove home more slowly, in the rain and the creeping fog of the night.

“Call the park service,” Reuben had said to Dan in the car. “Report him.”

For a moment Dan had done nothing. No response, like he hadn’t even heard his brother.

“Hey. Call the park service.”

“I can’t find my phone,” Dan said quietly. It was dark outside, and dark in the car.

“Jesus, use mine,” Reuben said. “Make the call.”

It was only later that Dan said what had been on his mind in the car ride back from the park. The thing he couldn’t bring himself to admit, not until they had gotten home and he had searched the car, searched his bag, searched his room, and searched the house.

“I’ve lost my phone,” he told Reuben and Smash the next morning. They were eating cereal at the table, Cheerios and Frosted Flakes.

“That’s a real bummer,” Smash said. His tie was flipped over his shoulder.

“No, I mean I’ve really lost it.”

“Totally sucks man.”

“There are two places it could be,” Dan said. “In Joe’s apartment. Or in his car.”

“Oh goddammit,” Reuben said.

They had driven to his apartment and parked across the street. At the very least they had a key now and wouldn’t have to go through the roof. Dan was just about to get out when Reuben grabbed his arm, the car still running. Their goal had been to move quickly; it wasn’t going to help them to be seen.

“Wait,” he said sharply. “Look.”

A car was coming up behind them on the street. They waited for it to pass but it didn’t; instead it pulled into their brother’s driveway, and a girl got out. She was short and average-looking, with light brown hair and loose jeans, and they watched her walk up

the stairs to his door, then a minute later stomp around to the main house, rapping sharply on its door. When there was no answer she walked back up the stairs to the apartment.

“Who the fuck is that?” Dan said.

“I don’t know...” Reuben had not taken his hands off the steering wheel, though his head was cocked to look across the street and his eyes followed her, back and forth between the two doors.

When she left the stairwell a second time she turned and, much to their surprise, looked straight at them. She raised a hand in the air and flipped them off. Before they could even register what had happened she was in her car and driving away.

“What’d she do that for?” Dan said.

There was no time for an answer. He got out and rushed inside and found his phone, left on top of the dresser from which they’d taken the keys. His walk back to the Honda was more like a run.

“We have got to be,” Reuben said, his eyes locked on the road. “A hell of a lot more careful. Do you think we’re gonna get lucky again?”

“I don’t know,” Dan had said. “Do you think we’re lucky now?”

After Gage had given them his free advice, they’d started thinking. It was true their work had gotten more illicit, or rather stayed the same level of illicit, but their culpability in it had gone up. The lawyer called their new project White Light – it was printed on the checks at least – like they were supposed to be the good guys, shining bright or something, but mostly it felt like they were just fucking with people more important than them. Twice they doctored state ID cards, and once manufactured a

request on the letterhead of a Barnwell College VP. When that same VP had later gotten caught, having fabricated portions of her own work history and accomplishments, they realized they had played some role in drawing her out.

They didn't mind the work itself, or the pay – if they were messing with people, it at least seemed like people who could stand to be messed with – but they felt the risk nonetheless, and Gage's words remained with them. *Sooner or later*, he had said.

Everything falls.

It was Dan who first noticed Arthur Blotch.

Gage had never hesitated – to them, or even just in front of them – to invoke Blotch by name, but it was always in the context of an absence or excuse. If he wanted to pardon a mistake, for example (“Arthur was the last one to look at this, I think”), or soften a blow (“I'm okay with it, you know, but my partner has some reservations”). If he wanted to stop a decision (“Let me talk to Arthur and get back to you.”), or most clearly pass the buck (“Mr. Blotch made that call without me, but we'll have to make do.”). They had never met the man, nor even seen a picture, and once Dan pointed it out they couldn't stop noticing his absence. There was a chance, they realized, he had no idea what Gage was even doing, what he was running after hours from the office with his name on it.

“He's like never around,” Dan had said. “I bet old Arthur doesn't know any of this.”

“It's actually brilliant,” Reuben said. “In a fucked-up kind of way. I like Gage a little bit more now.”

Their lawyer had, it seemed to them, put his fall guy into place.

They were in his office later when they did the same. It was evening again, and the hall outside the door was dark. From his chair across the desk, Reuben winked at his twin and turned to Gage.

“We recruited another person to join our, uh, team,” he said.

“Excuse me?” Gage said sharply.

“Don’t worry, it’s our brother. We thought he was the one person we could, you know, trust.” He paused. “And we’ve had a lot to do; we needed the extra help.”

“Your brother? Gentlemen, you cannot just...share this work with anyone you’d like.”

“Yeah,” Reuben said. “Yeah, I know that. Except he’s *family*, and like I just said we trust him. He’s already done some work with us, in fact – which has been good work, by the way – so really we’re just telling you as, like, a professional courtesy.”

They showed him a picture of the three of them – college graduation, the most recent photo they had. Gage sighed. He looked very much like he wanted to say more. It was a look he’d often had around them.

“Very well,” he said. “But our client isn’t going to increase his payment.”

“It won’t be a problem,” Reuben said.

Over time their work had not grown clearer, but more cryptic, more confusing, and less tethered to reality. They had started this new project with sex tapes and fake IDs, bribes and bogus transcript requests, some truths and some – they recognized – lies, but all in the service of uncovering greater, more interesting truths. Stories they hadn’t

known about, and stories they didn't see coming until they showed up in the news, at which point the brothers realized they had already played some small, unwitting part.

Then they were getting pushed into even murkier, more unwitting waters; they didn't know what they didn't know, nor did they know why, though the tasks and the money kept coming. Often they were mindless – changing dates on order forms, basic image editing. At times they were faintly sinister – manipulating pictures and crafting composites from separate photos, made creepier by the fact that the images were ordinary, that they'd been lifted off of basic social media. They combined two photos to make it seem like a man was posing with a teenage girl, and another time that a person had taken a selfie at a bar.

When they spoke about it they assured themselves that things had panned out so far – there were realities they hadn't faked, crimes they hadn't committed. The county prosecutor had really taken bribes. The chief of police had really driven drunk, and really crashed his car – twice. They didn't do that, they told themselves. They didn't fake it. And to be honest, they didn't uncover it either; they weren't that connected.

They were helpers, if anything. They were guides.

Still it would have been nice at times to have a sense of the overall project, or even meet the people they worked for. But Gage refused to share.

“It's better if you don't know,” he had said. “There's no reason to meet the client. This is for your own good, I promise.”

When they protested he had lost his temper – the first time, in all his reserved condescension, that they saw him angry.

“If you don’t want to do it,” he snapped, “that’s fine, but get the fuck out of here. You’re just wasting our time.”

It had only taken a second for him to calm down, smoothing his silver head and straightening the papers on his desk. “I apologize,” he added. He flexed his toes on the carpet and drummed his fingers on the desktop glass, like he was shaking something from his limbs. “I also feel the occasional...pressure from this client of ours. Sometimes it comes out, I’m afraid.”

There were times, as well, where it followed them home. One afternoon Reuben stuck his head in the house and yelled at his brother to come outside. Dan padded onto the porch in his socks and Smash followed, looking ready for a light diversion.

“What the fuck,” Reuben said, and he pointed at their Honda, parked in the dirt of the driveway. “Is on our car?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Dan said.

“The plate is what I mean,” Reuben said. “The license plate.”

“Oh, that, sure. It came in the mail the other day.”

“We’ve been driving that thing around for *days*? What does it even mean?”

Dan had looked at his brother with genuine disbelief, like he couldn’t understand the question, much less how to answer it.

“Pro Cutters,” he said at last. “The name, remember? The name of our studio.”

“Our *what*?”

“What will be our studio, once we’ve built it up. And built our, you know, our client base. You were pretty positive about it before. I bought the domain as well.”

Reuben put one hand on his head and stepped over to the railing. “I didn’t agree to that name.” He kept his back to them, facing the street, and for a moment giving the appearance that he was having a quiet, angry conversation with himself. “I mean, ‘pro cutters,’ that’s not a thing. It makes no sense. Cutters like we mow lawns? Cutters like we cut hair? Cutters like...” He drew a line across his wrist.

“Jesus, no. It’s not that hard.”

“It is kinda stupid,” Smash said.

“Oh my God, Smash, shut up. Literally no one asked you.” Dan turned toward his brother. “It’ll work if we make it work, that’s why I’m starting now. Building the brand.” He took a step closer and lowered his voice. “We can’t keep doing this forever, man. This town is gonna run out of scandals soon.”

Reuben didn’t want to hear it. He brushed past them both and opened the door to go inside, and as he did the letterbox on the siding fell off, like it did half the time they opened the door. Instead of picking it up he gave it a kick, rattling it across the porch and onto their neighbor’s half. Then he stepped inside and slammed the door.

“You’re not helping,” Dan told Smash, and Smash had shrugged.

“I’m not your helper,” he said. He too had gone inside, leaving Dan to find the letterbox and mount it back on the wall.

When Reuben had shut the door on the pastor, he heard the letterbox rattle on the wall, but it had kept from falling again. He walked back into the living room.

“*A pastor,*” he said. “A goddamn pastor. Why would he care about Joe – at all?”

“He is a pastor,” Smash had said.

“Smash, I swear to God. Don’t you have work to do?”

“I’m ahead of schedule,” Smash said. He didn’t take his eyes from the TV.

First there had been the girlfriend – the same girlfriend they had seen outside his apartment, the same girlfriend they thought had seen them, though apparently not well enough to recognize their faces. Reuben did his best to shoo her away, but he knew as it was happening that his best wasn’t very good. Why did Joe have to have a girlfriend? they thought. Why did Joe have to have *this* girlfriend?

Their parents had been distraught when they called, their mother crying into the phone, their dad breathing heavily on the line and saying nothing. They told them the same story they also told the park service, and later the news, and the girl when she knocked, and the pastor. The only thing that kept them afloat, Reuben thought, was that he knew when to stop talking: *Joe told us he was going hiking, but we didn’t hear from him again. We got worried. I don’t know anything else.*

It had been a breakthrough, actually, when he first said that Joe had wanted to borrow his boots – it gave them a reason to know about the hike and only the hike, though they’d had a moment of panic after he said it – were there perfectly good boots in Joe’s closet? Had he even needed any? Should they throw away their own boots just in case?

And now this pastor was hovering around their door asking questions too, just like everyone else. It had been a mistake to let him in. They had gotten stupid, and despite what he said the minister had been nothing, not much more than a meddler – asking pointless questions, they thought, just to be involved. They didn’t have time to deal with him; they just didn’t have time.

They had wasted a whole day driving back to the state park to meet their parents, acting like it was the first time they'd been there, like they were confused and distraught and anxious but not guilty, not aware. On the drive home Dan had tugged at his shirt, sticking to him like it was June.

"I can't do this," he said. "I can't do it any longer. How did we even get here?"

Reuben had been thinking of the same thing. "We got here through a bunch of small choices," he said. "And that's how we're gonna get out. We'll keep our mouths shut, we'll do the work they want. We'll get Joe back."

"Even if we get him back," Dan said. "It's too late. He's going to know."

"What's he gonna know? What's he gonna be able to prove?"

"*Something*," Dan said.

"We have to risk it. There's literally no other choice."

Dan shook his head. "We're never getting the family together again."

"You know," Reuben said, "we don't get the family together now."

Gage had wanted to meet for lunch. It was strange – they'd never met him during the day, and never any place outside his office. He picked a café in Five Forks, out of downtown and closer to their house. They had thought he didn't know where they lived – they always picked up their checks from his office – but this, though it could have been a coincidence, made them reconsider. When they arrived they realized it was down the street from La Spiazza, the coffee shop where their mother had told them Joe was working.

It was noon and the café was noisy, crowded with people waiting for seats just inside and outside the door. They found Gage at a table near the back, and to their surprise he wasn't alone. Another person sat with him, someone they had never seen before. Someone their own age – or even, perhaps, a few years younger – wearing boots and a sweatshirt and khakis with cargo pockets, looking out of place next to Gage.

“Who is this?” Reuben said before they sat down; he and Dan had been bickering more and more lately, and his nerves were too frayed for surprises. He looked at the stranger. “Who are you?”

Gage frowned. The young man frowned as well, and looked as though he might say something, but Gage answered first: “This is Kyle,” he said shortly. “Now sit down and listen before the waiter comes back.”

They did.

“Kyle,” Gage continued, speaking fast and low, “is a young man I helped out with a spot of legal trouble last year. He's also done some work for me, and a few months ago I recommended him to this client of ours. Consider him part of the evidence-gathering team. Kyle doesn't live in Ransom itself, so we don't often see each other, especially not now, but yesterday I received a message from him that said he had something important to tell me. Something about our White Light project. Something urgent. He asked me to bring along my...design team” – here he used his water to indicate Dan and Reuben, then stopped his story to take a small sip – “so that's what I've done, minus your absentee brother. Given the nature of the meeting, which is to say I have no clue, I thought we could steer clear of the office for once.” He took another sip and put his water down. “Now Kyle, what do you need to tell us?”

Kyle leaned in close. His voice, when he spoke, was softer and higher-pitched than either brother expected, a tenor with slight twang.

“These White Light folks are loony,” he said. “They’re not right.”

Reuben and Dan looked at each other. They had tried to think nothing about their work and White Light, nothing but vague positive memories and the dreams of what they planned to do with their money. It had grown increasingly difficult.

“How so?” Gage prompted.

“They’re starting to frame people,” he said. “Set ‘em up. This Clayton guy has some weird thing about, like, justice, and he won’t let it go.”

“Wait,” Reuben said. “Frame people? Have all these scandals been...fake?”

“Not at first, no, we found some real stuff. But that’s what I’m telling you: we’re running out. And he’s still not gonna stop. They’ve started talking about other ways to do things – forcing people with, like –” Kyle checked the tables around them and lowered his voice even more. “Like alcohol, or drugs, like *roofies*. And when that doesn’t work just faking more stuff, pictures and videos and whatever. They’ve been collecting photos, just normal stuff online, so they have material to work with. It’s like...shopping for them. They’re gonna want you guys to do more of that, the photoshopping.” He looked at Dan and Reuben, his head already close to theirs. “Like you’ve been doing already.”

Before they could answer their waiter came over with more water, and they sat up straighter. Neither brother had known how to respond anyway. Gage ordered coffees for the table.

“This is crazy,” Dan said. “That’s too far; we didn’t sign up for that.” He looked at Gage like it was clearly the lawyer’s fault. “We’re outta this. No more.”

“It’s not that simple,” Gage said. “I don’t think Mr. Clayton would take too kindly—”

“Bullshit,” Dan said, but under the table Reuben stepped on his foot.

“It’s not simple,” he agreed. “You’re right. We’ll need to go home and talk about it. Our brother deserves to know too, what he’s really been doing.”

“There’s something else,” Kyle said. He waited a moment as their coffee arrived. When the waiter had stepped away he looked at Gage.

“You’re on the list,” he said. “Once you stop being helpful, they’re gonna cut you out.”

Gage had not taken the news well, as flustered as they had ever seen him, though Dan and Reuben didn’t stay to hear it all. He and Kyle were talking quickly and quietly as they left, ignoring the waiter who hovered just out of reach, trying to take their order.

Both brothers had come out of the meeting angry, their anger rooted most of all in shame, that they had chosen to do something stupid, something reckless, and it had bitten them in the ass in a way they should have seen coming – in the general, if not the particular – and hadn’t. It was surprising, and yet utterly not surprising, and because of this they cast around for someone to blame, Gage or Kyle or Clayton. It was too much to blame themselves. They had to get out.

That same night Reuben had called the lawyer.

“Look,” he said. “None of us our happy here. But we talked it over and our brother Joe – he’s pretty fucking pissed. Tell those White Light guys we’re on, like,

sabbatical until we figure this out. We gotta get Joe on the same page. Tell them we're working on it."

"Fine," Gage said. "I will." His tone told Reuben he saw through him, but in the moment – at the end of his own day, with his own news – he didn't have the energy to care.

They had never been heavy drinkers before – they were party drinkers, if anything – but for a few nights they made an exception. It was easiest to pass the time, and they felt, for the moment, like they were doing nothing but passing time.

When they stumbled out of their cab the second night, having left the Honda at home, they saw a figure on their porch, a small man sitting preposterously in one of their lawn chairs. It was too dark to see his face, but they didn't need to.

"Goddammit, man, leave us alone," Dan said. He walked heavily up the steps to the door, Reuben in the yard behind him.

Gage waited for the cab to pull away before he stood.

"Kyle is dead," he said dully. "The police have been by to speak with me."

Reuben caught his foot on one of the stairs up and stomped hard, catching himself at the last moment from falling. Dan made it far enough to lean on the house.

"Oh shit," he said. "Oh shit, oh shit."

"I have a message from our client," Gage said. "Mr. Clayton."

"Oh shit," Dan said.

"Clayton says he's been by to see Joe. If he was causing problems for the team, they wanted to be sure – in his words – to straighten him out."

“Shit shit shit shit,” Dan said quietly, his hands on his knees. Reuben stood unmoving near the front step.

“Is he alive?” Reuben asked.

“Yes, I believe so. But I would consider this encouragement to finish your work.”

Gage stepped past them and off the porch, turning back from the lawn. He looked up at them and seemed to struggle with his words. “You’ve done this to your brother,” he said at last, and then he turned to go.

“Wait,” Dan said. He walked over next to Reuben at the top of the stairs, his movements thick and sloppy. There was something plaintive in his voice. “I thought...we learned it from you. I mean you said...”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“Arthur Blotch,” Reuben said.

“There is no Arthur Blotch,” Gage said. “There never was. You boys have no fucking clue what you’re doing. My God...” He trailed off and bent to pick up a branch at his feet, thin and reedy, fallen from one of the nearby trees. His knees cracked when he stood. “I was careful,” he said. “For years. But I’ve just gotten so tired...” Now that he was in the yard there was moonlight on him, bright enough to show his face; the slight imbalance of his features, turned inward, seemed to make his sadness even sharper. He snapped the twig in half and threw it away. “Now Kyle is dead,” he said. “And your brother is lost.”

Without another word he turned and walked to his car on the street. Both brothers watched him drive away, standing shoulder to shoulder on the porch, saying nothing, until Dan stepped suddenly to the railing and threw up over the side.

During the first week without Joe, there was a point where they had asked themselves: Can we trust the lawyer? Can we trust Gage?

No – it seemed the obvious answer. He had lied to them, misled them, kept them in the dark. He made a living in deceit and dishonesty and criminality. There was a name on his office he had made up, and they weren't allowed to visit in the daylight. After Joe was taken they called him and he refused to talk any more. "There's nothing else to say," he had told them. "Do your work and hope they like it."

"Did you forget what Kyle said?" Reuben asked. "About you?"

"Worry about yourselves," he said. "There are enough people worrying about me."

They worried about themselves, and they worried about Joe, and Clayton and his friends, but they also worried about Gage. They drove by his office once to see it in the day, parking across the street to watch. It was sunny again, and in the daylight it looked like they were on a different street entirely.

"He would be pissed if we came in," Dan said.

"Maybe he should be pissed," Reuben said.

Before they could decide, someone stepped out of the office and onto the sidewalk. It was the pastor who had visited their house; the one who had weaseled his way inside and offered a donation.

"Motherfucker," Dan said. "You can't trust anyone, can you?"

Before they could be seen, Reuben pulled the car out and drove away. Did the man work for Gage? For Clayton? In the rearview mirror they watched him jog over to a car parked behind them and get in.

“I knew he wasn’t a pastor,” Reuben said. “We really should’ve known.” He trailed off, and a second later hit the steering wheel. “Goddammit,” he added. “Goddammit.”

In the end Gage was right, there was nothing to do but the work, so they did it and did it well. They watched as the story of the councilman broke, his drinking and driving, his pictures and emails and texts with the girl. They recognized her from their early material, things that hadn’t made it out. She was a plant. It had done the job.

They prepped the pictures of the minister, Laythrop – a real minister this time, and their client’s new target. They waited.

Word came to them from Clayton, word that he was happy with the work they had done, and were doing. Happy with the results, and happy with their quick thinking – the hiking story had helped everyone. They were doing well.

Still Joe would be staying with them awhile longer. Until it was finished, he had said. Phase one, at least.

“Phase one...” Dan said. “What are they, fucking NASA?”

In their house Reuben had looked at the ceiling. He hadn’t shaved in a week, and his stubble ran so far down his neck it nearly hit his collar.

“I don’t think I can wait any longer,” he said. “We need to do something. We need to talk to Clayton.”

They thought Gage would have the address – or would know, at the very least, where to get the address. They called every day, in the afternoons and evenings, called enough that he stopped answering, then started again when they still wouldn't relent. They drove to the office in the daytime and tried to find him, tried to convince the lady receptionist to let them back. Instead Gage had come into the lobby and pushed them out onto the sidewalk.

“Okay,” he said at last, looking up and down the street. He reached into his jacket for his phone. “It's your funeral. Or your brother's funeral.”

“It might be our brother's funeral anyway,” Reuben said. “We're trying to make it right here.”

Gage sent them a map on their phones, a tiny dot out in the country, north of Ransom.

“He might be right,” Dan said once they'd left. “Have you forgotten Kyle?”

“Of course I haven't forgotten Kyle,” Reuben said angrily. “I wish I could.”

They told themselves it was time.

When they were in college they had taken a class together with their brother, all three of them, a large, gen-ed English course. They hadn't realized until the first day, as their professor called the roll. When he reached Decker he stopped and looked around, his eyes landing on the twins.

“I think I can see the resemblance here,” he’d said. “But you, Joseph, where are you? Are you related as well?”

Joe had looked up from his desk across the room, and straight at the teacher.

“No,” he’d said.

They told themselves again it was time. They told themselves they were just going to talk, that they would be listened to, that Clayton and his friends had been happy with their work and they were valued. That nothing might come of it, but at least then they could say they tried, at least then Clayton would know they were serious, to be taken seriously, that they were unafraid. They told themselves they weren’t afraid. They told themselves they had waited long enough. Too long. It was time.

They didn’t tell themselves that Joe was their brother, that they were miserable pieces of shit for what they’d done, but somehow those thoughts made it into their heads as well.

The drive out of Ransom was quiet, and neither spoke until they had traveled almost forty minutes, out of the city and through the country roads north of town. The houses were fewer and farther apart, spaced between larger tracts of farmland and pasture, and in their last few turns the road itself was no longer a road, but a one-lane strip of dirt and gravel grooved by tires.

“If we stay calm,” Reuben said as they bounced their final half mile, the Honda’s suspension protesting. “They stay calm. We can do this.”

Dan nodded from the passenger’s seat. “Sure,” he said.

One minute later they were pulling up to a farmhouse, peeling paint on wood siding. There was no driveway, but tire tracks in the grass that Reuben followed as he parked. He hadn't even turned the car off before someone came out of the house, a sturdy man with sandy blond hair who approached them slowly. Reuben killed the engine and stepped out of the car, and before he had straightened the man was pointing a gun at him.

"Hi," he said. "Give me your keys."

Otherwise the man didn't want to talk, but searched them and led them inside with their arms up, ignoring Reuben's introduction and Dan's slightly more frantic explanations. They entered the house and turned right, into a living room of flowery armchairs and standing lamps and a single, pastel pink sofa. A middle-aged man was sitting on the sofa with his legs crossed, and Gage was standing by the far window. He turned when they came in.

"Who are these guys?" said the man on the sofa, speaking not to them, it seemed, but to the room. He looked them over once, then smiled and waved at the man with the gun, and that man – who had not followed them into the room, but rather stood in the doorway – watched them sit, then turned and disappeared around the corner. Once he was gone both brothers put their hands down.

"Well," Gage said. "This is the rest of your design team. Daniel and Reuben Decker." He looked at them with hardened eyes. "I had thought they might come for a visit, but I wish I had known *when*. This isn't the best time, gentlemen."

"Oh, interesting," the man said. "Very interesting. And really, it's okay, we're just settling down at this point. Nothing to do but wait. Daniel, Reuben, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Custer Clayton."

“Oh,” Reuben said first, glancing at his brother. “Right, hi.”

“This has been an eventful day already,” Clayton said, again speaking more to the room. “What brings you out here?”

They looked at each other once more. Was he serious? It was hard to tell. Gage folded his arms like he, too, was waiting for an answer.

“Mr. Clayton,” Reuben said. “We need to talk about our brother. And we need to talk about our work.”

“Ah well,” Clayton said. “If you’d like to speak about your brother then I’m afraid Mr. Gage is correct then, this isn’t quite the best time. Soon, though, soon. As for your work we’re very pleased; it’s been effective so far.” He was resting one arm on the back of the sofa, reclined like he was at home, though they noticed him glancing now and then at his watch.

There was a moment’s pause, then both brothers started speaking at once.

“But Joe –” Reuben began.

“How much longer are we gonna have to do this?” Dan said.

“Well,” Clayton said. “That’s actually a big question – I don’t think you realize how big – and it depends entirely on how well our movement is able to...snowball.”

“What movement,” Reuben said, “are you even talking about? You’re just ruining people’s lives.”

“Now that’s where you’re wrong,” Clayton said, and he looked pleased to correct him. “Those people were actually just a start – that’s where the snowballing comes in. It’s about so much more than a few individuals, can’t you see that? We’re talking about taking down a *society* here, something built on lies, built fundamentally on fakery and

posture, and still a society that has the gall to hold itself above me – I mean governments and churches and schools and media that tell us what we’re allowed to believe, and who we have to love and who we have to hate, and what we get to say and what we *don’t* get to say, and meanwhile it’s all bullshit. All this talk of progress is bullshit – give me another George Washington, that’d be some progress. Our new state-sponsored vocabulary, acceptance, inclusion, tolerance, it’s all bullshit, it’s all corrupt itself, dirty and stained black, and in case you haven’t noticed it’s about power anyway. Power over *us*. So it needs to be wiped clean, is what we’re doing. We need to start over.” He paused. “You want to know how long that’s going to take? I have no idea. It might be awhile.”

“Oh fuck,” Dan said to his brother, like he had just realized something essential. “I think they’re racists too.”

“Now that I object to,” Clayton said. “I’m not a racist, I’m –”

By the window Gage raised his arm and pointed. Thin white smoke was coming into the room. “Your upstairs is on fire,” he said.

That was when the house started burning.

Clayton shouted something unintelligible and leapt from the couch, running out of the room and around the corner. They heard him thundering up the stairs, and a moment later more sets of feet coming down the stairs and moving into another part of the house, toward the back. Somewhere a door banged open. Dan and Reuben jumped to their feet but stayed, for a moment, in place – paralyzed by fear and confusion.

“You should leave,” Gage told them. He didn’t look as bothered by the fire as they were, but rather angry and determined.

A gunshot sounded outside, somewhere toward the front, and though it made no sense both brothers ducked.

“Get out of here,” Gage said again. “Now.”

They ran out of the living room and into the foyer, but before they could open the door Reuben stopped, his eyes wide.

“I don’t have my keys,” he said.

“I don’t think,” Dan said, “that’s gonna matter.” He was looking out the front window in disbelief, watching their car drive away down the gravel road.

“Oh my God,” Reuben said.

Dan pushed past his brother to open the door, then grabbed his arm and pulled him outside and into clean air. The house was starting to burn in earnest, so both brothers – not knowing what else to do – took off running through the fields, away from the smoke and the fire and the shouts from the second floor, everything coming down behind them.

CHAPTER 40

Warm, heavy breathing, cries and murmurs in their sleep.

Ben spent the next night with his family, Alex and Dylan and even baby Miles all together in their bed. Dylan had refused to sleep alone in his room, and they were too tired after everything, after the crying and hugging, the long conversations, to stay awake until he drifted off, so they slept with the kids between them, their warmth in the dark. In the morning Ben lay on his pillow and read the stories from his phone, not wanting to get up. It had made the front page: Missing men found safe after fire in rural county. Three presumed dead in blaze, including local attorney Thomas Gage. Ransom Police were still piecing together a motive, and Gage's partner Arthur Blotch, reached via email, had been unforthcoming. Shocked and unhelpful, on holiday in Mexico with limited connection. Law enforcement were following up.

They had used his name in the article, but they didn't have a picture of him or the other young man, Joe. He had declined to speak with them, or anyone outside the police.

In the sunlight Alex stirred, just starting to wake, and he reached across the bed to her with his free hand, over the heads of the boys. He wanted to apologize for everything, everything that happened to him and everything he'd done, but it was too early and he didn't want to wake the kids, so he held her hand and waited for her eyes to open and said nothing.

There would be time.

He took a few days off of work, a few more days than the several he had already taken. Mary came by to visit once and told him they were missing him at Zip, but he didn't feel ready to go back, to see everyone and talk, so he thanked her and said little else, and when she left he sat quietly in his living room and enjoyed being home, being safe and doing nothing. There would be time, he told himself again. There would be time.

CHAPTER 41

Erin said she would take the job in Greenville.

She wasn't going to know everything. The truth was she had come to know a lot, as much as she could reasonably expect – everything Joe had told her, everything she saw and read online, everything from her mother as they talked and cried and sometimes argued, and still she felt like she wasn't going to know everything, and she never would. She just had to know that she was ready for her life to move, to start anew, to change. She had to know that it had changed already.

She would still come back to see her mother. They were fine, and getting better. No longer living at home had changed her experience of the space fundamentally, lowered its stakes – that she had something else, and somewhere else.

And she would come back for Joe. It had not been the same for them, not like before, but they were trying – something led them to keep trying, something drew them back together. It was growing easier to laugh again.

Still it was like they had started dating for the first time. She was never going to understand what he experienced that week. And he was never going to know what she did for him.

CHAPTER 42

Consider how the wild flowers grow, here today and gone tomorrow, thrown into the fire. Not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of those.

For Doug to go to church in Ransom in the weeks after the Revival was to be identified as the pastor who got divorced and quit his job and told everyone about it. Within their world he had made it a much bigger deal than it otherwise would have been, and the strangeness of his admission caused everyone to think he'd had an affair. Doug didn't bother to correct them. He found it was easier, in a way, to live with their unease, their lowered expectations and their looks. He had thought he might just stop going to church entirely, but he didn't.

He did get his real estate license, though, and the first house he sold was their own. Sam took her share and moved north, but Doug found that he wasn't ready to leave, though it didn't quite make sense to stay, not to him. Once Joe came back he had stopped paying attention to the news. He thought he wanted to know everything but he didn't, and Erin had told him the important parts anyway. Instead he spent evenings in his new apartment reading books and watching television, and after a while he found a small Episcopalian church to attend, a chapel he could sneak into and sit, near the back, enjoying the stiffness of the pews and the priest's gentle voice, the discomfort of the kneeler and the prayers that weren't his own.

Do not worry about tomorrow, he told himself, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.