“Wonderful. Levin has written a political novel as deft and cunning as any politician. As well as she knows that game, she’s even shrewder about love and lust, family and friendship, the faces we put on and the mysteries we remain. She reminds us of the suffering in every scandal, especially that of the hapless unfortunates who share their lives with the boldfaced names. Here the personal and the political truly are one.”

Bill Curry, Counselor to President Clinton

We all see negative ads in political campaigns but rarely consider how they affect the people involved -- the targets and the attacker alike. This human drama takes the transaction off the air waves and integrates it into a flesh and blood story of two candidates battling their fears, worries about their past and each other. It is not just behind the scenes in a campaign. The book takes you inside the heads of the candidates and their consultants to show you what these campaigns cost all the participants.

Dick Morris
Author and Political Consultant

In this sexy, sensitive and observant novel, Levin, who knows politics, - and knows the motivations and hopes and fears that politicians often have, writes a mystery story against the background of two women competing for the Democratic primary for the Senate from New York. For a realistic, passionate and page turning experience, read Musical Chairs.

Roy Occhiogrosso
Managing Director, Global Strategy Group
Dedication

To My Children
Alison, Ethan and Mase

My Grandchildren
Samantha, Livi, Macky, Josie and Dylan

My Brother
Elliot Honig

All of you are my joy and inspiration,
and the best cheering squad on the planet.
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Musical Chairs

written by
Sheila Levin
Chapter 1

March 2008
Roberta

Roberta Palmer had been up all night watching her husband die. She was staving off grief with doses of memory. When she felt herself succumbing, she reached for more of that potent medicine. She knew the supply was not limitless, but hoped it would be enough to see her through for a little while.

It was not quite light. The night sky was speckled with patches of dawn, blackness giving way to the relentless force of daybreak. Roberta, always an early riser, rarely missed this reassuring moment of transition. Even on this day, Roberta was grateful for the stability of sunrise, hopeful, for a moment, that it would be a better day.

Then she remembered, there would be no better days.

Roberta waited until it was morning before she called her stepdaughter, Joan. She was afraid of Joan: afraid of her sad eyes, her raw needs. Roberta knew that Joan had been neglected for too long. She had tried to befriend her, but Joan was immune to her stepmother’s charm, unimpressed with her occasional overtures. What Joan needed she could only get from David. She was too proud to accept substitutions. If her father failed her, and he did, she would go it alone.

Joan sensed the vibration of the phone before it rang. She had been awake for several minutes, contemplating coffee, wondering if it would rain. She snatched the phone from the night table before the first peal ended, silencing the offensive din.

"Hello," she said, expecting a wrong number or the click of a hang-up.
"Joan, it’s Roberta."

“Roberta!” Joan said alarmed. Her stepmother would not call this early unless it was an emergency. "Joan, there’s no easy way to say this,” Roberta hesitated, coughed. She was choking on the words. “Joan, I am so sorry. Your dad passed away last night. I’m so sorry. I waited to call. I didn’t want to call you earlier. I thought you should...."

“Passed away? He told me, just a couple of days ago…. He said he was fine; he said I didn’t have to worry.” Joan sounded mystified, incredulous.

A couple of days ago, Roberta thought, a lifetime ago.

"Yes, well, he was sicker than any of us knew," Roberta said. "Perhaps it was for the best. He didn’t suffer."

The cliché stuck in her throat, and Roberta wondered as she uttered this first facile lie if the others would flow so effortlessly.
"What do you want me to do?" Joan asked. It was this bleak, chilly tone that Roberta feared.

"Take the first shuttle down; take a taxi to the house; I’m not sure if I can send Arnold."

"All right, Roberta, I’ll be on the first shuttle. I can’t believe this. I keep wanting to ask you if you’re sure. Isn’t that insane?" Joan whispered.

"It’s a terrible shock, Joan. I know just how you feel. Hurry, it will be good for us to be together."

"You think so?" Joan replied, “I wonder...”

Roberta switched the phone to “off” but did not replace it in its cradle. There were so many people to notify, she had made a list. She wasn’t sure of the protocol. Was it too early to call Very Important People, David’s Congressional Colleagues, the Secretary of State?

She had been scribbling a list of people to call on the back of an envelope. But now, as she tried to decipher her notes, she was uncertain how to proceed.

Roberta watched the freezing rain through the French doors leading to the patio of the Georgetown townhouse where she and David had breakfast on the mornings he was in Washington. Throughout the autumn into winter, even when it was so chilly that Roberta resorted to heavy sweaters and scarves, they warmed their hands on hot mugs of coffee, enjoying these rare moments of privacy.

Large drops of rain splattered on the patio and ricocheted against the glass doors. Roberta watched the rain from the room she thought of as her office, a small sitting room off the living room. Her coffee was cold. The wind was whipping up the puddles outside, creating small whirlpools.

She glanced at the clock on her desk. David had been dead for two hours. The only people she had called were Malcolm Marshall, David’s close friend and lawyer, and Joan. Malcolm was taking care of the details to have David’s body removed. He left her the task of notifying people.

Calling Joan had sapped her; she was exhausted. Joan was her responsibility now. She would like to comfort her stepdaughter, to hold her. She knew that Joan could be harsh, that she had a cutting tongue. Perhaps now, Roberta thought, now that David was dead, she and I could be friends. If Joan would bend a little we could manage this together.

Roberta’s head was throbbing; she hadn’t eaten in many hours. The thought of food made her nauseous, but she was hungry. She had always been ravenous in the morning.
She pictured David sitting across from her, always impeccably dressed, and having his monotonous Spartan breakfast of half glass of grapefruit juice, dry wheat toast, and black coffee. She felt gluttonous next to him, enjoying as she did, sweet melon, an Entenmann’s fat free blueberry muffin, and coffee with half and half, her one daily dietary indulgence.

It was a perfect picture, the handsome couple on their patio at breakfast, exchanging sections of the Washington Post. People Magazine ran that picture years ago when they did a story on Washington’s new power couple.

In her own way, Roberta was as famous as David. Despite the fact that she hadn’t modeled in years, people remembered her. She was frozen in time, locked in the public’s memory as if she was ageless. She still received letters requesting pictures, seeking advice, urging her to come out of retirement; as if the clock had stopped, as if she were still the same young girl.

During the years of her celebrity, there developed between Roberta and her public a special kinship. She was ostentatiously imperfect, unafraid to expose her flaws, able to laugh at her blemishes, mock her constant battle with diets.

With her unconventional good looks and artless manner, Roberta captivated a public bored with perfect faces and arrogant celebrities. Roberta was approachable and vulnerable. She allowed the public to share in her delight and surprise at the turn of events in her life. If it can happen to me, she often said, it can happen to anyone.

Roberta was a born listener. Since both of her parents were deaf, Roberta learned to sign as she learned to speak. Her parents were teachers for the deaf. Their lives revolved around teaching and political action for deaf rights. Her parents read lips, but preferred signing.

In Roberta’s silent home, the nuances of life were not overlooked. With conversation limited, other senses developed: an especially keen sense of vision and smell, sensitivity to the unspoken. Roberta learned to read the moods of her parents from the gleam or the tear in their eyes, from the set of their chins. She believed, too, that she developed a sure instinct for judging character. She was proud of that.

In the soft spring evenings of her girlhood, Roberta remembered flying down the stoop of their Brooklyn apartment house, swallowing air, exhilarated, calling out to parents who could not hear, "See you later, if you’re lucky." She remembered running to the corner lot, where she joined the boys choosing up sides for a softball game. Roberta was accepted because she had a remarkably controlled pitching arm and she was wise enough to conceal her excitement with
casual gestures of good fellowship. She was all business. No hint of flirtation in her deep squint as she hesitated for just a moment, concentrating on the pitch. Everything was innocent, even the sweat drop she caught with her tongue was sweet. Standing there on the mound, licking her lips (it helped her fix the pitch) she had the feeling she was beating the guys at their own game.

Disguised as one of the boys, she was accepted.

Looking back she wondered if her memory was unduly sentimental. Weren’t those hugs and victory smacks just a bit self-conscious? For two years, her team was the neighborhood champion. Then when she was fourteen, she stopped. It became clear to her that if she wanted to have any girlfriends, she would have to stop playing ball with the boys.

She understood the rules of the game. She was a girl who did not overstep boundaries.

Now, thirty years later, Roberta yearned for such simple solutions. She was unprepared for the pain she knows she must confront, for the loneliness, the desolation of this new role as widow.

Her years as a model enhanced Roberta’s uncompromising ability to see herself as an observer. While she did not flinch at a critical scrutiny of her appearance, she was not yet ready to undertake a similar audit of her inner resources.

Roberta was a born again beauty, embraced at a certain moment in time by a fickle public’s revisionist perception of style. She regarded her success as a fluke. In fact, she never fully understood it, and she certainly never trusted it. Roberta was never a conventional beauty.

For one thing, her teeth were slightly crooked with that now-famous gap between her two front incisors. As a girl she developed the habit of casually pushing her tongue out between those two teeth trying to fill in the space. She never smiled broadly, but the pressure of her tongue resting on the inside of her upper teeth forced her cheeks to puff out slightly. This resulted in what one critic later celebrated as “a delicious wispy latent smile."

Her long, lanky look so richly praised when she was modeling was not well regarded when she was growing up. Then, she was merely skinny and tall. Her hair—that gorgeous, honey bush copied by thousands of women—had been tortured into braids by her mother in a never-ending effort to subdue that unruly mop. With her tongue darting around behind those uneven front teeth and wisps of silky curls popping from asymmetrical braids, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror in despair.
Roberta lived in a silent world. She listened to people chatter, but when she entered into conversation, she invariably felt ridiculous. Either she talked too much, or she was terse and unable to articulate her feelings or sense of things.

She believed she was unremarkable and hated that. She tried every artifice she could afford; padded bras, hair straightener, and waist cinches so tight she had difficulty breathing. She roamed the corridors of Bloomingdales for exotic makeup to draw attention away from her teeth. They told her, those legions of perfectly complicated cosmetic saleswomen, to emphasize her eyes.

She stooped to diminish her height and shoveled on blemish cream to cover freckles. She bleached the hair on her arms and her upper lip, hopping around the room waving her arms to cool the acid sting. Of course she shaved her legs. Her right leg still had a faint scar running the length of her shinbone.

At thirteen she started menstruating and required glasses for distance.

She kept her objectives simple.

She wanted a husband and children, a home filled with sound. She did not indulge much in fantasy; she respected her limitations.

She was not ambitious, or so she believed. She had collaborated in her career, been an accomplice in her marriage. Everything was accidental, her success, her marriage to David. She credited herself for hard work and for an ability to seize the moment.

Still, it was all too easy, she thought, as she watched the sleet pound against the glass. She was always on the sidelines of her own life, an accidental partner. A career dependent upon the whim of public approval, then, until a few days ago, a marriage in which she hovered on the periphery, always wanting more, unsure of how to stimulate in her husband an intimacy that was perpetually elusive.

There was, between Roberta and David, a bond of trust and understanding, the warmth of shared experience, the pleasure of relaxed companionship. There was love, sometimes passion. She blamed herself for wanting more, for seeking a perfect union of body and soul. In search of that union, she became compliant. She thought that might work. She was soft and gentle, tender and sweet, reassuring David of her love. But their marriage remained a blend of its parts, and what Roberta wanted was fusion.

When that failed to produce results, or results so evanescent they slipped through her grasp, she tried it other ways: sexy and confrontational, brassy and aggressive. Not really her style, but she was, after all, a professional. For years she laid in wait, watching for an opportunity to sneak up on her marriage, to find a way in.

Finally, she simply relaxed in his embrace, allowed herself to be comforted by his version of love, determined to quash any lingering discontent of her own.
Roberta was jarred out of her reverie by the front doorbell. They have come for David, she thought. Morning had officially started—The milk and the paper delivery, the sound of cold engines struggling to turn over, the grinding of the garbage truck. On the base of the phone, she noticed that all six lines were lit. Malcolm would have notified the press; all of that was about to begin.

Soon people will arrive: David’s staff, the press, perhaps some friends. And Joan, of course, Joan would be here soon. Joan was the one she worried about. She would have to be very careful around Joan.

Roberta had only a few moments more to savor her loss alone. She wanted to feel the raw pain of grief, to moan, to wail before she is subjected to sympathy and must endure the clichés and platitudes of condolence. I could easily become hysterical, she thought; let it slide over her like a smooth, metal shield protecting her from the well-meaning, the compassionate, and the curious. But if she allowed it to start, how would it ever stop?

She was still in her robe but knew she must dress. She would not allow herself to be seen so disheveled. She felt lightheaded and dizzy as if she had just stepped off an airplane after 20 hours of flying, muscles sore and cramped, unsure of her footing, stumbling around on foreign territory. Disoriented and bewildered, Roberta pushed herself up, leaning on the desk for balance. This was no time to start crying, she thought, noticing that the rain was letting up.

Taking a few steps to the French doors, Roberta rested her head against the cool glass. It was only drizzling now, puddles of water on the patio glistening, reflecting the rays breaking through the brightening sky.

Surely, she thought, this horror was some elaborate mistake. It could not be true that David was dead. Perhaps I am suffering from some profound delusion. Perhaps I am mad, she thought.

Too tired to hold them back, she felt hot tears streak her cheeks; an oppressive hopelessness began to overwhelm her.

“Come on, kiddo,” she said to herself, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her robe, "stop sniveling."

One thing she knew: all the claptrap about death—all the ritual, the polite intoning of the clergy, the poetic babble of inevitability, the ludicrous notion of death as friend, as simply another phase of life—were all wrong.

Death was no friend. It was the ultimate contradiction of life, the definitive enemy. Roberta did not believe in an afterlife. David was gone, truly and forever.

Roberta knew, too, that her cup of sorrow was laced with anger. For the moment, however, she must turn her attention to what she would wear, what she would say. She must prepare her face for the world to see.
She found a tissue mashed in the pocket of her robe and, gratefully, blew her nose. For just a moment, this absurd act of clearing her nasal passage made her feel better.

I’ll have plenty of time, Roberta thought, as she went upstairs to dress, to grapple with the demons, all the time in the world to confront the ghosts.

David’s Story

As an adult, David didn’t much dwell on the past. Memories didn’t come to him in flashes or from a sudden whiff of perfume or a fabric from his mother’s favorite dress—no sense of déjà vu distressed him. He did not scan his memory or grope his subconscious in an effort to remember his past.

Since he was 12, David suspected. Something about the locker room at school, the playful towel slaps, his fascination with what he thought of as “his package”. He liked girls with their sweet smells and their scraped knees, their pigtails and their flirty eyes. But it was the boys who captured his imagination.

David was always too serious to be popular, but he was more popular with the girls than with the boys. Girls liked him, felt safe with him; they were amused and pleased by his good manners, his courtly and old-fashioned ways.

His dreams at night were aggressively sexual— He knew but didn’t; he knew but rejected it; he knew but he could not believe it. Was he always going to be an outsider? Perhaps he should just disappear, making it simple for his mother; grief was surely better than shame.

When David did want to think about the past, he did it as he did almost everything else: methodically. Usually saving it for before sleep, as he arranged himself on the bed. If he lay with his back toward the center of the bed, he was prepared to remember; if he wanted simply to go to sleep, he turned, facing the other side of the bed, and fell asleep immediately. Guided always by ritual, comforted by touchstones, he felt almost safe, almost all the time.

He developed an agenda for memory, non-sequential and not date stamped. Rather, his memories were occasion oriented, frequently referring to the “first,” the first time he did it and, then,
the first time he did it again and again, which inevitably brought him to Arnold Custer, the boy from the circus.

Arnold Custer, the boy on the white horse, shirtless, tight black pants, barefoot, astride a white ride, jumping through that ring of fire, and then back again to thunderous applause.

Arnold was 15, and under the make-up he had pimples. He carefully drew hair on his chest with a black mascara pen. He considered himself a coward in all things except this one trick, this one horse trick of jumping through fire. His terrible doubts and insecurities he kept secret. He needed the job and had no idea what was going to become of him. Without the horse and the ring of fire, a trick taught to him by his father, who was now promoted to Assistant Manager of the circus, he would surely be lost.

David and Arnold met in the park, struck up a conversation, and then a friendship. They had a lot in common: they both liked hot dogs with sweet mustard and orange soda.

Arnold and David made quite a pair—the 12 year old David, casually dropping the French phrases his mother taught him, and the showy but frightened Arnold, thrilled to find a boy who admired him.

If David had been a little older, his friendship with Arnold would not have remained innocent. But as it stood, the most they achieved was some boyish familiarity while wrestling, there was a good deal of wrestling for sport, and once, just once, a lingering kiss on the mouth, quite accidentally, when David slipped and would have hit the ground if Arnold hadn’t caught him. Arnold caught him, saving him from hitting the pavement and holding him just a moment too long, long enough to look into his eyes and move toward his mouth and put his mouth on David’s, while David, dependent on being held by Arnold for stability, first tensed and then relaxed, relaxed into the kiss, the first kiss that sealed the bargain.
Chapter 2

Joan

By the time Joan Palmer arrived in Washington, she was too late. Her father was already gone from his deathbed.

"He would not have wanted to be cremated," Joan insisted, "I don't want him cremated. I hate the idea. He was my father, after all," she adds, as if that would matter.

"It's what he wanted, Joan," Roberta replied, so tired herself she could barely talk. "He put it in writing. Really, he did."

Joan demanded to see the document. Roberta called Malcolm Marshall. She handed Joan the phone leaving her alone to speak to Marshall who confirmed that he had a document signed by her father.

"It is quite explicit, Joan" Marshall said, "He wanted to be cremated. He did not want any funeral service. If Roberta wishes, she can hold a memorial service at some time in the future."

"He never said a word to me about it," Joan insisted.

"Well, you know what a private person your father was," Marshall said. Private person? Joan thought? So private I barely knew him.

David’s first wife, Sharon, died when Joan was 12. It was not surprising that Joan fixated on her father as the only parent left, and for a while David was present and fatherly to Joan. But it was not really his style. Just before David met Roberta, he decided to send Joan to boarding school, so away she went only to discover upon her return home, that she had been replaced by Roberta. The Beautiful Roberta had not only taken her Mother’s place but her place in her father’s life as well.

They rarely spoke of her mother. Only once, several months before David died, did he mention Sharon. They were sitting in his home office in the late afternoon. Joan, home for the weekend from boarding school, was reading in the chair opposite his desk. The sun filtered through the Venetian shades, and she shifted in her chair, squinting to avoid the glare.

"You look just like her," he said. "Remarkable, really, the resemblance. Do not squint, Joan; it is bad for your eyes. Your mother needed glasses—too vain, she was always too vain," he added.

She was afraid he might cry he looked so sad. The moment passed. She could not muster the courage to ask if she could live with him or to tell him she was unhappy, so terribly unhappy, and afraid of being left again.
When David married Roberta a brief year after Sharon’s death, Joan knew she was on shaky ground. She felt herself a guest in her Father’s home, lucky to have a roof over her head for a weekend before returning to boarding school. There was some secret, she believed, some dreadful thing that must be kept buried for all their sakes. He had loved her mother once, of that she was sure. When Sharon died, it broke his heart. Joan, who knew she resembled her mother, thought that perhaps she brought Sharon with her when she came. No wonder he was sad and distant.

She barely breathed during those weekends visits with her father. She was behind enemy lines, sweating it out until she could make her escape. No noise, please, even the pounding of her heart might set off some hidden land mine and blow them all to kingdom come. It was all up to her. If she kept her wits about her, her mouth shut, something might be salvaged.

Now David was dead, her last chance to discover the secret buried with him.

Joan blamed Roberta for that, too. For the fast shuffle to the oven, obliterating David, denying him the resting place next to her mother, which she knew he had already reserved. She found Roberta lying down in her bedroom.

“What happened?” she asked, sitting down on the corner of the bed, keeping her distance.

Roberta was holding a damp cloth to her forehead.

"God, I’ve got the worst headache,” Roberta took a deep breath, expelling it slowly. "Around ten or so last night, your father said he wasn’t feeling well. He looked terrible, as if he was going to collapse. So I called a doctor, a new one your father was seeing.”

"Why was he seeing a new doctor?"

"I’m not sure, but he was.”

"But I thought his cancer was in remission.”

"It is, it was. I guess it came back. I don’t know how that happens. I don’t think anybody knows.”

"Just like that, in a day?”

"Not in a day but suddenly. Joan, I just don’t know why that happens. But it does. Anyway, the doctor came, examined your father, and said he should go to the hospital. Nevertheless, your father refused. He absolutely refused to go.”

"Why? Why would he refuse?”

"God, my head. I don’t know why, Joan. It is all very confusing, it all happened very quickly. He just got sicker in the night and died. Can we talk about this a little later? My head is killing me. Why don’t you lie down for a while or have some breakfast.”
I’ll talk to her later, Roberta thought, when I’m not so tired, when my head isn’t throbbing so badly.

For weeks after David died, Roberta called frequently. "I wish you would come down for a while, Joan. It must be very lonely for you there," Roberta said.

"Not at all. I’m pretty busy now. Maybe in a few weeks," Joan replied. Her relationship with Roberta had always been strained. It was a relief now to be exempt from any pretense of a connection between them.

Before her father died, Joan contemplated returning to college. She had dropped out after two years, bored and intimidated.

Her request to Wellesley for readmission remained propped on her desk. With David dead, there seemed no urgent reason to return to college.

Joan remained cloistered in the New York apartment, watching television, creating a scrapbook of her father’s death notices. She was deciding what to do next.

It was not that Joan had no friends. Her telephone book was filled with the numbers of classmates and other friends from her childhood. It was only when she leafed through it, there did not seem to be anyone around whom she felt comfortable calling.

She had not kept up with her friends; they all seemed too distant and calling too much an admission of failure. She was hurt that she received no calls at all when David died, not even from her former roommate. A good thing, she thought that her father had drummed into her the importance of what he called "inner resources."

"Depend only on yourself," he told her, "and while you will occasionally be disappointed, at least you will have only yourself to blame." She had long since learned to guard against rejection. Such defense training can be habit forming.

Joan brooded about her father’s death. In some ways, David’s death had little reality. She did not see her father often and sometimes did not even speak to him for weeks. Now, she had the sense that he was simply gone away on business.

How could it have happened so fast? He was well—she is certain of that—just two days before he died.

Joan wondered if she would hear from Congressman Marcia Baker, for whom she had until recently been working as an intern. Joan had her own small office. The other staff gently teased her and treated her like a mascot; she was content.

That brief interlude with Marcia had been one of the happiest of Joan’s life. Maybe now that she was an orphan, Marcia would take her back.
She perused *The York Times* for jobs and thought about writing a book—perhaps a biography of her father or a photo collection of her mother. She started a film script based on her father’s life. She consulted several manuals on script writing but decided that writing was a gift, that it cannot be learned.

On Thursday, when *TV Guide* was delivered, she circled the movies she hoped would inspire her. Her days and nights were meticulously programmed around the timing of the movies she selected.

The largest television in the apartment—there are five in all—is in her father’s den. It is here that she arranges herself for the days viewing. Reclining in an old Eames chair, a table at her side, she keeps a pad and pen handy for detailed notes. A small refrigerator built into the bar is stocked with diet coke, non-fat cookies, and a bag of chocolate kisses. She tries to limit herself to five kisses a day, slowing sucking the chocolate, leaving her mouth coated with a fragrant residue of sweetness.

In the den where she spends so much of her day, framed pictures of her father with foreign dignitaries adorn the walls. He is more absent than dead, she thinks, wondering if there would come a time when she will cry. She drifts through the days, secure in her programming choices, her intermittent note taking, her simple preparation of meals. Everything is scheduled. In the morning, after she determines her day’s movie schedule, she plans her day’s menus. It is important to know what she is going to eat. She does not approve of falling back on ordering pizza.

She walks for an hour every day in Central Park. Her uniform: a white tee shirt and blue shorts. She listens to calypso tapes on her iPod, punches her stopwatch when she has jogged long enough to get her heartbeat elevated, and continues for precisely one hour.

Joan remembers sorrow; she mourned for years after her mother died. She has not yet grieved for her father. I am an unnatural daughter, thin of flesh, hollow of heart, she thinks.

As the weeks pass and Joan stitches together the few facts she knows about her father’s death, about his troubled relations with Roberta, her suspicions harden. Something is wrong, and she is sure of it. Something is wrong. She knows what she knows, what she heard with her own ears, two days before David died.

Joan had flown down to Washington to have lunch, or so she thought, with Marcia Baker. Instead of lunch, there was only a misunderstanding. Sol Markowitz, Marcia’s chief of staff, came out to the reception area to greet her. He seemed perplexed. “I’m sorry, Joan, but Marcia is tied up in committee hearings. Are you sure she said lunch today?”
“I spoke to her secretary yesterday” Joan insisted, “She said Marcia was free for lunch today.”

Free for lunch but not for you, Sol thought.

“I flew down especially to see her,” Joan added, a little too vehemently.

“Gosh, I am sorry. I know she will be disappointed. You remember what it is like when those hearings go on forever?” Sol said, hoping to soothe her.

Joan went to a movie. When she got out, she was restless. I’ll stop by Dad’s, she thought, and spend the night there. It was dusk as she approached David and Roberta’s townhouse. Joan had a key. She let herself into the house and immediately heard loud voices shouting. They’re fighting again, she thought. She heard Roberta wail; she was sobbing. Joan was frozen in the moment. Something about this fight, the intensity of Roberta’s pleas caused her to want to flee. But she listened to their argument; her father as furious as she has ever heard him and Roberta, heartbroken about something, sounding as if she hated David. That’s it, she thought, they hate each other. No surprise there, Joan had suspected this for some time. Her father’s frequent absences, Roberta’s barely suppressed anger--this marriage would never last.

Roberta, Joan decided, was to blame for David’s death.

Although Roberta had been calling her, urging her to visit, Joan believed that implicit in her stepmother’s attentions was the desire to keep Joan from telling—to keep the secret. Joan was certain Roberta knew that Joan suspected her. She certainly knew that Joan had never accepted her, barely tolerated her.

Joan was going to tell. She knew it. She was tired of living in the shadow of the secret.

The secret was like death itself, an overarching truth that must be faced down. She must find the courage, the strength to do the right thing.

She vacillated for three months. Determined and certain one moment, frightened and confused the next.

Who would believe her? Whom should she tell? Has she left it too long? They would want to know why she had not come forward immediately. She had no answer for that, except the fear that she would not be believed.
Roberta

Roberta was surprised when New York’s Governor George Goodwin called to ask her if she would be willing to serve out David’s term. "It’s only for a little more than a year," he said, “but, if you would like it, I feel it’s the appropriate thing to do.”

"Well," Roberta said, "I’ll have to think about it, of course, but it sounds like something I’d like to do."

"I hoped you would say that, my dear," Goodwin sighed, “such a loss. I can’t begin to tell you how this has affected all of us. So sudden, so swift.” Goodwin paused. "So brutally unjust. Made us all the more conscious of our own mortality. So little time to do all that one wishes."

"Yes," Roberta interrupted, "so true. Thank you so much for your kind thoughts, and I’ll call you very soon about this."

Ever the Pol, Roberta thought, Goodwin could not resist delivering a speech. Goodwin and David had locked horns on many occasions: bitter public quarrels, David representing the social liberals, Goodwin the conservatives. Insults, backbiting, misrepresentations, outright lies were momentarily buried after the election when they vowed to work together for the good of all New Yorkers.

Roberta called Maxine Chertoff, president of MEOW (Money Elects Our Women), "What’s this about?" she asked Maxine.

Really?” Maxine says. "The bastard. I’ll give you my opinion. He does not want to appoint either Larry Marchand or Harry Reilly; they’re both after the Republican nomination to run for David’s seat. It’s about saving the seat for one of them. That’s what it’s about. The Governor doesn’t want to appear to favor one over the other. They’re both good friends, so he figures he’ll appoint you and let them fight it out in a primary. If he thought you were a viable candidate, he wouldn’t even consider appointing you. He thinks you will disappear after you serve out David’s term. He was in deep shit with women and this would give him some cheap brownie points, especially since you have such a high profile. He looks bi-partisan when we all know he is as partisan a Republican as they come. Even the hit he will take from his own party will work to his advantage in his reelection campaign where he needs women. So, he plays bi-partisan hero by appointing the Democratic widow who is no threat. He thinks you will be a placeholder maybe even fuck up, leaving it more likely that either Marchand or Reilly will be elected. Actually, Roberta, it’s basically an insult. Too clever by half, if you ask me.”

"I think I’d like to do it." Roberta said.
"You bet you would. Listen, you call him right back and tell him you are delighted. I have a few ideas of my own."

"Like what?"

"Let’s see how you like being in the Senate. Then we’ll talk. Look, Roberta, this is a terrific opportunity, handed to you on a platter. Just because they see this as marking time doesn’t mean it has to be that way. It wouldn’t be the first time a politician’s widow was launched into politics."

“You know, Roberta, David and George Goodwin didn’t get along so well,” Maxine added.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Roberta said, remembering David’s disgust with the Governor. David thought Goodwin was a conservative tool, always willing to rob the poor and middle class to enrich the already rich. David thought he was mean on taxes, stupid on welfare, constantly looking for the one poor slob who actually did abuse the system and parading that fellow out in public until he was torn to shreds. Sure, some small percentage of the people gamed the system, got something for nothing, but it wasn’t worth throwing out the entire social safety net.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little hard on the guy?” Roberta asked David.

“No, I don’t” David replied. “Look, he has supported every move the President and his band of warmongering creeps have made, costing this country not only thousands of lives, and millions in treasure but perhaps our moral authority—not perhaps, definitely. No one respects us anymore, too much military corruption, too many people getting rich on the backs of the middle class, No mercy for anyone, even here in the U.S; no compassion for our poor, our sick, our elderly. And he got rich; when he got to the Governor’s office he was worth maybe half a million tops. Take a look now; he is good for more than 10 million, in six years. How did he get that? How in six years as Governor did he accumulate that kind of wealth? One day it will all go public, the contracts with the so called “Consultants,” the fast bucks made on so called improvements to our infrastructure, the deals he has fast tracked, the shadow PACs he has encouraged, it’s not only corrupt, it’s criminal. One day it will be exposed. I just hope I live that long.

“When it bursts, all the sordid facts will come out, like water torture, dripping on all of us. Goodwin can tread water for a while but the rest of us will be drenched in salacious details. I’m not the only one that feels this way, believe me. There are plenty of us who know exactly what he is about.“ David was adamant.
"Goodwin will be thrilled to have you appointed," Maxine reiterated. "You’re actually one of the few people in our party who isn’t on the record calling him out."

Maxine hated George Goodwin. He was, she believed, a venal man, indifferent to the needs of working people, insensitive to minorities and dismissive of MEOW. He wanted to be President; they all wanted to be President. From the moment they were elected, from Sheriff to Senator, they fancied themselves presidential material. The very idea of George Goodwin as president nauseated Maxine. She’d been trying to outsmart him for years. This little maneuver with Roberta might give her just that opportunity.

Senator Roberta Palmer, Roberta liked the sound of it. Even if it was only for a few months, it would distract her.

Since David’s death, Roberta has found herself rootless. Her daily walks become long excursions of window-shopping, her emotional meandering is melancholy. Both are circular. She seemed to have no place, no profession, or calling, no one who even cares.

I have been here before, she thinks, remembering her early years. Then she wanted to travel, to escape from the tedium and the quiet of home.

After Roberta graduated from Hunter, where she took a liberal arts degree, English major Home Economics as a minor, she applied to American Airlines. “Too tall,” they told her. How can you be too tall to serve meals on a plane? “Regulations,” they said. “You have to be less than 5’6’.” So, that dream was finished, and marriage, the real dream, was nowhere in sight.

Still a virgin, still going to movies every Friday night with girlfriends—those who were not getting married, who were left,

By the time she was 23 she had bridesmaid burnout. She went to one single’s weekend at the Grossingers, to Bermuda with her parents, and summer shares in the Hamptons.

She dated, but not often. She tried to be pleasing, but she was inept. What do people talk about, she wondered. She watched other couples in the movie line, engrossed in conversation. She could not think of anything to say to her infrequent dates. She seemed to attract the quiet men who also didn't know what to say. Those years of strained dating exhausted her.

She thought about moving. She earned enough now as a secretary in the English Department of Columbia University, but she was lethargic, depressed. It all seemed like too much trouble.

At 24, she had saved enough for a trip to Europe. At the last minute her friend Amy, with whom she had planned to go, canceled.
So Roberta went alone. London, Paris, Rome, and Jerusalem. Observing the flight attendants on the plane, she envied them. That was the life she wanted. They chatted easily with passengers, and each other, they seemed to be having a fine time.

She imagined she would meet people somehow. That’s what happened on these trips. One met people, fell in with people. In museums, in restaurants, in bookshops. One heard some English spoken and turned to chat. That led to plans to go to Versailles, to Oxford, to dinner.

She tried. She struck up conversations with people in cafes, in hotel lobbies, in buses. She ended up alone every night, eating alone in small restaurants, sleeping alone in a small single room, booking a single seat for the theater, for a bus tour. It broke her spirit, that trip to Europe. More than anything else, it was destroying her confidence.

What was wrong with her that she was always alone? Too tall? No, surely not that. Too quiet, maybe, but she just needed someone to help her, to bring her out a little. She dressed fashionably, she had nice hands, lovely eyes, gleaming honey hair. I want it too much, she finally decided. They sense that, all these people, they know I want it so much. Just to be included, to move out of the silence. The more she tried to relax, the more tense she became.

By the time she got to Jerusalem, she had given up. She was to spend three days in Israel and then fly home. The first day, in the old city, she met Ari. Fast talking, dark skinned, handsome, he approached her and asked her if she was from New York.

"Why, yes, I am," she said.
"Thought so. Alone?"
"Yes."

Ari smiled, bowed slightly from the waist, held out his hand.
"I'm Ari Levy, your guide." He said, bowing slightly.

She hesitated, but only for a moment. How bad can it be, she thought, as Ari led her around the narrow streets of the old city.

Later, he took her for lunch and, in an old VW bug, around the city. His English was good, although she missed some of what he said. She didn't like to ask him to repeat himself, so she wasn't quite sure if he was a student or a professional guide. She didn’t care.

He told her he would pick her up for dinner. She was afraid he wouldn't show. He was early, grabbing her hand, out the hotel door to the waiting bug.

When the check came, he looked at her and said, "You have money? Or better yet, plastic?"

"Of course," she said, taking the check.
“Ok, I like you, so I charge you only $50 a day for tour plus meals including gas.”

“How much would it be if you didn’t like me?” Roberta asked.

“It’s too much? Okay. $40.”

Roberta hesitated.

"$30, come on. $30 is fair." Ari insisted.

For $30 day, plus meals, eaten in inexpensive local restaurants, Roberta finally had a companion.

She enjoyed herself. After the initial surprise about the money, Ari turned out to be bright, engaging, energetic, and kind.

The last evening he took her to a small Arab restaurant where he was greeted warmly.

He ordered for her, as he usually did. “This is on me," he announced magnanimously, when the wine was served.

Ari was a college student, a guide, and a taxi driver. He was studying engineering at The Hebrew University, saving money to go to New York. He talked about himself, his large family, and his plans. He liked Roberta. She listened well. People stopped by their table, greeting Ari. "This is my friend Roberta from New York.” He would say.

“So,” he said, as they finished their meal on that last evening, "you had good time?"

"Yes, very good time."

"You have boyfriend in New York?"

"No, not at the moment."

Ari took her hand, shades darker than hers, “You are nice person, Roberta,” he said seriously. “One day you come back here, to Israel, with boyfriend. You should get boyfriend.”

He was rubbing her thumb; she thought he was perhaps just slightly high from the wine.

"I visit you in New York," he continued," Okay?"

“Okay,” she smiled.

He’s flirting with me, she thought. Can it be he’s attracted to me. Slightly high on the wine herself, she began to fantasize staying on for a little while in Israel. She liked Ari and sitting here now, she thought he liked her too. Even as her daydreams persisted, the cynical side of her recognized the cliché: American tourist and Israeli guide. She was by nature a romantic and even realizing the absurdity of her fantasy did not tame her longing for love.

She wondered how her parents would react if she told them she was remaining in Israel. With Ari as a teacher, she would quickly pick up Hebrew
and get a job at the American Embassy. She and Ari would live together, of course. They could live in one of the apartments overlooking the old city, meet friends for drinks at the American Colony Hotel in the Arab quarter every Friday, and entertain friends from home who would be unable to hide their envy and amazement at the remarkable life Roberta had created for herself.

“Want to see my room?” Ari asked guardedly.

Roberta thought, Oh boy, this is crazy; it’s one thing to pay for a guide, but to pay him for sex.

“How much will that cost me?” she said lightly.

He looked offended, opened his mouth in surprise. “Ah, Roberta, you kidding. Now I off duty,” he kissed her hand. “Now we are just friends.”

So Roberta went with Ari to the small room he rented in a rooming house, near the university.

As usual, Ari kept up a lively stream of conversation, pointing out more sights as they drove to his house.

She was nervous but committed. She thought she knew what to expect. She had read enough books, novels, spent enough time talking about sex with girlfriends. Necked, petted, masturbated, she did not really feel herself a novice.

When Ari undressed her, unfastened her sensible bra, removed her cotton underpants, she felt only slightly embarrassed. He had reverted to Hebrew; perhaps he was telling her she was lovely. He kissed her, maneuvered her onto his single bed, and began to stroke her thigh. It certainly felt nice, she admitted to herself. Pleasant, warm feeling, as if her blood was moving faster, snake blood, circulating faster now, pulsing through her system.

Ari stopped. He was smiling, his dark head moving down her body, one hand under her, cupping her buttocks. His tongue darted out, licking her, leaving traces of wet down her belly. His tongue did the rest. “Oh my God,” she said, and gave herself over to the first real passion she had ever known.

“I could stay a few more days,” she offered.

“Why?” he asked.

“Well,” she stammered, “to get to know each other better.”

“Ah, but I have another tour tomorrow,” Ari replied. “I’ll come to visit you in New York,” he said again.

“You won’t really, will you?” she asked.

Ari shrugged. “Right now I’ll bring you back to your hotel and pick you up in a few hours in time for your flight.”

Mortified, Roberta said No. She would make her own way.

Later, as she packed, she was almost feverish with humiliation. Her yearning for romance had overcome her good sense. She was nothing to Ari; it was just
another mundane encounter for him. Europe was over, the saving, the planning, the expectations all over. This trip, which was supposed to be some kind of breakthrough was over. She was ordinary, not even attractive enough to enthral an Israeli guide.

Settling into her aisle seat on El Al for the long flight home, the man seated next to her asked her if she would mind changing seats with him. "I missed my flight. Late. I’m lucky to get on this flight but I hate window seats," he explained. "I can’t help myself looking out and it terrifies me."

Martin Porak, heir to the Porak publishing empire and managing editor of Outlook, the newest entry into the quasi-feminist women’s market, was traveling in Israel scouting locations and interviewing Israeli feminists for an upcoming feature article.

It was his intention to fill what he perceived as a void in the market with a magazine for women that combined a traditional emphasis on style, features on diet, and fashion, with at least one major article each issue on a subject of interest to the growing feminist movement.

Martin was both alcoholic and gay, the only person Roberta ever met who was a better listener than she was. By the time they landed in Amsterdam for a four hour stopover, they had exchanged life stories.

Roberta poured out her heart to Martin. Assured of a sympathetic audience, she told Martin about Ari, laughing now about her unrequited romantic notions, about her futile efforts for self-improvement, the lotions and potions, her search for an elixir that would make her beautiful.

"Roberta, my dear girl," Martin said, holding her chin with one hand and brushing out her hair with his fingers, “You are a fine woman, yes, even beautiful. All you lack is confidence."

"But my teeth," Roberta exclaimed.

"They will start a craze. Women will pay anything to have such a charming space."

He wasn’t kidding. Martin had a keen eye, a sure instinct for packaging. He had a hunch about Roberta. He noticed as she made her way down the long aisle to the bathroom that she attracted attention. Her coloring was magnificent, a natural peach complexion enhanced by burnished hair. It was 1991, the search for the classic unblemished beauty was over. People wanted a more natural icon now, one to whom they could relate. Roberta had a robust yet vulnerable quality. Martin, accustomed to following his impulses, was certain that with the kind of expert guidance he could provide, Roberta could be a star.

He encouraged Roberta to call him and when she did he arranged for a photo session. When he saw the proofs, he knew he had a winner.
It's a rare quality, the ability to outwit the camera. Most people struggle all their lives in a losing battle to take a good picture. For some few, the camera is a friend. It was for Roberta.

She saw it too.

She never flinched. With Martin at her side coaching, Roberta exploited every opportunity. Martin gave Roberta her first break by using her to promote one of his magazines. She was signed by Model Models, a small but aggressive agency. She began doing trade shows and catalogues. Seven months into her new career, she got her first cover.

Martin wanted more for her. It was not enough to simply model. He'd seen too many girls finished in their twenties. "You have to be more," he said to her.

"More? What more? I like this," she said.

"More," he replied. "I'm just not sure what exactly."

The answer presented itself in an issue he was planning as a follow up to his first, highly successful article on Israeli and American feminists.

He was returning to Israel to shoot Israeli models and conceived the idea of a dialogue between Roberta and Hanna Glass, the top Israeli model, entitled "BEAUTY: TRIUMPH OR TRAP?"

It was out on the stands a month later. Roberta was dressed in Israeli Army fatigues on the cover. Inside the magazine, Roberta modeled Israeli fashions, a skimpy swimsuit and an evening dress.

The text was lively, the two models amusing in their observations about themselves and the world of high fashion and small budgets.

Within twelve months, Roberta was immensely popular, not only as a model but also as a celebrity participant on talk shows and game shows. She was surprisingly adroit at television interviews. After so many years of feeling ignored, she enjoyed answering questions, perked up when her opinion was sought.

She overcame her shyness with her outspoken observations. She said the kind of things other people repressed. The talk show hosts liked her. She did not challenge them; she didn't make a fuss about things. The booking agents liked her too, if she was bumped, she came back another time.

She was, in a sense, simply a conduit for the inane and banal discourse that television and popular magazines heralded as entertainment; a perfect foil for talk show anchors. As her career thrived, she was surrounded by people all the time. Photographers coaxing her, designers dressing her, hairdressers, masseurs, manicurists, her personal trainer. She went to movie premiers, theater openings. She loved partying, was indiscriminate in accepting invitations.

Her quiet years were over.

She was, at first, attracted by all the noise.
She met Maxine Chertoff when they appeared together on an afternoon talk show. Maxine liked her. They had lunch and became friends. Roberta agreed to help with MEOW’s fundraising, to join its board of directors.

By the time she met David Palmer, Roberta had grown accustomed to the attention of powerful men. As her celebrity grew, she evoked all kinds of reactions: sophisticated charming notes from financiers, inept passes from assistant directors, promises of trips, jewels, and exotic sex from an array of men. It was too easy; Roberta developed a resistance and then revulsion to the men who pursued her. Such indifference is provocative. It served to whet the appetites of her would-be suitors.

One man she had dated for a long time, Jeff Stone, kept calling her “a treasure.” It irritated her to be thought of that way. She could not rid herself of the sense that her value was illusory, transitory. She was an investment for men who traded in the currency of cover girls, models, and actresses. She was constantly in danger of being devalued or degraded or being caught in the free fall of a market crash. At the same time, perhaps not totally aware of the trap she set for herself; she was increasingly bored with the rituals necessary to preserve her looks. Vanity was the tool of her trade. She took nothing for granted.

Such confidence as Roberta had acquired needed constant bolstering. Martin gave her that, but he was gay. She was waiting for a man who understood the fragility of her celebrity. Throughout it all, the silent years at home, the hypnotic loneliness of her girlhood, the boisterous dazzle of her years as a model, Roberta remained essentially tongue tied at her core.

When she met David Palmer she hoped his sharp eyes would penetrate the frenzy and return her to a quiet place.

David’s Story

David’s inner life was always in turmoil. His persona was deceptive; he was impeccably dressed, always in charge. He was a man who had both feet firmly planted and was bound for success. But, in fact, it was the anxiety that made him know he was alive.

He was 18 when he had his first encounter. He always thought of it as rape, but was it really? David was walking home late at night from a college party, one of those dumb parties where bad gin mixed with diet coke and people rolled their own cigarettes, tobacco or pot. He was a little high, not much, just enough to feel a slight buzz. Walking across the park, he noticed a handsome fellow sitting...
on a bench, smoking and listening to a radio with one earplug. As he passed him, David murmured "good music?"

The guy, whose name was Tully, handed him the earplug and said, "take a listen for yourself."

It was surprisingly easy. First, Tully engaged him in some banal conversation. Then, Tully said he would like to see David "more comfortable," as he slowly unbuttoned David's shirt.

From there, David felt he was in a dream. Tully gently touched his nipple, rubbed his breasts, and David was gone, he just floated away. They skirted around the bench to the bank of trees, and Tully laid David down, opening his belt, whispering to him all the while, how handsome he was, how soft, how manly, how exciting. David said nothing until Tully, head bent, took David in his mouth. Nothing had ever felt like this, the smooth mouth, a hint of teeth, moving over and around his dick. He thought he would come right away, but Tully, experienced, withdrew and made him wait and made him ask for it and, then at last, made him come. Tully sat back and smiled.

"First time?" Tully asked, David, unable to speak, just nodded. "Thought so," Tully smiled. "Lucky you, " Tully began to rub his dick. David watched, fascinated, as Tully's dick grew long and hard. "Lesson two," Tully said, moving his hand to David's head, gently pushing it down.
Chapter 4

Roberta

A year after Sharon died Roberta met David Palmer. She was on location in Jamaica shooting a commercial advertising a line of cosmetics—guaranteed to protect against the sun, erase dark lines and shadows, and conceal sunspots.

She had made a fortune walking just so in the famous designer houses of Paris, Milan, London. This time, however, she stumbled slightly, was forced to stop for a second to recover her balance.

Shit, she thought, what is wrong with me?

By the time they met for dinner, several hours later, she had figured it out. In some way this man had nicked the armor of self-assurance which shielded her thin defenses. Here was another man come to her out of a fantasy. She was only slightly relieved at her diagnosis. She had the feeling that if she could not repair the damage quickly, this very evening, she might fall once again into a destructive daydream.

They spent most of the week together; between dances they shared confidences. She knew she was sunk. She simply did not have time to regroup, with the shoot taking up so much of her time and seeing David every free moment.

On their third evening together, he told her about Sharon. “I never planned on remarrying.”

"Why not? You’re rather young to give up on marriage."

“Let’s just say I did not think I would do well marrying again. I never want to go through what I went through with Sharon. Never.”

"It was an awful tragedy. She was very young."

He let it go. In time he would tell her the rest. There was something about this woman he was sure he could trust. In time, he thought, I will tell her everything.

“Afraid of commitment?” Roberta asked.

He thought this over.

"Not in the way you mean, not afraid to make the commitment."

He saw Roberta as an innocent, an accidental beauty who had never learned to swim with the sharks. He was attracted to her tranquility, her calm manner, her quiet center. He felt he needed that, a restful place, a safe harbor for his nomadic soul. He was tired of running.
After a few days, he knew he wanted this woman. He did not trouble to analyze it. What was the point? He had found a woman who made him feel safe the way Sharon had.

Perhaps with Roberta by his side he would be less lonely, protected from the demons that plagued him since he was a boy.

David Palmer did not have to stand with the crowd admiring an icon. He could have it wrapped and taken home.

He needed only those few days to determine that his instinct was correct. When she was not working, rehearsing or actually shooting, they spent all their time together. They did the tourist things, swam, looked at waterfalls, played tennis, and rode horses to local villages.

She carried a small purse with her, a mirror, a comb, lipstick. After she swam, she ran the wide toothed comb through her hair; she reapplied lipstick when they stopped their horses to cool them down. Those were the only signs of vanity he observed.

She asked him many questions about his life, about politics. She replied in kind, relating a spare dossier of her own past. When they parted for the evening, she exhibited no anxiety about their next meeting. He had the feeling that if he had simply dropped her, never saw her again, it would not matter much to her. But when he asked "Tomorrow?" she did not hesitate, simply responded, "Lovely, tomorrow at 4."

Alone in his suite, he did not feel the customary relief he usually felt after a date. Instead he felt uneasy, impatient to see her again. He refrained from midnight calls, from sending flowers. He bought her no presents, and was deliberately spare with compliments. He knew it was a test; he might have done much more. He was not romantic; he never kissed her, never held her hand.

He waited to see if she would take the initiative or perhaps start hinting about his apparent lack of demonstrative affection.

Nothing, she never said a word. She was the same: cheerful, pleasant, and glad to see him.

On a moonlit night in Ocho Rios, dining al fresco on the terrace of his suite, David asked Roberta to marry him.

"But I hardly know you," she said frowning,
"Nonsense, don't be so conventional. You know me. Perhaps you don't love me, but you know me."
"It's true," she said, "I do. But how can it be? It's just too short a time. We haven't even..."
"Right, not even," he smiled. "Did you think I was uninterested or gay?"
"No, but I did wonder."
“I wanted us to wait. I don’t believe in casual sex.”
“You think we’ll get along in bed?” Roberta asked playfully.
“Marry me?” he asked again.

Roberta was thirty. While she still had a year to go on her contract, she knew she was nearing the end of her modeling career. It took too long these days to perfect her make-up, too much deprivation to keep her weight down. It was time to quit, time to leave as well the facile world of talk shows. People who talk too much eventually appear pathetic. If she married David Palmer, this handsome prince of D.C., she could shut up.

He had come at just the right time. She knew he would ease the transition for her. In a sense she was simply exchanging one kind of celebrity for another. As for love, she felt a strong attraction to David. His restraint, particularly his ability to enjoy, as she did, comfortable silences impressed her. Most people she knew could not do that. Any void in the conversation was filled with banal observations. She had never been in love, but she imagined it started this way, with attraction and companionable silences. He was taken with her, his excitement palpable; she responded in kind. After a few days, she felt it herself. She could hardly wait to see him, and when she did, when she opened the door and he was there, she was relieved. By the end of the week, she was afraid he would lose interest in her. When she told him she wanted to retire from modeling, he said, "Good. It’s time." He did not want her for luster or trophy.

“Yes,” she said. "It’s crazy, but I’ll marry you."

When she said that, yes, he felt a tenderness begin to flow through him, and then a sense that he had, at last, become indemnified against pain.

Should he tell her? Not yet. One day he would; for now it was enough.

They made love that night. He knew her combinations right from the start, as if he had spent long years exploring her best places, perfecting the precise degree of pressure, which would unleash her.

She made love, as he knew she would, accepting all he had to offer, demanding nothing more. What he was, what he did, was enough for her.

When it was her turn, when she stirred herself to make love to him, he lay still, the beneficiary of her passion. She made love to him by satisfying herself, doing what she wanted and needed to achieve her own pleasure. Neither of them asked if this or that was good, or do you like this, or is this a good place. They each took what they wanted, gave what they wanted, to please themselves.

They did not instruct each other or otherwise seek to channel the other’s instinctive need for pleasure. It was exactly what he wanted. He had found a woman who accepted what he had to give, without reservation. A suitable replacement for Sharon.
He held her very close when it was over for just a moment; he knew she was eager to refresh herself, to bathe, to brush her hair, to slip on a fresh gown.

She returned from the bathroom, a hint of perfume on her shoulder, draped in a white silk gown.

Outside their room, there were the country sounds, the cacophonous chirping of the crickets, a shrill rooster, bleating goats. The air conditioner wheezed its cool breath; Roberta laid her head on David’s chest, listening to the faint cadence of his snore as he fell asleep. For hours, Roberta drifted between wakefulness and sleep content to rest in David’s arms while she planned the rest of her life.

David arranged for a deaf translator to be present at their wedding. A nice touch, Roberta thought, and a good start for their marriage.

In keeping with his recent bereavement, David wanted a small wedding, just a dozen of their closest friends, Roberta’s immediate family, and Joan, of course. There was to be no press.

The morning of the wedding, which took place at David’s Georgetown house, Roberta awoke to find a horde of reporters on their front lawn.

"Shit," David said, pulling down the window blind. He dressed quickly and went out to talk to them. David regarded the press with a jaundiced eye. He had a healthy respect for their ability to distort, to manipulate. Over the years, he tried to maintain a cordial relationship with them.

Knowing that they would not respond to any plea for privacy, he negotiated an informal agreement for two pool photographers, two reporters who would share with the rest. He promised to make Roberta available for a photo in her wedding dress. "Just don’t turn this into a circus," he warned.

Roberta watched from their bedroom window. She could not hear what he was saying, but she could see the reaction of the press. David, posing for pictures, was laughing, charming them. No hint of the rage he felt at this intrusion in his affable demeanor. He motioned for her to join him, pantomiming a camera with his hands. She slipped on a tee shirt and jeans and went downstairs.

He held her hand while the cameras clicked, but when they asked the couple to kiss, David, a shy smile on his lips, shook his head and declined.

The wedding went off as planned. Their official wedding photograph made the cover of *Newsday* and *People*. David’s pollster, who had been a little concerned about his marrying only a year after Sharon’s death, was delighted with the first polls after the wedding. David’s popularity was at an all-time high.

In their first year of marriage, Roberta still had modeling commitments to fulfill. Although they lamented the fact that they were frequently separated, Roberta had the sense that their busy schedules served them well. For she had
Sheila Levin discovered that her husband, so seemingly open and candid with the public and the press, was a secretive man at home. He was not disposed to talk about his background or to share with her his deep feelings.

She was hungry for such revelations. She held back nothing, told him, as best as she could, about the hard times of her youth, the pain of her adolescence. She knew that he had lived alone with his mother, after his father abandoned them, that they had been poor, and that David would never take for his wealth for granted.

His life, as he unveiled it to his new wife, seemed to begin in his late 20s, when he bought the company that would eventually lead to the real estate empire he now controlled. When she asked him about his life as a boy, he shrugged her off.

If he had known how to characterize his childhood, how to explain his relationship with his mother, how to articulate his isolation, he would have done so.

One day, perhaps, he thought, he would tell her. One day he would find the right words to satisfy her curiosity.

His official biography noted the absence of his father and the death of his mother. He never said more. When pressed, he related the bare facts of his childhood honestly. His mothers’ single mother status went over well with women voters. Sometimes he talked about her struggle, their early poverty.

Sharon had accepted his reticence to talk about his early years. Roberta was always probing, wanting to know more than he was willing to say.

"Why do you ask so many questions?" he asked her.

"You're a deep man," she said. "I guess I think it will help me to understand you."

"You understand me, honey," he said, "just fine".

By the end of their second year of marriage, Roberta admitted to herself that her husband seemed to be almost pathologically secretive.

She made light of it, teasing him about his reluctance to talk about his emotions.

He was good-natured about it. Only sometimes did he display irritation.

"Honey, do we have a good thing or do we have a good thing?" he asked her.

"We have a good thing," she said laughing.

"Okay. So, leave it at that, will you? I know I am difficult sometimes, but I can’t, I really can’t spill my guts the way you want. Put it down to a natural reserve, but don't keep at me. It doesn't help."

She learned to leave it alone. He would not discuss his early life, his first marriage, his relationship with his daughter. Roberta was disappointed.
In her deaf home, she had learned to decipher the extra sensory communications between her parents, to explicate the abbreviated conversation necessitated by signing. She was adept at translating not only the signing but also the more complex meaning behind it.

When she married David, she looked forward to straightforward talk, long evenings of companionable sharing.

Instead, she felt as she had in her parents’ home. That she had to read the signs, translate, decode her husband's body language, to interpret what he said and what he didn’t say. Stranger still, David took great pains to tell her everything about his daily affairs. He discussed the positions he took on legislation, listened carefully to what she said, as if her opinion mattered.

He talked to her about his business deals, his plans to buy an interactive media company. She certainly could not complain he did not talk to her. He talked so much sometimes that it gave her a headache.

She could not complain either about his generosity. He never questioned her spending, was careful to see to it that she had whatever she wanted.

She could not complain about their sex life, although she privately thought it sparse. David deflected any possible criticism from his wife on that score by praising her beauty and allure.

Roberta noticed that David never made love to her without having had a few drinks. When she asked him about that, he said it relaxed him, encouraged her to do the same. David was modest. He never undressed in front of her, liked her to wear a nightgown even while they made love.

Although there was nothing she could specifically put her finger on, she felt that she was playing a role. Stagecraft defined their life. David wanted the perfect image of wife, lover, and friend. Although their homes were furnished with originals, their marriage felt like a reproduction, a facsimile.

"We live our life as if we were on a stage set, being observed by an audience," she once said to David.

"Well," he said, "we are frequently observed."

"That’s not what I mean. I mean even when we are alone, private, it still feels somehow like a set piece."

"I believe in civility," he answered.

Roberta was unhappy, but she was cautious about revealing her unhappiness to David. She feared he would become angry; she feared too that if she suggested separating he would not oppose it. She knew she needed to be sure before she took that step.
Frequently left behind, she intensified her efforts for MEOW and for other worthy organizations, particularly those working on behalf of the disabled. She entered into his political life as a full partner.

Roberta tried as best she could to befriend Joan; she suggested to David that Joan come to Washington to live with them.

"It wouldn’t work,” David said. "I’m going to run for reelection in a few years, and we’ll both be too busy to pay much attention to her. Anyway, she’s happy where she is. It’s a great school, and she has her friends there. It would be more disruptive, selfish really, to just yank her away from everything familiar.”

How could he tell her the truth? That he could not bear to be around Joan. He saw her resemblance to Sharon growing each year as Joan matured. He saw, too, her neediness. He knew it all too well. He could not satisfy Joan’s yearning to cast him as a loving father. He was a spoiler, a human spoiler. What he could do was buy things, supply things, provide things. Once he too had felt that desire and it had destroyed his mother and almost destroyed him. Joan, he was convinced, would be better off learning to be independent. That was the legacy he wanted to impart.

Roberta knew she should protest that Joan was unhappy and isolated. However, Joan was so unpleasant, so clearly resentful of her, always eager to force confrontation. It was not that Roberta was afraid she might lose but, rather, that she knew Joan would. It was kinder, really, not to force the issue.

David Palmer wanted no reminders of the past. Roberta was content to let it go, although it made her a little uneasy. With David by her side, she had developed perfect pitch. She would not risk such perfect harmony.

Eight years after they were married David was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Although it was in an early stage, she could see he was badly frightened.

He began to sleep in one of the guest bedrooms, ultimately redecorating it as a bedroom for himself, indicating it would be a permanent arrangement.

He would be unable to have sex, he told her. “I can’t ask you to sacrifice so much. If you want to leave me, I’ll understand.”

"Of course not," she said. "I love you. I'll never leave you.”

In some ways, it was a relief. Their sex life had been a worry to Roberta. Now, at least, there was a reason.

She thought that now, sadly, he would need her, turn to her. She wanted to play an active role in his recovery. She read articles on prostate cancer, familiarized herself with current trends in treatment.
But David wouldn’t talk about it and, except for seeing his doctor more frequently, and adding an afternoon nap to his schedule he seemed quite well. Nonetheless, the press got wind of it, and there was a brief flurry of stories. David handled it, and he handled it alone.

Sometimes David came to her at night, slipped into her bed, and relieved her with his hands. When she tried to touch him, he pushed her hand away.

They lived this way for two years until the night David came home and told her the truth—the night that Joan Palmer listened at the library door.

David’s Story

He did not know who gave it to him, it could have been anyone of several lovers. Of course he always used a condom, insisted upon it, but in his heart he knew it was not enough. The juices flowed, out and around, from mouth, from anus, from armpit - really no place was entirely safe. He did not worry unduly, even when casual friends became ill, even when they died. What was the point, he thought, about panicking, one did what one could reasonably do and then depended upon luck. He had always been lucky. Why should it fail him no.?

But it did fail him; it took him by surprise, sitting across from some dyke Doctor who was telling him that they had improved medical cocktails now, that he was in the early stages, if he took care of himself he could live for, well, for quite a while.

He could have killed her, felt no gratitude at all for what he knew she thought was the gentle way to break it to him.

He had been sleeping for almost a year with a writer named Jack, a failed writer but not at all bad. Except in bed, in bed he was bad, very bad. He drank too much, he smoked a lot of hash and he occasionally mainlined some coke. He was by far the hottest and most satisfying lover David ever had. Maybe it was the poetry he spouted, or the utterly abandoned passion he spilled over David. Neither of them was faithful, they didn’t herald it but neither did they hide it. So, it definitely could have been Jack, Jack the writer, whom he would never, ever see again.

Not Jack, not anyone. The HIV was the final segregator; his isolation was now complete. He was not altogether unhappy about that. He could protect himself in his isolation, and he had the best
reason in the world to do so. Now, at least, no one would ever get to him again.
Chapter 5

Joan

“You’ll sit in the first row,” Roberta said when she called Joan to tell her about the memorial service for David three months after his death. “And Joan, if you would like to say a few words, to talk about your Dad, that would be perfectly appropriate,” Roberta continued.

“No, I don’t think I could do that, that’s not for me. But the president, the President is really going to deliver the eulogy?”

“Yes, he called me himself, isn’t it marvelous? Look Joan, come down a few days early; we’ll spend some time together.”

"I'm tied up," Joan said. “I'll come the night before."

The President. Joan smiled. How Daddy would have liked that.

The chapel was filled with dignitaries: senators and congressmen from both sides of the aisle. Several cabinet officers were present, as well as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Joan and Roberta waited in a small anteroom until President Bill Winston arrived. He escorted them into the large chapel, and everyone stood. Joan was dressed in a teal blue suit, Roberta in a simple, form fitting black dress. Joan had been observing Roberta all morning, noticing the fine lines around her eyes, the unnatural pallor of her complexion, the tension in her jaw. What is she hiding, Joan thought. That she is so rigid, so inflexible?

As they entered, Joan noticed Marcia Baker sitting in the third row. She caught her eye, and Marcia smiled and raised her hand in a salute. I should have called her, Marcia thought. However, she associated Joan Palmer with unpleasantness. Marcia had enough to cope with without pursuing trouble.

Marcia Baker had been reluctant to hire Joan when Sol Markowitz, her Chief of Staff, suggested it a year ago.

"Give the kid a job. What does it cost you? She’s willing, will work for practically nothing, and David Palmer will be in your debt," Sol countered.

"Why isn’t she in college like she should be at her age?” Marcia asked.

"Who knows? Who cares? Maybe she just wants a year or two off. It happens. Not everybody has to go to college," Sol said pointedly, always sensitive about his own lack of a degree.

At first, to her surprise, Marcia was pleased. Joan was a quick study. She was a hard worker too, prompt and careful in her work. Joan was assigned the task of generating Marcia’s call lists: lists of people Marcia calls for campaign contributions. It was helpful that Joan had grown up in a political family.

Joan looked through Marcia’s own contributor list and then the fundraising lists filed with the FEC reports of every other Congressperson from New York
Sheila Levin

For new names to call. Since there were no telephone numbers on the filings, she had to look them up and then organize a call list.

During call time, she sat opposite Marcia and placed the calls.

"Hello, is Mr. Smith in for Congressman Baker?" Joan loved doing that, hearing the respectful voice of the secretary. She then took notes on the conversation for follow up (or notes the person was out of town, will call back, is unavailable) and prepared a summary for Trish, Marcia's fundraiser.

Because Marcia could not legally use her congressional office for these calls, she often asked Joan to meet her in her apartment for an hour or two when she had a break.

Because she was sometimes late, she gave Joan a key.

For a few months, everything went smoothly. Marcia knew that Joan admired her; she was childlike in her regard. She noticed that Joan was copying her clothes, emulating her mannerisms.

Since Joan did not seem to mind working nights, they would have a meal together occasionally and make calls between seven and nine. Once when Joan wasn’t feeling well she asked Marcia if she could sleepover at her apartment.

Marcia had just separated from her husband, Jerry; she did not mind the company. She did not want too much time alone to rehearse her past mistakes.

Sometimes on a Saturday, when Marcia had a few hours off, she and Joan went shopping or to a movie.

"That kid is really needy," Sol said to Marcia one day.

"I guess she is, but who wouldn’t be with what she's been through. She's told me about her mother's death. She took care of her while she was dying. Poor kid, I’m surprised David allowed that. Then, just a year later, David married Roberta. She sais Roberta is a real bitch, that she set her sights on David until he agreed to marry her."

"Do you believe that? I don't have that impression of Roberta at all," Sol said.

"No? I do. Look at the way she's ingratiated herself with Maxine Chertoff and that crowd. I mean really, a supermodel as a feminist role model? If that isn't ridiculous, I don't know what is. Besides, I know for a fact that David and Roberta pay almost no attention to Joan. They don't even want her to live with them."

"I still say she's a strange kid," Sol insisted. "If you like her, that's all that counts."

As for Joan, she had never been so content. Marcia needed her; Marcia liked her. She felt that Marcia was more friend than boss. She sensed that Marcia was lonely. Marcia asked her opinion on things, on what to say to potential
contributors. She listened while Marcia rehearsed her speeches, and sometimes Joan retyped them on large cards, which was so much easier for Marcia to read.

Joan resented that people didn’t realize what a good person Marcia was. She had a reputation for being cold, but she wasn’t like that at all. She was shy; that was all—shy, even as shy as Joan. They were alike in so many ways, although of course Marcia was much smarter.

“I heard you’re going to run for the Senate,” Joan said to Marcia one day. “You should be the next woman senator from New York.”

“Well, thanks. That's a long time away, and besides, what if I had to run against your father?”

“Oh, he won’t run. He’s thinking of quitting altogether. With all his money, as he says, what does he need this for?”

“Really? That is interesting.” Marcia replied. She could hardly wait to report this to Sol.

"Joan says David Palmer is thinking of quitting, that he definitely won’t run again against Marchand," Marcia told Sol the next day.

"Oh for Christ’s sake, what a crock. Palmer will run, that much I can tell you. He'll run and he’ll get the nomination, so forget about it. Concentrate on reelection," Sol responded. He was annoyed at the growing relationship between Marcia and Joan.

"She is his daughter," Marcia said.

"She tells you what she thinks you want to hear. She’s got a crush on you or something. I told you she’s a mixed up kid, and now I’m sorry we ever hired her."

"What makes you think that?" Marcia asked Sol, whose opinion on people and interpersonal relations she found to be generally reliable.

"What makes me and everybody else on staff think that is how she acts. She’s always hanging around you."

"That is her job."

"Not on weekends and holidays, not every minute. She imitates you, your clothes and style."

"I have no style," Marcia said dryly.

"Whatever. You know what I mean. A blind person could see she has a crush on you. Look, all I’m saying is don’t lose sight of the fact that she is a kid—not your daughter, not your ward, just a kid working for us. Maybe you should reconcile with Jerry, at least he's a grownup. Wouldn’t be a bad idea for the upcoming campaign anyway."

Marcia thought about it. She missed Jerry. While she was confident of reelection, she dreaded the campaign season. Long hours giving speeches,
attending fundraisers, calling people for money. She might as well plaster her phony smile on her face for the entire six months preceding the election. She needed someone with whom she could let down her guard, someone who would rub her back, with whom she could have adult conversation. She admitted to herself that she missed sex—making love as Jerry called it—especially during the campaign season; she needed that. Joan Palmer was good at many things. She liked Joan but knows she is no substitute for what she wants. She wanted Jerry back.

It wasn’t hard.
Jerry was willing, seemed glad to try again.
"I know it’s not perfect," he said "but if you’ll try, I sure will."
With Jerry home again, Marcia curtailed her time with Joan.
"Just give me the lists, Joan. I’ll make the calls myself."
"But you can’t. It’s not right for you to call personally."
Marcia laughed, "Of course it is. I loved having you do it. I’ll miss you, but that’s a luxury. I can make the calls and keep the notes, so don’t worry."

She asked Joan to return her key. Now she saw Joan only in the office. There are always people waiting to see Marcia, and they rarely had time alone. She had no time for lunch with Joan or for shopping.

Joan blamed Jerry. It must be Jerry who forced Marcia to drop her. That’s what happened: she was just dropped. Likely, Jerry was jealous.

Sometimes, at night, she called Marcia. She hung up when Jerry answered.
"Somebody’s harassing me," Marcia said to Sol, "calling and hanging up, it’s a real nuisance."
"Change your number."
Marcia changed her number to an unlisted one, gave it to her top staff and to Joan, who needed it so she could fax the call lists.

When the annoying calls continued after that, Marcia realized it might be Joan.
"Do you think she would do something like that?" she asked Sol.
"I’m afraid so. I told you she has a crush on you. Now you’re back with Jerry. Well, sorry to say, it makes perfect sense."
"Makes perfect sense if you’re unhinged."
"Well, she is a little unbalanced, don’t you think?"
"Shit. I think you’re right. Gives me the creeps to think about it. Get rid of her, but do it so David doesn’t get mad,” she said. "Oh, and try not to hurt her feelings."
"I imagine David has other things on his mind."
“Like what?”
“Like coping with cancer, like maybe running for the Senate.”

“Well, just do it. Kindly, but do it.”

Joan refused to accept Sol’s story that they have to cut back for financial reasons. She waited for Marcia in the hall as she was leaving her office.

“Marcia, did you know Sol fired me?” Joan asked.

“Well, I know we’re having serious financial problems in the campaign. I didn’t know it would be you. Probably have to let a few others go too.”

“But Marcia, I’ll work for nothing. You know that.”

“I know, dear, but I don’t think that’s such a good idea. It just wouldn’t look right, David Palmer’s daughter working for me for nothing? You see that, don’t you?” Damn Sol, he should have prevented this.

“I’ll give you a terrific reference.”

“I don’t want a reference. I want to stay with you.”

“I want you to stay. Really, I do. It’s just not possible right now. Maybe later, when things heat up, when we have more money.”

“Have I done anything wrong?”

“Not at all. Don’t think that, please. You are the best. It’s just these money problems. You know how it is.”

So Joan leaves the campaign, the calls continue for a week, and then peter out and stop. Joan never blamed Marcia; it wasn’t her fault. Clearly, she had been manipulated by Sol or Jerry.

President Winston sat with Roberta and Joan in the first row, as the minister spoke and an organist played Brahms.

Then the President rose and walked to the podium.

“Friends,” he said, “I feel privileged to be here today to pay tribute to David Palmer because I called David Palmer ‘friend.’ He paused for a moment and turned to Roberta and Joan.

Roberta marveled at how smooth the President was. He was besieged by problems, foreign, domestic, and personal. The never-ending press speculation of his extramarital dalliances had been ignited by a recent picture that gave “going viral” new meaning.

Never know it, she thought, watching him. He seemed to be a man impervious to embarrassment. If only David could have been so courageous, she thought.

“To Roberta Palmer, I want to say how pleased I am that you will be serving out David’s term. I know he would be proud. Roberta, you can count on all of
us here, all of us who knew and respected David, to give you all the support we can. And to Jane Palmer, David’s beloved daughter...."

Joan did not hear the rest. Her throat constricted, her vision blurred, her face was inflamed, saturated with humiliation. JANE JANE JANE, Joan controlled the hysterical laughter building up in her throat. JANE JANE JANE, That’s perfect, she thought. I don’t even exist; I’m no one at all.

Twice more Winston referred to “Jane," and once again at the end of his treacherous speech. He turned to "Roberta and Jane to offer, on behalf of the country, our sincere condolences.”

Roberta moved her hand to cover Joan’s the first time the President said "Jane." Joan shook it off. She did not need or want any comfort from Roberta.

As Winston left, Roberta whispered, "Stupid mistake, just a stupid mistake.”

Congressmen and Senators clustered around Roberta for a last word. Marcia Baker stopped to talk to Joan.

"I’m so sorry," Marcia said to Joan. “Your father was a wonderful man.”

"Thank you, Marcia. Thanks for coming,” Joan replied. "Marcia, there’s something I want to talk to you about. Can I call you later?” She added impulsively.

"Of course you can. You know my number. Try me at about 10 tonight." 

Joan stood alone, watching Marcia dash to her car, watching the people around Roberta offering solace. It would be all right now, Joan thought. Marcia Baker was the perfect one to tell.

Although Joan planned to fly directly back to New York, she allowed Roberta to persuade her to stay another night. She wanted to see Marcia Baker tomorrow.

Later that evening, soaking in the tub, scented by Channel, the bath salts her mother preferred, Joan examined her body. She had a bruise on her left thigh, almost a perfect circle of bluish grey. When she ran her hand across her leg, she noticed slight stubble. Having shaved her legs only the day before yesterday, she wondered if waxing would be more efficient.

Leaving the cooling water of her bath, Joan wrapped herself in a warm, oversized yellow towel. She flung one corner of the towel over her shoulder, toga style, and returned to the bedroom.

She slipped into a white cotton gown with lace trim, a present from her father.

She folded the towel and replaced it neatly on the towel rack in the bathroom.

She smoothed the sheets on the bed. She disliked climbing into a wrinkled bed.
Joan tried Marcia's number several times but only got her machine. She did not leave a message.

This would ruin Roberta's life, she thought. While Joan recognized that her pleasure in Roberta's downfall was malicious, she believed her motives were pure; what she wanted was simple justice.

If she strained, she could hear muted voices coming from downstairs from Malcolm Marshall, Maxine Chertoff, Senator Riley, and others. Roberta was one of them now, Senator Roberta Palmer. As if Roberta could ever fill her father's shoes. What a laugh that is. Miss Supermodel, Miss Tramp.

Joan folded the sheet a couple of inches over the blanket, as she does every night. No reason not to cleave to ritual.

She was anxious, as always, about falling asleep, gauging what pills she might need tonight.

When Joan cannot fall asleep, she has a cache of pills, some prescribed, some stolen from the medicine chests of friends' parents, which will gently make her drowsy and then unconscious. For years she has made it a point to pocket a few whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Perhaps she should wait, in the morning. No, by the morning she might lose her nerve.

Sighing, she slipped out of bed and padded barefoot to the French windows. A soft rain was beginning to fall, and raindrops ricocheted off the terrace. She heard a dog bark, then another. Mating, she thought. She listened to the dogs for a little while, imagining that they were calling to each other, hoping they would find each other.

Thirsty now, she returned to the bathroom and ran the cold water. She would like a coke but didn’t want to be observed going to the kitchen. She settled for a glass of water.

She rinsed the glass and returned to bed. She was feeling a mounting anxiety.

What if Marcia didn’t believe her? God, that would be the worst. She had to believe her; she would make Marcia believe her. Her agitation was tinged with excitement; it served to strengthen her resolve. Her father was dead now and her mother long gone. She was an orphan. She swirled the word around in her mouth, “Orphan.”

Roberta's fault.

Her father's will, which she was sure was a mistake or a forgery, read in part, "To my beloved daughter Joan: Until Joan reaches age 30, my trustee shall pay to her the sum of $3000.00 per month and such amounts as they deem necessary for her medical and education needs. Should Joan marry before attaining age 30, my trustee shall distribute to her the sum of $2,000,000.00 from principal. The
trust shall terminate when Joan attains the age of 30, at which time she will receive the sum of $3,000,000. The trustee shall have full authority to release other sums if they are deemed necessary."

Roberta Palmer was named sole trustee.

She could not believe her father would do such a thing, to make her go to Roberta for money, money that was hers anyway. She was only 23. The thought of having to go to Roberta for seven years sickened her. Not that she needed money; she already had ample money in the trust from her mother.

Malcolm Marshall assured her it was a legal and ordinary will. "Your father just wanted you to be mature enough to handle so much money, and thirty seemed like an appropriate age to him," Malcolm said.

Roberta, who claimed not to know the specifics of the will, told her she could have anything she needed "within reason." "It's just a formality as far as I'm concerned," Roberta said.

Bitch, Joan would rather die than go begging to Roberta.

Marcia will believe me, Joan thought, as the digital clock advanced to 11 p.m. Joan picked up the phone, listened for the dial tone, admired the dainty ruffle on the sleeve of her nightgown, and asked herself one last time if she was doing the right thing.

She dialed Marcia's number again. Her breathing was rapid, her feet cold. Was that twinge in her tooth the start of a toothache? She had a cramp in her right hand; a pulsing vein bulged on the back of her hand. If Marcia was not in this time, she thought, I’ll let it go. Let God decide. Joan was a young woman who had good reasons for believing in mystical solutions. Reality, thus far, had not treated her well.

The phone rang twice, three times, Joan began to feel a mixture of disappointment and relief, then, at last, Marcia's voice. "Why, hello Joan," Marcia said. "I'm sorry to call so late." "That's perfectly all right. I just this minute got in." "I was wondering if I could see you tomorrow." "Well," Marcia hesitated. She doesn’t want to encourage Joan, but she felt sorry for her, a little guilty as well. "Please, it's very important. It won't take up much time. It really is important."

"Sure, if you say it's that important. Let’s meet for breakfast, say 8:00 at the Wilshire?"

"Oh, that's perfect. Thanks, Marcia, thanks very much."
Joan Palmer fell asleep almost immediately after she hung up the phone. For years she had been at war with sleep; sleep was the enemy.

Her medicated sleep obscured the memory of her dreams; frequently she could not remember them at all. She had prepared a matched set of 500 mg Ambien for this evening. These were saved for very special occasions, since they left her feeling drugged and headachy. However, the two white soldiers lay untouched. Something would have to happen now, she thought, as she let go and began the long descent into sleep. Something would have to happen; it’s out of my hands.

They ordered coffee and English muffins. "You look tired, Joan. Not sleeping well?" Marcia asked sympathetically.

"Not too well. You look good. Lost weight?" Joan asked.

Relieved, Marcia continued the banal small talk, checking her watch. "I’m going to have to leave in a minute. I have another breakfast meeting. You know how it is."

"The reason I wanted to see you," Joan said. "Well, I need help."

"What kind of help?" Marcia asked cautiously.

Joan hesitated. She wasn’t sure, not absolutely. She knew what she knew, and what she had heard.

It was wonderful to see Marcia again, to be sitting having coffee as they used to. Marcia would understand, and she would know what to do.

Marcia checked her watch again, impatient now to leave.

"Listen, Marcia," Joan began, "a couple of days before my father died, I was in Washington, and I stopped by the house. Roberta and my father were in the middle of a terrible fight. I hung around a while, not wanting to barge in."

"So? Married people fight all the time."

"Not like this they don’t."

"Joan, what exactly do you mean?"

"Roberta was screaming at Dad, ‘How long?’ She kept repeating ‘How long?’” Joan dramatically told Marcia.

"Father said something about two years, and then their voices dropped and the next thing I heard was Roberta screaming, ‘I won’t let you go. Please, don’t leave me.’ Then, she said, ‘I will never forgive you. Never. You cheated me. You deceived me. It’s all been a lie. And now this? No. No more.’ And my father said something, like ‘I’ll do this my way. You can’t stop me.’”

"Good God, Joan, what are you implying?"

"There’s more. Two years ago, they started sleeping in separate bedrooms. That’s probably when he started having the affair, and they almost never spent
time together. Roberta was always complaining about that, always nagging him for more time." Joan stopped for a breath, then plunged in again. "Also, I almost forgot, she called some new doctor, not daddy’s regular doctor. Someone who didn’t even know him. Marcia, Roberta had Daddy cremated. I never even saw him; she just had him sent to the crematorium. But when my mother died, Daddy showed me the plot he had bought next to hers. It was his plot. He told me that. He planned to be buried next to my mother."

"What are you saying, Joan, that Roberta is in some way responsible for your father’s death?"

"Just a week before he died, I asked Father how he was feeling. We never really talked about his cancer, I just asked generally. He said he was fine, just fine. He actually told me not to worry."

“Well, I don’t know what to say. I agree it's disturbing. You’re quite sure about what you heard?"

"Absolutely. Roberta was crying and pleading with him. Oh, Marcia, you have no idea how good it feels to tell you, how frightened I've been no one would believe me. You do believe me, don’t you?"

"I believe you, Joan. I just don’t know what it all means. There is probably a perfectly reasonable explanation. I have to think about it. Is that alright? Give me some time to think this through."

Marcia repeated the conversation to Sol as soon as she returned to the office.

"What else did she say?" Sol asked. "Well, she was very upset. I didn’t feel I could press her much more. God, isn’t that enough? I didn’t want to say it to her, but it looks to me like the start of a circumstantial case."

"So, Roberta Palmer killed her husband?" Sol said. “C’mon Marcia. Get real. The kid is jealous."

"Well, Joan said David was fine. He told her his cancer was in remission with a good prognosis."

"That’s not what I heard. The grapevine had it that he was sicker than he let on."

"Maybe, but that’s not what he told his daughter. Then she heard this bitter quarrel. The next thing she knew her father was dead."

"Wasn’t there a doctor in attendance? What was the official cause of death?"

"Complications of cancer, I think. That’s another thing. Joan said the she never heard of the doctor, that it definitely wasn’t David’s regular doctor."

"It sounds like a fantasy to me. Probably the kid wished her father was going to leave Roberta” Sol said.
"Maybe, but Joan is convinced. She says things had been cool between Roberta and David for some time. Separate bedrooms, that kind of thing. And," she added, "Roberta is the sole trustee of all that Palmer money."

Sol remained skeptical. He was adamant about not revealing any of this conversation to anyone.

"Not a word, not to anyone. Look, we're going to hire Jake Rubin to do opposition research. Let's see what he and his snoops come up with. If the saintly Senator was having an affair, or if there was real trouble in that marriage, Rubin will ferret it out. You cannot hide that kind of thing for long in Washington. Someone will know about it. But I gotta tell you, it sounds fishy to me."

"Well, David was cremated, so even if it was true, there's no body and probably no way to prove it," Marsha said.

"You really believe this, don't you?"

"I don't know. I really don't. I believe Joan heard what she did, and God knows people are capable of all kinds of terrible things, but I just don't know."

"Well, I think it's crazy."

"I'm not so sure, not as sure as you anyway. You had to be there. Even you would have believed Joan."

"I doubt that. But let Jake Rubin handle it."

What neither of them said, but both understand, was that there might be enormous political benefit for Marcia if a story like this hit the wires. Even a whiff of this story could be deadly for Roberta. Some of the women's groups were already promoting Roberta Palmer for the Senate. She had a name, money, and a beloved dead husband. Sol was counting on the women's vote for Marcia. He did not want two women in the race splitting that vote. A scandal like this might be just enough to convince Roberta not to run.

Politics, Sol thought, shaking his head. He hated it sometimes. He would be delighted to dump this problem in the lap of Jake Rubin.
Chapter 6

David

It was perhaps predictable that David Palmer, who had made his first million in real estate by the time he was 30, would enter politics.

What was not so predictable was his stunning success with the voters. He had the kind of star quality, good looks, charm, and an honest appeal that resonated with a wide variety of constituencies.

For a time, his single status did not hurt, either. He made every bachelor of the year list. But he was no playboy. He worked hard, paying attention to the issues that affected his district: the upper east side of New York City. He was known for calling and writing constituents, for responding personally to their complaints and requests.

He surrounded himself with perfection, beauty. Everything he owned was original. He despised copies. His personal habits were impeccable. What he could not control was the draining of body fluids and those he attended to with dispatch. He did not smoke or spit, was repelled by stains and odors, showered at least twice a day, and washed his hands obsessively. He wore only natural fabrics close to his skin.

He was careful to keep his eccentricities secret: that he wore underwear only once and then disposed of it, that he found the sight of older people revolting, that he could not eat for hours after he smelled something sour, was terrified of bugs, would not hire anyone overweight, regarded a stained piece of clothing as permanently ruined. The list of what David Palmer found distasteful expanded yearly. He was rich enough to support his eccentricities and wise enough to conceal them.

David had a knack for winning people over. This was apparent in the Senate, where his abilities to persuade opponents to support a bill they really did not like were legendary. He kept his promises; he prided himself on his good name, his reputation for integrity in a profession where that virtue was fast disappearing, was legendary.

When David was a boy and afraid of the dark, his mother sat by his bed humming a sweet tune, stroking his forehead. He remembered how the light faded from the room as darkness seemed to seep in behind her. He was afraid it would engulf her as it crawled towards him. However, she was immune from the enveloping darkness. She diffused the darkness with her body; her eyes were beacons providing him with points of reference.
The song ended, and she rose to leave. "Don't go, mother," he pleaded. "I'm afraid."

His mother smiled; he tried to count the soft creases in her face. She said, "You're never alone, sweet boy. I'm always with you." He pressed her hand to his cheek, closing his eyes so that he would not see her leave. Years later, he could recall at will her fingers splayed on his cheek.

They lived alone, mother and son. The father had gone years before. David did not remember him at all. While he was sometimes curious about his missing father, he did not yearn for him or wish for his return. He wondered how his friends could stand having two parents. It seemed an awkward arrangement, two parents and more than one child. Far better, thought David, to have what he and his mother had.

While she lived, his mother's breath was his center of gravity. When her eyes spilled over with translucent drops of tears, he was there with a tissue to remove the lash. He could not resist her planes. He yearned to touch her curves, arches, angles, her soft flesh.

Her arms extended, she invited him to drink, to sip some comfort and he sucked for dear life. Later she hid her breasts beneath a wrapper, safely tucked in a brassiere. Now all he had as she cradled him in her arms was the cardboard taste of commercial fiber.

She barred him from her flesh as all mothers do. He understood. He played the game. However, she could not secure his dreams; even she could not protect him there.

Did she know?

In the morning, her body encased in a plumed robe, barefoot, fixing breakfast, humming along with the radio, their eyes never met. He took his coffee black. She poured him a cup. Standing to her left, so close his head could have nestled in the forbidden place,

Did she know?

Was that why, although they passed the time of day, "Nice morning, fine weather, storms possible." Their eyes never met.

Sitting across the oak table, she poured herself a cup, added some cream and a teaspoon of sugar. She lifted her arm, the wide sleeves of her robe fell back, and he sought refuge in the black ink of his cup.

Her legs were crossed; the odious wrapper covered one knee. He felt a momentary flash of anger as her naked leg kept time to the music. She shaved them close, her legs, until they were glass smooth, shimmering with reflected light.
Her hair was weaved into one long thick Indian plait falling half way down her back. Blessed with a widow's peak, her delicate face was framed in tendrils, and the line of her forehead was enhanced by the slight V of her widow's peak.

He knew every freckle, every mole, every blemish. On the inside of her left arm, there was a line lying just beneath her elbow, a crease about one inch in size going nowhere, connecting nothing, just there, that crease. He looked for it when her arm was naked to him.

Everything was forbidden, of course. Touch, taste, smell, she denied him everything, smiling all the while.

He got her back by denying himself nothing in his dreams. Only sometimes did they get too vivid, too real even for him. He would awaken with a dry mouth, his heart pounding, his body covered with sweat, his penis leaking more wetness. He sat bolt upright, unsure of which way to go, back into the terrifying sensuality of the dream or to the bathroom to relieve himself?

Did she know?

When David was 19, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was too late, the doctor said, for surgery. She refused radiation. The odds, she told David, were simply not worth the suffering.

"Only thing I ask you," she said to him, "don't let me suffer."

He took to his post: son, doctor, friend, priest. A man manages such things and university besides. He made her comfortable, relieved her of domestic duties, prescribed rest and a light diversion. His palliative words delivered in a soothing tone seemed to comfort her. For once, he held the power in his hands, he thought. That was all right. He was a kind man. He would not abuse his authority.

In his mother’s last year, David mimicked her symptoms. He kept up as best he could with her weight loss, her lack of appetite. He developed headaches and a permanently sour stomach. Sometimes when he felt her weakness envelop him, he stayed home from school, reading in a chair in her room.

Once he took a shot of Demerol to keep her company. Towards the end, the last weeks, he steeled himself to give her extra shots for the pain. He could see no reason she should wait the prescribed four-hour interval.

He filled the syringe, swiped from the nurse’s kit, and they laughed as he found a vein, swiped it with alcohol, and plunged in the needle that would bring her relief.

In her dying year, they were never apart. He was so glad to see her alive he hardly noticed she had lost her looks.
"Are you afraid?" he asked her.
"A little, but not so bad as I would have thought. I feel bad though to leave you alone."
"I'll never be alone," he replied, "as long as memory serves."
They celebrated with a feast on her good days, thick steaks char broiled, baked potatoes with caviar, Boston lettuce with Roquefort cheese.
David made sure she had enough pain medication to relieve the pain. The doctor warned him to be careful, that she might, in a drugged state, overdose herself.
David did the best he could to brighten her last months. In the morning, he left her just enough pills for the day. He frequently came home between classes, to see if she was all right, if she needed anything. He brought her treats, but she was too sick to eat, too weak to appreciate the flowers.
One morning, as he was putting her pills in the small saucer on her night table, she said to him, "The pain is worse these days. Leave the bottle."
He held the bottle in his hand, shook out two more pills.
"I said leave the bottle," his mother said, her voice weary with hopelessness. Still he hesitated.
"You can't control everything, David," she said gently. "Someday you'll know that."
He left the bottle. He sat down on the side of her bed and kissed her. "I love you so much," he said.
"Yes, I know you do," she said. "I know how much you love me." When he returned home from school in the late afternoon, he found his mother comatose, on the floor.
He would never stop asking himself if he had known. He must have known, he thought, that she would take the bottle. An overwhelming odor of vomit pervaded the room; it would be years before he stopped smelling it. He called 911 and held her in his arms for the 23 minutes it took them to arrive. He snatched the blanket from the bed and wrapped her in it, cradling her, crooning to her, pleading, begging her to live. He would lose this last contest; his mother had finally outsmarted him.
The doctor assured him she had not died from the overdose, much of which she had thrown up. She had died from a heart attack, perhaps brought on by her suicide attempt. She would have died within weeks in any event, he said.
She left an insurance policy, of which he had been unaware, totaling $500,000. David had a financial legacy with which to begin to build his fortune. His confused emotional legacy was another matter.
With his sharp intelligence, his unfailing intuition and his inheritance, David began to buy real estate. He leveraged the money, just bordering on the illegal. But he was lucky, before long his fortune was assured. Like a few others, he gambled for high profits and then gambled again with the profits for enormous gains. He had nothing but disdain and loathing for his fellow investors, he could hardly bear to shake their hands. He wanted the money more, though. It took him a decade to make his fortune, to become a student of culture, to escort the right kind of woman, to obtain the best contemporary art. He shook off the Harlem tenements, left the Brooklyn row houses in his dust. He no longer had to trade pleasantries with the despised moneylenders; now he wore white gloves and a silk cravat.

When David turned 30 he decided he wanted to marry. He was not looking for love, although he believed he was capable of strong affection.

David called Sharon White after he saw her in a small role in her first film. Her wholesome beauty attracted him. Their brief courtship was followed by the press, devoured by a prurient public.

During that time Sharon also made her breakthrough film. She played a showgirl, stalked by a fan who brutally assaulted her, and the film exploited Sharon’s luscious body. Despite middling reviews, the box office was fantastic. A large poster of Sharon presided over the marquee. David commissioned a portrait of that poster. It amused him and it had hung over the mantle in their Washington home. Briefly, at least, Sharon was every man’s dream woman.

This was precisely what David Palmer wanted.

He thought he found the perfect combination in Sharon. She was breathtakingly beautiful and had a sweet temper. She loved him, or so she said. Her basic flaw was her vanity. She required constant admiration; David was clever enough to administer just the right dose of praise that kept her tranquil. She was incurious about him, in a sense so self absorbed in maintaining her looks and her new position that she did not probe into her husband’s internal life.

David felt he had made a good choice. He liked being married; it answered many questions. He had been ducking from the press and even from some friends. It was good for his image, good politics as well. Sharon was easy to manage. She loved the status of her new position and did not regret at all giving up her career. She accepted separate bedrooms, his travel schedule, and his need for socializing and entertaining. There were some drawbacks, a certain diminution of privacy. Altogether, he was satisfied.

Sharon’s pregnancy two years after they were married was the first serious quarrel of their marriage.
David wondered if it was his child. Their sex was infrequent, but he always insisted on protection. He did not voice his suspicion, but neither did he ever completely overcome it.

"I don't want children," David said bluntly.
"But you never told me that," she objected.
"Well, I'm sorry. I should have. I thought it was obvious. We certainly took enough precautions. Anyway, I don't want children."
"David, darling, I do. I really do."

They were stuck on this issue. Each felt too deeply about it to simply accede and quietly chalk it up on the scorecard.

"Why, why don't you want children?" Sharon asked him, almost pleading.
"It will ruin everything. Can't you see that? We're so right together. It's a perfect balance, and a child will change all that." He felt too, although he could not tell her, that he could never relate to a child and was incapable of loving one.

"Not necessarily," Sharon said.
"Yes, necessarily. We will have to think of the child, to adjust to the child. A child demands things neither of us can give."

"I can. I can give a child a lot," Sharon said.
"But I will pay the price for it. What you give the child, you won't have for me. You want to be a mother, but I tell you Sharon, as honestly as I can, and knowing it sounds awful, I do not want to be a father." He did not add that he could not bear the idea of living with a pregnant woman.

David saw it was no use. Sharon meant to have this child. He made the best of it, but in some way, he knew the balance was now immutably altered and would be for the rest of their lives.

Soon after Joan was born, Sharon saw he had been right. Joan changed everything. David was gone almost all the time now, and when he was around, he seemed even more remote than usual.

When Joan was 11 years old, Sharon was told she was dying. The diagnosis of her cancer succeeded where she had failed. David came home.

David said Joan was too young to be told the truth, so Joan was told only that her mother was "under the weather."

"Have you ever told a lie?" Joan asked her mother.
"There are all kinds of lies," her mother replied. "Some are merely fibs, like white lies, some are real big whoppers, and some are just secrets." Stroking Joan's hair, Sharon Palmer, dying of pancreatic cancer at the age of 37, sat in a rocking chair in her East Hampton home, surrounded by the lavish and exotic mementos of travel, pretending that she was not dying, that she would soon be well. Well
enough to dash into the cold sea outside her veranda, well enough to make love, well enough to forget for a moment that there was anything wrong.

Sharon's own life was now a lie. Only David and her doctor knew she was dying. "Best this way," David had said without explaining.

Sharon had come to think of it as their secret, like the rest of their life together lived behind closed doors. She meant well, the dying young mother, feeling that with so little time left there were things she should say to her daughter. There was all of life to be explained in just a few months. So in the late afternoon, after she had rested, she sat with Joan for an hour or so, until she hurt too much, touching lightly on life's themes. Good and evil, truth and lies, the essential ambiguity of the human condition.

These conversations with her daughter were her job, she felt, her last task as mother. For her own comfort she looked to her husband David.

When David arrived home, as soon as Sharon heard his step, Joan's lessons were over.

He brought her wildflowers and Godiva chocolate.

"How are you darling," he asked as he strode across the room. He was determined to do everything he could for Sharon. He had deprived of her enough during their marriage. He smiled at Joan as she rose to leave. Sometimes he touched Joan's cheek or patted her shoulder as they passed each other. Soon, he was sitting where she had been, on the chair at her mother's side.

Except for her mother's illness, which Joan had been assured was not all that serious, things seemed pretty normal to her that last summer. She loved the East Hampton house, its spacious veranda circling the front, the French doors always open to the sea, the large undisturbed cobweb like a lattice adornment just outside the kitchen. She rode her bike on unpaved roads, picked berries and sweet peaches.

That last summer, like all the summers preceding it, she forced herself to go into the cold ocean, swimming frantically to get warm. Before, her mother would wait at the shore, watching her swim, holding an oversized towel open for her to run into, both of them laughing as her mother rubbed her cold limbs. This summer, she took her own towel, leaving it lying open on the beach, flinging herself into it, rolling over, wrapping herself up in its warming threads.

Joan started to notice that some things were different. For example, the nurses started coming every eight hours, exchanging information on clipboards. She watched through keyholes and listened at doors. She saw and heard everything. Toward the end, she was blinded by the whiteness of the sick room, white sheets, white gown, nurses in white uniforms, white roses. Everything white, her mother's favorite color. The only relief from the whiteness was the
fresh flowers cut daily from their garden and the streaks of crimson blood on her mother's nightgown.

For months, Joan was witness to all of this, the cries in the night, the rustling of starched uniforms, the pop and plunging sounds of the needle, the whispered promise of a better day.

Joan watched and waited holding her breath, until her mother was quiet again, asleep or dead. Sometimes she wished her mother would die. She struggled with her own desires, as if they made a difference, as if someone was watching, listening. She knew it was wrong, but she so wanted to be the center of attention. Sometimes, when she found herself daydreaming about being popular and desirable and wanted, she smacked her face. - Hard. Very hard.

Her father was distracted and impatient with her, although she could hear her parents whispering, even laughing, behind the closed door.

Cook still listened to the same classical station as she kneaded bread dough. Simon, the gardener, pruned the flowerbeds with his iPod blaring Grateful Dead in his ears. If things were really serious, Joan reasoned, nobody would be smiling. She had asked her father point blank, "What's wrong with mother. Is she going to die?" "Die?" David answered. “No, Joan” David answered, “a virus, some mysterious virus.”

The night she died, David was awakened by a crack of thunder; he sat straight up, his pulses pounding. A bolt of lightning struck the lawn, and he raced to the window to shut it as the rain began. He went to the bathroom, in part to shake off the scare, and lit a cigarette.

He smoked it down on the john, riffling through the June issue of National Geographic. He went into Sharon's room; she seemed to be asleep. But as he began to tuck the covers around Sharon, he knew from her slack mouth, her fixed, blank eyes that she was dead.

He didn't check her pulse. He didn't touch her. He fled from the room, passing the nurse as he stumbled down the stairs to the kitchen.

He sat in the kitchen, in striped pajama bottoms, barely feeling the chill, until the police came.

The ambulance removed Sharon's body; the cook put up coffee and brought him his robe.

He was starting to call people when he remembered Joan. It was still early, barely 5:30. Let her sleep, he thought, God knows what her sleep will be like from now on.
SHEILA LEVIN

An hour later he went to his daughter’s room. David looked at his daughter. She was the image of Sharon, and it was horrible to see. A miniature of his dead wife; he wished he could exchange the one for the other.

"Joan, Mommy’s gone. You knew she was sick."

“But you said... .”

"She’s dead, Joan. Gone."

Nothing stirred. The room was preternaturally quiet.

Joan was crying softly. "Oh Daddy, I want mommy.” David, too, wept. "I know, dear. I know. I want her, too.” Too late, David thought, for he knew now that he would miss Sharon terribly. Despite the flaws in their marriage, he had been happier and less afraid with Sharon in his life.

Joan had always known her parents had secrets. She saw it in their glances, heard it in their whispers.

Brushing off her damp face with the back of her hand, Joan patted her father’s shoulder.

"Don’t cry anymore, Daddy. We’ll be okay. Mommy would want us to stop crying."

But David couldn’t stop. Having let down his guard, he was racked with a sense of loss.

Finally Joan went to the bathroom and wet a washcloth, as Sharon used to do when she had a fever.

"Daddy,” she said, gently applying the cloth to his face, patting it across the back of his neck, “Daddy, you have to stop crying now.”

Now her mother was gone and Joan would help her father, help him to stop crying, to recover. They would be each other’s family. Heartbroken as she was on that morning, Joan could not help but wonder if now she would be the one to share his secrets.

Devastated by her mother’s death, Joan gravitated toward the adults in her life; they at least understood her loss. Her own friends, after a couple of weeks of mourning, expected her to go on as before, to join in, to laugh, to talk on the phone, to gossip about boys. In her father’s world, they left her alone. They approved of her silence; she did not disturb them at dinner with foolish chatter or inane questions.

Seated across from her father, at what had been Sharon’s place, Joan did not understand all of the conversation, the talk of legislation and public policy matters, but she got the point anyway. She had something in common with all these people; the journalists, the businessmen, and politicians all wanted her father’s approval too.
After Sharon died, David became restless. He traveled much of the year, devising fact-finding missions to Asia and South America. He spent most of his time in Washington, only rarely visiting his New York home.

The East Hampton house was kept shrouded, the front gate manacled. David refused to put it on the market, but he could not bear to visit it.

Joan occupied what had been two rooms on the second floor of the New York apartment. It was spacious enough for a queen sized, four-poster bed, two dressers, a dressing table, and a sitting area with four chairs and a round glass topped table where she ate many of her meals. A balcony outside her window overlooked Park Avenue.

David allowed Joan to redecorate her room after Sharon died. She obliterated all signs of her childhood. A television and VCR were now snugly enclosed in an armoire, which had previously housed a doll collection. Her toys went to Goodwill, rocking horse, stuffed animals, all of it gone to the needy.

She discarded, too, her Hello Kitty sheets, replaced them with linen from Pratesi. In the year following her mother’s death, she acquired an instant library of great books, an Apple computer, a state of the art sound system, and an original Degas.

One wall was decorated with signed photographs of Streisand, Prince, Springsteen, several U.S. Senators, and Presidents, too. These pictures, acquired by her father, read, “To Joan with Love.”

A solitary picture of her mother was encased in a silver frame on her dressing table. Tucked away in a bottom drawer were other pictures: Sharon bathing an infant Joan, feeding her a bottle, the predictable photographic chronicle of babies’ first year. David was in a few, but he disliked being photographed. There were fewer of Joan’s second year, fewer still of her third year. Nothing after that, no pictures of Joan and Mom, just more of Sharon, on the slopes, on the beach, sitting at outdoor cafes.

Every now and then, as if by mistake, Joan came across herself in the background of a picture. She was always out of focus, blurred. David could not throw any picture of Sharon away, so these contaminated ones were kept with the rest. Even Sharon, however, was not spared David’s immutable fixation with perfection. As soon as Sharon’s illness began to show, he stopped photographing her.

Joan waited. She dieted and then gorged herself on chocolate covered marshmallows and gummy bears. She began to develop allergies and severe headaches. She had trouble sleeping. Her skin erupted in patches of red, itching all the time. She wore gloves to bed to prevent scratching. Warts grew on the tips of her fingers, of which she was deeply ashamed.
Because her esophagus was frequently in spasm, she ate irregularly. When she could swallow, she gulped down great quantities of food, but when her throat closed, she could take only liquid, some ginger ale and a sip of apple juice.

Of all her physical ailments, she dreaded the stomach pains most of all. It began with a terrible wrenching gut pain, and spread to her neck and brain. It was all connected, of that she was sure. Once it started, the instant she felt her throat close, it might be days before she could eat again. Days before she could stand the sunlight, reading was out of the question. Noise, any sound, plucked at her nerves leaving her exhausted.

All of these ailments were camouflaged with pills, ointments, and lotions. She was on large doses of antihistamines, which made her sleepy sometimes and agitated at other times. She had Tagamet and Maalox with her and Kaopectate for the diarrhea, which was a side effect of the medicines for her stomach.

For all of that, she appeared to the impartial observer a normal, healthy, and lovely young girl. Her face remained unmarked, no pimples or boils erupted to mar her complexion.

When her body matured, her monthly menses were hard. She had muscle pain and leg cramps. When she bled, she took to bed for two days; the cramps were that severe. Now her sheets, her nightdress, her life was stained with threads of crimson blood.

The doctors she consulted said, “You’ll grow out of it. It’s nothing to be alarmed about.”

Her heart was sound, her lungs clear, she had 20-20 vision, and all the blood tests were negative. An EKG and CAT scan were both normal.

"It hurts,” Joan, said of her eyes, her stomach, her warts, and her life.
"It’s a hard time for growing girls,” the doctor said.

She did not complain to David. She waited. She knew that she must keep her sorrow a secret or risk losing her father forever.

David’s Story

David was surprised at just how free he felt. No longer a husband, hardly a father, he was restless, he craved some fun. He struck up a conversation at dinner one night with a good looking boy named Chris, who was alone at the next table. It was easy, he realized, so easy, dumb chatter about a football game, about the food, about whether they would have dessert. “Dessert?” Chris smiled “want some dessert? I know just the place.”
“So what do you do?” Chris asked David after their first time. “DO?” David replied, “I’m a plumber. Can’t you tell?” “Bull-shit,” Chris said affably. “Man you ain’t no plumber, but you sure do have a lovely wrench. Com’ere, let’s see if that wrench can get stiff and hard and wet again.”

“I really have to go,” David said weakly, making it clear that the last thing he wanted to do was leave. “Sure, go,” Chris said, his mouth already halfway down David’s shank, his wrench, his tool.

“Aw, come on,” David groaned. “Please. Please.” “Please what?” Chris asked, “Please more. Please, I’m begging you for more,” Chris mocked. David sank back against the cheap pillows and looked around the room at a rooster clock over the fridge and polyester curtains blocking the window. So cheap, he thought, so fucking cheap. “Yes,” he said, “I’m begging you, more, please more.”

After Chris, there was no denial left. David knew. He had been so troubled by the anticipation of it, he was now relieved. At least, he thought, now I know for sure.

Eventually, the question became how to manage it. He was a public figure, and he did not intend to suffer the fate of the many other public figures who had been caught and publicly humiliated.

The choices were all dangerous. Clubs were out, call in services out, practically everything that required him to make a move was out, everything except one. He decided he would not seek out these encounters; he prided himself on this. He was not desperate for these encounters, he could take them or leave them, and he would wait until it happened naturally, until he was having a drink at a upscale bar and someone picked up on him, just the way he knew he would be able to identify the right one when he met him. Yes, that was how he would play this; at a party, at a bar, in a meeting, on an airplane, he would let the other make the first overture, and if he felt the man was his type, although he wasn’t quite sure what his type was yet, he would play with him a little and see where it went. David loved verbal combat, conversational foreplay; this passive attitude would serve him well.

He was extremely successful. He emitted strong vibes; he had no trouble at all meeting men who wanted the same anonymous sex he craved.
Chapter 7

Laura

On the morning of the day Marcia Baker and Sol Markowitz were scheduled to see Jake Rubin, his colleague, Laura Bennett left her apartment with an almost giddy feeling of deliverance.

It was early, not quite 6:30 A.M., and Park Avenue seemed deserted.

Laura paused in the lobby to adjust her scarf and to allow Roberto, the doorman, to open the door. This is the first time she has lived in a building with a doorman. She found it faintly ridiculous.

She knew she must guard against her tendency to be overly friendly in an effort to be liked.

"Mornin’, Roberto's dour greeting was fragrant with gin.
"How are you, Roberto?" she asked.
Roberto shrugs. "Hokay, wanna taxi?"
"No thanks," she replied.

Looking up the street, she saw a platoon of bored doormen standing guard, a frail line of burnt out soldiers in the urban war. The avenue was shrouded in a cool mist. The center island, which will soon be bright with tulips, was barren. The city was a graveyard, Laura thought; surely, nothing would ever grow here again.

Here and there, lights flickered. Someone must be tending the wounded, Laura thought.

Laura was leaving earlier these days, trying to escape before Neil was awake. This morning, however, he arose with her.

Do you have to leave so early?" Neil complained.
"Honey, I want to make a good impression. As it is, Jake is in before I am and, besides, I get a seat on the subway."

Neil smiled but she saw in his eyes that he knew the truth. He yielded as he did on practically everything these days, afraid to challenge even this transparent excuse.

"Is today the day Marcia Baker comes in?" Neil asked, knowing how much Laura admired Baker.

"Yes, haven’t seen her in a few years. Wonder if she’ll remember me."

Laura did admire Marcia Baker. In some ways, she thought, Marcia was everything I’m not: strong, an independent woman who had made it on her own as a lawyer, as a leader in the women’s movement, and now in the Congress. She can’t imagine Marcia Baker having hung around for ten years sucking her thumb, waiting for a man.
"If she doesn’t remember you, she’ll fake it. Never liked her much,” Neil said.

Laura was annoyed. She admired Neil once for his snap judgments, his quick analysis of people and situations. Now she was more cautious. She discerned some oblique criticism of her lurking behind his poor opinion of Marcia Baker. Since she returned to Bennett Wallace Marsh & Rubin, Neil’s former law firm, Neil felt free to dissect her clients. He challenged her analysis, her instincts, and her methodology. It made her angry, demoralized her, and vitiated her creativity. It took the fun out of her new job.

"Why not?” Laura asked, trying not to sound defensive, She respected Baker, but wasn’t sure she liked her all that much herself. But in the face of Neil’s arbitrariness, she was prepared to defend her.

"Something hard about her, unyielding,” Neil said. "I admire her energy. I know she's smart as hell, but I just don’t like her.” Irritated though she was, Laura decided not to make an issue of it.

"Okay, I’m outta here. See you tonight, honey,” Laura said.

"I didn’t sleep well,” Neil yawned. “Think I’ll go back to bed. Has the Times come yet?” His tone is too casual. She realized he was embarrassed.

Laura left him returning to bed with his feeble excuse. He was wearing a silk maroon dressing gown she gave him years ago. It had a contrasting black velvet collar, which draped down the front. With its monogram on the breast pocket, it was a king’s robe.

She wished he wouldn’t wear it anymore. Its use was clear. It was for after work, while they were relaxing with a drink before joining friends for dinner. It was never meant to be a housecoat, a bathrobe. Why couldn’t he see that now, in these circumstances, it made him look pathetic. She could no longer bear to see him bid her goodbye as he faced another blank page in the retirement book. Weeks ago she stopped asking him what he was going to do.

The computer, on which he was supposed to be writing articles, memoirs, anything at all, was the most powerful on the market. With its state of the art processor and sophisticated software, it should be a worthy collaborator for such a gift as Neil must have.

"Technology as enemy," Neil complained after a few weeks. “I can’t think when I’m sitting at it, can’t get used to all the bells and whistles, takes all the fun out of everything."

It has become part of the bleak landscape of their lives since Neil retired, along with the "business" phone lines, dedicated remote conferencing screens and routers that decorated their apartment.

Neil said they all "indict with their silence."
Laura wondered if she was reaching for something that wasn’t there. What did she want from this nice man? She knew that even the most intimate exchange of confidence would not really change things. She did not love him the way she hoped she might. It’s all so trivial. Perhaps in the way he held his head, cocked slightly to the side, the trace of a smirk on his face, as if he were always thinking, “I know better than you.” Or maybe it’s his hands, so large with blunt, elongated fingers. She knew he was handsome, and he knew it, too. She saw him preen as he dressed. But the hair on his arms was too sparse and the hair on his back grew in patches.

How could she tell him these things? It was ridiculous. When he touched her, she sensed he was thinking about her as if he were a mechanic, making sure she was in good operating order: a ten point tune up, kicking the tires, checking the oil.

She could not put her finger on it, the one thing that would make it alright. She was afraid that in the end he had become simply a man who no longer appealed to her.

She wanted to fix it, to make it work. She liked being married. Last night she tried to resuscitate their marriage with one of her tall tales that Neil loved so much.

“Neil,” she said, “have I ever told you about my stepfather’s poker games?”

They ordered in pizza and beer, Laura spun her fairytale. These erotic fairy tales brought them closer. Laura believed they had the magical power to temporarily rejuvenate their failing marriage. Over the years, Laura had become a sensual storyteller. It amused her to make good use of the crimes of her childhood. The reaction of her absorbed listeners was consistent. Without fail, these men, while trying to resist her stories and blathering on about how terrible for her, fell victim to arousal. Stimulated, thrilled, they offered her solace with a good fuck. Usually amused, she was now dismayed that Neil still fell prey to her erotic yarns.

“We were living in a house in South Florida,” she began. “The house was on a stream. There was a porch just outside the kitchen, which was in the back of the house, near the stream.

“Every Thursday Martin, my stepfather, had five of his friends over for poker. My mother stayed upstairs, reading or listening to music. They set the table up in the kitchen so they could get a slight breeze from the stream. If you put a fan in a certain place near the door, it caught a draft and cooled the place off. The first time it happened, I had come from studying with a friend. Came in through the kitchen door and said “Hi” to the guys. I was wearing shorts and a tee shirt. No bra, I was so firm then, I didn’t need a bra—certainly not under a tee shirt.
They were drinking beer, not drunk, just happy and a little raucous. Martin said, ‘Hey, Lori.’ He always called me Lori even though he knew I hated it. ‘Hey Lori, come on over here and bring me some luck.’”

“I wasn’t worried. I walked over to him.”

“You know the guys,’ he said to me, and he reeled off names, Pete, Chuck, Red. Mo”

“Sure,’ I said, ‘How ya doin.’”

“Well,’ Martin said, ‘I’m a loser, but now that you’re here, little Lori, I’m going to be a winner.’ He pulled me down on his lap. I was uncomfortable. The guys were staring at me. Martin was making a great show of settling me on his lap. My legs were bare, of course, and he opened his legs and caught mine between his. He was very strong, and I tried to get free, but he smacked my thigh and told me to quiet down. It seemed funny, sitting there on his lap. I didn’t like it. I was embarrassed. Mo was dealing out a hand of five cards. ‘Pick up my cards,’ Martin said to me. I picked them up and fanned them out. He had a pair of tens and a four, a six and a queen. I was holding the cards.

“Now, that’s just great, Lori. I knew you’d bring me luck. You just keep holding those cards.’ As he said this, he was slipping his hands under my tee shirt and touching my breasts. I started to jump up, but he was caressing my breast really hard, pinching the nipple. ‘Just you hold those cards, Lori. You’re my luck now.’ I could see the other men looking at us. They were uncomfortable, but they were enjoying it. Martin was rubbing my breasts, playing with the nipples. Everybody was trying to act normal, and Mo, who had dealt, passed. Pretty soon the betting started. I’m holding the cards, Martin is rubbing my breasts, and he’s raising on his pair of tens. When the pot is right, Martin asks for three cards. He whispers in my ear, ‘We’re going to win this, Lori, and you’ll get a cut. Just hold those cards.’ As I’m picking up the three cards, he moves his right hand down to the end of my shorts and begins to run his hand over my thigh.”

As Laura spins out her tale, she watches Neil’s reaction carefully. His lips are pushed tightly together, his eyes bright, she begins to drag out the story. Pausing a little, she takes a sip of some wine.

“He’s pushing his finger under the shorts, almost to my cunt, right around the edge of my cunt. He’s still rubbing my breast with his left hand. I pick up a ten, a two, and an ace. When he sees the ten, he gets excited. He is pinching my nipple with one hand and rubbing around my cunt with the other. The betting starts, and he is raising until finally only Chuck and my stepfather are still at it. The pot is enormous, must be a couple of hundred dollars. Chuck raises again and Martin hesitates. He doesn’t have any more chips. He picks up his can of beer and dribbles some of it over my tee shirt so that it gets wet and you can see
right through it. He puts the can down and starts to pinch my nipple again. He thinks a minute and says to Chuck, ‘Tell you what. I think I’ve got you beat. I know it because I got this little Lori here for luck.’ He’s making this big show now of pinching my nipple, ‘So, what I’ll do is this. If I win, I get the pot. If you win, well, it means Lori is luck for you, so if you win you get the pot and you get little Lori here, to hold your cards.’ This friend of his, Chuck, is very fat. He’s wearing Bermuda shorts, and his belly is hanging out over the beltline. His legs are hairy.

“Martin says, ‘I don’t have any more chips, but I got this little Lori chip. What do you say, Chuck?’”

“Chuck is mesmerized; he is puffing on a cigar. ‘What if she doesn’t want to sit on my lap?’ he says.”

“’Doesn’t want to?’ Martin says, surprised, ‘Why, Lori always does what her daddy tells her to, don’t you honey?’ He gives my nipple such a pinch; I almost drop the cards. Because if she doesn’t, why she gets spanked. If she doesn’t, I just have to pull down her pants and give her a spanking, like you do with kids who don’t mind. Right, Lori honey?’”

“’Well?’ she asked Neil, “Sad story, isn’t it”


“Surprised you, didn’t I?”

“That’s a terrible thing to do to a young girl,” Neil said in a serious voice.

“It certainly was,” Laura, agreed. “You would never do anything like that, would you?”


They made love that night. She lay there in the dark, both amused and disappointed that her husband depended on her pornographic tales.

Laura had too much ammunition. She was a soldier with a thousand rounds but no will to shoot. She knew all his weaknesses. He doled them out to her while she waited for him to leave his wife. His guilt, obsessions, night terrors, apprehensions, was the salve with which he smoothed over ten years of broken promises.

When she resolved to break with him, he tossed her another heart stopping excuse. She was so busy catching these tidbits of his inner turmoil, she didn’t have time to pack.

Now that she had the book on him, it turned out to be useless. By revealing all his flaws, Neil insured she would never use them. He counted on Laura to maintain a level playing field in their marriage.
There was a time she remembered, as she waited for the train, when she kidded him about his inability to be alone. "Want company?" she would ask laughing as he padded to the bathroom.

The subway car was half filled; she lurched into a seat, still smiling at that old intimacy, remembering how she sometimes sat watching him shave, barely able to concentrate on what he was saying. She could, at will, thank God, still recall how much she adored him. How the sight of his wrists engaged in the ordinary task of shaving, rinsing the razor, splashing his face, was enchanting.

Entering the staid, slightly seedy outer reception room of Wallace Marsh & Rubin, Laura straightened her shoulders and mentally detached herself from the problems at home. If she could not shed them completely, here at least, she is obliged to watch both her posture and her manners.

Here at Wallace Marsh & Rubin everything was calm.

From the controlled but friendly greeting of Sally, the receptionist, to the long walk to her small office down halls adorned with Art Deco prints, it was the kind of place that didn’t allow for hysterics.

Laura knew perfectly well that there was turmoil here too. That some partners drank, some had messy home lives, some even skirted close to the law. She was relieved, however, by the patina of civility, the game of Old World courtesy played out in client conferences in the arcane language of the law.

It kept in check the fear that her marriage would dissolve under the slow drip of eroding passion.

She began to clear her desk. Her routine called for discipline. A paper touched was a paper disposed of in the "file bin" or in the basket. She marked the papers to file with a large encircled " F" using a red pen. I’m cheating even at this, she thought, shaking her head. Why file all this stuff? Because I am too lazy, too distracted to dispose of it, to take some action.

Laura feels lonely, bereft, overwhelmed. By what? What was so burdensome? She asked herself. The answer, she thought, was close at hand. All she had to do was fill in a few blanks, if she had the courage.

Neil had been opposed to her rejoining the firm.

Now she wondered if he was right after all. Maybe it was a mistake, working with Jake, pretending she's young enough to start over. She was nervous about this meeting. She needed to do well, to appear confident and in charge. Jake had hinted that he wanted to refocus his energy; she knew he was bored and disgusted with this political work. She’d heard he was on the shortlist for a federal judgeship. His background was impeccable, clerked for a judge in the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals and was an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Southern
District of New York. He was a close friend of the Governor’s and a major contributor to the Democratic Party.

Jake took on very few opposition research cases anymore. She wondered why he was considering Marcia Baker. When she asked him, he simply said she was an old friend.

She didn’t want her fate to be tied to Jake. She wanted to stand on her own. If she did well with this client, her position would be enhanced; she might even be in line to take over the Opposition Research Unit. Fat chance, she thought.

She wished she could lay her head down on her desk, push the papers off, and rest. However, her office door, as was the custom here, was open. She must appear busy and efficient. Who knew who might be watching?

She might see herself as others do: successful, still young, married to the love of her life. Lucky. Once, not so long ago, she did see herself that way, heard herself in casual conversation strike a modest note, about her work, her marriage.

Her unassuming pose bespoke assurance. She had no need to brag, to tempt whatever jealous gods might be listening.

Lately, though, since Neil retired, something was wrong. All of life seemed imbalanced.

She closed her eyes to conjure up a pleasant memory of her life.

It was a small moment she recalled: years ago, early in their love affair, she and Neil met in Carmel. "What a relief," he said, hugging her at the airport. "Four days alone, no calls, no interruptions."

Laura made dinner reservations at three restaurants, not knowing which would appeal to them. They strolled into town, arms around each other. They stopped at the first restaurant to check it out. Laura could tell Neil thought it was too stiff, too formal. "We’ll be back," Neil said casually to the maître d." As they left the restaurant, they heard someone call out "Stop."

Laura froze. For a moment she thought they were under arrest, that it was a crime to make multiple dinner reservations in Carmel. She turned around slowly to find Neil greeting a client. "This is my wife," Neil said to Charles Rockford. "Darling," he gripped her hand for emphasis, this is Charles Rockford, of Rockford Company." They were both too flustered to think of an excuse, so they dined together with the Rockfords, Laura as wife.

Later, giggling, Neil volunteered that he too had thought they were under arrest for making a false reservation. "Only we would think that," Laura said, taking it as an omen that they were meant to be together. It set a tone for their days in Carmel. It was the beginning of what they would always be short of: shared memory.
She lived too much in memory now that she and Neil were together. It was a simple truth she was afraid to acknowledge with its implied verdict on their life. Memory now filled their life the way lust once did. They escaped into memory, picking their way through fields of revisionist history and selective recall. While it warded off the pain of acknowledging they weren’t making it, Laura wondered if she was the only one plucking out the thorns.

Jake Rubin tapped at her door, a snappy, friendly “Rat. Tat. Tat.”
"Busy?" Jake asked.
"No, what’s up?"
"You know Marcia Baker, don’t you?"
"Well, depends on what you mean by ‘know’. We’ve met, of course, but I would not exactly say I know her. I met her and Roberta Palmer a couple of times when I was at MEOW. Why do you ask?"
"Just curious. She may think you still have some influence with MEOW." Jake said.
"Well, she’ll be sorely disappointed. Believe me, I have no influence. You know that, you know no one counts there except Maxine,” she said, referring to Maxine Chertoff.
"I know that, but Marcia may not."
"She is coming here because of your reputation, Jake. You’re the best political investigator in the business. That’s what the papers say."

Years ago, at the start of her affair with Neil, Jake was her confidante. For years he had come to her in the ugly place she inhabited while she waited for Neil. She believed she was contracting for love. But such leases as Laura signed were rife with loopholes, which only the experienced eye can detect. She was an innocent, a first time renter.

As the years wore on, the paint began to chip, the ceiling leaked, and there was no heat. She practiced stealth and tact at first, tried to be amusing and constant.

After a time, the years of broken promises wore her out. Jake, who had marital problems of his own, would sometimes come over. He found Laura slumped over with despair, feverish with jealousy.

He cheered her up, took her for a good meal, and dried her tears while they polished off a second bottle of wine.

Jake brought her roses to decorate her bleak room, a banquet from Chinese takeout to whet her appetite. It helped to see her through.

When she drew comparisons between the two men then, as she inevitably did, Neil won hands down. Now she was not so sure. Jake seemed not to have aged in the years since she left the firm. Of course, she reminded herself, he was
ten years younger than Neil. Jake had a full head of graying hair, which added seasoning to a boyish face. He had a calm self-assurance, which she admired, a reputation for being unflappable. Laura would like to reminisce about those old days, but Jake shied away whenever she brought it up.

"How's Neil?" Jake asked picking up a picture of Laura and Neil taken at an outdoor cafe in Paris six years ago.

"Okay, I guess. Bored."

"The fate of us all, a long, boring retirement. Talk about odd. That's odd. We work for forty or more years, longing for vacations, travel, and time with family and when we finally get it, it's all wrong. Too used to action, I guess."

"Well, it's especially hard because I went back to work," Laura said.

"Sure, but you've got a lot of working years ahead of you. Why should you sacrifice that?"

"There was a time when I would have sacrificed everything for Neil," Laura replied.

"I remember. Be careful of what you wish for...," Jake let the rest trail off.

"Jake, couldn't Neil take on something here?"

"Busy Work?" Jake sighed. "Leave it alone, Laura. It's something we all have to figure out for ourselves. You can't fix this for Neil. If he's the Neil I know, he'll find something for himself before long."

Jake was tired of Neil's problems. He'd had years of it while Neil was still at the firm—all kinds of messes: clients unhappy with his brusque manner, subordinates, and even other partners near mutiny, and he'd grown especially weary of Neil's personal life. He had warned Laura often enough, all those years, while she waited for Neil.

Jake's own life was in a bit of mess now. He's got enough on his plate without playing nursemaid to Neil and Laura. He was beginning to see Laura in a different light. Was she, after all, the kind of woman who couldn't sit still, playing musical chairs with crisis and turmoil? He hoped not. He had gone out on a limb when he brought her back to the firm.

I can't wait anymore. Laura wanted to shout. Fix it. You can fix it. Just give him a case. Anything. No big deal. Just so that we do not have to talk anymore about the "options," the possible teaching positions, the columns he might write the consultancies he might get. But of course she said none of this. Once she would have felt free to say anything to Jake, but now, that too had changed.

"What do you think about Marcia Baker? Can she make it to the Senate?" Laura asked.

"Don't know. It'll be a tough race. That's for sure. I gather she's been a good Congressman, knows her stuff. You worked for her, what do you think?"
"You know her better than I do."

"Well," Laura says doubtfully, "to tell the truth I don’t know her all that well." Laura had worked for MEOW for five years as house counsel, giving opinions on compliance questions for the FEC, ruling on the legality of campaign contributions. She was also involved in special fundraising projects.

"Is that all?" Laura asked.

"Is what all?"

"Just because I worked at MEOW, that’s why you wanted me on your team?"

"What are you getting at?" He asked.

"I thought, maybe," she paused, biting her lower lip, "that you thought we would make a good team."

She was circling, watching with hawk eyes for the empty chair. Jake considered, for a moment, the possibility of starting an affair with Laura. Too late, maybe years ago, when he was holding her hand while she waited for Neil it would have worked; however, not now.

He liked Laura, found her attractive. However, she was too much like all the others. He had been nibbling for years on this tasting menu. His appetites now run to something more substantial.

Goddammit, he did not want Laura and he’s afraid of another go around with Marcia Baker. He’s not sure he’d ever gotten over Marcia. He wished Marcia wasn’t coming. He’s sorry now he made the appointment. It occurred to him that for all the distance he traveled in his life, the weary journey through his marriage, his exhausting professional treks, he always ended up in the same place. He’s tired of repeating himself, of playing it safe. He wanted out. He’d been on the shortlist for a federal judgeship for months. The announcement could come any day now. Then he would be free of all this crap. He could hardly wait.

"Sweetie," he says dismissively, sliding off Laura’s desk, giving her a thumb’s up, “time to get to work.”
Neil

Neil awoke from a fitful sleep realizing he was alone in the apartment. She’s slithered out again, he thought, my wife the thief. What has she stolen this time? Perhaps he should inventory the apartment, see what was missing.

Reaching for his glasses, he squinted at the digital clock. Shit, only 7:30. He put the glasses down, turned over, pulling a pillow down over his head.

His left hand was numb. Has he had a stroke? He monitored for other symptoms and decided that he must have slept on it. He did not mind the sensation. Numbness was okay. It was the restoration of feeling he feared. One eye was sunk in his pillow. He kept the other shut. The top sheet was tangled between his legs, pressed against his scrotum, a pleasant sensation, familiar, comforting. Naturally, he had to pee.

He heard the faint beep of the automatic percolator and stopped breathing for a moment to forestall inhaling the aroma of the brew. This self-conscious concentration protected him for a few seconds from the truth that he was now awake and had to face the day. Precious moment, innocent time: he wanted his wife.

With a physical yearning, he remembered times they would awake entwined. When his eyes opened then he found Laura wrapped around him, touching as much of him as possible. Extricating himself from Laura, peeling her off him, frequently resulted in a gentle morning lovemaking moment. He drank in her sweet morning breath, caressed her warm body as she told him "I love you" in her throaty, morning voice. He thought it would always be like that. It did not occur to him that she would change. Before they married, he assumed it would be he that had to change. He depended on Laura for constancy. He felt confident in that since she had remained the same for so many years—waiting, loving him, understanding—surely when she had everything she wanted, or said she wanted, she would be more devoted not less.

It was Neil who cautioned Laura over the years she waited, warning her that there were no guarantees in life. Maybe he should have demanded some reassurance for himself.

Neil shook his numb hand, wondering what he would do if he had a stroke. He was panicked for a moment, terrified he would die alone. Where was Laura? Where was this child bride for whom he sacrificed so much?

The coffee was perking noisily now; the pungent aroma drifted towards him. Go back to sleep, he thought; it’s too early.
Neil tried to be optimistic. The thought of coffee and the morning papers brightened his outlook for a moment.

When he entered the kitchen, all chrome and almond tile, his spirits began to fade. He deeply regretted having hired a decorator, although it had been his idea. Laura wanted to do it herself, but he had insisted.

"Don’t you think I have good taste?" she asked him.

"Sure you do, fine taste. But believe me, I’ve been through this before. It’s far more economical to hire a professional. Get it right the first time. You’ll have veto power of course."

Laura lost interest. He imagined she would spend happy hours shopping with Maria Cortez, the decorator. They would present him with swatches of fabric, design ideas. Laura and Maria would gang up on him; cajole him into agreeing to their ideas. He would be forbearing and generous, maybe giving them a hard time for the fun of it, and then taking them out for a good lunch. He looked forward to the whole process.

Maria created the design for their apartment on a computer, subcontracted the renovation, selected the items to be purchased (always giving them a choice of at least three variations), and came in on budget and on time. Neil had no horror stories to dine out on, as practically everyone else he knew did. He gave Maria a small bonus, feeling oddly cheated.

Perhaps he had offended Laura. Was that what this was about? Now he stood in the center of his immaculate kitchen hating its sterility. It reminded him of an operating theater, cold and antiseptic. Take out from last night was disposed of, two forks and two glasses in the dishwasher. The apartment was ready for viewing, for photographing, for guests. No one was coming.

Neil knew what a home felt like; a home was noise and mess. A home had a glass in the sink and a few dishes on the draining board. A box of cookies left out, a couple of overripe bananas in the fruit bowl, fruit flies hovering. He knew Laura thought this pristine look was what he liked: everything in its place, including Neil.

Even if she had an early meeting, she could at least have kissed him goodbye. Ah, don’t be so churlish. He took out a can of evaporated milk, its top covered with dried crust, and put two sweet and low packets in his cup. He padded to the front door to pick up the Times and Wall Street Journal.

As he opened the door, the elevator boy was slinging the papers toward him. They were both startled. Neil had never caught him in the act before. Neil felt trapped too, ashamed to be seen in his pajamas at this late hour retrieving the paper.
Back in the kitchen with a cup drawn, he added the evaporated milk, a holdover from his childhood. It curdles. He took a tentative sip, decided it was ok. He took the paper and the sweet coffee drink into the small sunroom adjacent to the kitchen.

He debated turning on the Today show or checking his email. He wanted to enjoy this, to take pleasure from the leisurely act of morning coffee and the papers.

He felt exhausted. He was tired all the time. Laura urged him to check with his doctor. He refused. He understood there was no medication for his fatigue.

He glanced at the headlines. Once, he devoured the papers. Each day there was some tidbit to which he felt connected. He knew many of the people making headlines and many in the gossip columns, too. He, himself, was mentioned fairly often. He wrote letters, which were published regularly—then, his views on a wide variety of affairs were welcomed.

Now he was peripheral, an outsider. Each day he felt himself sliding further away from the center. While he was ashamed to be clutching so frantically to the rim of life that he was afraid to let go, he was not yet in free fall. He would hang on as long as he could. Maybe help, in some form, was on the way.

On this day, a Thursday, the style section of the Times ran a long article on retirement. Cheery suggestions on keeping busy, helping others, reaching out—Oh, how the Times loved to reach out. They listed a variety of secular organizations for people like him to call. Maybe he should become a big brother or a scoutmaster or a teacher of English as a second language; or a surrogate grandfather; or take up cooking, bridge, cartology. Classes, academic and social, groups, committees, were all available. All that was missing, he thought, was a twelve-step program for retirees. They should have one, he thought, because it was like an addiction. Can’t ever get away from it; can’t leave it alone. It sure as hell ruined your life. One drop of retirement and you’re hooked forever. Fuck the Times.

He scanned the rest of the paper, but it held little interest for him. He felt no connection. Was he supposed to be just a spectator after all these years as actor? Just an observer?

He was not so old, for Christ’s sake. He had been a player all his life; now he was a prisoner of this fucking retirement. They did not tell him, when they added up his retirement compensation, gave him a round of parties, eased him out of his office, that it was a life sentence.

Before the bitterness enveloped him, he headed for the shower. Need to make a plan, just for today. It was now 8:10. Just for today, just get through this day.
Unfortunately, nothing needed doing around the house. Laura had put a blouse in the dry cleaning pile, not enough to warrant a trip. Their wine cellar was complete, the larder was filled, and they had plenty of eggs. He had a complete physical two months ago; his teeth were cleaned only last week. Neil had seen the current exhibits at the Metropolitan and Modern and Natural History museums. He had lunched with everyone he knew. He could not schedule another round of lunches for a few months without appearing desperate.

In the first months after he retired, he contacted several philanthropies. Surely his experience, his contacts, would be a valuable asset. He was willing to do some pro bono legal work. Confident that he would be in a position to choose among them, he began a series of meetings with the executives of the philanthropies. What they wanted, it turned out, was money—money from him and a promise to raise more. Implied, although not always baldly stated, was that board membership was based on the ability to raise money. Even a star such as he was not exempt from that reality. As for legal work, they already had more lawyers helping them out than they knew what to do with.

Dressed and ready to go by nine, he took the paper into the living room to read it more thoroughly.

The living room, too, was lifeless. He opened a window and looked around the room trying to decide where to sit. The room is decorated in tones of beige and white. A black Eames chair and smoky black glass on the cocktail table provided some contrast. The art he has collected over the years remains in his old home. He promised Susan she could keep it for five years, giving her time to replace it gradually. He regretted having signed off on that. There was nothing here that was familiar, that he recognized.

It was a living room in waiting, ready to receive. The room was perfect for cocktail parties, for welcoming guests after a funeral.

He took his paper into the den and automatically turned on the TV. Regis and Kathy Lee were discussing where they dined last night. Neil turned again to the paper, checking the stock market. When he first retired he called his broker every day. Since he invested for the long term, rarely speculating, there was no purpose to the calls. He stopped when he realized they betrayed his sorry state.

He glanced at his watch, 9:22. He took out his phone and scanned his contacts. Maybe someone would be free for lunch.

He called Sam Winslow. Sam, a former client, was also retired. He hadn’t seen him in a couple of months. "Hello, this is Sam Winslow. I’m not home right now...."
Where in hell was Sam on a Thursday morning at 9:24? Why wasn’t Sam home? Probably at the dentist, Neil thought.

He called Laura; she picked up on the first ring.
"Hi, you left early," he said, trying to keep from sounding accusatory.
"Early meeting, what's up?"
"What's up? Nothing's up? I just called to see if we could meet for lunch."

From her stilted tone and the hesitation in her voice, he assumed Jake was in her office.

"Doesn't look good for today. Anything wrong?"
"Does there have to be something wrong for me to want to have lunch with you? No, nothing's wrong. What time will you be home?" he asked, although suddenly he didn’t give a shit.

"Not sure. Look, I've got some people here. Can I call you back?"
"Sure, see you later."

Bitch. Getting some of her own back. Copycat revenge. He remembered that tone, that conversation when he was in the office and she waiting at home. She could at least display some wit instead of merely giving him the same crapola he had dished out for years.

What was wrong with him today? He knew.

Today was the first day of his retirement that he had absolutely nothing to do. For six months he managed to busy himself with at least one activity in a day. Today? Nothing. It was bound to come, this day. He had to deal with it.

Neil viewed his life through a kaleidoscope that he alone controlled. Turning it one way, the refracted light always gave him a felicitous view of his success, his many affairs, his grand passions, and his dramatic divorce. When he tired of that image, he had only to twist it slightly and another starburst appeared. His options seemed limitless. Now he wondered if it had all been a distortion, all of his life, his choices. He was filled with self-doubt, uncertain not only about his future, which he could barely stand to think about, but about the past.

Neil flipped the channel. The Home Shopping Network fascinated him. If he had the guts, he would order something. He was beginning to understand why it was such a success.

Was it he they have in mind, these genial hosts, these instant electronic friends. He wished he could speak to one of them, get through to Sandy or Eric.

He turned it off, afraid of the temptation. He could watch it all day; it was mesmerizing in its dullness, comforting in its simplistic demands. How could one resist buying something in gratitude for the pleasant company? It was the least one could do; order a computer or a china figurine to keep the hosts happy.
He knew Susan watched; he had seen the detritus of the packages when he dropped by the apartment. She probably called in often, had a nice long chat with Sandy.

It was 10:10. The phone pealed; he let it ring. He was torn between the hope it may bring relief and the shame he felt at still being at home. Maybe it was Laura, changing her mind about lunch, apologizing for being so shitty. He heard the answering machine go off and was momentarily hopeful. No one there, a hang-up.

Come on, guy. Get with it. Stop sulking like some spoiled brat.

He should have insisted that Laura not go back to the firm.

He had argued with her, pointing out the obvious: that the timing was lousy, just as he was retiring.

"Just give me a couple of years. I’ve earned that," she said.

But what was the point.

"I thought you wanted to be with me," he said. “Wasn’t that the whole point of this?"

"I do. I wanted to be with you ten years ago, but that didn’t suit your timetable," Laura replied.

"I’m here now, right here. Be with me now."

"It’ll only be for a couple of years, just for a year or two. Please, I’ve been vegetating in that stupid job all these years. This is a chance to prove something to myself."

"What? What do you have to prove?"

"That I too can make it in the real world. You had your chance; now let me have mine," Laura insisted.

For years, Laura regretted leaving Bennett, Wallace, Marsh, and Rubin. She left, in part, because of Neil. Not that he asked her to leave or even suggested it. She could see, after they had been seeing each other for a couple of years, that it would do him damage at the firm. It was such a cliché, this affair with the senior partner. He was going to leave his wife, he told her. It was only a matter of time. In the meanwhile, however, she had to suffer seeing him with Susan at firm events, listen as he took her calls, as he attended to family business.

When Maxine Chertoff offered her a job with MEOW, she consulted with Neil and with Jake.

Jake was surprised that she would even consider it.

"Well, it’s your decision, of course," Jake said doubtfully. "But I’d sure think twice. I mean it’s all very worthy and all that, but do you really want to throw in with that crowd."
"Why not?"

"Future, outlook, prospects. Money, too, just to name a few things. And it’s so narrow, so limiting. Frankly, I don’t even consider it a lateral move. Laura, you’re good. You ought to hang in here."

"Really?" Laura said. "What chance do you think I have of ever making partner?"

"Well, you’ve only been here two years," Jake temporized. "You know, we don’t even begin to think about partner status until the fifth year."

"Sure, I know it’s early days. But give me a reading anyway, your hunch, an informed guess."

Jake was annoyed. He had no answer. He thought the affair with Neil had hurt her chances.

Neil was enthusiastic about the offer, but of course she questioned his motives. In the end she took the job, but Jake was right; it was too limiting. She didn’t really connect to the women, their passion and anger. She discovered that their backroom politics were every bit as devious as she imagined the men’s to be. MEOW backed winners; that was almost the sole criteria. Too often good women who were long shots were denied help in favor of others who could prove their viability. All year long women came from all parts of the country to make their case to Maxine and the board to prove their allegiance to feminist causes, feminist fundraising, and feminist goals.

As the organization grew in numbers and in power, she became increasingly unhappy with their single focused theme. She resented the demand for obedience, the requirement that she always step to the feminist beat, and most of all, she was tired of their victimness. What did these women want? They complained they were held to a higher standard, not treated equally, especially by the press. Frequently, Laura observed, women candidates relied too much on just being women. They brushed off legitimate criticism with charges of "anti-feminism."

She started to put out feelers for other jobs, but until Jake there were no takers. She knew the timing was lousy, but she wanted to do it.

"This was not what I bargained for at all," Neil said."

"I never said I was a bargain."

"You know what I mean; I thought we would be together."

"So did I, for ten years. Well, who knew I’d have a chance to go back to Bennett Wallace Marsh? I gave it up for you once. I’m not going to do that again."

"You could have done this before, joined a law firm."

"No one asked before."
“All right, all right,” he finally agreed, as if his permission was a factor, fearing that she would do it anyway even if he continued to object.

Neil considered calling one of his three children. Missy, the second born, was married to Walter Mitchell, a psychiatrist. They had three children. Since her marriage to Walter, Missy had begun to sound like her husband. She said things like, “You need to think about developing a hobby.” Judy, his younger daughter, was presently in Alaska. She was studying engineering; Neil had not known what to talk to her about in years. As for Adam, his only son, Adam was something of a disappointment. He was still finding himself. Neil suspected his search included a lot of alcohol and drugs. Adam worked in an art gallery in SoHo. Neil hoped Adam was not gay and if he was, Neil didn’t want to know.

He looked up Adam’s number at the gallery. There was no answer, just a machine. The gallery didn’t open until noon. “What was that?” he thought. The kid didn’t even get to work before noon. All his life Neil had been at work no later than 8.

He does not like to call his children. He is afraid of them. They were all angry about the divorce. At first, they all refused to meet Laura.

After Susan agreed to the divorce, Neil met Missy for lunch.

"Why now?" she asked him. "It’s the wrong time, too late. If you wanted to divorce, you should have done it before."

"Before what?"

"Before Mother was too old to find someone new."

"It wasn’t possible. She wasn’t ready."

"God, you are arrogant. She wasn’t ready; you mean you weren’t ready."

"You don’t understand. Your mother is a wonderful woman but fragile. I had to prepare her, to make sure she was ready."

"How exactly did you do that?"

He was tired of this daughter with her questions, her judgments. What did she know of life?

"Really, Missy, you don’t understand. The proof is your mother is taking this well, isn’t she?"

"As a matter of fact she is. Maybe that’s because she is tired of your lies, your women. Tired of you all together."

"Whatever, she would not have taken it so well five years ago."

"But after all these years, don’t you think it’s sad not to grow old together, not to have each other when your friends die, when you get sick, when you have grandchildren. I mean what were the early years about if not to have these years? I just don’t understand."
Susan had said something like that too, which was the only thing she did say really, when abruptly she agreed to a divorce.

“Are you sure?” Susan asked for the last time.

"I’m sure."

"I suppose it’s Laura?” she asked.

He knew she knew, still the name from her lips pained him, thrilled him too.

"Yes, I’m sorry."

"Oh, don’t be so sorry. Honestly, it’s too late for sorry. If you feel so strongly, if you must have her, fine. One thing though."

"Yes?"

"You left it too long. Not for me, for you. It hardly makes sense now. You didn’t really need me so much when we were young, but now you do. I’m afraid you’ll find that out, and again it will be too late.

She smiled then, seeing he was confused. "What people our age really have, beside money, is memory, shared memories. I’m only sorry that we will miss that. We are, in the end, each other’s chronicler. That’s what we are, and that’s what she can never be."

He made time for his children when they were young. He changed diapers, walked them to school, attended their ball games, their school plays. He was stern but fair. God knows they had every opportunity to become something. He remembered many details: his daughter’s birthday dresses, the time he sat with Adam all night until a high fever broke. Maybe Susan bore the brunt, but he had been a good father. He fixed whatever needed fixing. He had not burdened his family with his problems. He was grateful to his children for the camouflage they provided.

It had not occurred to him that one day he might need them, would want his children for friends, for companionship. But then it had not ever occurred to him that he would need anyone. Something has gone wrong with his children, with their relationship. He was perplexed. Did he have to draw them a diagram? He needed them now. He did not want to hear about their problems, their stress. He wanted them to be good to him, to comfort him. He thought this lack of connection to his children was another mark of his failure.

The sense of failure began to envelop him. He felt leaden; soon it would be hard to move at all.

He had developed a potbelly. Once, he worked out regularly; for years he had a personal trainer. His shoulder had been bothering him; he had not done any
regular exercise in months. The skin on his hand was slack. There was nothing elastic anymore about his body or his soul.

Neil Bennett was a man who did the best he could. Nobody gave him anything. Now, he figured, it was time he learned to ask.
Marcia

"Wait up, Marcia." Sol Markowitz was walking fast and breathing hard trying to keep up with Marcia Baker. Marcia, who disdains flat shoes, resembles a heron fleeing a menacing predator. Sol had observed that many politicians have this trait. Television news was partial to shots of politicians dashing to a meeting with aides and the press trailing behind.

For Marcia, though, there was more to it. Even without an audience, Marcia Baker was always in the race.

Sometimes it made him laugh, the way they must look to others: the trim, tall woman with her uncertain gait, expecting civilians to make way and the short, stocky, balding guy trying to keep up. People seem to move aside for Marcia, to shift slightly to avoid a head on crash.

"For Christ’s sake, slow down a little. What's the rush?"
"Keep up, Sol. It’s good for you," Marcia replied.
Sol grabbed her arm. "Hold it a minute. Just hang on a little minute, will ya?"
Marcia punched the up elevator button twice. "What?" she asked Sol impatiently.
"I'm not crazy about this," he said
"So you’ve said. You’re overruled."
"OK. Okay, I’m overruled. What's a chief of staff for, especially yours, if not to be overruled? But listen, just for one minute."
"Talk, Sol," Marcia said, with exaggerated patience.
"Don’t give away the store. That’s all. Just don’t fuckin’ give away the store."
"Meaning?"
"Meaning let them do their thing. See what they find out before you tell them what you think you know. Let it go for now. We got plenty of time. Let’s dance with these people a little first. Let’s see how they operate.

Marcia Baker was not entirely certain that Sol hadn’t missed the point. He was a genius at the kind of street politics that make a campaign successful, but this was a new ball game. Campaigns were different now. It was no longer enough to get the backing of clubs, county, and district leaders. They meant so much less. One played their game, although she would enjoy telling them to go screw themselves. If you wanted to win the big one, and she could taste this one, you had to go beyond the dismal machinery of the clubs, the worn out hacks. You had to go directly to the voting public. Her pollster, message gurus and web managers would decide what issues would be on the front burner. The polls and the focus groups would draw a detailed map of the issues; all she had to do is
follow the political topography her consultants laid out for her. Her campaign
would do the rest.

Sol would take care of massaging the regulars, dealing with the petty politics
of what was left of the New York machine. Maybe they would get out their
voters, but she was not going to count on them. The clubs were broke; they all
had their hands out. On primary day, it would be $1,000 here, another $2,000
there.

Her record was good. Her reputation for integrity well established. She was
ready to take on all comers. All, that is, except Roberta Palmer.

What Marcia Baker instinctively knew was that Roberta was a grave threat to
her own candidacy. Jake Rubin was just the man to take care of that.

"You know, Marcia, sometimes I wonder why you need a campaign manager.
You're a one-man campaign band."

"Woman."
"What?"
"Woman band," she repeated.

Sol shook his head, resigned to her automatic corrections of his language,
vocabulary, and syntax.

"Don't you ever have any doubts?" Sol asked as he held the elevator door for
her.

“I have doubts, and I do appreciate your advice. I really do."

It was his fatal flaw, Marcia thought. He liked to play it safe.

Despite her occasional irritation with Sol's lack of confidence, Marcia found
it a more palatable flaw than the braggarts she dealt with who consistently
overestimated their abilities. Over the years, she had grown fond of Sol. He did
not whine, he never asked for anything, did not presume on their friendship.

He's not afraid to show his kind side. He's sensitive to other people's feelings.
Sol had seen her through many dark days, the loss of her first congressional race
and the deaths of both her parents.

She knew that Sol was afraid, constantly worried that he would make a
mistake, fail. She wished that were not so, that she could do something to
reassure him. She had tried in the past, but Sol’s problem was too deeply
ingrained; he was a man who suspected he was marginal. That was, in a way,
what Marcia admired most. She looked at Sol, a head shorter than she, always
running to catch up. Despite his fears he straightened his back and marched
smartly into the ring.

"Sol, you're great," Marcia continued. "You really are. I know it's hard for
you sometimes, but I wouldn't have made you my chief of staff if I didn't have
complete confidence in you."
Sol heard Marcia’s assertion “made you chief of staff” with the mixture of resentment and gratitude that characterized their relationship. He’s tired of being the supplicant, of carrying her bags.

How long was he supposed to pay homage to Marcia for choosing him? Did she think she made him? Suppose Marcia hadn’t come along. He would have done just fine on his own. Maybe he wouldn’t be a chief of staff, but maybe he would have done something else, made even more money. He wanted to tell Marcia he’s grateful for the chance she gave him, but it’s enough already. He was always in check; any sudden move could lose him the game.

"Don’t sulk, Sol, play along with me on this. Jake Rubin is smart, Let’s just see what he has to say."

Sol gave up, "Sure, Okay, Okay," he agreed.

He thought this was a bad idea. He didn’t trust Marcia’s instinct on this one. She’s too impressed with Jake Rubin. In his experience, these smart lawyers don’t know shit about practical politics.

He weighed the wisdom of pursuing his objections. What’s the point? Marcia won again. Marcia always won.

He knew that tone of voice, that cold voice of hers, which isolated him, was meant to relegate him back to the bench. As long as they had been together, she still had the power of the incumbent to do that, to make him feel small, inadequate, a minor player in her major league world. "Be careful, is all I’m saying. Roberta Palmer’s popular, people like her, they admire the way she handled herself when the Senator was so sick."

Do they?" Marcia replied, "Do they now? I know you mean well, Sol, really I do. Nevertheless, I have a hunch about this. If Roberta announces and MEOW is forced to make a choice, I’m not sure they will support me. And if they don’t, well, you know what that means. Maybe millions in fundraising. That endorsement is worth a lot. Trust me a little bit, Sol. Trust my instincts."

Sol knew it was time to put the icing on this conciliation cake.

"I do, Marcia. I do."

"Then let me handle this my way," Marcia said.

Jake Rubin came out to the reception room to greet them. He kissed Marcia, held her shoulders, told her she looked great. Marcia wondered if she looked composed. Over the years she had developed an ability to mask her feelings. She had screened her press conferences and been amazed at how calm she looked and sounded at hostile questions. Prepared though she was to see Jake, she found she was agitated.
Long ago, she disciplined herself to put Jake Rubin out of her mind. Now that he was standing in front of her, she was momentarily overcome with memories.

Jake shook Sol’s hand. “Heard you’re the reason Marcia keeps getting herself elected all these years,” he said to Sol as he escorted them to his office.

Jake’s office was large but not the largest or grandest in the firm. It was his way of making a point. His power was intrinsic. He did not need the trappings.

“Hello Marcia,” Laura said as she extended her hand. “We met a few years ago when I was with MEOW,” she added.

"Of course, how have you been? This is Sol Markowitz, my chief of staff.”

"Anyone else coming, Jake?” Marcia asked.

"Not at present. Laura will be working with me. If we need more people we have them. But I don't see any reason to clutter up the room right now." Jake tapped his pipe on the ashtray.

He hadn’t seen Marcia for a couple of years. He had not seen her alone to talk to for five years or so. She looked slimmer, tighter, and tauter. When he last saw her she wore her hair shoulder length. Now it was short, an auburn cap with blonde highlights. He remembered her once admiring that particular cut: "Takes a really beautiful woman to cut her hair that short,” she said "or else an incredibly confident one.”

He knew he was staring at her too long. Absorbing the changes in her. She did seem changed. He remembered her as round, soft, pliable. He had liked that about her. Ten years ago, she had a fleshy quality; his fingers would leave a mark if he pressed her too hard. Now he could detect no give in her flesh, probably not in her heart, either.

Marcia gave him an appraising look back, smiled, and ran her finger across her brow.

Years ago when they found themselves in public together, that had been their private signal, borrowed from a play, Bent, about homosexuals incarcerated in concentration camps during World War II. The gesture meant, "I love you." Would he remember?

Jake leaned back in his chair, casually drawing his index finger across his brow.

"Well,” Jake began. "Mind a pipe?"

"No," Marcia said, "I like it.”

"You said on the phone you want to retain the firm. I gather you want us to do opposition research on other candidates.

“For the moment, only on Roberta Palmer."
Jake sighed deeply, "She's a bit of an icon these days, Marcia. Are you sure she's going to run?"

"Nothing in politics was sure," Sol volunteered, "but she was making noises like she's going to run and even though she's never been elected, she had the power of the incumbency, as it was fondly referred to by the press."

“And she worries you Marcia,” Jake asked.

“Yeah, she worries me some. Anyone who runs against me worries me some. Roberta had a certain appeal, and she would be able to raise significant funds, to tap into Dave's contributors. I know that—that's why I want to start early. I wanted to know, well, I wanted to know everything about her. Before her marriage to David, after, right up to the present. One thing I knew was she'd not get along with her stepdaughter. Joan interned for me a while back. She's a nice kid. It would be interesting to know if Roberta and David had the storybook marriage portrayed by the press. I heard he was having an affair. Anyway, I leave it to you. Surely you don't have a problem with that, just because she's gotten some favorable press lately."

"No, I have no problem with that. I'm just pointing out that Roberta Palmer was one of those people one had to deal with carefully, very carefully. I wouldn't want this to backfire on you."

"Maybe there's nothing there," Marcia said. "Maybe she is the perfect woman. All I'm saying is let's find out."

"Anything in particular you want to focus on?" Laura asked.

Marcia hesitated, glancing at Sol. "No, I mean nothing in particular. I guess you know better than I do what that means."

"Sure, financial, personal, recent voting record, public statements, the works."

Laura made a note on her pad. "She was a model before she married the congressman; we'll look into that aspect too."

Laura closed her pad; put a cap on her pen. “You know Marcia, we like to encourage our clients to have us do opposition research on them as well,” she said.

"On me?"

"Yes. It may be even more important than investigating the opponent. We will find out what your opposition will find, and we will help you decide how to handle it. Right, Jake?"

It was Jake who taught her this pitch. It was the standard proposal they made to clients. Makes good sense, usually. He wished now he had told her to keep her mouth shut.

"Usually. Laura's right, in most cases. We do like to insure our clients’ victory by using our research efforts to uncover any, well, any vulnerability."
"She's run three times already. They uncovered what there was to uncover," Sol said.

"Not for a race like this," Laura argued, "This was the big one. For this they will go all out. Shouldn't you be as prepared as you possibly can be? We'll examine Marcia's tax returns, Congressional papers, voting record, as well as anything else we feel could be used against her. You'd be completely prepared for anything your opponent threw at you."

Marcia Baker grimaced. "That's what one has to do these days to get elected."

"Maybe later," Sol said. "After all we haven't even made a definite decision to run."

"Oh, I'm running," Marcia said to Sol, that hard voice sluicing out through tight lips pursed in a fake smile. She turned to Jake.

"You understand, Jake. This is my chance, my shot. If David Palmer were still alive, I would not have dreamed of challenging him. However, he is not. The country, particularly this state, is ready to elect a woman senator. Roberta Palmer has no right to that seat. I could accomplish so much in the Senate, so much. So many issues I could work on. Sometimes when I walk the streets, see what this city has come to, see the homeless, the kids on drugs, all of it, I feel hopeless. Then I remember that I can do something, I can stand up, as I always have, for the vulnerable. That sounds like political rhetoric, but I believe it. If I didn't I sure wouldn't put myself through this. I can beat Larry Marchand, even with all his money."

Larry Marchand is the millionaire Congressman from upstate New York. Long associated with conservative causes; his popularity eroded with his support of the privatization of social security and his opposition to gay civil rights legislation. This was New York, after all.

"It's not only his money," Jake said. "Larry was a more serious person than people realized. I happened to know him fairly well. I must tell you, he impressed me."

"Impressed you? With his bigotry perhaps or his blind devotion to everything right wing?" Marcia's tone was contemptuous. Sol was getting nervous.

"I do not think he was a bigot. I don't agree with everything he stands for, but I really don't think he's a bigot," Jake replied. His voice was pleasant enough, almost formal. Too formal, Sol thought.

"Gave a good imitation," Laura interjected. "Anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-everything we believe in."

This assumption that everyone in the room held the same political views drove Jake crazy. He found himself surrounded by this provincial judgment at dinner parties and charity banquets. Sipping champagne and dining on $1,000
plate meals, the women dressed in designer originals, the men laying the framework for deals, the political talk assumes they are all of a single mind.

It was sometimes hard to keep up. In place of the social register, there was the *Forbes* 500 and the listing of contributors’ names in the programs of Lincoln Center and the Metropolitan Museum. Each week Jake opened a dozen invitations for Honoree Dinners. Scanning the names of the chairmen (sometimes “chairs”) of the dinners was like perusing his own contact list. There, they all are - his extended family. The partners in Wall Street firms, the CEO’s of listed companies, a smattering of stars, and lately, if the cause was AIDS or Global Warming, some prominent doctors and scientists. His rich relations were being awarded prizes for their significant contributions to disease, education, climate change, and social change. Some of these were secular; others had a distinct religious bent. Occasionally he would receive an invitation to something so absurd, he wondered at the sanity of the Host.. A fund for Animals of People who have AIDS, for example, seemed particularly odd. There are building funds, capital funds, endowment funds, and operating funds. There were naming opportunities (from a shelf to a building), fun galas (he once bid on dinner with Meryl Streep,) benefits attached to the opera, the theater, the ballet.

All of this cost him a small fortune. In the political season, which had become year round, the intensity of fundraising reached a fever pitch.

Political fundraising was, in some ways, the mother lode of all fundraising. This monopoly game began with capturing Wall Street and East Hampton. When the Players discover that money cannot buy everything (almost, but not quite) the most ambitious of his circle move smartly along the casino to the gaming table for political power. In this crap game, they roll the dice, aligning themselves early on in a campaign to the likeliest winning candidate. This game was not for the faint of heart. There was no betting allowed on the line. A zero sum game, the losers are out in the cold for four more years.

Jake was not actively involved in politics anymore. He demurred from receiving awards, shrank from prestigious board appointments. He found political conversation masturbatory. In his circles, the men were bloated with liberal clichés. The malodorous gas they emit while lamenting the plight of the poor repulsed Jake. The crackling sounds of knee jerk reactions resonated through the watering holes at lunch and cocktails.

Years ago, he and Marcia laughed at all this. They were better than that, wiser, not bound by the conventions of their peers or political party. Once she would have been curious as to how he knew Marchand so well, why he was impressed with him. Now he sees she is tense, debating whether to have the last
word on Marchand or to let Laura’s stand. He wondered if she had lost her sense of humor.

"Well, Jake, you may admire Marchand, but I don’t. I think he’s done nothing for the people, nothing except feather the nests of his friends. He’s too rich to know or care about people who are really hurting." Marcia was rubbing the back of her neck, a sure sign she was getting annoyed. "I’ve done a lot of good," Marcia said defensively. "A lot of good. My name is on a bill protecting homeless children, allowing their parents an additional welfare stipend. I’m not going to rehearse all my accomplishments here, not now. But I’m telling you, I know I make a difference."

"Got my vote," Jake said to Marcia

Oh, sure, Laura thought. Like that’s all she thought about, the homeless. She remembered why she left MEOW, how she came to loathe the sanctimonious pronouncements of the women, the office holders, the office seekers, the handlers, the fundraisers, and especially the board of MEOW. It was gender, not feminist, principles, that drove that organization. When she voiced this heresy to Maxine Chertoff, she was told she might be happier elsewhere.

"Got my vote, too", Laura added. "This is why it’s really important to let us do opposition research on you. We want you to win."

Right to the point, Jake thought. Her remark gave him the opportunity to look between them, first at Laura then at Marcia. He wondered if some opportunity would present itself that might lead to a ménage a trois. Late hours pouring over Marcia’s tax returns, over her legislation. Laura leaning over Marcia’s shoulder discussing some fine point of Marcia’s tax return. Jake might come up behind them, start to rub their asses. Marcia liked that, liked it a lot. Jake corrected his smile, which had turned into a smug grin. He turned his attention to Marcia; this fantasy would have a long shelf life.

"Maybe you’re right. These days who knows what an opponent can make of even the most innocent transaction in one’s life," Marcia said.

"Such as?" Laura made it sound friendly.

"Such as?" Marcia sighed again, crossed her legs, crossed them again. "Such as, I was in the civil rights movement in the South. Maybe I’m a communist. I was a struggling lawyer for years, sharing space with Rita Morgan, the gay lawyer who killed herself after losing her lover’s child custody case. I made a lot of money in the stock market and then made more money with some good real estate investments. I’m worth, unfortunately, about 2 million now. On and on, just the stuff of life. However, as Sol says, I’ve run three times before and nothing harmful has come out. What do you think Jake? Should I have myself investigated as well?"
Bitch, Jake thought. "Sure you should. Every candidate should."
"Well if you say so, then we'll do it"
"So, we're to do both of you. And Marchand?"
"Not now. First I have to win the primary. I just want to focus on this, for
now at least."
"This won't be cheap," Jake said, frowning now to show he doesn't like this
part.
"That's okay. We have a war chest, and I spend half my time on fundraising.
Discuss the terms with Sol. Whatever it takes, Jake. I know you will not gouge
us."
Sol did not intend to pay Rubin directly. He had already spoken to Judith
Parks, their media consultant, about funneling the money to Rubin through
their firm.
"Okay. Laura? Anything else?" Jake asked.
Plenty, Laura thinks. "No, not now. I would like to make an appointment to
talk to you at some length," she said politely to Marcia.
"I'm available. I would like to see this concluded in say three months. Think
that's realistic Jake?"
"I don't see why not. Roberta's life is pretty public, and yours isn't all that
complicated. Is it?"
"Not at all. Simple as apple pie."
"And Laura will have access to all your papers, tax filings, that kind of thing?"
"Whatever she needs."
"I guess that does it for today. We'll start immediately. Sol, do you have a
card. I'll call you in the next few days, after Laura and I have had a chance to
consult on how to approach this."
"Laura, are you still close to Maxine?" Marcia asked as she stands to leave.
"I don't know that close is the word I'd use, but we talk," Laura replied.
"Good, maybe you and I can chat about that."
"Sure."
Sol stands up and hands Jake a business card.
"I haven't said much, but I want you to know I'm nervous about this.
Sometimes when you start something like this, it takes on a life of its own. So,
for the moment keep it in the family, okay." Sol says.
"Everything we do is strictly confidential," Jake said.
"Yeah, well these things get out. In politics, a lot gets out. No sense making it
easy for them. Nice to meet you."
Sol nodded to Laura. "And I'll hear from you, I guess," he said.
"Yes, nice to meet you too. Marcia?" Jake said, "I wonder if you would stay for just a moment."

As Laura closed Jake's office door behind her, Marcia walked to the window, clasping her hands in front of her, wishing she still smoked.
"Nice view," she said.
"Hi," Jake said, standing too close. His voice is hoarse, as if memory has infected it, weakening it. Marcia closed her eyes, steeling herself for a ride on that mellow tone.
She had been there before, holding tight to him, while the toboggan careened out of control. She had no wish to go down that precarious slide again.
"Hi," she replied, her voice steady.
"Just like old times," Jake said.
Marcia turned. "Not exactly."
"Thanks, you look pretty good yourself." Marcia walked over to Jake's desk and picked up his warm pipe.
"How's Pat?"
She doesn't know, Jake thought. How could she know? Secrets had been the building blocks of their past life together. The only one who knew all the secrets was Pat. Loyal Pat, who suffered his affairs for years, discovered this one years ago. Clever Pat kept her own counsel and it worked. He didn't leave. He could not leave Pat then.
The lies to Marcia compounded fast. He had an interest bearing account with Marcia.
"You know that we've separated again. This time I think it's going to stick. What about you, are the rumors true?"
"That Jerry and I are separated? Yes, it was true, but we seem to be giving it another try at the moment."
"Sorry, when I heard you married, I hoped..."
"What? That I had found true happiness."
"Something like that."
"Look, we're not going to be awkward with each other, are we?" Marcia asked abruptly.
Jake took the pipe from her, holding on to her hand "Why should we be?"
"No reason. I just want us to, well, to be okay with each other."
"I'm okay," Jake lifts his finger once again to his brow. "You're okay, so why shouldn't we be okay?" he says.
For a moment, Marcia almost took the bait. So easy to pick it up again, to let herself be distracted as she was years ago by Jake’s gift for reeling out just enough line.

Jake had an unfailing sense of just how deep he had to probe to penetrate her emotional debris. What would be the harm, she mused, if she regressed just a little. It wasn’t, after all, a religious experience; she didn’t have to immerse herself. Oh, she was tempted. She was tired of keeping up her guard, of being misunderstood, satirized in cartoons, criticized by the press, denying false rumors, always watching her back. She was tired too of being alone. It was not working out with Jerry. Now that he was back, she seemed lonelier than before. How lovely it would be to slip back into Jake Rubin’s arms, right here, right now. She could feel him waiting for her, wondering if he had cast his line dead on.

Years ago when Marcia realized that she and Jake were not going to make it, that she would have to get over him, she took up swimming.

She forced herself to go to the 92nd Street “Y,” with its chemically treated water. The smell of the disinfectant irritated her nostrils, inflamed her skin. She hoped it would cleanse other wounds as well. She trained for months, and on New Year’s Eve she swam her first mile at midnight. She hated every stroke, pushing herself back and forth across the pool, counting laps. Through the windows high above the pool, she could see snow falling. Only once did she look up at the bleachers to see if Jake was there. If he had somehow miraculously known she would be doing this sad thing and come to rescue her. To make it alright.

However, he was not there, and the next day, sore but proud, she knew her recovery had begun.

She was still a swimmer, accomplished now, knocking off a mile, sometimes more. Now she concentrated on other things while she swam. Legislation she was working on, an impending press conference.

She rarely thought of Jake. It wasn’t necessary to fine-tune his image. He was with her all the time. Finally, that was how she neutralized the pain. She carried him with her, a fixed satellite around her heart.

"Jake, it would never work. You know that."
"Might."
"Too late."
"Sure?"

"No, not sure, but sure enough. You know, Jake, I have not come this far without learning a little something about discipline. About deciding what you
want and going after it. I've developed the ability to concentrate. I'm afraid you'd spoil that."

Jake shrugs, picks up his pipe, walks around his desk to his chair, cupping his hands around the lit match, drawing in, buying time.

"Marcia, what is this really about? What's the hidden agenda?"
"I don't want Roberta Palmer in this race."

She wanted to trust Jake; she wanted him to ask her more so she could tell him everything.


Marcia hesitated. She heard Sol's voice telling her to go slow. But she did trust Jake. Despite everything, she trusted him. She wanted to tell him everything.

"Because," Marcia hesitated once more, her mouth moving slightly, as if she was rehearsing her next sentence. Jake remembered this habit. He used to sit across from her and watch her thinking, watched her mouth move as if she were a ventriloquist throwing her voice. He found it endearing at the time.

"Because," Marcia said again, her voice strong and slightly defiant. She wanted to trust Jake, but suddenly she was afraid. She did not really know him anymore, better to be cautious, not to invite betrayal. Plenty of time, if things worked out, to tell Jake everything.

"Because," Marcia repeated, "everybody has something to hide. Everybody has secrets. I'm absolutely certain Roberta is no different."

Jake knew she was holding back. He didn’t press her. Whatever it was, she’ll tell him in time. He was not sure he wanted to know. He had learned over the years that the gathering of information, the collecting of secrets, which is what he is paid to do, left him saddled with thorny ethical and moral choices. He did not mind waiting for whatever it was Marcia thought she had on Roberta Palmer.

“What if Laura found out about us? Laura was no fool. What if she found out?” Jake asked.

"She won't. After all, Jake, that is what we did best. We were nothing if not discrete. It was a million years ago; no one knew about us then. Ironic, isn't it? All that fuss I made about not being seen in public. Now, of course, I'm grateful. No, she won't find out. Look, Jake, someone is going to start serious probing into my life. Better it be you, don’t you think?"

"I wish to hell you’d leave it alone. You’re right; everybody has secrets, including you. Assuming Roberta Palmer doesn’t run, do you really think you can win? Is it worth all this? I’m telling you, this could be trouble."
Embarrassing for you, Marcia thought. She had heard the rumors about Jake’s impending nomination to the bench. This would not sit well, may even derail it.

"If Roberta Palmer doesn’t run, I’m assured the nomination. And yes, I do think I can win. It may be a little risky, but better to get it over with. I promise you this: if things get out of hand at all, I’ll call it off." Marcia says

"You will?"

"Sure I will. I’m not a fool either, Jake. Help me, Jake. You were there for me at the beginning. Be there for me now. I need you on my team."

That again, Jake thought. "Well," Jake said for the second time that day, "There’s nothing I like better than good teamwork."
Chapter 10

Neil and Laura

Although Jake was the person who hired Laura years before as an associate in the law firm, it was Neil she wanted from the first.

She met Neil on her second day at the firm. He was handsome, tall, lean, well proportioned. He had a long, oval face and a loping posture. His deep green eyes were set far apart above his high cheekbones. When he was animated, small smile lines flickered and receded, creating a mischievous sparkle. His skin tone was dark, even in winter, he was burnished copper. When they shook hands, his was cool, firm. She fell in love with him on the spot.

Neil had been totting up the years, weighing his accomplishments, passing judgment on himself. He was deeply disappointed in his professional life but it was not only his professional life that troubled him on this day. His measurements of himself were far more complicated. He had long ago discovered the fleeting nature of concrete accomplishments. Once he had hungered after praise, adulation, congratulatory response. He had his share of promotion and publication, but he felt remote from his achievements. Perhaps he had not worked hard enough; certainly, he had not invested enough of himself, not in his work, not in his marriage. He had not, in short, really gotten his hands dirty. Such success as he had came too easily, but he pretended along with all the rest that it represented the best he could do.

He got away with it. Never once did anyone challenge him. He waited for the accusation that he was lazy, stubborn, deficient, could do better. Didn’t anyone notice how slipshod his life was lived? He was always being congratulated for the wrong thing, undervalued or overestimated by a defective yardstick. He had just about given up, was resting comfortably in his laurel hammock, when he fell in love with Laura.

For years, he was like a tourist basking in an overcast sky, trying to catch some rays before his two weeks were over. Well, he thought, his two weeks were almost over; this vacation was drawing to an end. Perhaps a tan wasn’t so important after all; maybe he should stop lying around the beach, waiting for the sun. He could reconnoiter the island, rent a jeep, walk barefoot through a rain forest, and climb that volcanic mountain, meet the locals, buy a beer, taste the native fruit. Such exploration might yield some surprises, some moments of pleasure. Perhaps, he thought, the thing I seek is the exploration itself. I have been too timid, he acknowledged, and is momentarily disgusted with himself. Once begun on this derogatory road, he rolled downhill. Too nervous, too eager for audience reaction. His years had been spent playing the crowd for a laugh.
Was it too late now? If he started right now, this minute, took a stand, shed his conventional life, his obeisance to conformity, could he find what was missing?

He was soon hooked on Laura. She supplied a life-affirming serum; he craved another dose.

He was married to a woman who rarely tried anything new. His wife refused to learn to drive. She had no interest in sports or games, although he himself was an avid baseball fan. Their vacations were pedestrian, group trips to the Caribbean or London. "I like to be comfortable," she said, when he suggested a trip to Africa or the Galapagos.

Then there were Laura's notes to him. That surprised him; he had not anticipated she would become so ardent this early in their relationship. It threw him off; it was not the usual pattern. In the morning when he arrived at the office, he would frequently find a note on his desk. At meetings, she would pass him notes. When they parted for the evening, she would give him one. When he left for a few days on business, she gave him a letter for each day, carefully marked and tied with a blue ribbon. That first year, she wore her hair long. When it was warm, she pulled it back in a ponytail. She looked so young to him, so delicate. She was determined to become indispensable. What can she see in me, he wondered. Surely, she would get bored and give it up. However, she didn't seem bored; she became more loving and wrote more notes. He mentioned to her once that he thought every man found garter belts a turn on. The next time they were together, she had one on.

"Your other friends," she said as she lifted her dress," probably only wore it on special occasions. But I'll wear mine every day, just in case you want to see me straightening my stocking, or something." He made excuses to drop into her office or to call her into his. Her leg resting on a chair, she would adjust her stockings. It was all for him, or so she said.

Depending on the amount of time they had, they would go to the movies, have dinner, and seek out one or another of the motels around New York. It was assumed that Laura would make the arrangements. She had no shame, breezily exchanging pleasantries with desk clerks as she registered. The rooms were not elegant. However, she didn't seem to mind. Once in the room, the door locked and they both breathed a sigh of relief. They sometimes had just a couple of hours, sometimes all night. From her tote, she took a bottle of wine and two cokes, some chocolate candy or doughnuts. He lay on the bed watching her arrange their treats, pour the wine, light a joint. Soon, she was mellow. He didn't smoke, but it didn't matter. As soon as she got high, so did he. She strolled around the room, talking of the day's events, or tomorrow's schedule, as she slowly took off her clothes. Soon, she went into the bathroom. She emerged a
few minutes later, a sheer negligee over her garter belt and black stockings. One time she had on a low cut dress, another time a bathing suit.

He marveled that she took the time to dream up these surprises for him. He loved her for that. He turned on the television; he had a horror of their being heard in the next room. The walls in the places they frequented were not thick. Sometimes she danced for him, a silly seductive dance that pleased him, nevertheless.

Their lovemaking was a long, exquisite excursion, unhurried, with time to roam and explore small side roads and uncharted paths. With some embarrassment, she guided him so that he learned she liked her buttocks rubbed. He liked it, too. Some things he had always resisted with other lovers, things he felt improper, he overcame with her. They talked all the while, "It's really you" she said, as if amazed at her happiness. He loved her for that.

"Tired?" Neil asked, "Try to rest for a while now."

"Just a little, I’ll recover, a little rest time now." They would rest, she would smoke a little more of her joint.

Sated and stoned, she was funny. He had never laughed so much in bed before. She told him stories; she had an uncanny ability to imitate voices.

Soon, she covered him with herself.

"Are you sure?" he inquired politely, although he knew he could not wait another minute more.

"Ah yes, I’m quite all right now," she replied, "and I’m a strong believer in equal play for equal work. With gratitude and love, she would lie in his arms and start to move again.

"Again?" he asked.

"I’m afraid so."

"No rest for the weary," he said, beginning to touch her in all her good places.

"But maybe after this time, we could sleep a little. You’d be a perfect woman if only you would learn to sleep a little."

"I’ll sleep," she whispered, "soon I’ll sleep."

On the occasions when they spent the night, he arose before her. He was eager to start the day and nervous about calling Pat. In the early years, Laura accepted this. She would chat with him sitting on the toilet seat while he shaved.

"You look about twelve years old," he said. "It’s amazing, no makeup and you look terrific. You look better now than when you’re all dressed up."

When he came out of the shower, he found her standing there naked, holding a towel open for him. "I’ve warmed your towel," she said. "You’ve warmed my heart," he replied.
Was she merely clever, he wondered, experienced and devious?

If so, what for? He was twenty years her senior; what did she want with him? He had always ended up in second place. He would be sixty in a few years and he wanted, for once, to get the prize. Just once, before it was really too late for anything, he wanted to be first.

There had been other women over the years. He had loved some of them, or liked to think so. Those affairs kept his spirits up. He meant no harm, certainly not to Pat. He was careful, he thought, to protect her. He left no evidence around, as some men do. He did not want to be caught out; he did not want to hurt Pat.

He was a lonely man; he had been a lonely boy. He felt as if he had lived his whole life in a secret garden of loneliness.

Inside he grew estranged. Isolated and reclusive in his soul, he was a man of solitary habits, lone walks; books, movies, music - all enjoyed alone. He was surprised when people liked him. He always felt maladroit, socially inept. He did not encourage small talk. He was a hermit in modern dress, roaming a sequestered, verdant island. Such loneliness as Neil knew has its own lush quality. His seclusion kept him safe; in some ways, he was unreachable.

With Pat, at least, he was more at ease. She visited him, from time to time, in exile.

Laura came into his life like some lost tourist, no passport, no papers, just a name written on a slip of paper. She knew nothing of the local laws; she did not brake at stop signs. He saw her as a friendly trespasser, a little gauche, perhaps, over eager, but that would change once she learned his language. She was resistant, however, unable or unwilling to adjust to his vernacular. He relented a little; she looked so appealing, he did not think she would be dangerous. It wasn’t long before he realized he had made a mistake, a bad error in judgment. She encroached on his private thoughts, invaded his solitary space, and overstepped the boundaries. For once, he didn’t have enough ammunition to keep the enemy at bay. All he had ever had was a bow and arrow and an old musket. That was the joke. Had anyone tried, really tried; he was a pushover. No one ever did, not even Pat— Pat, who was his best friend and knew better, for both their sakes, than to force a confrontation. He was courteous to Laura at the start, patiently explaining the rules. She seemed to listen with rapt attention.

He told her the facts, how he had failed at this and that.

She did not say, "Too bad. He was used to being loved despite his failures; she seemed to love him because of them. She made no excuses for him, as others had. She was blunt in her observations, on his career, his marriage.

"You’re not a risk taker," she said. "You think all change is for the worst"
"It usually is" Neil replied.

Laura hesitated; she wanted to reveal all her secrets to Neil. She was never quite sure just how far she should go, how much she could trust him, what the parameters of acceptable risk were.

She wanted to be loved for her essence, not her image. She had tried to be careful with Neil not to muddy the waters. So far, he had proved himself a careful listener. As she had spun out her life story, he filtered out the embellishments. He had an appetite for the bawdy garnish with which she decorated her tales.

She threw him the same curves she had been tossing around for years, wondering if Neil would be taken in like all the others, dazzled by her conjuring. She wanted to tell the truth; surely, this was the man to whom she can tell everything. Not yet, she thought, not yet.

''Damn," Laura said, looking down at her leg, as they are about to leave the motel.

"What?" Neil asked, alarmed.

"I think I have a run in this stocking.” She raised her leg and propped it on the chair. Slowly, she lifted her skirt, pulling the stocking of her left leg taut, as if checking for a run.

"Nope, it's okay.” She dropped her leg down, straightened her skirt.

"Neil," she said, a broad smile on her face. “The fact is I've got your number.”

They used to do this for each other, Laura and Neil. Each had a magic bag of tricks; a few extra cards up the sleeve; some pratfalls; a rabbit in a hat; an irresistibile phantasmagoria of optical illusion, the essence of a love affair.

He was fed up with the world’s criteria. Even this inner monologue he saw as a kind of existential bantering, the icebreaker at a party of one. Just try, he thought, that is what matters. Try. Experiment a little with life. Expose yourself.

This is precisely what he had done with Laura. Revealed, as far as words are ever adequate, his gravest fears, his truest self in all its ambiguity. Laura made it all come right. Not that way, she said, don’t look at it that way but, rather, this way. Looking at things her way, through her eyes, he thought he might like himself, respect himself, too. Why, it took her no time at all to plow her way through his professional blunders, his personal failures. Machete in hand, this sturdy woman chopped away at the tangle of aborted dreams and missed opportunities, until she found, she said, the inner man. And what a guy!

He could not resist this woman, this explorer, who rescued him from solitary confinement.
Chapter 11

Laura and Marcia

A week after their first meeting in Jake’s office, Laura and Marcia met for lunch.

"Unfortunately," Marcia said to Laura, "my life is an open book." Marcia has just taken a sip of a fine Pouilly Fuisse at Peter’s, where it costs just under $120.00 a bottle.

"It’s ironic," she continued, holding the glass by its stem, and then cupping it with her hands, as if to warm it, "because I’m really a very private person."

Laura wondered if that was meant as a warning. Laura preferred red wine; she was annoyed at herself when Marcia offered her a choice, she shrugged and said it didn’t matter. She took a sip of the wine, wishing she had ordered a real drink.

So far in this awkward half hour they have spent together, Marcia had not yet met Laura’s eyes. Laura now felt this lunch was a mistake. Jake suggested it; he suggested it might be easier for the two women to get to know each other. So far, Laura thought grimly, it had been far from easy.

When she told Neil she was lunching at Peter’s with Marcia, Neil puckered his lips in a mock whistle.

“Big mistake," he said. "Restaurants are for beginnings and endings of love affairs and business deals," he continued pompously. "They are not really suitable for getting down to the nitty-gritty. If you’re hiring or firing, mistresses or staff, Peter’s is the place."

Neil was certainly right this time; it was not relaxing. Laura was at a loss. She did not know how to get Marcia to relax; she was beginning to wonder if the woman was capable of it.

Laura tried to dress carefully for this lunch. It was one of those mornings when nothing seemed to fit, to go together. She settled on a navy suit with wide lapels. She knew the blouse was wrong when she put it on, a too-busy print, with a floppy bow. It was a form of sartorial suicide with which Laura was all too familiar. The skirt is tight; she could feel the waistband cutting into her waist. She was afraid she was going to pop the skirt button; she could feel herself expanding as she sat there.

Marcia, on the other hand, was wearing a simple black dress, two gold buttons on the sleeves and a small gold chain around her neck.

Laura was at a disadvantage in every way. She should have ordered some gin or a glass of red wine.

"So," Marcia said, taking another sip. "My, this is good, pricy but good. So, if you’ve done some basic research on me, which I assume you have, then maybe I
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can fill in whatever blanks there are. Although, God knows, there aren’t many. The press ferrets out everything, every goddamn thing. When I married Jerry it was a circus. But nothing compared to when we separated. The questions they ask, you wonder where they get the nerve. And there’s no point in trying to evade them. None. They just hang on and probe and pry until they get what they want." She made a sound, a little "Ha.” Her shoulders were tense; she put the glass down and rubbed her neck.

Marcia took a deep breath, shaking her head once, as if to clear it, "So, you have done your homework?” she asked Laura.

"Yes, I’ve begun. I mean, I’ve read your official bio and the folders of clippings your office sent over. Also, the section on you in Women and Politics and the backgrounder MEOW puts out. Just the official facts," she said.

I sound like a jerk, Laura thought. She saw what Neil meant now, something cold about this woman, off putting.

The captain appeared all smiles. "Ladies, so nice to see you both.” Laura had been here once before, with Neil. She assumed this was meant for Marcia.

She knew she had the kind of life now where such places were taken for granted, but she still wasn’t casual about it. While she was waiting for Marcia, she recognized quite a few people.

Tom Post, the head of Oriole Pictures came in. Tom had been a client of Neil’s. He stopped to say hello, but did not call Laura by name or introduce her to his companion. She was sure he did not know who she was, just that he was supposed to recognize her. She entered the game too late. It happened to her all the time. Unless she was with Neil, people don’t seem to be able to place her. She had taken to saying her name causally. "Hello, Laura Bennett,” as she extended her hand. Generally, the response was a blank look. "Of course,” they said, implying they knew it all the time. She thought Tom knew her, so she hadn’t done that when he passed by her table. Another mistake.

"Oh, just a small Caesar salad." Marcia says, “You know the way I like it: no anchovies and maybe a tiny piece of that Plaice. Laura, what about you?"

"Sounds fine. I’ll have the same.” Laura hates fish. Shit, she thought, this was ridiculous.

Jordan backed away from their table, beckoned to a waiter, and transmitted the order.

I could have had anything, Laura thought, as she observed a lovely dish of lobster ravioli pass by. For a moment, she considered changing her order. Simple really, just say I’ve changed my mind because that lobster ravioli looks so good. I’ll have that. Jordan doesn’t care; nobody cared. Might even be kind of sweet. She could do it just slightly wide eyed. Nobody would be mad. She knew
absolutely that if Marcia Baker wanted to change her order, she wouldn’t give it a
second thought.

"Hell being a woman," Marcia was saying, "I haven’t been off a diet in twenty
years. You certainly look like you’re in good shape. What do you do?"

"Do?"

"As in exercise?"

"Oh, exercise. Not a lot. Well, I run on weekends, some, and in the summer
Neil and I play tennis."

"Hmm, well tennis isn’t too aerobic, but whatever you’re doing it looks good
on you."

Lucky she could not see, Laura thought, that my skirt was hanging by a
thread, maybe my marriage as well.

"What do you do?" Laura asked.

"I swim. I try and swim at least four times a week, and I have one of those ski
machines. You know, I forgot that you were married to Neil Bennett. How is he?
I’ve met him a couple of times."

Marcia had indeed remembered. So this was the one he left his wife for. She
remembered Susan Bennett. She had contributed to her charities; they had been
at some meetings together. Too bad they couldn’t let their hair down; it must be
quite a story.

"Neil just retired, "Laura said brightly to Marcia. “You know how that is.
He’s considering a few options, mostly just enjoying having time to himself."

"I imagine he’s swamped with offers," Marcia said politely.

"Well, not swamped, but there are quite a few."

"Has he an interest in politics?"

"Yes, of course," Laura answered, her mind racing ahead to how Marcia
Baker might get Neil appointed to some important committee. He could fly to
Washington a few times a week, take a suite at the Four Season. She would fly
down too; they would have to coordinate schedules to see each other. Lots of late
night calls. They would be missing each other again, as they used to.

"Well, we ought to get him involved in something," Marcia said. "He’s too
valuable to waste."

"That would be terrific,” Laura said leaning towards Marcia. “Really, I’m sure
he would like that, and he knows everybody. Oh, you know what I mean."

Marcia knew precisely what Laura meant. She meant he knew the current cast
in Washington, probably knows the President—certainly a few senators and a
couple or three cabinet people. They returned his calls, not immediately maybe,
but they do return them. So why is this wife of his so eager, Marcia wondered?
Something was going on here; maybe he was in some kind of trouble. She would have to remember to ask Jake.

"Should I ask him to call you?" Laura asked.

"By all means, I'd love to talk to him," Marcia said, making a mental note to call Jake today to see if there is a problem with Neil Bennett.

Laura felt a surge of well-being; she was close to falling victim to a form of counterfeit friendship elicited by such conversations. That had happened to her before: mistaking polite conversation for something more, mistaking cordiality for the start of a friendship.

Laura could hardly wait to tell Neil. She felt better; maybe she did belong here after all. She caught Jordan's eye, motioning to the wine.

"No more for me," Marcia said to Jordan as he poured Laura more wine. "I've got a busy afternoon."

"Well," Laura said; suddenly she did not want the wine after all, "I have just a few questions about things that were a little unclear from what I read."

"Yes?"

Jordan returned with their salads, artfully arranged on dinner plates, a scoop of greens appliquéd with butterflies of pale yellow salad dressing.

"Just the way you like it," Jordan said. "No anchovies."

Laura tasted the salad, no anchovies, which she did like; there was barely any dressing. She knew she would be starving after this lunch. Maybe stop off for a Dunkin donut before going back to the office. The idea lifted her spirits for a moment.

"The main thing is about the money."

"What about the money?"

"Well, in 1980, you were in private practice. Your tax returns show an income of $44,320."

"I did a lot of pro bono work then."

"Sure, but then just a year later, you have income from investments that is fairly sizable."

Marcia turned her wine glass, creating a whirlpool in the glass. "Right, remember I said I made some good investments."

Marcia put her fork down; she had barely touched her salad. "Nothing wrong with getting lucky in the market, is there?"

"Of course not."

"Good thing I did, too, because it financed my first campaign. You have no idea how tough it is for a woman to break into politics. I think I raised a total of $24,000 that first time. It's laughable, really laughable."

"I was sorry you lost."
"Me too. But, and I guess this is what separates the, well, the wheat from the chaff, I came right back two years later and won."

"I remember that race. In fact, I distributed literature in my building for you."

"Did you?" Marcia was skeptical, as if she did not believe Laura.

"All of my friends were for you. We were really very proud."

"That's good to hear, thank you. It's nice to know you were on my side."

The salad plates had been removed and the trout was served. An even larger dinner plate was put before of them; the slim trout was surrounded by half-lemons covered with gauze.

"Now that is a handsome presentation," Marcia said to the waiter. Only after Laura squeezed some lemon on the brown skin of the trout did she realize that Marcia has expertly slipped her knife into the trout and flipped it over so that the meat of the trout was exposed. Then Marcia squeezed two lemon halves on the trout flesh. Where's the sauce, Laura wondered.

"Anyway," Laura continued, "I was just wondering where you got the initial money for the investments."

"Why is that important?"

"Probably isn't," Laura said. "But it just isn't clear. And we want to be sure nobody else can make anything of it."

"I've run for Congress three times and no one has made anything of it. In fact, as you know, my reputation for integrity is impeccable."

"True, but this is a senate race. You're bound to come under more intense scrutiny. I thought that was the whole point, to make sure there is nothing left unanswered, nothing any opponent can hurt you with, no surprises, especially unpleasant surprises."

"There isn't. But that isn't the point. The point is to find out everything we can about Roberta Palmer."

"We've started on that, too. But for your own good, we want to have a complete dossier on you as well. Jake explained that."

"Yes, he did," Marcia said grudgingly.

"Great, so where did you get the money?"

Laura was acutely uncomfortable. She had not expected so much resistance. Something was wrong here. She's having to work too hard. She did not want to alienate Marcia, not now, not when she might help Neil.

Laura did not like the fish. The wine tasted sour now, too. She wondered if she had the nerve to have something off the dessert cart. Her stomach was rumbling.

"Laura," Marcia said, "Have you talked to Jake about this?"
"No, not specifically. I did tell him I needed to see you to fill in the whole picture but not about this specifically."

"Perhaps you should. Yes, I think you should. I'm not trying to give you a hard time. Really, I'm not. But I do think it would be good for you to talk to Jake."

"Marcia, I'm your lawyer. I'm really on your side. I respect what you've been doing, trying to do. You brought moderation and sanity to women's issues. I know you've been fighting the establishment."

"I have, on all fronts. People don't seem to understand. They expect me to toe a line, their line—a union line, a feminist line, a liberal line. But I won't do that. I just won't."

Laura smiled, more relaxed now. "Many of us appreciate your approach. I know I do."

"I hope the voters will see it that way."

"That's why it's so important for you to trust me. Please believe me. I want to help."

Marcia thinks this over. She likes Laura, but trusting her at this early stage is out of the question. "I appreciate you're saying that, but I still suggest that you talk to Jake."

"Okay, I will." Laura shrugged, disappointed. She wondered if she should order coffee. She would like to get away from Marcia as soon as possible. She would like to unbutton her skirt, munch a donut, and have a good cry.

"Are you having coffee?" she asked Marcia

"Sure, if you will."

"I read in today's paper that Roberta Palmer is going to Israel. Did you see that?" Laura was groping for something that would see them through coffee.

"I sure did. I'm planning to go myself in a couple of months. Sol wants me to go with a Jewish group, thinks it will play better. What do you think?"

"I have no idea."

Marcia laughed. "Well, that's honest. Refreshing, really."

"Why would I know about that?" Laura was confused.

"No reason at all. It's just that most people, most people who are involved in politics in any way at all, think they know how to manage a campaign. And you did work for MEOW, so...."

"I was a lawyer for MEOW, just did their compliance work."

"What do you think Maxine will do if Roberta and I are both candidates in the primary?"

Laura hesitated. She thought she remembered that Maxine didn't particularly like Marcia. She knew that Roberta and Maxine were close friends.
"Hard to say, maybe a dual endorsement."

"That’s the best I can hope for. It will not be good if they endorse Roberta, not good at all. Not fair either, not that that matters. But really not fair."

"Women have to be able to run against each other, or what was it all about, anyway?” Laura responded, hoping she was striking the right chord.

"Precisely, but I’m afraid that’s not the way MEOW will see it or a lot of other people, too. I’ve already had some calls, some from people you would know, asking me to meet with Roberta to see if we can work this out."

"What did you say?"

"I said no. Why should I? If Roberta wants to drop out, great. I’m not going to do so. Why should we meet?"

"Are you and Roberta friends?"

"Not particularly. I knew David, naturally, and I see Roberta around, but we were never close. David’s daughter, Joan, interned for me last year. She’s the one I really feel sorry for, losing both parents that way. You know her mother died of cancer, too. And then, her father, going so suddenly, Odd, don’t you think?"

"What’s she like?” Laura asked, realizing she has fallen into the convenient pit of pretending to be interested in some obscure third person, a form of conversational sleight of hand, misdirection through gossip. She could care less about Joan Palmer. Now she was to be treated, no doubt, to a full psychological profile of the girl.

"Well, she’s okay. A funny kid—funny strange, that is. Sad, I guess she has plenty of reason to be sad. Always living in the shadow of her actress mother and her model stepmother. She’s nice looking, not great, but certainly okay for a normal young woman. But imagine having both your mother and stepmother on the cover of *Vogue.?"

"Hard to take."

"And I don’t think David was much of a Dad, if you know what I mean. He was a great senator, maybe even a great man, but one didn’t get the feeling he was all that interested in being a father."

Jordan was hovering with the check.

"I’ll take this,” Marcia said. “I will one way or the other, so might as well just pay now."

As Laura stood up, she felt the button pop. Shit, would she make it to the door?

Marcia preceded her through the restaurant to the front door. On her way, she stopped to greet people at several tables. After the first one, when she did not acknowledge Laura, Laura walked ahead, feeling awkward and worrying about her skirt.
"I have a car," Marcia said as she caught up with Laura outside Peters. "Can I give you a lift?"
"No, thanks. It's just a few blocks."
"Okay, thanks for everything," Marcia said.
Marcia lingered for a moment. The two women seemed to be having trouble parting, as if they realized too much has still been left unsaid, too much unfinished business.
"Laura," Marcia said, turning around as she entered her car. "Talk to Jake and then give me a call." She rolled down the window, "and Laura, do ask Neil to give me a call."

Laura’s conversation with Jake was not reassuring at all.
"She said to ask me?" Jake repeated incredulously when Laura reported the highlights of her lunch with Marcia.
"That’s exactly what she said. Talk to Jake, and then she’ll condescend to talk to me," Laura said.
"Tell me again what the exact problem is?"
"The problem is, or isn’t as the case may be, that all of a sudden, right before she announced her first congressional run Marcia Baker had income from of about $500,000. The year before she had no income, and, according to her deduction for interest payments, was paying off a lot of debt. So, I asked her how she came into all that money. Not an unnatural question, don’t you think?"
"No, not at all. How come this wasn’t picked up in her other races?"
"Nobody looked. This tax return was the last before she was elected. She had released all her returns since she won, but nobody pressed her to release any from prior years. In addition, she wasn’t that important. Anyway, she came over tense and asked if I have talked to you. So now, I’m talking to you. What the hell is going on, Jake?"

Jake was irritated. Of all the goddamn stupid tricks, this took the cake. He knew Marcia would be trouble. Why in hell didn’t he turn this down? On the other hand, maybe it was better this way. What was all this about $500,000? He had given her some stock worth maybe $50,000, not more, of that he was sure.
"Jake," Laura asked again. "What is going on here? What do you know about this? It is not fair to me, you know, to be in the dark this way, especially if there is something wrong."
"There’s nothing wrong, Laura. It’s fairly straightforward."
"Good, tell me."
Jake weighed how much to explain, how to surround the bare facts with just enough garnish to enhance its presentation.
Jake stood and walked around his desk to the window, stalling. Better not to make too much of a big deal of this. He has hesitated long enough.

"I gave it to her," he said finally. "I loaned her $50,000 worth of stock to start her campaign."

"You? Well, I guess that explains a lot of things," Laura said. "Would you care to tell me more about it?"

"No, not really."

"Doesn't matter. I think I can fill in the blanks. Has she paid it back, by the way?"

"Don't make such a drama of this. It's mildly embarrassing but not criminal," Jake said sharply.

So, they had an affair. Jake and Marcia Baker, Laura thought. Jake had connected with a live wire. What do I care she wondered. But she did. She had been flirting with Jake for years, putting herself out there. He never once picked up on it. It must have happened during the time he was holding her hand, propping her up for Neil. She had always thought he was interested in her, forbore out of respect for Neil. She saw now it wasn't that, not at all. It was goddamn Marcia Baker. How long did it go on? She wanted to ask. Was it important? Did he consider leaving Pat? Was Marcia Baker the love of Jake's life? She felt cheated. He owed it to her to explain.

"If you only gave her $50,000 worth of stock," Laura said, "it still doesn't explain how she ended up with four times that amount."

"No," Jake replied, "it doesn't."

"Do you want me to pursue this?"

"Yes," Jake says. "Of course, I'll talk to Marcia, tell her she has to be more forthcoming with you."

That was the way they left it, a glut of unanswered unspoken questions between them.

That night, Laura confided in Neil, in part to make up for Jake's betrayal.

"Well, well," Neil commented, "the dirty dog. I never suspected a thing. I guess I didn’t know him as well as I thought I did. So where do you go with this?" he asked his wife.

"Wherever it takes me," Laura said. "All the way."
Marcia and Jake

Marcia was thirty-eight when she met Jake nine years ago. They represented opposing sides in a matrimonial matter. Jake’s client was bitter, determined to punish his wife emotionally and financially for initiating divorce proceedings. The case dragged on. Marcia’s client was barely making ends meet and on the verge of a breakdown. Jake was handling the case because the client was important to the firm.

Marcia called Jake and suggested a meeting, just the two of them without the combative clients. Jake, who did not normally handle matrimonial cases, brought along the associate on the case. They met in Marcia’s office. He was impressed with Marcia; she had structured a fair and equitable settlement.

"Looks to me as if you’ve put everything on the table. Is there any room for negotiation?" he asked her.

"No, not really. I know it’s customary to ask for more than we think we can get. However, that’s not my game. My client must have closure on this; she’s not in good shape. This,” she said holding up the agreement, “is what we want. We won’t settle for less."

Jake was used to dealing with smart women, women who knew the score, women who had made it. It seemed to him he met nothing but smart women. His marriage was faltering; he thought about divorce all the time. He wished Pat, his wife, would come to the same conclusion. But she seemed, or pretended to be, unaware of his unhappiness. He was increasingly restless, bored at work and at home. He was working up the nerve to leave Pat, to make some major changes in his career. Nothing in his life was what it appeared to be.

Although he was managing partner of the firm, it was Neil Bennett who brought in 60% of the business and called the shots. He spent his days cleaning up after Neil, fixing problems with clients, soothing the ruffled feather of other partners. He fixed things for Pat, too, because he owed her, could never repay what he had taken from her. More than anything Pat wanted a good marriage, a happy marriage. That was why she had the abortion, which rendered her sterile, the abortion Jake insisted upon in their first year of marriage. Now, ten years later, he still felt guilty, trapped. Most of the men he knew who wanted to leave their wives and didn’t, stayed because of the children, or so they said. He stayed because she could never have children and it was his fault. He stayed, but he could not conceal his discontent. Since Pat would not, could not, acknowledge that their marriage had failed, they both pretended his bad temper, his anger, his unhappiness was job related. It was exhausting keeping up these two fronts.
He lived his life by sleight of hand, always the magician keeping one step ahead of the audience. One day, he knew, he would be caught out. While he was up there on stage doing card tricks someone would notice what he had up his sleeve.

Watching Marcia explain the agreement, he was struck by her straightforward approach. Her appearance too intrigued him. Her long hair was swept up, fastened with a large barrette that bulged and threaten to pop open. Long tendrils had already escaped; she brushed them back off her face with one hand. She wore no rings, no jewelry of any kind. Her nails were short, small white moons at the end. Her expressive eyes seemed to engulf her face when she talked. She wore, as far as he could tell, no makeup, not even lipstick. She was natural and guileless, intense but not strident. At one point, that barrette did pop. She wound her hair up, holding the barrette in her teeth, and gracefully refastened it, without missing a beat.

She wore a white cotton long sleeved man’s shirt, which seemed to engulf her slim wrists. He knew she must be in her forties from the diplomas on the wall, but she looked to him much younger.

Jake was sympathetic. He did not much like his client. He promised Marcia he would try and persuade his client to agree to a settlement. Two days later, Jake called her.

"Good news, counselor," he said.

"Yes?"

"Yes, indeed. My client has decided that he has perhaps been too harsh. He would like to make a new offer, one I’m sure you will find acceptable."

It was acceptable. It was, in fact, generous.

After the settlement, Jake called again.

“Thanks and how did you convince him? He seemed adamant,” Marcia asked.

“Tell you over dinner?” he asked impulsively.

Marcia hesitated. She knew he was married. She had resolved not to go out with married men. The several she had known brought her no joy.

What’s the harm of dinner, she argued with herself. Besides, he had really done her a favor, done her client a good turn. She found him attractive; she was flattered. It had been two years since a new man asked her out. The men she dated were all old friends, between wives or otherwise unavailable. She found Jake attractive, the kind of attractive man who never asked her out. Really, she thought, he is much better looking than I. It’s Jake they will stare at as we walk through a restaurant, she thought ironically.
He took her to a family Italian restaurant in the Bronx, afraid of running into friends, she assumed.

"How on earth do you know this place?" she asked him.

"I grew up two blocks from here. This was the big treat—I mean the big one. Maybe twice a year we would come here. I was allowed any pasta dish I wanted, no veal or anything expensive like that. I usually ordered lasagna. They have terrific lasagna."

"And," Marcia asked, "Can I have anything I want?"

"Anything you're little ole heart desires. Spare no expense, except, of course, no lobster."

Jake had lasagna. Marcia had veal parmesan. They shared a bottle of house red and ordered another although they knew they wouldn't finish it.

A bottle of amaretto came with their coffee.

"It's on the honor system," he explained. "We just tell them how many shots we had."

"Nice," she said "very nice. I didn't know places like this still existed."

Except for the venue, their time together was conventional. They talked about their recently concluded case, about other cases. She talked more, telling him about her work. Marcia was too aware of keeping up the conversation; she was leaning forward all the time. She knew that was a bad sign. She glanced at her watch.

"Bored?" he asked.

"No, but I have a long day tomorrow."

"Yes, of course, a long day. Look, I'm sorry. I haven't been such good company, and I guess this was a mistake."

Jake was annoyed with himself. What was he doing in the Bronx with this perfectly nice woman? What did he want from her? He was married, would probably be married all his life.

He had brought up a trial separation with Susan. She refused to consider it.

"I'm damaged goods," she said. "You can't take me back to the store. There's no way to refurbish me, to make me whole. It's just a phase, darling. We'll work through it. We always have."

Maybe one day he would fight back. Tell her the past was past, he was sorry about the abortion; he would do anything to take it back, to have the child. But what could he do? Did he have to pay with his life? He hadn't forced her to go; she could have refused. This last was, he knew, disingenuous. How could she refuse when he was so inflexible, so firm in his resolve? He was thousands of dollars in debt from law school; it was simply the wrong time. Had he really said, "If you love me, you will end this pregnancy?" Yes, he had. He had said that and
more. Didn't she have the right to hold him to the contract? What did he want his freedom for anyway? He had affairs. He always had affairs. He liked the routine of an affair. He liked the preliminaries, waiting for the woman in a secluded cocktail lounge, allowing himself a cigarette, a martini, listening to Sinatra. He even liked the long walk to the hotel room.

The women he knew over the years were attractive, well-manicured. Some were wives, some single. He did not allow for turmoil. In the room they might speak of love, of grand passion. But like the used towels, the rumpled bed, the partially consumed wine bottle, it was left behind. In the hall, waiting for the elevator, he straightened his tie, establishing a new reality with his cool smile. Whatever she was feeling, and he sometimes knew, he could feel the extent of her hurt. He smiled back acknowledging the end of the episode. These women did not weep or plead for more.

But this woman, Marcia, sitting across from him was vulnerable; he saw that now. The quiet self-confidence she had displayed in her office was gone. She was simply another 30 something woman so desperate to find a man she accepted invitations from married men. He found this curious since she was obviously a feminist type. A type he generally disliked, too hard to get along with, scrutinizing every word, no sense of humor. He wondered idly if she would go to bed with him.

Shit, this is awkward, Marcia thought. Serves me right. What the hell am I doing in the Bronx, in this tacky restaurant with a married man?

Jake called for a check; they left the restaurant in silence.
 Jake had parked the car in an open lot a few blocks away.
 "Want to wait here?" he asked her politely.
 "No, I'd like to walk."

She could feel that the evening was ruined. She had broken one of her rules, no more married men. Horror stories abounded amongst her friends of involvements with married men. How they promised this and that, swore they didn't sleep with their wives (who somehow got pregnant anyway). Broken dates and broken hearts. She knew better; she could not imagine what had induced her to go out with him. She was attracted to him because he was handsome, because he was a high profile lawyer. She was lonely, she faced that. She refused to try to meet men, she never went to bars, and she did not ask her friends to fix her up. More than the loneliness, she feared appearing desperate, another thirty-nine year old woman who had missed it. Well, she had missed it. She would have to learn to live with that with dignity not by accepting invitations from womanizing married men. She was disgusted with herself, eager to put Jake Rubin and this awful evening behind her.
He could not wait to get rid of her, she thought. Well, good. She wanted to get home fast, take a hot shower, and finish the new P.D. James she started last weekend.

Jake took her arm, guiding her through an alley shortcut he remembered.

They came out of the shadows, two boys wearing hooded sweatshirts pulled over their faces. One had a knife, a long mean knife. He was poking Jake with it; Marcia felt her arm being twisted behind her.

"Hold it there, right there, motherfucker."

"Easy now," Jake said conversationally, looking around at the isolated alley. "Just take it easy. Nobody has to get hurt. Just take my wallet."

"Don't tell me what to do, motherfucker. Don't you tell me nothin'."

"My, look it here, Bullet," the one who was holding Marcia said to his companion. "Just look it the fine lady. You a fine lady?" he asked, pulling her arm tighter.

"Please, you're hurting me."

"Gonna hurt you some more, fine lady. What you got in that purse, fine lady, something good for me?"

"Anything. Take it all. Stop it, please."

"Oh, I do love to hear the fine lady beg. Don't you, Bullet?"

"Ah, leave her be. Take the money."

The one holding Marcia began to touch her breast with his free hand. "Oh, don't," she cried.

"You sure are a fine lady," he turned her around so she was facing a wall. "What a fine lady."

"Leave her alone," Jake said in a murderous voice. "Take what you want and leave her alone."

"Who you givin' orders to, handsome? Cut him, Bullet. Cut him on the face."

"No," Marcia cried. "Don't, please"

"So you like him handsome honey? Well, let's see how much." He let her go, pushing her harder against the wall.

"Put your hands on that wall, beauty. That's right."

He stood behind her and put both on hands on her breasts, ripping open her blouse.

"Oh my, she is a juicy one. You like her juicy, handsome?"

The other boy had the knife against Jake's neck. Jake couldn't move. He didn't dare even speak.

Marcia felt the boy's hands on her. He was pressing into her with his hard penis, fingering her nipples.
"Shit, she is a beauty. I'm going to stick it into her, Bullet. Then, you can. She is a juicy one. One hand was under her skirt, playing at the edge of her underpants. Suddenly, the boy was all business. He lifted her skirt up, covering her head. Oh God, she thought, please no.

But he was pulling down her pants, rubbing her exposed behind.

The one holding Jake relaxed his hand for a minute.

Jake pleaded. "Leave her alone. I can get you more money. As much as you want, just leave her alone."

At that moment, they heard the sirens: fire, police, EMS, loud sirens coming towards them.

"Shit, Fuckall," the boy holding Marcia turned around. "Give me your wallet white boy—fast."

Jake scrambled for his wallet, tossed it on the ground. The sirens were louder, almost upon them.

The boys panicked and fled, too frightened to pick up the wallet. Marcia dropped to her knees.

"Are you alright?" he asked her, listening to the sirens pass them by.

"Ah, counselor, what a question," she replied.

"You're bleeding," she said, reaching up to touch his face.

"It's nothing; shall I take you to a hospital?"

"No, no. Just take me home" she said.

They drove to her apartment in silence, Marcia crying softly, Jake intent on his driving.

"Come up," she said.

She showered and changed into a robe. He poured two brandies.

"We should report this," he said.

"What for?" she asked.

He looked at her. "You know what for. We're officers of the court. Those boys were armed, and next time they'll hurt somebody."

Marcia considered this. She knew all about the criminal justice system, having defended these boys and their friends for years. She knew how to confuse the victims, to render their identification inadmissible, to exhaust them with delay and more delay until they refused to appear or dropped the charge.

"You want to go through all the paperwork, maybe a lineup? I couldn't really identify them. Could you? And what if it makes the papers? Not too good for either of us. I say drop it and be grateful it wasn't worse."

She had not mentioned that if they reported it his wife would know. She did not have to.

"I could kill those bastards," Jake said.
"You know something? Me too. After all these years of defending them, apologizing for them, that's what it comes to? I could kill them, too."

"I'm so sorry, so damn sorry. I can't imagine what I was thinking about, taking you to that absurd restaurant in that godforsaken place. I'm so very sorry. I wanted to impress you, to take you someplace different, so that we wouldn't start out like everyone else, sipping martinis in an Upper East Side waterhole. What a jerk I am."

"Look, I'm okay. You better go now."
"I'm not leaving you. I'll stay until you're asleep."
"I'm not sure I can sleep."
"Have another brandy. Let me tuck you in and sit with you."
He could not leave her, not until he was sure she was all right.
She had two brandies and slipped herself a valium when he wasn't looking.
When she awoke in the morning, he was still there.
"Did you sleep?" she asked him.
"A little, but you did."
"Sure did," she stretched.
"How do you feel?"
"Still tired, worn out really. God," she shuddered, "that was really scary, wasn't it? I mean, I was terrified he was going to lose control and really hurt you. That knife was so long, so sharp."

"And I was terrified he was going to rape you. I couldn't move. The son of a bitch had that knife right against my carotid artery. I don't think I've ever felt so impotent in my life, so utterly helpless."

"Let's not talk about it anymore. I'll make some coffee."
She heard him in the shower as she put on the coffee. Doesn't he have to call his wife? she wondered.
"That's better," he said joining her in the kitchen. "I feel almost human."
"Don't you have to call your wife?"
"I did, last night after you fell asleep."
"What on earth did you tell her?"
"Nothing. Just that I wouldn't be home."
"That's it? Just that?"
"That's all that is required."
"Oh?"
"It's a long story," Jake said, answering her unspoken question. "We're on the verge of a separation. It's a difficult time. I told her something came up, that I had to fly to Chicago to see a client."
"Why Chicago?" she asked.
"I have a major client there; I spend a lot of time there. Look, don’t go to work today. Let’s do something."
"Like what?"
"Like drive somewhere out of the city. Let’s go to the Cape."
"Just like that?"
"Take tomorrow off, too. Surely you can take a couple of days off, after what we’ve been through."

As if to prove his point, he went to the phone and punched in a number. "Sally, this is Jake. I won’t be in today or tomorrow, not until Monday. Just cancel and reschedule for next week. I can’t be reached. I’ll call you tomorrow."
"And your wife?"
"Leave that to me," Jake said. He was feeling defiant, the injured party in an unraveling marriage with which he was fed up. He did not care what Pat thought. All he wanted was to extricate himself from the muddle of his vows.

Driving up to the Cape, they talked easily. Now their conversation flowed with exchanges of life stories, opinions about politics, causes. From time to time they talked of the incident, of the violence in the city, of the violence in their own souls. They were like old friends who hadn’t seen each other in a long time. There were no awkward silences.

The incident in the alley striped them down to basic instincts. Despite their fear, the terror each experienced, they had not abandoned each other. Although they hardly spoke of the incident, they knew they needed to be together, that they were not yet recovered. A shared secret is the mortar that binds many relationships.

Marcia drifted off to sleep. They stopped for gas, for hamburgers. They found a motel on the beach in Truro. They shopped for clothes, bathing suits. She let him charge it all. She bought a halter sundress, a short white cotton nightgown, shorts, and tee shirts. Jake bought slacks, two shirts, underwear, and a bathing suit.
"I could have packed a bag," she said. "Somehow it didn’t occur to me."
"More fun this way," Jake replied.
"Yes, it is," she agreed.
They dined on lobster, French fries, and lime pie.
Their room had one king size bed. Marcia was exhausted, and she fell into it grateful stretching, enjoying the strangeness of the room, of the experience.
Jake came out of the bathroom in blue boxer shorts. He slid onto his side and reached out for her hand.
"Are you okay?" he asked.
"Yes, Jake, I am. It was a wonderful day. I'm just so tired all the time. Do you think it’s emotional exhaustion?"

"Of course it is. Sleep now. You'll be even better tomorrow."

The next day they swam and sunned. They debated other activities; he offered to rent a sailboat, to find some horses. But she was lazy; she wanted only to lie around the beach. She had never had a vacation like this, without worrying about money. She knew he would buy her anything she wanted. Knowing was enough; she had no need to test it.

They went to a square dance that night at a local church. They drank beer, danced, and talked with people. She knew they looked married. She slipped into the fantasy. They walked along the beach holding hands.

Later, back in the motel, it was a little awkward for the first time. She washed up first, turned on the television news.

Jake came out of the bathroom in a fresh pair of peach boxer shorts.

"He bent to kiss her.” Okay?” he asked.

She swallowed hard. "I think so."

They kissed for a long time, as if their kisses were a new language they had to learn. They kissed as if they were mutes, as if this was the only way they had to communicate. Long, soft kisses, which were not preparatory, were not meant to lead anywhere. He licked her lips, played with her tongue. This kissing was a lovemaking all its own, complete in itself.

"I'm falling in love with you," he murmured.

"Good," she said, kissing his eyes.

They were together for four days. He wanted to extend it, and she insisted she had to go home. She did not ask him what would follow. She let it go. From experience, she knew she would find out soon enough if these four magic days meant anything, anything at all.

Jake was not her first married lover, but before Jake she took it all in stride. Such affairs follow a mathematical curve of ascent and decline. Marcia knew this and believed she had factored in at the start the predictability of the end. Always before, she could spot the finish line, even as she was racing along enjoying the adrenaline rush. With Jake, however, she veered off course. Instead of making a clean run around delineated lap lines, she found herself sprinting too fast and then falling behind.

She blamed her digressions on timing, a natural restlessness as her 40th birthday approached. For a while she could see clearly again, kept to a steady pace. The path was a narrow one; she was restrained by the rules of the game. His rules. She was to be understanding and circumspect, never display disappointment at a broken engagement. She could call Jake but not too often
and never at home. Certain subjects of conversation were barred. His marriage and their relationship were non-starters. They could lunch or dine in popular restaurants, but there was to be no public display of affection. A minimal amount of complaining was acceptable, just enough to make Jake feel desirable. She did not need to consult a manual for these regulations; she had already committed them to memory. Marcia was she a trailblazer. She simply followed the clearly diagrammed instructions of the adultery handbook.

In return, it was expected that the permissible aspects of the relationship would gratify her. Someone, or something else, was to provide for other essential requirements.

For years after it was over, Marcia would ponder why she breached the covenant ending up in no man’s land. She fell in love with Jake Rubin, intensely and passionately in love. Something about their lovemaking, perhaps, or the way he tipped his hat. Something, anyway. She could not explain or articulate it. She could not resist it either.

She became a renegade, an outlaw lover frightening Jake with her disregard for the codes. He stayed in the game because he, too, was infatuated, captivated at first by the excesses of this intelligent and measured woman.

She bought gourmet takeout and passed it off as her own, served on Lenox dishes with a first class wine in her Steuben glasses. She had been set up for years for domesticity, firmly believing she didn’t have to be a wife to enjoy the pleasures of a well-appointed home.

Everything was intensified, as if she were a finely calibrated machine attuned to the slightest alteration of pressure. Jake himself took up a lot of space. She couldn’t bring him down to size. She tried not to mind. She’d given up trying not to notice the casual slights, the snubs occasioned by his marriage.

As she cleared the table and combed through the crumbs for clues, she hoarded those leavings that reinforced her own desires, sweeping the rest into the garbage. She was not, after all, a bag lady, rummaging through the refuse. She was simply a woman in love.

Jake, too, thought himself in love. He thought Marcia the bravest woman he had ever met, unspoiled and undemanding. He had been wrong, too, about her having a sense of humor. She was funny. They were funny together, especially in bed. She smoked a little dope. He could never get the hang of it, and it gave her an edge. He delighted in her acid criticism of the women’s movement; she understood it better than anyone he knew. Everything was fair game for her marijuana commentary. Everything except Pat: Pat was out of bounds, and he made that clear. He was going to leave Pat; he would not allow her to be held up to ridicule. He did not tell Marcia about the abortion; he could not bring himself
to soil her image of him. She thought him moral, admired him for not leaving Pat casually, for struggling to make his wife understand. Maybe he wasn’t such a bad guy after all.

He did tell her she had not wanted children, that Pat had reluctantly agreed not to have them, and he felt he had cheated her. That was why it was so difficult to leave her. He was sure Pat would agree to a divorce once she saw how serious he was.

However, Pat did not agree. "Don’t make me be cruel," he begged her. "You are cruel. You think you’re not?" she cried.

Marcia celebrated her 40th birthday with Jake. Although they saw each other only on weekday nights, she had asked him, in a tone of voice that was meant to convey "I don’t ask much of you, so when I do it must be important" to take her out for her birthday on a Saturday. “Delighted,” he said and booked at table at Arne’s, an expensive Italian restaurant. She had debated that simple request for longer than she should have. The alternative was to spend her birthday with some close women friends or alone. Alone, she decided, was just too neurotic, the women friends too poignant. She was pleased with Jake’s reaction. But he had not sent flowers and there was no gift, not even a small present, just the dinner and then home to her apartment—to bed. She tried to shrug it off, had been trying to forget it for a week. But she couldn’t. It had been a dismal evening forcing her to confront her failure, as she saw it, to form a genuine relationship with a man.

One consolation was that she didn’t look forty. She was a trim woman, slightly under 5'5", her body perfectly scaled to her height. Her long auburn hair framed an oval face. Her skin was near perfect, slightly tan, and taut, even around her almond shaped eyes. She wore her skirts short, her blouses open two buttons down, opaque panty hose on shapely legs, and high heels. She specialized in matrimonial law, always representing the woman, and age- and sex-bias cases. She taught at New York University Law School, wrote prodigiously, published and edited books, occasionally appeared on Charlie Rose. She lived alone, hated pets, enjoyed cooking for herself, and never, ever referred to her biological clock.

After Jake left—he rarely stayed the night—she poured herself a stiff drink. Marcia was not afraid to look at her life. She did so that night with the same critical facility that had brought her success as a lawyer. What she saw was a woman facing the downside of life alone, never mind the status, the TV appearances, the envy of colleagues, she needed something more.

She rarely drank alone, but she wanted something to blur the memories, the images she was preparing to recall. Bittersweet as a lost lover were her reflections on her early days as a lawyer. She shared offices with three other women lawyers,
who represented only female clients. For years, she listened to women, strident women and shy women, frightened and abused women. She and they relied on the movement, the litany of the movement, the lingo, the premises, the warming sisterhood of it all.

Marcia wrote articles for journals, testified at state and congressional hearings on child abuse and custody, spoke at feminist gatherings, considered running for public office but abandoned it when another woman declared. Everyone had her telephone number; she held nothing back.

It was fun. It felt important.

In the summer, there was the shore, one shore or another: Fire Island, the Jersey Shore, the Hamptons, cramped shared rooms, sometimes with bunk beds, community meals, and equal division of labor.

She smoked a little weed, carried a large carpet bag in place of a briefcase, wore her hair long tied back with a ribbon. Her repartee was slick, her body lean, her manner sharp. She was overworked, broke, in therapy twice a week.

She had lovers but they knew their place. In those days, any man who chose Marcia Baker knew what he was getting into. She took it all in stride until Jake.

Only occasionally did she ask herself if she was happy. No, not happy. Happy was not necessary, not relevant for a life dedicated to righting abuses, to fighting the good fight.

Content, perhaps. Yes, she was content. Surrounded by women, she was mother, daughter, sister, friend.

But things began to change. She wanted something more.

She needed to talk to someone. She called her old friends. Men answered the phone. "She's not here right now. Can I have her call you back?" They did call, days later (the same women with whom she had spoken daily for years).

"Marcia, how good to hear from you. Come to dinner, next Tuesday. No, that's no good. We've got the ballet. How about Saturday? Fine. Are you with someone? Feel free to bring him. No? Well, perhaps I'll invite someone for you. So hard, though, these days to find an acceptable single man. Maybe Dick-Paul-Barry-Sam-Peter knows someone. I'll try. See you."

She wanted to talk with her former comrades, to find out how she had missed the signal that it was time for a cease-fire. Apparently, while she was still busy loading the mortars, others had received the good news. What she thought was static was apparently the din and clatter of housework, the babble of love talk, the moans of satisfying sex. There was no one listening on the other end, the line was as good as dead.

It turned out that the oppressors were good guys after all—or some of them anyway. Were all these women suffering from the Stockholm syndrome?
Now the men were helping with orgasms and legislation.

Her sisters were upbeat. They still marched carrying a kid or two in a sling, holding hands with the enemy now disguised as husbands. Their battle was joined by others, animal rightists, gay, and lesbians, AIDS activists, whale protectionists, blacks, Asians, peaceniks. There was so much work to be done on all fronts, difficult to apportion time what with the demands of the PTA, the Arts Boards, the obligatory business dinners for husband’s advancement.

A check?
Well, he handles the money, but be sure I’ll ask him.
Picket?
Baby has such a bad cold, and we’re leaving for our two weeks in Barbados tomorrow.

Marcia wanted to ask if they were still best friends. She knew the answer. She still had the scars of the blood bond they took years ago. Her sisters, however, were healed, released from their vows.

At the office, she listened to the litany of poignant stories, unrequited love, impotent lovers, abused children, abandoned wives. She listened hard; she applied herself as best she could in the circumstance. She had a sandwich for lunch, an ear cocked waiting for the phone to ring. She saw herself in all their tales: saw herself, as they were, pathetic and immobilized, pitiful and dreary. Brave too, sometimes. Brave enough to take legal action, to believe that there might be some relief from the unhappiness with which they were visited or which they brought on themselves. One day soon, she thought, I will have to be brave, too.

In a sense, it was easy work. She listened to the stories, drafted appeals.

Easy listening, easy work, just right for a woman who needed to pace herself, to conserve her energy for her own consuming passion. Something needs to change, she thought.

Not long after Marcia’s 40th birthday, Pat came home with news of a tumor in her right breast, of an operation scheduled for the following week. The tumor was in an early stage or so the doctors said.

Jake stayed with Pat in the hospital, took her to every appointment for chemotherapy. He could not leave now, not for a long time, if ever. Oddly, he felt relieved about that, too. Marcia was too tense; he could not give her what she wanted. He was tired of feeling guilty all the time about Marcia. Pat really needed him now, he would stay.

He was honest with Marcia, to a point.
"So this is the way it ends,” she said.
"Does it have to end?" he asked, although he knew she would not accept any half measures.
"You broke my heart," she said at last, but she did not cry until later.

It was time, Marcia decided, to move on to other things, which is when she first began to think about running for public office and asking Jake for the money.

The one thing that never occurred to Jake was that Marcia would ask him for money. He had expected that she would cry, make it difficult, or maybe go the other way, just not talk to him again.

He was, at the time, preoccupied with Pat, who was receiving radiation for her cancer.

Marcia called him several weeks after that last difficult conversation in her apartment.
"How are you?" he asked.
"Okay, you?"
"Okay."

"I'd like to have lunch. There's something I want to talk to you about," she said.

He imagined she wanted to see him to come to some new understanding about their relationship. He had expected something like this. He was prepared to be reassuring, to work out a way to see Marcia from time to time. Nothing too intense, those days were over, just a casual arrangement. He would not mind that at all.

He took her for lunch at Peter's. Just in case, which he doubted, she was inclined to histrionics, Peter's would have a chilling effect.

As he waited for her, he felt a resurgence of affection, of lust. He admitted to himself that if he had not heard from her, he would have called her. It was certainly better this way, gave him an edge. Not that he needed it, not with Marcia. She was intensely proud. He liked that about her.

He wondered if she would have trouble bringing it up. He would help her there, not make her sweat it. He would even tell her that he loved her still. Yes, he thought he could do that. It was true. He did love her. Now that he was waiting for her, sipping a martini, he allowed himself to admit how much he missed her. She had a certain combination of vulnerability and bravado that he found compelling.

Pat wore her injuries like a badge, exposed for everyone to see. At the slightest sign of a bruise, she ran for salve and Band-Aids. He owed it to her, so he patched her up.
Marcia, on the other hand, whistled a happy tune while camouflaging her body blows with self-deprecating jokes.

He thought that maybe Marcia was one in a million, a woman who understood that love was often not enough.

From the moment she sat down, coolly receiving his kiss on the cheek, he knew he had been wrong. She was dressed for business not for seduction.

"So," she said, displaying at last some sense of nervousness, "let me get to the point."

Jake smiled warmly. "Okay, honey, what is the point? I hoped the point was you wanted to see me, but obviously there is something else."

Marcia would not meet his eyes. Do not do this, she thought. Do not hold out hope.

"Jake, we said all there is to say about us. I don't want to go through that again." She looked up so he could see she wasn't being coy.

"I need your help, Jake. I want to run for Congress."

"Really?" Jake was startled and disappointed. This was no romantic reunion; they would not be going home to her apartment to spend a few hours in bed.

"Well, that is news. Tell me more," he said.

Marcia, having broken the ice, took a deep breath. "After you left, for days afterwards, I had to take a hard look at my life. I will not diminish us by pretending that you weren't important, that I hadn't hoped we would work it out. I'm not given to fanciful illusion and not to the kind of backstreet love affair continuing with you implies. So, I was stuck. I don't think romance is my game. I'm not going to have children, I don't want to adopt and be a single mother. I'm tired of my law practice. It added up to making a major change. Over the years, people have suggested that I run for office. I seriously considered it once or twice, but the timing was off for one reason or another. Now, well now, I think it's the right time. Sid Franklin, the Congressman from my district, is not going to run again. I know Sid; I know him pretty well. When I heard through the grapevine that he wasn't going to run, I called him. He said he would consider supporting me. Then, I talked to a few other people, friends, women, and former colleagues. Everyone was very enthusiastic, very. So, put it all together and what you get is the right time for me to try it."

"But is this what you want, a political career?" Jake asked.

"I think so, I can't be 100% sure, but it feels right. I've devoted my professional life to taking on issues I care about. I'm tired of dealing with them one by one. I honestly think I would be a good legislator. Don't you?"
Jake thought about it. "Yes, I do. The more I think about it the more I like it. I think you will be a terrific candidate. This certainly wasn’t what I thought you were going to say, but honestly I think it's terrific."

"You know, after you left that night, I spent a lot of time feeling sorry for myself—one of those long nights that lasts for days. I had nothing to show for my life, nothing except a few grateful clients. I wallowed in it. I indulged myself until I couldn’t stand it anymore." Marcia took a deep breath, relieved to be sharing this with Jake.

"I'm sorry," Jake said. "I didn’t realize."

"Oh, well, it wasn't your fault. I know that, although, of course, you came in for a share of blame. Mostly though, I blamed myself, not just for us or for the stupidity of getting involved with a married man but for not waking up sooner to reality. That's what I was dosing myself with: the bitter medicine of reality. I knew I had to do something different, something that made me feel worthwhile, something I could really dedicate myself to that would utilize my training, my experience, but get me out of the rut I've been in for years. I think politics fits the bill. I don't have anything to lose and a lot to gain if I win. There’s just one problem," Marcia said.

"What's that?"

"Money," Marcia said.

"Money?"

"Yep, money. They—all those wise political types—tell me I have to have some kind of kitty to start with. Well, you know my financial situation. I'm lucky to make it month to month. So, I wanted to know if you could loan me some money."

"How much money," Jake asked cautiously.

Marcia hesitated, a slight nervous smiled played around her lips. "$100, 000," she said tentatively. She was suddenly apprehensive; she did not want to tell him she needed $500,00.

"That’s quite a lot," Jake said.

"I know."

I don't like this, Jake thought. It feels like a business deal. He was annoyed, but, more than that, he was offended and a little hurt. Is that what it's come to? This mad love affair that he was ready to resume?

Money had not been an issue between them. He had a lot; she had a little. He bought her expensive champagne, ordered takeout from good restaurants. When they traveled out of town, it was first class. She would sometimes allude to being broke but never in a way that made him feel he should offer her money.
Now, after only a year's affair, was he supposed to pay her reparations? No judge in the country would insist on that. He wished she hadn't mentioned money; somehow it tainted their affair.

Marcia, observing his reaction, saw the flicker of distaste. She had anticipated resistance. Still, it was a disappointment.

When he was inside her, she remembered, there were moments that were almost violent in their struggle for fusion. Sex between them was more than the sum of its erotic, flailing parts. She would never understand, she thought, how such passion, such intimacy gets lost in translation. It did not for her; Jake had a call on her. Did he know this? She wondered. Too bad, she was the one to call in a marker.

"I know it's a lot," she said again. "I wouldn't ask if I had other alternatives. But you are the only really rich person I know."

He ignored this. "What's the money for?" he asked.
"Startup cost, for fundraising, for a staff person, that kind of thing."
"Marcia, I don't have that kind of disposable money," Jake's brow is furrowed, of course he does have that kind of money - and a whole lot more.
"Oh, I guess I didn't realize that. Maybe I'm naïve. I thought, well, you always made a point of telling me how comfortable you were, how you didn't have to worry about money."
"That's true, but it's not the same as having that kind of money to give away. I mean I am comfortable, although I've had a lot of expenses lately, medical expenses. By the way, how did you think I could conceal giving away that much money?" Jake asked as if this was as important to Marcia as it was to him.
"Shit," Marcia said, "I'm really sorry, I guess I didn't think. I feel terrible about this; don't give it a second thought. Just forget it, please."

Now that he was off the hook, he could not leave well enough alone.
"I can't forget it, let me think about this. Maybe there is a way I can help you."

What demons urged him on, Jake wondered. He was home free. He could walk away paying the $200.00 tab for lunch and not look back.
"If there is a way —" Marcia said
"There might be, give me a few days."

He knew the way, of course. He had plenty of stock, given to him as part of legal fees. Stock Pat knew nothing about. He could give Marcia $100,000 worth of stock and never miss it. Pat would never know. Nobody would get hurt. Everybody won.

He called Marcia a few days later.
"I've arranged to transfer $50,000 worth of Marvel Electronics stock to you. You can use it for collateral. You won't get the full amount, but you will get about $35,000. That's the best I can do."

"That's plenty. Jake, I'm really grateful; I can't tell you how much this means to me."

"One thing, Marcia."

"Yes?"

"For all kinds of reasons, for both our sakes, this has to be completely confidential. Can you manage that?"

"Of course. No problem. Jake, thank you."

Jake took a certain pleasure in Marcia's success. Although she lost that first campaign, it launched her in politics. He should have remembered, "No good deed goes unpunished."
Chapter 13

Roberta

"Do you honestly think I can win the nomination?" Roberta Palmer asked Maxine Chertoff. They met in the boardroom of MEOW, three months after David's death. "You bet I do," Maxine replied enthusiastically. "And I'm not the only one. I think I can safely say that if you decide to run, you'll have cooperation from us."

"You mean you'd endorse me?"

"I cannot say that, not now" Maxine equivocated. "Just leave it to me. It is, shall we say, very likely."

"But what about Marcia Baker? She isn't going to lie down and play dead just because I decide to run."

"No, she won't. Not at first. But I think there's a good chance she will withdraw once she sees the support you have. She's not a fool; she can wait a while. She has to know that two women split the women's vote. That vote is what makes it possible. She'd be a fool to risk it. Our polling shows her negatives are high. People respect her, but they don't like her. And in the end, politicians have to be liked. You are our best chance for a woman in that seat, the first woman senator from New York. People are sick to death of politicians. Every poll shows that. Even when they're good ones, like Marcia, the public doesn't trust them. Look at Christie Whitman came in New Jersey, for God's sake, and she's a Republican."

Privately Maxine thought it would be a hard race. No point in upsetting Roberta at this stage. Not likely Marcia Baker would drop out, not Marcia. Maxine remembered Marcia from their early advocacy days. She didn't like her then, and she didn't like her now. Marcia was always questioning, throwing roadblocks in the way of some of her best ideas. And didn't she like the limelight a little too much? Whereas Maxine preferred to take a backseat, working behind the scenes. Everyone knew how powerful she was. She did not have to flaunt it, and besides, she did not like the way she photographed.

Of course, Maxine got plenty of publicity. Feature articles in Time, invitations to appear on popular TV talk shows. After this election, when Maxine calculated there might be as many as six women senators elected, there would be no stopping MEOW. Women, and even some men were contributing more than ever—even she had not appreciated just how angry women would be over those Senate hearings, and the stupid position the Republicans continued to take on abortion, on the poor, on women in general. God bless the Republicans, Maxine
thought, because they have done more to advance the cause of gender equality than MEOW could have ever done alone.

Women candidates were emerging from all over the country. Maxine interviewed them all. She was not about to throw away MEOW’s hard won capital, political or financial, on women who couldn’t possibly win, women who were not serious or deserving. She had to save the organizations resources for those women able to demonstrate that they could win; that MEOW’S support would give them that edge, maybe make the difference between winning and losing.

Maybe Marcia Baker would win, but she would set the movement back with her approval of parental consent for minors, her bill to outlaw PAC money. She didn’t seem to understand the importance of solidarity on feminist issues. Maxine took this personally. Marcia, she thought, was just too much of a wild card.

Marcia had called Maxine only last week.
"I’d like to come and talk to you," Marcia said.
"Anytime, you know that" Maxine said
"Well, you know I’m thinking of running. I want to explore the possibility of getting an early endorsement from MEOW."

"I don't think an early endorsement is in the cards, to be honest. You know Roberta Palmer may run."

"I heard that, but I was hoping you would try and talk her out of it. Really, Maxine, she hasn’t got the experience, and she hasn’t paid her dues.”

"I’m staying out of it for now. You know I think the world of you, but I don’t feel comfortable trying to persuade Roberta not to run. You do understand?"

"No, frankly I don’t. She represents everything we’ve fought against. A woman trading on her husband’s name, a supermodel for God sake. No, I must say I’m not only disappointed, but I also do not understand. We may not have always agreed on everything, Maxine, but I was at least there. I didn’t discover the movement a few years ago. I marched and lobbied twenty years ago; surely that means something.”

Maxine made further soothing noises, placating Marcia for the time being. She could not deny what Marcia’s was saying; it was true. Marcia had been an early supporter of the movement. But of late, she sounded more like a critic. Marcia Baker did not get along with her women colleagues in the House; she remained, after six years, unpopular, an outsider. If the advances in the movement were to be solidified, Maxine believed, they needed women who
understood the nuances of the struggle, women who were team players. Roberta Palmer seemed to fit that bill.

For a moment, Maxine was irritated with Roberta. Why should she have to waste her time convincing the woman to run? If she didn't want it, there were plenty others, aside from Marcia Baker.

"Why me?" Roberta asked her.

"Don't be naive, Roberta. You're the Palmer in Congress now, so you've got a built-in base. If it's played right, they won't desert you. Voters believe in family politics, carrying on the tradition. Look at the Kennedys, the Clintons, for God's sake, even the Bushes. You have the potential for capturing women, you've got fantastic name recognition, you'll have lots of money that I guarantee, you're a fresh face, no awkward paper trail to have to explain away. There are a dozen reasons you should make this race, unless, of course, you don't want it."

She did not add that a recent private poll MEOW commissioned found Roberta among the five women the respondents were presented with the one they would like to see hold public office in family politics.

"Of course I want it, but I've never actually run for anything. It's a bit overwhelming."

Maybe she is right, Roberta thought. Maybe I can win.

David would have run again. They discussed it all the time. Although his staff was not as loyal to her as they were to him, they too were eager for her to run. Roberta put their enthusiasm down to their instinct for job preservation.

She was pleased that she had been appointed to fill out David's term. She did not kid herself that it was anything more than honorific, but she took it seriously. As soon as she got back from her last remaining obligation to David, she thought, I will have to make a decision.

Roberta was leaving the next day for Vieques, a small island off the coast of Puerto Rico, where she and David owned a home. She was planning to scatter David's ashes, as he requested, at their favorite beach.

Perhaps there, she thought, she would find some answers. Since David's death, her balance was off, and she felt herself stumbling around, bumping into walls. She couldn't keep up a conversation, faded out on the few friends she agreed to see.

Perhaps there, in Vieques, she thought, she would understand the mourning process; she had read volumes on the subject. It was not that she could not cry, she cried. She was past denial; she accepted David's death. She mourned; she grieved; she did it by the book.

Something was wrong. Something more than the sum of her loss.
Her grief had a restless quality; she became agitated if she stopped in one place for too long. She needed to be on the move. Her face was frozen in an unnatural smile. She remained vigilant, braced for the next blow.

Surely, the worst was over, she thought. I didn’t immolate myself or even quietly take an overdose. I did the right thing, she thought, reassuring herself. She couldn’t, however, stave off the doubt and fear that had seeped into her soul.

Have I become pallid? She wondered, in danger of fading away altogether? Once she had been capable of far grander gestures, not so long ago, in fact.

Perhaps, she thought, it was not David’s death but their marriage that has left her so bereaved. She was saving the inevitable reflections on her marriage for later. She knew now that major revision was required. It would keep; she was in no hurry. She should have known, she thought, she of all people, that nothing was ever what it seemed to be.

She was not certain how to put her life back together or if, after everything that happened, that it was even possible.

“I’ll give you an answer when I get back from Vieques,” she told Maxine.

"Make it yes, Roberta. We can do this. You’ll be in the Senate on your own terms. David would have liked that," Maxine said.

The limousine was ordered for 6 a.m. Roberta had dismissed David’s chauffeur, seeing no need to keep him on.

She went outside to wait for the car, dragging her bags. It was still dark; she had not taken a coat, just a light sweater. When she traveled with David, cars were always at the ready. Now she was cold, shivering, waiting for the car. She felt dizzy and slightly nauseous from lack of sleep. The limousine was cold, so she asked the driver to turn up the heat.

She looked around, checking out the interior. The ashtray was dirty; there were patches of yellowing scotch tape curled on the seat under her. She settled herself on the rough edges. The automatic control button for the left window was broken; it would not close.

Inside the car, the air was stale, redolent with the odors of too many passengers, spilled beer, and cigarette smoke.

Checking her watch, Roberta realized she had been conned into leaving too early. She allowed the dispatcher to decide what time she should be picked up. She would have to hang around the airport for a couple of hours. When she traveled with David, everything went like clockwork. David demanded precision.

Choking back tears of frustration, Roberta saw the first signs for the airport. She checked her watch; they had made it in record time, twenty-five minutes. She wished she were traveling first class, the way she did with David.
She was not worried about money, but without David, it seemed somehow too extravagant to travel first class. David left her half of his estate, to be shared with Joan. But he left the house in Vieques to her absolutely. She invited Joan to come on this trip, to stand with her at the edge of the sea as she scattered David’s ashes. But, Joan refused. She was glad about that, too. Her relationship with Joan, never easy, had of late been impossible.

Roberta was not sure of her responsibilities to her stepdaughter. Joan had always been a little strange. Angry, she supposed, at her father’s marriage to her. Unnatural father, she thought. David’s role as a father was his greatest failure; he himself admitted that. "I know I should have helped her more," he said to Roberta, "but I didn’t, and now she’s too old."

"Too old?" Roberta said. "Nonsense, she needs you more than ever."

"I can’t help her," David replied. "I wouldn’t even know where to start. I was not meant to be a father. I resisted it. Fortunately, she has everything she needs. She always will have."

It was David’s greatest flaw. Roberta did not understand it, and she felt sorry for Joan. But in truth, Joan was a difficult child. On the few occasions when they saw her, Joan did nothing to make the evening agreeable.

Now that David was dead, Roberta wanted to try to befriend his daughter. It was on her post-mourning agenda, after she decided what to do with the rest of her life.

She would not sell the house in Vieques. She and David spent their winter vacations there for the past six years. David talked about spending even more time there when he retired.

David loved the small island; it was close to the states, five hours if one made the connection by Cerromar Air from New York to the island. No one knew them; no one cared who they were. He discouraged friends from visiting by telling them, "You wouldn’t like it. No room service. Food stinks. Electricity goes out every ten minutes. Not for you."

Roberta had sent the urn containing David’s ashes ahead by UPS, declaring it to be "books." Fitting, she thought. UPS played a vital role in their early years in Vieques bringing toaster ovens, VCRs, and gourmet food. Now, it would bring David, delivered right to her door.

As she waited at the San Juan airport for the small plane that would take her to Vieques, Roberta counted the times she and David had waited for this same plane—two or three times a year for six years, David making conversation with the charter pilot, who was always hanging around hoping for customers.
The plane was now a half hour late. Predictable. It was usually late. Finally, the ticket agent, whom she recognized and who seemed to be the only staff of Cerromar Airline, besides the pilot, called the passengers for the short flight. He pushed the baggage cart out to the tarmac where he and the pilot loaded it in the rear of the plane.

There were only four passengers, and after he loaded the luggage, he checked his manifest and directed passengers to their seats. There was some rationale to the order in which the passengers are seated, distributed by weight, she supposed. About half of the time, Roberta was seated next to the pilot.

This time, too, she was assigned the co-pilot’s seat. She felt ridiculously pleased. This was the first time I’ve felt pleased about anything since David died, she thought, and was immediately annoyed with herself. First trip back without David, first this without David, first that without David, a widow’s recitative, a dirge which matched the monotony of her misery.

She pulled the seat belt around her and tried to click it into place. It is broken; she held it fast, decided to say nothing about it. The pilot rattled off the safety precautions in Spanish and then in English for her benefit. She smiled at him, nodding to assure him she understood. She wondered what kind of life it was to ferry people back and forth to the small island all day long in this cardboard plane. Did this pilot dream of larger aircraft, of a jet with instruments - of flying to Miami?

He settled his blue pilot’s cap on his head, buckled himself in and started the noisy engines. One, two, down the runway, she saw him squinting, visually checking for other airplanes. It started to rain; he turned on the windshield wipers. Do jet planes have windshield wipers? She wondered. Surely not, surely they had some sophisticated mechanism for clearing the rain.

The plane groaned and lurched as it lifted off, and Roberta relaxed. She counted to twenty on take off and closed her eyes for landings.

She and David followed the course of Hurricane Mitch with some concern, worrying about their house, hoping that Luis, the neighbor they paid to check on their property when they were away, had properly prepared it for the storm.

As she flew over the island, she was startled to see how much damage there was from the hurricane. There were some patches of green, but for the most part the island was shrouded in a lattice of bowed and fallen trees. From the air, it looked as if there is some grand design, as if someone had dug a huge hole, camouflaged to trap a prehistoric lizard.

The small plane dipped in preparation for landing; she saw the curves of the sandy beaches, the clear blue water drawn as if by some invisible finger, up, round, back down to the shore creating gentle foam.
On the beaches, a few trees survived, but few were upright. Some were precariously bent over, ready to snap with the next strong gust. Palm fronds splayed against the sand littered the shore.

"Terrible," she said to the pilot. "I hadn’t realized how much damage there was."

"Si, much trouble," he replied.

She had flown with him many times before, but she didn’t know his name. "My husband died," she blurted out.

"Si, I know. Sorry for your trouble," he replied, nodding his head slightly. He casually held one earphone, listening to the tower.

Although the sun was bright, burning through the clouds, the landscape below looked bleak. Roberta felt chilled, as she did sometimes after she had been swimming in the late afternoon, as the sun began to fade. She looked away, out the other window, where a rainbow had formed.

It seemed a good idea to come here, to spend a week, put her house and herself in order.

She had been looking forward to this time alone. The plane took a last dip before heading in for a landing. Roberta braced herself but did not feel the fear that usually accompanied these landings.

What, no concern for life or limb? She remembered holding David’s hand at this moment.

Right here, right now, just as the wheels skated along the landing strip, when the plane feels as if it is not going to make it, as if it would be crushed against the mountain, She would squeeze David’s hand; he gripped hers tightly, brought it to his lips for a kiss.

She knew she must allow herself more time to come to terms with his death. Luis, who met Roberta at the airport, handed her keys to a rental jeep saying he hoped she finds the house in order and then left her to go back to work.

She was a stranger here. She could not remember the names of people, even those who invited them to holiday parties. Maybe, she thought for the first time, this was not such a great idea. The house they own is on a high hill, the view of the Caribbean is unimpeded. Luis had taken good care of the house. Some paint was peeling on the outside portico; the slats of a couple of windows were twisted and would have to be replaced. The French doors were still boarded but, miraculously, not broken. The gas was turned on but not the electric. Luis left two large kerosene lamps in the kitchen.

David read only classics here, although he liked to read contemporary novels at home. But here, he said, it seemed somehow appropriate to reread the favorite
novels of his youth. *Portrait of a Lady* lies open on the kitchen table, where he left it when they were last here.

The water in the shower was brown but cleared after a few minutes. There was no hot water, so Roberta rinsed off quickly.

At dusk, she poured rum, no ice, no soda, taking it out on the deck.

David used to say that everywhere but here dusk was a sad time. Night fell quickly in the Caribbean; you could see it coming. The sun was swallowed up by the sea in small bites. No street lights dilute the potent sparkle of the stars. David knew the names of the constellations and would point them out. Roberta tried to remember. She was looking for the Three Sisters; she found that name enchanting. Perhaps, she thought, I will stay here, make friends with the retirees, the expatriates. I could take up gardening, raise goats, maybe run a guesthouse. Maxine Chertoff, running for the Senate, it all seemed far away.

There was no food in the house. She drove to town and ordered a pizza. Young men and girls hung about the pizza parlor, but she did not speak much Spanish and could only make out a few words. The pizza was like cardboard covered with red sauce. She took a few bites and asked to take the rest home. On the way, she stopped for a few cans of diet coke, tossing the pizza into the garbage.

Roberta took up David’s book, started to read from the page he left off. The kerosene lamp was barely enough light, and her eyes were tired. She would not cry here. She wanted to keep this place pure, to disassociate it from her grief.

As she drifted off to sleep, she willed herself to remember falling asleep in David’s arms, listening to the crickets and roosters.

The sunlight streamed in, awakening her in the morning. It was 6:30. Dogs barked wildly. She heard a lawnmower start up.

Roberta spent the next two days alone. She went to the beach, took long swims, ate pick-up meals at the few operating restaurants. The island was a mess and people were busy cleaning up. She was more an outsider than usual, not having lived through Mitch, not having lost anything to the storm.

David’s ashes arrived three days later. The same day, the electricity was suddenly turned on. Now, she thought as she unpacked the urn, I will buy provisions, stock the refrigerator, as if that would make all the difference.

So far, these days have been surprisingly restful. It reminded her of something, all this quiet. It was like being home at her parents’ house. Good thing, she thought, I know how to live with quiet. The silence, the absence of human contact, allowed Roberta to rummage through her memory. She had all the time in the world to revisit the past. It is a blank page, a fresh canvas. She brushes on with a bold stroke the happy times, the loving times with David.
When she feels strong enough, she slowly sketched in the outline of the recent past, of David’s illness and death. She sat on her deck, sipping straight Don Q rum, easing herself into the details.

David’s Story

Of course he had taken a sacred vow, after he learned he was ill, that he would never, never engage in sexual relations again. He meant it, too. Even masturbation was difficult, although he had to laugh at the idea that he could contract HIV from himself. The winter after his diagnosis he went down to Vieques himself. Roberta had some charity function she could not get out of and the dates he selected were really the only dates he could go. He loved Vieques, although he did realize that he would go bonkers if he lived there full time. But for a week, the beach, the waves, the sunsets, the air itself were a balm for all that hurt him. He believed he did not mind being alone, he didn’t feel lonely, perhaps slightly bereft, but not lonely. He was not a lonely man.

The boy’s name was Raoul; he seemed to be a fisherman, although he spoke English with an especially refined accent and his long, silver hair, tied back with a ribbon, belied his age, which David figured to be about 45. He hired Raoul to take him out fishing. David fancied himself a fisherman, although he was also aware that he enjoyed dining out on his fisherman stories just a tad too much. Raoul did not ask him to help, as he seemed to have full control of the boat. The wind was not strong enough to sail, so they motored out a mile and a half, enough so the shore seemed very far away.

Raoul poured him a rum, and gave it to him with a sliver of lime. They chatted; later David could not remember much of what they talked about. The sun, the rum, the water, the occasional ocean spray, all the sensations of life, even the bait in the bucket, seemed to conspire to remind David how much he missed sex. Once that idea, just a small mosquito of an idea, got into his bathing suit, it tickled him, it slithered its way around until he didn’t have to look down to know he had a boner.
David forgot the dyke doctor, he forgot his virtuous promises, he forgot HIV - all he felt, all he knew, was that his hard cock was at long last going to get some relief.

He spent the week with Raoul, one of the happiest of his life. After that first time, David did wear a condom, and Raoul asked no questions. They fished, they cooked the fish, they drank, they fucked day and night as if it was surely the end of days. David knew it as the happiest he had ever been, and was grateful, so grateful for this last chance. When he and Raoul said goodbye, they hugged and vowed they would see each other again, again and often. Oh, they meant it.

A month later, David was dead.
Early on the fourth day, Roberta took David’s ashes to a remote beach, a beach where she once ran topless into the surf while David snapped a dozen pictures.

She remembered feeling stuffed with happiness the first year David brought her to Vieques. She floated in the clear aqua water, marveling at how well her life had turned out, how unexpected this joy was. She had not known people could be so happy, that life could offer up such magnificent bounty.

She had not seen the large wave that crashed over her. She struggled for a moment and then let herself be carried in by the tide.

David was waiting at the edge of the sea, anxiously peering out to spot her. He ran to her, helped her up. She was coughing, sputtering, laughing.

They both fell, were dunked again. He held onto her, pulling her away from danger, out of the water.

"Are you alright, Sweetheart?" he asked.

"Fine, fine. Just swallowed a lot of water. Half the ocean, I think."

He held her close. They kissed. She loved it when he cupped her head in his hand.

The sun reflected off the water, a mirror image of the night sky. Drops of stars glistened on the surf. I know, she thought, what they mean by infinity. That was how it felt, an expanse of enchantment stretched before her. There was no way to run out, to come up empty.

Now she was back here on this beach with a job to do.

Roberta had memorized a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. She began to recite it aloud as she walked into the ocean. Her hands were wet; she had trouble opening the urn.

She wiped her hands on a dry section of her bathing suit. Finally, she felt the lid of the urn rotate.

Roberta opened the urn, looked down at the ash, the pulverized remains. She was standing waist high in the water.

She tipped the urn. The wind caught the ash. Suddenly she wanted this over with. She upended the urn, the ash spilled out, some particles falling on her legs. Horrified, she dropped the urn and plunged into the sea. She tried to dive for the urn, but it was gone, claimed by a stronger force than her own desire for a keepsake.
She drove home in the rental jeep passing people raking their lawns, workers clearing a road, women taking children to school.

Once home, she showered and went back to bed. She dreamed in reels, as if her subconscious was giving her this last chance to understand. David used to tell her that the last thing he would think before he fell asleep was "dream the solution." And often, he said, it happened. A vexing problem would become clear. He could see, in the morning, the resolution of some situation that had been troubling him.

She dreamed of everyone in her life. She was a child alone in a quiet place, a woman acclaimed, and a wife beloved. Suddenly the dream turned nasty. She was naked, wandering through Washington trying to cover her nakedness. She awoke trying to slough off this part but was unable to resist falling asleep again. Her mind, determined to be done with it once and for all, spared her nothing. Naked when David told her, naked when he died, naked when she would be judged.

When she awoke, she knew she would have no more dreams. She could feel an almost mystical desertion of that part of herself which was afraid. The dreams purged her, restored her; she began to think about the future.

Now she was alone; she wished she had listened more attentively to David. Perhaps he would have had a bright idea about how she should live the rest of her life.

She stripped before the full-length mirror. She saw in her reflection a middle-aged woman. Despite her regimes, her toning exercises, her facials, the signature of age, the puckering, the pouches, the lines, and the crevices were plain to see. She would never expose herself to a camera again. It was the equalizer, she thought, the one true equalizer; we all get old; the once beautiful, the awkward, even the ugly, get old. Roberta knew she was the good kind of old, elegant, good bones, soft greying hair, and that still well countered figure. Not so bad, she thought, except that good as it is, it’s old.

The isolation of those days in Vieques began to pall. Despite herself, she found she was listening for another voice. A few days more and she started calling friends back home. She had reached an age where the only surprises were when things work out well. Her women friends were discovering daily various growths in breasts and womb. The husbands were faithless or woke up in the morning drenched in night sweats, fast pulse, heart pounding, a prelude to stroke. The children were "in recovery," jobless, divorcing. Roberta longed for the days of minor irritations. Everything now was life threatening.

She was beginning to feel nervous alone in the house. At night, she was fearful of the crawly things, the huge moths that circled the reading light. She
finished *Portrait of a Lady*, wishing she had a compelling mystery to read, the kind of junk book of which David would have disapproved.

She was coming out of the anesthesia of grief, hurting, but glad to be alive. She couldn’t live in the silence anymore. She saw this as disloyal to her parents, an indictment of their world. Was that why, she wondered, I chose David. Their marriage had been comprised of interludes, brief spells of reunion with her husband separated by long stretches of solitude. It had become a habit before she caught on. In the beginning she thought his absences were only temporary. He was traveling or busy on the hill, or campaigning, or meeting with consultants, constituents, special interest groups. He gave speeches out of town before business groups, interviews to the media. Time was devoted to his private business interests, which were considerable. She could not fault him; there was always a reasonable excuse. When they were together, he was companionable, affectionate.

She resented the reserve that permeated their marriage. She was afraid to voice her unhappiness. Roberta had had her fill of sacrifice, of living her life for the benefit of others. Loneliness came easily to her; it held within it the echoes of her childhood. She sought refuge in it, seeing nothing wrong in that quiet comfort.

She knew too that she had been deceived and left to wither, an accomplice, to be sure, to her own abandonment. She did not intend to give in to her core need for solitude.

Roberta placed the house on the market. She would not come back to this particular desolation.

Once she made the decision to leave, she couldn’t get out fast enough. She called Maxine.

"Do you still think I can win?" she asked once again.

"You bet," Maxine said.

"Okay, let's do it."

"You'll run?"

"I'm already running," Roberta replied," and I'm going to win."
Neil

"Not interested," Neil said, when Laura told him about her conversation with Marcia.

"Not interested? For heavens sake, why not?"

"Because it's nonsense, that's why. Marcia Baker is not going to do anything at all for me. I'm sorry you even brought it up. How in hell did it come up anyway?"

Neil was furious and ashamed. He was hemorrhaging self-respect. Every aspect of his life now seemed spoiled, tainted. He saw his retirement as a disease, as if botulism had been insinuated into his bloodstream, potentially deadly.

After years of secretaries screening his calls, Neil Bennett was waiting for the phone to ring. For a moment he hated Laura, this young wife who was part of the problem, coming home with a grab bag of lunatic schemes to salve her conscience.

"It came up quite naturally," Laura replied. "It was no big deal, just a natural extension of the conversation. But she did seem interested. I don't see what would be so terrible if you called her."

"You don't? Good, you call her. Let's drop it. Want to go out for dinner?" Jake asked, struggling to control his temper.

Laura knew he wanted this, looked forward to dressing and going out for dinner. He drinks a little too much these days, a restaurant setting made it acceptable. But she was tired tonight.

"I'd rather order in."

Neil hesitated. He wouldn't mind going out alone to dinner. He hadn't been out all day and felt lousy. He shaved in the late afternoon, had a small drink while waiting for Laura. Now he would like some distraction but not television, something alive, noisy. Something that felt like his life used to.

"Sure," he said, resigned. "Tomorrow we'll go out, okay?"

Laura rummaged in the take-out menu folder for the nearest Chinese restaurant. "Honey," she said as she extracted it from the dozen other ethnic menus, "I know this is a hard time for you. It makes me scared that you're sorry."

"I'm not sorry."

"I don't mean about us. I mean about retiring."

"Oh, well, of course I'm sorry about that. Didn't have much choice, though. I was part of the committee that revised the mandatory retirement age to 65."
Looked pretty good when I was thirty two, all that blather about making room for young lawyers."

"They might have made an exception for you," Laura said.

"Maybe. I thought about it; it didn’t seem right. Even if they agreed, it just didn’t feel right. It was time to move along. It’ll be okay. It will come together. I know I look like I’m floundering," he laughed.

Laura put her arms around him.

"That’s only because I am," Neil admitted, kissing his wife. "It’s bound to straighten itself out," Neil continued. "But honestly, Marcia Baker isn’t the answer."

"Maybe you’re right," Laura conceded. She liked this moment with Neil, one of a very few lately that felt intimate.

"I trust you, Neil. I always have," she said, wishing it felt like this more often.

In the early years, she insisted on mantras spoken under a full moon.

"You won’t forget this moment?" she asked Neil in Key West, and again in Rome a year later. These perfect moments would save them, she believed.

It went on that way for so many years, nearly ten, that she had almost forgotten the point. Worn down by years of waiting, she found herself relieved when Neil would leave to go home. She was tired, no longer sure that he would come, no longer certain it was such a good idea after all.

"I don’t like change," Neil would say, his lips pressed together.

"But surely change can be good," Laura replied. “People do change and are happier.” But she sounded uncertain herself. Who knew, after all, what was right anymore.

Neil worried about the toll her waiting would take in years to come.

Then, quite suddenly, when she had already exhausted every plea and threat, when the years of recriminatory words vaporized into a cloud of reproach, suddenly Neil and Susan divorced.

In a sense, Laura was disappointed. "Why now?" she asked him.

"For my sake," he said. "I did it for my sake."

But Laura wanted him to do it for her sake. It was to vindicate her, to legitimize her that he had to leave Susan.

Having ignored her pleas, her ultimatums for so many years, she was strangely unsatisfied with the circumstances of his leaving. His leaving was disruptive, almost an intrusion, coming now, so late.

As it turned out they went on much as before. Marriage did not count for much, Laura thought after the first year. It was strangely dull, this much sought after marriage. It ran smoothly enough, the rough edges sanded down to a
polished gloss during the years of their affair. But, she thought privately, it lacked texture.

It wasn't even much of a scandal. Neil was wealthy enough to leave Susan well provided for, and she agreed to the divorce without making a fuss. Susan flourished. Rid at last of her faithless husband, she lost weight, took up bridge, and lunched with her ex-husband to discuss financial matters. Laura, who after all had won the big prize, who for years had pleaded, cajoled, threatened, viewed this kaleidoscope of shifting relationships with an ironic eye.

As for love, well their love was constant. In the night they moved towards each other, in a kind of dozing love making, sweet, but no longer urgent. They knew each other's places. She would look down as he sucked on her, touching the top of his head, no need to guide him, to teach him anything. "It's you," she whispered. "You're here." But she missed the passion.

She had pictures in her head. She saw them, Neil and Susan, in the dark, in their bedroom with the twin beds. Susan sat on the edge of Neil's bed. She pulled down his blue pajama bottoms. She moved Neil's hand under her nightgown. Neil lies there in the dark thinking of Laura, playing with his wife's cunt. Susan sucked him and, as a reward, reached a pinnacle of sorts.

Sometimes when she and Neil are making love, she imagined that Susan could see them. There was Susan, sitting in the corner of the room, watching them. Watching Neil, her husband, do things to Laura. Everything she herself has craved for so many years. Susan observed them, touched her own breast, as her husband whispered to Laura, "God, you are smooth, so beautiful, so smooth."

Laura remembered a time several years ago when she had been bitterly disappointed at another of Neil's missed deadlines for leaving Susan. They had fought; Laura determined to break it off.

The details of that quarrel were not memorable. She spat out the predictable angry words while Neil crooned a palliative lullaby. Soon her rage was reignited as passion; sex was the salve to heal her wounds.

"You will come one day, won't you?" she asked him again.

"Yes, yes, I will."

It was not that way now. Sex was not irrelevant, but it was not the point either.

Did he yearn, too, for that lost passion? She wondered. Was he sorry he came?
She knew it was too late for such speculation. The deal was done, the tradeoffs written into the contract. If it was flawed, they would have to work around it.

She had been afraid that if he left Susan, he would blame her and that she would ultimately pay for his defection. She had anticipated midnight calls from Susan, nasty notes from her friends. None of that happened. He had waited so long that there was no drama.

"You see," she said after they had been married for six months," you could have left years ago."

"No, I couldn’t. I left at the right time."

"But we missed years together. I mourn for those years. We could have had so much."

"We have it now."

"I wanted it before, when we were still young."

"You’re still young."

"No, I’m not. I’m as old as you; life began with you."

"You’re over dramatizing. It didn’t begin with me, and darling, it won’t end with me, either."

He knows me too well, she thought. Before Neil, Laura was a girl who was always in love. Everything felt like love. Great sex with a young internist named Sam, who was poetic about her breasts, that was love. And Alex, a professor of art history, who arrived at her Upper West Side apartment with wine and anecdotes, who made her laugh, made her beg for sex as well, that was love. And a cop she met when she was mugged, Mike, who fell madly in love with her, who turned her on to pot, that was love. Before she met Neil, she seemed to love everybody.

She told Neil about most of them, an expurgated version of her past. She left out every other man; Neil couldn’t take it.

During their years together, she had affairs. Neil knew of a few. What, after all, could he say? However, there were others, one-night stands and a few married men, about whom she said nothing.

She enjoyed the moment with those men but did not miss them when they were gone.

From the first time she met Neil, from that first casual meeting in Jake’s office, Neil was the love of her life.

She understood then that she had not been calling love by its rightful name.

Laura was a woman who has lived an asymmetrical life; she wants parity now, just that, nothing more.

As they settled down with their cartons of Chinese food, Neil asked Laura what else happened at her lunch.
"Well, it's funny. Nothing happened really. Absolutely nothing. I found myself jittery, almost tongue-tied. I mean, she is a cool lady. You were right about that. I found it difficult to ask her where she got the money to invest that made her such a rich woman."

"And where did she get it?" Neil was poking at a spare rib. This wasn't so bad, he thought. He felt redeemed, sitting here with his young wife, eating this tasty food, listening to her day. Hell, she listened enough to his days; for a little while this will be fine. Just a little while though, until he decided what to do next.

"That's what's so curious. I still don't know."

"Oh."

"Precisely, Oh. I expected her to tell me it was an inheritance, something like that; it's a lot of money."

"How much?"

"As far as I can tell she invested about $100,000."

Neil shrugged, "Not a fortune exactly."

"No, but think of where she was at the time. A small private practice, lots of pro bono work, never filed income of more than $60,000 in her best year. I mean we're talking ten years ago."

"I see your point. So, what did she say?"

"She said to ask Jake."

"Jake? You mean Jake gave her the money? Not possible, Jake didn't have that kind of money. I doubt it anyway."

"Well," Laura shook her head. "I don't mean that she got it from Jake, just that she wanted me to talk to Jake about it. So I will. I sure will. I wish Jake would do his own dirty work on this one. I do not like messing around in Marcia Baker's life. It makes me nervous. She makes me nervous."

"Get over it. She's your client. It doesn't matter if you like her or if she's warm and fuzzy."

"Oh, I know that. It will be interesting if she and Roberta Palmer run against each other. Don't you think?"

"Sure, I guess so. I'll enjoy the spectacle of women choosing up sides. Which way will Maxine go? That's the bellwether, I suppose."

"She asked me that, I think, although who knows. But I think that Maxine will stay neutral. Do a joint endorsement, give each of them $50,000, and sit back and watch."

"Not too gutsy."
"No, but look at the spot she's in. They both have good feminist credentials, not a dime's worth of difference substantively, although their styles sure are different."

"What about the so called “winability” factor? Who do you think is most likely to beat Marchand? Personally, I don't think either of them can take Larry."

"Maybe not, but if one of them can it's probably Roberta."

"Why?"

"Name recognition, for one. She's got it three ways: her modeling career, as David's wife, and now in the Senate. Do you know her?"

"Met her, knew David, of course. Knew him rather well at one time. Damn shame, his dying that way. Hard luck family all around. I knew his first wife, Sharon; she also died of cancer. Tough on the kid, Joan. David took Sharon's death hard; it was a particularly terrible death, I heard. I was surprised when he married so soon after. What a guy, grabs off not one but two beauties. Having all that money didn't hurt, I guess. I saw them both at David's memorial service. Roberta seemed okay, but Joan looked terrible, really awful. If I were a good guy I would call her and take her to lunch."

"Better not just for now" Laura cautioned.

"Her father was an old friend, for God's sake. If I want to take her to lunch, I will."

"Just pointing out that I represent her stepmother's adversary. So, honey, what do you think about Marcia and her evasions?"

"Want this last sparerib?" Neil asked, licking his fingers.

"I wouldn't think of depriving you," Laura said. "You have it."

"I think, sweetie," Neil said sucking on the last rib, "that Marcia Baker has something to hide. I think, too, that this Chinese food has been tampered with."

"Tampered with? Are you feeling sick?"

"No," Neil stood up, wiping his mouth, taking a last swig of beer, "not sick at all, just unusually spry," he says grinning.

For years, Neil knew, Laura thought it was sex that drew him to her. Often he wished it were true. It would have been easier, he thought, if it was only sex. He loved her sex, but in truth, he had been more satisfied with another woman with whom he had an affair years before. Laura was too passionate, too eager to please. Something about her sex sounds put him off slightly: too loud, too much groaning and moaning, a touch too showy. He wondered how much she faked it; he did sometimes.

As he got older, as their affair wore on, he became less interested in making love even as he became more interested in sex generally. He thought about sex all the time. He was surprised to find himself testing the boundaries of his erotic
imagination. Now when he met a couple he immediately wondered about their sex life. As he became less active, he became more voyeuristic. Every woman he saw became a sex object in his imagination. The more he allowed himself this luxury of private fantasy, the more liberated he became. It was a side of him he kept secret. He could have told Laura; he suspected it would excite her. But he resisted. He liked this new world of sexual speculation; he wanted to keep it all to himself. He would rent porno movies if he thought he could get away with it, if it did not seem so sad. Maybe he would anyway. After all, he did not have to account to anyone for his time, for his private passions. He discovered he could think anything that amused him. He could stand at a cocktail party talking pleasantly with some woman and wonder how her mouth would feel around his cock. If Laura came over, he might include her in the fantasy. All the time moving his mouth, smiling his smile, munching on a celery stalk. What he wondered most was if everyone was like him? Had he been missing something? Did everyone think about sex as much as he did? Was this merely a symptom of old age?

He touched himself more too. Not necessarily for release but for comfort, for fun. This new wrinkle to his internal life pleased him.

A month ago Laura she returned late from the office. Neil put down the book he was reading and asked, "Are you sleeping with someone?"

"What kind of question is that?" she countered.

"A perfectly civil question. Are you sleeping with someone? Jake, perhaps?"

"Laura walked over to where Neil was sitting. "Unzip me, will you?" she said. "You have some reason to ask me that?"

"Not a reason exactly, more instinct, and you don't seem terribly interested in sex with me lately. You didn't answer the question."

"I'm not in court."

"Nevertheless," he said as Laura removed a black, diaphanous nightgown with thin straps from her drawer. A gift from Neil for her birthday, his favorite. She stood before him, slowly removing her brassiere, garter belt, and stockings. She slipped on the gown, stretched out her arms as she yawned.

"Hmm, I'm tired. It was one of those long meetings."

"Was Jake there?"

"Of course Jake was there."

She yawned again and propped the pillows up on their bed. Lying down, her head slightly raised, she crossed her legs as she got comfortable. One of the straps of her gown slips to her breast. She makes no move to pull it up. "Are you sure you want to know?" she asked, smiling.

"Quite sure."
Laura was rubbing her left foot along her right leg. Her gown slid up the leg as she moved her foot. She appeared to be concentrating on this. "I was wondering when you'd realize it. It took you long enough," she said thoughtfully, her lower lip protruding slightly.

"When did it start?" Neil asked stiffly.

"Last summer, when I was alone at the house in the Hamptons."

Neil smiled. "I'm serious," he said.

"So am I, darling."

"So, it started last summer in the Hamptons," he repeated.

"Yes. I was lying on the beach. It was late in the afternoon, and no one was around. The sun was hot; it was one of those very hot days. I was lying there on a towel, catching the last rays of the day when I sensed someone standing over me. I could barely make him out at first; the sun was in my eyes. When he dropped to his knees, I saw that he was a handsome boy, perhaps twenty or so. He was holding a branch in his hand, sort of using it as a walking stick, I guess."

"Laura?" Neil strikes a warning note.

"You asked," she interrupted. "Now you don't want to hear it?"

Neil was wearing a striped silk robe over his pajamas. He stood up and took off the robe. "I want to hear it," he said stiffly.

"Oh good. Sit down, please."

He returned to his chair.

"Well, this young man—I never did get his name—was incredibly tan, about six foot one and fantastically good looking, a little macho but sensitive eyes. 'Hello,' he said to me. He started to run the branch over my thigh. It scratches a little, but I liked the sensation. I'm too lethargic to move, my mouth is dry."

"Mine is now," Neil said.

"Me too. Get us a drink."

Neil returns with two scotches. He hands Laura one and she waves her hand, motioning for him to return to his chair.

"The boy is tickling me with his stick," she continued, not missing a beat, "running it over my body. He leaned down over me very slowly and kissed me on the mouth. I was aroused," she smiled. She paused, "You know the way I get when I'm aroused."

"Yes, I know," Neil's voice is low.

"That way. I was that way."

"There were no other people around?"

"No one."

"Then what?"
"After he kissed me, a long deep kiss, he naturally realizes I'm aroused. 'Is there something I can do for you, Madam?' he asked. 'You have a beautiful body; surely there is something you would like.'"

"'Please,' I said. I wanted him, Neil. I couldn't help it. I wanted him."

"'Oh,' he said, 'you want that.' He slid his arm under me to undo the fastening on the top of my bikini. He was drawing circles around my breasts with his stick. The sun was beating down."

"What did he do then?" Neil's voice was now thick, hoarse with desire.

"He slipped his hands under me. He's so sure of himself; I started to protest. 'Don't move,' he said, 'or I'll stop.' Well, darling, I could tell you I wasn't going anyplace. He untied the bows on either side of my bikini. I was lying there naked now. The sun had moved a little and I could see him clearly. He was just a boy. He wore one of those small bikinis, and I could see his cock was hard, bulging."

"How did you feel?" Neil asked her in an even voice.

"Humiliated, embarrassed, crazy with wanting him. I wondered if he'd expect to be paid. Such a young, handsome boy might expect a small gratuity."

Neil starts to rise out of his chair. "That's enough."

"Sit down," Laura said sternly. "You asked. I'm telling you."

Neil hesitated, and then sat down again.

"He began to kiss me, to suck my breasts. My nipples were hard, and all the time he was smiling, not a nice smile, but he knew I wanted it. He's all over me, with his hands and using the branch to tickle me. I could not help myself. You know how I get. He turned me over; I could feel the sand pressing into my stomach, my shoulder, and my right cheek as he separates my legs to take me from behind."

She was touching herself as she was telling her tale. "Can you see it, Neil?" she says as he walked over to her.

"Bitch," he said. "God, you're a bitch." He raised her gown. "What a bitch you are," he said again as he started to make love to her. After, Neil poured them another drink.

He was sleepy, mellow. "I love you, Laura," he said. "I don't ever want to lose you."

"No chance," she said.

As he reached for Laura on this night, an image of Marcia Baker came to him. As he aroused his wife, the lovely face of Roberta Palmer came to him. Laura, now fully aroused, pushed him away so she could reposition herself between his legs. He lay back receiving the bounty of her passion. She knew all the right moves; at this she was expert. Slow, deep thrusts into her mouth, she cupped his
balls stroking, teasing. He drew her head tighter, knowing she liked that, and a moan escaped him. God, she was good. Now that she had him going, he was close to coming, and he wanted more. He wanted all the women, Michelle, Susan, Marcia Baker, Roberta, all of them surrounding him, licking him, pleasuring him. His passion was heightened by intensity of the fantasy. “Fuck me,” he said to them, all the women, “Fuck me.”

After, Neil fell asleep. Laura lay quietly for a time, hoarding the moment. It had been a long time since they had an evening like this, since Neil wanted her, since they talked in this companionable way. She was afraid it wouldn’t last but it was not in her nature to resist this pleasurable feeling of well-being.

In the shower, Laura palpated her ego for signs of hubris. She found a small growth, just something to keep her eye on, no radical treatment required.

Laura slid back into bed beside Neil replaying her afternoon with Marcia, wondering about Marcia’s reaction and about how she would approach Jake. She molded her body into Neil’s back, kissed the back of his neck. “I do love you, sweetheart,” she whispered.

But that night she had disturbing dreams about moving to a new apartment with more rooms, and about Jake.

In the morning, it was the same, and as usual, Neil was grouchy. She was anxious to leave for the office. Her dreams, she believed, revealed an ambivalence she did not want to confront.

She could not shake the feeling that she was missing something important. Betrayal was in the air. She had lived with it a long time, and she knew the scent.
Chapter 16

Neil and Susan

There are moments in time remembered with scrupulous precision. The millions of women who were cleaning up after breakfast when they heard the report of planes crashing into the World Trade Center could tell you the dish they were holding. It was not a voluntary act, this kind of recall.

Some few events in a lifetime had an intrinsic power. Everything was captured in the moment. Whatever followed, grief or joy, the first emotion, the one fixed in time, was shock. It was that, the utter incomprehensibility of the news that delivered the first blow. More followed, of course—the details. By then, the body was either ready to receive the rest or to succumb to grief. Barely ready, still reeling from the first blow, resisting, denying, praying it was not true: nothing stopped the news.

On Tuesday, February 11, at 9:45, Susan Bennett was throwing out the Sunday Times. Neil read the Times all over the house. The sports section was in the bathroom, the financial section in the living room, the magazine he saved for more careful reading during the week. She was wearing a yellow print housedress that zipped up the front. She only zipped it to her chest, just below her breasts, for comfort. Her routine rarely varied. The first task was to pick up the papers. WQXR was playing Vivaldi’s “La Notte,” one of her favorite pieces of music. She was in the bedroom when she found Laura’s letter. She was bending from the knees as she had been advised to do by her doctor, sorting through the newspaper and some typed papers Neil left on the floor on his side of the bed. The papers looked to her like early drafts of an article he was writing, and she wondered if she should save them. She was holding them in her right hand when she noticed a page of thick yellow vellum mixed in with the rest. She read the salutation, “Darling,” written in a bold script. She straightened up, dropping all the papers but the letter, which she continued to hold in her right hand.

She folded the letter and took it into the kitchen. She put it down on the table and boiled some water for tea. She sugared the tea, two teaspoons, and used a china cup, not her mug. She stared at the letter, sipping her steaming tea. The tip of her tongue was very slightly burned from its initial immersion. She rolled it over her lip for comfort. She found her mind wandering, back to her chores. She had planned to drop in at the Metropolitan Museum on her way to work. She had been looking forward to today. It was to have been a pleasant day. “Damn him,” she said aloud. How did it get there, she wondered. He must have been reading it when the phone rang. He forgot and dropped it. Something like that, he would never do it deliberately.
When she was first married, she and three newly married friends talked about what they would do if they discovered their husbands had been unfaithful. In those early days, it was so improbable, so ludicrous; it was almost fun to try to imagine it. As these four brides evaluated their own husbands, they secretly evaluated the husbands of their friends. As it turned out, all these husbands would be unfaithful, although one was just a one-night stand in Atlanta for which he paid dearly, believing he had contracted a venereal disease. When it was Susan's turn to answer, two others had gone before (one said she would understand if he promised never to see the girl again; the other simply said she would kill him), Susan said, "I'd leave him on the spot."

Years later, when other friends would speculate on why Susan Bennett did not leave her philandering husband, they agreed it was, at least in part, because she was afraid she would not find anyone else. By that time, she had gained the cursed weight, which would follow her around the rest of her life, no matter how much she starved, herself no matter how many pills she took.

After all, Neil had married her. No, it was not fear of being alone, not then, or self-doubt about her charm. It was Neil. She loved Neil. By the time she first realized he had been unfaithful she knew she would never leave him. That first time she found no letter. She thought she detected something remote in his attitude. He seemed to have trouble hearing her. He was not all there. So she asked him one day, just boldly, "Are you having an affair?" He denied it, was indignant at her suspicion. Something in his denial confirmed it for her. His disavowal was altogether too emphatic. Their sex life was spare. In the early years of their marriage, this disturbed Susan. She was curiously more interested in the frequency than the quality. Susan had rigid ideas about what fell within the normal range. She had it fixed in her mind that the average couple, after two years of marriage, had intercourse three times a week. Of course, average means sometimes more, sometimes less. She and Neil were less. Much less. Susan had a lively but not lusty sexual appetite, frequently initiating sex. Neil was compliant, when he was not too tired or preoccupied. He gave an appearance of gusto in his work, in his political quarrels. He was an animated conversationalist, a galvanizing lecturer. It was odd, therefore, that he was so passive in bed. Something was missing for Neil in sex. She tried to talk to him about it. He refused. It was all deeply embarrassing. He did not seem to like sex. She even wondered once if he might be a latent homosexual. For years, she went through stages where she alternatively blamed herself, then him. Once during a terrible argument, when she had again accused him of having an affair, she screamed at him, "Living with you is an indictment of me as a woman. You never want me, you never touch me, and you're a cold man, Neil, a cold man."
"It's not you," he said. "It's something in me. Call it neurosis, repression, whatever. It's too late to fix it. Sweetheart, it's not you, I promise. I'll be better. I will."

Susan had an uncomfortable but not abnormal pregnancy with their first child, Adam. Neil watched her being wheeled into the delivery room, bent down to kiss her. She was in some discomfort from labor pains but smiling.

Hours passed. Still nobody was alarmed. First babies, they said, took time. There were many birth stories in that waiting room. The stories of both Susan's and Neil's births were told by their respective mothers. Susan was in labor for over 24 hours. Neil watched her squirm in pain, beg for water, curse all men.

Neil regarded himself as a clear thinker, a rational man. He had touched this beautiful Susan, injecting his sperm into her like some lethal venom. For three months, she threw up, then she lost her figure, and then she bled, until she was thin again from blood loss and weak from pain.

Despite the difficulties of Adam's birth, Susan wanted more children. Two years after Adam, Missy was born and then, two years later, Rosie.

The children, however, did not satisfy Susan's fundamental needs. She had expected the children to distract her, perhaps even save her, from her obsessive attachment to Neil. She wanted Neil. She wanted him body and soul, heart and mind, all of him, all the time. Of course, the more Neil withdrew, the more she ran after him. Sometimes, she could visualize herself, running in a long skirt, down a narrow path, with hanging branches obstructing her view, running faster and harder to catch Neil.

Susan was not a fool. She realized eventually that she could not catch him. Plus she had three perfectly good children to take care of, to play with, children who wanted her, who would run after her. For a while she tried very hard focus totally on the children. Her mind wandered, she felt annoyed, left the freezer door open, lost her wallet, found reasons to call Neil six, seven, sometimes a dozen times a day. The minute he took the call, the instant she heard his voice, she felt better. Better than those children ever made her feel. Before long, the children formed their own troika. Deprived of a full time Mother, they were not dissatisfied. They had each other, a part time Mother and their Father, their brilliant, handsome, funny and desirable Father.

One thing Susan knew is that the children were proof of the success of her marriage. Neil surprised her by paying attention to the children. She had expected him to be a drop-in father; she was prepared to excuse his truancy. Neil, however, kept up his end. He was proud of the children and relieved that they kept Susan preoccupied. No time, he thought, for her to ruminate on what he was doing, on their marital relations. The children were his barrier against
suspicion. No wonder he was so fond of them. They protected him from scrutiny; they were a get-out-of-jail free card. With his children in his life, he could range freely over the sexual landscape of quick affairs, broken promises. Hurrah for the children, he often thought. For nearly two decades, Neil hitched up his chaps, put on his boots and his ten-gallon hat. Alone and unobserved, he sat tall on his ride rounding up the strays. Hurrah for the children. Once the children were in place, Susan’s role as wife-mother was secure. No quarrels for this fine couple, no need for impassioned arguments about neglect and desertion. With the children in their lives, there was no time to worry about occasional abandonment. Susan was that good. For many years he believed it was all good enough, their marriage, their children, their life was good enough.

Neil sometimes held her in the night, and if she moved in a certain way, or guided his hand, he touched her, loved her with his hands, and relieved her momentary urge. She would do the same for him, touch him, suckling him until he too turned hard, for just a moment, and came.

She thought he had some classic problems, wife into mother, that sort of thing. Or perhaps he had been traumatized by Adam’s birth. She surreptitiously read books and articles; she knew the correct names and diagnosis of a dozen types of sexual dysfunction. Eventually, she stopped blaming herself.

Neil was in every way a good husband, her best friend. For her, what they had was enough. She wished, from time to time, that it were different, that he would take her with a brutal passion. That, she knew, was the stuff of romance novels, of movies, of fantasy. A good marriage was something else. It was just this, more or less. Best friends, and in the night, learned tricks, sexual sleight of hand. She relied on an intimacy, nourished by their secret, the poignancy of his impotence. They shared a love of books, although he read philosophy and she liked mysteries. Often, he would call and say "How about Chinese tonight?" just as she was thinking of an egg roll. He told her of his female colleagues who flirted, who left him notes, and who invited his attention.

Susan was aware of her faults and flaws. She was overweight and generally fearful of trying new things. A therapist would have a field day with her.

She picked up the letter, as if to judge its weight, to see how many stamps it needed to send it on his way. Out of here, out of her kitchen, her life. It was very slight; it hardly weighed an ounce, nothing at all really. I can just not read it," she thought. Why should I read it, a letter addressed to Neil as "Darling." It's pointless to read it, some lovesick student, at worst a brief flirtation. Throw it away; he will worry so about where it is that it will be enough punishment.
She wished the phone would ring. She considered another cup of tea; the first was cold. Her tongue was still a little raw, and she felt some pain in her toe, the one in which she frequently got an ingrown toenail.

And if it’s more? she thought. Suppose it’s more. Just suppose he’s having a real affair, a full-fledged affair, a midlife crisis affair in spades. And she remembered her own voice, so sure, so cool all those years ago. She almost laughed aloud, "Leave him flat—my God, I was young." The very idea of leaving Neil flat was so silly, so theatrical; she did not give it another thought. It was entirely possible that she and Neil would laugh over tonight, her bad moment when she saw the word "Darling," her foolish suspicions rather flattering to a middle aged man. The issue, should the letter be bad, was not separation; it was confrontation. For that, she needed to know what it said. Her hands did not tremble when she unfolded the letter. She did not have tachycardia or a seizure when she read it. She did not even cry.

Darling,

Thank God for Mondays. Even one day without you is too much. I thought a lot about what you said on Saturday. You said I am "insensitive," but really I’m not. I know how hard it is for you to leave Susan. "A little more time," you said, but it’s been so long already. Don’t we, don’t you, deserve some happiness too? Sweetheart, I love you. I know you love me, and in an odd way, I know we’ll be together before too long. I do have faith in that. I do trust you. So take a little longer, if you must. Protect her as long as you can. Only know that I’m waiting, and that in the end, it’s your choice to make.

I love you,
Laura

Susan was sick with humiliation that Laura would write of her this way. She did not mind so much about the sex. It happens; monogamy is foolish anyway. But this? That Laura should write so condescendingly of her? That Neil and Laura discussed her? That she was laid bare before this stranger by her best friend?

She sat there at her kitchen table for a long time that morning. The phone never rang; she did not make another cup of tea. She knew she should call somebody: a friend, a psychiatrist, a lawyer, someone who would give her advice, comfort, counsel. But most important, she knew she mustn’t panic.
On the kitchen table, the magazine section of the *New York Times* was open to the crossword puzzle. She and Neil had a system. He would begin it, putting in anything that was obvious to him, not reaching for any words. Then she took over and did her best to fill it in. Sometimes he finished it, but most often, she would get it back with a few holes.

In their dresser drawer were their tickets to the opera. They had the same subscription for twenty years. They subscribed as well to a couple of off Broadway theaters. Each September, Susan and Neil would have a culture conference and select together what they wanted to see for the coming season. In the desk were their savings books. Each entry was a cause of celebration. Each withdrawal denoted some setback, an illness, or the long weeks of her convalescence after gallbladder surgery. Laura had no crossword puzzles, no tickets, and no savings books. She had his sex. So what? Sex had not been the point of their marriage anyway. It wasn’t so important before. Why should it be so important now? Laura had gotten his attention, caught his eye for a minute. She wondered if he was hard for her. Maybe. Maybe.

However, Laura didn’t know that for more than 30 years both of them took off the first day of spring and drove to the country for lunch. It was, Neil said, a time for renewal, and neither of them had ever missed a year. Did Laura know that when she fell asleep reading, as she often did, Neil would gently remove her glasses, fold them, and put them in the drawer next to her side of the bed? She looked around her kitchen. Neil’s vitamins were lined up on the counter. He took twelve different vitamins each morning and bran mixed with orange juice. Did Laura know that? The evidence of her marriage, the documents, the certificates, the memories, the sheer weight of their shared years, the children, the secrets, were all hers. Laura had no part of that.

Susan loved Neil Bennett; she wanted to keep him as her husband. What he wanted would have to matter less. What Laura wanted? Not at all. She knew she must not panic, and she knew, too, that no one must ever know she had found the letter. She could bear anything, as long as no one knew. She was astonished at her ferocity. This letter stirred a passion for her husband that had long been dormant.

They, Neil and Laura, had their secrets. She had hers. She knew him well; he might betray her, but he would never let her down. Of that much, she was sure. Then, at last, she cried. She was bitterly disappointed in Neil and shamed to her core. She fought a sense of total waste, of the years all having been a sham. But most of all, she cried because she knew nothing would ever be the same between them. She cried for all the years to come that would now be contaminated because she knew.
A few months later Neil came home with fists clenched in a fighter’s stance. 
"Neil, is something wrong?" Susan asked him after dinner. 
"What do you mean wrong?" Neil replied. 
"Wrong, not right, bad. Something's bothering you." 
"You know how I am." 
"Yes, I know, but lately you seem more remote, more depressed than usual." 
"Sorry."

They sit for a moment, as they have for so many years, on matching Hepplewhite chairs with a glass table between them. The glass rests on a tree stump they bought in Maine on their honeymoon. Susan brought it home and finished the top, rubbed it with oil. It seemed to Neil that he had spent his life in that chair talking to Susan. Years, too, of silence. Years of him watching the ball game, while Susan put the children to bed.

Neil would not eat with the children, it’s too early, he said. Feed them first, then you and I can dine alone. Years of trays of dinner, glasses of wine, in front of the television.

Falling asleep in that chair, Susan would gently nudge him. Years of talk about his moods, about his coldness, his not being home enough. And why didn’t they entertain more? Why couldn’t he make some effort to put up with her friends? Most of all, why didn’t he make more time for his children?

Now Neil felt the weight of those years, the waste of all that talk. What did it matter now, all those conversations? Hadn’t he changed, hadn’t given her what she wanted. She had been cheated out of the life she wanted. It would have been simple enough, but he could not do it. He felt so cheated himself, so strangled by his life, he could not do much for Susan. They had the children and now the children were gone.

Still, it worked. Their marriage worked, or had worked until Laura.

"Susan, why do you stay with me?" he asked her.

"That’s a strange question, now, after thirty years."

"Well, I’m asking it. Why? I haven’t given you much. I’m miserable to live with.”

"Why? It’s too late to ask that, now, Neil. You haven’t given me enough and you are, sometimes, miserable to live with. However, I’ll be goddamned if I’m going to start analyzing it now, at this point. Maybe years ago I should have. Maybe, if I had been stronger, smarter, I would have left. But I wasn’t, and I’m here and I love you. Besides,” she smiled, "you always told me I was your best
friend. That's not so bad, you know, being best friends." "That's true," Neil said. "You have been my good friend, my dear friend."

"Have been?" Susan asked.

Neil was silent. He was right there, right at the edge of the precipice. One more step, arms outstretched, a little bounce, and he would dive free. Now, now, he has to do it. So what if there is no net, if it is dangerous and frightening. So what if he crashes against the rocks. So what if a sudden gust of wind pushes him off course. Is he such a coward, so timorous a man, so cautious he will let this moment pass? Sit there, in his chair, inert, immobile, lacking the will, the guts to spring out of the tedium, away from this custodial marriage.

He had been here before, on this edge, however, never so acutely, so clearly in danger of making a move.

He was sweating, had a headache, and his stomach was cramped. He put his hands to his head, pressing them against his skull trying to still his head pains. He closed his eyes, rubbing his temples on both sides.

"Headache?" Susan asked.

"Yes, bad headache."

"I'll get you some aspirin."

"No, it'll pass."

"For God's sake, take an aspirin," she yelled.

"I don't want an aspirin."

"What do you want? What's the matter with you?"

"Susan? Susan, I'm unhappy."

"I know. That's why we're talking. I see that. I see how unhappy you are. I want to help."

"You can't help."

Now she was frightened. Something was different; something had changed. She had always been able to pull him back away from the edge. Usually it wasn't so hard. Only once or twice before did she know that a great effort would be required. She could not lose. She felt excited, animated, almost glad it was happening again. He looked pitiful to her, sitting there holding his head, refusing an aspirin, afraid to tell her, paralyzed by his doubts.

"Neil, what is it? Do you want to leave? Is that it?"

She would help him over this first hurdle, give him a foothold, happy to help this poor soul, her husband, her best friend. This man who was her life, she'd cup her hands and let him step into them, as if to hoist him up and over. A classic feint.

Her body was alive now, poised for the weight of what may come. Her mind was alert and resolute.
"Go on," she said softly. "Say it. Tell me. I'm not afraid anymore."
"Susan, I don't know. I don't know what to do. God, my head hurts. Maybe we should separate for a little while, think things over."
"What things?"
"Things. Why I'm so unhappy."
"You've always been unhappy."
"Not like this. This isn't going away."
"It'll go away, Neil. It always goes away. I don't think we should separate now. I know you're unhappy, so am I sometimes. But we've been through this before; it does go away."
"I don't think this will," he said, looking at her.
Susan stood up, took a few steps towards him, and stood above him. "Then make it go away. Do you hear me? Make it go away. I've spent my life in you. You, always you first, years of you, living through all the small and large humiliations, the thousands of days of your depressions, the thousands of nights of your coldness, and now, now after all these years, you're unhappy and you don't think it will go away. I am telling you, Neil, let it go. You're a fool if you don't. What do we have? We have each other, which is just as it should be. We are each other's connections, each other's history; we are nothing without each other. You think because we don't sleep together that that changes anything. So what. Oh, I'm not saying it didn't hurt me, all those years ago, when you just stopped. Just stopped wanting me. Don't turn away. Don't shut me up. You were there, you remember. God, I remember how I tried. I did try. I lost weight. Was that it? I was too heavy? I read books. I bought sexy underwear. I would have done anything you wanted. But you knew that; you knew it all. And you still couldn't touch me. You never gave me a chance. Then ... then you should have left, if there was to be any leaving. Then, maybe, while I still had a chance for a life. But now, now when I have no chance for anything? Oh no, Neil, not now."
"Susan?" Neil stood up. He could feel her body start its sob before he hears the first cry. "Susan, I'm so sorry. I never meant...."
"No," she said crying, "No, you never meant to hurt me. But you did, Neil, you hurt me."
"Baby, baby," he says moving to hold her. An awkward, unfamiliar gesture, he encircled her with his arms and pressed her head to his shoulder, "Don't cry."
Her tears were like warm rain on his cheek, damping down the embers of that small fire inside him. A little fire, ignited by Laura, stoked and kindled until it burned hot and bright for a few minutes, fueling his fantasy, casting it's firelight along the dark road, so that he thought he could see where he was going.
He patted her shoulder, and raised her head so he could look into her eyes. However, it was not her tears that stopped him. He saw then that he would have to trust one of them. Either Susan or Laura had the right idea about life, about love. He loved both of these weeping women. He was never more afraid in his life. He knew that he would survive whatever he did. Suddenly, for the first time, he knew he could leave Susan. He had been wrong about that, about her. She would not hold him against his will. He was quite free to choose. He must do just that, choose, and try to live with it. Either way there would be great difficulty and heartbreak. He wasn’t too old; it wasn’t too late.

"Neil," Susan said, "don’t you see that the ending changes everything. Can you really afford for all these years to have gone for nothing? For that is what it will mean, for you as well as for me."

"Things change," he said softly. "People change."

"Yes, they do. We’ve changed. Once I could not imagine accepting living through your affairs. It made it difficult to love you; sometimes I hated you. Our marriage has always been flawed. I knew that. But we had a commitment. I had a commitment. I saw even at the beginning it wasn’t going to be easy. I wished it would be easy, but then, well, anybody can do well in an easy marriage. But we survived—until now we survived. We can survive this; we should survive this. Although, God, I hope it is the last. Make it the last, please."

"Susan, it’s so hard. You don’t know."

"Yes I do, I know. You love her."

"Don’t," Neil said quietly.

"Why not? If I knew it yesterday, a month ago, why not today? All that is changed is that we are speaking of it, for once bringing it out. Did you think it hurt less because it lay between us, unspoken? I will say it again. You love her. Love her."

"Don’t. Stop it. Don’t hurt us this way."

"So what. So what if you love her. You love me too. Yes, you do. You love me, more than you know. I don’t give you everything, but then, think about it, does she? What about loyalty, for example, which is also a part of life. She got the best of you; I made do with less. What child’s play an affair is, each of you coming in your Sunday best, showing off, so smart and self-righteous. What’s that?"

Neil was silent. "Not much. Believe me, Neil. Practically anybody can do that.

How does she know? he wondered. "Have you...?" he started to ask.

Susan hesitated. "No, it happens I never did. But I know about it anyway. I can feel it anyway, what it’s like. You lack imagination in some ways, Neil, clever
as you are. You should try to live a little more quietly, a little more inside
yourself, with yourself. Stand still for a minute, these vexing questions about life
that torment you may become clearer."

He saw then that one could repudiate love but not a life—not one’s whole
life, nullified, cancelled. At the end, when he would indeed be standing still and
quite alone, he must have something worthwhile to review: a life lived
imperfectly but not completely wasted. “You’re a smart woman, Susan,” he said,
“I have not been kind.”

“No,” she agreed, “you have not been kind, but then again, Neil, neither have
I.”

They stood there, in front of Neil’s chair, now apart again, not touching, that
moment gone, but searching each other’s faces to see if it was over. Susan,
satisfied and reassured, began to smile. She sniffed; her nose was pink from
crying. “I need a tissue, Neil,” she said finally, “and you need an aspirin.”

For a while, they lived as before until Susan realized it was, in fact, too late.
That furtive, secret way Neil had of undressing in the dark and crawling into
bed. Never even needs to pee. Never brushes his teeth or turns on the light. Just
slides into his side, holding his breath. She can feel the release of tension, his and
hers, when he realizes he’s home free. They lie there, Susan and Neil, in that
queen bed, the old games gone, nothing left, not even a goodnight kiss, not a
gentle holding, nothing left.

Long ago, she relinquished her physical claim. In the face of his coldness, his
disinterest, she finally let that go. Buried it somewhere, deep inside. Smothered it
with just enough cold, dark earth to dampen any last embers.

She could see the relief in his eyes, feel his gratitude in the gentle way he was
with her. It wasn’t such a big deal, she thought. This will bind us, she thought.
She never mentioned doctors or therapy. Not to Neil, this husband whom she
loved. Better to ignore it, shroud it, and deny its existence.

Soon, nothing was left of what she remembered as desire. Now, lying in this
pristine bed, Susan knew it had all been for nothing. She was a long time falling
asleep; a sense of loss pervaded her thoughts.

Neil and I are finished, Susan realized. To be sure, there were still things to be
said: more explanation, recrimination, and melancholy talk about what might
have been.

It’s time to recoup whatever she could, cut her losses while she still had some
chips. She never meant to bankrupt herself, although she certainly seemed to be
throwing it away with both hands. She had a little something in reserve, just a
pittance she kept hoarded under the mattress, and a little in an old sock. Enough,
she hopes, to get her on her feet again. Let him have his Laura, she thought, with
relief. She was turning over a damaged man. Let this Laura change his bandages;
apply a compress to his aching head. Poor woman, she thought, winning this
carcass of a man.

She wanted to do this well, this ending with Neil. No more pleas or vows. It
was too late for that. Just cut it, slice it clean through. She knew she could expect
some moments of searing pain and some, not quite so bad, of constant ache. In
time, she thought, in time, it will hurt much less but only if she had the guts to
be a conscientious cleaver.
Neil

He’s known since he awakened that he would call Marcia Baker. Slim reed though it was, it was all he had. He was not prepared to sit like this in his exquisitely decorated living room, saliva dribbling down his chin. He rehearsed the conversation as he picked up the phone to dial Washington D.C. information.

Congressman Baker, he said when her receptionist answered.

"Whom shall I say is calling?"

He hesitated. Ah, fuck it, he thought, and in a strong, clear voice answered, "Neil Bennett from New York."

"I was really very surprised," Neil said to Laura that evening, "pleasantly surprised. She called me back in a couple of hours.” Neil was relating his conversation with Marcia Baker, trying to disguise how relieved he felt.

"I guess I owe you an apology, honey,” he added. “There just may be something in this after all.”

"What did she say?" Laura asked. "Tell me every word."

"Come on, Laura. It’s not that big a deal."

"Tell me anyway,” she persisted.

Neil did not want to make too much of this. He feared he had lost a lot of ground already in his wife’s eyes. Nevertheless, this small conversation felt like salvation.

His conversation with Marcia had been the first pleasant surprise since he retired. The fact that she actually called him back, and in less than two hours, impressed him. Maybe he wasn’t totally forgotten after all; maybe it would be all right.

Marcia was not surprised to hear from Neil. She had called Jake to ask him about Neil after her lunch with Laura.

"So, anything I should know about him?” she says to Jake.

"No, nothing. He is smart, he’s rich, and he’s retired," Jake said.

"Well, is there any reason I shouldn’t ask him to do some policy research work?” Marcia asked.

"No reason at all, except he won’t do it. He won’t even call you, so forget it. “

When Marcia learned Neil had called, she made it a point to call him back as soon as possible.

"How are you?" she said warmly.

"As well as anyone who’s just retired,” he said.
She liked that. No bullshit.
"Your wife is lovely," Marcia said, “and she seems very bright, a good lawyer.”
"She is, and thank you."
A small silence ensued.
"Well, Neil, you know I’m planning to announce for the Senate. When I do that, I am going to resign from my congressional seat; I think that shows both confidence and a certain seriousness of purpose. My staff will be considerably reduced. So I was wondering, if you have the time, if you might care to sign on to help us during the campaign."
"What would my role be?" Neil asked.
"I was thinking of Director of Policy," Marcia says, making up the title. “You know, researching issues, coming up with recommendations, that kind of thing."
"What kind of chance do you think you have?" Neil asked, as if it mattered.
"Ah, that’s a tough one. Obviously, I think I have a good chance or I wouldn't be doing it, but I can’t tell you it will be easy. Of course, Laura may make it easier, if things work out," she said vaguely.
"Well, I’d certainly like to talk more about this. It sounds interesting and I do have the time."
"That’s terrific," Marcia says enthusiastically. "I'll be in New York this weekend. Why don’t we meet? I want you to meet Sol Markowitz, my chief of staff. He’s the one you’ll be working most directly with. Neil, I really am excited about this."
"Your enthusiasm is catching, Marcia. I’m getting a little excited myself."
Sol groaned when Marcia told him.
"Aw, shit. What did you do that for? That’s all I need now, another hot shot New York lawyer who thinks he can run a campaign."
"Calm down. First, nothing is actually finalized. If you don’t like him, no. If you hate him, then we won’t do it. Second, we really do need someone to do policy research."
"We’ll hire someone."
"We could, of course, but why? When here is this newly retired, rich husband of Miss Nosey Parker Laura Bennett, willing to do it."
"Why's he so willing?"
"I guess he’s bored, maybe people aren’t returning his phone calls so promptly now. Who knows?"
"Really rich?"
"Really, really rich. That’s what Jake said."
"Rich as in might make a large contribution to the campaign and help raise money?"
"Might. If he were involved and turned on, might raise a lot of money."
"And sort of cements the friendly relationship with Laura Bennett, an insurance policy."
"Could be."
"Okay, you convinced me," Sol said. "Maybe it's not such a bad idea."
"One other thing, Sol," Marcia said.
"Yeah?"
"Laura is asking questions about how I got started in the market. You know, I made quite a bit of money several years ago."
"Yeah, so?" Sol had never questioned Marcia about her assets; there had been no reason to. Now that he thought about it, he wondered where she got the money.
"Well, it's bound to come up again."
"Come on, Marcia. What's the story?"
Was it possible, he thought, that she's done something wrong? As long as he had known her, she'd been a straight arrow. Careful about campaign contributions, about access, about anything that even smelled a little funny.
"Sol, this goes no further than you, okay?"
"You ever had a problem with that?"
"No."
"So then it goes without saying, right?"
Marcia nodded. "Jake Rubin loaned me money years ago, to help finance that first race."
"Jake Rubin? Our Jake Rubin?" Sol was genuinely surprised.
"Yes, our Jake Rubin."
Now it all made sense to him. Why she was so hot to go to Rubin in the first place. Sol was trying to figure the angles, to see if this could damage her in any way.
"Was there anything wrong about the loan?"
"No, of course not. We were friends at the time. He wanted to help out."
"So, what's the problem?"
"There is no problem. I just felt you should know. Laura is making a big deal out of this."
"Did you tell her Jake gave you the money?"
"No, I told her to ask Jake."
Something's wrong here. It is not like Marcia to fumble, to sound so unsure of herself, Sol thought.
"Look, Marcia, I don't get it. Guy makes you a loan, okay. The guy is married. I take it he was married?"
"Yes."
"So, it’s not great but not such a big deal either. Or is it?"

Sol had already computed the potential damage if this were to become public. Marcia wasn’t married at the time. It was long before Jerry. These days, Sol thought, an affair didn’t count for much, unless the guy left his wife and ten children or murdered her. Besides, it was a hell of a long time ago. "If that’s all there is to it," Sol said. "That is all there is to it ...."

"That’s all," Marcia said.
"Relax, Marcia. It may be a slight embarrassment, but I don’t see how it can hurt you."

Marcia knew she would feel relieved if she told Sol. But she didn’t. She couldn’t bring herself to tell him the whole story. She once had a compulsion for confession, but long ago, she learned to keep her mistakes and transgressions to herself.

Throughout her life, Marcia stockpiled her mistakes, like a hoarder of string, adding layer upon layer until the ball in her gut began to squeeze her vital parts. Her secrets were so entangled she feared a massive unraveling.

Marcia has moral myopia. She cannot distinguish between human failing, peccadilloes, and venality.

"As long as we’re talking," Sol said, "I have something I want to ask you."

"Sure."

Fuck it, Sol thought. He hated this, hated her for making him ask.

"Am I going to be campaign manager or not?" he asked bluntly.

Marcia had been expecting this; she tried to forestall it as long as she could. She had seen a few other candidates. One wasn’t interested, and she didn’t like the other two.

"Of course," she said.

"Well, people are asking. It’s getting to be that time."

"Well, of course you are," Marcia said. "We can put out an announcement anytime you want."

"Look, Marcia, this is the big one for you. If you have any doubts, if you want to look at some other people...."

"Don’t be silly, Sol."

If it were that simple, Sol knew, it would have happened already. He was relieved but he wished she were able to be more direct. It was insulting in a way, as if he couldn’t take it.

"Okay," he said, holding out his hand. "I’ll do you proud; we’re going to win this one."

Marcia shook his hand and then impulsively gave him a hug.
"And Marcia, about this Jake Rubin business: forget it. Really, it's no big deal. I may have a word with Laura myself. I'll handle it."

If only he could, Marcia thought. If only he could.

"So," Neil continued telling Laura, "she seems to be thrilled at the idea of my taking over as Director of Policy for her campaign. I'm meeting her and her chief of staff."

"Sol Markowitz?" Laura said. "I've had that pleasure."

"Meeting them this weekend sometime. Not here, though. Don't want to mix it up with what you're doing."

Now that Neil had called Marcia Baker, Laura regret having brought it up. It has the potential, she thought, for making things even more awkward than they were. Something's wrong here, Laura thought. She felt certain that Marcia Baker had an ulterior motive, may think it's a smart move to involve her husband in the campaign.

Neil seemed happy; at last he had something to look forward to. Laura did not want to rain on his parade, to spoil this respite from rejection he so badly needed.
"Lots of problems," Sol Markowitz said at a meeting of the Baker for Senate strategy group. He was distributing a report on the results of the focus groups they conducted recently on Roberta Hansen. Judy Parks, Director of Communications and Mike Caruso, Field Director, observed the groups through a one-way mirror, so they already knew what Sol was going to say. Marcia had been briefed, but she was waiting for a complete analysis. The campaign had these meetings once a week. This was in addition to the telephone calls every morning at 7am; invitations to those calls are regarded as a status symbol. Sol couldn’t figure out if these meetings were more useful for the morale of the Senior Staff or for the information delivered.

"It seems," Sol continued, "that the voting public loves Roberta, although I guess the good news is that they could not point to one single accomplishment that qualified her to be a Senator", Sol shook his head. God bless ‘em, the voting public are morons."

"That’s not the problem. They do love her, but we can change that. The question is how?" Judy Parks added as she rifled through some papers. "The real problem is that when we show the focus groups negative commercials on Roberta, just mild stuff, pointing out her lack of experience for a job as important as Senator, they resist. They just don’t want to hear it. They absorb it, they begin to waffle on whether they would vote for her, but, and this is the big thing, they are angry with you for telling them. Which means that if there is another candidate, and probably someone will get into this, he or she will benefit. It happens all the time. The candidate who is attacked loses. But the attacker doesn’t necessarily benefit."

"So, it means no direct hits?" Marcia asked.

"Not necessarily. We have to find the right hit, the thing that will not appear to be attacking their darling but will do the job," Sol replied.

"What do they like about her so much?" Mike asked.

"Mostly, they just feel comfortable with her. They feel as if they know her; about a quarter of them think she has accomplished good things. They can’t identify anything, just a general sense that she has done good. They also associate her with David. Somehow, that translates into Roberta deserving a break; she’s had such a hard time, dying husband, loyal wife, that sort of thing. The good news for us is that it is all touchy feely stuff. No one can point to anything she’s actually done."
"So, that’s the job: finding a way to persuade them Roberta hasn’t really done anything without attacking her," Sol said. "Shouldn’t be too hard. I mean she hasn’t done anything."

"Any chance there’s some bad stuff on her? Affairs? Was she faithful to David? Did she maybe play around a little?" Judy read from a list of questions she’d noted on a pad.

"I mean, she was a model. Surely there’s something in her past," Judy added.

"We’re working on it," Sol said. "I agree there’s bound to be something. The question is, what is it and how can we use it? I’m nervous about Marcia doing anything negative."

"Let’s focus for the moment on Marcia’s positives. Overwhelmingly, people think she is honest, independent, and a good legislator. Surprisingly, the parental consent doesn’t work against her. Those who agree think it’s great; those who don’t aren’t too bothered by it."

"Sounds good," Trish Marcus, said. Trish is the fundraiser.

It’s good, but there are problems," Sol said.

"What?" Marcia asked.

"You’re not perceived as a team player. Too much a loner. That’s where early endorsements will really help. Also, you don’t excite them. They see you as a bland hard worker but not charismatic, not a leader. And that is more difficult to overcome."

"Look," Trish said. "I know you’ve rejected this before, but I want to suggest again Monroe and Perkins.” Monroe and Perkins is a new media firm, known for their outrageously irreverent commercials. Last year they helped elect Joe Montagna, a freshman congressman from Texas, to the Senate. Joe’s opponent, Sol Garner, served as state attorney general for six years. Monroe and Perkins used that against him. "Another lawyer in the Senate,” the promo ran. "Is that what we need?" They then proceeded to do a series of radio spots, which started off with lawyer jokes. When Garner responded by saying, "I’m proud to be a lawyer," they used that against him.

Their client, who weighed 270 pounds and owned a couple thousand acres of ranch land, was also mocked. Shots of Montagna on his horse, supposedly herding cattle, were shown with a voiceover in Mr. Ed’s voice, "Elect Joe Montagna, and get him off my back."

It worked. People were laughing, delighted with the unconventional commercials. The more Garner tried to defend himself, although he wasn’t even sure what he was being vilified for, the more he sounded like a stuffed shirt.

That was their big win. They had also handled a couple of smaller races, using the same techniques, and won. Judy felt that they might just have an answer to
Marcia’s perception problem. But she had suggested it before, and no one was interested.

"Too dangerous," Mike said. "Much too dangerous." Maybe that stuff works in Texas but not in New York.

"We already discussed this," Sol said. "They’re clever, but I don’t think that works here. I don’t want Marcia held up to ridicule."

"It’s not ridicule. It’s just, well, and they’re funny. People like to laugh," Judy repeated.

"Not at their public officials, they don’t."

"Yes they do. People like to laugh with and at their public officials. That’s why Reagan’s self-deprecating humor was so effective. Can’t we just have them in, see what they say?" Judy asked.

"Because we probably won’t hire them, and I don’t like to give them information they can use elsewhere," Sol replied.

"Maybe we should think about this," Marcia said. "It looks like we need a real lift, something out of the ordinary."

"That we do," Sol agreed. "Okay, let’s see what these guys have to say. Let them make a presentation. We’re not going to win if we do same old, same old."

"Anybody want a fundraising report?" Trish asked nervously. She had taken on two other clients, one of them a Republican running for Congress. She had not yet told Sol. Although she was not paid for full time work, she knew Sol would be furious, especially because of her Republican client. She knew it wasn’t done, working both sides of the aisle, but she needed the money.

"It must be good or you wouldn’t be asking," Sol said.

"Well, there’s good news and bad news. The good news is, I’ve contacted ten of our top twenty-five donors, and they have all agreed to raise $100,000."

"That is good news," Sol said. "Good work, Trish. What’s the bad news?"

"The bad news is four of the most important women who have supported Marcia said they are waiting to see what happens."

"What exactly do they say?" Sol asked.

"Pretty much the same thing. Waiting to see what MEOW does, too early, want to see some poll numbers before they commit, and of course, the question of Roberta. There is a lot of hand wringing about two women slugging it out for the nomination."

"Goddamn it," Marcia said. "Would it help if I called them?"

"Maybe. Can’t hurt. It’s going to be a problem. You know as well as I do that if there is any excuse not to give, people use it. Roberta gives them that excuse."

"What about Wall Street?" Sol asked.
Marcia, who is on the banking committee, had been fund-raising on Wall Street for years. "Too early," Trish said. "I've taken some soundings and I think we'll do okay there. We'll walk Marcia around to a series of meetings, the usual breakfasts and lunches, and I think by the end of the campaign we'll pick up maybe a couple of million from the street."

Fundraising on Wall Street was a delicate art. The hypocrisy of the Traders and Bankers, who support candidates whom they think might be helpful to them and who can win, is legendary. Trish knew many of them couldn't stand Marcia personally. You'd never know it from the warm reception she received at meetings. "Be a lot more if she was on Ways and Means. But we have to broaden the base. We have to start thinking statewide," Trish added.

"We're setting up offices in a couple of cities: Albany, Rochester, and Buffalo. Truth is we don't have a lot going there yet, just a couple of core people. We'll have to make it look like a lot more than it is," Sol said.

"Roberta is going to be a stumbling block there too," Mike said. People are going to take their time signing on until they see how this plays out."

This is precisely what Marcia feared. At every turn, Roberta was thwarting her early efforts to get out ahead.

"I've already put it out that we would refuse the party's endorsement," Sol said," but the press ain't stupid. They want to know if we're saying that because we don't think we can get it."

"Why?" Marcia asked him. "What reason did you give for refusing the party's endorsement?"

"The usual. There all party hacks, don't want to be beholden to the party. You're independent, have your own idea of what needs to be done, might not be along party lines. That helps with independents in the general, lots of good bullshit reasons."

Marcia got the subtext; Sol did not think she would get their endorsement.

The Democratic Party would meet in April to officially endorse a candidate. It was all back room politics, without much impact on the ultimate outcome. The endorsement cut two ways. On the one hand it eliminated the need for a costly petition drive and showed the support of the party regulars. But that too is a problem. If Marcia was to be perceived as an independent candidate better she reject an endorsement she might not even get.

If Sol believed Marcia would get the endorsement, they would play it that way. His conversations with party bosses led him to fear she wouldn’t get it.

Sol and Mike had devised a messaging and field strategy that called for Marcia to eschew the Party endorsement, seeking a public referendum through a petition drive. That petition drive would be expensive, but if done properly
would serve a number of purposes, including raising Marcia’s statewide candidate profile.

"So tell them we are going the petition route no matter what. We believe in the people, in Marcia's ability to galvanize the public behind her candidacy, blah blah," Sol said.

"Sure, I'll tell them that. I do tell them that. They are not impressed," Mike said. "Also, they want to know if I am working for the campaign or for the congressional office."

"Shit, so soon?" Sol said.

It meant they would have to charge Mike’s time to the Senate campaign. "Don’t fool around with this. Start putting in bills for time spent on the campaign. The last thing we need is that kind of publicity," Sol said.

"When do we set up an office?" Trish asked.

"As late as possible. Not until April, if we can hold out that long," Sol said.

Sol was worried about every aspect of this race: money, bad publicity, lack of organization, the screw up that would go viral. There’s always one; he’d never seen a campaign without it. Where it would come from, what it would be, gave him heartburn. Mostly, he was worried about Roberta.

He had met with party leaders, taken their temperature. Most were cool to Marcia, waiting to see if her candidacy took off. They didn’t mind Roberta getting into this. There were several other candidates, all men, waiting to see what developed.

"We have one more problem," Judy said.

"What?" Marcia asked.

"Well, I got a call from a friend on the Wall Street Journal. They are preparing a story on Jerry."

"Jerry? My husband Jerry?" Marcia said.

"The same."

"What about?"

Conflict of interest, big time. Apparently, although he is President of Save the Earth and gave them a huge donation to get the Presidency, he forgot to tell them he was the single largest stockholder in some lumber company that the group opposes for indiscriminate deforestation. The reporter said there might be other conflicts, since he also owned oil stock and some other stuff, which the environmentalists are hysterical about. Now the question is, did he buy his position to influence the organization for the benefit of his business interests?"

"You're kidding? Jerry?" Marcia was stunned. Jerry had always been so high-minded about his environmental work, seemingly devoted to the cause.
"Don't you two talk?" Judy said. "He knows this story is breaking. He gave them an interview. Said his financial interests are separate from his involvement in Save the Earth."

"Shit," Sol said. "This is not good."

"Pardon me, Marcia, but rumor has it you're separated again?"

"Well, we are, sort of."

"Either way, it's no good. If she is separated, she's not standing by her man; if she isn't, she's tainted," Judy said.

"Tainted? I know nothing about his finances, absolutely nothing."

"He's contributed to your campaigns, made large loans, etc. right?"

"Well, yes. But he is my husband."

"And you have no idea how he makes his money?"

"No idea of his stock holdings."

"You file a joint return?"

"Yes."

"Well, there you are. Who is going to believe that you are ignorant of his business interests?"

"How the hell did they get onto this?" Marcia asked.

"Good question. My guy says a tip."

"A tip. From who?"

"He won't say. But, in the next breath, he tells me 'Your candidate doesn't have a lot of friends at MEOW, does she'?"

"You mean Maxine?"

"Who knows? Could be, or could be someone who wants to see Roberta get a leg up. Could be a lot of people."

"Well, we're going to have to think this one through carefully. Marcia has to have a statement ready. Something distancing herself but not abandoning Jerry," Sol said to Judy. "You better draft a couple of alternatives. This could get messy."

I will have to call Jerry, Marcia thought. How could he get himself into this mess? Damn, wasn't anything going to break her way?

"What the hell is going on with the oppo research on Roberta?" Judy asked.

"It's beginning to sound like we need all the help we can get."

"I'll know more tomorrow. I'm getting a report tonight," Sol said.

Sol is meeting Laura for drinks. "See her alone," Marcia suggested. "Just a hunch. She'll feel freer to talk."

"Suppose she doesn't have anything; what do I tell her, if anything?" Sol asked.

"It's up to you. Use your judgment. One thing, though, if there is anything, anything at all, let me know right away."
Suddenly Laura Bennett has become a player. Sol chuckled. Laura Bennett might just hold the key to Marcia's success.

Sol was eager to hear what Laura Bennett had to say. They met in the cocktail lounge of a small midtown hotel. It was 4pm, and they were the only customers. The bartender was polishing glasses; the floor was still damp from its recent cleaning. Sol got their drinks himself. They both ordered Campari and soda.

Laura had a full dossier on Roberta.

"I presume you're not interested in the routine stuff." Laura said. "The only unusual thing in her life before she started modeling is that she has deaf parents. Aside from that, she lived a perfectly ordinary life. Then, boom, she meets Martin Porak on a plane, Martin takes her under his wing, and soon she's modeling and making the rounds of talk shows. Her income shot up. In her top year, she made a million six. She was linked with a laundry list of men, film stars, bankers—you get the picture. But, I can't find anything remotely scandalous. Her career was waning when she met David Palmer. She gave up modeling, became quite active in MEOW and a couple of other women's groups Her finances were originally handled by Porak, very conservative, so while she accumulated some money of her own, it was negligible compared to what David left her."

"Men? Affairs? Nothing there at all?" Sol asked.

Laura made a face, and nodded her head. "No, actually, I couldn't find anything linking her to anyone for more than a few dates. To be sure, she went out. But it doesn't look as if she had any hot romances, not from the papers."

"So, nothing? Nothing at all?" Sol asked.

"Well, not so far. She pays her taxes on time, she donates any speaking fees to MEOW or other feminist groups, she is on the board of almost all the important feminist groups, she keeps her nose clean, hasn't dated since her husband died. For an icon, she lives a depressingly clean and boring life."

"What about the relationship with her stepdaughter, Joan? I heard there was trouble there," Sol said.

"Really? Well, no way to know that unless I speak to the kid. I can do that, on some pretext, if you like."

"Sure, give it a shot. Nothing too obvious, of course," Sol said.

"Sure. One thing, the stepdaughter didn't accompany her to that island to scatter David's ashes. Some columnist pointed that out. More in the spirit of Roberta wanting to say a solitary final farewell than any trouble between Joan and Roberta. But who knows?"

"Did you come across anything, well, anything at all that seemed out of place about David's death?"
"Out of place? Like what?"

Sol was conflicted. The report on Roberta was nothing He was disappointed. He didn’t want to tell Laura about Joan’s suspicions. He wanted Laura to uncover something, anything, herself.

"I’m not sure; I heard something about trouble between Roberta and David."
"Really? That doesn’t seem to fit with anything I’ve read. But I’ll do what I can to check it out."

“Good, but be discrete.”
"I’m paid to be discrete," Laura said.
"Sure, I didn’t mean anything by it."
"Which brings me to a delicate matter," Laura continued.

"Yes?"
"I was promised Marcia’s tax return for the five years prior to her election.”
"You got them."
"Not the schedules. I need the schedules if the analysis is to be complete.”
"The schedules?"

"Yes, the schedules, the backup material. Look, Sol, you know perfectly well I need the schedules. Is there any reason you're holding out on me?"
"Of course not. I thought you had everything you needed."
"Well, I don’t. I presume you know about the loan Jake made to Marcia?"
Sol chuckled. "Yeah, just found out about it. Look, it’s no big deal."
"Probably not. You’re not concerned about it?"
"Why should I be?"
"Well, if you’re not concerned, I’m not. But I do need those schedules."
"I'll see to it you get them first thing," Sol said.

What was Marcia screwing around for, he wondered. She’d managed to irritate this woman, to appear as if she dragging on providing these stupid schedules. She’s making it look as if there was really something wrong. What the fuck did she think she was doing?

"By the way, your husband seems to be taking to politics like a duck to water,” he said to Laura.

Laura smiled. "Yes, he does enjoy it."

"He’s doing important work. Frankly, I hadn’t realized myself how much we needed an issues person of his caliber until he showed us his first reports. Really excellent. It could be the difference between winning and losing."

Sol looked into Laura’s eyes to see if she was buying this bullshit.

"It does seem a good fit. He likes Marcia a lot. Says she is much smarter and more flexible than he had credited her with."

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Laura didn’t want to appear too eager. She was enormously relieved that Neil found this project interesting. He was working out of their apartment. Finally, the computer had been pressed into service. Neil had hired, at his own expense, a part time secretary to dictate his reports to.

Neil entered into this new responsibility with enthusiasm. Her old Neil had been resuscitated. She did not know what he really thought or felt about this last ditch reprieve. He had been pardoned or at least awarded a stay of execution and, like any prisoner, was grateful. Laura was afraid to delve too deeply into Neil’s emotional state. As she observed her husband slipping back into old routines, she saw his confidence begin to emerge. He was not yet on sure ground, just bobbing his head around as he struggled to get a clear picture of his new world. He graduated from crutches to a cane, less likely to take a header and crash to the floor. Before long, she hoped, he would find his sea legs, strutting once again on sure ground.

Laura had stopped talking to Neil about the details of her investigation. He was part of Marcia’s team now; she was not comfortable sharing these problems with him.

For the first time in many years, Laura wished she could have a child. Child as escape, she thought, as salvation. That was impossible; she was too old and, even if she were not, Neil would never agree. She should not have waited; she saw that now. She would end up with nothing, not a serious career, not a child. Just Neil.

Laura was stuck. She felt abandoned by the men in her life. Jake and Neil. It had all come around again, infidelity, betrayal. Perhaps, she thought, I should call Susan for some advice on how to deal with the other woman.

For that is how she saw Marcia Baker now. Not content with having had Jake, Marcia had now captivated her husband. As surely as if it were a sexual dalliance, Marcia had seduced Neil. She lured him to her side jingling promises of importance, of relevance. Maybe Jake could give her advice on how to thwart this hostile takeover of her marriage. Laura felt she could not compete in this bidding war. She was only his wife. For years she fine-tuned her strategy for breaking up Neil’s marriage, neutralizing his guilt with rational arguments. For support, she clipped articles about the unhealthiness of staying in an unhappy marriage, why it could kill you, with its systemic corrosion of the heart. After she won, she relaxed. She was now the majority stockholder.

She listened to Sol extolling her husband, thinking she should have been more alert.

"Laura," Sol said. "I really think you need to dig a little deeper into Roberta's life. Nobody is that pure. See what the stepdaughter has to say."
That’s that, he thought. If Joan repeated her story, which he now doubted she would, it wasn’t his fault. Laura would carry that water. He was not sure why he felt so bad; he hadn’t done anything wrong. All he did was give this lady a tip, but it’s up to her to follow it.

More people came into the lounge; there was a soft buzz of laughter and conversation. The piano player was tuning up. At exactly 5 p.m., the pianist turned to Sol and said, "I’m Lanny Fine, just Fine to you. Welcome to my house. If you would like to hear something special, just let me know."

Sol turned and noticed a huge brandy snifter on the piano, for tips. He envied this Lanny Fine, with his talent for making people feel good. Nothing devious about Lanny Fine, Lanny may be forgiven for the conspicuous dollars he had placed in the tip jar as an incentive.

Sol turned back to Laura. "Anything special you want to hear?" he said with a smile.

He was joking, of course, but Laura took him seriously. "Ask him to play 'Fly me to the Moon'," she said impulsively.

Sol, a little startled but oddly pleased, walked over to Lanny, slipped $5 in the tip jar, and delivered Laura's request. He added, "And then, if you don't mind, maybe a little 'Is That All There Is?'"

The music had lulled Sol and Laura into a place of companionable suspension. For a few moments, they lingered there, in a place of old dreams, romantic illusions.

As Lanny began the first strains of 'Is That All There Is', Sol gave himself over to the sweet sorrow that always accompanied the memories of his wife.

Laura reached out and touched him on the shoulder. Sol’s eyes glistened with tears as he lifted his head, acknowledging this small comfort.

In a hoarse whisper, he said, "Life sucks, sometimes."

Laura, released for a moment from the binding constraints of professionalism, moved closer to him and whispered back, "I know," she said, patting his shoulder. "It seems the law of life is loss."
Marcia

Marcia experienced an ominous sense of dread from the moment Laura began to ask her questions about her tax return.

The queasy feeling in her stomach developed into a knot, the tension in her shoulders radiated down her left arm. She frequently felt as if she had a low-grade fever, her head ached all the time. Several times a day she could feel her body heat rising, as if she was suddenly plunged into a sauna. Her body tingled; her face was flushed. Even her throat muscles seemed to tighten. Her voice, she noticed, had changed. She felt as if she were shouting but heard, in fact, only a strained, low tone, emanating from her twisted gut.

Marcia began sneaking cigarettes, a habit she gave up eight years ago.

She was sleeping badly, exhausted in the morning. She started to take Xanax at night. Her sleep was punctuated by abrupt waking spells, in which she had threatening dreams.

Marcia, like many solitary people, talked to herself. It was a way of distancing herself from the daily irritations and problems of her life. Her internal voice was at times consoling, at other times censorious and inquisitive.

Although in her youth Marcia tried to fit in, to adopt the mannerisms of her friends, copying their dress codes, their lifestyle, their language, there was something about her, she believed, that branded her an impostor. As she grew older, she abandoned the effort to be accepted. She saw it for what it was: a desperate attempt to disguise herself in the hope that no one would notice she was not one of them.

Despite constant self-examination, she never came to any conclusion as to why she was different. In middle age, bored with introspection, she integrated her loneliness into her life. Instead of denying it, or trying to change it, she assimilated the loneliness. It was like some non-life threatening medical condition, which had to be monitored, medicated, and tended to. She planned for loneliness. She loved movies and rented five or six on any evening she would be home alone. She never exposed herself to dining alone in restaurants but, instead, developed a simple repertoire of menus she enjoyed preparing and eating. She had her swimming and, of course, her work. A battalion of books stand ready on her night table; she always carried one or two with her in case she had to wait in line at the bank or at the doctor. Central to this discipline was planning. She did not allow herself to be taken unaware. If her loneliness was not quite a friend, neither was it an enemy.
In this way, she thrived for many years. Of course, she had friends, dinner dates, romances. At times, the loneliness seemed to be in remission. However, it never lasted. It was almost a relief to note the symptoms emerging again. She knew better than to wait for a full-blown case. She immediately began the protocol, which she hoped would keep it in check.

The years with Jake were the only time in her life she was completely symptom free. She felt a part of life in ways she had only observed before. Loving Jake, being loved by him, gave her a kind of instant access to conformity, liberating her to adopt the mundane. Before Jake, she insisted on the eccentric, the idiosyncratic. Before Jake, she made a virtue of her inability to conform.

With Jake in her life, she saw the good sense of buying classic clothes instead of the faddish garb to which she is partial. Assured of love, his love, she shed her self-consciousness, became easy with clients and friends.

With Jake at her elbow, she no longer entered life by the back door.

She hated that Jake had meant so much. Or was it Jake? Or was it that she had been chosen at last? Even if it did not last, wasn’t it that what she craved? To be selected, plucked out of the crowd?

When Jake left, she struggled to hold on to her new persona. She suffered, as women do, the end of the affair with a combination of grief and rage, despair and scorn.

When Jake left, he took with him the last hope she had for obliterating her loneliness. She

Determined to keep up appearances, she took long walks in her new Ann Taylor suit, treated herself to dinner at Chanterelle. I'll be alright, she told herself. Time was what's needed here.

No more than I deserve, she thought. Just what did you think the end of this would be? Angry too at Jake with his casual promise of forevermore.

She resolved to move forward not to fall back into bad habits. Proficient in loneliness, she was now challenged to perfect that skill. She knew the basics, the rudimentary art of managing it. Now she had to make the big move, to conquer it once and for all.

A political career seemed to Marcia to offer the best hope for a new life. She liked everything about it, the struggle to get elected, the prospect of helping to change society once in office. The struggle appealed to her because she knew it would occupy all her time. She looked forward to a new cast in her life, people who did not know her as a misfit. People who would accept her on her own terms, terms she carefully crafted in the lonely nights alone.

By the time she met Jake at Peter's for lunch to ask him for the money, she had converted her despair into an almost manic fervor for running for office. Her
background appealed to a variety of political power players, her zeal persuaded them she would be a good candidate. All that was missing was the money.

When Jake called with his loan of $50,000 worth of stock she concealed her disappointment. It was not nearly enough. They told her she had to come up with at least $500,000 in startup money, which is why Marcia Baker, whose professional life was dedicated to upholding the law, broke the rules.

In the months before he left her, Jake had been regaling Marcia with humorous stories about a company, PRC, of which he was a Board member. Although she didn’t pay close attention, she remembered Jake clearly telling her that the company, which wasn’t in his opinion worth much, was going to release a new web page, which, he told her laughing, they thought would make their stock go through the roof. “It’s all I can do not to crack up at the Board meetings,” he said laughing, “the friggin stock is worth about three bucks, and this genius PR guy thinks a new web page will make all the difference—what a jerk.”

She would never have thought of it again, except she saw in the paper a small story that PRC was doing better, earnings were up. She remembered then that Jake had told her about this company, something about the possibility that it would go through the roof. He was very negative about it, disparaging. But still, she thought, if it worked, if whatever it was worked, she would have enough money. She wished she had listened more closely, better understood what he was talking about. Worried that she would lose it all, she was desperate. Later, she thought she remembered only what she wanted to remember, that Jake said it might make someone a fortune. She had forgotten, or perhaps she admitted suppressed, that he also said, it more likely would end in ruin.

She had never had a brokerage account. She called a discount broker who advertised on TV and bought 7000 shares of PRC at $3.00 and another 7,000 at $4.00. She used all her savings and sold the stock Jake had transferred to her.

She waited, for two weeks there was no change. Then, suddenly she noticed a story about PRC being the most active stock of the day, after announcing their new web page and some decent earnings. Some hedge fund was buying, then some others bought in and the stock, this loser stock that Jake found so absurd, rose in the following two weeks to over $22.00 a share.

Marcia held on. She finally sold when the stock hit $30.00 a share. She had made a profit of over $400,00 in two weeks. She did a little jig for joy, wished she could have shared this brilliant windfall with someone, with Jake. Took herself out for a very expensive dinner, drank too much wine, just made it home in time to throw up.
It was not until much later that the fact that she had profited from insider information hit home.

She had followed the investigations and trials of those hapless men charged with insider trading with a cheerful fascination. Now she wondered, was she like them? She loathed everything they stood for, the greed, the cavalier attitude towards law, rules and ethics.

By that time, she was in the Congress. She had already, even in her freshman term, proposed legislation that would help speed emergency food to any woman who showed up with a child at a social service center. She argued that the mere presence of a woman who claimed to have a hungry child is enough to cause the state to feed that child. The cost to the city or state was negligible; it passed as an amendment to a larger tax bill.

As the story of corruption on Wall Street unfolded, Marcia tried to reconstruct what she had been thinking at the time she bought PRC. She remembered she felt no fear; she did not feel she was doing anything wrong. She was nervous because she was not sure, not having seen Jake for a few months that the plans were still on course. She was appalled at the risk she had taken. It was, she realized, her very naiveté that catapulted her into these ill-gotten gains. if she had known anything at all about the market, she would never have taken such a chance.

After she sold PRC, she opened an account with a small investment adviser, giving him complete discretion. She wanted nothing more to do with investments. She did not question her broker’s advice, although she was pleased her account did well. In fact, her account did remarkably well. She spent little and reinvested her profits.

When she began to get serious with Jerry, she asked him to look at her brokerage account. He suggested some other investments, real estate, and options. She turned it over to him. He tripled her money.

She met Jerry two years after Jake left her. He suggested some other investments, real estate, and options. She turned it over to him. He tripled her money. At first, at least, he seemed to cherish every move she made. He was free of course to take her out everywhere, and for a while that was what they did. Opening nights, first class restaurants, the best parties. It was the whirlwind Marcia had always dreamed of and Jerry provided it to her and then some. In bed, well, in bed he was okay. In a way, she thought technically he was better than Jake.
Sometimes, she lay in his arms and believed she loved him. Why not love this adoring man who took her to the best places? No hiding with Jerry. He was proud of her, wanted to show her off. Jake was gone and Jerry warmed her bed and bought her champagne and called a dozen times a day and sent flowers and, well, a lot of other good things. So she married him. She never told him about the quick bundle she made in the market, she never told him she didn’t like to have her breasts sucked so hard, and she never told him about Jake.

The marriage failed; it failed almost from the first day. All too quickly the very excesses that Jerry provided became distasteful. Once they were married, it was as if she saw right through him. He provided the goodies in an attempt to satiate her, to fill her up so she would never be hungry or thirsty again. She began to see it as repellant, controlling, a way to keep her on the farm. She was gorging on his goodies, feeling stuffed, overdosed, losing her edge, losing her grip, her pizzazz. She asked him to stop; he took it as a sign she wanted more.

It didn’t last long, this mismatched marriage. She, ambitious, unwilling to cede even a little control, and Jerry, believing he had been betrayed by this calculating woman, felt foolish, hadn’t he given her everything?

They had never had much to talk about, neither of them really wanted intimacy, certainly not Marcia, who had had her fill of intimacy with Jake and where did that land her? So, they separated, barely two years after they married.

During her first reelection campaign, she worried that something might come out about her investment in PRC. Her profits from that investment were clearly shown in her tax return. She never released that return; no one pressed her for it. Until Laura Bennett began to ask questions, Marcia believed the episode was closed.

Now that Laura Bennett was hot on her trail, dogged in her determination to uncover where Marcia had gotten that first large influx of money, Marcia was frightened.

Marcia knew how it would look if it ever came out that she made money off a stock about which she had inside information. Her career would be ruined; she might be liable for criminal charges.

The link, of course, was Jake. She had served him up on a platter to the prying forager at lunch. Why? What had possessed her to do the one thing that might eventually expose her? Panic, she supposed. She was completely unprepared for Laura’s insistence on knowing where she got the loan to finance her first campaign.

Laura worked for her, for God’s sake. She was not accustomed to being cross-examined by her staff. She wanted Jake to deal with this earnest young snoop. That was really all she meant when she told Laura to talk to Jake. Let Jake tell
Laura Bennett to back off. How could she have overlooked the more significant fact that it was Jake who loaned her the money? Of course Jake did not know of her subsequent investment in PRC.

She was frightened all the time, now. Frightened she would be exposed, frightened of Jake's reaction. She saw that she could lose everything.

Sol told her flat out to get her accountant, Marty Engle, to release the schedules for her tax returns to Laura Bennett. She had postponed it as long as she could, but she knew that she could not defer that day much longer.

Taking herself in hand, she decided she had to tell Jake first. If she explained it properly, the way it happened, he might understand, might not be angry. She finally called Jake and invited him for a drink. She could hear the surprise in his voice, almost a purring, he probably saw this, she thought, as a vindication of himself and the end of the affair.

"Oh," he would say. "Well, of course you shouldn't have done that, but I certainly can see why you did, and really it's a minor matter, and I'll never forgive myself for letting you down and I still love you, never stopped loving you. So stop worrying, you silly old thing. I'll take care of everything.

"Well, of course you shouldn't have done that, but I certainly can see why you did, and really it's a minor matter and I'll never forgive myself for letting you down and I still love you, never stopped loving you."

She unlocked the terrace door, cracked some ice, and arranged the flowers she bought in a vase. She debated changing clothes but decided the suit she was wearing was as good as anything else. This was a business meeting, she kept reminding herself. She wondered how any meeting with Jake could be just a business meeting. Wasn't there always another agenda?

"Very nice," Jake said, as he strolled around the living room. "Really, very nice."

A grand piano dominated one corner of the large room. A state-of-the-art music system, gleaming in black and chrome, lined one wall. An oversized teak cocktail table held flowers artfully arranged in a glazed pottery vase alongside copies of The New Yorker and National Geographic.

A sideboard along another wall displayed framed pictures with scribbled autographs of Marcia with a variety of public officials.

Black and white framed photos asymmetrically covered several walls. One Mexican tapestry took up almost all the space on the wall behind him. Everything in good taste, Jake thought. However, something about the apartment reminded Jake of a set, as if this were a replica of a home instead of the real thing.
"Some difference from...." He did not finish the sentence.
"Well," Marcia said, "it was time to grow up. I loved the walk up, but I love this too, especially the terrace at night. If it isn't too cloudy, or the smog isn't too bad, you can see some stars. Not too many, but some."
"Drink?" she asked him.
"A light one," he said. "I've only got an hour". He didn't explain why. Why should he?
"The usual?" she asked.
"Gin, diluted with anything you've got."
She fixed the drinks, a stiffer one for her. She tossed some macadamia nuts into a dish and put it on the drinks tray. She splashed another measure of gin into Jake's glass at the last minute. Better, she thought to take edge off. She handed Jake his drink; he was settled into a corner of the curved green leather couch.
He took a sip of his drink, plucked a couple of nuts from the dish.
"Shouldn't eat these," he said tossing one into his mouth, "but I never could resist macadamia nuts.
It might have been a first date, Marcia thought, or for that matter, a last date they were so awkward with each other.
What if she slipped off her jacket? She was only wearing a lace camisole underneath. Slipped off her jacket, sidled over to him. Loosened his tie, touched his cheek. Would he react? Did he really have only an hour?
She could do that; she could even bear it if he did not react. He would have to say something, something phony, but consoling about why they shouldn't do this.
Or perhaps he would respond. Draw her to him, fold her into him, say, "Sweetheart, it's been too long, I'll never let you go again."
Her bed had fresh sheets; she imagined him lying there, propped on a pillow, admiring her as she shed her clothes. A copy of O'Neill's Long Days Journey into Night was on her nightstand. She had been thumbing through it a few nights before. He would be impressed.
Then, after, she would tell him.
"So, what did you want to see me about?" Jake asked her.
"I'm a little concerned about something," Marcia said.
"What?" Now Jake was curious, he rarely saw Marcia as vulnerable.
It was going to be now, Marcia thought. Right now, she would have to confess. To tell him. Extraordinary really, she thought, this tingling in her body. She knew it was the adrenaline preparing her body for the danger.
"You remember when you gave me the stock, so I could run that first campaign?"
"Of course, I remember.” He was slightly annoyed.
"It wasn’t enough," she said. She had not meant to say it that way, as if it were his fault.
"I’m sorry. It is all I could manage at the time,” he said a little too sharply. “I gather you got the rest of the money elsewhere. Is that what this is about? Why you’ve been so mysterious with Laura? She’s only doing her job, you know,” Jakes said. He was annoyed.

He thought he got it now. Marcia had taken money from somebody else. Another lover? That's why she was so worried? After making him feel so guilty, like a rotter, all the time she had another lover?
"I invested the money you gave me," she said.
She could see he did not understand. She was going to have to spell it out.
"Invested it? You didn’t get money from, er, someone else?
"No, there was no one else. I invested it, and I made a killing. "Refill?" she asked, holding out her hand for his glass.
"Sure, but easy on the gin.”
"Well, good for you.” He said. I never had much luck with investments.

Of course there had not been anyone else, Jake thought. He was glad, relieved. He wanted their affair to have been what it appeared to be. Even after all these years, that was still important. So much had turned out not to be what it seemed. The shifting realities of life made his head swim. Even Jake, who was expert at steering the wheel on dangerous curves, holding firm on a sudden ice slick, suffered whiplash on occasion.

Marcia returned from refreshing their drinks. As she handed him his glass, she said, "Jake, I invested the money in PRC."

For a moment, he was simply perplexed. So, she made a killing in PRC, a lot of people did. Then, it dawned on him. PRC, how the hell would she know to buy PRC, except that he must have said something?
"When? Exactly when did you buy PRC?"
"A week before the tender offer."
Jake put his glass down carefully on the National Geographic.
"What are you telling me?” he said.
"I invested in PRC a week before the news broke. I used the stock you gave me, borrowed a little more, and bought all I could. When it shot up, I sold."
"Are you serious?” he asked, although he could think of no reason she would make this up.
"I'm afraid so. I didn't realize, I didn't think at the time that I was doing anything so wrong.

"You didn't know it was wrong?" he asked incredulously. "You're a lawyer, but you didn't know it was wrong? Terrific, I'm sure the jury will take that into account."

"I know you must be upset, but don't go overboard. There isn't going to be any jury."

"Really? In this climate? You think if this comes out that the U.S. Attorney will simply overlook it? Because you didn't know it was wrong?"

Jake took another sip of his drink. "There could be serious problems for me, too, if it appeared that you bought the stock on information I gave you. Even the suggestion that he might have been involved in insider trading, and he would never get an appointment to the bench.

Marcia was silent.

"Let me tell you what will happen if it ever comes out that we were lovers at the time you bought PRC. The best, the absolute best that will happen, is that I will be asked to leave the firm. That's the good news. I may be liable, as you will, for criminal charges. And no one, no one, will believe I had no involvement. That I didn't know, never dreamed that my bohemian girlfriend would suddenly convert and become an instant capitalist. Quite simply, Marcia, you may well have ruined my career as well as your own."

"It isn't going to come out. That's why I am telling you Jake, so we can figure out a way to protect ourselves."

"Too late. Laura already knows I loaned you money. She already infers from that we had an affair. The minute it is disclosed you bought PRC, a company with which I am still identified, still a Board member, she will immediately realize I must have given you a tip. The jig, as they say, is up. Too late, Marcia."

"No," she said again. "You've got to control her. She works for you, for God's sake."

He thought about this. Is it possible? Could he somehow get Laura to back off? Even so, that wouldn't stop others from uncovering the trail that led to him.

"I have to think this through. Suppose Laura does back off. If you run, others will begin to look into your newfound wealth, just as she did."

"The only link is you," she said. "I never should have told her to talk to you. I'm sorry about that."

"Shit. You didn't think. Why wouldn't I tell her the truth? I didn't know what it could lead to. So it is a little embarrassing, but I had no way of knowing."
"Right, you're right. I should have said I got the money from someone else, from an inheritance, from a friend. I didn’t think; I just thought you would take care of it."

"Why? Why did you do it?"

"Because I needed the money. God, you're still so smug. I remember the look on your face when I asked you for money. I touched a nerve, all right. The nerve of me, asking you for money. Never mind that after all your promises you simply left me with barely an explanation. Never mind that you knew, you knew, I had nothing. I never asked you for a dime, and I was careful to shield you from my money worries, afraid, maybe, that you wouldn’t react well. Have you any idea how broke I really was that year? Even the meals I prepared for you, nothing to you, ate into my meager earnings. I remember once asking you what you wanted for dinner. You said, ‘Honey, I feel like steak. Get some really good steaks, butcher steaks.’ They cost me $52.00. My food budget for the whole week then was $80.00. Did I say a word? No, I gave you steak and endive salad and strawberries with cream. I thought about asking you for the money. But how could I? You knew I went through terrible fallow periods, when clients couldn’t pay, when cases dragged on.

So then, finally, when there is a good reason and I worked up the nerve to ask, you sat there, telling me how tough it would be, how Pat couldn’t know, how it was a lot of money I was asking for. You think I didn’t know how much you were worth, even then? I’m not saying you owed it to me, but it wasn’t all that much to you. Was it?"

Jake stared at her. No, he thought, it really was not all that much to me.

"Why didn’t you tell me it was not enough?"

"You must be kidding. After your reaction, I felt lucky to get anything. There wasn’t anything else to say. I was this woman you said you loved. You told me; you said I was the love of your life. And all you could spare was some stock you would never miss."

"So, you decided to break the law."

"No, it wasn’t like that. I was racking my brain for a way to get some more money. I had everything else set up, but I needed more money. I didn’t think about the implications of insider trading. In fact, I was worried that I would lose the money. I was a wreck until the announcement. It seemed to me to be a gamble, not a sure thing. A gamble I was risking because it was the only way I could think of, besides going to Vegas, to make enough to launch the campaign."

"Ironic, I must say. You, of all people, the incorruptible Marcia Baker. Well, whatever your reason, your judgment stinks. Look, Marcia, you've got to drop out. You said you would.
"I know what I said."
"Well?"
"No."
"No?"
"Fix it."
"I don’t think it can be fixed."
"I do. The only thing linking me to you is Laura. She is the only one who knows. She’s constrained under attorney/client privilege. Just call her off."
"Marcia, drop out."
"No. At least try. She is the only link. Even if I release my schedules eventually, and it emerges I bought PRC, without the link to you, it’s just a lucky pick. Some broker, whose name I don’t remember suggested it. Or I had a hunch. Nobody will ever put it together. Not without Laura."
Jake checked his watch. He was already late for his dinner appointment.
"I think you should drop out. It’s the only really safe thing to do."
"I don’t play it safe, Jake."
Jake stood to leave. He did not recognize this woman who was once his lover. He needed to think this through. Maybe there was a way out. However, he knew, too, that he would never feel completely safe again. He had seen clients who had to live with the dread of exposure, seen them blanch as he delivered some minor piece of bad news, heard the fear in their voices when he called, even with an innocuous update.
He did not want to live like that. Always waiting, anticipating the call that would ruin his reputation. Scanning the papers for any hint that the story might break. That threat of exposure alarmed him, but he knew he would learn to live with it if he had to.
What he would never recover from, he thought, was the sense that he was vulnerable at any moment to some erratic act that would forever alter his life.
He had been wrong about life. He had practiced the fine art of manipulation and exploitation in the sure knowledge that it was all he needed. He fought the wars on his turf. He did not engage in hand-to-hand combat. He had people around to cover his rear, as he lined up targets through his telescopic scope—the finest money could buy.
It never occurred to him that all the time, he too, was framed in the crosshair of a trigger-happy deity.
Chapter 20

"Sol, I think I've got something," Laura said to him, whispering on the phone. She could hardly control her excitement.

"We'd better meet. Can you come over this morning, and I'll ask Jake to sit in?"

"What is it?" Sol asked.
"Say 10:00, can you make it at 10:00?"
"For Christ's sake, what is it?"
"Not on the phone."
"Should I bring Marcia?"

Laura thought about this. "It's not necessary. In fact, it might be better if you didn't."

Damn the woman, had she actually found out something? "All right, I'll be there at 10:00," Sol said.

Laura briefed Jake before the meeting.

"Shit," Jake said. "Do you think this is reliable? It's pretty serious; I mean it's really serious."

"You think I don't know that. Believe me; I know. As soon as we get the go ahead from Sol, I want to put more people on this. We need more interviews. But I don't want to go ahead until they tell us to." She is confident that Sol will tell her full speed ahead. Laura is on a high. She thought she found the smoking gun. She could hardly sleep last night for thinking about what this might do for her career.

Sol was waiting in the conference room, helping himself to coffee and Danish, when Jake and Laura entered.

"Well, what have you found out," Sol asked, biting into a prune Danish.

"Maybe nothing. But maybe," Laura said, holding up her hand to quiet Jake, "but maybe something. Let me tell this my way."

She knows, Sol thought. He tried to calm himself; he knew he must appear surprised.

"Based on what you said about the toxic relationship Joan had with Roberta, I spoke with Joan." Laura picked up her notes.

"Really? Who did you tell her you were?" Sol asked.

"I just said I was doing some research. She had a remarkable story to tell, unconfirmed, of course, but remarkable."

Sol tuned out. He was trying to decide how to handle it.
Laura related Joan's story pretty much the way Joan told it to Marcia. For a moment, Sol was concerned maybe Joan mentioned she talked to Marcia, but Laura did not refer to it, so he assumed Joan had not said anything.

Jake sat silently throughout Laura's presentation. He was worried; with this ammunition, Marcia would never drop out. He was trying to figure how to react, what to do. He thought this Palmer kid’s story was ludicrous. God, he hated politics. As soon as this was over, he would never take on another candidate. No matter if he got the judgeship or not, no matter what the firm demanded. He would dissolve the unit. They could get somebody else to do their dirty work.

"So," Laura said, at the end of her report on her interview with Joan, "the question is where do we go with this? It's dynamite. I don't have to tell you that."

"What was your impression of Joan?" Sol asked.

"Neurotic but not crazy. She believed what she was saying, which didn’t mean it had any validity. But she sure did believe it. She’s a sad kid. I felt sorry for her. She thought the world of Marcia, by the way. Talked about how much she enjoyed working with her."

"Any chance she made this up because she thought it would help Marcia?" Jake asked.

"I don’t think so. As I said, it may be all wrong, but she definitely believes it. That much you can count on."

"There's more," Laura said. "Joan made such a thing about her father's cremation, how rushed it was, how he wouldn’t have wanted it. I decided to see what I could find out at the funeral parlor. First thing, it was kind of out of the way, not the kind of major place you’d expect David Palmer to be taken. I talked with the Funeral Director Paul Serkin. I chatted him up a bit, said I was a lawyer who had just talked to Joan Palmer. Didn’t say I represented her or anything, and he didn’t ask. I asked him if he remembered when David Palmer was brought in. He said he, and I'm quoting, 'Sure do.' So I asked him if there was anything unusual about it. He got kind of cagy, nervous. Asked me what I meant by that. I said, 'Nothing really, just was there anything that stuck out in his mind about it. I was still thinking about the cremation part. Then he said, 'Well, nothing except of course he was another of Dr. Fallow’s patients.' I asked him what he meant by that, but he clammed up. Totally. Said he was busy and I had to leave. Naturally, as soon as I got back at the office, I googled Fallows. And guess what?"

"What?" Sol asked.

"Fallows, who unfortunately died last month, had something of a reputation for being the doctor in attendance at the deaths of three men, one of them a
well-known movie star, who died under somewhat suspicious circumstances. In all three cases, he was not their regular doctor, never treated them before, and was alone with them with only one family member at the time of death. All three men died of complications of some kind of cancer. The reason the story surfaced is that some group called Against God’s Will accused him of being involved in assisted suicides. There were three small articles about a year ago, but no investigation was ever undertaken. He was over eighty when he died, apparently of a heart attack at home.”

"What the hell does it mean?" Sol asked.

"I don’t know. I wanted to tell you all this before I went further. So," Laura said to Sol, "you have to tell me. I assume you want me to pursue this?"

"How would you do that?" Sol asked.

"Talk to more people. I would like to talk to servants, friends, anybody who could shed some light on Joan’s theory. If David Palmer was having an affair, it was certainly possible that we could uncover that. I’d look further at the order for cremation. See if there really was a document from Palmer. Joan said she never saw it, just heard about it from the lawyer. Of course, Roberta inherited a fortune. Joan got a lot, but it is a trust. Roberta was the trustee. She did seem bitter about that, but who wouldn’t be? Did Roberta know the terms of the will?

Of course, we have to try to find out why Fallows was called in. It may be that only Roberta knew. But it did look peculiar as hell. I’m not sure what all this does for you, but it’s not a bad start."

It did plenty, Sol thought. Or it could do plenty with the kind of intimation and innuendo a good tabloid reporter could bring to it. Plenty. He didn’t want Laura Bennett, this eager beaver novice, doing any more. Now that he knew Joan would talk about this, apparently to anyone who asked, it was enough. The last thing he needed is a Baker campaign fingerprint on this story.

"I think you should drop it," Sol said.

"Really?" Jake came to life at last. “Why?"

"I just don’t like it. It’s, well, in a way, it’s too crazy. I don’t want anyone to ever be able to trace this back to us."

"So you won’t use it?" Jake asked.

"Never. I mean that, I’d never use this. I mean what is it? The unsubstantiated word of a neurotic kid? There’s no way to prove anything. Even if Palmer was screwing around, what does it prove? No, just drop it."

Laura was furious. She was bitterly disappointed. She thought she did some good work here, getting the girl to trust her, delivering this bombshell to the client.
“Come on, Sol, drop it? This could be "IT." Even what we have now could make Roberta think twice about running. Drop it? Just like that? This is good info, maybe not completely verifiable yet, but frankly it feels right to me.”

“It doesn’t feel right to me,” Sol said. “It feels like a story that will backfire on Marcia. We put this out or leak it and bang, there’s some perfectly reasonable explanation and Marcia is toast.”

“Well, okay,” Laura said with a sigh. “It’s up to you. But I think you are dead wrong here. You’re missing a bet, a good bet that might just end Roberta’s political ambitions.

You want me to continue digging into Roberta’s life?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Sol replied, “I think we’ve gone as far as we can. She’s basically clean. We’ll have to live with that.”

"Suits us," Jake said. He’d never relinquished a task with such pleasure.

“You did a great job, Laura,” Sol said.

“Apparently all for nothing” Laura replied. “Now, about Marcia’s tax schedules.”

"You mean she still hasn’t delivered them?” Sol asked.

"It’s okay. I had a word with her. I’ll talk to you about this a little later,” Jake said to Laura.

Sol shook his head. Boy, oh boy, maybe something really was wrong with those schedules. He shelved this worry for later. Right now, he wanted to get to a phone. He needed to run his plan by Marcia, although he knew she would agree. Then he needed to have a frank talk with Judy Parks, their communication’s person.

As Sol closed the door behind him, Laura said coldly to Jake, "Well, what’s the story with the schedules?"

"The story is there isn’t going to be any disclosure of the schedules," he said, matching her cold tone.

"Cover up?" Laura said.

"No. Not a cover up. It’s not necessary. That return was filed before she entered public life." "Cover up," Laura said again.

"Laura, just drop it. Will you?"

"I don’t know if I can do that, Jake. I really don’t know what to do. You’ve placed me in an awkward position. Obviously you had, or still have for all I know, a personal relationship with Marcia Baker."

"Even if it were true, it’s none of your business."
"But you made it my business. By concealing it, the relationship and the loan, or gift or whatever it was, you unfortunately made it my business. I think you ought to make a disclosure to the firm."

"For Christ’s sake, what for?"

"If there's no problem, then why not just do it?"

"Because it’s not necessary."

"Well, if you won't, I think maybe I should. Maybe I should just take this to Morris." Morris Marsh is the senior partner of the firm. "I haven't up to now because I don't want to embarrass you. But now I'm out of my depth. What's in those schedules that is so troublesome?"

"Who said there is anything 'troublesome' in them?" Jake asked.

"There must be. And furthermore, I think you know it. Whatever it is, I think you not only know it but also have some involvement. What else can I think?"

"You can think that I know what I’m doing, for the protection of the client, for your protection."

"Bullshit, for your protection, you mean," Laura said heatedly.

"Laura, just drop it, please. Drop it," Jake pleaded.

"No, I won't just drop it. You want to fire me? Go ahead. Fire me. Right now. I'd welcome it. Neil was right; I shouldn't have come back here."

Laura was furious, close to tears. She was willing to forgive Jake for not telling her he had known Marcia Baker, for keeping the fact of his loan from her. She can see how it might have been hard for him to tell her, especially her. But now this. It clearly wasn't over with Jake and Marcia Baker. Maybe it had never ended at all.

Laura had been delighted when Jake asked her to come back to the firm to work with him. For once in her life, the timing was perfect. She saw it as a way to escape the depressing atmosphere at home. Disillusioned with her marriage, disappointed in Neil.

All the years of waiting for Neil were a waste. She was trapped on all fronts now, with her morose husband, her lying boss, her cowardly client.

She hoped she could talk to Jake about all of this as she used to. Jake would give her good advice, comfort her. Flirt with her too, as he used to. Jake always made her feel better, desirable, and strong. She counted on that.

All she had wanted was to reestablish her balance, to use Jake for ballast, a countervailing weight for her sinking marriage.

Instead, Jake let her down. Too bad about Jake, she thought, her old friend, her fantasy suitor.
Everything had turned sour: her marriage, the job, Jake. Outflanked by her losses, her position was perilous. At home, and now at work, she felt herself to be in enemy territory. She had to watch her every move. One false step and she could be blown to bits by a stray bullet. She knew that others were injured. However, her wounds were starting to seem fatal. She’s too busy stanching the flow of her own despair to care much about other fallen warriors.

They stood there, these two old friends, unable to find their way back. Not even their shared history was enough to heal this rupture. Jake felt sick with anxiety, with the fear of exposure. He had no doubt that if Marcia did not abandon her candidacy, her stock purchase would come out. Then, anything linking him to Marcia would be fatal. Laura was that link. Laura, unaware of the peril her old friend faced, was stubborn.

"Jake," she said in a calm and sympathetic voice, "can't you tell me what’s going on? Just tell me the truth."

Jake knew all about truth. For years, he and Neil had manipulated the truth, massaged it, and manipulated it to fit the picture they framed. Truth? Numbers, cash flow, productivity, bottom line, assets: all of it was malleable, capable of being molded into their truth, for the right deal. There was nothing he liked better in those days than the challenge of putting the deal together. Nothing got in their way, certainly not the truth, or the facts. Nothing was illegal; they were not unethical or corrupt, not according to their own standards, which was all that mattered.

For years he sat across highly polished mahogany conference tables in well-appointed offices, facing CEOs who didn’t want to sell, union officials who threatened to strike, greedy buyers who thought they had a sweet deal. Piles of papers, reams of profit and loss statements, contracts, facts and truths by the yard, were the raw material of his work. He and Neil provided the analysis, the answers, and the bravado. He smiled even now thinking about their boldness, the bluffs, the deals put together on nothing more than a creative reorganization of existing facts. Corporate gymnasts, he and Neil, springing off the mats, doing double, triple twists in mid air, leaving the crowd gasping while executing intricate, perfectly timed maneuvers. And it was he, Jake, who was the catcher. Jake provided the counterweight, the stability for Neil, the wild man, who would not take no for an answer—ever.

Now Neil’s wife, who was not unfamiliar with scheming and lying herself, wanted the truth. Jake almost laughed in her face. Married to Neil Bennett and she still believed in truth. Neil could tell her there was no truth. There was point of view, perspective, and angle; it was the slant, the spin that mattered.
"Laura, I am telling you the truth," he protested. "The client wants this stopped. That's all there is to it. Plain and simple."

"If the client weren't Marcia Baker, would you be so understanding?"

"Yes, I would. It's not for us to determine how far we go. It's up to the client."

Laura wanted to believe him. She wanted, she needed, to preserve their friendship.

"All right, Jake. All right, you win."

"About the other thing, the money I loaned Marcia. I am sorry, I should have told you. To be honest, I had forgotten it. It wasn't important now or at the time. But you're right. It could be embarrassing. I would prefer you not say anything to anyone."

Something in his tone set her off again. Suddenly, she knew, she knew with certainty that there was more to this. She could see it in his eyes, in the way he was looking at her.

"Let me think about it, Jake."

"Sure, I know you wouldn't want to do anything to hurt me."

He wanted to plead with her, to tell her she had it in her power to save him from ruin. For a moment, he panicked, afraid he might actually say the things he was thinking, that he'd done a lot of good, helped many people, that he didn't deserve to go down for this, he hadn't done anything wrong. Even a hint of his possible involvement in insider trader would ruin him. The judgeship would be gone, maybe his career, too. At best, if it could not be proven, if he was technically found "not guilty" no one would trust him again.

"I really wouldn't, Jake. I wish this had never come up. But it has, and I do have a responsibility. That may sound stuffy to you," Laura said. "Let me think about it. One way or another, I'll tell you first. That much I promise," she said.

Jake thanks her. It is the best he will get for now. Maybe he should call Neil, ask him to persuade Laura to drop this. He did not want to involve Neil. He dreaded the idea of asking Neil for anything at this stage of the game.

Jake left Laura gathering up her papers. Returning to his office, he found a message from Marcia.

He put it aside. He took out his pipe, tapped out the ash, and poked a cleaner through the stem. He lit it with a box of kitchen matches he kept in his top drawer.

Jake had clients who had lived with the fear of indictment for months, sometimes years. He'd watched them disintegrate, seen their families break, their business fail. He thought he understood. Now he saw he understood nothing. Loss in the abstract only reinforced the safe perch of the observer. For all the
reassuring words, the cheap solace, the self-conscious compassion he offered these clients, they, and their terror, were left alone as he enjoyed a cold martini and rare steak with his latest conquest.

He was surprised at his sense of foreboding, as if he were on the verge of catastrophe. This was no time to lose his nerve.

He was cornered. If this came out, the US Attorney’s office would cut him no slack. For years he had been their adversary, Jake Rubin against the U.S. government. His clients walked on slim technicalities, delaying tactics, imaginative defense concepts. Only rarely, when the client was wrapped in a red flag of guilt, a flag that would usually involve audio and videotape, did he condescend to a plea bargain.

They would have a field day with this. He shuddered at the idea of some eager young US attorney investigating him. Even if they didn’t have enough evidence to make a case, they could ruin his career. The FBI would investigate, calling on clients, subpoenaing them before a grand jury. They would be sure to leak it. That would be enough. He could picture himself denying the charges, proclaiming his innocence. Crying out, as he had seen so many powerful men do, for justice, he could hear himself saying to the multiple cameras: “I welcome a full investigation that will exonerate me.” Welcome an investigation? What crap. Although he had counseled that well-worn line, used it himself on behalf of clients. No one ever actually welcomed an investigation. Once it started, once the clients, friends, and some enemies were contacted by the FBI, there was always more to come. His bank loans at very favorable rates, his offshore accounts, his affairs: all of it exposed and added to the alleged insider trading dooms him to a spiral of free fall to disaster.

 Plenty of people were waiting for him to slip, to lose his foothold. It was in the nature of his game to make enemies.

He knew what happened to men in his position who stumbled. People nattered on about how sorry they were, how unjust it was, how they knew he would beat it. In truth they were glad. Relieved to be rid of the competition, ready to pick up the spoils. He couldn’t bear to be the subject of pity, of casual dinner table speculation about his fate. He himself had rendered such disingenuous testimonials to fallen colleagues.

He tried to think of one person he could share this with, just one person whom he trusted to feel genuinely sorry, to listen. He can think of no one, not one person on his old Rolodex or his voluminous Christmas card list.

Only Pat. Pat would care, would hold his hand for a little while. But even Pat would be distracted by her new life, her new man.
Surely, this wasn’t right? He had so many friends. One by one, he sifted through his partners, his tennis buddies, his women. It didn’t take long. They were dismissed for cause.

I was too casual, he thought. Too sure of life to make friends. Perhaps Neil. Could he trust that Neil, having had a taste of abandonment himself, might surface at this late date as his one real friend? It was the only possibility, and for that reason, he held it in reserve.

He was not accustomed to relying on others. Now his future was in the hands of these two women, Laura and Marcia. The ball was in their court. He’s all alone out there on the field, playing net without any backup.

His pipe had gone out. He had only one match left. He struck it, shielding it from the faint breeze. He sucked at the stem, too hard, the match went out. He sat there, holding his pipe, contemplating his future, wondering if he had lost his touch.

Judy Parks listened, fascinated, to Sol’s account of Joan’s story and to the sketchy information about Dr. Fallows.

"Wow," she said, "this could do it."

"Let’s not rush into anything; we haven’t got anything really," Sol said.

“What I see is that we’ve got this kid willing to shoot off her mouth to anybody who asks. That’s what we’ve got. Let nature do the rest," Judy said.

"What’s the downside?" Sol asked.

"Well, two things. One, any link to our campaign. Deadly. Two, she worked for us, also not so good. Aside from that, there’s no downside."

Sol was thinking. When he told Marcia he was going to consult Judy, she said, "Okay, but just see what she thinks; don’t do anything without talking to me first."

"What do you think we should do?" Sol asked Judy.

"Come on, Sol, what do you think I think? We have to leak it carefully, very carefully. Not the story, just the idea of talking to Joan. The question is to whom?"

"Any ideas?"

"It’s a delicate calculation. I want to think about it."

Judy was in her element. This was what she got the big bucks for: fat cash for knowing who to leak what to. She was debating between electronic and print. She would prefer the *Times* or the *Washington Post* to the *Drudge Report* But her contacts there, while good, were not as tight as some others. She couldn’t afford to have some reporter putting out that she was shopping this story. She needed someone she trusted absolutely, someone who wouldn’t screw her.
She examined her scruples for a moment. No problem; this was politics. She hadn’t made up this story. She wasn’t saying it was true. She was just pointing the way. Absolutely A-OK.

The person she trusted most was Sally Forrest of the *Washington Times*. It’s a tabloid, denigrated by the mainstream press but impossible to ignore. This is just up their alley. If the kid cooperated, if Sally handled it carefully, the story would take off on its own. It would come back to her, she knew, in kind. A grateful reporter was money in the bank to a PR person.

“I really think the best person may be Sally Forrest.”

"*Washington Times*?” Sol said.

"Right. She’s young, very ambitious. They’ll eat this up."

"They’ll eat the kid up. What about the *NY Times*?” Sol asked.

"No, not any paper in New York and not the *Times* in any event. Trust me, if Joan Palmer repeats this story to Sally, she’ll break it and it will have legs."

"Just let me run it by Marcia,” Sol said.

"Sure. You have some hesitation about this?” Judy asked.

"Don’t you?"

"Not really. It’s a story, Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe it will just be enough to convince Roberta she doesn’t want to undergo this kind of scrutiny, can’t take the heat. Nope, I would go with it. Just let the chips fall."

Sol was somewhat reassured by Judy’s cavalier attitude. He didn’t doubt for a minute that Marcia would give the go ahead. He’d advised her to do it, if she asked him.

Like Jake, Sol had an uneasy sense of foreboding. He knew he was about to topple the first domino, to set in motion the first in a chain of events over which he would have no control.

He admitted to himself that he didn’t think Marcia would win the nomination. He didn’t have the nerve to tell her that, but the numbers didn't add up. It’s isn’t just the polls, not just the reaction of the focus groups, not even the growing suspicion that Marcia was hiding something on those illusive schedules she refused to release. She made the wrong enemies, Sol thought. While he believed she represented the truest spirit of feminism, the women do not like her. She’s strident, brisk, and impolite. People don’t warm to her; he’s seen it time and time again. That phony smile that hides her fear doesn’t help. What Marcia wanted was respect. Well, she got that. Respect, maybe even admiration, but the cost was too great. Socially, she didn’t know how to walk and chew gum at the same time.
It was all of that and something more, the feeling that it was not her year. Despite all the palaver about the year of the woman, his gut tells him that there is something fundamentally wrong about her candidacy.

Sol thought Marcia was one of the best public officials around. He admired her integrity, her hard work, her attention to detail. He knew, better than most, how hurt she had been by the slights and the rejection of some of the advocacy groups. He did not want to see her hurt again. A loss now could mean the end of her political career.

"Ah, what the hell do I know?" he said to himself.

He smiled remembering others whom he was sure would win or lose. He'd lost a dozen bets over the last few years.

Maybe the polls would turn around; maybe Joan Palmer really did know something and Roberta would drop out; maybe, maybe, maybe. It was politics, after all. Anything could happen.
Chapter 21

Roberta

Roberta still took morning coffee on the patio. It was a time she reserved for herself.

The house was much too large for one person, but she did not want to give it up. Not yet. She was not finished sifting through the memories and the secrets of her marriage. She came across them everywhere, like dust mites, transparent, hard to capture, but ubiquitous. For months, she had been circling the truth, bringing isolated incidents into focus. But she wasn’t ready to look at the whole of it. She contents herself by rambling through her marriage selectively. She knew she must confront it all, if she was ever to be whole.

Roberta had not known what to expect of marriage. In some ways, David was overwhelming. A self-made millionaire, a popular and respected U.S. Senator and media personality, she wasn’t sure exactly where she would fit into this accomplished man’s life.

They were both busy the first months of marriage; Roberta was still fulfilling commitments for guest appearances and a major layout for a magazine. As Roberta began to wind down, she looked forward to having more time with David.

With her own parents as model, they rarely left each other’s side; she was prepared to accompany David on trips, to spend as much time with him as possible.

But she rarely saw her new husband. Sometimes he was gone for days, flying to New York for weekly visits with constituents, to California for a fundraising speech for a colleague up for reelection. He called each night at midnight, exchanging reports on the day’s events. Their marriage was played out in headlines, the talking points describing each of their days. I might just as well read his official calendar, Roberta thought.

When he was at home, he seemed distracted. Bored, she thought, by her conversation about her own activities, her increasing involvement in the women’s movement.

When he was in Washington, they entertained frequently. They had a staff that planned and executed their dinner parties, the cocktail parties. Roberta was neither wanted nor needed except for cursory consultation.

They met their guests, arm in arm, and then separated to circulate. Washington parties end early; everyone was gone by 10 p.m.

David, brandy snifter in hand, would often go back to work after the guests left, spending an hour or more in his den.
Roberta waited patiently. She took a long, warm bath, slipped on a silky peignoir, dabbed a bit of perfume behind her ears. She arranged herself seductively in the large chair in their bedroom. She often fell asleep there, waiting for her husband.

Her involvement in feminist politics provided Roberta with a sort of informal group therapy. Although she never directly discussed David, or her marriage, she was eager to join in conversation about men, the changing roles of women in society, the workplace and in marriage. It was comforting, she thought, that on the surface, at least, her marriage appeared to be one of equals.

She kept her end up. She ceased probing for subconscious motives, stopped looking for an intimacy David couldn’t provide, and got on with the job.

After ten years, she had, she believed, adjusted remarkably well to this phantom marriage. It gave her a secure place, a good perch, for the activities that comprised her life.

David was fiercely loyal to her, concerned that she might be tiring herself too much or that she was taken advantage of. Urging her to shop, to go to a spa, to do only that which pleased her.

By her side, holding her hand, he never left her alone for long throughout the numbing political and social functions they attended. He never raised his voice, he did not flirt, and they did not quarrel. If she felt blue, and sometimes she did fall into some deep, melancholy stretches, he did what he could to make her feel better. He talked to her; he brought her presents, promised her trips.

He often told her he loved her, sometimes listing the reasons quite poetically. When he did that, when he expressed his love, Roberta was completely happy.

By such sleight of hand, her husband managed to distract her from the essential fact that they had almost no sex. How churlish, how wrong it would have been of Roberta to even raise such an issue. When here was David, taking a taxi so she could have the car, buying her a necklace worn by an Italian princess, extolling her virtues in a television interview with Tom Brokow. Distracted by global events, David would chide her if she tried to talk about the void in their marriage. How petty of her to press this topic of conversation when he, as Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, was struggling to decide the appropriate course of action in the Middle East or South Africa.

She remembered vividly that her parents were always touching. Even at the breakfast table, her father would sometimes stroke her mother’s arm in a casual way.

Her own marriage was arid by comparison. David shrugged off the impulsive affectionate hugs, the tender touch of his cheek.
His signals were clear, so she stopped. She stopped trying to initiate sex as well, when those coy efforts were ignored. Sometimes, before he became ill, she would awaken as she felt David pulling up her nightgown. He required no assistance from her as he entered her from behind.

"Let me turn around," she said struggling to position herself, but it was already too late.

He climaxed quickly, asking her if she was "all right." She hardly knew what to say. All right? What did alright mean? This stealth fuck seemed to please David, he told her he loved her, she was wonderful, as he was falling asleep.

Roberta was torn between wanting to ask him about this and the fear of sounding critical and driving him away altogether. She heard a great deal about "fear of intimacy" in the confessional talk radio and TV conversations of women. Perhaps that's what it was. If so, she didn't think calling attention to it was going to help.

When David’s cancer was diagnosed, of course, even that changed. He never came to her after that. She assumed he was impotent. It was simply too delicate, too painful to discuss.

She felt now, as she had felt in her girlhood, that she wanted too much. Once, when she had engaged a reluctant David in a conversation about their marriage, he said to her angrily, "I wanted to be married. I did not mean for it to be a confessional or a protracted therapy session."

If he felt that way, she thought, I had better look to my own future. Not long after that conversation, David was diagnosed with cancer and, once again, she put aside her resentment.

Since David’s death, Roberta had become once again acutely sensitive to detail.

She was amazed at her new renewed powers of observation. The room looked different. The desk was too large, much too large. It was placed at an angle so she could see out the French doors while writing letters or paying bills. It was her idea, this fine old mahogany desk positioned just so. Bad planning, it distorted the room.

This return to awareness as she came to think of it, began the night David told her he was dying.

She had been reading in the library, curled up in one of the generous, overstuffed armchairs when David walked in.

"Hi," he said, heading for the liquor cabinet. "Want a drink?"

"Hi," she checked her watch. "You're home much earlier than I expected. Just a small one, a short gin straight, if you're having one."

"Oh, I'm having one. That's for sure."
She looked for something to mark her place and, not finding anything, she surreptitiously dog-earred it, hoping David wouldn’t notice. He didn’t approve of dog-earring, neither did she, but sometimes, after all, it was expedient.

"So, how was your day, and what did you cancel or skip out on that you’re home so early? Not that I’m not delighted. I was just thinking about getting something to eat. You hungry?"

David handed over her drink, took a long draw on his own.

He moved the ottoman over, close to her, so he was sitting at her feet. Do it fast, he thought. Quick, before she has time to realize something was gravely wrong. For David, the fear was the worst. He didn’t want Roberta to feel fear, not for a minute.

"Honey?” He couldn’t just blurt it out, even he, who had rehearsed this all the way home, was sure in his mind of what he was doing, still equivocated.

"I’ve just come from the doctor,” he began.

He saw then what he feared, that look in her eye, that expression of anxiety, soon to turn to terror or worse.

"Roberta, I’m dying," he said. Now it was out, that much at least. Not nearly enough but a start. He took another long draw of his drink, giving her and him, a moment before he went on.

Roberta, looking down at her husband’s head, noticed a tiny bit of scalp showing, just at the crown. He had covered it with hair, but looking straight down she could see the beginning of a bald spot.

There was a slight tear in the burgundy leather covering of the ottoman, hard to replace that particular color, she thought.

Well, she thought, so are we all. Dying, that is. Or perhaps it was metaphysical, some political setback. David’s tie was loosened, a dot of stain at the knot. It would have to go; he didn’t believe in having ties cleaned.

David put down his drink on the rug and reached for Roberta’s hand, holding it in both of his, entwining their fingers.

She looked down and noticed how very square and even his nails were, how the dark brown hair on the back of his hands lay flat.

"You’re frightening me, David, what is it?"

If only he could keep it inside. If only he could do this alone. He could, he supposed. But he was too tired; he needed help. He knew he was a man who brought pain to others. He tried as best he could to minimize it. He kept everyone at a distance; it was the best way, keeping his distance. Now he would have to let her in. There would be no breathing room between his pain and hers. No space at all.

"David, what is it? What’s wrong?"
"I'm dying," he said again.
She waited.
"I mean, now, I'm dying now. I'm sick, very sick." Maybe that would be enough, he thought. No, not enough.
Roberta was silent. Her breathing shallow.
"I have AIDS," he said. Finally, it was said. Blunt, cruel, destroying all illusions.
That was when her vision cleared completely, as if all her married life had been hampered by a membrane clouding her vision, her understanding of things.
He told her then that he did not have prostate cancer, that two years ago he had been diagnosed as HIV positive.
"How long? Two years ago? You didn't think you should tell me, that I had a right to know?"
"I couldn't. I just couldn't face that. It was possible I would live for years without developing any symptoms. I wasn't lucky. This morning the doctor confirmed what I had suspected for almost a month. I have full blown AIDS."
He explained in detail, just enough detail, what would happen: the pain, the humiliation, the despair, the inevitability of a hideous death compounded by the notoriety. The lesions were on his chest and back now, but soon they would spread, covering his body, his face, his hands.
This confession was the first thing he had ever done that measured up to the anticipation. He had rehearsed it, believed he was equal to any response Roberta might have. He fortified himself against her reaction, made himself cold, indifferent. He could not afford pity, for Roberta, for himself. Heartless as he appeared, he knew there was a limit to even the most savage act. Somehow, one bore it, rationalized it as part of the human experience. One broke promises, let people down, betrayed them, treated them shabbily. People were often cruel, sometimes deliberately so. If an apology or some form of recompense was not sufficient, what could one do? Was one expected to prostrate oneself in perpetuity? Surely there was some universal statute of limitation for even the most brutal acts.
Roberta, with her new clarity of vision, saw there was more to come. Her mind was swarming with half thoughts, semi-formed questions.
"No," she said, shaking her head. "No."
"Yes," he replied.
"There are medicines."
"Yes, there are. I know all about them. About the trips to Paris, to Mexico too. Roberta, it is hopeless."
Roberta took her hands from him and covered her face. She rocked herself for just a moment.

"How?"

"Precisely, that is what they will want to know. How?"

"Well, do you know?"

"I know."

"Then?"

"What difference does it make? I'm dying all the same."

"It makes a difference to me. All these years, I thought I had failed you, that I was not attractive to you. I even wondered sometimes if I smelled. Imagine, I wondered if I smelled. Oh, David it makes a difference to me."

"Yes, I can see that. Only to you, though."

He didn't know how to explain it. He thought of it as a kind of spasm of sexual desire. He would have been relieved if that was all he wanted. If the anonymous young boys he chanced on fulfilled him. But it didn't. They didn't. Still it had become a sexual craving he needed intermittently, the only time he was able to experience complete sexual release. He trusted himself with these boys.

In those moments, he was able to love, to lose himself in a way he had never been able to experience with a woman. He had married two of the most desirable women in America. He had slept with other women as well. He wanted them with their soft, fleshy curves, sometimes with a violence he had to restrain for fear of bruising them. But he could not give himself over to them. In the end, in the final moment of release, as love words dribbled from their mouths, as their hands clutched at his back, he sensed danger, as if he would be destroyed if he succumbed to these women.

For years, he despised himself. In the beginning, he vowed after each encounter that he would never do it again. He cleansed himself through work, through his fastidious habits.

It was not enough. One morning he would awaken and know. It would be tonight. It had to be tonight. He stopped fighting it, stopped despising himself, stopped making resolutions he knew would fail. As he grew older, the incidents became less frequent. He had come to accept this dark side, wondering how many others shared his compulsions. He thought sometimes he recognized a certain look in other men, at lunch or at a meeting. Surely he wasn't the only one; he knew that.

David sat his hands in his lap now. Be calm, he thought. It will soon be over.

"You already know, don't you?" he said.

She nodded. She knew.
"It makes no difference," she said. "I’ll do everything I can for you. You know that. David, I love you."

He almost broke then, but he held on.
"I love you too. I really do. It was just something, something even I have never understood. I loved Sharon and I love you. I love you very much, as much as I can love anyone."

"What about me? It’s possible that I—."
"No, not as of now."
"How do you know that? You can’t know that."
"When you went for your last physical, two months ago, I asked Bob to test you." Bob Current was their family doctor.

"Without telling me?"
David shrugged. "Everything was fine, so—."
"I see. So I’m fine."
"Right, as I say it’s possible, but our contact has been minimal. I hope to God."

"What will we do?" She wanted to tell him how sorry she was, but knew it would sound hollow. It seemed crucial to be one with him now; to express her sorrow would create a distance.

"You’re a good woman, Roberta," he said as he handed her a new glass. "Perhaps we should have had champagne."

"Hardly a celebration," she said.

"Oh, I don’t know. Maybe even in this there is something to celebrate. You always wanted to know so much, to delve into my life, my psyche. Well, here it is. All on the table. Just what you always wanted, nothing held back. Husband and wife are one at last."

"David, what are we going to do? What comes next?" Roberta said.

"The next act," David said, "may be the hardest. But once it is over, it is over. By God, I’m sloshed."

"Seems so. I wish I were."

"I’ve made a decision, Roberta. Please, I don’t want any arguments. I don’t want any discussion. I only want your help."

"You know I’ll do anything I can to help you."

"Good. In two days, the day after tomorrow, a Dr. Fallows will come over about 9 p.m. He will administer to me a shot of potassium. The worst pain, I’m assured, will be the stick of the needle. A few minutes later, I will be dead. It will be put out that I died of complications of prostate cancer. I will be cremated."

Roberta broke down. That was when she cried and screamed the things that Joan overheard in the hall.
David tried to calm her. In a quiet tone, David explained. There was simply no point in protracting his life. If he lived, if he opted for treatment, it would be impossible to keep it secret. Could she imagine the press, the media attention? And it would be his responsibility, many would say, to keep them informed about every goddamned indignity along the winding road to the grave. Every open sore, fever, weight loss, would be reported.

The HIV/AIDS groups would be the worst. Nothing to be ashamed of, they would howl, David Palmer—Senator David Palmer—you’re one of us. Tell us every little, tiny, miniscule detail. Start with when you first knew you were gay—be gay, be proud of being gay, gay, gay how marvelous it is that DAVID PALMER IS GAY! He supposed it was their right to proclaim victory. They had, after all, brought in a big fish. He wanted no part of it; it was unbearable to even think about the afterlife of any announcement or leak about his condition.

To say nothing of the speculation as to how he had contracted it in the first place. “Indeed,” he said, “let us say nothing about that. That is my business, perhaps a little yours as well but surely no one else’s. That, along with other demons soon to be buried with me, I am entitled to keep to myself. I will not give them that.”

But even if the prospect of all of that were not so grotesque, there was still the essential question of what was laughingly called the quality of life. Did she imagine that he, of all people, could bear the indignities of a progressive disease like AIDS? And why should he?

He had thought about death during the past two years. It was hardly frightening at all. Death, the idea of being dead, was the common terror, the inexorable reality that must be dealt with in the still of the night with whatever palliatives come to mind—religion, medicine or simply resignation. It was not death that had to be conquered, but the fear of death. It was the last gasp that concerned him not the moment following it.

He talked without interruption for nearly an hour. It was a pleasure to talk with his wife like this. To tell her these conclusions, the epiphanies he had been processing for a long time now. Like all such revelations, however, while there was intense pleasure, even pride, in the recognition of life’s simple truths. It did not alter the facts.

Roberta, weak from listening to such a scholarly justification of suicide, could find no rationale for objection beside the selfish one of her own need for him. And that, she knew, would not be nearly enough.

Into the night, they sat together, adjusting to their plight as if marooned on an island or lost in a snowstorm. From time to time, Roberta would try and look
out, to see if help might be on the way. But David pulled her back, protecting
his wife from the cruel disappointment of a failed rescue.

"I need more time," she said finally, desperate for some delay. "What about
Joan?"

"I know you do," he replied. "I know it. But I need to do it now. As for Joan,
all I ask is that you try and take care of her. She must never know. I'm a lousy
father; we both know that. But I can protect her from this. At least I can do
that."

"Because you might change your mind, if you waited?"

"Perhaps. I don't think so but perhaps. It is such a fragile thing, this last
breath business, such a delicate balance between fear and release. If I wait, I will
have to go to the hospital immediately. Tonight, tomorrow at the latest. I have a
fever, I have lesions, and my blood count is not good."

And then he told her about his mother.

"For years after, maybe until now, I questioned whether I should have taken
steps to stop her. Because, you see, I knew. I knew she was finished. It is only
now, now that I have the answer. I suffered so with the question, I loved her so
much. I couldn't face that I had ruined her life, spoiled the only bright time for
her with my possessiveness, my adolescent jealousy. Part of me was glad she died,
just so I didn't have to face her each day knowing there was nothing I could do
to relieve her pain."

"All these years, the times you have been so aloof, so remote, I thought it was
my fault. I thought I had failed you in some way, that you were tired of me, that
I was not enough for you, not smart enough, not anything enough. But it wasn't
me at all, was it?" Roberta said.

"No, it wasn't you. It wasn't anything lacking in you. I thought you knew
that. I tried to tell you, I could not come too close, not to you, not to Sharon,
not to Joan."

"I understand, I do. We can work this through, we can," she said.
"We might have, maybe. Who knows? It's too late. It's just too late."
"Won't you give us a chance, try, at least for a little while?"
"There is no little while."
"Your doctor, did you tell your doctor what you are planning?"
"I intimated something of the sort."
"And what did he say? Surely he gave you some hope."
"He told me the truth. This is what I've been telling you for the last hours.
He made it clear he would not help me end it but wished me well. He then
suggested, quite casually, that I might want to consult Dr. Will Fallows. He said
Fallows knew quite a lot about these matters. So I went to see Fallows this
afternoon. An unusual man, he asked all the right questions, and he was satisfied
that I know what I’m doing. He says it’s not all that uncommon. He asked that I
make a significant contribution to Aids Research, which of course I said I
would."

"So it’s all taken care of. Just like that?"

"Yes, it is. I want to do this well. All I ask is for you to understand. And if
you can’t understand, to be there, and if you can’t do that—."

"All? All? You say that as if we were choosing a color for the kitchen or a
movie to see. All? You are asking everything, everything. I will never forgive you,
ever. You cheated me, you deceived me, and you ruined my life. You must have
known you could never be a complete husband to me. You knew that. You can’t
control everything, David, not even you can control everything."

"My mother said something like that to me before she died. I can’t control
this. How could I tell you these things? You wouldn’t have married me. You
simply wouldn’t have understood that it made no difference in how I felt
towards you."

"Of course it did. It made a huge difference, all the difference in the world.
You didn’t really want me; you just wanted a wife, any decorative cover. I’ve felt
that all along, but I couldn’t face it because I didn’t understand it."

Roberta was struck suddenly by the futility of this conversation. What
difference did it make now?

"Anyway," she said, "you are asking too much now, too much."

"Then I am asking too much. Listen, this has made me see things. The past,
the past is frozen, immutable. The future is always uncertain. All there is, all
there is, is the moment. This is a fine moment. Look at us, man and wife, flawed,
impaired, but closer now than ever before, closer than most people ever get,
closer, my darling, than I have ever dreamed of being to another human being.
Do you hate me? Tell me, do you hate me?"

"No, I don’t hate you. I just feel so stupid and abused in a way, I guess. And
helpless, mostly I feel helpless. I don’t want you to die. I want a chance to make
things right between us. Oh, God, that does sound stupid."

"I hate that I will die, and I hate what I am putting you through. But I do not
hate this moment," David said.

He wanted to apologize to her, felt as if he could spend hours saying how
sorry he was, sorry for the anguish he caused her, sorry he ruined things for her,
so terribly sorry to have caused so much pain. He could never live long enough
to say how sorry he was. To all of them. How wrong he was, how cruel, how
selfish, how alone. This was the best he could do. He had considered simply
driving off a cliff or jumping out of a window. Perhaps, he thought now, that
would have been better. It was selfish he thought to do it this way, to ask for this last consolation as if it were forgiveness. He needed absolution now, and that was why he was doing this. More than anything he needed to maintain control.

David rose from the hassock, pulling Roberta up so that he could hold her. He smoothed the hair back from her face, kissed her eyes, and touched her lips with his finger.

"It's already done, darling. This was the worst part," he said. "Please forgive me. Forgive me."

"Please don't leave me," she said, even as she knew her cries fell on deaf ears.

"Forgive me," he asked again.

Roberta wept, holding him, their bodies cradling each other, swaying slightly. She heard him ask again, "Forgive me?" Slowly, she moved her hand against his upper back, once, then again. He dropped his head until it rested on her shoulder. Roberta could see her hand moving against him, comforting him, patting him, strokes that served to console her as well. "All right," she said, not sure herself what she meant.

David straightened, moving just slightly so that she stopped her stroking. He held her hand to his lips. "Thank you," he said.

Whatever she meant, permission or forgiveness, it was enough to see him through.

She held his hand the night he died. They were alone. The doctor, a kindly man, did what he could and stepped aside.

It wasn't long. Just a few minutes.

"I really loved you," he said, as if she doubted it. Or perhaps, she thought, he had doubted it.

She told him she loved him, but she thought he could not hear her. His grip weakened; he was slipping away.

In the days before he died, David seemed to thrive on the details. He made all the arrangements, updated his will, simplified his holdings, and instructed Roberta of what to do about even small matters, like bequests to former staff. She wondered if he actually had a checklist, a dying countdown list. He had conversations with his lawyer and his accountant. He tried to talk to Roberta about her own future, but she could not bear it.

"I know it will be hard," he said.

"You don't know," she replied. "You don't know anything about it," she replied in a quiet voice. "Have you talked to Joan?"

"No," he said, holding up a hand to forestall her comments. "I can't. I just can't. I don't know what to say."
How could she quarrel with him? At times she hated him. Irrational, she knew it was not fair. Those last days, time neither flew nor dragged. Time became the enemy. It was only later that she realized that time is always the enemy.

The phone jarred Roberta from this reverie, this morning lamentation that has become something of a ritual. She reached for it but it stopped. Roberta took a sip of cold coffee. She thought she would be moving soon. Everything looked faded: the carpet, the upholstery. The cushions on the couch were shabby; the wallpaper was curling at the seams. There were water stains on the ceiling; two panes of the French windows were scratched. It might be, she thought, that I have extracted all there was out of this place.

She began to contemplate a smaller place, perhaps a cottage in Virginia. The phone rang again, startling her. When she reached for it, she knocked over her juice glass, which was still full. The orange juice spilled onto the table, dripping down to the floor.

"Just a minute," she yelled, thinking she would get something to mop up the juice before it seeped into the rug.

But she didn’t move. She sat there holding the phone, watching the rug absorb the orange liquid, not caring at all. She didn’t care who was on the phone, either.

Furious suddenly, she picked up her coffee cup and flung it across the room where it smashed against the wall. The rage felt wonderful, although she thought she should stop trashing her house. The phone rang again; she was indifferent.

"Nobody home," she thought as she left the room. She passed the housekeeper, Mrs. Ravel, on the stairs. "I had a little accident in the sitting room," she said to her.

The phone rang again. "Nobody home," she said aloud. "Certainly I’m not."
WASHINGTON TIMES
MYSTERY SURROUNDS SENATOR'S DEATH
By Sally Forrest

In an exclusive interview with the Washington Times, Joan Palmer, the 24-year-old daughter of Congressman David Palmer, reveals for the first time her suspicions that her father's sudden death three months ago may not have been of natural causes.

Palmer, who had been diagnosed with prostate cancer two years before, was on the mend, according to Ms. Palmer. The official reason for Palmer's death was "complications of prostate cancer."

"He was definitely getting better, he told me so himself just a few days before he died," Ms. Palmer told this reporter.

The late William Fallows, a retired physician, attended David Palmer, who died in December. Dr. Fallows, who was 82, died last month. Fallows was also present at the death last year of the noted film actor Robert Patton. The Justice department refused to comment on the rumors that Fallows was being investigated for participating in physician assisted suicides. However, a well-placed source has confirmed that a case was being prepared by the Justice Department for presentation to a Grand Jury. At the time of his death, Palmer had been married for ten years to Roberta Fenn, the celebrity model.

"Just two nights before he died," Ms. Palmer said, "he and Roberta had a terrible fight. I think he was going to leave her. It sounded as if he was telling her he wanted a divorce. Roberta was really angry. She kept saying, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me." Then, a few days later, I got a call early in the morning that Daddy died. All I know is he was healthy a couple of nights before, yelling and arguing with Roberta. Daddy’s own doctor wasn’t even there. Roberta called in some new doctor, a Doctor Fallows, who Daddy didn’t even know."

Roberta Palmer was appointed to fill out her husband’s term and is widely rumored to be considering a race for the US Senate seat from New York. Before her marriage, Roberta was one of the most popular media celebrities on the circuit.

According to Ms. Palmer, "Roberta inherited a lot of money. I have to go to her if I want money. I just can’t believe my father would have wanted that. And," Ms. Palmer added, "Roberta had him cremated. Daddy would never have wanted that. He would have wanted to be buried next to my mother." Ms. Palmer’s mother, Sharon Palmer the actress, died of cancer twelve years ago.
David Palmer had disclosed that he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer two years before his sudden death. At that time he said he was taking a prescribed course of therapy, which included drugs and radiation. "If Daddy was so sick, why didn’t he have one of his own doctors there, instead of this Fallows person?" Ms. Palmer questioned.

According to Ms. Palmer, the Senator and his wife had not been getting along for some years. "They didn’t share a bedroom; they hardly ever saw each other," Ms. Palmer asserted.

When asked if she had reported these suspicions to the police, Ms. Palmer broke down in tears. "I was afraid no one would believe me," she said.

Senator Roberta Palmer did not return several phone calls left at her office and her home.

Larry Marchand, who is likely to be the Republican candidate for New York’s Senate seat, had this to say.

"In the circumstances, I think a full investigation should commence into the death of David Palmer. David was a good friend. These accusations by his daughter and the presence of Will Fallows, a disreputable physician, are disturbing. I am going to request that the Justice Department and the DC Police open an investigation."

Calls by this reporter to Attorney General Frances Maloney were not returned.
Chapter 23

Joan

Joan was awakened at 6:30 a.m. the morning after the story appeared in the *Washington Times*.
"Ms. Palmer."
"Yes."
"Sorry if I woke you. This is Forrest Tucker of *The Daily News*."
"What do you want?"
"Like to talk to you about the story in the *Washington Times*."
"What about it?"
"Well, there are some pretty serious charges attributed to you against your stepmother."
"I haven’t seen it."
"Let me read it to you."
When he finished, Joan put down the phone. It rang again.
"Joan Palmer?"
"Yes."
"Hi, this is Marvin Thompson of CBS. We’d like to send a camera crew over to interview you."
"No, no, don’t send anybody."
"Well, could we just ask you a few questions?"
"Not now."
She had barely replaced the handle when it rang again, again, and again.
“Toni Watkins of *Time Magazine*.”
"Randi Perkins of Showtime."
"Florence Simmons of Hard Copy."

By 10: a.m. she had received twenty calls from the media. Her doorman rang up to say a camera crew from NBC was in the lobby. She told him not to let anyone up.

Looking out the window, she could see several reporters, photographers, and a camera crew hanging around across the street.

How could she have been so stupid? She knew better. Father was always talking about how unfair the press was. If she had only realized—but she hadn’t. She couldn’t kid herself. She knew that she was talking to a reporter, but such a nice woman, who drew her out, was interested in what she had to say, was on her side. This reporter, Sally Something, was definitely on her side. She said it was just for background, just between them.
Marshall Malcolm was furious when he saw the story. Marshall, a great admirer of Roberta’s, called Joan.

"Joan, what the hell are you doing?"

"Marshall, I’m so glad you called. I need to talk to you; I really do."

"You’ve talked enough, young lady, quite enough. I don’t know what you think you’re about, but I can tell you this: your father would turn over in his grave."

"Marshall, please. I just want to explain."

"Don’t explain. Just retract. Roberta’s been through quite enough without this hysteria."

With that, he hung up. Soon, he thought, he would call Roberta, maybe take her out for a nice dinner. Lovely woman. David Palmer had been a lucky man.

Made a mess again, Joan thought.

"Have you seen the story?" Maxine Chertoff asked Roberta on the phone early that morning.

"Just reading it now," Roberta said.

"What the hell is with that kid? Is she crazy?"

"Well, she’s certainly neurotic. I don’t know about crazy."

"You’re taking this very calmly, I must say."

"What do you want me to do?"

"We’ve just been talking about what we should do. I guess if this is it, if there are not any other stories, we do nothing. But Roberta, you know this town. This isn’t going to just go away. Nothing the press likes better than conspiracy. I suspect you’ll be getting calls."

“I’ve been getting calls, lots of calls. I’m letting the machine answer. What do you think I should do?” Roberta asked.

"Let me think about it a little more. Don’t talk to the press yet. Let’s see what the pick-up is."

"Should I call Joan?"

"That’s up to you. She’s your stepdaughter. Might be a good idea to let her know how serious this is for you, how much it can damage you. That is, if she cares at all."

"I’m not sure she does. She worshiped her father. I was simply an intruder."

"Well, I guess that accounts for it. Didn’t she intern for Marcia Baker?"

“Yes, she did. She adores Marcia, as a matter of fact."

"Hmm, that is interesting. I wouldn’t put anything past Marcia Baker."

"You think she put Joan up to this?"
"I don’t think anything, just factoring in all the pieces. Well, keep your chin up and stay off the phone. I’ll call you in an hour or two. We’ll figure something out.”

Reading the story in the *Washington Times*, Roberta realized she had, in a sense, been waiting for this day.

She had not known Joan overheard their quarrel, but she was not surprised that there are questions about David’s death. She expected those questions to come immediately. David had prepared her for that.

Everything had gone even more smoothly than expected. She felt safer, although not completely secure, after she scattered David’s ashes. While she was reassured by the unquestioned acceptance of David’s death, she could not shake a chronic anxiety.

Roberta was beginning to put it behind her. She was looking forward to the campaign, enjoying her service in the Senate.

She called Joan frequently after David died. "You should move in with me," she said. "It would be good for both of us."

Joan said she would think about it, but when Roberta raised it again she said, "No, I like living alone. You need your privacy too. You’re young still. You’ll meet someone else."

"That’s not even a consideration now," Roberta said. "Right now I think that being together would make us feel like a family."

"A family?" Joan said. "We’re not a family."

Rebuffed, Roberta tried again. Invited Joan to the theater, to view a new art exhibit, to have lunch.

One day, a few months after David died, Roberta invited Joan to go shopping. After considerable coaxing, Joan agreed.

They met for lunch at the Four Seasons. Roberta listened as Joan talked about the possibility of going back to school, perhaps to get a Master’s in Art History. They each had a glass of wine and a salad. Joan ordered a chocolate dessert, which Roberta tasted. They had not spoken of David, except for one moment when Joan said, "I miss Daddy. I suppose you miss him terribly, too?"

"Yes," Roberta said putting her hand over Joan’s. "I miss him very much."

Roberta saw that Joan’s eyes were moist, that she was fighting back tears. "I’m sorry now that you didn’t live with us," she said, “but I would like you to move in now.”

"No, what would be the point now with Daddy dead? I’ve lived alone so much; I’m quite used to it."

"It must have been hard sometimes, lonely."
"Well, yes, when I was small." Joan drained her glass of wine. "I don’t think about that much, but I guess it was lonely and kind of scary too."
"I imagine so."
"The worst was when he sent me to that school in Connecticut, the Ravenwood School it was called."
"It’s supposed to be a very good school."
"Sure, it’s good. It’s just a holding pen for the unwanted kids of rich people. It was before Mom died. I was only 7 or 8. I hated it. I really hated it."
"Well, you were so young."
"The first week I was there, I was playing in the playground, which was a little ways from the main house. I didn’t know any kids yet. I was playing alone. I had to go to the bathroom, really bad, but they only let one kid out at a time. I kept telling the teacher I had to go, but she made me wait. Well, I couldn’t hold it, so I messed my pants. The kids started to call me smelly and held their noses. Finally, the matron let me go. I was so scared; I tore out the name tape of my pants and threw them behind the radiator in the bathroom. Boy did it stink. I was terrified they would know it was me, but they never did. At assembly the next morning, the matron asked if anyone has something they wanted to confess. She didn’t say what it was, but everyone knew. They all knew it was me. I was the guilty party. The whole year I was there I kept expecting to get arrested or something for throwing dirty pants behind the radiator." Joan laughed. "God, kids are dumb."

"How awful for you," Roberta said, imagining very well the shame the young Joan must have felt.

Joan told this story to several psychiatrists. In its repetition, it began to sound like a lie. Probably Roberta doesn’t believe me, she thought, she probably thinks I made it up for sympathy. Sometimes, Joan thought she just should stop talking altogether. No one ever really understood. She didn’t have the vocabulary to explain.

This incident in the playground, for example, how could she ever put into words the shame she felt messing her pants? She remembered the shame as cold, freezing her to the spot, immobilizing her. She couldn’t turn her head, look around. She was that mortified.

Joan and Roberta left the restaurant to wander through Georgetown, looking in the small boutiques, the charming stores that lined the narrow streets.

"I really need a bathing suit," Joan said, as they passed a Waterworks store with bathing suits in the window.
"My treat," Roberta said.
Joan picked out four to try on. The dressing room was small, with only a curtain shielding it from the store. She went in alone while Roberta waited, chatting with the sales girl.

"Excuse me," the sales clerk said to Roberta. "Aren't you?"
"Yes, I am," Roberta said.
"Oh, I think you’re wonderful, and I’m so sorry about your husband’s passing. Are you still modeling?"
"No, not anymore."
"Well, you could. You still look fabulous. Is she your daughter?"
"Yes," Roberta answered.
"Really? You hardly look old enough to have—."
"They’re all too tight," Joan called out, poking an arm through the curtain with the bathing suits. "Could I have the next size up?"
"Certainly, dear," the sales clerk said, taking the suits. Then dropping her voice she added, "Pity she doesn’t resemble you."

Joan ripped the curtain open, pulling on her jeans.
"I could hardly resemble her, since she isn’t my mother," she said in a cold voice. "But then, I don’t even resemble my own mother who was twice as beautiful as my stepmother." She grabbed her coat and her purse, dashing for the front door. Roberta ran after her, but Joan was too quick.

When Roberta called Joan later that evening, she got her answering machine. She left several messages over a period of days, but Joan did not return her calls.

Roberta sent Joan a note with her monthly check:

Joan dear,
    I’m sorry you were upset. People are sometimes thoughtless. Please, please call me. Despite what you may feel, we can be a family. I want to.
    Also, if you need anything at all, more money, anything, just let me know.
    Love,
    Roberta

She never heard from Joan again.

Laura Bennett walked into Jake's office, holding the Washington Times. "Seen this yet?" she asked him.
"Yes, I’ve seen it."
"I guess we've earned our fee," Laura said.
"Looks that way," Jake answered, wondering if Laura felt as lousy as he did.
"What do you think?" Marcia asked Sol.
"She's history," Sol said.

Joan took cover in her apartment. She sent out for food, watches TV, and took her pills. She paid the doorman to get her some magazines. She loved magazines, even magazines about yachting and gardening. She particularly enjoys decorating magazines. In her mind, she decorated a home she would share with a husband sometime in the future.

Roberta called twice. Joan listened to Roberta's messages repeatedly. If she called again, Joan thought, I'll pick up. Just one more time. She waited. The only calls were from the media. Please call, she thought. It struck her that Roberta was the only person who would understand. That for years Roberta had been trying to tell her that she understood. That she was her friend. How could she have missed that? Now it was too late. Now she had killed her only friend. She would have to look to the future all alone, more alone than ever before.

Perhaps, she thought, she would write a book. After all, her name alone might sell. She imagined sitting in a bookstore signing autographs, cheerfully getting up at five for a morning TV interview show.

She pondered running for public office. Perhaps her father's chief of staff would help her do that.

She had the name, the Palmer name. She should do something with it. She mulled it over while munching on donuts.

The broadcast business also appealed to her. Surely she could do as well as some of these young girls delivering the nightly news. She wouldn't mind starting on weather; she imagined that's how some got started in the business.

As a fallback, she supposed she could become a vice president or something in one of her father's businesses. She'd need some good Armani suits, an attaché case from Mark Cross.

Then again, maybe she should go back to school.

Travel too had some appeal. Just take off for a year or so, no special destination. Meet up with people, it might be a real lark.

Please call again. I'm sorry, please call.

She thought about calling Roberta. She could apologize; maybe it would be all right.

Not yet; not now. She recognized that she was a little agitated, a little depressed; better to wait until she was more herself.

The Peace Corps? Was that still around, she wondered.
Her phone rang regularly with messages from the media. She let the machines take the calls.

She planned her day, as usual, with *TV Guide*. She taped movies against a time when she might live on a small island where there is no TV. She didn’t want to be caught short. It was irritating that often two movies she wanted to record were airing at the same time. Also, she did not know how to record one movie and watch another. She called the Samsung 800 number but it was always busy.

She remembered when she worked for Marcia how much she had enjoyed leaving in the morning to go to work. She thought perhaps soon Marcia would be calling her to come back. That would be good for a little while, until she decided what to do with the rest of her life.

At 5 p.m., she began to plan her dinner, to consider what restaurants to call for takeout or to dash out to the market for a steak to broil. She prided herself on having a proper dinner, but couldn’t decide what to eat. Maybe she wasn’t so hungry after all.

By 6 p.m., she settled in for the evening. Just like everybody else now, she thought, just watching TV, having a drink.

The shock of her father’s death had worn off, but the pain had gotten worse. Time was supposed to heal, she thought, but it wasn’t working with her.

Sharing with that reporter was a mistake, but how to make it right?

I need quiet, she thought, more quiet time to fix this.

She turned the button on her phone to “off.” It was a relief; really, she needed the quiet to get over this little depression.

She alternated between pacing her apartment and lying flat on her back and very still in bed.

She realized she was ravenously hungry. Too hungry to cook, to wait for takeout.

She piled peanut butter on rye bread, one of her favorites. Ate four slices with a cold can of Coke.

She measured herself, as she did every day. She maintained a strict record of her bust, abdomen, hip, and thigh measurements. She noted down the numbers. There was a very slight increase in her abdomen, less than 1/8 inch. She was disgusted with herself for getting fat.

She picked up a book to distract her, read the first page three times, and tossed it across the room.

She ran a bath, emptied the last of her bath salts in it. As she began to submerge herself, she suddenly became frightened of being naked and hurried to put on some clothes.
She took a Xanax.
She looked through a picture album, caressing the pictures of her mother.
She put a frozen Sara Lee chocolate cake in the microwave to defrost. She removed it too soon, and it was still hard and cold inside. She ate half of it anyway.
She gave herself a bang cut. It looked even to her eye. She was pleased.
She took out the blue contact lens she sometimes wears in her right eye to hide the mismatched color of her eyes.
She took another Xanax.
She knew, with a strange calm that it was over. It only remained to pick the moment and the means.
She came to it gradually, busy with all the other activities of eating and trimming and looking at pictures.
It's hard, she thought.
It's sad, she thought.
She called Marcia Baker. Marcia Baker was not in. She left no message.
She calls Roberta. Roberta was not in. She left no message.
She listened to her messages again. Very popular, she thought, at last. Too late.
She turned on her computer, stared at it for a few minutes, turned it off again, saving the first line, "I'm sorry if I caused anyone trouble," filed under "Thoughts."
She finished the rest of the chocolate cake, which has defrosted completely. The sweet, creamy taste was heavenly.
She removed the polish from her toenails in preparation for a pedicure. The smell of the acetone made her nauseous. She didn't finish the job, leaving her toenails smeared.
I am not stupid, she thought.
I am not crazy, she thought.
Lies are like dreams, she thought.
How?
She remembered Dorothy Parker and giggled.
She curled up on the couch, the scrapbook open, and stroked her cheek for comfort, hugged herself, patted her back, saying, "There, there, everything will be alright."
She wished it could happen naturally. A heart attack or stroke.
It won't. She had to face that fact. It was her job.
When she looked back, there was only bleakness.
When she looked forward, she saw nothing. It won't be bad at all, she thought, to be dead.

The more she thought about it the more she liked it.

She was not sentimental. She did not cry. She began to feel the immense relief of dead.

She wondered if anyone would weep for her.

She felt, simply, the urge growing stronger to end it now.

She thought about all the others gone before: Marilyn Monroe, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, many, many others. Smiling, she thought to herself, it was after all a family affair. Kurt Cobain, John Belushi.

She surveyed her future with a critical eye. The landscape was desolate. Her prospects were bleak.

If I could think of one happy thing, I won't do it, she thought. Nothing came to mind. The sorrows of her past informed her future.

She took another Xanax.

A psychiatrist once told her she was programmed. She forgot what for. Maybe he meant for this.

It was a slow dance to death. She never much fancied rock and roll.

In the spirit of fairness, she tried to think of arguments for living. Nothing came to mind.

She measured herself again. The 1/8 inch gain in the abdomen is gone. But she thought it was because she cheated and sucked in her stomach.

She was getting a little bored. The boredom frightened her. It reminded her of living.

There was never any question, really, of how.

She pours a large glass of skim milk, wishing she had whole milk on hand for the task. It would hardly matter now if she drank a whole glass of whole milk. But it wasn’t worth going out to the store, although she considered it.

She lined them up. The composite of multi-colored pills, some stolen, maybe even a few from her father.

Fought off a tinge of fear.

Fought off a scrap of hope.

Fought off a trace of self-pity.

Good way, she thought, way to go.

She saw it as a cooperative venture. It was she and her pills, each pulling their own weight.

It was even better once she was drowsy.

It was familiar.

It was peaceful.
Sheila Levin

Very smart move.
Her plan had been to go to bed; she did so enjoy lying between clean sheets.
I’ll just rest for a minute, she thought, stretching out on the couch, one arm
dangling towards the fallen photo album on the floor.
It’s okay, she thought, one last time.
She died sometime during the night. She didn’t know exactly when.
She dreamt until she stopped breathing. She hadn’t even thought about that
bonus.
She dreamed a dream of light, of water, of golden fields of flowers.
She neglected to close the freezer. The ice cubes and four quarts of Häagen-
Dazs ice cream, vanilla supreme, rocky road, super cherry, and peanut brittle, all
melted. It was a real mess.
Chapter 24

Roberta

"Roberta, it's Maxine."
"Yes, Maxine?"
"Horrible, just horrible. I couldn’t believe it when I heard the bulletin on the radio, just couldn’t believe it. Do you want me to come over?"
"No, thanks. Not just now."
"Maxine, I have to get off now. I'll call you later."
"Do you think she did it because of that story, because she lied?" Maxine asks Roberta.
"No," Roberta said. "She did it because she told the truth."
"What do you mean?" Maxine asked.
"Shit, Maxine. Let me call you later. I have to get dressed."
"Roberta, what did you mean by that? You’re not yourself. Don’t talk to the press. I think I should come over there."
"Not now, maybe later."

Roberta had been awakened earlier with the news of Joan’s death. The Chief of Police came with the news. She offered him coffee; he declined.
"No question it was suicide?" she asked.
"I'm afraid not," he said. "Was she depressed recently?"
"We weren't close; she was an unhappy young woman."
"Well, I know this must be a terrible shock. The New York Police have asked if you would go up to identify her. Unless, of course, there's someone else? A relative?"
"No, there's no one else. I'll fly up this afternoon. Will that be all right?"
"Sure, take your time."
After he left, Roberta called Marshall Malcolm.
"God, the poor kid. What can I do?" he asked.
"Well, I would appreciate it if you would fly up to New York with me. I don’t want to face this alone."
"Of course, I’ll be over in an hour. Take it easy, Roberta; just take it easy on yourself."

What does he mean by that, she wondered. Am I guilty of something?
They offered to let her identify Joan with a picture, but Roberta insisted on seeing her body. Roberta looked down at the face of her stepdaughter. She noticed that Joan had taken her advice and bleached the thin line of dark hair above her lip. "Yes," she said. "That's Joan."
Marshall held her arm, guided her out of the morgue.
He spoke to the police, signed some papers, and hustled Roberta to a waiting limousine, brushing aside photographers and reporters.
"What a mess," he said, looking out through the one-way glass on the windows.
"Did you ever dream she would do such a thing?" Marshall asked Roberta, thinking it better not to mention his call to Joan. Maybe later he would say something about it.
"I never thought about it one way or the other. But, you know, it not so surprising. You knew her; she had such a hard time in life, such a very hard time."
"Well, you and David did everything you could for her."
No, we didn't, she thought. We didn’t do anything for her. No one ever did anything for her.
"The press is already speculating that she killed herself out of remorse for lying about you."
"Is that what they’re saying?"
"Yes, I heard it on the radio."
"Did she leave a note?"
"Haven't heard of one, but they may be keeping it quiet. I'll ask Chief Thompson. I think if there had been one, they would have told you."
"When will they release the body?"
"I'm not sure, soon. Do you want me to handle the funeral arrangements?"
"No, I'll do it. I'm getting to be quite the expert at it."
Marshall patted her hand, noting that even in sorrow Roberta looked attractive.
"Marshall, I want you to come in when we get home. There's something I want to discuss with you, professionally. I need some legal advice."
Settled with coffee and muffins in David’s den, Roberta told Marshall the truth.
"So, you see, Joan was telling the truth, the truth as she heard it, as she believed it," Roberta said at the end of her story.
"My God, Roberta, God. I can’t believe it. David, of all people. David."
"Believe it, Marshall, it's the truth."
"My dear, what can I say? Horrible for you, for him. For the child too, I suppose. But it’s over now, nothing to be done about it. David. In a million years I never would have..."
"There is something to be done," Roberta interrupted
"What do you mean?"
"I didn't tell you this because I thought you should know. I told you because I want to know if there are any legal implications of going public with the truth, the whole truth. Exactly what am I letting myself in for, legally?"

"Well, I don't know. I don't think you are guilty of anything at all. All you did was watch. Isn't that right? I have to research this. Roberta, as your friend, not your lawyer, why do this now? Isn't that exactly what David didn’t want?"

"David was entitled to do what he felt he had to for his own good. But now, now with Joan’s death, I have to do what I think is right. Besides, the wagons are circling. The questions about David’s death should be addressed. What should I do, tell more lies?"

"I want you to think about this very carefully, very carefully. It will ruin David’s memory."

"Perhaps for some people. But it may make his death count for something."

"Don’t be too sure of that. You'll be applauded by the fringe, but this will not be welcome news in most other quarters. Not at all. It’s not the image they want to have of David."

"Image? That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? People don’t want to know truth. They just want image."

"If you think you’re being some kind of hero here, forget it. Some people will think it’s great, but believe me the majority of people will not approve at all."

"Christ, Marshall. I don’t care about being applauded or about being vilified for that matter. I just want you to tell me what the legal ramifications are. I think it’s more prevalent than people realize. Anyway, it’s the truth. It was David’s way of handling it. I don’t judge him, I hope you won’t."

"All right, I’ll get back to you as soon as possible. Please think about this Roberta. You know it will ruin your chances for the Senate race."

“Think so? I’m not so sure about that. I have to call Maxine and tell her first. I owe her that."

Marshall stood, preparing to leave. "Roberta, you’re quite naturally upset now. Please think about this. Don’t make any hasty decisions."

"Marshall, you just don’t understand."

"Perhaps not. I’m not saying I understand. I’m just advising you to wait. Don’t talk to anyone, including Maxine, about this. Give it a day or two; you can always talk to the press. But once you do, you can't take it back."

"Marshall, I won’t have people thinking Joan killed herself because she lied. I just can’t let that happen. I couldn’t live with myself if I let that happen. Really, Marshall, I couldn’t. Besides,” she said, helping him on with his coat, "I’m tired of the lies. I know it’s the right thing to do. If I don’t do it this way, I’ll die the death of a thousand cuts. Better by far to get it over with."
The next day Roberta invited Maxine to come over.
"I’m sorry, Maxine. You’ve been a good friend; I appreciate all you’ve done. I’m really very sorry."
"You have nothing to be sorry about. What hell you've been through. I know it’s only 11, but do you have a drink?"
"Sure, I think I’ll join you."
Roberta poured two stiff gin and tonics, "I thought you might try to talk me out of it," she said.
"No, I wouldn’t do that. Although—No, this is your decision. I would like a chance to figure out the best way to handle it, for you as well as for us."
"Marshall doesn’t think I should do it."
"Marshall is a coward, an asshole and a lawyer. Doesn't surprise me."
"You think I’m doing the right thing?"
"I don’t really know. I admire you for it though. It’s not going to be easy; it will be a feeding frenzy for the media."
"I know that. I want to consult with Frank Crimp, that’s David’s PR guy, and with Sam Wallace, David's chief of staff."
"These people are your staff now."
"Yes, I still think of them as David’s people. But you’re right, they are my staff now. Anyway, I’m going to ask them to come over a little later. I thought you might like to be here too. You know, to decide how and when, that kind of thing."
Maxine thought this over.
"Yes, I would. I think we should ask Susan Winik. She is the smartest communications person I know."
"Of course."
The women were silent for a moment. Maxine drained her glass.
"Roberta?" she asked, "can I say something?"
"Of course."
"Well, I guess I just don’t see the point. You’ll be ruining David’s reputation. Joan is dead. I can see you don’t want it put down to her having told a lie, but is that so terrible compared with what people will say and think about David? Isn’t preserving his memory worth something?"
"I thought you approved."
"I never said I approved. I said you had nothing to be sorry for. David had his reasons. That was his business. You may be sorry for this, however."
"If I had told the truth yesterday, Joan might still be alive."
"Joan was a sick girl. She was going to kill herself eventually; one could see that in her. You don’t even know why she did it. Maybe it had nothing to do with this; maybe it was a romance that went sour. Who knows?"

"I know. It was this. I’m not saying I blame myself for her death. I know she was a depressive. But it’s enough already. David’s dead; Joan’s dead. I don’t know if you can understand, but it’s too big a secret, too big a lie. There are already hints that I cremated the body to hide something. I can’t carry it alone anymore, no matter what the consequences."

"You know what people will think?"

"Let people think whatever they want."

"You don’t care what people think?"

"Not anymore."

"Nothing I can say then to discourage you?"

"Nothing. It’s what I have to do, Maxine."

"And the Senate race?" Maxine asked.

"What about it? I didn’t commit a crime; at least Marshall doesn’t think so. As a matter of fact, I can see quite a few important issues coming out of this. A national debate on assisted suicide, the government’s slow progress on AIDS research. Maybe I’ll introduce Right to Die legislation. Who knows, this may be just the thing to focus attention on me as a serious candidate. I’m tired of being seen as just an amateur."

"That was part of your charm, Roberta, a politician with amateur standing appeals to the public these days. Our polls show the voting public is cynical of all professional politicians. You may be right about this. We’ll have to take some polls, fast. You just may be right."

After Maxine left, Roberta slept a long, deep, dreamless sleep.

She awoke in mid-afternoon, surprised by the silence. Everything’s so quiet, she thought.

Confused for a moment, she remembered she had turned off the phones, and then she remembered why.

She looked at her watch. It was 3:15. She had invited the group of advisors for 4:30. Plenty of time.

She got up to go to the bathroom, glancing in the mirror. A deep crease was imprinted on her cheek, as if she had been branded with a hot iron. I am disfigured, she thought.

She removed her clothes, took a shower, and opened the closet to select something to wear and suddenly, overcome, lay down again on the bed.
All her life she had been afraid of being a hard luck case, one of the unfortunate ones whose lives just didn't work out.

She had never trusted her success, her good luck. Her career and her marriage were flukes, unearned capital. If she failed now, if she was wrong about this, the long slide down would begin. People would ask, "Whatever happened to Roberta?" and "Poor thing, one never heard of her after the tragedies."

The friends she had collected over the years were, she believed, acquaintances attracted to her position, her status. She had no confidence that any of them would stand by her while she drifted into obscurity. People didn’t like to be around failure. It made them uncomfortable, took too much effort to do and say just the right thing.

I'll be okay for money, she thought. That's something. I could just hang around Washington, waiting for the odd dinner invitation. She knew those women, widows, having their hair done twice a week, waiting to meet someone.

No. I'll sell this place. Start over. As what? Where?

She thought of Joan. Joan, who must have felt despair far greater than her own. Joan, who never really had a chance.

This thing she was about to do, this truth-telling about David, maybe it wasn’t such a great idea after all. “What was the point?” Marshall had asked. Exposing David, ruining her own political chances, for what? Already too many people knew. She was protected with Marshall by attorney-client privilege, but who knew what Maxine might do. If only she hadn’t told Maxine, maybe she would change her mind about this altogether.

I have to get up, she thought. To dress. To choose something to wear. To speak and to behave rationally.

She held up her hands to inspect her manicure. The polish was just beginning to chip. Was Marshall right? Was there really nothing I could do? She thought. How could that be? That nothing I said or did would make a difference?

David had left her alone to cope, holding the bag.

Now she was going to betray him. To tell the world that David Palmer arranged his death, that he had AIDS. To explain that Joan Palmer did hear an argument, that she had not lied.

Choosing a simple black wool suit, she slipped on the skirt and realized she had lost weight.

Roberta smoothed out the bed, plumped up the pillows. She opened the window to let in some air. She dabbed a touch of perfume behind her ears.

She was sorry now that she had asked the staff and consultants over. She didn’t need any help with this. Nobody was going to manage this news story, nothing to spin. It was beyond damage control. She was tired of being handled,
manipulated. She would make her own choices now, her own decisions. She suddenly had a sure sense of herself. She hoped it would last.

Maxine, Frank Crimp, Sam Wallace, and Susan Winik arrived together. Roberta had not met Susan Winik before, although she knew her reputation as a master communications person. Frank and Sam shook her hand, said how sorry they were. Maxine hugged her.

She had asked Mrs. Ravel to prepare coffee, tea, and sandwiches.

"Tell the truth," Frank said. "If it’s alright with you, I could use a drink."

"Of course," Roberta said. "Anybody else?"

"Maybe a little brandy," Maxine said.

"I'll have tea," Susan said.

"Sam?" Roberta asked.

"Hell, any kind of whiskey," he said.

Settled in the living room with their drinks, Roberta asked if they had been filled in on what this meeting was about.

"I took the liberty—," Maxine said, "to save time."

"Well, then, you know. So, the question is how to handle this?"

"Two choices," Frank said. "Exclusive to the Times or the Washington Post, or a press conference. Both have obvious dangers. The exclusive route pisses everybody else off, the press conference route leave it open to endless questions."

"Are you prepared for the kind of questions they will throw at you?" Susan asked.

"Such as?"

Susan opened her attaché case and took out a folder. "Don't take offense," she said, "but I've made a few notes. Okay if I throw some likely questions out?"

"Sure," Roberta said.

"First, was David homosexual?"

Roberta frowned. "I'm not going to answer that. It's none of their business."

"They think it is. They will press you on how he contracted AIDS. If you stonewall, they'll never go away. It will linger."

"What can I say?"

"The truth, if you know it," Susan said.

"Okay, the truth is, I believe that he had occasional, infrequent homosexual contacts."

"Then say that," Susan said.

"When did you learn of your husband's infidelity? How did you feel? What exactly happened the night he died? Do you think he did the right thing? Did you try and stop him? Did his daughter know? Why did Joan Palmer kill herself?"
SHEILA LEVIN

Do you feel responsible? Are you gay? Have you ever been gay? Did you and your husband have a normal sex life? How often did you and your husband have sex? Are you HIV positive? Are you worried? Are you still planning to run for the Senate? Do you think the American people will have sympathy or contempt for you? Are you in favor of euthanasia?"

"Wow! Hold on," Roberta said. "That's enough."

"They won't stop there. They'll go on and on."

"So, what's your advice?" Roberta asked.

"A statement, a full statement answering most of the relevant questions. And then take no questions. None at all. You're still grieving; you're entitled to some privacy," Susan said. "Then, in a few weeks, we go on Sixty Minutes, or Oprah--just one major talk show. Probably Sixty Minutes. We allow them to ask whatever they want; you tell the truth. By that time, we'll have feedback from the polls. We can see how things are shaping up," Sam said.

"Maxine?" Roberta asked.

"I agree. Best way to handle it. Let's see how the country takes this before we open you up to questions."

"Also, there will be some distraction. I hear that Jerry Walsh, Marsha's husband, is in big trouble. Some kind of conflict of interest case. Could be charges against him. I'm not sure of all the details," Susan said.

"Aren't they separated?" Roberta asked

"Well, it's been an on and off marriage. But now she's stuck. If she leaves it looks bad. If she stays she gets tarnished with his problems. Either way, it's a losing situation for her. May take some of the heat off you. We have plenty of ways to keep that kind of story alive."

"Also," Sam said, "we think we should start positive commercials in a few weeks. Probably two weeks of intensive radio, and some internet presence. Not TV yet. The polls show people don't like Marcia much. Her negatives are high. They respect her, but they don't like her. This business with her husband will hurt too. They like you; we want to exploit that. You'll take a hit on this, but we can follow with commercials that underscore your loyalty, your commitment, your courage."

"About what?" Roberta asked.

"Doesn't matter, just hammer home those virtues. Brave woman, courageous wife, etc. The details don't count now, just the underlying message," Susan said.

"You people have given this a lot of thought. I'm impressed. Imagine if you had more than a couple of hours," Roberta said.

Susan, glancing at the others, said, "I think I am speaking for all of us when I say we think you're terrific. Personally, I don't know how you're holding up so
well. By the way, no makeup for the press conference, maybe just a little blush and a touch of lipstick. We'll get through this, Roberta. The early polls show Marcia is weak; she will be weaker when we get through with her. She's vulnerable on a lot of issues. I think we can win this. I think you can be the next U.S. Senator from New York.

The others nodded in agreement.

"I can't take sides, yet," Maxine said, "but, unofficially, I think you're playing this just right. If we pull this off, it may help in the end."

"Thank you, thank you very much. All of you. I'm going to need you. Susan, I hope you'll join the team officially. I mean to win this election. For the first time, I actually believe we can. So, let's see the statement," Roberta said.

They worked late, refining the statement, arguing about one point or another. Mrs. Ravel provided more sandwiches, and cookies. Maxine confessed she was fast on a computer, so she was appointed secretary. By 10 p.m., they had a statement they were all satisfied with.

Roberta stretched. Her neck was tense. "Well, I guess that wraps it up. When do we do this?"

"Tomorrow at noon in the press room of the Congressional Office Building," Susan said.

"So soon? I thought I would have more time," Roberta said.

"Can you handle it?" Susan asked.

Roberta hesitated. Could she? Too many people dead of shame, of heartbreak, she thought. David was right. There is only the moment.

For a moment, she felt frightened, bereft. She looked at her advisors, wondering how much they really cared, how genuine their commitment was, how wise their advice.

What difference did it make? This was her decision not theirs. Hers to take; hers to execute. David was right about one thing, at least. She was certain that this was her moment, the moment for truth. If she missed this moment, whatever the consequences, she too would be trapped forever in the lie and all the remorse and shame that went with it.

"I can handle it," she said. "You guys work out the details, and leave the driving to me."
Chapter 25

Laura

"Sol assured me, swore to me, that he wouldn't tell anyone about my conversation with Joan," Laura said to Neil, hanging up the phone after a strained conversation with Sol.
"Well, then?" Neil asked.
"I still feel uneasy."
"You can hardly blame yourself."
"Maybe not. Christ, all I was thinking about was that now I finally had something juicy to report. I wish I’d never talked to her."
"Just doing your job. Look, Joan was always unstable. Everyone knew that. An odd kid, an even stranger adult."
"Barely an adult," Laura said.
"I also feel bad. I should have called her. Remember I said I was going to?" Neil replied.
"Why do you think she did it? Even if she was lying, was it worth killing yourself over?"
Neil shrugged. "Who knows? She didn’t have an easy life. Who knows what went on in her mind?"
"Imagine how Roberta Palmer must feel. God, I wouldn’t want to be her for anything."
"She won't run now, you know." Neil said.
"How do you know that?" Laura challenged him.
"Well, that’s the word around the campaign."
"Puts Marcia in a stronger position?"
"We think so."
She hates the way Neil casually tosses off the "we." He’s on the team now; Marcia had been calling him more often for advice.
"You like her now, don’t you?" Laura asked.
"Marcia?"
"Yes, Marcia. You seem to like her a lot now."
"I don’t know that ‘like’ is the word I’d use. I respect her, I think she is very smart, and I think she can win this race."
"Suppose she can’t? Suppose she drops out too?"
Neil chuckles. "Not Marcia. She wants this so bad she can taste it. I can’t imagine anything causing her to drop out."
"I can."
Now she’s got his attention. She hasn’t told him about her last conversation with Jake. She’s gotten accustomed to keeping things from him, telling him what
he wants to hear. It's been almost a week since she and Jake had that talk. She hasn't seen him since except once as he was rushing to court. She thought Jake assumed she'd decided to drop it. But she hadn't.

What she would like to do is blow the lid off everything. She did not believe Sol; she thought he leaked the story to that reporter. She thought Jake was still involved with Marcia, that Marcia was using Neil, playing him for a fool. She herself had been badly used. She's in over her head, out of her depth.

Neil, busy with his position papers, with his advice and hand holding of Marcia Baker, was feeling important again.

He's on top again; the phone rang. He had appointments, meetings. He's planning a major fundraiser for Marcia, calling on old friends and clients. He kept a daily diary again, a sure sign that he was back in business.

I should be glad for him, she thought, but she wasn't. She found his new persona unappealing; she's surprised he could not see through it. She didn't want him to be unhappy, but she can't stand his grave tone, his pretentiousness. She knew he saw himself as playing a major role in Marcia's campaign, and later, after she was elected an even more important role. She saw in her husband the kind of desperate pandering of which she thought he was incapable. She had loved his dignity, his control over life. Now, he's just like everyone else: bending, bowing deep from the waist, kissing ass.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Neil asked.

"Just that there may be reasons for her to withdraw."

"Such as?"

Laura turned away. She knew having gone this far she's going to tell him.

"She's hiding something. Something big. Maybe even something illegal."

"Really? What?"

So she told him. She told him everything, Jake's petition to her not to tell anyone about the loan, her suspicions about the tax schedules Marcia would not release. She told him everything.

"Doesn't sound like all that much to me. So she had an affair, and he lent her some money, not exactly the crime of the century."

"But why is Jake so crazed, so frightened of my telling anyone?"

Neil didn't know the answer to this. But he did know that Jake was afraid. Jake called him a few days ago; they met for a drink. He had no intention of telling Laura about this. He knew Jake would never mention it.

"How have you been, Neil?" Jake asked, as they ordered a couple of scotches at the Plaza Bar.
"Good, you know I’m helping Marcia Baker on the campaign. I really am enjoying myself. I didn’t think it would be this interesting, but I find it quite engaging. How about you?"

"I’m okay, going through a hard time. You know Pat’s left. She wants a divorce; she’s planning to get married. That’s a funny feeling after all these years."

"Well, you certainly had your flings, so I guess—."

"Oh, I know. I don’t blame her; it’s just a strange feeling. I always imagined I would be the one to leave, if we split at all."

"That’s not so easy either. Leaving, I mean."

"But you and Laura are okay, aren’t you?"

"Sure, we’re fine."

"No regrets?"

"Plenty. But then, don’t we all?"

"Sure do. Me too, plenty."

"Anything to these rumors about the federal bench?" Neil asked.

Jake hesitates. "I hope so," he said finally.

"You want it?"

"Christ, I want it more than I’ve ever wanted anything. I’m sick to death of our old game. You bet, you bet I want this," Jake replied. I don’t want to end up like you, Jake thought, waiting for the phone to ring, grasping at straws.

Neil knew Jake didn’t trust him. He didn’t blame him, but he wished things were different. He thought Jake was more lost than he. He would like to tell Jake the things he has learned. That life was not the game they thought, that ambition, even success, was transient. He wanted to tell his old friend, his protégée, that he set a bad example. It’s getting late. Jake, he feared, was still missing the point, still looking for outside approval. That’s what this judgeship was about, what the years of women were about. It’s time. He wanted to tell Jake to stop kidding himself. Don’t wait, as I did, until it’s too late. Prepare yourself for life without an audience. Look inside; start talking to yourself; it would be good practice for the future. But he saw that Jake was flush with life, animated by all manner of outside stimuli. It will do no good to preach, he thought. They sipped at their scotches; Jake finished his and signals for another. "One more?"

"No, thanks, I’ll nurse this one."

"Look, I’ll be honest with you. I need a favor, but now that you’re here, I’m not at all sure I can ask it."

The idea that Jake might need something from him had not occurred to Neil. He had some vague idea that Laura’s work might be unsatisfactory, that Neil
wanted to talk to Jake about how to let her down easy. Or maybe just consult him about his divorce.

"Well, you can certainly ask," Neil said. "We've known each other a long time. I guess I owe you one or two."

"Does Laura talk to you about the work she is doing for me?"

"You mean the investigation of Marcia and Roberta Palmer?"

"Yes."

"Some. She tells me a little."

"Let's not screw around. Did she tell you that Marcia and I once had an affair?"

"Yes, she did. Surprised me, actually, I thought I was pretty much up on your women."

"She told you about the money I loaned Marcia?"

"Yes, she mentioned it."

"She thinks she should go to Marsh with this."

"That I did not know. She wants to go to Marsh to report you loaned Marcia Baker money?"

"Well, what she really wants, or so she says, is for me to disclose it to someone in the firm."

"So, what's the big deal? Disclose it." Neil says.

"I can't do that."

"Want to tell me why?"

"Not without invoking attorney/client privilege."

"I see. That bad?"

"Could be."

"Well, whatever it is," Neil holds up his hand. "No, don't tell me. I don't need to know, whatever it is. Won't it come out eventually?"

"Maybe, maybe not. But if Laura insists on revealing my association with Marcia, it puts me in, shall we say, a more difficult position."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I would think that was obvious. Discourage her, talk her out of it."

"Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. Like the way Neil Bennett does things when he wants them to go his way. Like that."

"She's pretty stubborn. I guess you know that?"

"You're pretty good, but then you know that. Look, either you will help or you won't. Just don't jerk my chain on this. It's too important."

Neil sat for a minute, wondering what his old friend has done to frighten him this much. He was going to help Jake. He knew that. But he was savoring, for
just a moment, the situation. He was entitled, he figured, a moment or two to digest his old friend’s humble pie.

"Does Marcia know about this?"

“About the problem or about my asking you to help?”

"Either or both?"

"She knows about the problem; she doesn’t know I’m talking to you. I wasn’t sure I could."

"Well, of course, I’ll see what I can do. Laura usually discusses things with me. If she brings it up, I’ll certainly try and dissuade her from doing anything. Will that do it?"

"That would be just fine, terrific."

"Okay, I’ll do my best. And, by the way, if it works, it’s okay with me if you mention to Marcia that I was helpful."

"I won’t forget this, Neil. I know we’ve had our problems from time to time, but I won’t forget this."

"Good. Having you in my debt is most appealing." Neil said, handing Jake the check.

Neil knew he would have to play it down with Laura, to propel her gently towards her own decision.

"He’s probably just really embarrassed about the affair, about the loan, about not telling you. You know I think he’s going through a hard time with the divorce. And maybe it’s not so easy having you there," he said to Laura now that she has raised it.

"Why on earth not?" Laura said.

"I always thought he had a thing for you; maybe he still does. His marriage is breaking up; ours is stronger than ever. The guy’s human. Maybe it bothers him."

"I doubt it; I don't think he thinks of me as a woman, not now anyway."

"Still, I don’t think you’ve got enough to take this to Marsh. Doesn't look good for you either, disloyal."

"But isn’t my loyalty to the firm?"

"Sure. But what have you got really? A clandestine affair, a loan, may be inappropriate, maybe not, a client who has changed her mind about representation."

"Not about representation, just about doing opposition research on her."

"Whatever, it’s still the client’s call."

"I can’t continue to work on her case. I’ll have to withdraw."
“That’s not a bad idea. You don’t seem to get along with her. In fact, it’s a good idea. Just withdraw from the case, and let Jake put somebody else on it.”

"Of course, with Roberta dropping out, if she does, there won’t be any need for even that part of the investigation," Laura said. "Well, if you really think I shouldn’t do anything, I guess I won’t."

"You sound disappointed."

Laura smiles. "Maybe I am a little; maybe I liked the idea of stirring things up, getting noticed."

"Laura, aren’t I enough for you anymore? I used to be. What’s changed? Have I changed? What’s the matter honey?"

Laura sighed deeply. "I wish I knew. I thought when we were finally together that life would be perfect. I know that was naive, but I thought that. All those years of waiting for you, all that crushing disappointment, years of coming second, of your breaking dates, of never knowing. I wanted for all that to end, for us to be together."

She remembered waiting for Neil one summer years ago. In Greece. She rented a white washed room on the island of Patmos. That month had been a chasm of loneliness.

It was a month of fearful anticipation. She went to the village every day, to a small guesthouse where Neil had the number, to see if he had called to say when he was coming. She spoke to no one, nodding occasionally to a neighbor. By the time Neil came, she thought she would die of quiet. She was so sure then that her life would be complete if only Neil showed up. She waited in that solitary white room, the milky afternoon sun filtering through wooden shutters, making bargains with God.

Perhaps, she thought now, God only makes deals with the pure of heart, not with the likes of me. Maybe those of us who managed our lives by manipulation, who relied on cunning and fabrication, were not candidates for such spiritual covenants.

"And now, now what do you want?" Neil asked gently, nudging Laura back to their delicate negotiations.

How could she tell him? She only has the barest inkling herself of why things are sour. Why the flavor of her marriage, the taste of her life, is more tart than sweet. Nothing seems fresh, crisp. Perhaps, she thought, I’m simply yearning for youth, for the sense that I am entitled to everything, for the simplicity of younger sensations, youthful aspirations, knowing all things are possible.
Everything now seemed ordained. She would not leave Neil, this husband for whom she has done battle, for whom she waited, in whom she invested so much of her life. She would not embarrass Jake, her old friend who betrayed her.

She did not know why Joan Palmer killed herself. Laura was not so foolish to blame herself, to take on that responsibility. But she knew she was part of a chain—a willing, eager, conspirator in her destruction.

If Neil wanted to continue to work with Marcia Baker, she would not try to stop him. Let it run its course. She’d waited before; she knew how. She was not like Marcia Baker, not willing to sacrifice everything for her profession, to end up alone cataloguig her press clippings, waiting for the phone to ring. Flawed as her marriage was, she wanted it still.

Neil was waiting for an answer.

“T’m not enough for you, is that it?” he said again.

"Who is?" she said. "Who is ever enough for another person? It's true I thought we could be everything for each other. I was wrong. It’s just not the way things are, not for anyone, I think. But what difference does it make? I wanted you when I wanted you; I wanted you to make a statement by leaving your wife for me. It wasn't supposed to take ten years. The whole world was going to know you loved me more.”

"Still that," Neil said. "Still, after all is said and done, it is still that?"

"It will always be that. It will always be between us, for you as well as for me. But so what? We have to stop hiding from each other, stop pretending that we are still clandestine lovers. I'm tired of pretending that it's the same as it was, the same desperate love affair, the same passionate sex. It's not; we both know that. But so what? What we have is plenty good enough. I love you, Neil. I've always loved you.”

"You want to know what I want? I want to be your best friend, your very best friend, so you don't have to hide behind appointments and busywork. You don't have to conceal your disappointment, your pain," she continued.

"You are, you are my best friend. Sometimes I think you're my only friend," Neil said. "I thought I was losing you."

"Not a chance," Laura said, thinking that Neil sounded strange, but familiar. She recognized that tone, that gentle voice she had longed to hear. "Not a chance, darling," she said again.

"It's funny," Laura said. "This reminds me of a time when I came home to find my mother and Martin in bed. They had been arguing; I could tell. I heard my mother say, 'Am I losing you?' to him. 'Not a chance, Martin said. I walked in just at that moment. Martin was smoking a cigarette; he put it in the ashtray and said to me, 'Well, look who's here. Laura, I have a present for you.’
'You do?' I said. 'Yup,' he replied, slowly getting out of bed. He had his arm around my mother and before he got out of bed, he casually ran his hand down over her breast...

Neil cocked his head, staring at Laura. "Laura," he interrupted, you don’t have to do that," he said.

“No?” Laura replied, “I thought—.”

“Yes, you’re not wrong. It’s exciting. You’re the modern Scheherazade, with your pornographic stories, propping up your nearly impotent husband.”

“Stop that, you’re not impotent, it’s just—.”

“I know what it is, Laura. I know all about every kind of diminished capacity. But these stories hurt you more than they help me. There’s something corrosive about them, something that makes me feel guilty, as if I were the perpetrator.”

“They’re just stories.”

“Not really. I mean they are stories, but you don’t have to be quite so naked, so vulnerable. You don’t have to fix me, Laura, or, for that matter, anything else. We are what we are, flaws, problems, even impotence. That’s who we are; it’s enough for me. I hope to God it is for you too.”

Later that night, after they had made love, after Neil was asleep, Laura got up to have a cup of tea. She took her cup into the living room; the view of the city on this clear night was magical. She wondered what Marcia Baker was doing right now, probably asleep, resting up for another important day. Well, she thought, we couldn’t all be wonder woman. I’ve spent too many years tossing my fishing line as far as it would go.

Neil was the big one; I landed him with my wit, patience, and my tall tales.

I’ve had enough, she thought, I’m getting out. Attention must be paid to some other things right now, like this apartment, these premises that should be a home. And Neil, attention must be paid to Neil.

It’s not coincidental, she thought, that Marcia, Roberta, and I were childless. Not a babe between us to sweeten the night. She imagined an army of women all bearing arms not babes. Rushing about just like the men, telephones strapped to their sides instead of an infant, nurturing ambition too, just like the men. Power sucked at their breast until they were dry. Most will fall in battle, left behind to shrivel and die. A few lucky ones, of course, will take the hill. Just like the men.

At day’s end, when they counted their losses, Laura thought, as they stepped gingerly among the wounded, holding their skirts for fear of contamination, would one of them call a halt? Would one of them be brave enough to lay down arms, sue for peace? She thought not. Certainly it won’t be Marcia Baker marching at the head of the line who will notice those who had fallen behind.
Laura rinsed her cup and slipped quietly into bed. She moved towards Neil, pressing her body into his back. Just before she fell asleep, she thought again of Marcia Baker. You keep running, old girl. I’m getting off.

Laura had the feeling that she was changing course just in time, just in time to have a life.

Sol learned about Joan’s death as he was brushing his teeth. CNN broke into the news with that eerie music it plays for “Breaking News.”

He turned off his electric toothbrush, walked into the bedroom to watch it, and flipped the channel to catch it on another station. He flipped it again, searching for one that would correct the error. Sitting down on the edge of his bed, holding his head, Sol tried to shake it off. I did not expect this, he thought, not this. This was not what was supposed to happen. This was not what I wanted. Damn stupid girl.

He was surprised at how heartbroken he felt. He never liked her; she was such an annoying girl. He knew instinctively that he would never talk to Marcia about this, that they shared the blame for this sad girl’s death. What did Marcia feel now? He wondered. He didn’t really care. It was another life burden he must bear alone, another secret he had to cover up. He knew, too, that one day, when he had time to think about this, when all the campaigns were over, when all the bets were paid off, he would be left alone with the essential truth of his complicity in the last act of Joan Palmer.
Chapter 26

Roberta

The conference room was jammed. Although statements were only now being handed out, word had gotten around that Roberta was going to drop a bomb.

Frank Crimp stepped to the podium, tapped the microphone to make sure it was live.

"Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. The Senator has a statement to read. She will not, repeat not, take any questions at this time. Senator Roberta Palmer."

Roberta stepped to where her index cards were placed at the podium. She picked them up, cleared her throat, and took a sip of water.

"Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. Two days ago, my stepdaughter, Joan Palmer, committed suicide. Joan was an unhappy young woman; her death is tragic. Shortly before she died, she gave an interview to the Washington Times in which she claimed she overheard a quarrel between my husband, David Palmer, and me a few days before he died. The article implied there might have been something amiss about David's death. Joan was not lying, although she did misinterpret what she heard. My husband, David Palmer, and I did quarrel a few nights before his death."

Roberta paused, took another sip of water. All she could hear was the grinding of cameras; otherwise, the room seemed preternaturally quiet.

"We quarreled because he had told me he had arranged his own death, that he wanted to die because he was ill, terminally ill. My husband had contracted AIDS and had determined that he did not wish to extend his life. Until that evening, I knew nothing about this. Like everyone else, I thought he had been battling prostate cancer. He told me that evening that he had been diagnosed as HIV positive two years ago. Concerned about his family, he decided at the time of his diagnosis to conceal his condition. However, as the disease advanced and with the onset of late stage symptoms, he felt he could no longer go on.

“David Palmer was a remarkable man, an outstanding public servant, a compassionate person, a loving husband. He was a very private person. The idea of subjecting himself to the inevitable media frenzy, was intolerable to him. In the face of what he believed to be certain death, despite the possibility of heroic medical efforts, he decided to die on his own terms."

Roberta paused again. Done. She looked down. Some reporters were holding tape recorders, some writing in notebooks. Others were staring at her, as if she had lost her mind, she thought.
"So, what Joan heard was part of a conversation in which I, naturally stunned, tried to persuade my husband to wait, to try the treatment. But it was to no avail. He had already contacted a doctor who was willing to assist him. Dr. Fallows, that doctor, as you know, has since died as well.

Now she heard the gasps, the flurry of pens scratching, the grinding of the cameras seemed louder. She saw their faces harden; the mood altered.

This was big. She could hear and smell them salivating. She thought then that David was right. He could not have borne this kind of exposure. They would have gnawed at him, chewed him up, as they will now devour him dead. Roberta felt herself stiffen, toughen, ready now for anything.

“I know my husband loved me. I never doubted it when he was alive. I didn’t doubt it that evening, and I don’t doubt it now. We did not discuss the details of those experiences; it was not relevant to the central issue.”

"After hours of discussion, David persuaded me that he had thought this through thoroughly, that he was ready. He asked me to be present and to be with him when he died. It was not easy to do so. But in a sense, I had no real choice. Either he would die alone or with me by his side.

"I never dreamed that Joan had heard any part of that conversation. I did not intend for this to become public. I do so now because of the questions raised, because of the suspicion that Joan lied, and because I believe it to be the right thing to do.

“If David’s and Joan’s deaths are to have any meaning, only the truth will serve. The truth is that David Palmer chose to die. That Joan, perhaps afraid of being accused of lying, perhaps haunted as well by other demons, killed herself. Their deaths point an accusatory finger at a society that has still refused to deal with an epidemic that stigmatizes the victims, and does not allot sufficient funds for either research or education.”

"In my remaining months in the Senate I pledge to do everything I can to reverse these trends. I make a commitment to all those who are suffering with AIDS to help in every way I can.

"I know there have been many rumors about my candidacy for the Senate. Well, I intend to run and I intend to win. I am accused of being a political amateur. It is true that I have little professional political experience but I do believe that my candidacy will bring together individuals from both parties, from all walks of life, who want a different voice. Someone who will listen to their problems and not be afraid to propose real solutions. I will run a clean campaign on the issues, the kind of campaign David Palmer would have run if he were alive.”
"I know you have questions, but as Frank said, I will take no questions at this time. In the weeks to come, I will have more to say on this. For now, I ask that you allow me to mourn my husband and my stepdaughter. I loved them both very much."

Roberta thanked them and turned to leave. As she stepped off the podium, Martin Friday from the *L.A. Times* asked her if she was HIV positive.

She continued walking.

"Did you have sex with your husband?" Kim Saxon from Dish the Dirt shouted out.

Roberta walked past them, out of the room.

CNN had carried it live. It was the lead on all the networks and was featured around the world.

During the following week, Roberta received 937,000 emails urging her to run for the Senate. She received seven death threats, 180,000 letters, 34,000 postcards and 22 proposals of marriage. Her approval rating doubled. Editorial opinion on David's decision was mixed. But editorial comment on Roberta's press conference was unanimously favorable. Rush Limbaugh invited Roberta to be a guest on his show.

Susan Winik negotiated a full hour with Barbara Walters and agreed to a long piece for the *New York Times Magazine*.

There was a rumor, unconfirmed, that *Time* was considering putting Roberta on the cover.

A few days after the press conference, Judy Parks found herself in an elevator with Sol. They were old friends.

"Hiya," he said. "Long time. How are you?"

"Very. I'm good, yourself?"

"Couldn't be better," Sol said.

"What did you think of the press conference?" Judy asked.

"Like Chinese food, they'll be hungry for more," Sol replied.

Judy laughed. "So, want to make a side bet on which of our worthies wins?"

"Name it," Sol said.

Sometime in November, one of them was going to be out big bucks for dinner.
Marcia

"What a week," Marcia said, as she slid into the banquette across from Jake at The Plaza.

"I'm exhausted. I only have a few minutes; Sol booked me for some stupid speech. Can I have a drink? No, better not. The way I feel it could knock me out. So, how are you?"

"Fine, just fine. Since you're so pressed, I'll be brief and to the point. I think, mind you, don't know for sure, but think that Laura will not tell anyone about the loan. She is probably going to insist on withdrawing from this matter, but that's okay."

"Well, that is good news. Probably doesn't hurt that Neil is so involved with the campaign. I knew you could do it."

"Did you? Well, it wasn't so easy. And we are far from being out of the woods. Marcia, you should think hard about withdrawing. Your stock purchase of PRC is going to come out. Believe me, I know. It's what I do."

"So, it comes out. Maybe I even bring it out," Marcia says. "I'll check with Sol, but I think that's the way to handle it. I'll make some joke about getting lucky in the market." She is warming to this idea.

"You don't seem to get it, Marcia. You really don't. The risk is too great."

"Why? You said she wouldn't tell anyone."

"Sol knows too," he reminded her.

"Well, you can be damn sure Sol isn't going to tell anyone."

"Withdraw." Jake repeated. His voice was muted; he knew he would not persuade Marcia.

"You haven't made a case counselor, not even close."

"How about it could ruin my life, to say nothing of your own."

"Look, suppose the worst case scenario. I announce in my own way how I made the money. Somebody leaks that we had an affair. I deny it. We were friends, just friends. The loan to me comes out. What have they got? Nothing but a lot of supposition. I bought the stock on a hunch; it was public knowledge that you were representing Simmons. Most natural thing in the world that I might think to buy PRC."

"I doubt the US Attorney will see it that way. Marcia, if there is an investigation, just an investigation, it would be ruinous for me."

"They could never prove anything."

"They don't have to prove anything; they just have to start questioning people, lots of people. About lots of things. They can take a year—years—and
subpoena all my clients, my partners, widen the investigation, do whatever they want. To you too."

"Politician under siege might not be so bad. Might play very well with the women, with the liberals. Don’t be so glum; this is going to work out. I can feel it."

"Not impressed with Roberta’s press conference?"

"Oh, it was impressive all right. But it won’t last. In the end, she doesn’t have the experience, the substantive background for the job. What’s she going to do, run on David’s tragic death? It’s not enough. I’m glad now that we didn’t use anything we had against her.” Jake noted the implied denial. He did not say anything. They were both quiet for a few moments. Marcia, afraid of falling into the silence finally said. “Terrible about Joan. You know she worked for me briefly?”

Marcia had been assessing her role in Joan’s suicide since she learned of it. Culpable, she decided. I am culpable, but not guilty. Her world was moving so fast, her exposure so worrisome. Marcia could not afford to take responsibility; she could not afford to feel remorse.

"Yes, you mentioned that,” Jake said.

Marcia sighed. "Not a happy child at best, but I never would have suspected that she would—."


Jake was tired of this. Like Laura, he too believed Sol leaked the story, maybe even got Marcia’s approval to leak it. However, what does it matter? If it hadn’t been Laura who talked to Joan, someone else would have. Joan Hansen was a suicide waiting for a pretext, he thought. He was getting out of the killing game now.

"Marcia,” he said, "what happened to you?"

"You mean, when did I grow up and become ambitious and dare to think I could be someone, count for something?"

"No, I mean when did you become so hard, so cynical?"

"That’s the way you see it, is it? Well, how do you see yourself then? Haven’t you spent your whole professional life in a kind of commercial cynicism without doing anyone, except the rich and the guilty, any good at all? If I am, as you put it hard and cynical, at least there is a payoff for lots of people. Take a close look at my record sometime; I’m damn proud of it. I’m not about to fold my tent because of one small mistake. How many mistakes have you made Jake? How many people have you hurt along the way? You want to compare our records on the humanity-compassionate index?"
"Maybe you're right," Jake said. "I don't doubt it; you've done important things, good things. But Marcia, something got lost along the way."

"Perhaps. That's what happens if you take the road less traveled," Marcia tossed this off.

"Too slick, honey. You think I don't know that you're as scared as I am? You think maybe you've got me fooled?"

"I have to run, Jake. I have to," she said. Surely, she thought, Jake must see there was nothing else in my life now. That it was too late for anything else. Whatever it was at the beginning, politics had now become her life. The morning fax with its tight schedule, hour after hour of meetings, dashing to airports, consulting with staff: she loves the challenge of drafting legislation. She had come to enjoy the negotiation and deal making necessary to get it passed. Why can't he see that? Maybe she isn't liked, but she is respected. She feels a sense of pride; she believes that she does meaningful work. She knows she saved herself from an anonymous middle age.

"That's your call. I think you're going down. I think we're both going down. But it's your call. Just don't kid me; your guts aren't as twisted as mine are. That you won't be waiting for the axe every day until it's over. Because you will. If it's worth all that, do what you have to."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sure."

Marcia started to slide out from the banquette.

"Fuck it," she said, sliding back opposite Jake. "Can I have a real drink?"

"Okay." He motioned for the waiter.

"Gin Martini, dry, cold, twist," Marcia says.

"What about the speech?" Jake asks

"Yes, the speech. It's not like me to be irresponsible," she said. "Probably give Sol a heart attack."

"Go give your speech, Marcia. This can wait."

"No, I don't think it can. It's waited ten years, but suddenly I don't think it can wait a minute longer."

Marcia's martini is full to the top of the glass. She puts her head down to sip it then lifts it and takes a mouthful. She hasn't had a martini in years. At social functions she sips at white wine or diet coke.

The slightly acrid oily taste of the gin reminds her of waiting for Jake years ago in small, obscure bars.

She frequently arrived first, settled herself at a table, and ordered two martinis, asking the waiter to bring the second when her friend joined her. She enjoyed the wait. She checked her makeup, pleased with her image in the small
compact mirror. It never occurred to her he wouldn't come; she had no apprehension on that score. She often did not know how long they would have together; that was the big anxiety. Sometimes, it was only an hour. More often, it was the evening, a long evening, beginning with the martinis, going on to dinner, and ending at her apartment making love. Sometimes they went to the movies or rented romantic classics to view at home. She had not noticed when it began to change. The ending came in a rush, a tidal wave of an ending, leaving her gasping for air. Too proud to ask questions then, she wanted to know now.

"I want to ask you something," she said.

"What?"

"Did you love me, all those years ago? Probably seems stupid to ask that now, but I am anyway."

Jake was surprised and annoyed. Could that still matter? He thought. What difference did it make? If he loved her then, wanted her now? Months would pass without him even thinking about her. Is that what she wanted to know? That he had survived perfectly fine, that he could barely remember what he had felt then. Still, he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"Of course I did. I thought you knew that."

"No, all I really knew was that you didn't leave. I wasn't important enough."

"But you knew why. Did you think I was lying?"

"No. But I did think it was an excuse. And you never came back."

"You got married, after all."

"Yes, I did. That's true. We both made a lot of mistakes, I guess."

Jake took Marcia's hand. "I think you're making another now."

"You mean running?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps. You know I can get out anytime. Let's see how it develops. I don't have a death wish; let's just see how it goes. Jake, when I first came to your office, you seemed to suggest—I don't suppose you think that we might?"

"I don't know, and that's honest. We both need somebody. I know I do. I don't know if we can recapture what we had, if that is even possible."

"I don't know either. Once, I think it was the second trip to the Cape, I was changing and you were lying on the bed reading. You put your book aside and you held out your hand to me, you were smiling a warm and loving smile, and you said, "Come here." I don't suppose you remember that?"

"No, not that particular moment."

"It was a nice moment," Marcia said. "It stayed with me for years. The trouble with falling in love after forty is that it turns into a chronic ailment."
"Like arthritis," Jake said, putting his hand over hers. "It's been a long time, Marcia. We've both changed. We'll have to see if we still fit."

"Yes. Well," Marcia said. "I guess I do have to go now."

"I'll call you," Jake said.

"Good," she said. "Jake, be on my side. I need you."

"I know you do." he replied, wondering if he wants to be there for her, cheering her on, running interference, blocking and faking, as she tries to outrun their past into the end zone.

Marcia hurried out into the dark night. She glanced up to see black storm clouds rushing toward the city. In a moment, they were overhead. It began to rain, softly at first and then harder, a sudden drenching downpour.

I could go back to Jake, have another drink, she thought, just until this lets up. Surely, I know enough by now to come in out of the rain. However, she was not sure she would be welcome, that Jake would take her in. She was not sorry she asked. It had to be asked. Some things, she thought, just have to be said. It's over, she admitted to herself. All the years of nurturing the fantasy, of relying on their lost love, over.

For even as she asked the question she knew she didn't really want Jake. Not this Jake, not after all that had happened.

What she wouldn't give to be back in that place she shared with him for those years. The yearning for that lost time fueled her dream life; she saw in it her last hope for an enchanted life. Now it is really over, she thought again. It would take some getting used to.

Marcia stood there, under the safety of the marquee, thinking about Joan Palmer. Since Joan's suicide, people had been asking, "Why?"

She thought she knew the answer. Not just the proximate cause, the newspaper story, Joan's agonized suspicion and paranoia. What she knew was that Joan reached out to her for help, for life support. Her refusal to extend a hand haunts her. Nothing could erase that failure; life doesn’t work that way. She had made some bad bargains, some shoddy choices. She did not discount the constructive work she had done, all that she had accomplished and might still achieve. What she had missed, she had missed.

She suspected that she has not finished toting up her losses; there would be more. It was time, however, to let go of the old ones, time to forge some enduring connections.
A few hours later, in Washington, Maxine asked Roberta, "Want me to help you clean up?" It was just past midnight on the day of the press conference.

"Don't bother, Maxine," Roberta replied. "I'm going to leave it all. All I want is a hot bath and some sleep. Maybe I'll skip the bath. I really am bushed."

Roberta’s staff, Maxine, and Malcolm came back to Roberta’s house to wait for the early coverage.

They flipped from channel to channel, and surfed the web, delighted with the initial reports. At one point, when it became clear that the commentary was largely sympathetic to Roberta, Susan Winik let out a cheer and they ordered in Chinese food. Maxine opened three bottles of champagne.

A blood sport if there ever was one, Roberta thought.

Later, Roberta surveyed the remains of their Chinese feast, the cardboard cartons, and the plastic plates.

She wished Maxine would go home. But Maxine had more to say.

"You know, honestly, I didn't know if you could pull it off. I really didn't. I don't know that I could have," Maxine said.

"Me too, I didn't know either."

"Yes, you did. Don't kid yourself. You knew. I owe you an apology."

"For what? You’ve been great Maxine."

"No, I haven't. Until I saw you up there, I think I forgot that this was a human problem. That there are some things even more important that politics."

"No! More important than getting elected?"

"Okay, okay, so I get a little obsessed. But seeing you up there, well, let's just say I really respect you. David would have been proud of you, Joan too."

"Think so? I hope that's true. It turns out that lying, even to yourself, is not a victimless crime."

"Ha. You'll never convince the politicians of that. Anyway, there may be tough days ahead. I want you to know I'll be there for you, anyway I can."

"So this means I get MEOW's endorsement?"

"Don't push your luck."

"What if I lose?"

Maxine jammed her feet into the shoes she had been carrying.

"I'll be there, especially if you lose. But you won't."

Roberta walked Maxine to the front door; they embraced. A light drizzle was falling.

"You all right?" Maxine asked.
"Right as rain, at least I think so. Takes some getting used to though."

Alone, Roberta started to pick up some glasses, changed her mind, and put them down again. She reached into the front closet and took out David’s favorite jacket to put over her shoulders.

She stepped out on the patio, pulling the jacket closer.

She had always thought that if she tried to climb certain mountains, she would lose her footing, run out of breath in the rarified air. Now she knew that she was sure footed, that she has an instinct for where the handholds are, the hidden crevices that would support her weight as she ascended to the top.

Despite Maxine, despite the generally favorable response to the press conference, Roberta was uneasy. She was acutely aware that she has sacrificed David’s privacy for her own purposes. She would not kid herself about that. It was a betrayal, pure and simple.

For a moment, she was filled with despair and with a sense of self-loathing. She had, she admitted, derived pleasure from these past few days. The strategy sessions, the planning, the camaraderie, even the press conference. People listened to her now; what she said mattered. She is one of them.

Now that it was over, Roberta realized how frightened she had been. Must be made of sterner stuff than I imagined, she thought.

This was the way it will be from now on. Whatever the crisis, however scared and lonely I may be, they will look to me.

She wanted to win. It was the right thing to do. David surely would have understood that, she thought.

The sky was clearing; she could see a sliver of moon as the clouds began to disperse. “It’s a strange night, she thought, sitting center stage under a dome of stars.

They seemed to listen with rapt attention as she planned the rest of her life.

"It’s for the best, don’t you think?” she asked.

For the most part, Roberta looked at life with a cautious eye, a distant heart. Illusions, she saw, turned quixotic and mean. She was through being dazzled by quicksilver promises, ambushed by counterfeit dreams.

There was a moment after the rain when the air was fresh and fragrant. Roberta breathed in deeply, enjoying that mellow moment savoring the sweetness of the cleansed air. “I’m sorry,” she said to David. “Forgive me,” she whispered to Joan.

It’s not so bad, she thought, nodding to Jupiter, smiling at the Seven Sisters. It’s certainly a start.

The End

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