To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Laura Elizabeth Koons entitled "Into the Attic: A Novel." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Michael Knight

Margaret Dean

Christine Holmlund

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

INTO THE ATTIC:
A NOVEL

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Laura Elizabeth Koons
May 2010

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandfather,
whom I wish I'd known better.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is often said that writing is a lonely endeavor, but I find that the time when I am most involved in bringing a story to the page is also the time when I communicate most happily and fruitfully with my mentors and with writerly and readerly friends.

I would like to express my deep-felt thanks to all those who helped me in completing this dissertation: Professor Allen Wier, whose thoughtful and considered criticism often helped me see my characters from a new perspective; Professors Michael Knight and Margaret Dean, whose intuitive feedback and careful line edits have undoubtedly tightened the narrative immeasurably; and Dr. Christine Holmlund, whose guidance in the field of queer theory opened up whole new ways for me to view my own work.

And to those friends and family—Holly Wendt, Michael Greenage, Sarah Martin, Linda Koons, and Craig Koons—who encouraged, read drafts, offered suggestions—it never would have gotten done without you.

ABSTRACT

This creative dissertation is a novel titled *Into the Attic*. The novel tells the story of Sullivan Young, a junior at a small liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania in the mid-2000s, and James Shelley, a young literature professor at the college, with whom Sullivan initiates an affair. The narrative switches between the points of view of these two men, neither of whom is happy with the person he is becoming, and develops around the fears each has about the relationship.

The novel is concerned with character, sexuality, and power; in order to explore these issues fully within Sullivan and Shelley's relationship, the novel alternates between the two characters' points of view, thus attempting to illustrate the way the negotiation of power in the relationship also alternates between them as the relationship develops. The novel relies heavily on Sullivan's and Shelley's experiences as gay men and uses explicit sex scenes to develop character; therefore, my critical introduction examines the implications of writing a political or social "other" and references writers and critics—such as Dorothy Allison, Wayne Booth, Tillie Olsen, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Calvin Thomas—who have informed my understanding of writing "the other."

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I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: WRITING THE SELF, WRITING "THE OTHER"[1]

Writing "the Other"

Into the Attic is the story of a relationship developing, and it is told from both sides, from both characters' points of view. The participants in the relationship are Sullivan Young, a junior at a small liberal arts college in Central Pennsylvania in the mid-2000s, and James Shelley, a young literature professor at the college. As their relationship develops, so do their fears about it.

The novel takes as its themes guilt, sexuality, power, and place. I began to write about Sullivan and Shelley for the same reason I always begin a piece of fiction: the characters presented themselves to me and wouldn't leave me alone until I started to tell their story. But as I worked on the novel, I realized that, like many of my characters, Sullivan and Shelley, because of their gender and sexuality, constitute for me a political "other"[2]. I began to think about how character, "the other," craft, and politics are intertwined in writing fiction—and how those concepts are illustrated in my novel.

Initial Inquiry: Character, "the Other," Craft, and Politics[3]

The question of writing "the other" has arisen for me in the past, though I had never before had the opportunity to explore the issue. In thinking about writing "the other," I was reminded of the objection of a visiting writer in my master's program to a character in one of my

[1] Some sections of the Critical Introduction appeared, in slightly altered form, in the Dissertation Prospectus.
[2] A loaded term, with specific meanings in psychology, philosophy, and post-colonial theory. Throughout the critical introduction, I mean to refer to characters who might be put in a different category (say, on a government form which inquired after race, ethnicity, gender, and so on) from the writer. I dislike this term because it privileges the very notion I hope to interrogate, but I use the term because it is difficult to talk about something without naming it.
[3] This section adapted from the proposal for the Specialized Comprehensive Exam.

stories. She declared that she thought it inappropriate that the point-of-view character in my story was a gay man. She wondered if it were not necessarily an act of political disenfranchisement for me, a(n assumed) straight woman to take on the voice of a gay man. The members of the workshop leapt to my defense, but conversation never developed into a useful discussion of either writing about difference in general or the portrayal of "the other" in the specific story in front of us. The workshop leader did not object to the development of this gay character; it was *that* he existed in *my* story that concerned her. She thought it wrong of me to assume that I could access and portray the experience of someone whose experience I could not have lived myself.

Of course, the fiction writer's job is to imagine that which is different from herself. To do otherwise would be to write something else—memoir perhaps. However, for the writer leading that workshop, the depiction of difference in my story crossed a line, a line seemingly made up of political considerations. Her implication was that some difference cannot and should not be bridged, that the politics and history of the difference in question can make assuming the position of one different from oneself untenable. I gather that her objection hinged on her discomfort with a representative of a historical oppressor (a straight writer, for example, or a white writer) assuming the voice of a character representing one historically oppressed (a gay man or a black woman). Her objection did not—and does not—sit right with me, because it feels limiting, because it seems to ignore the way writers work, and because it closes off one of the

functions of art—the creation of empathy and understanding. But that workshop has stayed with me, and as I worked on *Into the Attic*, I found myself returning to the question of writing difference, or writing "the other."

I do not give much thought to who my characters will be when I sit down to write; my characters choose me, I do not choose them. Like Faulkner, I often feel that I "run[] along behind [characters] with a pencil trying to put down what they say and do" (Inge 197). I believe, as Mark Twain said, that I "can only find out what [the story] is by listening as it goes along telling itself" (309). But I accept that whatever my process may be, I am responsible for my characters once I put them into words and let them loose in the world. And the workshop leader's objection raises several inconvenient questions for me. What, if any, is the fiction writer's responsibility to the politics of her time? Is writing "the other" necessarily a political act? How is writing "the other" related to questions of character development and the writer's experience? These are questions that I found, though compelling, were in some ways getting in the way of my creative process. I find it difficult to "listen[] as [the story] goes along telling itself" if I am constantly stopping to question my (mis)use of "the other." I began to answer those questions as I first started work on *Into the Attic* and prepared for my specialized comprehensive exam through a study of a group of novels which collectively can be termed novels of character and, in some cases, *bildungsromam*. My fiction has always been character driven, and my exploration of these questions revolved as much around discussions of character as of writerly responsibility.

My thinking on this issue has evolved since I first began to study it in relation to my novel, but that study initially could be broken down into three separate but related areas of inquiry. The first was a study of that fiction which is primarily concerned with the depiction or development of character. I hoped to form my own understanding of what the label "novel of character" means and to consider how writers working in this tradition develop on the page a sense of self for their characters. Integral to this part of the study was an examination of novels in which writers create characters significantly different from themselves, whether through race, ethnicity, orientation, gender, or age. Are women characters more essentially womanly when written by women? Can straight writers ever accurately portray gay experience? Does a writer from a historically privileged circumstance disenfranchise the racial minority, the politically oppressed, the opposite sex, by speaking for them in fiction? Or does art transcend political considerations?

This last question formed the basis for my second area of inquiry: an exploration of writing "the other" from the point of view of craft. From my own reading experience, it was clear that writing "the other" is not the norm[4]; while many writers may depict characters different from themselves, protagonists in novels of character often mimic their authors, sometimes to the point of semi-autobiography. Crossing some lines of "otherness" is more common than crossing others: it is more common, for example, for a female writer to write a male protagonist than for a white writer to write a black protagonist. It would be impossible to examine this question from the point of view of craft without referring to that old adage "write what you know." The advice likely stems from a line in Henry James's essay "The Art of

[4] At least, it is not when "the other" is conceived in political terms. When we consider the act of creating character, writers write "the other," that is, someone who is not "self," every time they write fiction.

Fiction" in which he responds to Walter Besant's claim that one should write from experience: "Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, 'Write from experience and experience only,' I should feel that this was rather a tantalizing monition if I were not careful immediately to add, 'Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!'" (11). James means to expand the scope of the possible meaning of experience here, to prevent the misconception that experience is limited only to that which an individual has known intimately and personally.[5] For James, experience is never finished; it is infinite and acts as a sort of net for catching reality:

> experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of the consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative . . . it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (10)

James describes a person who is not intent on the conscious notation of every detail, or on frantically cataloguing the world, but one who never misses an opportunity to more fully understand the world around her. Given this attitude toward experience, it would seem that writing about "the other" should be no more problematic than writing about anything else. If the writer is paying sufficient attention, she should be able realistically to portray "the other" just as she could the sea or the atmosphere in a fine restaurant to which she has only been once.

But would doing so be a political act? And can attempting to soak up the experience of "the other" like so much ambience be considered, at the least, hubris? And worse, offensive and harmful? The politics of writing "the other" formed my final area of inquiry. In his 1976 essay

[5] I am borrowing here, in brief, from an earlier paper of mine on James's conception of realism.

"Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature," Italo Calvino noted that our modern tendency to find hidden motives in everyone should not be considered a bad thing: "I should like to add that if it is impossible today for anyone to feel innocent, if in whatever we do or say we can discover a hidden motive—that of a white man, or a member of a given economic system, or a sufferer from a certain neurosis—this should not induce in us either a universal sense of guilt or an attitude of universal accusation" (100). He goes on to claim that it is this very recognition of motives that will allow for improvement: "when we become aware of our disease or of our hidden motives, we have already begun to get the better of them. What matters is the way in which we accept our motives and live through the ensuing crisis. This is the only chance we have of becoming different from the way we are—that is, the only way of starting to invent a new way of being" (100). Might a novelist who writes "the other" thus contribute to an awareness of difference and further the movement toward "a new way of being"? Or does the writer, in lending her voice to "the other," somehow disrupt one of Calvino's right uses of literature by giving the wrong voice "to whatever is without a voice" (98)?

Two things were clear to me as soon as I started examining these questions: that I had always been inclined toward the opinion that writing "the other" is politically and artistically sound and that I was nevertheless conflicted about that view. That conflict arose from my belief that the written word has the power to wound as well as to facilitate understanding. It was, and is, important to me that if I write about difference, I understand what it is I undertake.

Throughout my early work on the novel and my exploration of writing "the other," my interests in writing about difference shifted more toward questions of how writing "otherness" seems to work and what effect use of "other" has in fiction.

Laying Claim: Mitigation of "Otherness"

When writing Sullivan and Shelley, I never feel as if I am writing characters who are any more "other" from myself than any character who may be in some ways "closer" to me—a female character, for instance, or a straight character. Any difficulties in writing them arise from

my fears about misrepresenting individual experience, not from fears about misrepresenting a type of self inaccessibly "other" from my self. And these are the fears—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the *concerns*—that I believe all writers have when writing all characters. The experience must have an air of authenticity if the fiction is to be successful (but more on the issues of authenticity later). While Sullivan and Shelley may engage in acts with which I have no direct experience (male homosexual sex, say) and encounter prejudices with which I have never had to deal (the stigma of dating your professor, for example), they have these experiences and encounter these prejudices in an environment with which I am intimately familiar—that of a small liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania.

My study of fiction which is primarily concerned with character and of works which include characters somehow "other" from their writers has shown me that writing "the other" is often mitigated by a high level of authentic detail that *does* arise from the writer's personal

experience, and, conversely, it is rare for a writer to develop character through ethnic and cultural voice when writing "the other." Novels which successfully use a voice which is attached to a particular culture or ethnic group tend to have writers who do have some kind of direct access to that culture. There is nothing particularly surprising or remarkable, for instance, about J.D. Salinger's choice to develop Holden Caulfield in *The Cather in the Rye* through a first person narrative largely dependent on Holden's unique voice. Salinger, a disaffected writer from New York, writing in the voice of a disaffected young man from New York, may impress many, but the accuracy of that voice should surprise no one. We should be more surprised if Salinger has gotten the voice wrong. The same is true of Philip Roth, whose novel *Portnoy's Complaint* appropriates the voice of American Jews:

> They render it from me like fat from a chicken! "Call, Alex. Visit, Alex. Alex, keep us informed. Don't go away without telling us, please, not again. Last time you went away you didn't tell us, your father was ready to phone the police. You know how many times a day he called and got no answer? Take a guess, how many?"
>
> "Mother," I inform her, from between my teeth, "if I'm dead they'll smell the body in seventy-two hours, I assure you!" "Don't *talk* like that! God *forbid*!" she cries. Oh, and now she's got the beauty, the one guaranteed to do the job . . . . "Alex, to pick up a phone is such a simple thing—how much longer will we be around to bother you anyway?" (36)

Again, as with Salinger, we are not surprised that Roth can render such speech patterns accurately, because we expect him to have access to this voice.

Writers who choose to write "the other" tend to step back a bit from the "otherness" they portray—they often stay away from first person (which both *The Cather in the Rye* and *Portnoy's Complaint* employ) and tend to avoid appropriating a distinctive, recognizably cultural or ethnic voice. Characters are developed through other techniques. In G.W. Hawkes's novel *Semaphore*, the third person narration remains quite close to the mute protagonist, Joseph, throughout the story, but develops him through his individualized reactions to people and events:

> [teacher] "Well, yes, there are some *hygienic* questions—" She said *hygienic* as if the word itself needed cleaning.
>
> "You mean, Is he free of lice? Things like that?" his father asked.
>
> *Whoo-hoo!*
>
> The Witch made a face and leaned forward, carefully unwrapping her hands from the cup like tissue from a present . . . .
>
> [teacher] "Thank you, Mrs. Taft; I'm aware of what his is."
>
> "*Who* he is! And thank you for coming, whoever *you* are."
>
> The Witch raised an eyebrow.
>
> *My mom can take you*, Joseph thought.
>
> "Miss Elena Woolcroft. They didn't tell you?"
>
> "They told us," Frank said.
>
> *You* didn't. My parents are funny that way. (40-41)

Hawkes need not attempt to imagine a cultural voice to which he may not have access because the story does not require it. What he must do, however, is create a character with a disability with which he may have no personal experience. Joseph's reactions to the dialogue between his parents and the teacher sent to teach them all sign language deftly illustrates Joseph's love for and complicity with his parents as well as his own attitude toward his own disability without relying on voice to do so.

"Otherness" is also often off-set by the inclusion of details with which the writer is intimately familiar. Annie's Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain," for example, deals explicitly with male homosexual sex but depends on its Wyoming setting, where Proulx has lived for years, for much of its sense of authenticity. Jeffry Eugenides's *Middlesex* similarly places its narrative of an intersex individual in settings with which Eugenides is familiar—places like Detroit, Grosse Pointe, and Berlin and among immigrants with a Greek heritage similar to Eugenides's own.

I see this impulse in my own work as well. While I may not have consciously chosen to set *Into the Attic* at a fictional version of my alma mater specifically to mitigate writing "the other," I believe that is easier for me to depict individual experience for these men in *this* setting than it might be if I had chosen to imagine not only unfamiliar situations but unfamiliar settings and atmosphere as well. Because the college in the novel acts almost as character itself, being able to evoke a particular place with which I have had extended experience allows for easier imagining of how any character, a political "other" or not, would act and react in that setting. Knowing the particular and peculiar history and workings of one small liberal arts college, I can create my fictional college with an air of authority which might be absent otherwise:

> Scotsdale College had been founded in 1812 and would be associated forever with a war and an overture with which she had nothing to do. The college valued her history almost more than her future, and there were three things she would see upheld above all else: devotion to the school, the liberal arts ideal, and a commitment to community. The college deans fostered these characteristics by keeping enrollment low, bucking trends in sister schools to relax requirements outside of students' major fields, and requiring all unmarried students under the age of twenty-five to live on campus.
>
> Like its general philosophy, the grounds of Scotsdale College had not changed appreciably for over one hundred years. The school occupied one city block and a tall, black iron fence separated the grounds from the city sidewalks and streets beyond. It sat at the edge of the city's modest downtown, and students were free to pass through the gates at the north and south ends of campus any time they liked. Each gate consisted of a large main gate, firmly shut and locked with a matching iron key which must have dated from the nineteenth century at the least. On either side of the main gate was a smaller, shorter gate, always open and with no lock at all. The main gates were unlocked and opened on only two days of the year: freshman convocation and senior commencement. On the first, the incoming class marched through the North Gate; on the second, the outgoing slouched through the South.

For me, this sort of mitigation is not limited only to setting, but to some of my characters

as well. As a teacher, I have access to the kinds of fears and attitudes a teacher like Shelley might have. And as a recent graduate of a small liberal arts college, I have access to the kinds of fears and attitudes a student like Sullivan might have. I apply my knowledge of teacherly jitters to a scene:

> Shelley did not consider himself a particularly paranoid man, but he had always preferred to get to a classroom before the students. If he got there last, he felt them watching him as he walked to the front of the room, as he dug through his bag for the papers which had managed to work themselves to the bottom of the heap in the short walk from office to classroom. He became hyper-aware of his every movement, of the little mistakes he made, like dropping the chalk or misplacing his pen. By the time he was settled enough to take roll, he could feel facts and figures turning themselves peculiar and unfamiliar in his mind, and he kept losing his place in the too-small Ward Record Book provided by the department.

If that scene, which draws from experience I do have, succeeds in drawing Shelley as an authentic, believable character, the task of drawing him later as an authentic gay man is that much easier for having already established authenticity. In other words, letting these characters inhabit a familiar setting and providing them with familiar occupations makes them more like me, and thus, in some ways, easier to depict authentically.

Fiction Matters

"Fiction matters" is surely a peculiar revelation for a fiction writer to have, but my reading of Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep* has clarified for me my instinctive hesitation about shoving writing "the other" aside as a concern which only ignores the ways that writers work. Booth outlines the ways that fiction can and does have real world effects on readers when it inspires them to behave in certain ways and teaches particular attitudes. He lists some ways that colleagues and friends have told him that fiction has affected them:

> I am told that "Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* made me swear not to be such a mouse—to stand up to people the way Fanny Price stands up to Sir Walter toward the end." I am told that "Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* led me to tell off my boss at the hospital and walk out on him" . . . . I hear a tearful claim that "Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* made me feel really guilty about how I had been thinking about blacks these days . . . and I've really acted different toward them [since]." (278)

That fiction can have this kind of effect should surprise no one who is passionate enough about reading to have dedicated her life to studying the written word, but the notion that books traditionally considered *good* could have a negative effect on readers is one that is hard for many in English Studies to swallow. We tend to react to objections to classics such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with disdain at the objector's inability to see the text in the proper historical context or insist that the objection throws out the overwhelming value of the text along with a

few unfortunate missteps. But Booth points to the ways texts may subtly influence us and argues that such influence is not only real but very powerful. The potential to do harm may be higher when a text takes on the voice of politically oppressed or marginalized "others":

> It's hard for me to say this, but I have to say it anyway. I simply can't teach *Huckleberry Finn* again. The way Mark Twain portrays Jim is so offensive to me that I get angry in class, and I can't get all those liberal white kids to understand why I am angry. What's more, I don't think it's right to subject students, black or white, to the many distorted views of race on which that book is based. No, it's not the word "nigger" I'm objecting to, it's the whole range of assumptions about slavery and its consequences, and about how whites should deal with liberated slaves, and how liberated slaves should behave or will behave toward whites, good ones and bad ones. That book is just bad education, and the fact that it's so cleverly written makes it even more troublesome to me. (Moses qtd. in Booth 3)

The power of this influence also can be seen in the example of texts which attempt to reclaim "others" from classics. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, attempts to reclaim Bertha from the animalistic depiction which Charlotte Brontë provides for her: "In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark,

grizzled hair, wild and as a mane, hid its head and face" (297). This kind of reclamation would not be necessary or desirable if the original text did not have power over readers' imaginations and emotions and lives.

But those very kinds of reclamations speak to the dangers of writing "the other." The writing process may be suspect when viewed by readers identifying with the writer's "other." In order to write a character who is "the other," someone who, by definition, differs from the writer, the writer must use Jamesian experience and imagination in envisioning that character. Tillie Olsen has labeled this sort of imagining "trespass vision" (62), and it is not a process which is always welcomed by readers. Jacqueline Jones Royster, in an article about, among other things, claiming authority for ethnic groups, objects to the use of "trespass vision": "I tend to be enraged by what Tillie Olsen has called the 'trespass vision,' a vision that comes from intellect and imagination . . . but not typically from lived experience, and sometimes not from the serious study of the subject matter" (34).

There is no denying that in writing *Into the Attic*, I rely heavily on "trespass vision." The following scene, in which I describe one of Sullivan's masturbatory fantasies, would be impossible to write without it:

> But this picture of James Shelley aroused Sullivan slowly, and seemed to work on him in several ways and places at once. He felt the slow swelling in his cock, surely, but something was happening in his stomach as well, and his mind. It was the sort of complete arousal he'd once fantasized himself to but which he had never experienced as a reaction to another human being before. He imagined

himself standing in front of Shelley, abashed and nervous, as he never was with anyone. Shelley reached for Sullivan, caressed one cheek, then lifted him in his arms and carried him to a narrow cot shoved into a corner. He lowered Sullivan to the cot slowly, arranging him so that he was propped against the wall, his legs stretched before him along the length of the cot. Shelley leaned toward Sullivan then, stopping when his own lips were inches from Sullivan's, and licked his own. He kissed Sullivan then, slowly, carefully, but he pulled away after a few seconds. "Not until I tell you," he whispered, and then he was stroking Sullivan through his trousers, and then pulling the trousers down but not off. Shelley straddled Sullivan, a knee on either side of the younger man's hips, his hands pressing into the wall above each of Sullivan's shoulders. He eased himself onto Sullivan's cock, and rocked back and forward, back and forward, pausing to kiss Sullivan's mouth every few seconds. Finally, he said, "Now, Young. Now."

Sullivan blushed at his own fantasy but popped open the top button of his jeans and slid his hand into his underwear. The warmth of his own flesh was comforting, soothing, even as his desire was consuming, and he came as he replayed Shelley's command to do so over and over for himself in his head.

My hope is that these sorts of scenes, the kinds that require me to depend on "imagination coupled with experience," read just as authentic as any scene where my own experience is closer to that of my characters. I hope that they contain something more akin to "visit vision" than Olsen's "trespass vision," something more congenial, more friendly, less intrusive, and less likely to get me run off with dogs at my heels.

Authenticity and Responsibility to the Work

I have spoken repeatedly about the importance of authenticity in a work of fiction. Faulkner has said that readers must be inclined to say of successful fiction that "'yes, I believe that's so, I believe that's true . . . this is what I felt or what I imagine myself feeling. I would know this anguish. Anyway, I believe this anguish is so'" (qtd. in Inge 216). Above all else, the successful work of fiction will have an air of authenticity and the writer's responsibility therefore must be to the work before other considerations. Royster uses the metaphor of the home to illustrate her frustrations with writers who appropriate the voices of the oppressed or marginalized "other": "when you visit other people's 'home places,' especially when you have not been invited, you simply can not go tramping around the house like you own the place, no matter how smart you are, or how much imagination you can muster, or how much authority and entitlement outside that home you may be privileged to hold" (32). But I wonder if the writer who *visits* instead of trespassing might sometimes see something in the home of "the other" that the residents miss or cannot see clearly for being too close. In this case, authenticity may more easily arise from the

writer writing "the other," and it would be a mistake to shy away from that vision for fear of offending. Some of the passages in lesbian writer Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, for example, seem too sentimental, too melodramatic:

> And now there was only one voice, one demand; her own voice into which those millions had entered. A voice like the awful, deep rolling of thunder; a demand like the gather together of great waters. A terrifying voice that made her ears throb, that made her brain throb, that shook her very entrails, until she must stagger and all but fall beneath this appalling burden of sound that strangled her in its will to be uttered.
>
> "God," she gasped, "we believe; we have told You we believe . . . We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!" (437)

Might a writer less invested in Stephen's plight, perhaps a writer less conscious of writing from a particular point of view, have written a more successful piece of fiction, if not a more successful social comment for that time? Such a writer may have been able to produce something more alive. Virginia Woolf refers in *A Room of One's Own* to any work produced under conscious thought of writing as either man or woman as "doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilised. Brilliant and effective, powerful and masterly, as it may appear for a day or two, it must wither at nightfall; it cannot grow in the minds of others" (104).

Novels written by those very close to a political or social issue explored in the work often seem to lose a certain perspective on that issue. Just as Hall appears to be too close to Stephen's anguish over the way lesbians are treated in her time to portray the scene in a way that will allow it to be *both* authentic *and* lastingly effective, certain scenes in Dorothy Allison's partly autobiographical novel *Bastard out of Carolina* seem too close to the horrible events of Bone's past to describe them fully. When describing the first time Bone is molested by her step-father, the narrator pulls away from the action; the moment is strangely both specific and vague, and the narrator cannot continue the description of the act after a certain point:

> He kept rocking me, breathing through his mouth and staring straight ahead. I could see his reflection in the windshield. Dawn began to filter through the trees, making everything bright and cold. His hand dug in further. He was holding himself in his fingers. I knew what it was under his hand. I'd seen my cousins naked, laughing, shaking their things and joking, but this was a mystery, scary and hard. His sweat running down his arms to my skin smelled strong and nasty. He grunted, squeezed my thighs between his arm and his legs. His chin pressed down on my head and his hips pushed up at the same time. He was hurting me, hurting me! (47).

The line "he was hurting me, hurting me" is both telling, as it speaks to the emotion of the scene, and masking, as it replaces the step-father's action with the narrator's reaction to it. What, exactly, has occurred here is lost in the elision that this replacement creates. Unlike Hall's passage, it is not clear that a writer further removed from this subject would write a *better* scene,

though I have little doubt that she would write a wholly different scene. With an appropriate respect for the houses writers enter when writing "the other," welcoming both the voices of the oppressed and the voices of those who must use "visit vision" to write "the other" should provide us with a wider range of understanding through discovery in fiction.

(Mis)Appropriation of "the Other"

While writing "the other" should have its benefits for creating empathy and understanding, there are still potential pitfalls to writing "the other," pitfalls which potentially may (rightfully) "enrage" those who feel as Royster does about "trespass vision." The greatest potential I see for misappropriation of "the other" is in using the particulars of "the other's" subject position for specific literary ends. Using, for example, a character with a mental handicap to further not understanding of that handicap but only as a kind of literary device. At times, Faulkner's Benji in *The Sound and the Fury* seems to exist mostly as an experiment in point of view and narrative rather than to foster empathy. While I would not go so far as to say that Benji is presented unsympathetically, I do sense a kind of hubris in using a real handicap that effects real people as the means to a literary end.

Another example of such (mis)appropriation is Eugenides's exploration of an intersex individual in *Middlesex*. In an NPR interview, Eugenides explained that he became interested in writing a novel about an intersex character after being disappointed with a 19th century hermaphrodite's memoir in which she could not fully articulate her feelings about her condition and her love for a woman. There are two ways of looking at Eugenides's novel with this

revelation in mind: as a reclamation of the repressed and silenced experiences of intersex individuals or as an attempt to explain for a marginalized group what they have not been able to explain for themselves. Either interpretation smacks of hubris, though Eugenides's work does not offend, largely because he so carefully and successfully makes Cal so much more than just an intersex character or just a plot device.

I see this tension between using "the other" for a literary end and saving "the other" from such use in my own writing. One of the themes of *Into the Attic* is power, specifically the transfer of power in sexual relations. While I write my characters because they interest me as characters, I must admit that I find an exploration of power in sexual relations more tenable (perhaps "simpler" is a better word) when the relation is not between a man and woman. Part of the interest of Sullivan and Shelley's relationship is the way it explores dominating, submitting, and negotiating the constant shifts between the two:

> He marched Sullivan backward a few steps, and gave him a small push. Sullivan landed on the bed and had just a moment to register that the blankets smelled faintly of moth balls before Shelley was on top of him, one hand on either side of his shoulders, one knee on either side of his hips, mouth slanted over Sullivan's, tongue invading, but slowly, deliberately. It was not his physique that had attracted Sullivan to Shelley. He had been drawn in by his demeanor, the way he walked, the way his hair flopped over his forehead. He'd appreciated seeing Shelley bare-chested at the pool, but his features stood out to him now, as if cast in sharp relief by their surroundings. It was impossible now not to notice

the way his pecs sat defined in his pale chest when he leaned away from Sullivan for a moment to remove his own shirt. It was impossible not to see the way his bicep stood out when he supported himself with one arm in order to tease at the hem of Sullivan's sweatshirt. Sullivan pushed up a little, squirmed a bit, hoping to be pressed back into the mattress, and he was rewarded with a tiny growl from James Shelley. "Hold still, Young."

Sullivan wriggled again, trying to force more contact, but Shelley grabbed his wrists and held his hands to the mattress while keeping his own body just out of reach of Sullivan's.

"Are you going to keep still, you greedy little thing?"

Sullivan pretended to try to get away. Making Shelly restrain him was about the most arousing thing Sullivan could think of, but he suspected that if the professor had wanted to hold him down in earnest, if Sullivan had actually wanted to leave and Shelley thought he should stay, the resulting struggle might be one he couldn't win. "I don't know if I can do this with Schubert in the background."

"I guess you'll have to try. Cause I'm not moving." Shelley blew up at his bangs and they flopped away from his eyes momentarily. "Are you going to keep still?"

Sullivan nodded.

"Good." Shelley let go of his hands and pulled at the sweatshirt. Sullivan lifted up a bit so the shirt came free from between his back and the bed.

It was from within the folds of Guy's sweatshirt that Sullivan said, "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"It's not a good idea." Shelley let the shirt fall to the floor. "It wasn't a good idea in my office and it wasn't a good idea in the third floor stacks. It won't ever be a good idea." Shelley slid a hand up and under Sullivan's shirt.

Sullivan snatched at Shelley's wrist, caught it. "Wait," he said, and part of him was relieved when Shelley removed his hand, eased off of Sullivan altogether, even while another part of him wanted nothing more than for Shelley to ignore his command, to take, to accept Sullivan's submission and dismiss any other reaction.

While an exploration of this kind of power exchange would certainly be interesting between any two people, including a man and a woman, I am not interested in exploring how this kind of power exchange would be complicated and altered by both a man's and a woman's perception of historical and traditional power dynamics between the sexes. Thus, it suits my purposes that my characters are both men. I hope that like with *Middlesex's* Cal, my characters are characters first, and "others" who are serving a literary purpose last.

Look Again: What "Other"?

My inquiry into writing "the other" has led me to some works in queer theory, and while that reading has confirmed some of my fears about "trespass vision," it has also helped me to identify a positive stance from which to claim access to some of these "othered" spaces. My primary entry into queer theory has been Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, and I would like to use three of her seven axioms from the introduction to that work as a basis from which to mark out those positive spaces.

Sedgwick's first axiom reads, "People are different" (22), and she goes on to list some of the many ways those differences may be expressed through individual sexuality:

> it is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation." (Sedgwick 8, emphasis original)

When we consider all that this axiom entails, particularly the way it problematizes the identification of *gender* of object choice as *the* element of sexuality by which we identify "sexual orientation," identifying an "other" becomes increasingly difficult. If we think of gender and

sexuality as expressed through multiplicities (e.g. gender of object choice, age of object choice, preferred erotic zones, preferred sexual acts, preferred sexual situations, et cetera) rather than through binaries (i.e. male/female and hetero/homo), it becomes more and more difficult to locate and label "other." To say "a woman writing a man" or "straight writing gay" elides so much of what is different by forcing individuals into one half of an either/or category that the either/or categories which allow for the designation of "other" seem almost irrelevant.

Sedgwick's fourth axiom states, "The immemorial, seemingly ritualized debates on nature versus nurture take place against a very unstable background of tacit assumptions and fantasies about both nurture and nature" (41). For Sedgwick, the question of heterosexual/homosexual definition would be better stated not in terms of the individual (nurture) versus the species (nature) but in terms of minoritizing versus universalizing. Sedgwick outlines the difference between seeing the hetero/homo definition as a concern for a small group of individuals versus viewing it as a something which should concern everyone:

> the first is the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as universalizing view). (Sedgwick 1)

Throughout *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick privileges the universalizing view. Considering the homo/hetero definition as a universalizing concern certainly does the work of providing space for straight-identified writers to take on gay characters (and vice versa). If the concern has a "continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities," surely people of all sexualities may engage creatively with the concern.

The fifth of Sedgwick's axioms claims that "the historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity" (44). One of Sedgwick's goals in *Epistemology of the Closet* is to demonstrate "how issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist" (Sedgwick 47). Like axiom four, the fifth axiom privileges multiplicities and pluralities while rejecting the kind of "unidirectional narrative of supersession" which can (and does, according to Sedgwick) erase or obscure the "gaps" between established "understandings of same-sex relations" (Sedgwick 46, 47). If, as a result of thinking about same-sex relations in this way, our understanding of "'homosexuality as we know it today'" becomes "denaturalized," identification of "the other" once again becomes difficult to the point of near impossibility. With a destabilized sense of what homosexuality *is*, on what basis could we deny that anyone, from any point on the spectrum of sexualities, may have access to the voice of a character who engages in homosexual acts?

I began this section by noting that my reading in queer theory has confirmed my fears about entering the spaces of political "others" without being invited. While it is true that this

theory has helped me see ways of claiming some of these spaces myself, I am still conscious that the theory is *theory,* and while it is certainly relevant to the real world, it does not live in that world. To say, from a theoretical point of view, that it is impossible to label an "other," will not salve the kind of pain Thomas Glave describes at being marginalized by friends in his essay "On the Difficulty of Confiding, with Complete Love and Trust, in Some Heterosexual 'Friends'"; it will not erase the years of hiding desires that Dorothy Allison discusses in her piece "Public Silence, Private Terror"; it will not prevent someone from yelling "'Hey, *queer*!'" at Calvin Thomas as he walks down the sidewalk (Thomas 33, emphasis original). And while I may design my creative work in a theoretical space, it must live in the real world where that pain, silence, and harassment is far from theoretical.

I began writing *Into the Attic* conflicted; I present it now no less conflicted but perhaps more confident. I said that it is important to me that if I write about difference, I understand what it is I undertake. As I consider the reading and work I have done thus far, it is clear to me that the questions revolving around writing "the other," like those involved in the question of hetero/homo definition, involve multiplicities. There may be no one answer; there may be no answer at all. But perhaps this is no bad thing; perhaps the way to resolve the tensions of writing "the other" is not to theorize about it, but to do it, with care; to observe the results, with humility; and to embrace the dialogue it may inspire, with good grace.

II: INTO THE ATTIC

SEEK NOT THE FAVOUR
OF THE MULTITUDE;
IT IS SELDOM GOT BY
HONEST AND LAWFUL MEANS.
BUT SEEK THE TESTIMONY
OF THE FEW; AND NUMBER
NOT THE VOICES, BUT
WEIGH THEM.

~ Immanuel Kant

Chapter One

James Shelley was just the type of young professor the deans thought parents most wanted to see at Scotsdale College. He was young, but not remarkably so. He could speak earnestly about his work but was willing, at functions like the Parents' Weekend Faculty Brunch, to discuss things like GPAs and the GRE exams. His student evaluations always came back with average scores around four out of five. He was liked, but not so well liked to suggest that his courses were—that he was—too easy. He could be counted on to advise clubs and not to stir up trouble among the student body. In five years of teaching, he was on track for tenure, only three students had challenged the grade he'd given them (the students all lost their appeals, one in the shortest deliberation the student/faculty review board had ever sat), and no one had filed a sexual harassment complaint against him (of the members of his department—seven strong—five had more than one complaint listed but none had been found to be at fault). Dr. Tarr, whom Shelley suspected of being entirely capable of harassing, sexually or otherwise, had pulled him aside on his second day and warned him that it was somewhat of a burgeoning tradition among some of

the sorority sisters to file complaints against professors they found attractive. Shelley had said something about barbarism, and Tarr had laughed, a long, full, and oddly disconcerting laugh, and patted him on the back. The notion bothered Shelley for a few days, but as he couldn't quite picture any of his students as sexual creatures at all and certainly couldn't imagine any of his female students would find him attractive, he forgot about it after a few days.

Sullivan Young was the kind of student the deans pretended didn't attend Scotsdale College. Sullivan had a full academic scholarship, but came within a hair's breadth of losing it every semester. When asked by the dean of students to explain himself after his second semester of disappointing grades and disciplinary actions, Sullivan had shrugged and recited something the dean thought might have been Kant. Sullivan's advisor said that he simply couldn't be bothered to apply or behave himself. Sullivan's parents were dead or missing and summer mailers sent to the address he'd provided when he'd applied were returned "no such address." The secretary in charge of sending the mailers wondered briefly how Mr. Young had received his acceptance letter, but once she'd noted in his file that the address was no good and sent him an e-mail requesting an update (never answered), she forgot about it after a few days. No one on campus could recall ever seeing him do much more than poke at his food, and he always looked slightly ill, as if he were perpetually about to succumb to flu. Aside from his roommate, he ran with two different crowds on campus—the theatre techies and the chess club.

Sullivan Young first saw James Shelley in the cafeteria. The young literature professor had hurried through the lunch crowd, his arms loaded down with graded papers to return and a whole apple stuffed in his mouth. Sullivan caught just a glimpse of him as Dr. Shelley stumbled backwards out of the caf's back door. Shelley had never seen Sullivan Young at all.

#

Long floor-to-ceiling windows lined the west wall of the lounge where the annual Parents' Weekend Faculty Brunch was held. The windows faced a low brick wall separating a walkway from a grassy slope gently rolling down toward the iron fence surrounding the campus, and, beyond that, a faculty parking lot. Commuters filled the lounge during the week, but on weekends it became a deserted and lonely place. Sullivan liked to go there early on Saturdays and Sundays—before the library opened—to read books not listed on any syllabus at Scotsdale College. The Parents' Weekend Faculty Brunch exiled him to the low brick wall.

He sat—hunched—on the wall, one foot dangling to the sidewalk below, the other bent in front of him. He smoked a skinny, organic cigarette and held open his copy of *Venus in Furs* with his sneakered foot. He sometimes lifted his head to watch the janitors maneuvering tables into position and unstacking chairs from their leaning towers and dropping them into place. Slowly they transformed the room into a sea of Scotsdale's spirited blue and white. Sullivan was watching members of the Food Services staff shake out table cloths and let them flutter onto the tables—two cloths overlapping on each table in order to cover them adequately—when Guy Day walked up to the wall and perched on its edge next to Sullivan.

The two had been assigned as roommates at random in their first year and continued on rooming together in the years following despite having no discernible interests in common. Guy was as unlike Sullivan as he could be—blond and rosy-cheeked where Sullivan was dark and pale, round and plump where Sullivan was angular and slight, determined to impress the faculty where Sullivan all but ignored them. Their freshmen resident advisor had feared that Guy looked up to Sullivan and would emulate him, maybe idolize him, pick up his bad habits. But the boys were indifferent to the differences between them, uninterested in making themselves like the other or molding the other into an image of themselves. They found that they got on together, that the little traits that might grow to aggravate others simply did not affect them.

Guy leaned a bit to see what Sullivan was reading, then let out a great puff of air that ended in an exclamation of, "Jesus!"

Sullivan pulled at his cigarette and narrowed his lips to blow a thin wisp of smoke toward his own chest. He raised an eyebrow.

"What's that, Masoch?" Guy asked. "As in—?"

"Yeah, as in."

Guy snatched the book from under Sullivan's foot and flipped through the pages, too quickly to read any of them. "If you spent half the time, *any* of the time on what they set you that you do on this shit—"

"I'd be bored senseless. Give it back."

"Like the rest of us. But they'd leave you be."

Sullivan reached for the book but Guy pulled it away, taunting. An envelope fell from

the pages and smacked to the sidewalk. Sullivan slapped his foot down on it to keep it from blowing away and pulled the book away while Guy was distracted. He fitted the envelope between the pages of the book and tucked the book under his arm. Sullivan waited for Guy to ask about the envelope, and Guy narrowed his eyes at the book, as if sorting something for himself.

When Guy still hadn't spoken after a few moments, Sullivan shook his head, once, almost imperceptibly, then nodded toward the lounge and the tables. "They go to this great expense—huge, red, ripe strawberries in October, tray after tray of fresh fruits that they'd never dream of serving to us in the cafeteria, tureens of coffee, uniformed staff to stand around and do fuck all because it's a buffet, get the profs out in their best, arrange parking and events to show off the college to people who've already committed their thirty-five thousand a year, and they don't bother to iron the table cloths."

Guy squinted into the lounge, and turned back to Sullivan. "Iron the table cloths?"

Sullivan shook his head. "It's all a show, but they don't even know how to put one on. Ostentation is all about details. They haven't got the details. Paying too much for out-of-season fruit they can do, but they don't see the details."

"Like ironing the table cloths."

"Exactly."

Guy watched as Sullivan snuffed out his cigarette, stood, and slipped the stub into his jeans pocket. As Sullivan moved closer to the windows, Guy sighed. "Let's go get some breakfast, huh? Sunday. Omelets to order."

"That guy. Right there." Sullivan pointed. "Shelley. British modernism. That guy has the details. Everything about him says 'English Prof with class.' Tweed jacket, but no elbow patches. Can't wear elbow patches in the 21st century. Turns you into a cliché. Glasses that almost, but not quite, fade into his features. Says 'I'm scholarly, but not hopeless.' Belt, watchband, and shoes all match. I bet his wallet is the same brown leather, too. But not a set. They go together but they don't *go* together. He's the James Bond of English Studies, I'm telling you."

Guy moved to stand behind Sullivan. "Which one?"

Sullivan grinned, letting just the left corner of his mouth turn up. He'd spent most of fall semester first year teaching himself to do it. "Shame, Day. You don't know your faculty."

Guy rolled his eyes dramatically, ruining what effect he might have achieved with the gesture when he ended it by checking his reflection in the glass. "Give me a break, Sull. I'm a math grunt. Excuse me for not knowing every bastard hired by humanities."

"You should know Shelley. He's going to be the golden boy of Scotsdale College. His doctoral work on Forster swept his field like wildfire. It was all anyone could talk about for *weeks*. He got scholars talking and debating issues that they'd all thought were long laid to rest."

"Like was he a faggot?"

"Oh, it does read."

"Fuck off, Young. You're just making shit up."

Sullivan nodded toward the windows. "That man may be the greatest scholar America has produced in the last fifty years. It was a great coup for Scotsdale to get him. Lured him

away from big research universities because his first love is teaching. I mean, *The E.M. Forster Review* said that James Q. Shelley had single-handedly altered the landscape of English belles-lettres forever."

Guy snorted. "Belles lettres. You may be the greatest bullshitter America has produced in the last fifty years. Can we go to breakfast, please?"

"You wait. Within six months, James Shelley's name will be on every lip at Scotsdale College. You won't be able to step out of the room without hearing about his latest conquest."

Guy groaned and threw his head back and his arms wide, as if embracing the sky. "Why me?" he asked a passing cumulus. "Why must I have the only roommate at Scotsdale who stalks the faculty rather than go to class and prefers skulking over food?" He dropped his head but left his arms up, putting them through a wide shrug. "Okay, Sull. If I admit that the prof shits golden bricks, can we go to the caf before the football team wakes up and eats all the eggs before we can get there?"

Sullivan shrugged. "You hungry, Guy? Why didn't you say?" He threw an arm around Guy's neck and canted his hips sideways to avoid Guy's friendly punch aimed at his ribs. Guy didn't notice when Sullivan looked over his shoulder to watch James Shelley through the windows until they turned a corner and he was obscured from view.

#

James Shelley hated the Parents' Weekend Faculty Brunch more than any other function his duties as a professor at Scotsdale College required of him. It was a peculiar event in the first place, talking to parents about their adult children, who usually stood next to them, hunching

their shoulders, studying their shoes, everything about their posture advertising their discomfort. This year, Shelley was particularly malcontent. He hadn't been able to settle into the semester, and he suspected that his new students disliked him and his returning students wondered what had happened to make his teaching suddenly so lackluster. He couldn't manage to stay on top of even the smallest tasks, and small deadlines—like finishing lesson plans and getting papers graded reasonably quickly—that he normally would meet without any consideration at all, snuck up on him with alarming quickness and frequency. He often found himself cranky from staying up too late to finish things, and this Sunday morning he resented the brunch for keeping him from preparing for tomorrow's survey course on twentieth century British literature.

The parent he was talking to—who'd introduced himself as "Katie's father"—seemed more interested in demonstrating that he'd read everything published from Herodotus to Ian McEwan than discussing his daughter's courses or progress.

"I mean," the father was saying, "I enjoy a good read as much as the next guy, but I just don't see how the book can withstand the pressures of new technology. Don't you think? I mean, do you honestly think that in fifty years we'll still be carrying around pulped trees? When we have the means *right now* to go completely digital? It's only a matter of time until the book as we know it will seem as outdated and ridiculous as the eight-track player." He gestured at Shelley with a plastic cup of punch. "Imagine how many more books could be published each

year with the reduction of cost in materials. Scholars like you from our great little schools like this one could see their work published right alongside the big names from the big schools. It would revolutionize scholarship. Am I right, Dr. Shelley?"

Shelley tried to smile. "Undoubtedly."

Katie's Father took a breath to begin again, but Shelley raised a hand. "Did you have a question about the course Katie's taking?" Shelley could see that the man thought him very rude and out of turn to interrupt, no, to *preempt*, him, but the older man ran a hand down his chest, smoothing the tie he had foregone that morning and made a stalling noise. "No, no. Not at all, sir. She says she's doing fine, likes it all right." He turned to smile at his daughter, and she smiled back, though her father missed the sigh that followed. "Just wanted to meet you, sir." He stuck out a pudgy hand, and Shelley had to switch his punch from one hand to the other to shake it.

"Well, I certainly do appreciate when parents take the time to come to the brunch. It's so nice to see the students supported in their studies. Especially the humanities. We seem to take so many hits these days." Shelley was sure that he missed the properly pleased smile he was going for and that he was, in fact, grimacing.

The man raised an eyebrow. "Right," he said, and his tone was what Shelley imagined writers of those old noir detective stories meant when they said someone spoke icily. Her father put his arm around Katie. "Come on, honey. Let's see if your mother managed to find that science teacher you were telling us about."

Katie unfolded her arms long enough to wave at Shelley. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dr. Shelley. *Frankenstein*."

It was only then that Shelley could place the girl. Second row, caddy corner from the department's current creative writing darling. She was enthusiastic but hopeless at close reading, intent on offering increasingly unlikely interpretations of favorite passages. He waved back. "Tomorrow. *Frankenstein*," he said, and felt that sinking feeling that came every time he was faced with teaching Percy or Mary. To make the joke or let it pass? He felt a fool if he made the joke and silly, as if he had walked into the room unknowingly trailing toilet paper from his shoe, if he didn't.

The clock above the poorly disguised janitor's closet (draped in blue and white swaths made from gathered table clothes) read 12:34. Still nearly half an hour until the brunch would officially end, but many of the parents seemed to have shuffled off and he spotted a group of biology professors making their way out the back together. There really was no reason for him to stay—it was less than half an hour. And the thought of talking to another middle-aged parent who considered himself an intellectual because he belonged to a book-of-the-month club made Shelley's head ache slightly. He made his way to one of the refreshment tables—one of the cafeteria's oatmeal raisin cookies would make the perfect afternoon snack. He was wrapping the cookie in a napkin—trying in vain to be surreptitious about it while he shook out the napkin so it would be big enough to wrap around the cookie he held in his other hand—when he happened to glance up and out the windows. He saw two young men making their way toward the heart of campus, arm in arm, and smiled softly.

#

Guy invariably spent Sunday afternoons in the library working complex equations with his classmates. Sometimes Sullivan tagged along. He had satisfied his math requirement by taking a class in combinatorics his freshman year. On the first day of the second week of class, he had handed the professor a notebook containing the solutions to all the problem sets in the course book. The professor, a Dr. Sturgis, had been incredulous at first, and then when Sullivan had demonstrated that he could work through any random problem Dr. Sturgis set him, astonished. The professor had offered Sullivan private sessions in higher math, had tried to lend him books to read, but all Sullivan was interested in was an exemption from attending class for the rest of the semester. Sturgis agreed after Sullivan took a version of the four exams that would be set the class throughout the course.

Guy's friends greeted Sullivan with cheers when he showed up at their Sunday sessions, for it meant that they would finish their work in half the time, and usually with a better understanding of the concepts before them. Only one of the friends, a physics major with a nervous twitch called Allie, disliked Sullivan.

Allie glared at Sullivan when he and Guy stepped off the single library elevator, his black eyes darting from one to the other from under a mop of hair which flopped perpetually over his forehead. "If it isn't Achilles and Patroclus," Allie called out in a voice too loud for the library. "How's the west side of campus, boys? Debauched as ever?"

Guy held up his notebook and showed Allie the middle finger behind it before slipping into a seat across from him. Sullivan pulled a chair away from the table slowly, deliberately

dragging it across the linoleum floor to make a dreadful scratching sound. It echoed through the stacks. "What are you struggling with this week, Allie? Imaginary numbers?"

Allie tossed his head, trying in vain to remove the hair from his eyes. "Don't you worry about it, Young."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Footloose and fancy free, me." Sullivan took a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and tapped it on the table. He let one of the cigarettes slide from the box into his hand, then began rolling it back and forth on the table with one finger. Beneath the table, he put one foot on top of the other and pressed down just hard enough to hurt to keep himself from bouncing his leg.

Guy watched him for a moment, before he turned to the group and slapped one hand against the table. "Right. The midterm. Who's got the answers?"

Most of the boys gathered around the table laughed, but Morton Goldstein looked from Guy to his notebook and back again. "If Sterne saved it on the college server, I could probably find it. But I don't know, you guys. We could get in a lot of trouble." Morton, unlike the boys he hung around with, looked like a math geek. He had thick, plastic-rimmed glasses, and while he had no pocket protector, a pen was perpetually in his breast pocket, the clip carefully hooked over the pocket's hem. He wore his cell phone, an accessory no student at Scotsdale was without, clipped to his belt and it somehow gave him the air of one obsessed with unnecessary gadgetry that only the select few could—or would want to—operate.

The table had fallen silent after Morton's confession. Finally, Guy laughed and it was as if he had pulled the stopper holding back the playful ridicule of the rest of the boys. "I was kidding, Goldstein," Guy said amid unkind mocking and impersonations of Goldstein.

"Oh." Goldstein flipped open a textbook lying in front of him. "Then we'd better get started, hadn't we?"

Sullivan was quiet that afternoon, sullen. Guy elbowed him once after about an hour and told him he didn't need to stick around if he didn't want to. "After all, Sull, it isn't your midterm."

"Don't bother tagging along if you aren't going to be any use, is that it?"

"Of course not. I don't mean it that way. Just take off if you want to, is all I'm saying."

Sullivan smiled, broadly, as he rarely did. "I know." He slipped his cigarettes back into his jacket pocket and pushed himself away from the table. "Gentleman"—he gave a slight bow—"enjoy your midterm. I'll be off."

He heard Allie mutter "motherfucker" under his breath as he made his way toward the stairwell, followed by the sound of someone being smacked upside the head.

The sky was darkening when he made his way through the turnstiles and glass doors out of the library. It was mid-October, just after the time change, and the first evenings of a month-long series of days with alarming early afternoons had begun. Sullivan found the back half of October and November terribly depressing. Other people despaired in February and during those days in March when the light lasted just long enough and the breeze was just warm enough to lend some hope before wrenching it all away with the worst blizzard of the season, not only

burying lawns and streets and sidewalks, but sending the population into a collective funk that would not lift until well into May. Sullivan didn't mind the long wait for spring. He found the gray sky, the frozen ground, the barren trees refreshing, a sign of renewal, of unceasing cycles that he had no choice but to submit to. But the weeks between the end of Daylight Savings Time and the first appearance of Christmas lights lining front railings and hedges—those were the worst for him. Those were the days when he would just as soon stay in bed as get out of it, the days when nothing really mattered, the days when he couldn't see the point in living at all if you were just going to die in the end.

Sullivan kicked at the withered stalk of a marigold that had been planted by the grounds staff at the base of a tree months ago. It was a few minutes shy of 4:30, when the caf would start serving dinner. Cafeteria hours were shortened on the weekends and the food was noticeably less appetizing from Friday night through Sunday afternoon. Extended hours began again each week with the early opening of the cafeteria for Sunday dinner, and the fare improved with that meal as well. Sullivan smelled dinner cooking from the sidewalk and his stomach rumbled, but he couldn't bear the thought of eating alone while the dining hall filled around him with students in loud groups, returning from weekends away from campus or enjoying an impromptu get-together before a long evening of studying and homework that they'd put off for two days.

He made his way to his dorm room, telling himself that he had three hours to head back to the cafeteria for dinner but knowing that once he'd entrenched in the building he wouldn't wander back out into the darkness. The room Sullivan shared with Guy somehow looked bigger with all of their things crammed into it than it had when they'd arrived. Like all of the other

dorm rooms at Scotsdale, theirs came equipped with two single beds (extra long, so that one had to buy special sheets or forever deal with fitted sheets that came unhooked and bunched up in the night), two dressers (one almost certainly wobbly), two desks (tables, really, made desk-like only by the addition of a single, narrow drawer in the center), and two plastic molded chairs (in long-rejected kitchen colors from the seventies like avocado and burnt umber). Sullivan and Guy had added a ratty couch from which you couldn't really see the television, which was propped up on top of Sullivan's dresser.

Sullivan flopped onto the couch, not bothering to pull the three separate shades over the three sections of the windows behind him even though he knew that with the falling darkness anyone walking between the student center (which housed the cafeteria) and his dormitory would be able to see into the lighted room. Several books lay stacked on the floor by the couch. They were Sullivan's course texts for the semester. He had signed up for four classes: 20th Century Fiction, The Novel, Europe from 1945-Present, and Economics. He had read all of the four-hundred-plus-page anthology and each of the novels assigned in the two English courses (though he skipped class as often as he went), had skimmed the history text, and hadn't picked up (much less read) the econ text since he'd brought it home from the campus bookstore in August. He considered catching up with the economics work now, thought he remembered that there would be a midterm soon, but even lifting the book from the floor to his lap seemed too much effort.

After a few minutes he leaned toward his desk and hauled his laptop onto the couch with him, pulling impatiently at the Ethernet cord to loosen it from the jumble behind his desk and free it enough to reach the extra few feet to the couch. He fired up the laptop and directed his

internet browser to Scotsdale College's homepage. The search in the faculty directory only took a few seconds and in no time he was looking at James Shelley's page. A large head-and-shoulders picture in sepia tones filled the left-hand side of the screen. Sullivan gave it only a quick glance before he shifted his attention to the information Shelley had listed about himself. Joined the Scotsdale faculty five years ago in '02. Position prior to that: adjunct faculty for two years at New York University. Completed his doctoral work in British modernism at Ohio University in '00. Sullivan smiled his practiced half-smile. Guy had been right—he'd only been guessing, running at the mouth, when he'd claimed Shelley was the greatest living expert on E.M. Forster. Perhaps he wasn't so far wrong.

Masters and undergraduate work at Penn State, degree awarded in '96. Three publications in journals mostly devoted to modernism, beginning with one on Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* the year he finished his master's work. Sullivan made a note of the Woolf title on the back of his hand with a pen that had been lying on top of his stack of books. Shelley had listed several courses he'd taught at Scotsdale since joining the faculty, mostly freshman- and sophomore-level courses like the composition classes all English faculty were obligated to teach each semester and survey courses covering a continent and a century. There were a few upper-level courses with names that hinted at the instructor's theories about the subject matter, such as "'Make It New': Paradox and Imperative in Early 20th-Century Fiction" and "Man About Town: The Flaneur, the City, and British Modernism." Under "Service and Interests," Shelley noted that he had been the advisor to the English Club at Ohio and was involved with Scotsdale's small chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society. Sullivan clicked on the Sigma Tau link

and noted the next meeting time on his hand as well. He'd be noticed if he attended, he was sure. Scotsdale didn't have that many English majors and of the ones it did, only a handful would have the kind of GPA necessary for the group. He probably wouldn't go, but it gave him a warm fluttery feeling to know exactly where James Shelley would be next Tuesday evening at 7:00 o'clock.

He opened a new tab in his browser and found the college's on-line library catalogue. He did a search for *Jacob's Room* and penned in the call number longways between his thumb and first finger, taking slow, deliberate care, forming the rounded parts of the P and the R and the hook in the seven as if he were sketching the outline of something he loved. He noted that one of the library's copies was checked out and not due back until sometime in the middle of the next semester. A faculty member, then. Student loan periods were much shorter. He wondered idly if it was Shelley who had checked it out, but decided that he most likely had his own copy of the book that had been the subject of his first published work. The other copy was in. It occurred to Sullivan that he could go over to the stacks right now, take the elevator to the fourth floor, where the PRs were shelved (thus avoiding Guy and his math friends entirely), and curl up in one of the drooping armchairs shoved into a haphazard circle around a low table in the back corner of that floor. He could read for hours there, undisturbed—it was unlikely that he would even see another human being that far from the group study tables on a Sunday evening. He could stop at the cafeteria on the way, grab something quick and portable, something he could sneak into the library unnoticed.

The notion was appealing and he might well have done it had he not returned to Shelley's webpage. That sepia photograph caught his eye. Sepia seemed an odd choice. It was an effect Sullivan associated with the late nineteenth century, with photographs of immigrants freshly arrived in New York or Chicago, with pioneer families assembled for the only portrait they would ever sit for, on the family's dining room chairs, transported to the front lawn with the help of the traveling photographer who would snap the shot. He took a quick detour through other faculty pages through the departmental link on the left of the page. None of the others had such a photograph. Theirs were all candid or impromptu shots, usually in their offices and with poor environmental lighting and grainy color. One professor had declined to include a picture of herself and had put up a drawing of Jane Austen instead.

James Shelley's was by far the most formal, the most professional, the most distancing. The picture encompassed the area from precisely two inches above his head to midway down his chest. He wore a brown suit coat of some sort of heavy, textured material which would hang from his shoulders in straight lines, never bunching or flapping when he moved. His shirt was white and crisp, his tie knotted with a knot even Sullivan knew was not the standard schoolboy knot most men wore. He had brown hair which he wore quite short in the back and just slightly longer in the front. It was swept to his right in a part that put Sullivan in mind of Allie, if the way Allie wore his hair were deliberate and successful. It was the sort of haircut which would tolerate the sort of hat or cap no man wore anymore and Sullivan had a sudden picture of James

Shelley sporting a Gatsby around campus and hanging it with his long coat on a hook behind his office door. His eyes were light and ensconced behind a pair of wire-framed glasses which mostly disappeared if you looked at the picture from an angle.

It was the eyes that most held Sullivan's attention. He had never seen quite such a look in a photograph before. Shelley looked directly at the camera. Not *into* it but past it, as if he were looking not at what was in front of him, but at who he knew would someday look back at him. Despite his carefully tailored attire and smart grooming, there was a vulnerability to the photograph, to Shelley's expression. The professor somehow managed to look both authoritative and unsure at once, a combination Sullivan had only recently come to realize he found arousing. He right-clicked on Shelley's picture so he could save it, open it in another program, and look at it without the distraction of the text and links on the webpage. His left hand had rested on his belly as he used his right to navigate the internet, and now, as he opened Corel, he let his hand wander to the hem of his own shirt, to caress the soft skin where shirt and jeans met. He ran his hand up under the shirt, found his nipples, rubbed one, tweaked the other.

When he'd been younger, when he'd had to do this in closets, behind bathroom doors pounded on by anxious younger foster brothers, he'd wanted to take his time, to explore. He wove intricate seduction stories for himself, playing with his chest, touching his lips, his sides, his belly—anything but his cock—trying, and, in the beginning, always failing, to make those delicious moments last. He'd practiced, he'd started to take note of the time to see how long he lasted, and by the time he was sixteen, he'd trained himself to hold out, to keep from coming until he allowed himself to. He'd made the mistake of mentioning this to a school friend and

found his friend's leer at describing his own masturbatory habits—which boiled down to fast and often—so inexplicably frightening that he began rationing his own sessions. Once a week only, and then as quickly as possible, without any elaborate fantasies or undue lingering. His resolve had lasted for the better part of a year and by the time he'd gotten over his bout of guilt, he found himself out of practice and without the mental discipline to unravel the thread of a fantasy once he became physically aroused. This had worried him at first, but only briefly, and when the worry went away he was left with his impatience and his frustration at it.

But this picture of James Shelley aroused Sullivan slowly, and seemed to work on him in several ways and places at once. He felt the slow swelling in his cock, surely, but something was happening in his stomach as well, and his mind. It was the sort of complete arousal he'd once fantasized himself to but which he had never experienced as a reaction to another human being before. He imagined himself standing in front of Shelley, abashed and nervous, as he never was with anyone. Shelley reached for Sullivan, caressed one cheek, then lifted him in his arms and carried him to a narrow cot shoved into a corner. He lowered Sullivan to the cot slowly, arranging him so that he was propped against the wall, his legs stretched before him along the length of the cot. Shelley leaned toward Sullivan then, stopping when his own lips were inches from Sullivan's, and licked his own. He kissed Sullivan then, slowly, carefully, but he pulled away after a few seconds. "Not until I tell you," he whispered, and then he was stroking Sullivan through his trousers, and then pulling the trousers down but not off. Shelley straddled Sullivan, a knee on either side of the younger man's hips, his hands pressing into the wall above each of

Sullivan's shoulders. He eased himself onto Sullivan's cock, and rocked back and forward, back and forward, pausing to kiss Sullivan's mouth every few seconds. Finally, he said, "Now, Young. Now."

Sullivan blushed at his own fantasy but popped open the top button of his jeans and slid his hand into his underwear. The warmth of his own flesh was comforting, soothing, even as his desire was consuming, and he came as he replayed Shelley's command to do so over and over for himself in his head.

Guy returned to the room while Sullivan was still lying on the couch, the laptop forgotten and quickly running out of power beside him. Sullivan was mostly asleep, his t-shirt still hitched halfway up his torso and his jeans still undone. Guy gave the dorm room door a kick and let it slam. He snickered as Sullivan jumped and clutched at the back of the couch with one hand and reached for his pants button with the other.

"Should I come back later, then? Leave you two alone?"

"Fuck off, Day." Sullivan rubbed at his eyes with the heel of one hand. "What time is it?"

"Must be about 7:30. They were starting to shut down the caf when I left." Guy picked up the laptop and dropped onto the sofa next to Sullivan. He reached behind himself to pull at the cord on the shades. "You giving the campus a show? I didn't know you were into that."

Sullivan shrugged, bit at a fingernail. "Give me that," he said and reached for the laptop.

Guy twisted away from him, keeping the laptop out of Sullivan's reach, and pushed the lid open far enough so that he could see the monitor. He whistled, as another boy might after being told the price of a coveted sports car. "What's this?"

"Give it here." Sullivan lunged at his roommate and yanked the machine away from him. "It's mine, isn't it? Don't go nosing though your stuff."

"I don't know what you do when I'm not here. You might have infiltrated every last secret of my sock drawer for all I know."

Sullivan smiled despite himself. "Fuck *off*." Sullivan shut the laptop's lid and put it back on his desk

Guy grinned back, but his face turned serious again quickly. "For real, though. That was that professor, wasn't it?"

"You said you didn't care." Sullivan ducked his head and fumbled with the cords for his computer. "First year, right off, you said you didn't give a shit."

"Yeah, about guys, Sull. And I don't. But that's not guys, that's a prof."

"And I suppose you've never had a crush on a teacher? Never jerked off thinking about your guidance counselor?"

"No comment, you pushy fag. But this is different."

"Why's it different? Because it's another man? I like cock so my fantasies are alarming where a straight horny bastard's are not?"

"Don't be an idiot, Sull." Guy stood and headed for the bathroom. "It's because you're you."

Chapter Two

James Shelley shuffled his notes for the day's classes for what seemed like the thirtieth time that morning. He'd been up too late again the night before and the three cups of coffee he'd had before nine just to make himself feel even alert were now making him jittery and irritable. His lesson plan depressed him. He had introduced Mary Shelley and her "modern Prometheus" many times before, but the notes he'd compiled last night seemed to be missing something. Around one in the morning he had become confused about particulars he had known since undergrad. Dates and the connections between people suddenly made no sense to him, seemed wrong even though he knew they were right, even after he had checked and rechecked them. After nearly an hour of this peculiar panic, he'd convinced himself to go to bed, that everything would have fallen back into place for him in the morning.

He'd slept badly, awaking several times in painful need of a pee and once just seconds before his left leg began to spasm painfully. No time seemed to pass between these interruptions. He could swear that he'd been sound asleep each time he awoke, but virtually no minutes had ticked off on the clock and he never felt any more rested than when he'd gone to bed. Around five he'd given in and pushed himself out of bed with such purpose that his tiny tabby cat had to scramble to get out his way. He'd apologized to the cat, using the obscure literary name he'd given her, as he did only when he felt he had something to make up to her.

That he talked to his cat at all confounded him. He had not been prone to addressing animals and inanimate objects in childhood or early adulthood and he sometimes wondered if it weren't a sign of some sort of instability.

He was in his office, two cups of coffee already sloshing around with his habitual granola bar and working on the third, by 7:30. It was a solid hour and a half before his usual time, nearly three before his first class, and by far the earliest he'd been on campus since joining the faculty at Scotsdale. By nine he'd checked his e-mail five times, read every news site and blog he frequented through and through, made one trip down the hall to the bathroom and an aimless pass through the department to satisfy his—rather childish, he thought—curiosity about who was in the office in the early morning. He'd read through his class notes twice, once slowly and deliberately, mumbling the words out loud to himself and making extraneous notes in the margins in his tiny, precise handwriting and once quickly, dismissively, because while the dates and facts had indeed settled overnight, he still couldn't overcome the feeling that the notes and the lecture they would produce were inherently inadequate.

He was staring vacantly at one of his office bookshelves, drumming his fingers against the edge of the desk, his class notes and other papers pushed to one side, when Dr. Tarr stuck his head in. He appeared, really, head and one arm between the door and the door jam, the rest of him invisible and, as far as James could imagine, immaterial.

"Here early, aren't you, James?"

Shelley looked at his watch, though he knew exactly what time it was. 9:12. "Not so much, now. I was though."

Tarr frowned. For an English professor, he had a peculiar difficulty parsing speech. He chewed at his lower lip, catching a bit of his beard in his mouth. It was a habit James found particularly annoying and it grated on him this morning. "Did you want something, Hubert? I'm preparing for class."

"No you weren't. You were doing Shelley's one man band on the desk there."

Shelley scowled. Somehow it was particularly galling to be caught in his office wasting time when he was also early. It was something only someone terribly lonely would do. Otherwise, surely he would waste time at home. "Well, I *should* be preparing for class."

Tarr was in the office then, perched on the edge of the tattered couch which had been left by the office's previous occupant. He sat with his knees spread wide apart and his folded hands hanging between them. "It reminds me of graduate school."

"What does?"

"Not preparing for class. Not that I was guilty myself, of course."

"Of course not." Shelley was reminded of an acquaintance from undergrad who used to wander into his apartment uninvited and sit in the living room for hours. He or one of his two roommates would often wander downstairs to find the man sitting there, staring into space, and be unable to determine if he had come over for a reason or whether someone else had invited him. He and the roommates had had several conversations about the situation, all conducted in hushed tones, though the acquaintance lived on the other side of town, and while they all found Sherman rather creepy and no one could remember actually befriending him, they all felt sorry for him as well and didn't want to be the one to ask him to stop his impromptu visits. They had

continued until graduation when the roommates all headed for separate grad programs and prayed that Sherman, who was a year behind them, wouldn't follow any of them when he finally finished his degree.

Tarr was examining the bookshelves, his eyes moving from left to right and back again just as if he were reading a page.

"So, can I help you with something then?"

"No, no. Just dropping by. Had a student not show up for a scheduled meeting. Time on my hands. Thought I'd see what you were up to."

Shelley suddenly was struck by how much of his day was spent in getting ready for the next day, and the thought depressed him horribly. Here was Hubert Tarr, upon finding himself sufficiently prepared, wandering the halls looking for someone to fill his time. It occurred to Shelley that at some other point in his life, as a sophomore perhaps, or maybe even at the beginning of his graduate studies, Tarr's impulse to seek out others would have been refreshing, some sort of comment on the human desire to connect, to seek companionship. Now it just reminded him of how much he had to do and how little time he ever had to pursue interests not directly related to his paycheck.

"I'm up to very little, as you noted yourself," he said as he pulled his notes toward him once again. "But I'm afraid I ought to be, so that when the time comes when I want to be up to nothing for the rest of the day, I can indulge. So unless there was something . . .." Shelley opened his copy of *Frankenstein* at random and ran his hand along the crease between the pages to break the pages into staying open.

Tarr raised his hands in front of him, palms facing Shelley, as if to say, "Say no more." He headed for the door, but turned back toward the desk just before he'd reached it. "Only, come to supper at the house. Marian asks after you, you know. She thinks you work too hard."

"Does she think you work too hard?"

"Funnily enough, she never mentions it." Tarr smiled, and there was something wistful about the expression, something Shelley had never before seen on the man's face.

Tarr slapped at the door jamb. "So. Shall I tell Marian to pick a date?"

Shelley heard himself agreeing, though the prospect of spending a meal and several hours with Dr. and Mrs. Tarr in their over-heated, over-decorated, and over-stuffed house was a grim one at best. He was still going over the ways he might have politely declined, over the ways he might still politely decline, when it was time to go to class. Consequently, he arrived flustered and with his mind on something other than the lecture he was about to give. Despite having been on campus for hours, he made it to his classroom just minutes before the class was scheduled to begin, and therefore arrived after the majority of his students. Shelley did not consider himself a particularly paranoid man, but he had always preferred to get to a classroom before the students. If he got there last, he felt them watching him as he walked to the front of the room, as he dug through his bag for the papers which had managed to work themselves to the bottom of the heap in the short walk from office to classroom. He became hyper-aware of his every movement, of the little mistakes he made, like dropping the chalk or misplacing his pen.

By the time he was settled enough to take roll, he could feel facts and figures turning themselves peculiar and unfamiliar in his mind, and he kept losing his place in the too-small Ward Record Book provided by the department. A student in the back of the room made Shelley pause. He adjusted his glasses and pointed at the young man, using all of his fingers, his open palm pointed toward the ceiling. "Who are you?"

The boy smiled a strange half smile which made him look ridiculous and somehow endearing for it, and said, in a voice which surprised Shelley with its clarity, "Sullivan."

"Sullivan who?" Shelley rifled through the papers before him, looking for the class roster he had long ago banished to a forgotten folder in favor of his hand-written roll book and an on-line spreadsheet. "I'm afraid that the drop-add period is past," he said into his desk. He looked up and his gaze fell to one of his better students in the front row. "Isn't it?"

She gave a small shrug, as if to say that she wouldn't go around dropping and adding classes weeks into the semester in any case.

Sullivan's smile threatened to turn whole. "Sullivan Young. And I'm not adding. I just wanted to sit in. If that's all right."

"What for?" The words sounded harsh to Shelley, and he thought that Sullivan's smile wavered for a moment before the boy shrugged.

"I'm thinking of taking you next semester. Wanted to see what I'd get."

Shelley frowned at Sullivan's tone and wanted to refuse, to banish the boy from the room. The nerve. And halfway through October yet. But he could not find any good reason to turn the boy away, aside from bad humor and bile, and he nodded his consent. But why did it

have to be *this* day? Why a day when he would inevitably make that joke and it would fall flat? Why the day he already felt so discombobulated and why a student, unknown to him in any way, simply appearing at the start of a random class? "Positively Dickensian," he muttered to himself. A girl in the front row, not one of his better students, said, "Pardon?" and he was forced to shake his head and mutter never mind.

"Right." Shelley took a deep breath and tossed his pencil onto the roll book and let it roll down the podium and onto the floor as he circled around the desk. "Who here has seen some representation of Frankenstein in popular culture? In a movie, a cartoon, a comic book?"

Everyone in the class raised a hand. Shelley perched on the edge of the desk, leaning on his hands on either side of him. He was settling a little now he'd started in. He always did, and he always forgot that he did before hand. He tilted his head and asked of the ceiling, "Good, then, how many of you have read *Frankenstein*?"

Hands dropped around the room until only three were left in the air—two girls' in the front row and the new boy's—Sullivan's. "I thought so. You see, it's a peculiarity of *Frankenstein* that the monster has gained so much popularity while so few people ever read the story. I look forward to introducing so many of you the original afresh—you'll be surprised, I think, by the story. It's nothing like what you might have been led to believe by modern adaptations and usages of the character. The novel may sometimes be described as a horror

story, but it has little to do with creeping up on unsuspecting young woman in the dark of night and everything to do with the darkness that can arise in mankind when our best intentions are misinformed and when we fail ourselves."

Shelley reached behind him on the desk for his notes, and caught sight of Sullivan slouching in the back row. The half-smile had turned into a smirk, like you might expect to see on an audience member who had seen the magic show before and, having figured out the trick, waited in amusement to see it performed again. Shelley hesitated for a moment, then turned round to the class, and adjusting his glasses while he peered at his notes, started in again: "Mary Shelley—no relation—was, of course, married to Percy Bysshe Shelley, and together they formed part of one of the most important literary circles in the history of English literature." Shelley had stumbled slightly over "no relation," the timing had been off, the comment too practiced. No one had laughed, there had not been even the polite twitter he could usually count on from the girls in the front who seemed determined to please him in all things. Sullivan was grinning now, and he slid farther down in his seat, put his feet up on the chair in front of him, and folded his arms across his chest. Shelley looked up from Sullivan's feet to his grinning face, and their eyes met. Sullivan's expression seemed to laugh, to say, "Well? Go on. I'm listening." It wasn't unheard of that Shelley would make eye contact with a student during a lecture, and that some unspoken communication would pass between them. But it was rare, and Shelley always felt as if he had stepped over some line, violated some edict, when it happened. This was different. It was as if *Sullivan* were the one stepping over lines, and rather than feel affronted, as Shelley sometimes did with his students who felt most entitled, Shelley felt

confused, bested, unsure—and intrigued. He raised on eyebrow slightly at Sullivan, and went on.

#

Dr. Shelley had put the class into groups to read and discuss the prologue to *Frankenstein* for the last twenty minutes of class, and, having no interest in what his classmates might think or say, Sullivan had shouldered his bag and walked out as the groups were forming. He caught Shelley watching him out of the corner of his eye and could feel the man's gaze follow him out of the room.

It had been a ballsy thing to do, Sullivan thought, to show up at Shelley's lecture. Like a declaration of some kind, though Sullivan wasn't sure yet what it was he wanted to declare, beyond, at least, "Here I am." *That*, he felt, he had accomplished. Shelley would surely remember him, recognize him now if he saw him elsewhere on campus.

Sullivan delighted in the quiet of Scotsdale's small campus when classes were in session. There were few enough students, and few enough sections of each course, that during popular class times nearly everyone was in class and the grounds took on an almost eerie stillness. It was almost as if the sidewalks, the quad, the student center, had taken a deep breath and were holding it in, letting the pressure build, until, at the end of the period, they would let it out in a great whoosh of students laughing, talking, jostling, tossing things about, and trampling the ground beneath their feet.

He made his way to the student center and twirled the dial on his mailbox. Sullivan liked

to check his mail when there were few other people around. He hated crouching to the floor and opening that box with others standing over and around him, never knowing what might be waiting for him there or who might see. It wasn't as if he ever received anything terribly embarrassing or secret—there was no one to send such things and he didn't have the money to subscribe to the kinds of magazines that might make him blush in the mailroom. He supposed it was a holdover from feeling like he had no privacy whatsoever in foster homes—foster brothers and sisters and often foster parents wanting to know what was every little slip of paper, where had he been every minute.

There was only one thing Sullivan received in the mail he really wished no one else to see—and those envelopes came randomly. He never knew when another would arrive, and he never knew how he would react when he saw those now-familiar light purple envelopes that marked a letter from his grandparents.

By the time his grandparents had found him, Sullivan had already completed his first two years at Scotsdale and he liked to think of the part of his life that revolved around foster homes and false hopes as behind him. For good. But once Lionel and Peggy Young had found their dead son's son, they were persistent. Ignoring their tactful but lengthy letters did no good; they simply wrote again, giving no indication they were discouraged by a lack of reply or embarrassed to be writing again so soon. Sullivan read every one of the letters, slowly, carefully, absorbing every word, soaking up the sentences. Every time he received one of them, in the envelopes with the addressee typed on a typewriter with a dirty "e" key that left the sections of the letter unconnected and with the handwritten letters inside in the slanty writing that looked so

elegant but was so hard to read, he told himself that he would not read it this time, would not even open it. He chanted to himself on the way out of the mail room in the student center that he wouldn't this time, he would not, that he was fine now, had lived all those years without family, without these faceless grandparents who wanted so much to contact him now. That he had got this far without help, that he was only letting himself in for heartache if he opened the letter.

For his heart did ache. A silly, romantic phrase, but he didn't know what else to call it. He felt both hollow and like something welled up inside him, threatening to take over his insides, to consume him from the inside out. He could control it fairly well by the third or fourth letter, but the first one had taken him completely and wholly by surprise. A little gasp had escaped his lips, quite without his knowing it was going to, and he had tried to cover it with a cough though he was alone in his dorm room. He'd spent nearly an hour in the bathroom, sequestered in the single toilet stall designed to allow the four boys who shared the bathroom to use the sink and shower even if one needed the toilet. He felt silly hiding in the bathroom while all of his suitemates were at class anyway, but he was afraid that if he were required to open his mouth to speak, he might lose all control of his traitorous lungs.

So Sullivan had taken to being even more careful about checking his mail when he was alone—or, if he could not avoid opening the box in Guy's presence, of holding his small pile of mail close to his chest, like a poker hand in a high stakes card game, before rifling through it. But it had not been long before Guy realized that Sullivan was receiving strange mail. Every few weeks Sullivan would stuff an envelope between whatever other pieces of mail he got that day. He avoided Guy's gaze and changed the subject. Guy was the sort to heckle, to pick—not out of

malice, but rather out of a dangerous combination of curiosity, energy, and boredom. Somehow this time, with these mysterious letters of Sullivan's, Guy knew to leave him alone.

Sullivan kept the letters in a shoebox in the closet he shared with Guy. He didn't remember bringing the box with him to school, but there were three or four broken concert buttons in the bottom that he did remember picking up the summer before. Sullivan had thought he'd been successful in keeping the letters from Guy until the day Guy asked about them as he was stuffing the latest one into the box.

"When are you going to tell me what's in the letters?"

Guy's tone was serious and Sullivan found his retort dying in his throat. "What letters?" he asked, and the question felt transparent to Sullivan, or rather it made him feel as if he'd turned transparent himself. He was suddenly sure that Guy could know every secret Sullivan had ever kept, just by looking at him.

"You don't have to say if you don't want to." Guy started stripping for the shower. "But if you do . . .." Guy shrugged.

Sullivan watched as each piece of clothing hit the floor. Normally they looked away, casually, or simply acted as if the other weren't undressing. But Sullivan was mesmerized somehow, entranced by each layer, not because of what it might reveal but because of the way each removal seemed to be marking off the time remaining until Guy's offer expired. As sweatshirt, t-shirt, and socks hit the floor, Sullivan felt time running out, felt that if he didn't tell Guy now, somehow he'd never be able to. As Guy came closer to standing naked before him, Sullivan felt his chance to share himself with another slipping away.

Guy was down to his boxers and with his hand on the bathroom door knob when Sullivan said, “They’re from my grandparents. My dad’s parents. They’ve been writing for about three months now. The first came just after this semester started.”

Guy folded his arms across his chest. Sullivan was reminded of his foster brothers waiting for the school bus and jamming their hands into their armpits to keep them warm.

“I thought you had no family,” Guy said.

“Nobody knew of any. The letters say they didn’t know their son had had a child until just before he died last February.”

Guy sank onto the sagging couch under the window. He looked as if he’d just received shocking news about himself, not about his roommate.

“Your father was alive all this time?”

Sullivan shrugged, though the implication of what his grandparents had written him couldn’t be more clear. “He didn’t know what happened to my mother after I was born. Or something. The letters aren’t very clear. They wanted to tell me themselves. They wanted to meet me. But I think no.”

Guy nodded but was finding it hard to meet Sullivan’s gaze.

“So you agree then. About me not meeting them?”

Guy shifted and slunk lower on the couch. “I don’t know if I get to agree. I mean, I don’t really have a frame of reference, do I?”

People on cop shows were always yelling that no, the helpful detective *didn't* understand when they found out that their child had been murdered or that the serial killer was going to go free because of a procedural error, but Sullivan couldn't have felt more different than those distraught characters he watched on TV. He wanted an accomplice in his campaign to avoid his past, a companion in his attempt to cross this emotional minefield unscathed. He wanted Guy to have an opinion, longed to hear what someone else had to say on the subject.

"Is that your way of saying you think I should go?"

Guy sort of squinched up his face and shrugged his shoulders. "No," he said at last. "Not really. It's just . . . ." He sighed. "Again, I don't see as how I get to have an opinion."

That had been the end of the conversation really, though Guy had continued to sit on the couch in his boxers, looking as if he wanted to help but was at a loss as to what to do. Sullivan had finally nodded and made a point of being enthralled by his e-mail, and Guy had gone for his shower.

That had been about two weeks ago, and Sullivan had kept up his surreptitious opening of his mailbox because he was afraid of revisiting the conversation with Guy. But there had been no more letters in that time, and Sullivan found himself annoyed at their absence. For nearly three months the letters had come not quite once a week, maybe every nine or ten days, and now it had been—Sullivan counted quickly on his fingers—sixteen days since the letter that had caused Guy finally to ask about them had arrived. A small voice nagged at him that his grandparents might be quite old—something might have happened to them to keep them from writing. But he snarled inwardly at this small voice and retorted to himself that it was unlikely

that something would happen to stop them *both* from writing. The letters were always written in one hand—his grandmother's, he could tell from the signatures—but they were signed in two different hands: "Peggy" in that same slanty, elegant, hard-to-read script of the body of the letter and "Lionel" in a broader, loopier style that suggested to Sullivan that its owner was unaccustomed to writing in long hand.

Far more likely, Sullivan thought as he bent into the low crouch necessary to turn the combination lock on his mailbox, that the Youngs had taken his silence as a rebuff and had stopped writing. Sullivan swung open the mailbox door and pulled out the envelopes from within. He could tell immediately that there was no purple envelop there—they tended to jump out at him—but he flipped through the pile anyway. Phone bill. Flier. Campus memo. Flier. Flier. Credit card offer. Flier.

He shoved his mail back into the box and slammed shut the door, giving the dial an angry little twirl as he stood. "You weren't supposed to give up," he muttered as he aimed a kick at the wall of mailboxes, then turned and headed back out into the crisp October afternoon.

#

Shelley fumbled with the key to his front door. It was nearly dark, and the light from his neighbor's porch didn't really reach his. Shelley stood between the screen door and the front door holding the screen open with his elbow while he tried to maneuver the key into the lock without dropping the papers he had under one arm. The stack of papers began to slip, and Shelley's elbow went through the screen as he shifted to try to prevent them from falling. "Fuck!" The papers landed on the damp porch with a sloppy splat, and Shelley muttered,

"fuckity fucking fuck" as he wrestled himself free of the screen. When he bent to pick up the papers the screen door tried to close on him and his satchel slid from his hip and knocked him in the head. When he'd finally made it through the door, he flung the satchel from him onto the landing and heaved the papers overhand at the top of the stairs. They hit the wood floor of the living room and slid in every direction. Shelley sighed at the job of picking them all up again, but the action of throwing them had made him feel a bit better. He toed off his shoes and nudged

them into place in the corner between the front door and the landing closet, then shut the door as quietly and deliberately as he could before slinging his satchel over his shoulder and slouching up the stairs.

He walked past the scattered papers into the kitchen, where his tabby cat sat waiting for him on the corner of the table. She had her head cocked slightly to one side, as if to ask just what the hell kind of display he called that and was he all right anyway. He let his satchel fall to the floor and scooped up the cat. "Sorry, my little Mina. I have been making rather a lot of noise, haven't I? Yes." The cat condescended to be held and petted for a few seconds before she kicked and squirmed and Shelley let her jump to the floor.

It was earlier than Shelley usually got home—he'd canceled his afternoon office hours and left campus as soon as his British Survey class ended. There was time, then, actually to cook something for supper, he thought, rather than just to defrost a frozen dinner. He pulled open the refrigerator door and peered at the contents—a package of spinach, a half-empty carton of yogurt

probably past its date, a jug of orange juice, and a carton of eggs. There was cheese and lunch meat in one of the drawers, he knew, and an assortment of fruits and vegetables in the crisper. Nothing very exciting. The freezer wasn't much better—mostly frozen meals and waffles—but there was a package of ground chuck Shelley didn't remember buying. But the date on the package said it was still good, so he popped it in the microwave to thaw. Hamburgers would be no good made with frozen meat, but meatballs or tacos would be okay. Shelley didn't much keep taco shells on hand, and a quick search through his cupboards confirmed his suspicion that he didn't have any. "Spaghetti and meatballs it is then," he said, and on a whim he pulled an apron someone had once given him from the tea towel drawer and tied it around his waist.

He filled a pot with enough water for three helpings of spaghetti—enough for seconds tonight if he fancied them as well as leftovers so supper would be easy one night later in the week. Into a pan he emptied two cans of diced tomatoes and then chopped three fresh tomatoes to give the sauce more heft. He crushed some garlic, and stirred it in along with a sprinkle of oregano. He set the pan of sauce to simmer while he crumbled a slice of bread into a bowl along with an egg and the defrosted meat. He hummed while he kneaded the meat mixture with his hands, his dark mood fading a bit as he found work that felt to him like *work*—like doing, like producing—in a way that writing and preparing lectures never did. He gave his sauce a quick stir, and poured some olive oil into another pan for the meatballs. As he was rolling the meat into balls and plopping them into the pan, his humming turned to singing—one of the songs his mother used to sing in the kitchen herself. Like many of the songs he had heard from her as a boy, this one was about love lost. As he sang of wandering the hills and mourning the love now

buried in the very place lovers once walked together, he had an image—sharp and quick—of his new student sitting in the back of the classroom, grinning. Shelley shook his head, finished balling the meat, and washed his hands. He put the spaghetti in to boil, mixed up some instant chocolate pudding and put together a quick salad while the rest of the meal finished cooking.

Fifteen minutes later he sat down to his spaghetti and salad with a glass of wine and a novel he'd snatched up from his nightstand. He'd about decided to take the evening for himself, to leave the papers and lesson planning for morning, and a quiet evening of supper he'd cooked himself, reading, maybe some more wine and a classical CD on the stereo seemed just the thing. The first bite of pasta and sauce and meat was perfect—just the tangy, garlicky medley he'd anticipated as he prepared the meal. The first sip of wine, too, seemed heavenly after the confusing day he'd had. He felt himself settling as he read the first words of the novel propped open against the butter dish. But the second bite tasted of nothing special and by the fourth, he was no longer sure he was hungry enough to finish even half of what he'd dished up for himself. The wine suddenly seemed to leave a peculiar aftertaste in his mouth, one that was particularly unpleasant mingled with the garlic from the sauce. He could not concentrate on the words on the page, and the narrator's voice grated. Shelley took a deep breath, chided himself for being ungrateful.

It was the image of Sullivan Young. Since he had remembered the boy, he hadn't been able to get him out of his head. It was such a strange thing to do, to show up for a class, mid-semester, uninvited, unannounced, and ask to sit in. So unusual. So illogical. So unlike any Scotsdale student he'd encountered before. Scotsdale students, on the whole, were good

students, conscientious, studious, but they were not *scholars*. They did not go out of their way to seek knowledge for its own sake. They did what they needed to, sometimes a bit more, to get what they wanted: the grades they needed to satisfy their parents, or the admission board of the next school, or the personnel officer at the company in the next town over. Shelley couldn't twist it into sense, and that he couldn't let it go bothered him as much as the peculiarity of the situation itself. He could see the boy so clearly in his mind, slouching, smirking. He had thought it at the time, and it came back to him now—the sense that Sullivan Young knew something Shelley didn't, that Sullivan Young was in possession of some sort of secret about James Shelley, that when it came to the two of them, it was Sullivan Young, sloucher, smirker, student, who had all the power over James Shelley, thinker, teacher. And that intrigued him as much as it annoyed him.

But that wasn't what Shelley couldn't shake out of his mind, wasn't what had turned his supper sour for him. For Shelley had a suspicion that if he were to allow himself to look, allow himself to recognize the desire, he would see that he wanted nothing more than to respond to the challenge of that power, to trap it, to temper it, to tame it, to make it his. It wouldn't be the first time he had played with such feelings, just the first time he had tried to be the one turning the tables, the one to be in control. It had been years since he'd thought about such deliberate play—he had put those desires away when that one relationship had ended, had marked it up as a part of his life that was passed. It wasn't that he had expected never to explore those feelings again, he just wasn't prepared to have them sneak up on him like this.

Shelley slapped his book closed and stood to dump the rest of his supper in the trash. He pulled haphazardly at the knot he'd put in the apron, and, when he'd succeeded with it, flung the apron on the counter. He stood, then, in his kitchen, with his hands on his hips, staring into the pot of leftover spaghetti until it went out of focus.

Chapter Three:

Interlude

Scotsdale College had been founded in 1812 and would be associated forever with a war and an overture with which she had nothing to do. The college valued her history almost more than her future, and there were three things she would see upheld above all else: devotion to the school, the liberal arts ideal, and a commitment to community. The college deans fostered these characteristics by keeping enrollment low, bucking trends in sister schools to relax requirements outside of students' major fields, and requiring all unmarried students under the age of twenty-five to live on campus.

Like its general philosophy, the grounds of Scotsdale College had not changed appreciably for over one hundred years. The school occupied one city block and a tall, black iron fence separated the grounds from the city sidewalks and streets beyond. It sat at the edge of the city's modest downtown, and students were free to pass through the gates at the north and south ends of campus any time they liked. Each gate consisted of a large main gate, firmly shut and locked with a matching iron key which must have dated from the nineteenth century at the least. On either side of the main gate was a smaller, shorter gate, always open and with no lock at all. The main gates were unlocked and opened on only two days of the year: freshman convocation and senior commencement. On the first, the incoming class marched through the North Gate; on the second, the outgoing slouched through the South. There were no other ways to enter the college grounds proper, and many a new faculty member had balked at the idea of

parking a five minute's walk away from the academic buildings and passing through one of the gates twice a day. What about safety? they asked. What about convenience? But the same protests had been ignored for years, and the deans were always ready to offer those professors who objected living space in the student dorms. In the effort to foster community, they said. Protestations were invariably squelched, as the faculty knew that they would be bothered by their students much more than their students would be bothered by them in the dorms.

At the center of the Scotsdale campus was a quad, which, unlike those so called at so many of her sister schools, was actually a large, unbroken (but for one sidewalk running directly through its middle) quadrangle. Around its perimeter ran a ring of large oak trees, dressed in splendid, full leaves of green or red or swathes of snow, depending on the season. Just beyond the trees was a sidewalk ringing the whole of the quad, and just beyond that were the buildings which made up the heart of residential life at Scotsdale. At one of the short ends—the southern end—stood the school chapel, the main vestibule of which was used now only for one religious service a year at Christmastime. The rest of the year she housed the college band, orchestra, choir, and music classes. The basement, which was divided into two sections which were not accessible to each other from the inside, consisted of a series of tiny classrooms and offices in one section and, in the other, a kitchen and one small meeting room, which served as a gathering place and worship area for the handful of students on campus who cared to use it.

Directly opposite the chapel stood the administration building, which echoed the chapel in size and architectural design. A long bank of shallow stone steps, bisected by a black iron railing running down their middle, led to Short Hall's heavy double doors. The doors were solid

oak—no classy modern glass doors with pull bars and hydraulics designed to facilitate opening and make closing automatic. These doors required the turn of a knob and some heft, and if a forgetful student didn't pull them to behind himself, they stood open letting in leaves and crisp air and the shouts of whatever contest had been got up on the quad. The entry way was often littered with leaves, and it had happened on more than one occasion that a snow ball had come flying through the doors to melt away into the carpet.

The walls of Short Hall were lined with oil painting portraits of past college presidents, all looking much the same in their college robes and with their bespectacled faces and balding heads. Most rested their hands on a book in their laps, but the spine of the book seemed to have been intentionally blurred by the painter, so that the book became nothing more than a vague symbol of learning. Beneath the row of paintings on the far wall of the main hall was a long glass case, encased in which was the college's public symbol of learning, the college mace. It was crafted from one long piece of mahogany and glistened on its royal blue velvet cloth as if it were wet. The head of the faculty, a revolving position which most of Scotsdale's professors tried to avoid because it meant obligatory attendance at many college functions, carried the mace at convocation, commencement, and any other time processions and robes were required. A small brass plaque was propped among the folds of the velvet. It read: Donated by Clarence T. McPherson and the living members of the Scotsdale Soothsayers. In memory of the best times. In veritate, vita.

The ground floor of Short Hall was home to the registrar and the bursar. The second and third floors were full of lavishly furnished offices for the college president, various deans, and a few other administrative personnel whose functions were unclear, even to themselves. One of the legends among the Scotsdale student body was that the college president and the college dean, like some terribly important pair of government officials, were rarely together at functions or social gatherings. In reality they had simply long ago decided to divide the duties of attending meetings and ceremonies so that each of them could salvage some time in the evenings and on weekend afternoons to be with their families. They often ate lunch together, on either side of one of their solid oak desks, hunching over sandwiches and fruit laid out on flattened paper lunch bags. Their conversation differed little from that one might hear between any two professional men of their age, and the casual, commonplace tones of these lunches seemed quietly at odds with the heavy velvet and wood décor they inhabited. It was as if the room, or perhaps its occupants themselves, inhabited the wrong time.

Short Hall had a basement and an attic as well. The basement was damp, moldy, and dark and home to boxes of old student records which everyone agreed should be computerized and then got rid of but which no one had the time or the inclination to take care of. The attic was accessible only through a hatch in the ceiling of the third floor. A student doing an article for the school newspaper on campus ghost stories hadn't been able to find anyone—either from the maintenance staff or in Short Hall—who had been in the attic. A small window above the hall's

clock was said to look out from the attic, and several students claimed to have parents or older siblings who had seen a face at the window late one stormy night. The student reporter had been denied permission to go into the attic and investigate for himself.

Chapter Four

Hubert Tarr had been more than usually persistent about his dinner invitation, and Shelley found himself pulling into the Tarrs' driveway for the described evening less than a week after the suggestion had first been made. The house had an unmistakable look of newness to it, and it was a cutout version of every other house in the neighborhood. Shelley could never remember from visit to visit exactly what the house looked like, and despite having been there nearly a dozen times, he had to drive slowly past the mailboxes, reading the names on each one until he found his colleague's.

He sat now in the driveway, his car idling, and looked up at the stone façade of the house. It might have been pleasing if every other house in the neighborhood hadn't had a similar façade—stone or brick or stucco. The stone covered only the top floors. The area around the basement and the garage—and, if Shelley craned his neck he could see, the sides of the house as well—were done in a more ordinary vinyl siding. It gave the house an unfinished look, as if the builders had run out of money.

Shelley was just trying to think of a plausible reason he might give for leaving right then when Marian Tarr appeared at her front door. She leaned out a bit, holding the storm door open and waved. "James! I thought I heard a car! Come in, come in."

Shelley grimaced and turned off the car. He gathered the bottle of wine he'd brought for Marian and the volume of poetry he'd promised Hubert and climbed out of the car. "Hello, Marian," he called as he made his way up the walk and onto the front stoop. He leaned in to kiss her cheek as he handed her the wine. "It's been too long."

"I quite agree. Ooo, Chateau Montelena. You do spoil us, James."

Shelley smiled. Marian Tarr was a little much, but somehow she was more genuine than anything else in her house, including her husband. "Not at all, Marian. You simply deserve the best."

She waved a hand at him dismissively. "Now stop. You'll make an old lady blush. Won't he, Hu?"

"Won't he what?" Hubert offered Shelley his hand as he came in from the den and shook it as if it had been years since they'd seen each other, rather than two days.

Marian patted at her hair. "Oh, never mind. Just silly chitchat. You two get comfy in the living room. I just have a few things to finish off in the kitchen and I'll be right in."

Shelley wondered at Marian's backpedaling about her comment. It was her way to flirt harmlessly with Shelley, and he'd seen her do it with other of Tarr's colleagues as well. But tonight she seemed almost nervous, apprehensive, as if she suddenly felt the flirting really dangerous.

Hubert led the way back into the den. Shelley supposed it was a compliment, a testament to the friend the Tarrs thought he was, that they entertained him in the den rather than in the more formal living room, but Shelley would have preferred the living room. Being a room the Tarrs used infrequently themselves, it was less subject to the accumulation of the couple's *stuff*. It was still stuffy and horribly over-decorated, but at least he felt less assaulted there. Anywhere his gaze landed in the den, Shelley saw something that made him want to roll his eyes or squirm

or both. It was as if the all corners and crannies of their psyches were laid open about the room, ready for anyone's inspection, with no care taken to hide the bits that might not make for pleasant evening discussion. It was a bit like sitting across from a woman who lounged so that she unknowingly displayed her underpants for all to see. It made Shelley want to look away. The trouble was, there was nowhere to look away to.

"So, old boy. How have you been?" Hubert gestured to an overstuffed leather armchair facing one of the windows in the room.

Shelley started to sit, then stopped himself, said "oh" and handed Hubert the book. "That's the one you asked for, I think."

Hubert took the book and peered at the spine. "I believe so, yes. Wonderful stuff."

Shelley was arranging himself in the chair—he could seem to find no way to sit so that his knees did not end up higher than his chest and he kept catching the tails of his sports coat underneath him. "Yes, wonderful stuff," he muttered as he leaned to one side and pulled at his coat.

When he looked up again, Hubert was holding a glass out to him. Shelley took it and sipped cautiously. He knew from the aroma that it was sherry before it hit his tongue, and he steeled himself against the sweetness of the style he knew Hubert preferred. He tried to suppress a grimace and was only partly successful. Hubert guffawed.

Shelley tried for a smile and set the glass down on the table at his elbow. Hubert was sitting now too, on an equally overstuffed leather sofa at caddy-corners with Shelley's chair—though Hubert had no trouble sitting in it comfortably. He was smiling broadly now, as if he were waiting to hear something that he'd long anticipated. "So? What news?"

Shelley raised an eyebrow. "News?" He thought of Sullivan Young again and mentally kicked himself in the ankle. Though, really, Young showing up in his class unannounced was the only "news" he supposed he had. Nothing much out of the ordinary happened to a young, single professor in a small town. And all of his professional news Hubert had surely heard on campus. "You make it sound as if I am some strange traveler bringing news of the lands to the far-flung inn."

Tarr laughed, short and sharp. "I just wonder what's been going on with you lately."

Shelley picked up his glass again for something to do with his hands, but stopped short of taking another sip. He felt silly just holding the glass, sillier still avoiding what was really a simple, normal question. It was almost as if he had something to hide. He rolled the glass between his hands, remembered his father doing this very thing, could almost hear the sound his father's wedding ring made clinking against the glass.

Marian appeared in the doorway of the den. "What have you gents got up to while I was in the kitchen, then," she asked as she came into the room, and Shelley thought that she really could be described as flowing when she walked. She had the sort of lithe, willowy body that made some women look old and frail once they hit a certain age but which, on Marian, spoke only of ease and lightness. Shelley was struck suddenly at how much Marian did not belong in

this house or with this man. There was nothing uncouth about Marian, and he decided then that Hubert must have been in charge of decorating. He wondered if there was a room in the house that was Marian's, and if he would find her lightness there.

"Got into the drinks with no time lost, I see." She walked, no, *flowed*, to the couch and sat gracefully next to her husband.

Hubert held up his glass in acknowledgement, then took a long swallow. He gestured at Shelley. "James here is showing some reluctance in telling what he's been up to. I suspect shenanigans."

"Oh?" Marian turned toward Shelley, raising an eyebrow.

Shelley tried a laugh, but it came out somewhat strangled. "I assure you, there's simply nothing to tell."

"Go on. You look like you've been caught sneaking out some girl's window at dawn. You've been up to something, as sure as the sun will rise."

Marian shifted slightly and patted at her husband's knee. "If James has something he wants to tell us, I'm sure he will, in his own time. I really wish you wouldn't badger people so." There was a shade of long-standing argument in her tone, and Hubert made a sort of grimace as if he had been reminded of something that tasted particularly unpleasant. "Just trying to make conversation," he muttered into his glass before emptying it of its contents.

Shelley pointed to a small statue standing on a table in one corner of the room. "Can one of you tell me about that piece there? It's so unusual." The statue had been in the den forever as long as he knew, and he hoped he hadn't ever asked to hear about it before.

Marian swiveled to look where Shelley was pointing. "One of Hubert's favorites, that one. Hercules and Diomedes. But surely you know that story?"

Shelley shook his head.

"He can tell it better than I can. One of those awful, glorious Greek stories. Go on, Hubert."

Hubert stood and walked to the sideboard to refill his glass. "It was one of the Twelve Labors of Hercules. The man-eating horses of Thrace. Hercules is supposed to have thrown Diomedes to his own horses to calm them. That's a renaissance representation of Hercules and Diomedes wrestling. Replica of course. Meant to demonstrate competitive strength or some such. To be perfectly honest, I'd like it much better if Diomedes weren't grabbing on with his left hand quite so . . . enthusiastically."

Shelley stood and approached the statue. Hercules had the Thracian king around the waist, upside down, and Diomedes clutched at Hercules's penis. The image was weirdly erotic, and Shelley wasn't sure which was more arousing: the intimate, desperate grasp, or the sheer strength of violence captured in the stone. He thought, again, of a man whose memory he had put aside, and he startled when Hubert spoke.

"De Rossi did eleven others—a whole set for the myth. This is the most striking, though."

Shelley straightened. "Yes. I can see how it might be."

#

After sitting with the Tarrs over coffee and some surprisingly nice rhubarb tarts for what he hoped was long enough not to be rude, Shelley made some excuses about needing to finish grading papers before bed and got up from the table. Marian made some noises about wishing he didn't have to go so soon and Hubert stood when Shelley did but then stayed at the head of the table looking lost. Shelley shook his hand again as he made his way to the front door, and Hubert thanked him for coming, a bit coldly, Shelley thought, and he made a note to try and be nicer to the man at school.

As Marian helped him into his coat, he caught a glimpse of the dining room table through the entryway. Their dessert plates and coffee cups still sat there, and Marian had certainly done nothing but whisk the dinner things away before bringing in dessert.

"I should stay and help you clean up." It was a statement, not a question, and though Shelley wanted nothing more than to escape their company, he thought he managed not to let himself sound resigned.

"No, not at all. Don't be silly." Marian brushed at the shoulders of his coat. "You see? I hear Hu starting in on the dishes already. It will take us no time at all to clear up together. Three would only be in the way in the kitchen."

"If you're sure." Shelley softened a bit at her refusal; he could imagine a pleasant evening helping Marian clean up the kitchen, drying the good dishes she handed him, putting them away carefully in the cupboard for the next occasion. She was suited, he thought, to quiet

domesticity, to baking and tending and slow evenings by the fire with a good book and a drowsy companion. He didn't imagine she got much of that with Hubert. He was too boisterous, too loud and blundering.

Shelley bent to kiss her cheek and as he did, she lifted a hand to cup his face gently. He started and pulled back a bit, but not so much that her hand fell away. "There is something troubling you, James. You will tell someone what it is? Talk it out?"

Shelley took a breath to protest, but Marian shook her head. "I can see there's something. I thought you were going to collapse right into yourself when Hu wouldn't let you alone about what you've been up to. God knows that Hu can be the most tremendous bore, but he thinks of you as a friend. He can be made to listen. And he would, to you, if you came to him with a problem." She patted his cheek then, and smiled. "Well, that's what I wanted to say said. You'll drive safe?"

Shelley nodded. "Of course."

Marian saw him out the door and watched as Shelley got into his car. He couldn't remember ever speaking one-on-one with Marian before, about anything. He still felt the softness of her words and her light touch against his cheek as he drove the dark and silent streets of the neighborhoods between the Tarrs' home and his.

He didn't know much about Marian, he realized. Wasn't sure if she had once worked, and if so, at what. The Tarrs were quite a bit older than he was—nearing their middle fifties. Hubert had come to Scotsdale after a brief stint at a large university, had found the more intimate environment of a small school inviting, and had stayed. As far as Shelley knew, Marian had

been with him before the move. That was over twenty years ago. He imagined what it would be like to be the wife of a professor with no work of your own to do. They had no children, at least not that either of them had ever mentioned. Shelley tried to think what he would do with his time if he had no obligations, no work to worry about. Keep the house a damn sight cleaner, that was for sure. Really keep up with the maintenance the way it ought to be done. Cook more often, maybe try new recipes, things he was normally too wary and too hungry to try after hours on campus and many evening hours to follow planning, grading, researching. Go to the gym regularly, instead of just making it in a few times a week to do a paltry thirty laps in the pool. Maybe add weight-lifting a few days a week and alternate the swimming with some running or rowing. Catch up on his reading. He could read all of the contemporary novels he kept letting pile up on the bottom shelf of his nightstand. And with no *obligation* to read them and have opinions on them, imagine how many of the journals in his field he could keep up with. But, of course, it wouldn't be his field then. That was the whole point.

Would there be any satisfaction in it then? Any point to doing it? Would self-gratification be enough? His vision was a bit *The Dick Van Dyke Show* meets the ideal of the independent scholar. Exercise and a bit of housework in the morning. Study and writing and reading in the afternoon. Meet the husband at the door with a smile (having had just the loveliest day) with something interesting for dinner simmering on the stove. It sounded marvelous.

But another image came to him—one much darker. Rolling over and going back to sleep when your husband got up for his shower. Muttering a goodbye when he sticks his head in to say he's off a while later, and then snoozing until ten. Stumble to the kitchen and, having really

missed breakfast time, making a meal out of the junkiest bits of both breakfast and lunch. Bacon and chocolate chip cookies, perhaps, or maybe a poptart and potato chips. Swearing to go for a quick walk to make up for missing the gym (again) and then do something productive for a good few hours before allowing yourself to watch television, but turning the blasted thing on anyway and, almost without realizing you were doing it, watching reruns of cop shows for most of the day. Realizing with a start at four o'clock that your husband could be home anytime and you've not even gotten out of your pajamas, taking a fast shower, hastily making the bed and straightening the kitchen in time to greet him with a question about whether he'd prefer the same old hamburgers and baked beans or spaghetti Bolognese for supper. This picture was dim and tinged around the edges with depression and guilt, but for all its gloom in the light of the other image's brightness, this one was the clearer.

He remembered his mother, how she used to campaign for vacations to exotic places to *see* things like the Grand Canyon or New York City or the Redwood Forests. She would order free brochures from the AAA and leave them lying on the table next to his father's chair, hoping he would read them and take an interest. She would borrow volumes of the encyclopedia set they'd purchased for Shelley and his brother and read up on the places she'd like to see and then try to work little facts tailored to his father's interests into the conversation. But his father never took the bait. He listened carefully for a few days, then with less and less attention until he finally pointed out that the boys wanted to go fishing and anyway they had all that camping gear just sitting there waiting for them to get the full use of it.

When the annual campaign for a more exciting vacation failed, she would leave it for a few weeks, and throw herself into getting the family ready for the yearly camping trip to the Catskills. She'd take the boys to Sears and buy them new shorts and swimming trunks, then stop at the local used bookshop on the way home to find herself two or three light summer reads to take on the trip. But soon the sly suggestions that they make this or that side trip (it *was* only 150 miles out of the way, *look*, Vernon, just a little over two hours, we could take two days at the end of the trip for that) and sometimes his father seemed on the verge of giving in. But somehow they never did go anywhere but to the camping site, and sometime in the last week or two before school started, they would all go to some casual dining restaurant for what their father called "a nice long sit-down meal." Shelley had been able to tell, even as child, from the way his mother made a big deal of getting dressed up and of combing the boys' hair, and of commenting on how nice everything was—the entrance of the restaurant, the table settings, the food, the sunset as they trooped back to the car afterwards—that this was meant to appease his mother, to make up for his father's failure to make her life more exciting yet again this year.

It saddened him to remember his mother this way, but he also couldn't shake the feeling that her life had actually been much better than he remembered it looking back as an adult. *He* had not had a particularly unhappy childhood, so surely she could not have been particularly unhappy providing him with it. But to think of Marian living that way, of trying to convince Hubert to take her somewhere new, take her *with* him to MLA this year since she'd always

wanted to see San Francisco, to put up his books just for tonight and go dancing, *please*, angered him. She was so graceful, so lovely, so kind and good at putting guests in her home at ease. She deserved a life apart.

As he climbed into bed and tried to settle for the night, it was not Marian's words that lingered, but the gentle way she seemed to reach out to him still. He wished now that he had not pulled away from her, but had let her comfort him in whatever way she wanted. He imagined himself in the house with her again, Hubert nowhere to be seen, tidying after a meal, sitting together at the kitchen table with mugs of cocoa, talking over the day or playing some simple card game, gin or hearts. It was peaceful, this image, and he didn't see them going anywhere terribly special together. But he was happy there, and she seemed happy too, and not at odds with a husband whose demeanor seemed not to mesh with hers. In the morning, Shelley wasn't sure what he had conjured up consciously and what he had dreamed, but sometime in the night he had rescued Marian Tarr, and in the process, had rescued himself as well.

#

Monday afternoon and Shelley had shut his office door hoping that it would discourage students from seeking him out, even though his office hours weren't over for nearly another hour. So the confident rapping just as he'd settled into a slump in his desk chair, feet crossed on the desk, a collection of Dylan Thomas's works open to his favorite poem, was particularly annoying. He tensed at the sound, held his breath, hoped that if he didn't answer, the knocker would go away. But just as he let his shoulders loosen a bit, the knock came again, louder, more confident rather than less, which Shelley found was usually the case with students who knocked

a second time. "Oh, come in then," he said and winced a bit at this peculiarly petulant and Britishy turn of phrase, even as he decided to hell with it all and left his feet on the desk.

The door opened to reveal Sullivan. Shelley scrambled to get his feet on the floor and ended up pitching a stack of ungraded papers into his waste basket and spilling the remains of his morning mug of coffee into his lap. He was dabbing at the spreading stain ineffectually with a tissue when Sullivan said, the smirk more than evident in his tone, "I could come back later."

Shelley looked up from his half crouch over his crotch, and there it was—the smirk right where he knew it would be, just as he knew it would be, crooked and inviting, dangerous and not quite reaching the boy's eyes. Shelley tossed the tissue at the desk and gestured toward the chair across the desk from him. "No, no. Have a seat. What can I do for you?"

Sullivan moved into the room quietly, as if he somehow was able to keep any piece of his clothing from rubbing against any other. But he wore black Converse sneakers, and they squeaked when he took a step. He carried a messenger bag slung across his chest, but it looked empty to Shelley and he wondered if it was only for show. Sullivan pulled the bag over his head with one hand and sat on that tatty old couch. The couch was a little too far from Shelley's desk to facilitate conversation, and Shelley thought for the hundredth time that he ought to get rid of it and get two small arm chairs that he could position better.

Sullivan was looking from Shelley to the bookshelves that lined the office, his gaze running slowly along the titles, then flitting to Shelley, then back to the books. He seemed in no hurry to tell Shelley why he was there.

"So, what brings you here today, Sullivan?"

Sullivan grinned when Shelley said his name, and Shelley frowned at the grin. "I wanted to thank you for letting me sit in on your class," Sullivan said. "Not just anyone would do that. Not just anyone would be that . . . kind." Sullivan licked his lips after the last word and lowered his eyes.

Shelley had the strangest notion that he was being chatted up. "Well, it is a little unusual, I have to say. And I do wish that you'd come to see me privately rather than just showing up in class."

"Do you mind if I keep coming?"

Shelley was sure he should say no, but instead he told Sullivan that he didn't see any harm in it. "But the registrar would probably prefer it if you signed up as an audit."

Sullivan nodded, his look serious, studious. "Oh, I'll stop by there right after we're done here to clear it with them. I'm sure that if they know that I don't expect any credit for it or anything, they won't mind me just sitting in the back of the room."

Shelley shook his head. "No. I don't suppose they will."

"Maybe you ought to write me a note though. Just saying it's okay with you. So there's no question, I mean."

Shelley eyed Sullivan for a moment. There was something peculiar about Sullivan's behavior, but he couldn't quite decide what it was. The situation was perhaps a little unusual, but if he accepted the situation as given, the conversation seemed to be progressing as it ought. So why did he feel as if he stood precariously at the edge of cliff, peering out into a foggy,

frightening, but somehow desirable, abyss? "A note. I think I can handle a note," he said, trying to clear his head of the image by making a little joke. He fished a drop/add slip from a desk drawer, made a big X through the form on the front side, then flipped the slip over. He scribbled a note giving Sullivan his permission to sit in on his class for no credit for the rest of the semester and signed his name.

When he looked up, he saw that Sullivan had leaned forward and was peering across the space between them trying to see the note. He sat back when Shelley caught him looking. Shelley smiled tightly at him, and passed the note across. "I think that will do."

Sullivan took the note in two fingers, glanced at it, then folded it carefully and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Shelley stood, thinking to usher Sullivan out of his office, but Sullivan spoke again and he sank back into his seat. "I wondered, Dr. Shelley, if you might have a copy of . . ." He glanced at the bookshelf quickly, and if Shelley hadn't been looking at him just then he'd have missed it. " . . . Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gypsy*. I've been wanting to read it, and the library never has a copy in."

Shelley stood again, feeling ridiculous at his bobbing up and down in response to Sullivan, and made his way around the desk. He crossed in front of Sullivan and looked up at his shelves. He knew right where the book was—he knew the location of every booked he owned, could picture the spines and rattle off room, bookshelf, and whether the book sat to the right or left of center with hardly a moment's thought—and even if he hadn't, Sullivan had been looking right at it only seconds before. But Shelley pretended that he needed to search. He ran his fingers along the shelf just below the book, then jumped to the shelf above it, muttering "let me

see" as he went. He pulled one book after another from the right shelf, glanced quickly at their covers, then pushed them back into place. Finally, he pulled on *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, and gave a little ah ha. He brushed at the top of the book to remove a light layer of dust, flipped quickly through the pages, then held the book out to Sullivan.

Sullivan stood, but he left his hands at his sides. "I don't care about the book."

"You don't." It wasn't quite a statement, not exactly a question. It sounded, even to Shelley's ears, like the utterance of a man on the verge of figuring something out that he wasn't entirely sure he cared to know. He leaned against the desk, his ankles crossed at an angle in front of him. He folded his arms in front of him, tucking the volume between his arms and his chest.

Sullivan shook his head, mouthed "no" with just enough breath behind it that Shelley almost heard it.

Shelley took in a breath, straightened a bit, tried to behave as if he were the professor who was asserting authority after discovering a student had wasted his time. "I have to ask then, Young. What are you still doing here?"

Sullivan took one step forward and bit softly at his lower lip for just a moment. The look Sullivan gave Shelley then—veiled, but somehow *hungry*—made Shelley want to back up. The impulse had him uncrossing his ankles and straightening up, which had just the opposite effect he wished for. He found himself closer to this strange student with the dark hair and pale, angular face. "Mr. Young, what can I do for you?" Shelley asked, and he would have to admit that it was a feeble attempt at stalling, at gaining time.

One of Sullivan's hands came up, as if to touch Shelley, but he was still too far away to connect with him, and the hand just hung there between them, an interrupted gesture frozen in time. Shelley was never sure if it was Sullivan's hand hovering, not quite touching, not quite reaching further, or the look on Sullivan's face, but in that moment Shelley felt *wanted*, felt not desire but that he was *desired*, and the realization of that desire rolling off Sullivan did something funny to Shelley's stomach and to his knees. He began to edge toward the side of the desk, hoping to retreat to the safety he felt behind it, but Sullivan put up his other arm, still not touching but blocking his escape. He shuffled in a few steps closer then, until he could rest his hand on the desk next to Shelley's hip. He leaned in and Shelley thought suddenly, inexplicably of vampires and pulse points, but Sullivan stopped inches from Shelley's neck and just inhaled. Then he had his hands wrapped in Shelley's lapels and their mouths slammed together with an unappealing knock of teeth meeting. Sullivan eased back a bit at the sound but there was no lessening of the intensity of the moment.

Shelley brought his arms up—*The Virgin and the Gypsy* thudded to the floor—and tried to get his hands between himself and Sullivan, tried to think of shoving this student away, but Sullivan only pulled him in harder. Shelley found himself kissing back, kissing in a way he'd forgotten, like he was trying to swallow Sullivan, like he was drowning and Sullivan was the air at which he gulped. He fisted his hands in Sullivan's jacket at his back, and he was no longer sure which of them was pulling at the other the harder. Sullivan's tongue pushed its way into Shelley's mouth, and Shelley chased it back.

The kiss went on for a few minutes, and it was Sullivan who pulled back first. He licked at his lips, and they looked swollen. The boy's eyes were wide, as if he had been the one kissed rather than the one doing the kissing. He ducked his head, and Shelley wondered at a young man who was brave enough to try to seduce a professor in his own office but could turn blushingly shy after succeeding at it. Shelley suddenly wanted to pull Sullivan back to him, but Sullivan backed away from Shelley until the backs of his legs hit the couch. He turned to pick up his bag, slung it over his shoulder once more.

"Thanks for the note, Dr. Shelley. I appreciate it." This mumbled as he rushed through the door.

The door didn't latch behind Sullivan, and Shelley moved to it, and leaned on it to push it to. He turned so that his back was to the door and allowed himself to slide down the door until he sat on the cold linoleum floor of his office. He ran his fingers lightly over his lips, then through his hair. The memory of what they had just done was vivid but somehow distant, as if it were a scene he remembered particularly well from a film he had seen long, long ago. His lips tingled and he was decidedly aroused. He had never before been so forcefully *attacked* by a kiss, and the fact that the one to do so had been a student, even if not really *his* student, confused him. The students at Scotsdale always seemed to him so young, so immature, that if he thought of them as having any sort of sexuality at all, it wasn't a sort that he thought in any way similar to his own—certainly not such that it would have power over him. And what of the boy's behavior after the kiss? Why had he acted embarrassed? Was this to be the end of it? Would he come back to class? Shelley felt a quick, sharp pang of disappointment at the thought of Sullivan's *not*

coming back to class, and with that thought he shook his head and stood quickly from his spot on the floor. He tugged at the lapels of his sport coat and rolled his shoulders to try to settle himself and shake the rumple from the garment. He bent to pick up *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, returned it to its spot on the shelf, and sat at his desk. He straightened a stack of papers, selected a pen from the holder on the edge of his desk, and dove into grading a pile of essays he'd been putting off for days.

#

Sullivan ducked around the corner at the end of the hall containing Shelley's office and flung himself through the door leading to the stairs. He ran down the stairs, his arms outstretched so that he brushed the railing on either side of the stairwell. At the first landing, he grasped the inner railing and swung himself around it so that he continued down the next flight of stairs with his feet hardly touching the landing itself. When there were only three steps to go, he transferred all of his weight to his arms and propelled himself over those last steps. He landed on his feet with a soft thump and his bag bounced against his hip.

He hadn't exactly gone to Shelley's office to kiss the man. He'd really just wanted to see what would happen. He supposed it was a bit like giving himself a dare, and now that he'd done it, he wasn't sure how he felt about it. When he'd started the kiss, he'd felt good—alive and . . . smug. But Shelley had startled him by kissing back, by kissing back like he *meant* it, like he *wanted* something, and Sullivan had suddenly wanted to be somewhere—anywhere—else. He

had no longer felt in control, no longer felt that he was the impertinent student making a play, but the flirt who, having gotten what he asked for, wasn't sure he wanted it after all. Shelley's reaction had frightened him, and that it had, frightened him still more.

He pulled the note Shelly had written for him out of his jacket pocket and stopped to read over it. It was simple and entirely to the point. The body of the note was printed and Sullivan had never before seen handwriting that looked so much like it had been produced by a machine. The signature was another story altogether. The loops in James Shelley's signature were open and confident, the ascenders and descenders sloping and free. The whole thing had a kind of flourish to it that spoke to Sullivan of assurance and mystery. He traced over the lines of the signature with one finger, then peered up at the academic center behind him. He had never been any good at translating knowledge of the inside of buildings to understanding what he was looking at from the outside, and he wondered if Shelley's office faced this direction. He crumpled the paper in his hand, stuffed it back into his pocket at the thought, and made his way back to his dorm room.

Guy looked up at him from the notebook he was glaring at when Sullivan came into the room. "Hey, Sull," he said, and something in his voice made Sullivan stop in the middle of toeing off his sneakers.

"I know that tone. People use that tone when they're sorry about something that isn't their fault. When they know something isn't going to go over well but they have to say it anyway."

Guy quirked on eyebrow upward. "Fair enough, I guess. But it's not bad news exactly. I'm just not sure how you're going to react."

Sullivan finished taking off his shoes and dropped his bag to the floor. "Just tell me already."

Guy took a breath, blew it out noisily between his lips. "You had a phone call while you were out. I took a message."

Sullivan started to relax a little. News that came over the phone couldn't be that bad. If it was bad news from the school, there would be a letter in his box, not a phone call, and he didn't have any family that anything bad could have happened to.

"It was your grandmother."

Sullivan looked at Guy sharply. "What?"

"That's what she said. 'Hello, young man. This is Peggy Young, Sullivan's grandmother.' This after I told her that I wasn't you and that you weren't here."

Sullivan sat on the bed. Phone calls were harder to ignore than letters. More annoying. Loud. "How'd she get this number?"

"Asked at the switchboard, apparently. Since you didn't ask for your dorm phone number to be unlisted in the campus directory, they had no reason not to give it out. She said they want you to come to lunch at their place. Any Sunday she said." Guy held a slip of paper out for Sullivan. "This is the phone number. And directions to the house. I don't know why she insisted on giving those. You'd call first."

Sullivan made no move to take the paper.

"It looks really easy, actually. Getting to their place, I mean. Just about an hour down one of the state roads."

Sullivan nodded but stayed put. After a moment, Guy stood and moved closer to the bed. Sullivan reached up for the paper then. "If you want to talk about it, just say the word. Otherwise, I'll stay out of it."

"Thanks, Guy." He looked down at the paper, stared for a moment without really registering the few lines of directions to his grandparents' house, at their phone number. For the second time in one day, he crumpled a slip of paper that had somehow come to represent far more than what was written on it.

Chapter Five

Shelley's survey class that Sullivan sat in on was a Monday/Wednesday/Friday, so Shelley didn't have long to wait to see if the young man would return after kissing him in his office. But the hours—only about forty of them, really—passed excruciatingly slowly. Shelley'd agreed to teach a class in the summer semester, so his load was light this fall and he only taught one class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The class met midmorning, and Shelley had loaded all of his office hours into Mondays and Wednesdays just so that his afternoons on Tuesdays and Thursdays would be free. Normally he looked forward to these "free" afternoons as blessedly large blocks of time to do his own work. But he'd yet to settle into it this semester—he couldn't seem to get a routine going and he often found himself putzing about aimlessly, flipping through texts that had little to with his research and looking up hours later, startled that the afternoon was almost gone. He would zip through some grading then, in an effort to salvage the afternoon from a complete waste of time, but this left him feeling vaguely guilty and unsatisfied.

Monday evening—just hours after the seduction that returned to Shelley so vividly—passed relatively quickly. He'd been putting off grading the first paper for his advanced British Modernism class and he couldn't justify letting another day pass without handing them back. The due date for the next paper was only a week away, and the upper classmen majors wouldn't sit still for handing in a second paper without knowing how they'd done on the first. Because he had procrastinated on the papers so long, he still had fifteen to grade—nearly half the class—when he returned home that evening. He sat down to work on them in his cramped home office

around six and hardly moved until each one sported comments and a grade in green ink in his neat handwriting. It was nearly two in the morning then, and he collapsed into bed without changing out of his clothes, brushing his teeth, or checking the locks—all things he generally did without fail.

But Tuesday was painful. The alarm went off at 7:00, as always—Shelley set the alarm again each morning as soon as his feet hit the floor—and he wanted nothing more than to smash it and sleep until noon. He did hit snooze six times, which meant it was nearly eight o'clock before he stumbled for the shower. The warm, fuzzy remains of a sexual dream tickled the edges of his memory, and he was harder than usual this morning.

He considered a cold shower, but the muscles in his neck and across his shoulders had tightened badly through his marathon grading session and the few hours' sleep he'd gotten had done nothing to ease them. The hot water felt good on his back, and he grasped at his shoulders, sticking his thumb just behind his collar bone and letting his fingers lie across his trapezius before squeezing and kneading the muscle and rolling his head from side to side. His muscles started to relax, and Shelley felt his mind easing back toward sleep rather than wakefulness. He palmed his own cock before he realized that he was reliving the kiss again, and he jerked his hand away to slam it into the tiled wall of the shower. "Damn it," he muttered, then stuck his face under the stream of the water. He slapped at his cheeks a bit in an effort to wake up more fully and again willed his cock to go down. He repeated "this is not okay" to himself as he soaped up, his touch on his own body harsh, and then lathered his hair. "Think about something else. Anything else." He was out of the shower now, sort of bouncing on his toes at the chill of

the fall air as he dried off with a towel that looked clean but smelled as if it ought to be washed. "Okay, lecture notes. Virginia Woolf today. Vitals. They'll already know but have to go over it anyway, for the completeness of the thing. Born 1882. Daughter of Leslie Stephen. Married Leonard Woolf, 1912. Died 1941 by walking into the Ouse, rocks in pockets. Most famous work *Mrs Dalloway*. But we'll be reading *Orlando* because you little snots have all done *Mrs D* four times already. Besides, I like *Orlando*." Shelley squirted shaving cream into his palm, then slathered it on his face. He continued his monologue between strokes with his razor. "Theories about the gender of the writer. Man-womanly and woman-manly. Girls and boys meeting at taxi cabs and gliding off together." Shelley had a picture, then, of Sullivan Young stepping into a cab and tossing one of his knowing but somehow still shy smirks over the cab door before he disappeared inside. Shelley's hand jerked, just a bit, but enough for the razor to nick his skin and a spot of bright blood to well up beneath the fingers he pressed to his cheek to keep it down.

Shelley hated to cut himself shaving. It was damned inconvenient for one—there simply was no good way to keep the bleeding stopped without looking a fool—but he hated it even more for the way it made him feel young and inexperienced, as if he were fourteen again and not sure of what he was doing. He'd been having enough trouble with that sort of thing this semester without being reminded of it and he muttered "fuck" as he dabbed a bit of toilet paper at the cut.

The rest of the day went much the same and little better. Shelley chanted to himself a lot—trying to distract himself from thoughts of Sullivan—from wondering if the boy would return, from fearing that he would and dreading that he wouldn't. He took to making lists to occupy his mind. Lists of things he needed to do, divided into categories: things he needed to do

for school, things he needed to do *at* school, things he needed to do at home right away, things he needed to do at home soon. He challenged himself to remember the lists in order and when that ceased to be a challenge, he rearranged and rememorized them in alphabetical order. This worked well when no one distracted him from his distraction, but if someone tried to hold a conversation with him, or when he was teaching, not enough of his mind was engaged to keep his back thoughts from wandering to Sullivan.

His sentences kept trailing off during class, and at one point one of his students actually asked him if he was all right. Shelley dismissed the class then—there were only a few minutes left anyway—and retreated to his office, where he munched on some Lorna Doones from his desk drawer and tried to motivate himself to work on his conference paper on the structure of *The Good Soldier*. But the afternoon stretched in front of him like an endless sea, and after only twenty minutes, he stood quickly—sending his desk chair rolling with a thud into the wall behind him—and began to shove papers and books willy-nilly into his briefcase. He was folding his trench coat over his arm when Hubert Tarr knocked on his door and leaned around it without waiting for an answer.

Shelley deflated at the sight of him. "Hubert," he said. It was mostly acknowledgement, partly a question.

"James."

Shelley remembered his resolution to be nicer to Hubert that he had made, what? Just two nights ago? and tried not to sigh at his colleague. But he'd be damned if he would stand here and make, no *initiate*, small talk with the man when it was he who had invaded Shelley's office.

Hubert wore a tattered green cardigan over his shirt and tie, and the sweater might have been reasonably pleasing when it was new. Hubert thrust his hands into the large pockets in the front, and the shape of his fists poked through the worn material. "Marian says there's something wrong with you. Says I should try to get you to talk it out."

Shelley closed his eyes for a moment. Marian. He felt a small jolt of pleasure at the thought of her, and his irritation at Hubert for cutting off his get-away with a Marian-inspired query after his well-being seemed entirely separate from that pleasure. His sour mood could not touch her. He smiled, brightly, he hoped, though probably too brightly to be convincing. "Nothing's wrong. Marian's very sweet to worry though." He patted Hubert's shoulder. "Thank her for me."

Hubert hmphed and circled around Shelley, shuffling out of the way as Shelley made his way to the door. "I'm just going to . . ." Shelley pointed over his shoulder at the door and fumbled in his pants pocket for his office key. "So if you want to . . ." He made another gesture toward the door, incredulous that Hubert had not yet taken the hint.

Hubert continued to stand in the middle of the room, fists in cardigan pockets, sort of worrying at his bottom lip. "I can be talked to, you know. I know I'm not the type most inclined to inspiring confidences from other people, but I am your friend. Or thought so anyway."

Shelley dropped his briefcase to the floor and flopped onto the sofa. "Of course you are." He waved vaguely in the direction of an old wooden desk chair he was never sure when had ended up in his office, but Hubert sat next to him on the couch. He let his hands dangle, clasped, between his knees, and his gaze flitted about the room, as if he were nervous and deliberately

avoiding looking at Shelley. Shelley was looking at Sullivan in his mind, Sullivan who had done the very same thing, sitting on that very same couch yesterday. Though his looking around the room, Shelley thought now, had been much more calculated, much more deliberate. Shelley was starting to thinking of Sullivan as shy, perhaps, but he was not bumbling. And Hubert Tarr bumbled.

Shelley rubbed at his forehead. The beginnings of a headache curled around in there, and a heart-to-heart with Hubert surely wasn't going to make it any better. He raised his eyebrows at the man. "Well? What's wrong with me?" It was a bit harsher than he'd really meant it to be, but part of the fun of sneaking out on the afternoon was in the sneaking; the longer he sat here with Hubert, the more he would feel the pull back to his desk and working through the afternoon after all.

"I can't say that I noticed it at the house the other night, but Marian says you acted odd. Like something was bothering you that you were afraid to talk about. Those were her words: 'afraid to talk about.' I know I played with you a bit—teasing that something was up, but I didn't really see as anything was *wrong*. She insists though. And now she mentions it, you do seem a little funny some days this semester, James. Distracted somehow. Or not entirely on your game. Skipping out on things. Not the bright young thing we've all come to expect when we see James Shelley." Hubert made a noise in his throat when he said "bright young thing"—sort of a cross between a Canadian "eh" and a choke—and Shelley smiled thinly at the reference.

Hubert was right—he wasn't the sort to inspire confidences. Shelley did not want to confide in this man, did not want to entrust pieces of himself—pieces of himself that he himself was unsure of—to this man. And worse, he didn't know what he would say even if he wanted nothing more than to lean on Hubert now, to seek what advice he had to give. What *could* he say? A student is trying to seduce me? I'm thinking about letting him? I think maybe I've already let him? Shelley could imagine, almost, saying these things to *someone*, some platonic ideal of best friend, the sort of person who would not judge, who would know just what to say, who would quite literally die rather than betray the confidence, the sort of person who existed in stories and nowhere else. Though, there had been someone, once. Len. Shelley shook his head. But to even think these things in the presence of Hubert Tarr, to consider speaking them out loud. The notion made Shelley shudder.

"I don't want to pry, you know. I'd just hate to think there was something wrong, and I didn't offer to help out."

Shelley shifted the trench coat in his lap. "I really don't know what to tell you. Nothing's *wrong*, you know? Maybe I've hit a bit of a slump. Lectures not coming together as easy as they might, papers taking a little too long to grade. That sort of thing. Nothing to be alarmed about, I don't think. Probably snap out of it any day. Just a little post-summer-break burnout."

Hubert nodded. "What about your own work? What are you cooking up there?"

"Oh, Ford Madox Ford."

"Are you excited about it?"

"Jesus, Hu." Shelley ran a hand through his hair. "Give a guy a break, huh? I mean, really."

Hubert flexed the fingers of his right hand in the pocket of his cardigan. The fingers made a series of strange protrusions, and Shelley could just see the color of flesh through the stretched fibers of the weave. Hubert clenched his fist again before he spoke. "Well *are* you? Why do you avoid the question?"

Shelley stood and tried to pace, but his office was too small, and he could only get in a few steps before Hubert's feet blocked him from really going any farther. "You're like a goddamn psychiatrist or something. Pick, pick, pick. Niggle, niggle."

Hubert nodded once, but said nothing. The comparison seemed even more apt to Shelley. He felt of a sudden like he was being, not talked to, not encouraged to get something off his chest, but *analyzed*, poked and inspected, rammed under a microscope with the magnification turned up high.

He stood in front of his desk, back to the door, facing one wall of bookshelves crammed with the intellectual detritus of the last twenty years of his life. He was in profile for Tarr; he could just see his older colleague with his peripheral vision without moving. He balled his own fists then, and thought of Hubert's hands, encased in the yarn of a sweater that he'd probably had since grad school. He wondered if the yarn was soft or coarse, comforting or itchy. "No, I'm not excited about it. It's boring. A retread. I don't know of what or whom. I can't find anyone else who's looked at Ford quite this way before, but it doesn't seem to even matter anymore." Shelley collapsed back onto the sofa. "What am I really doing here anyway? Sometimes it all

just seems like such a waste of time." He listened to himself breathe for a few minutes, and noted with a small snort that he had done precisely what he'd thought he could not: unburden himself to Hubert.

But this isn't what he'd thought had been bothering him, though he was willing to bet that it was more along the lines of what Hubert had been expecting than a confession about a burgeoning illicit affair with one of Scotsdale's students. He turned his head slightly so he could see Hubert. He expected shock on the man's face, shock that Shelley, who everyone expected to leave Scotsdale any moment for a large university where he could concentrate more fully on his work. What he saw was more akin to understanding and . . . relief.

"I don't want to sound as if I think your worries are not important, James. But I have to say that my first reaction is, 'Is that all?' Surely you've felt this way about your work sometime in the past? As a graduate student? Most of the people I know in the humanities tell me that they felt this way for most of the years they did their doctoral work. Burned out. Feeling as if there's nothing exciting about the process anymore. Realizing that literature *won't* save the world."

Shelley narrowed his eyes at Hubert. "Yeah. I felt that in graduate school. I felt that a lot in graduate school. But somehow it didn't matter then. It was all part of the gestalt of the thing. Poor over-worked, under-paid grad student, enlightened but with no one willing to listen to him. All that sort of thing."

Hubert laughed. "Gestalt. Nice."

Shelley scowled. He did not feel better for having confided in Hubert. If anything, he felt worse. He had not quite realized how much animosity he'd been harboring toward his work, and to hear himself rant about it so vociferously took him aback. He had more problems now than he'd had when Hubert stopped him from sneaking out of his office—or at least, he had more problems now that he was aware of.

"You're scowling, my friend."

"I know it." Shelley flung his trench coat away from him. He aimed for the wooden chair, and the coat did hit it, but then slid to the floor. "I don't want to dislike my work. I became a professor so I wouldn't dislike my work. If I had wanted to dislike my work, I'd have followed my dad into a pointless office job or my brother into the factory. I wasn't supposed to *be* doing this at thirty-five. This stupid job crisis shit." He let his head fall into his hands and sort of mock-groaned. "Never mind, Hubert. It isn't as bad as all this. You've just caught me at a bad moment. Something will spark my interest—get me clamoring to work again. Something always does."

Hubert stood. "I can see that you are trying for the second time to usher me out of your office, and this time I will go. But I am not convinced that you feel any better."

Shelley tried to smile, but gave it up before his lips had even began to twitch. "I don't, to be honest. But I do appreciate that you tried."

"That's a terribly sad thing to say, somehow." Hubert bent over on his way to the door and retrieved Shelley's coat from the floor. "I don't think you'll be needing this," he said as he draped it over the chair. "Almost beastly warm for October." At the door, just when Shelley

thought he was finally actually going to be quit of him, Hubert turned and pointed at Shelley as if he had just had a thought. "I find that watching a good long piece of television often helps. To get me excited about my work again. Something ghastly. One of those reality shows where all the contestants are dumber than can be believed. Never fails to send me back to my study in the mood for some good old-fashioned research." He paused. "Or to teach." Hu raised an eyebrow at him, and Shelley shook his head.

"Why I'm here, isn't it." Shelley smiled, though he didn't feel any better. "Maybe that's the answer for me, too—TV. I'll give it a try."

Hubert returned his hands to his cardigan pockets. "No, you won't. I'm not sure that you actually want to get back to your work. But you will come talk to me if you need to, won't you, James? So I won't feel like a bad friend?"

Shelley nodded, and watched as Hubert meandered out of sight, heading back down the hall toward his own office. Shelley waited a moment, then peered around the door jamb. He just caught sight of Hubert disappearing into his office, and Shelley very nearly leaped back into the confines of his own, swooped onto his briefcase and trench coat, and was out the door, and galloping, quite un-professorially, down the stairwell almost before Hubert had shut his door.

Shelley walked as quickly as he could toward the North Gate and the parking lot where he'd left his car. He dumped coat and briefcase on the passenger seat and rolled his window down, enjoying the slight pull in his shoulder as he turned the window crank. He turned the key in the ignition, then rested for a moment in the driver's seat, relishing the feel of warm sun shining on his face through the windshield. He loosened his tie and rolled up his shirt sleeves,

then put the car in gear and quickly navigated the quiet faculty lot and pulled out into the light early-afternoon downtown traffic. He drove to the small park that ran along the river. He left the car in one of the gravel parking spots along the edge of the greenway running along the river and made his way to a bench near the bank. He kicked off his loafers as he settled on the bench, then toed off his socks and let them fall into the grass. He pulled his feet up onto the bench so that he sat with his knees bent and his arms wrapped around his legs. He rested his chin on his knees.

The park was quiet. Too early yet, Shelley realized with a glance at his watch, for school children. They wouldn't be released for a good half an hour yet. And mothers with younger children, he thought, probably came earlier in the day. That's what his mother would have done, he was sure. Worn out the children in the morning so that after a late lunch, they'd take a nap. Under that scheme, a lucky mother would still be enjoying the peace of a house with napping children at this time of the day. The river was quiet here too. Shelley could see that it was moving, but he thought that if he were on it—in a small kayak, perhaps, or an inner tube—that he would hardly feel like he were moving at all, the only proof of it the way he floated past landmarks on the shore. He hadn't meant to make a comparison, but the analogy began to form without his consent and then there was no stopping it. His life was like this—sitting on a river, minding his own business, having a reasonably pleasant time, but with the only proof of movement a comparison with some stationary rubric ashore. He wanted to take out a paddle and speed up his course, see what was around the next bend already. But he wasn't sure he could

even see that there was a next bend anymore. And what if around the next bend lay not excitement, but disaster? It was Sullivan around that bend, maybe. Just visible up ahead, but with the greatest part of him still out of sight. And which was he? Excitement or disaster?

"Rubbish," Shelley said and wiggled his toes in the still-green grass of mid-autumn. The grass tickled his bare feet, and when he stood to pad closer to the river bank, the odd sharper blade poked and scratched at his soles. The grass gave way to rocks and pebbles a few feet from the water's edge, and Shelley bent to scoop up a handful of the stones. He flicked through them, picking out the thinner, flatter ones, and letting the others fall back to the ground with a series of thuds and clacks. He'd never been very good at skipping stones, and calmer water—a small lake or a pond—would be better for it anyway. But he'd always delighted in the idea of sending something so solid as a stone soaring across the water, touching down only for the briefest of seconds, leaving only the gentlest disturbance on the water as it passed. His father had been good at skipping stones, and his brother too, but it was his father who would do it again and again, letting Shelley watch for as long as he cared to, and leaning over to show him after every few throws how to curl his finger around the edge of the stone just *so*, how to cradle it in his hand *thus*, how to snap his wrist, *there*.

His father had never been much for beauty or silences and Shelley couldn't remember ever thinking of him as being tender, and those moments at the edge of the lake were the only ones when Shelley had ever felt truly comfortable with him. He'd wondered at it then—what about that activity, or that place, let Christopher Shelley be so still and so patient with the quiet son he never did really understand—and he had no better handle on it now. His father had never

once suggested that he was tired of tossing the stones or showed any other sign that he would rather be doing something else. Shelley was sure that he would have remembered this, was sure that such a thing would have been crushing at the time and therefore would have stuck with him. It was always his brother, Joe, who had picked up this skill so treasured by Shelley in only a few tries and who found it only reasonably and temporarily diverting, who ended this time Shelley shared with his father by demanding that they get a move on and *fish* already or that he was hungry and couldn't they go back to the cabin *yet* or, on one occasion, sneaking along the shore to the dock with a huge rock he had excavated from somewhere and throwing it with such force and glee into the lake that its ripples overwhelmed any a poor skipping stone could hope to make.

Shelley tried again now to skip a stone. He rubbed his thumb over the surface of the best of the stones he still held in his hand. It was about the size of a silver dollar, a little oblong, and smooth with years of water bubbling over it. He curled his finger around the edge of the stone *just* so, cradled it in his hand *thus*, and snapped his wrist, *there*. The stone hit the water too hard with a loud splat, gave a half-hearted skip, then sunk to the bottom of the river with a plop. Shelley clucked his tongue, then readied a second stone, giving just as much attention the second time to how he held the stone, how he released it. But it fared little better.

He kept at this, readying a stone, envisioning the simple beauty of the ripples it would make on the water's surface, leaning back just a bit, and then letting go, for nearly five minutes before he ran out of good stones and would have to go hunting about for more if he wanted to continue. He sat on the bank then, resuming his position from the bench, knees up, arms

wrapped around them. He hadn't thought about his father and skipping stones in months, maybe over a year. In the months after his father had died, this had been what he had thought of most—those moments at the lake. He'd almost told the story at his father's funeral but at the last minute decided that he didn't want to share that memory with anyone and had told about the words of advice his father had given him before going off to college. The skipping stones would have been a better story, and it meant more to Shelley than any thing his father had ever *said* to him, but he had feared that if he had tried to bring those feelings into words, they would somehow lose their potency, like a fine brandy ruined by too much ice.

Shelley smiled. He'd sounded like a fool telling that story about the college advice, but he'd made the right decision then. The skipping stones were safe, unsullied by his own fumbling, grief-stricken attempts to make his aunts and uncles, his mother and brother, *see*. He stood then, and brushed at the seat of his pants. He made his way back to the bench and gathered up his shoes and socks. He walked back to the car barefoot, and when he got in, he rubbed the arches of his feet against the pedals to ease the lingering itch from the prickly grass. Sullivan still shimmered at the edges of his consciousness, but he was calmer about it somehow now. Whatever game Sullivan was playing at, Shelley could be patient, could wait to learn the rules, could see it out. He wasn't sure whether he was the skipping stone here or the one skipping the stone, but suddenly he was content in not knowing. Shelley started the car and headed for home.

#

It turned out that Sullivan did come back to Shelley's class the next day, and Shelley found his presence in class calming. He had always been a wreck for observations, falling apart inside while his outside demeanor remained as professional as ever. But his brain would shut down, and he would let go ridiculous speculations from students and fail to correct misinterpretations because he was unable to formulate even for himself what, exactly, was wrong with what had been said. The first time he had been observed by anyone other than the students he taught had been in graduate school when a peer in a pedagogy class sat in to fulfill a course requirement. Shelley confessed his nervousness after the observation and his fellow graduate student had sworn he'd noticed nothing. Shelley thought he probably believed him, but somehow that only made him feel worse. Sullivan had no such effect on him. It was as if what they had shared in Shelley's office—as confusing and unquantifiable as it was—held those usual feelings of nervousness at bay.

Sullivan sat in the back of the room, grinning every once in a while at something Shelley had said and which no one else in the room, including Shelley, found amusing in the slightest. He sat in a desk turned sideways so he could lean back against the wall, with one arm draped over the desk's arm rest and his feet propped up on the seat in front of him. Shelley wondered what the other students thought of Sullivan, their classmate who had turned up in the middle of the semester and appeared not to belong to the class in any way. He didn't volunteer to contribute to the discussion, and unlike with the other students, Shelley didn't call on him at random. Shelley did wonder if their—what? association?—was suspected, wondered if it would

be discovered, knew that it was terribly inappropriate, but those concerns were not settling into his stomach in the way he might have expected them too. It was as if he knew that he should be concerned about being found out, but he couldn't feel it.

Shelley did have to avoid making eye contact with Sullivan because he was entirely unable to control the rush of blood to his face, and in one instance, to his cock, when he looked up and caught Sullivan in one of those inexplicable grins. As a result, he was paying less attention to the last row of his students. If he let his gaze include that row, it necessarily included Sullivan as well. So, when the first phone chimed to alert its owner of an incoming text message, Shelley couldn't locate the sound. It came from the back row, from Laney Smith's phone, and she was reaching for her purse before she realized that the tone was for a text message and therefore stopped after only one chime. Seconds later, another phone went off as well, and then another. Within two minutes, nearly everyone in the class was rooting for a beeping or flashing little machine in pockets and bags. Shelley wondered for a moment whether this wasn't some sort of practical joke, like arranging for the entire campus to drop books to the floor at 11:03, and only the confused looks on his students' faces stopped him from making a sarcastic remark. When his own phone, which he kept in the breast pocket of his sports jacket and set to vibrate two minutes before the end of class, gave its own pathetic beep-beep, he looked up at Sullivan, who shrugged.

When Shelley fumbled for his own phone, it broke a spell over the room and all of his students flipped open their phones as well. Shelley was still scowling at the display on the Samsung phone he'd been meaning to upgrade for months when a girl in almost the exact center of the room gasped. "The early alert system. It's a text from the early alert system."

Shelley only vaguely remembered signing up for the program, which promised to send alerts to him via text message and e-mail should the campus be threatened by violent weather or madmen. The message said, simply, maddeningly, "Stay inside. Do not leave current location unless to proceed inside."

Shelley wondered vaguely at the Latinate language. Surely the language of an alert should show some alarm, should betray its visceral Anglo-Saxon heritage. That low hum of conversation common to coffee shops and classrooms not under the control of an instructor rose and seemed to hover just below eye level. Laney Smith raised her hand, and Shelley raised an eyebrow while he nodded at her. "Should we lock the door, Dr. Shelley?" Her tone suggested that they most definitely *should* and Dr. Shelley was a bit silly for not having thought of it himself, for not, maybe, having done so immediately.

Shelley looked down at his phone again, whose screen had gone dark. "The message doesn't say anything about locking doors." He looked up again, scowled at the classroom's door. "Do they even lock?"

Everyone began to speak at once, and Shelley caught something about finding classrooms doors locked when trying to have a meeting on the weekend and locks on dorm room doors. He looked to Sullivan, who had removed his feet from their make-shift ottoman and was sitting up

straight in his seat. Shelley walked to the door, and a quick examination revealed that there was nothing so simple as push-button lock on the knob. He hesitated for moment, oscillating between real concern for his and his students' safety and a rising feeling of ridiculousness which bordered on panic in its intensity, before he pulled the door open just far enough to peer at the knob mechanism from the other side. "There *is* a keyhole," he said, just loud enough for him to wonder who had heard him. He swung the door to again, and bit his lip. He felt as he always did when he couldn't get a DVD player to work in front of the class. Silly, that. He'd been using such equipment since its inception, and he always wanted to exclaim to the waiting class, the one paying him no attention at all, to the one using his confusion and befuddlement to catch up on an overdue math assignment or to make plans for the evening, he wanted to exclaim that he was technically inclined, really, that the machine was being unusually problematic, that it *wasn't fair*.

"There *must* be a way," he muttered, and then felt a hand on the small of his back. Sullivan wasn't grinning now—he looked as serious as Shelley had ever seen him. He let his hand rest there for only a second, briefly enough that the gesture could easily be missed by anyone in the room not looking directly at them, casually enough that it might be taken for an accidental touch.

Sullivan opened the door again, peered at the inside edge for a second, then pushed one of two buttons running vertically under the doorknob's latch. He reached around and tried to turn the knob on the other side. Shelley could hear the quiet click-click of a knob resisting against set tumblers. Sullivan pushed the door closed again and looked up at Shelley. "Locked," he said.

Shelley smiled. "Thanks."

Sullivan nodded, curtly, quickly, and for a moment Shelley doubted that that the kiss he'd been reliving for two days had ever happened. He wondered, not for the first time, how much Sullivan played with him on purpose, how much he intentionally schooled his features into these unreadable visages and what he hoped to gain from doing so. He wondered if Sullivan was waiting for him to make some kind of move in answer. Sullivan returned to his seat, and turned it around to face forward before he sat down. It was a peculiar thing to do, and Shelley was struck, as he headed back to the front of the room, by how much he didn't know, probably couldn't know, about this strange boy.

"Okay, guys," Shelley said once he'd reached the desk at the front of the room, and, as always, he winced internally at the use of the gender-specific colloquialism. "Class is almost over anyway, so why don't you get started on the reading for next class while I try to figure out what's going on?" He pulled out his phone again, and remembered the last time he'd needed to call the administration building on the go and how he'd sworn that he would enter the phone

number in his contacts just as soon as he got back to his office. He hadn't. He flipped through his folders half-heartedly, the image of the salmon-colored sheaf of papers hanging over the far corner of his desk foremost in his mind. It was the list of phone number and e-mail addresses of all the faculty, staff, and administrative personnel on campus. "I don't suppose any of you has the phone number for Short Hall memorized, do you?" Shelley asked, and a few heads shook, no.

"A laptop, then? Is this room even hooked up for wireless?"

Those students who looked back at him seemed to wear blank expressions, as if they couldn't begin to fathom why he would want the internet. Sullivan made his way to the front of the room, holding his laptop in front of him, the lid hanging slightly open. "It's already connected to the building's wi-fi," he said as he set it down on the desk. He circled around behind Shelley and whispered, "Saving your butt, Jamie" before settling into one of the empty desks in the front row.

Shelley felt the blush rising in his cheeks and the flutter down his spine, the very beginnings of arousal. Addressing him this way felt like an incredible liberty, almost more so than the kiss, and the combination of the nickname and the wildly inappropriate comment for the setting was calling up images he'd prefer not to have to tramp down. Sullivan's crazy grin was still absent, and Shelley was beginning to find that a bit creepy.

It took only a moment to find the number on-line—Sullivan had the faculty directory set as one of his homepage tabs—and Shelley was soon listening to a busy signal. He punched the red "end call" button a bit too emphatically and dialed the number again. He held the phone between his head and his shoulder as he rifled through his folders again with the half-imagined notion that he had once carried around a college brochure about campus emergency procedures.

"Pick up, pick up," he began chanting to himself. He tried to check his e-mail by using the laptop's touchpad left-handed, and then almost dropped his phone as he switched it from one ear to the other. There was a message from the early alert system sitting in his in-box, just as it should, but its text was identical to the message he'd already received.

"Maybe we should all try calling?" said a girl whose name Shelley could never remember. "One of us would probably get through."

The boy next to her informed her that increasing the number of people making an attempt decreases the likelihood of any individual being successful in a tone which indicated that he didn't think she could be any more stupid.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "It's not like the lottery, Brad. Individual success doesn't matter as long as *some*one in this room gets through."

Shelley closed the laptop in frustration and tucked his phone back into his pocket. "If you applied that sort of logic to your analyses of our texts, you'd all have As." They looked up at him quickly, as if they were surprised that he had been able to hear them talking.

Shelley raised his voice to address the room. "You're all welcome to try to contact whomever you like to find out what's going on, but I don't think we're actually in any danger. I suggest we just hang out until we get the signal that it's all clear." He pulled the chair out from under his desk and sat down, adjusting his tie as he did so.

Sullivan snapped shut his own phone and slouched a bit in his seat. "Talked to my roommate," he said, and, unlike the other students, he didn't pitch his voice loud enough to expect the whole room to hear. "He's stuck in the physics lab. They don't know what's going on either."

Shelley thanked Sullivan for the second time in minutes, then cleared his throat, and straightened his tie once again. Sullivan's attitude seemed to have changed since talking with his roommate. He still looked rather serious, but somehow he was grinning at the same time. And he looked at Shelley steadily; he would be holding Shelley's gaze if Shelley himself didn't keep letting his eyes dart from the front of the room to the back, from one group of students to another. But he couldn't not return to Sullivan, to that expression he couldn't quite parse, to the mystery that permeated their interactions. He felt sure one of the other students would—*must*—notice that something peculiar went on between their professor and the strange interloper. But no one seemed to pay them any mind, and just as Shelley's phone alarm vibrated to warn him that class ended in two minutes, the chorus of tweets and chimes made its way around the room again. Shelley stared down at the message: "All clear." He looked up at Sullivan, who continued to sit in his seat while all around him his peers stood and chatted, and gathered their books and bags. Never had everything been less clear to Shelley in his life.

Chapter Six

Sullivan sat in his seat, watching Shelley, who had stood when the all-clear message came through and tried to give the class a series of announcements about the work they should be doing for the next class over the din of thirty chairs being pushed back on the linoleum and dozens of conversations weaving in and out and among the class members. Several students stayed behind to talk to Shelley today: this was typical. A handful of students hovered around his desk while he packed his things. Sullivan could have answered any of their questions himself—they were simple questions, and Sullivan wondered if the students didn't ask them just because they wanted to interact with Shelley. They had crushes, maybe. Or someone had told them that it paid to make sure your professors could put your name with your face—probably true, but at Scotsdale, with its tiny student body, only the most unconscientious of professors could make it past the first few weeks of the semester without knowing the names of every one of his students.

Sullivan ducked his head and smiled at the surface of his desk while one of the girls giggled through her conversation with Shelley. She sounded pretty far gone, and Sullivan wondered what she would think if she knew what he had done to Shelley on Monday afternoon. Sullivan felt a little jolt at the notion of having *done* something to Shelley. He hadn't thought of it that way before. When he'd first left Shelley's office on Monday, he'd been frightened of the encounter he'd instigated, but Guy's news when he returned to the room had distracted him, and when he returned to thoughts of the kiss later in the evening, while he lay in bed pretending to read a novel and Guy muttered at a math assignment at his desk, he had gone back to feeling

pleased with himself. Shelley had kissed back, and it had been a good kiss. A bit rough, maybe, but good. He'd wanted to see what would happen if he confronted Shelley feeling the way he did—infatuated, he thought was probably the word, but with a tinge of something else, something more consuming. And now he knew, and now it was Shelley's turn to make a move. Sullivan had decided to put himself in Shelley's way until the professor did something—told him to piss off or threatened him with some kind of action or ignored him, pretending nothing at all had happened. Or . . . what? This is where Sullivan wasn't sure what he really wanted next. None of those things, no, surely not. They all led to endings, and he wasn't looking for an ending. But when he tried to envision what would happen between Shelley and him, he couldn't keep his mind engaged with the scenario.

As the students finished talking to Shelley and made their way out of the room, Sullivan lifted his head again and looked toward Shelley. He was making rather more of a business about getting his papers and books into his briefcase than was strictly necessary, and Sullivan realized with a start that the man was flustered. Flustered by him. Sullivan was dimly aware that another person in this situation might feel empowered by this realization, but it only intensified his desire that Shelley should be the one to make a move this time.

When nothing remained for Shelley to fuss with, he set his briefcase down on the desk and rested his hand atop it. He looked at Sullivan then, and raised an eyebrow. "Well?" he asked, and it was so much not what Sullivan expected him to say that he had no idea how to

respond. He shifted his feet under the desk and sat a bit straighter. He thought for a moment of replying "well, what?" but dismissed it as more of a wise ass remark than he wanted to risk in the moment.

Shelley picked up his brief case and moved out from behind the desk. "I don't know what you want, Young. You're going to have to tell me what the game is before I can decide how to play."

"I don't know what the game is." It could have been just as much a wise ass remark as what he chose not to say, but it wasn't, and Sullivan wasn't sure whether he was more surprised at himself for saying it or at Shelley for seeming to understand that he meant it.

"I thought you might not." Shelley nodded toward the door. "Walk with me."

Sullivan gathered his messenger bag, ducked into the strap, and followed Shelley out of the classroom. Shelley walked quicker than Sullivan would have thought he would and he had to take a few running steps to catch up with him. They walked in silence down the academic center hallway and then down the stairwell and into the lounge where the Parents' Weekend Faculty Brunch had taken place. The stairwell was full of students moving between classes, the lounge abuzz with students with gaps in their schedules, and Sullivan followed a step behind Shelley through them both. It wouldn't have been clear to anyone observing them that they were walking together at all, and it wasn't until they had crossed the lounge and stood outside the interior doors to the college library that Shelley spoke again. "I'm doing some research on *The Good Soldier* and I need to pick up some books. We can talk while I look for them."

Sullivan nodded, and walked through the door Shelley held open for him. It would be difficult to discuss what had happened between them in a public space like the library stacks, and Sullivan wondered if Shelley had picked the location for that very reason.

Shelley made his way through one of the turnstiles at the front of the small Scotsdale library, and Sullivan followed behind him, shifting his bag in front of him and lifting it over the mechanism to avoid getting caught. Shelley headed for the open staircase in the middle of the main floor and took the steps two at a time. Sullivan hurried to keep up, feeling himself running out of breath. Shelley didn't pause at the top of the stairs among the shelves of history books but immediately pushed through the double doors into the dim stairwell leading to the upper floors. He stopped at the third floor—periodicals and the library's stores of microfilm and microfiche—then almost barreled through the doors.

"Are you doing work with early twentieth-century newspapers?" Sullivan asked, genuinely curious. He knew that Shelley concentrated primarily on British modernism, and he didn't think that Scotsdale's small library would hold any newspapers or magazines from the times and places he would be most interested in. In fact, this floor of the library was nearly always mostly deserted—so many of the academic journals were readily available on-line now and only a very few members of the faculty and student body were interested in working with the store of local materials Scotsdale prided itself on.

Shelley simply shook his head and wound his way through the shelves and study tables to a back corner. They passed the small grouping of easy chairs Sullivan sometimes retreated to when he was tired of the dorm room, but Sullivan was sure he'd never been in the corner Shelley

led him to. One row in the bank of overhead lights was out back here, making it too dim to do any work, and Sullivan wondered if something was amiss with the ventilation system as well. The book and Mylar smell was strong enough here that it seemed to stick to the insides of his nostrils and coat his throat.

Shelley dropped his brief case onto a stray carrel against the back wall—its thud shattered the silence of the floor—and turned to lean against the table edge, his arms crossed over his chest. "Well, here we are. What do we have to say to each other?"

Sullivan looked around him, tried to peer around the edge of the bookshelves to see if anyone was about. They'd seen no one after they'd left the ground floor and much of the noises students in the library might make—scraping chairs back, coughing, dropping books—would echo as the sound of Shelley's briefcase hitting the table had through this floor, the only one in the library with no carpeting. "Why aren't we meeting in your office?" Sullivan had been surprised by Shelley's approach to this conversation from the beginning, but the manner and place in which they were meeting were beginning to alarm him. A sharp spike of fear pricked his belly. He hadn't felt that since he'd come to Scotsdale two years ago and escaped his latest foster family. The uncertainty he'd felt after leaving Shelley in his office on Monday was more of an anxiety, and about himself, about what was going on inside his head and chest—it had nothing to do with what might *happen* to him.

Shelley shrugged. "I told you. I have some books to pick up. I'm busy, you know." Sullivan was completely nonplussed. He'd been so in charge of things on Monday, so in control, even if he had managed to unnerve himself afterward. Now he had no notion of what to do, or

say. And worse, he wasn't sure how he ought to feel. He felt his defenses coming down, felt all of the little things he did in public to keep his real self secret—dressing a certain way, talking a certain way, cultivating a particular kind of facial expression—falling away from him and leaving behind the person he was right before he fell asleep at night. He had just enough time to wonder why these things would desert him at precisely the moment he most wanted to be opaque before he said, "I don't know what to say," then dropped his gaze to his shoes, and let it trace the lines in the linoleum tiling. It was unlike him to be so honest, so unprevaricating, and he cursed himself for letting himself in for such a situation without first having a plan.

"Was it a dare? A bet? Your roommate put you up to it?"

The idea of Guy's being involved in this mess disgusted Sullivan, even though he was sure Shelley was speaking generally and had no notion whatever who his roommate was. "No. Nothing like that."

"You're bored, then. Your own class work wasn't stimulating enough, so you decided to amuse yourself by toying with one of the professors, eh? See how far you could wind him up before he snapped?"

Sullivan shook his head. Shelley's words twisted at the fear in his belly, the more so because they contained a hint of truth. Sullivan wanted Shelley, lusted after him, daydreamed about him, but he had pursued all of it because of a desire to see what would happen, to see what Shelley would do. He hadn't thought about it much at all at the time; now it seemed like the height of inconsiderate stupidity. "No. I mean, I am bored, mostly. But I didn't want you to snap."

"You thought maybe it was too quiet around here? A little gay sex scandal involving a teacher and a student would be just the thing to liven up poor, provincial little Scotsdale College?"

Sullivan shook his head again, less enthusiastically this time, slowed by this idea. He hadn't thought of that at all, and now that he did, he could think of nothing he wanted less. Shelley spoke softy, and Sullivan thought his voice probably wouldn't carry, but he looked around him again, though he could no better tell if anyone shared this part of the library with them than he could before.

"You were planning on stringing it along for another few weeks, maybe then call the papers? Then sit back and watch as your little game plays out in everyone's living room."

Sullivan clutched at the strap to his bag, wishing as he never had before that he could hit rewind and edit his actions of the days before. "Please. Stop."

Shelley hadn't moved since he'd started to grill Sullivan, but now he unfolded his arms and let them fall to his sides. "I've been agonizing over you for two days, you little punk. Two days. Wondering what you meant by it, wondering if you'd come back, trying to figure out what you wanted. I was a *wreck*. And then today you show up and it's like you're my own personal worry stone in the back of the room, making everything somehow all right as long as I don't look at you, because then all the wondering just comes crashing back down on me. I was determined to wait you out, to see what you wanted. But you don't know."

Sullivan ran his hand up and down the strap, the roughness of the material somehow a comfort. "I don't know. But I don't want to get you in trouble. I don't know what I want, but that's not it." The material of the bag's strap made a rasping sound against his hand. His palm burned a little from the friction, but the movement was soothing now and he didn't want to stop.

"Fuck." Shelley shoved away from the carrel then and crowded Sullivan. His briefcase teetered and the sound of it falling from the table to the floor mingled with the dull thud of Shelley turning Sullivan and pushing him into the bookcase behind him.

Sullivan's head hit the line of books, and he felt them give way into the back reaches of the shelving. He imagined them pushing into the books behind them, the books facing the aisle one row over, and nudging their spines over the lip of their shelf, creating a mirror image of the volumes behind his head. Shelley had one hand cupped around Sullivan's jaw and he ran his thumb along Sullivan's lips. Sullivan took a breath, unsure whether he wished to say something or simply try to calm himself, but Shelley leaned in and pressed their lips together. This was not the jarring and clashing kiss of Monday afternoon, though Sullivan imagined he could feel the desire thrumming through Shelley wherever their bodies met. The shelving pressed painfully into Sullivan's back, and he tried to shift against Shelley, tried to pull himself away from the shelf. But Shelley wouldn't give, and Sullivan reached up to Shelley's shoulders—if he couldn't maneuver, he would just have to hang on. Unlike their first kiss, Sullivan let Shelley have all the control. Shelley's tongue explored Sullivan's mouth with a series of hot darts and licks, and Sullivan did nothing to try to take over the kiss, to push his way into Shelley's mouth.

When Shelley pulled back, he did so with only the upper half of his body, leaving his hips, his thighs, his knees still pressing Sullivan's hips, thighs, knees into the shelf. They were almost precisely the same height. Shelley licked at his lips, and swiped that thumb over Sullivan's once again. Sullivan felt Shelley's hand hot against his face, and his skin was going

feverish and sweaty beneath it. "I'm sorry," Sullivan said, and it came out a cracked whisper. Shelley did move away a little then, sort of canting his hips away from Sullivan's without moving his feet. "What?"

Sullivan cleared his throat and swallowed. "I'm sorry."

Shelley let his hand drop away from Sullivan's face, but it came to rest, lightly, on his hip. "What for?"

Sullivan cocked his head toward the rest of the library, tried to make an encompassing gesture with it. "For starting this, getting you into this."

"Us."

"Okay. Us, I guess. But I'm sorry."

"I don't see me doing much to resist you."

Sullivan shifted a little then. Moved his back so that a book corner wasn't jutting into his spine, picked up his feet, replaced them so he felt a little more balanced. "Not much, no. But you weren't thinking about me before I came to your class. You didn't even know me. I started it all. I put things into motion."

Shelley reached out to brush a piece of Sullivan's hair from his forehead. Sullivan thought the gesture sweet and annoying both at once and—almost unconsciously—shook his head so that the errant lock fell right back where it had been.

"You did," Shelley said. He seemed about to go after the hair again but instead moved entirely away from Sullivan and sat on the carrel top. "Why did you?"

Shelley's moving away had been unexpected. Sullivan had thought that he wasn't going to move until Sullivan asked him to—or pushed him away. The places where his body had touched Shelley's now felt cooler as the air hit them and he shivered just a bit. Sullivan shook his head.

"And don't say you don't know again. When what you mean is you aren't ready to say." Shelley scooted further back on the carrel and let his legs swing freely. He looked impossibly young for just a moment, and then he adjusted his glasses by pinching them between thumb and middle finger and wiggling them a bit on his face, and the middle-aged professor was back.

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"I won't say it again."

"But you still won't tell me why?"

Sullivan was suddenly painfully conscious of where he stood, of how close he was to Shelley—or how far away—of where they were, of how hungry he was, and how badly he needed a piss. "I don't think I can." When Shelley looked about to speak Sullivan went on quickly. "Yet. I don't think I can yet. I'm not saying I don't know. Just that I can't say."

"Do you think maybe you should have figured out whether you could say before you decided whether you could kiss?"

Shelley still let his legs swing and Sullivan watched them. Shelley wore loafers—almost moccasins, really—and they were tattered and scuffed. The end of one lace was frayed, and the soles were worn down sharply unevenly at the heels. It was unclear to Sullivan whether Shelley was reprimanding him or simply asking a question, and Sullivan warred with himself over how he should respond, how he should *feel*. Part of him wanted to become defensive, was already putting up walls and figuring ways to hurt back. But another part of him, a part surprisingly just as strong as the defensive part, hoped to explore the question with Shelley, to start down a path of discovery with him.

"Don't know that either?"

Shelley's tone was sharp, and Sullivan feared that the man was losing patience with him. He heard himself apologizing again, and wondered where that impulse was coming from. But apparently it was the right thing to do, for Shelley stilled his legs and held a hand out to Sullivan. "Come here."

"What?"

Shelley waved him toward him impatiently. "Come here, come here."

Sullivan pushed himself away from the bookshelf and took a step toward Shelley. Shelley waved again, and Sullivan closed the space between them so that he was standing within Shelley's legs, their faces just inches apart. Sullivan expected Shelley to put his arms around him or to kiss him or even to wrap his legs around Sullivan's waist, but he did none of those

things. He held Sullivan's gaze for a second, then said, "I don't understand you, Young. I don't know what you want. But there's something between us here. Something strange, maybe. But I'm willing to see where it goes. I think I like you, Young. There's something. Now it's me who doesn't know. We'll just see what happens next then, shall we? And you think about what you want and what it is you think you're doing, and I won't ask you about it again for a long time. But when I do, you need to have an answer. How's that sound?"

"What do we do in the meantime?"

"How do you mean?"

"While we're just seeing what happens next. What are we *doing*?"

Shelley crossed his arms over his chest again, and Sullivan wondered if the professor weren't more affected by this encounter than he appeared. The effect of standing so close to this man, close enough that just the smallest shift would put him in his embrace, but without really touching him, was heady. He watched Shelley's mouth as he asked, "What do you want to be doing? And if you say 'I don't know,' I'll defenestrate you."

Sullivan was already smiling before he realized that Shelley had actually meant it as a joke. "The kissing is nice."

"Mmhmm. I agree."

"I could stand to do more of that."

"As could I."

"But I think I meant, how will we be doing what we'll be doing? Or where, maybe?"

"An excellent question. Do you want to keep coming to class? Or will that no longer hold any thrill for you now you've managed to entangle me in some manner of relationship?"

"Do you mind my coming?"

"Funnily enough, I don't. Or at least, I didn't today. I thought I would, thought you'd be an unholy distraction, but it was the opposite really. Helped me concentrate. Until that damned alert went off."

"I'll keep coming then. I like watching you. What else?"

"I'm in my office Monday/Wednesday/Friday. Why don't you stop by when it suits you. Just not during office hours."

Sullivan ducked his head. "Because we might get caught?"

Shelley lifted Sullivan's chin with two fingers. "Because I should be working."

Sullivan rested his hands on the lapels of Shelley's jacket. It wasn't a caress or an embrace; he just let his hands lay there and focused on the feel of the material beneath his fingers. Shelley let him. "This is strange."

A smile from Shelley. "It's a fairly common tweed."

Sullivan laughed, and it was a strangled, cut-off sound. "Not the jacket."

"No."

"No. The . . . all of it."

"Ah. I suppose it is. Does strange bother you?"

Sullivan let his hands fall away from the jacket and took a step away from Shelley. He turned and hitched himself onto the carrel top as well so that they sat side by side. "Not usually. I like strange, actually, most of the time. But this is real strange. I mean, real *and* strange. Not strange like in a movie or a book. You see?"

"Real strange has more potential than fiction strange."

"Exactly." Sullivan bit at the side of his thumb.

Shelley watched him for a moment, then took Sullivan's hand in his and drew it up to his face. He peered at the thumb, then clucked his tongue at the ragged flesh there. "This is a filthy habit, Young. A filthy, nervous habit."

Sullivan grinned his lopsided grin. "That's what my roommate says."

"I would have thought you were too self-assured to indulge in a filthy, nervous habit."

Sullivan pulled his hand away, his grin descending into a frown. "Yeah, well." He buried his hand in his jacket pocket.

"Well?"

The grin returned, perhaps more lopsided than it had been before. "I guess you'll just have to wait and find out for yourself."

"I guess I will." Shelley slapped his hands against his thighs. "But now, I have to go. I really do have work to do." He stood, and stuck his hand out like he wanted to shake. "So I'll see you around?"

Sullivan gaped at the hand for a moment before he hopped down from the carrel and took it. He shook it up and down once, then let go. "See you around."

And with that, Shelley took up his briefcase and made his way down the aisle of books, turned a corner, and he was gone.

Sullivan stayed where he was, watching the space where James Shelley had stood. Slowly, he turned and looked at the carrel where they had been sitting only a moment before. It was an ordinary carrel. The library sported hundreds of them lining the walls of each of its upper floors. This one was no different than any other, except perhaps in that it was relatively free of graffiti and no chair accompanied it. Sullivan guessed that the chair had been appropriated for some study table in a more frequented part of the library. He ran his hand along the surface of the carrel and thought he could feel the heat of Shelley's body still pressed into the wood. He lifted his hand to his face and rubbed his fingers across his lips, then straightened as if released from a trance, situated his bag on his shoulders, and strode out of the library.

When he got back to his room, Guy was sitting on the couch, a laptop open in his lap. "It was a hoax," he said.

Sullivan stopped short, thinking suddenly of James Shelley sitting back in his office snickering into his tweed sleeve.

"The alert this afternoon?" Guy said. "It was a hoax."

Sullivan breathed in through his mouth slowly, then blew the air out his mouth. "You mean a bomb threat or something and there wasn't one?"

Guy shook his head. "No. I mean the alert didn't even come from the school at all. Someone hacked into the system and sent out the alert. The all clear, too. It looks like the administration only knew what was going on because they got the alert messages too. See." Guy held out the laptop to Sullivan.

Sullivan took it, cradled it in one arm so he could use the other to scroll with the touch pad. It was an article on the local paper's webpage—very short and saying little more than what Guy had told him. "That's really shitty." He passed the computer back to Guy.

"I hope when they catch the guy, they bury him. Up to his neck. In sand. When the tide's coming in."

Sullivan sat on the edge of his bed. "Gruesome."

"Yeah, well. There was, like, a fucking *stampede* outside the lab when that message came through. You know Sarah Matthews? She fell. If I hadn't been there to help her up, she probably would have been trampled."

Guy glanced up from his computer and looked Sullivan up and down. "You okay, Sull? You look a little pale."

"He kissed me."

Guy rolled his eyes. "Right. Who this time?"

"Shelley. In the library stacks."

Guy stared at him for a second, then returned his attention to the computer. He took a long time fiddling with something before he said, "Yeah? Right there in the stacks, huh?"

"You can't tell anyone though. Guy. Really."

Guy looked up from his fussing and shook his head. "Not a soul." He shut the laptop then and put it to one side. "Are you okay, though? Didn't you want this?"

Sullivan flopped back onto the bed. "I kissed him first." He knew he wasn't keeping to the thread of the conversation, but somehow the words he needed to say just popped out of him without any consideration for the back and forth. "Monday. I went to his office, and I sort of attacked him. I didn't mean to. And then today he told me to come with him to the library, and at first I thought he was just going to chew me out, you know. But then he kissed me."

Guy lifted his baseball cap from his head, scratched under it, then set it back in place. "That's a lot to dump on a guy, Sully. Even someone who's sympathetic, you know?"

"You're saying that you'd be just as uncomfortable with this if the professor in question were a woman?"

Guy considered for a moment. "Yeah. That's what I'm saying."

"That's fair." Sullivan studied the slats of Guy's bed above him. "Christ, I don't know what to do."

Guy stood in the middle of the dorm room, his hat slightly cockeyed, his hands in his pockets. "I don't know what to say, man. This is a little beyond me. Except, maybe, how about we go for some pizza or something?"

"To distract me?"

"To feed *me*. I'm famished."

Sullivan sat up, peered at his friend. "Okay."

#

Salvatori's couldn't decide if it was a hole in the wall catering to Scotsdale's students or an upscale restaurant catering to its faculty. The front door stood in a slight recess from the street, with one small window on either side. The window on the left was stained glass picturing a single red rose. The window on the right was boarded up. First-time visitors to Salvatori's invariably walked right by the restaurant and had to double back when they realized that they'd surely gone too far down the block. The interior of the restaurant was long and narrow, with a shining mahogany and brass bar running along one wall and a row of tables and booths along the other. The tables were covered in red linens; the flatware was silver and the glasses stemmed. But the seats of most of the booths were torn with padding sticking through and the free-standing tables were wobbly. The lights were dim, and Gino, the owner, refused to allow the one television over the bar to be turned on. Sullivan and Guy had discovered Salvatori's during their first weekend on campus as freshmen, simply by walking by and then stepping in. They went back regularly now, treating the restaurant either as a pizza joint (for impromptu or late-night food runs in whatever they happened to be wearing) or a fancy place (when Guy's parents came to town) as it suited them.

Tonight they were greeted just inside the door by Gino, who was the stereotype of an Italian restaurateur turned on its head. He was tall and skinny, with hair so blond it was almost white. He spoke like he'd listened to some Italian immigrants growing up, but his accent was

flat, unremarkable Pennsylvania with the occasional touch of a northern Midwest vowel. He looked them up and down, and said, "It's pizza tonight then, boys?" as he pulled two menus from a pile.

Guy smiled. "Looks like it, Gino. Thought we'd give the caf a miss tonight."

"Always wise, my friends. This way." Gino led them to one of the booths near the door to the kitchen. "Our special tonight, should you two be inclined to look past the pizza pie, is a mushroom ravioli in vodka sauce with a tomato and mozzarella salad to start. And it's out of this world." He opened the menus and passed them to his customers as he spoke. Guy smiled at him again, but Sullivan barely looked up as he took the menu and then glanced at it unseeingly. Gino hit Guy lightly on the shoulder with the back of his hand, then gestured toward Sullivan. "What's with him?"

Guy shrugged. "Love. Or something like it."

Gino raised an eyebrow. "Ooooh. Starting out or finishing up?" He looked from Sullivan, who was shooting Guy a look, to Guy, who was steadfastly ignoring Sullivan.

"I think that's the problem. He doesn't know."

Gino swatted at Guy again. "Budge up. Lemme sit here with you a minute."

Guy shifted over to let the other man sit next to him. Gino immediately plopped his elbows on the table and dropped his face onto his fists. "Well, young master Sullivan. Spill."

Sullivan looked at him over the top of his menu, and almost let himself smile at the sight of Gino. But then he shook his head. "Nothing to tell. Just a silly situation, that's all. Come on, Guy, what do we want on it?"

"You are in luck. Gino specializes in silly situations. Tell me all about it."

"Trust me, you don't want to know."

Gino leaned back in the booth. "No? Let me guess. You like someone you think maybe you shouldn't. They like you back. And you think maybe they shouldn't. Now, what to do. Should or shouldn't? Yes?"

"I think maybe sausage and spinach tonight, Guy, yeah? We had that the one time and we keep saying we're going to have it again and we never do."

Guy scowled at Sullivan, then turned in his seat to look more fully at Gino. "That's pretty much exactly it. How did you know?"

Gino shrugged. "You work in the restaurant business long enough, you see things. I know what a boy looks like when he's had his heart broken by a girl. And that—" he waved toward Sullivan "—ain't it."

Sullivan put his menu down and sighed. "Right. What do I look like then?"

"Hoot toot, Sullivan, my boy. Don't get snarly."

"I'm not snarly."

"Suit yourself. But you are."

Sullivan opened his mouth to protest, but Guy nodded at him. "You're snarly."

"Fine. I'm fucking snarly. What else am I, if not heartbroken?"

Gino cupped his face in one hand and looked at him, making little "mmhmm" noises every few seconds. "Confused. Scared. Tempted."

"Jesus." Sullivan picked up his menu again and opened it.

"Am I right?"

"You're amazing, Gino. Do me," Guy said.

Gino snorted. "You're too easy. Content. Eager. Open. All the time. I'd be exhausted to be you."

"Well, thanks."

"Don't mention it." Gino stood. "So, shall I bring two orders of the ravioli?"

Guy tried to catch Sullivan's eye, but he had hunched down behind the menu now. "I don't think we can quite afford your excellent ravioli this evening, Gino. You understand."

"But of course. When you make food as wonderful as I do, the price naturally can only be met by the most discerning of clientele."

"Naturally. So, a medium house pizza pie. With sausage and spinach."

Gino took the menu Guy offered him, then snatched Sullivan's away from him as well. "Coming right up, boys. I'll bring your usual drinks?"

Guy nodded.

When Gino had disappeared behind them into the kitchen, Sullivan leaned forward and said, "What did you have to go and tell him for?"

Guy folded his arms across his chest. "I told him *nothing*. It's not my fault you radiate your distress."

"I do not."

"You do too. You look like someone's kicked puppy. Gino's just trying to help anyway. You're just mad because he's right."

Sullivan pulled the container of sugar and artificial sweetener packets toward him from the edge of the table. He pulled all of the white sugar packets out and laid them on the table in front of him. "Not mad. Just, hell, I don't know. Afraid he's right." The blue Equal packets joined the sugar on the table, followed by the pink Sweet n' Lows.

"About which bit?"

Gino arrived then with a Coke for Guy and a glass of skim milk for Sullivan. He slapped cocktail napkins down in front of each of them, then set the glasses down as well. "How anyone can drink milk with pizza will always be beyond me," he said. "Your pizza will be out in about ten minutes, boys." He lanked off then, showing no signs that he'd discussed anything more personal with them earlier than how they'd like to top their pizza.

Sullivan organized the Equal and Sweet n' Low packets so they were all facing the same way and returned them to their container, running his finger along their tops to be sure they were neatly in line. Then he added all of the sugar packets but one, which he shook, then opened and emptied onto his bread plate. He wetted a finger with his tongue, then stuck the finger to the pile of sugar granules. "I don't know. All of it, I guess." He stuck the finger in his mouth and sucked the sweet from it. "'Confused and scared and tempted'. Jesus. I mean, that's not how I started the semester, you know?" Guy made a face at Sullivan as he reached for the plate of sugar again, and Sullivan flicked some of the granules at him. "I started out cocky and confident."

"And tempted."

Sullivan shook his head, his sugar-covered finger lingering in his mouth. "No, not

tempted. Horny. Attracted. But from afar. There was no question of 'tempted' because Shelley wasn't real. You can't be *tempted* to seduce Brad Pitt, right? Without any chance for opportunity, there's no dice."

Guy half shrugged, half nodded as he sucked Coke through a straw. "That's what you get for making it real, I guess."

"How do you mean?"

"You can be cocky and confident and wanking in your room or you can be confused and scared and kissing in the library."

"What if I want cocky and confident and kissing in the library?"

Guy answered with a great slurping; he had drained his Coke and now attempted to vacuum up the last remnants from among the ice cubes at the bottom of the glass. "Then, my friend, you must give in to temptation, tell scared to go fuck itself, and let confused unravel as she will. What's the worst that can happen anyway?"

"Public humiliation?"

Guy waved at a passing waitress and shook his empty glass at her. "Well, that one's easy. Stop having your trysts in the library."

Chapter Seven:

Interlude

News of the alert hoax at Scotsdale College traveled quickly. Students told their parents and friends at other schools, professors told their colleagues, and one or two members of the administration let their indignation too much inform their dealings with the local news people. The initial report of the alert in the local paper was short and to the point; it simply warned the people of Scotsville that some manner of threat had been reported on the Scotsdale campus and that further information would be posted as news trickled off campus. The second report, the one which claimed that the alert had been a hoax, still relayed nothing but the facts as they were known at the time. By the morning following the event, the president of Scotsdale had been visited by no fewer than three local news reporters and four local media crews. Beginning with the noon news that Thursday, all of the local outlets were reporting that disgust and disbelief ran through the halls of Scotsdale, and that faculty, administration, and students alike were determined to root out the person or persons responsible for the hoax and subject them to the full brunt of their disdain. This was only partially true.

Scotsdale's president, Phillip Humphries, was convinced that the hoax could only have been perpetuated by someone inside the school system and called for a campus-wide investigation to be followed by full and swift disciplinary action by the appropriate disciplinary committee. Secretly, he hoped the perpetrator was a Scotsdale student so that the student/faculty academic disciplinary committee could make a spectacle out of the proceedings and re-instill a

proper respect for the college in the eyes of its students. No one was quite sure what procedures ought to be followed in order to initiate such an investigation, so when President Humphries was able to convince the dean and three of the older faculty members that this action was imperative, none of the rest of the faculty were able to mount a sufficient protest to stop them. A few of the younger members did speak out, insisting that if there were no procedure in place that the first action should be to adopt one and that the president couldn't just behave as if he had absolute power. But as President Humphries thought that he *ought* to have absolute power in such matters, he was loathe to be overruled. James Shelley was one of those in favor of going slow and establishing some ground rules, and he spoke up rather vehemently, though he was swiftly talked down by the head of the English Department, who happened to be President Humphries's oldest friend.

The hoax was the subject of an emergency meeting of the Scotsdale Student Senate, and, in a development that surprised everyone in attendance, the room was packed and the meeting had to be shuffled to a larger conference room down the hall. Student Senate meetings at Scotsdale generally drew a respectable but entirely predictable crowd: the officers, of course, as well as at least one representative from each of the fifty-three student organizations on campus. Beyond that, there might occasionally be a small huddle of students hoping to address the senate about their pet issue and one or two casual observers. But this meeting, by unofficial head count, was attended by no fewer than three hundred students.

The Student Senate President gave an impassioned but perhaps misplaced speech about the sanctity of the Scotsdale name and the affront this hoax represented to the school and her student body. Many of the students in the audience nodded and there were a few brief outbursts of applause. Sullivan Young and Guy Day attended the meeting, Sullivan in a slouch and a scowl, Guy with an air of enthusiastic curiosity. When the Senate put forward a motion to draft an official response to the President's call for an investigation in which the Senate would offer their support on behalf of the student body, Sullivan was one of those calling and hooting from the back that the student body ought to be consulted first. The Senate President succeeded in silencing them all with a glare, and the motion passed. Sullivan left then, with Guy trailing behind him, casting glances over his shoulder trying to see what happened next even as he exited. Sullivan shook his head all the way back to the dorm, though he declined to explain to Guy what he found so objectionable.

After a week, one of the national morning shows picked up the story and invited the college President to speak with them about the issue via satellite. The President agreed, and for three short, but somehow glorious, days, the whole nation buzzed about the tiny liberal arts college in Pennsylvania that was taking a stand against dishonesty and irresponsibility. But the story had short legs, since there was little to say beyond the facts of the hoax and to indicate that the local police and the school officials were both conducting their own investigations.
By Scotsdale's Fall Break, the national news had forgotten them all together and the local outlets mostly ignored the story as well. The Scotsville police had come up against a dead end in their investigation.

But President Humphries would not abandon the issue. He organized a committee of faculty members to investigate the case, and had given them permission to interview whatever students and members of staff they needed to in order to find the culprit. The committee looked on their job with the kind of seriousness only an academic discovery committee could muster, and it wasn't long before most Scotsdale students, though they typically wanted to see the case resolved as well, shied away from Dr. Mulligan, Dr. Tarr, and Dr. Voorhees. Dr. Mulligan all but disappeared as he supervised the Head of IT's search for evidence of the hack. Students generally answered the other committee member's questions, mostly politely, but they began to weary of their presence, always in tandem, popping up in odd places around campus—sitting in the back of choir rehearsal, lurking behind the dessert station in the cafeteria, hovering in front of the doors to the library. The students they had in class sometimes asked after the investigation and intimated that maybe it was time to give it a rest, but the committee could not be swayed.

As finals approached at Scotsdale, the committee announced to President Humphries that they believed they knew who the perpetrator was, and submitted to him a twelve-page report of their suspicions and evidence. Humphries thanked them for their service, and dismissed them. Rumors began to circulate that someone had been caught and that the special meeting of the student/faculty disciplinary meeting would be called any day. But no more official word came from the President's office for nearly three weeks.

Chapter Eight

Shelley was in Wegmans, pushing his cart through the produce section and wondering what had possessed them to tile the floor this way so that the cart rattled and bumped, when he saw Marian Tarr. She stood in front of a small display of white nectarines in a long, loose chocolate brown skirt and a turquoise top that made a striking contrast to her long black hair. She held a shopping basket in the crook of one elbow, and Shelley thought she was the only woman in the world who could look graceful with one of the unwieldy things. He tossed his bag of prewashed spinach into his cart and rattled and bumped his way over to her.

"Hello, Marian."

Her look was one of surprise, then recognition, then delight. "James! What a coincidence. I'm just picking up some vegetables and things for our dinner tonight. Hu wants to have an indoor picnic in front of the fire. Isn't that sweet?"

"Real sweet." Shelley choose a nectarine from the display, tossed it lightly in the air, let it smack back into his palm. "I wouldn't have thought you could get these in Pennsylvania in October."

Marian took the fruit from him and placed it in a plastic bag with two others. "Normally you wouldn't. They're a special. You should take some. I'm sure they'll be gone for the winter in a few days."

Shelley took two of the nectarines in one hand and shook open one of the plastic bags with the other. He didn't especially care for nectarines, but it was simpler than arguing.

"May I walk with you?"

Marian smiled. "Of course, though I won't be long." She shifted her basket on her arm and moved on to the tomato display where she carefully selected each fruit by giving it a gentle squeeze, then lifting it delicately to her nose and sniffing. Shelley watched as her nostrils flared almost imperceptibly as she breathed in the tangy red scent of the fruits. "I'm afraid we've been remiss, lately. We should have had you by for dinner again."

Shelley shook his head. "No, no. I owe you two. I was just to your place for an evening."

Marian finished selecting her tomatoes and tied a knot in the top of the plastic bag before depositing it in her basket. "But after all of that fuss I made about you seeming upset and making Hu talk to you about it, we really should have had you back sooner. How is that going, by the way?"

"How is what going? Oh, my little tantrum about work?" Shelley waved a hand as if to brush the thought away. "Fine, fine. It's nothing. Just a momentary slump. Over it by the time I got home that night."

Marian raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "I don't believe that for a minute, James Shelley." Her voice was soft and cultured, like a film actress's from the thirties, and Shelley swore she could say the most vulgar thing in the world and still sound like she sat with the ladies from church sipping tea from cups pinched pleasantly in tiny, begloved hands.

"It's true. Fit as can be." Shelley slapped his hands against his chest.

Marian laughed lightly. "I mean that I never believed the story in the first place. Oh, you may feel that way about your work, but that isn't what I saw on your face that evening at the house. And it's not what I see there now." She reached toward him and touched his cheek lightly, as she had at the end of that evening a few weeks ago. Shelley flinched, and Marian pulled her hand away and smiled her apology. "It's not work. It's something more personal than that." She walked toward the wall and the long case of glistening greens.

Shelley pushed his cart after her, gritting his teeth at the vibrations the rattle and bump sent through his forearms. "What kind of something more personal?"

Marian shook a bunch of spinach and flung water droplets onto the produce still sitting in the case. Shelley felt a drop hit him on the nose. None hit Marian. "That's what I haven't figured out yet. But I will."

Shelley feared he was being toyed with, and that made him think of Sullivan and how even after they'd established a tentative relationship, he still never knew where he'd be with him from one meeting to the next. But he thought of their meetings with excitement and couldn't muster any real fear anymore about being found out. And while Marian gave him the same thrill of familiarity, of being cared about, the thought of being suspected of an affair with a colleague's wife suddenly terrified him.

#

The house sat on a hill at the end of a long drive. Guy had let Sullivan out at the bottom at Sullivan's insistence that he didn't want company on his first visit to the Youngs'. Guy claimed that he had a friend who lived one town over. Sullivan wasn't sure he believed it, but he

wasn't inclined to argue. It took about ten minutes to walk from the road to the house, and the thing that struck Sullivan most about that walk was the quiet. The town of Gatherington was small—just two perpendicular streets in the town proper—though there was enough activity on the state route through it to generate traffic noise. But the drive was surrounded by pine forest and the trees muffled any sound coming from the road and town.

He'd carried the phone message from Guy around in his pocket for a week, reaching into his pocket several times a day and crumpling it in his fist, then pulling it out and smoothing it before putting it back to start the process all over. Then, on the Sunday following his grandmother's call, too late in the afternoon for there to be any possibility that he could visit them that day, he'd called. It had been a short, and, on Sullivan's end, awkward conversation. His grandmother had answered the phone and declared it about time he'd returned the call. And Sullivan had felt something like shame at that, but at the same time he wasn't sure that she'd meant it as a reprimand. They'd agreed upon lunch the following Sunday, and short of Peggy Young declaring how much she was looking forward to seeing him, there'd really been little else to the conversation.

Now Sullivan wished that he'd engaged her a little more at the time so that he had a better sense of what to expect. He stood at a bend in the drive where he could see the house but where he was reasonably sure that no one in the house would be able to see him. His first impression was one of quiet perfection. The house was one story and it seemed long to Sullivan, like it had stretched or grown to fill the space that was available to it. The whole of the front of the house presented a unified façade. A stone porch ran the length of the front, and a stone

walkway led to seven stone steps ascending to the porch. Two large windows bisected the house front and the front door stood at the far left. Sturdy wicker chairs furnished the porch, and Sullivan could make out a half-empty glass and a small book on the armrest of one of them. The effect was of looking at a stage set in that moment between the actors' exit at the end of the act and the descent of the curtain.

The forest which surrounded the drive continued around the house on both sides and the scent of damp pine needles permeated the air. Sullivan thought of what it might have been like to grow up here, nestled in among the trees, with so much green to filter out the noises of the real world passing by just a few yards away. His foster families had all lived in town, and he'd never slept without the sounds of traffic and the light from a street lamp streaming through his window. The quiet was nice, but he wondered how long it would be, if he were to stay here, before he longed for some sound other than his own breathing.

Sullivan suspected that the front door wasn't often used but he couldn't immediately see any other way in. There was surely a back door, but he would have to circle around the house, tramping on the lawn, to find it. He rang the bell, and listened for any sounds from inside. The peals of the doorbell carried faintly through the door. There was nothing particularly special about the sound of the bell, but somehow it put him in mind of those phantom people, always disapproving, who one of his foster fathers had referred to as his "betters." He pulled at his tie, wondering if one of the "betters" would be able to tell that he'd tied this one months before and slipped it on and off without untying it for fear that his tenuous grasp on the skills necessary to get the top bit longer and the bottom bit shorter, to get the knot to lie right, would slip suddenly

away. He wished now that he had not waffled so long about going through with this lunch at the Youngs', that he had planned ahead, at least far enough to have been sure he had clean pants to wear instead of a pair of blue jeans he'd found in a heap on the closet floor. He was just debating the relative merits of trying to catch his reflection in one of the windows (was his hair standing crazily on end? What if Peggy Young saw him goggling in at the window on her way past?) when the sound of various and sundry locks and bolts being uncaught rattled through the door.

The opening door revealed a woman older than Sullivan had expected, a bit stooped, and wrapped in a hand-knitted shawl. Any impression of a frail, dour old lady he might have been forming were shattered instantly when her eyes lit up, she reached out for Sullivan as if she were either going to haul him inside the house by his shirt front or bless him, and she tipped her head back as she called, "Lionel, he's here! Come out from your accursed dust and chemicals, Russell's boy is here at last." She held open the storm door with one arm and crowded the front door to give him room to pass. "Come on in here, boy. I'd know you anywhere."

Sullivan attempted to smile as he found he had no reply to such an exuberant welcome. He inched past Mrs. Young into the vestibule and then did an awkward kind of little dance with her as she tried to maneuver the door shut and usher him into the room. "Go you in, boy. Go you in. I never did see the like of men for standing about aimless in doorways." She gave him a gentle shove in the small of his back, then circled round in front of him before he'd hardly had a chance to take a step. "Let me look at you." She squinted at him through glasses that on a woman half her age would have been daring and trendy and on Peggy Young were inexplicably

and incontrovertibly absolutely right. "Hmmhm" she hummed to herself and punctuated this with a poke at Sullivan's chest. "You're too skinny. Just like Russell. Clothes hang right off you. Lionel! The cat's got his tongue. Come make him talk."

Sullivan fought the urge to bury his hands in his pockets and managed a "Thank you for inviting me" before his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

"Of course, boy. Though I'll say it took you long enough to decide to come." She shooed him toward a couch. "Sit, sit. And you must call me Grandma Young."

Mrs. Young must have noticed Sullivan's look of wariness for she waved an arthritic hand as if to brush away the importance of the remark. "Everybody does. All the young people. If it's bothersome you must devise your own name for me." She shifted in her seat then. "Lionel! The boy will think you don't care to see him."

Lionel Young shuffled in then. He, too, struck Sullivan as older than he'd been expecting, and he was never sure if this was the reason why he stood when Lionel entered the room. Lionel waved vaguely towards Sullivan and he sank back onto the sofa as Lionel circled his wife's chair, kissed her on the cheek and lowered himself into a chair next to her.

Grandma Young scowled at him. "I called you three times. Didn't you hear?"

Lionel crossed his legs and let one moccasin slipper hang from his foot. "Yes, mother." He let one hand rest on her knee before addressing Sullivan. "Hello, Sullivan. We're glad you've decided to come see us."

"Thank you for inviting me, sir."

"Pssht. Listen to the boy. 'Sir.'" Grandma Young pointed at Sullivan. "Where do you suppose he picked that up, Lionel? Not like those snot-nosed cashiers at the market, is he? It's got so I dread to food shop, having to deal with those impolite young men. And the girls! Rings in their noses, green hair, and heavens knows what else. And they crush the eggs and squash the bread as often as they don't. Isn't that right, Lionel?"

Lionel patted the knee. "Maybe Sullivan would like something to drink, Peg."

Grandma Young fingered the shawl at her chest. "Of course, dear. A nice cup of tea and some shortbread. Just the thing with the chill like this." She disappeared through a door at the far end of the room, which she shut behind her.

Lionel and Sullivan both watched her go, and at the snick of the latch catching Lionel said, "A cousin of mine built the house nearly eighty years ago. Insisted on all the most modern central heating but wouldn't hear of leaving off any of the doors. It's an oddity now, doors on a front room. And that woman closes every blessed one behind her every blessed time."

Sullivan smiled at that, and Lionel nodded at him as he reached into an inside pocket for his pipe. "That's better," he said, lighting the pipe and puffing at it. "You've been looking a little startled. Peggy can do that to a man. Girls, they take right to her. But men just don't know what to make of her."

Sullivan nodded and watched as Lionel leaned back into the cushions of the green velvet armchair and drew contentedly on his pipe. He supposed this was meant to be a companionable silence, but Sullivan didn't feel companionable at all. He felt lost and fidgety. He didn't know what to do with his hands and it seemed incredible to him that he had ever been at ease or that

hands ever simply occupied space without him sorting where they ought to be. He crossed his legs, then recrossed them, then tried to stretch them out under the coffee table. He pulled at his tie and rolled his shoulders, aware all at once of the muscles of his shoulders and neck bunching and tightening. A headache was creeping up his neck, and he tried to inch his fingers underneath the stiff material of tie and collar.

"She'll hover like a mama bear if she thinks you're upset. Come to think of it, that may be what throws men about old Peg. Men don't take so well to being fussed at. I know it probably won't do any good to say so, but try to relax, Sullivan. You may not feel like it, and no one here is going to make you act like it if it's not what you want, but you're family. Russell meant the world to that woman, and to me, too, if I'm speaking honest, but that should make no never mind to you. We're glad to see you and to keep on seeing you if you want. We feel obliged to you, son, because we're connected to you. But you don't need to feel obliged to us. You're your own man now, or will be any minute, and if you've put the past behind you and want to leave it there, that's your lookout."

Sullivan swallowed and nodded, then, realizing he'd hardly said a word since he'd arrived, he said, "Right. Okay."

Lionel sort of hmmmed to himself and looked Sullivan up and down. "I mean it, Sullivan. This is just lunch. The only obligation here is to pretend Peggy hasn't put too much salt in the soup."

"I heard that, you old codger." Grandma Young was maneuvering through the door with a tray which Sullivan couldn't imagine her balancing and opening the door at the same time.

"Sit you down, sit you down. The day hasn't yet come that Grandma Young can't serve tea in her own parlor without help."

It hadn't occurred to Sullivan to offer any help and it shamed him. He felt his face going warm and he thought he sensed Lionel looking at him again. But when he glanced over at him, Lionel was busy shifting coffee table books so there would be a place for Grandma Young to set down the tray.

"So." Grandma Young settled herself into her chair and began to fuss with the tea cups. "What did you two talk about while I was away? Sullivan, how do you take your tea?"

"I don't. I mean, that is to say, I've never had any."

"Well, this'll be an experience then. Lemon, sugar, milk," she said, pointing to a small dish of lemon wedges, a tiny sugar bowl, and a small jug of milk in turn.

"Though I wouldn't take lemon and milk both in the same cup. Vile," said Lionel.

"I don't know. How do you take it?" Sullivan directed his question to Lionel without really meaning to.

"Some days one way, some days the other," Grandma Young said with a smile and a shrug. "They each have their merits."

"With sugar I guess."

"Excellent choice." Grandma Young poured him a cup and spooned in two teaspoonfuls of sugar. "Can never have enough sugar in a nice cup of tea, I don't care what they say on the television. Oh!" Her hand jerked at her exclamation, but none of the tea spilled from the cup she was passing to Sullivan. "I forgot the shortbread." Her hands fell to her lap, and Sullivan

thought it was lucky he had taken the cup and saucer when he did, for Grandma Young's hands seemed to move of their own accord, not much aware or caring what they might be about to spill into another's lap. "Just as well, I suppose. You wouldn't want to spoil your appetite for the salty soup." She cast Lionel a sideways look at that, and Sullivan braced himself for the shattering of tension this sort of petty remark would have brought about with the foster parents he had spent most of his adolescence with. But Lionel simply puffed at his pipe, something like a smirk pulling at his lips.

Sullivan couldn't decide whether he liked the tea. It was warm and felt nice going down, but the taste was bitter, the sugar seeming not to lend the drink any sweetness but to create its own separate sweetness so that there were two sensations in his mouth at once—one bitter, one sickly sweet. They left a peculiar aftertaste and he rubbed his tongue against the roof of his mouth after each sip as if trying to remove some unpleasant coating from it with the back of his teeth.

#

Lunch was homemade chicken soup and sandwiches. Sullivan was ushered into the dining room, which contained more china and silverware than he had ever seen before. The table dominated the middle of the room with the head facing a window onto the back yard and the foot facing a door into the parlor. A third wall opened onto the kitchen and the fourth was dominated by a floor-to-ceiling sideboard with a cabinet filled with green glass and the waist-high shelf laid with a silver tea service. There was a corner cupboard to the left of the door onto the parlor similarly filled with dishes. Grandma Young pointed him toward the chair at the foot and set a

platter of meats, cheeses, and vegetables on the table. Sullivan wished he knew more about traditional seating arrangements. Was this an honor, being seated at the foot of the table? Shouldn't Grandma Young have the foot, opposite her husband? Was he displacing her by sitting here? Maybe he should object? Maybe he was expected to do so?

"Hand me that bowl, boy, and I'll get you some soup."

Grandma Young's demeanor didn't change, but from what Sullivan had observed so far, it never did. He tried to catch Lionel's eye, hoping that there might be some clue there, but again the older man seemed not to be paying the interaction between his wife and grandson any particular mind. He was unfolding his napkin into his lap and staring at the ceiling.

When Grandma Young returned with a steaming bowl of soup filled with vegetables and huge chunks of chicken to set in front of Sullivan, Lionel pointed up. "Has that crack always been there, Peg?"

She snatched up the soup bowl that sat in front of her place and peered at the spot where he was pointing. "Haven't a notion." She swatted at his shoulder. "Hand me that bowl."

"I don't think it was. I think it's new," he said to the ceiling. "What do you do about ceiling cracks, I've never known," he asked as Grandma Young came back into the room with their soup. She started to lower herself into her chair and then popped back up again. "The bread! Can't have sandwiches without bread, can we."

The bread she returned with in a basket was no store-bought bread. Sullivan could see that even before it was passed to him. It looked heartier, and the crust was a robust deep brown rather than the tan of mass-produced store-bought loaves. Where you could roll a slice of store

bread into a ball, this stuff broke into pieces if you folded it over. When Sullivan took a piece it was still a touch warm and there were nooks and crannies in this bread, places for the butter, which melted just a little when Sullivan spread it, to pool and hide. He took a bite of it, forgetting that he was meant to be making a sandwich out of it, and the taste was nothing like he'd ever had before. It was breadier than bread, like bread squared, like all his life what he'd thought was bread was really only bread's shadow, a dupe, a stand-in. There were only six slices in the basket—enough for each of them to make a two-slice sandwich—and Sullivan sheepishly made his sandwich out of only one slice cut in half. He felt silly eating the other slice on its own, like a child who has shown too much enthusiasm for a treat his friends have long ago outgrown, but neither Grandma Young nor Lionel took any notice of him.

Lionel was still inspecting the ceiling while Grandma Young tried to pass him the platter of sandwich fixings. "What do you suppose causes them, ceiling cracks? There's always one around, isn't there? I remember there was one above my bed as a boy. Ran all around one corner of the room. I used to watch that crack—I could just make it out from the light coming down the hallway from the sitting room—before I went to sleep. Almost like a friend. Isn't that funny?"

Grandma Young gave up and set the platter at his elbow, and Lionel started a little when he noticed it. "Oh, roast beef, is it. I do like a cold roast beef sandwich. Did we have this beast hot, Peg? I don't remember."

"You didn't. I served it to the Red Hats on Thursday. It was my turn to host the Book Talk."

"Where was I?"

"Hiding in your darkroom, I suppose." She turned to Sullivan. "Lionel has his own darkroom. Maybe you'd like to see it after we eat."

Sullivan nodded. He'd taken a few photography classes in high school, and while the process of it and the science of it had fascinated him, it took him days after time in the darkroom to get the scent of acetic acid and ammonium thiosulfate out of his nose. His teacher, a Mr. Rupper, had been surly as well, barking out safety rules every time someone got near the trays of developing solution. Sullivan's time in photography class were memories he wished were happier. He thought that photography was something he might have been very comfortable with under other circumstances. The thought of touring Lionel's darkroom after lunch chilled Sullivan, made him lonely, as if the insecurities of high school, as if the special insecurities of high school as a foster child, awaited him among the chemical smell and glowing red light of Lionel's work space. Sullivan wished that he were better at small talk, wished that he had the ability to converse easily, to say nothing with many words and to say something with few.

When they had finished eating, Sullivan watched Grandma Young and Lionel carry the platter and the soup bowls through the kitchen, then stood up and began making a pile out of their plates, scraping food scraps and moving all the silverware onto the top plate. He lifted the stack and followed the Youngs into the kitchen. He stopped short when he looked up to see Grandma Young and Lionel embracing. It was a quick embrace—a shoulder squeeze and a quick peck, really—and if Sullivan had been a moment later he'd have missed it entirely.

Sullivan felt himself go red and after a second he realized that his embarrassment had little to do with what he was seeing but with fear of being seen. He immediately felt guilty for having not thought of Shelley all afternoon and ashamed of what he thought of now, in his grandparents' kitchen. His seduction of Shelley, if that's what it was, clashed here with the cozy smells of homemade bread and soup, with sweet, stolen kisses over the dishpan. The ambivalence he'd felt after that first kiss in Shelley's office congealed now in his gut and morphed into something he'd never quite felt before: an overwhelming sense of filth, as if what he and Shelley had done, were doing, were intending to do again, as soon as possible, was unthinkably depraved, despicable, unspeakably inside out. He shook his head, to clear it of the image of Shelley backing him into a wall, bending in for a kiss, to clear it of the fear and shame that now curled at the edges of image. He set the stack down on the counter, and smiled at his grandparents.

#

Sullivan hopped from one foot to the other at the end of the Youngs' driveway. He was more nervous now that the meeting was over and he was waiting for Guy to return than he had been before. The Youngs had offered to drive him back to school, and at his insistence that that wasn't necessary, had tried to convince him that he should at least wait with them in the den until Guy arrived. He'd said that he would enjoy the walk down the drive (which was true) and that Guy would surely be there by the time he got to the bottom (which was not). The two had arranged that Sullivan would call Guy on his cell phone when he was ready to be picked up, but Sullivan didn't do this until he was halfway down the driveway. He hadn't wanted to speak to

Guy while he was still in the Youngs' home, hadn't wanted to create a connection just yet between his world at Scotsdale and this world that he was tiptoeing around the edges of with the Youngs.

He badly had to piss and he wished now that he had asked for the bathroom before he left. He'd been afraid to, as if there were something shameful about needing a piss or, worse, some unspoken reproach of the Youngs' hospitality in not pointing it out to him before he needed to ask. He thought for a moment about slipping into the woods and relieving himself there, but he dismissed this idea as crass and a betrayal of the Youngs' kindnesses almost immediately and then tried to distract himself from his full bladder by thinking of all the reasons he wouldn't have been able to piss in the woods anyway. The bank was too steep. He was too close to the road and someone might see. The Youngs might have decided to go for a walk and *they* might see. With this thought, Sullivan glanced over his shoulder, it suddenly occurring to him that the Youngs might very well decide on an afternoon walk and it would be awkward to be caught here still waiting for the ride he had assured them was imminent. He stepped away from the end of the drive then, trying to obscure himself behind the cover of the overhanging pine branches from any view from the driveway.

When Guy finally arrived, Sullivan yanked open the passenger door and jumped into the seat before the car had come to a full stop. "Let's go, okay?"

An inquiry about the afternoon died on Guy's lips and he nodded once as he shifted into gear and executed a three-point turn in order to head back for the state road. "That good, huh?" he asked as they waited at the stop sign for a break in the traffic on SR 239.

Sullivan didn't answer him, and Guy let the silence play out for a few miles. Sullivan jiggled his leg and tapped his fingers on the door handle. Finally he looked over at Guy and said, "Did you know your grandparents?"

"Yep. Still do. On the one side anyway."

"Are they weird?"

"No weirder than any of the rest of us, I guess. Yours peculiar, were they?"

But Sullivan didn't take any offense at the remark. "*They* weren't peculiar. Or maybe they were. Interesting. Different, maybe. But we didn't talk about anything. I mean, we talked, we *chatted*. But I was expecting some kind of discussion, you know? 'Tell us your life story, Sullivan.' 'Look at these old family albums, Sullivan.' Or maybe, 'we're glad we found you, now never contact us again, Sullivan.' Just. *Some*thing." Sullivan stared out the window at the passing trees and the occasional house.

"What did you talk about then?"

"I don't know. Lionel's photography. Books. The crack in the dining room ceiling."

Guy laughed, then bit at his lip. "Sorry. The crack in the dining room ceiling?"

"I'm serious. There was this great crack in the ceiling, and Lionel was all 'was that there before?' and Grandma Young was all 'how should I know, do I stare at the ceiling all day?' Hey, a gas station. Pull over, will you?"

Guy pulled into the Mobile station and stopped in front of one of the pumps. Sullivan was out of the car and making for the back side of the gas station building before the car had fully stopped. He thought halfway there that this may well be one of those gas stations where you needed a key for the bathroom door, but when he came to the single-occupant men's room, the door gave easily at a turn of the knob. The room smelled strongly of urine and air freshener, and a trash can in one corner spilled crumpled brown paper towels onto the floor. Sullivan relieved himself, then worked the flush lever with one sneakered foot. He watched himself in the cracked mirror above the sink as he washed his hands. He looked pale—ill almost—and his hair flopped over his forehead. The paper towel dispenser was empty. A stack of towels sat on the back of the sink, but they were soaked through. Sullivan placed one hand on either side of the sink and leaned forward, letting his head drop between his shoulders.

He hadn't quite recovered from the embarrassment he'd felt at seeing his grandparents embracing and his subsequent thoughts of James Shelley. Thinking of Shelley had been an intrusion into the strange domesticity of the Youngs', and as much as he thrilled at the memory of Shelley's hands on his hips, of his lips pressing against his mouth, he resented Shelley's memory for invading this space. When Shelley had suggested, the last time Sullivan had walked into his office and casually shut the door behind him that they ought to try meeting somewhere else once, Sullivan had been delighted, but the meeting was set for tonight, and now he almost hated Shelley for the presumption of bringing it up.

A rust stain ran from the overflow hole to the central drain, and Sullivan imagined scrubbing at it, rubbing and rubbing until it was scoured away. His wet hands slipped on the porcelain, and he pitched forward a bit before he caught himself and straightened up. He yanked at the knot in his tie, pulling it loose and then pulling it undone entirely and cursing at the thought of having to tie it again. He stuffed it into his jacket pocket and made his way back to the front of the gas station. Guy had pulled the car forward and parked it crookedly in front of the convenience store. No one else was around, and Guy leaned against the passenger door of the car with his ankles crossed in front of him. "Ready?" he called when Sullivan was still a few feet away from him. "Need anything from inside?"

Sullivan shook his head and reached around Guy for the door handle. He pulled on it before Guy had a chance to move, sort of bumping his friend out of the way.

"Hey, watch it." Guy flailed a bit in regaining his balance.

"I'm not broken, you know." Sullivan pulled the car door shut on the last words, and Guy's answering "What?" was muffled through metal and glass.

Guy appeared on the other side of the car and settled into his seat before repeating himself. "What's that supposed to mean, anyway? 'Not broken'?"

Sullivan slouched in his seat and put his Converse-clad feet up on the dash. He stared out the windshield at the sign advertising hot coffee in the gas station store window. "You don't have to take care of me because I'm not broken."

Sullivan could see out of the corner of his eye that Guy was working his jaw, clenching and unclenching, falling just short of grinding his teeth, a sign that he was either thinking something through or very angry. Sullivan decided from his tone when he finally spoke that in this case it was likely both.

"Who said you were broken?" His words were clipped, as if he were afraid of letting them out into the world.

Sullivan picked at the laces of his sneakers. He feared now that he was about to have the wrong argument—or maybe the right argument with the wrong person—but he was souring for a fight now and everything he could think of to say had a dangerous edge to it.

"I said who says you're broken?" Guy asked again and something about Guy's emphasis and the way his knuckles were white against the steering wheel made Sullivan wonder if Guy's anger wasn't directed at him.

"Nobody's said it. *I'm* just saying you don't have to treat me like somewhere inside something is busted. This stuff with my grandparents, the shit with Shelley, I'm okay with it all. I'm not falling apart inside or anything." Sullivan imagined how he must have looked slumped over a rusty gas station men's room sink and pulled harder at his laces, yanking the loop closest to his toes away from the sneaker, tightening the laces across the top of his foot and ensuring that he would have to relace the entire shoe if he wanted to get the tension right again.

"Did I say you were?"

Sullivan unlaced the sneaker, feeling blood flow back into his foot as he undid each cross of the laces. "I'm just saying I'm *okay*, is all."

"Did *I say* you were?"

"No."

"Listen, Sully. You fall apart inside if you want, or don't if you want, and visit your grandparents or don't, or fuck whoever you damned well please. I'm your friend. I don't pity you, and I sure as *hell* don't see you as something I should fix. We clear?"

Sullivan's fingers were sure as he threaded his laces back through the eyes of his sneakers, but his breathing had quickened. "Clear," he said.

"Good." Guy turned the key in the ignition. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get out of Bumblefuck before dark."

Shelley made an after-you-gesture. "By all means." He let it hang in the air for a moment while Guy maneuvered the car away from the station and toward the road. Then, "Sorry."

"Don't fucking mention it."

"Right."

Guy glanced over at him for a minute, then looked back to the road. "Seatbelt," he said, and waited while Sullivan belted himself in. Sullivan wondered for a few miles if Guy was still angry, but then Guy asked whether Sullivan was up for take-out Chinese and horror movies, and Sullivan figured the incident was as good as forgotten. "I can't," he said. "I have a date."

Chapter Nine

Shelley sat on the edge of the indoor pool with his feet dangling in the water. He'd told Sullivan to meet him here at seven, and he'd just finished thirty slow laps and now waited for the appointed time to arrive and bring with it his young—what? lover? Shelley couldn't settle on a way to think of Sullivan even in the privacy of his own mind. The swimming had felt good—like a deep breath—and Shelley swiveled at the waist now, stretching out the muscles in his side. He did not come to the Y to swim on Sunday nights often enough for it to be a habit, but he did come with enough frequency to know when the pool would be crowded and when it wouldn't and which life guards spent more of their time chatting than watching and how many lap lanes would be occupied and how many free.

The pool was quiet now, at just a few minutes before seven. The lifeguard—a somewhat unreasonably tanned young man with broad shoulders and spectacles—kept half an eye on the pool while he flirted with the girl he'd relieved twenty minutes before and who now stood to one side of the chair and gazed up at him. The guard's inattention to the occupants of the pool would annoy Shelley if it didn't suit his purpose. The area of the pool designated for free swim was empty, and Shelley watched with satisfaction as the only other swimmer in the lap lanes came into the wall, quickly ran through some stretches, then hoisted herself out of the pool and padded toward the locker room. The pool was empty now save for Shelley and the two guards more interested in each other than anything else.

Shelley heard the squeak of one of the locker room doors opening, and he squinted across the deck. He could see that it was Sullivan even though he really couldn't make out his features until he was much closer. He wore red swim trunks which gave the look of being much too large for him, and his skin stuck out pale and almost sickly against the red of the suit. Shelley thought he might have been shivering, and this suspicion was confirmed when Sullivan sat next to him on the deck, his heels tucked into the gutter so that his toes hovered above—but did not touch—the water, and Shelley saw Sullivan's jaw spasming with the cold. "Jesus, Young. It's probably eighty-five degrees in here." He took a slow, appraising look at the swim trunks. "Had to borrow your daddy's?"

"Fuck off," Sullivan said as he crossed his arms over a chest Shelley could swear showed a tinge of blue. "Why'd you want to meet here anyway? Isn't it kind of public?"

Shelley shook his head and pointed toward the lifeguards. "They didn't even see you come in. And there's no one else around."

Sullivan looked around the pool quickly; his gaze ended on the guards, lingered there. "Great. Who'll save me if I drown?"

"Me." Shelley slid into the water and turned so he was facing Sullivan. "I'm an excellent swimmer."

Sullivan looked skeptical. "But are you an excellent rescuer?"

"The best." Shelley cupped his hands in the water, then raised his hands and let the water run over his head. He ran his hands through his hair, brushing it back away from his forehead as he looked Sullivan up and down. "You swim, Young?"

Sullivan rubbed his arms. "I've *been* swimming."

His tone seemed defensive to Shelley, and he cocked his head at the younger man. "But you don't know *how* to swim."

Sullivan shook his head. "Not really."

Shelley backed away from the wall, gesturing for Sullivan to join him in the water. "Come on in. You'll feel warmer in the water," he added when Sullivan shook his head. Shelley shrugged, turned and dove under the water. He resurfaced a few yards down the lane, then began a lazy freestyle back to the wall where Sullivan sat watching him. Shelley's arms were tired from the laps he'd already swum, but he concentrated on keeping his movements fluid, on keeping his elbow bent at just the right angle, on holding his streamline for just a fraction of a second after finishing one stroke and before beginning another. It was an easy glide into the wall, and, conscious that Sullivan would be watching him, he did the ten yards without turning his head to breathe. He touched the wall just below where Sullivan's feet still hovered over the water, and he rose so that he was face to face with him, their noses only inches apart. Shelley thought he heard a hitch in Sullivan's breathing as he stood before him, but he couldn't be sure through the slosh of water in his ear. He tipped his head to one side and gave it a shake. The ambient noise of the pool—the water filters, the life guards' conversation—came sharper as the water cleared his ear, and he grinned at Sullivan. "Come *on*, Young. I'll teach you."

"I'm not good in the water, all right? Not comfortable in it. I'll just watch."

"Like hell." Shelley grabbed hold of Sullivan's legs. He didn't pull, but his grip was firm.

Sullivan tried to pull his feet from Shelley's grasp, braced himself against the pool deck when Shelley didn't give and he started sliding closer to the water. "Let go, Shelley."

Shelley gave a small tug at Sullivan's feet—not hard enough for there to be any danger of Sullivan's falling in, but enough that Sullivan scrabbled anew for purchase on the slippery tile of the pool deck. "'Shelley' is it? What happened to 'Jamie'? Or are you saving that only for when you're being an insufferable ass?"

Sullivan scowled and kicked forcefully enough that Shelley really had to hang on if he didn't want to lose his grip. He forced himself not to look toward the lifeguard chair, knowing that if they were going to take notice of the horseplay, the sound of a whistle blast would already have cut through the humid air of the pool.

"You never told me what I should call you," Sullivan said then, and he was refusing to meet Shelley's gaze.

That gave Shelley pause. It was such an odd thing to be awkward about with a man you'd seduced and spent the last weeks sharing clandestine make-out sessions with. But when he thought back over their times together—there had been three, plus that first time in his office and his own answer in the library stacks, and Shelley was a bit bemused that he knew the exact number—he realized that Sullivan didn't call him by name at all. Except for that day in class during the alert. And Shelley was sure that had been designed to throw him off. Since that day, Sullivan had been less defiant somehow, more pliant. "I think I like it when you call me 'Jamie.' Just as long as doing so isn't always going to be the prelude to a challenge."

"Is that what other people call you?"

"No," Shelley said. "Not a soul." And with that he swooped up, wrapped an arm around Sullivan's waist and hauled him into the pool. They both went under, and even though the water was less than four feet deep, Shelley was sure to keep his hold on Sullivan, plant his feet, and lift Sullivan's head back above water within seconds of pulling him in. Sullivan had reflexively grabbed onto Shelley's shoulder when he was pulled under, and he left his hand there even after he was on his feet again. He reached behind himself as if to hold on to the wall for support, but halfway through the motion he let his hand drift to his side. "Bastard," he said.

"Probably. But, hey, you're in now, you might as well let me learn you something."

"I lived this long without—"

Shelley held a hand up. "All God's land creatures gots to know how to swim. Now." He moved Sullivan's hand from his shoulder. "First thing is to be comfortable floating." He pressed lightly at one of Sullivan's shoulders. "Lie back."

"Jamie." It was a warning as much as a plea, but Shelley smiled at the use of his name. He stretched his arms out in front of him so that if Sullivan were to lie back, he'd be lying across Shelley's arms. "Go on. I won't let anything happen to you."

Sullivan made a face that Shelley had some difficulty interpreting. Fear? Disdain? But he positioned himself closer to Shelley and sort of leaned back at the waist. It was an awkward position, and Shelley could see the fear of falling, the inability to let go, in the set of his shoulders, in the way his knees bent to maintain his upright position. "Here," he said. "Try it like this." Shelley lifted his feet from the pool floor and stretched them before him, then lay

back so he was floating on his back looking up at the beams of the ceiling. He held the position for a few seconds, then reversed the process so that he was standing beside Sullivan once more. "Start by picking your feet up, then lie back. You'll feel less off balance that way."

Sullivan was looking at his feet and shaking his head. This fear, this reluctance even to try, made no sense to Shelley, especially given the way Sullivan had pursued him days before. He wasn't sure how to react to this, whether this was part of the game Sullivan sometimes seemed to be playing or whether this was real insecurity he was seeing. The possibility that Sullivan was letting him in somehow, was granting him access in that way, was a sobering thought, and Shelley laid a hand on Sullivan's arm, just above the elbow. "You don't have to if you don't want to." That was the wrong thing to say, or perhaps the right thing, for Sullivan's eyes narrowed and he'd kicked his feet out in front of him before Shelley realized it. The kick was a little too forceful, and it dunked Sullivan's head under water. Shelley got a hand under the middle of Sullivan's back and pushed up gently to force his body to lie flat on the surface of the water. Sullivan spluttered a little and his hands reached for something to hold onto. Shelley pressed harder into Sullivan's back to reassure him that he was there and squeezed one of his hands. Sullivan lifted his head at that and there was a question in his eyes when he caught Shelley's gaze. "Put you head back, Young. Can't float on your back if you're up looking around." Sullivan held his gaze for a few seconds, then let his head drop back. "That's it. Just relax and let the water support you."

Shelley kept his hold on Sullivan's hand, but let his other hand float beneath Sullivan's back—he was no longer holding him up, but he'd be right there if Sullivan started to sink. The

water was nearly but not quite still and it slowly carried Sullivan away from Shelley. Shelley let the drift happen, his arm extending a little farther with each passing second so he could maintain his grip on Sullivan's hand. At just the moment when Shelley would have to let go or take a step forward, he noticed the lifeguard looking in their direction. Their eyes met, and the guard nodded, once. Shelley nodded back, and the guard turned his attention back to his girlfriend. Sullivan was several feet away now, and Shelley moved toward him. In another few feet he'd be in water over his head. Shelley's movement stirred the water, and when it lapped at Sullivan's sides, he lifted his head again and looked around. This unbalanced him and set him sinking in the middle. Shelley was close enough that he could have put out a steadying hand, but he watched as Sullivan found his feet on his own instead. "Good, Young," he said. "Next, floating on your front."

"You don't really think you're going to teach me to swim tonight, do you?"

"I mean to try. Now come on. On your front."

Sullivan took a couple of steps toward the shallow end so that the water didn't lap so much around his shoulders as around his waist. "But I won't be able to breathe if I'm lying with my face in the water."

"No, you'll lift your head when you want to breathe, just as calm and controlled as you please, then put your face right back into the water until you need to breathe again. Your choice, all of it." And there was that look again, that Shelley couldn't quite make out. Something was going on with Sullivan this evening—something was bothering him or had set him in a sour mood. Not that Sullivan had ever been bright and shiny, but he mostly seemed reasonably sure

of himself. But tonight he looked as if the wrong move, the wrong touch would cause him to shatter into millions of pieces which would disperse throughout the slowly undulating pool water never to be seen or assembled again. Shelley put a hand on the small of Sullivan's back, and let his thumb wander in little circles. "We can start by just dunking your head under water, let you get used to the feel of the water on your face."

"Don't *baby* me," Sullivan said, then clenched his jaw and turned away from Shelley, his arms crossed over his chest.

Shelley let his hand fall away from Sullivan's back. "Okay."

"Sorry. I'm just tired of everyone treating me like I might break at any second. I'm not some precious piece of china someone's grandmother just unpacked from the attic."

"Okay, Sullivan. I'll try to treat you more like the everyday dishes."

"It's not funny. I'm serious."

Shelley blew air between his lips. "I know you are." He ran a hand down one of Sullivan's arms, tried not to sigh again when Sullivan flinched away. "You could stop acting like you are. About to break, I mean. If you don't want people to treat you like you are."

"Fuck it," Sullivan said. "Are we doing this floating on the front thing or what?" He slapped at the water with his hands, sending ripples through the pool.

"If that's what you want to do."

"Whatever."

Shelley eyed Sullivan for a minute. Every time he thought he'd started to figure the kid out, he did something else that set his assessment of him swirling. "It's easier to get into a float on your front than on your back, probably because you can see what you're doing. Just bend your legs and glide forward into the water. Easy." Shelley pushed his hands in front of him in a streamline position and kicked off gently from the pool floor. He let his legs rise into the glide and his arms float away from his body. When he was sure he had his balance, he took a deep breath and let his face fall forward into the water. He'd taken his goggles off when he'd finished his laps, so he keep his eyes closed to protect them from the sting of the chlorine, and it only took a second for the familiar peace of floating this way to wash over him. He focused on relaxing the muscles in his shoulders and neck, letting the water hold him. He blew some air into the water—maybe a third of what was in his lungs—knew he could hold on at least this long over again before he'd come close to needing a breath. He concentrated lightly on the places where the water lapped at his body, how it touched him softly then pulled away, only to advance again an almost imperceptibly short time later. He was just thinking that he ought to surface, continue the lesson with Sullivan, when the world turned on him, bottom seemed top, up seemed down, and light and water flooded his eyes while his arms flapped uselessly in the blue. He felt a panic he didn't think he'd ever felt in water before and he was kicking at the *something* holding his ankle before his brain showed up and he realized it could only be Sullivan, that his student had snuck up on him and pulled him under by his foot.

He had his feet again in only a moment, and he rubbed at his eyes while the lifeguard blew his whistle and called out "No horseplay!" from his chair. *Horseplay, hell.* Shelley thought. *I'm going to* murder *the kid.* Sullivan stood a foot or so away from him, breathing a little heavily, grinning. "You been conning me all night, Young? You were the star of your high school swim team? Learned to swim before you could walk? Sent your doctor's kids to college with the number of times you were in with swimmer's ear?"

Sullivan's smile faded slowly, his face growing grimmer and grimmer with each of Shelley's sentences. "No. I just wanted to see what you would do."

Shelley advanced on him, covering the distance in one exaggeratedly long stride. "You seem to have a little bit of a problem with that, Young. Seeing what I would do. Isn't that how we got here in the first place?"

"I don't know about you, but I got here on the bus," Sullivan said, but he was taking a step back.

"Wise ass." Shelley closed the gap between them again, and, again, Sullivan backed away from him.

"You like it." Sullivan's voice broke on the second word, and Shelley moved better in the water than he did. Shelley had Sullivan backed into the pool wall in just a few steps, and he gripped the gutter with both hands so that he enclosed Sullivan in the space between his arms. Their chests were touching, and Shelley realized with a start that this was the closest to naked they'd been with each other.

"I like it all right. I'd like it better if I thought I had any idea, *any idea*, Young, of what you were playing at." He leaned forward, but Sullivan turned his head away.

"The guards."

Shelley cast a glance their way. They were talking again; the boy on duty wasn't even looking their way. The girl was facing in their direction, but her attention was completely occupied.

"Fuck 'em." He kissed Sullivan and was gratified to feel the younger man's mouth part for him almost before he hoped it would.

The kiss lasted only a moment before Shelley pulled away himself. "Let's get out of here." He moved to the side of Sullivan, braced his hands on the gutter, and pulled himself out of the water.

"What about my lesson?"

"Later." Shelley reached down and took Sullivan's hand. He lifted Sullivan from the water with only a little help from Sullivan scrabbling against the wall with his feet and trying to leverage himself with his free hand. The life guard cast a look in their direction but apparently decided that it wasn't worth the effort to blow his whistle because the air remained unrent. Shelley bent to scoop up his goggles and kick board, then ushered Sullivan toward the locker room door. Sullivan's skin quivered beneath his touch, and Shelley rubbed at his back, wondering again at how he could be so cold on the overheated pool deck. He pushed the locker room door open and sort of shuttled Sullivan through it. "Where'd you leave your stuff?" he asked as he headed toward the first bank of lockers.

"Next row over."

"Okay." A quick look around the small locker room showed Shelley that they were alone. He backed Sullivan into one of the lockers and winced himself at the look of pain that crossed Sullivan's face when his back hit. "Sorry," he said as he leaned in again. He bypassed Sullivan's lips this time and mouthed at the spot where Sullivan's neck and shoulder met. His skin tasted of chlorine—salty and sharp—and the smell tickled his nose, but he couldn't seem to make himself pull away.

Sullivan let out a small moan but pushed at Shelley's chest at the same time. "I'm cold, Jamie. I need a shower."

Shelley pulled away reluctantly. "A shower would warm you up."

Sullivan nodded and slid out from between Shelley and the locker. He padded to the locker where he'd left his own things, and then returned a moment later. He stood looking at Shelley uncertainly, then pointed to the block of shower stalls around the corner. "So, I'm, um, going to. Shower."

Shelley smiled and nodded and worked the combination lock on the locker where he'd stowed his gear. Sullivan disappeared around the corner and Shelley heard one of the showers turn on a moment later. He dug his shower supplies out of his bag and followed Sullivan into the shower area. He paused for a second outside of the stall where the water was running, but quickly rejected the notion of joining Sullivan as too dangerous at the Y and as likely pushing Sullivan too far too fast. He wondered as he stepped into the stall next to Sullivan's and worked the knobs if, in slightly different circumstances—if it had been Sullivan's idea to come to the

pool, perhaps—if *Sullivan* would have followed *him* into the shower stall. It seemed, oddly, like exactly the kind of thing Sullivan would do to him, cheeky grin in place, and exactly the kind of thing that he should not do to Sullivan, for fear of frightening him off.

Shelley had turned the water up hot, and he rolled his shoulders under the spray. It felt incredibly good to stand under that hot stream and he imagined the water sluicing the chlorine away from his skin. As always happened when he first stepped under the shower after a swim, his pores seemed to release all of the chlorine they'd soaked up at once and he was nearly overwhelmed by the smell of the chemical for a second before it faded into just a faint irritant that tickled cloyingly at his nostrils. He was just reaching for his own shampoo when another scent came to him through the steam filling the air: it was spicy, with just a hint of mint, and Shelley realized that it must be Sullivan's shampoo, that he must have just then been working the lather into his hair. The shampoo gave the whole shower room a smell of clean, and Shelley hummed softly to himself as he ran his hands through his hair and rubbed the beginnings of a knot out of his shoulder. "What say we get some food after this," he called over the sound of the showers running.

"What?"

Shelley thought Sullivan had probably heard him just fine and was stalling for time. He pictured him, on the other side of the tiled wall separating their two shower stalls, water running down his face, his chest, his hands resting high on his pectoral muscles where he had let them drop from rinsing his hair when Shelley'd called to him. "I said, how about we go get something to eat once we're cleaned up. I'm starved."

"Oh."

Shelley waited for more, for a stammered refusal, a flat-out rejection, an acceptance. But there was nothing.

"Sullivan?"

"I'm thinking."

"What of?"

Shelley tried not to be impatient, tried to let Sullivan have whatever time he needed to work through whatever he needed to work through, but the silence from the adjoining stall was somehow galling and the sound of the water hitting tile and flesh grew louder and louder. He squirted some shampoo into his palm and began working it through his hair to distract himself while he waited.

Sullivan had lined his bottles of shampoo and body wash along the top of the wall between the stalls, and Shelley watched as the bottle of body wash disappeared, removed by Sullivan's unseen hand. He breathed deeply, hoping to catch this new scent as Sullivan washed himself. But the room was too full of warring aromas now and mostly Shelley smelled only his own shampoo as he massaged it through his hair. He hesitated before ducking under the water to rinse it away for fear of missing Sullivan's answer, but chastised himself for acting a fool and leant back into the spray with a small sigh. The bottle of body wash was back when he opened his eyes again, and he stood for a moment, waiting. He was just about to speak, was just taking in breath to do so, when the water cut off in Sullivan's stall and his voice came over the wall.

"Jamie?"

Shelley smiled again at the use of the name—couldn't help himself. "Yeah?"

"I think maybe no."

Shelley had expected this answer, so while he was disappointed, he was more intrigued by how unsure Sullivan sounded. "Well, if you're sure," he said as he worked quickly to soap up and rinse off—he didn't want to give Sullivan a chance to dash off on him while he was still showering. "No big deal."

"It's not that I wouldn't like to."

Then what is it? Shelley forced himself not laugh, thought it sounded almost natural. "Don't worry about it. Just thought you might be hungry."

"Okay."

He heard the rings on the shower curtain scrape on the metal of the shower rod, and the curtain covering his own stall fluttered as Sullivan walked passed and toward the rows of lockers. Shelley rinsed quickly, then rubbed madly at his hair before drying off too hastily. He could feel the slick of water still on his back and he knew his legs weren't dry as he wrapped his now-damp towel around his waist. He meant to go to his own locker and dress, hoping that he would hear and be able to call out if Sullivan tried to leave, but he found himself walking by the row containing his locker and continuing until he found Sullivan. He would have thought the sound of his shower shoes on the locker room floor would have alerted Sullivan to his presence, but Sullivan stood with his back to Shelley, facing his open locker. He was bare-backed and wearing a pair of jeans which rode low on his hips. He had dropped his towel on the floor and

stood on it now in his bare feet. He appeared to Shelley to be studying something at the back of the locker, but after a moment of watching his shoulder blades flex and his body shift, Shelley concluded that he was watching a man try to regain control of himself.

Shelley backed away and hurried as quietly as he could back to his locker. He grimaced at the noise the locker made when he opened it and hoped that if Sullivan heard he would just assume that Shelley had spent that much longer in the shower. He was dressed and running fingers through his hair, trying to tease it out of flopping into his eyes when Sullivan appeared, fully dressed and holding a mesh bag with his swim things in it.

"I *am* hungry," he said after a moment.

Shelley raised his eyebrows. Sullivan was continuing a conversation they'd cut off nearly ten minutes before. "Offer still stands. We can go find a pizza or a hamburger somewhere."

Sullivan shook his head. "I just can't tonight."

Shelley stepped away from his locker, reached for Sullivan, but put his hand in his pocket instead. He half shrugged, as if to dismiss the gesture. "Let me help," he said, not quite meeting Sullivan's gaze.

Sullivan's breath hitched a bit, and he was quiet for a moment. "I don't think you can."

Shelley balled his fists in his pockets, wished he had the nerve now to pull Sullivan into an embrace, wondered why it was so much easier when they were just horsing around. "Why not?"

Sullivan adjusted his grip on his bag, watched as it twirled slowly at the end of its string. “Because you’re part of the problem.” He smiled a thin-lipped smile then, an apology-smile, and he looked as if he were about to say something more, but then he turned and walked away.

Shelley watched him go, then nodded slowly and gathered up the rest of his gear. His locker door made almost no sound at all as he carefully, deliberately lifted its latch and pushed it to.

Chapter Ten:

Interlude

Three weeks after the beginnings of the rumors claiming that the perpetrator of the alert hoax had been caught, an official e-mail from the office of the president of Scotsdale was sent to the entire school. Faculty, staff, students, alumni—everyone, from the oldest faculty emeritus to the part-time night janitor in the library—received the e-mail, and there seemed to be nothing else anyone could talk about for days. The e-mail summarized the events of the hoax and made clear just how seriously everyone at Scotsdale took this attack against the sanctity of the community of Scotsdale before getting on to the bit everyone had been waiting to hear: the academic discovery committee had filed a report and the office of the president believed their evidence sufficient to call a meeting of the student/faculty academic disciplinary committee to hear the evidence and decide the most appropriate next course of action. The committee would meet in Jeffers Auditorium—the largest auditorium on campus, the one that could hold half again the size of the student body and no one was quite sure why—on the Monday following Thanksgiving. Classes were to be cancelled for the day, and all students and faculty were encouraged—nay, urged—to attend. The e-mail concluded by expressing the president's surety that the students of Scotsdale would uphold the traditions of honor and honesty held close by the college and attend the hearing rather than take the cancelled classes as an opportunity to extend their Thanksgiving holidays. Initial reaction to the e-mail suggested that he was right to believe that the students would want to attend—though perhaps not for the reasons he listed.

The e-mail did not list the name of the student—for it was, indeed, a Scotsdale student—who was accused of perpetuating the hoax, but his name was common knowledge within hours of the e-mail going out. Howard Walsh was a sophomore, whom everyone seemed to know of, but no one seemed to know. He was a computer science major, and Guy Day was heard to remark that if it hadn't been for Walsh's tutelage, he would never have gotten through CSS 101. Walsh became a kind of immediate celebrity on campus, and wherever he went he generally trailed a small group of students behind him. He appeared unbothered by the attention and unconcerned with his fate, which only served to enhance his status in the tiny community that was Scotsdale.

The local media ran with the story immediately, and a few of the national morning shows included a brief piece in their news round-ups, but the story never caught on like it had when it first broke. The local papers were more interested in the legal aspects of the case than in what one of the local news editors called "a human interest story that had lost all interest." When the story of the alert hoax appeared in Scotsville's papers now, the articles focused not on the college and her search for the truth but on whether the police would be able to use the evidence the academic discovery committee had gathered in their own investigation. There was some speculation that the college's investigation would be impeded by the student's refusal to talk, on the grounds that doing so might incriminate him in a criminal case. The police chief refused to comment on the matter, claiming that it was not for him to make legal speculation, and President Humphries simply reiterated his faith in the "principles on which Scotsdale had been founded."

As Thanksgiving grew closer, many of the student clubs and organizations on campus began to host events related to the hoax and the alert. The Student Senate sponsored a panel discussion of past scandals at Scotsdale and how the college had risen above them and invited several members of the campus community to speak, President Humphries chief among them. The Literature Club held a reading of excerpts from great works who took hoaxes as their subject. The history honorary fraternity added a section to their webpage called "Great Scandals and How They Changed the World." In the weeks leading up to the hearing, the atmosphere of Scotsdale College steeped in the history of, discussions about, and fervor for scandals of all kinds. There was simply no escaping it.

Chapter Eleven

The day before Thanksgiving had always bothered Sullivan more than the holiday itself. There was nothing terribly special about that Thursday, nothing much to remind him that he was nearly alone on a college campus designed to house thousands, nothing to signal to him that he was different, apart. The late afternoon feast in one of the special dining rooms in the student center with the dean, his family, and the few other students, mostly international, who stayed behind for the short holiday break was one of the better times he had on campus each year. But the day before, when those thousands of inhabitants were collectively throwing clothes and books into bags and racing each other to get out of parking spots or onto busses, was like a very slow and very particular torture.

He awoke early, and he knew from the first sound of Guy's snores above him that he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. He rolled over anyway and buried his head beneath the pillows. Guy's alarm would go off fairly soon, so that he could get a good start on his four-hour drive home. Sullivan dreaded the conversation that would precede this leaving. It had gone the same way for two years in a row now, and Sullivan suspected the only difference this year would be that he wouldn't have to convince Guy's mother as well as his roommate that, no, he really was all right staying behind. *Yes*, he was sure. *No*, he wouldn't change his mind. He lay there, listening to the sounds of Guy sleeping, until the alarm did go off, and for several minutes after.

When it seemed sure that Guy didn't intend to turn it off any time soon, Sullivan crawled to the foot of his bed and stood up so that he could see into Guy's loft. One pink foot stuck out from under the blanket. Sullivan grabbed it and pulled.

The responding kick nearly tumbled Sullivan over backward, but he held on and, once he'd regained his balance, he pulled again.

"Let go, asshole! I'll kick your face in."

Sullivan was undeterred by this threat delivered from under a pile of blankets, and he began to tickle at the bottom of the foot he still held.

The result was wriggling and breathless cursing and the emergence of Guy from under the covers, his blond hair sticking straight up from his head. "I will bite every one of your fingers in half," he said with just enough seriousness that Sullivan loosened his grip. "Sucker," Guy yelled as he lunged for Sullivan. He wrapped an arm around Sullivan's neck and rubbed roughly at the top of his head with his knuckles. "Teach you to wake a guy up. Teach you to fucking *tickle* a man while he's sleeping. Say 'uncle.'"

"Dream on, fucker. No one says 'uncle' anymore."

"'Uncle' or I'll rub all of your hair right off."

"How 'bout 'auntie'?"

Guy resumed his torment of his captive until Sullivan finally gave in. "Damn straight," Guy muttered as he slid from his loft onto Sullivan's bed, the bounce from the impact sending Sullivan scrambling for balance as he tipped over the foot of the bed. Guy stepped over Sullivan on his way to the bathroom. He didn't bother to shut the door behind him and the sounds of a

stream of urine hitting the bowl drifted back with Guy's voice. "I *was* going to haul your scrawny ass back home with me, stuff some turkey down your throat, but see if I let crazy fucks ride in my car."

Sullivan got up and switched off the alarm. "So, you'll feed crazy fucks, but you don't provide them transportation?"

Guy strode back out of the bathroom in just his boxers. "Something like that. Lend me a towel, Sull. I packed mine already."

"You know, you could just do your own laundry instead of hauling it all home to mommy three times every term."

"And *you* could be less of a miserable fuck and come home with me this year." Guy poked Sullivan in the chest. Sullivan started to shake his head. "Come on, Sull. It would mean a lot to my laundry slave."

Sullivan laughed. "Have you no shame?"

"Not this late in the year. Allotment's all used up by sometime in September. What do you say?"

Sullivan climbed back onto his bed and scooped up a novel from the floor. "The towel on the back of the door is clean."

Less than an hour later, Guy stood by the dorm room door with his bookbag slung over one shoulder and a sack of dirty laundry at his feet. "You sure, Sull? I can wait for you to pack. We do the whole shebang—turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes. *Pie*."

Sullivan lowered his book to his chest, his finger still between the pages, marking his

place. He grinned his half grin. "No thanks, Guy. I'm good here." He and Guy had had something almost like another fight the week before when Guy discovered that Sullivan had refused an invitation to his grandparents' for Thanksgiving Weekend. Sullivan had hated every minute of it and thought bitterly at the time that Guy had not been truthful when he'd said he didn't pity him. But Guy had apparently decided to let it go, for after an afternoon of silences and tension, they'd been back to normal. Sullivan appreciated this traditional offer to have Thanksgiving with the Days, but hoped they weren't about to have another argument over it.

"Okay. If you're sure." Guy fished in his jacket pocket for a minute before coming up with keys. He rattled them. "Hope she turns over." He hefted the laundry sack onto his other shoulder and gave Sullivan what he would call an assessing look. "See you Sunday," he called behind him as he ducked out the door.

Late in the evening, Sullivan tossed aside the book of essays he'd been dipping into and the bag of chips he'd been munching on. He looked up at the slats of Guy's loft above his head. He did this not infrequently, often as he was trying to fall asleep while Guy still sat hunched over his books with his desk lamp blazing. They'd stuffed a blanket under Guy's mattress so that it hung down and blocked the light from shining directly into Sullivan's eyes, but it was still light enough under the loft to read when Guy's desk light was switched on. The slats ran short-ways across the underneath of the bed, resting on the metal lips of the bars that kept the whole contraption from falling onto Sullivan's head. The light was different now, coming just from the small goose-neck lamp Sullivan had clipped to his headboard, and Sullivan noticed for the first time a series of tiny nails running all along the wooden edges of the mattress frame. It was as if

someone had nailed something—a bit of cloth, perhaps—to the frame to cover the slats and bars. Sullivan reached up to pick at one of the nails, but it wouldn't come loose. He wondered if he might worry less about dying horribly under a fallen and crushing loft bed if he couldn't see so clearly the apparatus preventing that from happening. He let his hand fall to his chest, then wiped his fingers absent-mindedly on his t-shirt to remove chip grease.

The room was almost maddeningly quiet, and the sounds that he normally couldn't hear at all—or simply didn't notice—seemed to take over his senses and preclude anything else. The tiny refrigerator hummed, noisily cycling through its settings. The whirr of his laptop fan seemed loud enough to accompany something much larger, like an airplane or some sort of building-wide ventilator. He imagined that the thump-thump in the walls portended the coming of something large and frightful, though he knew it was just the sound of metal expanding quickly as warm water rushed through the pipes to heat the dorm.

He rolled off the bed and snatched a Scotsdale sweatshirt—Guy's—from the couch. He let the room door slam behind him, confident that no one would be around to shout about it. The night was warm for late November and though he could see his breath misting in front of him, he was not uncomfortable in just the sweatshirt. It was a hoodie and he stuffed his hands in the front pocket to keep them warm.

He'd left the hall without a destination in mind and thought briefly about walking into downtown to see what he could find to do. But he didn't really want people, crowds, and it was unlikely that he would find much happening so late on the night before Thanksgiving. Stores would certainly be closed, and he wasn't sure he wanted to hang out with the people he might

find in a bar on this night of the year. He circled around the outer rim of campus once, passing the academic center, its lights all out, not even the janitorial staff moving through the empty classrooms and offices. Steam rose from some invisible opening in the science building. Some of the more hardcore upper-level science majors surely had experiments running over break. Some of them probably were still around or planning to come back early, though Sullivan had never seen any evidence of them in his previous years holidaying on campus. Sullivan tried one of the doors to the building, but it didn't give. He wound his way back to the quad and stood on the chapel steps, peering across the dark grounds to Short Hall. The quad was like an oasis of darkness rimmed by the sort of street lights one imagined in a Victorian novel and the pale and scattered lights from the buildings on all sides. The student center and his own dorm shone to his left, while the library and a dorm known on campus to be the place to score pot were to his right. The chapel was dark behind him, but one light was visible from Short Hall. It lit the clock face and obscured the attic window above it. The clock chimed as Sullivan was looking at it, the tones ringing out, each seemingly entirely separate from the other in a way he was sure they had never sounded before. He held his breath, waiting for the clock to count the hour, and when it did, the sound cutting through the night air, he counted along with it, whispering, one—two—to himself as the clock struck. Just as the final tone sounded, James Shelley appeared at Sullivan's elbow and wished him a good evening. Sullivan startled and let out a little yelp.

"*Christ*, Jamie. I about pissed myself."

Shelley smiled. He was dressed more appropriately for the evening air in a woolen navy blue trench coat, red scarf, and leather gloves that creaked slightly when he flexed his fingers. He was wearing a Gatsby cap pushed back on his head, and Sullivan bit his lip and smiled at the sight of it.

"What?" Shelley laughed, then asked again, "What? My hat?" He touched it with one gloved hand. "Don't you like it, Young?"

Sullivan held Shelley's gaze for seconds longer than would have been appropriate. Then, "It's smashing, old sport."

Shelley reached to boff Sullivan soundly on the head, but the boy ducked away too quickly. "You were awfully intent on something just now. Life, the universe, and everything?"

Sullivan shook his head. "Nothing." He wasn't sure he liked the way James Shelley made him feel—sort of anxious and willing and a little out of control, as if his mind were just half a second behind his mouth, his limbs, his lips, watching while Sullivan did things he knew he shouldn't, but not quick enough to do anything about it. And he was acutely aware of their date of two weeks ago, of how he'd left things, of how he'd *left*, of how he'd avoided Shelley since that night. He licked his lips, hated himself for it. "What are you doing on campus?"

Shelley stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and tucked in his chin so that he couldn't be looking at anything but his shoes. "I was hoping to see you."

Sullivan didn't know what to do but tease, and he crowed. "Ladies and gentleman, behold the besotted young professor—"

"For God's sake, keep your voice down." Shelley gave him a shove, and Sullivan stumbled down to the next step as he continued on.

"A sight never before seen in this land or any land, ladies and gentlegerms, he's living proof that some members of the academy, despite all appearances, do still have a heart—"

Shelley wrapped one arm around Sullivan's chest, clapped a hand over his mouth, and lowered him to the steps all in one motion. Sullivan's eyes went wide as Shelley kneeled next to him and removed his hand only to replace it with his mouth. The kiss was slow, nothing like the fierce jarring together of teeth and tongues that Sullivan had instigated in Shelley's office weeks before, nothing like the rough, consuming pressing and rubbing Shelley had responded with in the library stacks. Shelley teased and taunted, pressing in then pulling back, never quite resigning either of them to the kiss, and Sullivan clasped the professor by the shoulder when he felt he was about to slip, even though he could feel the cold stone step beneath him.

Shelley pulled back just enough so that Sullivan's eyes didn't cross when he focused on the other man's face. He cupped Sullivan's cheek with his hand, and the pungent smell of leather tickled Sullivan's nose. "Ladies and gentlemen," he whispered, "behold the besotted young student."

Sullivan could never be sure if he was actually blushing or not, but he'd never felt more like his face must be flaming red. He had first felt this tenderness toward Shelley at the pool that night when Shelley had been so gentle with him. He hadn't been sure what to do with it then, and two weeks of trying not to think about it hadn't provided any revelations. He pushed at Shelley a little and scrambled out from underneath him. "I have to go. Better go back to the

dorm." The night air suddenly seemed to have a bite to it that had been absent before. His hands felt like ice and he could feel the beginning of the shivers starting in his spine, somewhere just below his shoulder blades. "I have work."

He tried to push past Shelley, but he caught him by one arm. "Wait."

Sullivan pulled away, got his arm loose, but Shelley still held on to the sweatshirt sleeve. "Young, wait. Sullivan."

He stopped struggling, but refused to look anywhere but at the sidewalk straight ahead of him.

"Don't run off, please. I didn't mean it."

"Does that make it better? That you didn't mean it? What does that mean anyway?"

Shelley let go of the sleeve, let his arm drop. "I don't know. I didn't mean it in whatever way is hurting you. I didn't mean to scare you away."

Sullivan shook his head, still didn't turn around. "I'm not scared." Somehow, the lie was easy to tell.

Shelley beat his hands together then crossed his arms and folded his hands under his armpits. "Christ, I am." Sullivan could almost hear Shelley decide to keep talking. "A student? And this reckless desire to do exactly what I know I shouldn't. *Fuck.*"

Sullivan did turn then. He was hunched against the wind and the redness in his face no longer had anything to do with embarrassment and everything to do with the cold. His nose was running, and he snuffled even though it made him feel like a child. "It's not me you don't want

to run away. It's the way I make you feel." It wasn't a question. It was a statement of clarification, as if Sullivan were repeating it to remind himself of the fact. "I could be anybody. It's what's happening to *you* that you don't want to lose."

Shelley shrugged. "I don't know. Does it matter? Right now, tonight, on this spot, does it matter?"

Sullivan shook his head.

"No," Shelley said.

"All right then," Sullivan said, raking the back of his hand across his nose and wincing because he couldn't tell whether the cold he felt came from his nose or his hand. "We gotta get inside or something, man. I'm freezing my balls off." He gave a little jump as if trying to encourage good circulation in his legs.

"Well, that won't do." Shelley smiled smally, and Sullivan thought for a moment that he was being laughed at. "Where should we go? I'm sure everything's locked down tight."

Sullivan eyed him for a moment. "I suppose it's too early for your place, Jamie?"

Shelley had been blowing into his gloved hands, and Sullivan's question caught him up short. "My place? Take you home, you mean?"

Sullivan started down the steps. "I thought so." There was nothing petulant or upset in his tone, and Shelley followed him after hesitating for only a second. "And I'm not sneaking you into the dorm like some weird 1950s co-ed and her frat sweetheart," he said as Shelley fell into step with him.

"Thank God for that. Leaves the question, though."

They walked on in silence for a few minutes until they had reached the point where they would either have to turn left or right on the sidewalk or proceed up the steps to Short Hall. Sullivan stopped and tipped his head back to peer up at the clock. He scowled at it.

Shelley tipped his head back too. "What is it?"

"Only fourteen minutes. Seems longer."

"That's good. It's when it seems shorter that things get really depressing."

Sullivan ducked his head and started to run up the steps.

"Where are you going?"

"See if it's open."

"The administration building? Don't be ridiculous, Sullivan. Let's go find a restaurant that's still open."

Sullivan shook his head. "Too far," he said as he turned the knob and flung the door open. "Well, fuck me."

Shelley stood behind him, and Sullivan wasn't sure if the noise he made was one of agreement or surprise. "Come on," he said. "Get warmed up, at least."

"I don't know, Young. This is trespassing. This is actually illegal."

"As opposed to just illicit?"

Sullivan thought he couldn't describe the look on Shelley's face as anything other than wounded, and he turned away from him so he wouldn't have to see it anymore. "It's not trespassing," he called behind him as he shuffled into the hall's dark entryway. "We both belong here."

"It's awfully dark in here," Shelley called from the doorway. He was standing on the cusp between inside and outside, framed by the doorway, and the open door let in some light from the lamps ringing the quad. Sullivan looked back at him and all he could see was a dark outline of a human form. "I don't know about this."

Sullivan shrugged and he wondered if Shelley could see the movement. "It wasn't locked."

"But it *should've* been."

"You're not afraid of the dark, are you, Jamie?"

Shelley stepped forward and pulled the door shut behind him. "Of course not."

Sullivan felt something like panic rise in his stomach as the room fell into near-total darkness. The lamplight shining through the windows was just enough to make shapes discernable in the gray. He wouldn't say that he could *see* exactly. He heard more than saw Shelley moving toward him, and he backed up without really meaning to. He didn't have far to

go before he hit the door to the registrar's office. He'd never realized that there was a door there before, as, during the day, it was always open. "Find a light switch, why don't you?" he asked, hoping that he imagined the hitch in his voice partway through "switch."

"We'll be found out if we turn on lights. Someone's sure to notice."

Sullivan's vision was growing more accustomed to the low light. Shelley stood a few feet in front of him, his head tipped back as if he were admiring the artwork on an elaborately painted ceiling.

"Who'd notice? Everyone's gone."

Shelley reached forward, laid his hand on Sullivan's chest. "You're still here. I'm here. Who's to say what other crazy people are out there?"

Sullivan took Shelley's hand in his own, removed it from his chest, didn't quite let go. "The upper floors."

Shelley twined his fingers together with Sullivan's. "What about them?"

"The hallway's in the center of the building upstairs. No windows. With all of the office doors shut, no one outside would be able to see the light."

"Genius." Shelley bowed, still holding Sullivan's hand. "Lay on."

Sullivan grinned, then felt for the stairs, pulling Shelley along behind him. When he hit the landing at the second floor, he kept going, ignoring a half-question, half-protest from the professor. At the third floor he dropped Shelley's hand and began to feel along the wall for a light switch. "You take the other side."

After a minute or so of inching down the hallway, their hands pressed to the wall, their backs to each other, Shelley laughed.

"What?"

"Nothing." Sullivan thought he could hear Shelley shaking his head.

"What? You laughed."

"When I came to campus tonight, I hoped to feel something up, but I didn't expect it to be the hallowed walls of the administration building."

Sullivan stopped running his hands along the wall and touched a finger to the tip of one ear. It felt hot even to the touch and he imagined for a moment the hallway lighted up by his burning ears, his embarrassment lighting the way like some children's Christmas fable turned weirdly adult. Shelley must have noticed the blushing before, outside. It couldn't matter for him to see it now, but Sullivan suddenly didn't want to be seen by Shelly at all, blushing or not. He let his arms drop to his sides. The dark seemed to fold around him, and he entertained for a moment the notion that he wouldn't be able to move when he tried.

Shelley still moved down his side of the hall. "What if there isn't a switch? What if the lighting system for the whole building is controlled by some master switch in the basement or something?"

Sullivan resumed his own search. "Then I guess we have to sit in the dark."

"Not afraid of the basement, are you, Young?" Shelley affected the same tone Sullivan had used with him earlier.

"Damn straight I am. Snakes and shit live in basements. I wouldn't go down there for anything."

"Snakes? In November?"

"What, you think snakes disappear into the ether or something for the winter and then magically reappear on the garden rock on the first warm day of the spring? They have to be somewhere."

Shelley laughed. "I don't think that somewhere is the basement of Short Hall."

"You don't know fuck all about it."

"*Hot* dog! I think I found it. Behold."

Sullivan heard a kind of a click, from the light switch or perhaps from the lights themselves. They hummed and buzzed above the two men, and one stuttered, either at the beginning or the end of its fluorescent life.

Sullivan still faced the wall, his hands braced against it at just below shoulder height. Shelley laid a hand on Sullivan's shoulder. "You okay?"

Sullivan turned, smiled. "It doesn't matter, remember? Look." He took a step further down the hallway. "The attic hatch."

"Who said anything about that not mattering?"

Sullivan batted at the cord that hung from the trapdoor embedded in the ceiling. "I wonder what's up there. Ghosts, my roommate says."

"Sullivan, if this is going to be—"

"Let's see, shall we?"

Sullivan grasped the cord with both hands and pulled. The door separated from the ceiling around it with a creak and fell to a forty-five degree angle, the edge of the trapdoor coming to just about Sullivan's forehead. A wooden ladder, joined together in three sections, lay

folded against the door, and Sullivan pulled at the bottom-most step to make the contraption unfold. He pushed at the lowest join to make the ladder straighten, then leaned some of his weight against it to test its sturdiness.

"Artie Smith says no one's been up there in living memory," Sullivan said, deliberately casting his voice in a tone that suggested innocent wonder.

Shelley leaned around him to peer up the steps into the darkness. "Who's Artie Smith?"

"One of the reporters for the *Scotsdale Crier*. He did a story about campus ghost stories."

"And the Short Hall attic has one, does it?"

"A ghost?"

"A story."

Sullivan shrugged. "Not as such. People claim they've seen lights in the window." He started up the steps. "They wouldn't let Artie up to have a look around."

Shelley grabbed at one of Sullivan's ankles. "So you think you're going to finish the story for him?"

"Why not?"

"I think maybe this little romp has gone far enough."

Sullivan kicked his leg free. "Suit yourself."

A string hung from the ceiling at the top of the ladder, and Sullivan smiled to himself just before he pulled it; the sound of Shelley clambering after him up the ladder was unmistakable. The string was attached to a single bare bulb, but it did a fair job of illuminating the small room.

The ceilings were higher than Sullivan expected—both he and Shelley could stand up with nearly a foot of clearance above their heads, but the room couldn't have run more than a third of the length of the building. The ceiling sloped toward the floor at one end of the room, making the attic feel strangely lopsided. Sullivan stared, and there was nothing affected about the wonder in his "whoa."

"Come on, *move*," Shelley said from behind him, still perched on the ladder. He gave Sullivan a little push.

Sullivan stepped to one side to give Shelley room to emerge into the attic, but the professor stopped when he could see the contents of that attic. It was as if they had stepped into a room in another time.

The room was stuffed with furniture, but in a way that suggested use, not storage. Not one item in the room could have been purchased after 1920, and it all had the look of decadence squeezed from a budget that shouldn't have allowed for it. In the center of the room was a sofa upholstered in red velvet and draped with brocade shawls and floppy green pillows. Two armchairs, similarly upholstered and bepillowed, faced the sofa, and a squat, oval table sat between them. It was covered in a doily and supported a stack of six or seven books, their titles worn away from the spines. An oriental rug in shades of reds and blues and greens covered the floor, and there was a peculiar square of lighter material on one edge, as if a negative image of a sun-paled rug. A desk had been shoved into one corner so that anyone sitting at it would see nothing but the wall in front of him, but the wall was covered in yellowed postcards thumbtacked in place. A green-shaded banker's lamp sat on the edge of the desk. Against the wall under the

sloping eaves was a bed, its brass head- and footboards detached and leaning against the wall behind it. The bed was pushed longways against the wall, so that one could climb into it from only one side, but the form of two pillows was clearly visible under the dingy white blanket pulled up haphazardly over the mattress. At the foot of the bed, there stood a small chest of drawers, and balanced on top of it was a Victrola with a magnificent horn, too big for its perch and seemingly about to topple over at any moment. Under the tiny window was a window seat, one corner of which was piled with books as well. While it would have been a lie to say that the room was clean, there was nothing like the accumulation of dust that should have been there.

"I thought you said no one had been up here for as long as anyone could remember."

"I said Artie Smith said that."

Shelley moved into the room and ran a finger along the wooden edge of the Victrola's casing. "Impossible."

"You think they know about this?" Sullivan reached for the record resting on the Victrola. "The president, I mean? The dean?" He freed the record from the machine and peered at the yellowed and torn label affixed to its center.

"I don't know. Somebody must know. Someone's been up here. Recently." Shelley scuffed his foot along the floor boards. "No dust."

"It's kind of romantic."

"Romantic? It's fucking weird, Young. I'm going back down."

Sullivan ignored him, held up the record. "Schubert. One of his piano pieces for four hands. Think it would play?"

"Somebody will hear."

"They'll just think it's the ghost. We have a ready-made alibi." Sullivan placed the record back on the turntable, then cranked the handle.

"I don't think that's actually an alibi. It's more like a shit-faced explanation," Shelley said as he unwound the scarf from his neck and shrugged out of his coat.

"Loosen up, Jamie. Lord." Sullivan placed the needle and grinned at the static and the slight thump-thump of the table turning before the music started. The track began with a burst of applause, and Sullivan hummed the first few bars of the fantasie before the performer played the first quiet notes.

"You know Schubert?"

Sullivan faced the Victrola, watched as the shiny black disc spun around. He felt Shelley's hand at the small of his back, felt his breath brush his cheek as Shelley leaned over his shoulder as if to see some answer to his question on the turntable. "It just so happens, I know him very good. I saw him on the number five bus to the beach just the other day."

Shelley's hand snaked around to encompass Sullivan's waist. He squeezed. "That's Mozart."

Sullivan turned in Shelley's arms. "My mistake."

Shelley leaned forward, stopped with just inches between their lips. "What is it about you?"

"I don't know. I thought you were leaving."

Shelley cocked his head slightly to one side, seeming to think about something carefully. Then he grinned. "In for a penny, in for a pound."

"A cliché, professor? Tsk tsk."

Shelley kissed Sullivan then, once, quick. "Would you believe that you leave me utterly, brilliantly, speechless?"

"Not even a little bit."

Shelley sighed dramatically. "Then I'm afraid there's nothing for it. I shall have to conquer you to keep you from spreading nasty rumors." He marched Sullivan backward a few steps, and gave him a small push.

Sullivan landed on the bed and had just a moment to register that the blankets smelled faintly of moth balls before Shelley was on top of him, one hand on either side of his shoulders, one knee on either side of his hips, mouth slanted over Sullivan's, tongue invading, but slowly, deliberately. It was not his physique that had attracted Sullivan to Shelley. He had been drawn in by his demeanor, the way he walked, the way his hair flopped over his forehead. He'd appreciated seeing Shelley bare-chested at the pool, but his features stood out to him now, as if cast in sharp relief by their surroundings. It was impossible now not to notice the way his pecs sat defined in his pale chest when he leaned away from Sullivan for a moment to remove his own shirt. It was impossible not to see the way his bicep stood out when he supported himself with one arm in order to tease at the hem of Sullivan's sweatshirt. Sullivan pushed up a little, squirmed a bit, hoping to be pressed back into the mattress, and he was rewarded with a tiny

growl from James Shelley. "Hold still, Young."

Sullivan wriggled again, trying to force more contact, but Shelley grabbed his wrists and held his hands to the mattress while keeping his own body just out of reach of Sullivan's.

"Are you going to keep still, you greedy little thing?"

Sullivan pretended to try to get away. Making Shelly restrain him was about the most arousing thing Sullivan could think of, but he suspected that if the professor had wanted to hold him down in earnest, if Sullivan had actually wanted to leave and Shelley thought he should stay, the resulting struggle might be one he couldn't win. "I don't know if I can do this with Schubert in the background."

"I guess you'll have to try. Cause I'm not moving." Shelley blew up at his bangs and they flopped away from his eyes momentarily. "Are you going to keep still?"

Sullivan nodded.

"Good." Shelley let go of his hands and pulled at the sweatshirt. Sullivan lifted up a bit so the shirt came free from between his back and the bed.

It was from within the folds of Guy's sweatshirt that Sullivan said, "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"It's not a good idea." Shelley let the shirt fall to the floor. "It wasn't a good idea in my office and it wasn't a good idea in the third floor stacks. It won't ever be a good idea." Shelley slid a hand up and under Sullivan's shirt.

Sullivan snatched at Shelley's wrist, caught it. "Wait," he said, and part of him was relieved when Shelley removed his hand, eased off of Sullivan altogether, even while another

part of him wanted nothing more than for Shelley to ignore his command, to take, to accept Sullivan's submission and dismiss any other reaction.

Shelley swung one leg back over Sullivan and sat back next to him on the bed. "What's the matter?"

Sullivan rolled onto his side, and began picking at the weave of the blanket covering the bed. "He wrote this for one of his students, you know. Schubert. It's a duet. Four hands, one keyboard. She was a Hungarian countess. He loved her, supposedly. She didn't." He'd worked one thread loose from the weave, and he pulled on it, watching as it unraveled itself from the rest of the blanket. "The resolution in the fourth movement is considered one of the most remarkable in all his repertoire."

Sullivan jumped slightly when Shelley started rubbing his back. The light, warming friction through the thin material between his shoulder blades seemed to chill him everywhere else, and he rubbed at his bare arms.

"Young. What is it?"

Sullivan stilled his own hands, hugged himself. "I think, maybe, it matters."

"What?" Shelley had stopped rubbing, but he left his hand in place. "What does?"

"Before. On the quad. I said that it wasn't me you didn't want to let go but the way you felt."

Shelley's hand fell away. "And I asked you if it mattered."

Sullivan nodded. "And, I think it does."

Shelley said nothing, and Sullivan sat up, still facing the wall. He crawled toward the foot of the bed, then over it. "I'll just go, then." When he leaned down to pick up the sweatshirt, Shelley touched his arm.

"Sullivan."

Sullivan shook his arm free, pulled the sweatshirt on one arm, then the other. "We don't have to talk about it. You were clear before. I get it. I'm sorry I started this whole thing. I didn't think I would care, you know, at all. I'll leave you alone now." He pulled the shirt over his head and tugged it into place.

"Sullivan, *stop*."

Sullivan did, halfway between the bed and the hole in the floor leading to the ladder and the building below.

"I can't let you just run out into the night like this."

"Like what?"

"Distraught."

"I'm not fucking 'distraught,' okay? I just don't want this to turn into a thing. I just want to go to bed."

"One bed, right here. Two arms. No waiting."

Sullivan turned, started to climb down the stairs backwards. "Don't be upset if I don't say 'hi' in the halls or anything."

"I want to talk this out."

"I don't."

Shelley was out of bed then, and kneeling on the floor in front of Sullivan. With Sullivan half-way down the ladder, they were at eye level. "Don't you run away from this, Young. Don't you even dare to deny that there's something here. Something between us."

"I'm not the one who thought it didn't matter! I'm not the one who said *I* didn't matter. I'm not the one who implied that I could be having this thing with anybody."

"Poor choice of words."

"They were my words."

"I shouldn't have agreed with them."

Sullivan had been prepared to continue down the ladder, but he paused at Shelley's words. He thought of Shelley pressing him into the mattress and the thrill of the memory made him momentarily proud of himself for leaving rather than sticking around longer than he should just for the pleasure of it. "But you did." He was still determined to leave, but he was still standing on the steps, half in the attic and half out.

"Sullivan. I said what I was thinking. I wasn't prepared to examine it, okay? I was caught up in the moment of saying what I thought you wanted to hear or, Christ, I don't know. Just please don't walk away from me." He looked down at his own hands resting on his knees. "Again."

Sullivan reached for Shelley's hand, let his fingers rest atop his. "I'm sorry about that."

Shelley moved his hand so their fingers were actually entwined. "Me too. And I don't just mean that I'm sorry that you left. I'm sorry about that night. I was maybe pushing too hard. I said I wouldn't ask you again what you wanted for a long time. I promised myself I wouldn't

until I thought you were ready to say, and I think that night I was trying to ask without asking. And that's not fair."

Sullivan scrabbled back up the stairs and landed next to Shelley on the floor. He leaned in and kissed Shelley softly, briefly, before standing and heading for the bed. He ducked out of his sweatshirt and kicked off his pants before sliding under the covers in his boxers and t-shirt. The sheets were cold, and he shivered a little as they touched his back, his legs. "Coming?"

Shelley watched him from his position at the top of the stairs for what seemed like forever before standing and coming to the bed. He mimicked Sullivan in getting undressed, then slid into bed behind him, flinging an arm around Sullivan's waist as he settled his head on one of the pillows.

Chapter Twelve

Sullivan awoke to a pale and cold light streaming through the window. Shelley still had an arm snugged around his waist, and he felt rather than heard Shelley breathing as each exhale fluttered against the back of his neck. He wasn't sure exactly what he'd expected when Shelley had gotten into bed with him, but it hadn't been falling asleep in the other man's arms—at least, not right away. But Shelley's arm around him had felt startlingly good, and Sullivan had found himself sinking into the embrace, letting himself be held. When he'd realized that Shelley was stroking lightly at the back of his neck with his other hand, Sullivan had the feeling that he'd been doing it for a while, but he couldn't pinpoint the moment when it had started. That's when he'd recognized that he was drifting to sleep, and he resolved, hazily, to say something, or move, to stave off sleep. Clearly, he'd been remiss in his resolve.

Shelley shifted a bit behind him, and Sullivan marked the change in his breathing as a yawn. "We seem to have some trouble getting past first base, Young."

Sullivan ran his hand along the length of Shelley's arm and then let his hand rest along side Shelley's on his own hips. "I'm sorry I fell asleep. I remember trying not to."

"I'm not. It gave me some time to think."

Sullivan twisted around in the bed so he could see Shelley's face. "You've been awake this whole time?"

Shelley laughed. "Not the *whole* time. A good deal more than you though."

"Why didn't you wake me?" Sullivan was something like mortified that he'd slept the night through while Shelley lay awake behind him.

Shelley palmed Sullivan's face, traced the line of his cheekbone with his thumb. "I didn't want to. It was rather pleasant, actually. Lying here in this peculiar room, away from the world, you in my arms, safe in our secret little room." Shelley dropped his hand and folded his arms under his pillow. "Am I being sappy?"

Sullivan mirrored Shelley's position so that they each lay on their stomachs, heads resting on the nest made of their arms and pillows, facing one another. "A little." He watched as Shelley made a face, then said, "It is nice here though. It feels . . . apart. Like there's nothing to worry about here."

"What do you have to worry about when you're not here, Young?" It was an honest question, one with no hint of sarcasm or derision in it.

Sullivan shrugged and the movement shifted his pillow out of place so that when he put his head back down, his face hit cool sheet.

"I never thought when I first saw you sitting in the back of my classroom that you'd be the sort to worry. But you are, aren't you? You worry about all kinds of things. Big things. Abstract things. Not how to pay tuition or whether you're going to find a job after graduation."

"Well," Sullivan said. "I have a full scholarship." And he turned his head so he faced the room.

Shelley laid his hand on Sullivan's back. Sullivan felt the warmth of it between his shoulder blades, through the thinness of his t-shirt. He tried to slide away from the touch, but he met the edge of the bed long before Shelley's hand would have fallen away from him. Shelley flexed his fingers when Sullivan moved and the gesture turned into gentle rubbing, Shelley making ever widening circles on Sullivan's back.

"You pull away from tenderness, Young, you know that?"

Sullivan swallowed. "It has occurred."

"But in other contexts, you welcome the contact."

Sullivan snorted. "That a nice way of saying I don't mind so much being shoved around?"

Shelley's hand stilled for a moment, then began to move again, this time circling in the other direction, this time going from large circles to small. "I suppose so. But I didn't mean to be flippant about it. I'm just trying to puzzle you out."

"Why?"

"Because you're there?"

Sullivan ran his hand along the edge of the mattress, then let his arm dangle over the side. He watched his hand, skin pale, fingers long, as if it didn't belong to him. Funny things, hands, if you really looked at them. "You seem unsure, professor."

He heard Shelley moving behind him, heard the rustle of sheets and blankets, then felt him pressing the length of his body against his back. "I am."

"We make a fine pair, then, don't we. Neither of us can ever make up his mind."

Shelley hummed something like an agreement before laying a kiss on the nape of Sullivan's neck. Sullivan shivered at the contact and only half heard Shelley guess that such indecisiveness would always make them late for dinner. Sullivan meant to reply, perhaps to ask what Shelley meant by "always," but Shelley laved his tongue over the skin of Sullivan's neck once more and yanked him onto his back and Sullivan was fully distracted.

Shelley straddled Sullivan then and leaned in to lick quickly at Sullivan's lips. He ran his hands down Sullivan's chest, then up and under his t-shirt. The caress was gentle, but when Shelley's hands stilled, he pressed his weight into Sullivan through his arms, and the pressure on Sullivan' chest was almost painful. "What if I said I was going to fuck you right now, Young? What if I said I was going to fuck you into the mattress right here, right now?" He rolled his hips and smiled, almost wolfishly, Sullivan thought, when Sullivan caught his breath at the movement. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Young? You'd love it if I just took control right now, had my way with you, pounding into you until we both came together in a mess of heat and light." He pulled Sullivan off the bed by a handful of his shirt, kissed him fiercely, then pulled his t-shirt over his head before pushing him back down into the mattress again.

"Jamie."

"What, Young?" Shelley bit at Sullivan's neck, sharp and quick, then sucked at the spot before running his tongue over it slowly. "What?"

Sullivan's breathing quickened, and he tried to take a deep slow breath, but Shelley ran his fingers over the spot he'd bitten and grinned. "That's going to leave a mark, Sullivan." His voice was low and husky, and Sullivan's attempt to control his breathing was destroyed. Shelley

pressed one finger into the spot. "Yes. You like that, too, don't you? You like the thought of me leaving a mark on you, that you can wear around campus, our secret, blazoned on your skin, just there under your shirt, hiding just out of sight."

Sullivan bucked up at that, tried to throw Shelley off of him, but Shelley squeezed with his knees, dropped his hands to Sullivan's wrists, pinned him to the bed. "That you don't like so much, eh? Secrets not so appealing?"

"Let me up, Jamie." Sullivan's voice was quiet, and he wasn't sure for a second if he'd actually spoken aloud or only spoken the words in his head.

"No." Shelley shook his head. "We're going to finish this this time."

Sullivan pulled against Shelley's grip on his wrists. This was the scenario he'd envisioned the night before, of him trying to get away and being unable to shift Shelley's hold on him. Shelley's hint that there was something wrong here, that what they were doing both marked him and should make him want to hide, had sent a jolt of quick fear through him, but there was no fear in *this*, and that was surprising. There was a certain rightness somehow, a certain acceptance of Shelley's control over his body, over him. He nodded, once. "Okay."

Shelley kissed him again then, all the while continuing to pin him down. "Yes, Sully." He reached between their bodies and tugged at Sullivan's boxers, then, when they were halfway down Sullivan's legs, he pushed them down and off with his feet. He slid down the length of Sullivan's body, running his hands over bared skin as he went. He ended sitting between Sullivan's legs, his hand resting just above Sullivan's knees. "You look amazing like this, Sully. All warm and waiting." He kissed at the inside of one of Sullivan's thighs, trailed higher,

replaced his mouth with warm fingers and caressed Sullivan's belly. "What do you want, Sully? Tell me what you want."

Sullivan knew the words, they were as clear as anything right there in his mind, very near the front, all ready to slide out into the world, but somehow he'd forgotten how to make the connection with his tongue, his lips, his teeth. It was as if they just couldn't get there from here.

"Tell me." Shelley rubbed across Sullivan's belly, down his thighs, circling around but never touching his cock. He was so close, Sullivan could swear that just the barest inch, just the slightest move over *there* would bring them skin to skin, would finally allow him to feel James Shelley's touch on him. "Tell me, Young. What do you want?"

Shelley's voice was clipped now, and Sullivan frowned at the return to the use of his last name. "You." It came out more a moan than a word, and Sullivan knew it wouldn't be enough even before Shelley removed his hand from Sullivan's thigh.

"You need to do better than that, Young. Tell me what you want."

"You. To touch me."

Shelley inched his way up Sullivan's body, one leg on either side of him, carefully and pointedly not letting any part of him touch Sullivan. He stroked Sullivan's hair away from his forehead, then kissed him softly, chastely on the spot he'd uncovered. "Say me a sentence, Sully. Give me subject-verb-object. I know you can do it."

"Bastard." Sullivan bucked up with his hips, was sure he would make contact, would finally achieve some kind of friction, even for just a moment, but Shelley was quicker, had swung one leg over and was kneeling by Sullivan's side full seconds before they would have made contact.

The sting from the slap was startling and then sharply pleasant. Sullivan closed his eyes, concentrated on the sting, gave it his every attention as the sharp prickling began to suffuse into a softer warmth across his cheek. He let himself sink into the warmth, willed it to spread through his whole body. And then Shelley slapped him again, with the same heat, the same hardness, not even the tiniest bit more or less. Sullivan opened his eyes then, found Shelley looking at him intently.

"You know better than that, Young."

Sullivan wasn't sure what, exactly, he was meant to know better about, but the sentiment felt right. Shelley was in control here, and he shouldn't have tried to dictate when he would be touched, shouldn't have called Shelley out for exercising the control Sullivan had so longed to give up to him. He nodded.

Shelley nodded in concert with him. "What are we nodding about, Young?"

Sullivan licked his lips, fought down an urge to clear his throat before speaking. "I know better," he said.

"You know better than what?"

What Sullivan felt then was panic. He didn't know, and he desperately didn't want to screw up again, desperately wanted to avoid disappointing Shelley again. And how he wanted to get back to where they had been before he'd failed the first time.

"What do you know better than, Sullivan?"

Sullivan was relieved to hear his first name again, and he flexed his hands, still resting where Shelley had pinned them, squirmed about in his hips, wanting, hoping, that his pleasure and his relief would be communicated to Shelley, somehow, this way.

Shelley kissed him then, hard, fast. It was a consuming kiss, one that Sullivan wanted both to pull away from because it was almost too much to bear and to surrender to fully, to keep from fighting the rough rasp of Shelley's scruff against his cheek, to sink into the sharp nips against his lips. Shelley had a handful of his hair at the back of his head, was just holding him in place by it, and when he pulled away, he kneaded his fingers through it as he watched Sullivan try to catch his breath. "Answer me, Sullivan."

The command was a caress, and Sullivan lifted one hand to caress back, but let it fall back to the bed before he'd reached even halfway to Shelley. "Than to try to take control," he said.

"Say it again. A full sentence this time. Say it again."

Sullivan stuttered over the pronoun, his head lifting a bit from the pillow in his effort to make the words come. He swallowed and rested his head on the pillow again, turning his face, trying to find a cool spot to take some of the burn from his cheeks.

"Come on, Sully, say it."

"I know better than to try to take control," he said, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

Shelley tugged at his hair. "Again."

"I know better than to try to take control."

A kiss, just as consuming as the last, but not quite as frantic. "Again. Louder, Sullivan. Own it."

Sullivan took a deep breath, gritted his teeth. Then: "I know better than to try to take control." His voice was startlingly loud in his own ears, and he wanted to hide from the utterance once he'd said it.

But Shelley was gathering him up in his arms, laying kisses along the line of his throat, murmuring into his skin. "Yes, Sullivan, yes. Good boy. So good, baby."

The hand on his cock was so unexpected after that, that Sullivan actually jumped when Shelley closed his fingers around him and gave him one delicious slide. "Is this what you wanted, Sully? Was this it?" Shelley punctuated his questions with little movements, with a flick of his thumb over the head of Sullivan's cock.

Sullivan hummed, and somewhere in his exhale that hum turned into a "yes, please" and Shelley was humming along with him and then pumping him in time to his own litany of "goods" and "yeses." Sullivan wondered for a moment if he should ask for permission to come, and the notion of doing so, of being given the go-ahead, or being told *no*, was so tantalizingly sweet, so indescribably hot, that he was coming before he could quite form his surprise at the thought.

He moaned as Shelley stroked him through his orgasm, shuddered when Shelley stroked one stroke past comfortable, then hissed when Shelley fingered him, one finger nudging inside of him.

"Relax, Sully. You were so limp and blissed out a second ago. Let it come back. Come on, let go."

Sullivan breathed deep, pushed the air back out again. He willed himself to relax, to unclench the muscles in his lower back, to ease the way for Shelley. Shelley inserted another finger as Sullivan began to relax and twisted them slowly, rubbed gently back and forth. Sullivan's head fell back, and Shelley shifted his hold on him so that Sullivan's head rested against his forearm. When Shelley stroked him from the inside, Sullivan made a strangled noise, and flung one arm across his face.

Shelley paused, not pulling out, but not moving either. "You okay, Sully?"

Sullivan was breathing fast and he could feel the tingling in his hands that meant he was beginning to hyperventilate.

Shelley lowered him to the bed and took Sullivan's hand. "Sullivan. Squeeze my hand twice if you're okay."

Sullivan squeezed, and he felt a rush of air against his face as Shelley breathed out.

"Listen, Sully. Are you listening? Squeeze if you're listening."

Sullivan squeezed again.

"If you need to stop, I want you to say 'Woolf,' okay?"

Sullivan squeezed, could feel Shelley shaking his head through the places where their bodies connected. "Not going to be good enough this time, baby. I need you to say it for me. Tell me what you're going to say if you need me to stop."

Sullivan squeezed Shelley's hand again, one steady squeeze this time, and after a few seconds he said, "Woolf."

"Good boy. Good. Should I keep going, now?"

Sullivan flexed his free hand to try to stop the tingling, took a deep breath and held it for a second before pushing the air out in a huff. He nodded and squeezed Shelley's hand both. He became suddenly aware of Shelley's fingers still inside of him, and wiggled his hips, just the tiniest bit, thinking madly at Shelley, hoping he'd understand that he didn't mean to try to take control, to hurry Shelley along, but just to convey that he was enjoying himself, that he was glad to be where he was.

"Greedy little Sully. Just as greedy when you're under as when you're not," Shelley said, then stroked him again, once, just as he had before, and, just as before, Sullivan made a noise that frightened him a little in its rawness. He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, thinking that he was going to need a long time to think this through when they were done, then squeezed Shelley's hand, more to reassure himself than Shelley. Shelley pulled his hand away from Sullivan's then, and stroked his face once. He pushed his fingers further inside Sullivan then pulled them out in one long, slow, stroke. He moved away from Sullivan, and Sullivan lifted his head to see what he was doing. Shelley pushed him down again, gently. "Just lie still, Sullivan. I'll just be a second. Be patient."

Sullivan nodded and closed his eyes. He tried to sort what Shelley was doing by listening to the rustling coming from the side of the bed, but he was too addled to think straight. When Shelley touched him again, it was to caress his hips, then grasp them and pull Sullivan toward the foot of the bed. He positioned him so that his legs hung over the foot of the bed and spread them wide before pushing them toward Sullivan's shoulders. Sullivan felt Shelley press against him then, warm skin to warm skin—*of course, undressing*—and a hot pressure against his asshole.

"I'm wearing a condom," Shelley said softly, then waited until Sullivan said okay before pressing in. For a moment Sullivan was mortified that it hadn't occurred to him to ask, to insist—he'd certainly never forgotten before—but then Shelley was pushing in and he was thinking of nothing but relaxing, accepting. For all the franticness that had characterized their relationship so far—all of the pushing and pulling, all of the grappling for control, all of the advancing and retreating—there was something weirdly peaceful and calming about the way Shelley rocked in and out of Sullivan, about the way he kissed Sullivan slowly with each thrust, about the way Sullivan wrapped his arms around Shelley's back and ran his fingers through his hair. He came again, dimly aware that he sent Shelley over with him, but it was less like the explosion Shelley had predicted and more like a long, satisfying sigh. Shelley pulled away from him for a moment, then settled in behind him, holding him, rubbing circles again, this time on Sullivan's chest. Sullivan touched a finger to his lips—they tingled like his hands and he felt faint.

"You're okay, Sully," Shelley said. "Deep breaths and push all the air out. It's okay. In and out." He said it again and again as Sullivan breathed, all the while cradling him in his arms. "Push it all out. Come back up."

Sullivan did feel like he was rising somehow, like he'd dropped below a blanket of haze where underneath it every sensation was uncannily clear, but to get back to his normal, thinking self, he had to find his way up through that haze again. Shelley's voice helped, gave him something to concentrate on, and when it occurred to him to try shaking his hands to stop the tingling, the action seemed to pull him closer and closer to normal. After a few minutes, Shelley stopped talking him through his breathing, and they lay in silence, Sullivan shaking out his hands every now and then.

Shelley rolled onto his back and stretched his neck all the while keeping one hand on Sullivan's chest. "You up?"

"I guess. I think so."

Shelley patted his chest, then let his hand drift to Sullivan's hip. Sullivan figured that Shelley was consciously maintaining contact, and he appreciated the gesture.

"You ever do that before?" Shelley asked. "I should have asked before, of course."

Sullivan scowled. "Which?" So much of the last half hour seemed to fall under that question.

Shelley laughed. "Either."

Sullivan rolled onto his side so he faced Shelley. "I'm still going to need you to be more specific, professor."

"Yeah, you're up. Good to see you back." He started to take his hand away, but Sullivan grabbed it and returned it to his hip. He patted it, once, then folded his arms underneath his head. He smiled when Shelley left his hand where it was. "I meant the sex itself when I asked the question. I kind of figured the control stuff was new to you, but feel free to disavow me of my notions."

Sullivan bit at his lip. "The sex I'd done before." He left it there, and Shelley watched him for a moment before nodding.

"Okay."

Neither of them said anything more for what seemed like a very long time to Sullivan. Then Shelley turned so that they lay face to face. "An ex of mine once said, years after we'd broken up, that she hated it when couples talked about their relationships. Said it was too post-modern to be believed. I don't think she meant to be making a commentary on my pillow talk, but I always kind of liked checking in, you know, seeing what page the other person was on."

Sullivan nodded, not sure if this was a point in the conversation at which he was supposed to add something.

"Ever since then I've been sort of ridiculously shy of talking about a relationship. Not that I've had an amazing number of opportunities, really. The upshot is that I really want to make sure you're okay and, I guess, not freaking out, but I don't want to harsh your afterglow, you know?"

Sullivan ran a hand along Shelley's arm, could feel his mouth turning up into his smirk.

"What?" Shelley pushed himself up onto an elbow. "What?"

Sullivan shook his head. "Nothing. You're just a fantastic study in dichotomies, that's all. Ten minutes ago you were holding me down and making me fucking *confess* my submission and now you're all shaky about whether we should talk about what happened. Make up your mind, professor."

Shelley kissed Sullivan, hard.

Sullivan was determined not to get all needy, all *submissive*, this time, but the kiss was so damned *possessive*, and he was letting his weight press into Sullivan, sort of pinning him without really pinning him, and his tongue, oh, his tongue. Sullivan couldn't keep track of it—one second it flicked and fluttered fast around his mouth and the next it stroked and stuttered slowly, exploring, easing, and the switch from the one to the other was so fast, so random, that Sullivan was breathless just from the change in the stimulation, never mind the stimulation itself. He moaned, and the sound seemed to hang in the room somewhere above them, almost repeating, insisting that it had been made, that it had come from Sullivan, and, oh, was it ever a lovely, happily, dreamily, contentedly, wantonly *possessed* sound.

Shelley hummed into Sullivan's mouth when he moaned and then pulled away from him slowly. "Was that decisive enough for you, Young?"

Sullivan nodded. "Yeah. That was pretty, um. Decisive. Yeah."

Shelley laughed and actually ruffled Sullivan's hair. "Don't go under again, okay? I need a break."

"Don't *do that*, then." Sullivan scooched up the bed until he was sitting with his back against the head board. He thought maybe he'd have a better chance of staying Sullivan if he weren't lying down. He shuffled the pillows around behind him to try and make a comfortable rest for his back.

"Sorry. You're kind of a natural, though. You go down really easy."

"I suppose that's a compliment."

Shelley's gaze rested at the join of Sullivan's shoulder and neck. He raised a finger to the spot and traced lightly. "It is, yeah. Or I meant it to be, anyway." He pressed gently into the bruise that was coming up where he'd bitten Sullivan earlier, and Sullivan hissed. "Sorry." He let up on the pressure but didn't take his finger away. "Is this okay?"

Sullivan bent his head to try to see the bruise. He thought he saw a hint of purpling skin, but really all he could see was Shelley's finger. "Yeah." He touched the spot himself, inching his own finger under Shelley's and pressing lightly himself. He was ready for the ache this time, but he still winced a little. The pain reminded him sharply of Shelley, of Shelley's mouth, of Shelley over him, inside him, even so soon after they'd been together, even with Shelley still sitting beside him. "I think I might like it even."

"Good." Shelley took his hand away and rearranged himself in the bed so that he was lying, mostly propped up against the head board, his head just a bit lower than Sullivan's. "Because I went about this so very, very ass backwards." He picked up his head a little and let it fall back again against the pillows. "And I know better."

"Went about what backwards?"

Shelley looked at Sullivan. "All of it. Everything. Communication first, always." He yanked at the covers, pulling them this way and that, seemingly suddenly unhappy with the tangle about his feet. "Christ, negotiating a safeword mid-scene. Len would kill me." He pressed the heel of his hands to his eyes, then let them fall to the bed. He fixed his gaze on Sullivan. "You're sure you're all right?"

Sullivan nodded. "Just because I'd never done anything like that before doesn't mean I didn't know what I was getting into. I do read, you know."

The last was the bit that betrayed the lie, and Sullivan knew it. His own suspicions, the reading he had done, the fantasizing—none of it had prepared him for the reality of it, for the sense of being submerged and of *wanting*. Shelley had already been looking at him a little skeptically, but his look became positively incredulous by the time Sullivan had finished.

"Look, Sully," he said, and his tone was conciliatory. "I don't mean to tell you how you feel—"

"Then don't."

Shelley clamped his mouth shut and studied the blankets for a moment. "Right. Where the fuck are my glasses?"

There was no reason Shelley shouldn't like to be able to see, even if they were going to lie in bed together all morning, but this felt like the prelude to the end of Sullivan. "Jamie," he said and watched as Shelley dangled over the edge of the bed, rooting around for the glasses he'd dropped there the night before.

Shelley popped back up, rubbing at the lenses with a corner of the shirt he'd also retrieved from the floor. "Yeah?"

"Happy Thanksgiving."

Shelley scowled.

"It's Thanksgiving. So, thanks. I mean that. And not just because of the day or some shit. This morning was real good and I really am all right and thanks."

Shelley watched him for a moment, seemingly unsure what to say. Finally he said, "You're welcome, Sullivan."

They both got up then, pulling on clothes against the chill of the room. Sullivan wanted both to stay with Shelley and to return to the solitude of his dorm room where he would be free to process their time together without having to worry about whether he should discuss what the was thinking with Shelley, without having to worry about putting it all into words. Maybe Shelley's ex had been right.

"You have somewhere to go today?" Shelley was into his coat already, though it hung unbuttoned. No lingering about, then. "I'm invited to Dr. Tarr's and his wife's or I'd . . .."

Sullivan let him wait for a moment after he trailed off before he said, "I'm signed up for dinner with the President and other students who stay on campus over the holiday. It's actually quite good."

Shelley nodded. "Well then."

Sullivan clapped his hands in front of him, stopped just short of rubbing them together. "Right."

They stood watching one another for almost a full minute before Sullivan rushed forward, kissed Shelley quickly, said "See you around," then disappeared down the ladder.

Chapter Thirteen

Shelley stood watching the space Sullivan had just occupied, then walked to the window seat below the tiny window overlooking the quad. He leaned on it with one knee, bracing his hands on either side of the window frame. It took a few minutes, and Shelley was just starting to get antsy, to wonder if maybe Sullivan had doubled back the other way and wouldn't pass beneath the window, but then there he was, hunched against the wind, much like he had looked when Shelley had first spotted him the night before, his hands pushed into the front pocket of his sweatshirt, his head sort of pulled down between raised shoulders, his ears already turning pink from the cold. Shelley wondered why he didn't put up the hood of the sweatshirt, then was struck forcefully by the concept of the walk of shame. It was a phrase that hadn't been much in use when he was at school, and he'd really only started to hear it in snippets of conversations that passed him by in crowds of undergrads in the cafeteria or the halls of the academic building. But watching Sullivan padding across the deserted campus, in the, well, reasonably early, hours of the morning, he felt the mark of it keenly. It was a physical sensation, like a weight in his gut, and he wondered at the power of it, even for him, safe behind these walls, even today, when one was more likely to be teased for being inexperienced by the college years than being experienced, even now, when there was no one, it seemed, but him to see Sullivan making his way back to his dorm from the place—not his—where he'd spent the night.

He had rarely spent the night away from his own room in his college years. He'd simply not been interested in spending the night with any of the girls he'd taken out. Later, when he was in grad school and had his own small apartment, he'd taken a certain pride in keeping it

clean enough that he felt no embarrassment at bringing a girl home at the spur of any moment. And then there had been Janice and their seven months of living together before suddenly they weren't any more. That's when the men had started, just for a change, to stir things up, at first, and then because he found those relationships easier, that sex sexier. And then there had been Len.

He had been nudging at his thoughts almost since the first time Shelley'd seen Sullivan, and now there was no pushing him away. Len with his broad chest, his immense arms, his narrow waist. Len had been exactly the sort of man Shelley avoided when he first starting dating them. He preferred men more like himself—on the lean side, bookish rather than athletic, with, if he was admitting things to himself, a look of being just a touch lost, just a little overwhelmed by being *here*, doing *this*. But Len was all easy confidence and t-shirts that strained to contain his physique. Shelley still remembered the night they met, remembered it with a strange clarity that rendered certain bits as clear as glass and others with an impenetrable haze. Shelley mistrusted these memories, partly for their selectiveness, but also because he thought the encounter could not really have been that perfect, that deliciously arousing. He'd been at a bar—which one, exactly, was one of the details relegated to the haze, but it was one of the less "obvious," as one of his short-term lovers had called it. It might take someone not in the know a second to piece together the signs: the absence of woman, the way those men in the back corner booth were eyeing the youths at the pool table, the way those youths leaned over the table so exaggeratedly to make their shots. He'd been sitting at the bar, nursing a scotch, a drink he'd not

yet quite learned to appreciate on its own terms, and trying to decide what to do with his night. He was restless, jumpy. The night felt made for some kind of action, some kind of announcing to the world that he was *there*, *alive,* and ready to claim it for his own. He would have been up for sex, but wasn't looking for it, exactly. And there had been nights when he had, by God. Nights when he came out with just that express purpose. But not that night.

He hadn't noticed Len come in, was only aware of him when he had crowded up behind him at the bar, had rested one hand on the bar on either side of him, had leaned in and asked him, soft, his lips ghosting over Shelley's ear, if he thought he might like to get out of there. An electric jolt had passed through Shelley, starting in his belly, then rushing up and then down his spine, firing all of his nerves and going straight to his cock. He turned his head just enough to take in Len's dark hair, the stubble on his cheek, before Len had reached around, taken Shelley's chin in his hand, and eased him back to facing forward and informed Shelley that he had asked him a question.

It had gone from there, Shelley leaving with him that night, discovering kinds of sex with Len he hadn't known were there to be discovered, learning what Len had to teach him: how to be safe, how to trust, how to be worthy of it yourself. They were together for over year, at first not exclusively, but later easing out of seeing anyone but each other. It had ended, sadly, but not badly, when Shelley pursued and was offered the job at Scotsdale and Len hadn't been willing to leave the friends he had in the city. Shelley had packed his time with Len along with the

contents of his small apartment and then never really unpacked it, like the box of composition textbooks he'd pushed into the back of his spare room closet—not hidden, not forgotten, simply not in use.

Shelly took a deep breath as Sullivan disappeared from view when he rounded the corner of his dorm. He glanced down at his wrist watch; he would likely have to scramble to get to Hu and Marian's on time, as they ate their Thanksgiving dinner in the early afternoon. He would have to go all the way home, shower, change, retrace his route—the Tarrs lived only a few blocks from campus. He ran his finger over one of the books lying on the window seat, looked around the room once more. There surely was a perfectly mundane explanation for the attic, for its furnishings, for its cleanliness, but Shelley preferred not to think of them. He settled his coat about his shoulders and headed out of the attic, pulling the string to turn out the light on his way down the ladder. At the bottom, he folded the stairs and pushed at the attic hatch until the spring engaged and the doorway into that strange, secret room snapped shut.

#

Shelley didn't see Sullivan again until the day of the hoax hearing. He was distracted all through dinner at the Tarrs', and Marian had kept throwing him little tender looks, like she wanted nothing more than to make it all better—whatever it was. He'd found this endearing and intriguing earlier, but now it simply irritated him. He couldn't shake the slow realization that every time he and Sullivan came together, one or both of them ran away from the encounter in the end, and Marian's attempts at closeness only made it worse.

He shrugged off Marian's efforts to tease him into some sort of emotional confession, escaped the Thanksgiving celebration sooner than was probably polite, and then spent much of the long weekend pacing the house wishing he'd made plans to be with Sullivan. He got as far as picking up the phone to call him before he realized that he didn't have his number. The

campus directory stashed somewhere in his office might tell him, but he couldn't quite bring himself to go into campus specifically and only to find the directory on the off chance that he might find Sullivan's number there.

So when he met up with the Tarrs in the far parking lot half an hour before the hearing was set to start on Monday morning, he was frustrated and cranky. The three of them made for Jeffers Auditorium, he and Hu flanking Marian. Hu had his arm through his wife's, and Shelley felt increasingly compelled to take her other arm and walk with the two of them like a set of school chums on a holiday together. This compulsion made him unsure what to do with his hands, and he ended up walking with his arms folded tightly over his chest, which gave him the air of someone desperately cold, an image he felt surely looked ridiculous in the mild air of the warm snap that had developed over the weekend. Hu and Marian seemed in strangely high spirits given the proceedings they marched toward, and their gaiety made him crankier.

"What's wrong with you this morning, James?" Marian touched his arm with one stylishly-gloved hand, and he looked down at her long fingers encased in thin, supple leather. He shrugged. "Not a very nice thing we're going to witness today, I don't think. Could ruin this kid, Walsh."

Hu sniffed. "Serve the bastard right. Miserable thing he did."

Shelley shrugged again, shifted his arms. His hands were growing uncomfortably warm inside his gloves and folded up against his body. He didn't uncross his arms. "Going to be embarrassing whatever the result. Watching, I mean."

"Oh, I don't know. I've always enjoyed courtroom intrigue. All that posturing and arguing."

"For God's sake, Hu, it's not a movie." Shelley huffed and was surprised to see his breath illustrated by a puff of steam in the air. It must have been colder than he thought.

Marian disentangled herself from her husband's arm so she could hold onto Shelley's with both hands. This set her slightly off balance and the two of them took on a strange little stutter step to accommodate her posture. "What bothers you so much about it?"

Because I can imagine being in that kid's shoes. Everyone looking on, judging me for fucking up. Shelley kicked at a stone on the sidewalk. "I don't like the spectacle of it. All this excitement swirling around the thing, calling it a scandal, everyone getting all het up about it." He pushed at his glasses with his free hand, then shoved his hand into his pocket to keep from crossing his arms again. Marian shifted so that she simply let one of her hands rest on his elbow. "It's so *eins zwei drei*."

"Now, Shelley, really. That's taking it a little far, don't you think."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. We're taking it way too far. The kid maybe should be tossed out on his ear, but this academic disciplinary committee in front of the whole school thing." He shook his head. "It's so prep school."

Marian continued to hold onto Shelley, but she reached out to touch Hu on the arm as well. Shelley thought it was probably a calming gesture, meant to remind Hu to keep his temper.

Hu took a deep breath at the touch, then went on. "I was on the academic discovery committee, you'll remember. I think the work we've done here to keep up the standards of Scotsdale have been completely appropriate."

"Do you."

"I do."

"And what are they, these 'standards of Scotsdale'? What makes us so freaking special?"

Hu puffed up like some sort of deep-sea fish on the defensive. Shelley could actually see, even through the coat Hu wore, the way he pushed his chest out and tucked in his chin. "That's a strange question coming from a member of the faculty. Surely you agree that Scotsdale offers one of the best educations in the state?"

Marian's hand fell from Hu's arm, and she returned to her two-handed grip on Shelley's. "Hu, calm down. He's only asking. The spirit of debate and all that."

Hu ignored her. "I want to hear an answer. Scotsdale is only as good as the students and faculty who make her up. If Shelley doesn't think—"

"I think that Scotsdale is one of the best, yes, but I think that all this school spirit shit the president spews at us all the time creates a dangerous attitude of silence and conformity on campus."

"Silence and conformity!"

"It's what I said."

They were approaching the center of campus, and Marian dropped Shelley's arm as they began to see other groups making their way toward Jeffers Auditorium. "Maybe you two should pick up this conversation some other time?" she asked.

Hu muttered something into his beard, and Shelley pulled at his gloves, then slapped them together, more forcefully than he had meant to, into one palm.

They walked into the auditorium together, but there was nothing of the friendly camaraderie of only a few minutes before. Shelley and Hu both scowled, and while Marian was smiling, she no longer clung to either of their elbows. Hu made his way toward some empty seats in the front row where the rest of the academic discovery committee sat, and Marian trailed behind him. Shelley took a step after them, then stopped in the aisle, overcome with distaste at the notion of sitting next to the pair of them for the next several hours while President Humphries grilled the pale, pimple-faced boy who already sat in a chair on the stage, his ill-fitting suit crushed and rumpled. Shelley watched Marian follow Hu to a seat. She seemed clumsy to him, and tottering. When she caught her toe on a step in the aisle and reached out a hand to steady herself against her husband, Shelley turned away.

He cast around the already mostly-full auditorium, looking for an empty place that was neither in the midst of a group of his colleagues nor part of a horde of his students. An empty row would be ideal; he could set up in the middle of it, drape his coat over one of the seats next to him and hope that no one would sit near him at all. But the auditorium was too full—only a few seats remained vacant at all, and Shelley suspected that if he didn't find one soon, he would be in the irritating position of having to scurry into whichever empty seat was nearest when the

president began the proceedings. He trotted up the center aisle, deciding that the best move was to take a seat in the back, where at least he would likely be as far away from those keen on this hearing as possible.

He didn't see Sullivan until he was standing right next to him. He and another boy sat in the second and third seats of a row about a third of the way back. The aisle seat was empty. Shelley met Sullivan's gaze, and was hard-pressed to decipher it. He would almost say he looked hurt, and the implications of that stabbed at Shelley in the gut. He took off his coat, folded it over one arm, and slid into the empty seat without a word. Sitting so close to Sullivan after the weekend of pining over him, after the morning they'd shared, felt odd. He was struck by the strangeness of being so near to a man he had touched, kissed, fucked, so near that he could touch him again now with no effort whatsoever, while being yet so far away. He turned toward Sullivan, about to try to start a conversation, any conversation, but Sullivan was looking determinedly ahead. The boy on Sullivan's other side looked from Shelley to Sullivan, then back, then seemed to settle some question for himself and let his gaze drop to his knees, which he bounced, out of boredom or anxiety.

It was taking much longer for the hearing to begin than Shelley had anticipated. All around him, people began to look at their watches and cell phones and the level of the murmured conversation rose. The boy on the stage fidgeted, but avoided looking out over the auditorium, concentrating instead steadily on the podium from which the president would no doubt interrogate him. Shelley was filled with a hatred for this whole thing, and was fingering his coat, thinking about just dashing out and be damned who saw him leaving, when Sullivan spoke.

"Someone else must know." He continued to look straight ahead, and when Shelley turned toward him as he spoke, he saw the other boy look away quickly. Shelley felt a thrill of panic at Sullivan's statement: someone else must know what? About them? Why someone *else*? Who already did? It didn't make sense. "About what?" he asked.

"The attic. Someone else must know."

Shelley nodded. That thought had been part of his musings over the weekend as well. It was simply too well kept up, too clean, too *weird*, to have been a long-forgotten secret in the history of Scotsdale. "Probably."

Shelley waited for a moment, his gaze fixed on Sullivan's cheek. There was a tiny mole there—just above the hinge of his jaw—that he'd not noticed before. He was taking breath to ask why Sullivan brought it up, when President Humphries took the stage and called the hearing to order.

#

President Humphries made a big production of organizing his notes at the podium. He had a folder with the Scotsdale college seal on the front, and he shuffled it about on the podium with some other papers and a pen. He opened the folder and flipped through several pages of a yellow legal pad within it, each flipped page hanging over the top edge of the podium. He adjusted his glasses, leaned on the podium with one hand on either side of it, then shifted to one-elbow braced on it, then finally stood erect with one hand resting on the podium and the other in his trouser pocket.

Sullivan watched all of this with growing dread. It was an unconscionable agony to him that the president was dragging the thing out so with his own uncomfortable fidgeting. Howard Walsh waited patiently, hardly varying his gaze from the podium to the president during all of this posturing, and his patience only fueled Sullivan's discomfort. He heard each rustle of the president's legal pad as if it were amplified and sent straight into his ears, as if he were singled out as one who should pay particular attention to these proceedings, as if he had something terrible to learn here, as if some warning had been orchestrated for his benefit alone.

The president began, as expected, with a speech about the honored history of Scotsdale and how it was their job here today to ensure that that history was not tarnished by the kind of growing permissivism and lassitude that marked so much of the times in which they lived. Sullivan thought not of academic discipline, but of Shelley holding him to the bed, of *wanting* him to, of wondering if he should ask permission. The president spoke of instilling each new generation of Scotsdale students with a sense of right and wrong and enlisting their help in passing that message along as they moved through their studies to those who followed along behind them. Sullivan thought of attacking Shelley in his office, of following him to the library stacks and delighting in the way his scheming and maneuvering was redirected at him, in the way he couldn't know from minute to minute which of them would be in control. The president spoke of the attack on the values of Scotsdale that the alert hoax had constituted, and Sullivan thought of breaking into a campus building, of spending the night there, of fucking one of the school's professors within the confines of those walls. Sullivan slouched in his seat, trying to

make himself as small as he could, though he knew it was unlikely that anyone, excepting, perhaps, Shelley, was looking at him. He wondered how Shelley was reacting to the president's speech, but something stopped him from turning to him.

The audience, many of whom had started by gazing intently at President Humphries and sometimes nodding, were now growing visibly impatient with the speech, and the president wrapped it up with a summary of the way the academic discovery committee had run their investigation and with his thanks to them for their time and service to Scotsdale. He then turned to Howard Walsh, resumed his one-elbowed slouch against the podium, and pushed his glasses up his somewhat bulbous nose.

"Mr. Walsh."

Howard sat up fractionally straighter in his chair and rewarded the president with a glance, but otherwise gave little indication that he realized that all eyes in the room were now on him.

"Mr. Walsh, you are of course aware of the events of Wednesday, October the 16th, at approximately 10:42 in the morning." The president paused, and when Howard gave no indication of speaking or even reacting to what had been said, he went on. "On that date and at that time, a message was sent to all those members of the faculty, staff, and student body who had signed up to receive emergency alerts through e-mail or cellular phone notification. That message indicated that there was some danger to the campus and that everyone should remain where they were until further notice. That danger, of course, did not exist, as that message was sent by someone who had hacked into the college computer system for the express purpose, it

seems, of sending such a message and causing whatever chaos that may have been a result." He paused to look over the audience, his gaze sweeping the room. Sullivan hunkered down even lower in his seat. The top of his head was just flush with the top of his seat.

President Humphries removed his glasses and wiped at them with a handkerchief he retrieved from the breast pocket of his suit. "Luckily no one was injured as a result of this hoax, and no damage was done to any campus property. I can only imagine the pain and sorrow under which we would all sit here today if that had not been the case."

Sullivan thought he saw Howard begin to roll his eyes and stop before he'd quite completed the gesture, and a part of him wondered why the president's words affected him so much. Sullivan'd never cared for the rhetoric of school spirit that issued from the president's office, had ignored and mocked it in turns. He was at Scotsdale for what he could get out of it, and let the painted peacocks have their dance. It was nothing to him. So why the sick feeling in his stomach, why the sweat on his palms?

"As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the academic discovery committee has worked tirelessly to discover who was behind this hoax and has presented me with the information they've uncovered. The evidence—both circumstantial and digital—points to you, Mr. Walsh. The purpose of this meeting here today is to determine if that evidence is sound, to give you a chance to defend yourself, and, if your guilt is satisfactorily established, to determine appropriate punishment for conduct so unbecoming a student at Scotsdale. Do you have anything to say before we begin questioning?"

Howard shuffled his feet beneath his seat and shook his head.

"Very well." President Humphries looked down at his notes, rifled through the pages of his legal pad. After several moments, he turned back to Howard and cleared his throat. "Officially, this is an open meeting of the student/faculty academic disciplinary committee. As president of the college, I have the option of presiding over such meetings. I exercise my right here today. As such, I will conduct the questioning of you, Mr. Walsh, members of the academic discovery committee and anyone else who the disciplinary committee has listed and requested be in attendance today. Final determination of your guilt and subsequent possible punishment is at the sole discretion of the disciplinary committee. Do you have any questions, Mr. Walsh?"

Howard spoke up for the first time, and his curt "No" seemed to Sullivan to hang in the air.

"Shall we get on then? Where were you during the alert hoax, Mr. Walsh?"

Howard straightened in his seat and crossed his legs, one ankle resting on the knee of the other leg. He looked into the audience briefly, seemed to catch someone's eye, then turned back to President Humphries. "As there is currently a criminal investigation of these matters underway, in which I am a suspect, I decline to answer your question, President Humphries." The answer had a somewhat rehearsed feel to it, though Howard spoke confidently and with no difficulty.

Everyone in the auditorium seemed to lean forward at once, Sullivan included. The newspaper had been predicting a development along these lines for weeks, but somehow no one had really believed that the disciplinary committee's efforts would be so perfunctorily denied.

President Humphries stared at Howard for a full minute. "You refuse to answer the question."

Howard looked into the audience again, and Sullivan followed his gaze. A well-dressed man who was probably pushing seventy sat in the second row on the side of the stage where Howard sat. He was nodding at him. Howard turned back to the president. "Yes, sir."

"The discovery committee believes that you have the knowledge necessary to have executed this hoax. Would you agree?"

"I cannot answer your question, sir."

The president turned to look at the members of the disciplinary committee sitting behind him on the stage. He seemed not to get the direction he sought, for he turned back to Howard almost immediately. "You mean you will not."

Howard shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"Yes, Mr. Walsh, I believe it matters quite a bit. You flaunt these proceedings."

Howard simply slouched in his chair. Sullivan realized that he was gripping the arm of his seat and forced himself to let go and lay his hand on his thigh. Surely President Humphries wouldn't continue to badger Howard in the face of a perfectly reasonable response to the questioning.

"Did you hack into the school system, Mr. Walsh?"

Howard shook his head. "I'm not answering."

"Did you not, in fact, hack into the school's alert system and send out a false alert to the entire school?"

Howard was still shaking his head, slowly, as if he meant to negate something more enduring than the president's question.

"Did you not, in fact, hack into the school's alert system and send out a false alert in order to, as the disciplinary committee informs me you boasted to a friend on the internet, 'show those Scotsdale morons that they're not as special as they think they are'?"

"This is bullshit. I said I'm not answering your questions." Howard stood. "I'm out of here." He headed for the stairs leading from the stage to the floor of the auditorium.

"Mr. Walsh, if you leave these proceedings, you forfeit any right to defend yourself against the charges brought against you here."

Howard waved behind him dismissively without turning around.

The president raised his voice. "I advise you not to walk out of this auditorium, Mr. Walsh. You may find yourself expelled from Scotsdale without recourse."

Howard continued up the aisle without responding. After a moment, the elderly man in the front row rose, gathered an overcoat and a briefcase, and followed him. Howard passed by Sullivan's row, and Sullivan smiled at him, a smile he hoped was friendly, supportive. But Howard kept on going, and Sullivan knew he hadn't seen him.

The door shutting behind Howard was audible throughout the auditorium, and President Humphries allowed it to echo through the audience for several moments before he spoke again. "Since Mr. Walsh has chosen not to cooperate with these proceedings and offer any defense or explanation for the actions of which the discovery committee accuses him, we will go on without

him. A member of the discovery committee will now read a summary of the evidence against Mr. Walsh. The disciplinary committee will then deliberate as to Mr. Walsh's fate at Scotsdale."

The president went on, but Sullivan was no longer listening. He wondered where Howard would go if they expelled him. They would, he was sure. Would he apply to another school? Did he have parents who were on his side? Was the gentleman who followed him out his father? A family lawyer friend? If Sullivan were expelled from Scotsdale, he would have to find a job, quickly. He lived on his full-ride to Scotsdale. His grandparents, perhaps, would help him, but he hated the idea of asking them for anything, hated the notion of being forced into a relationship with them when he wasn't yet sure how he wanted to be with them. He was gripping the armrest again, and when Shelley laid a hand on his arm, he startled. He turned to him, and he recognized that the look on the other man's face was gentle, but all he could see was himself writhing under Shelley's touch with the image of Peggy Young looking on in disbelieving horror.

He bolted from his seat and climbed over Shelley to reach the aisle, tripping over Shelley's feet in the process. Shelley caught him, and for a moment his hands on Sullivan's waist were steady and comforting, but then he had disentangled himself and rushed out of the auditorium.

He leaned against the side of the building, concentrating on the cold that seeped through his jacket from the brick. The cigarette he'd pulled from the pack in his pocket hung unlit

between his lips when Shelley came through the glass outer doors of Jeffers Auditorium and stood before him. He looked Sullivan up and down, then turned to lean against the building with him.

"You got another one of those?"

Sullivan took the cigarette from his mouth, held it away from himself for a moment, assessing it, then returned it to his lips. He fished in his jacket pocket for the pack and passed it to Shelley. Shelley looked at it for a moment before flipping the top and removing one. He put it into the corner of his mouth.

"Got anything to light it with?"

Sullivan shook his head. He'd been laying off the cigarettes and somehow his lighter had gotten separated from the pack.

Shelley nodded, looked into the distance. "You okay?"

He wasn't. "Yeah."

The silence between them was filled by the sound of fallen leaves rustling over the grounds of Scotsdale. After a while: "You kind of look not okay."

Sullivan took his cigarette from his mouth again, pinched and rolled the end between his fingers to round the end slightly flattened by his lips, and slid the cigarette back into his pack. "I'm okay, okay? This hearing is just bullshit."

"Agree with you there."

"Hits too close to home, you know?"

"You mean getting caught?"

Sullivan bit his lip, shook his head. "Being looked at—on display. Judged."

Shelley was silent for a minute, then asked, "Do you know him? Howard Walsh?"

"No. Guy does. He tutored him in some computer language class. Walsh did, tutored Guy. But even he didn't really know him, I don't think. Didn't sound like it."

"Guy's your roommate? The fellow who was sitting next to you in there?"

"Yeah."

Shelley took his cigarette from his mouth, mimicked the actions Sullivan had taken with his own. He held it out to Sullivan. "He was about to come after you."

Sullivan looked at the cigarette. "You stopped him?"

Shelley laughed, a short humorless laugh. "I said 'I'll go.' Like I knew him, like he and I had some sort of joint charge to take care of you." Shelley shrugged. "He gave me a look. But he sat back down."

"Christ." Sullivan snatched the cigarette from Shelley, but put it in his mouth rather than fish out the pack again.

They were silent again, and Sullivan waited tensely through the first few minutes, expecting Shelley to speak again. But he seemed content to stand in silence, and Sullivan relaxed into the break, into the quiet between them.

It was nearly ten minutes before Shelley broke the silence. "We should talk, you and I."

Sullivan looked at him sideways, through narrowed eyes. "Talk."

"Yes, Sullivan, talk. Don't you think?"

Sullivan nodded, slowly, pursed his lips while he plucked Shelley's cigarette from them

and flicked it away from himself. He reached for Shelley's hand, missed and grasped the sleeve of his coat instead. He pulled Shelley away from the wall and led him along the path toward the quad. Shelley allowed himself to be dragged along, but when they came within sight of the administration building, he pulled back against Sullivan's grasp.

"Now, hold on a minute. It's too dangerous."

"Everyone's at that damned hearing." Sullivan gestured around the quad with his free hand. "We haven't seen a soul since we left the auditorium."

"It's still a damn dangerous stupid thing to do."

"Probably," Sullivan said, and he pulled Shelley up the steps to the door of Short Hall. The knob gave easily, and it was clear before they'd even crossed the threshold that the place was essentially deserted. Sullivan felt Shelley tense when they passed the switchboard operator's open door and saw the back of her permed head framed by her telephone headset, but he followed Sullivan up the stairs even after Sullivan dropped his arm.

When they reached the attic hatch, Sullivan pulled on the cord, revealing the ladder. The attic looked just the same as it had when they'd left it several nights before, Schubert on the Victrola, bed clothes rumpled. When Shelley had climbed the ladder, Sullivan turned into him, was pressing against his chest, he hands at the back of his neck, before Shelley had a chance to speak. Shelley tried to pull away, but Sullivan clung to him. Shelley walked him backwards until Sullivan's knees hit the edge of the bed, and when Sullivan fell to it, Shelley didn't follow. Instead he sat on the bed next to him.

"Talk first."

Sullivan felt lost. He had spent the weekend on the internet, reading anything he could about sexuality, domination, submission, control. He had pored over books he'd had out of the library just out of curiosity. He had spoken the truth on Thursday when he'd told Shelley that he knew what he was getting into—he did, intellectually. He knew about kink, he knew some of the vocabulary, he had known right off what Shelley had been initiating. But he didn't *understand* it. His reading seemed to help as he was doing it, but now he was faced with Shelley again, he wanted what he'd felt before, wanted the wonderful giving up, giving in, that meant he didn't have to understand, didn't have to *think*, even if just for a few minutes. The thought of his grandparents niggled at the back of his mind, picking at him, and he closed his eyes against it, hoped that if he could get Shelley to overwhelm him again, the image and the fear it brought to him would be overwhelmed too. "I don't know what to say."

Shelley took a breath to speak, then clamped his mouth shut and snorted. "Hell. Me neither."

Sullivan lay where he'd landed, idly rubbing circles on his stomach, echoing what Shelley had done to him days before. "Who's Len?" he asked, surprising himself a bit in the asking.

Shelley raised an eyebrow. "Old boyfriend."

"He taught you how to be kinky?"

Shelley lay back next to Sullivan. "He helped me learn how to be kinky with other people. I *was* kinky before I ever met him."

"Did you know?"

"Not really. Or, I didn't realize until later when I had some context for memories of how I'd always been."

Sullivan rolled onto his side and rested a hand on Shelley's chest. He had pulled Shelley to the attic because he wanted a repeat of Thursday morning, because he wanted to see how he would react a second time, but now his desire had morphed into something far less urgent but somehow more pressing. They lay that way for several minutes, the faint smell of moth balls rising from the pillows and tickling Sullivan's nose. When he shifted to look at Shelley's face, he saw that he was looking down at him, his gaze assessing, appraising. He settled his head down again, not wanting to be the one to break the silence but feeling that what remained unspoken between them grew heavier as the minutes passed. Before long, its weight would be crushing.

When Shelley spoke, his question wasn't one Sullivan had been expecting. "Did you know?"

"Know what?"

Shelley rolled over too, so that he faced Sullivan, and Sullivan's hand fell away from his chest. "On Thursday, after, you said you knew what you were getting into—"

"And you scoffed at me."

"I don't know that I would say 'scoffed.'"

A sharp burst of anger arose in Sullivan's chest, and it was only partly dampened when Shelley quickly added, "But point taken."

Sullivan crossed his arms over his chest, knowing that the move was both defensive and petulant but unable to keep himself from it.

"So, did you suspect that you were kinky?"

Sullivan set his jaw. Suddenly he was furious, at Shelley, at himself, at Howard Walsh for getting himself into such a fantastically stupid mess, at President Humphries for everything.

"Sullivan."

"What?" The word sounded harsher than Sullivan meant it, but he let it stand, like a dare.

"You went all hard."

"Fucking funny, Jamie." Sullivan started to roll off the bed, but Shelley grabbed him from behind and pulled him back down. Sullivan landed on his side, trapping one of Shelley's arms beneath him. The other was wrapped around his chest, pinning him against Shelley.

"I wasn't trying to be funny, you little bastard. You just suddenly got the stoniest expression I think I have ever seen on someone who wasn't an ex." Shelley's arm relaxed a bit and Sullivan eased away from him slightly. Shelley's other arm remained under him, and it was uncomfortable, but he didn't move to dislodge it. "Unless that's what you are now?"

Something uncertain and small sounded in Shelley's voice. In all of Sullivan's anger he hadn't thought of ending things with Shelley, not now. He wasn't sure how to go on with him, but he pictured going on, not breaking off. That Shelley had asked the question, had asked it with that vulnerability in his voice, made Sullivan smile. "I had fantasies about you. I would see you on campus and then go home and dream up little scenarios about you. Does that freak you out?"

Shelley pulled away from Sullivan, maneuvering his trapped arm out from under him. "Not really. I suppose it's sort of expected, seeing what we've been doing."

Sullivan tucked his knees up to chest. "What *are* we doing?"

He felt Shelley's fingers in his hair, stroking lightly, then brushing his bangs away from his forehead and trailing to the nearly faded bruise on his neck. "I think that's what I've been trying to get you to talk about for a while now."

"I didn't have a good childhood. Foster homes. Some of them bad."

Shelley's hand moved to his shoulder, stayed there. Sullivan waited for Shelley to say something, was relieved when he didn't. "My dad's parents—I never knew my dad—but his parents, they just found me, contacted me earlier this semester. I met them a few weeks ago. They invited me for Thanksgiving. But I stayed here. And now I'm invited for Christmas. All of it. The whole three-week break. And I think I'm going to go." Sullivan closed his eyes, listened to his own breathing, tried to be conscious of it without allowing his concentration on it to change the rate, the rhythm.

There was no sound but his breathing, Shelley's behind him, their inhales and exhales just out of sync.

When Shelley spoke, Sullivan started slightly at the sound. "So what are we doing?"

Sullivan hadn't been sure what had prompted him to bring up his family then, but Shelley sounded as if he thought the confession to be an explanation. "I've always known I was gay. Always. Like as long as I knew about sex, I knew that's how sex would be for me. And it never bothered me. I dealt with shit, I knew I would have to. I wasn't stupid as a kid—I knew that

growing up gay in Pennsyltucky was not going to be . . . easy. But I was never ashamed of it." Sullivan shrugged. "Just not wired that way, I guess. But there was also never anyone whose opinion I gave a goddamn about either." Sullivan's voice took on a hard edge then, and he both welcomed and hated the gentle squeeze Shelley gave his shoulder.

"And now there is."

Sullivan turned to Shelley. "Yeah. Maybe."

Shelley nodded.

"It's still not the being gay. If they don't like that, they can shove it." Sullivan winced slightly at his own words, but for their violence, not their meaning. "But the other." Sullivan shrugged again.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. You should go to your grandparents', figure things out."

"Right." Sullivan supposed that this was what he had wanted, but Shelley's acceptance, his willingness to send him off, rang of abandonment.

"Hey." Shelley moved closer to Sullivan and kissed him carefully. "I'm going to give you my number. You call if you're freaking out."

Sullivan had responded belatedly to Shelley, trying to kiss back only when Shelley had already pulled away.

"No pressure to use it. Just, you know, if you need to."

Sullivan nodded. Mouthed "okay," no sound coming out.

Shelley sat up, fished a scrap of paper and a pen out of his jacket, scribbled something onto the paper and folded it into Sullivan's hand. He turned to leave, but paused at the hatch. "Just, when you're figuring things out, don't forget to factor in how you felt."

Sullivan watched as Shelley climbed down the ladder, then looked at the paper in his hand. Factor in how he felt. First he would have to know.

Chapter Fourteen

Only a week and a half separated the Thanksgiving holiday and the beginning of Scotsdale's Winter Break—half a week of classes and one of final exams. Sullivan generally did passably well on exams, usually without studying for them, but this time he threw himself into studying. He needed to do a whole semester's worth of work in his economics class, and the girl he usually snagged history notes from had developed an attack of honor and could not be convinced to hand over the sheets and sheets of neatly parsed lecture notes to him for any price. He was glad of the distraction, glad of the excuse to avoid Shelley. He had decided, without any soul-searching, without any emotional fanfare, that he would not see him again until after the break. He had decided this within moments of watching Shelley disappear through the attic hatch after the hoax hearing. But it was nice to have something to point to as a reason for staying away from his office on the fourth floor of the academic center. He tried not to think of the attic in Short Hall, for any time he did, he unavoidably began to list reasons why the attic might be so furnished and maintained. He liked none of the scenarios he could devise. He packed away his confusion over his desires in the back of his mind, determined not to touch it till exams were over, promising himself that he would examine it thoroughly when he was safely away from campus.

Guy had looked at him askance when he'd returned to their room after being with Shelley on the day of the hoax hearing. Sullivan had tried to ignore him, being deliberate and careful about hanging up his coat, about arranging the textbooks he would need to get through on the edge of his desk, but eventually it was too much, and his shoulders sagged. "What?"

Guy had shaken his head. "I guess you know what you're doing, then?"

"Not at all."

"Great." He'd shuffled off to the bathroom, but stuck his head back into the room a moment later to tell Sullivan to be careful for God's sake.

Sullivan had assured him that he would, having to repeat himself twice before Guy was appeased, and now, as he stuffed clothes and books into a bag in preparation for his stay with the Youngs, Guy's words came back to him. He wanted to be careful, he wanted to be sure rather than flinging himself headlong into whatever came along, as he had done at the start of the Shelley situation. The trouble was that he couldn't quite map out the dangers so he was never sure which step might be the one to send him tumbling.

The Youngs had insisted on picking him up, and he had relented, mostly because he hadn't been able to figure out another way to get to their place. Taking the bus there would require so many changes in small towns and so much travel in the absolute wrong direction that he had given up on that notion before even completing his calculation of the route. He had thought about asking Guy for a ride, but had dismissed the idea as somehow too complicated, though he wasn't sure at all what was so complicated about it.

He had, however, maneuvered the arrangements so that his grandparents would not be coming to his dorm, would not be seeing his room. He would meet them in the faculty parking lot below the academic center at 12:30. Since Guy had had a light exam schedule and had therefore left the day before, it was up to Sullivan to track down the resident advisor for their floor and stand by while he did the end-of-semester, pre-break inspection of the room. He had

knocked on the RA's door an hour earlier and explained that he would be ready to go at noon and that he had people waiting on him, so could Sam come then and not be late? Sam had agreed, but now it was nearly quarter after twelve with no sign of him, and Sullivan grew antsy. He envisioned Peggy and Lionel Young waiting for him, cheerfully at first, then with growing irritation as the clock moved farther and farther past the appointed time. He wasn't sure what this irritation would lead them to—somehow in his mind they both gave up on him and drove off and got out of the car and began to wander the campus in search of him, becoming increasingly lost and annoyed with every new campus sidewalk they turned down. There was nothing to do in the room—he'd unplugged the television and the stereo as part of the requirements for inspection and his computer and any books he was currently interested in were packed. He sat in his desk chair, facing the room and his two bags, and drummed his fingers on his knees. Finally he jumped up and threw open the door, ready to find Sam and chew him out, but there Sam stood in the hall, studying a clipboard in his hands.

"Jeez, Young," he said. "You almost ran me over."

Sullivan was practically hopping with impatience. "Right, whatever. Just hurry up, huh? My ride is waiting."

But Sam wouldn't be hurried. He moved with an infuriating slow deliberateness, leaning behind the mini-fridge and the desks to peer at the outlets and ensure they were free. He pulled open the fridge door to see that they had left nothing inside it to go rotten and nasty over the break and inquired whether they'd left any other food lying around the room.

"No, Sam. Christ. This is the third year we've done this, yeah? We know not to leave anything out."

Sam made a show of checking something off on his clipboard, which maddened Sullivan further. "Got to ask. If someone leaves a box of saltines and the place is crawling with roaches when we get back, it's my ass, right?"

"Right." Sullivan shouldered his messenger bag and picked up the strap to his duffle. "Is that it?"

"You *are* in a hurry. Never thought you cared about getting out of here at break, Young."

Sullivan moved a step toward the door, sort of yanked his duffle bag along with him across the floor. "I told you, I don't want to keep my ride waiting."

Sam looked up at him over the clipboard, where he was making some other notes, and bit the inside of his cheek. Sullivan shifted under his gaze. Lord, he hated Sam Kelley. He acted like he thought he was some sort of wise older brother to the whole floor, and he was spectacularly bad at it. His inquiries into Sullivan's life outside of Scotsdale never failed to make Sullivan wish violently to hit him, hard.

"Not going home with Guy this year?"

"Obviously not." Sullivan reached out with one hand toward the clipboard, made gimme motions at the paper Sam had been filling out.

Sam slowly signed his name to the paper and moved it aside to initial a line on a master list next to their room number. "But that is what you usually do, right? You two have a fight?" He folded the checklist for the room in half carefully, making a sharp crease by running his thumb nail along the fold.

Sullivan snatched the paper from him. "No. We done?"

Sam looked around the room once more, eyeing the pulled blinds and the mess of covers on each of the beds. "Yep. Don't forget to lock the door behind you." He turned and headed out of the room. "Have a merry Christmas."

Sullivan heaved his duffle bag up onto one shoulder. "Right," he said. "Merry Christmas."

#

As it turned out, Sullivan was only about five minutes late meeting up with his grandparents, though he was out of breath from rushing across campus in the cold with his bags. They were standing outside of their car, Lionel leaning against the driver's side in a mid-thigh length camel coat, matching gloves, and a cap that reminded Sullivan of Shelley's. He cringed at the thought of Shelley and pushed the thought aside. *Not yet*. Grandma Young's coat came almost to her ankles and was a bright red that he thought would have looked ridiculous on anyone else, but on her looked nothing but festive and right. He waved hesitantly at them in that weird moment when he was close enough to know they had seen him, but still too far away to speak without shouting. When he got a little closer, Lionel said something that sounded like a

cross between a greeting and a grunt and Grandma Young rushed into him for a hug. Sullivan tried to hug back, but his arms were effectively pinned by his bags and he ended up just patting her somewhat awkwardly on the tops of her arms. She pecked at his cheek sloppily before pulling away and in that moment he got a whiff of her. She smelled of pressed powder and age, and the smell made him homesick, but for what home, he wasn't sure.

Lionel had circled around the car while Grandma Young embraced her grandson, and he clapped Sullivan on the back while he took the duffle bag from him. He positioned it far back in the trunk, between the back wheels of the car, and motioned at Sullivan to hand over the messenger bag. "Want that back here, too, Sullivan?"

Sullivan shook his head. "My computer," he said, gesturing at the bag. "Don't want it to get knocked around."

"Quite right." Lionel let the trunk fall closed, a strip of white skin showing between his coat sleeve hem and his glove.

His grandmother launched into a speech about how glad they were that Sullivan had accepted their invitation to stay with them for the holidays and how much they were looking forward to spending so much time with him. She ducked into the passenger seat still talking, and Lionel caught Sullivan's eye over the roof of the car. He grinned and nodded toward Grandma Young, then got into the car himself. Sullivan smiled himself as he arranged his bag next to him in the car and buckled himself in.

They stopped in town for lunch at one of the local restaurants, and sometime over the sandwiches and pickles, Sullivan realized that he was at his ease, that he was happy. He tried to hide his sudden smile by mouthing at the straw in his root beer, but he thought he saw Grandma Young and Lionel exchanging a look out of the corner of his eye.

Life at the Youngs' was slow and routine, and Sullivan liked it more than he ever imagined he would. Despite Grandma Young's enthusiasm, his grandparents mostly left him to himself, not pestering him to spend time with them but always happy to welcome him into whatever they were doing. He had been dismayed at first to learn that there was no internet at their house, but his disappointment was replaced with delight when he walked into the den for the first time and saw that the pine-walled room contained two walls of floor-to-ceiling built-in bookshelves stuffed with books. Lionel had chuckled at the look on his face when he'd stepped into the room, at Grandma Young's bidding, to tell him that lunch was ready on his first full day with them. Lionel had been sitting on the couch, flipping through a copy of *National Geographic*, and he tossed it onto the coffee table as he stood, then clapped a hand on Sullivan's shoulder. "Help yourself, son," he said as he shuffled past and out toward the breakfast nook. Sullivan spent the first few days reading in the den, more often with his grandfather on the other end of the couch as not. In the late afternoons he would help Grandma Young in the kitchen with supper, and the evenings were spent with the three of them watching television, he and Lionel arguing good-naturedly over what to watch and Grandma Young reading in her rocking chair. After every commercial break she would raise her head from her book, squint at the television, and then accuse Lionel of switching the channel in the middle of the program. He

always denied this, even if he had, and Sullivan noticed the gleam in Lionel's eye when he would cast a look in Grandma Young's direction as he changed the channel. He suspected that he did it more than half of the time just to hear her yell about it.

The holiday itself was low key—nothing at all like the frantic cheerfulness of the Days' where the four bedroom house overflowed with siblings and relatives and friends for a straight week of chaos and gift wrap and food. Sullivan had been surprised when he first arrived to see no Christmas tree in the Youngs' front room, but on the day before Christmas Eve Grandma Young had put a hand on his shoulder after lunch and beckoned him to follow her to the pantry. She pointed to a cord hanging from the ceiling, and Sullivan had a moment of squeamishness at the sight of an attic hatch identical to the one in Short Hall. But this attic was nothing like that one—it was floored in plywood with cross beams hanging low. The perimeter was lined with cardboard boxes, some labeled, some not, and Grandma Young led him to a corner crammed with six or seven boxes with "Christmas" sketched on them in black marker. She had asked him to bring the boxes down, minding the steps, they're tricky, and take them into the living room. Lionel would help him to set up the artificial tree and she'd be in after the washing up to direct the trimming of it.

The smell of something baking awoke Sullivan on Christmas morning. Out of some manner of propriety he was surprised to discover he possessed, he normally took a shower and dressed before emerging from his room for the day. But the scent of cinnamon and apples was enticing, and he followed it to the kitchen in his pajama bottoms and t-shirt. Grandma Young

stood before the stove already dressed for the holiday in a long green skirt and beige sweater with a Christmas wreath pin on the shoulder. She was pulling a pie from the oven when she looked over and saw Sullivan in the doorway.

"Merry Christmas, young man!" She gestured at the pie. "Got up this morning to throw this together so it would be out of the way when it's time to put in the turkey. Some do their pies the day before, but there's nothing like filling the house with the smell of baking in the morning. Gives it a certain touch, don't you think? What do you want for breakfast?"

Sullivan still was unsure how to react to his grandmother's enthusiasm, though the more he experienced it, the more he was sure he liked it. He settled on "Merry Christmas" and a quick kiss on the cheek as an appropriate response to her greeting. He was about to excuse himself and go shower and change when Grandma Young pushed a glass of orange juice into his hand. "That's fresh squeezed. I always save some of those special Florida oranges the high school kids sell for Christmas morning and make a pitcher of fresh squeezed. Best juice you'll ever have." She herded him toward the breakfast nook and he sank into his chair. "I'm making a batch of scrapple, but there's all the usual toast and cereal and whatnot if you'd rather."

"Scrapple's fine."

Grandma Young patted him on the shoulder. "Good boy. It's not Christmas without scrapple for breakfast."

Sullivan took a sip of his juice. The taste was full and rich and nicely sweet without any of the bitterness that store-bought orange juice had. He refused to remember Shelley calling him a good boy and focused intently on the view out the window of woods behind the Youngs', the pine trees capped in the white of the previous day's brief snowfall.

After breakfast the three of them gathered around the tree, and Grandma Young appointed Sullivan to the task of passing out packages. He started by passing one present to each of them and then waiting until they had each unwrapped theirs before passing out any more, but it soon became clear that there were far more packages with his name on them than anyone else's, and after a few rounds he just passed around all of the remaining gifts in an attempt to minimize his embarrassment at having so much more to unwrap than his grandparents. It was their fault, of course, as all but one of the packages (a hastily and clumsily wrapped Scotsdale t-shirt from Guy) for him were from them. Their gifts from him—purchased at the campus bookstore and clandestinely wrapped in his bedroom from paper he'd pilfered from the stash he'd found when helping to decorate the tree—were met with approval and delight. Grandma Young exclaimed over the cookbook and Lionel seemed genuinely pleased with the book, written by a member of Scotsdale's history department, about local Native American legends. He'd also given them each a coffee mug with "Scotsdale Grandparent" emblazoned on the side in the school's colors and Grandma Young in particular made a big deal of the gift. She got up from the couch and hugged him. The wool of her sweater was scratchy against the bare skin of

his arms—he never had gotten around to showering and dressing before presents—and he felt guilty that something that seemed to make her so happy had actually been an afterthought when he'd seen the mugs on a display next to the register in the campus store.

Their gifts to him were nice and thoughtful but betrayed the fact that they'd known him for so short a time—a shirt and tie (Sullivan wondered if they were a commentary on his outfit the day he'd come for lunch), a series of classics of English literature in nice hardbound editions (all books Sullivan had read before but none of which he owned), a gift certificate to Salvatori's. But the last present was special. Sullivan had set it aside to save for last. He wasn't sure why, except perhaps because it was remarkably heavy and was clearly, by its shape, not a book. When he got to it, Grandma Young and Lionel had finished unwrapping all of their gifts and watched him expectantly. Lionel sat up a little straighter on the couch and Grandma Young touched his arm as Sullivan pulled at the ribbon on the package. The wrappings revealed a plain cardboard box taped shut. Sullivan picked at the ends of the tape, but he couldn't get a big enough flap loose to pull the tape away.

"Here." Lionel pulled a small pocket knife from his pants pocket and passed it to Sullivan.

The tape split easily under the blade, and Sullivan unpacked from a bed of tissue paper an old Nikon 35 millimeter camera. It was the sort Sullivan had used in the short course on photography he'd taken in high school, and he ran his finger over the dial which would adjust the shutter's aperture. He waited for the loneliness of those years in high school to return to him, but he felt nothing but a warm gratitude toward Lionel for wanting to share something important to

him with Sullivan. It was just the sort of gift he'd never before been given—something that he was desperately glad to have received but which he had had no notion of wanting ahead of time. "Thank you," he said and immediately wished there was some better way to express his feelings about the gift, but the way Grandma Young said "See?" and poked Lionel playfully in the ribs suggested to him that maybe they understood anyway.

"There's a couple of rolls of black and white film in that box too, and you can borrow any of my lenses and things if you want to play around. I thought I would show you the darkroom later, get you set up to do some developing while you're here, if you like."

Sullivan pulled the rolls of film out of the bottom of the box and held them in one hand carefully, running his thumb over the corner of one box. These were not so easy to come by now. "I'd like that."

Grandma Young hit the tops of her thighs with her hands. "Well! I have things to be doing in the kitchen. Sullivan, if you would, gather all of the presents and slide them back under the tree. We can deal with putting things away later."

Sullivan nodded, his attention still on the camera in his lap.

"If you'll excuse me, gentlemen," Grandma Young said as she bustled out of the room, and Sullivan gave the camera one last look before nestling it carefully into its box again. Then he gathered all of the presents from the couch and the floor around them and settled them into three neat piles under the tree.

"It always looks like less when they're unwrapped, doesn't it?" Lionel asked.

"Yeah, I suppose." He didn't trust himself to say much more.

Lionel stood and stretched. "Think I'll go for a walk," he said. "Take off some of that scrapple before it's time to eat again."

Sullivan watched him go into the hall and fuss about in the hall closet for a moment before heading out the side door leading into the garage. Sullivan folded the flaps of the box down over the camera to protect it, and padded to the back of the house to take his shower and dress. He stood under the hot water for a long time, thinking. Christmas hadn't meant much to him in the past few years since he had trained himself not to care as a child. There had been a few foster homes where the day had been reasonably pleasant, where there had been a few gifts for him and his foster siblings, where there had been some kind of a feast. But it had never been a day of joy, of having or making dreams come true, and the last string of families he had stayed with had made little, if anything, of the day at all. The Days had made him feel welcome the last two years during their celebration, but he had still felt as if he didn't belong, as if he were watching something pleasant from the outside. But here, he felt strangely at home, and he wondered, not for the first time since he'd arrived for this visit, what suddenly made this place seem like a home when he'd been so uncomfortable during his first visit. "It's Christmas!" a voice sounded in his head, and he scowled at the wall of the shower at the thought. He knew there were people in the world who would believe that the spirit of the season could accomplish such a thing, but he was more inclined to think it was just that he had been searching for something and realized now that he had found it. He massaged his hands through his hair, making sure he'd rinsed out all of the soap, then ran his hands along his chest, his sides.

He'd been trying not to think of Shelley since he'd arrived, and he'd been successful, mostly, pushing the thought of him down and back whenever it threatened to creep forward into his uppermost thoughts. Nights had been the hardest, when he'd been alone in his room, in bed far earlier than he would have been on his own for going to bed when Grandma Young and Lionel did. He'd taken to reading until he fell asleep, and this meant he slept the night through with the light on. Every morning he awoke with a start around sunrise and blinked for a moment in the too-bright artificial light coming from the nightstand. He feared that Grandma Young or Lionel would be up in the night and come to investigate the light, but so far it had gone unnoticed or, perhaps, just unmentioned.

But now he thought of Shelley anew, and nothing would banish him from his mind. He tried reciting Fibonacci's Sequence and then recited pi until he ran out of decimals that he could remember. He listed all of the phone numbers he could dredge out of depths of memory and sighed dramatically when he found himself listing Shelley's office number, which he hadn't realized he'd remembered from his faculty web site. It was their trip to the pool that Sullivan couldn't steer his thoughts away from now. He remembered the way Shelley had teased and played with him that evening, and how his gentleness in trying to teach him had belied that banter. He pictured Shelley in his trench coat and Gatsby cap, though the image was ridiculously incongruous with that night. Sullivan was ashamed of that night, ashamed of the way he'd run away, of the way he'd left Shelley standing in the locker room with that *look* on his face, like Sullivan had just tossed his puppy into the street. Sullivan had known what he was doing then, had known the hurt and confusion he caused and wished to allay it but could not stop himself

from walking away. And then he'd done it again. Sullivan leaned an arm against the pristine shower wall and rested his forehead against it. This feeling in his gut was precisely why he'd been avoiding thoughts of Shelley with such stridency. He felt the gnawing certitude that he'd done something wrong and that the only way to fix it, the only way to keep this crawling in his insides from coming back, was to set it right himself.

He twisted the knob to turn off the shower and pushed back the shower curtain with more force than he'd meant to. He faced the little window above the toilet as he reached for a towel and scrubbed at himself with it. The window faced the backyard, a narrow strip of lawn bordered by a long stone wall, on the other side of which stood a small field disappearing into a dense pine forest. It had struck Sullivan as odd for a bathroom to have a window placed as this one was, and though he hadn't been prudish enough to rearrange the mostly decorative curtains over the panes when he occupied it, he was surprised when he recognized Lionel's form on the other side of the stone wall, his back to the house, making his way down a path leading through the trees. Sullivan was disconcerted by his undress only for a moment; he doubted that Lionel would have been able to see into the bathroom from that distance and at that angle, even if he were facing in the right direction.

Lionel wore the same coat he had when he and Grandma Young had picked Sullivan up at school, and he carried a walking stick. He walked with a bit of a hunch in his shoulders that Sullivan had noticed before but which was somehow more pronounced set against the green and white of the wintery scene he ambled through. What would it have been like, Sullivan wondered, to have grown up with this man? If things had been different, if he hadn't been lost to

these relatives as a baby, and had spent his childhood not bouncing from one strange family to another but here, in this warm, carefully furnished house nestled in the trees away from the world? Neither Grandma Young nor Lionel had made any noises about discussing his father, about explaining what had happened, and he understood that it was up to him to bring it up if he cared to. He hadn't, and he thought now that he still didn't—he had been unlike the other foster children in that he spent very little time wondering where his parents were or hoping for his return to them. Perhaps because he had no memory of them, had no expectations beyond what he knew from foster care. He had often wished for something different, for something better, for a place where it wasn't always a fight for the bathroom because there were too many people in one house, for a place where no one ever called him by the wrong name because they simply couldn't remember what his was, for a place where walking in the door wasn't like walking into a wall of tightly strung unnamed tension. But for the first time he wished that his childhood had been a particular way rather than only wishing that certain things had not been. As Lionel turned around a bend in the path, Sullivan felt a deep regret that this had not been his childhood, that he had not had the opportunity to grow up with Lionel's quiet direction and Grandma Young's enthusiastic way of throwing herself into the middle of things.

Sullivan had never regretted his life before. He'd seen no point in it; it was what it was and it had made him what he was now. If he was satisfied with who he was, then to regret the events that had made him that way would be the height of illogic. He knew this was a peculiar attitude to have, perhaps for anyone, but especially at his age. He'd always known, and the fact had been sharply driven home to him when he'd tried to explain it to Guy—Guy who usually

understood him so well or, when he didn't, didn't let that matter—and his roommate had looked at him with such confusion, that Sullivan had quickly changed the subject. And the regret was made bitter now by the knowledge that nothing he could have done would have changed things. Those years of time with his grandparents had been lost to him probably since the moment he was born.

He dressed slowly, sullenly, his realization souring his mood and making him resent the cheerfulness of the day. He pulled on a smile along with slacks and a red sweater and tried to appear as happy and contented as he had earlier in the morning. He thought Grandma Young noticed his change in mood immediately when he slouched into the kitchen inquiring whether there was anything he could do to help, and he knew that Lionel looked at him longer and harder than he generally did when he returned from his walk. But nothing was said, and Sullivan managed to clamp down his irritation throughout dinner and even laughed at Grandma Young when she turned doing the dishes into an impromptu water fight.

After about an hour of sitting in the living room with a book open on his lap Sullivan jumped when Lionel snapped his own book shut and stood. "Darkroom," he said, pointing at Sullivan.

"Darkroom?" Sullivan asked. He'd thought Lionel had been asleep and was still stewing in his thoughts.

Lionel nodded. "We can get a few hours in before Peggy decides it's time to eat again."

Grandma Young stuck her head into the room from the dining room where she was putting away the good dishes they'd eaten their dinner from. "I *heard* that, you old coot. You can just sit and watch when Sullivan and I have turkey sandwiches if that's the way you feel about it."

Lionel muttered a "Yes, mother" under his breath and winked at Sullivan. "Bring the camera. I'll show you some tricks while we're over there."

Sullivan picked up the box containing the camera from under the tree and followed Lionel out of the house and down a short path to a cottage standing on the corner of the front lawn.

"My uncle built the house and put in the cottage as guest house." Lionel fished in his pocket for a key and unlocked the door. "Got a lot of use, too, at one time. But it had just been sitting here for years when I got the notion of setting up my own darkroom." The door opened into a small kitchen with a sitting room furnished with high end camp furniture adjoining. The cottage was paneled in the same pine as the den in the house, and the place smelled of canvas and rope and a touch of damp. Lionel tossed the key ring onto a counter and gestured for Sullivan to follow him. A door led off the kitchen, and Sullivan followed Lionel through it. Behind the door was an alcove just wide enough to allow the door to open. On the far wall was another door, and Lionel shut the first before he opened the second. "I don't have anything going right now, so there's no need to keep it light tight, but it's habit now."

Sullivan nodded, impressed at Lionel's set-up before he'd even really seen it.

Lionel spent an hour showing him his equipment, and pointing out where he stored the

assorted chemicals he needed for developing, walked him through a refresher of which chemical did what, of safety procedures. He took the camera out of its box and quizzed Sullivan on which f-stop would produce what effect in what situation. Sullivan was surprised at how much he remembered from that class and was looking forward to having an opportunity to take some shots and fiddle with them in the development stage.

He was messing with the light meter on the camera, pointing it at different spots in the room and making tiny moves, trying not to overshoot the adjustment with clumsy hands, when Lionel pulled a stool out from under the work counter and perched on it in front of Sullivan. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

Sullivan lowered the camera slowly and turned to look at his grandfather. He swallowed, thought of Shelley, wondered why he so feared letting Shelley occupy this same space as his grandparents. "Talk about what?"

"You'd have to tell me, son." Lionel took the camera from Sullivan's hands and it was only when he did so that Sullivan realized that his grip on it had loosened dangerously. Lionel replaced the lens cap and set the camera down carefully on the counter.

Sullivan tried a smile. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?"

Sullivan shook his head.

"That first time you came for lunch, you were so shy, so nervous. We saw it. Peggy said when you left that that was it, that you wouldn't be back."

Sullivan looked down at his hands. He could tell from Lionel's voice that he had made

Grandma Young sad, and he dreaded what would come next.

"I wasn't so sure, but when you turned down Thanksgiving, I started to think she was right. Peggy wanted to keep after you, but we had agreed not to badger you, to let you come around if you wanted, to always make the invitation clear, but not to try to insist. So she left it alone. When you agreed to come for Christmas, I think we both worried about how it would be for three weeks. Neither of us wanted to see you so uncomfortable like you had been that first time."

Sullivan continued to study his hands. He hadn't thought much at the time about hurting Grandma Young and Lionel by turning down their invitation, but now it seemed horrible, and the thought of what he had spent Thanksgiving morning doing sent a jolt through his cock and set the twisting in his belly going again.

"But when you got here, you just seemed to settle right in, like you'd been coming here for years, like it was the most natural thing in the world for you to spend the holidays with us. And then at dinner just now, that first Sullivan was back. I can see you were trying to hide it, but there it was."

Sullivan flexed his fingers, then stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry." He was horrified at the sound of his own voice, hoarse and raw.

Lionel put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not giving you a dressing down, kiddo. I just want to know what's wrong. What changed in the space of an hour?"

Sullivan scrabbled around for an answer. The truth was impossible, and he wasn't even sure what it was. He might tell Lionel about his realization in the bathroom, but it seemed too

complicated to go into, and he refused to hurt his grandparents more than he already had by letting them know how much he was coming to hate how his childhood had been, now that he saw how it might have been. And Shelley clamored around the edges of it all, calling out to be recognized, to be allowed to claim a place in this world that might be coming together for Sullivan. He could confess to him as a lover to Lionel, he thought the man's compassion, regardless of his feelings about men together, would see them through that, but it would be a confession that left out the most important part, the part Sullivan couldn't even yet express to himself. Everything was so tangled together, like some knot in his shoelaces that refused to be unpicked and the more he pulled at it the more the shoe tightened on his foot, pinching and squeezing until he wanted to scream with the frustration of it. Sullivan opened his mouth, felt rather than heard an "I" and a gulp fall out of it, then clammed up again. After a moment he said, "I can't."

Lionel pursed his lips, took a breath, and laid his arm across Sullivan's shoulders. "Okay," he said, as he led him out of the darkroom and then back toward the lights of the house.

#

The last day of Sullivan's stay at the Youngs', he spent the afternoon in the darkroom. Yesterday's crisp air and sunshine had dissolved into a damp, drizzly gloom, and Sullivan was glad he took Lionel up on his suggestion of walking the forest's paths yesterday with his camera. Today the light would have turned all of Sullivan's shots mushy. Lionel had set Sullivan up with some expired rolls of film the other day to practice getting the film from its spool onto the film reel in complete darkness, but today Lionel had done this for him saying that it would be a shame

to ruin the roll simply because Sullivan hadn't had enough practice yet. After that he'd asked if Sullivan was sure he didn't want any help with the developing, and at Sullivan's insistence, had left his grandson to work alone. The afternoon was growing late now—Sullivan had developed his film and had joined Grandma Young and Lionel in the breakfast nook for a game of euchre while his negatives dried—but Sullivan refused to rush, telling himself that he could always come back and develop more photographs later. He thought of coming out for a weekend sometime, leaving campus on a Friday, staying till late Sunday afternoon, doing some work in the darkroom, sitting in the den with Lionel and Grandma Young as they bickered good-naturedly over the television, and smiled.

He had set up the trays of chemicals he would need to develop his photographs, and pulled from his pocket his grandfather's instructions detailing how long to leave the photographic paper in each bath. Another slip of paper tumbled out with it and fell to the darkroom floor between Sullivan's sneakered feet. He stared at it for a moment, knowing what it was, before he bent to pick it up. Shelley's phone number, the one he had left with Sullivan with instructions to call if he should freak out. Sullivan had gotten so good at pushing down his thoughts about Shelley, about delaying the realization of his promise to himself to sort through his feelings about him, that the slip of paper was like the sharp shock of static electricity when you climbed out of the car on a cold day—not entirely unexpected but painful all the same. A wave of guilt passed over him at not calling, then intensified at not freaking out. Or, perhaps, for not wanting to talk to Shelley about it when he had. After Lionel had offered to talk about whatever was bothering him, Sullivan had spent a sleepless night, his thoughts jumping from one

thing to another and refusing to settle. Shelley had been in those thoughts, the way he'd been with Sullivan, the way Sullivan had been with him, but he had been like a cut-out, a stand-in, and the realness of Shelley, the fact of him, now hit Sullivan fully in the gut. He could not go on here at the Youngs' forever, he would have to step back into the world of Scotsdale, the world where James Shelley was living, breathing, feeling, and unavoidably real. A decision would have to be made, and Sullivan would have to make it.

He stuffed the phone number back in his pocket and pinned his grandfather's instructions above the long sinks where the chemical trays were set up. He fumbled through making a test strip with the enlarger, too impatient to lay the cardboard carefully on the paper, knowing that his strip would be sloppy, the lines between each section crooked, the sections of the test coming out in wildly varying widths. It didn't really matter, the strip would still serve its function, would still tell Sullivan which exposure length would best reveal the composition of that particular shot, but the sloppiness of the job irritated him, and he slapped the paper into the developer rather than sliding it in gently to ensure even wetting. Developer sloshed against the sides of the tray and though none spilled over, it sent the acrid smell of the chemicals into the air. The smell put him in mind of the burn of chlorinated water going up his nose. He scrubbed his forearm over his eyes before using the tongs to flip the paper over and agitate it slowly in the chemical. The image began to appear. It was the creek a few hundred yards down one of the side paths. Snow covered the rocks which reached above the surface of the water and clung heavily to the branches hanging over the water from the tree-lined bank. The darkness of the longer exposures marched up the strip until the creek itself became indistinguishable from its banks and all faded

into a heavy blackness. Sullivan shook his head and pulled the strip from the developer and slid it into the stop bath. He knew he'd left it in the developer too long. But he finished the process with the fixer and the wash, then hung the strip up to dry.

It was a mess—sloppy work and unusable, and he ought to have thrown it away. But he couldn't stop staring at the way the creek seemed to descend into darkness the farther upstream you looked, how the water ran naturally into the light. He began to clean up, to dump the trays of chemicals, to put away his negatives in the folder his grandfather had provided for him. He would be back to work here again. He patted the test strip dry and slipped it into an envelope. He took it with him when he closed the darkroom doors behind him.

Chapter Fifteen:

Interlude

The academic disciplinary committee had refused to render a verdict on the day of the hearing on the grounds that they needed time to deliberate over the evidence presented and to give due consideration to Howard Walsh's declining to answer the committee's questions. They held a meeting on the day before Christmas Eve to vote on Walsh's future. The vote came in nine in favor of expelling Walsh, two against, and one abstaining. The vote was more than enough to carry the expulsion, and notification was sent to Walsh's permanent address. He was never seen again on campus.

The verdict was clear in the meeting minutes, which were available to any member of Scotsdale's academic community upon request. On Christmas Eve, the local paper ran a small piece, buried in the back pages, about the decision. The campus paper likewise carried a piece on the decision, but that story didn't appear until two weeks into the spring semester; the students of Scotsdale relied on rumor for their information when they returned to campus, and by the time the story ran, it was old news.

The break had dampened the interest in Howard Walsh and the alert hoax among the students and faculty. Time away from school reminded them of other interests and concerns, and beyond a flurry of conversations in the first few days of the term, the Walsh incident no longer sparked the imaginations of Scotsdale. There was one attempt, backed strenuously by President

Humphries, by a student current issues group to hold a debate on the incident, but it was extremely poorly attended and dissolved into a debate about the merits of a national identification card within half an hour.

Howard Walsh never faced criminal charges for his actions. They were dismissed due to insufficient evidence, and there was some speculation on campus that he might have been able to beat the school charges if he had been able to speak freely. But this was only the natural inclination to speculate on what-if scenarios, and died down quickly.

President Humphries found the whole of the Walsh incident immensely unsatisfying, from his inability to grill the perpetrator—something he had relished the thought of since the hoax was first discovered—to the committee's refusal to give a verdict in front of the gathered student and faculty, to the campus's subdued reaction upon the resumption of classes after the break. He longed to agitate for more discussion, more reaction—his backing of the current issues debate his first move in a planned series of such events—but an unnerving discovery in the second week of the semester led him to suspect that his ongoing affair with his secretary may have been discovered, and the distraction kept him from stirring up the sensibilities of his campus.

Chapter Sixteen

Sullivan returned to his dorm room after break late in the evening to find Guy slouched on the couch, eating popcorn and watching an episode of the original *Star Trek* series. He raised an eyebrow and inclined his head toward the television as he dropped his bag on the floor and set his messenger bag on his bed.

"What?" Guy asked. "TOS is the shit." He pronounced it "toss."

"If you say so." Sullivan unpacked his computer, and crawled under the desk to find an open outlet in the power strip. The computer had run completely out of power from sitting unused at the Youngs' for three weeks.

"I mean, *look* at this set. It's like cardboard and last week's paint sample rejects and from that they spun out forty years of franchise. That speaks to some quality there, you know?" He tossed a piece of popcorn in the air, tried to catch it in his mouth, shrugged when it bounced from his nose to the floor. "My brother gave me the whole series on DVD. I'm up to 'Amok Time.' Come watch."

"I don't think so, man. William Shatner gives me the creeps."

Guy gave him a mock-glare. "Fighting words, Sully, my friend." He paused the DVD and stood, stretching and popping his back. He held the bowl of popcorn out. "Have some?"

Sullivan took a handful absently as he watched his computer cycle through its boot-up screens.

"Have a good break?"

Sullivan clicked impatiently on his internet browser's icon. He hadn't really missed the web while it wasn't available to him, but now the fact of three weeks of unread e-mail taunted him. "Yeah." When the browser opened, he turned to Guy, letting his home pages load. "Yeah, I did. Real good."

Guy grinned, punched him softly in the shoulder. "Good. I'm glad." He moved to the DVD player, pushed the eject button.

Sullivan gestured at him. "You can keep watching. I don't mind. Just don't make me look at it."

Guy fished through a pile of slip cases next to the TV and put the DVD away. "Nope. You and I are going to Salvatori's. Welcome back feast. My treat. Got a certificate in my Christmas loot."

Sullivan snorted. "Me too."

"Great! Next time, *your* treat." He pulled his shirt off and headed for the shower. "Head out in half an hour?"

"Sounds good." Sullivan sighed at the sight of his inbox. Over two hundred e-mails, and it looked like most of them were spam. He read through the list, checking the ones he could delete without opening, and started at one about two-thirds of the way down the list. It was from Shelley. And it was dated almost two weeks ago. *Shit*. He stared at it for a minute, then continued to scroll through the list. When he'd gotten it down to the twenty or so messages that

were actually from real people, he started with the ones that sounded the least interesting and worked his way up till the only ones left were the official report of his last semester's grades and the one from Shelley.

He opened his grades. Three A's and a B+. Damn that Susie and her sudden reluctance to hand over history notes anyway. He let his cursor hover over the Shelley e-mail without clicking. He admitted to himself that he'd been hoping to run out of time before Guy bundled him off to dinner, but he could still hear the shower running and Guy singing "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" off-key. He clicked on the message. It was short. "Sullivan~ Just checking. Let me know how it's going. I kind of miss you. ~JS" Sullivan read it through three times, his anger growing every time he read his name, the casual admission, the jaunty initialed signature. Good to know that as he wrestled with himself, that while his stomach tied up in knots, that he was *kind of* missed. He clicked out of the e-mail program and slammed the laptop closed. "Hurry up, Guy!" He snatched his coat from the bed where he'd dropped it and shouldered into it even though it would still be minutes before Guy could be ready to go. "I'm starving!"

#

It was nearly nine when they left for Salvatori's, and the place was deserted. Gino waved at Sullivan and Guy from behind the bar when they walked in. "Sit wherever you like, boys! Be right with you!"

They slid into a booth, and Gino appeared with their usual drinks and two menus tucked under one arm. Guy gulped at his Coke eagerly while Sullivan ignored the tall glass of milk in front of him. "Slow night, huh?" Guy asked as he put the drink down.

Gino slipped into the booth next to Guy. "Between you and me, boys, I kind of like it when all of you Scotsdale apes take off for a few weeks. Quiet, you know? Sure, I hardly break even, but it's a peaceful poverty. What do you say?"

Guy grinned. "If you say so, Gino."

Gino slapped his hands onto the table top. "I do." He looked from Sullivan to Guy, made a little gesture with his hand as if to ask "Again?"

Guy shrugged.

"Special tonight is lobster ravioli. Why I ordered lobster when I knew there'd be no one to eat it is anyone's guess. More for me, I suppose, yes?"

"Two," Guy said, holding up two fingers. He kicked at Sullivan under the table, and Sullivan looked up briefly, then nodded.

"Coming right up, kids."

Guy stared at Sullivan for a minute, twirling his glass of soda in his hands while he did. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he finally asked.

Sullivan shrugged.

"Fuck that." Guy slouched in his seat.

Sullivan took a long drink from his glass, watched Guy. "What?"

"Your moods are getting a little too fucking much, Sull, that's all. I mean, you came back fine, then start yelling at me to hurry up and get ready, and we get here and you're like some twelve-year-old somebody dragged along because they couldn't find a sitter. What's your problem?"

Sullivan shook his head. "Nothing." His anger at Shelley had not dissipated in the half an hour since he'd first read his e-mail, and, worse, it had both grown into a fury and lost the clarity he had started with. He was angrier than he could remember ever being, with a hot, itchy anger, and he could no longer remember exactly why. The last thing he wanted was to try to explain it to Guy. Or, maybe the last thing he wanted was to try to explain it to Shelley. But explaining it to Guy was damn near the top of the list.

Guy dropped it then, and they sat in silence until their meals came. Gino patted Sullivan on the shoulder after he placed his plate in front of him, let the hand linger there for a moment. Sullivan watched as he disappeared into the kitchen. Guy tried to make small talk while they ate, telling about his Christmas with his family, asking Sullivan for details about his stay with the Youngs. Sullivan tried to act interested, tried to explain to Guy about how it felt to be there, but nothing came out right, and their conversation was strained. Guy paid for the meal with his certificate, exclaiming that he still had enough with the certificate to fund a pizza night, and Sullivan drummed his fingers on the table, impatient, but not knowing what for. When Guy stood and put on his coat, Sullivan shook his head at him.

"I'm going to hang around downtown for a little bit. Walk around. Clear my head."

Guy paused in the buttoning up of his coat. "You sure?" He looked to the door of the restaurant, as if assessing the safety of the streets outside from there. "Alone?"

Sullivan half laughed. "I'm a big kid, Guy. I'll be okay."

Guy shook his head. "Just be careful. Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't."

Guy watched him for a minute, absently folding his receipt and putting it in his coat pocket. "Sure you're okay?"

Sullivan tried a smile. "Yeah. Will be. Just need a little time to myself, you know?

Guy nodded, turned to head out.

Sullivan called after him. "I'm sorry I've been that way, man."

Guy turned, kept walking, backward, toward the door. "Don't worry about. Just cut it out." He waved as he ducked out the door.

Sullivan continued to sit at the table, staring at his empty plate, smeared red with vodka sauce. Gino came out of the kitchen and looked over at him, but continued on his way behind the bar. After a minute, Sullivan followed him, crossing the threshold between restaurant and the bartender's domain that was marked by one plywood step.

Gino smiled at him, wiped at a glass. "Can I help you with something, Sullivan?"

Sullivan stepped closer to him, close enough that there were mere inches between them. Gino took a small step backwards, still smiling. "What's going on, kid?" His tone was still friendly, but carried something else too, something with an edge of warning.

Sullivan put his hands on Gino's chest, stepped into him, caught the back of his head with one cupped hand when Gino's next step backward would have sent him crashing into the display of bottles behind the bar. He pressed a kiss to Gino's lips, pulled back when Gino pushed at him. "What the hell, kid?"

"Come on, Gino. You don't mind. I've seen the way you look at me." He leaned in again, his anger pulsing in his ears, seeming to thrum through him, but somehow his hands on Gino remained light, his lips insistent, but gentle. The kiss was longer this time, and maybe Gino was kissing back. But when Sullivan snaked a hand low, fondled Gino's ass, Gino shoved at him, and Sullivan was grabbing at him, turning him, trying to press him against the bar where he'd have more leverage. They grappled then, and on a better day, Sullivan might have had a chance. As it was, Sullivan was all hands, trying to hold when he should have been throwing punches, and the scuffle ended when Gino landed a right cross on Sullivan's jaw. He twisted his wrist when he hit the floor, his other arm grazing a tub of glasses and bringing it down to the floor with a crash. Sullivan reached for the bar, thinking to pull himself up by holding onto it, but he couldn't find the edge and his fingers kept slipping. Gino was speaking, but not to him, and he couldn't make the assurances that everything was all right, to go back to the kitchen, make any sense. And then Gino was crouching in front of him, reaching for his hurt wrist, asking if he was okay, and Sullivan gulped for air, feeling a sob fighting for its way out of him. He pushed at Gino, resumed his attempt to get himself onto his feet. Gino put a hand on his shoulder, effectively keeping him on the floor, said, "Stay put." Then he was handing him a glass of ice and guiding his good hand to hold it against his jaw. Sullivan was hiccupping now in the effort to keep from crying, and the cold against his jaw only made him realize that the rest of him was unbearably hot.

Gino rested a hand on his shoulder, like he had earlier, and now Sullivan read it as friendly only, and he had to fight the urge to shrug it off in embarrassment. "Who can I call, kid?"

"What?" Sullivan sniffed after speaking, and hated himself for it.

"You can't get yourself back to school like this alone. Who can I call to come get you? Guy?"

Sullivan shook his head. "No. Leave Guy alone."

"Somebody else then?"

Lionel. Shelley. Nobody. Sullivan shook his head again, and the movement sent pain shooting through his jaw.

"Okay. Let's get you up off the floor, at least." Gino maneuvered one of Sullivan's arms over his shoulders and half-lifted Sullivan to his feet, then led him to one of the booths and let him drop into it. He sat across from him and studied him for a minute. "We should get that wrist looked at. Probably sprained."

Sullivan was cradling the wrist against his chest, and holding the glass to his jaw with the other hand. "It'll be okay. And I can get myself home all right. Just need a minute." Sullivan closed his eyes, tried to concentrate on something other than the pain in his jaw, in his wrist, tried to convince himself that he wasn't feeling queasy, dizzy.

In the end, Gino did convince Sullivan to tell him a number he could call, and the number he gave him was the one Shelley'd scribbled onto a piece of paper for him at their last meeting. When Shelley arrived, looking thrown together and worried, Sullivan dropped his head to the

table and groaned. He felt a hand on his back, just resting there, and heard Shelley ask Gino what happened.

"Is he drunk?"

"Not as far as I know, Mr. Shelley. He certainly didn't have anything here."

"You say he got into a fight. With you?"

Sullivan liked that Shelley hadn't bothered to correct Gino, hadn't bothered to make it clear that it was "Dr. Shelley." He didn't like where this conversation was heading.

"You could sort of call it that. He made a little bit of a pass at me, and wasn't really taking to my answer."

Sullivan could hear the shrug in Gino's voice and hated him for trying to make light of it, hated himself for being so easy to make light of. "Made a pass at you." Shelley said it quietly, as if he were piecing something together, and Sullivan raised his head from the table, causing Shelley's hand to slide farther down his back.

"I'm sorry," he said. He wasn't really looking at either of the two men, and he realized that he should be apologizing to Gino but that he meant to apologize to Shelley. He wasn't sure what he was apologizing for, but he said it again, and then again, and realized that the tears he'd been holding back were now streaming freely down his face.

"Right," Shelley said. "Time to get him home, I think." He shook hands with Gino and thanked him for calling him.

"No problem, there, Mr. Shelley. I'm kind of fond of the kid."

Shelley pulled gently at Sullivan's good arm. "Come on, Sullivan. Let's get out of here."

Sullivan thought briefly about resisting, about insisting again that he could make it back to the dorms unassisted, but in the end he hurt too much and felt too sick to put in the effort. He let Shelley lead him out the door and to the curb where Shelley's car was parked. Shelley opened the passenger door for him, and Sullivan climbed in, shutting the door a little more forcefully than he meant to when he thought Shelley looked like he might be thinking about leaning in to help Sullivan with his seat belt.

He stared straight forward, looking through the windshield to the nearly deserted streets, the greens and reds of the streetlights reflecting in patches of wet from a cold rain earlier in the evening. Shelley was silent, but he didn't seem mad, just confused. "There was no internet at my grandparents'," Sullivan said as they pulled to a stop at a red light.

Shelley turned to look at him, and Sullivan waited for him to ask why he'd brought this up, was sure he saw Shelley's lips forming the questions at least twice, but then Shelley said, "The e-mail. You never got it."

Sullivan nodded, wished he hadn't. "Not till this evening."

Shelley stared ahead then, and Sullivan watched him, watched his jaw working. Maybe he was mad after all. He didn't speak again until the light had changed and they were rolling through. "You didn't respond to it. Tonight, when you got it. You didn't respond."

"No."

Shelley drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Do I get to know why?"

Sullivan looked out the passenger window, tried to remember how the maze of one-way streets connected. "This isn't the way back to campus?"

"I'm taking you to my place. Get you fixed up."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fucking fine. You've got a sprained wrist. You're getting a hell of a bruise there, and you're practically hysterical. I ought to take you to the ER."

"The fuck I am." The hardness in his voice startled him a little, and he relaxed back into his seat, willing himself to calm down, to be less fucking *angry*.

Shelley looked at him, longer than he should have. "You were," he said as he turned his gaze back to the road.

After a few minutes, Shelley spoke again. "You hit on Gino?"

Sullivan laughed, clamped his mouth shut over the sound when he realized how close to hysterical it sounded. "I sort of attacked him, more like. Thought he was going to go for it for a second."

"Why?"

"Is this some kind of jealousy thing?"

Shelley slammed his hand into the steering wheel, hit the horn accidentally. Sullivan shrunk away from the sound, pushed himself against the car door. "Christ, Sullivan. No, it's not some kind of jealousy thing. I was worried about you, okay? I'm just trying to figure out what's going on with you."

Something in Sullivan seemed to snap. "I was angry! Balls-flaming, blood-boiling, all-

out, fucking *pissed off*, that's what was going on with me! Jesus *Christ*, Jamie." Sullivan stopped at using Shelley's first name, thought he could go on, but he wouldn't be saying anything new, so he gripped the edge of the car seat beneath him to try to keep the words inside him.

"At Gino?

Sullivan's eyes stung, and the tears he shed now were hot against his face. "No, not at Gino. Just take me home, okay? I can go to the school health center in the morning if you're that worried."

Shelley didn't say anything, but he didn't alter their course either. A few minutes later he pulled into a driveway and parked. "Just come in with me for a few minutes. Let me wrap your wrist and take a few minutes to settle down. In half an hour, I'll drive you to the dorm or call you a cab. Up to you."

Sullivan reached across himself to release the latch on the door. "Fine. Half an hour." He headed up the stairs to Shelley's porch as if he'd been there before and waited by the front door for Shelley to catch up with the key.

#

Sullivan sat on a chair in Shelley's kitchen holding to his jaw an ice pack Shelley'd handed him. Shelley was down the hall in the bathroom rustling through cabinets. He reemerged a few minutes later and put a bottle of ibuprofen down on the table in front of Sullivan and moved to the sink to draw him a glass of water. Sullivan tried to get the cap off the

bottle with one hand, but it was a safety cap, and he couldn't get his fingers to twist the cap into the right position one-handed. Shelley took the bottle from him, opened it, and poured two pills into Sullivan's hand. Sullivan downed them, then watched as Shelley pulled another chair up in front of him. He produced a rolled-up ace bandage and gestured for Sullivan to give him his hand.

"It's okay," Sullivan said.

Shelley closed his eyes for a second, then said, "Let me help, Sully."

Sullivan nodded and put out his hand for Shelley to take. Shelley took one end of the bandage in his fingers and let the rolled portion rest in his lap. He placed the end over Sullivan's palm then wrapped it twice diagonally across the hand between his thumb and fingers before twining it down around the wrist itself. When he was done, he fastened the bandage with two safety pins, maneuvering the pins into the layers of fabric with a gentleness which did not surprise Sullivan and a dexterity that did.

"There," Shelley said, giving Sullivan back his hand. "It'll do. I don't know what happened to the original fasteners." He gestured at the ice pack Sullivan still held to his face. "You might better put that on the wrist now, I think."

Sullivan put the pack on the table in front of him and rested his wrist against it. The pressure from the bandage lessened the pain, but he could hardly feel the cold through it. His eyes burned from earlier but he no longer felt like he was in any danger of crying again. He just wanted so badly to close his eyes and sleep.

"I'll set you up on the couch, if you like," Shelley said.

"No, I want to go home," Sullivan said and stood, but he walked to the couch in the next room and lay down on it. Shelley appeared in a minute with a pillow and a blanket.

"Sit up."

Sullivan did, and Shelley arranged the pillow behind his head, then draped the blanket over him. He sat sideways at the end of the couch with Sullivan's feet and leaned his elbow on the back of it, let his head drop onto his hand. "Tell me why you're mad at me."

Sullivan glared at him through slitted eyes, torn between being impressed that he'd figured it out and annoyed that he wanted to talk now. "Your e-mail," he said finally, knowing that was nothing like an answer.

"What about—"

"Too casual."

"Too casual."

Sullivan nodded. "Too off-hand. Like the answer didn't really matter."

Shelley kept leaning on his hand, didn't change his lazy sprawl at all. "Bullshit."

Sullivan felt the anger rising in him again, sat up so he faced Shelley. "Don't tell me how I feel."

Shelley didn't move. "Then don't be dishonest about how you feel."

"You think I'm not honest about how I feel?"

"I think you're telling half-truths, Sullivan. I think you're scared shitless and even more scared to figure out what's scaring you."

Sullivan shook his head.

"No?"

"No."

"How was your stay at your grandparents'?"

"Fantastic. Never had a better time."

Shelley smiled. "That's great. What did you decide?"

"About what?"

Shelley's face turned hard. "Don't be that way. You know about what."

Sullivan lay back down. "I didn't give it much thought, really. Was having too nice a time."

Shelley was on top of him in a second, pinning his good hand above him and letting his body weight settle against Sullivan's hips and legs. "You didn't think about this at all, then?" He leaned in, licked at Sullivan's neck, kissed him softly, then nipped quick at his bottom lip.

Sullivan yelped at the nip, tried to buck Shelley off of him. "Let me up." His voice sounded frantic to him, and this was something like panic, not the delicious desire to give in that he had felt before.

Shelley backed off immediately, retreating to the other end of the couch again. Sullivan sat up, swung his legs to the floor.

"You weren't afraid of that before," Shelley said. "Before when you'd never done it before, when you had no reason to believe that I'd stop if you asked me to, you went down like you'd been waiting to all your life. What's different?"

Sullivan shook his head, tossed the ice pack away from him onto the coffee table.

"Why'd you shove Gino around today? You like him? You wanted to start something with him? Wanted to fuck him?"

Sullivan shook his head, a little more vehemently with each question.

"Why, Sullivan? You were mad at me? You wanted to hurt me?"

Sullivan grabbed at the ice pack, flung it across the room. "I wanted to be in fucking control of something, okay? Just for once, I wanted to decide, to say this is how it's going to go down, and have it go down just like that."

Sullivan dropped his head into his hands, but there were no tears this time. Shelley moved closer to him on the couch, put an arm around him in a side hug. After a moment, Sullivan rested his head on Shelley's shoulder.

"Was that what this was all about from the start?"

"Maybe. At first."

"And then the professor you seduced turned into a great dominating bastard."

Sullivan closed his eyes. "Something like that."

"And you're afraid your grandparents won't like how much you like that."

"Not just them. Everybody. Anybody."

Shelley nodded. "I'm sorry, Sullivan."

They sat that way together until Sullivan fell asleep against Shelley's shoulder and was eased back onto the couch again.

#

From the easy chair next to the couch, Shelley watched Sullivan sleep. His cat jumped into his lap, and he petted her idly. He had agonized over the e-mail he'd sent to Sullivan, arguing with himself about sending it at all, about what it ought to say. Then, when he had gotten no reply, he'd fought with himself about what that meant. Sullivan was shoving him off. He was mad. Dead. It had never occurred to him that he'd never received it. And then the call from the owner of Salvatori's—Sullivan's hurt and asking for you. He felt like he'd been through a wringer by the time he'd made the ten-minute drive to the restaurant, never mind what he and Sullivan had gone through in the few hours since then. He wanted to sleep, could feel sleep waiting for him if he would just give into it, but he was afraid to take his eyes from Sullivan, wanting to be ready if he was needed, afraid that he might slip away.

He did sleep a bit in the early hours of the morning, then woke again to watch the room brighten with the sunrise and Sullivan stir on the couch. He was a mess when he awoke, his hair sticking every which way, his jaw a startling purple, his eyes red and puffy. Sullivan smiled at him as he scrubbed his good hand over his face. "I need a shower," he said.

Shelley nodded, told him to help himself, straightened up the couch, retrieved the ice pack Sullivan had thrown the night before, and started on breakfast while he was in the shower. Sullivan emerged looking a bit brighter but still like the victim of bad night. He sat at the table, resting the elbow of his bad arm on it, holding the wrapped wrist in the air.

Shelley set a couple of boxes of cereal on the table along with two bowls and two spoons. He peered at the fingers of Sullivan's bad hand. "That feel all right? You have feeling in your fingers?" He took the fingers gently in his hand, examined them for purpling. "You really shouldn't have slept with it wrapped."

Sullivan wiggled his fingers. "Seems okay."

"We'll rewrap after you eat. How's it feel?"

Sullivan shrugged. "Aches. Not as bad as last night."

"You should see someone about it. Make sure it's not broken."

Sullivan pulled one of the boxes of cereal closer to him and poured some into a bowl. Shelley pulled a carton of milk from the fridge and set it on the table at Sullivan's elbow. He watched Sullivan eat. About half-way through the bowl, Sullivan cursed under his breath and fished a cell phone from his pocket. "Guy's probably freaking out," he said as he flipped the phone open. He was quiet for a second, then looked up at Shelley. "Gino called him to tell him I was all right. Guy sent me a text letting me know he knew."

Shelley poured himself his own bowl of cereal. "Sounds like Gino's a good friend."

Sullivan stared at his phone for another second, then put it away. "I wonder how Gino got his number."

Shelley shrugged and pushed his cereal around in the milk. "You can ask him later."

Sullivan grunted in agreement, then was quiet. A few minutes later he looked up at Shelley. "We're done, aren't we?"

Shelley raised his eyebrows. He wanted to deny it, wanted to say that they could work past anything if they wanted to badly enough, but he knew they wouldn't, knew that the timing for them had been too wrong, that they had gone about things too much in the wrong order for a relationship between them to ever settle down into something right and stable. He dropped his spoon, let it clatter against the side of the bowl as he leaned back in his chair. "I think so."

Sullivan stared into his cereal. "Are you going to be okay?"

Shelley looked up at him, startled. "Am *I* going to be okay?"

Sullivan nodded without looking up from the bowl.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

Sullivan's shrug made Shelley want to reach across the table and wrap him in his arms, but he resisted. "I'll be all right."

"Because it wasn't so long ago you were saying how you weren't going to let me run away, and all."

Shelley watched Sullivan as he chased his cereal around the bowl with his spoon. "I don't think I have."

Sullivan looked up at that, seemed to be mulling it over. "No," he said at last. "Maybe not."

They sat in silence while they finished their breakfast, then Sullivan said, "I guess I should be going."

Shelley stood. "I'll drive you."

Sullivan shook his head. "I think I want to walk."

"It's almost four miles." It wasn't quite a protest.

"Give me time to clear my head."

Shelley stood by, unsure what to do, how to behave, while Sullivan fetched his coat and started to struggle into it. Shelley stepped behind him and held the right sleeve open so Sullivan could easily slide his bad arm into it. Then he turned him around, and buttoned the coat for him. The expression on Sullivan's face was not quite a smirk, it was tempered by something softer, and Shelley leaned in to press a closed-mouth kiss to Sullivan's lips. The smirk left his face at that, and Shelley tugged gently at his lapels when he pulled back from the kiss. "Be careful," he said.

Sullivan nodded, opened his mouth to speak, closed it, then tried again. "About the liking to be shoved around . . . ."

Shelley smiled. "You'll figure it out."

#

Guy raised an eyebrow when Sullivan came in, his cheeks flushed red from the walk in the cold, but didn't say anything. He looked as if he were about to speak when Sullivan took off his coat and revealed his wrapped wrist, but he just shook his head slightly and turned back to his computer. Sullivan dumped his coat on the foot of his bed and lay down with an arm flung over his eyes.

"Are you all right?" Guy asked after a few minutes, his tone almost disapproving.

"Yes?"

"Well are you or aren't you?" Guy's voice came from the foot of the bed.

Sullivan lifted his arm, peered at his roommate, who had moved to where he could see Sullivan and watched him now, arms folded across his chest.

"I will be."

Guy snorted. "Okay then."

It was two weeks later that Sullivan found the test strip he'd made before leaving his grandparents'. He ran his finger over the image, tracing the way the image grew lighter and lighter. He fished a push pin from his desk drawer and pinned the strip to the wall above his desk just as Guy came into the room. He leaned over to get a better look at the picture.

"Neat. What is it?"

"A reminder."

Guy dropped his bag by his desk and brushed snow from his shoulders onto the carpet. "What of?"

"I don't know yet."

Sullivan waited for Guy to make some kind of remark, but he only paused for a moment, then smiled and clapped Sullivan on the shoulder as he passed him. "Good," he said.

#

Sullivan Young's turn-around surprised his academic advisor, but went unnoticed by most everyone else. It wasn't just the improvement in his grades—they always had been passable, just—it was something in his attitude. He came to advising meetings with questions now, with goals and plans for meeting them. When his advisor asked him why the change,

Sullivan shrugged it off and asked him if he knew if an upper-level physics seminar held only every two years would be open to students outside the major. The advisor dropped the subject, but liked to tell himself that it had been his own lectures and cajoling that had finally gotten through.

Scotsdale lost James Shelley at the end of the spring semester; in a move unheard of at Scotsdale, he resigned only two years after achieving tenure and with no other jobs on offer. No one seemed able to get him to explain why—he answered them with a smile and a shrug—but his friends in the English department noted that he was happier—almost more himself—as he finished up the last few weeks of the semester than he ever had been before.

James Shelley last saw Sullivan Young in the faculty parking lot. The young man was crossing the lot with a load of books cradled in one arm and his other arm wrapped loosely around the waist of a boy Shelley had never seen before. Shelley had the door of his car open, about to climb in, and he tooted the horn once, and waved when Sullivan looked his way. Sullivan waved back.

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VITA

Laura Elizabeth Koons spent her childhood in Northeastern and Central Pennsylvania. She graduated from Abington Heights High School in 1999 before earning a B.A. in English and history at Lycoming College, Williamsport, PA, in 2003. She received her M.A. in English with a concentration in fiction writing from Ohio University in 2005. This dissertation fulfills the requirements for her Ph.D. in English, with a concentration in fiction writing, which she received in May 2010.