

ONE

When Mike McAfee opened his mother's front door on that Tuesday morning to find the perfect circle of a TV camera lens looming just past the tip of his nose, he knew that they had found her body. He studied the circle, huge and black like an eclipsing moon, and felt it cast darkness over his world. It blocked out the reporter, the house across the street, his ability to recall Jenna's face. He felt neither grief nor relief in that instant, just the awful feeling that it was all about to happen again. The tabloid smears, the police interrogations, the fear that innocence might not be enough. He squeezed the door knob to keep his knees from buckling.

He had come here, a thousand miles from Denver, to get away from the round-the-clock insanity. The opposite of the childhood fantasy, he had run away from the circus to go home. Looking at the camera, he saw that the circus had come back for him.

Before the reporter could speak, Mike began to formulate sentences in his mind, to note that he had not yet heard from the authorities but that this was the sad day everyone feared would come. He considered reaffirming that he had nothing to do with Jenna's fate and no knowledge of how she came to meet it, but he thought better of any immediate declarations of innocence. Today is about her, he thought. I'll begin fighting for my life again tomorrow.

And so when the sunny blonde reporter emerged from the shadow of the lens and asked "what is your reaction to the news that Jenna Kaye has been found alive and well in Reno, Nevada?" he had no words for her. He could not speak of what he could not believe.

Back inside, Mike discovered that he would have learned the news earlier had he not silenced his phone in an effort to get a little extra sleep. He found a string of text messages, missed calls and voice mails from ecstatic friends ("Dude! OMG!!") and scoop-seeking reporters ("pls call asap").

As he scrolled through messages, the phone buzzed in his hand. *Edward Kaye* lit up the screen. *Edward Kaye*. Millionaire, entrepreneur, philanthropist. The man who hired Mike, promoted him, groomed him, anointed him, blessed his intentions, and shared in his shock before suspecting him, accusing him and firing him.

"Hello, Edward," Mike said.

"Good morning, Mike. I assume you've heard by now."

"I found out just a minute ago. A TV crew rang my doorbell."

"Mike, I'm so sorry," Edward said. At first Mike thought Edward was apologizing for the way the news was delivered.

As they spoke, Mike turned on the television. CNN showed a picture of a police station and the banner headline "She's Alive!"

“Have you talked to her?” Mike asked.

“I’m here with her now.”

“Is she OK?”

Edward paused. “She has not been harmed by anyone.”

“I can drive to St. Louis and catch a flight. I could be there by late afternoon.”

“I would send a plane if it were a good idea for you to come.”

Mike paused to consider all of the messages contained in that statement. “So I take it the wedding’s off?”

“You deserve better,” Edward said.



The Reno cop thought she looked familiar, but the face didn’t quite register, nor did the identity on the license, Stella Driver, which seemed like an ironic name for one who swerved between lanes with so little apparent care. It started like a routine traffic stop until he ran the license and considered that the sweet thing behind the wheel looked pretty good for being eighty-four years old. And dead.

Things began to crystallize for Officer Riley an hour later in a conference room back at the station when the platinum blonde with the pixie cut and the banging body confessed her true identity. In that moment, Riley saw his future unfold. By morning he’d be on the *Today* show, by noon he’d have an agent, and by night they’d have a deal for a book, a TV movie and a line of action figures depicting the chiseled physique of the courageous cop who had rescued America’s missing angel. He took a moment to ponder whether he should immediately resign in an effort to cleanse himself of the department’s prohibition on officers accepting million-dollar rewards.

And then Jenna Kaye pitched forward and puked all over the conference table and Taylor Riley’s dreams.

“Fugggh,” she said, and rested her forehead in the puddle.



By the time Edward Kaye finished talking, the loop of TV images included video of a guy in a doorway sporting a Ramones t-shirt and a bad case of bed-head. Mike recognized himself as the slack-jawed man, but just barely. He was more interested in the graphic that identified him by name in big letters, with smaller type that declared “Did not kill Jenna Kaye.” Mike assumed he spoke for all of America when he muttered “no shit.”

Still, it was no more absurd than the words that Edward had spoken. Though Jenna had many details yet to provide, the rough sketch is that she had attended her ten-year high school reunion shortly before vanishing, and had become reacquainted with her senior-year boyfriend, Craig Doolittle, who possessed the most fitting name Edward could imagine. Mike had not attended the reunion with Jenna because he was downtown in a hotel ballroom, in a tuxedo, introducing Edward as he received the Person of the Year

award from Denver's Council of Philanthropy. Apparently while Mike was hobnobbing with Mile High society, Jenna was boot-knocking with a high school loser who had migrated to Nevada, where he dealt cards in a casino and Chinese Viagra on the internet. Whatever Jenna knew of Doolittle's vocation seemed not to bother her, at least not enough to dampen her rekindled passion or her unstated desperation to escape her life. Doolittle was savvy about the perils of leaving digital breadcrumbs, so he and Jenna communicated by mail over the next few weeks, burning each letter after reading. She quietly stockpiled thousands in cash, no sweat for a child of such wealth. Then on that fateful Sunday, Craig Doolittle pulled up to the curb and she hopped into his Camaro with only the clothes on her back and the money in her bag, leaving her phone behind to preclude any electronic tracing. It sounded like "Thunder Road" meets *Breaking Bad*, Mike thought. Jenna and her old new flame were in Reno by Monday morning, and no one knew to talk to Doolittle because no one knew that she had any ongoing relationship with him. She chopped her lustrous chestnut hair, bleached it blonde, took to wearing oversized sunglasses, and hid in plain sight at Craig's house for months. He procured a counterfeit ID for her in the name of a recently-deceased local woman, which Jenna used primarily for the purpose of buying liquor. She was out shopping when federal agents raided Doolittle's house and seized his implements of online drug-peddling. As she approached the house with a trunk full of groceries, she saw the fleet of law enforcement vehicles parked out front. Without being spotted, she turned left and then turned despondent. Jenna stopped in a bar, looking for a cool place to sit and think, but mostly she just sat and drank, which inspired the driving that caught Officer Riley's eye. At the station, she emptied her stomach and then spilled her guts, never wanting her daddy quite as much as she did right then.

She called Edward. Within an hour he was on a private jet. Within three he was on the ground preparing for a wave of attention that no man, no matter how powerful, could hold back. The list of people who knew that Jenna was alive before Mike did included Edward's general counsel, a crisis communications expert, a Hollywood publicist and the governors of Colorado and Nevada. Edward didn't want to call Mike until Jenna confirmed that he had nothing to do with her disappearance, and by the time she did, it was the middle of the night in Illinois, and so Edward waited until morning.

"At least she won't be charged," Edward said.

"With what?"

"Abetting the distribution of controlled substances. They've agreed to give her immunity in exchange for information about Doolittle."

"What a relief," Mike deadpanned.

"Mike, you have a right to be angry."

"It beats the right to remain silent."

"Jenna is going to have to account for what she's done. I can't apologize for her. But I can apologize for myself and my family and my company. You've suffered terribly and unfairly, and I regret the part I've played in that. I don't expect you to forgive me, at least

not yet, but I want you to understand how sorry I am. In a few days, after we get Jenna back home, I want to talk to you about coming back to work.”

“We both know that can’t happen.”

“I know it feels that way today,” Edward said, “but there’s no telling how it will feel next week. I’ll be in touch. Until then, be well.”

Mike hung up and wondered what to do with the rest of the morning besides avoiding the swelling mass of reporters he could see through the curtains. Then a text message popped up. *Put on a ball cap and come to your back door. We’re going on an adventure.*

Mike opened the back door and Greg tumbled in, ninja-style.

“Nice somersault,” Mike said. “So what are we doing?”
“I have our getaway all figured out, but first, have you made coffee yet? I was up late last night. Still a little groggy. I feel like I ought to be better caffeinated in order to properly execute the plan.”

“Use the Keurig. Make whatever you’d like. Make me one, too.”

Greg brewed two cups of Italian roast and used the steam from the first to liven his face before taking a sip. “Quality shit,” he said.

“So what’s the plan?” Mike asked.

“As soon as I finish this cup, we’re going to bolt out the back, over the fence, through the Hendersons’ yard, and down to Polk Street. We’ll be outside the perimeter of the news trucks there.”

“There’s a perimeter?”

“You have the world’s attention, my friend. There are cars parked along Jefferson for two blocks. The previous record for cars parked on Jefferson was a block and a half for the homecoming parade that year the football team was good. Once we get to Polk, we can hoof it down to the shop and you can hang in the office, where we’ll discuss phase two of Operation Prairie Storm.”

“Was there anyone in the back yard?”

“Nope. All clear. They seem to be adhering to a no-trespassing protocol. But we better run for it before those dicks from TMZ get here. I doubt that they’ll be so respectful of your domicile.”

“My domicile?”

“My brother the lawyer drops fancy words on me from time to time. Some of them stick.” Greg broke into a broad grin as the steam condensed on his beard. “You’ve been back in my life for a week. Most eventful seven days in ages. Glad to have you home. Also, it should go without saying, I’m glad you didn’t kill your fiancée.”

“Did you have any doubts?”

“If you were a killer, I’d have been dead a long time ago. Now go throw some decent clothes into a backpack.”

Mike came back two minutes later with a bag slung across his shoulder.

Greg gulped the last of his coffee. “Time to slip out the back, Jack,” he said.

With that, the two old friends bolted out the door, sprinted across the yard and leaped over the fence, executing ninja maneuvers they had perfected nearly thirty years earlier.

A few minutes later, several blocks away, they sat inside the office as Greg unveiled the rest of the plan. Mike didn’t love it, but he knew that he would either have talk to the reporters or hide from them, and with his life so fully ripped open there was little to be

gained from seclusion. And, anyway, things had to get better now that he had been vindicated. Have a press conference, answer some questions, get on with life. And if his friend drummed up a little business in the process, so be it.

“All right,” Mike said. “Let’s do it. I’ll rough out some notes while you’re gone.”

Greg stepped out to the alley behind the shop and on to his vintage Schwinn Sting-Ray chopper with the zebra-striped banana seat. He rode the eight blocks to Mike’s house, down shady streets, past old colonials that served as fraternity houses. They must have been private residences at one point, Greg thought, but he couldn’t imagine that anyone in Cameron could’ve afforded such extravagant homes seventy-five years earlier. He envisioned an alternate history for his hometown, a place where railroad barons settled in plantation-style homes, drank 100-proof bourbon, smoked cigars of exotic Caribbean provenance, stocked libraries with leather-bound volumes of Verlaine and Rimbaud, kept mistresses, threw debauched dinner parties and enjoyed raucous dialogues on philosophy, music and politics. Greg wanted to believe that this sort of thing was possible here. He needed to feel that there was some *there* here, some reason to exist in this dead end, something to hope for. Maybe Mike McAfee and his attendant calamity were just what this town needed.

Greg approached the media throng from behind. Seven satellite trucks, twice as many cameras, even more microphones and steno pads. He was never good at estimating crowds. He could be in a high school gym or a pro football stadium, look around, and conclude that one thousand people were in attendance. And so as he got closer to the McAfee house, he surveyed the scene and thought to himself “maybe a thousand.”

Greg put the kickstand down, snaked his way through the bodies to the front steps, and shouted until he had the attention of the crowd. Ringed by cameras and microphone flags for ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC and CNN, Greg stood his straightest and cleared his throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Glanville T. Allen. I am Mr. McAfee’s . . . *au pair*,” Greg said as he stood before the crowd in his cargo shorts, Chuck Taylor high-tops and Mr. Bubble t-shirt. “Mr. McAfee is not here. He is at my place of business. And he is prepared to speak to all of you. He would be glad to answer your questions to the best of his current ability. After that, it is our hope that you would allow him his privacy. The information about Ms. Kaye that has become available makes clear that Mr. McAfee has done nothing to warrant your attention. He is merely an innocent bystander.”

Back inside Greg’s office, Mike watched the scene unfold on television as the graphic “Glanville T. Allen, Mike McAfee’s *au pair*” stretched across his friend’s girth. “Jenna isn’t dead, but fact-checking is,” he thought to himself.

“Now, if you will follow me, I will lead you to Mr. McAfee,” Greg said. He descended the front steps and the assembled press parted for him. Greg imagined that he was Chuck Heston in *The Ten Commandments*. As the sea closed in his wake, he mounted the Sting-Ray, which he thought of as a chariot, and then considered that he was conflating Heston flicks.

A news helicopter had arrived, and Mike watched through the eye in the sky. It was a glorious day in late May, and his hometown looked more beautiful from above than it had ever appeared at street level. The action was framed by trees so thick with leaves that they looked like broccoli stalks. Greg pedaled his three-speed bike as news trucks fell in line behind him, a slow procession down a small-town street, with oncoming traffic stopped to accommodate a wide convoy travelling at fifteen miles per hour behind a sweaty bearded cherub struggling to propel his bicycle up a gentle incline.

The trip took just a few minutes, but after all the back-and-forth of the previous hour, Greg's thighs burned like he had ascended a French mountain. He parked his bike along the street in front of the shop. Looking at the sign, reporters wondered if he had taxed himself so greatly that he needed to stop for a sandwich. Greg bent over and grabbed the ends of his shorts, panting and sweating. "All . . . right . . . this . . . is . . . the . . . place," he said before beginning to catch his breath. "If . . . you'll gather . . . here on the sidewalk . . . I'll get Mr. McAfee."

Greg took keys out of his pocket and let himself in. He walked straight to the refrigerator next to the cash register, grabbed a sixteen-ounce Diet Coke and drained it with a single forceful pull. He said hello to Alyssa, who was preparing for the day's business. Then he stepped into the office and looked at his friend.

"You said you were my *au pair*," Mike said.

"I said that? Man, I was so nervous. I think I meant *attaché*. That has more panache than saying I'm your friend. Anyway, it's French. No one will understand what I said."

"Everyone understands, Greg. It means nanny. You said you were my nanny."

"Well, that doesn't make any sense," Greg said with a snort. "Why would you need a nanny? Don't worry. They'll fix it in post-production."

"There isn't any post-production. This is news."

"You're being naïve, Mike. This isn't news. It's entertainment. You're going to need an agent."

"I don't need an agent."

"Well, you certainly need an agent more than you need a nanny, but that can wait until later. Come on. You need to do this now."

Mike stepped into the unlit dining area and saw the reporters through the windows. He looked at the television behind the counter and saw the same scene from above. The instant he stepped through the door, the snapping sounds of camera shutters and shouts of "Mike! Mike! Mike!" engulfed him.

The bewilderment Mike felt when first hearing the news about Jenna had given way to other, darker feelings. Ninety minutes after talking to Edward, he tried to calm himself. An inner monologue repeated that it must be more complicated than it seems, that more details will emerge. But he couldn't imagine what they were. His fiancée had ditched him for another man, and had left him as the prime suspect in her disappearance. *Gonna take a shitload of mitigating circumstances*, he thought.

Mike stepped forward and put up his hands like a quarterback quieting the home crowd. "Thank you for coming here," he said, voice quavering. "I'm sorry about avoiding you back at the house, but I wanted to show some respect for my mother's neighbors and not overrun their block."

Greg stood to the side and grinned while the whole nation saw the Mellow Submarine sign glowing behind his friend.

"I don't know much more than you do, but I am overjoyed by the news that Jenna is alive, and I am grateful to know that she seems to be well, or at least unharmed. I have not spoken to Jenna, but I have spoken to her father, Edward Kaye, and we had a good talk. Mr. Kaye was very gracious. As you can imagine, his primary concern is for the safety and health of his daughter, but he also expressed his concern for my well-being. Edward Kaye is a good man. Despite what has been reported over the past few weeks, there is no animosity between us, certainly not anymore."

Mike dropped his head slightly, closed his eyes for a moment, and looked back at the reporters.

"This day isn't about me in any respect, but I do want to take the chance to thank all of the people who have supported me through these past few months, which have been hard. I feared that the woman I loved might be dead, and I fell under suspicion. I understand why that was, but it only served to make an unbearable situation even worse. Suffice it to say that I'm grateful to many good people in my life, including my friend Greg Allen, in front of whose shop we are standing today. With that, I'm happy to answer your questions to the best of my ability."

Mike barely saw faces. He just heard voices.

"Was Jenna kidnapped?"

"My understanding is that she was not, but I have no first-hand information."

"Did she leave Denver of her own free will?"

"It appears that she did. But again, I don't know anything first-hand. Other people will be able to answer that better than I will."

"Did you have anything to do with her leaving?"

"No."

"Did the two of you fight before she left?"

"No."

"Did you have any idea that something might be wrong?"

"No."

"Did she run off with another man?"

"It seems that she did."

"Do you know his name?"

"I have heard a name, but just once, and I'm not sure I remember it correctly. I wouldn't want to give the wrong name."

"Was the name Craig Doolittle?"

"Again, I'm going to leave that to someone else."

“Did you ever hit Jenna?”

“No,” Mike said and flinched. “No. No.”

“Did you ever threaten her?”

“No. Emphatically, no.”

“Did you abuse her in any way?”

“Absolutely not. No.”

This was beginning to seem like not such a good idea.

“Why did she leave?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Are you going to see her?”

“No. At least not immediately.”

“Does that mean that the wedding is off?”

“I think that’s fair to assume at the moment.”

“What’s the status of your relationship?”

“I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“How did you feel when you heard that she had run off with another man?”

“I really haven’t had the chance to process that yet.”

“Do you still love her?”

Afterwards, Mike didn’t remember his answer to the question, or anything that followed. He just remembered the whooshing of blood in his ears and the cold prickling on his face. He asked Greg if he had passed out at any point, and Greg said no, he’d handled it all like a champ.

After ten minutes of questions that grew increasingly inane and repetitive, Greg jumped in front of Mike like a corner man shielding a battered boxer. “OK, folks, we’re finished. But I know that you’ve been at this for hours and you must be hungry. Mellow Submarine is now open for lunch.”

THREE

The Cameron he had known was not quite the Cameron that Mike found when he returned. It was the Dadaist version, familiar but rearranged. Walker's, his family's preferred grocer, had been razed and replaced by a Wal-Mart. Easton Elementary, where he attended through fourth grade, became a school for students with special needs. The county courthouse, a castle when Mike was a kid, suffered from the addition of an annex that resembled a big shoebox. Perhaps that was where Lady Justice kept her pumps.

Morgan Park remained, though it seemed so much smaller than when Mike played little league baseball on its lone diamond. In the first days after he came back, Mike would go there and wedge his adult ass into a child's swing and wonder about creation. A cousin who was a Bible literalist once took a trip to a museum devoted to Creationism and then emailed a missive to everyone he knew, claiming to have seen proof that the earth was made in seven days just a few thousand years ago, and that all the science that claimed otherwise was either a hoax or a cock-up in the calculations. The message didn't offend Mike, it just made him sad. If God is all-powerful, Mike thought, surely He is capable of a metaphor, and that's how Mike chose to think of the book of Genesis in the time he thought of it at all.

As he looked at buildings that had gone up in spots where totems of his youth had come down, Mike thought that the world couldn't have been created in seven days because it was still being made, with ice caps collapsing into the Atlantic and volcanoes pumping bedrock into the Pacific, and there was probably some crazy seismic shit happening in the Indian Ocean that he had never even heard about. He thought to himself that the issue was mildly fascinating, and then he thought that nothing could be "mildly" fascinating, only vaguely interesting. And since he found the topic only vaguely interesting, someone else would have to write the book rebunking all of the museum's debunking. He had no immediate plans to get off the swing in the name of science.

Mike had been home a week when he decided to survey the town's ongoing evolution on foot, taking long walks, five or six miles a day. He took inventory of old friends' houses. He retraced the steps he took to the public pool years before. He went in search of familiar tastes and smells. To his delight, Murray's was still there and still serving the nachos with chicken and avocado. The aroma took him back to 1989, which he recalled was a very good year.

During the fourth such excursion, Mike walked up Monroe Avenue and turned left on Van Buren, a leafy street named for a nondescript president. It drew its heavy shade from elms planted by a long-dead history professor in honor of the little-known fact that the nation's eighth commander-in-chief grew up speaking Dutch. Given that most of the townsfolk couldn't tell an elm from an oak, and none knew this piece of historical ephemera, the reference remained a secret that the professor took to his grave. In fact,

half the people in town still called the street Van Doren, so dubbed in the 1950s by teenage boys beguiled by the cantilevered cleavage of a certain Hollywood starlet. If only the president had sported better tits.

Back in high school, Mike walked this street at least once a week to visit Gould Records. Marty Gould opened the store in the Seventies, selling records, eight-track tapes and other implements for expanding one's aesthetic horizons. Before he had a CD player, a pubescent Mike McAfee hovered for hours over the record bins, first flipping through the hits of the day and then graduating to hipper fare, including the great alt-rock bands of the early Nineties. But Marty's influence on the impressionable boy helped make Mike a young Bob Dylan fanatic. Before he was old enough to drive, Mike was especially fond of the lesser-loved records: *New Morning*, *Planet Waves*, *Street Legal*. To love any Dylan at age fifteen projected depth, Mike thought. To love it all, well, that projected dimension.

After years away from home, Mike assumed the shop would be gone, the record store having grown as quaint as the rotary phone, but he walked that way just so he would know. And even if it were gone, it could still be his secret and sacred place, a spot for quiet reflection, like a Civil War battlefield. Or it could be a time machine, a place that transported him to his younger self, to a boy who had never heard of Jenna Kaye. Some speck within him felt that if he approached the place from just the right angle, he could wish it true and go back in time, walk into Gould Records, and warn the kid flipping through the bins not to take the job in Denver.

As he rounded the corner from Van Buren to Division Street, Mike felt his heart flutter. And when he got close enough to see that the Gould Records sign had been replaced by one that said Mellow Submarine, he felt both relief and a new sense of anticipation, as if this might be a worthy successor. Could be something. Could be nothing. Could be sandwiches.

Mike stepped through the door, saw the face behind the counter, and felt a surge in his chest that recalled the time he touched an electric fence on a dare from the boy who had grown into the man he now saw. Through the beard and the pounds and the years, there stood Greg Allen. They had been friends. Then they had been rivals. Then they had been nothing. It had been twenty years, more than half his life, since Mike saw Greg in the flesh. But there he was, bouncing his head to an old soul tune and making a sandwich for a pretty young woman. Mike and Greg used to hang out inside Gould Records and pretend not to look at the college girls, with their perfect skin and buoyant breasts. They still pretended not to look, but for different reasons. The girl handed Greg a ten, he handed back change, and then he looked up at the man in the doorway and froze.

Mike never hated Greg. He felt betrayed, aggrieved and confused, for sure. He even felt glints of recognition, understanding and compassion, which he didn't expect at first, but which eventually made perfect sense. When Jill changed from the skinny girl Mike had known since elementary school into the best-looking, best-smelling, best-feeling, best-

tasting person in his world, she achieved gravity. He was drawn inescapably to her. Mike might have been able to summon the strength to push away from her ever so slightly, a sort of emotional jumping, but he always fell back towards her soft landscape. And when she exerted that same kind of force on Greg, what was the guy supposed to do? Not fall into her? At age eighteen, at the intersection of emotional infancy and hormonal anarchy, it would be like asking Greg not to hit the ground after falling from a tree.

When Jill released her pull on Mike, he began to drift away not just from her and Greg, but from his hometown, too. He was just a few weeks from high school graduation, and then off to college, and beyond that, who knew? He wasn't going to grow soybeans, sell insurance or teach history at Central Illinois University, so he failed to see much reason to remain tethered to this town beyond semi-annual visits to see his mother. From as early as he could remember he placed special significance on the city limits sign that made it seem like one small wing of the Holiday Inn hung over the edge of town and into nothingness, the region he and his friends called the Wild Prairie Outback, or WPO, site of many a clandestine campfire kegger, the place where he first felt the soft flesh beneath Jill's lacy bra. The population number on the simple green sign that marked the break between civilization and wilderness had stayed pretty steady over the years, and he was always struck by the precision. By the time high school ended, it read "Population 21,238," an awfully specific accounting for a place where no one lived and nothing happened.

Even after drifting out of Cameron's orbit, he still received occasional transmissions from home in the form of phone calls from his mom or clippings from the local newspaper that she would mail to him. She sent stories about the junior high basketball team winning the state championship; about the retirement of Mrs. Baird, Mike's beloved second-grade teacher; about the closing of Papa Anthony's, the town's best pizza place and home of the hippest jukebox around, not one of those modern CD-playing varieties, but an old Seeburg Select-o-Matic chock full of vintage 45s by the likes of Stevie Wonder and David Bowie. Linda McAfee kept stacks of newspapers in her kitchen and would spend some Sunday afternoons catching up on weeks of news. By the time it arrived in Mike's mailbox, the news could seem like history, including one story that was two months old when Mike finally laid eyes on it. His mom had written "I thought you'd want to know" in the margin and highlighted the name Greg Allen in the first paragraph. It recounted how Greg's two-year-old son Luke had been killed when Greg backed over him in the driveway. Mike held the paper up high after his first tear hit the page and began to form a gradually expanding circle. The story said that Greg and his wife Kim, whom Mike had never met or even heard of, each thought that Luke was with the other parent inside the house. It also quoted someone, maybe a prosecutor, as saying it was all a terrible accident and that no charges would be filed.

When he put the paper down, Mike felt an urge to call Greg, but he had no idea what to say. It was too late to send flowers, and Greg and Kim were already weeks into whatever process couples go through to try to heal. Offering condolences at that stage might simply remind them of their loss and amplify their pain, he thought. And in some

small sense, the temptation to contact Greg felt selfish. Mike hadn't seen Greg in, what, fourteen years? Of all the names that streamed through Greg's grieving mind, Mike's wouldn't be one. They had been friends long ago, before Mike refused to forgive Greg for a transgression now all but forgotten. Why should he expect an invitation to the Allen family's lingering wake? In the absence of knowing what to do, Mike did nothing.

A couple of years later, another clipping. It was from the courthouse news. Greg and Kim's divorce was final.

Glanville Allen, the youngest of three children, was born to parents who planned to stop at two. He was not just an accident, but an afterthought, given a name that should have gone to Mark, the family's first-born. Though Jerry and Anita Allen never bothered to do the genealogy, it was understood that Jerry's great-great-great grandfather, Glanville Putnam, enjoyed some connection to Abraham Lincoln back when the Great Emancipator was still a state representative. Some relatives said that Glanville was Lincoln's personal secretary. Some said he crafted the man's hats. And others whispered that the two shared a more intimate bond. Whatever the case, this ill-defined relationship to the nation's greatest president conferred considerable pride on Glanville Putnam's descendants, at least when they remembered it, which Jerry and Anita regrettably failed to do when their first son was born. The oversight struck Jerry only shortly before Stephanie came along two years later, and when she emerged *sans* scrotum he viewed it as a missed opportunity. And though he was unenthusiastic about the birth of a third child, and resentful at Anita's lack of contraceptive care, he was at least glad to be able to grant his second son the name of the family's most celebrated ancestor. Except that he and Anita realized that it was a silly name for a child born in 1975, one that smacked of a certain foppishness. In searching for a nickname that began with G, Jerry and Anita looked no further than the television show that transfixed Mark and Stephanie, and so baby Glanville, the youngest Allen, came to be named for the oldest Brady.

Glanville, an old French name, meant "a settlement of oak trees," which seemed painfully perfect to Greg, who felt stuck in the ground in this shitty little town. He had lived all but part of one year of his life here. Born, raised, escaped, captured, returned, and sentenced to life within the four walls of corn fields that surrounded the place.

After high school, Greg went to the University of Illinois, where the only major he declared was a major affection for weed, and the only distinction he earned was the distinction of being asked to leave. Greg seemed mostly untroubled by being kicked out of school but it infuriated Jerry, who was still grieving for Anita, lost to cancer a year and a half earlier. Faced with the threat of going to work in Jerry's insurance agency, Greg opted to enroll in the culinary arts program at the nearby community college, where he thrived. The idea of making a living by making food unearthed a previously unrecognized passion in Greg. He was especially enthralled by the great sandwiches of the world, the kinds he never found at home – the *Cubano*, the *Bàhn Mi*, the *torta* – and he put them on the menu

of the local restaurant where he worked after graduation. In those next few years, Greg saved some cash, married Kim, and hung out at Gould Records. When Marty decided to close the shop because no one wanted to buy music anymore, Greg couldn't bear to see the town's lone record store go. So he bought it and diversified, keeping a few bins of records, but transforming most of the space into a sandwich shop with a few beer taps. He changed the name to Mellow Submarine, in homage both to his favorite band and to the place's history as a head shop. That he quit his job and did this without consulting Kim, who was eight months pregnant, proved unpopular at home.

Mike had been on Greg's mind. On some level, Mike had been on the mind of everyone in America who owned a television or who scanned the tabloids in the checkout line. But it was different for Greg, who still felt the remnants of their long-broken bond whenever he saw Mike's face on the screen, like some phantom limb of friendship. So when Greg spied Mike standing in the doorway of his shop he momentarily believed it was some kind of brain trick, a subconscious conjuring of the person he most wanted to see. But when the realization took hold, he felt the bond regenerate, stronger than before, tempered by the kind of experience no one else could understand. Greg was the only friend who could comprehend what Mike was going through, the suffocating weight of guilt, suspicion and grief. Greg was not the sort to believe that Mike had been put in his shop for a reason, but circumstances like this could give a man pause.

For the longest time they did not speak. They just held on to each other and cried.

Over the next few days, Mike would come into Mellow Sub in the afternoon and hang out until close. Then they would adjourn to Max's, the bar their dads frequented three decades earlier. Mike and Greg had grown out of the college joints and into this place, away from cheap beer and young girls and toward stiff drinks and mature women. They bridged twenty years with talks in a small booth in the far corner.

"At first we assumed it was a kidnapping for ransom," Mike said. "Edward is very wealthy. But no one made a demand. And so the attention turned toward me. I did everything the police asked. I told them everything I knew. They searched my house, my hard drive. I think they determined pretty early on that I wasn't involved, but there's one detective, total jackass, who I can't quite read. Maybe they are still looking at me. They've refused to rule me out, at least publicly. Still, the media has been after me much harder than the cops have. And Edward, I don't know. We were allies at first, trying to do whatever we could to help find Jenna. But when there were no leads at all he just got desperate. And I think he suspected me because he didn't have anyone else. It got ugly and I went on leave and then he fired me. But the not knowing, that's the worst. It's just awful."

Mike covered his eyes with the heels of his hands, and Greg decided to change the subject.

"How's your mom?"

“Really good,” Mike said. “This has been hard on her, of course, but she has been great about it. She retired not long ago. Did you know that my sister is living in South Carolina, married with kids?”

“I had heard the married-with-kids part. I don’t think I knew where she lived.”

“Anyway, mom had been planning to go out there and visit, spoil her grandchildren. Then she decided to extend her stay so I could have the house to myself. That’s been good for me, getting out of Denver. I just got too self-conscious. It felt like everyone was looking at me all the time. Normally, that would seem paranoid. But in my case I think it was true.”

“Ever hear from your dad?”

“Every once in a while,” Mike said. “He lives in Texas, near Houston. His wife is nice. I haven’t seen him in a long time but I still get a Christmas card. What’s up with your family?”

“Mark is in L.A. He went to law school at Stanford. Now he’s a partner at some gigantic firm. Has money flowing out of his ass. He has to wear special pants just to keep it all in. Stephanie lives in Chicago. She did pharmaceutical sales and then married one of the doctors on her circuit. Now she stays at home with three kids.”

“How about your dad?”

“He’s, um, not so good. Still lives in the same house. He started to drink after mom died and he never really stopped. It wrecked his business. Been to rehab twice but never tried very hard. He gets out, goes to meetings for three or four months, and then gives up. And it all falls on me because I’m the only one who’s close. Mark’s a total hard-ass. He doesn’t have the time or patience. He just thinks that dad is weak. At one point, dad wanted to move to Chicago and live with Steph, but she said no, and I don’t blame her. You don’t want to interject that kind of shit into your kids’ lives. He forgets. He accuses. He can be a mean old bastard, but every once in a while you can see the glint of the guy he used to be. Then it goes away. I grew the beard because I was starting to look so much like him and I got sick of seeing his face in the mirror.”

“That’s too bad. He was always nice to me.”

“You wouldn’t recognize him as the guy you remember,” Greg said.

“You seeing anyone?”

“No. Not for a long time. I have no talent for it. My marriage was never very good and it got even worse after Luke was born. I don’t even know why we got married. I think it’s just what we thought we were supposed to do. Around here, if you reach twenty-five without tying the knot, it’s like there’s something wrong with you. Kim tried for a while, but I think she finally realized that I wasn’t worth it. I had opened the shop. I was stressed, drinking too much. I had a girl on the side for a while, someone who worked at the shop. That’s something I’ve never told anyone before. It sounds so pathetic when I say it out loud. I broke it off after I, um – after what happened with Luke.”

Mike didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing.

“Now,” Greg said, “it feels like I’m married to this town. I always wanted to be someplace else, but I’ve managed to spend my whole life here and now I’m permanently anchored by my Mellow Submarine.”

In the town where I was born lived a man who failed to flee, Mike thought to himself. “Hey, can I ask you something?” Greg said. “And don’t answer if you don’t want. But what was the deal with that other woman?”

FOUR

Though suspicion naturally fell on him as the fiancé of the missing woman, Mike escaped the public's full scorn until the day that Maggie Kleinsasser sold her story to a national tabloid. There, on the front page of *The Inquisitor*, a photo of the two of them ran beneath the blaring headline "I Had an Affair With Mike McAfee!" Once that happened, well, things turned very bad indeed.

Yes, he had slept with Maggie. He did not deny it. He wasn't proud of it, but he felt no real guilt about it, either. What he did feel was a scalding embarrassment when the world learned that he'd done the deed with a relatively homely sociopath. The detail with which she described the encounter proved especially excruciating. "He removed my panties with his teeth," Maggie told *The Inquisitor*, "and then dived in head-first like a boy whose hands are tied behind his back in a pie-eating contest." She went on to say that "he treated my body like a buffet, gently biting the meaty flesh of my thighs and nibbling my nipples like sweet cherries." Maggie had no future writing romance novels, Mike thought to himself, but he acknowledged that he was no authority on the subject. He had not foreseen the boom in women's literature that involved sex with vampires and other fanciful creatures, nor the one in which credulous young women do S&M with handsome rich men. Maybe the world thirsted for some kind of chick-lit food-porn. Maybe Maggie would one day become the J.K. Rowling of stories about sloppy cunnilingus and the drunken schlubs who perform it. Maybe selling her story was just the first step in a masterful marketing plan. Maybe he had drunk-fucked a literary genius.

It would be wrong to say that Mike foresaw no negative consequences in sleeping with Maggie. A string of them had flashed in his mind between the fourth and fifth rounds of Maker's Mark. Pregnancy, STD, workplace awkwardness, and worst of all, the thought that he would one day be sober and she would want to do it again. At the far end of the spectrum was the idea, not entirely far-fetched, that they might one day enjoy something of a man-and-his-stalker relationship. Still, this seemed like nothing that couldn't be cured with a restraining order. As a consequence of the pain in which he then found himself, Mike could barely see beyond the night's end. He was going down in flames, and Maggie was a very soft, very wet place to land.

But he could not foresee that one evening of torrid, gelatinous ambiguity with Maggie Kleinsasser could serve as evidence that he had murdered a woman he had not killed and who was not, in fact, dead. Jenna broke up with *him*. That's an important piece of context, he shouted inside his head. Mike had never fully considered the ethics and etiquette of post-breakup sexual escapade but he assumed they imposed no restrictions on the partner whose heart had been stomped upon. Sure, if you did the dumping, decorum somehow dictated that you wait an acceptable period before engaging in third-party intercourse, and however long that period was, we could all agree that it was longer than six hours, couldn't we? Sex that same night would be an act of cruelty. But if you had been dumped,

why should any rules bind you? Mike had not asked to be heartbroken and bereft. Jenna, if she had any sense of mercy, would want Mike to find solace any way he could, even if it came between another woman's thighs. She didn't want him to suffer. She just didn't want him.

So why should Mike's lack of obligation be retroactively revoked the next night when Jenna showed up at his door sobbing, saying she had made a mistake, begging him to take her back? It was a sign of his own basic goodness that he had taken Jenna into his arms, into his home, and had held her, told her that it was OK, and had never asked why she left him in the first place. "Let's pretend the last twenty-four hours never happened," he said, knowing that it was a good deal for him, too. Still, the moment Mike took Jenna back, the previous evening's coital misadventure was somehow converted into a betrayal, and that was fundamentally unfair. It made him flash back to his high school civics class. It was like an *ex post facto* law, and this great nation won't stand for those.

Mike and Maggie had come up through the ranks of EDK together. The picture of them that appeared in *The Inquisitor* wasn't really a picture of *them*. No such photo existed. Instead, it was a shot of them next to one another at an office party, with a dozen other revelers carefully cropped out, giving the illusion of intimacy. Maggie had long craved to turn the illusion into reality, but the flame she carried for Mike had only served to scorch a once pleasant and platonic relationship.

Business-bright but socially stunted, Maggie was just *too much*: too loud, too close, too brash, too big. She carried thirty pounds she would never miss, and Mike knew he was shallow to include that on the list of reasons he could never be with her. But in fairness it was way down the list, behind a plethora of traits that had made Maggie a good bar-hopping buddy back in their twenties but poor relationship material in their thirties. She could drink like a fish, curse like a sailor, lie like a rug, and sing like Aretha come karaoke time. But she couldn't, or wouldn't, keep a secret when it came to sex. Maggie wasn't promiscuous, just prolific, and the unsolicited details she provided Mike about her exploits with a series of steady boyfriends seemed funny at first, if only for their startling impropriety. But after a time they grew to seem sad and perhaps exaggerated or even untrue, some kind of distress signal that Mike could never decode.

Still, the two remained friends until the night, a few years back, when Maggie called to say that she had broken up with her boyfriend because she was in love with Mike. "I'd be in bed with him and think of you," she said, failing to understand that this was the sort of thing that people simply do not say. Mike knew that his silence in that moment must have devastated Maggie, but he could think of nothing short of the boldest lie ("I'm gay!"; "I'm dying!"; "I'm moving to Cambodia!") that could possibly paper over her humiliation. Instead, he said "Maggie . . . I'm sorry . . . I . . . I don't know what to say." And before he could figure anything out, she hung up.

In the days and months that followed, Maggie tried to play it all off as a joke but she couldn't nail the tone because it wasn't a joke at all. "Remember that time I called and professed my love and you totally crushed me? That was hilarious!" At first, Mike would

smile and play along, trying to telepathically communicate that it would be fine just to forget all about it. But he couldn't forget because Maggie wouldn't stop reminding him, so he did his best to ignore her altogether.

Their career paths had already begun to diverge. Maggie was an ace analyst – no one knew Asia like she did – but her rough edges chafed Edward Kaye and ensured that she would never advance further. While she floundered, Mike flourished, earning Edward's trust, Jenna's love and a corner office. When Mike and Jenna announced their engagement, Maggie showed personal growth by telling the kind of polite lie that allows people in pain to get along in the world: "I'm so happy for both of you."

Looking back, months later, Mike could pinpoint the moment when his world began to crumble. He was sitting in their favorite old bar, half in the bag, when he saw Maggie come through the door. He was just sober and decent enough to know that he shouldn't, but just drunk and despondent enough to know that he would. Maggie Kleinsasser had never looked as good as she did right then.

Dr. Emory, the school is on the line. I think it's the principal."
The nurse lingered as the pediatrician picked up the receiver and punched the blinking light.

"Hello? . . . Yes. . . . Hi, Dr. Keller. . . . What happened? . . . No, you did the right thing. . . . I don't know for sure, but I have a pretty good idea. . . . I'll be right over. Thank you."

"Everything OK?" the nurse asked.

"More or less. How many appointments do I have left?"

"Just one."

"Would you ask Laura to handle it?"

"Sure."

Ten minutes later Dr. Emory walked down the first-grade hallway at Carl Sandberg Elementary School, stopped in the doorway of Mrs. Tepper's classroom, and saw Liv tied to a chair.

"Hi mommy," Liv said through the gap in her smile where her baby teeth used to be.

"You're tied to a chair," Dr. Emory said.

"Yep."

"Who tied you to the chair?"

"I did."

"And why did you do that?"

"Because I'm like Martin Loofer King."

"You're like Martin Luther King?"

"Uh-huh."

"And how are you like Martin Luther King?"

"For Martin Loofer King Day, Mrs. Tepper told us that Martin Loofer King had dreams and that when bad things happened he would sit in the same place until the bad things didn't happen anymore. And sometimes I have dreams, like the one with the great big hamster, and I'm going to sit here until I don't have to go to daddy's this weekend."

"I don't think you really understand that much about Martin Luther King."

"I think I do. I got a perfect score on my Martin Loofer King Day quiz."

"Martin Luther King would think that you're a silly little girl."

"Do you know that he was a mountain climber?"

"I don't think that's right."

"We listened to him talk and he said that he went to a mountain top."

"That's a metaphor, sweetie."

"What's a metaphor?"

"It doesn't matter right now. Let's untie you and go home."

“No! I’m going to stay here until I don’t have to go to daddy’s. I don’t have any friends there, and I would have to miss Maddie’s birthday party, and we were going to dress like princesses, and Christina is always at daddy’s, and she always talks about how pretty I am and about how I’m going to be a flower girl.”

“You are pretty and you are going to be a flower girl.”

“I don’t want to be a flower girl. I don’t want there to be a wedding.”

“Well, there’s going to be a wedding whether you want it or not, and you’re going to go, and you’re going to be good, because we want your daddy to be happy.”

“Daddy doesn’t want you to be happy.”

“Oh, that’s not true,” she said without really believing it. He chose this. Chose to leave his wife and little girl, to take up with a woman ten years younger, to not give a damn about how it looked or who it hurt. “He wants you to be happy. And he knows that you won’t be happy unless I’m happy, too.”

“I won’t be happy if I have to go.”

“Sometimes you have to do things that don’t make you happy right now, but that will help make you happy later.”

“But Maddie’s party,” Liv said with a sadness so real that her mom felt it in her own chest.

“Tell you what. Let’s call Maddie’s mom and see if we can go out for ice cream tonight, and you can give her your present and have your own little party. OK?”

“OK.” Liv stood up and the blue yarn fell to the floor.

“I don’t know how to tie a knot,” she said.