

A PRIVATE PLANE sits on a runway in Martha's Vineyard, forward stairs deployed. It is a nine-seat OSPRY 700SL, built in 2001 in Wichita, Kansas. Whose plane it is is hard to say with real certainty. The ownership of record is a Dutch holding company with a Cayman Island mailing address, but the logo on the fuselage says GULLWING AIR. The pilot, James Melody, is British. Charlie Busch, the first officer, is from Odessa, Texas. The flight attendant, Emma Lightner, was born in Mannheim, Germany, to an American air force lieutenant and his teenage wife. They moved to San Diego when she was nine.

Everyone has their path. The choices they've made. How any two people end up in the same place at the same time is a mystery. You get on an elevator with a dozen strangers. You ride a bus, wait in line for the bathroom. It happens every day. To try to predict the places we'll go and the people we'll meet would be pointless.

A soft halogen glow emanates from the louvered forward hatch. Nothing like the harsh fluorescent glare you find in commercial planes. Two weeks from now, in a *New York Magazine* interview, Scott Burroughs will say that the thing that surprised him most about his first trip on a private jet was not the legroom or the full bar, but how personalized the decor felt, as if, at a certain income level, air travel is just another form of staying home.

It is a balmy night on the Vineyard, eighty-six degrees with light winds out of the southwest. The scheduled time of departure is ten p.m. For the last three hours, a heavy coastal fog has been building over the sound, tendrils of dense white creeping slowly across the floodlit tarmac.

The Bateman family, in their island Range Rover, is the first to arrive: father David, mother Maggie, and their two children, Rachel and JJ. It's late August and Maggie and the kids have been on the Vineyard for the month, with David flying out from New York on the weekends. It's hard for him to get away any more than that, though he wishes he could. David is in the entertainment business, which is what people in his line of work call television news these days. A Roman circus of information and opinions.

He is a tall man with an intimidating phone voice. Strangers, upon meeting him, are often struck by the size of his hands. His son, JJ, has fallen asleep in the car, and as the others start toward the plane David leans into the back and gently lifts JJ from the car seat, supporting his weight with one arm. The boy instinctively throws his arms around his father's neck, his face slack from slumber. The warmth of his breath sends a chill down David's spine. He can feel the bones of his son's hips in his palm, the spill of legs against his side. At four, JJ is old enough to know that people die, but still too young to realize that one day he will be one of them. David and Maggie call him their perpetual motion machine, because really it's just nonstop all day long. At three, JJ's primary means of communication was to roar like a dinosaur. Now he is the king of the interruption, questioning every word they say with seemingly endless patience until he's answered or shut down.

David kicks the car door closed with his foot, his son's weight pulling him off balance. He is holding his phone to his ear with his free hand.

"Tell him if he says a word about any of this," he says quietly, so as not to wake the boy, "we'll sue him biblically until he thinks lawyers are falling outta the sky like frogs."

At fifty-six, David wears a hard layer of fat around his frame like a bulletproof vest. He has a strong chin and a good head of hair. In the 1990s David built a name for himself running political campaigns—governors, senators, and one two-term president—but he retired in 2000 to run a lobbying firm on K Street. Two years later, an aging billionaire approached him with the idea of starting a twenty-four-hour news network. Thirteen years and thirteen billion in corporate revenue later, David has a top-floor office with bomb-resistant glass and access to the corporate jet.

He doesn't get to see the kids enough. David and Maggie both agree on this, though they fight about it regularly. Which is to say, she raises the issue and he gets defensive, even though, at heart, he feels the same. But then isn't that what marriage is, two people fighting for land rights to the same six inches?

Now, on the tarmac, a gust of wind blows up. David, still on the phone, glances over at Maggie and smiles, and the smile says *I'm glad to be here with you*. It says *I love you*. But it also says, *I know I'm in the middle of another work call and I need you to give me a break about it*. It says, *What matters is that I'm here, and that we're all together*.

It is a smile of apology, but there is also some steel in it.

Maggie smiles back, but hers is more perfunctory, sadder. The truth is, she can no longer control whether she forgives him or not.

They've been married less than ten years. Maggie is thirty-six, a former preschool teacher, the pretty one boys fantasize about before they even understand what that means—a breast fixation shared by toddler and teen. Miss Maggie, as they called her, was cheerful and loving. She came in early every morning at six thirty to straighten up. She stayed late to write progress reports and work on her lesson plan. Miss Maggie was a twenty-six-year-old girl from Piedmont, California, who loved teaching. Loved it. She was the first adult any of these three-year-olds had met who took them seriously, who listened to what they had to say and made them feel grown.

Fate, if you would call it that, brought Maggie and David together

in a ballroom at the Waldorf Astoria one Thursday night in early spring 2005. The ball was a black-tie fund-raiser for an educational fund. Maggie was there with a friend. David was on the board. She was the humble beauty in a floral dress with blue finger paint smeared on the small curve inside her right knee. He was the heavyweight charm shark in a two-button suit. She wasn't the youngest woman at the party, or even the prettiest, but she was the only one with chalk in her purse, the only one who could build a papier-mâché volcano and owned a striped *Cat in the Hat* stovepipe hat she would wear to work every year on Dr. Seuss's birthday. In other words, she was everything David had ever wanted in a wife. He excused himself and made his approach, smiling a cap-toothed smile.

In retrospect, she never had a chance.

Ten years later they have two children and a town house on Gracie Square. Rachel, nine years old, goes to Brearley with a hundred other girls. Maggie, retired from teaching now, stays home with JJ, which makes her unusual among women of her station—the carefree housewives of workaholic millionaires. When she strolls her son to the park in the morning, Maggie is the only stay-at-home mother in the playground. All the other kids arrive in European-designed strollers pushed by island ladies on cell phones.

Now, on the airport runway, Maggie feels a chill run through her and pulls her summer cardigan tighter. The tendrils of fog have become a slow roiling surf, drafting with glacial patience across the tarmac.

"Are you sure it's okay to fly in this?" she asks her husband's back. He has reached the top of the stairs, where Emma Lightner, their flight attendant, wearing a trim blue skirt suit, greets him with a smile.

"It'll be fine, Mom," says Rachel, nine, walking behind her mother. "It's not like they need to see to fly a plane."

"No, I know."

"They have instruments."

Maggie gives her daughter a supportive smile. Rachel is wearing

her green backpack—*Hunger Games*, Barbies, and iPad inside—and as she walks, it bumps rhythmically against the small of her back. Such a big girl. Even at nine there are signs of the woman she'll become. A professor who waits patiently as you figure out your own mistakes. The smartest person in the room, in other words, but not a show-off, never a show-off, with a good heart and musical laughter. The question is, are these qualities she was born with, or qualities seeded inside her by what happened? The true crime of her youth? Somewhere online the entire saga is recorded in words and pictures—archived news footage on YouTube, hundreds of man-hours of beat reporting all stored in the great collective memory of ones and zeros. A *New Yorker* writer wanted to do a book last year, but David quashed it quietly. Rachel is only a child, after all. Sometimes, when Maggie thinks about what could have gone wrong, she worries her heart will crack.

Instinctively, she glances over at the Range Rover, where Gil is radioing the advance team. Gil is their shadow, a big Israeli who never takes off his jacket. He is what people in their income bracket call *domestic security*. Six foot two, 190 pounds. There is a reason he never takes off his jacket, a reason that doesn't get discussed in polite circles. This is Gil's fourth year with the Bateman family. Before Gil there was Misha, and before Misha came the strike team of humorless men in suits, the ones with automatic weapons in the trunk of their car. In her schoolteacher days, Maggie would have scoffed at this kind of military intrusion into family life. She would have called it narcissistic to think that money made you a target for violence. But that was before the events of July 2008, before her daughter's kidnapping and the agonizing three days it took to get her back.

On the jet's stairs, Rachel spins and gives a mock royal wave to the empty runway. She is wearing blue fleece over her dress, her hair in a bowed ponytail. Any evidence that Rachel has been damaged by those three days remains mostly hidden—a fear of small spaces, a certain trepidation around strange men. But then Rachel has always been

a happy kid, a bubbly trickster with a sly smile, and though she can't understand how, Maggie is thankful every day that her kid hasn't lost that.

"Good evening, Mrs. Bateman," says Emma as Maggie reaches the top of the airplane stairs.

"Hi, thanks," says Maggie reflexively. She feels the usual need to apologize for their wealth, not her husband's necessarily, but her own, the sheer implausibility of it. She was a preschool teacher not so long ago, living in a six-story walk-up with two mean girls, like Cinderella.

"Is Scott here yet?" she asks.

"No, ma'am. You're the first to arrive. I've pulled a bottle of pinot gris. Would you like a glass?"

"Not right now. Thanks."

Inside, the jet is a statement of subdued luxury, contoured walls ribbed with sleek ash paneling. The seats are gray leather and laid out casually in pairs, as if to suggest you might enjoy the flight more with a partner. The cabin has a moneyed hush, like the inside of a presidential library. Though she's flown this way many times, Maggie still can't get over the indulgence of it. An entire airplane just for them.

David lays their son in his seat, covers him with a blanket. He is on another call already, this one clearly serious. Maggie can tell by the grim set of David's jaw. Below him the boy stirs in his seat but doesn't wake.

Rachel stops by the cockpit to talk to the pilots. It is something she does everywhere she goes, seeks out the local authority and grills them for information. Maggie spots Gil at the cockpit door, keeping the nine-year-old in sight. He carries, in addition to a handgun, a Taser and plastic handcuffs. He is the quietest man Maggie has ever met.

Phone to his ear, David gives his wife's shoulder a squeeze.

"Excited to get back?" he asks, covering the mouthpiece with his other hand.

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"Mixed," she says. "It's so nice out here."

"You could stay. I mean, we have that thing next weekend, but otherwise, why not?"

"No," she says. "The kids have school, and I've got the museum board thing on Thursday."

She smiles at him.

"I didn't sleep that well," she says. "I'm just tired."

David's eyes go to something over Maggie's shoulder. He frowns.

Maggie turns. Ben and Sarah Kipling stand at the top of the stairs. They're a wealthy couple, more David's friends than hers. All the same, Sarah squeals when she sees Maggie.

"Darling," she says, throwing open her arms.

Sarah gives Maggie a hug, the flight attendant standing awkwardly behind them, holding a tray of drinks.

"I love your dress," says Sarah.

Ben maneuvers past his wife and charges David, shaking his hand vigorously. He is a partner at one of the big four Wall Street firms, a blue-eyed shark in a tailored blue button-down shirt and a pair of belted white shorts.

"Did you see the fucking game?" he says. "How does he not catch that ball?"

"Don't get me started," says David.

"I mean, I could have caught that fucking ball and I've got French toast hands."

The two men stand toe-to-toe, mock posturing, two big bucks locking horns for the sheer love of battle.

"He lost it in the lights," David tells him, then feels his phone buzz. He looks at it, frowns, types a reply. Ben glances quickly over his shoulder, his expression sobering. The women are busy chatting. He leans in closer.

"We need to talk, buddy."

David shakes him off, still typing.

"Not now."

"I've been calling you," Kipling says. He starts to say more, but Emma is there with drinks.

"Glenlivet on the rocks, if I'm not mistaken," she says, handing Ben a glass.

"You're a doll," Ben says, and knocks back half the scotch in one gulp.

"Just water for me," David says as she lifts a glass of vodka from the tray.

"Of course," she says, smiling. "I'll be right back."

A few feet away, Sarah Kipling has already run out of small talk. She gives Maggie's arm a squeeze.

"How are you," she says, earnestly, and for the second time.

"No, I'm good," says Maggie. "I just—travel days, you know. I'll be happy when we're home."

"I know. I mean, I love the beach, but honestly? I get so bored. How many sunsets can you watch and not want to just, I don't know, go to Barneys?"

Maggie glances nervously at the open hatch. Sarah catches the look.

"Waiting for someone?"

"No. I mean, I think we'll be one more, but—"

Her daughter saves her from having to say more.

"Mom," says Rachel from her seat. "Don't forget, tomorrow is Tamar's party. We still have to get a gift."

"Okay," says Maggie, distracted. "Let's go to Dragonfly in the morning."

Looking past her daughter, Maggie sees David and Ben huddled together, talking. David doesn't look happy. She could ask him about it later, but her husband has been so standoffish lately, and the last thing she wants is a fight.

The flight attendant glides past her and hands David his water.

"Lime?" she says.

David shakes his head. Ben rubs his bald spot nervously. He glances at the cockpit.

"Are we waiting for somebody?" he says. "Let's get this show on the road."

"One more person," says Emma, looking at her list. "Scott Burroughs?"

Ben glances at David. "Who?"

David shrugs. "Maggie has a friend," he says.

"He's not a friend," Maggie says, overhearing. "I mean, the kids know him. We ran into him this morning at the market. He said he had to go to New York, so I invited him to join us. I think he's a painter."

She looks at her husband.

"I showed you some of his work."

David checks his watch.

"You told him ten o'clock?" he says.

She nods.

"Well," he says, sitting, "five more minutes and he'll have to catch the ferry like everyone else."

Through a round portal window, Maggie sees the captain standing on the tarmac examining the wing. He stares up at the smooth aluminum, then walks slowly toward the plane.

Behind her, JJ shifts in slumber, his mouth slack. Maggie rearranges the blanket over him, then gives his forehead a kiss. He always looks so worried when he sleeps, she thinks.

Over the chair back she sees the captain reenter the plane. He comes over to shake hands, a man quarterback-tall with a military build.

"Gentlemen," he says, "ladies. Welcome. Should be a short flight. Some light winds, but otherwise the ride'll be pretty smooth."

"I saw you outside the plane," says Maggie.

"Routine visual inspection," he tells her. "I do it before every flight. The plane looks good."

"What about the fog?" asks Maggie.

Her daughter rolls her eyes.

"Fog isn't a factor with a sophisticated piece of machinery like this," the pilot tells them. "A few hundred feet above sea level and we're past it."

"I'm gonna eat some of this cheese then," says Ben. "Should we put on some music maybe? Or the TV? I think Boston's playing the White Sox."

Emma goes to find the game on the in-flight entertainment system, and there is a long moment of settling in as they take their seats and stow their belongings. Up front, the pilots run through their pre-flight instrument check.

David's phone buzzes again. He checks it, frowns.

"All right," says David, getting antsy. "I think that's all the time we've got for the painter."

He nods to Emma, who crosses to close the main cabin door. In the cockpit, as if by telepathy, the pilot starts the engines. The front door is almost closed when they hear a man's voice yell, "*Wait!*"

The plane shakes as their final passenger climbs the gangway stairs. Despite herself, Maggie feels herself flush, a thrum of anticipation starting in her belly. And then he is there, Scott Burroughs, mid-forties, looking flushed and out of breath. His hair is shaggy and starting to gray, but his face is smooth. There are worn gouache splotches on his white Keds, faded white and summer blue. He has a dirty green duffel bag over one shoulder. In his bearing there is still the flush of youth, but the lines around his eyes are deep and earned.

"Sorry," he says. "The cab took forever. I ended up taking a bus."

"Well, you made it," says David nodding to the copilot to close the door. "That's what matters."

"Can I take your bag, sir?" says Emma.

"What?" says Scott, startled momentarily by the stealthy way she has moved next to him. "No. I got it."

She points him to an empty seat. As he walks to it, he takes in the interior of the plane for the first time.

"Well, hell," he says.

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"Ben Kipling," says Ben, rising to shake Scott's hand.

"Yeah," says Scott, "Scott Burroughs."

He sees Maggie.

"Hey," he says, giving her a wide, warm grin. "Thanks again for this."

Maggie smiles back, flushed.

"It's nothing," she says. "We had room."

Scott falls into a seat next to Sarah. Before he even has his seat belt on, Emma is handing him a glass of wine.

"Oh," he says. "No, thank you. I don't—some water maybe?"

Emma smiles, withdraws.

Scott looks over at Sarah.

"You could get used to this, huh?"

"Truer words have never been spoken," says Kipling.

The engines surge, and Maggie feels the plane start to move. Captain Melody's voice comes over the speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please prepare for takeoff," he says.

Maggie looks over at her two kids, Rachel sitting with one leg folded under her, scrolling through songs on her phone, and little JJ hunched in slumber, slack-faced with childish oblivion.

As she does at a thousand random moments out of every day, Maggie feels a swell of motherly love, ballooning and desperate. They are her life, these children. Her identity. She reaches once more to readjust her son's blanket, and as she does there is that moment of weightlessness as the plane's wheels leave the ground. This act of impossible hope, this routine suspension of the physical laws that hold men down, inspires and terrifies her. Flying. They are flying. And as they rise up through the foggy white, talking and laughing, serenaded by the songs of 1950s crooners and the white noise of the long at bat, none of them has any idea that sixteen minutes from now their plane will crash into the sea.

WHEN HE WAS six, Scott Burroughs took a trip to San Francisco with his family. They spent three days at a motel near the beach: Scott, his parents, and his sister, June, who would later drown in Lake Michigan. San Francisco was foggy and cold that weekend, wide avenues rolling like tongue tricks down to the water. Scott remembers his father ordering crab legs at a restaurant, and how, when they came, they were monstrous, the size of tree branches. As if the crabs should be eating them instead of the other way around.

On the last day of their trip Scott's dad got them on a bus down to Fisherman's Wharf. Scott—in faded corduroys and a striped T-shirt—knelt on the sloped plastic seat and watched as the flat, wide stucco of the Sunset District turned to concrete hills and wide-plank Victorians lining the serious incline. They went to the Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum and had their caricatures drawn—a family of four comically oversize heads bobbling side by side on unicycles. Afterward, they stopped and watched the seals splay themselves on salt-soaked docks. Scott's mother pointed at flurries of white-winged gulls with wonder in her eyes. They were landlocked people. To Scott, it was as if they had taken a spaceship to a distant planet.

For lunch they ate corn dogs and drank Coke out of comically large plastic cups. Entering Aquatic Park, they found a crowd had gathered.

There were dozens of people looking north and pointing toward Alcatraz.

The bay was slate gray that day, the hills of Marin framing the now defunct prison island like the shoulders of a guard. To their left the Golden Gate Bridge was a hazy, burnt-orange giant, suspension towers headless in the late-morning fog.

Scott could see a mass of small boats circling out on the water.

"Was there an escape?" Scott's father asked aloud to no one.

Scott's mother frowned and pulled out a brochure. As far as she knew, she said, the prison was closed. The island was just for tourists now.

Scott's father tapped the man next to him on the shoulder.

"What are we looking at?" he asked.

"He's swimming over from Alcatraz," the man said.

"Who?"

"The exercise guy. What's it? Jack LaLanne. It's some kind of stunt. He's handcuffed and pulling a goddamn boat."

"What do you mean, pulling a boat?"

"There's a rope. This is off the radio. See that boat there. The big one. He's gotta drag that thing all the way over here."

The guy shook his head, like all of a sudden the world had gone insane on him.

Scott climbed to a higher step where he could see over all the adults. There was indeed a large boat out on the water, bow pointed toward shore. It was surrounded by a fleet of smaller boats. A woman leaned down and tapped Scott's arm.

"Here," she said, smiling, "take a look."

She handed Scott a small pair of binoculars. Through the lenses he could just make out a man in the water, wearing a beige swim cap. His shoulders were bare. He swam in surging forward lunges, like a mermaid.

"The current is nuts right there," the man told Scott's father. "Not to mention the damn water is, like, fifty-eight degrees. There's a rea-

son nobody ever escaped from Alcatraz. Plus, you got the sharks. I give the guy one shot in five.”

Through the binoculars Scott could see that the motorboats surrounding the swimmer were filled with men in uniforms. They were carrying rifles and staring down into the chop.

In the water the swimmer lifted his arms from the surf and surged forward. He was bound at the wrists, focused on the shore. His breathing was steady. If he was aware of the deputies or the risk of shark attack, he didn't show it. Jack LaLanne, the fittest man on earth. His sixtieth birthday was in five days. Sixty. The age where anyone with sense slows down, puts up their feet, and lets a few things slide, but, as Scott would later learn, Jack's discipline transcended age. He was a tool constructed to complete a task, an overcoming machine. Around his waist, the rope was like a tentacle trying to pull him down into the cold, black deep, but he paid it no mind, as if by ignoring the weight he was pulling he could take away its power. Jack was used to it anyway, this rope. At home he tied himself to the side of the pool and swam in place for half an hour a day. This was in addition to ninety minutes of weight lifting and thirty minutes of running. Looking at himself in the mirror afterward, Jack didn't see a mortal man. He saw a being of pure energy.

He had done this swim before too, back in 1955. Alcatraz was still a prison then, a cold rock of penitence and punishment. Jack was forty-one, a young buck already famous for being fit. He had the TV show and the gyms. Every week he stood in simple black and white wearing his trademark jumpsuit, tailored skintight, his biceps bulging. Every so often without warning he would drop to the floor and punctuate his advice with a hundred fingertip push-ups.

Fruits and vegetables, he'd say. Protein, exercise.

On NBC, Mondays at eight, Jack gave away the secrets of eternal life. All you had to do was listen. Towing the boat now, he remembered that first swim. They said it couldn't be done, a two-mile swim against strong ocean currents in fifty-degree water, but Jack did it in

just under an hour. Now nineteen years later he was back, hands tied, legs bound, a thousand-pound boat chained to his waist.

In his mind there was no boat. There was no current. There were no sharks.

There was only his will.

"Ask the guys who are doing serious triathlons," he would later say, "if there are any limits to what can be done. The limit is right here [in your head]. You've got to get physically fit between the ears. Muscles don't know anything. They have to be taught."

Jack was the puny kid with the pimples who gorged himself on sweets, the pup who went sugar-mad one day and tried to kill his brother with an ax. Then came the epiphany, the burning bush resolve. In a flash it came to him. He would unlock his body's full potential. He would remake himself entirely, and by doing so change the world.

And so chubby, sugar-brained Jack invented exercise. He became the hero who could do a thousand jumping jacks and a thousand chin-ups in ninety minutes. The muscle that trained itself to finish 1,033 push-ups in twenty minutes by climbing a twenty-five-foot rope with 140 pounds of weight strapped to his belt.

Everywhere he went, people came up to him on the street. It was the early days of television. He was part scientist, part magician, part god.

"I can't die," Jack told people. "It would ruin my image."

Now, in the water, he lunged forward using the flopping butterfly stroke that he'd invented. The shore was in sight, news cameras massing by the water. The crowd had grown. They spilled over the horseshoe steps. Jack's wife, Elaine, was among them, a former water ballerina who had chain-smoked and lived on donuts before she met Jack. "There he is," someone said, pointing. A sixty-year-old man pulling a boat.

Handcuffed. Shackled. He was Houdini, except he wasn't trying to escape. If Jack had his way he would be chained to this boat forever.

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They'd add a new one every day until he was pulling the whole world behind him. Until he was carrying all of us on his back into a future where human potential was limitless.

Age is a state of mind, he told people. That was the secret. He would finish this swim and bound from the surf. He would leap into the air, like a boxer after a knockout. Maybe he'd even drop and knock off a hundred push-ups. He felt that good. At Jack's age, most men were stooped over, whining about their backs. They were nervous about the end. But not Jack. When he turned seventy he would swim for seventy hours pulling seventy boats filled with seventy people. When he turned a hundred they would rename the country after him. He would wake every morning with a boner of steel until the end of time.

On shore, Scott stood on tiptoes and stared out at the water. His parents were forgotten. The lunch he hadn't liked. There was nothing on earth now except the scene before him. The boy watched as the man in the swim cap struggled against the tide. Stroke after stroke, muscle against nature, willpower in defiance of witless primal forces. The crowd was on its feet, urging the swimmer on, stroke by stroke, inch by inch, until Jack LaLanne was walking out of the surf, newsmen wading out to meet him. He was breathing hard, lips turning blue, but he was smiling. The newsmen untied his wrists, pulled the rope from his waist. The crowd was going crazy. Elaine waded out into the waves, and Jack lifted her into the air as if she were nothing.

The waterfront was electrified. People felt like they were witnessing a miracle. For a long time after, they would find themselves believing that anything was possible. They would go through their day feeling elevated.

And Scott Burroughs, six years old, standing on the top step of the bleachers, found himself undone by a strange surge. There was a swelling in his chest, a feeling—elation? wonder?—that made him want to weep. Even at his young age he knew that he had witnessed something unquantifiable, some grand facet of nature that was more

than animal. To do what this man had done—to strap weight to his body, bind his limbs, and swim two miles through freezing water—was something Superman would do. Was it possible? Was this Superman?

“Hell,” said his father, ruffling Scott’s hair. “That was really something. Wasn’t that something?”

But Scott had no words. He just nodded, his eyes fixed on the strong man in the surf, who had picked a news reporter up over his head and was mock-throwing him out into the water.

“I see this guy on TV all the time,” his dad said, “but I thought it was just a joke. With the puffed-up muscles. But man.”

He shook his head from wonder.

“Is that Superman?” Scott asked.

“What? No. That’s—I mean, just a guy.”

Just a guy. Like Scott’s dad or Uncle Jake, mustached and potbellied. Like Mr. Branch, his gym teacher with the Afro. Scott couldn’t believe it. Was it possible? Could anyone be Superman if they just put their mind to it? If they were willing to do what it took? *Whatever* it took?

Two days later, when they got back to Indianapolis, Scott Burroughs signed up for swim class.

WAVES

HE SURFACES, SHOUTING. It is night. The salt water burns his eyes. Heat singes his lungs. There is no moon, just a diffusion of moonlight through the burly fog, wave caps churning midnight blue in front of him. Around him eerie orange flames lick the froth.

The water is on fire, he thinks, kicking away instinctively.

And then, after a moment of shock and disorientation:

The plane has crashed.

Scott thinks this, but not in words. In his brain are images and sounds. A sudden downward pitch. The panicked stench of burning metal. Screams. A woman bleeding from the head, broken glass glittering against her skin. And how everything that wasn't tied down seemed to float for an endless moment as time slowed. A wine bottle, a woman's purse, a little girl's iPhone. Plates of food hovering in midair, spinning gently, entrées still in place, and then the screech of metal on metal and the barrel roll of Scott's world ripping itself to pieces.

A wave smacks him in the face, and he kicks his feet to try to get higher in the water. His shoes are dragging him down, so he loses them, then forces his way out of his salt-soaked chinos. He shivers in the cold Atlantic current, treading water, legs scissoring, arms pushing the ocean away in hard swirls. The waves are quilted with froth,

not the hard triangles of children's drawings, but fractals of water, tiny waves stacking into larger ones. Out in the open water they come at him from all directions, like a pack of wolves testing his defenses. The dying fire animates them, gives them faces of sinister intent. Scott treads his way into a 360-degree turn. Around him he sees humps of jagged wreckage bobbing, pieces of fuselage, a stretch of wing. The floating gasoline has already dissipated or burned down. Soon everything will be dark. Fighting panic, Scott tries to assess the situation. The fact that it's August is in his favor. Right now the temperature of the Atlantic is maybe sixty-five degrees, cold enough for hypothermia, but warm enough to give him time to reach shore, if that's possible. If he's even close.

"Hey!" he shouts, turning himself in the water. "I'm here! I'm alive!"

There have to be other survivors, he thinks. How can a plane crash and only one person survive? He thinks about the woman sitting next to him, the banker's chatty wife. He thinks about Maggie with her summer smile.

He thinks about the children. Fuck. There were children. Two, yes? A boy and a girl. How old? The girl was bigger. Ten maybe? But the boy was small, a toddler still.

"Hello!" he shouts, with added urgency, swimming now toward the biggest piece of wreckage. It looks like part of a wing. When he reaches it, the metal is hot to the touch and he kicks away hard, not wanting to get swept onto it by the waves and burned.

Did the plane break up on impact? he wonders. Or did it crack open on the way down, spilling passengers?

It seems impossible that he doesn't know, but the data stream of memory is clogged with indecipherable fragments, pictures with no order, and right now he has no time to try to clarify anything.

Squinting in the dark, Scott feels himself rising suddenly on a heavy wave. He struggles to stay on top of it, realizing he can no longer avoid the obvious.

BEFORE THE FALL

Straining to stay afloat, he feels something in his left shoulder pop. The ache he endured post-crash becomes a knife that cuts through him whenever he raises his left arm above his head. Kicking his legs, he tries to stretch the pain away, like you would a cramp, but it's clear something in the socket is torn or broken. He will have to be careful. He still has partial motion—can manage a decent breaststroke—but if the shoulder gets worse he could find himself a one-armed man, adrift, injured, a tiny fish in the saltwater belly of a whale.

It occurs to him then that he may be bleeding.

And that's when the word *sharks* enters his mind.

For a moment there is nothing but pure animal panic. Higher reason evaporates. His heart rate soars, legs kicking wildly. He swallows salt water and starts to cough.

Stop, he tells himself. *Slow down. If you panic right now, you will die.*

He forces himself to be calm, rotating slowly to try to get his bearings. If he could see stars, he thinks, he could orient himself. But the fog is too thick. Should he swim east or west? Back toward the Vineyard or toward the mainland? And yet how will he even know which is which? The island he has come from floats like an ice cube in a soup bowl. At this distance, if Scott's trajectory is off by even a few degrees he could easily swim right past it and never even realize.

Better, he thinks, to make for the long arm of the coast. If he keeps his stroke even, Scott thinks, rests occasionally, and doesn't panic, he will hit land eventually. He is a swimmer, after all, no stranger to the sea.

You can do this, he tells himself. The thought gives him a surge of confidence. He knows from riding the ferry that Martha's Vineyard is seven miles from Cape Cod. But their plane was headed to JFK, which means it would have flown south over the open water toward Long Island. How far did they travel? How far are they from shore? Can Scott swim ten miles with one good arm? Twenty?

He is a land mammal adrift in the open sea.

...

The plane will have sent a distress signal, he tells himself. The Coast Guard is on its way. But even as he thinks this, he realizes that the last flame has gone out, and the debris field is scattering with the current.

To keep himself from panicking, Scott thinks of Jack. Jack, the Greek god in his swim trunks, grinning, arms flexed into rippling towers, shoulders hunched forward, lats popped out. The crab. That's what they called it. *Snapping a crab*. Scott kept his poster on the wall throughout his childhood. He had it there to remind himself that anything was possible. You could be an explorer or an astronaut. You could sail the seven seas, climb the tallest mountain. All you had to do was believe.

...

Underwater, Scott folds himself in half, peeling off his wet socks and flexing his toes against the cool deep. His left shoulder is starting to tighten up on him. He rests it as much as he can, pulling his weight with the right, settling for fifteen minutes at a time into a child's dog paddle. Once more, he recognizes the sheer impossibility of what he must do, choose a direction at random and swim for who knows how many miles against strong ocean currents with only one working arm. Panic's cousin, despair, threatens to settle in, but he shakes it off.

His tongue is already starting to feel dry in his mouth. Dehydration is another thing he will have to worry about, if he's out here long enough. Around him the wind is picking up, roughing the seas. *If I'm going to do this*, Scott decides, *I need to start swimming now*. Once more he looks for a break in the fog, but there is none, so he closes his eyes for a moment. He tries to feel *west*, to divine it like the iron filling feels the magnet.

Behind you, he thinks.

He opens his eyes, takes a deep breath.

BEFORE THE FALL

He is about to take his first stroke when he hears the noise. At first he thinks it's gulls, a high-pitched ululation that rises and falls. But then the sea lifts Scott a few feet, and at the wave's peak he realizes with a shock what he's hearing.

Crying.

Somewhere a child is crying.

He spins, trying to pinpoint the sound, but the waves rise and fall unevenly, creating bounces and echoes.

"Hey," he calls. "Hey, I'm here!"

The crying stops.

"Hey," he shouts, kicking against the undercurrent, "where are you?"

He looks for the wreckage, but whatever pieces haven't sunk have floated off in any number of directions. Scott strains to hear, to find the child.

"Hey!" he yells again. "I'm here. Where are you?"

For a moment there is just the sound of the waves, and Scott starts to wonder if maybe it was gulls he heard. But then a child's voice comes, sharp and surprisingly close.

"Help!"

Scott lunges toward the sound. He is no longer alone, no longer a solitary man engaged in an act of self-preservation. Now he is responsible for the life of another. He thinks of his sister, who drowned in Lake Michigan when she was sixteen, and he swims.

He finds the child clinging to a seat cushion thirty feet away. It is the boy. He can't be more than four.

"Hey," says Scott when he reaches him. "Hey, sweetie."

His voice catches in his throat as he touches the boy's shoulder, and he realizes he is crying.

"I'm here," he says. "I've got you."

The seat cushion doubles as a flotation device with arm straps and a cinch belt, but it is designed for an adult, so Scott has a hard time getting it to stay on the boy, who is shivering from the cold.

"I threw up," the boy says.

Scott wipes his mouth gently.

"That's okay. You're okay. Just a little seasick."

"Where are we?" the little boy asks.

"We're in the ocean," Scott tells him. "There was a plane crash and we're in the ocean, but I'm going to swim to shore."

"Don't leave me," the boy says, panic in his voice.

"No, no," says Scott. "Of course not. I'm taking you with me. We're just going to—I have to get this thing to stay on you. And then I'll—you'll lie on top and I'll pull you behind me. How does that sound?"

The boy nods, and Scott gets to work. It's hard with only one working arm, but after a few torturous moments he manages to tie the flotation device straps into a weave. He slips the boy into the harness and studies the results. It's not as tight as he'd like, but it should keep the boy above the water.

"Okay," says Scott, "I need you to hold on tight and I'm going to pull you to shore. Can you—do you know how to swim?"

The kid nods.

"Good," says Scott. "So if you fall off the cushion I want you to kick real hard and paddle with your arms, okay?"

"Dog and cat," says the boy.

"That's right. Dog and cat with your hands, just like Mommy taught you."

"My daddy."

"Sure. Just like Daddy taught you, okay?"

The boy nods. Scott sees his fear.

"Do you know what a hero is?" Scott asks him.

"He fights the bad guys," the boy says.

"That's right. The hero fights the bad guys. And he never gives up, right?"

"No."

"Well, I need you to be the hero now, okay? Just pretend the waves

are the bad guys and we're gonna swim through them. And we can't give up. We won't. We'll just keep swimming until we reach land, okay?"

The boy nods. Wincing, Scott loops his left arm through one of the straps. His shoulder is screaming now. Each swell that lifts them adds to his sense of disorientation.

"Okay," he says. "Let's do this."

Scott closes his eyes and tries once again to feel which way to swim.

Behind you, he thinks. The shore is behind you.

He rotates carefully around the boy in the water and starts to kick, but just as he does moonlight breaks through the fog. A patch of starry black is briefly visible overhead. Scott searches desperately for constellations he recognizes, the gap closing quickly. Then he spots Andromeda, and then the Big Dipper, and with it the North Star.

It's the other way, he realizes with a sickening vertigo.

For a moment Scott feels an overwhelming urge to vomit. Had the sky not cleared, then he and the boy would have set out into the Atlantic deep, the East Coast receding behind them with every kick, until exhaustion overtook them and they sank without a trace.

"Change of plans," he tells the boy, trying to keep his voice light. "Let's go the other way."

"Okay."

"Okay. That's good."

Scott kicks them into position. The farthest he has ever swum is fifteen miles, but that was when he was nineteen, and he had trained for months. Plus the race was in a lake with no current. And both of his arms worked. Now it's night, and the water temperature is dropping, and he will have to fight the strong Atlantic current for who knows how many miles.

If I survive this, he thinks, I'm going to send Jack LaLanne's widow a fruit basket.

The thought is so ridiculous that, bobbing in the water, Scott starts

BEFORE THE FALL

But if he stops moving he'll drown.

He rolls over onto his back, breathing deeply to inflate his chest. He has never been more aware of his tenuous place on the food chain. Every instinct in his body screams at him not to turn his back on the deep, but he does. He floats in the sea as calmly as he can, rising and falling with the tide.

"What are we doing?" the boy asks.

"Resting," Scott tells him. "Let's be real quiet now, okay? Don't move. Try to keep your feet out of the water."

The boy is silent. They rise and fall with the swells. Scott's primal reptilian brain orders him to flee. But he ignores it. A shark can smell a drop of blood in a million gallons of water. If either Scott or the boy is bleeding they're done. But if not and they stay completely still the shark (if it was a shark) should leave them alone.

He takes the boy's hand.

"Where's my sister?" the boy whispers.

"I don't know," Scott whispers back. "The plane went down. We got separated."

A long beat.

"Maybe she's okay," Scott whispers. "Maybe your parents have her, and they're floating someplace else. Or maybe they've already been rescued."

After a long silence the boy says:

"I don't think so."

They float for a while with this thought. Overhead the fog begins to dissipate. It starts slowly, the clearing, first a hint of sky peeking through, then stars appear, and finally the crescent moon, and just like that the ocean around them becomes a sequined dress. From his back, Scott finds the North Star, confirms that they're going in the right direction. He looks over at the boy, eyes wide with fear. For the first time Scott can see his tiny face, the furrowed brow and bowed mouth.

"Hi," says Scott, water lapping at his ears.

The boy's expression is flat, serious.

"Hi," he says back.

"Are we rested?" Scott asks.

The boy nods.

"Okay," says Scott, turning over. "Let's go home."

He rights himself and starts to swim, certain that at any moment he will feel a strike from below, the razor grip of a steam-shovel mouth, but it doesn't come, and after a while he puts the shark out of his mind. He wills them forward, stroke after stroke, his legs moving behind him in figure eights, his right arm lunging and pulling, lunging and pulling. To keep his mind busy, he thinks of other liquids he would rather be swimming in; milk, soup, bourbon. An ocean of bourbon.

He considers his life, but the details seem meaningless now. His ambitions. The rent that is due every month. The woman who has left him. He thinks of his work, brushstrokes on canvas. It is the ocean he is painting tonight, stroke by stroke, like Harold and his purple crayon, drawing a balloon as he falls.

Floating in the North Atlantic, Scott realizes that he has never been more clear about who he is, his purpose. It's so obvious. He was put on this earth to conquer this ocean, to save this boy. Fate brought him to that beach in San Francisco forty-one years ago. It delivered to him a golden god, shackled at the wrists, battling the ocean winds. Fate gave Scott the urge to swim, to join first his junior high swim team, then his high school and college crews. It pushed him to swim practice every morning at five, before the sun was up, lap after lap in the chlorinated blue, the applause of the other boys' splashing, the *kree* of the coach's whistle. Fate led him to water, but it was *will* that drove him to victory in three state championships, *will* that pushed him to a first-place medal in the men's two-hundred-meter freestyle in high school.

He came to love the pressure in his ears when he dove down to the pool's apple-smooth bottom. He dreamed of it at night, floating like a buoy in the blue. And when he started painting in college, blue was the first color he bought.

...

He is starting to get thirsty when the boy says:

"What's that?"

Scott lifts his head from the water. The boy is pointing at something to their right. Scott looks over. In the moonlight Scott sees a hulking black wave creeping silently toward them, growing taller, gathering strength. Scott measures it instantly at twenty-five feet, a monster bearing down. Its humped head sparkles in the moonlight. A lightning bolt of panic hits him. There is no time to think. Scott turns and starts swimming toward it. He has maybe thirty seconds to close the gap. His left shoulder screams at him, but he ignores it. The boy is crying now, sensing that death is near, but there isn't time to comfort him.

"Deep breath," Scott yells. "Take a deep breath now."

The wave is too big, too fast. It is on them before Scott can get a good breath himself.

He pulls the boy from the flotation device and dives.

Something in his left shoulder pops. He ignores it. The boy struggles against him, against the madman dragging him down to his death. Scott grips him tighter and kicks. He is a bullet, a cannonball streaking down through the water, diving under a wall of death. The pressure increases. His heart pounds, his lungs tick—swollen with air.

As the wave passes overhead, Scott is certain he has failed. He feels himself being sucked back up to the surface in a maelstrom of undertow. The wave will chew them up, he realizes, rip them apart. He kicks harder, holding the boy to his chest, fighting for every inch. Overhead the wave crests and topples into the sea behind them—twenty-five feet of ocean falling like a hammer, millions of gallons of angry surge—and the updraft is replaced in an instant by a churning rinse cycle.

They are spun and dragged. Down becomes up. Pressure threatens to rip them apart, man from boy, but Scott holds on. His lungs are

screaming now. His eyes are burning from the salt. In his arms the boy has stopped struggling. The ocean is pure blackness, no sign of the stars or moon. Scott releases the air in his lungs and feels the bubbles cascade downward across his chin and arms. With all his strength he flips them over and kicks for the surface.

He emerges, coughing, his lungs half full of water. He screams them clear. The boy is limp in his arms, his head lying inert against Scott's shoulder. Scott turns the boy until his back is against Scott's chest, and then, with all his strength, compresses the boy's lungs in rhythm until he too is coughing up salt water.

The seat cushion is gone, chewed up by the wave. Scott holds the boy with his good arm. Cold and exhaustion threaten to overwhelm him. For a time it's all he can do just to keep them afloat.

"That was a big bad guy," the boy says finally.

For a moment Scott doesn't understand the words, but then it comes back to him. He told the boy that the waves were bad guys and they were the heroes.

So brave, Scott thinks, amazed.

"I could really go for a cheeseburger," he says, in the calm between waves. "What about you?"

"Pie," the boy says after a moment.

"What kind?"

"All of them."

Scott laughs. He cannot believe that he is still alive. He feels giddy for a moment, his body thrumming with energy. For the second time tonight he has faced certain death and lived. He looks for the North Star.

"How much longer?" the boy wants to know.

"It's not far," Scott tells him, though the truth is they could still be miles from shore.

"I'm cold," says the boy, his teeth chattering.

Scott hugs him.

"Me too. Hold on, okay?"

He maneuvers the boy onto his back, working to stay above the spray. The boy hugs Scott's neck, his breath loud in Scott's ear.

"Finish strong," Scott says, as much for himself as the boy.

He gives one more look to the sky, then starts to swim. He uses a sidestroke now, scissoring his legs, one ear submerged in the salty murk. His movements are clumsier, jerky. He can't seem to find a rhythm. Both of them are shivering, their core temperature falling with every passing second. It is just a matter of time. Soon his pulse and respiration will slow, even as his heart rate increases. Hypothermia will quicken its pace. A massive heart attack is not out of the question. The body needs warmth to operate. Without it, his major organs will start to fail.

Don't give up.

Never give up.

He swims without pause, teeth chattering, refusing to surrender. The weight of the boy threatens to sink him, but he kicks harder with his rubbery legs. Around him the sea is bruise purple and midnight blue, the cold white of the wave caps glimmering in the moonlight. The skin of his legs has started to chafe in the spots where they rub together, the salt doing its insidious damage. His lips are cracked and dry. Above them, seagulls chatter and glide like vultures waiting for the end. They mock him with their cries, and in his mind he tells them all to go to hell. There are things in the sea that are impossibly old, astonishingly large, great undersea rivers pulling warm water up from the Gulf of Mexico. The Atlantic Ocean is a nexus of highways, of undersea flyovers and bypasses. And there, like a speck on a dot on a flea, is Scott Burroughs, shoulder screaming as he fights for his life.

After what feels like hours, the boy shouts a single word.

"Land."

For a moment Scott isn't sure the boy actually spoke. It must be a dream. But then the boy repeats the word, pointing.

"Land."

It seems like a mistake, like the boy has mixed up the word for sur-

A WALLEYED FISHERMAN drives them to the hospital. The three crowd together on the worn bench seat of his pickup, bouncing on battered shocks. Scott is pantless and shoeless, without money or ID. Both he and the boy are racked with bone-deep chills. They have been in sixty-degree water for almost eight hours. Hypothermia has made them slow-witted and mute.

The fisherman speaks to them eloquently in Spanish about Jesus Christ. The radio is on, mostly static. Beneath their feet wind whistles into the cabin through a rust hole in the floor. Scott pulls the boy to him and tries to warm him through friction, rubbing the child's arms and back vigorously with his one good hand. On the beach, Scott told the fisherman in his limited Spanish that the boy was his son. It seemed easier than trying to explain the truth, that they are strangers drawn together by a freak accident.

Scott's left arm is completely useless now. Pain knifes through his body with every pothole, leaving him dizzy and nauseous.

You're okay, he tells himself, repeating the words over and over. *You made it*. But deep down he still can't believe they survived.

"*Gracias*," he stutters as the pickup pulls into the crescent driveway of the Montauk hospital emergency room. Scott bucks the door open with his good shoulder and climbs down, every muscle in his body

numb with exhaustion. The morning fog is gone, and the warm sun on his back and legs feels almost religious. Scott helps the boy jump down. Together they limp into the emergency room.

The waiting area is mostly empty. In the corner, a middle-aged man holds an icepack to his head, water dripping off his wrist onto the linoleum floor. On the other side of the room an elderly couple holds hands, their heads close together. From time to time the woman coughs into a balled-up Kleenex she keeps clutched tightly in her left hand.

An intake nurse sits behind glass. Scott limps over to her, the boy holding on to his shirttails.

"Hi," he says.

The nurse gives him a quick once-over. Her name tag reads MELANIE. Scott tries to imagine what he must look like. All he can think of is Wile E. Coyote after an ACME rocket has exploded in his face.

"We were in a plane crash," he says.

The words out loud are astonishing. The intake nurse squints at him.

"I'm sorry."

"A plane from Martha's Vineyard. A private plane. We crashed into the sea. I think we're hypothermic, and my—I can't move my left arm. The collarbone may be broken."

The nurse is still trying to work through it.

"You crashed in the sea."

"We swam—I swam—I think it was ten miles. Maybe fifteen. We just came ashore maybe an hour ago. A fisherman drove us here."

The words are making him dizzy, his lungs shutting down.

"Look," he says, "do you think we could get some help? At least the boy. He's only four."

The nurse looks at the boy, damp, shivering.

"Is he your son?"

"If I say yes will you get us a doctor?"

The nurse sniffles.

"There's no need to get surly."

Scott feels his jaw clenching.

"There is actually every need. We were in a fucking plane crash. Get the damn doctor."

She stands, uncertain.

Scott glances over at the ceiling-mounted television. The sound is down, but onscreen are images of search-and-rescue boats on the ocean. A banner headline reads, PRIVATE PLANE FEARED LOST.

"There," says Scott, pointing, "that's us. Will you believe me now?"

The nurse looks at the TV, images of fractured wreckage bobbing in the sea. Her reaction is instantaneous, as if Scott has produced a passport at the border crossing after pantomiming a frantic search.

She pushes the intercom button.

"Code Orange," she says. "I need all available doctors to intake immediately."

The cramping in Scott's leg is beyond critical. He is dehydrated, potassium-deficient, like a marathoner who has failed to give his body the nutrition it demands.

"Just," he says, buckling to the floor, "one would do, probably."

He lies on the cool linoleum looking up at the boy. The boy's face is sober, worried. Scott tries to smile reassuringly, but even his lips are exhausted. In an instant they are surrounded by hospital personnel, voices shouting. Scott feels himself being lifted onto a gurney. The boy's hand slips away.

"No!" the boy shouts. He is screaming, thrashing. A doctor is talking to him, trying to make the boy understand that they will take care of him, that nothing bad will happen. It doesn't matter. Scott struggles to sit up.

"Kid," he says, louder and louder until the boy looks at him. "It's okay. I'm here."

He climbs down off the gurney, his legs rubbery, barely able to stand.

"Sir," a nurse says, "you have to lie down."

"I'm fine," Scott tells the doctors. "Help him."

To the boy he says: "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

The boy's eyes, in daylight, are startlingly blue. After a moment he nods. Scott, feeling light-headed, turns to the doctor.

"We should do this fast," he says, "if it's not too much trouble."

The doctor nods. He is young and smart. You can see it in his eyes.

"Fine," he says, "but I'm getting you a wheelchair."

Scott nods. A nurse wheels over the chair and he falls into it.

"Are you his father?" she asks him as they roll to the exam room.

"No," Scott tells her. "We just met."

Inside the exam bay, the doctor gives the boy a quick once-over, checking for fractures, light in the eyes, *follow my finger*.

"We need to start an IV," he tells Scott. "He's severely dehydrated."

"Hey, buddy," Scott tells the boy, "the doctor needs to put a needle in your arm, okay? They need to give you some fluids, and, uh, vitamins."

"No needles," the boy says, fear in his eyes. He is one wrong word away from losing his mind.

"I don't like them either," says Scott, "but you know what? I'll get one too, okay? We'll do it together. How about that?"

The boy thinks about this. It seems fair. He nods.

"Okay, good," says Scott. "Let's—hold my hand and we'll—don't look, okay?"

Scott turns to the doctor.

"Can you do us together?" he asks.

The doctor nods, issues orders. The nurses ready the needles and hang IV bags on metal arms.

"Look at me," Scott tells the boy when the time comes.

The boy's eyes are blue saucers. He flinches when the needle goes in. His eyes tear up and his bottom lip quivers, but he doesn't cry.

"You're my hero," Scott tells him. "My absolute hero."

Scott can feel the fluids entering his system. Almost immediately the urge to pass out dissipates.

"I'm going to give you both a mild sedative," the doctor says. "Your bodies have been working overtime just to stay warm. You need to downshift."

"I'm fine," Scott says. "Do him first."

The doctor sees there's no point in arguing. A needle is inserted into the boy's IV line.

"You're going to rest a little bit," Scott tells him. "I'll be right here. I may go outside for a minute, but I'll come back. Okay?"

The boy nods. Scott touches the crown of his head. He remembers when he was nine and he fell out of a tree and broke his leg. How he was brave through the whole thing, but when his dad showed up at the hospital Scott started bawling. And now this boy's parents are most likely dead. No one is going to walk through the door and give him permission to fall apart.

"That's good," he tells the boy as his little eyes start to flutter shut. "You're doing so good."

After the boy is asleep, Scott is wheeled into a separate exam room. They lay him on a gurney and cut off his shirt. His shoulder feels like an engine that has seized.

"How are you feeling?" the doctor asks him. He is maybe thirty-eight with smile lines around his eyes.

"You know," says Scott, "things are starting to turn around."

The doctor does a surface exam, checking for obvious cuts or bruises.

"Did you really swim all that way in the dark?"

Scott nods.

"Do you remember anything?"

"I'm a little fuzzy on details," Scott tells him.

The doctor checks his eyes.

"Hit your head?"

"I think so. On the plane before we crashed..."

The penlight blinds him for a moment. The doctor clucks.

"Eye response looks good. I don't think you have a concussion."

Scott exhales.

"I don't think I could have done that—swim all night—with a concussion."

The doctor considers this.

"You're probably right."

As he warms up and his fluids are replaced, things start to come back to Scott, the world at large, the concept of countries and citizens, of daily life, the Internet, television. He thinks of his three-legged dog, staying with a neighbor, how close she came to never eating another under-the-table meatball again. Scott's eyes fill with tears. He shakes them off.

"What's the news saying?" he asks.

"Not much. They say the plane took off around ten o'clock last night. Air traffic control had it on their radar for maybe fifteen minutes, then it just disappeared. No mayday. Nothing. They were hoping the radio was broken and you made an emergency landing someplace. But then a fishing boat spotted a piece of the wing."

For a moment Scott is back in the ocean, treading water in the inky deep, surrounded by orange flames.

"Any other . . . survivors?" he asks.

The doctor shakes his head. He is focused on Scott's shoulder.

"Does this hurt," he says, gently lifting Scott's arm.

The pain is instantaneous. Scott yells.

"Let's get an X-ray and a CAT scan," the doctor tells the nurse.

He turns to Scott.

"I ordered a CAT scan for the boy too," he says. "I want to make sure there's no internal bleeding."

He lays a hand on Scott's arm.

"You saved his life," he says. "You know that, right?"

For the second time, Scott fights back tears. He is unable, for a long moment, to say anything.

"I'm going to call the police," the doctor tells him. "Let them know you're here. If you need anything, anything, tell the nurse. I'll be back to check on you in a few."

Scott nods.

"Thanks," he says.

The doctor stares at Scott for a moment longer, then shakes his head.

"Goddamn," he says, smiling.

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The next hour is filled with tests. Flush with warm fluids, Scott's body temperature returns to normal. They give him Vicodin for the pain, and he floats for a while in twilight oblivion. It turns out his shoulder is dislocated, not broken. The procedure to pop it back into place is an epic lightning strike of violence followed immediately by a cessation of pain so intense it's as if the damage has been erased from his body retroactively.

At Scott's insistence, they put him in the boy's room. Normally, children stay in a separate wing, but an exception is made given the circumstances. The boy is awake now, eating Jell-O, when they wheel Scott inside.

"Any good?" Scott wants to know.

"Green," the boy says, frowning.

Scott's bed is by the window. He has never felt anything as comfortable as these scratchy hospital sheets. Across the street there are trees and houses. Cars drive past, windshields flashing. In the bike lane, a woman jogs against traffic. In a nearby yard, a man in a blue ball cap push-mows his lawn.

It seems impossible, but life goes on.

"You slept, huh?" says Scott.

The boy shrugs.

"Is my mommy here yet?" he says.

Scott tries to keep his face neutral.

"No," Scott tells him. "They've called your—I guess you have an aunt and uncle in Westchester. They're on their way."

The boy smiles.

"Ellie," he says.

"You like her?"

"She's funny," the boy says.

"Funny is good," says Scott, his eyelids fluttering. *Exhausted* doesn't describe the kind of heavy-metal gravity pulling at his bones right now. "I'm going to sleep for a bit, if that's okay."

If the boy thinks otherwise, Scott never hears it. He is asleep before the kid can answer.

...

He sleeps for a while, a dreamless slumber, like a castle dungeon. When he wakes the boy's bed is empty. Scott panics. He is half out of bed when the bathroom door opens and the boy comes out wheeling his IV stand.

"I had to tinkle," he says.

A nurse comes in to check Scott's blood pressure. She's brought a stuffed animal for the boy, a brown bear with a red heart in its paws. He takes it with a happy sound and immediately starts to play.

"Kids," the nurse says, shaking her head.

Scott nods. Now that he's slept he is anxious to get more details about the crash. He asks the nurse if he can get out of bed. She nods, but tells him not to go far.

"I'll be back, buddy, okay?"

The boy nods, playing with his bear.

Scott puts a thin cotton robe over his hospital gown and walks his IV stand down the hall to the empty patient lounge. It's a narrow interior room with particleboard chairs. Scott finds a news channel on TV, turns up the volume.

"...the plane was an OSPRY, manufactured in Kansas. On board were David Bateman, president of ALC News, and his family. Also confirmed now as passengers are Ben Kipling and his wife, Sarah.

Kipling was a senior partner at Wyatt, Hathoway, the financial giant. Again, the plane is believed to have gone down in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of New York sometime after ten p.m. last night."

Scott stares at the footage, helicopter shots of gray ocean swells. Coast Guard boats and rubbernecking weekend sailors. Even though he knows the wreckage would have drifted, maybe even a hundred miles by now, he can't help but think that he was down there not that long ago, an abandoned buoy bobbing in the dark.

"Reports are coming in now," says the anchor, "that Ben Kipling may have been under investigation by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, and that charges were forthcoming. The scope and source of the investigation aren't yet clear. More on this story as it develops."

A photo of Ben Kipling appears on the screen, younger and with more hair. Scott remembers the eyebrows. He realizes that everyone else on that plane except he and the boy exist now only in the past tense. The thought makes the hair on his neck flutter and stand, and for a moment he thinks he may pass out. Then there is a knock on the door. Scott looks up. He sees a group of men in suits hovering in the hallway.

"Mr. Burroughs," says the knocker. He is in his early fifties, an African American man with graying hair.

"I'm Gus Franklin with the National Transportation Safety Board."

Scott starts to stand. A reflex of social protocol.

"No, please," says Gus. "You've been through a lot."

Scott settles back onto the sofa, pulling the cotton robe closed over his legs.

"I was just—watching it on TV," he says. "The rescue. Salvage? I'm not sure what to call it. I think I'm still in shock."

"Of course," says Gus. He looks around the small room.

"Let's—I'm gonna say four people max in this room," he tells his cohorts. "Otherwise, it's gonna get a little claustrophobic."

There is a quick conference. Ultimately, they agree on six, Gus and two others (one man and one woman) in the room; two more in the

doorway. Gus sits beside Scott on the sofa. The woman is to the left of the television. A trim, bearded man to her right. They are, for want of a better word, nerds. The woman has a ponytail and glasses. The man sports an eight-dollar haircut and a JCPenney suit. The two men in the doorway are more serious, well dressed, military haircuts.

"As I said," says Gus, "I'm with the NTSB. Leslie's with the FAA and Frank is with OSPRY. And in the doorway is Special Agent O'Brien from the FBI and Barry Hex from the Treasury's OFAC."

"The OFAC," says Scott. "I just saw something about that on the TV."

Hex chews gum silently.

"If you feel up to it, Mr. Burroughs," says Gus, "we'd like to ask you some questions about the flight, who was on it, and the circumstances leading up to the crash."

"Assuming it was a crash," says O'Brien. "And not an act of terrorism."

Gus ignores this.

"Here's what I know," he tells Scott. "As of now we've found no other survivors. Nor have we recovered any bodies. A few pieces of wreckage were found floating about twenty-nine miles off the coast of Long Island. We're examining them now."

He leans forward, placing his hands on his knees.

"You've been through a lot, so if you want to stop just say so."

Scott nods.

"Somebody said the boy's aunt and uncle are coming from Westchester," he says. "Do we know when they'll get here?"

Gus looks at O'Brien, who ducks out of the room.

"We're checking that for you," says Gus. He pulls a file folder from his briefcase. "So the first thing I need to do is confirm how many people were on the flight."

"Don't you have, I mean, an itinerary?" Scott asks.

"Private jets file flight plans, but their passenger rosters are pretty unreliable."

He looks over his paperwork.

"Am I right in saying your name is Scott Burroughs?"

"Yes."

"Do you mind giving me your Social Security number? For our records."

Scott recites the number. Gus writes it down.

"Thanks," he says. "That helps. There are sixteen Scott Burroughs in the tristate area. We weren't sure exactly which one we were dealing with."

He offers Scott a smile. Scott tries to work up an encouraging response.

"From what we've been able to piece together," Gus tells him, "the flight was crewed by a captain, a first officer, and a flight attendant. Would you recognize the names if I said them?"

Scott shakes his head. Gus makes a note.

"Passenger-wise," says Gus, "we know that David Bateman chartered the flight and that he and his family—wife, Maggie, and two children, Rachel and JJ—were on board."

Scott thinks of the smile Maggie gave him when he boarded. Warm and welcoming. A woman he knew in passing, small talk at the market—*How are you? How are the kids?*—the occasional conversation about his work. That she is dead right now at the bottom of the Atlantic makes him want to throw up.

"And finally," says Gus, "in addition to yourself, we believe that Ben Kipling and his wife, Sarah, were on board. Can you confirm that?"

"Yes," says Scott. "I met them when I got on the plane."

"Describe Mr. Kipling for me, please," asks Agent Hex.

"Uh, maybe five-eleven, gray hair. He had, uh, very prominent eyebrows. I remember that. And his wife was very chatty."

Hex looks at O'Brien, nods.

"And just so we're clear," says Gus. "Why were you on the plane?"

Scott looks at their faces. They are detectives scrambling for facts,

filling in missing pieces. A plane has crashed. Was it mechanical failure? Human error? Who can be blamed? Who is liable?

"I was—" says Scott, then starts again, "—I met Maggie, Mrs. Bateman, on the island a few weeks ago. At the farmers market. I would—I went there every morning for coffee and a bialy. And she would come in with the kids. But sometimes alone. And we started talking one day."

"Were you sleeping with her?" asks O'Brien.

Scott thinks about this.

"I wasn't," he says. "Not that it's relevant."

"Let us decide what's relevant," O'Brien says.

"Sure," says Scott, "though maybe you can explain to me how the sexual interactions of a passenger in a plane crash are relevant to your—what is this?—investigation."

Gus nods quickly three times. They are getting off course. Every second wasted takes them farther from the truth.

"Back to the point," he says.

Scott holds O'Brien's eye for a long antagonistic moment, then continues.

"I ran into Maggie again Sunday morning. I told her I had to go to New York for a few days. She invited me to fly with them."

"And why were you going to New York?"

"I'm a painter. I've been—I live on the Vineyard and I was going in to meet with my rep and talk to some galleries about doing a show. My plan was to take the ferry to the mainland. But Maggie invited me, and, well, a private plane. The whole thing seemed very—I almost didn't go."

"But you did."

Scott nods.

"At the last minute. I threw some things together. They were actually closing the doors when I ran up."

"Lucky for the boy you made it," says Leslie from the FAA.

Scott thinks about it. Was it lucky? Is there anything lucky about surviving a tragedy?

"Did Mr. Kipling seem agitated to you?" Hex interjects, clearly impatient. He has his own investigation and it has little to do with Scott. Gus shakes him off.

"Let's do this in order," he says. "I'm leading this—it's my investigation."

He turns to Scott.

"The airport log says the plane took off at ten oh six."

"Sounds right," says Scott. "I didn't look at my phone."

"Can you describe the takeoff?"

"It was—smooth. I mean, it was my first private jet."

He looks at Frank, the OSPRY rep.

"Very nice," he says. "Except for the crashing, I mean."

Frank looks stricken.

"So you don't remember anything unusual?" Gus asks. "Any sounds or jostling out of the ordinary?"

Scott thinks back. It happened so fast. Before he could even get his seat belt on they were taxiing. And Sarah Kipling was talking to him, asking him about his work and how he knew Maggie. And the girl was on her iPhone, listening to music or playing a game. The boy was sleeping. And Kipling was—*what was he doing?*

"I don't think so," he says. "I remember—you felt the force of it more. The power. I guess that's what a jet is. But then we were off the ground and rising. Most of the shades were closed and it was very light in the cabin. There was a baseball game on the TV."

"Boston played last night," says O'Brien.

"Dworkin," says Frank in a knowing way, and the two feds in the doorway smile.

"I don't know what that means," Scott says, "but I also remember music. Something jazzy. Sinatra maybe?"

"And did there come a time when something unusual happened?" Gus asks.

"Well, we fell into the ocean," says Scott.

Gus nods.

"And how exactly did that happen?"

"Well—I mean—it's hard to remember exactly," Scott tells him. "The plane turned suddenly, pitched, and I—"

"Take your time," says Gus.

Scott thinks back. The takeoff, the offered glass of wine. Images flash through his mind, an astronaut's vertigo, a blare of sounds. Metal shrieking. The disorienting whirl. Like a movie negative that has been cut and reassembled at random. It is the job of the human brain to assemble all the input of our world—sights, sounds, smells—into a coherent narrative. This is what memory is, a carefully calibrated story that we make up about our past. But what happens when those details crumble? Hailstones on a tin roof. Fireflies firing at random. What happens when your life can't be translated into a linear narrative?

"There was banging," he says. "I think. Some kind of—I want to say concussion."

"Like an explosion?" asks the man from OSPRY, hopefully.

"No. I mean, I don't think so. It was more like—a knocking and then—at the same time the plane kind of—dropped."

Gus thinks about saying something then, a follow-up question, but doesn't.

In his mind, Scott hears a scream. Not of terror, but an involuntary expulsion, a reflexive vocal reaction to something unexpected. It is the sound fear makes when it first appears, the sudden, visceral realization that you are not safe, that this activity you are engaged in is deeply, deeply risky. Your body makes the sound and immediately you break out in a cold sweat. Your sphincter clenches. Your mind, which up until this moment has been moving along at pedestrian speeds, suddenly races forward, running for its life. Fight or flight. It is the moment when the intellect fails and something primal, animal takes over.

With a sudden prickling certainty, Scott realizes that the scream came from him. And then blackness. His face pales. Gus leans in.

"Do you want to stop?"

Scott exhales.

"No. It's fine."

Gus asks an aide to bring Scott a soda from the machine. While they're waiting Gus lays out the facts he's managed to assemble.

"According to our radar," he says, "the plane was in the air for eighteen minutes. It reached an altitude of twelve thousand feet, then began to descend rapidly."

Sweat is dripping down Scott's back. Images are coming back to him, memories.

"Things were—*flying* is the wrong word," he says. "Around. Stuff. I remember my duffel bag. It just kind of levitated off the floor, just calmly floated up in the air like a magic trick, and then, just as I reached for it, it just—took off, just disappeared. And we were spinning, and I hit my head, I guess."

"Do you know if the plane broke up in the air?" Leslie from the FAA asks him. "Or was the pilot able to make a landing?"

Scott tries to remember, but it's just flashes. He shakes his head.

Gus nods.

"Okay," he says. "Let's stop there."

"Hold on," says O'Brien. "I still have questions."

Gus stands.

"Later," he says. "Right now I think Mr. Burroughs needs to rest."

The others stand. This time Scott gets to his feet. His legs are shaking.

Gus offers his hand.

"Get some sleep," he says. "I saw two news vans pull up outside as we were coming in. This is going to be a story, and you're going to be at the center of it."

Scott can't for the life of him figure out what he's talking about.

"What do you mean?" he says.

"We'll try to shield your identity as long as possible," Gus tells him.

"Your name wasn't on the passenger roster, which helps. But the press is going to want to know how the boy made it to shore. Who saved

him. Because that's a story. You're a hero now, Mr. Burroughs. Try to wrap your mind around that—what it means. Plus, the boy's father, Bateman, was a big deal. And Kipling—well, you'll see—this is a very messy situation."

He extends his hand. Scott shakes it.

"I've seen a lot of things in my day," says Gus, "but this—"

He shakes his head.

"You're a hell of a swimmer, Mr. Burroughs."

Scott feels numb. Gus herds the other agents out of the room with his hands.

"We'll talk again," he says.

After they're gone Scott sways on his feet inside the empty lounge. His left arm is in a polyurethane sling. The room is buzzing with silence. He takes a deep breath, lets it out. He is alive. This time yesterday he was eating lunch on his back porch and staring out at the yard, egg salad and iced tea. The three-legged dog was lying in the grass licking her elbow. There were phone calls to make, clothes to pack.

Now everything has changed.

He wheels his IV over to the window, looks out. In the parking lot he sees six news vans, satellite dishes deployed. A crowd is gathering. How many times has the world been interrupted by the cable buzz of special reports? Political scandals, spree killings, celebrity intercourse caught on tape. Talking heads with their perfect teeth ripping apart the still-warm body? Now it is his turn. Now he is the story, the bug under the microscope. To Scott, watching through tempered glass, they are an enemy army massing at the gates. He stands in his turret watching them assemble their siege engines and sharpen their swords.

All that matters, he thinks, is that the boy be saved from that.

A nurse knocks on the door of the lounge. Scott turns.

"Okay," she tells him. "Time to rest."

Scott nods. He remembers the moment from last night when the fog first cleared, and the North Star became visible. A distant point

BEFORE THE FALL

of light that brought with it absolute certainty about which direction they should go.

Standing there, studying his reflection in the glass, Scott wonders if he will ever have that kind of clarity again. He takes a last look at the growing mob, then turns and walks back to his room.

List of the Dead

David Bateman, 56
Margaret Bateman, 36
Rachel Bateman, 9
Gil Baruch, 48
Ben Kipling, 52
Sarah Kipling, 50
James Melody, 50
Emma Lightner, 25
Charlie Busch, 30

DAVID BATEMAN

APRIL 2, 1959–AUGUST 23, 2015

IT WAS THE chronic chaos that made it interesting. The way a story could spark from a cinder and race through a news cycle, changing speed and direction, growing wilder, devouring everything in its path. Political gaffes, school shootings, crises of national and international import. News, in other words. On the tenth floor of the ALC Building the newsmen rooted for fires, both literal and metaphoric, betting money on them like a back-alley dice game.

Anyone who could guess the length of a scandal down to the hour got a salad spinner, David used to say. Cunningham would give you the watch off his wrist if you could predict a politician's apology word for word before it happened. Napoleon offered sex with his wife to any reporter who could get a White House press secretary to curse into an open mike. They spent hours establishing the ground rules on that one—what constituted a curse? *Fuck*, sure. *Shit* or *twat*. But what about *damn*? Was *hell* enough?

"*Hell* will get you a handjob," Napoleon told them, feet stacked up on his desk, left over right, but when Cindy Bainbridge got Ari Fleischer to say it, Napoleon told her it didn't count because she was a girl.

If you were lucky, what started as a brush fire—a governor's name found on the client list of a call-girl ring, for example—quickly

became a raging inferno, exploding in backdraft share points and swallowing all the oxygen out of the broadcast market. David used to remind them constantly that Watergate started with a simple B&E.

"What was Whitewater, after all," he'd say, "but a bush-league, Po-dunk land scandal?"

They were twenty-first-century newsmen, prisoners of the cycle. History had taught them to dig for scandal in the fringes of every fact. Everyone was dirty. Nothing was simple except for the message.

ALC News, with a staff of fifteen thousand and a viewership that hovered around two million a day, was founded in 2002 with a hundred-million-dollar investment by an English billionaire. David Bateman was its architect, its founding father. In the trenches they called him The Chairman. But really what he was was a general, like George S. Patton, who stood unflinchingly as machine-gun fire strafed the dirt between his legs.

David had worked on both sides of the political scandal racket in his day. First, in his role as a political consultant running to stay ahead of the gaffes and missteps of his candidates, and then, after he retired from politics, in constructing an upstart twenty-four-hour news network. That was thirteen years ago. Thirteen years of outrage and messaging, of jeering chyrons and knock-down, drag-out war; 4,745 days of constant signal; 113,880 hours of sports and punditry and weather; 6,832,800 minutes of tick-tock air to fill with words and pictures and sound. The sheer, endless volume of it was daunting sometimes. Hour after hour stretching out to eternity.

What saved them was that they were no longer slaves to the events they covered. No longer held hostage by the action or inaction of others. This was the Big Idea that David had brought to the table in constructing the network, his masterstroke. Sitting down for lunch with the billionaire all those years ago, he laid it out simply.

"All these other networks," he said, "they *react* to the news. Chase after it. We're going to Make The News."

What that meant, he said, was that unlike CNN or MSNBC, ALC

would have a point of view, an agenda. Sure, there would still be random acts of God to cover, celebrity deaths and sex scandals. But that was just gravy. The meat and potatoes of their business would come from shaping the events of the day to fit the message of their network.

The billionaire loved this idea, of controlling the news, as David knew he would. He was a billionaire, after all, and billionaires get to be billionaires by taking control. After coffee they settled it with a handshake.

"How soon can you be up and running?" he asked David.

"Give me seventy-five million and I'll be on the air in eighteen months."

"I'll give you a hundred. Be on in six."

And they were. Six months of frantic building, of stealing anchors from other networks, of logo design and theme music composition. David found Bill Cunningham throwing snark on a second-tier news-magazine show. Bill was an angry white guy with a withering wit. David saw past the small time of the program. He had a vision of what the guy could become with the right platform, a godhead from Easter Island, a touchstone. There was a point of view there that David felt just might personify their brand.

"Brains aren't something they hand out in Ivy League schools," Cunningham told David when they met for breakfast that first time. "We're all born with them. And what I can't stand is this elitist attitude that we're all, none of us, smart enough to run our own country."

"You're doing a rant now," David told him.

"Where'd you go to college anyway?" Cunningham asked him, ready to pounce.

"Saint Mary's Landscaping Academy."

"Seriously. I went to Stony Brook. State school. And when I got out, none of those fucks from Harvard or Yale would give me the time of day. And pussy? Forget it. I had to sleep with Jersey girls for six years until I got my first on-air."

They were in a Cuban-Chinese place on Eighth Avenue, eating

eggs and drinking paint-brown coffee. Cunningham was a big guy, tall with a deliberate loom. He liked to get in your face, to unpack his suitcase and move in.

"What do you think of TV news?" David asked him.

"Shit," said Cunningham, chewing. "This pretend impartiality, like they don't take sides, but look at what they're reporting. Look at who the heroes are. The working stiff? No way. The church-going family man who works a double so his kid can go to college? It's a joke. We got a guy in the White House getting blowjobs from those guys' daughters. But the president's a Rhodes Scholar so I guess that makes it okay. They call it objective. I call it bias, pure and simple."

The waiter came and left the check, an old striped carbon sheet torn from a pocket-size pad. David still has it, framed on the wall of his office, one corner discolored by coffee. As far as the world was concerned Bill Cunningham was a washed-up, second-rate Maury Povich, but David saw the truth. Cunningham was a star, not because he was better than you or me, but because he *was* you or me. He was the raging voice of common sense, the sane man in an insane world. Once Bill was on board, the rest of the pieces fell into place.

Because at the end of the day, Cunningham was right, and David knew it. TV newsmen tried so hard to appear objective when the truth was, they were anything but. CNN, ABC, CBS, they sold the news like groceries in a supermarket, something for everyone. But people didn't want just information. They wanted to know what it meant. They wanted perspective. They needed something to react against. I agree or I don't agree. And if a viewer didn't agree more than half of the time, was David's philosophy, they turned the channel.

David's idea was to turn the news into a club of the like-minded. The first adopters would be the ones who'd been preaching his philosophy for years. And right behind them would be the people who had been searching their whole lives for someone to say out loud what

they'd always felt in their hearts. And once you had those two groups, the curious and the undecided would follow in droves.

This deceptively simple reconfiguration of the business model turned out to bring a sea change to the industry. But for David, it was simply a way to relieve the stress of waiting. Because what is the news business, really, except the work of hypochondriacs? Anxious men and women who inflate and investigate every tic and cough, hoping that this time it might be the big one. Wait and worry. Well, David had no interest in waiting, and he had never been one to worry.

He grew up in Michigan, the son of an autoworker at a GM plant, David Bateman Sr., who never took a sick day, never skipped a shift. David's dad once counted the cars he'd built over the thirty-four years he worked the rear suspension line. The number he came up with was 94,610. To him that was proof of a life well lived. You got paid to do a job and you did it. David Sr. never had more than a high school diploma. He treated everyone he met with respect, even the Harvard management types who toured the plant every few months, sluicing down from the curved driveways of Dearborn to slap the back of the common man.

David was an only child, the first in his family to go to college. But in an act of allegiance to his father, he declined the invitation to go to Harvard (full scholarship) in order to attend the University of Michigan. It was there that he discovered a love for politics. Ronald Reagan was in the White House that year, and David saw something in his folksy manner and steely gaze that inspired him. David ran for class president his senior year and lost. He had neither a politician's face nor charm, but he had ideas, strategy. He saw the moves like billboards in the far distance, heard the messages in his head. He knew how to win. He just couldn't do it himself. It was then that David Bateman realized that if he wanted a career in politics, it would have to be behind the scenes.

Twenty years and thirty-eight state and national elections later, David Bateman had earned a reputation as a kingmaker. He had

turned his love of the game into a highly profitable consulting business whose clients included a cable news network that had hired David to help them revamp their election coverage.

It was this combination of items on his résumé that led, one day in March 2002, to the birth of a movement.

DAVID WOKE BEFORE dawn. It was programmed into him now after twenty years on the campaign trail. Marty always said, *You snooze you lose*, and it was true. Campaigns weren't beauty contests. They were about endurance, the long, ugly blood sport of gathering votes. Rarely was there a first-round knockout. It was usually about who was still standing in the fifteenth, shrugging body blows from rubbery legs. It's what separated the something from the something else, David liked to say. And so he learned to go without sleep. Four hours a night was all he required now. In a pinch he could get by with twenty minutes every eight hours.

In his bedroom, the wall-size windows across from the bed framed the first glow of sunlight. He lay on his back, looking out, as downstairs the coffee was making itself. Outside he could see the towers of the Roosevelt Island tramway. Their bedroom—his and Maggie's—faced the East River. Glass as thick as an unabridged copy of *War and Peace* blocked the endless roar of the FDR Drive. It was bulletproof, along with all the other windows in the town house. The billionaire had paid for the installation after 9/11.

"Can't afford to lose you to some jihadi cabdriver with a shoulder rocket," he told David.

Today was Friday, August 21. Maggie and the kids were out at the

Vineyard, had been all month, leaving David to pad the marble bathroom floors alone. Downstairs he could hear the housekeeper making breakfast. After a shower, he stopped at the kids' rooms, as he did every morning, and stared at their perfectly made beds. The decor in Rachel's room combined scientific gadgetry and horse worship. JJ's was all about cars. Like all children, they tended toward chaos, a juvenile disorder the house staff erased systematically, often in real time. Now, staring at the sterile, vacuumed order, David found himself wanting to mess things up, to make his son's room look more like a kid's and less like a museum of childhood. So he went over to a toy bin and kicked it over with his foot.

There, he thought. That's better.

He would leave a note for the maid. When the children left town she was to leave their rooms as she found them. He would tape them off like a crime scene if he had to, anything to make the house feel more alive.

He called Maggie from the kitchen. The clock on the stove read 6:14 a.m.

"We've been up for an hour," she said. "Rachel's reading. JJ is seeing what happens when you pour dish soap in the toilet."

Her voice was muffled as she covered the mouthpiece.

"Sweetie," she yelled. "That is not what we call a good choice."

In New York, David mimed drinking and the housekeeper brought him more coffee. His wife came back on the line. David could hear the frazzled energy she got in her voice when she spent too long parenting by herself. Every year he tried to get her to bring Maria, the au pair, with them to the island, but his wife always refused. Summer vacation was for them, she said, family time. Otherwise, Rachel and JJ would grow up calling the nanny *Mommy*, like all the other kids in their neighborhood.

"It's super foggy out," his wife said.

"Did you get the thing I sent?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, sounding pleased. "Where did you find them?"

"The Kiplings. They know a guy who travels the world collecting old-world clippings. Apples from the eighteen hundreds. Peach trees no one's seen since McKinley was president. We had that fruit salad at their place last summer."

"Right," she said. "That was yummy. Were they—is it silly to ask?—were they expensive? This seems like something that you'd hear on the news is the price of a new car."

"A Vespa, maybe," he said.

It was just like her to ask price, as if part of her still couldn't fathom their net worth, its implications.

"I didn't even know there was such a thing as a Danish plum," she said.

"Me either. Who knew the world of fruit could be so exotic?"

She laughed. When things were good between them, there was an easiness. A rhythm of give-and-take that came from living in the moment, from burying old grudges. Some mornings when he called, David could tell that she had dreamed about him in the night. It was something she did from time to time. Often she told him afterward, biting off her words, unable to look him in the eye. In the dream he was always a monster who scorned and abandoned her. The conversations that followed were chilly and brief.

"Well, we're going to plant the trees this morning," Maggie told him. "It'll give us a project for the day."

They made small talk for another ten minutes—what his day looked like, what time he thought he'd be out tonight. All the while his phone chimed, breaking news, schedule changes, crises to be managed. The sound of other people's panic reduced to a steady electronic hum. Meanwhile the kids buzzed in and out of Maggie's end of the line like yellow jackets scouting a picnic. He liked hearing them in the background, the melee of them. It was what set his generation apart from his father's. David wanted his children to have a childhood. A real childhood. He worked hard so that they could play. For David's father, childhood had been a luxury his son could not afford. Play was

considered a gateway drug to idleness and poverty. Life, Dad said, was a Hail Mary. You only got one shot at it, and if you didn't train every day—with wind sprints and grass drills—you would blow it.

As a result, David had been burdened with chores at an early age. At five, he was cleaning the trash cans. By seven he was doing all their laundry. The rule in their house was that homework was done and chores were completed before a single ball was thrown, before a bike was ridden or army men were dumped from the Folgers can.

You don't become a man by accident, his father told him. It was a belief that David shared, though his was a milder version. In David's mind, the training for adulthood began in the double digits. At ten, he reasoned, it was time to start thinking about growing up. To take the soft-serve lessons about discipline and responsibility that had been fed to you in your youth, and cement them into rules for a healthy and productive life. Until then you were a child, so act accordingly.

"Daddy," said Rachel, "will you bring my red sneakers? They're in my closet."

He walked into her room and got them while they were talking so he wouldn't forget.

"I'm putting them in my bag," he told her.

"It's me again," said Maggie. "Next year I think you should come out here with us for the whole month."

"Me too," he said immediately. Every year they had the same conversation. Every year he said the same thing. *I will*. And then he didn't.

"It's just the fucking news," she said. "There'll be more tomorrow. Besides, haven't you trained them all by now?"

"I promise," he said, "next year I'll be there more." Because it was easier to say yes than to dicker through the real-world probabilities, lay out all the mitigating factors, and try to manage her expectations.

Never fight tomorrow's fight today, was his motto.

"Liar," she said, but with a smile in her voice.

"I love you," he told her. "I'll see you tonight."

...

The town car was downstairs waiting for him. Two security contractors from the agency rode up in the elevator to get him. They slept in shifts in one of the first-floor guest rooms.

"Morning, boys," said David, shrugging on his jacket.

They took him out together, two big men with Sig Sauers under their coats, eyes scanning the street for signs of threat. Every day David got hate mail, apoplectic letters about God knows what, sometimes even care packages of human shit. It was the price he paid for choosing a side, he reasoned, for having an opinion about politics and war.

Fuck you and your God, they said.

They threatened his life, his family, threats he had learned to take seriously.

In the town car he thought about Rachel, the three days she was missing. Ransom calls, the living room filled with FBI agents and private security, Maggie crying in the back bedroom. It was a miracle they got her back, a miracle that he knew would never happen twice. So they lived with the constant surveillance, the advance team. Safety first, he told his children. Then fun. Then learning. It was a joke between them.

He was driven cross-town through the stop-and-go. Every two seconds his phone blorped. North Korea was test-firing missiles into the Sea of Japan again. A Tallahassee policeman was in a coma after a car stop shooting. Nude cell phone photos of a Hollywood starlet sent to an NFL running back had just dropped. If you weren't careful it could feel like a tidal wave bearing down, all this eventfulness. But David saw it for what it was, and understood his own role. He was a sorting machine, boxing the news by category and priority, forwarding tips to various departments. He wrote one-word replies and hit SEND. *Bullshit* or *Weak* or *More*. He had answered thirty-three emails and returned sixteen phone calls by the time the car

pulled up in front of the ALC Building on Sixth Avenue, and that was light for a Friday.

A security man opened the back door for him. David stepped out into the bustle. Outside, the air was the temperature and consistency of a patty melt. He was wearing a steel-gray suit with a white shirt and a red tie. Sometimes in the mornings he liked to veer away from the front door at the last second and wander off to find a second breakfast. It kept the security guys on their toes. But today he had things to do if he was going to make it to the airport by three.

David's office was on the fifty-eighth floor. He came off the elevator at a fast clip, eyes focused on his office door. People got out of the way when he walked. They ducked into cubicles. They turned and fled. It wasn't the man so much as the office. Or maybe it was the suit. The faces around him seemed to get younger every day, David thought, segment producers and executive administrators, online nerds with soul patches and artisanal coffee, smug with the knowledge that they were the future. Everyone in this business was building a legacy. Some were ideologues, others were opportunists, but they were all there because ALC was the number one cable news network in the country, and David Bateman was the reason.

Lydia Cox, his secretary, was already at her desk. She had been with David since 1995, a fifty-nine-year-old woman who had never married, but had never owned a cat. Lydia was thin. Her hair was short, and she carried a certain old-school Brooklyn chutzpah that, like a once thriving Indian tribe, had long since been driven from the borough by hostile gentrifiers from across the sea.

"You've got the Sellers call in ten minutes," she reminded him first thing.

David didn't slow. He went in to his desk, took off his jacket, and hung it on the back of his chair. Lydia had put his schedule on the seat. He picked it up, frowned. Starting the day with Sellers—the increasingly unpopular LA bureau chief—was like starting the day with a colonoscopy.

"Hasn't somebody stabbed this guy yet?" he said.

"No," said Lydia, following him in. "But last year you did buy a burial plot in his name and send him a picture of it for Christmas."

David smiled. As far as he was concerned there weren't enough moments like that in life.

"Push it to Monday," he told her.

"He's called twice already. *Don't you dare let him blow this off*, was the gist."

"Too late."

There was a hot cup of coffee on David's desk. He pointed to it.

"For me?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "It's the pope's."

Bill Cunningham appeared in the doorway behind her. He was in jeans, a T-shirt, and his trademark red suspenders.

"Hey," he said. "Got a sec?"

Lydia turned to go. As Bill stepped aside to let her pass, David noticed Krista Brewer hovering behind him. She looked worried.

"Sure," said David. "What's up?"

They came in. Bill closed the door behind them, which wasn't something he normally did. Cunningham was a performance artist. His whole shtick was built on a rant against secret backroom meetings. In other words, nothing he did was ever private. Instead he preferred to go into David's office twice a week and yell his head off. About what didn't matter. It was a show of force, like a military exercise. So the closed door was a concern.

"Bill," said David, "did you just close the door?"

He looked at Krista, Bill's executive producer. She seemed a little green. Bill dropped onto the sofa. He had the wingspan of a pterodactyl. He sat, as he always did, with his knees spread wide so you could see how big his balls were.

"First of all," he said, "it's not as bad as you think."

"No," said Krista. "It's worse."

"Two days of bullshit," said Bill. "Maybe the lawyers get involved. Maybe."

David got up and looked out the window. He found the best thing you could do with a showman like Bill was not look at him.

"Whose lawyers?" he asked. "Yours or mine?"

"Goddammit, Bill," said Krista turning on the anchor. "This isn't a rule you broke, *Don't spit in church*. It's a law. Several laws probably."

David watched the traffic go by on Fifth Avenue.

"I'm going to the airport at three," he said. "Do you think we'll have reached the point by then, or are we going to have to finish this by phone?"

He turned and looked at them. Krista's arms were crossed defiantly. *Bill's gotta say it*, was her body language. Messengers get killed for delivering bad news, and Krista wasn't going to lose her job for another one of Cunningham's dumb mistakes. Bill, meanwhile, had an angry smile on his face like a cop after a shooting he'll swear on the stand was justified.

"Krista," said David.

"He tapped people's phones," she said.

The words hung there, a crisis point, but not yet a full-blown crisis.

"People," David echoed cautiously, the word bitter on his tongue.

Krista looked at Bill.

"Bill has this guy," she said.

"Namor," said Bill. "You remember Namor. Former Navy SEAL, former Pentagon intel."

David shook his head. In the last few years Bill had taken to surrounding himself with a bunch of Gordon Liddy kooks.

"Sure you do," Bill said. "Well, we're drinking one night. This is maybe a year ago. And we're talking about Moskewitz, you remember the congressman who liked smelling black girls' feet? Well, Namor is laughing and he says wouldn't it be great if we had those phone calls on tape? Broadcast gold, right? A Jewish congressman telling some black chick how he wants to smell her feet? And so I say, yes, that would be good. And whatever, we order couple more seven-and-sevens and Namor says, *You know...*"

Bill paused for dramatic effect. He couldn't help it. It was in his nature to perform.

"... *You know*... it's not hard. This is Namor. In fact, he says, it's a fucking cinch. Because everything goes through a server. Everyone has email, cell phones. They've got voice mail passwords and text messaging user names. And that shit is all accessible. It's crackable. Hell, if you know somebody's phone number you can just clone their phone, so every time they get a call..."

"No," said David, feeling a hot flush climb up his spine from his asshole.

"Whatever," said Bill. "It's two guys in a bar at one in the morning. It's just bullshit cocksman-ship. But then he said, pick a name. Somebody whose phone calls you want to hear. So I say, *Obama*. And he says, *That's the White House. Not possible. Pick somebody else. Lower down.* So I say, Kellerman—you know, that piece-of-shit liberal reactionary on CNN. And he says *Done*."

David found himself in his chair, though he couldn't remember sitting. And Krista was looking at him like, *It gets worse*.

"Bill," said David, shaking his head, his hands up. "Stop. I can't hear this. You should be talking to a lawyer."

"That's what I told him," said Krista.

Cunningham waved them off like they were a couple of Pakistani orphans at an Islamabad bazaar.

"I didn't do anything," he said. "Picked a name. And who cares anyway? We're two drunks at a bar. So I go home, forget about the whole thing. A week later, Namor comes to the office. He wants to show me something. So we go into my office and he takes out a Zip drive, puts it in my computer. It's got all these audio files on it. Fuck-ing Kellerman, right? Talking to his mother, his dry cleaner. But also to his producer about cutting some bits from a story to make it skew a different way."

David felt a moment of vertigo.

"Is that how you..." he said.

"Shit yes. We found the original footage and ran the piece. You loved that story."

David was standing again, fists clenched.

"When I thought it was journalism," he said. "Not..."

Bill laughed, shaking his head with wonder at his own inventiveness.

"I gotta play these tapes for you. It's classic."

David came around the desk.

"Stop talking."

"Where are you going?" Bill asked.

"Don't say another fucking word to anyone," David told him, "either of you," and walked out of his office.

Lydia was at her desk.

"I've got Sellers on line two," she said.

David didn't stop, didn't turn. He walked through rows of cubicles, sweat dripping down his sides. This could be the end of them. He knew it in his bones, didn't even have to hear the rest of the story.

"Move," he yelled at a group of crew cuts in short-sleeved shirts. They scattered like rabbits.

Mind racing, David reached the elevator bank, pushed the button, then, without waiting, kicked open the door to the stairs, went down a floor. He stalked the halls like a spree killer with an assault rifle, found Liebling in the conference room, sitting with sixteen other lawyers.

"Out," said David. "Everybody."

They scrambled, these nameless suits with their law degrees, the door hitting the last one on the heels. Sitting there, Don Liebling had a bemused look on his face. He was their in-house counsel, mid-fifties and Pilates fit.

"Jesus, Bateman," he said.

David paced.

"Cunningham," was all he could say for a moment.

"Shit," said Liebling. "What did that wet dick do now?"

"I only heard some of it," David said. "I cut him off before I could become an accessory after the fact."

Liebling frowned.

"Tell me there isn't a dead hooker in a hotel room somewhere."

"I wish," David said. "A dead hooker would be easy compared to this."

Looking up, he saw an airplane high above the Empire State Building. For a moment his need to be on it, going somewhere, anywhere, was overwhelming. He dropped into a leather chair, ran his hand through his hair.

"The fucktard tapped Kellerman's phone. Probably others. I got the feeling he was going to start listing victims, like a serial killer, so I left."

Liebling smoothed his tie.

"When you say *tapped his phone*..."

"He has a guy. Some intel consultant who said he could get Bill access to anybody's email or phone."

"Jesus."

David leaned back in the chair and looked up at the ceiling.

"You have to talk to him."

Liebling nodded.

"He needs his own lawyer," he said. "I think he uses Franken. I'll call."

David tapped his fingers on the tabletop. He felt old.

"I mean, what if it was congressmen or senators?" he asked. "My God. It's bad enough he's spying on the competition."

Liebling thought about that. David closed his eyes and pictured Rachel and JJ digging holes in the backyard, planting old-world apple trees. He should have taken the month off, should be there with them right now, flip-flops on, a Bloody Mary in hand, laughing every time his son said, *What's up, chicken butt?*

"Could this sink us?" he asked, eyes still shut.

Liebling equivocated with his head.

"It sinks him. That's for sure."

"But it hurts us?"

"Without a doubt," said Liebling. "A thing like this. There could be congressional hearings. At the very least you've got the FBI up your ass for two years. They'll talk about pulling our broadcast license."

David thought about this.

"Do I resign?"

"Why? You didn't know anything. Did you?"

"It doesn't matter. A thing like this. If I didn't know, I should have."

He shook his head.

"Fucking Bill."

But it wasn't Bill's fault, thought David. It was his. Cunningham was David's gift to the world, the angry white man people invited into their living rooms to call bullshit at the world, to rail against a system that robbed us of everything we felt we deserved—the third-world countries that were taking our jobs. The politicians who were raising our taxes. Bill Cunningham, Mr. Straight Talk, Mr. Divine Righteousness, who sat in our living rooms and shared our pain, who told us what we wanted to hear, which was that the reason we were losing out in life was not that we were losers, but that someone was reaching into our pockets, our companies, our country and taking what was rightfully ours.

Bill Cunningham was the voice of ALC News and he had gone insane. He was Kurtz in the jungle, and David should have realized, should have pulled him back, but the ratings were too good, and the shots Bill was taking at the enemy were direct hits. They were the number one network, and that meant everything. Was Bill a diva? Absolutely. But divas can be handled. Lunatics on the other hand...

"I've gotta call Roger," he said, meaning the billionaire. Meaning his boss. *The boss.*

"And say what?" said Liebling.

"That this thing is coming. That it's out there, and he should get

ready. You need to find Bill and pull him into a room and beat him with a sock full of oranges. Get Franken here. Get the truth, and then protect us from it."

"Does he go on tonight?"

David thought about this.

"No. He's sick. He has the flu."

"He won't like that."

"Tell him the alternative is he goes to jail or we break his kneecaps. Call Hancock. We put it out there this morning that Bill's sick. On Monday we run a *Best Of* week. I don't want this guy on my air again."

"He won't go quietly."

"No," said David. "He won't."

INJURIES

AT NIGHT, WHEN Scott dreams, he dreams of the shark, sleek-muscled and greedy. He wakes thirsty. The hospital is an ecosystem of beeps and hums. Outside, the sun is just coming up. He looks over at the boy, still asleep. The television is on at low volume, white noise haunting their sleep. The screen is split into fifths, a news crawl snaking across the floor. Onscreen, the search for survivors continues. It appears the navy has brought in divers and deep-sea submersibles to try to find the underwater wreckage, to recover the bodies of the dead. Scott watches as men in black wet suits step from the deck of a Coast Guard cutter and vanish into the sea.

"They're calling it an accident," Bill Cunningham is saying from the screen's largest box, a tall man with dramatic hair, thumbing his suspenders. "But you and I know—there are no accidents. Planes don't just fall out the sky, the same way that our president didn't just forget that Congress was on vacation when he made that hack Rodriguez a judge."

Cunningham is smoky-eyed, his tie askew. He has been on the air for nine hours now delivering a marathon eulogy for his dead leader.

"The David Bateman I knew," he says, "—my boss, my friend—couldn't be killed by mechanical failure or pilot error. He was an avenging angel. An American hero. And this reporter believes that

what we're talking about here is nothing less than an act of terrorism, if not by foreign nationals, then by certain elements of the liberal media. Planes don't just crash, people. This was sabotage. This was a shoulder-fired rocket from a speedboat. This was a jihadi in a suicide vest on board the aircraft, possibly one of the crew. Murder, my friends, by the enemies of freedom. Nine dead, including a nine-year-old girl. Nine. A girl who had already suffered tragedy in her life. A girl I held in my arms at birth, whose diaper I changed. We should be fueling up the fighter jets. SEAL teams should be jumping from high-altitude planes and sharking up from submarines. A great patriot is dead, the godfather of freedom in the West. And we will get to the bottom of things."

Scott turns down the volume. The boy stirs but does not wake. In sleep he is not yet an orphan. In sleep his parents are still alive, his sister. They kiss him on the cheeks and tickle his ribs. In sleep it is last week and he is running through the sand, holding a squirmy green crab by the claw. He is drinking orange soda through a straw and eating curly fries, his brown hair bleached by the sun, freckles splashed across his face. And when he wakes up there will be that moment when all the dreams are real, when the love he carries up with him is enough to keep the truth at bay, but then the moment will end. The boy will see Scott's face, or a nurse will come in, and just like that he will be an orphan again. This time forever.

Scott turns and looks out the window. They are meant to be discharged today, Scott and the boy, expelled from the looped loud-speaker of hospital life, BP checked every half hour, temperature taken, meals delivered. The boy's aunt and uncle arrived last night, red-eyed and somber. The aunt is Maggie's younger sister, Eleanor. She sleeps now in a hard-backed chair beside the boy's bed. Eleanor is in her early thirties and pretty, a massage therapist from Croton-on-Hudson, Westchester. Her husband, the boy's uncle, is a writer, squirrely about eye contact, the kind of knucklehead who grows a beard in summer. Scott doesn't have a good feeling about him.

It has been thirty-two hours since the crash, a heartbeat and a lifetime. Scott has yet to bathe, his skin still salty from the sea. His left arm is in a sling. He has no ID, no pants. And yet, despite this, his idea is still to head into the city later as planned. There are meetings on the books. Career connections to be made. Scott's friend Magnus has offered to drive out to Montauk and get him. Lying there, Scott thinks it will be good to see him, a friendly face. They are not close really, he and Magnus, nothing like brothers, more like drinking buddies, but Magnus is both unflappable and relentlessly positive, which is why Scott thought to call him last night. It was essential that he avoid talking to anyone who might cry. Keep things casual. That was his goal. In fact, after he'd finished telling Magnus—who didn't own a TV—what had happened, Magnus said *weird*, and then suggested they should grab a beer.

Looking over, Scott sees that the boy is awake now, staring at him unblinking.

"Hey, buddy," says Scott quietly, so as not to wake the aunt. "You sleep okay?"

The boy nods.

"Want me to put on some cartoons?"

Another nod. Scott finds the remote, turns channels until he finds something animated.

"Sponge Bob?" Scott asks.

The boy nods again. He hasn't spoken a word since yesterday afternoon. In the first few hours after they reached shore it was possible to get a few words out of him, how he was feeling, if he needed anything. But then, like a wound swelling shut, he stopped speaking. And now he is mute.

Scott spies a box of powdery rubber exam gloves on the table. As the boy watches, he pulls one out.

"Uh-oh," he says, then quietly fakes the big buildup to a sneeze. With the *achoo* he hangs the glove from his left nostril. The boy smiles.

The aunt wakes, stretches. She is a beautiful woman with a blunt bang haircut, like a person who makes up for driving an expensive car

by never washing it. Scott watches her face as she regains full consciousness, as she realizes where she is and what has happened. For a moment he sees her threaten to collapse under the weight of it, but then she sees the boy and forces a smile.

"Hey," she says, smoothing the hair back from his face.

She looks up at the TV, and then at Scott.

"Morning," he says.

She brushes her own hair off her face, checks to make sure her clothes are on properly.

"Sorry," she says. "I guess I fell asleep."

It doesn't feel like a comment that deserves a response, so Scott just nods. Eleanor looks around.

"Have you seen . . . Doug? My husband?"

"I think he went to get some coffee," Scott tells her.

"Good," she says, looking relieved. "That's good."

"You two been married a long time?" Scott asks her.

"No. Just, uh, seventy-one days."

"But who's counting," says Scott.

Eleanor flushes.

"He's a sweet guy," she says. "I think he's just a little overwhelmed right now."

Scott glances at the boy, who has stopped watching the TV and is studying Scott and his aunt. The idea that *Doug* is overwhelmed given what they've been through is mystifying.

"Did the boy's father have any family?" Scott asks. "Your brother-in-law?"

"David?" she says. "No. I mean, his parents are dead, and he's, I mean I guess he was an only child."

"What about your parents?"

"My, uh, mom is still around. She lives in Portland. I think she's flying in today."

Scott nods.

"And you guys live in Woodstock?"

"Croton," she says. "It's about forty minutes outside the city."

Scott thinks about this, a small house in a wooded glen, easy chairs on a porch. It could be good for the boy. Then again, it could be disastrous, the isolation of the woods, the glowering drunken writer, like Jack Nicholson in the winter mountains.

"Has he ever been there?" Scott asks, nodding toward the boy.

She purses her lips.

"I'm sorry," she says, "but why are you asking me all these questions?"

"Well," says Scott, "I guess I'm just curious as to what's going to happen to him now. I'm invested, you could say."

Eleanor nods. She looks scared, not of Scott, but of life, what her life is about to become.

"We'll be fine," she says, rubbing the boy's head. "Right?"

He doesn't answer, his eyes focused on Scott. There is a challenge in them, a plea. Scott blinks first, then turns and looks out the window. Doug comes in. He's holding a cup of coffee and wearing a misbuttoned cardigan over a checked lumberjack shirt. Seeing him, Eleanor looks relieved.

"Is that for me?" she asks, pointing.

For a moment Doug looks confused, then he realizes she means the coffee.

"Uh, sure," he says, and hands it to her. Scott can tell from the way she holds it that the cup is almost empty. He sees her face get sad. Doug comes around the boy's bed and stands near his wife. Scott can smell alcohol on his clothes.

"How's the patient?" Doug asks.

"He's good," says Eleanor. "Got some sleep."

Studying Doug's back, Scott wonders how much money the boy stands to inherit from his parents. Five million? Fifty? His father ran a TV empire and flew in private planes. There will be riches, real estate. Sniffing, Doug hikes up his pants with both hands. He pulls a small toy car from his pocket. It still has the price tag on it.

"Here you go, slugger," he says. "Got this for you."

There are a lot of sharks in the sea, thinks Scott, watching the boy take the car.

Dr. Glabman enters, eyeglasses perched on top of his head. He has a bright-yellow banana sticking out of his lab coat pocket.

"Ready to go home?" he asks.

They get dressed. The hospital gives Scott a pair of blue surgical scrubs to wear. He puts them on one-handed, wincing as the nurse maneuvers his fragile left arm into the sleeve. When he comes out of the bathroom the boy is already dressed and sitting in a wheelchair.

"I'm giving you the name of a child psychiatrist," the doctor tells Eleanor, out of earshot of the boy. "He specializes in post-traumatic cases."

"We actually don't live in the city," says Doug.

Eleanor shushes him with a look.

"Of course," she says, taking the business card from the doctor. "I'll call this afternoon."

Scott crosses to the boy, kneels on the floor in front of him.

"You be good," he says.

The boy shakes his head, tears in his eyes.

"I'll see you," Scott tells him. "I'm giving your aunt my phone number. So you can call. Okay?"

The boy won't look at him.

Scott touches his tiny arm for a moment, unsure what to do next. He has never had a child, never been an uncle or a godfather. He's not even sure they speak the same language. After a moment Scott straightens and hands Eleanor a piece of paper with his phone number.

"Obviously, call anytime," he says. "Not that I know what I can do to help. But if he wants to talk, or you..."

Doug takes the number from his wife. He folds it up and jams it in his back pocket.

"Sounds good, man," he says.

Scott stands for a minute, looking at Eleanor, then at the boy, and finally at Doug. It feels like an important moment, like one of those critical junctures in life when you're supposed to say something or do something, but you don't know what. Only later does it hit you. Later, the thing you should have said will be as clear as day, but right now it's just a nagging feeling, a clenched jaw and low nausea.

"Okay," he says finally and walks to the door, thinking he will just go. That that's the best thing. To let the boy be with his family. But then as he steps into the hall he feels two small arms grab his leg, and he turns to see the boy holding on to him.

The hall is full of people, patients and visitors, doctors and nurses. Scott puts a hand on the boy's head, then bends and picks him up. The boy's arms encircle his neck, and he hugs hard enough to cut off Scott's air. Scott blinks away tears.

"Don't forget," he tells the boy. "You're my hero."

He lets the boy hug himself out, then carries him back to the wheelchair. Scott can feel Eleanor and Doug watching him, but he keeps his eyes on the boy.

"Never give up," he tells him.

Then Scott turns and walks off down the hall.

...

In the early years, when he was deep in a painting, Scott felt like he was underwater. There was that same pressure between the ears, the same muted silence. Colors were sharper. Light rippled and bent. He had his first group show at twenty-six, his first solo show at thirty. Every dime he could scabble together was spent on canvas and paint. Somewhere along the way he stopped swimming. There were galleries to commandeer and women to fuck and he was a tall, green-eyed flirt with a contagious smile. Which meant there was always a girl to buy him breakfast or put a roof over his head, at least for a few nights. At the time this almost made up for the fact that his

work was good, not great. Looking at it, you could see he had potential, a unique voice, but something was missing. Years passed. The big solo shows and high-profile museum acquisitions never happened. The German biennials and genius grants, the invitations to paint and teach abroad. He turned thirty, thirty-five. One night, after several cocktails at his third gallery opening of the week to celebrate an artist five years younger than himself, it occurred to Scott that he would never become the overnight success he thought he'd be, the *enfant terrible*, the downtown superstar. The heady exhilaration of artistic possibility had become elusive and frightening. He was a minor artist. That's all he'd ever be. The parties were still good. The women were still beautiful, but Scott felt uglier. As the rootlessness of youth was replaced by middle-aged self-involvement, his affairs turned quick and dirty. He drank to forget. Alone in his studio, Scott took to staring at the canvas for hours waiting for images to appear.

Nothing ever came.

He woke up one day and found he was a forty-year-old man with twenty years of booze and debauchery ballooning his middle and weathering his face. He had been engaged once and then not, had sobered and fallen from the wagon. He had been young once and limitless, and then somehow his life became a foregone conclusion. An *almost was*, not even a *has been*. Scott could see the obituary. Scott Burroughs, a talented, rakish charmer who had never lived up to his promise, who had long since crossed the line from fun-loving and mysterious to boorish and sad. But who was he kidding? Even the obituary was a fantasy. He was a nobody. His death would warrant nothing.

Then, after a weeklong party at the Hamptons house of a much more successful painter, Scott found himself lying facedown on the living room floor. He was forty-six years old. It was barely dawn. He staggered to his feet and out onto the patio. His head was pounding and his mouth tasted like a radial tire. He squinted in the glare of sudden sunlight, his hand rising to shield his face. The truth about him,

his failure, came back as a throbbing head pain. And then, as his eyes adjusted, he lowered his hand and found himself staring into the famous artist's swimming pool.

It was there that the artist and his girlfriend found Scott an hour later, naked and swimming laps, his chest on fire, his muscles aching. They yelled at him to come for a drink with them. But Scott waved them off. He felt alive again. The moment he entered the water it was like he was eighteen again and winning a gold medal at the national championship. He was sixteen, executing a perfect underwater pivot. He was twelve and getting up before dawn to slice the blue.

He swam backward through time, lap after lap, until he was six years old and watching Jack LaLanne tow a thousand-pound boat through San Francisco Bay, until that feeling returned—that deep boy certainty:

Anything is possible.

Everything is gettable.

You just have to want it badly enough.

Scott wasn't old, it turned out. He wasn't finished. He had just given up.

Thirty minutes later he climbed out of the pool and, without drying off, put on his clothes and went back to the city. For the next six months he swam three miles a day. He threw away the booze and the cigarettes. He cut out red meat and dessert. He bought canvas after canvas, covering every available surface with an expectant white primer. He was a boxer training for a fight, a cellist practicing for a concert. His body was his instrument, battered like Johnny Cash's guitar, splintered and raw, but he was going to turn it into a Stradivarius.

He was a disaster survivor in that he had survived the disaster that was his life. And so that's what he painted. That summer he rented a small house on Martha's Vineyard and holed up. Once again the only thing that mattered was the work, except now he realized that the work was him. *There is no separating yourself from the things you make*, he thought. *If you are a cesspool, what else can your work be except shit?*

He got a dog and cooked her spaghetti and meatballs. Every day was the same. An ocean swim. Coffee and a pastry at the farmers market. Then hours of open time in his studio, brushstrokes and paint, lines and color. What he saw when he finished was too exciting to say out loud. He had made the great leap forward, and knowing this he became strangely terrified. The work became his secret, a treasure chest hidden in the rocky ground.

Only recently had he come out of hiding, first by attending a few dinner parties on the island, and then by allowing a Soho gallery to include a new piece in their 1990s retrospective. The piece had garnered a lot of attention. It was bought by an important collector. Scott's phone started ringing. A few of the bigger reps came out and toured the studio. It was happening. Everything he had worked toward, a life's pursuit about to be realized. All he had to do was grab the ring.

So he got on a plane.

A DOZEN NEWS vans are parked outside the hospital, camera crews assembled and waiting. Police barricades have been erected, half a dozen uniformed officers keeping things orderly. Scott spies on the scene from the hospital lobby, hiding behind a potted ficus. This is where Magnus finds him.

"Jesus, man," he says. "You don't do anything half-assed, do you?"

They man-hug. Magnus is a part-time painter and full-time ladies' man, with just a trace of Irish lilt in his voice.

"Thanks for doing this," Scott tells him.

"No worries, brother."

Magnus gives Scott the once-over.

"You look like shite."

"I feel like shite," Scott says.

Magnus holds up a duffel bag.

"I brought some skivvies," he says, "a fetching frock and some panties. You want to change?"

Scott looks over Magnus's shoulder. Outside, the crowd is growing. They are there to see him, to get a glimpse, a sound bite from the man who swam for eight hours through the midnight Atlantic with a four-year-old boy on his back. He closes his eyes and pictures what will happen once he is dressed, once he steps through those doors,

the spotlight and questions, his own face on TV. The circus of it, the blood frenzy.

There are no accidents, he thinks.

To Scott's left is a long hall and a door that reads LOCKER ROOM.

"I've got a better idea," Scott says. "But it involves you breaking the law."

Magnus smiles.

"Just one?"

Ten minutes later, Scott and Magnus walk out a side door. They are both in scrubs now, wearing white lab coats, two doctors going home at the end of a long shift. Scott holds Magnus's cell phone to his ear, talking to the dial tone. The ruse works. They reach Magnus's car, a seen-better-days Saab, with a sun-bleached fabric roof. Inside, Scott reaffixes the sling over his left shoulder.

"Just so you know," Magnus tells him, "we're definitely wearing these out to the bar later. Ladies love a medical man."

As they drive out past the press line, Scott shields his face with the phone. He thinks about the boy, hunched over and tiny in his wheelchair, an orphan now and forever. Scott has no doubt that his aunt loves him, no doubt that the money he inherits from his parents will insulate him from anything close to ruin. But will it be enough? Can the boy grow up to be normal, or will he be forever broken by what has happened?

I should have gotten the aunt's number, Scott thinks. But as he does, he wonders what he would do with it. Scott has no right to force his way into their lives. And even if he did, what does he have to offer? The boy is only four, and Scott is a single man approaching fifty, a notorious womanizer and recovered alcoholic, a struggling artist who's never been able to keep a single lasting relationship. He is nobody's role model. Nobody's hero.

They take the Long Island Expressway toward the city. Scott rolls down the window and feels the wind on his face. Squinting into the sun, he can half convince himself that the events of the last thirty-six hours were just a dream. That there was no private plane, no crash,

no epic swim or harrowing hospital stay. With the right combination of cocktails and professional victories he could erase it all. But even as he thinks this, Scott knows it's bullshit. The trauma he suffered is part of his DNA now. He is a soldier after an epic battle, one he will inevitably return to fifty years from now on his deathbed.

Magnus lives in Long Island City, in a condemned shoe factory that's been converted into lofts. Before the crash, Scott's plan was to stay there for a few days and commute into the city. But now, changing lanes, Magnus tells Scott that things have changed.

"I've got strict fucking instructions," he says, "to take you to the West Village. You're moving up in the world."

"Strict instructions from who?" Scott wants to know.

"A new friend," says Magnus. "That's all I can say at this moment."

"Pull over," Scott tells him in a hard voice.

Magnus gives Scott a double eyebrow lift, smiles.

Scott reaches for his door handle.

"Chill, boyo," says Magnus, swerving slightly. "I can see you're in no mood for mystery."

"Just tell me where we're going?"

"Leslie's," says Magnus.

"Who's Leslie?"

"Geez, did you crack your head in the crash? Leslie Mueller? The Mueller Gallery?"

Scott is at a loss.

"Why would we go to the Mueller Gallery?"

"Not the gallery, you tosser. Her house. She's a billionaire, yeah? Daughter of that tech geezer who made that gizmo in the 'nineties. Well, after you called me I maybe shot my mouth off a bit about how I was coming to get you and how you and me were gonna hit the town, get some ladies' numbers—you being a shit-you-not hero and all—and I guess she heard, 'cause she called me. Says she saw what you did on the news. Says her door is open. She's got a guest suite on the third floor."

"No."

"Don't be stupid, amigo. This is Leslie Mueller. This is the difference between selling a painting for three thousand dollars and selling one for three hundred thousand. Or three million."

"No."

"Perfect. I hear you. But think about *my* career for a minute. This is Leslie fucking Mueller. My last show was at a crab shack in Cleveland. At least let's go for dinner, let her rub up against that giant hero boner of yours, commission a few pieces. Maybe throw in a good word for your boyo. Then we make excuses."

Scott turns to look out the window. In the car next to them a couple is arguing, a man and woman in their twenties, dressed for work. The man is behind the wheel, but he isn't looking at the road. His head is turned and he is waving one hand angrily. In response, the woman holds an open lipstick, half applied, and jabs it in the man's direction, her face lemoned with distaste. Looking at them, Scott has a sudden flash of memory. He is back on the flight, seat belt on. Up front, at the open cockpit door, the young flight attendant—what was her name?—is arguing with one of the pilots. Her back is to Scott, but the pilot's face is visible over her shoulder. It is ugly and dark, and as Scott watches the pilot grabs the girl's arm tightly. She pulls away.

In the memory, Scott feels the seat belt clasp in his hand. His feet are flat under him, his quads tensed as if he is about to stand. Why? To go to her aid?

It comes in a flash and then it's gone. An image that could be from a movie, but feels like his life. Did that happen? Was there some kind of fight?

In the next lane the furious driver turns and spits out the window, but the window is up. A frothy rope of spit runs down the curved glass, and then Magnus speeds up and the couple is gone.

Scott sees a gas station ahead.

"Can you pull in here?" Scott asks. "I want to get a pack of gum."

Magnus digs around in the center console.

"I've got some Juicy Fruit somewhere."

"Something mint," Scott says. "Just pull over."

Magnus turns in without signaling, parks around the side.

"I'll just be a second," Scott tells him.

"Get me a Coke."

Scott realizes he's wearing scrubs.

"Lend me a twenty," he says.

Magnus thinks about this.

"Okay, but promise we're going to Mueller's. I bet she's got scotch in her cabinets that was bottled before the fucking *Titanic*."

Scott looks him in the eye.

"Promise."

Magnus pulls a crumpled bill from his pocket.

"And some chips," he says.

Scott closes the passenger door. He is wearing disposable flip-flops.

"Be right back," he says, and walks into the gas station convenience store. There is a heavyset woman behind the counter.

"Back door?" Scott asks her.

She points.

Scott walks down a short hall, past the restrooms. He pushes open a heavy fire door and stands squinting in the sun. There is a chain-link fence a few feet away, and behind that the start of a residential neighborhood. Scott puts the twenty in his front pocket. He tries to climb the fence one-handed, but the sling gets in the way so he ditches it. A few moments later he is on the other side, walking through a vacant lot, his flip-flops slapping against his heels. It is late August, and the air is thick and broiled. He pictures Magnus behind the wheel. He will have turned on the radio, found an oldies station. Right now he's probably singing along with Queen, arching his neck on the high notes.

Around Scott, the neighborhood is lower-class, cars on blocks in driveways, aboveground pools sloshing in backyards. He is a man in hospital scrubs and flip-flops walking through the midday heat. A mental patient for all anybody knows.

Thirty minutes later he finds a fried chicken joint, goes inside. It's just a counter and stove with a couple of chairs in front.

"You got a phone I could use?" he asks the Dominican guy behind the counter.

"Gotta order something," the guy tells him.

Scott orders a bucket of thighs and a ginger ale. The clerk points to a phone on the wall in the kitchen. Scott takes a business card from his pocket and dials. A man answers on the second ring.

"NTSB."

"Gus Franklin, please," says Scott.

"Speaking."

"It's Scott Burroughs. From the hospital."

"Mr. Burroughs, how are you?"

"Fine. Look. I'm—I want to help—with the search. The rescue. Whatever."

There is silence on the other end of the line.

"I'm told you checked out of the hospital," says Gus, "somehow without being seen by the press."

Scott thinks about this.

"I dressed up like a doctor," he says, "and went out the back door."

Gus laughs.

"Very clever. Listen. I've got divers in the water searching for the fuselage, but it's slow going, and this is a high-profile case. Is there anything you can tell us, anything else you can remember about the crash, what happened before?"

"It's coming back," Scott tells him. "Still just fragments, but—let me help with the search. Maybe being out there—maybe it'll shake something loose."

Gus thinks about this.

"Where are you?"

"Well," says Scott, "let me ask you this—how do you feel about chicken thighs?"

PAINTING #1

THE FIRST THING that catches your eye is the light, or rather two lights angled toward a single focal point, becoming a figure-eight flare at the center of the canvas. It is big, this painting, eight feet long and five feet high, the once white tarpaulin transformed into a smoky gray glitter. Or maybe what you see first is calamity, two dark rectangles slicing the frame, jackknifed, their metallic skeletons glowing in the moonlight. There are flames on the edge of the picture, as if the story doesn't end just because the painting stops, and people who view the image have been known to walk to the far edges looking for more information, microscoping the framing wood for even a hint of added drama.

The lights that flare out the center of the image are the headlights of an Amtrak passenger train, its caboose having come to rest almost perpendicular to the twisted iron track that bends and waves below it. The first passenger car has disconnected from the caboose and now makes the trunk of a T, having maintained its forward momentum and smashed the engine dead center, bending its bread-box contours into a vague V.

As with any bright light, the headlight glare here obscures much of the image, but upon further examination a viewer might discover a single passenger—in this case a young woman—dressed in a black

skirt and torn white blouse, her hair tousled across her face, matted by blood. She is wandering shoeless through the jagged wreckage, and if you squint past the illusion of light you can see that her eyes are wide and searching. She is the victim of disaster, a survivor of heat and impact, cantilevered from her resting position into an impossible parabola of unexpected torture, her once placid world—gently rocking, click clack, click clack—now a screeching twist of metal.

What is she looking for, this woman? Is it merely a way out? A clear and sensible path to safety? Or has she lost something? Someone? In that moment, when gentle rocking turned into a cannonball ricochet, did she go from wife and mother, from sister or girlfriend, from daughter or paramour to refugee? A fulfilled and happy *we* to a stunned and grieving *I*?

And so, even as other paintings call to you, you can't help but stand there and help her look.

STORM CLOUDS

THE LIFE VEST is so tight it's hard to breathe, but Scott reaches up and pulls the straps again. It is an unconscious gesture. One he's been doing every few moments since they got on the helicopter. Gus Franklin sits across from him, studying his face. Beside him is Petty Officer Berkman in an orange jumpsuit and glassy black helmet. They are in a Coast Guard MH-65C Dolphin racing over the wave caps of the Atlantic. In the distance Scott can just make out the cliffs of Martha's Vineyard. Home. But this is not where they're going. Not yet. Sneeze, the three-legged dog, will have to wait. Scott thinks of her now, a white mutt with one black eye. An eater of horse shit, a connoisseur of long grass, who lost her back right leg to cancer last year and was climbing stairs again within two days. Scott checked in with his neighbor after he got off the phone with Gus this morning. The dog was fine, his neighbor told him. She was lying on the porch panting at the sun. Scott thanked her again for watching the dog. He said he should be home in a couple of days.

"Take your time," his neighbor said. "You've been through a lot. And good for you. What you did for that boy. Good for you."

He thinks of the dog now, missing a limb. *If she can bounce back, why can't I?*

The helicopter bucks through chunky air, each drop like a hand

to laugh, and for a moment can't stop. He thinks of himself standing at the counter of Edible Arrangements, filling out the card.

With deepest affection—Scott.

"Stop," says the boy, afraid suddenly that his survival is in the hands of a crazy person.

"Okay," says Scott, trying to reassure the boy. "It's okay. Just a joke I thought of. We're going now."

It takes him a few minutes to find his stroke, a modified breast-stroke, pulling water more with the right hand than the left, legs kicking hard. It is a noisy mess, his left shoulder a bag of broken glass. A gnawing worry settles into his gut. They will drown, both of them. They will both be lost to the deep. But then somehow a rhythm presents itself, and he begins to lose himself in the repetition. Arm up and in, legs scissoring. He swims into the endless deep, ocean spray in his face. It's hard to keep track of time. What time did the plane take off? Ten p.m.? How much time has passed? Thirty minutes? An hour? How long until the sun comes up? Eight hours? Nine?

Around him the sea is pockmarked and ever changing. Swimming, he tries not to think about the great tracts of open water. He tries not to picture the depth of the ocean or how the Atlantic in August is the birthplace of massive storm fronts, hurricanes that form in the cold troughs of undersea gorges, weather patterns colliding, temperature and moisture forming huge pockets of low pressure. Global forces conspiring, barbarian hordes with clubs and war paint who charge shrieking into the fray, and instantly the sky thickens, blackens, an ominous gale of lightning strikes, huge claps of thunder like the screams of battle, and the sea, which moments ago was calm, turns to hell on earth.

Scott swims in the fragile calm, trying to empty his mind.

Something brushes against his leg.

He freezes, starts to sink, then has to kick his legs to stay afloat.

Shark, he thinks.

You have to stay still.

vival with the word for something else. Scott lifts his head, half blind with exhaustion. Behind them, the sun is starting to rise, a gentle pinkening to the sky. At first Scott thinks the landmass ahead of them is just some low-hanging clouds on the horizon, but then he realizes that he is the one who's moving.

Land. Miles of it. Open beach curving toward a rocky point. Streets and houses. Cities.

Salvation.

Scott resists the urge to celebrate. There is still a mile to go at least, a hard mile against riptides and undertow. His legs are quivering, his left arm numb. And yet he can't help but feel a surge of elation.

He did it. He saved them.

How is that possible?

...

Thirty minutes later a graying man in his underwear stumbles out of the surf, carrying a four-year-old boy. They collapse together onto the sand. The sun is up now, thin white clouds framed against a deep Mediterranean blue. The temperature is somewhere around sixty-eight degrees, gulls hanging weightless in the breeze. The man lies panting, a heaving torso ringed with useless rubber limbs. Now that they're here he cannot move another inch. He is done.

Curled up against his chest, the boy is crying softly.

"It's okay," Scott tells him. "We're safe now. We're gonna be okay."

There is an empty lifeguard station a few feet away. The sign on the back reads MONTAUK STATE BEACH.

New York. He swam all the way to New York.

Scott smiles, a smile of pure, joyous *fuck you*.

Well, hell, he thinks.

It's going to be beautiful day.