



ACROSS THE LACQUERED, mission-style desk in front of Chasen sat a tall man with a thick layer of graying brown hair. He was angular and long-limbed and wore a black suit that left too much of his shirtsleeves exposed.

In contrast to the shortness of the sleeve length was a long, skinny, black tie that snaked down his white shirt and disappeared behind the desk. If it wasn't for the fact that the man had a face, Chasen would have dubbed him "Slender Man," since the lanky dean of students was a dead ringer for the faceless, fictional Internet boogeyman who has been terrorizing children in the last several years.

However, there was a relaxed quality around Zach Hadgen that was surprising for someone who not only resembled a serial killer but was also responsible for over five hundred teenagers on a daily basis. Most of this casualness was revealed in blue eyes, lids slightly lowered, giving his face a comforting appearance that was anything but unfriendly. While they talked, the dean leaned back comfortably in his chair and only periodically glanced at the brass-and-wood clock perched on the edge of his oak desk.

The clock that was sitting at an unnatural angle.

Skewed.

Tilted a bit too far to the right.

Knocked off a flawless square of perfectly accumulated dust.

While Hadgen, with his drooping eyelids, began to elaborate on the many deficiencies of a public school education, Chasen kept his eyes on the clock and felt his hands began to warm. Seconds later, his palms were slick with a familiar wetness.

As if preparing for a disaster just like this, his nervous system sounded the alarm, and he took in a long breath through

his nostrils, drawing it deeply into his lungs. Wiping his hands along the sides of his pants, he forced his attention back to this man who could be his next boss. While he silently prayed he wouldn't spend the entire interview counting all the leather-bound books in the room whose titles started with "C," a comforting thought came to him: *Is it possible ole Slender Man here might be one of us?*

*Wouldn't it be a relief if there was some sort of universal identifier like a secret handshake?*

*Maybe a fist bump for the paranoid hand washers, or a shrug-blink-nod that only the housecleaning obsessives would recognize? Just a quick knowing signal so that all members wouldn't feel so alone in their aloneness.*

His blood circulated the fresh oxygen and distributed it to all the relevant places. Moments ticked off, as did the hands on the clock he was still eyeing, and he was rewarded with a heart that began to pound less forcefully. By then, the dean had launched into a tribute to Dysart Academy's SAT scores, explaining that they had been trending upward for the past five years. This part of Hadgen's presentation Chasen found unnecessary, since he had done his due diligence, spending hours online researching the school within moments of the dean's phone call last week.

He tuned out and concentrated on his breathing.

Then he saw the hair.

It was a short hair, equal parts brown and gray, one end lying on Hadgen's left shoulder, the other hanging midair, lifting and nodding as Hadgen spoke. The hair would most likely dislodge the next time the dean moved or perhaps when the air-conditioner clicked on, and it would then drift to the carpet and out of sight.

It was just an ordinary hair, but it held Chasen's gaze as he stifled a breath.

He shook himself back into the Hadgen monologue and tossed up another quick prayer, hoping that this growing sense

of panic—stronger than the one triggered by the desk clock—would also go unnoticed.

Although he was losing the battle, Chasen knew that people often mentally disengage from conversations at least once about every ten seconds. He was hopeful he could fake this sudden distraction. He had his mother's DNA, after all.

*Okay, Dad, it's about the size of a chicken,* he thought.

"So when did you decide to come back?" Hadgen asked.

Forcing his eyes to meet Hadgen's, Chasen said, "I'm sorry. Come back?"

"I was wondering if you were ready to come back to teaching, and when it was that you had finally decided to return."

"Oh. Yes, I am. Absolutely." He paused, but before he finished the prepared answer, he drew in a large breath and—without considering the implications—blew it out with such force that it shot across the desk and hit the dangling jacket hair, sending it slowly floating over Hadgen's back. It hovered for a second as if to wave goodbye, but Chasen chose not to follow it in case it landed in his line of sight. He locked his gaze on the dean, who was pretending he hadn't just had a man blow roast-beef-sandwich breath at him. He sat there, blinking, waiting for Chasen to continue.

"I was ready about three months ago," Chasen said. "I just hadn't started looking. But I was about to when you called."

The answer had been grappled with and rehearsed at least a dozen times over the last two days, and he was pleased with the final delivery. With his eyes off the clock and the strand of hair gone, his heart slowed to a semi-normal rhythm.

The line of questioning continued. "Well, you've kept busy the last couple of years, anyway. I caught you once on CNN, and I think on MSNBC once or twice?"

"No, not MSNBC. I've done Fox a couple of times, though."

"Fox? I would have flipped over if I'd known you were going to be on. I've been a fan of your segments. I just don't watch a lot of Fox News."

A grin slipped out for the first time since the interview began. “Yeah, well,” Chasen said, “Christians sort of have an exclusive relationship with Fox. Most churches yank your membership if you don’t. Part of the bylaws.”

He couldn’t help himself any longer, and he glanced at the floor to Hadgen’s left, but he didn’t see the hair.

*Victory.*

There was a laugh in response to the Fox comment, and while there was no doubt it was one of those social, obligatory laughs, Chasen appreciated it nonetheless.

“If I may, Chasen, I’d like to ask: how does a person go from teaching high school English to debating Rosie O’Donnell on *Anderson Cooper*?”

Now it was Chasen’s turn to laugh. Crisis of a few moments ago fading away, he was beginning to loosen up, and the thought hadn’t escaped him that Hadgen had been privy to this unstable episode and had stepped in to divert his attention. The guy had no doubt read the news over the last two years and done his own homework, so any attempt on Chasen’s part to hide his compulsions would be a waste of time and energy.

“I’ve debated Alex Jones, Jesse Ventura, various government representatives...and you’re interested in my debate with Rosie O’Donnell?” he asked, only half joking.

“Well, that was your most celebrated appearance, right? Had to have been great for book sales.”

“That it was,” Chasen admitted. “To answer your original question, though—I sort of fell into the subject. My American literature professor was a nut on all things conspiratorial: 9/11, JFK, fluoride in the water. He even threw out his lesson plans one night, and after three hours had most of the class sold on the certainty of the reptilian elite.”

“Reptilian elite?”

“Alien reptiles masking as humans who can shape-shift as needed,” Chasen clarified. “Theorists claim they’ll one day enslave

the human race if we don't identify and destroy them before they rise to power."

"And what kind of power attracts these...lizards?"

"Heads of states. Presidents. Anyone with influence over massive numbers of people. According to my professor, half of all US presidents have been a part of the reptilian elite. Some in Congress. All of the royal family."

"Ah, I see."

Chasen was pretty sure he didn't.

"So you argued with your professor that night," Hadgen said. "You proved him clinically insane, and this in turn ignited an interest in debunking conspiracy theories that eventually turned into a side career."

"It didn't happen overnight, but, yeah, within weeks of that lecture I found myself looking into all sorts of conspiracies. His views on most things were a bit hare-brained from the first night of class, but when his fourth wife left him halfway through the semester—for some reason a story he felt compelled to share with us—he went over the deep end."

"Okay, but when did denouncing conspiracy theories become a 'thing'? I can see why theorists with eccentric views might get some publicity, just due to the oddity of their agenda. But you wrote a book discrediting the most popular theories of the last couple centuries, and it landed on the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Look, I know you're an extremely competent writer, but how did you find an audience for something like that?"

Chasen shrugged. "Who knows why a particular subject grabs the attention of the public? I didn't call it, my wife and editor didn't call it. We just had a great publisher who knew how to market the book."

"All right. So you researched and managed to dismantle hundreds of theories that are held by a very limited group of people. Maybe even by people who could use serious mental intervention. But did you ever consider the 'broken clock' analogy when you were compiling all of your evidence?"

*Broken clock? Keep your eyes off the clock. Eyes off the clock.*

“That’s funny,” Chasen said. “Wolf Blitzer asked me the same thing.”

“It’s a legitimate question, don’t you think?” Hadgen asked.

“Is there a possibility that of the hundreds of thousands of conspiracy theories in the world some of them may have at least some aspects of truth to them? Sure. That’s why I was careful with the book. Each theory I chose to write about was heavily researched, and the evidence was overwhelming that all those theories are bogus. For lack of a better word.”

“So, Princess Diana?”

“Died as the result of reckless driving. End of story.”

“Lone gunman?”

“Clearly. Oswald was working alone.”

“9/11?”

“Yeah, you know what? Those theories would be laughable if they didn’t continually torment the victims’ families year after year...but let’s say for a second that the ‘truthers’ had inside information on 9/11 that could prove the American government was responsible. If there were any truth to these theories, wouldn’t our leaders—the same leaders who ordered the death of over three thousand Americans, mind you—just order the deaths of the conspiracy leaders? I mean, why not? If these people were a threat, and the US government felt they needed the public to continue to buy the lie, what’s a few more lives to supposed madmen like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld?”

“Good point. UFOs?”

“You’d have to define your terms. Are there flying objects in the sky that a group of everyday people like you and I can’t identify and name? Sure, I’ll buy that. Are there little green men with antennas, floating in and around rural parts of the country in saucers, Mr. Hadgen? No.”

Hadgen put up a hand in protest. “Zach. Please, it’s Zach. All the staff here are on a first-name basis.”

The hand went down, signaling the time for small talk was now over. Zach opened his top left drawer and pulled out two identical spiral notebooks and a well-worn manila folder with “Chasen Derrick” printed on a bent, blue-striped tab.

Chasen could see “Master Agreement” printed on the covers of the notebooks as Zach passed one to him. He looked down at it. Dominating the center was an artist’s rendering of a black bear, muscles taut, fangs protruding through the sides of a squirming trout. Or bass. The mascot’s dark eyes looked straight ahead, its ravenous expression a challenge to the prospective employee: “You sure Dysart’s the right place for *you*?”

In contrast, small, gray, and less-threatening letters below the bear read “Teacher Resource Handbook.” Chasen looked up and attempted to revisit the casual conversation that was now threatening to be replaced by business. “So I got the job?” he asked with good humor.

“Let’s make sure you agree with the terms first,” Zach said. “You may take a look at this and decide you want to continue shopping around.”

And with that last statement, Zach was now caught in his first lie since the interview began. It was the polite thing to do, but it was a lie regardless. There was no shopping around, they both knew it, and they both also knew there weren’t any headhunters looking for someone with a résumé like the one inside the bent-tabbed folder, no matter how many times someone had pawed through it.

Zach placed the folder in front of him and opened it up. “Chasen. That’s a...that’s a, uh,...”

“Strange name? Yeah, that’s what people tell me.”

“You don’t see a lot of ‘Chasens’ at thirty, do you? It sounds more like a Millennial name, like ‘Elektra or ‘Creedence.’”

“Well, Mr.—Zach...I’m sure you’ve read a few things over the years about my mother. If you have, you, well, you know what she’s like.”

“I take the tabloids with a grain of salt.” He skimmed through a few pages, but it was a polite formality; they both knew Chasen had been prescreened days before—and by more than just the dean of students. “So, you sure you’re ready to come back?” he asked again, looking Chasen in the eyes. “We’re not pushing you, are we?”

Chasen sat up a little straighter. “No. Definitely not. Your call came at the right time, actually.”

“Anything we should be concerned about?”

“Nope,” he answered quickly. “Everyone thinks I should go back. My wife. Some friends.” He cleared a throat that didn’t need clearing. “My doctor even. Everyone agrees that my getting back to work is probably the best thing.”

“Great. Then turn to section three of your manual, would you, please? We can start with the salary agreement.”

As if he considered contracts and offers each day, Chasen casually opened his copy of the manual, and like he once did with his little Disney books and their accompanying red cassette tapes, Chasen read to himself while Zach read aloud.

Until the numbers with their corresponding zeroes got in front of the narration and begged his immediate attention.

His eyes flew down the page, past dollar sign after dollar sign, until he reached the bottom and read the final number, which happened to be in bold italics and underlined. One thing he was sure of: no educational institution, public or private, was offering what Dysart was now putting in front of him in beautiful, bold Century Schoolbook font.

“A starting teacher with your credentials and experience begins in column A at \$135,000 for the school year with a \$10,000 gas allowance, divided up over your ten-month contract,” all-business Zach read. “Most of our teachers live over twenty miles from the school, so we see the stipend as a necessary perk. You have your choice of health insurance plans. If there are no hitches, tenure is offered two years after full-time employment begins, and at that time a \$5,000 salary increase will be added. As long

as economic activity continues to improve, there are COLA raises every three years—generally 4 to 5 percent...”

Chasen’s poker face melted and he was no longer listening. He didn’t need Zach—now most definitely his hero and his new best friend—to recite to him the rest of the details. He could add up the numbers all by himself: \$135,000 as a *base* salary. *None* of his teacher acquaintances were making close to this amount, even at the junior college or university level. There had to be some sort of gross misunderstanding: the average starting salary for a private school teacher in the United States was \$40,000. He did quick math and discovered that Dysart was offering him *more than triple* the national average.

So, *how* became the \$135,000 question. An exorbitant Dysart tuition aside, *how* was it still possible to shell out over four million dollars in salary, plus benefits, to just one high school English teacher over a thirty-year period?

Tearing away from the binder to look out the giant window to his left, he took in the acres of green grass, soccer and baseball fields, and the row after row of red-brick, Gothic two- and three-story buildings—only a portion of the thirty acres that constituted Dysart Academy. The revenue the school generated was enormous, no doubt, but it was a stretch to think tuition at even a *private* high school was covering what must be a massive overhead. These numbers were odd to say the least.

Nevertheless, he was having a hard time containing the growing excitement sliding its way up from the pit of his stomach. These numbers meant *security*. The book royalties, in addition to Jessica’s nursing salary, were more than paying the bills for their modest lifestyle, but who knew when the public would tire of its current obsession with all things conspiratorial and move on to something else?

When that happened, the articles...the occasional speaking engagements...the even more rare paid debates would disappear like Big Foot the moment a Nikon makes an appearance.

“Employees are on a September through June contractual calendar. While some institutions offer salary bumps for master’s degrees and doctorates, most of our instructors already have both, so it’s included in the salary. We also have a requirement that all teachers of core subjects seek publication at least twice a year in some professional periodical, but if this doesn’t happen for you, guest speaking engagements—like the ones you seem to take on a regular basis—are acceptable. The point is: we want our teachers out there. Your public presence promotes our school and brings credibility.”

Chasen’s head was swimming, but he realized he was calmer than at any other moment in the interview thus far.

“One other thing, Chasen. Dysart is very flexible with our staff; we want our teachers to see this as a second home. After all, you spend almost half your week with us for ten months, so we want you to feel valued and appreciated. Therefore, there are no hard and fast rules about what time you get here each day, as long as you’re in your room when class begins. Once your students have left for the day and you are caught up on your lesson plans and other responsibilities, by all means go home. Family comes before the job. If you need time off, whether you’re sick or you just want to get some personal things done, and you’ve used the ten days you’re allotted, take off. We can work something out.”

Zach paused.

“But we do have one very important rule here that we are not flexible with,” he said firmly. “All Dysart staff understand the seriousness of this requirement.”

A somber weightiness overtook his voice, and the earlier casualness of their conversation was replaced by a metaphorical chill in the air. Zach leaned in closely and Chasen could see there was no buddy here, no new best friend.

“No one speaks about individual salary to anyone other than their spouse. Doing so will be reason enough to terminate your contract,” Zach warned. “If you discuss it outside of this

room once you've been hired, your dismissal will be immediate. There is no teacher's union to come to your defense, and there will be no opportunity to contest it. You will be let go with no recourse. The same goes if your wife tells someone and it happens to get back to any Dysart staff. You'll need to explain to her how serious we are about the issue."

"I understand. It's not a problem."

"Are you sure? I mean, you and I have had some fun here, shooting the breeze. I have to say I haven't had many interviews that have gone as informally as this one, but celebrity status or associations won't mean anything if you or a family member speak about salary issues."

"No, I understand. But..." he hesitated. "But, won't people be able to figure it out? I mean, there has to be some sort of pay scale based on experience and university credits. Doesn't the staff here have a pretty good idea of where everyone stands financially?"

"The employee salary our board has adopted is unusual in the sense that it's not a blanket one; variable factors go into creating a teacher's individualized contract. While all of our instructors have value—they wouldn't be here if they didn't—their value has been carefully weighed by our administrators and board members, and a personalized salary structure was created for each teacher.

Chasen wondered again what he could possibly have done to merit such value as \$135,000. His mind took yet another detour, this time a quick stroll down Rational Lane where he attempted to examine the offer with a modicum of perspective. Was it the book? That was doubtful. While *Conspiracies Undone* had sold very well, it had brought him only a small measure of literary success, and copies of it were already showing up at local used bookstores.

Could this have something to do with his mother?

This, he reasoned, seemed more plausible than the book, for his mother's periodic appearances in gossip magazines were proving she wasn't going away anytime in the near future. Even so,

her only Academy Award was thirty years prior, and it had been five years since she had stopped being a contender for the roles Glenn Close rejected.

Sure, Abbey Derrick had her fan base...small fan base...but these days it was mostly theatre goers from the sixties and seventies, those diehard Broadway zealots who followed her from one production to another. As the movie offers began to wane, New York had welcomed her back to Midtown, asking her to repay dues to a city that made her a big enough star to warrant a film career. But most of the newer, chic Broadway crowd didn't know who she was.

So if wasn't his book, and it wasn't his mother, why would Dysart be so interested? They had approached *him* to come in and interview. Why? What advantage could a school like Dysart gain by putting Chasen Derrick in one of their classrooms, especially a college prep school that was wise to his history?

Chasen, an obsessive researcher by nature, had done his homework on the burgeoning Dysart Academy, but the information he uncovered just created more questions than answers.

The academy had opened its doors nine years ago, and immediately established itself as a competitor to the East coast prep schools. Within four years, 10 percent of the graduating seniors were accepted into Ivy League schools. The following year, that number tripled, and Dysart was named by *US News & World Report* in 2011 as the most promising private prep school in California. Enrollment was always at capacity with hundreds turned away each year, even as parents packed up and moved to the exclusive Newport Beach community where Dysart was located in hopes of making connections with school administration. Enrollment last year was at 546, with tuition just over \$21,000 a year.

Each year Dysart offered full-ride scholarships to three applicants who showed exceptional academic promise. They never offered more than three.

As for staff, there were fifteen full-time teachers and six adjunct professors, and even though Zach had mentioned that some of the teachers had a doctorate, the research showed that most of them did. Chasen would be one of the few who had only a master's. Okay, he had two of them, but two master's degrees did not come close to equaling one doctorate.

*All this money being thrown around and teachers coming in with these qualifications, and yet I'm the one sitting in this chair...*

"So you can see why talking about individual salaries could cause serious divisions among the staff," Zach continued. "Everyone signs a non-disclosure agreement when they are hired, and"—here the broad smile returned—"we'd like to offer you a non-disclosure agreement as well. We'd be very pleased to have you join us here, Chasen. You bring a good amount of experience with you, and your schooling proves you have a solid knowledge of the subject matter."

Chasen started to respond when Zach cut him off. "Chasen, we had already decided to hire you before we made the call. This interview was just a formality to make sure you are not only ready to come back to teaching but are ready to join the exclusive staff at Dysart. We are very careful in who we hire."

The dean shifted in his seat and leaned forward, his voice dropping an octave. "Listen, I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable, but we've examined *the incident* left and right. The board too. We were all unanimous in our decision to offer you a position. Charlotte was especially favorable."

Charlotte. That would be Charlotte Poskanzer, Dysart's superintendent from the beginning. Very little had been written about her, but in the occasional published piece, academics seemed to credit Zach with being the face of Dysart and the driving force behind its success. On the other hand, Charlotte, the self-sequestered superintendent, stayed out of the spotlight and seemed to run things behind double-doors, doors that didn't even boast a brass nameplate.

Zach pushed his chair away from the desk, surely rolling it right over the strand of hair. He stood up. Chasen stood as well. “As you are probably aware,” Zach announced, “the first semester starts the day after Labor Day, but we have two weeks of staff meetings before school launches. Those will start on August twenty-second.”

“Perfect. I’m eager to begin.”

“You’re sure you’re ready to come back?”

He nodded, perhaps a bit too vigorously. “Yes, definitely; it’s time.”

Zach stuck his hand out and Chasen took it. “Then, Chasen Derrick, we’ll see you here on August twenty-second. Welcome to Dysart Academy.”

ZACH HADGEN SHUT his office door behind the retreating Chasen, then headed in the direction of his chair. At the last moment, he changed course and turned to a leather couch by the window and considered. Then made a decision. It came as no surprise that sleep had been a struggle as of late; he'd take the opportunities when they came.

With his secretary off for the day, he could take advantage of a brief nap without embarrassment. It was mid-July and the campus was deserted. Charlotte might be in her office, but he wasn't certain; once the Wizard was behind closed doors, she wasn't seen until quitting time. If she needed him, she would email, and Zach's plan was to avoid checking his email until after his nap.

Not bothering to loosen his tie, he kicked off his shoes and reclined, his long legs catapulting his feet over the edge. He settled in and tried to relax, but he found his eyes staying open, studying the laptop on his desk instead. The call could come in the next five minutes; it could come within the next several hours.

His eyelids eventually fluttered shut, his bottom jaw drooped, and his lips parted to form quite the dainty "o" for such a large face. The little "o" began to whistle in tandem with his rising chest, and he was asleep in less than three minutes.

It seemed he'd barely closed his eyes when a ringtone from his laptop shrieked from tinny speakers, grating enough to pull him out of the beginnings of a dream that was getting interesting. Something about a gas pump and a lacrosse player. He sat up from the couch and pitched forward too quickly, his abdomen colliding with the corner of the desk. His golden clock fell to the carpet and bounced once, rolling over. Having yet to gain

control over his momentum, Zach stepped on it, pushing a sharp edge into a sock-clad foot.

Despite the pain he felt, it occurred to him that the hobbling and cursing would have made for a funny YouTube video.

He slammed into his chair and opened the laptop, where the incoming Skype caller was identified.

At forty-five Zach felt he was too old to adapt to the sensitivity of a touchpad, so he used the mouse to connect the call. Even before he saw a face, he heard controlled, deep breathing from the other end, and it wasn't the first time he was reminded, for some reason, of the late Hamlet Sr., that rare type of self-important apparition who skulks and stares, refusing to speak until someone either acknowledges his presence or, in stupefying fear, throws himself off the stone parapet.

It was good to be the king—even if you were dead.

The black background on the screen vanished and the ghost himself shimmered into frame. Two bright lamps lit the caller from behind, and the harsh lighting, together with the man's silver hair, created a halo effect, and the ethereal glow did nothing to diminish any dead Danish king imagery. The man leaned into the frame with a squint as if it might help improve the video quality.

"I can see you, Allan. Am I coming through?" Zach asked. He was tired and was unable to fake it, even if he had wanted to. He wanted to get back to the gas pump.

"Yes, I see you now, but it's a bit pixelated."

"We could switch to cells," Zach offered.

"I went through my last pre-paid an hour ago. This will be quick, Zachary. I just wanted to know how it went."

"As we thought." He hesitated. "He did blow on me, though."

There was a pause. "He *blew* on you?"

"He blew on me," he repeated slowly and loudly. "He leaned over the desk and blew air at my shoulder. I think I had a piece of lint or a hair or something on my jacket, and it was distracting him. He had broken out in a sweat."

“What about her?” Allan asked quietly. “Did she come in to meet him?”

“Allan, have you ever known her to join me for any interviews?”

“Has she shown any indication that she suspects something might be off with this particular one?”

“Come on, now,” he reasoned, a son chiding a father caught slipping into age-related paranoia. “Charlotte’s inabilities were thoroughly vetted; same with the board. Right now the only thing she’s thinking about is how she might book a rental in the Hamptons the same week as the Spielbergs. Be confident in the way you’ve handled everything so far.” Then he added, “The four of you have done exceptional work.”

“And it’s because we’ve done exceptional work that I have to double-check. You are more than competent, Zachary, but you aren’t working in a vacuum.”

“Look, if it makes you feel any better, she hasn’t left her office. In fact, she may not even have come in today. It’s Friday and the place is a tomb. My secretary left for her third bridal shower in two months; if she wasn’t the one getting married, I’d fire her.”

The old man chuckled, every third “ha” lost in a sudden, intermittent connection. “And ruin your golden boy reputation? You wouldn’t. You’re just in a foul mood, Zachary; try getting a few more hours of sleep each night. You look terrible.”

“It’s the pixelation.”

“We’ve made it through the first phase and everything is in place. Why don’t you take a couple weeks off and go someplace warm?”

“It’s Southern California in August. I’m warm,” he said, a little surprised at the suggestion.

“Then go someplace *cold*, Zachary. You’ve been a steam engine for two years. We’ve all carved out some personal time.”

“A month and a half before school starts? You’re not serious?”

More broken chuckling, this time at a question that wasn't meant to be funny. "You are no more a school administrator than I am CEO of the *Washington Post*. Take a week at the very least, Zachary—no one likes a martyr."

"I can't do it right now. I might take some time next summer. Before we implement the next stage."

They argued about Zach's vacation plans for a bit longer, but neither had much passion for the debate. Allan offered an extended stay at his vacation home in Aspen during ski season, but Zach politely declined. Allan pushed, but when Zach pretended to consider the invitation, Allan backed off. They were both playing courteous.

In truth, while Zach had always enjoyed the shop talk, however infrequent it was becoming, the relationship had cooled since his move to Southern California. He couldn't point to any specific reason for the change in dynamics, but he knew that neither of them seemed too disappointed in the way it was evolving. At its best, the two had been closer than Zach had been with his own father; at worst, the two were like friendly exes who forced themselves to get along for the sake of their children.

After covering some last-minute details, Zach ended the call, but once he did, he found himself a little depressed.

At seventy-one, Allan was showing age-appropriate signs of winding down, and it didn't take a bad video feed to see the man's golden years were tarnishing around the edges. The stress of the last decade or so showed prominently around the face. Especially in his eyes. Ample wealth may have afforded him the means to tighten and pull the skin in every place not covered by long sleeves and pants, but there wasn't a surgeon out there who could add vitality to the eyes of one who lived his life for a future he knew he wouldn't be around to see...at least not for very long.

For the next few minutes, Zach found himself swinging his foot lightly over bristled carpet tips, up and back, back and up... before stopping to create jerky figure eights and smiley faces

with triangular ears. The blood flow finally resumed and the pain had dulled.

He stood up gingerly and started for the office door, figuring he would see if Charlotte was in her office after all; he should fill her in on the interview, whether she was interested or not. He chickened out and decided to sit back down and call her instead, but when her office phone went to voicemail after the fourth ring, he hung up, glad to put off any conversation with her as long as possible.

As an afterthought, Zach dug into his front pants pocket and fished out a key, unlocking the middle drawer of the desk. He removed an ugly red paisley folder embossed with cursive gold lettering and shut the drawer. He then leaned back in his chair, kicked his feet up on the desk, and opened the folder, his knees bending into a makeshift bookrest.

The two-hundred-and-fifty-three pages were written by a private detective Zach had hired two years ago, an ex-security guard who happened to be a would-be novelist in his spare time. Zach had known about the writing hobby, of course, and the prescription drug hobby for that matter, since he had hired a different investigator to first investigate the detective. So when the detective finally submitted his report after six months, Zach wasn't surprised to find the entire document had been written as one long narrative, complete with a traditional five-act structure and a few too many unnecessary adverbial phrases. But each time Zach had gone through the report (and his last count came to twenty-one), he found himself almost appreciating the style of the storytelling, however pretentious. The account wasn't *Dorian Gray* by any means, but the final draft had so much potential that if things had been different, Zach would have offered to send a copy to a literary agent friend with connections at Scribner.

He didn't have the energy to scrutinize the full manuscript, but he wanted to scan through it to see what information he might need to reprocess now that the interview was over. In the

end, if one of a thousand unforeseen events or overlooked details brought the whole operation down, it wouldn't be for a lack of thoroughness on Zach's part.

He began flipping through the beginning, thinking about the fantastic steps T. J. Medina, Private Investigator, must have taken to dig up the massive amounts of exacting details in the pages that followed. He had never asked Medina how he had collected his information—and Medina hadn't offered—but the final report went beyond the normal requirements of professional “snoopers,” and in the case of chapter 3 specifically, the private thoughts and conversations were so intimate that they must have been lifted from not only personal records, but emails. Diaries, perhaps.

Again, Zach didn't want to know.

Pages one through seventy-ish looked fine—at any rate they were just rehashes of childhood history probably gleaned from back issues of *People* magazine—so he opted to start his close reading at the point where the protagonist evolved from a one-dimensional byproduct of a self-absorbed American actress into a fully fleshed out character, interesting enough to create his own backstory.

Zach flipped to chapter 3, by far his favorite, and reintroduced himself to the character who would be the central figure in his life for the next two years.