

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27TH
6:49AM

We are not going down. Only it seems like they are. The wheels of the plane just left the ground, but the takeoff feels tenuous, the aircraft moving too slowly to maintain flight. The cabin lights flick off and on, and the plane rattles loudly, shuddering like a harpooned whale as it muscles skyward through a driving rain.

Melissa Carnes glances at the stewardess sitting placidly in the forward jump seat. No reaction, but what does that airhead know? Probably so used to dodgy takeoffs that she can't recognize a tragedy in the making.

The plane dips left, thrusting Mel against the window, and even though it rights itself immediately and continues climbing, she can't help the feeling of dread she has.

Come on, Carnes. Pull it together. We are NOT going down. It's a true statement, but it feels like a lie, a half-truth at best. She's managed enough of those over the years to know how it works. Technically the plane continues to ascend, but it can't possibly last. It's a blatant falsehood to maintain that it will. They're simply not moving fast enough to make it through such a fierce downpour. The nose jolts downwards suddenly, then eases back up, the plane laboring valiantly, but it's a baby bird kicked out of the nest too soon. They will be going down before long. That's the hidden truth, the one no one wants to admit.

Mel hunches forward, clenching her knees tightly. She slides her glasses to the top of her head, stares out the window feeling helpless, trying to breathe steadily as the ground disappears and the plane gets swallowed up by the clouds, the universe empty except for the wing lights flashing against blackness and droplets sizzling on the window. The shuddering continues, the interior creaking and groaning like the plane is missing half its rivets. The rest of the passengers seem to think this is normal, nobody looking around in fear or grabbing their seatmate's forearm for reassurance. Mel holds herself in check, doesn't want to be the one to start a chain reaction of panic.

A line from *Airplane* pops into her head. *Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit sniffing glue.* She smiles meekly at the memory—she saw *Airplane* in high school, with her father for a date—but then the plane bucks hard half a dozen times, and Mel's mouth goes dry. Her heartbeat is weak but way too fast, her hands sweating, her eyeballs tight and dry, the hiss of compressed air and the roar of the engines slicing through her tightening eardrums. She's never had a panic attack, but this sure as shit feels like one coming on.

She takes a deep breath, tries to forget that 65% of all plane crashes happen within 5 minutes of takeoff or landing, one of many unhelpful stats Mel has learned over the years. A life in politics dumps all kinds of unnerving facts into your brain, though there's also a fair share of countervailing data that could make you feel less bad if you were so inclined. It's far more dangerous on the highway than in the sky, for one thing. Mel clicks through the stats in her mind: over 40,000 automobile deaths last year, compared to under 1,000 flight fatalities. Plus, 34% of passengers survive fatal accidents involving 10+ people. The facts don't calm Mel in the slightest. A thousand dead is a lot of people, a 1-in-3 chance of survival not exactly the most reassuring of odds.

She drops her glasses back to her nose, pulls out the safety information card for the first time since childhood, when she made a habit of familiarizing herself with emergency procedures whenever her family flew anywhere. She remembers her mother chiding her for it. "They haven't changed any since last time, Boo boo." The memory tightens her chest, makes her long for her mother's casual attitude towards danger. She tries to feel less alarmed as she studies the diagram of the Boeing 727-200, notes that the front hatch is her nearest emergency exit. That's just three rows away. The inflatable slide is also an emergency floatation device. She fights back a growing sense of dread, tells herself she's just having a bad morning, she's not going to die on the 6:42 from Omaha.

She folds and stores the card, dries her hands on her skirt, piles on the reassurance by noting that she's been on far more dangerous flights, statistically speaking—prop jobs flying out of tiny airports even the locals haven't heard of, charter flights on corporate jets of questionable reliability, maintained by mechanics nursing grudges against the uppercrust who fly around the world in sleek comfort, isolated from the grimy, coughing masses. These "general aviation" flights, as the government calls them, are over 5 times more likely to produce fatalities than commercial airline flights, contributing the bulk of that 1,000 dead, taking out half a dozen or a dozen people at a time

with little or no press mention, unfamous businessmen mourned only by their accountants, obscure politicians and their staff on bullshit junkets, the occasional rock star that most people end up assuming died from a heroin overdose. Mel remembers the exact numbers—25.4 fatalities per million flight hours in general aviation compared to 4.5 for airliners, a 1 in 4.7 million chance of dying on the average commercial flight, roughly 1 in a million for general aviation. She's known these facts for years—she briefly staffed a Congressman on an FAA oversight committee—which is why she's rarely worried about crashing, even under the most statistically treacherous conditions. 1 in a million never seemed all that risky.

We are not going down, she repeats to herself. She pushes her glasses back up her nose. *You're being ridiculous.*

It shouldn't take a shrink to tell her why she's so worked up today. She's never been fired before, never even worried about it, yet it's entirely possible she loses her job on the other end of this flight—a highly coveted position she loves and kicks ass at. She tells herself this would be an odd way to do it, sending her a first-class ticket on short notice just to deliver the news in person. Cliff Barker could've simply called her at her motel last night, told her to pack up and get out, her final check is in the mail. Instead, he sent a ticket by special messenger, no indication of why he wants her back in D.C., just a note telling her to head to the office straight from the airport. There's no agenda for the meeting, not even a specific time, just the number of an anonymous conference room on the second floor. It struck Mel as exceedingly Kafkaesque, but this is the way Barker operates sometimes, his idea of a management style to throw random acts of disruption at his staff to cover for his own wide-ranging anxiety. He's exactly the kind of prick who'd use precious committee funds for a first-class ticket, only to fire the poor schmuck at the other end. His treatment of women at the DNC is particularly random, nervous and sweaty at times, stern and tyrannical at others, no obvious reason for the difference except he's an insecure asshole who quit drinking and smoking at the wrong phase of life. Mel's glad she spends most of her time in the field and doesn't have to see Barker much except between campaigns, when all the strategists are back at DNC headquarters waiting for a new assignment, trying to dry out in anticipation of the extra-hard boozing that's coming with the next campaign.

Mel has been relatively abstemious over the past few months, Bob Kerrey's crew in Nebraska unusually buckled down and no mini-bar in her motel room. HQ is in a dry county or some bullshit like that, no bars within easy range for whatever reason. It feels like she was sent

away to Mormon summer camp for misbehaving at school. She's not particularly sad to be leaving that scene behind, though she has come to like and respect the candidate, and the race seemed to be going pretty well. She flatters herself that's because of her, knows it probably is. Lack of confidence has never been Mel's problem. Not that success guarantees she's not being fired. She could've pissed off the wrong person. That's probably it.

Whatever awaits in D.C., Mel has to assume she's off the Kerrey gig for one reason or another, though it's also possible that Barker just wants an in-person report from the field. He's old school, doesn't believe the polls—doesn't understand them is probably closer to the truth. The 50-somethings who clog the upper echelons of the Democratic Party still think in terms of caucus meetings and ward bosses, glance only in passing at the data printouts Mel and her generation of pols rely on. The old boys prefer to operate face-to-face, working out differences over Scotch and cigars, staring down rivals through a thick haze of smoke, analog to the core. Hard as it is for Mel to believe, it really still operates that way, 1994 closer to 1900 than it is to a new millennium. Mel has no idea how her party holds Congress with the outdated way most campaigns are still run. Well, they probably won't after November 8th. Not exactly consolation.

So of course it's both particular and generalized anxiety that has Mel on edge this morning. Doesn't take a Georgetown shrink to tell her that. Her job's in jeopardy, and her party's looking at a drubbing all over the map this cycle. Even if Kerrey holds his seat, the Senate's on thin ice, the House almost guaranteed to flip. A fucking Republican wave. Mel supposes she'd have to live through one eventually, though there was always that secret hope that the Dems could maintain a permanent majority, as though the word *permanent* has any place in politics.

Mel takes another deep breath as the plane labors through the onslaught of rain, the elements fighting desperately to knock this intruder back to the ground. How can this fragile metal tube possibly defeat Mother Nature?

The deep breath fails to reduce the mounting panic, succeeds only in making Mel think of cigarettes. She desperately wants a smoke. Her last one was #3 for the day, just outside the terminal. She should've had one more in the Delta smoking lounge before boarding, didn't think she'd have to endure this stress along with 3 1/2 smoke-free hours. She remembers when you could still light up on flights, the ban going into effect only 5 years ago. Her habit wasn't as strong back then, and she rarely smoked on a plane. It did seem a bit rude to the non-

smokers—she's always agreed that smoking on a plane, even in the designated smoking section, was a bit like peeing in a pool—but just knowing she could do it in the past makes her yen for it that much stronger now. You could make an argument that it's more like medicine than an addiction in a situation like this. Critics called cigarettes a drug—well, every drug has a necessary and proper use. If this isn't the time and place for a cigarette, when is? Mel has heard California is inching towards legalizing "medical marijuana." If that makes sense, couldn't she declare an emergency need for medical nicotine and light up right here, right now? They let people facing firing squads have a last cigarette—why not her?

She takes yet another deep breath, lingers on the exhale. *Out with the bad air.* She wants to believe the danger has passed, but the cabin lights flick off and on again, and the plane banks hard to the right, pushing Mel against the shoulder of her seatmate, a typical wide-body Southwestern businessman, complete with 10-gallon hat, bolo tie, crocodile boots, and an oversized Cornhuskers belt buckle—the kind of cliché central casting would put in the adjacent seat to round out Mel's distress if her life were a movie. Sometimes it seems like it is.

"You all right there, little lady?"

Little lady? For Christ's sake! People really talk like that? Maybe this is a movie. But is it *Airplane* or *Airport*? That's the million-dollar question.

Mel offers a forced smile in response, pulls a quote from her vast reservoir. "*There has to be a more dignified mode of transportation.*" She does a half-decent Molly Ringwald, adds a slight eye roll to make the comedy more obvious. She hopes she seems blasé, not unhinged.

"Excuse me?" The Cornhusker looks down at Mel with what seems like genuine concern, brown eyes sparkling with tenderness and brotherly love.

Oh, Jeez, he's one of those churchy types, she thinks. Could things get any worse? Mel flashes a quick, apologetic smile, though it's possible this makes her come across as even more terrified than before.

"You sure you're alright? You look a little..." He searches for the right word, probably worried about further agitating his distressed seatmate.

"Bedraggled?" Mel offers this before she can consider a better response. What she should've said was, "I'm fine, thanks for asking."

The man's eyes become even more tender as he studies Mel, his face betraying a battle to say the right thing here. He clearly doesn't want to agree, but Mel knows *bedraggled* would be the right word even if she weren't on the edge of a panic attack. She ran a comb through her

hair this morning after a quick shower, but that's the extent of her beauty regimen. No make-up, no curling iron, no effort whatsoever. She doesn't want to be put-together at all for her encounter with Barker. Some women think they have to look and sound perfect all the time to impress their superiors, but in Mel's experience, it's better to be as rough-edged as possible. She tried the look-nice/play-nice approach when she started out in politics, discovered quickly that she gained exactly zero recognition for it. To the old boys' network, it signaled obedience and irrelevance, invited sexual advances but gained no professional respect. She adapted quickly, started throwing elbows, never let herself doubt she could stare down any asshole in the business. It's served her well for the most part, but she knows she can come across as unkempt in circumstances where that's not to her advantage.

"I was thinking *nervous*," the seatmate says. He gives Mel a hopeful smile. "It is a mite bumpy."

"I'm fine. Really I am." She forces another smile, knows it looks as false as her statement. Even a robot could tell she's not fine.

"Turbulence makes me nervous too," he says, but he's clearly lying. He looks like he could fall from 35,000 feet, bounce a few times, and walk away singing *Amazing Grace*.

The plane dips again, and the cabin lights flick off and on once more. She notices a few other first-class passengers are glancing around with concern now, but the stewardess remains Buddha-like up front, inspecting the polish on her nails and smiling vacantly. Bird brain! We're fucking desperate here!

"Uh, this is your captain speaking. Just want to give you a little update on this turbulence we're experiencing. We'll be heading through a rough patch here for a few more minutes. Stay buckled up and hang tight. We'll be up and out of this and clear sailing pretty soon."

Is exactly what the captain would say if the situation were completely out of control, Mel says to herself. Remain calm. Don't panic the passengers with the ugly truth. They'll either pull out of it, or 66% of them will die. No use spreading unnecessary terror.

Mel's not usually a disaster visualizer, but her jaw clenches as she pictures quiet mayhem in the cockpit—dials spinning, the stick unresponsive, the pilot and co-pilot pale and sweaty. A quote from *Airport* flies into her brain when she really needs another line from *Airplane*. *Hold on, we're going for broke!* They survive the re-entry in that one, right? It's only a movie, though. Even in disaster flicks, nearly

everybody lives—not so much in reality. 66% likelihood of *not* surviving.

Mel's stomach drops with another shudder of the fuselage, her body flooding with every unhelpful chemical in the book, nudging her that much closer to a genuine panic attack. She turns to the window, closes her eyes against the flashing of the wing lights, her breath shallow, her hands and feet ice cold.

We. Are NOT. Going. Down. What a goddamned lie.

Mel tries to remember when she loved to fly, when a flight somewhere was an adventure-in-the-making, a life-changing experience waiting at the other end, or even in the next seat, when a Sony Walkman and a fresh novel was all she needed to occupy herself for a day of travel, when tomato juice seemed like an exotic beverage and the idea of emerging into a jetway somewhere different, hundreds or thousands of miles away, was among the most romantic feelings possible. That began to erode when she started working campaigns, and now all she feels is anxiety and annoyance whenever they're delayed on the tarmac before takeoff, or a stranger's elbow vies with hers for possession of the armrest, or the stewardess is out of Diet Coke by the time she reaches Mel's row. Or, as it's doing now, the plane feels like it can't possibly do anything but crash.

At best, flying these days is another low-grade hassle to be borne stoically—a visit to the gynecologist or dentist—and a time to work, to study polls and news clippings, to draft strategy memos and plan ad buys for radio markets no one a hundred miles away even knows about. Not that Mel planned to do any of that this morning. Waiting for her cab this morning, she decided to give work a rest for once. She was sure Barker was calling her in for the duration, not looking for an in-person status report. Bob Kerrey's fate come election day almost certainly rests with someone else now, probably that fuckwit Daniels. Good luck with that. She brought all her belongings—she's not going back to that piece-of-shit motel again either way—checked everything, briefcase and all. She boarded the plane empty-handed except for her complimentary copy of *USA Today*, trying to feel like she's free, not useless.

The plane finally pops out of the clouds and settles into its cruising altitude, the turbulence gone in an instant like the captain promised. Mel opens her eyes, takes as quiet of a deep breath as she can, tries not to appear as though she just survived a harrowing experience. She blinks at the bright sky, turns to smile at her seatmate—*nothing to worry about, right?*—furtively checks her pulse. Heart rate elevated but slowing. She unfolds her paper with slightly shaky hands, wishing

again for a cigarette, a celebratory one in this case. She peels off the first two sections of the paper, tucks them in the seatback pocket. Usually she'd pore over the news, then work through the business section to make sure there's nothing going on in the economy she should know about, but she needs to escape reality for a while, for any number of reasons. Most women would probably turn to the lifestyle section, but Mel's refuge is Sports, football in particular—pro, not college. She scans the NFL standings and injury reports first, looks over the early line for next week's game, then digs into the commentary. The Chargers are the only undefeated team left in the league after a last-second game-winning field goal to beat the Raiders, who were favored by 3 1/2 points but drop to 1-3 after a shocking loss at home. The Chargers? Seriously? With Stan Humphries under center? *That can't last*, Mel thinks, though the *USA Today* pundits are already talking Super Bowl. Idiots.

There's a short piece about the 3-1 Browns leading in the AFC East. The Browns have been Mel's team since childhood, a terminally heartbreaking form of loyalty for her and roughly 1 million other Ohioans. The anonymous writer has some cautiously optimistic things to say about Coach Belichick and QB Vinny Testaverde, but there's the usual wait-for-them-to-blow-it disclaimer in the final paragraph, noting how the Browns started 5-2 the previous season before limping to a 7-9 finish. Mel wishes she could be pissed at the negative coverage, but it's fair enough after four years below .500 and a string of heartbreaking playoff losses for 10 years before that. She'd like to think the Cleveland Curse could be broken this year, but that's even less likely than the Democrats holding the House—roughly the odds of rolling two Snake Eyes in a row, in Mel's opinion.

Her hulking seatmate catches Mel lingering over the NFL page.

"You a football fan, little lady?"

Again with the *little lady*?

"Browns fan," Mel notes dryly.

"That's not exactly the same thing, now is it?" He chuckles in a way that actually makes Mel chuckle too. "No offense," he adds with a warm grin.

"They've got a 3-and-1 start this year," Mel says. She hates that she sounds so defensive about it. "I smell a division championship," she adds, trying to sound more sure. "Maybe even conference."

"Uh huh. Could be. Huskers are 4-and-0h." He taps the Cornhuskers buckle with a thick finger. "'Nother national championship comin', I just know it. Played on the '70 and '71 championship teams myself."

"Let me guess," Mel says. She doesn't want to engage—she could really use a nap after that takeoff—but she can't help it. Pegging people's sports abilities is one of her odd forms of ESP. "Offensive line. Left guard, if I'm not mistaken."

"That's 100 percent correct, little lady. How'd you know?"

"I have a knack." Mel allows herself a sly smile, folds her paper closed and turns slightly in her seat, signaling a willingness to talk to her seatmate. This is not her typical M.O., but this is not a typical morning either. She's got a kind of survivor's high even though all she really survived was her own irrational panic.

"You're not a sports writer, now are you?" He sounds impressed. "I hear some women're breaking into that racket. 'Bout damn time, if you ask me. Equality's a long time comin' for too many folks in too many ways."

"Nope, not a sports writer." Mel lets the commentary pass without remark, but she smiles more cordially. Something about this guy makes her feel oddly at ease. Normally this is exactly the kind of person who would piss her off just for being alive, bulging over the armrest into her personal space and forcing conversation on her with his saccharine evangelical grin, but there's a genuine warmth to him that gets through to Mel. Plus he seems to be a friend of gender equality, a nice surprise. Is it possible he's not the standard-issue Great Plains Republican he looks like? Nebraska *is* an oddball place—she's learned that over the past few months.

"Don't tell me, then," he says, rubbing his meaty hands together like he's about to offer Mel a great deal on prime Nebraska grassland. "Lemma guess. Early morning flight to D.C. You're wearing a grey pinstripe lady suit, conservative black heels, expensive wire-frame glasses. No wedding band or engagement ring. Above average in the looks department. You gotta be one a them lobbyist types. Am I right?"

"Close." Mel is impressed and offended in equal measure, but she can't seem to muster any anger at the implicit sexism in his analysis. The fact is, what she does is only a few clicks from lobby work, and there's definitely something disarming about this guy. She knows she looks like hell, especially after that takeoff, but he gives her credit for *above average in the looks department* with such a matter-of-fact tone it doesn't sound like a come-on. "Really close. But nope, not a lobbyist."

"Secretary of Health and Human Services, then." He says it with a broad grin and put-on assurance. "Donna something-or-other."

"Getting colder," Mel says, but she's impressed that he knows one of the three women in Clinton's cabinet. Donna Shalala. He's probably a lobbyist himself, National Beef Association would be her guess.

"Well you're not Janet Reno, that much I know. Wait, you're not Diane Sawyer, are you?" He widens his eyes. "Come on now! You are! No way." He looks around comically, as though he simply has to tell someone else who he's sitting next to.

Mel feels herself beginning to blush just before she thinks to feel affronted. She's been told before that she bears a striking resemblance to a *young* Diane Sawyer, but Sawyer must be in her late-40s by now. Does she look that worn down today? She feels a good 20 years older than her age sometimes, and Sawyer does look fantastic on TV, but it's an insulting stretch for a 29 year-old to be mistaken for a middle-aged woman. Mel hates that she thinks in those terms—it galls her how much women are judged by their appearance—but the thoughts fly through her mind unbidden, her own unconscious sexism stronger than she'd like to admit.

"Nope, not Diane Sawyer." Mel still can't dredge up any anger. There's something about this guy that's drawing her in. He reminds her of exactly nobody she likes or respects, except for maybe Bill Clinton. That could be it. He's got that same kind of close-up charisma, the big friendly face, the air of a man who knows a lot about a great many things, wisdom and tolerance belied by his hillbilly get-up and cracker accent.

"I give up, then. I'm usually pretty good at this too, but you've got me stumped."

"I'm a campaign strategist, a perfectly anonymous behind the scenes kind of person."

"And you were in Nebraska for..." He raises his eyebrows.

"I'm running Bob Kerrey's Senate re-election."

"Impressive."

"At least I was until this morning," Mel adds. "I'm headed back to D.C. for a meeting at DNC headquarters. I'm not exactly sure what's waiting for me there. And I'm not exactly sure I care."

"And why's that?"

"High politics is an ugly game. I've spent my whole adult life down in the mud. I'm not sure how much more I can take."

This is far more than Mel would normally say to a seatmate—to anyone—but she can't seem to stop herself. Before she knows it, she's unloading to this stranger, telling him about her mother's unsuccessful battle with cancer and how she's struggled ever since to live up to her dying words, the obstacles and frustrations of a woman in politics—"In *any* top profession"—the denial and subterfuge that make up the bulk of her existence, even the parade of short-term boyfriends who've never amounted to much.

"I mean, what the hell do I think I'm *accomplishing* with my life?"

It's not until the plane banks to begin its final approach into National that Mel halts her outpouring. What the fuck? She really must've needed to talk this out. *Probably time to find a new therapist*, she thinks.

"Wow. Whew. Sorry to unload all that on you," she says over the landing announcement.

"Don't you worry none there, Diane." She never gave her name, and he called her Diane the whole flight, a ruse she played along with, as though he really was sitting next to the famous lady journalist unloading the tale of personal and professional woes.

"I really appreciate you listening so patiently. I don't know what came over me." This is not the kind of thing Mel is used to saying to anyone. None of it is.

"Well, good luck to ya, Diane," he says when they part in the terminal. "I'll be praying for you. I gather from what you've been sayin' that you probably don't believe in God, but He believes in you, whether you want Him to or not. *I believe in you*, that much you can count on. You're an extraordinary young woman, even if you're havin' a hard time seein' it right now. I think your mama'd be proud."

"I hope so." Mel sounds – and feels – unconvinced. That's the whole problem, in a nutshell. *Would* her mother be proud? She's been dead nearly 15 years now, leaving exactly 0.0% chance for Mel to ever find out.

"You need to *know* it, little lady. She would. I'm sure of it."

Mel has no idea who this guy is – he never gave his name either – but she chokes up at their parting, as though a lifelong friend is headed off to war and she might never see him again. It's been a long time since someone she wasn't paying listened this closely to her troubles and doubts, a long time since she's let anybody, paid or unpaid, hear them.

"And good luck to the Browns too," he says over his shoulder, a playful grin on his face. "Something tells me they're gonna need it even more than you."

She remembers that remark 6 weeks later, when the Browns are still running hot at 7-2, a game ahead of the 6-3 Steelers.

"Hah!" she says at the memory, not sure what she means exactly, but pleased to recall her kind Cornhusker from a previous life. She wishes she'd gotten his name.

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395 is shut down for some reason, so the cab takes Mel along the south side of the Mall. She sees the big monuments and historic buildings all the time, and she's long since lost her awe at the majesty of D.C., especially with what she knows about how politics really goes down. But today – with her guts recently spilled on the plane – seeing the Lincoln Memorial and all the rest, the flocks of tourists marveling at the grandeur, reminds her of the first time she visited D.C., back in '76 with her parents, their big East Coast tour for the Bicentennial, her father making every landmark an excuse for a mini history lesson, her mother taking deep breaths of the cherry-blossom-scented air and reminiscing about the March on Washington.

"It wasn't just black people," she said, eyes glittering at the memory. "It was a march for jobs and justice, things that concern every American, black *and* white. Brown, yellow, and red too." Somehow her mother could make these sweeping racial references sound not-so-awkward, which wasn't the case with her father.

"The White House was built largely by slave labor," he said, his tone mixing white guilt with admiration for the valiant men in chains who built the symbol of their own oppression

"Always a good reminder of how far we still have to go," her mother said, rescuing Mel's father from saying something even more cringe-worthy. Only 11 years old at the time, but Mel was in the full fervor of adolescent rebellion – against her father, at least. Her mother was – and always would be – perfect.

"That's true, Eleanor. Very true." Her father nodded and took his wife's hand. "One step at a time, right?"

"Only maybe pick up the pace a bit," she said, smirking and letting go of her husband's hand to dash ahead in the direction of the Capitol Building. A crack in the sidewalk tripped her up, and she sprawled onto the concrete, skinning her hands and knees, but when Mel and her father rushed up to see if she was okay, she was laughing. "Guess that's what happens when you try to run before you can walk." She got up and wiped her bleeding hands on her denim cutoffs. "Not that a little blood should ever stop us from charging forward. What's that Thomas Jefferson quote, Boo boo? The tree of revolution?"

Mel recited dutifully, pleased, as always, to back up her mother's life lessons. "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."

"Exactly. The blood has to stay fresh. We can't ever let it scab over, or the forces of reaction win the battle for our nation's soul." This last

remark was a clear dig at Mel's father, whose own interests lay squarely in the desiccated past, his expertise petering out with the election of Millard Fillmore.

The memory tightens Mel's chest, carries her unbidden into thoughts about her mother's funeral 3 1/2 years later, generally an off-limits corner of her mind. What the hell has her dredging this stuff up today? She cranks down the window, lights her 4th cigarette since landing, tries but fails to push away the image of her 15-year-old self, sitting stone-faced as people she knew and didn't know shed quiet tears over her mother. The funeral was unforgettable, a parade of speakers – Mel thinks it must've taken hours to complete – each of the eulogies more inspiring and heart-wrenching than the last, stories of her mother in college organizing the women on campus to protest the earlier curfew than the men had, her outrage at the inequality and her determination to end it way ahead of the college protests that became fadish a decade after Eleanor had done her difficult work, going sorority to sorority, patiently explaining why the difference of an hour mattered so much. Others told stories of a young community organizer in the wilds of southeast Ohio in '61 and '62, working 18- and 20-hour days to chip away at rural poverty, or the anti-nuke activist chained to a fence at a government facility, or the dedicated feminist joined by a handful of local mothers and a smattering of college students to cheer on Shirley Chisholm when she came through Wooster in '72. And on and on.

They told Mel more stories at the reception afterwards, standing with wine glasses in hand as they poured memories into the daughter they assumed would carry the torch, the girl who looked so much like Eleanor had when she was young, tall and fierce, eyes burning with the will to build a better world one brick at a time. Some of them said this flat-out to her face – at her mother's goddamned funeral! – "You look exactly like your mother when she was in college" and "I'm sure we'll see you do even greater things in the future." No pressure.

What they didn't know was Mel's eyes burned mostly from the effort of not crying. She shed not a single tear as she listened, hardly blinking, taking in every anecdote and tribute, the litany of praise canonizing her mother once and for all. She didn't want to miss anything – she worried that if she started crying, she might never stop – but it became a habit, not crying over her mother, a habit that strengthened over the years. She's still tall, obviously, but not quite as fierce – she's even a touch hunched over at times, diminishing her imposing height – and these days, when her eyes burn, it's with frustration at yet another idiocy or sexist remark, not with the will to

build a better world. She's given up on that, embraced what all the men who've come before her in this field have, that progress is measured in millimeters, not miles – or even yards – that ideals must often be set aside for any mote of advantage over those who advance opposing goals. She's adjusted her expectations—an excellent euphemism—telling herself whenever doubts surface that this is the real world, where victory has to stand in for higher purpose, where data printouts and strategy memos are more important than principles and values, where your only choice is to pick the right side and advance its cause at all costs, even if that makes it feel like narrow ambition has supplanted the grand aspiration to make the world a better place.

Every once in a while – why does today have to be one of those days? – she reproaches herself for failing so spectacularly to follow in her mother's footsteps as everybody expected. Even her father – the moderate, the gradualist, the disappointment himself – expected it. Her mother has such a powerful legacy that Mel has to suppress it with utter ruthlessness to keep it from crushing her. That's another habit she has, burying the fact that she's her mother's daughter, ignoring the whispers at the back of her mind that she's wasting her life and her talent doing what she does. Even acknowledging that the whisper exists is heresy.

She has to admit she's been a heretic more and more lately, questioning her motives for staying the course with the career she choose when she entered college. Did she really know what she was doing at age 18? It felt like it at the time, and most of the time since, but seriously? She had it together enough back then to map out a sensible career for herself? Maybe more than now, is the likelihood that tortures her in these moments of uncertainty. She remembers with perfect clarity what it felt like to have no doubts about going into political communications, and she craves a return to that feeling. Her last therapist told her she was seeking a false sense of security in a mythologized past – "Were you really that much more self-assured as a younger person?" – but what if she was actually just smarter and more focused back then and her anxieties now are only a result of moral flabbiness and burnout? Shouldn't she stay the course rather than accepting that the past decade has been a colossal waste of time and energy?

"Hey lady!" It's the cabbie, an angry-looking middle-aged black man. Mel feels the predictable pang of guilt for even thinking about the man's race. He has ample reason to be angry, a working-class man in post-Reagan America – whether he's black or white is irrelevant. Now here comes some privileged politico zoning out in his cab, maybe

costing him another quick fare because of the delay. He's right to be impatient with her. "Snap out of it. We're here."

"Yeah, sorry. Thanks." Mel grinds out her cigarette, flaps a \$20 bill at the cabbie, tells him to keep the change, then bustles away with too many unhelpful thoughts crowding her brain.

The cabbie calls out again, more sympathetic this time. "Hey lady! Don't forget your bags." He gestures at the open trunk, lifts out her suitcase and briefcase with a semi-genuine grin.

The irony is almost too much to take. Of course she can't forget her baggage, and if she ever does, someone or something is sure to come along and remind her of it. *Christ! Who has these kinds of thoughts?* This is why she always quits therapy after a few months. No one should be saying this kind of shit to themselves. It's even less helpful than simply burying your emotions and plodding on through a fog of denial.

#

The conference room feels all too familiar, a depressing realization for Mel. It's a generic workspace entirely devoid of humanity, one of hundreds Mel has occupied over the past decade. The walls are light blue yet unsoothing in the fluorescent glare, the floor tiled in off-white with swirls of grey and green, vertical blinds over the windows, open but hogging most of the midday sun. There's a rectangular brown table, a dozen chairs upholstered in thick-woven beige fabric, a pinholed U.S. map tacked to one wall, blank whiteboard on another, TV-VCR combo on a rolling cart playing C-SPAN.

Mel sits at the far end of the table, feet planted, leaning forward and smoking a fresh Parliament. She looks like a weary baseball manager mulling over a bullpen move. The smoke, so soothing at times, does little to calm her as she watches the smug pie face of Newt Gingrich, speaking from the Capitol steps only a few blocks away.

— For all those who are tired of negative attack smear campaigns. For all those who have asked political parties to get together and be a responsible team. For all those who have said we have to deal in a positive way with the challenges of America's future...

Mel could be anywhere — Trenton, Jacksonville, Bakersfield, Boise, any of the dozen Columbuses she's been through. She used to keep a map of all the cities and towns where she stayed overnight, an acne-scarred America she left in her last apartment, the '70s studio she lived in after college, before she started making good money and moved to a pre-war building in Dupont Circle. It hardly matters that she's at the Democratic National Headquarters, only about a 45 minute walk from

home. That's a raw geographic fact, nothing more. The word *home* is utterly meaningless when there's only 6 weeks til election day. She's never spent September or October in her apartment, can barely remember from her college days what Dupont Circle looks like in early autumn. She's not even sure she pictures her bedroom accurately. Is the TV at the foot of the bed like she thinks, or angled in the corner? Is she still using that dark-green cotton duvet, or did she switch to the charcoal flannel her father gave her for Christmas last year? Does she really have a Cindy Sherman print hanging on the wall, or is that something she transposed from an upscale hotel she stayed in once?

Not that it matters. It's almost certain she'll spend tonight in a hotel somewhere, upscale or otherwise, and the next 40-or-so nights after that – call it the odds the average NFL kicker makes a 25-yard field goal, pretty much a guarantee. It is possible Cliff Barker called her here to fire her, and it's possible the kick gets blocked or the snap fumbled, but neither is likely. Mel was worried earlier, but now that she's here, she knows Barker has a different plan. She sees a brand-new cardboard box on a chair in the corner marked "PORTER," her new assignment no doubt.

She should've known it all along. However much Barker resents her for her youth and her lack of a penis, the fact is, he needs all his best people in the field or his ass is grass. He's probably going down no matter what – he's at the exact right pay grade to take the fall for a bad cycle – but he has to at least look like he's trying or he won't be able to land a cushy consulting job once the DNC scapegoats him out. Mel explores the idea of feeling sorry for Barker. Even if it is a wave election no one at the DNC could possibly stop, someone has to be blamed. That's an iron law of politics – a fall guy must always be found so no one suspects systemic rot. It's sure as shit not going to be the new Chairman of the DNC, not this time around. It might actually be his fault – it's explicitly his mandate to hold and expand the party's base of power – but he's too young and too high up to take the fall. Firing him would be admitting that the future of the Democratic Party has been placed in the wrong hands. Even if it's true – *especially* if it's true – you can't admit that. No, someone a step or two down has to be sacrificed. Barker stands beneath the falling safe, and he probably knows it, knows too that an anvil or a piano takes him out if he evades the safe.

Maybe Barker deserves some sympathy, but Mel can't manage to dredge it up. What's coming November 8th may not be his fault, but he's a certified asshole under the best of conditions, so fuck him. Mel's job right now is to keep herself from getting dragged down with him.

Oh yeah, and to try to make the drubbing they have coming as little bad as possible. That too.

Barker drifts in while Mel's lighting a new cigarette off the tip of the previous one. He studiously ignores Mel, perches on the far edge of the table and glares at the TV, crosses his arms and tries to look annoyed and wise at the same time. It's a signature expression, a mask to hide anxiety and burnout, or so Mel has always thought. Barker wears the expected costume – white shirt and blue tie, pleated khakis, oxblood loafers – but he's dumpy and rumpled, eternally slouchy, exhibits the body language of a man who's actually as sad and hopeless as he should be, stuck at deputy national strategist at age 54 and looking down the barrel of a Republican tsunami.

– We were asked as recently as this morning, why are we here? Why not just run against the Clinton administration and its collapsing public support? And in the spirit of total honesty, I have to say, when you watch them collapse this badly, it is tempting.

"I hate that weasely shitbag." Mel flicks her old cigarette at the TV. It bounces off the screen with a spray of sparks and drops to the floor.

Barker considers the cigarette with a frown, steps over to crush the glowing tip with his toe.

"Get used to him," he says. "He's going to be the next Speaker of the House. Thank you Hillary Goddamn Clinton."

Mel blows a cloud of smoke at Barker. "You're gonna blame the First Lady for that haughty piece of shit? Nice, Barker. You're a real team player. Go Team Patriarchy."

"She botched the healthcare thing, and this is what we get." Barker squats with a groan and picks up the dead butt, twisted like a question mark. He wags it at Mel. "Newt Gingrich is an ambitious motherfucker, and he smells blood. Blood that Hillary dumped in the water with that ridiculous tome of a healthcare plan of hers. A Hillary Goddamn Disaster."

Mel says nothing in response – what counter-argument is there? She opens her briefcase, squints through the smoke of her own cigarette to peer inside, as though there's something important she needs to find. The truth is, she just doesn't want to look at Barker. She's pissed that she has to concur with his assessment, double pissed that it stretches the sisterhood that much thinner. Barker doesn't have to feel bad about every male Democrat who fucks up. Why should she take it so personally that the First Lady whiffed on her first swing at a policy homer? And why did Big Bill let her take the lead on something every Democratic president since Harry Truman has coveted? It's his deal with the devil, is the conventional wisdom. Probably about right. The

bullshit Hillary put up with during the campaign justified her pick of the litter, even if was a colossal mistake.

Barker drops to a chair still holding the mangled butt. He places it in the ashtray ruefully—an ex-smoker missing the good old days—scratches the side of his nose, shakes his head as he watches the speech, giving Mel no indication what the point of this might be. Is she supposed to be watching this speech for a reason, or is it just what happens to be on C-SPAN at the moment?

—Think of America as a giant family of 260 million people, of extraordinarily diverse backgrounds, riding in a huge car down the highway, trying to pursue happiness and seek the American dream.

Mel scissors her cigarette and looks away, scans the room with disgust, exhales another burst of smoke across Barker's face. Let the son-of-a-bitch remember what he's missing. She looks out the window, tries to tune out the surroundings and smoke placidly until Barker decides to tell her what's going on. *Empty your mind, Carnes*, she tells herself, but she can't forget that she's spent her entire adult life in rooms just like this, watching grown-up frat boys like Newt Gingrich on C-SPAN and CNN, plotting how to get them elected or defeated, which task depending only on party affiliation, not any real relationship to what Mel believes in, where she wants the country to go, what's right and what's wrong. Maybe she should just quit, flick another cigarette at the TV and simply walk out. *Fuck you, Barker, and fuck all this shit.*

What would her mother say about that? Good riddance, probably. To the cigarettes as much as the job, Boo boo. Don't you remember that your mother died of cancer?

Mel brushes tobacco crumbs from her lap, spins her lighter on the table, tries to convince herself that it really is time to quit—the cigarettes for sure, if not the whole shitshow of politics. She's not an 18-year-old waif anymore, so why keep up the habit? All it does these days is make her hair brittle and her skin spongy. Otherwise she might not look so bad, even by America's ridiculous beauty standard. She looks like Diane Sawyer, for fuck's sake, or close enough, even if it is present-day Sawyer, not the version closer to Mel's actual age, back when she first joined *60 Minutes*.

Mel takes a deep drag and looks back at the TV, reminds herself that it's the existence of men like Newt Gingrich that keeps her going in this job, and the keeping going keeps her burning through pack after pack of Parliaments. Politics is a shitty enough endeavor for any human being. For a woman in the '90s—a decade when they're supposed to be treated like equals, for fuck's sake!—it's an exquisite

hell of immeasurable despair. Without her Parliaments, she wouldn't be able to take it.

Her anger flares at the thought of a Republican-controlled Congress. Much as she hates what it might take, she has to do whatever she can to stop that from happening. She might not be able to make the world a better place, but she can stop it from getting worse. *That* might be within her grasp.

— And then a tire blew out because the welfare state failed so totally, and it's so clear we have to replace it with an opportunity society. And with three blowouts, the American family car began to have a terrible ride, and people were anxiety-ridden...

"Contract with America my ass," Mel mutters. "Hypocritical peckerwood."

Barker ignores the remark, blinks at the TV, thinking God-knows-what, maybe just wondering when he can sneak off to the men's room to masturbate—or sneak a cigarette is more likely.

"Look, forget about this." Barker jumps up, snaps off the TV, strides to the corner and yanks open the PORTER box. He tosses an accordion file towards Mel. It hits the table with a sharp slap, slides a few inches. Mel takes a casual drag, pretends not to see the folder. "There's a Senate race we need you to win for us." Barker cracks his knuckles. "Forget about Newt Gingrich and the lost cause of our House majority and focus on that."

"I'm already winning you a Senate race." Mel says this matter-of-factly, but she knows that no, she's not—not anymore, at least. Her position with Kerrey is in the hands of someone else, some dumpy white guy like Barker, a loyal time-server who hopefully won't fuck up the lead she worked so hard to build. And why, exactly, should she care? Did she believe in Bob Kerrey any more than she ever believed in any candidate, or is she just annoyed that the DNC brass thinks it owns her?

Barker looks uncomfortable for a second, then turns to the map and considers it ruefully. "We need to move some pieces around the board. Wilhelm thinks Nebraska's in the bag. Ohio, on the other hand..." He glances pointedly at the folder.

"Nothing's ever in the bag," Mel says. She's calm for the moment, but she feels the familiar anger building. "You think Kerrey's sailing to victory? You have no idea what's going on out there. You can't yank me now. We've barely got an eight-point lead. That's right on the margin of error. You know what a margin of error is, right?"

"Don't blame me. It's not my call."

"Don't shoot the messenger, huh? Fuck that, Barker. I hate messengers."

Mel glares at Barker with disdain, borrowing a look she's seen men give other men innumerable times. It's an animal challenge, nothing more, the outcome a function of determination more than anything. This is just men locking horns or thumping their chest, a wordless fight to establish dominance. Women can do it too, though in Mel's experience, they rarely try. Probably because they rarely win. Mel, however, wins all the time, at least lately, her premature wrinkles and a smoldering cigarette giving her an edge, a lack of make-up and unkempt hair further adding to her power. She does what she can to be prepared for these showdowns, goes into potentially contentious meetings looking disheveled and harried like she does now. The average 29-year-old woman, washed, coiffed, and carefully made-up, wouldn't stand a chance against an asshole like Barker in a conventional staring contest. Even a beta-male has enough pride to hold on against a pretty-ish woman trying to take a stand. Just look rough, don't move, don't blink, and you carry the moment, whether your position is actually stronger or not.

Mel feels her glasses sliding glacially down her nose, fights the urge to scratch the itch on her cheek, reminds herself what a useless piece of shit Barker is, tries to remember what they're staring down about. Not that it matters. Once engaged, thinking about the issue at hand is sure to bring defeat. Fortitude is all that matters. Mel has a deep reserve, even at the most fragile moments in her life.

Barker breaks first. "Just take a look, wouldja? Kyle Porter. Son-in-law of a former Ohio governor. Good-looking guy. A touch raw, sure, but, well..." He shrugs, scratches his nose again, smiles wanly. He looks like an anguished Pop Warner coach struggling to buck up his puny misfits in the face of another 42-0 blowout.

Mel grinds out her cigarette, unclasps and opens the flap with exaggerated slowness while Barker nods encouragement. *This can't be good*, she says to herself, the tiny thrill of victory draining away as she remembers what this is all about—some new dickweed to get elected with just 6 weeks on the clock. She pulls out the stack of file folders, spreads them in front of her like she's preparing a card trick, looks for the latest poll results. May as well find out the bad news right off the bat. She flips open the folder, glances at the tracking poll graph. Holy fuck, seriously?

"Eighteen points! He's down by 18 points? You've got to be kidding me."

"Turn him around, Mel." Barker wipes his sweaty hands on his pants, lifts the cardboard box onto the table with a muted grunt. "Win the election, keep the seat, help safeguard our Senate majority. A grateful party awaits your victory."

"You're fucking kidding, right? Eighteen points? With 6 weeks to the election? How the hell am I supposed to turn *that* around?"

"You're a miracle worker, Carnes. That's what everybody says."

"Everybody?"

"Like it or not, that's your reputation, and right now, we need a miracle worker in Ohio. Oh, wait. You're from there, aren't you?"

"You know perfectly well I'm from Ohio, asshole."

"Oh, right, sure. How could I forget?"

Mel narrows her eyes, wonders for a second if Barker is bullshitting her. He's got the dry humor thing down, she'll admit that much, but she often catches him on a piece of honest-to-God sincerity too. Another weakness.

"Yeah, well, bonus points for the local connection," Barker says.

"*Bonus points*? It's gonna take more than gold stars from the goddamned teacher to overcome an 18-point deficit. Where'd you get this bozo anyway?" Mel glares in outrage at the graph, the line for her guy drifting downward from June to September, bottoming out a week ago at 31% to the Republican's 49%. She knows a bit about the opponent—Dick Musgrove, sitting lieutenant governor, founder of a regional telecom company that got bought out for a hefty sum before he went into politics—a generic Republican fatcat but exactly what the American public seems to want this cycle, a businessman-turned-politician allegedly bringing the drive and efficiency of the private sector to government service. Fucking idiots.

Mel tries not to feel defeated already, only half listens to Barker explain how Porter stole the nomination, took them all by surprise getting into the race in the first place, a rich entrepreneur with zero political experience edging out the Cuyahoga County Commissioner the ODP had its eye on.

"So we're working with Grade B meat here, is what you're telling me." Mel pages quickly through the latest newspaper clippings, headlines shuttering past her eyes, Porter's optimistic smile and thick wavy hair the only bright spot she can see. He certainly looks the part of a self-made-man turned Senate candidate, running against—what?—a turtle-man with beady eyes and flabby cheeks. In a straight-up battle of faces, their guy would win, hands down. So there's that much at least. It's not nothing, she knows. Porter's got a kind of Clintonian sparkle in his eye too.

"Despite the father-in-law, his roots in the party are pretty shallow," Barker admits, "but he's got good name recognition on the private-sector side of the ledger. Porter Legal Services. Something like 150 offices in the Midwest and upper Southeast. New York too. And still expanding. Maybe you've seen his TV commercials?"

"Good name recognition, and he's 18 points down to some no-neck lieutenant governor?"

"Something about Ohioans distrusting lawyers, I guess it is," Barker says. "*Negative perception of candidate's chosen field of endeavor*, is how Shep put it."

"So we've got name recognition, and that's our *weakness*? Jesus pissant, Barker, what am I supposed to do with this mess?" Mel shoves the files away in disgust and rummages through her briefcase.

"Cigarettes are right there," Barker says after watching her dig around for a few seconds. He points forlornly at the pack.

Mel lights up, exhales with relish, the angst briefly melting from her face. "Let me get this straight," she says with clinical calmness. There's no sense drowning in outrage. She has a job to do. The harder it is, the more she has to stay focused on the task, the more rewarding it'll be when she wins. "Our guy's a newbie to politics, minimal connections with local party orgs, distrusted for the exact reason he's well known, and he's running in what looks like a Republican wave."

"And." Barker cracks the lid again, reaches furtively into the box, ease out a plastic-coated report like he's sneaking a cookie.

"There's another *and*?"

Barker hands the report to Mel with a pained smile. He almost looks apologetic. "He's got a slow start staffing up. He had a solid organization running up to the primary, which is partly how he got past our guy, but he dismissed most of his campaign staff immediately after winning the nomination, manager and all. It's all in Shep's report."

Mel glares at the generic title, *Preliminary Analysis of the Kyle Porter Senate Campaign* by USA Data Services. She opens to page one, scans the executive summary. "*While his new team was still getting organized in August,*" Mel reads aloud, "*the Republican mounted a radio and television campaign in the Cleveland media market, an indispensable segment of our base, and made significant inroads there, as the post-Labor Day polling shows. See Appendix C for a detailed breakdown of the latest results.*" Mel helicopters the report across the table. "Appendix fucking C? Sweet baby Jesus, Barker, is it April first, or am I just imagining that this is all a cruel prank?"

"There's more," Barker says. He retrieves the report, opens to a back page, turns it to face Mel.

"What am I looking at here?" Mel barks, but the header is clear. Campaign Staff List.

"Alex Tremont is campaign manager," Barker says. He sounds genuinely sorry. "Porter hired him just before Labor Day. Wilhelm tried to object. He wanted to send out Paul Begala—this is a crucial goddamned race, as everyone knows—but Porter insisted. Tremont is a friend of his father-in-law, or some stupid shit like that."

Mel's mood collapses. An 18-point deficit she could accept, but this is too much. In a world of sexist male pigs, Alex Tremont is one of the worst. You might think a gay guy would sympathize with the plight of women, but not Alex. Doesn't like to sleep with women, doesn't like to work with them, and he's not afraid to show it. He seems to think that being gay makes him immune to charges of discrimination, which it pretty much does, among Democrats at least. Plus, he's as old-school as they get, and not in a good way. Out of touch with modern campaigning, he still seems to get work at the highest levels. This is the hardest part to swallow.

Barker tries on an encouraging smile, but it only makes it look like he has gas. "Wilhelm did get Tremont to take on Shep Blumenthal as his pollster, so you've got that going for you."

"And I suppose David's the genius who insisted on sending me in as a second wave of kamikazes?"

"The Chairman thinks very highly of you." Mel notices more than a touch of sourness in Barker's voice. "As do I."

"Well, that makes me feel just fantastic. Validation from a couple of privileged white males. Just what I've always wanted." Her sarcasm is genuine, but she has to admit that her actions over the past decade give credence to what she just said. If she's not seeking validation from the old-boys' network, what *is* she doing? It's the one thing all of her therapists have agreed on, that she's dedicated to obliterating her mother's memory by seeking success among the very people her mother was always trying to overcome—career politicians, the Establishment, the Man. She never believed them, but it gets harder all the time to deny that they're right.

Barker checks his watch, eases the box in Mel's direction, tries on another version of a hopeful expression, but now he's like a father watching a kid with his fly down botching his lines in the school play. "You're on a 3:30 flight to Cleveland. Porter's got a rally in Lorain tomorrow, just outside Cleveland, not far from his HQ. Struggling blue-collar town. The perfect place for a reset."

Mel stares hard at Barker, the cigarette smoldering in the corner of her mouth. "You don't really think I can do this, do you?"

"It's politics, Carnes. Anything can happen in 6 weeks. If you win this one, you'll be an even bigger hero than you already are. Could be on your way to a major position on Clinton's re-election campaign. Something national, close to the top. Assistant Campaign Manager. Deputy Chief Strategist. Something along those lines. You know how Wilhelm favors you younger guys." Barker scrunches his face, struggles not to look too bitter. "Sorry, gals."

"Gals?"

"You know what I mean. No offense, okay? You've got a career out ahead of you, and this is a real opportunity here."

"Opportunity? You've got the brass balls to call this," Mel shoves the box back at Barker, "an opportunity?"

Barker's anger flares up. "A hopeless situation like Porter's in? Hell yes, it's an opportunity. Think of what happens if you win. If you even get close." Barker slides the box back towards Mel, keeps his hands at the back as though he expects Mel to shove it back again. Mel goes into stare-down mode again.

"We got you a hotel near HQ," Barker says, his bitterness escalating. "Four star, office nook, mini bar, the whole nine yards. Usual compensation plus hazard pay for the late deployment, full expenses. Per diem to keep the paperwork down. Ninety-five a day's the rate at this pay grade."

"Generous."

"Don't be snide, Carnes. It *is* generous. Ridiculously so, if you ask me. You're what, 31, 32 years old? That's a chunk of change for someone your age, especially in this economy."

"Twenty-nine." Mel wishes she didn't feel the need to say it.

"Well there you go, then." Whatever that means. Barker is trying his best not to look jealous, without much success, Mel thinks.

She breaks down. Money talks, bullshit walks, right? This may be bullshit, but the money can't be denied. Besides, what else would she do? Slink back to her apartment and start reading that Camille Paglia book she's had on her nightstand for 3 years? Find a new therapist to help her beat back a premature mid-life crisis? Cruise the D.C. bars for one-night stands? Join a gym, quit smoking, and get her life on track with a career that's healthier and more sane? There's only one path to take here, and she knows it.

Mel draws the box closer, to Barker's obvious relief, the image of a Navy PT boat gliding upstream into the jungle popping into her mind as she does it. The voice-over is an automatic response, Martin Sheen's gravelly narration a familiar companion to treacherous turning points in her life. *When I was here, I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I*

could think about was getting back into the jungle. It's true. Whenever she has down time, she paces her apartment like a caged animal, waiting for a new assignment, jonesing for the adrenaline of a campaign, the smoke-filled rooms like this one, hashing out strategy, pitting her mind against the vagaries of the American electorate.

Mel yanks off the top of the box, sends it spiraling across the room. She loves throwing things, especially when there's no risk of breaking something. Inside there's a stack of video cassette tapes, more newspaper clippings, campaign credentials, even a roadmap of Ohio.

She lights another cigarette, tosses the folders and Shep's report in with the rest of it.

"I took the mission," Mel says with her best Captain Willard impersonation. "What the hell else was I gonna do? But I really didn't know what I'd do when I found him."

Barker's brow crinkles. He's obviously not familiar with the quote.

Mel draws fiercely on her cigarette. "*Apocalypse Now*, dimwit. Greatest movie ever."

"Whatever you need to get charged up." Barker reaches down the table, takes one of Mel's Parliaments without asking. Mel reflexively flicks her lighter, watches Barker's face melt in relief. His plods across the room to turn the TV back on, steps back and smokes placidly as they both watch.

— But isn't that what America is about? The right to dream these kind of heroic dreams.

"We have to hold the Senate, Mel, or their vicious, backward-looking agenda sails through Congress and veto be damned."

Mel watches the crowd cheer, fights the temptation to flick her cigarette at the screen again, squints at Gingrich like he's there in the room and they're about to draw pistols for a duel.

— We are in the business of reestablishing the right to pursue happiness, and the reality of the American dream, for every child born in this country...

Mel feels a surge of adrenaline, or maybe it's just the nicotine. Whatever it is, it's getting the job done, firing her up for the challenge of bringing this Kyle Porter shithead back from the dead. She a junky and she knows it—politics, the endless duel with Republicans, the challenge of winning the unwinnable. She's been hooked for nearly 20 years, ever since she led that strike of the safety patrol in 6th grade because the principal made them stay in their posts for a full half hour, well past the time when there were any students to usher across the street. She got suspended for that one, but her mother fought the principal, won not just a reinstatement without a note in her school record but an apology from the school board for violating her First

Amendment right to assemble peaceably to redress grievances. Her first lesson in insurgent politics, the moral codified by her mother. "A short-term loss means nothing as long as you never give up," she said. That's been a guiding principle for Mel ever since, even as she's drifted further and further from her mother's ideals.

Barker is saying something, but Mel's not listening.

"Just win it, Carnes. Don't think about *not* winning it, okay. We don't expect a victory, not exactly, but we *need* one. Very much so. Work your ass off, but be comforted by the thought that a relatively close defeat won't hurt you personally. While a blowout, on the other hand..." He tries to look stern, mostly succeeds.

Mel ignores Barker, keeps her eyes trained on the TV screen, wallows in her hatred for Newt Fucking Gingrich and his crowd of self-serving ass hats. In the end, the politics does motivate her, however stupid and futile that might be. She wants Porter to win, even if he doesn't deserve it. With a weak-kneed sack of shit in the White House, a Democratic Senate is the nation's only hope—if there even is any hope.

—America is the most revolutionary experiment in human history. We truly believe that we are endowed by our creator, that our rights come from God, and not from the government or the state...

Mel gives in to temptation, flicks her cigarette at the screen again. She pushes her glasses up her nose, grabs the box, and marches off to lend her talent and energy to yet another white male champion of all that's not Republicanism.

"We are *not* going down," she says under her breath as she strides down the hall with a renewed sense of purpose. It's not until she's standing by the elevator that she realizes this is exactly what she told herself on the plane earlier today. *Well, it was true then...*

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Another taxi ride, another airplane, a pleasant surprise that the flight to Cleveland is virtually empty. The takeoff is smooth, Mel's terror from earlier in the day forgotten. *1 in 4.7 million chance of a crash*, she thinks briefly, chiding herself for getting so worked up this morning.

She's in coach this time, but she has the row to herself and a renewed sense of purpose, her briefcase bulging with files like usual, work to be done and no time to lose, 6 weeks to the day, and an 18-point deficit to overcome. Is it a winnable challenge, or is she doomed from the start? She thinks of *The Bad News Bears*, a favorite of her and her mother's, reminds herself the team came a long way but still lost

the championship game by 1 run. A favorite Walter Mathau quote comes to mind. *Listen, Lupus, you didn't come into this life just to sit around on a dugout bench, did ya? Now get your ass out there and do the best you can.* "And if the best you can isn't enough, do even better," her mother whispered to her right afterwards, that knowing smile on her lips and the box of popcorn held out to Mel.

She pushes away thoughts of her mother — *No more of that shit today, OK Carnes?* — spreads out the Porter materials on the tray tables on either side of her and digs into the ugly news. First she makes a thorough study of Appendix C. It's always best to know the worst of it before anything else. The crosstabs paint a pretty clear picture of a candidate doing poorly among traditional Democratic constituencies — union members, minorities, young college-educated voters, the unemployed. Porter's not actually *losing* among any of these groups, but he's drastically underperforming. You know it's bad when a Republican isn't being blown out among Africa Americans, and Musgrove's got solid numbers there, especially younger suburban blacks. When a Democrat can't get 80 or 90 percent of the black vote, he's doomed. That's axiomatic.

Mel runs her finger along the numbers, shaking her head in disbelief. Porter tops out at 67% among African Americans with a college degree, an odd group for a forty-something white lawyer to do well with, though maybe they're the ones in the best position to see through Musgrove's bullshit. She turns the page, sees that the gap among traditionally Republican-leaning groups is predictably large — 21 points behind with older voters, almost the same with non-union whites, nearly double that with people making the median income or greater, nearly 70 points among people who identify Christian values as their most important issue.

Oddly, the number for suburban, college-educated, married white women doesn't look so bad, the one ray of sunshine. What is it about this group that isn't repulsed by Porter? Is it his good looks? Do they not distrust lawyers as much as other people? Do they see this Contract with America for the empty rhetoric that it is?

Mel should be able to tell. She could very well be in this sub-group herself. In a parallel universe, that's exactly what she is, a professional woman living in the Columbus suburbs, 2.3 kids, a husband in finance, or maybe a tenured professor at Ohio State. Her father would love that. She can picture him in the living room, smiling and hugging the grandkids, waving her and her husband out the door for a weeknight dinner date. Grandpa Mike building a swing set in the backyard and staying for dinner, arguing politics with her Reaganite husband,

playing endless games of Life and Monopoly with the kids. Grandpa Mike taking the kids for the weekend while Mel and her husband fly to Florida for a much-needed getaway, regaling the kids with stories of Mel as a girl, the safety patrol strike, her tumultuous tenure as student-council president, the time in high school when she ran her science teacher's unsuccessful campaign for Wooster City Council. They listen in awe, hug grandpa tightly, pepper Mel with questions when their parents get back from their trip. *Did you really organize a walkout at your high school to protest Apartheid?* They can't possibly believe that their mother was once so political.

Mel tears herself away from the fantasy, reminds herself how little time she has to get up to speed on the ins and outs of this race. She slaps the report closed, turns to the clipping pile. She picks up a piece about the primary from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

Close Race To Succeed A Retiring Democratic Senator

By Thom Reynolds

PARMA, OHIO, APRIL 28— Kyle Porter, who is running to fill the Senate seat being vacated by three-term Democratic Senator Howard M. Metzenbaum, worked his way through a shopping center, shaking hands in the final days before Tuesday's primary election.

The layer-turned-entrepreneur, who founded a regional chain of low-cost legal clinics, repeatedly introduced himself to the shoppers, but he is so well known from the steady stream of television ads in Ohio for Porter Legal Services that most people he meets seem to be familiar with him already.

A typical response came after he greeted Marvin Unger, a 70-year-old retired pipe-fitter who looked unmoved by the candidate's disarming smile and warm handshake. "I'm voting for Boyle," Mr. Unger said to Mr. Porter, referring to Mr. Porter's main rival for the Democratic nomination, Mary Boyle. "She's not rich like you."

Score one for Mrs. Boyle and her ad blitz, which has suddenly given shape to this down-to-the-wire election with the clarity of a bumper sticker: "The Senate doesn't need any more millionaire lawyers," she says in her latest radio and television ads. "What it needs is more moms."

The Senate race here is being closely watched in Washington as one of a handful that together could potentially save the Democrats' imperiled majority this fall. Like voters in other states, people in Ohio are anxious about crime and health care. They express a deep

cynicism toward Washington and a profound dissatisfaction with government, and have approved term limits for their elected officials.

With so few issues dividing them in their respective primaries, the Democratic and Republican Senate candidates are trying to distinguish themselves by claiming to be the most ordinary candidate.

Mrs. Boyle's "Mom versus Millionaire" advertisement, which is being broadcast statewide, deliberately echoes the successful 1992 Senate campaign of Patty Murray in Washington State, who converted a legislator's dismissal of her as "just a mom in tennis shoes" into a winning campaign slogan. Mrs. Boyle, the mother of four and a popular three-term Cuyahoga County Commissioner, has sought advice from Senator Murray as she seeks to become one of only a handful of women in the United States Senate.

The article comes to an end there, the rest of the clipping missing from the packet. Not that reading more will tell her much. She knows Porter won the primary, but she can see why he's having problems.

Mel looks at the byline again, dredges up Thom Reynolds from her memories of '92. He gave Clinton some pretty sympathetic coverage, if she remembers correctly. Cute too, in a rumpled, high-school sports star who managed to grow up a little but still thinks about the past all the time kind of way. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Mel checks the press contact list, sees that Reynolds is still the *Plain Dealer's* guy on the politics beat. That's good. He's a friendly, or at least a potential friendly. They'll need sympathetic coverage from as many in-state rags as possible. Mel makes a note to seek out Reynolds, use her wiles to keep him from more unflattering coverage like that snarky anecdote about the pipe-fitter who shook Porter's hand but pledged support for his opponent. That's the kind of writing Mel tries to steer the scribblers away from when she can, the subtle negativity that can sour voters on a candidate even more effectively than a dozen attack ads from the other camp.

The next clipping mentions that Musgrove's campaign is being run by Howard Kane. Goddammit, really? Howard "The Shark" Kane. Mel has never run against The Shark, but he's a legend in the business, the kind of opponent everyone dreads. Brilliant, ruthless, utterly amoral. One of the best in the business, if not *the* best.

A real prick, too, Mel reminds herself, a true-blue asshole of the worst kind. Back in '90, he raped a friend of hers from college, a speechwriter working for him on the California gubernatorial race. The son-of-a-bitch got away with it in a he-said/she-said situation, and the woman quit politics and went to nursing school, last Mel heard.

Mel originally got the story from another DNC strategist who worked the other side of the race against Kane, a smug little prep-school asshole who remained studiously neutral as he told Mel the story. "Kane says he didn't do it, she says he did." He sipped his gin-and-tonic as Mel fumed, pounding the bar with both fists.

"What the fuck, Orton? Nicky gets raped by some piece-of-shit Republican, and that's what you have to say about it?"

"Innocent until proven guilty, right?"

Mel controlled her urge to grind out her cigarette on the back of Orton's hand, rose and walked out without paying for her drinks. Goddamned old-boys' network, circling the wagons around one of its own, even a scumbag from the other side who raped somebody. That's how it went, forever and always, even now.

Mel never spoke to Orton again, but she heard the same story — and the same blithe dismissal of guilt — from a bunch of other people, including some college friends of hers and Nicky's who should've been more incensed, out of loyalty to a friend if nothing else. Even the ones who used the word *rape* without qualification — some called it *date rape*, as though that made a difference, others said *alleged rape*, taking the same presumption-of-innocence tack as Orton — were quick to note that there wasn't anything you could do about it, so what good did it do anybody to dwell or get outraged?

"You think Nicky can just decide not to *dwell on it*?" Mel came close to delivering a few punches, did throw her drink in the face of one particularly haughty little asshole who said, "Look, you play with fire, you get burned, right? Everybody knows who and what Howard Kane is. Just don't ever get left alone with him, when it's his word against yours. Simple as that." Simple, sure. Just don't ever be a victim.

Mel threw her drink with glee. "I'm a drink-thrower, fuckface. Just don't ever get within 3 feet of me, or you're asking for it." She told herself later — sitting alone in a different bar, fuming — to keep her fury focused on the one who really deserved it, not waste her energy hating the endless parade of apologists who would always be there to shield the villains. It was too draining to maintain outrage at half the world. "Stay focused on the real evil," her mother told her once. "The world's full of distractions, Boo boo. Both the shiny things and the easy targets of outrage. You have to keep your eye on the prize."

Mel stuck to it, vowed that if she ever ran across the so-called Shark at any point, she'd castrate him — literally if possible, metaphorically if necessary. Mel pounds the armrest remembering what Kane did to Nicky Simmons, and who knows how many other women exactly like

her. She was writing speeches for the future governor of California one day, an emotional wreck the next, and all because of Howard Kane.

Mel knows she just found her true motivation for the race. The hell with New Gingrich and the Senate majority, Cliff Barker and the DNC, Kyle Porter, David Wilhelm, Bill and Hillary, and everybody else. She'll come back from 18 points down and humiliate Howard Kane and Dick Musgrove, and if she comes across a way to ruin Kane in the process, she'll seize the opportunity, even if it means losing the election. Whatever it takes, she'll do it.

Mel calls up an image of Kane's face to sharpen her hatred, pictures the slicked-back hair, the beady eyes set deep in his face, the Mephistophelean goatee. She's throwing mental darts at the image when she remembers her first encounter with the son-of-a-bitch, back in college. Jesus, that's right. He gave a guest lecture to one of her classes in political management, and she hated him even then, before she knew.

"Politics is about winning," was the first thing he said. The slight Texas drawl lent the statement a certain air of poetry. "No one who forgets that lasts long in my job."

He paused to let this sink in, scanned the class slowly as he paced the front of the room in jeans and cowboy boots, blue cotton dress shirt open at the collar—the only thing missing was the ten-gallon hat—waiting for some idealistic idiot to dispute his claim. Only there weren't any idealistic students there to defy him. George Washington University's Political Communications program wasn't a place where idealists went. Those dweebs were all over in PoliSci, the Congressional hopefuls, the self-aggrandizing jerks who saw themselves on the Supreme Court some day, the Reaganite Young Republicans sure they would ultimately occupy a governor's chair or run a legislative office as chief of staff, or work in important positions in State or Defense. The PoliCom majors were the people who would get them there, the strategists and pollsters and campaign managers of the future. While the idealistic ones were reading de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, *The Federalist Papers* and Madison's *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention*, the PoliCom students were taking classes in campaign advertising, data analysis, grassroots organizing. Kane was guest lecturing in PC 432: Advanced Campaign Strategy, a course that covered everything from micro-targeting demographic groups to stump-speech writing. The title of Kane's guest lecture was "The Three Essential Keys to Electoral Victory." No one expected a civics lesson or a call to higher principles.

Kane broke the silence at last, repeated his maxim. "Politics is about winning. And once you've won, the next thing you do is win again. Then again. And again. Because that's the only way to get something done in American politics. You have to not only win elections, you have to *keep* winning them. The getting something done, the enacting your agenda and changing people's lives—that's for the politicians." He said *politicians* with an obvious sneer of disdain. "The type of people that *my* type of people put into office. For political professionals such as myself, and for some of you someday, winning is all there is. Ever. Doing good—that's what someone else does with your victories. That's why you bring them their victories, like a mother bird feeding her young. Without the nourishment of victory, the politician starves, and whatever good he might've done dies with him."

Mel could tell that Kane loved this part, the moment after he likened politicians to innocent, hungry birds and himself to the caring but ruthless mother bird. He was there to tell them the truth, not inspire them to a higher calling in public service. The pens were going a mile a minute, the 25 or so juniors and seniors in the room hunched over their notebooks, capturing every syllable of Kane's wisdom.

"If you're interested in doing good, you should close your notebook and head on out, save yourself an hour of your life. Don't be embarrassed. I won't be insulted. The world needs do-gooders—I won't ever say it doesn't—but I'm here today to talk about winning a political campaign, not making the world a better place." Again the sneer of disdain. Kane scanned the room a second time to see if anyone would raise an objection. Mel figured he usually spoke to political science classes—GWU's Political Communication program was the only one of its kind at the time—where he was sure to run into some tall Midwestern presidential hopeful ready to stake out the moral high ground and call out the ugly cynicism of Kane's enterprise. No one in Mel's class took the bait. No hands went up. No notebooks were closed in self-righteous indignation. When the silence had gone on for maybe a full minute, Kane nodded his head, leaned back against the desk.

"Good. Okay. Nobody has any illusions. Let me start by telling you a little about myself. I've been in politics for over three decades, since Harry Truman was president. Yup, that far back. I've worked on everything from city council to Congressional and gubernatorial campaigns. Never had the honor of running a presidential campaign—not yet, but I'll get there. Could be '88, could be '92. I already work in The Show—Senate mostly these days—but presidential is the World Series. I'm patient. So far, my record as chief campaign strategist or campaign manager is 15-and-14, a batting average of .517. Amazing for

professional baseball, even more amazing, believe it or not, for politics. One of the best. But enough about me. What you're here to learn about is winning a political campaign. I'll repeat myself yet again. *Politics is about winning.*"

Kane removed a package of Marlboro's from his shirt pocket, tapped out a cigarette, continued speaking while he lit up. "One of the toughest things about any campaign is keeping your candidate squarely focused on that fundamental truth. Sometimes your biggest obstacle in politics is the politicians themselves. I'm completely serious. This is something you should know about politicians and never forget. The vast majority of them want to do something good for the world. Believe it or not, that's why they go into politics." Kane exhaled, nodding sagely, his face saying, *Yeah, that's what motivates those stupid fucks. Can you believe it?*

"Surprising, isn't it? But that's why they subject themselves and their families to all the bullshit that comes with running for office. Because they *care*. They want to think about policy. They want to talk about values and progress. They want to fix what's wrong with the country and make the world a better place. Sometimes they get so wrapped up in all that do-gooder mumbo-jumbo that they forget that you have to win elections—and keep on winning them—if you want to accomplish any of that stuff. I'll repeat this point. In politics, only the winners get to make a difference. The losers go back to defending criminals, or selling cars, or running a chain of funeral homes or pest control businesses, whatever stupid shit they were doing in the private sector. Without victory, someone else gets to decide what's good. Someone else gets to make the future."

He took a deep drag, exhaled with obvious relish, narrowed his eyes and peered through the smoke at the classroom of acolytes eating up his wisdom. "Here's another surprising thing. Winning elections doesn't come naturally to most politicians. Winning elections—that's what the professionals are for. If politicians were good at winning elections, they wouldn't need people like me." He thrust out his chest in pride, or tried to anyway. His taut beer gut led the way instead, and to Mel, if no one else in the room, he seemed comical suddenly, an insecure wreck pretending to be tough and cynical. She kept writing down what he said, but her awe disappeared, just as it would for every confident-seeming man she'd come across over the ensuing decade. They all revealed their inner loser eventually, usually sooner rather than later. The more they bloviated, the more obvious to Mel how deeply they feared exposure as a terrified, unconfident child. She saw it all the time.

"So how do you win a political campaign? The most crucial factor is information—possessing it, using it correctly, controlling its flow. Write down that one word and underline it three times: Information."

Kane stopped and nodded as 25 pens scratched out the word, hands bearing down on paper as everyone obeyed his command. Information. Always a bit of a rebel, Mel put a box around it instead of underlining it three times as everyone else did.

"The next crucial factor is expertise. You need to know how to acquire reliable information, how to utilize that information effectively, how to control its flow through your own campaign as much as through the news media. And just as importantly—no, *more* importantly—you need access to other people who know how to do these things, because you can never do it all yourself. You have to be good at everything—I mean that—but you also have to surround yourself with people who are even better than you at particular tasks. You need a top-notch speechwriter, a top-notch pollster, a top-notch strategist, the smoothest press secretary you can find, the most organized chief of staff. Hell, you even need the best secretaries, the best coffee-fetching interns. Politics is a team sport, people. Write that down too."

Kane smiled as the class frantically wrote down everything he said. He paused to let them catch up.

"The third crucial factor, you won't be surprised to hear, is money. But I mention money *last*, not first, because money in politics, as everywhere, is simply a means to an end. Without money, you can't buy the information and expertise you need to win. Without money, the most you'll have—and this is only in the very best of cases, so you should never enter a campaign expecting to have this—the most you'll have is ideas and charisma, and that's not nearly enough to win in politics. Not today, not ever. So yes, you need the very best fundraisers too, and it helps to have a candidate with deep pockets, but don't ever think that money buys you victory. It's the *sine qua non* of victory, but even if you've got a ten-to-one margin in fundraising over your opponent, you still have to know how to use that money to buy the information and expertise that win elections."

Kane paused again, scanned the room with satisfaction, let the pens catch up once more.

"Everything else is just strategy. I can give you some basic tips on strategy, but this is where the real art of campaigning comes in. You have to make up your strategy as you go along. That's what all that information, expertise, and money is for—to develop and deploy a winning strategy—but exactly what that strategy is will always be

contextual and highly dynamic. It'll be vastly different from campaign to campaign, from week to week sometimes, so even if you're a master at the high-level stuff, like I am, you still have to study the situation like a motherfucker." Kane turned to the professor. "Can I say 'motherfucker' in a college classroom?"

The students laughed for the first time. The professor smiled.

"I think you just did. Twice." The students laughed again.

At the meet-and-greet afterwards, Mel overheard a fellow student ask Kane why he was a Republican. "Do you honestly think the Republican agenda is better than the Democratic agenda?"

Kane chortled like an amused Texas oil baron, put his hand on the guy's shoulder and said, "Son, being a Republican is the only way you can be utterly ruthless. People value that in a Republican. They expect it. It smacks of competitiveness, frontiersmanship, results. Republican candidates, they'll let you do pretty much whatever you want as long as you get 'em a win. Democrats, not so much. Democrats *want* to be ruthless, but they have to tiptoe around it, look like they care about the little guy, about principles and civility. You run the campaign of a Republican, and you don't have to take off the gloves at any point because the gloves are always off, right from the get-go."

Kane turned to the professor. "Chalfont, why the hell are you a *Democrat*? Never made sense to me, you being such a cold-blooded prick and all." Kane's tone was admiring, as though he'd just said, *You're about the most wonderful human being I've ever come across.*

Mel remembers being appalled when the professor, whom she'd always admired for his liberal principles as much as his practical brilliance, admitted he wasn't really a Democrat – not in his bones. He said the Democratic Party was no more of a natural home to him than the Buffalo Bills were to O.J. Simpson. He was a Democrat because he'd gotten caught up in the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley – "the chicks were just simply amazing" – then he was drafted by the Democrats after college, and they never traded him. He worked for Democratic candidates because they kept paying him, and he knew how to mobilize and motivate their constituencies. "If I'd ever been in a country club before I turned 25, I could've been a helluva Republican," he said, clinking his glass with Kane as though they'd just made a sweet deal to drill for oil on the last plot of fertile land on the last Indian reservation.

And so another idol fell, eventually leading Mel to stop seeking role models in the first place, at least among men. They were all self-serving dickweeds, the principled-seeming ones worse in the end than the blatantly mercenary.

Mel remembers watching Kane drape his arm over the professor's shoulder—both of them obviously pretty drunk at that point—grinning at the admission. "It's not too late, my friend. You're always welcome in the Party of Lincoln."

"Thanks, Kane. The Party of Jefferson, sadly, wouldn't touch you with a 10-foot pole. He's right about the ruthlessness thing," the prof confided as the group of student admirers leaned in closer—all males, Mel noticed. "That's one of our built-in disadvantages. Hasn't stopped us from controlling Congress for the past 30 years, but it makes the climb a bit steeper."

Mel walked away, not sure if she was disgusted or not. A touch disillusioned maybe, but that was hardly a new feeling. The process had started freshman year, her intro to political communications class making it abundantly clear that style would always trump substance in terms of swaying the public. She accepted the necessity of such a cynical operating principle—*To get anything done in politics, you have to win first*, she told herself all the time, not realizing she was paraphrasing what she would hear Kane say 3 years later—and now that she was this far into the program, she understood pretty clearly what she was getting into with her chosen profession. Most of her classmates would've gladly taken a job with either party after graduation, worked their asses off to elect any candidate who paid. Mel always assumed she'd go Democratic, but she knew she was prepping to be a gun-for-hire—that much was more clear now than ever. If she was good at it—and she already suspected that she was, top 10% at the very least—the Republicans might make her a lucrative offer. Would she balk, simply out of principle?

Mel never had to find out. Professor Chalfont helped get her a job that summer doing mid-level staff work at the DNC—an actual paying job, not an internship—and her career as a Democrat was locked in.

Thinking back on it now, Mel wonders if she wouldn't have been happier working for the other side. At least she wouldn't have had to be terminally disappointed, watching the men she helped get elected do little or nothing to advance a progressive agenda. She wouldn't expect a Republican to do any good in the first place, so she could just walk away after election day and never check the paper see if anything had come of her efforts. If the RNC had hired her instead...

Mel pulls off her glasses, rubs her eyes to erase the memories and doubts. *There's no place for ifs in the life you've chosen*, she says to herself. Besides, you probably would've had to work under Kane at some point if you'd gone red instead of blue. However sexist a lot the Dems were, at least they weren't rapists—not literally, anyway. Not a very

inspiring motto—We're not actual rapists like the other guys—but it was enough for Mel at this point in her life. And whether it was enough or not, it's where she found herself at the moment, jetting to Ohio to face down Kane from 18 points behind. She lets the thought of overcoming such a massive deficit charge her up for what lay ahead.

"I'm gunning for you, you fucking asshole," Mel whispers to the empty window seat, imagining Kane sitting there to hear it. "I'm going to win, and when I do, I'm going to grind out my victory cigarette on your forehead."

"Excuse me, miss." Mel pivots to the stewardess, wondering how loud she was. "Please close your tray tables and buckle your seatbelt. We'll be landing shortly."