

# DYING DECLARATION

*Confessions of a President*



By C. Scott Tripp



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The writing of this novel was a dream that took ten years, on and off, to realize. Those ten years were ones in which we raised three children, were blessed with and began to raise another, and in which I finished my doctorate, got my first real job, and bought our first house. This proved to be a tumultuous time in the life of our family, but through it all—the good times and the bad—the dream was always there in the background. This was also a tumultuous time in the life of our nation, and as the events that feature so prominently in the novel were overshadowed by events in the real world, I would stop working on the book for long stretches of time to see how the stuff of history would unfold. We've been through a lot in the last decade—a presidential impeachment, a disputed election, the tragic and barbaric terror attacks of September 11, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But through it all, though it required a slight retooling of the book, the basic premise in the novel was still sound, was still relevant. The basic idea of the book was conceived after the funeral of President Richard Nixon in 1994. During that time and the years that followed, we as a nation struggled with our identity and our morality, through the moral struggles of our leaders. A great debate ensued on the meaning of character in our leaders and—through a contemplation of the similarities and differences between the then-sitting president, William J. Clinton, and the ex-president being laid to rest in Yorba Linda, California—I conceived of a novel comparing leaders from different generations. Only through the long gaze of history can we accurately judge the character of our leaders—and thus ourselves. This book thus owes much to those two historical figures, as well as those other historical figures who have played such a major role in our recent history. This is a fictional account, and it is customary to disclaim that the characters and events in a work of fiction have more than a coincidental similarity with those in the real world. But it is drawn from the same tapestry as recent events and represents what I believe is a reasonable if rather chilling extrapolation of those events.

*Dedicated to my wife, Julie Anne,*

*who has put up with the shortcomings of a dreamer  
capable of being preoccupied enough to write a book*

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### PROLOGUE

The hearing room emptied out slowly, the wire reporters and administration staffers and the few morbidly interested members of the public milling to network and finish scribbling their notes. Eventually they shuffled out in time for the next political drama down the hall. When all the cameras had been turned off, the senators somberly marched into the cloakroom behind the semicircular bench on the dais, the flag flapping in their wake. Half an hour had passed and the armed Capitol Police had abandoned their sentry before the oversized wooden panel doors when one man entered the chamber through the cloakroom doors.

A second man was waiting in the shadows, having slipped back in as soon as the guards left their post. He was dark-skinned, vaguely Middle Eastern in appearance, but not sufficiently foreign-looking to generate much interest. He could have been just one of thousands of visitors, lobbyists, and diplomats who trudged through the sprawling halls on Capitol Hill each day; the bustling, self-absorbed cadence didn't skip so much as a heartbeat to notice him. He was dressed in a dark brown suit, a cream-colored handkerchief sticking out of his pocket. Strange the details that a man noticed on such occasions.

*Here is the first installment,* the second man started. His melodious voice was vaguely tinged with an urbane and nondescript accent that could have been from anywhere between the Mediterranean and the Himalayas. He removed a small manila envelope from the breast pocket of his blazer, and dropped it on the nearest cherry-wood table. It was thick, bulging with papers.

*Is it all there?* the second man drawled.

*Half now. Half later, after the President approves the shipment.*

A brief wave of darkness crossed the second man's face, the hurt indignation of one used to holding the reins of power in this town. A furrow of rage crossed his handsome features and then disappeared, like the slightest tremor in the earth, one that wouldn't even have rattled the china. He smiled the grimace of a predator and smoothed his voice as he regained his composure and put on the face he used for the cameras.

*This is not what we agreed to,* he growled.

*This is just survival, nothing personal. We know you can deliver much, but this being an election year and all.... The political equations are different, very difficult to predict. I'm sure that someone of your vast experience appreciates the value of insurance.*

*This is not acceptable. You will not do this again.*

*Don't forget who you are dealing with, who owns whom.*

This time the urbane voice had an edge, accented by a finger jabbed in the chest. Both knew they were playing an elaborate chess game, one in which neither could be allowed to check the other. And so they circled like bobcats and traded the occasional pawn. One had a career and a life of power that would immediately be wrecked if their little game came to light, personal stakes that were immeasurable. The other had the leverage of the most highly placed mole in the United States government that a foreign power had ever had.

*I cannot guarantee anything. This President does not believe in selling arms to the Third World. It violates his pacifist sentiments.*

The voice was tinged with sarcasm bordering on contempt.

*He is a fool. But he is weak and vacillating. His principles can be overcome if*

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*you will only exert pressure.*

*These things are complicated. We pushed through the arms shipment to Israel only because he cannot afford to alienate certain factions within his own party. We will not be able to gain approval from this administration for the Yemenite deal—there are no champions for this cause and it will look like we're encouraging an arms race. There has been much criticism of this from member of my party.*

Everyone knew how these games of statecraft worked. This President was a man who was very squeamish about the use of military power, who did not understand and therefore had misused and now had learned to fear its awesome potential. Such a man cried over the graves of anyone killed by the exercise of that might, agonized over a single casualty of war. The only war he would pursue would be one he was led to believe would be a victimless one. He did not have the stomach for the darker side of statecraft, and there was no place in his world for arms dealers, weapons trading, and geopolitical gamesmanship.

The Administration had, however, been hounded into approving a shipment of F-18A Hornets to Israel, after the latest collapse of Middle Eastern peace talks. Of course, to preserve the balance of power they had had to approve a similar request from the Saudis. Nothing would be worse than destabilizing the world situation, so the inevitable result was that the arms policy was to build each side up equally. This foreign policy—or lack thereof—was to sell modern weaponry to both sides without regard for ideology or security or national interest, as long as the balance was maintained, but now even the president recognized the folly of continuing this policy in such a powder keg. This was the kind of blind arms race that had allowed the Iran-Iraq War to escalate to such deadly proportions. This President was one of little convictions save survival and political expediency, and so thrashed about in the tug-of-war between the liberal pacifists to whom any weapons deal was a bad one and the pro-Israel and pro-Arab constituencies that he continually courted. A man who has no solid convictions worth taking a stand for is one who continually tries to please everyone and ends up pleasing no one, the second man ruminated to himself.

But this atmosphere had allowed the administration to evolve into the main broker in a lucrative and clandestine arms trade, one that some both here and abroad had learned to use to their advantage.

*He will sell to us because he sold to the Saudis. He sold to the Saudis because he sold to the Israelis.*

*Maybe...maybe not. It's not that simple. He wilts under the growing controversy, and his pacifist tendencies will eventually predominate. I know the man—he shamelessly courts both sides but at heart he despises the weapons trade. That side of his nature will eventually win out, especially when the media latches onto what he's doing.*

He was a man who prided himself of understanding others, had used his natural instincts well throughout his career.

*He has not the stomach to stand up to any kind of pressure. We just have to exert more pressure than the other side. Let him be accused of prejudice and intolerance towards our clients and he will crumble and give us our way.*

The President was a man who hated conflict, domestic or foreign, and would try as hard to avoid conflict at home as much as war overseas. Subject him to criticism and demagoguery and he would cave in nine times out of ten. To their clients he was a mere lump of clay who would yield in the direction of maximum force.

*There is a presidential election in two years. Wait until then and there will be a new administration. One that is likely to be more sympathetic to your cause. The*

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powerful man shrugged, trying to mollify his visitor.

*We cannot wait that long and take that risk. There must be another way.*

*There is no other way. If you want the planes, you need to let me work it. I know how this town works, how to get things done. But this town works slowly, even if you know how to grease the machinery. Things take time, cajoling, persuasion.* Takes the kind of skill that you can only have access to in me, he didn't say, but the thought was communicated nonetheless. The visitor nodded thoughtfully.

*You Americans all talk alike. Everything is complicated to you. You lack principles.*

*We don't believe in rushing in and blowing things up whenever things don't turn out how we want. We believe in subtlety.*

*You Americans are soft. Let you experience what we have experienced and you'll be motivated by something other than greed or your own selfish comfort. Then you will know what it's like to have to act out of desperation.*

They were silent for a moment, looking at each other coolly across the table. They might as well have been thousands of miles apart, for their minds worked in two different worlds, world that were centuries apart, worlds that the other could never fully understand.

*Let me tell you something,* the dark-skinned foreigner said, jabbing his finger into the powerful man's chest again. *There is another way, something you Americans have all too little experience with. There is more than one way to—how do they say? Skin a cat?*

*What do you mean?* Now it was the American who was uneasy.

*We do not need to simply sit by and wait till the next election. This man is an impediment to our grand schemes.*

*What are you suggesting? If you are suggesting assassinating—*

*Nothing so dramatic. This man's weakness is also the key to his undoing. We can turn the course of the next election to guarantee that the new occupant in the White House is more... amenable to our interests.*

*How so?*

The visitor flashed his teeth pleasantly and described a scenario that would be triggered by his contacts overseas, a scenario designed to trap the president in an international crisis from which his psychological profile indicated he would be unable to extricate himself. They would paralyze him as was done by the Ayatollah during the Carter Administration.

Immediately, the powerful man shifted his eyes and grimaced, letting his urbane veneer fade for a split second.

*I don't want anyone to get hurt.*

*Now you are talking like that fool of a President.*

*No American deaths. We will not sacrifice my countrymen for such a calculating scheme. He can fend for himself, deserves whatever demise is awaiting him. But no American body bags—that is one thing that I must insist on.*

The visitor spat on the floor with contempt.

*So, you have scruples after all? This is an elaborate play. No one need get hurt...unless he acts foolishly. Then the blood will be on his head.*

Do you have the stomach for such a task? he wondered to himself.

Hesitantly, the man extended his hand and they shook on the agreement and the foreigner slipped out through the main doors. The powerful man ran his coarse fingers through his thinning hair, straightened his tie, and exited through the cloakroom door.

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Back in his own office in the Dirksen Building, he closed the door to his private office and slit open the envelope. A wad of five hundred dollar bills fanned out across his desk, one hundred thousand dollars total. A sheaf of checks also tumbled out, each one for a crisp thousand dollars, each one signed by a different dead constituent with an account in the same offshore bank. The total bundle was worth two hundred fifty thousand dollars. And the other half would be delivered as soon as the President signed the appropriations bill.

Outside, the foreigner stopped in the cafeteria for a cup of espresso, bumping into a gentleman in a dark suit and cowboy boots. They mumbled to each other for a few minutes and then parted company. He had been sitting in the back of the hearing room during the testimony, and had been there when the committee voted to release the appropriations to the Committee of the Whole. Upon the final rapping of the gavel, he'd slipped out before anyone could notice him. Now he observed the dark-skinned foreigner through cold black eyes and trailed him out of the building. He trailed him to a waiting car with diplomatic license plates and hailed a cab. He followed the car as far as the gates of the Syrian Embassy, and there made the cab wait for a brief moment, thinking and smiling to himself as he drew back his graying hair into a ponytail. He exited from the cab a few blocks later and walked the rest of the way to his luxury room at the Mayflower Hotel. The dusk gathered as the streetlights and monument floodlights turned on. It was time to set his grand plans into motion.

The capital of the political world was a well-greased political machine. The machinery hummed and throbbed, grinding inexorably but painfully slowly. It ground silently, its innermost workings hidden and cloaked in darkness. Other deals were made in dark conference rooms, cloakrooms, taverns, and limousines. The machinery ground on, scarcely slowing its pulse in the gathering gloom as the country went about its normal business.

Five hundred miles away, there was a silent plague spreading in the dark recesses of a human body, a single microscopic spot on the surface of the man's liver. He was now an old man and had lived a full life. He went about his daily routine, the miniscule blastula of diseased cells beginning to spread, growing slowly at first like a curling wisp of flame just beginning to smoke. It was rapidly fanned into a creeping malignant tumor. As it grew small clusters of cells detached themselves and began to spread through the bloodstream, taking root in other organs like the colonies of a particularly expansionist empire. By the time it would manifest itself in bloody stools and severe cramps in the gut, half the battle would be over. But now it was a silent killer, stalking its victim with feline stealth.

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### BOOK I

*Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:*

*In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened,*

*And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:*

*Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.*

*Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.*

*Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.*

Eccl. 12:1-8

*I met a traveler from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed,  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Percy Bysshe Shelly, *Ozymandias*

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### CHAPTER ONE Rites of Passage

Sometimes the true meaning of one's life is not apparent till the shadow of death lengthens over a man's soul. The shadow was lengthening in the twilight of the long life of David Allen Stockton. Though the ink was nearly dry in the last chapter of the book of his life (its pages filled with bittersweet memories now rendered as insubstantial as ghosts in his fevered brain), and though he now saw the true shape of things clearly for the first time, he had few regrets. It was ironic that a man had to come to the end before he learned life's hard lessons, he rued. One of his few regrets was that he would not live long enough to see the birth of his niece—the other he had committed to paper to make amends for the transgressions he had committed, a dying confessional his last epistle to the world. David Stockton lay on a king-sized bed in a musty, subdued room filled with antique mahogany furniture, plush carpet, and velvet curtains a deep shade of green. A breeze was gently blowing through the half-opened window and billowing the curtain inward like a sail. The sound of it reminded him vaguely of the distant sound of galloping horses and the memories of his long-vanished childhood. The breeze brought with it the sweet smell of lilacs that grew in fragrant bunches just beyond the window. Thus he insisted on having the sash thrown up even though he was struggling to stay warm beneath a multitude of blankets, the physical warmth of a late spring day competing with the chill of imminent death. He looked down at his once-powerful body lying wasted beneath the sheets, dissolved by the ravages of cancer.

He drifted in and out of consciousness under the influence of oxygen deprivation and morphine, mercifully escaping the cruelest final throes of the disease. He focused in his lucid moments on the ticking grandfather clock across the room from his bed, and on the purple clusters of lilacs that bounced in and out of sight in the evening breeze beyond the window frame. Once upon an earlier and happier life the clock had been a wedding present from his mother, handed down from the generations that he would soon join in eternity. It seemed a headlong rush after a the span of his lifetime. The season was late spring—he could not remember if Memorial Day had come and gone yet—and he knew that before the violet flowers wilted away he would be gone. From where he lay they appeared they fresh and long-lived, though some of the blooms were already browning and curling up.

David Allen Stockton was a former President of the United States, and he was dying of liver cancer that had metastasized to all his major organs except his brain and had turned him into a gaunt shadow of his former self. The cancer had risen from deep within his treasonous flesh like some daemonic progeny born in a sacrilegious version of the Immaculate Conception, a betrayal born of his own body. He imagined death stalking him silently, not revealing itself with a dull ache between his ribs and blood in his urine until it had already started to spread. Somehow it seemed both unfair and unsporting. What political enemies could not do the cancer now did, robbing him of his dignity and rendering the once powerful and lofty man unable to eat alone or use the bathroom by himself.

He had been a naval officer, a state senator, governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and finally Chief Executive of the United States and in retirement a renowned statesman. But in death he was treated to the same indignities and infirmities as any other man. Death alone dealt with him the same as other men, and for that he respected it as he never had the sycophants who congregated around him while he was at the top of his career. That it met him as a master—or even on equal terms—could not be said of many others.

Recognizing his great stature, the entire nation had participated in the deathwatch that had been going on for the last few weeks. There was a constant flow of citizens as well as foreign supporters along the sidewalk that ran in front of his beloved mansion; he could see

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them from his balcony window when he was strong enough to sit up. There were even some erstwhile opponents and detractors who'd come to express their concern, much to his pleasant surprise. The throngs brought wreaths and flowers and get-well cards, and left them before the gate or enmeshed in the wrought-iron fence. Celebrity well-wishers appeared on the morning news shows to offer encouragement. Occasionally, he would ask to be wheeled across the hallway so that he could see the crowds, but lately the pain of his distended liver kept him in bed. There was an eternal vigil of television cameras and reporters as the world held its breath and waited for him to die. He alone seemed to wait impatiently.

They shed tears for him that he'd long since stopped shedding for himself, and worst of all they brought words of false hope in an effort to lift his spirits. *Why is it that no one can admit the truth except myself? Why can't they just face the inevitable?* he often thought to himself. It was just as well that he could no longer see them, for he preferred to face death alone with his memories, here in his inner sanctum.

The memories came to him unbidden but mostly welcome: his first date in high school, going to the state football championship with his high school team, his first car (a black gas-guzzling convertible that he had wrapped around a tree), pledging with his fraternity buddies, his commissioning as an ensign in the U.S. Navy. He remembered his aging mother weeping the morning he'd shipped off to Korea, and when he reached California he watched the harbor dwindle away in the distance and wondering if he'd ever see her or home again. He remembered the hot blood gushing over the deck of the aged wooden landing ship he piloted when it was ambushed off the coast in the Sea of Japan. His second-in-command drove the ship all the way back to their task force, taking shells all along the way. He remembered spending much of the rest of the war recovering in a cheap hospital in Manila. His mother had intervened with the senior senator and gotten him reassigned to the deck crew on an aircraft carrier. His taskforce spent much of the rest of the war supporting bombing raids and patrolling the coastline, but the North Korean supply lines drove further and further south and his buddies tried to stem the tide with one arm shackled behind their backs by the civilians. He remembered spending the majority of his tour pulling airmen out of burning fighters, the smell of tar and oil and burning flesh still in his nostrils. In more recent and pleasant memories he recalled meeting his departed Millie at a church barbecue, and bouncing his newborn daughters on his knees, and still later watching them giggle as they chased their golden retriever down the august corridors of first the governor's mansion and then the White House. He recalled weddings, anniversaries, births, baptisms, and funerals, the signposts along the winding course of his life. There were fierce battles in arenas military, political, and business. These memories swirled around him like a ghostly dervish more and more these days. There was love and hate, jubilation and sorrow.

On balance he thought the good outweighed the bad, and that was something that could not be said for everyone. For this he was more grateful than for anything else, that the blessings outweighed the disappointments. The saddest thing was that he would not live to see his niece brought into the world in the next month, or ever meet his grandchildren, but that could not be helped. If he more than broke even he had been more fortunate than many men.

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The wood-paneled door opened softly and the ghostly images receded from his mind. Esther MacMillan had been his live-in housekeeper for thirty years, a tall and patrician widow who maintained her elegance and quiet grace though across the decades though she was now wrinkled and bowed with age. She had once been a strawberry blonde with flawless fair skin, but now had hair that was a snowy white. She entered the room slowly carrying a tray of toast, sliced cantaloupe, and hot tea. Since undergoing chemotherapy, anything much heavier

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gave him severe nausea, especially dairy products for some reason he didn't understand. Though he had been off the chemical drip for several weeks, the effects lingered as a cruel reminder—a situation exacerbated by the obstruction of his duodenum. This was another cruel manifestation of the cancer that was now migrating south from his liver into his bowels.

She set the tray before him with considerable grace, despite her arthritis. Lately she was unsure whether she would find him lucid when she checked in on him.

"Are you comfortable, sir?" she asked gently in her crisply enunciated, aristocratic voice.

She wrung her swollen hands as his eyes cleared and gradually swam into focus. He tried to speak but instead of words there was just a croak like the metallic rasp of unlubricated machinery. With trembling hands he took a drink of the black tea.

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances, Esther," he finally managed. The once-sonorous baritone was rendered strangely mucous through the liquid that was pooling into his lungs, and the brief exchange set off a short coughing fit. He managed a weak smile that collapsed in exhaustion.

"Let me straighten those pillows for you," she offered.

He sat forward as much as possible and she fussed over the pillows for a few minutes, anxious to

busy herself in whatever futile gestures she imagined would relieve his discomfort. He pretended that it made all the difference in the world.

"Could you bring me the morning paper, please?" he asked.

"The Globe or the Herald?"

"Both."

"Certainly, Mister Stockton." Though addressed as Mr. President by most of the populace, she still referred to him as she had since before he'd been in the Statehouse. She retrieved the folded papers from the cherrywood buffet that lay against the far wall and placed them gently on top of the covers. "Will that be all, sir?" she asked uncertainly. He nodded and she retreated to polish the hardwood floors, or launder the soiled bedsheets downstairs, or whatever she did while he waited to die. She shut the heavy oak door behind her. Laboriously he chewed his food as though it were a well-done steak. The sun slowly faded from the windows and the sky turned a deep, bruised shade of purple.

He gradually drifted off to sleep, the only light coming from the glowing monitors that were clustered uselessly about his bed, able to observe but not slow his demise.

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David Stockton dreamed restlessly for the next few hours, dreaming of himself in the cold dark hospital breathing oxygen from a device that reminded him of an antique gas mask. The cold, metallic oxygen rushed into his injured lungs with a grating hissing sound and his putrid breath rushed out, filling the clear mask with white mist. There was a tube in his trachea and so many hoses and needles running from his veins that he looked and felt like a fly trapped in a spiderweb. The monitors glared down at him with their baleful green and red lights, recording every tenuous beat of his heart and every ragged breath. In the dream it was the middle of the night and he was turned to his side, watching himself half-enmeshed in the roopy hoses and humming machinery in the black mirror that was the window of his room. The nurse on the midnight shift entered as she always did to change the bedpan and check his vital signs.

"Let me go home," he begged sibilantly.

She shook her head as she always did. "You will die," she said simply and clinically.

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"I will die anyway...I just want to go home, let me go home," he repeated.

He clawed off the oxygen mask. I just want to breathe air against before I die. This is no way for a man to die! Let me die like a man! She sedated him and roughly thrust the oxygen mask back over his face, before slamming the door behind her and leaving him alone in the darkness.

He awoke with a cold sweat, and immediately turned on his side and went back to sleep. This time he dreamed it was the war. There was another mask on his face and he was strapped down, this time in the cockpit of a plummeting fighter jet. There was smoke all around and he tried desperately to land on the carrier, but he was turning around and around, and he could not find the meatball. He could not line up with the swelling deck, was coming in way too steeply. He turned his head stiffly and saw the thick black threads of smoke trailing from the right wing, and he could smell the acrid scent of jet fuel in his burning nostrils. Then the sound was louder than anything he'd ever heard, felt the hot wave of pressure tear through his body. The jet crashed down in a shower of sparks and flipped over, flames spreading through the cockpit. He called for those who would hose down the aircraft and pull him from the burning metal, as he had done to so many airmen, but his lungs were shut down and all he could do was wheeze. But this time he needed rescue and there was no one there to save him.

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The sounds in the foyer mercifully roused him from his nightmares around eight. He tossed aside the forgotten newspaper (he'd barely gotten to glance at the front page before drifting off to sleep) and turned on the lamp as dull footsteps started up the stairs. He heard Esther talking animatedly with a man and a woman. Their tones and cadences he knew well although he could not make out the words through the thick blanket of the door. There was some nervous laughter, the sort of attempted mirth mixed with heartache that nearly always ends in choked sobbing. He glanced in the black window next to his bed and was immediately sorry, as the sunken eyes and fallen cheeks surprised and dismayed even him. The heavy door opened as Stephen and Erica entered. David embraced his oldest daughter warmly as best he could and motioned them over. Her husband Stephen pulled over two chairs from the antique desk in the corner.

Erica Williamson was dressed in a navy business suit and long black overcoat, devoid of all jewelry and ornamentation except a string of pearls and her plain gold wedding band. She wore little makeup on her swarthy skin and seemed to exude subdued coolness through all her pores. Her wavy raven hair was shoulder-length and her thin, angular features gave her a—somewhat deservedly—haughty appearance that was accented by her dark brown eyes. They were deep and piercing, shining with a bold intelligence and cool rationalism. Her skin was tanned and healthy and she had her father's imposing square jaw and fiery temperament. Though few considered her beautiful she had a certain radiant hauteur and an understated, statuesque beauty. She exuded charisma and self-confidence that with her striking features tended to intimidate men around her.

Stephen was a diametric opposite in appearance and temperament. He had thin blond hair that was fading into history and a broad, youthful face with owlish wire-framed glasses, and he wore a rumpled Oxford shirt, faded khakis, and loafers. He was laid-back and gregarious, with a slightly devilish grin and casually disheveled demeanor. David often thought he looked more like a beach bum than a self-employed businessman, and he wondered not for the first time how they had wound up together. His was the earnest informality of California entrepreneur, hers the stately demeanor of New England Yankee.

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"Sorry we were late tonight," Erica said in her husky voice, "I had to work late at the office yet again." She huffed impatiently.

He nodded dismissively as though he never worried when she was late.

"So how are you, Father?" She asked this with uncharacteristic tenderness.

"I'm doing just great," he said, trying to sound upbeat.

"Liar," she whispered, gently wiping away tears.

Suddenly the weariness showed through as he coughed and attempted to sit up. "You're right, of course. I don't think it will be long now...I suppose I can't protect you from the truth forever, can I?" he asked, wiping her moist cheek with one gaunt claw.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," she replied.

"How would you like me to talk?" he asked merrily.

She paced around the bed for a minute, her brow furrowed in thought. "I don't know," she finally replied, "either you are all sunshine and trying to hide how sick you really are, or you're talking about going to see Mother and Gramps and talking about what kind of service you want...". Her voice cracked and she turned to the window so he couldn't see the wetness on her cheeks.

She wandered back after a few moments and sat on the edge of the bed. He squeezed her hand. "Some days are better than others."

"There's more to it than that, Father," she said with disdain.

"You're my little girl and I have to protect you."

"That's your stubborn streak showing through. You can't fool me." She looked deep into his eyes before answering in a lower tone. "Have you ever had to protect me from *anything* before?"

They looked at each other for a moment before he admitted defeat, and they both smiled. Stephen just shook his head in bemusement; both of them were notoriously stubborn and when they were at loggerheads it was like the deafening clash of bull moose. Amusing to watch but you better stay out of their way if you didn't want to get trampled.

"How's business?" he asked abruptly.

"Good...," she said, aware and relieved that they were changing the subject. "We closed a major account today—signed an up-and-coming sports manufacturing firm for a long-term contract. They make basketballs and softballs mostly, feeling bullish after acquiring a southeastern rubber manufacturer. We lobbied them hard."

"You were the first ones on the scene after the merger?" he asked.

"Yeah. We have our ways," she said simply.

"That's my girl," he said in admiration.

"Well, I should qualify that...we can't take all the credit. The old man's getting rash in his old age, but he's still got it."

"How so?" David asked.

"Harrington kind of stipulated that he could get a big basketball star from the NBA to do the celebrity endorsements. 'Erica, my dear,' he said, 'I know you can take care of it.' Caught us all off guard."

"Set up a high stakes game and expected you to put it all together, eh?"

"You bet."

Erica was a rising star in an East Coast advertising firm, renowned both for her ruthless industriousness and raw intensity. She could melt down the toughest negotiators over lunch with her icy stare and talent for silence, something most people could not long endure (a technique she learned from her father and the diplomatic corps). She made no bones about the fact that she thought her boss was going senile and trying to build the company up before his idiot son took over and destroyed it. Erica was also an accomplished marksman and equestrian, and often made the circuits lecturing to civic and political organizations. The same

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qualities that made her executive material made her a captivating speaker and opened doors at the Statehouse. She was a well-recognized figure on Beacon Hill and in the Boston papers. She routinely lobbied the State Senate on behalf of everyone from gun owners to business groups. Sometimes she'd make a great ambassador, or even a senator, he often thought, though she'd made it clear she didn't care for the Washington scene anymore. She'd been disabused of that growing up in the White House.

David always seemed genuinely impressed with her accomplishments and never tired of hearing his trail-blazing little girl's latest exploits. Stephen was another matter—strange how opposites did seem to attract after all. He was a successful businessman who had carved out a niche developing encryption software for government agencies, banks, and other clients. He was content to leave the runnings of his firm to his associates, sit back, and let them toil long hours to make him rich while he played tennis and hunted and worked on his many hobbies. He came from lower middle-class roots, his parents blue-collar workers in the mills at Lowell. He retained many of their blue-collar tastes except tennis and sports cars. Where he was laid-back, she was reserved; he was beer and she was champagne. Somehow he and the old man maintained an amiable relationship, though sometimes it dismayed Stephen how much the old codger was *so* like his daughter. Deep down they had affection for each other and thought that they complemented and moderated each other well.

"Tell me a little about the contract," David demanded.

Although she struggled to smile and be enthusiastic for her father's sake, her worry showed through her brave facade. Over the course of the last several weeks, he had stopped fighting and acquired the blissful serenity of someone who'd laid down his arms before the inevitable and knew the end was near. He'd begun to speak more freely about those loved ones he had lost, as though death were a trifling matter, and had begun to discuss his wishes for the funeral and burial. It was almost as though he were planning a particularly grim cruise vacation, it seemed to her. He ought not be so blasé about the whole affair. She'd seen this in many older people she'd known, the calm come over them when they finally surrendered themselves to death.

She could hardly bear this wistful tone in his voice, but she began to warm to her subject after a while.

"Father," she said—for she hadn't called him the more familiar *Dad* since she'd been a little girl—"Business has been good this year. We raised record profits in the second quarter," she said.

"I'll bet it's all due to your, ah - your fierce animal spirit, heh?"

She blushed. "Oh, you give me too much credit. It was a team effort."

"Pah! You sell yourself short. I always knew I raised a trouper," he beamed, "Tell me a little about the new contract."

"Oh, it's nothing much, Father," she demured, "A major Massachusetts-based sporting goods manufacturer--baseballs, hockey pucks, precision golf clubs, that sort of thing--just cemented a long-term contract with a large rubber producer down South. Should dramatically cut overhead costs, and they were both looking to expand operations. They're very bullish and want to start an aggressive ad campaign in anticipation of increased profits. So we've been wining and dining some Knicks and Celtics players in hopes of signing a celeb to represent their products. You know, the usual behind-the-scenes stuff that we want to keep from our competitors so we're the only ones wining-and-dining them." She added curtly.

David nodded. He knew a large part of his daughter's business was entertaining potential clients as well as trying to woo big-name sponsors. Not much different than politics really, with all the wheeling and dealing in back rooms and over power lunches—just a slightly different arena. That was all part of the game.

"So, how are things otherwise?"

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"Well, to be perfectly honest, Father, work doesn't leave me much time for a personal life."

"Ah, yes, well... You should try to keep things in their proper balance. Your work isn't everything. I found that out too late in life."

"You say that all the time," she reminded him, shaking her head.

"Sorry if I'm repeating myself, my memory isn't so good these days. I just don't want my little girl to get too burned out. So what have you been doing, outside of the office, I mean. Indulge me."

"Oh, not much. Went out to the track for a while last weekend. Took Blackfoot out for a trot around the grounds."

"Must've felt good. You haven't had much chance to get out much," he said, obviously referring thoughtfully to the endless hours she'd spent beside his deathbed. "How is business with you, Stephen?"

"The usual stuff," Stephen allowed, shrugging. "Haven't been to the office for meetings in a couple of weeks - they're a bore and seldom accomplish anything. Flew down to Washington last week though. I met with some senior staffers at the Pentagon and gave them the hard sell. Only time will tell if we'll get the new contract for the laser-modulated scrambler system - that is, if it survives the budget fight on the Hill. The shop hasn't called me, so I guess things are running along smoothly."

"Very good. Good luck, by the way. We all know how touch-and-go these programs can be.

Congress gets skittish about anything with big sticker shock, especially with an election looming around the corner," replied David. He started coughing violently just then as his words were drowned in the thick mucus that was invading his lungs. He coughed repeatedly as his body was wracked with violent spasms.

"Father, are you all right?" Erica asked softly, with mounting concern.

He sighed. "For now - it'll pass." Just then he started coughing again. He leaned over, summoning

the last few ounces of his strength, and coughed a massive wad of blood into the metal basin on the hospital stand beside his bed. Erica looked on with concern as he collapsed back on the pillows, and immediately sweat erupted on his brow from the exertion.

"Father, maybe we should go now. You don't seem too well tonight. Get some rest."

"Nonsense," croaked David.

She could tell his throat was parched, far dryer than that of any man who hadn't crawled across the desert floor in search of water, so she held up a glass of water for him to sip. His hands were shaking badly now as though he were trying to bench-press a two hundred pound weight instead of hefting a tumbler to his cracked and arid lips. The knuckles started to turn white, the fingernails turning a lurid and deadly shade of blue. It was becoming increasingly clear that as the cancer and pneumonia sapped the last of his strength, it was beginning to affect his circulation, the many-tentacled monster within strangling off his oxygen supply.

"Nonsense," he rattled when enough breath had returned, "I always like to see you, hear how... how things are going. I need to make sure that... that you've started out—I mean, that you've gotten a good, solid foundation in life before I die. And I see that you have." The thought was disjointed, the once-razor sharp mind wandering, but the meaning and the desperation behind it was unmistakable. He started coughing again, and this time there was only a slight foaming of blood around his lips, the kidney-shaped basin now half-filled with crimson-tinged sputum.

"I'm so glad you came to see me tonight," he said, patting her hand, "But I feel myself starting to

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slip...slip away—damned drugs."

"It's all right," she reassured him.

"Just before you came, Esther had to adjust my morphine drip. So sorry."

"Well, Father, I guess we will get going," Erica said, picking up her coat, "I brought you a little something." She remembered suddenly.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Something you bought me as a little girl," she replied, and gave him the locket that he'd given her shortly after her mother had died. On the front was engraved an ornate rose in cameo, and inside was a sepia-tinged photo of her mother. His tears welled up then, remembering that dark day. He recalled kneeling on the floor next to where she sat on the White House couch in her frilly dress, and how he'd held her tiny trembling hands as he explained to her and her sister that their mommy had gone to heaven—she'd been the one to choke back tears that dreary day. "In case you want to remember her for a while...I know you'll be back with her soon." Her voice cracked and she had to turn away, angry at herself for this uncharacteristic display of emotion.

He looked down at the locket through his tears and placed it on the nightstand next to his tumbler, sitting open on its rusted hinges.

"Thank you, my dear. I shall treasure it," he said simply.

"Bye, Father. See you tomorrow. Hopefully you'll feel a little better then. Come on, Stephen."

"Bye, see you tomorrow," he said cheerfully as they walked out. Erica gently closed the heavy oaken door behind her. "See you tomorrow," he echoed softly to the closed door, even though he knew in his heart that this was not to be, that he would never see his little girl again in this lifetime. He sat staring at the door for a long while and then tried to read the paper, but the words kept blurring on the page and running together, and he couldn't concentrate on them long enough to make them stand still. Trying to read the headlines—trying to read anything—was giving him a massive headache. He put the paper down sadly, chagrined that he couldn't even enjoy the one favorite pastime left to him.

Around ten he awoke, shaking as he tried to keep warm.

"Esther," he called hoarsely through the intercom, pressing the buzzer with his shaking thumb.

She came at once. "You called, sir?"

"Esther, you've been a good servant these many years. I'm going to miss you. I wanted you to know how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. You never...signed on to be a nursemaid."

She sighed and looked demurely down, smoothing out her apron to give her fidgeting hands something to do. She was from the old school, and though they shared a deep but platonic bond going back many years, any overt display of affection embarrassed her and went against her patrician mores.

"Well, I see I've embarrassed you," he said, chuckling lightly at her immense discomfort.

"Just one more thing - could you bring me some more blankets? I can't seem able to keep warm."

"Yes, sir," she said, relieved at having the awkward moment interrupted by the task she'd been given.

She paused just a moment before leaving the room. "Sir...t has been a pleasure, to be part of your household these many years."

"Yes, Esther, I thought it had been. And thanks again."

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She went to fetch the blankets, but they weren't enough. They were like the thinnest parchment against the cruel chill of death. Though he was sweating profusely now, he could not stay warm, and his wraith-like body was trembling constantly. It was as though the very blood of him was draining from his ruined body, soaking up all his warmth with it. And no matter how many of the thickest blankets she piled on his bed, it couldn't bring him warmth.

"Esther, the morphine," he croaked through cracked and bleeding lips.

She moved to the medicine tree with its several bags of intravenous drugs, tangles of hoses falling like the tentacles of a jellyfish and snaking to the veins in his arms. She turned up the drip one last time, careful not to open the stopcock too far. This operation always made her feel as though she'd given him too much, even though his physician had patiently reassured her and carefully trained her to administer the vital meds. A home health aide looked in on him once a day just to make sure. Not that the thought of delivering a lethal dose hadn't crossed her mind on more than one occasion.

"You may go now," he slurred as the medicine took its potent effect.

"Very well. I'm going to retire for the night. I'll check on you first thing in the morning." She said this every night to reassure his confused mind.

"See you in the morning," he repeated, waving as cheerfully as he could before his leaden hand

thundered to the blankets. Again, somewhere in his dazed consciousness, he knew this was a promise he could never keep.

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She went downstairs, and at last he was alone with his last lucid thoughts, knowing it would take no more than a few more hours before the last dregs of his life forces drained from his body. Seventy-four years had seemed like such an eternity once, had seemed to stretch out endlessly before him in his youth, and now he could measure his remaining span in hours on one hand. Now he wondered what it was like to die, the drugs dulling the edge of fear from his thoughtful ruminations. He picked up the locket and looked at it, straining through the drugs to make out the nebulous picture, imagining what it would be like to see his late wife face-to-face after so many years. He believed in life beyond death, had always been a religious man. His eyesight and his memory were failing him now... would they return to him when he was on the distant shore? What would it be like to have his clarity of thought back? This is something he'd often wondered about, and he'd feared losing his senses in old age the most. He watched his mother descend into Alzheimer's (though it hadn't been recognized as such in those earlier times) and, despite the agonizing pains that wracked his tortured body, was glad he'd been spared that death. He wondered if they were truly gone, if their personalities and memories were destroyed in the ravages of that disease (or by his own oxygen-starved condition), or if they returned when the tortured soul was relieved of its tomb of flesh. It seemed to him if there were a meaningful existence on the other side of death's curtain that they would return—and the thought that the memories he'd cherished for so long would return comforted him. Then for those who suffered dementia in old age their memories and character were not truly lost, but only distorted by their damaged brain. Deep down they still resided in him.

But sometimes he wondered if there was truly life beyond the grave—and this was where he had to take a leap of faith. Not that he had any real choice in the matter. In any event, he would soon know for sure.

For the first time in the fifteen years since his beloved wife had died, he allowed himself to think of her for more than a moment, and he openly and bitterly wept. The images were starting to come back to him now like ghosts. The phantoms circled his bed and began to

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take the form of scenes from his life. These scenes would coalesce out of the deep recesses of his mind and then slowly evaporate. He saw scenes of his little girls running and playing in meadows and in their living room. He saw the son he'd lost as a young boy playing carefree with his dog and giggling. He saw Millie in their most tender and private moments. And the trickle soon came back to him as a flood. These could be morphine hallucinations, he knew, but they seemed too real to discount. They could be nothing more than the bizarre actions of the drugs and his oxygen-starved brain. But deep down he knew better - he could feel Millie in the room with him, and the presence of his parents watching down on him. He felt them more vividly than ever before, now when the veil separating this world from the next was at its thinnest. And he knew the time had come when that veil was rent completely through.

Then in that moment he knew for sure, for the hazy altered state he'd been in for so long was worn completely through and his mind cleared. There were those who dismissed near-death experiences as the hallucinations or coping mechanisms of a traumatized brain and he had wondered. Now the time of wondering was over and the memories were no longer ghostly and insubstantial but they stood before him and it was the room with its sheets and blinking lights that became subdued and ethereal.

His body was once more wracked with pain, as he sat up to cough up more blood. This time he coughed up nearly a pint of bloody sputum, and this time it was tinged black. Somewhere in his feeble mind he remembered that that meant that necrotic tissues were starting to erode into his bloodstream, like rotting icebergs breaking from a crimson glacier. His doctor had discussed the process in clinical terms in his white-walled office many times—explaining how the rotted tissue would enter his bloodstream in the final stages of the disease, causing sepsis and diminishing his blood's capacity to carry oxygen. This septic shock was often the last stage in the cancer battle, and usually resulted in a sudden decline at the end, competing with organ failure to cause the patient's death. He pushed this out of his mind—this was a bizarre line of thought to be holding onto as his brain shut down.

And the moment held no terror for him, surprisingly. He fell back down on the pillows and then he just drifted off to sleep. It was as simple as that. In the distance he could feel—not hear, but feel, that was the closest word to describe the sensation—he could feel familiar voices softly calling his name, and across the dark horizon, the music of angels.

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The weather was already turning hot and sultry, and there was no wind flowing across the arid plain to relieve the scorching rays of the sun. The minarets of the ancient city turned golden in the easterly light and purple shadows fell across the bazaars and the narrow streets. The American consulate was smaller than the main embassy in Ankara, but the duty station more imposing due to the central position that the largest city in Turkey played in the region, standing at the strategic crossroads of the world.

Here the modern clashed with the ancient, East with West, in a cultural fault line like nowhere else in the world. The Turkish city with a Greek name had been almost at the center of the known world on maps of the classical age, and had dominated the history of the world for thousands of years. It had been the capital first of the Eastern Roman Empire, then the Byzantine Empire, then the Ottoman Empire. It had been the gateway to and from Europe and the spiritual center of the Orthodox Church. This was where Darius and Xerxes had come on their invasion of Greece, where Alexander's forces had invaded Asia, where the Crusaders had trod.

Byzantium. Constantinople. Now Istanbul for the last several centuries, its name had been changed as different civilizations passed through and claimed the ancient city. The grand city slumbered like many of those in that part of the world, pulsing with a rhythm much slower

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than that in newer and more modern cities. The ancient bazaars, the dusty roads, the ornate mosques, hadn't changed noticeably in hundreds of years. The donkey carts had been replaced by sleek, modern automobiles, the sounds of humming motors and angry horns filling the air along with the sound of the muezzins calling morning worshippers. The world had long overlooked it since the attention of mankind had shifted dramatically westward. Though their eyes were drawn periodically by the spectacular and gaudy violence of the Middle East, the massacres and famines of Africa, or the ruthless tyranny in the Far East, the world had turned its gaze from this dusty place for many centuries.

That was about to change.

The slim, dark Middle Eastern man passed through the gate of the state prison in Istanbul. Like many other Turkish prisons, it had attracted the criticism of human rights groups such as the ever-present Amnesty International. The prison resembled nothing so much as a medieval dungeon. The quarters were cramped, the cells narrow. There was no air conditioning in the stone catacombs of which the prison was constructed, and the lack of air was stultifying. Though the limestone walls often kept the temperature lower than the sweltering daytime temperature in excess of 100 degrees, it was not much cooler than the outside, and the walls often dripped beads of moisture that ran down them in rivulets from the humidity. Several of the prison cells had small windows hacked out of the limestone, though many did not. This was a prison for the most vile terrorists and subversives, who were never allowed a glimpse of the outside.

Latrines were small holes drilled into the floor, many of which overflowed across the floors and ran into the halls with an overpowering stench. Food gathered flies and the inmates were cramped into their cells and forgotten. They were put here and left indefinitely, until they got ill to the point of death or died in their cells. The reasons they were left here in these conditions were many and complex. They were the worst of terrorists, who had brought misery and death to this country many times in the past. They were often foreigners caught passing through on their way to bring their deadly wares to Western Europe. There was little money in the state treasury, most of it going to build up the arms and armed forces needed to defend the nation, and they could not spend funds modernizing a prison they didn't even want to acknowledge existed. For this was a politically awkward but necessary institution, as the needful goal of keeping Turkey free from the rising tide of terrorism was something that would incite certain portions of the populace. So, though everyone knew it, both here and abroad, they combated the scourge that passed through their land in secret and those who were sympathetic to terrorists tolerated it as long as they could pretend it did not exist. And the weightiest reason of all was simply that this was how it had been done since time immemorial.

The man went down the narrow stone steps, careful to avoid the human waste that had long since dried and been trod underfoot till one could not tell where the steps began. He passed through another checkpoint, showed his pass to the bored guard, who waved him through dismissively. There was no need to check those coming in, only to make sure those who were there did not escape. He was an older man in faded fatigues and two days of stubble, armed with a billy club and Uzi submachine gun. The gun was not loaded. He nodded to the visitor, who passed to the third cell on the left and stopped.

The man in the cell sat with his head bowed on the cot, reading something in Arabic. He paused to watch the man a moment until the metal door slammed shut behind him.

"Ahmed," he said. No response. He repeated the name louder, "Ahmed!"

Ahmed al-Farouk looked up with a wide grin and rose quickly. He pressed himself against the bars to grasp the visitor's hands in both of his own.

"Kemal!" he cried, "So good to see you, my brother!"

"How is your stay here, brother? They are treating you well, I suppose?"

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"As well as can be expected for a worthless dog of a terrorist, as they call me." Ahmed said this with pride, as though their taunts and bruising strikes were a badge of honor. "The food is not halal, but is not bad just the same. Someone should complain to the management."

"You will not be here much longer, my brother," Kemal offered.

"The only way out of here is in a body bag—or to survive my fifty year sentence," he said ruefully, "it has been seven years and still it seems there is an eternity to go."

"But our cause is just," Kemal said, "and you have done much to help us. Surely you can endure the remainder of the time in this vile place."

"Indeed. I did as much as I could for our righteous cause."

"That is why I have come to see you. Your dedication, your brilliance, is needed once more. We have yet another job for you."

That brought peals of derisive laughter, barely more tolerable than the howl of hyena would have been in those cramped quarters. The guard barked harshly and rapped his billy club across the iron grille. "How can I do anything here?" Ahmed asked.

"All I can say, my brother, is that you will be freed within the month."

His eyes clouded at this. Several inmates had attempted escape from the intolerable conditions over the last seven years since he'd been incarcerated. None had survived the breakout. There had even been an aborted escape attempt that led to the death of two of his confederates. He was willing to die for his faith but didn't relish the idea of dying in such a stupid manner. Despite the terrible conditions to which he was subjected, and the torture of being reduced to reading about the state of his homeland and the struggle of his compatriots in the newspaper instead of being part of them, life here was comfortable. He had three meals a day—if they could be called meals—access to strong Turkish coffee, newspapers in Turkish, Greek, and Arabic, his books, and his prayer mat. Everything he needed to keep himself lean and the fire within him burning. He even managed to remain physically fit by pulling himself up on the bars of his cell and bench-pressing his bare metal cot. All for the day when he would once again be free to roam the streets of Europe and Asia as a predator.

"Are you planning a rescue? That would be rash—"

"Give me more credit than that, Ahmed. Surely you will walk through the gates of this filthy prison on your own accord. The guards will crawl over each other to lead you through the gates."

Ahmed sat back on his cot, smiling at this. Kemal barked sharply to the guard, who opened the cell door and allowed him to sit next to his compatriot. There were few of the bureaucratic barriers in this country that a United Nations diplomatic card could not open (not to mention a few thousand lira thrown to the underpaid guards). The new government was falling over itself to extend visiting privileges to human rights observers, in an effort to extort money from the international community to clean up its prisons. Most of the time, of course, they paraded them through minimum-security prisons that had been cleaned up just beforehand. Surely the inmates would be promised food if they'd behave like well-fed and content prisoners, and the observers would return to write their reports, and things would return as they were.

They sat and talked for two hours, and much passed through their lips that could have sent either man to prison for many years. Kemal and Ahmed shared coffee and cigarettes, while they pored over the plans for their next mission. Kemal tucked them back into his diplomatic pouch and hurried away. And night fell, a cool wind bringing relief from across the Hellespont. And the world turned below and there were dreams of political upheaval and a renewed wave of terror in several Turkish prisons that night.

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## DYING DECLARATION

It was cool for a late spring day, the frosty wind blowing dark gray clouds through the sky like a herd of buffalo as Erica and Stephen drove back up to the mansion. A solitary news truck was parked across the street, its satellite dish pointed upwards like an opening tulip in the dawn light, and for once there were no cameras shoved in their faces. Esther had called them and left a message on their machine—Erica must have slept clean through, a sign of just how emotionally exhausted she had become over the last few weeks. Their Town Car was waved through the gate by the unsmiling footman, which was unusual in the extreme. Erica shivered at the ominous sign as they passed Henry, his eyes cast down towards the pavement. He'd always greeted her with a warm smile, and she knew by its absence that something was terribly wrong. Tensely, she drove up the winding path with mounting apprehension. She parked the car cockeyed in the circle in front of the imposing Federal façade and went immediately into the kitchen. Esther was sitting there with her shoulders hunched over, her face as drawn as that of the footman.

Erica padded softly over to her, and the two women embraced.

"I'm sorry I didn't get a hold of you sooner, my dear," Esther fretted when they parted, her mellow English voice breaking.

"That's all right, Esther... What's happening? It's Father, isn't it?"

Esther nodded. "He's not well, dear. Why don't you sit down?" she gestured to one of the high-backed rustic chairs.

"I've got something to tell you both. Your father has slipped into a coma. I couldn't wake him this morning as I usually do. Doctor Dexter just left here a few moments ago—I'm surprised you didn't see him on the road."

Erica shook her head. "I think he's been using the rear entrance to avoid the media."

"He said there is nothing they can do," Esther said simply, letting the rest of the bad news tumble from her. "The prognosis isn't good..."

"How long?" Erica asked, looking away from her.

"Hours. Maybe a couple days. But he might as well be gone already."

"Can't they get him to a hospital?" Stephen asked, "Dexter just left?"

Erica put her hand on his arm to restrain his accusatory questions as Esther repeated what she'd just said with all the patience of a school marm tutoring an unruly pupil. "It was, as you both know, Mr. Stockton's wishes that he be allowed to die with dignity when the time came, at home. He had the sense to know when it was time to go home. There's nothing we can do to change that, nor should we...I'm going to miss him so much..." She spoke gently, but firmly. "Your father had a living will, and the doctor did his utmost to relieve his suffering. He did a fine job, in my esteem. But nothing he could do could stop the decline."

"Oh, Esther," Erica groaned, as the harsh reality set in for the first time. "I don't know how I'm going to take it when he's gone...can I see him?"

"I wouldn't recommend it. He's just a shadow of the man he was."

"Esther, please? I have to."

"It would be better to remember his as he was, dear." There was an imploring tone, rather than the resolve she'd used with Stephen.

"Take me to him anyway," Erica replied in a wavering voice, but one full of the resolute character that the entire family could instantly recognize. No sense arguing with her when she sounded that way. They went wordlessly up the long staircase, quietly, not that marching in jackboots would disturb the old man's rest now. They stood at the foot of the bed, looking somberly down at the prostrate figure. The previous night, he had looked positively sanguine compared to his deathly pallor this morning. He was white, the liver spots showing through the almost translucent skin. His eyes were mercifully shut. His face appeared peaceful, though his brow was furrowed and his mouth bore the terrible rictus that the loose

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jowls of old age acquire with death. He looked like a corpse that had not yet been made up for the funeral, a sight that was growing increasingly rare. Erica walked over next to his side and held his hand tightly. The claw was already cold, the nails an effeminate shade of blue, and felt like a stone in hers. His head was marginally warmer, but the heat was draining out even here as his metabolism wound to a halt.

"I just can't believe I'm going to lost you," she despaired. "Father, you've been everything to me since Mother died...I just can't believe I'm going to lose you."

She went and stood by the open window so the others wouldn't see her tears. The lilac blossoms had been turning brown for some time, but had now blown away on the stiff wind of the previous night's storm. The obvious symbolism was at once touching and terrible. She opened the blinds to admit more light into the cheerless room, and turned back to the bed.

"Do you mind if I sit here a little while?" she asked.

"Dear, take all the time you need," Esther said sympathetically, "I'm going to miss him terribly too...Well, can I get you something, coffee, or tea?" Her voice dwindled away like the ripples from a stone cast into a brook.

"Maybe some coffee," she allowed.

"Stephen, can I get you anything?" Esther asked, slipping into the familiar role of hostess. He shook his head absently.

Erica sat next to the bed in the leather armchair for the next few hours, watching his ragged breathing and the rise and fall of the covers. She sat there staring at the shadow of a man, stroking his hand and muttering softly to him. When the coffee came it was black and strong, but she drank it without seeming to notice. The phone rang, but it registered distantly in her mind, which was preoccupied with more immediate concerns. She watched his face impassively, brushing the last few wispy strands of hair from his sweat-drenched brow, rocking back and forth in the chair to comfort herself. *How could he be sweating so when he's so cold?* she thought to herself. The room seemed to grow colder as the day wore on and the shadows lengthened through the windows, making the room grow increasingly gray and bleak, as though it could be any more bleak. She knew intellectually that the sun was shining outdoors and a warm breeze rustled through the trees, but she also knew that numbing gray pallor that settles on everything when the shadow of death comes. It bleached the world of its colors and dulled its emotions, turning even her heartache mercifully drab and desiccated as dry bones. As the soul was leached from his withered body, the lifeless husk chilled the surroundings and she had to draw her sweater around herself to stay warm.

Esther came back after a short while, motioning her downstairs. She followed, grateful to be rid of her macabre reflections for a few moments. Esther had put sandwiches on the kitchen table, and as Erica picked at her food listlessly, the housekeeper said, "Your sister called a short while ago. She's in Salt Lake City."

"What's she doing in Utah?" Erica asked, displaying infinitely more curiosity than she felt.

"She's coming back East. She should be here around four o'clock this afternoon."

Erica shrugged indifferently at the news. She watched Esther purse her lips and fidget with her hands as she waited for Erica's reaction. Her heart would normally have gone out to the woman, but was drained at the moment and she took a perverse pleasure at chewing on her tuna finger sandwich and watching her poker-faced. The rather stormy relationship between the sisters was hardly a secret in this house; neither was the fact that this had always been a source of uneasiness for the mild-mannered domestic.

"Well, I don't know why she bothers anymore," Erica said, growing suddenly ashamed at putting Esther through this. "Even if she's had a change of heart, it's too late to do any good now."

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Esther bit her lip and turned back to the sliced bread and mayonnaise, saying nothing more as she cut the crusts off the bread. Erica reluctantly left the house after a couple hours, Stephen gently pulling her by the arm, and they drove back home in silence. After a quiet cup of coffee in their kitchen, Stephen couldn't take the tension any more and went out the back door to his woodshed. She finally slipped off her sweater, placed it carefully on the rack in the hall, and went to check her messages. Though she knew there'd be a message on the answering machine, the sight of the baleful red light still filled her with dread. She depressed the button with a grimace.

"Hi! How ya' doing?" the cheerful voice on the tape rasped. "We got a little late start getting started, so scratch whatever Esther told you about our arrival time. Work stuff—you know how it goes. Should have called you first, but figured you'd be with Dad. I'm at the Salt Lake City airport, and we should get in around six-thirty, and up to the house around seven-thirty or eight. Don't worry about picking us up. We'll rent a car. Uh...guess I'll see you then. Take care. Bye."

Erica slammed down the stop button on the machine. "Damn her!" she exploded. "There's always something with her." She didn't know whether to be more annoyed with her for coming now or for waiting so long. *She never could be there for him*, Erica fumed. She lay down on the couch to nurse a sudden throbbing headache, hearing something about anti-American riots in Turkey from the small black-and-white television in the hall. Exhaustion soon got the better of her and she fell asleep. She'd always been there for him, and she was the only one there for him now. Her sister Amy had always been her father's favorite, she thought bitterly as she drifted off to sleep, still in the black cloud of anger. *She* was his favorite, even though it had been *her* who'd been by his side during his long illness, when all others deserted him. She'd stayed around him the last few years, electing to remain in Boston despite the career advancement that could have accrued to her in New York or Los Angeles. She'd always been ambitious and it had been a sacrifice deeper than most would ever know to cut short her burgeoning career to nurse him. It was a sacrifice she'd willingly paid so she could be with him in his final days. Everyone else, it seemed, had deserted him except for her and a small handful of his most loyal associates—political friends and erstwhile sycophants, media stars, lawmakers, and other celebrities had all drifted back into the background as soon as he was diagnosed with incurable cancer. The loneliness that came after the life-long adulation he'd once basked in was almost unbearable.

Erica Williamson was pushing thirty, childless, married to a small company executive who was moderately successful. She dwelt on a ten-acre estate in a fifteen-room Georgian-style mansion on the affluent north side of Boston. She was a department head now—sometimes spoken of as vice presidential material—in a major East Coast advertising agency. She had had access to the legislature on Beacon Hill at the drop of her father's name for many years, and had lobbied the lawmakers for causes she believed in on more than one occasion. She had more than once contemplated a career in politics, for that is what truly fired her up, not selling basketballs, tools, sailboats, coats, or any other the numerous other products they'd helped sell. But growing up in the White House before cameras, and later on, seeing their father all but forgotten as though he had leprosy instead of cancer, had embittered her. At least in advertising she had to be more or less honest in what she presented.

She was also well recognized in the social circles of the Boston Brahmins, her comings and goings among the topics of the local gossip columns. This had never ceased to strike her as exceedingly strange, with her relatively tame home life and far-from-glamorous appearance. There must not be much else worth reporting on in Boston High Society. By any objective standard, Erica Williamson was successful and had a bright future. But there was something missing in her life, and she ached for more. She yearned secretly for a child of her own, and she and her husband had been trying unsuccessfully for many years. She also

yearned for something else, something she could not quite grasp that would give more meaning to her life than the daily grind of the advertising business. What it was she could not put into words, however, a rare problem for her. This something was a nondescript, aching void in her heart, even while her father was alive. She knew it would widen to a chasm when he was gone. She pushed the thought roughly out of her mind.

Her sister, on the other hand, had always been at the center of attention her entire life. She'd been the darling of the White House staff and press corps during their father's eight-year tenure in office. Erica remembered those childhood times as filled with bittersweet memories. She'd always been known as the smart one—the cool, thoughtful one. She had always carried herself with poise, charming state dinners with her piano expertise and cool wit and refined manners.

She had been the one to take over some of the ceremonial duties of the White House hostess after her mother had died. That in itself put an immense burden on a young girl, but she managed the best she could between tutoring sessions in her private quarters. She thought she did as well as was possible in this role, but it was Amy who got all the attention from the press. She was always cutting up, doing silly things like sneaking her puppy into the State Room before formal dinners, lifting up her dress at the most inopportune times, sticking out her tongue at portrait sessions, mimicking her father behind his back and drawing laughter from the crowds on the White House lawn. Erica had always scolded her and been short when she embarrassed them in public. Their father could not be counted on to be stern; he tried, but he inevitably cracked into a smile on such occasions and ended up dropping it. The press latched onto her sister's antics and made Amy the most popular little girl in the nation, probably since Shirley Temple. She was still an insufferable ham, and flocked to the limelight like a particularly annoying moth.

In later years, Amy abandoned the family and moved to California to pursue a movie career. But even then she'd continued to draw the spotlight. First her floundering model career garnered headlines and raised eyebrows with some especially revealing magazine spreads, then her spotty success as she struggled to win mediocre motion picture roles titillated the nation. She had one gigantic flop in motion pictures—a low-budget horror flick that had resulted in considerable embarrassment to the family—but it had brought her enough attention to win her eventual success on the stage. She had even recently starred in a long run of *My Fair Lady* in San Francisco, which was probably the high point of her career as far as Erica was concerned. She was the starring role in reverse.

Erica's resentment deepened over the years as she was left to care for her aging and ailing father, as his once loyal sycophants found new idols to latch onto. He was relegated to writing his memoirs, making the lecture circuit, and occasionally advising the current occupant of the White House behind closed doors. While he appeared confident before the adoring crowds and cameras, he sank deeper and deeper into a lonesome depression. He had been marginalized by some of the more powerful rising elements of his party in those long and lonely years, for reasons he did not understand, and the depression and increasing isolation began to take its toll.

He had been everything to the girls after their mother had died of a particularly virulent case of pneumonia. He had to do all the things for his little girls that a mother would have done in a just world, trying to cover the disappointment and heartache of losing his only son at the tender age of four from leukemia. He taught his little girls to be ladies, coached them in etiquette and proper behavior, and struggled to braid their hair and do all the other things that come along with raising girls—and failed miserably at all of them.

Although the poor man had been somewhat unequal to this daunting task—daunting even to a man with a wife—he'd thrown all his heart into it. For that Erica would be eternally grateful. He'd proved to be the best mother that any man could, and though he had eventually

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resorted to hiring a full-time *au pair* to care properly for the girls, he remained involved and interested in their lives as they grew through their teenage years into full womanhood. He had always had time for them, had always put them ahead of the pressures of statecraft and diplomacy. Erica drifted aimlessly from room to room and wondered if she'd told him all the things she'd wanted to say before the time had fled. Though they'd shared their lives together for nearly thirty years, it seemed a brief and fleeting moment looking back on it. Though she'd had time to prepare for this moment, it seemed to come upon her all too suddenly. She trudged around the house like a convict awaiting her executioner, the thought seeing her sister again and answering the phone filling her with dread.

Erica knew her father was just an empty shell now, and that he was already brain-dead. But she had to see him. It was the same irrational gut response that overcame mourners looking on the face of the dead at funeral homes, their attention drawn to the visible remains that did not really contain the impulses and thought of the deceased anymore. She'd seen distraught widows clinging to the casket as though it were a raft. Strange how they clung to that last bit of debris, the least significant scrap left of their loved ones.

Morbid thoughts. But she had to see him. The luxurious walls of her mansion suddenly seemed to crowd around her, suffocating her till she could take it no more. She scooped up her keys and headed out the back door to the woodshed. She patted the dog on the head to keep her hands from shaking and called softly to Stephen.

He came out pulling his jacket on over a dark sweater encrusted with curling wood shavings. He picked absently at them as he looked at her with concern.

"Let's go back up to the house," she suggested, with her characteristic tone that implied the subject was not open to debate.

"Um, okay. Are you sure you're up to it?" he asked anyway. She could see he was also distraught. "I know, honey, he's gone. But despite everything, I don't think...I mean, Amy shouldn't get there alone to find him like that. That would be awful to walk into." The dual emotions of sorrow and anger churned inside her stomach, and she shook her head vigorously to dispel the wooly thoughts. She had to get it together.

"I'm starting to worry about you spending so much time up there."

"I have a feeling it won't be much longer." A sudden heady feeling came over her and she gripped his arm to steady herself as she vocalized the reality she felt for the first time. Her biggest fear was that he would linger in a coma for years. They strapped themselves into their Town Car parked in the carport behind the house. The Lincoln should have been safely locked in a garage, but a garage tacked onto the back of the 19th Century Georgian mansion would have been an ugly anachronism. They drove around the spacious circle and down the steep sloping driveway. At the bottom, Stephen pressed an electronic button over the driver's side visor and the well-oiled metal gates swung silently inward on their hydraulic chains.

He turned right onto the street and started driving the short distance towards Route One, accelerating as they entered the highway and headed up the coast towards Beverly. As they drove past the old yacht club nestled in Beverly Harbor, she looked out at all the boats bobbing up and down on the waves. She finally burst into tears as she remembered all the time they'd spent out on her father's boat as teenagers. It seemed that's where they had been the happiest, out on the open sea without the paparazzi and the endless procession of aides and bodyguards. There was no sound except for the shrill cry of the gulls, the dull thudding of waves against the hull, and the swooshing of the cold sea air. They had even managed to leave the Secret Service agents assigned to them on the pier, watching them disappear out of sight through their binoculars. She didn't know how they managed that. She also remembered the tangy smell of the salt air and the blistering summer heat that made everything shimmer. She could remember the hours they'd spent together trolling for cod bluefish on Cape Cod Bay. She knew that memories like this would continue to come back with sudden force and clarity

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from time to time for the rest of her life. It was just something she'd have to live with when he was gone.

They finally arrived back at the mansion around two in the afternoon, and found Esther nervously fidgeting in the kitchen. She conducted them to her father's room, and though she imagined she was prepared for the worst, the sight of him made her draw in her breath. He was even more drawn than before, if that was possible without turning a human into a mummy. They padded softly up the steps and onto the plush green carpet of his room, as though they might still rouse him from his sleep. But there was no waking from this slumber.

Erica sat by his bed holding his hand, speaking softly to him as she said all the things she'd wanted to say but their staunch Yankee reticence didn't normally allow. Perhaps the stern faces that lined the walls downstairs would give her some forbearance. She stood occasionally to stretch her sore back muscles, going downstairs to the kitchen for a cup of coffee or out on the patio to catch some fresh air, when her breath felt too heavy. As she stood there in the open French doors, the head of steam from her mug and the filigree curtains billowing on the stiffening breeze, she could tell there was a storm front coming. The smell of the air, the general feeling of decreasing pressure, these were signals that she learned from observing the sea at her father's knee.

She softly closed the French doors and padded back inside, meandering around the cavernous floor rooms, for a while and crying softly to herself. She tried desperately to get her emotions under control before she had to deal with Amy. She wandered from room to room, touching her father's belongings and meditating wistfully on the flood of memories that their familiar sights and smells continued to evoke.

There would be none of this when Amy arrived. Amy would be shedding her crocodile tears and would go into unseemly hysterics when he finally died. Erica would have to be the strong one then, enduring her sister's belated demonstration of concern and trying to be strong for her. She hated playing that role—Stella to her sister's Blanche. She reflected dryly that with each passing mile that brought them closer together, her quiet time of grieving was coming to an end. This was a complication she didn't need right now.

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The sun began to set behind the dense canopy of willows and oaks on the front lawn around four-thirty, and the room grew stodgy and dark. She wandered downstairs for no apparent reason and turned on several of the lights, just to have brief respite from the gloom and from her endless bedside vigil. As she returned to his side, Stephen passed her on the stairway, grinning with little mirth in a vain attempt to cheer her spirits. Erica could hear him playing with her father's prized huskies in the back yard minutes later, as she wore a path into the carpet admiring the old man's trophy wall and straightening the plaques and certificates. These activities were for no other reason than to avoid staring at the dying figure on the bed and to prevent succumbing into an abyss of grief.

Stephen's own father had died a drunken and broken young man of forty-eight, and she knew David had become something of a surrogate father to him, teaching the younger man how to sail, hunt, and even shoot skeet—much to the chagrin of the Secret Service detail. But David had taken his youthful son-in-law under his wing and done much to bolster his fortunes with what political capital he had left. But Stephen had never been good at displaying his emotions, except to her, and only after several years of marriage, and subsequently just fidgeted and wandered about the house and grounds, desperately waiting for someone to interrupt the funereal scene.

Erica was sitting in her chair and holding her father's limp hand when the doorbell chimed. She grimaced to herself as her stomach seemed to contract inside her, but she

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otherwise displayed no reaction. Several minutes passed and she could hear the sound of muffled conversation in the downstairs foyer, first tinged with laughter and then with gasps and whispering. Footsteps soon approached up the stairs, muffled by the plush hall carpet. Esther opened the door as it creaked in protest on its un-oiled hinges, admitting Amy and Benjamin Van Zandt into the room.

Amy was wearing a short black cocktail dress with a black raincoat and high heels. She was shorter by a head than Erica, and was neither overweight nor willowy like her older sister. She was well-endowed and had the right curves in all the right places, the product of many years of aerobic exercise and weight-lifting and strict diet. She had been working on a California tan that evidenced itself in a flawless golden-brown complexion, much to her sister's envy, which was partly due to expensive creams and spas and partly due to nature. Her eyes were the palest blue, something that men apparently found irresistible, and she had shoulder-length fine blonde hair. Her husband Ben was younger than Stephen, but he looked considerably older, his skin weathered by many years of working outdoors on construction sites throughout Southern California. He was mostly bald except a ring of silver-flecked hair and his skin was leathery and prematurely wrinkled, reticulated from the harsh sun and premium cigars. His fleshy face and round spectacles gave him an owlish appearance. He wore an ill-fitting pinstripe suit, carrying it in the manner of a cowboy more used to chaps and denim.

The two men greeted each other first as the women eyed each other cautiously.

"How's it going, Ben?" Stephen asked first, trying to project more enthusiasm than he felt. Both men knew what lay ahead.

Ben laughed a raspy, tobacco-drenched guffaw. "Fine. How's business?" His pleasant voice was tinged with a faint Midwestern twang.

Stephen shrugged. "Same old. The checks keep coming in the mail."

"Life had been good," Ben agreed, then looked involuntarily to the pale figure on the bed and shuddered.

"Looks like the Lakers are having a better than usual season." Stephen followed up for want of something better to say.

"Better than the Celtics, that's for sure. They might even get into the playoffs this year," Ben retorted, resurrecting an old rivalry that the two men had going back several years.

"Oh, yeah? Sounds like a challenge. Why don't we discuss their relative merits over a beer?"

"I thought you'd never get around to asking."

The two men headed off, nodding encouragement to their wives but exiting the battle zone as expeditiously as they could without the gauche maneuver of running for the door. Ben laid his overcoat over the Chippendale next to the door on the way out and the relief on their faces was palpable as they undoubtedly prepared to negotiate a wager over lagers.

"No! Stay a few minutes," Erica said belatedly and somewhat desperately, but the oaken door was already slamming shut behind them. *Hmph! How courageous*, she thought, biting her lip, then realized how awkward it was to be an in-law during a time of grieving. She remembered standing by Stephen's side at his father's funeral. Even more awkward it was to be in the midst of a family dispute. She decided to cut him some slack. Erica stood in resignation and turned towards her sister, acknowledging her presence for the first time.

"How nice of you to come," she began, her voice dripping sarcasm. She'd wanted to put on a nonchalant air and had practiced what she's say on the way over in the car, but now she couldn't help the bitterness from showing through. At once, she regretted it and wished she had one of the dogs' muzzles at hand.

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"Well," Amy replied defensively, "I did catch the first flight out as soon as I heard. Things are busy in L.A. right now." As soon as she said it, she too regretted her opening riposte, caught off guard by her sister's candid barbs.

Two could play at that game, and she *was* the smart one.

"Too busy to visit your dying father, huh?" Erica let the comment hang in the air for a moment before continuing in a more civil tone. She hadn't spoken to her sister in two years and was tiring of the tense exchange. "The doctor says that as the tumors continue to grow, it will affect his blood chemistry and make it harder to his blood to carry oxygen. The failure of his kidneys and liver is just accelerating the septicemia, as it's known, starving his brain of oxygen. The coma is irreversible."

"But people have come out of comas unexpectedly," Amy replied.

"Not from terminal cancer." Erica sighed. "Amy, there's no hope he'll ever recover and not much chance he'll even regain consciousness. He's dying."

"The prognosis is terminal," Esther added, having remained in the room to mediate the dispute between the two headstrong women.

"It's probably more merciful that he's unconscious now," Erica whispered. They glanced down at the wretched figure on the bed, and waited for the inevitable. There was not much talking in the next few hours but at least the mood did not sour completely while he was still alive. Surely that wouldn't last after he was gone. Erica felt a degree of sorrow for her sister, whom she could tell was having trouble getting her emotions under control, realizing for the first time that she knew she'd come back too late this one last time.

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Though they had not spent much time together with him in his latter years, they were with him when he died. They sat together near the bed through the rest of the afternoon waiting...waiting ... waiting for the inevitable demise as the life seemed to seep out of him. His hands grew cold and stony, and his lips and fingernails turned a deep shade of blue. His breathing became ragged and shallow. Their father had ordained that he not be resuscitated, and so the monitors stood by passively, their only purpose now to herald the moment of death rather than forestall it. The deep red lights of the monitors clustered around his bed melted together with the light of the setting sun, which was throwing its blood red rays upon the carpet and the bedspread. The sun cast a coppery hue to the skin of the gaunt figure beneath the sheets, mocking and making him appear more alive and healthy than he was. The sisters shifted around the room from the bed to the window in a listless dance as the life force ebbed. Now and then they sat to hold his hand, stroke his head, and trace the bony line under his cheek in a loving caress.

Ben was gazing out the window at the darkening sky, a sky filled with dark, smoldering clouds with underbellies of brilliant gold and orange, when the dread moment came. David Stockton stopped breathing—not for the first time that afternoon—so imperceptibly that he resumed his ragged breathing before his daughters realized what had happened. They sat forward in some alarm.

"I think he stopped breathing again," said Erica under her breath.

As they leaned forward in concern, his breathing arrested itself again. He gasped twice involuntarily for breath and then let out a long, rattling sigh. His skeletal head settled back in the pillows and his gaunt features relaxed and assumed the slack rictus of death. They waited for what seemed like ages for him to catch his breath but it never came. After a minute had passed, they grasped his hands tightly as though they could arrest his departure, but he was already gone. The heart monitor went flat and emitted its belated warning tone as the tears started flowing. Esther crossed the room and turned off the blinking electrocardiogram

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machine and respiratory monitor. She gently covered the dead man's head with the blanket and turned away from the women before they could see the moistness in her eyes. "I'd better go call Dr. Woodley," she said softly, and retreated downstairs.

Woodley was the county coroner. Amy Van Zandt let out a tortured moan and collapsed forward across the bed. Ben rubbed her shoulders and patted her back in sympathy. Across the bed Erica half-turned in her chair and threw herself into Steven's arms. Both men stood embracing their wives and gently pulled them to their feet away from the deathbed. Ben and Steven led them out into the corridor and shut the door behind them.

"Come on," said Steven choking up, "let's go get some fresh air."

Once in the corridor, the full horror seemed to hit them. Amy's eyes went wide and her hands flew to her mouth to stifle her further groans and the baleful sounds stopped. They somehow managed to force their suddenly rubbery legs to descend the stairs and turned right into the dining room. Still in a trance, the sisters collapsed into chairs at the dining room table while Esther made the call to Ernest Woodley.

"What do we do now?" asked Erica in bewilderment.

"First thing, dear, is we must have the coroner come to the house," Esther said. She was an old professional at the rituals of death, she reflected.

"You really shouldn't be here for that," suggested Steven, "we should go."

"So much to do..." Erica mused, "the wake, the funeral...". The enormity of everything which had to be done was just starting to dawn on her.

"We need to call the funeral director," said Esther, "Your father stated that he wanted to use Bradford and Sons. Joe Bradford's excellent; he'll help you handle everything."

"Me? I don't know what to do."

"You should be the one to handle the arrangements," she said simply.

Amy merely looked over to her and nodded, rising and walking out the double doors into the garden without a word. "Oh dear," whispered Esther, "Have I said something wrong?"

"Forget it," responded Erica, "This is a sore spot with her. As it should be."

Erica put her arm around the worried domestic and comforted her, then went silently out into the garden.

Esther then called Leonard Shelburne, David Stockton's attorney and putative executor. He would be the one to make the general press announcement in time for the evening news programs. Soon the news would spread across the world and their grief would be shared with the masses. Then their time of private grieving would be over and the camera trucks would begin to cluster about the old manor yet again. There would be demands from all the news outlets for interviews. Privately she began to dread their coming.

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Erica walked out through the double doors and up to her sister, who had her back turned looking at the lilies and wilted lilacs. She must have heard Erica's rapid footsteps on the crushed gravel walk, but didn't turn around.

"I want to talk to you," Erica demanded, steel in her voice.

"Why bother? We've got nothing to say to each other."

"Why bother—you've got some nerve, Amy."

"Notice how everyone just assumed you'd be the one to handle the arrangements," Amy spat, "you always were the perfect one."

"The perfect one?" Erica yelled, her voice rising with her temper, "You have some nerve. And why shouldn't I handle the arrangements? I was the one who stuck around to take care of him—what did *you* do?"

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“Oh, sure, I see how that is. Well, I got a newsflash for you, sis, he was my father too.” Amy said, then burst into tears and sat down on the park bench under a broad willow tree. She put her face in her hands.

“Why didn’t you act like it?” Erica started to shout, but her sister’s antics were deflating her rage, damn her. She didn’t know if this were her being manipulative or belated regret, but she hated it just the same. She *so* wanted to hate her for breaking her father’s heart. “I hate it when you do that!” she said, but it came out more tenderly than she wanted. She walked round in circled a few times, then sat down next to her. “It’s just like you to make this about *your* feelings. What about Dad? He was heartbroken when you moved to L.A.” There was an edge in her voice but she was now whispering.

“I have a life there, don’t you realize? Don’t you know what it’s like to grow up in his shadow?” Amy spat back, then buried her hands again.

Erica laughed bitterly. “Of course, I was the one in the shadows. You were in the limelight.”

“And you never wanted to be,” Amy said simply, “did you?”

“No—but that’s not the point.”

“What is the point then, Erica? Do you resent that I have a life?”

Erica jumped up and turned on her sister. “You have a hell of a nerve saying that to me—I was here taking care of him the last two years. Where were you? And I have more of a life than your pathetic Beverly Hills actress thing, which, incidentally, is getting a bit old!”

They sat down, this time facing away from each other, while Amy rubbed the tears from her eyes. Neither spoke for some time and shadows began to fill the small garden. There was a deep rift, much that had never been spoken between them, and now had to be spoken, but it would not be without pain. Erica looked over to her a few times, but the words would not come and she looked away. Finally, Amy looked over to her, a new resolve in her eyes. “Don’t hate me,” she begged, “I did the best I could.”

“I don’t hate you, and no, you did *not* do the best you could,” Erica said with finality. She rose from the bench and looked down on her sister with pity.

“Yes you do hate me,” Amy contradicted.

“No I do not, but I am very angry...you want everyone to feel sorry for you now that he’s gone, but where were you when he was alive? While you were out pursuing your life, I was here standing by his side, going to the doctor’s, helping Esther take care of him.”

“I had to get out from under all of this,” Amy said, waving her hands around, “and away from you. Do you know what it’s like living in your shadow? I needed to have a life.”

“And what about my life?” Erica demanded.

“You haven’t done so badly for yourself.”

“Please—I got passed over for a big promotion because I couldn’t handle my accounts—did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t know,” Amy whispered, her eyes downcast. She finally spoke after a few moments, though with difficulty. “Erica...don’t hate me. You’ve always been the strong one, and in some ways, it was better you take care of him. It might not seem fair to you right now, but I couldn’t handle seeing him this way, and I couldn’t handle always having to measure up to you. You’ve always been so strong and so perfect, knowing when and how to do the right thing.” She choked up and couldn’t continue for a few minutes. “I couldn’t breathe in this kind of environment—this high society, political thing isn’t what I was born to be part of, you know?”

The shouting had stopped and Erica cautiously put her arm around her shoulders. Amy remained still, didn’t lean into her despite a sudden chill in the air. But her shoulders were quaking beneath the heavy overcoat.

“Amy,” Erica started softly, “how can you say that you grew up in my shadow?”

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Father *adored* you, and-”

“And what? And I broke his heart? He wanted his daughters to be diplomats, senators, that sort of thing. Not a two-bit B-move actress.”

This surprised Erica. She never thought her sister recognized the tawdry nature of her work, and how it appeared to the family. She wondered what else she may have been wrong about, and was silent while her sister poured everything out.

“I just know that I embarrassed him, and every time I saw him there was disappointment in his eyes. He never approved when I moved to California, when I became something as *bourgeois* as a film actress or a glamour model. But you—you had the kind of life he approved of, and I could never bear to see the disappointment in his eyes. So I left.”

“Amy...he *loved* you, more deeply than you’ll ever know. His disappointment was not because he didn’t approve of your lifestyle, it was because he wouldn’t see you as much. Deep down he knew that.”

“That’s not true...you were always his favorite, Erica.”

This floored her, and her jaw literally dropped. “Amy, that’s not true...*you* were his favorite, he doted on you all the time, from the time we were little girls. You were always the beautiful one, the cute one, everyone adored you.”

Amy looked up slowly, the tears welling up in her eyes again, her eye shadow starting to run at the corners of her reddened eyes. “Do you really think so?”

“I do. And truthfully, I think I resented you for it...resented you for leaving him most of all, though.”

“Do you regret being the one by his side? You’re the one he wanted there.”

“He wanted *both* of us there. And no, I don’t regret it, I feel blessed that I got that time to spend with him...but why couldn’t you be more, more, available? He needed you and I needed you too.” Amy watched her carefully and then when she spoke it was low and cautious.

“I want things to be normal between us.”

“Things haven’t been right for a very long time,” Erica admonished her.

“Do you think we’ll ever be all right?” Amy responded.

Erica didn’t answer at once. When she did, she tried to be gentle but she couldn’t hide the profound bitterness in her voice. She was buffeted on the stormy seas of emotion, her mood rising and falling as she alternately hated and longed for the relationship she’d never had. She’d never gotten her sea legs and she couldn’t get her bearings now either. “I don’t know,” she said at last, “I just don’t know, but let’s at least try to have a truce till after the funeral. Can we do that for his memory?”

Amy nodded, dejectedly.

Erica rose and headed towards the double doors. “That’s all I’m willing to give—for now. Don’t push me.” She slammed the door and went back into the rustic kitchen.

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Erica and Stephen talked with Esther at the table while they waited for Dr. Woodley to arrive, and they began to go through the various papers that he’d hurriedly written in his shaky hand over the last few months. Erica was mostly familiar with what was written there, as she’d had to steady his hand while he had written it, though it pained her to do so. Her heart wasn’t in this, with him gone so recently, and the talk around the table was hushed and surreal. She felt drugged, but went through the motions as the three of them discussed his interment (in the family plot beside his beloved wife Mildred), where to have the memorial service and wake, whether to let him lie in state in Washington or have a local funeral, when to go to pick out the casket and flower arrangements...and a hundred other sundry details. Amy came into the

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kitchen and stood by the table biting her lip for a tentative moment, then huffed into the other room. While they were talking Dr. Woodley arrived.

He was an old, crusty gentleman in the Yankee tradition, and his manner was brisk and efficient. He stayed upstairs just a few minutes, then clomped down the stairs to announce: *yep, he was sure dead awright. Pretty much expected cause of death, major organ failure resulting from cancer. He'd look up the technical term for the certificate but basically his body was eaten out by cancer. Amazing he lived as long as he did. See ya' next time, folks.*

Joe Bradford was somewhat more empathetic, and he came to meet the family at the house on account of David Stockton's stature. They sat around the kitchen table and picked out a casket from the full-color catalog, then agonized over whether to get one flower arrangement or two. They called to Amy in the kitchen, who just nodded and said "Two" before breezing back into the other room. They talked till Erica couldn't stand his benevolent tone any more. When it was fully dark, they stood to leave and Amy and Ben met them in the foyer.

"You could come back to the hotel for a while, talk over old times," Amy said hopefully, her mascara having run and pooled dark circles around her eyes.

Erica was still bitter at her and did not have the strength to deal with her right now, on top of the loss of her father. She did feel a momentary urge to reach out to hug her, the same scared little girl whom she'd comforted when their mother had died, but she was too drained to deal with the complications that would arise, and had arisen already in the garden. "Not tonight," she heard herself saying, "I'm too exhausted, I'm afraid. We're going home to get some sleep."

"Could we come over for a while then?"

Erica grimaced inside and sighed. Amy never was one to take a hint. "I just don't think that would be a good idea after everything that's happened between us, Amy. Let me be frank with you, you've hurt us too deeply. But let's talk tomorrow - there's a lot of...arrangements that still have to be made, and I'd like you to be part of them." She didn't really, but thought the gesture might ease tensions.

"And you will be handling all of them?" Amy asked, "Dad sure didn't talk over his wishes with me."

"I can't change that," Erica said, exasperated, "Do you want to be part of them or not?"

Esther spoke up for the first time. "Mister Stockton left detailed directions with the family. Mrs. Williamson well knows this as she helped him draft them." Amy's eyes fluttered downward at this. "She knows many of the local people, florists, funeral directors, and so forth. So he's discussed things with her, it's just the most convenient way. Tomorrow let's go over to the funeral home together to finalize the arrangements."

"Of course. That makes sense," Amy said, obviously still somewhat miffed, but knowing that much had been put into movement already. Hers was a token protest, and a habit of hers was to wait till the work was mostly done before offering help. Just all well, as far as Erica was concerned.

"The ceremony will be here in Boston," Erica added.

This news seemed to surprise and hurt Amy all over again. "I would have expected him to have the ceremony in Washington, lie in state at the Capitol and all that."

"He was more comfortable here," Erica reasoned with her, "His roots were always here. He never was completely comfortable among those people, and they abandoned him in his later years. And I think he'd like to be remembered in happier settings."

"Well, perhaps Ben and I can help out somehow."

## DYING DECLARATION

"I'm sure that could be worked out," Erica responded gently. "But right now, this is all just too much for me to deal with. Why don't we meet back here in the morning, discuss it over a late breakfast?"

Amy pulled her coat on, still pouting slightly. She had never been able to take a hint when it was given graciously, even though her sister believed her to be more astute than she let on. She was just more obstinate than she was obtuse. She was the type that would not accept a genteel brush-off, but would continue to impose herself on you until you dropped your polite resistance and ended up being rude and blunt, getting angry at yourself for acting that way and at her for making you. Then she'd sulk and accuse you of being mean to her. Amy Van Zandt was still very much a child inside and not accustomed to not getting her own way. Amy and her sister had never been close, and this was the most they'd seen of each other in two years, but it was obvious they would not be brought closer together just because of their father's death.

Erica collapsed onto the sofa in the sitting room after her sister finally left for her hotel room. It didn't seem fair that everything was going wrong at once, that she had to deal with all these complicated and messy family problems at the same time as she'd just lost her anchor and her rock.

But tomorrow was another day, and she knew that somehow she'd get through it. The panic that the walls were starting to suffocate her and that she didn't know which way to turn was starting to abate. If she could get through the night, she knew that there would be plenty of time to deal with this in the morning. They left for home, dodging the camera crews that tried to stop their Town Car and shove their microphones in their faces.

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Somewhere in the distance she could hear a television blaring, as she collapsed on the sofa in her own home. Soon there would be relatives coming over to express their condolences and offer emotional support; she'd already had several messages waiting for her when they arrived. The news had started to spread, and she could hear them reporting the scene from the street in front of her father's—now probably her—house. That was something one never got used to. The house looked eerie with floodlight casting macabre shadows across the broad lawn. On the news, there were already synopses of her father's life and career, as though they had been working on his obituaries for months. They probably had. The words were by-and-large gracious and pleasant (though she could never tell on such occasions how sincere), and she half-listened in the darkness till her heart grew to heavy within her, and she turned the channel. There was another news story that depressing night, one about the storming of the American embassy in Turkey. Hostages had been taken. Little did she know the death of the ex-president and the terrorist action halfway around the world would become inextricably intertwined in the days to come.