MISTRESS

JAMES PATTERSON

SPECIAL FREE PREVIEW: READ 15 CHAPTERS FREE

DAVID ELLIS
CHAPTER 1

Let’s see what she has in her medicine cabinet. I mean, as long as I’m here.

Careful, though. Before you turn on the light, close the bathroom door. The rest of her apartment is dark. Best to keep it that way.

What do we have here… lotions, creams, moisturizers, lip balm, ibuprofen. What about the meds? Amoxicillin for a sinus infection… lorazepam for anxiety…

Diana has anxiety? What the heck does she have to be anxious about? She’s the most put-together woman I know.

And what’s this? Cerazette for…birth control. She’s on the pill? Diana is on the pill? She never told me that. She isn’t having sex with me. Not yet, anyway. So who is she having sex with?

Diana, every time I think I have you figured out, you
remind me that you’re a mystery. *A mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma*—Joe Pesci’s line from *JFK*, though Winston Churchill first used it in a 1939 radio address to describe Russia. President Roosevelt, who grew very close to Churchill during the war, once wrote to him, *It is fun to be in the same decade with you.*

Diana, it is fun to be in the same decade with you. Now excuse me while I check out your bedroom closet.

Same drill: get inside, close the door, then turn on the light. Keep the light from filtering into the remainder of the condo.


Woodrow Wilson favored white dress shoes with his linen suits. Lincoln had the biggest presidential shoe, a size 14, while Rutherford B. Hayes had the smallest, a size 7.

You’ll have to excuse me. Sometimes my mind wanders. Kind of like Moses through the desert. Except that he had a better excuse. And a speech impediment—unlike me, unless you count putting your foot in your mouth.

Anyway, that’s a long story, so back to our regularly scheduled programming: Lady Diana’s Closet. And what do we have here, hanging behind a row of dresses, hidden from all but the keenest of voyeurs? Hmm…

Leather vests and headgear. Chains and whips. Vibrators of various kinds and colors. One of them is purple and
curved on the end (I'm not sure why). Most of them are shaped like the male organ, but some have appendages for some reason. There are some black beads on a string...what are those for? Nipple rings—I get that, I guess. Creams and lotions. A long yellow feather—

Then I hear it and see it and feel it all at once—movement across the carpet, brushing against my leg, circling me—

“Hey, Cinnamon,” I say after the momentary terror dissipates and the prickling of my spine ceases. Diana's Abyssinian cat, three years old. The word Abyssinian is Ethiopian, but the origin of the breed is believed to be Egyptian. Isn't that weird? Abyssinians have bigger ears and longer tails than most cats. Their hair is lighter at the root than at the tip; only a handful of breeds have hair like that. I told Diana she should have named her cat Caramel, because it more accurately describes the color of her coat. Plus I just like caramel more than cinnamon, especially those candy chews.

Okay, time to get to work. I turn off the closet light before I open the door—still dark in the place. I feel like Paul Newman in Thief.

Start with the bedroom. There's a desk on one side, near the balcony. Next to it, a pair of electrical outlets. I plug the AC adapter into the lower outlet and drag the cord behind the window curtain toward the desk. It looks just like any other AC adapter for a computer or appliance. But it's a high-resolution, motion-activated video recorder with thirty-two hours of memory that will film the entire room in color. It can be switched to continuous recording if necessary, but motion activation is the smarter play here. I like this one be-
cause it doesn’t need a battery, as it’s plugged into the wall. And it doesn’t transmit signals—it only records them to an SD card that can be played on a computer—so it wouldn’t be detected in a bug sweep.

Keeping low, I move out of the bedroom into Diana’s main living space, which has an open floor plan that encompasses a small kitchen area and a large living and dining area. Her place is on the top floor of a condo building in Georgetown, which means she’s paying for location, not square footage.

I don’t want to use another AC adapter; if one is discovered, the other will be found. Diversify, I say. But this one will be more complicated than plugging something into a wall, so I need my night-vision goggles—like the serial killer in The Silence of the Lambs, except I’ve never murdered anyone, much less skinned them.

Murder can be made to look like suicide, and suicide can be made to look like murder.

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Trust me, I’m not as normal as I seem.

Okay, all done. The kitchen looks the same as it did when I entered. I drop Diana’s old smoke detector and my night-
vision goggles into my gym bag and stop for a minute to make sure I haven’t left anything behind.

I check my watch: it’s 9:57 p.m. My instructions were to be done by ten. So I made it with three minutes to spare.

I reach for the doorknob and then it hits me—I’ve made a terrible mistake.

Paul Newman didn’t star in *Thief*. It was James Caan.

How could I mix up Paul Newman and James Caan? Must be the nerves.

I lock up and move quickly down the hallway to the fire escape, accessible with a key. I pop the door open and slip into the night air just as I hear the ding of the elevator down the hallway.
I take the stairs down the fire escape, all six stories, at a slow pace, gripping the railing fiercely. I don’t like heights. Presidents Washington and Jefferson wanted DC to be a “low city.” I’m with them all the way.

In the 1890s, the Cairo Hotel was built on Q Street to a height of 164 feet, towering over its neighbors. In reaction to the uproar that followed, Congress passed a law called the Height of Buildings Act a few years later. But they amended the law in 1910, making it even more restrictive. Now the heights of buildings in the capital are limited to the width of the streets they face plus twenty feet. Most streets in DC are no wider than 110 feet, so most buildings are no higher than 130 feet, which usually means thirteen stories or fewer.

Still too high for me. I can’t stand near ledges. I’m not so afraid of losing my balance or slipping. I’m afraid I’ll jump.
When I reach the bottom, I walk through the parking lot and take the stairs up to the brick path that follows the C&O Canal. Diana lives on a tiny, two-block stretch of 33rd Street between the Potomac River to the south and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal to the north. Hers is the last building before the dead end at the canal, so it’s a secluded walk for me as I come around to the front of her building again.

It’s sticky-hot outside in August. The capital was built on swampland, and our humidity is unbearable this time of year. I don’t blame Congress for staying away.

Two younger guys are standing outside the loft building across the street, smoking cigarettes and checking out my bike.

“Sweet ride,” one of them says. He’s small and mangy, like Joaquin Phoenix in *To Die For*—Nicole Kidman’s breakout role, in my opinion, in which she showed for the first time she could carry a movie.

“You like it?” I ask. I do, too. It’s a 2009 Triumph America. Dual overhead cams, 865-cc, twin four-stroke engine, twin reverse cone pipes, phantom black with chrome detail. Yes, like the one Colin Farrell drove in *Daredevil*. I’m not saying I bought it for that reason. Not saying I didn’t. But yeah, it’s a pretty sweet ride.

“You get this thing out on the open road much?” the guy asks me.

Colin Farrell was terrific in *Phone Booth*. I liked that cop movie he did with Edward Norton and that futuristic movie he did with Tom Cruise, *Minority Report*. He’s underrated as an actor. He should do a movie with Nicole Kidman.

“Yeah, I try to stretch her legs when I can,” I tell the guy.
I’m not supposed to be advertising my presence here, and yet here I am chatting up a couple of guys about my bike.

I look up into the darkness at Diana’s apartment, at the triangular brick balcony that juts out over 33rd Street. The balcony serves more as a garden than anything else. The ledges on the sides are all lined with potted plants and flowers, and some small trees sit on the balcony floor, all of which she treats with loving care.

A light has gone on inside her apartment, illuminating the kitchen window.

“What do you got on the front there?” the guy asks me, kicking my front wheel.

“A 110/90 ME880,” I say. “I like to ride with 880s front and back.”

Diana’s home already? That’s . . . interesting.

“Cool,” says the guy. “My tire guy doesn’t do Metzlers. I’ve been running Avons all these years.”

I look back at the guy. “They handle pretty well so far.”

He asks me for the name of my tire guy. I tell him while he scribbles it down on a scrap of paper. Then I jump on the bike and take one last look up at Diana’s balcony. Good night, Lady Di—

—what—

“No!” I cry.

A body is in free fall from Diana’s balcony, plunging head-first six stories to the ground. I close my eyes and turn away, but I can’t close my ears to the sickening whump of a body hitting the bricks, of bones snapping and crunching.
I jump off my bike and sprint toward her. No. It can’t be. It can’t be her—

“Did you see that?”
“What happened?”

I reach her second, after two women, from a car in the circular driveway, have jumped out and knelt down beside her.

Oh, Diana. Her body lies just short of the street, spread-eagled and facedown. Her luminous hair spills over her crushed face and onto the curb. Blood runs over the curb onto the street. I stand by the two women, looking over their shoulders at the only woman I’ve ever—

Why, Diana? Why would you do this to yourself?
“Did anyone see what happened?” someone shouts.
“That was Diana’s balcony!” someone running toward the building shouts.
A crowd has quickly gathered. Nobody can do anything but stare at her, as though she were a museum object. She is—I can’t say the word, but she isn’t breathing, her body has been crushed, she… isn’t alive.

*Leave her alone,* I say in my head, maybe out loud, too. *Give her space. Let her have some dignity.*

At least it’s dark, which, mercifully, shrouds her in a semblance of privacy. You can’t see her damaged face, can’t see the pain. It is, in a strange way, consistent with Diana’s fierce pride that she would hide her broken face from the public even in death.

Somebody asks about an ambulance. Then ten people at once are on their cell phones. I sit back on my haunches, helpless. There is nothing I can do for her. Then I see, to my right, between the feet of some onlookers, pieces of a broken clay pot and dirt. I even detect a whiff of cinnamon. I look up at her balcony again, not that I can see anything from this angle in the dark. Must be her apple geraniums, which she kept in pots outside during the summer, near the tip of the triangular balcony overlooking the street.

I pull back and part the growing crowd of people, moving back onto 33rd Street, suddenly unable to be part of their morbid curiosity.

I turn and vomit on the street. Before I know it, I’m on all fours on the pavement.

Diana’s hand on my cheek. Diana giggling when she spilled creamer all over herself at that new coffee shop on M Street. Diana showing me her hair a month ago, when she dyed it brown, wondering what I thought, caring about my opinion. That look she had when something was on her
mind but she didn’t want to say anything. Turning and looking at me, realizing it’s me, and smiling. Smiling that carefree smile but maybe not so carefree. She was taking lorazepam, you idiot; how did you miss that? How did you miss the signs?

She needed my help and I wasn’t there for her. I didn’t take the steps necessary to be proactive. It never occurred to me that suicide could be an option.

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“Hey, bro—”

The apple geraniums.

“—dude’s freaking out over here!”

Run, Benjamin, run.

Sirens now, flashing lights cutting through the darkness, sucking away the air—

“Hold steady,” I coach myself. “Hold steady, Benjamin.” I take a deep breath and get to my feet.

“Okay.” I jump on my motorcycle and speed away.
I avoid the highway and take Independence home because I don’t trust myself to drive my bike at a high speed right now. I keep my motorcycle steady and don’t try to pass anybody. I’m looking through cloudy, tear-soaked eyes, and my hands are trembling so feverishly I can hardly keep my grip.

Independence is a slightly more direct route—4.44 miles door-to-door, to be precise, compared to 4.8 miles on the highway—but it’s slightly longer, 15.8 minutes compared to 13.2. This time of night, with traffic more sparse, the gap should narrow. Over the last nine months, the Independence route has varied from twenty-two minutes and eighteen seconds to eleven minutes and five seconds, but I’ve never been able to compare the routes during rush hour because Constitution and Independence have turn restrictions those times of day, so I have to adjust the route, and that obviously
throws the comparisons out the window. Like apples to oranges. Oranges to apples.

Apple geraniums.

Fiona Apple should be a bigger star. She should be as popular as Amy Winehouse was. They remind me of each other, those throaty, soulful voices, but Fiona never seemed to take off after “Criminal.” Not that Amy fared much better, ultimately.

Yeah, the way my mind wanders? It gets worse when I get stressed. Dr. Vance had a fancy phrase for it—*adrenaline-induced emotional sanctuary*—but I always thought he was just trying to justify all the money my father was paying him to “fix” me. It took me a long time before I figured out that I suffered from “Pater Crudelis” disorder.

I take Pennsylvania within a block of the White House and, like everything, like a song or a tree or oxygen, it makes me think of Diana. *He’s so talented,* she’d said of the president. *He understands what we’re trying to do like nobody before him.*

Oh, Diana. Intelligent, caring, idealistic Diana. Did you do this to yourself? Did somebody kill you? Neither possibility makes sense.

But I’m going to figure it out. It’s what I do for a living, right?

An oncoming SUV honks at me as it passes me in the other direction on Constitution. Only two presidents signed the Constitution, Washington and Madison. Madison was also the shortest president. And the first to have previously served in the United States Cong—

I swerve to avoid the Mazda RX-7 in front of me, gripping
the brakes with all the strength my hands can muster. I end up sideways, perpendicular to the cars at my front and rear. Red light means stop, Ben. Focus! You can do this.

*Benjamin, the sooner you learn your limitations, the better.*

You’re not like everyone else, Benjamin. You never were. Even *before*—well, *even before everything happened with your mother.*

You’ll have plenty of *time to make friends when you grow up.*

Diana was my friend. And she could have been much more. She *would* have been.

I can do this. I just need to take some medicine. I just need to get home.

Light turns green. I right the bike and move forward.

Diana Marie Hotchkiss. Marie was her aunt’s name; Diana was her grandmother’s name. Born January 11, 1978, in Madison, Wisconsin, played volleyball and softball, won the award for outstanding Spanish student from Edgewood High School of the Sacred Heart, from which she graduated in 1995—

Honking; someone’s honking at me for something I did; what did I do?

“Shut up and leave me alone!” I yell, not that I expect a response from the car behind me—or that they’ll even hear me.

“*Pull your motorcycle over and kill the engine!*” booms a voice through a loudspeaker.

I look in my rearview mirror and notice for the first time the flashing lights. It’s not an angry motorist.

It’s a cop.

This should be interesting.
I pull my motorcycle to the side of Constitution and kill the engine.

The first reported murder of a cop was in 1792 in New York in what is now the South Bronx. The perpetrator was a guy named Ryer, from a prominent farming family, who was involved in a drunken brawl at the time. Want to hear the funny part?

“How we doing tonight?” says the cop, walking over to me. I’m illuminated by the searchlight from his car, which he’s trained on me.

The funny part is that one of the police precincts in the Bronx is located on Ryer Avenue, named after that same family.

I give him my license and registration. He probably already traced my plates. He already knows who I am.
“You wanna take off your helmet, sir?”
Actually, no, I don’t. But I do it anyway. He takes a long
look in my eyes. It can’t be a pretty sight.

“Do you know why I pulled you over, Mr. Casper?”
Because you can? Because you have the power to stop,
frisk, search, seize, and arrest pretty much whoever you want
whenever the mood strikes you? Because you’re a consti-
pated, impotent, Napoleonic transvestite?

“I lost control back there a bit,” I concede.

“You just about caused an accident,” he says. He has a
handlebar mustache. Is this cop on loan from the Village
People?

I don’t favor facial hair, but even if I did, I wouldn’t shape
it like a handlebar. I’d probably go with the two-day stubble
Don Johnson wore in Miami Vice. That would be cool.

“You crossed the centerline three times in one block,” he
says.

I decide to exercise my right against self-incrimination. And
pray that he doesn’t ask me what’s in my bag—like night-
vision goggles or a used smoke alarm or some rudimentary
tools. Or the body frosting I took from Diana’s closet.

I need to get home. I need time to think, to figure this out.

“Have you been drinking tonight, sir?”

He’s standing pretty close to me. One of the hazards of
pulling over a motorcyclist. I could reach over in jest and
grab his baton or the handcuffs on his belt, maybe his hol-
stered weapon, before he could say doughnut. He probably
wouldn’t think it’s funny.

But if he gets too inquisitive, I might not be joking. I may
have mentioned that sometimes I don’t trust myself.
“Sober as a priest,” I answer. Actually, my priest when I was growing up, Father Calvin, was a raging alcoholic.

“Something upsetting you tonight?” he asks.

Well, the night started off okay, when I successfully planted surveillance equipment in the home of the woman I love. It took a turn for the worse when she later plummeted to her death. *HOW DOES THAT SOUND, COP?*

“Fight with my girlfriend,” I explain. “Sorry about my riding. I was just a little worked up. I’m totally sober and I’ll drive home carefully. I’m on the Hill, just five minutes away.”

I can play normal when I have to. He looks me over for a while, watches my eyes, and then tells me to sit tight. He takes my license and registration back to his vehicle. He isn’t going to find anything interesting. I don’t have a criminal record—not one that he’d find, anyway.

Ulysses S. Grant was once stopped for speeding on his horse. The fine was twenty dollars and he insisted on paying it. Franklin Pierce was once arrested for hitting an old lady with his horse, but the charges were dropped.

“You’re a reporter,” the cop informs me when he returns. “The Capital Beat. I’ve read your stuff before. Thought I recognized the name.”

Actually, I’m the White House correspondent, and I also own the company. The benefits of having a wealthy grandfather. Does that mean he won’t write me a ticket?

Nope. He cites me for reckless driving and crossing the centerline. It seems duplicative to me, but now is not the time to engage in a debate about logic. I just want him to let me go, which he’s going to do, albeit with tickets for mov-
ing violations. That’s the good news. The other good news is that, in a bizarre way, this cop has calmed me down, forced me somewhere toward normal.

The bad news is that now I’ve been placed near Diana’s building within an hour of her death.
I don’t sleep but I dream: of a gun on a bathroom floor; of a woman prone on a sidewalk; of blood spatter on a shower curtain; of vacant, lifeless eyes; of a scream nobody can hear; of a blood droplet in free fall, taking the shape of a sphere before striking a surface without a sound.

“Diana,” I say aloud. My head pops up. I get up from the second-floor landing and rush downstairs. Did I hear her voice?

“Diana?”

I check the kitchen, the family room, the bathroom.

Outside, the darkness is gently dissolving. Dawn. Seven hours have passed in what felt like seven decades, torturous, agonizing. My body is covered in sweat and my pulse is just starting to slow. My limbs ache and I’m breathing as if someone is standing on my chest.
I race to the front door and look through the keyhole: a white panel truck is parked directly outside my townhouse. Coincidence? A couple of joggers are running through Garfield Park, across the street. My neighbor’s giant schnauzer, Oscar, is urinating on my brick walkway. Giant schnauzers freak me out. People should only have the small kind. They don’t make sense being that tall. They remind me of Wilford Brimley for some reason. That guy’s been sixty years old my entire life.

President Johnson had at least three dogs, mostly beagles, including two he named Him and Her. George Washington kept foxhounds, but he loved all dogs. During the Battle of Germantown, his troops came upon a terrier that belonged to British general Howe, his sworn enemy. His troops wanted to keep it as a trophy, but Washington bathed it, fed it, and then called a cease-fire so that one of his men could return the pooch to his owner across enemy lines under a flag of truce. FDR had a dog he took every—

Just then, a kid appears out of nowhere and hurls a newspaper at my front door.

I duck down, which makes no sense, then silently curse Paper Boy—he’ll get his, one day soon—and then decide that I should probably have taken my medicine last night. But no time for that now. I need to get out of here.

First I need to shower, because I stink with sweat and that vanilla body frosting from Diana’s closet. I think you’re supposed to have somebody else in the room when you use it. Calvin Coolidge liked to have Vaseline rubbed on his head while he ate breakfast in bed. “Vaseline” is second only to “Interstate Love Song” as the Stone Temple Pilots’ best song.
I probably should have taken a pill last night, but I don’t like the side effects, which include mild nausea, ringing in the ears, and, oh yeah, impotence. *It keeps you from getting down, and it keeps you from getting it up.*

Not that impotence is my number one problem right now. You need another person in the room for that endeavor, too, last I checked. I’ve had sex with eight women a total of ninety-nine times. The shortest encounter, from foreplay to climax, was three minutes and roughly fourteen seconds. I say *roughly* because sometimes it’s a little awkward to go straight to the stopwatch afterward, so you estimate: it takes five seconds to withdraw and between five and ten seconds to pay her a compliment before checking your wrist discreetly.

The longest encounter, if you’re wondering, was forty-seven minutes and roughly thirty seconds. Taking all my encounters together, and using round numbers, the mean duration is twenty-one minutes, the median is eighteen minutes, and the mode is seventeen. My math tutor, Miss Greenlee, would be proud. Because every time with her was over thirty minutes.

I’ve never had a long-term girlfriend, though. For some reason, most of them thought I wasn’t romantic.

Until Diana. We connected. We’re all puzzle pieces on a huge board, and she and I, well, our jagged edges just fit together. Even if she hadn’t figured it out yet.

I turn on the shower water but whip my head back around. What was that?

I throw a towel around my waist and rush to the bedroom window, overlooking F Street. The white panel truck is still
parked directly across from my town house. My quaint little
tree-lined street is blossoming as the city awakens. More
dogs are running around now in Garfield Park, but not that
giant schnauzer.

I walk to my staircase and remain still, listening for any-
thing on the two floors below.

Nothing.

Satisfied, I return to the bedroom. A blast of music erupts,
thrashing guitars, thumping bass, almost knocking me to the
carpet. “Fine Again,” by Seether. I take a moment to recover
from what could have been a coronary. It must be 6:30 a.m.
I have my clock radio alarm set to DC101.

I turn the shower water past hot and let the scalding water
punish my neck. My eyelids are heavy and my legs are rub-
bery. Staying up all night has handicapped me now, when I
need to focus more than ever.

Because now I’m going back to Diana’s apartment.
I take my motorcycle back the same way I came last night. The streets are relatively quiet, as it’s not quite seven in the morning, plus Congress isn’t in session, which means its coattails—staffers, interest groups, lobbyists, even reporters—have thinned out considerably. We’re still packed into the city like sardines, but everything’s relative. I can feel the heat index rise as I move down Constitution again. It’s going to be hotter than yesterday.

There’s so much I don’t know at this point. I don’t know what Diana was doing yesterday, either in the daytime or in the evening. I just know that my instruction was to be out of her apartment by ten o’clock.

Ten o’clock was Calvin Coolidge’s typical bedtime. He usually slept until somewhere between seven and nine the next morning, plus he took an afternoon nap. He used to
joke, When I’m asleep, I can’t make any bad decisions. President Arthur rarely went to bed before two in the morning. President Polk routinely worked late into the night and rose early, but then he died from exhaustion three months after completing his one term. He did purchase California, though, which some people consider a plus.

What happened after I slipped out of her apartment a couple minutes before ten? The elevator door I heard opening—was that Diana? Was she alone? And why was it so important that I be gone by ten?

I feel my pulse ratchet up as I cruise along K Street, driving along the Georgetown Waterfront Park, watching some kayakers on the Potomac, approaching 33rd. Truman was our thirty-third president but the thirty-second to hold the office, as Grover Cleveland was elected to two nonconsecutive terms, losing his reelection bid to Benjamin Harrison in 1888 even though he won the popular vote. But then he thwarted Harrison’s reelection bid and won a second term four years after his first, when Harrison was unable to campaign because of his wife’s illness.

Maybe I should have taken my medication.

I take a right onto 33rd and ride north toward the canal and Diana’s apartment building. I park my ride a block short and walk up the street, sweating from the humidity—already—and probably some nerves, too.

I feel like Bruce Willis in Pulp Fiction, returning to his apartment after he killed his boxing opponent and betrayed a mobster. If John Travolta were waiting for me inside, I’d ask him why he did Battlefield Earth. If I had a Bruce Willis film festival, I would watch The Sixth Sense, Die Hard,
Unbreakable, and Pulp. And probably Ocean's Twelve, even though he just played himself. Hey, it's my film festival, my rules.

This could be risky. I have to be careful about being seen. I have a key to her place, but some people might recognize me. I wish I had one of those realistic masks like they wore in the Mission: Impossible movies, the ones they dramatically rip off to reveal their true identities. But it's just lonely old Benjamin. I don't particularly stand out. I've become good at blending into the woodwork. People used to tell me I look like my father, which they meant as a compliment, even though I welcomed it like a tetanus shot. Diana said I looked like Johnny Depp. Maybe I should be disguised as a pirate. Or John Dillinger. Or Willy Wonka.

As I get closer, I feel my chest constricting, my throat and mouth drying up, my limbs becoming unsteady. This is where Diana's life ended last night. It hasn't really sunk in yet. I've been punched, but the bruise hasn't yet formed. My brain knows it, and my body is physically responding, but somehow it doesn't seem real yet.

And then it does. Then it crystallizes. The image of her falling comes into focus and I want to rewind time, like Superman did to save Lois Lane, and find out what was happening with Diana that I didn't know, what caused someone to kill her or prompted her to take her own life. Tell me, Diana, give me something, tell me how I can figure—

A man in civilian clothes is standing very close to the spot where Diana landed, looking up at the balcony. Unless he's an architect or a real estate agent or a big fan of balconies, he's probably one of DC's finest. He looks over at me and I
see the mustache, which seals it. This guy's a cop, investigating Diana's death.

And having lost myself in my thoughts, I've made a terrible blunder. I'm only ten feet from him, and now I've seen him and come to a complete, dead stop in response, in the middle of the sidewalk. Which, of course, makes me stick out to him. He turns and looks at me. I stare back. Neither of us says a word. This is getting worse with every second that passes. This is what Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction* called an uncomfortable silence. I wonder if he can hear the throbbing of my pulse.

It's way too late to start up again and walk past him casually. Headlong flight is an option, and, looking the guy over, I see that I could probably take him in a footrace, but all in all that seems like a last-resort idea, and maybe he saw me park my bike, so even if I got away clean, it would take him one call on his radio to know all about me—including the fact that I was in the neighborhood last night, driving erratically and acting upset.

Oh, this is really going well, Ben. Nice idea, coming here.

He takes a step toward me. He folds a stick of gum into his mouth and nods to me.

“Morning,” he says with a practiced calm. But I can tell. He can see it in my eyes. He’s better than handlebar-mustache patrol guy from last night. His antennae are up. He knows. *He knows.*

What now, smart guy?

“You live around here?” he asks, like it’s just idle curiosity, like he’s about to ask me for directions to the Washington Monument.
I don’t answer. Instead, my left hand reaches around behind my back. I move casually, with a smile on my face to keep his threat radar low.

In one seasoned, fluid motion, he disengages the cover on his hip holster and eases his hand over the revolver.
CHAPTER 8

Turns out this cop’s a lefty. I guess the holster on his left hip should have been a clue. President Garfield was a lefty. So was Truman. In the modern era—

I brandish my MPD press pass, which was folded up in my back pocket. “Capital Beat.”

The cop takes a breath and decelerates, releasing his grip on his sidearm. “Jesus Christ,” he says.

“No. Just a reporter.”

Actually, Garfield was ambidextrous. He could write ancient Greek with one hand while writing Latin with the other. Lefty was Al Pacino’s character in Donnie Brasco. In my opinion, it was his finest acting job, restrained and despairing.

The cop does a quick read of my credentials. They’re issued annually by the Metropolitan Police Department. “Ben-
jamin Casper,” he reads. “Well, you sure as shit gave me a nervous moment there, Benjamin Casper.”

Great. He said my name twice, quadrupling the likelihood that he’ll remember it later.

President Buchanan often cocked his head to the left because one eye was nearsighted and one was farsighted.

“You’re supposed to keep your credentials in plain sight, pal.”

“Guilty as charged.” I nod in the direction of Diana’s building. “Jumper last night?”

He looks me over again. “PIO will release something later. Still working on identification.”

That’s a dodge if I ever heard one, and White House correspondents hear them every day. Most detectives or uniforms will feed you the basics even before the public information officer releases an official statement, especially if you promise to spell their names correctly in the story. That tells me something: this case is being treated differently.

The area where Diana landed is roped off with yellow tape. Pieces of the clay pot and some soil from the apple geraniums still remain. There is the bloodstain, which is amassed primarily on the sidewalk, with traces beyond it onto the curb.

*Once blood has left the body, it behaves as a fluid, and all physical laws, including gravity, apply.*

“Help me out, Detective,” I say. “No leads at all?”

He’s already begun to tune me out. Now that he makes me for a reporter, I’m about as welcome as a flatulent cockroach.

But my question gets his attention. He turns to me. “Leads on what? On a lady jumping from her balcony?”
“Have it your way,” I say, sounding like a reporter getting the stiff-arm.

“Sorry, Benjamin Casper. This is dark for now.”

What’s with repeating my damn name?

I decide to cut my losses and beat it. This was a net loss, all told. I didn’t get into Diana’s apartment, and one of the investigating detectives said my name three times, virtually guaranteeing it would be burned into his memory. But at least I used my reporter angle to avoid a catastrophic misstep.

And the trip wasn’t a total waste. I came away with three things I didn’t previously know. First, the Metropolitan Police Department is treating Diana’s death as a homicide investigation. Second, they’re acting like they’re not, for some reason.

And third, there are two guys wearing sunglasses, parked down the street in a Lexus sedan, who seem awfully interested in me and this cop.
CHAPTER 9

I kick the Triumph to life, throw on my shades, and turn in the direction of the Lexus with the two guys just to get a quick look. Each of them is Caucasian, steel-jawed, muscular, and constipated. Okay, constipated is just a guess. I don’t know their deal, but now is not the time to find out—not when I lack the element of surprise, they’re two and I’m one, and they’re in a car and I’m on a bike. Besides, I’ve aroused enough suspicion for one morning.

I drive back to my house slowly, giving them a chance to follow me. They don’t. So maybe they have no interest in Diana. Maybe they just wanted a glimpse of the Potomac from their vantage point. Maybe they’re bird-watchers.

Diana would ride with me on the Triumph sometimes. It was the best time I ever had on the bike, with her arms nestled around my waist, her chin on my shoulder, sharing an
adventure. I haven’t yet come to grips with the fact that she’ll never ride with me again.

We were going to be a couple. I know that. The best couples are the ones who start out as friends first, like Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan in When Harry Met Sally. Except let’s face it—she was way too cute for him. Anyway, most people come together through sexual attraction and then try to figure out if they’re compatible. The sex distracts them, then they realize too late that their pieces don’t fit together. Diana and I, we were different. We were pals. Buds. True, I wanted more, but her resistance forced us to develop a different kind of relationship. Once we got to the romantic part, we would’ve already checked off all the other boxes.

Or maybe I was just dreaming. I’ll never know for sure.

Because somebody killed her. I’m sure of it now. She loved those apple geraniums. Even if she wanted to die, she would’ve taken care to step around them before taking the plunge. She wouldn’t have willy-nilly barreled over the side and taken them with her.

I can imagine a cop laughing at my analysis. The Case of the Fallen Geraniums. Someone in this room is a florist!

You’d have to know her like I do.

Anyway, the video surveillance in her apartment will tell the story. I’ll just have to wait until the police clear out—

Wait. Wait. Did Diana know somebody wanted to kill her?

Is that why she asked me to put the surveillance equipment in her apartment? She never volunteered why, so I never asked. But it makes all the sense in the world.

Why would Diana go to the trouble of having me install
eavesdropping devices in her apartment if she were going to commit suicide the same night?

She wouldn't. That confirms it. Diana Marie Hotchkiss was murdered.

Oh, Diana. Were you afraid for your life? Why? What did you do? What situation were you stuck in? Did you know something you shouldn't have? Did you do something you shouldn't have?

And why didn't you trust me enough to tell me?

I should go to the police with this. It's a critical piece of information. They'll know Diana was afraid of somebody, plus the surveillance cameras should solve the crime.

But I'm left with the same problem I've had since the moment I left her that night, dead on the sidewalk: I was in her apartment only minutes before she fell. And I fled the scene.

The minute I go to the police, I become the prime suspect in her murder.
They come at me all of a sudden, faceless, but big and strong, with quick hands that take hold of me, seize me by the neck and the wrist, forcing me into submission as my feet slip on the wet bathroom tile, placing the gun in my hand but gripping it fiercely, maintaining control, pressing it against my temple. I resist, moving my hand, angling my head away from the barrel, but their fingers grip my hair, force my head forward, press the barrel against my temple, and reach for the trigger. I stretch my fingers outward, off the trigger, but they’re too strong, they’re too strong and I’m too weak, and I see the blood spatter on the shower curtain before I hear the bullet, before I feel it penetrate my brain, before I know that I am dead.

I lurch forward and almost break my laptop computer in half. I expel a loud breath and take a moment to reorient myself. I’m sitting in the corner of my bedroom. I was online
doing research for a story and I guess I dozed off. I’ve been
doing that a lot since Diana died—not sleeping in any reg-
ular fashion but rather nodding off until the violence of my
dreams shakes me awake. I can count on one hand the num-
ber of hours I’ve slept in the last forty-eight.

I place the laptop, hot in my sweaty lap, onto the carpet
and rise to a crouch. I stay that way, keeping low, as I move
toward the window, careful to stay below the sight line.

Then I rise up just enough to look down at the street level.
The sun, recently risen, sends stripes through the trees into
the park and onto F Street below.

The white panel truck is still parked along the curb across
from my house, two days running now. I have passed it several
times in the days since Diana’s death. Never have I seen a sin-
gle person inside. Then again, I can only see inside the driver’s
compartment. I have no idea what’s going on in the back.

One of my neighbors, a grad student named Alicia who
won’t let you forget she studied the classics at Radcliffe, is
walking her Doberman along the brick sidewalk across the
street. A Frisbee sails to a rest at her feet and she pauses, con-
cerned, as another dog, a yellow Lab, races to retrieve it. She
hustles her Doberman away to avoid a confrontation. The Lab
manages to scoop up the Frisbee in his mouth and gallops back
to his owner, who is standing in the middle of Garfield Park.

No sign of Oscar, the giant schnauzer.

Someone’s playing Frisbee with his dog this time of morn-
ing? The guy is big and athletic—is he one of the guys from
the Lexus a couple days ago, watching me and the cop out-
side Diana’s building? Could be. I don’t know.

I turn away from the window and catch a whiff of myself.
I didn’t shower yesterday. I don’t remember much of what I did yesterday, which is not to say that I have amnesia but rather that it feels like a blur. Somewhere in there, while hunkered down in the house—the benefits of owning an online newspaper—I banged out an article on a power struggle between the president’s chief of staff and the secretary of homeland security, something I dug up from a source inside DHS, an assistant to the deputy secretary, one of the few women I ever dated who actually liked me when it was over.

Music pops on over a DJ’s voice—my clock radio. Six thirty in the morning in the nation’s capital, and it’s going to be a great day, he tells me.

No, it’s not. Today’s going to be a bad day.

I move slowly, trudging along, bitter and wounded. Over the last two days, I have veered wildly between depression and bitterness and fear, depending on whether I consider that (a) Diana is gone forever; (b) someone violently took her from this world; (c) someone might have similar thoughts toward me; or (d) somehow, in some way I can’t fathom, I am being set up for Diana’s murder.

The instinct comes naturally to me, bred into me since childhood, to turn inward, to hide, to keep everything and everybody out.

Benjamin, the sooner you learn your limitations, the better.
You’ll have plenty of time to make friends when you grow up.

Diana was my friend. And that’s why I can’t stay in the house today.

Today is Diana’s visitation in her hometown of Madison, Wisconsin, and I owe it to her to attend.

Even if it gets me killed.
I shower, shave, put on a suit, and take the Triumph over to the airfield for my flight to Madison. The fresh air does me some good, snaps me out of my funk for the moment. I need my head screwed on tight.

I park my bike and walk right through the lobby out onto the tarmac. Potomac Airfield is just a few minutes from downtown DC, yet there are still no fences, no cameras, no real security checkpoints. Go figure. The guy who runs this place has some kind of guts. But when he’s got an empty spot, he’ll let me tie down or hangar for practically nothing, as long as I talk him up with the other correspondents. Politics in the District isn’t limited to elected officials.

I walk over to my plane, a Cessna 172N Skyhawk, 1979 model. I bought it two years ago, tapping the trust fund my grandfather left me. Never knew the guy, but Grandpa did
well in the convention business and even better in the stock market, and I have a plane, an online newspaper, and a pot of money invested in bonds to show for it.

The Cessna’s a beauty. Four seats with just enough cargo space. Blue stripes, the color of a peaceful sky. The color of Diana’s eyes.

I’m going to say good-bye to you today, Diana.

President Kennedy was the first to use the plane that became known as Air Force One, a modified Boeing 707. He didn’t want an overtly military look, so he went as far as to remove the words Air Force from the side of the fuselage. Kennedy flew in it the first time to attend Eleanor Roosevelt’s funeral in Hyde Park, New York. His last time on the plane was his flight to Dallas in November of 1963. President Johnson took the oath of office on board that aircraft.

I remove the chocks, the triangular blocks that prevent the wheels from moving. I walk around to remove the wing and tail tie-downs. I get a funny look from a pilot tying his plane down next to me. Most pilots just use chocks for short stops of an hour or so and only use tie-downs if the plane remains outside overnight or longer. I use both. You can never be too safe.

President Kennedy fantasized about his own death. He talked about assassination frequently and even reportedly made a playful home movie about it.

The routine of the preflight inspection comforts me, freeing my mind from weightier subjects. No frost on the wings—fat chance in this sweltering August heat. Sufficient oil; external lights illuminated. I’ve already called in the flight plan, so I won’t have an unexpected air force escort.
The SFRA—the Special Flight Rules Area all around the District—isn’t really a big deal unless some idiot pilot forgets to notify anyone that he’ll be flying through. Then he just might have the nation’s finest airmen using him for target practice.

Cargo door secure. Rudder control and elevator control cables okay. VOR antennas in good condition. The VOR antennas, radio beacons that create the “highways” in the sky, are crucial to instrument-guided flight. With two or more bearings to or from a station, I can triangulate my position on a map—but only if my antennas are working properly.

One of Kennedy’s favorite poems was “I Have a Rendezvous with Death.” He would often ask his wife to recite it to him.


I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—

Or apple geraniums, tumbling to the sidewalk six stories down.
A blood droplet in free fall will take the shape of a sphere.
A crackle of muted static, frantic squawks from the radio.
To my right, the pilot who shot me the funny look is scream-
ing and pointing. I hear a strange loud thrumming, like the metro rumbling by the Eastern Market while I walked with you, Diana, in the cherry blossom–scented spring sunlight—

No!

I slam on the brakes. The prop on the front of my Skyhawk nearly takes the wingtip off a Piper Mirage as it taxis past me. Jesus, Ben, wake up!

The three most important things to remember when you’re in the cockpit, Benjamin. Fly the plane. Fly the plane. Fly the plane.

Breathe, Ben.

My heart creeps back down my throat to its cage in my chest, and I taxi out for takeoff with trembling hands.

I have a rendezvous with death.
I take a rental car from the Dane County Regional Airport to this place, the Partridge Funeral Home, which is bordered on the north by its cemetery, on the south by residential housing, and across the street by some kind of forest preserve or park. The building looks like an elementary school, a one-story structure of faded brown brick with simple shrubbery and a small lawn that’s withering in the blasting summer heat.

I slow my pace as I approach the front door. Through the glass door I see a blown-up photograph, placed on an easel, of Diana from long ago, a high schooler in her purple homecoming dress, her hair poofy and sprayed, wearing a gaudy white corsage and, as always, that carefree, crooked smile.

A tremble runs through my body. I stifle the instinct to turn and run, to return to the capital. But I have to do this.
There are some things in life you just have to do. That from my dear father as he knotted my tie on the morning of Mother's funeral. I always thought that was a stupid thing to say, but now I guess I understand what he meant.

I enter the building, take one more look at the photo of the smiling Diana, and follow the directions on a sign. At the end of the hallway, a large parlor area hums with the quiet, respectful tones of those paying their last respects. There are flowers everywhere. More photographs are displayed throughout the room: Diana as a newborn; as a toddler in a Halloween princess costume; as a teenager setting a volleyball; as a graduate in a posed yearbook photo, her eyes full of promise as they look off into the distance. In the middle of the room, several women who look to be Diana's age gather around a laptop computer that plays a slide show of images.

Where's the casket? With my question comes relief. I'm not sure I'm ready to see her lifeless. It was one thing to see her facedown in the dark; it would be another to see her posed in cruel artificial lighting, broken and damaged and on display.

Then it hits me. Diana's body isn't in Madison. It's in DC, in the custody of the Metropolitan Police Department. They haven't released the corpse. For now, they're only having a visitation, to be followed by a funeral at a future time after they determine the cause of death.

Just as they did with Mother.

To the far right of the room, an elderly couple and a guy in his midthirties shake hands with well-wishers. Her parents and brother, a receiving line.
I do another survey of the room. About thirty people here and I don’t recognize a soul. It’s probably asking a lot for people from DC to trek out here to Wisconsin. Most people don’t have a trust fund, as I do.

A woman in a crisp black suit, somewhere around forty, stands in a corner, looking at a collage of photos of Diana. Except she’s not really looking. Her eyes move casually about the room, keeping an eye on the entrance. She’s chosen the corner that maximizes her view of the entire parlor. She avoids eye contact with me when I try to establish it. She’s pleasant-looking and unremarkable, which is smart—she’s a good choice, somebody who won’t stick out. Whoever sent her, they aren’t stupid.

I mean, in The Firm, one of the henchmen, the one who killed Gary Busey and the lawyers in the Caymans, and who tried to kill Tom Cruise—that guy was an albino. If you were going to pick someone to anonymously carry out your wet work, would you choose an albino? Anybody, but anybody, could identify him: Well, let’s see…don’t remember much, ’cept, oh, yeah, he had white hair and red eyes and was completely pale.

This woman here—dirty-blond hair, normal-looking, medium height, simple black outfit, etc. She could be anybody.

I take a breath. Okay. I can do this.

I stand in a small line of people waiting to speak with Diana’s family, my heartbeat accelerating. Why would an albino go into acting in the first place? Are there a lot of roles out there for people lacking pigment? Maybe you figure you have a niche, and you do minor roles just to put food on
the table, awaiting that one part, that film that will define your career, *The Color of Nothing*, the story of the albino kid from Detroit who everyone said wouldn’t amount to anything, who lifted himself up by his bootstraps working at carnivals and tanning salons until he rose to prominence as Alfie the Clown, the star of a Nickelodeon—

“Hello.”

I turn to see a woman standing behind me, alone, dressed in a loose-fitting blouse and blue jeans, more casual than I might have expected for a visitation. She looks to be about Diana’s age, so I’m guessing local, a high school classmate or neighbor.

“Hi,” I manage. It comes out weak, through a full throat.

“I’m Emma.”

“Ben.”

“You’re from DC?” Emma asks. She’s a tad overweight, a round stomach, possibly pregnant, but I don’t dare ask. I’m not *that* stupid.

I nod. “You?”

“High school,” says Emma. “I still live in town. My husband’s a math professor at the university. Do you work at the same PR firm as Diana?”

PR firm? Diana didn’t work at a PR firm.

“Yes,” I answer. “I do.”

She shakes her head—bemusement, not admiration. “That must be something, living out there. All the fighting and spinning and talking heads.”

“Diana—Diana talked about it a lot?”

“Oh, I don’t know about ‘a lot.’ We’d lost touch. I’d see her when she came back in town, maybe once a year around
holidays, that sort of thing.” She smiles absently, recalling a memory. “I remember when she graduated from UVA—”

She didn’t graduate from UVA. She didn’t even go to UVA.

“—and she took that job on the Hill.”

She didn’t take a job on the Hill after college.

Here: Diana was a sophomore at Wake Forest, a poli-sci major, when she got pregnant. The history professor who knocked her up talked her into an abortion. She complied, it tortured her, and she dropped out of school and moved to DC. She was a housekeeper at then-congressman Craig Carney’s apartment. Then, history repeating itself, she started an affair with Congressman Carney. He recognized her brains as well as her beauty, and when Carney became deputy director of the CIA he elevated her to her current position as a CIA White House liaison. He also put her up in a nice place in Georgetown. The affair ended, Diana picked up the rental payments on her own, and she kept the job with the CIA.

“That’s what she called it, the Hill. She was so excited. She said she might run for Congress someday.” Emma shakes her head, lifts her shoulders in frustration. “What—I mean, does anyone know why she would take her own life?”

I look up at the ceiling. This is an interesting development.

“Sometimes,” I say, “you just don’t know a person.”
George Hotchkiss is retired, a former middle manager with Madison Gas and Electric. He was born in pre–World War II London and came to America in the 1950s to study engineering at Purdue University. There he met Bonnie Sturgis, whom he married on November 23, 1963, the day after JFK's assassination.

He’s also a domineering, violent prick, according to Diana.

“George Hotchkiss,” he says to me with a dour expression, slowly extending his hand. He looks like he once had significant upper body strength, probably pumped iron, but now has about twenty pounds layered over that flabby muscle.

“Ben Casper, Mr. Hotchkiss. I’m very—”

“Say the name again?”

That stops me a moment. “Benjamin . . . Casper.”

It doesn’t register with him. “How did you know Di?”
Cognizant of Emma, whom I’d just told that I worked with Diana, I keep it vague. “I was a friend of hers in DC,” I say. “She was wonderful,” I add, to change the subject. “The best.”

He takes the measure of me. I don’t get the sense he’s coming back with a positive read. The feeling is mutual.

“She never mentioned you,” he informs me, which is sweet of him.

“Well, she loved you very much, sir.” That’s a lie. Diana couldn’t wait to get out of Madison. It had nothing to do with the town and everything to do with her parents.

Moving right along. Diana’s mother, Bonnie, is no picnic, either. She appears to be a couple of vodka martinis past the intersection of sober and appropriate. Her eyes are bloodshot and her words are a bit slurred. I’m offended for Diana’s sake. A mother should be strong for her daughter at a time like this, right?

We have to be strong today, Ben. It’s what Mother would have wanted.

Well, maybe I’m being too judgmental. Everyone grieves differently.

“I don’t remember ever hearing your name,” Bonnie tells me.

“Right, your husband mentioned.”

Next up, brother Randy. Diana had a weakness for the kid. He had a rough patch in his early twenties. He’s supposedly interning now at a local TV news station in the sports department, though as I look at him—short, rough complexion, small, liquid eyes, hair in all directions—I see that he has a face for radio.
“She talked about you all the time,” I say, which is a stretch. “All good.”
“I doubt that.”
I almost laugh. “It’s a very nice visitation.”
“Wake,” he says.
“I’m sorry?”
“It’s a wake. We’re Catholic. We call it a wake.”
Well, then. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”
His eyes narrow. “You knew her how?”
“We were friends.”
“Good friends?”
I think of many ways to answer that but just say, “Yeah.”
“Hmph.” He nods slowly. “Well, if you were good friends with her, Mike—”
Ben. My name’s Ben.
“—then maybe you can tell me why she would kill herself.”
Another one I could answer many ways. What does he expect me to say? How about, Murder can be made to look like suicide, and suicide can be made to look like murder. I opt for respectful silence instead.
“So maybe not such a good friend.” He dismisses me with a pat on the arm. “Thanks for coming, Mike.”
I don’t say anything in response, though I’d like to. This guy just lost his sister, so he gets a long rope.
So! That was the family. Can’t imagine why Diana didn’t like coming back home.
The fortyish woman in the stylish black suit is still loitering at the other end of the room. She looks up every time someone new enters the parlor and studies him or her a mo-
ment. She finally catches on that I’m watching her, but she still won’t lock eyes with me.

Detective LaTaglia did the same thing at Mother’s visitation. Except she didn’t watch the other people entering and exiting the funeral home in Rockville, Maryland. She didn’t even watch my father.

She watched only me.

You’re a strong little boy, Benjamin. Eight years old and all grown up! Your mother would be proud.

She loved you a lot, didn’t she?

You loved her, too, right?

“They’re grieving.”

I spin around. It’s Emma again, the possibly pregnant high school friend. She likes to sneak up on me.

“The family,” she says. “Especially Randy. He can be nice, believe it or not. But it’s gotta be tough for him right now.”

It must be tough, Ben. Not being able to give your mother a proper Christian burial. They say your soul doesn’t go to heaven until your body is buried.

“Yeah,” I tell Emma. “It must be tough.”

But here’s the thing, Ben. We can’t let your mother be buried until we figure out what happened to her.

Do you know what happened to her, Ben? I kinda think you do.

Emma smiles at me, subdued for the occasion. “A bunch of people are getting together later,” she says. “Someone rented a room at Jack’s. If you want to stop by?”

I glance back at black-suit lady. For the moment, at least, she is gone.

“I just might do that,” I tell Emma.
Jack’s Pub is an off-campus bar populated by grown-ups and students from UW who have decided they’re too mature to be hanging out at a campus bar. They would be the outcasts, the rebels, the ones who didn’t go Greek, didn’t play a sport, didn’t join the student council or any of the clubs, who lived off campus and made the decision to rebel before they knew what it was they were rebelling against.

They would be me.

Someone rented the back room so we could celebrate the life of Diana in the proper way, meaning with alcohol. In my experience—as an adult—wakes and funerals provide an opportunity for reunions, and despite the depressing premise for the occasion, people are generally happy to reconnect with old friends.

The back room is all brick, with televisions in the corners,
well lit, full of maybe fifty or sixty people, with music from the ’90s—a rap song, then a dance song—playing overhead. Almost everyone in here is the same age. They are, presumably, members of the class of ’95 from Edgewood High School of the Sacred Heart, or their significant others.

I love that PC term “significant other.” It means you’re someone special—you’re significant!—but either you can’t get married because you’re gay, which nowadays is only true in some states, or you’re unmarried and for some reason object to the word boyfriend or girlfriend. The next time the person you’re with says, “I love you,” respond by saying, “You’re very, very significant to me.”

I slip between some people and head toward the bar when I hear someone say, “That’s the guy who worked with Diana at the PR firm.” I turn to a group of people looking my way, including Emma and Randy, sitting on a bar stool in the center of the pack.

“Is that right?” Randy says too loudly. He’s had more than his share already tonight. “Hey, Mike—”

Ben. My name’s Ben.

“—what was the name of that PR firm again?”

In Spy Game, Robert Redford taught Brad Pitt the fine points of espionage, including how to recruit foreigners to be undercover spies for the United States. Don’t lie to them, he advised Brad, because from that point on, that lie will have to be true.

I wave a hand. “I don’t want to talk business.”

“I don’t wanna talk business, either, Mike. I just wanna know the name of that PR firm you worked at with my sister.”

I prefer some of Pitt’s earlier roles—the felon in Thelma &
Louise and the stoner in True Romance. He was great in Seven, too.

I move to the bar. Randy calls after me, “Hey, Mike,” and I hear Emma say, “I thought his name was Ben,” and then Randy calls, “Hey, Ben!”

I order a vodka and pay too much for it. Then I head back, trying to decide if I should talk to Randy or not. That is, in fact, my primary reason for sticking around Madison tonight. I’m a reporter, after all, and if I’m looking for the skinny on someone, the chance to talk to that someone’s brother is irresistible.

“There he is—Mike-or-Ben.” Randy salutes me by raising his pint. He’s goading me. But I’m not in the mood.

“I prefer Ben-or-Mike,” I answer. A couple of ladies in the group like that. Randy doesn’t, but that’s too bad for Randy. It’s my parting shot, so I part.

I see the lady in the black suit nursing a Bud Light at a corner table, fending off a couple of boozers who think she’s the cat’s meow.

I stop dead. Cinnamon. Who’s taking care of Diana’s cat?

The lady in black senses a hitch in my giddyap. She doesn’t know why, but it interests her. She’s pretty good, but not as good as Detective LaTaglia thirty years ago.

Tell me what happened, Ben, and your mother’s soul can go to heaven.

Now, Robert Redford, as much as I loved The Sting and Butch Cassidy and The Natural—actually I thought The Natural was boring, but everyone else raved about it so I went along—to me his most amazing work was behind the camera on Quiz Show and especially Ordinary People.
I find a table not far from black-suit lady and watch her and everybody else for a long hour. Luckily the music is decent, and, even more important, there’s a waitress walking around (my “significant other”), so I’m four drinks in when I see Diana’s brother part the crowd and sit next to me.

“Please have a seat,” I say after he already did.

He whacks my arm with the back of his hand. “Hey, man, didn’t mean to come on so strong. I was just—Diana didn’t say a lot about what she did, y’know? So I was wondering, if she worked at a PR firm, maybe I could, at least, know the name of it.”

Overhead the song changes from “Groove Is in the Heart” to “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” Someone has dimmed the lights without me noticing.

Randy probably wouldn’t be good at this kind of sleight of hand on a good day, but with half a gallon of booze in him, he can hardly keep a straight face.

I lean in and speak directly into his ear. “I don’t feel like being tested, Randy. I don’t know who or what you think I am, but I’m really, truly, a friend of Diana’s. We both know she never worked at a PR firm, and she didn’t attend UVA, either. But that’s what she told everyone around here, and I, for one, am not going to contradict her.”

Randy, his eyes forward while I speak into his ear, remains motionless.

“She loved the hell out of you,” I say. “I can’t imagine why, but she did. And my guess is she would be unhappy to see you drinking yourself down a hole tonight, especially after she spent all that money sending you to New Roads that
summer while your parents thought you were living with her and interning on the Hill.”

With that, Randy’s face contorts and he lets out a low moan. He covers his face with a hand and has himself a good cry. I pat his back a couple of times but generally leave him to himself. I hardly know the guy, after all, and I’m not a big hugger.

After ten minutes or so, Randy takes some deep breaths and rights himself in his chair. “I couldn’t be sure of you,” he said.

The hair on the back of my neck stands at attention.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Hey, don’t ask me. Nobody tells the dopey brother anything.” He spits out the words like he’s expelling a pill. He pushes himself off the chair and starts to leave.

“Well, who should I ask?” I try.

Randy turns and looks at me. “Ask the guy she was fucking,” he answers. “Ask Jonathan Liu.”
I wake up with a nasty hangover in a mediocre hotel room. I need more sleep, but the gong banging in my head won’t allow it, and anyway, I need to get back to DC. I need to learn more about Jonathan Liu.

The two attendants at the desk at Wisconsin Aviation give me a friendly glance and a wave on my way through to the tarmac. They don’t ask for any kind of identification, even though I’ve never flown from here before this trip. The rules for general aviation just aren’t the same as those for commercial flight. No metal detectors here. As long as I have the pilot “look,” nobody asks any questions. And I’m not even wearing my aviators.

I know what you’re thinking—a Leo DiCaprio mind-scroll, right? Sorry, too tired.

I rush through the preflight check, eager to be rid of
Madison, of Diana’s family, of the lady in black, of Diana’s diminutive drunk of a little brother, with his furtive reference to the most powerful Chinese lobbyist on the Hill.

Chocks up, preflight checklist complete, tower cleared for takeoff. I never go to the big airports. Nearly all airports are public, and they can’t refuse to let small aircraft land or take off, but they can leave a tiny plane like mine on the tarmac until I’m roasted or rusted through. Dane County Regional gets me off the ground in an hour.

Flaps up and trim set for takeoff, I release the brakes and open the throttle to full. About fifteen hundred feet down the runway, I hit sixty-five miles per hour and the wheels are bouncing before we’re airborne, climbing at full power.

The ground falls away beneath me. Funny how the fire escape at Diana’s makes me shake with fear, but throttling up to eighty knots and hurtling through space, supported by faith in the invisible power of lift, is no problem.

I reach altitude and check the GPS, banking east and settling into the flight plan, which will take me to Mansfield, Ohio, for a quick refueling stop before the last leg home.

The engine suddenly brings my mind back to the moment. It sputters. Coughs. I change the fuel mixture to rich, adding more fuel to the mix of fuel and air, and turn on the carburetor heat. The temperature at the airport was ninety degrees when I took off. There can’t be ice in the carburetor. Can there?

The engine roars for a moment. Then there is a horrible clatter, like the time we were sitting in the café on G Street, Diana, and a city bus making a right turn tore the side mirrors off two parked cars, and you laughed at the crowd that gathered.
And then, more horrifying than any noise, there is silence. I hear the wind rushing past and nothing more.

“The Sound of Silence” is a nice song, and a nice thought, too, in moments of contemplation or serenity. But it’s not a nice sound when you’re nine thousand feet off the ground in a single-engine Cessna.

Easy, Ben. You know what to do.

Airspeed at eighty miles per hour. Switch fuel tanks. Mixture to full rich. Carb heat on—check. Primer in and locked. Ignition to left, then right, then... start.

I said, Start.

Nothing. Not even a click.

That engine is not going to start.

I try again, just to be sure.

My heartbeat kicks into my throat. There are no atheists in Skyhawks that lack engine power. She’s a sturdy aircraft, but she’s no glider. Watertown is too far. There’s no way I can coast all the way there.

This plane is going down.
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