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Opening Extract from...

Three Weeks to Say Goodbye

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ONE

It was Saturday morning, November 3, and the first thing I noticed when I entered my office was that my telephone message light was blinking. Since I'd left the building late the night before, it meant someone had called my extension during the night. Odd.

My name is Jack McGuane. I was thirty-four years old at the time. Melissa, my wife, was the same age. I assume you've heard my name, or seen my image on the news, although with everything going on in the world I can understand if you missed me the first time. Our story, in the big scheme of things, is a drop in the river.

I was a Travel Development Specialist for the Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau, the city agency charged with bidding on and hosting conventions and encouraging tourism to Denver. Every city has one. I worked hard, often staying late and, if necessary, coming in on a Saturday. It's important to me that I work hard, even in a bureaucratic environment where it's not necessarily encouraged or rewarded. You see, I'm not the smartest guy in the world, or the best educated. My background doesn't suit me for the job. But my ace in the hole is that I work harder than anyone around me, even when I don't have to.

I am the bane of an office filled with bureaucrats, and I'm proud of it. It's the only thing I've got.

Before doing anything, though, I punched the button to retrieve my voice mail.

"Jack, this is Julie Perala. At the agency . . ."

I stared at the speaker. Her voice was tight, cautious, not the confident and compassionate Julie Perala from the adoption agency Melissa and I had spent hours with while we went through the long process of adopting Angelina, our nine-month-old. My first thought was that we somehow owed them more money.

"Jack, I hate to call you at work on a Friday. I hope you get this and can call me back right away. I need to talk with you immediately—before Sunday, if possible."

She left the agency number and her cell-phone number, and I wrote them down.

Then: "Jack, I'm so sorry."

After a few beats of silence, as if she wanted to say more but wouldn't or couldn't, she hung up.

I sat back in my chair, then listened to the message again and checked the time stamp. It had arrived at 8:45 Friday evening.

I tried the agency number first, not surprised that it went straight to voice mail. Then I called her cell.

"Yes?"

"Julie, this is Jack McGuane."

"Oh."

"You said to call immediately. You've got me scared here with your message. What's going on?"

"You don't know?"

"How would I know? Know what?"

There was anger and panic in her voice.

"Martin Dearborn hasn't called you? He's your attorney,

isn't he? Our lawyers were supposed to call him. Oh dear."

My heart sped up, and the receiver became slick in my hand. "Julie, I don't know *anything*. Dearborn never called. Please, what is this about?"

"God, I hate to be the one to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

A beat. "The biological father wants Angelina back."

I made her repeat it in case I hadn't heard correctly. She did.

"So what if he wants her back," I said. "We adopted her. She's our daughter now. Who cares what he wants?"

"You don't understand—it's complicated."

I pictured Melissa and Angelina at home having a lazy Saturday morning. "Of course we'll work this out," I said. "This is all some kind of big misunderstanding. It'll all be fine." Despite my words, my mouth tasted like metal.

Said Julie, "The birth father never signed away parental custody, Jack. The mother did, but the father didn't. It's a terrible situation. Your lawyer should have explained all of this to you. I don't want to be the one going over legalities because I'm not qualified. As I said, it's complicated . . ."

"This cannot be happening," I said.

"I'm so sorry."

"It doesn't make sense," I said. "She's been with us nine months. The birth mother *selected* us."

"I know. I was there."

"Tell me how to make this go away," I said, sitting up in my chair, leaning over the desk. "Do we pay off the kid, or what?"

Julie was silent for a long time.

"Julie, are you there?"

"I'm here."

"Meet me at your agency *now*."

"I can't."

"You can't or you won't?"

"I can't. I shouldn't even be talking with you. I should never have called. The lawyers and my executives said not to make direct contact, but I felt I had to."

"Why didn't you call us at home?"

"I got cold feet," she said. "You don't know how much I wished I could erase that message I left for you."

"I appreciate that," I said, "but you can't walk away. I need to understand what you're saying. You've got to work with me to make this kid go away. You owe us that."

I heard a series of staccato sounds and thought the connection was going bad. Then I realized she was crying.

Finally, she said, "There's a restaurant near here called Sunrise Sunset. On South Wadsworth. I can meet you there in an hour."

"I might be a little late. I've got to run home and get Melissa. She'll want to hear this. And on such short notice, we'll probably have Angelina with us."

"I was hoping . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Hoping what? That I wouldn't bring them?"

"Yes. It makes it harder . . . I was hoping maybe you and I could meet alone."

I slammed the phone down. Stunned, I wrote down the address of the restaurant.

I SENSED LINDA VAN Gear's arrival before she leaned into my office. She had a presence that preceded her. It could also be called very strong perfume, which she seemed to push ahead in front of her, like a surging trio of small, leashed dogs. Linda was my boss.

She was an imposing, no-nonsense woman, a force of nature. Melissa once referred to Linda as "a caricature of a broad." Linda was brash, made-up, coiffed with a swept-back helmet of stiff hair like the overlapping armored plates of a prehistoric dinosaur. She looked like she wore suits with shoulder pads, but they were her shoulders. Her lips were red, red, red, and there was usually a lipstick line across the front of her teeth, which she moistened often with darts from a pointed tongue. Linda, like a lot of the people who worked international tourism marketing, had once had dreams of being an actress or at least some kind of indefinable celebrity, someone who judged amateurs on a reality singing show. Linda was not well liked by the women in our office or by many in the tourism industry, but I got along with her. I got a kick out of her because everything about her was out front in spades.

"Hello, darlin'," she said, sticking her head in the doorway, "I see you found the leads."

I hadn't even noticed them, but they were there: a bulging manila envelope filled with business cards that smelled of her perfume, cigarette smoke, and spilled wine.

"They're right here."

"Couple of hot ones in there," she said with mock enthusiasm. "They'll singe your fingers when you touch them. Let's meet on them in a half an hour." She squinted, looking me over, asked, "Are you okay?"

"No I'm not."

I didn't really want to get into details, but felt I needed to explain the situation to her in order to postpone the meeting.

She listened with glistening eyes. She loved this kind of thing, I realized. She loved *drama,* and I was providing it.

"Some boy wants custody of your baby?" she asked.

"Yes, but I'm going to fight it."

"The baby obsession skipped this broad," she said. "I guess I never really understood it." She shook her head. She had no children and had made it clear she never wanted any.

I nodded like I understood. Fragile ground, here.

She said, "Look, you know I'm leaving for Taiwan with the governor Monday. We've got to get together before then. Hell, I dragged my jet-lagged ass out of bed just to meet you here this morning. We *need* to meet."

"We will," I said. "Let me call you as soon as I talk to Julie Perala. That's all I ask."

"That's a lot," she said, clearly angry.

"I'll call," I said. "I'll even come meet you at your house if you want."

"Plan on it," she said, turning on her heel and clicking down the hallway, her shoes sounding like manic sticks on the rim of a drum in the empty hallway.

MELISSA WAS ON THE FLOOR with Angelina when I came in the door. Before I could speak, Melissa said, "What's wrong?"

"Julie Perala called. She says there's a problem with the adoption."

Melissa went white, and she looked from me to Angelina and back.

"She said the father wants her back."

"Back?" Melissa said, her voice rising in volume, "Back? *He's never even seen her!*"

I met Melissa when we were both students at Montana State University thirteen years before. She was a lean jade-eyed brunette—attractive, smart, athletic, earthy, self-confident—with high cheekbones and a full, expressive mouth that tended

to betray whatever she was thinking. She *sparkled*. I was drawn to her immediately in a crazy, almost chemical way. I could sense when she entered a crowded room even before I could see her. She was taken at the time, though, involved in a long-term relationship with the star running back. They were a remarkably handsome couple, and I despised him for no reason other than she was his. Still, I pined for her. The thought of her kept me awake at night. When their breakup became news, I told my friend Cody, "I'm going to marry her." He said, "In your dreams," and I said, "Yes, in my dreams." He said, "You've got it bad," and urged me to forget about her and go out and get drunk and get laid. Instead, I asked her out and became Mr. Rebound. She thought I was solid and amusing. I found, to my delight, that I could make her laugh. All I ever wanted to do, all I still want to do all these years later, is make her happy. After we'd been married three years, she said she wanted children. That was the next step, the next easy, logical step. Or so we thought.

The look on her face now crushed me and angered me and made me want to pound someone.

I walked over and picked up Angelina, who squealed. Until this little girl entered our lives, I didn't know how much I could care. She was beautiful—dark-haired, cherubic. Her eyes were big and *wide open*—as if she were always in a state of delighted surprise. Hair that stuck straight up in spots when she woke up from a nap. Four pearly teeth, two top, two bottom. She had a wonderful laugh that started deep in her belly, then took over her entire body. Her laugh was infectious, and we'd start laughing, too, which made her laugh even harder, until she was limp. She laughed so hard we actually asked our pediatrician if there was a problem, and he just shook his head at us. Recently, she'd learned to say "Da" and "Ma." The way she looked at me, like I was the greatest and strongest

creature on the planet, made me want to save and protect her from anything and anybody. She was my little girl, and like Melissa, she made me think differently about my place on earth. In her eyes, I was a god who as yet could do no wrong. I was a giant—her giant. I wanted to never disappoint her. And as the bearer of this news, I felt I had.

I THOUGHT I'D MISUNDERSTOOD the address or name of the meeting place as we entered because I couldn't locate Julie Perala at any of the tables or booths. I was lifting the cell to call her when I saw her wave from a private room in the back used for meetings and parties. I pocketed the phone.

Julie Perala was broad-faced and broad-hipped, with soft eyes and a comforting professional smile. There was something both compassionate and pragmatic about her, and we had liked her instantly when we met with her so many months before for our orientation. She seemed especially sensitive to our situation without being cloying, and was by far more knowledgeable about "placements" than anyone else we had met at other agencies. Nothing made her happier to be alive, she told us, than a placement where all three parties were perfectly served—the birth mother, the adoptive parents, and the child. She was to be trusted, and we trusted her. I also noticed, at times when she let her guard down, a ribald sense of humor. I had the feeling she'd be a hoot with a few drinks in her.

"Coffee?" she asked. "I've already had breakfast."

"No thanks," I said, pausing.

Melissa held Angelina tight to her and glared at Julie Perala with eyes I hoped would never be aimed at me.

"I know the manager," she said, answering a question I

was about to ask, "and knew I could get this room in the back. Please close the door."

I did, and sat down as she was pouring coffee from a thermos carafe.

"I'm taking a real chance meeting with you," she said, not meeting my eyes, concentrating on pouring. "The agency would kill me if they knew. We've all been advised to communicate only through the lawyers now."

"But," I said, prompting her.

"But I like you and Melissa very much. You're good, normal people. I know you love Angelina. I felt I owed you a frank discussion."

"I appreciate that."

Melissa continued to glare.

Julie said, "If this comes back to bite me, well, I'll be very disappointed. But I hoped we could talk without lawyers around, at least this once."

"Go ahead," I said.

It took her a moment to form her words. "I can't tell you how bad I feel about this situation," she said. "This should never happen to a nice couple like you."

"I agree."

"We shouldn't have kept it a secret from you that Judge John Moreland contacted us three months ago," she said. "Our hope was we could settle it internally, and we offered to do exactly that. Our hope was you would never be troubled about it at all, that you wouldn't even know."

"Who is Judge Moreland?" I asked. "The biological father?"

"No, no. The biological father is his son, Garrett. Garrett is a senior at Cherry Creek High School. He's eighteen years old."

"Unbelievable," I said.

She shrugged and showed her palms to me. "I agree. But if we'd been able to resolve it internally, we wouldn't be here now. There wouldn't be a problem at all."

I said, "*Ninety-nine percent*. Remember when you used that figure when I asked about the birth father signing away his parental rights?"

Her face clouded. "I remember. And it's true. It really is. I've been involved in nearly a thousand placements in my life, and this is the first time this has ever happened. We just didn't think it could."

"Didn't you say you tried to find the birth father?" Melissa asked bitterly. "Didn't you say he'd agreed to sign the papers?"

She nodded.

"What happened?"

"We tracked him down in the Netherlands, where he was on vacation with his mother. He was staying with his mother's relatives, I guess. I didn't talk with him, but a coworker did. She explained the situation to him, and she said he was surprised. He agreed to sign away custody and he gave us a fax number where he could be reached. We sent the papers over."

"But he never signed them," I said.

"We dropped the ball," she said. "The woman who'd made contact left the agency. If any of us had had any inkling at all that he would refuse to sign, we would have kept you abreast of the situation. But as far as we knew, it was his wish not to be a parent. We can't coerce him, you know. We can't pressure. It has to be his decision."

My anger was building to the point that I had to look away from her.

"Legally, we covered our bases," she said sympathetically, almost apologetically to us. "We placed public notices for

him and did everything we're required to do. Not having the signed papers isn't that unusual, because the family court judge always—and I mean always—awards full custody to the adoptive parents in a case like this. After all, we can't let a nonresponsive birth father hold up a placement, can we?"

"Did you contact Garrett's father?" I asked. "Is that how he got involved?"

"We normally don't contact the parents of the birth father. That's considered coercive."

"But you knew about him? You knew about John Moreland?"

"No."

"Interesting that his mother didn't know, since she was with him overseas when your agency contacted him. How could she *not* know?"

Julie shrugged. "It doesn't make sense to me, but a lot about this situation makes no sense. Maybe she knew but didn't want to tell her husband. Why—I don't know."

I said, "So this Judge Moreland entered the picture after Garrett told him?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"And that's when Moreland's lawyers contacted the agency?"

She looked down. "Yes. The letter came from them with less than ten days left in the public notice period. If they'd waited just two more weeks, custody would have been granted to you by the family court. It was bad timing for you."

"It sure was," I said sarcastically.

"If you and Melissa choose not to fight the Moreland claim, our agency will do everything in our power to make the situation right for you."

"Meaning what?" Melissa asked.

She took a quick breath and raised her eyes to meet Melissa's. "I've been a party to the meetings we've had with our executives and our lawyers. I know we would immediately refund all fees and arrange, free of charge, for a new placement. You would be moved to the top of the priority list for a new baby. And we'd offer a very large settlement to you and Melissa and our apologies. That's if we can keep this whole thing out of court and out of the news. I think you'd agree with me that the last thing anyone would want to do is discourage children's chances of future placements with loving families who might be scared out of adoption by this situation."

"This can't be happening," Melissa said, as much to herself as to Julie Perala.

"Why didn't your lawyers contact our lawyer about these meetings?" I said. "Isn't that how it's supposed to work?"

"I thought they had," she said.

"We've heard nothing."

She shrugged. "I'm not a lawyer."

"Neither is ours, apparently," I said, spitting it out.

"You don't understand," Melissa said. "We can't lose our baby."

Julie started to speak, then bit her lip and looked away.

"We can't lose our baby," Melissa said again, but this time her voice was close to a shout.

"Judge Moreland is a powerful man," Julie said softly. "I get the impression he's used to getting what he wants."

"Tell me about him," I asked. "Tell me what kind of man I'm up against."

"He's a wealthy man," she said. "His wife has the fortune, from what I understand. Judges aren't paid that much, I guess. He owns lots of real estate. I'm telling you this because you

mentioned something about buying off Garrett. I hate to say it, but I don't think you could. And the judge comes across as such a nice man. He's handsome, confident. He's the kind of man you instantly like, and you hope he likes you because you don't want to displease him, you know?"

I said, "Julie, when I think of you all having these meetings and talking about us it makes me ill."

She nodded, then looked away again. "We discussed what his options were. He was very concerned about doing things the right way so as not to hurt you and Melissa."

"How kind," Melissa said.

"Tell me, Julie," I said, "how do you live with yourself?"

She put her face in her hands and cried. I couldn't help it—I felt terrible for making her cry again. But I didn't take my words back.

Finally, she grabbed a napkin and wiped the tears from her eyes, smearing eyeliner down her cheek, making it look like a faded scar.

Melissa stood up with Angelina. "I've got to change her diaper," she said, and left the room. "We'll be back."

For a moment we just sat there not looking at each other.

"There's one thing you can help us with," I said.

"What?"

"If you were Melissa and me, would you fight this in court? Knowing what you know, do we have a prayer?"

She shook her head sadly, said, "The best you could hope for, I think, is some kind of joint custody that a judge would decree. But I don't think either of you would be happy with that. And if I were you, I'd pray to God your baby is raised by John and Kellie—that Garrett is kept as far away from the baby as possible."

I felt my skin crawl. "Why do you say that?"

She shook her head. "There's something wrong with that

boy. He scares me. And it isn't anything I can quite put my finger on—there's just something wrong about him."

"Oh God," I said.

She pursed her lips and looked down at her hands. "It's like the temperature in the room goes down ten degrees when he enters. There's no warmth. He seems bloodless and cunning. I wouldn't trust him with a child—or anyone."

I felt myself tingling. I leaned forward. "I understand what you're saying, but do you have anything I can use? Have you heard anything about Garrett we can investigate to prove what a bad father he'd be?"

She was still, her hands mindlessly caressing her coffee mug on both sides. Thinking.

She said, "I think there's been some trouble at school," she said. "Once, when we were meeting with John, he got a call from someone at Garrett's high school, and he had to cut the meeting short. I don't know who called or what it was about, but the judge was quite upset."

"This happened within the last month?" I asked, trying not to show my anger that the Morelands and the agency had been meeting behind our backs in secret.

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

"One thing, but it's no more solid than the first. When we were looking over your placement application with them . . ."

I took in an angry breath, but she continued.

". . . the judge pointed out you owned a dog."

"Harry."

"The judge said they couldn't have pets because Garrett couldn't get along with them. I thought that was an odd choice of words. Not that he was allergic to them, or wouldn't take care of them or something, but that *he couldn't get along*

with them. When he said it, I could see he wished he hadn't."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "And it all sounds so baseless when I say it."

"Thank you," I said. "At least it gives me something to go on. But it also makes me feel a little sick."

"Yes," she said, then she lifted her chin and looked at me. "I think the only answer is somehow to convince Garrett to sign the papers giving up his parental rights," she said.

She took a deep breath to compose herself, mumbling that she hated to cry in front of others.

"Maybe he needs some *strong* persuading," she said, letting an angry edge into her voice.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," she said, leaning across the table, her eyes flashing, "if Angelina were my daughter, I'd hire a couple of mean-ass bikers or wranglers and have them scare the living shit out of Garrett so he's only more than happy to sign anything put in front of him. He needs the kind of persuading that makes him think his father's determination is the least of his concerns."

I sat back. *That* had come from left field, but obviously it was something she'd been thinking about.

"I'm speaking hypothetically, of course," she said. "Not as a representative of the agency or a placement professional."

"Of course," I said. "Could he be scared?"

She thought for a moment before whispering, "I think so."

ON THE WAY HOME, I said to Melissa, "You're taking this much more calmly than I thought possible."

"I'm not calm at all," she said. "I'm dead inside. But this

does explain why we have a phone message from Judge Moreland. He says he's coming over tomorrow afternoon with his son."

"Jesus," I said.

"What should we do?"

"I'm going to go see Martin Dearborn," I said. "I'm going to his house. Don't call the judge back. In fact, keep the phone off the hook. I'll call you on your cell, so keep it with you. The judge may put off coming to our house if he isn't sure we got the message, and we don't respond."

She laughed—a chilling, uncharacteristic laugh I'd never heard before and never wanted to hear again. It was a false laugh filled with horror and defeat. She said, "You know how they say your life passes before your eyes before you die?"

"Yes."

"That's happening now."

MARTIN DEARBORN, OUR ATTORNEY for the adoption, was in his driveway wearing a gold-and-black Colorado Buffaloes sweater and loading seat cushions and blankets into the back of his Mercedes M-Class SUV when I drove up in my ten-year-old Jeep Cherokee. I remembered the CU alumni awards on the wall of his office and noted the CU license-plate frame. Dearborn was plump and sandy-haired and wore thick glasses that made his light brown eyes look bigger than they were. He had a large head and a deep bass voice and ham-sized hands. He squinted when I jammed my Jeep into park because he obviously didn't recognize the vehicle or the driver—at first.

When I jumped out, I saw something pass over his face that told me he knew why I was there but didn't want to admit it.

His wife, a too-thin woman with a pinched face, also decked out in Buffs colors, came out of the garage, saw me approaching, and said, "Who is *that?*"

Martin gestured for her to go back inside. He tried hard to blank his eyes and face as I came up the driveway, but he wasn't successful. His wife theatrically looked at her wristwatch, and he said, "I know. We'll make it in time for kickoff."

She said, "It isn't kickoff I'm worried about. It's the preparty."

He said, "We'll make it, don't worry."

She stomped back into the garage.

"Jack," he said, "this can wait until office hours on Monday. My wife and I are . . ."

"You son of a bitch, how long were you going to wait to tell us?"

"Monday. During regular office hours. That's when we *work,* Jack."

"Monday's too late, and you know it."

"Look," he said, lowering his voice into his official lawyer tone, the one he used to impress Melissa and me, "I've been in the Springs on a big civil case. I wasn't able to return the calls to them during the day because we were in court."

I stepped close enough to him that he flinched. "You didn't have breaks? You don't have paralegals who could make the call on your behalf?"

He looked away.

"Damn, you look guilty," I said. "You've got to get us out of this, and I mean now. This guy and his son are coming to our house tomorrow."

His voice wasn't as low when he spoke. "I'd advise you to be civil. He's got the law on his side, I'm afraid."

I reached out and grabbed a handful of CU sweatshirt, then

quickly let it go. I couldn't help myself. From the garage I heard Dearborn's wife say, "Honey, do I need to call the police?"

"No," he said. "It's okay."

I said, "So you know all about it, then. I'd advise *you* to pretend you're an attorney—our attorney. We need to go to court right now and do something. Isn't there a restraining order or something? Can't we prevent this from happening?"

"I'd have to research it," he said, uncomfortable.

"We don't have the time."

He turned to me, his face flushed. "Jack, he's a sitting federal judge. He's been appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Don't you think he knows the law? Hell, he makes it."

"So that's it, then," I said.

"Our firm has cases scheduled before him next month, Jack. Big cases. Million-dollar cases with national implications. I've got a real conflict here."

I shook my head. I wanted to smash him. His wife was still in the garage, and I noticed she had a telephone, ready to call the police. She pointed to it with her other hand, and mouthed "9-1-1."

"Is he aware I'm your counsel?" Dearborn asked.

"No," I said, "because you haven't done a damned thing. How would he know?"

"You need to calm down," he said. "And I'm afraid you need to get a new attorney. I'm not your man for this case. He's best friends with the mayor and the governor, for Christ's sake. And his name has come up for the Tenth Circuit and higher."

"So what are you saying?"

"That he not only knows the law, he knows how to work the law. This is inside baseball, Jack. You never told me you were going up against Judge Moreland."

"I didn't know."

"I think you should calm down and look at this from his point of view."

"I think you're fired," I said, even though he'd resigned.

"Good."

"Nine-one-one," his wife said, holding up the phone like a totem.

I DROVE TO LINDA Van Gear's town house in an angry fog. I found her wearing sweats with her hair down, shuttling between a fish tank in the living room to the toilet in the bathroom carrying dead fish one at a time. Her town house was a shambles.

"This is what happens when you travel for a living and you ask your neighbor to feed your fish and he forgets and goes skiing '*because the powder was awesome, dude,*' " she said angrily. "You come back to a tank full of dead objects."

I told her my situation had grown much worse since I'd seen her last, and I needed to cancel my scheduled trip to World Tourism Bourse in Berlin in a week.

That stopped her cold, and she stood there with a pale and dripping angel fish in a little net.

"So you want to send someone else to WTB, then?"

"Yes."

"Whom do you suggest?"

Our department consisted of the two of us. I suggested Rita Greene-Bellardo, a new employee who served as executive assistant but seemed to have little to do.

"Pregnant," Linda said. "I just heard. She's gonna have her baby and take the maternity leave and quit. I heard her telling a girlfriend that was her plan. We can't depend on her to follow up."

I floated the name of Pete Maxfield, who headed the media-relations department. Pete sometimes worked with international journalists and might have some experience he could use at the show. Linda didn't like Pete, though.

"Honey," she said, "Pete is a hound dog. He'd spend the whole time drinking German beer and trying to get some deaf, dumb, and blind German girl to come to his room at the hotel, or he'd blow the entertainment budget on prostitutes. This is our biggest and most important market. We don't just send people for the sake of sending someone. The only choice we have is me, and you know it."

I did, but I didn't want to ask.

"I'll be in Taiwan," she said. "I can't be both places."

I knew where this was headed.

"You *need* to have that big meeting with Malcolm Harris," she said.

Malcolm Harris was the iconic UK owner of a travel company called AmeriCan Adventures—a play on America and Canada—which sent thousands of British tourists to North America on custom-designed package tours. AmeriCan was the number one tour operator to Denver and the Mountain West, and thus a very important client. Our marching orders were to treat him like a god, despite his reputation as being quarrelsome, cantankerous, and smug about his claims that he knew more about America than practically any American he'd ever met. He expected to be fawned over, wined and dined, and he was. Any requests he made were immediately first priority in our office and across destination promotion bureaus throughout the region. Linda was infamous for attaching herself to him like Velcro when she worked the European market, hanging on his every word, laughing at his asides, and beholding him with what was described by one of her detractors as "Nancy Reagan eyes."

She said, "As you know, he's thinking of establishing a U.S. reservations office and call center to handle his tours." "We're talking hundreds of jobs. He's looking at three cities—New York, L.A., and Denver. We're the front-runner because of our location. If we got that office here, the mayor would love us because he could say our tourism efforts not only bring in tourists but jobs. I'm sure he's meeting with reps from L.A. and New York. If you just *don't show up* in Berlin to convince him to choose Denver, we may lose out on this."

There was an uncomfortable pause. I said, "Does the mayor know about this, then?"

"It was in my report to him last month. His chief of staff sent me an e-mail about it last week, asking if we'd landed AmeriCan yet."

I let her go on.

"Honey," she said finally, "do you realize that every time the city gets a budget hit, and they're looking for places to cut, someone always suggests international tourism promotion? We're the easy ones to dump because they think we have these glamorous jobs and jet all around the world. We're easy to dump, you know? Tab Jones has no love for us, but he sees us as a means for him to travel the world, so he's not given the department the ax. But every time there's a budget crunch, I go to the mat and fight for us. I show them facts and figures, and this time when we were on the chopping block I told them about the possibility AmeriCan might open up a company here. Tab and the mayor got all excited about that because tourists are ghosts, but a building and jobs are something he can take credit for. Are you hearing me?"

"Yes," I said.

"If you don't go, honey, we can kiss this department and your job goodbye. And I *need* this job."

"I do, too."

I wasn't kidding. Since Melissa had quit her job to stay home with our daughter, we were literally one paycheck away from not making our mortgage payment. The loan we had was one of those bad ones, one of the worst decisions we'd made. We had *no* cushion. If I lost my job, Jesus, I didn't know where we'd be. Especially given the situation we were in, possibly trying to prove in court what great parents we were. My job was *everything*.

She stepped back, sized me up, said, "So you understand me, then?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll be going to Germany and meeting with Malcolm Harris."

"Good man, Jack," she said. "I knew you'd come around. Let's get going on those leads now."

As I gathered up the work and stuffed it into my briefcase, Linda said, "Aren't there other babies out there?"

"Not an option," I said back with heat. "It's not like trading her in for a new model," thinking: *How can she not understand?*

She waved dismissively, "Well, good luck with the baby thing."

THE BABY THING.

We had tried everything to get pregnant. Melissa studied up on the medical literature, threw herself into reproductive studies with a single-minded will as only she can do, reading everything from the library, on the Internet, becoming as well versed in the subject as any doctor and better than most. Having sex became my second job. Melissa drew pink hearts on our wall calendar to chart our couplings. There were a lot of hearts. We had sex every morning for three weeks straight

and every other evening in one magnificent stretch run. Once, when we were able to have lunch together downtown, she showed up with bare legs in a dress and told me over sandwiches that she wasn't wearing underwear and that she'd rented a dayroom in a hotel next door. I could barely eat. I was equally aroused and alarmed, pointing out to her (tepidly, I admit) that with my job at the CVB it was possible someone might recognize me and assume the tryst was something it was not. She laughed and shook it off, then led me outside by the hand. In the elevator on the way to our floor, she started disrobing. I got hard, and she squeezed me through my pants. She said, "So you're getting into it, then?"

But it was never about me not getting into it. I was. And I was, and am, wildly attracted to my wife. She's my *ideal*. That she seemed to think—deep down—that she no longer did it for me and for some reason that was why we couldn't conceive was as startling as it was desperate. I told her repeatedly she drove me wild. She said, "Then why can't we have a baby, Jack?"

THE DOCTOR'S NAME WAS KIMMEL. He was thin, athletic, and fastidious in appearance. When we finally sat down with him at the clinic to review the tests, he confirmed what she had already determined: It was me.

"Let me put it this way," the doctor said, turning slightly on his stool in my direction but not really facing me. "Imagine, if you will, that you are a machine gunner but not a good one. In fact, a lousy one. The worst one in the entire Corps."

Kimmel paused to let that sink in.

"So I'm shooting blanks," I said. "Thank you, Mr. Bedside Manner."

He nodded, first to me, then to Melissa.

I felt Melissa's eyes brush across the side of my face.

"There are alternatives, of course," Kimmel said. "In this day and age, there really isn't male infertility anymore. We can isolate a single sperm." He explained procedures, drugs, in vitro fertilization.

We were hopeful. We tried them all, one after the other. For years. Melissa had three miscarriages. Our marriage became tense and our time together frustrating. There were long, silent meals and times we would be in the same room for hours and not look at each other. She secretly blamed me, I secretly blamed her. Her emotions were raw and increasingly close to the surface. Sometimes I caught her looking at me as if she was assessing my manhood and character, and I'd lash back with something sarcastic and cruel that I immediately regretted. I suggested once that maybe if we didn't try so hard, maybe if we didn't make our entire life's mission to conceive a child, we could be happy again. She didn't speak to me for weeks after that. I thought she might even leave me.

Finally, she said, "Let's adopt."

We really didn't discuss it. I trusted her judgment, and adoption is a good thing. And I had my wife back, and the clouds that had been building for years in our lives broke up and sunlight poured through.

Julie Perala at the agency explained to us that there were three kinds of adoption: international, closed, and open. We chose open. But there were levels of openness as well, from meeting the birth mother (our preference) to agreeing on visitation with the birth mother and her family.

The birth mother was a fifteen-year-old named Brittany. She was pale, freckled, and slightly overweight even before the pregnancy. Every other word from her was "like," as in,

"I'm, like, gaining weight," or "It's, like, a *drag* to get morning sickness." The reasons she gave the agency for choosing us included the fact that we were fairly young, childless, and we looked "calm" and "outdoorsy." We overlooked Brittany's arrogance at times. She knew she had what Melissa wanted. Brittany was fertile, and she assumed Melissa wasn't, so she took on a superior air. Once, though, when Melissa left the room, I leaned toward Brittany and said, "It isn't her. It's *me*."

Even though, frankly, with our unexplained infertility it was most likely both of us somehow. But I didn't tell Brittany that.

Terms regarding adoption are something we're both sensitive about now, especially Melissa. Often, the wrong thing is said in all innocence, but it can cut deeply. For example, Brittany is the birth mother, not the "real" mother or the "natural" mother or the "biological" mother. Melissa is Angelina's mother. Period. Brittany didn't "give her baby up for adoption," she placed the baby with adoptive parents. People have a natural instinct to pry. I try not to hold that against them when they ask, "Where did she get those dark eyes?" (since mine are blue and Melissa's are green) or "Her hair is so thick and dark!" when mine is reddish brown and Melissa's is light brown. We'd learned to answer, vaguely, "It runs in the family." We weren't lying. We just weren't saying *whose* family.

In retrospect, we could have asked more questions about the birth father. But we were assured by the agency and from Melissa's discussions with Brittany that the boy was no longer in the picture. Brittany wouldn't even say his name other than to call him "Sperm Boy" and say he refused to take her calls. She never mentioned that he was out of the country, which led us to believe she hadn't known where he was. He meant nothing to her, she told Melissa. She'd

been drunk and in the backseat of Sperm Boy's nice car. One thing led to another.

Angelina turned six, seven, and eight months old. She was healthy, cheerful, loving. She began to form the words "Ma" and "Da." She loved Harry, our old black Lab and my last carryover from bachelorhood, who began to sleep under her crib to protect her. Everything was right with the world.

Then it wasn't.

THERE IS AN ABSOLUTE irredeemable beauty to pure routine, for if there wasn't, I'm not sure we could have gotten through that evening when I finally got home.

We ate, I'm sure.

We might have watched television.

I do remember halfheartedly playing with Angelina on the floor. She loved her Fisher-Price barn set. Angelina got all of the other animals as well as the farmer and his wife, and I was the cow and the cow only. Angelina's menagerie spent all of their time telling the cow what to do. The cow spent all of his (her?) time trying to make Angelina laugh. But my heart wasn't in it.

I also remember a disjointed, fierce "They'll never take her away" discussion Melissa and I had. We were in the midst of it when Melissa walked over to the telephone in the kitchen and hung it up on the receiver to check and see if there were any more messages. I watched her eyes widen and her mouth purse, and she pressed the speaker button.

The voice was male, mature, and sympathetic:

"Jack and Melissa, I hate to place this call. This is Judge John Moreland. I know you're aware of why I'm calling and believe me, this is just about as difficult for me as it is for you. No one ever in his or her life expects to be in a situation

like this. For that I am deeply, *deeply* sorry. But I hope you appreciate the situation my family has found ourselves in as well. Angelina is our first granddaughter, and my son's child. I assume you are checking messages, even though you aren't picking up the phone. We will be at your house tomorrow at 11:00 A.M. Don't worry—we're coming simply to meet you and to talk. There's no reason to panic or overreact. It'll be a conversation among adults who find themselves in a bitterly tough situation through no fault of their own."

Melissa and I exchanged glances. I could see relief flood into her face, and her shoulders relaxed.

Then he said: "The county sheriff is aware of my visit tomorrow. I'm sorry I had to contact him, but I thought it best for all concerned—especially the baby—that our meeting be under the auspices of the authorities. Don't worry—he won't be with us. But he'll be available if the situation turns sour. Not that I expect it to. I admire and respect you both. And I think a reasonable solution to our dilemma is at hand. I hope you'll hear me out, and I hope you will welcome our visit.

"God bless and good night, and we'll see you tomorrow."

Click.

THAT NIGHT, as we lay in bed not sleeping, I slid out of the bed and padded over to the closet. On the top shelf of our closet, hidden by a ball of loose old clothing, was my grandfather's single-action Colt .45 Peacemaker revolver. The Gun that Won the West. I wish I could say he gave it to me in some kind of intergenerational ceremony loaded with symbolism and meaning, but the fact is I stole it while I helped my father move Grandpa from his house in White

Sulfur Springs to a nursing home in Billings. He never knew it was missing and never asked about it at the time. Later, as he slipped deeper into dementia, the nurses said he called out for his weapon, but they had no intention of locating it for him.

The revolver was blunt and heavy, with a six-inch barrel. It was loaded with five ancient cartridges. The firing pin rested on an empty cylinder to prevent accidents. The handgrip was made of ash, polished smooth by years of handling. The cylinder was rubbed clean of blueing from being drawn and put back into a leather holster hundreds of times.

"What are you doing?" Melissa asked.

"Nothing," I said.