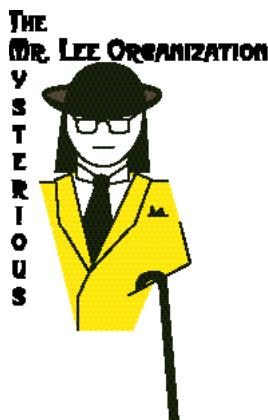


The Teaser



Part One

The invitation, when it came, was something of a shock.

To be fair, I hadn't seen her or talked to her in almost a year, not since graduating from law school, so no doubt plenty of things had happened to her since then. But the incongruity of it all rang through my head as if I were standing within the Yale carillon at noon.

Kate? Getting married? I would sooner believe she had been abducted by aliens.

The invitation was engraved, printed on heavy cotton-rag paper and hidden within multiple envelopes, with bits of tissue paper throughout. "Mr. and Mrs. William G. Armitage request the honor of your presence," etc., etc. The name below Kate's was unfamiliar: Preston Mayhew MacDonnell MacAllister IV. No one I knew from Adam.

I could picture him, though. The name just reeked of wasp-y privilege and money, the milieu I had stood on the fringes of all during college, as if it were the dance pit at a strip bar: Look But Don't Touch. Boys who had made their money the old-fashioned way, by inheriting it.

My family did have money, but it was new. My grandfather had been born in a wooden shack in the coalfields of West Virginia, climbing his way out all the way to Yale Law School and beyond while their grandfathers were presiding over the wreckage of the Depression from their mansions in Newport. And they let me know it in a thousand little ways.

Kate had come from their world, but she had never seemed to be a part of it. Until now. I wondered what had finally turned her around.

The invitation sat on my desk at home for a couple of days while I pondered this development. Kate and I had been close friends at one time. I liked to think we still were, but the fact remained that we hadn't spoken in about nine or ten months. The why of it was something I didn't like to think about much, and didn't need to, since I could explain it away by blaming the seventy-hour work weeks I had to log as a first year associate at a giant Manhattan law firm. Most of the time it felt like the truth.

My curiosity finally got the better of me after three days—she had not, I knew full well, sent me the invitation simply because she found my name in her address book. I looked up her parent's number and called her. The phone rang twice before an unfamiliar female voice answered.

"Armitage residence, may I help you?"

"Uh, hi. My name is Tom Dempsey. I'm trying to reach Katherine Armitage."

"Just a moment, please."

The maid set down the phone, and about a minute later, Kate's voice came shrieking over the line.

"Tom?"

"Hey, stranger."

"My God, how are you?"

"Still a little in shock. I just got the invitation."

She laughed.

"I know, can you believe it?"

"No."

She laughed again.

"God! I wasn't that bad!"

"I'm kidding. A little. Congratulations."

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"Thanks. I'm so sorry I haven't called you about it. I meant to and meant to, I've just been so incredibly busy planning this thing."

"I understand. It's okay. How did it happen? Who is he?"

"A friend of the family. You know how those things go. I don't think you ever would have met him. He was a year ahead of us at Yale."

"I don't think I did. The name doesn't ring any bells."

"Well, I hardly knew him myself then. My uncle introduced us our junior year, but we didn't start dating until about a year ago."

"What's he do?"

She laughed.

"Preston? Nothing. He moves his money around on e*trade when he wants to feel useful. He worked for Merrill Lynch as an analyst after graduating, but he quit after about a year. He doesn't really have a job anymore. Not that he needs to work."

"Trust fund baby?"

"Right."

I ignored the growing twinge in my stomach, shoving it back into the past where it belonged.

"Look," she went on, "you're still in New York, right?"

"Right. Midtown. I'm still with Wilson & Taft."

"Well, do you think you could burn a sick day and come up to Newport? I'd love to have lunch and catch up with you before I get too caught up in the wedding."

"Sure. When?"

"Wednesday? Say at noon? Do you remember that fish place near the Block Island Ferry?"

"Anderson's?"

"Yeah. Meet me there at noon?"

"No problem. I'll see you then."

Part Two

I first met Kate during our freshman year at Yale.

Though I had grown up in midtown Manhattan, not far off the Park, I was not the typical New York City private school-educated teenager. Unlike many of my friends, who were drinking at 12 and having sex at 14, I was a quiet and reserved kid. Much of that mien I inherited from my father, and from my grandfather, who had been elevated to the federal bench by President Bush while I was in junior high. As a survival mechanism early in his career, he had kept his undistinguished background close to his vest, trying to absorb the affections and mannerisms of his colleagues, some of whom had ancestors who had practiced law with Thomas Jefferson. My father grew up in this environment, and, knowing nothing else, had assumed that presenting a distinguished and conservative front to the world was paramount if one wished to succeed. By the time I hit puberty, my father was a partner at a large city law firm, my grandfather was a federal judge, and my one greatest fear was not living up to their expectations for me. So the last thing I was going to do was engage in any adolescent rebellion, no matter what my friends might be up to.

I arrived at Yale a shy, uptight, anal-retentive virgin. When I left, I was none of these things. Kate fixed the first three directly, and had a hand in fixing the fourth.

That first fall, I pledged sae for little more reason than my father and grandfather were both members themselves. In October of my freshman year, the house had an exchange with Tri-Delt. For much of that night, I wandered aimlessly around the party, a bit drunk, checking out the girls but too shy to approach any of them.

I was standing by myself, minding my own business, when someone crashed into me from behind. I lost my balance and fell to the floor, spilling beer all over myself, hearing a shriek of feminine laughter at the same time.

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I looked up to see a brown-haired girl standing over me, giggling in tipsy embarrassment. Two other girls behind her were laughing just as hard at what she had done.

“Oh, my God. I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

I stood up, wiping at the beer on my jeans. The girl laughed again.

“I’m sorry. Let me clean you up.”

As if we had met a year ago rather than about five seconds, she took my hand and dragged me into the kitchen. She found a towel and blotted it against my leg.

“I’m sorry. Rebecca shoved me, and I tripped over something.”

“It’s all right. It’s just beer.”

She wiped at my jeans for another few seconds before standing straight.

“Anyway. I’m Kate.”

“I’m Tom. Nice to meet you.”

She noticed the pin on my shirt.

“Are you a freshman?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too. Where are you from?”

“New York City.”

“Oh, cool. I’m from Newport. Do you like it up here?”

I slowly checked her out as I talked to her, getting a better look at her under the brighter lights in the kitchen. She wasn’t quite conventionally pretty, yet something attracted me to her anyway. She was about average height and build, dark hair, and big hazel eyes just brimming with energy.

I spent the rest of the party with her, thinking we had somehow hit it off immediately. A cute meet, right? I would learn the truth soon enough. Kate was simply like that with everyone.

I called her a few days later, asking if she wanted to go see a movie. After we discussed what was playing that weekend, she agreed. I picked her up at her room, and we drove to a theatre near campus. We had arrived early, and we went to a cafe across the street to get something to eat.

I had, by then, begun to think that she was kind of cute. She seemed to be the sort of woman who got more attractive the longer you knew her.

“What do your folks do?” I asked.

“Do? You mean work?”

“Yeah.”

“Well... nothing really. My family has a lot of money. My granddad did work when he was younger, but my dad never really has.”

“What did your granddad do, then?”

“His grandfather, my great-great-grandfather, was one of those railroad barons back in the 1800’s. He started a bunch of companies, and my granddad inherited all of it. He managed it himself until it got too big for him. Then he just retired and let someone else run it. That’s basically what my dad does. Let other people manage his money.”

A wave of dollar signs spun through my head as I absorbed this. My mother had joked about my finding a rich girl to marry at Yale, but I doubt she had expected anything like this.

“What about your folks?” she asked.

“My dad is a lawyer. My granddad is a judge.”

“Wow. What does he judge?”

“He’s a federal judge in New York, an appeals judge. That’s one level below the Supreme Court.”

“Are you going to be a lawyer too?”

“I don’t know. Everyone kind of expects me to. My dad and grandfather both went to law school here. I’ve got a lot of expectations to live up to.”

Kate nodded.

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"I know what you mean. Before I left home in August, my mother gave me this big speech about remembering who I was and where I came from and how I had to be careful about who I dated."

Uh-oh, I thought.

"Are they picky about your boyfriends?" I asked evenly.

She rolled her eyes.

"Beyond picky. Don't get even me started."

I tried to grin.

"Parents suck sometimes."

"Tell me about it. I figure I'm just here to have fun and go to school, and I'll let them worry about who I'm allowed to marry."

I spent most of the movie trying to work up the guts to hold Kate's hand, but I couldn't quite make myself do it. She didn't want to go home right after the movie was over, so we found a coffeeshop nearby and got a table out front.

"Tell me something embarrassing," she said when we sat down.

I twitched in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I hate small talk. I want to know something important about you."

I began to blush without even having thought of what to say. Kate laughed and touched my arm.

"I'll tell you something, too. Come on, don't be shy."

"I don't know."

"I think this is the best way to make friends with people, if you exchange secrets. Then you've kind of got this bond, you know, where you're equally embarrassed. Plus it's a way to test whether you think you can trust the person."

I was beginning to doubt whether Kate was capable of being embarrassed, by anything, but I saw what she meant.

"Okay. Give me a minute."

She grinned as she watched me think.

"Well," I began, blushing more intensely, "I'm a virgin. Is that embarrassing enough?"

She smiled warmly, then squeezed my hand.

"No. I think that's cool. I know most guys would rather die than tell a girl that. It's nothing to be embarrassed about. If it makes you feel any better, so am I."

"Oh." I tried to smile back at her. "Does that count as your secret?"

She giggled.

"No. Because I'm not embarrassed about it. Okay, listen to this. Did you ever catch your parents doing it?"

I laughed.

"Once. Why?"

"Well, I bet it was nothing like what happened to me." She closed her eyes to gather some fortitude. "I mean, it's so gross I don't even like thinking about it. It was about four years ago, when I was in ninth grade. One Friday night, I was supposed to be spending the night at a friend of mine's, but she got really sick that night so I had to go home. Her mom tried calling my folks to let me know, but no one answered. We figure someone's just on the phone, right? So home I go."

"Now you have to understand that we have a really big house. It's got like three wings and twelve bedrooms and more rooms than we've ever really used. My great-granddad built it around the turn of the century. Anyway, the point is that there was no way my folks could have heard me come in, and our servants are all in bed. I go upstairs to my room, which is right next to my parents' bedroom. The door to that wing is closed when I get up there, which strikes me as kind of weird, but I don't really think about it. As I go down the hall, I can hear my mother making all kinds of noise, just going "Oh!, Ah!", that kind of thing. I was old enough to know what they were doing, but not old enough to leave well enough alone. So I peek in their door, which is open a couple of inches."

She paused, taking a deep breath.

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"And there is my mother, wearing nothing but black stockings and a garter belt, bent over a chair with her hands tied to the arms and her ankles tied to the legs. And my dad is behind her, you know, and I have somehow arrived at the precise moment that he is..." She paused again, closing her eyes and trying not to laugh. "Finishing up, you know? He doesn't see me looking in, but my mother does."

"Oh, my God," I laughed.

"She freaks out completely. She tries to jump up, but the problem is that she's tied to the chair, right? So she just loses her balance and falls over, and my poor dad is standing there suddenly jerked back to reality with his... stuff... going all over the place. And that was the point that I ran back to my room in terror."

I struggled with myself for a few seconds to keep from laughing out loud. Kate shook her head wearily.

"I thought they were going to ground me for a million years. I didn't realize until a long time afterward how mortified they must have been. My mom came into my room a few minutes later and tried to give me some explanation for what they had been doing, but I was too traumatized to really listen to her."

"God. I guess."

She sighed, still laughing weakly.

"So that's my most embarrassing secret. If you ever meet my parents, you can't let on that you know about that."

I laughed again.

"I'll try."



Kate and I went out again the next week, and the next, and I often ran into her around the first-year residential college. We rapidly reached the plateau of being "good friends," but somehow it went no further.

This is not to say that we stopped going out, for we continued to do so with some regularity. We just didn't "date." We went out to dinner, we went to the movies, and though on occasion we did engage in some casual smooching (nothing beyond friendly pecks on the cheek or the lips), she made it quite clear that she was not ready to be tied down to anyone.

What I learned, slowly, was that a prospective suitor was going to have to run a rather harrowing gauntlet with Kate's family to be welcomed into the fold. Her great-grandfather had used his fortune to build one of those palatial mansions along the Newport coastline, where Kate's family still lived and her mother still held court among Newport society. The great-grandson of a West Virginia coal miner, as I was, had no chance whatsoever of gaining her parents' approval, never mind that the son of that coal miner was now a judge on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. More than one scion of a WASP establishment family far more prominent than mine had been judged and found wanting. Kate had finally decided to deal with this issue by dating no one at all. She had armies of friends, but of boyfriends, none.

This hardly meant, I would often tell myself, that I meant nothing to her. I was one of her better friends, and when I was feeling bold enough, I would let myself think I was her best friend. I might well have been, but even then, that fact would have changed nothing of substance. We stood on opposite sides of a great divide, and nothing was likely to ever bridge it.

Part Three

I got my supervising partner's blessing to take a day off and drove up to Newport. The restaurant was a block or two away from the Fort Adams pier. It was mid-April, still early spring for New England, and the day, though pretty, was not warm. A few sailboats were out on the water, chasing the elusive breeze that had bedeviled generations of America's Cup skippers, before the Aussies had finally broken the New York Yacht Club's monopoly in 1983.

Kate was waiting in the lobby, and she gave me a warm hug and peck on the cheek when I walked in. As she withdrew, I looked down at her left hand, seeing a glittering four-carat diamond on her ring finger.

"How was the ride up?" she asked.

"Slow. But not bad."

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She took my arm and led me toward the hostess desk. We got a table by the window, looking out on the water.

“So fill me in on all the gory details,” I said.

Kate rolled her eyes, laughing softly.

“There’s less to tell than you might think,” she said. “We started going out just after Thanksgiving the year before last. He lives in Boston, but his folks have a place here, so he comes down a few times a week. He proposed at Christmas. That’s really about it.”

She had an air of bored sophistication about her now that she had lacked in college, more poised and jaded, you might say. Her hair was up in a short, snappy cut, and her nails were French-manicured. I wondered if her mother had been sending her off to the beauty salon for some polish in preparation for her married life.

“What’s he like?”

“He’s great... or at least he can be when he wants to. He’s one of those guys who seems to need everyone’s approval, you know? Got to be everyone’s best bud. Most of the time it’s funny. Sort of cute. But sometimes it can get annoying.”

“I gather your parents like him?”

She laughed.

“They love him. He and my dad are always smoking cigars together, arms over each other’s shoulders, sharing a glass of Remy Martin on the back patio. And my mother would probably marry him herself if I wasn’t around and she wasn’t married already.”

“What’s his family do?”

“No more than he does. Or at least most of them don’t. Some of them still work. But they made their money in shipping. And his great-something-grandfather came over on the Mayflower.”

“Blood so blue it’s almost black.”

She laughed even harder.

“Don’t let him hear you say that. He’d totally take it the wrong way, like you were saying he was black himself.”

I laughed with her.

“I guess that came out wrong.”

“I know what you meant. He probably wouldn’t.”

The waitress came back, and we ordered lunch. Kate told me some more about what she had been up to over the last year, and I filled her in on the life of a big-city litigator.

“Are you seeing anyone now?” she asked at one point.

“Not really. I was dating a woman I met through a guy I work with, but it never really went anywhere.”

“We’ve got to get you hitched up. I’ve got some single friends I can introduce you to at the wedding. I can think of a few who’d love to meet a guy like you.”

“I only date cute brunettes.”

She smiled slyly, knowing what I really meant. We had played that game a lot during college, pretending things weren’t the way they really were.

“Well, I’m thinking of one. One of my bridesmaids. She’s a doctor, though she’s still an intern.”

“I doubt she has time for a social life then.”

“She could make the time, I think, if she wanted to.”

“What’s her name?”

“Melissa. She’s interning at a hospital in New York, so you guys could get together if something happens at the wedding.”

I grinned.

“We’ll see.”

We ate slowly, talking more and more about our days at Yale, and how we had parted ways since then. Then, bit by bit, the conversation drifted back to her impending nuptials.

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"Preston is having a bachelor party in about a month. I could get you an invite if you want to go. They're going down to Miami for the weekend."

"I don't know. Those things sort of turn me off now. I think I left that nonsense behind in college."

Her forehead wrinkled ever so slightly, and her eyes fixed on mine.

"I'd like you to get to know him, at least a little. Would you go? Please?"

I tried to read what I was seeing in her face.

"I guess so. If it means that much to you."

"Thanks. It's not that it means that much, it's just..."

Her voice trailed off, and her eyes darted toward the window. I looked at her, my concern growing by the moment.

Then I got it.

"I'm spying for you, aren't I? You want to hear what happens from someone who won't be inclined to cover for him."

She forced a smile onto her face.

"Is it that obvious?"

I stared at her.

"Kate, tell me something."

The smile became a bit more genuine.

"Do I have to? I know what you're going to ask me. I could never fool you before."

"Why are you marrying this guy?"

She sighed and turned back to the sea. She didn't say anything for several long seconds.

"This is something you would understand better than I do, the legalities of it anyway. All of that stuff is just Greek to me, no matter how many times our lawyers try to explain it. Basically, there is a trust at stake here. A big one. A very, very big one. There's something to it, the lawyers keep calling it a 'contingent remainder,' whatever that is, that means I get nothing if I don't get married before I'm twenty-six. I've been getting the income, but I don't get the whole thing unless I get married."

I did some quick arithmetic.

"Your twenty-sixth birthday is in July."

She managed another weak smile.

"Bingo."

I felt myself physically wilting as this sunk in. I had never realistically expected to be able to marry Kate—and frankly, I would not have just up and done it even now—but to lose her to something like this? That hurt.

"And that's what this is about?"

She put her hand over mine and squeezed it lightly.

"It's not quite that cold-blooded. I do like Preston. And I like I said, he can be sweet when he wants to be. I think we'll be happy together."

"But you don't love him."

She made a small shrug of surrender.

"As if that matters."

For a few seconds, the silence hung thickly in the air, like smog.

"I understand," I said finally. "As much as I can, I guess."

She squeezed my hand again.

"Thanks."

Part Four

Whether or not it had any to do with wanting deflect my romantic pretensions toward her (I would never work up the guts to ask), Kate began our sophomore year at Yale by announcing that she was going to a) get

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me fixed up with someone serious, and b) solve my virginity problem. I had dated other girls the previous year, but as my heart was really set on Kate, I had never slept with any of them.

She soon selected a girl named Mara, who was one of Kate's sorority sisters and about as different from her as she could get. Where Kate was short, slim, brown-haired and at best sort of cute, this girl was blonde, curvy and one of those women who fall out of bed pretty. And where Kate had been born with sophistication running through her veins, Mara had come straight to Yale from a farm in rural Iowa.

Kate set up everything, so on the appointed evening, I walked across campus to Mara's residential college. There I saw a pretty blonde girl waiting on a bench outside the main entrance.

Several things shot through my head when I saw Mara for the first time: Is that her? No, that can't be her. Then, as she met my gaze: Oh God, please let that be her.

She wore nothing but jeans and a Yale sweatshirt, and her blonde hair was loose and straight down her back. She smiled at me, glanced down shyly at the pavement, then back up to see if I was still looking at her. Then she stood up as I approached.

"Hi. Are you Tom?"

"Yeah. Are you Mara?"

"I guess so."

That reply made both of us burst into nervous giggles.

"I mean, yeah, I am," she said. "So where are we going?"

To heaven, I thought to myself. Honestly. The sparks were shooting that thick.

"Just off campus. You know that little Italian place?"

"Sure. That's a great idea."

She fell in beside me as we began walking.

"Kate said you're from New York?"

"Midtown. Have you ever been there?"

"No. I'd love to go, though. It must be really exciting."

I shrugged in the way only a New Yorker can shrug about his hometown.

"It's okay. You're from Iowa?"

She glanced away from me briefly.

"Yeah. I bet it would be really dull after New York."

"I don't know," I said. "I've been to California, but nowhere in between."

"Where else have you been?"

"I went to Europe a couple of times with my folks."

"Really? How was it?"

"Pretty neat. How about you?"

She colored a tiny bit in embarrassment.

"I've never been anywhere, really. I'd love to go to Europe some time though."

Mara continued pumping me for details about the places I had been until we sat down at our table in the restaurant. Only then did I get a chance to learn much about her. Her father owned a farm in Iowa, and she had been valedictorian of a high school class of 53 kids. She had a vague Midwestern twang to her voice that came and went through the evening, which made me think she was trying to lose it.

She was absolutely nothing like any of the girls I had known when I was growing up in New York, who were so jaded and full of themselves and so convinced they knew everything there was to know. Mara was just Mara. Likewise, I (and I knew this because she said so) was nothing like the boys she had dated in high school, who "dipped snuff and forgot to bathe everyday," as she said in disgust. She had dated a few people at Yale, but "nobody interesting."

We stayed at the restaurant until it became clear the staff needed us out. We walked slowly back to campus. My hand bumped against hers halfway back, and the two slipped together slowly.

I walked her up to the door to her room. I promised to call her. We kissed nervously, then more deliberately. When we finally pried ourselves apart, she had given me a definite hard-on.

A week later, I was no longer a virgin.

Despite our disparate backgrounds—or perhaps because of them—Mara and I became an item almost immediately, and we dated steadily for nearly two years. I remained close friends with Kate, of course, but not until the end of my relationship with Mara did that become an issue.

The summer between our junior and senior years at Yale, I took Mara home to meet the rest of my family. My parents had met her a few times before during various visits to New Haven, but she had never spent more than an hour or two in their company. She had also never met the rest of my family, particularly my grandfather, nor had she ever been to New York City.

When we arrived at my parents' apartment that afternoon, having taken a cab from Grand Central, no one was home yet to meet us. Mara had spent the entire cab ride staring wide-eyed up at all the buildings, and when we walked in and set the bags down in the foyer, she went straight across the living room to stare out the main window. We had a partial view of the Park—nothing that should have been illegal, but it was nice nonetheless—and she leaned against the glass to take it all in.

I came up behind her and hugged her.

“Pretty nice, huh?”

“Yeah. Wow. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen. It almost looks like a bunch of toy houses around a garden.”

“Want to take a walk over there?”

“Could we?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Let me go to the bathroom first.”

She went into the restroom off the hall while I carried our bags back to my room. I had just set them down beside my bed when I turned around to see Mara in the doorway with a confused look on her face.

“What?”

“This is going to sound stupid, but... why are there two toilets in there?”

It took me a second or two to realize what was giving her problems.

“There aren’t. One of them is a bidet.”

Her forehead creased even further.

“A what?”

I tried to explain, and her face colored in embarrassment as I did. It was a look I had seen before.

“Oh. Sorry.”

She disappeared back into the hall before I could say anything else.

When she returned, we descended to the street and walked a few blocks down East 70th Street before reaching Central Park. Mara continued looking around at everything, though she seemed a bit subdued now. It was a beautiful June day for New York, warm but not yet humid as it would get in July. We stopped by the Turtle Pond and lay back on the grass together looking up at the sky.

“This is pretty,” she said a few minutes later.

“It is.”

“It doesn’t feel like we’re in New York.”

“That’s why it’s so crowded. It’s about the only place to get away from all that.”

She rolled over, laying her head on my chest. I ran my fingers through her hair. Blonde like corn silk, I thought, like the corn her family farmed on 500 acres in northwestern Iowa. A place I had never seen and frankly had no desire to ever visit, even though Mara had never let me meet her parents.

“I love you,” she said softly.

I hugged her.

“I love you, too.”



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When we returned to the apartment, my mother was home from work and getting dinner together for that evening, as my grandparents were coming over to see us. She greeted us warmly and inquired briefly about our trip south.

“Can I help with dinner?” Mara asked.

“Sure,” she said. “In fact, could you get me the shiitake mushrooms out of the bottom drawer of the refrigerator?”

I saw a familiar look of embarrassed confusion shoot through Mara’s eyes and went to help her out. I found the mushrooms and gave them to her.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

Mara chopped up the mushrooms and some other vegetables for the recipe my mother was making while we discussed school and our plans for next year. My father returned home about twenty minutes later, and shortly after that, my grandparents buzzed up from the building foyer. I could see Mara getting progressively more nervous, and I went over and squeezed her hand.

“Relax. I’m sure it will be fine.”

I answered the door when they arrived. My grandfather shook my hand vigorously.

“Tom, good to see you. How have you been?”

“Good. School is going well.”

I kissed my grandmother on the cheek and then introduced them to Mara.

“It’s nice to meet you, ma’am,” she said.

“And you too, dear,” my grandmother said. “Tom tells me you’re from Iowa.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Where in Iowa?”

“Granite. It’s a little town near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. My family has a farm there.”

My grandmother gave me an unctuous smile.

“Well, you’ve certainly come a long way.”

We made idle chit-chat for another fifteen minutes until my mother announced that dinner was ready. Mara helped her serve it, and we all sat down in the dining room.

“Tom, you’ll be applying to the Law School this fall, won’t you?” my grandfather asked.

“Yeah. I’m taking the lsat in a few weeks.”

“How are your grades going?”

“Good enough, I hope. I just need to do well on the test.”

“Well, you’ve always tested well,” my father said. “We’ve all got our fingers crossed.”

“What are you studying, dear?” my grandmother asked Mara.

“Economics.”

“What do you think you’ll do with it?”

“I’m not really sure yet. I want to go to graduate school, so I’ll probably go on and get an mba or mpa. I might work for a year or two first, though.”

“Are you going to stay on the East Coast or move back to Iowa?” my father asked.

Mara glanced briefly at me.

“I don’t know yet. I guess I’ll decide when I graduate.”

The conversation drifted back to my father’s job and the general aspects of lawyering, and nothing unusual happened the rest of the evening. My grandparents went home and my parents retired to their room. Mara insisted on doing the dishes, and I stayed in the kitchen to help her.

“How did I do?” she asked.

“You did fine. They’re always like that.”

“I don’t think your grandmother liked me.”

I leaned over to kiss her on the cheek.

“Give her time. And what matters is that I like you.”

She giggled, nuzzling my head.

"I can't believe your parents are letting me stay in your room."

"They're pretty cool about stuff like that."

"My folks would never let us do that in a million years. I mean, not unless we were m-"

She cut herself off, then began to blush. I kissed her again.

"Right."

We finished with the dishes and went back to my room to watch television. Mara changed into her nightshirt and flopped onto the bed. She lay on her stomach and propped her chin up in her hands to watch the tv. I was leaning against the headboard, and when she settled into place beside me, I reached up to caress her thighs. She giggled but stayed put, even when I lifted up the hem of her nightshirt to see if she was wearing panties. She wasn't. I reached up further to cup a firm buttock in my hand.

"What are you doing?" she asked softly.

"You'll see."

I slid my hand downward, finding the warm nest between her thighs. I tickled her gently, and she began rolling her hips against my fingers. I kept it up until she started to lubricate, and then I slowly slipped my middle finger inside her. She gasped, legs tensing, but let me.

Using my thumb and middle finger, I masturbated her gently for a few minutes, and her hips were soon moving with me. She lay down flat on the end of the mattress, head on her arm, biting at her fist. I watched her rising toward orgasm, thinking that my grandmother had been right about how far Mara had come, though not in the way she meant. Mara had not been a virgin when we met, but she might as well have been when it came to understanding her own needs and reactions. Sex in Granite, Iowa, she would tell me later, was just something girls did for their boyfriends. When I went down on her the first time we slept together, it was literally the first time she had ever reached orgasm in her life, whether alone or with someone else. She had never even masturbated, for God's sake. She had lost her virginity at fifteen, while I had never made it beyond second base before that night, but somehow I felt as if I were the one with the experience.

Mara let out a little cry as I continued to pleasure her, and then her hips were bouncing rapidly against my hand as she finally came. I finished her off and withdrew, sucking her arousal off my fingers.

"Mmm," she sighed.

"Mmm," I said.

She opened her eyes, seeing I was doing, and laughed softly.

"God."

"Come here."

She crawled around and straddled me, sitting in my lap. I played with her firm breasts, tweaking her nipples through the fabric as she kissed me.

"I love you so much," she moaned.

"Mmm. You too."

She reached down and pulled her nightshirt over her head, leaving herself naked. Then she kissed her way down my chest, pausing to suck on my nipples, before finding my erection and pulling it through the fly of my boxers. She gave it a few slow licks before taking most of it into her mouth.

She bobbed slowly over me, working lips and tongue hard against the most sensitive spots. Mara had gotten very good at this over the year and a half we had been dating, in part because she frequently asked me what I liked and how I wanted her to do it. She kept up a slow massage on the head of my penis for several minutes, then began bobbing more rapidly. All the while, she was gently caressing my balls and thighs with her free hand. I felt myself growing close to orgasm and tried to pull her up, but she shook her head, not letting go. I groaned, running my fingers through her hair as she tried to finish me off. I felt her sucking tightly, bringing her lips and tongue hard against my cock, then began bobbing as fast as she could go. A few moments later, she had me on the brink, and then my come was spurting wetly into her mouth. I felt her gulping it down as it came, and only when it was all out did she finally withdraw, crawling up to lie in my arms.

I laughed softly when I caught my breath.

“I wanted to make love to you,” I said.
“Later. I just love making you feel good.”
“You did.”

She snuggled closer to me, nuzzling my neck. I turned off the lights and the television, and we crawled under the covers, kissing and caressing each other. After about fifteen minutes of random cuddling and fondling, my erection returned and Mara pulled me onto her body. I slipped into her, and we made love slowly and quietly in the dark.



We spent the rest of the week sightseeing and shopping around New York, and we hit all the requisite tourist spots. Sunday afternoon, as we were window-shopping on Fifth Avenue on the way home, we walked past a jewelry store, and Mara slowed down to look at the pieces in the display windows. One of them caught my eye, a two-carat diamond engagement ring. I looked at Mara, seeing what appeared to be a hopeful gleam in her eyes. At that moment, something clicked in my head.

This was not the first time I ever thought of the possibility of someday marrying Mara, but that instant was the first time I seriously considered it. I don't quite know what triggered this epiphany—it wasn't the first time we had walked past a jewelry store together or even the first time she had sent me those sorts of matrimonial signals. But as we continued our walk back to my parents' apartment, I realized that for the first time in my life, I could actually ask someone to marry me, and she would almost certainly agree.

We had a year left at Yale. If I wanted to marry Mara next June, after graduation, now was the time to ask. We might be pretty young to be doing it, but I loved her. That seemed to be enough.



I would have asked her. Except for what happened that night.



At six, my grandparents came over for dinner again. Mara was in the kitchen helping my mother and grandmother prepare a roast. My father was still at work but on his way home. My grandfather appeared at my side with two glasses of scotch in his hands. He gave me one and motioned for me to join him out on the balcony. I did.

“You and Mara are quite the couple.”

I nodded, not sure what to say to that.

“She's a nice girl,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Have you thought much about the future, what's going to happen after you graduate?”

“Not really,” I lied. “We've talked about it, but nothing serious.”

He reached out and rubbed my shoulder.

“Tom, don't take this the wrong way, I mean, she's a sweet girl, but love alone isn't enough to make a successful marriage.”

Distress shot through my gut.

“What do you mean?”

He took a sip of his drink and pondered for a moment.

“One thing I've noticed throughout my life is that men will not advance very far in the world without the right woman at their side. However hard I've worked, I would not have accomplished half of what I have without your grandmother. I surely would not be sitting behind a bench right now without her. She's the one who really made the contacts I needed for that, made sure people knew what I could do. I think the same thing goes for your parents. Your father had loads of talent, just like you do, but it was your mother who honed him into who he is.”

I swallowed hard.

"And you don't think Mara could do that."

He sighed.

"I want you to understand that I do like her, and she does seem like a wonderful person... I just think she's lacking in the sort of polish she needs if you're going to be a successful lawyer."

"She's from Iowa. It's not like she grew up here."

He nodded.

"That is my point."

"There's nothing wrong with Iowa."

"I didn't say there was. If you live in Iowa. In New York, though... I think it may prove to be a handicap."

I looked back into the house, watching Mara with my mother and grandmother. My stomach tightened as the color of this scene changed before my eyes. A few minutes earlier it had looked like a vision of the future, grandmother, mother and wife cooking together. Now Mara simply looked like an intruder.

My grandfather shook my shoulder again.

"You know her much better than I do, so maybe I'm wrong about her. I just want you to think about what I'm saying."

"Okay."

"Whatever happened to that other girl you were seeing, what was her name, with the brown hair?"

"Kate."

"Kate, right. What happened to her?"

"Nothing. We're just friends."

"Well, that girl, I could see you marrying. You could go a long way with her beside you."



I had lost much of my appetite by the time we sat down to eat. The food moved around as we served each other.

"Could someone pass the Burgundy, please?" Mara asked.

My grandmother picked up the bottle of wine as a patronizing smile spread across her face.

"It's not Burgundy, dear, it's Bordeaux. There's a difference."

Mara glanced at me quickly. The knot in my stomach turned into a ball of lead.

"Oh. Sorry."



Though it would be another month before I broke up with her, my relationship with Mara effectively ended that night. Though I truly loved her, I realized in the back of my mind that a marriage to Mara was not for me. She was too unsophisticated and unpolished, even with her Ivy League education, for me to feel comfortable presenting her to the family as my future bride.

No one could fault Mara's intentions—she certainly tried her best—but she was simply lost in a setting more formal than a casual dinner party. My grandfather had actually been overestimating her meager social graces, and the more they got to know her, the worse it would have gotten. No one would have tried to stop me were I dead set on marrying her, but the pall of disappointment that would lay over such a union would ultimately have poisoned whatever I had with her.

My grandfather was right about Kate. She would have been perfect in that respect. But I would have had the same problem with her family that Mara had with mine. And it was up to poor Mara, sadly enough, to point out that irony during our final, tearful, confrontation. I don't know what she might have told Kate, if anything, but I was too ashamed of what I had done to ever discuss any of it with her myself.

Part Five

I was at work a few days later when Preston called about the bachelor party.

The Teaser

"Hey, any friend of Kate's is a friend of mine. If you want come, you're welcome. Did she tell you where we're going?"

"Miami, right?"

"You bet. We're staying on the South Beach. I got the whole top floor of the hotel rented out so we've got plenty of room for you. Should have a blast."

He went for a minute or two about all the debauchery they had planned for the weekend: Booze, golf, strippers, etc., etc.

"I'll call my travel agent and get her to send you the plane ticket."

"I can take care of that myself. It's okay."

"Hey, all expenses paid, bud. Don't worry about it. She'll send you the whole itinerary. We're going to meet at the airport and take a couple of limos over to the hotel."

"Okay. I guess I'll see you there."

"You bet. Catch you later."

When he hung up, I had to force myself to set the phone down gently rather than pitch it through the window across from my desk. Luckily I had a ton of work to do, and I didn't have time to dwell on how much I despised this guy already.



I didn't hear from either of them for a couple of weeks. The plane ticket to Miami arrived in the mail a few days after I spoke with Preston, and I got permission from the firm to take that Friday off work.

I spent a few days wondering if keeping my promise to Kate about reporting the details of this weekend would torpedo her marriage. I didn't know for certain what Preston was going to do, but based on what he had told me, and my impressions of him over the phone, I had a feeling that he wasn't planning on behaving himself.

But, I kept saying to myself, Kate had to know this—she had to know what kind of person he was, and she was still marrying him. Because this wasn't really about Preston. It was about \$100 million being held in trust for her by Bank of Boston.



Kate called me a few days before I left for Miami.

"Are you ready for all this?"

I laughed.

"I don't know. It sounds like it's going to be pretty wild."

"Just have fun. Don't feel like you have to take notes or anything."

"Okay."

I heard her taking a deep breath.

"Anyway, I'm calling because there's something else I need to warn you about. I didn't mention this last month when we had lunch because I hadn't heard from her. She hadn't rsvp'd yet."

"Who?"

"Um... Mara. She's going to be at the wedding."

I sighed.

"Oh."

"We've kind of stayed friends, so of course I was going to invite her. But she lives in Chicago now, so I didn't really think she was going to come."

"It's all right. It's your wedding."

"Have you guys kept in touch at all?"

"No. I haven't seen or heard from her since graduation."

"You won't have to talk to her. There'll be 500 other people there."

"Don't worry about it. It's not that big a deal."

"Thanks. Have fun in Miami, okay?"



Friday morning, I took a cab to Kennedy and got on the flight south. We got into Miami International about one, and I made my way toward the baggage claim area, where I was supposed to meet Preston and his friends. They should have gotten in a little bit before I did, and when I got there, I spotted them immediately. I didn't think there would be more than one group of twenty-something rich kids meeting here, even had there not been a limo driver standing there with a "MacAllister" sign in his hands. Most of them were standing around holding golf bags and joking about the upcoming weekend.

One of them, a tall, good-looking guy with dark hair, seemed to be directing things, so I went up to him.

"Is this the bachelor party? I'm Tom Dempsey."

He shook my hand.

"Hey, good to meet you. I'm Phillip Macintosh. I'm the best man. You're that friend of Kate's?"

"Right."

He checked my name off on a list he was holding and got the attention of one of the other guys there.

"Preston!"

Kate's fiancé' was shorter than I was but more heavily built. His sandy blonde hair was haphazardly styled at best, and he wore what looked like a very expensive Sea Island cotton button-down shirt. I don't know how much stemmed from my knowledge of the situation, but I disliked him the instant I saw him.

He came up to us with a big grin on his face and shook my hand roughly.

"Hey! Good to see you. Thanks for coming."

"Thanks for inviting me."

"The more the merrier. You got all your bags?"

"All I've got is carry-on."

He turned to Phillip. "We got everyone?"

"This is it."

"Cool." He raised his voice and motioned toward the doors. "Let's go! Let the party begin!"

Whooping it up, Preston and his friends headed out toward the limousines. One of the drivers took my bags, and I ended up in the second limo. We drove east toward Miami Beach, and I spent the time trying to get to know the other guests. Most of them were high school or college buddies of Preston's, and I had enough of a mutual conversation topic in Yale to make me feel like I wouldn't be completely lost that weekend.

The hotel was at the extreme south end of Miami Beach, off Ocean Avenue, in the art deco district of South Beach. It was a relatively small, all-suite place, and Preston had indeed rented the entire top floor for his party. We didn't need every single room, but this apparently ensured that they could run wild without overly disturbing the other guests.



I managed to avoid Preston for the rest of the day, even when we all went out to dinner that night and he got monumentally drunk on a succession of designer shots. We had reservations for golf the next morning, and he somehow pulled himself together enough to come with us.

I was assigned to a foursome consisting of myself, a guy Preston had worked with at Merrill Lynch, and two of his fraternity brothers from Yale. I had never been much of a golfer, but I had enough experience to avoid completely embarrassing myself. My partners weren't much better, but since we were doing a best-ball scramble, it didn't really matter much.

"Do you know what's going on tonight?" I asked as we were finishing up the sixth hole.

"Strippers," one of the frat brothers said.

"Plural?"

"So Phillip said."

"How many?" I asked.
"I'm not sure. But it sounded like it might be a bunch of them."
The analyst laughed.
"What, like three or four?"
"More than that. He was talking like six of them. Maybe more."
"Jesus," I said.
"What I heard," the other frat brother said, "and don't quote me on this, but the way Preston was talking about it, I think they might be something more than just strippers."
The other three of us exchanged a look.
"Seriously?" the analyst asked.
"I don't know. You know how full of shit Preston is. But I got the distinct impression he was expecting more out of them than just taking their drawers off and dancing around."
"Six hookers," I said evenly.
"I didn't say that," he responded, "I just said it sounded like that."
The analyst laughed again.
"Oh, fuck. This should be good."



We finished the golf by about noon and had lunch nearby, drinking heavily and generally behaving like asses. The energy of the weekend was beginning to carry me along, and as the day progressed, I found myself wavering between disgust with Preston and anticipation of what we were going to do that night. At least I didn't have to worry that I was cheating on anyone myself.

We spent the afternoon around the pool, went out to eat again that night, and then headed back to the hotel. Phillip had ordered up a full bar's worth of alcohol for the party, and we collected in the two adjoining suites at the back end of the building, where the hotel looked out on the beach. We rearranged the furniture to create a dance floor, and put a chair in the midst of it for Preston to sit in. Someone produced two boxes of bootleg Cohiba Robustos, and the entire floor was soon clouded with pungent cigar smoke.

One of the limo drivers who had been ferrying us around arrived at ten with the girls in tow. Not wanting to create a scene in the lobby, Phillip had warned the concierge about them, and the hotel staff brought them in through the service entrance when they showed up.

There were indeed six of them, two blondes, two brunettes, and two redheads, all with the tanned, toned, aerobicized and implanted physiques of professional dancers. Some of the guys whooped it up when they arrived, but most of us just stayed put and watched as the girls filed into one of the bedrooms to get ready. Phillip and the limo driver worked out the finances in one corner of the room while the rest of us waited.

Preston was already half-drunk by this point, sitting in his chair with a cigar in one hand, a bottle of Bacardi in the other, and big shit-eating grin on his face. Someone started up the music, and the girls emerged en masse about ten minutes later.

For about an hour, they stripped, danced around naked, took off most of Preston's clothes, and otherwise did their best to entertain us. They worked their way around the room from one guest to another, and I got a good look at just about all of them.

I was sitting on one of the couches in a corner of the room, and at one point, I had one of the blondes—a cute little thing who looked all of twenty, if that—in my lap while one of the redheads was next to me on someone else's. After displaying their breasts and privates to us from several different angles, they leaned together to kiss for a few seconds as the guys around us yelled encouragements. The redhead reached over to caress the blonde girl's breasts, then they separated and moved on.

As my view cleared, I looked over at Preston, seeing him down to his boxers with one of the brunettes rubbing herself all over him. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

The girls finally took a break and went back to the bedroom, and the limo driver then announced that the "love act" was next. More whooping and cheering greeted that announcement.

The Teaser

The analyst I had played golf with that morning had been on couch with me, and he got up now to refill his drink. Phillip was standing by the bar, and I saw them talking as he poured himself another glass of whiskey.

He returned a moment later and nudged me, grinning, as he sat down.

“Jake was right. They’re all hookers, and they’ve all been paid for already.”

“Paid for?”

“Yep. Preston and Phillip worked something out with the escort service. When they get done with the show, they’re all available if you want them.”

I wanted to ask “Preston did this?” except I knew the answer to that question already. Instead I just tried to nod and grin.

“Which one do you like?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe that blonde who was on my lap.”

“I want that redhead with the big tits. Man, she gave me some wood.”

The girls returned, still naked, and as the limo driver put on some slow romantic music, they came together in a clump in the middle of the room, kissing and fondling each other. I tried to relax and enjoy this, but I kept looking over at Preston, wondering if he was really going screw one of these girls tonight. And I wondered what Kate was doing at that moment, how she would react to this bacchanal we had orchestrated, to seeing her fiancé cheering and laughing over the mass of limbs at his feet, mouths locked to breasts, to pussies, all sorts of feigned cries of ecstasy in the air.

After about ten minutes, the mass orgy began to break up, and the girls split up into pairs to continue performing around the room. The blonde and the redhead who had danced on the couch before returned to us, to the analyst’s delight. The blonde girl straddled me, leaning in to suck on my earlobe, before lying flat across our laps. The redhead bent down, pulling her partner’s thigh up onto her shoulder, and commenced eating her.

The blonde girl writhed around, gripping her breasts, moaning softly, groping at us. She reached for my crotch and began massaging me, trying to give me an erection. To my mild embarrassment, she succeeded. The redhead continued to eat and finger the blonde until her partner feigned a massive orgasm after a few minutes.

Then they switched places, the redhead climbing onto the back of the couch between us, propping her feet on our shoulders. The blonde girl knelt in front of her and leaned in to lick at her. Her friend moaned and writhed around and clawed at our hair.

The analyst apparently could no longer stand to just be a spectator at this, and reached over to stroke the blonde girl’s butt. I expected her to stop him, but she didn’t, even when he reached in to play with her little tits. Instead, she reached over to me, took my hand, and pulled me into the action. I was more than a little surprised at this until I remembered that these girls had already been paid to have sex with all of us, so a little fondling was hardly out of bounds.

Similar scenes were taking place around the room, and I looked again for Preston. I wished I hadn’t.

He was across the room with one of the brunettes and the other redhead, lying on his back. The brunette was straddling his face, and although I couldn’t quite see what was going on, it was obvious enough what he was doing. The redhead stood over them with her legs in a V while the brunette leaned forward to eat her.

The redhead on the back of the couch grabbed my head and turned me back around to watch her and her friend, looking down at me and licking her lips. The blonde was still licking and sucking on her friend’s clit and labia, and the analyst now had his hand between the blonde’s legs, rubbing away.

The redhead cried out, clawing again at my hair and the analyst’s, and thrashed around as if she were in agony. When her “orgasm” subsided, she pulled the blonde up to kiss her. Then they slid off the couch and went to perform for another group.

I got up to make myself another drink, and that taken care of, I stood by the bar finishing my Cohiba and watching the various performances around the room. Preston was still engaged with the brunette and the redhead, but I tried not to watch. The less I saw, the less I had to tell Kate.

Phillip appeared and took the stool beside me.

“Pretty wild, huh?”

“No kidding.”

“My cousin just got out of the Navy. He was a seal, and he told me a couple of times about stuff like this they used to get into in Thailand and the Philippines.”

I grinned.

“Probably a lot cheaper though.”

Phillip laughed.

“No shit.”

“Did I hear right earlier, you guys bought all these girls for the night?”

“Yep.” He laughed again. “Don’t ask how much it cost, but yeah. They’re here until three, and whatever you want, they’ll do.”

I heard whooping and cheering from where Preston had been performing, and we looked over to see him standing up with the two girls. As the other guys cheered him on, he led them into the bedroom and shut the door.

I sucked my front teeth in disgust and sighed.

“Hard to believe Preston is getting married.”

Phillip chuckled.

“I know what you mean.”



One by one, the girls were taken off to the bedrooms. I was still trying to decide if I really wanted to do anything myself, battling my horniness at not having gotten laid in several months and my embarrassment at taking the last plunge into this debauch.

Preston reappeared after about half an hour, wearing nothing but a bathrobe, and his girls were immediately claimed by other guests. He did a series of shots with some of his fraternity brothers and finally passed out on the couch around midnight.

With the entire floor cleared of uninvited guests, the party was soon drifting from room to room, the girls still naked and many of the guest nearly so. I wandered around, either watching or trying not to.

Though we had the girls until three, things seemed like they were going to wind down before then. The guests began passing out or disappearing into their rooms one by one, and the girls slowly returned to the big suite in the back. I was by the bar around one-thirty when the blonde girl who had danced for me earlier came up, looking a little worse for wear.

“Hi. Make me a drink?”

“What do you want?”

“A rum and coke.”

I mixed her the drink and handed it to her. She took a long swig and then wiped her mouth.

“Thanks.” She looked me up and down, smiling at my still-neat appearance. “Are you staying out of this?”

“I’m deciding.”

“Married?”

“Nope. Not even steady.”

I felt a little weird having a conversation with a completely naked girl, so I tried to keep my eyes on her face.

“Why, then?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because the bride is a good friend of mine, and I’m still dealing with watching her fiancé’ cheating on her.”

She smiled, nodding.

“Ah. Got it.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

"Tammi. You?"

"Tom."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a lawyer in New York City."

She looked around the room.

"You guys must be doing pretty well. I've never been to something like this before, six girls at once. I thought only, like, the Arab oil guys did stuff like this."

"Preston is pretty loaded. I think he paid for all of it."

"What's he do?"

"Sits on his butt spending his family's money from what I know. I don't really know him that well."

She smiled, then took one of my fingers, stroking it lightly with her thumb.

"So have you decided yet?"

"About—oh. I don't know."

"You're cute. I'd like to, if you want."

"Have you already worked tonight?"

"Yeah. But I cleaned up. Is that a problem?"

"No. That's not it."

"Could be me and somebody else if you want." She looked over at the sitting area, where several of the other girls were lounging around, talking with the few remaining guests. "See anything you like?"

I almost turned her down, and had this encounter occurred earlier in the night, I probably would have. But I had been watching so much debauchery tonight, and had been walking around in various states of tumescence for so long, that I let myself consider it. And that led to the inevitable question, When am I going to get a chance like this again?

"Uh... okay."

"Who else?"

I saw the redhead she had danced with, sitting across the room.

"Her."

She smiled.

"Cool. She's my bud. We work together a lot."

She took my hand and led me toward her. Her friend looked up as we approached, and Tammi bent down to whisper something to her. The redhead smiled and stood up, and the two guys she was talking to laughed and whooped at me, pumping their fists in the air.

"This is Kelly."

"Hi," I said. She shook my hand.

"Hey."

"Where's your room?" Tammi asked.

"Back up the hall."

They followed me there and shut the door behind us. Then they began undressing me.

Tammi, as I said, was a little thing, about 5'2" and slim, with pointy little breasts and a smooth little butt. Kelly was a few inches taller but with the same athletic physique, except for her oversized and artificial tits. They had me naked in a few moments, and then dropped to their knees in front of me.

In the back of my mind, I was rapidly growing disgusted with myself, no matter how much I tried to give in to my gonads and enjoy it. I kept thinking of Kate as the two girls alternately fellated me, wondering if she would be as upset at my participation in this as she might be about Preston's. And suspecting that she probably wouldn't much care, which made me feel even worse.

I drew the girls up from the floor and got them to work on each other for a while. They were either good actresses or genuinely getting into it, and I didn't make myself think too hard about which it might be. I found a condom, rolled it on, and slipped into Tammi from behind as she continued eating her friend. Kelly

thrashed around in front of us, putting on a good show, and Tammi worked her butt back at me as best she could.

By this point, I simply wanted this over with, but I couldn't reach orgasm in this position. I pulled Tammi off her friend and rolled her on her back. She pulled me back into her, and I thrust into her rapidly for about a minute, thinking of Kate however much I tried to stop myself.

I came, withdrew, and tried to catch my breath. The girls lay with me for a minute or two, pretending to be sated, then got up.

"Thanks," Tammi said. "See ya."

When they left, I took a long shower and tried to get to sleep.

Part Six

Now and then back at Yale, when I was feeling depressed about the futility of my affections toward Kate, I would console myself with a little inside joke: Even if I couldn't date her, I was at least the only guy who got to sleep with her regularly. It was one of those jokes more pathetic than funny, which was why I never shared it with anyone. The pathos came from the fact that Kate and I never once had intercourse of anything but the intellectual variety (and for all I knew, she had left Yale a virgin, the way she arrived), but she nevertheless slept in my room fairly often, even when I was dating Mara.

Kate did not get a room at her sorority until midway through her junior year, while I moved into my fraternity after having been at Yale just one semester. Kate's roommate her first year could, most charitably, be referred to as having an active sex drive, and as a result, she often asked Kate to sleep somewhere else. That "somewhere else" usually meant my room. I slept on the floor the first couple of times she came over, but eventually she declared that she felt too guilty about evicting me from my bed, and we did our best to share it.

Only once, that first April, did my eighteen-year-old horniness get the better of me. We had gone out to dinner and a movie that night, and I misinterpreted the signals she was giving me, thinking that her tipsy flirtiness was something other than playful. When we got back to my room and went to bed, I tried cuddling up to her. She let me, at first, until I started kissing her neck. That earned me an elbow in the ribs and a threat to sleep on a bus bench until I apologized and promised to behave. These nights together stopped during the height of my engagements with Mara, but after I broke up with Mara that last summer before my senior year, Kate again returned to my bed, and my fixation with her returned as well.

The break-up with Mara had left me lonely and confused, and Kate was the only other girl I had any sort of bond with. We had become almost like brother and sister over the last three years, and I clung to the stubborn hope that I could nurture that feeling into something more.

One frigid Connecticut morning in March of our last year at Yale, I woke up beside her wondering what was going to happen after we graduated. I had already been accepted to the Law School and would start there that fall, but Kate simply planned to go home to Newport after a lengthy trip through Europe. We had, briefly, discussed going to Europe together, but her parents had scotched the idea despite Kate's protestations that I was "just a friend." (And even after four years, it had hurt me to the core to hear her say that.)

Kate was still asleep, and she lay on her side facing me, scrunched up under the duvet. She wore the same oversized Patriots T-shirt that she wore to bed every night, and the neck hole had fallen open as it often did while she slept. I had, over the years of sleeping with her, caught various glimpses of her breasts or brief views of dark pubic hair peeking out the leg holes of her panties, and I had by now a pretty good idea of what Kate looked like naked. I could see her left nipple now, small and dark, and I felt, as I always did, as if I were sitting in front of a big pile of cash that I could never possess.

I wanted, so badly that it hurt, to reach out and run my fingers through her tousled hair, to slide closer and kiss her awake. I was close enough to smell her breath and feel her warmth under the covers. I let myself fantasize that we were two young lovers hidden away from the rest of the world, sharing something no one else could ever understand. I indulged this fantasy several times a month, and sometimes it seemed so close

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that I could reach out and touch it, but I always came crashing back to earth when I remembered the impenetrable wall that stood between us. The inevitable disappointment was sometimes so intense that I almost brought myself to tears. Had I been wiser, I would have stopped letting her sleep with me, but there was about as much chance of that as there was of my leaping into the air and jumping over the moon.

Kate stirred in her sleep, moving closer to me. I pretended to be still asleep myself, and I rolled on my side toward her. The action left us with Kate's head against my chest and my arm across her waist above the covers. I closed my eyes and lay still beside her.

I had not awoken with an erection, but in such close proximity to a female body, I found myself with one rather quickly. It stirred from my boxers, emerged from the fly, and soon rested against Kate's leg. With one arm trapped above the covers and the other trapped under my pillow, I could not undo this inadvertent exposure unless I rolled away from her, and that I did not want to do.

Whether my arousal was the cause or not, Kate seemed to wake up at that moment. Her leg moved against my penis, then stopped. A few moments later, I felt her arm moving slowly under the covers, reaching down to where my erection lay against her knee. Very gingerly, she felt around, as if to be certain of what it was.

Feeling her gently touching my penis, I could no longer feign being asleep, and I slowly stretched out beside her. Kate's hand withdrew instantly, but she stayed where she was.

I still had my arm over her waist, and I snuggled with her sleepily. She mumbled something, nuzzling her head against my chin. Sharing my narrow bed as we had to do, it was not unusual for us to end up like this simply by rolling around in our sleep, but as Kate made clear early on, it would never go beyond that.

Except, that last morning, it did. Even now, on the eve of her wedding, I still didn't know what was going through her mind that day. Curiosity perhaps, though afterward she would insist endlessly that it had been a mistake and that she was sorry to have let it happen. We fought. I didn't speak to her for nearly a month.

We had been awake for a minute or so. I felt her hand moving again. It found my erection, touching it gently, exploring. My breath caught in my throat as I realized what she was doing, not wanting to move for fear it would end. She took me in her hand, enveloping me. She began to stroke me softly.

I remained paralyzed beside her, not believing what was happening. She kept up a steady rhythm over me, and when I began to leak in arousal, she used it to lubricate her hand. She sped up. I began to twitch and shake beside her. After a few minutes of this, she brought me to the brink, and with a restrained grunt, I ejaculated all over the sheets between us.

We lay still as the odor of my semen rose from under the covers. Confusion spun through my head. What did this mean, if anything? I dared to hug her closer to me, but she went suddenly rigid. My heart stuttered.

She finally moved, reaching up to caress my face. She kissed me once, quickly, half on the lips and half on the cheek. Then she was slipping rapidly out of bed.

"I'm sorry. I need to go."

"Uh. Wait—"

She didn't look at me as she quickly pulled on her clothes. She turned away from me, pulling her nightshirt over her head—something she was normally far too modest to do in my presence—giving me a view of her naked back as she donned her bra. I lay in bed, dazed and on the verge of tears.

Only when she was completely dressed did she glance at me, face lined with pain.

"I'm sorry. I—"

She grabbed for my hand, squeezing it, then ran out of the room. She was gone down the stairs before I could get to my door.

I tracked her down later that day. We fought, as I said. Though I went back to her a month later, unable to stay angry with her, we would never speak of that morning, nor would she ever share a bed with me again after that.

Part Seven

"Okay, spill it."

I was at work later that week, rubbing my forehead in frustration as Kate waited at the other end of the line for my report on the bachelor party.

“You sure you want to hear this?”

“Yes.”

I had spent the last several days struggling over what to tell her, not out of any desire to protect Preston but because I knew the full truth would cause Kate a lot of pain. And I just didn’t know if I could do that to her no matter how much I felt she deserved to know.

“We played golf.”

She snorted.

“And that’s all? Come on.”

“Well, they had some strippers Saturday night.”

“Go on.”

“I don’t know about this.”

“Tom, please.”

I sighed.

“No one else is going to tell me anything,” she went on. “You know that. Even though the other guys have probably told other people. How can you let them know and not me?”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I heard a little gasp, and she didn’t say anything for a few seconds. I banged my fist against my head at what I had just done.

Her voice, when it returned, was quiet and nervous.

“Tom?”

“What?”

“What happened?”

I groaned.

“I’m not trying to protect Preston,” I said. “I’m trying to protect you.”

“I don’t have the right to know what my future husband has been doing?”

“You do, it’s just...”

Silence howled over the line. Then I began to hear vague noises that I was fairly sure were the sound of Kate crying. I heard her cry enough times before to know.

“Kate?”

She took a ragged breath.

“Tom, listen to me. I told you I don’t love Preston. And this is not a surprise. I think he’s cheated on me before, I just wasn’t sure about it.”

“How can you do this to yourself?”

“I don’t have any choice. You know that.”

“Kate—”

She cut me off instantly.

“Please don’t. Just don’t, okay? You can’t say anything that will change the reality of this.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Now tell me what happened.”

“They had strippers, like I said.”

“And?”

“It turned out they were also hookers.”

“And Preston...” Her voice trailed off.

My throat tightened.

“Yes,” I managed.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

Neither of us said anything for about five seconds. I could hear her breathing heavily.

“Thank you,” she said finally.

“I’m sorry, Kate. I wish it were different.”

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not.”

Her voice came back at me, heated and edgy.

“And what do you want me do about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“This isn’t your problem, Tom. It’s mine, and I’m doing the best I can.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“No. You’ve done what you could. Thank you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.” She sighed heavily. “I need to go cry now. Goodbye, Tom.”

“Good bye.”

The line went dead, and I hung the phone up slowly. I didn’t know whom I hated more at that moment, myself, Preston... or Kate.

Part Eight

During my years in law school after graduating from Yale, Kate and I had remained in close contact. We spoke on the phone every week or so, and about once a month, she would come down from Newport and we would have lunch. A few times she spent an entire weekend with me, staying at my apartment, though she always slept on the couch.

Kate had never mentioned her trust fund or its onerous terms, but that was in part because we did not much discuss her family, and I would certainly never have pried into something so private as her finances in any case. She must have begun seeing Preston during my third year of law school, but she never mentioned him once or even hinted that she was dating. She surely suspected that I would not have reacted well to the whole truth, as indeed I would not have. But I wasn’t any happier about it now.

The last time I saw Kate before receiving the invitation to her wedding was shortly after my law school graduation, when I was taking a brief break before beginning my study for the New York Bar Exam. She had come down for the commencement ceremony and stayed at my apartment for a few days afterward.

My roommate had already moved out, having gone home to California, and I was in the midst of packing up myself in preparation for a return home to New York City. I woke up early that Monday morning, stumbling out of my bedroom to make some coffee. Kate was sprawled across the sofa, still asleep. She remained so while I filled the coffee maker, and when I was done, I sat down in a chair beside the couch, watching her.

It occurred to me at that moment that, almost seven years after we had met, we were finally going off into our respective lives. I was heading home to New York for a big firm job; Kate would remain in Newport in her world of money and privilege. We would not see much of each other in the foreseeable future. For all I knew, I might never see her again after she went home that night. A lot of things could happen. I would be very busy. Kate might finally succumb to family pressures to settle down, and I might come to be viewed as a distraction from some arranged marriage. And I felt a profound ache in my chest the longer I contemplated this bleak future.

The smell of the coffee finally woke Kate up. She stretched, yawned, popping a few joints, then rolled on her side to look at me. She smiled.

“How long have you been sitting there?”

“A few minutes. Just since starting the coffee.”

We stared at each other for a moment or two.

“Marry me,” I heard myself say.

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Kate's face paled, and her eyes closed slowly. She rolled on her back and covered her face. My throat tightened as I watched her begin to cry. I had to look away from her at that point, and I did not look back at her until I heard her voice.

"Tom?"

She lay on her side again, eyes red, staring forlornly across the gulf between us. My powers of speech were temporarily crippled. She reached for my hand and squeezed it.

"I can't," she whispered.

"But you want to."

"I can't," she said again. "Tom... I love you, but right now, at this point in my life, I need a friend more than I need a husband."

I pulled my hand from her grip, turning away.

"I can't go on just being your friend. I'm sorry."

I heard her climbing off the couch, and then she was trying to hug me. I remained rigid.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, "but if I marry you, I turn my back on my entire family. I can't do that. You don't know what you're asking me to do."

I pushed her away from me, battling the tears. She sat down heavily on the edge of the couch, sobbing into her hands. I couldn't stand anymore of this. I stood and walked back to my room, lying on the bed. I covered my face with my pillow and began to cry.

Some time later, I felt Kate sitting on the end of the mattress. I looked up. She was dressed, and her overnight bag was at her feet. She reached out and rubbed my leg.

"I should go. I'm sorry."

I let go of the pillow and stared blankly up at the ceiling.

"I meant what I said."

"I know. So did I. For what it's worth, I do love you. Probably more than I'll ever love anyone else."

"For what that's worth."

She sniffed.

"I'll call you. Good luck on the exam."

I nodded, unable to say anything. She left.

Ten months later, I got the invitation to her wedding. By then, though, I had filed that morning away with all the other temporary insanities that infected my relationship with Kate. We were back to being best buds again. Right?

Part Nine

The wedding was the first weekend in June. I drove up to Newport Friday night and checked into the hotel. Kate had told me they were planning to regroup at the hotel bar downstairs after the rehearsal dinner, and I drifted down there around ten.

I spotted them quickly, Kate and Preston surrounded by a big knot of their friends but somehow paying little attention to each other. I immediately looked around for Mara, not seeing her.

Kate waved me over and gave me a big hug.

"Hey!"

"How you doing?"

"Great. Come meet Melissa."

She introduced me around, and Melissa proved to be a fairly intriguing prospect, who did indeed look somewhat like Kate, slim and impish and brown-haired.

"Kate's been telling me a lot about you," she said.

"Has she?"

"I almost think she's been trying to sell me on you."

We exchanged a grin.

"How do you know her?" I asked.

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"We went to high school together, at Choate. We haven't seen as much of each other since then, but we've tried to stay in touch."

"Kate told me you're a doctor."

"A baby doctor. I just started my internship last fall. I've still got a long way to go."

"What are you thinking of doing?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe emergency medicine. I really like what I'm doing now."

"Didn't get into it to do anything specific?"

She smiled.

"I got into it mainly because half the people in my family are doctors. Did you meet Phillip?"

"Yeah."

"He's my cousin. He's a doctor too. So's my dad."

"In my family, it's lawyering. My granddad is a judge. Where'd you go to med school?"

"Harvard. We're a Harvard family, pretty much. What about you?"

"I went to Yale."

She laughed.

"So much for that."

I talked with Melissa for about an hour. Though she was nice and interesting, it became clear to me fairly quickly that there were no sparks developing. Kate was still working the room, trying to talk to everyone—except Preston, that was. It wasn't as if they were avoiding each other, it simply struck me that they might not have anything to say to each other.

Eventually I was ready to call it a night, and I walked Melissa back to her room. I went to sleep dreading the next day, for long list of reasons.



I spent most of the next day sitting around my room watching television and trying not to think about anything. I showered and dressed at five, then descended to the lobby.

And there, sitting on a couch waiting for the shuttle to the church, was Mara.

I saw her before she saw me, and I briefly considered fleeing back to my room, before discarding the idea as juvenile. Her blonde hair was pinned up in an elegant roll, and she wore a trim peach-toned suit and some well-coordinated jewelry where she had once worn little beyond jeans and sweatshirts. Mara had always been naturally pretty; when she tried, she could be beautiful, and she was certainly trying this afternoon. I wasn't quite egotistical enough to think it had anything to do with my presence, which Kate had surely warned her about by now.

She finally saw me approaching, and an uneven look passed across her face. Then she stood up.

"Hey," I said.

"Tom. How are you?"

"I've been worse. I'm still in New York."

"Are you a lawyer now?"

"Yep. How about you? Kate said you're in Chicago."

"I'm in grad school at the University of Chicago. I'm going to get my mpa this summer."

"Congratulations. What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm applying to a couple of federal agencies. I got an offer from HUD, but I turned it down. It wasn't really what I wanted to do."

"I'm sure you'll find something great."

She nodded and turned away from me. I stood there uncomfortably, not sure what to say next. She continued staring out the window toward the street.

A few more guests approached, and we stood in a clump waiting for the van. Mara was still not looking at me. We hadn't seen each other in about four years, and our last parting at Yale was not amicable. I wanted to say something to reduce the tension, an apology of some sort, but this was really not the best time for it.

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The shuttle arrived at that point, and Mara stepped out toward it, not bothering to wait for me. She took a seat in front, and I sat in back.



The wedding was being held at a nearby Episcopal cathedral. When I arrived, I saw Preston in the foyer, joking and roughhousing with his groomsmen as the guests filed in. I sat by myself, amongst a clump of other guests I didn't know, about five pews back from the front.

Little expense appeared to have been spared for this undertaking. Exotic arrangements of stargazers, orange blossoms and orchids were arrayed around the inside of the cathedral, and the central arrangements on the altar were at least six feet high.

The service began at six, and the groomsmen gradually seated all the members of Kate's and Preston's families. Then Preston took his place at the head of the church with the priest and his groomsmen, and the bridesmaids finally began their procession.

When the last of the bridesmaids had reached the front, and the organist began the wedding march, I had to close my eyes and fight to stay in control. My stomach tightened, and for a moment I thought I might vomit. But I regained my composure after a second or two and turned toward the rear of the cathedral.

Kate was beautiful. They say all brides are, but she was. She walked slowly the center aisle at her father's side, giving me a nervous smile as she passed.

Most of the ceremony flew past me by in a blur. I felt as if I were watching it on television, not really there, not really a person who had any connection to the people or the event. Just a spectator with nothing at stake.

I kept waiting for the bit when the priest would ask if anyone wanted to stop the ceremony, thinking of all the things I could say, feeling immensely stupid because of it. I could stand up and shout, "Preston fucked two hookers at his bachelor party!" or "Kate told me herself that she doesn't love him!"

And all of that would, of course, accomplish nothing beyond profoundly humiliating Kate, and probably driving her out of my life for good.

"If anyone can show just cause why these two may not lawfully be joined together in matrimony," the priest said, "let him speak now or forever hold his peace."

I held it, and held it tightly.



The reception was on the back lawn of the Armitage family mansion, looking out over Narragansett Bay. I rode over in a shuttle with the other guests, and we filed in through the house. Several huge tents had been set up over the dining area, the orchestra and the dance floor. There were already at least a hundred people there, and more arriving every minute.

The wedding party arrived about twenty minutes after I did. Kate's parents were polite but distant to me as I went through the receiving line. You wouldn't have thought that I had known their daughter for nearly eight years. I allowed myself a smidgen of revenge at this snub by thinking of Kate's story about catching the two of them having sex all those years ago.

Kate herself was giddy and teary-eyed when I got to her. She gave me a tight hug.

"I'm so glad you're here."

"I wouldn't have missed it. Feel any different?"

"I'm still in shock."

"Congratulations."

She relaxed her grip, giving me a kiss on the cheek. I withdrew from her and shook Preston's hand. He pumped it up and down vigorously.

"Congratulations," I said.

"Thanks, man. Great to have you here."

Dear God, he was already half-drunk. I could smell the liquor on his breath. I stifled the expression of disgust that fought to climb onto my face.

I managed a final smile and moved on to meet Preston's parents. I continued down the line and headed to the bar when I was free.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked.

"Bourbon. Neat," I said. "Make it a double."

He poured me a double shot of Maker's Mark, and I downed it in two gulps.



I went looking for my seat, and there I discovered that either Kate, out of some twisted desire I could not quite fathom, or the cruel gods of chance, had conspired to seat me at the same table as Mara.

I sat down, watching the other guests blankly. About a minute later, I saw Mara approaching the table. She saw me at the same time, and her face tightened. She sighed, dropping her purse across a chair a few seats away.

"Well," she said.

"Yeah. I, uh, I'll move if you want me to."

"No. It's all right."

She sat down.

"Do you want a drink?" I asked. "I was about head back to the bar."

"A white wine would be nice. Thanks."

I returned to the bar and got Mara's glass of wine. She was still there, quiet, when I returned to the table.

She regarded me for a few moments, and as she did so, something caught in my stomach, and I found myself wondering if she had been this good-looking when we were dating. Then a small smile spread across her lips.

"This must have been a weird experience for you," she finally said.

"What do you mean?"

She rolled her eyes in disbelief.

"Come on. I know you better than that."

I had to look away from her.

"I'm all right."

"Sure you are. I know you wanted to up there with her tonight instead of Preston."

The twinge in my stomach grew into a rock. I couldn't say anything. She twisted the knife a bit more.

"Must have been tough, watching the only woman you ever loved marry someone else. Someone she doesn't even love herself."

I forced myself to look at her.

"She's not the only one I ever loved."

Mara's eyes flared a little at that, and her lips pursed.

"Maybe not. But she was always number one with you, wasn't she?"

I shook my head slowly, trying not to let her get to me.

"Tom, do you know what a 'teaser' is?"

"No."

Her eyebrows went up in mock surprise.

"Wow. A miracle. Something I actually know and you don't."

"Just say what you're going to say."

"It's a ranching term. When you're going to breed a mare who's in heat, you can't let the stallion at her right away. You bring in another horse first to see if she's ready to mate. If she is, you take that horse out and bring in the stallion. That first horse is called the 'teaser.'"

"And your point being?"

"That's what you were with Kate. They let you hang around until it was time for her to get married, then they booted you out of the picture and brought in Preston. You never had any chance with her. You were just the teaser."

I couldn't listen to this anymore. I returned fire the only way I could.

"Does it still hurt that much? That I dumped you for some impossible dream with her?"

She looked away from me finally, and her eyes closed. I realized she was battling tears, and I suddenly felt like shit.

"I'm sorry. That was over the line. I shouldn't have said that."

Mara shook her head.

"No. It hurt, but... the truth always does."

I reached across the table and squeezed her hand. She returned the squeeze.

"Let's just forget all this, okay?" I said. "It's ancient history."

She nodded.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have started."

"Well, you were right, too. I'm not really enjoying myself tonight."

A smile, a much more genuine one, crept back onto her face.

"Probably more than Kate is."

I grinned.

"Probably."



The reception ran on into the night, and as it progressed, I found myself paying more attention to Mara than to what Kate was doing. At first I thought I was just trying to spare myself any further pain, but when I watched Kate dancing with Preston for the first time, I realized what I had to do.

Kate was gone. For good, this time. She was not mine and never would be. I either moved on with my life, or I would end up wasting it by pining after her forever.

I danced with Mara a few minutes later, and though some tension still lay below the surface, we seemed to enjoy ourselves. Then Kate cut in, and I danced with her through the end of the song.

"I can't believe you're dancing with Mara!" she whispered when we were out of earshot.

"Some one put us at the same table."

Kate gasped.

"No! Oh, my God, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"It's all right."

"I didn't have anything to do with the seating chart, I swear. It was my Mom who set it all—"

She froze, as did I, jaws agape. Then we both started laughing, though inside I was thinking that Mara might well have been correct about my role. Kate hugged me, shaking her head.

"You don't think..."

"I'm not going there," I said.

"I wouldn't put it past her. You know she knows all about you."

"Yeah. But as I said, it's all right now."



When the song ended, I rejoined Mara at the edge of the dance floor.

"I think I discovered the answer to tonight's mystery," I said.

"What mystery?"

"How we ended up at the same table."

Her eyes swelled.

"Kate?" she asked incredulously.

"She says no. But it looks like it might have been her mother. So maybe you were right after all."

She put her hand over her mouth and stared across the dance floor in a daze. Then she exhaled slowly.

"I don't know whether to be upset or just amused."

"I'd go with amused."

She laughed softly, and I laughed with her.



I spent about half an hour circulating through the room after that, catching up with some of our old friends from Yale. I danced with Melissa for one song, then with another friend of Kate's I had known in college. I ran into Phillip near the bar, and we talked for a few minutes as I watched Preston getting progressively drunker.

"Preston sure knows how to have a good time," I said.

Phillip snickered.

"He won't be having a very good time tonight if he keeps up like that."

I laughed, trying not to feel pleased at that thought.



A bit later, I found Mara again, sitting on a low wall that surrounded the pool.

"How are you doing?"

She shrugged.

"Tired."

I leaned forward onto my knees, holding my drink in my hands.

"Mara, um, I'd like to say something."

I heard her sigh.

"Go on."

"I want to tell you how sorry I am for what I did to you. I've realized over the past few months how much of my life I've wasted chasing something I can't have. I'm not asking you to forgive me, I just want you to know that I'm finally realizing how stupid I've been."

I glanced at her, but she was looking away from me, looking out across the water.

"I guess, maybe tonight was what it took to make me realize how much I hurt you. I'm sorry."

She took a ragged breath and turned back to me, eyes aflame.

"You think you know how much you hurt me? Do you really fucking think you know how much you hurt me?"

"I don't—"

"You don't have a fucking clue how much you hurt me!"

She paused for a moment or two, nostrils flaring as she glared at me. Then she shook her head in disgust.

"You don't know how proud I was of myself for making it to Yale, how happy I was knowing I was getting out of that jerkwater town. That was I was actually going to go places and be somebody. That I wouldn't have to date any more boys who smelled like cow shit and had dip stuck between their teeth. And then I meet this great guy from New York whose grandfather is a judge and who knows all these important people, and the whole time I'm scared to death that I'm not good enough for him, that I just don't know enough about life and how to be sophisticated enough for him."

She paused, wiping her eyes and catching her breath.

"And then I find out that I'm not! That every fear and insecurity I've been carrying around the entire time I was at Yale is confirmed. That no matter what I do or how I look, I can't compete with girls like Kate, who've had everything their life handed to them on a fucking platter."

She looked down at me, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Tom, I loved you like I didn't think I could love anyone. And you stabbed me right through the heart."

I swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what else to tell you except I'm sorry."

She wiped her face again and cried into her hands. Then she leaned back and took a deep breath.

"Do you remember my mentioning that offer I got from hud?"

"Um... yeah."

The Teaser

"I told you I didn't take it because it wasn't what I wanted. That wasn't quite true. It was what I wanted, at least the job, but it wasn't where I wanted it to be."

I closed my eyes and sighed.

"It was in New York," I said.

"Right. So I turned them down. Eight million people in New York, and I turned them down just because I didn't want to risk running into you on the street."

"I'm sorry. I'll say it however many times you want me to. If it's any consolation, I'm hurting pretty bad myself right now."

She laughed weakly.

"You know, that was the one thing I was really looking forward to tonight, seeing the look on your face when she married Preston." She paused, sniffling. "Except when it happened, I didn't feel better. I just felt like shit."

I sat back next to her, trying to smile.

"I didn't mean I'm hurting because of Kate. I meant because of you."

Half a dozen emotions shot through her eyes before she turned away from me again. I sat there numbly, not sure what to say.

"Do you mean that?" she asked quietly.

"Do I feel dead on the inside thinking of what I did to you? Yes. As for Kate... it's over. It was over a long time ago, I just couldn't let go of it until tonight."

She looked back at me now, jaw vibrating. She reached up and touched my cheek gently.

"Tom..."

"I'm not asking you to forgive me. I'm just saying I think I understand now."

Then her hand dropped, and she turned toward the lawn.

"I need to think about this."

"I know."

"I can't go through all that again."

"I'm not asking you to," I said. "Things would be different."

"Hud is still after me about that job, but..."

"I know. It's a big step."

"I'd like to see you again."

"We would take it slow. Start from the beginning."

"A blank slate," she said.

"A blank slate. Absolutely."

She took a deep breath and exhaled.

"Do you have your card with you?"

"Yes." I dug one out of my wallet and gave it to her. She stared at it for several long seconds before slipping it into her purse.

"I'll try to call you when I get back to Chicago."

"Okay. No pressure."

She looked at me, eyes still wet, and then kissed me tenderly on the cheek.

"Thank you." She stood up, and I stood up with her. "I should go," she said. "I have an early flight tomorrow."

"Okay. Take care of yourself."

We hugged gently, and then I watched her leave, walking slowly across the lawn toward the house. The orchestra began a slow, jazzy tune, and I looked wearily up at the stars, twinkling in the sky above me.

Part Ten

I stayed a bit longer, waiting only until Preston and Kate left. Then I climbed into the shuttle with the other guests and rode back to the hotel.

The Teaser

When I got to my room, I lay on my bed watching television, unable to sleep. I thought of Mara, aching over the things she had told me. I kept covering my face with my pillow in mortification at the memories of how cruel I had been to her, knowing now just how sharply the things I had said during our break-up must have cut her. I was going to make all that up to her somehow. Maybe a renewed relationship was not in the cards—I suspected I had done too much damage to her feelings toward me—but I could do my best to be a good friend.

I heard a knock on my door.

I glanced at the clock, seeing that it was just after midnight. I got off the bed, went to the door, and got the shock of my life.

“My husband is passed out dead drunk,” Kate said. “Can I come in?”

“Uh—”

She swept past me, still wearing her wedding gown—a Vera Wang original, someone had told me—and flopped onto the bed. She backed up to the headboard and reached for the remote.

“Preston is drunk?”

“Out cold. I don’t want to talk about it.”

I sat down beside her on the other side of the bed. On the TV screen, Pamela Lee was strutting around in some black leather fetish outfit.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Barb Wire”

She smirked at me.

“I thought you liked cute brunettes.”

I returned the grin.

“There’s nothing else on.”

We watched the movie in silence for about ten minutes, and though I could tell that Kate was fuming about Preston, I didn’t say anything, sensing that she would talk when she was ready. I made her a drink from the minibar, opened a bottle of beer, and we ate a bag of Doritos together.

“Did anything happen with you and Mara?” she asked a bit later.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I gave her my card. She said she would call me.”

“It would be nice if you guys got back together.”

“Yeah.”

She sighed.

“I can’t believe I’m still going to be a virgin tomorrow morning.”

My head shot around in surprise, but Kate was already looking up at me, eyes narrowed.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said. The glare—half annoyed, half embarrassed—intensified. “I said, don’t look at me like that.”

“I’m sorry. I just—”

“Thought there weren’t any twenty-five-year-old virgins left in the world? Well, there’re still a few of us left.”

“But after all this time?”

“Tom, you knew me better than anyone else at Yale. Who would I have slept with?”

She had a point.

“The only person I would have slept with back then was you,” she went on, “and I couldn’t sleep with you. Who does that leave?”

“Preston?”

She shook her head.

“No.” She sighed again. “See, by the time I got out of Yale, I was thinking that I had waited so long that I might as well wait until I got married. And when I started going out with Preston, that was what I told him. He accepted it, even though I wasn’t sure I really meant it. And when we had been going out long enough

that I might have considered it, I had begun to suspect he was cheating on me. So I didn't think I even wanted to do it with him. I still don't. Not when he stuck that dick into a hooker at his bachelor party."

"Two hookers," I said wearily.

Her eyebrows shot up.

"Two?"

I gave her a slightly more detailed description of what had gone on that night than I had given her a few months before. Her face reddened in anger, and she finally looked away from me, shaking her head.

"God."

"I'm sorry."

She wiped at her eyes.

"It's not your fault."

I reached over, and she rolled onto my chest, letting me hug her. We stayed like that for a while. Then she started laughing weakly.

"God, this is so pathetic. I can't believe I saved myself all this time for this."

"Did anything happen?"

"No. I had to help him walk from the limo to the room. When we got there, he sat down on the end of the bed to rest, and I went to get him a glass of water. When I got back, he was already out. I tried to wake him up, but I couldn't. I was so mad, I didn't know what to do. I finally called the front desk to get your room number."

She started crying again, and the spell lasted for another few minutes. I just held her and stroked her head. When she stopped crying, she simply lay still for a minute or two.

"Tom?"

"Hmm?"

She was quiet for a few seconds before she spoke again, very softly.

"I don't want to be a virgin tomorrow morning."

It actually took me a moment or two to realize what she really meant. I was frozen in shock, and she finally brought her head around to look at me. She just stared at me sadly.

"Kate, I—"

I couldn't finish the thought. Her eyes dropped to my chest, and she took a deep breath.

"Do you know what 'droit de seignior' means? Did they ever cover that in law school?"

I answered her as calmly as I could manage.

"It's medieval Norman French. It means 'the right of the lord.'"

"To the virginity of any peasant girl who got married, on her wedding night. He got her before her husband did."

I swallowed hard.

"Most historians consider it a myth," I said. "And you're not exactly a peasant."

"Still. It wouldn't be unheard of."

She looked up at me, then reached over to squeeze my hand.

"Tom..."

I lay there, still paralyzed with shock, unable to say anything.

"Please don't make me beg for this," she said softly. "I'm feeling pathetic enough as it is."

We stared at each other for only another second or two. Then I pulled her to me roughly and kissed her.

We groped at each other, moaning with long-accumulated frustration. She pulled at my shirt, popping the top button, before I simply jerked it over my head. I struggled with the zipper on the back of her wedding dress for a few seconds, and she untangled herself from me to help.

"Let me do it."

She sat back on her knees and wriggled out of the riot of lace and satin. Under it she wore a sheer white merrywidow, with garter straps going down to white silk stockings, with matching white panties. I had never

seen her in anything more erotic than a long nightshirt, and I forced myself to pause a second to appreciate her.

She crawled back over to me, and I took her in my arms.

"Let's slow down," I said. "Let's do this right."

We recoupled, and I kissed her again. She lay under me stroking my chest as I fondled her, feeling her firm little breasts under the lace. I scratched gently at her nipples over the fabric, and soon they were poking out at my fingers. She moaned a little through her nose, kissing me harder.

I kept losing my grip on what I was doing, thinking over and over again that this was Kate in my arms, finally giving herself to me. I was finally possessing the woman I had wanted for so long.

She reached for my pants, undoing my belt and zipper, pushing them down over my butt. Soon was I down to just my boxers. I rolled on my back, pulling her on top of me. She straddled my waist and sat back, hands on my shoulders. I stroked her stockinginged thighs, looking up at her in her bridal lingerie. Lingerie she had donned for someone else, someone who wasn't going to get to enjoy it now.

She reached behind her back and began undoing the hooks on the merrywidow. I freed the garter straps from her stockings as she did, and in a moment or two, she was seated on my waist wearing only her panties.

She bent down to kiss me, and I cupped her breasts in my hands, feeling the hard little nipples against my palms. I stroked her gently, and she began moving herself against my erection, rubbing herself against me. I stopped playing with her breasts and reached down to stroke her behind.

She stretched out her legs on top of me, and I rolled her over again. I sat up to remove her stockings, kissing my way down her leg as I took each one off. As I kissed up her right thigh, she reached for me, pulling me up to kiss her again. And like that we lay against each other for a few minutes, kissing and gently caressing.

I withdrew a bit and looked down at her, stroking her cheek.

"Are you sure about this?"

She nodded.

"Tom, if there's anyone who deserves my virginity, it's you. God knows Preston doesn't. I'm sure."

"What are you going to tell him tomorrow?"

"I'll just say we did it somehow. If he wakes up naked with me, he'll just figure he blacked out on it."

I resumed kissing her, and I reached down slowly for her panties. As I hooked a finger into the waistband, she rolled over a bit to help me get them off. I slid them down her thighs, and at last she was naked in my arms. She pushed my boxers over my butt, and I kicked them to the floor. Then she pushed me on my back and sat up a little. She reached for my erection and took it gently in her hand.

She smiled, stroking me lightly.

"There he is again."

I closed my eyes.

"What made you do that for me, that one morning?"

She saddened a bit as she thought back through the years.

"I don't know. I just woke up in your arms, and it felt so nice to be next to you. When I realized what was poking me in the leg, I just..." She paused for a moment. "I had never touched one before. And once I did, I just wanted to make you feel good. I knew how much you wanted me. I wasn't stupid. I thought it might help, but I realized afterward that I had just made things worse. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I enjoyed it."

She lay down across my chest, hugging me.

"Why did you put up with me for so long?"

"Because I love you."

She hugged me more tightly, and then she was rolling on her back, pulling me with her. I reached down between her legs, exploring very softly, finding her wet. She twitched when I touched her the first time, letting out a little squeak.

The Teaser

I played with her gently for a few moments, then crawled above her. I kissed my way down her chest, stopping to worship at her breasts. I suckled them softly until I had both nipples standing at attention.

I began to move further down, but she stopped me as she realized where I was going. I looked up, seeing a nervous expression on her face.

“Not... not the first time. Afterward... okay?”

“Okay,” I said. “Afterward.”

I kissed my way back up until I was at her face again.

“I just realized that don’t have any condoms.”

“You don’t need one. I trust you.” She smiled. “And I’m pure as the driven snow.”

“I didn’t mean for that, I meant—”

“It’s the wrong time of the month. It’s okay. Don’t worry.”

“Sure?”

She nodded. I positioned myself between her thighs, and she spread herself open for me. Her hands came to rest on my waist as I kissed her, probing forward slowly. As I touched her the first time, I felt her reaching down to guide me in. A moment later, I was resting against her virginity.

“Ready?”

She grinned up at me. “Go for it.”

I pushed forward, and she gave way almost immediately.

I tried not to dwell on the fact that I was taking the virginity from another man’s wife, on her wedding night, but I couldn’t help it. I felt her tensing up a bit as I moved into her. Bit by bit I slid inside her until our pubic bones were resting against each other. She was warm and tight around me, and she grunted, squeezing my waist, as I filled her up. Then she hugged me tightly.

“I love you.”

I kissed her tenderly.

“I love you, too.”

I began to move slowly within her, trying to control myself, trying to make sure she enjoyed it. She lay still under me, only holding me tightly. Her thighs wrapped around mine. I drove into her again, grinding myself against her. A little whimper escaped her lips as I did it.

I rocked back and forth in her arms, remaining deeply inside her. She pushed up at me with her hips, trying to match my movements. I opened my eyes, looking down at her. It was Kate. It was really her, and I was really making love to her. She moved her arms up to my neck and pulled me down, kissing me deeply. I kissed her back as hard as I could, penetrating her from two directions.

We held each other like that for a long time, moving slowly, kissing and driving our hips together. She whimpered again, biting at my shoulder. My initial arousal plateaued, and I began to make love to her more deliberately, no longer as concerned with ending it too soon. I bent down to kiss her breasts, then trailed my tongue up to her neck, sucking on her lightly. Her nails dug into my back.

I drew myself back out of her, almost to the tip, then slipped back in. I did it again, then again, feeling every inch of myself moving within her. She moaned, pulling me back, wanting me all the way inside her. She was so wet now that I could hardly feel her, could feel only the tightness and heat around me. I drove at her more rapidly, seeking some friction, and she let out a moan.

“Oh, God, please.”

I silenced her with another kiss, and she sucked at my tongue. Her body clung to mine, wanting all of me in her. Her sex sucked at my erection, gripping it, not wanting it to withdraw. I felt my climax rising again, but this time I felt her rising with me. She whimpered, rolling her hips with mine, and I ground myself down at her. I could feel the twitches and shudders of her approaching orgasm around me. Her nails clawed my back now, and she gasped for breath against my neck, half cry and half whimper.

“Oh, God. Oh, God, yes!”

I felt her spiking up at me, convulsing, clamping down on me, and I lost all control at that point. I drove myself relentlessly into her spasming sex and let out a grunt, then a cry, then I was spurting off helplessly

inside her. We shuddered together in climax, holding each other tightly for long seconds, before relaxing slowly, melting back into the bed.

I lay still on her body, until I felt her kissing my neck.

"Oh, Tom. Oh, God."

I lifted up just enough to kiss her.

"How was it?"

"Wonderful. Perfect. You were just perfect."

She hugged me, and I moved slowly inside her, enjoying the last vestiges of our lovemaking. I didn't withdraw until my limp penis finally slipped out of her on its own.

She climbed off the bed and went to the bathroom to clean up. I looked at the damp, bloody spot she left behind, wondering if Preston knew what an idiot he was. She returned a minute later and lay down in my arms.



We made love again about half an hour later, and this time she let me pleasure her with my lips and tongue, let me bring her to orgasm several times before pushing me off. Then she took me in her mouth, returning the favor as best she could. The second time together was even better than the first, longer and slower and less tense. I took my time with her, knowing that this night would certainly never be repeated, nor should it be. She had her life now, and I, just maybe, had a future with Mara.

We lay together afterward, spooning, with her firm bottom pressed back against me. She held my hand between hers, playing idly with my fingers.

"We should have done this at Yale," she said.

I laughed softly

"You wouldn't have had to ask me twice."

She laughed with me.

"I know."

She was quiet a moment.

"Tom?"

"What?"

"Do you remember what you asked me last year, after your graduation?"

I didn't know what she meant at first, but then I remembered, and my blood ran cold. I couldn't answer her right away.

"Yes."

"Would you ask me again?"

My heart stuttered, and I lost my breath. Kate twisted around in my arms, looking up at me sadly.

"Kate—"

"I could get an annulment. If I asked for it right away. You know Preston and I have never slept together. That's enough of a reason, isn't it?"

"But—your family—the trust—"

"I don't care about them anymore. I only care about you. And it doesn't matter who I marry, for the trust, as long as I'm married on my twenty-sixth birthday. Tom, please."

I rolled away from her, covering my face in my hands. A profound sense of vertigo washed over me as I absorbed this. My head spun—my entire body. How could she do this now, after all this time, after I had finally made the decision to move on with my life, after I had actually tried to patch things up with Mara?

Mara—dear God, this would kill her. I didn't know how she had been dealing with our break-up in the last few years—I wasn't so self-centered to think she had been pining away for me all this time—but we had dredged up everything again tonight, reopened all those old wounds. She had opened herself up to me, had taken that risk in hopes of rekindling something that was still there, for both of us. She might not call me when she got home. But if she did, and I had to tell her about Kate—

"No. I'm sorry," I sobbed. "Oh God, Kate, I'm so sorry, but I can't."

I could feel her cringing next to me, pulling up into a fetal position. Then she was sobbing against my arm, shaking and crying.

"I'm sorry. It's just that tonight—with Mara—we said—oh, God, we said... we said were going to try again. I can't do this to her. If you had asked me even yesterday or this morning... I'm sorry."

She bawled uncontrollably into the pillow, and I took her back in my arms. We cried together so long and so hard that I thought someone might hear us and come knocking on the door thinking someone had died.

In some not insignificant way, something had.



The tears dried up eventually. Kate rolled on her back, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"So am I."

She sighed.

"I guess I had my chance... and I blew it."

"It's not that, it's—"

She cut me off.

"No. It is that. I made you wait and wait and wait for me. For so long. You stuck by me long after anyone else would have given up. I did this to myself. I have to sleep in the bed I made."

"I'm sorry. Maybe some things just aren't meant to be."

"This was meant to be." She closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. "I just screwed it up."

She sat up, wiping her face.

"I should get back before Preston wakes up and wonders where the hell I am."

I watched as she dressed, putting her wedding clothes back on. I had to look away in embarrassment as she turned back into a bride. I slid off the bed and pulled on my boxers.

She took my hand and led me to the door. Then she rose up on her toes and kissed me.

"Thank you."

"You too."

"I hope Mara makes you as happy as I could have."

"I hope so too."

She kissed me again. Then she was gone.

Part Eleven

The announcement, when it came, was something of a shock. For a lot of reasons.

We had stayed in touch, unlike our last parting, so I knew what was coming. But it was a shock nonetheless.

Mara called me a few days after the wedding, and we talked for nearly three hours. At the end of the call, she told me she was going to get back in touch with Hud and take the job in New York. A month later, I helped her find an apartment in Greenwich Village. We started dating again, starting from the beginning as we had agreed to do.

Six months later she moved in with me. And two months after that, we got the letter from Kate.

The envelope was engraved with the return address: "The MacAllisters," with an address in Beacon Hill. "Preston Mayhew MacDonnell MacAllister V," it said. Eight pounds nine ounces. Born March 6th. A honeymoon baby. With the announcement was a picture of him, pink and healthy, wrapped in a monogrammed receiving blanket.

Mara came up behind me, hugging me, looking over my shoulder at the picture. I put my left hand over hers, feeling the engagement ring on her finger.

"It's funny," she said.

"What?"

"He almost looks a little like you."

"Yeah," I said. "Funny."

Send your comments to Michael D. You can email him at MichaelD38@aol.com. You can also visit his site and read more of his great stories at <http://www.asstr.org/~MichaelD/>.