

The
GOOD
FATHER



a novel

NOAH
HAWLEY

ALSO BY NOAH HAWLEY

The Punch: A Novel
Other People's Weddings
A Conspiracy of Tall Men

THE
GOOD
FATHER

Noah Hawley



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For Kyle and Guinevere, proof that life is good

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About the Author

He bought the gun in Long Beach, at a pawnshop called Lucky's. It was a Trojan 9-mm. This from the police report. The trigger mechanism was rusty so he replaced it, using a kit he bought on the Internet. It was May. He was still living in Sacramento, a squinty kid with chapped lips who spent his days reading about famous murders at the public library. Before that he'd lived in Texas, Montana, and Iowa. Nowhere for more than four months. Sometimes he slept in his car. There was a journey he was taking. Each mile brought him closer to an end.

The Trojan was one of three guns he'd purchased in the months leading up to the event. He kept them in the trunk of his car, an old yellow Honda the police would later find in a parking lot near the Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles. The odometer read 210,000 miles. He had done a lot of driving in the fifteen months since he'd left college. Sometimes he took odd jobs for cash: day labor, fast food, construction. He stayed off the grid. Everybody said the same thing: he was quiet, kept to himself, a little intense. This was later, after the multipronged investigations, the illustrated timelines documenting his journey, the painstaking reconstruction of each leg. Now there are bar graphs, books in progress. But in the early hours after the event, nobody knew anything. Who was this young man? Where had he come from? They say nature abhors a vacuum, but CNN hates it more. Seconds after the first shot, journalists were scrambling for context, rewinding the tape, analyzing angles and trajectories. Within hours they had a name, pictures. A young man, bright-eyed and milk-skinned, frowning into the sun. Nothing as damning as Lee Harvey Oswald brandishing his rifle, but viewed through the lens of what had happened, the photos seemed prophetic somehow, like Hitler's baby pictures. A feral glint in the eye. And yet what could you see for sure? It was only a photo after all. The closer you got, the grainier it became.

Like any event that can be called historic there is a mystery to the details that remain impenetrable. Flashes of light. An echo unexplained. Even now, months later, there are holes in days that can't be accounted for, in some cases whole weeks. We know he did volunteer work in Austin, Texas, in August, the year before the event. Organizers remember him as a bright kid, hardworking. Ten months later he was working as a roofer in Los Angeles, fingernails black with tar, a skinny man perched on sweltering shale, breathing the smoky air.

He'd been on the road for more than a year at that point. A rubber hobo losing himself in the great American absence. Somewhere along the way he changed his name. He started calling himself Carter Allen Cash. He liked the sound of it, the feel on his tongue. His given name was Daniel Allen. He was twenty years old. As a boy he had never been attracted to the mindless aggression of men. He did not collect toy guns or turn everything he touched into a weapon. He saved birds that had fallen from their nests. He shared. And yet there he was on two-lane Texas, test-firing automatics on a narrow gun range with cigarette butts on the floor.

On clear May nights he would sit on motel-room floors and polish his thoughts. He would handle the bullets, opening the box and letting them crackle in his hand. He was a human arrow racing toward an inevitability. The TV news showed images of politicians making stump speeches in small-town diners and dusty midwestern farmhouses. It was an election

year, voters and candidates, pundits and money rushing toward a great democratic surge. Primary season was almost over. Partisan conventions loomed. Sitting on his motel-room floor, Carter Allen Cash fantasized casting his vote with a bullet.

When he was seven he lived for the swing. He would pump his feet and point his heels toward the sky, yelling *more, more*. He was a voracious child, unstoppable, and so alive he made everyone around him seem sickly and still. At night he would lie in a tangled heap on his bed, clothes half on, his brow knit, fists clenched, like a twister that had run out of air. Who was this boy and how did he become a man in a motel room fondling bullets? What made him ditch his comfortable life and embrace an act of barbarity? I have read the report. I have watched the footage, but the answer continues to elude me. More than anything I want to know.

I am his father, you see.

He is my son.

One

HOME

Thursday night was pizza night in the Allen household. My last appointment of the day was scheduled for eleven a.m., and at three o'clock I would ride the train home to Westport, thumbing through patient charts and returning phone calls. I liked to watch the city recede, the brick buildings of the Bronx falling away on the side of the tracks. Trees sprang up slowly, sunlight bursting forth in triumph, like cheers at the end of a long, oppressive regimen. The canyon became a valley. The valley became a field. Riding the train I felt myself expand as if I had escaped a fate I thought inevitable. It was odd to me, having grown up in New York City, a child of concrete and asphalt. But over the decades I had found the right angle and constant siren blare to be crushing. So ten years earlier I had moved my family to Westport, Connecticut, where we became a suburban family with suburban family hopes and dreams.

I was a rheumatologist—the chief of rheumatology at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan. It was a specialty that most people didn't recognize, concerned they'd guess with the watery eyes and phlegmy cough of a bad pollen allergy. But in truth, rheumatology is a subspecialty of internal medicine and pediatrics. The term "rheumatology" originates from the Greek word *rheuma*, meaning "that which flows as a river or stream" and the suffix *-ology* meaning "the study of." Rheumatologists mainly deal with clinical problems involving joints, soft tissues, and allied conditions of connective tissues. We are often the doctor of last resort when patients develop mysterious symptoms involving most of the body's systems: nervous, respiratory, circulatory. The rheumatologist is called to consult when a diagnosis remains elusive.

I was a diagnostician by trade, a medical detective, analyzing symptoms and test results, looking for the most pernicious diseases and intangible traumas. After eighteen years I still found the work fascinating and often took it to bed with me, mulling patient histories in the slippery moments before sleep, looking for patterns in the grain.

June 16 was a sunny day, not too hot but with the threat of New York summer in the air. You could smell the first wisp of humidity rising off the macadam. Soon any breeze would feel like the hot breath of a stranger. Soon you would be able to reach up and smudge clouds of exhaust across the sky like oil paint. But for now there was just the threat, a slight smother, a trickle in the armpits.

I was late getting home that night. Afternoon rounds had taken longer than expected, and I didn't step off the train until close to six. I walked the nine blocks to our house through rows of manicured lawns. American flags hung from mailboxes. White picket fences, at once so welcoming and prohibitive, ran beside me like the sprockets of a bicycle wheel, half seen from the corner of my eye. A sense of motion, of one thing being ticked off, then another. This was a town of affluence, and I was one of its citizens, a medical expert, a lecturing professor at Columbia.

I had become an MD in the era before the HMO, before the nickel-and-diming of doctors, and I had done well for myself. The money afforded certain freedoms and luxuries. A four-bedroom house, a few acres of hilly land with a weeping willow and a faded white hammock

that swung lazily in the breeze. On these early evenings when the weather was warm, I walked through the suburban quiet with a sense of peace, a feeling of accomplishment, not smug or petty but deep-seated and human. It was the triumph of a marathoner after a race, the jubilation of a soldier after a long war is over. A challenge had been faced and overcome, and you were better, wiser for the facing.

Fran was already working the dough when I walked in the door, rolling it out against the marble countertop. The twins were grating cheese and scattering toppings. Fran was my second wife, a tall redhead, with the slow curves of a lazy river. Turning forty had changed the quality of her beauty from the athletic glow of a volleyball player to a languid voluptuousness. Contemplative and sure-footed, Fran was a woman who thought things through, who took a long-term approach to problems. These were not qualities my first wife shared, prone as she was to impulse and the full roller coaster of emotion. But I like to think that one of my better qualities is that I learn from my mistakes. And that, when I asked Fran to marry me, it was because we were—for lack of a more romantic word—compatible in the truest sense of the word.

Fran was a virtual assistant, which meant she worked from home, helping people she never met schedule appointments and make flight reservations. Instead of earrings, Fran wore a Bluetooth earpiece, which she put in when she awoke and didn't remove until just before bed. This meant she spent large portions of every day conducting what appeared to be a long conversation with herself.

The twins, Alex and Wally, were ten that year. They were fraternal and not in any way similar. Wally had a harelip and a slight air of menace about him, like a boy who is just waiting for you to turn your back. In truth, he was the sweeter of the two, the more innocent. A miscoded gene had given him a cleft palate, and though surgery had mostly corrected it, there was still a quality to his face that seemed off-kilter, imprecise, vulnerable. His twin, Alex, fair-haired, comparatively angelic looking, had gotten into some trouble recently for fighting. It was a familiar problem for him, starting in the sandbox era as a willingness to battle anyone who made fun of his brother. But over the years, that instinct to protect had evolved into an irresistible need to champion the underdog—fat kids, nerds, kids with braces. A few months back—after being called to the principal's office for the third time that semester—Fran and I took Alex to lunch and explained to him that while we approved of his instinct to protect the meek, he would have to find less physical ways to do so.

"If you want these bullies to learn a lesson," I said, "you have to teach them something. And I guarantee, violence never taught anybody anything."

Alex had always had a quick wit and a sharp tongue. I suggested he sign up for debate classes, where he could learn to beat his opponents with words.

He shrugged, but I could tell he liked the idea. And over the next few months, Alex became the top debater in his class. Now he turned every request to eat his vegetables or help with the chores into an Aristotelian *voir dire*.

I had no one to blame but myself.

This was our nuclear family. A father, a mother, and two sons. Daniel, the son from my first marriage, had lived with us for a year during his sullen teens, but had departed impulsively as he'd arrived, waking me one morning before dawn to ask if I could drive him to the airport. His mother and I had split when he was seven, and he had stayed with her o

the West Coast when I had come east.

Three years after his brief stay with us, Danny, eighteen, had started college. But he dropped out after less than a year, climbing into his car and heading west. Later, he would say that he just wanted to “see the country.” He didn’t tell us he’d left. Instead, I sent a card to his dorm, and it came back unopened, with a stamp OCCUPANT NO LONGER AT THIS ADDRESS. That had been his way since childhood. Danny was a boy who never stayed where you left him, who popped up in unexpected places at unexpected times. Now he called infrequently; sent mails from Internet cafés in the flat states of the Midwest. The occasional postcard scrawled in a moment of summer nostalgia. But always at his convenience, not mine.

The last time I saw him was in Arizona. I’d flown in for a medical conference. Daniel was passing through on his way north. I bought him breakfast in a hipster coffee shop near my hotel. His hair was long and he ate his pancakes without pause, his fork moving from plate to mouth like a steam shovel.

He told me he’d been doing a lot of camping in the Southwest. During the day he hiked. At night he read by flashlight. He seemed happy. When you’re young there is no more romantic conceit than freedom—the boundless certainty that you can go anywhere, do anything. And though it still bothered me that he had dropped out of college six months earlier, knowing him as I did, I can’t say I was surprised.

Daniel had grown up traveling. He was a teenage gypsy, shuttled between Connecticut and California, living partly with me and partly with his mother. Children of joint custody are, by the nature of the divorce settlement, independent. All those Christmases spent in airports, and those summer vacations shuffling back and forth between mom and dad. Unaccompanied minors, crisscrossing the nation. Daniel seemed to survive it without major trauma, but I still worried, the way any parent does. Not enough to keep me up at night, but enough to add a layer of doubt to each day, a nagging sense of loss, like something important had been misplaced. And yet he had always been self-sufficient, and he was a smart, likable kid, so I convinced myself that wherever he went, he was fine.

Last fall, sitting across from each other in that Arizona coffee shop, Daniel teased me about my coat and tie. It was Saturday, and he said he didn’t see the point.

“It’s a medical conference,” I told him. “I have a professional reputation to uphold.”

He laughed at the thought of it. To him all these grown men and women acting and dressing in a manner that society deemed “professional” was ridiculous.

When we parted I tried to give him five hundred dollars, but he wouldn’t take it. He said he was doing good, working odd jobs here and there. He said it would feel strange carrying that much money around with him.

“It’d throw off the balance, you know?”

The hug he gave me when we parted was full-bodied and long. His hair smelled unwashed, the sweet musk of the hobo. I asked him if he was sure about the money. He just smiled. I watched him walk away with a deep feeling of impotence. He was my son and I had lost control of him, if I’d ever really had it. I was a bystander now, an observer, watching his life from the sidelines.

When he reached the corner, Daniel turned and waved. I waved back. Then he stepped into the street and I lost him in the crowd. I hadn’t seen him since.

Now, in the kitchen of our Connecticut home, Fran came over and kissed me on the mouth.

Her hands were covered in flour and she held them up the way I had held mine up a few hours ago walking into the ICU.

“Alex got in another fight,” she said.

“It wasn’t a fight,” Alex corrected her. “A fight is where you hit someone and they hit back. This was more like a mugging.”

“Mr. Smart Ass has been suspended for three days,” she told me.

“I plan on being furious,” I told them. “After I have a drink.” I took a beer from the fridge. Fran had returned to the pizza stone.

“We figured pepperoni and mushroom tonight,” she said.

“Far be it from me,” I told her.

Apropos of nothing Fran said, “Yes, the seven-fifteen flight to Tucson.”

Tucson? Then I noticed the blue light.

“Yes, he’ll need a car.”

I started to speak, but she held up a finger.

“That sounds great. Will you e-mail me the itinerary? Thank you.” The blue light went off. The finger came down.

“What can I do?” I said.

“Set the table. And I’ll need you to take it out in ten minutes. That oven still scares me.”

The TV was on in the corner, playing *Jeopardy!* It was another ritual in our house, the watching of game shows. Fran thought it was good for the kids to compete with contestants on TV. I had never understood why. But every night around seven our house became a cacophony of barked non sequiturs.

“James Garfield,” said Wally.

“Madison,” corrected Fran.

“In the form of a question,” said Alex.

“Who is James Garfield?” said Wally.

“Madison,” said Fran.

“Who is James Madison?”

I had gotten used to the nightly confusion, looked forward to it. Families are defined by their routines. The pickups and drop-offs. The soccer games and debate clubs, doctor appointments and field trips. Every night you eat and clean. You check to make sure homework is done. You turn off the lights and lock the doors. On Thursdays you drag the Toters to the curb. Friday mornings you bring them in. After a few years, even the arguments are the same, as if you are living out the same day over and over. There is comfort in this even as it drives you mad. As a virtual assistant, Fran was militant about order. We were her family, but also her ground force. She sent us e-mails and text messages almost hourly updating calendar events in real time. *The dentist appointment has been rescheduled. Glee club has been replaced by ice-skating.* Armies are less regimented. Twice a week in the Alle household we synchronized our watches like a special-ops team tasked with blowing up a bridge. The occasional annoyance this raised in me was tempered by love. To have marriage once and failed is to realize who you are in some deep and unromanticized way. The veneer of personal embarrassment about your weaknesses and idiosyncrasies is lifted, and you are then free to marry the person who best complements the real you, not the idealized version of you that lives in your head.

This is what led me to Fran after eight years of marriage to Ellen Shapiro. Though I had long thought of myself as a spontaneous and open person, I realized after my marriage to Ellen fell apart that I was, in fact, a creature of rigidity and repetition. I cannot stand living with uncertainty and forgetfulness. The bright-eyed, hippie ditziness that seemed charming in Ellen at first glance quickly became infuriating. Similarly, all the qualities that made me a good doctor—my meticulousness, my love of redundancy, the long hours I worked—proved to be qualities that Ellen found oppressive and dull. We took to fighting at every opportunity. It wasn't so much what I did or what she did. It was who we were. And the disappointment we voiced to each other was disappointment in ourselves for making such poor choices. That is the learning process. And though our marriage produced Daniel, it was a union better dissolved before any real damage was done.

I took a glass from the cabinet, poured the remainder of my beer into it. I was thinking about the patient who had kept me late at the hospital today, Alice Kramer. She had presented herself to me two weeks earlier complaining of leg pain. It felt like her legs were on fire, she said. The pain had started three months ago. A few weeks later she'd developed a cough. At first it was dry, but soon it became bloody. She had been a marathon runner, but now even a short walk exhausted her.

I was not the first doctor she'd seen. There had been an internist, a neurologist, and a pulmonologist. But a valid diagnosis remained elusive, and despite their best efforts, the weakness and shortness of breath had persisted.

Other than the cough she seemed healthy. Her lungs sounded clear. She had some mild weakness in her right hip, but her joints, skin, and muscle were all normal. The symptoms she presented with suggested that her illness involved the nervous and pulmonary systems. This was unusual. Could it be Sjögren's syndrome? This was a disease where the body's immune system mistakenly attacks its fluid-producing glands. Except patients with Sjögren's usually complain of eye pain and dry mouth, and she had neither of these.

Or maybe it was scleroderma, which is caused by an overproduction of collagen. This condition causes a thickening of the skin and can affect other organs of the body. I ordered blood tests. While I waited for them to return I went back over the patient's medical files. As the doctor of last resort it is the rheumatologist's job to reexamine every detail with fresh eyes. I reviewed her CAT scans and MRIs. On the chest CT, I saw faint cloudy patches on both lungs. By themselves they didn't mean anything. It was the context in which I read them that gave them meaning. Looking at Alice's film, another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

I'd ordered a lung biopsy. The pathology report showed evidence of inflammation. When the tissue came back I sat with the pathologist and reviewed the slides under a double-headed microscope. And there I saw the pivotal clue: a granuloma, a cell formation made up of groups of cells up to one hundred times the size of normal cells. They are found in the lungs only in a few diseases. The most common are sarcoidosis and tuberculosis. And since the patient showed no symptoms of tuberculosis, I was certain she suffered from sarcoid, a chronic disease characterized by tissue inflammation.

This afternoon when I told her I had a diagnosis, Alice had started crying. It had been months since the onset of her symptoms. She had been to dozens of doctors, many of whom had said her disease was all in her head. But it was my job to believe the patients who came to see me, to take pieces that didn't seem to match and solve the puzzle.

On TV, the game show was interrupted by a newscaster. Banner headlines. Crisis color. None of us noticed at first. We were deep in the ritual of pizza. The dough was rolled. The cheese and sauce applied. Children were scolded for an overly liberal application of toppings.

"I'm no structural engineer," I told them, "but nothing round can hold up under that kind of weight."

Wally told us about what he'd learned that day. Frederick Douglass was a freed slave. George Washington Carver invented the peanut.

"I don't think he invented it," Fran told him.

"Discovered it?"

"I think you need to go back over your notes," I told him, finishing my beer and getting another.

Fran was the first to notice. She turned to the television and instead of toothy hosts and eager guests found shaky camera footage of some kind of rally.

"What's this?" she said.

We turned to look. On-screen were images of a political event in Los Angeles. We saw pictures of a crowd. Red, white, and blue banners hung on the walls. A presidential candidate stood onstage making a speech. The words were lost in the commercial mute of the TV. It was something the kids do when the ads come on, cutting the volume, letting the huckster pantomime their sales pitches to the walls. As we watched the politician flinched, staggered back. Behind him two Secret Service agents pulled their weapons.

"Volume," said Fran.

"Where's the remote?" I asked, searching around.

It took precious seconds to find the remote, then many more to locate the mute button. All the while the children yelled at me to push this button or that one. When we finally got the volume working we heard the newscaster saying, "... reports of at least two shots fired by an unknown gunman. Seagram has been taken to a nearby hospital. No report yet as to the extent of his injuries."

On-screen the footage played again. The candidate onstage, the sound of shots fired from the crowd. This time the frames played slower, the camera pushing in.

"We are trying to find a better angle," the newscaster said.

I turned the channel. CNN had it. So did ABC and NBC.

"To repeat, thirty minutes ago Jay Seagram, a Democratic senator from Montana and the presidential front-runner, was shot by an unknown gunman."

Back on CNN we found a female reporter standing in front of a hospital. Wind whipped her hair sideways. She spoke with one hand on top of her head.

"Ted, we're hearing that Senator Seagram is in surgery. He suffered at least two gunshot wounds, one to the chest and one to the neck. No word yet as to his prognosis."

This is how it happens. There is nothing and then, suddenly, something. A family is making dinner, talking, laughing, and then the outside world muscles in.

Fran sent the kids into the living room. They were too young for this. She was upset. She had gone to Seagram's rally the last time he came to town. She had even gone so far as to stuff envelopes for him one weekend last month. He was young and handsome and spoke with authority. She had come to believe he was what she called "the real deal."

"Who would do such a thing?" she said.

As a doctor I knew that Seagram was in for a long night. Reporters said that the first bullet had punctured a lung and the second had severed the carotid artery. Paramedics had gotten him to the hospital quickly, but those injuries would cause extensive blood loss. The loss of blood would depress his circulation, hindering his already compromised breathing. It would take a skilled surgeon to fix the damage in time.

We ate pizza in separate rooms, everyone glued to their TVs. Fran sat at the kitchen table typing on her laptop, scouring the Web for the latest rumors. In the living room the kids watched Disney pirates seeking adventure on the high seas, the whimsy of the score offsetting our hawkish watching of the news. Every few minutes I would wander in and make sure the kids were okay. This is what you do when crisis strikes, check on the people you love.

On TV a witness said, "I was watching and then, suddenly, blam blam blam."

Three shots? The news anchors had mentioned only two.

"Two hours," said Fran. "But you'll have to connect through Dallas." She was sitting at her computer trying to do two different things at once. Her Bluetooth earpiece was glowing. On her computer screen I could see the airline's website side by side with a real-time political blog.

"Turn on MSNBC," Fran told me, looking up from the computer monitor. I changed the channel. We arrived in time to see the event filmed from a new angle. Camcorder quality, shot from the far right of the stage.

"The footage you are about to see," said the anchor, "is quite graphic, and may be disturbing to younger viewers."

I checked to make sure the kids were in the living room. On-screen the camcorder zoomed in on Seagram's face as he spoke. The audio was shaky, homemade. This time the sound of the first shot made us jump. It sounded like the gunman was standing right next to the camera. Onstage the senator stumbled, blood spurting from his chest. The cameraman turned and for a split second we saw the gun elevated above the crowd. The gunman was wearing a white button-down shirt. His face was blurred by motion and chaos. People were screaming in the background, running. As we watched, the gunman turned and started pushing his way toward the door. A Secret Service agent jumped into the crowd, trying to reach him.

"Who does he look like?" said Fran. "An actor, maybe. Do you ever get that? That feeling that you've seen people before? Is it that they remind you of someone? Or maybe just *déjà vu*."

The camera swung wildly. Spectators grabbed the gunman. Agents and police reached him. They were lost to the camera.

I got closer to the TV, but rather than make things clearer it made them harder to identify.

"We are getting word," said the anchor, "that police have identified the gunman."

The doorbell rang.

Fran and I looked at each other. I reviewed in my head all the disasters of my life. The death of my father, a car crash in high school that required three separate surgeries, the demise of my first marriage, the deaths of every patient I had ever lost. I weighed them against one another. It was a warm spring night, and I was a man who had found contentment in life, happiness. A lucky man, who had come to expect good things. I wiped my hands on my napkin and moved toward the hall.

There were two men in suits at the door, several others on the lawn. I saw a series of SUVs

parked at the curb, blue-and-red lights flashing silently.

“Paul Allen,” said one of the men. He was tall, a white man with an impossibly close shave. There was a plastic-coated wire winding from his collar to his left ear. The man next to him was black, broad shouldered. He may have been a linebacker in a former life.

“I’m Agent Moyers,” said the white man. “This is Agent Green. We’re with the Secret Service. We need you to come with us.”

The image I was seeing didn’t make sense. The words he spoke.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Are you sure you have the right house?”

Fran crept up behind me and stood wide-eyed in the foyer. She had taken the Bluetooth from her ear. The orchestral narrative of Captain Jack Sparrow reached us from the living room.

“They’re saying it’s Daniel,” said Fran. “The TV. They’re saying he did it.”

I looked at the Secret Service agents. They were affectless, steel-eyed.

“Mr. Allen,” said Moyers, “we need you to come with us.”

I felt like a boxer who had taken an uppercut he never even saw.

“Let me get my coat,” I said.

I walked back into the kitchen, each step taken as if through water. I thought about the beers I’d had, the train ride home. I thought about the fences and the lawns and the neighbors I had known for years. How would they look at me now?

On television I saw a photo of my son. This is the speed of the world. Before you can even think, an action has occurred. It had been less than an hour since the shooting. Where had they gotten a photograph? It was one I didn’t recognize. Daniel stood on a wide lawn in a sweatshirt and jeans. He was squinting against the sunlight, one hand raised to shield his eyes. He looked about eighteen. A college photo maybe. I remembered the day I dropped him off at Vassar, a skinny kid with all his belongings in a footlocker. A boy who had tried to grow a mustache at fourteen but ended up with only a few whiskers on each side of his mouth like a cat.

What have you done? I thought. But even as I thought it I didn’t know if the question was meant for Daniel or for me.

I rode alone in the backseat of the SUV. The new-car smell fed my underlying nausea. Ahead of us was a lead car. A third SUV tailed close behind. We drove fast, sirens on, lights flashing. Agent Moyers and Agent Green sat in front. Moyers was driving. They said nothing for the first few minutes as we hauled ass through residential streets, taking the bumps at full speed, the SUV bucking like a horse.

I pictured Daniel the last time I'd seen him, the long hair, the bear hug, the final wave, and the feeling I'd had—like a man who is watching a movie he doesn't understand. Why did I let him go? I should have dragged him to my hotel. I should have forced him to come home with me. A shower, a hair cut, a good meal. To be surrounded by family, people who love you, isn't that the deepest human need? Instead I'd watched him disappear.

"Is my son okay?" I wanted to know.

They didn't respond. I watched the houses of my neighbors recede in the fading light, lit warmly from inside. Families in their dens, feet up, listening to music, watching TV. Had they seen Daniel's picture yet? Had they made the connection?

"My son," I said. "Is he okay?"

"Your son has a bullet in his leg," said Agent Moyers.

"Which leg? Did it hit the femoral artery? Please. I'm a doctor."

Green turned in the passenger seat. I could see the earbud in his ear. It was colored to match the flesh of a white man. I wondered if this bothered him, that the world did not believe technological advances needed to be made available to people of his race.

"When Secret Service agents hear shots," said Green, "we stand up tall to try to make ourselves bigger targets."

The words didn't make sense to me, and for a moment I wasn't even sure he was speaking English.

"We attempt to draw fire away from our protectee," he continued. "If you watch the tapes again, you'll see that this is what the agents were doing in Los Angeles. They ran *toward* the gunfire."

"Unfortunately," said Moyers, "your son was a good shot."

"Please," I said. "There must be some mistake."

Green turned away.

"We have been told to take you to a secure facility for questioning," he said. "This is the extent of our involvement."

"He's my son."

"Dr. Allen, your son killed the next president of the United States."

The words flared around me. I heard a steady droning sound, blood rushing in my ears.

"He's dead?" I asked.

Green looked out the passenger window, the blue-and-red lights of the lead car strobing. Cold, hot, cold, hot.

"We're taking you to a secure facility," he repeated.

"My family."

“Your family is safe,” said Moyers. “Agents have been assigned to your house. In situations like these people are upset. They act without thinking.”

“Situations like what?”

“Assassinations. Elections are about hope.”

We were on the highway now, the blare of sirens drowning out the growl of the engine. The speedometer read 106 miles per hour.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “did you just say elections are about hope?”

He didn’t answer. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath. From my years in emergency medicine I knew that in order to think clearly in hectic circumstances, I needed to slow things down. Approach the problem in stages. As a scientist I had to stay clear, to put the facts together. I couldn’t afford to get emotional. Emotions cloud the mind. They make you careless. I tried to review the facts. My son was in Los Angeles. He’d been arrested at a political rally and accused of shooting a senator. There was videotape, but none so far that showed his face. The gunman had fired two shots, maybe three, and then disappeared into the crowd. It was possible the police had made a mistake. That they’d captured the wrong man.

Racing down the highway I thought about the congresswoman in Phoenix. The one who had been shot outside a supermarket. What was her name? Giffords? A sunny day in January. Card tables have been set up. *Come meet your representative.* A crowd builds. The congresswoman steps out into the sun, smiles and waves. She shakes hands with her constituents, and then a pale, moon-faced man steps up beside her and opens fire with a semiautomatic pistol, one bullet passing through the congresswoman’s head at point-blank range. Six were killed. Thirteen injured by a Glock 9-mm that held more than thirty bullets.

I thought of the mug shot. Jared Loughner, twenty-two years old. It was everywhere in the weeks after the shooting. An eerie grin on the suspect’s puffy face, like a fat kid who just won first prize at the state fair. There was something chilling about the image. The yellow glare of the camera flash giving his skin the jaundiced hue of an old bruise. His nearly bald head read unnatural, cancerous, misshapen. And on his face, an unblinking stare, one eye darkened by shadow, hovering over a Joker’s grin. From the photo alone you could tell. This was not a sane person. He was a madman, a droog from *A Clockwork Orange*.

I tried to see my son in that way—a deranged assassin with a maniacal scheme—but my brain literally refused to make the connection. Danny was a normal kid from a normal home. Okay. The product of divorce, but isn’t that considered normal these days? Fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce, and you don’t see all those kids growing up to be lone gunmen. No. This was a mistake. And I would put it right.

“Listen,” I said. “I demand that my son get medical attention immediately.”

“With all due respect, sir,” said Green, “fuck you and your son.”

Those were the last words we spoke until we arrived at the secure facility.

Twenty-eight minutes later we pulled up outside a nondescript office tower in Stamford, Connecticut. A guard with a machine gun waved us through a gate. We came to a fast stop beside a rear entrance. Armed agents climbed out of all three SUVs, slamming doors with a sound like gunshots. The night was warm. The air smelled like French fries, the aroma wafting from a fast-food restaurant on the other side of the highway. Entering the lobby, w

passed men in suits carrying assault rifles. We rode the elevator in silence, six men watching the LED numbers rise. Arriving on the fifth floor, I saw a mechanized hub, men and women in suits manning telephones, hunched over keyboards, navigating online chatter, collating data. There was an air of controlled panic. Men walked quickly, ties flapping. Women on cell phones hustled down hallways, carrying urgent faxes.

The agents steered me down the hall. Passing a conference room I saw a white board pasted with details of my son's life; all the information federal agents could draw together in two hours. The story of my family as cataloged by banks and federal databases. How surreal to see them there. Dates and events that, when we lived them, we called our lives, but to these men now, putting together the pieces, were just facts, data collected forensically. Birthdays to be studied; decisions we had made, the places we had lived, the people we had known.

I saw pictures of Daniel, an arrest report, the black whorl of fingerprints. There were still frames of the video images taken from the auditorium. Later I'd learn that this was how they identified him. Fingerprints had yielded a name, a recent arrest for vagrancy, an alias. A timeline had been started: my son's birthday, the dates of his schooling. There were yearbook photos, copied and enlarged. I saw all this in the time it took to walk ten feet.

From the command center I heard somebody say, "I don't care who her father is. Nobody leaves the hall without a thorough screening."

I was led into a windowless room and told to wait. There was synthetic tan carpeting on the floor and a sink hanging on the far wall. It was a strange thing to see in an office. A sink. *Was this where confessions were beaten out of men?* I wondered. It seemed silly to put carpet in a room that might see blood.

Sitting there I tried to assemble what I knew about the kinds of young men who took shots at public figures. Hinckley, Chapman, Oswald. The details of their crimes were fuzzy in my mind. Loughner was the clearest, being the most recent. I'd been as shocked as everyone else by the violence, had read the articles and watched the endless coverage. A twenty-two-year-old high-school dropout with a 9-mm bullet tattooed on his right shoulder, a burgeoning crackpot who railed against our currency. This was not my Danny. Loughner was a kid who once showed up at his high school so drunk they had to take him to the emergency room. A kid who wrote on Facebook that his favorite books were *Mein Kampf* and *The Communist Manifesto*. As a teenager he made people nervous by smiling when there wasn't anything to smile about. He was an angry young man who tried to enlist in the army but failed the drug test.

Sitting there I tried to find similarities between Loughner and my son. Did the kids at Vassar think Danny was creepy? Did my son make strange outbursts in the middle of class or verbally threaten the teachers who critiqued his schoolwork? If he did, I had never heard anything about it. I had visited the school several times, had met the dean. Danny's grades were average, his attendance adequate. Everything I knew told me that Danny was a normal student, hardly an overachiever but not a nut case.

Loughner, on the other hand, had been expelled from community college and told he wouldn't be welcomed back until he presented certification from a mental health professional that said he was not a threat. At twenty-two, the signs of mental illness were clear. He was evolving from a troubled teen into a full-blown paranoid schizophrenic.

Danny was a quiet kid, a little withdrawn, but no one had ever suggested he was mentally ill. The newspapers said that when Loughner walked into his local bank, tellers would put their fingers on the alarm button. He struck people as creepy, menacing. Loughner believed women should not hold positions of power. He told the tattoo artist who drew the bullet on his shoulder that he dreamed fourteen to fifteen hours a day. He said he could control his dreams.

That was not my son.

The night before he opened fire on the crowd at a political rally, Loughner took pictures of himself in a bright red G-string holding a Glock. When the cabdriver dropped him off at the supermarket the next morning, Loughner asked if he could shake the man's hand. And then he pulled a gun and began killing people.

This was not my boy.

Sitting in the cold fluorescent glow, I found myself getting angry. I was not intimidated by the authority of this place. I had faced death in all its forms. As a doctor I was used to being in control. The decisions I made saved lives. I would not be bullied by government bureaucrats. If Daniel had been shot, he must be treated. He was an American citizen. He had rights. I wished I had thought to call Murray Berman, my lawyer. Daniel should have representation immediately. I took out my cell phone, started to dial. The door opened. Moyers and Green entered accompanied by an older man in a gray suit. His gapped teeth were yellow from years of smoking.

"Mr. Allen, my name is Clyde Davidson. I'm the assistant director of the Secret Service. I am here to talk to you about your son."

"It's *Doctor* Allen."

"Of course. Dr. Allen."

"I'm told my son has been shot. I want to go on record saying I will not answer a single question until I'm certain he's receiving treatment."

Davidson sat, adjusting the crease of his trousers. He was a heavyset man with short white hair. At his age he should have thought about getting more exercise, losing weight. He should also quit smoking immediately. The human heart starts to congest after fifty. Arteries close. The risk of stroke increases dramatically, the threat of cardiac arrest.

"Dr. Allen, a lot has happened very quickly. I think we both need to take a deep breath."

I studied him as if he were a resident fresh out of medical school.

"People say *shot in the leg*," I said, "like it's nothing. But a bullet literally crushes the tissue as it hits. A high enough caliber can shatter the femur. A low-caliber bullet can ricochet off the bone and slice up into the bowel and abdomen."

Davidson looked at Moyers. Moyers nodded, spoke into his wrist. Davidson opened his hands in front of him in a gesture meant to be magnanimous.

"Your son will be treated immediately," he said.

"I want to speak to his doctor."

Davidson sat back, crossed his legs. "Dr. Allen, let me explain something to you. I can have the president on the phone in fifteen seconds. This is the level of my authority. When I say something will be done, it is being done as we speak."

I thought about this.

"There's no way Daniel did this," I said.

“We have video and still photographs. He was caught with a gun. Ballistics and fingerprint tests are outstanding, but rest assured, your son has been positively identified.”

“He needs a lawyer.”

“He’s twenty years old. If he wants a lawyer he must ask for one himself.”

I sat back, rubbed my temples. It was beginning to dawn on me that I was not in control here, that, in fact, I never had been. Control was an illusion, a luxury of the mind. If they were right, I had created a life, and that life had taken another life. The low-lying nausea I had felt for the last hour became a wave of sickness. I gritted my teeth against it.

“Have you ever heard your son use the name *Carter Allen Cash*?” Davidson asked.

“No. Who is that?”

“It’s an alias your son has been using for the last six months. We still don’t have all the details, but it appears he registered at motels in both Dallas, Texas, and Sacramento, California, using that name.”

Carter Allen Cash. It sounded like a country singer.

“We call him Daniel or Danny,” I said.

“When was the last time you spoke with your son?”

“I don’t know, three weeks ago, maybe. He was on the road. I bought him a cell phone last Christmas, but he lost it.”

“You and his mother are divorced. Is that correct?”

I rubbed my eyes.

“We separated when Danny was seven.”

“He went to Vassar College.”

“For a while. He dropped out last spring without telling us.”

“Would you say you were close to your son, Dr. Allen?”

I checked his tone for traces of sarcasm but found none. For a moment I saw myself through his eyes: an absent father who had not seen his son in months, had not spoken to him in weeks. A man who was too busy building his résumé to be a father.

“Agent Moyers said the senator died of his wounds,” I said.

“About thirty minutes ago. The first bullet punctured his aorta as well as his lung. Dr. Harden did everything he could.”

“I know Dr. Harden. He’s a good surgeon.”

“Not good enough,” said Moyers. Davidson silenced him with a look.

I thought about what Seagram’s insides would have looked like. A bullet enters the human body like a sledgehammer. Once punctured, the chest cavity filled quickly with blood, compressing the lungs, suffocating its victim. And if, at the same time, his heart were also compromised, Seagram never had a chance.

“His wife,” I said.

“Rode with him in the ambulance. His two children are at home in Montana.”

Two children; Neal, ten, and Nora, thirteen. I had seen pictures of them on the news. They would grow up now without a father, children who slept with photographs of the dead under their pillows.

“What’s going to happen to my son?” I asked.

“That depends,” said Davidson. “Officially your son is a terrorist.”

“He’s what?”

“Political assassination by definition is an act of terror. This gives the federal government great leeway in terms of punishment and prosecution.”

He paused, letting me process this. *When does a criminal act become an act of terrorism?* wondered.

“You should know,” I said, “that the publisher of *The New York Times* is a patient of mine. If Davidson was impressed by this, it didn’t show.

“If we choose,” he said, “we can have your son classified as an enemy combatant. He can be tried in a military court. We can control his access to legal counsel. He could be held, not indefinitely, then at least for several years without a hearing.”

“I won’t let you do that.”

“It’s sweet,” said Davidson, “that you think you could stop us.”

We stared at each other.

“Luckily for you,” he said, “this administration needs a victory. Too many terror-ce prosecutions without positive outcomes. Not enough evidence, groups arrested before a crime was committed. Conspiracy to commit what? Here we have witnesses. We have video. There is a smoking gun and a dead senator. This is our slam dunk.”

Looking at him, I caught my first glimpse of the scope of this event. A presidential candidate was dead. Danny was accused of his murder. In a split second my son had become public property. A tool to be used for political gain, an effigy to be burned. He was no longer a child to most people, no longer even human. If I didn’t act quickly, my boy would become slave to history.

“My point,” said Davidson, “is don’t worry about Daniel. Or should I call him Carter? It is in our best interest to keep him safe and well.”

Slow down, I thought. Stay cool.

“The last time I checked,” I said, “in this country a man is innocent until proven guilty.”

Davidson shrugged.

“There are questions we’re trying to answer,” he said. “Who were your son’s friends? Why did he go to Texas? Why Sacramento? Was he meeting his handler? We need to know whether your son was working as part of a team.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “The last time he called me he said he was in Seattle.”

“As far as we know,” said Davidson, “your son has never been to Seattle.”

By the door, Moyers put his finger to his ear, came over, and whispered something to Davidson.

“Interesting,” said Davidson, “it seems your son volunteered for the Seagram campaign in Austin, Texas. Did you know that?”

I didn’t. I knew nothing about my son, apparently.

Moyers whispered something else to Davidson. He stood.

“Excuse me,” he said.

They left me alone. My jaw was tight. I had sweated through the armpits of my shirt. There was a metallic taste in my mouth. I could hear the nasal hum of the fluorescent lights overhead, mixed with the dim buzz of chatter from the war room outside. I tried to picture my son holed up in some interrogation room, a crude tourniquet around his leg. He would be answering questions to the barrel of a gun, surrounded by angry men with bruised knuckles. If I thought about it too long I felt faint. Had it really been three weeks since we’d last

spoke? Worse, it may have been five. There was an ache in my side. Is it possible my Dan had shot a senator?

In medicine, when grave errors are made, hospitals hold a morbidity and mortality conference. At Columbia these meetings were held on Thursday afternoons at five. Attendance was mandatory. There, all the botched cases were presented. An emergency tracheotomy. An accidental overdose of pain medication. We reviewed the patient symptoms, the chronology of events. We weighed the choices that surgeons and residents made. We looked not to assign blame but to learn from our mistakes. This was the only way we could improve. As doctors we knew it was only a matter of time before each one of us made a fatal mistake. It was the nature of our business. Thousands of patients treated in the course of a career, thousands of life-or-death decisions. How could you possibly get them all right? The M&M conferences were considered privileged under the law. Nothing said they could be used in a court of law. How could we punish others for crimes we ourselves committed every day? This was why only the grossest negligence was ever punished at hospitals. We took our failures as an opportunity to learn.

Sitting in that room I allowed a shred of doubt to sneak through my resolve. What if he had done it? What if they were right, and my child was a murderer? Why would he do such a terrible thing? Was it political? Was he sick? Or was it my fault? His mother's? Had we broken him, ruined his childhood in some deep and profound way? There were too many questions, too many miserable combinations. As quickly as the door opened, I slammed it shut.

Slow down, I thought. Think it through. There weren't enough facts yet to make a diagnosis. I needed to see Daniel. I needed to review the evidence. Until I could see the whole case, all I knew for sure was that my son was in the crowd, and now he was in custody. I would get to the bottom of it. I was the man who took nothing for granted, who showed no bias, who didn't let his emotions get in the way. Until the authorities showed me undeniable proof my son was guilty, I would remain objective. I would collect the facts and form a studied conclusion. This was the case I'd been training for my entire life.

It would be months before I knew the whole story.

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