

# STASH

DAVID KLEIN

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*To my family: Harriet, Julia, and Owen,  
who are always there for me*

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Reading Group Guide

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**part 1**  
**She Took a Hit**

## I'm Here to See Jude

Gwen arranged to meet Jude at ten, after dropping the kids at their morning camps. She'd already delivered Nate to Nature's Workshop, and now drove her daughter to the pool. It was Nora's last day of swim camp and Gwen had baked a tray of cupcakes, vanilla with whipped cream frosting and red, white, and blue sprinkles left over from July 4th.

Nora balanced the tray on her lap in the backseat, snitching frosting edges under the plastic wrap. Two cupcakes were missing, eaten by Nora and Nate in the car, wrappers discarded on the floor, crumbs flattened into the seats.

"Honey, will you be able to carry the tray if I drop you off in front?"

Nora hesitated. "I might spill them."

"Not if you're careful."

"Will you do it?"

Because she was anxious to get downtown, Gwen almost snapped back at Nora about being old enough for this small responsibility. But she reminded herself that Nora was only seven, a loving, intelligent girl, tall and strong and for the most part capable, yet fearful of small things going wrong—such as dropping a tray of cupcakes. You had to accept your children were people, with their own quirks and limitations as well as talent and potential. Once you realized you couldn't mold them into robotic perfection, you could do a much better job parenting; for instance, by carrying the cupcakes for your daughter who was afraid of spilling them.

"Okay, sweetie. You carry your towel and backpack and I'll carry the tray."

Gwen parked in the drop-off zone in front of the pool complex, navigating a place between the other cars coming and going.

"Mom, you're not supposed to park here, it's for drop-off only," Nora told her.

"It's just for a minute—you want me to carry the cupcakes, don't you?"

"You might get a ticket."

Nobody issued tickets at the Morrissey town pool.

Gwen lifted the tray from Nora's lap and waited while her daughter located her flip-flops, centered her backpack on her shoulders, got out of the car without her towel, and climbed back in to retrieve it after Gwen reminded her.

"Come on, honey," Gwen urged her.

"I'm not late."

“Mommy has a lot to do today,” Gwen said. “Remember, you’re going home with Abby. Mrs. Fitzgerald will drive you and I’ll come get you this afternoon.”

“And then we’re going up to the lake?”

“As soon as Daddy gets home.”

“I can’t wait to swim in the lake.”

And Gwen couldn’t wait for the getaway with her husband and family. Four entire days at their house on Tear Lake, which they’d hardly been to this season because of camp schedules and Brian’s work. Four days of rest, relaxation, and love.

They walked to the entrance where Nora stopped to remove her backpack and look through two zipped compartments to find her pool ID card. Gwen explained to the desk attendant that she was just delivering cupcakes for her daughter’s camp party.

The party consisted of two picnic tables pinned with paper tablecloths on a grassy area between the kids’ pool and the big pool. A breeze flapped the sides of the cloths and rippled the surface of the water. Not a great day for swimming, not for Gwen anyway, who liked hot weather and warm water. The pools would close for the season in another week, right after Labor Day.

She found a spot for the cupcakes on one of the tables and spent a few minutes thanking the instructors—college kids home for the summer, heading back to school this weekend—and when she turned to leave she was waylaid first by Carly Eller asking Gwen which teacher Nora got for third grade, and then by Heather John who reminded Gwen about their annual open house on Sunday, one of the few adults-only social gatherings among their circle. Gwen apologized for having to miss out. If they were in town it would have been fun to go; the Johns played great music and hosted a karaoke contest that commenced after everyone had spent an hour or two loosening up at the patio bar.

“You won’t be there to defend your karaoke crown,” Heather said.

Last year, Gwen and Brian were voted karaoke king and queen for their Sonny and Cher duet, “I’ve Got You Babe.” In a silly rush of sentimentality, Gwen had felt tears when she sang, “So let them say your hair’s too long, ’cause I don’t care, with you I can’t go wrong,” and Brian, sporting a fresh haircut, had answered, “Then put your little hand in mine, there ain’t no hill or mountain we can’t climb.” In her acceptance speech, margarita in hand, Gwen had reminded everyone she’d played the role of Maria in her high school’s production of *West Side Story*, sans the painted-on Hispanic tan that Natalie Wood sported in the movie version.

“Some other lucky talent will have to go home the winner this year,” Gwen said. Using talent in its loosest meaning.

“We’ll miss you guys,” Heather said.

A last check with Nora. Did she have the gift cards for her instructors? Her goggles? Hairbrush? Love you, sweetie. A final hug and Gwen made her way back to the car, stopping once to dig a stone from her sandal, then driving downtown to meet Jude.

In the car she called Brian. He didn't pick up—no surprise. Whenever he planned time off work, the few days leading up to it were crazy. She knew he had a big presentation today. When she got his voice mail she said, "Hi love, just wanted to wish you good luck again in your meeting. I dropped off the kids and am running errands, then going home to pack. I can't wait for the weekend. Love you." Then she added, "Call me if you need anything."

She parked in a metered spot across the street from Gull. She checked herself in the rearview mirror and played with the flip in her hair, without success, then touched up her lips. She found two quarters in her purse to feed the meter, which gave her thirty minutes.

A neon sign with blue lettering hung perpendicular from the transom over the door to the restaurant, with the L's in Gull tipped to the side to resemble a bird's wingspan. A pair of real gulls, up from the river, circled overhead, screeching.

Gwen expected the restaurant to be empty—it didn't open for lunch until 11:30—but she was greeted at the hostess stand by a short, dark woman with bangles running up and down both wrists.

"Do you want to fill out an application?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you applying for the cocktail waitress job?"

"Oh, no. I'm here to see Jude."

"Who should I say is asking?"

"Gwen Raine. He's expecting me."

"Why don't you wait in the bar?" the hostess suggested. "I'll find him for you." She reached for the phone next to the reservation book.

Gwen sat in the bar. Three women occupied other tables. They all appeared to be in their early twenties, long hair, each wearing at least one article of black clothing—miniskirt, cami with bra, spandex T-shirt—each with dark lipstick and piercings. They all displayed a degree of cleavage.

The women were filling out job applications. Could Gwen really have been mistaken for a potential cocktail waitress? How could she—with her Eileen Fisher tee and khaki slacks and sandals—even if she had carefully picked out her clothes this morning and spent an extra minute in front of the mirror before coming in? And with the real giveaway: her crow's-feet ticking off time like the markings of a clock around her eyes.

Gwen had worked in a bar once, but that was almost nine years ago, during law school. She never finished law school, even the first year, but she'd had a blast working in the bar. It's where she first met Jude, who hired her, and

later, Brian, who married her.

The woman at the table closest to Gwen tore her job application and shoved the pieces in her handbag. She was the one with the miniskirt, and when she stood, Gwen got a look at her trim, tanned legs all the way up to where her skirt just covered the curve of her butt. Not an inky vein or cellulite crease in sight. I was like that, Gwen thought, two kids ago, sigh, although she never wore her hem that high.

The woman who ripped her application left the restaurant, averting her face from the hostess.

A moment later, Jude appeared from the dining area. He approached Gwen's table, his pace slow and unhurried. Gwen remembered that even on the busiest nights at the Patriot, Jude never rushed around, appearing calm and poised amid the chaos of the dinner crunch.

She stood and hugged him briefly, catching a drift of the same cologne he'd worn when she worked for him. Whether it was Armani or Old Spice, she didn't know: it was Jude. She'd recognized the scent a few times over the years, on a stranger standing nearby or walking past her; every time it reminded her of Jude, and every time she looked around expecting to see him.

"You must have had a great summer, you're so tan," he said.

"A lot of pool time with the kids. One of the advantages of being a full-time mom."

Gray flecks streaked Jude's hair, along the temples and sideburns. He wore what Brian called an executive cut—trimmed, parted, gelled into place. Except Jude had these long straight sideburns that tapered below the ear. On someone else they would have been a mistake.

"I'm sorry I'm a few minutes late. I had to get my daughter settled at her swim camp."

Jude waved off her comment. "It's fine. Can I get you a drink? Glass of wine? A Bloody Mary?" He motioned to the bar.

"I'd have to take a nap, and it's not even noon yet."

The two remaining job applicants looked up, unsure whether Gwen had cut ahead of them in the interview line.

"Coffee then?"

"Coffee sounds good."

"We'll go to my office." On the way through the dining room Jude stopped at a dish station where a fresh pot of coffee sat on a burner. He lifted two cups down from the shelf and poured.

"You must be asking hard questions on your job application," Gwen said. "I saw one woman tear hers up and walk out."

"We get a lot of response to our ads but it's hard to find anyone who really

wants to work. You ready to come back?”

“Your hostess thought so.”

“In your case I’ll waive the application.”

“I’m sure it would be fun, only now I’m in bed every night by eleven—about the same time the bars get busy.”

Jude smiled. “So much for the good old days. Let’s see, coffee black, right?”

She nodded.

Jude carried both cups. They passed double doors with porthole windows and Gwen glimpsed the kitchen where two cooks performed prep work while listening to music.

At the end of the corridor they climbed a staircase, traversed a hallway, and ended up in Jude’s office, which provided a second-floor view of the river, passing slow and gray in the direction of New York City. Jude settled behind a glass desk that held nothing except a laptop. There wasn’t a surface in Gwen’s house that clean, despite her constantly picking up and putting away. The credenza behind him was a different story, brimming with papers and folders and books—everything from novels to business books to cookbooks. Another shelf unit to the side held a stereo dock and a pile of restaurant magazines.

Gwen sat in a chair opposite the desk, holding her cup. She didn’t want to set it on the pristine desktop, although Jude had put his down. She turned to check that Jude had closed the door. This part made her tense, and she listened for footsteps, voices, anything to indicate someone approaching.

“You can relax, there’s no one else up here,” Jude told her.

“I’m fine,” Gwen said, her face heating. Was she that obvious? She sat up straighter, set her shoulders back.

“How are Brian and the kids?”

“They’re great. We’re going away this afternoon for a mini-vacation, so thank you for seeing me today. We have a house in the Adirondacks now. Tear Lake. I don’t think we had it last time I saw you.”

“No kidding? I have a place up that way, too, just an old cabin; it was in Claire’s family for years. I’m also heading north this weekend because Dana’s starting her freshman year at St. Lawrence.”

“Wow, that’s right. Be sure to tell her I said hi. I mean, if you want to. She probably doesn’t remember me.”

There was a photograph of Jude and his daughter next to the stereo on the bookshelf. They wore skis. Their arms and ski poles were tangled around each other. It looked like a recent picture, Dana tall but still much shorter than Jude, with dark straight hair flowing from underneath a ski hat. Her wide smile showed off dazzling teeth, the mark on her eye just a shadow from this camera angle.

“I’ve been thinking about you since last time,” Jude said. “I was wondering

when you would call again.”

She had visited Jude for the same purpose over the winter, and then in April when she had to come downtown to serve jury duty. Gwen didn't get picked for a jury, but she stopped at Gull and had lunch with Jude one day that week. Otherwise, she hadn't seen him the past nine years, and although she didn't respond to Jude's comment that he'd been thinking of her, she had thought about him a few times as well. Not about their brief relationship years ago, but about Jude's life now. She wondered if he was the only unmarried man she knew, which didn't say much about the diversity of her circle. He was the only one who didn't have the look of married men, like they were part of a whole, and when on their own came off as incomplete or inadequate, as if they hadn't dressed quite right or had gotten a bad haircut. Gwen also knew how married men looked at her, as if conducting a compare and contrast study: How did this woman stack up to my wife? Was she better looking, younger, smarter, thinner? Or just different—which may be the best attribute of all? With Jude looking at her right now, she sensed his appraisal was based more on a clean slate than a weighted scale: Is she desirable? A question that carried no qualifying conditions, just an eye of the beholder. A question whose answer made her fidgety. A question she'd rather not address because she also wondered if she might be rekindling a friendship with Jude, if such a friendship were allowed, no matter how casual—a married woman having an unmarried male friend, who also happened to be a former lover. Not against the law, but likely against the rules. She doubted Brian would welcome the news without suspicion.

“I thought you and Brian were coming in for dinner some night,” Jude said.

“We haven't been out in months, he's been so busy with work, but we will.”

A few seconds ticked off. “Or just come by yourself,” Jude said. “We'll have lunch again.”

Gwen looked at the clock on Jude's bookshelf. Ten minutes left on the meter.

“I meant some other time,” he added. “When it's not business.”

“Okay.”

“You don't have to call ahead, just show up. That day you came in, it was a nice surprise.”

Another thing about having a male friend: it would probably be okay if he was unattractive or unavailable, but in Jude's case the *un-* didn't apply. It definitely applied in her case, though, at least the unavailable part. She was firmly married, entrenched, and fulfilled in her life and role as mother, wife, and volunteer. Her days of messing up relationships were distant memories, played out by her younger, less mature, and more experimental self.

Gwen reached into her purse and handed Jude a white business envelope, the flap unsealed. “I really appreciate this,” Gwen said.

“You’re one person I’m happy to make a call for.”

“Five hundred, right?” She was nervous and sure her voice betrayed her, although the risk seemed so low here with Jude.

“That’s perfect.” Jude placed the envelope on his laptop keyboard without looking in it. He opened a desk drawer and took out a brown paper lunch bag and set it in front of Gwen.

“Do you want to try it first?”

The question surprised her; he hadn’t asked her this last time. It was tempting, like the old days at the Patriot, but was Jude going to join her or leave her solo? Would she get stoned with him now upstairs in his office? That wasn’t a good idea.

“Actually, I’d better go,” Gwen said. “I have to get packed for the weekend.”

Jude shrugged his shoulders. She put the bag in her purse.

“I should get your number,” Jude said. He unsnapped a phone from his belt. “You have mine, I should have yours—in case it’s me who needs a small favor next time.”

“Oh, sure, of course.” She gave him her cell number and he keyed it into his phone.

Then Jude stood up. “Have a great trip, Gwen. Come see me when you get back. You don’t have to wait until you run out.”

He walked her downstairs and through the dining room, out to the bar and hostess area. A new applicant sat at one of the bar tables, filling in blanks.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Jude said, leaning close and lowering his voice. “Don’t tell anyone. I’m only doing this for you.”

“I promise,” Gwen said.

“I don’t want anyone getting the wrong idea.”

He pushed open the door for her. He followed Gwen outside and they were alone on the sidewalk in front. She turned for the good-bye hug but Jude reached for her, touched her chin and cheek, leaned in, and kissed her. Time slipped for the second or two that his lips found and pressed against hers, then pulled back and were gone. She hadn’t seen it coming. Her breathing halted, heart drummed. She stepped back and turned without meeting his eyes and walked quickly to her car. By the time she dared a look, he’d gone back inside.

## A Few Minutes to Relax

Gwen drove along Route 157, the road curving in and out along the ridgeline of the escarpment, until she came to the start of the Indian Falls trail in Thacher Park. She turned into the lot and parked in back where there were no cars.

That kiss. What was that kiss about. He'd caught her 100 percent off guard, although now that she thought about it, Jude definitely had been flirting with her. Thinking about her since he'd last seen her, he said. Suggesting she come back again for lunch, alone. Asking her to visit him when she returned to town. That was his nature, she knew, and there was nothing wrong with getting a few strokes, as long as she let it pass, which she did, as long as she didn't stroke back, which she didn't. But then he kissed her at the end and ruined it all.

Now she wouldn't be able to visit Jude again, for any reason.

It was just a kiss, one she likely misinterpreted, and she should put behind her, the sooner the better. This was her chance to relax. She had four hours of alone time before retrieving the kids from Marlene's, and only a few more errands on her list. Jude had included a sheaf of rolling papers in the lunch bag, which also contained a plastic baggie holding four pungent, sticky, egg-sized buds with frosted purple hairs around the edges. Gwen held the bag to her nose and breathed in. Wow. She broke a piece off one of the buds and crumpled it inside the bag, then pinched the loose flakes between her fingers to roll a thin joint she put into a stringed clutch along with her phone. She tucked the bag of remaining buds in the seat pocket behind her. She hung the purse over her shoulder and carried her sweater and found a remote picnic table along the fence near the edge of the cliff. The sun shone but a breeze blew and the air felt a few degrees cooler up here than in the valley.

From the ridge in the park Gwen looked out across the valley, the few taller buildings downtown poking up in the distance like toy blocks stuck in the ground. The sky blazed blue and she could make out the swells of the Adirondack foothills on the northern horizon.

She lit the joint and took a few hits and lay back on the plank top of the picnic table and let the sun warm her face. She closed her eyes. Hummed deep in her throat. Wet her lips. Four days at the lake house, just her and Brian and the kids. Hiking, swimming, canoe rides, fires at night. That's how she imagined it would be: their family nested and spending every minute together. She and Brian had bought the house when Brian's company was acquired, his stock tripled in value, and he received a bonus for staying on. But they'd hardly been up there because Brian had been too busy with work,

long hours, traveling for days at a time. She thought of this trip as promoting a new lifestyle—less hectic, more simple. Breakfast and dinner as a family. No television. A bottle of wine on the couch with Brian after the kids were in bed, a little pot to relax. A lot of lovemaking. When was the last time they did that. Hugging. There would have to be a lot of hugging and holding, among all of them. Cuddling with the kids. They were still young and delicious and wanted to touch her. Nora would hold hands with her all day. Nate had stopped nursing but still wrapped himself around her, would curl in her arms and press his face against her like a baby.

A few more hours and they'd be going.

Gwen wasn't a stoner. She didn't laze around all day with a bong by her side and the TV and stereo both on, too mellow to get off the couch to wash the dishes or get dressed. She didn't order takeout day after day. She'd known plenty of people who did live like that—mostly when she was in college or working at the Patriot—but even back then Gwen didn't fit the profile. She would take a puff or two off someone's joint or pipe and stayed away from other drugs, stuck with wine as her drink of choice unless a bartender knew how to make a good margarita.

She was sixteen the first time she got high, in her junior year, hanging around the park after school with her friends one day, when a joint appeared in someone's hand. It got passed around and ended up with her boyfriend, Mark, a senior. She watched him take a long deep inhale and hold it, like he knew what he was doing. He offered it, and Gwen took the smallest poke. It came around again and this time she inhaled deeper. The next thing you know she and Mark were goofing around on the kids' playground, pumping on the swings, playing chase on the jungle gym. It was a cold November day and they had the playground to themselves. Later, before leaving the park, she made out with Mark. The past month they'd been moving closer and closer to doing it, rubbing through their clothes, hands in each other's pants, and that Saturday night she went to Mark's house when his parents were out. He'd gotten a big joint for them to smoke. She had sex for the first time and it wasn't painful or scary like she'd been made to believe but exciting and sensual—maybe quicker than she'd expected, but they did it a few times and she felt happy and full.

A few months later Mark broke up with her because she'd gone with someone else to the movies. He was too proprietary and she didn't protest much. However, he'd been her source for pot and now she stopped smoking, didn't think of it again until college when suddenly everyone had it. Gwen got high at parties and on weekends—but not before or instead of classes or as a daily ritual like some of her suitemates did. If she happened to be going out with a guy who liked to get high, she'd join him. She loved to have sex when stoned; it managed to be both soothing and intense at the same time. She had

great orgasms.

Brian preferred vodka. Maybe once in a while if he had drunk enough he'd take a hit or two, get paranoid, and shortly thereafter pass out. Therefore, Gwen never encouraged him. He had no objections to Gwen getting high when they were dating, and then living together, and then married, although for the first seven-plus years of marriage she didn't smoke at all; up until last year she'd been either pregnant or nursing the entire time. When Nate finally weaned—Gwen was the only mother she knew nursing a four-year-old, making her a target for clucks and stares from some of the other Morrissey moms—what remained was a much less intimate routine of shuttling, entertaining, managing school schedules, cleaning up after her kids, and cooking for her family. Chores and errands and bills. She hung out with other moms, volunteered in the PTA, found babysitters on weekends so she and Brian could do more than pass each other coming and going, and overall loved her life and her husband and children and wouldn't trade any part of it, knowing how lucky she was. And one day when the kids were in school and Brian at work and her to-do list crossed off, she experienced a nostalgic craving while watching the wind blow the empty swings in her backyard. She wondered where she could get a little pot, that would be fun; she didn't know anyone like that now.

Then she thought of Jude. She had run into him over the winter when downtown with Brian and the kids for Winterfest. They had left the bonfire and jugglers at center square and were walking along Pearl Street toward the river to see the ice sculpting display when Nora announced she had to pee. When Nora needed to pee, you called all hands on deck; it was a state of emergency. A two-minute drill began to find a bathroom; otherwise she'd wet her pants. The nearest place with an open door was a restaurant called Gull, too elite-looking for family dining or kids, but they went in and three of them stood just inside the front door while Nora darted into the bathroom. Wait. Was that Jude Gates standing behind the bar? It was. The same Jude who managed the Patriot when Gwen had worked there, who hung out with her after hours, who shared his joints and poured free drinks. Jude who she had partied with and slept with and almost fell in love with, even though he had a wife in a rehab facility and a young daughter to care for. Long gone days. Young days. Days when she did not consider consequences.

Gwen checked on Nora in the restroom while the boys waited. She hadn't thought about Jude in a long time. Should she say hello? Would he remember her? Nora finished in the stall; Gwen decided she needed to pee, too. When they came out of the restroom, Jude was looking their way. He walked over and hugged her and shook hands with each of her kids and Brian. I guess he remembered her. And sure, he remembered meeting Brian when Gwen worked at the Patriot. He'd no idea they'd gotten married, or that she still lived in the area. He insisted they stay for a drink. Nora and Nate experienced virgin piña coladas for the first time. Gwen and Brian drank a quick glass of wine. Jude invited them to come back for dinner some night and try the menu

of his new chef, Andrew Cole.

She and Brian never went back, but it was Jude she thought of when she wanted to find some weed.

Gwen lit the joint again and took a last hit, then snuffed it out against the table. She had enough time to walk the Indian Falls trail and still finish packing and have the car loaded and kids ready when Brian got home this afternoon.

Then her phone rang. It was Marlene.

“I’m stuck in the waiting room,” Marlene said. “I haven’t been in to see McGuire yet. I hate to do this, but I don’t think I’m going to be on time to pick up the kids. Can you do it and drop them off, then they can spend a few hours with me?”

“Oh, I thought your appointment was at ten.”

“I know, ninety minutes sitting here. It’s probably not worth it.”

“No, I can do it,” Gwen said. She checked her watch. She’d have to leave in a few minutes, first to get Nate, then the girls.

“Sorry to throw this back at you.”

“That’s okay,” Gwen said. “By the way, I got it.”

“You did? What was it like?”

“Pretty easy; he’s just an old friend who did me a favor.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Marlene said.

“I mean, it wasn’t totally comfortable, but ...”

“Roger and I don’t know anyone else. If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t know where to begin looking.”

“I won’t be able to ask him again, though.”

“Never mind, we’ll worry about that later. We’re flush now and I’m putting the kids to bed early tonight.”

“I’ll bring it by later when I see you.”

“Thanks again, Gwen, for everything. You’re a great friend.”

Gwen took a few breaths to clear her head and focus. She’d have to save the trail walk for another time. She wrapped the remains of the joint in a tissue and zipped the tissue and pack of matches inside an inner pocket in her purse. She put the bag back over her shoulder, returned to her car, checked her teeth in the mirror, and drove back along Route 157, the road a series of wide switchbacks on descent, the sun bright through her windshield. She kept two hands on the wheel and the stereo on scan, hoping for a good song. She rounded a curve and suddenly a car appeared right behind her. She heard the bass of its stereo blaring and the growl of its engine. The driver edged out across the double line as if to pass, then pulled back behind her bumper.

Her heart pushed against her throat, but she maintained course and speed, stayed calm, and held the wheel firmly. She'd been in this situation before, she could handle it.

When the road straightened, the other car pulled out again and accelerated, defying the double yellow line, flashing past, windows dark as night. It cut back into the right lane and braked into the next turn, a long arcing curve with a wide cinder shoulder and a rusted guardrail on the ridge side. She must have been looking far ahead along the curve, to where the car that passed hers had disappeared around the bend and into the shade cast by a stand of roadside trees. It must be going so fast to be gone from view already. And then a new movement in the sunlight brought her focus in closer and another car was there, a different one, oncoming, right in front of her—a heartbeat from head-on.

Gwen wrenched the wheel to the right. The other car struck her rear quarter panel with a shuddering bang, sending her car into a spin. Her body pitched but her seat belt held her in place. She stared out the windshield. She felt motionless, as if the road and the shoulder and the road again and now the trees moved in a slow horizontal pan in front of her while she remained in place clenching a steering wheel that would not respond.

Then the view through the windshield became mottled shades of dark. A flash of sun, shade again. Then another loud bang—and this one hurt.

## A Growing Market

John Wilcox, up from the mother ship in Jersey, watched Brian, not the slides. Ryan Garcia, the CFO, and Jennifer Stallworth, legal counsel, sat back in their chairs, nodding as Brian clicked through his presentation. Seated at the far end of the table, Teresa Mascetti kept watch on the reactions in the room. She'd helped Brian with the presentation and knew it as well as he did; the few times he veered from his prepared talking points he could see her inhale and get this stricken look on her face, as if he'd whispered something dirty in her ear.

Brian stood to the side in front of the room and clicked a remote to move through the slides.

"The target market is growing with no end in sight," Brian said, as his next slide came up, a bar chart showing the increasing weight of American adults over the past ten years, with ten-year projections added on. In place of simple colored bars to show the data, Brian had found a graphic of a belt, with the buckle in the middle representing median weight and the length of the belt growing longer with each successive year as average weight increased.

Teresa drew a breath. Brian wondered if he'd offended her. He'd added that slide just this morning, although it wasn't necessary. Everyone in the room knew the market situation.

"Looks like my belt," Wilcox said, patting his waistline. He was a thick, powerful man with a voice that carried like thunder over distance, a throwback sales executive who landed big contracts with hospitals and HMOs over golf, meals, and cigars. "What do you think, Jennifer? Will that belt graphic work for our revenue chart in the annual report?"

Everyone at the table chuckled.

Home run. After eliciting the reaction he had hoped for with the depiction of the belt, Brian moved quickly past the slide.

The purpose of his presentation was to promote and defend the business case for Caladon Pharmaceuticals to seek FDA approval for Zuprone as a weight-loss drug, a strategy Brian recommended and expected the executive team to support. Zuprone already was approved and marketed as an antianxiety drug, which in itself covered a broad and vague range of indications. The problem was that Zuprone had captured only a minor share in the crowded antianxiety market. There were lots of "me too" competitors, and Zuprone was one of them. Yet, even at the time of launch, evidence existed of the weight-loss benefits. Over the past three years, active off-label prescribing of Zuprone for weight loss had increased the drug's sales and