Chimera

by Readingrat

Summary

Third fic in the Kelpie AU, sequel to The Cuckoo. Wilson may have survived his bout with cancer by way of half a liver from Cuddy and House's medical genius, but he knows there's a good chance his reprieve won't last forever, so he is determined to make proper arrangements for his son's future. He doesn't count on House's unexpected interest in the proceedings.

Notes

Genre: Family, Friendship, Angst, Romance (if you squint really hard).
Rating: Teen for language. No explicit sexual content.
Characters: Gregory House, James Wilson, Lisa Cuddy, Rachel Cuddy, Joel Wilson
Setting: Third fic in the Kelpie series, an AU that diverges from canon after the S7 finale. Set after The Cuckoo.

Warning: This fic is incomprehensible unless you've read The Kelpie and The Cuckoo. Please read them first! (If you don't like them, you won't like Chimera either ...) For those of you that have read them, there's a summary of The Kelpie here, and of The Cuckoo here. Be warned: if you haven't read the fics, the summaries won't make much sense.

Further warning: This fic will end with the pairing House/Cuddy. If you are a fan of that pairing, don't despair: we'll get there somehow or other. If you hate that pairing, don't despair either. I'll tell you where to stop reading so that the fic is open-ended.

This fic is dedicated to the marvellous Menolly, who consented to beta over 100 k with such alacrity and enthusiasm that one would have thought I was doing her a favour, not vice versa. Without her, I probably wouldn't have completed it.
chimera noun:
1 a capitalised: a fire-breathing she-monster in Greek mythology having a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail b: an imaginary monster compounded of incongruous parts
2: an illusion or fabrication of the mind; especially: an unrealizable dream
3: an individual, organ, or part consisting of tissues of diverse genetic constitution (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

He has two hours to kill. Two whole hours without tasks, duties, or obligations. He stands in the middle of his hotel room, remotely registering the noise of the traffic through triple-glazed windows, the slant of the afternoon sunshine on the pristine bed, the hum of the air conditioner. He supposes he could lie down; he didn’t get much sleep on the flight to Paris, so maybe he should get some shut-eye now. Or he could finish the book he started reading on the plane. Or he could explore the area around the hotel: the Champs-Elysées and the Tuileries are supposed to be within walking distance. He remains where he is, fidgeting indecisively. None of the three options appeal to him; they are too … meaningless.

He reminds himself that it has only been four weeks since his life started running according to a strict schedule. Surely he can shed the weight of responsibility for a few days and revert to — not a carefree existence, because he’s never been the kind of guy to take life lightly, but a more spontaneous take on life. Talking of spontaneity, he supposes he could give Joel’s caregiver a quick call, just to make sure whether everything is okay. He checks his watch and subtracts six hours. Ten o’clock in the morning: Joel will be taking a mid-morning nap. Esther should have the time for a short talk. He takes out his phone to dial, but then he reconsiders. He called Esther just before the conference’s opening event three hours ago. She’ll think he is hovering if he calls her again, and Cuddy will laugh at him.

So instead, Wilson takes his best suit, a clean white shirt and a blue-and-silver striped tie from his suitcase and lays them out on the bed. He showered before the opening session of the conference, but perhaps another shower will revive him sufficiently to get him through the conference dinner this evening. He wastes half an hour and a considerable amount of water under the shower, only stepping out and towelling off when the air is so thick with steam that he can hardly see the door of the bathroom. He returns to the bedroom with a towel around his waist and stares down at his conference get-up. He could slip into a pair of chinos and explore Paris, but he knows he won’t. He has placed his son in the care of strangers — okay, Esther has been looking after Joel for almost four weeks now, while he has known Cuddy for twenty years or so, but still! — in order to attend this conference, not to play hooky. He can’t justify leaving Joel for a week in order to indulge himself. So, he’ll get dressed, go downstairs to the banquet hall, and smile and make polite conversation to people he vaguely remembers (or maybe not) from earlier conferences.

His phone buzzes. He snatches it up from the table where he’d placed it before his shower, thinking that it might be Esther or Cuddy, but it’s House who has texted him: Wanna Skype?

Why not? He boots his laptop, and then starts Skype. He clicks on House’s avatar, a clown with a sinister grin; the Skype ringtone resounds through his hotel room. A second later House takes the call.

“Your laptop camera sucks,” House says by way of greeting.
“Good afternoon to you, too,” Wilson says. “Unfortunately the pittance I earn as an oncology consultant doesn’t cover the costs for a state-of-the-art computer like the one you …” He stops, frowning, his brain registering what his eyes are seeing on the screen in front of him. House’s laptop camera provides a sharply defined picture: House is lying fully dressed on a bed in a room that Wilson has never seen before, a room that has the unmistakable decor of a budget hotel.

“Where are you?”

“In bed. Thought we could have Skype sex,” House says, waggling his eyebrows, “so I got all comfy already. Oh, wow, seems you had the same thought.” He leans forward until all that Wilson can see of him is his eyes peering into his camera over an artificially elongated nose. “The wet, fresh-from-the-shower look. Me like-y!”

Wilson tips up the lid of his laptop until his face is all that his camera catches of him. “No, I mean in bed where?”

“Aw, no! Buzzkill!” House pauses, but when that elicits no reaction from Wilson he leans back again, saying, “In a hotel. Unfortunately my meagre budget won’t cover a five star conference venue, so I have to make do with more modest quarters near Montmartre.”

“Mont- …? You’re in Paris?”

“Couldn’t miss James Evan Wilson fleeing the joys of domestic bliss to paint the town red, could I? Let’s see, I’ve got tickets for the Crazy Horse on Thursday and there’s a promising joint down the road from my hotel.”

“Why are you in Paris?”

House bats his eyelashes. “Snookums, you’re there, barely an hour’s flight time from London; how could I resist popping over to surprise you?”

Wilson pulls his fingers through his damp hair in despair; trust House to do something spontaneous and disruptive and confusing. “If you’d told me you were coming, I’d have organised a room for you in my hotel.”

“To be honest, I thought you’d chicken out at the last moment. Didn’t believe that you’d start neglecting your paternal duties after a mere four weeks,” House says.

Wilson thinks that House isn’t the only one to be surprised: he, too, is somewhat astounded to find himself here. “I registered for the conference long before I knew that I’d get Joel,” he says, “and Cuddy encouraged me to come anyway. I can renew old contacts here and get back into the subject matter. Besides, I submitted an abstract, so —”

“Yeah, yeah,” House says dismissively. “You don’t have to justify abandoning your babe in the woods. You are the one who has a problem spending a few nights away from him; everyone else is convinced that he’s better off without you fussing over him.”

“Everyone else, huh? You’ve been talking to Cuddy,” Wilson surmises. “Why are we Skyping if you’re in Paris?”

“Because you haven’t invited me up to your room?” House says with a suggestive leer.

In the little window at the bottom of the screen that shows what the laptop camera is capturing, Wilson can see that he has exposed half his torso to the camera again. He grabs his shirt and pulls it on, laughing nonetheless at House’s exaggerated expression of disappointment.
“Okay,” he says. “I’ll skip the convention dinner. I saw a café down the road from my hotel; we can meet there. I don’t remember what it’s called, but you can’t miss it: it has red awnings and tables all along the sidewalk.”

He spends the next half hour reading up a few articles on developments in palliative oncology as preparation for the next day, telling himself that it’s not a penance for shirking the conference dinner. Then he pulls on his chinos and a polo shirt, slips into his loafers, and heads for the café. He is seated outside in the late afternoon sunshine with a cappuccino when House arrives and slides into the seat opposite him. It’s anyone’s guess what he’s thinking, because his eyes are hidden behind sunglasses that he doesn’t take off. He orders a café noir and a sandwich, and then leans back to observe Wilson.

“So what’s the deal?” House finally asks.

Wilson tosses him the conference programme in which he has been marking the sessions that he wants to attend. House takes it and holds it in one hand, flicking through the pages with the thumb of the other as though it was a flipbook. There’s no way he can see what sessions Wilson has marked, much less read the session titles or times. Well, he won’t have come to Paris because he has developed a sudden interest in the newest trends in palliative oncology, but whatever the reason for his presence, it would be nice if his agenda left Wilson with the time and the nerves to attend the major part of the conference. He doesn’t suffer from the delusional belief that he’ll be able to attend as many events as he planned now that House is here, but if he doesn’t attend the odd session here and glance at a few posters there, he’ll have spent a lot of money for next to nothing.

“I mean, with you and Lisa,” House elucidates, his sunglasses reflecting the awning’s stripes.

If Wilson had foreseen that he’d have to face an interrogation in Paris he’d have prepared a foolproof story, but he’d assumed that he still had a few days’ respite – until after the conference, to be exact. There’s a reason why he hasn’t told House about his Paris plans (other than attending the conference), the reason being that this is precisely the kind of conversation that he wants to avoid. Wanted to avoid. Hoped to avoid, because hope is the last thing that dies. It has just kicked the bucket in this little Parisian café.

Still, he can buy a few minutes while he tries to figure out what House knows, as opposed to what he merely assumes. So, he shrugs and says, “We’ll share a house, we work at the same place — if what I do at the moment can be described as ‘working’ — and we have dinner together most days. Most days that she’s there,” he amends, because Lisa isn’t there quite a number of evenings. She’s working hard trying to regain a foothold at the hospital. “And of course she takes Joel a lot, and in return I ...” he puts in a rhetorical pause, “… do nothing, actually.” Which isn’t quite true; he has started cooking again, and on weekends he plans outings with Joel that Rachel can participate in so that Lisa has a bit of breathing space.

And now comes the tricky part. “Oh, and she’s coming here for the weekend. I invited her; it didn’t seem fair that she should be stuck with Joel for the entire week and get nothing in return, and she has always wanted to see Paris.” If House has talked to Lisa, then chances are that he knows this already. Telling him will give the impression of openness, of having nothing to hide.

“She isn’t ‘stuck with Joel’: you have a nanny who is looking after the poop machine,” House points out. His facial muscles haven’t moved. Those damn sunglasses hide the only part of his face that might show a reaction. Wilson wants to lean forward and tug them off, but doing so or even remarking on them would tell House that he is less than relaxed, which in turn would only fan the flames of his (justified) suspicion.

So Wilson has no choice but to accept that he’s facing a blank wall, with no way of gauging
House’s reactions. “Esther is doing a great job and she’s staying overnight while I’m away, but I feel better knowing that Lisa is there to take Joel for a few hours whenever Esther needs a break.”

“Lisa?” House asks. “Since when do you call her Lisa?”

“You call her Lisa,” Wilson points out, cursing himself for slipping up.

“I’ve been calling her Lisa for as long as I can remember; you’ve been calling her Cuddy for as long as you can remember. What has changed?”

“Well, for one thing we share a liver,” Wilson says. “That’s sort of intimate, so I thought we could slowly switch to first names. Of course, if you think that it’s too soon, after twenty years of friendship …”

House changes tack. “Is Rachel coming too?”

“No, Julia’s looking after her.”

“Lemme see, you suggested to Lisa that she embark on an eight-hour trip each way in order to join you for a weekend in Paris, you extended your own stay for two days —”

“One day,” Wilson corrects. “The conference ends on Saturday, while we fly back Sunday night.”

“… leaving your kid at the mercy of a babysitter —”

“Julia’s coming to Philly to look after Rachel, so she’ll be there too.”

House’s head jerks up. “I thought she doesn’t want leave Mama Cuddy overnight anymore.”

Wilson bites his tongue. In his attempt to downplay the effort it cost him to leave Joel alone for an extra day, he has blurted out more than he intended. “Her husband is home at the weekend and can keep an eye on Arlene, just like he did when Julia spent the night just after Joel came to stay with me.”

“You mean, that time when Julia had to leave in the wee hours of the morn to make sure that hubby didn’t murder MIL before breakfast,” House says reminiscently, a thoughtful frown on his forehead.

“It’s not that bad,” Wilson says. “Arlene is —”

“Demented. Bats in her belfry. Gone to live in Alzheimerville.”

“She’s in the early stages: she recognises everyone and she’s still coherent; she just tends to wander off and get lost. As for the rest, she has always been that annoying, even if Lisa thinks she’s getting worse.”

“Doesn’t explain why Julia is prepared to enable her sister’s fun trip to the end of the world at the expense of her own limited spare time and presumably against the will of her long-suffering spouse. Unless both he and she think that the benefit will outweigh the cost.” Wilson doesn’t need to see House’s eyes to know that he is being nailed by a piercing glare. “And they’d think so if Lisa came back — with a husband. You’re going to propose to Lisa.”

“No! … I … Well … Yes, okay. … Okay! I’m going to propose to Lisa Cuddy,” Wilson says, trying to infuse his words with confidence.

House’s features are immobile; his sunglasses, aimed straight at Wilson, distort Wilson’s reflection
so that it is compressed horizontally and stretched vertically, which makes him look as though he’s grinning. Which he isn’t. There’s absolutely nothing to feel amused about, not when he has just informed Gregory House, the man who takes decades to get over relationships gone wrong, that he intends to propose to his ex.

There’s no visible reaction from House, physical or verbal. There’s nothing at all.

“Unless you object, of course,” Wilson adds, hoping to get some sort of reaction from his friend, positive or negative. Okay, that was a stupid thing to say, an invitation to House to jerk him around. How exactly is he going to get out of proposing to Lisa after moving heaven and earth and half of Lisa’s family in order to get her to Paris for exactly that purpose?

House’s smile is humourless. “I’m not her father; you don’t need my blessing.” He tips his head to one side. “What happened to him?”

The sudden change in direction throws Wilson off balance. “Uh, he’s dead. Heart attack some ten years ago, I think.” Realising that House changed the topic on purpose, he changes it back again. “Are you okay with me proposing to Lisa?”

House finally (and surprisingly) takes off his sunglasses, tucking them into his shirt pocket. He leans forward, his blue eyes free of guile. “Sure. If you think you need to propose to every woman who looks after your sprog for you, go ahead. If Lisa shoots you down, you can propose to Esmeralda next.”

It takes Wilson a moment to make sense of the last sentence. “Esther,” he says. “Joel’s nanny is called Esther. And she’s married already. Besides,…”

He stops: House is side-tracking him again. He should have prepared a script for this conversation. And now that House has taken his sunglasses off, it strikes Wilson that it was a lot easier to argue convincingly as long he couldn’t see that penetrating gaze. “Are you okay with me marrying the woman you used to date?” he asks. That nailing-you-with-my-stare thing is a game two can play at.

“Two years ago we had an on-and-off, long-distance relationship for a few months,” House says. “More ‘off’ than ‘on’, actually.” He grimaces at his own words, tapping a rhythm on the table with the fingertips of one hand.

“In case you’re worried that I’ll drive a car through your nice new suburban home, I can assure you that I won’t,” he finally says. “I dated Gail for longer and with more, shall we say, intensity than I dated Lisa, but I neither stalked nor terrorised her after she broke it off. You can ask her.” His eyelids flutter bird-like as he drops his gaze to his sandwich, his cheek twitching uneasily. It’s the first time since the collapse of his last relationship that House has openly referred to it. Wilson heard from Lisa, not from House, that it was over; all he got from House was the occasional oblique reference. That House is referring to his ex-girlfriend by name and actually letting slip a few details is a token of good faith, a gesture meant to show that House, for his part, is prepared to play with open cards. Sure, he’d rather Wilson didn’t approach Gail for information, but he wouldn’t make the offer if he feared negative consequences. In this age of social media and networking, Wilson could contact her without any effort at all and enquire of her whether House has been a nuisance recently. She mightn’t like having her privacy invaded, but in view of what is at stake, she won’t refuse to answer his enquiry.

“Besides,” House adds, lifting the top slice of his sandwich and peering at the contents, “you always contend that I wasn’t trying to drive into the house, but into the tree in front of it. Changed your mind, now that you’re joining the Dark Side?”
“Nope. And it isn’t Lisa’s safety I’m worried about so much as yours,” Wilson says. Driving his car through Lisa’s house was only the cherry on top of the sundae of self-destruction that House had concocted that summer, no more. Before that he had cannon-balled off a fifth floor balcony into a swimming pool, married a green card aspirant, assaulted another participant at a spud-gun contest, trashed Wilson’s office, and induced tumours in his leg by injecting himself with an untested drug. Those actions, irresponsible even by House’s admittedly low standards, had been either suicidal or liable to get him tossed into jail (or both). Nevertheless, they had mostly been directed against House himself or against third parties — House had probably hoped they’d assault him in turn — but not against Cuddy. Which is why Wilson believes that House’s stunt drive wasn’t directed against her either and that his own memory of that terrible afternoon — House aiming for a tree and swerving at the last moment when Wilson stepped in front of it — is not a false one born out of a need to see his friend in a benign light.

House’s eyes widen. Then, with that quick sideways jerk of his head that indicates he’s acknowledging a point, he says, “I’m touched. Don’t worry; I’m keen to keep my remaining leg intact.” He takes a big bite from his sandwich and says with a full mouth, “So, how’s the sex?”

“Fine,” Wilson says in a neutral voice. This is dangerous territory for more reasons than he has fingers to count them off on.

“Fine? Just fine? That’s all you can find to say about the bodily union with the woman whom you’re going to nail for the rest of your life?”

“That’s all I’m prepared to say to you.”

House’s eyes narrow. Then he grins. “You’re not sleeping with her,” he says, wagging a knowing finger at Wilson.

Wilson breathes in deeply, avoiding House’s gaze. “No, I’m not,” he admits, getting ready for the volcano of sarcasm that’s about to erupt around his head.

House leans back, scratching his chin and chuckling. “You’re about to propose to a chick who hasn’t even put out yet? That’s pitiful, absolutely pitiful!” He leans forward again, impaling Wilson with his stare. “Unless … unless you’re lying to me for fear that I’ll lose it and start planning vehicular assault strategies. … You are sleeping with her.”

“Fine, I am,” Wilson says. Whatever rocks House’s boat. A feeling of déjà vu washes over him: it’s as though they’ve had this conversation before — and they probably have, because House has always felt the need to pry every last detail out of Wilson, no matter how intimate.

House is nonplussed, which gives Wilson a short jab of satisfaction. “You are?” he asks.

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not.” House leans back again, taking another bite from his sandwich. “You’re missing the smug look of the well-laid man who knows that in a few days, he’ll be getting seconds. And trust me, I know that she’s a great lay.”

There’s no way he can argue with this obfuscating, nonsensical drivel without getting into the kind of conversation that’ll have Lisa itching to amputate his balls, should she ever hear of it. And it’s a sure bet that she will, because House will quote anything he says straight to Lisa, complete with exaggeration, hyperbole and personal embellishments. So, Wilson doesn’t even try, but resigns himself to being the butt of House’s jokes for the remainder of the week. It could be worse, a lot worse, given that he’s aiming to marry House’s ex-girlfriend.
“Fine, I’m not,” he says amiably and continues straightaway, hoping to shut House up, “So, you’re really okay with me marrying Lisa?”

“I broke off the relationship with her, not the other way round, at least the time that I can remember,” House points out, “and I’ve never made an effort to revive it. You can rest assured that if you were foolish enough to invite me to your wedding, I’d happily screw each and every bridesmaid and the best man to boot.”

When Wilson opens his mouth to protest that of course he’ll invite House to the wedding, House raises his hand. “You can’t invite me, because there’s the small matter of the Cuddy clan to consider,” he says.

Wilson shuts his mouth again. He hasn’t thought that far ahead, although he has been pondering his plan for the best part of four weeks. Of course, he has avoided thinking about the complications that House adds to the matter, because … well, because.

“Besides,” House adds, “it’ll be a bit difficult to call it off, now that she’s coming here specially to be proposed to.”

“Oh, she doesn’t know,” Wilson says. “It’s meant as a surprise.”

House snorts. “How stupid do you think she is? If I figure it out within ten seconds, it won’t have taken her longer than … ten days.”

Wilson smiles, feeling very superior indeed. It took an effort to get everything sorted without arousing Lisa’s suspicion, but he feels that he handled it well. “I persuaded Julia to offer her babysitting skills before suggesting to Lisa that if she had the weekend off she might as well spend it in Paris with me.” He’d helped matters along a bit by dropping the information that House was due to visit again soon, leaving it to Julia and her husband Rob to figure out that Lisa, once safely engaged to him, Wilson, was unlikely to get entangled with her unsavoury ex again. Julia hadn’t been hard to persuade; on hearing of his plan she’d thrown herself into it with a vengeance, practically begging Lisa to allow her to spend some quality time with her niece, away from the demands of her own family (and her mother). “It was risky — she could well have decided to book into some wellness resort close to Philly instead — but it worked.”

House idly plays with his spoon. “I get what Lisa gains from the union: the nuclear family with Jewish doctor-husband and two kids that she’s been dreaming of since junior high. But what do you get out of it? She’s hot, but so are other women, younger women who’ll stay hot for longer than she will. Great ass, but those funbags are beginning to sag and her waist is thickening.”

Wilson is torn between agreeing — it is the truth, after all — and rising to the defence of his bride-to-be. That he actually hesitates is a sign of House’s pervasive bad influence. “I’m not discussing her appearance with you either,” he says. If he did and Lisa found out, he’d be road kill.

House continues undeterred. “She’s mothering your rugrat already; no need to propose in order to ensnare her into babysitting duties. And there’s no question of more little Jimmies: her biological clock has jammed for eternity and we nuked your sperm. Gratitude for her self-mutilating generosity? Doubtless. But she gave you her liver half a year ago. Why this belated outburst of emotion?”

Wilson uses the opportunity that House’s short pause gives him to get a word in edgeways. “She’s a wonderful person and we’ve got a great thing going, with the kids and the house, and it makes sense to make it official all the way.”
House points his spoon at Wilson. “You,” he says with slow emphasis, “have a great thing going. She doesn’t. She’ll be saddled with an alcoholic whose cancer could flare up again any day. She may choose to ignore that the way she ignores so many of life’s ugly sides, pretending that not seeing them will make them go away, but you wouldn’t do that to her. You wouldn’t saddle her with an additional burden if you couldn’t offer a reciprocal benefit. What can you give her that you believe will recompense her for your brokenness?”

Wilson considers pretending to be insulted at House’s insinuation that he isn’t worth the bother of marrying, but decides that it’s a waste of time. So he massages the back of his neck, not so much to release the tenseness in the muscles there as to avoid House’s eyes for a moment, because it’s hard to look House in the face when saying the words that need to be out in the open. “I’m living on borrowed time.”

The ten-year survival rate for thymic carcinoma, his particular and rare brand of thymoma, is crappy as it is. Add to that the fact that he’s on immunosuppressants to stop his body from rejecting Lisa’s liver, and he has the makings of a time bomb set for the not-so-far future: the immunosuppressants will suppress his body’s ability to fight the carcinoma, should it return.

He hears House say, “The appropriate course of action would be to sign your will, not a marriage certificate. That’s unless you’re trying to provide for your future spouse, but you can make her the beneficiary of your life insurance without entering wedlock. Besides, Lisa earns more than you ever will.”

“If …” Wilson says, then pauses to ponder whether he should change the ‘if’ to ‘when’. “If I die, Joel’s custody will probably revert to Amy. Lisa could try to come to some sort of agreement with her, but legally, she’d be no more than my housemate. She’d have no legal claim and little chance of proving that she was practically a mother to Joel. If she’s my wife, then maybe Amy will let her adopt Joel, in which case she won’t lose him when I die.” There, he has managed to insert ‘when’ without tripping over it.

He risks a glance at House. House’s face has a quizzical air. “Adopt?” he echoes with no intonation.

“Yes. Step-parent adoption. Legally, it shouldn’t be a problem, since she has already adopted a child. It would be an open adoption, of course,” he hastens to add. “Amy wouldn’t lose much.”

“When you die, Lisa will have full legal custody,” House summarises with his usual lack of tact and bedside manners. “Why would you want that?”

Wilson looks at House helplessly. He has understood everything else so far; why is he so dense with respect to Joel? Wilson is reminded of the time when Lisa was in the adoption process, first that other little girl and then Rachel. House had been … obstreperous, lacking any kind of compassion and empathy. Maybe it’s the same kind of thing here, some form of sibling jealousy.

“I’m not sure whether Joel would be better off with Amy, although she’s his mother.” He flounders on, wondering how to put it without seeming insensitive to the rights of birth parents. “She loves him, but she’s … she’s young and she has her own issues to work through. Lisa is great with him and I’m sure she’d love to have him, and Joel is used to her and Rachel. It seems foolish to uproot him from the surroundings he knows …”

House isn’t listening. He’s fiddling with the salt and pepper shakers, unscrewing the lids and mixing the contents.

“Hmm?” House says when Wilson stops talking.
“Forget it,” Wilson says. “It makes no difference to you either way. Consider the upside: if I marry Lisa, you won’t ever have to deal with Joel again. I can leave him with her when I come to see you. I can leave him with her when you come to see me. Lisa won’t mind, especially if it gets you off her back.”

“And when you’re dead?”

Wilson stares. “You don’t care who ends up raising Joel when I’m dead. You’re not planning to play fairy godmother and look in on him, are you?”

House doesn’t answer the question, which doesn’t matter since it was purely rhetorical. Still, his habit of veering off at a tangent is as disquieting as it ever was. He says, “When you’re dead, then no matter what agreement you had with Amy, she’d have to re-negotiate everything with Lisa, because she’ll forfeit all her rights the moment she consents to an adoption.”

“She was on the verge of doing that anyway,” Wilson says, surprised that House of all people is standing up for Amy and more than a little put out about it. He’d thought that House, if anyone, would applaud his move to get Joel legally out of Amy’s sphere of influence and firmly into his own. “Four weeks ago she gave me a choice between taking full physical custody or signing the papers agreeing to place him for adoption.”

House is silent for a long moment, ostensibly busy building an edifice with their cups and saucers, his plate, and the silverware. Then he leans back, pulls his sunglasses out and puts them on again, which is pretty much useless because the sun has just disappeared behind the roofs of the surrounding houses. Finally he says, “Has it occurred to you that maybe you’re not the father?”

“It has,” Wilson says. He pinches the bridge of his nose, wondering how to explain this to House. Ever since he mentioned Joel, trying to get through to House has been like wading through a swamp. It isn’t worth the effort, he decides. “I don’t care. I love Joel. Whether he’s my son or not makes no difference.”

“Very noble, but what happens if the biological dad turns up?” House asks in a neutral voice.

“Nothing,” Wilson says, shrugging carelessly.

House’s eyebrows rise behind his sunglasses. Wilson supposes he’ll have to explain after all; House won’t let it (or him) rest until he gets behind this seeming indifference to Joel’s true paternity. “Amy says I’m the father, but I’ve done the math on this and — although it’s possible, it’s unlikely. So, let’s assume some other guy knocked her up. That’s okay. Unlike you, I don’t believe that nature programmed us with the instinct to solely protect our own offspring. Joel gives my life meaning and structure. That makes me responsible for Joel’s well-being. He’s my son now, and I’m gonna protect him.”

He shifts in his chair; anger has been brewing in him for some time now — ever since Amy handed Joel over like an unwanted pet. “Once Lisa adopts Joel, she will have full parental rights. Should it turn out that I’m not the biological father, I can then adopt him as a step parent.”

House is silent again for a long moment. “Only if the bio dad consents,” he finally says.

“In Pennsylvania abandonment is a reason to terminate parental rights,” Wilson says flatly, wondering when and how House has gotten so interested in the question of adoption. “Whoever he is, he has clearly abandoned Joel.”

“Or maybe he doesn’t know of his good fortune,” House interposes.
“Oh, you can be sure that if he exists, he knows of it. Amy is nothing if not trusting and naive. She must have run straight to him and told him all about the pregnancy, imagining that he’d share her joy. That she placed Joel with me means one of two things: either Joel is in fact my son or the real father is refusing to take responsibility.”

“Why don’t you do a paternity test? Then you’ll know whether he exists.”

Wilson takes a deep breath. “If I do a paternity test, I can’t ignore the possibility of a different birth father anymore and am legally bound to try and find him before Cuddy adopts Joel.” Oops, he’s back to calling her ‘Cuddy’. Maybe he should abandon the plan to call her ‘Lisa’ and just stick to ‘Cuddy’. House continued calling her Cuddy when he dated her at PPTH, and she hadn’t seemed to mind, so maybe it’s okay if he does so too.

House’s eyes behind the shades are invisible, but his brow is furrowed in thought or puzzlement. “You’ll purposely ignore the rights of Joel’s bio dad for your own convenience? Unexpected, that,” he says, pursing his lips. “I’d have thought you’d be all for Joel being allowed to explore his roots and making a qualified decision on who he is.”

“I would be — if his father had shown the slightest sense of responsibility. But he has forfeited all rights by allowing Amy to place Joel with me. I’m not going to have some joker who can’t be bothered to look out for his kid disrupting Joel’s life, either now or after I’m dead.”

“What’ll you do if he turns up asking for visitation rights or custody?” House asks.

“Smash his fucking nose!” This outburst is entirely uncalled for, he knows, but it has the gratifying effect of making House, who has been fiddling around with everything on the table throughout the entire conversation, freeze in his motions.

“O-kay,” House says slowly, putting down the much-abused salt shaker.

Wilson waits for the interrogation to continue but no more questions are forthcoming. House leans forward and picks up the neglected conference programme. He switches his sunglasses for his reading glasses and looks at the entries that Wilson has marked for the coming day.

“You’re gonna attend ‘Traditional Eastern Medicine and Pain Management’?” he asks, one eyebrow rising in amusement.

“Uh,” Wilson says. He hasn’t found anything better for the afternoon time slot, and he has a moral obligation to Joel (and Joel’s caregivers) to use his time to maximum benefit.

“Wilson,” House says, “you’ll be a better father if you return to Philadelphia rested and relaxed. You can read up about acupuncture, herbal remedies, and tantric massages afterwards in the conference proceedings. Though in the case of tantric massages I recommend a hands-on approach, because there’s nothing like personal experience to convince your patients of the efficacy of a remedy.”

Wilson is pretty sure that the authors of the paper on traditional Eastern medicine weren’t thinking of tantric massages or the Kama Sutra. “What do you want to do tomorrow afternoon?”

“There’s a wine tour,” House says and grins when Wilson rolls his eyes. “In deference to the sobriety sorority among us I’m prepared to make do with a culinary tour instead. Any alcohol they serve, I’ll drink your share too.”
Sightseeing

‘Optimising’ travel time, her travel agent called it when she booked her flight. She leaves Philadelphia on Thursday at 6 p.m., reaching Paris eight hours later at 8 a.m. local time. The downside: sleeping on the plane. The upside: she has the whole day ahead of her. She’ll get three full days in Paris at the expense of only one working day. She still can’t believe her good fortune: Julia volunteering for an extended weekend of babysitting and Wilson providing her with an excuse to move further afield than the Poconos. He was gently persuasive, asking her to consider it his treat to make up for all that she’d been through because of him and citing her long-cherished dream to visit France as an additional incentive. A trip to France in exchange for half a liver — why not?

Unfortunately, Julia read more into the vacation than was called for. Although she was too discreet to give relationship advice, she had a habit of trying to set Cuddy up with ‘suitable candidates’, as their mother once put it. Ever since House literally crashed Cuddy’s date with Julia’s colleague Jerry, Julia’s matchmaking efforts had been put on the back burner, but when she drove Cuddy to the airport that unmistakable gleam in her eye was back again. Cuddy didn’t bother to disillusion her; she was only too aware how her continued proximity to Wilson and their increasingly intimate living arrangement must appear to outsiders. She would have liked to explain to Julia that theirs was an alliance of convenience (Pete would call it ‘desperation’), but Julia was in a romantic haze, commending Wilson for upgrading Cuddy’s flight to business class, remarking on his good manners, and expressing her approval of Wilson as a potential boyfriend without actually saying so.

Cuddy doesn’t know whether to be glad that her family is prepared to overcome their natural prejudices, accepting a three times divorced dry alcoholic for her sake, or whether she should feel insulted that they would consider her to be the lucky one if she and Wilson got together. The truth of the matter is that her family has reached the stage where they will happily root for anyone who isn’t House. Which isn’t exactly flattering, but if she’s honest with herself she has to admit that she, too, has given up hope of happiness within a relationship. She’s forty-nine, her longest relationship lasted for a year, she has a disabled child, and if her mother is to be believed, she has unrealistic expectations and impossibly high standards. Julia, more tactful, once noted that if she wanted a reliable and steady guy, she shouldn’t date exciting, slightly creepy bad boys.

Her mother is wrong about her expectations. Her standards aren’t too high: she dated Lucas Douglas for a year. Sure, he has his good sides, such as being a family guy, but he’s still the least mature man she ever dated, and sexually — oy vey! She shouldn’t have let him get away with his masculine brand of selfishness, but at forty plus she’d been grateful to be found desirable at all. And Julia is wrong about her wanting a steady, reliable guy. She can deal with House-style erratic behaviour, being jerked around regularly and even being let down on occasion. It comes with the territory. What she can’t deal with is having to be the strong one, the one holding the fort, the one who glues everything together in the relationship.

In a way it’s all Julia’s fault — for having a husband like Rob. Rob, who is short, bald, and slightly paunchy, whose verbal utterances are mostly restricted to comments on the invariable ball game on television, and the highlights of whose life are vintage car rallies. (He has pointed out to her a number of times that the term ‘vintage’ is restricted to the era between nineteen-something and nineteen-something-else, and that the correct term is ‘antique’, but whatever.) Whenever her mother gripes that the prince she’s waiting for doesn’t exist, she looks at Rob and thinks that he does, only Julia has grabbed him.
It isn’t that she’s physically attracted to Rob; as a matter of fact, he’s the absolute opposite of the type she is attracted to. But whenever she’s almost convinced that the qualities she’s looking for don’t exist, watching Rob with Julia overturns that conviction. Taciturn, pragmatic Rob does things for Julia, not because he’s worried she’ll leave him if he doesn’t (Julia doesn’t know how to spell ‘dump’ or ‘break up’) or because he fears he won’t get laid (Julia couldn’t get mad if she tried), but because it makes Julia’s life easier — and that makes Rob happy. He puts up with his mother-in-law’s constant nagging and her subtle digs, because if he sniped back at her, Julia would get stressed. He looks after the kids and his MIL while Julia helps out at Cuddy’s place, because if Julia couldn’t come over to help out, she’d worry about Cuddy, and Rob doesn’t want her to worry. He doesn’t say a word about House in front of Cuddy, because if he got into a fight with his sister-in-law, Julia would feel torn, so it isn’t worth the hassle.

Dating House hadn’t been like that. Everything House had done for her had been fuelled by the fear that not doing it would lead to the end of the relationship. Doing something simply because it would make her life easier or make her happy, with no direct benefit to himself, had been foreign to his thought processes. If he babysat Rachel, it was to get laid. If he took her out on dates or attended official functions with her, it was to avoid getting dumped. It was never ever to make her life easier or simply to see her relaxed and smiling. And that was because he’d seen her as his crutch, as the drug he could lean on after kicking his Vicodin habit. Drugs and other crutches didn’t have needs or feelings; they were hard mistresses with unreasonable demands, but they didn’t expect support or empathy. It hadn’t occurred to him that she might need a crutch too, someone she could trust implicitly to do what was best for her even if it got him nowhere, someone who covered her back even if it meant a bullet through his heart.

(She remembers one of the fevered dreams she had during her cancer scare: she and House as the Sundance Kid and Butch, but when she’d run out to face the bullets, he had disappeared.)

Wilson could be the guy who took the flak for her, if he was interested in her, but she doubts that he has cast himself in that role. House needed her to lean on; Wilson, however, is still smarting from being the needy one after his stay in Mayfield and during his cancer treatment. He referred to it once as ‘leeching off her’ and she doubts that his self-esteem will ever recover from having to accept sponge baths from her. It’s funny: she’d have thought that House with his overt masculinity and unrelenting sexism would need to be the strong one in a relationship, but it’s Wilson who has fixed ideas about his role as the ‘man’ in a relationship, and those notions don’t see him leaning on his partner to get through addiction, depression, or cancer.

It’s ten o’clock by the time the cab drops her off at Wilson’s conference hotel. Wilson must be in some session or other, so maybe she can have a nap. First she needs a shower, but before she has finished unpacking there’s a knock on the door. Is Wilson playing truant already?

She opens the door, but the corridor seems empty at first sight. Then she peers around the frame. “You?”

It’s Pete, leaning against the near wall, dressed in jeans, a white button-down shirt and Nikes, a backpack slung casually over his shoulder. A pair of sunglasses sticks out of his shirt pocket.

“Good to see you too,” he says.

She waves him into her room, wondering why she is surprised. “Does Wilson know you are here?”

“In your room? No. I don’t kiss and tell, or tell and kiss, as the case may be.”

“Here in Paris,” she elucidates, although she’s sure he knows what she’s trying to get at.
Pete gives her a pitying look. “Wilson and I don’t keep secrets from each other;” he says. “He’s yin to my yang, I’m the plug to his socket.”

When she swats him lightly he says, “I arrived the day he did. James Wilson’s Week Off is too good to be missed. The French aren’t much into non-alcoholic wines, so he isn’t having as much fun as I am.” He considers his last statement with a grimace. “Non-alcoholic wine and fun: definitely a paradox. So, Wilson isn’t having fun, period.”

She wonders why he’s rambling. It’s a sure sign that he’s nervous. Is he worried that she’ll let slip to Wilson the truth about Joel before he has an opportunity to confess? Because he definitely hasn’t done so yet: if he had, she’d have heard something about it from Wilson when he last talked to her. Which reminds her: “Why didn’t Wilson mention that you’re here?”

Pete twitches a cheek in a deprecating grimace. “He was hoping I’d disappear before you appeared or that he could squeeze me back into the closet that I popped out of, so you wouldn’t discover his dirty little secret: he’s gay.”

“Sure,” Cuddy says equably. Pete’s sexual innuendos may be new territory for him, especially with regard to Wilson, but she had to listen to them for over a decade at PPTH. “And I’m a transsexual. Tell me something new.”

“I was going to leave yesterday, but then I heard that Wilson intended to leave you to your own devices while he presented his paper today, so I extended my stay by one day. I’ll be your friendly guide, showing you the sights and easing your way around Paris …” He pronounces it ‘Pah-ree’ the way her French teacher in high school used to. “… so you won’t get lost, mugged, or even worse, seduced by a Gallic gigolo.”

“Huh,” she says. “And how do you intend to find your way around Paris?” Pete is notorious for getting lost within the fairly modest confines of Philadelphia Central Hospital; allowing him to drive a car without GPS basically amounts to sending him on a round trip of the world.

“Ve haf zeese very clever devices,” Pete says, his ‘r’ guttural, pulling out his cell with a flourish and presenting it with a bow, “viz a special app for finding ze way.”

Cuddy can’t help giggling. “Okay, but I have to shower first.”

“Don’t mind me,” Pete says, sprawling on one of the chairs in the room.

“Oh, no,” Cuddy says and marches towards the door. “Out!” She holds the door open for him. “You can wait in the spacious lobby and check out the receptionists. They are all young and pretty.”

He pretends to be hurt, but does her bidding. She, for her part, takes a shower in record time, feeling gladder than she’d have expected at the prospect of his company. (They haven’t exactly been at ease with each other since their last break-up, and although working together to keep Wilson alive created a loose camaraderie, they’ve both instinctively avoided more intimate moments ever since. It doesn’t help that she knows more about Joel than he’s comfortable with.) She wouldn’t hesitate to launch herself into the streets of the city armed with a map and a guide book, but sightseeing all by herself would be a drab business. Where’s the fun in being awed by a world famous gothic cathedral — her first gothic cathedral — if there’s no one to share that awe with?

She dresses in jeans, a soft mauve sweater, and flat shoes, ties her damp hair back and applies light make-up. Her reflection returns her critical gaze with approval: casual and understated without
appearing blowsy or careless of her appearance. There’s no reason why she should care; the French
don’t know her and will never cross her path again, while Wilson has seen her in considerably
worse disarray. As for Pete …

Instead of following that line of thought she dabs perfume behind her ears and on her wrists,
realising too late that she’s using the wrong perfume, the taboo one, the one House gave her when
they were dating. She brought it with her thinking that it would be just the thing if she had to attend
a conference dinner with Wilson, not reckoning on meeting Pete here. Now that she thinks of it, it
strikes her that she used the ‘wrong’ shampoo too. She switches to a different brand whenever Pete
visits, but again, it didn’t occur to her that she might need her ersatz shampoo in Paris and she
didn’t think to use the complimentary sample that the hotel provides. Short of showering again
there’s nothing she can do about it now; she’ll just have to keep her distance and hope that he
doesn’t recognise it.

A moment later she’s back in the bathroom, scrubbing behind her ears with a washcloth. Now her
wrists, and did she dab the perfume anywhere else? She brought one of her everyday ‘work’
perfumes, a Lancôme and she applies that liberally, hoping it’ll cover everything else. She knows
she’s a coward, and if Pete had any idea how far she’s prepared to bend over backwards to avoid
memories of the past, he’d mock her. And no, she’s not going to shower again with a different
shampoo, because that would be pathetic, even more pathetic than the extra dabs of Lancôme at
the base of her throat.

Pete is in the lobby reading a newspaper, his legs stretched out comfortably. When she walks up to
him he nods his approval at her get-up, throws the newspaper on the lobby table, and rises.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks, pulling a linen flat cap out of his backpack and putting it on.

“Lemme see.” She pulls out her guide book and checks the post-its she stuck into it. “Notre Dame,
the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, the Tuileries, Sacré-Cœur, the Musée d’Orsay, …”

“Oh-kay,” Pete says, holding out a hand to stop her. “First of all, I’m not your average tourist
guide. I’ll take you places you’ve never been before,” a leer punctuates that statement, “but I’m not
prepared to spend the day in lines. If you haven’t booked online for the Louvre, you can forget it.
The Eiffel Tower is a bore, the Tuileries are gardens, —”

“I know the Tuileries are gardens. So?”

He rolls his eyes. Plant life apparently isn’t on his agenda any more than lines are. They’re out on
the road now, the morning sun pleasant rather than warm, the traffic, which is lighter than she’d
thought it would be, dominated by scooters. They walk down the street past a café, and then up
another street.

Pete looks around casually, but she isn’t fooled; he’s checking out landmarks, trying to stave off
the inevitable — having to ask her to help him navigate — for as long as possible. “Sacré-Cœur is
also off the map: Wilson insists that he’ll take you there himself. That leaves …”

“Why does he want to take me there?” The guide book says it’s a ‘must-see’, but it doesn’t really
look like a ‘Wilson’ kind of place. She has him down as a Louvre and Notre Dame type of person.
Sacré-Cœur is rather closer to kitsch than to Wilson.

“He says you’ve been ‘dying 2 go there 4eva’.”

“Me?” She stops and opens her guide book at the appropriate page, glad she stuck post-its in
regardless of whether Pete thinks they’re ridiculously anal. No, her memory isn’t fooling her:
Sacré-Cœur is that white marble meringue perched on a hill. Maybe it’s the sort of place you have to see in real life to appreciate its ‘magic’ and ‘grandeur’, but there’s no way she’s been hankering to go there all her life. Hell, she didn’t even know it existed until she started preparing for this trip.

“Yep, you. He said you’ve wanted to see Montmartre since you were old enough to spell it, and Sacré-Cœur is in Montmartre.” Pete’s eyes narrow, then he grins. “Don’t tell me he got you mixed up with some other girlfriend!”

“Montmartre?” she repeats to make sure she hasn’t misheard. Pete pronounces everything the French way, which means she has to translate it into something she can understand. Her high school French classes weren’t strong on verbal skills. The artists’ quarter? (Picasso and Matisse spring to mind, but she isn’t about to make a complete fool of herself by checking in the guide book to make sure.) “Mont- …? Oh, he got that wrong. Not Montmartre.”

“Then where? Montparnasse? There’s nothing there.” He scrutinises her. “No, not Montparnasse either. So, which hill was it that you wanted to see?”

He isn’t about to let it slide, so she says reluctantly, “Mont Saint-Michel.”

Taking a deep breath, Pete chuckles. And then laughs. “Mont Saint-Michel. Oh my God! Wilson fucked it up — he’s off by over 200 miles. Though if he skipped the closing session tomorrow morning, you could do it. You’d be on the road all day, but —”

“No, it’s fine,” she says quickly. Mont Saint-Michel will always be linked to House in her mind, to his futile attempt to get both of them there at the beginning of their relationship. She hadn’t wanted to take Rachel with them on such a long trip (it would have been a nightmare and a romance-killer) nor had she wanted to start off their relationship by neglecting Rachel in order to be with her new boyfriend — she’d thought it would send the wrong signal to House and to Rachel regarding her priorities — so she’d essentially chickened out when he’d gotten down to booking their flights. He’d been hurt, though he had understood. He’d always understood, sometimes too well.

“So, where are you going to take me?” she asks, determined to change the topic before he has an epiphany and manages to connect Mont Saint-Michel to himself.

He’s agreeable to doing Notre Dame and the Musée d’Orsay, the latter probably only because of Courbet’s larger-than-life vagina, but he endures her beloved impressionists with stoicism. As for Notre Dame, he’s blasé about it while they’re in the line, pretending that the visit was a chore to which he’d never subject himself if it weren’t for her, but as they roam around the cathedral, every now and then she finds herself waiting for him while he lags behind, sunk in contemplation. He drops little titbits of information about gothic architecture, stained glass, and the statics of flying buttresses, subjects on which she is completely ignorant. And later, up on the tower, she catches him sticking out his tongue at one of the gargoyles. Now gargoyles and Pete will forever be intertwined in her memory.

By the time they’re done with all that and have walked over the Pont Neuf (which smells of urine) it’s late afternoon. Pete parks her on a bench and disappears (she hopes that he’ll find his way back with his navigation app, but to be on the safe side she gets out her map so she can figure out where he is if he should phone to say he’s gotten lost), reappearing twenty minutes later with a baguette sticking out of his backpack.

“Is that the authentic French gourmet dinner you promised me?” Cuddy asks, wondering why she’s surprised.

“Don’t judge it before you’ve tried it,” Pete says.
They stroll along the banks of the Seine, where a waterside road has been converted into a car-free zone. Half of Paris is here, walking, running, cycling, or skating. Students with bottles of wine and plastic cups lounge on strips of verdure, tourists sit on stones overlooking the water, families with picnic baskets are spreading whole meals on blankets and along benches. On the river a packed tourist barge churns up the water, while the guide’s amplified voice informs them that the building on the left-hand side is the famous XYZ, built in the year so-and-so. Around her Cuddy can hear French, but also lots of Spanish, and every now and then English, German, and Japanese.

Cuddy feels herself relaxing for the first time in days — no, weeks. She’s had a good time so far, but art galleries can be exhausting and gothic cathedrals give you a crick in the neck. Besides, although she isn’t wearing heels, all that walking and standing around is killing her feet. Ambling along beside Pete, with no agenda and no worries that she’s missing the significance of some objet d’art, is calming the way that yoga is. Maybe this is better than sitting in some posh restaurant with white linen tablecloths and artistically folded napkins, hoping that Pete won’t antagonise the waiters.

When they’ve walked about a mile Pete stops at a group of beams piled up to make a seating arrangement. It’s fairly quiet along this stretch of the river, probably because there are no major tourist attractions in the vicinity, so they have the seats to themselves. Pete takes out linen napkins with the hotel logo printed on them (Cuddy rolls her eyes, but it’s too late anyway and she guesses she can return them discreetly) and spreads them out in lieu of a tablecloth. He takes off his hat, lines it with another napkin, and places it in the middle of the tablecloth. Then he takes out a humongous Swiss knife with just about every tool one can think of, chooses the miniature saw, and cuts the baguette into slices that he places in his hat.

“Voilà,” he says, before stretching out his hand imperatively. “Guide book?”

She hands it over, mystified. He places it next to the hat, covers it with a paper napkin (he has run out of linen ones, it seems), and then takes a number of small packages out of his backpack. Those turn out to be different cheeses. He cuts wedges or slices off each cheese and places those on the guide book, garnishing the arrangement with grapes and walnuts that he’s brought in a little Tupperware box. He also unwraps a pat of butter, and he groups strawberries, peaches, and grapes in a corner of his makeshift table. Finally he takes out two disposable cups and a bottle of Pinot Noir, uncorking the latter with the corkscrew of his Swiss knife. He pours a mouthful into one of the plastic cups, swirls it around and takes an experimental sip, making a great show of tasting it, eyes closed in pantomimic ecstasy.

Cuddy shakes her head reluctantly. “Not for me, please. I think I’ll have some water.”

He cocks a questioning eyebrow at her, but pulls out a small bottle of Perrier which he unscrews before handing it to her. “Then I guess I can drink straight from the bottle,” he says, taking a swig.

He feeds her cheese and baguette, regaling her with anecdotes and obscure facts about each of the cheeses, most of which she suspects he’s making up along the way.

“The cows that produce the milk for the Comté,” he says, “get a hectare of pasture each. That’s a hundred cows per square kilometre, max.”

She learnt the metric system in school and she knows that there are 1.6 kilometres to a mile, but there’s no way she can convert hectares into acres, and even if she could, she has no idea how many cows normally graze on an acre of land. “That sounds like a lot of cows,” she says.

“Major cities have five to fifteen thousand inhabitants per square kilometre,” he says drily.
She feels dumb until she remembers that one of his specialities is infectious diseases. He’ll have numbers like that on his fingertips in order to predict the spread of airborne diseases or the likelihood of a major epidemic. “So you’re saying it’s better to be a cow.”

“If you like your privacy, yes. But only if you’re a Comté cow. It’s no use being a Brie or an Emmenthaler cow.”

He pronounces ‘privacy’ with a short ‘i’, like in ‘sit’. Earlier, when he took a work-related call, he slipped back into a British accent; when he talks with her his accent is in-between — undefined, but un-American. She can’t remember noticing anything of the sort when he visited them in Philly, not even the first time he came. He’d slipped into his ‘American’ persona without any delay. Of course, they aren’t in the US now.

She brushes a few crumbs off her lap and says as casually as she can manage, “Can I ask you something?”

He cuts a slice out of one of the peaches and proffers it to her on the point of his Swiss knife. When she takes it he cuts the next slice. She takes that one too.

“Well?” she says.

“Perhaps,” he answers, cutting the third slice, a perfect wedge.

She observes him, the neat, precise movements, the dexterity with which he handles the knife. “Perhaps what?” Why do conversations with him have to be so strenuous?

“For every question you ask me, I get to ask you one,” he proposes.

Oh okay, a game. “Does the answer have to be the truth?” she asks.

“Yes. And that was your first question. It’s my turn.”

Wait, what happened there? She wanted to ask him … . But he’s asking his question already. “Your fairy godmother grants you one wish before you die. What do you choose?”

She pretends to think about it, her mood dampened, though in all honesty she isn’t surprised by the turn his question has taken. Wilson, the walking time bomb, at a conference on palliative oncology — can it get more morbid than that? She decides to turn his thoughts to lighter matters.

“A VIP ticket for a Bruce Springsteen concert. I had a huge crush on The Boss when I was, oh, sixteen, but I’ve never been to a concert.”

That earns her a strawberry directly from his long fingers. “Hmmm, good,” she says. She loves strawberries. “Have you thought about returning to the US?” And taking responsibility for Joel, she adds silently.

“Thought about it? Yes. Is it going to happen? No.”

“Why not?”

“If you want more specific answers, you’ll have to ask more specific questions. Would you sleep with Bruce Springsteen?”

Okay, that distraction worked too well. She considers which answer will shut him up quickest. “Yes.”
His eyes flash. “Yes?”

“Yes, I would,” she says defensively.

“He’s old.”

“He’s sexy.”

The tilt of his head indicates that he’ll allow for that. It’s her turn. She’d better get her question in before he’s side-tracked completely. What does she need to know? “Do you have a job?”

“Yes.”

Dare she push this? Before she can decide, he volunteers further information of his own accord.

“There were a couple of mysterious deaths on the excavation team at an archaeological dig in Mesopotamia. I’d been dabbling in pathological forensics for the Metropolitan Police in London on a consultancy basis, so they sent me to look into the matter; none of the regulars wanted to go to Iraq. Turned out that one of the deaths was suicide and the other an undiagnosed case of Chagas caught when the guy was excavating in Guatemala years ago. So, no curse of the mummy, just a coincidence.” He leans forward and pops another strawberry directly into her mouth. “The suicide was the team’s only osteologist, so they’d put some students to work on the bones they’d found at the site. I took a look at those and re-sorted them — it wouldn’t have looked good if they’d unwittingly exhibited pictures of chimera on their websites. Next thing I knew, I was being asked about possible causes of death and dietary habits of their legit corpses, and from there it was a small step to Jack-of-all-trades at the site.”

“Jack-of-all-trades?” She doesn’t see him doing menial work for a bunch of academic hole diggers.

“All the odds and sods: piecing together artefacts, figuring out what they were used for, differentiating between objects of daily use and cult objects. … Those archaeology chaps aren’t exactly systematic. They come up with a theory and then bend the facts to fit it, instead of looking at the facts and deducing theories from them. And they are crap at three-dimensional puzzles. You wouldn’t believe the problems they have reassembling shards of pottery. I suspect it’s only done to keep the student volunteers busy and out of the way.” He shrugs indifferently.

“And you helped a bunch of students to put together old clay jars,” she says incredulously.

His smile is lazy. “One of the students was a D cup,” he says by way of explanation, “and I was stuck there anyway: the only bus out of there ran irregularly. Anyway, someone from a UN team investigating the ethnic cleansing carried out by ISIS two years ago dropped by the camp and looked at my work, and the net result was that I was offered a job in forensic archaeology.”

“What’ll you be doing?” she asks, though she has a dark inkling.

“Digging up mass graves in lovely places where one group of humans slaughtered another group of humans in the name of some -ism or other.”

“That sounds …” She wants to say, ‘exciting’, but the lie won’t pass her lips. “… disgusting!”

Pete reclines along the beam on which she has propped her feet so that his head is level with her knee. He looks up at her from that position. “You owe me two answers now,” he says.

“I don’t,” she swiftly retorts. “If you miss your turn it’s your problem.”

He idly picks up a grape and examines it. “Why are you here instead of supervising the move to
your suburban arcadia?”

She sighs; she’d rather not think about the weeks ahead of her. “When I closed the deal with the owners four weeks ago, it looked like we’d be able to move within a month. There was no need to redecorate anything; the only major alteration was adjusting the bathroom to Rachel’s needs, so I planned the move for last weekend. But then the plumber damaged a water pipe in Rachel’s bathroom while lowering the washbasin to her height, so now the entire wall has to be re-tiled.”

“Rachel can cope with normal bathrooms,” he points out.

He’s right; she does it all the time at Louisa’s place.

“I can’t deal with moving into a new place and unpacking while the tilers hammer away in the bathroom and trail dust through the entire house. Do you have any idea how much of a mess knocking tiles off the walls makes? They’ve sealed off the bathroom, but the dust still pervades every corner of the house.”

“First world problems,” Pete drawls, spitting a peach stone at the thigh of a passing runner.

She slaps his head lightly with a rolled paper napkin. “It’s beyond irritating and it has messed up my schedule. The only good thing about the affair is that it gave me the time to come here.” She hesitates, biting her lip. “Are you going to tell Wilson about yourself and Joel before you leave?”

His eyelids, which have been drooping, fly open. “Are you kidding?”

“I take it that’s a no,” she says coolly.

He sits up again and twists around to face her. “The last time Wilson received bad news before he boarded a plane, it didn’t end well. Are you sure you want to escort him back to the States after he finds out that the squirt isn’t his?”

She slowly shakes her head. No, she doesn’t need Pete to drop his bomb and then take off, leaving her to mop up the mess. His mess, his problem.

“Time enough when I come next week,” Pete says.

“Oh, are you still coming then?”

“Sure,” he says easily. “The flight’s booked. What was I like at med school?” he asks next.

This is precisely what she doesn’t need: a trip down memory lane. Then again, med school is less tricky than their later association. She hadn’t known him well at Ann Arbor: she’d crushed on him, pursued him, and slept with him, but they’d never dated and they hadn’t spent much time with each other outside of class. In fact, her pursuit of him remains clearer in her memory than any personal interaction of that time, sex included. The fun lay in the chase, she supposes.

He’s waiting for an answer. “Brilliant and notorious,” she tells him.

“That’s just so … impersonal,” he drawls.

“I hardly knew you,” she says defensively.

“You remember everyone who ever crossed your path. You’ve got a filing system in your head where you sort people according to professional and personal relevance, with a grading system that reflects their future potential. So, what was I like in college?”
She has a sudden flash of memory of him sprawling in the endocrinology lecture hall, his arms and legs draped loosely over desk and chair, his hair — longer and curly then — in disarray, his eyes darting everywhere, his sensitive lips twitching in thought. No, there’s no way she’ll let him share her memories. They belong to her, not to him.

Three adjectives, she decides; it’s one of the exercises her therapist makes her do occasionally to describe her feelings. “Gawky. … Shy. Arrogant.” There, that should do.

“Isn’t that a contradiction: shy and arrogant?”

She doesn’t bother to answer that; he knows as well as she does that it isn’t. He just doesn’t like to hear himself described as anything but self-confident.

“Gawky,” he meditates, “as in, ‘Gawd, what a cute hottie’?

It takes her a moment to parse his sentence. Then she grins. “You were kinda cute, I guess — once people got past your surly frown and supercilious sneer.”

He leans back again, his head resting against her knee, tempting her to circle the bald spot on the back of his head with her fingers. The sun is setting beyond the Seine, bathing him in pink light that softens the wrinkles and furrows, making him look younger, more innocent. Is he flirting with her? She feels confused and disoriented even though she’s had none of the wine, for by now jet lag is kicking in with a vengeance. She needs to get to a safe place, where old memories don’t mingle with new complications.

“Wilson should be done soon. Shouldn’t we get back to the hotel?”

He looks up, smiling knowingly; her confusion hasn’t escaped his notice. She breaks their eye contact, busying herself with packing up their picnic. He takes the backpack from her when everything is packed, then holds out his hand to pull her to her feet. When she’s standing he doesn’t release her hand; instead, he interlaces his fingers with hers.

She hesitates. She could (and probably should) pull her hand free, but maybe she’s reading too much into this. Maybe he’s flirting with her, but what’s wrong with that? They’ve spent a wonderful day together, and she has no desire to ruin their accord by reading more into his actions than they mean. If he’s just trying to give her a good time by treating this like a date instead of what it really is — she strongly suspects that Wilson guilted him into staying another day so that she wouldn’t have to spend it by herself — then she’d be churlish if she showed mistrust.

Or so she tells herself.

They saunter back the way they came, not talking much. She’s too aware of his proximity to make casual small talk, which isn’t her strongest point anyway. After a few futile, stilted attempts she gives up and decides to enjoy the moment. Carpe diem, and all that. After all, it’s her first visit to Paris, it’s a lovely summer evening, and the man beside her has organised an enjoyable day out for her. What’s not to like? So she resolutely shushes the part of her brain that’s trying to tell her that this is too good to last (she’s good at that), relaxes (she’s not quite so good at that), and allows herself to pretend that she’s on a date with a charming stranger.

When they get back to the conference hotel the participants are already streaming out of the lobby onto the street. Wilson is outside, pacing up and down. When he spots them he hurries towards them, stopping short when he catches sight of their clasped hands. Cuddy self-consciously pulls her hand free — did she imagine it or did Pete just try to retain her hand in his? — and steps up to Wilson to hug him. His embrace is warm and tight, as though he’s been worried about her. His gaze
when he releases her is quizzical, examining. She smiles reassuringly, not quite sure what the issue is. Does he think Pete may have persuaded her to drink AMA? She’s not that stupid.

Wilson turns to Pete, who is observing them with a mocking gleam. “When’s your flight?”

Pete shrugs. “No rush.”

“I’m taking Lisa out to dinner,” Wilson says challengingly.

Something’s definitely off here, Cuddy decides. All of a sudden there’s too much testosterone in the air. She hasn’t seen the two men staring each other down since … oh, probably since the last time House stole Wilson’s prescription pad to get at Vicodin. It’s not a Good Memory, so she hurriedly pushes it back into the box out of which it just popped, hoping to retrieve the atmosphere of careless bonhomie. If Pete has been jerking Wilson’s chain, she’s sure she’ll hear about it the next two days.

“Umm, we’ve eaten already,” she says. “I’m sorry; if I’d known, I’d have —”


“How was your talk?” she asks belatedly.

He tugs a hand through his hair. “Fine,” he says. “It went really —”

“I’ll take off then,” Pete interrupts him brusquely.

Cuddy stares. What the hell is going on here?

“I’ll see you next week,” he says to Wilson.

Then he turns to Cuddy, moving a step closer, which brings him right back into her personal space. He frowns down at her, as though weighing something in his mind. Maybe he fears that she expects him to hug her after their day out, what with them holding hands and so on, but really, she knows how he feels about that. So she gives him a tight little smile, and then breaks eye contact, taking half a step back — only to be held back by a hand in the small of her back. His other hand comes to rest on her hip. Her skin under her thin sweater prickles; she can feel a tingling running up her back to her scalp and her abs tightening in an automatic reaction that she’s sure he can sense under his fingers. She swiftly gazes up at him, only to find that his face is already too close to hers for her to focus properly on his features. And then his lips brush hers.

She doesn’t know how to react. It isn’t that she minds — far from it. But how is she supposed to react? What … this isn’t … does he …? Her thoughts lose all coherence. She has two seconds to think of an adequate reaction — and those two seconds are long over. She closes her eyes and takes a steadying breath: she’ll step out of his embrace and pretend this never happened. But then his lips are on hers again, this time not brushing them, but pushing insistently. She should …

Oh, well. There’s no way she’s pushing him away, so instead she relents, allowing him to deepen the kiss. This feels … good, and not just physically: for the first time in, oh, two years she doesn’t feel rejected. She gets why Pete avoided contact with her, both physical and emotional, ever since finding out that he is Gregory House, but at times it felt as though she was being punished for who he was. So she allows herself to enjoy the comfort of his embrace and the stealthy warmth of his kiss, her hands moving up his shirt and over his shoulders around his neck.

A passer-by makes a joking comment that pulls her out of — whatever this is. She surfaces, her brain reconnecting with her surroundings. Pete breaks the kiss and pulls back slightly without
relinquishing his hold, looking down at her with an amused, quizzical expression. Then he raises his glance over her head, his smile morphing into a full-fledged grin, his eyes darkly jubilant. She twists around in his arm, wondering what the reason for his impish amusement might be.

It’s Wilson, staring at them flabbergasted. Oh dear, he must be thinking she has lost her head completely — and he isn’t all that wrong! Cuddy can feel herself flushing guiltily, and that annoys her. Yes, she’s being stupid and naive and God knows what else, but heaven knows Wilson has made his share of mistakes. But she isn’t the one who Wilson is regarding with a look of reproach; he’s glaring at Pete. Her gaze flickers to and fro between the men: Pete is grinning provocatively while his tongue probes the corners of his mouth, while Wilson throws his hands up in the air.

“Okay,” he says to no one in particular, half turning away from them as he brings his hands down in a parallel chopping motion. “Okay. I … oh, never mind!” He twists sharply on his heel and disappears inside the hotel.

Pete’s hands finally drop off her hips; she resents that she instantly misses the comfort of his hands. She turns back to him. “What was that about?”

He’s still staring at the revolving door through which Wilson just departed. Then he twitches his head sideways in a gesture of approval, his grin ebbing into a satisfied smile. “Nothing,” he says. “I just proved a point.”

That doesn’t sound good. “Do I … want to know?”

He looks down at her again. “No,” he says, “I don’t think you do.” With that he flicks her cheek casually with his index finger before he, too, departs without another word.

She is left alone on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, wondering what just happened.
Wilson Confounded

Wilson has almost reached the elevator when he realises that he can't run from this. He hasn't exactly provoked this situation — in fact, he did his best to defuse it before Cuddy's arrival, even though his best wasn't good enough — but he's been aware all along that it could go terribly wrong. It wouldn't be fair to let Cuddy suffer from the fallout just because he's upset that his wonderful plan backfired. Furthermore, he can't pretend even to himself that his heart is broken. His pride is hurt and his ego is bruised, but there's little pain in the knowledge that Cuddy (still) prefers House to him. Nothing has changed for him. It's Cuddy who is facing a problem.

So, he turns around and pushes his way through the convention throng until he's back outside the hotel, where he finds a frowning Cuddy. There's no sign of House.

"Where is he?" he asks.

"He left," Cuddy says, tugging her pendant irritably as she looks down the street, presumably in the direction in which House departed. "What's going on here?"

So House didn't tell her that he, Wilson, intended to propose to her. Wilson supposes that he should be grateful for small mercies; he'll be spared the awkwardness of having to spend two days ignoring the elephant in the room. As long as Cuddy knows nothing about his aborted plans, there's no elephant.

"Nothing," he says, hoping that he looks convincing and innocent.

Cuddy's gaze is suspicious, but then it softens. "You don't look too good. Are you okay?"

"Yes. … No," he corrects himself belatedly. He'd do well to provide a credible explanation for his dampened mood. "The presentation didn't go as well as I expected. Well, hoped, rather than expected. Expecting it to go well when I didn't concentrate on preparing it would have been hubris. The research for this paper was a year old and I haven't done any new research since, so there were some critical questions that I couldn't answer satisfactorily."

As expected, that gets him Cuddy's sympathy and it forces her to focus her attention on the conference and his performance there, as opposed to House's presence in Paris. He's rambling on about his talk, yesterday's poster session, and whatever else enters his mind, when Cuddy suddenly yawns.

"Oops, sorry!" she says. "That's jet lag."

It's contagious, he finds. "Look, since you've eaten, would you mind if we called it a night? I'm finding the conference more tiring than I anticipated."

Cuddy assents at once, which would be mildly insulting if he weren't sure that she's eager to avoid being asked what the hell she's up to. She can't know that he'd rather not hear about it and that he certainly won't ask any questions.

A good night's sleep serves to restore his equilibrium. Matrimony with Cuddy, the outcome that he'd anticipated with so much certainty that he'd practically regarded it as a given, has receded on his personal horizon until it is no more than a hazy possibility. As he goes down to the breakfast room it strikes him that he'll have to show some interest in whatever is going on between House and Cuddy if he is not to arouse Cuddy's suspicions.
At breakfast he therefore asks Cuddy, "So, what's up with you and House?"

Cuddy smiles self-consciously. "I'm not sure," she says.

"Did I imagine his tongue down your throat?" Wilson can't help saying.

Cuddy pokes at her fruit salad. "So, he kissed me," she says. "Even when I knew him better, that could have meant anything from 'he wants to move in with me' to 'he's gonna run for the hills'. What it means now is anyone's guess."

Wait, House has been messing around with her without giving any indication of his intentions? And she's permitting that? Has everyone taken leave of their senses?

"Cuddy, what are you doing?" he can't help asking. "You're … playing with fire." The phrase is trite, but he's too dismayed to pay attention to matters of style.

"It was a holiday flirt," Cuddy says, "that's all. Don't blow this up out of all proportion."

"House isn't a charming Frenchman you met in a café; he's your ex."

Licking yoghurt off her spoon, Cuddy looks at him through her eyelashes. "And you've never started anything with an ex," she says.

"I've never pretended it was casual when it wasn't," he says seriously. "Cuddy, someone will get hurt."

"Don't worry about me; I can take care of myself."

"It's not you I'm worried about," he rejoins. She has survived two break-ups with House; there's no reason why she shouldn't survive a third one.

Cuddy nods thoughtfully. "Sorry, my mistake, thinking you'd worry about me when I was the one mauling Pete. Except …" She frowns in mock thought. "... he was mauling me."

"It looked mutual from my perspective," Wilson says.

Cuddy's coffee cup clatters back onto the saucer. "Fine, I was kissing him back. But I refuse to worry about something that's probably a storm in a teacup. And I absolutely refuse to be held responsible for Pete's actions; I don't know why he was doing what he was doing, but I didn't 'entice' him with my feminine wiles. I don't know anyone with greater self-control than Pete, and if he's flirting with me, then it's because he wants to." Throwing down her napkin, she gets up and stalks out.

Wilson sighs. His problem is, he knows something Cuddy doesn't know: however casual this 'holiday flirt' may seem to Cuddy, it's anything but. Perhaps Cuddy was lulled into behaving irresponsibly by jet lag, the city's romantic atmosphere, or you-name-it, but House's indiscretion was planned, triggered by his fear that Wilson will change things permanently by marrying Cuddy. House has gone all in so as to stop that from happening, but it's anyone's guess whether he has the consequences under control. He'll be in too deep before he knows it, and then there'll be unpleasantness and heartache and relapses and heaven-knows-what.

They spend the weekend tiptoeing around the issue. Sightseeing in Paris makes this easy: they push their way through the throngs at Montmartre (he gets Cuddy to sit for a portrait, saying that he needs a present for Rachel), allow the Louvre to overwhelm them (the Mona Lisa, Wilson feels, is overrated), picnic in the shade of the Eiffel Tower (no alcohol permitted, but since both of them
have to be abstinent, it doesn't matter), stroll through the Tuileries, and eat in restaurants that Wilson chooses based on the ratings on TripAdvisor. All things considered, Wilson feels that he has done a good job of hiding that this weekend hasn't gone the way he hoped.

He feels bad for Cuddy; although she pretends that she's emotionally uninvolved, he notices that she checks her phone surreptitiously for messages. When it rings, there's just a hint of anticipation in her features — which invariably fades when she takes the call. You have to know her well, like he does, to see it. When there's no message or call by Sunday afternoon, even Wilson is surprised. It's true that House has reached his short-term goal — ensuring that Cuddy remains unattached — by making sure that Wilson won't propose to Cuddy. Nevertheless, he must realise that neglecting Cuddy after getting her hopes up will piss her off, which in turn increases the danger that Cuddy will seek solace in someone else's arms — which is what House is trying to prevent, isn't he? In short, House's present behaviour is counterproductive to House's aims (though in Wilson's opinion it *is* conducive to his long-term well being).

When Cuddy glances at the screen of her phone one last time before they are due to board their flight, Wilson says gently, "You know how he is."

Cuddy nods, but some of trace of what he knows must be showing on his face, because she gives his elbow a sharp tug as they board the plane, pulling him up short. "Was this some kind of bet that you two had going?"

"Bet?"

"A *bet*: a puerile pastime in which the participants place money on different possible outcomes. There used to be a lot of that going on when both of you were at PPTH."

Wilson is struck speechless. (Besides, he needs a moment to smile politely at the flight attendant.) "You think House and I ...? What bet would that have been?"

"Whether I'm stupid enough to fall for his charms again." She slides into her seat, every square inch of her tense body screaming an accusation.

He's genuinely distressed. "God, Cuddy, no! Give me credit for a modicum of decency."

"I do," she says darkly. "But he rubs off on you."

She's closer to the truth than he cares to admit: maybe there was no open challenge, but House was bound to interpret his nuptial plans as a covert one.

"What makes you think he's toying with you?" he asks her.

She gives her seat belt a vicious tug. "He wasn't overpowered by a …" She rolls her free hand. "… 'spontaneous eruption of sentimentality'; the day was carefully choreographed. Which makes sense if he's trying to seduce me — or if he's messing with me. If it was the former, he'd have followed up by now."

"He could be sticking to the three-day rule."

"What's that?"

Wilson scratches his neck in embarrassment. "You're supposed to wait for three days before calling a woman with whom you've been on a date."

Cuddy's mouth literally drops open. Then she snaps it shut again. "That has to be the stupidest
dating rule that I've ever heard. Where'd you get that from, Barney Stinson's Playbook?"

Stupid? He has followed this rule (and a few others) for the past thirty years and he can say (in all modesty) that he's been more than moderately successful. "If a guy called any sooner than that, he'd appear desperate."

"Goodness, how dreadful! His date might believe that she means something to him, instead of being just another notch on his bedpost."

"Or he'd come across as a creepy stalker," he says.

She ponders this for a moment. "Okay, but I'm a sucker for creepy stalkers."

"Most women aren't," Wilson says.

"No, but Pete knows what I like. If he's letting me squirm with disappointment, then it's deliberate on his part."

"It has always been one step forward and then two steps back with him," Wilson points out. "In Princeton, he circled you for a long time before he closed in."

Cuddy worries the leaflet with the safety instructions, the one no one ever reads. "This … feels different. Then, if he got closer, it would be reluctant and awkward and spontaneous, like a pull he couldn't resist. This time it felt planned; he was doing the pulling, if that makes any sense."

Yes, it does. It's time to distract her before she gets too close to the truth. "Talking of pulling, did I tell you how we got stuck in the Catacombs and were pulled out by a drunk teen who puked all over House's shoes?"

It's an obvious ploy, but Cuddy allows herself to be distracted by his tale of sightseeing with House gone wrong: he, Wilson, had assumed that when House offered to take him to the Catacombs, he meant the official guided tour. He hadn't gotten suspicious when they'd met the guide, a haggard young man in worn clothes, in a relatively quiet residential area, nor had his bullshit alarm gone off when they'd entered the Catacombs via a quiet subway station, the sign on the metal door saying, *Entrée interdite aux personnes non autorisées.* After all, what did he know about how the French regulated the access to their tourist sites? Besides, since he hadn't made enquiries beforehand, the Catacombs not being on the list of sights he'd wanted to see with Cuddy, he didn't know that entry to the Catacombs was closely regulated and severely restricted. He discovered all that afterwards ...

It was only when they were deep inside the Catacombs, following their guide's flickering candle, which contributed enormously to the gothic atmosphere, but not to general visibility, that Wilson was rudely roused to face the true nature of their excursion. All of a sudden their guide interrupted his practically unintelligible monologue — his English wasn't hot — on the history of the chamber they were in and doused his candle, pressing them against the nearest wall. In the dark, two bright pinpoints of light advanced towards them from opposite side of the chamber. Their guide cursed, drew a small flashlight from his pocket, and took off in the direction that they'd come from, hissing at them to follow him.

They tried. But their guide was about half their age, had two whole legs, and no noticeable health issues. Now while House was not to be messed with when he wore his Ossur blade and ran along even ground, he was shaky on uneven ground and his 'everyday' prosthetic was no match for a real leg. Wilson, barely able to cope with the challenges of everyday white-collar life, didn't stand a chance of outrunning the specialists who guarded the Catacombs from intruders. Soon their guide's
flashlight faded in the distance, while they were left in the pitch dark — which grew less pitch-like
the closer their pursuers came.

Wilson had just resigned himself to being arrested for the third time in his life —

"What, the third time?" Cuddy interrupts.

"I'll tell you about the other two times the next time we come to Paris," Wilson promises.

Anyway, he was wondering about the French legal system, of which he'd heard that it had a de
facto presumption of guilt with the defendant having to prove his innocence, when House tripped
and stumbled into what appeared to be a small alcove. At the back there was a gap or hole — it
was difficult to say in the dark — down which they crawled as far as they could, which wasn't very
far. But it sufficed: their pursuers continued down the main corridor without spotting them. They
waited for five minutes before moving again. The problem was that it was only Wilson who
moved; House was stuck. He'd crawled down the hole head first as far as possible and then drawn
his legs up under his body, so that Wilson would be able to squeeze in too. This wouldn't have been
a problem if he possessed two whole legs, but his prosthesis wasn't as flexible as a real leg. In his
crouched position House couldn't get it to straighten, and with his leg under him he couldn't back
out. Nor could he unfasten the prosthesis: he was wedged in so tightly that he couldn't get his
fingers on the fastenings under his jeans, let alone remove the prosthesis. And no matter how hard
Wilson tugged, he couldn't get House out of the hole. House was wedged in like Winnie-the-Pooh
in Rabbit's hole.

Of course, their cell phones had no reception that far underground, and even if they had, whom
exactly could Wilson have called? He hoped their guide would come back to get them — if he
hadn't gotten caught or decided to call it a night. The guide had made a very shifty impression,
anyway.

They waited. And waited. It occurred to Wilson that this wasn't exactly Paris's main thoroughfare;
if things went badly and their guide didn't return to get them, they might have a very long wait
ahead of them. The only alternative was for Wilson to venture out to get help. The question was
whether he'd run into anyone before the flashlight function of his cell phone died on him, and
whether he'd find the way back if he did manage to get help.

The answer became obsolete when Wilson heard footsteps approaching them. At this point he was
beyond caring whether he was dealing with friend or foe, so he called out in every language he
knew. The footsteps belonged not to the security guards, but to a young cataphile (which is what
dedicated trespassers in the Catacombs call themselves) returning from an illegal party in the
depths of the Catacombs. Soon his headlamp illuminated House's rear end, while he argued with
Wilson in slurred French about how to extract House from his predicament. Finally they managed
to pry him loose, Wilson levering House's body up against the top of the recess while the youngster
tugged his legs out, puking all over House's trainers in the process. Not that Wilson was bothered
about House's lack of cleanliness; all he wanted was to get back to the hotel and fall into his bed.

When they finally exited through a manhole, Wilson gave the teen a generous wad of banknotes
and House slipped him a small plastic bag.

"He gave him drugs as a little 'thank you' gift?" Cuddy asks incredulously.

Wilson shrugs. "Apparently the deal with our original guide included weed. Since our rescuer did
all the heavy lifting, House felt he deserved it instead. It showed a greatness of spirit considering
that his shoes were ruined. Besides, the close encounter with the cataflics, the policemen who
patrol the catacombs, probably heightened his awareness of the dangers of being apprehended
while in the possession of cannabis. Believe it or not, he's not any keener to do time in a French prison than I am."

The little anecdote has relaxed and cheered Cuddy, and the meal that is now being served distracts her further. After the meal Wilson pretends to be tired, wraps himself in the thin blanket the airline provides, and turns away from her.

Air travel doesn't agree with him. He has weird, vivid dreams. He's back in the Catacombs, but they aren't dark. They are well lit and resemble hospital corridors more than anything else. He's pushing Joel's stroller, looking for the ossuaries, but he can't find them. Groups of youngsters are carousing in sitting areas, toasting him with their wine bottles as he passes. Suddenly he realises that he has lost the stroller with Joel in it. He can't remember leaving it anywhere, but he isn't pushing it anymore. He looks around. He's in a big cavern from which a tunnel branches off. Somehow he knows he has to go down that tunnel to find Joel, but he has to hurry. With that nightmarish slowness that is typical for his dreams he goes down the tunnel.

The people he passes don't have Joel — he can see that at once — and they don't seem to understand him when he asks whether they've seen a little boy. They keep pressing him to drink from their wine bottles; he knows he shouldn't though he can't remember why, so finally he takes a swig from a bottle, hoping that if he does what the cataphiles want, they'll help him. Suddenly everyone is pressing their wine bottles on him and he takes one drink after another, asking between each mouthful whether they've seen his little son. Still no one seems to understand him — except for one guy. He resembles their guide with his long, lanky hair and shifty expression.

'Have you seen my son?' he asks him directly.

'You took Lisa, so I'm taking the boy,' the man says. When Wilson looks at him again, he sees that the man is not the guide; it's House.

Wilson wakes with a stiff neck and drool on his chin. What a stupid dream! He's worried about Joel and he's got House's asinine behaviour towards Cuddy on his mind, but the idea that House would take Joel in lieu of Cuddy is plain ridiculous. House is no Rumpelstiltskin who'll saddle himself with a kid just to prove a point.

Julia has brought Rachel to the airport to pick them up. When Cuddy spots Rachel jiggling up and down in her wheelchair with excitement she rushes forward to embrace her. Wilson follows more slowly to give them a few moments of privacy, but when he reaches them Julia comes forward to hug him.

"Can I congratulate you?" she says expectantly, ignoring Wilson's warning glare.

Wilson fakes a coughing fit, but it's too late. Cuddy swings around and rises from her crouch, her face alight with suspicion. "For what?" she asks.

"A successful presentation," Wilson improvises, not daring to look at Julia. "No, you can't, because it wasn't successful. It was … uh …"

Julia picks up her cue. "You're just being modest, aren't you?" she says. "I'm sure it wasn't that bad. Maybe next time —"

"There won't be a next time," Wilson says with force. And for all it's worth, that applies to presenting papers and to marriage proposals.

Rachel talks non-stop all the way to Germantown, which saves Wilson the bother of further
evasions, but he can feel Cuddy's distrustful stare from the back seat where she's sitting with her daughter. And then he's back in the safety of his apartment with Joel in his arms, and suddenly it all doesn't matter anymore. He finds himself murmuring soothing words to his son, burying his nose in the softness of his cheeks and gently stroking over the fluff on his head.

"Arrh," Joel says.

"Yes, Daddy's back," Wilson croons, glad that House isn't here to shower him with ridicule.

Esther updates him on Joel's health in general and his progress in particular. He turned from his back onto his stomach all by himself on Thursday, but hasn't repeated the feat since. (Wilson can't help feeling a pang at having missed this milestone.) He greets his bottle with a loud gurgle of delight. (Wilson knows this; Joel did that already before he left for Paris.) He was restless at night. (That's definitely not news; Joel hasn't slept through a single night since moving to Philadelphia and odds are that he didn't do so before either.)

When Esther leaves, Wilson feeds and bathes Joel, and then reads a book to him, showing him the pictures — a complete waste of time, but his parenting guide insists that you can't start promoting literacy too early. So Wilson reads a story about a gluttonous caterpillar, wondering whether the beneficial effects on Joel's literacy won't be counteracted by a potential eating disorder. His own parents never read to him when he was young; on the rare occasion that his mother reminisces about his childhood, the gist is that when her sons were small she was in a permanent state of exhaustion. Wilson pauses in the middle of the story to think about his mother. He'd been born during an era when mothers were expected to fulfil their familial duties. What Amy did — passing the responsibility for her child on to someone else — wouldn't have been acceptable for a middle-class wife of his mother's generation, no matter whether she was coping or not. His mother was not a happy woman. Wilson can remember her smiling on occasion, but he can't remember her laughing or ever letting down her hair. In his childhood memories she's grey and flat, a part of the furnishings, but not a real flesh-and-blood figure. He puts down the book — today the caterpillar won't get its lollipop or the cupcake — and picks up Joel instead. He smiles at him, tosses him up to make him giggle, and laughs back at him. He doesn't know how much time he'll have with his son, maybe half a year, maybe twenty-five years, but he wants Joel to remember his father as a cheerful guy who enjoyed every minute he spent with him.

He manages to avoid an intimate conversation with Cuddy for another two days, but on the third day Cuddy invites him upstairs for dinner. It's all very relaxed while Rachel is around, but when she disappears to watch television and he's left in the kitchen with Cuddy and a cup of coffee, Cuddy gets down to the nitty-gritty with no further loss of time.

"I'm sorry," she says, sitting down across from him cradling her own cup.

"Huh?" There's just a tiny chance that she isn't talking about what he fears she's talking about.

"You were going to propose."

He looks down at his cup. "Julia told you," he surmises.

"I extracted the truth from her under threat of torture," Cuddy says. She taps her forehead with her fingers. "But I should have figured it out myself."

The silence between them stretches out uncomfortably. He risks a longer look at her; she's thoughtful, but not particularly put out. "You'd have shot me down anyway," he guesses.

She laughs. "No. Well, I don't know. But it's probably better this way."
He thinks of Joel, sleeping in Cuddy's guest room. "For whom?" he asks. "For me, for you, or for House?" Definitely not for Joel.

Her expression is pained. "For you," she says. "You deserve better. What I don't get is what he gets out of this. Did you tell him about your intentions?"

He's silent.

She sighs, resting her forehead in her hands. "Of course you did. And he decided to play dog in the manger. Great!"

Well, that's one way of looking at it, he supposes. He'd have thought that she'd prefer being the target of House's romantic-possessive interest to being the butt of his head games, but what does he know? She has a point: the last time House had gotten possessive it had ended with a car-sized hole in her dining room wall. "It's presumptuous, it's a tad creepy, and it's totally House. Are you surprised?"

She lets out a long puff of air. "No, but I am surprised that you're not bothered more. He wasn't messing with my head, he was messing with yours."

He's confused for a moment before he understands what she's getting at. "No, he wasn't messing with me. He was trying to protect his own interests. He wants to keep you."

She laughs, low and bitter. "Then he's going about it in a strange way. He hasn't answered my texts or my emails since we returned to Philly."

"He'll be here in two days; perhaps he thinks it'll keep till then. He's not a very regular correspondent or communicator."

Her head snaps up. "You're letting him come here even though he …?" She breaks off uncertainly.

"Exactly," Wilson says. "He didn't do anything. He flirted with you. That isn't a crime."

"You're okay with him flirting with me even though he knew what your intentions were?" she asks incredulously.

He considers his answer, turning the words over in his mind before uttering them. He doesn't want to hurt her feelings, but there's no sense in pretending to be more outraged than he really is. Besides, if she and House end up an item — which some higher power will hopefully prevent — then the fewer hard feelings that exist, the easier it'll be all round. He wants and needs to keep Cuddy in his life, if only for Joel's sake. If that means forgiving House for being really craptastic in communicating his fears, then so be it.

He says, "If we'd been dating, then it wouldn't have been okay — for you to flirt with him. But as it is …" He shrugs. "I can't be angry with him for showing me … where I stand."

Being noble and understanding is strenuous; he can feel a stress headache coming on. He massages the bridge of his nose in a futile attempt to stave it off. "I just wish he'd been more open when I asked him whether he was okay with us getting married. He insisted that he was, but I guess he wasn't."

"What, you asked his permission?" Cuddy rolls her eyes in despair.

"Well, yes." The tiredness that always accompanies his headaches sets in. "And honestly, he seemed fine with it. Not exactly supportive, maybe, but he was resigned. The only thing he was put
out about was Joel, but he has always been odd about you and kids."

Cuddy stills and tenses. "Joel? What do you mean?"

He flounders, because this part of the plan still stands, though he'd have preferred to break it to her in a more organised manner. "I, uh, mentioned to him that I'd like you to adopt Joel. He didn't approve of the idea. Believe it or not, he took up arms for the rights of birth parents." He scratches an eyebrow as a notion ripens in his mind. "Maybe he'd share you with me, but not with Joel. Remember how unmanageable he was when you first considered adopting a child? He turned your life into a living hell. This seems like a reprise of that situation; he has a bad case of sibling rivalry." It is unexpected, because House's reincarnation as Pete Barnes seems to accept Rachel with no qualms, but perhaps he fears infants more than bigger children.

"You told him that when we married, I'd adopt Joel," she summarises.

"Yes."

She's chewing her lower lip with a vengeance; he feels like telling her to stop it, but he's not her mother. Suddenly she rises, slamming her palms on the table. Her face is set in firm lines. "Wilson, this has nothing whatsoever to do with wanting to keep me for himself. This isn't about me at all."

"Then what is it about?"

She paces around the kitchen, stops to lean on the sink, moves on again to the fridge. Leaning against it she looks up at the ceiling. "It's about … oh, goddammit!" She thumps the fridge with her fists, then rubs her eyes with the balls of her hands. "This is so complicated!" She shakes her head as though to clear it. "I can't believe he did this! This is about you marrying, not about me."

She isn't making sense, and he's beginning to feel alarmed. "Uh, Cuddy? Would you care to explain it to me?"

She blinks at him as though recalling his presence. "No. … No, I really wouldn't." She pushes herself off the fridge. "I'm going to bed. Ask him when he comes."
In the days following his blitz visit to Paris Pete has ample time to regret having gone there. Messing with Wilson’s head when Wilson is custodian of his DNA carrier wasn’t a good move. Upsetting Lisa was a crappy idea, period, given that she knows whose son the brat really is. Besides, short-circuiting Wilson’s plan was unnecessary: proposing to someone isn’t the same as marrying them, so he should have waited and let the matter fizzle out. Even if Lisa was inclined to accept Wilson’s offer, lots of things could happen to disrupt their forthcoming nuptials. If he had given himself a little more time, he would have found a way to drive them apart without implicating himself in the process. But no, he had to lose his cool and do something stupid and traceable. Way to go, Pete!

He lies low, trying to assess the damage done. At the beginning of the week he gets a call (which he ignores) and two text messages from Lisa. He reads the text messages; they are short, giving little insight into the writer’s mind. Not even he can read much into a text that says, ‘You ok?’ At least she isn’t reviling or threatening him. Then, about two days after they returned to Philly, there’s complete communicative silence, not even broken by the weekly picture of Joel that she normally sends him on Wednesdays. That could mean anything; other than sending him pictures of Joel she doesn’t communicate with him unless it’s to update him on Wilson’s health. Since he has just seen Wilson, there’s no reason for her to get in touch with him, so chances are that all is well. She has probably written his kiss off as an aberration and is getting on with her life, which is something she’s good at (or so he tells himself). As for the Joel update, she knows that he will arrive within a week, so there’s no reason for her to spam him with pictures (except that she’s predictable and a woman of routine).

Wilson is a different matter altogether. Frosty silence from him for the greater part of a week, a silence that Pete doesn’t try to break. (Wilson is always the one to initiate communication, unless Pete wants something specific from Wilson.) Since he is completely off Pete’s radar, it’s difficult to assess just how pissed he is, but on a scale of one to ten Pete thinks it’s probably a seven. An eight isn’t warranted, not when there is no bodily injury involved, while anything below a six would have Wilson communicating his displeasure volubly. The day before Pete is due to leave for Philadelphia — and beginning to wonder whether he should cancel the trip and continue lying low until everyone has calmed down again — Wilson sends him a short email saying he’ll pick him up at the airport. So that’s okay, then.

At the airport Wilson’s greeting is curt, which is fair enough. He beckons to Pete to follow him and strides ahead, heading for a remote corner of the terminal that might or might not lead to the parking area — Pete is never really sure where the parking area is located. Then again, maybe Wilson wants to murder him and dispose of the body in an incinerator for unattended baggage.

Turns out that Wilson is targeting a coffee shop at the end of the terminal. He gets two cups of something sweet and foamy that masquerades as coffee. Thrusting one of the cups at Pete, Wilson gestures at a vacant table. A talk in a public place means that either Wilson wants witnesses or he doesn’t want him at the apartment. Pete revises his estimate of Wilson’s level of annoyance: it’s definitely an eight, if not a nine. But as long as he is feeding Pete, murder isn’t imminent.

“Peace?” Pete asks, saluting him with the cup.

“Truce,” Wilson answers coldly, “and only on my conditions.”

“You do realise that I saved you from a giant mistake,” Pete can’t help pointing out. “You don’t want to marry a woman who has the hots for your friend.”
Wilson’s hands fly up (thankfully without the coffee cup in them) and flap for a moment before thumping back on the table. “House, just … shut up and listen!”

Pete sits up very straight and mimes zipping his lips shut.

Wilson ignores him. “You’ll go and apologise to Cuddy.”

Whatever. Much good it’ll do her.

“And for the rest of your visit you’ll stay away from her.”

They’re on the same page: he’s planning to avoid Lisa as much as is humanly possible anyway, because he values his balls and Lisa would be well within her rights if she went for them. “I’ll be in my room making no noise and pretending I don’t exist,” he drones.

Wilson’s lips twitch slightly; Rachel has undoubtedly put him through all the Harry Potter movies multiple times. But then his expression grows grave again. “So you really don’t want a relationship of any sort with her. She said as much, but I thought she might be mistaken. You’re a bastard, you know,” he adds almost conversationally. His tone becomes business-like again. “You’ll go back to therapy. Two sessions a week while you’re here, to be continued when you get back to England.”

That’s so unexpected and so far beyond the back of Absurdistan that his mouth drops open. Literally. This time he isn’t acting up. Wilson sits back, waiting for his reaction, his verbal reaction. He clears his throat. “I’d want to do that because?”

Wilson has found his way back to his usual cool. “You don’t have to want it. You just have to do it.”

Indeed? “And if I don’t?”

“Then you get on the next flight to London.”

This is ridiculous. Flirting with his friend’s love interest is a violation of the bro code, not of the penal code. “You can’t make me,” he says. He sounds like a toddler, but who cares?

“Try me,” Wilson says with annoying calm. “I’ll inform security that you stalked your ex-girlfriend to Paris, threatened her, and managed to terrify her into submission. They’ll check your police record, and then you’ll be cooling off in a cell quicker than you can say ‘Domestic abuser’.”

He’s serious. He’s dead serious. He’s so serious that a little victorious smile plays on his lips. Pete is about to say that he’ll refute any fairy tale Wilson dishes up when Wilson adds, “Whom do you think they’ll believe, the guy with a history of violence and a criminal record or the settled oncologist whose friends will vouch for his integrity?”

Pete leans back. This is surreal; it’s turning into something from a psycho thriller. He’d like to scoot his chair back and look for an emergency exit; when the hell did Wilson turn into an unpredictable psychopath? “It was one kiss. Nothing else. Don’t you think you’re … overreacting?”

Wilson laughs unpleasantly. “This isn’t about what you did, it’s about why you did it. What did you do when I let you know that I wanted to marry Lisa? Instead of informing me how you felt about it and coming to some sort of understanding — and if I’d known it would upset you so much I’d have backed off, believe me! — you did everything in your power to woo her away from me. Do you realise that normal people don’t behave that way?”
His voice has risen, but when heads turn their way, he lowers it again. “What will you do if she
dates someone she likes or, God forbid, invites them in for a cup of coffee? Does she get slammed
up against walls again? Or should she invest in speed breakers in front of her house? Should I set
aside funds for an office refurbishment?” He pauses rhetorically, then points a finger at Pete. “You
don’t see yourself in any sort of relationship with her. That’s fine; I’d strongly advise against it too.
But you have to let her get on with her life. You can’t go berserk every time she looks at another
guy!” He rubs his forehead. “My God, she didn’t even look at me and you were already in a dither!
What do we do with you?”

Oh. … Okay. … He hadn’t really looked at it from Wilson’s perspective, or rather, from the
‘Wilson pre-amnesia’ perspective. “What was that about office refurbishment?” he asks, because
that reference is new.

Wilson, his rant over, is deflated. “What? Oh, that! You got mad at me once and smashed some of
the stuff in my office. It was … disturbing. Before that you shot a teenager straight in the stomach
with a spud gun. Two weeks later you …” He trails off, rolling his hand.

Pete gets the idea. How come no one has ever told him about the demolition spree or the spud gun
incident? “You’re worried I’ll turn abusive again,” he says.

“You’re showing all the early symptoms: you’re being obsessive, you’re stalking Cuddy, you’re
refusing to talk about how you feel, you’re messing with her love life.” Wilson stabs the table with
his index finger at every point he recounts. “We’ve been there before and I don’t need a reprise,
thank you!”

“You’re connecting the wrong dots,” Pete feels compelled to point out. He isn’t exactly fussy
about other people’s opinion of him, but the fact is that he isn’t losing it over Lisa, so he’d rather
not be painted into that corner. With his criminal record, he simply can’t afford it.

“Oh, yes? Then point me to the right ones,” Wilson says.

He could come clean and tell Wilson what his little manipulation was all about, but Wilson is in a
foul mood already. It’s not the ideal moment for a major game changer. Pete hasn’t really planned
his next steps, but mellowing Wilson before divulging the paternity of his supposed son is kind of a
given. Wilson is anything but mellowed at the moment, but hey, there’s time to spare: Pete hasn’t
set a date for the return flight. He intends to wait for a fitting moment (or create one, if need be) to
lead up to the revelation. That moment can’t come until he has shown Wilson that he, Pete, can be
a good father, but that he has no problems sharing if that’s what Wilson wants. In fact, he’d much
rather share: as far as children are concerned, he’s the poster boy for sharing. Finders are keepers,
and so on.

So, if he doesn’t want to let Wilson in on his dirty little secret right now, what options does he
have? Not very many; a show of cooperation is called for here.

“Oh, yes? Then point me to the right ones,” Wilson says.

Okay, so … I apologise to Lisa and attend therapy sessions. Got it. Though it’ll be difficult
finding a therapist at such short notice,” he points out hopefully.

Wilson raises an eyebrow. “You can have my appointments with Nolan. I’ve been seeing him
regularly ever since I took Joel; I’m sure he’ll agree to take you on instead while you’re here. Next
appointment is …” He makes a show of pulling out his cell and checking his calendar. “…
Thursday afternoon.”

Pete pulls out his phone in turn and pretends to note the appointment in his calendar. “Bit busy on
Thursday, but I think I can fit it in.”
“Wonderful!” Wilson says with fake enthusiasm. “Now that we’ve gotten the rules sorted, we can go.” He rises and tosses their cups into the trash.

Pete follows him out of the terminal and to the parking deck with mixed feelings. If Wilson is already getting his thong all in a twist, then Lisa with her history of PTSD could well prefer to stay away from him altogether. Maybe he should stay in a hotel or leave straightaway.

After a drive of some twenty minutes they come to a suburban neighbourhood with wide streets, stone colonials with red, white, or green shutters, and cast-iron lampposts. The front lawns are well kept, red maples and white ash flank the sidewalks. Pete gazes out of the window; Wilson still isn’t exactly a chatty Kathy, so there isn’t much else to do. Suddenly Wilson brakes and draws into a driveway. They come to a halt in front of a double garage with white wooden doors. The fieldstone colonial to which it belongs has multi-paned windows with matching white shutters and a decorative crown over the front door. A chimney rises along the right side gable; next to it an eastern redbud looms over the garage. The front lawn could do with a trim, but other than that the place looks neat — and uninhabited.

“You think this is a good neighbourhood to dispose of my corpse?” Pete asks.

“That’s the new place,” Wilson says. “The workmen are still fixing the bathroom. Lisa should be here, taking a look.”

“Uh,” Pete says, remaining seated.

Wilson, who has gotten out of the car already, walks over to the house’s front door. He raps neatly on the door, then extricates a key from his pocket and lets himself in. Pete gets out of the car slowly, as much out of curiosity as a desire to get this over with.

“Cuddy?” Wilson calls, standing in the open doorway.

Instead of Lisa, a workman appears, wiping his hands on his pants. “Dr Cuddy isn’t here,” he says. “Haven’t seen her today.”

“Oh,” Wilson says, nonplussed.

“She called saying she thought she was coming down with a bug. But we’re almost done, so maybe she should come and take a look,” the workman continues, looking at Wilson expectantly.

“Wait a sec,” Wilson says, pulling out his phone. “Cuddy? Sorry to disturb you, but I’m at the house. The workman says … Yes. … I had no idea … No. … Okay, I’ll take a look. … No, it’s no problem at all. … Sure. … Yes. … Yes, he’s here. Do you want to see him? He’d like to apologise. … Yes. … Okay. I’ll see you later.”

He puts his phone back into his pocket and gestures to the workman. “Dr Cuddy would like me to look at the bathroom.” They disappear inside the house.

Pete follows them into an entryway with hardwood flooring that’s partitioned off from the remainder of the first floor. There’s a stairway going upstairs and a door (white, of course) with a fanlight leading to the downstairs rooms. Through the door there’s a foyer that merges seamlessly into the living area — with fireplace, of course, and massive timber beams. It is partly furnished: shelves are up on the walls already, pictures are stacked on one side, and moving boxes are scattered around the room. He enters the room and opens one of the boxes. It contains books, while another box has wine glasses and whisky tumblers — non-essentials that Lisa can dispense with during the last days or weeks in the old apartment. He looks around, picturing the room furnished
and inhabited. It’s light and friendly, with double doors to a deck and a back yard with a lawn and a few large trees, and it makes him feel melancholy. This is a life that’ll never be his. He’ll always stay on the outside, looking in through a frosted window pane, envying others for the comforts they enjoy — family, security, routine — but unable to adapt himself to their lifestyle. He can hear the workmen and Wilson arguing off to the left, so he moves towards the right, through a doorway into a short corridor that opens onto a kitchen with morning room on one side and a small room, presumably a study or a guest room on the other. The kitchen has timber beams like the living area and is fitted with wooden cabinetry painted in a milky blue-green. He’s prepared to bet that the real estate agent praised it as a ‘colonial-inspired style with all modern amenities’. It’s spacious, though; he’ll grant that. Cooking there must be fun.

He drifts back through the house. There’s a bedroom opening off the foyer towards the street, a fairly small room that’s presumably meant for a child. He moves into it and looks around. Empty. There’s a bathroom next to it with ‘normal’ ceramics — presumably not the one that’s causing all the bother. So, is this going to be Lisa’s domain? Because if that’s the master bedroom then he hates to think how small the other bedroom must be. Deciding to check that out, he goes through the door on the left side of the foyer and stops short. This is the master bedroom, a room that would leave nothing to be desired — large, well-lit, facing out towards the back yard — if it weren’t decorated in white-and-purple striped wallpaper with a unicorn border all around and matching purple curtains. At present the only piece of furniture is a long low table, about six by four. He remembers seeing something similar, though smaller, in Rachel’s room in the Germantown apartment, stacked with whatever toys she happens to be playing with. He nods his approval; Rachel can’t play on the floor like other children. Giving her the master bedroom so she has enough table space and room to manoeuvre her wheelchair makes eminent sense.

There’s a door to the left of the one he came in through, and it’s from there that voices are raised in disagreement. He pops his head in through the door. The bathroom is large, as befits the one attached to the master bedroom, and it has been adjusted to Rachel’s needs much as the one in Germantown is: grab rails, lowered toilet, lowered washbasin, ‘drive-in’ shower. The bone of contention, the tiles above the washbasin, are visibly of a different hue than the other tiles in the bathroom; presumably those are the ones that had to be replaced after the washbasin was lowered.

Wilson looks irritated, the workmen look unhappy. “I’ll settle this with your boss,” he says to them.

Then he takes Pete’s arm and drags him out of the bathroom. “Cuddy is gonna freak,” he mutters. “The construction company couldn’t get matching tiles to replace the ones they ruined. Short of retiling the whole bathroom, which will take roughly two weeks and cost a mint, there’s nothing to be done.”

“Rachel won’t care,” Pete points out, “and no one else will want to use a bathroom with everything the wrong height.”

“Let’s hope Cuddy shares your perspective on the problem,” Wilson says. “Want to see the second floor?”

He nods; Wilson is eager to show him around and he is eager to humour Wilson. They go back to the entryway and up the stairs.

“The previous owners partitioned the second floor off for their daughter when she started college,” Wilson explains, “so the unit is self-contained.”

All the rooms have slanted ceilings, making the living space somewhat smaller than downstairs. Living and dining area are similar, with dormers at the windows to support the notion of
spaciousness, but the study/guest room has been halved to allow for more room for the kitchen, which doesn’t have an adjacent morning room. The apartment is even emptier than the downstairs one: no moving boxes here as yet and Wilson hasn’t put up curtains or brought over any knick-knacks, which could either be because he doesn’t possess any or because he has put them in storage.

“Here,” Wilson says proudly, pulling open one of the doors. It’s a bedroom, decorated in light green and the only room in the house that’s furnished. Evidently it’s meant to be the Scab’s room: matching nursery furniture in white wood, a border along the wall featuring jungle animals, a mobile hanging from the ceiling, a shelf with stuffed toys. Instead of getting furniture for himself, Wilson has gone all in for the kid. Well, why not? It’s not like he’ll have to eat off the floor as long as he can escape to Lisa’s place.

Wilson is waiting for a reaction, so Pete drawls, “Nice.”

“I’m going to install a swing set and a sandbox in the backyard. And a trampoline,” Wilson continues, undeterred by Pete’s lack of enthusiasm.

“I’m sure Rachel will enjoy those,” he says sarcastically.

Wilson raises an eyebrow. “There are high-backed swings for disabled children, and she can use the trampoline. In fact, the idea came from her physiotherapist.”

Oh, wow, he’s been dissed. He has noticed that Wilson has become more assertive lately, less of a pushover. That’s good for the kid, bad for Pete.

“We’ll need to fence in the back yard, but there’s no hurry.” Wilson precedes him down the stairs and out of the house. “Now that the bathroom is sorted, we’re set to move once Cuddy is back on her feet.”

“What’s with her?”

“I’m not sure,” Wilson says. “She was run down after we got back, but thought it was jet lag at first. It’s not letting up, so she thinks she might be coming down with something.”

“Symptoms?”

“Don’t,” Wilson says.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t objectify her by turning her into one of your patients.” Wilson stops in the doorway and squints into the setting sun. “She’s caught some virus or other and will have to stick it out.”

“You can’t know that.”

“No, but I do know that objectifying people helps you to distance yourself from your feelings. It doesn’t necessarily work out well for the people concerned.”

Looks like Wilson is still pissed. “And I’d want to distance myself from my feelings because, uh, I’m madly in love with her and in denial about it?”

“You’re not pining for her; you’re feeling guilty about messing with her. Don’t interfere with her health; it won’t make her get better and it won’t solve your problem.” He waits for Pete to join him outside before closing the door.
“I don’t have a problem.”

“Fine, you don’t have a problem.” Wilson says, not bothering to hide his disbelief. He pats the stone walls. “Solid stuff. Not like that flimsy shack in Princeton. This one won’t collapse during a hurricane. Perhaps a few tiles will come down, but that’ll be it.”

Pete opens his mouth and shuts it again. Wilson isn’t talking about hurricanes; he’s talking about cars.

“Why,” asks Wilson, walking over to the car, “does Cuddy seem to believe that your interference with my marriage plans has something to do with you,” he flicks his wrist to and fro between them, “and me?”

Pete’s heartbeat accelerates. What has Lisa told Wilson? She can’t have told him the whole truth, because if she had, they wouldn’t be making semi-polite conversation. Nevertheless, she must have dropped a few hints; at this rate it won’t be long before Wilson pieces the truth together. He moves towards the passenger door. “It’s that gay vibe coming off you,” he says.

“Huh,” Wilson says. He seems to be giving the diversion some serious consideration. He fastens his seatbelt and pulls out of the drive after checking the road in his rear mirror. “I’ve noticed that since getting Joel I’ve become more —”

“Feminine,” Pete supplies.


“Is that a Game of Thrones reference? ‘Cause I’ve stopped watching it — too many characters, too little sex.”

“I mean that when women see me with Joel they home in on me as though I was exuding a special kind of pheromone. I get showered with phone numbers like they’re confetti.”

“You’re being besieged by single moms looking for a dad for their kids. They see you as a fellow sufferer.”

“There’s a fair number of those, but there are women of all ages without kids and — surprise, surprise! — non-singles. Women,” he posits, “are subconsciously attracted to guys with kids. For years I took women out on expensive dates, was polite and considerate, made sure I was well-groomed — hey, once I even rented an expensive sports car to impress a chick! — when all I needed to do was borrow someone’s baby.” He grins conspiratorially. “If you apologise nicely to Cuddy, I’ll let you borrow Joel. But only for a few hours in the park,” he clarifies.

“You’d let me use your kid as bait?” Pete asks.

“I prefer ‘eye-catcher’. Trust me, after an afternoon out with my son, you’ll want to have one of your own.”

Pete grunts. “Keep your kid; just give me the phone numbers.”
Outed!

“Mo-om!”

Cuddy rolls over and squints at her alarm clock. Six p.m. Crap! She’d meant to take a short nap. She rubs her eyes and sits up. Rachel is in the doorway, glowering at her.

“Sorry, my alarm didn’t go off. Are you okay?” Cuddy asks.

“Your alarm went off an hour ago,” Rachel says. “You didn’t hear it. How long are you going to have jet lag?”

“Sorry,” Cuddy repeats.

This isn’t jet lag: if it was, she should have gotten over it within a few days. Instead, she’s feeling worse every day, worse in a way that feels vaguely familiar. She pushes that thought to the back of her mind; she can’t deal with it now. “You should have woken me. You’ve missed your Orff class, haven’t you?”

“Doesn’t matter; I can go next week,” Rachel says. Given half a chance, she’ll opt out of most of her extra-curricular activities. Instead of swimming in a group with other special needs kids she wants to ride; she dreams of dancing, not banging on a xylophone. Cuddy can sympathise with Rachel, but she won’t let her brood at home just because she can’t have what she wants. At least, most days she won’t allow it. Today she’s honestly too tired to care, so it’s a relief that it’s ‘only’ the Orff class that Rachel has missed.

“Have you packed some of your toys into the box I put in your room?”

“I’m hungry.”

“I guess that’s a no.” Cuddy rubs her forehead tiredly. They’re due to move at the next weekend — if the bathroom is done by then. Which it won’t be if she doesn’t get herself out to the house soon and kick the construction company into action. “Okay, I’ll see what I can fix for dinner.”

The fridge fails as a source of inspiration. “I could make … ”

She stares into the cavernous depths, trying to focus, but all she can think about is the silverware. She can’t do without it until they move, which means it’ll have to go with the last batch of things. She should make a list of things that she’ll need right till the end, she supposes. Pulling her head out of the fridge, she looks around for a notepad or a scrap of paper. There’s a magazine on the kitchen counter and some junk mail, but no notepad. Where is her notepad? She drifts towards the door, wondering whether it’s worth the bother. Maybe she should just leave it until she can concentrate better.

“Food, Mom,” Rachel says.

“Right,” Cuddy says. “Food.” She can’t focus on cooking when there’s so much to be done. “Shall I order pizza?”

After an astonished silence Rachel whoops with delight. “With lots of cheese, please.”

“Okay.” Ordering pizza isn’t that difficult. “Do we have …?” She riffls through the kitchen drawers.
“What are you looking for?” Rachel asks.

“One of those leaflets. You know, from a takeout.”

“You chucked Pete’s stuff when we started packing.”

There’d been piles of print-outs and other papers that Pete amassed when coming up with a treatment plan for Wilson, sports magazines, other magazines (that she’d deftly hidden from Rachel’s curious eyes), and all sorts of odds and ends, including leaflets from takeouts where Pete ordered when looking after Rachel. She’d figured they wouldn’t need Germantown takeout flyers after moving to Drexel, so she’d thrown everything in the trash.

She stands irresolutely in the kitchen. This, she tells herself, is a problem with a solution. She just needs a moment to come up with it. In theory, they could go out somewhere and eat, but in practice that would mean getting Rachel in and out of the car, and she doesn’t feel up to it. Besides, she’d have to get dressed, brush her hair, and put on some make-up …

“Can’t you Google some place with takeout?” Rachel asks.

“Yeah,” Cuddy says. “Yeah, I could do that.”

With Rachel’s help she finds a place nearby that’ll deliver in half an hour; their order reflects a balance between healthy eating and Rachel’s preferences that leans heavily in Rachel’s favour. She has barely put the phone down when it rings. It’s Wilson, calling from Drexel, with something about workmen and the bathroom. She should have checked on the bathroom yesterday, but she’d been too tired. Surely tiling a bathroom isn’t rocket science! It takes a few minutes to get Wilson to volunteer to take care of the problem — which is by far the best solution, because he’s out there already. Besides, the longer he’s out there, the longer the reprieve before she has to face Pete.

Now that she knows what game Pete was playing in Paris, she has no desire whatsoever to face him. How she’d been so obtuse as not to notice what he was up to is a mystery to her now. In hindsight, with additional information at her disposal, it’s easy to see where he was going when he flirted with her. She should have known that he’d never tempt her back into his orbit for her own sake. He is convinced that she should never, ever get involved with him again, so if he sweet-talks her, then it’s for some other purpose, for some greater good. She has come out of the affair looking like a moonstruck idiot and Wilson has gotten hurt. He isn’t moaning about it, but he is upset — if not for himself, then for Joel.

She would doubtless have refused his proposal: Wilson may choose to marry in order to safeguard the interests of his child, but that doesn’t mean that she is prepared to do the same. Besides, since she knows more than he does, namely that Joel isn’t his son, she can’t very well marry him and then adopt Joel under false pretences. Nevertheless, she’d have preferred to deal with Wilson on her own terms instead of having Pete humiliate both of them.

But that’s a minor glitch in her emotional system compared to how she feels about Pete using her. It hurts that he can’t be open and upfront with her. It hurts even more that he believes she’d adopt his son without his consent. What hurts most of all is that their friendship didn’t stop him from messing around with her feelings and playing with her heart.

She’d believed that they were okay. That saving Wilson together created a … not a relationship, but a bond or a pact. A non-aggression pact, or even a mutual assistance pact. But apparently Pete doesn’t see it that way. To him, theirs was a temporary alliance that he could — and did — terminate at will with no prior notice. She was never an ally; she is The Enemy, tolerated as long as she is needed, but not trusted.
She’s sick of it: sick of being appreciated as long as she’s performing and being dropped the moment she loses her usefulness or doesn’t fulfil expectations. She was Mom’s favourite daughter while her achievements were something to boast about: valedictorian, med school, dean at a ridiculously young age. But when her mother’s friends told tales of their successful sons-in-law and their talented grandchildren, she couldn’t compete anymore. She was PPTH’s darling as long as her leadership brought in donations and national renown; she was heir presumptive to the deanship at Philadelphia Central after curing their ailing Department of Family and Community Healthcare, but when her own health took a beating she was dropped like a hot potato. She was good enough to donate her liver to Pete’s friend, but now he has no use for her anymore …

And yet she’ll let him into the apartment, listen to whatever apology Wilson has brow-beaten him into proffering, and say that she’s fine, no harm done. She’ll do that because it’s easier that way: she’ll come out of the meeting with her pride intact, Wilson will be placated, and everything will go back to normal. Besides, there’s no alternative. She has nothing to gain if she takes a stand on this. Pete saved Wilson’s life and he’s the father of Wilson’s son. If she makes Wilson choose, he’ll choose Pete. Oh, he’ll be annoyed as hell and perhaps he won’t talk to Pete for a few days or months, but sooner or later he’ll cave. He always does.

Around eight p.m. there’s a knock on the door. Rachel, aware that Pete is expected in town, flips her wheelchair into reverse gear in the direction of the door. Cuddy instinctively rises to call her back and go to the door herself, but then she realises that Pete has come while Rachel is still up in order to use her as a buffer. Okay, he’ll get what he wants — but it’ll come at a price.

“It’s probably Pete, honey. Do you think you can entertain him while I, uh, take care of some packing?”

“Sure, Mom.”

While Rachel opens the door and greets Pete enthusiastically, she withdraws into her bedroom and stares at the packing boxes that are stacked in one corner. The voices — Rachel’s youthful lilt and Pete’s baritone rumble — move to the living room. She considers lying down again, but Rachel won’t be able to keep Pete in check forever. Now that he’s here, he’ll come in search of her sooner or later. So she gets up, pulls open her closet, and throws her clothes haphazardly into the top box, knowing that she’ll regret it when she has to unpack the boxes in her new home. Nevertheless, emptying her closet shelf by shelf is satisfying; at least she’s getting something done. It would make more sense to pack the remaining books or the crockery that she doesn’t need on a daily basis, but she’d need to leave the bedroom to do that.

She discovers a box of mementos at the bottom of her closet, mostly things she collected when Rachel was a baby, and is crouched on the floor immersed in them when the bedroom door opens.

“You gonna avoid me all night?”

She carefully replaces one of Rachel’s earliest drawings into the box before swinging around to face him. “Yes, that was the plan. That’s why I stayed here, where you were bound to find me.”

He gazes around the room — the open closet, the half-filled boxes — and then steps inside, moving to the nearest box and fingerling the contents.

“Keep your hands off of my stuff!”

He glances her way quickly before looking down again. “I … came to apologise,” he says.

“I’m aware of it. Apology accepted.” She’s aiming for an aura of ‘too busy to waste time on the
past’, but maybe she isn’t one hundred per cent convincing; his gaze is keen and searching. So she adds a bright smile.

He raises an eyebrow. “You’re still mad at me.”

Okay, so the smile was a total fail. “No,” she says in measured tones. “I’m not mad at you.” That’s the truth: she’s hurt, not mad. “I get why you did it. You’re worried that if Wilson gets married, you’ll lose control over your son.”

He looks over his shoulder, steps back to the door, and pulls it shut.

“Afraid to proclaim the truth?” she mocks.

“The truth is best administered in homeopathic doses,” he says, lowering himself onto the bed, “which isn’t Rachel’s strong point.”

“Nor is it yours. When are you telling Wilson about Joel?”

He shrugs. “The present moment lacks magic.”

She takes a deep breath. “Look, this is going to keep happening.”

“What, Wilson proposing to random women?”

Random, huh? She opts to ignore the insult. “Yes. Either that, or Amy claims Joel again.” Or Wilson dies. “If you want to be in Joel’s life, you need to —”

“Who says I want to be in the kid’s life? Perhaps I just don’t want you in it.”

She rocks back on her heels, shaking her head. “Why am I even surprised?” she says more to herself than to him. Of course he’s going to avoid the problem for as long as possible. Thing is, his take on how long that could be differs from hers. He’ll do as he pleases, while Wilson, Joel, and she herself draw the short straw. “Okay, I don’t care what you want. If you don’t tell Wilson what’s going on —”

“Nothing is going on!” Pete insists (predictably).

“… then I will.”

He rises to loom over her. “Are you threatening me?”

She folds her arms in front of her chest. “I’m telling you how this will go.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“You should have thought of that before you started messing with me. Now it is my business, and I’m under no obligation to put up with the games you play.” He doesn’t contradict her, which she takes to be a good sign. “You have twenty-four hours to tell him the truth; that’s nine o’clock tomorrow evening. If you haven’t told Wilson by then, I’ll tell him.”

When his lips tighten she feels a twinge of satisfaction. She has finally gotten his goat. But then he smiles. “You wouldn’t do that,” he says.

She rises to face him. “I wouldn’t?”

He tips his head to one side in contemplation. “No, you wouldn’t. You don’t want to cause a rift
between Wilson and me. Nor will you do anything that is detrimental to the kid’s well-being.”

She has had enough! When he manipulates people, he banks on them playing the game according to a predictable pattern, sticking to the rules that society and morals dictate, while he interprets those rules as he pleases. He’s expecting her to fold or to call, but not to raise. Well, not this time, because although she doesn’t have a good hand, his is even worse. She tosses the memento in her hand (Rachel’s first shoes) onto the bed and pushes past him.

“You’re bluffing!” he calls after her.

Oh no, she isn’t! She takes the stairs, because it’s quicker than waiting for the elevator. Downstairs she rings the bell; she forgot her key to Wilson’s apartment at her place. Wilson opens the door with Joel on his arm and an expectant expression, but when he sees her, his face falls. “Come in. Did he screw up the apology?”

“You could say that,” she says. She hasn’t prepared what she wants to say, but her anger fuels her tongue. “Wilson, you know how I said that House messing with us wasn’t related to me in any way?”

“Yes. I still think you’re wrong. He’s —”

“It is related to me insofar as you were planning for me to adopt Joel.” She holds up a hand to silence Wilson, who is probably about to expound his ‘sibling jealousy’ theory again. Pete is bound to turn up soon, and she needs to say her lines before he does. “He doesn’t want that because Joel is his son, not yours.”

Wilson’s mouth drops open and then shuts again. His glance flickers from her to Joel and back again. “Uh,” he says. Then, after a moment, he flaps his free hand in denial. “That’s … no. No, no! He’s messing with you, Cuddy. He didn’t even know Amy before —”

Cuddy considers explaining what happened, but decides that the story is too convoluted for a short summary. Besides, how Pete did it is of no significance. “Ask him,” she says instead, “and do a paternity test for good measure.”

Wilson’s eyes are focused on a spot behind her. She doesn’t need to turn around to know that Pete has caught up with her. “Is any of this true?” Wilson asks Pete. There’s no reply, but from the way Wilson’s features slacken she can tell that Pete’s demeanour confirms her words.

“You couldn’t keep your trap shut, could you?” Pete says.

Cuddy whirls around. “Go ahead, blame me,” she snaps at him.

There’s a squawk from Wilson. He must have tightened his grasp on Joel, because Joel is squirming in his arm, pushing against Wilson’s face with the palm of one hand. Cuddy steps forward, holding out her arms. “Shall I take him?”

Wilson takes a step backwards, half turning away from them. “No!”

“Relax, I’m not gonna take him away from you. You can keep him,” Pete says.

Cuddy digs her elbow in his ribs.

“What?” he says, looking down at her in astonishment. “He’s worried that I’ll abscond with the little pooper, which I have no intention of doing. He can keep him for as long as he likes.”
Cuddy mentally face-palms. Maybe Pete is trying for ‘reassuring and conciliatory’, but he’s coming across as ‘uncaring’.

“You tricked me into getting chemo treatment by pretending that Amy was pregnant,” Wilson says in a flat monotone.

“Not by ‘pretending’, by getting her pregnant,” Pete corrects him. “Pretence seemed risky; I figured you might administer a pregnancy test yourself before agreeing to chemo therapy, given her history of false alarms.”

Cuddy sighs and rubs her forehead. She wishes Pete would show the slightest indication of guilt or remorse, but now that he’s immersed in the technicalities of his clever little plan, he is distancing himself from the emotional aspect. He’s even slightly boastful. What an immature brat he is! All it needs is for him to crow how clever he is.

“Nice,” Wilson says in the same tone as before. “What made you believe a child would change my mind?”

“Married three times before the age of forty,” Pete says, “to women in the best child-bearing years. You were practically begging for the patter of little feet in the hallway. You were lucky your marriages never lasted long enough for little Jimmies to materialise.”

“Lucky,” Wilson echoes.

Perhaps Pete realises that he’s put his foot in it multiple times, because he holds his peace for a change. When Wilson makes no further comment Pete asks, “Can we take this inside?”

“What for?”

“So … I can, uh, apologise?” Pete says, sounding uncertain for the first time. So he has finally, finally understood what he has done! Cuddy exhales, only now noticing that she’s been holding her breath. Her legs feel like jelly, her hands are shaking. She feels every year of her age dragging her down like weights attached to her waist. She’s getting too old for Pete’s shenanigans.

Wilson turns around and disappears into the apartment, leaving the door open behind him. Pete hesitates, then trails behind him. Before Cuddy can follow him, he demonstratively slams the door in her face. That’s okay, she decides. She has had enough for one evening; let those two fight it out! They’ll settle the matter with one of their absurd male bonding rituals.

She’s barely been back upstairs for five minutes when her front door slams. It’s Pete, looking grumpy. “What do you want?” Then she sees his bag. “Oh, no!”

“He kicked me out. He went inside, got my things, and dumped them outside the door.”

“Where is he? Did you leave him alone?”

“I didn’t leave him; he kicked me out,” Pete says, getting louder and enunciating each word separately.

Cuddy feels gloom descending on her. “And you let him? Idiot!” The one time that Pete should stay obstinate and not listen to Wilson, he actually does as he’s told!

Pete scratches his cheek. “He wouldn’t see it rationally. Got all pissy.”

“Well, you’re not staying here. I’m feeling pissy too.” She’s even more annoyed at him than before
she marched downstairs — if that is even possible. Even his kicked puppy look (which isn’t fake for a change) doesn’t placate her. She’s going to have to go down and sort this out, because he, the guy with the gift of the gab when he so chooses, can’t manage a decent or even a half-assed apology. Oh, for crying out loud! What she wants is an early night so that she won’t feel like death warmed over tomorrow; what she needs is a cup of good, strong tea; what she’s going to get is a few hours at Wilson’s kitchen table, talking him through this so that he doesn’t throw a pity party. She should have waited till morning to spring this on Wilson, but knowing what to do is always easier in hindsight. (And it’s a lot easier to keep your temper when you aren’t dead on your feet.)

She holds the door open for Pete. “Out! I’ll fix this for you, but that doesn’t mean I’m putting up with you. I have better things to do than to pamper you. Or are you volunteering to help me pack up my belongings?”

In answer he picks up his bag.

“I thought not,” she mutters as he departs.

After checking on Rachel (who is still awake, reading in her bed) and telling her where she’s going, she ventures downstairs for the second time. She listens outside the apartment door: she can hear Joel screaming, but it’s muted. Joel must be in his bedroom at the other end of the apartment. First she knocks, then she rings the bell. There’s no reaction; maybe Wilson is with Joel and can’t hear her. So she gets out her key to his apartment to open the door, but although it turns in the lock, she can’t get the door to open. Wilson must have bolted it from the inside. He never does that, because he takes naps whenever he gets an opportunity, preferring not to be disturbed if she swings by to drop off groceries or bring him a meal.

She raps on the door again and calls his name, in a low tone at first, but more insistently when there’s no response whatsoever. Then she goes out onto the sidewalk and peers at the windows facing the street. It’s dark outside by now, but there’s no sign of light from Wilson’s apartment. If Wilson is in there, then he’s sitting in the dark. She pulls out her cell and tries to call him, first the landline, then his cell phone. Both go to voicemail.

“Crap!” she says and goes back inside. Joel is still bawling. What on earth is Wilson doing in the dark? A shiver of realisation runs down her back: he’s probably drinking. How could she forget that he’s an alcoholic? She rings his doorbell again, pressing the bell button while she counts to fifty.

That finally provokes a reaction. “Go away!” Wilson calls from inside.

“Open the door and let me take care of Joel,” she answers.

She listens for his reply, but all she can hear are odd scraping sounds on the inside. It sounds as though he’s doing something to the wall. She rattles the doorknob.

“Open up, Wilson. Someone needs to see to Joel,” she repeats.

When she presses her ear against the door she hears a door inside the apartment open and then slam shut. So Wilson isn’t going to open the door. When she tries to ring the doorbell again, she realises what he has just been doing: he has disconnected the doorbell. She considers her options. She could call the caretaker and ask him to break down the door, but if Wilson shows signs of life before the door is open, the caretaker will refuse. She pulls out her cell and calls Pete’s number, but his phone goes to voicemail, just like Wilson’s.

She has Dr Nolan’s numbers, both the office one and his private cell (for emergencies), and after a
moment’s consideration she calls him.

“Dr Cuddy? What has happened?”

She opts for the nutshell version of the evening’s happenings. “Wilson has locked himself into his apartment. He isn’t answering the door or the phone, and I can’t get in. I think he’s drinking.”

Nolan is brisk and to the point. “Do you have reason to believe he’ll harm himself?”

She considers the question. “I … don’t know. But Joel is in there — the baby.” She can’t bring herself to say, ‘his son’. “And as far as I can make out, he isn’t looking after him. Joel is screaming his head off. Normally Wilson carries him around the apartment and sings to him when he’s restless.”

“Okay,” Nolan says. “Where are you?”

Cuddy isn’t sure she understands the question. “I’m in front of the door to his apartment.”

“Can you hear Joel?”

“Yes.”

“Can you hear or see Wilson?”

“No. I’ve been out on the sidewalk in front of the house, and there’s no sign of him from there either.”

“Okay. Stay where you are, please. If anything changes — if you stop hearing Joel or you have reason to believe that Wilson is doing something to endanger himself or the child — then please call the police at once. I’ll be over as soon as possible; I estimate it’ll take me about half an hour.”

After disconnecting the call Cuddy sinks down on the doormat with her head resting sideways against the door so that her ear is pressed against the leaf. Other than Joel’s screams there is no sound from within: no television, no footsteps, nothing. The guy living on the third floor, traversing the hall on his way out, looks at her curiously but he asks no questions. The headlamps of occasional cars passing by outside send streaks of light along the otherwise dark hallway. A television blares on the second floor; the smell of cooking wafts down the stairs. Joel’s screams die down. Cuddy sits up and stiffens. There’s relative silence for about half a minute, only broken by snatches of voices from the street, but just as she’s about to pull out her cell and call the police, Joel gets going again. He’s probably hungry.

When Nolan arrives less than twenty minutes after the phone call, Cuddy struggles to her feet and shakes the hand he holds out. She probably looks a sight, but she’s beyond caring.

“What happened?” Nolan asks.

She decides that Wilson can tell him the details, so she only says, “He found out that he isn’t Joel’s father.”

Nolan’s reaction isn’t quite what she expected. “He has suspected that to be the case all along.”

“Oh.” She drags a hand through her hair. “I didn’t realise that.”

“So, what changed? Has Joel’s birth father claimed him?”

A brief explanation is called for. “It’s Pete.” Nolan looks at her blankly. “He’s the father. … You
know, *House.*”

Nolan stares at her. “You’re kidding.”

She wishes! “No. He did it so Amy would pressure Wilson into getting treatment for his thymoma. It worked, so …”

“I don’t understand,” Nolan says.

Cuddy rubs her forehead with the back of her hand. She doesn’t want to think about this; she just wants Wilson in safe hands. “He figured Wilson would consent to treatment if he had an incentive to stay alive, so he conned Amy — Joel’s mother — into getting pregnant. He didn’t consider the ramifications of passing his own child off as Wilson’s.”

“And today he told Wilson.”

“I told Wilson,” Cuddy clarifies. “We had an agreement that he’d tell Wilson when he came this time, but he chickened out, so I took the matter into my hands. It … it wasn’t good timing, I guess, but I lost my temper.”

“So you were in on this deception.” Nolan doesn’t try to hide his disapproval.

“I found out about five weeks ago, the last time Pete … House was here. That was when Wilson got custody for Joel. It was all so sudden and confusing. … Anyway, before House left he promised he’d own up, but now …” She trails off.

“Where is Greg now?” Nolan asks.

“I don’t know. Wilson kicked him out, and I didn’t want him at my place either.”

Nolan receives this last piece of information with a raised eyebrow, but Cuddy decides that she owes him no explanation for her treatment of Pete. Then he turns towards the door and tries to ring the doorbell.

“It’s no use; he has disconnected it,” Cuddy informs him.

“Okay.” Nolan steps back and scans the door from top to bottom. “I assume he isn’t responding to knocks either.”

Cuddy shakes her head.

Nolan moves about three yards away from the door before taking brisk steps towards it, ramming it with his shoulder when he reaches it. The door shakes, resonating, but doesn’t give way. When he moves back to repeat the procedure, Cuddy says, “Are you sure …?”

“You got a better idea?” Nolan says just before his shoulder collides with the door again. The door, made of solid, durable wood, shows no sign of giving way, but the din is impressive, as will be the bruise that must be forming on Nolan’s shoulder. After repeating the procedure a third time, he calls, “James? Are you going to open the door? Because this was the ‘light’ version. If you don’t open up, I’ll take a proper run, and then the bolt will give way.”

There’s silence on the other side, and then the sound of the bolt being removed and the door being unlocked. Wilson, dishevelled and bleary-eyed, his shirt hanging out and his feet bare, stands in the doorway glaring at Nolan.
“James,” Nolan says. “I was worried about you.”


“Can we talk about this?” Nolan asks.

“There is no ‘this’,” Wilson replies. “I had an altercation with House, that’s all. I’m not drinking, in case you were wondering.”

“That’s great,” Nolan says, and it sounds as though he means it.

“No liquor in the place, and I didn’t want to leave Joel alone,” Wilson admits.

“Still great,” Nolan responds. “You had a choice and you made the right call. Now, since you’ve admitted you were tempted, can we go inside and talk about it?”

Wilson hesitates, then he nods, standing aside to let Nolan enter. Cuddy wants to follow them to get Joel, but Nolan blocks her way when he notices.

“Go inside,” he says to Wilson. “I need a moment with Dr Cuddy.” He steps outside again while Wilson disappears down the entryway.

“What about Joel?” she asks.

“Between James and myself, I’m sure we will manage,” Nolan says, his voice now devoid of the friendliness with which he greeted Wilson. “Find Greg.” It’s an order, not a request.

“Sorry?” She doesn’t want to deal with Pete; she contacted Nolan because she was worried about Wilson and Joel, not because she wanted to get sucked any further into the vortex of Pete’s machinations. In fact, she’d told Wilson about Joel precisely in order to put an end to her involvement in them.

“Wilson isn’t the only addict in danger of a relapse,” Nolan says in the manner of someone spelling out the obvious.

She’s not in the mood to play minion to Nolan or babysitter for Pete. “So?”

“Dr Cuddy, you interfered in something that wasn’t your business. What concern of yours was it whether or when Greg told James about the boy’s paternity? You precipitated this showdown so that you wouldn’t be accessory to what you consider a deception. Didn’t it strike you that openness might result in a worse state of affairs than an on-going deception?”

Wait, he’s blaming her? Pete screws Wilson over royally and plays with her peace of mind, but his therapist decides that she’s the culprit? Wonderful!

Of course she’d wondered whether Wilson would benefit from knowing that Joel wasn’t his son as long as Pete wasn’t prepared to take over as father. Seen from a short term perspective, Wilson would be better off stewing in blissful ignorance, but — the matter would only have gotten more complicated the longer he remained in the dark. Take, for example, this idea of his that he and she should marry: he’d never have had it if he hadn’t wanted a mother for his son. Had he known that Joel was Pete’s kid, he’d have left well alone. As for Pete, his ploys for keeping his fatherhood a secret while maintaining a grip on his son would only have gotten more and more convoluted. This time, they were lucky: she was the only one who got hurt. Next time, they mightn’t be so lucky. Next time, Wilson might actually be in love with his future bride.
She stares at Nolan angrily, her lips incapable of uttering the complex chain of thoughts going through her head. Besides, she doesn’t owe him an explanation. What happened between Pete and her is none of his business, regardless of how it influenced her actions. So all she says is, “He isn’t answering his phone.”

“Keep trying,” he instructs her.

“Sure,” she mutters, rolling her eyes as she turns away.

Nevertheless, she tries calling Pete at ever lengthening intervals, in between putting Rachel to bed and trying to get some more packing done. What Nolan said about Wilson not being the only addict struck a chord: she’d rather not be held responsible for Pete’s third relapse. Wilson holds her responsible for Pete’s first one and not quite innocent of the second one, although her personal jury is still out on that one …

Around midnight, when, giving up hope, she goes to brush her teeth, her phone rings. It’s Pete’s number, but when she picks it up the voice at the other end asking whether he’s talking to ‘Lisa’ is that of a stranger. Her heart misses a beat while her overwrought mind paints ten different scenarios of disaster in a matter of milliseconds. But his next words disabuse her mind of all notions of accidents, muggings, or overdoses.

“Desire Gentlemen’s Club, ma’am. We’ve got a guy here who needs to be picked up.”
After Midnight, ...

Pete is sitting at the bar twiddling his thumbs — or rather, spinning the credit card that caused all this bother — when the tilt of the bartender’s head alerts him to Lisa’s arrival. She’s magnificent when she’s on the warpath, even at one a.m. when she’s had too little notice to freshen up her war paint. Her hair is tied back in a tight ponytail, but she has put on a business suit and a low cut blouse that bodes ill for whoever she’s declaring war on. He hopes it’ll be the bartender, not himself.

She ignores him as completely as she does the pole dancers, fixing the bartender with a hard stare instead. “Next time, call him a taxi, will you?”

“He isn’t drunk; he can’t pay, is all.”

“If he can’t pay, make him rinse glasses or mop the floor,” she says.

“I *can* pay,” Pete says, aggrieved, flourishing the credit card.

The junior manager — probably recently promoted from the position of bouncer — materialises at the bartender’s elbow, snatches the credit card from his fingers, and coughs in a manner that is probably supposed to be reminiscent of an English butler, but sounds more like a walrus with laryngitis. “He has a credit card issued to a certain … Gregory House, but he signed as …” He pulls a print-out from his pocket and slides it over to Lisa. “… P. Barnes. Looks like credit card fraud to me.”

“Then why didn’t you call the police?” Lisa asks pointedly.

The junior manager puts on a smarmy expression. “Because he produced a driver’s licence issued to ‘Gregory House’ and the picture looks a little like him. We didn’t want to involve him in any unnecessary unpleasantness.”

“You don’t want the cops checking out your back room for what goes on in there,” Pete mutters. The place has a sleazy air and some of the dancers have indicated that they’d be prepared to ‘go further’ if they were given the right incentive.

“Keep out of this!” It’s not advice; it’s an order, and Lisa reinforces it by holding out her hand. He looks at it stupidly until she says, “Driver’s licence.”

He hands it over. She takes a quick look at the picture — taken a mere nine months ago, when he finally obtained a *bona fide* driver’s licence — and levels a glare at the manager. “A little? You’ve got to be kidding! It’s definitely him.”

The bartender and the junior manager look at each other sheepishly. “Then why did he sign as ‘Barnes’ instead of ‘House’?” the bartender asks in a last-ditch stand.

Lisa casts a furtive look around, and then she leans confidingly over the bar, exposing a lot of cleavage and the top of a lacy bra.

“He’s in a witness protection programme,” she breathes at the bartender (the name stitched on his T-shirt identifies him as ‘Sam’), whose eyes are glued to the hilly vista in front of his nose. “Used to be private physician to the head of a Columbian drug syndicate. Saw too much, heard too much, talked too much, so they cut off his leg as a warning.” She taps his prosthetic, letting them hear the hollow echo. “They were considering cutting off more, higher up …” She nods at his groin. “… so
we organised a new identity for him. But when he’s drunk, he forgets and uses his old name.”

The story is so improbable that the two idiots buy it.

“Now sign the receipt,” Lisa instructs him, “and then we can go.”

“Excuse me,” the junior manager says, “but we’d rather have cash.”

When Lisa lifts an incredulous eyebrow at him he hurries to explain, “That credit card has, um, issues. Mr Barnes — sorry, House — has issues. This establishment would rather not get involved with the Columbian drug mafia. Besides, most of our patrons pay for their drinks in cash.”

Well yeah, they don’t want their wives blowing their tops when the credit card statement arrives in the mail. He doesn’t have that problem. He shrugs at Lisa apologetically.

“Seriously?” she asks. “You don’t have enough cash to pay your bill here?” She turns to the bartender. “How much does he owe you?”

“Ninety-six dollars.”

He does a neat little trick, making his credit card disappear up his sleeve and reappear out of her ear when he reaches up there. She’s not amused.

“What exactly am I paying for with my ninety-six dollars?” she asks acidly, glancing at the dancers.

“Dances are strictly cash, so only his drinks,” ‘Sam’ says. “Then there was a few drinks for the young ladies over there.” He nods towards a table a few yards away, where two young dancers are sitting, observing the scene and giggling. They turn away when they catch Lisa staring at them.

Lisa’s face hardens, but not before he catches a glimpse of hurt flutter across it.

“A paternal gesture?” she says. “How sweet! But are they even old enough to drink legally?” She turns back to the bartender. “What else?”

“He threw a round for everyone at the bar.”

She subjects the bartender to another incredulous look coupled with ironically raised eyebrow.

“You poured drinks worth ninety-six dollars without checking his financial status or his credit card?”

“He’s been here before, and we’ve never had any problems with him.” Translated into plain-speak that means that he gives good tips. “Besides, he paid for the lap dances and tipped when he was at the rack, so we assumed that he had enough cash.”

Lisa digs in her purse, slaps the money down on the bar, takes his elbow, and propels him out of the place. He isn’t exactly sad to leave; had they let him pay with his credit card, he’d have been out of there an hour ago. Not a word from her as she stalks to the car and slides into the driver’s seat. He gets in beside her. When he reaches for the radio — the silence between them is frosty — she slaps his hand away.

“If you want to walk, just say so.”

He tries to explain himself. “I tried to phone Wilson, but he —”

“You what?” She brakes in the act of pulling away from the curb.
She gets called out of bed at one a.m., she has to pay a whopping bill for him, and all she’s bothered about is that he could have disturbed Wilson’s beauty sleep? Okay, Wilson is as mad at him as she is, but from the looks of it he’ll come round faster.

“Didn’t think you’d want to come and get me,” he says.

The driver behind them flashes his lights. Giving him an irritated wave Lisa pulls into the lane. “I didn’t, but a midnight pick-up is the last thing Wilson needs. I thought you read your Mayfield records. Didn’t they say that Amber — his girlfriend — was killed after she picked you up from a bar? You think Wilson needs to be reminded of that?” Her voice reverberates in the confines of the car.

He hadn’t thought of that. How could he, when it was but one among a multitude of stories in the folders that he read while at Mayfield? A memorable story to be sure, but one that made little sense. He hadn’t killed the woman, hadn’t even wished her ill, and there had been no connection between him needing a ride home because he’d gotten drunk and her getting killed by a garbage truck. True, she hadn’t deserved it, but you didn’t get what you deserved. You got what you got. Anyway, today he isn’t drunk. He is, unfortunately, pretty sober, and he wouldn’t have needed a financial boost if those morons at the strip club hadn’t been such douche bags.

“And that makes you feel better, to go to your death instead of sending him?” he can’t help querying.

“No. It makes me feel better to know you’ll be irritating me, not him. Now shut up before I make you walk.”

“Why don’t you?” So far, he hasn’t been able to figure out why she came to get him.

“Because Nolan is here and he wants to see you — alive.”

His stomach clenches. He can avoid Wilson and piss Lisa off until she’s so mad that she won’t talk to him anymore, but Nolan is a different case altogether. Not being involved, Nolan won’t get provoked the way Lisa and Wilson do, which will make diverting him from the issue a difficult undertaking. Besides, it’s practically a given that Nolan will be on Wilson’s side: Wilson is still his patient while he, Pete, isn’t.

So, who’s on Joel’s side? the ‘Wilson’ part of his brain asks.

Joel gets what he gets, he answers himself impatiently. At the moment this isn’t about the kid; this about a set of adults getting hung up over a ‘situation’ that isn’t all that bad. It has had a few bad-hair days — for instance, when Amy decided to change the game — but other than that it was stable until Lisa decided to make it crash.

So he says, “What if I don’t want to see Nolan?”

“I couldn’t care less.” A red traffic light makes her brake hard, so that he’s flung forward almost through the windscreen. When he has recovered he reaches for the seat belt. Her driving tonight leaves something to be desired; it is sadly reminiscent of his first few attempts at driving with a prosthetic. Perhaps he should just shut up and let her concentrate.

She continues speaking as though nothing untoward has occurred, “You might want to keep in mind that at the moment Nolan is the only friend you have on this side of the Atlantic.”

Oh, snap!
He’s silent the remainder of the journey back, thinking about Wilson, getting drunk in bars, dying girlfriends, and other imponderables, until they draw up outside her apartment block. “Thanks,” he says awkwardly.

“Huh?”

“For coming when I called. And helping.”

She stares straight ahead of her. Then she gets out of the car without acknowledging his apology. It’ll take more than words to fix this, which is why he doesn’t believe in words. They’re useless, empty, interchangeable. He follows her inside the building and lingers in the hallway, wondering what to do. It’s almost two a.m. Lisa, waiting for the elevator, finally takes notice of him again.

“Go and knock,” she instructs him. “Wilson has disconnected the bell, and even if it was working, he’d murder you if you woke Joel.”

So he knocks on the door. Nolan opens it within seconds. “Ah, Greg. Excellent! I was getting worried about you.”

He is subjected to a quick but thorough scrutiny; no doubt Nolan is checking for signs of drug use, senseless violence, etc. “I’m fine.”

“Good!” If Nolan doesn’t believe him, it doesn’t show. He steps out of Wilson’s apartment, closing the door behind him. “Now, how do we best handle this?”

Pete allows his eyes to wander around the hallway, gliding over the beige paint on the walls, the mailboxes at the entrance, and the worn runner leading to the elevator. He’s about to get chewed up, swallowed, and regurgitated, ending up in an unappetising mess that Nolan and Wilson can poke with a stick, wondering why they even bothered with him. “Say what you want to say, and get it over with,” he advises.

“Oh, I don’t believe in tackling controversial issues between ten p.m. and eight a.m.,” Nolan says cheerfully. “In your case, make that ten a.m. Besides, James is finally asleep. I don’t think we should wake him. Why don’t you go to bed and come back tomorrow morning for breakfast?”

“Why don’t I go to bed and not come back tomorrow?” he suggests, rolling his hand towards the door to the street.

“Because Joel happens to be your son.”

When he snorts Nolan says, “Greg, it’s past midnight and I’ve had a long day. Don’t pretend to be indifferent, because I’m not buying it. You’ve interfered in Wilson’s life and you’ve tried to apologise to him. You wouldn’t have bothered to do all that if you didn’t feel some measure of interest in the boy. I think you’ll find it easier to follow your agenda, whatever that may be, if I’m here to mediate between you and James. It’s an offer: take it or leave it.” After a moment he adds, “You needn’t decide till tomorrow morning. Either you’re here at ten or you aren’t. Good night, Greg.”

Nolan leaves him standing in the hallway. He considers his options: he can either find a hotel or sneak into Lisa’s place and crash in her guest room. The surrounding area isn’t exactly great on cheap accommodation and he has no cash for a cab, so it’s Plan B. That’s if Lisa still leaves her key under the doormat. (After a few hours’ sleep he’ll be fit enough to deal with the shouting and screeching that’ll ensue when Lisa discovers him in her apartment.)

The key is still in its customary location. But when he creeps past Lisa’s bedroom towards the
guest room, her bedroom door opens and he’s face to face with her again. He waits for the yelling to begin, but with a resigned shake of her head she waves her hand towards the guest room. “Nolan sent you?”

He nods.

“What?” she says listlessly.

“Who, me or Nolan?”

“Both of you. Where’s your stuff?”

Okay, that means he can stay. “At the airport. I tried to get a flight back tonight, but they only had one tomorrow afternoon— no, *this* afternoon —, so I put my baggage in storage.”

“You’re leaving today.” Her voice is flat; disapproval emanates off her in waves. “Running away. The sad thing is, I’m not even surprised.” She turns towards her bedroom.

He says defensively, “There isn’t anything I can do here at the moment. Wilson needs time to cool down.”

“Sometimes,” she says as she goes into her room, “it isn’t about doing anything; it’s about being there.” She shuts the door in his face.

A good old-fashioned yelling, he decides, would have been preferable.

James has two blends of coffee: a Melange of Colombian and Kenyan coffee and a Mocha-Java blend; the odour of the ground beans suffice to reanimate Nolan. Nolan is willing to bet that James bought the latter with Greg in mind. But it’s his job to support James, not Greg, who might be a no-show anyway (and who will hopefully imbibe a few cups of coffee before he appears for breakfast, because otherwise he’ll be unbearable), so he heaps a judicious number of spoons of the Melange into the filter and turns on the percolator. Then he turns his attention to the matter of food. He knows that James is a sucker for pancakes, so pancakes it is. It isn’t his area of expertise, but in these modern times even mediocre cooks like him can turn out decent chow, Google be thanked. With his iPad propped up on the counter, he assembles the ingredients and gets cracking. James, he notes, has organic milk from ‘happy’ cows, organic butter and organic maple syrup (whatever that may mean) imported from Canada. He can’t tell whether the eggs are organic as well, since they come in an unmarked grey carton that screams ‘local farmers market’. They could be anything from anywhere — are they even hens’ eggs? — and their lack of a sell-by date makes Nolan fidgety.

Twenty minutes later James shuffles in, his eyes bleary and his shoulders hunched, a baby monitor clipped to his belt. He perks up visibly when he smells the coffee and the pancakes, although he subjects the ones that Nolan has prepared already to a skeptical scrutiny. James, Nolan remembers, is a culinary perfectionist.

“Did you sour the milk?” James asks.

“Huh?”

“You add vinegar or lemon to the milk or you use buttermilk,” he explains. When Nolan pulls a face, James says, “You don’t taste the vinegar and it makes the pancakes fluffier.”

“Next time,” Nolan says.
“It reacts with the baking powder, you know.”

“Fascinating!” Nolan says with only the slightest of intonations.

“Sorry.” James scrubs a hand across his face as he sits down. “I’ve got a thing about pancakes.”

Who would have guessed? Nolan smiles as he pours a cup of coffee for James and pushes the sugar and milk towards him.

“Good!” James praises him after the first mouthful, but Nolan isn’t fooled. James is being his usual polite self. Greg, should he turn up, will undoubtedly give a harsher, more honest judgment. Before that can happen, however, the baby monitor hiccups into life, emitting a few plaintive wails. James rises and, with a regretful glance at his cup of coffee, leaves the kitchen. Nolan gives him a few minutes before following him.

James has taken the baby out of his cot and is talking to him in low soothing tones. “Oh, that diaper is wet, isn’t it? Shall Daddy change it for you? Yes, we’d better do that. There! … Pooh, that wasn’t nice, was it? … No, no, don’t wriggle like that; we have to get you into your onesie. … Huh, it’s getting too small for you. You’ve grown, Joey. Daddy’s big boy, aren’t you?”

Daddy’s Boy stares at James with solemn eyes throughout the procedure, sticking out his lower lip in displeasure as James manoeuvres him into a clean onesie. Then, when James picks him up with a little toss, Joel gurgles. James blows a raspberry at him; he blows one right back.

Nolan feels his tensed shoulder muscles loosen. All’s clear there; no need to worry about the boy. Last night, after letting Nolan into the apartment, James apathetically made a bottle for Joel and fed him. He wasn’t rough or uncaring, just listless. That listlessness is gone now. Nolan would hesitate to describe James as energetic or focused, but he seems balanced enough. Nolan waits until James notices him before returning to the kitchen. James follows a moment later with Joel on his arm. He gets the extra bottle of formula that he’d made last night from the fridge and heats it.

“I’ve asked Greg to drop by at ten,” Nolan remarks.

“Oh?” James, who has sat down again with Joel on his knee, looks up. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You’ll have to deal with him sometime.”

“Can’t it wait until I’ve calmed down sufficiently to suppress the urge to wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze hard?” James deadpans, pulling a lunging Joel away from his cup of coffee and giving him the spoon instead.

“By that time Greg will have skedaddled, and when he decides to turn up again, I won’t be here to defuse the situation. You don’t want to deprive your son of one of his fathers, do you?”

James sighs, while Joel bangs on the table with his spoon. Nolan finds it difficult to concentrate while the boy squirms, makes a racket, and takes up at least half of James’s attention, but James doesn’t seem to notice anything untoward. “I’ve been dealt a crappy hand,” James says. “It’s a lose-lose for me.”

“Why?” Nolan asks. It’s funny how all of his patients tend to make value judgments on a given set of circumstances, instead of accepting the circumstances as a neutral given.

“I have no desire whatsoever to be fair or even polite to House, but if I want to be just to Joel, I’m going to have to put up with him, aren’t I? And he can afford to be as outrageous as he pleases,
because he knows that I’ll put Joel first.”

Nolan wriggles and rotates his shoulders experimentally. The joints crack ominously, but there are no sharp jabs of pain, a miracle given that he spent the night on the couch after giving his shoulder a good banging against James’s front door. “That’s one way of looking at it,” he agrees.

“Is there any other?” James enquires. It’s a challenge.

“You hold the trump card: maybe Greg is the biological parent, but you’re the one who has custody. You don’t want anything from him, while he wants something from you. It’s the ideal bargaining position.” In actuality, Nolan hasn’t a clue about the legal niceties of the situation, but it’s a fair bet that Greg isn’t about to start a custody battle.

James’s eyes widen. “Are you encouraging me to use the kid as leverage against House?” he asks with a hint of humour.

“Oh, no, never!” Nolan hastens to assure him. “I’m pointing out to you that you can afford to be generous. Greg is going to be obstreperous, unreasonable, and demanding — in short, the way he gets when he’s cornered. It would help if you remembered that and didn’t allow yourself to be provoked.”

James regards him in silence for a long moment. “That’s quite something you’re asking of me,” he finally says.

“See it this way,” Nolan says. “I’m acting as Joel’s advocate because he can’t protect his own interests as yet. You, James, may be best served by allowing yourself to vent your anger and frustration (absolutely justified frustration, in my opinion), but the same can’t be said of him.”

“You’re saying I should suppress my own needs in order to fulfil those of a child who isn’t my son, but the son of the man who has gone behind my back. Shouldn’t you be persuading House to chip in and do his part, instead of making me run in circles around him?”

Nolan takes a deep breath. “I think,” he says, “that Joel has rights and that those rights exist independent of your personal needs or your biological ties. You have no obligation towards Greg, but I do believe that you, both of you, have a moral obligation to ensure that Joel gets what he’s entitled to.” And if that can only be done by running in circles around Greg, he adds silently, then that’s what they’ll all do.

At ten to ten he gets up to make another round of pancake batter for Greg. “So, how do I sour the milk?” he asks, hoping to get James involved, but James doesn’t rise to the bait.

“Don’t bother,” he says. “House should be grateful he’s being fed at all.”

Nolan is inclined to agree with James, but it’s a simple truth of human interaction that compromises are easier to find if both sides are mellowed by good food. But souring the milk now, after James has indicated that he’d see it as a concession to Greg, is off-limits.

Greg is fashionably late — pushing the envelope already. Nolan sighs inwardly. Greg’s long absence has made him forget just how much of a challenge he can be. Besides, dealing with him during his last stay had been a walk in the park by Greg’s standards: Greg had been mortified by his relapse and eager to cooperate in order to find out more about his past. This time, with the stakes so much higher — it isn’t just Greg’s well-being that’s at stake, but James’s and the child’s too — it’s very inconvenient that Greg’s inner terrible teen has to make an appearance.

Nolan nods at him to sit down at the place he’s laid for him and pours him a cup of coffee too.
Greg eyes the pancakes even more critically than James did. “Do you have eggs and bacon?” he asks.

Nolan is about to rise and look for bacon in the fridge when James says, “There’s no bacon in there.”

Greg tips his head to the side like a curious sparrow. “No bacon?”

“No bacon,” James confirms.

“You knew I was coming and you didn’t stock bacon? I’m hurt.” He pushes out his bottom lip in a childish pout.

“I’m raising Joel kosher,” James says with a challenging look.

Greg’s chin drops half an inch before he catches himself and shuts his mouth. “You’re not religious. Why are you raising him kosher?”

“Because …” James pauses, then says with a hint of indignation, “Who says I’m not religious? I may not have been particularly observant lately, but I believe in the basic tenets of my faith and I want to raise my son in them.”

That’s a clear statement of James’s intentions regarding Joel’s custody, coming rather sooner than Nolan expected, outside the frame of the mediated conversation that he’d spent almost all night preparing. He’ll have to scrap his notes and play it by ear.

Greg leans back. After the first shock his face has settled into an unreadable mask. “What does Annie say to your sudden desire to walk in your Jewish ancestors’ footsteps, dragging her kid in tow?”

“It isn’t sudden: I’ve been observing all the Jewish festivals with Cuddy and Rachel. And Amy thinks it’s great. She says it’ll give Joel an appreciation for traditions; her parents weren’t observant Christians and she says she missed religious rituals and traditions when she was a child.”

Nolan wonders whether this isn’t wishful thinking on James’s part or even an outright lie, but that isn’t his problem.

“The hatafat dam brit will take place as soon as we’ve settled in,” James adds.

“The what?” Nolan asks, since Greg seems to know what James is talking about.

“It’s a symbolic circumcision,” James explains. “A drop of blood is drawn from where the foreskin used to be. Amy had Joel circumcised right after birth, but according to Jewish law that doesn’t count, because it wasn’t done correctly and with religious intent.”

Greg rises to prowl through the kitchen. It’s unnerving in the confined space that already seems cramped with three adults in it, but Nolan holds his peace. Sure enough, after two rounds Greg explodes.

“You’re subjecting the boy to archaic rituals of mutilation?”

“It’s one drop of blood, House!”

“An unnecessary drop of blood. What happened to, ‘First do no harm’?”

Now James is standing too and yelling back at House. “The ceremony is totally harmless. It
symbolises Joel’s entry into the community.” (Joel, who fell asleep again after his bottle, snoozes through the commotion. He’s probably catching up on the sleep he missed last night. Nolan wishes he could do the same.)

“Does the rabbi know that neither of the parents are Jewish and that you haven’t officially adopted him?” Greg asks. “No? What do you think he’ll say when he finds out?”

James is silent. He looks at Nolan beseechingly as though to say, ‘He can’t stop me, can he?’

Nolan doesn’t know the answer to that question; he isn’t conversant with the intricacies of Jewish law or child custody regulations. So he shrugs at James and says to the room at general, “Let’s all sit down and talk about the situation.” When both men have sat down again, Nolan continues, “Let’s start off with our expectations.”

He turns to Greg. “Greg, what aims do you have for this meeting and what are your expectations?” The question seemed fine when he noted it down last night, but in the clear light of morning, with two men who are singularly resistant to conventional forms of therapy, it sounds empty and trite.

Greg’s response is predictable. He pulls a face and says, “I have no aims or expectations. You said I should come, so I did.”

“So, you threatening to expose James if he tried to perform a Jewish ritual on Joel was all in my imagination?” Nolan says with a smug gleam in his eye.

“I’m stopping him from raising the kid in an atmosphere of superstition and unscientific hocus-pocus,” Greg protests, but he has lost some of his bluster.

“Then you do have an aim, namely to ensure that Joel’s childhood is secular.” Nolan leans back, satisfied that he has made his point.

Greg narrows his eyes. “An inveiglement!” he says, a hint of admiration beneath his irritation.

“Stop seeing yourself as a victim,” Nolan advises. “And don’t, either of you, get the idea that this is a bazaar where haggling will get you an advantage. The sooner both of you verbalise your true wishes and expectations, the quicker we’ll be done.”

The kitchen clock on the wall ticks. Outside, a woman yells at her dog. A car door slams. Joel breathes rhythmically. Nolan resists the temptation to look at the clock — he has an appointment at two.

“James?” he prompts. It isn’t fair on James to have to open up first when he hasn’t done anything to let things come to this pass, but Nolan has little hope of making Greg behave with any semblance of sense and maturity.

James leans back. “I’m amenable to the customary kind of custody arrangement: House gets every other weekend and one weeknight,” he says, straight-faced.

Greg’s mouth twitches. Then he chuckles. The corner of James’s mouth turns up in response. He tries to keep a straight face, but within a few seconds both men shake with laughter. Nolan allows himself to relax a little; the ice seems to be broken. Maybe, just maybe, there’s a chance that this will not end in a complete fiasco. A quick glance at his watch tells him that he has another hour to wrap this up. He’s about to suggest that they get down to the nitty-gritty when he senses rather than sees Greg tense next to him. He looks at Greg. All signs of amusement have left his face; he’s stiff as a poker and staring at James with something akin to horror. Nolan switches his attention to James, whose shoulders are still shaking with laughter while his face is buried in his hands. It takes
Nolan a moment to realise what Greg has recognised: James isn’t laughing anymore, he’s crying.

Nolan takes a deep breath before slipping into his ‘comforting’ routine. This isn’t exactly a shock; he has witnessed too many men and women break down in his room and cry to be fazed by one more example of the same, but it’s obvious that Greg finds the situation … challenging. Nolan scoots closer to James and lays a hand on his arm: James isn’t averse to physical contact, but he isn’t particularly receptive towards it either. He doesn’t say anything; James should be allowed to take all the time he needs.

Greg shifts uncomfortably on his chair. Nolan ignores him; if he decides to make a run for it, then so be it. But Greg waits three minutes, four and then five. James’s heaves have subsided, but he’s still covering his face and his shoulders are hunched.

“I’m … I’m sorry.” Greg’s words cut through the silence.

More silence. Finally James lifts his head. “Do you know what ‘sorry’ means? It means that given another opportunity, you’d act in a different manner. Can you honestly say that?”

Greg breaks eye contact with James. His eyes roam around the room, flicker over James and come to rest on Joel. Slowly, he shakes his head. “No,” he says, that piercing gaze back on James. “No, I can’t.”

“I didn’t think so, House.”

“I wouldn’t let you die for the sake of sparing him,” Greg nods at Joel, still peacefully asleep, “the pain of existing. I honestly don’t believe his life will be all bad, despite the less than stellar start he had.”

“And if he grew up with you?” James asks pointedly (and not very kindly, Nolan thinks.)

“Ah, that would be a cruel and unusual punishment,” Greg says. “Can you honestly say that you love him less now that you know I’m his father?”

It’s James’s turn to look down at Joel. His face softens visibly. Then he, too, shakes his head. “No. But,” he points a finger at Greg, “that doesn’t mean you did me a favour!”

“I’m not saying I did.” Greg rubs his chin thoughtfully. “I’m saying you’d do no one a favour by insisting that I raise him.”

“I’m not saying you should raise him. We don’t even know whether you’re his father. It could be me, it could be someone else altogether,” James says.

“What?” Nolan says before he can stop himself. “You don’t know for sure that Greg is Joel’s father?”

Greg shrugs. “We can do a paternity test,” he says, “but I’m not optimistic about the outcome. My swimmers are that good.” He wriggles his eyebrows suggestively.

“No,” James says sharply, “no test.”

“Why not?” Greg says. “Then we’ll know what we’re dealing with.”

James massages the back of his neck. “As long as we don’t do a test,” he says slowly, “I can choose to believe that he’s my son.”
“And that gets you — what exactly? A feeling of fuzzy paternal fluffiness when you carry that screaming bundle of misery around at night?”

“He’s sleeping through most nights now,” James says, diverted. He catches himself at once. “As long as I can say with all honesty that as far as I know, I’m the father, I can justify making decisions that’ll affect his future. The moment I know I’m not the father, how can I do that?”

“I’m perfectly okay with any decision you make in my name,” Greg says drily.

“Except every decision I’ve made so far, such as raising him in the Jewish faith,” James says equally drily. Greg tips his head to acknowledge the point. “You may be okay with any decision I make, but if I’m not the father, then Amy might not be okay anymore with the custody arrangement as it stands. You’re assuming that she’d want me to raise Joel regardless of whether I’m a blood relative of his, but she might see that differently.”

“So, you don’t have to tell her,” Greg says with his best ‘duh’ expression.

Nolan decides to interfere before the argument gets circular. “I get the moral implications, even if you don’t,” he says to Greg. To the room at large he says, “Okay, no paternity test. Not even secret ones.” This with a pointed look at Greg.

Greg makes a show of being disappointed, but Nolan gets the impression that on a deeper level Greg, too, would rather not know. That’s an interesting development that Nolan files away for later contemplation. It’s also possible that Greg has already done a paternity test without telling James. In that case he’s showing admirable reticence in not rubbing the result under James’s nose. Again, an interesting thought. He’ll have to ask Greg about it at an opportune moment. “What other ground rules can we agree on?”

Both he and Greg look expectantly at James, who shifts uncomfortably. “I … haven’t really thought about it yet.”

“Do you want Greg involved at all?”

“Yes.” There’s no hesitation in James’s voice. “You said so yourself: this is about Joel, not about House or me.”

“Okay. What shape could his involvement take? Greg, what can you offer?”

Greg looks stymied. “Uh, when he’s older I can take him to strip clubs,” he deflects.

“Greg,” Nolan says warningly.

Greg stares at the table. “I can come over regularly,” he says quietly. “I figure I can babysit when I’m here; it can’t be rocket science.”

James quirks an eyebrow. “If your neglect of Rachel is anything to go by —”

“Excuse me,” Greg says sharply. “She was fine when I looked after her. She still rants about the great time she had with me.”

“I don’t mean this time; I mean when she was small. You left her unsupervised the moment Cuddy turned her back on you, and you treated her like a dog. I’d rather not subject Joel to that level of non-caring. Rachel was too small to complain — and so is Joel.”

Greg is absolutely silent, immobilised. His jaw has slackened and his face has lost its characteristic
tenseness, allowing a glimpse of his true emotions. It’s one of those rare moments of vulnerability that Nolan cherishes, although it takes a major hurt for Greg to open up like that. When Nolan sees him like that, he can’t help feeling protective, so he steps in. He’s sure Greg can babysit when he puts his mind to it, but unless and until James feels the same, there’s no use in expecting him to place his child in Greg’s care. How much of James’s attitude is genuine worry for Joel’s safety rather than suppressed resentment against Greg is another matter altogether, but it’s one that’ll have to wait until he and James can tackle it in a therapy session.

“Okay, it doesn’t have to be babysitting. Greg can help in other ways. You can cook,” he suggests, turning to Greg.

“So I’m to be a glorified housekeeper,” Greg says bitingly.

“Whatver it takes to build trust,” Nolan says mildly. “I suggest you agree on when Greg should come next and how long he should stay. Dr Cuddy and you are moving into a house in the suburbs in the near future, aren’t you?” James nods. “It might be best if he stayed with Dr Cuddy, so that stress that isn’t related to Joel is minimised.” Expecting James to deal with a baby and with Greg is asking too much of him.

James and Greg look at each other. “Not a good idea,” James says.

Yes, she’s an interfering busybody, but I’ve busted her balls (metaphorically speaking, of course), Nolan thinks. Aloud he says, “Greg and she may have their differences, but I think she sees that her behaviour in this matter wasn’t constructive.”

Greg and James glance at each other again. “Uh, her behaviour?” James says.

“Yes,” Nolan says, the vibes around him mystifying him. “She shouldn’t have interfered, but it’s done now.”

Greg leans back, grinning sardonically. James passes a hand through his short hair. “Please tell me you didn’t give her a dressing-down,” he says.

Nolan looks from one to the other. “Actually, I did. … Is there something I should know?”

Greg’s grin turns malicious. James, giving Greg a warning glance, says, “No, not really.”

Nolan feels a flush travelling up his neck. He should have suspected that Dr Cuddy’s foul mood was down to more than moral outrage, since strict adherence to a moral code has never been an outstanding character trait of hers. Greg must have … what exactly?

“If I wronged her,” Nolan says to James, “it would be better if we cleared the air.”

“Openness is overrated, huh, Wilson?” Greg says, confirming Nolan’s suspicion that he did something to upset Dr Cuddy.

James nods his head. “Actually, I agree with that. If she didn’t tell you what happened, then she’s good with the present state of affairs.”

This is what makes therapy sessions with James and Greg such an uphill task. They’re both secretive by nature. Other patients evade, lie, or gloss over events in order to avoid embarrassment; James and Greg do it because they are convinced that they know better than their therapist whether a piece of information is relevant to their treatment or not. They don’t trust others, least of all their therapist, to discard superfluous bits and hang onto what is relevant, so they do the pre-sorting themselves and feel perfectly justified in doing so.
Something of this must show in his face, because James says, “She’s feeling stupid about what happened, and she doesn’t like feeling stupid. She won’t thank us for telling you about it even if it makes you feel more charitable towards her. She’s used to people oozing disapproval at her; she’ll survive.”

‘Oozing disapproval’ hits the nail on the head. Thinking back, Nolan figures that his behaviour was unprofessional. Well, this isn’t the first time; he, too, will survive.

Greg rises, saying, “Are you giving me a ride to the airport?”

Nolan raises an eyebrow at him.

Greg smiles. “You’ve been squinting at the clock or at your watch in ever decreasing intervals, so you’re leaving soon. You’d be an idiot to leave us together by ourselves, so it’s a win-win if you take me with you.” He turns to James. “Let me know when you feel up to dealing with this,” he says, flicking his hand to and fro between himself and Joel.

“And then?” James asks.

Greg shrugs. “We could go to Nolan’s custody counsellor,” he suggests, widening his eyes as though he has just had a revelation. “The one Lisa and I went to once.”

James chuckles, but Nolan isn’t amused. He doesn’t have many friends, and Greg will cost him the few he has. Confidentiality forbids Staines, the counsellor to whom Greg is referring, from telling Nolan about the meeting with Greg and Dr Cuddy, but whenever they meet up to play golf, he makes snide comments about Nolan referring sociopaths to him.

He rises. “Baby steps,” he says to James. “Don’t expect miracles; don’t expect the perfect little family. Above all, don’t expect to make this perfect for Joel. He’s lucky to have you; anything over and above that is a bonus.” Then he crooks a finger at Greg. “Let’s go, then.” Better get him out of the apartment before he says or does anything else to annoy James.

Greg nods at James. Then he looks down at his sleeping son. “Do I get invited?” he asks.

“To what?”

“The hatafat dam brit.” Greg’s eyes narrow. “Wait, you weren’t even planning one, were you? You just said that to … oh, damn!” He slaps his forehead with the palm of his hand.

James grins. “I’m having it done. And yes, I’ll invite you. You can be the sandek.”

“I don’t —” Greg protests.

“Your choice,” James interrupts smoothly. “We don’t need one since it isn’t a bris, but the rabbi says I can devise the ceremony as I choose.”

It’s a test. The seconds pass. Finally Greg’s gaze drops. “Okay,” he says. “Sandek it is. But no mikvah before, and I’m not paying the costs for the feast.”

Nolan takes hold of his elbow and drags him out before they start haggling like fishmongers. He’ll ask Greg on the way to the airport what a sandek is.
Pete waits a judicious week before getting impatient, because if Wilson wants to flex his muscles and show that he’s the boss, then that’s fine with him. Wilson will come around, and the less Pete gets on his nerves, the quicker that’ll happen. Besides, there’s no hurry.

Nonetheless, when there’s no sign of life from Wilson and the kid after a week, he gets ... not nervous, but edgy. He knows they're moving sometime now, but still! Lisa doesn’t send her weekly picture of the boy. Not that he was expecting her to: even if she weren’t mad at him, she wouldn’t consider herself obliged to keep him up to date, not now that Wilson is in the picture and can supply him with intel if he so pleases. Problem is, it does not please Wilson to do so. It’s the Cold War: there’s been a summit with bad food (if anything shows that Wilson’s intentions weren’t friendly, it’s the fact that he let Nolan make the pancakes), frozen smiles, and declarations of intent, but Wilson hasn’t made a binding commitment, let alone agreed to disarm.

Pete gives Wilson and Lisa another week to get their ‘suburban bliss’ act together, then he tries to contact Wilson via the usual channels: Facebook, then email, and finally Wilson’s phone. Wilson doesn’t respond. That annoys Pete even more than if Wilson had slapped him down. If Wilson were defining boundaries and reminding him of their existence, he’d be acknowledging that Pete has certain rights within those boundaries. Refusing to do even that, however, is tantamount to depriving Pete of all rights. Perhaps Wilson believes that if he keeps him in suspense for a while, he’ll be suitably chastened and cowed. Or maybe Wilson hopes that if he lets sleeping dogs lie, then Pete won’t bark up his tree (read: try to influence the freeloader’s life).

Actually, that isn’t such an abstruse notion: Pete is aware that if Lisa hadn’t forced the issue, he’d still be evading it. Until he knew that Wilson knew, he was quite happy to let things take their accustomed course without interfering. But now that he knows that Wilson is aware of the true nature of things, he’s finding it more difficult to distance himself from the problem. On a rational level, that makes no sense whatsoever: the kid isn’t more his son than he was when Wilson didn’t know that Pete is his father.

Still, out of sight isn’t out of mind, as Wilson should have noticed by now. It behoves him to acknowledge Pete’s advances as what they are: overtures of peace and surrender.

Saturday night he finally loses his cool and does the unthinkable: he phones Lisa. Rachel takes the phone. Asking Rachel why the fuck Wilson is treating him like a fricking Ebola patient isn’t an option, so he asks, “Have you seen Wilson around lately?”

“He’s taken Joel to visit Amy,” Rachel says.

Okay. That’s no reason to ignore his messages, though. “When did he leave for wherever?”

“L.A. On Friday.”

“When’s he returning?”

“Sunday.”

“Tomorrow?” It’s Saturday afternoon on Rachel’s side of the Atlantic.

“No, the Sunday after. He said it’s Joel’s last chance to have a long visit with Amy because he has to start working full-time the week after. He’s gonna work at Mom’s hospital,” Rachel says.
Wilson isn’t answering his messages and he’s somewhere where Pete doesn’t know anyone. There’s no help for it: he’ll need Lisa’s assistance. “Where’s your mom?”

“Uh, she’s sleeping.”

Pete glances at his watch. It’s eleven p.m. in England, which means it’s five p.m. in Philadelphia. “Then go wake her.”

Rachel hesitates. “I … don’t think that’s a good idea. She’s really tired.” There’s something odd in Rachel’s voice; she’s lying or hiding something. Pete doesn’t really care what it is: if Lisa chooses to have lovers over while Rachel is in the house, it’s not his headache.

So he says, “Wilson isn’t answering his phone.”

“Oh, that!” Rachel says, audibly relieved at the change of topic. “He forgot it here. He got all hectic getting Joel ready, and then he left the phone at our place, and by the time Mom found it his flight had left. But he phoned from Amy’s place to say they are fine.”

Okay, now they’re getting somewhere. “Do you have Amy’s phone number?”

“No.”

Pete summons the last vestiges of his patience. “Your mom must have Amy’s number somewhere. She keeps track of everyone and everything.”

Silence.

“Rachel?”

“Yeah?”

“The phone number! Please,” he adds as an afterthought.

“I … Mom …”

“Okay, Mom has the number. I got that. Now go and wake her.”

No response. He’ll have to convince Rachel that Lisa has slept long enough. (Since when does she take long afternoon naps?) “How long has she been asleep?”

“She …” There’s a very long pause. “She …” Rachel whispers something that he can’t understand.

“Can’t hear you!” he yells into the phone.

“She didn’t get up at all today,” Rachel says. And then there’s sobbing over the line, not amateur theatrics, but the real thing. “Something’s wrong with her. And we don’t have any food. There isn’t even milk in the fridge.”

“Call your babysitter,” Pete says. “And tell her to call a doctor. What’s Lisa eating if there’s no food in the house?”

“I don’t think she’s hungry. And I don’t have a babysitter. This place is too far away for my old one, and Mom hasn’t found a new one yet. She said she’d do it, but …”

“Call your ex-neighbour, the one with the godawful glasses and the smelly cats.”
“Louisa. I’ve t-ried.” Rachel’s words are drowned in further sobs. “And Mom said I shouldn’t call Julia.”

Distracted from his desire to contact Wilson, Pete pauses to consider the situation, which is decidedly odd. Lisa in bed, no food in the house, and Rachel upset enough to consider calling in outside help.

“Have you tried your next-door neighbours?” he asks.

“I don’t know them,” Rachel says with the stubbornness of a child who has been taught to never ever talk to strangers.

“It’s a great opportunity to remedy that,” he says. “Go over and —”

“I can’t. They have steps in front.”

Oh, okay, that’s a bummer. “Then wheel yourself as close to the door as possible and holler from there,” he advises.

“I c-can’t. I’m scared! … Is Mom dying?”

“I doubt it. People dropping down and dying from one day to the next isn’t as common as you’d think.”

“She’s been that way for ages!”

Oh, not so good! He hadn’t noticed anything off when he was there, although now that he comes to think of it, she did look under the weather. He’d put it down to the stress of moving — and of having to deal with him. “What does ‘for ages’ mean?”

“Since … since her vacation in Paris? She’s been sleeping all the time since then.”

“What about work?”

“She goes there,” Rachel says as though stating the obvious, but her intonation makes it clear that work is the only thing Lisa does go out for. “But she comes back early and lies down.”

He thinks for a moment. “Can you open the front door?” It’s possible that Lisa hasn’t had it altered to make it Rachel-friendly as yet.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll order food from a takeout and have it sent to you.” He hesitates. He should warn her about making sure it’s the delivery service before opening the door, but she’ll probably be scared shitless if he puts thoughts of burglars and other criminals into her mind. He’ll just have to hope that the area is low on crime and exemplary in terms of neighbourhood watch. “And call your aunt Julie.”

“Julia.”

“Whatever.”

“But Mom said —”

“‘But Mom said’,” he mimics cruelly. “I say, phone your aunt. Now!”

Rachel takes a long shaky breath. “Okay.”
“I’ll call you again in …” He checks his watch. “… an hour. Takeout should be there by then, and with a bit of luck your aunt too. Bye.”

He disconnects the call before Rachel can object. He *could* talk to her all night, but that wouldn’t solve her problem (or his). So he Googles takeouts in their neighbourhood until he finds a place that does pizza, and orders a pizza for Rachel. On second thought he orders one for Lisa too, and some soda. Next, he orders groceries online: toast, butter, milk, cereal, cheese, and eggs, to be delivered the next morning. A few apples, once again as an afterthought. And then he sits back and thinks.

What did he miss? Is it something to do with her liver? He remembers noticing that she shunned alcohol when she was in Paris. Who visits France without trying a glass of wine? If he hadn’t been so distracted by his own problems, he’d have explored that anomaly. He turns to his computer and tries to get access to her medical file at Philadelphia Central, but their firewall is an easy match for his rusty hacking skills. So instead, he considers the advisability of sending an email to Lucas Douglas telling him to get Lisa’s medical files. The man is good at snooping — but there’s a fifty-fifty chance that he’ll run to Lisa to tell her that ‘nasty House’ is poking his nose into her personal business. Make that eighty-twenty, so that’s a no-go. Besides, Pete wouldn’t be surprised if Douglas went running to Julia …

Did Lisa show any symptoms when he was in Philadelphia a fortnight ago? He goes through a mental list:

- Weight loss or gain: no. (Or at least, nothing noticeable over and above what you’d expect in a woman nearing fifty who hasn’t been able to exercise regularly.)
- Loss of appetite: he wouldn’t know, since they didn’t eat together. If Rachel is to be believed, that one’s a ‘yes’.
- Anaemia: possibly. She’d been pale.
- Neurological symptoms: none that he noticed.
- Signs of infection: none. She hadn’t appeared flushed or feverish. Besides, her day clinic caters mostly to elderly and immune compromised patients, so if she had something contagious, she wouldn’t be going to work.
- Fatigue: yes (according to Rachel), though she’d been spry enough when he’d seen her. But — she’d been unkempt by her standards. He’d put it down to her having been busy packing, but now that he comes to think of it, there’d been precious few *packed* boxes standing around. Empty ones, yes, but considering that they were going to move within a few days, Lisa’s household had still been pretty much intact.
- Bitchiness: triple check. He’d expected her to be cranky, but not to the point that she’d involve Wilson and the rugrat in their little ‘misunderstanding’. He can remember — yes, he actually can! — being considerably more irritating than this without provoking such extreme reactions: the time she had to pick him up from the Trenton precinct springs to mind.

How could he have missed all those obvious signs? The answer is clear: he’d been busy worrying about how to break the Good News to Wilson. An angel to do the dirty work for him would have been neat, but instead he got Lisa, who botched it up. And now Lisa is sick. Some might see karma or poetic justice in that, but if it’s karma at work, then chances are that it’s out to get him, not Lisa, because he’s the one who has been trying to avoid facing the music.

An hour after his first call he dials Lisa’s number again. Rachel takes the call before the phone rings twice; she must have been waiting next to it.

“Did you call Julia?”
“Yes, but …” Her voice fades.

He wills himself to remain patient and not interrupt her.

“… but Julia made me wake Mom.”

_Which you refused to do for me_, he thinks. “How’d _she_ make you wake Lisa?”

The veiled accusation is lost on Rachel. “She said she wouldn’t come until she’d talked to Mom. So I woke Mom. And Mom talked to Julia and said everything was fine. And then she went back to bed. I guess Julia isn’t coming.” There’s resignation in her voice, but underneath he can sense fear.

He considers making Rachel wake Lisa so he can talk to her, but it isn’t worth the bother. He has a rough idea of what’s wrong with her, and talking to her won’t change anything. So he changes the topic. “Has the food come?”

“Yeah, pizza came half an hour ago. Mom hasn’t eaten anything.” A short pause. “How much was I supposed to tip?”

The order cost about 25 dollars. “Depends on how cute the delivery guy was. Nothing if he was old and bald, about two dollars if he was young and polite, and four dollars if he was a hottie like me.”

Rachel snorts. Then she says reluctantly, “It was a woman and I gave her ten dollars.”

“You … what?”

“I’ve never tipped before. Mom always does it.”

“Where’d you get the money from?” He’d paid for the order itself with his credit card, but he hadn’t thought to add a tip.

“My pocket money. I didn’t want to wake Mom.”

“You got ripped off, kid. Who does that, cheat a poor cripple out of her pocket money?” he wonders aloud, more for her amusement than because he is bothered. This is the least of his problems. Then again, he needs to make sure that whoever delivers food will be eager to do so again should the need arise. “Look, there are groceries coming tomorrow morning around ten; give whoever delivers them about four dollars. Make that five: it’s Sunday, so they’ll be expecting a bit more. With a bit of luck someone should be with you by then.”

“Who?”

“Dunno. I’ll try to reach Tanja or Louisa.”

“Okay. … When will you call again?”

Not so dumb after all, he thinks. She must have figured out by now that if she doesn’t make sure she’s looked after, no one else will. “Tomorrow morning. When was the last time you catheterised?”

Dead silence.

“Go do it. Now!” Jeez, the last thing they need is Rachel in hospital with a bladder infection that’s gotten out of hand.
After ending the call he scrolls through his contacts. Louisa, the ex-neighbour, is still MIA. That’s no surprise; she’s the kind of person who forgets to recharge their cell phone. (“Oh, dear, all this modern technology! I really have no idea how other people cope.” By using their brains, of course!) He tries Tanja instead. Unfortunately, Tanja has moved on, quite literally. When he asks her to pop over to the Cuddy-Wilson residence to check on Rachel and Lisa, she informs him that she can’t, because she’s living near Pittsburgh now and working as a full-time caregiver for some old geezer with multiple issues. She doesn’t even pretend to regret that she has to refuse his request (which he may have verbalised in a manner more suited to a demand); somehow she and Lisa never really hit it off.

There’s no denying that he has hit a bit of a dead end. In theory he could contact a care provider in the area, but he can’t force Lisa to grant a stranger access to her house. Anyone he hires from afar will probably meet with the same resistance as Julia did. The same goes for the only other people he knows in the area, Lisa’s staff and colleagues at the hospital. (Not to mention that if he spills the beans there, Lisa will have his head on a silver platter. She’s obviously trying to keep up a front by going to work regularly, even if she’s incapable of managing anything else.)

There’s only one other option. It’s the only sensible option anyway, but he’s been trying to avoid it for obvious reasons. He even has the number, because he obtained it when Lisa donated her liver — just in case. Now he dials it with inner trepidation: this conversation is not going to be pleasant by any standards.

“Hello?” a male, probably in his teens says.

“Is Julia there?”

“Hang on a sec. … Mom! It’s for you.”

About twenty seconds later a female voice says, “Hello?”

He clears his throat.

“Yes?” Julia says with a hint of impatience.

“It’s … I’m …” God, he’s pathetic! “Greg House. You know, Lisa’s … uh.”

There’s a dead silence at the other end. Then, “No!”

“Actually, yes.” He’s got to stop this, get down to the nitty-gritty. “It’s about Lisa. I’m afraid she’s —” The beep of the dial tone stops his prepared speech.

Okay, so that’s that. The conversation could have gone worse, he supposes, but the net result is zilch, nil, niente. He has no more aces up his sleeve, no Plan B, no alternatives. So, he makes a few more calls, and then he dials Lisa’s number for the third time that night. It is a long time before Rachel answers it.

“I was watching television!” she complains. “You said you’d call tomorrow.”

“Can’t call you in the morning because I should be with you by then. Just hang in till then, okay?”

Now that the food issue is resolved, Rachel’s interest is limited. “Yeah, okay. Can I go watch television again?”

“Yes. Take the phone with you when you go to bed, then you won’t have to get up if someone calls. Take down my number, in case something crops up before my flight leaves.” He dictates his
mobile phone number and makes her repeat it to make sure she’s got it right before ending the call.

It’s past midnight, the best time of day in his eyes, so he goes downstairs and knocks on his landlord’s door. Moving back to Bristol after losing his job in London has paid off in more ways than one. Other than the financial benefit of living in a marginally cheaper city, he lives in his ‘old’ flat again and has his former set of friends to hang out with. And there’s Gavin to annoy and amuse him. Pete’s flat hadn’t been rented out in his absence. Gavin had muttered something about how difficult it was to find reliable tenants in these modern times, which would have been flattering if it hadn’t been absurd: Pete Barnes is hardly the epitome of a reliable tenant. Pete harbours the suspicion that Gavin doesn’t like change any more than he does. Pete was Gavin’s first tenant after his marriage hit the rocks, and from the looks of it he’ll be the last.

Gavin is as much of a night owl as he is, so he shows little surprise at this late-night call. “What’s up?” he asks.

“Can you drive me to Heathrow?” Pete asks him.

“What’s wrong with your car?” Gavin asks.

“Nothing.” Other than that the fifth-hand wreck mightn’t survive a trip to London and back. “I don’t know how long I’ll be away for, so I don’t want to leave it there in the parking facility.”

Gavin nods, satisfied with Pete’s line of reasoning. Paranoid about everyone and everything, he is convinced that long-term parking facilities are badly guarded and that leaving your car in them is tantamount to asking people to key it, slit the tires, or break into it.

“When d’you need to be there?”

“Flight leaves at ten past five, so I’d say at four.”

“Don’t you have to check in two hours before departure?”

Pete shrugs. Gavin huffs and turns back into his flat. “We’ll leave now. I hate rushing. I hope you’ve packed.”

Packing is overrated. Pete goes back upstairs, throws a few items into a duffle bag, gets his Ossur blade in its carrier case, and packs up laptop and passport. He’s back downstairs before Gavin has completed his routine of bolting and double-checking every window and door. Once Gavin has stowed Pete’s luggage in the boot of his Vauxhall Astra they’re off.

Pete doesn’t pay much attention to the route (he wouldn’t know the way even if he had to commute to London every day), but when they’re out in the dark countryside and there’s still no sign of the motorway, he gets edgy. He knows for a fact that there’s a motorway between Bristol and London; he’s been on it countless times, and just because he’d never be able to find it on his own, doesn’t mean that he isn’t aware that they should be on it.

“Shouldn’t we be on the M4 by now?” he asks.

It’s anyone’s guess where they are because Gavin does not believe in GPS. (“They keep tabs on you wherever you go,” he says. He never says who ‘they’ are or why ‘they’ should be interested in the whereabouts of a minor postal employee’s antediluvian car.)

“Road works on the M4 with partial lane closures at night,” Gavin says by way of an explanation. “This route’s better.”
How much congestion can road works cause between one and two a.m.? It isn’t as though the route that Gavin has chosen boasts a dual carriageway that’ll allow them to progress at a steady pace. It’s a narrow, winding country road, unlit except at crossings or in the hamlets along the route, barely wide enough for two cars to pass each other. Not wide enough, Pete mentally amends as a pair of headlights approaches them. Gavin brakes sharply; both cars edge past each other before they pick up speed again. If they meet a tractor here, they’ll have to back up till the previous intersection, because they are literally hedged in. (It’s to be hoped that none of the local farmers are insomniacs.) There’s no way that this route saves time; he’ll be lucky if he reaches his flight in one piece.

Gavin unintentionally strengthens his doubts when Pete asks him whether he’s sure he knows the way.

“Oh, yes,” he says. “Came this way ever so often when me ex-wife — she was me girlfriend then — was working in London. Always drove this way. See that sharp turn up in front? Missed it completely one time; me eyes are bad in the dark. It was a good thing there was a drive straight ahead; if it’d been a wall, I’d a’ been dead. Came to a stop just before I crashed through the wall of tha’ house.” With an oblique look at Pete he adds, “But don’t worry; now I know that the turn is there.”

Very reassuring. “I think I’ll take my chances with the road works,” Pete says, holding onto the door handle.

Gavin gives him another sideways glance. “They monitor your speed there,” he says obscurely. “Have you never seen those signs saying that there’s ‘average speed surveillance’ along the stretch affected by the road works?”

Well, yes, but Gavin isn’t exactly known for breaking the sound barrier. Even at this god-forsaken hour he’s devoutly sticking to every speed limit there is, even the ones saying you need to go slow because of school children, though it’s not likely that there’ll be school kids running around in the middle of the night — and if there are, they deserve to be hit by a car.

“Worried you’ll get a speeding ticket?” Pete asks.

“How d’you think they measure your ‘average’ speed?” Gavin asks, but he doesn’t wait for an answer. “With average speed cameras that recognise your plate number. They’ve got to scan your number plate when you enter the lane and then again when you leave it, so they can calculate your speed. Means, they know you’ve been there. They can track you, righ’?”

Pete refrains from remarking that anyone can track him via his mobile, because Gavin will probably make him throw it out of the window. They drive in silence the rest of the way; Gavin is a weirdo, but he’s happy to keep his mouth shut and do without polite conversation, a quality that redeems him in Pete’s eyes.

When they reach Heathrow, Gavin drops him off at Terminal 5 without any further ado, desiring no effusive expressions of gratitude. Pete gets himself a bottle of bourbon at the duty-free shop: Wilson can’t stock liquor, and Lisa won’t from some far-fetched notion of solidarity, so he’ll have to bring his own. But he nobly resists the temptation to get shit-faced on the flight. He’ll need all his wits about him when he gets to Philly; time enough for a pity party on the return flight.
Fraternising With the Enemy

He spends the flight working because, contrary to what Lisa and Wilson believe, he has a few commitments that he can’t wriggle out of, one of them being his lectures at Oxford. He has a backlog, and the academic year is coming to an end. The university lets its academic staff post pre-recorded video talks for the students to download instead of teaching in person — provided that the lecturers tune in for an hour-long Q&A session afterwards. This latter stipulation makes the offer eminently unattractive, because the Q&A session alone is as long as the class that it aims to replace. But now he isn’t in England to hold his remaining lectures, which robs him of any choice in the matter.

Those lectures are tougher than he’d thought they’d be, the problem being that he can’t remember his old cases. Yes, he can read up on them (the ones that PPTH can release without causing a big HIPAA stink), but he can’t recall how he and his team arrived at a diagnosis. The patient histories and the tests they performed give him some clues, but he frequently doesn’t have any idea why he rejected one diagnosis in favour of another or what clue told him to attempt a different diagnostic strategy. Foreman and Chase have been helpful, but — reconstructions aren’t the same as memories. That’s what he’s doing: he’s reconstructing his past in the manner of an archaeologist reconstructing prehistoric sites, trying to get a clear picture from evidence that has been scattered, damaged, and corroded with time. (Chase’s memory, pickled in alcohol, leaves something to be desired and Foreman’s tends to be selective …)

Preparing an online lecture entails recording a voice-over to the slides that he means to show. Strange to say, the passengers on either side of him (and in front and behind him, for all he knows) aren’t interested in the finer details of maternal mirror syndrome, the topic he has chosen for the next lecture because a former patient, Emma Sloan, lifted all HIPAA restrictions off the case, saving him a lot of bother and paperwork. (She reiterated her offer to take some spiffy pictures of him, but he declined as politely as he could manage.) There’s a big stink, during which the flight attendant not only takes needless umbrage at being referred to as a ‘glorified waiter’, but also sides openly with his persecutors, insisting that if he, Pete, continues talking into his laptop microphone while the passengers around him are trying to sleep, the flight attendant will be forced to confiscate his laptop till the end of the flight. So, he’s forced to add captions and explanatory notes to the slides instead, which takes more time and will probably take some explaining to TPTB at Oxford University. On the other hand, even if he can’t record an accompanying commentary to the slides, he can add a soundtrack. He browses through his hard drive in search of titles featuring the word ‘mirror’ and finds both awe-inspiring (Iron Maiden’s ‘Dream of Mirrors’) and plain awful specimens (a contribution by Justin Timberlake).

By the time he reaches Philadelphia, fatigue is setting in. After the taxi drops him off outside Lisa’s place he hesitates, contemplating the house. Lisa isn’t going to be keen to see him; she’ll feel humiliated. He pulls out his phone to call Rachel, thinking that he should have instructed her not to open the door to anyone who doesn’t advertise their arrival in advance, but as he’s about to dial he sees a movement inside the house, the shadow of a person passing by a window. It can’t be Rachel, because her wheelchair is too low for her to be spotted from the outside, so it’s probably Lisa, who must be up and about again. If she’s better again, she’s going to be even unhappier to see him. Maybe the situation isn’t as bad as Rachel made it out to be and Lisa is on the road to recovery. In that case his presence is superfluous.

Nonetheless, now that he’s here he’d do well to check that everything is under control, so, suppressing his desire to run, he goes to the front door and rings the doorbell. The woman who opens the door is not Lisa, although she resembles her: she’s short, slim, and dark haired, but softer
and less energetic. She smiles at him politely, uttering an enquiring hello.

After the first shock has died down, a myriad of possibilities flash through his mind. Julia — if it’s her, but he’s pretty sure that it is — hasn’t recognised him. He could say he has come to the wrong place, turn around, and depart. Or he could pretend to be someone else, like Lisa’s … what exactly? Colleague or employee? Or an insurance rep going from door to door?

“Um,” he says, reviewing and discarding one or two opening lines.

His hesitation, unfortunately, has lasted for too long. Rachel, appearing behind Julia, says, “Who —? Oh, hi, Pete!”

Julia’s expression changes from a friendly smile to a puzzled frown. From there it morphs into dull recognition. “You!”

“Yes, I …” He scratches his eyebrow with his thumbnail. “Rachel said you weren’t coming.”

Julia contemplates him, breathing heavily. Her self-control, however, is better than her sister’s. After a moment she moves away from the door, beckoning for him to come inside. He follows, grimacing at Rachel as he passes her. Rachel gives him a sympathetic smile.

Lisa appears at the door of her bedroom in pyjamas, her hair a mess. She takes one look at him, says, “Oh, God!” and retreats into her bedroom again.

“Rachel, would you give us a minute, please?” Julia asks.

Rachel pulls a face, but wheels herself into the living room. Julia leads the way into the kitchen and motions him to a chair. She sits down opposite him. He doesn’t say anything; the less he says, the less likely he is to put his foot in it good and proper. Besides, there isn’t much you can say to someone you nearly killed. ‘Sorry’ doesn’t really cut it in such cases, he finds.

Julia seems to find long silences unnerving. “Lisa said she was fine and that Rachel was just being dramatic, but she sounded — odd, and then, when you called, I realised something must be really off, so I fixed things at home and came.”

He nods.

“I haven’t seen Lisa like this since, oh, Rachel’s accident.”

He nods again, not because he has any idea what state Lisa was in after Rachel’s ‘accident’, but because his teeth are clamped down on his tongue. But he registers that this isn’t the first time that Lisa has crashed this badly.

“What happened?” Julia finally asks.

He shrugs. He could make an educated guess, but he’d rather not enlighten her sister, who isn’t his biggest fan as it is.

“She was fine until she came back from Paris,” Julia continues.

“Was she?” he asks, not because he doubts his own culpability in this, but because it doesn’t seem likely that his asshattery in and of itself could have transformed Lisa from perfect health into a cast member of *The Walking Dead*.

Julia takes her time to answer. He likes that; it isn’t often that people try to figure out the truth
instead of spouting assumptions that they make based on their prejudices and preconceptions. “She was run down before she left,” Julia finally admits. “It was one of the reasons we encouraged her to go to Paris. We thought a few days away from here would help her to unwind and get a perspective on things.”

“What ‘things’?” It can’t just have been moving house. There’s no perspective to be had on that; it needs to be done, that’s all there is to it.

“Oh, everything,” Julia says with a vague wave of her hand. Her face says, *If you don’t know, I’m not about to tell you.* That’s interesting. So something has been going on over and above Wilson’s grand marriage schemes and the disruption that buying a house and moving into it causes.

Lisa comes in, dressed in yoga pants and a baggy sweatshirt, with her hair tied back. Other than that she has made no concession to being in society. She sits down between them.

Julia rises. “Are you hungry?”

Lisa shakes her head.

“You have to eat and drink something,” Julia insists.

“Cup of tea,” Lisa says, leaning her head on her hand.

“Do you … want to take a shower while I fix your tea?” Julia asks delicately. She has a point; Lisa looks as though hygiene hasn’t been a primary concern for a few days.

Lisa shakes her head. “If he doesn’t like the way I look, he can leave. Actually, he can leave, period!”

That’s fine with him; it’s not as though he was eager to come, nor did he expect to be greeted with open arms and a welcome parade. A cup of coffee obviously isn’t a possibility either: Julia pointedly ignored him when she offered Lisa sustenance. But hey, there’s more than one coffee shop at the airport, and drinking coffee in Julia’s company won’t improve its taste. So he pushes back his chair and rises.

Julia looks up at him and smiles awkwardly. “Thanks for coming,” she says. Lisa doesn’t even look up.

He doesn’t quite know what to say to that, so he just nods and leaves the room.

Rachel is watching television in the living room; in passing he says by way of a farewell, “Do your bowel programme!” (It’s a safe bet that she hasn’t done it yet.)

She pulls a face and doesn’t move, so he grabs the remote, switches the television off, and places the remote out of her reach on the bookshelf next to the television set. Then, oblivious to her wails, he limps out. Shit, phantom pain! It hasn’t bothered him in — oh, about two years, he estimates. He’d touch Lisa up for a scrip for something with a bit of punch, but today probably isn’t the day for it. He’s going to have to sit this out.

When he opens the front door, there’s a van parked at the curb in front of the house and a deliveryman with a box is coming up the path.

“Groceries!” Pete yells back into the house.

Julia appears. “I didn’t order anything,” she says.
“I did,” Pete says.

There’s a bit of a scrimmage at the door: the deliveryman is trying to make someone take the box, Pete is attempting to get past him, and Julia is scrambling for her purse instead of taking the box. Lisa comes into the entryway, but makes no effort to assist anyone.

“It’s paid for,” Pete says to Julia. The deliveryman finally dumps the box down at his feet so he can’t get out the door, and waits expectantly.

“Why’d you order food?” Lisa asks, scowling at Pete.

“Because Rachel said there’s no food and you guys haven’t been eating.” Duh!

Julia squeezes past him to slip the deliveryman a tip, a satisfactory one judging by his polite wishes that they have a pleasant day.

“We won’t,” Pete barks at him.

The deliveryman stares at him.

Pete spells it out. “We won’t have a nice day.”

Julia, to her credit, doesn’t even blink. “Thank you very much,” she says to the deliveryman. “Have a nice day, too.” She closes the door on the deliveryman before Pete can manage to push past her and get outside.

Lisa calls in the general direction of the living area, where Rachel is still whining about the TV remote. “Rachel, stop wailing! Why’d you say we didn’t have any food?”

“Coz we didn’t!” Rachel wheels herself into the entryway to stare at the box. “We didn’t have lunch yesterday.”

“I fixed you a cheese sandwich,” Lisa says, looking guilty.

“That isn’t proper food!” Rachel says sulkily. “You’re supposed to cook. And there wasn’t anything decent in the fridge. No milk either.”

“There is food in the house,” says Lisa, opening the box and peering inside. “There’s a loaf of bread in the kitchen, cheese and butter in the fridge, a few frozen meals in the freezer, and some UHT milk on a shelf in the pantry.” She takes out a carton of milk. “We have about five of those in the pantry already.”

Well, he ordered five more, just to be on the safe side, so now she has ten.

“That’s milk?” Rachel says.

“We normally get fresh milk,” Lisa says, “but yeah, that’s milk.” She drops the milk back into the box, rises, and goes back into the kitchen.

Pete, after calculating what this trip has cost him so far (plane fare, cab, groceries, and pizza), glares at Rachel, who backs her wheelchair away. “I’ll do my bowel programme now,” she says to no one in particular.

“Rachel,” Julia calls, “you did everything right.” (Maybe she’d like to pay her share of the costs he incurred?)
Rachel looks at him for confirmation. (Since when is he a moral authority in this household?)

“Yeah, you did fine,” he says, nodding. We mucked up, he adds mentally. Whether Rachel’s pessimistic take on the food situation was warranted or not is pretty much beside the point; Lisa’s state is dire enough to warrant Rachel’s panicked reaction. “But you still have to do your bowel programme.”

When Rachel is out of earshot Julia turns to him. “Since you’re here anyway … what’s your opinion?” She tips her head towards the kitchen.

He leans against the wall. “You’re asking me about Lisa?” (He doubts she’s interested in his opinion on the kitchen décor.)

Julia flushes. Then she says, “Lisa trusts your medical opinion.”

He shrugs. “This doesn’t require an expert. She’s having a medium to severe depressive episode.”

“Shouldn’t she be … doing something about it?”

“Exercise. Medication. Therapy. Whatever rocks her boat. She has a therapist, doesn’t she?”

“I don’t know whether she’s seeing her.” Julia’s expression says, Do something!

“Oh well, therapy’s overrated,” he says flippantly. “Besides, you slammed the phone down on me not twenty-four hours ago. What changed?”

Julia heaves a long sigh. “Now it’s about Lisa, not about me. I can’t leave her here by herself while she’s in that state, can I?” she asks. He shakes his head. “I need your help to make her come with me, because I can’t stay here, and she won’t listen to me. She has never listened to me.” She trains soft grey eyes on him. “You owe me, you know.”

He realises that her softness and her overt ability to smooth over rough situations are deceptive. She’s every bit as manipulative as her sister, if not more so. She has appealed to his professional pride, his chivalry (she can’t know it’s non-existent), and his guilt, all within a bare minute. He couldn’t have done better himself if he’d tried. So he follows her into the kitchen a second time and looms over Lisa, who is listlessly poking a spoon into a yoghurt cup.

“You can’t stay here by yourself and Wilson isn’t returning till next weekend. Take a few days off and go with your sister,” he says.

“I can’t,” Lisa says, not even looking up. “I’ll lose my job if I do.”

“You’ll lose your job if you call in sick?” Julia says, with a hint (but only a very small hint) of incredulity.

“I had roughly four months of sick leave this past year, and I took personal days for the move,” Lisa says to her sister. “And you know what Ryan thinks.”

“What does Ryan think?” Pete asks, because he doesn’t know Philadelphia Central’s current dean of medicine’s state of mind.

“That I’m conspiring against him. He’d love an excuse to fire me, and if I call in sick again, my department will fall apart, giving him the excuse he needs.”

“Are you conspiring against him?”
Lisa stares at him blankly. “Of course not. Where would that get me? I’m not a complete moron, you know.”

“So either he’s paranoid or you’re paranoid,” Pete says, considering the likelihood of the second option.

“He’s paranoid — but he can afford to be. What does he care whether I’m really conspiring against him? By firing me he’ll set an example, so that no one will dare to challenge his authority for a long time. It’s a win for him, no matter what.” She lifts the spoon out of the cup and watches as a big blob of yoghurt drips off the end of the spoon back into the cup. It doesn’t look as though she intends to eat any of it any time soon.

Lisa’s interpretation makes sense. He turns to Julia. “How long can you stay?”

Julia looks worried. “I can’t. Even if I take a few personal days, there’s my mother.”

He frowns at her. “You’re married, three teens. You’re not needed there. They can look after Granny and after themselves.”

Julia flushes angrily, but her tone is neutral as she says, “No, they can’t. I mean, they can look after themselves, but my mother needs a diplomatic hand and a lot of attention. It’s tight enough as it is with both Rob and me working now.”

“She means that Mom walks off and gets lost, and then yells at everyone for changing the street layout and disguising the house,” Lisa says dully. “And she goes out of her way to rile Rob. She accuses him of stealing her money, reviling her to her friends — as though she had any! — and turning the boys against her, but they can’t stand her guts because she’s always criticising them.”

“It’s not that bad,” Julia says.

“It is, and you’re a masochist,” Lisa replies.

“The boys love her, even if they are a bit stretched at the moment, and Rob knows better than to —”

“Care facility,” Pete says succinctly. “It’ll only get worse, you know. You’re not doing anyone a favour by playing the martyr.”

“I don’t want …” Julia begins before correcting herself. “Even if I started looking for a care facility, that wouldn’t solve our present problem.”

He’s inclined to say that it isn’t his problem, but chances are that she’ll just remind him that he owes both her and the absent Rob big time. So instead he asks, “Can you take Rachel?”

“And leave Lisa alone?” Julia asks doubtfully.

“I’ll stay till Wilson comes back,” Pete says, hoping he can get hold of Wilson and make him return earlier than planned.

“I’m not deaf,” Lisa says morosely. “And I’m fine. I don’t need a babysitter.” Her tone is so much like Rachel’s that in a different context it would be funny. Pete and Julia roll their eyes in unison, a short moment of bonding before Julia remembers that she doesn’t like him.

Julia rises. “I’ll get Rachel ready,” she says to no one in particular as she leaves the kitchen. It strikes Pete that she has avoided voicing an opinion on leaving her sister in his care. She’s leaving
the decision entirely to Lisa.

Lisa hasn’t moved. She’s staring down at the table, as though the grained wood holds the answer to the questions of life. He folds his hands on the tabletop and leans in to rest his chin on them, so that he’s peering up at her.

“This has happened before,” he states.

She doesn’t look up. “Yes. When Rachel was in hospital. I snapped out of it; I’ll snap out of this again too. I just have to …” Her voice trails off; her finger draws a pattern on the table.

“Last time, how long did it take before you ‘snapped out of it’?” he asks, his intonation painting the quotation marks.

“Did you stay by yourself or with your sister?”

More silence. Then, “You don’t have to stay. I can manage.”

Oh no, she can’t. He’s pretty sure about that. He’s stuck now, unless he can persuade her to depart with Julia. “Why’d you tell Julia you were fine when you talked to her last night?” he finally asks. If she hadn’t done that, Julia would have come and taken over, and he’d never have come here.

Her nails scrape across the table, setting his teeth on edge. “What was I supposed to tell her? ‘Dear Sis, you already have to shoulder the entire burden of dealing with Mom, but hey, wouldn’t you like to pull me out of the rut I’ve gotten myself stuck in? Remember that guy you warned me about, the one who nearly killed us all? Well, he not only talked me out of half my liver, sabotaging my career in the process, he’s also screwed me over big time again. So drop your job and abandon your family, like you always do when your sister screws up her life.’ Sounds like an attractive proposition, doesn’t it?”

“You’re blaming me,” he says heavily.

Now she does look at him, with dark rings under her eyes. “No,” she finally says. “No, I don’t blame you. What happened in Paris was just the straw that broke this camel’s back, and that’s as much on me as on you. I blame myself for believing that you care when you don’t. I do that all the time. I look into those soulful blue eyes and tell myself that what I see there is real, that it exists. But it’s a figment of my imagination. I’m an idiot, but that isn’t your fault. I should know better, should always have known better.” She rises abruptly, almost tipping over her chair in the process. “I have to talk to Rachel, explain to her …”

He doesn’t like the way her sentences trail off. He also doesn’t like the way he’s feeling. She says she doesn’t blame him, but no matter which way he turns her words, there’s hurt and disappointment and contempt dripping off them. Maybe he is who she perceives him to be: someone with so little empathy and such a low level of awareness that he can’t be expected to fulfil expectations of any kind, someone with an emotional disability who therefore gets the maximum handicap for the course. The alternative to her perception of him isn’t any more flattering, namely that he knew his actions would hurt Wilson and Lisa, but that he nevertheless chose to do what he did anyway, letting them pay the price for his policy of avoidance. Is he a sociopath?

Now that he comes to think of it, it’s odd that he has never asked himself this question. (Or maybe he has, before his ‘Pete Barnes’ days.) He sees himself as an eccentric with a rational take on life and a tendency to shun dumb people (meaning most of the world’s population), but Antisocial Personality Disorder? He goes through the ICD-10 list (as much of it as he can remember).
Callousness towards the feelings of others: Uh, check, he supposes.
Disregard for social norms, rules, etc., etc.: Double check. (Yeah, but those norms are not rational! You have to be a moron to believe that sticking to them gets you anywhere.)
Something about maintaining relationships (he can’t remember the exact wording): There’s too little data to evaluate that one, but that could be a check too. He has no idea how he handled family relationships when his parents were still alive, but judging by his Mayfield notes, visits were few and far between — not good. His relationship with Gail ended because of circumstances, not because he failed to maintain it — not bad. From what he could glean from his Mayfield notes, however, he wrecked the one with Stacy — uh-oh! — but it lasted for five years before he managed to do so — phew!. A stately period of time, in his opinion. So, no check there.
Immunity to feelings of guilt: No check mark there. He’s feeling guilty as hell at the moment and will probably continue to do so for the next, oh, ten minutes or so.
Rationalising bad behaviour or blaming others for it: No. … Leastways, he doesn’t think so. His behaviour is rational, so he doesn’t need to rationalise it. … Damn, that might be a check too.

There are one or two other symptoms on the list, but if he remembers correctly, three check marks make a diagnosis. Ergo, he’s a sociopath. Or if he isn’t, he’s close enough to pass for one, because even if he doesn’t fulfil enough criteria to be an officially diagnosed sociopath, he has some of the nastier character traits. Besides, there’s no clear cut-off mark, no definitive marker like those of genetic diseases.

He eats up Lisa’s yoghurt (ugh, low fat!), and then rises gingerly, taking care not to irritate his leg, and hobbles into the living area. It’s empty, with bright sunlight streaking in through the windows, highlighting the dust motes in the air. He examines the surfaces of the shelves and the coffee table: there’s about a ten-day layer of dust on both, meaning that they haven’t been cleaned since Lisa moved in. A babysitter isn’t the only amenity Lisa has failed to organise. It’s going to be a dire week.

Julia comes out of Rachel’s bedroom pulling a trolley suitcase behind her. “Rachel’s still in the bathroom,” she says over her shoulder to Lisa. “Do you have spare catheterisation kits for her anywhere else?”

“In the utility room. It’s next to my bedroom.” Lisa, who has followed her, waves vaguely in the direction of her bedroom.

Julia looks at him expectantly as she passes him, so he follows her to the utility room.

“I know you’re going to talk about me,” Lisa says as they exit the living area, but it’s a token protest.

Once they’re in the utility room, a small shelf-lined chamber with no natural light, Julia turns to face him. Her expression, puzzled at first, suddenly clears. “Now I know why I didn’t recognise you when I first saw you: you’ve shaved.”

He rubs his chin, thrown off balance by her non sequitur. But there’s no sense in beating about the bush. Julia must be crapping her pants at the thought of him alone with her darling sister. “You didn’t drag me off to a dark corner to tell me that. Worried about leaving Lisa with me?”

“No. I mean … I wanted to ask you if you’re sure you can do this.” She flicks her wrist to indicate the direction in which they left Lisa. “If you … can’t take it, let me know.”

That is — unexpected. “Depression isn’t Ebola. I can handle this.” It entails kicking Lisa out of bed
in the morning, making her take a shower every now and then, and ensuring that she exercises. He’ll check on her therapist, find out what medication she’s on, and maybe get someone competent to take a look.

“Are you sure?” Julia asks.

He looks at her down his nose. “Is there anything I need to know? Some complication? A dirty family secret? Does she turn into a werewolf at full moon?”

Julia shakes her head, almost but not quite smiling. “No, of course not.” He can sense that she’s weighing her words, wondering what to say next. “It’s just that you don’t cope well with medical stress in your personal circle.” She draws an imaginary circle in the air with her index finger to illustrate her point.

He draws himself up, feeling decidedly misunderstood. He did just fine during Wilson’s run-in with cancer, which was a lot more ‘stressful’ than anything Lisa has come up with so far. “What makes you say that?”

Julia sighs. “That time when you thought Lisa had terminal cancer: you were conspicuously absent. Don’t deny it; I was there, so I know.”

She waits for a reaction, so he says, “Well, I don’t know.”

“Oh. Sorry, I forgot.” Julia has this look that people get when they’re confronted with a disability, the ‘pretending everything’s normal while taking sly peeks at the disability’ look.

“How long was she this way the last time this happened?” he asks.

“Difficult to say,” Julia says. “It was when Rachel was first hospitalised, and everything was terribly hectic and chaotic, so we didn’t catch it at first. When we did, she was put on medication and improved rapidly. But when I asked her just now about going back on medication, she said something about her liver. It’s been over half a year; shouldn’t her liver be back to normal?”

“Yes,” he says. “Do you know anything about that?” He should definitely look into that while he’s here.

“Only that she’s been going for regular check-ups. There was something about a consult with the Mayo Clinic in Jackson.” Julia hesitates. “She keeps her medical files on her laptop,” she finally says, turning away and fingering one of the boxes on the shelf in front of her.

“You’re advising me to hack into your sister’s account and sneak a look at her medical files?” he asks, pretending to be outraged.

“No,” Julia says. “See, I don’t know how serious her condition is, but if … if something goes wrong and I could have prevented it, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“So that’s yes, you are advising me to hack her computer,” he says drily.

Julia turns around again to face him, leaning against the shelves. “You don’t have to. Get her to show the files to you. She listens to you.”

He wishes he shared her confidence in his superpowers, because he’d rather not have to fight Lisa all the way during the coming week.

Lisa appears at the door to the utility room. “I don’t want to break up anything intimate, but Rachel
has completed her bowel programme,” she says. “Catheterisation kits are in the box right in front of your nose, Julia.”

“Oh, right,” Julia says, looking guilty and grabbing the box. “I’ll put Rachel in the car, shall I?”

Lisa leans against the doorjamb watching Julia as she goes to get Rachel, then she turns to Pete. “Fraternising with the enemy,” she says. “Making a pact with the devil.”

He isn’t sure whether she’s referring to Julia or to him. “You look better already,” he says.

“A week without Rachel,” Lisa says, expelling air in a huff that blows a few stray locks out of her face. “It’s like a vacation.”

“You haven’t exactly been taking care of her lately,” he points out.

“Do you have any idea how much work Rachel is even when I’m ‘not taking care of her’?” Lisa asks, sketching the quotation marks in the air. “She may not have been getting gourmet meals or doing her physio routine the past week, but I’ve still had to get her out of bed, to school and back, help her take showers, catheterise her when she’s too tired to do it herself, and so on.”

Actually, he knows. He experienced a week of it himself last fall; he had Tanja to take care of the grosser stuff and do most of the cooking, and that student (he has forgotten her name) to do some of the school drop-offs and pick-ups, but even so the mornings — two hours of getting a very grouchy Rachel through her hygiene programme and ready for school — were excruciating.

“Lisa, we’re ready to go,” Julia calls.

He watches from a safe distance while Julia and Lisa take Rachel to Julia’s car and transfer her to the passenger seat. Rachel is quiet and subdued. It’s anyone’s guess what she’s thinking, but at least she isn’t making a fuss about going with Julia. Then again, she has probably figured out that she’s getting out of school, so it’s a win for her. Once they’re out of sight Lisa returns to the house and walks back to her bedroom without sparing him a glance.

“Shower,” he calls at her back. She hesitates, her shoulders once more slumped in exhaustion, but then she continues on her way, ignoring him. He stands there, staring at her bedroom door long after she has closed it behind her. Maybe, just maybe, Julia, with her three teens, semi-demented mother, and crippled niece, is getting the better deal.
Reorientation

*How can something go from 'breezy' to 'pretty shitty' within the space of a fortnight?*

Wilson stands at the window of his room staring out at the road flickering in the afternoon heat, at the houses dropping away down the street, at the blue sky streaked with nimbostratus. It's a lovely early summer afternoon in Los Angeles; too hot for his taste, but better than the rain that will soon hit Philly according to the weather forecast. This isn't Malibu Beach or Beverley Hills, but there's no denying that the people living here are a lot more chillaxed than along the East Coast. Two days with Amy and her fiancé, and already he's feeling overdressed and uncool, and he can't even begin to count the number of surfboards he has seen strapped to car roofs. More to the point, he's feeling disappointed and hopeless. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is working out as planned.

It started off with House sabotaging his nuptial plans. He'd taken that little setback in his stride at the time, since Cuddy's consent hadn't been a given anyway — and the more he thinks about it, the more he wonders that he was so sanguine about his odds. His only excuse is that he was too fatigued at the time to calculate them realistically. He'd had it all mapped out: they'd be a little family, and if he died during Joel's childhood, Joel would still have Cuddy and Rachel. Nevertheless, even though his heart came out of the fiasco pretty much intact, his plans for providing for Joel's future lost some of their momentum.

After an initial phase of glumness he'd come to the conclusion that he needn't abandon every aspect of the scheme. Cuddy, other than making cryptic remarks about House's level of asshattery, hadn't seemed fazed or embarrassed by Wilson's romantic aspirations (if one could call them such). She'd picked them up, given them a good shake, and then tossed them into oblivion, and that had been that. So, he'd moved on to Plan B — which maybe he should have implemented right from the start, because if he had, he'd probably have been spared Cuddy's revelation and having to deal with House. Plan B entailed instating Cuddy as Joel's future guardian in the case of his death and getting Amy's consent for the arrangement. Not a major change, given that he would have needed Amy's consent for 'Plan A: Adoption by Cuddy' anyway, the only drawback being that if Amy chose to protest against Plan B at any time before or after his death, chances were that she'd prevail in court, whereas Plan A would have taken matters out of her hands the moment she consented to an adoption. That made Plan B considerably fairer — for Amy. (Fairness towards Amy, however, has ceased to be a consideration of importance in his eyes …)

And then Plan B combusted in a mess of allegations, confessions and confusion — in short, in typical House-ian chaos. House, not he, is the father of the little boy gurgling in the travelling cot next to him. It took Wilson longer to recover from the shock of losing his paternity than from the disappointment of not marrying Cuddy (perhaps because it wasn't that much of a disappointment); in fact, he isn't sure he has recovered as yet. He still sees Joel as his son. And he still feels betrayed, by House, by Amy, by Cuddy, and by life. He, Wilson, wants a child — he has wanted one for a long time, even though he dismissed his desire for progeny as being both unrealistic and selfish — and *House*, who'd sooner keep roaches than kids, is the one who gets a son, a healthy, loveable, perfect little guy. Karma sucks big time!

Quite apart from the emotional roller coaster ride that he's been through, it has put him into a tight spot regarding Joel's future. Were Joel his biological son, he'd feel bad about planning for his future in a manner that basically banishes Amy onto the outer fringes of Joel's planetary system. Nevertheless, he'd go through with it, telling himself that since Amy won't or can't commit herself to Joel, it's his duty as the boy's father to ensure that Joel has a stable childhood. That line of reasoning has collapsed. It's one thing for a father to make plans for his biological son that
marginalise the boy's biological mother; it's another for James Evan Wilson, a man who is no relative whatsoever and whose custody is based on false premises, to make decisions that potentially remove not one, but both biological parents from the scene.

One day Joel will have to know the truth, and then what will he tell him? Can he say, 'My boy, I'm not your father, but I chose to raise you miles away from your mother, and should I die, you'll be placed in the care of a woman who doesn't think highly of your mother and can't stand your biological dad's guts. I took it upon myself to make these decisions in your name and your biological mother's (who, BTW, doesn't know I'm not your father) because … um, because …'?

No, not really an option. Leastways, that was what he thought when he arrived in LA. After two days in the company of Amy and her partner — soon-to-be husband, if she is to be believed, but Wilson can't detect signs of imminent nuptials — he's revising his opinions once more. He came with the avowed intention of facilitating Amy's contact with Joel, because if he isn't the father and House intends to shirk his duties, then Joel should at least see as much of his mother as possible. House would tear his reasoning to pieces, saying that it made no difference to Joel whether Wilson was truly his father or not, but — House is no legal authority and his grasp of morals can be sketchy. Wilson has a sneaky suspicion that obtaining and retaining child custody under false pretences is tantamount to kidnapping, and there's no doubt that he'd never have obtained primary custody or parental rights if the judge hadn't believed that he was Joel's biological father.

Sadly, after two days at Amy and Tyler's place, Wilson is convinced that even if he moved next door to them (which the powers above prevent!), Joel wouldn't see much more of his mother than if he stayed in Philly. Amy's attitude towards her son is ambivalent at the best, and the last vestiges of maternal concern disappear completely when Tyler frowns his disapproval at her. She holds Joel every now and then, whenever Wilson is busy and Joel gets restless (and Wilson has taken care to appear busy at regular intervals to facilitate bonding), but she doesn't offer to play with him, feed him, change his diaper, bathe him, or put him to bed, let alone spend any time with him by herself. Wilson is as much a single parent here as he is in Philadelphia, if not more so, because in Philadelphia he has the babysitter and Cuddy. Nor have Amy and Tyler gone out of their way to accommodate him; the living area and the kitchen aren't baby proof, and Tyler leaves everything lying around where Joel can get at it. Joel isn't mobile as yet; the best he can do at present is turn from his back onto his stomach, but it's a matter of days rather than weeks before he starts rolling everywhere, and then he won't need to have beer cans, TV remotes, empty chips bags, etc., within his radius of action. Wilson would like to believe that Amy and Tyler would be more accommodating if it were necessary, but so far they haven't indicated in word or deed that Joel's safety and comfort are any concern of theirs. They're going on with their lives as if Wilson and Joel weren't there.

Joel, who has been lying on his back, rolls onto his stomach. Stemmed on his elbows and peering myopically around him, he burps, and a blob of pureed carrot drips onto the blanket.

"Gah," he says, looking up at Wilson.

"Great!" Wilson says heavily. "Just great." He picks Joel up, takes a wipe, and cleans his chin. Joel rewards his efforts by turning his face away, hiding it in Wilson's shoulder.

"The Orange Badge of Fatherhood," Wilson says, surveying the stain on his shirt. "I'm very grateful to be the recipient of this singular honour, and I'd like to thank my family for their unfailing support, especially my son Joel, who never hesitated to challenge and encourage me."

On hearing his name, Joel breaks into a toothless grin. Wilson reluctantly grins back; it's going to
take more than a smile to lighten his sombre mood. "You know, you're a loser," he says, stubbing
Joel's dimpled cheek with his nose. "You have two healthy and able parents, yet neither of them
seems interested in raising you. Now you're stuck with me."

The front door bangs and voices drift over from the living area. Amy and Tyler must be back from
their grocery shopping.

"Show time," Wilson says to Joel, carrying him into the living area. Tyler is carrying grocery bags
in from the car while Amy is sorting the contents into the refrigerator.

"Do you want to eat the hamburgers today or tomorrow?" she asks Tyler.

"Don't care," he says, walking over to the television and switching it on. "Shoot, the ball game has
started already. Had a good day?" he asks Wilson in passing.

"Yeah, and you?" Wilson responds. His day was as uneventful as the one before. Besides, Tyler
tends to ask questions without waiting for the answer.

"The usual. Fat old ladies who think that if they shake their booty to Amy Grant twice a week,
they'll look like twenty again." Tyler, who is a fitness trainer (or 'personal trainer', as he prefers to
call himself), is bridging the time till his career in Hollywood takes off by working in the fitness
room of a country club in Pomona. He sprawls on the couch. "But it pays, so I'm not complaining.
And I get to meet people who count. There's this MILF who comes regularly; her old man's a
producer ..." Wilson zones out. Tyler's tales are full of people who are eager to further his career. So far, their
supposed willingness hasn't resulted in concrete benefits.

"Hey, baby, wanna watch the game with me?" Tyler shouts to Amy.

"In a sec. James, would you like something to drink?"

"No, thanks."

Amy comes over with a beer for Tyler and orange juice for herself and sits down next to Tyler. He
puts a possessive arm around her, staring at Wilson challengingly. Wilson sighs inwardly. Those
two kids don't seem to realise that he has no interest whatsoever in Amy. His sole agenda is Joel,
but they're so self-absorbed that Joel's needs don't even register. Joel is being fed, burped, and
bathed, he has someone to take care of him, so why waste two thoughts on him?

Tyler is such a kid himself that he can't imagine that another guy might not be interested in getting
a pretty woman (his woman) into bed. In fact, if he did realise it, he'd probably feel insulted by
Wilson's lack of interest in his sexual property. Tyler likes showing off his personal assets: his
perfectly formed abs, his girlfriend, his job — he talks endlessly about it when there isn't a game
on television, so Wilson is very thankful for baseball. And there are Tyler's aspirations, his career,
his financial prospects. Wilson tries to remember if he was like that at the age of twenty-five. Third
year of med school; yes, he'd been a pain too. It had been all about getting the ideal residency at
the best hospital and rotations in departments that carried a lot of clout, and boasting about all that
to less fortunate students. Naturally he'd been subtler about it than Tyler, but he must have pissed
people off big time in his years at med school.

Wilson makes a bottle for Joel — Amy doesn't join him in the kitchen niche even though he's
juggling the boy and the formula — and then sits down in an armchair to feed him.

"Doesn't he eat anything else?" Tyler asks.
Wilson glances at him, trying to figure out the intention behind the question. "I've started him on solids, but he's not enthused. Mostly he spits out whatever I feed him with a spoon or he swats at the spoon."

Tyler nods wisely. "Gotta feed them right, otherwise they're preprogrammed to be obese. You wouldn't believe how many kids are obese these days. You don't sweeten that bottle, do you?"

"No," Wilson says shortly. "It's formula, so it's foolproof. Even you could make it."

Either sarcasm is wasted on Tyler or he's wise enough to ignore it. "Great," Tyler says. "Amy, you better get some advice from James before he leaves."

Wait, what? Do they think he'll leave Joel with them when he goes? Are they so casual about the kid because they think they have all the time in the world to enjoy his company? Wilson's stomach gives a nasty little lurch. If Amy cuts up stiff, will he be able to convince a judge that Joel has already formed a close bond with him? Oh God, she could demand a paternity test, and if she does, he's screwed!

Amy blouses. "I … I wasn't going to tell him," she says to Tyler.

Tell him what? Wilson's stomach is making odd churning noises.

Tyler's arm tightens around Amy. "Amy's pregnant," he says, pride and possessiveness warring in his voice.

"Pregnant," Wilson echoes stupidly. Joel is barely five months old and Amy is pregnant again?

"Yeah," Tyler says with studied casualness. "We're starting a family. No sense in waiting till we're old."

Okay, so he did understand Wilson's dig earlier on. Wilson decides to ignore Tyler. "You're pregnant," he says to Amy. She nods. "Is that wise, so soon after Joel? And you aren't even settled yet."

Tyler interrupts him. "It isn't like she'll have to look after your kid and ours at the same time. And we are settled, sort of. I've got a good job, and I've had a few offers with potential, great potential. My career is kick-starting right now." Amy looks down and doesn't say anything.

Wilson registers that Tyler refers to Joel as 'Wilson's' kid, as though Amy wasn't his mother. He also notes that Tyler is speaking for Amy. He addresses Amy directly again. "Amy," he says gently. "You couldn't cope with Joel. Do you really think a baby is what you need right now?"

Amy looks up. "Oh, that," she says. "It'll be different this time. We … I was stupid before; I shouldn't have had Joel. … Tyler and me, we've known each other forever. It's gonna work. We want a family together, right, baby?"

"Right," Tyler affirms, giving Wilson another challenging stare. "You can't blame her for panicking when she first had Joel: she was on her own, the kid was screaming non-stop, you were dying. But I'm here to take care of her now."

"Where were you when she was trying to cope with Joel?" Wilson thinks. "What about Joel?" he asks out loud.

"What about him?" Tyler says, a hint of aggression in his voice.
"Where does he figure in your plans?" Wilson asks, willing himself to remain calm and patient.

"He's got you," Amy says, innocent eyes trained on him. "You're doing great!" she adds encouragingly.

He's aware of that, but his question was aimed at how she intended to fulfil her obligations, not on whether he was fulfilling his.

"I won't really have time for him," Amy says. She continues hurriedly, "Not with another baby to take care of. I'm so grateful that you're — you're being so good about this."

Wilson stares hard at her. She has the grace to flush and look down again.

"You've got a girlfriend, though, to help you, don't you?" Tyler remarks.

Wilson raises his eyebrows. Where'd Tyler get that idea? "No," he says carefully.

"I thought you're moving into a big stone house with her," Tyler says, a hint of envy in his voice. The apartment that he and Amy are renting isn't exactly spick and span, and the neighbourhood isn't the kind where you'd willingly roam the streets at night.

"Oh, Cuddy," Wilson says. Maybe Amy told Tyler about Wilson's fake engagement to Cuddy, the ruse that allowed her to donate her liver to him. "Cuddy isn't my girlfriend. We're … just friends."

"You misunderstood that," Amy says to Tyler. "Dr Cuddy isn't James's type."

Good to know, Wilson thinks.

"They're more like buddies," Amy explains. "Besides," she adds, wrinkling her nose in distaste, "she's kinda bossy."

"Oh, a queer," Tyler says. "I get it. Not like you, all soft and cuddly." He and Amy exchange a long kiss.

Wilson doesn't like … . The list of his 'don't likes' is so long that he doesn't know where to begin. "She isn't a lesbian," he begins before catching himself. Cuddy's sexual orientation is beside the point and she doesn't need him to take up arms for her. What he needs to do is slap those two down. "But surprise, some women don't want to take up with a miserable old alcoholic with major health issues." In your face, Tyler Brand! You may think you're a great catch, but your girlfriend isn't exactly picky.

"She's helping you with the kid, though," Tyler says.

"Yes, and I have a babysitter."

"So you'll be fine even if Amy can't chip in, won't you?" It's a statement masked as a question. The message is clear: Tyler doesn't want Joel in Amy's life, and Amy will do whatever Tyler wants.

"Yes, I'll be fine," Wilson says. "This visit wasn't about me needing help. I wanted to give Amy an opportunity to catch up with Joel, that's all."

Tyler withdraws his arm from around Amy to pick up his can of beer. "I think a clean cut is best for everyone," he says.

For you, undoubtedly, Wilson thinks. "Amy?" he asks.
"Oh, I don't mind seeing Joel every now and then," she says quickly without looking at Tyler. "But __"

"But she can't help financially," Tyler butts in again. "She won't be working in the near future, and you can't expect me to pay for someone else's kid."

Wilson would like to smash his nose, but Tyler is about six inches taller than he is and he's all muscle and bone. "I don't need child support," he says, his voice as chilly as he can make it. "I'm returning to work on Monday."

"What, tomorrow?" Tyler asks. "I didn't know you're leaving that soon." There's no regret in his face or voice.

Wilson has already opened his mouth to correct him, but then he thinks better of it. There's no sense in staying: Amy doesn't want (or doesn't dare) to bond with Joel.

"Yes, I'm catching a flight this evening," he says, hoping he can reschedule his flight. If not, he'll move into a hotel. This has proven to be a complete waste of time and effort, and in a hotel he'll enjoy a higher level of comfort than in this tiny place with its iffy air-conditioning and loud traffic outside.

Amy looks surprised, Tyler pleased. Again, Wilson has to hold back. His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "We'll leave in half an hour. I hope that doesn't inconvenience you."

"No, that's okay," Tyler says. "We'll run you down to the airport."

Now that he has what he wants he can afford to be generous, Wilson guesses. "Thanks, but I've already ordered a cab," he lies. "I have to pack a few things." He looks around, but there's no clear space on the floor where he can put down a blanket for Joel, so he puts him down on the couch next to Amy. "Can you keep an eye on him while I pack?"

He's gone before Amy can object, into the guest room to call for a cab, pack his bags, and fold the travel cot. Then he gets his toothbrush and his shaver from the bathroom. When he returns Tyler blocks the way to the guest room, looming in the doorframe in all his muscled glory.

"I'll take your bags," he says, grabbing the travel cot and the smaller suitcase in one hand and Wilson's larger one in the other. "You take the kid."

He's out the door before Amy can object, into the guest room to call for a cab, pack his bags, and fold the travel cot. Then he gets his toothbrush and his shaver from the bathroom. When he returns Tyler blocks the way to the guest room, looming in the doorframe in all his muscled glory.

"I'll take your bags," he says, grabbing the travel cot and the smaller suitcase in one hand and Wilson's larger one in the other. "You take the kid."

He's out the door before Wilson can protest that he can manage, leaving Wilson with very mixed feelings. He's not supposed to exhaust himself or carry heavy items, two medical injunctions that are near to impossible to implement with an infant around, and he knows that if he plays the strong guy now, he'll regret it later. But having to be beholden to someone half his age with a muscle-to-brain ratio of 1000:1 irks. He grabs his jacket and a small bag with baby supplies and follows Tyler.

On the couch Amy is bent over Joel, talking to him but not quite touching him. Joel is watching her with wide-open eyes, giving her a toothless grin as she croons at him. It's the closest Amy has come to natural interaction with her son since his arrival. When she notices Wilson she quickly draws back and rises.

"Watch out," Wilson says. "He can roll off the sofa."

Amy jumps a little, turns to Joel indecisively, then picks him up gingerly. She stretches out her arms to Wilson. "Go to Daddy," she says to Joel.
"You can hold him a little longer," Wilson offers.

"No, no, Tyler says you're leaving now."

Wilson debates whether to pretend to need to use the bathroom so as to facilitate mother-son-bonding, but then decides that it's futile. He nods and takes his son.

"Great," Amy says. She gives Joel a little artificial wave. "Bye-bye, Joel. See you soon!" Wilson gets a filial peck on the cheek.

Tyler is waiting outside at the curb. "When'd you say the cab is coming?"

Wilson makes a show of checking his watch. "Uh, in five minutes," he says, hoping that the cab will turn up by then.

"Good, coz I still wanted to talk to you," Tyler says. He looks down at Wilson as though sizing him up. "I'm just trying to do what's best for Amy."

Wilson can feel his chest constricting, his blood pounding in his head accompanied by a thudding in his ears. He notes that his fists are clenched, his knuckles shining white, his sparse arm muscles chorded.

Tyler must have noticed too, because his gaze drops. "Look, she was crying all through the last three months of the pregnancy, saying she shouldn't have kept the kid and that she'd made a giant mistake, and things didn't get any better after the little man was born. Amy's always been emotional, but this?" He trails off, shrugging expressively.

"You think another kid will fix the problem?" Wilson asks coldly.

"Dunno. But if she doesn't bond straightaway, I'm around to make sure she and the kid are okay."

Wilson looks pointedly from Tyler to Joel.

Tyler gets his meaning. He stiffens. "No offence, but there's just so much I'm prepared to do for another man's kid, and that guy is high maintenance. You should be grateful to me: I persuaded Amy to offer you the chance of taking him. She was all for having him adopted by strangers. Y'know, a childless couple or something."

"She couldn't have done that without my consent," Wilson points out.

"No?"

"No."

"Oh." Tyler digests that. "I didn't know that. She seemed sure she could."

"Now that we've gotten the question of gratitude out of the way, can we go back to disliking each other?" Wilson asks, mentally kicking himself the moment the words leave his mouth. Quite aside from the foolishness of provoking someone who is pumped full of steroids, he isn't benefitting Joel by antagonising his step-dad.

Tyler rolls his eyes. "Geez, if you're going to be that way! But to my way of thinking you're not gonna do Amy or Joel a favour by pushing this. She'll get attached to the kid, there'll be tears every time he leaves, and the long and short of it will be that she'll want him back."

The subtext is clear: if you want to keep your son, stay away.
"I'm not saying you should break off all contact," Tyler continues. "Just — keep the visits short, so Amy isn't pulled to and fro."

"Right, 'short'. Got it," Wilson says.

Tyler nods his approval.

"And how often do you think we should visit?" Wilson enquires with deceptive calm.

"Maybe … twice a year?" Tyler suggests, impervious to undercurrents.

And he can well afford to be, Wilson thinks. In Tyler's eyes, he's only half a man, out of shape, ageing, and dependent on immunosuppressants to stay alive. "Let me discuss this with Amy," he says.

"Sure. She won't say any different. I've cleared this with her." Tyler's indifference isn't pretence; if anything, it's smugly complacent.

Impotent fury bubbles up in Wilson. Why did he father a child with a woman who is shallow and utterly spineless, dominated by a bully of a boyfriend? Except, he didn't. House was the moron who rode him — correction, Joel — into this mess. Then again, Amy hasn't given any sign that she isn't okay with whatever Tyler decides in her name. It's definitely within the realms of possibility that she's letting Tyler do the dirty work for her, bouncing him out to the curb. If she wanted more contact with Joel, she could have told Wilson so sometime during his visit. But there's been no initiative on her part, no 'When will you be back?' or 'Shall we Skype sometime?' Much as Wilson would like to cast Tyler as the villain of the piece and Amy as the helpless victim waiting to be rescued — and wouldn't he just love to let House loose on Tyler's case! — the evidence sighted so far points to the conclusion that removing Tyler from the scene won't solve his problem.

Thankfully the cab pulls up at the curb before Wilson's frustration reaches the point where he'd deliberately provoke Tyler into beating him to a pulp. (He's beginning to get how House does that and why, but he still possesses last vestiges of sanity that tell him that emulating House in this respect is Not A Good Idea.) On the way to the airport he mentally berates himself for setting his expectations too high. He'd come to Los Angeles with the avowed intention of making Amy face the possibility of his early demise, from where he'd hoped to lead into the topic of custody for Joel. And secretly he'd also hoped to tackle the subject of Joel's true parentage. He hasn't managed to get any of these items onto Amy's agenda, let alone hold a meaningful discussion about them, and he doubts that this will change anytime soon. This wouldn't matter if he were hale and hearty and Joel's bio dad. Unfortunately, he really, really needs to make provisions for Joel soon, and in such a way that House isn't excluded. How the hell is he supposed to do that without Amy's cooperation? He has come out of this weekend without anything to show for it, no closer to resolving all those open issues than when he left Philadelphia.

There's no help for it; he can't sit around waiting for Amy to come to terms with her motherhood and his mortality. His (or rather, Cuddy's) liver could fail any day, and then he'll go down fast. He'll have to plan without Amy, no matter how unethical that is. What possibilities are open to him?

He supposes he could pressure House into doing a paternity test, confront Amy with the result, and force both of them to take a stance, but he doubts that the result will be felicitous. Both House and Amy tend to go into panic mode when cornered: House will probably run for the hills; it's anyone's guess what Amy will do, but so far her reaction to stress has been uniformly bad. Nope, honesty and openness will have to wait for a few more … years, Wilson estimates. Then there's his original plan, marrying Cuddy, which crumbled in an unappetising mess on the floor of a Parisian hotel.
lobby. He supposes he could resuscitate it, but the reason it collapsed in the first place still holds: House doesn't want his son in Cuddy's custody. Wilson actually gets that, regrettable though it is. Having to deal with your ex on a regular basis is difficult enough when the reason is a mutual child that already happens to be in the custody of that ex. Making House deal with his ex (whom he could otherwise well avoid) by placing his son in her care would be pushing it very hard indeed.

He needs an option that doesn't depend on Amy or involve Cuddy.

The next flight to Philly doesn't leave for another four hours. He's in Hudson's, getting Joel a new squishy book (Joel has chewed/sucked large chunks out of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, so no more board books until he shows the due amount of respect for the written word), when his eye falls on a teen vampire book, purple and silver with lots of glitter and sparkle. That must be the one Rachel was talking about, the one Cuddy refused to buy for her because it was 'age inappropriate'. It's among the Top Ten for 'Young Adults', whatever that may mean. It definitely doesn't mean him.

He picks it up and looks at the cover, smiling reminiscently at Rachel's enthusiastic rant. "*Wilson, the guy on the cover looks exactly like you — except he's much younger!*" She isn't all that wrong; he did look like that when he was in school. In fact, he has lost so much weight since his thymoma that he actually looks somewhat like that again. His hair is now streaked with grey and doesn't flop over his forehead sexily anymore (it still has to regrow to its original length), his cheeks are sunken rather than fashionably slim, and there's the slight matter of crow's feet around his eyes, but other than that he's still quite the chick magnet.

Joel whines impatiently.

"Sorry, *you're* the chick magnet," Wilson tells him. "I just bask in the rays reflected from your glory. But let me tell you that your dad, in his youth, was quite the heart throb. What, you don't believe me?"

Joel's whine escalates to a wail. He twists in his stroller, looking up at Wilson and stretching out his hands for whatever is distracting Wilson from attending to his needs here and now. Wilson, resigned, gives him the book. "Hold this while we find something for you," he says, pushing the stroller towards the children's section.

Joel clamps the book tightly to his chest, much to Wilson's relief. (Joel's newest pastime is dropping things on the ground and watching Wilson pick them up again.) Then he shortles, lowers his head, and — sinks his gums into the book.

"Oh, f-f-f-frick! If you've imprinted the cover with your gum marks, we'll have to buy it, young man." When Wilson pries the book from Joel's grasp, Joel bursts into a wail of utter bereavement.

"Drama queen!" Wilson mutters, casting furtive looks around him. Everyone in the shop is staring at him accusingly; he's a short step from having social services called on him. "Okay, take it. Take it and eat it, for all I care."

Joel clasps the book once more, uttering a series of satisfied *bahs* and *gahs*.

"Your reading choices leave much to be desired," Wilson informs him. "I know from whom you inherited your taste for the low and the trivial. But if you think I'm gonna watch *Twilight* with you, you have another think coming." He grabs a cloth book from the display and heads towards the cash register. Once there, Wilson jangles his keys in front of Joel's face, going, "Look at what I've got," in a voice that even he finds creepy — he sounds like the Child Catcher in *Chitti Chitti Bang Bang*, a figure that haunted his childhood nightmares. If Joel had any sense ... .
Luckily he doesn't. Letting go of the paperback — Wilson uses his free hand to stop its downward slide off the stroller — he lunges for the keys, which Wilson relinquishes.

"We've got signed copies, if you like," the salesperson says, scanning the vampire saga.

"Uh, no, that's okay," Wilson says. He's already regretting the wave of paternal guilt that's inducing him to buy the book in the first place. House would have taken the soggy specimen and shoved it between other books at the bottom of the pile, saying that copies which didn't get sold — and there was no way any shop could sell ten copies of such drivel! — would end up in landfills anyway, so it wouldn't matter whether the cover was damaged or not.

"Are you sure?" the cashier asks. "There's no extra charge. The author was here for a book reading a few weeks ago and signed any number of copies." That explains why the store is displaying the book so prominently. "Besides, this copy is damaged. I'll get you a new one." And before Wilson can protest, he's the owner of a brand-new signed copy of Separation (Part I of the Dracul High Chronicles).

"I don't need a bag, thank you," Wilson says to the assistant. "We'll, uh, eat them straightaway." He hands the cloth book to Joel, who promptly stuffs a corner into his mouth and starts sucking on it. Wilson clamps his new purchase between his teeth, scoops his keys up from the ground where Joel dropped them, takes the handles of the stroller, and pushes Joel out of the store. Once outside, he takes the book out of his mouth and subjects it to a close scrutiny. "Signed by the author, huh?" He flips it open and scans the fly leaf. The dedication is written in purple ink, the handwriting neat with little curls at the end of each word.

Hope you enjoy reading it!
Yrs, Melanie Robbins.

"Wait, who?" Wilson fast-forwards to the back flap where there's an author bio with photograph.

Melanie Robbins, he reads, has written a number of teen novels, two of which were nominated for ALA awards. She holds a degree in creative writing from Simmons College. She lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with two dogs and two daughters, and she loves reading, cooking, and jazz.

Yes, it's definitely her. Melanie Robbins, the girl of his high school dreams, who broke his heart into a thousand shards, sending him into the depths of despondency for the sum total of — two months.

"It's a sign," Wilson tells Joel, "that we're meant to go to Massachusetts. It's time you met your grandparents Wilson. You need family, even if it's only my dysfunctional bunch."

Which is why, two hours later, Joel and he are on a flight to Boston.
Boredom and Babysitting

Bullying Lisa into getting up in the morning and taking a shower is of little entertainment value. A chick, Pete decides, is only hot if she's acting like she's hot. There's nothing to inspire wet dreams in the way Lisa drags herself out of bed and into the bathroom, there's no titillating banter to accompany her progress, and there isn't even an eye roll when he asks whether her nightwear is a hand-me-down from her grandmother. When he recounts his trials and tribulations to Wilson, he'll have to garnish his tale with choice fictional titbits if he is to retain any sort of street cred with his friend.

Clad in a bathrobe and with a towel wrapped around her hair, Lisa pokes at the breakfast he has made for her in a desultory fashion.

"I can make pancakes if you like," he offers half-heartedly.

Lisa shakes her head. "Muesli with fruit is fine," she says.

"As is shown by the hearty manner with which you're digging in."

"Don't nag. You're worse than Mom."

Ouch, that hurts!

Lisa pushes her chair back. "I'll get ready," she says.

Pete's eyes move from her bare feet up her legs. "You haven't shaved your legs," he says, frowning.

Lisa pauses, tugging at a stray lock that has escaped the towel. "Neither have you," she says.

"I never shave my legs, so in my case it isn't an aberration. In your case it is."

"Fine, so it's an aberration. Sue me."

"You're going to work with stubbly legs?" She must be in a worse state than he'd estimated.

"I'm wearing pants. Satisfied?"

No, he isn't, but at least she's aware that she can't appear at work without attracting attention unless she hides her legs. Is he going to have to blow dry her hair and help her apply her make-up? But half an hour later she's ready. Her make up is rudimentary, her hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail, but she has concealed the rings under her eyes and her wardrobe is neat. He snatches the car keys from under her nose.

"Oh, no, you're not driving," he says. He has bad memories of the last time she drove.

"I'm depressed, not mentally or physically —"

"Shut up and let me drive," he says, ushering her out of the door. She doesn't protest; maybe she sees the sense behind his offer, maybe she's too tired to argue.

"Who's your primary care physician?" He glances over at her as they leave the suburbs and hit the morning rush hour traffic. "I can find out, so you may as well tell me. Have you seen anyone? Are you taking medication?"
She stares at him resentfully. Then she asks, "Do you know the way?" She leans forward, programmes her GPS, and then leans back again, closing her eyes and turning her face away from him.

'Mandy' tells him to turn right at the next intersection. He promptly silences 'Mandy', making a mental note to download some other GPS voice (Homer Simpson maybe?) at the next opportunity. "Medication?" he prompts, keeping an eye on the navigation screen.

She sighs. "Not a good idea."

"Says who? Oh, sorry, I forgot. You have a degree in medicine, right? And sometimes you even indulge in a bit of doctoring."

She ignores the sarcasm. "Says HUP."

"Who asked HUP?" The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania is a leading transplant centre — the leading centre in the area — but Philadelphia Central has a large gastroenterology department of its own. Post-transplant recovery is something they should be able to handle.

"Hamadi, our leading gastroenterologist, after my liver values refused to recover."

"I want to see your files."

She sighs again. "There's nothing to see, no puzzle to solve. It's rare, but it happens, and there aren't enough case numbers to make an educated guess on cause and effect. It's … the way it is. And normally it really doesn't matter. With Wilson around, I wasn't drinking anymore anyway. It just means … that I have to get through this without any medication."

"SSRIs don't mess with the liver."

"Normally they don't. But there have been cases, and until they know why my liver's still acting up, they don't want to take the risk."

He wouldn't hesitate to give it a try, but donor livers are notoriously hard to get hold of, so the people at HUP have a point. "Okay, but I want to talk to Hamadi, and —"

"Hamadi's off my case. It was awkward having someone from our staff handle it, and I was glad when HUP took over. Turn right at the next intersection; there's a construction site on the Interstate."

They drive the last two miles in silence.

"Drop me off in front," Lisa says. "Are you picking me up after work?"

Now that he's managed to ensure that she isn't driving anywhere by the simple expedient of taking her car keys, he's inclined to tell her to take a cab, but if he does that, chances are that she'll insist on driving herself tomorrow. So, he rolls his eyes as though he feels imposed upon and says, "I guess I may as well. What time shall I pick you up?"

"I should be done by five. Park in my space in the parking deck, and I'll meet you there."

"I need Amy's telephone number," he says by way of a parting.

"I'll text it to you." She takes a deep breath, checks her appearance in the mirror, and then enters the hospital without a backward glance.
And then he's at a loose end. He employs his time gainfully by hiring a cleaning lady for Lisa — and a gardener while he's at it. Then he sorts Lisa's books, which are still imprisoned in boxes, onto the shelves. He's occupied with that when the telephone rings.

"Hello, my name is Sarah Blecker from Germantown Academy, PA to the head of Lower School," a breathlessly airy voice says.

"Uh, hello?"

"Am I speaking with Rachel Cuddy's parent? I'm afraid Rachel hasn't appeared in class today. Is she sick?"

He briefly considers lying, but for all he knows he'll be asked to produce a doctor's note or something. Not worth the bother, he decides. "We've outsourced her."

"I'm sorry?"

"She's staying with her aunt for the week."

"Mr Cuddy, the school has a strict attendance policy. If you wish to take your child out of school during the semester, you need to apply for leave in writing in advance, stating your reasons, and then the head of Lower School —"

"It's a family emergency."

There's a short pause. "I'm sorry, but if Rachel isn't sick, then —"

He interrupts. "Are you offering to take Rachel? Drive her to school and pick her up afterwards? Catheterise her, bathe her, get her ready for school, do her physio routine with her, take her to her medical appointments, etc.? Because if not, I suggest we end this conversation."

He counts till three to give her time to respond, then he slams the phone down. Lisa is going to be pissed, but that's too bad.

Two book boxes later it's time for the online Q&A session with his Oxford students. He uploaded the lecture the night before, giving the students a mere eight hours to watch it and then prepare questions, which should keep any but the most intrepid from wasting his time. Actually, it's not a bad way of going about this lecturing thing, he decides. No fixed dates that he has to attend, no direct contact with the students, no lecture halls filled with 90% morons and 10% smart-asses, no stupid questions during his lectures.

One hour later he decides, Never again! It's a good bet that two-thirds of his students didn't spot the uploaded video in time to watch his lecture and thus couldn't participate in the Q&A, but the few that came, saw, and asked were an obstreperous bunch. When he lectures in person, hardly anyone dares to ask questions afterwards, and the few who are suicidal enough to doubt his methods or his conclusions are easily shot down. A sarcastic word here, a put-down there, and a racial or sexual slur thrown in for good measure (delivered while looming over the offender) usually suffice to nip all student-teacher interactions in the bud. No such luck with the online version. His students, far from being deterred by the sarcastic answers he types to their questions, actually respond in kind now that there are barriers of distance and anonymity to protect them from his stinging barbs. Questions are followed up by more questions — he has to admit that some of them have a certain degree of justification — and his students don't let up until they are satisfied with his answers. Perhaps they aren't complete idiots after all, but there's no doubt that this is more strenuous than a regular lecture.
Lisa has sent him Amy's number as promised — with an injunction to remember that Los Angeles is in the Pacific Time Zone, but hey, with The Screamer around, no one is going to get any shut-eye after six a.m. anyway, so he calls L.A. next.

"James?" Amy says. "James left yesterday."

"Where'd he go?" Pete asks.

"Home?" Amy surmises. "He said he has to start working today."

Obviously Amy is no help whatsoever. Wilson seems to have gone MIA, but maybe he obtained a new phone before disappearing into his Second Life. "Do you have a contact number?"

"I can give you Lisa Cuddy's number. She stays in the same house, so —"

"I'm phoning from Lisa's place, and Wilson. Isn't. Here," Pete enunciates slowly. "Now Amy, think! Where could he be? He must have said something or talked to someone on the phone or mentioned taking the kid somewhere."

"I don't know. We didn't talk much, you see."

Yes, he's beginning to see, and he can't blame Wilson for avoiding heart-to-hearts with Amy. He also can't fault Wilson for not sticking it out the entire week; he, too, would have fled from Los Angeles. Then again, he wouldn't have gone there in the first place from a misplaced sense of obligation towards the kid's birth mom. If Amy wants to see her son, then she can make the trek down to Philly. But it isn't like anyone is asking *him.*

He goes for a run to work off his frustration: Lisa's place is on the outskirts of Philadelphia, and soon he's out on narrow lanes that wind among wooded hills, with houses few and far between. There's hardly any traffic; it's so quiet that when he pulls out his ear buds all he hears is the wind in the leaves, birdsong, and his own panting breath. Finding his way back is slightly trickier than heading westwards, but the navigation app on his cell saves the day.

When he gets back to the house, the phone is ringing persistently. Thinking that it might be Wilson, he lunges for it.

"Yep?"

There's silence. Then, "Hi, it's me. Rachel."

He's bent over double, catching his breath, sweat running down his face. "Your mom's at work," he finally presses out.

"I thought she's *sick,*" Rachel says.

"Gimme a sec," he says, heading for the kitchen, where he places a glass under the faucet. As it fills he says, "She's too sick to go to work *and* look after you. So she's going to work and earning lots and lots of nickels and dimes, so that when she's better, she can look after you and still have a job."

"Oh." There's a longer pause, which makes him hope that the conversation is over. "Then she's not dying?"

"No. What gave you that idea?" He chugs down the glass of water.
"Last time — you know, when Mom had her liver taken out — I didn't have to stay at Julia's place. I had to go to school, even though she was nearly dying."

"She wasn't 'nearly dying'. Who told you that?"

"Nana. She says Mom could've died and left me an orphan. And that it's typical for Mom to get sick and make Julia deal with the consequences. I think she means having to look after me. And that if Mom did die, Julia would be saddled with me forever."

He expels a frustrated breath. Jesus, but the Cuddys are an exhausting bunch!

"Your Nana is an idiot. Your mom didn't ask to get sick and she certainly didn't do it in order to dump you on Julia." He considers adding that Julia loves having her and would gladly look after her till the end of her days, but the lie refuses to pass his lips. No one, least of all a mother with three children of her own, wants to be saddled with a fourth one with so many special needs that she'd have to neglect her own family in order to cope.

"If you're there, can't I come home? You could look after me," Rachel says in a wheedling tone.

"I don't have Tanja to help this time around," he says succinctly. "I thought you liked Julia."

"Yeah, but she's at work. So's Rob. And Ben, Sam 'n Ethan are at school. It's boring here."

That leaves … Lisa's mom. Who, if Lisa is to be believed, is close enough to dementia that leaving Rachel in her care isn't what your friendly social services worker would recommend. What the hell is Julia thinking?

"So you're alone with your grandmother?" he asks carefully.

"Yeah, and Rosa. She came in the morning to keep Nana company. But they watch television and play stupid card games. Leastways, that's all they've done till now. I want to come home!"

Okay, so there's a caregiver or companion of sorts. "Stick it out for a few days," he advises. "Then your mom should be coping again and Wilson will be back." Or so he hopes.

"I'm bored! What am I supposed to do all day?"

"I can phone your school and ask them to send course work for you," he suggests drily.

"No!"

He has had enough of this conversation. Rachel's life sucks at the moment, but that isn't his problem. "I gotta take a shower."

"Can I talk to Mom when she comes home?"

"Yeah, I'll tell her to phone you." He disconnects the call before Rachel finds some other reason to keep him talking.

After his shower he drives back to the hospital to pick Lisa up. Lisa is already waiting for him when he draws into her parking space. She sinks into the passenger seat without a word, not even reprimanding him for being late.

"Do we need to get groceries?" he asks. What he ordered and had delivered was rudimentary, enough to get her and Rachel through a day or two, but not exactly a source of culinary inspiration.
"We'll order takeout," she says.

She hates takeout; he knows that. He needs to get her more involved in everyday activities, reintroduce routine into her life. When they pass a supermarket, he turns the car around and pulls up into the parking lot. She protests weakly, but accompanies him inside when he insists. He even manages to coerce her into making food choices of her own by the simple expedient of throwing a few pork chops into the shopping cart. Converting the vegetables that she puts into the cart into something he won't mind eating will be a challenge, but — so is everything connected with Lisa.

"Wilson isn't at Amy's place," he says offhandedly as they drive home. He doesn't want to worry her, but it's possible that she has an idea where Wilson could be.

"No, I know," she says. "He phoned me at the office."

"Where is he?"

She has to think about that real hard. "I think he said he was in New York. He said something about visiting someone. His brother Danny, I think."

"Is he coming back anytime soon?" Pete asks, fighting to stay casual.

Lisa frowns. "He … didn't say anything about coming back earlier than planned. Why?"

Why, indeed, would he want to be informed about his son's whereabouts? Why should he be worried when his son is in the care of a depressive alcoholic who has just had a major emotional crisis?

"Oh, no reason at all," he says lightly, braking harder than necessary in Lisa's drive. (When he doesn't concentrate, he still has problems dosing the force of his prosthetic.)

When Lisa has recovered from the backlash she says, "You don't need to stay because of me. I can manage, now that Rachel is with Julia."

"You mean, like this morning?" He gets out of the car and pockets the car keys. Better safe than sorry.

She follows slowly, tugging at her lower lip. "If you weren't there, I wouldn't rely on you to get me out the door in the morning. I let myself go today because I knew you'd pick up the slack."

Her confidence in his reliability and interest in her health is heart-warming, but misplaced. "I'll stick around till Wilson reappears," he says with finality. "Did he give you a contact number?"

"Yes, he's gotten himself a new cell. I should have texted you the number." She rolls her eyes at her own stupidity.

"You should phone Rachel," he tells her as they enter the house. "She called here today."

He brings the groceries into the kitchen and sorts them into the fridge and the cupboards. When he's done he goes to the living area. Lisa is on the landline, talking to Rachel in all probability. He goes to her purse and takes out her cell. It's locked, a safety precaution he wouldn't have credited Lisa with, but he cracks the swipe code at the first try: it's an 'L'.

Lisa covers the telephone receiver with her hand, saying, "Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

"Getting Wilson's number," he says, which is a half-truth. While he's at it he checks her calendar,
memorising her appointments for the next few days. Chances are that one or more of them are health related: Lisa may be off her game, but she's too much of a control freak to neglect her health. Then he goes through her calls and forwards all the numbers which she called and from which she received calls today, including Wilson's, to his phone.

He takes Lisa's phone into the yard to call Wilson.

"Yes?" Wilson says.

It takes Pete a moment to realise that he has no idea what he wants to say. He wants to vituperate Wilson for disappearing off the face of the earth without as much as a 'by your leave', but …

"Hello?" Wilson says.

"Bastard!" Pete counters.

"House," Wilson says, surprise and disbelief in his voice.

"Where the fuck are you?"

"Boston," Wilson says cheerfully. "Forgot my phone in Philadelphia, though, in case you're wondering why I'm not taking calls. Did Cuddy give you my new number?"

"Yes," Pete says through gritted teeth.

"Then she's talking to you again; that's good."

"What are you doing in Boston?" Hadn't Lisa said he was in New York?

Some of his aggressiveness must be penetrating the ether, because Wilson picks up on it. "Visiting my family. Got a problem with that?"

"You're needed here," Pete says.

"Here' being?"

"Philadelphia. Lisa has had a melt-down."

"Wait. You're in Philly?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a melt-down?" Wilson asks. "I called her at work and she seemed okay."

"Depressive episode, as far as I can make out. Could be liver-related, but I haven't had the chance to hack her medical files yet."

"House, …, don't! Don't … oh, forget it. Just call Julia — no, wait, make Cuddy call Julia — and get out of there."

"I have called Julia, which reduced the problem, but didn't solve it. Julia has taken Rachel to Princeton, but I'm still stuck here."

"You … called Julia? And your balls are still attached and functioning?"

"Probably better than yours. When are you returning?"
"I've booked a flight for Saturday."

There's a note of finality in Wilson's voice that Pete doesn't like. He considers how to phrase his next request/threat/turn of the thumbscrew. "You're gonna leave Lisa here with me, the guy whose guts she hates?"

A snort from Wilson practically deafens Pete. "Cuddy doesn't hate your guts. She's much too efficient to waste her energy on useless emotional turmoil. You're just trying to find an excuse to bail out on her again."

"She isn't my responsibility," Pete points out.

"Well, she isn't mine either. I have enough responsibility to last me the rest of my life and probably a bit beyond that, thanks to you."

Pete chooses to ignore the direction in which Wilson is trying to take the conversation. It's a dead end down which they've been before. "She gave you half her liver. If it weren't for her, you wouldn't be around anymore to shoulder your responsibilities."

Wilson chuckles. It's not a nice chuckle. "Nice try, House. Do you want in on your son? You wanna look after him, play with him, watch him grow up? Then show that you can do it. Show that you can shoulder responsibility, that you can be more than a fair-weather parent."

"You're making my access to the kid conditional on whether I jump through hoops for you?" Pete asks, a vice clamping around his heart.

"House, again, don't! Don't try to make me out to be the villain of the piece. You want me to entrust my son into your care? Fine. I accept that you feel a sort of attachment or a sense of responsibility or whatever you may call it for your biological offspring, but I — love him. With all my heart. If I am to entrust him to you, I need to know that you'll be there for him, even when things get rough. Especially when things get rough. I'm not prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt, because I'm responsible for him, not for you. I need to make things right for him, not for you. So maybe this isn't fair on you, but — news flash, House: life isn't fair. It hasn't been fair on Joel so far, and now it isn't fair on you. If you want in on his life, you'll have to prove that you can do more than watch cartoons with him and take him to monster truck rallies. I'll see you on Saturday." And with that Wilson disconnects the call.

Someone has issues, major issues. The question is, is Wilson being pissy because he's generally mad at him or are his reservations about Pete's paternal abilities justified?

Considered objectively, the latter is probably the case. He, Pete, isn't exactly inclined towards philanthropy, and so far there's no evidence to suggest that he makes an exception for children. He doesn't actively dislike them, but he wouldn't go so far as to say that he enjoys spending time in their company. If Wilson suggested that he spend an afternoon with Joel, he'd be challenged to find something to do that wasn't utterly brain numbing.

But that doesn't disqualify him as a babysitter. Heck, there are parents who do a lot worse than just ignoring their kids. Wilson knows that, and Wilson also knows that he's capable of assessing dangers and dealing with medical emergencies, something your average parent is incapable of. Either Wilson is out to punish him or he knows something that Pete doesn't know, something that casts more than a faint shadow of doubt on his ability to bond with a kid.

When he returns to the living area Lisa is studying the bookshelves with a frown. "Did you pile the books haphazardly on the shelves?" she asks. "I don't see any sort of system. My fiction used to be
sorted alphabetically by author and that's the way I put the books into the boxes, but now … . Wait, there it's alphabetical. … No, it isn't. It just looks like it, but then you've got a completely different author right between two books by the same author."

"Thank you, Pete, for unpacking my books and sorting them," he mutters.

"Sorry," Lisa says, "that's what I meant to say, but I still don't understand what you've done. I'll never find a book like this."

"They're sorted by first publication date. It makes more sense than sorting them alphabetically by author. There's no logic in placing War and Peace next to The Lord of the Rings; they'd be next to each other solely because their authors' last names share the first letters."

"I don't have any Tolkien. I don't read fantasy," she says querulously.

"Trust me, Rachel will read Tolkien."

Lisa moves over to the nearest shelf and pulls out a book, looking doubtful. "So now I have to know that To Kill a Mockingbird was first published in … 1960. It's miles away from Go Set a Watchman. How am I supposed to find a book whose publication date I don't know?"

"I'm giving you credit for a smidgen of general knowledge." When she rolls her eyes at him he adds, "You don't have to know the exact publication date; if you know the rough era, you can find it. Or you can check online. Woman, your bookshelves now mirror the evolution of modern fiction — or they would if your taste in literature were more eclectic. This is a hands-on lesson in the history of literature for your kid. Show a little more enthusiasm, please."

She takes a deep breath. "Thank you, Pete, it's lovely. Next time, ask first."

They eat in subdued silence, Lisa chasing thoughts of her own, Pete replaying the conversation with Wilson in his mind. Lisa doesn't ask about Wilson, for which Pete is glad even as he notes the uncharacteristic omission. Then Lisa goes into her bedroom. Pete hangs around in front of the television, but the programme is as unsatisfactory as the entire day has been so far. He needs something to help him calm down, to get a perspective on this, to stop his thoughts from exploding in his brain in little puffs of smoke. He gets up, gets the car keys, and leaves the house.

Two hours later he's sitting comfortably on the steps leading from the deck to the yard when Lisa appears. He's a friendly kind of guy, so he holds out his spliff.

She sits down next to him, but pushes the spliff away. "What's wrong?" she asks, hugging her knees.

"You're harshing my mellow, that's what's wrong."

"I mean, why are you frying your short-term memory?"

"So that it matches my long-term memory. The asymmetry was bothering me."

She nods slowly. "Good point."

And that's it. No lecture on how an addict like him should stay off drugs altogether, no reprimands for indulging in illicit activities on her back stoop, not even an eye roll at his general state. Lisa Cuddy, his former girlfriend, benefactor, and general babysitter, doesn't care a damn about what he does to his health, mental or physical.
"Thought you were going to bed."

"So did I, but it didn't work out." She sighs, then she says nothing for a long while. "When I was a kid, there were more stars."

"The number of stars has remained the same, give or take a few," he feels obliged to point out. "Light pollution has increased. Too much sky glow here." They're facing due west. Betelgeuse is barely visible above the horizon, while further to the north Capella fights valiantly against the city lights.

"Uh-huh. And where's the Polar Star?"

"Ursa Major, Ursa Minor," he mutters, scanning the sky above him. "There."

"I thought it was that one." She points to Arcturus, misleadingly bright. "I can't even find the Polar Star anymore. That's pathetic."

"It is," he agrees.

She mulls over that. "Last winter Rachel had to do a science project during winter break. She was supposed to draw her own star chart. It was awful. You couldn't even get a good view of the sky from our apartment, let alone see any stars, so we drove out of the city, maybe a few miles west of here. And then — we tried to map the stars. Have you ever tried mapping a sphere onto a rectangular piece of paper?"

"You should have done an azimuthal projection, where you map all the points in the sky onto a circular area." He draws an imaginary circle on the step beside him.

"Thank you," Lisa snaps with something akin to her former energy. "That information would have been useful if I'd had it before heading out into the wilds. We spent about two hours freezing our backsides off, looking up at the sky and then trying to sketch the result onto paper in mittened hands with the help of a flashlight, before we gave up. Rachel got a C for the project, a fucking C, after she and I spent half a night in the wilds and nearly got frostbite. I don't remember elementary school being so tough in my day."

Pete figures that Lisa Cuddy never got anything worse than an A minus during her school days. "There are star charts galore on the internet. You could have downloaded one of those and made her copy it."

"What, encourage her to cheat?"

"It's 'using the advantages of modern media', not cheating. That's what all the kids who got an A did. There's no way fourth graders can make a decent star chart by themselves." He takes another drag. "Rachel's school called."

"Shoot, I forgot all about them. I'll fix that tomorrow."

"I fixed it already. I think they got the general idea," he says, cocking his head to one side as he contemplates the end of his reefer. Then he stubs it out, saying meditatively, "I don't see why she goes to school in Germantown, now that you live here."

Lisa gets the subtext. She buries her face in her hands. "I was hoping, hoping, that she'd be able to complete lower school over there with her friends. I didn't want her to have to switch schools in the middle of the school year. I suppose I can forget about that."
"Nah, I don't think it's that bad. I only pissed off the PA, not the head. If you're worried, up your donation." He gets up; he's starving. If he doesn't get carbs soon, he'll collapse in a soggy mess on the deck. "I'll drive you to work tomorrow. When do you want to be there?"

"Same as today." She hesitates, then she says with studied casualness, "You don’t have to pick me up in the afternoon; I'll take a cab."

Okay, so she has a medical appointment that she doesn't want him to know about. If she's returning by cab at a time that won't arouse his suspicion, then the appointment has to be between three and four p.m. The only item he can remember seeing in her calendar at that time was 'Lang'. That narrows the possibilities down considerably; Google should do the rest.
Brookline, Boston

It's past midnight when they arrive in Boston, so Wilson books into a hotel. Next morning he phones his parents.

"James, what a pleasant surprise!" his mother says.

Thus encouraged, he packs Joel's day bag and swings by his parents' place. It's much as it was during his childhood, a mismatched assortment of the sixties and seventies. His parents haven't replaced any of the furniture or window treatments; the couch and armchairs are more threadbare, the dining room chairs somewhat more rickety, the rugs faded. Pictures of Michael's children augment the ones of Wilson and his brothers.

"Good to see you, son," his father says, awkwardly patting him on the shoulder.

"James, dear," his mother says, hugging him. "And that's your boy? He's so handsome!"

Wilson takes Joel out of the carrier seat and cradles him in his arm.

"You've called him Joel?" his father says. "A good name."

"Hello, Joel," his mother croons. "Sit down, James, sit down!"

He sits down on the couch. His mother perches beside him, his father sits in the same armchair as he always does, the 'holy' armchair, the only leather armchair in the room. When they were young, the boys were strictly forbidden to sit in it even in their father's absence, for fear that they'd soil the leather. Michael, the daredevil of the family, had sat in it a few times to the great admiration of his younger brothers, but they'd all jumped at every sound in the apartment, scared of being discovered.

"So, how old is he now?" his mother asks.

"He's four months old. He was born in February."

"You should have visited sooner." There's an awkward pause.

"Why don't you get James a cup of coffee?" his father suggests.

His mother takes up the suggestion gratefully. "I'll get you a cup of coffee," she says unnecessarily as she rises and goes into the kitchen.

His father fidgets. "Bit of a surprise for your mother, your arrival."

Wilson nods.

His father fidgets some more. "She doesn't cope too well with surprises any more. Next time, son, give her a few days' notice."

"Sorry. I'll call in advance next time." Wilson hasn't noticed anything off in his mother's behaviour, but what does he know? There's another tense silence.

"And how are you?" his father asks.

"Fine. I'm fine," Wilson says. "What about you and Mom?"
"Not getting any younger, but we're coping. Yeah, we're coping, your mother and me." He frowns at his hands, gnarled and flecked with age. "Good to hear that you're doing well. Michael said you were in a bad state, but he must have misunderstood."

"I was …" Wilson begins, but then he backtracks. "Yes, he must have gotten it wrong. I'm fine now."

"Michael said something about liver failure, but he must've gotten it all muddled up, I guess," his father states. He adds with a chuckle, "Michael may be a financial wizard, but he has no head for medicine. You're sitting here now, which you wouldn't be if your liver had failed."

"Yes … No. I mean," Wilson stutters. "Yes, I had liver failure, but I had a liver transplant."

His father frowns. He lowers his voice, leaning forward and glancing towards the kitchen. "I thought you had your … problem under control, James." Wilson takes a deep breath. "It had nothing to do with my alcohol problem. It was the cancer treatment that did my liver in."

His father harrumphs. Then he says, "Don't mention cancer in front of your mother. Things like that worry her unnecessarily. It's cured anyway, right?"

Wilson considers explaining about remission, but then decides that it isn't worth the bother. His father has more or less told him what to answer anyway. "Yes, Dad, it's cured."

His father leans back. "Good! That's what I told your mother, see? Thought you'd get a handle on it; after all, you're an oncologist. All those years in med school and then those residencies have to have been good for something, I figure."

His mother comes back with a lone cup of coffee that she places in front of Wilson. "We don't drink coffee anymore," she says. "We can't sleep when we've had coffee."

Wilson glances at his father, who nods in unwilling confirmation. Coffee used to be one of his humble pleasures. Wilson takes a polite sip. The brew is truly terrible. Maybe his father stopped drinking coffee when his mother switched brands.

"James and I were talking about his health," Wilson's father says with forced joviality. "He's fine, he says. He says Michael has gotten it all wrong; there was nothing much the matter with him. Just a spot of liver trouble that they fixed."

"Well, that's nice," his mother says with an absent smile. "Health is very important, you know. You only learn to value it once it's gone." She sits down once again. "Such a lovely baby. It's so nice of your … your girlfriend to let you bring him here."

Wilson takes a deep breath. "Amy and I are not in a relationship anymore, I'm afraid," he says. The 'anymore' is an afterthought, but the mind boggles at having to explain that Amy and he were never an item.

"Oh, dear," his mother says. "So sad!"

"Sad?" his father says. "I don't know what you're thinking, James. Children need their father."

By now Wilson is floundering. "Joel has his father. He's growing up with me, not with Amy. Didn't I mention it?" he says, turning to his mother. There are a lot of things he doesn't tell his mother, but he's sure that he mentioned that he has physical custody of Joel.
"You mentioned something, but I thought it was a temporary arrangement," his mother says apologetically. "You said your girlfriend was moving away, so I thought you were taking Joel for the duration of the move until she'd settled down."

His father is close to apoplectic now. "That child is growing up without his mother? What kind of nonsense is that? Children need their mother."

Well, you don't always get what you need, let alone what you want. "I'm in a better position to look after him than Amy is," Wilson explains patiently, as he has done so often before, both to complete strangers accosting him in the supermarket and close acquaintances. "Nowadays lots of fathers raise their children. Joel won't notice the difference."

His father settles back into his armchair, muttering something about modern nonsense and the downfall of family values. "Look at the shul. Used to be a great place, but can you believe it, last year the rabbi married a gay couple?"

Wilson hums something non-committal.

"Don't get us wrong, James," his mother says. "We don't mind people having homosexual relationships, but —"

"They can do what they like in private, but do they have to get married? How are kids supposed to learn to cherish family values when not even the shul upholds them anymore?" His father glares at him as though daring him to contradict him.

"How long are you staying?" his mother asks.

"I was going to return to Philadelphia at the weekend," Wilson answers.

"You've taken the whole week off?" his father asks.

"I'm only starting my new job next Monday," Wilson explains, feeling like a kid who's been caught playing hooky.

"That's lovely!" his mother says. "Then Joel and I can get to know each other, can't we, dear?" She smiles at Joel, who yawns. "I'll get your old room ready, James, shall I? Why don't you bring your things up from the car?"

"They're at the hotel," Wilson says. "I haven't brought the car. I flew here from LA."

His mother looks indignant. "At the hotel? Did you think we'd let you stay at a hotel while you're here?"

His father rises. "Are you sure you can manage, Evelyn?" he asks. "James will understand if you —"

"Of course I can manage!" Wilson's mother says. She and his father engage in a staring match. "My grandson is here for the first time. I want to get to know him."

"Well, son, let's swing by the hotel and get your baggage," Wilson's father says with forced cheer.

Wilson rises too, Joel on his arm. "Mom, do you want to —?"

"We'll take the young man with us," his father decrees. "Your mother will be busy getting the room ready."
The journey to the hotel and back is accompanied by stilted conversation. Wilson can't recall talking much with his father when he was younger. There had never been much to discuss. His career choices had met with his parents' unalloyed approval, his other life choices less so, but they'd never actually said anything. They'd simply not talked about his wives, as though not mentioning them would make them go away somehow — which it did. His parents have outlasted his three marriages.

"So, what kind of job is it that you've gotten now? Research again?"

So his father does know what he's been doing the last few years in New York. "No, I'll be working with patients again. I started again recently, giving consults at Philadelphia Central, and now I'm easing back into regular working hours."

"Looking forward to it?"

"Yes," Wilson says. "Yes, definitely. What's wrong with Mom?"

"We-ell," his father says, "nothing really. It's just that … small things excite her, more than they used to. She's never been very strong." Shrugging as though to put the thought aside, he grabs one of the suitcases, the bigger one. Three minutes later, closing the trunk, he continues his thought as though there's been no interruption. "Dunno if she's up to having you for a week. She's excited about it, and that'll tide her over the first days, but after that she might need her old routine back." He squints sideways at Wilson to see how he'll respond.

"That's okay; I can always move back into a hotel or go home," Wilson says.

Getting into the car next to his father, he thinks about his mother. He supposes his father is right. His mother has always been nervous and inefficient in everyday life. When his father came home from work, she'd tell him about some disaster or other that had befallen her during the course of the day — the cat bringing in something disgusting or Michael being obstreperous or the window jamming — and his father would say, "Don't worry, I'll fix it." And he'd fix the jammed window or tell Michael that he was grounded or dispose of the cat's latest kill, and Wilson never wondered why his mother didn't do these things herself. It was the way things were in their family.

When they get back to the apartment in Brookline, his mother is fixing a meal. "I'm afraid I don't have much food in the house. Your father and I hardly eat anything anymore. I'm making us some sandwiches. What will Joel eat?"

Wilson hastens to reassure her that sandwiches are fine and that he has everything that Joel needs.

"I'll cook a decent dinner," his mother assures him. "What would you like?"

Wilson lets her standard meals pass before his mind's eye. His mother's cuisine, as he remembers it, is limited and unimaginative. "Meat loaf?" he suggests.

He senses relief. "You always loved my meat loaf, didn't you?" his mother says.

'Love' isn't the word he'd use to describe his feelings for her meat loaf. It's a sight better than her chicken pot pie, but then, it's difficult to ruin a meat loaf. Still, she's making an effort, so he nods, realising too late that this is how Wilson family myths are created and perpetuated. He has spent fifty years of his life nodding at whatever his parents say, even at what Michael says, never saying what he thinks because that would upset the fragile balance between him and them.

"Michael doesn't visit anymore," his mother says as they eat.
"He came last year," his father remarks, "for Thanksgiving."

"Well, he hasn't come since then. And he's stopped coming for Pesach and Hanukkah."

"He's busy."

There's something in the way his father says it that gives Wilson the impression that there are things he knows but doesn't say, things that would explain Michael's absence.

His mother, however, is on a roll. "The Tengelmans' children visit all the time. Flo's son comes twice a year all the way from Arizona. Yet our boy can't be bothered to come even once a year."

"He calls regularly," his father says. "He called a few days ago."

"Did he?"

"Yes, he did. You were resting so I didn't disturb you, but he talked to me for half an hour."

"Well," his mother says stubbornly, "he should also talk to me."

"Next time I'll make sure that he also talks to you," Robert Wilson says, not taking his eyes off his sandwich.

"Yes, I'll tell him to come for Hanukkah and to bring the children. He should bring the children more often. They are almost strangers to us."

It's the sort of circular conversation that Wilson remembers from his youth, but at that time he'd considered it normal. Now, more observant and maybe more distanced, he can't help noticing that there's more subtext than actual content. His father is hiding something about Michael from his mother, perhaps trying to protect her, while his mother, habitually paranoid and sensing that something is going on behind her back, is justifiably suspicious. Or maybe it's the other way round: his mother might well be upset at a very real slight by his brother, while his father, not wanting to deal with the issue, is protecting Michael by lying for him. It had been much the same when the trouble with Danny started. His mother would report some misdeed or odd behaviour, which his father would then downplay — sometimes rightly (some of Danny's escapades were no worse than Michael's, but his mother had always been easier on Michael, her oldest and favourite child), sometimes wrongly so.

One time, Danny had refused to leave his room for a week, saying that aliens had invaded the earth and were about to kidnap him. His mother had been furious, insisting that Danny was acting up in order to avoid going to school. His father had laughed the matter off, saying that Danny had a vivid imagination and had watched too much television. Both of them had chosen to ignore the obvious, namely that no self-respecting thirteen year old would ever admit to being scared of aliens, much less pretend to be so, not even to play hooky. It had taken Wilson every spare hour that entire week to talk Danny through it and get him to leave his room again.

"You could have Danny over," Wilson suggests on a sudden impulse, a very House-ian one admittedly, but he's tired of beating around the bush and speaking in code, a code that he used to be fluent in, but which he's now finding strenuous. "I'm sure he'll be allowed to come home for a day."

The effect of his statement is all he can desire. His mother freezes while masticating, her eyes widened. Then she casts a quick, hunted look at his father, a fix this! look. His father sort of retracts like a turtle, except that he has no shell to hide in. But he seems to shrink into himself, as though by taking up as little space as possible he can make everyone forget that he's there.
Finally his mother swallows noisily and says, "I don't know whether that's such a good idea. We … ." She rounds on her husband. "Robert? What do you think? It's not a good idea to have Danny over, because . . .?"

His father has recovered sufficiently to chime in on cue. "I don't drive that far anymore," he says, not meeting Wilson's eyes. "Not getting any younger, you know."

Wilson is sure his father could manage it if he wanted to. But the good son in him comes to the fore again, so he lets the matter drop.

In the afternoon his mother, Joel, and he take a stroll around the block. When they return his father, who must have used the respite to do some grocery shopping, is in the kitchen chopping onions. His mother joins him; she waves Wilson away.

"You go and rest, dear. I know how tiring little children can be."

So Wilson takes Joel and retires to the living room. He is tired; he has jet lag, and Joel's sleep rhythm, only recently anything close to regular, has suffered a severe setback. Joel is content to play with his rattle, banging it against his head, or to suck on the cloth book that Wilson bought him at the airport. Wilson is tempted to lie down and rest, but he knows that if he gives in to temptation now his jet lag will drag on for days.

"Dad, can I use your computer?" he calls.

His father grunts something that he interprets as an affirmative, so he boots the machine and starts searching — for Melanie Robbins. Yes, Melanie has an author's website with links to Twitter, Facebook, etc. It's all very 'teen' oriented, however, and doesn't sound like the Melanie he knows. (Correction: knew.) There's a blog with past and upcoming book signings and similar PR stuff, links to her books, an activity page where her fans can post their own fan art and fan fiction, and an excerpt from her next book. Her fame as an author seems to be founded on the vampire/werewolf/witch series of which he now possesses a signed volume. Before that she wrote a few books of 'normal' teen angst that reviewers compare to John Green's novels. Those, however, have very few readers if the Amazon customer reviews are any indication. (It's disquieting, how much information he has managed to glean in twenty minutes of amateur stalking. Someone like House or Lucas Douglas would undoubtedly be able to find out her address and telephone number with little more effort than he has invested.)

There's an email address with the caveat that much as she'd love to, Melanie can't answer the many emails that come her way, and that her FAQ page is a good place for answers to common questions. Wilson has a feeling that Melanie's telephone number won't form part of the information imparted by the FAQ, so he sends her an email via the contact form, hoping that she still reads her fan mail even if she doesn't answer it. It takes him a solid half hour to phrase the email in a way that is light and imparts enough information that Melanie can be sure that it is him, James Wilson, writing it (not some creepy stranger who has gotten hold of a copy of her high school yearbook) without divulging so much personal data that he'd feel embarrassed if someone else were to read it. (Do authors of teen lit employ personal assistants?) When he's satisfied with his literary efforts he clicks on 'send' before he has second thoughts.

He's just through with that when his cell rings. Cuddy is the only person who has his present number — he should give it to Amy so she can reach him, he supposes — so he takes the call assuming that it's her, but it's House instead. (He wouldn't have thought that House, who isn't exactly on speaking terms with Cuddy, would get hold of his number so quickly, but House is a devious devil.) He sighs and steels himself. Forgetting his phone in Philly — though unintentional — had briefly freed him from the worry of how to deal with House, though he knew he must
eventually. Now that Cuddy has passed his number on to House, 'eventually' has turned into 'now', so he sneaks into his bedroom, hoping that Joel, busy chewing his foot, will hold his peace until he has dealt with House.

House is up to his usual tricks: he's in Philadelphia. And he's trying to sell this to Wilson as a medical emergency, not as House-losing-his-patience-because-Wilson-is-avoiding-all-contact. It's an amateurish ruse by House's standards: he must have gotten Wilson's number from Cuddy, so he should realise that Wilson knows that Cuddy is fine. Okay, maybe not 'fine', but close enough. When Wilson called her at work today, she was up and about, although maybe she wasn't her usual confident self. Nevertheless, if Cuddy needed him, she'd have said so. She certainly wouldn't have asked House to stay in Philly to help out. Something is off, but whatever it is, it can wait until he comes back as planned — and not one minute earlier! If House gets the idea that he can jerk Wilson's chain whenever he likes, then there'll never be an end to it.

He's in his bedroom putting Joel to sleep — a procedure that involves a bottle of formula and a lot of patience, because Joel can only fall asleep with one of Wilson's hands trapped under his cheek and his foot encircled by Wilson's other hand — when Wilson's new cell rings again. Wilson lets go of Joel's foot to take the call, which unfortunately pulls Joel back from the brink of sleep. Good job, House!

"Hello, is that James?" a woman says. She doesn't sound like Amy.

"Yes?"

"Oh, hey, it's me — Melanie."


"Yes. It's wonderful hearing from you after so long. You're in Boston?"

"Yes, visiting my parents." He's at a standstill. This is where he should (and normally would) invite her out for a meal, but with Joel in tow, a fancy restaurant isn't feasible. And somehow he doesn't see himself leaving Joel with his parents, not just yet. Maybe never.

"Can we meet?" Melanie asks. "I'd love to see you again."

"Sure," he finds himself saying. "I'd love to see you too."

"Do your parents still live in Brookline?" Melanie asks. "There's a bar on Washington where we could meet, if you're free tonight."

"Uh," Wilson says. "That'll be a bit tricky. I've brought my son with me and he's still too young for late-night outings. Or bars, for that matter."

"Your son? Then the zoo, maybe?" Melanie must be really eager to see him if she's prepared to spend a few hours tramping around animal enclosures. It's more than Wilson is prepared to do, though; so far Joel has shown no interest whatsoever in wildlife.

"Joel is only four months old. If you can make the time during the day, a coffee shop would be fine."

Melanie thinks for a moment. "I know just the place on Harvard Street. It's near —"
"Could you text me the details, please? I have, um, both hands full at the moment."

"Sure." Melanie chuckles. "Four o'clock?"

Wilson makes the mistake of nodding (which is really idiotic since Melanie can't see him), causing the phone to slip from his shoulder and hit Joel squarely on the forehead, thus not only destroying his efforts of the past half hour, but also disconnecting the call. Not that he could have continued any sort of meaningful conversation in the resulting tumult, but he'd have liked to have ended the call in a polished manner, thanking Melanie for responding so promptly and expressing his eagerness to renew their friendship. Oh, well.

The next afternoon he makes his way down Harvard Street with the stroller, enjoying the sunshine and the appreciative glances that come Joel's way. Even taking into account his own lack of objectivity there's no denying that Joel is a cute baby. He doesn't smile much, but those wide-open blue eyes, coupled with dimples and a snub nose, are practically irresistible. Wilson can't even count the number of people who have started casual conversations with him by complimenting him on his son. (There was that one occasion — which Wilson prefers to forget — when a little girl asked him whether he was Joel's granddad . . .) He easily finds the coffee shop where he is to meet Melanie, and when he passes the front window someone waves to him from inside.

Melanie comes forward to meet him as he enters the coffee shop, and Wilson's doubts about resurrecting his past vanish. Even without the photo on her website to prod his memory, he'd probably have recognised her: she has grown older and heavier, but her clear grey eyes still shine above a wide, sensual mouth. A quick hug, then Melanie coos over Joel, remarks that Wilson hasn't changed at all (a compliment that he can return without stretching the truth unduly), and expresses her pleasure at resuming their friendship.

She has a chai latte, but recommends the place's espressos and cookies. Once they are served, Melanie sits up straight. "This can't be the first time you're in Boston after thirty years. What made you decide to seek me out?"

He pulls the book out of his backpack, the one that started it all.

"Oh my goodness, you've bought one of my books!" Melanie exclaims. "How embarrassing!"

"It's even signed. You say that you hope I'll enjoy it," Wilson says with a straight face. "My friend's daughter picked it out because she thought the hero looked like me." He points at the young man on the cover.

She has the grace to blush. "I gave the cover artist a copy of our high school annual and asked her to make Jacob look like you," she confesses.

He feels oddly flattered.

"I started writing when the girls were young. It wasn't serious at first, just a way of killing time while I was a homemaker. Then came the divorce and I had to make money fast. That's when I jumped on the *Twilight* bandwagon. I'm not proud of it, and heaven knows that churning out a book to order every half year is no fun, but," with a shrug and a half-laugh, "it's a reliable income and I am in control of my working hours. That's more than can be said for journalism."

Wilson for his part gives her the 'tidy' version of his CV, mentioning med school and oncology, dwelling a moment on his long stint at PPTH and another on his present job at Philadelphia Central, but omitting such minor matters as thymomas, stints at Mayfield, and longer rehab periods of various kinds. He explains Joel as the result of a relationship turned sour.
"So you're not married?"

"Divorced — three times," he feels compelled to mention. He's already concealing too many blemishes.

"Three times? Wow!" Melanie gives him that wide grin of hers that catapults him back onto the high school bleachers. "I never had you down for a ladykiller."

"No? I have quite a rep," Wilson says ruefully.

"You were awfully shy in school. Lots of girls wanted to go out with you, but you never asked them."

No, because I wanted to go out with you, Wilson thinks. Aloud he says, with a chuckle to take the sting out of his words (he's good at that kind of thing), "You didn't."

"Of course I did!" Melanie remonstrates. "But I couldn't very well ask, could I? At least, not then. Today, I would."

That's the forthright girl he remembers, the one who traded baseball cards with him in middle school during recess while the other girls hung around in tight groups, giggling and eyeing the boys and trying out make-up that they'd wipe off hastily before going home. The one who taught him yo-yo tricks and tagged along when he had to take Danny trick-and-treating on Halloween.

Since they're being frank, he points out, "You let Kyle Calloway take you to the prom."

Her chuckle is long and low. "A teenage stupidity. You remember Alicia, my best friend? She said that if I wanted you to notice me — as a girl, I mean — I had to make you jealous, so when Kyle asked me to go to the prom with him, I said yes." She shakes her head at the memory. "We were so foolish then. Can you believe it, Kyle expected me to allow him to grope me afterwards? As though going to the prom with him obliged me to grant him sexual favours! When I didn't let him, he spread the rumour that I was a lesbian. God, the drama of high school!"

His memories of high school are overshadowed by the constant struggle to keep his family life strictly segregated from his school life, a struggle that failed when Danny entered high school. He'd been a senior at the time. Till then, he'd managed to keep his brother's weirdness a secret: he scrupulously avoided inviting classmates to his house and he didn't participate in school athletics or drama productions for fear that his parents might attend, dragging Danny with them. But when Danny entered his freshman year, the corridors of Brookline High teemed with stories of how James's little brother came to school in the same clothes every day, how he disrupted classes with confused tales of persecution and alien abduction, how he lined up his pencils and pens obsessively on his desk — and how he freaked out whenever his classmates brought them into disarray, a pastime they indulged in whenever they wanted to disrupt classes. Michael, two years Wilson's senior, had a much easier time. He'd graduated by the time Daniel entered high school, so he'd never attended the same school as Danny. Their parents didn't expect Michael to allow Danny to tag along when he went out with his friends, and Danny never felt the need to burden him with his fears and phobias. No, Wilson hadn't had much time or energy to spare for teen drama of his own, not until he left home and entered college. Then he'd caught up with drama with a vengeance.

But all that is over now. And Melanie is leaning over the table confidingly, as though to imply that if he chose to remedy his mistake of long ago and ask her out, she wouldn't say no. He for his part is quite prepared to make up for the aforementioned mistake— he'll solve the problem of what to do with Joel later — when his cell phone rings.
"Excuse me," he says to Melanie. It's either his parents or —

"Where are you?" House asks.

"Boston," Wilson answers, scooting back his chair a little. "Same as yesterday. I'm a bit busy, so if you don't mind —"

"I do. What are you doing?"

"Drinking coffee in a café."

"Alone?" There's suspicion in House's voice.

Wilson glances at Melanie. No, there's no need to let House in on this part of his life. "You've got me. Actually, I'm in a strip bar, introducing Joel to the pleasures that will be his once you take charge of him." Melanie gives him a curious look. He'd take the conversation somewhere else, except that there's no need to continue it. "House, I'm not returning to Philadelphia just because you snap your fingers. Suck it up, okay?"

"Why are you in Boston?" House asks. He's being tenacious; something is bothering him.

"I told you, I'm visiting my parents. I want them to get to know Joel. Is that so surprising?"

"They're too old to take Joel if you die," House says, clinically detached.

Wilson passes a weary hand over his face. "I can't possibly be visiting my family without an agenda?" he asks rhetorically.

"You have less than one week before your job ties you down to Philadelphia. Any travelling you need to do has to get done now. So, no, you can't."

"I'm sorry that my spontaneity disconcerts you, but you'll have to live with it." He disconnects the call.

Melanie is regarding him quizzically, and he's still so deep in thought about House's preoccupation with his whereabouts that he says, "Joel's dad. He's upset that I took off without letting him know where I'd be or when I'd be back."

"Joel's dad?" Melanie echoes. At his disconcerted look she quickly adds, "Sorry, it's none of my business, but I thought he was your son."

"It's — complicated," Wilson says, rubbing the back of his neck as he wonders how to talk his way out of this one. Then it strikes him that there's no need to talk his way out of it. There's no reason not to tell Melanie the whole story, because she isn't part of this giant fuck-up and therefore can't benefit or come to harm from knowing the truth. And she's discreet: she'd known about Danny almost from the start, when he'd started behaving oddly, but she'd never told anyone about it, not even her friends. So he tells Melanie the whole story, starting with his thymoma and ending with the revelation that Joel isn't his son. Melanie sits wide-eyed, unmoving, not interrupting his story even once with comments or exclamations of disbelief or dismay. That's what he likes about her, her ability to listen.

"Well, … wow!" she says at the end. "That's just — totally amazing!"

"In what way?" Wilson asks drily.
"Here I am, making up ridiculous stories off the top of my head about vampires and werewolves, while you're living something that's real and a lot more ..." She hesitates, searching for words. "... raw and honest and exciting."

"Forgive me for not gaining any pleasure out of living the ultimate soap opera," Wilson says. Melanie reaches over the table to clasp his hand. "James, you've always looked out for others. You used to protect that little brother of yours, smoothing his way and ensuring that no one bullied him. It's the same trait that causes you to take responsibility for a child that isn't yours. That's who you are! It's what makes you special. Would you really like to be someone else, the kind of person who abandons others to their fate?"

He doesn't know how to answer that. Of course he wouldn't want to go through life trampling over others, but why does his way come at such a price?

"You remember Danny?" he asks instead, taking Joel, who is getting restless, out of the stroller. Joel promptly grabs at everything within reach. Wilson sighs and bends down to get a rusk out of Joel's bag.

"Of course!" she laughs. "I … I even wrote a book about him and you. My first one. It didn't sell well, I'm afraid. Not racy enough: no doomed teen romance, no mysterious sparkly strangers with dietary issues and selenophobia, no pretentious cancer kids. Just a realistic book about realistic problems."

"You — what?" Wilson asks. Joel takes advantage of his momentary inattentiveness to grab his coffee cup and upend it. Luckily it's mostly empty. Melanie reacts promptly, dabbing at the mess on the table with a paper napkin while Wilson half turns away from the table so that Joel can't reach anything else on it. He uses his free hand to push everything on the table away from Joel in Melanie's direction before reaching back into the bag for the elusive rusk.

"Don't worry," Melanie says. "You're both unrecognisable. It's a story about a kid who tries to protect his schizophrenic brother from the world in general and high school in particular."

"You knew that Danny is schizophrenic?" He'd only figured it out when he was in pre-med.

"Not then. I pieced it together later, when I was researching mental illnesses in another context." She sighs, balling up a soggy napkin. "It must have been tough on your family. How's he doing?"

"He's in an institution in New York," he tells her. "I don't think he'll ever be able to lead an independent life."

"Tough on your parents," Melanie says. That isn't exactly how Wilson would describe the situation. "Maybe. They don't let it touch them."

Melanie tugs her ear. "Too bad. In my book there's a sort of resolution, but I guess it isn't that easy."

"No," Wilson says, "it rarely is. Life is messy and mental disease particularly so. There's no happy end. How did you resolve your story?"

"You'll laugh: they find a good psychiatrist who becomes a sort of mentor to the older brother, and the younger kid — Danny — goes to live in supported housing with other challenging kids."

Wilson lets out a deep sigh. That is what he's been hoping for Danny, but so far, Danny hasn't
gotten any closer to such an arrangement. Whenever his mental health seemed to improve he stopped taking his medication, and then the whole cycle started from the beginning again.

"You know," Melanie says, "your story would make a great plot for a novel."

"My story?" Wilson queries. This doesn't sound good.

"A werewolf raises the child of the woman he loved in vain, a human girl who was involved with a vampire and died giving birth to the kid, because … the vampire blood in the infant kills the mother when it mingles with hers during birth, like that thing with the negative rhesus factor," Melanie says, a faraway look in her eyes, pausing every now and then in order to fit the bits and pieces of her plot together.

Wilson refrains from pointing out that rhesus factor incompatibility will kill the foetus rather than the mother. What does he know about the medicine of fantasy creatures?

"Complications ensue when the vampire comes to claim the kid, because … because he wants the kid to be a vampire too. The werewolf defends the kid's right to be human like his mother. There's a showdown and in the end, uh, … ." Wilson stares at her. Joel bounces up and down on Wilson's lap, rusk smeared all over his face.

"Sorry," Melanie says. "I got carried away. I guess that was in bad taste."

"No, it's okay," he finds himself saying. "You have to get your plots from somewhere, I expect. But why am I always the werewolf?"

"I don't know," Melanie says. "You just are. Would you rather be a vampire? That would work too."

"No, no, werewolf is fine," Wilson says with a grin. "I'll be the Big Bad Wolf. Who gets to be Little Red Riding Hood?"

Oops, that sounded more like a come-on than he meant it to be. Embarrassed, he tries to remove a rusk stain from Joel's cheek. Joel protests with a squawk, catching hold of Wilson's hand and stuffing it into his mouth.

"Ouch!" Wilson says. "I think you've grown your first tooth. Yeah, your dad is definitely a vampire. So, what happens in the end, vampire kills werewolf or …?"

"I'd have the kid killing the vampire to defend his foster father, but that would be patricide, a big no-no in teen books. I guess they'll have to reconcile somehow. I'll probably have the nymphs mediate between them."

"The … nymphs?"

"Yes, I have nymphs," Melanie says defensively. "I was going to have elves, but my editor thought that would be too 'Tolkien', if you get what I mean. And mermaids need water, but my plots don't necessarily allow for a convenient sea or stream nearby. It's a primitive device: they work as a sort of deus ex machina whenever the plot gets out of hand."

Nymphs. Of course! It's his fate to be eternally persecuted by pesky forest nymphs.

Unfortunately, Joel's interest in the niceties of character development and plot resolution within the context of young adult fiction is limited. He is of the opinion that it's time for his afternoon nap —
'Thank you, jet lag!' Wilson thinks — and gets increasingly agitated. After a few attempts to distract him Wilson gives up.

"Will you be here more often to visit your parents now that …?" Melanie asks, nodding at Joel, as they leave the café.

"Uh, no, I don't think so," Wilson says. "I mean … ."

He stands in the sun contemplating cars passing by, student couples sauntering by hand-in-hand, a homeless person pushing a shopping trolley piled high with odds and ends. He pictures his parents sitting in the living room, the couch and armchair worn thin at the arm rests, the smells the same as forty years ago, the conversations identical. He thinks of Joel's patchwork family.

"It's more of a farewell visit," he finally says.
He oversleeps, something that rarely happens to him by accident regardless of what his bosses, former and present, believe. Mostly his lateness is deliberate, a middle finger stuck out at the bureaucrats of this world. Today, it isn't premeditated; the joint did a better job of relaxing him than he'd anticipated. He catches himself thinking that he should do that more often, and grimaces. He's in his room getting dressed when the doorbell rings, and a moment later pandemonium breaks out. The timing is a little awkward, because he's at the stage of disarray where he has threaded his prosthetic through his jeans, but hasn't strapped it on yet, so he ends up hopping out of the bedroom on one leg, the other one hanging loosely in his jeans.

It seems Lisa was right about getting herself moving of her own accord: she's fully dressed and in the entryway, yelling at someone at the door. "I have no idea who you are!"

"I am Jiaying," a female voice says. "I clean. I clean your house."

"Oh, no, you don't!"

He closes his eyes briefly, and then hops forward.

"Hello, my morning star!" he says with as much cheer as he can muster at the unearthly hour of eight a.m. "That's your new cleaning lady." After a short pause he adds, "I see you are speechless with delight. She can't clean unless you let her enter, so move!"

Lisa squeezes her eyes shut and takes a deep breath. Probably some yoga technique, but whatever it is, it doesn't seem to be working. "Does she even have a work permit?" she asks.

He gazes at her with eyes widened innocently. "Would she accept employment if she didn't?" he asks.

Jiaying gazes ahead stoically, ignoring their little exchange. "I work for you?" she asks him.

"Sure," he says, giving Lisa's elbow a little tug. With his prosthetic dangling loosely in his jeans, he can't actually pull her aside without tipping over in an undignified manner.

Lisa moves aside ungraciously. "Is there anyone or anything else I should know about?"

"The gardener. He's called Hernandez, I think."

Lisa throws up her hands, turns around, and stomps off into the house.

"She's crazy, feng," he confides to Jiaying. Jiaying smiles blandly as she edges past him.

"Where are the car keys?" Lisa calls, irritation lacing her voice. "I need to leave."

"Ready in a sec, snookums," he replies, patting his pocket to make sure he still has the keys.

"I can —"

"… manage. Yes, I know." The moment Jiaying is out of sight he drops into a chair and pulls down his jeans far enough that he can strap his prosthetic to his stump. When Lisa reappears carrying her briefcase, with Jiaying trailing behind her, he hastily tugs up his jeans again.

"Where are cleaning things?" Jiaying asks. "And what you want clean?"
He looks at Lisa, who merely shrugs.

"Everything," he says to Jiaying in Chinese. "There's a utility room back there." He points in the general direction. "You'll find what you need there. If not, go out and buy whatever is missing."

Lisa rushes past him to the door. He grimaces at Jiaying in farewell, then he hurries out behind Lisa. They complete the first part of the journey in silence.

Then Lisa asks, "What are you doing today?" Her voice is neutral; it's hard to tell whether she's making polite conversation (the ability to do so would be a good sign), is sincerely interested (which would also be a good sign), or wants to be sure that he won't get in her way.

"Gotta prepare a lecture," he says. When he lectures in person, he tends to play it by ear, but if he's stuck here for another few days, he'll have to post another online lecture, which means he needs a bona fide case. "Need an interesting case. Do you remember any of my cases?"

"Dunno," she says, staring out of her window. "You could go to PPTH and ask Cameron to let you access your patient files."

"I could," he says, "but first of all, I need a rough idea of what I'm looking for, and secondly, I'm not Cameron's bosom buddy at the moment. I get all these negative vibes from her whenever I have to deal with her."

"Wilson's," Lisa says. "You had a patient who presented with a blood clot and … schizophrenia, I think, and it turned out to be a liver tumour and Wilson's. If you don't want to deal with Cameron, talk to Chase. He'll remember the case."

The case doesn't sound promising: Wilson's being misdiagnosed as schizophrenia and an undiscovered liver tumour sounds more like crappy medicine than a truly interesting case. But talking to Chase isn't a bad idea, really. He's been thinking of going that way, anyway.

So, after dropping Lisa off, he programmes the GPS and makes his way out to Mayfield.

"To what do I owe the honour?" Chase asks him. He sprawls on a bench, his face turned towards the sun. His hair, unfashionably short, is greying at the temples, an observation that cheers Pete.

"Wilson's," Pete says shortly.

"Wilson's," Chase echoes, "as in 'the property of James Wilson, MD' or as in the genetic disease?"

"The disease. Had a case once, Lisa said. I need something for a lecture."

"Ah. And I'd hoped that you were here to congratulate me on my upcoming release. Or on my new job. As in, offering me your support."

"Now why would I do that?" he asks with raised eyebrows. "I'm not a charity."

Chase spreads his hands. "Boredom?"

"Right! Wilson's," he prompts.

"That would have been one of my first cases," Chase says, digging in his pockets. He pulls out a packet of cigarettes and lights one, putting the packet away without offering Pete any. "The woman was diagnosed with schizophrenia a few years before; she was brought to the ER because of strong abdominal pain caused by a blood clot. That's where you snagged her."
"What caught my attention? Schizophrenia and blood clots doesn't sound interesting."

"She was too young to throw clots. Besides, you liked crazy. Probably still do."

Still not promising. "Was she duly impressed and grateful? Because I'll need her permission to use her case, otherwise Cameron won't give me the case files."

Chase scratches his head. "The cancer returned and she died a few years later. Her kid should still be around somewhere — though he wasn't your biggest fan."

No surprise there. Kids aren't his thing, really.

"I could talk to him, though," Chase continues. "Explain what really happened. He thought you ratted him out to social services. He was a minor, but he was doing a really great job looking out for his mom, and then social services picked him up. He was right pissed."

"So maybe I did rat him out."

Chase laughs. "No, you didn't. His mom phoned social services herself, but she didn't want him to know, so you took the rap."

He raises his eyebrows. That doesn't sound like him at all.

Chase grins at his reaction. "You liked him; thought he was bee's knees, though you'd never have admitted it. He was intelligent, thorough, and a good scammer. Like Wilson. He even looked like Wilson — more than Wilson's own kid does, that's for sure."

"You've seen Wilson's kid?" he asks carefully.

Chase nods. "He brought him to his last few sessions with Nolan, and he always drops in on me after his sessions. Cute kid; Wilson's a lucky guy. Funny, somehow I didn't think he'd ever have children."

Pete considers asking why, but decides that it's better to drop the matter. Chase's radar is calibrated to home in on omissions and subterfuges, and the way he's emphasising his words indicates that he suspects something is off with regard to Joel.

Chase leans forward to stub out his cigarette. "Get Cameron to give you the contact details and then I'll talk to the guy. Without you his mother would have died seven years earlier than she did, and then he'd have ended up in a foster home for sure, so he should be grateful."

Pete nods and rises, checking his watch. It's one o'clock, the time at which Nolan takes a lunch break, and he knows where to find him. Just outside the gates of Mayfield a footpath branching off the access road leads down to a creek. A short way down the footpath, behind a bend, there's a bench — Pete suspects that Nolan had it installed — where Nolan can be found on fair days during off hours. Nolan's look of surprise when Pete rounds the bend changes to resignation when he recognises him.

"Greg," he says, shifting to make room for him. "What a surprise!"

At least he isn't so dumb as to say that it's a pleasant one. Pete sits down and peers into Nolan's lunch box. The contents aren't inspiring: carrot and celery sticks, a yoghurt dip, a sandwich made of wholegrain bread, apple slices. When Pete pulls a face Nolan says, "My physician insists that I lose weight. My hip joints aren't what they used to be."
"Get new ones," Pete suggests.

"I will, I will," Nolan says, selecting a celery stick. "But it seems that I need to get rid of the extra pounds too."

"Stones," Pete corrects him.

"Have you ever thought about a career as a motivational coach?" Nolan asks sarcastically. Pete takes a carrot stick and crunches it noisily. "Isn't James in California?" Nolan asks next.

"Boston," Pete amends.

"Boston? I must have misheard." Nolan shakes his head ruefully.

"California didn't work out," Pete explains with a casual wave of his hand. "Amy disappointed, so Wilson left again."

He knows what Wilson is up to. Having abandoned his plan to inveigle Lisa into fostering the spawn, Wilson is sussing out alternatives. Amy must have set a negative benchmark in terms of parenting skills, otherwise Wilson wouldn't have given up on her so quickly. Now Wilson is checking out his parents as potential guardians, in case he should bite the dust before he has filled the kid's college fund to the brim, a measure that reeks of desperation. Pete tried to talk to them when Wilson's liver values plummeted, hoping that they'd be able to provide a list of family members who might qualify as donors. From a communicative perspective it had only just beaten talking to a deaf-mute. If they raise Joel, he'll join his uncle Danny in the nuthouse sooner or later. It can't have taken Wilson more than a day to realise that he's wasting his time in Boston. Nevertheless, he hasn't shaken the dust of Boston off his feet and moved on to Chicago, where his brother Michael, the next logical choice, lives. His continued sojourn in Boston means one of three things: one, his brother Michael has informed him in no uncertain terms that he doesn't want anything to do with Wilson's spawn, two, he's flirting with someone (he definitely wasn't alone in that café), or three, he has returned to his original plan of roping Lisa in, in which case he can afford to hang about Boston wasting his time.

"Hmm." Nolan takes another celery stick. "You didn't come here in order to inform me of James's travel itinerary."

Pete flexes his remaining foot, crosses his ankles, uncrosses them again, and takes a slice of apple. "Social call," he mutters.

"Nice try, but you don't do 'social'. You're strictly functional. I'm not judging; I'm merely stating facts. Another fact is that you're in Philadelphia even though James isn't here. That means your visit isn't about him. … You aren't involved in any way in that diagnostic project that Dr Cuddy is starting at her hospital, are you?" Nolan says with a hint of worry.

He shakes his head. "No. I'm steering clear of that shipwreck."

"Shipwreck?" Nolan's interest is piqued, and so it should be. If he's releasing Chase in a few days, he'll want to know whether Chase is heading for stable surroundings.

"Let's just say that Lisa's position at that hospital is somewhat tenuous," Pete says. "I doubt that'll affect Chase, though. It seems to be a power struggle between Lisa and the new dean, one that she's losing, but since he personally approved of the diagnostic project, he's unlikely to let it — or Chase — go."

"And your role in all this?"
"Innocent bystander," he says.

When this draws a disbelieving chuckle from Nolan, he pouts, sticking out his lower lip. He'll have to throw Nolan a morsel or two of information. "I'm here because I happened to barge into a bit of a situation at the Cuddy household, and now I'm stuck there, because Wilson is judging my parenting skills by my ability to stick around and get a handle on the situation. It's ludicrous and completely beside the point, and sooner or later there'll be murder and mayhem!" His voice has risen and his sense of grievance isn't played any more. It's very real. He wills himself to calm down and get his breathing under control, and then he says, "I have no idea what he wants from me, but I'm the last person to be able to help Lisa. I'm the problem, not the solution!"

"In what sense?"

"She has health issues, probably partly brought on by the liver transplant, exacerbated by workplace issues — that wouldn't have arisen if she hadn't agreed to the transplant."

"That's bullshit," Nolan points out. "The transplant may have been your suggestion, but she had a choice. She didn't have to do it. Don't allow anyone to guilt you into taking responsibility for the outcome, health-wise or professionally."

That's true enough, and so he always tells himself. But it's only half the truth. The other half is that he's been manipulating Lisa for the past year or so, first into donating her liver, then into keeping her mouth shut about Joel, and finally into falling into his arms instead of Wilson's. He probably did everyone a favour all three times, but that doesn't alter the fact that Lisa has no reason to trust him or to want him around, because there is, unfortunately, no doubt that promoting Lisa's well-being didn't feature on his list of priorities at all. She was lucky, that was all. Next time, she might be less so, and she's only too aware of it. She wants out, out of his life and his plans and his schemes, and he can't blame her.

"You're stressed," Nolan remarks.

"Wow!" He rolls his eyes. "What a superb diagnosis! You're good!"

"And anxious," Nolan continues, unimpressed by his sarcasm. "What are you doing about it?"

"Getting plastered." He waits for censure, but none is forthcoming.

"Okay," Nolan says. "What about drugs?"

"A joint the other night."

"That's all?"

He nods. He'd wanted opiates, craved their power to deaden emotion and take away anxiety, felt the desire to throw himself into their all-enfolding embrace, but he'd resisted. Not because common sense told him that the relief would be short-lived, not because he feared the detox that must follow sooner or later (well, he did, but not enough), but because he remembered only too well the misery that had followed his last detox roughly two years ago. The detox itself had been bearable, since he'd been on Vicodin for less than a month, but he'd been low and listless for a long time, plagued by self-hatred, anxiety, and a sense of insecurity that he couldn't remember having felt before. He'd even cried himself to sleep a few nights (and then some), a memory that he represses as much as possible.

Besides, Wilson would find out; Wilson figured out his last relapse within a space of five minutes. If he caught Pete as much as thinking about opiates or even thinking about thinking about them,
he'd make sure that Pete gave the kid a wide berth till all eternity. It's unfortunate that Lisa witnessed his last indulgence, the reefer, but hopefully she won't mention it to Wilson, and from now on he'll be the poster boy for healthy living and good choices — at least while he's on this side of the Atlantic.

He takes the top slice off one of Nolan's wholegrain sandwiches, tears off a piece of the bread, and rolls it into a soggy ball that he places in the palm of his hand. He flicks it towards the creek with a snap of his fingers. Ten feet, maybe. The mallards on the water turn and make a beeline for the bread; Nolan must be feeding them regularly. He rolls another ball. Fifteen feet should be feasible with the right technique.

"Good," Nolan says, placing his lunch box on the far side of the bench where Pete can't reach it. "Let's take a look at the situation: James wants something from you, a proof of good faith, and you don't know how to give it. Does that summarise your dilemma?"

"Goddammit, yes!"

Nolan leans back, interlacing his fingers over his ample stomach. "Now why would he want that?" he asks in a meditative tone. "Why does James fear that you'll abandon your son?"

Pete gets Nolan's problem, patient confidentiality: Wilson has probably discussed the matter with him, and regardless of whether Nolan agrees with Wilson's stance on this or not, he can't tell Pete anything that Wilson said to him. He's prodding Pete into figuring it out himself.

"Because," he says slowly, "because Wilson feels I abandoned him when I induced amnesia in myself. He resented that — still resents it. He threw it at my head when he was diagnosed with cancer. He wouldn't get his cancer treated because staying alive for me wasn't worth the bother. He's afraid I'll disappear from his son's life the way I disappeared from his." He sits up straight. "This has nothing to do with how I treated Rachel when she was small."

"How did you treat Rachel?"

"No idea; you know I don't remember," Pete says irritably.

"I thought you might have talked to Dr Cuddy about it," Nolan says in a mildly suggestive tone.

Pete contemplates that little hint. There's no way that Nolan believes that he has talked about anything of the sort with Lisa, which means that Nolan is suggesting that he do so now.

Nolan adds, "It's always good to know what behaviour patterns to avoid if you want to steer clear of negative associations and bad memories. Besides, you need to focus on the things you can change, not on the ones that you can't. You can't change the past; what's done is done. What you can change is the way Wilson perceives your ability to cope with children. You can also prove that you're able to weather difficult situations if you stick out the week with Dr Cuddy and support her in whatever she's going through."

"You're with him on this," he says heavily.

"I'm not with anyone. If James isn't talking to you, you can't use your gift of the gab to make him see things differently. That being so, you can either dig in your heels or go with the flow. Since you want something that he has, you don't have much of a choice. Correct me if I'm wrong."

When Nolan puts it that way, neatly and succinctly, there isn't much he can say, except his token form of protest. "Who says I want something from him?"
Nolan tosses up his hands. "Greg, spare me! You're wasting my time and yours if you insist on playing the Tin Man at every opportunity."

Okay, that isn't going to work; he didn't think it would. He guesses he wouldn't respect Nolan if it did. "Thing is," he says, "I don't know how much I want. I … don't know how much of a father I can be or want to be."

"'Can' or 'want', which is it? Two words, different meanings," Nolan points out.

He looks at Nolan with dislike: he came here for help, not to be placed under a magnifying lens and examined like a particularly nasty bug.

Nolan leans back again, one could almost say, 'happily'. He's definitely in his element. "Let's look at the matter from a different perspective."

Pete raises his eyebrows. "There's a different one?"

"There's James's and there's yours. So far, we've looked at what James feels, desires, and demands. Let's look at you."

"I told you I don't —"

Nolan raises his hand. "Let me finish my thought process. I'm slower than you are, but every now and then I, too, have an idea worth considering." He drops his hand again. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you weren't always bothered about the circumstances surrounding Joel. The situation escalated about two weeks ago, but it wasn't merely Dr. Cuddy's interference that made it escalate. You said or did something before, something that made her aware of your paternity. Knowing you, that was deliberate." He pauses questioningly.

Was his indiscretion towards Lisa deliberate? He supposes so; Lisa had been on the right track, but it wouldn't have been difficult to divert her into the woods again.

"All of a sudden, you felt a need to acknowledge your paternity. So far, we've looked at what James feels, desires, and demands. Let's look at you."

What changed that evening two months ago when Wilson entered the apartment with a baby in tow?

"Wilson obtained custody." It's the only fact that changed that night. Everything else remained the same. "Lisa found out about Amy and me the day Wilson became Joel's primary custodian."

"Let's follow that lead: something about James being granted custody bothered you. Do you think he's less capable of taking care of Joel than the mother, Amy, is?"

A moron can see that Wilson is by far the better parent, so he shakes his head.

"Are you worried that James's addiction issues will affect his parenting abilities?"

Again, he's pretty sure that Lisa will catch that if it should become a problem. Chances are that Amy in a sober state is more of a wild card than Wilson even when he's shit-faced. He shakes his head again.

"His cancer?"

Well, that's worrisome, but it was so already before the kid appeared as a permanent fixture in Wilson's life. In fact, it's somewhat less worrisome now than it was before, because if anything, the
leech will give Wilson a reason to monitor his own health and take measures to preserve it — as far as that is possible.

"No," he says, plucking his lower lip. "I don't think it's connected to Wilson."

"Okay." Nolan draws out the word. "Maybe it's connected to the change in Joel's circumstances, namely that he is in your proximity from now on. Where and how did you visit Joel before James brought him home with him?"

He looks at Nolan blankly. "I didn't. There was no reason to."

Now it's Nolan's turn to stare. "You … never visited him? You'd never met him before?"

"No."

"Ah!" Nolan's voice reverberates with smugness. "I think that answers our question."

He doesn't like the direction this is taking. Nolan is insinuating that personal contact with his offspring induced a sense of responsibility or obligation in him, but in fact, nothing changed during that meeting. He'd known before that Joel was his son. That knowledge alone should have sufficed to make him protect his genes; it shouldn't have taken a face-to-face confrontation for him to buckle up and face his responsibility. The fact that it took him so long to accept his liability is irrevocable proof that he won't be a good father.

That's Wilson's whole point, so they've come around in a full circle and are back where they started.

He gets up abruptly. Nolan follows suit, closing the lid of his lunch box and swinging into step beside him as though they'd agreed on some secret signal to leave the place. When they reach the top of the path where it rejoins the road to Mayfield Nolan says, "You're castigating yourself for not acknowledging your child sooner."

He looks down at a spot a few inches to the right of his foot. Then he says, "Wilson is right not to trust me. So far, nothing I have said or done indicates that I'll be of any benefit to … to his son."

"We don't know whether the situation would have been better if you had been upfront about your paternity right from the start or, say, from his birth onwards. Chances are that it would have been worse."

That's what he's been telling himself. That has been his justification all along.

"Greg!" Nolan calls after him as he turns towards the car park. "I'll be happy to share my lunch box with you anytime."

He hesitates, then he nods a short acknowledgement. Talking to Nolan hasn't exactly helped, but on the other hand it hasn't done any harm either. And who knows, perhaps Nolan will put in a good word for him with James. He turns this thought over in his mind. Was his aim in coming here not to gain any clarity for himself, but to manipulate Nolan? Would it matter if his motives weren't entirely pure?

He's on his way back to Drexel (or so he hopes) when his cell phone rings.

"Hello?" he says irritably. Driving with a prosthesis while trying to follow Homer Simpson's driving instructions is challenging without additional distractions.
"It's me, Rachel."

"Hello, 'Me, Rachel','" he says, trying to tone down the irritation. "Your mother is as much at work today as she was yesterday, and calling me on my cell phone won't change that."

"I know." There's a pause. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Where'd you get my number?"

"You gave it to me, remember? Before you arrived. ... It's awful here."

There's a moment of silence. This is where a good parent, or any caring adult for that matter, would ask why it was awful or voice their commiseration. He doesn't.

"What are you doing?" Rachel asks.

"Driving," he says, taking a left turn at the last moment because taking the call made him miss the GPS instructions. The driver of the oncoming car blows his horn; he flips him the bird in return.

"Idiot! ... Not you; the other driver."

"Oh. You're not supposed to use the phone while driving."

"Right," he says with heavy sarcasm; the light version doesn't work on Rachel. "Shouldn't have called you. My bad."

"Can you call me when you reach … wherever?"

He hesitates, then he says, "Yeah, sure."

"Okay, bye then."

"Bye," he mumbles, already concentrating on the GPS's next instructions. God, but Homer is bossy today!

When he reaches Drexel he prevaricates, wondering what to do. He can return Rachel's call, but no matter what her problem may be, he can't solve it. With a sigh he picks up his cell, pulls up the list of recent callers, and hits the dial button.

"Hello?"

The person taking the call isn't Rachel. At a rough estimate the speaker is well over sixty. Judging by the similarity in accent and intonation she is Lisa's mother, Arlene Cuddy. Arlene the Hun. Alzheimer Arlene. He considers disconnecting the call, but trying again later won't help him. If Arlene (as far as she can still think clearly) or her caregiver/companion get the idea that they're being harassed by an anonymous caller, they won't let Rachel anywhere near the phone. His only option is brazening his way through the call.

"Hello, this is Brad Johnson, Rachel Cuddy's home room teacher. Is that Julia Cuddy's place?" No reply. That woman must be beyond salvage already. He soldiers on. "I heard that Rachel won't be returning to school this week, so I wanted to give her some tasks to do while she's gone."

There's a muffled sort of harrumph at the other end.

He continues valiantly, "So, if I could talk to her, please?"

"You," says Arlene Cuddy (if it is her, but he has no reason to assume otherwise), "aren't Rachel's
teacher any more than I'm the President of the United States."

"Sorry?" he says with feigned innocence. It's a pity Arlene can't see his face; he certainly deserves an Oscar.

"Gregory House! There's no way I could ever forget that voice, not in a hundred years!"

He makes a valiant last-ditch effort to salvage the situation. "Gregory who, ma'am?"

"Greg House, don't try to make a fool of me! I may be old and my daughter may think I'm senile, but I'm not so far gone as to believe that Rachel's teacher would call from a British number!"

If there's an Oscar for stupidity, he's on the short list. He didn't think to hide his caller ID, which means his number with its British country code is showing on the phone's display. (And Arlene isn't as far up the road to Alzheimerville as Lisa chooses to believe, but that's neither here nor there.)

Arlene is on a roll. "I don't know why you want to talk to Rachel, but I don't want you talking to my grandchild. Ever! And I don't care what Julia's position is on the matter, much less Lisa's, who is a complete moron where you're concerned. Do you remember what I threatened to do to you if you ever hurt Lisa?"

"No, ma'am, but I can make an educated guess." Probably something that features a grapefruit spoon, his balls, and a lot of gratuitous violence.

"Don't be facetious and don't you try that amnesia number on me! You can con Lisa and Julia, but you won't get past me. I haven't had an opportunity to carry out my threat, but if I get the chance now, I won't say no."

There's a click and then he's left holding a beeping phone. He sincerely hopes that Rachel will fare better than he did when faced with the Grand Cuddy Inquisition regarding why the near murderer of her two daughters is phoning her residence, but somehow he doubts her ability to brazen it out. Lisa is so not going to be happy. He goes for a very long run to take his mind off the suckotage of the day, takes a long, hot shower afterwards, making a right old mess of the bathroom (so that Jiaying will feel needed), and then heads out for the city centre again.

"Lighten up," he says to Lisa on the drive home.

"You gate-crashed my therapy session," she says dully, not for the first time.

"In the interest of your health," he counters.

"You learned nothing of interest. Hey, you need to turn off at the next intersection! Construction site ahead, remember?"

Yes, sort of, but have they reached it already? Throwing a quick glance over his shoulder, he pulls over sharply into the left lane.

"I learned," he says carefully once he's sure that the car whose lane he cut into has managed to brake sufficiently to avoid a collision, "that your therapist considers SSRIs neither indicated nor necessary."

"Could have told you that. Did tell you that."
"I prefer my information first hand. Patients lie. You don't care anyway; if you did, you'd have told your therapist not to divulge anything."

"Yeah, like you wouldn't have hacked her files if she'd refused."

True enough. He'd been reckoning with as much and had already contacted a computer science major who'd done him a favour or two when he'd needed Wilson's medical files, so he'd been pleasantly surprised when Lisa, after getting over the initial shock of seeing him comfortably ensconced in her therapist's waiting room, instructed her therapist to tell him what he wanted to know.

When they reach home, Lisa goes to get the mail while he parks the car in the garage. She comes back from the mailbox, frowning.

"Do you know anything about Wilson having things in storage?" she asks turning one of the envelopes she's holding over. "This is labelled URGENT, but it could be an ad, I guess."

He tweaks the envelope out of her hand. It doesn't look like junk mail and the 'urgent' label is stamped manually. The return address is that of a storage unit in New Jersey that seems vaguely familiar.

"When I asked Wilson whether he had any furniture of his own, he said he owned practically nothing and would have to buy everything he needed," Lisa says.

Pete remembers an early autumn afternoon almost two years ago: a drive to a storage unit near Princeton, Wilson hovering while he rooted through his former belongings, a baby grand that responded to his touch as though it knew him — which it did.

"Crap!" he says, tearing open the envelope. His eyes fly over the words of the letter, one layer of his brain taking in their literal meaning while another tries to grasp their significance.

Dear Sir,

In your letter dated 06/15/2017 you requested the termination of your lease of Storage Unit H364356CC at the next possible date. As we notified you on 06/17/2017, your lease will end on 06/30/2017 at 12 p.m. Any items remaining within the unit after that hour will be removed from the unit and put into the Unclaimed Property facility until such time as you pick them up, at an additional charge of $50 and a fee of $100 for moving the items from your unit to the Unclaimed Property facility. Should the items remain in our possession for longer than a month, we will take legal steps to dispose of them. We will not be liable for damage or loss of items that have not been collected before the lease expires. Please note that the unclaimed property facility is not climate controlled.

Yours etc.

"Fuck!"

"What's up?" Lisa asks.

"That double-dealing bastard!" he says, digging out his cell phone. "Tomorrow's the thirtieth, right? ... Hello? James Wilson, Storage Unit H364356CC. I'm afraid there's been a mix-up; I didn't mean to terminate the lease."

It takes a moment until he's connected to the 'facility coordinator' and another one till the coordinator has found Wilson's correspondence. Lisa shrugs and goes into the house.
"You want to keep the unit?" the coordinator asks.

"Yes!"

"But you cancelled the contract. We have your letter terminating the lease. We sent you a confirmation email, which you acknowledged on — let me see — on June 18."

"I … thought it was a different unit. I have another storage unit in another facility and I got them mixed up. I must have cancelled the wrong unit," Pete improvises. "Can't I keep this unit?"

"Let me check." A keyboard clacks in the background. "I'm sorry, but the unit is taken from July 1. We don't have many climate-controlled units; there's a waiting list for those and they are taken immediately. I can offer you a unit without climate control that's the same size."

"Okay, I'll take that," he says, grimacing.

"You'll have to move your things tomorrow though," the coordinator says, "by noon."

"You're kidding!"

"The contract states clearly that —"

"Fuck the contract!"

"Our removal service can move your things from one unit to the other. The charge is 100 dollars, as stated in —"

"Yeah, okay. Do that."

"Okay." Fingernails clack on a keyboard. "I've reserved Unit L745372 for you and the removal service will move your things at … 11 a.m. You can pick up the key card during our office hours. Oh, and if there's anything in the old unit that's heat or cold sensitive, I'd advise you to come and get it."

"Yeah, yeah!" He disconnects the call, glowering inwardly, and follows Lisa into the house. Wilson must have cancelled the lease right after he found out that the kid wasn't the fruit of his loins.

Lisa is on the phone. He can guess whom she's calling, so he beats a strategic retreat into the kitchen to bang about with pots and pans. But no matter how vigorously he chops herbs, he can hear Lisa's raised voice. He has definitely put his foot in it this time.

Then there's silence. He continues chopping until the basil turns into slush, but there's no sound from the living area. Finally he goes to take a look. Lisa is on the couch, her head in her hands. She looks up when he stands before her.

"I honestly don't know why Julia puts up with Mom's crap," she says, "but I've had enough."

He has no issues with Arlene Cuddy getting a portion of the blame for today's fiasco, so he doesn't comment. Lisa doesn't expect him to do so anyway. She continues, "Apparently one of Rachel's teachers phoned. It must have been Mr Jones, her science teacher, but Mom thought it was you. Heaven knows where she got that idea!"

He scratches his brow with his thumbnail. "Maybe he sounds like me."

Lisa rolls her eyes. "I doubt it; he's a soft-spoken guy. Mom is paranoid, and now she's terrorising
Rachel, telling her that you're a danger to society who'll murder all of us in our beds. Rachel thinks she's done something wrong and won't talk to me on the phone because she's worried I'm mad at her. And Julia believes it'll all sort itself out somehow!"

"It probably will," he says, sitting down. It's not like there's much they can do about the situation.

Lisa snorts. "I doubt it. Julia doesn't come down hard enough on Mom when she oversteps the mark. I think she even believed Mom at first. I told her that you're twenty kinds of irritating, but you'd never do anything that stupid."

"No?" He'd be flattered if her confidence weren't misplaced.

"Why would you call Rachel? It serves no purpose and it gets Rachel into a heap of trouble, so no, you wouldn't," Lisa says with certainty. "I need to go to Princeton to pick Rachel up."

"Isn't that a bit radical?" he asks, sizing up her state. She's more energetic than she was the previous days, but a drive to Princeton and back, coupled with a confrontation with her mother and possibly with her sister, isn't wise.

"You got a better idea? Rachel is half convinced that I'm terminal. Now she believes that if my depression doesn't kill me, you will. She wouldn't talk to me, but I could hear her sobbing in the background. Rachel isn't a child who cries much. I need to bring her home."

He sighs. "I have to go up to Princeton tomorrow anyway, to the storage unit. I'll pick her up on the way back."

She considers his offer with pursed lips. "Make it on the way there," she finally says. "Julia can take her along to her workplace, and you can pick her up from there. That way there's no danger of you running into my mother. Besides, I don't want Rachel to spend more time with my mother than is necessary."

"I'm preferable to your mother?"

"Oh, yes!" she says with feeling. She must finally have registered his doubtful expression, because she gives him a tiny smile — the first one in all these days — and adds, "You're good with her, you know."

He shrugs. "It's an easy age. Too young to be critical, too old to need constant attention."

"As opposed to a four month old?" she asks knowingly. When he doesn't answer she adds, "You weren't half bad with Rachel when she was young."

That's so diametrically opposite to what Wilson said and Nolan hinted at that he doesn't even bother to hide his disbelief. "I've heard differently."

Lisa shrugs that off. "Don't listen to Wilson," she says. "You did just fine. I still remember the first time you babysat Rachel: you weren't enthusiastic at all when I asked you, but by the time I came home you were so invested that you were on your feet half the night, looking in on her whenever she made the slightest sound, changing her soiled diapers, and making sure I didn't have to get up. It was sweet. I have no idea why Wilson always made snide comments about your abilities, because I never saw any justification for them. You managed somehow, and Rachel took to you."

Try as he will, he can't picture himself as an enthusiastic babysitter at heart. "You must have had something I wanted very badly," he says.
Lisa doesn't pretend to misunderstand him. "I did." She looks at him dispassionately. "So does Wilson: he has custody of Joel. If you could do it for me, you can do it for him."

Perhaps he could; he isn't wildly enthusiastic about it, but how difficult can it be? The problem is, in Lisa's case the want was mutual. He, too, had something Lisa wanted (though the heavens only knew why she did), so she had a reason to put up with him and give him access to her child. He has nothing whatsoever that Wilson wants.
Julia wakes her earlier than the other mornings. "Rachel, do you want to go home to your mom?"

Too sleepy to talk, she just nods.

"Fine, I'm taking you to my workplace today. You'll be picked up from there. But you need to get up now and start getting ready, okay?"

Her uncle Rob is already at the breakfast table when Julia wheels her into the kitchen, as is Ethan, slouched over a bowl of cereal, his music turned on so loud that Rachel can hear the heavy metal beat through his earbuds. Mom would never allow her to listen to her music on the iPod during meals, but Julia and Rob don't seem bothered.

Nana sails in and says brightly, "Good morning!"

Julia echoes her greeting, so Rachel follows suit. Rob looks up from the newspaper and grunts something that can pass for a good morning at a stretch. Ethan doesn't say anything because he doesn't hear Nana. Nana lifts an eyebrow, which doesn't impress Ethan, because so far he hasn't looked up yet. So Nana looks expectantly at Rob and Julia.

Rob dives back into his newspaper while Julia turns to the stove, asking, "What would you like for breakfast, Mom?"

"Nothing special. Pancakes, if you have any," Nana says.

"I'll make some," Julia says.

"Oh, no! Don't bother. Toast will be fine."

"It's no bother," Julia insists, getting an egg out of the fridge. "Rachel, would you like pancakes too?"

"Yes, please," Rachel says, impressed by the way Julia has distracted Nana from Ethan. Mom tends to get involved in lengthy discussions with Nana that don't lead anywhere, because whenever Mom is right about something, which is practically always, Nana starts off on something completely different.

Julia's strategy has one downside: it calls Rachel to Nana's attention. "Why are you up already?"

"I'm going with Julia today," Rachel says.

Nana swivels around in her chair to face Julia. "You don't need to get her out from under my feet. I don't mind having her here, and how will you keep her busy all day in your office?"

"Lisa is picking her up from my office," Julia says, whisking the batter briskly.

"Lisa is picking her up? She's taking time off from her busy work schedule, her personal commitments, and her oh-so-many health issues to take care of her daughter? I'm impressed!"

"Lisa really isn't well," Julia says mildly. "Besides, I enjoy having Rachel over."

"You have enough on your own plate," Nana says.
"True," Rob mutters, venturing a peek at Nana from behind his newspaper. Rachel suppresses a giggle while Julia rolls her eyes at Rob.

Nana mustn't have understood what Rob meant — Pete would say she has no 'irony detector' — because she continues undeterred, "You have a husband, three children, and a job. Not to mention an irritating old mother." She cocks an eyebrow at Rob as she says that. Oh ouch, then she did understand him! "Lisa only has one child. She should be helping you, not the other way round."

"Lisa," Julia says, putting a hand on Rob's shoulder, "doesn't have someone like Rob."

She doesn't mention that Mom has a disabled child to deal with, for which Rachel is grateful. That would only make Nana rant on about how it's all Mom's fault that Rachel is in a wheelchair, and Rachel has heard that tirade often enough.

"That's because Lisa doesn't recognise a good thing when it's staring her in the face!" Nana states.

If something or someone doesn't stop Nana, then she'll go into the rant where she accuses Mom of scaring all the nice guys away and of being too picky, but also not picky enough about the men she dates. (Apparently it's possible to be both at the same time.) Yesterday the rant had a new part: Why hadn't Mom married that nice man James Wilson yet? Surely if she tried just a little, he'd propose, and then Rachel would grow up in a proper family, a Jewish family, with a father figure, and so on.

Today Nana doesn't get that far.

"Mo-om!" Sam calls from upstairs. "Ben's blocking the bathroom. Tell him to get out. I'll be late for school if he doesn't let me in the bathroom!"

"Ben, your brother needs the bathroom," Julia calls.

A muffled "In a moment!" comes back in reply.

"He always says that!" Sam whines. "Can't I use your bathroom?"

"No!" Julia and Rob say together.

"What does that boy do in the bathroom that he takes so long about it?" Nana murmurs.

"Trust me, you don't want to know," Rob drawls.

Nana opens her mouth and then shuts it again. She looks around for some other topic and her eyes fall on Rachel again. Rachel ducks inwardly.

"So," Nana says, drawing the word out, "why doesn't Lisa pick Rachel up from here?"

"She has some business close to my office," Julia says. She's not a good liar, Rachel thinks.

"She's making you go out of your way so that she doesn't have to go out of hers?"

"I'm not going out of my way," Julia says placidly, placing pancakes in front of Nana and Rachel. "I'm going to the office anyway."

"You know what I mean: she's inconveniencing you."

"Mom, I'm old enough to look after myself. Besides, I've always wanted to show Rachel where I work."
Nana doesn't look convinced, which doesn't surprise Rachel. Her guess is that Mom is avoiding Nana.

Upstairs, the bathroom door opens.

"You stupid jerk!" Sam yells.

There's a scuffle, a few loud thumps (Sam being shoved into the wall, Rachel assumes), a yell of pain from Ben (Sam must have gotten a jab in), more thumps, and then something bumping down the stairs, followed by a drawn-out wail.

Rob rises, sighing. A few moments later he reappears, hustling Ben in front of him.

Sam, sniffling, follows in their wake. "Ben ..." he starts.

"I don't care," Rob cuts him off. He points to two chairs at the far ends of the table. "You, here. You, over there. Don't move without my permission!"

"He threw me down the stairs!" Sam protests.

"Ben!" Julia says reprovingly.

"He provoked me! Besides, he knows I need the bathroom at this time. He can go in earlier," Ben grumbles.

"Why do I have to go in earlier? Why can't he ...?"

"Enough, both of you. Eat your breakfast," Rob orders. "Ethan ... Ethan!" Leaning forward, he plucks an earbud out of Ethan's ear.

"What?" Ethan asks, bewildered. "I didn't do anything!"

"Do I need to pick you up from band practice this evening?" Rob asks patiently.

"Oh. Yeah, you do. Anything else?"

"No, but thank you for taking the time to communicate with me."

Ethan looks confused. "S'okay," he finally says, popping the earbud back into his ear.

"He's dumb," Ben says.

"Look who's talking!" Sam snipes.

"Stop it!" Julia reprimands them. Rachel wishes she could have slept longer, like on other mornings, and gotten up after the boys leave for school.

"Children didn't behave that way when you were young," Nana says.

"We're not children," Ben says. "We're —"

"Ben!" Julia says warningly. To Nana she says, "You didn't have boys. Too much testosterone during puberty."

"Too many fancy words for bad behaviour," Nana says.

Ben pushes away his plate. "Not hungry," he says with a covert glance at Nana and a beseeching
one at Rob.

Rob eyes him, then says, "If you aren't going to eat anything, you may as well leave for school. Sam, you can leave too."

Sam flees after Ben, shooting his father a grateful look.

"And you," Nana says, glaring at Rob, "encourage them to be rude."

"Sure," Rob says equably. "Ethan … Ethan!" He flaps his hand in front of Ethan's face.

Ethan removes an earbud. "Yeah?"

"Go to school."

Ethan shuffles out. A few minutes later the boys pass the window, Sam and Ben scuffling and kicking each other again, Ethan still immersed in his music.

"We should sell them," Julia says, shaking her head.

"Let's face it, no one would take them even if we offered a reward," Rob says, rising. He gives Julia a peck on the cheek and ruffles Rachel's hair in passing. "See ya in a week," he says to her. "That's if you still want to go on vacation with three teenage boys."

And Nana, Rachel adds silently. Nana is as bad as Sam and Ben together. Ethan's okay, but he's about as interesting as a goldfish now that he's all into heavy metal.

When Rachel is ready, Julia packs her things into the car. "The boys don't need their Lego anymore. Would you like to have it?" she asks.

Rachel nods enthusiastically. "Oh yes, please! I have plenty of room now."

"They've mostly got Star Wars, though, not Harry Potter."

"Doesn't matter; I have most of the Harry Potter sets already."

Three big boxes are added to Rachel's things, Rachel allows Nana to give her a hug, and then they're off. They drive downtown to the bank where Julia works. Julia shows her the office, a big room where she works with about twenty other people, each sitting in a little cubicle. It's not really impressive, but when Julia's co-workers ask her how she likes it, she says it's nice.

"Okay," Julia says. "You'll have to wait for Hou … Pete out in the visitors' lobby. There's no room for you in here, and my boss wouldn't like it. I can see you from here, and if you need anything, just wave."

So Pete is picking her up, not Mom. She shouldn't be surprised, really, but she's a bit disappointed. She sits in the lobby among potted plants, a water dispenser, and an assortment of magazines. Every now and then someone who is passing by stops to chat with her; even Julia's boss drops by. After what seems a long time, Pete turns up.

"Where's your stuff?" he asks

"In Julia's car."

"And where is Julia's car?"
Julia must have been on the look-out for him, because she's there almost at once. "You're taking her back to Lisa's place?" she asks.

"Nope. The moment I have her in the car, I'll run for the Mexican border and sell her to the organ donor mafia."

"Very funny. How's Lisa?"

"Crappy. But doing good compared to Sunday. Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters! I care about how my sister is doing."

"It won't change anything."

She gapes at him, her jaw working. Finally she expels a long breath and says, "Never mind. Can she take care of Rachel?"

Pete sighs. "I'm still there and there's help for the household. I'd say, yes."

Julia looks at Rachel. "Then I guess that's the best solution. I didn't think it would be this tough for Rachel, but she's really missing Lisa. The boys' behaviour doesn't help; they're in puberty and they're godawful."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," Pete says. "I'm only the executive arm; I have no stake in this either way. And I haven't got all day."

He goes to Rachel and releases the brakes of her wheelchair. "Let's go, crip."

"I'll get her things," Julia says. "By the way, did you call my place yesterday around noon?" she asks casually.

Rachel stiffens, giving Pete a beseeching look, but he isn't looking at her.

"Why would I do that?" he asks Julia.

"I don't know. My mother says you called."

Rachel waits for him to tell Julia that he only called because she called him first, but he only says, "If I'd wanted anything from you, I'd have called you at work or on your cell, not at home. It's not like your mother can help with Lisa, is it?"

Rachel is impressed: so far he hasn't told a lie.

He pushes Rachel out of the bank onto the sidewalk. The disability parking space is occupied by another car. Pete has parked Mom's car right next to it in the right hand lane, blocking it in. A woman is standing next to it, looking around — probably for Pete — while the cars on the road have to change lanes to pass Mom's car. When the woman sees Pete she walks briskly towards him, only to stop short when she spots Rachel. Rachel gets that a lot: people doing a double take when they see her, only to pointedly look somewhere else.

Pete gives the woman a fake smile, cutting off her apology for parking in the disabled spot. "Would you mind stopping the traffic for us so I can get the kid into the car?" he asks her.

When she grasps what he wants she nods and steps out into the left lane, holding out her hand. While traffic piles up on the street, Pete ambles over to the driver's side and opens the rear door. Then he pushes Rachel out into the lane and helps her to pull herself into the car. Finally he folds
the wheelchair laboriously, taking his own sweet time before he finally moves off the road again. Rachel is mortified; she can sense the drivers of the cars stuck behind them staring at her.

By this time Julia has arrived with Rachel's suitcase. Behind her, a young man from her office is carrying the Lego boxes. Julia takes in the scene — the woman on the road, holding up about twenty cars by now, Mom's car parked in the right hand lane, Pete with the folded wheelchair — and shakes her head.

"You're a piece of work," she says to Pete.

"Whatevs," Pete says.

When everything is stowed away in the trunk, Pete gets in the car without saying goodbye to Julia or thanking her for having Rachel over, which Rachel is sure Mom would want him to do, so she waves hard to make up for Pete's rudeness.

"Why don't you like Julia?" she asks Pete.

"She doesn't like me," he says.

"She never will if you're rude to her."

He glances at her in the rear view mirror, his eyes stony. "She never will anyway, so it isn't worth bothering."

Rachel doubts that. Julia gets along with everyone, including Nana, and doesn't dislike anyone. But experience tells her that it's no use arguing with adults about such things; they have set opinions that they hardly ever change.

"Why can't I sit in front?" she asks. "If you hadn't put me in the back behind the driver's seat, we wouldn't have needed to stop the traffic."

"Exactly," Pete says, which doesn't explain anything. He sighs dramatically. "Why waste the potential of the situation? That woman will think twice before blocking a disability parking space again. Furthermore, we have increased people's awareness of congestion in urban areas, encouraging them to leave their cars at home and use public transport." Pete's expression is angelic, but somehow Rachel doubts that he cares about … whatever that was what he was saying about public transport.

As they approach a large intersection she notices which way they're going. The big road sign pointing to Philadelphia shows that they need to turn off, but Pete keeps going straight ahead. Pete has this thing about not finding the way, sometimes even with GPS. He must have programmed it all wrong.

"Uh, you're going the wrong way. You need to get on the Interstate."

"We're going somewhere else first," he says.

"Why?"

"Got something I need to do."

Rachel remembers how Peter didn't say yes when Julia asked him whether he was taking her home. Was it another of his clever evasions, and if so, does Mom know where he's taking her? Maybe Mom never asked Pete to pick her up; then he'd be kidnapping her now. Ben says no one would
ever buy her, because she's 'damaged goods', but she isn't so sure. None of the kids in her class are ever allowed to go anywhere on their own (even though they can all walk, skate or cycle), because their parents worry about them, so there must be a market for kids, even not-so-great ones. What was that Pete said about selling her somewhere?

Her voice quavers as she asks, "Does Mom know where you're taking me?"

Then it strikes her that if Pete was kidnapping her, he'd lie about it and about Mom knowing where he was taking her, so her question was useless. She bites her lip, wondering what to do. In movies, the heroine opens the car door and jumps out, but even if she wasn't a paraplegic, she'd be too scared to jump out of a moving car. She supposes she could bang against the window and call for help, but the people in the other cars wouldn't hear her. Or she could hold up a note that said, 'HELP!', only she doesn't have pen and paper. Besides, if she's wrong about being kidnapped, then there'll be a lot of trouble and Pete will dislike her as much as he does Julia.

Pete's arm snakes out in between the front seats, holding out something. "Here, call your mom and ask her." It's his cell phone.

Mom's voice reassures her, and Mom knows that Pete is taking her someplace. So that's okay. By the time she has finished talking to her, they've arrived at a warehouse-y sort of place in the middle of nowhere.

"What are we doing here?" she asks.

"Rescuing my belongings," Pete says tersely.

That leaves Rachel as ignorant as before. "I suppose you wouldn't care to explain?" she asks in the same haughty tone that her English teacher uses.

Pete grins as he says, "No." A moment later he adds, "You'll see."

First they go to an office where Pete has a long argument with the lady in charge. It seems he loses that one, because he's in a foul mood afterwards as he pushes her through the warehouse-y place (which is kinda like a huge room with lots of indoor garages), so she keeps her mouth shut, not even pointing out that she can wheel herself. Finally they arrive at one of the garages — they're called 'units', Pete tells her when she asks whether the garage is his — where two men are shifting boxes onto a trolley. After staring at her one of them comes forward to meet them.

"Dr Wilson?"

Pete nods. Rachel decides to keep her mouth shut a bit longer. No one will thank her for pointing out that Pete isn't Wilson, and he happens to be her ride home.

"We're moving this lot," the man waves a hand towards the boxes, "to your new unit."

"Not the piano. I need that moved somewhere else." Pete says, walking into the open unit and looking around. There's a couch in it, some shelves, a closet and something covered in big sheets. That must be the piano. It isn't one of those that stand up against the wall like a closet, but a big one like the ones that they use at concerts.

"We don't do that. You'll have to get someone else for the piano, doc."

"How much more do you want?"

"It's not the money. We're not piano movers," the man says.
"What happens when you clear the units of people who go MIA without paying their dues?"

The man shrugs. "We clear everything out."

"So, clear the piano out, and then clear it where I want it."

"Look, sir," the mover says. "You don't want that. When we clear abandoned units, we heave everything out, and if the contents get damaged, then that's too bad. We aren't equipped to move a piano from one place to another. You organise a mover while we clear out the rest of your things."

"Fuck!" Pete says.

"There's a good piano mover in Trenton," the man says. "Do you want me to call him?"

"Fuck!" Pete says again. "Yeah, call him."

"Okay. Where do you want the piano taken?"

Pete hesitates, scratching his chin. Then he says, "Philadelphia."

While they wait for the piano mover, Pete goes through the boxes and sorts a few things into an empty one. Rachel, bored, rolls herself to one of the other boxes. It contains books, but they're not interesting. They're medical stuff, like the ones Mom has.

"What are you looking for?" she asks Pete, who is rooting through another box.

"Piano music," he says. "If we're to have a piano now, we might as well take some music to go with it."

"Can you play the piano?" Rachel asks.

"Yes. The question is, can I play any of this?" He upends a whole box on the ground and sifts through the pile of sheet music.

"You don't know whether you know those pieces?"

"Oh, I know them; I just don't know whether I ever learned to play them." He looks at a manuscript. "Brahms? Bombastic. Not my cuppa. Though maybe ...?" His eyes narrowing, he glances over at the piano, but the movers have pushed it to the back of the unit so they can get the other stuff out and right now they're trying to get the closet past it. Grimacing, Pete places the manuscript on top of a box. His tongue probing his cheeks, he squats in front of the box and flexes his fingers. Then his fingers crawl up and down along the edge of the box, and Rachel realises that he's playing the piano on it. "Huh, I can play this. Must've had a 'bombastic' phase, probably in my teens."

Rachel wonders how he can tell that he can play the piece when there's no sound. For all she knows, he could be playing something completely different or he could be playing the piece all wrong, but if she asks he'll probably say something she can't understand.

He looks at the back of the manuscript. "It's got the stamp of a second-hand shop in Baltimore on it, so I must have bought it when I was in college. A bombastic phase at the age of twenty-two, all sturm and drang. Well, it's over now, so back into the box Brahms goes."

He picks up some more sheet music. "But something tells me that I can't play this: Beethoven, Opus 106, 'Hammerklavier'." He holds up some sheet music in one hand. "Or this: 'La Campanella'." He tosses both aside.
"You could learn to play them," Rachel suggests.

The corner of his mouth twitches. "You've been exposed to too many motivational posters. Guess what: not everyone gets to be an astronaut when they grow up. Or a ballerina, for that matter." This last with a pointed look at her legs.

"That," Rachel says haughtily, "was absolutely superloof- … superloofous … unnecessary!" Wilson taught her to say that when people are annoying, only she can't remember the word with 'super' at the beginning.

"You can't even do outrage right," Pete says, casually pushing her wheelchair aside so he can get past her.

That does it! "Fuck you!" she says.

The movers stop what they're doing and stare at her.

Pete whistles. "My, we're feeling naughty today!"

She flushes, but says defensively to the movers, "He said it first. Twice! You heard him!"

"Doesn't make it okay for you to use that word," one of them says. He asks Pete, "That your kid?"

"Nope," Pete says perfunctorily. "Not even related."

The mover isn't impressed. "If you're looking after her, you should try to be a good example, even if she isn't your kid."

Pete throws more stuff from one of the boxes haphazardly on the ground. "This is me being a good example. I can do a lot worse. Now, why don't you do what you're being paid for?"

Shrugging, the mover pulls the couch out of the unit. Rachel sulks in a corner until the piano movers come. Thankfully, that doesn't take long, and after Pete's usual haggling about the price they take the piano out of the unit.

"Where are they taking it?" Rachel asks Pete, forgetting for a moment that she isn't talking to him.

"Didn't you listen? To Philadelphia."

"To our place?"

"Got a problem with that?"

"Where are you gonna put it?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you're an inquisitive brat?" Pete asks. "Let's go; we need to get there before the piano does."

Car trips with Pete are a pain. He doesn't talk to Rachel the way Mom and Wilson do, though he does allow her to ride shotgun this time round.

"Is that supposed to be music?" she asks after about three minutes of screeching and wailing accompanied by a penetrating beat. The radio stations Pete chooses are not Rachel's favourites.

Pete sighs in an exaggerated manner. "Your ignorance of the cultural highlights of the last century dismays me. That's Led Zeppelin, 'Whole Lotta Love'."
Knowing what it is doesn't make it sound any better. "Can we listen to something else? Please?"

Pete ignores her. Wilson would have let Rachel choose the radio station and Mom would at least have switched to something nicer.

She tries again. "Can I have my MP3-player?"

"Where is it?"

"In my suitcase."

"Then no."

Rachel stares out of the window. "There's the piano movers' van," she says.

The movers left the storage rental before Pete and Rachel did, because it took Pete longer to get Rachel into the car than it took the movers to get the piano into their van. (Loading the piano looked easy enough; Rachel has no idea why the other movers, the ones who emptied the storage unit, made such a fuss about it.) Now the van appears ahead of them on the freeway.

"Right," Pete says. "Hold on tight!"

And with that he accelerates and swerves into a gap between two cars on the left lane, forcing the rear car to brake hard. He continues accelerating, overtaking two sedans in the right lane, until he's practically hugging the bumper of the car ahead of him. Then he moves back into the right lane again and accelerates some more, pulling ahead of the car in the left lane in the process, before weaving back into the left lane.

"Whoopee!" Rachel cries. Mom and Wilson never drive like that. They complain about lame drivers in front of them, but they never actually do anything about it.

Grinning, Pete repeats the process a few times until they've caught up with the piano movers' van.

"I'd tell you to moon them, but since that isn't possible, just stick your tongue out, cross your eyes, and waggle your hands next to your ears," he suggests.

"Wh-what?"

Pete blows the horn to gain the movers' attention, and then he takes his hands off the steering wheel. Half leaning over the passenger seat, he does what he just described, right down to the hand waggling. The guy driving the piano van stares in utter disbelief. Mom's car swerves to the left, Rachel gives a little scream, and Pete grabs hold of the steering wheel again, correcting their course just before they hit the median barrier. Rachel holds her breath until she's quite sure that they won't crash.

"Everything's under control," Pete says. "No need to wet yourself. Oops, forgot; you can't wet yourself, can you?"

She musters the last vestiges of her dignity. "I wasn't scared," she says, "but I don't think Mom will like it if you crash her car." Especially with me in it, she adds silently.

"She owes me. I'm bringing her daughter back and throwing in a baby grand for good measure."

Rachel considers this. "I don't think Mom plays the piano," she says at last.

"It's never too late," Pete says breezily.
"Yeah, and I get to be a ballerina, right?"

Pete gives her one of his lopsided half-grins. "You're too sassy for your own good," he says. Before she can think of a cheeky reply, he's doing that 'weaving in and out of the lanes' thing that would drive Mom crazy if she saw him do it. It's scary and exciting at the same time, so Rachel clutches her seat and concentrates on not squealing, because she knows that if she does, Pete will shower her with ridicule again.

Back in Drexel, Pete barely helps her to get into the house before abandoning her in order to suss out a location for the piano. The movers arrive while he's still prowling around the living room, pulling the couch back and shifting the armchairs.

"You want it in here?" one of them, probably the boss, asks.

"Yeah," Pete says, tugging the couch. It shifts suddenly, throwing Pete off balance right onto his butt, his peg leg banging hard against the coffee table. Rachel chortles while Pete scowls, waving away the helping hand proffered by one of the movers as he struggles back to his feet.

"That didn't sound good," the mover comments. "Sure your leg is okay?"

In answer Pete tugs up the end of his jeans to give him a glimpse of his prosthetic.

"Huh," the mover says. He looks from Pete to Rachel and back again. "You guys got something hereditary?"

Pete gives him a really nasty glare.

The mover is unabashed. "I mean, both of you have bad legs."

"That wasn't heredity; that was stupidity," Pete says. Rachel isn't sure what he means, but she sure hopes he doesn't mean that the mover is stupid to ask such a question, because the mover is a lot stronger than Pete is.

"Car accident?" the mover asks. "Both of you?"

With a sideways glance at Rachel, Pete nods. "Sort of."

Now Rachel remembers that Pete lost his leg in a car accident. She considers correcting Pete (which would be very satisfying, because he's such a know-it-all) and telling the movers that it was a whopping big hurricane that crippled her, not a stupid car accident, but that would entail more curious stares and questions, and she's had enough of being the monkey in the zoo for the day.

The boss mover, who has gone over to the windows, shakes his head. "Not a good place," he says, nodding at the space Pete has cleared. "Direct sunshine isn't good for the piano. You'll ruin it if you put it there."

Pete grimaces as he nudges the coffee table aside. "I know, but there's nowhere else … ."

He straightens with that faraway look that he gets just before he has really bad ideas. He had the same look before he built that cool contraption that went from the kitchen right into the living room of Rachel's old apartment. It was constructed out of pots and pans, spoons, CD cases, all the kitchen chairs, and every bit of string they could find in the apartment, and it switched off the television in the living room when you tugged at a string that was tied to the strainer, because that made a ball roll down the table to … well, wherever. She can't remember how it switched off the TV, because the downside of the contraption was that she was trapped in the kitchen by all those
strings running from chair to table and back again, but she can remember Mom being upset at having to tidy up two hundred CDs and unravel a few miles of string just to release her from the kitchen.

Definitely a good time to get out of the way, Rachel decides. She's only just back, and she doesn't want to make Mom mad. She doesn't even want to witness Pete doing something that'll make Mom mad at him. Besides, she's hungry. Maybe there's something in the fridge that she can eat. She backs her wheelchair out of the living area and into the kitchen, where she finds that she has to make do with fruit and cereal. (Well, there's a bowl of salad, but that doesn't count.) There's no 'good' stuff like cheese sticks or granola bars, let alone cookies; it doesn't look like Mom has done much shopping since Julia took her to Trenton. The sound of furniture being heaved around the place drifts into the kitchen, but she can't reach the stereo to drown it, so she gets out two saucepans and pretends they're bongos.

Finally, when the movers have left, Pete also turns up in the kitchen and fixes her some food. Then he carries in the Lego boxes from the car, drags her own Lego and her big play table from her room into the living room, and lets her play in peace while he tries to tune the piano.

Finally he returns to the living room and levers himself onto the ground next to her. "Why do I have a piano tuning set if I can't tune pianos?" he says, picking up a random piece of Lego and placing it on another brick that's already in place.

"That doesn't belong there," Rachel says, removing it again. "You also have piano music that you can't play. … Don't ruin my house; build something of your own!"

To her surprise he promptly takes one of the big baseplates, snags all the grey bricks he can find and starts building something. She can't quite figure out what he's doing until he gets up and paces up and down the living room, counting his steps. She has never seen anyone build freestyle as quickly and efficiently as Pete; his nimble fingers pick out suitable bricks unerringly, and within no time at all, their house's layout is recognisable. Watching the house grow is so fascinating that finally Rachel abandons her own project (which is pitiful in comparison) and starts sorting bricks for Pete – a corner piece here, a window there. He takes some pieces, others he discards.

Wilson would have taken them all, Rachel thinks. But Pete isn't Wilson and he isn't building the house for her. Although he accepts Rachel's help, mutters an occasional word of explanation, or voices demands for special bricks every now and then, he's more or less oblivious to her presence. Mom phones at five, asking whether Pete is picking her up, but he tells her to take a cab. By the time Mom walks into the house, the first floor is completed, with furniture and all the rest of it, and Pete is using a matchbox as a piano so as to figure out where else his piano might fit. As far as Rachel can make out, there aren't many options.

Rachel speeds over to Mom, who bends down to hug her. There's a long silence before Mom lets go and asks, "Everything fine?"

"Yeah," Rachel says, deciding to spare Mom the not-so-fine parts: Nana being nasty non-stop, the boys fighting all the time and calling her an annoying brat. "I got tons of Lego from the boys. Julia gave it all to me. Look at what we built!"

"We?" Pete mutters.

Mom surveys the living room. Pete's edifice is on the floor because both Rachel's table and the coffee table serve as sorting stations for all the bricks that Pete needs. The house is pretty colourful by now, because they ran out of grey bricks, then white ones and finally black ones, so Pete had to take whatever he could get, but now that all the rooms are partitioned and furnished, there's no
doubt that it represents their new place. Rachel didn't get to help much in the actual building work, but she's sure that without her sorting and finding skills Pete would have taken much longer.

"That's great!" Mom says, and she seems to mean it. She lets Rachel show her all the little details that they've added.

"We've done each bedroom in a different colour. Mine is red, 'cause I'm in Gryffindor. Yours is blue for Ravenclaw, 'cause you're clever. And the guest room is green for Slytherin," Rachel explains.

When Mom gives her a reproving look she hastens to defend herself. "That wasn't my idea. Pete said he's a Slytherin. And he says Wilson's a Hufflepuff. I think he's a Gryffindor, though, don't you, Mom?" Hufflepuffs are boring. Even Slytherin is better, but Pete insisted on Hufflepuff. He'll probably make the entire second floor of the house Hufflepuff yellow-and-black just to annoy Wilson.

"Wilson's a squib, like Argus Filch," Pete says. "He should be lucky he's allowed to stay."

Mom doesn't appear to be interested in who gets sorted where, but thanks to Rachel she knows who's who in the world of Harry Potter. "Lay off Wilson," she says to Pete. "You deserve whatever he's dishing out, with compound interest."

Pete sticks his tongue out at her, which she ignores. She turns back to Rachel. "Any reason why you're building Lego in here and not in your room? This can't stay here, you know."

"There's a piano in my room, so there's no room for the table anymore," Rachel explains.

Mom's eyebrows rise, and so does Mom from the spot where she's been crouching. "A piano?" she says, heading towards Rachel's room.

"Yes. We picked it up after we left Princeton," Rachel says, following Mom. Pete is exceptionally quiet, though he tags along too.

Mom comes to a stop in the doorway of Rachel's bedroom. "A piano!" she says hollowly.

"Not just any piano. It's a Sohmer baby grand," Pete growls. He finally looks apprehensive, which is how Rachel has been feeling ever since she saw where Pete had the movers place the piano.

"Why is it in Rachel's room?" Mom asks, not taking her eyes from it.

"It's the only room that's large enough and has a suitable climate. The living room is too sunny and draughty; over there, the piano would be out of tune in no time and it would run risk of permanent damage," Pete answers. (He and the movers were in rare agreement about that.)

Mom doesn't say a word.

Pete rambles on, "It looks good in here and it isn't in your way. You can forget it's even here. Besides, if Rachel decides to take up the piano, it'll be right there, waiting for her."

Rachel has no intention whatsoever of learning to play the piano — she has bad memories of a short stint at the instrument when she was six, before Mom gave up and put her into the percussion group instead — but she doesn't want Pete in more trouble than he is already, so she nods her head with what she hopes is a show of enthusiasm.

Mom harrumphs. "How is she going to get to her closet? Do you think she isn't going to need clean
clothes the few next weeks or months or however long you want that 'thing' to stand in here?"

Mom has a point. The space between the piano and the closet is too small for her wheelchair. In fact, Rachel isn't sure the closet door can be opened at all.

"I'm going to bed," Mom says, turning to her bedroom.

"No, you're not," Pete contradicts her. "We're going for a run."

But Mom simply goes to her bedroom and closes the door on them. And that's that.

Pete looks at Rachel and sighs. "What do you want to have for dinner?" he asks. "Hamburger? Tacos?"

She guesses it's his way of saying he's sorry he upset Mom on Rachel's first evening back home.

"Sushi," she says.
"Nice neighbourhood," the cab driver comments as he heaves the suitcase onto the sidewalk.

Wilson smiles. "Thanks."

"Good place to raise kids."

"I hope so." Wilson still has to get used to everyone talking about children, the ups and downs of raising them, and so on, the moment they spot Joel. Time was when people asked him who he was and what he did, and then he'd hear stories about parents, siblings, neighbours, and pets in various stages of cancer, the stories as depressing as hell. That's finally over; nowadays people's eyes merely skim over him before they home in on Joel. He has lost his own identity; now he is primarily 'Joel's dad'. Better than 'cancer guy', he figures.

"Need any help?" the cab driver asks. (Wilson tipped generously.)

"No, I'm fine." Do young mothers get as much consideration from strangers? People are perpetually stopping to lend a helping hand with the stroller, hold doors open for him, and compliment him on how well he's managing. It's a mystery to Wilson why complete strangers would feel competent to judge whether he's doing well; as far as he can make out, he is managing no better or worse than any other parent. What is it with people that they equate 'male' with 'innately too stupid to change a diaper'?

After the cab drives off, Wilson gazes at the house with a sense of familiarity that's premature considering that he has only lived here for a few weeks. He hasn't even gotten his furniture sorted yet, let alone decorated the apartment or organised window treatments. Maybe it's because the other apartments that he inhabited during the past three years were only temporary solutions to acute problems of one kind or another. This place isn't a 'quick fix'; it's the result of a planned decision on his part to settle down in Philadelphia and raise his son here. If anything, the past week has served to cement his decision to remain here, rather than move closer to Amy or to his family.

Something has changed since last he saw the house, though Wilson can't quite put his finger on it. He scans the front of the house, noting Cuddy's car is in the drive and behind it a car that he doesn't know, a bright violet Chevrolet Sonic. Not the kind of car House would want to be caught dead in, let alone drive around town, so whose is it?

Wilson takes Joel, blissfully asleep in his car seat, and the bigger suitcase up to the front door before returning for the other things, and then lets himself into the house. In the entryway he pauses. There are sounds coming from Cuddy's apartment (music?), so she must be there. He may as well greet her and check on her before going upstairs.

When he talked to her on the phone she seemed okay, so he has come to the conclusion that House's whine to the tune of 'Cuddy is in a terrible state!' was just another of House's convoluted manipulations, though he hasn't figured out yet what House was trying to achieve. What worries him a little is Cuddy's silent acquiescence to House's presence; he'd have thought that even if she was under the weather she'd protest volubly at having him around, but she seemed resigned. Does she feel she has to be nice to House for Joel's sake? … That needn't be a bad thing. It would make life vastly easier for Wilson if Cuddy and House returned to some kind of truce.

He takes Joel, and after knocking on the door to Cuddy's apartment, he lets himself in. It is music that he heard from the entryway, something oriental and soothing. Wilson advances into the living
area — and stops short. Cuddy and a woman he doesn't know, both clad in yoga gear, are doubled
over with their palms flat on the ground and their butts stretched upwards. Guiltily averting his
gaze, Wilson wonders how anyone can bear to stretch their biceps femoris or
their semitendinosus to that extent. That's when he sees the newest addition to the living area: a
long, low table covered in Lego. Rachel is sitting there, adding the final touches to a major edifice.
When she sees him she waves in greeting. Not wanting to interrupt Cuddy's yoga session, he
gestures to her to come into the entryway before backing out of the living area.

A moment later Rachel is with him. "You're back!" she says.

"Obviously," Wilson says, tousling her hair. "What's going on here?"

"Pete said that Mom had to exercise, but she refused to go for runs with Pete after the first time,
because she nearly collapsed and he called her a 'wuss', so he phoned her yoga teacher and told her
to come. So Gilda is coming here every day now."

"I see. I heard you were staying with Julia."

"Yeah, but then Nana got into a fight with Pete. … Oops, you're not supposed to know that!"

Wilson feels weak at the knees, but there's no chair in the entryway, so he leans against the wall
instead. "Pete and your nana had a fight," he mouths hollowly, rubbing his forehead with his hand.

Rachel looks around furtively. "Don't tell anyone. Mom and Julia think it was one of my teachers
who called, but it was Pete because I asked him to call me, but then Nana took the phone and she
told Pete she wanted to kill him or something, and then she told Julia and Rob that Mom is crazy,
and … . You know what I mean." Rachel ends her tale, looking guilty and harassed.

Wilson doesn't quite know what she means. He can't make sense of her ramblings, but he gathers
that House had a face-off with Arlene Cuddy — no, a voice-off — and that Cuddy doesn't know
about it, which is a felicitous state of affairs.

"That explains why Pete isn't here, but not why you are back," he says to Rachel.

"Pete is here," Rachel says. "He's in my room, playing the piano. Very quietly, because he doesn't
want to disturb Mom's yoga session."

"You've gotten a piano?" Apparently he has missed a development or two. The last he'd heard,
Rachel was rooting for a dog.

"It's Pete's. He had to pick it up from somewhere near Princeton because they were going to turn it
into firewood. Leastways, that's what he said they'd do if he didn't bring it here, but I think they
would have sold it and kept the money."

With a guilty pang Wilson remembers the storage unit whose lease he'd terminated in a fit of anger.
Now, having cooled down again, he's glad that House managed to rescue the piano.

"Why is the piano in your room?" he asks Rachel.

"Pete says the living room isn't a good place."

"And your mom?"

Rachel scrunches up her face. "She doesn't think anywhere is a good place. She likes listening to
Pete play, but she doesn't like having the piano here. Pete says you gotta make sacrifices for the
sake of art, but Mom says she might just as well listen to a good CD that she can turn off when it
gets on her nerves."

Oh, dear! He needs to take a look at this.

"Will you keep an eye on Joel, please?" he says to Rachel. Joel is still asleep in his car seat, but
Wilson would rather not have Rachel witness a confrontation between House and himself.

As he gets closer to Rachel's room Wilson hears the piano tinkling — something bluesy. House is
playing very quietly indeed. He looks up when Wilson enters the room and stops playing, his
hands resting on the keys. Wilson looks around the room, the arrangement of the furniture putting
damper on his mood. What is House thinking, cluttering up Rachel's bedroom with a grand piano?

"Great, House," he mutters, his hands cutting through the air. "Just great!"

House remains seated at the piano, but he moves his hands to his lap. Wilson walks over to the
window willing himself not to overreact, because he won't be doing anyone a favour if he drives
House away at this stage. He looks outside, not really focusing on anything, when he realises
something is different there too.

"What happened to the yard?" he asks. The lawn, which was somewhere between 'wild flower
meadow' and 'untamed wilderness' when he left, is now a barren wasteland. Or (if one is a 'the-
glass-is-half-full' sort of person) an earthworm paradise. Furthermore, someone has taken a chain
saw and shortened each and every bush and shrub to a uniform height — knee level. Now Wilson
can place the change he noticed on the front of the house when he arrived: there, too, everything
has been subjected to a good trim, though not quite as radically as in the back yard.

House plays a dissonant chord. "I, uh, hired a gardener."

"Not a lumber jack?"

"Hernandez assures us that he has twenty years' experience and that his previous employers were
fully satisfied with his abilities." House's face is straight.

"Who were his previous employers, soy farmers deforesting the Amazon basin? Get someone else
before Cuddy throws a fit."

"Lisa sat down for a 'talk' with Hernandez, during which he told her about his five children and
fifteen grandchildren, how his wife died of cancer, the mortgage on his house, etc." House rolls his
hand. "After that, she said it might be easier to install a swing set and a sandbox and to put up a
fence to keep the non-existent dog in, now that Hernandez has 'tamed' the yard."

Wilson sighs. "Then I'd better get used to him. Anything else I need to know?"

"I also hired someone to do the cleaning."

"Wonderful!" Come to think of it, that is rather wonderful. It's almost too good to be true, House
sitting down and hiring people. There has to be a reason. "How's Cuddy?"

"She's okay, more or less. Even shaved her legs today."

Wilson prefers not to ask. And hopes that he can stop himself from staring at her legs when next he
sees her, which would be little better than staring at her ass.
Coming to stand next to him, House stares at the remains of a rhododendron. "Lisa wouldn't let me hire a babysitter for Rachel, though, so you need to get that done sometime soon. Summer vacation's starting in a few days, and there's nothing in place for Rachel yet, as far as I know."

"Piano, babysitter," Wilson repeats to himself.

"Piano?" House queries.

"It can't stay in here," Wilson says brusquely. "The babysitter can wait. As far as I know, Rachel is going on vacation with Julia and her family right after school closes for the summer, so we just need to cover the next few days." He looks straight at House so there's no misunderstanding as to whom he means when he says, 'we'.

"Uh, no," House says. "Now you're back, I'm outta here."

"I'm going back to work on Monday. An excellent opportunity for you to bond with your son," Wilson says.

He waits for a moment for that to sink in, for House to realise that Wilson has acknowledged his paternity, then he goes in search of Cuddy. She's sitting on the couch in the living room with Joel in her arms. There's no sign of the yoga teacher, who must have left in the meantime.

"Hey, Wilson," Cuddy says. "Joel woke up, and Rachel insisted that he needed to be taken out of his car seat." Cuddy's complexion is paler than usual and a bit of concealer under her eyes wouldn't hurt, but other than that she seems no different from when he left.

"He does!" Rachel says. "Wilson always takes him out when he wakes up."

"I brought you something," Wilson says to Rachel. "It's in the big suitcase, right on top. Think you can open the suitcase all by yourself? It's out in the entryway."

"Sure," Rachel says, diverted, and she's off.

Wilson waits until she has disappeared, then he sits down next to Cuddy. "What happened?" he asks. "With you, I mean."

She hugs Joel. "Oh, you lovely little boy!" Then, to Wilson, "Nothing, really. It was stupid. If I'd recognised the signs quicker, no one would have noticed and there wouldn't have been such a commotion. Anyway, once Julia took Rachel, everything was okay. I should have gotten a housekeeper in place before moving here, that's all."

"So I subjected you to a week of House for nothing," Wilson says. Only now, upon returning and finding House ensconced in Cuddy's part of the house, has it struck him that making House stay to keep an eye on Cuddy may have been more of an imposition on Cuddy than on House. House and Cuddy hadn't been on speaking terms ever since House's last short visit, so Wilson had assumed that House would withdraw to the upstairs apartment, checking on Cuddy every now and then and maybe ensuring that she got medical aid as and when necessary. He hadn't reckoned with House intruding into Cuddy's life or encroaching on her living space, turning it into his playground.

"It was fine," Cuddy says. Catching his doubtful expression she gives him a wan smile and adds, "Really, it was. He's been doing his best."

"And the piano?"

Cuddy almost chuckles. "Yes, that threw me off for a moment, too. But I've gotten used to it, and
he does play beautifully. Besides, that's partly your fault, isn't it?"

He relieves her of Joel, inwardly shaking his head at how quickly she has succumbed to House's charm again. She puts a hand on his arm.

"Wilson, he's trying to be who you want him to be. He really is. He stuck it out with me even though I spent the entire week whining and moping and ignoring his advice, and he even volunteered to pick Rachel up from Princeton on Wednesday. He re-arranged my entire book collection just so I wouldn't figure out that he has taken all my books on child raising to read secretly. He wants to be a good father."

"But you did figure out that the parenting books are missing," Wilson points out, "so it could have been one of his deliberate ploys, where you think you've caught him at something, but he intended to get discovered all along."

"I only figured it out because I was looking for them so I could lend them to you," Cuddy says. "Otherwise I'd never have noticed in a hundred years. I quit reading them years ago."

There's a thump and a crash from the entryway, presumably a suitcase tipping over. He goes out and finds Rachel leaning crazily out of her wheelchair, trying to reach the zipper.

"I managed to lay it down," she says excitedly, "but it was tough."

"Will you hold Joel while I open the suitcase?" he asks, not particularly wanting to explain to Cuddy how her daughter fell out of her wheelchair at his instigation.

When Rachel pauses, undecided, he puts Joel unceremoniously on her lap and turns his attention to the suitcase, extricating a wrapped package before Rachel can complain. Rachel nearly drops Joel in excitement, whereupon Wilson drops the package and lunges for Joel. In the end everything is as it should be. Joel, unflappable, is back in his arms and Rachel is ripping the wrapping to shreds.

"Mom, Mom!" she yells. "It's a helicopter, a real helicopter that can fly! Thanks, Wilson, you're the greatest!" And she's off to show her trophy to her mother.

"You shouldn't have," Cuddy says to Wilson when he rejoins her in the living area.

"It'll keep her and House happy," Wilson says, smiling.

An hour later Wilson leads three men into Rachel's room. They immediately start dismantling the baby grand's legs.

"Where do you want us to take it?" one of them asks.

"Nowhere," House, who is leaning against the doorframe with folded arms and an expressionless face, says.


Up on his floor the possibilities are even more limited than downstairs. Really, there's only the living room; all the other rooms are either too small or too close to Joel's room. Wilson has no illusions about House's playing habits. Minor considerations such as sleeping infants won't deter him when the muse kisses him. House won't be pleased, because the factors that prompted House to reject Cuddy's living area as a potential location for the piano doubtless apply to Wilson's living room as well. As Wilson shifts the coffee table to a corner, House comes in.
"I think they've gotten stuck on the stairs," he says with a show of indifference.

Wilson stops what he's doing to listen. There's grunting and muted shouts from the stairs, but the tone isn't desperate. This is the third time at the very least that he is witnessing House's piano being transported, and so far it always worked out somehow.

"You want to put it in here?" House asks.


House wordlessly leaves the room. Wilson hears him opening and shutting doors and then senses him brooding in the doorway.

Turning his head, Wilson says, "Quit exuding disapproval. If you don't like the location, then put the piano back into storage. I'm not stopping you."

"It's a good piano," House says, "not a jukebox. It needs —"

Wilson straightens. "Yeah, yeah, I've heard all this before. I was there when you bought the piano, House, and I'm fully aware that it's special. Very special, indeed. Your piano buying spree isn't something I'm likely to forget in a hurry."

He'd spent a miserable night in a New Orleans jail, among thugs and drunks, mourning his marriage, berating himself for his stupidity, and generally not getting any sleep, only to be bailed out in the wee hours of the morning by a complete stranger. A creepy stranger who insisted that Wilson buy him breakfast. Fair enough, Wilson thought, wondering whether the guy was hitting on him. But House didn't hit on him during or after breakfast, not noticeably at least. Instead, he dragged Wilson from one piano seller's to the next, ignoring Wilson's initially polite and then increasingly irritated excuses that he was tired and needed a shower and sleep. House must have played over fifty pianos in the course of the day, some of them more than once, before homing in on the one now stuck somewhere on the stairs. It was only back in his hotel room that night, taking a shower and finally getting into clean clothes, that Wilson realised that he hadn't thought of Sam even once during the day.

House finally shuts up, hovering while the piano is set up, but calming down noticeably once the movers have departed. He sits down immediately and starts playing.

"Not too loudly," Wilson admonishes him. "Joel is sleeping already."

House shows no sign of having heard him, but Wilson notes that the volume slowly decreases while the tune morphs from something funky to a lullaby. He goes into the kitchen to sort a few odds and ends that he picked up from Cuddy's place into the fridge. Then he unpacks, and when that's done he decides that he has given House enough time to sulk. He returns to the living room with two cans of soda. House has stopped playing. He's sitting there, picking out notes with one hand, frowning at the keys. Even Wilson's unschooled ears can hear that the piano would benefit from a tuning. Wilson puts House's can and a coaster on the piano. His own soda and the baby monitor he places on a moving box. He hasn't gotten a couch or armchairs yet either, so he goes to the kitchen and drags two chairs back into the living room.

"When are you buying furniture?" House asks.

Wilson eyes him with distaste. He's been postponing the task for at least four weeks now, and it doesn't look any more attractive now than it did then.

"I've got a couch and a coffee table in storage," House volunteers. "Want them too?"
"Too?" Wilson echoes, not sure what to make of this offer.

"In addition to the piano," House elaborates, flicking his free hand. Wilson stares at him. House is offering the use of his furniture? He doesn't know what to say; the only thing that comes to his mind is that he doesn't want the piano, but that wouldn't be helpful at this point.

"And a closet. Solid oak," House continues undeterred.

"You're suggesting I take your furniture?" Wilson says slowly.

"Yeah. Unless you don't like it. But you're not particular about furniture," House says.

"And you know that because?"

"Because you lived in that apartment in Germantown for over six months without changing a single damn thing. If you want the furniture, just say so."

"You don't want it?"

House huffs impatiently. "I'll see more of it if it's here than if it's in storage."

Wilson struggles to get his mind around the fact that House's furniture, most of which he's had for as long as Wilson can remember, isn't 'House's' furniture any longer. House can't remember buying it or living with it. He has furniture in Bristol that he considers his own now; the things in the storage unit are artefacts of a stranger's life.

"I'll take it," Wilson says. "That couch has a depression that fits my butt cheeks exactly. The closet can go in the guest room." Which is where House will stay from now on.

House nods and goes back to playing arpeggios with one hand.

"What about the piano?" Wilson asks. "Have you considered shipping it to England?"

House shakes his head without interrupting his activity. "Got an upright over there already, and no space for a grand." But he's not as definitive about it as with the furniture.

Wilson sits down on one of the chairs and picks up his soda. House makes no move to join him. Time to extend the olive branch, Wilson decides. It'll have to be done sooner or later, anyway. "You did well with Cuddy," he says. "So far, she hasn't asked me to help her murder you and dispose of the body."

House's expression grows broodier, if anything, and the arpeggio he's playing switches from major into minor.

"The yoga sessions were a good idea," Wilson plods on valiantly.

"Leaving me here to cope with her was a bad idea," House mutters.

Wilson feels a wave of guilt rise in him. He shouldn't have coerced House into staying in Philly; it was unnecessary, awkward for both House and Cuddy, and an imposition on House.

"House, it worked just fine. She was raving about how you volunteered to bring Rachel back the moment she mentioned it. She says you were a help and that you did a great job: you didn't lose your calm and you took care of her needs." That's not quite what Cuddy said — come to think of it,
she didn't really say much — but Wilson is perfectly willing to embellish the facts to make his point.

House's hand slips and then falters. "I took care of her needs and she took care of mine. Fucking symbiotic we were!" He plays a jangling chord that doesn't sound symbiotic or harmonic at all.

"What's that?" Wilson says.

"She didn't tell you about the blow job?" House asks, not taking his eyes from the keys.

"Blow job? No," Wilson says with a sinking feeling. He guesses the outward calm here in Drexel was too good to be true.

"She gave me a blow job. Kinda nice of her, don't you think?"

"You're kidding!"

But House is deadly earnest, there's no doubt about that. There isn't the slightest hint of mockery or amusement in his face.

Wilson tries again. "Why'd she give you a blow job?"

House pauses, pretending to think. Then he says, "No idea. You'll have to ask her."

"How did you react?" Wilson asks, hoping that House will say he refused it, stopped it, or aborted it in some manner, but knowing from the way that House is talking about it that it took place.

House lifts his eyebrows in an exaggerated manner. "I did what any gentleman would do in such a situation: I accepted the situation with grace."

"And then?"

"Nothing," House says. "I offered to return the favour, but she spurned my offer. I admit that I was pained; my skills at cunnilingus are generally admired." He waves a hand in a foppish manner, but his eyes still don't meet Wilson's.

"House, you … !" Words fail Wilson. He needs to find out what happened, what really happened. This could be a serious complication. Did House take advantage of Cuddy's vulnerability or proffer help in return for sexual favours? The mind boggles! Or is all this a figment of his imagination, brought on by a relapse and too much Vicodin? He can't see any signs of drug abuse, but then, House knows how to hide it. He rises and picks up the baby monitor.

"Don't disappear!" he instructs House. Then he goes downstairs.

Cuddy is in the living area, sitting on the couch with her knees drawn up under her chin and her arms clasped around her legs, watching television — Grey's Anatomy. That's so unusual that Wilson stops short. Normally, Cuddy has a pile of papers that she works through once Rachel is in bed. On the rare occasion that she grants herself an 'evening off', she either reads or she watches feature films and police procedurals. Cuddy has little patience with the trials and tribulations of fictional medical universes.

He sits down next to her, wondering how to broach the subject. "I didn't know you watched medical series," he says, stalling.

Cuddy frowns at the screen. "The patient is dying, and they're all standing around discussing their
private problems. It's stupid! ... But it's relaxing."

That's his cue. "Talking of relaxing," he says, "House says you gave him a blow job."

He waits for her to deny it with a show of indignation or to make a barbed comment about House's vivid sexual fantasies, but instead she drops her forehead on her knees.

"Oh, God!" she says. "I was hoping that I'd dreamed that!"

Wilson doesn't quite know what to make of her reaction. "So it's true?" he asks, perplexed.

"I suppose so. Oh, frick! I'll never be able to look him in the face again." She raises her head and says querulously, "Why'd he have to tell you? You two are such gossips! If he hadn't told you —"

"A sexual act isn't Schrödinger's cat; not talking about it won't make it un-happen, Cuddy," he says with a touch of asperity.

"Don't you start talking in metaphors too!"

Wilson briefly considers explaining Schrödinger's cat to her, but his grasp of quantum physics is limited and it's beside the point anyway. "Tell me what happened."

Cuddy turns her head towards him, leaning her cheek on her knees now. "It was the day he picked Rachel up from Julia's place. I went to bed early because ... I was tired, so he must have helped Rachel get ready for bed. Anyway, I awoke around one a.m. and heard sounds from in here, so I went to check whether it was Rachel, but it was Pete — watching porn. I told him to cut it out in case Rachel woke and caught him at it."

He's with her so far. Honestly, does House have to watch porn in Cuddy's living room?

Cuddy continues, "He said he'd hear Rachel in time if she got up, but I doubt it. He didn't hear me coming."

"Or he chose to ignore you."

"Think I should have taken the chance?"

Wilson shakes his head. Rachel is notorious for roaming the apartment at night, and Cuddy has the right to demand that her living room be a porn-free zone.

"Anyway," Cuddy continues, "so I ripped the DVD out of the player, took it to the kitchen, and threw it in the trash."

Okay, that was — radical. Chances are that House didn't get a warning, let alone a second or third one, before being deprived of his property.

"He followed me, kvetching all the way, so I dragged him off to his room and ... . You know what happened then." She buries her face in her knees again.

Wilson isn't sure that he does. "He asked you — coerced you into performing oral sex on him?" Cuddy shakes her head without lifting it. Her answer is muffled by her knees. "No, I ... pushed him down onto his bed and just ... did it. Omigod, I can't believe I did that! He hasn't mentioned it since then — no knowing smirk, no indirect allusion, nothing — so I was convinced I'd dreamed it. I've had a lot of weird dreams lately, so it seemed the most likely explanation."
"You … you got excited and carried away by the porn, so you …" Wilson surmises, as much to find an explanation for what happened as to comfort her.

Cuddy's head snaps up again. "No! I didn't watch it. I switched it off the moment I saw what he was watching. I'm not a fan anyway." She sighs. "There's no excuse."

"Okay, and then?"

"Then what?"

"What happened then?"

Cuddy looks at him blankly. "I went to bed."

"You didn't … he didn't …?" Wilson stammers.

Comprehension dawns on Cuddy's face. "Wilson, I didn't want sex. I didn't do it because I wanted to get off. An orgasm was the last thing I needed."

Wilson feels discombobulated. "Then why — why — did you get him off?"

"He was taking care of me, he'd just brought Rachel back to me, he couldn't play the piano to relax because it was in Rachel's bedroom, and I wasn't even letting him watch his porn. I had to make it up to him somehow."

"With a blow job," Wilson says, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Should I have slipped him a couple of Vicodin instead?" She blows a stray lock out of her face. "Since he was watching porn, it seemed a safe bet that he wanted sex. … Shoot, I can't believe I did that!"

Neither can Wilson. "You do know that there are alternatives to offering him sex or drugs."

"Like what?"

"You could have sent him away to … ." He trails off uncertainly.

"To do what? Pick up a hooker? Get wasted at a bar? The last time I threw him out, I had to pick him up from a nightclub afterwards, and I didn't feel up to that. Besides, he was this close to a relapse." She holds thumb and forefinger half an inch apart. "Sending him out into the night didn't seem a good idea."

"What do you mean, 'he was this close to a relapse'?" Wilson asks, his heart thumping. *House, don't! This is not a good time to have a melt-down.*

Cuddy's eyes slide away and she picks at imaginary lint. "You know how he gets: all manic and obsessive and turned inward."

Yes, he does. He has noticed it too: House's mood, the signs of stress, old patterns resurfacing. "You could have sent him upstairs to my place where he could have watched his porn in peace. I don't get why he didn't sleep there in the first place."

"He didn't suggest it, and it didn't seem right to let him mess up your apartment, not when you weren't talking to him. … Do you even have a TV up there?"

"It's still packed, but yeah."
Cuddy leans back tiredly, her head against the back of the couch. "I guess I should have done that. I didn't think of it. … How am I ever going to face him again? What the hell was I thinking? … What did he say about it?"

"Not much."

"Was he gloating?" she asks bitterly. "I'm such an idiot!"

Wilson agrees silently. Aloud, he says, "No, he wasn't. He seemed confused."

"Oh. … That makes two of us." She rises. "What am I going to do?"

"You could apologise," Wilson suggests.

"I didn't rape him," Cuddy says. "He was surprised, but not unwilling."

"I didn't say you molested him or anything," Wilson hastens to say, "nor did he. I don't think he exactly minded."

"Well, he probably minds now," Cuddy points out.

"Only because he has no idea what's going on between you. He hates that."

"Everyone does," Cuddy says dispassionately. "Nothing is going on; you can tell him that."

"I'm not playing messenger boy for either of you," Wilson clarifies.

Cuddy raises her eyebrows. "No? Then why are you here?"

"Curiosity. Damage control. Making sure my friend doesn't get hurt. Take your pick."

Cuddy harrumphs. Then she says thoughtfully, "Maybe I don't have to say or do anything at all. When is he leaving?"

"Not in the near future," Wilson says, coming to a decision. Desirable as it would be to put a few thousand miles between Cuddy and House, he has axes of his own to grind. He can't put his plans on hold until they've gotten themselves sorted, because experience shows that neither of them is ever really 'sorted'. They'll have to muddle through, the three of them. Dropping a bomb on them now is bad timing, what with House craving opiates and Cuddy down in the dumps, but it can't be helped. This is one of the days when he wishes he'd married a sweet uncomplicated girl, settled down, and had a family. Then he'd be paying college fees now and waiting for the first grandchild to arrive, instead of helping his weird friends to get their lives untangled and making provisions for an infant who, even at an optimistic estimate, will barely make it to adulthood before he dies.

"Go to bed, Cuddy," he says. "It's done now. You'll survive. You'd be surprised at how many mortifying moments you can survive without showing any outward scars."
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Wilson's departure he sits staring at his hands a while longer. He'd really love to hammer away on the piano — something noisy and sufficiently uplifting to keep him from thinking, like Van Halen's 'Jump' — but if he wakes Joel ...

Not an option, so he finally gets up and closes the lid of the piano. He needs a distraction though, so he roots through Wilson's moving boxes in search of the television. He's sure Wilson has one because he made Wilson get a decent one when Wilson moved from Cuddy's apartment in Germantown to the downstairs one he'd rented from the academic couple on sabatical. Finding and setting up a flatscreen, however, doesn't prove to be challenging enough to keep his thoughts at bay.

Until recently his relationship with Lisa was clearly defined: Lisa was She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Dated. Paradoxically, this wasn't because he was worried about her dumping him (although that was Wilson's primary objection to the relationship, as far as Pete could make out), but because he feared that she mightn't dump him even if she wanted to.

He'd explained it to her when he had ended their relationship after finding out his true identity: if at any point she wanted to leave him, she would be incapable of doing so because there was a good chance that he was the kind of guy who would commit random acts of violence against her and her daughter. He didn't feel particularly inclined towards violence, she didn't seem to believe he was an abuser, but — they'd never know for sure. Dating a woman who flinched or had flashbacks whenever he yelled at her and who in the future might only stay with him because she'd be too scared to leave, simply wasn't an attractive proposition, so — he'd left her instead.

After ending their relationship he aimed for 'distanced politeness' towards her. Politeness wasn't exactly his forte, but he prided himself on his ability to keep people at arm's length (or more), and Lisa was too proud to throw herself at someone who showed no interest in her. Besides, they had little reason to deal with each other: they were on different continents, their paths crossing only when their mutual friendship with Wilson made a meeting inevitable.

Wilson's thymoma forced them to work together for some time (and maybe Pete abused her weakness for him in order to talk her into volunteering to be Wilson's live donor), but he didn't have any intention of hanging around her for longer than strictly necessary once Wilson's health issues were resolved. He wasn't blind: he could see that she still found him attractive (against all reason). Forcing his proximity on her when he had no intention of resuming their relationship wouldn't have been fair.

For a while it had seemed as though they would gradually lose sight of each other anyway: Wilson was to move to New York to be closer to the child, where Pete would visit them in order to keep an eye both on Wilson and on the sprog. Wilson would be increasingly involved with his family, the contact with Lisa would gradually taper off, and Pete would only see her again when a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah necessitated both their presence. And maybe one day they'd be comfortable in each other's company again, enjoying an easy camaraderie based on mutual liking and understanding.

Or so he thought.

And then his good intentions were taken apart at the seams and put together again in a completely
different pattern. Wilson got saddled with the brat and put down roots in Philadelphia.

He wasn't blind to the changes that Wilson's altered family status would induce. Doubtless Lisa would play a major rule in Wilson's family life, which in turn meant that Pete would need to get along with her on more than a rudimentary I-need-your-liver level. But hey, he could handle that! He was capable of banishing all memories of 'Lisa the Girlfriend', seeing her only as 'Lisa the Housemate of his Best Buddy'. Lisa and he were both adults, capable of controlling those hormone-driven impulses that led lesser mortals to throw caution to the winds. Besides, he was well aware of the advantages of having a medically trained person in Wilson and the child's proximity, what with Wilson's multitudinous medical issues.

So, until that fateful day in Paris, he was convinced that all was well under control and that he could indulge in an occasional shower fantasy without endangering the fragile peace between Lisa and himself. (It wasn't like he was obsessing about her — his shower fantasies weren't monogamous by any standard!) But then Wilson dropped his bombshell: he wanted to marry Lisa and have her adopt the parasite!

To this day he isn't sure why his reaction to Wilson's revelation was so strong, but perhaps Nolan was right about personal contact with his son having a major impact on him. However that may be, it can't be helped now. His brain short-circuited and he kissed Lisa, not intending to ensnare her again, but solely from a desire to keep Wilson from putting his plan into action. He has noticed in the past that when he sets himself a target, he takes the shortest route to achieving it without heeding the collateral damage he causes along the way. That was pretty much what happened in Paris: when he kissed Lisa he was so focused on Wilson's reaction that he completely blanked out all thought of Lisa's interpretation of his actions.

Once the initial euphoria of wrecking Wilson's plan wore off, however, a critical examination of his actions told him that he'd screwed Lisa over royally, creating false expectations that he had no intentions of fulfilling, so he'd lain low, ignoring Lisa's messages and hoping that if he did nothing at all, everything would return to normal.

That was before Wilson found out that he wasn't Joel's father. Since then, Wilson has been devising plans that Pete can't afford to ignore.

Wilson has some maudlin notion about enabling Pete to stay in contact with his child, not only for the present, but also in case of his death. Wilson would deny anything of the sort, but his actions speak loud and clear: he hasn't tried to keep Pete away from Joel, no matter how indifferent Pete seems to the kid or how badly he messes with Wilson's head. Wilson wants Pete in Joel's life from a misplaced sense of guilt about raising the kid under the pretence of being his biological father. (Wilson probably lies awake at night imagining how Joel, on discovering that Wilson isn't his progenitor, will walk out of Wilson's life slamming the door behind him.) Therefore, he needs a future guardian for Joel whom he can trust with the secret of Joel's parentage, who doesn't have moral scruples about duping Joel's mother, and who is prepared to accept Pete's presence in Joel's life as part of the package deal.

There aren't many people who fit Wilson's bill. In fact, given Wilson's secretive nature there's only one person: Lisa. She already knows about Joel's parentage and she won't hesitate to sideline Amy. It's merely a question of time before Wilson suggests the arrangement to Lisa, and doubtless she'll agree.

Equally doubtless, however, is that the arrangement will be an imposition on her. She'll be forced to deal with her ex-boyfriend, the guy who ... . (Pete can replace the ellipsis in his thoughts with at least three examples of how he messed with Lisa's head — and that isn't even counting events that
he's heard of, but can't remember!) If she ever dates in earnest, she'll have to explain to her boy-toy/man-child/status symbol why she's allowing her unstable ex to descend on her household and hijack one of her charges. Even if Pete were inclined towards optimism (which he isn't), he wouldn't be able to pretend to himself that there was any chance of such an arrangement working in the long run.

Besides, although in principle he has no major issue with Lisa dating other guys, in practice he'd rather not have his child raised by the likes of Lucas Douglas. Since Lisa's taste in men leaves a little something to be desired — first Douglas, then himself — there's really only one way to keep her from dragging some unsavoury character out of the gutter into her life.

He's going to have to date Lisa Cuddy again.

He came to that conclusion long before arriving in Philadelphia to keep an eye on Lisa. After pondering the pros and cons of such an arrangement, he is convinced that he wouldn't mind being in a relationship with Lisa. She's easy on the eyes, fun to be with (when she doesn't have the blues), unflappable, and absolutely unscrupulous. He likes that. True, she's bossy as hell (which is kinda hot) and not exactly what he'd call 'low maintenance', but he figures that if things get too hot for him, he can flee to England and wait for her to cool down again. That's the upside of long distance relationships: you don't have to stick it out on the couch. (Besides, he has an inkling that he doesn't do low maintenance relationships. He's apparently the type who likes complicated, hard-to-please women with a strong attitude.) He has always liked Lisa, right from the day he barged into her life in a Bristol hotel. From that moment on he tried to get into her panties until he finally got into them, and he would have stayed in them — and very nice ones they are! — if he hadn't found out that he'd done his goddam best to knock her out of them into an early grave a few years earlier.

So, setting aside the small matter of his pride and his natural reluctance to date a woman whose life he pretty much ruined, there is no reason why he shouldn't date Lisa Cuddy — and a lot of good reasons why he should.

Until Wednesday evening he'd believed that Lisa saw the matter in the same light. True, she didn't exactly fall around his neck in gratitude when he appeared at her doorstep, but — she didn't kick him out either. She didn't even make him stay at Wilson's place, but accepted his presence in her guest room. She let him run her life, she accepted his presence at her therapy session, she allowed him to chauffeur her around the place. He'd assumed that once Lisa was fully recovered, she'd ... signal acquiescence to the general idea of getting involved with him again. All he'd need to do was make an attempt to get things to work between them.

This past week he has been trying to make things work (on a very basic, non-romantic level), but the going has been rough. For one thing, staying on Lisa's sunny side when she is all Dark Side of the Moon is no trivial matter, not when it is also his task to ensure that Lisa does a heap of things she doesn't feel like doing, like exercising, eating, sleeping regularly, and generally getting her life back into sync. (Besides, cossetting people isn't precisely his primary area of competence.) Then there were a few unexpected setbacks: he hadn't meant to cause a ruckus with Grandma Cuddy, let alone grace Lisa's place with a baby grand, but there's no denying that both factors weighed in against him and his limited natural charm. It was as though some inner demon of his was trying to hinder Lisa's progress towards recovery.

As a result, on Wednesday evening he was stressed and demotivated, but he didn't dare to go out to score some more weed, because he wasn't sure that he'd stop at weed. Besides, he had a sneaky suspicion that even if he stayed off opiates, Lisa wouldn't approve if he smoked a reefer on her deck now that Rachel was back at home. Same with booze: if he drank now, he'd get shit-faced, and then there'd be hell to pay. So, he opted for porn to keep his mind off other distractions.
He wasn't really surprised when Lisa marched into the living area and put a stop to his voyeuristic pleasures, but he put up a token protest when she threw his DVD into the trash, partly because he felt it was expected of him, partly because picking a fight with Lisa was also a form of distraction. When she took his arm and dragged him to his bedroom, he assumed she was going to lock him in so as to stop him from going back to watching porn once she went back to bed. He made a few lewd comments as she hustled him through the door and a few more when she pushed him down onto his bed, but he didn't really mean them. In fact, if he'd had the slightest premonition that she might take him at his word, he'd never have mentioned wanting some head (or any other sex-related activity). He expected her to leave him then and there, but she briskly undid his jeans (‘She's kidding’, he thought), pulled down his boxers (‘She's bluffing’, he thought. ‘Let's see how she'll get out of this!’), and took his cock in her mouth (he stopped thinking).

By the time his brain started working again, she was rising, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Ignoring the hand he was holding out to her to pull her closer, she turned around and left the room instead. Once he'd managed to pull up his boxers and jeans he followed her, catching up with her at the door of her bedroom.

"Goodnight, House," she said.

"Hey, don't you want —?"

"I'm tired, okay?"

Next thing, he was staring at the door of her bedroom and listening to the lock click into place.

He's been waiting for her to mention what happened, if only to vituperate him, ever since. (He doesn't quite see how it was his fault, but he's pretty sure that somehow he'll get the blame.) But Lisa hasn't referred to the 'incident' even once; it's as though it never happened. Has she had a complete blackout? If she has, then she's in a worse state than he estimated. Did he imagine it all? Nope; he was neither drunk nor high. It happened — he's sure of that, even though he has no clue as to why it happened.

Putting Wilson on the case is a last-ditch effort to figure out what's going on, but he isn't sanguine about the outcome. Chances are that Lisa, stretched too thin and insecure as hell about ten thousand different things — beginning with her parenting skills and ending with her ability to do her job — misinterpreted something he said or did and is now telling Wilson in long and gory detail what an ass Pete is and how she'd love to scoop out his balls with a grapefruit spoon. There's nothing for it but to wait and to hope that Wilson is too tired from the journey and the upheavals of the day to toss him out on his backside immediately.

Wilson returns half an hour later, by which time Pete has plugged in the television and found a brain-rotting medical show of the type that Wilson hates. In addition, he has helped himself to another can of soda and a packet of chips.

Wilson doesn't say anything. Glancing at Pete's feet up on a moving box, he drags over another moving box for his own feet. Then he sits down and holds out his hand for the chips. Pete hands them over wordlessly.

"Cuddy's also watching that," Wilson says, nodding at the television.

If he's trying to approach the topic obliquely, he's not doing a good job.

Wilson tips his head to the side. "Perhaps she'd profit from a stay in a psychiatric institution."
Pete considers possible replies to that, like, 'If you commit everyone who goes down on me, there'll be no beds for the real crazies' or, 'We'd profit from her staying in an institution', but discards them in favour of a non-committal grunt. He's uncommonly lucky that Wilson is choosing to focus on Lisa's part in this instead of picking on him, so he'd better not call negative attention to himself. Besides, they both know that regardless of whether in-patient treatment would profit Lisa or not — Pete for one isn't convinced of the efficacy of therapy in any form —, she will never agree to anything that'll condemn her to inactivity and group therapy.

"What did she say?" he asks. It comes out all garbled because of the chips, but Wilson gets his meaning.

"She said nothing happened," Wilson says flatly. "As in, Forget that it happened!"

"The Groundhog Day kind of forgetting?" Pete asks without much hope.

Wilson snorts. "You wish! The 'It won't happen again, ever!' kind. The 'Don't mention it, or your balls will be on display as gate ornaments!' kind of —"

Pete holds up his hand. "Yeah, yeah, got it. I'm good at obliterating memories. Two electrodes and a teensy bit of voltage is all I need."

"You could also stick a knife into an outlet," Wilson suggests with a poker face. "Or run a car into a house again. ... For starters, just stay away from her."

And that's it. Wilson eats chips, gets himself a fresh can of soda, comments on the lame medicine and the even lamer plot of the episode they're watching, and meditates on the ratio between his income and that of a B-rate actor — topics of conversation that Pete can join in without engaging more than twenty percent of his brain. The other eighty percent continue to brood on the epic fail of Wednesday evening. So much for making things work with Lisa!

Wilson rejects Pete's plan to avoid Lisa by returning to England without delay.

"I'm starting my new job in oncology on Monday," he says.

"You've got a nanny," Pete grouses. "You don't need me."

"This isn't about my needs," Wilson says pointedly. "This is your chance to get to know Joel without me peering over your shoulder and making tsk-ing noises all the time."

What's there to get to know? The kid is predictable and absolutely normal — boring, in short. He lies around drooling on everything. When he's in a truly adventurous mood he rolls over, but that's about it. Developmental highlights are not to be expected in the near future. Pete knows better, however, than to say anything of the sort to Wilson, because parents are damned touchy about their kids and interpret a lack of interest as a downright insult. Besides, he's aware that Wilson has another reason to desire his continued presence: Wilson is waiting for a suitable moment to get Lisa's consent to his custody plans; he has been making oblique references to custody arrangements ever since his return from Boston. Wilson knows that Lisa will make her consent to becoming Joel's guardian in the event of Wilson's death dependent on Pete's approval, so he needs Pete to be around when he approaches Lisa.

Wilson takes the better part of a week to gather sufficient courage to broach the topic, a week that fully confirms all Pete's prejudices about infants and family life. Operation Bonding is an exercise in futility: Joel doesn't care a fig who drags him around the place and provides him with food. When Wilson isn't around, Pete lets the nanny do her thing. Far be it from him to offer to lighten
her load: she's getting paid to look after the brat, he isn't. Unfortunately Wilson returns home after lunch (he's only working half-days so far), proceeds to send the nanny home, and then expects Pete to share the hardships of childcare.

To add insult to injury Wilson decides that there's no sense in finding someone to do the school run with Rachel as long as Pete is around, seeing that the summer vacation will commence in three days. Pete only manages to ward that chore off by suggesting that Hernandez can do the job. Hernandez doesn't mind, and anything that slows down his policy of scorched earth in the yard has Lisa's approval. Thankfully, Rachel is to go on vacation with Julia and her family the moment school closes for the summer, eliminating one child trap from Pete's vicinity. She'll only be gone for a week, but Pete has no intention of sticking it out that long. If Wilson can't be brought to approach Lisa before the end of the week, then Pete will do it for him.

After another online lecture (Wilson's disease, with the data provided by Chase and his former patient's son) and corresponding Q&A session Pete has had enough. It seems that news of his posting strategy (three a.m. GMT) has gotten around, so this time many more students manage to download the lecture early enough to watch it and prepare questions. There's no way he'll survive a third round of online interrogation, so he needs to return to England to deliver live lectures. He has also received a request from the International Criminal Court to examine corpses in connection with war crimes allegedly committed by British forces in Iraq between 2003 and 2008. Not spectacularly exciting as such, but the time factor — the corpses are at least ten years old — turns it into a challenge. He doesn't care whether there is a trial or not — the Iraqis are dead; nothing will make them come alive again — but he does want to deliver conclusive evidence one way or another.

The day of Rachel's felicitous departure, Pete opts to make an effort to include Joel in his activities — a serious effort, not one of those ploys that he uses to make Wilson believe that he's bonding with the little tyke. (Not that Wilson is fooled, but it has become a ritual: Pete pretends to do something with the kid, like giving him a bath, but instead of putting the kid in the bathwater, he closes the bathroom door, puts the kid on the mat beside the bathtub, and gets out his iPad to watch a movie or read. Every now and then he splashes his hand in the water and makes cooing noises. After about twenty minutes he puts the kid into clean clothes and comes out again. Wilson greets them with an approving smile, but the next time he picks the boy up, he says something like, "Goodness, you're one sticky little boy! Wouldn't believe you'd had a bath already if I hadn't seen you coming out of the bathroom all fresh and pressed.") He decides to take Joel with him on his daily run. He is strongly motivated to go for a run at five in the afternoon, because even though that isn't his preferred hour for running, Julia and Co. are due to pick Rachel up. He is inclined to take the brat with him in the jogging stroller because running makes low demands on adult-child interaction. He will run while Joel chews on his toys, observes his surroundings, and drools over everything. That will get Wilson off his back without disrupting his own plans.

When he returns an hour later, the coast — as far as he can make out from the end of the road — is clear. Lisa's hatchback and Wilson's Prius are in the drive, and there's no sign of Julia's car. So far, so good. He's loping slowly down the sidewalk two hundred yards from Lisa's house getting his breath back, when a car draws up beside him and the window on his side opens. After a quick glance — not Julia, but a man in a suit is peering up at him — he ambles on, ignoring car and driver.

"Gregory House?" a sonorous voice calls.

He stops and turns around slowly. The car draws up at the curb and the driver gets out. "Good afternoon, Mr House," he says.
Pete considers denying his identity, but he has more or less confirmed it by reacting to his name. So he waits, one hand on the grip of the stroller to keep it from rolling down the road.

"Chris Clark," the man says, holding out a hand. "Attorney for the Department of State."

Department of State? Maybe something to do with his identity: he wouldn't be surprised if someone somewhere decided that his disappearance and sudden reappearance required a close scrutiny, more thorough than the one that Princeton Township accorded his papers two years ago. Pete ignores the hand, focusing on the rest of the guy. Tall, about six foot four, athletic, between forty and forty-five at a guess. A well-cut suit of light wool, a conservative blue tie, expensive shoes. The Department of State does well by its minions. The limo, spotless and sleek, has tinted windows.

While one part of his brain is observing, another is sifting through incongruities. Clark knows who he is. Not a big deal if his interest is identity related: he must have examined photographs, both old and new. He also knows where to find Pete, which means that he has access to international flight details and a good overview of his social connections. Thing is, he came up from behind and was sure of Pete's identity before he'd gotten a good look at his face. So either he has been observing Pete ever since he left the house (which would be creepy) or …

Pete stares down at his cell phone, fixed to the stroller grip in a halter, the GPS function active. When he looks up again at Clark, the man's expression is bland. Oh-kay.

Clark has withdrawn his hand. "Mr House," he says, his tone still courteous, "I'd appreciate it if you'd spare me a few minutes."

"And if I don't?" Pete says warily.

Clark shrugs with a show of nonchalance. "Then you'll be left wondering why the Department of State is taking a sudden interest in you."

Pete narrows his eyes. The bastard has assessed him too accurately for comfort. He's an American citizen, so unless someone doubts his identity, he isn't really a case for the Department of State. If, however, his identity is under scrutiny, then there's no chance that The Powers That Be will be shaken off by a simple refusal on his part to talk to their minion. So it has to be something connected to his professional abilities.

He turns away and starts pushing the stroller back towards the house, pretending indifference. "You need a consult?" he asks. "Some high-ranking diplomat dipped too deeply into the pleasures of oriental brothels?"

Clark catches up with him easily and matches his stride. "We're concerned about your consulting activities for other agencies."

Other agencies. The International Criminal Court, Pete realises with a sinking feeling. When he'd accepted the assignment to investigate the misdemeanours of British troops in Iraq, he'd been aware that it was a controversial mandate, but he'd expected opposition in Britain, not in the US. That was short-sighted, he decides. The only reason American armed forces haven't been indicted too is because the US government doesn't accept the jurisdiction of the ICC.

"I don't see what concern that is of yours," he says, although he knows exactly why the State Department is getting its thong all in a twist.

"The British government is our ally," Clark says.
"Even allies can err," Pete says with a casual shrug. "Would you deny victims of injustice the right
to know the truth?"

Clark smiles thinly. "What is truth?" he queries. "There's their truth and there's our truth."

"And our 'truth' trumps theirs, because we're bigger and badder?" Pete asks sarcastically.

"Mr House, I researched your diagnostic process and your methods before coming here to talk to
you. I think we speak the same language. Your aim is to save your patients' lives, and there's no
law or moral code that'll keep you from pursuing that aim with all the resources at your disposal.
Your patients' lives take priority over all other considerations. As I see it, our aims and methods are
similar."

When Pete snorts, Clark stations himself in front of Pete so that he can't push the stroller past him
along the sidewalk. Pete is uncomfortably aware of the two or so inches that Clark is taller and of
the greater muscle matter that the younger man possesses.

Clark continues smoothly, "If our allies were to be convicted of war crimes, then that would imply
an indictment of our troops too. That in turn would damage our reputation and it would be bad for
troop morale — the troops that protect your interests and your life as well as mine, Mr House."

"I'm not asking them to."

"You certainly don't hesitate to profit from the freedom that American armed forces worldwide
enable you to enjoy. Freedom of speech, the freedom to move around at will, the freedom to
choose your religion or to be an atheist. Our service men and women will have their reputation
besmirched because of the wrongdoings of a few knuckle-headed idiots. If we allow that to
happen, then maybe they won't be quite so eager to put their lives on the line for people like us,
people who use their services and yet don't hesitate to condemn them for what they do. … I've
heard that you don't always stick to the right side of the law when you treat your patients. Beware
of throwing the first stone, Mr House."

Pete considers telling him that he wouldn't have hesitated to take the rap for any transgressions he
committed in his past, but as usual, he neither knows what crimes he stands accused of nor can he
say for certain how he'd have reacted to criminal proceedings against himself. He believes that he
wouldn't have shied away from personal consequences, but does he know for sure? Perhaps he'd
have fled the country if he'd been in danger of getting sentenced to jail.

He glares at Clark, but the reply that is on his lips dies when Lisa appears behind their unbidden
guest.

"Hey," she says. "You want to take this conversation inside?" She looks around pointedly at the
neighbouring houses. There's no one leaning out of windows or standing overtly on their front
lawns observing them, but Pete wouldn't be surprised if the old woman living two houses down on
the opposite side of the road was peering out from behind her curtains.

Pete automatically shakes his head. This conversation should never have taken place and he has no
desire to prolong it. Moving away as though he'd never intended to block Pete's way, Clark looks
down at Lisa, breaks into a courteous smile, and once more stretches out his hand.

"Dr Cuddy? I'm Chris Clark from the State Department."

Lisa blinks at him, but routinely shakes his hand. "You know me?"

"By name only. We've been looking into Mr House's activities and environment, so it's natural that
"Your name should crop up."

Lisa's eyebrows rise. "You've been investigating ... Greg?" she says. "And us?" She does muted outrage very nicely.

"'Investigating' is the wrong term," Clark says smoothly. "We're merely doing a background check because of his activities for international organisations. That kind of work is not without its risks, and we'd hate to have him involved in a Middle East hostage crisis."

That has Pete wondering whether the US government would pay ISIS or Al Qaeda to kidnap and execute troublesome citizens.

"I'd feel sorry for anyone who took him hostage," Lisa says briskly. "As for his work, it has nothing to do with the rest of us. Who has he annoyed this time?"

Clark smiles reassuringly. "No one. He's doing honourable work for the International Criminal Court. Nevertheless, there are always conflicts of interest in such matters. The State Department is responsible for the safety of American citizens living or working abroad, and Mr House's safety will become a matter of concern if the investigations uncover, shall we say, controversial material."

Lisa gives a little incredulous laugh. "And you asked him to stay out of it all? Good luck with that! You do realise that you're probably achieving exactly the opposite?"

Clark's head tips in assent. "I have been wondering," he admits. "I should have talked to you about the best way to get my point across before accosting him."

"Probably," Lisa says, kneeling down in front of Joel (whom Pete has forgotten entirely ever since Clark materialised). "I'll take Joey inside while you two thrash it out." She unfastens the harness and pulls him out of the stroller.

Joel rubs his face on her shoulder enthusiastically, smearing snot and saliva all over her blouse. "A-gah," he says.

"We're always wiser in hindsight," Clark says, eyeing her appreciatively. "You wouldn't mind filling me in on him?"

Lisa rises, Joel on her arm. "Sure," she says. "Any time. ... It's been nice meeting you." She nods at Clark before turning back to the house.

"I'll call you," Clark calls after her. She glances back over her shoulder, smiling.

Pete frowns down at the empty stroller. Did Lisa just agree to collude with the enemy?

"I think we're done here," he says to Clark, pushing the empty stroller resolutely towards the house. When Clark doesn't move aside, Pete bumps the stroller hard against his shin. That does the job: Clark jumps aside cursing under his breath, but he doesn't try to stop him.

Wilson ambushed both of them that evening. Pete can't pretend to be surprised; he has been expecting this ever since Wilson's return. The timing makes sense: Rachel is safely out of the way in Delaware. There's no one except for the Screamer to interrupt their confabulations, but Wilson has had the foresight to ask the babysitter to come this evening. (In fact, it's her unaccustomed presence at 7 p.m. that alerts Pete to what lies ahead.) If he were Wilson, Pete would wait a few more days for Lisa to be a little less ... stretched. Maybe Wilson is worried that Pete will skedaddle
back to England before Lisa can consent to the scheme.

Pete allows Wilson to drag him down to Lisa's place without any show of resistance; the sooner they get this over with, the better. He can't pretend to be pleased with Wilson's plan, but he's aware that it could be worse, a lot worse. If they're lucky, Wilson won't croak for a long, long time. He wouldn't be surprised if Wilson outlived him, obviating any need for worry or dismay.

"Hello?" Lisa says when she opens the door and finds both of them standing there.

"Can we come in?" Wilson asks. "I come bearing gifts." He bows, presenting her with a box of her favourite chocolates.

"That isn't going to buy her!" Pete stage-whispers from behind him.

"Oh, my demands are modest," Lisa says coolly. She stands aside to let them in. "Soda or iced tea?"

Wilson goes for iced tea, while Pete chooses a soda. He wants a beer, a cool one, but he has little hope of getting anything he desires tonight.

Lisa leads them out onto the deck, which is furnished with chairs and a table that Pete hasn't seen before. "Hernandez and I got these today," Lisa says to Wilson. "He says I need to 'enjoy' my back yard while the weather is good."

While Wilson murmurs something approving, Pete growls, "Then maybe he shouldn't have slaughtered the lawn."

"He is renewing it," Lisa says with barely contained impatience. "He said there was too much moss and weeds in it to save it; he has sown new grass and expects the first shoots next week."

"Garden fascist!" Pete declares. "Euthanatising the dandelions!"

"You hired him, so deal with it," Lisa decrees. She looks from one to the other. "You guys didn't come here to inspect the back yard."

"No," Wilson admits. "I'd … like to talk about Joel's future."

Lisa immediately looks worried. "Is anything wrong with your liver values?" she asks. Wilson shakes his head. "Your thymoma, then?"

"No, everything's fine, Cuddy. Really! This is purely precautionary." When Lisa opens her mouth in protest, he holds up a hand. "You've been through making arrangements for your child in the middle of a health crisis. You know what that's like. In my case, it would be bordering on criminal neglect not to take the necessary precautions while I'm in good enough health to do so."

He twiddles with the straw in his iced tea. "Amy isn't in a position to guarantee a stable environment. In fact, I fear that if I don't set anything up for Joel, she'll opt to have him adopted."

Lisa looks from Wilson to Pete. "Can she do that without Pete's consent?" she asks. "Rachel's maternal grandparents had to get her bio dad's consent before placing her with me."

Wilson rubs a hand across his face. "I honestly don't know what will happen if House turns up at her doorstep claiming paternity and she goes to court with the tale of how he tricked her into the pregnancy. I figure we're talking fraud, coercion, bodily assault, or possibly sexual assault; it's a fair bet that he'll get a jail sentence instead of custody. But even if she sees reason with regard to an
adoption, any arrangement that features her is going to be tough on everyone else." He squints at Pete as he says this. "My family isn't an option. My parents are ... too old and my brother told me in no uncertain terms that he wants nothing to do with the matter."

That's news to Pete. He had no idea that Wilson tried to drag his brother into the custody arrangement. He isn't exactly surprised that this hasn't worked out; when Wilson was losing his fight against liver failure, Michael Wilson's level of empathy had been limited.

Lisa leans forward and clasps Wilson's hand. "What did he say?"

Wilson swallows hard. "He says that he wants nothing more to do with the family. Apparently my mother antagonises his wife to the point where they can't meet anymore without a major showdown. Michael says he's had it and that he's sick of the hypocrisy and non-communication among us."

"But … that's not your fault!" Lisa says.

Pete desists from pointing out that life isn't always fair and that blame, like entropy, is eternally on the increase.

Wilson draws lines on the table. "His memories of our childhood and mine … differ. He feels that I left him to deal with our mother, while I took the easy way out, hiding behind Daniel and his oddities. He says he had to keep our mother functioning and the family going, and that I ignored what was going on, pretending that Danny was the only problem. I don't know. ... Maybe he's right. Maybe I deliberately closed my eyes to the issues in my family. Whatever. He doesn't want to see me or Joel."

"I'm sorry," Lisa says, which is superfluous because Wilson's family problems aren't her fault.

Wilson blinks; he's more upset than Pete considers warranted, given that his family didn't exactly keep a watch at his bedside when he nearly kicked the bucket. Perhaps he's playing Lisa, softening her so that she agrees to his plan to make her Joel's guardian. Not a bad strategy; Lisa is a lot less stretched than she was last week, but she's still far from mellow and chilled.

Wilson, after blinking away a few (pseudo-) tears, sits up straight and looks first Lisa, then him in the eye. "I've been doing a bit of thinking. My original plan, before I found out that House is Joel's biological father," he says ponderously, managing to give the term a slightly derogatory sound, "was to marry you, Cuddy, and have you adopt Joel as soon as possible."

Lisa snorts.

Wilson raises his eyebrows at her. "It's not particularly romantic, but people marry for worse reasons. Hell, I've married for worse reasons. I like you, I respect you, and I trust you."

"Um, thank you," Lisa says, blushing.

"Hear, hear!" Pete mocks.

Wilson gives him a quelling look before continuing, "Obviously, I've had to rethink the matter since discovering the truth about Joel, but after initial doubts, I've come to the conclusion that my original plan wasn't all bad."

Now Lisa cocks an eyebrow at Wilson. Can she be so dumb as not to have realised from the start where this was headed? Apparently she has been so busy with her own problems that Wilson's preoccupied state of mind has escaped her notice.
Pete leans back. This is where Wilson will suggest guardianship of Joel to Lisa. Lisa won't find it in her to refuse, not with Wilson playing the 'dying man' card, and before she knows it, he'll have manipulated her into promising to give Pete visitation rights. (It would be an amusing scene to watch if Lisa weren't so obviously at a disadvantage.) At the end of the conversation Wilson will ask him whether he is okay with the arrangement, indicating by voice and expression that he'd better be. He will agree to whatever Wilson suggests, because if Lisa is prepared to do all this for a kid who isn't even hers, he can hardly play up.

"It's hardly feasible now," Lisa says, tipping her head towards Pete.


It's going to come now. Pete observes Lisa's face, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Three, two, one … .

Wilson says, "I can marry House."

Lisa's chin drops dramatically. Pete grins — until his brain catches up with what his ears just heard.

"Wait, what?" he says, turning hastily to Wilson.

"Don't tell me the thought hasn't occurred to you," Wilson says sharply. After eyeing him for a moment he sighs. "No, it hasn't. You still believe that this is my problem, not our problem. It's simple: we marry, you adopt Joel as soon as Amy gives her consent (like I planned for Cuddy to do), and if I die, you have no legal hassles."

For once, he's rendered completely speechless.

Lisa, however, isn't. "Sounds like a plan," she says crisply. "One for which you don't need me. I'll leave you to discuss the details." She rises.

"Wait," Wilson says, rising too. "This affects you."

Lisa glances at him dispassionately. "No," she says. "This is between the two of you. But you're asking a lot of him at short notice."

"I'm not asking anything of him. I'm simply making a suggestion," Wilson says. "He's free to take it or leave it."

"And if I refuse?" Pete asks. His voice is croaky.

"Then I expect you to suggest alternatives or to accept any other arrangement that I make for Joel without interfering. Either you're in on this or you're out, but you can't sabotage what I organise without taking responsibility in turn. Are we clear on that?" His eyes are narrow and hard.

Pete drops his eyes. Wilson means business.

Lisa sits down and taps the table impatiently. "What alternative do you have?" she asks no one in particular.

Wilson pinches the bridge of his nose. "We come clean to Amy and hope that she doesn't try to send House to jail. But I don't want to do that; I'd lose all legal rights without any guarantee that it'll benefit House … or Joel. Or I designate you as guardian in the event of my death, stipulating that you grant House visitation rights."
"Oh," Lisa says. She looks at Pete thoughtfully. "Not ideal."

"Under the circumstances — no," Wilson agrees.

"Can't you name House guardian?" she asks.

Wilson shrugs. "I can, but he's neither a relative nor closely connected in any other manner. If I die in the near future and Amy challenges the guardianship, then you have better cards than he does. A judge is more likely to accept you than House. You live in the same house as Joel, you have a child already, you're a woman. That carries a lot of clout. Obviously, that would change if I survived for long enough that House could become a fixture in Joel's life, but I don't think we should bet on that."

"I see," Lisa says. "It's me or him. … Then I guess you two had better get married."

"Hey, isn't anyone going to ask me what I want?" Pete asks by way of a token protest.

"Um, no?" Wilson says.

Lisa, rising again, pats Pete's arm. "Go buy a ring," she says.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Many thanks to menolly_au, without whose input the chapter would have been unintelligible.
I repeat, this fic will end with the pairing House/Cuddy; it'll just take time and patience to get there. And no, I don't intend to kill Wilson off :)
It's not exactly a *nightmare*, but the preparations for the wedding aren't a walk in the park either. If a wedding planner could handle this, Wilson would immediately engage one, no matter what the expense. But the problems are strictly interpersonal, which (in theory) is his area of competence. He knows he can handle them — 'them' being House, Cuddy, and Rachel respectively — though he could have forgone one or the other conversation without feeling that he was missing out on anything.

First there's House who, after an atypical period of utter silence, deals with the situation in his accustomed manner of 'evasion by diversion'. Throughout the evening up in Wilson's apartment, he spices up the conversation with homoerotic innuendos and references to matrimony as the ultimate form of bondage. Since Wilson expected no less, he takes it in his stride. He does, however, put a definitive stop to it when House trails him to his bedroom.

"I sleep here, you sleep there," he says, pointing towards the guest room.

"Saving yourself for our nuptials?" House asks with a leer, but there's uncertainty in his voice, and Wilson recognises that House is in limbo, unsure of what to expect or what is expected of him.

"Saving our friendship, more likely," Wilson answers. "We're *not* having sex!"

"You're not putting out?" House asks in mock outrage.

"I'm prepared to make an honest man of you," Wilson says, echoing his mocking tone. "Isn't that enough of a sacrifice? Other couples have joint bank accounts, joint property, and a joint bed; we'll have a joint kid. That's *all*. If we do this, then it'll be a contract, a business arrangement."

House nods, but his expression is still perplexed. "Are you having second thoughts?" he enquires. "You said 'if', not 'when'."

"You haven't said that you'll do it," Wilson points out.

House nods again. "What do you expect from me in return?"

"Nothing that I don't expect of you anyway: that you'll be a father to Joel. Think you can handle that?" He can't keep the sarcasm out of his voice: so far, House has been making an art form of avoiding personal contact with his son. He's unconsciously mirroring Amy's behaviour in a way that is disquieting. It is only House's show of good will, manifested in his sticking out the week with Cuddy, that is fuelling Wilson's determination to pursue his present course of action, a determination that is slowly being eroded by House's seeming lack of interest.

"How long till I have to decide?"

Wilson is sorely tempted to set him a twenty-four hour deadline just for the heck of it (and because House's air of being imposed on is getting his goat), but in the end he settles for, "Once I marry someone else it'll be too late." He is about to close his door on House when he remembers something. "And just for the records, I *didn't* propose. I merely made a suggestion. If you want to take me up on it, then you have to propose — on bended knee!"
Dealing with Cuddy carries its own brand of awkwardness. Perhaps she truly believes that she is over House and sees a 'casual' blow job as the ultimate proof of her emotional disentanglement, but Wilson has been through too many episodes of 'sex with the ex' to share her sanguine outlook. At the next opportunity (lunch in the hospital cafeteria) he broaches the topic.

"I believe that House and me getting married is the easiest way to combat our legal difficulties," he says.

"I agree," Cuddy says, picking at her salad. (Wilson is too nervous to actually eat.)

"It's the sensible thing to do," Wilson continues, kicking himself mentally for trying to justify his actions to someone who has no right to judge him.

Instead of protesting, Cuddy assents immediately. "I'm sure that once he recovers from the shock of having to show his colours, Pete will appreciate the coherence of the plan."

Wilson notes that Cuddy has diverted the focus neatly onto House's reaction and the impact the plan has on him. That's not quite what he was aiming for.

"It's also awkward for you," he suggests, not prepared to give up until they've talked about the elephant in the room.

Cuddy puts down her fork. "I'm over him," she states flatly.

"As is evinced by you being all over him at the slightest opportunity," he says rather more sharply than he intended.

Cuddy leans her chin on her hand, smiling. "Are you jealous? You needn't be. Even if Pete didn't know better, I wouldn't dare mess with you."

Flustered, Wilson waves his unused fork in concentric circles.

"You misunderstand me," he insists. "I'm trying ..." What exactly is he trying for? "This scheme puts House permanently in your vicinity, something you don't have to be okay with regardless of whether you are over him or not. I think it might be best if I looked for a different place to stay."

Cuddy plays with her watch. "Does he intend to move in with you and find a job here?"

Wilson shakes his head. "We change as little as possible. This isn't about shackling either of us. This is about creating conditions that will give Joel and House maximum legal security. He should visit us regularly, so that there's no doubt that he'll be a dedicated adoptive father. Other than that he can live where he pleases and do as he pleases — though it will be in his best interest to do nothing in this country that will cast doubts on the legitimacy of our marriage, at least until the adoption is through. He already has one sham marriage on his record."

"Was it a sham?" Cuddy asks, smiling bitterly.

It isn't Wilson's job to reassure Cuddy about the past or cater to her self-esteem, so he merely says, "Yes. You wouldn't know, but Immigration caused a huge stink during the divorce proceedings. If that comes up in court and Amy challenges the legitimacy of this marriage ... . We can't afford to have the slightest rumour about us, nothing that could cast the shadow of a doubt on our mutual devotion."

"No hookers?" Cuddy asks.
"No hookers, no strippers, no affairs," Wilson says tiredly. "He can have those in England for all I care."

"And you?"

"The same goes for me, of course," he says, surprised that she's asking.

Cuddy gazes thoughtfully into space. "That means you're putting your personal life on hold."

"What personal life? I've got a kid!" Wilson jokes. Then he's serious again. "Since Joel has come to stay with me, I'm happier than I've been in a long time. I'm prepared to make concessions if that's what it takes."

"It doesn't," Cuddy opines. "You already have Joel, and it doesn't look like Amy intends to backtrack and claim him again. Nor does Pete, as far as I can make out."

The feeling of impotence that has been besetting him regularly ever since he heard the truth about Joel bubbles up with a vengeance. "Cuddy, we both know how this will go if I try to sideline House. Maybe he won't mind initially, maybe he never will, but if at some point he decides he wants a say in Joel's upbringing, he'll barge in and flatten everything in his way. I believe that'll happen sooner rather than later. If he decides to take Joel away from me, he'll find a way. This way, we both get what we want."

Cuddy nods as though coming to a decision. "You don't need to move out because of me. I can deal with the situation. It's not as though having Pete hanging around is new or unexpected. I'm sure he'll avoid me all he can."

She picks up her tray and departs, and Wilson, who hasn't touched his food as yet, has no excuse to follow her and press his point. Besides, he's okay with the outcome of their little talk. If Cuddy wants to fool herself into believing that the living arrangement as it stands won't cramp her style, then that's her headache. He has done his duty by offering to move out. Over the past months he has made more adaptations and concessions than ever before in his whole life, so he figures it's okay if he takes the easy route on this.

It's the talk with Rachel, the one that he expected to be a walkover, which turns out to be the most exhausting. He tackles it when Rachel returns from her vacation full of tales of the beach.

Cuddy refuses point blank to contribute to it in any manner. "You're getting married, so you can explain it to her," she says with an unholy smirk.

"Would you like to be a bridesmaid?" he asks Rachel the next afternoon, cornering her in the kitchen of Cuddy's place, where Cuddy is stacking the dishwasher. (She said she wouldn't help with this one, but there's no harm in having her around, just in case.)

Rachel looks puzzled. "Who's getting married?"

"I am," Wilson tells her.

Rachel's face lights up. "You 'n Mom are getting married? She didn't tell me!"

Wilson can feel his face flush. If nine-year-old Rachel is making assumptions about him and Cuddy, what must outsiders be thinking? Cuddy, instead of helping out, sort of disappears into the dishwasher.

"No, I'm marrying House. ... Pete," he elucidates when Rachel looks blank.
"I know House is Pete's last name," she says, "but why are you marrying him?"

"Umm," Wilson says. He guesses he should have anticipated the question, but it's not one that he has ever asked anyone or that anyone (except for House) asked him the previous times he'd gotten married. He expected Rachel to ask whether guys can marry other guys, not why he'd get married. "We thought it would be nice if Joel had a family …"

It strikes him a moment too late that this was a tactless statement: Rachel has to make do with a single parent. Cuddy surfaces for long enough to give him the stink eye, which he guesses he fully deserves.

"He still won't have a mom," Rachel says.

"No, he'll have two dads."

"If you and Mom got married," Rachel says, sneaking a look at her mother's back, "he'd have a dad and a mom and me."

"I'm kinda hoping you'll be his big sister anyway," Wilson says.

"Yeah, but …" She wrinlkes her nose, probably sensing that she's being conned in some manner, but not quite able to put her finger on it. "Are you sure Pete is any good at this daddy thing?"

No, he isn't, but he isn't about to air his doubts in front of Rachel.

Cuddy finally has mercy on him. "Wilson would rather marry Pete than me," she says in her 'end of discussion' voice. "Pete will learn to be a good father. All of us have to learn."

Rachel pulls a face, but lets the matter rest. "Who'll be the bride?"

Haven't they just clarified the matter? Wilson casts a helpless look at Cuddy.

Rachel rolls her eyes at him in a manner reminiscent of Cuddy. "You said I was to be the bridesmaid, so one of you has to be the bride."

"Oh." Wilson scratches the back of his neck, grateful that House isn't around to witness the conversation. "I figure that you're a 'groomsmaid' then."

"So you're both grooms," Rachel says, mulling it over in her mind. "Then — who proposed?"

"House did: he got down on one knee, but he ruined the moment by losing his balance and tipping over. He should have practiced kneeling on his prosthetic before proposing," Wilson says drily.

"Then he's the groom," Rachel insists.

"Does it matter who's the groom?" Wilson, who is heartily sick of the whole matter, asks.

Rachel gives him a duh-look. "Well, yeah. My dress has to match the bride's dress, doesn't it, and if I don't know who the bride is and what she's wearing — I mean, what he's wearing —"

"I'll be wearing a suit, and I should think any dress of yours will match," Wilson says.

Rachel looks dissatisfied with the whole affair, but luckily Cuddy chips in once more. "I'll take you to buy a dress tomorrow, okay?"

"A real bridesmaid's dress?" Rachel asks suspiciously.
"Yes, of course," Cuddy assures her. "Just because Wilson is acting up about wearing a wedding dress, doesn't mean we don't do this properly."

He's acting up? He's acting up? Wilson knows someone who's Acting Up in capital letters.

"Why not today?" Rachel asks.

"Because I'm busy today. Remember I told you I'm going out this evening?"

Rachel grimaces. "Yeah. On a 'date'.' She manages to make it sound like a questionable activity.

"A date?" Wilson asks. Cuddy asked him to keep an eye on Rachel, but he'd assumed her request was work-related, because … well, because Cuddy doesn't date much, and when she does, she tries to keep it from Rachel. (Something or other about 'avoiding unrest in Rachel's life', though Wilson suspects that Cuddy keeps Rachel in the dark so that no news of potential love interests leaks to her family.)

"Yes," Cuddy says nonchalantly.

"Who's the lucky guy?"

"His name is Chris. He's a lawyer who works for the State Department," Cuddy says, her look daring Wilson to state objections.

"Sounds good," Wilson says, wondering what the deal is with this 'Chris' guy, but comforting himself with the notion that it can't get worse than Lucas Douglas, PI and wrecker of condos. "First date?"

"Second."

"O-kay!" Wilson says. Maybe, just maybe, their living arrangement will work in the long run after all.

The next hurdle to be taken is planning the ceremony. House allows Wilson to drag him to the Marriage License Bureau — Wilson takes care to organise all necessary paperwork beforehand, including both their decrees of divorce — but he puts up a stand when Wilson suggests that the rabbi of his synagogue officiate at the ceremony itself.

"Not happening," House says.

When Wilson protests that they have an agreement pertaining to religious ceremonies House elaborates, "Our agreement covers the critter's religious education; it doesn't by any stretch of imagination deal with anything that concerns me."

Wilson looks helplessly at Chase. He has taken to ensuring that someone is present whenever he has a 'summit meeting' with House; it doesn't improve House's attitude but it helps Wilson to stay calm and collected in the face of adversity. In general he prefers Cuddy, who possesses almost magical intervention and negotiating skills and can defuse a situation within seconds — when she so chooses. The big unknown in the equation is in whose favour she'll intervene; by and large it's in House's favour, which is why Wilson has opted to broach the matter of the ceremony with Chase around as mediator.

Chase, toying with his lunch, merely shrugs. "Is the food at the hospital always this bad?" he asks.

"I don't know," Wilson says irritably. "I haven't been around much longer than you have. Complain
to Cuddy; she's your boss, not me."

"Jeez, touchy, isn't he!" Chase says in House's direction. "Prenuptial nerves are perfectly normal, Wilson. It'll all work out somehow or other."

"And if not, there are places that do wonderful divorce parties," House adds. "What's the deal with the bachelor party, anyway? If we're to be joined in the holy bond of matrimony this week, we need to get cracking."

"If we're to get hitched any time at all, we need someone to officiate," Wilson reiterates. The bachelor party, as House well knows, is a no-no. (He has gotten Cuddy to run interference to make sure that House gets that. His nerves are all twisted as it is; if there's even a whiff of alcohol in his proximity, he'll relapse faster than he can say, 'I will!')

"I could do it, I guess," Chase says. "I don't know what the legal requirements in Pennsylvania are, but they can't be that different from New Jersey."

"Thanks, but no," Wilson says decidedly.

"Why not?" House asks, suddenly all intense curiosity. "A moment ago you were desperate to find someone we could both agree on, and now you reject an honest offer?"

Wilson worries the back of his neck. "He officiated at your last wedding," he finally admits.

House filches a fry off Chase's plate. "So?" he says. "You can hardly blame the failure of the marriage on Chase."

"It was a sham from start to finish —"

"So is this one," House says, with no consideration for the fact that they have a very interested audience of one.

"… and I was the idiot who had to get the divorce sorted, —"

"For which you were ideally qualified after going through three divorces of your own," House points out smoothly, taking another fry.

"… because one party fried their brain and went MIA. So, I don't want to be reminded of your previous wedding."

Chase pushes the plate over to House's side of the table. "Is this a green card marriage too?" he asks. "I thought House got his US papers back ages ago!"

Wilson is wondering how to evade that one when House's satisfied grin registers. This isn't only his problem, he decides; it's just as much House's. "This is a 'Let's rescue House from the consequences of his Machiavellian machinations' marriage," he says, rising. "I need to get back to work, but I'm sure House would love to put you into the picture."

Cuddy stalks up to their table at that very moment. She nods to Wilson, ignores House (and the Philadelphia Central patient folder on which his hands are resting), and homes in on Chase. "Chase, you and I were supposed to be in the dean's office ten minutes ago."

"Oops, sorry," Chase says, not looking particularly repentant. His glance flickers from Cuddy to the folder in front of House. (Wilson guesses that Chase hasn't officially run the idea of having House consult on his cases past Cuddy ...) "We were discussing officiants for House and Wilson's
wedding ceremony."

"You're looking for someone to officiate?" Cuddy asks Wilson. "What are the requirements? Are they similar to those in New Jersey?"

Wilson pulls the leaflet that he picked up at the Marriage License Bureau — House, needless to say, can't be bothered to take care of any of the details — out of his pocket and hands it wordlessly to Cuddy.

She skims through it and then says, "There's a judge on the hospital board. If you like, I'll ask him whether he'll do it."

After a quick glance at House, whose expression is neutral, Wilson nods. "Thanks," he says.

"Am I invited?" Chase asks.

"Sure," House says. "Wouldn't want you to miss any of my weddings, would we?"

Wilson had a stairlift installed along the stairway to his apartment during Rachel's vacation at the beach, so once she has figured out how to use it on her own, she spends hours riding it up and down. Every now and then Pete, who is making some sort of contraption that'll secure Joel's stroller in the stairlift, makes her quit so he can try it out, and she always bargains for chips or candy when he does that. (Mom is clamping down on those; there are none in the pantry or in the kitchen cupboards.) Wilson tells Pete not to bother about getting the stroller upstairs with the stairlift, saying it's easier to carry Joel than to fix the stroller securely and that Joel should soon be able to crawl or walk up by himself, but Pete ignores him. It also doesn't bother him that Joel prefers being carried to going in the stairlift.

When Pete is done with his stairlift project he spends his time watching television at their place or smoking out on the deck. When Rachel tells Mom what Pete is doing out there (he refused to share his soda with her, so she's mad at him), Mom, instead of going out to stop him or at least scold him, just looks worried.

"He's scattering cigarette ash on the steps," Rachel reports, hoping to rouse some indignation.

Mom roots around in a cupboard and returns with an empty tin.

"Here," she says, giving Rachel the tin. "We don't possess an ashtray, so give him that and tell him to use it."

Rachel does as she's told, but when this state of affairs continues for two days, with Mom making Hernandez supply Pete with food and soda out on the deck, she begins to wonder.

"Why do you let him smoke in our yard?" she asks.

"Well, he can't smoke upstairs because Joel is there," Mom says as though stating the obvious. "The deck is the best place."

"Can't he not smoke?"

"Give him a break; he's nervous about getting married."

"Shouldn't he be happy about getting married?"

Mom says, "He's both."
But if Pete and Wilson are happy about getting married, they're hiding it well.

Mom gets her a new dress like she promised, a real bridesmaid's dress made of shiny, silky yellow material with a bow around the waist and silk flowers and sequins, and a pair of shoes to go with it. Wilson approves fully and promises to wear a matching tie.

Pete raises his eyebrows in mock admiration, saying, "Wow, that really emphasises your elephant – sorry, elegant – curves." Mom is already shooting daggers at him when he adds, "Could have spared yourself the bother of getting shoes. Even if we had dancing, …" He shrugs expressively at Rachel's legs.

Rachel is too shocked to burst into tears (she cries herself to sleep later), but Mom reacts instantly. "Out!" she says, pointing at the door. "Now!"

When Pete has left — he does so promptly after one look at Mom's face — Wilson collapses on the couch. "Cuddy, Rachel, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't apologise for him," Mom says through pressed lips. "You're not his keeper."

"I'm marrying him, though," Wilson says, his head in his hands. "Perhaps this isn't such a good idea."

"It is," Mom insists with a certainty that Rachel doesn't share. "Rachel and I aren't your responsibility; Joel is."

As though Pete is going to be any nicer to Joel than he is to her! But she knows that it won't go down well if she points this out, so she keeps her mouth shut and sulks.

"Is it too much to ask that he behaves like a normal human being?" Wilson asks Mom.

Mom laughs outright. "You know that it is. Give him time to adjust, don't make the same mistakes that I made, and you should be fine."

That evening Rachel decides to get a neutral opinion on the matter. She needs someone to talk it through with, someone who isn't Mom, because Mom is part of the weirdness that's going on.

"Mom, can I phone Julia?" she asks.

Mom gives her a quizzical look. For a moment it seems that she might refuse permission, but then she says, "Go ahead. It's not like we can keep this a secret forever."

So Rachel grabs the phone and takes it into her room and, aware of Mom's eyes drilling holes into the back of her wheelchair, closes the door behind her.

"Hey, big girl, what's up?" Julia asks.

"I'm gonna be groomsmaid tomorrow, if I don't manage to get out of it," Rachel says.

"Groomsmaid? What's that?"

"Same as bridesmaid, only for the groom," Rachel explains.

Julia obliges with, "Wow, cool!" in reply. "Who's getting married?"

"Wilson."
"Wilson?"

Julia's reaction is gratifying, because everyone is acting like this was a normal, commonplace thing to happen, so Rachel has been feeling really stupid for not seeing it coming. "Yep," she says, the way Pete does, aiming for a cool she doesn't feel.

"Wilson and your mom ...? No, of course not! How stupid of me!" Julia backtracks.

Again, Rachel feels gratified, because her first reaction, too, had been that Wilson should damn well marry Mom.

"Who's the lucky bride?" Julia asks cheerfully. "Anyone I know?"

"Pete," Rachel says gloomily.

There's silence at the other end, giving Rachel ample time to wonder whether mentioning He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to Julia was a bright idea. But it can't be helped now.

"You mean, House?"

"Yep," Rachel says.

"Okay," Julia says after a pause. "I guess that explains a lot."

"Like what?" Rachel asks.

"Well," Julia says slowly, "if Wilson loves Pete, he can't marry your mom or Joel's mom, can he?"

"I guess not," Rachel concedes.

Thing is, she isn't sure whether Wilson loves Pete, not with the way he and Pete are arguing all the time. It's kinda awkward when they're both around. Wilson says things like, "It's your turn to change Joel's diaper, I think," and Pete pretends that he hasn't heard him, so then Mom gets up and does it, which makes both Wilson and Pete look pissed. Rachel honestly doesn't get it; they should be happy Mom is doing it — without having to be asked, guys! — because seriously, Joel's diapers are real stinkers, and if they don't want Mom doing it, then maybe they should get themselves sorted beforehand, because everyone knows that Mom doesn't have the patience to wait for them to sort it out.

And Pete makes jokes that aren't really funny about guys marrying guys, and that's embarrassing. Maybe where he comes from they don't do that — Mom says same-sex marriages are a fairly new thing even here — but if he thinks that marrying a man is weird, then maybe he shouldn't be doing it. Not much use mentioning any of that to Julia, though. Adults just say that it's normal for couples to have disagreements and that it doesn't mean anything.

Julia says, "Hang on a sec, I have to tell Rob about this. Rob, James Wilson and House are getting married."

Rob's voice carries over the phone. "You weren't thinking of sending a card, were you? Because I'm not signing it."

Julia chuckles. "Goodness, no!"

Rob asks, "Where are they gonna stay? Not at Lisa's place, I hope."

Julia speaks into the phone again. "Rachel, how is this going to work? Does House move in with
Wilson or are they looking for a new place?"

"Uh, I don't know. I think Wilson is staying."

"I guess he can afford to; he isn't the one living level with the street," Julia says. "Oh shoot, forget I said that! I'd better talk to your mother."

Rachel says cautiously, "I'm not sure she wants to talk with you."

"I'm pretty sure I don't care," Julia states.

Mom and Julia spend about half an hour arguing, with Mom repeatedly saying that she's fine with what's going on and that she and Wilson are still good friends, and no, she and House aren't friends and never will be — (then why does she let him camp out on the deck?) — and yes, she'll watch out for herself, and no, she doesn't know what Wilson is thinking to be marrying a guy who's a hazard to his son (Mom rolls her eyes when she says that), and could Julia please stop worrying.

The next day Rachel asks whether she really has to attend the wedding.

Mom gives her a considering look. "I have to go," she says. "If you don't want to go anymore, I'm sure Wilson will understand, though I think he'd be really happy to have you there. It's not like his family is coming."

Rachel thinks of Wilson getting married without anyone from his family attending. That's depressing, so she says, "I'll come — but only for Wilson!"

Later in the afternoon Wilson, Joel, and Pete come downstairs to pick them up for the wedding. Wilson is wearing a suit with a golden-yellow tie; the tie is nice, but Rachel is disappointed because she'd thought he'd wear a tux like she has seen at other weddings. Pete is even worse: he's wearing jeans, a blue shirt and a sand-coloured jacket sort of thing. He could just as well be going to work. This is going to be the worst wedding ever.

Pete is carrying a bouquet, though, that he drops in Rachel's lap. It's gorgeous, with yellow and white flowers that go with her dress. Rachel looks up at him. He has matching flowers in his buttonhole. He doesn't say anything; he just stands next to her wheelchair fidgeting and staring off into the distance.

He hasn't apologised, so she isn't going to say thank you. "That's really pretty," she says instead.

Mom comes in carrying her heels and her handbag. When she catches sight of Wilson and Pete she stops short.

"Is that the best you can do?" she asks Pete.

"I didn't bring a monkey suit, and anyway, Wilson loves me for the beauty of my immortal soul," Pete says, batting his eyelashes at Wilson in a creepy manner.

Mom circles him, inspecting his gear. "Gregory House, you are not getting married in a rumpled shirt!"

"You're not my mom," Pete says at the same time as Wilson says, "It's okay, Cuddy."

"No, it's not," Mom says. She stretches out her hand. "Give me that shirt."

When Pete makes as if he's about to pull off his shirt right there in the living room, Wilson drags
him off to the guest room, reappearing a moment later with the blue shirt. It is really rumpled. Rachel is surprised that Pete didn't notice when he put it on. Meanwhile Mom has brought out the iron and the ironing board.

"Don't we have to go?" Rachel asks.

"We're well within our schedule," Mom says. "I told Pete the wedding was an hour earlier than the scheduled time so he'd be there in time, and it's a good thing I did."

Wilson smiles for the first time. "You're an evil woman, Lisa Cuddy."

"I don't get paid to be nice."

When Pete is dressed again, they finally head for the door.

"Who's driving with who?" Mom asks.

"We're all driving together," Pete says, jingling a set of car keys. "Voilà!"

Parked outside blocking the other cars in the drive is a red convertible. It's huge, with shark fins at the back.

"Wow!" Wilson says.

"What's that?" Mom asks.

"That, ma'am, is the one and only 1959 Cadillac Eldorado SeVille," Pete says, looking like a little boy with his favourite toy. "I am pained at your ignorance."

"Rachel and I could …" Mom says, waving her hand vaguely at her car.

"No!" Wilson and Pete say together.

There's a bit of a scramble and bustle until Joel's car seat is fixed to Wilson's satisfaction, followed by a short fight about who's driving (which Wilson wins), and then they're off. Mom holds onto her head throughout the drive so her hair doesn't get messed up, but it's no use.

The location is the next disappointment. Rachel assumed that they'd get married at a synagogue or a church (though she isn't sure whether Pete is a Christian), but they go to a normal office building. Inside, Mom leads them to one of the offices. Chase is waiting outside the door. It's an ordinary office with an ordinary old man inside. He shakes everyone's hands.

"Lisa didn't specify what kind of ceremony you'd like," he says, looking at Wilson and Pete. "Have you prepared vows or would you like me to say a few words?"

Wilson glances at Pete. "We'll go for something short."


"Exchange of rings, maybe?" the old man suggests.

"We'll do that afterwards in private," Wilson says after another look at Pete. "Just the obligatory paperwork, I think."

There's a lot of checking of papers and passports, then Wilson and Pete sign, and Mom and Chase sign too. And — that's it. There's nothing for Rachel to do except hold her bouquet. No scattering
flowers along the aisle, no accompanying anyone inside a synagogue or church while the wedding music plays, no posing for pictures in a pretty garden. Mom takes a few pictures while Wilson and Pete sign — Pete sticks his tongue out, of course — but that's about it.

"Doesn't the bride get a kiss?" Pete asks, closing his eyes and making a pouty mouth.

The old man looks at Wilson.

"I think not," says Wilson, turning away and leaving Pete standing there with his pouty mouth. With Joel on his arm he thanks the old man and shakes his hand. Then he leaves the room.

After that they have dinner in a fancy restaurant with tablecloths and real napkins and 'good' glasses, the kind that look as though they'll break if you touch them. Wilson and Pete sit on one side of the table with Joel perched precariously in a high chair between them, while Rachel sits between Mom and Chase on the other side, right opposite Joel. When the waiter hears that it's a wedding dinner, he brings a big bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice, which Mom and Wilson, exchanging a quick glance, wave away again with profuse thanks.

"Hey, what about me?" Pete whines. "I'm allowed to drink!"

"You're the designated driver," Wilson says. "Besides, it's not at all de rigueur to pass out on your wedding night."

The waiter brings Rachel a very uninspiring kids' menu. "Do you have sushi?" she asks.

"Yes, but are you sure you mean sushi? That's raw fish, you know," the waiter says condescendingly.

"Yes, I mean 'sushi'," Rachel says, scowling at the waiter.

She gets her sushi and Joel gets a bowl of pureed whatever. When Wilson starts feeding him, Joel refuses to cooperate, hitting the spoon away. While Wilson dabs ineffectually at the orange spots on his suit with a napkin, Pete picks up the spoon. Rachel isn't sure how Pete manages it, but the food ends in Joel's mouth (mostly), not on Pete's clothes or on the tablecloth.

"How come Joel eats when Pete feeds him? Whenever Wilson feeds him it's a huge mess," Rachel asks Chase.

"I could tell you something about kindred spirits, but … your 'Pete' has an eye for gaps in other people's defences."

"Huh?"

"He waits for Joel to be ready before offering him the spoon. Joel probably has a tell that shows when he's ready for another spoon of mush. Wilson hasn't figured it out yet; House has."

That seems terribly unfair when Wilson spends so much time with Joel while Pete doesn't really bother. "Pete doesn't even like babies!" she points out to Chase.

Chase shrugs dismissively. "So? He doesn't like anyone. You could learn a thing or two about eating from Joel, though."

Rachel stares down at her plate. The plate and its surrounding area aren't particularly messy by her standards, because sushi is easy to eat as long as you stay away from the chopsticks. If you try using those though, then the sushi goes all over the place, which is why she uses her fingers to pick
up the sushi and dip it in the soy sauce. It must be her mouth then. Rachel picks up her napkin and dabs at her lips.

"Better?" she asks Chase.

"I was thinking more along the lines of not eating with your hands," Chase says.

Now that is totally unfair! "Joel isn't using the spoon himself either; Pete is holding it for him. And I can eat with a spoon. I just can't eat with chopsticks."

"You could learn," Chase says.

Mom, who has been half listening in, says, "Not now and not here. If you want to teach her table manners at my place, then be my guest."

Chase raises his hands defensively. "Sorry, forget I said anything."

Mom smiles a tight smile, and Chase wisely turns his attention to the other side of the table.

"Nice bluff with the rings," he says to Wilson.

"It wasn't a bluff," Wilson says. Digging in the pocket of his jacket, he takes out a small box that he slides over to Pete.

Staring at it as if it could bite, Pete gingerly opens the box. "You're joking," he says to Wilson.

"Are these lips smiling?" Wilson asks.

"I'm not wearing this!"

Mom leans forward and turns the box around. The ring in it is a plain golden band, nothing special. "It's very discreet," she says to Pete the way she tries to sell veggies to Rachel.

Wilson slips a matching ring onto his own finger. "You can take it off the moment you board a plane to England, but you'll wear it whenever you're here." His voice is quiet with no marked emotion, but after a glance at him Pete picks the ring out of the box and slips it onto his finger. Then he snaps the box shut and slips it into one of his pockets, picks up his fork and continues eating as though nothing happened. Wilson does the same.

"I'm not hyphenating, though," Pete mutters to no one in particular.

"Don't they just know how to put the small 'r' into romance?" Chase whispers to Mom over Rachel's head.

Mom shakes her head, smiling.

When they get back to the car Chase whistles. "What a baby!"

"Let me take a few pictures," Mom says.

Wilson and Pete pose together in front of the car, they pose with Joel, then they pose with Rachel and Joel. They pose with Chase and Mom while Rachel takes a few pictures.

"Now the happy couple with the bridesmaid and the car," Chase says. "Will you put Rachel on the car, please?"
So Pete and Mom lift her out of the wheelchair and perch her on the hood of the car.

"Hold her tight!" Mom instructs Pete.

After handing Joel to Mom Wilson puts an arm around Rachel's shoulder that's meant to steady her. Pete is on the other side.

"Closer together!" Chase, who has hijacked Mom's camera, calls. "Say cheese! Heads together now!"

Wilson and Pete lower their heads to her level. Pete's arm snakes around the back too, not to steady her, but to make rabbit ears behind Wilson's head. Wilson tries to swat his hand away.

"House, grow up!" Chase calls. "Rachel, bang their heads together."

Rachel does as she's told: she pulls their heads together sharply. There's a resounding thunk, a grunt from Pete and a yelp of pain from Wilson, and then Rachel feels herself losing her balance as the arm around her midriff ceases to hold her in place. She slides forward in slow motion, vaguely registering that Wilson is bent almost double in front of her and Pete, though still upright, is holding the side of his head. Mom rushes forward, but she's holding Joel and she can't stop Rachel's downward slide with one arm. Nor can Pete, shooting out an arm and catching hold of her dress from behind: her progress is halted for a moment, but then there's a ripping sound. She falls on top of Wilson, dragging Pete, who loses his balance in turn, right after her. Wilson topples over and they all thud onto the ground, Pete's teeth cracking against her skull.

"Whoof," Wilson says.

Rachel doesn't say anything; she's got Wilson's tie in her mouth and a dead weight on her back. From far away she hears Mom asking, "Are you okay?"

Pete, on top of her, is quivering. For a dreadful second she thinks he's having some kind of seizure, but then she hears him chuckling.

From underneath her Wilson says, "House, stop laughing and get off of us!" but he's sort of giggling too.

The weight on her shifts and then eases up, and several hands pick her up. Finally Chase holds her securely in his arms. She looks around. Pete is sitting up against one of the tires, dabbing at his mouth with a handkerchief. Mom, with Joel on her arm, is helping Wilson up with her free hand.

The wedding picture Rachel later chooses to put in a frame and hang on her bedroom wall features her in the wheelchair, her dress dusty and the bow torn off, Wilson on the left with Joel, a bruise on his forehead and his tie askew, and Pete on the right with a swollen lip and a cut just above his eyebrow, all of them grinning manically — Pete's grin is lopsided, but it always is anyway, so it makes no difference — and making victory signs.

Chapter End Notes

As I promised at the outset, I now solemnly advise all House/Wilson shippers to quit reading the story and to make up their own ending where House and Wilson live happily ever after, have tons of steamy sex, and raise Joel to be a medical, musical,
and linguistic genius, while Cuddy dates a series of slightly creepy, badass guys and
Rachel, after a suitable mourning period for her dream of having Wilson for a dad,
gets on with her life, going to Wilson when she needs comfort and to House when she
needs someone's butt kicked.
Cuddy's Calamity

Nine months later

"Need you here," Wilson says on the phone. "You'd better book a flight."

He's atypically terse. Usually whenever he wants Pete to cover his back, say, during a particularly stressful phase at work, he lets him know early on, enquires about his work commitments, and books a flight for him. Something must be really off. The question is, what?

"Oh, dear!" Pete says in a high falsetto, examining his nails foppishly, even though Wilson can't see him. "Has 'Joey dear' cut his teeth? Or is our wee little laddie getting his measles jabs? Does Howsey need to hold his hand?"

"Cuddy has been suspended. She's as good as fired."

That's all? For a moment he'd believed there was a real crisis, like Amy demanding the kid back. "And that's my problem because?"

"Because I need to help her get job applications sorted and possibly accompany her to Oregon."

Seriously? "Wilson, she's practically fifty, not five. I'm sure she's in a position to travel by herself."

"We're a bit short on time, and Cuddy is out of practice. Turns out she has had exactly two job interviews in her whole life."

"She has also held exactly two jobs, which means she rocked both interviews. She has a hit quota of one hundred percent, so statistically she'll rock the third one too. You're wasting your time."

"Those times she applied for jobs for which there were no other viable contenders. I doubt she'll get that lucky again, so she needs someone to coach her, stat."

Pete sighs, putting his feet up on the coffee table. There's a beer in the fridge calling his name, but he won't be able to enjoy it until he has settled this little matter. Why does Wilson have to be such a do-gooder? Lisa may be a rookie at applying for jobs, but she has conducted enough job interviews from an employer's point of view to know the ropes.

"Do what you have to do," he says to Wilson, "but do it on your time, not mine."

"Funny, I thought you'd say that," Wilson says conversationally. "I'm doing something for Cuddy because Cuddy is there for our kid whenever it's necessary."

"She isn't doing it for me and I didn't ask her to," Pete points out. "She's doing it because she has a soft spot for kids and because she has a soft spot for you."

"I don't think it's possible to narrow her actions down to one or two motives," Wilson says. "Besides, her motives are no concern of yours. The net result of her actions is that you can afford to bang around the world, leaving your DNA carrier in my care for weeks on end without having to fear any sort of retaliatory action on my part, so it behoves you to make sure things stay that way."

"They won't if she moves to Oregon," Pete mumbles.

At the other end Wilson chuckles. "Oh, that's your problem, is it? Well then, get your ass over here
and help me find an alternative, because at the moment Oregon is her best chance of landing a job in the near future."

"I don't want to move to Oregon," Rachel complains. "If we leave now, I'll never get my service dog. The dog people say she's almost trained. Can't Mom just stay at her hospital? Why does she need to get a new job?"

They're up in Wilson's living room, half watching a ball game, but mostly waiting for Lisa to return from a meeting with the hospital's HR and legal department.

"Your mother," says Pete, ignoring Wilson's hems, haws, and glares, "got herself fired because she was stupid. So, now she needs a new job."

"You of all people allege that breaking rules is stupid?" Wilson asks incredulously.

"No, getting caught while breaking them is stupid."

"Actually, Chase got caught, not Cuddy, so that makes Chase stupid."

"See, that's even stupider: getting herself fired for covering for other people's idiocies."

"Her 'stupidity', as you call it, was what enabled you to work practically unhindered for nearly fifteen years," Wilson says with frost in his voice.

"Two stupidities don't make a cleverness," Pete chants. "Covering for me doesn't make covering for Chase a good idea."

"What happened?" Rachel asks impatiently.

"Chase," Pete says, "pissed off a patient while drunk, and it turned out that your mom knew he was drunk, because," he flourishes his hand, "Chase is always drunk. So, bye-bye, job!"

"Oh." Rachel digests this piece of information. "Did Chase get fired too?"

"Chase was sent to rehab because he relapsed; that means he started drinking alcohol again," Lisa says from the doorway. It's anyone's guess for how long she's been standing there. "That can happen, and it isn't a crime. Once he's out of there he can go back to work. And Pete's version isn't quite correct. I've been suspended because Ryan wants to get rid of me, but until the board decides what to do, I still have my job. Ryan thinks I'm a threat to his authority." She plonks her briefcase down on the floor and slips out of her heels.

"You're a what?" Rachel asks.

Lisa frowns, either at the thought of Ryan Andrews or at the sight of cookies and M&Ms on the coffee table. "He thinks I want to take over his job."

"Now why would he think that?" Wilson murmurs.

Lisa homes in on him with a pissed look. "Wilson, I have not been encouraging all the malcontents at the hospital to come to me with their complaints and I certainly didn't advise them to greet every change Ryan made with, 'Dr Cuddy would never have done that!' Sometimes I wonder who they are trying to sabotage, Ryan or me."

"Then the patient didn't lose a kidney to Chase's incompetence?" Pete queries. That's what Wilson told him — and that the patient was suing the hospital for an astronomical sum. Fuck-ups of that
sort tend to piss deans of medicine off.

"She lost a kidney," Lisa says calmly, "but — she would have lost her life if I hadn't let Chase work. By the time Chase came up with a diagnosis, the patient's kidneys had failed, but no other doctor at the hospital would have come up with babesiosis at all. There was no mention of a blood transfusion in her records. Ryan is using Chase's lapse as an excuse to try to fire me."

"So," Wilson says with a quizzical lift of his eyebrow, "your justification for letting an inebriated doctor work —"

"'Inebriated' is a fancy word for 'drunk'," Pete stage-whispers to Rachel, just in case she is losing track of the conversation.

"… is that there's no one else to do his job?"

"That has always been my justification," Lisa says with no remorse whatsoever, aiming a pointed look in Pete's direction.

"I'm unique," Pete says without any false modesty. "Chase, however, is not a special little snowflake, except perhaps in his mother's eyes."

"Trust me, he's miles ahead of everyone else around him," Lisa says. "Though he'd be even better if he kept off the booze. Anyway, the patient survived thanks to Chase, so it was ungrateful of her to sue the hospital."

Wilson smiles tightly. "You'll have to forgive her for believing that the time and money that's being invested in medical training in this country should pay off by enabling more than one physician to diagnose her ailment correctly. She shouldn't have to put up with an inebriated physician in order to be diagnosed."

Both Pete and Lisa snort in rare agreement.

"She can't have her cake and eat it too," Pete says. "If patients have the common cold, they can insist on someone who fits their profile of the ideal physician. If they're dying, they'll have to make do with what the hospital can come up with to save their lives."

"Can't you ask Ryan to let you keep your job?" Rachel asks around a mouthful of cookies. "You could … apologise or something."

"Not happening," Lisa says. "If Ryan won't support the way I run my department, our ways must part."

Pete leans back and grins while Wilson tiredly pinches the bridge of his nose. It's clear that he doesn't believe in ideals that cost you your job.

Lisa turns on Wilson. "Listen, I don't approve of Chase drinking and trying to sleep with every pretty face on my staff, but if I run an intervention every time he relapses or suspend him whenever he subverts the hospital's fraternisation policy, patients will die."

"Well, that's exactly what's going to happen from now on, isn't it?" Wilson counters. "Now that Ryan has set a precedent by suspending you (and probably getting you fired), no one, least of all your successor, will dare to let anyone under influence enter the hospital."

Lisa huffs once again. "Then Ryan will have to close the place down. Well," she amends, "surgery at the very least will have to shut down; we don't have enough surgeons or anaesthetists without
addiction issues to cover all shifts. And you with your 'holier than thou' attitude," she pokes Wilson in the chest, "don't even pretend you aren't aware of that! You happily send your patients to the OR without checking who's on duty, because you aren't the one whose career is on the line if something goes wrong!"

"How often has Chase relapsed?" Pete asks, because Wilson and Lisa's argument isn't going anywhere. They both have a point, but regardless of which position you espouse, somewhere along the line you have to take a stand and face the consequences. The consequences of Lisa's stance are catching up with her, that's all there is to it, and there's no sense in moaning about it. She was an idiot to believe she could get away with it, and Wilson is a hypocrite if he thinks that his policy of placating all parties is any better.

"Twice," Wilson answers, "but the first time he got it under control again. A minor slip-up."

"Let's not discuss Chase's medical history," Lisa says somewhat belatedly with a concerned look at Rachel.

Pete sits up straight and folds his hands like a preacher. "Okay, what shall we talk about? The political situation in Darfur? Climate change?"

Lisa swats his arm. "Don't be silly! Has Rachel had her dinner? Thanks, Wilson. Can we look through a few applications once I've put her to bed?"


"Can't I —" Rachel begins when Lisa's phone rings, "stay here?"

Lisa fishes the cell out of her purse, frowning when she sees the caller ID. "Hey! … You're where?" She gets up and goes over to the front of the apartment where there's a window overlooking the street. "Yes, I can see you. … Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot! Hang on, I'm coming."

Picking up her heels and her briefcase she rushes to the door. "Will you send Rachel down?" she asks in parting.

Rachel pouts, making no attempt to follow her mother.

"What's that about?" Wilson asks her.

"She forgot that Chris is coming over for dinner," Rachel says, shrugging.

"But you didn't," Pete surmises, considering the ramification of Rachel remembering her mother's date, but not reminding her mother of it. "You don't like Chris."

"He's okay," Rachel says grudgingly. "But we don't have M&Ms or cookies at our place. Or chips."

"Half an hour," Wilson decrees. "That'll give your mom time to fix dinner for herself and Chris. Then you're going downstairs again."

"Chris doesn't have a key," Pete states, wondering what that implies about the relationship.

"I imagine that if he wanted to, he could get in without a key," Wilson says.

"True dat."

"He always knocks or rings the bell," Rachel says, looking at them somewhat confused. "And you're not supposed to say that people are criminals just because they're black." Sometimes she
understands more than she is given credit for.

"What?" Wilson says, flustered. "I wasn't … I mean … it's his job, not his skin colour. He works for the State Department and he, uh, keeps an eye on a lot of people —"

"People like me," Pete augments morosely.

"... so he probably knows how to, uh, —"

"Break and enter," Pete helps him out. "Chances are the State Department employs him because of his talents in that field."

"Let's try for a modicum of unprejudiced conversation here," Wilson says, "like Rachel suggested."

Rachel, however, is off on a tangent. "You mean he's a spy? Like Lucas?"

"Not like Lucas," Wilson says with a little shiver of dislike. "That's like comparing …"

"A roach to a butterfly. They're both insects, but that's where the similarity ends," Pete supplies helpfully.

"Who's the roach?"

"Chris," Pete says the same moment that Wilson says, "Lucas."

"Mom says Chris is a lawyer," Rachel says.

Pete chuckles. "That's like saying Lisa is a doctor."

Wilson gives him a quelling look. "He is a lawyer. House and I are just gossiping, because … because Chris rubbed House the wrong way, so now House doesn't like him."

"I wouldn't have minded a rub," Pete says with a leer, "but I don't dig being penetrated."

"House!" Wilson hisses with a warning look in Rachel's direction.

But Rachel has stopped listening. At an optimistic estimate, her attention span lies somewhere between two and four minutes.

"What's that about?" Wilson whispers.

Pete doesn't bother to lower his voice. "He's gotten me under surveillance."

Wilson, looking harassed, shakes his head. "You're paranoid!"

"I could tell my class that Mom is dating a spy," Rachel says dreamily.

Wilson facepalms. "I doubt they'd believe you."

"They will; they're stupid."

"I'm sure they aren't," Wilson says uncomfortably. "They're probably just —"

"They're stupid," Rachel says with absolute certainty. "They keep asking me what it's like to have a black step-dad."

"And what do you say?"
"I tell them that Chris isn't my step-dad, so I really couldn't say," Rachel says, flicking her hand like Hermione Granger waving her wand to Wingardium Leviosa. (She probably copied it from there: Pete has caught her practicing spells with her toothbrush in front of the bathroom mirror.)

"And if he was your step-dad, what would you say then?" Pete asks, hoping he can get Rachel to say something so politically incorrect that Wilson will tie himself into knots trying to make her un-say it without hurting her feelings.

"That it's no different from when he dated Mom and wasn't my step-dad yet," Rachel says smugly. Nicely circular; Pete approves fully. He notes though that Rachel has considered the possibility of having to answer that question someday: her reply isn't a spontaneous stroke of genius, but a premeditated put-down. Are there wedding bells in the offing?

"Isn't there anyone in your class with African-American or — I don't know — different parents?" Wilson asks.

"There's Carl, but he's black himself, so I figure everyone thinks it's normal for his parents to be black."

"Yeah, it's called heredity," Pete says. "A not to be underestimated force, even in this era of equal opportunity, patchwork families, and trans-everything."

"Again, let's stay unprejudiced and let's keep anything with 'trans' in it out of the discussion," Wilson says. "You'd think though, that there'd be more mixed race families, wouldn't you?" he adds meditatively in Pete's direction.

"Nope," Pete says. "Partner choice is based on instinct, not on common sense or rampant libido, and our instinct tells us to trust the familiar and distrust the unfamiliar."

"You don't think there's an element of racism involved?"

"That's the definition of racism: distrusting people solely because they are different from you." Wilson narrows his eyes at him. "You're justifying racism by saying it's ingrained?"

"I'm explaining it, not justifying it. No one is forcing you to act on your instincts."

Wilson's hands cut through the air in an elongation of his thinking process. "On the one hand you say that our instinct tells us to distrust strangers, on the other … . You're advocating that we ignore our instinct and make partner choices based on … what?"

"I'm not advocating anything. I don't care whom you nail."

"Do you mind?" Wilson says with a nod in Rachel's direction.

"S'okay," Rachel says. "I know better than to repeat any words Pete uses."

Downstairs the front door slams hard. Twenty seconds later, a car engine roars into life. Wilson gets up and goes to the same window that Lisa looked out of.

"Huh," he says.

"Trouble in paradise?" Pete surmises with unholy glee.

"I think I'd better go and check on Cuddy," Wilson says. "Rachel, can you stay here with Pete?"
"Can I have some more cookies?"

"I don't know whether your mom wants you to have —"

"You're not cutting off her drug supply if you want me to look after her," Pete cuts in. That's just so like Wilson, to make paedagogic decisions that he doesn't have to enforce. "I don't want her jonesing during the ball game."

Throwing up his hands, Wilson leaves. Pete gets up and goes stiffly to the sideboard; the leg room in the economy class seems to be decreasing from year to year. He extricates a packet of Oreos that he tosses to Rachel. She catches it awkwardly, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"What's with Lisa and carbs?" Pete asks. "Does she intend to live off greens from now on?"

"It isn't Mom, it's me," Rachel says, ripping open the packet.

"She wants you to eat only fruit and fibre?"

"Uh-uh," Rachel mumbles, stuffing an Oreo into her mouth.

"That's cruel and unnatural," Pete opines, leaning over to help himself to an Oreo too.

"It isn't her fault. The paediatrician ripped right into her the last time we were there. Said she was being irresponsible, because I gained twelve pounds in three months. He didn't know that it was you and Wilson, not Mom."

"And your mom didn't tell him."

"She doesn't know how much junk food you've been feeding me," Rachel says indifferently. "It's not like she's up here much. And I don't think the paediatrician cares who's doing it. He just expects her to put a stop to it. She has talked to the school and everything, so now I get a 'special diet'. It's what the others get, but without the good bits. I hate school."

He takes a close look at her. Yes, she has definitely gained weight; he estimates that she weighs around eighty pounds, which puts her well above the 90th percentile. Overweight, going on obese. School lunches aside, her school life can't be a walk in the park.

"Oh, well," he says. "Fat's the new slim."

"No, it isn't," Rachel unexpectedly contradicts him. "But I'm never going to be pretty anyway. I'm a cripple."

He doesn't like where this is going. "And cripples can't be beautiful?"

"Don't be stupid!"

He sits back, watching her out of the corner of his eyes. She's scowling at the cookie she has just liberated from the packet, her eyes blinking.

He comes to a decision. Leaning forward again, he extricates the packet from her hands and puts it away high up on the shelf behind him. "Your paediatrician is right and so is your mother. You'll always be a cripple, but there's no need to complicate your life any further."

"Hey, it's none of your business!" Rachel protests. She stretches to reach the shelf, but she doesn't stand a chance. Pouting, she sinks back into her wheelchair. "I don't mind being fat."
Everybody lies, even ten-year-olds. "Yes, you do. … I'm told that there's a chance you'll be able to walk with braces and a frame. A few extra pounds won't hamper you, a few stones will. Once you're of age you can stuff whatever you like down your hatch, but until then you'll do as you're told."

"You're not the dad of me," Rachel says.

He most certainly isn't, nor does he have any intention of getting involved in Lisa's child raising problems. Medically, however, it's the right call. It's not as though Rachel can lose excess weight by getting on a treadmill or running a few miles. Any weight she gains, she'll have to lose via dieting. He picks up the remote and switches channels until he finds cartoons; Rachel isn't a baseball fan, and if she decides she needs her mom right now, he'll be in trouble. He'll have to make Wilson get Netflix.

Rachel settles down, sniffling and scowling, which he manages to ignore. More difficult to ignore are Joel's screams a few minutes later. He turns off the baby monitor, but the sound carries through the apartment.

"You're supposed to go to him when he screams," Rachel says tentatively.

"As long as he can yell, he's still alive."

Rachel looks distressed. "Wilson never leaves him alone when he screams. He says —"

"Wilson's a sentimental idiot."

When he doesn't move, Rachel unlocks the brakes of her wheelchair and wheels herself out.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" he calls after her.

"To get Joel. I don't want him to feel lonely or scared."

He doubts that Rachel is capable of lifting Joel out of his crib even if the kid cooperates or of keeping him in check if she does manage to extricate him in one piece. He sighs as he rises; there's nothing for it but to get the boy.

All in all Wilson is doing a pretty good job as a parent; Pete will grant him that. Wilson's take on all things medical or nutritional is sensible. He's neither overly cautious nor recklessly negligent. The nanny he chose for Joel, Esther, is a reliable and warm-hearted woman with her head screwed on right. The apartment is child-proof, as is Lisa's — mostly. Joel's schedule is predictable without being monotonous, varied without being overwhelming. Wilson is neither bombarding him with premature educational activities nor depriving him of stimuli. But — he has this thing about not letting Joel cry, even after the kid has been put to bed. If Joel wakes and doesn't calm down within a minute or so, Wilson goes to him, and if that doesn't do the job, he takes the critter out of the crib and carries him around until he has calmed down. It's irritating as hell and has ruined many a good evening in front of the television.

"What the hell is your problem?" Pete asks him every now and then.

Wilson shrugs. "I don't want him to feel abandoned. Young children, as you well know, don't have much of a concept of time. At night, ten minutes spent crying can feel like hours to them. He can't know that I'm just around the corner." And off he goes and ruins whatever sleeping rhythm the kid is supposed to be getting accustomed to. Yeah, someone has abandonment issues here, and it isn't necessarily Joel.
Joel is standing in his bed, hanging onto the rails and howling. The volume subsides somewhat when he sees them, but he keeps up a good show until he has been lifted out of his bed. Safely up on Pete's arm, he immediately stretches his hands out towards Rachel. Pete passes him down to her, and Rachel gathers him to her in a practiced move, with one arm under his butt and the other tucked tightly around his body.

"Push me back into the living room!" Rachel orders, "and switch off the television; he isn't supposed to get up in order to watch cartoons."

"Not bossy at all," Pete mutters, but he grasps the handles of the wheelchair and does as he's told. "Anything else, your majesty?"

Rachel rolls her eyes. "You could put on some soothing music. Maybe he'll go back to sleep quicker then. Wilson says it doesn't really matter what kind of music it is as long as it doesn't have a strong beat. There, there," she murmurs to Joel, who has switched from screams to soulful sobs. "Daddy will be back soon."

Honestly, why does he even bother? Other than performing menial fetch & carry tasks that anyone could handle, he is of no earthly use.

Wilson listens outside the door to Cuddy's part of the house for a few seconds, but there's dead silence from inside, nothing that gives him any clue as to what is going on. He is, however, sure that Chris Clark has just departed, and he's fairly sure that Chris departed in a huff. Since Chris is pretty much unflappable — Wilson deeply admires the way he ducks under Cuddy's radar and deflects her ultimatums — this bodes ill. Wilson knocks on the door, first quietly, then a little louder. He has a key, but hesitates to use it. After a moment he hears footsteps, and then Cuddy opens the door. She's still in her 'board meeting' gear except for her feet, which are bare. She turns away leaving the door open, which Wilson interprets as an invitation to enter. He closes the door and follows her into the kitchen.

There's a bottle of wine and a half-full glass on the table. Cuddy sits down and waves her hand at the chair next to hers.

"I'd offer you some, but …" Cuddy says. "There's no soda in the house. How about … some juice?"

"I'm good," Wilson says. Cuddy drains the glass and pours herself another one. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No, but are you sure that's a good idea?" Wilson asks.

"My liver can take it," Cuddy says. "I'm not supposed to 'overdo it', but two glasses of wine can hardly be called excessive."

Wilson watches in silence as she twists and turns the glass.

"He proposed," she finally says.

"That's … wonderful?" Wilson ventures.

Apparently it isn't. "I lose my fucking job, and he fucking proposes. Does he think I need his fucking charity?" she snarls.
"Perhaps he's trying to be supportive, to show you that there's more to life than your job."

"Crap! He's being patronising. Suppose he lost his job; do you think he'd feel better if I proposed?"

"You shot him down," Wilson says heavily.

"I refused, yes. I'm not so desperate that I need to marry in order to preserve my self-esteem."

Wilson scratches the back of his neck. "Okay, it's hardly surprising that he's upset, but once he has recovered from his disappointment, he'll realise that maybe this wasn't the best moment."

Cuddy sighs. "I guess so."

"Give him a week," Wilson says bracingly.

Cuddy's laugh is shaky, but confident. "A week? Three days at the most."

"You're very optimistic."

She empties the wine glass. "He better not take much longer than three days: the sex with him is the best I've ever had."

"Really?" Wilson says, because finding an appropriate rejoinder to a woman talking about sex is always a bit tricky. Now if Cuddy were a guy, they could compare notes.

"Yes," Cuddy says dreamily. (The wine must be kicking in; Cuddy doesn't normally do 'dreamy'.) "Other guys are always trying to get off themselves or show how great they are in bed. He doesn't feel the need to prove anything; he just focuses on what I want."

"Then why did you refuse his proposal?" Wilson asks.

"Wilson, if you married three times because the sex was great, I'm not surprised your marriages didn't last! I'm not prepared to take the relationship to the next level; I'm happy to keep it the way it is." Dipping her finger into the wine dregs, she draws circles on the table. "My therapist says I have commitment issues. That I chicken out whenever a relationship gets so serious that I have to decide whether I'm in or out."

"And do you? Have commitment issues, I mean," Wilson asks, because that's the essence of active listening: showing that you've understood what you've been told by reflecting it back and asking your opposite to clarify statements if you're unsure what they mean and how they apply to the situation.

Cuddy shrugs. "I guess so. I broke up with Lucas a day after he proposed, and I shot Chris down immediately."

House would point out that her sample is too small to be statistically relevant. On the other hand, House would be the first to spot a pattern here. Wilson remembers that Cuddy once said she thought House was on the verge of proposing when she had her cancer scare and dumped him. He has his doubts about that, but whether House was in fact intending to propose is hardly relevant for her therapist's case. The decisive factor is is whether Cuddy was convinced that he was going to propose.

"Not much data to go on," he says, mulling it over.

"Oh, there is also my marriage."
"Marriage?" He must have heard wrong.

"Yeah. House never told you? I was married once, when I was nineteen. It didn't last long. My parents had the marriage annulled on the grounds that I was inebriated."

He's so preoccupied with getting his mind around the idea of Cuddy having been married — didn't she just mock him for his divorces? — that all he manages is, "You were drunk and got married?"

"No, I was sober, more or less. But a few days sufficed to show me that marrying someone just to piss off my parents was really, really stupid, so I went along with their strategy for getting me out of the mess I'd gotten myself into. My ex-husband — funny, I never think of him in those terms; I hardly ever think about him at all. … Anyway, my ex was at college on a football scholarship. I knew my parents would hate him: a goy, a redneck who didn't care a hoot for academics, a slob. The last time he read a book that wasn't required reading was in grade school. Turns out," she says, staring into the distance, "that I hate the same things that my parents do. Not surprising, I guess, but I believed I was different: more open, less prejudiced, and all that."

She snaps out of her thoughtful attitude. "I guess we all have more of our parents in us than we care to admit," she says, sitting up straight and rolling her shoulders.

Wilson hopes not. He really hopes not. "And how does your marriage fit in with your therapist's theory?"

"She says that when I'm stuck with someone or fear that I'm getting stuck with someone, I start looking around to see who else is on the market. 'The grass is always greener on the other side,' and that sort of thing. But we haven't really thrashed it out; it's not like it's been a major issue recently."

"Except now it is."

Cuddy thinks about this for so long that he wonders whether he should change the topic. "No, it isn't," she says. "Chris will get his head out of his backside and things will go back to the way they were. Aren't guys supposed to be keen on relationships with no strings attached?"

"Uh, yes … maybe … although I think …" That's what the media suggest, but Wilson has never been keen on casual affairs. He goes through a mental list of guys he knows, but can't come up with a definitive answer either way.

There isn't much else to say, really, so he goes back upstairs.

The television is off, Glenn Gould is playing Bach or something, and Rachel is sulking, as far away from House as possible, with Joel in her arms. Joel is blissfully asleep, as a quick glance confirms.

"What's up?" Wilson asks, rescuing Joel from Rachel's sticky grasp.

"Did you know that she's on a D-I-E-T?" House says in a stage whisper, tipping his head at Rachel. Rachel's scowl deepens.

"I … Shoot, I guess I should have known. I'm sorry, Rachel. Next time, I'll make sure there's a healthy snack here."

Rachel pouts. "I don't like fruit or vegetables."
Wilson racks his brains for low-carb snacks that don't feature fruit or vegetables.

"Sushi," House says from his corner of the couch. Is that a smidgen of guilt emanating off him?

Rachel perks up. "Sushi?" she asks. "Really?"

"Sushi it is," Wilson confirms. "I'll run it by your mom, but I'm sure we can manage that." If it turns out that House ate up all the cookies in front of Rachel's nose, he'll ensure that House personally makes the sushi.

Wilson takes Joel back to his crib. Then he accompanies Rachel downstairs. She's quite capable of managing by herself, as she doesn't hesitate to point out, and she isn't old enough yet — or mobile enough, for that matter — to abscond along the way, but still. He supposes he should ask her what happened upstairs, but he doesn't feel up to it, not tonight.

When he gets back House has switched the television back on and is watching one of his dreadful medical dramas.

"Chris proposed and Cuddy shot him down," Wilson says.

"Moron," House opines.

"I guess so. It's not like guys are queueing up —"

"Clark, not Lisa," House clarifies. "What idiot proposes to a woman unless she shows clear signs that she wants a proposal?"

"Umm," Wilson says, reviewing the four or so times he proposed. He can't remember whether he received a clear signal each time from his current sweetheart.

House's eyes bombard him with a blast of contemptuous amusement. "You really believe you determined the whens and hows of your proposals! It's a major game-changer in a woman's life. You think she's not gonna want to control when it happens? Especially Lisa. She hates losing control over her life in any way."

Wilson shrugs helplessly. "I don't see how she benefits if she retains control, but loses him."

"She never had him under control, only the relationship. He was threatening to change that by dictating his own terms. If she'd accepted, she'd be stuck with his covert subversiveness on his terms. He'll be back with apologies for trying to force her hand, she'll accept the apologies graciously, and then it'll start all over again. There'll be never-ending power battles for supremacy masked as mutual concern."

This is too abstract and convoluted for Wilson, who in some small corner of his soul prefers to keep the hope alive that somewhere within the murky depths of sexual relationships there's a bubbling fountain of pure romance. He puts his feet up on the coffee table next to House's and changes the perspective.

"If Chris is observing you, then making up with Cuddy will be the top item on his agenda," Wilson says.

House's attitude towards Chris strikes Wilson as just a teensy bit paranoid. He doesn't doubt that Chris dropped a word in House's ear about the inadvisability of getting involved in controversial human rights investigations, but it doesn't seem likely that the State Department would deploy a lawyer to keep an eye on a small cog in the works of the International Criminal Court. House is the
least political person Wilson has ever met. His sole aim in looking at war corpses is to figure out how they died; he isn't interested in whether anyone ultimately gets convicted for killing them.

House snorts. "He won't stop having me observed just because he isn't talking to Lisa."

"He'll find it difficult to explain his presence in this house if they aren't talking."

"Wilson, open your eyes! Haven't you noticed how often Douglas has been babysitting for Lisa lately?"

Wilson frowns. It's true; Lucas Douglas, who is easily in the Top Ten of his 'Least Favourite Persons' list, has been conspicuously present recently, taking Rachel for the day or babysitting her on evenings that Cuddy went out with Chris. "You think Chris Clark is paying Lucas Douglas to spy on you."

"I know Clark is paying Douglas. I asked Douglas, and he confirmed it. A guy with a young family, babysitting for a woman who is dating another guy: in what universe does that happen?"

Now that House spells it out it amazes Wilson that he didn't catch on himself. "Why don't you … do something about it? Like, tell Cuddy."

House shrugs. "Why should I? I know Douglas is observing me; he knows I know he's observing me. That's better than not knowing who it is. He knows my eyes are on him, and if I ever feel the need to keep something from Clark, I know whose thumbscrews I have to tighten so that the news doesn't reach him."

Wilson finds it hard to understand how House can be so blasé about the whole matter, but then, House has no memories of sprinklers going off and ruining expensive electronic equipment, of loosened grab rails and wild beasts in the bathtub, of being tripped and humiliated in public. A thought strikes him and he looks around the room, trying to spot minor changes, small shifts in the alignment of decorative objects, protuberances, anything that he didn't do. It's hopeless: with House in the apartment, everything is in flux. House has pulled books off the shelf and replaced them elsewhere, he has shifted the floor lamp so he can read while watching television, he has pushed everything on the mantelpiece to one side to make room for his iPad and his cell, and there's a pile of journals on the piano and on the floor. And that's just the living room … .

Finally he asks House, "Do you think he has bugged the place?"

"I debugged it after I arrived," House says nonchalantly. "He bugs it; I find the bugs. It's a game we play."

"He … you … House! What if he bugged it while you were gone? He may have been spying on me for months on end!"

"I take the apartment apart every time I'm here, so he can't eavesdrop on you for longer than eight weeks at a stretch."

"That's a comfort," Wilson says. "If he has been listening in on me …"

"Oh, he has. How do you think I know that you've been doing Melanie Robbins?"

Wilson goes hot and then cold. "You know about Melanie?"

House expels a puff of air and leans his head back against the headrest. "Wilson, you're an idiot. You went from frustrated and pissy to calm and balanced, and you think I won't get suspicious?"
"My spouse pays my enemy to eavesdrop on me," Wilson says heavily. He steals a sideways peek at House.

House looks calm and relaxed and amused in that dark, self-satisfied way of his, his expression saying, 'My prejudices about mankind have once more been confirmed.'

"I didn't pay him. I … made it attractive for him to pass on information that's of interest to me."

Wilson turns this over in his mind and decides that he'd rather not know. "You're okay with … me and Melanie?" he ventures.

House sits up and leans forward. "Wilson, this 'chastity till death us do part' thing wasn't my idea. You're the one who believes that the Family Court is interested in our sex life." He pauses, and then a mischievous smile twists his lips. "If you invite me for a threesome, it would count as marital sex."

A mental image of House and Melanie entwined, of the three of them in a heaving sweaty bunch rises unbidden in Wilson's mind. He resolutely banishes it. That's the last thing he needs; besides, Melanie would never agree. "Dream on," he says to House.

"Oh, I will," House says, waggling his eyebrows.

It's all very well for House to be impervious to being spied upon, but Wilson has little trust in Lucas's discretion. Maybe he's acting on the behalf of Chris Clark and the Department of State, but that won't stop him from earning a dollar or two on the side.

Therefore the next day Wilson takes an extended lunch break, which he uses to visit a coffee shop a few blocks down from the hospital. The place is fairly empty, so Wilson, after ordering a chai latte and a cookie, sits down at a secluded table far from the counter. Chris, arriving two minutes before the appointed time, nods in acknowledgment of his wave before going to the counter to place his order. He crosses over to the table with a laden tray, dressed impeccably as always. Wilson feels a pang of guilt: Chris and Cuddy would have made a handsome couple.

He rises politely and shakes the hand that Chris proffers after setting down the tray. "Thanks for coming at such short notice," he says. "I wouldn't have asked you to meet me if the matter weren't urgent."

"That's okay," Chris says.

They both sit down.

"This wouldn't be about yesterday?" Chris asks, his expression guarded.

"Oh no!" Wilson says. "I wouldn't dream of interfering. You're both quite capable of handling a little misunderstanding by yourselves. No, it's a matter that concerns House and me. I came to you for advice because it has some legal connotations."

He reaches under his chair, pulling out a shoe box that he places on the table between himself and Chris. "When House arrived yesterday, he found something odd in my apartment. We searched the whole place, and this is the yield." He opens the box to display a selection of the surveillance devices that House has discovered so far. "We're being observed."

Chris stares at the contents of the box. Then his eyes rise to meet Wilson's. "Any idea who planted these?"
"Oh, I have a fairly good idea," Wilson says. After a meaningful pause he continues, "It's a sleazy PI called Lucas Douglas — but I have no proof whatsoever. That's why I'm talking to you, not the police. As long as they have nothing to go on, they won't be able to stop him, and I need him to stop now." Wilson's hand slices the air.

"And what do you want me to do, get a background check, have him followed, ...?" Chris manages to make all this sound like a major imposition.

"Just have a talk with him, like you did with House regarding his work for the World Court. Indicate that if he continues with his present course, a can of whoop ass will open on him."

Chris twists his cup around, smiling in a chilly manner. "Regardless of popular rumour, we don't go around threatening people with medieval torture and summary execution."

"Sorry, my bad," Wilson says unrepentantly. "House must have 'misunderstood' you."

"He most certainly has!"

"That's a pity. When I inform him that you didn't mean it that way, it'll considerably raise his incentive to accept further work for the International Criminal Court. I'd more or less gotten him to give it up, since his travelling was infringing on his family time with us."

"Family time is important," Chris says.


"Especially when you have a young kid."

"Totally."

Chris tips his head. "Maybe you don't need to tell him that I wasn't threatening to waterboard him."

Wilson pretends to consider this. "Maybe not. I have connections at my former hospital, Princeton-Plainsboro, who might be willing to give him some work if I talked to them. Then he wouldn't have the time to work for the World Court."

"In Princeton? That's really close; it would be great for your kid to have his dad — his other dad — at home more often."

"Yeah, exactly. Now back to your talk with Lucas Douglas ..."

Chris smiles, almost in a friendly manner. "Consider it done."

"There's just one small thing to mention to him, and that's regarding passing on information that he has gleaned already to third parties."

"I'm sure I'll manage to be clear on that point."

Wilson leans forward. "Chris, you don't know the point. The point here is that Lucas doesn't like us, House and me. This isn't the first time that he's penetrating our private sphere. He has done it before; in 2010 I think it was, when House and I moved into a loft conversion together. He harassed us there, ruining the interior decoration and nearly doing House serious bodily injury. It culminated in him tripping House up and humiliating him in a public place. In case you don't know, House wasn't an amputee then; he was in chronic pain from his leg, and tripping him up wasn't exactly the act of a friend!"
"I'll be very clear. … What or who exactly are you worried about?"

Wilson takes a deep breath. "You know that we're trying to get Joel's mother to consent to House adopting Joel or at least getting custody in the event of my demise?"

Chris nods.

"If Lucas plays information about us to her, then we could be in for a sticky time in court."

"Wilson," Chris says, "what happens in your bedroom is no one's business, not even the family court's."

"It isn't what happens in our bedroom that's bothering me, but what happens in other bedrooms." Chris's eyebrows rise.

So we're a teensy bit prudish, Wilson thinks.

"House and I, we go back a long way. … Cuddy too," he adds as an afterthought. "We've found that the clue to longevity and stability in a relationship is diversity within a well-defined framework, if you get what I mean. We both have our … little needs, needs that the other can't meet, so we find other outlets. We don't publicise it, we don't make a big deal of it, because homophobia is hard enough to deal with as it is. People wouldn't understand, and when we were all working at PPTH — Cuddy, House and me — being open about how we organised our private lives wasn't up for debate anyway. That's when the trouble started: at PPTH, when Lucas was dating Cuddy, and House and I had just moved into the loft conversion together. Lucas was insanely jealous of House. Heaven knows why, because House was prepared to let them get on with it." Wilson adds an expressive shrug and a hand roll.

Chris's face is a mask. "I thought you said you and House were already living together then."

Wilson purses his lips and taps his fingers on the table, the way House does when he means, 'Do I have to spell this out to you, you moron?'

"Well yes, but as I said, we're open to variation, and House has always had a thing for Cuddy. So far, House and I have been able to integrate his predilections into our relationship, but Cuddy has a harder time with the people she dates. (Which is fine: the woman I'm seeing at the moment isn't too keen to include House either — as yet. You have to give these things time.) Ultimately the situation got so bad that Cuddy had to drop Lucas; he simply couldn't adapt to … to the way things were. Then she and House dated, while I dated my ex-wife. … You see that it's complicated: sometimes we're closer to the one, sometimes to the other, while at other times we all need a bit of space. At that time, House and I hadn't figured out the need for a stable framework yet, a fixed point of return, so to say. Our kid, Joel, kinda forced our hand there, and I'd say it isn't a bad thing."

He pauses to allow Chris to catch up. "I hope you see why I don't want Lucas using anything he found out about us as ammunition. That man is a sociopath, and I can't have him passing on random titbits of gossip to people who are interested in harming us, just for the fun of watching House squirm! He's vindictive; he won't hesitate to relay anything he overheard to Amy, her lawyer, or the family court."

"I see," Chris says slowly. "I'll make sure he understands that if anything about House or you gets passed on to anyone else, he's in big trouble."

"Good!" Wilson leans back and drains his chai latte. "Well, I have to go back to work. Thanks, Chris, you're really helping us big time here."
"Don't mention it." Chris, however, isn't sounding as cheerily suave as when he'd arrived.

"Will we be seeing you around again soon?" Wilson asks as he rises.

Chris grunts something unintelligible.

That evening, when Wilson goes downstairs to help Cuddy with her job applications, he finds her on her couch, hugging her legs and looking bewildered.

"What's up?" he asks, sitting down next to her.

"Chris phoned," she says.

"Wow, not even three days!" Wilson says with an enthusiasm that he doesn't feel. "It's a good thing I didn't put any money on him."

"He said he'd like a time-out. Says he needs some space after my rejection."

"O-kay."

"Wilson, it's not okay! When people say they need a time-out, they've either found someone else and want to test that relationship or they're too cowardly to say it's over. Either way, the relationship is a goner."

Or they've been told that their girlfriend has an exotic love life. "But you weren't too cowardly," Wilson says. Cuddy isn't the kind of woman who waits around for her man to come to his senses.

"Yeah, I told him we should break up."

And then she's sobbing into his shirt while he pats her back feebly. "I'm sorry, Cuddy," he says. "I'm so sorry."

And he is, but he really can't have her badass boyfriends threatening his happiness or his son's future.
"You're back," Cuddy says, standing on tiptoe to give him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Good to see you," Wilson says, shrugging out of his coat and hanging it up. Joel, ignoring Cuddy completely and pushing her away when she bends down to hug him, tugs at his hand, pointing across the living room towards the yard. "Wait a moment, Joel."

"Do you want to go into the yard?" Cuddy asks Joel. He lets go of Wilson's hand, taking Cuddy's instead.

She disappears with Joel in the direction of the deck. Wilson takes off his shoes and goes into the kitchen, wondering whether Cuddy will return or whether he should join her and Joel outside. Rachel is probably outside, though, with Hernandez the gardener. She spends entire afternoons in the swing set they installed last fall. Joel will join her on the swing set and Hernandez will push his swing. And Wilson can have a cup of coffee in peace, without Joel tugging at his hand.

"How was it?" Cuddy asks when she returns.

"Not great. Amy says she has to think about it. She doesn't want to do anything rash."

"That's new!" Cuddy says with a roll of her eyes. "Couldn't she have begun her thinking process a little earlier – like, two years ago or even one year ago? She seemed only too happy to get rid of Joel then."

"Ah, but then I wouldn't have him now, would I?" Wilson says, even though on a rational level he agrees with Cuddy.

"Coffee?"

He nods. "It's a big decision, and she rightly says that if she consents to an adoption, her decision is irreversible. My impression is that she's gaining maturity. She didn't bring Tyler to the meeting with her lawyer, which is a first."

"Or she's trying to manipulate you," Cuddy says shrewdly. "If she consents now, she loses leverage for the future."

"Yeah, that's what House says too," Wilson says once the grinding of the coffee maker subsides, "but she isn't really the type to play the long game."

"Pete knows?" Cuddy asks, placing a cup of coffee in front of him and sitting down opposite him.

"Yes, I spoke with him before I left Los Angeles."

"That would explain his foul mood. I thought maybe his patient died."

"He's here?"

"Yes, he arrived from Seattle yesterday."

Wilson considers this piece of information. "It's probably his patient; the news about Amy didn't seem to surprise him, while five days would be pretty quick for a case that stumped Foreman. Hardly long enough to re-run the necessary tests. Have you checked with Foreman?"
"No, it isn't *that* bad."

"Are you sure? House wasn't upstairs just now."

Ever since House went on a bender a few weeks after their wedding, indulging himself with every non-opiate he could lay hands on, Wilson's been keeping a wary eye on him. House snapped out of it again and came back as good as gold with no visible damage done, but Wilson has been on tenterhooks ever since. Cuddy says it was the stress of adjusting to his new role and all that, but Wilson doesn't buy it. It was House acting up and indulging his self-destructive tendencies. When House gets stressed, he takes a 'time-out' and the world has to wait for him. When Wilson gets stressed, he has to stay strong, first for his family, then for his patients and for House, and now for Joel. No one ever asks him whether he'd like a time-out to go on a little bender.

"Yeah, I'm sure. He's out in the yard with Hernandez and Rachel." Cuddy tips her head towards the window.

Wilson gets up and peers out into the yard. Rachel, Hernandez, and House are beside the swing set, Hernandez gesticulating wildly while House frowns down at a sheet of paper in his hand. Rachel isn't in her customary place in the nest swing, but in her wheelchair on the flagstones that Hernandez laid from the deck to the swing set, watching the two men with interest. Joel is on Rachel's lap, his thumb in his mouth.

"What's going on?" Wilson asks. House and Cuddy have gotten into the habit of avoiding each other, which isn't much of a challenge given that House isn't around nearly as often as Wilson would like. Cuddy doesn't come upstairs of her own accord when House is in Philly, while House doesn't accompany Wilson and Cuddy to the synagogue (pigs might fly!) or to work, so their interactions are limited to those mealtimes that Wilson habitually shares with the 'Cuddy girls' – Wednesday evenings and Sunday lunches. House does, however, take advantage of Cuddy's yard to keep Joel occupied whenever he's supposed to mind him; Cuddy for her part withdraws from the deck into the house whenever House is in the yard.

"Oh, Pete said there had to be a solution to the problem of getting Rachel in and out of her nest swing that didn't involve an adult (aka Pete) getting lumbago lifting her in and out of it, so he organised a winch and Hernandez strengthened the beams of the swing set, and now they're adding a winch control that Rachel can work by herself."

Now that he knows what he's looking at, it's obvious. The winch, which is fixed to the lateral beam of the swing set, raises and lowers the swing. "She lowers it to the ground?"

"That's the idea, once they've added a hand-held control. When the swing is on the ground she can clamber into it."

"And you're good with that?" Wilson asks, eyeing the whole contraption dubiously.

"She fell flat on her face trying to get on the swing by herself. It swung away while she was strung between it and the wheelchair. So yeah, I'm good with this solution. She doesn't want to wait around until someone has the time and the strength to heave her into her nest, because believe me, I'm not strong enough to do it anymore. I suggested one of those ramp swings which she can drive her wheelchair onto, but she refused point blank." Cuddy's face says it all: The Battle of the Swing must have been fought and lost while he was gone.

"You took a 'no'?"

Cuddy sighs. "She spends hours lying in that nest swing, reading and listening to music. Sitting in
a wheelchair isn't the same, she says. Pete supported her, by the way. I told him that he's free to champion widows and orphans as long as he finds a solution."

His argument with House resolved, Hernandez climbs the ladder up to the winch and busies himself with a screwdriver. Then he climbs down again and pulls the ladder away. A thick black cable with a box attached to the end hangs down from the winch. House throws himself into the swing and grabs the box. The winch purrs; the swing descends until it hits the ground. House and Hernandez high-five each other.

"Up again!" Wilson hears Rachel say.

House obliges, and the swing rises until it's about a foot off the ground.

"Did House say how long he's staying?" Wilson asks. He hates having to touch Cuddy for information, but getting a definitive answer from House is like trying to get a word out of Joel — very much a matter of chance and good luck. Not the world's greatest communicator, Joel is — like his father.

Cuddy shakes her head. "I got the impression that he's reallocating the time that he'd planned to spend on Foreman's case. So, a few more days, maybe?" Her expression is sympathetic and knowing.

"Fine, then maybe I can go to Boston for the weekend and check on my parents," Wilson says, pretending to be immersed in the happenings outside so Cuddy won't see his guilty flush.

"Now me, now me!" Rachel says.

"Me, me!" Joel echoes.

After lowering the swing to the ground, House climbs out. He plucks Joel from Rachel's lap and indicates to her that she is to clamber into the swing. Joel squirms in House's arm, trying to get down and into the nest swing. Wilson turns away from the window. If the contraption holds House's weight, it'll hold Rachel and Joel, but he'd rather not watch the first time they try it out.

"Are you all set for the interview in Portland?" Wilson asks Cuddy. "We could practice again if you like."

Cuddy looks embarrassed. "I withdrew my application," she says.

"Why?" Wilson enquires worriedly. She isn't spiralling downwards again, is she?

"Rachel doesn't want to move to Oregon. She's happy here in this house: she enjoys the swing, she's looking forward to getting a dog, and she is reacting very negatively to the idea of moving away. She loves you and Joel, and my family lives fairly close. Moving across the country means leaving all of that."

"Children adapt quickly," Wilson says. It's all very well to refuse a new post in view of the sacrifices it'll engender, but so far, Cuddy hasn't found anything in the vicinity of Philadelphia that compares to the offer from Portland.

Cuddy looks skeptical. "You know that because?"

Wilson shrugs helplessly. "Isn't that a Basic Truth of child-rearing, rather like Bohr's model of the atom for chemistry?"
"If Pete is to be believed, Bohr's model is one big scam."

"I'd rather not know — another of my favourite myths being debunked by modern science. I haven't recovered yet from having lost Pluto as a planet. What's your plan now?"

"I've been offered a job at the Community College: developing a degree course in Public Health, administrating it, and some teaching duties. They have Health Care, but not Public Health, and it's a growing field."

Wilson hurriedly snaps his mouth shut. "That's … well, fascinating!" It is fascinating — in a morbid manner. The pay will suck and Cuddy will leave the medical field altogether. "What's the attraction? The stellar salary or the stimulating environment?"

"Nice," Cuddy says, "but save the sarcasm for Pete. It's my chance to build something new, something that I can shape and mould. The things I can do at the Community College might actually make a difference. All the other offers entail adapting to existing structures, ensuring continuity, and all that."

"Okay, that's a valid point," Wilson concedes, although he isn't quite convinced. He is tempted to ask whether Cuddy's sudden decision to stay and apply for an administrative/teaching post instead of a better paying job in hands-on health care is in any way connected to her changed relationship status and the regular appearance in Drexel of a certain charismatic personality from her past. But he has annoyed her already; besides, he can't really fault her for the way she has handled living in the same house with him ever since he and House got married, and maybe he doesn't want to know anyway.

He turns back to the window. Rachel is swinging in her nest swing. Joel is standing in front of his toddler bucket seat, tugging at it with a look of frustration.

"Oh, no!" Wilson says.

Cuddy looks up enquiringly.

"Now Joel wants a nest swing too."

It's none of her business; they'll have to work it out on their own. There's no reason to suppose that Wilson will be grateful if she gets involved, and gratitude is foreign to Pete's way of thinking.

Fact is, however, that Pete is putting down roots on her deck once again, glowering in a manner that puts the sunset to shame (which is kinda cute), smoking (which is less cute, bothering her sufficiently to drive her off the deck, not to mention that it's a bad example for the kids), and interpreting the concept of 'keeping an eye on Joel' in a very creative and laissez-faire manner (which bothers her rather more, because she's going to be the one to drive Joel to the ER when the inevitable happens). But she's going to keep out of it, because Pete is immune to any sort of advice, and she isn't going to end up the way Wilson did when House and Stacy combusted or when she and House broke up: caught between the fronts, torn between duty towards a friend and self-preservation. The first time around, when Stacy left House, Wilson lost a wife, the second time he nearly lost his life, earning no thanks from anyone involved in the humongous mess. Certainly not from her.

Not even piano music at three a.m. (Chopin and blues) manages to shake her resolution. It does, however, make it wobble enough for her to ask Rachel casually at the breakfast table, "Any idea what's up with Pete — other than that he's having to look after Joel by himself for an entire
"Wilson told him to take Joel to his swimming class today. Pete says that if Wilson wants Joel to learn swimming, he can take him there himself instead of skedaddling off to Boston," Rachel says around a mouthful of cereal.

"That's all?" Cuddy can't decide which is stupider: Wilson expecting Pete to participate in a parent-kid activity with other parents, or Pete refusing to attend the swimming class. Taking Joel swimming is a sure guarantee of peace and quiet for the remainder of the day, Joel generally being completely exhausted after an hour in the water.

"It's not that easy," Rachel says. "Pete doesn't want people staring at his stump, and he can't very well go into the water in pants. I think Wilson kinda forgot that Pete only has one leg."

That figures. It's easy to forget that Pete is disabled in any manner when one observes him coping with daily life. Now that she thinks about it, she sees that accompanying Joel to his swimming classes would be difficult for Pete, even if he wasn't sensitive as hell about his leg. He'd need to take his prosthetic off and approach the pool with his crutches, which in turn would mean that he'd be unable to stop Joel from performing acts of kamikaze at the deep end of the pool.

Rachel continues, "But Pete is kinda stupid about it too. It's not like anyone cares that he has a stump."

"No?" Cuddy says.

"No; he's old. People expect old folks to have disabilities," Rachel says with full conviction.

"Right," Cuddy says, suppressing a smile. "Did you tell him that?"

"No," Rachel says, wrinkling her nose. "He doesn't like being told he's old."

"That's very wise of you," Cuddy says, "and tactful."

"I'm trying, but it's difficult," Rachel confides. "It's not like he is tactful."

"No, but as you say, he's old. Old people are allowed to be eccentric. 'Eccentric' means that they have odd habits and idiosyncrasies, and Pete's idiosyncrasy is being abysmally rude." Cuddy sincerely hopes that Rachel will repeat most of this to Pete, because she has a sneaky suspicion that he has been coaxing Rachel to be 'painstakingly honest' to her teachers and her classmates, the net result of which is that Cuddy has had to answer a number of irate emails.

Cuddy's resolution crumbles completely later that morning when Joel falls off the swing. Before leaving for Boston Wilson gave in to Joel and switched the toddler seat for a small nest swing like Rachel's. Cuddy disapproved silently, Pete mocked volubly. At least Wilson had the sense to mount it a mere six inches above the ground.

Joel isn't the kind of child to sit around in an immobile swing. So far, this hasn't been a problem: when Wilson, Esther, or Hernandez are around, they are happy to push the swing for hours at a time. Unfortunately, none of the three are around this morning.

Rachel gives her two cents' worth. "You gotta move your body forwards and backwards, Joel," she tells him. "Watch me!"

But Joel's movements are too hurried and erratic; he ends up howling in frustration.
Needless to say, Pete isn't the guy to spend hours nudging a swing just to keep a kid happy; his solution to the problem is to tie a rope to the frame of the swing set and toss the end to Joel. He has to demonstrate its use — Joel screams in protest when he is evicted from his swing, but watches in awed silence as Pete tries to accommodate himself in the low-slung basket and tugs at the rope — and after a few tries Joel catches on.

Disaster strikes after Pete has withdrawn to the deck with the newest edition of Scientific American: Joel, after giving the rope a particularly hard tug, doesn't let go when the nest swings backwards again. He doesn't so much fall off the swing as get pulled off it, which is probably why the damage done is limited. Rachel's shout of alarm rouses both Pete on the deck and Cuddy in the kitchen. She looks out of the window in time to watch Joel, who has scrambled back onto his feet, get knocked off them again by the rebounding swing.

By the time Cuddy gets to the yard Pete is down by the swings, grasping a bawling Joel by the back of his overalls and swinging him into his arms.

"The toddler seat is coming back," he mutters, dusting Joel off and checking for injuries.

"You're fine," he tells Joel. "Your diaper took the brunt of the blow." His tone, however, is gentle and his fingers probe carefully.

Unfortunately, Joel isn't interested in whether he's physically intact. He stretches his arms out towards Cuddy, who takes him and comforts him. Pete looks down at them silently, his eyes narrowed. Then he turns away and stomps back to the deck.

"He can join me on my swing and I'll look after him," Rachel offers. "I can lower it till it's almost on the ground." She works the winch until her swing is a mere inch above the grass, and then stretches out her arms for Joel.

Since Joel's sobs have subsided, Cuddy decides that he's fine — and that it's time to return to her policy of non-interference, so she hands Joel to Rachel with an injunction to swing only with the gentlest of movements and to call for help immediately should Joel get restless. Then she returns to the kitchen via the deck.

At least, that's her intention. It isn't Joel's mishap — minuscule compared to what she has witnessed in the way of childhood injuries during her clinic hours — that stops her in her tracks; Pete's expression persuades her to give up the neutrality and distance that she has managed to preserve for upward of nine months.

He's wearing that lost look that she has observed too often on him, the look that he wore when he realised he'd been crippled, when Stacy finally left, when Wilson opted out of their friendship after Amber's death. The look with which he accepted the inevitability of their split-up even as he pleaded with her. He's completely immobile, staring straight ahead, his mouth soft and vulnerable, his fingers rolling something they aren't holding. Her first guess is that it's his cane that his subconscious is conjuring, but then the right association surfaces with a clarity that pierces her gut like a glass shard: it's an illusory Vicodin bottle that his fingers are twisting this way and that.

She stands immobilised for ten … seconds, minutes? She doesn't know, but when she realises that she's staring at him, most likely with dread splattered across her face, she composes herself and sits down next to him.

She is wondering whether he has noticed her presence when his fingers cease their movement. He looks down at his hands.
"I'm fucking useless," he mutters. "He doesn't even want me to comfort him when he's hurt."

"You're not useless," she says quickly. "He knows me and Rachel better, but you're the one who can assess best whether he's okay or not."

"I'm not his paediatrician. I'm supposed to be his father. He doesn't even have a name for me."

That is, unfortunately, undeniable. Joel has names for Wilson, herself, Rachel, Esther, and Hernandez, not necessarily phonetically related to the original names — Esther is 'Tata' — but each unique to the person he uses it for. So far, however, he has resolutely ignored Pete.

Cuddy puts a comforting hand on his arm. When he stares down at it as though it was an interesting but somewhat creepy reptilian specimen she withdraws it again.

"It's not about doing or being something for him," she says, somewhat against her own convictions. "It's about being there. Someday he'll look back and he'll know that you were there for him, even though he didn't appreciate it at the time."

"You don't believe that yourself," Pete states without even looking at her to confirm his impression. "Hernandez features more in his life than I do."

"Not the point," Cuddy says. "My dad wasn't around much when I was young either. We were traditional; my mom was responsible for keeping the family up and running, while my father worked long hours and withdrew whenever things got unpleasant. I still adored him. He was the most important person in my life for years — until he died, actually. I never wondered whether he couldn't have been around more or whether he couldn't have spent more quality time with us when he was around. I accepted that his interest in us was limited to a few minutes here and there and to certain parts of our lives."

"So according to you, in order to be a good father, I only have to put in an appearance every now and then."

She bites her tongue. It's so like him to take her words, which were meant to reassure, as a statement of absolute truth, to be analysed and dissected. "No, of course that isn't enough if you want to be a stellar dad. But not doing more doesn't mean you're a total fail. There isn't just 'good' and 'bad'. There's a vast area in between."

"I'm not really an 'in-between' kinda guy."

She pats his knee patronisingly. "Welcome to the universe of paradoxical parenthood, a parallel universe to the one you lived in till now. It's all about shades of grey, not about black or white. Even if you do everything right, things can go awfully wrong, while undeserving parents are loved unconditionally by their kids. No one's perfect, no one's absolute crap — well, almost no one. It isn't about trying to be the best. It's about being there, an anchor in the kid's life."

"Not my strength," he mumbles.

"And because it isn't the area in which you excel, you aren't prepared to try for as much as a 'D'? Joel can work with a 'D'; what he can't work with is absenteeism."

He tries to unnerve her with a critical, unbelieving stare. "You're saying that because his standards are low, I'm allowed to slack."

"I'm saying that although you're not an 'A+' dad by any standard, you don't have the right to quit. You're not total crap. What you can do is good enough for this task. You have the ability to handle
fatherhood."

"Like you have the ability for that new job of yours that someone with half your brains and a third of your qualifications could rock?"

She scrutinises him. His words aren't flattering, but there's no sting in his tone. It's almost friendly. Is he trying to reassure her in turn? Difficult to say. "If you want to put it that way, yes. Like parenting, it's open-ended, with any number of results being acceptable. There's no life-or-death imperative, no need to achieve perfection at the first try."

"Boring," he opines.

"Yes, thank God!" Cuddy breathes. Thank God that large stretches of parenting are boring and repetitive, lacking any kind of challenge. It's the non-boring bits that bite you in the ass with amazing regularity, taking large chunks out of it.

"Wilson should never have left me alone with the kid," Pete grouses, leaning sideways to pluck a stalk of grass from the edge of the lawn, which he proceeds to shred systematically.

Okay, that's a lot better already: he has moved his focus from his own failings (real-slash-imagined) to Wilson's. Bad for Wilson, good for Pete's sobriety.

"I believe his parents aren't doing too well," she says vaguely. When Pete gives a sardonic half-grin, she adds in Wilson's defence (why the heck is she even defending him, when he took off, leaving her to deal with Pete's melt-downs?), "So far, when he visited them he always had Joel in tow, demanding his attention and not allowing him to focus on what his parents need."

"Is that what you call it nowadays: 'parents'? Time was when it was called 'fuck buddy'."

"Na-a," Cuddy says, eyeing him from the side. "Wilson isn't —"

"He is," Pete says with certainty. "He's doing a woman from his past."

"Who, Amy?" Cuddy asks incredulously. Her opinion of Amy, never high, has recently sunk so low that she'd need a drilling rig to recover it.

"Nope, Melanie."

"Who, pray, is Melanie?"

"The woman Wilson is screwing … oh, probably right now," Pete says with a glance at his watch that is studiously casual. "High school sweetheart of his. Writes shallow teen novels."

_Oh, Wilson!_ Cuddy thinks, sinking into herself. "And you know that, because?"

"When Wilson's visits to Boston increased in frequency, I put Douglas on him."

"Lucas? Pete, you're crazy! Lucas ruined your Ossur blade and wreaked carnage in your apartment, and you …!" Words fail her, so she just shakes her head at him. She likes Lucas, she really does, and whenever she sees how good he is with Rachel, she feels a pang, not of regret but of _..._ guilt, but there's no doubt that he can be a vindictive bastard. She's lucky he took the end of their short engagement so well — she has a sneaky suspicion that he might have proposed in order to provoke a break-up, because he was _far_ too understanding — because if he hadn't, her first months with House would have gotten very ugly indeed.
Pete bats his eyelashes at her in insincere innocence. "See, I believe in the good in mankind. I am confident that he won't bite the hand that feeds him."

"He could be lying," Cuddy states flatly. "He doesn't like you or Wilson."

"The feeling is mutual, but he isn't lying. Wilson admitted as much." Pete shrugs as though he doesn't really care.

"Oh, Pete!" Cuddy breathes. What a mess! And what the hell does Wilson think he's doing? Heaven knows that she herself is prone to ruthlessness, but even she wouldn't dream of subjecting her partner to the humiliation and heartbreak of infidelity. Before she did that, she'd … . Okay, that's an option that Wilson doesn't have; he and Pete have to stick it out somehow for Joel's sake. "Are you okay?"

"My heart isn't broken, if that's what you're wondering," he says with a simple directness that she has ceased to expect from him, his gaze frank. "Wilson's idea of matrimonial bliss doesn't include the 'bliss' part, if you get my meaning." He rolls his hand.

Cuddy digests this. When Wilson suggested the marriage he hinted that the 'arrangement' was meant to stay platonic, but she'd assumed that once both got used to the idea, they'd get intimate. During their Princeton days there'd always been rumours about them, and there were times when she too had wondered whether there wasn't more between them than 'just' friendship. And ever since the wedding they've behaved like any other couple she knows. Wilson acts possessive, while Pete — difficult to say, really. He certainly goes out of his way to stay out of her way, which is what you'd expect from someone who is worried that his present partner might be jealous of his ex.

She has noticed that they don't exchange PDAs the way House used to insist on doing with her, but she hasn't attributed much meaning to the omission: Wilson, wary of homophobia in his environment and wishing to shield Joel from the consequences, may be insisting on complete public abstinence. Rachel did ask her once why Wilson and Pete didn't share a bedroom, an incongruity that Cuddy hadn't noticed because she seldom went upstairs when Pete was there, but at the time she didn't attach much significance to that morsel of intel either. Wilson needs his sleep more than ever, and sleeping in the same bedroom as Pete is, as she knows herself, not exactly conducive to that.

"You mean you don't …?"


He can probably spout sex euphemisms for hours, so she holds up a hand to silence him.

"No, we don't," Pete admits. "Wilson is so worried about tumbling out of his closet by accident that he has delved all the way through to Narnia and is now frolicking with fauns."

"You're saying he's gay or bi, but in complete denial."

"No one's that straight," he says dismissively, "so it has to be denial."

"It can't be that he just isn't into you?" Cuddy teases gently.

Tossing back his head, Pete draws his fingers through his sparse hair. "Impossible!"

Although Cuddy can't help laughing, her curiosity isn't satisfied. "And are you into him?" she asks, not really expecting a serious answer, and she doesn't get one.
"Oh, I'd be prepared to be gay for him, if that's what it took. But my humble — please note I say 'humble', not 'small' — offerings have been rejected." He shreds another blade of grass, his mouth working. Then he says slowly, "I'm good with the way things are. More than this would be too complicated."

Cuddy doesn't buy it. "You like complicated. You've never shied away from conflict."

He twists several strands of grass into an intricate Celtic knot, turning the result over in his hands to inspect it. She waits, masking her impatience. Without looking up he says, "You're dating or cohabiting with someone who knows you better than you know yourself, who reminisces about common experiences that you can't remember, who holds deeds over your head that you can't recall. You're conscious of the abyss that separates your perception of the relationship from his, and you know that you'll never — can't ever — tap into the memories that shape the relationship for him. Think you'd be happy?"

She opens her mouth to respond, but the platitudes her brain automatically comes up with stick in her throat. She shakes her head slowly. "No," she says slowly. "No, I suppose I wouldn't."

He turns his head to meet her gaze, his slate-grey eyes soft and empathetic. "I'm sorry, Lisa," he says, dropping the grass ornament into her lap.

Then, his attention swerving from her, he rises. Rachel is at the foot of the ramp, next to the stairs, with Joel tagging along beside her wheelchair.

"I think he pooped," Rachel says.

"No!" Joel says.

"Yes, you did. You're smelly."

"No-o!"

"Okay, I've got this," Pete says, unfolding his long limbs and stretching out his hand to Joel. "Come along, punk," he says.

"No!"

"We'll do it next to the swing and then you can go straight back on it again. Hey, we can even do it on the swing — if you hold still," Pete says, grabbing the changing bag he brought with him and leading Joel back to the swing set. Joel, conflicted, goes with him, wailing, "No, no, no," all the way to the swing, but shutting up instantly when Pete hoists him onto his nest swing and lays him down.

Rachel, observing them, says, "If he wriggles now, it's gonna be really icky-yucky disgusting."

"Pete knows what he's doing," Cuddy responds.

Rachel returns her attention to her. "Why was Pete apologising?" she asks suspiciously.

"Oh, for letting Joel fall off the swing," Cuddy lies. There's no way she's initiating Rachel into the intricacies of Wilson and Pete's relationship.

"It was Joel's fault, not Pete's," Rachel opines. "I told him not to tug so hard on the rope."

"Joel is too small to understand," Cuddy says. "Pete should have watched out for him."
"Then Pete should apologise to him, not to you."

"He …" Cuddy begins when it strikes her that Rachel is right. Pete wasn't apologising to her for not wanting an intimate relationship with Wilson. "Oh!"

"What?" Rachel asks.

"Nothing," Cuddy says, rising and turning away so Rachel won't see her wiping away the tear that has snuck out from the corner of her eye.

"Why'd you say, 'Oh'?' Rachel perseveres, driving her wheelchair up the ramp so she can follow Cuddy into the house. The calibration of her bullshit radar is increasing in accuracy; soon Cuddy will be saying (like her mother used to when she was a child), 'None of your business, young lady.'

"I … I forgot that I'd promised to call Nana this afternoon," Cuddy improvises around the lump in her throat. Her words elicit the desired response; Rachel stops following her and turns back into the yard.

She manages to stave off the memories for the remainder of the day, focusing on her duties, everyday tasks, some preparatory research for her new position, and even a telephone call to her mother, because although she'd lied to Rachel about promising to call her mother, in terms of distraction potential Arlene Cuddy's diatribes and recriminations are hard to beat. But that night, when Rachel is asleep and melancholy blues chords drift in through the open window of Cuddy's bedroom, mental visuals crash over her in mounting waves: Pete accosting her in the restaurant of the Brunel Hotel in Bristol, Pete cooking dinner for her in his seedy apartment, Pete rowing her along Bristol canals, Pete dancing with her in a Latin night club. … Pete standing in front of her door explaining why he didn't want to date the woman he'd assaulted.

The next day Wilson returns, and after Pete has left for England, he comes downstairs for Sunday dinner with a bemused expression on his face. Cuddy tries for a friendly, open expression, but the knowledge that she has been subjected to a weekend of emotional turmoil so Wilson could get it off with the next love-of-his-life doesn't exactly improve her mood. Wilson, however, is too distracted to notice the chill wave that cuts through the summer heat.

"Did … anything happen?" he asks.

"Why?" Cuddy asks in return, because a lot of things happened, but mostly in her mind. After a night of crying into her pillow she's way too tired to put together a coherent story that leaves out her part in it entirely.

Wilson stands with his head bent, his hand massaging the back of his neck. "When I asked House when we'd see him next, he didn't evade or try to put me off. He went to the planner and started noting down when he'd be there — for the next three months! Said he might come more often or for longer, but those were the slots he could guarantee."

"That's good, isn't it?" Cuddy says somewhat snappishly, because Wilson doesn't seem to appreciate his windfall.

"Joel fell off the swing," Rachel offers by way of an explanation.

"He what?" Wilson says, alarmed.

"Nothing happened," Cuddy puts in, giving Rachel a quelling look. "He didn't even have a bruise."

"Where was House?"
"Fielding a telephone call from Cameron."

That isn't quite true: the phone call from Cameron came earlier in the day, but Cuddy is sick of the stress that Wilson and Pete's on-going parenting battles are causing. *Nothing* happened, for God's sake! Joel doesn't have as much as a scar, let alone a serious injury, and if Wilson wants his son to be protected from every potential evil, he should swathe him in bubble wrap and put him in a padded cell. Wilson *knows* what Pete is like. Besides, he's the idiot who installed a nest swing for a toddler.

"Cameron asked whether he'd consult for Diagnostics at Princeton-Plainsboro," Cuddy continues. "It's a good offer: he's to go in once a month, look through potential cases, select the ones that he deems interesting for the department, and assign them to the doctors working there. He can choose whether he'd like in as a consultant on any of the cases, but he gets his money either way."

"Oh, okay," Wilson says, not looking particularly surprised. "That's good! It explains how he knows when he'll be here again."

"And when is that?" she asks.

"In two weeks," Wilson says. He subjects her to a close scrutiny that makes her blush. On his way out he turns and points a finger at her. "Cuddy, …"

"What?" she asks defensively.

"Just … mind your step."
Chase's disgrace and Lisa's downfall combine to contribute to the termination of Pete's activities at Philadelphia Central. Chase, soon back at work, wouldn't have minded continuing their weird partnership, but his new boss, bent on lasting longer than Lisa did, shows little flexibility and hardly any inclination to compromise on … anything, really. Radiology remembers that there's such a thing as a schedule and a waiting list, the lab insists on paperwork in exchange for blood work, and all of a sudden it isn't just Chase who has to approve of spinal taps and liver biopsies, but Chase's boss as well, a spineless twerp who shows a tedious tendency to refer Pete and Chase to the dean. There's just no way Pete can work like that, so he stops trying.

He briefly considers expanding his cooperation with Foreman in Seattle, but quickly discards the notion: Seattle is not close enough to Philadelphia to help him out in a major way, and Foreman is as much a stickler for rules as Chase's annoying boss, though his reasons are different. Foreman doesn't use rules in order to evade responsibility, he believes in them in a way that neither Chase nor Lisa do, and the older he gets, the less he is prepared to bend or adjust them to suit the diagnostic process. It's a real pity, because the man is undeniably talented. He'll probably end his career as the highly respected dean of some major hospital or other, but for Pete's purposes he's a dead end.

This doesn't turn out to be the deal breaker that he feared it might be with regard to the length and duration of his stays in Philly. An unexpected opportunity presents itself: Allison Cameron of PPTH's diagnostic department asks him to work with them. He goes to the initial meeting with few expectations, but comes out of it pleasantly surprised: after months — years! — of countering his requests for information on his former patients with every bureaucratic obstacle imaginable, Allison Cameron suddenly eyes him with benign approval. Turns out that she has heard of his and Wilson's marriage. She cherishes the romantic notion of furthering the rights of gay couples in general, and Wilson's marital bliss in particular, by offering Wilson's spouse opportunities to spend time close to Philadelphia. It's no end irritating to have her squeeing just because he's in a gay marriage; if anyone knew the now archaic meaning of 'gay', they'd realise that his marriage is nothing of the sort. According to Chase, however, Cameron has been fan-girling for him since Day One, only going into hiatus when her superficial feminist kicked her innate fan girl in the butt, hard. Still, Cameron's attitude towards rules is fairly flexible and she's willing to take on his paperwork — what other consultant can boast of having the head of a department as his informal PA? — so he endures the bullshit she spouts about compassion and empathy in patient care with a stiff upper lip (or with a scathing comment, as the case may be).

As a result he manages to divide his time almost equally between Bristol and Philadelphia. Well, not quite, but he's getting there. There's just so much familial bliss that he can take before he needs a round of communicative austerity, Gavin's unchallenging conversation, and jazz or blues with the Bristol crowd. It's not like he is needed in Drexel; sometimes he feels that he's being tolerated because everyone is too charitable to tell him that he's a complete cop-out in every respect. Neither Lisa nor Wilson are strong on charity, but in their drive to 'do what's best for darling Joey' they're prepared to go out of their way to be nice to him. If he were a kid, his report card would read 'Peter has achieved basic skills at such-and-such' (this kid sucks at what he does) or 'His performance satisfied our expectations' (because we didn't have any) or 'He has shown a good attitude in trying to improve' (but didn't actually make any progress).

He knows he's an utter failure when Lisa volunteers to take Joel to his swimming class the next time Wilson goes off to shag Melanie. She says that it's a good opportunity to get Rachel to go into the water, because Rachel doesn't want to flounder around with other crippled kids anymore, but
it's obviously a ploy to ensure that Wilson doesn't freak when he finds out that Joel hasn't been to his swimming class again. There's no way that Lisa can enjoy an outing to the swimming pool with two kids, one of whom tries to kill himself by slipping on wet tiles or throwing himself into the deep end of the pool whenever she turns her back on him so she can get the other one, the disabled one, into her swimsuit.

Nevertheless Pete is grateful for her attempts to keep the peace, grateful enough to accompany them to the pool and keep an eye on Joel while Lisa gets Rachel ready for swimming. In fact, he even goes so far as to squeeze Joel into his bathing shorts, shower him after the event, and get him dressed, arduous tasks that the bugger resists with all his might. During the lesson Pete sits by the poolside with a soda, 'checking out the chicks in bikinis' (as he tells Rachel when she asks what he's going to do while they're in the pool), while Lisa participates in the swimming class, chatting easily with the other moms and dads. Joel socks some other kid who gets in his way on the mouth (her dad kindly pretends it was an accident when Lisa apologises profusely, turning on the full wattage of her charm and cleavage) and Rachel cavorts next to the group, her movements about as graceful as those of a roach caught in a puddle, but proud as punch that she can swim better than the toddlers.

Afterwards, at dinner, the little squirt is too tired to be a nuisance, while Pete pacifies the bigger squirt with his cooking. Lisa tells him that, yes, by the standards of other parents, he may be a failure, but by a child's standards he's doing just fine, and isn't it Joel's standard he's trying to live up to, not those of the other parents who he despises anyway? He informs Lisa that she may not be a brilliant doctor, but that her experience and expertise should more than suffice for the sub-standard stuff she needs to teach. With such pleasantries they manage to get through the first weekend without Wilson. And through the subsequent ones, because as often as not, Wilson takes advantage of Pete's presence in Philly to spend a night in Boston.

When Wilson is around, the programme is somewhat less strenuous. On Saturdays everyone goes to the synagogue, unless Lisa is too busy, in which case Wilson and the kids go, while Lisa goes in to work. That gives Pete time to go for an extended run. Wilson and Lisa share cooking chores, so all he has to do is 'supervise' the kids in the yard or take Joel to an indoor play centre. It isn't exactly rocket science. During the week it's even easier, because Esther takes the brunt of everything from diapers to tantrums. All things considered, he's coping. He'd even go so far as to say that he's capable of attaining an acceptable level of proficiency. … Okay, maybe not.

His first educational project is teaching Joel his name. He develops a system of incentives and rewards, sacrifices an afternoon of his precious time – he even sends Esther away, so that the atmosphere of concentration and learning isn't disrupted by outer constraints such as meals or afternoon naps – and is ready to present his results to Wilson when Wilson returns from work.

"Kid," he says to the boy when Wilson is seated and ready for a demonstration, "who is Greg?"

Wilson's eyebrows rise. "Greg?"

"Shurrup! Don't distract him." Pete hisses at him. He turns back to Joel, enunciating clearly, "Show me Greg!"

Joel's face lights up and he chortles, grabbing Pete's index finger and pulling him into the kitchen where he jiggles up and down excitedly, pointing to something on the shelf.

"Wow!" Wilson says from the doorway, grinning widely. "What a success!" He goes to the shelf, takes the jar of cookies down, and gives one to Joel. "Here, have a 'Greg'. Guess who's changing the bed sheets if you upchuck tonight?"
"Why 'Greg'?" Wilson asks later. "Why not … ?"

"'House' is practically a term of abuse."

"What about Pop or Father or … . You probably know the word for father in ten different languages."

"Twenty, more likely," he answers absently. "He can call me 'father' in any language he likes when he feels that I deserve the appellation."

"A-ha," Wilson says. "In your opinion, what requirements does a parent have to fulfil in order to 'deserve' to be called Dad or Father?"

Pete doesn't deign to answer. It's easy for Wilson to radiate confidence: there's little doubt that he fulfils all requirements.

"Why not 'Pete', like the Cuddy girls call you?" Wilson asks presently.

Pete sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. "Because Peter Barnes is a myth. He doesn't exist. I'm Gregory House, formerly board-licensed physician, born in Lexington, Massachusetts in 1960. We're not raising that kid to believe in myths."

He senses Wilson staring at him. "Isn't that what you always wanted, that I acknowledge my past?" he barks.

"It's not as satisfying as I thought it would be," Wilson admits. "Is there no one else who calls you Pete?"

Lisa and Rachel are the only two people in the US who still call him 'Pete'. Maybe Lisa prefers to live a lie (and maybe he's happy to let Lisa believe in a lie), but it's her own free choice. She could follow Wilson's example if she liked; after all, she knows the truth. In England, the Bristol crowd, cottoning on that he isn't called 'Pete Barnes', but not really sure who or what he is, have stopped referring to him by name altogether. The verbal contortions they go through in order to avoid calling him by an appellation that they fear might cause offence are mildly amusing. (He supposes he should inform them that they're free to call him Greg.) Only his landlord Gavin, oblivious to his current identity status despite the fact that mail addressed to 'Gregory House' lands in his letterbox regularly, still resolutely calls him 'Pete'.

Oh, and he sees himself as Pete. It's the name everyone used when he woke up with retrograde amnesia after his electroshock therapy, it's the name that he connects with his first memories, it's the name with which he had to make do the first three years of his personal era, the era pEST(post Electro-Shock Therapy).

Nevertheless, he isn't merely the sum of his present memories. The person he is today was shaped long before he woke up in a British clinic bed, with bright lights flashing in his eyes, low voices conferring in the background and no memories of his personal history of the past fifty years or so.

"We could symbolically bury Pete Barnes — or burn him, if you prefer," Wilson suggests.

Pete swivels around to stare at him.

Wilson is serious. "That would give you closure, you know. You'd ritually say farewell to the past and, uh, welcome the present."

This is exactly what he doesn't need: New Age mumbo-jumbo disguised as rites of passage.
Besides, who or what is 'Gregory House', if not the past? "And how do you picture this rite? Ritual sacrifice of infants under a new moon at a crossroad?" he asks bitingly. "Seppuku in Central Park?"

Wilson shifts uncomfortably. "You probably have invalidated papers of Peter Barnes — his passport or driver's license — somewhere. We could burn them, maybe at the Mayfield Open Day. I'm sure Nolan would —"

"Not happening!"

He manages to talk Wilson out of making a big deal of his return to 'Greg House' — if that's what it is. That doesn't mean that Wilson isn't interested in the Open Day. He wants to go because this year's event is special: Nolan is retiring and the Open Day is an unofficial farewell, so to say. Besides, according to Wilson there'll be tons of kids' activities, so he intends to drag Joel there with him. Pete privately thinks that taking Joel is a crappy idea, because Wilson won't be able to have meaningful conversations with Joel tugging at his hand, whining when he's tired, and wanting to participate in activities that are meant for kids five times his age, but that's Wilson's headache.

He rethinks his stance when Wilson mentions that he's taking Rachel there too; it isn't just a crappy idea, it's utter insanity.

"What do you think Rachel is gonna do there?" he snarls at Wilson, waving the flyer advertising the Open Day at him. "Bouncy Castle? Kids' Rodeo? Dance to music played by the Rolling Raccoons?"

"Rolling Raccoons?" Wilson asks, diverted.

"Do you love rock 'n' roll music? The Rolling Raccoons, former Mayfield inmates united by their love for music, will fulfill your every need. Book us for weddings, anniversaries, and business occasions," Pete reads aloud before balling up the flyer and tossing it at Wilson.

Wilson straightens it out on the coffee table. "Ah, now I remember. Chase plays with them, or used to play with them before they went commercial. They used to have some other name — Mayfield Madmen, I think. May have been bad for business. … I'll find something for Rachel to do. I can't not take her; she'll think it's because I don't love her."

"You don't."

"I do love her. … She's having a rough time."

"That's a non sequitur."

"One wasn't meant to follow on the other. The first statement corrected your erroneous assumption about my feelings for Rachel; the second explained why I feel the need to include her in our family activity. I'm sorry if I was too fast for you and two causally unconnected statements overtax your brain."

It's interesting that Wilson isn't citing his usual reason for dragging Rachel along to whatever brain-rotting activity he has planned for Joel, namely 'giving Cuddy a break', even though she could definitely do with one. She is overworked (which isn't exactly news) and underpaid (which is definitely a first) in her new job; her employers are hoping for miracles, but Lisa is no god. Chris Clark's abrupt departure from her life hasn't exactly helped matters. Perhaps Rachel is having a rough time in the wake of Lisa's career change and relationship fiasco, but that doesn't explain Wilson's sudden surge of parental responsibility towards her.

So that evening Pete goes downstairs, ostensibly to smoke on Lisa's deck, but actually to sound her
on what is going on. It's dusk, but the temperatures are still a comfortable 75° outside. Lisa is on
the deck with her computer, her face illuminated by the screen, an extension cord snaking across
the deck from the living room. She has a glass of something-or-other, probably lemonade, in front
of her and is typing as though bugs would bite her fingers if she slowed down. In the yard Rachel's
swing creaks slowly and ominously. She can't be reading; it's so dark already that he can barely
make out the swing set.

He throws down cigarettes and lighter on the table and pulls out the chair next to Lisa's. Lisa
automatically shuts the laptop and rises; it's something between a ritual and an unspoken
agreement that when he comes to smoke on the deck, Lisa departs. Some days he smokes not
because he craves the nicotine, but because smoking ensures him solitude. Today, however, he
doesn't want solitude; he wants information.

"Stay," he says, pushing the cigarettes to the middle of the table where they are out of his reach to
show that he isn't going to light up.

Lisa sits down again. "You want something to drink?" she asks.

There's never any alcohol in the entire place, upstairs or downstairs, the occasional bottle of wine
that Lisa used to keep on the premises for Clark having disappeared along with him, and ever since
Lisa put Rachel on a diet, she doesn't stock soda anymore either, so he shakes his head. Lisa nods
and opens the lid of her laptop again. The screen lights up immediately.

"Why is Wilson feeling guilty?" he asks abruptly before she can immerse herself in her work again.

"Is Wilson feeling guilty?" Lisa asks back, not even looking up from her screen.

He leans forward and flips the lid shut on her fingers, but not too hard. Lisa scowls as she extracts
her fingers from between cover and keyboard, but pushes the laptop aside. "Okay," she says. "Spit
it out."

"On Saturday he's taking Rachel to the Open Day at Mayfield."

"So? He spent months there; is it so surprising that he should want to meet up with his former
carers and give Nolan a fitting send-off?"

"That doesn't explain why Wilson offered to take Rachel as well as Joel. If he takes both of them,
there's no way he'll interact with anyone there. He said she's having a rough time, but she's always
having a rough time. What has he done?"

"Nothing. ... But he's right; Rachel's school life has just hit an all-time low."

He waits.

Lisa leans slightly towards him and lowers her voice so that it won't carry to the swing set. "Her
class went on an excursion the first week of school and she wanted in. It's the first time they've
been on more than an overnighter; it was a whole week in Washington and Chesapeake Bay. I said,
fine, and offered to go with them, but the teacher didn't want that. Neither did Rachel. She wanted
to be like the others. Her teacher said she'd handle everything, wake Rachel on time, make sure she
catheterised, and so on, so I explained everything to her, gave her the file with Rachel's care
instructions, and hoped for the best."

Lisa falls silent. He can picture it: the teacher overconfident and ignorant; Lisa doubtful, but
unwilling to hover; Rachel sick of being the focus of curiosity and pity.
"What went wrong, bladder infection?"

Lisa blows air into her hairline. "I told the teacher that Rachel needed extra time in the morning for her bowel programme, but I guess she thought I was being overprotective and not strict enough with Rachel — or maybe she didn't think at all. I don't know. She woke Rachel half an hour before the others the first morning, not one hour as we'd agreed, and that wasn't enough. Rachel didn't have a bathroom to herself, so when the others knocked on the bathroom door and insisted that she get out, she interrupted her bowel programme. She didn't dare tell her teacher what happened — for fear of getting the others into trouble, I think — and the teacher didn't enquire about her hygiene programme. Same thing the next morning."

"Great!" he says. "The teacher is a moron."

"Yes," Lisa agrees quietly. Her tone says more about her state of mind than any rant could have done; she's fuming. "At midday, in the bus on the way to someplace, Rachel's bowels caved. She was mortified to the bone, had a complete meltdown, and insisted that I pick her up. Seems that her classmates had a few choice words to say about the smell before the teacher managed to get the situation under control and Rachel out of the bus. The teacher was apologetic, but basically said that Rachel should have told her that she couldn't get her bowel programme done. Now Rachel is refusing to go back to school. She's been at home since Monday."

It's Wednesday now. Rachel isn't about to turn into an illiterate. He shrugs. "So what's the problem?"

"She can't stay at home forever!"

"Esther's there to look after Joel. She can keep an eye on Rachel too. It's not like Rachel can run away."

"Nice!" Lisa says, not amused at all. "That's what we're doing this week. I got a sick note from her paediatrician, but he says Rachel can't avoid situations like that forever via sick notes. He won't give her one for next week."

"Make Wilson write her a sick note. As I said, he's feeling guilty about something, so he'll do it."

"A sick note from an oncologist?"

"Who's to know that she doesn't have cancer?"

Lisa seems to give the idea some consideration. But then she shakes her head. "Her paediatrician is right. We have to deal with this some other way."

"Her school insists that she come back immediately, after what happened?" he asks. That seems over the top even for the elitist school that Lisa selected for her sprog.

Lisa leans back tiredly. "I'm getting mixed signals from them. Her class teacher, the idiot who mucked it all up, isn't insisting on anything, but she's young and carries no clout. She is busy downplaying her own role in this so that the school administration doesn't roast her for being an irresponsible goose. I told the school administration about Rachel's feelings after the bus incident, but they chose to believe her teacher's version of events in Washington, which probably featured an overprotective mother and a hypersensitive, spoilt kid. The school has a thing about regular attendance: they didn't take too kindly to her absence before the summer vacation. Besides, Rachel is in the school percussion group. They have rehearsals all through next week, and the first competitive performance the week after."
"Competitive percussion playing?" Pete asks, chuckling. "What do they do, throw cymbals at the other groups?"

"Think 'Glee'," Lisa advises, "with drums instead of singing. It's up and coming, and Rachel's school has good chances of winning some championship or other; I forget which one."

Lisa obviously doesn't care a dog's turd for her kid's career in music, so Pete still can't see the problem. "So, they'll have one basin banger less. The world won't come to an end."

"Apparently it will. The percussion group leader, an overzealous music teacher, has informed me that rehearsals are of the essence and that Rachel is 'endangering the success of the group'." Lisa flicks a dismissive hand.

"And we care, because?" Pete prompts. This is ludicrous on twenty different levels.

"We don't, but the thing is that this guy has made snide asides about Rachel's attitude in front of the percussion kids. They — and their parents — take the competition very seriously. Some of the parents have called, ostensibly to ask how Rachel is doing or to apologise for their kids' behaviour on the bus, but actually to persuade me to get Rachel back to rehearsals. If they lose that stupid competition, then no matter what, Rachel will be blamed. It's ridiculous, because all the teacher has to do is give Rachel's solo to some other kid; she isn't so talented that someone else couldn't learn to play it in a week."

"Why aren't you busting his balls?"

"Regretting Rachel's absence and indicating that it considerably lessens the group's chances of winning the competition isn't a punishable offence, even if the inference is clear."

"Okay," Pete says. "I get the picture. How's Mayfield supposed to help?"

"No idea. The outing gets Rachel off my back so I can get some work done — if 'crazy percussion teacher' or 'insistent school administration' don't bombard me with phone calls."

"Switch schools," he advises.

"Pete, it's September! It's much too late to find a new school for Rachel."

He isn't conversant with the intricacies of school admission policies, so he'll have to take her word for it. With the right incentive (money), however, any school can be brought to its knees. The question is whether Lisa has the financial wherewithal at the moment to gently persuade a reluctant school administration to take her crippled cutie. Not his problem, though.

He rises and wanders to the swing set. Rachel is lying on her back, eyes closed, swinging gently, wriggling her torso every now and then to keep the swing in motion. He leans forward to pull her earbuds out.

"Hey!" she says indignantly.

"Heard about your tribulations."

"My what? Never mind. … I don't want to talk about it."

"Neither do I, but your mom is wetting her pants with worry."

Rachel gives him the stink eye. "I don't care. None of your business." She starts replacing her
Okay, that's a pretty accurate summary of the situation: it is none of his business, and whether Lisa is worried or not isn't Rachel's problem. He tweaks the earbuds out of her hands, gives them a tug to disconnect them from her MP3-player and holds them out of her reach. "I'm making it my business. How is Wilson involved in all this?"

"Wilson?"

"Guy who lives in the apartment above yours. You may have noticed him coming and going every now and then."

Rachel smiles reluctantly. "He isn't involved. He has Joel; he doesn't need to look after me."

Okay, sibling rivalry. Not unexpected, but also not connected to the problem as such. "Then why is he bothered?"

"No idea. He thinks Mom needs support because Chris up and left, but that's stupid, because Mom managed fine before she dated Chris. He feels bad about Chris leaving."

That isn't the impression Pete has gotten: it seems to him that Wilson is relieved that Chris has left the scene, a sentiment that he doesn't find surprising insofar as he pretty much shares it. This conversation isn't helpful at all. The whole evening has been a waste so far. He has been inundated with information that he could well do without, but he's no closer to figuring out why Wilson is on a guilt trip than he was a few hours ago. He's beginning to doubt his own perception.

"Can I plug in again now?" Rachel asks with an air of bored irritation.

"Nope. What would need to happen for you to go back to school?"

"I don't want to go to school again, ever!"

Pete huffs impatiently. "I got that. I'm not interested in what you want. I want to know your price. How much?"

"No school," Rachel repeats, now impatient herself.

"You haven't got the hang of bargaining yet, lady. You name your price, I name what I'm willing to pay, and we meet somewhere in the middle."

Rachel finally cottons on, thank goodness! "You're gonna give me money to go back to school?"

"Or some other thing that you want – provided I'm in a position to give it to you."

Rachel stares at him, the cogs in her head whirring visibly. But in the end she says, "I just wanna stay at home." She covers her eyes with her arm.

"Jeez!" Pete grouses, throwing the earbuds into the nest swing. "You're no fun."

Lisa, back at work, barely looks up when he returns. "Any luck?"

"No," he mutters. "She says Wilson feels bad about Clark absconding at the altar."

"He didn't leave me standing at the altar! I refused him when he proposed."

He ignores her, straddling one of the chairs and rolling the lighter along his knuckles. Why would
Wilson feel guilty about Clark? It was a win for him.

"But," Lisa says, propping her chin up on one hand, "I think Wilson is feeling guilty because Joel has two parents (three, if you count Amy) while Rachel only has one. He made a pretty tactless remark about it just before your wedding, and he's been self-flagellating ever since. While Chris was around it looked like Rachel might win the father stakes for once, but now that that race is run, Wilson is back to feeling bad about Joel's windfall, so he's trying to make it up to Rachel."

Pete considers this. "Rachel has a bio dad."

Lisa's chuckle is mirthless. "Simon? … Let's agree not to count Amy or Simon. Then Joel is one up on Rachel."

Pete sucks in his lips and blows them out with a plop. "You're counting me as a full parent." Before Lisa can protest that he is a full parent, he continues, "And you're not counting Wilson's impact on Rachel's life. He's more of a parent to her than I am to Joel."

"Look, this isn't about crunching numbers. Wilson's feelings about the situation aren't an exact science. If his impression is that Joel has a clear advantage, then —"

"You're wrong," Pete says suddenly. "Wrong about Wilson's motives. You're right about it not being about the math of the situation."

He sees his mistake now; it's the same one that he made with regard to Rachel's school attendance. The clue to getting Rachel back into school isn't making Rachel see the situation differently, but the school. Similarly, the clue to Wilson's behaviour towards Rachel isn't something that's happening to Rachel, but something that is happening to Wilson, and that would be — Melanie!

He rises and swings the chair out from under him, turning it back to the table before heading back to the house. In the doorway he pauses. "You wanna give me the number of Rachel's school?"

"Pete, it isn't your problem," Lisa says with finality. "And I definitely prefer dealing with them myself. The last time you 'dealt' with them, I ended up donating a new set of outdoor tables and chairs to the school."

"Suit yourself," he says. He knows where to find Melanie's number, at any rate.
Saturday dawns bright and clear and with no sign of the rain that would put a timely end to Wilson's stupid excursion. So Pete steels himself, smiles brightly, and says he'll go too if he gets to choose where they'll have dinner afterwards.

Wilson smugly says that (a) he doesn't need him to accompany them because Cuddy will come too as soon as she has collected some papers from her workplace, and (b) there'll be a picnic-cum-barbeque in the evening, so they won't need to go anywhere for dinner. And if Pete wants to come along to Mayfield, he should just say so instead of beating about the bush.

Pete grits his teeth, but gets his sunglasses and his flat cap.

Wilson, Pete and the kids all go in Wilson's car so Lisa can follow them at her convenience. It's difficult to gauge Rachel's mood because Joel sings loudly all the way. Wilson says that he's singing 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', which (according to Wilson) is Joel's favourite song at the moment. When Pete suggests that the tune might also be 'Itsy Bitsy Spider' (Joel sings without intelligible lyrics), Wilson admits that it's possible. However, he arbitrarily excludes 'Ode to Joy' and 'The Bad Touch', claiming that Joel doesn't know those songs.

"What do you think I sing when I put him to bed, 'Mary Had a Little Lamb'?" Pete asks.

"What's 'The Bad Touch'?" Rachel pipes up from behind.

"You 'n' me, baby, we ain't nothin' but mammals," Pete chants, jerking his head and shoulders back and forth rhythmically to the lyrics.

Wilson's response to Pete's musical performance is lost in the ensuing cacophony: Joel, resenting Pete's intrusion on his solo, ups the volume painfully, while Rachel holds her hands over her ears, yelling, "Shut up! Shut up!" Everyone is glad when they finally reach Mayfield.

The entrance is festooned with roughly a hundred balloons in patriotic red, blue, and white and with a big banner stating that everyone is welcome to Mayfield's Open Day. Despite these professions of hospitality, there's tight security in place: their car is checked and they are issued day passes. Attendants in neon vests try to direct them to a temporary parking lot until Wilson flashes Rachel's disability parking badge at them, upon which they are waved through to the parking lot in front of the building.

Wilson has barely disembarked when a staff member runs up to him and envelopes him in a tight hug. "Dr Wilson, it's so good to see you again. And is that your son? What a darling!"

Within moments a crowd surrounds Wilson, all hugging and back-slapping him. Pete wordlessly dumps the kids in their various vehicles and unpacks baby paraphernalia.

"We've got an arts and crafts section for kids," someone says with a nod towards Rachel.

"Shall we go there?" Wilson asks her. When Rachel nods, Wilson grabs the grips of her wheelchair and pushes her in the general direction of a group of tents.

Pete figures that it's his job to look after Joel while Wilson does penance for real or imagined wrongs towards Rachel by keeping her amused.

"I'm onto you!" he mutters darkly at Wilson's back. "I know what you're planning."
He pushes Joel's stroller towards a bouncey castle that is visible from the parking lot. When Joel gets bored with that, they move on to a ball pit. The going is slightly tougher at the ball pit insofar as more kids have arrived by now, kids who trespass on what Joel considers his property. Joel, who has a clear concept as to which part of the ball pit is his territory (roughly one-fourth of the entire area) and which balls are his (any ball that the other kids pick up), does not as yet have a realistic take on his strengths and weaknesses.

"You do not bite a kid who is double your size and triple your weight," Pete informs him drily, wiping snot and tears off his face. "And you do not bite any kid whose parent is within sight, period. Let's find something else to do."

Luckily, Joel is willing to be distracted by food and knows where to find it. He goes through the changing bag, scattering its contents around him until he finds a box with apple slices.

"You gonna eat that?" Pete asks skeptically. He finds a bench where they can sit in peace.

"Appa," Joel says.

"Your pronunciation leaves a little something to be desired."

Joel takes a chunk out of the first slice and grins delightedly. "Appa," he repeats.

"And your conversational arts have scope for improvement."

Having finished the first slice, Joel says, "More!"

"Okay, that was clear enough." Pete hands him the box.

Three slices later, his mood vastly improved, Joel turns his attention to the other contents of the bag. He finds a book, which he carries over to Pete.

"You're here among bouncey castles, trampolines, giant slides, and pretty chicks, and you want to read a book?" Pete asks.


"Fox in Socks," Pete reads. "God help me!"

But the deity is deaf to his pleas. Half an hour later Pete knows why: the deity requires a human sacrifice in order to be placated, namely the idiot who bought Fox in Socks and read it to Joel so many times that Joel knows exactly what words are on each page. He insists that each and every word be read. He notices when you try to turn two pages instead of one. He's onto you immediately if you try to abbreviate the tongue twister about the three free fleas who fly through three cheese trees (sic!) to a manageable length, his hand slapping down on the page while he yells, "No! Flea! Flea!"

After three readings Pete's tongue is fuzzy and his brain is mush. "Let's find Wilson," he suggests.

Joel doesn't want to sit in his stroller. He trots along beside Pete until … he doesn't. Pete, homing in on what he hopes are the same tents as the ones Wilson was headed for with Rachel, suddenly realises that he's alone with the stroller. When he looks back the way he just came, he spots Joel spread-eagled on the path, staring intently at something in front of him. Next to him is Nolan, regarding the boy with an amused expression. Pete abandons the stroller and sprints back as quickly as his prosthesis will allow him.
"Hello, Greg," Nolan says. "Family day?"

Pete blows a raspberry at him.

"Bug," Joel says, pointing a chubby finger.

"Yeah, it's a bug," Nolan says, smiling.

Pete squints down at the path. "It's an ant."

"Bug," Joel repeats.

Pete turns on Nolan. "It's no wonder that this institution is choc-a-block full of long-term patients with poor prognoses, since you treat your patients by confirming their delusions."

"That's not quite what I did here."

"It's not any old bug, it's an ant. 'Bug' is not a scientific classification."

"Your son's problem isn't bad science. His problem is that he hasn't mastered the code that we adults use to communicate. I'm establishing a common base. Once that's done, the code can be refined."

Pete hates it when Nolan is right.

"Oh-oh," Joel says.

Pete looks down. The ant has stopped moving. Like Joel, it is now spread-eagled on the path.

"Oh-oh," Joel says again, looking helplessly at Pete.

"You killed it; there's nothing I can do about it now. What do you think," he says, turning to Nolan, "is he a future psychopath?"

"This is where you lead him away from the scene of the crime before he starts finding pleasure in his new discovery that ants stop moving when you squash them, and at an opportune moment you teach him that life is sacrosanct."

"Except when it ends up on our plates."

"Let's find James," Nolan says, rolling his eyes.

Pete grins. He likes it when Nolan gives up the noble fight.

"Hey, buster," he says to Joel, who is poking at the dead ant with one finger. "Our agenda wasn't murder and mayhem, but finding Daddy."

He has to pick Joel up by his overalls and set him on his feet before the kid drops his preoccupation with the corpus delicti and remembers his dad.

"How's it going?" Nolan asks, strolling alongside them.

"Fine," Pete says warily. "Same can't be said of you, I hear."

Nolan chuckles. "I'm retiring so that I can focus on my other interests. I'm writing a book on the effect of medication on creative ability."
"You're kidding!"

But Nolan isn't kidding. He has decided to write up wishy-washy observations backed by numbers so soft that they won't withstand statistical criteria, let alone scientific ones, in the hope that this will be a valuable contribution to 'understanding the sufferings of patients whose loss of abilities can't be measured in terms of intelligence or mobility'. Neither Pete's rational arguments nor his scathing sarcasm seem to affect Nolan's determination to bless the world with another example of totally crappy science. Pete is relieved when Joel, calling Daddy, stumps off across the grassy expanse in front of them. Wilson and Lisa are spreading a picnic blanket about two hundred yards further on. Lisa looks up and spots them. Dropping her end of the blanket, she marches towards them.

"Oh-oh," Pete says. He has a fair-ish idea what this is about.

Lisa gives Nolan a curt nod and a brief greeting before taking Pete's arm and dragging him a few token feet to the side. "Guess who called me this morning?"

"Umm," Pete says.

"Rachel's principal. He said 'Rachel's Uncle Greg' dropped by. Rachel's Uncle Greg? Pete, what did I say about Rachel's school?"

(The pause is rhetorical, he assumes.)

"I said to drop it. I said it was none of your business. None of Your. Fucking. Business! Which part of that didn't you understand?"

"Has she been expelled?"

Lisa tugs her fingers through her locks, not for the first time today judging by their appearance. "Pete, it doesn't work that way. What did you do?"

He clears his throat. "Explained that the tale of how a disabled kid was victimised by a bunch of craptastic teachers could go viral on the net. Pointed out that it would be bad publicity for a school that prided itself on its social focus and culture of awareness. Asked him how it was that his staff could do as they pleased with no control or monitoring. Wondered aloud how an unwritten school agenda that propagated achievement at any price was compatible with the school's declared aim of supporting and nurturing children of all backgrounds and abilities. Showed him an email I'd drafted to the Board of Governors and asked him whether I should click the send button."

"Oh. My. God!" Lisa says in quiet awe (or maybe it's quiet despair).

"What did he say to you?" It seems polite to ask, now that he has given her his version of the interlude. (The short version, to be precise. There's an extended version, in which he shows the principal Lucas Douglas's findings on how the school's new science wing was funded and enquires whether he should go to the local newspapers with the information, but Lisa, having gotten the general gist, doesn't need minor details.)

Lisa twists a lock of her hair. "He said you were a 'lovely gentleman', a 'wonderful person' and that he 'appreciated' your efforts to explain the situation to him."

"See? Someone appreciates my inner beauty!"

"And that he'd give Rachel's teacher a dressing down and make her apologise to Rachel. That he'd relieve the percussion-band teacher of his duties. And that the school will provide home teaching
facilities until such a time as Rachel feels confident enough to return to lessons."

"Then … that's okay," Pete half asks, surprised at the relief that washes over him.

"Don't be naive, it doesn't suit you! Do you seriously believe that Rachel will have an easier time at school if the percussion band collapses just before a major performance and her class teacher hates her guts?"

"She can stay at home until …"

"Until Junior High? Puh-lease! Besides, we'll be blackballed in the entire Philadelphia area. I'll have to bribe some school to take her after this. This sort of thing gets around."

He looks away. "Have you asked Rachel how she feels about this?"

"I didn't want to ruin her day," Lisa says flatly.

"She has a ghoulis disposition; she'll enjoy having her teacher apologise to her. Make the teacher do it in front of the whole class."

"Ghoulish disposition," Lisa echoes. "I'll have them write that in Rachel's next report. You!" She pokes him in the chest so hard that he catches hold of her hand to stop her from repeating the attack. "Next time … next time, just don't!"

He releases her hand when he's sure she has calmed down. "I won't," he promises.

"You will," she prophesies darkly as she turns back to the picnic blanket.

Nolan, Wilson, and the kids have abandoned the picnic paraphernalia and are strolling along the path towards a provisional stage where the members of a band, presumably the former Mayfield Madmen, are doing a sound check. Lisa doesn't follow them; she lies down on the blanket with Joel's changing bag as a pillow, clasps her hands behind her head and closes her eyes.

While Pete hesitates, caught between Scylla (more time with the kids, potentially on a one-to-one basis), and Charybdis (currently lying on the picnic blanket), the lead guitarist counts, "One - two, one - two - three - four," and the band pounds out 'Jailhouse Rock' with more verve than talent. That decides it. Pete opts for the blanket and the picnic basket that Wilson packed in the morning, 'just in case'.

Turns out that Wilson hasn't prepared so much for a scarcity of food as for a paucity of kosher and low-carb options. Vegetable sticks (carrot, celery, cucumber, peppers) with dips abound. The salad bowl reveals a brown rice salad smelling of ginger and soy. (What happened to potato salad or coleslaw?) A further Tupperware container holds something green and creamy that could be a dressing if there weren't so much of it. Pete dips a finger into the green mush and licks it experimentally. Odd, distinctly odd: avocado with a hint of lemon and cumin, but what the hell is it supposed to be?

"Cold avocado soup," Lisa says, opening one eye.

Disgusting! As a dip it would be sufferable, but as soup? "Who's supposed to eat that?" Pete asks.

"Rachel."

"Does she know of her good fortune?"
"She specifically asked Wilson to make it."

Pete continues his exploration of the basket, filing away in his head the anomaly of Lisa dozing on a picnic blanket when she's swamped with work. As far as he can make out, she only has a small purse with her, no big bag with laptop, files, or other work-related items. Hadn't she come here later because she had so much work that she needed to go in to pick some up?

"How come you haven't brought any work?" he asks, moving napkins and paper plates aside to check what's at the bottom of the basket.

"I handed in my resignation today," Lisa says without any intonation.

He wouldn't have thought that she had it in her to surprise him, but this time she has managed. How could he have missed something as vital as Lisa intending to chuck her job in?

"What happened?" he asks, rummaging around as though her revelation was an everyday matter.

"I handed in a proposal for the new Public Health degree. It was shot down." She's silent, her arm draped over her eyes.

"So? Write a new one."

Lisa sits up and looks around without meeting his eyes. "They pulled their own proposal out of the drawer. It consists of renaming existing Health Care courses so they sound like they're Public Health courses and offering so many electives that there's no need to create anything new that specifically targets Public Health students. It's a sham! The course is aimed at drop-outs from the Health Care course. In other words, if you're too dumb or too irresponsible to become a nurse – especially the latter – why not let you loose on the public with a degree in Public Health?" She hugs her knees. "I was basically told to spruce up their proposal and then teach all the courses for which they can't find teaching staff. That wasn't what I'd been led to believe I'd be doing when I accepted their job offer."

No spare ribs (okay, given Wilson's present kosher leanings he wasn't expecting any, though it would have been nice if Wilson had thought of him), no buffalo wings. The sandwiches are vegetarian, sporting carrot and avocado (again!) and alfalfa sprouts. What happened to Wilson's legendary club sandwiches? Pete finally finds some samosas. They're vegetarian too, as he discovers on biting into one, but at least they taste of something, and the avocado soup works as a dip for them.

"What are you going to do now?" he asks around a mouthful of samosa.

"I don't know yet."

She has a CV with more holes than a Swiss cheese, has recently gotten herself fired, and she kicks her job without having anything else lined up? That sounds like something he would do, but not Lisa. "You're an idiot," he opines.

Apparently that's the wrong thing to say. She gets up wordlessly and follows the others to the stage.

The band, after a passable rendition of 'With a Little Help From My Friends' (it's difficult to sing worse than Ringo Starr), has now embarked on a version of 'Stand By Me' that sounds more like a rehearsal than a performance. A few people in front of the stage are dancing singly or in couples. It's uncoordinated and messy, like most of this Open Day. Wilson is hopping around with Joel on his arm, looking utterly goofy. When Lisa reaches them, Wilson puts Joel down and they swing
him around between them. Lisa likes dancing, Pete remembers. Now that he isn't hampered by Joel's weight, Wilson's movements are more elegant and coordinated. When the song is over, Wilson calls something to the band, which promptly launches into 'Walk the Line'. Wilson lines Joel and Lisa up, gives a few instructions to some of the other dancers, and after a few tries they manage something that is recognisable as a line dance, despite Joel generally getting into everyone's way. At the end of the song the band goes straight into a repeat, while more and more dancers join the line.

Pete looks around for Rachel and spots her stuck on the grass at a picnic table near the dancing area. Rachel can manoeuvre her wheelchair over smooth surfaces and slight inclines, but she isn't strong enough yet to manage soft, uneven surfaces. She's struggling, rocking to and fro, but the wheelchair won't budge. Wilson, coordinating the line, and Lisa, trying to keep Joel from getting under people's feet, haven't noticed. A few people watch Rachel, but make no move to help her. Pete sighs, rolls sideways and uses his remaining leg to lever himself upright, then he walks over to Rachel and tugs her wheelchair back onto the path leading to the picnic tables.

"You're in a rut," he says.

He expects a put-down or a sassy comment, but she stares straight ahead saying nothing. He moves in front of the wheelchair so he can see her face. It's blank.

"Where were you going?" he asks.

There's a long moment of … nothing, then she points to where Wilson, Lisa, and Joel are dancing. Right, she was going to be a ballet dancer when she grew up, wasn't she.

"I wanna go to Mom," Rachel says, her chin quivering a little.

He risks a quick glance at the dancing area. The band is playing 'Rock Around the Clock'; Wilson and Lisa are kicking and stepping like professionals, the other dancers around them gradually stopping to watch. A half circle of spectators forms around them, clapping and cheering them on as Wilson grows more daring, lifting Lisa up and swinging her between his legs. Lisa is laughing, the first genuine expression of joy on her face that he has seen over the past days. Joel is bouncing up and down near them, clapping his hands too, though not in time with the music, in acute danger of getting bowled over by the dancers. Too bad; the kid will survive. If, however, he pushes a tearful Rachel to the dancing area, that'll be the end of Lisa's time-off from life in general and Rachel in particular.

"Do you know how to do wheelies?" he asks.

"No-o?"

"But you've seen people do it."

"Yeah, in rehab, when I was small. There was a boy who did it all the time."

"You should be able to cross the grass if you tip back into a wheelie. Then your front castors won't get stuck."

He looks at the wheelchair. It'll be tight, but he'll fit. "Out you go, then I'll show you."

He knows he can do it: he can't remember the months he must have spent in a wheelchair after the infarction and the amputation, but he can remember only too well the first weeks in London after his memory-altering surgery, stuck in the psychiatric institution without a prosthetic, waiting for the NHS to supply him with a new one. (The one he'd had before the electroshock therapy had to
be abandoned so that it — and he — wouldn't be traced back to the USA.)

So, he lifts Rachel out of the wheelchair onto the ground before lowering himself into her seat.

"Your legs are too long," Rachel says, distracted from her original agenda.

"I'll cope," he says, gripping the wheels and giving them a few experimental twists to get a feel for the wheelchair. Definitely better quality than the one in which he raced through the corridors of the Maudsley Hospital in London: it's basically a sports wheelchair with handles added so it can be pushed when needed. The wheels are big and slightly slanted to allow for quick manoeuvres and spins, and it's a lightweight chair. Doing a wheelie should be a doozy.

He scoots his buttocks back, grips the top of the wheels, and leans back until he can sense that the front castor wheels, though still on the ground, are free from weight. He holds the position for a moment to get the feel for it, then slowly readjusts his weight so that the castor wheels lift off the ground about half an inch. After counting to ten he lets himself down again. Rachel claps. He gives her a mock bow, then repeats the movement a few times, each time faster, lifting the front wheels higher. Finally he tries forward propulsion. This is the tricky part: turning the wheels forward with your hands without succumbing to the temptation of moving your upper torso forward too, away from the equilibrium state that keeps the castor wheels up.

Once he's sure he has his balance completely under control, he propels the chair off the path onto the grass, only stopping and reversing again when he has covered roughly ten yards. Rachel's admiration would be balm to a more wounded soul than his. He vacates the chair and lifts her back into it again, saying, "Your turn." Lisa will probably kill him for teaching her kid wheelies, but that can't be helped.

After about twenty minutes of practice, with him behind the wheelchair to stop it from tipping over, Rachel can get her weight off the front wheels, but she finds it hard to lift them off the ground without losing her balance.

"I can't do it!" she complains.

She's not exactly your poster girl for motor skills. If she were, she'd have been bumping down stairs long ago. Still, it's not a lost cause.

"It'll take a while," he admits, "but if you can do it, then you can go down curbs by yourself and possibly even stairs."

The band is having a break (hopefully a long one), there's muzak from the loudspeaker to fill the silence, and Lisa, Wilson, and Joel join them. Wilson is wiping his brow looking winded, Lisa seems relaxed, and Joel is hungry.

"Na-nana," Joel says, sounding like a Minion.

"Right," Wilson says. "Your master hurries to be at your service. Let's have something to eat."

Pete opts to skip the family meal, wandering around in the hope of finding something hot, greasy, and spicy. There's little chance of finding beer on the grounds of Mayfield, but a cool, sugar-loaded soda wouldn't be bad either. Once his basic needs have been met, he returns to where the others are finishing their frugal repast.

Wilson is digging around in Joel's changing bag looking frantic. "House, I'm sure I packed a book for Joel. Have you seen it?"
"Fox in Socks?" Pete asks, sinking down ungracefully on the blanket. What's wrong with a picnic table, he wonders.

"Yes."

"I tossed it."

"You ... what?"

"Beastly boring book in bag. 
Beastly boring book in bin. 
Book in bin, 
Greg with grin," Pete recites.

"Wow, that rhymes!" Rachel crows.

Wilson is somewhat less impressed. "Grim Jim wipes grin off Greg's chin. That rhymes too."

Turning to Pete he asks, "How am I supposed to put Joel to sleep without the book?"

"With his nap-time bottle?" Pete suggests with his best 'duh' look.

"He's eighteen months old, for heaven's sake! I've weaned him off the darn bottle."

"Plain case of teat envy," Pete postulates. "You're pissed that you don't have a tit to suck on."

"Boys!" Lisa reprimands them, but without heat. "Where did you toss the book, Pete?"

"In a trash can over ..." Where exactly? He looks around, trying to remember which part of the park Joel and he had come from when they joined the others. It's hopeless; he wasn't paying attention to where he was going while talking to Nolan. He finally comes up with, "There was a ball pit nearby."

Rachel jiggles up and down in the wheelchair. "Wilson, I know where the ball pit is. I can show you!"

"Okay," Wilson says, rising. "We'll find the book while House puts Joel down for his nap."

There's no doubt about who is getting the better deal. Joel moans, whines, and wriggles around, tired to the bone but unable to drop off. A sip of beer would solve the problem, but of course there's no beer to be had for love or money.

"Give him to me," Lisa finally says, "and go away. You make everyone around you fidgety."

He hands the squirming bundle to Lisa and walks a short distance away. Lisa lies down on the blanket, tucks Joel close to her body, and croons in his hair. It takes a while, but Lisa is obdurate and Joel finally nods off, thumb in mouth. So, apparently does Lisa, because when he creeps back again, her breathing is even and her eyes are closed. He looks down at her frowning, then he picks up her purse. When he opens the zipper her eyes fly open.

"What are you doing?"

"Going through your purse," he says, "obviously!"

She props herself on one elbow, observing him. "Why are you going through my purse? I'm not one of your patients. ... Pete, I'm fine! Quit obsessing! Don't go through my things, don't hack my medical files, don't terrorise my therapist, who doesn't deserve having to deal with you as well as
me, and … just don't!"

When he ignores her she huffs. "Look, I'm tired to the bone because I hardly slept last night, wondering whether to hand in my resignation, and then drafting it, that's all. Quitting my job isn't something that has come out of the blue, hitting me over the head with a two-by-four. This is planned. I'm doing it deliberately in full knowledge of the consequences. Now shut up and go away! I want to sleep. And wake me in half an hour, otherwise I'll be unbearable the whole afternoon."

So he goes to a nearby picnic table from where he can observe the sleeping pair — let no one accuse him of leaving the runt unsupervised — and empties Lisa's purse out on the table. (She said he should leave; she didn't say he shouldn't take her purse with him, and it's safer with him than with her, where any passing thief can snag it.) Its contents are uninspiring. No medication, nothing. The call list on her phone is unremarkable.

Someone sits down opposite him. He looks up, ready to chase the intruder away with a well-placed insult.

Nolan smiles in greeting. "James asked me to tell you that he has found the book, but that it's covered in trash, so you're to buy a new one at Barnes and Nobles on the way back. And he's taking Rachel to the chess competition in the main hall."

"Since when do you play messenger boy?"

"Whenever it amuses me to do so."

"Should a therapist sow dissent among his patients?"

"I'm retiring. Neither of you is my patients any longer, so I'm free to jerk you around as much as I please," Nolan says with an impish grin. "From now on, Greg, it's tit for tat."

Pete spreads the contents of Lisa's purse — cell phone, keys, pen, wallet (he hasn't gone through the wallet yet, but the last time he did, its contents were boring), lipstick, powder case, tampon, emery board, tissues, sales slips — and sorts the items alphabetically. Nolan purses his lips, glancing from Lisa to him and back again.

"How's Dr Cuddy?" he asks.

"Physically? Fine. Liver's been given the okay."

He could also sort the things by colour or size. That would make more sense than sorting them alphabetically, because an alphabetical order is related to the language in which one names the objects, not to the nature of the objects themselves. Alternately, he could order them according to use or usefulness, although 'usefulness' is not an objective category any more than alphabetical order is. Colour it is then.

"And mentally?"

"She says she's fine in every respect."

"But you don't believe her."

"I …" Pete hesitates over the wallet, which has a multi-coloured pattern. It could go with green or with purple. "How would you define 'fine' in terms of mental health?"
"The ability to cope with the demands of everyday life?" Nolan postulates.

"Check." Pete looks up from his sifting and sorting. "That's all?"

"It's a starting point. What would you say?" Nolan asks, steepling his fingers.

"I'm asking you."

"Then, having human connections, a social network."

"Check." She has Wilson, Rachel, the curtain climber (though he doesn't really count yet, being barely beyond the invertebrate stage), and Julia.

"Happiness," Nolan offers next.

Pete places the purse on his lap and rakes the contents inside.

"You believe she isn't happy," Nolan says/asks/states.

He doesn't believe it; he knows it.

"Is that your fault?" Nolan asks.

He shakes his head slowly. "I ... don't know," he finally says. "I don't think so."

If he's in any way to blame, it's for of sins of omission, not sins of commission — or so he hopes. Perhaps he should have warned her that closing an eye (or two, as it were) to Chase's issues would wreck her career. He'd seen it coming; one look at the situation in that hospital after Ryan Andrews took over as dean had shown him that the power distribution was in flux, with Lisa on the edge of a vortex. Maybe he should have put the thumbscrews on Chase and made him seek treatment. But he hadn't considered Chase to be his problem: he could work with Chase either way, and when drunk, Chase was more amenable to being manipulated than when sober. (Chances are that Lisa would have gotten fired any which way.) Then there's something about the whole Chris Clark episode that fills him with unease, even though he can't put his finger on the source or nature of his suspicions. And maybe, just maybe, he should have taken the whole matter of finding a new career for Lisa into his own hands instead of leaving it to Wilson, who is so busy staying in tune with his feminine, maternal side that he has lost his bite.

"Then why make it your problem?" Nolan asks.

Now that is a really good question, though he has no intention of telling Nolan so. The answer is surprisingly simple; nevertheless, it takes him a moment to overcome his unwillingness to verbalise it. "Because ... I want her to be happy."

Nolan, equally surprisingly, lets that answer stand uncommented. Pete, who has been staring at Lisa asleep on the blanket, turns to look at him. He's aware of Nolan's low opinion of Lisa, though the psychiatrist has never voiced it. She manages to rub a surprising number of people the wrong way simply by being Lisa. "Isn't this where you advise me to let well be and stay out of trouble, as in, stay away from Lisa Cuddy?"

"As I mentioned earlier I'm not your therapist any longer, and I never give advice to friends. I've found that the secret to keeping the few friends that I have lies in not telling them what to do."

"So you'll allow me to take the road to hell in all amicability."
"If that's what you want to do, I'll support you in any way I can."

"And say, 'I told you so,' when it all goes down the drain."

"Should it 'go down the drain', I'll be there to pick you up and dust you off," Nolan corrects him gently.

Pete can't help grinning. "So the difference between patients and friends is that you coerce your patients while you manipulate your friends."

Nolan smiles a slow, lazy smile as he rises. "Takes a thief to catch a thief, Greg. I'll leave you to it. I have a few more hands to shake and backs to pat."

Pete returns to the picnic blanket and lowers himself carefully. Joel has turned onto his back with his hands on either side of his head, a light sheen on his forehead. Lisa is still curled up on her side facing Joel with one hand under her cheek. When the half hour that she set him is up, he plucks a long blade of grass. A better man would gently nudge her shoulder or maybe brush the hair aside from her forehead. He tickles her under the nose with the grass. Her nose wrinkles in automatic reaction, her face puckers up, and she sneezes. She sits up slowly, flinching when she becomes aware of his proximity. He chews on the blade of grass pretending innocence. She leans forward to take a bottle of water out of the picnic hamper, giving him a decent view of her cleavage.

He watches her throat move as she swallows the water, the pharyngeal muscles contracting sequentially. "What are you going to do about a job?"

She puts the bottle down. "I don't know yet," she says, twisting the lid to and fro.

"Did you do your yoga session this morning?" he asks, assessing her tenseness.

"Which part of 'staying awake all night and writing resignation letters' didn't you get?" she enquires snappishly.

Definitely wound up. "Surya namaskar," he orders.

She stares at him incredulously. "What, do yoga here?"

"No one's watching and no one cares. This place is full of nut-jobs; people will think you're another one and look away politely. First pose: Tadasana." She continues to glare at him, so he extracts the water bottle and lid from her hands and gives her a nudge. "Hop; up you go. Get cracking!"

She gets up and tentatively takes the first pose of the sun salutation.

"Breathe," he reminds her. Imitating her psycho yoga instructor he intones in a monotonous voice, "Urdhva Hastasana."

She brings her arms out to the side and joins her hands above her head, leaning back into the pose. He nods his satisfaction to no one in particular, pacing himself as he guides her from pose to pose. (Her yoga instructor always kicked him out of the living area during yoga sessions, but there's limited privacy in a house with an open-floor layout.) After a few poses he has slipped into an easy rhythm, relaxing as he watches her through half-closed eyes. He lies back on the blanket, his hands folded under his head, enjoying the warmth, the peace, the unhurried, fluid motion next to him as Lisa completes the sun salutation. Without hesitation he guides her through a workout that ... what exactly? From where does he know that workout? It isn't the one her yoga teacher uses, but it comes naturally to him, and from the looks of it Lisa knows it too.
Lisa ends the routine with the Savasana pose and stretches. "Thanks," she says quietly.

He fidgets, finally asking, "Did we used to do this when we were ...?"

She sighs, avoiding his gaze, as she always does when the past comes up. (While Wilson refers to The Past with a mix of nostalgia and exasperation, Lisa prefers not to look back.) "You'd watch while I did my morning session — if you'd stayed the night and were up in time. And yeah, those poses were my morning routine at the time, in case you were wondering."

He nods.

She sits with her arms loosely clasped around her knees. "I'd like to ... take a break. Go on vacation. Not think about work for a few weeks."

It's the first sensible thought she's had ever since Philadelphia Central collapsed around her head. He refrains from pointing this out, however.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I've always wanted to see Cambodia," she says dreamily. "Or Venice."

"So what's to stop you?"

She gives him a nasty look. "Last time I checked, I had a daughter."

"Leave her here. With Wilson." Who can indulge in a last bout of surrogate parenting before he moves to Boston to be with Melanie, the rising star of teen fantasy lit.

"I can't leave Rachel, not when she's upset and vulnerable."

He's inclined to tell her that Rachel's mindset isn't likely to change anytime soon, not with her slowly catching on that life has screwed her over big time and with puberty approaching in giant steps, but that would serve no purpose. Lisa needs a short-term perspective, not a long-term vista of suffering and horror. "Take her with you. It'll solve the school problem in one fell swoop: she can't attend classes because you're taking her on an 'educational' trip."

"Yeah, that'll be fun!" Lisa says sarcastically. "Which do you think is more wheelchair friendly, a Venetian gondola or the Killing Fields?"

He busies himself getting the box of samosas out of the picnic basket while he wonders how to phrase what he's going to say next.

"I'd go along," he says tentatively.

She twists around to stare at him.

"Not on a gondola," he hastens to clarify, although an unbidden memory surfaces: Lisa in a rowing boat on Bristol's backwaters, trailing her hand in the water, her head thrown back, laughing at something he said. "Just to help out with the logistics of transferring the kid from one location to another and getting the sightseeing done."

Lisa blinks, once, twice, and then a third time. "So what's the catch? You don't do 'no strings attached' deals," she finally says.

"More like chains than strings," he mutters through a mouthful of samosa. Chain. Ball and chain. Odd, where subconscious associations will take you. When she raises a questioning eyebrow he
says, "You've gotta put up with *me*. I'd say that's a major drawback."

"Why would you offer? What's in it for you?"

"Can't it be me being nice? I'm a helpful guy."

She kneels in front of him, moving into his personal space. "What are you trying to do: keep me away from Wilson or from Joel? What's your agenda?"

"You wrong me!" he says with mock pathos (although in truth he is a little hurt).

When she merely lifts an enquiring eyebrow he elaborates, "I don't need to keep you away from Wilson. He's so busy screwing Melanie that if we don't watch out, he'll get stuck in her. Metaphorically speaking, that is. Not so metaphorically speaking, he'll move there if I don't stop him."

She rocks back on her heels, visibly shocked. "He's thinking of moving away?"

"It's the only explanation for Wilson's guilt-fuelled paternal binge with Rachel. Wilson is thinking of moving away, and he's aware that he's the closest thing to a father figure that Rachel has. But not to worry: I'm fixing that. I have Melanie's number. Wilson won't be going anywhere."

"Like you 'fixed' the problem at Rachel's school," Lisa says with foreboding.

"Yeah, roughly. I'm gonna make Melanie an offer she can't refuse," he says, imitating Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*.

He'll call Melanie and inform her in no uncertain terms that it's possible to write vampire tales from anywhere in the country, *including* Philadelphia, and that he, James's/Jimmy's/Jim's spouse, will take umbrage if she should encourage James/Jimmy/Jim to move his primary residence to any place outside the confines of Philadelphia, PA. That's the kind of thing he's good at: making people face up to the choices they've made. Rachel's headmaster *chose* to appropriate scholarships for underprivileged kids in order to finance his science wing. Melanie *chose* to fuck a married man. That's their bad, not his.

Lisa shudders theatrically. "You're creeping me out." And as an afterthought, "Someone should warn Melanie."

"You think anyone will profit from Wilson moving to Boston?" he asks her seriously.

"It would suck — for us, Rachel and me. You couldn't care less where he lives as long as the place has an international airport."

That's wrong on so many levels that he doesn't even know where to start. For one, if he wanted to see her, he'd have to divide his US time between Boston and Philly. For another, it would upset her to lose Wilson; she's gotten used to having him around.

"Hello? Are you still with me?" Lisa asks, flapping a hand in front of his face.

He realises that he hasn't refuted her logic except in his mind. He shakes his head to clear it before saying, "I've kinda gotten attached to the steps that lead from your deck into the yard. And I need the creak of the swing set to fall asleep at night."

"Oh, puh-lease! You're acting like a cross between a Mafia don and Bob the Builder. There has to be a reason, as someone I know likes to say."
"Maybe it's my way of thanking you for helping with the kid." He nods at Joel, still blissfully asleep.

Lisa takes a deep breath. "That's sweet of you — but don't bother," she says. "I'm not sure I can deal with your particular brand of gratitude."

He leans forward and plucks a stray leaf out of her hair. "Maybe I enjoy being here," he says, examining it. *Zelkova serrata*, Japanese Zelkova. He looks up to find her regarding him through narrowed eyes.

"Are you flirting with me?"

He gives her a lopsided grin. (She sure took a long time to catch on.) "And if I was, would you mind?"

Now it's her turn to rummage through the picnic basket, her head practically immersed in it. Her voice is muffled. "Like in Paris? I'd love a reprise! 'Fool me twice' and all that."

Crap, he'd forgotten Paris, storing it on his hard disk in the folder labelled 'To be deleted' and generally pretending to himself that it hadn't happened. (Besides, it was small fry compared to drugging and kidnapping Wilson to get him into hospital for cancer treatment or dumping a changeling on him.) "Lisa, I —"

"Don't!" she says sharply, extracting her head from the basket. "We're good like this. It's working. Just let it rest!"

He can practically see the crack between them widening into an unbridgeable chasm unless he does something to stop its progress. The easy camaraderie of the last weeks, the give-and-take, the teasing — it'll all be over if she withdraws into her shell and gives up on him. He should have had it out with her about Paris ages ago. But that's not who he is; he much prefers sitting situations out, waiting for them to go away. "Paris was —"

"I know what Paris was. You were on a roll and I was collateral damage. I get that. But I'm not getting involved with you again. We work better like this: no emotions; no stress."

He catches hold of her hand. "I can do better; I know I can."

She freezes in the act of withdrawing her hand, an odd look on her face.

"Yeah," he says, not relinquishing his hold and caressing her knuckles with his thumb. "Paris was crap in every respect, but I've been trying."

And he has; since spring he's been attempting to prove, not to her but to himself, that he is more than the sum of his fuck-ups. That he can get a handle on this parenting thing if necessary. That if Wilson should die, he'll be in a position to take over and get the critter through childhood and adolescence. And if he can do that, he can do anything.

Lisa's expression is still frozen. Acquiescence looks different.

"Besides, you owe me a chance," he points out.

"I ... do?" she says, looking uncertain and rattled.

"You ratted me out to Wilson, told him Joel was my kid without giving me a chance to tell him myself. Shoved me up shit creek without a paddle." He doubts that anything would have changed
if Lisa had waited for him to 'fess up, but there's no harm in playing her guilt complex.

"Oh, that!" Lisa says, relaxing visibly and looking down at her hand in his.

"What did you think I meant?" he asks, interested by her reaction.

She shakes her head. "Doesn't matter. Doesn't make a difference." She withdraws her hand and rises, turning away from him. "You don't want ... me. You said so yourself."

Empathy isn't his strongest point, but that doesn't mean other people's feelings don't register. Lisa is emanating hurt and low self-esteem in tsunami-size waves. Some of that is down to that god-awful mother of hers, but he's painfully aware of how their break-up after the Ghastly Gala at PPTH and his subsequent avoidance of her affected her. He gets up too.

"Lisa," he says slowly and with emphasis, "it's never been about not wanting you. It's always been about not wanting to be me."

"Then what has changed?" she asks, whirling around to face him, her hands on her hips. "You've been giving me a wide berth for years, so something must have changed. You always have a reason."

It's a legit question, one he'd have asked if he was in her place. He scratches his chin. "Whether I'm with you or not doesn't change who I am."

"You don't want to be reminded of who you were, if I remember correctly. Don't want to be confronted with your past."

He sighs. He hates it when he has to explain himself. "I don't like certain parts of my past."

"The parts that include me." he corrects her. "Being Peter Barnes was great: no regrets, no major fuck-ups. Not a stellar bloke, but not bad shakes either. But he was a lie; Peter Barnes doesn't exist. I'm Greg House, whether I like it or not: the guy who topped a major relationship fiasco with a violent rampage. An epic fail, with a capital F. ... But if Pete Barnes doesn't exist, then the guy you flirted with in Bristol, who took you to pubs and rowing and sightseeing, with whom you went dancing — that one is Greg House too. Greg House isn't all bad."

He tips up her chin so that she has to look at him. "You said it's all about shades of grey and that Joel can work with a D. Can you work with a D? Because that's what it boils down to: an occasional B, mostly Cs and Ds, and every now and then an F. It's never going to average out to an A."

She looks at him doubtfully, skittishly. He's reminded of Joel who, having taken an involuntary plunge into the deep end of the swimming pool during one of his lessons, now hesitates at the edge of the pool before going into the water, scared and eager at the same time. So far no one, not even Wilson, has suggested that Joel should opt out of swimming altogether. The comparison holds in more than one way, he figures. Lisa, too, once dived into deceptively calm water, only to be pulled down by the undercurrents. She knows the dangers now, while he has grown shallower, more translucent.

"What's in it for you?" she asks him.

He considers looking her up and down with a leer, but drops the idea. She's too tired and rattled for
cruder brands of humour. Instead, he releases her chin in order to pull her close and bury his nose in her hair.

"You smell nice," he murmurs.

She laughs breathlessly. "That's not a reason."

"It's a very good reason," he contradicts her, his hand moving up her spine to caress her shoulder blades. "If we're to spend whole nights together it's a prime consideration. I can close my eyes, I can use earplugs, but I can't stop breathing."

"Wait! How did we get from 'flirting' to 'staying overnight'?" she asks, leaning back in his arm so she can get a good look at him. (She's getting far-sighted in her old age.)

He can't help grinning. "I'm not much good at flirting and dating, and you like putting out."

"So this is about sex."

"It's always about sex or about money. Since neither of us has much money, it has to be sex."

He underlines his words by allowing one of his hands to stray to her butt and cop a feel. She tugs it away with a surreptitious look around her, saying, "You sure know how to romance a girl."

"You don't want romance. You go for a certain type: people like Douglas and Clark — and me. Pushy, pig-headed, lacking in boundaries. The difference between them and me is, they won't put up with your crap. I can and I will. They leave and they don't come back. I will."

She stares at him for ten long seconds, frowning slightly. (Maybe brutal honesty is the wrong strategy.) Then she sighs, leans her forehead on his chest, and says, "Okay."

"Okay?" he echoes, perplexed.

"Yeah." His shirt muffles her voice. "That's probably the most romantic thing you've ever said to me."
They're idly watching as Joel sorts peppers, cucumber sticks and cherry tomatoes into piles and throws them around every now and then, Lisa leaning against his propped up legs, one of his arms casually draped across her stomach while with the other hand he plays with her hair. She's drawing patterns on his forearm with the tips of her fingers, which gives him a funny sensation somewhere below his midriff.

"Switzerland?" she asks.

"What'll you do there?"

"Enjoy the mountain panorama."

"And when you've finished looking? You can't hike with a wheelchair in tow."

"I loved The Sound of Music when I was a kid. I wanted to be like the oldest von Trapp girl."

"That was Austria, not Switzerland. And the girl was a moron."

She turns her face to smile at him. "See, you know the movie, so don't go all 'intellectually superior' on me. And it's all in the Alps, so same difference."

He rolls his eyes in mock despair, resisting the urge to kiss her. "Go for someplace flat."

"What's flat in Europe, Amsterdam?"

"Why Europe?"

"The places I want to go in South America are anything but flat, and I'm thinking Asia might be difficult with a wheelchair. We could stay in the US, I guess." She chuckles morbidly, tracing the veins on the back of his hand. "We could visit Amy in LA."

He shudders. "Europe it is. Barcelona?" Rachel likes beaches and seafood.

"That's where Messi plays, isn't it?" she asks. "Think we can get tickets for a match?"

He narrows his eyes at her in mock jealousy. "You're not ogling muscular young men in skimpy shorts in my presence."

"Rachel is the soccer fan here, not me," Cuddy laughs.

"Yeah, sure," he says, wondering whether he can cop a feel under cover of a little skirmish about her supposed fondness for soccer players. He moves his hand up her ribs, saying, "And I'm just imagining your accelerated heart beat and shallower breathing at the mention of Messi's name."

Feeling her stiffening, he looks up. Wilson and Rachel are approaching. Were approaching. They're a bare hundred yards away, but they've stalled. Or rather, Rachel has come to a complete halt. To say that she's scowling would be an understatement; she's shooting virtual daggers at him. Wilson stops too and turns towards her, every fibre of his body indicating discomfiture and unease, his left hand already up at the bridge of his nose pinching for all it's worth. It's a safe bet that (a) Rachel
has spotted Lisa and him in close communion so to say, and (b) that she isn't happy about it.

Lisa undrapes his arm and rises. He gets up too, looking down at Lisa for a cue as to how she wants him to act. Is he supposed to pretend this never happened? Since Rachel disapproves of him, then has this just un-happened? What misplaced sense of optimism made him believe that Rachel would accept him as easily as she did Chris Clark? His heart literally misses a beat, and then picks up and accelerates while he waits for Lisa's next action.

She turns to him, soft eyes looking up at his face. "Pete, no!" she says, one hand rising to his cheek. That's it, he thinks, straightening and trying to wipe every expression off his face.

She rises on tiptoe, kisses him swiftly on the other cheek and says quietly, "I'll fix this. Just hang in. Don't panic, please!" The hand that's on his cheek trails down via shoulder and arm to his hand, giving it a quick squeeze before she turns away and walks to Rachel.

Wilson, looking distinctly relieved, abandons his post and comes over to where Pete is standing. Pete can sense his disapproval without looking at him. He can't hear what Lisa is saying to Rachel, but it's obvious that it has no impact whatsoever. He doesn't need to hear Rachel's replies to gauge her mood; he can see that they are monosyllabic. Finally Lisa gives up and returns to where he and Wilson are standing awkwardly.

"I guess I'd better take her home," she says, not really looking at either of them.

"Yeah, I think Joel has had enough too," Wilson concurs. "Why don't you go ahead? House and I will pack up over here."

Lisa nods. Pete turns around and busies himself, chucking things randomly back into the picnic hamper and trying not to listen for the sound of Lisa's departure. He's pathetic; he's aware of it. This morning he hadn't even envisioned starting something with Lisa, and now he's behaving like a lovelorn teen, unable to face rejection with stoicism. Someone touches his arm. He freezes.

"Will you come downstairs later?" she asks.

He nods without looking up. They'll have to talk sometime, he supposes. Lisa will wind her way out of what she stumbled into today, quoting rational arguments, assuring him that he'll be better off without her, and neatly side-stepping her true reason for giving up on them: her daughter. He'll be civilised; he'll accept her arguments and add a few of his own, because she's right. If Rachel doesn't accept him, then Lisa will feel guilty about being with him on anything between three and twenty-three levels. They'll agree not to let this unfortunate interlude poison the atmosphere between them, part with mutual professions of good will and understanding, and avoid each other assiduously for weeks, months, or however long it takes Wilson to move to Boston.

Wilson watches him 'tidy up' without offering to lend a hand. He only swings into action when Pete tries to pull the picnic blanket out from under Joel, snatching the pooper up before he can tip over.

"Seriously, House?" Wilson snarls as he places Joel in the stroller. "Get a grip! Did you expect Rachel to jump enthusiastically out of her wheelchair, shouting, 'Howse, how wonderful! I've loved you since I was a toddler, I've missed you so much, and I've always wanted you to be my daddy!' or what?"

"I didn't expect anything," he mutters.

Wilson raises his hands defensively. "Okay, I'll attribute your bad mood to the music, which I'll admit could hardly be worse." The Rolling Raccoons' rendering of 'Love Me Tender' sounds like a
bad parody, with the lead singer missing the high notes and wailing his way through the lower ones.

"I mean," Pete explains, pushing the stroller from the lawn onto the path, "I didn't expect any reaction from her at all. I get that she doesn't want her mother to date, but …"

He leaves the thought hanging. Yeah, he isn't the world's greatest dad, but fatherhood isn't what's up for debate here. He merely wants to be with Lisa, that's all. He isn't claiming any sort of relationship with Rachel, he isn't asking her to respect him, listen to him, or even like him. All he wants is a non-aggression pact, but even that seems to be asking too much.

Wilson smiles coldly. "You forget that you're married to me."

"Pot meet kettle!"

"Beside the point," Wilson says. "Rachel is outraged because a man in a committed relationship is hitting on her mom."

Pete can't help feeling a twinge of amusement. "She has moral objections?"

"She said (I quote), 'Why is Pete flirting with Mom? He's married to you!' Wilson does a passable imitation of Rachel's treble. He adds drily, 'I think she was hoping I'd challenge you to a duel with pistols at dawn to restore my honour and bring you back onto the path of virtue — should you be fortunate enough to survive. I got a distinct 'kill him!' vibe from her."

"I assume you informed her that we're all about 'openness' and 'trust' and 'not tying each other down'," Pete says, lifting his hands off the stroller to sketch quotation marks.

Wilson snorts. "I didn't get down to telling her that you have a predilection for sham marriages. Cuddy was there before I could rob her of her youthful innocence and destroy her illusions of romance and eternal love."

The matter rests while Wilson wrestles Joel into his seat (Pete opts for the less challenging task of folding and stowing away the stroller) and pops his favourite nursery rhyme CD into the car stereo (not even Wilson is up to another repeat of Joel's musical efforts), but once they pull out of Mayfield Pete picks up the topic again.

"How'd you get Melanie's kids to accept your adulterous relationship?" he asks, partly because he is genuinely interested in a foolproof recipe for dealing with your love interest's crabby kids, partly because he is annoyed with Wilson for succeeding in an area where he has just failed spectacularly.

Wilson has the decency to look discomfited. "They don't … I mean …" he blusters.

Pete chortles. "You haven't told them you're married."

"It hasn't come up. You don't introduce yourself to a couple of children saying, 'Hey, I'm James and I'm married.' Melanie knows, though," Wilson says, on the defensive.

"They haven't noticed the ring?"

Wilson flushes furiously.

"Okay, no ring," Pete says, pulling his ring off and slipping it into his wallet.

"How about 'no Cuddy'?" Wilson suggests.
"Says the expert on sexual abstinence."

"Millions of women on either side of the Atlantic are willing to drown themselves in your baby blues, but you have to chase the one woman who —"

"I didn't chase her," Pete defends himself, interrupting Wilson because he doesn't need to hear why dating Lisa is shitabulous in a thousand different ways. "I suggested that she should take a break, go and chill somewhere, and suddenly she was all over me."

Wilson waves Pete's words aside. "She has managed to stick to a self-imposed restraining order for over nine months, giving you a wide berth. What has changed? … Oh, shoot! This is my fault."

Although Pete concurs heartily, he's pleasantly surprised by Wilson's level of self-awareness.

Wilson continues, "I should have made sure that there was someone — someone who isn't you — waiting in the wings to take over before I …"

"Before you decided to move to Boston," Pete augments when Wilson doesn't complete his sentence.

"Boston?" Wilson says, turning to Pete for so long that Pete leans forward to grasp the abandoned steering wheel.

"Boston. City in Massachusetts. Place of residence of one Melanie Robbins, author of shallow teen lit."

"I'm not moving to Boston. Nothing is further from my mind."

"Get your eyes back on the road!"

Wilson thankfully returns his attention to the traffic, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

Pete leans back. "You're lying," he says.

"I have no intention of moving to Boston. If I did, I'd have no excuse not to see my parents regularly. ... Goodness, that sounds callous!" When Pete doesn't react, Wilson gives him a quick glance. "I'm staying here indefinitely. Melanie is flexible; her kids will be off to college soon. I enjoy sharing a house with Cuddy and Rachel. They're good for Joel and good for me. I'm happy here. Besides, Pearson is retiring in two years. The dean has indicated that I'm a strong contender for his post."

"Ah, buying your loyalty, because he fears you'll take subtle revenge for Lisa's disgrace."

"It can't be because I'm qualified for the post, respected by the other oncologists, and generally well liked in the hospital?"

Pete doesn't bother to reply, because Wilson is obviously staging a little diversion. He subjects Wilson to an intense scrutiny. "If you're not moving away, then why are you behaving as though you've wronged Rachel and Lisa?"

"I'm not —"

Pete reaches over and mutes the volume of the car stereo. Today the black sheep won't sell any wool. "No?" he says softly.

"Baa-baa," Joel calls from the rear seat. "Baa-baa!" His voice rises to a plaintive wail.
"House, for heaven's sake, turn his music back on! You know how he gets when he doesn't have music in the car."

Joel starts bawling. Pete lays his hand protectively over the volume control so that Wilson can't get at it.

Wilson caves. "Okay, okay, I'll talk."

Pete turns the volume up again, making sure that only the rear speakers are active. "Spill the beans."

Wilson is silent for so long that Pete places an admonishing finger on the volume control again. "You remember when Cuddy and Chris Clark went splitsville?" Wilson finally asks.

"Vaguely." He wasn't exactly thick as thieves with Lisa at that point. "Lisa refused his marriage proposal. And then …"

He pauses, realising that he has no idea why they finally broke up. Clark doesn't seem like the kind of guy who'd let an ill-timed proposal impede him on his pilgrimage to perfect bliss. Pete remembers Lisa looking under the weather for a few days before snapping out of it, but she didn't volunteer any information and he didn't ask. What is bizarre is that he can't remember Wilson gossiping about the break-up either. "You had a finger in that pie?"

"What did you do?"

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you, because if Cuddy finds out, I'm roadkill."

Pete walks his hand along his thigh towards the car stereo, his index and middle fingers scissoring like legs.

"I may have indicated that Cuddy's sex life is diverse, comprehensive, and extensive," Wilson says hurriedly.

Pete pretends to ponder this, scratching his chin. "Not good enough. We're talking about someone from the State Department whose minion planted bugs in our apartment. He'll have checked your story."

"Precisely. And he'll have found out — though he probably knew as much before — that you dated Cuddy. And that there has been gossip about Cuddy and you ever since she employed you. That there have been rumours about you and me ever since I started working at PPTh. That you and I shared an apartment — and possibly more — years ago. That you started dating Cuddy shortly after you moved out of our shared apartment. And that I lived in Cuddy's household for months. That I was engaged to her for a short period about two years ago. That we now live in the same house, all of us. That there seem to be no clear demarcation lines between us."

"You told him that we — you, Lisa, and I — are a threesome?"

"I prefer the term 'polyamory', but — I didn't tell him anything. I merely sowed the seeds; he must have watered them with nourishing rumours or assumptions."

Pete leans back. "You are one evil bitch, James Wilson."

"Let's not be overly lavish with compliments," Wilson says, his smile complacent.

"Song's over, buddy. This one is 'Yankee Doodle',' Pete says, turning towards the back so that Joel can hear him over the cacophony coming from the speakers. He has no preferences either way, but twenty repetitions don't improve any of those nursery rhymes. He'll have to check online for jazz or blues versions.

"Baa-baa," Joel insists, his eyebrows drawn together in a frown, the corners of his mouth turning downward dangerously. "More Baa-baa."

"Just put 'Baa-baa, Black Sheep' on endless loop," Wilson says, looking over his shoulder as he changes lanes.

"You want to enable him by giving in to his demands every time he bawls?" Pete asks. "What kind of parenting is that?"


"I heard him."

"His first two-word sentence; a verbal milestone. It begs for positive reinforcement."

Pete fiddles around with the car stereo until the opening bars of 'Baa-baa, Black Sheep' trickle from the speakers and the 'loop' icon appears on the stereo's display. "There you go, critter. I'm glad you're showing signs of cerebral development; I was worried that you take after your mother."

Wilson chuckles bitterly. "As in 'low maintenance', 'gullible', or 'easy to manipulate'? No such luck, House. He's every bit as obstinate and tiring as you are."

Back at the apartment they have a slight disagreement about whose turn it is to put Joel to bed, Pete stating that he fulfilled his daily duty in Mayfield (Wilson can't know that Lisa stepped in for him), whereby it is now Wilson's turn, while Wilson insists that Mayfield doesn't count, being reparation for the book that Pete trashed.

"I can't stop you or Cuddy from behaving like idiotic teens," Wilson finally says, "but I won't encourage or enable you by doing more than my share of parenting. Suck it up."

He backs out of Joel's bedroom, pointing a finger at Pete. "Don't give me those puppy eyes and don't pretend you believe that all you're asking for is a farewell visit because she'll kick you out on your sorry ass. She won't. Unfortunately. Your problem isn't Rachel's whole-hearted and well-deserved disapproval; Cuddy can brave veritable tsunamis of negative vibes from everyone around her, and then some. Your problem is that while Cuddy will insist that Rachel's animosity isn't your problem (and even believe it herself), she'll nevertheless expect you to do something about it."

So he reads Joel a book about a badass rabbit who rides a motorcycle through the forest and harasses the sylvan fauna with a wooden mallet. The ending is lame, so he skips it; luckily Joel doesn't seem to know this book well enough to notice. When the kid finally falls asleep, he tiptoes out of the room. Wilson is in the kitchen, preparing a marinade for next day's roast. Pete drops the baby monitor onto the kitchen counter, puts on a clean shirt and brushes his teeth.

When he returns to the kitchen to get Wilson's spare key for Lisa's place Wilson, glancing at him sideways, asks with studied indifference, "Will you be back for breakfast?"

He hesitates. Wilson could be wrong about Lisa's robustness, in which case he'll be back in
roughly an hour, licking his wounds. Then again, if Wilson is right — it has been known to happen —, then he'll stay an itsy bit longer than an hour at Lisa's place. Maybe not all night, but one never knows, does one? And then, in the morning, he could say something like, 'That was nice; we can do it again sometime, but now I have to have breakfast with my husband.' ... It doesn't take amazing relationship skills to figure out that this is not an option.

"I'm making banana-and-blueberry pancakes," Wilson purrs, adding (unnecessarily), "Joel likes them."

Of course Joel likes them! Everyone likes them. Pete swallows hard. Ever since Lisa put Rachel on a diet, the morning repast in the Cuddy household has consisted of muesli with fruit and yoghurt and other misery-inducing options. (He came, saw, and fled from the Cuddy breakfast table the first time Wilson absconded to Boston.) Even if Lisa was to soften sufficiently to make pancakes, they'd be ... rotten compared to Wilson's.

Wilson's mouth twitches. "Relax. If you can't bear to leave Cuddy, then just bring the girls with you. Now go before your plight moves me to tears!"

He nods gratefully, grabs the keys and heads downstairs.

Lisa is cross-legged on the couch, her laptop perched precariously on her knees, print-outs on the coffee table in front of her. She's frowning at the screen, her teeth worrying her lower lip, while her fingers type an occasional word.

"Hey," he says quietly after observing her undetected for a few minutes.

She looks up and smiles, lifting her laptop and placing it on the coffee table before uncurling her legs. Then she pats the couch next to her invitingly. (Maybe Wilson is right.)

"Another job application," she volunteers after he has sat down, with a wave at her laptop. "The city needs someone to head the health centre on Woodland Avenue. And a medical centre in Center City is looking for endocrinologists."

"Hmm," he says, shelving the information whilst looking down at her face for a clue regarding her intentions.

"Pete, I'm not going to back out just because Rachel is suffering from early-onset puberty," Lisa says. "Maybe it's my fault; I never dated much, and when I did, she mostly didn't know about it."

"Clark?" he prompts, relaxing just a little as he leans slightly towards her.

"Honestly, do we have to talk about my exes?" Lisa asks.

"If they're pertinent to the subject, then yes."

She sniffs exasperatedly. "I inflicted Chris on her in small doses at first, so she'd have time to get used to him. I didn't think I'd need to do that with you; she's known you for ages."

"Maybe that's the problem."

"How do you mean?"

He takes her hand in his, tracing over her knuckles with his thumb, then running a finger along metacarpals and phalanges of her index finger. She leans her head against his shoulder, sighing contentedly. He says, "Rachel doesn't have me down as your boyfriend. She sees me as a fixture in
Wilson's life, not in yours. She can't remember the first time we dated, any more than I can, and you never told her about the second time, did you?"

Lisa shakes her head. "Plus, she has grown up with my mother's stories of Big Bad House. I don't think she pictures you as the perpetrator of all the misdeeds that my mother attributes to you, but ... she knows they're about you. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah." He gets what Lisa is trying to say. Rachel isn't actively scared of him, but she has been indoctrinated to see him as someone you wouldn't wish on your frenemy, let alone on your mother. "What did she say?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. She refused to comment on the situation, refused to acknowledge that it exists, even. It's as though she believes that if she doesn't talk about it, it'll be gone by tomorrow. She withdrew to the swing the moment we got home."

"She's out on the swing now?" Pete asks, pointing his thumb at the yard. It's pitch dark outside, and although daytime temperatures at Mayfield were in the balmy seventies, they're around sixty degrees now and dropping fast.

Lisa nods. "I took a throw out when she refused to come back inside. If she stays outside much longer, I'll have to get a heat pad and the extension cord."

He leans in to kiss her, first lightly, then more deeply. When it gets to the point that he'd really rather not stop, he pulls back, enjoying Lisa's frustrated mewl since it pretty much mirrors his state of mind. But there's business to be taken care of, and kissing Lisa was meant to motivate him to get it done, not keep him from doing it.

"I'll go out and talk to her," he says, rising without relinquishing her hand.

"Seriously?"

"Yep." (Once he has cut through the layers of social convention that Wilson plasters around his advice, he can sometimes find a solid core of insight.)

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Lisa says, sitting up and hanging onto his hand.

"Don't worry, I don't antagonise kids half as much as I do adults," he says, as much to convince himself as her. He bends down to kiss her neck and bury his face in her hair — he enjoys doing that no matter which shampoo she uses — before freeing himself from her hold and going outside.

The only light outside comes from the door to the living room, yellow streaks along the wooden slats of the deck. The yard itself is completely dark, at least for someone who is coming from the light. He can hear the steady creak of the swing, but he can barely make out its form on the lawn. He moves to the balustrade around the deck and leans on it, considering the pros and cons of having a smoke while his eyes adjust to the darkness. The cons outweigh the pros, if only because Rachel hates cigarette smoke almost as much as her mother does, so he takes tentative steps out into the yard.

The lawn is a monument to Hernandez's gardening abilities: true to his prediction, it is now a dense, lush carpet, kept at a uniform length of two inches. Hernandez preys on plants that he classifies as weeds — by his definition anything that he hasn't planted — with the ferociousness of a goshawk protecting his nest. He has laid out flagstone walks to every place that might be of interest to Rachel: the swing set, where she spends most of the day; the sand box, which she gives a wide berth; the place where Hernandez intends to build a stone barbecue grill. (He is undeterred
Pete walks along the flagstones to the swing set, wishing he'd brought a coat and reciting under his breath:

"Little Rabbit Foo Foo
Riding through the forest,
Scooping up the field mice and bopping them on the head.
Down came the Good Fairy and said,
'Little Rabbit Foo Foo, I don't like your attitude,' ..."

"What's with you?" Rachel's disembodied voice asks.

Pete snorts quietly. "Too many brain-addling toddlers' books."

He turns his back on the lights from the house and concentrates on distinguishing objects in the dark. He can see Rachel's swing, a darker blur in the now blue-ish surroundings, but he can't make out her features. Next to it Joel's toddler seat — the nest swing was dismantled again after the Great Tumble — vibrates lightly. Grabbing hold of the ropes, Pete lever(s) himself onto it, perching precariously on the bucket seat. The horizontal beam of the swing set creaks ominously.

"And what's with you?" he asks Rachel.

"Nothing! ... You're too heavy for Joel's swing."

"We'll see." He's feeling cold and he dislikes not being able to read her expression. He's at a disadvantage, because the rod cells in Rachel's eyes have adapted to the dark already. "Let's keep this short. You don't like me. I'm fine with that. If you make your mom choose between us, she'll choose you. I'm not fine with that. What do I have to do so that you accept that I'm dating your mom?"

"What about Wilson?" Rachel asks with a hint of indignation. "You're married to him."

"Wilson doesn't care." That's a half-truth. Wilson disapproves, but he does so as a matter of principle, not because he's married to Pete. "He's seeing someone on the side too."

"He isn't," Rachel says uncertainly.

"He is so! Ask him."

After a beat Rachel says, "You're supposed to love each other, not other people."

He considers questioning the way she equates love with eros, but that's a distinction that has led older and wiser people than Rachel down the winding route of digression and diversion. "Marriage is a social contract. Means, it's like a game: the people playing it can negotiate the rules and the aim of the marriage, like you invent new rules for chess when you play it with Wilson, but have to stick to the classic rules when you play with me. People get married for tons of reasons. Love is probably the least important of them."

Rachel's tone is truculent as she asks, "What reasons?"

"Money, social status, children, convenience, societal expectations, to name a few. Sexual attraction."

Rachel takes her own sweet time to digest this revelation. It's anyone's guess whether she has
comprehended any of it. "Why'd you marry Wilson, if you don't love him?"

His personal adaption of Mark Twain's aphorism regarding the truth reads, 'When in doubt, tell a lie.' He scans through a few promising fibs, but discards them again. Rachel is bound to discover the truth sooner or later, and when she does … He shuts his mind to the realisation that he's assuming he'll still feature in Rachel's life when she discovers that he is Joel's biological parent, and concentrates on the task at hand.

"Joel," he says. "We married because of Joel. Besides, I do ..." He can't bring himself to say that he loves Wilson, but he comforts himself with the thought that his feelings are none of the girl's business and that she'd equate 'love' with something mushy and sentimental anyway, not with what he means. Meanwhile, the toddler seat cuts into his thigh.

"You don't even like Joel!"

"Family isn't about likes or dislikes. No one asks you whether you like your mother, do they? You're expected to cope as long as she doesn't neglect you or beat you to a pulp. Same with parents: they have entered a binding commitment, regardless of whether they 'like' their kids or not."

"Mom loves me!"

"You can love people without liking them," he points out.

Rachel broods over his words. "You're saying you love Joel?"

Actually, he meant that he's responsible for Joel, committed to ensuring his well-being the way Lisa is committed to Rachel, but explaining that would mean letting Rachel in on Joel's parentage and swearing her to secrecy until Amy relinquishes her legal hold on the kid. Which might be ... never. He can't place the burden of truth on Rachel: should she slip up and tell someone (Douglas, for instance), there'd be hell to pay. He pictures Joel ripped out of Wilson's arms and returned to Amy, and his heart sinks.

Where does commitment end and love start?

"Yeah," he says quietly. "Yeah, I suppose so."

"What'll happen if Wilson decides that he doesn't want you to love Mom and divorces you?"

"That isn't going to happen," he says, certain about Wilson as he is about little else. "Wilson won't drop me. He's innately incapable of abandoning me."

"But if you and Wilson aren't married according to the real rules —"

"You've got this wrong. Other people are married according to simplified rules. They can say, 'I don't love you anymore,' and then they're out. Wilson and I are in the Quidditch version of marriage: we don't get to decide when the game is over and we have to keep going until the snitch is caught, no matter how long it takes, what the weather is like, or whether we're injured."

"And if you don't keep going?" Rachel asks. Again, he wonders whether she's following him.

"Then we lose Joel. If Wilson and I muck this up, then there's a good chance that the sprog's mother will step in and take him back."
Rachel says, "Maybe Wilson will be mad at Mom for loving you, and then he'll ... move out and leave us."

"Wait, your problem is Wilson?"

"Yeah. If you hadn't turned up, he'd have married Mom."

The Higher Power that he doesn't believe in grant him patience! The kid is sulking, not because she is convinced that her mother deserves a better boyfriend than he is (i.e. anyone but him), but because she's rooting for 'Wilson as Daddy'. There's nothing he can do about that; even if he tried, he wouldn't be able to take the place she has planned for Wilson in her life.

"If I hadn't 'turned up', as you put it, there wouldn't be a Wilson anymore."

"He would've married Mom if he hadn't married you," Rachel reiterates, unimpressed by his medical awesomeness.

The seat has interrupted the blood flow to his left leg, numbing it. He hops off the swing with more vigour than elegance and proceeds to massage his thigh and buttocks. "I doubt it."

"Everyone says so."

"Who's 'everyone'?"

"Julia. And the nurses at the hospital. They told me Mom and Wilson were engaged, and then he left her for you."

He considers explaining what really happened in the wake of Wilson's liver failure, but it's beside the point, really. "You should be mad at Wilson, then, not at me."

"I'm not mad at you," Rachel says with audible reluctance. "I just don't want Wilson to go away because he's mad at everyone."

"Perhaps it'll be the other way round. He may want to move away to, uh, be closer to the woman he's seeing, but he'll have to stay, because I want to stay here with Lisa."

"You think so?" Rachel says hopefully.

No, he doesn't. Wilson won't change his agenda to suit Pete's love life any more than he, Pete, will adapt his lifestyle accommodate Wilson's romantic aspirations. But Wilson will stay, if not for the sake of Pete's happiness, then for Joel's (because Wilson is convinced that Joel will benefit from contact with his bio dad), and for Rachel's (because he knows he's more of a father to Rachel than Simon, Pete, or anyone else that Lisa drags along can ever be), and for Lisa's (because if Lisa dates guys like Pete, she's going to need a shoulder to cry on every so often). He is needed by at least three people here, sometimes to a greater and sometimes to a lesser extent, never so much by one individual that he's bled dry, and yet never completely expendable.

All of that, however, is much too complicated for Rachel. What she is asking for is reassurance — not his strongest suit, but still.

"Yes," he says, putting as much confidence into his voice as he can. And to stop her from asking more complicated, unpleasant questions he adds, "It's cold; you should come inside."

"Yeah," Rachel says, her tone indicating that she has no intention of moving anytime soon.
It's Lisa's problem, not his. He turns to go, wincing slightly at the pins and needles in his left leg.

"Pete!" Rachel calls before he has gone ten yards. "Don't you think you're too old to date?"

He's speechless. It's only when Rachel giggles that he realises that he's being ragged. He flips her the bird as a parting salute.

The living room is quiet and seems deserted. Looking around for Lisa, he spots her stretched along the couch, one arm under her head. She's asleep. He considers his options. He could wake her, but Lisa tends to get pissy when she's exhausted. She'll drag her feet to her bedroom and collapse on her bed, possibly yelling at him for allowing her to drop off on the couch in the first place. Better to leave her where she is. He looks around for the throw that's normally draped over the back of the couch, but it isn't there. Right, it's outside with Rachel.

He returns to the swing. "Time's up."

When there's no reaction from Rachel, he reaches for the winch control and lowers the swing to the ground. "It's past ten and Lisa has fallen asleep on the couch. You can either follow me inside quietly, or I'll wake her up so that she comes and gets you. It's your choice, but remember that she's a grouch when her beauty sleep is interrupted."

Rachel huffs theatrically, but levers herself out of the nest swing, indicating that he should push the wheelchair closer. He does so and holds it steady while she climbs inside. The winch, while undoubtedly a major improvement, isn't the perfect solution to Rachel's mobility problems.

"What happened to the service dog you were supposed to get?"

"It's still in training. Mom says it'll take another month till I can go into handler training."

"Taking their own sweet time, aren't they?"

"I mucked it up," Rachel says without much regret. "The dog people said we needed a scrip from the doctor in order to get a service dog. When the doctor asked me how I was coping with daily life, I said I was doing fine and could manage by myself, coz I thought he won't let me have a dog if I can't take care of it and feed it and all that. So then the doctor said I didn't need a service dog, and Mom blew her top, and then we needed a new doctor for me, and all that took a while. Can you push me up the ramp?"

He goes inside ahead of Rachel, opening doors for her along the way so that she doesn't bump into doorframes and wake Lisa. Rachel heads straight for her bedroom.

"Bathroom," he says from her doorway. "Catheterise."

Rachel glowers. Pete jerks his thumb towards the bathroom.

"Okay, but I'm not brushing my teeth. Or my hair."

"Whatevs."

He removes himself from the doorway so she can pass, and watches her enter the bathroom. He stays to wait for sounds that indicate that she's doing as she's been told: the cupboard that holds catheterisation kits being opened, the whoosh and whump of Rachel moving from the wheelchair onto the toilet. Then he returns to the living room and spreads the throw over Lisa. No, he isn't going to get all sentimental and drop a kiss on Lisa's cheek — straightening her hair for aesthetic reasons doesn't count as a caress — so after turning off the lights except for the floor lamp in the
corner he turns to go.

On second thought, however, he makes a short detour to Lisa's bathroom. Her favourite shampoo, the vanilla and orange one, is in the shower. (Lisa, eschewing baths because she is convinced that they will age her skin, nevertheless takes showers long and hot enough to dehydrate an elephant's cutaneous layers.) He grabs the bottle, and another of her body lotion for good measure. In her bedroom he pauses again to switch on the lamp on the nightstand. A few lights here and there will ease Lisa's way later.

He sits down on the edge of her bed and bounces experimentally a few times. Nice and springy, her mattress. If Rachel weren't a cripple, she'd probably come here to bounce on the bed; chances are that Joel will do so as soon as he figures out that Lisa has the biggest, bounciest bed in the house. He throws himself onto his back, his arms spread-eagled across the bed, and looks at the room from that perspective. The curtains have a floral pattern, bed and armoire are of solid cherry, the ceiling lamp is one of those pendant affairs with a cloth shade. It's not bad, but very — feminine.

He turns his head into the pillow, breathing in deeply to take in the scent. It's a mixture of her shampoo, her perfume, and her body odour — a mélange that is so much more her than just the shampoo. Letting the bottle of shampoo and the lotion drop from his outstretched hand onto the rug, he buries his face in her pillow. He has no memories of spending nights in her bed, absorbing every particle of her scent. All he can remember is tussles on worn-out mattresses in sleazy hotels, Lisa usually rising and getting dressed again long before midnight. Oh yeah, and that first fateful encounter in his apartment in Bristol, and the one time she'd spent a weekend with him in a motel, just before he'd discovered his true identity. That had been nice: waking up next to her, her warm body tucked into his, her hair spread over the pillow ... He wakes (sort of) to a muffled exclamation — something about shoes on the bed — followed by small hands tugging at his trainers. An ineffectual attempt to get his legs onto the bed, which he supports by grunting and rolling over. Sounds from the bathroom — the toilet flushing and running water — which lull him back to sleep. Then, the mattress dipping and the duvet being pulled out from under him. Half awake and irritated by the light from the nightstand lamp (which he turned on, idiot that he is), he growls in disapproval until warmth returns in form of a soft body spooned up against his and the duvet being tugged over him. The stupid light finally goes off. He drapes an arm comfortably around her waist, drawing her closer and dropping a sleepy kiss on her shoulder. "Night," she mutters.

If she thinks either of them will get much sleep now that she has cuddled up next to him with her butt practically in his groin, then she has another think coming. But for the moment, he's good just holding her, with his nose buried in her hair and a hand caressing her hip and comfortable warmth all along his body. Yeah, he could get used to this.

The End

Chapter End Notes


A big hooray for my intrepid beta, Menolly, who accompanied me all the way, was endlessly supportive and encouraging, and contributed great ideas and tons of tongue-
in-cheek comments.

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