

*When I think of Princeton I think of many images:
ivy-covered buildings, students arguing philosophy in the dining hall,
shadows in the Yard. It is truly a great privilege to attend
a school like Princeton.*

CHAPTER ONE

THE GOOD NEWS OF PRINCETON

The flight from Newark to Hartford took no more than fifty-eight minutes, but she still managed to get her heart broken three times. This was a feat at once pathetic and, bizarrely, something of an underachievement, Portia thought, making a painful note on the reader's card of an academically unadmittable Rhode Island girl and shoving the folder back into her bag. Any of her colleagues, she thought ruefully, might have had their hearts broken by twice as many applicants in the same amount of time.

In the real world, of course, Portia was no slower a reader than anyone else. She could fully scan *The New York Times* while waiting in line for her habitual (and necessary) Americano at Small World Coffee, half a block from the FitzRandolph Gate of Princeton University. She had even, once, completed Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* during a weeklong visit to her mother in Vermont (when, admittedly, the whole point had been to evade Susannah, especially when she wanted to talk). Fifteen hundred pages in seven days—not too shabby. But she was well aware of her reputation as the slowest reader in Princeton's Office of Admission (singular, *nota bene*—not plural), and she probably deserved it. With an application open before her, Portia could almost feel herself decelerate, parsing the sentences and correcting the grammar, fixing the spelling, rereading to make sure she at least knew what they'd managed to say, if not what they'd meant to say, even as she took the temperature of her anxiety at falling behind, because she couldn't stop herself from lingering, lingering, lingering . . . on the kids.

She wasn't supposed to think of them as kids, she knew that. Few of

them sounded like kids, they were trying so hard not to be young. They were ventriloquizing the attorneys they thought they wanted to be, or the neuroscientists, or the statesmen. They were trying to sound as though they already worked at Morgan Stanley, or toiled at a feeding station in Darfur, or were due in surgery. But so often the newness of them, the flux of their emerging selves, would poke through the essays or the recommendations, stray references to how Jimmy had grown since his difficult freshman year or Jimmy's own regrettable use of the word *awesome*. Their confidence was sometimes so hollow, it practically echoed off the page. They were all so young, even the ones who had already seen so much.

In this batch, on this brief flight, already there had been a wizened seventeen-year-old who lived with her younger brother in an apartment in South Boston, their parents back home in Taiwan. She wrote of the microwavable meals she prepared for her bisected family and the bureaucracy she had learned to manipulate for herself, the weekly phone calls from Mom, who had never been able to attend a parent-teacher conference, being unable to speak English and, incidentally, on the other side of the planet, but wasn't it worth it? Because she had six AP scores of 5 and four more exams still to be taken? Because she was first in her class of four hundred, with a very realistic chance of getting into a first-tier college and achieving her dream of becoming a doctor? And the boy from Holyoke whose mother had left her two oldest children to cross the border for her day job in a medical supply factory and her night job at Wendy's, whose father was described as "Unknown/No Information," who was a physics whiz and captain of the soccer team and All-State, who was applying not just for admission to Princeton, but for admission to America. And this last, from a girl in Greenwich, Connecticut, who was smart enough to know that she wasn't smart enough, only just very, very smart, and wrote with preemptive defeat about her hospital internship and the inspiration of her older brother, who had survived childhood cancer to attend law school. Smart enough to know about, or at least imagine, the ones she would be compared with, who had been handed so much less than she, and done so much more with what they had, while the children of privilege were penalized for having been fortunately born, comfortably raised, and excellent in all of the ordinary ways. Sometimes those were the ones who got to Portia most of all.

It was a sparsely occupied flight, of course; if it hadn't been, if there

were, for example, a businessman or grandmother or—worst of all—high school-age kid within sight of her seat, she would never have extracted from her bag and opened, and then studied, the contents of these very private, very freighted files. Instinctively, Portia closed the folders whenever the single, tight-lipped attendant cruised the aisle, glancing at people's laps. She dropped her white plastic cup of tepid coffee into the attendant's proffered garbage bag or made the appropriate noises when he said they were ten minutes from Bradley, holding her place with a finger as she held the folders shut. This was the unwritten code of her profession and Portia's own inclination for secrecy, neither one more than the other, really, as if the numbers, letters, declarations, and aspirations within each file outweighed the secrets of governments or espionage cells—which, to the teenagers they represented, they surely did. Outside the window, beyond the ridge of the descending wing, the autumn trees of New England sharpened: electric red-and-yellow branches and spiky green pines divided by the highway. This trip, late in the season for its kind, would be her final airing before the approaching cataclysm of paperwork. In this post-Early Decision era, there were no longer any foothills in Princeton's admissions calendar; there was only flat land, then Everest, and the twenty orange folders in her bag were merely the first-from-the-gate forerunners of the onslaught to come. When that bell curve hit its apex in a month's time, she and her co-workers would simply disappear into their offices or their homes, emerging only sporadically until midwinter, before finally crawling out the other side, pale and gasping from beneath all that aspiration, all that desperation, in April.

But today, this brilliant New England day, would be calm seas before the storm. Today, Portia would preach the good news of Princeton to the preemptively converted, and with a glad heart, because at long last she was here in New England and shot of the West Coast, in whose intense, teeming schools she had toiled for the past five years. She had been waiting for the New England district to open up, waiting for her colleague Rand (actually Randolph) Cumming to vacate the helm, something he had shown no inclination to do. Rand had never once set foot beyond the charmed circle of venerated and wealthy educational institutions, not since the day his parents dropped him off at a certain tradition-draped boarding school (as, Portia liked to imagine, a howling babe, "untimely ripped" from his mother's breast). In due course, he had swanned off to Princeton (BA) and Yale (JD) and then, as if the whole notion of practicing law had been merely a

whim, straight back to the (literally) ivy-covered walls of his alma mater's Office of Admission, where he spent the next two decades tending the very prep school garden from which he had sprung and becoming, more or less, the very personification of what most people imagined an Ivy League admissions officer to be: bow-tied, well groomed, class ringed, and always ready to be of service to an old classmate or a classmate's chum, whose fine young son was a rising senior with a letter in squash and a winning way with a sailboat.

Rand was, in fact, one of those boulders around which the waters of Ivy League admissions had parted, leaving him in a wake of soaring academic standards and dizzying diversity. He had bristled through every clank of progress, every painful adjustment in policy that aimed to transform the university from its dunderheaded Jazz Age uniformity to its rightful place as the best of all possible universities for the best of all possible students. The new Princeton, so wondrous and varied, so . . . multicolored, was not his Princeton, and his suffering was evident. He was an angry man, a furious man, beneath his veneer of impeccable manners.

He had been waiting himself, Portia supposed, for the retirement of Martin Quilty, his chief antagonist in the struggle of tradition versus merit and the dean who had brought coeducation and surging minority enrollment, so that he could begin the slow but necessary work of turning back the clock; but when that blessed event finally arrived, Rand had found himself passed over in the most offensive way possible. He soldiered on for a year or two, making his opinion on just about everything known to the new dean whenever possible, and then, quite suddenly, the previous May, he had left—completing the circle of his unadventurous journey by taking the post of college counselor at his very own prep school.

And there, Portia knew, he was destined to prove as irritating a voice in her ear as when he'd occupied the office just down the hall from her.

But it was worth it to have New England. She had wanted New England for years, coveting the post as she'd watched Rand Cumming glad-hand his cronies at Groton and Concord and Taft. She had considered asking for it whenever there was a district reshuffle (Rand had seemed oddly immune to these.) And she had made sure she was the first one in Clarence Porter's office to ask for it—Clarence being the new dean in question—when the opportunity finally arose. Not *only* (she explained) because she herself was a product of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont—in

roughly that order—and not *only* because her mother, now a Vermonter, was getting on in years (hint, hint) and she would be personally grateful for the opportunity to drop in on her more often, but also because the New England district featured the kind of boarding school interaction she hadn't much experienced in the California-Oregon-Hawaii-Washington-Alaska applicant pool. That in particular was a deficit in her experience, a deficit unbecoming an admissions officer, and that embarrassed her. Serving Princeton to her utmost ability called for fluency with its traditional feeder schools: the Grotons and Choates and Andovers, whose top students the university had been cherry-picking for centuries. She had reminded Clarence of the miles she had logged for Princeton, not only along the coasts and valleys of California, but, before that, along the empty highways of the Midwest, plucking genius 4-H'ers and ambitious dreamers from the Great Plains. She had personally recruited the Inuit girl from Sitka, Alaska, who'd won Princeton's sole Rhodes scholarship last year. She had found Brian Jack, homeschooled (self-schooled) in some barely existent Oregon town, and made sure he chose them over Yale. (His senior thesis, a novel, had just been published by Knopf, showering Princeton with the fairy dust of reflected literary glory.) She'd been about to start in on the fact that her West Coast region had boasted the highest percentage of female engineer admits for all five years she'd had it when he stopped her and offered her the job. And a good thing, too. She couldn't have supported any claim of credit for those last admits, not really. There were simply more female engineers in the heavily immigrant population she'd overseen.

"I was going to give it to you anyway," Clarence had said, barely looking up from the call log on his desk. "I thought you needed a little shaking up."

A little shaking up. She hadn't quite engaged with that at the time—it had seemed more advisable not to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. A hearty thank-you, a formally written letter of delighted acceptance later that day, and some unsolicited advice with regard to her replacement—she had done what was expected without ever returning to this nagging, vaguely shameful moment. The exchange had not been very satisfying, in any case. There was a kind of detachment to it, given that Clarence's mind had been more consumed by the call sheet on his desktop than by the very sincere and well-phrased request of his very present employee. His very competent employee, who had never asked for anything before or indicated in any

way that she was in need of anything, required any concession or support, and was generally not in the habit of calling attention to herself. Portia had never, not ever, thought of herself as someone who needed shaking up, and it appalled her to realize that he, apparently, had.

Clarence had come from the Yale Admissions Office, a fact more than a few Princeton alumni were still—rather comically—grumbling about. Before he had been an admissions officer he had been a professor of African-American history at Yale, in fact the head of that fractious department, where he had taught the music, culture, literature, and lore of the Delta, an immaculate gentleman in full Savile Row regalia holding forth on Howlin' Wolf, Leadbelly, and Blind Willie McTell. He had an ever-present silken handkerchief in the breast pocket of his beautifully cut jackets and a silken voice that rumbled an accent north of the islands and west of the United Kingdom. Before an audience he was magic, his beautiful voice equally calming to the jittery freshmen at orientation and the alternately fawning and preemptively furious parent groups he addressed. He could, better than any admissions officer Portia had ever worked with, soothe an irate alumni parent whose child Princeton had turned down, and unlike every other admissions officer Portia had ever known, he was never seen hauling around great sacks of folders but seemed to be able to retrieve an astounding range of data from memory. His office, too, was always serenely uncluttered, with a perennial vase of calla lilies on the corner of his desk and a rather nice Asher Durand on loan from the Princeton University Art Museum on the wall behind him. It was a far cry from the mixed-up-files cacophony the room had been when it belonged to Martin Quilty. (Back then, only Martin's assistant could guess in which pile or holding bin something might be stashed.) Portia, who was nothing if not supremely well organized herself, could only aspire to the minimalist mastery of her new boss. Theirs was not a warm relationship, obviously. But she did appreciate the calm. And she did appreciate that Asher Durand.

After they landed, Portia made her way into the terminal, pulling her small suitcase behind her. There was a real chill in the building, and she held the lapels of her tweed coat together at the throat. She wore one of the outfits she now rotated for these visits: a synchronicity of tweed and cashmere and brown leather boots, *überschoolgirl*, Sylvia Plath minus the pearls and plus the sunglasses, but comfortably of the world she was about to enter. The previous May, on her first visits to New England prep

schools, she'd learned that they had rituals of their own, with more graces and ceremony than she'd been used to in, for example, a Bay Area public school. Typically, some sort of tea-and-cookies affair followed her presentation, which took place in a slightly shabby, generations-old salon, under the watchful portraits of (white, male) alumni. The first time she'd been ushered into one of these receptions—at Andover, as it happened—she'd experienced a discomforting moment, a kind of self-detected fraudulence—clad as she was in her basic black jeans and careless sweater. No one had ever discussed wardrobe with her or suggested she might be letting down the institution with her evident sartorial imperviousness, but the plain surprise in the eyes of the college adviser, the teachers, and even a couple of the students had sent the message home effectively enough. Later that day she'd dropped nearly a thousand dollars at an Ann Taylor outlet on the way to Milton Academy.

Portia picked up her car in the rental lot and took off directly, heading north on 91 to familiar lands. When she had learned to drive as a teenager, Bradley Airport had been at the outer edge of her home range, which extended this far south and as far as the Vermont border in the other direction. The highway was a spine supporting the breadth of New England. It was a part of the world that held firmly to its past, and how could it do otherwise? Indian attacks and iconic American furniture. Austere family portraits and most of the earliest groves of academe, Shakers and Quakers and colonial unrest, the place where the essential idea of American-ness was forged, its very filaments dug deep into the rocky earth. Growing up here, she had sometimes had the sense of walking over bones.

Portia pulled into the school parking lot and left her car. She reported first to the well-marked Admissions Office and was directed to college counseling in a brick building on the quadrangle. She had known many Deerfield students as an undergraduate at Dartmouth, where they had seemed to flow seamlessly into the culture of the college, retaining their friends, their rustic athleticism, even their prep school sweats (which were, handily, identical in color to Dartmouth's). Looking around at the fit and good-looking kids on the walkways, she was struck by the stasis of this vision, a self-replenishing gene pool bubbling up to fill these grand and lovely buildings. These kids were interchangeable with her own college classmates of two decades earlier: the same hale complexions and down jackets and laden backpacks, the same voices of greeting. They were sons

of Deerfield, identical to the smooth-faced footballers in the sepia photographs she passed in the entryway of the administration building. Oddly, even the Asian or African-American faces did not overly thwart the general vision of blondness and fair skin.

At the college-counseling office, Portia introduced herself. The secretary, a pale woman with a noticeable blink, jolted to her feet. "Princeton! Mr. Roden's expecting you."

She had spoken with William Roden on the phone earlier in the week, mainly to assure him that she had directions, needed no overnight accommodation, had no special requirements—museum tickets? a room at the Deerfield Inn?—that might make her visit to Deerfield complete. He seemed surprised to learn that she had grown up not terribly far away, and almost distressed—as if her local status, her presumed education outside the prep school bubble, might predispose her, and by extension Princeton, against his kids; but he didn't quite articulate this. Now, bounding from his office, he looked entirely as she'd imagined him: a decade her senior, with a growing middle and fleeing hair, cheeks disarmingly pink.

"Ms. Nathan," he crowed, hand outstretched. "So glad to see you."

"It's so nice to be back," she told him, shaking his hand. "It all looks exactly the same."

"Yes," he said. "You grew up nearby."

"Northampton High School," she told him, anticipating his next question. "I used to play soccer here. I'm afraid we didn't stand a chance against Deerfield," she said indulgently, though her team—she remembered perfectly well—had in fact more than held its own.

"Yes, we're very proud of our athletics. Our students train very hard. And I don't know if we still used the old gym at that time." He was too polite to ask her age. "The new gym opened in '95. You should have a look while you're here."

She didn't need much, she told him as he took her back outside. They were going to a meeting room in the library, a modern building designed to harmonize with the older structures around the quadrangle. Inside, he led her into the librarians' lounge and brought her some coffee in a Styrofoam cup. "Starbucks hasn't come to Deerfield yet," he told her apologetically. "We do our best to carry on."

"I totally understand," she said, smiling. "I'd like to show a DVD, if I may. And I've brought some applications. If they're on the fence about

applying, sometimes it makes a difference if we get the application into their hands.”

“I don’t think you’ll have very many on the fence,” Roden said. “You had, what, twenty-five? twenty-six? from us last year. I expect you’ll get about the same this year.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Portia. “We love Deerfield students.”

“They are remarkable,” he agreed. “Now, let’s see about the DVD.”

The DVD, in fact, was identical to the version on the Web site, but Portia had found that showing it to a group had an interesting effect. It made some students dreamy, others morose and uncomfortable, as if all those iron tigers and grand neo-Gothic buildings fringed by rippling ivy were a taunting Shangri-la. Kids got withdrawn or determined, she found, and while it nearly always came down to what was actually contained in the applications, there had also been times when a student had made such an impression, in just this kind of setting, that she had followed up and pushed things along. Just as Portia retained that little trill of excitement every time she opened a folder, so she still relished taking the temperature of a group like this. Undoubtedly, there were going to be future admits here. It was always intriguing to try to pick them out.

He took her DVD to the meeting room and left her with her terrible coffee, and Portia used the moment to review the numbers: in five years, 124 applications, 15 admits, 11 attends. Without doubt, Deerfield was a serious player in the construction of any Princeton class, and at a great school like this she wouldn’t need to muster much of a sales pitch. On the contrary, she could walk into a room full of Deerfield seniors and tell them the university was a hole, the entire state of New Jersey sucked, and a Princeton degree was a poor return for the roughly \$128,000 in tuition they’d have to come up with, and she probably wouldn’t lose a single applicant (though she would undoubtedly lose her job).

“Is this a class period?” asked Portia when Roden came back for her.

“Yes, but we let seniors out. It’s important.”

Portia suppressed a smile and followed him into the meeting room: midcentury portraits of steely masters overlooking Williamsburg sofas and wing chairs. She didn’t doubt that Princeton’s admissions office was of vital importance to Deerfield. In spite of the laudable philosophy of the institution—the education of young minds or something of that nature—college placement was the *raison d’être* of every prep school, and

the annual dispersal of students to the Ivy League and other selective colleges functioned like a stock market within their world; a prep school that found itself unable to place its students well would find itself unable to attract students in the first place. Indeed, these economically symbiotic relationships were so long-standing that they had attained the filmy gleam of tradition, Portia thought, allowing Roden to take her leather bag. But it was far, far more complicated now. And though there would undoubtedly always be Princeton students who hailed from Deerfield and Andover and Harvard-Westlake and Lawrenceville, it had also become harder and harder for those applicants to get in, a fact known to every single student waiting for her to begin her presentation.

The kids sat on the couches and on the floor, some perched on the window seats or leaning against the walls. They seemed to avoid the wing chairs, as if these were consecrated to adults. They smiled nervously at her or did not smile (in case it was a bad thing to smile, in case it made them seem too eager or insecure); then, thinking better of that, thinking that it might make more sense to seem friendly and affable, the ones who had resolutely not smiled began to grin. One bold boy in a green Deerfield Crew sweatshirt stepped into her path and introduced himself.

"I'm almost finished with my application," he said, squeezing her hand a little too tightly. "Just waiting on my physics teacher. I wish you still had Early Decision. I'm totally committed."

"This is Matt Boyce," Roden said helpfully. "Both his parents went to Princeton."

"Yeah, we're total Princeton," Matt Boyce said eagerly. "I was, like, wrapped in an orange blanket."

"I'll look forward to reading your application," said Portia with practiced warmth, noting the scowls of displeasure around the room as this exchange was observed.

Roden was deflecting other students who'd been emboldened by their classmate and held up his hand as they stood to catch her eye. "Later," she heard him say quietly. "Wait till later."

Later meant the inevitable reception, she thought. More bad coffee, but this time with Oreos. And full-throttle adolescent anxiety.

"Okay, settle down," Roden said. "Everyone . . ." He trailed off, eyeing a too-cool-to-care-about-college-admissions trio on one of the sofas. "Hunter, is there someplace else you need to be?"

"Absolutely no, Mr. Roden," the boy said, not giving an inch.

"Then let's please quiet down and give Ms. Nathan our attention. She's come a long way to be here with us today, so let's give her a warm Deerfield welcome."

Energetic applause. Portia stepped to the front of the room and gave her audience a swift appraisal. At least sixty of them. It was going to be a tough year for these kids.

"Hello," she told them. "I'm really pleased to be here, because I grew up nearby and I love coming back. Especially this time of year. Actually, any time of year except for mud season." This got a laugh. The tension slipped in the room, just slightly. "I'm a great believer in visual aids," she said, "so I'm going to show you a little film about Princeton. Takes about sixteen minutes. Some of you might already have seen it on our Web site, so you can just amuse yourselves. Work on your college essays or something."

Nervous laughter in the room, but they settled in. No one worked on their college essays. They watched, instead, the parade of bright kids through the bright courtyards and leafy glens of the campus and listened to the newly minted Princetonians on the screen speak about their freshman seminars, their adventures of the mind and spirit. "Each of you," intoned Clarence in an address to the freshman class, filmed a couple of years ago in Richardson Auditorium, "is the kind of person your classmates came here to meet." The students were admonished to play with their fancies, to step beyond their comfort zones and take the chance of learning something truly unsuspected about themselves. They were fantastic, articulate, adorable. And when it was over, Portia was not really surprised to see two girls wiping away tears.

"Okay," she said as the lights flicked on. "Lots of great schools out there. Lots of places to get a first-rate education. So why Princeton? What's so great about us?"

"You've got Toni Morrison," said a girl with a long red braid, seated on the floor in front of the foremost couch.

"Okay. And twelve other Nobel laureates. Thirteen, if you count Woodrow Wilson." She smiled. "But who's counting? We're not the only university with an outstanding faculty."

"What about Albert Einstein?"

"Alas," she said, "we no longer have Einstein."

"No," the boy said, chagrined, "I mean . . . he *was* there."

“Well, more or less. He was at the institute, not the university proper.” Due to the small matter of endemic academic anti-Semitism at the time. But why rain on her own parade? “Here’s my point,” said Portia. “At Princeton, we’re all about the undergraduate. Yes, we have graduate programs. Graduate students are an important part of our community. But our professors are dedicated to the undergraduate. Now, you can go to a university with marquee-name faculty, and you can park yourself in a very large lecture theater and have your mind blown by an hourlong talk on Milton or Buñuel or fractals, or whatever it is you’re into, but you may never get closer to that lecturer than the first row of the lecture hall. And for many students, that’s just fine. But the ones we’re looking for want more than that. If you’re the kind of student who wants more than that, we hope you’ll apply.”

They laughed uncomfortably.

“Look, there is no mystery about this,” she said bluntly. “There is no secret formula or hidden agenda. I’m going to tell you right now what we’re looking for. We’re looking for intellectual passion. What it’s for—that’s secondary. We are looking for the student who is so jazzed about . . . *whatever* . . . that he or she can’t wait to get to Princeton and find out everything there is to know about it. And that’s, by and large, not going to be the student who’s content to sit in the lecture theater and take her notes, and take her exams, and collect her grade, and move on. We’re looking for the students who are looking for our faculty.”

Now there were expressions of real dismay as well. She wondered if she’d been too strong.

“Does this mean,” she said, “that every Princeton undergraduate is a genius? A prodigy? Absolutely not. But what makes Princeton such an exciting place is that it’s an environment where people care about ideas. We have a faculty who are doing work they’re passionate about, and every fall, about twelve hundred bright and excited new students turn up to meet them and argue with them and learn from them. And that makes them happy.” Portia shrugged. “Intellectuals . . . can be strange.” She laughed. “But sometimes that’s what I think admissions really is: the care and feeding of the Princeton faculty. We procure fresh young minds to keep them busy, and I have to tell you, we’re very good at it.”

She told them a story—true story—related to her some years before at a History Department party. The man who’d told her this was a post-

colonialist in a limp suit, who'd had a student he was quite fond of, a sophomore from Pittsburgh. The student had a twin brother at another Ivy league school, which she naturally refrained from naming, who was also majoring in history. One day, the professor had been in his office at around ten in the morning when this student arrived, his identical brother in tow.

"This is Peter," said the student.

The Princeton student, whose name was Patrick, and Peter both took seats in the historian's office, and they talked. They talked about being twins and having twins (the professor had fraternal girls, so physically different that they barely looked like siblings). They talked about Peter's growing interest in cold war Europe and his recent class on the economic history of the Baltic states. They considered a couple of evolving ideas for Patrick's junior paper, compared and contrasted the schools' football teams, and discussed the relative merits of Bent Spoon and Thomas Sweet ice creams (the brothers had already embarked on a highly scientific study). They took a run at Pennsylvania Democratic politics and the failure of the Clinton health plan and the various repellent aspects of Karl Rove and the Blair scandal at *The New York Times*. They talked about the professor's daughters' obsession with Harry Potter and the twins' remembered literary obsessions from their own childhood, and they spent a good long while going over the paper the professor was readying for the AHA in two weeks, about the amateur photographs taken by British troops in the Boer War. And then finally, *finally*, the professor had looked at his watch, seen that it was nearly three o'clock, and announced that he had to go and pick up his children at school. Whereupon the twins burst into hysterical laughter, and Patrick turned to his brother and said, "See? I told you. I *told* you."

They had had a bet, the Princeton brother reported, when the two had at last stopped high-fiving each other. "Peter said I was always jerking him around when I talked about conversations I'd had with my professors. He said he never got past the TA in any of his classes, and he'd never be able to just knock on a professor's door and sit down and have a conversation. I said I did it all the time, so he bet me. Five hours! I have to say, you surpassed even my expectations. But don't worry." Patrick laughed. "I'll donate my winnings to charity."

"You ought to donate your winnings to *me*," said the history professor, but he wasn't really angry. In fact, there was definite pride in his face as he told this story, and Portia had happily purloined the tale.

"I'm telling you this," she said, "because I want you to think carefully

about what you really want out of the next four years. Ivy League institutions may be wrapped up in one big ribbon, but these are very different institutions, offering very different experiences. Don't just apply to these eight schools because they created an athletic conference in 1954. You might be happiest in a huge university, or in a little college. You might want to see an entirely different part of the country when you go to university, or even a different part of the world. And let's not forget, some people just don't want to work that hard in college. They want to go, learn a little bit, play a little Frisbee, and get a halfway decent job when it's over. Not everyone is looking for the kind of intellectual environment Princeton is offering, and if you're not, I urge you to save yourself the effort involved in applying, not to mention the application fee. And I urge you to spare us the very distressing task of having to reject your application. Please be honest with yourselves, because this is about your well-being, and your goals, and your life."

She stopped there. They were all somber, of course. A few of them seemed actively engaged in some sort of internal catechism: *Because Mom wants me to? Because Dad wants me to? Because it never occurred to any of us that I wouldn't? Because I just want to get in, and I'll worry about all this Deep Thoughts crap in my own damn time.*

"Okay," said Portia. "I'm sure you have questions. I'm here to help. Is there something you'd like to know about the university? Or about admissions?"

It didn't take long. This was why she'd come, after all, not the promotional film or the save-us-all-the-trouble lecture or the cute story about the kid who'd never talked to a professor. They wanted in. They wanted the tricks, the secrets, the strategies. They wanted to maximize and package. They wanted to know what they should write their essays about, and if a 720 on the math SAT was good enough, and was it better to take six APs and get some 4's or three APs and get all 5's?

"Are the essays important?" said a girl with fearful eyes behind thick glass. "I mean, if you have good grades and good scores?"

"At Princeton, the essays are very important. I think perhaps more so than at other colleges. You should think carefully about them, and spend time on them."

"But," the girl said plaintively, "some people aren't that good writers. I mean, some people are good at other things."

“Oh, we understand that,” Portia said. She nodded appreciatively at Roden, who was bringing her a chair. “We know that not everyone’s equally gifted as a writer. We’re not expecting every student to have the same fluency with language, and we know that people are intelligent in different ways. But as far as we’re concerned, you’ve had about seventeen years to write your application essays.” Predictably, the kids exchanged looks of horror. “Oh, you’ve been busy. Part of those seventeen years was probably spent, I don’t know, spitting up and learning to ride a two-wheeler. You’ve been doing your homework and going to camp, or maybe working on your Facebook profile.” There was a ripple of sheepish acknowledgment through the room. “But the fact is, you’ve had time to think about how you want to use these brief opportunities on the application, and that’s how you should think of them: as opportunities. What are the most important things you need to tell us about yourself? *How* do you want to tell us those things? If you decide that you want to squander an essay declaring your undying devotion to the color blue, or your love for your childhood goldfish Fluffy, well, I’m going to wonder if you really have very much to say. On the other hand, there are so many things we want to know about you, and with the exception of your recommendations, this is just about the only way we’re going to find out. We want to know what makes you tick, what gets you out of bed in the morning. If you love to play sports, we want to know why. If your favorite subject is math, we want to know why. If you can’t stand biology, make a case for it. Tell us about it. We want to know about the people who have influenced you and the way you feel about our leaders and our national policies. We’re interested in your thoughts on religion and even popular culture. Basically, we’re interested in just about everything.”

She turned to the fearful girl, who did not seem at all comforted. Portia sighed.

“And as far as the writing itself, again, not everyone has a natural, flowing, literary style. We understand this. But on the other hand, with seventeen years to write your essays, you’ve certainly had enough time to make sure you’ve made proper use of grammar, and that every single word is spelled correctly. Not because mistakes will tell us you’re unintelligent. I freely admit that most of us in the adult world rely heavily on our computer spell-check programs! But a spelling or grammatical mistake in your application means that you haven’t cared enough to make sure there aren’t any mistakes. And that does mean something to us.”

“You hear that?” Roden said. “Now you know why I’m always on your case about this.”

“It isn’t a timed exam, after all,” Portia said. “You know, you might make an error in the middle of an SAT essay. It’s not a disaster. Anyone can butcher the English language when the clock is ticking. But with your essays, you *have* time, so take the time to go over them. You might catch something, and be really glad you did.”

“Any other dumb, avoidable mistakes?” Roden said. “Pay attention, everybody.”

“Okay.” She smiled. “A few. Please don’t write us a long, rapturous essay about how much you want to attend Yale. You’d be surprised,” she said when they laughed. “It happens quite a lot. The cut-and-paste function on your computer makes it easy to declare undying love for any number of colleges simultaneously. Unfortunately, it also makes it easy to slip up. I’ve read essays telling me why the applicant feels he is perfect for Stanford, Duke, Harvard, USC, you name it. You know, we get that you’re applying to more than one college. We understand the kind of pressure you’re under. But again, just take the time to make sure you’re ready to seal that envelope. Or, in the case of the common application, or the online Princeton application, before you hit Send. Okay?”

They nodded. Some of them were scribbling notes.

“Another thing. Please don’t mount a campaign. There’s a reason we ask for two recommendations from teachers, plus an optional recommendation from someone who might shed light on another aspect of who you are. There’s very little we can learn from four of your teachers that we couldn’t have learned from two, and just multiply those extra letters by eighteen thousand and you can understand why we’re going to get a bit annoyed if you ask everyone you’ve ever known to send along a testimonial. And think carefully about whom you want writing for you, and make sure they know you well enough to speak knowledgeably about who you are. And please, don’t bombard us with extras. A recording of your instrumental work or some slides of your art, that’s great. And as you probably know, we send these submissions to our departments for evaluation, so you don’t have to worry about a tone-deaf person like me passing judgment on the quality of your Chopin. If you’ve written fiction or play the bassoon, by all means send it along. But hold off on the cookies. I won’t deny that we eat them,”

she said, smiling. “But they don’t help our waistlines and they won’t help your applications.”

They looked, she thought, oddly bereft, as if they had secretly taken comfort in the notion of baking cookies for the admissions officers, and now this option had been rudely stolen from them. It was an illusion, of course. These kids were far too sophisticated to try something so crass.

“But here’s the main thing,” Portia told them seriously. “The cardinal rule is: Tell the truth. You may say to yourself, They can’t possibly check every single fact in every single application. And you know what? You’re right. We can’t. And we shouldn’t have to. Because Princeton has an honor code, and we expect honor from the very first moment of your relationship with us. If you lie about your record, will we find out? Probably. And when we do, I can promise you that bad things will happen. Does anyone remember a little situation we had about ten years ago? This is probably too far back for them,” she said, looking over at Roden.

“Johann something,” he said immediately.

“Yes. Before my time, too, actually, but we admitted a student who wrote eloquently about his life as a shepherd out on the high prairie. How when the little sheep were asleep at night he took out his copy of *War and Peace* and read by the light of the stars, and how he wanted to study Freud as a philosopher, and write nonfiction with John McPhee. Only there was very little nonfiction about him. One day during his sophomore year, a student from Cornell recognized him at a football game. They were from the same hometown, it turned out. In Florida, which last time I checked didn’t have much in the way of prairie.” The kids laughed, but uncertainly. They were not quite certain whom the joke was on. Not that they really cared, as long as it wasn’t them.

“He had a record for mail fraud, and an outstanding warrant, and he was thirty-something years old. So he had to drop out of Princeton and go straight to jail. Bad for him and certainly bad for us, but how could we have known? There is ample opportunity for fraud, as Johann discovered, because we have trust in this process, and the trust is mutual. You trust us to treat your application seriously, and with an open mind, and I can promise you that we will do that. You trust us to read it carefully—which, again, I assure you, we will do. We are going to give your request for admission very thoughtful, very respectful consideration. But in return, we trust

you to tell us the truth. To write your own application. To take your own SATs. Any questions?”

No questions about that, at any rate.

Then, a hand in the back, from an Asian girl, her black hair secured tightly in a scrunchie. “Yes?”

“Yes?”

“Yes,” said the girl. “I wanted to ask about how much it matters if your parents went to Princeton. It’s easier for you to get in if they did, right?”

Portia considered. There was now palpable tension, almost hostility, in the room, which undoubtedly held more than the one Princeton legacy she had already met. In fact—and it would come as no surprise to anyone here—it did make a difference that an applicant’s parent went to Princeton, even though the university bore little resemblance to the old boy network it had once almost exclusively been. Walking the tightrope between Princeton’s sense of tradition and its outreach to the best available students from any and every background was one of her most serious charges, but it required calibration.

“Look,” she finally said, studiously avoiding the gaze of her wrapped-in-an-orange-baby-blanket applicant, “our alumni are very important to us. They’re part of our university culture. They *are* our tradition. Yes, it matters, and if you look at the statistics, you’ll see that your chances of being admitted are higher within the legacy pool than they are in the nonlegacy pool. But don’t for one minute think that having a parent who attended Princeton means you get to walk in. Again, the statistics for legacies show that most legacy applicants don’t get in. And believe me, you don’t want to be sitting in my boss’s chair when the letters go out and that phone starts ringing. We could fill every class just with legacies, but we won’t, because that’s not our mission. In fact, we have exactly as many students who are the first in their families to attend college as we have students whose families have been attending Princeton for generations, and a whole lot of students who are neither of those things. Okay? Here’s my advice: If you’re not a Princeton legacy, don’t waste your time worrying about it. And if you are, it’s still a very, very competitive process.” She looked at the girl in the scrunchie. “You don’t look happy.”

The girl seemed to remember herself. “No, that’s okay.”

“Joanne?” said Roden. “You had a question?”

Portia looked where he was looking. In the front row, a heavy African-

American girl sat cross-legged. Her Deerfield Lacrosse sweatshirt did not fully disguise something essential about her, a displacement. She lacked the sheen of money, the lean, muscular good health, good skin, good clothes. Prep for Prep, Portia thought right away, or one of the other programs that sponsored inner-city kids at some of the best high schools in the country.

“Yes?” Portia said. “Joanne?”

“Uh, well,” Joanne faltered. “I was wondering about financial aid. Is it harder to get in if you can’t pay the tuition?”

“Oh no.” She smiled. “And I’m really glad you asked that question, because it gives me a chance to brag. Like most other selective colleges, Princeton is need-blind. We don’t even look at your financial aid application until you’ve been admitted. Then we put together a package designed for you and your family that will enable you to cover your expenses. And over half of our students are on financial aid, so there’s no stigma about it. Then in 2001 we eliminated the loan as part of our financial aid package. You know those student loans you hear so much about? The ones your parents are still paying off from when they went to college? We don’t give them anymore. We give you a grant to make up the shortfall between what you can pay and what the tuition costs. We did that because we could. We could afford it, and we didn’t think it was right to graduate our students already burdened by debt. Also, we trusted that our graduates would show their appreciation for our gesture, but later, when they could afford to do it. I’m being perfectly frank here. It’s a little too soon to say whether we were right about that. Our first alumni to graduate since these changes were made are still at the start of their professional lives.”

“So nobody’s given you a building yet.” It was Hunter, the smug kid on the sofa.

“Nope.” She declined the bait. “Not yet. But we’re not hurting for buildings.”

She told them about the new student center, the new Neuroscience of Cognitive Control Laboratory, the new residential college to be named after the CEO of eBay, the \$101 million arts initiative, Toni Morrison’s Atelier, which brought performing artists to campus to create original artworks with undergraduates. Their eyes began to glaze. There was abundance fatigue, overstimulation. Even the eager ones were stupefied. The note takers had stopped taking notes. Some of them looked crestfallen, as

if they could never hope to experience such a playground of riches. Some of them must have been thinking how nice it might be to go to a college where they could get loaded and play Frisbee, at least most of the time. Though selfishly, Portia wanted the Frisbee players to apply. The Frisbee players were the easiest to cut and set the intellectual kids in bolder relief. They made her job easier by providing contrast where the only typical contrast was far more subtle: wonderful student versus phenomenal student, terrific kid versus amazing kid, applicant upon applicant who could obviously come in, do the work, contribute to the community, and go on out into the world to project retroactive glory on Alma Mater. Her bag was full of them. Her desk back at the office was laden with them. And in six weeks' time, when the application deadline rolled around, the entire building would flood with them, and she, like all of her colleagues, would begin to swim with them, and struggle with them, and sink with them.

"So," she said brightly. "Any more questions?"

Miraculously, there were no more questions. They moved to a different room in the library: apple cider in waxy cups, cookies (chocolate chip, as it happened, not Oreos) on a paper doily. She spoke to a boy from Mumbai who wanted to be an electrical engineer, the girl with the long braid who wanted to take a class from Chang-Rae Lee, her favorite author, another girl who let Portia know that her father was a famous movie director.

"And what about you?" said Portia. "Are you interested in film? What are you thinking of doing?"

The girl looked up, notably shocked. Perhaps it had always been enough, having a famous director for a father. The thought of having to do something, having to be something, care about something, herself, seemed to have stunned her. Portia spotted Joanne, the girl who had asked about financial aid, near the cider and quickly went to pour her own refill. Joanne was a Brooklyn girl, and Prep for Prep. She was actually a year older than her classmates, she told Portia, having spent her ninth grade back home preparing for the SSAT and the academic challenges of a school like Deerfield.

"That isn't a problem," she asked. "Is it?"

"Not at all. Actually, it says a great deal about your determination that you were willing to step back and work that hard to get where you wanted to be."

Joanne nodded warily. More than likely, they had told her the same thing at Prep for Prep when they'd accepted her with this proviso.

"What are your thoughts about college?" Portia asked her.

"Well... ah... I'm kind of thinking about being a lawyer. But you know, I'm better at math."

"So you'll be a lawyer who's good at math. Maybe you can prosecute white-collar financial cases."

She frowned. "Or, like, accounting or something."

"Well, I'm actually one of those people who thinks it's better not to have too clear an idea when you go to college. Lightning strikes, you know."

"Yeah," Joanne said uncertainly, but her classmates were crowding her aside. The orange blanket baby wanted her to know that his lacrosse team made the regionals last year. Hunter from the couch wanted to give her a manila envelope containing, he said, his recent op-ed piece in the Deerfield student paper on the anti-intellectualism endemic at the school. Portia looked at her watch and noted gratefully that she was nearly out of time.

"Mr. Roden?" She looked around for him. He was standing with two ponytailed girls in front of the fireplace. She tapped her watch and he nodded, moving off instantly, probably leaving the girls in the middle of their angst-ridden declaration.

"Time to go?" he said, reaching her. "Listen, this was great."

"Oh, I love coming here," she said heartily. "The kids are so articulate."

"Yes, they certainly are. They're happy kids. It's a happy campus."

"Yes," she agreed, because it seemed like the appropriate response. She made eye contact with her orange blanket applicant, and Joanne, and told the director's daughter that she was looking forward to her application. Then they were outside in the bright midday sun.

"I remember this smell of burning leaves," she said as he walked her to the parking lot. "I think all of New England burns leaves the same week."

"It's a decree!" Roden said. Like her, he was killing time. "So where are you off to now?"

"Oh, Keene. I'm crossing the border."

"Public school?" he asked. There was an edge of hopefulness. It was bad enough that she should bestow her favors on any other school but Deerfield. He did not, in particular, wish to share her with his students' most

direct competitors: applicants from Northfield Mount Hermon, Groton, St. Paul's.

"No. It's a new school, actually. I think they've only been going a couple of years. Outside of Keene. Wait a minute."

They were beside her rental car now. She opened up the passenger door and put her satchel on the seat. Then she leaned down and hunted out the downloaded directions. "Quest School. Do you know it?"

"Never heard of it," he said with notable relief. "Experimental? Sounds experimental."

"I actually don't know anything about it. It's a first visit for us. And we haven't had any applications so far."

"Ah." He seemed even more relieved to hear this. "Well, good to know what's out there."

"Absolutely." She put out her hand. "Thank you again, I think it was a very successful visit, and I can't wait to start reading the applications."

"Yes. And one or two I'll be writing to you about."

"I'll look forward to it."

He waited to wave as she drove away, a piece of arcane protocol about how the departing representative of the desirable college must be the one to break contact. Portia knew it had nothing at all to do with her. Their interaction had been thoroughly predictable, professional, impersonal. Only a couple of times, in fact, over sixteen years had Portia felt any real connection with the college advisers she'd dealt with, and both times the locale had been thoroughly remote, both in the geographic sense and in terms of Princeton's reach. The first was in the Central Valley of California, where the overwhelmed guidance counselor was herself newly graduated from community college and responsible for nearly six hundred seniors, many of them the kids of laborers or Hmong immigrants; the second took place in Sitka, Alaska, where she was the first Ivy League admissions officer ever to materialize, and the effusive guidance counselor had roused the entire PTA to throw a potluck in her honor, complete with dried bearded seal meat—an indelible culinary experience. (Portia could only imagine the potluck they must have thrown five years later, when the student she'd recruited on that trip had won her Rhodes scholarship.) Those two counselors had both moved on to other jobs, but Portia still thought of them. There had been time for human contact in their conversations, in their inelegant cinder-block offices, on rickety folding chairs, across laden

Formica desks. She still remembered their names and didn't doubt those women could produce her own. But William Roden would retain only one fact about her from this meeting: that she represented Princeton. She might have been lacquered in ivy and leading a tiger, Portia thought, driving west from Deerfield and winding north into the woods. He would not remember her face, or the fact that she had grown up nearby, or indeed anything personal about her. It was a good thing she had given him her business card. When it came time to get in touch on behalf of those "one or two" students he'd mentioned, he would undoubtedly need to reacquaint himself with her name.