

LAMAR GILES

 OVERT

URNED

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Tate's father has been on death row for killing his best friend in a gambling dispute,
but he has always maintained his innocence, and now his conviction has been overturned and
he is back at the casino, where high school junior Nikki has been operating illegal
poker games in the hopes of saving enough money to get out of Vegas after
graduation—and now he is determined to find the real killer, and Nikki is
inevitably drawn into his dangerous search for the truth.

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Dan Harris was not an Uber driver. He was my dad's latest and greatest attorney from the law firm of Cheap Suit, Bald Spot & Smoker's Cough. Since we left Vegas, he'd chattered endless nothings straight from the small-talk handbook as if angling for five stars and a tip. Stuff like "It sure is hot today, huh, Nikki."

Dude, we live in the desert.

Or "UNLV's looking good this year."

Were they? He probably meant football, which wasn't my thing. Not that kind of football. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Lady Rebels soccer team had gotten off to a mediocre start this season with a 4–5 record. I didn't say that because if Harris knew anything about soccer, we might end up in a real conversation. I was a little too anxious for that.

My mom, sitting next to me in the backseat, was more accommodating, nodding and uh-huhing at the right moments. But her eyes and hands gave her away. She never stopped staring at the browns and grays outside her window, scrolling north from the city perimeter to barren sands, and her fingers tapped an endless nervous rhythm on the leather next to my thigh.

It was a strange thing, picking up your dad from death row.

When Harris started talking politics, I knew I couldn't deal with all our nerves tangled in one big vibrating bundle for the entire four-hour drive to Ely State.

Uncoiling the wires in my bag, I screwed buds into my ears and dialed up a long and hearty playlist usually reserved for the game I cared about more than soccer. Eyes closed, my forehead resting on the cool window, careful not to mush my big poofy hair, I zoned,

then dozed. Constellations filled my dreams, all the pinpricks in the sky Dad showed me when I was little, before “Uncle” John’s murder interrupted us.

A firm squeeze above my knee pulled me from the cosmos. I said, “Wha—” Or maybe I just vampire-hissed.

Mom plucked a bud from my ear. “Wake up. We’re close.”

Groggy, I smacked my lips, my tongue sour with the notes of afternoon breath. My Altoids tin rattled when I fished it from my bag. I chewed a handful of chalky mints into paste.

Harris got us off Route 6, drove the all-too-familiar streets lined with pool halls, trailer parks, and ice-cream stands that also sold beer. In the distance, snowcapped mountains made the horizon ragged. Dad once told me in a letter that he could see those mountains from his cell. For years I hoped it wasn’t just a lie to make me feel better.

When we turned onto the final street before the prison, the change from our last trip was clear. What was usually a desolate strip of faded asphalt bordered by a set of odd businesses was crowded with vehicles. Rental cars and news vans with satellite dishes on extendable arms.

The last tenth of a mile to the prison’s entrance was a slow crawl through reporters and protesters and fans (every death row inmate had them). There was a dull buzz in the parting crowd, like driving through a swarm of bees.

“I suspected we’d get some attention,” Harris said, moving beyond small talk, “but I certainly didn’t expect this much.”

Why not? I did. The news had been going crazy over Dad ever since his release went from lofty goal to undeniable certainty. Not the big national morning shows where they mix terrorism with celebrity guests and recipes. Locally, though, it’s been kind of a big

deal. Black man wrongly convicted on shady circumstantial evidence, officialdom's long, hard stance on admitting no wrongdoing whatsoever because, hey, reasons. People picking sides based on as little real information as possible. Vegas loved its homegrown horror stories.

"You two okay?" Harris asked.

Mom glanced at me before answering. I nodded, and she said, "We're fine."

Neither of us were strangers to noisy packed crowds, nothing different from an average weekend at the casino. I was even dressed for it in my black Saturday night hostess dress. I'd considered buying something new, but a stylish black dress was a stylish black dress, even if a longer swath of brown thigh extending from the hem indicated a much different fit from when fourteen-year-old me bought it two years ago. There'd be time for better clothes and a generally better life than that of a hostess leading drunken oglers to dinner tables if I had my way. For the time being, I was on a budget.

Not like anyone was going to pay me much attention anyway. This was Dad's day. If I didn't already get that, the potbellied poker fan holding a "Welcome Home, Nathan" sign clued me. That poster board greeting, done up in fat Sharpie letters and punctuated with a bad drawing of a royal flush, was pleasant. Though it couldn't match the painstaking detail of a sign on the opposite sidewalk. "Whoever sheds the blood of man," the sign read, "by man shall his blood be shed," followed by the Bible chapter and verse. The wicking fire and white-hot brimstone coals on that one was a nice touch.

Fifty yards from the prison entrance, sawhorses formed a perimeter that the groupies and haters couldn't cross. Guards

waited behind the line. One stone-faced, refrigerator-sized correctional officer stepped to Harris's window. Harris explained who he was, who Mom and I were, and why we dared approach the border the prison so thoughtfully erected between his world and ours. Harris's lawyer thing satisfied the CO enough to swing one saw-horse aside and let us through.

We pulled into an empty parking space, and the guard appeared in his window again. "Is everything ready?" Harris asked.

Checking his watch, the guard said, "It's time."

I'd stowed my music but heard a drum. In my chest. My hand found the door handle, and I waited for seconds that felt as long as the last five years.

A Klaxon sounded and a yellow light spun in a bubble over a massive steel-and-concrete door. I expected the huge entrance to trudge open and unleash some giant tank or humanoid battle-armor suit thingy from the sci-fi video games my Bestie #2 Gavin sometimes forced me to play, while Bestie #1 Molly reminded him we weren't that kind of girl. The big doors didn't part. All that drama for a smaller door set in the larger one. It was from there that Ely State Prison spit my father out.

He wore the gray suit Mom and I bought him, guessing at the measurements. It almost fit.

Erupting from the backseat of Harris's Cadillac, I sprinted despite my heels and flung myself at him like the earth was falling away beneath my feet and it was either his arms or oblivion. He caught me, and I buried my head in his chest, ugly-crying and soaking a patch of his suit coat to a darker gray. Mom was there a minute later sliming my bare shoulder with her tears. Dad squeezed us so tight.