The Gym on Atlantic

Madison signs up for 6am boxing at an old-school gym on Atlantic Avenue to hit something after the worst week of her life, and finds a trainer who says almost nothing and corrects her stance with his hands.

At 2:07 on a Tuesday morning, Madison Clarke signed up for boxing lessons because a website had a photo of a heavy bag on it and she wanted to hit something that wouldn't file a complaint.

She was sitting on the kitchen floor of her apartment on Bergen Street with her back against the dishwasher, which was still warm. There was a bottle of Sancerre next to her that she'd opened to celebrate something on Friday and was now finishing for the opposite reason. Her laptop was balanced on her knees. Her phone was face down on the tile, because every time she turned it over it showed her a text from Ryan that said I think we both knew, and she had not, in fact, known.

Four years. He'd ended it at Cafe Luluc, between the eggs and the check, like he was canceling a gym membership. He'd even said "I think it's healthier this way," which was a sentence she was fairly sure he'd read somewhere.

That was Saturday.

Friday was the other thing. Friday, Douglas Hale had called her into his corner office on the forty-first floor and told her, very kindly, that the partnership committee had decided to go with Brett Fowler this cycle, and that she should take it as a sign of how close she was. Brett, who billed less than she did. Brett, who called every woman in the M&A group "chief." Brett, who once asked her what a reverse triangular merger was in a hallway, out loud, the week before he closed one.

"Next year," Douglas had said. "Your time is coming, Madison."

She'd thanked him. She'd actually thanked him.

So now it was 2am and she'd typed boxing gym near me into the search bar with one hand and the results had come back in a neat little list. There were places with names like FORGE and Rumble and something called PUNCHLINE, with photos of women in matching sets throwing jabs in front of neon lighting. Forty dollars a class. Playlists curated by somebody named DJ Kale.

And then, fourth from the bottom, there was Atlantic Boxing Club.

The website looked like it had been built in 2006 by a nephew. There was one photo, a little blurry. A long room with exposed brick, two rings, a row of heavy bags hanging from chains, a hand-painted sign over the door that said NO EXCUSES in red letters that had dripped a bit. There was a phone number and an address on Atlantic Avenue between Third and Fourth, about a twelve-minute walk from where she was sitting. Under that, in plain text, it said Private training. Mornings. Ask for Damien.

That was it. No class schedule. No DJ.

She clicked the button that said Book. It took her to a form where she had to type her name, her phone number, and her reason for wanting to box.

She looked at the blinking cursor for a long time.

Then she typed I would like to be able to hurt someone, and hit submit before she could fix it.

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The reply came at 5:15 that same morning, which was the first sign.

> *Tomorrow 6am. Wear something you can sweat in. Don't eat a big breakfast. -D*

She read it in bed with one eye closed. She had a hangover that felt like a filing cabinet falling over in slow motion. She thought about not going. She thought about it all day, through two conference calls and a lunch she ate standing up at her desk.

At 9pm she found a pair of leggings that still had the tag on them. She set an alarm for 5:20. She went to sleep thinking she'd cancel in the morning.

She didn't cancel in the morning. She walked down Bergen in the dark with her hands jammed in the pocket of an old Penn hoodie, past the brownstones with their garbage cans chained to the railings, past the bodega on the corner of Third where a guy in an apron was hosing down the sidewalk and a gray cat sat on a stack of Gatorade cases like a supervisor. She turned onto Atlantic. The avenue was mostly asleep. A B63 bus groaned past with nobody on it. The Barclays Center glowed rust-colored at the far end like a spaceship that had parked badly.

Atlantic Boxing Club was between a tire shop and a store that sold Yemeni honey. The window had the name painted in old gold letters, flaking at the edges, and underneath it, smaller, Est. 1979. The door was propped open with a ten-pound plate.

She could hear it before she went in. The rhythm of a jump rope on wood. Something heavy being hit, steady, like a clock.

Inside, it smelled like leather and bleach and a century of other people's effort. The room was long and narrow, the ceiling high,

fluorescent tubes buzzing over everything. One ring in the back, one closer to the front with the ropes wrapped in red tape. Heavy bags. Speed bags mounted on a wooden platform along the wall. Faded fight posters in cheap frames. A Mets calendar from 2015 that nobody had taken down. An old man in a folding chair by the front desk, reading the Daily News, with a cane hooked over the arm.

And in the middle of the floor, a man was working the heavy bag.

He wasn't hitting it hard. That was what she noticed first. He was hitting it like he had all the time in the world, like he and the bag had an understanding. Jab, jab, a hook that made the chain rattle, then he'd step out and circle and come back. He was wearing a gray T-shirt that had gone dark down the spine with sweat and black shorts and no shoes. His forearms were wrapped in white tape. He had dark hair cut short and a nose that had clearly been broken at least once and then left to make its own decisions.

He caught the bag on its swing, steadied it with one hand, and looked at her.

"Madison?"

"Yes. Hi. That's me."

"You're early."

"Is that bad?"

He seemed to think about it. "No," he said, and came over, pulling the tape off his hands. Up close he was taller than she'd thought, and younger. Early thirties. Brown eyes, very steady. There was a small white scar through his left eyebrow that made him look like he was

always about to ask a follow-up question.

"Damien," he said. He didn't offer to shake. His hands were still half wrapped.

"I read your form," he said.

Her face went hot. "Yeah. About that. It was late."

"Who do you want to hurt?"

"Nobody. Specifically. It was more of a general mood."

He looked at her for another second, and she had the feeling that she'd been read the way she read a contract, front to back with nothing skipped. Then he nodded at a bench by the wall.

"Sit," he said. "Give me your hands."

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She had never had her hands wrapped before. She didn't know it was a whole thing.

He sat on the bench across from her, knee to knee, and took her right hand in his and spread her fingers. He hooked the loop of a long black wrap over her thumb and started winding it around her wrist. Three times around. Then up across the back of her hand. Then between her fingers, one at a time, pulling it snug, his thumb pressing the fabric flat against her knuckles.

"Make a fist," he said. "Not that tight. Like you're holding a bird."

"I've never held a bird."

"Pretend."

She pretended. He checked it, unwound one pass, did it again. It was the most careful anyone had been with her in about a year. She was aware of that in a way that made her stare very hard at the Mets calendar.

"You do this for everyone?" she asked.

"Everyone who wants to keep their hands."

"Is that a lot of people?"

"More than you'd think." He tucked the end in and pressed the Velcro down with the flat of his palm. "Other one."

The old man by the desk lowered his paper. "That the lawyer?"

"Yeah, Ray."

"She looks like a lawyer."

"Ray."

"I'm just saying." Ray went back to the Daily News. "Lawyers make good fighters. They're used to getting hit and billing for it."

Madison laughed, surprised at herself, and Damien looked up at her from her left hand. Something moved at the corner of his mouth. She wouldn't have called it a smile. It was more like a smile had been considered and filed.

"Okay," he said. "Stand up. Show me how you'd stand if somebody came at you."

She stood up. She put her fists in front of her face like she'd seen in movies.

He walked all the way around her once, slowly, the way you'd look at a car you weren't sure you wanted to buy.

"Okay," he said again, in a voice that told her it was not okay at all.

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The first session was forty-five minutes long and she did not hit anything.

He taught her how to stand. That was it. Left foot forward, right foot back and turned out a little, weight in the balls of her feet. Knees soft. Chin down. Hands up by her cheekbones, elbows in.

"Your chin's up," he said.

She put it down.

"Up again."

"I'm literally looking at it."

"You can't look at your own chin."

"That's why I'm so frustrated."

He stepped behind her. "Can I?" he said, and she said "Yeah," and he put two fingers under her jaw and tipped her head forward half an inch. Then his hands moved to her shoulders and turned them, just slightly, so her left shoulder came forward. Then his palm settled flat on her lower back for a second and pressed, and her hips shifted, and suddenly her whole body made sense in a way it hadn't a minute ago.

"There," he said. "Feel that?"

She felt a lot of things. She said, "Yes."

"That's your stance. Everything comes out of that. You lose it, you've got nothing."

He took his hands away. The places where they'd been stayed warm, which was ridiculous, because the gym was already about eighty degrees.

For the rest of the session she moved. Forward, back, side to side, around in circles while he called out directions from the middle of the floor and occasionally tapped her elbow with the back of his hand when it drifted. Her calves started to burn in the first ten minutes. By thirty her thighs felt like wet paper. By forty she was sweating in places she hadn't known could sweat, and her mascara, which she'd put on out of some instinct she now deeply regretted, was running into her eyes.

"Time," he said.

She bent over with her hands on her knees and breathed like a broken accordion.

He handed her a bottle of water. "Same time Thursday?"

She looked up at him. She'd thought about this all day yesterday, how she'd come once to prove something to herself and then never come back, like the pottery class in 2019 or the Italian app that still sent her sad notifications.

"I didn't even get to punch anything," she said.

"You will."

"When?"

"When you can stand up."

"I can stand up."

He looked down at her, still bent in half. "Thursday," he said.

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She went Thursday. She went the Tuesday after that, and the Thursday after that, and by the third week she'd moved her alarm to 5:10 so she had time to stop at the bodega and get a coffee the guy behind the counter had started making before she asked.

On the fourth Tuesday, Damien held up a pair of focus mitts and said, "Jab."

She jabbed. It hit the pad with a sound like a wet sock.

"Again."

She jabbed again. Sock.

"You're pushing it," he said. "Don't push. Snap. It goes out and it comes back. Like you touched a stove."

"I've never touched a stove."

"You've never held a bird, you've never touched a stove." He adjusted the pads. "What did you do as a kid?"

"Debate team. Model UN. I was very popular."

"I can tell." He tapped his own chin with the mitt. "Jab."

She did it the way he said. Out and back. The pad made a sharp clean pop and the sound went up into the high ceiling and came back down and Ray, at the front desk, said "Hey," without looking up from his paper.

Madison stood there with her hand still half raised. She felt it all the way up her arm. It was the best sound she'd heard in a month.

"Again," Damien said, and she could have sworn he was trying not to look pleased.

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Here was the thing about Damien. He didn't talk.

That wasn't quite fair. He talked. He said "jab," and "again," and "chin," and "breathe," and "time," and he said them in a low even voice that never went up or down, so that after a while she started listening for the differences between them like a dog listening for its name. He said "good" maybe once a session, and when he said it, she'd catch herself replaying it in the shower afterward, which was embarrassing for a grown woman with a law degree from Columbia.

But he didn't talk about himself. He didn't ask about her either. He never asked why she showed up at 6am with her eyes puffy, or why for two weeks straight she hit the pads like they owed her money. He just moved the mitts and let her do it.

She found out things anyway. She was a litigator before she went to M&A. She knew how to collect facts from people who didn't want to give them up.

From Ray, who talked enough for both of them, she found out that Damien had been coming to the gym since he was eleven, when his mother had dragged him in by the ear because he'd gotten in his third fight at middle school on Dean Street. That he'd won the New York Golden Gloves twice, at 156 pounds, in a row. That there'd been a

promoter from Atlantic City sniffing around, a guy with a pinky ring and a Cadillac, and that it had been a sure thing.

"And then?" Madison asked.

Ray folded his paper. He was seventy-four and had the hands of somebody who'd been punched for a living and the eyes of somebody who'd enjoyed it. He'd had a stroke two years ago and the left side of his face hadn't quite caught up with the right.

"Ask him," Ray said.

"He doesn't talk."

"He talks plenty." Ray tapped his own temple. "Just not out loud."

From the walls, she found out more. There was a framed photo by the water fountain of a skinny kid in a robe that said ATLANTIC on the back, with a younger Ray holding his arm up in a ring she didn't recognize. There was a newspaper clipping from 2014, yellow under the glass. Brooklyn's Damien Russo Takes Second Gloves Title. In the photo he was twenty years old and grinning so wide it looked like it hurt. She had not seen him grin like that once. She'd hardly seen him grin at all.

From the front desk, one morning when he was in the back fixing a speed bag, she found out the last thing, which she wasn't supposed to see.

It was an envelope. Heavy paper, a logo she recognized the shape of before she recognized the name. Atlantic Terrace Holdings LLC. It had been opened and then put back down on top of a pile of unpaid-looking bills. She didn't read it. She would have liked credit

for that. But the first line was visible through the window of the fold, and it said Notice of Lease Expiration and Revised Terms, and the number under it had a comma in it that looked very far to the left.

She heard him coming back and moved away from the desk and was doing jumping jacks by the ring when he walked out.

He looked at her. He looked at the desk. He didn't say anything.

"Wrap up," he said.

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"So he's a mystery," Lauren said.

They were at the bar at Long Island on Atlantic, the one with the old diner sign and the drinks that cost sixteen dollars and tasted like you'd been born rich. Lauren had been Madison's roommate at Penn and was now a pediatric dentist on the Upper West Side, which meant she spent her days lying to children about how much things would hurt and her nights asking adults uncomfortable questions.

"He's a trainer," Madison said.

"He's a hot mystery trainer who touches your hips."

"He corrects my stance."

"With his hands."

"How else would he do it, Lauren? Email?"

Lauren ate an olive off her toothpick with great deliberation. "And you haven't looked him up."

"I looked him up a little."

"How little?"

"I found a YouTube video from 2015 of a fight at the Barclays Center. He knocks a guy out in the second round with a body shot. The guy just kind of folds. Like a beach chair." Madison turned her glass on its napkin. "Then nothing. He just stops showing up anywhere. No fights after 2016."

"Maybe he went to prison."

"He didn't go to prison."

"How do you know?"

"Because I checked," Madison said, and Lauren laughed so hard she had to put her drink down.

"Okay. So what's the problem?"

"The problem," Madison said, "is that I'm paying him. He's my trainer. There's a line. You don't date your trainer. It's like dating your therapist or your doctor or your tax guy."

"And Ryan?" Lauren asked, more gently. "Have you heard from Ryan?"

Madison thought about it. She'd gotten one text last week asking if she still had his Patagonia, and she'd left it unanswered for three days and then replied with a photo of the jacket in the building's donation bin. It had felt incredible.

"I've been getting up at 5:10," she said. "I'm in bed by ten. I don't have the energy to think about Ryan."

"That's not a no."

"It's a no," Madison said. "It's actually a no."

And she was surprised to find out that it was.

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By November she could throw a combination without thinking about it. Jab, cross, hook. Jab, cross, slip, cross. She learned to roll under a punch and come up on the other side with her hands still where they should be. She learned the speed bag, which took her two weeks of humiliation and then one morning simply happened, the rhythm suddenly in her wrists like a song she'd always known.

Her body changed. Her shoulders got a line in them she'd never had. She could feel her obliques when she laughed. In a meeting with opposing counsel on a forty-million-dollar asset purchase, a man named Carl had leaned across the table and told her that her client's position was frankly unserious, and she'd found herself sitting a little sideways in her chair, chin down, weight forward, waiting. Carl had backed off within two minutes.

She didn't get any happier at work, though. That was the strange part. She was better at it, sharper, faster, and somehow it fit her worse every week, like a suit that had been tailored for a person she was no longer exactly.

At the gym, things changed too, so slowly she almost missed it.

Damien started holding the pads closer. He started moving with her instead of in front of her, so that pad work became something like a conversation, him stepping in, her stepping out, the mitts showing up where her fists were going a half second before she knew it. He

started saying "good" twice a session. Then three times. One Thursday he said "That's it, that's it," under his breath, and she nearly forgot to put her hands back up.

And he started staying after.

Her sessions ended at 6:45. His next client, a retired fireman named Lou who came in to hit the bag and complain about his knees, wasn't until 7:30. Before, Damien had always started cleaning the second she finished, sweeping, wiping down the bags, making it clear the hour was over. Now he'd unwrap her hands himself. Slowly. Sitting across from her on the bench again, knee to knee, unwinding the long black cloth from her wrist while the sun came up orange over the tire shop across the street and the light came in through the front window and turned the dust in the air into something almost pretty.

They didn't say much during that part. She'd tell him about the subway, or a judge she'd once seen fall asleep during an argument, or the gray cat at the bodega, which she'd found out was named Tony Danza. He'd listen. Sometimes he'd say "Huh," which she had come to understand meant he liked it.

One morning she told him about the partnership. She hadn't planned to. It came out while he was unwinding her left hand.

"They gave it to a guy who calls everyone chief," she said. "He has a putting green in his office. A real one. With a little flag."

Damien didn't look up. He kept unwinding. "You want it?"

"Want what?"

"The office. The putting green."

She opened her mouth to say of course. It was what she'd been working toward since she was twenty-two years old, sixty-hour weeks, then seventy, then whatever came after seventy. Missed weddings. A Christmas on a conference line. A whole relationship with a man who'd apparently known for a while that it was over and never mentioned it because she was never home long enough to be told.

"I don't know," she said. And then, because it was 6:50 in the morning and her hands were bare and he was holding one of them, "I don't think I've wanted anything in a really long time. I think I just kept going because I didn't know what else to do."

He was quiet for a moment. The wrap was off now, and he was still holding her hand loosely, palm up, his thumb resting on the inside of her wrist where her pulse was.

"Yeah," he said. "I know that one."

She waited. He let go of her hand and stood up and went to put the wraps in the bin, and Lou came in early, complaining about the weather, and that was the end of it.

But it wasn't nothing. She walked to the subway that morning and couldn't stop thinking about where his thumb had been.

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He told her about the eye in December, on a morning when it was so cold the windows of the gym had frost on the inside.

She'd asked to spar. She'd been asking for two weeks. He'd said no for two weeks, the way he said everything, without any heat in it, and on

this particular morning she'd pushed.

"You let Tommy spar," she said. Tommy was sixteen and came in after school and had the attention span of a moth.

"Tommy's been here four years."

"I've been here three months."

"Exactly."

"I'm ready."

He was taping a new grip on a jump rope, sitting on the edge of the ring apron with his legs hanging over. He finished the wrap and bit off the tape and looked at her.

"You know why I stopped?" he said.

It was the first time he'd ever brought it up. She shook her head, even though she'd been wondering since the first week.

"Sparring," he said. "Not even a fight. Three weeks before I was supposed to go pro, I'm in here with a guy from Bed-Stuy, big guy, good guy, and he catches me with an overhand right. Here." He touched the bone just beside his left eye, under the scar through his brow. "Didn't even hurt that bad. Next morning I wake up and there's like a curtain coming down on one side. Like somebody's pulling a shade."

"Your retina."

"Detached. They fixed it. Laser, then a surgery, then another surgery." He shrugged one shoulder. "Doctor at Mount Sinai sat me down and said, one more good shot, maybe that's it. Maybe you don't get it

back. She said it real nice. She was very nice about it."

"Damien."

"So I stopped." He turned the jump rope over in his hands. "Same year Ray had his first stroke. The small one. Somebody had to open up in the morning. So that was me. That's ten years ago now."

Madison didn't know what to say. She was a person who always knew what to say. She was paid six hundred and forty dollars an hour to know.

"Do you miss it?" she asked finally.

"Every day," he said simply. "But I'm good at this. I didn't know I'd be good at this." He looked out at the gym. The bags hanging still. Ray's empty chair, because Ray didn't come in until eight anymore. The NO EXCUSES sign. "Kids come in here like I came in. Mad at everything. You give them somewhere to put it. That's worth something."

"It's worth a lot."

He nodded. Then he got up off the apron and held out the headgear she hadn't noticed he'd brought out with him.

"Light," he said. "Touch sparring. Nobody's trying to hurt anybody. You get one rule."

"What?"

"Keep your hands up," he said. "You drop them on me, we're done."

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She'd been wrong about what sparring would feel like.

She'd pictured something like the pads, only louder. It was nothing like the pads. The pads came to her. Damien, in the ring with headgear on and sixteen-ounce gloves and his hands up, did not come to her. He moved like water moves when you try to grab it. She'd throw a jab and he simply wouldn't be there. She'd throw a cross and his glove would turn it aside with a little tap, almost polite, and then the other glove would touch her ribs, gently, so she'd know it could have been something else.

"Hands," he said.

She got her hands up. He touched her headgear with a jab so light she barely felt it.

"Again."

For the first round, she didn't land a single thing. By the second, she'd stopped trying to hit him and started trying to watch him, the way he'd taught her, his shoulders, his hips, the half-inch dip before he moved. And in the third round she saw it. He stepped in and his right shoulder dropped just slightly, and she slipped left and came back with a hook, and it landed. Not hard. Right on the side of his headgear with a soft thud.

They both stopped.

He looked at her through the bars of the headgear. She was breathing hard. Her heart was going so fast she could feel it in her teeth.

"Sorry," she said.

"Don't be sorry." He was breathing hard too, she realized. Less than her. But not nothing. "That was good."

He came in again and this time it was faster, and she kept up, mostly. They moved around the ring together. Jab and slip, step out, step back in. It went on and on until it stopped feeling like a fight and started feeling like something else, something closer and more careful, where she knew without looking where his weight was and he knew where hers was going to be. At some point he tied her up against the ropes the way fighters do, his arms over hers, his chest against her shoulder, and they stayed there one second longer than they needed to. She could feel him breathing. She could smell him, clean sweat and the menthol of whatever he put on his wraps. His forehead was almost touching her temple through the padding.

Neither of them moved.

Then the buzzer on the round timer went off, loud as a fire alarm, and he let go and stepped back to his corner and pulled his headgear off and stood there with his back to her, both hands on the top rope.

"Time," he said, to nobody.

Madison stood in her corner and pressed her glove against her mouth, because she had the strangest urge to laugh, or cry, or walk across the ring and turn him around.

She did none of it. Ray came in at eight with a box of Entenmann's and asked why the hell they both looked like they'd been hit by a truck.

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After that, there was a week where Damien was very formal with her. It was a little like being trained by a polite stranger. He held the pads

at arm's length. He didn't unwrap her hands. On Thursday, he was in the office with the door shut when she finished, on the phone, and she could hear his voice through the wall, lower than usual and tight.

"I know what the lease says," he was saying. "I know what it says. I'm telling you we can't do fourteen."

She gathered her stuff very slowly. She was not proud of how slowly.

"Then tell him to come down here and say it to Ray's face," Damien said, and hung up.

She was gone before the door opened. But on the walk to the train, she called Ray.

Ray told her everything, because Ray had never in his life been asked a question he didn't answer. The building had sold in October. The new owner was Atlantic Terrace Holdings, which was really some outfit out of Connecticut that was buying up the whole block between Third and Fourth, the tire shop, the honey store, the dry cleaner, all of it. The gym's lease was up March 31st. The new rent was going from sixty-five hundred a month to fourteen thousand.

"Fourteen," Ray said. "For this dump. You know what I paid in 1979? Four hundred dollars. And I complained."

"Is there anything in the lease? A renewal option?"

"Honey, I signed that thing in 2011. I don't remember what I had for lunch."

"Where's your copy?"

"Somewhere," Ray said. "Damien says forget it. He says he doesn't want lawyers. He says lawyers are how we got here."

"I'm a lawyer."

"I know," Ray said. "So does he."

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It started raining on the second Thursday in January and didn't stop for three days.

Her firm had a closing that week, a midsize pharma deal that ate her alive, and she couldn't make her morning sessions. She texted Damien to cancel Tuesday, then Thursday. He replied both times with a single word. Okay. She stared at that word for a long time on her phone at one in the morning, in a conference room on the thirty-eighth floor that smelled like cold lo mein.

The deal closed Friday at 8pm. She went home, took a shower, stood in the middle of her living room with her hair wet and realized there was only one place she wanted to be.

It was almost ten when she got to Atlantic. The rain was coming down so hard it bounced. The avenue was empty except for a cab going too fast, its headlights smeared across the wet street. Her umbrella had turned inside out on Third Avenue and she'd given up on it and stuffed it in a trash can and now her hair was plastered to her face and her sneakers squelched.

She didn't even know why she'd thought he'd be there. The gym closed at nine.

The lights were on.

Through the gold letters on the front window she could see him. He was alone, working the heavy bag, the same as the first morning.

Except this time he wasn't patient with it. He was hitting it hard, combination after combination, the chain shrieking, his shirt soaked through, like he was trying to knock it off the ceiling.

She knocked on the glass.

He stopped. He caught the bag. He turned and saw her standing there in the rain like a drowned cat and for a second he didn't move at all.

Then he came and unlocked the door.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"I missed my sessions."

"It's ten o'clock."

"I know what time it is." Water was running off her chin. "I wanted to come anyway."

He stood in the doorway looking at her. Then he stepped back to let her in and shut the door behind her and the sound of the rain dropped to a low steady roar against the window.

The gym was different at night. Half the fluorescent tubes were off. The rings were dark shapes. The only real light was over the heavy bags, a pool of it, and the red glow of the EXIT sign over the back door. It was warm. It always smelled the same, leather and effort, but now it smelled like rain too, coming off her.

"You're soaked," he said.

"Yeah."

He went to the office and came back with a towel, a thin white gym towel that had been bleached so many times it was practically

see-through. She took it and pressed it to her face.

"I heard you on the phone last week," she said into the towel. "About the lease."

He didn't answer.

"Ray told me the rest. Fourteen thousand."

"Ray talks too much."

"Ray's worried about you." She lowered the towel. "Let me look at the lease, Damien. That's all. Just let me read it."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you come here at six in the morning to get away from that stuff." He said it quietly. "I'm not going to be one more thing you work on."

She looked at him. He was standing about four feet away, in the edge of the light, with the tape still on his hands and his chest still rising and falling from the bag, and his face was as unreadable as it had been the first morning. Except it wasn't. She'd spent four months learning to read the half-inch dip of his shoulder before a punch. She could read this.

"That's not why I come here," she said.

"No?"

"No."

He didn't move. She did. She walked the four feet and stopped right in front of him, close enough to feel the heat coming off him, and reached out and took his right hand in both of hers. She found the end of the tape with her thumbnail and started unwinding it, slowly, around his wrist, across his knuckles, the way he'd done for her a hundred times.

He let her. He watched her do it.

When the tape was off, his hand was red where it had pressed. She ran her thumb over his knuckles, over the old pale scars there, and then turned his hand over and pressed her lips to the inside of his wrist, right where his pulse was.

It was going faster than hers.

"Madison," he said. Her name sounded different in his mouth. It sounded like he'd been holding onto it.

"You can tell me to go," she said.

He didn't tell her to go. He put his other hand in her wet hair and tipped her chin up, half an inch, the way he had the very first day, and kissed her.

It was slow at first. Careful, like everything he did, like he was asking a question he'd been working up to for months. Then she made a sound against his mouth and it stopped being careful. He backed her up until her shoulders hit the ropes of the near ring and the ropes gave and held. She pulled at his soaked T-shirt and he pulled it over his head with one hand, the way men do, and she put her palms flat against his chest and felt his heart going like the speed bag. He kissed her jaw. Her neck. The place under her ear she'd forgotten anyone

could find. Her wet sweatshirt hit the floor somewhere near the bucket of jump ropes.

"Office," he said into her shoulder. "There's a couch."

"There's a couch?"

"Ray naps."

She laughed, and he laughed, a real laugh, low and surprised, and it was the first time she'd heard it and she wanted to hear it again immediately. He took her hand and they walked through the dark gym past the bags and the rings and the NO EXCUSES sign, and the rain hammered the windows, and he reached back without looking and switched off the last of the lights.

. . .

She woke up at 5:10 without an alarm, which was its own kind of tragedy.

The couch in Ray's office was green corduroy and about four inches too short for two people, and at some point in the night Damien had put a gray wool blanket over both of them that said PROPERTY OF ATLANTIC BOXING CLUB in marker along the edge. The rain had stopped. The window over the desk was going from black to blue. His arm was heavy across her waist and his breathing against the back of her neck was slow and even.

She lay there and looked at the office. A space heater. A filing cabinet with a Golden Gloves trophy on top. A coffee can full of pens. A framed photo of Ray in 1983, shirtless, with a mustache that could have had its own lease.

"You're thinking," Damien said behind her, his voice rough with sleep.

"I'm a lawyer. It's a condition."

He pressed his mouth to her shoulder. "Think quieter."

She laughed into the corduroy, and he pulled her closer, and for a while she didn't think about anything.

. . .

On Monday, she ran the conflicts check.

She told herself it was a formality. Every lawyer at Hale & Whitmore had to clear a name before they touched a matter, even pro bono, even just reading a lease for a friend. She typed Atlantic Terrace Holdings into the system at 9:15 with her coffee still too hot to drink.

It came back in under a second. Active client. Real estate acquisitions. Responsible partner, Brett Fowler.

She sat back in her chair. Through the glass wall of her office she could see straight across to his, where he was practicing his putting in socks.

She went down there. She didn't plan to. She just stood up and walked.

"Chief," Brett said, delighted. "What's up?"

"Atlantic Terrace," she said. "The Brooklyn block. What's the plan for it?"

He lined up a putt. "Clear the ground floor, knock it down, eleven stories of luxury rentals. Gorgeous. Rooftop pool." The ball rolled into the little cup. He looked up. "Why?"

"Just curious."

"Couple of holdouts on the leases," he said. "Some old boxing place. Tire shop. We're squeezing. They'll fold by spring. They always do."

She went back to her office and closed the door and sat there for a long time.

. . .

Damien found out on Wednesday.

It was her fault. She'd gone to see Ray on Tuesday night, at his apartment over the deli on Bergen, and Ray had dug through three shoeboxes and a closet and finally a drawer full of rubber bands and handed her a thick stapled document with a coffee ring on the cover. The lease. She'd taken it home and read it twice, the way she read everything, with a pen in her teeth. And on Wednesday morning she'd left it sitting on top of her gym bag, flagged with yellow tabs, next to a printout from the firm's client portal with Brett's name on it that she'd meant to shred.

She came out of the bathroom and he was holding both.

"You work for them," he said.

"I work at the firm that represents them. That's different."

"Is it?"

"Damien. I didn't know. I found out Monday."

"Monday." He set the papers down carefully on the bench, like they might go off. "And you didn't say anything."

"I was trying to figure out what I could do first."

"You went to Ray behind my back."

"Ray's the tenant. It's his lease."

"It's my gym." His voice didn't go up. It went flat, which was worse. "I've been holding this place together with tape for ten years. I don't need somebody from the forty-first floor coming down here on her way to work and fixing it for me. So she can feel good about something."

That one landed. She felt it all the way up her arm.

"That's not fair," she said.

"Maybe not." He picked up the pads and walked to the ring. "Lou's here early. We'll do Thursday."

She didn't come Thursday.

· · ·

She spent the next four days doing the thing she was best at.

She read the lease again, and then a third time. Section 32, on page nineteen, buried between the insurance requirements and a clause about signage, gave the tenant one option to renew for ten years at the existing rent plus three percent a year, exercised by written notice to the landlord at least six months before expiration. Which meant by September 30th. Which had come and gone.

She called Ray.

"Did you ever send a letter to the old landlord? Last summer? Saying you wanted to renew?"

"Of course I did," Ray said, offended. "Nobody asked me. Nobody ever asks me. Certified mail. I'm not an animal."

"Do you have the receipt?"

There was a long pause.

"Coffee can," Ray said. "In the office. With the pens."

She went at six in the morning on a Monday, because that was when she knew the door would be propped open. Damien was holding pads for Tommy, who was supposed to be in school. He saw her come in. He didn't stop the round. She went into the office and dumped the coffee can out on Ray's desk and there, under a hundred dead ballpoints and a Golden Gloves pin and a fortune cookie fortune that said You will be hungry again in one hour, was a green certified mail receipt, dated August 14th, with a return card signed by somebody at the old landlord's management company.

She sat down on the corduroy couch and laughed until her eyes watered.

Then she went to work and walked into Douglas Hale's office and resigned.

He was very kind about it. He said the firm would hate to lose her. He said her time had been coming. She said she knew, and she thanked him, and this time she meant it, because she'd figured out that she was done waiting for it.

. . .

The letter went out that Friday on letterhead she'd made herself at eleven at night. Madison Clarke, Attorney at Law. A P.O. box in Boerum Hill. Two pages, very polite. It cited Section 32. It enclosed a copy of the certified receipt. It pointed out, also politely, that a buyer takes a building subject to its existing leases, and that her client would be delighted to pay sixty-six hundred and ninety-five dollars a month through 2036, and that her client would also be delighted to discuss all of this before a judge in Kings County Civil Court, at whatever length the landlord preferred.

She addressed it to Atlantic Terrace Holdings, care of Hale & Whitmore, attention Brett Fowler.

It took him nine days to call.

"Chief," he said, and he did not sound delighted. "Come on."

"Madison," she said. "It's Madison."

They signed the renewal on the twenty-eighth of February. Ray signed it with a felt-tip pen in letters an inch high and then made her take a photo of him holding it up like a title belt.

. . .

She hadn't talked to Damien in five weeks. She'd given the signed copy to Ray. She'd told herself that was enough.

On the first Tuesday in March, at 5:15 in the morning, her phone buzzed on the nightstand.

> *6am. Wear something you can sweat in. -D*

She lay there looking at it for a long time. Then she got up.

The bodega guy had her coffee ready. Tony Danza was asleep on the Gatorade. The sky over the Barclays Center was going pink. When she got to Atlantic, the door was propped open with a ten-pound plate, and somebody had repainted the gold letters on the front window so they shone. Atlantic Boxing Club. Est. 1979.

He was sitting on the bench with the wraps in his hands.

"Ray told me," he said. "About the coffee can. About your job."

"Ray talks too much."

"Yeah." He looked down at the wraps. "I was wrong. What I said. About you feeling good. That wasn't what it was, and I knew it, and I said it anyway because I was scared you'd fix it and then you'd go." He looked up. "That's what people do. They fix it and they go."

She sat down across from him, knee to knee.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. "I'm starting my own practice. Small businesses. Commercial leases. Mean landlords." She held out her right hand. "I need an office. Ray says there's a room upstairs nobody's used since 1994."

"There's a dead pigeon in it."

"I've had worse offices."

He took her hand. He hooked the loop of the wrap over her thumb and went around her wrist, three times, and across the back of her hand, and between her fingers, one at a time. Careful. The sun came

up over the tire shop and the light came through the new gold letters and landed on both of them.

"Make a fist," he said.

She did, like she was holding a bird. He checked it. Then he didn't let go.

"You know," she said, "there's a rule about dating your trainer."

"Yeah?" He leaned in until his forehead touched hers. "Who made it?"

"Nobody. It was more of a general mood."

He kissed her, slow, in the early light, with Ray coming in the front door behind them and saying "Oh, for God's sake," and dropping a box of Entenmann's on the desk.

"Chin," Damien said against her mouth.

She tipped it up. "Make me," she said, and he smiled, wide, the way he had in the photo when he was twenty. It looked like it hurt a little. It looked like it was worth it.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.