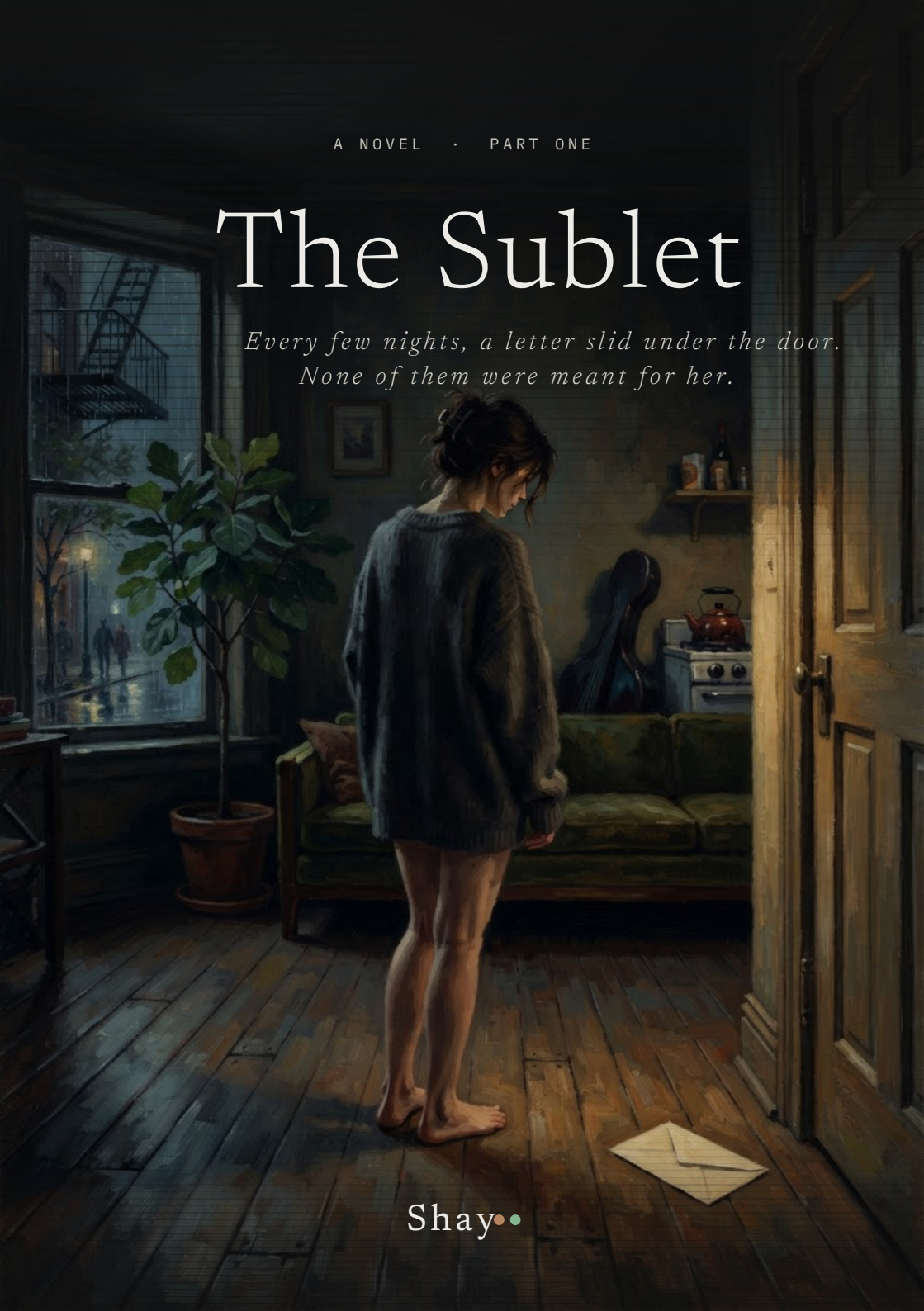
A NOVEL · PART ONE

The Sublet

Every few nights, a letter slid under the door.
None of them were meant for her.



Shay

PART ONE

The Sublet

Shay

The Sublet – Part One

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Contains adult content.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Toast

FOR THE RECORD, IT was a very good toast, right up until the part where it ended my engagement.

I would know. Other people's sentences are how I pay my rent. I have written five bestselling memoirs, and my name is on none of them: an actress, a senator's wife, a tennis player, a woman famous for flipping a table on reality television, and a chef whose first book I built entirely out of voice memos he recorded at red lights. I signed the NDAs. I cashed the checks. When people asked what I did, Ryan said, "Claire edits stuff," and I let him, because it was easier than explaining that I spend my days living inside strangers' heads, listening for the exact moment they start to lie.

You'd think that would have helped.

Bettina's was the kind of Tribeca restaurant that looks like it was assembled by someone who once saw Italy in a dream. Exposed brick, Edison bulbs, a back room with one long table and forty people at it, all of them there because of me. Ryan's parents had driven in from Greenwich. My mother had flown in from Phoenix with my stepfather, Gary, and a camera roll of four hundred photos of their dog. The dog was named Biscuit. The dog was not invited. My

mother had brought him anyway, in a sense.

"Look," she said, tilting her phone at me over the burrata. "That's him in his little raincoat."

"He looks very dry, Mom."

"He hates it. He's so dramatic." She scrolled. "That's him hating it."

I was happy. I want that on the record, too. I had checked, the way you pat your pocket for your keys. Happy, yes. A little numb around the edges, the way you get when you've been planning one day for fourteen months and it finally becomes tomorrow. I'd decided that was normal. I'd decided a lot of things were normal that year.

Ryan was at my left, being handsome. Ryan was handsome the way a LinkedIn headshot is handsome: good jaw, good teeth, the expression of a man who has just been told his quarterly numbers are excellent and is too modest to mention it. He worked in private equity, which as far as I could tell meant buying companies that made things and then teaching them to make less of them. He was charming to waiters. He remembered birthdays. He ironed his own shirts, which I'd found sexy for about two years and then just efficient.

If I were writing him, and I'd thought about it, the way you think about writing everyone, I'd have opened with his hands. Ryan had a habit of touching the small of my back when we entered a room, like he was steering a shopping cart he was proud of.

Across from me, his mother asked if I was nervous.

"Only about the chairs," I said, and she laughed, because she thought it was a joke, and it was, mostly. The venue had sent the wrong chairs to the walkthrough. Gold chiavari instead of the wooden crossbacks. I'd had a twelve-minute phone call about it that morning that I would think about, later, as the last normal

conversation of my life.

. . .

Maddie stood up after the branzino.

Maddie Price had been my best friend since the second week of freshman year at NYU, when she knocked on my door in Weinstein Hall at two in the morning holding a box of Franzia and a fire extinguisher and said, "I don't know how to use this and I think my roommate is a witch." We'd been inseparable since. She'd held my hair. I'd held hers. She knew my mother's maiden name and my bank password and the exact face I make when someone says "irregardless." She was my maid of honor. Of course she was.

She looked beautiful. Green silk, hair up, the little gold hoops I gave her for her twenty-fifth. She tapped her glass with a fork, and the room hushed in that eager, wine-loosened way rooms do, and she smiled down the table at me like I was a sunrise.

"I'm going to keep this short," she said, "because Claire will edit me in her head if I don't."

Laughter. True, also. I was already doing it.

She told the Franzia story. She told the one about spring break in Tulum when I'd read the entire terms and conditions of a Jet Ski rental out loud to the man renting the Jet Skis. She told the one about me crying at a Pixar movie about a lamp. The room loved her. People always loved Maddie. She had a way of standing in a room as if she'd been invited personally by the room.

"And Claire is the most loyal person I have ever met," she said, and her voice wobbled a little, and I thought, oh, she's going to cry, she always cries at toasts, she cried at her cousin's, and her cousin is a nightmare.

She turned toward Ryan.

"And Ryan," she said. "Ryan, I know what you're like at three a.m.—"

It was a pause, maybe a second long. Less.

It was the pause that did it.

A professional listens for those. The half-breath where a sentence realizes what it's just said and tries to get back into the car. I heard it the way you'd hear a glass break in another room: before I understood it, my body had already turned toward the sound.

"—because Claire calls me," Maddie finished, bright as a bell. "To complain about the snoring."

Everyone laughed. Gary laughed so hard he coughed. Ryan's father said, "He gets that from me," and Ryan's mother swatted him.

Ryan didn't laugh. Ryan smiled, the headshot smile, and his eyes went to Maddie and stayed there one beat too long. Not a long look. A short one. But I've spent six years watching people talk about the worst moments of their lives into a recorder, and I can tell you that the truth almost never shows up in a long look. It's in the short ones. The ones that are over before the person giving them knows they've happened.

Maddie's phone was face-up on the table, next to my bread plate, where she'd set it so she could read her notes.

It lit up.

R ♥

And under it, the preview, small and gray and very clear: Mads. Sit down.

I looked at Ryan's left hand, under the table, and his phone in it.

The thing nobody tells you is how fast it goes. I'd always imagined that if something like this happened to me, if, I'd have a long, slow,

cinematic dawning. A hand rising to my mouth. Instead it all arrived at once, like a paragraph I'd already written and forgotten. The spin class on Tuesday nights that Ryan had started in March. The way Maddie had stopped asking me how things were with him, sometime around spring, and I'd thought, how nice, she's finally being less nosy. The new cologne. The weekend she'd been "upstate with a guy from Hinge" and he'd been "in Boston for the Henderson deal." The fact that she'd known, the week before, which side of the bed he slept on, and I had told myself I must have mentioned it.

I must have mentioned it.

One second. All of it. Like being handed the finished book.

"To Claire and Ryan," Maddie was saying, raising her glass, beaming, a tear on her cheek, and the whole table rose with her, forty glasses of Barolo catching the Edison bulbs.

I stood up too.

I didn't plan it. I want to be clear about that, because later people would describe what I said as if I'd workshopped it, and I hadn't. It came out the way the best lines do in the books I write for other people: fully formed, from somewhere below the ribs.

I lifted my glass. I looked at my best friend.

"To Maddie," I said. "Who always did know him better than I did."

I drank. All of it. It was very good wine, and Ryan's father had paid for it, and I've never regretted a sip.

Then I set the glass down, picked up Maddie's phone, the screen still glowing, R ♥, and slid it gently across the tablecloth until it stopped against Ryan's plate.

"It's for you," I said.

Nobody breathed. A busboy in the doorway actually froze with a tray of tiramisu, like a deer in a very upscale headlight. My mother

said, "Claire?" in the voice she used to use when I came home late from school, half worried and half already disappointed. Maddie's face did something I would spend weeks trying to describe and never get right. It went white and then it went blank, the way a page does when you delete everything on it.

Ryan said my name. He said it the way you'd say it to a horse.

I picked up my purse. I picked up the little cardigan I'd brought in case the restaurant was cold. And I walked out of the back room at Bettina's, past the bar, past the hostess who said "Have a beautiful night!" with real feeling, out the door and into the rain.

. . .

It was really coming down. A warm September rain, the heavy kind that makes the gutters on Greenwich Street run like they've got somewhere to be. Within half a block my dress was ruined. It was champagne silk, bias-cut, and it had cost more than my first car, which, to be fair, had been a 1997 Corolla with a door that only opened from the inside. The silk went dark at the shoulders and then everywhere. My hair, which had been professionally set at four o'clock that afternoon, gave up somewhere around Harrison Street. I didn't put the cardigan on. I don't know why. I carried it like a small wet animal I'd rescued.

I didn't cry. I want that on the record, too.

I walked until I found a bodega on West Broadway with the door propped open and a roller grill turning in the window, six hot dogs rotating slowly like the world's saddest carousel. A gray cat was asleep on a stack of Gatorade cases inside the door. The man behind the counter looked at me, at the dress, at the water pooling around my heels on his floor, and did not ask a single question, which is why I

will love him until I die.

"One hot dog," I said. "Mustard. And a Diet Coke. And do you have, like, a bag?"

He gave me a hot dog, a Diet Coke, and a plastic bag. Then, after a second's thought, a second plastic bag, and a gesture at my head. I put it on my head. He nodded, satisfied. The cat opened one eye at me and closed it again, unimpressed by weddings in general.

I ate the hot dog on the steps of a loft building on Franklin Street, under a sliver of awning that kept off maybe a third of the rain. The steps were cold through the silk. The hot dog was the best thing I've ever eaten. I'm aware that's a sentence that says more about the night than the hot dog.

My phone, in my purse, had started buzzing as I left the restaurant, and it had not stopped. I didn't look. I knew the shape of it without looking: Ryan, Ryan, Ryan, Mom, Ryan, an unknown number that would be Ryan's mother, Ryan. Not Maddie. I knew Maddie wouldn't call. Maddie, right then, would be sitting very still at a table full of people, waiting to find out what kind of person she was.

At the end of the block, under a black umbrella, a man came out of a doorway and looked up and down the street. Good shoulders. Good coat. He turned and jogged the wrong way, toward Chambers, his phone pressed to his ear. I watched him go. I thought, if I were writing him, this is where he'd turn around. He'd feel me. He'd look back.

He didn't. He went around the corner, and that was the last I saw of the man I was supposed to marry in nineteen hours.

I finished my Diet Coke. Then I took out my phone, ignored forty-one notifications, and called Priya.

She picked up on the second ring, which meant she was on shift and in a hallway, because Priya Shah never picks up on the first ring and never lets it go to a third. Behind her voice, I could hear an ER doing its thing: a monitor's beep, someone yelling for a tech, a man somewhere singing what sounded like Bon Jovi with great conviction.

"Are you hurt," she said.

"No."

"Is anyone else hurt?"

"Not yet."

A pause. I could hear her deciding something. Priya was an emergency medicine resident and had the bedside manner of a very kind parking meter, which was exactly why I'd called her and not anyone else on earth.

"Where are you."

"On a stoop. On Franklin. I'm wearing a bag."

"Okay." I heard her start walking, fast, and a door bang open. "What happened."

I opened my mouth to tell her. Every version I tried sounded like a chapter in someone else's book. My best friend. My fiancé. Three a.m. A little red heart. In the end I just said, "Maddie."

The silence on the other end lasted long enough for a siren to go by on her side, and another on mine, so that for a second it felt like we were in the same place.

"Okay," Priya said, very quietly. Then, in her normal voice: "I'm getting a cab. Don't move. Don't answer him. Don't go back to his apartment. Don't let your mother find you, because she'll want to talk about the dog."

"Priya, you're at work."

"I'm a resident. I'm basically a chair with a pager. Somebody will cover." Her voice softened, very slightly, which on Priya is like anyone else bursting into tears. "Claire. Did you say something? When you left?"

I thought about the glass. About the phone sliding across the tablecloth, the little screen still lit up like a votive.

"Yeah," I said. "It was pretty good, actually."

"Of course it was," she said. "Eat something."

"I just had a hot dog."

"Eat another one."

She hung up. I sat there in the rain in a ruined dress with a bag on my head, and for the first time all night, something in my chest unclenched one notch, and I laughed, out loud, alone, on Franklin Street. The bodega cat, if it could hear me, did not care.

The wedding was supposed to be tomorrow. Instead, two weeks later, I moved into a stranger's apartment with three rules, and broke all of them.

CHAPTER TWO

The Listing

PRIYA'S COUCH WAS TECHNICALLY a loveseat, which meant that for sixteen nights I slept in the shape of a question mark.

Her apartment was on the third floor of a vinyl-sided house in Astoria, two blocks from the N train, and it was the size of a generous closet. You could stand in the kitchen and touch the bathroom door and the front door at the same time, which I did, once, at four in the morning, to see if I still had arms. Her radiator hissed like a disappointed aunt.

And there was Judge.

Judge was a large gray cat with a flat face and the general bearing of a magistrate. Priya had found him in the ambulance bay three winters ago and named him for his expression. Every night, around two, he climbed onto my chest, settled his full weight on my sternum, and stared down into my face until I woke up. He just looked at me, as if he'd heard my case and was weighing the evidence.

"He likes you," Priya said, the first morning.

"He's sitting on my lungs."

"That's how he likes people." She poured coffee into a mug that said WORLD'S OKAYEST DOCTOR. "He sat on my ex for a year.

Then he peed in his shoes. He knew before I did."

I looked at Judge. Judge looked at me.

"Where was he seven months ago," I said.

. . .

It turns out that when your life ends, the caterers still want to know about the chairs.

I spent the first week on the phone. The florist cried. The band kept half the deposit and sent a card. The cake woman charged me in full and offered to freeze the top tier "in case." In case of what, I didn't ask. The venue in Dumbo kept everything and emailed me a link to rebook "your special day" at fifteen percent off. Each phone call was a small, polite funeral where I was both the widow and the guy who stacks the folding chairs.

Ryan texted. Ryan texted a lot.

Claire please pick up.

It's not what you think.

Ok it's partly what you think. Let me explain the rest.

Mads is a mess. She hasn't left her apartment.

Also we need to figure out the venue refund, my dad's asking.

I read them all. I didn't answer any. Somewhere in my chest there was a dial turned all the way to zero, and I left it there, because I was afraid that if I touched it, it would spin.

Maddie didn't text. Maddie sat in my messages for forty minutes on the Sunday, the three little dots appearing and disappearing, appearing and disappearing, like someone trying to start a car in the cold. Then nothing. I've drafted what she was going to say a dozen ways since. Every version I wrote was better than anything she could have sent, and that made me angrier than anything.

On the Wednesday, Priya and I went to Ryan's apartment while he was at work and packed up my life. The doorman held the elevator for us and said, as the doors closed, "For what it's worth, I never liked the way he said thank you." Everything I owned fit in three boxes and a suitcase. I'd thought of it as our place. It turns out it had been his place with my towels in it.

My mother called on Sunday, as she always does, and told me she was there for me, and that Biscuit had an ear infection, so it had been a week for all of us. Then her voice caught, and I realized she was going to cry about the dog, and I let her, because it was easier than either of us crying about anything else.

. . .

And I worked, because the work doesn't care.

Danny Russo's memoir was due December fifteenth. Danny was fifty-two, owned three restaurants and a television show on which he yelled at people lovingly about pork, and had hired me in June to turn his life into a book his publisher kept calling "raw." He left me voice memos while driving, while cooking, while what I was fairly sure was sitting on the toilet. He'd start with his mother and end with a fistfight in a walk-in freezer in 1994, and somewhere in between there'd be a sentence so honest it knocked the wind out of me.

I'd never told Danny I was getting married, so I didn't have to tell him I wasn't.

His editor knew something was off, because Lorraine Fisch knew everything was off, always, about everyone.

"You sound like death," she said, the second Tuesday, on speaker, with Judge glaring at my laptop. Lorraine was sixty, had edited three Pulitzer finalists, and smoked on the sidewalk outside her office like it

was a sacred duty. "Are you sick? Don't be sick. December fifteenth, sweetheart, not a minute later."

"I'm not sick."

"Then what?"

"I'm between apartments."

A long exhale, which I knew was smoke. "Who isn't," said Lorraine, and moved on to chapter nine.

. . .

The listing came on the Thursday, thirteen days in, from Priya's phone.

She came home at seven a.m. from a fourteen-hour shift, dropped her phone on my face, and fell onto the floor next to the loveseat like a felled tree.

"Tasha from triage," she said into the rug. "Her cousin's boyfriend's friend's something. I didn't follow it. Read it."

I read it.

Perry St. 1BR sublet, 3 months, furnished, $1,400/mo. Fourth floor, no elevator, good light. Water the fig twice a week. Don't open the hall closet. Don't answer the door after midnight. — T.

I read it again. Then I read it out loud.

Priya lifted her head off the rug. "That's either a poet or a serial killer."

"Fourteen hundred dollars in the West Village is a serial killer," I said. "That's the only way that price makes sense. The fig is fertilized with previous subletters."

"Don't answer the door after midnight." She frowned. "That's a weird rule."

"It's a good rule. It's a rule for everyone, honestly."

"And the closet?"

"Every apartment has a closet you don't open," I said. "Most people just don't write it down."

There were three photos: a big window with light slanting onto old floorboards and a long green couch; a kitchen so small it looked like a diorama of a kitchen; and a fig tree in a terracotta pot, taken from very close, as if whoever had photographed it was worried it wouldn't otherwise get the credit it deserved.

I looked at the fig for a long time.

"Claire," Priya said, from the floor. "You have that face."

"What face?"

"The face you get when you've decided something and you're going to pretend you're still thinking about it."

"I'd like," I said slowly, "to meet a man who is that specific about a fig."

. . .

I emailed. The reply came within the hour, not from T., but from a friend of his handling the sublet, who wrote short, polite emails in full sentences and never once used my name. The keys were with the super. T. was "away for an extended period." No, he wasn't available to talk. Yes, the fig was serious.

I went to see it on Friday afternoon, in a gray October drizzle, and I fell in love on the walk from the subway.

Perry Street is the kind of block that makes you lower your voice. Brick and brownstone, black iron railings, the trees meeting over the middle of the street so that walking under them is like walking down the aisle of something. The leaves had started to fall, plastered flat to the wet sidewalk like someone had pressed them in a book. Number

forty-one was a red-brick walk-up with a green door, a stoop worn soft in the middle, and a radio playing salsa from somewhere just inside.

The radio belonged to Mr. Hector Ortiz.

He opened the door before I knocked, as if he'd been watching from the window, which he had. He was in his sixties, broad and short, with a gray mustache, a Yankees cap, and a ring of keys on his belt the size of a dinner plate. He looked me up and down with a thoroughness I'd only ever seen from customs officers and Judge.

"You're the one for 4B," he said. "The writer."

"How did you know I'm a writer?"

"You got ink on your hand, mija." He tapped his own. "Right there. Nobody uses a pen anymore except writers and old men. Come on, come on, the stairs, they're not getting shorter."

The stairs were narrow and steep and creaked in a different note on every landing. 3A, Mr. Ortiz told me, was Mrs. Kaplan, who had been there since 1971 and would hear every step I took. 3B worked "in finance or crime, I can't tell, he tips good either way." The front door's latch didn't catch unless you leaned on it, he said, and he'd told the landlord, and the landlord was a man without a soul.

On the fourth floor he stopped, breathing a little hard, sorted through the dinner plate of keys, and opened 4B.

I stood in the doorway for a long moment.

It was light. That was the first thing. Even on a gray day, the big window at the far end of the living room let in a pale, generous light that lay across the floor in a long rectangle, and beyond the glass was a black iron fire escape and the tops of Perry Street's trees, so close it felt like you could step out into them. The floors were wide old boards that slanted, very slightly, toward the window, as if the whole

room were leaning in to look out. One wall was exposed brick. The other walls were books. Not decorative books: cracked spines, slips of paper sticking out, leaning towers on the floor by a record player and a crate of vinyl. I tilted my head at the nearest records. Bach. Elgar. Dvořák. Someone called Jacqueline du Pré, three times.

There was the green velvet couch from the photo, long and low and a little worn on one arm.

And in the corner, standing upright against the brick, a cello in a dark case.

"He plays?" I said.

"He plays," Mr. Ortiz said. He said it the way you'd say someone was born in a particular country.

The kitchen was a galley the width of my arm span, with a gas stove, open shelves, and a red kettle dented on one side, as if it had been dropped and loved anyway. Its handle wobbled when I touched it. The bathroom had a clawfoot tub. A real one, deep, with feet like a lion's. The bedroom had a low bed with linen sheets the color of oatmeal and a single lamp. In the narrow hall between the rooms was a door painted the same white as the walls, with a small brass knob and an old brass keyhole.

I didn't touch it. I'd like credit for that, too, for the record.

And by the window, in a terracotta pot as wide as a car tire, stood the fig.

It was taller than me. Its leaves were big and soft and hand-shaped, and it leaned, very slightly, toward the light, the way everything in that room did.

"T. said water the fig," said Mr. Ortiz from behind me. "He was very specific about the fig."

"T.," I said. "Do you know what it stands for?"

He considered me for a moment. "Theo," he said finally. "Good boy. Quiet. Too quiet, maybe."

"Why's he leaving?"

"That's his story, mija. Not mine." He jingled the keys. "Twice a week. Not three times, he says, not once. Twice. You'll drown her or you'll starve her, and either way I hear about it."

"And the door after midnight?"

Something passed across his face and was gone, quick as a car's headlights sweeping a ceiling. "Old building," he said. "Sometimes people knock. Let them knock."

I signed that night, on Priya's floor, on my laptop, with Judge sitting squarely on the trackpad. I paid through December. I had never wanted anything so fast in my life, including Ryan, including, if I'm honest, the wedding.

. . .

I moved in on Sunday, October twelfth.

Priya helped me carry three boxes and a suitcase up four flights, swore steadily on every landing, and stood in the middle of the living room afterward, hands on her hips, catching her breath.

"Okay," she said. "I get it."

"Right?"

"It's very sad and beautiful in here." She eyed the cello. "Don't touch that. That's somebody's whole personality. And don't open the closet."

"I'm not going to open the closet."

"You're going to open the closet," she said, and hugged me, quick and hard and bony, which was the most she'd hugged me in ten years. "Call me if the serial killer comes back for his fig."

When she'd gone I stood in the middle of a stranger's life and listened to it. The radiator clanked twice, like someone knocking from inside the wall, and then hissed and went quiet. Somewhere below me, faintly, Mr. Ortiz's radio switched from salsa to a man talking very fast in Spanish about baseball.

I ran a bath in the clawfoot tub, so hot it fogged the little mirror, and drank cheap red wine from the corner store out of a jelly jar I found on the open shelf. I lay there until the water went lukewarm and I felt, somewhere very far down, the dial in my chest move a single degree.

Afterward, wrapped in my own towel because using his felt like too much, I filled a pitcher at the sink and watered the fig.

"Hi," I said to it. It was the first time I'd spoken out loud in hours. My voice sounded strange in the room. "I'm Claire. I'll be your caretaker."

The fig said nothing. It stood there, tall and stooped and slightly anxious-looking, holding its big leaves out like a man at a party who doesn't know what to do with his hands.

"You're a Gerald," I told it. "I'm sorry. It's not personal. You just are."

Gerald accepted this.

Then, because I am who I am, and because I'd had most of a bottle of wine, I went into the hall and put my hand flat on the closet door. I tried the little brass knob, gently, the way you'd take the hand of someone you've just met.

Locked.

Of course it was locked. I'd known it would be locked. I told myself I'd only wanted to know. I told myself that was different.

. . .

I fell asleep on the green couch with the lamp on and a book I'd taken from his shelf open on my chest, a paperback of Rilke with somebody's pencil underlinings, small and careful, in the margins.

Something woke me.

It wasn't loud. That was the thing. It was the smallest sound in the world, the softest whisper of paper moving over old wood, the sound a page makes when you turn it in a quiet library.

I lay very still. The clock on the record player said 12:40.

From the other side of the front door came a breath. Not a word. Just someone breathing, slowly, the way you breathe before you say something hard. Then, after a long moment, footsteps on the landing, light and careful. Then on the stairs. Going down. One flight, two, the creak of the third-floor step that Mr. Ortiz said needed a nail, then fading, then the faraway thud of the front door that never latched unless you leaned on it.

Don't answer the door after midnight.

I didn't. I got up and crossed the room in my socks and stood with my hand on the knob, my heart going hard, and I didn't open it.

I went to the window instead. The trees on Perry Street were thick and dark and dripping, and I could hardly see the sidewalk through them. Just, for a second, under the streetlight at the corner, something red. A coat, maybe. A scarf. A trick of the light. Then nothing but leaves.

When I turned around, there it was, on the floor just inside the door, pale against the dark wood.

An envelope. Cream-colored, heavy, the good kind of paper.

I picked it up. It was sealed. It had been held for a long time by someone, I could tell; the corners were soft. And on the front, in ink, in the most beautiful handwriting I had ever seen, slanting and looping and sure, a single letter.

T.

CHAPTER THREE

J.

I DIDN'T OPEN IT for a whole day. I'd like that entered into evidence.

I propped it against the red kettle, where I'd have to look at it every time I made coffee, which, as it turned out, was seven times. Some people would call that self-discipline. Priya would call it a cry for help. I called it Monday.

In daylight the apartment was even better, which felt unfair, like a man who also looks good in the morning. The sun came in low over the trees and lay across the slanted floor in a long gold stripe that moved, over the course of the day, like the hand of a clock. I followed it around with my notebook. I write by hand first, always, in cheap spiral notebooks with a black pen that has to be a very particular black pen, and I've filled more than a hundred of them since I started ghostwriting. Ryan used to call them my diaries. They aren't. A diary is where you tell the truth about yourself. These are where I tell the truth about other people, and then sand it down until it fits on a book jacket.

That morning I was working on Danny's chapter about the summer he was fifteen and his mother taught him to make her

Sunday gravy, which in Danny's family meant a red sauce that took nine hours and three kinds of meat and at least one argument. I had a voice memo of him telling it. In the memo, about four minutes in, his voice goes thick and he says, "Ah, hell, hang on," and you can hear him walk away from the phone and blow his nose like a goose. Then he comes back and says, "Don't put that in." I was going to put that in. That was the best part.

I wrote three pages. I looked at the envelope. I wrote two more. I looked at the envelope again.

T.

The handwriting really was beautiful. Not neat, not schoolteacher neat. Alive. The T had a long, curving top stroke, like an arm reaching across a table to touch someone's wrist.

"Don't," I told it, and went to get more coffee, and there it was, leaning against the kettle, waiting.

. . .

At noon I took it out of the apartment with me, because I didn't trust myself alone with it, which is a sentence I'd previously only said about cheesecake.

I walked down Perry toward the river, through wet leaves, past brownstones with pumpkins already on the stoops and one particularly ambitious skeleton in a bathrobe. On Hudson Street a bodega had a black-and-white cat asleep in the window on a bag of rice, belly up, completely unbothered by the concept of property. I bought a coffee I didn't need and called Priya.

"Mail tampering is a federal crime," she said, before I'd even finished.

"It wasn't mailed. It was slid."

A pause. "Is sliding federal?"

"I don't think the post office has jurisdiction over sliding."

"You've thought about this."

"I've thought about nothing else for eleven hours," I said. "I wrote five pages about meatballs. I don't remember any of them."

I could hear her chewing. Priya ate lunch at the speed of a person who might be called to a cardiac arrest at any moment, because she might. "Okay. Arguments for opening it."

"It might be important. Someone might need help. It might be about the apartment, like a, a pipe."

"Someone hand-delivered a pipe letter at midnight."

"Old building."

"Arguments against."

"It's not mine," I said. "It's his. It's private. And the rules said don't answer the door after midnight, which I didn't, but I feel like the spirit of the rule is, don't get involved in whatever happens at that door after midnight."

"Correct. Don't open it."

"Okay."

"You're going to open it."

"I'm absolutely going to open it," I said. "I just wanted someone to tell me not to first, so it would count."

. . .

When I got back, Mr. Ortiz was on the second-floor landing, on his knees with a hammer, fixing the creaky third-floor step from below, or trying to. His radio was on the step beside him, playing a woman singing about a heart like it was a city that had burned down.

"Mija," he said, without looking up. "You sleep okay?"

"Fine. Great." I hesitated. I had the envelope in my coat pocket, and I swear I could feel it, like a hand pressed flat against my ribs. "Mr. Ortiz, who else has a key to 4B?"

He did look up then. He took a nail out of his mouth.

"Me," he said. "And family." He studied my face. "Why? Somebody bother you?"

"No. No. Just curious."

He looked at me for a second longer, then went back to the step. "Nobody's gonna bother you," he said, to the step, and hit the nail so hard the whole staircase rang.

I went up the last flight thinking about the word family, and about a lamp left on, and about whoever had stood outside my door at 12:40 and breathed like that.

. . .

I opened it that night, a little after eleven, sitting on the kitchen floor with my back against the cabinet under the sink, because it felt like the kind of thing you should do sitting on a floor.

I slid my thumb under the flap slowly, so as not to tear it. Inside was a single sheet of the same cream paper, folded in thirds, written on both sides in that alive, reaching hand. It smelled very faintly of something. Hand cream, maybe. Something clean, like a hospital that someone had tried to make nicer.

T.,

I know you won't open the door. I know you're probably standing on the other side of it right now, with your hand on the knob, being kind to it the way you're kind to everything. I'm not asking you to open it. I'm only asking you to read this, which is less, I know, and

also more.

I keep thinking about the first night I stayed. You couldn't sleep, so you played. Two in the morning, the window open, somebody downstairs banging on a pipe, and you just kept going, quieter and quieter, until it was hardly sound at all, just the bow and my breathing. I lay on your couch and thought: I am going to be this lucky my whole life.

I wasn't. I made sure I wasn't.

I'm not going to write down what I did. You know what I did. I have said I'm sorry so many times the word has worn through, like the knees of your old jeans, so I won't say it here. It doesn't hold anything anymore.

I'll say this instead. I'll be at the end of the pier every Sunday at ten, where you asked me. I won't stop. Not if it rains. Not if it snows. Not if you never come. You can be as angry as you need to be, for as long as you need. I'll be there when you're done.

I still love you. That's not an excuse. It's just true.

— J.

I read it three times. Then I put it down on the floor next to me, very carefully, as if it might spill, and sat there with my hands in my lap.

I felt sick. I want to be honest about that. I felt like I'd walked into someone's bedroom while they were undressing, and I'd stayed, and I'd looked.

And I felt something else, underneath the sick, that I'm less proud of. A kind of hum, a lit-up feeling, like the moment in a book when the real story finally starts. Because I knew this. I knew the shape of it. I'd written two memoirs with a letter like this in the middle, and in

both of them I'd had to invent the letter, from scraps, from a sentence somebody half-remembered at a kitchen table, from what I thought a person in that much pain might say. I'd never held one. A real one. Still warm, practically, from the hand that wrote it.

Where you asked me.

I said it out loud in the dark kitchen. Asked you what? To meet me? To wait? And then I got it, all at once, the way you get the end of a joke, and I put my hand over my mouth.

The end of the pier. Where you asked me.

He'd proposed there. He'd gotten down on one knee at the end of some pier on the Hudson and asked her, and she'd said yes, and then she'd done something, something so bad she wouldn't write it down, and now she went back there every Sunday at ten to sit on the exact spot where her life had been perfect and wait for him to come and find her in it.

Gerald stood by the dark window, leaning toward a streetlight like it was the sun.

"Well," I told him. "We're in it now."

I didn't sleep much. Around three I gave up, put on a second pair of socks, and lay on the green couch looking at the cello in its case in the corner, standing upright against the brick like someone waiting to be asked to dance.

. . .

Ryan texted Tuesday at 4:12 p.m., which is a very Ryan time to text: after the market closes, before the gym.

Maddie says you're not at Priya's anymore. Where are you living? I'm worried about you.

Then, while I was still staring at it:

Also the venue says we need to sign something jointly to release the deposit. Can I send it to you?

Then, at 11:56 p.m., which is a very different Ryan time to text:

i never meant for you to find out like that

I typed, How did you mean for me to find out? I looked at it for a long time. I imagined him reading it, in bed, in our apartment that was his apartment, maybe with Maddie's head on his shoulder, maybe not. I imagined him showing it to her. I imagined her saying, God, she's so good with words, in the voice she used to use when she was proud of me.

I deleted it.

Instead, I got up and went to the crate of records, because the silence in the apartment had started to feel like it was waiting for me to say something.

I didn't know anything about classical music. I knew the songs from car commercials and the one from the shark movie. I thumbed through the sleeves, which were soft and worn at the corners, and picked the one that looked the most handled, the most loved: Bach, the cello suites, a black-and-white photo of a man bent over his instrument like he was listening to its heartbeat. I figured if T. had played it into the ground, it was probably a good place to start.

I opened the window an inch, because the radiator had decided to heat the apartment to the temperature of a pizza oven, and the cold air came in smelling of wet leaves and someone's fireplace. I put the record on and lay on the floor in the gold lamplight and let it play.

I don't know how to describe it. I'm a professional and I don't know how to describe it. It was one instrument, alone, and it sounded like a person walking through an empty house at night, touching things. It went on and on. I cried, a little, not about Ryan, not about

anything, and then I fell asleep on the slanted floor with my cheek on the wood, and when I woke up the needle was hissing at the end of the side and the clock said 12:41.

And there was an envelope on the floor by the door.

I hadn't even heard it.

. . .

This one was shorter. The handwriting was faster, the lines slanting uphill, as if she'd written it against a wall or a knee, standing up.

T.,

Your lamp was on tonight. You never leave the lamp on.

And I heard the Bach. I was across the street, under the tree, and I heard it come down through the window like it used to. You only ever play the Bach when you can't sleep. I stood there until it stopped. I couldn't help it.

I know that wasn't for me. I listened anyway.

– J.

I sat down on the floor so hard I bruised my tailbone.

Oh, no.

Oh, no, no, no.

It hadn't been him. It had been a forty-year-old record and a sleepless ghostwriter in two pairs of socks. And she had stood on Perry Street in the cold, under the trees, looking up at a lit window, listening to what she thought was the man she loved playing for the first time in God knew how long, maybe thinking he was softening, maybe thinking he knew she was down there. And it was me. It was me, being sad on someone else's floor with someone else's Bach.

I had been haunting her. I'd moved in and turned the lamp on and started haunting a woman I'd never met, with a record player.

I didn't sleep that night at all.

. . .

In the morning, I sat at the kitchen table with my black pen and a page torn out of a fresh notebook, and I drafted a note for longer than I've ever drafted anything, including the senator's wife's chapter about the miscarriage, which took me nine days.

My first version was two pages. It explained the sublet and the listing and the rules and the record and how sorry I was. It sounded like a deposition. My second version was a paragraph and sounded like a deposition written by a nicer lawyer. My third version said only, I'm so sorry, and then I sat looking at it, thinking how she'd said the word had worn through, how it didn't hold anything anymore.

In the end I wrote:

> *He isn't here. He's sublet the apartment and I don't know where he is. I'm so sorry.*
>
> *– the subletter*

I looked at it for a long time. It was the truest thing I'd written in months. It was also, I knew, going to break her heart, and I hated that I could feel, as a professional, how well it would do it. No adjectives. Nothing to hold onto.

I found a roll of masking tape in his kitchen drawer, next to a ball of string and a tin of tiny screws and a single wire-rimmed lens, popped out of some old pair of glasses, which I held up to the window and looked through, briefly, at a blurry Gerald. Then I folded the

note once and taped it to the outside of the door at eye height, where you'd see it if you were standing on the landing in the dark, about to bend down.

I took the record off the turntable and slid it back in its sleeve. I turned off the lamp. That night, I went to bed at eleven, in the low bed with the linen sheets, in the dark, like a person with nothing to hide, and I lay there listening.

At 12:38 I heard the front door downstairs, the thud of it not quite catching. Footsteps on the stairs, light and careful. The creaky step. The third-floor landing. Then the fourth.

Then nothing. A long nothing. The nothing of someone standing very still, reading.

I held still too. I don't know for how long. Long enough for the radiator to clank twice and go quiet. Long enough for me to wonder if she was crying, out there, and whether I should open the door after all, and whether there's any rule on earth you're supposed to keep when someone is crying on the other side of it.

Then the softest sound. The tape, peeling away from the paint.

Footsteps, going down.

I lay awake until it got light. I didn't go out there. I'd done enough.

The next night, at 12:40, a whisper of paper on wood.

I got up and turned on the lamp. The note was gone from the door. On the floor, pale against the dark boards, was a cream envelope in that alive, reaching hand. But it wasn't addressed to T. this time.

It said: To the subletter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Correspondence

To the subletter,

Well. This is mortifying.

I've been writing love letters to a stranger and a fig tree. Is the fig all right? Please tell me you're watering it. He'd forgive me before he'd forgive anyone who let that fig die.

I think I knew. The lamp. He would never leave a lamp on. He unplugs the toaster before he goes away for a weekend.

Since you're living in his life, you should know how it started. Five years ago, outside Lincoln Center, my bike chain came off and I was kneeling on the sidewalk in a work dress, swearing at it. A man stopped. He knelt down and put it back on with his bare hands, and the whole time he was talking to the bike, very quietly. "Sorry. Sorry, I know. Almost there." Then he stood up with his hands black to the wrist and apologized to me for getting grease on my handlebar.

That was him. That was the whole man, in one minute.

You don't have to write back. You'd be within your rights to think I'm crazy. I'd think I was crazy.

But thank you for telling me. Nobody else will tell me anything.

— J.

. . .

I WROTE BACK. OF course I wrote back. I'm a woman who reads the terms and conditions out loud; I was never going to leave a letter like that unanswered.

It took me two days, because I knew exactly what to say, and it was more than I'd said to anyone, including myself. On the second night I sat on the fire escape in a sweatshirt of Ryan's I was not giving back on principle, with my notebook on my knees and Perry Street wet and shining four floors down, and I just wrote it. Then I copied it out clean and taped it to the door.

J.,

You're not crazy. Or if you are, you're in good company. I'm writing back to a woman I've never met, because a man I've never met told me not to open the door.

I'm the subletter because three weeks ago, at my rehearsal dinner, my maid of honor stood up to give a toast and said, to my fiancé, in front of forty people and a tray of tiramisu, "I know what you're like at three a.m." Then she tried to save it. She almost did. But her phone was face-up next to my bread plate, and he texted her from under the table, and he had her saved with a little red heart.

She's been my best friend since I was eighteen. She held my hair. She knew my bank password. Apparently she also knew which side of the bed he sleeps on.

Fun fact: when your life ends, the caterers still want to know about the chairs.

I don't know where he is. The super says he left, and that he was very specific about the fig. The fig is fine. I named him Gerald. I'm sorry; I'm a namer. He's thriving.

— C.

. . .

That Saturday I spent the afternoon in the kitchen of Danny Russo's flagship on Gansevoort Street, three hours before service, sitting on an upturned milk crate while Danny broke down a whole pig and talked.

This was how we worked. Danny couldn't sit still long enough to be interviewed, so I followed him around with a recorder in my coat pocket and a notebook on my knee and let him tell me his life while his hands did something else. He talked best with a knife in his hand. Most men do, in my professional experience, though I mean that more metaphorically about senators.

"So the gravy," he said, sliding the blade along a rib like he was opening a letter. "You got the gravy in the book?"

"I've got the gravy. I've got you blowing your nose like a goose."

"Take that out."

"No."

He pointed the knife at me, not threateningly, the way some people point a finger. "You know what she used to say? My mother? She used to say, Danny, the sauce knows if you're in a hurry. You can't lie to the sauce." He laughed, loud. Danny laughed like a car alarm. "Nine hours. I'd sit on the counter and stir till my arm fell off.

Write that I loved her more than anybody. Write it better than that."

"I'll write it better than that."

"I know you will." He wiped his hands on the towel at his hip and looked at me, suddenly, with that quick, sharp look he has under all the noise. "You look tired, kid. You sleeping?"

"Like a baby," I said. "Every two hours, crying."

He laughed the car alarm laugh again, but he kept looking. Then he went back to the pig. "Halloween," he said. "The thirty-first. I'm doing a thing here for the cookbook, the press, the money people, all those vampires. Costumes optional. You're coming."

"I don't really do parties right now."

"I didn't ask," said Danny Russo, and that was that.

There was a gap in his life, I'd noticed. Somewhere between 1999 and 2004, the stories went quiet. He'd talk right up to the edge of it and then step over it like a puddle, every time, and start again on the other side. When I asked, he said, "We'll come back to that," in a voice I recognized, because I'd used it on Priya about Ryan. I was good at waiting. That's most of the job.

On my way out, Lorraine was on the sidewalk on Gansevoort, smoking in a camel coat with her collar up, looking like a woman in a French film about tax fraud.

"You look like a Victorian orphan," she said.

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment." She tapped her ash onto the cobblestones. "Chapter twelve's good, by the way. The one about the walk-in. It's the best thing in there." She narrowed her eyes at me through the smoke. "Whoever broke your heart did you a favor, professionally. Don't tell him I said that."

"Nobody broke my heart," I said.

"Mm-hm," said Lorraine, and lit another one off the first.

. . .

The next letter came on Sunday night, and it was the one that changed things.

C.,

Gerald. Oh, God. He'd hate it, and then within a week he'd be using it.

I read your letter on the subway and missed my stop by four. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry about the chairs. I'm sorry about the little red heart. Your friend should have to live inside that heart emoji forever, in my opinion, like a curse in a fairy tale.

You told me yours, so I'll tell you mine. Some of it.

I did the unforgivable thing, with the one person I could never take back. That's all I can write. Even on paper it's too loud.

Here's what I'd rather tell you. He hums when he cooks. Did the apartment tell you that? Probably not; apartments don't keep things like that. Nothing with a tune, just a sort of low, happy noise, like a refrigerator that's in love. He hums and burns the garlic and apologizes to the pan. And when he can't sleep he plays. Two, three in the morning. Mrs. Kaplan downstairs used to bang on the pipes. He'd play quieter and quieter until it was like he was only thinking the music, and the pipes would stop, and I'd fall asleep on that green couch.

I'm a pediatric nurse. Every day I tell parents that the worst part is over. I'd give anything for someone to say it to me.

I've signed all of these J. You may as well know. It's June.

June

I read it standing up at the kitchen counter, and then I read it again sitting down, and then I went and lay on the green couch, on my back, and looked at the ceiling, and thought about a woman named June falling asleep in this exact spot while a man played the cello in the dark.

The one person I could never take back.

I turned it over in my mind for days. It sounded like a sister. A best friend. Someone so tangled up in both their lives that you couldn't pull the thread without unraveling the whole sweater. I thought about how I'd describe what Maddie did, if I were writing it from her side, and it might sound a lot like that.

I didn't ask. You don't ask. If you've done the job as long as I have, you learn that the thing a person won't say is a door, and you can knock, but you can't kick it in.

. . .

After that we wrote every night or two, and the letters got shorter and easier, the way conversations do once you've told each other the worst thing.

She told me she worked twelve-hour shifts and ate dinner out of a vending machine in a stairwell. I told her I slept with socks on, two pairs if it was cold, and she wrote back that she did too and that we should start a support group. She told me she'd chewed her nails down to nothing since spring. I told her about Biscuit's ear infection, and she wrote back a full paragraph of professional concern, which made me laugh so hard on the fire escape that a man walking his dog on Perry Street looked up.

I told her about the record. She wrote: Don't stop playing it. Please. I like knowing someone's up there. It's better than the dark.

I kept them all in a stack on the kitchen table, weighted with the sugar jar, the cream envelopes squared neatly. Every morning I made coffee in the dented red kettle, holding its wobbly handle with a dish towel, and I'd look at the stack, and it would be a little taller, and I'd feel something I hadn't felt in a long time.

Not happiness. Company.

Here's the thing nobody tells you about having your life end: everybody you'd normally call is somehow part of the thing that ended. Half our friends were Ryan's, the other half were Maddie's, and Priya, whom I loved, worked eighty hours a week and showed love by threatening people.

June was something else. June was a voice in the dark that was also lost. She didn't know me. She didn't know Ryan or Maddie. She wasn't on anyone's side. She was just on the other side of a door, every night or two, sliding something under it.

That Sunday morning, at ten, before her letter came, I stood at the window with a coffee and looked west, toward the river, toward a pier I'd never seen. I thought about her sitting on a bench at the end of it in the cold, waiting. I thought about walking down there and sitting next to her and saying, Hi, it's me, I'm the namer.

I didn't. My mother called at ten-fifteen to say Biscuit was much better.

. . .

I'll confess something. I started writing him.

Not on purpose. That's how it always starts: you take a few notes, you get a feel for the voice, and one day you look down and there are

four pages and a person on them. I can't live in a man's apartment, play his records, water his fig and read love letters addressed to him without building him in my head out of the parts he'd left lying around.

If I were writing him, I'd start with his hands. Long fingers, calluses on the left fingertips from the strings. Hands that put a bike chain back on without being asked, and apologize to the bike.

If I were writing him, he'd be slight. Not small, but narrow, built for leaning over an instrument. He'd shave every morning, even on Sundays, even when there was no one to see. He'd wear glasses, wire-rimmed, and push them up with one knuckle when he was thinking, and lose them on top of his own head. There was a spare pair, folded, on top of a copy of Middlemarch on the third shelf. I hadn't touched them. I'd just looked.

If I were writing him, he'd be the kind of man who underlines Rilke in pencil, lightly, so he can erase it if he changes his mind. Who hums. Who never once raises his voice. Who loved a woman so much he proposed to her at the end of a pier on the Hudson, and when she broke his heart he didn't scream or throw anything; he just got very, very quiet, and left, and asked a stranger to keep his fig alive.

I wrote four pages. I read them back on the green couch, by the lamp, and I thought: I would like to meet this man. And then: I'd like to be the kind of woman this man writes letters to.

And then I thought: Claire, you absolute idiot, you're three weeks out from a cancelled wedding and you're falling for a sketch.

I tore the pages out and put them in a drawer.

. . .

The rain started Thursday afternoon and didn't stop.

By night it was really coming down, hard and steady, drumming on the fire escape and running in sheets down the big window so that Perry Street's streetlights smeared into long gold streaks. The radiator clanked like someone was trapped inside it, trying to get out. I made eggs at midnight in the black cast-iron pan, because I'd forgotten dinner, and ate them standing up, and left the pan on the stove to cool.

At 12:40, I sat on the floor by the door with my back against the wall, the way I'd started to, and waited.

Nothing came.

It was the rain, I told myself. Nobody walks across the West Village at midnight in rain like this to slide a letter under a door. Especially June, who had a twelve-hour shift and a cold she'd mentioned twice.

It still felt like being stood up.

I sat there anyway, scrolling my phone, which was a mistake, because at 12:52 a.m. my email chimed, and it was the venue in Dumbo.

We hope your special day was everything you dreamed! Tell us about your experience. Rate us from one to five stars.

Five little gray stars. Waiting for me.

I laughed. I really did, out loud, alone, the same way I'd laughed on that stoop on Franklin Street four weeks before with a bag on my head. I laughed so hard I had to put the phone down on the floor.

And then, somewhere in the middle of it, it turned.

I hadn't cried. Not really. Not at Bettina's, not on Priya's loveseat, not packing up my towels in Ryan's apartment, not on the phone with my mother while she cried about the dog. I'd been so proud of that, in a stupid, tight-jawed way. I think now I was just holding a door shut.

It came out of me like the rain. Huge, ugly, gulping sobs, my forehead on my knees, my socks on the cold floorboards, in a stranger's apartment, in a stranger's life, while the radiator banged and the rain drummed on the iron outside and Gerald stood there in the dark, leaning toward a window with no light in it.

I don't know how long. Long enough for the clock on the record player to tick over to 1:10.

Which is when I heard the footsteps.

Not June's. I knew June's by then, the way you know a song. Hers were light, careful, a little hesitant on the creaky step. These were heavy. Slow. A big, tired tread, coming up the stairs, one flight, two, three, not bothering to be quiet, the old wood groaning under every one. Something heavy bumped the wall, a bag maybe, and a low voice muttered what I was pretty sure was a swear word, and a creative one.

The fourth-floor landing.

They stopped outside my door.

I stood up. I didn't decide to. My body just did it, the way it had at Bettina's. I backed into the kitchen with my face still wet and my heart going like a fist on a table, and my hand found the handle of the cast-iron pan on the stove, still faintly warm, and closed around it.

Don't answer the door after midnight.

I wasn't going to. I wasn't going to answer anything.

On the other side of the door, a jingle. Metal on metal. Somebody fumbling in the wet and the dark, finding the right one.

Then the sound I'd never once heard in that apartment, not in twelve days.

A key, sliding into the lock.

And turning.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man in the Doorway

THE ONLY WEAPON IN 4B was a cast-iron skillet, so the cast-iron skillet it was.

I'd like to say I made a plan. I didn't. I heard the key, and the deadbolt, and the second lock that always stuck, and my body, which had already taken me into the kitchen without consulting me, brought me back out holding ten pounds of pre-seasoned Lodge like a tennis racket. I was wearing an NYU T-shirt with a hole in the armpit, a pair of Ryan's old boxers I kept meaning to burn, and wool socks. My hair was in a claw clip that had given up an hour ago. My face was wet.

That last part wasn't the intruder's fault. That was the venue's. At 12:52 a.m., an automated email had asked me to rate my special day from one to five stars, and I had laughed, and then I had stopped laughing, and then I had cried on the floor by the door like it was my job. Earlier I'd tried to write Danny's chapter on his first restaurant fire and cried at that too, which was a new low, because the fire was funny.

So, to recap: the lock turned and I was crying in a stranger's boxers holding a skillet, and the door swung open, and a man filled it.

I mean filled it. The hall light was behind him, the yellow one that buzzed, and for a second he was just a shape, shoulders that went almost from frame to frame and a duffel bag hanging off one of them. Water came off him in a steady drip. His hair was plastered to his forehead. He put his hand out to the left without looking, the way you do in your own house, and found the light switch on the first try.

The lamp came on. He saw me. I saw him.

"Don't," I said.

He stopped. "Okay."

"I have a pan."

"I can see the pan."

"It's cast iron."

"It's a good pan," he said. His voice was low and rough, like he'd been driving for a long time with the radio off. "You're holding it wrong, though. You swing that, you're gonna sprain your wrist before you get anywhere near my head."

"Then I'll aim for your knees."

"That's fair."

He didn't move. I didn't move. Somewhere behind him the rain was coming down the stairwell skylight like it had a grudge. He was maybe thirty-five, big and dark and unshaven, with a scar that cut straight through his left eyebrow and split it into two unequal halves, which made him look like he was perpetually about to ask me a follow-up question. His jacket was canvas and soaked black. His boots had left two neat puddles on the floor.

"I'm going to call the police," I said.

"Okay."

My phone was on the floorboards by the door, about a foot from his left boot, where I'd dropped it somewhere around star number

three. He looked at it. He looked back up. He was polite enough not to say anything.

"Mr. Ortiz knows I'm here," I said instead. "The super. He knows exactly who lives in this apartment."

"Hector knows who lives in every apartment," he said. "Hector knows who lives in apartments in New Jersey."

That stopped me, a little. It was true. It was also the kind of thing you'd only know if you'd been in this building before, if you'd stood on the second-floor landing while Hector told you about his sister's gallbladder over the sound of the Yankees losing.

"This is my apartment," I said.

"It's really not."

"I have a lease."

"Do you."

"I have an email that functions as a lease. And a Venmo receipt. And I watered the fig. Twice a week. On schedule."

He looked past me, at the fig in its terracotta pot by the window, and at the books, and at the green velvet couch with my laptop and my legal pad and my nest of blankets on it, and at the cello case in the corner. His jaw did something. Then he said, very quietly, almost to himself: "Of course he did."

"Who did what?"

"Nothing." He scrubbed a hand over his face and water ran off his chin. "Long drive."

And here's the thing about my job. I spend my life taking scraps of people and making them into a story that holds together. A tennis player tells me she always ate a banana before a final, and three weeks later I've built a whole chapter about her grandmother's fruit stand in Split. I can't help it. I see a man with a key, who knows the light

switch, who knows Hector, who looks at that fig like it owes him money, and my brain just goes, click.

The Con Ed bills I'd been stacking on the bookshelf. The mailbox downstairs with the strip of tape that said MARSH. The envelopes under the door, in that beautiful sloping hand, every one of them addressed to a single letter.

"You're," I said. "Oh my God. You're Theo."

He looked at me.

It was a long look. Long enough that the radiator had time to clank twice, and the rain had time to change its mind about its rhythm, and I had time to notice that his eyes were brown and very tired and that he was holding the strap of the duffel so hard his knuckles had gone white.

"...Yeah," he said.

. . .

He was nothing like the letters.

I'd had two weeks with T. I'd built him, God help me, the way I build everyone. I'd written four pages about him that week, half joking, the way I sketch a client before I meet them, and then torn them out and hidden them in a drawer. Slight. Careful. Long fingers, calluses on the left fingertips. The kind of man who folds a bike chain back onto its gears and apologizes to the bike. Wire-rimmed glasses, pushed up with one knuckle, because there was a spare pair folded on top of Middlemarch and I'd decided they were his.

This man was dripping on the floor and he had not apologized to anything.

"Can you put the pan down," he said.

"I'm thinking about it."

"Think faster, I'm freezing."

I put the pan down on the bookshelf, on top of a biography of Pablo Casals, which felt symbolic of something. He let the duffel slide off his shoulder. It hit the floorboards with a thump that went all the way down to Hector's apartment, probably.

"You're supposed to be away," I said. "The listing said three months. I paid through December. I paid your friend. I have it in writing that you're away."

"I was away."

"Where?"

"Rhode Island." He was shrugging out of the jacket. Under it was a gray Henley, wet at the collar, and arms that had very clearly lifted things heavier than a cello. "My mother's."

"For three months?"

"No."

I waited. He didn't add anything. He hung the jacket on the hook by the door, on top of my coat, and then looked at that like it was a problem and moved my coat to the other hook, carefully, so the wet wouldn't get on it.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. So what is this. Are you kicking me out? Because I want to tell you, legally—"

"I'm not kicking you out."

"Because I have a Venmo receipt."

"You said." He went into the kitchen. He opened the cabinet to the left of the stove, looked at it, closed it, and opened the one to the right, where the glasses were, and filled one at the tap and drank the whole thing standing up. "I need a few days. I'm in between places right now. I'll take the couch. You won't even know I'm here."

I looked at him. All six-foot-whatever of him, standing in a kitchen the size of a bathtub, dripping onto the tile.

"I will absolutely know you're here."

That got something. Not a smile exactly. The corner of his mouth went up and showed me, for half a second, that one of his front teeth was a little crooked, overlapping its neighbor like it was trying to see past it. Then it was gone.

"Take the bed," I said. "It's your bed. I'll take the couch. I've been sleeping on Priya's couch for two weeks, I'm basically a professional."

"I'm not sleeping in that bed."

He said it fast and flat, the way you'd say I'm allergic to shellfish. I opened my mouth to argue and then I didn't, because I'd read the letters, every one of them, sitting on that bed with my knees up, and I thought I knew why. You don't climb back into the sheets you were supposed to share with someone after she did the unforgivable thing. I'd have slept in the bathtub before I slept in my old bed with Ryan.

"Okay," I said, softer. "The couch."

"I've slept on it before," he said. "It's fine. My feet hang off."

. . .

I made up the couch with the spare sheets from the bedroom shelf while he took a shower, and I want it on the record that I did not think about the fact that there was a large wet stranger naked eight feet away from me with only a door between us. I thought about it a normal amount. I thought about it the amount anyone would.

I changed out of Ryan's boxers. I put on leggings. I took the claw clip out and put it back in again, better.

When he came out he was in sweatpants and a T-shirt so old the logo had worn off it, and his hair was towel-rough and sticking up at

the back, and he looked about four years younger and a lot more tired. He saw the couch, made up with hospital corners because I was raised by a woman who has opinions about hospital corners, and he stopped.

"You didn't have to do that."

"You looked like you were going to sleep in your jacket."

"I've done it."

"I believe that about you."

He sat on the edge of the couch and it groaned. He looked around the room again, slower this time, the way you look at a place you used to know. His eyes went across the books, the records, the window to the fire escape with the wet trees behind it. They stopped on the cello case in the corner and stayed there a second too long.

When he got up to turn off the lamp his shin caught the corner of the case, not hard, and the whole thing rocked. He grabbed it with both hands before it could go over. He steadied it and held on for a moment, and then took his hands off it slowly, palms out, the way you'd back away from somebody else's sleeping baby.

"Jesus Christ," he said, under his breath, to the cello. "Okay. Okay."

I filed that. I didn't know where yet.

Then he saw the table.

I'd left them out. That was my fault. I'd been rereading them before the venue ruined my life a second time, and they were stacked by the sugar jar on the little table under the window, all of them, the ones addressed to T. and the ones that had started coming addressed To the subletter, and my answers, the drafts, on yellow legal paper with my bad crossings-out.

He went still. Not dramatically. The way a deer goes still in a headlight, where you can see the whole animal deciding something.

He picked up the top envelope. The handwriting faced him. He ran his thumb along the edge of it, once, very lightly, not opening it.

"Where'd you get these."

"Under the door." I hugged my arms. "They started the first night I was here. Twelve forty, twelve forty-five. Like clockwork. Then footsteps going down."

"You opened them."

"The first one sat on the counter for a whole day. I want credit for that."

"You opened them," he said again, and it wasn't a question, and it wasn't angry, exactly. It sounded like someone describing weather.

"I wrote back," I said. And then, because he looked at me, "Not as you. I'd never. I told her you weren't here. I told her I didn't know where you'd gone. And then she kept writing. To me. And I kept writing to her. And I know that's insane and a violation of something, probably several things, but she was so—" I stopped. "She's not okay. She used to sign them J. Now she signs them June."

He put the envelope down. He put it face down, very precisely, square on top of the others, like he was closing a drawer.

He didn't say her name.

"Are you going to read them?" I asked.

"No."

"They're yours."

"No," he said, and I couldn't tell which thing he was saying no to.

. . .

I didn't sleep.

I lay in his bed, in the linen sheets, with my socks on, listening to the apartment the way you listen to a house when someone new is in it. The rain softened and stopped. The radiator ticked. At two-fifteen I heard the kitchen cabinet open, and then a rustle, and then a crunch, and I got up and stood in the bedroom doorway, and he was sitting on the counter in the dark eating my Honey Nut Cheerios straight out of the box.

"That's mine," I said.

He froze with his hand in it. "It's good."

"I know it's good. That's why I bought it."

"You want some?" He held out the box.

I took a handful. I didn't know what else to do. We ate cereal in the dark, him on the counter and me leaning in the doorway, and the streetlight came through the fire escape and laid stripes across his face, and neither of us said anything for long enough that it stopped being awkward and became something else.

"You don't sleep," I said.

"Not much."

"Is that new?"

He thought about it, chewing. "No," he said. "That's old."

"The letters said you play at two in the morning." It slipped out. "The cello. Sorry. I mean. The letters said that."

He looked at the box in his lap for a while.

"Go to bed, Bennett," he said.

It was the first time anyone had ever called me that, just that, like a coach, like a guy on a construction crew yelling across a site. I didn't remember telling him my last name. I decided I must have, somewhere between the skillet and the hospital corners, and I was too tired to go back and check, and I went.

Around three I heard something else. A small sound in the hall. The brass knob on the closet, turning, and catching, and turning again, soft, like someone testing whether it was still locked. Then nothing. Then the couch groaning as a big man lay back down on it.

Checking, I told myself. Making sure. If it were my closet I'd check it too.

. . .

What woke me at four was the smell.

Not wood smoke. Paper. That thin, sweetish, end-of-a-cigarette smell that gets into the back of your throat. I sat up so fast I knocked the lamp. I thought: the building. I thought: the old wiring, Hector's warned everyone about the old wiring. I was out of the bedroom before I was all the way awake.

The apartment was dark except for the kitchen.

He was standing at the stove with his back half to me. The front left burner was on, the blue flame low and steady, and he was holding a letter by one corner above it. Just holding it. The envelope lay open on the counter beside the cereal box. The pale paper had caught along the bottom edge and the fire was climbing it slowly, delicately, the way water climbs a napkin, the beautiful handwriting going brown and then black and then curling up into nothing.

He wasn't reading it. He was watching it.

His face in that blue light was something I didn't have a word for yet, and I have words for almost everything. It wasn't anger. It wasn't grief, exactly, or not the clean kind.

The flame reached his fingers. I waited for him to drop it.

He didn't let go.

CHAPTER SIX

House Rules

IN THE MORNING THERE was a man asleep on the couch and it was worse in daylight.

At night, a stranger in your apartment is a horror movie. In daylight, he's a logistics problem. He was too long for the couch by a good eight inches, so his feet in gray wool socks stuck out over the armrest, and one forearm was thrown across his eyes like he was shielding them from an interrogation lamp. The blanket had slid to the floor. The T-shirt with no logo had ridden up, and I looked at the strip of stomach it revealed for exactly as long as it took me to realize I was looking at it, and then I went into the kitchen and looked at the kettle instead, very hard.

There was a little drift of black ash on the stovetop, by the left burner. Somebody had tried to wipe it up and missed a spot.

I counted the letters on the table. I'm not proud of it. Eleven. There had been twelve.

I filled the dented red kettle and put it on the right burner, not the left, as if the left were a crime scene, and while I waited I stood at the window and looked down at Perry Street. The rain had stripped half the leaves off the trees overnight and pasted them flat to the

sidewalk, yellow and brown, like a collage a kid had made of autumn. A woman in a beige trench walked a bulldog in a beige trench. The bodega on the corner had its grate halfway up. Ordinary Friday. Ordinary everything, except the six feet of brooding on the couch.

The kettle started to scream. I grabbed it, and the handle did the thing it always did, which was swivel sideways on its loose rivet so my knuckles hit the hot body of it.

"Son of a," I said, and dropped it back on the burner.

From the couch, without moving his arm: "No talking before coffee."

"I wasn't talking. I was being burned."

"Be burned quieter."

"It's eight-fifteen. Normal people are awake at eight-fifteen."

The arm came off his face. He looked at me upside down over the armrest. In the daylight the scar through his eyebrow was pinker than I'd thought, and old, a clean white line at the center where the hair had never grown back.

"Is that coffee," he said.

"It's going to be."

"Then I'll wait," he said, and put the arm back.

. . .

By nine we had rules.

I don't remember whose idea it was. I think it was mine. I think I said, holding my mug like a shield, "Okay, so if we're doing this, we need some kind of framework," and he said, "Christ, you're one of those," and I said, "One of what," and he said, "People who say framework," and then somehow I was tearing a sheet off my legal pad and he was taking a flat red pencil out of the pocket of his jeans, the

kind that's shaped like a tiny plank, and we were standing at the fridge.

There was a lemon-shaped magnet on the door and nothing else. Not a photo, not a takeout menu, not a single wedding invitation, which I'd noticed the first night and decided was either very minimalist or very sad. I pinned the paper under the lemon.

"You first," he said.

I wrote in my handwriting, which is small and slanting and has been described by a senator's wife as "a little anxious."

One. No shirtless.

He read it over my shoulder. "In my own kitchen?"

"Especially in your own kitchen. It's a very small kitchen."

"What if there's a fire?"

"Then you'll have bigger problems than my rule." I wrote:

Two. No reading my stuff.

"Your stuff," he said.

"My notebooks. My legal pads. Anything on the couch with handwriting on it. I'm working on something. It's confidential."

"I'm not going to read your diary, Bennett."

"It's not a diary. It's worse." I tapped the pen on the paper, and then, because I couldn't help it, I added:

Three. No setting things on fire at 4 a.m.

He didn't say anything for a while. He looked at rule three. Then he took the pen out of my hand, and under it, in hard square capital letters that pressed through to the next sheet on the pad, he wrote: IT WASN'T YOURS.

I looked at that. He looked at me looking at that.

"Fine," I said. It wasn't fine. But he was right, and I had nothing to stand on except the fact that I'd watched him hold it until it burned

his fingers, and I didn't know how to say that in front of a fridge.

He wrote his own.

DON'T TOUCH THE CLOSET.

"I wasn't going to touch the closet. The listing said."

"Now the fridge says."

NO TALKING BEFORE COFFEE.

"You've already established that one."

"It's an important one. It's foundational." He paused with the pencil over the paper, and then wrote, in the same blocky hand:

DON'T NAME THE PLANTS.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. It came out of me like a hiccup. "Too late."

He turned. "What do you mean too late."

I nodded at the window, where the fig sat in its terracotta pot with the morning light coming through its big hand-shaped leaves, looking, frankly, like it was doing great.

"That's Gerald."

He looked at the fig. The fig looked back.

"Gerald," he said.

"He's a Gerald. Look at him. He has a Gerald posture."

"It's a fig tree."

"It's a fig tree named Gerald, and he's been watered twice a week on schedule by me, personally, for two weeks, while you were in Rhode Island." I took the pen back. I crossed out THE in his rule and wrote MY above it, small, and then underneath, in my own anxious slant: too late, Gerald.

"What's that for," he said, pointing at the MY.

"Own it. They're your plants. Have some feelings about them."

He stared at the word for a beat too long. I thought it was because I'd been obnoxious. Then he capped the pencil and stuck it back in his pocket and said, "I have to go to work," and went to put his boots on, and on the way past the window he stopped, and looked at the fig for a second, and said, very low, like he didn't want me to hear, "Gerald. Jesus."

. . .

"Work," it turned out, was a brownstone in Cobble Hill.

"Windows," he said, lacing his boots on the edge of the couch. "Eighteen of them. Original sashes, eighteen-nineties. Somebody painted every one of them shut in about nineteen seventy-four and the new owners want them to open again without replacing the glass."

"Is that hard?"

"It's slow." He pulled the lace tight. "You've got to take the whole thing apart. Weights in the walls, the cords, the stops. Strip it, reglaze it, put it back so nobody can tell you were there. The glass is the old kind. Wavy. You break one pane, you're not getting another one like it."

"So it's sort of a side thing," I said. "Like a. Hobby. That pays."

He looked up at me. "It's the job."

I didn't say anything. I nodded like that made sense. And then, because I am who I am, I stood in the kitchen and wrote the whole story in my head while he shrugged on the canvas jacket that still wasn't dry.

If I were writing him: the music dried up. It does that. The phone stops ringing, the seat you were promised goes to somebody's nephew. And then your heart gets broken in the worst possible way, and you can't sit in a room and make something beautiful anymore,

so you go find something you can make with your hands that doesn't sing. Windows. Wood. Things that are either square or they aren't. I could have written that chapter in an afternoon. I could have made a book club cry with it.

It holds together, I thought. It almost holds together.

He stopped at the door with his hand on the knob.

"Hey," he said. "The guy who lived here before—"

He stopped.

"Before," he said. "I mean. Before I left. It wasn't like this." He gestured vaguely at the couch, at my nest of blankets and pads and pens, at the whole lived-in clutter I'd spread across his life in two weeks. "It's nice. That's all. It's nice like this."

And then he left, and the door shut, and I heard him on the stairs, heavy and fast, and then Hector's radio two floors down getting louder for a second like someone had opened his door to say good morning, and then the street door, and then nothing.

I stood there. The guy who lived here before.

Grief, I thought. Grief makes you talk about yourself in the third person. I'd watched a reality star do it for six hours straight once, about the version of herself that existed before her husband's affair went viral. That girl, she kept saying. That girl had no idea.

. . .

Danny Russo called at noon and I put him on speaker so I could keep typing.

"Sweetheart," he said, which was how he started every call, including the one where he'd told me about his father's funeral. "The meatball chapter. I lied to you about the breadcrumbs."

"You told me it was day-old Italian bread soaked in milk."

"It was Wonder Bread. My mother used Wonder Bread. If the guys at the restaurant find out, I'm finished. Don't put the Wonder Bread in."

"Danny, it's a beautiful detail. It's the most honest thing in the chapter."

"Honest," he said, like it was a disease. "Lorraine says you're behind."

"Lorraine says that to everyone. Lorraine says that to her own dentist."

He laughed his big laugh, the one that sounded like it was coming out of a much larger man, and said "December fifteenth, sweetheart, December fifteenth," and hung up. I wrote the Wonder Bread in anyway. I'd fight him for it later. That was most of my job, honestly: fighting people for the truest thing they'd ever told me.

. . .

He came back after dark with sawdust in his hair and a bag of groceries, and he cooked, if you can call it that. Boxed rigatoni and a jar of sauce, and he went through every cabinet in the kitchen looking for something, opening and closing them in order, left to right, like a man searching a hotel room for a safe.

"What are you looking for?"

"The thing. The." He made a bowl shape with his hands and shook it.

"The colander? It's under the sink. With the pots." I stared at him. "That's where you keep it."

He crouched and opened the cabinet and there it was, nested in the stockpot, exactly where it had been since the day I moved in.

"Right," he said. "Right. Yeah."

He didn't hum while he cooked. I noticed that. I'd been waiting for it, a little, ever since June's letter. He hums when he cooks, she'd written. Nothing with a tune, like a refrigerator that's in love. This man didn't hum. He talked to the pot. "Come on," he told the water. "Come on, you lazy son of a bitch, boil."

We ate on the couch with the bowls in our laps. The cello case sat in its corner like a third person who hadn't been introduced.

"Will you play something?" I said. "After. Just one thing. I've been living with it for two weeks and I've never heard it make a sound."

He didn't look at the corner. He looked at his rigatoni.

"Not tonight."

"Tomorrow?"

"Eat your pasta, Bennett."

After, I put the kettle on for tea, because that's who I am at nine p.m. now, and grabbed the handle without thinking, and it swiveled, and I yelped.

"Give me that," he said.

He took the kettle off the burner by the body, with a dish towel, and turned it upside down on the counter and looked at it the way a doctor looks at an X-ray. Then he took a pocketknife out of his jeans, unfolded a tiny flat screwdriver from it I didn't know pocketknives had, and went to work. He was careful. His hands were huge and split across two of the knuckles and there was a dark half-moon of something, stain or bruise, under one thumbnail, and they were careful. He tightened something. He bent something. He went to his duffel and came back with a coil of thin leather cord and wrapped the handle with it, over and under, tight, tucking the end in so neatly I couldn't find it afterward.

"There," he said, and handed it back.

It didn't swivel. It didn't burn. It felt like something somebody had made on purpose.

"How long has it been like that?" I asked.

He wiped the knife on his jeans. "No idea."

"It's your kettle."

"I'm a coffee guy."

And here's where my phone lit up on the coffee table between us, face up, and buzzed itself in a slow circle, and the name on the screen said DO NOT ANSWER (RYAN).

He looked at it. I looked at it. It kept buzzing.

"You gonna get that?"

"No."

It stopped. It started again. He leaned back on the couch and folded his arms and didn't pretend not to watch.

"Ryan," he said.

"Ex-fiancé."

"Ex as of."

"The night before the wedding." I picked at the leather on the kettle handle. "My best friend gave a toast at the rehearsal dinner and accidentally told forty people she'd been sleeping with him for seven months. Maddie. Since NYU. My maid of honor." The phone stopped. "So that's why I'm here, eating cereal with you at two in the morning. If you were wondering."

He didn't say any of the things people say. He didn't say what a jerk, or her loss, or have you thought about therapy. He sat there with his arms crossed and his face gone very still, the way it had over the letters, and after a long time he said, quietly:

"Your best friend."

"Yep."

"Jesus." He rubbed his thumb along the scar in his eyebrow. "That's the worst thing you can do to somebody."

"Thank you," I said. "Priya says I'm allowed to say that it's the worst thing, but only twice a day."

"No," he said. "It is. It's the worst thing." And he got up and took the bowls to the sink, and ran the water for a long time, much longer than it takes to wash two bowls.

. . .

He went to bed early, or at least he lay down on the couch and turned the lamp off and became a long dark shape, and I sat at the little table under the window with a legal pad and wrote.

J.,

He came back.

Last night, in the rain. I'm sorry. I know you'd want to know. I don't know what to tell you about him. He's not what I expected. He fixed the kettle. He burned one of your letters and I don't know which one and I'm so sorry about that too.

He doesn't hum.

I stopped. I read it over. Then I tore it off the pad and folded it into a square, and then a smaller square, and I didn't tape it to the outside of the door.

I couldn't send it. I couldn't not have written it. And I couldn't leave it on the table, because the table, I'd learned, was not a safe place for letters.

So I knelt by the window and tucked it into Gerald's pot, down between the rim and the soil, where nobody would think to look.

Gerald didn't mind. Gerald was good at secrets.

My fingers went deeper than I meant them to. The soil was cool and damp from Tuesday's watering, and right there, an inch or two under the surface, the tip of my finger hit something.

Not a root. Not a stone. Something small, and hard, and much too regular to be anything that grew.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Fire Escape

I DIDN'T DIG.

I want that noted, for whatever court eventually hears this case. I lay in his bed on Friday night with my socks on and dirt under my fingernail and I thought about the small hard thing in Gerald's pot for roughly three hours, and in the morning I watered Gerald exactly the normal amount and did not dig. It was his tree. It was his apartment. Everything in it had turned out to be his, including, apparently, the right to burn things.

On Saturday he worked. I didn't know people restored windows on Saturdays, but he was gone before I woke up, and the only evidence he'd existed was the blanket folded into a perfect square on the arm of the couch, the empty cereal box flattened in the recycling, and a note on the fridge under the lemon magnet, under the rules, in those square capitals:

BOUGHT MORE. THE ONE WITH THE BEE. DON'T SAY I NEVER DID ANYTHING.

I stood there in my socks and laughed out loud in an empty apartment, and then I stopped laughing, because it was the first time in a month I'd done that, and I didn't like what it meant that it was

him.

I worked. I wrote the Wonder Bread paragraph four ways. I called my mother in Phoenix, a day early, which alarmed her, and she told me for nine minutes about the dog's new allergy to chicken and asked me nothing at all, which was its own kind of restful. Priya texted from the ER: alive? I texted back: he's back. She texted: WHO is back. I texted: T. The apartment guy. He's sleeping on the couch. Three dots appeared and disappeared four times. Then: Do not sleep with the cellist. Then: I'm serious. Then: Judge says hi.

Judge did not say hi. Judge has never said hi to anyone.

. . .

He came home at seven with a six-pack of Narragansett hanging off two fingers.

"What is that," I said.

"Beer."

"That's not beer. That's a can with a fish on it."

"It's a Rhode Island beer." He set it on the counter. "It's what my father drank. It's what my grandfather drank. It's cheap and it tastes like a lawn. You'll love it."

He cracked two. He handed me one. Then he went to the big window, the one that opened onto the fire escape, and did something to the lower corner of the sash with the heel of his hand, a sharp little tap and a lift, and the whole window slid up as easily as a drawer. I'd been fighting that window for two weeks. I'd almost thrown my back out on it. Every time I wanted the fire escape, I'd had to wrestle it up an inch at a time, swearing.

"How did you do that?"

"It sticks on the left. You lift from the right." He climbed out, folding himself through the frame with a grace a man that size shouldn't have. "It's a window," he said, from the other side. "I know windows."

I climbed out after him. Less gracefully. My sock caught on the sill and he put out a hand without thinking and I took it without thinking, and his palm was warm and rough as a cutting board, and then I was out, on the black iron slats, four floors above Perry Street, with the trees at eye level.

It was cold. It was gorgeous. The rain had cleared and left the sky that rinsed navy you only get in October, and the leaves that hadn't come down yet were lit from underneath by the streetlamps, gold and rattling. Someone across the street was cooking garlic with the window open. Somebody else was playing a trumpet badly, the same four notes, over and over, trying to get them right. Down on the sidewalk, the bodega cat, a fat orange tabby who everyone called Mayor, sat on a milk crate surveying his people.

We sat with our backs against the brick and our knees up. He took the side by the ladder, where the bars were. I took the side by the window, where the warmth from the apartment leaked out around my shoulders.

The beer tasted like a lawn. I loved it, a little, against my will.

. . .

His phone buzzed around the second beer. He took it out of his jacket and looked at it and I saw the screen before he tipped it away. MA.

He let it ring. It rang a long time. Then it stopped, and the screen lit again with the little voicemail ribbon, and he put it face down on the iron slats between his boots.

"Your mom," I said.

"Yeah."

"You don't want to talk to her?"

"I want to talk to her." He turned the can in his fingers. "I don't have anything to tell her yet."

"About what?"

He took a long time to answer, long enough that the trumpet player across the street got three of the four notes right and then gave up.

"She worries," he said. "About everything. About me. Mostly about my brother, right now."

"You have a brother?"

"Younger. Two years."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing's wrong with him." He said it quickly, almost sharply, like I'd insulted somebody in front of him. Then he softened. He leaned his head back against the brick and looked up at the fire escape above us, the one for the fifth floor, a black grid against the sky. "Nothing's ever been wrong with him. That's the thing about my brother. He's the good one."

"The good one."

"Every family's got one. The one who calls on birthdays. Who remembers what you said three years ago about your knee. Who'd show up at four in the morning and not ask why." He drank. "That's him. That's always been him."

"And what are you?"

He looked at me sideways. Under the streetlight his face was all planes and stubble and that pink line through his eyebrow. "What do you think I am, Bennett?"

"I think you're a man who burns mail at four in the morning," I said, "and fixes kettles at nine at night, and I haven't figured out yet which one's the real one."

He laughed, low and surprised, like I'd caught him with an elbow.

"Both," he said. "Probably. Unfortunately."

. . .

"Tell me about him," I said. "The good one."

He thought about it.

"When I was ten and he was eight, we built a treehouse. My grandmother's place. Big oak behind the garage." He held his hands up, measuring air. "He drew the plans. Eight years old, with a ruler and one of those plastic protractors from school, and he labeled everything. North wall, south wall. Little arrows. He made a list of materials. He spelled 'plywood' wrong and he was so mad about it he erased a hole in the paper."

"That's adorable."

"It was very annoying." But he was smiling. "I didn't have a plan. I had a hammer. That was my whole contribution, I had a hammer and a lot of feelings about it. Day three, I'm standing on a branch I shouldn't be standing on, swinging at a nail I shouldn't be swinging at, and the branch goes."

He touched his eyebrow. The scar.

"Oh no."

"Caught the edge of a two-by-four on the way down. Blood everywhere. Faces bleed like you would not believe. And my brother, eight years old, takes off his shirt, and holds it on my face, and walks me a quarter mile to the neighbor's house because my grandmother didn't drive. The whole way, he's singing to me. So I wouldn't freak

out." He shook his head. "Eight. I'd have left me in the yard."

"What was he singing?"

"I don't know. Something he made up. He was always making stuff up." He was quiet for a second. "Eleven stitches. He finished the treehouse while I was on the couch with a bag of frozen peas. Built the whole thing himself. Off his own plans. It's still up. It's crooked as hell and it's still up."

I sat with that. I tried to fit it into the man I'd built in my head. I couldn't decide if the story made him make more sense or less.

"Is he like you?" I asked. "Does he do. Your thing." I meant music. I meant the case in the corner.

"No," he said. "He's good with his hands, though. Better than me. Always has been."

. . .

He asked about my work around the third beer, and I told him.

I don't know why. I'd never told anyone. Priya knows I "write things for people," which she thinks means wedding speeches and LinkedIn bios, and my mother thinks I "do something with copy." Ryan knew I was a freelance writer and once, at a dinner party, called it "Claire's little word business." Maddie knew, I think, or knew more than the others, and I didn't want to think about what Maddie knew.

But it was dark and it was cold and he'd told me about the treehouse, and I was a little drunk on lawn beer, and I said: "I'm a ghostwriter."

He turned his head.

"Five books," I said. "Memoirs. All of them were bestsellers. One was number one for eleven weeks." I picked at the tab on my can. "An actress. A senator's wife. A tennis player. A reality star, God help me.

A chef's first book. You've probably seen all of them in an airport. My name isn't on any of them. That's the deal. That's the whole job. I get inside someone's life and I write it in their voice so well that they think they wrote it."

I waited for it. The thing people say. But your name's not on it? Don't you want credit? Isn't that kind of sad? Ryan had said "Isn't that basically lying?" and I'd laughed, and I'd thought about it every day since.

He didn't say any of those things.

He looked at me for a long moment, and then he said: "So the reason somebody cried on a plane over a tennis player's mom. That was you."

Something went loose in my chest.

"Chapter twelve," I said. "Her mother at the Wimbledon gates without a ticket. It wasn't even that sad. I just put the rain in."

"You put the rain in." He shook his head slowly. "You go into five people's heads and come out with the best version of them. Christ, Bennett. That's not lying. That's a hell of a thing."

"It's a lot of pretending to be someone else."

"Yeah, well." He drank. He looked out at the trees. "You're good at it?"

"I'm very good at it."

"Huh," he said, softly, and I couldn't read the way he said it at all. "So am I. Lately."

. . .

I was cold by then. I hadn't noticed until I started shivering, little ones, the kind that make your teeth click. He noticed before I did. He shrugged out of his jacket, the canvas one, finally dry, and put it

around my shoulders without asking, and it was heavy and warm and smelled like cedar shavings and rain and something underneath that was just him.

"You'll freeze," I said.

"I'm from Rhode Island. This is spring."

I pulled it tighter. He didn't move back to his side of the fire escape. We were closer now than we'd been all night. His knee was against my knee. I could see the crooked tooth when he breathed through his mouth, and the stubble along his jaw had a little gray in it at the corner I hadn't noticed before, and there was beer foam on his lower lip.

"You've got," I said, and touched my own lip.

He didn't wipe it. He just looked at me. And I thought: oh. Oh, no. Oh, absolutely not, I'm a month out from my own wedding, I'm drunk on a can with a fish on it, he's in love with a woman who leaves letters under his door, Priya is going to kill me.

I reached up anyway and wiped it off with my thumb.

He went completely still under my hand. Not the deer kind. The other kind. I felt his breath stop against the inside of my wrist. His eyes went to my mouth and stayed there, and the whole street went quiet, the trumpet and the garlic and Mayor on his milk crate, all of it, like New York had leaned in to listen.

"Bennett," he said. Barely.

He leaned in. Or I did. I'm a professional storyteller and I genuinely cannot tell you which of us moved first. I could feel the warmth of his face an inch from mine, smell the beer and the cedar, and his hand came up and his fingers touched the edge of my jaw so lightly I wasn't sure it was happening.

And behind us, inside, through the open window: a whisper.

Paper on wood. That soft dry slide I'd heard a dozen times now, the sound of an envelope coming under a door.

He went still in a different way.

I looked at the clock on my phone. 12:41.

Then, faint, through the apartment and down the stairwell: footsteps. Light ones. Quick. Going down.

He didn't move for a second. Then he was up, and through the window, so fast I barely saw him do it, and when I climbed in after him with his jacket falling off my shoulders he was standing at the door. He wasn't opening it. He had one hand flat against the wood, palm spread, at about the height of someone's face, and he was listening to those footsteps go down, landing by landing, until the street door opened and banged shut.

He stayed like that a long time after.

The envelope lay on the floor between his boots, cream-colored, beautiful handwriting. I knelt and picked it up before I could think about whether I should.

I didn't need to turn it over. I knew the slope of that T. by now better than I knew my own signature.

He turned around. He saw it in my hand, and something went across his face like a door shutting in a wind.

"Don't read that one," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sunday

IT WAS ADDRESSED TO T.

I knew that before I looked, and I looked anyway, and there it was, the single letter with its long elegant tail, and below it in the corner, very small, the way she'd started doing lately: please.

I stood up. My knees cracked. His jacket slid the rest of the way off my shoulders and landed on the floor between us, and neither of us picked it up.

"It's yours," I said, and held it out.

He looked at it like it might be hot. Then he took it. His fingers didn't touch mine. That was deliberate, I think, on both our parts. Ten minutes ago I'd had my thumb on his mouth.

"Thanks," he said.

He didn't open it. He didn't go to the stove, either. He put it in the back pocket of his jeans, and went into the bathroom, and shut the door, and I heard the water run in the sink and nothing else for a long time. I picked up his jacket and hung it on the hook and stood in the kitchen with my arms crossed and looked at the rules on the fridge. NO SETTING THINGS ON FIRE AT 4 A.M. IT WASN'T YOURS.

When he came out, he said, "Night, Bennett," at the floor somewhere near my feet, and lay down on the couch with his back to the room.

"Night," I said.

At four I woke up and lay very still and sniffed the air like a beagle. Nothing. Just the radiator and the old-book smell and, faintly, cedar from the jacket on the hook. I didn't know if that was better or worse. A letter you burn is gone. A letter you keep in your back pocket is still talking.

. . .

In the morning he was asleep, or doing a convincing impression of it, one arm over his face again, and I got dressed in the bedroom like a burglar.

Jeans. The good sweater, the oatmeal one Maddie had once said made me look like a "rich librarian," which I'd chosen to take as a compliment and now chose to wear out of spite. I put on lipstick. I don't know why I put on lipstick. I looked at myself in the little mirror over the dresser and thought, who are you dressing for, Claire, and the honest answer was I had no idea. A woman I'd never met. A man asleep on a couch who'd be furious. Myself, maybe, a little, for the first time in a month.

Then I went to the table under the window and slid the first letter out of the stack. The one I'd sat with for a whole day before I opened it. I'll be at the end of the pier every Sunday at ten, where you asked me. I won't stop.

I put it in my coat pocket. I said "Morning, Gerald," very quietly, to the fig. At twenty to ten I let myself out and pulled the door shut so softly the second lock didn't even click.

. . .

It's a ten-minute walk from Perry Street to the river if you don't stop, and I stopped twice. Once at the corner to let a man in a Rangers jersey walk six greyhounds across Washington Street like a sled team. Once outside the bodega, where Mayor sat on his milk crate in a bar of thin sun and looked at me with total contempt. "I know," I told him. "I know, okay."

Then the West Side Highway, six lanes of Sunday traffic hissing on wet asphalt, and the light, and across.

Pier 45 sticks straight out into the Hudson like somebody put a ruler down on the water and forgot it there. There's a lawn halfway out, gone tawny now, and wooden decking after that, and benches facing every which way, and at the very end, nothing but railing and river and New Jersey looking, as it always does, a little embarrassed about itself across the way. The wind came straight down the river from somewhere much colder and went through my rich librarian sweater like it had a personal problem with me.

Joggers. A dad with a toddler in a puffy suit so thick the kid couldn't put his arms down. Two old men playing chess with gloves on. A girl doing a TikTok dance alone, very seriously, to a phone propped on a water bottle.

And on the last bench, at the very end, facing the water: a red coat.

I'd known about the coat. She'd mentioned it once, in passing, the way you'd mention the weather. It's warm and it's ugly and he always said he could find me anywhere in it. I'd built her in my head the way I'd built him. I'd gotten the coat right. I'd gotten almost nothing else.

She was smaller than I'd thought. Thirty, maybe, with a thick copper-brown braid down her back and a face that was all freckles,

freckles on top of freckles, the kind that don't fade in winter. Green scrub pants showed under the hem of the coat, and clogs. She had a paper coffee cup in each hand and she was holding both of them against her stomach for warmth, and looking at the river, and not drinking either one.

I sat down at the other end of the bench.

She glanced over, and gave me the small polite smile you give strangers who choose your bench when there are nine empty ones, and looked back at the water.

"Cold," I said, like an idiot.

"It's always cold out here," she said. Her voice was nice. Lower than I'd expected, a little hoarse, like she'd been talking all night. "Even in August. I think the river makes its own weather."

"Do you come here a lot?"

She laughed, a short one, through her nose. "Every Sunday."

"For the view?"

"Not really." She turned one of the coffee cups in her hands. "I'm waiting for somebody."

I took the letter out of my pocket.

I didn't say anything. I just held it out on my knee, where she could see the envelope, and her own handwriting on it, the T. with its long tail, and she looked down at it, and I watched her understand. It went through her whole body, from the eyes down. Both coffees tipped. I reached over and grabbed one before it went.

"Oh my God," she said. "Oh. You're."

"The subletter," I said. "Hi. I'm Claire."

She stared at me. Her eyes were very green and already wet, from the wind or not.

Then she laughed. Really laughed, with her hand over her mouth, and then the laugh turned in the middle into something else, and she pressed the back of her wrist to her eyes and said, "Sorry, sorry, oh God, I'm so sorry, I'm off a night shift, I haven't slept, I'm a mess," and I said, "I came to a pier on a Sunday to meet a stranger whose mail I've been reading, you don't have to apologize to me for anything," and she laughed again, wetter, and put her hand out.

"June," she said.

Her hand was cold. Her nails were bitten down so far the skin around them was pink.

So that's her name, I thought, and then, oh, of course it is. Of course she's a June.

· · ·

"That one's his," she said, nodding at the cup I'd rescued. "I bring one every week. Black, no sugar. I know that's insane. Usually I throw it out at eleven." She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I don't know how you take yours."

"Black's fine," I lied. I take it with a horrifying amount of milk. I drank it anyway. It was cold, and bitter, and I've never been more grateful for a cup of coffee in my life.

We sat. The wind pushed at us. A tugboat went up the river pushing a barge full of gravel, and we both watched it like it was the most interesting thing that had ever happened.

"Pediatrics," she said, plucking at her scrubs. "Mount Sinai. Nights. I'm good at taking care of people who aren't me."

"I'm bad at being taken care of," I said. "So we'd be a terrible couple."

That got a real laugh out of her. Then she looked at me sideways, carefully, the way you'd check a bandage.

"Is he there?" she asked. "Has he come back?"

I didn't plan it.

I want to be honest about that, because I've spent my whole career putting other people's lies into beautiful sentences, and I know how this looks. I'd like to tell you I weighed it. That I thought about his hand flat against the door last night, listening to her footsteps go down four flights, not opening it. That I thought about the burned letter, and the one in his back pocket, and the way he'd said Nothing's ever been wrong with him, that's the thing about my brother. That I thought, very nobly, it's not my news to tell.

I didn't think any of that. I just looked at her chewed nails around his coffee cup, and I felt my teeth catch my lower lip, the way they always do, the way Priya has been pointing out since sophomore year, and I heard myself say:

"No."

She nodded. She'd expected it. That was the worst part. She nodded like I'd told her it might rain.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. Thank you for telling me."

. . .

We walked, after. Off the pier and up Christopher Street, past the tattoo place and the leather shop and the bakery that has had the same wedding cake in the window since I was at NYU, and she bought me a real coffee, with a horrifying amount of milk in it, because she'd seen my face when I drank his.

She talked. I let her. It's the thing I'm best at, letting people talk.

"He's the gentlest person I've ever met," she said, somewhere around Bleecker. "I know everybody says that about the person they lost. But he really is. He carries spiders outside. In a mug. He has a special mug for it. If he bumps into a chair, he says sorry to the chair. He's never once raised his voice at me. Not once, in four years. Not even at the end."

I thought about a man swearing at a pot of water. Come on, you lazy son of a bitch, boil.

"He's quiet," she went on. "You forget he's in the room. You'll be reading and you look up and he's been standing in the doorway for five minutes, just waiting for you to finish the page. He writes better than he talks. He'd leave me notes. Little ones. In my shoes, in the freezer." She smiled down at her coffee. "He shaves every single morning, even on vacation. Even camping. He says stubble makes him itch. I used to tease him he'd shave on his deathbed."

I thought about the stubble along a jaw, an inch from my face, with that little fleck of gray at the corner.

Grief, I told myself. Grief changes how a person moves through the world. I'd watched it happen. The senator's wife stopped wearing earrings for two years after her son died. The chef, my first chef, stopped eating his own food. You lose the thing you built your life around and you stop shaving, you start swearing, you burn the letters you can't bear to read. People are not consistent. That's the first thing you learn, writing them. People are almost never the character you'd have written.

It held together. It almost held together.

"His mom still calls me," June said. "Isn't that awful? Every couple of weeks. She doesn't know what happened. Nobody knows. Just me, and him, and." She stopped walking. Her face closed, just for a

second, like a hand around something. "And somebody else. It doesn't matter."

"It matters," I said.

"Not to you." Then she winced. "God, that came out wrong. I mean it's not your burden. You've got your own. Your Maddie."

My Maddie. I'd forgotten I'd told her. I'd forgotten how much I'd told her, at one in the morning, on yellow paper, to a stranger.

We stood on the corner of Bleecker and Christopher in the wind with our coffees, and she looked at me with her wet green eyes and said, "Can I have your number? Is that weird? In case the letters stop being enough. Or in case, I don't know. In case anything."

I gave it to her. She typed it in with her bitten thumbs. My phone buzzed in my pocket a second later, a text from an unknown number that just said, It's June. From the pier. I saved her.

"I'll still write," she said. "If that's okay. To the door. I like the door. It's easier to be honest at a door."

"I know what you mean," I said, and the lipstick on my mouth felt like a lie I'd painted on.

She hugged me, quickly, hard, smelling like hospital soap and the river. Then she walked off toward the subway in her ugly red coat, and I stood there and watched her go until she turned the corner, and I thought: I just looked that woman in the eye and lied to her, and she thanked me.

. . .

I walked home the long way. Hudson Street, Bank Street, Perry. I went up the four flights slowly, past Hector's door, where the radio was playing salsa and he was singing along to it, badly and happily.

I let myself in. I was taking my coat off, one arm out, when I saw him.

He was awake. He was dressed. He was on the green couch with his boots up on the coffee table and a book open in his lap, and he did not look up from it, and something about the way he didn't look up told me he'd been sitting exactly like that, facing the door, for a long time.

"How was the pier, Bennett?"

CHAPTER NINE

The Kitchen

THERE ARE A LOT of ways to answer a question like that. I've written most of them for other people. The senator's wife would have said "Lovely, thank you," and gone upstairs to cry in a closet with good shelving. The reality star would have thrown something.

I just stood there in the doorway with my coat half off one shoulder, like a woman caught climbing out a window.

He was on the green couch with his boots on the coffee table and a box of Honey Nut Cheerios wedged between his knees. He didn't look up. He fished out a handful, ate it, and turned a page of a book I was fairly sure he wasn't reading, because it was upside down.

"Your book's upside down," I said.

"It's a better book this way."

"How did you know?"

Now he looked up. The scar through his eyebrow made him look permanently skeptical, which was unfair, because at that moment I was the one with something to be skeptical about.

"You left at twenty to ten on a Sunday, Bennett. You put on lipstick. You took the letter with you. The one that says Sundays at ten." He shook the box. "I can read a calendar."

"You read my letters."

"They're not your letters." He said it flatly, not mean. "None of them were ever written to you."

That landed under my ribs, because he was right, and because he said it less like a point scored than a thing he'd been telling himself.

The radiator clanked three times, like a judge with a gavel.

"She's lovely," I said. "Just so you know. She's funny. She brought two coffees because she didn't know how I took mine. She chews her nails down to nothing. She asked me if you were back."

He went very still, the way a dog does when it hears a car it knows.

"And what did you tell her?"

I bit my lip. I knew I was doing it and I couldn't stop.

"I told her no."

Something moved across his face and then left it. If I were writing him, I'd have called it relief, and then I'd have crossed it out, because relief isn't supposed to look that much like pain.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay? That's it? I lied to a crying woman on a pier for you, and you say okay?"

"You didn't do it for me." He set the cereal down. "You did it because you didn't know what the hell I'd do if she came up those stairs. Which is fair. I don't either."

"She's waiting for you. Every week. In the cold."

"I know."

"So go."

"Leave her alone, Bennett." He stood up. He's big in a way you forget until he stands up in a small room. "I mean it. Don't write back. Don't go to the pier. She deserves better than either of us."

"Either of us?"

He was already halfway to the bathroom. "You lied to her too," he said over his shoulder, and shut the door, and I heard the water start, and I sat down on the couch in the warm dent he'd left and ate his cereal out of spite.

. . .

He was polite to me for three days. It was horrible.

He left before seven for the brownstone in Cobble Hill and came back after dark with sawdust in his hair and his knuckles nicked up. He said "Morning, Gerald" to the fig on his way out, every day, in the same gravelly voice, which I would have found adorable if I hadn't been punishing him. He said nothing to me except "You want coffee?" and, once, "You've got ink on your face," which I did, from Danny's chapter six.

By Wednesday I was going out of my mind, and also I had to make the gravy.

"Danny's mother's Sunday gravy," I explained to my laptop, propped open on the counter between a bag of onions and the dented red kettle. Danny's voice note played out of it, loud enough to rattle the forks. He'd recorded it in traffic.

"It's not a recipe, sweetheart, it's a religion," Danny bellowed. "My mother never measured nothing in her life. You burn the garlic, she'd hit you with the spoon. That's chapter eight. That's the spoon chapter. Put the spoon in."

"I'll put the spoon in," I told him, though he couldn't hear me, and I looked at the pork neck bones and the cans of San Marzano tomatoes lined up like soldiers, and I thought: I have written a woman's divorce in her own voice so perfectly that her ex-husband sent me flowers by mistake. I can make a sauce.

I could not, it turned out, make a sauce.

"What are you doing to that onion," said a voice behind me.

I didn't turn around. "Cubing it."

"That's not a cube. That's a crime scene."

He'd come home early, sawdust on his shoulders, a bodega bag under his arm: beer, a lemon and, inexplicably, a single hard pear.

"It's for chapter eight," I said. "It's his mother's. He wants me to make it so I can describe the smell properly. He says I write like a person who's never been hungry."

"Have you?"

"Been hungry?" I considered it. "I've been on a lot of diets before a lot of weddings. Well. One wedding."

He snorted. Then he came and stood next to me at the counter, and the kitchen, which was already the size of a nice bathtub, became the size of an ordinary one. He smelled like cut wood and the cold.

"Give me the knife," he said.

"You were polite to me for three days."

"I was. Give me the knife."

"I didn't like it."

He held out his hand. I put the knife in it. He took the onion apart in about nine seconds, small and even, like he'd learned it somewhere that cared about measurements. His hands were wide and scarred across the backs and very sure.

"Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Same place I learned everything. Somebody yelled at me until I got it right." He pushed the onion to one side with the flat of the blade. "Garlic."

I handed him a head of garlic. He looked at it like it owed him money.

"How many?"

"Danny says 'enough until your mother says stop, and then two more.'"

"Danny sounds like a lot."

"Danny is a hundred and ten percent of a person." I watched him split the head with the heel of his hand. "You've cooked with someone before."

"I've been in kitchens."

It wasn't an answer. I was noticing that more and more, the way he'd step off the edge of a question like it was a curb he knew was there.

He peeled the first clove, and it stuck to his thumb, and he said, "Oh, come on, you little papery son of a bitch," quite softly, with feeling, the way you might talk to a horse.

I laughed, a real one, the first in three days, and he glanced over and there was the tooth. The crooked one. My stomach did something stupid.

We got the bones browning in Theo's heavy pot, which he found under the sink after opening the oven, the cabinet with the extension cords, and the takeout-menu drawer. "Who keeps a pot under a sink," he muttered. I didn't point out that he did. The gravy started to smell like something. Garlic and fat and that sweetness tomatoes get when they cook down and stop being polite.

I'll tell you what I noticed again, standing in that tiny kitchen with the window fogging up and Perry Street going blue outside: he still didn't hum.

June had told me, in her letter. He hums when he cooks. Nothing with a tune, just a low, happy noise, like a refrigerator that's in love, and he hums and burns the garlic and apologizes to the pan.

He didn't hum. He swore. He swore at the garlic and the pot and the burner, which ran hot on the left, and he said "Bennett, stir, don't stab," and he talked, for the first time in days, about the brownstone. The weights in the walls, the hundred-year-old glass gone wavy because glass is technically a liquid, which I told him was a myth, and he said, "Don't ruin it for me, it's the only romantic thing I know."

But no humming. Not a note.

People stop singing when the thing they sang about leaves, I told myself. I'd written four hundred pages of Danny since the toast and not one line of Claire.

"You're staring," he said.

"I'm describing. It's different. It's my job."

"What are you describing?"

"You. For chapter eight."

"I'm not in chapter eight."

"Everyone's in chapter eight. It's the spoon chapter." I took the wooden spoon from the crock and held it up. "Danny's mom used to hit him with it when he did something wrong. He says it's the only time she ever touched him without being asked to."

He looked at the spoon for a long moment.

"Did he deserve it?"

"He says always." I dipped it in the pot and blew on it and held it out to him without thinking. "Taste."

He leaned in. I watched him do it. He didn't take the spoon from me; he put his hand over mine on the handle, warm and rough, and tasted the gravy off the edge of the wood, and his eyes closed for a second.

"Salt," he said.

"Salt," I agreed, and didn't move my hand, and neither did he.

The window had fogged all the way over. Somewhere downstairs Mr. Ortiz's radio was playing salsa, the trumpets coming up through the floorboards like heat. The pot ticked and murmured. And I was standing in somebody's mother's recipe, in a man's kitchen, more or less, with his hand on mine, and the whole thing felt like the moment in a book where the writer gets bored of the restraint.

"Bennett," he said. Low.

"I know."

"I don't think you do."

"Then tell me," I said, and he didn't, he kissed me instead.

It wasn't polite. Thank God. Three days of polite and then this, his mouth on mine like he'd been thinking about it longer than three days, like he'd been thinking about it since the frying pan. The spoon went somewhere. I heard it hit the floor. He backed me two steps into the counter and the edge of it caught me low across the spine and I didn't care at all, because his hands were in my hair, both of them, and the claw clip went with a little plastic clatter into the sink, and my hair came down and he made a sound into my mouth like that was what he'd been waiting for.

He kissed the way he cut onions. Like he'd been taught by someone who yelled until he got it right.

I grabbed his shirt. Flannel, soft from washing, warm from him. I could feel his heart going under my fist, hard and quick, and it surprised me, that a man that size could be that nervous. His thumb found the hinge of my jaw and tipped my face up, and he slowed down, and slowing down was so much worse, because now I could feel everything: the scrape of his stubble at the corner of my mouth, salt and tomato and the beer he'd opened while I wasn't looking, the heat of the burner at my hip, the cold fogged window at my back.

"Claire," he said against my mouth. Just once. Like he'd been saving it.

He'd never said it before. I'd never heard it sound like that, like something he was afraid to drop.

I pulled him closer. His hand slid down my back and stopped at my waist and spread there, fingers wide, as if he was measuring something, the way he'd put his palm flat on the old window frames he told me about, feeling for where the wood had warped.

And then he stopped.

Not all at once. He pulled back an inch. Then another. His forehead stayed against mine.

"I can't," he said.

"You were. Pretty clearly. You were doing great."

He laughed, but it broke in the middle. He took his hands out of my hair slowly, like he was setting down something that might go off, and stepped back until he hit the fridge, where our rules were still taped up in my handwriting and his. NO SHIRTLESS. NO READING MY STUFF. DON'T NAME MY PLANTS, and under it, in my writing, too late, Gerald.

"I'm not who you think I am," he said.

He looked so miserable saying it. Like a man reading his own sentence in court.

And I thought I knew exactly what he meant, because I'd written it before. The tennis player: I'm not the girl on the cereal box. The reality star, who cried so hard in our last session her lashes came unglued: I'm not who they think I am, I'm worse.

He meant broken. He meant the woman on the bench and whatever she'd done to him, the burned letters, the cello in the corner he wouldn't touch. He meant: I'm not the gentle guy in the letters

anymore.

"Nobody is," I said. "That's the whole secret. I've written five books about it."

He shut his eyes.

"Bennett."

"I don't need you to be who she remembers. I didn't know that guy. I know you." I picked the spoon up off the floor, because my hands needed something to do. "You swear at garlic. You talk to my plant."

"He's not your plant."

"He's his own plant. He belongs to himself." I set the spoon on the counter. "Stay."

For a second I thought he would. I watched him think about it. It went across his whole body, the wanting, and then I watched him put it down, piece by piece, like tools back in a box.

"I'm going to sleep at a friend's," he said.

"What friend?"

"A friend. I have friends."

"Name one."

He picked up his jacket. He didn't name one. At the door he stopped with his hand on the knob and didn't turn around, and the radiator clanked, and Mr. Ortiz's trumpets went quiet downstairs between songs.

"Don't let it burn," he said, and he went.

I listened to him take all four flights fast. The street door banged. I wiped a hole in the fogged window with my sleeve and watched him walk up Perry Street under the trees, hands jammed in his pockets, not looking back, past the bodega where the orange cat sleeps on the newspapers, and around the corner toward Seventh.

What brought me back was the smell. Sweet and then dark and then acrid, the unmistakable stink of something that's been loved for two hours and neglected for ten minutes. I turned around and the pot was smoking. Danny's mother's Sunday gravy, black at the bottom, welded to Theo's good pot.

I didn't turn off the flame. Not right away. I stood there in the haze with my hair down and my mouth still stinging and the claw clip lying in the sink like a small dead crab, and I let it burn for one more second, and then another, because some part of me wanted something in this apartment to be ruined that wasn't me.

Then I turned the knob and the blue flame ducked and went out.

I opened the window to the fire escape and the cold came in all at once, wet leaves and somebody's cigarette and the river two blocks west.

He didn't come home that night. At seven the next morning I woke to the sound of a man swearing at a pot. I lay in bed and listened through the door: forty-five minutes of scraping with the wooden spoon, and a long, inventive, deeply personal monologue addressed to the pot, its mother and the state of New Jersey. I didn't go out. When the street door banged, I got up and found Theo's pot drying upside down on the rack, scoured back to the metal.

He didn't come home Thursday night either. The couch stayed flat. Gerald went unsaluted.

On Friday morning, Halloween, there was a note stuck to the fridge under our rules, in his heavy square capitals, pressed so hard the pen had nearly gone through. He must have let himself in while I slept.

SORRY ABOUT THE POT.

That was all. Sorry about the pot. Not sorry about anything else.

I noticed that.

CHAPTER TEN

Costumes

I WROTE MY REPLY under his, in my roundest, most reasonable handwriting.

DANNY'S PARTY TONIGHT. 9PM. GANSEVOORT ST, THE PLACE WITH THE MEAT HOOKS. COSTUMES OPTIONAL. NOT THAT YOU ASKED.

Then I stood back and looked at it and added, smaller, ALSO YOU MISSED A SPOT. Which was a lie. He had not missed a single spot. That was the problem with him.

My costume was a plain black dress and a white sticker on my chest that said HELLO MY NAME IS, with nothing written underneath. A ghost. It was the kind of joke you make when nobody is allowed to get it, which is the only kind of joke a ghostwriter ever really gets to make. I put my hair up in the claw clip, took it down, put it up again, and told Gerald I looked fine, and Gerald, who has never lied to me, said nothing.

. . .

Danny's restaurant on Gansevoort used to be a meatpacking plant, and he has kept the hooks in the ceiling because, in his words, "people

like to eat under a little danger." For Halloween, someone had hung paper skeletons from them. They turned slowly in the heat from the kitchen, like they were browsing.

The party was for the paperback of his last cookbook, the one I hadn't written, and there were stacks of it everywhere, Danny's face on every cover, grinning over a plate of clams. There were maybe two hundred people. Half were in costume. The other half were in finance, which is also a kind of costume.

Danny himself had come as Danny Russo. Chef's whites, a cardboard box painted to look like an old television set around his head and shoulders, and on the screen, in marker: TONIGHT ON DANNY'S TABLE. He saw me from across the room and roared my name and came through the crowd with his arms out, and the television hit three people on the way.

"Sweetheart!" He kissed both my cheeks through the cardboard. He smelled like garlic and good cologne and a cigar he wasn't supposed to have. "What are you? You're nothing. Why are you nothing?"

"I'm a ghost," I said.

He squinted at the blank sticker. Then his whole face changed, and he laughed so hard the TV wobbled. "A ghost. A ghost! You're a sick woman. I love you. Don't tell nobody." He lowered his voice, which for Danny means the volume of a normal man. "I read the spoon chapter. I read it in the walk-in so nobody'd see me. I cried on a case of lemons."

"Was it okay?"

"Okay." He grabbed my face in one big hand. "My mother would've hit you with the spoon for making it that good. That's the highest thing I got."

Then somebody from the Food Network grabbed his elbow and he was gone, the TV bobbing above the crowd like a buoy.

I found Lorraine where I knew she'd be, outside on the cobblestones under the old loading dock awning, smoking a long thin cigarette with the air of a woman who had outlived several of her doctors.

"Ms. Bennett."

"Ms. Fisch."

She looked at my sticker. "Clever. Don't let him see it."

"He saw it."

"Then he's got it in his head now." She tapped ash onto the cobbles. "He's been talking about you. That's either very good for you or very bad for me." She didn't explain, and I knew better than to ask Lorraine anything twice. "Your ex is in there, you know."

My stomach dropped through the cobblestones and kept going.

"Ryan's firm took a piece of the Brooklyn location in the spring," she said. "I assumed you knew."

"I did not know."

"Well." She looked at me with her pale, sharp, unbothered eyes. "Now you're not surprised. Go have a drink, darling. Nobody cries at a cookbook party. It's tacky."

. . .

I saw them before they saw me. That's the only gift a ghost gets.

Ryan was by the raw bar in a navy suit and a pair of plastic devil horns, which was so on the nose I almost admired it. He looked exactly like himself, which is to say exactly like his LinkedIn headshot, teeth and jaw and confidence that had never once been tested by weather.

Maddie was beside him in a black cat headband and a green silk dress I'd helped her pick out for my own bridal shower. She was holding a glass of sparkling water with a lime in it. She kept her other hand flat against her stomach, low, the way you do when something you ate is disagreeing with you.

I thought: good. I hope it was the oysters.

I made it to the bar and ordered a vodka soda and had drunk half of it by the time Ryan arrived beside me. He'd taken the horns off. That was worse, somehow.

"Claire."

"Ryan."

"You look great. Really. You look—" He made a gesture that meant either rested or thinner. "Are you supposed to be something?"

"Yes."

He waited. I didn't help. He'd never once asked me about my work in three years beyond "how's the editing thing," and he was not about to get a free lesson in it now.

"Listen. I'm glad I ran into you." He leaned in, the way he leaned into people at dinners when he wanted them to feel chosen. "This is awkward. I know. I get it. But some of the partners are here, and people talk, and it's a small world. So if anybody asks, could we just say it was mutual? That we grew apart? It'd be better for everyone."

"For everyone."

"For you too, babe. Nobody wants to be the girl who—"

"Finish that sentence," I said. "Please. I'm a writer. I want to see where you were going with it."

He opened his mouth.

And a hand came down on the bar between us. A big hand, scarred across the knuckles, with a fresh nick on the thumb from a clove of

garlic that had not gone quietly.

"Hey, Bennett."

I turned around and there he was.

He was wearing a suit. It was charcoal and it was not his; the shoulders were straining and the sleeves stopped a half inch short of where they should, so you could see the white of his cuffs and the edge of a wristwatch with a cracked face. He'd shaved, sort of, badly, and there was a fleck of tissue still stuck on his jaw. His hair was wet from the drizzle. He looked like a bouncer who'd been sent to a wedding as a punishment.

He looked, honestly, unbelievable.

"You came," I said.

"You left a note." His eyes went to Ryan, briefly, and came back to me. "What are you supposed to be?"

"A ghost."

He looked at the blank sticker for a second. Then the corner of his mouth went up, and he didn't laugh, he just nodded slowly, like I'd shown him something that worked. "Good," he said. "That's good."

"And what are you?"

"I came as a guy who fixes windows."

Ryan made a small noise. The noise men like Ryan make when they are being left out of a conversation and don't know how it happened.

"Sorry," Ryan said, in the voice he used on waiters. "And you are?"

I said, "This is Theo," before I could think about whether I should.

I felt it more than saw it: a tiny jolt in the man beside me, like a step that's a quarter inch shorter than the others. He didn't look at me. He didn't look at Ryan either. He looked down at the bar, at Ryan's hand resting on it, at the fat gold watch, and then he looked

up, and he was perfectly calm.

"She's finished talking to you," he said, "and you're going to go back over there to your girl and keep your hands where she can see them, because I've spent all week ripping rotten wood out of hundred-year-old walls and I know exactly what it looks like when something's soft all the way through."

It was technically one sentence. I've edited worse.

Ryan's face did several things. Most of them were new to it. He looked at the suit that didn't fit, and the hands that did, and the scar through the eyebrow, and whatever arithmetic he did came out in my favor, because he picked up his drink and said, "Okay. Wow. Okay," and went.

Across the room Maddie was watching. Her hand was still on her stomach. For one second her eyes met mine and they were full of something, apology or fear or plain exhaustion, and she opened her mouth like she wanted to say my name across the whole loud room.

I turned my back on her. It's the only thing I've ever been fast at.

"You okay?" he said quietly.

"No." I finished my drink. "Yes. I don't know. Where did you sleep?"

"In the truck."

"You said a friend's."

"The truck's a good friend." He took my empty glass and put it on the bar. "Borrowed truck. Borrowed suit. I'm a man of borrowed things, Bennett."

"Whose suit?"

"Guy whose windows I'm fixing. He's shorter in the arms and longer in the patience." He held out his hand, palm up. "Come on."

"Where?"

"There's music. I assume that means somebody has to dance to it."

"You dance?"

"No," he said. "Come on."

. . .

He did not dance. What he did was stand in one place and move me around him like he was turning a door on its hinges, slow and careful and very sure of the weight. The DJ was playing Motown for the chefs and the chefs were losing their minds. Danny was doing something with his television box that was going to get somebody hurt. The paper skeletons turned overhead.

And then the song changed to something slow, Etta James, and nobody had to be told what to do, and he put one hand flat on my back, low, through the thin black dress, and I put my hand on his chest where the borrowed jacket pulled across it, and we just stood there and swayed.

"I'm sorry about Wednesday," he said into my hair.

"Which part?"

He was quiet long enough that I lifted my head.

"The leaving part," he said.

"Not the kissing part."

"No." His thumb moved against my spine, once. "Not that part."

I put my head back down. I could hear his heart through the shirt. It wasn't calm, not like the rest of him. It was going like he'd walked up all four flights carrying something heavy.

"Bennett."

"Mm."

"You told me once that you write people the way they want to be seen." He said it slowly, picking the words. "Do you ever write them

the way they actually are?"

"Never. Nobody pays for that."

"What if somebody did?"

"Then I'd do it in pencil," I said. "So they could change their mind."

He laughed, really laughed, and I felt it go through his whole chest under my cheek, and the song ended, and Danny shouted from across the room, "WHO IS THAT? WHO IS THE BIG GUY? SWEETHEART, IS HE MAKING YOU HAPPY?"

Two hundred people turned to look.

"Danny," I said, mortified.

"I'm asking him," Danny yelled, pointing at him through the cardboard. "You making her happy?"

Beside me, he went a little red at the ears. I'd never seen him embarrassed. He looked at Danny, and then at me, and he didn't make a joke.

"I'm trying," he called back.

Danny pounded his chest with his fist, twice, like a man at a ballgame. "Good! Try harder! She's the best thing in my book!"

. . .

It was really raining by the time we left, the kind of cold steady October rain that turns the cobblestones on Gansevoort into a river of little black mirrors. Perry Street was fifteen minutes on foot. I was in heels I hadn't worn since an engagement party in a different life.

He looked at my shoes, then at the sky, then stepped off the curb into the street with his hand up, and a cab swerved over so fast it was like it had been waiting for him.

Inside it was hot and smelled like pine air freshener and wet wool. The little screen in the seat back was playing a loop of a talk show

host making a face. He reached over and turned it off without asking. Rain ran down the windows in long silver ropes. The driver had the radio on low, something in Bengali, a woman singing.

"Where to?" the driver said.

I turned and looked at him. The streetlights came in through the rain and moved across his face, the scar, the badly shaved jaw, the tissue still stuck there. I reached up and peeled it off with my thumbnail. He let me.

I don't know what I was thinking. That's a lie. I was thinking about his hand on my back through the dress, and the way he'd said I'm trying, and the fact that I'd spent three weeks being polite to my own heart and I was tired of it.

"Take me home, Theo," I said.

He flinched.

It was small. If I hadn't been looking straight at him, I'd have missed it. Not a blink, more than that. A recoil, as if I'd touched a bruise I didn't know was there. His eyes closed for half a second and his jaw went tight, and then it was gone, and he leaned forward and gave the driver the address in a voice that sounded perfectly normal.

Forty-one Perry Street.

I told myself it was her. That someone used to say his name like that, in a cab, in the rain, on the way home, and that was what I'd touched. I told myself that the way you tell yourself the noise downstairs is just the radiator.

He didn't let go of my hand the whole ride. He looked out his window and I looked out mine and our hands lay on the cracked vinyl seat between us like they had their own arrangement and didn't need us for it.

. . .

The stairwell at 41 Perry smells like old wood and lemon floor polish and, faintly, Mr. Ortiz's cigars. His radio was still going behind his door on the ground floor, the Spanish-language sports station, a man describing something terrible happening to somebody in a very excited voice.

We went up without talking. One flight. Two. I could hear the rain on the skylight at the top of the building, a soft, steady applause. My heels were loud on the steps and I took them off on the second-floor landing and carried them, and he looked back at me in my stockinged feet and something happened in his face that I'll be trying to write down for the rest of my life.

Three flights.

On the fourth-floor landing, outside 4B, under the bare bulb with the moth that lived in it, he stopped and turned and got his keys out. And I watched him look at the door, and look at the key, and I knew, I knew the way you know the end of a book you're writing before you get there, that he was going to say good night. That he was going to let me in and pick up his pillow and go sleep in a borrowed truck, because of whatever it was. Because of her. Because of the man he said he wasn't.

So I didn't let him.

I dropped my shoes. They hit the landing one after the other, a tiny two-beat. I put my hands on the lapels of a stranger's suit and pulled him down and kissed him.

He made a sound against my mouth, not surprise, something lower. His back hit the door of 4B. The keys went somewhere. His hands came up and stopped in the air on either side of me, not

touching, like he was holding himself back from a ledge.

I pulled away just enough to talk.

"Don't stop this time," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment under the bad yellow bulb, rain drumming on the skylight four floors up, his chest going like he'd run the whole way here.

Then his hands came down. One into my hair. One at the small of my back, pulling me in until there was no air between us at all.

He didn't stop.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Fourth Floor

THE KEYS WERE UNDER my shoe.

We found that out the slow way, him with one hand braced on the door of 4B and his mouth on my neck, me patting the pockets of a suit that didn't belong to him and finding a pencil stub, a receipt, and a tape measure, and him saying into my collarbone, "Bennett, they're on the floor," and me saying, "Then why are you letting me do this," and him saying, "Because you're doing it."

He bent and got them. It took him two tries to fit the key in the lock. His hands, which could take an onion apart in nine seconds, were shaking.

I saw that. I kept it.

The apartment was dark except for the streetlight coming through the big window, all broken up by the rain on the glass and the leaves of the trees outside, so the light moved on the brick like water at the bottom of a pool. The radiator was ticking. Gerald stood in his pot by the window like a chaperone who'd given up.

"Evening, Gerald," he said, a little hoarse.

"Don't talk to him right now."

"He's watching."

"He's a fig. He's seen worse." I pulled the borrowed jacket off his shoulders. It stuck at the arms and I had to fight it, and he laughed, low, and helped, and it landed on the green couch in a heap. Underneath he was warm through the white shirt. I could feel the heat of him from a foot away, like standing near an oven door.

He reached for me and stopped, and peeled the blank sticker off my dress, HELLO MY NAME IS, very carefully, with his thumbnail. He looked at it. Then he leaned past me and stuck it on the rim of Gerald's terracotta pot.

"There," he said. "Somebody in here should be nobody. Not you."

I wanted to say something clever. I didn't have anything. I'd used it all up on the landing.

. . .

In the bedroom I got nervous. I hadn't expected to.

It wasn't him. It was the room, the low bed with its linen sheets that I'd made that morning without imagining anyone else in it, the lamp I didn't turn on, the mirror on the closet door where I could see us both in the half-dark, a big man and a smaller woman in a black dress, both of us standing very still like actors who'd forgotten the next line. It was the last time, and the time before that. It was three years of a man who'd treated sex like a meeting he was running.

He saw it. Of course he did. He sees everything; he's just polite about which things he says.

"Hey." He put both hands on my face. Rough palms, the skin hard in ridges like the grain of wood. "Look at me."

I looked at him.

"We don't have to do anything," he said. "I mean it. I can go sleep on that couch and make you eggs in the morning and we never talk

about it again."

"You'd burn the eggs."

"I'd burn the hell out of them." His thumbs moved along my cheekbones. "Claire. Tell me what you want."

Nobody had ever asked me that. Not like that. Not like the answer was the only thing in the room worth hearing.

"I want you to stay," I said. "All night. In here. I want you to not leave."

He shut his eyes like it hurt and opened them again.

"Okay," he said. "Then I'm staying."

He kissed me slow this time, nothing like the kitchen. Like he had all night and meant to use it. His hand found the zipper at the back of my dress and drew it down an inch at a time, and the cool air followed it down my spine, and then his fingers did, knuckles first, so lightly I felt every one. The dress slid off my shoulders and caught at my hips and fell. I stood there in my bra and my stockings in the streetlight and the rain and I didn't cover anything.

He looked at me. He didn't say anything for a long moment.

"Bennett," he said finally, like he'd been hit.

I undid his shirt. My fingers were clumsy on the buttons, and he stood there and let me, his hands loose at his sides, his chest rising and falling under my knuckles. When I got it open I put my palms flat on him. He was so warm. There was dark hair across his chest and a long pale scar along his forearm I'd never seen, and his heart was going hard under my hand, faster than mine.

"You're nervous," I said, amazed.

"I'm terrified."

"Of me?"

"Of doing this wrong." He caught my hand and held it over his heart. "I've done a lot of things wrong, Claire. I don't want this to be one of them."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I kissed him, and he made a sound into my mouth that went straight down through me, and then we were on the bed and the linen was cool against my back and he was not cool at all.

He took his time. That's the thing I keep coming back to, the thing I still can't write without putting the pen down. He took his time like time was something he'd been saving up. He kissed my throat, the hollow at the base of it, the line of my collarbone, the freckles on my shoulder like he was counting them. He unhooked my bra with one hand and then lay there and just looked, and then put his mouth on me, slow and warm, and I arched up off the sheets and heard myself make a noise I'd never made in my life.

The radiator clanked. Three loud bangs, like somebody pounding on a pipe in the basement with a wrench.

We both froze. And then he started laughing, his forehead on my sternum, his shoulders shaking, and I was laughing too, helplessly, my hands in his hair.

"It does that," I said. "It does that every time anything happens."

"It's jealous."

"It's a radiator."

"It's a very old building, Bennett. It's seen things." He lifted his head and grinned up at me, and there was the crooked tooth, in the half dark, and I loved it. I loved it so much it scared me.

He rolled my stockings down one at a time. He did it the way he'd peeled off that sticker, like it was a delicate job and he was proud of being trusted with it. When he got to my feet he held one in his hand

for a second, his thumb pressing into the arch, and I nearly came off the bed.

"Your feet are freezing."

"They're always freezing. I sleep in socks."

"Of course you do." He kissed the inside of my ankle. Then the inside of my knee. Then higher, his stubble scraping, his breath warm, and I stopped being able to talk about socks or anything else.

I'm not going to pretend I remember it in order. I remember it the way you remember music. The rain loud on the window. His hands under me, lifting me toward his mouth like I weighed nothing, like I was something he'd been asked to carry carefully up four flights. The way he listened. He paid attention to every breath I took, every catch, every time my fingers tightened in his hair, and he answered them, more, slower, there, until there was nothing left in me but the wanting and then not even that, just a long bright unraveling, my heel pressed into his back and his name almost out of my mouth.

Almost.

When he came back up and settled over me, his weight on his forearms so he wasn't crushing me, I reached for him and started to say it.

"The—"

He kissed me before I could finish. Hard. Then softer. Then he pulled back just enough to rest his forehead on mine.

"Don't," he said, very quietly. "Not tonight. Don't say anybody's name. Just be here."

I thought: her. Somebody used to say it here, in this bed, in this exact light, and he can't bear to hear it in the same room. I thought it with a sharp little ache that wasn't jealousy exactly. It was more like walking into a house where someone has died and seeing their coat

still on the hook.

"Okay," I whispered. "Just here."

"Just here." He touched my face. "You sure? Tell me if you're not."

"I'm sure."

He reached over the side of the bed for his wallet, and there was a crinkle of foil and a muttered curse when it took him a second, and I laughed again, and he said, "Don't watch me, I'm losing all my mystique," and I said, "You never had any," and he said, "That's fair," and then he was back, and he was looking at me, and nobody was laughing.

He was so careful. The first slow press of him and the stretch of it and the long, held-still moment after, both of us breathing like we'd surfaced from deep water, his eyes on mine in the dark. He didn't move until I did. Then we found it together, slow and deep and unhurried, his hand under my head, cradling it, my legs around him, the old bed creaking in a rhythm that I swear the radiator tried to join.

I'd thought I knew what this was. I'd been engaged. I'd written a reality star's chapter about her three-day honeymoon in Tulum with such conviction that she'd cried reading it and said, "Yes, that's exactly what it felt like," and I'd thought, privately, at least someone's having it.

This wasn't that. This was a man looking at me like he was memorizing me for a test he knew he was going to fail. This was his voice saying my name, Claire, Claire, ragged, against my temple, like it was the only word he trusted. This was his rough hand finding mine on the pillow and lacing our fingers together and holding on. This was the rain and the heat and the wood smell of him and the way he shook when he finally let go, his face in my neck, my name broken in

half in his mouth, and the way I held onto him after, both arms, like he might slide off the edge of the world if I didn't.

We lay there for a long time. The rain eased. The radiator, satisfied, went quiet.

. . .

Afterward I put my socks on.

He watched me do it from the pillow with an expression of deep personal delight. "Wow."

"Shut up."

"No, that's beautiful. That's very sexy."

"They're wool. They're practical. My feet are a medical situation."

"Come here, medical situation."

I came back under the sheet and fitted myself against his side, my head in the dip of his shoulder. He pulled the blanket up over us both. His fingers drew slow lines on my back. I could feel his heartbeat slowing down against my ear, the deep easy gallop of it going to a walk.

That's when I saw it.

It was on his ribs, on the left side, low, where you'd only see it if you were lying exactly where I was lying. A small tattoo, blue-black and gone soft at the edges the way old ink does, like it had been done by a friend in a kitchen and not in a shop.

W.M. + T.M. '01

I touched it with one finger. He went still under my hand and then relaxed, deliberately, the way you'd let go of a rope.

"What's this?"

"Me and my brother."

I traced the letters. W. M. His brother. He'd talked about his brother on the fire escape, the treehouse, "my brother is the good one," but he'd never said a name. Not once. I realized that now, lying there. He'd said my brother the way some people say God, like the name itself was too much to put in the air.

W. A W name. I wondered what it was. William. Walter. I tried them on in my head and none of them fit a man I'd never met.

"What happened in '01?"

He was quiet a long time. Out on Perry Street a car went by slowly with its wipers going, and the light from its headlights crossed the ceiling and was gone.

"That was the year he decided I was a hero," he said. "I've been letting him down ever since."

"That's not true."

"You don't know that, Bennett."

"I know you."

He didn't answer. I bent and kissed the letters, and he made a small sound, like I'd pressed on something that still hurt. Then he turned his head and kissed my hair, and held me tighter, and his thumb kept moving on my back, back and forth, back and forth, like he was smoothing a rough place in a board. I fell asleep that way. I didn't mean to. I fell asleep with my hand over his brother's initials, and his hand over my spine, and Gerald out in the living room with my blank name stuck on his pot.

. . .

I woke up because the bed was cold.

The clock on the nightstand said 4:07. The rain had stopped. The streetlight was steady and orange on the ceiling now, no water

moving in it. His side of the sheet was pushed back, the pillow still dented.

For one second the old animal in me sat up. I thought: he left. Of course he left. He got what he wanted and he went back to his borrowed truck and now I get to find out how this chapter ends.

Then I heard him.

He was in the hall, outside the bedroom door, by the closet. I could see a sliver of him through the gap: bare back, the pale shape of his shoulder against the dark, his phone pressed to his ear. He was talking low. Very low. The kind of voice you use in a hospital.

"No. No, Ma, listen to me."

Ma. His mother. I remembered the phone buzzing on the fire escape and him turning it face down on the iron. I lay very still.

"I know what time it is. I know." A long pause. I heard him breathe out. "Because I couldn't sleep either, okay? That's why I picked up."

Another pause. The radiator ticked once, softly, like it was listening too.

"I'm doing everything I can. I'm here, aren't I? I'm right here in the middle of it." His voice cracked on something and came back rougher. "Ma. Please don't cry. Please."

I should have put the pillow over my head. I should have coughed, or turned on the lamp, or done any of the decent things a person does when she's overhearing something that isn't hers.

I didn't. I'm a ghostwriter. Listening to the parts people don't say out loud is the only thing I've ever been good at.

He leaned his forehead against the closet door. The locked one. I watched his hand come up and lie flat on the wood, fingers spread, the way he'd held my back in the kitchen. Like he was feeling for something on the other side.

"She doesn't know," he said, so quietly I almost lost it under the tick of the radiator. "No. She doesn't."

Silence. A long one.

"I know, Ma." His hand curled into a fist against the door. "I'll find him. I swear I'll find him."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A Week of Us

I DIDN'T ASK HIM about the phone call.

I want that on the record, because later I'd go over that week the way you go over a crime scene with a flashlight, and that was the first place I'd stop. He came back to bed at 4:20 with cold feet and lay down behind me very carefully, so as not to wake me, and put one arm over my waist, and I pretended to be asleep. I lay there with my eyes open in the orange dark and told myself: his mother. His brother. W. Something has happened in that family, and he's looking for somebody, and when he wants to tell me, he'll tell me.

I'd spent my whole career waiting for people to get to the part they didn't want to say. I was good at waiting. If I were writing me, I'd have underlined that and written in the margin: really?

. . .

Saturday, he went out at eight and came back with bagels.

Everything with scallion cream cheese for me, plain toasted with butter for him, which I told him was a hate crime against bagels. We ate them on the fire escape in our coats, our knees touching on the cold iron slats, steam coming off two paper cups of bodega coffee.

The trees on Perry Street had gone gold and rusty overnight, and every time the wind came up from the river a few more leaves let go and spun down onto the parked cars.

"Morning, Gerald," he said through the window.

The HELLO MY NAME IS sticker was still on the rim of Gerald's pot. Neither of us had taken it off. Neither of us mentioned it.

"You have cream cheese on your face," he said.

"Where?"

He didn't point. He leaned over and kissed it off the corner of my mouth, and then didn't stop, and his coffee went over on the slats and dripped down onto the third-floor fire escape, and from somewhere below, a woman's voice yelled, "Hey!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Kaplan," he called down, not sorry at all.

"You know her name?"

"I know everybody's name, Bennett. I'm a very friendly guy."

"You have never been friendly in your life."

He grinned at me with the crooked tooth and the gold leaves coming down behind him, and I thought, oh no. Oh, no, no, no.

. . .

Sunday at ten, I didn't go to the pier.

I sat at the kitchen table with Danny's pages and watched the clock on the stove go from 9:58 to 10:00, and I thought about a red coat on the last bench of Pier 45, and a woman who chews her nails down to nothing looking out at the river and then over her shoulder, and then out at the river again.

He was on the couch pretending to read. He wasn't turning the pages. When the clock said 10:00 I looked over and he was already looking at me, and neither of us said a thing.

At 10:15 he put the book down. "Get your coat."

"Why?"

"Because if we sit in here all morning, one of us is going to say something, and I don't want it to be me."

We walked up to Gansevoort and climbed the stairs onto the High Line. It was bitterly cold, the first real cold of the year, that thin bright November light that makes everything look more expensive than it is. The grasses along the old tracks had gone the color of straw and hissed in the wind.

He walked on the river side, between me and the wind, and I don't think he knew he was doing it.

Near the stairs at Fourteenth Street there was a kid busking. Seventeen, maybe, in a Columbia hoodie, with a cello between his knees and fingerless gloves and an open case with a few dollar bills going soft in it. He was playing something slow and low and beautiful that sounded like the inside of a church.

I stopped. I couldn't help it. I looked over and he'd stopped too, a step behind me, his hands deep in his pockets.

"Is he any good?" I asked. "I can't tell. I just know I like it."

He listened for a long moment. His face was doing something complicated.

"He's better than I'll ever be," he said.

"Oh, stop."

"I mean it." He walked over and folded a twenty into the case. When he came back, he didn't take my hand. He just stood there next to me, very close, watching the kid's left hand move on the strings.

"Do you miss it?" I said quietly.

"Miss what?"

"Playing."

It took him a long time to answer. The wind came off the Hudson and went straight through my coat.

"I miss a lot of things, Bennett," he said finally. And then he took my hand, and put it in his own coat pocket with his, and we walked on.

By evening it was raining, and Priya had demanded a proof-of-life dinner in Astoria, and he rode all the way out there with me in a cab and then all the way back alone.

. . .

On Tuesday he took me to work.

The brownstone in Cobble Hill had a red door and a stoop with iron railings and a parlor floor full of dust sheets and sawhorses and the smell of old plaster. Every window on the front of the house was out of its frame, leaning in a row against the wall like patients waiting to be called, and he walked me down the line of them and told me their problems. Rot in the sill. Broken sash cord. Glass that had been puttied in by somebody in 1970 who should have been arrested.

"You love them," I said.

"They're good windows. They were made by somebody who gave a damn. They just got neglected."

"That's very sad."

"It's the whole job," he said. "Finding the good wood under the bad."

There was an old pocket door laid across two sawhorses in the middle of the room, walnut, dark and heavy, with a century of paint on its edge that he was taking down. He handed me a hand plane. The handle was worn pale where somebody's palm had been for a very long time.

"Was this your dad's?"

"Guy I apprenticed under. Left it to me when he died." He came and stood behind me. "Okay. Feet apart. No, wider. Like you're about to get pushed."

"Am I about to get pushed?"

"Possibly." He put his hands over mine on the plane. His chest was against my back, warm through my sweater, and his chin was right next to my ear. "Don't push down. Push forward. Let the weight do it. Feel that?"

I felt a lot of things.

"That's the grain," he said, low. "It'll tell you which way it wants to go. You go with it, it comes off sweet. You go against it, it tears out and you've ruined it. Don't fight the wood."

We pushed. The blade bit, and a long, thin, pale curl of walnut came up out of the mouth of the plane, unspooling like a ribbon off a present, and I made a ridiculous little sound of joy.

"There it is," he said, in my ear, and I could hear him smiling.

We did it again. And again. The shavings piled up on the floor around our feet, curling and fragrant. After a while he let go of my hands and just stood behind me, watching, and I did it alone, and the curl came up long and perfect, and I turned around with it held up between two fingers like I'd caught a fish.

He was looking at me in a way that made me put the shaving down.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. "You're good at that."

"I'm good at following instructions. It's my whole job." I reached up and brushed sawdust out of his eyebrow, out of the scar. "Other people tell me who they are. I just write it down."

Something went out of his face. He caught my wrist, gently, and held it there for a second.

"Don't believe everything people tell you, Bennett," he said.

Then he kissed my palm and let go and went to check on the windows, and I stood in the dusty light with a walnut shaving in my pocket that I still have.

. . .

That night I read him a page of Danny.

We were on the green couch, my feet in socks in his lap, the radiator knocking politely, a bottle of cheap red on the floor. He'd asked. Nobody ever asks to hear a ghostwriter's work. It's not supposed to exist.

"This is the chapter about Danny's son," I said. "He won't talk about it in interviews. He made me turn the recorder off twice."

I read it to him the way I'd written it, in Danny's voice, the big rough warmth of it with the cracks showing through.

"I told my son I'd call him on a Sunday. That was eleven years ago. Every Sunday since, I pick up the phone, I look at it, I put it down. You want to know what a lie is? A lie isn't the thing you say. Anybody can say a stupid thing. A lie is every day after, when you don't take it back. The first day it's a mistake. By the hundredth day it's a habit. By the thousandth it's a house, and you live in it, and you can't even find the door no more."

I stopped. He didn't say anything.

His hand had gone still on my ankle.

"That's where it stops," I said. "That's all he's given me. I don't know if he ever calls him."

He took his hand off my foot. He got up and went to the window and stood looking out at Perry Street with his back to me, the streetlight on his shoulders, Gerald beside him in the dark.

"Tell him to call," he said.

"I'm his ghostwriter, not his therapist."

"Tell him anyway. Tell him the longer he waits, the worse it gets." He was quiet for a second. "Tell him there's no good day to do it. There's just today and then a worse day."

"Is that from experience?"

He turned around. His face was in shadow and I couldn't read it.

"Yeah," he said. "That's from experience."

. . .

On Wednesday it was raining again, and he came home soaked, and I'd run a bath.

He came in dripping and looked at the tub, steaming, full to the claws, and then at me, sitting on the edge in a towel.

"That's for me?"

"That's for whoever gets in first."

He peeled off his wet flannel and dropped it on the tiles. Then the T-shirt underneath. Then he stopped with his hands on his belt.

"Rule number one," he said. "On the fridge. No shirtless."

"I'm suspending it."

"You can't just suspend a rule."

"I wrote it. I can do whatever I want with it." I let the towel go. "Get in."

The tub was not built for a man his size. It was barely built for me. He got in first and the water came up to the rim and slopped over onto the floor, and he swore, softly and creatively, at the plumbing,

the building, and the Victorian era in general. Then he held out his hand and I climbed in and settled back against his chest, between his knees, and the water closed warm over both of us, and he made a long low sound, like a man setting down something heavy.

"Oh," he said. "Okay. Yeah. This is a good rule to suspend."

The rain ran down the little window high in the wall. The steam rose. His arms came around me under the water, slow, and his hands spread over my stomach, and his mouth found the side of my neck where my hair was pinned up in the claw clip and coming loose.

"Your feet," he murmured. "No socks."

"I'll allow it. Once."

His hands moved. They were slow and slippery and patient and he took his time, his palms gliding up over my ribs and then higher, cupping, his thumbs moving in small circles until I was arching back against him and the water was lapping at the rim. I could feel how much he wanted me, hard against my back, and he didn't hurry. He just kept touching me, kissing the wet nape of my neck, the curve of my shoulder, saying things low into my ear that I'm not going to write down here because they're mine.

One of his hands slid down under the water. I let my head fall back on his shoulder. His other arm held me across the chest, firm and safe, and his fingers moved between my legs with the same unhurried attention he'd given that walnut door, reading the grain, going with it, and I heard myself laughing and gasping at once, because the water was going everywhere, slopping over the sides in waves onto the tile floor, and he was laughing too against my neck, and then I wasn't laughing anymore. I was holding onto the edge of the tub with one hand and his wrist with the other and saying his name, or almost his name, the beginning of anything, and he was saying mine.

Afterward I turned around in the water, which was a disaster, which nearly drowned us both and emptied a third of the tub onto the floor, and straddled him, and kissed him, and his hands came up and held my face like it was something he couldn't believe he'd been allowed to touch.

"There's no water left in this tub," he said against my mouth.

"There's enough."

"Mrs. Kaplan is going to have a ceiling stain with our name on it."

"Your name," I said. "It's your apartment."

He laughed so hard he slid down and went under, and came up spluttering, and I loved him.

There it is. I'm not going to cross it out. I loved him. Sitting in two inches of lukewarm water in a stranger's bathtub on a Wednesday, with the bathmat floating and a man with a scar through his eyebrow wiping bathwater out of his eyes and grinning at me with his crooked tooth, I knew it the way you know you've missed a step in the dark. All at once and all the way down.

I didn't say it. I'd said it to a man before and he'd said it back while texting my best friend.

But I knew.

. . .

He fell asleep before midnight, heavily, one arm thrown over his face. He sleeps badly, usually; he gets up at three to eat cereal standing at the counter in the dark. That night he slept like a man who'd been let off something.

I was the one who was awake at 12:40.

I heard it from the bedroom, the sound I'd know anywhere now. The soft whisper of paper on wood. Then footsteps on the stairs,

going down, light and quick.

I eased out from under his arm. He didn't stir. I went out in my socks across the slanted floor and picked it up from the mat inside the door.

To the subletter.

June's handwriting, rushed, the pen pressed hard. I sat down right there on the floor with my back against the door and my knees pulled up, in the stripe of streetlight from the window, and opened it.

Claire,

I'm sorry to write so late. I just got off a double and I can't sleep. Someone told me they saw a man on Theo's fire escape. Saturday morning, eating breakfast with a woman with brown hair. A nurse from my unit lives on Perry. She said they looked happy.

I told her she must be wrong. I told her you'd said he wasn't there.

You said he wasn't there.

I'm not angry. I promise I'm not. I just need to know. I have been sitting on that bench every Sunday since he left, and if he's been two blocks from the river the whole time, I need someone to tell me.

Please. Is he there?

Please tell me the truth.

June

I read it twice. Then I looked down the hall at the bedroom door, half open, and the shape of him asleep in my bed, one arm over his face, breathing slow and even, like a man with nothing in the world to hide.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Closet

I DIDN'T ANSWER JUNE'S letter.

That was the first thing I did wrong on Thursday, and I did it all morning, with real commitment. I didn't answer it while the kettle shrieked. I didn't answer it while I ate half a bagel standing over the sink. I didn't answer it while I sat at the little table by the window with Danny Russo's chapter nine open in front of me, the one about the summer his restaurant in Hoboken burned down, and wrote the same sentence four times.

The fire started in the walk-in. The fire started in the walk-in. The fire started.

The letter was propped against the sugar jar where I'd left it at one in the morning, after I'd read it on the floor by the door with my knees pulled up and my heart going like a dropped pan.

Someone told me they saw a man on Theo's fire escape. Please. Is he there? Please tell me the truth.

The man on Theo's fire escape had left at six-thirty, kissed me on the forehead in the dark, and said, "Don't let Gerald talk you into anything." Then he'd stolen my last banana and gone to Cobble Hill to take a window out of a house that was older than the state of Ohio.

That man was the one June wanted the truth about. And I'd already lied to her once, on a bench, in the cold, to her face.

"No," I'd said, when she asked if he'd come back.

Eleven days ago. I hadn't known why I'd said it. I still didn't, exactly. If I were writing myself, which I try very hard never to do, I would have said the narrator lied because she wanted something for herself for once. That's a generous reading. The ungenerous one is that I'm a coward with good handwriting.

"This is a lot of pressure for a Thursday," I told the fig tree.

Gerald, who had dropped a leaf overnight in protest of the radiator, said nothing.

. . .

Here is how I justified it, for the record.

I needed to water him anyway. Twice a week, the listing had said, and Mr. Ortiz had said, and Theo, by extension, had said: very specific about the fig. Thursday was a watering day. I filled the dented red kettle, the one with the handle that no longer wobbled because a man had turned it upside down on the counter one night with a pocketknife and a coil of leather cord and fixed it without being asked, and I knelt down by the window with it.

And I remembered the hard thing.

Thirteen days ago, the night the house rules went up on the fridge, I'd folded a note to June into a square and pushed it down into Gerald's soil because I couldn't send it and couldn't throw it away. My fingers had hit something that wasn't a root. Something with an edge. I hadn't dug. I'd been proud of not digging. I'd been saving it, the way you save the last chocolate in the box.

I am not a person with restraint. I'm a person who saves things for later.

I set down the kettle.

The soil was cold and smelled like a basement in a good way. My note was still there, soft as a tissue now, the ink bled into a blue bruise. I pulled it out and set it on the windowsill. Then I put my hand back in, past the place where it had been, and felt around the edge of the pot until my fingertips found it again.

It was wrapped in a square of yellow cloth. Soft, worn thin, a little sticky in one corner. When I unfolded it, it smelled faintly of pine, or of a violin case in a school band room, sharp and sweet at once. Inside was a brass key. Old, the kind with a round bow and a short barrel. The kind of key that only opens one thing.

I knelt there with dirt under my nails and looked down the hall at the closet door.

Don't open the hall closet. That was in the listing, typed, three lines above the T. And it was on the fridge now too, in his blocky carpenter's capitals, right above the rule about coffee: DON'T TOUCH THE CLOSET. At some point he'd underlined it twice. I'd added, beneath it in my own small slanting hand, no touching my Cheerios either, and he'd drawn a skull next to that.

Here is the second thing I want on the record. I'd seen him at that door.

Not often. Twice. Once, a few days after he arrived, I came out of the bathroom in a towel and he was standing in the hall with one arm up, running his fingers along the top of the door frame. "Dust," he'd said, and wiped his hand on his jeans, and gone pink around the ears, which I'd taken as a reaction to the towel. And once last week, late, I'd woken and the bed was empty and I'd found him standing in front of

it in the dark, not touching it, just looking, the way you look at a phone you're waiting to ring.

I'd thought: that's grief. That's where he keeps it.

I thought it again now, kneeling. Then I thought: why would a man bury the key to his own closet in his own plant?

Because he'd left, I told myself. Because he'd been leaving for Rhode Island, or wherever he'd really been, and he didn't want some stranger with a frying pan pawing through his life. So he locked it and hid the key where only he would think to look. And then he came home early and found the stranger anyway, and never dug it back up, because he couldn't stand to.

That was a good story. It held together. I've sold worse to bigger publishers.

I washed my hands at the sink and dried them very thoroughly, like a surgeon, like someone who was going to be careful.

Then I went down the hall and put the key in the lock.

. . .

It stuck, and for one sweet second I thought it wasn't the right key and I was saved. Then it turned with a sound like a knuckle cracking and the door swung toward me on its own weight.

The closet smelled like cedar and cold air and the inside of a coat.

There was a light, a bare bulb with a pull chain. I pulled it.

A garment bag hung from the rod, the heavy kind, black, with a little window of clear plastic at the top so you could see the collar inside. Below it, on the floor, a long thin case, narrower than my forearm. And on the shelf above, two shoeboxes and a flat brown box with the lid fitted on carefully, squarely, the way you'd close something you meant to come back to.

I should have stopped there. I'd seen enough to know it was private. I'd seen enough to close the door.

I unzipped the garment bag.

It was a suit. Charcoal, almost black, a fine wool that went silver when the bulb swung. There was a white shirt under it on the same hanger, and a tie folded over the bar, pale gray silk. A boutonniere pin was still stuck through the lapel, the little pearl head of it, with nothing on it. A ghost of a flower.

A wedding suit.

I held up one sleeve. Then, without meaning to, I held the jacket out by its shoulders, the way you'd hold it up to someone in a store.

It was narrow. I don't mean slim cut. I mean narrow, a jacket built for a man with a dancer's shoulders, a man you could fold into an airplane seat. I thought of the man who'd gone to Cobble Hill this morning, who had to turn sideways to get through this hallway with the laundry bag. Who'd broken my good chair by sitting on it wrong. I tried to put him in this jacket and he split it down the back like the Hulk.

Grief, I told myself. Months of it. People change shape. They stop eating, then they start lifting things for a living. They fill out. Grief and carpentry.

I zipped it up.

The thin case on the floor was a bow. A cello bow, honey-colored wood and pale hair, nested in a groove of green velvet. I didn't touch it. You don't touch a stranger's bow any more than you'd touch a stranger's baby. There was a cake of something amber tucked into the case beside it, and when I bent close it smelled exactly like the yellow cloth. Rosin. The key had been wrapped in the rag he used to wipe his strings.

I looked down the hall at the cello in its dark case in the living room corner. Three weeks and I'd never once heard it played. I'd asked twice. "Not tonight," he'd said both times, and both times found something that needed fixing.

The flat brown box was letters.

. . .

I want to say I hesitated. I did, for about as long as it took to sit down.

There were dozens. Forty, maybe. Each one folded once and slid into its own envelope, unsealed, and every envelope said the same thing in the same handwriting: June. Not "J." Not her address. Just her name, as if she lived in the envelope. In the top corner of each, small and neat, a number. They ran from one at the bottom to forty-three at the top.

The handwriting was beautiful. Not showy. Patient. Rounded letters that leaned a little forward, like they were listening. The kind of hand you develop when you've spent your life writing small careful notes in pencil above lines of music.

I pulled one from the middle. Seventeen. I told myself one.

17.

June,

It snowed last night. I didn't wake you, because you aren't here to wake, and then I stood at the window for an hour anyway, the way I used to before a downbeat, waiting for something to start.

I made eggs this morning and caught myself humming. That's the worst part, you know. Not the big things. The small ones. I hummed through half the Bach, the first suite, the one you used to say sounded like someone walking home, and then I remembered there

was no one to tell me I was flat, and I stopped, and the eggs burned.

I'm trying to forgive you both. Some days I get as far as the kitchen.

I keep thinking about the bike. Your chain off in the gutter and you swearing at it like it had insulted your mother, and me thinking, there she is, there's the whole rest of my life, and her hands are filthy.

I don't know what to do with all this love now. It doesn't have anywhere to go. It just sits in the apartment like weather.

I won't send this. I don't send any of them. But I wanted you to know that the fig put out a new leaf, and I almost called you.

T.

I read it twice. Then I sat in the closet doorway with my back against the frame and the letter in my lap and pressed the heel of my hand hard against my breastbone, because something in there had come loose.

It sits in the apartment like weather.

I knew this man. I'd made him up, weeks ago, at this same table, a little ghostwriter sketch I'd scribbled after June's letters: a gentle man, a careful man, a man who apologized to bicycles. I'd been so pleased with him. I'd even, privately, been a little in love with him, the way you fall for a character in a book you know you'll never meet.

And then he'd walked in soaking wet at one in the morning and called the radiator a "cast-iron son of a bitch," and I'd let go of the made-up man without a fight, because the real one was better. Funnier. Warmer than his own scowl. Mine.

Except this was the made-up man. In ink. Real.

I looked at the handwriting again. I thought of the fridge, the blocky capitals, the skull.

People write differently when they're in love, I thought. That's what love is, half the time: becoming someone with nicer handwriting.

He hums when he cooks, June had written, in the second week, through the door.

I had cooked with the man I was sleeping with. Twice. He'd sworn at the garlic and called a wooden spoon a coward. He had not hummed. Not once. He didn't even whistle. He did the opposite of humming, whatever that is. He narrated, mostly in obscenities.

Grief, I thought. Grief takes your music first.

I put seventeen back exactly where it had been. I am a professional; I know how to leave a room the way I found it. I lifted the stack to square it and that's when the photograph slid out from underneath, where it had been lying face down at the bottom of the box like a secret under a secret.

A small frame, plain wood. Two boys on a beach.

The bigger boy, maybe ten, was up to his knees in the surf in red trunks, grinning at whoever held the camera with his whole face, one front tooth crooked. He had his arm hooked around the neck of the smaller boy, maybe eight, who was skinny and pale and very serious and holding a shell up to the lens with both hands, as if it was the important thing in the picture. Which, to him, it obviously was.

I turned it over. On the back, in faded ballpoint: Montauk '01.

No names.

I turned it back. I looked at the big one, the grin, the tooth. I would have bet my advance on it. That's him. That's my guy, before the scar, before the stubble, before whatever it is that makes a man wake up at

four in the morning and burn letters on the stove. That's exactly how he grins when he's proud of a joke he hasn't told yet.

Then I looked at the little one with the shell, and the solemn, careful way he held it. And I thought about a man apologizing to a bicycle.

He'd told me on the fire escape that his brother was the younger one, two years, and I'd taken it the way I'd taken everything he handed me. I realized, sitting there on the slanted floor in a pool of yellow light, that I knew where he kept his cereal and how he took his coffee and the exact sound he made when I bit his shoulder, and that I did not know a single thing about him that he hadn't chosen to hand me.

Brothers share faces, I told myself. That's all. You're a woman sitting in a stranger's closet, reading his mail, building a mystery out of a crooked tooth because you feel guilty about a nurse in a red coat.

Close the box. Close the door. Put the key back in Gerald. Answer June.

I was reaching for the lid when I heard it.

Not the whisper of an envelope. It was two in the afternoon. It was the other sound, the one I'd heard once before at one in the morning with a frying pan in my hand: the scrape of a key in the front door lock, and the deadbolt turning over with a heavy, familiar clunk.

I didn't move. There wasn't time to, and anyway there was nowhere to go. The closet faced the door. That's how hallways work.

The door swung in. He was there with a paper grocery bag in each arm, celery sticking up out of one like a bad haircut, the cereal box under his elbow, sawdust in his eyebrows. He'd come home early. He'd come home early to surprise me. I could see it on his face, for one second, the surprise he'd planned, whatever it was, still there and

lit up.

Then he saw the open closet. The suit. The box. The photograph in my hands.

Everything in his face went out like a pilot light.

He didn't drop the groceries. That's what I remember most. A man in a movie would have dropped the groceries. He just stood there holding them, very carefully, the way you hold something that might go off.

"What did you do," he said.

It wasn't a question.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Fight

"I WATERED THE FIG," I said.

It was the wrong thing to say. I knew it was the wrong thing while it was still in my mouth, but my brain does this under pressure, it reaches for a joke the way other people reach for a railing.

He set the bags down on the floor, slowly, one and then the other. The celery tipped over. Neither of us picked it up.

"That's not yours," he said.

"I know."

"No. You don't." He came down the hall and he wasn't big in the fun way now, the way where he had to duck under the kitchen light. He was big in the way where the hallway got smaller. He stopped a foot from me and looked past me into the closet, at the suit in its bag, at the box with the lid off, and his jaw did something I'd never seen it do. "That's not yours, Bennett. None of that is yours."

"I know," I said again, and stood up, because I was not going to have this conversation sitting on the floor like a kid caught in her mother's jewelry. I still had the photograph in my hands. He looked at it and then held out his palm, and I gave it to him.

He looked at the two boys for a long time. The big one with the crooked tooth. The little one with the shell. His thumb moved over the glass once, at the bottom corner, like he was wiping off sand.

"Where was the key?"

"Gerald."

He laughed. It was a horrible laugh, short and sideways, nothing in it. "Of course. Of course it was in the goddamn fig." He tipped his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. "Two weeks I've been walking past that thing."

I didn't know what that meant. I filed it, the way I file everything, in the drawer in my head marked later, which was getting very full.

"June wrote again," I said.

His eyes opened.

"Last night. Someone told her they saw a man on your fire escape." I made myself say the rest of it plainly. "She asked me to tell her the truth. She said please twice. And I haven't, because eleven days ago I sat next to her on a bench and told her you weren't here. To her face. For you."

"I didn't ask you to do that."

"No. You asked me to leave her alone." I could hear my voice going thin and fast, the way it does when I'm about to cry and refusing to. "She deserves better than either of us, you said. Remember? I thought that was the saddest, most romantic thing I'd ever heard a man say. I thought you were talking about yourself and me. I didn't think you were talking about yourself and a box of letters you never sent."

He flinched at letters. I saw it. I went straight for it, because I'm a writer and I can't help finding the soft spot in a paragraph.

I picked one up off the stack. I didn't open it. I didn't need to; I could still feel seventeen on my skin like a burn.

"These are beautiful," I said. "Do you know that? These are the most beautiful things I've ever read, and I've read things people paid me a great deal of money to make beautiful. He stood at the window for an hour waiting for a downbeat. He hummed the Bach and burned the eggs. He doesn't know what to do with all this love, it just sits in the apartment like weather." I held the envelope up between us. "Who wrote these?"

He looked at the envelope with her name on it. Not at me. At her name.

"Someone who doesn't exist anymore," he said.

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I've got."

"He hums," I said. "The man who wrote these hums. He plays the cello at two in the morning. June told me that before I ever met you, and he hums his way through number seventeen. I've lived here three and a half weeks and I've never heard a single note out of that case. You don't hum. You don't even whistle. You swear at onions."

"So I don't hum." He spread his hands. "You want me to play something for you? Is that what this is? You want a recital?"

"I want to know who I'm sleeping with."

It came out louder than I meant. It bounced off the brick. Somewhere below us, on three, someone turned their television down, which is the West Village equivalent of a gasp.

He took a breath, and for a second I thought he was going to tell me. Something. Anything. His mouth opened and his face went very open with it, and very young, and I swear I saw the little boy with the shell in there somewhere, trying to hold up the important thing.

"You know who you're sleeping with," he said. "Bennett. You've known since the first night. Almost everything I've told you—"

He stopped.

"Almost," I said.

He didn't say anything.

"Almost everything you've told me is what?"

The radiator chose that moment to clank, three long iron knocks, like someone at the bottom of a well. He looked at it instead of me.

I understood it then, or thought I did. Of course there were things he hadn't told me. I'd found the suit. The man had been weeks from his own wedding, and something had happened that made him lock his whole life in a closet and leave. You don't hand that to a woman you met holding a frying pan. You don't owe it to her. I knew that. I knew it in my head.

But I'd been lied to for seven months by two people who said they loved me, and my body had learned something from that, and it was not reasonable.

"You told me something on the fire escape," I said. "The first night we really talked. You said, my brother is the good one."

His whole body went still.

"I thought you were being modest," I said. "I thought it was sweet. A big rough guy who fixes windows, all self-deprecating about his perfect little brother." I looked at the box of letters, at forty-three envelopes in that patient, careful, forward-leaning hand. "But I don't think you were being modest. I think you were just being accurate."

I wanted it to land. That's the ugly truth. I wanted to hurt him exactly as much as I was hurting, and I had the words to do it, and I used them.

It landed.

He didn't argue. That was the worst part. Ryan would have argued. Ryan would have explained to me, patiently, why I was upset, and

somewhere in the third paragraph it would have become my fault. This man just stood there and let it go in all the way, and then nodded, once, like I'd told him the time.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I was."

He put the photograph face down on the shelf, gently, exactly where I'd found it. He looked at the closet one more time, the suit, the bow, the box, the way you'd look at a room you weren't ever coming back to.

"Lock it," he said.

I took the key out of my pocket and turned it in the lock. The click was very loud. I held the key out to him on my palm, dirt still in the grooves of it.

He looked at it for a long second. He didn't take it.

"Keep it," he said. "Apparently you're better at finding things than I am."

Then he picked up his jacket from the hook by the door, stepped over the celery, and left. He didn't slam the door. He closed it carefully, all the way, until the latch caught.

I listened to him go down all four flights. Heavy, then lighter, then nothing. Then the street door, two floors of air away, banging shut in the wind.

. . .

I put the groceries away, because they were on the floor, and because I'm the kind of person who needs her hands to be doing something when the rest of her is on fire.

San Marzano tomatoes. Two cans. A fat paper-wrapped bundle from the butcher on Hudson, which turned out to be pork neck bones and two links of sweet sausage. A head of garlic. A wedge of real

parmigiano with the rind on. A loaf of semolina bread. Basil, the good kind in a pot with roots, not the sad plastic clamshell. A bottle of red that cost more than he'd ever let me see him spend. A box of the cereal he likes, with the cartoon bee on it.

And folded around the neck of the wine, a receipt. On the back of it, in those blocky capitals:

ROUND 2. DON'T HELP.

Danny's mother's Sunday gravy. The one we'd made together eight days ago, the one I'd left on the burner while he walked out the door to sleep at a friend's, the one that had welded itself to the bottom of his good pot so badly he'd spent forty-five minutes at seven in the morning scraping it and calling it names. He'd come home at two on a Thursday to make it again, right this time. For me.

I sat down on the kitchen floor with my back against the cabinet under the sink and held the receipt and cried in the specific, humiliating, wide-mouthed way I hadn't cried since the night the venue asked me to rate my special day.

Gerald watched. A leaf fell off him, which felt pointed.

. . .

At four I texted Priya, who was on shift and wouldn't see it until God knew when.

Found a locked closet. Opened it. Bad idea. He left.

She answered at six-fifteen, which meant someone had stopped bleeding long enough for her to look at her phone.

Define "found."

Dug it out of the fig.

Of course you did. Are you safe?

Yes. He's not like that. He just left.

A pause. The dots, then nothing, then the dots again.

Do you want me to come after? I'm off at 2.

No. Go home and sleep. Kiss Judge.

Judge does not accept kisses. Judge accepts tribute. Text me if he comes back. Text me if he doesn't.

I didn't text her either way. He didn't come back.

. . .

At ten I sat down at the table by the window with a pad of yellow paper and wrote June the truth.

It took me nine drafts. In the first one I explained everything, starting with the frying pan, and it ran four pages and made me sound like a woman being questioned by police. In the third I apologized so many times it read like a hostage note. In the sixth I told her I was sleeping with him, and then I sat and looked at that sentence for a long time, at how it would land on a bench in a red coat, and tore the page into very small pieces and ate a cracker.

The ninth one was short. The shortest thing I've ever written that cost me anything.

June,

He's back. He's here. He came home on the twenty-fourth, in the rain, two nights before I met you. He's been here the whole time.

I'm sorry I lied to you on the bench. I don't have a good reason. I have a lot of bad ones and I'm ashamed of all of them.

You asked me for the truth. That's it. That's the part of it that's mine to give.

I'm so sorry.

Claire

I folded it once and wrote June on the front and taped it to the outside of the door with the same roll of masking tape I'd used in October, the first time, when I still thought I was writing to a ghost.

Then I turned off the lamp and sat on the green couch, his couch, in the dark, with a blanket around me and socks on, and waited.

. . .

She came at twelve-forty. She always came at twelve-forty, give or take. I'd started to think of it as the hour the building exhaled.

I heard her on the stairs, the light quick steps of a woman who spends twelve hours a day on her feet in clogs and still takes stairs two at a time. Then she stopped on the landing. I heard the tape come away from the wood, a long soft rip.

Then nothing.

I sat with my hands pressed between my knees. I could picture it so clearly I might as well have opened the door. The red coat. The freckles. The chewed thumbnail at her mouth. Reading it under the bad bulb on the fourth-floor landing, three steps from the door he was supposedly behind.

She didn't knock.

I heard her sit down. The top step creaks, the one right outside 4B; Mr. Ortiz has been promising to fix it since the Clinton administration. It creaked now, under her, and stayed creaked, and the silence went on so long I got up and went to the door and stood there with my palm flat on it.

Don't answer the door after midnight. Rule three. The only one I'd never broken.

I could hear her breathing. Not crying. Something more careful than crying, the way you breathe when you're trying to hold your hands steady enough to write.

I could have opened it. I want that on the record too. I had my hand on the knob. I thought about what I'd say, what I could possibly say. Hi. Sorry. He's not here, but this time I mean it. Do you want tea? Do you want to come in and sit on his couch and I'll tell you all the things I left out of the letter?

I didn't open it. I stood there with my forehead against the wood like a coward, and after twenty-two minutes by the clock on the stove, the step creaked again as she stood up, and the folded paper came back under the door with that whisper I'd know anywhere. My own note. She'd written on the back of it.

Her footsteps went down. Slower, this time.

I knelt and picked it up and turned on the hall light.

Her handwriting was worse than usual. Shaky, pressed hard, the pen going through in one place. She'd written it on her knee.

Claire,

Thank you. I mean that. I think I knew. I think that's why I couldn't stop asking.

Please don't be sorry. You don't owe me anything. You've been kinder to me than anyone has a right to expect, and I've been the worst thing that ever happened to him, so let's not talk about who's sorry.

Tell him I'll be at the bench on Sunday. Ten o'clock, the way I always am.

Tell him I'll tell him everything about Wes. Everything he wouldn't let me say. All of it. He can hate me after, he can never speak to me

again, but I need him to hear it once from me and not from anybody else.

Please tell him.

June

I read it standing up, and then sitting down, and then a third time with my back against the closet door I'd locked eleven hours earlier.

Wes.

I didn't know a Wes. Nobody had ever said that name in this apartment. Not him, not June in four weeks of letters, not Mr. Ortiz with his radio and his mija and his opinion about everybody on Perry Street.

Except.

W.M. + T.M. '01. Small and blue-black and a little blurred with age, on his ribs, under my mouth, the first night. Me and my brother, he'd said, and I'd kissed it.

I'd noticed at the time, in the hazy way you notice things at three in the morning in someone else's bed, that he'd put his brother's initials first. I'd thought it was sweet. A boy who looked up to his big brother so much he gave him top billing.

The radiator knocked twice and went quiet. Outside, a cab went down Perry Street through the wet leaves with a sound like tearing paper.

"Wes," I said, out loud, to nobody, to the locked closet and the fig and the empty green couch, just to hear what it sounded like in the room.

It sounded like a door I hadn't known was there.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

3AM

I DIDN'T GO TO bed. I'd like to say it was a choice, but mostly it was that the bed smelled like him and the couch smelled like him and the only place in the apartment that didn't was the bathtub, and I'm not that far gone.

So I sat on the green couch in the dark with June's letter on the cushion next to me and the blanket around my shoulders and my socks on, and I listened to the building.

You learn a building, if you listen long enough. The pipes tick when someone on two runs a bath. The radiator knocks like a slow, bored drummer, three and then two and then a long silence where you think it's finished. The window over the fire escape whistles a single thin note when the wind comes off the river. Perry Street was wet and empty and gold under the streetlights, and the leaves had come down hard in the rain, plastered flat to the sidewalk like a thousand little hands.

At 2:58 by the stove clock, the street door banged.

I knew his feet by the second flight. Heavier than usual. Slower. Stopping once on the third-floor landing for long enough that I thought he'd changed his mind. Then the creaking top step, the one

June had sat on, and then nothing at all. No key. No knock.

I waited. One minute. Two.

Then something slid down the outside of the door, slow and heavy, and settled on the floor with a soft thump, like a coat falling off a hook.

I got up and opened it.

He was sitting on the landing with his back against the wall beside the door, legs out across the tile, soaked through. Rain dripped off his hair into his eyes and he didn't wipe it. His jacket was dark with it, his jeans black to the knee. He looked up at me with a kind of slow surprise, as if I were the one who'd turned up at three in the morning.

"Hey, Bennett," he said.

"You're drunk."

"I'm a little drunk." He considered it. "I'm medium."

"You're sitting in the hall."

"Didn't know if I was allowed in." He tipped his head back against the wall. "Wasn't going to use the key. Felt like cheating."

I looked at him for a long moment. The scar through his eyebrow was white with cold. There was sawdust still caught in the cuff of his jacket from this morning, a whole lifetime ago.

"It's after midnight," I said. "I'm not supposed to answer the door."

"I didn't knock."

"That's a technicality."

"I'm very big on technicalities," he said, and something in the way he said it made me stop and look at him harder. But he'd already closed his eyes.

I went and got a towel and came back and dropped it on his head. Then, because he didn't move, I sat down on the floor inside the doorway, on the threshold, my back against the frame. Half in and

half out. It felt right. It felt like exactly where we were.

. . .

He dried his hair badly, one-handed, and left the towel around his neck like a boxer.

"Where'd you go?"

"Bar on Hudson. The one with the dead neon. Had four whiskeys and an argument with a guy about the Jets." He paused. "He was right. I just didn't want him to be."

"Priya says hi. She says if you'd hurt me she'd know eleven ways to make it look like an accident."

"I believe her." He rubbed his face. "Did I hurt you?"

"Yes," I said. "I hurt you back. I think I did it better."

He made a sound that was almost a laugh. "You did. That thing about my brother." He shook his head slowly. "You don't miss, do you."

"It's my job not to."

The radiator inside knocked three times. I picked up June's note from my lap and held it out to him.

"She came," I said. "At twelve-forty. I wrote her the truth and taped it to the door, and she sat on that step for twenty-two minutes and wrote back on the other side of it. I didn't open the door. I'm sorry. I couldn't."

He didn't take it right away. He looked at it in my hand the way you'd look at a stove you knew was hot. Then he took it and turned it to the light coming up the stairwell and read.

I watched his face. I'm good at faces; it's half of what I do. I've sat across from a senator's wife while she lied to me about her marriage for two hours, and I could tell you which minute she started telling

the truth. So I watched, and I saw him read the first part with his jaw tight, and I saw him get to the line about Sunday, ten o'clock, and close his eyes for a second.

And then I saw him get to the next line, and something go out of him. Not out like a light. Out like air. Like he'd been punched somewhere low and quiet.

He folded the note very carefully along its crease and held it on his knee.

"Who's Wes?" I said.

He didn't answer for a long time. A car went by below, hissing in the wet. Somewhere on two, a baby started crying and then stopped, like it had thought better of it.

"My mother's oldest," he said.

"Your brother." I thought of the photograph. The big boy in the red trunks, grinning, with his arm around the little one's neck. "In the picture. The big one. That's him."

"Yeah."

"I'd have sworn that was you."

He looked at me then. I couldn't read it. For once in my life I couldn't read a face, and it was the only one that mattered.

"Yeah," he said again, quieter. "People do."

. . .

He told it looking at the stair rail instead of me. I didn't interrupt. I've learned not to. When someone finally starts talking, you shut up and you let them get to the end, and you fix the grammar later.

"Wes is the one who breaks things," he said. "Always has been. Curfews. Promises. His hand on a wall once. A lot of windows, which is funny, if you know him." He turned the folded note over on his

knee. "He's not a bad guy. I want you to know that, before. He's not some villain. He's just the kind of guy who's always been one bad night away from the worst thing he's ever done."

"And the guy she was going to marry was away," he said. "On tour. A week, ten days. And Wes was here. And she was lonely, and he was lonely, and he's an idiot, and there was a bar and then another bar and then there wasn't anyone around to stop it." His voice stayed very level, like he was reading it off a page. "One night. Just the once. He'll tell you it doesn't matter how many, and he's right. It doesn't."

I noticed, the way you notice a draft in a room, that he never said I.

The guy she was going to marry. As if that had been some other man, a stranger he'd once heard about. I've seen people do it. The actress did it for three whole chapters about her first marriage; I had to walk her back into the first person one sentence at a time. People talk about themselves in the third person when the first person hurts too much to hold.

"She told," he said. "She couldn't carry it. That's who she is. She'd rather blow up her whole life than lie in it. And the guy she was going to marry put his suit in a closet and got on a plane, and he hasn't been back since. Not really."

"And Wes?"

He was quiet.

"He did the worst thing a person can do to someone who loves him," he said finally. "He knows that. He doesn't get to not know it. He wakes up with it. He can't look at himself in the mirror long enough to shave some mornings." He rubbed a hand over the dark stubble on his jaw without seeming to notice. "He'd give anything to take it back. Anything. His hands. He'd give his hands."

"Do you hate him?"

"Every day."

"Have you forgiven him?"

"No," he said, and it was the surest thing I'd heard him say since the doorway. "No."

I sat with that. The cold from the landing was coming through my socks.

"The letters you burned," I said. "That first night, on the stove. They were about him."

"They were about what happened."

"And the ones in the closet. The forty-three." I made myself ask it. "Do you still love her?"

He looked at me, finally. Really looked, with his whole wrecked face.

"I'm not in love with her," he said. "Claire. Whatever else is true. Whatever else you find out. I'm not in love with her. I swear to God."

He didn't use my first name often. Never like that. Not like it was the only word he had left that he trusted.

. . .

I got up off the threshold and went to him on my knees across the cold tile and took his face in both my hands. His skin was freezing. His jaw was rough under my palms.

"Come inside," I said.

He came inside.

I closed the door behind us and locked it, and then I pulled the wet towel from around his neck and dropped it, and started on his jacket. He let me. He stood in the dark hallway with his arms at his sides like a man being measured for something, and let me unbutton his shirt with fingers that weren't quite steady, and peel it off his shoulders.

The cotton stuck to him. His skin underneath was cold on the surface and so warm a half-inch down that I pressed my whole palm flat to his chest just to feel the difference.

"You're shaking," I said.

"It's cold out."

"It's not the cold."

"No," he admitted, against my hair.

When he kissed me it tasted like whiskey and rain and something else, something careful, as if he thought I might break or change my mind or vanish if he did it too hard. It wasn't like the counter, that first time, all hunger and teeth. It wasn't like the night of the party. He kissed me like he was asking a question he was scared of the answer to, and I answered it the only way I had, by pulling him down the hall by his belt.

"Theo—" I started, at the bedroom door.

He stopped. His forehead dropped against mine.

"Don't," he said. "Not that. Not tonight. Please."

I thought I understood. Her name for him. The single letter on every envelope she'd ever slid under that door. Of course he didn't want to hear it in the dark, from me.

"Okay," I said. "Then I won't call you anything."

"Good." His voice was rough. "Just be here."

"I'm here."

I didn't say his name again. Not once that whole night. I think about that now.

He undressed me like it was the last time he'd be allowed to, slowly, the T-shirt of his I'd been wearing up over my head, his hands in no hurry on my ribs, my hips. When he got down to the socks he knelt on the floor in front of me and looked up.

"I'm keeping the socks," I said.

"You're keeping the socks," he agreed, very solemnly, and kissed my knee instead, and then the inside of it, and then higher, and I stopped having opinions about socks.

His hands were rough. I'd always liked that, the calluses at the base of his fingers from the plane and the chisel, the little nicked places on his knuckles. But that night he touched me like the roughness was something he was apologizing for. Long, slow passes up the backs of my thighs. His thumb tracing the crease of my hip as if he was learning it by hand. His stubble scraping soft and then softer over my stomach, my hipbones, the inside of my thigh, until I had my fingers in his wet hair and was saying please in a voice I didn't recognize.

He took his time. He took all of it. He took me apart with his mouth slowly, carefully, so thoroughly that by the end I was shaking and laughing and holding onto the linen with both fists. Outside, the rain came back harder and hammered on the fire escape like applause.

Then he climbed up over me and stopped, braced on his forearms, his weight just barely on me, and looked at me.

That was the part that undid me. Not his mouth, not his hands. The looking. We'd done this in a hurry and we'd done it laughing and we'd done it once in a bathtub with an alarming amount of water on the floor, but I had never been looked at like that. Like he was trying to memorize me against some coming dark.

"Hey," I said softly. "I'm here."

"I know." He swallowed. "I know you are."

When he moved into me it was so slow I felt every inch of it, every part of him, the full weight of the moment settling into my body. I made a sound and he stilled, and waited, and kissed the corner of my

mouth until I lifted my hips to tell him I was fine, I was more than fine, don't you dare stop.

He didn't stop. He didn't speed up either. He moved like the tide comes in, so gradual you only notice once you're already in deep. I wrapped my legs around him and my arms around his back and held on and felt the muscles work under his skin, the shiver that ran through him when I dragged my nails down his spine, the hitch in his breath against my neck.

"Look at me," he said, and I did.

I don't know how long. Long enough that the radiator went through its whole cycle, three knocks and two knocks and the long silence. Long enough that the cold went out of his skin and he was hot against me everywhere, damp at the temples, his heart slamming against my breast. I came apart with my eyes open on his, the way he'd asked, and the sound I made was almost a name, the shape of one, before I caught it and swallowed it and just said yes instead.

He followed a moment later with his face pressed into my neck and his arms locked around me so hard I could barely breathe, and he said "Claire" into my skin, once, like he was confessing to it.

Afterward he didn't let go. He lay half on me, heavy and warm, his mouth against my shoulder, and I ran my fingers over the blurred blue tattoo on his ribs. W.M. + T.M. '01.

The W first.

"I'm sorry," he said into my skin. "For today. For all of it."

"Me too."

"You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"I read your mail," I said. "I dug up your fig. I said the cruelest thing I've ever said to anyone, and I've said some things to Ryan."

"You were right, though." He was quiet for a while. I thought he'd fallen asleep. The rain had softened to that steady, patient sound that makes the whole city feel like it's under a blanket.

Then he lifted his head.

In the streetlight from the window, his face was all shadows, the scar a pale line through his brow, his eyes very dark. He looked more frightened than I'd ever seen him, more frightened than with the frying pan, more frightened than with the closet open and the photograph in my hands.

"Sunday," he said. "She said Sunday."

"Ten o'clock. She'll be on the bench."

"Don't go."

"She asked me to tell you—"

"I know what she asked." His hand came up and cupped the side of my face, his thumb on my cheekbone, holding me there. "Don't go to the bench, Bennett. Please. Whatever she tells you — let me be the one to tell you."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Danny & Maddie

LORRAINE FISCH WAS SMOKING on the sidewalk outside Danny's restaurant when I got there on Friday, under the awning in a camel coat, one arm folded across her body like she was holding her own ribs in place.

"You're late," she said.

"I'm four minutes early."

"In publishing that's late." She stepped on the cigarette with a very expensive boot and looked me up and down. "You look like you slept."

"A little."

"Huh." Lorraine can smell a change in a person the way a dog smells rain. "Don't make a habit of it. He's inside. He's been crying since eleven."

"Crying?"

"Good crying. I think. With Danny it's hard to tell. He cries at commercials for trucks." She pulled the door open. "Go on. Let him do his speech. He's been rehearsing it on the line cooks."

. . .

The restaurant was empty between lunch and dinner, chairs up on half the tables, the meat hooks hanging bare from the ceiling, a dishwasher somewhere in the back singing along to bachata. Danny was sitting alone at the long zinc bar with my manuscript in front of him. Not the file. The actual paper, three hundred and twelve pages, swollen with yellow and pink flags, red pen in the margins.

When he saw me he stood up so fast the stool fell over.

"There she is," he said. "There she is. Come here, you."

He hugged me the way he does everything, too hard and for too long, with a slap on the back at the end like he was burping a baby. Then he sat me down, yelled at someone named Marco for an espresso, and put both hands flat on the stack of paper. Lorraine took the stool on my other side, so that I was bracketed, and I had the sudden irrational feeling I was about to be fired.

"I read it," Danny said. "The whole thing. The son chapter."

Chapter nineteen. I told my son I'd call him on a Sunday. That was eleven years ago. He'd made me turn the recorder off twice while he told it, and then, a week later, called me at one in the morning and said, "Use it." I'd rewritten the last page more times than I'd admit to.

"I read it four times," Danny said. His eyes were already wet. "I sat in my car outside the Bergen County place and I thought, that's me. That's the worst thing I ever did, and she wrote it down so it sounds like the truth, which it is, and also like I'm a person, which I'm not sure I am." He wiped his eye with the back of his wrist. "How'd you do that?"

"You told me. I just wrote down what you said."

"Bullshit. I told you a bunch of words. You put them in the right order." He leaned in. "I'm gonna call him. Not yet. I'm working up to it. But I think when it comes out I send him the first copy. Let him see

I knew."

"That's a good idea, Danny."

"It's your idea. It's in your book." He patted the stack. "Which is why I want your name on it."

I laughed. Out loud. I thought it was a joke.

He didn't laugh.

"On the cover," he said. "Danny Russo with Claire Bennett. Or and. Whatever the word is. I asked Lorraine."

"With," Lorraine said. "Not and. Don't get greedy."

My espresso arrived. I didn't touch it.

"Danny," I said carefully. "That's not the deal. You're the name. Nobody wants to know there was somebody else in the room."

"I want them to know." He was suddenly very serious, the way he gets when a plate goes out wrong. "My whole life I've been taking credit. Every dish on that menu, there's a guy in the back who figured out the sauce, and I'm the one on TV. Not this one. This is the one where I'm supposed to be telling the truth." He pushed the manuscript an inch toward me, like he was serving it. "You wrote my life better than I lived it, kid. Least I can do is let people know who did."

I couldn't say anything.

Five books. Five bestsellers. An actress, a senator's wife, a tennis player, a reality star, and a chef before Danny who'd thanked his "team" in the acknowledgments. Five spines on a shelf in my head with five other people's faces on them. I'd told myself for years that I liked being invisible.

I'd only ever told one person the truth about it. On a fire escape, with a beer. He'd been quiet for a long moment and then said, "So the reason somebody cried on a plane over a tennis player's mom. That

was you," like it was something I should have been allowed to say out loud.

"Is she okay?" Danny said to Lorraine, over my head.

"She's a writer," Lorraine said. "She's having a feeling. Give her a minute."

"With," I said finally. My voice came out strange. "With is good."

"With is very good," Lorraine said, and for one second, I swear on my life, Lorraine Fisch smiled. Then she put her sunglasses on indoors and went out for a cigarette.

Danny came around and hugged me again, and this time I hugged him back, hard, with my eyes shut.

"You're crying," he said, delighted. "Lorraine! She's crying!"

. . .

I texted him from the cobblestones on Gansevoort with my hands shaking.

They want my name on the cover.

Three dots, instantly, as if he'd been holding the phone.

BENNETT.

Then: told you.

Then: i'm buying the first copy. full price. no discount.

Then, a minute later: proud of you. for real. coming home early. don't cook, i'm cooking.

He made the gravy that night. Round two. I didn't help. He scorched the garlic and called it a traitor and started over, and it still wasn't quite Danny's mother's, and it was the best thing I'd ever eaten. He did not hum.

. . .

He was asleep when I woke on Sunday, face down on my side of the bed, one arm hanging off the edge like he'd fallen there from a height. 7:12. Thin silver light.

Sunday. Ten o'clock.

Don't go to the bench, Bennett. Please.

Pier 45 was a nine-minute walk. I could be there and back and he'd never know. Or he'd know the second I walked in, the way he'd known last time, and this time it wouldn't be a joke.

Let me be the one to tell you.

I got up quietly and pulled on jeans and his sweatshirt and wrote on the back of a Con Ed envelope: Gone to Priya's. Back tonight. Not the pier. I promise. — B. I propped it on the cereal box, where he'd see it before anything else. I watered Gerald, though it wasn't a watering day. Then I went down past the creaking step and walked to the subway the way you walk past a bakery when you're on a diet.

Astoria was the only place I could think of that was far enough from the river.

My mother caught me on the platform at Thirty-Ninth Avenue. "Honey, I can't talk long, Biscuit has a thing." Biscuit is the dog. Biscuit always has a thing. This week it was his thyroid. I heard about his thyroid down the stairs and four blocks past the Greek bakery and the bodega with the orange cat asleep on the paper towels.

"Mom," I said, at Priya's corner, "I'm getting my name on a book."

"That's nice, honey. Oh, he's eating the remote again. Love you."

You can't stay mad at weather.

. . .

Priya opened the door in scrub pants and an enormous Mets sweatshirt, holding two mugs, as if she'd known I was coming. She'd

come off a night shift at seven and had the flat, bright look of someone whose body has given up on sleep and decided to just keep going.

"You look terrible and happy," she said. "Bad combination. Come in."

Judge was on the radiator with the expression of an appellate court. He looked at me, looked away, and went back to sleep.

I sat on the couch I'd lived on in September and told her everything. The closet. The letters. The fight. June on the step, writing on her knee. Three in the morning. The story about his brother. Wes. The third person.

Priya listened the way she listens to patients, face perfectly still, eyes moving.

"So the brother's name is Wes," she said. "And the brother slept with June. And your guy told you the whole thing without once saying I."

"People do that when it hurts. The actress did it for three chapters."

"Mm." She sipped. "What's his last name?"

"Marsh. It's on the mailbox."

"Have you googled him?"

"No." I could feel her looking at me over the mug. "I know. I google everybody. I googled my dentist. But at first I didn't want to see her. June. There'd be a wedding website, engagement photos in a field. And then he walked in, and he was right there, and it seemed rude. Like reading someone's diary while they're in the shower."

"You read his diary while he was in Cobble Hill."

"That was a closet. That's different."

Priya set her mug down on a stack of medical journals and picked up her phone, and I watched her decide not to use it yet.

That's when someone knocked.

. . .

It was Maddie.

I knew by the knock, which is a stupid thing to say, but we lived together for three years at NYU, in a dorm on Third Avenue with a window that didn't close, and Maddie knocks like she's apologizing for it. Two soft raps, and then a third one, late, like an afterthought.

Priya looked through the peephole, then at me. "I can tell her to leave."

I don't know what I said. Priya opened the door.

Maddie was in leggings and a puffer coat too thin for November, her hair scraped back in a knot, a smear of yesterday's lipstick she'd clearly forgotten about. She'd been crying for a long time. Not recently. Over days. It had worn something off her face. Her eyes found me on the couch and the last of her color drained out.

"Oh, God. I didn't know you'd be here. I'll go. I'm sorry."

She didn't go. She stood there with one hand on the doorframe and the other pressed flat and low across her stomach, the way I'd seen it at Danny's party and told myself I was imagining it.

"How far along?" Priya said. Doctor voice.

"Eleven weeks." Maddie's chin wobbled. "I've been texting you. I didn't know who else to—" She looked at me. "I don't have anybody else. I know whose fault that is."

"Where's Ryan?" I said.

It was the first thing I'd said to her since the rehearsal dinner. It came out in someone else's voice.

She laughed, a terrible wet sound. "Ryan sent me two thousand dollars on Venmo. With a note. For whatever you decide." She held up her phone, as if I needed evidence, and her hand shook so hard she nearly dropped it. "There's a little heart. The blue one. Not even the red one."

Priya made a sound in her throat I've only ever heard her make about drunk drivers. She took Maddie by the elbow, steered her in, sat her on the end of the couch, and put the second mug into her hands without a word.

"He said he's not ready," Maddie said into the tea. "He said his mother would have feelings. He said we were a mistake. Seven months, Claire, and he says it like he spilled something."

"Seven months," I said.

I was standing. I don't remember deciding to.

"You helped me pick the flowers. You sat next to me at the tasting and told me the lemon cake was better than the vanilla. You were in the dressing room when I found the dress, and you cried, and you told me I looked like a painting."

"You did," she whispered.

"And the whole time." I couldn't finish it. I didn't have to.

"I know."

"No. You don't get to say I know." I was so angry I could feel it in my teeth. "You were my best friend for eleven years. You were the person I'd have called about this. About you. If it had been anybody else. Do you understand that? The worst thing that ever happened to me, and the one person I want to tell about it is you."

She broke then. She folded over the mug and cried the way kids cry, mouth open, no sound at first. Priya took the tea out of her hands before it went on the floor.

I didn't go to her. I want to be honest about that. I stood in the middle of Priya's tiny living room with my fists closed and let her cry, and part of me was glad. A big part. I'd earned that part.

But the rest of me remembered the dorm on Third Avenue. Maddie at nineteen, at the end of my bed in a parka at two in the morning, after my dad's new wife sent me a Christmas card signed with his name in her handwriting. Okay, she'd said. We're going to hate him together, and then we're going to get pancakes.

I went into the kitchen and got the sleeve of saltines Priya keeps for her own post-shift nausea and a can of ginger ale from the fridge, and came back and held them out.

Maddie looked up at me, her face a wreck.

"I'm not forgiving you," I said. "I want to be really clear. Maybe not ever. But you're not going to throw up in Priya's hallway with nobody there."

She took the crackers with both hands, like they were something precious.

"You'll be good at it," I said, and my voice cracked down the middle and I let it. "The baby. You always remembered everybody's birthday. That's most of it, probably."

"Claire—"

"Don't. I can't do the next part." I looked at Priya. "Can you."

"Yeah," Priya said. "I've got it."

I stood in the kitchen with the water running so I couldn't hear. Priya's voice, low and steady: names of doctors, you can call me, I mean it, eat those slowly. When the door opened, I turned the tap off and looked through the doorway and watched Maddie go down the stairs with the saltines in one hand and the other flat on her stomach, holding on to the only thing she had left.

When I came back out Priya was on the arm of the couch with Judge in her lap and her phone in her hand. Scrolling. She didn't look up right away.

"You okay?" she said.

"No."

"Okay. Good. That's the right answer." Her thumb had stopped moving. "Claire. Come here."

Something in her voice. The doctor voice, but a different one. The one she uses, she told me once, right before she asks a family to sit down.

She read the first part off the screen, flatly, and looked up at me for the rest.

"Okay. I googled your Theo. Theo Marsh, cellist. New York Phil sub list, now playing in Lisbon. Glasses. Skinny. Very clean-shaven. Claire."

She turned the phone around.

It was a press shot, gray backdrop, a slight man holding a cello by the neck. Round wire glasses. A narrow, careful, solemn face. He looked like a man who would apologize to a bicycle. He looked like a man who would stand at a window for an hour waiting for a downbeat. He looked exactly, exactly like a little boy on a beach in Montauk, holding up a shell with both hands as if it were the important thing in the picture.

It wasn't him.

It wasn't him at all.

Priya's voice came from very far away.

"Then who is sleeping in your bed?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Who Are You

I LOOKED AT THE photo for a long time.

It was a press shot, the kind orchestras take against a gray backdrop so every musician looks like a thoughtful hostage. The man in it held a cello by the neck the way you'd hold the hand of someone shy. Round wire glasses. A narrow face. A jaw so clean-shaven it looked like an apology. His shoulders would have fit inside the doorway of 4B with room left over for a second, slimmer man.

Theo Marsh. Cello. Lisbon.

"Maybe it's old," I said.

Priya didn't look up. "It's from March."

"Maybe he got into lifting."

"Claire."

"Grief changes people. I literally told myself that in a closet three days ago, so it must be true."

"People don't grow four inches and a scar through their eyebrow." She turned the screen toward me again. "Look at his hands."

I looked. Long fingers. Pale. The hands I knew were wide and nicked, with a white seam across one knuckle from a chisel that slipped in 2019. I knew because I'd asked. I had kissed it. I had been

told a story about it, and the story had a hardware store in it and a great deal of swearing and not one single cello.

Judge walked across my lap like a landlord inspecting a unit and settled on Priya's laptop.

"Options," Priya said, in her ER voice, the one she used on men who'd put a hand through a window. "One, we call the police."

"No."

"Two, you stay here and we call the police in the morning."

"No."

"Three, you tell me what you're actually going to do, so I know which hospital to check."

Maddie's mug was still on the coffee table, a ring of lipstick on the rim. I'd been very brave about Maddie an hour ago. I'd thought, watching her go down the stairs with her hand flat on her stomach, that I was finished being lied to for the year.

"I'm going home," I said.

"That isn't your home. That's a stranger's apartment, and there's a different stranger in it."

"He's not a stranger. I know how he takes his coffee. I know he sleeps on his stomach with one foot off the bed like he's ready to run. He talks to the fig."

"Serial killers can talk to figs."

"Serial killers fold things. He doesn't fold anything."

She stared at me. Judge stared at me. It was a lot of staring for one small apartment in Astoria.

"Text me every hour," Priya said finally. "If I don't hear from you by midnight, I'm coming over with Judge, and Judge has nothing to lose."

. . .

If I were writing him, I'd thought, that first week, before I ever heard his voice. The letters had handed me a man, and I'd sketched him in a notebook like a client. Slight. Careful. Wire-rimmed glasses, pushed up with one knuckle. Hums when he cooks. Fixes a stranger's bike chain outside Lincoln Center and apologizes to the bike.

And then a door had opened at 1:10 in the morning and a soaked, enormous man had walked in, and I had looked right at him and seen the letters' man anyway, because the alternative was a stranger with a key and I'd had enough strangers for one autumn. You're Theo, I'd said. I'd held the name out like a coat.

He had put it on.

I changed to the 1 at Times Square, got off at Christopher Street and walked the long way, wet leaves pasted to the sidewalk like old posters. The bodega cat was in the window on the corner of Perry, orange and furious. I stood across from 41 and looked up. Fourth floor. Kitchen light on.

He was home.

. . .

"Bennett."

He was at the stove with his back to me, a dish towel over one shoulder, stirring with the wooden spoon that had a burn mark on the handle. He never turned around right away. I used to think it was confidence.

"You eat? I made the eggs thing. I murdered the onions, but they had it coming."

"I ate at Priya's."

"How's the cat?"

"Judgmental."

"Good. Somebody should be." He looked at me over his shoulder, and there was the crooked tooth, and the scar, and the face I'd been falling asleep beside for a week and a half. "You look like somebody read your search history."

"Maddie came by. She's pregnant, and alone, and sorry, and I don't know what to do with any of that, so I'm going to put a record on and pretend I have a personality."

"Go nuts."

The records lived in milk crates under the window. Bach, Elgar, Dvořák, a whole crate of Casals. I had never seen him touch them. He played a classic rock station that kept apologizing for its commercials, or nothing at all. I'd filed that under grief: a man who can't stand his own music anymore. It was such a good story. I'd have sold it to a publisher in an afternoon.

My hands were shaking, so I made them slow.

Fauré. Élégie. A soft blue sleeve split along one edge from being pulled out so many times. Someone had loved this record. Someone had sat on this slanted floor and listened to it at two in the morning.

I put it on. The needle hissed, and the cello came in low and grieving, like someone walking into a room where a person used to be.

"What's this one?" I said.

"Cello."

"I got that part. Which piece?"

A pause. "One of the sad ones."

"They're all sad ones."

"Then I'm right." He came up behind me and rested his chin on top of my head, which he did sometimes, and which I had found unbearably sweet, and which I now understood was a very good way to keep me from seeing his face.

"It's Fauré," I said. "Someone played this a lot."

His chin left my head. "Yeah, well. Someone had a lot of time on his hands."

Someone. Not I. I filed it in the place where I keep lines I'm going to use later, and I felt sick.

We ate. He ate; I moved onion around. The record ended and the needle went around the run-out groove, tick, tick, tick, and neither of us got up. The radiator clanked twice like it was clearing its throat.

"Play for me," I said.

"No."

Not "not tonight," lazy and smiling, the way he'd said it before. Just no. A door slammed by a draft.

"One song. I've lived with that cello for a month. I've dusted it. I've apologized to it when I bumped it. It deserves to be introduced."

"It's out of tune. It's been sitting. You don't just pick it up."

"So tune it."

"Bennett." Something in his face went careful. "What's going on?"

I could have said it then. I saw a picture of you today, and you were somebody else. The words were sitting right behind my teeth, lined up and patient.

Instead I reached across the table and took his hand and turned it over. I told myself it was tenderness. I'd read about calluses for the tennis player's book, how every body keeps a record of what it does all day. Cellists get them on the pads of the left fingers. Hard and shiny, like small coins.

His fingertips were soft. The calluses were on his palm, at the base of his fingers, where a plane handle sits. Where a hammer sits.

"Nothing's going on," I said. "I just miss music."

He watched me hold his hand like something I'd found on the street. Then he turned his palm up under mine, laced our fingers, and squeezed once.

"I'll put the radio on," he said.

. . .

I told him I had cramps, which was the first lie I ever told him on purpose, and which he believed instantly and kindly. He brought me a hot water bottle filled from the red kettle, two Advil and a glass of water, and set them on the nightstand in a neat row, like a table for a very small, very sad queen.

"You want me on the couch?"

"No," I said. "Stay."

I don't know why. Maybe I wanted to see if he could sleep. He did, eventually, on his stomach, one foot off the edge of the low bed. The streetlight came through the linen curtain and laid a pale stripe across his back, across the small dark letters on his ribs I couldn't see from this angle but knew by heart.

W.M. + T.M. '01.

Me and my brother, he'd said, the first night, smiling into my neck.

I lay on my side and looked at the back of his head and thought, I don't know your name.

I texted Priya at eleven, twelve, one. Alive. He's asleep. Then, at 1:40: Do people really not grow four inches.

Doctors are awake at 1:40 the way vampires are, she wrote back. They do not. Lock the bathroom door if you need to.

Around four he woke the way he always did, all at once, like someone had said his name. He lay very still. Then he whispered, "Bennett?" so softly I could have pretended not to hear.

I pretended not to hear.

The window slid up, the old sash he'd planed down himself so it would stop sticking. The fire escape rang once under his weight. Through the curtain I could see the edge of him out there in the cold, bent forward over his knees, for a long, long time.

When he came back he was freezing. He didn't touch me. He lay on his back with his arm over his eyes until the window went gray.

. . .

At seven I said I was getting coffee from the place on Hudson. He mumbled something into the pillow that might have been "large" and might have been "love."

The stairwell at 41 Perry always smelled like radiator paint and somebody's cumin. On the second-floor landing Mr. Ortiz was up a stepladder under the light that had been flickering all week, a bulb in his teeth, his little radio hanging off the top rung and playing salsa so bright it sounded like it was trying to cheer up the building single-handed.

He took the bulb out of his mouth. "Mija! Early bird."

"Morning, Hector."

"This light. Every week. The building wants to be dark, I think. It's a romantic building."

I should have kept walking. In every book I've ever written there's a moment where the person telling the story stands at the top of the

stairs and could still go back. You always want to write them turning around. They never do.

"Hector," I said. "The man in 4B."

"Wesley?" He screwed the bulb in. The light stuttered, caught, held. "Good kid. The brother. He's looking for Theo, poor thing. Their mother's sick with worry."

The salsa went on. Somebody on the radio laughed.

"Carol, she calls me from Rhode Island. Two months that boy doesn't pick up the phone! I tell her, Theo's a good boy, he's sad, sad people go quiet. But a mother." He climbed down and folded the ladder. "So Wesley comes in October, Hector, who's living in my brother's place? I say a nice lady, a writer, paid through December, you be nice to her. And he's nice, no? He fixed Mrs. Kaplan's window on three for free." He looked at me then, finally, and his face changed. "Mija."

I couldn't find a word. Five bestsellers and not a single word.

"Ay," he said softly. "Ay, no. He didn't tell you."

"I need to sit down for a second," I said, and I did, right there, on the cold painted step with the chip out of the edge.

He turned the radio off. The silence was enormous. He stood beside me with his hand hovering near my shoulder like he wasn't sure he was allowed to land it.

"He's a good kid," he said again, uncertain now, the way you'd repeat a fact you'd just been told might be wrong.

"I know," I said. That was the worst part. "I know he is."

He patted my shoulder twice and went down with his ladder, and he didn't turn the radio back on until the ground floor, and even then he kept it low.

I sat there, and everything I knew got up and rearranged itself, like furniture moving in the dark.

Wes.

Tell him I'll tell him everything about Wes, June had written. And I'd asked him, on the landing at three in the morning, Who's Wes? And he'd looked at the stair rail and said, My mother's oldest. Not my brother. My mother's oldest. I was the one who'd said your brother. I was the one who'd pointed at the big boy in the red trunks in the Montauk photo and said, I'd have sworn that was you. Yeah, he'd said. People do. Then he'd told me the whole story without a single I in it. The guy she was going to marry. As if that were a stranger. It was. It was his brother. The gentle one, who hums when he cooks and writes forty letters and never sends them.

He'd give anything to take it back. He hadn't been talking about someone else. He'd been confessing to me with the lights off.

The one person I could never take back.

The letters burned on the stove at four in the morning. The colander he couldn't find. The guy who lived here before, corrected too fast. The cello he wouldn't play because he couldn't, and I'd heard won't, because I'm a writer and won't is the better story. My brother is the good one, he'd said on the fire escape, a beer going warm in his hand, and I'd thought it was self-pity. It was the truest thing anyone had said to me all year.

I know, Ma. I'll find him.

W.M. + T.M.

He had told me the whole time, in pieces, sideways, like a trail left for someone he hoped would never follow it.

I laughed once, a terrible little sound that went up the stairwell and came back down. I'd spent years writing other people's lives in

their own voices so well nobody ever suspected. I knew exactly what a convincing lie looked like from the inside. And I'd asked one to stay.

I should leave. I knew it the way you know a stove is hot. Get on the train. Let Priya say nothing in the specific way she says nothing. Have Mr. Ortiz box up my things.

I stood. I looked down the stairwell at the gray morning in the front door glass.

Then I looked up.

Two more flights. The red kettle with the handle he'd fixed. Gerald by the window. A man who'd been ready to run for a month and hadn't.

He'd had a hundred chances to tell me. Maybe he needed one I gave him on purpose.

I went and got the coffee. Large, two sugars, the way he liked it, which I knew, the way I knew so many things about him except the one that mattered.

When I let myself into 4B he was at the window in a T-shirt and sweatpants, hair wrecked, a mug of water in one hand, bent toward the fig.

"Morning, Gerald," he said quietly, and didn't know I was there.

He turned, and smiled at me like I was the best thing that had walked through that door all year.

"Hey, Bennett."

"Hey," I said, and held out his coffee, and did not say his name.

I gave him until Thursday. He used every minute of it, and it still wasn't enough.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

One True Thing

I LEFT THE DOORS open for him all week.

Not real doors. The other kind. On Monday, over bagels on the fire escape, I asked where he'd grown up, and he said, "Little town outside Providence. Nothing happens there except my mother," and that was true. On Tuesday I told him June was still writing, that she'd asked about him again, and he went quiet and peeled the label off his beer in one long careful strip and said, "She deserves a straight answer from somebody," and that was true too. On Wednesday I left my laptop open on the kitchen table with nothing on the screen but a search bar, the cursor blinking, like a dare. He closed it so he could put down a plate of toast.

Every night I lay next to him and thought, Tell me. And every morning he said, "Morning, Gerald," and kissed the top of my head, and didn't.

On Thursday I came home with groceries.

"What's all this?"

"Sunday gravy," I said, dumping cans of San Marzanos on the counter. "Danny's mother's. Third time's the charm."

He leaned against the fridge, under the house rules still taped there in two handwritings. No shirtless. No reading my stuff. Don't name my plants. Somebody, at some point, had drawn a small fig leaf next to that one in pen. I thought it was me. It might have been him.

"First time we made that," he said, "it burned."

"First time we got distracted. Second time you wouldn't let me help, and you scorched the garlic and called it a traitor."

"Yeah." He rubbed his jaw. "I remember both."

"So tonight we watch the pot."

We watched the pot. I browned the pork and the sausage the way Danny's mother had insisted, in a chapter I'd written so many times I could hear her yelling in Italian from 1974. He crushed garlic with the flat of the knife and swore at every clove individually, personally, as if each one had wronged his family. "You little — come here — get out of your stupid jacket." He did not hum. He never hummed. I had stopped waiting for it.

The kitchen fogged. The radiator clanked. The window over the fire escape went black and then silver with the streetlight, and the whole apartment smelled like a Sunday in someone else's childhood.

He came up behind me while I stirred and put his hands on the counter on either side of me. Not touching. Just there.

"Can I tell you something?" he said. "About the night I showed up?"

I kept stirring. "Anything."

"I sat on the stoop for an hour before I came up. In the rain. Ortiz came out twice to ask if I was having a stroke."

"Why?"

"Couldn't decide if I should." His breath was warm on my neck. "Didn't know what I'd find up here."

I put the spoon down. I turned around inside the cage of his arms and looked at him, and I made my face as open as I knew how to make it. Here. It's here. Walk through.

"What did you think you'd find?" I said.

He looked at me for a long moment. Then over my shoulder, at the red kettle on the back burner, the handle he'd fixed with a brass screw and a strip of leather the first week.

"Not you," he said. "That's all. I didn't think I'd find you."

It was true. That was the cruelest thing about him. It was always true.

. . .

We ate on the floor because the table was covered in Danny's manuscript, and the gravy was perfect, and he said so with his mouth full, and I laughed, and for ten whole minutes I forgot. That's the thing nobody tells you about knowing. It doesn't stay put. It goes out like a pilot light and you have to keep lighting it again.

Afterwards we climbed out onto the fire escape with two beers and a blanket he'd stolen off the couch. It was cold enough to see our breath. Perry Street was empty and wet below us, the trees bare now, the bodega cat a smudge of orange in the lit window on the corner.

His phone buzzed in his jacket. He took it out, glanced at it, and turned it face down on the metal grating. But I'd seen. A long number. Plus three-five-one, and then a lot of digits.

"You can get that," I said.

"No."

"Who is it?"

He looked out at the street. "Somebody I can't talk to yet."

Yet. I held on to the word.

"Bennett," he said, after a while.

"Mm."

"If I wasn't—" He stopped. Started again. "If I turned out to be less than you think. A lot less. What would you do?"

The cold came up through the blanket. A cab hissed by below, and its headlights ran across the brick and were gone.

"I'd want you to tell me," I said. "Myself. From you. Not from anybody else." I made myself look at him. "I think I could survive almost anything if it came from you."

He turned his head. In the streetlight the scar through his eyebrow was a thin pale line, and his eyes were wet, or it was the cold.

"Claire," he said.

Not Bennett. He only ever used the other one when he meant something all the way down, in the dark, with nowhere left to put it. My whole body went still.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm here."

He opened his mouth.

Then he leaned in and kissed me instead, slow and cold-lipped and tasting of beer, his hand coming up to hold the side of my face like it was something that might crack. And I let him. I kissed him back. I hated myself for how easily I let the moment close over.

When he pulled away he said, "It's freezing. Come inside," and the door shut, and I heard it shut.

. . .

Inside, I went to the corner and put my hand on the cello case.

He was hanging the blanket back over the couch. He stopped with it in his hands.

"Play for me," I said. "Not a song. Just one note. I just want to hear what it sounds like in here."

I thought he'd say no again, fast, like a door in a draft. He didn't. He put the blanket down. He walked over and knelt in front of the case on the slanted floor, and he looked at it the way I'd seen people look at gravestones, and then he undid the latches one at a time. Click. Click. Click.

He lifted the lid.

The cello lay in its dark velvet like something asleep. Honey-colored, worn pale at the shoulder where an arm had rested a thousand times. There was rosin dust on the strings. There was a small folded square of paper tucked against the neck, yellowed, and he looked at it and didn't touch it.

He knelt there with his hands on his thighs for so long that the radiator clanked and stopped and clanked again.

Then he closed the lid. Latched it. Click. Click. Click.

"I can't," he said.

"Can't," I said, very carefully, "or won't?"

He looked up at me from the floor, and for the first time since the doorway, his face had nothing over it at all.

"Can't, Bennett. I swear to God. I can't."

And I believed him, because it was the truth, and he knew I didn't know which truth it was, and he let me not know.

That was the third door. I counted. I'm a writer; I always count.

. . .

I took his hand and pulled him up off the floor, and he came, and I walked him backwards down the little hall to the bedroom, past the closet with its brass lock, past the bathroom where the clawfoot tub

ticked as it cooled.

"Bennett—"

"Shh."

I stopped him at the foot of the low bed and put both my hands flat on his chest. His heart was going hard under his T-shirt. I could feel it in my palms.

"Tonight," I said, "you let me."

Something moved across his face, surprise and then something softer. "Okay."

I took his shirt off slowly. He lifted his arms for me like a kid, and that almost undid me before we'd started. I folded it. I actually folded it, and set it on the chair, and he looked at it and then at me like I was out of my mind, and I thought of Priya saying serial killers fold things, and I laughed, and he smiled without knowing why, and the crooked tooth caught the light.

I wanted to remember all of it. That was the whole plan. I didn't have another one.

I touched him the way you'd read something you knew you'd have to give back. The broad shelf of his shoulders. The scar on his knuckle. The hollow at the base of his throat where his pulse jumped when I put my mouth there. The small dark letters on his ribs. I kissed them, each one. The W. The M. The T. He made a sound, low, like I'd pressed on a bruise.

When he reached for me I took his wrists and put his hands down on the linen sheets, one on each side of him.

"Not yet," I said.

"You're killing me."

"I know."

I undressed in front of him in the slatted light from the window, not fast, not shy, and he watched me with his hands fisted in the sheets and his jaw tight, and he didn't move, because I'd asked him not to. I'd never been looked at like that. Like I was the last of something.

I climbed over him and kissed him, and he made a sound into my mouth and finally, finally, I let him touch me. His hands came up my back, rough at the palms, careful everywhere else, and I felt every place they'd held a plane and a hammer and the door frames of a hundred old houses, and I thought, this is who you are. This. Not the letters. This.

I set the pace. I wouldn't let him hurry, and he didn't try. When I took him in, I did it slowly enough that we both stopped breathing, and I stayed there with my forehead against his until he said Claire, like a prayer he'd made up himself.

The radiator knocked. The streetlight laid its pale stripe across us both. I moved and he moved with me, and his hands were on my hips but not steering, just holding on, like a man on the deck of a boat.

"Look at me," I said.

He looked at me.

"You're looking at me like you're trying to remember something," he said, rough.

"I am."

"What?"

"This," I said.

He pulled me down against him and held me so tight I could feel his heart through both of us. We were slow for a long time, and then not slow at all, and somewhere in the middle of it he said into my hair, "You haven't called me anything all night."

My whole chest went hot and tight.

"I know," I said.

He waited for more. I didn't give him more. I moved instead, and he gasped and let it go, the way I'd been letting things go all week, and I thought his name. The real one. I thought it so hard it should have been audible. Wes. I held it behind my teeth like a stone, and when I came apart over him, with his hands spread wide across my back and my face in his neck, I kept it there, and he followed me a moment later with a broken sound against my shoulder, and I didn't say anything at all.

Afterwards he didn't let go. He pulled the sheet over us and lay there, still holding me, his thumb going back and forth along my spine, and I pressed my face to his chest so he wouldn't see it.

From the other room, through the open bedroom door, came a whisper of paper on wood.

12:40. I didn't need the clock. I knew that sound like a heartbeat.

His thumb stopped on my back.

Neither of us moved. Neither of us said anything. After a while his thumb started again, and the envelope stayed where it was, on the floor inside the door, waiting for whoever had the nerve.

. . .

"Tell me one true thing," I said, much later, into the dark.

It was our game. We'd played it on the fire escape and in the tub and once in a cab on Tenth Avenue. He'd told me he was scared of horses. That he'd cried at the end of a movie about a dog and lied about it to a woman at a bar. That his mother still cut his sandwiches into triangles when he visited. Small true things, handed over like pocket change.

He was quiet so long I thought he'd fallen asleep.

"I've wrecked every good thing I ever touched," he said. His voice was very low, and very even, the way you talk when you've said a sentence to yourself so many times it's worn smooth. "I'm trying so hard not to wreck you."

I lay there and let it land.

True. Every word of it. I could hear that. I'd spent years listening for the exact sound a person makes when they finally tell the truth, and this was it.

It just wasn't the truth.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay?"

"Thank you for telling me."

He kissed my forehead. In a few minutes his breathing changed, slowed, and then he rolled over onto his stomach, one foot off the edge of the bed, the way he always did, like he was ready to run.

I lay awake and listened to him not run.

. . .

At six the window was the color of dishwater.

I got up without waking him. I'm good at that; I spent three years getting out of bed without waking Ryan, and I was finally going to get some use out of it. I dressed in the bathroom. I packed by feel. My duffel, the claw clip, my notebooks, the shoebox of June's letters, the socks I sleep in. I left the sweater of his I'd stolen folded on the chair, on top of his T-shirt.

In the living room the envelope lay inside the door where it had landed. T., in June's handwriting, the loops I knew now as well as my own. I picked it up. I didn't open it. I put it in my bag.

Gerald looked thirsty. Gerald always looked thirsty; he was a fig with a flair for drama. I filled the mug at the sink and watered him slowly, the way the listing said, the way I'd done twice a week since October, and then I took the brass key out of my coat pocket, where it had lived since the night he told me to keep it. Apparently you're better at finding things than I am.

It still had Gerald's dirt in the grooves. I rinsed it under the tap and dried it on the dish towel.

The kitchen table still had Danny's manuscript on one end and the cereal box on the other, the top rolled down the way he always rolled it, badly. I set the key next to it. Small and brass and wrong-looking on the scarred wood, like a word in another language.

I thought about writing a note. I'm a writer; it's what we do. I stood there with the pen in my hand for a full minute.

But there wasn't a sentence in the world I could leave him that would say it better than the key would. He'd see it and he'd know. I'd opened the closet. I'd read the letters. I'd been told the name of the man who wrote them, and it wasn't him.

From the bedroom, he said something in his sleep. One word. It might have been my name.

I picked up my bag, and I closed the door of 4B behind me very, very quietly, and I didn't look back up the stairs, because I knew if I did I'd see him standing at the top of them, and I'd turn around.

You always want to write them turning around.

I didn't.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Saturday

PRIYA OPENED THE DOOR in scrubs with her coat still on, a granola bar in her teeth, home from a night shift for exactly four minutes.

She looked at me. She looked at the duffel. She took the granola bar out of her mouth.

"Okay," she said, and stepped back to let me in, and that was all, and I loved her so much I had to sit down on the floor of her hallway.

She made tea. She didn't ask. She put the mug in my hands and sat on the arm of the couch and ate her granola bar and let Judge make a slow, suspicious circuit of my duffel bag, sniffing it like it had come from a crime scene. Which, in fairness.

"His name's Wes," I said finally. "He's Theo's brother. He's the one June slept with."

Priya chewed. Swallowed. "Huh," she said.

"That's it? Huh?"

"I've been awake for twenty-six hours. Huh is a lot." She set the wrapper down. "Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"Did he know you knew?"

"No. I gave him four days to tell me. I gave him—" I counted on my fingers, like a child. "I gave him three really good chances last night alone. He came so close. He kept coming so close."

"Close is a thing people say about horseshoes." She stood, swayed a little, put a hand on top of my head the way you'd steady a lamp. "I'm going to sleep for six hours. Don't answer your phone. Don't go anywhere. If you need to cry, Judge is very absorbent."

. . .

My phone started at 7:52.

I was on the couch with my knees up and the tea gone cold. It buzzed against the cushion. It said Theo, because that's what I'd saved him as, three weeks ago, the first night, with my thumbs shaking. I watched his fake name light up on the screen until it stopped.

At 8:30 it rang again.

At 9:15.

At 9:16.

By noon it was seven. I put it face down. Then I turned it face up again because face down felt like something a coward would do, and I'd decided, somewhere around the fourth call, that I was going to stop being one of those.

The texts came in between.

Bennett.

Then nothing for an hour. Then:

Please.

And then, at 2:07 in the afternoon, while Priya snored in the bedroom and the radiator in Astoria made its own different, wheezier noises, like an old man in a waiting room:

I know you know.

I read it a lot of times. I'm a professional. I can tell you how much is in four words if you let it sit. He'd found the key. He'd stood at the kitchen table in his sweatpants with his hair wrecked and seen it next to the cereal box, small and brass and dirty at the teeth, and understood all of it at once. I could see it. I could see his face. That was the problem. I could always see his face.

By Saturday morning he'd called eleven times.

He didn't come. That was the part I hadn't expected. He knew Priya's address; he'd dropped me here once in a cab, in the rain, after the High Line. He could have been on her stoop in forty minutes. He wasn't. The eleventh call came at midnight on Friday, and then one last text, a long one for him:

I'm not coming there. You don't get ambushed. Not by me. Not again. But I'm here. I'm not going anywhere till you tell me to.

I didn't tell him anything.

I tried. At one in the morning, under Priya's spare blanket, with Judge asleep on my feet like a warm sandbag, I opened the thread and typed What's your name. Just that. I looked at it for a long time. It seemed like the cruelest sentence I had ever written, and I've written a senator's wife forgiving him on page 212.

I deleted it.

I typed Why didn't you tell me. Deleted that too. I knew why. I'd been in the room for every reason. He'd been afraid, and then he'd been in love, and then he'd been afraid because he was in love, and somewhere in there the lie had stopped being a thing he told and become the house we were living in. You can't walk out of a house in the middle of the night without waking the person next to you.

Except I had. I'd done exactly that.

I put the phone under the pillow and lay there listening to the N go by.

. . .

On Saturday I did the thing I'd been not doing.

I'd kept June's letters to me in a shoebox, all of them, the ones addressed To the subletter in her round looped hand, the paper going soft from rereading. I'd read them the way you read a friend. Now I took them out and laid them on Priya's rug in order, like evidence, like the pages of a manuscript I'd been hired to fix, and I read them again as somebody else.

> *I did the unforgivable thing, with the one person I could never take back.*

I'd always read that as: someone so close that once it was done, it couldn't be undone. I'd thought, a friend. A colleague. His best man.

Never take back. As in you can't return him. As in he's family. As in he's at Thanksgiving forever, passing the potatoes.

> *He used to say his family was a house with one load-bearing wall, and it wasn't him.*

The good one, I thought. My brother is the good one.

> *I don't even know who to be angrier at. Except I do. It's me. It's always me. But some nights it's someone else, too, and I can't say his name, because if I say it I'll have to know it.*

I sat back on my heels.

She'd been writing about him. The whole time. Through a door, to me, about the man who was sleeping on the green velvet couch twenty feet away. And he'd been reading them over my shoulder in a way. Burning the ones addressed to his brother at four in the morning, over the gas flame, so I wouldn't find the name.

I'd thought he was burning her. He was burning himself.

Judge came and lay down on a letter. I let him.

Then I reached into my bag and took out the envelope from Thursday night. T., on the front. The one that had slid in at 12:40 while we lay there, neither of us moving, his thumb stopped on my spine.

I had broken every rule that apartment ever gave me. I'd opened the closet. I'd answered the door after midnight, more or less. I'd named the plant. This one seemed small.

I opened it.

T.

She says you're back. I've written this letter nine times. I'm going to send this one, whatever it says.

I've been calling it "the unforgivable thing" for ten months, like it's a weather event, like it happened to me. It didn't. I did it.

It was your brother. It was Wes. I'm writing his name because you never let me say it out loud, you put your hand up, and I understand why, but I can't carry it unsaid anymore. I'm so tired.

It was one night. You were in Cleveland. He was drunk and I was drunk and lonely and stupid, and that's not a reason, it's just what was in the room.

He hasn't forgiven himself either, if that matters. I don't think it does. I think it shouldn't.

I'll be at the bench on Sunday. Where you asked me. I'll be there whether you come or not, but please come.

I loved you the whole time. I never stopped. That's the worst part, isn't it. It would be so much easier if I'd stopped.

– J.

I read it twice. Then I folded it back along its creases very precisely, the way you'd fold a flag, and put it back in its envelope, and sat there on Priya's floor surrounded by a woman's whole heart in paper.

Wes.

There it was. In her handwriting. The name I hadn't said out loud, not once, not even in his bed with his hands on my back. She'd written it for me.

. . .

At four my phone rang again, and it wasn't him.

"Kid!" Danny Russo bellowed. Danny didn't have an indoor voice; he'd had it surgically removed on a cooking show in 2009. "You sitting down? Sit down. Lorraine sent the mock-up."

"Hi, Danny."

"Your name, Claire. On the cover. Under mine. Same size, I fought her on it, she said Danny, nobody puts the ghost the same size, I said she's not a ghost, she's the only person who ever got it right." He was in a kitchen; I could hear a pan, a radio, someone yelling for more shallots. "It says Danny Russo with Claire Bennett. I'm looking at it right now. It's beautiful. You're beautiful. Lorraine's outside smoking about it."

I laughed. It hurt my throat.

Five books. Five people's lives, in their voices, with their names on the spine. A senator's wife thanking her husband in a dedication I wrote while he was in Cabo with an intern. An actress describing a childhood I'd invented the furniture for. I'd been so good at disappearing. And now, for the first time, my own name was going on something, and it was going on the only true book I'd ever written.

"Danny," I said. "Thank you."

"No, listen, there's more." His voice changed. Dropped. The pan stopped. "I called him."

I knew who. Chapter nineteen of his book. The son. The phone he'd picked up a hundred times and put back down. I'd written that chapter four times, trying to make it sound less like a man hiding behind his own front door, and every draft he'd said, no, kid, that's it, that's exactly what it was.

"Tuesday," Danny said. "I called him Tuesday. He picked up. He didn't hang up. We talked for six minutes about the Mets, Claire. Six minutes about the goddamn Mets. Best six minutes of my life." He blew his nose like a trumpet. "Because you wrote it down, I couldn't pretend anymore. You know? You put it on paper and I had to look at it."

"I know," I said.

"So thank you. That's all. Go have a drink. Go do something nice. You sound like hell."

. . .

When Priya got up, I was at her kitchen table with a pen and a legal pad, writing.

She looked over my shoulder, read three words, and went to make coffee without comment, which is the greatest kindness one writer

can be offered by a non-writer.

June,

You were right about him. About the gentlest person you've ever met. You were right about all of it. I just met the wrong brother.

I'm sorry I lied to you at the pier. I didn't know why I did it then. I think I know now. I think part of me already knew he wasn't who I said he was, and I wanted to keep him a little longer before anybody took him back.

I'm not going to be at the bench. It isn't mine. It never was. It's yours, and Theo's, and maybe it's Wes's. I was only ever subletting.

Water the fig, if you ever get the chance. Twice a week. His name is Gerald. Nobody else will tell you that.

– Claire

I read it back. I didn't hate it. That's rare.

I folded it in thirds and put it in an envelope and wrote June on the front and didn't seal it, and put it on the table, and looked at it.

"Are you sending that?" Priya said, with her back to me.

"No."

"Then what's it for?"

"So I know what I'd say."

She turned around with two mugs. Set one in front of me. Sat. Judge got into her lap like he paid rent there.

"Can I tell you what I think?" she said.

"You're going to."

"I am." She wrapped both hands around her mug. "I think you've spent your whole adult life writing people's stories for them because it's safer than being in one. I think a man lied to you about the most

basic fact about himself, and you should be furious, and you are, a little. But mostly you're doing that thing where you're already editing it. Making it make sense. Making him sympathetic." She tilted her head. "You're ghostwriting him, Claire."

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

"And I think," she said, "that the woman on that bench doesn't need a ghost. She needs a witness."

. . .

It got dark at five, the way it does in November, all at once, like someone hitting a switch.

I sat by Priya's window with the radiator wheezing and the N train going by on its elevated track every few minutes, lit up like a necklace, full of people going somewhere. Tomorrow my mother would call from Phoenix and tell me about the dog, and I'd say, That's great, Mom, and she'd say, How's the city, and I would have no idea what to tell her.

My phone lay on my knee.

It buzzed at 8:14. I thought it was him. My stomach dropped and rose like a cheap elevator.

It wasn't him.

June. We'd swapped numbers that first Sunday on the pier, over two terrible coffees; she'd typed mine into her phone with her bitten thumbs. We'd hardly used them since. We'd both preferred the door.

I know he's there.

I sat up.

The dots came and went. Came again.

Not Theo. I know it's not Theo. Mr. Ortiz told me this morning. I went to the building. I stood on the stoop for an hour and didn't go

up. Isn't that funny.

Another.

I'll be at the bench tomorrow. Please come. I need someone to be there who isn't one of them.

I looked at the envelope on Priya's table, the one with June on it that I'd written so I'd know what I'd say. I looked at the eleven missed calls under his fake name. I looked at Priya, who had heard the phone and was standing in her bedroom doorway in a T-shirt that said TRAUMA BAY 3, watching me.

A witness.

"Pri," I said. "Can I borrow your good gloves tomorrow?"

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she nodded, once, slowly, like a doctor agreeing to a procedure she would have advised against.

I picked up the phone.

I typed, Yes. I'll be there. Ten.

My thumb hovered for a second over the screen, the way his hands had hovered over the cello latches, and then I sent it before I could turn around.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Bench

SUNDAY CAME UP COLD and bright and absolutely indifferent, the way the best and worst days in New York always do.

Priya's good gloves were black leather lined with something soft, a present from an attending she'd saved from a lawsuit. She held them out to me in the kitchen at 8:40 like a surgeon handing over a scalpel.

"I can come," she said.

"I know."

"I can stand fifty feet away and look menacing. I'm very good at menacing. I do it to interns."

"I know you are." I pulled the gloves on. They were a little big. "But she asked for somebody who isn't one of them. If I bring backup, I'm one of them."

Priya considered this with her whole face. "Text me after."

"It'll be over in an hour."

"Then text me once." She reached out and fixed the claw clip in my hair, which had been slipping, and her hand stayed on the back of my head for a second longer than it needed to. "And Claire. Whatever happens on that pier. You don't owe anybody a good ending."

Judge watched me go from the windowsill, which in Judge's language was practically a hug.

. . .

The N was half empty. Sunday people. A man with a bag of oranges. Two girls in last night's glitter, asleep on each other. A grandmother in a church hat reading the Post with tremendous disapproval.

I didn't write any of them. I didn't have it in me.

Instead I took out my phone and looked at the eleven missed calls, and then, because I am who I am and I can't leave a loose thread alone, I typed +351 into the search bar. The number I'd seen on Thursday night, glowing on the fire escape grating before he turned it face down. Somebody I can't talk to yet.

Country calling code: Portugal.

I looked at the word for a long time. The train rattled along the elevated tracks into Queensboro Plaza and then dove under the river, and the word stayed on the screen.

Portugal. Lisbon.

He'd found him. Or he'd been trying to. Or the one person in the world he couldn't talk to yet had finally called him back.

I put the phone in my pocket and held it there in Priya's big gloves the whole way to Times Square, the whole way down on the 1, like if I let go of it something would happen faster.

. . .

Christopher Street on a Sunday morning is the quietest it ever gets. The bars shut, the rainbow flags limp in the cold, a guy hosing down the sidewalk outside a diner and nodding at me like we were both in on something. I walked west. The wind found me two blocks from the

river and came straight down the street at me off the Hudson, wet and metallic, smelling like the end of the land.

I crossed the West Side Highway on the light. The pier went straight out into the water ahead of me, long and pale and flat, with the bright river on both sides and New Jersey squatting across it in the sun. Joggers. A woman with three greyhounds in matching sweaters. A man doing tai chi so slowly he might have been carved there. Gulls, hanging on the wind without moving, like someone had pinned them up.

At the very end, the last bench. Where you asked me.

I'd been here once before. Three weeks ago, a lifetime. I'd sat on that bench next to a stranger in a red coat and drunk a terrible coffee and lied to her face, and she'd thanked me for coming.

The red coat was there. I'd have known it from the moon.

And standing in front of her, between June and the water, his back to the river and his hands jammed in the pockets of the canvas jacket I'd worn to get the mail a dozen times, was Wes.

I stopped walking.

I stood by the railing about sixty feet away, half behind a lamppost like a spy in a bad movie, and I watched them.

I couldn't hear anything. The wind took every word and threw it into the river. But I didn't need to hear it. I've spent my whole working life watching people tell me the worst thing about themselves, and I know what it looks like with the sound off.

He was talking. Not much. A sentence, and then a long stop, and then another sentence. His shoulders were up around his ears. He kept taking his hands out of his pockets like he was going to do something with them and then putting them back, because there was nothing to do with them. He didn't sit down. She hadn't asked him to.

I thought of him on the stoop of 41 Perry, that first night, in the rain, for an hour. Ortiz coming out twice to ask if he was having a stroke. Didn't know what I'd find up there. I wondered how long he'd stood at the start of this pier this morning before he walked out to the end of it. I wondered if he'd thought, the whole length of it, about turning around.

June sat very straight with her hands in her lap. I could see her chewed fingernails from where I was standing, or I imagined I could. She was looking up at him, and her face was perfectly still, and that was worse than anything.

He said something else. Shorter.

June stood up.

She was small next to him; she came up to his collarbone. She looked at him for one long second.

Then she slapped him.

It cracked out over the water, clean and flat, and the tai chi man lost his balance and a gull let go of the wind. Wes's head turned with it. He didn't put his hand to his face. He just stood there and let it land, and turned his face back to her, like he'd been waiting ten months for exactly that and was relieved it had finally come.

And then June grabbed the front of his jacket in both fists, and her whole body folded, and she was crying, hanging on to him like he was the only thing between her and the river.

"Where is he, Wes?" Her voice went up and broke, high enough that the wind couldn't hold it. "Where is your brother?"

His hands came up. Hovered. He didn't hold her. He put one hand on the back of her head, very lightly, the way Mr. Ortiz had hovered over my shoulder on the stairs, like a man who wasn't sure he was allowed.

And then he lifted his head, and looked down the pier over the top of her red coat, and saw me.

. . .

I watched it happen to his face.

The scar through his eyebrow. The stubble. Two days of it at least; he hadn't shaved since I left, and I knew that the way I knew everything about him that didn't matter. His cheek was red where she'd hit him. His eyes found mine, and every single thing in them came apart at once.

June felt him go still. She turned around in his arms, wiping her face with the heel of her hand, and followed his look down the pier.

She saw me. I saw her understand.

Not all at once. In stages, like lights coming on down a long hallway. Me. Him. The subletter. The man in the apartment. He's back, I'd written her, he's here, I'm sorry I lied. And all the letters after, the things I'd told her through a door about a man who swore at radiators and talked to a fig tree and held my face like it might crack.

"Oh," June said. I could hear her now. The wind had dropped, or I'd started walking without noticing. "Oh, no. Claire."

I was walking. I was ten feet away. I stopped.

"Claire," Wes said.

My first name. The one he kept for the dark, for the things he meant. The last time had been Thursday night, in his bed, like a prayer. The time before that, on the fire escape, the closest he ever got, he'd said it like a man stepping off a ledge, and then he'd kissed me instead of jumping.

"Don't," I said.

"Claire, please, I—"

"Don't say my name like you've been saying it all along." My voice came out much steadier than I was. "You let me say his. For a month. In the cab. In your bed. You let me call you Theo, and you said Claire like it was the only true word in the room."

He flinched. Actually flinched, worse than when she'd hit him.

"I was going to tell you," he said.

"When?"

"Every day." It came out raw. "Every single day, Bennett. I swear to God. Every morning I'd water the fig and I'd think, today. And you'd come out of the bedroom in those socks and I'd think, one more day. Just let me have one more day of you looking at me like that, and then I'll—"

"I had to hear it from Mr. Ortiz." I hadn't meant to say it. It came out anyway. "On the stairs. While he was changing a light bulb. He thought I knew. He was so sad for me, Wes."

His name. Out loud, to his face. For the first time.

It hit him like a second slap. I watched it go in.

June had both hands over her mouth now. "You let her think you were Theo," she said through her fingers. It wasn't a question. "Oh my God. You let her call you Theo."

"I didn't let her. She said it. She was standing there with a frying pan, crying, and she said it, and I was soaking wet and Ma hadn't slept in a week and I just—" He stopped. Shut his eyes. "No. That's not true. She said it, and I said yes. That's what happened. I said yes."

He turned to me then. Fully. Took his hands out of his pockets and left them out, open, at his sides, like a man showing he wasn't carrying anything.

"My name is Wes Marsh," he said. "I'm thirty-four. I fix old windows. I can't play a note on that thing in the corner, I never could,

I can't even tune a guitar. I sleep like garbage. I eat cereal out of the box. I slept with my brother's fiancée, and he left the country, and I've been looking for him for two months, and I found you instead." His voice went. He got it back. "That's all of it. That's every true thing. I'm sorry it's late."

It was the most honest thing anyone had ever said to me. It was a week too late and a month too late and it went through me like the wind off the river.

The wind came back. It snapped June's coat around her knees. A ferry went by out on the river, white and far away and full of people having an ordinary Sunday.

I looked at him. The man I'd made coffee for. Two sugars. The man who'd fixed the kettle and the window and the hinge on the bathroom door and never once tried to fix me, which was why I'd loved him. Who'd held my face. Who'd told me, in the dark, with his thumb going back and forth on my spine, I've wrecked every good thing I ever touched.

He hadn't been lying about that either.

And June. In her red coat, with her nurse's hands and her wrecked, freckled face, who had loved someone so gently and so badly that she'd sat on this bench every Sunday since he left, in the rain, in the cold, waiting. Who'd written me in my worst week, You'll find out who you are on the other side of this. Who'd been right.

The gentlest person I've ever met, she'd said about the man who owned the apartment. About the letters in the closet. About forty-three letters in a neat, kind hand I had read sitting on the floor of the hall, with the suit in its garment bag hanging over me like a ghost at a wedding.

I'd fallen in love with the letters first. Then I'd fallen in love with the man who walked in instead.

"Which one of you," I said, and my voice finally cracked, right down the middle, "was I supposed to fall in love with?"

Nobody answered.

Wes looked at me like I'd asked him to name the day he died. June made a small, broken sound. The gulls hung on the wind. The whole bright, cold, ordinary morning held perfectly still around the three of us, the way a room does just after something breaks.

And then, behind me, a voice I had never heard before.

Quiet. A little hoarse. The kind of voice that had been awake for a very long time.

"I think that's my question too."

I turned around.

He was standing on the pier six feet behind me, and I had no idea how long he'd been there.

A slight man. Narrow shoulders under a gray wool coat much too thin for a New York November, the coat of someone who had packed for a warmer city. Round wire glasses, a little smudged, pushed up on his nose with one knuckle. Slight. Careful. Wire-rimmed glasses, I'd written in a notebook two weeks into his apartment, pushed up with one knuckle. My body recognized him before my brain caught up. A cello case strapped to his back, dark and scuffed, the way you'd carry a sleeping child. A carry-on at his feet with an airline tag still looped around the handle.

He hadn't shaved. Not for a day or two, by the look of it, the shadow on his jaw soft and uneven, as if it wasn't used to being there. The face from Priya's phone. The face from the photo on the beach, the smaller boy, the serious one holding up the shell beside his big

brother. Montauk, '01.

Behind me, I heard June stop breathing.

Behind me, I heard Wes say, so quietly it was barely a word at all, "Theo."

He didn't look at his brother. Not yet. He didn't look at June either, though I saw his hand tighten on the strap of the cello case at the small sound she made.

He looked at the three of us standing there on the end of the pier, at the bench, at the river, at the place where he'd asked her to wait. He looked at all of it for a long time, like a man reading a letter he'd been dreading.

Then his eyes came back, and settled, and stayed on me.

"You must be the one living in my apartment."

END OF PART ONE

The story continues in
The Sublet — Part Two.

Thank you for reading. If it kept you up past midnight, I'm not sorry.

— Shay