The Bookstore on Bleecker

A man keeps buying the same four-dollar paperback from Emma's grandfather's bookstore and bringing it back with notes in the margins, and the pages hold a promise nobody's kept for thirty-five years.

The letter came on the first Monday in August, the kind of hot morning when Bleecker Street smells like warm garbage and fresh mozzarella at the same time, and I knew what it was before I opened it because it was on heavy paper. Good news never comes on heavy paper. Good news comes on a Post-it.

I read it standing behind the register, under the fan that clicks every time it turns left. Then I read it again, slower, like the words might rearrange themselves into something kinder if I gave them a second chance.

They didn't. The lease on the ground floor of the building on Bleecker between Cornelia and Jones would expire on September 30 and would not be renewed at the current rate. The ownership was "exploring options consistent with current market conditions." A new rate was available upon request. There was a phone number for a management company in Midtown and a signature from someone named Gregory who had clearly never been inside.

I didn't need to request the new rate. Everybody on the block already knew it. The candle store two doors down had closed in May, and the sign in their window now said a sunglasses brand was COMING SOON, and the sunglasses brand was paying twenty-two thousand dollars a month to sell nine pairs of sunglasses on a shelf made of driftwood.

We paid eighty-six hundred. We'd been paying some version of eighty-six hundred since my grandfather signed the original lease in 1979, on a handshake and a typed page, back when the West Village

was a place people moved to because nobody else wanted it.

HADLEY BOOKS · USED · RARE · WHATEVER YOU NEED

That's the sign over the door. My grandfather painted it himself. The "whatever you need" was his idea, and for forty-four years people took him at his word and came in asking for things like bus directions, a bathroom, a notary, and once, memorably, a priest. He sent that man across the street to Our Lady of Pompeii, and the man came back an hour later and bought Moby-Dick.

He died two years ago, in March, in the apartment upstairs, in his reading chair with a Trollope open on his chest. He was ninety-one. The doctor said his heart just stopped, and my mother said that was the most Frank thing he'd ever done, finishing a chapter and then calmly checking out, no fuss, no hospital, no one to argue with.

He left me the store. I was twenty-nine, writing jacket copy for thrillers in the Flatiron District, books called The Silent Witness and The Silent Daughter and, once, The Silent Silence. I gave notice the day after the funeral. My boss said I was making an emotional decision. I said that was the only kind of decision I'd ever made that worked.

So now I'm thirty-one, and I run a secondhand bookstore with a leaking skylight, eleven thousand books, one part-time employee, and a cat named Dickens who belongs to the cheese shop on the corner but has decided he lives here.

And now I had fifty-eight days.

I folded the letter back into its envelope and put it in the drawer under the register, the one where my grandfather kept rubber bands, receipts from 1994, and a single bullet he'd never explained. Then I flipped the sign to OPEN, because that's what you do on Bleecker Street on a Monday. You open. You keep going.

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He came in that afternoon, around four. I didn't notice him right away. I was on the rolling ladder in Fiction, trying to fit three copies of The Goldfinch onto a shelf that already had four.

Tessa noticed him. Tessa is twenty-two, goes to NYU, works for me three days a week, and has a buzz cut, a septum ring and the reading taste of a seventy-year-old English professor. She notices everything.

"Emma," she said, from the register, in the voice she uses when someone's trying to sell us a box of National Geographics. "Customer."

I looked down. There was a man standing in the middle of the store with his hands in his pockets, not browsing, just looking at the place, the way people look at the ceiling of a church. Tall, thirties, a white button-down with the sleeves rolled, dark hair that needed a cut about two weeks ago. There was a lanyard sticking out of his back pocket like he'd shoved it in there the second he left an office.

"Can I help you find something?" I said, from the ladder.

He looked up. He had a nice face, a little tired, with a crooked nose that looked like it had been broken once by something that wasn't a fight. He looked at me for a second longer than people usually do

when they're answering that question.

"I'm just looking," he said.

"Okay. Look away."

He did. He walked slowly through Fiction and into History, and then he stood for a long time in front of the case behind the register where we keep the old paperbacks, the pulps and the mass-markets with the lurid covers, the stuff people buy for the art. He didn't touch anything. He just read the spines, his head tilted, like he was looking for one in particular.

I came down off the ladder. "Those are a dollar to forty," I said. "Depends how naked the woman on the cover is."

He laughed, a short surprised sound. "What's the rate on, like, a bare shoulder?"

"Six. Bare shoulder's six."

"That's fair."

"I think so."

He pointed. "Can I see that one?"

It was a skinny paperback with a cracked yellow spine. I had to get on my toes to reach it. The cover showed a woman in a white dress on a balcony, looking out over a blue sea and a white town, and the title was set in a font that really wanted you to know it was 1971.

A SMALL HOTEL IN CÁDIZ · A NOVEL BY ANNE MARLOW · 95¢

I'd never heard of it. Half the books in that case were written by people who were famous for one summer and then went into insurance. But I'd have remembered the woman on the balcony. She looked like she was about to make a terrible decision and enjoy it.

He turned it over in his hands. He didn't open it. He just held it, the way you'd hold something that might be hot.

"How much?" he said.

I looked at the pencil price on the first page. My grandfather's handwriting. He always wrote the price in the top right corner, very small, with a little line under it like a signature.

It said $4.

"Four," I said.

"Only four?"

"No naked shoulders. She's very covered up. She's practically Amish."

He paid in cash. A five. He told me to keep the change, and I told him I wasn't a cab driver, and I gave him his dollar back, and he put it in the tip jar on the counter that says FOR DICKENS'S MEDICAL BILLS, which is a joke, mostly.

"Thanks," he said. "This is a great store."

"Tell my landlord."

I said it without thinking. I said it the way you say "tell me about it" when someone complains about the heat. But something happened to his face, a small shift, like I'd stepped on his foot.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll do that."

Then he left, with the book in his back pocket next to the lanyard, and the bell over the door made the sound my grandfather always said was the store saying goodbye.

"He was cute," Tessa said, without looking up from her book.

"He was a customer."

"He was a cute customer who didn't know what he wanted and then knew exactly what he wanted." She turned a page. "That's a whole genre, Emma. You should know. You used to write the jackets."

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He brought it back on Thursday.

I was alone in the store, and it was raining, the hard August kind of rain that turns Seventh Avenue into a river and sends everybody in the Village running for the nearest awning. The skylight in the back was dripping into the yellow bucket I keep under it for exactly this reason. Dickens was asleep in the window on top of a stack of cookbooks, like a loaf of bread with opinions.

The bell went, and there he was, wet hair, wet shoulders, no umbrella, holding A Small Hotel in Cádiz inside a plastic Duane Reade bag so it wouldn't get wet.

"Hi," he said. "I want to sell this back."

I looked at the bag. I looked at him. "You bought it Monday."

"I did."

"You read it already?"

"I did."

"And you hated it?"

"I didn't say that." He put the bag on the counter and took the book out, carefully, like he was handing over evidence. "I just don't need to own it."

Our policy, which was my grandfather's policy, is that we buy back any book we sold you for half what you paid, in store credit, no questions asked. He thought books should circulate. He used to say a book on a shelf in your apartment was a book in jail. He let one woman trade in the same Agatha Christie every two weeks from 1988 until 2006, when she passed away, and then he put the book in the window for a month with a little card that said RETIRED.

"Two dollars," I said. "In credit."

"That's fine."

"You could have kept it. Two dollars is a bad deal."

"I'm aware." He smiled, a little. "I'm actually an engineer. I'm good at math. I just don't apply it to my life."

I wrote him a credit slip. He folded it and put it in his wallet like it was a real thing, which nobody does. Then he looked at the dripping skylight and winced, the way a doctor winces at an X-ray.

"How long has that been leaking?"

"Since the Clinton administration."

"Which one?"

"Both of them, probably."

"Has anybody looked at it?"

"The landlord looked at it in 2011," I said. "He said, huh."

He nodded slowly, like that was the answer he'd expected and he didn't like it. Then he said, "Okay, well. Thanks," and left, and I watched him go up Bleecker toward Seventh in the rain with no umbrella, his shoulders up around his ears, and he didn't run. He walked like a person who'd decided it was too late to get any wetter.

I picked up the book to put it back in the case.

It fell open in my hands at page 31. It fell open there because something was written in the margin, and the weight of the ink had trained the spine.

It wasn't his handwriting. I mean, I didn't know his handwriting, but I knew this one. I'd have known it anywhere. Small and slanted and in pencil, the same hand that wrote the prices in the top right corner of eleven thousand books, the same hand that had written CLAIRE on my lunch bags until I was fourteen and made him stop.

> *Leo, she is not going to marry the dentist. Nobody in a novel marries a dentist. Put your money away. F.*

I sat down on the stool behind the register. The rain was loud on the skylight. The bucket went plink.

I turned the pages. They were everywhere. My grandfather's pencil on almost every page, arguing with someone. And the someone argued back, in red ballpoint pen, in a big loopy hand that pressed so hard it came through to the other side.

> *Frank, she married a dentist in my wife's family and they were very happy and he did her teeth for free. You're a snob. L.*

> *Leo, that's not a novel, that's your wife's family. F.*

> *Same thing. L.*

It went on like that for the whole book. Two men, fighting in the margins. About whether the heroine should stay in Cádiz. About whether the hotel owner was a good man or a coward. About the Mets, at one point, for some reason, on page 88, where my grandfather had written ~1986 was a fluke, and the red pen had written underneath ~Say that in person and see what happens.

And then, on the last page, in fresh black felt-tip, a third hand. Neat. Square. The handwriting of someone who'd learned to print on graph paper.

> *I think she stays. I think the whole book is about whether she stays, and they both knew it, and they spent 200 pages arguing about the dentist because it was easier.*

There was no signature. I sat there for a long time, with the rain coming down and Dickens snoring and the book open on the counter. Then I got up and went to the door and looked out at Bleecker Street, as if he might still be standing there under an awning, waiting to see whether I'd find it.

He wasn't, of course. Just the sunglasses sign, COMING SOON, and the rain.

I read the whole thing that night, upstairs, in my grandfather's chair, with the window open and the air conditioner off because the air

conditioner sounds like a plane landing and I wanted to hear him.

The novel itself was fine. A young American woman goes to Spain in 1958 to get over a man, checks into a small hotel by the sea, falls a little in love with the widower who owns it, and spends two hundred pages not deciding whether to go home. There's a dentist back in Philadelphia. There's a lot of sherry. Anne Marlow was not a great writer, but she was a good one, and she knew what it felt like to stand on a balcony and not be able to choose.

But I wasn't reading Anne Marlow. I was reading Frank and Leo.

They'd been doing it for years. You could tell from the pencil, some of it faded almost silver, some of it dark and fresh. The red pen got shakier over time, the letters bigger, the way old people's letters do. They dated things sometimes. The earliest date I found was in the margin of page 12.

> *Leo, 6/14/89. You're wrong about Teresa. She's not cold, she's shy. Read it again. F.*

The latest was on page 201, near the end, in red.

> *Frank, 1/22/24. Okay. Fine. She's shy. 35 years and you finally win one. Don't let it go to your head. Your turn. L.*

January 2024. My grandfather died in March. He never answered. The book had been sitting in that glass case for two years, waiting for his turn, priced at four dollars in his handwriting, and I'd walked past it a thousand times.

They argued about the book, mostly. But they argued about other things, too, the way men that age do, sideways, in a code they'd

worked out somewhere. On page 54, under a paragraph about the hotel owner's dead wife, my grandfather had written:

> *Five years today since Ellen. I keep setting out two cups. F.*

Ellen was my grandmother. I was two when she died. I don't remember her except as a feeling, a yellow kitchen, someone singing. And under my grandfather's line, in red, pressed so hard it almost tore the page:

> *I know, Frank. Come up to Riverdale Sunday. Marilyn's making the brisket you pretend not to like. L.*

I put the book down on my chest and cried for a while, which I hadn't done since the funeral. Not the whole time. Just a while. Then I picked it up again and kept going.

And then the third hand, on the last page. Black felt-tip, square letters. I think she stays. I think the whole book is about whether she stays.

Whoever he was, he'd read all of it. He'd read Ellen and the two cups and the brisket. He'd read thirty-five years of two old men loving each other in the only way they knew how, which was by arguing about a dentist. And then he'd brought it back to me in a Duane Reade bag so it wouldn't get wet.

I went down to the store at midnight in my pajamas and turned on the lamp over the register. I found a pen in the drawer, next to the bullet. A green one, the kind of pen you'd use to grade a paper you liked.

Under his note on the last page, I wrote:

> *F was my grandfather. Who was L? And who are you?*

Then I put the book back in the case, at four dollars, right where it had been, with the woman on the balcony facing out.

. . .

He came in on Monday at four.

I'd spent the whole day pretending I wasn't waiting for four. I'd reorganized Poetry. I'd called Gregory, who had a voice like a hold message and said the ownership was "very open to a conversation" about twenty-four thousand a month. When I asked how a store that sold nine pairs of sunglasses could commit to ten years of anything, Gregory said that wasn't really his department.

"What is your department, Gregory?"

"Leasing," Gregory said, and I hung up on him, which felt incredible for about four seconds.

So by four I was in a mood, doing math I already knew the answer to, when the bell went.

He was wearing a different shirt, blue this time. Same lanyard in the same back pocket. He came straight to the counter, and he didn't look at the case, and he didn't look at me, either, not quite. He looked at a spot on the counter about four inches to the left of my hand.

"Hi," he said. "Do you still have that book?"

"Which book?"

He looked up. I gave him nothing. I'd sat across from literary agents for six years. I could give a man nothing for a very long time.

"The hotel one," he said. "Cádiz."

"Oh, that one." I looked at the case like I was trying to remember. "I think it might be around."

"Could I buy it?"

"You already bought it."

"I'd like to buy it again."

"It's four dollars."

"I have two dollars in credit." He took out his wallet and unfolded the credit slip like it was a check from a rich uncle. "And two dollars."

I took it out of the case. I didn't open it. I slid it across the counter, and he picked it up, and for a second we both had a hand on it, and I could feel through the cover that he'd felt it too, whatever it was, that small jolt of being found out.

"Thanks," he said.

"Enjoy," I said. "I hear it has a dentist."

His ears went red. Just his ears, the rest of him stayed perfectly calm, which I found very interesting. He put the book in his back pocket, next to the lanyard, and he left, and the bell said goodbye, and Tessa, who I had not realized was standing in the doorway of the back room holding a box of Penguin Classics, said, "Oh my God."

"Don't."

"Oh my God, Emma."

"He's a customer."

"He's a customer who bought the same book twice. That's not a customer. That's a subplot."

. . .

Thursday, he brought it back. He didn't say anything. I didn't say anything. I wrote him a credit slip for two dollars, and he put it in his wallet, and he left.

I waited until the door shut before I opened it. On the last page, under my green question, in the square black letters:

> *L was my grandfather, Leo. They met in 1979, the year your grandfather opened this place. Leo came in looking for a bathroom and left with a book. Same story as everybody, I guess.*

> *As for me, I'm the guy who keeps buying this book. That's all I'd like to be for now, if that's okay. I'm not trying to be strange. I'm trying to work up to something and I'm slow.*

And then, underneath, smaller, like he'd come back to it later:

> *Page 54. I'm sorry. I didn't know about Ellen until I read it. I didn't know about any of it. My grandfather never told us he had a best friend. He just took the 1 train downtown every Sunday and came back happy.*

I closed the book. I took out the green pen.

> *You're allowed to be slow. My grandfather took 35 years to win one argument. But I want your first name. That's the price. The book is four dollars plus a first name.*

I put it back in the case.

. . .

That's how August went.

He bought it on Mondays. He brought it back on Thursdays. On Thursdays it came back a little more worn, with new black ink in the margins.

His name was Danny. He wrote it on the inside of the front cover, under my grandfather's price, very small, with a little line under it like a signature, and I didn't know whether he'd done that on purpose and I didn't ask.

He was thirty-three, a structural engineer at a firm on Maiden Lane. He inspected old facades for Local Law 11, which, he explained in the margin of page 77, is the rule that says every building in the city taller than six stories gets its outside checked every five years so pieces of it don't fall on people.

> *I hang off the side of buildings in a harness and tap on terra-cotta with a hammer and listen for the hollow spots. It sounds more exciting than it is. Mostly it's pigeons.*

> *Do you ever find hollow spots? I wrote.*

> *All the time. Every old building in New York is full of hollow spots. They look fine from the street. You have to get close.*

I read that one a few times.

He wrote back to my grandfather, too. That was the part that got me. He didn't just write to me. He went through the old notes and he answered them, one by one, Frank's pencil from 1993 or 2004 or

2017, like he was picking up a conversation two men had walked away from.

On page 88, under ~1986 was a fluke and ~Say that in person and see what happens, Danny wrote:

> *For the record, Frank, it wasn't a fluke. But I'm a Mets fan, so I'm obligated to say that, and also I've been wrong about everything else this year.*

And on page 140, where my grandfather had written, sometime in the nineties, ~Leo, my granddaughter wants to be a writer. She's six. She writes stories about a horse who works at a bank. They're very good. Don't laugh, there was a note in black underneath:

> *What happened to the horse?*

I sat at the counter for a long time with that one. Then I wrote:

> *The horse got promoted to branch manager. Then she quit to run a bookstore. It was very emotional. Her boss said she was making an emotional decision.*

> *Was she? he wrote, the next week.*

> *Yes, I wrote back. It was the only good one she ever made.*

We never talked about it, out loud. That was the rule, the one nobody said. On Mondays he came in and asked for the book and I gave it to him and we talked about anything else. The weather. Dickens, who had started sitting on his feet. The sunglasses store, which had put up a second sign that said EYEWEAR IS A FEELING. He thought that was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. He came in one Monday and

just said, without hello, "Eyewear is a feeling," and I laughed so hard I had to sit down on the step stool.

He was funny in a slow way. He'd say something, and by the time you got it he'd be looking at a shelf like he hadn't said anything at all. He held books by the boards, not the spine. He never bought anything except the one book. I asked him once, why not, and he said, "I'm on a budget," and I said, "You're an engineer," and he said, "I'm on a very specific budget. It's four dollars a week."

And I liked him. That's the simple version. I'd stand behind the register on Monday afternoons with my stomach doing the thing it used to do at middle school dances, and I'd think, Emma, you have fifty days until you lose your grandfather's store and you're mooning over a guy who writes in the margins. Get it together.

Then I'd hear the bell and I wouldn't get it together at all.

. . .

The last Thursday in August he came back with the book and a tube of something in a hardware store bag.

"It's sealant," he said. "For the skylight. I'm not supposed to do this. I'm an engineer. Engineers don't touch anything. We point at things and other people touch them."

"So why are you doing it?"

He looked at the yellow bucket. "Because I can't stand listening to it anymore."

The back of the store is a one-story extension somebody built in the fifties, and the only way onto its roof is through the window of my

bedroom upstairs. I said I hadn't made the bed. He said, very professionally, that he'd keep his eyes on the flashing. Tessa, closing out the register, put her face in her hands.

So at seven-thirty, with the sky going pink over the water towers, Danny, whose last name I still didn't know, climbed out my bedroom window in his work pants and a T-shirt that said PASSAIC COUNTY SOFTBALL, and I climbed out after him onto a square of hot tar roof in the middle of the backs of a hundred buildings, fire escapes and air conditioners and somebody's tomatoes in buckets, a woman two windows over practicing the same four bars of Chopin again and again.

"Huh," he said, crouching by the skylight.

"That's what the landlord said."

"No, I mean, huh, this is bad. This flashing is from like 1960. Somebody's been patching it with roofing tar and hope." He ran his thumb along the edge of the frame, gently, the way he held books. "It's not hard to fix. It's just nobody ever got close."

He worked for half an hour. I sat on the ledge and watched him, and the Chopin woman got the four bars right once, and the sky went from pink to the color of a bruise. When he was done, he sat down next to me with sealant on his hands and wiped them on his pants.

"That'll hold till winter," he said. "Then somebody needs to replace the whole thing."

"Somebody," I said. "Sure. I'll ask the sunglasses."

He didn't laugh. He looked out at the water towers.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Okay."

"Why do you keep bringing it back? You could keep it. You could have kept it the first time. You've paid me sixteen dollars, in a complicated way."

He was quiet for a long time.

"My grandfather died last June," he said. "He was ninety-four. We cleaned out his apartment in Riverdale, and in his desk there was a shoebox full of receipts from this store. Hundreds of them. All for four dollars. And a credit slip for two dollars in your grandfather's handwriting that he never used." He rubbed the sealant on his thumb. "Nobody knew what it was. My dad thought he was losing it at the end. I just kept thinking, four dollars, every week, for thirty-five years. What do you buy for four dollars every week for thirty-five years?"

"A book about a hotel in Spain."

"A book about a hotel in Spain." He smiled at his hands. "So I came down to find out. And I found it, and I read it, and it was them. It was the two of them. And I didn't know what to do with it, so I brought it back. Because that's what he did. That's what they did. It felt wrong to keep it."

"And the second time?"

He looked at me then. Really looked, the way he'd looked at me the first day from the bottom of the ladder, a second too long.

"The second time it was you," he said.

The Chopin woman stopped playing. I swear to God she stopped. There was just the sound of the air conditioners and a bus going down Seventh, and Danny on the ledge next to me with tar on his hands, and I leaned over and kissed him.

He kissed me back like he'd been thinking about it for three weeks, which I guess he had. Slow at first. Then not slow. His hand came up to the side of my face and then remembered it had sealant on it and hovered there, an inch away, and I laughed against his mouth and grabbed his wrist and put his hand on my face anyway, sealant and all, and he made a sound low in his throat that I felt all the way down to the tar.

Then he pulled back. Just an inch. His forehead against mine.

"Emma," he said. "I have to tell you something."

"Okay."

"Not tonight." He closed his eyes. "I want to, and I'm going to. But I'm trying to fix something first, and if I tell you before it's fixed you're going to hate me, and if I fix it first maybe you'll only be annoyed."

I should have pushed. I'd written enough thriller jackets to know that when a man on a rooftop says not tonight, chapter thirty-one is going to hurt. But it was a warm night and his hand was on my face and I had twenty-nine days left, and I didn't want to know anything else that could hurt me.

"Okay," I said. "Not tonight."

He climbed back in through my bedroom window. He kept his eyes on the floor the whole way, like he'd promised, and at the bottom of

the stairs he kissed me one more time, quickly, by the poetry section, like he was stealing something. Then he was gone.

I had sealant on my cheek for two days. I didn't wash very hard.

. . .

The meeting was the following Wednesday, at the management company's office on Madison and 45th, on the nineteenth floor.

Ownership, Gregory said, had agreed to "hear me out." Tessa and I made a binder: five years of sales numbers and a petition with fourteen hundred signatures, including the guy from Murray's Cheese, the ladies from Faicco's, Father Ed from Our Lady of Pompeii, and a man who signed it Bob Dylan and was almost certainly Bob from the laundromat.

I wore the one blazer I own. I practiced the speech on the 1 train.

There were four people at the table. Gregory, who was younger than I'd imagined and had a vest on. A woman in her sixties with short silver hair and reading glasses on a chain, who stood and shook my hand and said, "Denise." A man about the same age, heavyset, with a Mets lanyard around his neck that he'd clearly forgotten to take off, who said, "Richard. Rich," and didn't stand.

And at the end of the table, in a navy suit, with no lanyard, with his hands flat on a closed folder and his ears going slowly, terribly red, Danny.

MORROW BLEECKER ASSOCIATES LLC

That was the name on the folder in front of him. It was the name on every rent check I'd ever written.

"Emma," Danny said, and half stood up.

"Mr. Morrow," I said, and sat down.

I gave the speech. Six years in publishing teaches you to put your face somewhere else and let your mouth do the work. I talked about the readings and the regulars and the kids from P.S. 41 who come every Friday. I talked about my grandfather. I said the word handshake. I said 1979.

Rich Morrow listened with his arms folded. When I was done he nodded, not unkindly, the way you nod at a waiter who's explained the specials very well.

"Look," he said. "My father made a lot of handshakes. He was a sentimental guy. But my father's not here, and there's three of us, and my brother Paul's in Boca and he wants to sell the whole building, and frankly, I'm not far off. We've got a buyer interested. We've got the eyewear people. Twenty-four is market. I'm sorry. I really am."

"Dad," Danny said.

"Danny, we talked about this."

"We didn't finish talking about it."

"We finished," Rich said. "You don't have a vote, kiddo. You've got a binder of old receipts and a theory."

I closed my binder. I put it under my arm. I thanked Denise, who looked at me over her reading glasses like she wanted to say something and didn't. I didn't look at the end of the table.

He caught me at the elevator. Of course he did. He put his hand in the closing doors, like a man in one of the thrillers I used to write jackets for, and we went down nineteen floors in a little gold box with Muzak playing "Africa" by Toto.

"I was going to tell you," he said.

"When?"

"When I fixed it."

"You were the landlord. The whole time. You came in the first day and I said tell my landlord, and you said, I'll do that. You were standing in my store doing a walk-through."

"That's not what it was."

"Then what was it, Danny? You came to look at the space. You came to look for hollow spots. That's what you do, right? You tap on old things until you find where they're weak."

"I came to find a book," he said. "I swear to God. I didn't know anything about the lease until my dad brought it up in July. I've been fighting them for five weeks. I've been on the phone with my uncle in Boca until he hangs up on me. I didn't tell you because I wanted to walk in there with good news, and I didn't have any. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Emma."

The doors opened on the lobby. People in lanyards flowed around us.

"You let me give that speech," I said. "You let me say handshake in front of your father. You sat there with your hands on that folder."

"I know."

"Don't come in on Monday," I said.

And I walked out onto Madison into the heat, and got on the 6 going the wrong way, and didn't notice until 59th Street.

• • •

He didn't come in on Monday.

I'd told him not to, and he didn't, and that was so much worse. At five Tessa put a cup of tea next to my hand without saying anything, which is how I knew I looked bad.

The book was in the case. He'd brought it back the Thursday before the meeting, the day after the roof, and I'd been too busy with the binder to open it. I took it out after we closed. I took it upstairs and went through it page by page, the way you go through a house after a break-in.

Nothing was missing. Everything was just different.

Every note from Leo meant something new now. My building, he'd written on page 23, in 1991, complaining about a boiler. My tenants. My kids. I'd pictured some guy in Riverdale with a two-family house. Not the building I was sitting in.

On page 118, in red, dated 1993:

> *Frank, Richard's boy was born this morning. Jacob. Eight pounds two. I held him and the first thing I thought, God help me, was I can't wait to bring him in to meet you when he can read. L.*

And under it, in black, square, much more recent:

> *He never brought me. I'm sorry I came so late.*

And then page 162.

I'd read page 162 before. It's where Teresa tells the hotel owner she's going home, and he says nothing, and goes out and repairs the shutters on her balcony so they won't bang in the wind after she's gone. My grandfather had underlined that part. He'd written ~This is the whole book right here in the margin, and next to that, in red, in big loopy letters, Leo had written something I'd read as an old man's joke.

> *Frank. As long as there's a Morrow in this building, there's a Hadley on the ground floor. I don't need a paper. This is the paper. L. 4/9/02.*

April 2002. I would have been seven. I would have been in this store, in the back, writing about a horse.

And then down in the gutter of the page, where the pages meet and you can't see unless you crack the spine flat, which no one who loves books ever does, black felt-tip, tiny, written so it would hide.

> *I'm trying, Leo. They won't listen to me. I'm going to keep trying.*

I thought about him at the table on Madison Avenue with his hands flat on the folder. I'd thought he was hiding something. He was. He was holding on.

I went downstairs. It was almost midnight. I called him from the store phone, my grandfather's black rotary.

He picked up on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Page 162," I said.

There was a long silence.

"You weren't supposed to see that," he said finally. "Nobody cracks the spine."

"I'm very angry with you."

"I know."

"Bring them to the store," I said. "Your dad and your aunt. Call your uncle in Boca and put him on speaker. Sunday at noon. Tell them it's a reading."

"Emma, I don't know if they'll come."

"Tell them it's their father's handwriting," I said. "They'll come."

. . .

They came.

I set up the folding chairs we use for readings, the ones from a church in Hoboken that still say ST. ANN'S on the back. Four in a row, in the middle of Fiction, under the skylight that didn't drip anymore. Dickens sat in the window and judged everyone.

Rich Morrow came in with his Mets lanyard on and his arms already crossed. Denise walked slowly around the store before she sat, touching the shelves like a museum with no guard. Danny put his phone on the empty fourth chair with his uncle Paul on speaker from Boca, where you could hear a television and a man yelling at a dog.

Danny didn't sit. He stood in the back by the history section with his hands in his pockets, the way he'd stood the first day, not looking at me.

I didn't make a speech this time. I just opened the book and read it to them.

I read them the dentist and the Mets. I read page 54, Ellen and the two cups and come up to Riverdale Sunday, and Denise said, "Mom's brisket," very quietly, to nobody. I read them page 71:

> *Frank, Denise got into Barnard today. First one in the family. I bought her a typewriter and then I went outside and cried in front of the bodega on 235th like a lunatic. Don't tell her. L.*

Denise took her glasses off.

I read them page 96, from 1999, where the red pen was barely legible:

> *Paulie's back in the hospital. I can't talk about it. Just argue with me about the dentist. Please. L.*

And underneath, in my grandfather's pencil, the longest note he ever wrote: a full, furious page defending the dentist, with a P.S. at the bottom.

> *P.S. He'll be okay, Leo. I lit a candle at Pompeii. I'm not even Catholic. They don't check. F.*

From the phone on the fourth chair, for a long time, there was only the sound of the television in Boca. Then a man's voice, rough: "He never told me that."

I read them page 118. Eight pounds two. I can't wait to bring him in to meet you. Rich uncrossed his arms. He looked back over his shoulder at his son, standing by the history shelf, and something happened on his face that I won't describe, because it was his.

And then I read them page 162. The shutters. This is the whole book right here. As long as there's a Morrow in this building.

I closed the book.

Nobody said anything for a while.

"I'm not going to pretend that's a legal document," Rich said finally. His voice wasn't quite steady. "It's not."

"I know it's not," I said.

"It's a paperback," Rich said. "It's a ninety-five-cent paperback."

"It's four dollars," Danny said, from the back. "He always paid four."

Denise put her glasses back on. "Fifteen years," she said. "Same rent he was paying in the end, plus three percent a year, and the building fixes the skylight. Properly, Jacob. Not with goo." She looked at her brother. "That's my vote. Paulie?"

"Yeah," said the phone, sounding like it had been crying. "Yeah, Dee. Whatever Dad would've done."

Rich looked at the book in my lap for a long moment. Then at the shelves, the ladder, the church chairs, the cat.

"He used to come home on Sundays," he said, "and he'd be in the best mood of the week. My mother said it was the train ride. I believed her for forty years." He shook his head. "Fine. Fifteen. But I want it in

writing. A real one. I'm not my father."

"Nobody is," Denise said, and patted his knee.

. . .

They left at two. Rich shook my hand and held on a beat too long. Denise hugged me. She whispered, "He's a good boy, you know. He's slow. But he's a good boy," and I said I knew.

Tessa took one look at the two of us standing in the middle of Fiction not talking and said she had to go to the library, and flipped the sign on the door to CLOSED on the way out without being asked. That girl is getting a raise.

So then it was just us. Me with the book. Him by History. Dickens in the window. The light from the skylight on the floor between us like a rug.

"I'm still very angry," I said.

"I know."

"You should have told me the first day."

"I know." He came a step closer. "I'm sorry I didn't. I'm sorry about the elevator. I'm sorry I made you say handshake to my father. I'm sorry it took me thirty-three years to come in."

"You're forgiven for the last one."

"What about the others?"

I put the book down on the counter. I walked over to him. Up close he looked like he hadn't slept, and he smelled very faintly, still, like

sealant.

"You fixed my skylight," I said. "You read my grandfather. You wrote back to him. You answered every single thing he ever wrote, even the dumb ones about the Mets." I put my hand on his chest and felt his heart going under the blue shirt, fast, like he'd taken the stairs. "I'm working on the others."

He kissed me first this time. He backed me into Fiction, gently, until my shoulders touched the spines, and the whole shelf shifted and a paperback fell off somewhere above us and neither of us looked to see what it was. His hands were in my hair. My hands were in his shirt. I could feel him smiling into my mouth, and then not smiling, and then I couldn't feel anything except how badly I wanted to be closer than the clothes allowed.

"Upstairs," I said, against his jaw.

"Is the bed made?"

"No."

"Good," he said, and something in his voice made my knees go stupid.

We went up the narrow stairs behind the register, and we didn't make it up them gracefully. He stopped me on the landing to kiss the back of my neck. I stopped him on the next step to get his shirt the rest of the way open. At the top, in the doorway of my grandfather's old apartment, which was mine now, which was going to stay mine for fifteen years, I pulled him inside by his belt, and he reached behind him without looking, the way you reach for a light switch in a house you know by heart.

And he closed the door.

. . .

The eyewear store opened on the first of October, with a DJ and a line of people who wanted free tote bags. On the second, a crew Danny trusted replaced the skylight, properly, with new flashing and new glass. They found three pennies in the old frame, from 1979, 1986 and 2002. Danny says that's a coincidence. The pennies are in the drawer under the register now, with the rubber bands and the bullet.

The book isn't for sale anymore.

It sits on the counter by the register on a little wooden stand, with a card in front of it in my handwriting that says RETIRED. ASK US ABOUT IT. People do. Most of them laugh. Some of them cry.

But on Mondays, at four, Danny still comes in. He still puts four dollars on the counter. He still takes the book off the stand and carries it home, in his back pocket, next to the lanyard, and on Thursday he brings it back with new black ink in the margins, and I answer in green.

We're running out of room. Some pages have all four of us stacked on top of each other, pencil and red and black and green. On page 162, in the gutter, under I'm trying, Leo, there's a new line in black.

> *We did it.*

And under that, in green, one more.

> *I think she stays.*

He brought it back last Thursday with two words underneath.

> *She stays.*

I didn't write anything after that. Some sentences don't need an answer. My grandfather would have said that's the whole book, right there.

I priced it anyway, out of habit. Top right corner, very small, with a little line under it like a signature.

Four dollars. Same as always. Some things you don't renegotiate.

— Shay

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