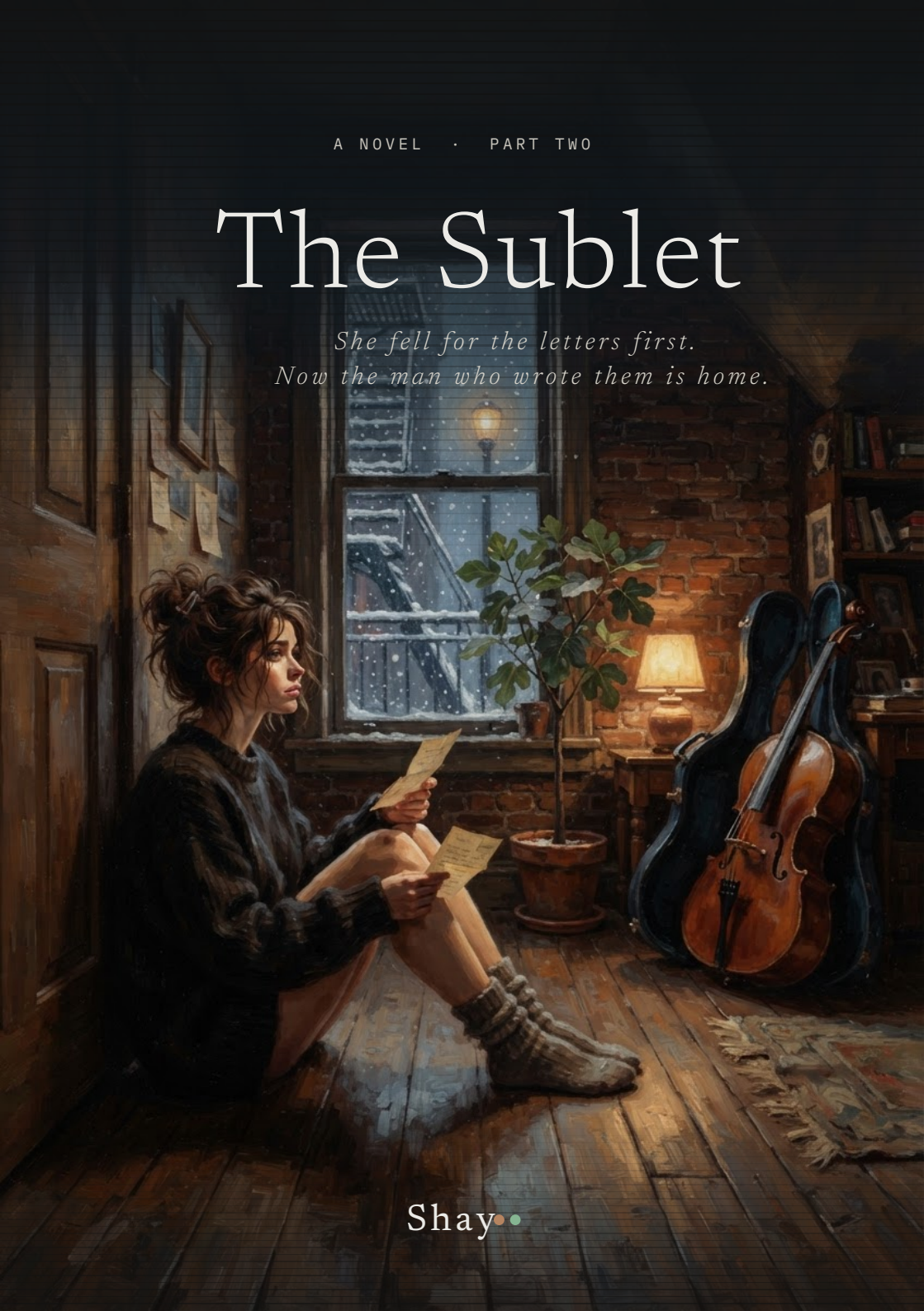
A NOVEL · PART TWO

The Sublet

She fell for the letters first.
Now the man who wrote them is home.



Shay

PART TWO

The Sublet

Shay

The Sublet – Part Two

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Contains adult content.

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CHAPTER ONE

Three Coffees

"I HAVE A VENMO receipt," I said.

I'd like that struck from the record. I'd said exactly the same thing to his brother, three weeks earlier, at one in the morning, holding a frying pan. Apparently that's my opening line now. That's who I am when a Marsh walks into my life: a woman with a Venmo receipt.

"I watered the fig," I added, because the first thing hadn't been stupid enough. "Twice a week. Not three times, not once. Twice."

Something happened at the corner of his mouth. It wasn't a smile. It was the place a smile would go if one were ever allowed back into the building.

"I know," he said. "Hector told me."

Hector told him. Of course Hector told him. Hector would have told the pigeons.

Behind me, June made a sound.

It wasn't a word. It was smaller than a word, the noise a person makes when they've been pressing on a bruise for ten months and someone else finally presses it for them. I didn't turn around. I didn't have to. I watched it land on his face.

He looked at her.

He hadn't, yet. I realized that only when he did. He'd looked at the bench and the river and the three of us like a crime scene, and then at me, and he'd kept his eyes off the red coat the whole time with the kind of discipline that costs something. Now he let himself. He looked past my shoulder at June Carver, and I've written a lot of looks for a lot of people, I've built entire chapters on the way a tennis player looked at her father across a locker room, and I have never once gotten near what was in that one.

It was ten months long. That's the best I can do. It had a wedding in it that didn't happen, and a plane, and a city I'd only ever seen as a country code, and somewhere at the bottom of it, under everything, still, the man who'd knelt on a sidewalk outside Lincoln Center and apologized to a bike.

Then he put it away. I watched him do that too. He folded it up and put it back wherever he kept it, like a letter you can't send.

"Theo," June said.

"Not yet, June." His voice was very quiet. "Please."

Please. Not a door slammed. A door held, gently, from the other side.

She sat down on the bench like her strings had been cut.

. . .

That left the brothers.

I'd seen the photo. Montauk, '01, the big boy with his arm around the little one's neck, both of them squinting into the sun like it owed them money. I'd got it wrong, the way you get a word wrong for years because you only ever read it and never heard it said.

Now I heard it said.

Wes hadn't moved. He was standing exactly where June had hit him, between the bench and the railing, his cheek still red from her hand, and he had the look of a man standing in a field waiting for weather. His shoulders were up. His hands were out of his pockets, open, the way he'd held them when he told me his name. He'd been ready to be hit by one person this morning. I watched him get ready to be hit by another.

"You came," he said.

It came out rough, and too fast, and I knew that voice. That was the voice from the hall at four in the morning, by the closet. I'll find him, Ma. I swear.

Theo looked at his brother for the first time.

"Ma called me eleven times," he said. "You called me forty."

Eleven. That was how many times Wes had called me since Friday. I wondered if it was a family number, if the Marshes did everything in elevens, like a superstition. I wondered if Carol Marsh in Rhode Island had sat with her phone the way I'd sat on Priya's couch, watching a name light up and go dark.

"Forty-one," Wes said. "I called you forty-one times."

"I stopped counting at forty."

"That's fair."

And then nothing happened.

If I were writing it, Theo would have dropped the cello and crossed six feet of pier and hit him. It would have been ugly and short and, in its terrible way, a relief. Wes wanted it. He'd turned his face a little, the good cheek, the way you'd offer someone the other side of a page.

Theo didn't hit him.

He just looked at him. Patiently. Without anything in his face at all, the way you'd look at a piece of furniture in a house you used to live in. Oh, that's still here.

That was worse. I watched Wes understand that it was worse. Something went out of him that June's slap hadn't touched.

Then Theo turned back to me, and asked one practical question, the way people do at funerals. Who's bringing the chairs. Where do the flowers go.

"Is there still a key under the fig?"

I thought about the brass key, small and dirty at the teeth, that I'd rinsed under his tap on Friday morning at six. I thought about everything it had opened.

"It's on the kitchen table," I said. "Next to the cereal."

A beat. The gulls hung on the wind. Out on the river the ferry had gone and the water was empty and very bright.

He almost smiled. I saw it come and I saw him not let it.

"Of course it is," he said.

He shifted the cello case higher on his back, the way you'd settle a sleeping child who'd started to slip. He picked up the carry-on by its handle, airline tag swinging. And then he turned and walked away from the three of us, back down the pier toward the city, not fast, not slow, the little wheels of his bag clicking over the seams in the concrete like a clock that had just been started again.

He didn't look back once. I counted. I'm a professional.

. . .

June had her hands over her face.

Not crying, or not yet. Just holding it, both palms flat, the chewed fingertips pressed into her hairline, the way you'd hold a cracked

bowl together until you could find the glue. The red coat had come open in the wind. Her scrubs were underneath it, blue with little cartoon bees. She'd come straight from a shift, or she was going straight to one. She'd come to the end of a pier in the cold to slap a man and wait for another one, and she'd done both.

I wanted to sit next to her. I wanted to put my arm around her and say the thing she'd said to me in my worst week, in her round looped hand through a door. You'll find out who you are on the other side of this.

I didn't know which side I was on. I didn't know which side there was.

Wes was looking at me.

He hadn't said anything since the forty-one. He wasn't going to. That was the thing I knew about him, the thing that had got me into this, that the man who swore at radiators and argued with garlic would stand completely silent when it mattered and let you have the next line. He was looking at me like a man in a courtroom waiting for a sentence. Not asking. Not even hoping, exactly. Just waiting to be told the number.

The scar through his eyebrow. The stubble. The canvas jacket I'd worn to get the mail.

I have a lot of sentences. That's my whole job. I had nothing for him.

So I did the only thing I had left that was mine. I turned around, and I left all three of them there, the man on his way to my apartment and the woman on the bench and the man waiting for weather, and I walked the whole length of Pier 45 back toward the city with Priya's gloves on and my hands in my pockets and the wind shoving at my back like it was trying to help.

It's a long pier. I'd never noticed. It goes on and on.

You always want to write them turning around. Every editor I've ever had has wanted it. One last look over the shoulder, the face in the distance, the music swelling.

I didn't. For the second time in three days I didn't, and it didn't get any easier, and I don't think it's supposed to.

. . .

The diner was on Hudson Street, the one with the rotating pie case and a mural of a cow in a chef's hat painted with enormous confidence and no training. I'd walked past it fifty times. I went in because it was the first open door, and because my legs had started doing something strange at the corner of Christopher.

I took a booth in the back. Red vinyl, a crack in the seat mended with silver tape. A waitress came over with a pot already in her hand, sixty-something, reading glasses on a beaded chain, a pencil stabbed through her bun like a hairpin. Her name tag said DOT.

"Coffee, hon?"

"Yes. Please."

"How many?"

She meant was anyone joining me. She was looking at the empty side of the booth. I knew that, after, the way you know you've missed a step after you've already fallen down it.

"Three," I said.

Dot looked at me over her glasses. She was a woman who'd worked a Sunday morning on Hudson Street for a long time, and she'd seen people come in from the river looking a lot of ways. She didn't say anything. She just turned over three thick white mugs and filled them and set them in a row in front of me, steaming, like a little

parade.

"Cream's on the table," she said. "Holler if the other two show."

I looked at them.

Three coffees. One for each of them. I hadn't meant to, but now that they were there I couldn't stop sorting them. The one on the left was June's, I decided, because she'd taken hers on the pier that first Sunday with too much milk and a single sugar she'd stirred for a whole minute without drinking it, her bitten fingers going around and around the little wooden stick.

The one on the right I put two sugars in. I didn't decide to. I just did it, tore the packets and tipped them in, because I had made that man coffee every morning for three weeks and my hands knew him better than my judgment did.

And the one in the middle I sat and stared at for a long time.

I didn't know how he took it.

I'd read forty-three of his letters. I knew how he wrote the word "always," with a loop on the y that went all the way back under the word, like an arm around it. I knew he underlined Rilke in pencil, lightly, so he could change his mind. I knew he'd once stood at a window for an hour waiting for a downbeat. I'd built him a body and a voice out of a spare pair of glasses and a fig tree, and I'd fallen a little bit in love with it, and I did not know whether the man took milk.

I knew everything about the wrong brother. I didn't know one useful thing about the right one.

I called Priya.

. . .

"Speaker," she said, when she picked up, in place of hello. "I'm at brunch. Marcus is in the bathroom. He takes a very long time in the

bathroom. It's one of his flaws."

"Who's Marcus?"

"Anesthesiologist. Third date. He reads the menu out loud, like it's news." A pause, and her voice changed. "You sound bad. Text me once, I said. That was a phone call's worth of bad."

So I told her.

I told her about the red coat and the slap and Wes's hand hovering over June's hair like he wasn't allowed. I told her about the thing I'd said. I said it out loud to her in the back of a diner, which one of you was I supposed to fall in love with, and heard how it sounded, and put my forehead down on the table.

"I said that," I said into the Formica. "On a pier. Out loud. Like a woman in a perfume commercial."

"It's a good line."

"That's what's so humiliating. I heard myself think, oh, good line, while I was saying it."

"Keep going," said Priya. In the background somebody dropped a tray and somebody else applauded.

So I told her about the voice behind me. The coat too thin for November. The glasses, pushed up with one knuckle, which I had written, I had sat on a green couch in his apartment in October and written that exact gesture into a notebook, invented it out of a spare pair of glasses on a copy of Middlemarch, and there it was, on a pier, on a real man's face, as if I'd sketched it and he'd shown up to model.

"He said, you must be the one living in my apartment."

There was a silence on the line so long I checked whether the call had dropped.

"Okay," Priya said. "I'm going to need a minute. Marcus is back, he's ordering for me, which is a flaw. Don't hang up." I heard her say,

away from the phone, "The eggs, the same eggs, it doesn't matter," and then she was back, and closer, like she'd turned her shoulder to the table. "So. To be clear. Three of them on the pier."

"Three."

"The real one is the cellist."

"Yes."

"The fake one is the carpenter."

"He's not fake. He's just not the one on the mailbox."

"Claire."

"He's a real carpenter. He fixed the kettle."

"I'm sure it's a beautiful kettle." She let out a long breath. "And the nurse is the nurse."

"The nurse is the nurse."

"And you walked away from all three."

"I didn't look back. I want credit."

"You have all the credit." I heard her tap a fork on a plate, which is what Priya does instead of fidgeting. "What did the cellist do?"

"He asked about a key. And then he left. He just picked up his bag and walked into the city with his cello on his back like he was going to work."

"Where's he going to go?"

I looked at the middle coffee. It had stopped steaming. A skin was forming on it, thin and gray.

"Home," I said. "He's going home, Pri. He's going to walk up four flights of stairs and open the door and my stuff is going to be all over his apartment."

"Your stuff is at my apartment."

"Half my stuff." The good lamp I'd moved to the bedroom. The grapefruit shampoo in his clawfoot tub that cost too much. My

handwriting on his fridge, under the lemon magnet, in my anxious slant: too late, Gerald. "Enough of it."

"Then he'll find out who you are," Priya said, "and you won't even have to be there."

That was a very Priya thing to say. It was meant to be comforting. I don't think it was.

· · ·

After she hung up I did two things.

First, I drank the coffee with two sugars in it. I don't take sugar. I think it's a betrayal of the bean; I have said that sentence at parties. I drank the whole thing, cold and syrupy and terrible, in four swallows, and I hated how much it tasted like a Tuesday morning on Perry Street with the radiator going and a big man reading the sports page upside down on the couch.

Second, I opened my phone.

He was still saved as Theo. That's what I'd typed, the first night, with my thumbs shaking, standing in the kitchen with the colander he didn't know where to find. Eleven missed calls from Theo. Bennett, from Theo. Please, from Theo. I know you know, from Theo.

I went into the contact and deleted the name. The cursor blinked at me in the empty field.

I typed Wes. I looked at it. It looked like a stranger's name on a delivery slip.

I deleted it and typed NOT THEO, in capitals, the way he wrote everything, and saved it before I could think about whether that was the cruelest or the kindest thing I'd ever done to a contact.

Dot came by and topped up all three mugs without asking, including the empty one, and patted the table once next to my hand, the way you'd pat a horse.

The phone buzzed.

I didn't know the number. A 917, which means nothing in this city; my dentist is a 917. I almost put it face down next to June's milky coffee and the cold one in the middle that nobody was ever going to drink.

I opened it.

The fig is very dry. Someone has been calling him Gerald.

And then, on its own line, as if it had taken him a while to decide whether to sign it at all:

– T.

CHAPTER TWO

The Lease

I DIDN'T ANSWER HIM that night. Every reply I drafted sounded like a hostage note.

Sorry about the fig.

He's not dry, he's dramatic.

His name is Gerald and he's been through a lot.

I deleted all of them and saved the number as Theo (actual), which was not my finest work either, and lay on Priya's loveseat in the shape of a question mark, the way I had in September. Five weeks, a man, a closet, a pier, and I was back on the same cushion.

Judge settled his full weight on my sternum at two a.m., right on schedule, and looked down into my face.

"I know," I told him. "I know. I heard the evidence too."

. . .

The problem with heartbreak is that the deadline doesn't care.

Danny Russo's memoir was due December fifteenth, four weeks away, and I had three chapters left, and one of them was the chapter Danny kept calling "the last one" in a voice that made me think he meant something other than the book.

On Monday morning I sat on the floor with the laptop on the coffee table and wrote two good paragraphs about Danny's mother's hands.

Judge walked across the keyboard and deleted them.

He stood on the delete key with his whole flat-faced weight and looked at me while the paragraphs went, letter by letter, like a man watching a building he disliked come down.

"He's editing you," said Priya from the kitchen, which was also the hallway. She'd slept four hours and was eating cereal standing up in scrubs. "He did that to my personal statement. I got into Columbia."

"You can't work here, Claire." She rinsed her bowl. "I love you. You can't work here. You've been typing with your elbows in the air like a T. rex."

She was right. I'd known it the way you know a tooth needs a root canal, and you keep chewing on the other side.

I went into her tiny bathroom to brush my teeth and unzipped my toiletry bag on the edge of the sink, and there, in the side pocket under the dental floss, was the little foil card of pills I'd stopped taking somewhere in the second week of October, around the same time I stopped doing anything on schedule except watering a fig. I looked at it. I'd been meaning to start again. I'd been meaning to do a lot of things. I zipped the pocket shut and brushed my teeth and forgot it was there, which is the only reason I'm telling you.

. . .

Mr. Ortiz called at eleven.

"Mija," he said. The radio was on behind him, a man talking very fast in Spanish about a pitcher's elbow. "You okay?"

"I'm okay, Hector."

"You're not okay. Nobody's okay. Mrs. Kaplan says she heard a cello come up the stairs Sunday. I tell her, Ruth, a cello can't come up the stairs, somebody carried it." He turned the radio down. "Listen. I got the paper here. I want you to know this from me."

"What paper?"

"The sublet, the thing his friend did on the computer, I printed it, I keep everything." Paper rustling. "It's in your name, mija. Through December thirty-first. Paid. I'm not saying go back. I'm saying it's yours."

I sat down on the edge of Priya's tub.

"Does he know?"

"He knows. He read it in my kitchen. He read it twice. He's like that, he reads everything twice." A pause. "He's skinny, mija. He was always skinny but now he's skinny like a coat hanger. Somebody should feed him."

"That's not my job."

"I didn't say it was your job," said Mr. Ortiz. "I'm only saying. Somebody."

. . .

Theo's second text came that afternoon.

I'd like to talk to you about the apartment. In person, if you can stand it. Tomorrow? I'm here. I'm always here now.

And then, a minute later:

There's only one chair that doesn't wobble. You can have it.

I read it on the N, across from a man eating a whole rotisserie chicken out of the bag with his hands, and I thought about the other brother.

Not a word since the pier. Not a call, not a single Bennett. Eleven calls in two days and then nothing, like a tap shut off at the main. I'd wanted him to stop. Now he'd stopped, and I kept checking my phone still worked, which told me something I didn't want to hear about myself.

NOT THEO, in capitals, at the top of my messages. Silent.

I typed to the other one: Tomorrow. 4pm. I'm bringing a lawyer.

Three dots. Then:

Bring anyone you like. I'll put the kettle on. Does the lawyer take milk?

I looked at that for three stops. He takes milk, I thought. He's asking because he takes milk. The right brother had just told me something true about himself, sideways, in a question, and I didn't know what to do with it.

I didn't bring a lawyer.

. . .

Perry Street on a Tuesday in the middle of November was wet black branches and flattened yellow leaves and the bodega cat asleep on its bag of rice. I'd been gone four days. It felt like a year and like an hour.

Mr. Ortiz was on the stoop of forty-one in his Yankees cap. He saw me coming from half a block and stood up and then sat down again, like a man who'd decided not to make a fuss and was having trouble with it. He looked at my duffel. He looked up at the fourth-floor window, where the lamp was on in the gray afternoon.

"He's up there," he said, before I asked. "He's been up there since Sunday. He went to the bodega one time, for milk and a lemon." He shook his head. "A lemon. What do you do with one lemon."

"Tea," I said.

"Tea," said Mr. Ortiz darkly, as if this confirmed everything, and held the door for me, and leaned on it so it would latch.

The stairs creaked their four different notes. Mrs. Kaplan's door opened an inch as I passed 3A and closed again with tremendous discretion. I stood on the landing where June had sat and written to me on the back of my own note, where Wes had sat in the rain at three in the morning, and I put my hand up to knock on a door I'd had a key to for five weeks.

He opened it before I touched it.

. . .

He'd ironed his shirt.

A pale blue button-down, the sleeves rolled exactly twice, the creases sharp enough to open mail. He hadn't shaved; the shadow on his jaw was uneven, a beard that didn't know what it was doing. His glasses were clean now. Behind them his eyes were gray, not brown. I don't know why that surprised me. I'd only ever imagined him in black ink.

"The subletter," he said.

"I have a name."

"I know. I'm working up to it." He stepped back. "Come in. Please. It's your apartment until New Year's. I've been told."

I came in.

The light was the same, the long gray rectangle on the slanted boards. Gerald was in his pot by the window, looking frankly relieved. The cello case stood in its corner against the brick, and next to it, now, the scuffed one from the pier with an airline sticker half peeled off. Two cellos in one room, like a couple who weren't speaking.

The duffel was gone from beside the couch. Somebody had taken the big man's things away between Friday and Sunday. There was nothing left of him.

Except the cereal box, on the kitchen table. Top rolled down, badly.

He'd left it there. Two days in this apartment, a man who irons his shirts, and he hadn't moved it.

"Sit," Theo said. "That one. It's the one that doesn't wobble."

I sat at the little table under the window. He went into the kitchen and took the dented red kettle off the stove, and as he picked it up he stopped, and turned it in his hand, and looked at the handle.

The leather cord, over and under, the end tucked in so neat you couldn't find it. Darker now than it had been. It had gone dark where I held it.

He ran his thumb along it once.

"He fixed it," he said. Not to me.

"The rivet was loose."

"It's been loose since 2019. I used a dish towel." He put the kettle on the burner, on the right, and lit it, and stood with his back to me a moment longer than he needed to. "He'd have hated that. Watching me use a dish towel for five years."

He came back and sat down across from me, with Gerald between us in his pot like a mediator nobody had hired, and put his hands flat on the table. Long fingers. Calluses on the left fingertips, hard and shiny, exactly where I'd put them in October. I looked at them and then I made myself stop.

"So," he said.

"So."

"I want to begin by saying that I'm not going to throw you out."

I'd prepared a speech with a whole section on tenants' rights I'd half invented. It went out of my head like air out of a tire.

"You're not?"

"You paid. You watered Fernando." He stopped. "Gerald."

"Fernando."

"His name is Fernando."

"His name has been Gerald for five weeks."

"He's a fig. He doesn't have a name. He has a species." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. My knuckle. My gesture. I looked down at the table. "You watered him. You kept him alive while I was not keeping anything alive. I'm not going to put you on the street four weeks before Christmas for that. Hector would kill me. He's already explained to me in great detail how he would do it."

"With a wrench?"

"With a radio. He'd just turn it up until I died."

I laughed. It came out of me like a hiccup and I put my hand over it, and he looked at me over the glasses, faintly interested, like a man who'd heard a bird he didn't know.

"Okay," I said. "So where are you going to go?"

"That's the problem."

"You don't have anywhere."

"I have a great many places. I have a brother in Red Hook with a couch." He said brother the way you'd say a word in a language you'd stopped speaking. "I'm not going there."

"No."

"I have a mother in Rhode Island with a woodstove. If I go there I'll have to talk. She taught high school English for thirty-one years; she can get a confession out of a radiator."

"Hotel?"

"I spent what I had on two plane seats." He nodded at the scuffed case. "One for me and one for her. She doesn't go in the hold." He looked at his hands. "I know how this sounds. I flew across an ocean and the only place I can stand to be is the apartment I rented to a stranger so I'd never have to come back to it."

"I'm not a stranger," I said. "I'm a subletter."

"Yes," he said slowly. "I'm beginning to see the distinction."

The kettle started to scream. He got up and took it off by the handle, without a towel, and poured, and brought back two mugs. Tea. Mine with milk already in it. I hadn't said.

"Guess," he said, at my face. "Most people do."

. . .

We worked it out the way two very polite people work out the end of the world: carefully, with a lot of thank-yous.

I kept the bedroom. He took the green couch.

"I've slept on it before," he said.

"Your brother said that." It came out before I could stop it. "Exact words. The first night."

Something went across his face and was gone.

"My brother's feet hang off," he said. "Mine don't."

Then he went to the fridge.

It was all still there. The sheet of yellow legal paper under the lemon magnet, curling at the bottom corner. My anxious slant. One. No shirtless. Two. No reading my stuff. Three. No setting things on fire at 4 a.m. And under that, pressed so hard into the paper you could feel it from the back, the square capitals. IT WASN'T YOURS. DON'T TOUCH THE CLOSET. NO TALKING BEFORE COFFEE. DON'T NAME THE PLANTS, with THE crossed out and MY

written above it. And my too late, Gerald.

He stood and read it for a long time.

He read it twice. He touched IT WASN'T YOURS with one fingertip. He didn't ask me what it meant.

Then he took a pen out of his shirt pocket, a real fountain pen, black, with a nib, and he didn't take Wes's rules down. He wrote underneath them. His hand was patient and forward-leaning and very small, the hand from the closet. I'd read forty-three letters in it on the floor of the hall. My stomach went over watching it happen live, like a song you've only ever heard recorded.

One. The subletter has the bathroom first. I'll wait.

Two. I play at night. If it's too much, knock on the wall once. I'll stop.

Three. Fernando is watered Tuesdays and Fridays.

He paused, and then added:

Four. Nobody talks about them.

"Them," I said.

"Either. Both." He capped the pen. "Anyone with my last name."

I took the pen out of his hand. It was warm from his fingers. Under his Fernando I wrote, in my anxious slant, Gerald, and he looked at it, and then at me, and said, "This is going to be a long six weeks," and again I saw the place where a smile would go.

. . .

The first night I lay in the low bed under the linen sheets with my socks on and listened to a different man not sleep on the couch.

Wes had been a whole weather system out there, the couch groaning, the cereal box at two, a muttered conversation with the radiator. Theo made almost no sound at all. A page, now and then.

Once he stood at the window a long time; the floor there has its own creak, soft and high, like a question.

I must have slept. I don't remember. I remember waking and the clock saying 2:04, and not knowing what had woken me.

Then I knew.

It came through the bedroom door so softly that at first I thought it was the pipes. A single long note, low, wavering, like someone saying a word they hadn't said in a long time and checking it still worked. Then another. Then a line of them, slow, climbing, falling back.

I knew it. That was the thing that undid me first. I knew it before I knew I knew it.

I'd played that record in October until the sleeve went soft, the cello suites with the black-and-white man bent over his instrument like he was listening to its heartbeat. I'd read the liner notes so many times on the floor of this room I could have recited them. Suite No. 5 in C minor. The fourth movement, the Sarabande. The liner notes said it was the only movement in all six suites without a single chord in it. One voice, all the way through. Nothing underneath to hold it up.

On the record it had sounded like a person walking through an empty house at night, touching things.

In the room it sounded like a person who lived there.

I got out of bed. I didn't decide to. I went to the bedroom door and I didn't open it. I sat down on the floor with my back against it, in my socks, on the cold boards, with my knees up, and I listened through the wood.

He played it slowly. Slower than the record. He played it like he had all night and meant to use it, like every note had to be set down

carefully and checked before he'd trust his weight to the next one. And he played it quieter and quieter as it went, the way June had written, so quiet at the end it was hardly sound at all. Like he was only thinking the music. Like there was still somebody downstairs who might bang on the pipes.

I started to cry somewhere in the middle and I couldn't stop.

Not about Wes. Not about Ryan. Not about anything I could have put in a sentence. I cried because it was exactly him. Because I'd sat on that floor in October with forty-three letters in my lap, and a man's patient, forward-leaning hand, and I'd thought, whoever wrote these, I'd like to meet him. And then I hadn't. And then I had, and he'd been someone else.

And now here he was, on the other side of a door, playing the loneliest piece of music I'd ever heard, in the dark, for nobody.

It was the man in the letters. Every word.

I put my palm flat on the floor and felt it come up through the boards.

CHAPTER THREE

The Real T.

IT WAS THREE DAYS. If you'd asked me at the time, I'd have said a month. I'd have said it the way you say it about a good book, and the way you say it about a hospital stay.

. . .

The first morning I woke at ten to seven to a sound I couldn't place: a long soft hiss, then a thump, then another hiss. Like a very small train arriving somewhere over and over.

He was ironing.

He'd laid a towel on the kitchen table and was pressing a white shirt with an old heavy iron and the concentration of a man defusing something. Sleeves, yoke, collar, both sides. His hair was flat on one side from the couch, and he was humming.

Not a tune. Just a low, contented sound under his breath, rising a little when the iron hissed, falling back when he turned the shirt over. Like a refrigerator that's in love.

I stood in the bedroom doorway in my socks and had to hold onto the frame.

June had written me that sentence five weeks ago. Then I'd lived with a man who swore at pasta water, and I'd decided grief had taken the humming out of him, the way it takes things.

It hadn't. It had just been the wrong man.

"Good morning," Theo said, without looking up. "The bathroom's yours. Rule one."

"Where did you get an iron?"

"The closet." He turned the collar. "It's been in there since February with everything else I didn't want to look at."

I looked down the hall. The closet door was shut. The brass key, I'd noticed the night before, was gone from the kitchen table. Later that morning, when he thought I was in the shower, I saw him kneel by the window and push it back down into Gerald's soil with two fingers, the way you'd plant a bulb. He didn't hide it from me. He just put it back where it lived.

I don't know why that was the thing that made me like him. It was.

. . .

He shaved on the second day.

The bathroom door was open a few inches, and I was passing it with a mug, and I stopped. I'd been living with half a face for two days, and the part of me that writes people for a living wanted the rest.

He was leaning into the little mirror with a real razor and a brush and a bowl of soap, like a man in a black-and-white film, one stripe at a time, tapping the blade twice on the edge of the sink.

And under it, stripe by stripe, there he was.

Younger than I'd thought. That was the first thing. Without the shadow his face was narrower, finer, the jaw clean and the chin a little

pointed, like someone had drawn him carefully in pencil and hadn't gone over the lines in ink yet. He looked like the boy in the Montauk photo, the small serious one holding up the shell. He didn't look like his brother at all. Wes was built out of beams. Theo looked like the drawing for something.

His mouth was the surprise. It had a kind of permanent tuck at one corner, as if he were always about to say something dry and then deciding not to spend it.

He nicked himself under the jaw and said, very mildly, "Ah."

Then he saw me in the mirror.

We looked at each other in the glass. I had a mug in my hand and nowhere to put my face.

"I was passing," I said.

"You've passed." He tore a tiny corner off a square of toilet paper and stuck it to the cut. "It's all right. It's your bathroom until nine. I'm trespassing."

"You have a"—I touched my own jaw.

"I know. It's very dashing. I'm going to wear it to the bodega." He rinsed the razor. "Was there something you needed, or is this a site visit?"

"Site visit," I said, and fled, and heard him laugh behind me, a short surprised sound, like he'd startled himself.

Nobody had warned me he was funny.

June had given me gentle. The closet had given me lyrical and patient and kind. Nobody had mentioned a sense of humor so dry you could strike a match on it, deployed at seven in the morning with soap on his ear.

. . .

On the second afternoon we negotiated the fig.

It was his idea. He came in from one of his walks, he walked everywhere, for hours, and came back with his ears red and his coat smelling of river, and he stood in front of the pot with his hands in his pockets and said, "We should resolve this."

"There's nothing to resolve. His name's Gerald."

"His name is Fernando. I bought him from a man in Chelsea named Fernando who cried when I paid. It was a tribute."

"You can't name a fig after the man who sold it to you."

"That's exactly how you name a fig." He sat down on the floor, cross-legged, facing the pot, like he was going to mediate between it and me. "Who's Gerald? Is there a Gerald?"

"There's no Gerald. He just has a Gerald posture. Look at him. He's leaning toward the window like a man at a party who wants to leave but doesn't know how to say so."

He looked. He looked for a long time.

"That's Fernando's posture," he said finally. "Fernando had a bad back."

I sat down across from him on the other side of the pot. "We could hyphenate."

"Gerald-Fernando sounds like a law firm."

"Fernando-Gerald sounds like a racehorse."

"Gerald Fernando," he said slowly. "No hyphen. Like a jazz pianist."

Gerald Fernando, playing Tuesdays in a basement on Bleecker. It suited him.

"Fine," I said. "Joint custody."

"Joint custody." He held out his hand over the soil, very formally, and I shook it. His palm was dry and warm and the calluses on his

fingertips scraped the side of my hand, and we both let go a little too quickly, and he got up and wrote it on the fridge under the lemon magnet. Gerald Fernando. With a little line under it, like a signature on a treaty.

. . .

He cooked every night. Portuguese, mostly, things he'd learned in Lisbon. The first night it was caldo verde, a soup of potatoes and kale sliced so thin it came off his knife like green thread, with slices of sausage he'd found at a shop on Ninth Avenue that he talked about with real tenderness.

He hummed the whole time. He burned the garlic and apologized to the pan.

The second night he tried to make custard tarts, pastéis de nata, and they came out of the oven scorched on top and split down the middle like small geological events.

He looked at them on the tray for a long time.

"There's a café near the river in Lisbon," he said, "where an old woman makes these at four in the morning. I asked her for the recipe nine times. She said I didn't have the hands for it." He picked one up and burned his fingers and put it down. "She was right. Nine times right."

"I'd still eat one."

"You'd be being kind."

"I'm almost never kind. Ask anyone. I'm hungry." I took one. It was burnt on top and curdled in the middle and the pastry shattered all over my sweater, and I ate the whole thing, and he watched me with that tuck at the corner of his mouth as if I'd done something either very brave or very stupid and he hadn't decided which.

The third night it was salt cod, which he'd soaked for a day in a bowl in the fridge, changing the water like a nurse. But it was the second night, the night of the tarts, that he picked up the senator's wife.

I'd brought one box back from Priya's, mostly clothes, and on top of it, because I'm a lunatic, a paperback I'd rescued from the dollar cart outside the Strand that spring. A Life in Public. A woman in pearls on the cover, smiling the way you smile at a man you're about to forgive on page 212. It had hurt me to see it out there in the rain for a dollar. I'd bought it out of pity. Mine, not hers.

He'd found it on the windowsill. He read it on the green couch in one sitting, after dinner, while I pretended to work at the table, and I could feel him turning the pages from across the room like a draft.

At midnight he closed it.

"Whoever wrote this," he said, "was better than the woman it's about."

I kept my eyes on my laptop. The cursor blinked in the middle of a sentence about Danny's father's truck.

"Her name's on the cover."

"Her name's on the cover," he agreed. "And on page two hundred and twelve she forgives her husband, and the sentence is so good I don't believe a word of it." He set the book on the arm of the couch, square, the way he set everything down. "Somebody who knew exactly what it cost wrote that sentence. And it wasn't her. She doesn't know what anything costs."

I said nothing. I'd never told him. I'd told one person in this apartment, on the fire escape with a beer, and it wasn't him.

I looked up. He was looking at me over his glasses, perfectly mild.

"I'll pass that along," I said.

"Do," said Theo, and went to brush his teeth.

. . .

Danny was at the long zinc bar at Gansevoort on Thursday at four, between lunch and dinner, with the chairs up on half the tables and his reading glasses on the end of his nose, staring at a legal pad like it had insulted his mother.

"I can't write it," he said, before I'd got my coat off.

"You're not supposed to write it. I write it."

"You can't write it either. Nobody can write it. It didn't happen." He threw the pen down. Marco came out of the back with an espresso for me without being asked and retreated at speed. "The last chapter. You keep saying the book needs a last chapter about after. After what? I called him. Six minutes about the Mets. You know what he sent me after?"

"What?"

Danny held up his phone. A text thread. Nick, at the top. His son. Twenty-four, a line cook at a place in Philadelphia that Danny had looked up and read every review of and never been inside. The last message was nine days old.

A thumbs-up.

"A thumbs-up," said Danny Russo, a man who'd once made a grown sous-chef cry on network television over a béarnaise. "My kid gave me a thumbs-up, Claire. Like I sent him a parking spot. I can't put a thumbs-up in a book."

"Then call him again."

He looked at me like I'd suggested he fly.

"The last chapter isn't the call you made," I said. "It's the next one. That's what's missing. You hired me to write down the things you did,

Danny. I can't write down the thing you haven't done yet."

He was quiet for a long time. Out on Gansevoort a delivery truck backed up, beeping, over the cobblestones.

"Not yet," he said.

I knew that voice. I'd heard it on a pier. Not yet, June. Please.

Lorraine was on the sidewalk when I left, in her camel coat with her collar up, lighting one cigarette off another under the awning.

"You look different," she said.

"I slept."

"It's not sleep. You look like you're living with someone."

"I'm subletting."

"From whom?"

"It's complicated."

Lorraine tapped her ash onto the cobblestones and looked at me through the smoke for a long, kind, terrible second.

"It's always complicated with the good ones," she said. "The bad ones are very simple. That's how you tell."

. . .

The betting pool I found by accident, on the way back in.

Mr. Ortiz's door on the ground floor was open a crack, the radio going, and taped to the inside of it, at eye level, was a sheet of graph paper. I'd have walked past it if I hadn't seen my own apartment number in black marker at the top.

4B.

Three columns underneath. EL MÚSICO. EL CARPINTERO. And, in a different and much shakier hand, NEITHER (SHE'S SMART). There were initials in all three, and dollar amounts. RK, $10, under NEITHER. Ruth Kaplan. Under EL CARPINTERO,

someone had written 3B, $20, and drawn a little hammer.

"Hector," I said.

He came out of the back with a mug and a wrench and saw where I was looking and stopped dead.

"Is a friendly thing," he said.

"It's a betting pool."

"Is a friendly betting pool."

"On me."

"On the situation, mija." He took the sheet down with tremendous dignity and folded it in half and held it against his chest. "Everybody's very invested. Mrs. Kaplan hasn't been this happy since 1986."

"Who did you bet on?"

"I'm the house. The house doesn't bet."

"How much is in it?"

He considered lying. I watched him consider it and decide I'd find out anyway. "Eighty-five dollars," said Mr. Ortiz, "and a lasagna."

. . .

That night I was cold.

The radiator had gone into one of its sulks. I was at the little table under the window with a blanket around my shoulders, trying to get Danny's father's truck to start on the page. Theo was at the sink with his sleeves rolled up, washing the pot from the salt cod and humming at it.

I got up, went to the bedroom, came back, and sat down to pull a second pair of socks on over the first.

He didn't turn around.

"I sleep with socks on," he said, to the dishwater, almost fondly, like a line from a book he liked. "Two pairs if it's cold."

My hands stopped on the second sock.

It wasn't the words. It was the shape of them. I knew that sentence. I'd written that sentence, in October, on yellow legal paper, at this table, and folded it and taped it to the outside of that door for a woman I'd never met. I slept with socks on, two pairs if it was cold. She'd written back that she did too, that we should start a support group.

I'd said it out loud to exactly one other person, in that bedroom, and he wasn't speaking to his brother.

"How do you know that?"

The water ran. For a second, maybe less, his hands stopped moving in the sink.

"June told me," Theo said.

He rinsed the pot. He set it upside down on the rack, square, the way he set everything down, and dried his hands on the towel, and didn't look at me, and went back to the couch and picked up his book.

I sat there with one sock on and one sock half on.

June told me. Fine. That was fine. They'd been engaged for years; they had five years of things to tell each other. Maybe they'd talked since the pier. He walked for hours every day; I didn't know where he went. Maybe he'd walked to the end of a pier. Maybe she'd told him the subletter sleeps in socks the way you'd tell someone the weather in a city they used to live in.

I pulled the sock on. I let it go.

It sat wrong all evening anyway, like a picture frame hanging a quarter inch off level, the kind of thing you can't stop seeing once you've seen it.

· · ·

At 12:40 I was still at the table.

Theo was on the couch with the lamp on, reading. Neither of us had said anything in an hour. It had stopped being awkward a while ago and become something I didn't have a word for yet.

Then I heard it.

The street door, the thud of it not quite catching. Footsteps on the stairs. Not light, not careful. Heavy and slow, a big tired tread, and the third-floor step that needed a nail groaning under it like an old dog. Up the last flight.

Then nothing on the landing. A long nothing.

Then the smallest sound in the world. The whisper of paper over old wood.

Footsteps, going down. Fast. Faster than they'd come up, like a man who'd done the one thing he came to do and couldn't stand to be near it.

I looked at the door. An envelope lay just inside it, pale on the dark floorboards.

Behind me, on the couch, Theo didn't move. I heard him not move. He turned a page he hadn't read.

I got up and crossed the room in my two pairs of socks and picked it up.

Plain white, the drugstore kind. No stamp. And across the front, in square, hard, blocky capitals, pressed so deep into the paper I could feel the letters from the back with my thumb:

BENNETT.

CHAPTER FOUR

Capital Letters

I READ IT IN the bedroom with the door shut, sitting on the edge of the low bed, the way you'd read a test result.

BENNETT,

I'M NOT COMING UP. I WANT THAT ON THE RECORD, LIKE YOU SAY.

I'M WRITING THIS ON THE HOOD OF THE TRUCK ACROSS THE STREET AND HECTOR HAS COME OUT TWICE TO ASK IF I'M HAVING A STROKE. TELL HIM NO. TELL HIM THANKS.

I'M NOT GOING TO SAY SORRY AGAIN. I SAID IT ON THE PIER AND I MEANT IT, AND IF I KEEP SAYING IT, IT TURNS INTO ME ASKING YOU FOR SOMETHING. I'M NOT ASKING YOU FOR ANYTHING.

HERE'S WHAT I'VE GOT. I LIED TO YOU ABOUT MY NAME FOR TWENTY-THREE DAYS. I COUNTED. I LIED IN EVERY ROOM IN THAT APARTMENT EXCEPT THE BATHROOM, AND ONLY BECAUSE YOU NEVER ASKED ME ANYTHING IN THE BATHROOM.

THERE'S NO GOOD REASON. THERE'S JUST THE REASON. YOU SAID THEO AND I SAID YEAH, AND THEN EVERY MORNING AFTER THAT I SAID YEAH AGAIN.

WHAT I DID TO MY BROTHER IS MINE. I'M NOT GOING TO EXPLAIN IT. YOU'RE TOO SMART TO BUY IT ANYWAY.

THE KETTLE HANDLE IS GOING TO GO DARK WHERE YOU HOLD IT. THAT'S SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN. DON'T LET ANYBODY REWRAP IT.

I'M GOING TO WRITE YOU. NOT EVERY NIGHT. SOME NIGHTS. YOU DON'T HAVE TO READ THEM. YOU CAN BURN THEM ON THE LEFT BURNER, I HEAR IT RUNS HOT.

WHEN YOU WANT ME TO STOP, PUT A PIECE OF PAPER ON THE LANDING THAT SAYS STOP, AND I'LL STOP. I WON'T ARGUE. YOU KNOW WHAT THAT COSTS ME.

HE'S THE GOOD ONE. I WASN'T LYING ABOUT THAT. THAT WAS THE ONE TRUE THING I HAD.

WES

P.S. TELL GERALD I SAID MORNING.

. . .

I read it four times. Then I read it the way I read clients' drafts, which is to say with my nose an inch from the paper, looking for the thing they didn't mean to leave in.

It was in the middle.

Between YOU'RE TOO SMART TO BUY IT ANYWAY and the kettle, there was a line I hadn't read, because there was no line left to read. He'd scribbled it out. Not crossed it out, the way you'd strike a typo. Scribbled it, back and forth and back and forth, so hard the ballpoint had gone through the paper in two places and left little torn mouths in it, like the page had been bitten.

I got up and held it to the lamp.

The light came through the tears and the thin places, and under the scribble, where the pen had pressed hardest at the start, before he'd stopped himself, I could just make out the first two words. Square. Capitals. Hard enough to stand up off the page.

IT WASN'T

That was all. Whatever came next he'd buried.

I stood there with the paper against the lampshade until it got warm.

It wasn't. It wasn't my fault. It wasn't supposed to go like this. It wasn't what you think, which is the sentence every man in history has said right before it was exactly what you thought. I tried the endings on like coats. None of them fit, and all of them did, and that's the trouble with two words: they'll hold anything you put in them.

Then I thought of the fridge.

Out there in the kitchen, under the lemon magnet, in the same hand, pressed through to the next sheet on the pad. IT WASN'T YOURS. The first morning, when I'd written no setting things on fire at 4 a.m., and he'd taken the pen out of my hand.

It wasn't yours, Bennett. The letter. Her letter. What I burned.

That was probably it. He'd started to tell me something about June's letters again and thought better of it. That's what I told myself, folding the page along its creases. That's what I'd have written, if he

were a client. A man who keeps reaching for the same sentence and pulling his hand back.

I'll tell you what ghostwriting teaches you, though, and I didn't want to know it that night. The line somebody crosses out is never the one they didn't mean. It's the one they meant too much.

I put the letter in the drawer of the bedside table, on top of the four pages I'd once written about a man I'd never met.

I didn't answer it.

. . .

When I came out for water, Theo was still on the couch with the book open on his chest and his glasses pushed up into his hair. He didn't ask. He didn't look at the envelope in my hand, or at my face, or at anything but the ceiling.

Rule four. Nobody talks about them.

I'd never been so grateful for a rule in my life. I'd never hated one so much.

. . .

The second one came the next night at 12:42. I was in bed. I heard the street door, and the heavy tread, and the step that needed a nail, and then the paper, and then the stairs again, faster.

In the morning Theo handed it to me with my coffee. He held it by the very corner, between two fingers, like a waiter presenting the check.

"Your mail," he said.

"Thank you."

"He's never written a letter in his life." He went back to the stove, where something with eggs was happening. "He wrote Ma one

postcard from sleepaway camp in 1999. It said FOOD BAD. SEND GUM. She has it framed in the downstairs bathroom."

I laughed before I could help it. He didn't turn around, but I saw the tuck at the corner of his mouth in the side of the kettle.

"That's breaking rule four," I said.

"That wasn't talking about him. That was history." He slid the eggs onto a plate. "History is exempt."

I took the envelope back to the bedroom.

BENNETT,

THE BROWNSTONE IN COBBLE HILL HAS EIGHTEEN WINDOWS. I'M ON NUMBER ELEVEN. NUMBER ELEVEN WAS PAINTED SHUT IN 1974 BY SOMEBODY WHO HATED FRESH AIR AND ME PERSONALLY.

GOT IT OPEN TODAY. THE WHOLE SASH CAME UP AT ONCE, LIKE IT HAD BEEN WAITING FIFTY YEARS FOR SOMEBODY TO ASK.

I'M NOT SAYING THAT'S A METAPHOR. YOU'RE THE WRITER. I'M JUST SAYING IT OPENED.

W.

I didn't answer that one either. I read it on the fire escape in my coat with the coffee going cold, and I thought about his hands on a window frame in an empty house, dust in the light, and then I made myself think about something else, and it didn't work.

. . .

The third came on Saturday night. It was the shortest.

BENNETT,

HAD CEREAL FOR DINNER. OUT OF A BOWL. LIKE AN ADULT.

IT WAS WORSE.

W.

I sat on the bedroom floor and laughed until I cried, or the other way around, I honestly don't know which came first, and when I came out Theo looked up from the couch, and looked at my face, and looked down again, and turned a page.

. . .

On Sunday morning at twenty to ten, Theo put on his coat.

I was at the table with my coffee. I watched him do up the buttons, all of them, the way he did everything. He wound a gray scarf twice around his neck. He didn't say where he was going and I didn't ask, but from the window I watched him turn left at the corner, west, toward Hudson Street and the river, walking the way he walked, not fast, not slow, like a man keeping an appointment he hadn't made.

Ten o'clock on a Sunday. I thought about a bench at the end of a pier, and a red coat.

He came back at half past twelve with his ears red, and put the kettle on, and didn't say anything, and neither did I. Then he went out again at three, for no reason he gave, and I had the apartment to myself.

. . .

Maddie called that afternoon.

I almost let it ring. I had her saved as Maddie, still, with the photo from Priya's thirtieth where we're both wearing paper crowns. I'd

never changed it. I'd never been able to decide what to change it to.

I took it on the fire escape with the window shut behind me, though the apartment was empty.

"Hi," Maddie said. She sounded like she'd been crying earlier and had stopped on purpose for the phone call. "Is this okay?"

"I don't know yet."

"That's fair." A breath. "I wanted to tell you something before you heard it some other way. I'm keeping it. The baby. I'm keeping it."

Down on Perry Street a man was trying to parallel park a Subaru and losing. I watched him lose.

"Okay," I said.

"I'm thirteen weeks. It has fingernails. I looked it up. It's the size of a lemon." Her voice did something. "Due the end of May. I keep thinking, May. I keep thinking, I'll have to buy a stroller. Me."

"Where's Ryan?"

A short laugh, not a good one. "He's gone quiet. Very quiet. Like a man in a witness protection program, but for responsibility. He sent me a Venmo request the day after I told him, for half the dinner where I told him."

"He didn't."

"Thirty-eight fifty. I paid it. I don't know why I paid it."

I put my forehead against the cold iron of the railing. That was Ryan. That was him all over, the LinkedIn headshot of it. He'd once split a cab with me eleven days after our engagement.

"Why are you telling me, Mads?"

The name came out by itself. Neither of us said anything about it.

"Because you'd want to hear it from me and not from Instagram," Maddie said. "And because you're the only person I know who'd tell me if I'm doing it wrong."

I could have said a lot of things. I had a lot of them ready. I'd been writing them for two months, in the shower, on the N, on the floor of this apartment, the perfect devastating sentence for exactly this moment.

"You're doing it wrong," I said. "Eat something green. You never eat anything green."

There was a silence. Then a sound that might have been a laugh or might have been the other thing.

"Okay," Maddie said. "Okay. Green."

"And don't pay him back for dinners."

"Okay."

"I'm not saying we're okay."

"I know." Very quietly. "I know you're not. Thank you for picking up."

After she hung up I stayed out there until I couldn't feel my fingers. The Subaru man had given up and driven away. A lemon, I thought. A whole person the size of a lemon, and the man who made it had sent a bill.

. . .

Priya came over that night with Thai food and the expression of a woman entering a crime scene she'd been warned about.

She met Theo in the doorway. He'd just come in, his coat smelling of river, and he took her coat and hung it on the hook, and then looked at it, and moved it to the other hook, so it wouldn't touch his wet one. I saw her see that. I saw her file it.

"You must be the lawyer," he said.

"I'm a doctor."

"That's much worse." He took the bag from her. "I'll get plates."

She ate pad see ew on the green couch with her shoes off and watched him the way she watches a monitor in the ER, unblinking, waiting for a number to change. He was lovely. That was the problem. He asked her about the hospital and listened to the answer. He laughed at the right place in her story about a man who'd come in with a Christmas ornament somewhere no ornament should go, a short surprised laugh, like he'd been caught. At ten he said he was going for a walk, and put the too-thin coat back on, and went, so we could talk about him. He walked more than anyone I'd ever met. I was starting to think it was the only way he could stand to be anywhere.

Priya waited until she heard the street door.

"Okay," she said. "He folded my coat."

"He doesn't fold it. He moves it. So it doesn't get wet."

"Claire. He's terrifying. He's terrifyingly lovely. He's like a very good novel about a sad man." She pointed a chopstick at me. "Marcus can't even pick a restaurant. He hums the Law and Order noise. Every time anything happens. I drop a fork. Dun dun."

"That's a flaw."

"It's a big flaw. I'm keeping a list." She looked at the drawer of the little table, where I'd put the third letter, half sticking out because I hadn't shut it properly. She'd seen it. She sees everything. "The other one's writing to you."

"Every night. Almost."

"And you're not writing back."

"No."

"And the cellist is sleeping on the couch."

"Yes."

"And they take turns." She set the chopsticks down. "One at the door at midnight, one on the couch at two. So now the brothers are

taking turns at your door like a Jane Austen with plumbing."

I threw a pillow at her. She caught it without looking, which is a thing they teach you in residency, apparently.

. . .

After Priya left, I wrote back.

I'd known I would. I'd known it since the cereal. I sat at the table for an hour with a legal pad, and written two pages and torn them up, and a paragraph and torn it up, the way I had once with June, back when I still thought words could be made to hold things if you just chose them carefully enough.

In the end I wrote five words. They weren't even mine. They were the thing I'd said to him once, in the dark, the last good night, when I'd already known his name and was giving him one more chance to say it.

He'd answered with something true that wasn't the truth. I wanted to see what he'd do now that he didn't have anything left to hide.

Tell me one true thing.

I didn't sign it. He'd know.

At midnight I went out on the landing in my socks. Theo was back on the couch with the lamp on. He didn't look up. Rule four. I folded the sheet in half and laid it on the top step, the one June had sat on, and weighted it with two sugar packets from the jar, because the stairwell is drafty and because I'm not made of stone.

Then I went to bed and lay there.

. . .

The answer came the same night.

12:40. The door. The heavy step. The nail. And then nothing on the landing, for a long time, longer than ever before.

For the first time, he didn't go straight down. I lay in the dark and listened to him sit on the top step outside my door. I heard the old wood take his weight. I don't know how long he stayed there. Long enough for the radiator to go through its whole slow cycle, three knocks and two and the long silence. Long enough for me to get up, and go to the door, and stand with my hand on the knob, and not open it.

Then the whisper of paper on wood, and he went.

The envelope was just inside the door. Out on the landing my note was gone, and so were the sugars. I didn't take it to the bedroom this time. I sat on the floor right there, with my back against the door he'd been leaning on, and opened it under the stripe of streetlight from the window.

One sheet. Three lines. He'd written it on his knee, on the step; the lines ran downhill. The capitals so hard the paper had gone shiny where the pen pressed.

THE FIRST NIGHT I SAT ON THE STOOP FOR AN HOUR BECAUSE I WAS SCARED TO SEE MY BROTHER'S STUFF.

THEN I SAW YOURS.

I'VE BEEN SCARED OF THE WRONG THING THIS WHOLE TIME.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mount Sinai

I CARRIED IT IN my coat pocket all the next day. Three lines on one sheet, folded in quarters, the corners going soft already from my thumb.

I've been scared of the wrong thing this whole time.

I want to say I didn't take it out and read it again on the stairs, and at the bodega, and in the bathroom with the fan on. I'm trying to be a more honest narrator in this part of my life. I read it nine times before noon.

June texted at eight.

Can you come to my break today? 7:15. Mount Sinai, the kids' floor, ask for me at the desk. I'll buy you dinner. Dinner is a vending machine.

And then, a minute later:

I need to talk to someone who isn't one of them. I know I keep saying that. I'm sorry I keep saying that.

Theo was at the stove, making eggs the Portuguese way, which as far as I could tell was the regular way but with more olive oil and a sense of grievance. He was humming. The radiator was knocking in time with him, or he was humming in time with the radiator, and I

couldn't tell which and I didn't want to ask.

I could have told him. I had the sentence ready: I'm seeing June tonight. I watched him turn an egg over without breaking the yolk and push his glasses up with one knuckle, and I thought about the fridge. Nobody talks about them.

I didn't tell him. I told myself that was respecting the rules. Mostly it was that I didn't want to watch the humming stop.

At six I put on my coat. He said, "Have a good night," from the stove, and I said, "You too," and I'd never felt so much like a woman sneaking out on someone she wasn't even with.

. . .

The 6 train at rush hour is a kind of argument everyone's losing. I stood pressed between a man in a Rangers jersey and a woman holding a sheet cake over her head like a waiter, and I thought about June on the bench in the cold on Sunday mornings, all those months, and about Theo going out on Sunday at twenty to ten with his scarf wound twice.

And about the other one, sitting on the top step outside my door at one in the morning, long enough for the radiator to go through its whole cycle. I'd stood on the other side of the door with my hand on the knob. I'd felt the wood take his weight, or imagined I had. Two people leaning on the same door from opposite sides, like a bad metaphor in a book I'd have sent back to the author.

Then I saw yours.

The sheet cake woman's elbow was in my ear. I put my hand in my pocket and held onto the folded paper like a ticket, and didn't take it out, which I'd like counted as growth.

I got off at Ninety-Sixth and walked up Madison. It was already dark. The hospital rose up out of the Upper East Side like a city that had decided to build itself a separate, more serious city, all lit windows and ambulance bays and people in scrubs smoking where they shouldn't.

The children's floor was the brightest place I'd ever been at seven o'clock at night.

Someone had painted the walls. Not well, not badly, but with love and no restraint. A blue whale swam the length of the corridor with a lighthouse balanced on its back. Giraffes stood by the doors with height marks down their necks, so a kid could measure himself against them. On the wall by the elevators was the whole of Central Park in the snow, and in the bottom corner someone had painted a small brown dog in a red sweater, very carefully, with tremendous attention to the sweater, like it was the most important thing on the wall.

A little boy in a hospital gown printed with dinosaurs came past me at speed, pushing his own IV pole like a scooter, his father jogging behind him saying, "Mateo. Mateo. Walking feet."

"She's on her way," said the nurse at the desk, before I'd said who I was. She had a jar of stickers by her elbow and looked at me with frank curiosity. "You're the writer. She said you'd look like you were taking notes."

I closed my mouth. I had been taking notes.

. . .

June came down the corridor in teal scrubs printed with tiny cartoon foxes and a gray cardigan with the sleeves pushed up, her hair twisted into a knot with a pen through it. She looked tired in the way only

nurses look tired, all the way down to the bone and still moving. When she saw me, her whole face did something complicated and then decided on a smile.

"You came."

"You asked."

Mateo shot past on his IV pole. June put one hand out without looking and stopped it, gently, by the pole, the way you'd catch a door before it swung shut.

"Mateo Ruiz," she said. "What's the rule."

"Walking feet," said Mateo, deeply betrayed.

"Walking feet. Because if you wipe out and pull that line, who has to put it back?"

He thought about it. "You."

"Me. And I'm on my break." She let go of the pole. "Walking feet, my friend."

He walked, with enormous dignity, for about four steps. His father mouthed thank you at her over his head. June watched them go and then turned back to me, and for a second, before she put her own face back on, I saw what she looked like when no one needed anything from her. I'd never seen it. I didn't think anyone had in a long time.

"Come on," she said. "I'll show you the restaurant."

. . .

The restaurant was a stairwell.

Stairwell C, behind a heavy fire door at the end of the corridor, where the murals stopped and the walls went back to hospital beige. There was a landing with a window looking out over the lights of Harlem, and a vending machine humming against the wall like it was trying to keep itself warm.

"C4," June said, feeding in a five-dollar bill that the machine spat back twice before accepting. "Peanut butter crackers. That's dinner. D2, Peanut M&Ms, that's dessert. A6 is a granola bar that's been in there since the Obama administration. Don't."

She looked at B3, which was Fritos, with real hatred.

"I always get those," she said. "And then I'm angry about them for the rest of the shift. Not tonight."

She pressed C4, and D2, and two Diet Cokes, and we sat on the stairs side by side with our knees up, the way you sit on stairs at a party when you've found the only person you want to talk to.

"He came to the bench," she said. "Yesterday."

I'd known. I'd watched him wind the scarf twice. I still felt it land.

"He sat at the other end. He didn't say anything for ten minutes. I didn't either. We just sat there. The tai chi man was there." She opened the crackers with her teeth. "Then he asked about my mother's knee. She had it replaced in August. He remembered it was August." She laughed a little, at nothing. "Then he said, thank you for coming, June. And he got up and left."

"That's all?"

"That's all." She looked at the crackers. "He looks at me like I'm a stranger he's being polite to. Like I'm somebody he sat next to on a plane once and he remembers I was nice about the armrest."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't think of anything that wasn't a lie or a cruelty, and I was trying to give up both.

"So," June said, very lightly, the way you'd test ice. "Where are you staying? Still with Priya?"

And here's the thing. I could have said yes. I'm good at saying yes. I'd said no to her on the pier, a month ago, when she'd asked if he'd come back, and I'd watched her thank me for it.

"I'm at Perry Street," I said. "The lease is mine through December. He's on the couch."

June stared at me.

Then she laughed. A real laugh, startled out of her, loud enough that it went up the stairwell and came back down. She put her hand over her mouth and laughed into it.

And then she was crying. Just like that, with no gap in between, the laugh turning over into the other thing like a car going over a hill. She pressed the heel of her hand against one eye and then the other.

And then she was laughing again.

"Of course you are," she said. "Of course. Oh my God. You're in the bedroom and he's on the couch." She wiped her face on her cardigan sleeve. "He loves that couch. He loved that couch more than me. He used to fall asleep on it with a score on his chest and his glasses on and I'd take them off him and he'd say, I was reading that, without waking up."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. God. Don't be sorry. Somebody should be in there." She drank some Diet Coke and coughed. "Is he eating?"

"He's cooking. Portuguese. Every night. Soup with kale in it. Salt cod. He tried to make custard tarts and they exploded."

"The pastéis." Her face did something. "He tried those in our kitchen. On that stove. Twice. He set off the smoke alarm and Mrs. Kaplan called the fire department." She looked at me sideways. "Does he hum?"

I thought about him at the ironing board, the low happy sound. A refrigerator that's in love. Her words, in her round hand, through a door.

"Yes," I said.

June closed her eyes.

"Good," she said, with her eyes shut. "Okay. Good. That's good."

. . .

I asked her.

I don't know if I'd come there to ask her, or if it was the stairwell, or the vending machine humming, or the fact that I'd spent my whole working life sitting next to people on stairs, figuratively, waiting for them to tell me the worst thing they'd ever done. I've got a talent for it. People tell me things. I think it's because I look like I'll write it down kindly.

"June," I said. "That night. With Wes. What happened?"

She didn't flinch. That was the first thing I noticed. She'd been laughing and crying and laughing a minute before, and her face had been all over the place, and when I asked her that it went perfectly still and smooth, like a pond after someone stops throwing stones.

"He was in Cleveland," she said. "Ten days, with the orchestra. Wes was drunk and I was drunk and lonely and stupid, and that's not a reason, it's just what was in the room."

I knew that sentence.

I'd read it on Priya's floor on Saturday the fifteenth, in her looping hand, in the letter I'd opened that wasn't mine.

"It was one night," June said. "Just the once. And I told him, because I couldn't carry it. I did the unforgivable thing, with the one person I could never take back."

And I knew that one too. I'd read it in October standing at the kitchen counter in 4B and then again sitting down. I'd turned it over in my mind for days. The one person I could never take back.

Word for word. Not close. Not the same idea in different clothes. The same sentences, in the same order, with the same little pause before stupid, the way you'd pause before a word you'd been told was hard to pronounce.

"Where?" I said.

It's a writer's question. It's the first one I always ask. Where were you sitting, what was on the table, what were you wearing. People forget the big things and remember the cup.

June looked at me. There was a gap, about the length of a breath.

"Does it matter?"

"No," I said. "No. I'm sorry. Habit."

"His place." She turned the M&M bag over in her hands. "In Red Hook. That's all. I don't want to do the rest. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to."

"I know." She tried to smile. "You'd think it would get easier, saying it. It doesn't. It just gets smoother."

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

Here's what I know about people telling the worst thing about themselves. I've listened to it from an actress, a senator's wife, a tennis player, a reality star, two chefs. The real story comes out different every time. That's how you know it's real. The actress told me about the night her first husband left her seven different ways over seven months: once he left in the rain, once in a taxi, once she was the one who'd left. Every time it was true. Every time it was a little more true. Memory is a mess, and it's supposed to be.

June had told it to me exactly the way she'd written it, twice, weeks apart. Like a speech. Like lines she'd learned.

I told myself that was grief. That she'd said it to herself so many nights in the dark that it had worn a groove, the way water wears a

step, until it could only run one way. People memorize the worst thing about themselves so they don't have to feel it every time. I've seen it. I've done it. I could have told you, in exactly the same words every time, what Maddie's toast had sounded like.

That's what I told myself. I put it in the drawer in my head where I keep the things that don't fit yet, next to IT WASN'T, next to the socks.

. . .

"He's writing to you," June said. "Isn't he. Wes."

I nearly dropped my Diet Coke. "How do you know that?"

"He called me. Saturday." She ate an M&M, a green one, and made a face at it. "He asked me how you write a letter to someone who's angry with you. I said, you don't explain. You don't ask for anything. You just tell them one thing at a time and let them decide."

"Why would he call you?"

June looked out the stairwell window at the lights of Harlem going on and on to the north.

"Who else is he going to call?" she said. "We're the only two people in New York who know what we did."

The vending machine hummed. Somewhere below us a door banged and somebody laughed, and the laugh came up the stairwell, strange and hollow, and faded out.

She looked at her watch, the old-fashioned kind, pinned to her scrubs upside down so she could read it looking down. Seven forty-one.

"I have to go back," she said. "Bed twelve has a fever and a very strong opinion about popsicles."

We stood up. She brushed cracker crumbs off her foxes. She looked at me for a moment, at the stairs, at the vending machine, as if she were trying to decide something, and then she said it anyway, lightly, the way you'd ask after somebody's cat.

"Has he played for you yet?"

"Every night," I said. "At two."

I meant it as a kindness. I meant it as, he's all right, he's still himself, he still can't sleep and he still plays the Bach when he can't, the way you said.

June went very still.

Not the pond kind of still. The other kind. The kind where you can see the whole animal deciding something. Her hand had stopped halfway to the fire door. Her bitten fingertips were resting on the metal bar, not pushing.

"Every night," she said.

"Since the first one."

She turned and looked at me, and her face in the beige light of the stairwell was the face of a woman doing very quick, very terrible arithmetic.

"He never played at two for anyone but me," June said.

CHAPTER SIX

Two A.M.

HE NEVER PLAYED AT two for anyone but me.

I carried that sentence home from Mount Sinai like a pot with no handle. Out past the cartoon giraffes, onto the 6, off at Astor Place, and then on foot across the whole width of the Village, because I needed the cold and I didn't want to arrive anywhere yet.

By the third landing of 41 Perry the stairwell smelled like garlic and smoked paprika. By the fourth I could hear him.

Humming.

I stood outside 4B with my key out and listened. A low wandering line that kept going somewhere and changing its mind, the way you hum when you've forgotten other people can hear you. I'd been living with it for days now. I still stopped on the landing for it, every time, like a woman checking that a light she'd left on was still on.

I let myself in.

Theo was at the stove with his sleeves rolled and a dish towel over one shoulder, basting something in a clay dish with the concentration of a surgeon. Gerald Fernando stood by the big window, glossy and smug, like a houseguest who knew he was the favorite.

"You're late," Theo said, without turning around. "That's not an accusation. It's just that dinner's been ready for forty minutes and I've been keeping it company."

"What is it?"

"Arroz de pato." He tilted the dish so I could see: rice gone gold and crackling at the edges, shreds of duck, and laid across the top in neat overlapping rows, coins of dark red sausage like roof tiles. "Duck rice. It's what you make in Portugal when somebody's sad. Also on Sundays. There's a lot of overlap."

"I thought the sausage place on Ninth was your soulmate."

"They ran out. I went to Newark."

"You went to New Jersey for a sausage."

"I went to the Ironbound for a chouriço," he said, with great patience. "It's a pilgrimage. The sausage is incidental." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. "There's a woman on Ferry Street who sells them out of the back of a bakery. She told me I looked thin. I told her I was a cellist. She gave me an extra one out of pity."

I laughed out loud, and he glanced back and looked pleased with himself for one small, careful second, the way you'd look at a plant that had put out a leaf. June had written me forty things about him. She'd never once mentioned that he'd go to New Jersey for a joke.

· · ·

We ate at the little table under the window. It was the best thing I'd had in a month, and I said so, and he said, "The rice is wrong. In Lisbon the oven is older than me and has opinions. Here I have a gas range and a grudge."

"Where were you tonight?" he asked, after a while. Lightly.

"Danny's."

He nodded. Then he looked at me over his glasses, which he does when he's already decided the next thing is rude.

"You did something with your lip."

"I didn't do anything with my lip."

"You're doing it now." He tapped his own, once. "You bite it. You do it every morning when you tell me you slept well, and the floor outside the bedroom door tells me otherwise."

Five bestsellers, and I couldn't lie to a cellist over rice.

"I was at Mount Sinai," I said.

He stopped with his fork halfway to his mouth. Then he set it down on the edge of his plate, very precisely, the way you'd set down something that might go off.

"Ah," he said. And then, with great care: "Rule four."

"You asked."

"I did. That's on me." He looked at the fridge, where his own neat hand said Nobody talks about them. "Go on."

"She asked me to come on her break. We ate dinner out of a vending machine in a stairwell."

"The Fritos," he said. "She always gets the Fritos and then she's angry about the Fritos."

"Not tonight. Peanut butter crackers."

He looked at the window. "How is she?"

"Not great. She told me about that night."

"Then you know more than I want to." His voice was perfectly kind. "You don't have to tell me what she said. I'm not in a position to demand anyone's truth, Claire. I've been very bad at mine."

It was the first time he'd put my name in a sentence like that, like it belonged in his mouth. I noticed it the way you notice a step that isn't there.

I didn't tell him about two a.m. When he asked if I was all right I said yes, and bit my lip, and he let me have it.

. . .

At 12:40 I was lying in his bed in my socks when I heard it.

The whisper of paper on wood. Heavy footsteps going down, a pause on the third-floor landing, the street door.

I'd been hearing that sound since October. June, and then Wes. And every night since the capitals started, Theo had done the same thing on the couch eight feet from the door: not moved, and turned a page he wasn't reading, and let me be the one to cross the room.

Tonight the couch groaned, and bare feet crossed the floorboards, and there was the small sound of someone bending down. A long pause. I imagined him standing in the dark reading my last name in his brother's hand, and I put my arm over my eyes.

The footsteps came down the hall and stopped outside my door. The paper whispered again, two feet from my bed. Twice in one night.

"Internal mail system," Theo said through the door. Very dry, very even. "I'm the postman. Good night."

"Theo—"

But the feet were already going back. The couch groaned. That was all.

BENNETT, in capitals, pressed so hard I could read it from the back.

BENNETT,
ONE TRUE THING. THE KETTLE HANDLE IS GOING TO GO AGAIN. IT ISN'T THE SCREW, IT'S THE RIVET. WHEN

IT GOES, DON'T LET HIM FIX IT. HE'LL WRAP A DISH TOWEL AROUND IT AND CALL THAT FIXED. HE DID IT FOR FIVE YEARS. HE THINKS EVERYTHING CAN BE FIXED WITH A TOWEL AND PATIENCE. SOME THINGS NEED A RIVET.

ANOTHER ONE. THE LAST WINDOW IN COBBLE HILL GOES BACK IN THIS WEEK. EIGHTEEN FOR EIGHTEEN. I DIDN'T BREAK A SINGLE PANE OF THE OLD GLASS. I'M TELLING YOU BECAUSE THERE'S NOBODY ELSE I KNOW WHO'D UNDERSTAND WHY THAT MATTERS.

GO TO SLEEP.

W.

I put it in the nightstand drawer on top of the first one, the line he'd crossed out so hard the pen went through. IT WASN'T, and then a black wound in the paper. I'd written a hundred endings to that sentence in my head. It wasn't love. It wasn't planned. It wasn't worth it. Every one made me angrier than the last.

I turned off the lamp. I did not go to sleep.

. . .

At two o'clock exactly, the cello started.

I'd sat against the bedroom door for it every night since I'd moved back in, knees up, pretending to be asleep in a way that fooled nobody. By now I knew the shape of it the way you know a street you walk home on, where it rises, where it turns. Bach. The fifth suite, C minor. The Sarabande.

On the record it had sounded like an empty house. By now it sounded like something else, and describing things is my whole job,

so I'll try: it sounds like somebody writing a letter they know they're never going to send. Crossing out. Starting the line again. Getting it right anyway, for no one.

That night I stopped pretending.

I went down the hall in my socks, and he didn't stop. He was in the wooden chair by the big window, the streetlight coming through the fire escape and laying stripes across his hands. His glasses had slid down his nose. His eyes were closed.

I sat on the floor against the bookshelves and listened.

He played it to the end. The last note went down and down and didn't so much stop as leave the room.

"You know you can come out," he said, eyes still closed. "You've been sitting against that door every night. The floor creaks. You're not a stealthy person."

"I could be stealthy."

"You hum along. Under your breath. Slightly flat."

"I do not."

"Second half. Every night." He opened his eyes. "It's all right. Nobody's hummed along in a long time."

"Why that one?" I asked. "Every night. Because there aren't any chords in it?"

He looked at me over his glasses, surprised.

"Liner notes," I said. "I had five weeks alone with your records."

"Then you know." He looked down at the long dark curve against his knee. "Everywhere else he lets you play two notes at once, three, four, so you have something to lean on. This one's a single line all the way through. Nothing underneath it." He rested his fingers on the strings. "It's very hard to play in tune. There's nowhere to hide."

"So you play it at two in the morning because it's hard."

"I play it because I can't sleep, and if I'm going to be awake I'd rather be bad at something difficult than good at something easy." He looked at me. "Do you want to try?"

"I can't play the cello."

"Nobody can play the cello. That's the first thing they tell you. Come here."

. . .

He put me in the chair.

He knelt beside me and set the cello between my knees and tipped the neck back until it rested against my left shoulder, the scroll by my ear. It was still warm from him.

"You don't hold it," he said. "You let it lean."

"Like a drunk friend."

"Exactly like a drunk friend. Give me your right hand."

He fitted the bow into it one finger at a time. His hands were cool and very exact, and the pads of the left ones were hard with calluses where they brushed my knuckles. Thumb under the stick, against the corner of the frog. "Bent," he said, when I straightened it. "Like you're holding something you don't want anyone to know about." My little finger went up on top of the stick, curved, perched.

"The pinky does the least work and gets the most credit," he said. "Every orchestra has one."

"Are you the pinky?"

"I'm the thumb. Nobody ever sees the thumb."

He kept his hand over mine. His whole hand, wrapped around the back of mine, his fingers lying exactly along my fingers. His shoulder pressed into my arm and I could smell him, soap and wool and the dusty sweetness of rosin. His breath moved the hair by my ear.

I want to be clear about this, for the record, for the court. It wasn't sexual.

It was worse.

Sexual has a script; I've written it for other people in four different voices. This had no script. This was a man holding my hand to teach it something, with all of his attention, as if my hand were the only instrument in the room.

"Don't press," he said, low. "Let your arm do it. Just your arm, falling. We're going to play the lowest string. Ready?"

"No."

"Good. Nobody is."

He drew my hand across.

The sound came up out of the floor. That's what it felt like. Up through the boards and my knees and the wood against my chest, a low, rough, enormous note that made my sternum buzz and the glass in the big window hum with it. I felt it in my teeth.

"Oh," I said.

"That's C," he said, right next to my ear. "The lowest note it has. It's the one that sounds like a building."

We did it again. And again. He let go a little each time until, on the fourth, he wasn't holding me at all, just hovering, and the note came up wobbling and entirely mine, and I laughed out loud.

"There," he said. "That's the worst C I've ever heard. You should be very proud."

. . .

We stayed like that a while. Me in the chair with the cello leaning on me, him on the floor with his back to the radiator, his glasses folded in his hand.

"Where were you," I said. "In September. When you stopped answering everyone."

He didn't make me ask twice.

"Walking. There's a coast south of Lisbon where nobody lives. Cliffs, the Atlantic, a fishermen's path along the top. The Rota Vicentina." He turned the glasses over. "I took a train to Porto Covo and walked south until there wasn't any more land. Five weeks. The end is a cape called São Vicente. People used to think it was the edge of the world. There's a lighthouse, and a man selling sausages out of a van, and then nothing until America."

"There's always a sausage."

"Always. And storks. White storks, nesting on the sea stacks, those columns of rock out in the water, right on the very tips with the waves going up underneath. It's the only place in the world they do it. Everywhere else they nest on church towers like sensible birds." He was quiet. "I watched them for a whole afternoon. I thought, I understand you completely."

"Did you have your phone?"

"Off, in the bottom of the bag. I turned it on once in a café in Aljezur and counted. My mother, eleven. My brother, forty." He looked at the glasses. "Then I turned it off and walked another week."

"Why did you come back?"

The radiator knocked, twice.

"Because of some letters," he said.

June's letters, I thought. Except June's letters had come here, under this door, into an empty apartment. They'd never been to Portugal. "Whose?"

He put his glasses back on and pushed them up with one knuckle, the way you'd close a book on your finger to keep your place.

"Some letters," he said again, gently, and that was all I was going to get.

. . .

I turned my head.

He'd come up onto his knees to take the cello, and he was closer than I'd thought. The streetlight was in his glasses, two small gold squares. I could see the place on his jaw he'd missed shaving. I could see him see me.

The cello leaned between us, its long body against my chest and his hand on its neck, the strings still faintly ringing, or I imagined they were.

He reached up, very slowly, and took his glasses off.

He folded them and set them on the sill beside Gerald Fernando, the most careful thing I'd ever watched anyone do, and looked at me without them, his eyes a little unfocused, a little naked, like a man who'd taken off the last thing between him and the weather.

I wanted him to. I won't lie about that. I wanted him to lean in, and I wanted to be the kind of woman who'd let him.

And then June was in the room.

Not really. Just her voice in the stairwell, the vending machine humming, cracker crumbs on her foxes. Has he played for you yet? Her face going still. And under that, in a drawer down the hall, eighteen for eighteen, not a single pane of the old glass.

"She asked me," I said, barely a whisper. "June. If you'd played for me yet."

He didn't move. But something went out of his face, the way the last note had gone out of the room.

"And you said."

"Every night. At two."

He sat back on his heels and put his glasses back on, and was himself again, the careful one, the thumb nobody sees.

"Yes," he said. "I suppose I do."

He took the cello from me and laid it on its side on the rug, the way you'd lay down something asleep. He stood. I sat in his chair with my right hand still curved in my lap, holding the shape of something that wasn't there.

He was almost at the couch when he stopped.

"Claire," he said, with his back to me. "Can I ask you something unfair?"

"Okay."

He turned around. In the stripes of light his face was very calm, and I'd been a ghostwriter long enough to know that calm is what people wear over the thing they can't afford to show you.

"Do you still love him?"

I opened my mouth.

I write words for a living. I've put them in the mouths of senators' wives. I had words for everything.

I sat there in his chair with my mouth open and nothing in it.

He watched me for a long moment. Then he nodded, very slightly, like a man who'd checked a note against a tuning fork and found exactly what he expected.

"That's an answer," he said quietly.

He lay down on the green couch with his back to the room and pulled the blanket up, and the radiator knocked three times and went silent, and I sat in the dark with the worst C anyone had ever played still humming somewhere under my ribs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cobble Hill

IN THE MORNING HE called me the subletter again.

"Good morning, subletter," he said, from the stove, where he was making coffee in a little dented stovetop pot he'd brought back from Lisbon in his carry-on, wrapped in a sweater, like contraband. "There's enough for two. I won't speak until you've had it. It's on the fridge."

It was. NO TALKING BEFORE COFFEE, in Wes's blocky capitals, from a month and a lifetime ago. Theo had never once mentioned the old rules. He'd written his own neatly underneath them and left Wes's exactly where they were, like a man who won't take down a picture of someone who's died.

He poured. He was ironed and shaved and perfectly pleasant. He had a rehearsal, he said, a friend's quartet needed a cellist for a wedding in Scarsdale, the bride wanted Pachelbel, he'd tried to talk her out of it and failed. He said all this to the coffee pot. Then he put on his thin gray coat and his scarf and picked up the cello and said, "Water Gerald Fernando, would you, if you're here. He looked thirsty at me."

"He always looks thirsty at you. He's manipulative."

"He's a fig," Theo said. "They're very political." And he went.

Not a word about the chair, or the C, or the glasses on the windowsill. Not a word about the question.

I filled the dented red kettle for my second cup, which I needed like oxygen, and when I lifted it off the burner the handle shifted under my hand. Just slightly. A tiny, loose, sickening give, like a tooth.

I stood there holding it.

It isn't the screw, it's the rivet.

"Oh, come on," I said to the kettle.

. . .

Priya called while I was on the F.

"Where are you? It sounds like you're inside a garbage disposal."

"The F train."

"Why are you on the F train? Nothing you need is on the F train." A pause in which I could hear her deciding. "The F goes to Brooklyn."

"It does go to Brooklyn."

"Claire. Which brother lives in Brooklyn."

I didn't say anything. The train came up out of the tunnel into gray daylight over the Gowanus, which looked like soup somebody had given up on.

"Okay," Priya said. "I'm not going to tell you not to go. I'm a doctor. I believe in harm reduction. Wear a coat. Don't sleep with anyone in a construction site, there's tetanus."

"How's Marcus?"

"He chews ice," she said darkly. "Loudly. During movies. He says 'expresso.' I've corrected him twice and he thinks it's a bit we're doing."

"So you like him."

"I'm monitoring him," she said, "the way you'd monitor a mole," and hung up.

. . .

The brownstone was on a block of other brownstones, all of them with stoops and iron railings and the air of people who'd been rich so long they'd stopped noticing. Red door. Bare window frames on the parlor floor, like a face with its glasses off.

And at the curb, two wheels up on it and a parking ticket under the wiper, an old green Ford pickup with a dent in the tailgate and a rust bloom over the back wheel the shape of Florida.

Borrowed truck, he'd said, at Danny's party, with my empty glass in his hand. I'm a man of borrowed things, Bennett. I'd thought it was charming at the time.

The red door was open a crack. I went up the stoop and pushed it.

. . .

The house was empty. Last time it had been dust sheets and plaster smell, a house in surgery. Now the floors were bare and swept and the walls were primed white and the whole parlor floor was full of light, cold November light coming in through the window openings with dust turning in it slowly, like something in water. Every window on the front of the house was back in its frame. Fourteen of them, I counted later, old glass, wavy, so that the brownstones across the street rippled in it like reflections in a pond.

Four were still out. They lay across two pairs of sawhorses in the middle of the room, and he was bent over the nearest one with a putty knife in his hand, pressing a bead of glazing putty into the edge

of a pane in one long, slow pull, the way you'd ice a cake if your life depended on it.

He didn't look up right away. He finished the stroke. He'd always finished the stroke. Then he set the putty knife down on the sill, carefully, and looked at me.

"Bennett," he said.

It came out of him like he'd been holding it in his mouth since the pier.

He looked bad. I mean he looked good, he always did, it was one of the most annoying things about him, but he looked like he hadn't slept in a week. He'd shaved, badly, a nick on his jaw. There was sawdust in his hair and in the scar through his eyebrow. He was wearing a flannel shirt I'd once worn to get the mail, and I hated that I recognized it.

"You said this week," I said. "I wanted to see one go in. Before you broke it."

"I'm not going to break it." He looked at the window on the sawhorses and then back at me. "You want me to keep working, or you want me to stop?"

"Keep working."

He picked up the putty knife. We were both grateful to give his hands something to do.

. . .

"The truck's yours," I said.

"The truck's mine." Long pull of putty. "Me and Chase Bank. We've got another two years together."

"You said it was borrowed."

"I said I was a man of borrowed things." He didn't look up. "I was standing in another guy's suit and another guy's name. The truck was the only thing I had that was mine, and I lied about that too. I don't know why. I think I just didn't want there to be anything you could check."

He set down the knife. He straightened up and wiped his hands on a rag, slowly, each finger, and then he put the rag down too, and stood there with nothing in his hands at all.

"I'm going to say this once," he said, "and then I'm not going to say it again unless you want me to, because I don't want it to turn into a thing I say to get something. Okay?"

I didn't answer. He took that as a yes.

"I lied to you about my name for three weeks. You stood in that doorway with a frying pan and you said his name and I said yes, and then every day after that I said yes again. I let you say it in the cab. I let you almost say it in bed. I let you fall for a guy who doesn't exist, and I let you do it because I wanted you to, and that's the worst part, Bennett. It wasn't an accident I couldn't get out of. I could have gotten out of it any morning. I didn't want to." He swallowed. "There isn't a reason that makes it okay. I'm not going to give you one. You'd see straight through it, and you'd be right. I'm sorry. That's it. That's the whole thing. I'm not asking you for anything."

It was the best apology anyone had ever given me, and I've ghostwritten three. That was what made me so angry.

"You don't get to be good at this," I said.

"I'm not good at it. I practiced it on the truck."

"You let me tell you about the toast." My voice was rising and I let it. "About Maddie. About the little red heart. You let me cry about being lied to. You sat there and listened to me cry about a man who

lied to me, and you nodded, Wes. You nodded."

"I know."

"Stop saying you know."

"Okay."

"And stop agreeing with me!"

"I don't know what else to do," he said, and his voice cracked straight down the middle, and he looked away at the window like it might help him. "You're right about all of it. What do you want me to do, argue?"

"Yes! I want you to argue! I want you to give me a bad excuse so I can hate it!"

"I don't have one."

"Then make one up! You're so good at that!"

That landed. I watched it land. He didn't flinch from it. He stood there in the cold light with the sawdust in his eyebrow and let it go in, the way he'd let June's hand go in on the pier, like he thought he was owed it.

I'd crossed the room. I didn't remember doing it. I was close enough to see the nick on his jaw, the stubble he'd missed by his ear, his pulse going in his throat. I had my fist in the front of his flannel shirt, my shirt, and I didn't know if I was going to shove him or hold on.

He didn't touch me. His hands stayed at his sides. That was the thing. He stood there and didn't touch me, and I could see in his face what it cost him.

I kissed him.

. . .

It wasn't gentle. It was every day since the pier of being furious at him and furious at myself for missing him, all of it at once, and it went into his mouth like I was trying to get the truth out of him by force. He made a sound against me, low and broken, and his hands came up, finally, and one went into my hair and the other went flat against the small of my back, and he walked me backward two steps and my shoulders hit the frame of one of the empty windows.

Cold air poured in behind me. I felt it on the back of my neck, the whole November street. The old wood of the casing was hard against my spine. He was so warm. He kissed me like a man who'd been starving and had promised himself he wouldn't, and was breaking the promise, and knew it, and didn't care. His thumb was on my jaw. My hands were in his shirt, his hair, the back of his neck where the hair was short and soft. I bit his lip and he groaned into my mouth and pressed me harder into the window frame, and I thought, from very far away, the way you think about something in another room: this is the brother who lied to you.

And then, closer: and this is the brother who's going to be in your kitchen tonight, ironing his shirts.

I put my hands flat on his chest. I pushed.

He let go so fast it was like I'd burned him.

He stepped back. He held his hands up, open, the way he had on the pier, a man showing he wasn't carrying anything. He was breathing hard. So was I. The cold kept pouring in through the window behind me, and I stood in it and let it.

"Okay," he said. Ragged. "Okay. That's okay."

"No, it isn't."

"No," he agreed, and laughed, once, a terrible little laugh with nothing in it. He scrubbed both hands over his face. "No, Bennett, it

really isn't."

. . .

We stood on opposite sides of the sawhorses like it was a negotiating table. The window between us lay flat, waiting for its putty.

"He's living in his own apartment," I said. "With me in it. He makes soup. He says good morning to your fig."

"It's his fig."

"Wes."

"I know where he's living." He looked down at the window. He picked up a glazing point, one of the little metal triangles, and turned it over in his fingers. "I'm not going to fight my brother for you," he said. "I want you to know that. I'm not going to do it. I already took enough from him."

I hated that it was decent. I wanted him to fight, a little. I wanted somebody, for once in my life, to make a stupid scene over me.

"Did you love her?" I said.

He looked up.

"June. Were you in love with her? Is that what it was? Because if it was, I'd understand it, a little. I'd hate it, but I'd understand it. I've written that chapter. People do terrible things for love all the time, they get book deals for it."

"No," he said.

"Then what was it?"

He took a long time. He pressed the glazing point into the wood, very precisely, with the flat of the putty knife, one small push.

"It wasn't like anything," he said.

"That's worse. You know that's worse."

"I know."

"You threw your brother's whole life in the river for something that wasn't like anything."

He didn't answer. He pressed in another glazing point. His hands were steady. His face was not.

I took the envelope out of my coat pocket. I hadn't known I'd brought it until my hand was on it, but of course I had: the first one, the one from under the door, with the black hole torn through the middle of a sentence. I held it up so he could see the line.

"What did it say," I said. "The part you crossed out. IT WASN'T what?"

He looked at the torn place in the paper for a long time.

"Something that wasn't mine to say," he said.

I waited. Nothing else came. He went back to the glazing points, one after another, pressing them in all the way around the pane, small and neat and final, like he was nailing down the lid of something.

I put the envelope back in my pocket.

"Eighteen for eighteen," I said, at the door.

"Fourteen," he said, without looking up. "So far."

"Don't break it."

"Bennett." I stopped on the threshold. He was looking at me now. "The kettle."

"It's the rivet," I said. "I know."

Something happened to his face that I didn't let myself stay long enough to read.

. . .

It was nearly dark when I got back to Perry Street. The streetlights were coming on in the trees, and Mayor the bodega cat was installed on his milk crate under the awning like a small orange judge, and the

stoop of 41 was damp and cold through my jeans when I sat down on it for a minute, because I couldn't go up yet. I had his mouth on mine still. I had the cold of that window down my back.

Mr. Ortiz opened the door behind me, looked at me, said, "Ay, mija," in a tone of deep and specific understanding, and went back in. His radio went up a notch, which in Hector is a form of tact.

I went up.

I heard the cello on the second-floor landing.

Not the Sarabande. Something I'd heard a hundred times without knowing it, in car commercials, in bank lobbies. Bright and rolling and endlessly patient, the same figure turning over like a wheel. Everyone knows that one.

But I knew it from somewhere else, too, and it took me until the third floor to remember where. A letter in a locked closet, in a neat forward-leaning hand, on a night when I'd sat on the floor of the hall with a suit hanging over me like a ghost. The first suite, the one you used to say sounded like someone walking home.

I stopped on the fourth-floor landing with my key in my hand.

It wasn't even six o'clock. He never played at six. He played at two in the morning, for nobody, for the dark.

I opened the door.

June was on the green couch.

She was still in her scrubs, the teal ones with the little cartoon foxes, with her red coat thrown over the arm of the couch and her shoes kicked off on the rug, and she was curled into the corner of it with her knees up and both hands over her mouth, crying. Not loudly. The quiet, steady, total kind, where the whole body does it and there's no sound left over.

And Theo was in the wooden chair by the big window, three feet from her, playing.

He was playing for her. There wasn't anyone else in the room for him to be playing to. His eyes were open, and they were on her, and his face was a thing I'd never seen on it, not at two in the morning, not in the chair with my hand under his.

June looked up when the door opened. She saw me. Her face crumpled even further, and she shook her head at me, a small helpless shake, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Theo saw me too.

He looked right at me, across the room, over the top of his glasses, with Gerald Fernando dark in the window behind him and the bow moving in his hand.

And he didn't stop.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What June Wants

HE PLAYED IT TO the end. It's not a long piece. I'd have sworn in court it was an hour, standing in the doorway with my key in my hand and Wes's mouth still on mine like a stamp.

When the last chord went up and hung in the room, June laughed. A wet, wrecked little laugh into her hands.

"You always rush the end," she said.

"I don't rush it."

"You rush it because you know it's coming." She wiped her face with the cuff of her cardigan, over the little cartoon foxes. "You always have."

He set the bow down across his knees. He didn't look at me. He looked at her, and she looked at him, and I stood in the doorway of an apartment where I paid the rent and felt, for the first time since October, like a guest.

"I should go," June said, to me, struggling up off the couch. "Claire, I'm sorry, I didn't know you'd be—"

"Stay," Theo said.

One word. Quiet. She stopped halfway up like he'd put a hand on her.

"I'll make tea," I said, because I'm from Ohio, and in Ohio when you don't know what to do with your face you put a kettle on.

· · ·

The kitchen in 4B is the size of a phone booth, which meant that when Theo lifted the big window from the right side, where it doesn't stick, and helped June out onto the fire escape, I was standing six feet from them with nothing between us but a pane of glass and my own decency.

The window was open an inch. It was always open an inch; the radiator ran so hot you'd die otherwise.

I filled the dented red kettle. The handle shifted in my hand again, that sick little give. I set it on the burner very gently, like it was sleeping.

I'd like to tell you I didn't listen. But I'd spent ten years with my ear pressed to the worst rooms in other people's lives, and you can't turn that off just because it's your own kitchen.

So I stood at the stove with my back to the window and listened.

Most of it I couldn't hear. The wind came up Perry Street off the river and threw the words down the block. Theo's voice, too low to catch. June's, higher, breaking in places.

Then the wind dropped, the way it does between gusts, and for about thirty seconds the street went still, and I heard it all.

"—you don't know what it cost," June was saying. "You don't. You think you do. You don't."

"Then tell me."

"I can't."

"You keep saying that. You've been saying that since January." His voice was perfectly level. That was the frightening part. "You can't.

Fine. Then tell me something you can."

A long silence. A car went by below.

"I know what I did," June said. Very quietly. I had to hold my breath to get it. "I know exactly what it was. And I'd do it again."

"Do what?" he said. "Ruin it?"

The silence went on so long I thought the wind had come back. The kettle began to tick as it heated.

"...Yes," June said.

The wind came back. It took the rest.

I stood very still at the stove with my hand on the counter.

Terrible things about themselves are the main thing people tell ghostwriters, once they trust you. And I've learned that when someone says I'd do it again about the worst thing they ever did, it's almost never pride. It's the opposite. It's someone telling you how weak they are, so you'll stop hoping. So you'll leave them, and be right to.

That's what I heard. A woman on a fire escape in November, telling the man she loved not to trust her. Not to come back. That she'd break it again, given half a chance, because that's who she was.

It was the bravest, cruelest thing I'd ever heard anybody say about themselves. I was so sorry for her I could barely stand it.

The kettle screamed. I grabbed it too fast, by the handle, and the handle twisted in my fist and nearly dumped boiling water down my leg, and I said a word that Danny Russo would have been proud of.

. . .

June came back in alone. I heard the window go down behind her. Theo stayed out on the fire escape, a dark shape against the bars, not moving.

She came into the kitchen doorway and stopped. Her face was blotchy and her eyes were swollen almost shut, and she was holding her red coat in both arms like a child she'd been handed by a stranger.

"He called me," she said. "This afternoon. He asked me to come. I didn't know you were going to walk in. I wouldn't have."

"It's his apartment."

"That's not what I asked you."

"You didn't ask me anything."

She looked at me. I'd sat in a stairwell with this woman yesterday, sharing her crackers, while she told me the worst thing she'd ever done. I'd thought, with a sloppy, grateful warmth, there she is. My friend through a door.

"Are you in love with him?" she said.

And because I'd just had his brother's mouth on mine in Cobble Hill, and because I'd just watched her cry on a couch while he played for her, and because I am sometimes not a good person, I said:

"Which one?"

She flinched. Actually flinched, like the window had banged. Then she nodded, slowly, once.

"That's fair," June said. "That's very fair."

She put on her coat in the hall and did every button with her chewed-down fingers, and she didn't look back at the fire escape, and she went.

I stood in the kitchen with two mugs of tea I'd made for nobody.

. . .

I texted her at midnight. I'm sorry. That was cruel.

At six, when her shift started: It's okay. You meant it a little. That's okay too.

And then nothing. It turns out you can lose a friend you've only had for six weeks, and that it's exactly as bad as losing one you've had for eleven years, just faster.

Theo, that night, was perfectly polite. At eleven he made pastéis de nata again, attempt ten, and they came out wrong in a brand-new way, and he stood looking at the tray like a man reading a bad review. He said good night to me, and good night to Gerald Fernando. He said nothing about the fire escape, or the chair, or the C. He played at two. I didn't go out. I wrote two thousand words of Danny's book instead, by lamplight, in bed. Misery is great for word count.

. . .

The phone rang at seven-fifteen the next morning.

Not my phone. A fat, round, old-fashioned double ring I'd never heard in that apartment, coming from the beige telephone on the kitchen wall. It had a curly cord and a rotary dial and a layer of dust on top. I'd assumed it was decorative, a charming piece of old New York that didn't actually work.

It was ringing.

Theo sat bolt upright on the green couch, hair standing up on one side, glasses nowhere, looking at the kitchen like a deer at a truck.

"Don't," he said.

I picked it up. I'm from Ohio.

"Hello?"

"Is this," said a woman's voice, crisp as a new apple, "the girl who's been keeping my son's fig alive?"

I looked at Theo. Theo was shaking his head, slowly and continuously, like a man paid to do it.

"This is Claire," I said. "Who's—"

"This is Carol Marsh. I'm the mother. Hector gave me this number. I'm the only person on earth who has it, so that phone is, functionally, for me." A pause. "Put Theodore on, please."

"He's," I said, looking at him, "in the shower."

"He's on the couch shaking his head at you."

I didn't say anything.

"I taught ninth-grade English for thirty-one years, Claire. I can hear a boy shaking his head through drywall. Put him on."

I held out the receiver. The cord stretched across the kitchen like a jump rope.

Theo looked at it for a long, terrible moment. Then he got up, found his glasses under a cushion, walked across the room in his bare feet like a man going to his own sentencing, and took it.

"Ma," he said.

I sat on the arm of the couch with my coffee. It was the best seat in the house.

"Ma. No. ... Yes, I know it's Thursday. I know what Thanksgiving is." He pushed his glasses up. "Because I'd have to talk, Ma. That's why. Because you'd sit me in the kitchen and make me a Manhattan and look at me, and I'd have to talk." A long pause. His face did something complicated. "That isn't fair. ... No, it isn't. You don't get to use Dad. ... Ma."

He put his hand over the receiver and looked at me with real despair.

"She says if I won't come to Little Compton, she'll come here," he said. "She says she'll bring a turkey on the train."

From the receiver, clearly, across the kitchen, came a voice like a fire alarm with a master's degree:

"A WHOLE TURKEY, THEODORE. ON AMTRAK. I'LL HOLD IT ON MY LAP LIKE A BABY."

I put my coffee down so I wouldn't spill it.

Theo closed his eyes.

"Ma," he said into the phone, very tiredly. "Fine. ... I said fine. ... Yes. Today. I'll rent a car." Pause. "Yes, I remember how to drive. I'm not a child, I'm a cellist." Another pause, longer. His eyes came open and landed on me. "She wants to talk to you."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you answered it," Theo said, holding out the phone.

. . .

"You'll come," Carol said.

"Mrs. Marsh, I don't think—"

"Carol. Mrs. Marsh was my mother-in-law and she was a nightmare." Crisp. Delighted. "You'll come. You kept that fig alive. He loves that fig more than he loves most people, and the people he loves, he loves too much. Hector says you named it something ridiculous."

"Gerald."

"That is ridiculous," Carol said, with deep satisfaction. "You'll come for Thanksgiving. There's room. There's always room. It's a big drafty house and my sons only fill it up with silence."

"I'm not really, I mean, I'm not family. I'm the subletter."

"Honey," said Carol Marsh, "in this family, that's practically a title."

I had the no ready. I'd built it carefully, like a little wall: Danny's staff dinner, my deadline, the fact that I had very recently kissed one of her sons against a window and nearly kissed the other in a chair.

The thing is, I can't say no to mothers. It's a known defect. My own mother uses it to make me watch eleven-minute videos of a pug named Biscuit eating a pupcake. A woman's voice on the phone asking for something, and I'm eleven in Columbus again, being good so nobody else leaves.

"Okay," I said.

"Wonderful," said Carol. "Bring a sweater. Bring two. And Claire."

"Yes?"

"Wesley will be here too. I'm telling you now so that you can't say later that I didn't." A pause, perfectly timed; you could hear thirty-one years of ninth grade in it. "Hector tells me quite a lot. Hector and I have been on the phone more this fall than I was with my husband in twenty years of marriage."

She hung up before I could say anything at all.

I hung up. Theo was at the window with his arms folded, looking out at the street.

"She does that," he said, without turning around. "Hangs up when she's won. She thinks it's dignified."

"Is it?"

"It's devastating," he said. "It's always been devastating."

. . .

Danny took it badly.

"I made you a place card," he said.

We were in his restaurant on Gansevoort in the dead hour before lunch, chairs up on the tables, the meat hooks in the ceiling, a dishwasher singing Bad Bunny in the back. Danny sat at the bar in his whites with my edits and looked at me like I'd backed over his dog.

"Danny."

"In calligraphy. I took a class, Claire. At the Y. With a nib." He held up his enormous scarred hands. "You know what calligraphy is with these? It's a bear doing surgery."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Staff Thanksgiving. Everybody who can't go home, or won't. The dishwashers, the line, the pastry kid whose mother threw her out. Forty people. I cook myself." He rubbed his face. "I put you between me and Lorraine. Best seat. Lorraine gets mean on the pie."

I sat down on the stool next to him.

"It's their mother," I said. "She asked me. On a rotary phone."

Danny was quiet for a while. The dishwasher in the back hit a high note and missed it.

"Six years," Danny said finally, to his legal pad. "My kid. Nicky. Six Thanksgivings. This year I finally call, I talk about the Mets for six minutes like an idiot, and I get a thumbs-up. So tomorrow I cook for forty people who aren't him." He looked at me sideways, his big wet face. "Go. Go to the one where they're all at the table, at least. Even if nobody talks. At least they're at the table."

"Danny—"

"Bring me back a story." He picked up his pen. "And finish the last chapter. You keep writing around it. I know what you're doing. It's the one with my kid in it, and it hasn't happened yet. I'm not stupid, Claire, I'm just a chef."

. . .

I packed as soon as I got home.

Two sweaters, like I'd been told, then a third, because Carol had sounded like a woman who meant it. Socks, more socks, a black dress in case Thanksgiving in Little Compton involved standing up. A

bottle of wine for Carol, which I agonized over in the liquor store on Hudson for twenty minutes like it was a job interview, and then a second bottle, for me, for emergencies. I knew it was going to be a two-bottle weekend. I'm not a ghostwriter for nothing. I can tell when a story's about to get long.

Priya called while I was sitting on the suitcase to close it.

"Let me make sure I understand," she said. "You're going to Thanksgiving. In Rhode Island. With both brothers. And their mother. In a house."

"It's a big house."

"Rhode Island is a state you physically cannot leave, Claire. There's one road. You'll be trapped there like a raccoon in a dumpster." I heard Judge yowl in the background, a long offended note. "Even Judge thinks it's a bad idea, and Judge licks the toilet."

. . .

At ten to one, the car rental place on Hudson Street called Theo to say that the car they'd promised him for one o'clock had come back from its last rental with a smell they described, after a long, careful pause, as "biological," and that there were no other cars, anywhere, in the whole of lower Manhattan, because it was the day before Thanksgiving and what did he expect.

He thanked them. He actually thanked them. Then he stood in the middle of the living room with his cello on his back and said, very calmly, "Well. That's the end of that, then," with such relief that I almost laughed.

"You're not getting out of it," I said.

"I was hoping the universe would get me out of it."

"Your mother will take the train. With a turkey."

He looked at me. He knew I was right. He looked like a man who'd always known that particular thing would be true.

That's when we heard the horn.

Two short blasts, down on Perry Street. Then a pause. Then one more, longer, almost apologetic.

Theo went very still.

I went to the big window. Mr. Ortiz was out on the stoop in his cardigan with his radio and his coffee, looking at the street with pure, uncomplicated joy, like a man whose horse had just come in. As I watched, he took a small spiral notebook from his pocket, licked his pencil, and wrote something in it.

At the curb, in front of the hydrant, with its engine running and white exhaust curling up into the cold from the tailpipe, was an old green Ford pickup with a rust bloom over the back wheel the shape of Florida.

The window on the driver's side came down.

Wes leaned out and looked up at the fourth floor, at the big window, at me standing in it, at the shape of his brother behind me with a cello on his back. He didn't wave. He just looked up at us through the bare branches, his breath going white, like a man who'd been asked to come and had come, and had no idea how he'd be received.

"Ma called," he shouted up. "Get in. The heater only does high."

CHAPTER NINE

I-95

THE CELLO GOT ITS own seatbelt.

I want that on the record before anything else, because it tells you everything about the next eight hours. Wes's truck was an extended cab, which meant that behind the bench seat there was a narrow shelf of space with two fold-down jump seats facing each other, the kind of seats designed for children or very forgiving dogs. Theo stood on the curb on Perry Street in his thin gray coat and looked at that space for a long time. Then he folded one seat down, laid the cello case across it on its side, ran the lap belt over the middle of it, and clicked it shut.

He tugged it twice to check.

Wes watched this from the driver's seat with both hands on the wheel and his jaw doing something complicated.

"It's not going anywhere," Wes said.

"It's a hundred and forty years old," Theo said.

"The truck?"

"The cello."

"It's been in a truck before."

"Yes," Theo said. "Yours. In 2014. Ask me how that went."

Wes shut his mouth.

That left the bench. Three people, one bench. Theo wasn't going to sit next to Wes, that was clear from the way he stood beside the passenger door like a man waiting for a different bus. Wes wasn't going to ask him to. Which meant there was only one place for me, and all three of us knew it, and nobody said it, and I climbed up into the middle with my bag on my knees and my thigh pressed against the gearshift on one side and Theo's narrow wool-covered hip on the other.

Up on the stoop, Mr. Ortiz raised his coffee to us like a toast.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" he called. "Nobody kill nobody!"

And then, as we pulled out, I saw him take the little spiral notebook out of his cardigan, lick his pencil, and cross something out.

. . .

The heater only did high.

He'd told us. He'd shouted it up four floors. But there's being told a thing and there's sitting in a sealed metal box with two brothers who aren't speaking while a fan the size of a dinner plate blows the air of a pizza oven directly onto your shins.

By the Willis Avenue Bridge I'd taken off my scarf. By the Bruckner I'd taken off my coat, which in a space that size required everyone's cooperation and nobody's eye contact. Theo cracked his window an inch. A wet freezing knife of air came in and hit me in the side of the face.

"Windshield fogs," Wes said, "if you do that."

"Then turn the heat down."

"It doesn't go down."

"Then fix it."

"I've been fixing it for six years."

"Then you're not very good at it," Theo said pleasantly, and left the window open.

The windshield fogged. Wes reached over without looking and wiped a hole in it with the side of his fist. Theo rolled the window up a quarter inch. The windshield cleared exactly enough to see the car in front of us. And that was the treaty, and we crawled into the Bronx inside it. The day before Thanksgiving, I-95 isn't a highway. It's a waiting room with exits.

I'd been in a lot of silences. I've sat in silences with a senator's wife that had their own weather. I've sat across a kitchen table from a tennis player while she decided whether to tell me about her father, and I could have boiled an egg in the time it took. But I had never sat in a silence like the one in that truck. It wasn't empty. It was full. It was packed tight with every word the two of them weren't saying, the way an attic is full, so that you couldn't move without knocking something over.

If I were writing it, I'd cut the scene. Nothing happened. Three people in a truck not talking through Westchester.

Except things did happen. Small ones. Around Pelham, Wes reached under his seat without taking his eyes off the road and came up with a box of Honey Nut Cheerios and held it out to me. My brand. The top rolled down badly. I took a handful and said thank you to the windshield.

Ten minutes later, Theo unzipped the bag at his feet and took out a napkin folded into a little square and unfolded it on his knee, and inside were three of last night's failed pastéis de nata, the ones with the custard that had split. He held one out to me without a word.

I took it. I ate it. It was delicious and it shattered all over my sweater.

So that was me, in the middle of the bench seat on I-95, being fed by both of them in turn like a zoo animal everyone was trying to make friends with.

Around Rye, Wes held out his hand, palm up, across me.

Theo looked at it.

"What," Theo said.

"Give me one."

"They're wrong."

"Give me one anyway."

There was a long pause. The wipers went. Then Theo picked up a pastel and put it, very precisely, into his brother's palm, the way you'd hand a scalpel to a surgeon you didn't trust.

Wes ate it in two bites. He drove for a while.

"They're good," he said.

"They're wrong."

"They're good wrong," Wes said, to the road.

Theo looked out his window at Connecticut. I couldn't see his face. But I saw his hand on his knee, folding the empty napkin into smaller and smaller squares, and I'd have bet the whole advance on Danny's book that it was the first thing he'd handed his brother in ten months.

. . .

It started raining in Stamford and didn't stop.

By New Haven it was coming down so hard the wipers couldn't keep up, the big trucks throwing sheets of it across the windshield as they passed. Wes pulled off at a gas station near the Branford exit, a Mobil with a mini-mart and a sign advertising HOT DOGS 2 FOR $3 in a font that seemed to be pleading. I went inside to buy water and use a bathroom that had clearly seen things. When I came out, it was

all over.

Or it had started. It's hard to say which, with brothers.

They were on the far side of the pumps, under the edge of the canopy where it stopped and the rain began, facing each other. Wes had the gas nozzle in one hand like he'd forgotten it. Theo was standing with his arms crossed over his thin coat, already soaked across the shoulders. I couldn't hear what started it. I'll never know. I've asked both of them since and they each told me a different thing, and both of them were sure.

I walked out to the truck and stood by the bed with a bottle of water in each hand like a woman holding two very small weapons.

"—don't get to do that," Theo was saying. His voice wasn't loud. Theo's voice was never loud. It had gone very clear instead, every word set down carefully, like the Sarabande. "You don't get to tell me what I was like at fifteen. You weren't there."

"I was there."

"You were in the parking lot."

Wes's face went still. "That's not fair."

"You were in the parking lot of St. Catherine's for the entire funeral," Theo said. "In his truck. With the engine running. I could hear it from inside. I played the Bach with the doors closed and I could still hear you idling out there through two sets of doors like you might leave any second, and Ma kept turning around in the pew to look."

"I couldn't go in."

"Nobody could go in. We went in."

"I couldn't watch you play it," Wes said. "Okay? I couldn't sit there and watch you play that thing over him like he was a concert."

The nozzle clicked off in his hand. Full. He didn't notice.

"And then you left," Theo said.

"I was eighteen."

"You were eighteen, and you left, and you went to Brooklyn, and I was the one who sat up with her. I was the one who knew where the checkbook was. You sent money in envelopes, Wes. Envelopes. Like a man paying a parking ticket."

"Somebody had to make money. You were playing the cello."

"I know I was playing the cello."

"I left because if I stayed I'd have turned into him." Wes jammed the nozzle back on the pump so hard the whole thing rocked. "Dead at forty-six with sawdust on my boots. I could see it, Theo. I could see the whole thing from the end. So I got out. And you stayed. You always stay. You stay, and you call it love, and then you sit up at two in the morning playing that thing like somebody died."

"Somebody did die."

That went in. I watched it go in. Wes stood there in the edge of the rain with water running off the end of his nose and didn't say anything.

The rain drummed on the canopy over our heads. A man filling up a minivan at the next pump had stopped filling it and was staring openly, with the expression of someone watching a very good show on a very small screen.

"You do this," Theo said, quieter. "You know that? You've always done it. Something breaks, and you walk in and look around and pick it up and say, mine. The window. Ma's car. The cigarettes in the garage, which were mine, by the way, which you know. You let everyone believe the worst thing about you." He pushed his wet glasses up with one knuckle. "It's your favorite hobby."

Wes looked at him for a long moment.

"It's not a hobby," he said, "if it's true."

Neither of them said anything after that.

Neither of them said her name. That's what I kept noticing, standing by the truck bed with my two waters. Twenty minutes in the rain about the funeral, and the checkbook, and the cigarettes in the garage, and the parking lot of St. Catherine's, and not once did either of them come within a mile of the thing. They walked around it like it was a hole in the floor. Every word they threw at each other was about something else, and every word was about that.

I've written that scene. I've written it four times, for four different clients, and every time I've had to go back and take the real subject out, because people never say it. They talk about the dishwasher. They talk about who forgot whose birthday in 1994. The real thing just sits in the room, underneath, holding everything up, like the C string.

The minivan man had started filming on his phone.

That's what did it.

"Okay," I said.

They both turned around. I don't think either of them had known I was there.

I walked out from under the canopy into the rain. It was freezing, the hard sideways November kind, and it hit my hair and my face and went down my collar, and I didn't care, I was so hot from the truck that it felt like a mercy. I stood between them. I had to look up at both of them, one tall and broad and dripping, one tall and narrow and dripping, the same mother's mouth on both of them.

"For the record," I said, "I have ghostwritten a reality star who thought Kafka was a yogurt. I have ghostwritten a senator's wife who described her husband's affair as, quote, a scheduling issue. I have sat

through a tennis player reading me her own diary out loud for six hours, in a voice. And this," I pointed at both of them, one finger each, "this is the worst dialogue I've ever heard in my life. It's all subtext. Nobody's saying anything. If you were my clients I'd fire you both and return the advance."

The rain came down.

"Now get in the truck," I said. "One of you is about to say 'Dad would have wanted,' and if that happens I'm walking to Rhode Island, and I'm from Ohio, and I'll die."

There was a pause.

Then Wes made a sound. It was a terrible sound, a sort of explosion through the nose, and he turned away and put his hand over his face. And Theo, beside him, looked down at the wet concrete and his shoulders started to shake, and then he was laughing too, silently, helplessly, his glasses completely fogged, holding onto the side mirror of the truck to stay upright.

They didn't look at each other. They couldn't. If they'd looked at each other, it would have stopped.

The minivan man lowered his phone, looking deeply disappointed.

. . .

We drove the rest of the way soaking wet, the heater on high, the cab full of steam like a laundromat. Theo had taken his glasses off to dry them and kept forgetting to put them back on. My jeans were stuck to my legs. Wes, for the first time since the city, turned on the radio, and it was an AM station out of Providence playing an old man's call-in show about lobster regulations, and nobody changed it.

After Providence the highway let go of us. Route 24, then the long bridge over the Sakonnet, the water underneath gone black, and then smaller roads, two lanes, then barely two, past stone walls and bare orchards and farm stands closed for the season with their signs still out. PUMPKINS. CORN. BACK IN MAY. It was dark by five. There were no streetlights. The headlights found mailboxes and stone walls and the white flash of a deer's tail going into the trees, and then nothing, and then more stone walls.

Wes drove it without looking. His hands knew the turns. At one point, without slowing, he said, "Peckham's," and Theo said, "Torn down," and Wes said, "No," and Theo said, "In April. Ma told me," and Wes didn't say anything for a mile.

The rain had stopped. The air coming through Theo's inch of window had changed. Salt in it. Wet leaves and woodsmoke and, under that, something vast and cold and moving. The sea.

Then the road dipped, and turned, and the trees opened up, and there it was.

A gray-shingled house on a rise above the water, with a long sloping lawn that went down to a dark cove and a smaller dark shape at the bottom of it, a boathouse, a squat chimney. Lights on in every downstairs window. Yellow. Old glass; I could see it ripple, even from the drive. A porch light. Smoke going straight up out of the chimney into the clear black cold, because the wind had dropped, as if the whole night was waiting to see what would happen.

Wes pulled up on the gravel and turned off the engine.

The heater stopped. The silence after it was enormous. The engine ticked, cooling. Nobody moved. Behind us, the cello sat in its seatbelt in the dark like the most patient passenger in the world.

"Well," Theo said, very quietly.

"Yeah," said Wes.

Neither of them reached for the door.

Then the front door of the house opened.

Light fell out of it, down the porch steps, across the gravel, onto the hood of the truck. A woman stood in the doorway. Small. Silver hair cut short and sharp. A long cardigan the color of oatmeal, half the buttons done wrong. Reading glasses pushed up on top of her head. And in her right hand, held at a perfect level, the way some women hold a purse, a cocktail glass with something dark and amber in it and a cherry at the bottom like a little red stone.

She came out onto the porch. She stood at the top of the steps and looked down at the truck.

At Wes, behind the wheel. At Theo, by the window, with his glasses in his hand.

And then past both of them, through the windshield, at me.

She looked at me for a long, unhurried moment, the way a ninth-grade English teacher looks at a new student in the second row. Then she lifted her glass about an inch, like a salute.

"So," said Carol Marsh, clearly, across the gravel and the cold. "You're the one who's been writing my son letters."

I opened my mouth.

On my left, Wes went completely still, both hands still on the wheel.

On my right, Theo stopped breathing.

Neither brother moved.

CHAPTER TEN

Carol

"I," I SAID, THROUGH the windshield. "Letters?"

Carol came down two porch steps in her slippers, the Manhattan held perfectly level.

"Theodore called me from Lisbon," she said, "the night he booked his flight. It was four in the morning his time and he was sitting on a hotel floor, he said. He told me he was coming home because of a woman's letters." She looked at me over the top of the truck's hood with frank, pleasant interest, as if I were a passage she'd been asked to annotate. "I taught English for thirty-one years. When a man says a woman's letters, and then a woman turns up in his truck, I draw the obvious conclusion."

"It's my truck," said Wes.

"Ma," said Theo.

One syllable, with a whole paragraph folded inside it, and the paragraph said stop.

"June wrote the letters," I said. "To the apartment. I just wrote back to her. I've never written him anything in my life."

Carol looked at me. Then she looked, for a long, still moment, at her younger son, who was looking down at his own hands.

"Did she," Carol said mildly.

Beside me, I felt Wes turn his head. Not much. An inch. Toward his brother.

I filed it with the socks, and June told me, and some letters on the floor by the radiator. A drawer of crooked picture frames. June must have written to him in Lisbon too, I told myself. Of course she had. She'd have written to him on the moon.

"Can we do this inside," Theo said, "where it's thirty degrees warmer? Claire's soaked."

"Why is everyone soaked?"

"Branford," said Wes.

"Ah." Carol nodded, as if this explained everything, which apparently it did. "You fought at the Mobil. Your father and I fought at that Mobil in 1993. He threw a windshield scraper into the woods and we had to go and look for it with a flashlight." She turned and went back up the steps. "Come in. I made chowder. Nobody's allowed to be sad until they've had chowder."

. . .

She caught Theo first, in the doorway.

She put her free hand flat on his cheek and held his face and looked at it, the way you'd hold a page up to the light to see the watermark. He let her. He stood there with his glasses fogging in the warm air of the house and let her.

"You're thin," she said. "Hector said coat hanger. Hector was being generous."

"Hello, Ma."

"Hello, my darling." Quietly. Then she let go.

Wes came up the steps behind him with all three bags and the cello case, carrying it like a bomb he'd been told was also a baby. Carol didn't hug him. She reached up, she had to reach a long way, and put her thumb on the scar through his eyebrow, and ran it along the line of it, once.

That was the hug. I could see on his face that it was the hug.

"And you," she said. "Pretending to be your brother for a month. Honestly, Wesley. If you're going to impersonate somebody, pick somebody who can't be googled."

"Noted," said Wes.

"Take the cello to the study before you drop it. You've dropped it before."

"Once."

"Once is the number of times you drop a cello," said Carol, and turned to me, and held out her hand, which was small and cold and had a grip like a vise. "Claire. Come and get warm. You can stand by the stove and drip."

. . .

The house was old the way New England houses are old, without apology. Low ceilings, wide pine floorboards worn into soft valleys in front of the sink and the stove, where people had stood for two hundred years. Books on every surface, books on the stairs, a stack of books holding a window open. Half-models of boats on the walls, a dozen of them, carved wooden hulls cut down the middle and mounted on boards, each one with a name and a year burned into a little brass plate. FRANK MARSH, they all said, and then a boat's name. CAROL, 1990. TEDDY, 1994. LITTLE WES, 1991.

A woodstove ticked in the kitchen, which smelled like clams and bacon and woodsmoke. On the sideboard, a Scrabble board sat mid-game.

"Who are you playing?" I asked.

"Myself," said Carol, ladling. "I'm winning."

She made me a Manhattan without asking. Rye, sweet vermouth, two dashes from a bitters bottle with the label worn off, stirred with a chopstick, and a cherry she'd been soaking in bourbon, she said, since before Theodore could walk. It tasted like a library on fire. I loved it immediately.

We ate at the kitchen table. Quahog chowder, thin and peppery, with johnnycakes off a cast-iron griddle. Carol talked the way the woodstove burned, steadily and without help, and the brothers sat on opposite sides of the table and said "yes, Ma" and "no, Ma" and did not look at each other.

"There were less people at the Mobil than usual," Wes said, at one point, about something.

"Fewer," said Carol, without looking up.

"Fewer people."

"Thank you."

"And what do you do, Claire? Hector says writer. Hector says it the way he says Yankees, so I gather it's serious."

I hesitated. I've had the same answer for six years. Copywriting. Bits and pieces.

"I write other people's books," I said. "Their memoirs. In their voice. With their name on the cover."

Carol put down her spoon.

"A ghost," she said, with real pleasure, the way you'd say a fox, spotting one at the end of the garden. "Oh, how wonderful. Whose?"

"I can't say."

"Good girl." She picked her spoon up again. "I taught Middlemarch to sixteen-year-olds for three decades, Claire. Do you know what I learned? Everybody's life is being written by somebody. Most people just don't get to see the drafts."

Across the table, Theo looked up from his chowder, and for a second, he looked straight at me. Then away.

. . .

"Quilts," Carol said, after dinner, washing up. "There are quilts in the cedar chest in the attic, and Claire will need two, because Theodore's room faces the water and the window has never shut properly in its life. Wesley, take her up. The ladder sticks."

"I could fix the window," said Wes.

"You've been saying that since 2009."

The attic hatch was in the ceiling of the upstairs hall, with a cord. Wes pulled it and the ladder came down in two jerks and a groan and a shower of dust, and he went up first and pulled a chain, and one bare bulb came on and swung, throwing his shadow back and forth across the rafters.

It smelled like cedar and mouse. Everything a family doesn't throw away was up there: lampshades, a crib, boxes labeled in Carol's slanted hand, XMAS, TAXES 1998–2004, DON'T. And along the far wall, under the eaves, a long workbench with a pegboard over it, and on the pegboard, every one in its own outline drawn in marker, the tools.

Planes, twenty of them, from one the size of my palm to one as long as my arm. Chisels in a canvas roll. A mallet worn smooth and dark. A drawknife. Clamps like iron question marks.

Wes stood in front of it with his hands in his pockets.

"These were his," I said.

"Yeah."

He didn't touch them. He looked at them the way he'd looked at the cello in the corner of 4B, the first night, like something asleep he wasn't allowed to wake. Then he reached up and touched one, just one, a small plane with a brass cap, put one finger on it and took it away.

"He used to let me hold that one," he said. "When I was six. I thought it was the most important job in the world. Holding it."

I didn't say anything. I'd learned that from his brother.

The cedar chest was under the window. I knelt and opened it and dug for quilts, and under the quilts there were other things, because there always are. A christening gown. A boy's blazer with a music-camp crest. A shoebox with TEDDY — SCHOOL on the lid.

I shouldn't have opened it. We've established what kind of person I am.

Report cards. A program from a recital. And folded in quarters at the bottom, a sheet of graph paper gone soft as cloth.

I unfolded it.

Pencil, in a careful, too-hard child's hand. Lines drawn with a ruler. A square on stilts, and a ladder, and little arrows. NORTH WALL. SOUTH WALL. DOOR (SMALL). A list down the side: 2X4S. NAILS (LOTS). And halfway down the list, a hole. A real hole, worn right through the paper, where somebody had erased one word so many times the graph lines were gone, and next to the hole, written again, very neatly, as if to make a point: PLYWOOD.

I sat back on my heels.

"Wes."

He turned. He saw what I had. Something went across his face so fast I almost didn't see it, and I see everything.

"You told me this," I said. "On the fire escape. In October. He spelled it wrong and he was so mad he erased a hole in the paper."

"I told you that."

"You told it true." I held the paper up in the swinging light. "You lied to me about your name, and you told me this true. Every word."

"I told you everything true except my name, Bennett." He crossed the attic and crouched beside me and took the plans out of my hands, gently, by the edges, the way he'd hold old glass. He looked at them for a long time. His thumb went over the hole.

Then he folded them along their soft old creases and put them back in the box and put the lid on.

"Not tonight," he said.

"Not tonight what?"

"There's another half to that story." He stood up. "Not tonight."

Under the shoebox there was an album, and I'd have left it, I swear, if it hadn't fallen open on its own, the spine broken in one place from being opened there too many times. A photograph. Small and square, the colors gone orange with age. Two boys on a beach.

Montauk '01. Not the copy from the closet in 4B. The original, bigger at the edges. In the closet frame, someone had cropped it down to just the boys. Here you could see the rest: the wet sand, a woman's beach bag at the edge of the frame, a white lifeguard stand behind them with a lifeguard standing up on it, looking straight at the boys. And the boys themselves, both soaking wet, hair plastered flat, the little one holding up his shell, the big one with his arm locked around his brother's neck. In the closet copy I'd thought it was a hug. Here, with the whole beach around it, it looked like something else. Like a

boy holding onto a rope.

On the back, in Carol's slanted hand: Montauk, Aug. '01. W. & T.

"Bennett," Wes said, from the top of the ladder. "You're going to freeze to death up there, and Ma will make me write the eulogy."

I took the quilts. I left the photograph.

. . .

Theo's room was at the front of the house. Narrow bed. Music stand. Stacks of sheet music on every surface, curling. A shelf of competition ribbons gone pale. And thumbtacked to the ceiling directly over the pillow, staring down at me, a poster of Yo-Yo Ma in a tuxedo with his eyes closed, in a state of ecstasy so complete it felt rude to undress under it.

"Mono," Theo said, from the doorway, when he saw me looking up. "Fourteen. Six weeks flat on my back. Ma put him up there so I'd have someone to practice with."

"Did it work?"

"I learned the whole Elgar lying down." He touched the doorframe. "Good night, Claire. Wes is across the hall. I'm in the study at the end, over the kitchen. The floors creak. Everyone in this house will know everything everyone else does all night." He paused. "That's not a warning. It's just the architecture."

. . .

I didn't sleep. Yo-Yo Ma watched me not sleep.

At midnight I gave up and wrapped myself in the second quilt and went down the creaking stairs in my socks and out the front door onto the porch, because if I was going to be awake I wanted to be awake somewhere with a sky.

He was already out there.

Leaning on the porch railing in his canvas jacket, looking down the black lawn at the cove. The cold was the hard salt kind that gets into the hinges of your jaw. Every star was out. I'd forgotten there were that many. Down at the bottom of the lawn, the boathouse was a darker shape against the dark water, and the water moved under the starlight like something breathing in its sleep.

He didn't turn around. He moved over, on the railing, about a foot.

I went and stood in the foot.

I'd come out ready for something. A fight, a kiss, a speech. He didn't give me any of it. He just stood there with his forearms on the frozen railing and his breath going out white, beside me, close enough that his arm was against my shoulder through the quilt, and he didn't move it closer and he didn't move it away.

It went on so long it stopped being silence and became a kind of saying.

I thought about the window in Cobble Hill. I thought about the parking lot of St. Catherine's, a seventeen-year-old in a running truck who couldn't go in. I thought about a small brass plane he'd been allowed to hold. Down on the water something splashed, once, and was gone.

"Bennett," he said finally. Low.

"Yeah."

He didn't say anything else. That was the whole sentence. I've had sentences translated into nineteen languages under other people's names, and I've never written one as complete as that.

My shoulder was against his arm. If I turned my head, my face would be against his jacket. I could smell it, sawdust and cold and the

truck. I could feel how still he was holding himself. A man not reaching for something with his whole body.

I turned and went inside.

He didn't follow. He didn't say my name again. I heard him stay out there a long time.

. . .

The kitchen light was on.

Carol was at the table in a quilted robe with her reading glasses on her nose, alone, with the Scrabble board in front of her and a second Manhattan at her elbow, and she didn't look up when I came in, as if she'd been expecting me at exactly this minute and I was slightly late.

"Sit," she said. "I'm bored of beating myself. Take the other rack."

I sat. The tiles were wooden and soft at the corners. She'd already poured me a Manhattan.

We played. She was terrifying. She played QUIXOTIC across a triple and didn't even look pleased about it. Ten minutes later she laid down ZEPHYRIC and folded her hands.

"That's not a word," I said.

"It's a word in this house."

"Carol, you can't just—"

"My husband once played FRANKLY and spelled it with his name." She sipped. "I let him have it. You let people have things, in a marriage. Your turn."

I played CAT. She looked at it with pity.

The stove ticked. Outside, faintly, I heard the porch boards creak, and the front door, and heavy careful feet go up the stairs, and a door close across the hall from Theo's old room.

Carol listened to all of it without moving her eyes from the board. Then she took her glasses off and set them down on the table and looked at me, really looked, and I understood where both her sons had learned it.

"June called me last January," she said.

I put down my tile.

"The night before it all happened. The ninth. It was late, past eleven. I thought someone had died." She turned her glass slowly on the table, a quarter turn, then another. "She didn't say hello. She didn't say anything about the wedding, or Theodore, or why she was calling. She asked me one question. She said, Carol, what would you give up for your sons?"

"I said, anything. I didn't even think about it. Anything." Carol looked at the black window, where the cove was. "And she was quiet for a long time. And then she said, 'That's what I thought.' And she hung up."

I sat very still.

"The next night," Carol said, "Theodore found out. And by February he was gone." She picked up her glass and didn't drink from it. "I've thought about that phone call every single day since, Claire. Every day. I taught literature for thirty-one years, and I've never once been able to work out what it means."

She looked at me across the board, across QUIXOTIC and ZEPHYRIC and my sad little CAT.

"You're a ghost," she said softly. "You work out what people mean. I thought you might like to try."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Toast, Again

I WOKE UP ON Thanksgiving to the sound of a man humming in a kitchen, and for one stupid second, before I remembered whose bed I was in, I was happy.

Then I saw the Yo-Yo Ma poster thumbtacked to the ceiling, a man in a tuxedo in ecstasy over a cello. It's a lot of eye contact before coffee.

Downstairs, Theo was at the stove in a gray sweater, and Carol was at the table in a quilted robe doing the crossword in pen. Below the yard, the cove was the flat pewter of a nickel someone had carried for years.

"He's making the stuffing Portuguese," Carol said, without looking up. "With sausage. On Thanksgiving. Frank would have had him deported."

"It's chouriço, Ma. It's from Fall River. It's practically a Pilgrim."

Carol held out a peeler to me. "Potatoes. Ten pounds. You're family until dinner; after that we'll see."

I peeled, and I thought about the porch at midnight and the man across the hall who'd stood against the frozen railing saying nothing for so long it became a kind of saying. I thought about Carol at one in

the morning with her Scrabble tiles. What would you give up for your sons? Anything. That's what I thought.

I hadn't understood it. I'd written it inside the cover of my notebook anyway, the way you pocket a stone on a beach without knowing why.

Out in the yard, the steady crack of an axe. Wes, splitting wood in a flannel shirt in twenty-nine degrees, like a man trying to get something out of his shoulders.

Theo looked out the window at him, and the humming stopped.

. . .

The guests came at four, in the blue part of the afternoon. Dottie Medeiros from next door, four foot eleven, with a sweet potato casserole under marshmallows the size of golf balls. Arthur Pell, who'd taught chemistry down the hall from Carol for thirty-one years, in a bow tie. Carol introduced me as "Claire, who saved the fig," which was apparently my title in Rhode Island.

I helped set the table under a low ceiling with a crack in it shaped like the coast of Maine. Carol's mother's china, the gold rim worn off by eighty years of forks. Seven places.

I counted twice. Six of us. The seventh plate sat at the end by the window, napkin folded, glass turned up.

I didn't ask. The widow who sets a place every year for the man who isn't coming: I thought about Frank Marsh, who built boats and died at forty-six with sawdust on his boots, and I didn't look at it again.

Wes carved. Somebody had decided this long ago and nobody had reviewed the decision. He went at the bird with his father's knife like the two of them had a long-standing disagreement.

"You're tearing it," Theo said.

"I'm portioning it."

"Then quit watching." Wes laid a slab of white meat on Dottie's plate that could have shingled a roof. He didn't look at me. He hadn't looked at me straight on since the porch, or he had, every time I wasn't looking. I couldn't tell which, and I'm good at telling.

Arthur said, "This stuffing is extraordinary," and Theo went pink to the ears, and Carol stood up with her Manhattan.

. . .

To be fair to Carol: it was her third, and both her sons were at her table for the first time in a year. Anybody would have made a speech.

"To Frank. Who should be carving, because Wesley is butchering it."

We laughed. Wes raised his glass to the crack in the ceiling.

"To my sons. Both at my table. Which I'd been told, by one of my sons, would happen at my funeral and not before."

Theo looked at his plate. Wes looked at the window.

"To Claire, who kept the fig alive while nobody else was keeping anything alive. You peel potatoes like you mean it."

"And to June," Carol said, warmly, automatically, the way you say a word you've said at the same table every year for four years, "who—"

She stopped.

The candles ticked. The wind leaned on the house. Dottie's fork stopped halfway to her mouth.

I know what a toast sounds like when it goes off the road. I was sitting in a back room in Tribeca in a champagne dress when my best friend said I know what you're like at three a.m., and I watched her face try to climb back up the cliff she'd just stepped off. Carol's face

did the same thing.

"—to June," Carol said. "The month. Which is beautiful here. The peonies. Everyone should come in June."

"Ma," said Wes.

"The roses too. Dottie, your roses."

"My roses are very good in June," Dottie confirmed, loyally.

I laughed. It got out before I could stop it, and I put my hand over my mouth, and Carol looked at me across the candles, two women who knew exactly how bad that was, and she started laughing too, helplessly, into her Manhattan.

Then Theo stood up.

He did it quietly, the way he did everything. He put his napkin beside his plate and pushed his glasses up with one knuckle, and the table went still, the way an orchestra goes still when the cellist lifts his bow.

"It's all right, Ma," he said. "I invited June. She's on her way."

Wes put down the carving knife. Very slowly, very precisely, flat on the board, the way you set down something you're afraid you might use.

I looked at the seventh plate. Not a ghost. A woman who'd sat at this table every Thanksgiving for four years. Carol hadn't set it for the dead. She'd set it on the off chance, and everyone at the table had known except Dottie, who was delighted, and Arthur, who was frightened, and me.

"When?" Wes said.

"Tuesday." Theo didn't look at his brother. "Her mother's in Tucson. She's had Thanksgiving here since she was twenty-seven. It didn't seem right to take that from her too."

Too. The word sat on the tablecloth like a dropped spoon.

And before anyone could pick it up, headlights swung across the wall, and a car door closed outside in the wind.

. . .

She stood in the doorway in the red coat.

The wind came in around her and laid the candle flames flat. Her hair was pinned up and coming down, her freckles stark the way they get when someone's gone pale under them, and she was holding an apple pie out in front of her in both hands, like a shield. The crust was burnt at one edge. She'd held it on her lap on the train from Penn Station and then in a cab from Providence.

"Hi," June said. "I'm sorry. The train sat outside New London for an hour. Happy Thanksgiving."

For half a second, before she looked at Theo or Carol or me, her eyes went to Wes. Quick, the way you check a stove you're not sure you turned off.

I filed it under guilt. What else would it be?

Then Carol was taking the pie and kissing her cold cheek, and Dottie was saying "June! Honey, you're thin as a rake," and Theo said, "Hello, June," exactly as politely as he'd said good morning to me, and pulled out the seventh chair.

That's how it explodes in a New England family. Nobody throws anything. Everybody passes the gravy.

They passed it to June, then Dottie's casserole twice, because nobody could think of anything else to do with their hands. Arthur asked very serious questions about a four-year-old who'd swallowed a magnet. Wes didn't eat. Theo ate everything on his plate in small even bites, like a man who'd decided the evening was a piece of music and he would play it to the end.

And I sat there in two pairs of socks and found out I was jealous. Of a woman who had a place set for her on the off chance, which no one had ever done for me in my life.

I was supposed to be in Greenwich tonight, eating Ryan's mother's cranberry relish, which tastes like a scented candle. Married eight weeks.

"Excuse me," I said, and picked up the open bottle of red from the sideboard, and walked out through the mudroom into the dark.

Nobody stopped me. That's New England, too.

. . .

The boathouse sat where the lawn turned to rocks, gray shingles and a door that stuck. Inside it smelled like cedar and old rope. Frank's last boat stood on sawhorses, a wooden skiff half planked, ribs showing like a whale on a beach. A woodstove, squat and black. A sagging plaid daybed under the window where, Carol said, Frank used to nap and swear he'd been thinking.

I sat on it in the dark and drank from the bottle.

The door scraped. He came in with an armload of split wood and knelt at the stove without a word and built a fire the way he did everything with his hands, without wasting a move. One match. The light came up orange on his father's boat and on his face.

"Ma sent me," he said.

"Liar."

"Okay. Ma looked at me. Same thing." He sat back on his heels. "You want me to go?"

"I want to be angry at someone, and you're here."

"I'm always here for that. Go ahead."

"He invited her. He didn't tell me."

"He didn't tell anybody. That's sort of his whole thing." Wes looked at the fire. "You're not mad he invited her. You're mad he's a good guy. It's a lot to live next to. Believe me."

"Don't be right," I said, and my voice cracked. "I'm in a dead man's shed with the guy who lied to me about his name, and his brother is up at the house being decent at me, and I used to know how everybody's story ended, and I don't even know what chapter I'm in."

He didn't touch me. He sat by the stove with his forearms on his knees and let me have the whole ugly thing, and when I ran out, he was still there, looking at me like I was the only thing in the room worth looking at.

"I'm not going to fight him for you," he said quietly. "So I'm not going to do anything. I want to be really clear about that, Bennett. I'm going to sit right here."

So I got up and went to him.

. . .

I knelt in front of him on the cold plank floor and took his face in my hands, and his eyes shut like I'd hit him, and he said "Claire," and I kissed him.

He didn't move for a second. Then his hand came up into my hair and pulled the claw clip loose, and it clattered somewhere under the boat, and he kissed me back like a man who'd been holding a door shut since the pier and had finally let go of the handle.

It wasn't gentle. Neither of us wanted gentle. He tasted like the wine and the cold. I pushed his flannel off his shoulders and he pulled my sweater over my head, and the boathouse air hit my skin like river water, and I gasped, and he wrapped both arms around me and pulled me against the heat of him until I stopped shaking.

"You're freezing," he said into my neck.

"Then fix it."

He laughed, low and wrecked. "Yes, ma'am."

He stood up with me wrapped around him, as if I weighed what the firewood weighed, and carried me the three steps to the daybed and laid me down on old plaid wool that smelled like woodsmoke and his father's pipe. The springs complained. The fire popped. He knelt over me in the orange light and looked, and I let him. I'd thought I might have forgotten what it felt like. You don't. Your body keeps the receipts.

"Tell me to stop," he said, "and I'll stop. Anytime. I'll go chop more wood."

"You've chopped enough wood for a decade."

"I'll chop the boat."

"Wes." I pulled him down by his belt. "Don't stop."

He kissed his way down my throat and my collarbone, slower now, the scrape of his jaw and then the warmth of his mouth, and I arched up and held the back of his head. His hands were cold at first and then they weren't. He knew where everything was. That was the worst part and the best part. Two weeks apart, the pier, his name, and his hands still knew exactly where on my ribs to press and how slow to go at my hip and the place under my ear that made me say his name. So I said it. His real name, out loud, like this, for the first time.

He stopped and put his forehead on my sternum and breathed.

"Say it again."

"Wes."

"Again."

"Wes. Get up here."

We got the rest of our clothes off badly, laughing, his boot caught in his jeans, my socks staying on because some things are sacred. The stove threw heat in waves, so one side of me burned and the other was cold, and he was everywhere in between.

Then he went still above me, braced on his forearms, and I knew why.

He didn't have anything. Neither did I. I hadn't taken a pill since sometime in October, when I'd stopped doing anything I didn't absolutely have to, including answering my phone and believing people. We both knew it. We looked at each other in the firelight and knew it the way you know a stove is hot, and he opened his mouth to say something sensible, and I put my hand over it.

"I know," I said.

"Bennett."

"I know. Do you care?"

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he shook his head slowly against my palm and kissed the inside of my wrist.

We were being reckless, and we both knew it, and we didn't stop.

He came into me so slowly, his eyes on mine, and we made the same sound at the same time, half laugh and half something broken. Then he didn't move at all. He held there with his whole body shaking, his face in my hair, until I wrapped my legs around him and said into his ear, "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. Move."

It was nothing like the first time on Perry Street, when he'd been so terrified of doing it wrong. This was the opposite of careful. This was two weeks of not, of the pier and the letters in capitals and the window frame in Cobble Hill, all of it at once. The old daybed groaned under us. The wind found a loose shingle and rattled it. I held his shoulders, then the back of his neck, then the plaid wool in

both fists, and he said my names, both of them, Claire and Bennett, like he couldn't decide which one he was allowed, and I wanted both.

I came apart with my mouth against his shoulder so I wouldn't shout, long and bright and almost frightening, and he held me through it, and followed me with a sound I felt in my own chest, his arms locked around me like the boathouse was putting out to sea.

Afterward we lay there with our hearts going like two people running in different directions.

That's when I started crying.

Not the pretty kind. The kind that comes up from under your ribs and has nothing to do with the person in front of you and everything to do with them at once. Ryan and the relish. June in the doorway with the pie. Theo pulling out the seventh chair. A boy carving a turkey with a dead man's knife.

He didn't say anything.

He didn't say it's okay, or what's wrong, or I'm sorry. He didn't ask if it was him. He pulled the old wool blanket off the back of the daybed and wrapped it around us both and held me against his chest with one big hand flat on the back of my head, and let me do it, for as long as it took, the way you'd let rain come down.

It was the rightest thing anyone had ever done for me.

. . .

It was two in the morning when we walked back up.

The frost crunched silver under our feet. Wes walked beside me with his hands in his pockets, close enough that our arms touched. He never once tried to take my hand. I loved him for that too, and hated that I did.

Halfway up the yard, I looked at the house.

A light was on upstairs. The little room at the end of the hall, over the kitchen, the one that looked straight down the lawn at the boathouse door.

And in it, a man. Slight. Still. A gray sweater. The lamplight caught on round wire glasses.

He wasn't hiding. He stood there looking down at the two of us in the frost.

Wes stopped walking. I kept looking up, and Theo kept looking down, and for one long second nobody in the whole cold world moved.

Then he reached over, and the light went out.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Black Friday

THEO WAS PERFECTLY POLITE in the morning, which was the worst thing he could possibly have been.

I'd have taken anything else. Silence. A slammed cupboard. A cello played at a volume that rattled the china. Ryan, when he was angry, used to reply to my texts with a single period, and I'd have taken a period. Instead I came down at eight in yesterday's sweater with my hair still smelling of woodsmoke, and Theo was at the stove making eggs, and he turned around and said, "Good morning, Claire. Did you sleep?"

Like a concierge. Like a very kind man at a very good hotel.

"Some," I said.

"There's coffee." He poured it for me before I could reach. He put in exactly the right amount of milk, which he'd learned in twelve days of standing next to me in a kitchen the size of a phone booth, and he slid it across the counter and gave me a small, pleasant smile, and went back to his eggs.

I stood there holding the mug. It was the perfect temperature. I wanted to throw it at him.

Out the window, Wes was already on the porch steps with a pry bar and a coffee can of nails, ripping out a tread that had gone soft. He'd been out there since six; I'd heard the first board come up while I was lying under the Yo-Yo Ma poster, not sleeping, counting the cracks in the ceiling. He hadn't come in. I didn't blame him. I'd have stayed out there too.

June came down at eight-thirty in one of Carol's old robes, with a pillow crease on her cheek and her eyes swollen. Carol had put her in the den on the pullout, under an afghan the color of canned peas. She looked at me. I looked at her. We both looked at the coffee.

"June," Theo said, turning off the burner. "Walk with me?"

She went very still. Then she nodded, and went to find her boots.

He put a plate of eggs in front of me on his way out, with toast cut corner to corner, the way you'd do it for a child who was sick. "Salt's by the window," he said. "Ma hides the pepper. It's a long story."

Then he took his coat off the hook and held the door for June, and they went down the frozen lawn together toward the water, not touching, a careful two feet of cold air between them.

I ate the eggs. They were perfect too.

. . .

"You smell like the boathouse," Carol said.

She was beside me at the counter in her robe and reading glasses, cutting cold butter into flour with two knives, very fast. We were making hand pies out of the leftovers, which was apparently a Marsh Black Friday tradition, along with not shopping and "reading something improving." There was turkey and stuffing and the last of the cranberry in bowls all over the counter, and a radio on low with somebody explaining tides.

I stopped rolling. "I..."

"The stove smokes when the wind's from the northeast. Frank never fixed the flue. Forty years. He'd come up to bed smelling like a ham." She didn't look at me. She pushed the bowl toward me. "Ice water. A tablespoon at a time. Don't drown it."

I added water. A tablespoon at a time. My face was the temperature of the oven.

"Carol, I'm so..."

"Honey." She put down her knives. "I'm sixty-one. I taught Romeo and Juliet to fourteen-year-olds for three decades. Whatever you're about to apologize for, someone did it worse in iambic pentameter, and it's not my business, and I'm not going to make it my business. All right?"

"All right."

"Good. Now roll."

From the window over the sink you could see the whole cove. The tide was out and the beach was a long gray crescent of stones and frozen weed, and two figures were walking slowly along it, the red coat and the gray one. June was talking. You could tell from up here; her hands kept coming out of her pockets. Theo walked with his head down and his hands behind his back, like a man in a museum.

"He walks like his father when he's deciding something," Carol said. "Frank used to walk the beach for an hour before he bought a can of paint."

"What's he deciding?"

"With Theodore? Usually whether to forgive somebody." She pressed a round of dough into a tin with her thumbs. "He always does, in the end. It just takes him a geological era."

Down on the beach, June stopped walking. Theo stopped too. She put her hand on his arm, and he looked at it, and he let it stay for a second, two, three. Then he stepped back, gently, and it fell.

I turned back to the dough.

"Can I tell you something about my sons?" Carol said.

"Please."

"When Frank died, Wes was seventeen and Theo was fifteen. Heart attack. In the boathouse, actually, at his workbench, which I'm telling you so you'll know I'm not precious about the place." She didn't look up. "That spring, somebody put a dictionary through the kitchen window. The big Webster's, off my desk. Glass all over the sink. Wes said he did it. Two weeks later somebody backed this car, the Volvo, into the mailbox post and caved in the tailgate. Wes said he did that too. Then I found cigarettes. Marlboro Reds, out in the garage, in the pocket of Wes's jacket. He said they were his."

"Were they?"

"Wes was on the track team. Wes could run a mile in four fifty-eight. Wes has never smoked a cigarette in his life." She pressed the edge of a pie closed with a fork, tine marks all the way around. "It was Theo. All of it. Theo, fifteen, who'd never broken a rule in his life, who used to apologize to the furniture. He was so angry he didn't know what to do with it. He threw my dictionary through a window because he wanted to hear something break. And his big brother walked into the kitchen every single time and said, 'That was me, Ma.'"

The radio said something about a low-pressure system off Nantucket.

"Did you know?"

"Of course I knew. I'm his mother." She set the fork down. "I let Wes do it. Theo needed somebody to carry it, and Wes wanted to be the one, and I was so tired, Claire. I was so tired that year I let my seventeen-year-old be the man of the house. That's mine. I don't let anybody else take that one."

She looked out the window at the beach, at the two figures, and then down, at the porch, where the sound of a hammer had started up again.

"Wes has always paid for things he didn't buy," she said. "Ever since. He walks into a room and looks around for the broken thing so he can say it was him."

I thought of the pier. I slept with my brother's fiancée. His hands out of his pockets, open, showing he wasn't carrying anything.

I thought: well, he's buying this one, at least. This one he did.

I didn't say it. I crimped my pie, badly, and Carol took it from me and fixed it without comment, the way you'd fix a student's comma.

. . .

I brought Wes a coffee at eleven.

He was kneeling on the bottom step with a pencil behind his ear and his breath smoking, fitting a new tread of raw yellow pine into place. He sat back on his heels when he saw me and took the mug in both hands and didn't say anything for a while.

"You okay, Bennett?"

"Don't."

"Okay." He drank. "That's fair."

"Are you?"

"I'm fixing a step." He ran his thumb along the edge of the new board, checking it, the way you'd check a child's forehead for fever.

"I'm going to stay a couple days. Ma's steps are a lawsuit. Then the back door sticks, and the boathouse flue." He glanced up. "You can take the Volvo back with Theo. It's got a good heater. Better than mine, which I know you'll miss."

"Wes."

"I'm not running away. I want to be clear about that." He set the mug down on the porch rail. "I just figure you two need to be in a car without me in the middle of it. For once."

I sat down on the top step, the one he hadn't torn out yet. The cold came straight through my jeans.

"About last night," I said.

"Yeah."

"I don't know what it..."

"It's not a bill." He said it very simply, looking at the board, not at me. "Last night. It's not a bill. You don't owe me anything for it. Not a phone call. Not a decision. Nothing. You hear me?"

I heard him. I didn't know what to do with it. Nobody had ever handed me anything without the invoice attached.

"I hear you," I said.

"Good." He took the pencil from behind his ear and made a mark on the board, and then he looked up at me, finally, straight on, the scar through his eyebrow white with cold. "He's down there telling her she's forgiven. You know that, right? That's what he does. He'll walk her up and down that beach until he can say it and mean it."

"And you?"

Something went across his face too fast to read. He bent back to the step.

"Nobody's forgiving me, Bennett," he said. "That's not how it works. Hand me that level."

. . .

Carol drove June to the train in Providence at one. June hugged me at the car door, quickly, her cheek cold against mine.

"He's a terrible passenger," she said. "He'll want to drive. Let him. He narrates the exits."

"Are you okay?"

She laughed, which was not an answer. Then she looked over my shoulder, at the porch, at Wes on his knees with the hammer, and her mouth did something I couldn't read, and she got in the car.

Theo carried our bags out to the Volvo at two. It was a 1998 wagon the color of a filing cabinet, with a dent in the tailgate that had been there, I now knew, for seventeen years, and a cassette of Middlemarch stuck permanently in the tape deck at side four.

Carol stood on the new step in her coat and kissed us both. "Bring it back at Christmas," she said. "The car. And yourselves. In that order, if you have to choose."

Then she held my face in both her cold hands for a second, like she was reading it, and let go.

Wes raised a hand from the porch. Theo raised one back. That was it. That was the whole goodbye between the two of them, after a year and a fight in the rain at the side of I-95 and a woman walking up from the boathouse at two in the morning. Two raised hands.

New England.

. . .

Theo drove, and he did narrate the exits. Not out loud. Under his breath, a small murmur at each green sign, Fall River, Swansea, Seekonk, like a man saying a rosary. I didn't think he knew he was

doing it.

For a long time, that was all.

Rhode Island went by, all bare trees and brown marsh and gray water flashing between them. Then Connecticut, which went on forever, the way it does, as if it's being paid by the mile. The sun went down somewhere around New London in a long smear of orange, and the cold came in through the floor of the Volvo, and the heater, which was in fact very good, roared like a hair dryer. I sat with my feet on the dashboard in two pairs of socks and looked out the window and tried to write him.

If I were writing him, I'd say he was furious. That's what the scene wanted. The polite man with the knife behind his back.

But I didn't believe it. I'd been watching him for twelve days across a kitchen the size of a phone booth, and I'd seen him annoyed, and amused, and so tired he fell asleep sitting up with the bow still in his hand. I'd never seen him furious. I'd seen him something else, at the window last night, with the lamp behind him. I'd seen him look like a man watching a house he used to live in get sold.

At a rest stop outside Madison he got us both coffee and a bag of pretzels and came back to the car and handed me mine, milk, the right amount, and sat down behind the wheel and didn't start the engine.

"I'm not angry," he said.

I looked at him.

"I'd like to be. It would be much simpler. I had a whole speech in Westerly." He turned his cup in his hands. "But I don't have any standing, Claire. You don't belong to me. You're the subletter. You've known me twelve days. You knew him first."

"Theo."

"I'm not finished." He said it mildly, but he said it, and I shut my mouth. That was the thing nobody tells you about gentle men. They're not pushovers. They've just decided, a long time ago, not to raise their voice, so when they do say I'm not finished, it lands like a door closing. "I was awake. I'm always awake at two. I went to the window because I heard the boathouse door, and I thought it might be Ma, and I didn't want her going down those steps in the dark. And it wasn't."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be anything else." He started the engine. "Just not sorry. I've had a year of people being sorry at me. It's like being pelted with pillows."

We pulled out onto 95. The dark came down for good.

. . .

Somewhere past New Haven, he started to talk.

Not about last night. About the beach. June had said she was sorry, and he'd said he knew, and they'd walked a mile on the stones saying versions of that to each other until it wore smooth, like sea glass.

"She asked me if I was happy in Lisbon," he said.

"Were you?"

"I don't know the Portuguese for it. I learned saudade first. That tells you something." The headlights of a truck coming the other way swept across his glasses. "I played better than I've ever played in my life. I want you to know that. That's the strange part. I was more miserable than I'd ever been, and I played like someone else. Like someone who'd been let out of a room."

He was quiet through Bridgeport.

"Then I stopped answering. In September. You know that."

"The coast," I said. "The storks."

"Five weeks. I walked until my boots fell apart. I had a phone and I didn't charge it. I thought..." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. "I don't actually know what I thought. That if I walked far enough I'd come to the end of something. And then I came back to Lisbon, to the hotel, and the orchestra office had a box of my mail. Six weeks of it. And most of it was nothing. Bills. A dentist in Chelsea who wants me to know it's been a year."

The Stamford exits went by. He didn't narrate them.

"And there were these envelopes," he said. "Manila. Big ones. Addressed to me care of the orchestra, in June's handwriting. Nothing else on the outside. No note inside. Not one word from her."

Something cold went down the back of my neck that had nothing to do with the Volvo.

"Theo."

He kept his eyes on the road. Both hands on the wheel, ten and two, the way you're taught. His voice didn't change at all. That was the worst of it, how level it was, like a man reading the next line of a score.

"I read every letter you wrote to June," he said. "All of them. She sent them to me. That's why I came home."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Copies

THERE'S A PARTICULAR KIND of silence you get in a car going seventy miles an hour on I-95 at night, when one of you has just said the truest thing in the world and the other one can't get out.

I sat in it for about a mile. Darien went by. A truck full of Christmas trees, wrapped tight in netting like a hundred green mummies, passed us on the right.

"All of them," I said.

"All of them."

"The first one. The one I taped to the door."

"He isn't here. He's sublet the apartment and I don't know where he is. I'm so sorry. The subletter." He said it the way you'd recite a phone number you'd dialed a lot. "June copied the tape too. You could see the edges of it on the photocopy. Little gray stripes."

I put my feet down off the dashboard. I needed them on the floor. I needed something to be on the floor.

"The toast," I said. "Maddie. The heart emoji."

"Your friend should have to live inside that heart emoji forever, like a curse in a fairy tale. That was June's line, but you quoted it back to her, so I got it secondhand." He didn't smile. "The caterers. When

your life ends, the caterers still want to know about the chairs. I laughed at that one out loud. On a hotel floor in Lisbon, at four in the morning. The man in the next room banged on the wall."

"Biscuit's ear infection."

"Biscuit's ear infection was a low point for both of us."

I made a sound. I don't know what it was. Something between a laugh and a car alarm.

"The socks," I said. "That day at the sink. You said June told me."

"She did." He changed lanes, signaled first, checked his mirror twice. "Through you. I thought it was technically true. I'm not proud of it. I've been living with a lot of people who say technically true things lately, and it's catching."

I looked at him. His profile in the dashboard light, the round glasses, the stubble he'd let come back since Thanksgiving.

"You read a man swearing at your radiator," I said slowly. "In my letters. After he came."

"I've never sworn at a radiator in my life. I apologize to that one; it's a hundred and ten years old." Now his mouth moved, barely. "I knew exactly whose boots were on my couch, Claire. I knew it on the hotel floor. There's only one man alive who'd call a radiator a cast-iron son of a bitch and then fix it for free."

"Pull over."

"We're on 95."

"Then get off 95."

He got off 95. He did it carefully, signaling, at the next exit, which was Port Chester, which is not a place anyone has ever had a revelation. He pulled into a Mobil station under the white lights and stopped by the air pump, and I got out of the car and stood in the cold with my arms wrapped around myself and breathed.

Here is what I felt. For the record.

I felt like someone had read my diary out loud on the radio. I felt like the walls of 4B had been made of glass the whole time and I'd been walking around in Ryan's old boxers, crying on the floor, writing things to a stranger through a door because the door was the only thing in my life that couldn't repeat them. Those letters were the most private things I'd ever written. Five bestsellers, and the only true sentences I'd put on paper in years had been for a nurse I'd never met, and they'd gone to Portugal in a manila envelope.

And under that, quieter, worse: a man had read them on a hotel floor and gotten on a plane.

Nobody had ever crossed a street for anything I'd written under my own name.

It was thirty-four degrees. I lasted about four minutes. Then I got back in the Volvo, and he handed me my coffee without a word, and we drove the rest of the way to Perry Street with Middlemarch stuck in the tape deck, saying nothing at all.

At the top of the stairs, outside 4B, he got out his key and then stopped with it in his hand.

"You're allowed to be furious," he said. "I'd like you to know that. I'd be furious."

"I am."

"Good." He opened the door for me. "Somebody in this family should be, out loud."

That night, for the first time since he'd come home, there was no cello at two. I lay awake and waited for it, and the silence was so loud I put the pillow over my head.

. . .

I texted June on Saturday morning from the diner on Hudson Street, the one with the three coffees. I ordered one this time. I was proud of that.

Bench. Tomorrow. 10.

She wrote back in under a minute. I'm always there.

I spent the day in the corner booth with Danny's manuscript, the chapter about the summer his first restaurant burned down, and I wrote nothing. I kept thinking about envelopes. About June at some copy machine with my handwriting on the glass, closing the lid, pressing the green button, watching that bar of light go across my worst week. Again and again. Every single time.

You don't do something like that once. You do it like a shift.

. . .

Sunday was gray and wet, the river the color of a pencil drawing, the gulls sitting on the railings with their shoulders up like old men at a bus stop. The pier was nearly empty. The tai chi man was there, unbothered by anything, moving through the drizzle like it was a choice he'd made.

June was on the last bench in the red coat with two coffees.

She held one out to me as I came up. I didn't take it. Then I did, because it was cold and I'm not a monster, and I sat down at the far end of the bench, as far as the bench went.

"He told you," she said.

"In the car. Outside Stamford."

She closed her eyes. "He told me on the beach that he was going to. I asked him not to. He said he was done with people deciding what he could say." She opened them again and looked at the river. "That's fair."

"How many?"

"All of them." She didn't pretend. I'll give her that. She didn't do the thing people do, the throat-clearing, the well, it depends what you mean. "Every note you ever wrote me, from the first night. I took them to the FedEx on Third Avenue on my way to work and copied them. Two copies. One for me, because I couldn't stand to let go of yours, and one for him. I put them in a big envelope and sent them to the orchestra. Orquestra do Tejo, care of the administration, Lisbon. Every week."

"With what?"

"Nothing."

"No letter?"

"No letter. His name on the front. Nothing inside but you." She turned her coffee cup around in her chewed fingers. "I didn't even know if he was getting them. They didn't come back. That's all I knew. I'd send one and it wouldn't come back, and I'd think, well, somebody's got it. Somebody in Lisbon has your socks."

"June."

"I know."

"Those were mine." It came out much louder than I meant. The tai chi man paused, one foot in the air, then continued. "Do you understand? I didn't write those for him. I didn't write them for anybody. I wrote them because you were on the other side of a door and you didn't know me, and you weren't Maddie and you weren't Ryan and you weren't my mother, and there was nobody on earth I could say those things to except a stranger. That was the whole point. That was what made it safe. You were a stranger."

"I know."

"Stop saying you know."

She stopped. She sat very still with her coffee, and the drizzle put tiny beads on the shoulders of her red coat, and she waited, like a nurse waits, for me to finish being in pain so she could do something about it.

"Why?" I said finally.

She was quiet so long I thought she wasn't going to answer.

"You made him laugh," she said. "He told me on Friday, on the beach. A hotel floor at four in the morning, and the man next door banging on the wall." Her voice went, and came back. "I hadn't heard him laugh in ten months, Claire. Not since January tenth. Not once. I used to be able to make him laugh by doing nothing. Walking into a room. Mispronouncing Dvořák. And then I couldn't. I'd done the one thing that meant I never could again. And then this woman moved into his apartment and started writing me about a fig named Gerald and five gray stars from a wedding venue in Dumbo, and I sat on my kitchen floor and laughed until I cried, and I thought: he'd love this. He'd love her. And I couldn't give him anything of mine. So I gave him you."

The wind came off the river and took the steam off both our coffees.

"I couldn't write to him," June said. "I could only send you."

I looked at her. At her wrecked face, the freckles, the nails chewed to the quick.

"You wrote to him every week," I said. "For ten months. You slid them under his door. I've read them. I've got a stack of them on his kitchen table."

"Under the door of an empty apartment." She almost smiled. "That's not writing to someone. That's praying out loud. It doesn't count if nobody's there."

"So why couldn't you just write him a letter? A real one? To Lisbon?"

And here's the thing I keep going back to. Here's the moment I'd circle, if I were editing this, in red, with a question mark in the margin.

June's face closed. Not slammed. Closed, gently, the way you close a door on a sleeping child.

"I promised someone I wouldn't," she said.

I thought I understood. Of course I did; I'd been living with him for two weeks. He'd put his hand up, she'd told me once, whenever she tried to say the name. He'd left the country rather than hear it. Of course he'd made her promise. Don't write. Don't call. Let me go.

"He asked you not to," I said.

She looked at the river. "Something like that."

"So you found a loophole. Me."

"Yes."

"That's very Catholic of you."

That got a laugh out of her, a wet, startled one. "I'm Methodist."

"That's worse. Methodists are supposed to be reasonable."

She laughed again and then she was crying, quietly, the way she seemed to do everything, without fuss, wiping her face with the heel of her hand. And I sat at my end of the bench, furious, my coffee going cold, and found out that I couldn't hate her. I tried. I'm a professional; I've built whole chapters on less. But she'd sent my worst week across an ocean because she thought it would make a man she'd hurt laugh, and it had, and he'd come home. It was the most devious and loving thing I'd ever heard of.

I felt used. I also felt, for the first time in my whole invisible life, read.

They're not as different as you'd think.

"I'm still angry," I said.

"Good," June said. "Be angry. Somebody should be, out loud."

I turned and looked at her. Theo had said that. Almost exactly. On the landing outside 4B, with his key in his hand.

She didn't notice. She was looking at the end of the pier, at the gray water, at the place where, I knew, a man had once asked her a question.

. . .

"So," Priya said. "A cellist fell in love with you through a photocopier."

"He didn't say fell in love."

"That's the most romantic thing I've ever heard, and I'd like to report it." She was on the floor of her apartment in Astoria in scrubs, with her back against the couch and a bowl of cereal on her knees, after a twenty-six-hour shift. Judge was on the windowsill, regarding me with the contempt of a magistrate. "To whom, I don't know. The authorities. Somebody at the post office."

"He read my mail, Priya."

"June stole your mail. He just opened it. Legally, that's a very different thing. I watched a lot of Law and Order in med school instead of studying." She ate a spoonful of cereal. "Claire. Listen to me. A man sat on a floor in Portugal and read six weeks of you. Your jokes. Your dog thing. Your ex. And then he bought a plane ticket. People don't cross oceans for a good pen pal."

"He came home because his mother was calling him eleven times a day."

"His mother's been calling him since February. He came home in November. What changed in November?" She pointed the spoon at me. "You. You changed in November. You're the new variable. I'm a scientist."

"You're a doctor."

"It's adjacent."

I put my head back against the couch and looked at the ceiling, which had a water stain on it shaped vaguely like a duck.

"How's Marcus?" I said, because I couldn't do this anymore.

Priya brightened in the specific way she only did when discussing his failings. "Marcus claps when the plane lands. Marcus has a favorite font and will tell you what it is. Marcus owns a boat, a small one, on Long Island, and he refers to it as she, and once, in my presence, he said 'she's a thirsty girl' about the gas tank."

"So you're in love."

"I'm in something. It's worse than love. It's interest." She set the bowl down for Judge, who descended from the sill without hurrying and began to drink the milk like he was doing us a favor. "And you slept with the other one. In a boathouse. On Thanksgiving."

"How do you..."

"You've said boathouse four times since you walked in. Every time, you looked at the floor." She leaned her shoulder against mine. "I'm not judging. Judge is judging. That's what he's for."

. . .

I got home at eleven. Theo was on the green couch in a sweater with a book open on his chest, Anna Karenina, a paperback so old the spine was mostly an idea. Gerald stood guard by the window. The radiator ticked.

He looked up. "How was the pier?"

I stopped in the doorway with my coat half off. How was the pier, Bennett. A different voice, a different man, the same couch.

"Wet," I said.

"Is she all right?"

"No. Yes. She's Methodist."

He considered this. "That explains a great deal, actually."

I went to bed. I lay in his bed in the dark, under his ceiling, in my socks, and listened. The radiator. The pipes on two. A cab on Perry Street, splashing. No cello at two. Not that night either.

I wasn't asleep at 12:40. I hadn't been asleep at 12:40 in two months; my body had been trained like a dog to listen for it. But I wasn't waiting for anything. Wes was in Rhode Island, fixing his mother's steps. Nobody else on earth had a reason to come up four flights in the cold at that hour.

And nobody did.

The sound came from much closer than the front door.

The whisper of paper on wood. Not the long slide across the floorboards of the hall. Ten feet away. My door. The bedroom door, with the green couch on the other side of it.

I sat up.

An envelope lay on the floor just inside, pale against the dark boards, a little crooked, as though it had been pushed through by someone who wasn't sure if he was allowed.

I got out of bed and knelt and picked it up and held it to the gray light from the window.

Not capitals. Not that blocky, furious, carpenter's print that pressed through the paper like it was carving it.

A patient hand. Rounded letters that leaned a little forward, like they were listening. The handwriting from the closet. The handwriting from forty-three letters to a woman who'd never read them.

In the top corner, small and neat, a number.

No. 1 — Dear Subletter.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dear Subletter

I READ IT ON the floor, where I'd picked it up, with my back against the bed and the streetlight coming in gray through the window.

No. 1

Dear Subletter,

I owe you a letter. I've owed you one since October, which in fairness is longer than I've owed anyone anything, including the dentist in Chelsea.

I should tell you how I read them. I was sitting on the floor of a hotel room in Lisbon with my back against the bed, because the chair was covered in my laundry and I am, apparently, that kind of man now. I meant to read one. I read all of them. In order, until the window went gray. Somewhere around the caterers and the chairs I laughed out loud, and the man in the next room hit the wall with something heavy, probably a shoe, and I put my hand over my mouth like a boy in church and kept reading.

You wrote that you didn't know who you were anymore. You were wrong. I could have picked you out of a crowd by the third page. You're the woman who names other people's plants without asking.

You're the woman who says sorry to strangers through a door. You're the woman who sleeps in two pairs of socks and makes a joke about it before anyone else can.

I didn't come home for June, or for Wes, or even for Ma, though I'd never tell her that. I came home to see who'd been keeping the lights on.

I'm not asking you for anything. I'm asking if I may write back, eight weeks late.

If you'd rather I didn't, leave the kettle where it is. If I may, move it to the left burner.

Gerald Fernando sends his regards. He's not speaking to me. He's been very clear about whose side he's on.

— T.

I read it four times. At six-fifteen, when the sky over Perry Street was the color of dishwater, I got up in my socks and tiptoed past the green couch, where a slight man was asleep on his side with one arm over his eyes and his glasses folded on the floor beside him like a small sleeping animal, and I went into the kitchen.

The dented red kettle was on the right front burner. Where it always lived.

I picked it up by the handle another man had fixed, and moved it to the left.

Then I went back to bed and pulled the sheet over my head like a teenager, and listened.

At seven he got up. I heard him fold the blanket. I heard him go into the kitchen. I heard him stop.

A long pause.

Then the tap running, and the kettle filling, and the click and whoosh of the gas on the left burner, and, very low, so low it was almost just a man breathing, the humming.

. . .

That's how it went that week. I'm a ghostwriter. I know an epistolary courtship when I'm living in one.

He slid them under the bedroom door at 12:40, every night. He'd read about the time, of course. I wrote back in the mornings and left mine under the kettle, wherever it was, and by the time I got out of the shower it was gone and the coffee was made.

During the day we were polite, almost formal. We said things like "There's bread," and then at 12:40 a man who'd said "There's bread" would slide four pages under my door about the first time he heard Jacqueline du Pré, or the fishermen in Ericeira, or the time he and his brother tried to sail their father's skiff to Block Island and got as far as the end of the dock.

No. 2

Dear Subletter,

You asked what Lisbon sounds like. I'll try.

Trams. Yellow ones, older than this building, that grind up the hills complaining like Ma on stairs. Gulls that scream as though they've been personally wronged. Washing snapping on lines between windows. And everywhere, in every bar after midnight, someone singing fado, which is a kind of song about a thing you've lost, sung by a person who has decided not to get over it. They have a word for that feeling, saudade. It's the first Portuguese word I learned. I learned it before "bread." I learned it before "please."

I'd like to learn some different words now. I'm not sure what language they're in.

You also asked, in your note this morning, very politely, under the kettle, why I didn't play at two this week. The honest answer is that I didn't know if you wanted to hear it. In the letters you said you lay on the floor and listened to my records and pretended. I didn't want to be another thing in this apartment you had to pretend about.

You also asked if I'm angry at June. I'm trying to work out which part. I think I'm angry she was right about me. She always knew what I'd want before I did. It's the most irritating quality in a person, and I fell in love with it on a sidewalk outside Lincoln Center, with grease up to my wrists.

I'll play tonight, if you leave your door open.

– T.

I left it open. He played the Sarabande, and then something by Fauré I didn't know, and then, very quietly, as if he wasn't sure he was allowed, the theme from Cheers, and I laughed so hard into my pillow that he stopped, and I heard him laughing too, out there in the dark, alone with his cello, like a man who'd forgotten anyone could hear him.

. . .

The only thing that didn't come under any door that week was capitals.

I noticed. Of course I noticed. My ears had been set to 12:40 for two months, and now 12:40 came with the right hand and the wrong one missing. Wes had stayed in Little Compton to fix the steps, then

the back door, then the boathouse flue. Monday he texted me a photo of a new stair tread with no words. Tuesday nothing. Wednesday nothing.

It's not a bill, he'd said. You don't owe me anything for it.

I kept my phone face-up on the table while I worked. I hated that I missed the blocky letters, the torn paper, the swearing. I hated that the absence of a thing I'd never asked for had a shape, and the shape was exactly him.

On Wednesday night Theo dug the closet key out of Gerald's soil.

He'd been asked to sub at Carnegie Hall. A chamber orchestra from Montreal, on tour, whose second cellist had broken his wrist falling off a Citi Bike on Sixth Avenue that afternoon. Somebody from the old Philharmonic sub list had given them his number. One rehearsal, then the concert Thursday night. Brahms.

"I need my tails," he said. He stood in front of the closet with the brass key in his hand and looked at it for a long time, the way you'd look at a dog that had bitten you once.

"Do you want me to get them?" I said.

"No." He put the key in the lock. "It's my closet. I should be able to open my own closet."

He opened it. The bare bulb. The garment bag. He didn't look at the wedding suit; he reached past it and pulled out a second bag from the back, black, the tails, and closed the door again. He left the key on the kitchen table by the sugar jar, and neither of us mentioned it, and it stayed there.

. . .

He got me a ticket in the Dress Circle, on the end, near the front, where the gold boxes curve around and the whole hall opens out

under you like the inside of a shell.

I'd been once before, with Ryan, who checked his phone during the slow movement and said afterward, "Long, though, right?" I sat in my good black dress with my coat folded on my knees and watched the orchestra come out, men in tails and women in black, and found him at the second desk of the cellos, slight and neat and very still, the way he stood at a stove.

Then the Brahms started, and I stopped being a person with baggage.

I'm not going to describe the music. I'd get it wrong. I'll say that in the third movement the cellos have the tune, the long sad one that goes up and comes back down like someone climbing a staircase in a house they've lost, and every cello in the section was playing it, and I could only hear his. That's not possible. I know it's not possible. I heard it anyway.

And somewhere in the middle of it, he looked up.

Not at the conductor. Up, and out, into the dark of the hall, past the orchestra seats and the boxes and the gold, into the Dress Circle, to the end of the row near the front. Two thousand faces in the dark. He found mine in about a second and a half.

He didn't smile. He just looked, the way you'd look at a window you'd been walking toward for a long time, and then he looked back down at the music, and I sat there in my good black dress with my coat in my lap and the tears running down into my collar, and the woman next to me passed me a tissue without a word, because it was Brahms, and that's what Brahms is for.

. . .

We walked home. Fifty-seventh to Seventh, down Seventh all the way, sixty blocks, him with the cello on his back and me in heels I stopped feeling at Penn Station. He couldn't sit in a cab with that much music still in him, he said. It was nineteen degrees, and a man was selling Christmas trees on the corner of Twenty-third, and the whole sidewalk smelled of balsam.

We talked the whole way. About Brahms, who was in love with his best friend's wife for forty years and never did anything about it except write music that sounds exactly like that. About Danny's book.

"You looked up," I said, somewhere around Fourteenth.

"I did."

"In the middle. In the slow part."

"Yes."

"How did you find me?"

He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. "I knew where the seat was. I picked it." A pause. "And you were the only person in the Dress Circle crying before the tune came in. You start early. You cry at the setup."

"That's slander."

"You cried at an ad for a hardware store on Tuesday."

"It was about a grandfather."

"It was about a drill."

At 41 Perry Street it was one in the morning and my feet were gone, and he made caldo verde. He'd made the broth that afternoon before the rehearsal, he said, in case. In case of what, he didn't say. He stood at the stove in his white shirt with the tie pulled loose and the tailcoat on the back of the kitchen chair, slicing kale into ribbons so fine they looked like grass, and humming, and I sat on the counter with my feet in a bowl of warm water he'd put down without asking,

and ate potato soup with chouriço out of a coffee mug at one in the morning, and it was the best thing I'd ever eaten, and I'd been ghostwriting a chef for a year.

. . .

Friday afternoon I went to Danny's.

The restaurant was empty at four, the dead hour between lunch and dinner, chairs up on the tables, the meat hooks hanging bare from the ceiling. The dishwasher was singing bachata in the back. Danny was sitting at the long zinc bar with his phone face-down in front of him, and his hands, those big burned chef's hands that could debone a chicken in forty seconds, were flat on the zinc on either side of it, like he was trying to keep it from getting away.

"I can't," he said, when he saw me.

"You don't have to."

"I wrote it down." He had a piece of order ticket with something in pen on it. "What I'd say. Like you do. You write it first, and then it's not so bad."

"Read it to me."

He read it to me. It was four sentences. It was very bad. It was the bravest thing I'd ever heard. Six years since they'd really talked, if you didn't count six minutes about the Mets; eleven since the Sunday he'd promised to call. Nick was twenty-four now and working the line at a place in Philadelphia, Fishtown, wood-fired, small plates.

"He's gonna hang up," Danny said.

"Maybe."

"He's gonna say, who is this."

"Then you tell him." I put my hand on top of his, which was shaking. "Danny. You spent eleven years making a house out of not

calling. You told me that. You said by the thousandth day, you can't find the door. I wrote it down. It's the best line in the book." I turned his phone over. "This is the door."

He picked it up. He got two digits in and his thumb missed. He started again and missed again. Those hands, that could debone a chicken in forty seconds, couldn't hit a seven.

"I can't," he said again.

So I took the phone and dialed it for him, off the ticket, and put it in his hand, and kept my other hand over his on the zinc.

It rang. I heard it ring, small and tinny, four times.

Then a voice, a young man, wary, a kitchen loud behind him.

Danny opened his mouth. Nothing came out. His eyes went to me, wide, terrified, a fifty-two-year-old man on television in forty countries looking at me like a boy who'd forgotten his line in a school play.

I nodded. Just once.

"Nicky," Danny said. "It's your father."

Then nothing. For a long time, nothing, on either end. Just two men breathing, like they'd both been underwater. Then I heard Danny breathe in, and I heard him say, "I know. I know. You're right," and then "I'm not calling for anything. I'm calling because I said I would," and then, after a long time, with his free hand over his eyes, "Sunday? Yeah. Yeah. I can call Sunday."

He put the phone down on the zinc. He looked at it. He didn't say anything for a long time. Then he put his big head down on the bar, on his folded arms, and his shoulders shook, and the dishwasher in the back stopped singing, and I sat beside him with my hand on his back and didn't say anything either, because sometimes that's the whole job.

"Sunday," he said into his arms. "He said call Sunday."

. . .

It started snowing on Saturday a little after ten at night. December sixth. The first snow.

I saw it from the kitchen table, where I'd been not-writing Danny's last chapter for three hours. One flake against the big window, then six, then the whole of Perry Street going soft and gray and slow under the streetlights, like someone had turned the sound down on the city.

"Theo," I said. "Look."

He came and stood behind me. Then he went to the window and pushed it up, and the cold came in, and the quiet, and he climbed out onto the fire escape in his socks and his sweater, and turned back and held out his hand.

I took it.

We stood on the iron grating in the falling snow, four floors above Perry Street, with the trees going white and the flakes catching in his hair and on his glasses until he took them off and folded them and put them in his pocket, and without them his face was younger and less certain and closer.

"I can't see a thing," he said.

"It's snowing. That's all there is to see."

"I can see you. Roughly. You're the blurry one."

I laughed. He was looking at me. Snow on his eyelashes. The whole quiet city falling down around us, white and slow and indifferent, and inside it, very close, this careful man who had crossed an ocean because of something I'd written, and who'd looked up in the slow movement and found me in the dark in a second and a half.

I don't know who moved first.

I've gone over it the way I'd go over a paragraph, looking for the place where it turned. I think he leaned in. I think I did. I think we both did, at exactly the same moment, like two people reaching for the same door, and for a second neither of us was sure which one of us was kissing the other.

And then it was both.

His mouth was cold and then it wasn't. His hand came up to my face, those long careful fingers with the hard tips from the strings, and held it like I was something he'd been asked to tune. The snow fell on us. The fire escape rang softly under our feet. Somewhere below, on Perry Street, a car door closed, muffled, and I didn't look down.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Snow

MR. ORTIZ WAS SHOVELING the stoop at eight on Sunday morning with the radio propped in the window of his basement apartment, a salsa station turned up loud enough to melt the snow on its own.

Six inches had come down overnight. Perry Street was white and blue and absolutely silent except for him, the scrape of the shovel, and Héctor Lavoe. The trees were bent with it. Somebody's Vespa had become a small white hill.

"Mija," he said, when I came down with two coffees. He leaned on the shovel. He didn't smile. Mr. Ortiz always smiled; it was structural, like the stoop.

"I brought you one. Two sugars." I stopped. "Sorry. Habit. You take it black."

"Two sugars is fine." He took it. He looked at it instead of me. "Mija, I have to tell you something, and I don't want to tell you, so I'm going to tell you fast."

I stood on the step and waited.

"Last night. Ten-thirty, eleven. I'm putting salt down." He pointed across the street with the coffee cup, to the big tree in front of 44, its branches white to the tips. "Wesley's truck comes. He parks. He gets

out, he has an envelope, I see it, a white one. He's coming to the door. Halfway across the street he stops. He's looking up."

I didn't look up. I didn't have to. I knew what you could see from the middle of Perry Street at ten-thirty on a Saturday night in the snow. I'd stood on that fire escape. I knew exactly how lit it was.

"He stands there," Ortiz said. "In the snow. I don't know, a minute. Two. Then he puts the envelope back inside his jacket. Here." He touched his own chest. "And he sees me, and he says, Hector, don't tell her I came. And he gets back in the truck, and he goes."

The radio sang something joyful about a woman in Ponce.

"So I'm telling you," Ortiz said. "Because I'm a terrible man."

"You're not a terrible man."

"I'm a terrible man with a big mouth." He drank the coffee and made a face at the sugar. "And I'm sad. For him. For you, also. For everybody. This building is very sad this morning. Mrs. Kaplan saw also. She called me at midnight."

"Mrs. Kaplan saw?"

"Mrs. Kaplan sees everything. Mrs. Kaplan moved her ten dollars off NEITHER and onto the cellist the week before Thanksgiving, before anybody told her anything. She's a witch." He looked miserable. "She wants me to pay out. I said, Ruth, it's not over, nobody's married, nobody's dead. She says she has a feeling."

"There's a pool," I said. "Still."

"There's always a pool. A hundred and twelve dollars and the lasagna. Four-B, that's you, you're not allowed in. Three-B is on Wesley. The boy in One-B thinks you're going to end up with June." He shrugged, unhappily. "He's nineteen. He thinks everybody ends up with everybody."

"Who are you on, Hector?"

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he went back to shoveling.

"I don't say," he said. "I'm the super. I'm like Switzerland. Go inside, mija, it's cold."

. . .

I texted Wes from the kitchen table.

Hector told me.

Delivered. Not read. Then, an hour later, read. Nothing.

I called him on Monday afternoon from the pier, where I'd walked in the snow because I couldn't sit still. It rang four times and went to voicemail. It's Wes. Leave it at the beep or don't, I'm not your mother. I listened to it twice and hung up both times without saying anything, which I'm aware is the behavior of a sixteen-year-old.

He didn't call back. Not Monday. Not Tuesday.

No capitals under the door. No photograph of a stair tread. He went silent the way a radio goes silent when you drive under a river: not off, just gone, somewhere you can't reach.

It's not a bill, he'd said. You don't owe me anything.

He'd meant it. That was the unbearable part. He'd come to leave a letter, and he'd seen us, and he'd taken it back, because a letter would have been asking for something, and he'd promised he wouldn't. He'd stood in the snow and kept his word. Even then. Especially then.

Theo didn't ask. He saw me check my phone on Monday night, twice, three times, and he put a cup of tea next to my elbow and went back to his book and didn't say a word, and I didn't know if that was kindness or because he already knew. Probably both. With the Marsh men it's usually both.

That night there was a letter under my door at 12:40, No. 9, about the storks on the sea stacks at Cabo Sardão, building their nests on rock pillars in the ocean where nothing could get at them. I read it twice. It was beautiful.

I lay awake anyway, listening for the other hand.

. . .

My phone rang at 3:07 on Wednesday morning.

I knew the name. She was still saved as Maddie, still in her paper crown from Priya's thirtieth. I'd never been able to decide what to change it to, and at three in the morning I was glad I hadn't.

"Claire." Maddie's voice was so small I almost didn't know it. "Claire, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't know who else, I'm bleeding."

I was already sitting up. I was already reaching for my jeans.

"Where are you?"

"Home. I called Ryan. I called him six times. He's not, he won't..." She was crying now. "There's so much, Claire. Is that bad? Is it a lot? I don't know what a lot is."

"Call 911. Right now. Then text me which hospital. I'm coming."

"You're coming?"

"Maddie. Call them. Hang up and call them."

Theo was up when I came out of the bedroom with one boot on, standing by the couch in a T-shirt with his glasses crooked, and he didn't ask a single question. He got my coat off the hook and held it open for me and put my other boot in my hand, and went to the window and looked down at Perry Street and said, "There's a cab on Bleecker. Go now, you'll get it," and I went.

Lenox Hill. The cab skidded twice on Park Avenue in the slush. The driver was listening to a call-in show about the afterlife in

Bengali and turned it up when he saw my face, I think to give me privacy.

. . .

She was in a curtained bay in the ER in a gown with tiny blue diamonds on it, her coat still over her legs, her face the color of the sheet. Her hair, which had been perfect every single day of the eleven years I'd known her, was in a terrible ponytail. She looked about fifteen.

She saw me and started crying again.

"You came."

"You called." I sat down on the plastic chair. I didn't take her hand. "What did they say?"

"They're doing an ultrasound. They have to wait for someone. Sixteen weeks. I'm sixteen weeks, Claire." She pressed both hands flat to her stomach, which was showing now, a small hard curve under the blue diamonds. "I named her. I know you're not supposed to, it's too early, they don't even know it's a her. I named her anyway. I didn't tell anyone. I didn't have anyone to tell."

I didn't ask what the name was. I wasn't ready for that much.

"Ryan?" I said.

"Voicemail." She laughed, horribly. "He changed his voicemail. It's a professional one now. You've reached Ryan Cole, managing director. Managing director, Claire. He got promoted. He didn't tell me that either."

I thought of a lot of things to say. I'd had two months to think of them. I'd drafted some of them, honestly, in the margins of Danny's manuscript, on the subway, in the bath. Some of them were very good. Some of them would have made a reality star cry.

I didn't say any of them. A woman I'd loved for eleven years was lying in a curtained bay at three in the morning, bleeding, and the father of her child was a voicemail.

"Okay," I said. "Then I'm here."

They came for her at 4:20, a tech with a portable machine and a resident with kind eyes and a coffee stain on her sleeve that I would have bet my advance Priya knew about. The room went dim. The gel went on, cold; Maddie flinched. The screen was all gray weather and static.

And then Maddie's hand came out from under the blanket, searching, blind, and found mine on the rail. And held on so hard her rings dug in.

I let her.

"There," the resident said.

A shape in the static. Curled, tiny, impossibly specific, a profile like a bean with a nose. And a flicker in the middle of it, fast, steady, stubborn. The tech turned a dial and the sound came up into the dim room: a quick wet galloping, like a horse running somewhere a long way off, very determined to get there.

Maddie made a sound I'd never heard a person make.

"Strong heartbeat," the resident said. "Good movement. See her kicking? That's a kick." She pointed at the bleed, a dark smudge at the edge, and explained it calmly: common, often harmless, it would likely resolve on its own; rest, follow up with her OB, no heavy lifting, come back if it got worse. Words I'd heard Priya use a hundred times, words that meant the worst part is over.

I looked at the screen. At the small determined shape kicking in the gray, alive, with absolutely no idea about any of us.

Maddie was crying with her eyes open, staring at it, still crushing my hand.

"I'm not forgiving you," I said, quietly, so only she could hear. "I want to be clear. This isn't that."

"I know."

"I'm just here."

"I know." She turned her head on the thin pillow and looked at me, and her face was wrecked and swollen and younger than I'd ever seen it, and for one second it was the face of an eighteen-year-old girl in a dorm on Third Avenue who'd knocked on my door with a bottle of terrible wine and said, I think we're going to be best friends, is that weird? "That's more, Claire. That's more than I get."

She didn't let go of my hand. I didn't make her.

The heartbeat galloped on in the dim room, a long way off and getting closer.

. . .

It was a little after five when I got back to Perry Street. Maddie's sister had driven in from Hoboken at a quarter to five with a duffel bag and a face like a closed door, and had looked at me, and then at our hands, and said, stiffly, "Thank you for coming," and I'd said "Of course," as if there were anything of course about it.

The snow had gone gray on the sidewalks. The sky over the river was still black.

4B was very quiet. The lamp was still on.

Theo was asleep on the green couch, his glasses folded on the floor, the cello leaning against the cushions beside him, against his shoulder, like a large patient friend who'd stayed over. The bow was still loose in his right hand. He must have played until he fell asleep,

waiting up.

I didn't wake him. I took the bow out of his fingers, very carefully, and laid it on the case.

The closet key was still on the kitchen table, where he'd left it on Wednesday night, the night he got out his tails. A week, it had been sitting there by the sugar jar. Neither of us had touched it.

I picked it up. It belonged in Gerald. That's what I told myself. I'd put it back in the soil where it lived, where he'd buried it, and the apartment would be the way it was supposed to be, and I'd go to bed.

I knelt by the fig. I had my hand on the rim of the pot.

And I thought about Maddie on the screen. About things you can see if somebody holds the light steady long enough.

I'd read them in November, all forty-three, on that floor, with my heart going. But I'd read them the way you read a stranger's diary: fast, guilty, for the feelings, skipping ahead. Reading him. Not reading them. I'd never gone through them properly, slowly, in order, to the end, the way I'd go through a client's life when I was looking for the place where the story didn't hold.

I got up and went down the hall and opened the closet as quietly as I've ever done anything.

. . .

I read them all.

I sat on the slanted floor in the doorway with the bare bulb on and the flat brown box in my lap and the wedding suit hanging over me in its bag, and I read them from one to forty-three while the window at the end of the hall went from black to gray.

They weren't dated. They didn't need to be. You could tell the time by them like rings in a tree.

No. 1 was written the morning after. Four lines. I don't know what to call you now. I tried "June" out loud in the kitchen and it didn't sound like anyone. No. 2 was about the bike chain. No. 8 was about Wes, the only one, a single sentence, and then the pen pressed so hard into the paper it tore. No. 17 was the snow, and the eggs, and the humming, and it sits in the apartment like weather. In the thirties he started writing about the cello again, about playing at two to the empty room, about a piece by Bach that sounded like someone walking home. No. 41 was a list of things in the apartment that were hers. No. 42 said: I leave on Tuesday. Ma thinks I'm brave. I'm not brave, I'm only going somewhere where nothing reminds me. I've asked Seth to post the sublet. Somebody should keep the fig alive. It shouldn't have to pay for us.

That was the last one he wrote before he left. I was sure of it. That was the end.

Except there was one more.

No. 43 was on top of the stack, and it wasn't like the others. The others were on the same plain paper, folded once, in unsealed envelopes with June on the front. This one was heavier, cream, the good kind of paper you buy for one thing. The envelope had been sealed once, properly, and then slit open along the top, very neatly, with a knife. The number 43 in the corner was in a different pen, blue instead of black, as if it had been added afterward. And under June, in the same patient forward-leaning hand, three more words.

For the morning of.

The morning of. I knew what morning. A man doesn't buy good paper for any other.

I unfolded it.

January 2

June,

I told Lisbon no today. I'd tell them no a hundred times. There's nothing in that city I want more than the sound of you asleep in the next room.

Don't be cross that I didn't ask you. You'd have said go, and you'd have meant it, and then I'd have had to choose between you and you. This way I only have to choose you, which is easy. It's the easiest thing I've ever done.

I'll give you this on the morning of the wedding. You'll cry and blame the mascara.

T.

I read it twice. Then I read the date again.

January 2.

He'd written it in the first week of the year, on good paper, for a morning in May that never came.

I sat very still in the closet doorway, with the cold coming up off the floorboards through my socks.

January 2, he'd told Lisbon no. He'd turned down the dream of his life for her, and told nobody, and bought good paper.

On the couch, in the lamplight, Theo stirred in his sleep and said something I couldn't make out, and was still again.

June had done the one thing she could never take back, with his brother, on January tenth. She'd told me so herself, on the bench, in the rain.

I counted it on my fingers, like a child, twice, to be sure.

Eight days later.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Forty-Three

I PUT THEM BACK in order. That's the kind of person I am. My life had just tipped over like a bookcase in an earthquake, and I sat on the slanted floor of the hall at six in the morning and squared forty-three envelopes into a perfect stack, one at the bottom, forty-three on top, the way I'd found them.

Then I took forty-three back out and read it again.

43.

January 2

June,

I told Lisbon no today. I'd tell them no a hundred times. There's nothing in that city I want more than the sound of you asleep in the next room.

Don't be cross that I didn't ask you. You'd have said go, and you'd have meant it, and then I'd have had to choose between you and you. This way I only have to choose you, which is easy. It's the easiest thing I've ever done.

I'll give you this on the morning of the wedding. You'll cry and blame the mascara.

T.

It was the only one with a date. I'd noticed that in November and hadn't thought about it, because in November I'd thought the letters were the story. I'd thought they were what happened after.

Seventeen talked about forgiving them both. Forty-three was from before anybody needed forgiving. He must have numbered them when he packed the box, in February, with his suit already in its bag, and he'd made the one from before everything the last one. He'd put it on top. Like he wanted the story to end before it went wrong.

That was the first thing that made me cry.

The second thing was the date.

He said no to Lisbon on January 2. On January 10, eight days later, June told him she'd done the unforgivable thing. By February he was in Lisbon.

I'm not a detective. I'm a ghostwriter. But a ghostwriter is mostly a person who sits across from someone for six months and waits for the dates not to match.

I locked the closet and buried the key in Gerald in its yellow rosin rag. In the living room, Theo was asleep on the green couch with the cello leaning against the cushions beside him like a large patient friend who'd stayed over. His glasses were folded on the floor. His hand was open on the blanket.

He looked like a man who'd never once been lied to. I stood over him for a long time trying to decide which one of us that made a fool.

. . .

He made coffee at eight. Wes had made coffee like he was mad at it. Theo made it like he was apologizing to it in advance: weighed the

beans on a little scale he'd brought back from Portugal, poured the water in slow circles, stood over the dented red kettle humming something that might have been Schubert and might have been a mattress jingle.

"How's Maddie?"

"Okay. The baby's okay. She said thank you. She's never said thank you to me in her life. It was like watching a cat do a card trick."

He smiled, the small one he did mostly with his left cheek. "You look like you read something."

I went very still over my coffee.

"Danny," I said. "His mother's funeral chapter. I read it at the hospital."

That was true. It just wasn't the answer.

I bit my lip. I felt myself do it. Theo didn't know what it meant. He knew how I took my coffee and which socks were my good socks and that I talked to Gerald in a voice I'd deny under oath, but nobody had ever told him about my lip.

Wes had known by the second day.

. . .

Danny's restaurant on Gansevoort has a whiteboard in the back hallway between the walk-in and the office, where the chefs write the specials and the eighty-sixes and, once, a message to a sous chef named Paulie that I'd been asked not to put in the book.

At two-thirty that afternoon, between lunch and dinner, I erased 86 BRANZINO and SEE ME, PAULIE and took a blue marker out of the tray.

I do this for every client. Every memoir has a timeline, and every subject lies about it, usually not on purpose. People move things. So I

put it on a wall, in order, and stand back and look for the place where the story bends.

DECEMBER: LISBON OFFERS THEO THE CHAIR.

CLEVELAND: "THE ONE NIGHT." From June's last letter, the one with his brother's name in it. You were in Cleveland. He was drunk and I was drunk and lonely and stupid.

JAN 2: THEO SAYS NO. "A HUNDRED TIMES."

JAN 9: JUNE CALLS CAROL. "WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE UP FOR YOUR SONS?"

JAN 10: JUNE TELLS THEO.

FEB: THEO IN LISBON.

I took the red marker and wrote, across the gap:

WHY WOULD LISBON TAKE BACK A MAN WHO SAID NO?

"Is that about my book?"

Danny was in the office doorway in his whites, a pencil behind each ear, which meant he'd lost the first one and found it after he'd already taken another. He came and stood next to me, big and warm and smelling of garlic and the Marlboros he claimed he'd quit, and read the board the way he reads a ticket, all at once.

"Who's the villain?"

"I thought I knew."

"Huh." He tapped the red question with a pencil. "You know what I do when a plate comes back? Guy says the fish is wrong. I don't ask who's lying. Everybody's lying, everybody's tired. I ask who touched it last."

I looked at him.

"Danny. Can I use your office phone? It's international."

"Is it about my book?"

"It's about a different book."

"Then put it on Lorraine's tab," he said, and went off down the hall yelling for Marco.

. . .

The Orquestra do Tejo's website had a photograph of the whole orchestra on the steps of a white building by a river, squinting into a sun that had never heard of December. Theo was in the second row, the only one looking slightly to one side, as if somebody off camera had said his name.

It was seven-thirty at night in Lisbon. I called anyway.

"Orquestra do Tejo, boa noite."

"Hi. I'm so sorry. Do you speak English?"

"Of course! Everybody speaks English, it's terrible, my mother is furious about it." A woman with a voice like someone leaning back in a chair with her shoes off. "How can I help?"

I'm not proud of what I did next. I'm good at it, which isn't the same thing. I said I was a journalist in New York writing a profile of Theo Marsh, the American cellist. I used my interview voice: warm, unhurried, a little dumb. The voice that makes people tell you about their mothers.

"Ai, Theo," she said, with enormous feeling. "Our Theo. I'm Sofia, I do everything here, they call it administration. You know he disappeared? In September! He doesn't come to rehearsal, he doesn't answer his phone, the maestro walks around for five weeks like a widow in a film. I said, Maestro, eat something. He said, Sofia, I can't eat, my principal cello is lost in the Alentejo. Then October, Theo calls, he says sorry, I was walking. Walking! Five weeks! A saint or a crazy person. With Theo you can't tell, he's so polite."

"I'd heard he was very settled in New York before."

"Oh, but this is the beautiful story." I heard her settle in. "Last December the maestro hears a recording and says, this one. We offer him principal. For an American who was only a substitute, it's a big thing. And he says no. January, a beautiful email, very sad, I printed it. He's getting married in May, he can't leave his life. The maestro gives the chair to a Spanish boy, the contract is half written." She lowered her voice. "And then. His fiancée calls."

The compressor in the walk-in switched off. The hallway went very quiet.

"His fiancée," I said.

"The twelfth of January. She asks for the maestro, I say he's at home, she says please, it's very important, so I give her his home number. I'm a romantic. Don't put that in. She tells him, Theo has changed his mind. He said no for me and I can't let him. He's too proud to call you himself, please ask him again. So romantic! The maestro calls him the next day and he says yes."

I was holding a pen above Danny's order book, over a line that said 40 LB ONIONS, like the pen had gone hot.

"And then February he arrives, and he's alone," Sofia said. "No fiancée. He lives in a room in Alfama above a woman who sells sardines, he practices nine hours a day, and he looks like a man who lost a war. I thought, ah. This is fado." She paused. "It's his trial season. The board is going to offer him permanent, I shouldn't say. Is the fiancée in the article?"

"I don't think so. I think she'd rather not be."

"Of course. A woman like that." Her chair creaked. "Tell him Sofia says he owes me a coffee. He'll know."

I thanked her twice. I hung up Danny's phone very gently, like it was asleep.

Then I sat down on the floor of the back hallway, in the smell of bleach and onions, with my back against the wall.

. . .

His fiancée called on January twelfth.

Two days after the unforgivable thing.

It came at me in a pile, the way the worst stories do, like a drawer pulled all the way out and dropped.

The one person I could never take back. She'd written it to me through a door. She'd said it in a stairwell at Mount Sinai with a bag of vending-machine M&Ms in her hand, the same words in the same order, like a line she'd been given and was afraid of fluffing. That's not a reason, it's just what was in the room. I'd heard that sentence twice. I've written sentences like that for other people. I know what a sentence sounds like when someone has practiced it in the car.

I promised someone I wouldn't. When I'd asked why she couldn't write to him herself. Who do you make a promise like that to, except the person you did it with?

I'd do it again, to Theo, on the fire escape. Do what? Ruin it? And she'd said yes. I'd heard remorse. I hadn't heard it the other way.

Carol, at one in the morning, with the Scrabble tiles: She asked me what I'd give up for my sons. I said, anything. She said, that's what I thought.

And Wes. The line in his first letter he'd scribbled out so hard the pen tore the paper. I'd held it to the lamp and got two words before the ink swallowed the rest. IT WASN'T.

It wasn't like anything, he'd said in Cobble Hill, when I asked if he'd loved her.

There was a thought behind all of that. I could feel the shape of it, the way you feel a step in the dark. I didn't let it in. I kept it on the other side of the door with both hands, because if I let it in, then a man I loved had stood on a pier in the wind and told me the worst thing about himself, and it might not be true, and I didn't know which would hurt more.

I knew one thing for certain, in the order book under the onions.

Theo didn't go to Lisbon. Somebody sent him.

Marco came down the hall with a crate of lemons and stopped. He looked at the red question on the board, and me on the floor.

"Chef's book is a lot," he said sympathetically, and stepped over my legs.

. . .

That night Theo tried the pastéis again.

Pastéis de nata. Custard tarts. They kept coming out of his oven like small edible tragedies, slumped and split and refusing to blister. In Lisbon there was a place in Belém with a line around the block, and he'd gone so often the women at the counter called him o triste, the sad one, and gave him an extra one for free.

Tonight's came out flat and slightly gray.

"They look like they're in mourning," I said.

"They're mourning the people they could have been." He nudged one onto my plate. "Eat it. Out of respect."

It was delicious, which was infuriating. Everything he made was delicious and slightly wrong, like an accent.

He took his glasses off to clean them on his shirt. Without them his face was younger and more tired.

"Can I tell you something stupid? Lisbon was the best year of my playing life. I've never played like that. I don't think I will again." He put the glasses back on with one knuckle. "And I hate it. I hate that the best thing I ever did came out of the worst thing anybody ever did to me. It's like being grateful to a car crash for the scar."

I had custard in my mouth and a phone call in my chest. I had my hand halfway across the table to his, the words lined up behind my teeth: Theo, a woman named Sofia says you owe her a coffee.

And then what? I didn't even know yet what it was.

"Your lip's bleeding," he said, surprised, and handed me a napkin.

. . .

I texted June at midnight from the edge of the bed.

Bench. Sunday. Ten.

The dots came up and stayed there a long time, appearing and disappearing, like someone typing a paragraph and deleting it.

What she sent, finally, was: Okay.

. . .

The rest of the week went by the way weeks do when you're waiting for the day at the end. Danny's book was due Monday and I wrote like a person bailing out a boat. Theo subbed in a Messiah and came home with raw fingertips and stories about a tenor who sang every aria as if it had personally insulted him. On Thursday he kissed me in the bathroom doorway, slowly, and then said, "I'm going to go and sit on the couch now, very far away from you, and think about baroque ornamentation," and did. Every night I lay in his bed alone and listened to him play at two, and the thought I'd shut out on Danny's floor came and stood on the other side of the door and waited.

Sunday was the coldest day of the year. There was ice along the edges of the Hudson, thin gray plates of it knocking against the pilings.

June was already there. Red coat, the last bench, two coffees in a cardboard tray. She'd been here every Sunday since February, where he asked her.

"I got you the oat thing," she said. "You had the oat thing last time."

"That was in October."

"I remember what people drink. It's the job. You'd be amazed what calms a four-year-old down. Knowing his juice." Her nose was red. Her nails were bitten so low there were little crescents of dried blood at the corners.

I'd planned to do this slowly, the way I do the last interview with a client, the one where I already know: sideways, gently, asking about the weather until they tell me about the war.

I didn't do any of that.

I looked at the water, and the ice, and New Jersey in the white light. Then I looked at her.

"Who called Lisbon on January twelfth, June?"

She didn't drop the coffee. She didn't move at all. She just went white, from the collar of the red coat up, like someone had opened a door behind her and let the whole river in.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Theo's Night

SHE DIDN'T ANSWER.

She sat there with her coffee and her white face, and I watched her do the thing I'd watched a senator's wife do once, in a hotel suite in Georgetown, when I asked the one question her lawyer had said I wouldn't. She went somewhere behind her own eyes and checked every door.

"I don't know what you mean," June said.

"Sofia says hi."

Something in her face folded, very small, like a letter along an old crease. She set the coffee down on the bench between us, carefully, so it wouldn't spill.

"Please don't ask me that again," she said. "Please, Claire. Not me. And not him."

She stood up. The wind got into the red coat and she held it closed at the throat with one hand.

"You were so kind to me," she said. "Through a door. When nobody else was. Please be kind to me now and don't."

Then she walked away down the pier. Not fast. She walked the way people walk out of my interviews when they've said too much,

upright and much too carefully, like the ground had gotten narrow. I said her name once more. She didn't turn around. The tai chi man, who as far as I can tell lives on Pier 45, watched her go and then looked back at me with an expression of deep personal reproach.

Her coffee stayed on the bench, steaming. I sat there until it stopped.

. . .

I didn't tell Theo.

I've spent my career cleaning up other people's reasons, and I know what a pretty one sounds like, so here are mine.

The pretty reason was that I wasn't sure. I had a phone call with a woman who said "so romantic" a lot, a whiteboard, a torn line in a letter, and a stack of sentences that sounded rehearsed. That isn't proof. That's a feeling with a filing system.

The real reason was his face when he said I hate that the best thing I ever did came out of the worst thing anybody ever did to me. I didn't know what it would do to him to find out the worst thing might have been done on purpose, by someone who loved him, so the best thing could happen. I didn't think anyone knew.

And the ugly reason, the one I'd cut from the book: I was happy. For three weeks I'd been happy in a way that had nothing to do with anybody needing me to fix them, and I didn't want to be the one who walked into the middle of it carrying the truth like a tray of hot plates.

He was practicing when I got home. He looked over his glasses.

"How was the pier?"

I stood very still with my hand on the key. Third time a man on that couch had asked me that. I was starting to think the question

came with the furniture.

"Cold," I said. "June's okay. She's tired."

He nodded slowly and touched one string with his thumb, not playing, just touching, the way you'd check a sleeping baby was still breathing.

"I'm glad she has you," he said. "I can't be kind to her yet. I'm trying to want to."

. . .

On Monday, December fifteenth, at nine-forty in the morning, I delivered Danny Russo's memoir.

I'd been up all night with it, taking out commas and putting them back, reading the chapter about the phone call to Nick out loud to Gerald at four in the morning and having to stop at the part where Danny says, I said hello and he said hello and then we both just breathed for a while, like two guys who'd been underwater. I printed it at the FedEx on Hudson at seven, three hundred and forty pages, and the kid behind the counter, who had a lip ring and a bad cold, said, "Is this a book?" and I said yes, and he said, "Cool," with real respect, and I almost hugged him.

Lorraine was on the sidewalk outside her building on Twenty-Third Street in her camel coat, smoking in the cold like it was a sacred duty. She saw me coming up the block with the box in both arms and let me walk the whole way to her.

"Nobody hand-delivers anymore," she said.

"I know."

She dropped the cigarette, stepped on it, took the box, and opened the lid right there with a bus going by.

SUNDAY GRAVY

A Life in Kitchens

by Danny Russo with Claire Bennett

She looked at it a long time. Then she looked at me over it, and her face did something I'd never seen it do, which was hesitate.

"I read the last draft on Friday. I didn't tell you, because I didn't want you getting ideas." She closed the lid. "It's the best thing you've ever written, Claire. And the first thing you've ever signed."

I stood on the sidewalk with my empty arms.

"Go home," said Lorraine Fisch, already lighting another one. "Have a drink. Have a man. Don't call me for a week, I'll be busy taking credit."

. . .

Danny called at noon, crying, because Lorraine had said it was good and Lorraine never said anything was good, and because Nick had texted him a picture of a pork shoulder with the words your way. Mr. Ortiz kissed me on both cheeks on the stairs, "Mija, you finished the chef!", and then wrote something on the clipboard he'd started carrying and folded it against his chest like a poker hand. "Building business," he said.

And Theo cooked.

He'd taken two trains and a bus to a Portuguese place in Newark for a whole salt cod, stiff as a board, and it had been soaking in the bathtub since Thursday in the big enamel pot, so that I'd spent the weekend brushing my teeth next to a fish. He made bacalhau à Brás, potatoes and onions and eggs and black olives, standing over the gas stove in an ironed shirt with a dish towel on his shoulder, humming.

I bought three bottles of vinho verde on Hudson. Theo said it tasted like a Tuesday in June.

He stood up at his own small table to give a toast.

"To Claire Bennett, who wrote five books with other people's names on them and a sixth one with hers. And to Gerald Fernando, who did nothing, and was there for all of it."

"He dropped three leaves," I said. "He was very supportive."

"Very supportive," Theo agreed, and touched his glass to the rim of Gerald's pot, and then to mine, and looked at me over it with his whole face.

. . .

It was a quarter past eleven, on the green couch with the last of the third bottle, when he took his glasses off.

He did it slowly. Folded the arms one at a time and set them very precisely on a stack of records, on top of Jacqueline du Pré. Then he turned back and looked in my general direction.

"You're a blur," he said. "A very lovely blur. My visual information right now is mostly hair."

"Then why'd you take them off?"

"Because I'm about to kiss you, and the last time I did it with them on, I nearly put a lens in your eye. I've thought about it all week." He found my face with his hand, his fingers on my jaw. "There you are."

He kissed the way he did everything, like he'd read about it first and then decided to ignore the book. Slow. Unhurried in a way that wasn't shy, that was the opposite of shy, a man who knew exactly how long a note could be held before it broke and meant to find out. His hand slid into my hair and the claw clip gave up and clattered onto the floor, and he laughed against my mouth.

"Sorry. Was that structural?"

"Completely structural."

"I'll repair it."

"You can't repair a claw clip. You can only grieve it."

He kissed my neck under my ear, and I stopped grieving anything.

In the bedroom he didn't turn on the lamp. The streetlight lay across the linen, and he stood by the bed and undid his own shirt starting at the cuffs, like a man getting ready to play. He was narrow and pale and lean, all long lines, a body that looked drawn rather than built. I touched his chest with my fingertips and he held still and let me.

"You're allowed to say if this is too much," he said. "Or too little. Or the wrong key entirely. I'm a classically trained musician. We take notes."

"If you ask me how I'm doing one more time, I'm reporting you to the orchestra."

"That's fair," he said gravely, and pulled my sweater over my head.

He was nothing like his brother. I'll say that once and not again, because it isn't fair to either of them, and because it was the last time that night I thought about anyone who wasn't in the room. Wes had made love to me like weather, all at once, everywhere, like he was trying to get it all in before the roof came off. Theo made love like he was listening.

He touched the inside of my wrist and waited to see what I did. He kissed the freckles on my shoulder and then kissed them again in a different order, as if checking. The fingertips of his left hand were hard, four small polished calluses from twenty-five years of strings, and when he drew them down my side, ribs and waist and hip, I felt each one separately, like four tiny cool coins. Then his fingers moved very slightly on my skin as they went, a small trembling roll, and I realized he was doing it on purpose.

"Is that a vibrato?"

"It might be a vibrato."

"Are you playing me?"

"I'm practicing," he said modestly, and I laughed so hard I had to put my face in the pillow, and he waited, smiling, on one elbow, and then started again from the top.

He took my socks off himself and held my feet in his warm hands and said, "Good God, Claire, these are a public health matter," and kissed the arch of each one like an apology. He worked his way back up with his mouth as if there was a score and he meant to play every bar, nothing skipped, no repeats cut for time. By the time he reached the inside of my thigh I'd stopped laughing. By the time he stayed there I'd stopped making sounds that were words. He was patient and precise and so completely attentive to every breath I took that I felt, for the first time in my life, like someone was reading me instead of the other way around. When I came apart it was slow and then sudden, a long rising and a held note and then release, and I heard myself say his name, and I didn't have to swallow it. That was the thing. It was the right name, and it was mine to say.

He came up beside me with a look of real and boyish pride.

"Feedback?"

"Shut up."

"Noted," he said, and reached for the nightstand drawer, and spent a while with the foil packet very close to his face. "I'd like it on the record that I can read a Bach manuscript in bad light."

When he moved into me, he did it with his eyes open and on mine, close enough that I didn't blur. He held still until I was the one who moved, and then he followed, and then he led, long and deep and steady, a tempo he'd chosen and wasn't giving up for anyone. His

hand slid under the small of my back and held me there. He murmured things into my hair, not all of them in English, and when I asked later what he'd said he went pink to the collarbone and said it was mostly directions.

The radiator clanked three times, loud as a hammer.

He stopped dead. "What was that?"

"It does that."

"It's never done that. Not in four years."

"It does it every time anything happens," I said, and then heard myself, and he heard me too, and for a second neither of us said anything. Then he put his forehead down against mine.

"Well," he said quietly. "Something's happening."

And then it did. He let go of the tempo all at once, and so did I, both of us holding on, the old bed creaking, the city going about its Monday under the streetlights. He said my name at the end, low, like he was signing a letter.

. . .

We lay tangled in the dark, his arm under my neck. After a while he made a small sound.

"Ah," Theo said.

"What?"

He found his glasses on the nightstand and put them on and looked down.

"I want you to know that putting my glasses on right now is the least romantic thing I've ever done in my life." He cleared his throat. "We should probably... It's fine. It's probably fine."

I understood. I put my arm over my eyes.

"It's probably fine," I said.

"Statistically."

"Statistically, it's fine."

"Are you laughing?"

"Are you?"

We both were, like idiots, in the wreckage of my good linen sheets, and he took the glasses back off and said, "There. Now I can't see the problem," and pulled me in against his chest. I did some math in the dark, the way writers do math, badly and with optimism, and decided he was right.

I fell asleep with my ear on his heart. It was slower than Wes's. I noticed that, and then I made myself stop noticing.

. . .

At two the music woke me.

It wasn't Bach. I knew the Bach by now. I knew the Sarabande the way you know someone's footsteps on the stairs. This was something I'd never heard.

I put his shirt on and found one sock and went out.

He was in the chair by the window in his undershirt, the cello between his knees and the streetlight on the side of his face. He nodded at my spot on the floor against the bookcase, and I sat with my knees up and listened.

It was low at first, and slow, and it walked. That was the only way to say it. Someone walking home late on a wet street, past windows with the lights on. Then it climbed. There was a little phrase that kept coming back, three notes and a fourth that went somewhere you didn't expect, like a joke told in a sad voice, a little braver each time. At the end it didn't resolve. It stopped on a held note, like a question somebody had decided to leave open.

"What is that?"

"It's mine." He was looking at the cello, the way you'd look at a dog that had done a trick in front of company. "I started it in Lisbon. On the floor of a hotel room at four in the morning, with forty envelopes all over the carpet. I'd read every one, and I couldn't sleep, so I wrote the first eight bars on the back of the room-service menu." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. "It's called 'Subletter.'"

I put my hand over my mouth.

"That bit that keeps coming back," he said. "That's you saying you sleep with socks on, two pairs if it's cold. I'm sorry. It's a very specific motif."

I laughed with tears running down into my hand, and he smiled at me across the room. Then he set the cello against his knee, and the smile went somewhere more serious.

"Claire. I've decided something. I'm going to stay."

I didn't move.

"I'm not going back to Lisbon. I'll write to the maestro this week. Sofia will be very upset, and I'll owe everybody coffee for the rest of my life. But I spent a year being brave somewhere I didn't want to be." He looked around the room, at the books, the fig, the dented kettle, me on the floor in his shirt. "I want to be here. I want to be home."

He held it out to me like the little boy in the Montauk photo held up his shell. The best thing he had.

And all I could see was a woman in a red coat alone on a bench in the ice, who had maybe broken her own heart and his on purpose so he could go and play like that. A man in Red Hook who'd let the whole world believe the worst of him. A phone call on January twelfth.

If I was right, everything they'd done was about to come undone, in this room, at two in the morning.

And I was the only one in the apartment who knew.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Pact

THEO LEFT FOR REHEARSAL at noon on Tuesday with the cello on his back and a pastel in his coat pocket "for the tenor, as a gesture of peace." He kissed me in the doorway. He tasted like coffee and the vinho verde we hadn't finished.

"Don't let Gerald eat the rest of them," he said.

"He's on a diet."

"He's a fig. He's always on a diet." He touched my cheek with two fingers, the hard ones. "I'll be back by six. I'm going to tell the maestro tonight. I've already written it in my head four times. It's very good. There's a semicolon."

Then he was gone down the stairs, and I sat at his table with Danny's line edits and Gerald and the radiator and didn't read a word.

At ten past two someone knocked.

Not an envelope. Nobody in this story knocks. I opened the door and June was on the landing in navy scrubs under the red coat, with a hospital ID still clipped to the collar and her hair coming out of its knot. She looked like she'd come straight off a night shift and walked here, all the way from Ninety-Eighth Street, without stopping.

"He's at rehearsal until six," she said. "It's the Messiah at St. Thomas. I checked."

Of course she had.

"Come in," I said.

She stood just inside the door for a long time. The last time she'd been in 4B she'd been crying on that couch while he played for her, and she hadn't looked at anything. I watched her look now: the couch with his blanket folded on one end, the cello's empty corner, the fridge with two sets of rules on it, one on top of the other, in two different hands. Gerald. She went to the fig and touched one leaf with the very tip of a bitten finger.

"He got big," she said.

"He gets a lot of attention."

"Yes." She took her hand back. "I suppose he would."

I put the kettle on, because it's what you do, and because I needed something in my hands. When I turned around she was sitting on the floor with her back against the green couch and her knees up, exactly where I sat at two in the morning to listen to him play. I don't think she knew. I don't think she'd have chosen anywhere else.

"You were right," June said. "I called Lisbon."

. . .

I sat down on the floor across from her. The kettle started to tick on the stove.

"He got the email last December," she said. "The week before Christmas. He never told me. I only saw it because he'd left his laptop open on the table, right there, and I was looking for a recipe for the thing his mother makes with the cranberries." She almost smiled. "Principal cello. Orquestra do Tejo. The music director had heard a

recording of him playing the Elgar. He'd written, I've been waiting ten years to hear someone play the slow movement like that. That was the subject line."

"And Theo didn't say anything."

"Not a word. For two weeks. He was lovely. He was lovely every single day, he made me soup, he ironed my scrubs, which nobody does, Claire, nobody irons scrubs. And on January second I checked his sent mail like a crazy person and there it was. Dear Maestro. Thank you. No." She pressed her lips together. "He didn't even ask me."

"He wrote you a letter about it," I said. "The same day. It's in the closet. Forty-three. He was going to give it to you on the morning of the wedding."

June put her hand flat over her mouth and kept it there.

"What does it say?"

"That he'd tell them no a hundred times."

She nodded behind her hand, fast, as if that was exactly what she'd been afraid of. Then she took it away.

"Do you know about Berlin?"

. . .

"He was nineteen," June said. "He got into the Universität der Künste. Full scholarship. Carol told me about it at our engagement party, laughing, like it was a sweet story. Frank had been dead four years and Wes was a mess, and Theo looked at his mother and his brother and wrote Berlin a very nice letter. And then he went to Juilliard on the subway, and played at weddings, and subbed for the Phil for eleven years, and was grateful. He's always so grateful."

The kettle began to murmur. Neither of us moved.

"You've heard him at two," she said.

"Every night."

"I lived with that for four years. I used to lie in that bed and listen and think it was for me. That he couldn't sleep because he was so happy, or something. Something stupid." She looked at the corner where the cello lived. "It took me two years to understand it was grief. That's what that is, the Bach at two in the morning. That's a man at a funeral for something nobody else knows died."

"June."

"If I'd asked him to go, he'd have said no. And married me. And loved me, and been kind, and grateful, and in ten years he'd still be playing at two, and it would be for Lisbon, and Berlin, and it would be for me." Her voice went thin. "I would be one more thing he gave the big thing up for. I couldn't be that. I couldn't be the reason."

"So you could have left him."

"I tried." She laughed, awful and short. "I said maybe we should wait. Push the wedding. He said he'd wait for anything. You can't leave Theo. He just holds the door open and tells you to take your time." She looked at me. "He was never going to leave me. So I had to make him."

The kettle screamed. I got up and turned it off and stood there with my hand on the dented red handle, the one Wes had fixed, and I didn't come back for a minute.

. . .

"January ninth," she said, when I sat down again. "I called Carol first. I don't know why. I think I wanted somebody to tell me not to. I asked her what she'd give up for her sons, and she said anything, and I said that's what I thought, and I hung up on her. I've never apologized for

that."

"She thinks about it every day," I said. "She told me."

June shut her eyes.

"Then I called Wes. We met at a bar on Smith Street, a horrible place with a jukebox that only plays Springsteen. I told him the whole thing. Lisbon, the email, Berlin, all of it. I told him what I needed."

"What did you need?"

"Somebody he'd believe it of." She said it simply, like reading a chart. "If it was a stranger, he'd forgive me. That's who Theo is. He'd be hurt, and then he'd forgive me, and then we'd get married, and he'd play at two. It had to be the one person he couldn't forgive. The one person I could never take back."

There it was. The phrase. Out of her own mouth, in this room, and for the first time it sounded like what it was.

"Every word of it was true," June said. "That's the trick. I needed one sentence that was completely true, so I could say it a hundred times and never lie. Wes is his brother. He's the one person I could never take back. It was true. It just wasn't what happened."

"And Wes said yes."

"Wes said no for two hours. He said it every way you can say it. He said it's insane, it's cruel, he'll never speak to either of us again. And I said yes. That's the point. That's what it's for." She was pulling at the cuff of her scrubs. "And then he went quiet, and he drank half a beer, and he said, 'People already believe this kind of thing about me, Junie. It'll be the easiest lie I ever told.' And then he said, 'I let him stay once. I'm not letting him do it twice.'"

Berlin. I could see it. Wes at twenty-one. Whatever he'd done to make his little brother write that very nice letter.

"I picked the week Theo was in Cleveland," June said. "In December. He couldn't check it. I wrote it out. I practiced it in the car in the parking garage at work. One night. 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."

"You said that to me," I said. "Word for word. At Mount Sinai."

"I've said it so many times it's the only way I know how to say it." She looked down at her hands. "You noticed. Didn't you. On the stairwell. I saw you notice."

"I write other people's sentences for a living. I know when someone's reading."

. . .

"January tenth," she said. "I told him here. In the kitchen. He was making eggs."

I looked at the stove. I couldn't help it.

"He didn't shout. He turned the gas off, very carefully, and moved the pan off the burner so it wouldn't scorch. And he asked me who. And I said the one person I could never take back. And he understood right away, and he walked out in his shirt, in January, without his coat, and took the train to Red Hook." Her voice was going now; she kept it on the road by force. "Wes opened the door. Theo didn't say anything. He just stood there. And Wes said, 'Yeah. It was me.'"

I made a sound. I didn't mean to.

"That's all he said. Yeah. It was me. And Theo looked at him for a long time and said 'Okay,' and walked home. Over the Brooklyn Bridge. In his shirt. He got pneumonia. I didn't know that until February. Carol told me."

"Where were you?"

"On the floor of Wes's bathroom." June wiped her face with the back of her wrist. "I'd gone there first, to wait. In case. So I heard it, through the door. Yeah, it was me. And then I sat on his bathroom floor all night, crying, with the tap running so nobody would hear. And Wes slept on his own couch with his boots on. All night. In case Theo came back. He said if Theo came back he wanted to be ready to go outside and let him do whatever he wanted. He didn't come back."

Boots on the couch. I'd seen Wes fall asleep on the green couch in his boots in October, and told him off for it, and he'd said, "Habit," and taken them off without arguing.

"January twelfth," she said. "I called Lisbon. Sofia gave me the maestro's home number, she's very sweet, she thought it was a love story. I said Theo had changed his mind but was too proud to call. I made my voice happy." She looked at me, wrecked. "I'm very good at it. Every day I tell parents the worst part is over."

I'd read that line through a door in October. I'd give anything for someone to say it to me.

"They called him the next day. He said yes. He was so broken he'd have said yes to the moon. He left in February, and he took nothing, and he left the suit in the closet and the fig by the window and asked Hector to find someone to water it."

"And the pact."

"Wes made me promise." She nodded slowly. "No calls. No letters to Lisbon. No telling, ever, not Carol, not anybody. Because if I wrote to him I'd tell him. He knows me. I can't hold a thing on paper." She laughed again. "So I wrote to an empty apartment instead. I slid letters under a door to nobody, at twelve-forty in the morning, after my shifts, and it didn't break anything, because nobody was there to read them."

"Except me."

"Except you." Her face did something complicated. "And Wes. Wes told me in October he'd been burning them on the stove. Some of them. He said, 'Junie, you wrote "I did it for you" on page two. Page two.' I didn't even remember writing it."

The smell of smoke at four in the morning. A man by the stove, watching a letter curl. I'd thought it was guilt. It was a lock.

. . .

"And then September," June said, and that was the part where she stopped being able to sit up straight. She folded forward over her knees. "He stopped answering the orchestra. And Carol. And anybody. Five weeks. I thought I'd killed him. I thought I'd sent him away to be happy, and instead he'd walked into the sea somewhere, and it was my fault, and I couldn't tell anyone what I'd done. I couldn't even say it to Carol. I couldn't go to his mother and say, I think your son is dead, and I arranged it."

I went across the floor to her on my knees. I didn't decide to. I put my arms around her, and she let me, the way she'd let me through a door, all at once and completely.

"Your letters," she said into my shoulder. "I started copying them because they weren't mine. They didn't break the promise. I wasn't writing to him. You were." She pulled back. "You made him laugh, Claire. I know you did. I hadn't heard him laugh in ten months, and the morning he came home he stood on that pier and almost smiled at you about the cereal. You were the only voice I had."

"I broke us so he'd go and play," June said. "And he went. And he played. And then he came home anyway. To you."

I sat back on my heels.

"He told me last night," I said. "He's staying. He's not going back. He's writing to the maestro tonight."

She stared at me.

"There's a semicolon," I said stupidly.

June made a sound I'd never heard a person make. Not crying. Something under it. She put both hands over her face.

"Then it was for nothing," she said through them. "All of it. Him in Cleveland that never happened. The bathroom floor. Every Sunday on that bench. I broke the only good thing I ever had into pieces, and I did it right, I did it perfectly, and it was for nothing."

"The bench," I said. "Why the bench? If it was over. If you'd done it on purpose."

She took her hands down.

"Because it's where he asked me," she said. "Because it was the only place in New York that was still ours and not a lie. I couldn't write to him. I could sit there. Somebody would tell him, eventually. I was there. I was still there."

"And the day I came. With Wes. You hit him."

"Because he was standing there telling me he'd found someone," June said. "He was telling me about you, Claire. A woman in the apartment who'd been writing me letters. And he'd lied to her. And I knew he'd keep lying, for me, for the plan, forever, and I hated him for being that good at it." Her mouth shook. "And then I held on to him because he was the only other person in the world who knew. We were the only two people who'd lost Theo on purpose."

I thought of her fists in his jacket, the wind, and his hand hovering over the back of her head, not sure he was allowed.

June stood up. She was unsteady. She held the arm of the couch, then let it go. At the door she stopped, with her hand on the knob,

and turned back, and her face was clear in a way it hadn't been since I'd met her, the way a sky goes after it's done.

"And Claire," she said. "Wes never told you. Not even at the bench, after you knew his name. Even then. He stood there and told you he slept with his brother's fiancée, with me right beside him. He lied to you about that too."

She opened the door.

"For me," June said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

What Wes Didn't Do

I LEFT THEO A note on the kettle. Priya's having a night. Back late. Don't wait up. Eat the fish. x C.

It was the first lie I ever wrote him. I used my good pen.

By the time the cab came down Perry Street it had started to sleet, the mean gray December kind that can't commit to being snow and takes it out on everyone. The driver had a rosary on his mirror and the Knicks on very loud. We went down the West Side Highway with the wipers going and the river black on the right, through the Battery Tunnel, into Brooklyn, and the city got lower and older and emptier until the streets were cobbles and the buildings were warehouses with their names painted on in letters a hundred years old, and the water was right there at the end of every block, the harbor and the cranes and, far off, the Statue of Liberty in the sleet with her arm up like a woman hailing a cab she'd never get.

"Here?" the driver said doubtfully, outside a long brick garage with a roll-up door on Van Brunt Street.

There was a green F-150 parked out front, rust at the wheel wells, sleet melting on the hood. A light on behind the small windows. Wood smoke from a pipe on the roof.

"Here," I said.

. . .

He opened the side door before I knocked. He must have heard the cab.

He was in a gray thermal with the sleeves pushed up and sawdust on his forearms, and he hadn't shaved in a week, maybe more, and he was thinner. Not by much. Enough that I saw it, the way you'd notice someone had moved a piece of furniture in a room you know. The scar through his eyebrow was white in the cold.

He looked at me for a long time.

"Bennett," he said.

That was all. He didn't say what are you doing here. He didn't say come in or go home or how's my brother. He stood in the door of his garage with the sleet coming down between us and the heat coming out around him, and he waited, the way he'd waited outside my door in November with his letters, for me to decide.

"Can I come in?"

He stepped back.

It was one big room, warm as a kitchen. A woodstove in the corner going hard. A workbench along the whole back wall under a pegboard of tools, every one hung inside its own outline in marker, so you'd know where it went. An old window sash in a clamp, half stripped. A mattress on a low platform he'd obviously built himself. A green couch, not velvet, a terrible plaid one, with a wool blanket on it. A narrow door at the back that I knew, without anybody telling me, was the bathroom.

And on the end of the workbench, under a coffee can full of pencils, a stack of envelopes. Thick. Thirty, maybe more, held

together with a fat blue rubber band. On the top one, in blocky capitals: BENNETT.

He saw me see them. He didn't move to hide them. He just looked at them too, like they were a dog that had done something on the rug.

"Those aren't for you," he said. "I mean they are. But they're not for sending."

. . .

I didn't take off my coat. I stood in the middle of the room with sleet melting in my hair and said it.

"You never slept with her."

He didn't flinch. He'd had eleven months of practice not flinching. He went to the woodstove and opened it and put a split log in that it didn't need, and closed it, and stood there with his back to me.

"Bennett. I told you what I did. On the pier."

"You told me what you told Theo."

"Same thing."

"June came to the apartment today."

His shoulders went up. Just slightly.

"June's been on nights for three weeks," he said to the stove. "She doesn't sleep. She gets ideas. She'll say anything to make it hurt less, she always has, she's a nurse, she thinks every wound's supposed to have a dressing on it."

"I called Lisbon," I said. "Last week. Sofia says hi."

He didn't turn around for a long time. When he did, he looked at me the way he'd looked at the closet the day he came home with the groceries. Like something had gone off.

Then he sat down. Not on the couch. On an upturned paint bucket by the stove, all at once, like his legs had made the decision for him.

He put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, sawdust and all, and stayed like that.

"Goddamn it, Junie," he said into his palms.

I waited.

"No," Wes said. "I never slept with her."

. . .

I've written the worst nights of five people's lives. I know how to stay very still and let somebody bleed onto the page. I've never had to do it for anyone I loved. I found out that night it's a completely different job.

"You know about Berlin," he said. Not a question.

"June told me."

"Did she tell you why he didn't go?"

"She said your dad had been gone four years. That you were a mess."

"I was a mess." He laughed, short, at the floor. "I was twenty-one. I'd been drunk since the funeral. I got fired off two framing crews. I put my fist through the kitchen wall in Little Compton, right through the plaster, Ma's still got the patch, she painted a lighthouse over it. And the letter came from Berlin, and she put it on the fridge with a magnet shaped like a lobster, and Theo looked at it every morning for a month. And then one night he came down and found me on the kitchen floor with my hand wrapped up in a dish towel, bleeding through it, and he sat down next to me and didn't say anything. And the next day he wrote them back." He rubbed his thumb hard across his eyebrow, across the scar. "I said, 'You sure?' Once. One time. That's what I gave him. You sure. He said, 'Somebody's got to keep the lights on, Wes.' He was nineteen."

"Wes."

"He played at two in the morning in his room for three years after that. Ma used to stand in the hall. I used to lie there and listen to it through the wall and know exactly what I'd done." He looked up. "I let him stay. That's the worst thing I ever did. Not this. That."

The woodstove ticked. Sleet ran down the little windows in lines.

"So when June sat in that bar and told me about Lisbon, I knew exactly what she was asking. And I said no. I said no for two hours. I said it's sick, Junie, it's the cruelest thing anybody's ever thought of. And she just sat there and let me, because she knew I'd get there." He shook his head. "And I got there. Because she was right. Because if he stayed, he'd marry her and be good to her and play at two in the morning for the rest of his life, and this time it'd be my fault again for not stopping it."

"So you let him believe you slept with her."

"I'm the brother you'd believe it of, Bennett." He said it quietly, like a man naming his trade. "That's all it took. Nobody asked a single question. Not Theo. Not Ma. Not one person in eleven months said, really? Wes? Are you sure? They just nodded. Because it's me. It's the kind of thing I'd do." He looked at his hands. "It was the easiest lie I ever told. That was the part that got me."

"The night he came to the door," I said.

He closed his eyes.

"He didn't knock," Wes said. "He just stood there in the snow in his shirt. No coat. He'd walked from the train. He was shaking so hard his glasses were fogged and he didn't even take them off. And he looked at me. And I knew if I opened my mouth and said anything except what I'd promised, it was over, all of it, June on the floor in there for nothing." He tipped his head at the narrow door at the back. "So I

said, 'Yeah. It was me.' Four words. And he said okay. Like I'd told him it was raining. And he walked back out into it."

"June said you slept in your boots."

"On that couch." He didn't look at it. "In case he came back. I figured if he came back I'd go outside and he could do whatever he wanted to me, and I wouldn't put my hands up. I'd let him. I wanted him to. I sat there till it got light with my boots on and the door unlocked, and she was crying in the bathroom with the tap going so I wouldn't hear, and I heard every minute of it." His voice went. He let it go, and got it back. "He never came. He went home and got pneumonia and got on a plane. He's never hit me. Not then. Not on the pier. You know that's worse? I'd have given anything for him to just hit me."

. . .

"Your first letter," I said. "The line you scribbled out. I held it up to the lamp. I could only read two words."

"IT WASN'T," he said.

"It wasn't what?"

"It wasn't true. None of it. That's what I wrote." He almost smiled. "And then I sat there on the hood of the truck and thought about June on my bathroom floor, and I went over it with the pen till I went through the paper and into the paint. Hector came out to ask if I was keying my own truck. It's still there, by the wiper. Every time I scrape the ice off, I think, you almost blew it, Marsh. For a woman who threatened you with a frying pan."

"And the bench," I said. "Wes. I knew your name by then. I knew everything, I thought. And you stood there in front of me, with June right beside you, and you said it again. I slept with my brother's

fiancée. To my face."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because it wasn't mine to tell. It was hers, and it was his, and I'd promised." He rubbed his face. "And because you were already leaving. I could see it. You were standing there with that look, and I thought, she's going. Let her go from the worst version. It's cleaner."

"Cleaner for who?"

He didn't have an answer for that. He just looked at me across his own stupid garage, a man on a paint bucket, with sawdust in the hair on his arms.

"I lied to you about my name," he said. "I want that on the record. That one's real. I did that. I don't get to give that back just because the other one's fake."

"I know."

"So don't stand there looking at me like I'm a good guy, Bennett. I can't take it. I don't know what to do with my face."

I took my coat off. I didn't decide to. I dropped it on the terrible plaid couch, and I crossed the room and stood in front of him, and he looked up at me from the bucket, and I put both my hands in his hair.

"The worst thing I ever believed about you," I said. "You never did."

He made a sound like a man who'd been holding up the end of something heavy for a very long time and had just been told he could put it down. He put his forehead against my stomach. His arms came up around me and held on, tight, around my waist, and his whole back shook once, hard, and then again. He didn't make any noise. Wes cries the way he does everything that hurts, very quietly, so it won't bother anyone.

I held his head. I stood there in a garage in Red Hook, with the woodstove going and the sleet on the windows, and let him.

. . .

After a while he stood up. We were very close. He had his hands on my arms. His thumbs moved once, up and back, on the inside of my elbows, and I felt it go all the way down to my knees.

I wanted him. I want to be honest about that, since this whole chapter is about honesty, and since everyone else in it has been lying for a year. I wanted him the way you want to go home. I tipped my face up and he looked at my mouth, and I watched him want it too, plainly, his jaw tight, his breath going short.

He leaned down and rested his forehead on mine instead.

"You've got sleet in your hair," Wes said, "and my brother's waiting up for you with a fish."

"He doesn't know where I am."

"That's my point, Bennett." He let go of my arms, one hand at a time, like he was setting down something that might roll. "I'm not doing that to him. Or you. I already took one thing from him that I didn't even take. I'm not taking a real one."

He went to the workbench and picked up the stack of letters with the blue rubber band. He looked at them for a long time. Then he slid the top one out and held it out to me.

"You can have one," he said. "Just one. The rest are going in the stove."

"Don't."

"They're not for you. They're for me. That's what June figured out, writing to that door. Sometimes you write it down so you don't say it." He put the one in my hand. "Read it in the cab."

I didn't wait for the cab. I opened it right there.

BENNETT.

I SAW YOU ON THE FIRE ESCAPE IN THE SNOW WITH HIM. I WAS ON THE SIDEWALK WITH A LETTER AND YOU WERE LAUGHING. I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER MADE YOU LAUGH LIKE THAT. I TRIED.

I WENT HOME AND I WAS GLAD. I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT. I WAS SO GODDAMN GLAD.

I'M NOT SENDING THIS.

W.

I folded it along its crease. I put it in my jeans, in the front pocket, against my hip, where I'd feel it.

"I pulled him out of the water at Montauk," Wes said, from the workbench, not looking at me. "When he was eight. A rip took him off the sandbar and I went in after him and dragged him back by his arm. Ma screamed so loud a lifeguard dropped his radio. He decided I was a hero. That's the tattoo." He touched his ribs, low on the left, through the thermal, without seeming to notice. "I've been trying to be one ever since. I keep doing it wrong."

"You didn't do this one wrong."

"I did it perfectly." He turned around. "That's what I'm scared of. Bennett. Listen to me."

He crossed the room and stood in front of me, and he didn't touch me. He kept his hands at his sides, open, the way he had on the pier.

"I'd do it again," he said. "I'd do it a hundred times. You've heard him. He plays like that because he went to Lisbon. He was never going to go for himself. Not once in his whole life. Somebody's always

going to need the lights kept on, and he's always going to be the one who stays."

"He's staying now," I said. "He told me last night. He's writing to the maestro tonight."

Wes went gray. All of him, at once, like the light had changed.

"No," he said.

"He wants to be home."

"He wants to be good. That's not the same." He took a breath like it cost money. "Bennett. Don't tell him."

I didn't say anything.

"If he finds out, he stays. You know he does. He'll stay because he'll think he has to make it up to her, and to me, and to Ma, for all of us breaking ourselves in half for him. He'll stay out of guilt, and he'll be kind about it, and he'll hate himself for twenty years and play at two in the morning till his hands go." His voice cracked straight down the middle and he didn't bother to fix it. "And June broke her own heart for nothing. She'd have done all that for nothing. I can't let that happen to her. I can't."

The woodstove ticked. The sleet had turned to snow at last, outside the little windows, big slow flakes going past in the light from the street.

"Please," Wes said. "Let it be mine."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ghostwriter

HERE IS THE JOB, if you've ever wondered.

Someone sits across from you and tells you the worst thing about themselves. Then the best thing. Then the thing in the middle that they've never told anyone, because it isn't bad enough to confess or good enough to brag about, it just hurts. You write all of it down. You make it beautiful. You put their name on the cover and you go home, and you never say a word about it to anyone, ever, for the rest of your life. That's what they pay you for. Not the sentences. The silence.

I'd been good at it for seven years. I'd kept a senator's marriage and an actress's first husband and a tennis player's panic attacks and a reality star's mother, and I'd never once been tempted to tell. Their stories weren't mine. I was just holding them.

I got home from Red Hook at one in the morning with snow in my hair and Wes's letter in my front pocket, and Theo was asleep on top of the covers in the bedroom with his laptop open on his chest, the screen gone dark. I moved it very carefully. When I touched the trackpad the screen woke up on an email.

Dear Maestro,

It is with real gratitude, and some sorrow, that I write to say I won't be returning to Lisbon in the new year; I hope you will understand

The semicolon. He'd gotten as far as the semicolon and fallen asleep.

He hadn't sent it.

I stood there in my coat for a long time, holding the laptop, with my thumb over the keys.

Then I closed it and put it on the dresser, and took off my wet things, and got into bed beside him. He turned toward me without waking up. "How's Priya," he mumbled into my hair.

"Fine," I said.

He was asleep again before I'd finished lying.

That's the job. Somebody hands you their story and you keep your mouth shut. I just hadn't ever done it to the person whose story it was.

. . .

Lying awake, I made a list, because that's what I do instead of sleeping.

June had written Theo's exit, on purpose, line by line, with a phone call and a single true sentence she'd practiced in a parking garage.

Wes had written himself as the villain, because he was the only character anybody would believe in the part.

Carol had written her sons' childhood around a patched hole in a kitchen wall with a lighthouse painted over it.

Theo had written forty-three letters to a woman and put them in a box, and composed a piece of music for a stranger whose words came

to him through a photocopier, unsigned.

And I'd written June letters through a door that she'd sent across an ocean without her name on them. I'd been ghostwriting the whole time and hadn't even known who the client was.

Everyone in this story had been writing everyone else's life. Nobody had been allowed to write their own.

And now me. I was holding the biggest story I'd ever been handed, and the man it belonged to was asleep with his hand on my hip.

. . .

Lorraine had the cover on an easel in her office the next morning, the way some people keep a portrait of their grandmother.

"Don't touch it," she said, as I came in. "It's a proof. Danny has already touched it. There's a thumbprint on the A that cost me forty minutes on the phone with design."

Danny was in the chair by her window in a suit that fought him at the shoulders, holding a coffee from the cart downstairs with both hands. He stood up when I came in and grabbed me in a hug that took me off my feet.

"Look at it," he said into my ear. "Look at it, Claire."

I looked at it.

It was a photograph of his hands. Just his hands, big and scarred, a burn shiny across one knuckle, holding a wooden spoon over a pot so old the enamel had worn through at the rim. His mother's pot. The steam was coming up off it into the light. Across the top, in plain heavy red letters, SUNDAY GRAVY. Underneath, smaller, A Life in Kitchens.

And at the bottom, in white:

DANNY RUSSO

with Claire Bennett

I didn't touch it. I wanted to so badly my fingers hurt. I stood with my hands clasped behind my back like a kid in a museum and read my own name about thirty times.

"It's small," Danny said anxiously. "I told them bigger."

"It's perfect."

"I told them bigger and Lorraine said—"

"I said with is a size," said Lorraine, who had come to stand at my other shoulder. She smelled of cigarettes and an expensive perfume she'd been wearing since before I was born. She looked at the cover with me for a while in silence.

"Seven years," she said. "Five books. I knew about three of them, you know."

I turned and stared at her.

"I'm an editor, sweetheart. I can tell when a tennis player has suddenly started using the word 'liminal.'" She tapped ash into a mug that said WORLD'S OKAYEST GRANDMA. "Get used to seeing it. Your name. It'll feel like a coat that belongs to someone else for a year or so. Then one day you'll put it on without thinking."

"Nick's coming to the party," Danny said, out of nowhere, and then his face went red and crumpled at the same time, and he had to sit back down in the chair by the window. "Tomorrow night. He's taking the train. He said he wants to see the restaurant. He said he wants to see where I've been."

Lorraine handed him a tissue without looking, the way you'd pass the salt.

"I'm going to cry on the investors," Danny said. "I can feel it."

"Cry on the investors," Lorraine said. "They've cried on us."

. . .

I met Maddie at a coffee place on Lexington, across from Lenox Hill, at two. Neutral ground. Neither of us said that, but we'd both picked a place with no history in it.

She was already there, in a corner, in a big cream sweater that didn't hide anything anymore. She saw me look.

"Seventeen weeks," she said. "I felt it move on Thursday. Like a goldfish turning over. I haven't told anyone." She looked at her tea. "I'm telling you."

I sat down across from her.

It wasn't forgiveness. I want to be clear. You don't forgive someone for seven months of your fiancé and a heart emoji just because she bled in a hospital bed and you held her hand. But there's something that comes before forgiveness, or sometimes instead of it, and it's mostly just deciding to sit down. I sat down.

"A goldfish," I said.

"Ryan doesn't know." She turned her cup around by the handle. "His lawyer sends a check. The check has a memo line. It says 'support.' Just the one word. Like a bra." She almost laughed. "Whatever it is, I'm naming it something he'll hate."

"Good."

We talked for an hour about nothing. Her mother's new boyfriend. A crib she couldn't afford. She asked about the apartment and I said it was fine. She asked about the brothers and I said it was complicated, and she said, "Claire, you've said 'complicated' three times in five minutes, you're the one who taught me that's what people say when they mean they're scared," and I didn't answer that.

When we stood up to go, she put her hand on my arm.

"He asked me about you," she said. "Ryan. Last week. He called for the first time in a month and I thought it was about the baby." Her mouth went flat. "He wanted to know if you were the one writing Danny's book. His firm's on the investor list. He saw something. He was being weird about it. Asking about your other ones."

"My other ones."

"The actress. The senator's wife." She looked at me carefully. "I didn't tell him anything. I want you to know that. I didn't. But he already knew. He was there, Claire. For three years. He knows what you do."

. . .

He was waiting outside Danny's restaurant on Gansevoort when I went by at five to drop off the last signed contract. Of course he was. He'd always had a gift for being where you were going to be, like a pothole.

Ryan Cole, in a navy overcoat and the haircut that cost more than my rent at Perry Street, coming out of the investors' meeting in the private room with his phone in his hand. He saw me and smiled. The LinkedIn smile. The one with the teeth he'd had fixed in college.

"Claire." He said it like we were old colleagues. "Congratulations. With Claire Bennett. That's cute."

"Hi, Ryan."

"I mean it. Good for you. Finally stepping out." He tucked his phone into his coat. "Must be strange. After all the others. Going public." He tilted his head, concerned, a man worried about a friend. "Does the senator's wife know? About the going public part? I'd hate for anybody to get the wrong idea. People get very sensitive about who wrote what."

I looked at him on the cobblestones under the old loading-dock awning, the same spot where Lorraine had once told me my ex was inside, in another life, in October.

"Ryan," I said. "You're about to be somebody's father."

His face went blank, like a screen when the power cuts. He hadn't let himself think it in those words. Of course he hadn't.

"Go call Maddie," I said. "That's the only story about you anyone's ever going to want to read. Don't make it a bad one."

I walked past him into the restaurant. I didn't look back. I heard him stand there for a long time, and then I heard his shoes going away over the cobbles, fast, and I wondered whose number he was calling, and I didn't care, and I should have.

. . .

Theo had a list.

He'd written it on the back of a page of the Messiah, in pencil, in that patient forward-leaning hand, and he was holding it when I came in, standing by the fridge as if he was presenting at a conference.

"I've been planning," he said. "Don't panic."

"I'm not panicking."

"You've got your coat half off and you've stopped moving. That's your panic face. I've catalogued it." He pushed his glasses up. "Item one. Christmas. Ma wants us in Little Compton. Both of us. She was very specific, she used the phrase 'or I'll take the train down there and find out why.' Item two. There's a recital at St. Luke's in the second week of January. Bach. They asked me to do the third suite. I said yes. You'll come and sit in the front row and make the face you made last night, and I'll play it straight to you and get everything wrong."

"Theo."

"Item three." He tapped the paper with his pencil. "Hector says he can draw up a lease from January. Both names. Yours and mine. On the same line. I asked him if there was a form for that and he said, 'Mijo, I am the form.'" He hesitated, then went on. "I know it's fast. I know you have a life that doesn't fit inside one bedroom and a couch. But I want you to know that I'm making plans that have you in them, and I'm not going to pretend I'm not."

He waited. He looked so hopeful. He looked like a man who'd never in his life been allowed to want something out loud and was trying it for the first time, to see if it hurt.

"Item four," I said, because I couldn't say anything else. "What's item four?"

"Pastéis that work," Theo said. "Long-term goal." He put the list in my hand, like a contract he wanted me to take home and read properly.

I kissed him. I couldn't not. He laughed into it and held my face, and I could feel Wes's letter folded in my front pocket against my hip, and the email on his laptop that ended in a semicolon, and I kissed him harder, as if that would close something.

On the stairs, on my way down to get the mail afterward, Mr. Ortiz was sitting on the third-floor landing with his radio and his clipboard, doing figures with a stub of pencil and his tongue between his teeth. He covered the page with his hand when he saw me.

"Hector," I said. "What are the odds?"

"I don't know nothing about odds," said Mr. Ortiz, with great dignity. "I'm a superintendent." He paused. "Mrs. Feldman in 2A has changed her money twice this week. That's all I'm saying. She's very emotional."

"Changed it to what?"

He put his pencil behind his ear and looked at me with infinite sorrow and affection.

"Mija," he said. "Go get your mail."

. . .

There was one envelope in the box for 4B. Not for me.

It was thick, cream-colored, heavy paper, the kind you don't see anymore except on wedding invitations. Portuguese stamps along the top, three of them, ships and a tram and a woman in a headscarf. A blue-and-gold crest in the corner, a river under a crown. Orquestra do Tejo. Theo Marsh, 41 Perry Street, Apt. 4B, in a looping old-fashioned hand.

I carried it up four flights like it was full of something that could spill.

He opened it at the kitchen table with a butter knife, carefully, along the top, the way he did everything. There were two pages inside. He read them standing up. I watched his face. I'm good at faces. I watched him read the first page and go still, and read the second page and put his hand flat on the table, and then read the whole thing again from the top.

Then he laughed. Soft. Disbelieving.

"It's from the maestro," he said. "Himself. Handwritten. Sofia must have given him the address, she's incapable of minding her own business." He held the pages up to me as if I could read Portuguese. "The board met. They're offering me the chair permanently. Principal. For life, basically. Or until my hands go." He shook his head slowly. "Even with the walking. He says, and I'm translating, 'We forgave you September in the first eight bars of the Brahms.'"

I couldn't move. I stood by the fridge with his list still in my hand, item one, item two, item three, in his patient pencil.

"I'm going to tell them no," Theo said.

He said it with his whole face open, smiling, like he was giving me something.

"I'd tell them no a hundred times." He folded the letter and set it down on the table next to Gerald. "Claire, I've never been happier to say no to anything in my life."

I heard it twice. Once in his voice, in the kitchen, in December, with his glasses pushed up and the radiator ticking. And once in ink, in a closet, in a box, on the top of a stack, dated January second, in a letter he'd never sent to a woman who'd broken herself in half so he'd never have to write it again.

He came around the table and kissed me.

And I kissed him back. I held on to his shirt with both hands and kissed him back with everything I had, standing in his kitchen, with his list crushed between us, with the truth of his own life in my mouth like a stone I couldn't swallow and couldn't spit out, and I didn't say a word.

That's the job. That's what they pay you for.

Nobody was paying me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Twelve Days

THE FIRST LIST, THE one on the back of a page of the Messiah, had got crushed between us when he kissed me. The second went up on the fridge the next morning, under the rules.

There were two sets of rules by then, one on top of the other like layers of rock. Wes's from October in square, pressed-down capitals, NO TALKING BEFORE COFFEE, DON'T NAME MY PLANTS. Then Theo's from November, in fountain pen, small and neat and slightly forward-leaning, each letter hurrying politely to catch a train. Nobody had taken Wes's down. Nobody had said why.

The new page was torn from Theo's music notebook, the staves printed faintly across it, and he'd written over them as if they weren't there. THE TWELVE DAYS, it said, and underneath: (They begin on the 25th. Everyone gets this wrong. I'm not angry, only disappointed.)

1. Dec 25. Ma's. You will lose at Scrabble. She cheats. Let her.

3. Dec 27. Home. Caldo verde. I'll get it right this time. (I won't.)

5. Dec 29. Write to Lisbon. Short letter. Two words.

He'd gone all the way to twelve. New Year's Eve on Hector's roof, with an underlined note: I will be forced to play "Auld Lang Syne" and you will be forced to watch. And at the bottom, January fifth, one line with no joke at all.

12. Ask you something.

I read number five a third time, which I never do, and the coffee in my hand turned over.

I'd made it the way I always made it, two scoops too many of the cheap Bustelo from the bodega, in the mug I'd been using since October. Now the smell came up at me like a wet penny. Like a subway car in August. I put the mug down and backed away from it as if it had said something about my mother.

"Problem?" Theo said, from the stove.

He was making eggs. He was humming. He'd been humming since the night before, since he'd held up the letter from the Orquestra do Tejo and said I'm going to tell them no, and kissed me, and I'd kissed him back with the truth sitting on my tongue like a lozenge I couldn't swallow. He hummed shaving. He hummed doing the crossword. June had once described it to me in a letter, and she'd been exactly right, and that was a problem too.

"The coffee's off," I said.

He sniffed my mug with a scientist's caution. "It's the same coffee. You said, and I quote, good morning, Bustelo, my only friend."

"Then the can's gone off."

"Coffee doesn't go off. It goes stale. It loses hope." He took a sip, and the face he made was about the strength, not the smell. "That's just your coffee, Claire. It's how I knew you were a writer before you

told me."

I poured it down the sink. It was the first cup of coffee I'd thrown away in my adult life. I felt I should say a few words.

"Number five," I said instead.

"Ah." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. "'Obrigado, não.' Thank you, no. I started an email and fell asleep on the semicolon. I'd rather it was on paper, in my handwriting. The last time I made a decision this big, things got away from me. I'd like to hold this one."

I bit my lip, felt myself do it, and stopped. He was turning the eggs. He didn't see.

Things hadn't got away from him. They'd been taken, very carefully, by a woman in a red coat and a man with a scar through his eyebrow, in a bar on Smith Street, and carried to Lisbon by hand. I'd known it for a day and a half. I'd sat in a garage in Red Hook in the sleet and heard a man beg me, let it be mine.

"What's number twelve?" I said.

"It says right there. Ask you something."

"Ask me what?"

"Well, Claire," said Theo Marsh, sitting down across from me with the morning on his glasses, "if I told you that, it would be number one, and the whole structure would collapse."

. . .

At eleven, Mr. Ortiz brought us a tree.

I heard it from the second floor, a dragging, rustling sound like a bear being taken somewhere against its will, and over it Mr. Ortiz's voice coming up the stairwell in two languages, neither of them suitable for church. Mrs. Kaplan had opened the door of 3A and stood in it in a quilted robe, holding a mug, with the face of a woman

who had seen the building through the blackout of 1977 and did not intend to be impressed by a fir.

"Hector, it's too big."

"It's not too big, it's ambitious."

Theo went straight down and took the bottom, and the two of them got it up the last flight together, needles raining on every step like a fairy tale with poor planning. They stood it in the corner by the big window, next to Gerald. It touched the ceiling and bent over a little at the top, like it was trying to read over my shoulder.

"From management," said Mr. Ortiz, breathing hard.

"The landlord bought us a tree?"

"The landlord is a man without a soul. From management."

Theo had sap on both hands and a needle in his hair, and his face went soft the way it did before he played. "Hector. Thank you."

"Every year since you moved in, there's a tree in this window, mijo." Mr. Ortiz looked at the radiator, which he does when he's about to say something true. "Last year, no tree. I walked past that dark window every night. I don't like a dark window at Christmas. It's bad for the building."

On his way out he stopped beside me on the landing, took out the little notebook he keeps the betting pool in, made a mark, and looked at me over his reading glasses for longer than was comfortable.

"What," I said.

"Nothing. You look tired, mija. Tired like my daughter looked tired."

That made no sense. He went down the stairs singing along to Marc Anthony, and I stood on the landing with a vague, itchy feeling that I'd been read.

. . .

My mother called at two o'clock on a Thursday.

My mother calls on Sundays. She has never once in eleven years called on a weekday, and when her name came up I sat down hard on the green couch and thought: Gary. Heart attack. Golf cart.

"Claire, honey, I need you to tell me if this is cruel. I bought Biscuit a Christmas sweater. It's red with a pom-pom on the back and little bells around the neck, and Gary says it's emotional abuse. I sent you a picture."

I opened it. Biscuit sat on the beige carpet in Phoenix in a tiny red sweater with a pom-pom on his rear like a target, looking straight into the lens with the wet, betrayed eyes of a pug who has been made to wear bells.

And I started to cry.

Not a sniffle. I put my hand over my mouth and wept over a pug in a sweater as if he'd been sent to war.

"Claire? Are you crying about Biscuit?"

"He's got bells on. He didn't ask for bells."

A long silence from Phoenix. For a moment I thought my mother might ask me something about my life, for the first time since the rehearsal dinner. The silence had that shape.

"I'll take the bells off," she said finally, very gently, the way you'd talk someone down from a ledge. Then she told me about his kibble for eleven minutes, and it was the kindest thing she has ever done for me.

. . .

By four I'd fallen asleep at the kitchen table, sitting up, over Danny's final proofs, and woken with a blue pen line across page 211 and a blanket over my shoulders I hadn't put there.

"You were snoring," Theo said from the couch, not looking up from his score.

"I don't snore."

"Not loudly. Musically. Mostly in B-flat."

Danny's party was at seven. At five I went out for milk because the apartment was too warm. That was another thing. I'd been cold in 4B since October. Now it felt like the inside of a mouth. Perry Street was already dark, the way it gets in December when the afternoon gives up and goes home. Somebody had wound white lights up the trees on the south side, and the brownstones had wreaths and candles in the windows, the battery kind, little brave flames that never move.

At the bodega on the corner the door was propped open with a space heater roaring inside it, and on top of the newspapers, in a cardboard box that had once held clementines, Mayor was asleep. On his back. All four orange feet in the air. Someone had set a tiny knitted Santa hat on the edge of the box, not on him, just beside him, as an offering. He had declined.

I burst into tears for the second time that day.

Amir, who has sold me roughly four hundred coffees, looked at me over the lottery tickets. He looked at Mayor.

"He's okay," he said cautiously. "He's just sleeping."

"I know. He just looks so safe."

Amir considered this. Then he handed me a napkin and, after a second's thought, a single clementine from the bin by the register, and wouldn't let me pay for it.

I peeled it walking back up Perry in the cold, and the smell of it was so sharp and bright I wanted to put my whole face in it, and I thought, clearly, the way you notice a draft: something's wrong with you, Bennett.

It was his word. It came into my head in his voice.

I told myself it was the secret. I'd written enough crises to know what holding one does to a body. The senator's wife broke out in hives the whole year her husband was lying to the Ethics Committee. Carrying something for someone else makes you strange. It makes coffee taste like pennies and pugs look like orphans. I'd built whole chapters out of it.

I ate the clementine on the stoop of 41 Perry and decided that's what it was.

. . .

The envelope came at twenty to six.

Not 12:40. For the first time, not 12:40, and that should have told me something. Theo was in the bath with the door shut, getting ready for Danny's, singing a carol in what he claimed was Portuguese. I sat on the green couch in my socks with Priya's dress on a hanger on the bedroom door, and listened to the building, and didn't know what I was waiting for anymore.

The front door downstairs, not quite catching. Footsteps on the stairs, heavier than June's, quicker than Theo's. The creaky step, taken two at a time, as if it had personally offended him.

I knew those feet the way you know a song you'd give anything to stop knowing.

The whisper of paper on wood. Then the footsteps going down, fast. The street door. And outside, the cough and catch of an engine

I'd have known from the moon. I got to the big window in time to see the green truck pull away from the hydrant with its one bad taillight, a duffel and a toolbox roped under a tarp in the back. It went up Perry under the white lights and turned on Seventh and was gone.

BENNETT, in blocky capitals, pressed so hard I could feel the letters from the back with my thumb. I opened it under the light over the stove.

BENNETT,

GOT A JOB IN VERMONT. AN 1820S MEETINGHOUSE OUTSIDE BRATTLEBORO, TWENTY-SIX WINDOWS, ORIGINAL GLASS, A CONGREGATION OF NINE PEOPLE WHO ARE VERY UPSET ABOUT THE DRAFT. IT'S GOOD MONEY AND IT'S FAR AWAY AND I'LL BE THERE TILL JANUARY. BOTH OF THOSE ARE THE POINT.

I'M OUT OF YOUR WAY. NO MORE ENVELOPES. NO MORE TRUCK ON PERRY STREET. YOU CAN WALK TO THE BODEGA WITHOUT LOOKING FOR ME. I KNOW YOU DO THAT. I DO IT TOO.

WATER GERALD. TELL HECTOR THE LADDER'S BACK IN THE BASEMENT. TELL MY BROTHER NOTHING, BUT YOU KNOW THAT.

BE HAPPY, BENNETT. HE'S THE GOOD ONE. HE ALWAYS WAS.

– W.

Half a page, really, in those huge square letters. There was no lie in it, which was worse. He'd done what he always did. He'd made himself small and moved himself out of the way and called it a favor.

I went to fold it back up, and saw there was something else in the envelope.

Three sheets of yellow legal paper, folded tight into a fat square and wedged in the bottom, the way a thing gets stuck when you shove two letters in at once in the dark cab of a truck. And on the outside fold, in the same capitals, a line not meant for me:

I NEVER TOLD YOU ABOUT THE TREEHOUSE.

I knew before I unfolded it that this was the one he hadn't sent. That somewhere on I-91, with the heater roaring on high because it won't do anything else, there was a man who would reach into his glove box tomorrow for this letter and find instead the short, kind, careful one he'd written to let me go.

I'm a ghostwriter. I have never in my life left the real draft unread.

I NEVER TOLD YOU ABOUT THE TREEHOUSE. I TOLD YOU HALF. THE HALF WHERE HE'S EIGHT AND SINGING AND I'M BLEEDING ALL OVER HIS SHIRT. THAT'S THE HALF I TELL EVERYBODY. IT MAKES HIM LOOK GOOD AND ME LOOK LIKE AN IDIOT, WHICH IS HOW I LIKE MY STORIES.

HERE'S THE OTHER HALF. IN RED HOOK I TOLD YOU ABOUT THE KITCHEN FLOOR AND MY HAND IN THE DISH TOWEL, AND I TOLD YOU ALL I SAID WAS YOU SURE. THAT'S TRUE. THAT WAS THE MORNING. THE NIGHT BEFORE, I FOUND HIM IN THE TREEHOUSE AT GRAN'S. SIX FOOT, IN A THING BUILT FOR AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD, KNEES AROUND HIS EARS, THE BERLIN LETTER IN HIS LAP. HE ASKED ME IF HE

SHOULD GO.

I WAS TWENTY-ONE. DAD HAD BEEN DEAD FOUR YEARS. SOME NIGHTS MA STILL SET THREE PLACES AND THEN STOOD THERE LOOKING AT THE THIRD PLATE.

I SAID, MA NEEDS YOU.

NOT GO. NOT YOU'D BE CRAZY NOT TO. I SAID MA NEEDS YOU, BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT TO BE THE ONLY ONE LEFT IN THAT HOUSE WITH HER AND THE THIRD PLATE. HE NODDED LIKE I'D TOLD HIM SOMETHING HE ALREADY KNEW. THE YOU SURE IN THE MORNING WAS ME TRYING TO TAKE IT BACK, TOO QUIET AND TOO LATE. HE'S BEEN PLAYING AT TWO A.M. EVER SINCE.

I NEVER TOLD ANYBODY THAT. NOT JUNE. NOT MA. YOU ASKED ME IN RED HOOK WHY I SAID YES ON SMITH STREET AND I GAVE YOU ALL THE GOOD REASONS. THAT'S THE REAL ONE. I OWED HIM A CITY.

SO HERE'S THE PART ABOUT YOU, AND THEN THIS GOES IN THE GLOVE BOX WHERE IT BELONGS.

I'M IN LOVE WITH YOU. SINCE THE FRYING PAN. I'VE NEVER WRITTEN THAT DOWN BEFORE AND IT TURNS OUT IT'S EASY IN CAPITALS. IT'S JUST LOUD.

I turned to the third page. My hands weren't working right.

AND I'M NOT GOING TO SAY IT TO YOU. THE LAST TIME I TOLD SOMEBODY WHAT TO DO WITH HIS LIFE, HE GAVE UP BERLIN. I'M NOT DOING IT TO HIM AGAIN

AND I'M NOT DOING IT TO YOU. NOBODY IN THIS FAMILY EVER GETS TO CHOOSE, BENNETT. YOU SHOULD.

THE TREEHOUSE IS STILL UP. I DROVE PAST GRAN'S AT THANKSGIVING, THE MORNING AFTER. THE PEOPLE WHO BOUGHT IT NEVER TOOK IT DOWN. HE BUILT IT OFF HIS OWN PLANS WHILE I WAS ON THE COUCH WITH A BAG OF PEAS, AND IT'S CROOKED AS HELL AND IT'S STILL STANDING, AND EVERYTHING I EVER BUILT FOR HIM FELL DOWN.

THAT'S THE TRUE THING. YOU ALWAYS ASK FOR ONE. IT'S THE ONLY ONE I'VE GOT LEFT.

No signature. He hadn't meant to need one.

I sat at the kitchen table long enough for the radiator to knock twice and go quiet, with three pages flat under my palms like I could keep them from getting up and leaving, and I cried without any sound at all, the way you do in someone else's apartment.

Then the bathroom door, and bare feet on the slanted floor.

I had the pages folded and inside my sweater before he reached the doorway. I'm fast. It turns out I've had practice.

"Claire?" Theo stood there in a cloud of steam without his glasses, squinting at me with that soft, unguarded, nearsighted face. "It's almost six."

"Nerves."

"Me too." He smiled, and went past me to the corner and took the cello between his knees. "I'll play you something cheerful. I've been feeling cheerful. It's very disorienting."

And under the bent top of Hector's tree, beside the window where his brother's truck had been, with his brother's three pages pressed against my heart, he began to play the happiest thing I had ever heard him play, and I sat there and let him, and that was the worst lie I'd told yet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Party

THEO CAME OUT OF the bedroom at six-thirty in his wedding suit.

I knew it before he'd finished buttoning the jacket. Charcoal wool, narrow lapels, the faint crease across the shoulders where it had hung for ten months in a garment bag in a locked closet like a ghost at a wedding. I'd sat under it on the floor of the hall in November and read forty-three letters. I'd have known it anywhere.

He saw my face and stopped with one button done.

"It's the only suit I own," he said. "It seemed a waste to let it go on haunting the closet."

"Theo."

"I know." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle and did the second button. "But it's a good suit, Claire. It didn't do anything wrong. I thought it deserved a nicer evening."

He looked wonderful in it. That was the problem. He looked like a man who'd walked out of his own past and decided to keep the clothes.

I was in a green velvet dress Priya had lent me on the grounds that it made her look like a Christmas ornament and me look "like a woman with a secret," which was more accurate than she knew. In my

clutch, in the little zip pocket where other women keep a lipstick, were three pages of yellow legal paper folded into a square. I'd been carrying them for an hour. I'd moved them from my sweater to my coat to my bag like a smuggler. I hadn't read them again. I didn't need to.

Theo held the door. Downstairs, the cello case stood waiting in the hall like a third guest.

. . .

Danny's restaurant on Gansevoort had kept its meat hooks, and for Christmas someone had hung a glass ornament from every one, red and gold and silver, so that the whole ceiling glittered and turned slowly in the heat from the kitchen, like a butcher's idea of a planetarium. The long zinc bar had garlands down its length. Every table had been cleared away except one, at the back, stacked with copies of a cover proof: Danny's scarred hands holding a wooden spoon over his mother's old pot, SUNDAY GRAVY across the top in heavy red letters, and at the bottom, under his name, with Claire Bennett.

I stopped in the doorway and looked at it for so long that Theo had to steer me by the elbow.

Lorraine Fisch was on the sidewalk outside, of course, under the awning in her camel coat with a cigarette. The smoke reached me on the wind, and for the first time since I'd known her, it made my stomach roll over like a dog asking for something.

"You look," Lorraine said, examining me, "like someone who's been crying in an expensive way."

"I haven't been crying."

"Darling, I've edited eleven memoirs about divorce. I can see it in your eyelids." She tapped her ash. "It suits you. Go inside. He's been asking for you every four minutes. And bring that gorgeous man in the sad suit, he's lowering the average age of my good mood."

Inside, a waiter put a flute of champagne in my hand before I'd got my coat off. I lifted it out of reflex, and the smell came up at me, sour and yeasty, like bread that's thought about something it shouldn't have, and my whole throat closed.

I held the glass at chest height for the rest of the night like a woman holding a candle at a vigil. Nerves, I told myself. Two days of no sleep, a secret in my purse and my name on a table. Anyone's stomach would turn.

"You're not drinking," Priya said, appearing at my elbow at seven-fifteen in a black dress, alone.

"Nerves."

She looked at the glass. She looked at me. She looked at the glass again, two seconds longer than she needed to, with the face she uses on patients who say they only had two beers. Then she said, "Mm," and nothing else, which from Priya is a paragraph.

"Where's Marcus?"

"Paged. An emergency appendectomy in Forest Hills." She took a canapé off a passing tray with real bitterness. "He was going to meet you tonight. He ironed a shirt. He sent me a photo of the shirt. That's how he is. He documents his ironing. Also he hums the Jeopardy music while he waits for toast, and he cries at the end of cooking competitions, and he had the nerve to be needed by a stranger with an appendix." She ate the canapé. "It's a flaw."

"It sounds like a flaw."

"It's the worst one he has," Priya said, and for a second her face did something soft and unguarded that she'd have denied under oath.

. . .

Danny found me at the bar and lifted me off the ground.

He's a big man, Danny, built like a refrigerator that cooks, and he hugged the way he did everything, which is too hard and for too long and with a running commentary. "There she is. There's my ghost. Look at this, look at this room. Did you see the cover? Did you see your name? I made them make it bigger. Lorraine said no. I said, Lorraine, I'll put it on the menu, I'll tattoo it on the sous chef." He put me down. His eyes were wet already, and it was barely seven-thirty. "Come here. Come meet my son."

Nick was standing by the kitchen doors in a white shirt that someone had ironed for him, possibly Danny, possibly at gunpoint. He was twenty-four and had his father's jaw and none of his volume. He held himself the way line cooks do in a dining room, like he'd been dragged up from the ocean floor and wasn't sure about the pressure. He'd come up from Philadelphia on the train that afternoon. Six years, and he'd come.

"You're the one who made him call," he said when Danny went off to shout at the bartender about ice.

"I didn't make him. I just sat across from him while he did it. He did the hard part."

"He said you held his hand." Nick looked at his own hands, which had burn scars across the knuckles, the same as his father's. "He said, Nicky, I couldn't dial. A woman had to dial for me. I've seen that man take a pan out of a four-hundred-degree oven with a dish towel. He couldn't dial."

"It was a heavy phone," I said.

He laughed, startled out of himself, and for a second he looked exactly like Danny. Twenty minutes later I saw him in the kitchen with his jacket off and his sleeves rolled up, plating crudo next to the sous chef like he'd been born there, and Danny standing in the doorway watching him with his hand pressed flat to his own chest, like a man keeping something from falling out.

. . .

Maddie came at eight, in a navy wrap dress, with her hand already on her stomach.

She was showing now. Not much, a soft, small curve under the wrap, but she held it the way you hold a lit match in the wind. I'd invited her. I'm still not sure why. We'd had one careful coffee the day before, where neither of us said sorry and both of us meant it a little, and at the end of it I'd heard myself say, Danny's having a thing, and she'd said, I'd like that, as if I'd offered her a coat.

"You look great," she said.

"You look pregnant."

"I'm told that's the idea." She almost smiled. "Is he here?"

She didn't mean Theo.

"His firm's on the investor list," I said. "I couldn't stop it. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She lifted her chin. "I'm not hiding. I'm four months along and I'm eating everything on that crudo tray and he can watch."

Ryan arrived at eight-twenty in a camel overcoat and a smile that had been professionally whitened, with two men from his firm. He saw Maddie across the room and his face did something quick and ugly, a flinch dressed up as a sneer, and then he turned his whole

body away from her as if she were a draft. He didn't look at her stomach once. I watched him not look at it, and I thought: if I were writing him, I'd give him one moment of shame here. Then I'd cut it in the edit, because it wouldn't be true.

. . .

At nine Danny banged a ladle on a stockpot until the room went quiet.

"I'm not good at speeches," he said, which was a lie he'd told on four seasons of network television. "I'm good at yelling. So I'm going to yell nicely."

People laughed. He held up a copy of the cover proof.

"Last spring, my editor, the terrifying Lorraine, said, Danny, you need to write a book. I said, I can't write a grocery list. She said, that's why God made ghosts." He found me in the crowd. "So they sent me one. And she followed me around for six months with a recorder in her pocket, and she listened to me talk about my mother and fistfights and pork shoulder, and she found a man in there I didn't know was there. And she wrote him down. And then she did something nobody else in my life ever did." His voice went. He let it. "She made me call my son."

Nick, in the kitchen doorway, looked at the floor.

"So I told them, put her name on it. They said, Danny, ghosts don't go on covers. I said, she's not a ghost. She's a writer. She's the best writer in this city, and nobody knows her name." He lifted the proof over his head like a trophy. "Danny Russo. With Claire Bennett. Say it with me."

And the room said it.

Sixty people under the glittering hooks, my name, out loud, in a room. Lorraine said it with a cigarette tucked unlit behind her ear. Priya said it like a diagnosis. Maddie said it with her hand on her stomach, and her voice cracked. Theo said it standing a little apart, by the bar, in his wedding suit, and he didn't clap afterward. He just looked at me with that patient, astonished face, the face he'd had in Carnegie Hall when he found me in the dark.

I'd spent seven years writing other people's names on things. I hadn't known what my own would sound like said by strangers. It sounded like a door opening.

. . .

Ryan caught me in the hallway by the restrooms at ten.

I'd gone back to breathe somewhere that didn't smell like champagne. He was leaning on the wall by the coat check with a whiskey, his tie loosened, his eyes a little bright the way they get on the third drink, when he starts saying what he thinks.

"Congratulations," he said. "Claire Bennett, author."

"Thank you, Ryan. Excuse me."

"No, I mean it." He didn't move. "It's a great story. Better than Danny's, honestly. Five bestsellers and nobody knew. The senator's wife. The actress. That reality girl who threw the table." He smiled. "And before you look at Maddie, she didn't tell me. She wouldn't. I didn't need her to. I lived with you for three years, Claire. You used to cry at two a.m. over a tennis player's mother."

I felt it go into me like cold water, and I kept my face exactly where it was, because I've sat across from senators.

"And now this." He tipped his glass toward the dining room, where Theo was talking to Lorraine with his hands in his pockets. "I

could've sworn you brought a different guy on Halloween. Big guy. Scar. You were calling him Theo in the cab line. And now there's a new Theo. Skinny one. Glasses." He shook his head in mock wonder. "The bartender says they're brothers. Brothers, Claire. Same apartment. You really don't waste time."

"Do you know what I've always liked about you, Ryan?" I said.

He waited, smiling.

"Nothing. I've checked. Thoroughly. You gave me seven months of free evenings to do it."

The smile slipped. For one second he looked like what he was, a thirty-one-year-old man in a hallway who'd just been told something true. Then he lifted his whiskey to me, and pushed off the wall, and walked back into the room, and I watched him go straight to the end of the bar, where a woman in a black turtleneck was sitting alone with a club soda. She'd come as somebody's plus-one. I'd noticed her earlier because she was the only person at the party not looking at the food.

He leaned in and said something. She laughed. She reached into her bag, and took out a small spiral notebook, the narrow kind that fits in a coat pocket, and opened it on the zinc.

I stood in the hallway and told myself it was nothing. People write things down at parties. I write things down at parties. It's a free country and a free bar.

I didn't believe it. I'd been the woman with the notebook too many times.

. . .

At eleven, Danny asked Theo to play.

He'd asked on the phone, days ago, shyly, in a voice I'd never heard him use, whether my cellist might play something for his mother. Rosa Russo had died in 2011. She'd made the Sunday gravy every week of Danny's childhood with the radio on the classical station, and she'd liked Bach, Danny said, because "it sounds like somebody counting something they love."

There was nowhere to sit. The chairs were all stacked. So Theo looked at the long zinc bar, and looked at Danny, and Danny said, "Go on, Maestro, it's my bar," and Theo climbed up onto it in his wedding suit, with the bartender holding the cello case steady, and sat on the edge of the zinc with his feet dangling over the bar stools and the instrument between his knees, under the turning ornaments, and the whole room went quiet without anyone asking.

He played the Prelude from the first suite. The G major. The one everybody knows even if they don't know they know it, the one that sounds like water going downhill and finding every stone.

I'd heard him play it at two in the morning. I'd never heard him play it for a room. It was different. At home he played like a man talking to himself. Here he played like a man telling sixty strangers something about a woman none of them had met, and every one of them understood it.

Danny stood at the end of the bar with his big burned hands over his face. Nick came out of the kitchen and stood next to him and, after a long second, put an arm around his father's shoulders. Danny leaned into it like a building settling.

Maddie cried. Half the investors cried. Priya didn't cry, but she put her hand through my arm and held on, which I had never once seen her do with anyone, and kept it there to the end.

And Theo, halfway through, lifted his head and looked out over the room, past all of them, the way he'd found me in the dark at Carnegie Hall. He found me again. By the hallway, with my full glass of champagne and my clutch held against my ribs and three pages of capitals inside it.

He smiled at me while he played. As if there were nobody else there.

I smiled back. I'm a professional. And across the room, at the end of the bar, the woman in the black turtleneck wrote something down.

. . .

We walked home. Gansevoort to Perry, eleven blocks in the cold, with the cello on his back and his hand in mine in his coat pocket, the West Village all lit up and steaming. He talked the whole way about Rosa Russo, and Nick's hands, and how Danny's sous chef had told him the bar was "structurally rated for three cellists, max," and how happy he was. He said it like that. "I'm so happy, Claire. I keep checking. It's still there."

I made love to him that night like an apology he didn't know he was getting, and he fell asleep with one hand on my hip, and I lay awake until four listening to the radiator and thinking about a spiral notebook on a zinc bar.

At 7:02 my phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Priya. Who had worked a double that week and does not, on her day off, exist before ten.

"Are you awake?" she said.

"I am now."

"Okay. Okay." I heard her take a breath, the one she takes before she tells a family to sit down. "Page Six. Are you sitting down?"

"I'm lying down."

"That's better." A pause. "I'm sending you the link. Don't read the comments. Claire. Promise me you won't read the comments."

The text came through. I sat up in Theo's bed, in the gray morning, with the man in it still asleep beside me, and opened it.

GHOST STORY: The secret pen behind five bestsellers (and the brothers who share her apartment)

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Exposed

I READ THE COMMENTS.

Of course I read the comments. I've spent seven years reading what strangers say about books I wrote, under other people's names, at two in the morning, in the dark. I wasn't going to stop now that they were finally talking about me.

The item itself was three hundred words. Page Six does in three hundred words what I'd need a chapter for, and I say that with professional respect. There was a photograph of me from Danny's Halloween party, holding a cocktail and laughing at something just out of frame, looking like a woman with nothing to hide. There was a list of the five books, with their covers in a row like a police lineup. "Sources say" Claire Bennett, 29, who "fled her own Tribeca rehearsal dinner in September," had written them all, including "the senator's wife's tearjerker that Oprah called brave." And then the last paragraph, where they always put the knife:

Bennett, who is credited by name for the first time on chef Danny Russo's upcoming memoir, has reportedly been sharing a West Village walk-up with not one but two brothers: heartbroken cellist Theo Marsh, recently returned from Lisbon, and his older brother

Wes, a carpenter. "She's a ghostwriter," says a source close to Bennett. "She's very good at being whoever the man in the room needs her to be."

I read that sentence four times. Then I read the comments, all two hundred and twelve of them, while Theo slept beside me with one hand on my hip, and by the end I had learned that I was a genius, a fraud, a homewrecker, a feminist icon, "giving Lifetime movie," and, from someone called BklynBrenda44, "honestly just a girl who can't pick a lane."

"Good morning," Theo said, into the pillow.

I held the phone out to him without a word.

He found his glasses on the nightstand, put them on, and read it, lying on his back, with the concentration he gives a new score. I watched his face. It changed the way it always does, slowly, like a tide.

"Heartbroken cellist," he said at last.

"I'm so sorry."

"I'd like to be consulted on my own adjectives." He scrolled. "Ma is going to laminate this. She'll put it on the fridge next to my fourth-grade spelling bee certificate." He scrolled again, and stopped, and went quiet. "'Not one but two brothers.'"

"Theo."

"We've never shared anything," he said, very mildly, to the ceiling. "He had the top bunk for eleven years. He said it was a seniority issue." He handed the phone back. "Who's the source close to you?"

"A man I used to be engaged to."

"Ah." He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. "Then I'm sorry for the adjective too. Not mine. Yours. 'Whoever the man in the room needs her to be.'" He looked at me, nearsighted and kind. "That's not true, you know. You're the only person I've met in a year who wasn't

trying to be what I needed."

I got out of bed fast and went to the bathroom and ran the tap so he wouldn't hear me not crying.

. . .

By ten o'clock my phone had become a small, hot, vibrating animal I was afraid to hold.

The senator's wife's lawyer called first. His name was Mr. Halloran and he spoke in complete paragraphs, like a man reading his own deposition aloud, and he wished to remind me of the confidentiality provisions of an agreement executed in March of the year before last, and of the remedies available to his client, which he began to list.

"Mr. Halloran," I said, "I didn't tell anyone."

"Then who did, Ms. Bennett?"

"A private equity associate in a camel coat. I'll send you his number. He'd love to hear from you. He really enjoys remedies."

The actress's publicist called second, and she was furious for exactly four minutes, and then something happened in her voice, a gear changing, and she said, "Actually, you know what, we're going to lean in. She's always been very collaborative. We'll say it was a creative partnership. Can you do a quote? Something warm? Something like, 'It was an honor to help her find her voice'?"

"I found her voice in a Starbucks in Burbank," I said. "She was on her phone the entire time."

"So that's a no on the quote."

The chef, my first chef, the one who'd thanked his "team" in the acknowledgments, left a voicemail that was mostly breathing and the word unbelievable, said eleven times in different keys, ending with: "I thanked my team, Claire. You were the team. I thanked you."

And the tennis player texted from a hotel in Melbourne at what must have been one in the morning her time, in all capitals, which made something in my chest jump before I realized it wasn't him.

> *FINALLY!!! NOW I CAN TELL EVERYONE MY GRANDMOTHER'S FRUIT STAND WAS YOUR IDEA. SHE NEVER HAD A FRUIT STAND. SHE HAD A BAKERY AND A TERRIBLE TEMPER. I LOVE YOU. WRITE MY SECOND ONE. PUT YOUR NAME ON IT. PUT IT BIGGER THAN MINE.*

I laughed so hard at the kitchen table that Theo looked up from the stove and said, "Is that a lawyer?" and I said, "It's Croatia," which explained nothing, and he nodded like it explained everything, and went back to the eggs.

I didn't eat them. The smell of butter in the pan had started doing the thing the coffee did. I said I'd grab something later. He looked at me for a second over his glasses and didn't argue, which is one of the things I love about him and one of the things that scares me.

. . .

Lorraine was smoking on the sidewalk outside her office on Twenty-Third Street, in the camel coat, one arm folded across her ribs. She watched me come up the block the way you'd watch a dog you were fond of cross a road.

"Well," she said. "You're famous."

"I'm infamous."

"Darling, at our level there's no difference. Infamous is just famous with better sales." She blew smoke sideways, away from me, which she'd never bothered to do before. I noticed. I didn't know why she'd

started. "Publicity is publicity. Danny's preorders tripled overnight. Your agent's phone is melting. I've had three publishers call me this morning to ask, very casually, the way men ask if you're seeing anyone, whether you have a book of your own."

"I don't."

"You will." She tapped her ash. "You've spent seven years writing other people's lives so well they believed they'd lived them. One of these days you'll have to sit down and write one in your own voice, and it's going to scare the hell out of you, and it's going to be the best thing you ever do."

"Is that a compliment?"

"It's a threat, darling. I don't make compliments. They're bad for the young." She dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. "Go see Danny. He's been calling me every twenty minutes to ask if you're all right. I've told him you're a grown woman. He told me that's what they said about his mother."

Danny was in the empty restaurant at noon with the chairs up and the ornaments still turning on the meat hooks, and he came around the zinc bar and hugged me so hard my ribs creaked, and I said, "Ow," because everything ached that week, even my bra felt like it had a grudge.

"Look at this," he said. He had the Post spread on the bar like a map of a battle he'd won. "Look at you. Five books. Five, Claire! I knew it was a lot. I didn't know it was five." He jabbed a big finger at the photo. "You know what you do now? Put your name on everything. Put it on napkins. Put it on the side of the truck. Put it on the bathroom wall at Port Authority. You've been invisible long enough, and I'm telling you as a man who hid in a kitchen for thirty years, invisible's not safe. It's just lonely with better lighting."

Nick was in the kitchen behind him, prepping something, the radio on low. He leaned out of the pass and raised one hand to me, a little wave, burned knuckles, and went back to his knife. He'd stayed. He'd told Danny he'd stay through Christmas.

I sat at the bar with Danny for an hour while he read the comments out loud and argued with each of them by name.

. . .

Here's the thing nobody tells you about being exposed.

I'd expected it to feel like being skinned. I'd spent my whole adult life building a career on the principle that nobody could see me, and for seven years I'd believed that was the safest place to stand. Behind the curtain. Inside other people's voices. The senator's wife got the Oprah couch and I got the check, and I'd told myself I preferred it.

And instead I walked back up Hudson Street at two in the afternoon, in the cold, with the whole city in its Christmas lights and nobody looking at me at all, and I felt light. Like I'd put down a suitcase I'd been carrying so long I'd forgotten it had a handle.

Everyone knew. That was all. Everyone knew who'd written the stories now. The actress could lean in and the chef could breathe on my voicemail and BklynBrenda44 could think I couldn't pick a lane. None of it mattered, because for the first time in seven years the truth was out in the air where anyone could look at it, and it was mine, and nobody was holding it for me.

I stopped on the corner of Bank Street, in front of a shop window full of glass birds, and stood there so long a woman asked if I was all right.

Because I'd just understood what I was doing to him.

Theo, lying on his back that morning, reading his own life in three hundred words. I'd like to be consulted on my own adjectives. Mild as milk. He'd said it like a joke, and it was a joke, and it was also the truest thing he'd ever said to me, and I'd been too busy being sorry about Ryan to hear it.

He'd been written his whole life. That was the shape of it. At nineteen, by a brother in a treehouse who said, Ma needs you. At thirty-one, by a woman in a red coat and the same brother, in a bar on Smith Street, who'd decided between them what he could bear and what he couldn't, and then written it for him. A betrayal. A broken heart. A city. They'd done it out of love. I believed that all the way down. I'd sat on the floor of a garage in Red Hook and watched a man come apart telling me how much he loved his brother. I'd sat in my own kitchen while June told me she'd broken her own heart on purpose so he'd go and play.

They'd ghostwritten him. Beautifully. So well he believed he'd lived it.

And now I was doing it too.

Every morning I let him hum in the kitchen. Every night I let him play me something cheerful at two. I'd let him put number five on the fridge, write to Lisbon, two words, and I'd let him pull the wedding suit out of the closet and tell me it deserved a nicer evening, and I'd smiled. I'd decided, without asking him, that he couldn't handle the truth. That he'd stay, and hate himself, and that June's sacrifice and Wes's lie should go on working, and that I, the subletter, the ghost, the woman who'd been in his life for five weeks, got to choose which story he lived in.

That was what I did. That was my whole job. I took people's lives and decided what they meant.

He'd fallen in love with me through a photocopier because I was the only voice in his life that wasn't managing him. And I'd been managing him for four days.

I stood in front of the glass birds until my feet went numb.

Then I walked home, and I knew.

He deserved the truth. All of it. Smith Street, January ninth, the bathroom floor, the boots on the couch, January twelfth. He deserved to read his own life in his own hand. It would cost me June, who I loved. It would cost me Wes, who had begged me, let it be mine, and whom I loved in a different and more dangerous way that I still couldn't look at straight. It might cost me Theo too, because the one thing he could never forgive was being managed, and I'd done it. Four days. I'd done it.

I didn't call June. I didn't text Wes in Vermont. If I asked either of them, I'd be asking permission, and I'd be one more person passing a note around him in class.

. . .

He had a Messiah that night. A Christmas sub job at a church on Fifth Avenue, in the cello section, three hours of hallelujahs, home past midnight. I didn't tell him then. You don't hand a man that at one in the morning with rosin on his fingers and his tie in his pocket. I'd edited enough chapters to know that where you put a sentence matters as much as what it says.

So I did what I do. I sat at his kitchen table on Saturday morning, after he'd gone to the bagel place on Bleecker, and I wrote it out longhand. Three drafts. The first sounded like a deposition. The second sounded like a deposition written by a nicer lawyer. The third was half a page, in my small, slanting, anxious hand, and it began:

Theo, I need to tell you something about January, and you need to let me finish.

I folded it into my pocket. I wasn't going to read it to him. I just needed to have written it. I needed to know the sentences existed somewhere outside my head.

Then I went to Danny's for one last pass on the acknowledgments, because Lorraine needed them Monday and because I was a coward who needed four more hours. I left my phone on the counter in 4B by mistake. I didn't realize until I was on Gansevoort, and I almost went back, and then I thought, it's four hours, what can happen in four hours, which is a sentence I should have learned by now never to think.

I came home at a quarter to five in the blue December dark with the speech in my pocket and my heart going like I'd taken the stairs at a run.

The apartment was dark. No lamp. No humming. Hector's tree stood unlit in the corner, bent at the top, still trying to read over my shoulder. The cello was gone from its corner.

There was a note on the red kettle.

He'd propped it against the dented side, where I'd have to look at it if I so much as wanted tea, folded once, in that patient, forward-leaning hand.

> *Ma slipped on the ice. She's fine, she's furious. Gone to Little Compton.*
>
> *Come for Christmas Eve?*
>
> *– T.*
>
> *P.S. Gerald Fernando has been watered. You may thank me.*

I stood in the kitchen with my coat still on and laughed, and it came out wrong, and I put my hand on the counter.

My phone was where I'd left it, by the sugar jar. The screen was lit. One message, from the contact I'd renamed in a diner on Hudson Street in November, in capitals, and never changed back. NOT THEO.

IN RI. MA'S WRIST. WHERE ARE YOU.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Little Compton, Again

CAROL MARSH HAD BROKEN her wrist in two places on the back steps of her own house, carrying a bag of birdseed, and she wanted everybody to know that she'd done it beautifully.

"I fell magnificently," she told me on speaker that Saturday night, from a bed in Newport Hospital, while Theo held the phone and a nurse said something in the background about not lifting her arm. "Ask the mailman. He saw the whole thing. He said it was like watching a heron get shot."

"Ma, that's not a compliment," Theo said.

"It is from a mailman." A rustle. "The doctor is twelve, Claire. He has a lanyard with a cartoon tooth on it. He told me I'd need help for six weeks, and I said, young man, I have two sons, and he said, wonderful, and I said, you misunderstand me."

I laughed. I was sitting on the floor of 4B with my back against the green couch and my coat still on and the note from the kettle in my hand. I'd read it eleven times. Gerald Fernando has been watered. You may thank me.

"I'm coming," I said. "I have to get Danny's acknowledgments to Lorraine Monday. I'll come Tuesday. The twenty-third."

"Good," said Carol. "Bring rye. Theodore's buying the wrong kind."

There was a pause on the line. The hospital noises. Then Theo, off speaker, his voice close and careful.

"Wes is here," he said. "He drove down from Vermont when Ma called. It's a three-hour drive. He did it in two." Another pause. "Ma's very proud. She's told the nurses twice."

"Okay," I said.

"I thought you should know before you came."

"Okay, Theo."

"I'm glad you're coming," he said, and he meant it, and I sat on his floor and held his note and the folded speech in my coat pocket, and didn't say any of the things I'd come home to say, because you don't tell a man the worst true thing of his life over a speakerphone in a hospital while his mother demands rye.

. . .

The Northeast Regional left Penn Station at 12:05 on Tuesday, and by New Haven it was snowing.

I'd taken a cab from Perry Street with my bag and a bottle of the right rye and Priya on the phone the whole way, saying things like "nor'easter" and "eighteen inches" and "if you die in Rhode Island I'm not coming to get you, I don't have a car." The train smelled of coffee and wet wool and somebody's egg sandwich, and somewhere past Stamford the rocking got into me and wouldn't leave.

I've never been carsick in my life. I rode the Q train to Coney Island reading a novel when I was twenty-two. And now I sat with my forehead against the cold window, watching Connecticut go by in a white blur, breathing through my nose and telling my stomach, very

firmly, that we were adults.

The man next to me, a retired dentist from Westerly with a Patriots hat and a bag of clementines, looked at me sideways around Bridgeport.

"You okay, honey?"

"I'm fine. It's the motion."

"My wife gets it," he said, peeling a clementine and handing me half without asking. "Only ever on trains. Forty years, she won't take Amtrak to her sister's. Here. Citrus. It's science."

I took the clementine. I ate it, segment by segment, and the sharp bright smell of it settled something, and I fell asleep against the window before New London and didn't wake up until the conductor said Kingston, with my mouth open and a crease in my cheek from the seam of my coat and the snow coming down so thick outside that the platform lights looked like they were being erased.

I'd slept for an hour and a half on a moving train in the middle of the afternoon. I hadn't done that since I was a child.

In my bag, under the rye, in the zip pocket, were three pages of yellow legal paper. In my coat pocket was half a page of my own. I put my hand on both of them, the way you check for your keys.

· · ·

Theo was waiting at the Providence station in Carol's old Volvo with the wipers going and the engine running, and when he saw me come out through the doors he got out and stood in the snow with no hat, his glasses fogging, and waved, a little wave, like a man flagging down a cab he wasn't sure would stop.

I walked straight into him. He held on.

"You smell like clementines," he said into my hair.

"A dentist gave me one."

"Of course he did. People give you things. It's very strange to watch." He pulled back and looked at me with snow on his lashes. "You look tired."

"Everybody keeps saying that."

"Then everybody's right." He kissed my forehead, and then my mouth, cold and quick, in the station lot with the snow coming down sideways. "Come on. Ma's been telling the neighbors you're 'the writer.' She says it like you're a racehorse."

The drive took an hour and twenty minutes in the storm. Route 24 to 77, the Volvo's heater wheezing like an old dog, the road disappearing under the headlights. He talked. He talked about the doctor with the cartoon tooth and the mailman and how Ma had refused the sling for two days on the grounds that it was "unflattering." He talked about the bacalhau he was going to make on Christmas Eve, salt cod he'd been soaking in Ma's sink since Sunday, changing the water every eight hours like a man tending a fire. He talked about number two on his list, the beach at Sakonnet Point, and how we might have to do it in snowshoes.

I put my hand in my coat pocket three times and touched the half page and took my hand out again.

Not in a car. Not with him driving, in a blizzard, on a two-lane road along the water. I'd done this for a living. I knew you don't put the worst sentence in the book where the reader can't stop and put it down.

"You're quiet," he said, near Tiverton.

"I'm carsick."

"You were never carsick in the truck."

He said it lightly. He didn't mean anything by it. But it went into the car and sat there between us for the last ten miles, like a third passenger, and neither of us mentioned it again.

. . .

The gray-shingled house stood above the cove with every window lit, the way it had at Thanksgiving, except now the snow was coming at it sideways off the water and drifting against the porch, and the cove below was a black nothing with the wind roaring out of it.

Carol was on the couch in front of the fire with her right arm in a white cast up to the elbow, propped on a cushion like a trophy, and a Manhattan in her left hand.

"There she is," she said. "Come here so I can look at you. I can't get up. Theodore won't let me get up. I'm a prisoner in my own home."

"You can get up, Ma."

"I'm choosing not to. As a protest." She took my hand with her good one and squeezed it and looked into my face with that English teacher's eye, the one that could find a comma splice from across a classroom. She looked a long time. "Hm," she said.

"Hm what?"

"Nothing, honey. You look like you've been carrying something up a hill." She let go. "Did you bring the rye?"

And then I looked up, past her, toward the kitchen doorway, and Wes was standing in it.

He had a dish towel in one hand and a coffee mug in the other and sawdust on the knee of his jeans, and he'd grown out his stubble into something closer to a beard in Vermont. He looked tired. He looked thinner. He looked at me the way you look at a photograph of yourself you don't remember anyone taking.

"Bennett," he said.

That was all. Just my name. He nodded once, and went back into the kitchen, and I heard the tap run.

Carol watched me watch the empty doorway. She sipped her Manhattan.

"Hm," she said again.

. . .

June came at seven, in the red coat, with snow in her hair and a duffel bag and a pharmacy bag and the expression of a woman who had driven a rental car from Providence in a storm because she couldn't say no to Carol Marsh.

"She called me," June said in the hall, unwinding her scarf. "Yesterday. Out of nowhere. She said, June, I've broken my wrist and I'm surrounded by men, I need a nurse I don't hate." June almost laughed. "I think it's the nicest thing she's ever said to me."

"It probably is."

She looked at me then. Really looked, the way she had in the stairwell at Mount Sinai over a vending-machine dinner. Her freckles stood out in the cold. Her nails were bitten down to nothing.

"Are you okay?" she said quietly. "You look..."

"Tired. I know."

"I was going to say pale." She touched my arm. Then she glanced toward the living room, toward Theo's voice saying something to his mother, and back. "Does he... has anything..."

"No," I said. "Nothing's changed."

It was the truth. Nothing had changed yet. I bit my lip, and June saw me do it, and filed it, and didn't say anything, because June knows exactly what a person looks like when they're keeping

something for someone else. She'd been doing it for a year.

She went in and redid Carol's sling in about four seconds, and Carol said, "See? A professional," and glared at both her sons.

. . .

The power went out at nine-fifteen, in the middle of Carol telling a story about Frank and a lobster boat that I suspect had been improved over the years.

There was a bang somewhere out in the storm, a transformer going on Long Highway, and the lights died all at once, and the refrigerator stopped humming, and the only light left in the house was the fire. For a second nobody moved. Then Wes said, "Well, sh—" and Carol said, "Wesley," and he said, "—oot," and everyone laughed, even June, even me.

The generator in the shed wouldn't start. Wes went out to it twice in the wind with a flashlight and came back both times with snow on his shoulders and a vocabulary that made his mother put her good hand over her ear. "Tomorrow," he said. "When I can see it. The carburetor's gummed. I'll take it apart in the morning."

So we sat by the fire. Five of us, and the candles Carol made Theo find in the dining room sideboard, and every blanket in the house, and the wind going at the shingles like it wanted in.

And Carol, who had broken her wrist three days earlier, demanded Scrabble.

We played by flashlight. Theo held it over the board like a man lighting an operating theater. June kept score. Carol drew her tiles one-handed out of the bag and laid them down with a click, and on her third turn she played QI on a triple word score.

"That's not a word," said Wes.

"It's a Chinese life force, Wesley. Look it up."

"I can't look it up. The internet's out."

"Then it's a word." She sipped her Manhattan. "Twenty-two points. June, write that down."

June wrote it down. Theo caught my eye over the flashlight and shook his head very slightly, as if to say, I told you, it's on the list, let her, and I laughed, and Wes, across the board, sitting on the floor with his back against the couch, looked at me laughing at his brother and then looked down at his tiles.

He played GRAVEL. Then STAYS. Then, very late, when the fire was low and Carol was winning by sixty points by means I couldn't prove, he put down four tiles, and pushed them into place with one finger, and didn't look up.

HOME.

"Eight points," said June softly, and wrote it down.

. . .

Carol had made up the beds by phone from the hospital, which is to say she'd told Theo where everyone was going and he'd done it. June in the sewing room. Wes in his old room across the hall. Me in Theo's room, with the sheet music and the Yo-Yo Ma poster, and Theo with me.

"I'm not running a dormitory," Carol had said, when Theo started to ask. "You're thirty-two. I've seen worse. I've seen your brother at nineteen."

Theo fell asleep at eleven, under three blankets, with his glasses folded on the nightstand and one hand on my hip. He sleeps like a figure on a tomb. I lay awake in the dark beside him listening to the house creak and the storm work at the windows and my own heart.

At a quarter to one I saw a flashlight going down the path to the water.

I knew who it was. There was only one person in that house who'd go out in a nor'easter at one in the morning to check on boats.

I told myself I was going to give back his letter. That was all.

I put on my boots and Carol's old barn coat from the hook and went out into it.

. . .

The boathouse stood at the bottom of the path on the edge of the cove, with the snow drifted halfway up its door. Inside, the woodstove was lit, a small orange eye in the dark, and the boats were where they'd been in November, under their tarps on the cradles, their shapes like sleeping animals. It smelled the same. Woodsmoke and cold salt and old varnish. I'd been trying not to remember the smell for four weeks.

He was crouched by the stove feeding it a split log. He didn't turn around when the door opened.

"The tarps were coming loose," he said. "Dad's boat. I didn't want the snow getting in."

"Wes."

"Bennett."

I had my hand on the letter in my pocket. Three pages of yellow legal paper, folded into a square, gone soft at the corners from a week of being carried. I'd rehearsed it on the path. You put two letters in the envelope. Here. I'd hand it to him, and he'd put it in the stove, and that would be that.

I didn't take it out.

He didn't ask. He must have found the short one in his glove box somewhere in Vermont and done the arithmetic, and he stood there by the stove and didn't say one word about it, and I understood he never would. That was the whole of Wes. He'd hand you the worst thing about himself and the best thing, and then he'd stand very still and let you decide which one you'd been given.

My fingers stayed on it. Beside it, in the same pocket, was the half page of my own that began Theo, I need to tell you something about January. Two letters, to two brothers, neither one sent.

The wind hit the boathouse and everything creaked.

I don't know why I said it then. I think because he wasn't asking anything. Because he was standing there in his boots by the stove where we'd been reckless together in the cold, and he hadn't said one word about that either, and he wasn't going to, and the not-asking was more than I could stand.

"I slept with Theo," I said.

He didn't move.

I watched it land. I've watched people get bad news for a living, and I've never seen anyone take it the way he took that. He didn't flinch. He didn't look away. He stood there and let it hit him square, like a man taking a punch he'd asked for, had begged for, had been waiting for since the pier. His jaw set. His hands, at his sides, opened and closed once.

"Good," he said.

"Wes."

"No. I mean it." His voice was rough and steady. "Good. He deserves something good. He hasn't had anything good in a year, Bennett, and that's on me. I'm glad it was you." He swallowed. "I'm glad it was you."

The stove ticked. The tarp on Frank's boat lifted in a draft and settled.

Then he looked at me, finally, straight on, across the cold, the way he had on the fourth-floor landing a hundred years ago.

"Do you love him?"

I could have lied. I'm good at it. I've lied for senators.

"Yes," I said.

He nodded. As if he'd known. As if he'd only needed to hear it in the air.

"Do you love me?"

And I stood there in his mother's barn coat, with his letter and my letter in the same pocket and the snow coming in under the door, and I opened my mouth to say anything else.

"Yes," I said.

Behind me the boathouse door tore loose from its latch and banged open against the wall, and the storm came in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Snowed In

NOTHING HAPPENED IN THE boathouse after the door blew open. I want that on the record, because so much else that winter was a lie.

Wes crossed the floor and caught the door and dragged it shut against the wind with his shoulder, and dropped the latch, and stood there with his back to me and his hand flat on the wood, breathing. The snow that had come in lay across the floorboards in a white fan between us, like a line someone had drawn.

"Go back up, Bennett," he said, without turning around. "Before he wakes up and you're not there."

"Wes."

"Please." His voice cracked on it and he waited for it to come back. "I just told you good. Let me have meant it."

So I went. Up the path in the dark, in his mother's barn coat, with the flashlight beam swinging in the snow, and I got into bed beside Theo with my feet like ice, and he turned over in his sleep and put his warm hand on my ankle without waking up, the way you'd settle a blanket. I lay there until the windows went gray.

. . .

By morning the world had been deleted.

Twenty-two inches, Carol announced from the couch, as if she'd measured it personally. The drifts came up to the porch rail. Long Highway was a white trough with a buried mailbox sticking out of it like a periscope. The cove was gone, the boathouse was a white hump, and the sky was still coming down, fat and slow and sideways, with no apparent plans to stop. No power, no plow, no cell signal except one bar on the third stair from the top if you held the phone over your head and leaned left.

"We're snowed in," said Theo, at the window, with the same pleasure a child takes in a fire drill.

"We're trapped," said June.

"We're fine," said Carol. "Frank and I were snowed in here for four days in 1996 with nothing but a ham and a crossword dictionary. We came out of it engaged."

"You were already married, Ma."

"We came out of it engaged again. It's a figure of speech, Theodore."

Wes made coffee on the woodstove in the kitchen, in an old aluminum percolator that had been Frank's, and the smell of it filled the whole downstairs, and I went and stood on the cold porch in my socks for a minute pretending to look at the snow. When I came back in, Carol was watching me over the rim of her mug. She didn't say anything. She just moved the sleeve of saltines from the counter to the arm of the couch beside her and left it there, like you'd leave a key under a mat.

. . .

At ten Carol decided we needed a tree.

There hadn't been one. She'd broken her wrist the week she would have gone to the farm on West Main, and she'd lain in a hospital bed in Newport worrying about it, she said, more than about the bone.

"There's a spruce at the edge of the yard," she said. "By the stone wall. Your father planted it the year Theodore was born. It's been getting ideas above its station. Cut it."

"Ma, it's a blizzard."

"Then dress warmly."

So the brothers went out into it. I watched from the kitchen window with my hands around a mug of hot water with lemon, which was all I could face. Wes with Frank's axe over his shoulder, wading through snow up to his thighs. Theo behind him in Carol's spare boots, two sizes too small, holding his arms out for balance like a man on a tightrope.

They hadn't done anything together since I'd known them. Not one thing. They'd sat in a truck, and stood on a pier, and passed each other in this house like two weather systems.

Now Wes swung the axe at the base of the spruce and Theo stood off to one side, directing.

I couldn't hear them. The wind took it. But I didn't need to hear them. Theo pointed left. Wes swung right. Theo threw his hands up. Wes stopped and leaned on the axe and said something, and Theo said something back, and Wes put his head back and laughed, a real laugh, I could see it from the house, and then Theo bent down and scooped up a handful of snow and threw it at his brother's head with terrible aim, and it missed by a yard.

"He never could throw," said Carol, beside me. She'd got up off the couch, against medical advice and her own protest, and come to the window. "Wes used to stand in the yard and let him practice. Hours.

Theo'd miss and miss and Wes would just stand there with his arms out. When he finally hit him, Wes fell over like he'd been shot. Theo was so proud he cried."

The spruce came down. It came down sideways, into a drift, with a soft enormous whump, and both brothers stood looking at it, and then at each other, and Theo did a small, dignified bow, and Wes shoved him into the snow.

I laughed. It hurt.

They dragged it in through the porch door, shedding snow all over the wide pine boards, and stood it in a bucket of stones in the corner of the living room. It was lopsided. It leaned toward the window like it was trying to get back outside. Carol looked at it a long time with her good hand on her hip.

"It's perfect," she said. "It looks like this family."

. . .

At noon the Pereiras came over the stone wall.

Mrs. Pereira from next door, in a parka and snowshoes, towing a plastic sled with two children on it and a round loaf of massa sovada wrapped in a dish towel, because it was Christmas Eve and in the Pereira family you take sweet bread to the neighbors whether or not there's a blizzard, and especially if there is. Ava was eight. Tomás was six and missing both front teeth. They'd heard, through some neighborhood channel faster than any cell signal, that "the cello man" was home.

Theo spoke to Mrs. Pereira in Portuguese. I hadn't known he could, not like that, fast and easy, laughing. She was from São Miguel. He'd spent his first month in Lisbon learning to order coffee and the other nine learning everything else. She patted his cheek and said

something that made him go pink to the ears, and Carol, who doesn't speak a word of Portuguese, said, "She's right, you should," and refused to translate how she knew.

Then he took the children into the dining room, to the corner by the window, where the cello had been standing since he'd got home, and sat on a kitchen chair, and showed them.

I stood in the doorway and watched.

He let Ava draw the bow. He held her small hand on it the way he'd held mine on the floor of 4B at two in the morning, his fingers over hers, guiding, not gripping, and the sound that came out was a long, wobbling groan like a cow in love, and Ava shrieked with joy. He let Tomás pluck the strings. He taught them "Silent Night." Note by note. Ava on the bow and Tomás plucking the low C on every downbeat with enormous seriousness and his tongue in the gap of his teeth, and Theo's left hand doing all the actual work on the neck, and his whole face lit, lit from inside like a house at night.

Noite feliz, sang Mrs. Pereira from the living room, and Carol hummed along, off-key, with her eyes shut.

I thought: this is who he is. The man in the closet letters. The man in the wedding suit on a zinc bar. A man who can make a six-year-old feel like a musician by doing all the work and taking none of the credit.

And then I turned my head and saw June.

She was standing in the hall behind me in the green sweater she'd borrowed from Carol, because everything she'd brought was wet from the drive. It was too big for her. The sleeves came down over her hands. She was watching him through the doorway, over my shoulder, and I've written a lot of faces, and I've never written one like that.

She looked like a woman standing in the street watching her own house burn. Not running in. Not calling anyone. Just standing there, with her hands inside her sleeves, letting it.

"He told me last night," she said, very low, so only I could hear. "After Scrabble. On the stairs. He's mailing it on the twenty-ninth. To Lisbon. Two words."

"I know."

"He's so happy, Claire." Her voice didn't break. That was the worst part. "I haven't seen him like this since before. Before any of it." She pressed her sleeve against her mouth for a second. "It's fine. It's what he wants. That's all I wanted, wasn't it? For him to want something for himself."

"June."

"Don't." She almost smiled. "Whatever you're about to say. I can see it on your face. Don't."

She went back into the living room and sat beside Carol and took her good hand, and I stood in the doorway between the two rooms, between the song and the woman who'd paid for it, and I didn't say it.

. . .

The generator went at two.

Wes had been at it for an hour in the shed by the time the snow got serious again, the carburetor in pieces on a sheet of newspaper, his bare hands red and stiff, swearing at it in a low steady stream I could hear from the kitchen door. I watched him through the window. The wind had picked up. It came off the cove white and horizontal, and every few minutes it would blot him out entirely, the shed and the flashlight and the man, and then let go and give him back.

He didn't come in to warm up. Not once. He knelt in the open door of that shed in a blizzard and put a gummed carburetor back together by feel because the furnace needed it and his mother was cold, and he'd have knelt there until his fingers broke.

He's good with his hands, he'd told me on the fire escape in October, about his brother. Better than me. Always has been.

He'd lied about that too. It was a kind lie. All his lies were.

At two-fifteen the generator coughed, and caught, and roared, and the furnace in the basement came on with a groan like a whale surfacing, and the refrigerator shuddered and hummed. Carol, on the couch, raised her Manhattan.

"That's for the furnace and the fridge," she called out to the whole house. "Not the lights. Nobody touch the lights. I'm not running a casino."

Wes came in through the kitchen door with ice in his beard and his hands in his armpits, stamping snow, and I had the percolator going on the woodstove before he'd got his boots off. I poured him a cup. Two sugars. I did it without thinking. Some things you learn in a week of mornings and never manage to unlearn.

He took it from me. Our fingers touched on the mug, his like stones, and he looked down at the cup, and at the two sugars, and his face did something I'd only seen once, on a pier.

"Thanks, Bennett," he said.

That was all. He went to stand by the stove. I turned around, and Carol was in the kitchen doorway with her cast in its sling, and she'd seen the whole thing.

. . .

"Peel," said Carol, and handed me a potato.

It was three o'clock and the light was already going blue. Theo was in the dining room with the salt cod, which he'd been soaking in his mother's sink since Sunday and talked about now like a patient in recovery. June had gone up to lie down. Wes was asleep in a chair by the fire, his boots still on, the way I'd once been told he slept on a couch in Red Hook.

Carol couldn't peel. She sat at the kitchen table with her cast on a dish towel and supervised, which she was born for, and every so often she reached over with her good hand and turned a potato in mine to show me what I'd missed.

"You're not drinking my coffee," she said.

"I'm off coffee."

"Since when?"

"Since this week. It tastes like pennies."

"Hm." She didn't look at me. She looked at the potato. "I was off coffee twice in my life. Once for each of them."

I laughed. I thought it was a joke about her sons, about how they ruin everything, even your coffee. It was the kind of thing Carol said. I peeled.

She let the quiet go on a while. The generator hummed out in the shed. Down the hall I could hear Theo talking to the salt cod.

"I taught teenagers for thirty-one years," she said. "Do you know what I learned? Everybody's carrying something. Every kid who ever walked into my room. A dead dog, a drunk father, a girl who wouldn't look at them. And you can always tell the ones who are carrying something that isn't theirs. They walk differently. They walk like it's a borrowed coat. Too heavy in the shoulders."

I stopped peeling.

"My boys have been walking like that for a year," Carol said. "Both of them. And June. And since you came through my door last night, honey, you walk like that too."

I put the potato down. My hands were wet and cold and I didn't know what to do with them.

"Carol," I said. "I can't..."

"I'm not asking." She reached over and put her good hand on mine, on the table, over the potato peelings, warm and dry and very strong for a woman of sixty-one. "I've spent a year not asking. That's my sin, not yours. I'm only telling you what I'd tell a student." She squeezed. "Whatever you're carrying, honey, set it down before it sets you down."

. . .

There were eleven candles on the table when we sat down at six.

Carol had counted them out herself from the sideboard and made Theo light them one by one, and the light was low and gold and moving, catching everyone's face in pieces. The new spruce leaned in the living room doorway, hung with whatever we'd found in the attic: Frank's fishing lures, a string of cranberries June had threaded with her bitten fingers, a paper star Theo had made in second grade with THEO written on it in a careful, furious hand. The furnace hummed under the floor. The snow kept coming.

Carol at the head with her cast propped on a folded dish towel like a small white roast. June on my left, in the green sweater, her nails flat on the tablecloth. Wes across from me, his chair pushed back from the table the way he always sat, as if he might have to get up and fix something. A glass of red wine at my place that I hadn't touched.

And then Theo came in from the kitchen with a dish towel over his shoulder and a platter in both hands.

He set it down in the middle of the table, among the candles. Salt cod, flaked and golden, with potatoes and eggs and dark Portuguese cabbage, glistening with olive oil and garlic. He stood there a second, looking at it, and then at all of us, a little shy, the way he'd looked on the zinc bar before he lifted the bow.

"In Portugal it's what you eat on Christmas Eve," he said. "The consoada. Everyone at one table, nobody leaves till it's gone." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. "I wanted to bring something home."

I sat there with my fork in my hand.

I looked at him at the end of the table, with the towel on his shoulder and the candlelight in his glasses, who had soaked that fish for three days and set an alarm in the night to change its water, because he wanted to bring something home. I looked at the paper star with his name on it. At June beside me, with her hands inside her sleeves. At Wes, with his chair pushed back, whose two sugars I'd poured without thinking. At Carol, who had just told me to set it down.

And I understood that I could not let him eat one more meal inside a story he hadn't been allowed to read.

I picked up my glass. I don't know why. It's what you do when you stand up at a table. My hand was shaking so hard the wine moved in it like the cove in a wind.

I stood up.

Everybody looked at me. Carol. Wes. June, already, before I'd said a word, beginning to understand. And Theo, at the far end, smiling, waiting for a toast.

"I have to tell Theo something," I said. "And June and Wes are going to hate me for it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Christmas Eve

NOBODY MOVED, WHICH IS how I knew I'd said it out loud.

There's a particular silence that happens at a table when someone stands up with a glass and doesn't make a toast. I'd heard it once before, at Bettina's, in September, about four seconds after Maddie said the words "three a.m." I'd been sitting down for that one. I'd had the luxury of being the person it happened to.

This time I was the one holding the glass.

The candles kept moving. That was the only thing in the room that did. Eleven small flames leaning and righting themselves in the drafts of an old house, and in their light five faces, and four of them had gone perfectly still.

Theo was still smiling. That was the worst part. He'd been waiting for a toast, and the smile hadn't gotten the news yet. It sat on his face for one more second, two, the way the lights stay on in a house after the power line's come down in the yard, and then I watched it go out, slowly, from the edges in.

Carol put her Manhattan down without looking at it. Wes's hands went flat on the table on either side of his plate, the way you'd brace for a boat going over a wave. The bacalhau sat in the middle of all of

us, golden and steaming, everyone at one table, nobody leaves till it's gone.

"Claire," June said. Not loud. The way you'd say a name to someone standing on a ledge.

"I know."

"Please."

"I know, June." I put the glass down. My hand was shaking too much to hold it, and I've learned that when your hand won't hold something you should stop asking it to. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You can hate me. I'd hate me."

Wes hadn't said anything. He'd gone completely still, the way he went still on the pier when June hit him, like a man who'd been expecting the weather to turn and was almost relieved to see it coming. He looked at me across the candles and I looked back, and he gave me the smallest shake of his head. Not angry. Begging.

I almost sat down. I want that on the record too. I almost sat down.

Then Theo said, "Claire?" in the voice he used at two in the morning, when he'd finished playing and the apartment was very quiet and he wanted to know if I was still awake. And I couldn't.

. . .

I'd ghostwritten five books. I knew how to tell a story. You start where it starts, not where it hurts, and you don't editorialize, and you let the reader get there a half-second before you do, so it feels like theirs.

I'd never told one about a person sitting at the same table.

"Last December," I said, "an orchestra in Lisbon offered you the principal chair. And on January second you said no. You wrote it in a letter you never sent. I read it. It's in the closet. Number forty-three."

I made myself look at him. "You said you'd tell them no a hundred times."

Theo's face didn't change. That was the thing about Theo; it never changed fast. It changed like a tide.

"I know what I wrote," he said quietly.

"And eight days later June told you she'd slept with someone. The one person she could never take back."

Carol set her drink down. Very carefully. With the hand that worked.

"And two days after that," I said, "on January twelfth, somebody called the music director in Lisbon and told him you'd changed your mind." I swallowed. "I called them, Theo. Two weeks ago. I said I was writing a profile. There's a woman named Sofia in the office who talks like a radio left on in another room, and she told me how romantic it was. That your fiancée called. That's how you got the chair back. Your fiancée called on January twelfth and said you wanted it."

The candle nearest me leaned and righted itself in some draft I couldn't feel.

Theo turned his head and looked at June.

It's a long table. It took a long time.

"June," he said.

She had her hands over her face. When she took them away she wasn't crying. I think she'd done all of that already, years of it compressed into ten months, and there was nothing left but the thing itself.

"Yes," she said. "It was me. I called."

"Why would you call Lisbon two days after you—"

"Because nothing happened." She said it to the tablecloth and then made herself say it to him. "Theo. Nothing happened. I never slept with anyone. I made it up. I found the email from the orchestra on your laptop and I watched you play at two in the morning for four years like a man saying goodbye to something every night, and I knew you'd never go. Not for yourself. You'd never go. So I gave you a reason to want to be anywhere else."

The kitchen clock ticked. Somewhere in the walls the generator hummed its one long note.

Theo didn't look at Wes. I watched him not look at Wes. It was like watching someone not look at the sun.

"I went to Red Hook," he said, to nobody. "That night. I took the train to Red Hook in my shirt and stood outside his door in the snow, and he opened it and said—"

"I said yeah," Wes said. "It was me."

He'd stood up. I hadn't seen him do it. He was standing behind his chair with both hands on the top rail of it, the knuckles going white, and his face was a wreck, and his voice was perfectly flat, the way it had been on the pier when he said, That's every true thing.

"Nothing happened, Theo," he said. "She came to me on the ninth and asked, and I said no for two hours, and then I said yes. She sat on my bathroom floor all night. I slept on the couch with my boots on." He stopped. Something went across his face that I'd never seen on it, and I'd seen most things. "I never touched her. I never would have. I just said I did."

. . .

I've thought a lot, since, about what I expected.

I expected him to hit someone. Some cheap part of me was braced for the chair to go over and the candles to go flying. I expected him to cry. I expected, God help me, relief. I'd built a little scene in my head on the train from Providence, in the motion-sick doze where I do my worst writing, where he put his face in his hands and said, She didn't, he didn't, and laughed with it, the way you laugh when the biopsy comes back clean.

What he did was take off his glasses.

He folded them and set them down next to his plate, very precisely, the arms crossed, like he was putting them away for the night. Without them his face was naked and younger and somehow much more frightening. He pressed his thumb and finger into his eyes. He held them there.

"So I want to make sure I have this right," he said.

Nobody answered.

"I turned down Lisbon." His voice was so calm. "Because I wanted to marry you. That was my choice. It was a stupid choice, probably, and it was mine. And you looked at my choice and decided it was the wrong one. And instead of telling me that, instead of fighting with me, instead of saying, Theo, you idiot, go, you lied to me. And you asked my brother to lie to me. And he did." He took his hand away from his eyes. "And then you called Lisbon. You called my job. You called the man who decides where I sit and you told him what I wanted."

"I was trying to—"

"I know what you were trying to do." It wasn't loud. It cut her off like a door. "I've been told what I want my whole life, June. I know what it sounds like."

He turned, finally, to his brother.

"You let me hate you for a year."

Wes's hands were still on the chair. "Yeah."

"I said things to you." Theo's voice wavered, just once, and came back. "On your doorstep. I said Dad would have been ashamed of you. I said I wished it had been you instead of—" He stopped. "I said it. You let me say it. You stood there and let me."

"You were supposed to hate me," Wes said. "That was the plan. You were supposed to hate me and be happy."

"Was I happy?" Theo asked him. "Did it look like that, from here? I stopped answering Ma. I walked the coast for five weeks because I couldn't sit in a room. I lost eleven pounds. A man in Sagres let me sleep in his boat shed because he thought I was going to walk into the sea." He looked at his brother with something worse than anger. "Was that the plan, Wes? Was I happy?"

Wes didn't answer. There wasn't an answer, and he was too honest now, finally, to make one up.

Then Theo did the thing I'd been dreading most. He turned to his mother.

"And Ma?"

Carol had been quiet the entire time. She sat at the head of her own table with her cast on its dish towel and her good hand flat beside her glass, and she looked at her younger son with an expression I recognized from my own mother on the very rare occasions she wasn't talking about the dog. The look of someone watching a thing she'd always known might fall finally hit the floor.

"I suspected," she said. "I didn't know."

"You suspected."

"June called me the night before. She asked what I'd give up for my sons." Carol's voice was steady, and her eyes weren't. "And then

your brother, who has never in his life done anything to you that didn't have you on the other side of it somewhere, suddenly did the worst thing he could think of. I taught high school English for thirty-one years, Theodore. I know when a plot's been forced." She lifted her chin. "I didn't ask. That's on me. I thought if I asked I'd have to choose which of you to lose. So I didn't ask, and I lost both of you anyway, and I've been sitting in this house with that since February."

Theo looked at her for a long time.

"So all of you," he said. "All three of you. You decided my life."

He didn't say it like an accusation. He said it like a man reading the last line of a letter he'd been dreading, the way he'd looked at the three of us on the pier. Like it was simply true, and he was only now able to make out the words.

"Not decided," June said. "Theo, I didn't decide, I—"

"You broke us to send me away."

"I broke us," June said, and her voice finally went, all at once, the way old ice goes, "so you'd go and play."

The candle by Carol's elbow guttered and caught.

And then Theo turned his head and looked at me.

. . .

I'd known it was coming. I'd known since the cab to Penn Station, since the motion-sick train, since the boathouse and Wes saying, Do you love me, and the door banging in the wind. I'd stood up anyway. I'd stood up because I couldn't stand being one more person who'd decided what he could handle.

But knowing a thing is coming is not the same as standing in front of it.

"And Claire knew," he said.

Not a question. He was too good a reader for questions.

He was looking at me without his glasses, and I wondered how much of me he could actually see. Probably more than I wanted.

"How long?"

I could have said I wasn't sure. I could have said I'd guessed at it in pieces, a phone call to Lisbon, a letter dated January second, the word IT WASN'T torn into a page so hard the pen went through. I could have given him the ghostwriter's version, with all the context, all the soft edges.

"Eight days," I said.

I watched him count. I watched him go back through them one at a time, and I went with him, because I couldn't not. The night of Danny's manuscript, the wine, his hands, the song he'd written and named after me. The party, where he played Bach on a bar for a dead woman he never met. Page Six. The morning he'd held up the letter from Lisbon, the permanent offer, and said, I've never been happier to say no to anything, and kissed me. And I'd kissed him back.

Eight days of letting him plan a life on a floor I knew was rotten.

"The night you played me the song," I said. "I didn't know yet. Not all of it. I swear. But I knew enough. And I let you say you were staying."

He nodded slowly. Like he was writing it down.

"Thank you for telling me," he said.

It was the worst thing he could have said. It was so polite. It was so exactly him. I'd have taken a chair through the window over that.

He stood up. He put his glasses back on, unfolding them carefully, one arm and then the other, and pushed them up his nose with one knuckle. Then he took the dish towel off his shoulder and folded it in thirds and laid it beside the bacalhau, which nobody had touched.

"Theo," Carol said.

"I'm going to go outside, Ma."

"It's a blizzard."

"I know what it is."

His cello was in the corner of the dining room by the window, where it had been all afternoon, since he'd played "Silent Night" for the Pereira kids next door. He went to it and knelt and snapped the case shut, one latch and then the next and then the next. Nobody stopped him. I think we'd all lost the right.

Wes moved. One step, toward him. Theo didn't look up.

"Don't," he said. "Not you. Not tonight."

Wes stopped like he'd walked into glass.

Theo stood and swung the case onto his back the way I'd first seen him carry it on the pier, like a sleeping child. He took his coat from the hook by the door, the gray wool one that was too thin for New England, and he didn't put it on. He just held it.

At the door he stopped, with his hand on the latch.

I thought he was going to say something. I think we all did. Four people at a table, leaning toward a doorway, the way you lean toward a radio when the signal starts to go.

He didn't. He opened the door.

The storm came in like it had been waiting outside for an invitation. It came in sideways and white and furious and it filled the hall in a second, flakes skittering across the wide pine boards toward our feet, the cold rolling over the table like a wave over a wall. The tablecloth lifted at the corners. June's napkin went off her lap and across the floor.

Theo walked out into it and didn't close the door behind him.

I watched him go down the porch steps that Wes had fixed in November, and into the yard, and he was gray, and then he was a shape, and then he was nothing but the place where the snow was moving differently.

Nobody got up to shut the door.

The wind came through the room and found the candles. It took the one nearest the door first, and then the two on the sideboard, and then the tall one by Carol's elbow that had guttered twice and caught twice and didn't catch this time. One by one, from the door inward, like someone walking down the table pinching them out with wet fingers, the way you'd go through a house at the end of a party.

The last one was in front of me.

I watched it lean and stretch and hold on.

Then it went out too, and we were four people sitting in the dark with the door open and the snow coming in, and somewhere out there in the storm, a man was carrying the only thing he'd never let anyone choose for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Christmas Morning

WES FOUND HIM AT a quarter to eleven.

He'd gone out after him with the big yellow flashlight from under the sink and no hat, and Carol had stood in the open doorway with her cast held against her chest, shouting into the storm that if either of her sons died of exposure on Christmas Eve she would never speak to the other one again, which I think was meant to be comforting. Then she'd shut the door and relit the candles with a long kitchen match, one by one, all eleven, with her left hand, and refused any help, and nobody argued.

June and I sat at the table and didn't look at each other.

When Wes came back he was white to the knees and his eyebrows had frost in them. He stood in the hall stamping his boots and said, "Boathouse. He's got the stove going. He told me to go to hell, so he's fine."

Carol let out a breath and sat down for the first time in an hour. "That's my boy."

"Which one?" Wes said.

"Both of you," Carol said. "God help me."

. . .

I didn't sleep. I lay on the couch in the front room under an afghan that smelled like cedar and dogs that had been dead for twenty years, and I listened to Wes not sleeping through the ceiling, the floorboards going under him from the window to the door and back.

At some point I heard the stairs creak and thought it was him coming down. It wasn't. It was June. She stood in the doorway of the front room in Carol's green sweater with her arms crossed, and for a while neither of us said anything.

"I don't hate you," she said finally.

"You should."

"I know. I'm trying. I'm not very good at it." She chewed the side of her thumb, then caught herself and put her hand down. "You know what the worst part is? I'm relieved. I've been holding it for a year and you just took it out of my hands and put it on the table, and I'm so angry at you, and my arms don't hurt anymore."

She went back upstairs before I could answer.

. . .

The snow stopped a little before six. I knew because the silence changed. After-storm silence is enormous, like the whole world has been wrapped in cotton and put in a drawer.

I made coffee in Carol's percolator, which took eleven minutes and sounded like a man drowning, and the smell of it came up out of the pot and turned my stomach over so hard I had to hold onto the counter. I poured it into a thermos anyway. Then I put on my boots and Carol's barn coat and a pair of mittens off the radiator that had been knitted, I was fairly sure, for a child, and I went out.

The yard was gone. Everything was gone. There was just white, smooth and blue in the half-light, up to my shins and in places to my knees, and the sky over the cove was the color of the inside of a shell. Theo's tracks from last night had filled in to soft dents. Wes's beside them were deeper and wandered, the way you'd walk if you were looking for someone and afraid of what you'd find.

I was halfway down the path to the boathouse when I heard it.

The Sarabande. The C minor. The first thing I ever heard him play, through a bedroom door in November, with my back against the wood and my socks on and my face wet. I'd have known it anywhere.

He wasn't in the boathouse. He was below it, on the beach.

The cove had frozen at the edges into a lace of gray ice, and the sand under the snow was crusted hard and sparkling, and the rocks at the waterline wore caps of white like old men in hats. He'd dragged one of Carol's kitchen chairs down there, God knows how, and set it on a flat place above the tide line, and he was sitting on it in his thin gray coat with the cello between his knees and the endpin jammed into a crack in the rock, playing to the water.

I stopped at the bottom of the path and listened.

It was wrong. I don't know enough to know how, but I could hear it. The notes came out stiff, like they were being pulled through something. Some of them didn't come out at all. He'd stop, and blow on his left hand, and flex it, and start the phrase again from the top, patiently, the way you'd coax a frightened animal out from under a porch. Again. Again.

I walked down onto the beach. The snow squeaked. He didn't look up.

"It's eleven degrees," I said.

"Nine. Ma's thermometer by the boathouse door says nine."

"Your fingers."

"My fingers are fine. I can't feel them, which is a kind of fine." He drew the bow across the low string and listened to it and winced. "The C's gone flat. Everything goes flat in the cold. Wood shrinks. Gut strings hate it. My teacher used to say a cello is just a very expensive way to find out what the weather is."

I sat down on the rock next to his chair and unscrewed the thermos and held it out. He looked at it. Then he leaned the cello carefully against his knee and took the cup in both hands, and held it without drinking, just for the heat.

His knuckles were red and white in patches. His glasses were fogged at the bottom edge. He hadn't shaved, and the stubble was coming in the soft, uneven way it had on the pier, the day he came home, like his face had forgotten how to do it.

"Did you sleep?" I asked.

"In the boathouse. On a sail." He drank, finally. "Wes left me a blanket. He stood in the door and I told him to go to hell, and he put the blanket on the workbench and said, 'Okay,' and went. He didn't argue." He turned the cup in his hands. "He never argues with me when it's about him. Not once since Dad. I used to think that was because he didn't care what I thought."

"I'm so angry, Claire," he said.

"I know."

"No, I mean it. I've never been this angry. I didn't know there was this much of it in me. I lay on that sail all night and I couldn't stop shaking and it wasn't the cold." He took off his glasses and wiped them on the inside of his coat, which only made them worse. "And I'm grateful. That's the part I can't stand. My fiancée broke her own heart so I'd go do the one thing I wanted. My brother let me spit on

him for a year so I could. Ma sat in that house knowing and not knowing. They did the most loving thing anyone has ever done for me, and it's the worst thing anyone has ever done to me, and they're the same thing, and I don't know where to put it."

"You don't have to put it anywhere yet."

"I know. I'm just telling you that I'm holding it." He put the glasses back on. "And I'm grieving, I think. I think I'm grieving the year. I hated him so carefully. I was so good at it. I'd lie awake in Lisbon going through every bad thing he ever did like rosary beads. The car, the window, the cigarettes. And half of it was mine. Did you know that? Half of what he took the blame for when we were kids was me. The cigarettes were mine."

"Your mom told me. At Thanksgiving."

"Of course she did." He almost laughed. "Of course she knew."

We sat there.

"You're the only one," he said.

I didn't say anything.

"I've been going through it. All night, on the sail. Who knew what, when." He put the cup down on the rock. "June knew. Wes knew. Ma guessed. And everybody who knew decided I couldn't handle it, and everybody who decided that loved me, and none of them told me. And then you stood up at the table with your hand shaking so hard the wine was going over the rim, and you looked at me, and you told me." He looked at me then, finally, straight on. "You'd known for eight days, and I'm angry about all eight of them. I want you to know I'm not pretending I'm not. But you're the only person in my entire life who decided I deserved to know what my own life was."

My throat closed. I looked at the water.

"I almost sat down," I said.

"I know. I watched you almost do it." His voice softened. "But you didn't."

. . .

I heard Wes before I saw him. He came down the path the way he did everything, without any attempt to be quiet, his boots punching through the crust, his breath going out in clouds. He stopped at the bottom of the path and stood there.

Theo saw him. His whole body changed.

I stood up.

"I'll be at the top," I said.

Theo didn't answer. He was looking at his brother.

I went back up the path past Wes. He didn't look at me as I passed, but his hand came out, just barely, and brushed my sleeve, the way you'd touch a doorframe going through a house in the dark. Then he went down onto the beach.

I stopped at the bend in the path, by the boathouse, where the snow had drifted against the gray shingles, and I turned around. I couldn't have walked away from that if the house had been on fire.

They stood on the rocks at the edge of the ice, ten feet apart.

I couldn't hear them. It was the pier again, the sound off, two people saying the worst thing to each other in a wind that took every word. But I knew them now. I knew how Wes held his shoulders when he was taking something, up around his ears, his hands out of his pockets and then back in, because there was nothing to do with them. I knew the way Theo held his chin when he was trying not to cry, very level, like a man balancing a glass on his head.

It went on a long time. Long enough that the sun came up over the point, pink and then gold, and hit the ice, and the whole cove lit up

like a struck match.

Theo was talking. Then Wes was. Then neither of them.

Then Theo stepped forward and hit him.

Open hand. Across the face. The same as June on the pier, the same sharp flat crack out over the water, and a gull lifted off the point and Wes's head turned with it, and he didn't put his hand up. He just turned his face back to his brother, like he'd been waiting for it for eleven months. Like he was relieved.

And then Theo grabbed the front of his jacket in both fists, and pulled him in, and held onto him.

Wes's arms came up. They hovered, the way they had over June. Like a man who wasn't sure he was allowed.

Then they closed.

They stood there on the rocks with the ice around them and the sun on the water, the big one and the slight one, Montauk '01, holding on. Wes's face was in his brother's shoulder. Theo's hand was flat on the back of Wes's head. I couldn't see whose shoulders were shaking. I think it was both.

I went up to the house and stood in Carol's kitchen and cried into a dish towel shaped like a lobster until Carol came in, looked at me, looked out the window, and said, "Oh, thank God," and poured a Manhattan at seven forty in the morning.

"It's Christmas," she said, when I looked at her. "Don't you start."

. . .

He came up to the house alone, an hour later, with the cello on his back and the kitchen chair in one hand.

I was on the porch steps. He set the chair down on the porch, very carefully, like he was returning a library book, and sat down on the

step beside me.

"He's walking," Theo said. "Down to the point. He said he needed to walk."

"Are you okay?"

"No." He took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Yes. I don't know. I hit my brother on Christmas morning and then I cried on him for twenty minutes. I don't think there's a card for that."

"I'll write you one."

That got a real laugh out of him. He put the glasses back on and pushed them up with one knuckle and then he turned on the step and looked at me, and his face changed, and I knew whatever he was about to say he'd been carrying all the way up the hill.

"I'm going to take the chair," he said.

I didn't say anything. I wasn't sure I could.

"Lisbon. The permanent offer. I'm going to call them tomorrow and say yes." He said it carefully, like he was setting each word down on the step between us. "And I need you to understand that I'm not doing it because June wanted me to, or because Wes went to hell for it, or because it makes their year mean something. I thought about that. I thought about saying no again, out of spite, just to be the one who chose. And I realized that would be one more person deciding my life, and the person would be me, and I'd be doing it for the wrong reason." He looked out at the cove. "I want to go. I wanted to go last December. I wanted it when I was nineteen and Berlin said yes and I said no because Ma was sitting in that kitchen in Dad's sweater. I've wanted it my whole life. And this is the first time I've ever been allowed to want it out loud."

"Theo."

"I'm not done. I've been practicing. Let me get it out before I lose my nerve, my nerve is very fragile, it's been a long night." He took a breath. "I want you to come with me."

The sun was on the snow. The whole world was too bright to look at.

"Not because I need you to," he said. "That's the thing. I'm going either way. If you say no, I'll still get on the plane, and I'll be sad, I'll play sad things on a balcony and the neighbors will complain. But I'll go. That's how you'll know it's mine. I'm not asking you to be the reason. I'm asking you to be there."

He reached over and took my hand out of Carol's child-sized mitten and held it between both of his. His fingers were freezing. I didn't care.

"I sat on a hotel floor in Lisbon in October," he said, "with six weeks of mail in my lap. Photocopies. Your handwriting. I didn't know who you were. I didn't know your name. You wrote about sleeping in socks and a man who swore at the radiator, and a toast, and my fig, which you'd named Gerald for no reason at all, and every page you were so funny and so sad and you never once felt sorry for yourself, and I laughed out loud on that floor for the first time in ten months, alone, at four in the morning, and the man in the next room banged on the wall." His voice went rough. "I came home because of you. Before I knew you. And then I knew you, and it was worse. It was so much worse, Claire. You're better than the letters."

I was crying again. I'd been doing it so much I'd stopped noticing.

"I have a room there," he said. "In Alfama, above a woman who sells sardines and throws the heads to the cats. With the chair I can afford a real place. I put a deposit on one at five this morning, from the boathouse, on my phone. Top of the hill, where the old trams

scream around the corner. It's a fourth-floor walk-up. I seem to have a type. The floors slope. There's a window over the river and blue tiles on the building across the street, and a desk under the window with nothing on it." He held my hand tighter. "We leave on the second. You don't have to decide now. But you came to my apartment to find out who you were on the other side of something. Come find out in mine."

The cove was gold. Down on the point, very small, a man in a canvas jacket was walking along the edge of the ice with his hands in his pockets, alone.

I looked at him. Then I looked at Theo, who'd seen me look, and hadn't let go of my hand.

"Ask me again," I said, "when you've talked to June."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Choosing

WE TOOK THE TRAIN back on the twenty-sixth, the three of us, because Carol said Wes was staying to shovel and she wasn't having June drive "in that car of hers, which is held together by prayer and parking tickets."

So it was Theo, June and me in a row of Amtrak seats out of Providence, in that order, like the world's least festive nativity.

I had the window. Theo had the middle, with his cello in the seat across the aisle, buckled in like a large and silent fourth passenger. June had the aisle and a cup of café-car tea she never drank. Somewhere around New London a conductor came by, looked at the three of us and the cello, and said, "Family trip?" and all three of us said "No" at the same time, and he moved on very quickly.

I slept from Mystic to New Haven. I'd been sleeping everywhere lately. When I woke up my head was on Theo's shoulder and June was looking out past both of us at the gray water going by, and her face was so open I had to shut my eyes again and pretend.

At Penn Station she touched his sleeve. Just that. He looked at her hand.

"Tonight," he said. "Ten o'clock. At night, this time, not a Sunday morning. I don't want an audience."

"Okay," June said, and then she walked off into the crowd in her red coat and I lost her by the Long Island Rail Road board.

. . .

He left 4B at nine-thirty that night with a thermos and two mugs from the cupboard and no cello.

"I don't know when I'll be back," he said at the door.

"I know."

"Claire." He stood there with his scarf half on. "Whatever she says. Whatever I say. It isn't about you. I need you to know I'm not going down there to decide about you."

"I know that too."

He kissed my forehead and went down the stairs, and I listened to him all the way, the creaking top step, the third-floor landing, the street door.

I didn't sleep. At two in the morning I caught myself listening for the cello, which was ridiculous, because it was in the corner six feet from me, asleep in its case.

At six I gave up and put on my coat.

It was still dark on Christopher Street. I walked out onto the pier, and the river was black on both sides, and New Jersey was just a line of lights, and the gulls were asleep somewhere, sensibly.

I didn't go all the way out. I stopped by the same lamppost I'd hidden behind in November like a spy in a bad movie, and I looked down to the end.

They were on the bench. The last one. Where you asked me.

I'd never asked what that meant. Not once in all those letters. I'd assumed it was where they'd had a fight, or a first date, or where he'd asked her to wait while he went to get coffee. I understood it, standing there in the dark with my hands in my pockets. It was where he'd asked her. That was all. He'd asked her, and she'd said yes, and for ten months she'd sat there every Sunday at the place where the question had been.

But I could see them. Two shapes in the first gray light coming up behind the city. The thermos between them on the bench. They weren't talking. They were just sitting, the way you sit at the end of a very long conversation when there's nothing left to say and you're not ready for it to be over.

June's head was on his shoulder.

His arm wasn't around her. His hands were in his lap. But he wasn't moving away either, and he had his cheek turned down, just slightly, against her hair.

Then I turned around and walked back up the pier and didn't look back, because I'd learned that much, at least.

He came home at nine. He hung up his coat and put the two mugs in the sink and stood there with his hands on the edge of the counter.

"I saw you," I said. "At six. I'm sorry. I didn't stay."

"I know. I saw you too." He turned around. His eyes were red behind his glasses. "Don't ask me yet. Okay? I'll tell you. Not yet."

So I didn't ask. I made him eggs and burned them, in honor of someone, and he ate them anyway.

. . .

I went to Priya's that afternoon, for a few days. It wasn't a fight. It was a decision: he needed to sit in his own apartment with his own cello

and his own year, and I needed to not be the thing in the corner of his eye while he did.

Priya's apartment was exactly the same as it had been in October, which was a comfort. Judge on the windowsill, regarding me with the specific contempt of a cat who has been left a voicemail.

"Marcus is coming over Tuesday," Priya said, the first night, pouring wine. "I want you to meet him so you can tell me what's wrong with him. I mean, I know what's wrong with him. He alphabetizes his spices and he says 'supper.' But I want a second opinion."

"Do you like him?"

"That's not relevant." She handed me a glass. "Drink your wine."

I took a sip and put it down. It tasted like a coin. Everything had been tasting like a coin, or like the inside of a cardboard box, or like nothing. The smell of Priya's coffee in the morning sent me to the bathroom to stand over the sink with the tap running, pretending to wash my face.

On the third morning she made eggs. Good ones, not burned. Toast cut on the diagonal, which is how Priya shows love, because she won't say it out loud under any circumstances short of a cardiac arrest.

I pushed the eggs around. I cut the toast into smaller diagonals. I drank half a glass of water and felt it sit in me like a stone at the bottom of a pond.

Priya ate her own breakfast without looking up. Then she put her fork down.

"That's three," she said.

"Three what?"

"Three mornings you haven't eaten breakfast. You also slept eleven hours yesterday. You cried at a commercial for car insurance. It was a gecko, Claire. You cried at a gecko." She said it all in her charting voice, the flat clinical one she uses on drunks at four in the morning. "When was your last period?"

I laughed. It came out higher than I meant it to.

"Oh my God. Priya."

"It's a question."

"It's stress. It's the wedding. It's the wedding that didn't happen, and then a man who was the wrong man, and then the right man who was also kind of the wrong man, and Page Six, and a blizzard, and a woman who broke her own engagement on purpose, and my body's just been on strike since September. It's the chaos. My body's a union. It's holding out for better conditions."

Priya looked at me for a long, level moment.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"I said okay." She picked her fork back up. "Eat the toast."

I ate the toast. I didn't count. I want to be honest about that. Priya asked me a simple question with a number for an answer, and I didn't count, because some part of me already knew I didn't want to know what the number was.

. . .

Wes had been back from Rhode Island since the night before. That afternoon I took the B61 to Red Hook in a wind that came straight off the harbor and tried to take my hat to Staten Island.

The garage door was half up. Inside, the space heater was going and the radio was on low, a Celtics game, and he was at the

workbench with his back to me, sanding something. The truck was parked nose-in against the far wall, a coffee can full of pencils on its hood.

He heard me. He didn't turn around right away.

"Bennett."

"How did you know?"

"You breathe like you're about to tell someone off." He put the sanding block down and turned. The cheek Theo had hit had gone back to normal. The rest of him hadn't. "Hey."

"Hey."

On the bench was a low wooden platform, maybe eighteen inches square, with four little brass casters screwed into the bottom. Pale wood, oak maybe, the edges rounded so smooth they looked poured.

"What's that?"

"Fig dolly." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Ortiz's place is ground floor, faces north. Gerald's gonna need to move around for the light. Hector's got a bad back. I figured." He shrugged. "I don't know. I had the wood."

I stood there and looked at it.

He'd made it before I'd decided. He'd made it because he already knew.

"Wes," I said.

"Don't." He said it gently. "You're gonna try to make me ask you to stay. Or you're gonna try to make me tell you to go so you don't have to be the one who said it. I'm not gonna do either. I'm sorry. I love you, and I'm not gonna."

I sat down on an upturned paint bucket because my legs had decided for me.

"He's taking the chair," I said.

"I know. He called me." He picked up the sanding block again, just to have it in his hand. "We talked for two hours and nobody hung up. He was a real asshole for about forty minutes of it. It was great. I missed it."

"He asked me to come."

"I know that too."

"Wes."

"Go, Bennett." He looked at me, and his face was perfectly calm, and his eyes weren't. "He deserves the good thing. I've done enough choosing for him. I spent a whole year choosing for him, and look what I did to him. I'm not gonna choose for you too. You get to do it yourself. That's the only thing I've got that's worth giving you."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

He turned back to the bench and ran his thumb along the edge of the fig dolly, checking for a splinter that wasn't there.

"Tell Gerald I said hey," he said, with his back to me.

. . .

From Red Hook I went to Danny's. He was at the restaurant with the dining room dark and the chairs up on the tables. I'd brought the galleys. He didn't look at them.

He was in the kitchen with Nick.

I stood in the swinging door and watched them for a minute before either of them noticed me. They were at the big range, side by side, both in white jackets, both with the same broad back and the same way of standing with one hip against the counter. On the stove, Danny's mother's Sunday gravy, the recipe I'd written down from his memory, filling the whole kitchen with garlic and tomato.

"You're burning the garlic," Danny said.

"I'm not burning the garlic. You burn the garlic. Grandma said you always burned the garlic."

"Your grandmother never said that."

"She said it to me. When I was seven. She said, 'Your father burns the garlic because he's impatient, don't be like him.'" Nick didn't look up from the pot. "Then she gave me a meatball."

Danny opened his mouth and closed it. Then he turned his big head away and wiped his face with the back of his wrist, fast. A chef's move. I've seen a hundred of them do it over onions.

"Claire!" He'd seen me. "Get in here. Taste this. Tell him he's burning the garlic."

I came in. I tasted it from the wooden spoon Nick held out. The smell of the garlic hit me so hard my eyes watered and I had to swallow twice and smile with my mouth closed.

"It's perfect," I said. "Nobody's burning anything."

"See?" Nick said.

Danny was grinning. He put one heavy hand on the back of his son's neck and left it there, and Nick let him.

On my way out he caught me at the door.

"Lorraine says you're going to Portugal."

"Lorraine doesn't know that."

"Lorraine knows everything." He looked at me. "You going?"

"I don't know yet."

"Kid." He put his hands on my shoulders. "Six years I didn't call my son because I decided he didn't want to hear from me. Six years. I decided it for him. You know what he said, when I finally called? He said, 'Dad, I changed my number twice and kept the old one both times in case you called.'" Danny's voice went thick. "Don't decide for people what they can take. Go find out."

. . .

Maddie called that night while I was walking back to Perry Street. I almost didn't pick up. Then I did, because we were apparently those kind of people now.

"I had the anatomy scan," she said. "Everything's fine. Everything's measuring right. It's a girl."

"Maddie. That's great. That's really great."

"I want you to be there," she said. "In May. When she comes." Her voice cracked and steadied. "I know I don't get to ask. I know exactly what I did and I don't get to ask you for anything ever again. I'm asking anyway. You don't have to answer. You can hang up."

I stood on the corner of Perry and Hudson and watched Mayor the bodega cat wash one orange paw on a stack of newspapers.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"Okay," Maddie said. "Okay. That's more than I thought." And she hung up first, before either of us could ruin it.

May. I stood there doing the math I wouldn't do for Priya. Where I'd be in May.

. . .

Theo was on the fire escape when I got home. The window was up, the cold coming in, and he was sitting out there in his coat with his knees up and his back against the brick, the way Wes used to sit, in the place by the ladder.

I climbed out. Less gracefully. My sock caught on the sill and he put a hand out without thinking, and I took it without thinking.

"I talked to June," he said.

"I know. I was there."

"No. I mean I'm done talking to June. For now." He looked out at Perry Street, the bare trees, the streetlights. "We talked about everything. The year. The bench. Why I asked her there. Why she kept coming back to it. Some of it's hers." He was quiet a moment. "I don't hate her. I thought I would. I love her, and I'm not in love with her, and she knew that before I did. She knew it a year ago. She'd just decided it would be kinder if she was the one who broke it." He shook his head slowly. "She said, 'Ask her, Theo. Go home and ask her properly.' So."

He turned on the cold iron slats to face me.

"I'm asking you again."

I'd written this moment in my head forty ways, on trains and in Priya's shower and on a paint bucket in Red Hook. Versions where I said no, kindly, and versions where I said no, badly, and one where I just climbed back through the window and went to bed, which was the cowardly version and which I'd liked the most.

None of them had his face in them. That was the problem with writing it. I could never get his face right from a distance.

"Yes," I said.

He didn't move. He didn't say anything. He just looked at me as if I'd played something he'd never heard before.

"Yes," I said again. "I'll come. To Lisbon. To the hill with the trams and the desk with nothing on it. Yes."

Then he kissed me, four floors over Perry Street, with Gerald Fernando watching from his pot, and I kissed him back, and I didn't hold anything in my mouth this time. Nothing at all.

Below us, the street door banged.

Mr. Ortiz's head appeared at the bottom of the fire escape, three floors down, tilted back, his radio in one hand. I don't know how long

he'd been in the courtyard. I don't know how he knew. He always knows.

"Mija," he called up. "That a yes?"

"It's a yes, Hector."

"Lisbon yes?"

"Lisbon yes."

There was a pause. Then Mr. Ortiz turned and went back inside, and I heard him shout something in Spanish into the stairwell, and a door opened on two, and a door opened on three, and Mrs. Feldman in 2A screamed, "I had the brother at four to one!" and somebody else yelled back, "It's not over!" and the whole of 41 Perry Street erupted, door after door, like an advent calendar somebody had been waiting since October to open.

Theo was laughing into my hair.

And then Mr. Ortiz leaned out of the street door one more time, and called up into the dark, and he wasn't laughing.

"Pool doesn't close till the plane leaves, mija," he said. "That's the rules. I don't make them."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

New Year's Eve

THE ROOF OF 41 Perry Street is not, technically, open to residents.

There's a sign on the door that says so, in red. Mr. Ortiz had hung a wreath on it. By ten o'clock on New Year's Eve there were forty people up there, three borrowed patio heaters, a folding table sagging under Danny Russo's arancini, two strings of white Christmas lights zip-tied to the water tower, and a chalkboard propped against the chimney that said, in Ortiz's careful capitals, POOL: FINAL ODDS, with a column of names and a column of numbers that nobody would explain to me.

"It's not for you to look at, mija," Ortiz said, and turned it to face the chimney.

"I'm in it, Hector."

"Everybody's in it. That's why it's a pool."

The whole city was out there beyond the parapet, Midtown lit up like it was showing off, the dark gap of the river, Jersey City across it trying too hard.

I had a seltzer with lime in a red plastic cup, because the champagne Danny handed me had smelled like a hospital, and I'd poured it discreetly into one of Mrs. Feldman's potted junipers when

no one was looking.

. . .

Everyone came. That's what I keep thinking about. Everyone who'd been in it.

Priya came with Marcus, who turned out to be tall and soft-spoken. Priya introduced him by saying, "This is Marcus. He sneezes in threes. He thinks cilantro is fine," and Marcus said, "Hi, I've heard a lot about you," with such open happiness that I liked him immediately and could see that Priya was furious about it.

"He's lovely," I told her, by the arancini.

"I know," she said darkly. "It's a disaster."

Danny and Nick came up with two hotel pans each, arguing about the arancini. Lorraine came in a long black coat and stood at the parapet with a cigarette, delighted. "The only party in New York where I can smoke inside," she said, "because there isn't one."

Mrs. Feldman from 2A was there, in a fur hat older than me. The young couple from three brought the baby in a snowsuit so puffy it looked like a marshmallow with opinions.

June came alone. She stood near the door at first, in the red coat, holding a bottle of wine like a ticket she wasn't sure would get her in, and then Mr. Ortiz went straight over and put an arm around her shoulders and walked her to the heater, and by eleven she was laughing at something Lorraine had said, the real laugh, the one I'd only ever heard through a door. She caught my eye across the roof once. She lifted her cup an inch. I lifted mine.

Okay. Almost. That's how she looked. Almost okay.

And Theo played.

He'd brought the cello up four flights and a ladder, and at eleven-fifteen, by the water tower under the lights, he played "Auld Lang Syne." Badly. On purpose. He played it like a man who'd heard it once, described by someone else, over a bad phone line. He slid between notes that weren't meant to be slid between. He added a cha-cha in the middle. Mrs. Feldman laughed so hard she had to sit down on a milk crate.

"That's a principal cellist," Nick said to me, appalled. "In Lisbon. That's who they hired."

"He's warming up," I said.

"For what?"

I watched Theo grin over the scroll at the crowd, his glasses catching the Christmas lights. He looked happy. I'd never seen it on him for this long without something sitting underneath it.

"For the rest of his life," I said.

. . .

Wes came at eleven-thirty.

I didn't see him come up. I just felt the roof change, the way a room changes when somebody opens a window. He was standing at the top of the ladder with a six-pack of Narragansett hanging off two fingers, the cans with the fish on them, and the canvas jacket, and no hat, and he was looking for someone.

He found his brother first.

Theo stopped playing in the middle of a cha-cha. He set the bow across his knees. And Wes walked across the tar roof between forty people, and Theo stood up, and they hugged, quickly, with a lot of back-slapping, the way men do when they want everyone to know it's fine and they're not going to cry about it in public. Wes said

something in his ear. Theo laughed and shook his head and said something back, and Wes put the six-pack on the folding table, cracked two, and handed one to his brother.

From across the roof, Ortiz looked at his chalkboard. Then he looked at me. Then he very quietly took out his chalk.

Wes didn't come over. He talked to Danny about a window in the restaurant that had been sticking since 1987. He survived Priya's look. He held the marshmallow baby, who stared at his scar with total absorption.

He never once looked at me. How hard that must have been. How careful he was, all night, to give me nothing I'd have to carry.

At eleven-forty-five Theo started playing again, properly this time, something slow and Spanish that made the whole roof go quiet. And I needed, suddenly and badly, to not be on that roof. The cigarette smoke, the cold, the seltzer sitting in me like a stone. My stomach turned over and my eyes stung and I put my cup down and went to the hatch.

"You okay?" Priya said.

"Bathroom."

She watched me go down the ladder. I felt her watch me all the way.

. . .

The fire escape of 4B is one floor below the roof. I didn't plan to go out on it. I ran the cold tap in the kitchen and held my wrists under it until my stomach settled, and then I turned around, and the big window was up.

I hadn't left it up.

He was sitting out there, in his place by the ladder, with his back against the brick and his knees up. He must have come down from the roof the outside way, the iron stairs, while everyone was watching his brother play.

"Hey, Bennett," he said.

I climbed out. My sock caught on the sill. He didn't put out a hand this time. I got through on my own and sat down in my place by the window, where the warmth from the apartment leaked out around my shoulders, and above us, through the iron slats of the next landing, I could see the Christmas lights, and hear the cello, and the forty people on the roof listening to it.

It was 11:50 by the clock on the stove.

"You're not supposed to be here," I said.

"I know."

"You came to say goodbye."

"Somewhere that wasn't an airport. I'm driving you on the second. Nobody should have to say anything real at an airport. There's a guy with a leaf blower for the floors."

I laughed, and it came out wet.

"I read it," I said. "The treehouse letter. The one you didn't mean to send."

He was quiet for a long time.

"Yeah. I figured."

"You wrote that you owed him a city."

"I did."

"You paid for it, Wes. A whole year. You paid."

"Doesn't work like that." He looked at the can. "You don't get to pay back a city with a bad year. You just get to stop taking them."

He looked at me then. Up close, in the light from the kitchen, his face was so tired. The scar white with cold. The crooked tooth, when his mouth moved, not quite a smile.

"The first night," he said. "When I sat on the stoop for an hour. You know what I was scared of? Not Theo's stuff. That's what I wrote you. That was true. But I was scared of walking in there and it being empty. Him gone, really gone, and nothing left. And instead you were there, with a frying pan, crying, in those socks." He shook his head slowly. "I said yeah. When you said his name. I said yeah because I couldn't stand to hear you say there was nobody here."

"Wes."

"I'm not asking for anything. I swear to God. I just never said it."

Above us, the cello found the end of its phrase and held it.

I didn't decide. I want to be honest. I'd like to tell you I weighed it, that I sat there on the iron with Theo's music coming down through the slats and made a choice like a grown woman. I didn't. I put my hand on his face. That was all. And he shut his eyes like it hurt, the way he had the very first night, and turned his mouth into my palm.

"Bennett," he said against it. "We can't."

"I know."

"He's right upstairs."

"I know." I was crying. "Tell me to stop."

He opened his eyes and looked at me, and he didn't tell me anything. He'd promised not to choose for me. He kept his promises. That was the whole trouble with him.

. . .

We went in through the window. He lifted me over the sill. My socks on the slanted floor. The radiator ticking. Gerald in his pot by the

window with the city behind him like a stage set, and the green couch, the long green velvet couch where Wes had slept in October with one foot off the end, and that's where we went, because the bedroom was Theo's now and some last decent part of us both knew it.

He kissed me like it was the last time, because it was. Not hungry, the way he'd been against the kitchen counter that first night in October. Slow. Deliberate. Like a man reading something he knows he'll only get to read once, and wants to remember the exact words. His hands came up and held my face and his thumbs moved on my cheekbones, and I felt them shaking.

I unbuttoned his jacket. His flannel. He let me, the way he always had, standing still under my hands like a man being measured for something. Under the shirt he was warm, and I put my palm flat on his chest where his heart was going, and he covered my hand with his, and held it there. The tattoo on his ribs. W.M. + T.M. '01. I touched it, and he made the same small sound he'd made the first time, as if I'd pressed on a bruise.

He undressed me in the dark. My sweater. The good bra I'd worn for a party and nothing else. His mouth on my shoulder, my collarbone, the freckles he used to count. When he got to my socks he stopped, and looked up at me from where he was kneeling on the floor in front of the couch, and almost smiled.

"Keeping them," I said.

"Course you are."

He laid me down on the green velvet. It was cold against my back and then it wasn't. He was careful. He was careful in every way there is to be careful, and I mean that, and it didn't matter, and I didn't know yet how much it didn't matter. He kissed down my body like he

was learning it again from the beginning, slow, his stubble rough and then soft, his hands warm on my hips, and I put my fingers in his hair and held on and didn't say his name, because I knew if I said it I wouldn't be able to stop.

At some point I pushed him onto his back. I don't remember deciding to. I just wanted to see him, all of him, once, in this room, in this light, and he let me, the way he'd let me do everything. I sat over him on the green velvet and looked. The broad chest, the dark hair on it, the long pale scar on his forearm, the stubborn line of his jaw. His hands on my hips, not holding, just resting there, like he was afraid I'd vanish if he gripped. I bent and kissed the scar through his eyebrow, the very first thing I'd ever seen of him, in a doorway with a frying pan. He closed his eyes when I did it. His whole body went quiet under me, as if I'd finally put my hand on the one place that had been hurting since he was ten.

Above us, on the roof, someone yelled, "Two minutes!"

He turned us again, gently, and came back up over me and stopped, braced on his forearms, and looked at me. The streetlight came through the big window, broken by the bare branches outside, and moved on the brick. His eyes were wet. I'd never seen that. Not on the pier, not at the table on Christmas Eve, not once.

"Hey," I whispered. "I'm here."

"I know you are." His voice cracked down the middle. "That's what's killing me."

When he moved into me it was so slow I felt everything. Every second of it. His forehead came down against mine and stayed there, and we breathed together, and he didn't move until I did. Then we found it the way we always had, as if our bodies had kept notes when we weren't looking, slow and deep, the old couch creaking, my legs

around him, his hand under my head holding it like something he'd been asked to carry up four flights and not drop.

On the roof, forty people started counting.

"Ten!"

His mouth at my temple. My name, Claire, not Bennett, the name he kept for the dark.

"Nine! Eight!"

My nails down his back. His breath catching against my neck.

"Seven! Six! Five!"

I was crying and I didn't stop and he didn't ask me to. He kissed the tears off my face one at a time, without hurrying, the way you'd pick up something you'd dropped.

"Four! Three!"

He laced his fingers through mine on the green velvet and held on.

"Two!"

"Look at me," he said, and I did.

"One!"

And the sky over the Hudson cracked open.

The fireworks came up off the barges in the river all at once, gold and white and a red so deep it was almost black, and the light poured through the big window and over the brick and over Gerald and over the two of us on the couch, and the whole apartment lit up and went dark and lit up again like a heartbeat. On the roof everyone was cheering, and somebody was blowing a paper horn, and the cello was playing "Auld Lang Syne," properly this time, slow and true and so beautiful I couldn't stand it. And I came apart under him in the light with my eyes open on his, and he followed with his face pressed into my neck and his arms locked around me, saying my name into my skin like a man confessing.

We lay there while the sky over the river went on breaking.

. . .

He dressed in the dark.

I lay on the couch under the afghan from the arm, the one Theo used, and watched him. Jeans. Flannel. He buttoned it wrong and didn't notice and I didn't tell him. He sat on the edge of the couch, by my feet, to lace his boots, and his hand rested for a second on my ankle, over the sock, and stayed.

"He's going to want you up there," he said. "For the toast. You should go."

"Wes."

"I know." He tied the second boot. He didn't look at me. "I know, Bennett."

He stood. He put on the canvas jacket. Out the window the last of the fireworks were coming down over the river in long slow gold trails, like someone pulling threads out of the sky.

"Go to Lisbon, Bennett," he said. "Go be happy." He looked over at the window, at the dark shape of the fig in his pot. "I'll water Gerald."

Then he went into the kitchen, and I heard something small and metal touch the table. And then the door of 4B opened and closed, very quietly, and his boots went down the stairs, past the creaking top step, past the landing on three, all the way down, and the street door banged, and he was gone.

I got up and wrapped the afghan around me and walked into the kitchen in my socks.

The light from Perry Street came in over the sink. On the kitchen table, on the scarred wood, next to the box of cereal I'd kept buying all through December and told myself was for me, was his key.

His spare key to 4B. The one he'd let himself in with on a rainy night in October, while I stood in the dark with a frying pan.

Small and brass and wrong-looking next to the cereal box, like a word in another language.

He'd done it exactly the way I had. There wasn't a sentence in the world he could have left me that would say it better.

Upstairs, forty people were singing, and a man who loved me was playing for them, and he didn't know yet where I was.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Forty-Four

THE RULES CAME OFF the fridge last.

I'd packed everything else by nine. Two suitcases and a duffel, my notebooks in a tote bag I didn't trust the airline with, Danny's galleys in an envelope for Lorraine that Mr. Ortiz had promised to mail "like it was a baby." Theo had packed in forty minutes the night before, with the terrifying efficiency of a man who irons his shirts, and gone to sleep with one arm over his eyes, and I'd lain awake beside him listening to him breathe and not playing.

So it was just the fridge.

The sheet of yellow legal paper was still under the lemon magnet, curling worse at the corner now. My anxious slant at the top. No shirtless. No reading my stuff. No setting things on fire at 4 a.m. Then the square capitals, pressed so hard into the paper you could feel them from the back. IT WASN'T YOURS. DON'T TOUCH THE CLOSET. NO TALKING BEFORE COFFEE. DON'T NAME MY PLANTS. And my too late, Gerald.

Under those, in the patient forward-leaning hand, from November. The subletter has the bathroom first. I play at night. Fernando is watered Tuesdays and Fridays. Nobody talks about

them. And my Gerald, squeezed in beside his Fernando, like two people sharing an umbrella.

Three months of a life on one page. Mine, and then his brother's, and then his.

I took it down. Then I tore it, very carefully, along the blank line between the capitals and the small, careful hand, and folded Theo's half and put it in the tote bag with my notebooks.

I put Wes's half back on the fridge, under the lemon magnet.

I know exactly why. I just can't explain it in a way that would make me look good. I left it on the door of an empty apartment, the way you'd leave a light on.

. . .

Gerald went down to Mr. Ortiz at ten, on the fig dolly.

Theo carried him down the four flights, because Theo insisted, and because the dolly's casters on the stairs would have been a slapstick tragedy. He went step by step with the terracotta pot hugged to his chest and his glasses fogging, and talked to the tree the whole way down in Portuguese, softly, the way you'd talk to a dog at the vet.

"What are you telling him?" I asked from the landing.

"That it's not his fault. That we'll visit." He reached the second floor. "That Hector's apartment has a radiator that works, which is more than we ever gave him."

Mr. Ortiz's apartment faced north, as Wes had said. It was full of plants already, all crowded at the one window like commuters at a platform edge. He made room. He set the dolly in the spot with the most light and rolled Gerald onto it and stepped back, and the four of us stood and looked at him: Theo, me, Ortiz, and Mrs. Feldman from

2A, in her bathrobe, for no reason.

"He looks good," Ortiz said. "He looks like a tree who got a promotion."

Then he turned around and hugged me. Hard. His radio was on in the kitchen, a Spanish station, a man singing about the sea.

"Mija," he said into my hair. "You call me. Not the building. Me."

"I'll call you, Hector."

"And the pool." He pulled back and held me by the shoulders. "Don't ask."

"I wasn't going to."

"Still open." He looked at me with his sad, knowing super's eyes, the ones that had watched every door in this building open and close for thirty years. "Till the plane."

. . .

Priya had come on New Year's Day.

I should tell you that part, because it matters. She came at noon with bagels, in yesterday's eyeliner, and stood in the kitchen of 4B and didn't say anything about the way I looked, and didn't say anything about the cereal box on the table, or the key next to it, which I hadn't moved. She looked at the key for a long time. Then she looked at me.

"I'm not going to ask," she said.

"Thank you."

"I'm going to want to know, eventually. Like in ten years. At a bar."

"Okay."

When she left she hugged me at the door, longer than Priya hugs, which is generally not at all, and her hand went into the pocket of my

coat on the hook beside us. I felt it. I didn't say anything. After the street door banged I put my own hand in my pocket and found a small flat box, and a yellow Post-it stuck to it, in her terrible doctor's handwriting:

Humor me. – P.

I didn't open it. I left it in the coat. I carried it around for two days the way you carry a letter you've decided not to read, every time I put my hands in my pockets, my fingers finding the corner of it and going away again.

. . .

Wes was on Perry Street at noon with the engine running.

He'd come all the way from Red Hook to drive us. Theo had tried to book a car, and Wes had said, on the phone, in a voice I could hear from across the room, "You're not putting a cello in an Uber, are you out of your mind," and that had been that.

The green F-150 sat at the curb with exhaust curling white out of the tailpipe. The heater was on high. The heater was always on high. When I climbed up into the cab it hit me like opening an oven, dry and roaring, smelling of sawdust and coffee and a pine air freshener that had stopped smelling like pine in roughly 2019.

I was in the middle. Of course I was in the middle. Theo had the window, with the cello wedged between his knees and the door, its scroll against the roof liner. Wes drove.

"Morning, Bennett," he said.

"Morning."

That was all. He put the truck in gear. He was exactly himself. It nearly killed me: the elbow on the window frame, the coffee in the cup holder, two sugars, the radio on low, swearing comfortably at a

cab on Seventh Avenue. His shirt was buttoned right today. His knee was an inch from mine and it never once touched it, the whole way to Queens, and I knew that was on purpose too.

They talked across me. That was the new thing, the miracle of it. Theo and Wes, arguing about the BQE versus the Midtown Tunnel like it was a theological dispute. Theo saying that in Lisbon the taxi drivers drove like they'd been personally insulted by the concept of lanes, and Wes saying, "Good, you'll fit in, you drive like a nun," and Theo laughing, really laughing, his head back against the seat.

Montauk '01. I sat between them with my hands in my coat pockets, my fingers on the corner of a small flat box, and listened to two brothers being brothers, and didn't say a word.

Somewhere on the Belt Parkway the smell of the heater got into me, the dust and the old coffee, and my stomach rolled over, slow and heavy. I swallowed. I looked out at the water going by, gray, Jamaica Bay flat and pewter under the winter sky.

"You okay?" Theo said.

"Planes," I said. "I'm just bad at planes."

On my other side, Wes didn't say anything. I felt him glance at me once, just once, and back to the road.

. . .

Terminal 4 at one in the afternoon on the second of January is a specific kind of hell. Everyone who went somewhere for the holidays is coming back, everyone who stayed is finally leaving, and they all meet at the curb and hate each other.

Wes pulled into Departures behind a hotel shuttle and a Port Authority cop immediately started waving at him.

"I'll circle," he said. "Go."

Theo got the cello out first. He always got the cello out first. It had its own seat on the plane, row 31, the window, booked under the name CELLO MARSH, which was apparently what the airline insisted on and which Wes had found so funny when he saw the itinerary that he'd had to pull over on the West Side Highway.

He set it on the curb in its scuffed case, upright, like a third passenger waiting for a ride. Then he came back to the truck, to my side, and leaned in through the open door.

He'd shaved that morning. I could see his whole face. The careful, serious face of the smaller boy holding up a shell.

"I have to go deal with Cello Marsh," he said. "There's a desk. It'll take forty minutes, and a woman named Brenda will ask me if it's a person. I'll meet you at the gate. B23."

"B23."

He reached into his coat and took out an envelope. Cream, thick, my name on the front in his patient hand. And under my name, smaller, the way he'd numbered every letter he'd ever written that mattered.

No. 44.

It wasn't the next number in my stack. It was the next number after the closet's, as if he'd gone back to the box of letters to June and kept counting, and this time put a different name at the top.

"Read it on the plane," he said. "Not before. Promise me. On the plane, when we're over the water and you can't get off."

"That's ominous."

"It's romantic. It's the same thing, at altitude." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. "Promise."

"I promise."

He kissed me, there, half in the truck, the heater roaring at our backs, the cop blowing his whistle. Then he straightened and looked past me, across the cab, at his brother.

"Wes."

"Go on," Wes said. "Brenda's waiting."

Theo stood there a second longer. Then he reached across me and put his hand on his brother's shoulder, and held it. Just that. Wes covered it with his own for a moment. Then Theo took his hand back, and picked up his cello, and swung it onto his back and settled it with a small hitch of his shoulders, and walked into Terminal 4 through the sliding doors without looking back.

You always want to write them looking back.

He didn't.

. . .

I got out of the truck. Wes got my bags out of the bed, both suitcases and the duffel, and lined them up on the curb, and put the tote bag in my hand without being asked, because he knew which one mattered.

The cop was coming.

"I'll circle," Wes said again. He didn't look at me. He was looking at the handle of my suitcase like it might need fixing. "Till you're through. Till I see you go in."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to, Bennett."

The cop blew his whistle, two short ones, a man at the end of a long holiday. Wes held up a hand to him without turning around. One minute. The universal sign.

"Wes."

"Don't." He said it so gently. "We did it. We already did it, at the window. Don't make me do it at an airport. There's a guy with a leaf blower."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. It came out wet and terrible and he looked at me then, finally, with his whole wrecked face.

Then he got back in the truck.

I stood on the curb with my bags and watched him pull out, green and dented, exhaust curling white, and go to the end of Departures, and stop at the light. He'd circle. He'd circle until I went in. I knew that like I knew which side his window stuck on.

I went in.

. . .

Inside, the terminal hit me like a wall. The noise, the cold white light, the smell. Floor wax and jet fuel and a Cinnabon somewhere, sweet and hot and enormous, and my stomach turned over so hard I stopped walking in the middle of the hall with a family of five going around me on both sides like water around a rock.

I made it to the bathroom across from the check-in desks. I made it into the last stall. I didn't throw up. I stood there with my forehead on the cold metal door and my eyes shut, breathing through my mouth, while a woman in the next stall had a phone fight with someone named Gary in Fort Lauderdale.

And then I put my hand in my coat pocket for my boarding pass, and found the box.

Humor me.

I don't remember deciding. I want to be honest, here, in the last pages. I think I'd decided on the Belt Parkway. I think I'd decided on the roof on New Year's Eve with the champagne going into Mrs.

Feldman's juniper, and at Priya's table with the toast cut on the diagonal, and in a kitchen in Little Compton with a percolator drowning on the stove. I think my body had been sending me letters for weeks, one under the door every night, and I'd been stacking them on the table unopened, the way I'd once stacked June's.

I opened the box.

It takes three minutes. Did you know that? I'd never done it. Not once, not in three years with Ryan, not ever. You do the thing, and you put the cap on, and you set it on the toilet paper dispenser because there's nowhere else in an airport stall to put anything, and then you wait three minutes, and they are the longest three minutes ever built.

The woman in the next stall finished with Gary and left. The hand dryers roared. Someone's rolling suitcase went by with one bad wheel. Over the speakers, a calm, bored voice said that Gate B23 would begin boarding shortly, all passengers to Lisbon, please have your documents ready.

I looked.

Two lines.

I looked again. I picked it up and held it under the light and turned it, the way you'd turn a letter to the lamp to read what's been scribbled out. As if it might say something else at a different angle.

Two lines. Clear and pink and absolutely without doubt. The surest thing anyone had said to me in months.

My legs went. I sat down on the floor of the stall. The tile was cold through my jeans and it was an airport bathroom floor and I didn't care at all. I sat there with my back against the metal partition and my knees up and the test in my hand, in my good coat, the one I'd bought to look like a woman who moves to Lisbon.

And I counted.

I'm a writer. I'm good at timelines. I'd built one on Danny Russo's whiteboard in December out of a phone call and a letter and a date, and solved something nobody else could see. I built this one on the floor in a stall at JFK, on my fingers, like a child.

Thanksgiving. The boathouse in Little Compton. The woodstove and the cold and the boats under their tarps and Wes, and both of us knowing, both of us saying it, and neither of us stopping, because we were past the place where stopping was a thing people did. November twenty-seventh.

Five weeks.

December fifteenth. Danny's manuscript delivered, the wine, Theo's hands, the song. And afterward, in the dark, the two of us laughing at the ceiling. We should probably. It's fine. It's probably fine.

Not quite three weeks.

And New Year's Eve, when we'd been so careful, and it hadn't mattered, because it was already too late to matter. I'd been carrying it up four flights. I'd been carrying it onto the roof.

Five weeks. Three weeks.

Two men. Two brothers. W.M. + T.M.

I put the test down on the tile beside me, very carefully, the way Theo had set his glasses down beside his plate on Christmas Eve.

And then, because I couldn't do anything else, because I was a woman who had broken every rule ever written on a refrigerator for her, I took the cream envelope out of my coat.

I'd promised. Over the water. When I couldn't get off.

I opened it anyway.

It was two pages, in that patient, forward-leaning hand. I only read the first line. I couldn't read the second. I couldn't have read the second if the building had been on fire.

> *No. 44*
>
> *Dear Claire, I'm going to ask you to marry me in Lisbon. I wanted you to know before you got on the plane, so you could decide with your eyes open.*

Dear Claire. Not Subletter. For the first time, in all forty-four, my name.

I sat there with the letter in one hand and the test on the floor beside me, and the bored voice came back over the speakers, and said it again, Lisbon, now boarding, and somewhere out past the sliding doors a green truck was going around and around Departures with the heater on high.

Gate B23 was boarding. Outside, a man I loved was waiting in a truck with the engine running. And I was sitting on the floor of a bathroom at JFK, holding the only story I'd ever been handed that I didn't know how to end.

END OF PART TWO

The story continues in
The Sublet — Part Three.

Thank you for reading. If it kept you up past midnight, I'm not sorry.

— Shay