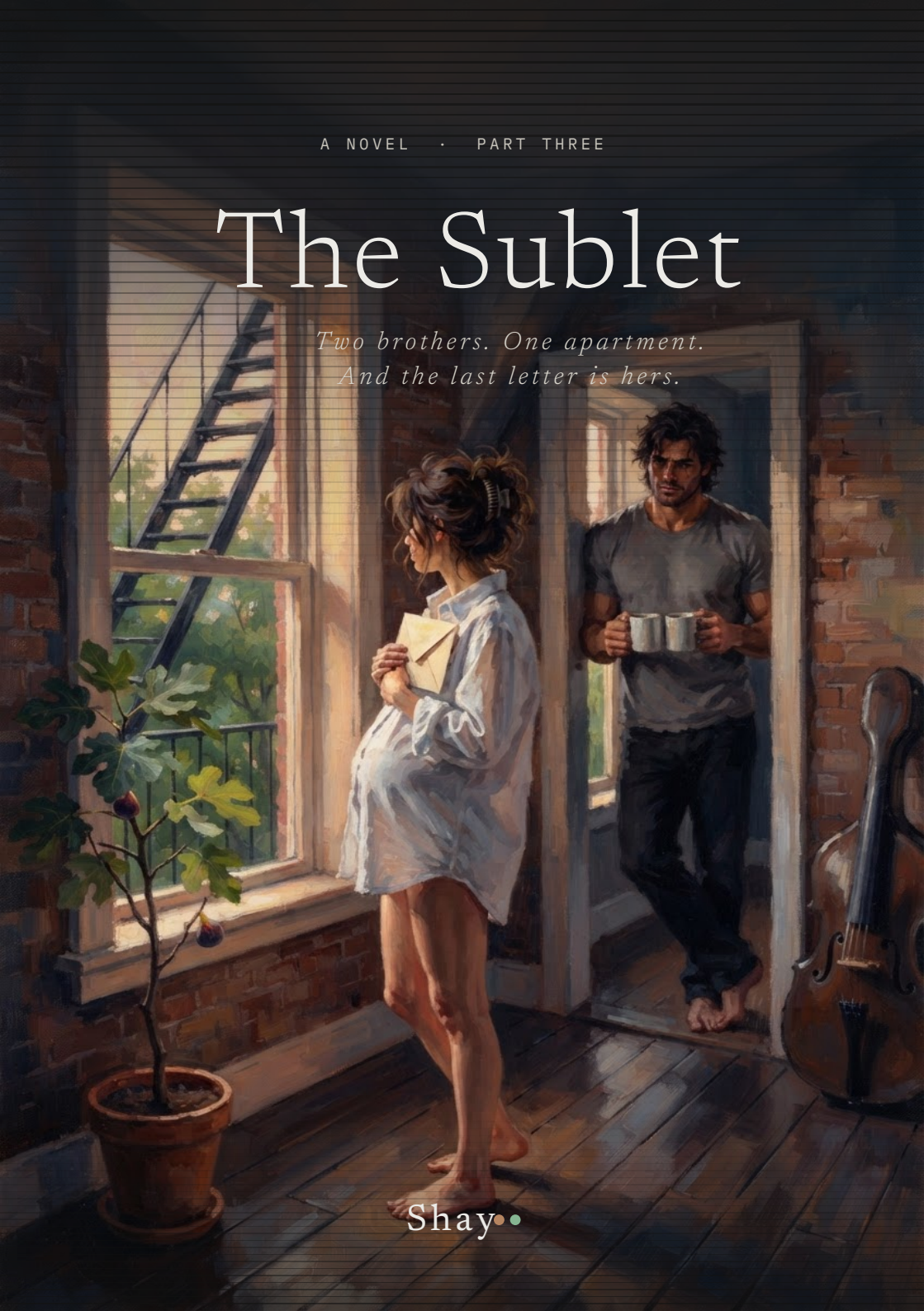
A NOVEL · PART THREE

The Sublet

Two brothers. One apartment.
And the last letter is hers.



Shay

PART THREE

The Sublet

Shay

The Sublet – Part Three

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Contains adult content.

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CHAPTER ONE

Gate B23

I READ THE SECOND line.

I'd told myself I couldn't, and I believed it for about forty seconds, which is a long time on a bathroom floor. Then the bored voice said Lisbon again, and some part of me that has been reading other people's mail since October said, Oh, for God's sake, Claire, and I turned the page toward the light.

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.

I've never given anyone that before. A chance to see it coming. For most of my life I've been the person things were done to, and then for one bad year I was the person who did things to everyone by vanishing, and I'd like to try a third way, which is to tell you the truth while you can still walk away from it.

So here is the case, such as it is. Things I know about you, from forty envelopes of photocopies and fifty-one days in my kitchen:

1. You sleep in socks. Two pairs if it's cold. You make the joke first so nobody can make it at you.

2. When your life ended, you worried about the chairs.

3. You apologize to strangers through doors.

4. You once described a man swearing at my radiator so precisely that I could tell you which words he used. I knew all of them. I grew up with them.

5. You laugh at your own jokes about half a second before the end, so the end always comes out a little wobbly. I've started waiting for the wobble.

6. You burn eggs and serve them with total confidence.

7. You keep other people's secrets until it makes you sick, and then you stand up with a glass in your hand, shaking, and tell the truth anyway.

8. Nobody has ever written you down properly. Not one person. Not even you.

I don't want to write you, Claire. I'm finished with people writing each other. I'd like to read you, for a very long time, in good light, with my glasses on.

I won't ask until we land. I won't ask at all if you aren't ready. I won't manage you and I won't be managed. You taught me that a person ought to see the shape of her own life before anyone else signs it.

If you get on the plane, I'll ask in Lisbon. If you don't, I'll understand, and I'll still play at two.

— T.

Number four made me laugh. Out loud, on the floor of a stall in Terminal 4, with a positive pregnancy test balanced on the tile beside my knee, a big wet honk of a laugh that bounced off the metal, and the woman washing her hands outside went very quiet in the specific way of a New Yorker deciding whether something is her business.

Then I stopped laughing, because I'd read number eight.

. . .

Here is what I thought about, sitting there, in order, because order is the only thing I'm good at when it counts.

The chairs. Maddie, whose toast told the truth before she meant it to. A listing with three rules and an initial. June at a photocopier, mailing my voice to a man I'd never met. Wes, who wrote a whole year of his brother's life with one word, yeah, in a doorway in Red Hook. And Theo, who had just handed me the pen and said, here, you do it, eyes open.

And me. Me most of all. Because you can write your own life badly too, just by leaving things out. I'd done it with Ryan for three years, every time I didn't ask where Boston was. I'd done it for eight days in December. I'd been about to do it again: sit down in row thirty-one, fasten the belt, and let the story go on without the most important fact in it.

I'm a ghostwriter. I know exactly how much you can cut before a book stops being true.

I'd been cut enough.

I wrapped the test in a long ribbon of toilet paper, like a sad little mummy, and put it in the tote bag next to my notebooks. I folded No. 44 back into its envelope and put it in my coat, over my heart, which was ridiculous and also the only pocket with a button. I stood up. My

knees cracked like a much older woman's.

Then I walked out of the bathroom and turned left instead of right.

. . .

I stood at the curb in the cold with my tote bag, my suitcases somewhere in the belly of the building being X-rayed for snow globes, and watched the lane. Shuttle. Shuttle. A black car with a man inside it shouting at his own hand. The first green truck was a landscaper's. The second was a Subaru, which isn't even a truck, but I was not in my right mind.

The third was him, on what I'd later learn was his fourth lap, at the speed of a hearse, elbow on the window frame, the face of a man who has decided to circle an airport until either the woman goes in or the Port Authority arrests him. I saw him see me. His face went completely blank, like a radio between stations.

I stepped off the curb into the lane.

The cop blew his whistle so hard it cracked. Wes braked. A shuttle behind him leaned on its horn for one long, injured note.

I opened the passenger door and climbed up, and the heater hit me the way it always did, all at once, a dry roaring blast of sawdust and old coffee, and I pulled the door shut, and we sat there in the middle of the lane with everyone honking.

"Bennett," he said. "You're on the wrong side of the glass."

"I know."

"Your plane—"

"I know." I put my hands flat on my knees. "Pull over. Please. Just for a minute. Somewhere the cop can't reach you."

He rolled forty feet to the far end of the curb, to a strip of yellow concrete under a sign that said NO STANDING ANY TIME, and put it in park, and turned to me with his whole body, the seat creaking under him.

"I'm pregnant," I said.

. . .

Some people go quiet. Wes went silent, which is different. Quiet is a room with nobody talking in it. Silent is a room after something falls.

He didn't move. The heater roared between us like it had something to say and nobody would let it. A plane went up over the parking garage, low enough that the cab trembled, and still he didn't move.

"It could be either of you," I said, because I'd promised myself on that floor that I'd never again leave out the second sentence. "Thanksgiving. Or December, the night of Danny's manuscript, there was a, it broke. So I don't know. I can't know. I've never even taken one of those tests before, Priya put it in my pocket."

That was what reached him. Not the word. Priya.

"Priya put it in your pocket," he said.

"On New Year's Day."

"Course she did." He reached out without looking and found the heater dial and turned it down, because the cab had suddenly become too small for that much air.

The dial clicked, thought about it, and sprang back to high. It had been doing that since 2011. He knew that. He'd turned it anyway.

He laughed. Once, under his breath, at the dial.

"Can I see it?" he said.

I unwrapped the mummy in my lap. He looked at the two lines for a long time without touching it, the way I'd seen him look at old glass in a window frame, finding the flaw he already knew was there and deciding to keep it anyway.

Then he sat back and put both hands on the wheel at ten and two, though we weren't going anywhere.

"Okay," he said.

I waited.

"Okay," Wes said again, to the windshield, and then he turned his head and looked at me, and his face was wrecked and absolutely steady, both. "Whatever it is, it's a Marsh. Uncle or father. I'm not going anywhere, Bennett."

I put my hand over my mouth.

"I mean it." He said it the way he says things he's going to have to live in. "You don't have to do anything with that. It's not a question. I'm just telling you where I'll be."

"Wes."

"And you're gonna get on the plane."

I took my hand away. "What?"

He nodded at the terminal like it was a job site. "You said yes to him. On a fire escape, in front of half the building and Mrs. Feldman. You don't un-say that on a bathroom floor because the floor gave you news. That's not choosing. That's ducking with a good excuse."

"Maybe I'm not ducking."

"Then you can tell me that when your suitcases aren't on a plane to Portugal." His jaw worked. "Go find out if it's him. If it's not, I'll be here. I'll be here either way. That's the whole offer. It doesn't have a deadline."

"That's not fair."

"Nope." He almost smiled. The crooked tooth. "It's what I've got, though."

The cop had found us, walking up the yellow strip with the terrible patience of a man in his ninth hour. Behind him, a guy with a leaf blower was working his way along the curb.

Wes saw him. "Oh, come on," he said. "It's the leaf blower guy."

I was crying and laughing at once in a No Standing zone, and he reached over and put his big hand on the back of my neck, under my hair, and held it there, the way you'd hold a level on a board to see if it was true.

"Gate's B23," he said. "That's the far end. You're gonna have to run."

"I can't run. I'm pregnant."

"You've been pregnant since at least Christmas. You ran for the M train last Thursday." He took his hand back. "Go, Bennett."

I opened the door. The cold came in like it had been leaning on it.

"Wes," I said, one foot on the running board. "Did you know? In the truck. On the Belt Parkway. When I said I was bad at planes."

He looked at the windshield.

"I know what you look like when you lie," he said. "You did the thing with your lip."

. . .

TSA at Terminal 4 on the second of January is a line the length of a Russian novel, with roughly the same number of people weeping in it. I have never had PreCheck. I've always thought PreCheck was for people who'd given up on surprises, and I would like to formally apologize to every one of them. I did a thing I have never done in my life, which was walk up the outside of the rope saying, "I'm so sorry,

I'm so sorry, my gate's boarding," in the voice I use on the phone with my mother.

People let me. New Yorkers will let you cut if you're crying hard enough and apologizing in full sentences. A family in matching Ohio State sweatshirts parted like I was a fire truck. A grandmother in a wheelchair said, "Is it a man?" and I said, "It's two," and she said, "Then you'd better hurry, honey," and rolled herself out of my way.

I took off my boots and went through the scanner in my socks, two pairs, one gray and one with small lemons on it, arms up like I was surrendering to something, which I suppose I was.

The tote bag came out the other side and stopped.

"Bag check," said the agent, a large woman with silver nails and a lanyard covered in Mets pins. She took out my notebooks. She took out a long, lumpy ribbon of toilet paper and, before I could say a word, unwound it, and held up the test between two silver fingernails, and looked at it, and looked at me.

"Ma'am," she said.

"I know."

She examined it like a boarding pass with a smudged date. Then she wrapped it back up, much more neatly than I had, tucked the end in like a hospital corner, and put it back in my bag.

"Congratulations," she said, completely flat. "You're gonna wanna run."

I ran.

I ran the B concourse in my socks, boots in one hand and tote bag in the other, past the Hudson News and the Shake Shack. B23 is so far down that it's practically in Nassau County. My lemon socks had no traction at all and I took the turn by B19 like a cartoon dog on a kitchen floor.

B23 was empty. Black chairs with nobody in them, LISBOA in orange letters over the desk, the jet bridge door half closed, and a gate agent with her hand on it, saying, in the gentle voice of a woman who has said it many times today, "Sir. Sir, I do need to close the door."

And Theo, standing at the desk with his coat over his arm.

He hadn't boarded. He was looking at the far end of the concourse with the face he'd worn on the porch steps in Little Compton, when he'd said that if I said no he'd still get on the plane. He'd waited until the very last door, and he was about to go through it alone.

Then he saw me. A woman in socks, carrying her boots, crying, at full speed.

"Claire," he said.

The gate agent looked at me. She looked at my feet. "Are you Bennett?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm Bennett, I'm so sorry, I'm here."

"Okay," she said, letting go of the door. "Okay, hon. Shoes on. Two minutes."

. . .

I didn't put my shoes on.

I stood in front of him in my socks on a carpet patterned with small blue airplanes going in every direction at once, and took the envelope out of my coat and held it up.

"I read it," I said. "On the floor. Not over the water. I'm sorry."

He looked at it. Then at me.

"Of course you did," Theo said, and his voice was gentle. "You never could leave mail alone."

"There's something you have to know before I get on. Before you ask me anything. Before we're over the water and you can't get off."

He went still. Not Wes's kind of still. Theo's kind, which is the stillness before a bow touches a string, the whole body listening.

"I'm pregnant," I said. "I found out twenty minutes ago, in the bathroom by check-in." I made myself keep looking at him. "It could be yours, or it could be Wes's. Thanksgiving, or the fifteenth. I don't know which. I just told him, outside, in the truck. And now I'm telling you, because I'm not going to write anybody's life with pieces cut out of it ever again. Not yours. Not mine."

The gate agent had gone very busy with her computer, the way people do when they're listening to every word.

Theo didn't say anything for a long time.

I watched it come across his face slowly, from the edges, the way it had on Christmas Eve. He looked at the envelope. He looked at my stomach, as if he expected it to look different. He looked at my lemon socks. Far up the concourse a child was screaming with joy about something, and the gate agent typed three letters and stopped.

He took his glasses down off his head and put them on, as if this were something he owed it to me to see properly.

Then he reached out and took my hand. The one without the envelope. His was cold, the way it always was before he played, and very steady.

"Get on the plane," Theo said. "We'll find out who we are on the other side of it."

It was June's line. You'll find out who you are on the other side of this. She'd written it to me in October, and I'd quoted it back to her, and she'd photocopied it and mailed it to a hotel floor in Lisbon, and here it was, come all the way around in his mouth. I don't think he knew he was quoting. I think it had just become true, the way the best lines do.

"Okay," I said.

"Shoes," said the gate agent, not looking up.

. . .

Row 31. Cello Marsh had the window. It sat buckled into its seat in its scuffed black case, upright and dignified, like a large man who has been asked to stop talking. Theo had the middle. I had the aisle.

The plane stood at the end of the runway roaring at itself, and then went, and Queens fell away, gray and gold, and then the water, and then cloud. He held my hand through takeoff. He ordered me ginger ale without asking, and held it some more.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, with the cabin dark and the blue aisle lights on like a submarine's, he fell asleep. Sitting perfectly upright, glasses still on, his left hand resting on the edge of the cello's seat, calloused fingers curled around the strap the way you'd keep a hand on a child in a car. He slept like he was listening for something.

Then I took the napkin from under my ginger ale, damp at one corner, the only paper I had that wasn't a letter from somebody else, and wrote, very small, so it would fit.

Wes.

Tell me one true thing.

That's what I'd always written to him. Under a kettle, on a landing. Tell me one true thing, and then wait at the door for whatever came back in capitals.

But I was done waiting at doors. So I wrote one more line underneath.

Here's mine.

And then I sat there with the pen over the napkin, thirty-seven thousand feet above an ocean I couldn't see, between a sleeping man

and the cello he'd bought a seat for, with a mummy of toilet paper in the bag at my feet and a letter over my heart and, under my hand, a baby the size of something I'd have to look up.

I have written whole books in other people's voices. I have never once been stuck for the next word.

I couldn't write it.

CHAPTER TWO

Alfama

THE FIRST THING LISBON did was wake me up.

We'd landed in the dark, taken a taxi up a hill so steep the driver downshifted with religious fury, and climbed four flights of stone stairs, Theo behind me with the cello, apologizing to each step. I fell into a bed I didn't see. So I had no idea, until nine the next morning, that I was sleeping under a skylight.

The light came straight down on my face like somebody had opened a lid.

The ceiling sloped on both sides, crossed with dark beams that still had the axe marks in them. Through a small square window, a wall of blue and white tiles on the building across the lane, so close I could have touched a painted bird. Below, a woman was shouting at someone named Zé about a bucket. Then a tram went by at the end of the lane, screaming around the corner on its rails like a violin being murdered by someone who loved it.

I put my hand on my stomach. I didn't mean to. It just went there.

The bed beside me was empty, the sheet folded back with geometric care, and from the next room I could hear him humming. The low, happy noise. A refrigerator in love, June had called it, in a

letter I'd read on the floor of 4B three months ago, when I didn't know his face.

Then I smelled the coffee, and I ran.

. . .

He was very good about it.

When I came out of the bathroom he was holding the coffee pot at arm's length, like a man who has been told it might be a bomb. By the time I sat down he'd poured it down the sink, opened the terrace door, and fanned the air with a sheet of music.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I'm an idiot. I'm sorry. I read about this. On the plane. I bought a book at the airport."

"You bought a book?"

"In Portuguese, it turned out. I didn't notice until we were over Newfoundland." He held it up. The cover had a smiling woman in a white nightgown cradling her belly as if it were a prize marrow. "I've read the first chapter with a dictionary. I know the word for nausea now. Enjoo. It sounds like a little dog."

"Enjoo," I said.

"Come and see the river. The book says fresh air." He hesitated. "It may say fresh eggs. My Portuguese is very good for music and very bad for biology."

So I went and saw the river.

The terrace was the size of a dining table, a low plastered wall, a dying geranium, two iron chairs that didn't match. And below it, falling away down the hill, the whole of Alfama: roofs in every shade of rust and old brick, aerials, laundry on pulleys between windows, a child's pink tights kicking in the wind. A church dome. And past all of it, so wide it looked like a sea that had wandered inland and decided

to stay, the Tagus, with a red bridge far off to the right and the sun lying on the water in one long hammered strip.

I didn't say anything for a while.

"I know," Theo said quietly, beside me. "That's what I did too. The first morning. I stood here and thought, well, I'll never be able to be sad here properly. And then I managed it for a year anyway. It took real dedication."

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"You have to say that, you're nauseous." But he was pleased. He had his hands in his pockets and he rocked very slightly on his heels, like a boy showing a visitor his room.

. . .

The flat was the top of an old building at the end of a lane called Beco do Chafariz, Fountain Alley, though the fountain had been dry since the fifties and was mostly used by cats. The bedroom under the skylight. A main room with a kitchen along one wall and an oven Theo described as "older than both of us and pettier than either." A tub too short to lie down in. And a window over the river with a plain wooden desk under it, with nothing on it at all.

He'd told me about that desk on Christmas morning. I looked at it now and it looked back at me, like a dog that knows it's going to be walked.

The floors sloped. Of course the floors sloped. If you set an orange down by the bedroom door it rolled, slowly and with great confidence, all the way to the terrace.

"I tested it," Theo said, when he saw me looking. "Before I signed. I brought an orange."

"You did not."

"I needed to know what I was getting into." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. "It felt like home."

His cello case was in the corner by the desk, standing up the way it always stood, like it was waiting to be asked to dance. And on the floor beside it, set down where I wasn't meant to look, was a small bundle of envelopes, tied with an old brown shoelace, that I watched him notice and quietly slide into the music pocket of the case, and zip.

I didn't ask. I'd learned about envelopes.

. . .

Dona Graça owned the building, and the one next to it, and, as far as I could tell, the lane, the cats, and the weather.

She was four foot ten and somewhere between sixty and immortal. Her shop on the ground floor was the size of a closet, lined to the ceiling with tins of fish in paper wrappers so bright they looked like candy in a dream about the 1950s. Out front, even in January, she kept a charcoal grill going on the cobbles, and stood over it in slippers with a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, throwing the heads to a semicircle of cats who sat in the cold like an audience waiting for an encore.

She looked at me for a long time. My coat, my claw clip, my face.

Then she said something to Theo in Portuguese, fast and low, and Theo went pink.

"What did she say?"

"She says it isn't sardine season. In January there are no sardines. She wants you to know that whatever's on this grill, it's not a sardine, and she takes no responsibility for it."

"That's not what she said."

"It's part of what she said."

The smoke drifted off the grill and found me, charcoal and fish oil and garlic, and my whole body went cold and then hot, and I turned away and breathed through my sleeve.

When I turned back, Dona Graça was nodding slowly. She took the cigarette out of her mouth. She said one word.

"Ah."

"Theo," I said. "What does 'ah' mean in Portuguese?"

"The same thing it means in English," he said faintly. "She knows."

"How can she possibly know?"

"She's Dona Graça. She knew I'd been left before I'd finished saying my name." He gave her a small, helpless bow. "She told me I had the face of a man who irons his own shirts for nobody."

Dona Graça went into the shop and came out with a heel of bread wrapped in paper and pressed it into my hands, and patted my wrist twice, hard, the way you'd pat a horse you approved of. Then she went back to her audience, and I understood that I had been admitted to something.

. . .

Sofia came on the fourth day.

I'd heard her once, over a phone line in December, while I pretended to be a journalist, and described her afterward as a radio left on in another room. I'd been wrong. In person she was the whole station. She came up all four flights at a run, a round woman in a purple coat and enormous glasses, a box of pastries in one hand, already talking.

"Ai, Theo." She kissed him on both cheeks and held his face in her hands. "Look at you. You're fat. A little. Good. In September you were a coat hanger. The maestro tells the second desk all week, my Theo is

back, my Theo is back, like you were a lost cat." She let go of him and turned to me, and her eyebrows went up over the glasses. "And this is her."

"This is Claire," Theo said.

"I know who it is. Everybody has seen the photographs, the American gossip with the ghosts." She took my hand in both of hers. "Welcome. Sit. You're very pale. Eat a pastel. Theo can't make them, you know this? Like a man trying to teach a cat to swim."

"Sofia."

"It's a compliment, Theo, I'm saying you're persistent." She looked back at me and her eyes narrowed. "Wait. Say something again."

"Um," I said. "Thank you for the pastries?"

Sofia let go of my hand. She took off her glasses. She pointed them at me.

"You," she said. "You! The journalist! December, on the telephone! 'I'm writing a profile, Sofia, tell me everything, Sofia.' There is no profile!"

"There's no profile," I admitted.

"I told you everything! The fiancée, the coast, the walking!" She put her glasses back on and looked at Theo in a state of high operatic betrayal. "She was finding out. The whole time. Ai. Ai, Theo. She's a detective."

"She's a writer," Theo said.

"It's worse," Sofia said darkly. Then she burst out laughing and hugged me, pastries and all, into a purple coat that smelled of face powder and diesel. "It's so romantic," she said into my hair. "I hate it. Eat a pastel. You need your strength. You're going to need it for him. He's very polite. It's exhausting."

. . .

On the fifth day Theo took me on the 28.

The famous one, yellow and wooden and older than everyone's grandmother, grinding through streets so narrow it scrapes the laundry. "The best way to see the city," Theo said, "if you're not attached to your internal organs."

He'd bought castanhas from a cart by the cathedral, roasted chestnuts in a cone made from a page of yesterday's newspaper, and he held the cone between us like a candle while the tram went up the hill, and around a corner, and stopped dead with a jolt, and lurched down another hill, tipping like a ship.

"Look," Theo said, pointing. "That's where they used to—"

I threw up in the chestnuts.

I'd like to say I'm exaggerating for effect. I'm not. I took the cone out of his hands with great dignity and threw up into it, neatly, chestnuts and all, while the tram screamed around the bend by Santa Luzia and a row of Scandinavian tourists turned around and looked at me with their beautiful, horrified, symmetrical faces.

There was a silence. The tram ground on, tipping.

Then an old woman in a black headscarf leaned across the aisle, took the cone, folded the top down twice with tremendous competence, and dropped it into her own shopping bag. She handed me a handkerchief that smelled of lavender. She said something to Theo, put her hand flat on my knee, and sat back, satisfied, as though the matter were closed.

"What did she say?" I whispered.

Theo's face was doing three things at once. Delight, terror, and a kind of awe, as if he'd just watched me do something enormous and

brave instead of vomit into a page of the Correio da Manhã.

"She asked how far along," he said. "I said we were very early. She said, 'Good, then it's a boy, it's always the boys who make you sick on the tram.'"

"Is that true?"

"I have no idea. I know the word for nausea." He took my hand. His was shaking slightly. "She also said I should sit on the outside so you could get to the window. And that I look like a priest."

"You do look a little like a priest."

"She said a nice one," Theo said, with dignity, and held my hand all the way to Graça, the river coming and going between buildings like someone checking in on us.

. . .

That week, between rehearsals, he showed me his city. The cathedral, which looked like a fortress somebody had decided to be religious in. The castle, with peacocks in it, screaming at tourists. Stone stairs worn into soft hollows by five hundred years of grandmothers. The calçada, little black and white stones laid in waves, so polished that in the rain it was like walking on a frozen pond someone had decorated.

He was so careful. He took the outside of every pavement. He carried tea sachets in his coat pockets like a smuggler. He'd bought seven kinds and laid them out on the counter with their labels facing forward, like a man setting out an argument.

At night he slept on his side of the bed like someone on a narrow ledge, very still, careful not to roll toward me, his back a warm fact six inches away.

He didn't play at two. Not the first week. I'd wake and lie there in the dark under the skylight and listen for it, and hear only the gulls

and the tram and Dona Graça's cats having opinions in the lane, and I didn't know if he was holding it back for me, or for himself, or because there was nothing left in him that needed to be said at that hour.

. . .

My mother called on Sunday.

She has called on Sundays at four o'clock her time my entire adult life, and now that was eleven at night my time, and she called anyway, because Sunday is Sunday and the dog doesn't care about time zones.

"Biscuit had a tooth out," she said, before I'd finished saying hello.

"Oh no. Is he okay?"

"He's being so dramatic. Gary built him a ramp for the couch, and he won't use it. He just stands at the bottom and looks at it, like it's personally insulted him." She laughed, the little exasperated laugh she saves for the dog.

I was on the terrace in Theo's coat. Down the hill a woman was singing in a bar, pulling a long note out of the dark like thread off a spool.

"Mom," I said. "I'm in Lisbon."

"Oh, fun," my mother said.

I waited.

"Anyway, they gave him a little cone. He hates it. He keeps backing into the furniture. I sent you a video."

I opened my mouth to tell her. I'd practiced it on the plane: Mom, I'm pregnant, and I'm in Portugal, and I don't know whose it is, and I'm okay, I think. I opened my mouth, and she told me about the ramp again.

She talked for nineteen minutes. I timed it. She didn't ask me a single question. Not where in Lisbon, or why, or with whom, or how I was. Not one.

After she hung up I sat there with the phone in my lap.

It wasn't new. It was Sunday. But there's something about hearing it from six thousand miles away, with your hand on a new thing, that makes you hear it properly for the first time, like a song you've had on in the background for twenty years whose words you suddenly understand.

My father left when I was eleven. I don't talk about it, because there isn't much to say. He drank, and then he wasn't there. He sent one Christmas card, when I was nineteen, to the dorm on Third Avenue, signed with his name in his new wife's handwriting, and I sat on my bed and looked at it until Maddie came in with a parka on over her pajamas and said we were going to hate him together and then get pancakes.

I remember very little about him. That's the truth. Not his face, really. I remember him as a sound. Some nights when I was small I'd wake up in the house in Columbus and there would be a single note somewhere downstairs, very pure and clear, held for a long time, and then gone. Just one note. I never found out what it was. I used to lie there and wait for another one.

It was the kind of thing you'd put in a book, if you were writing someone's father. I'd never put it anywhere.

. . .

Theo came out at half past twelve with two cups of chamomile and sat down in the other iron chair.

He didn't say anything about the call. He'd heard my half of it, which was mostly silence. He folded my fingers around the cup the way you'd fold someone's hands around a bird. Down on the river a ship was going out under the bridge with all its lights on, like a hotel that had decided to leave.

"I keep waiting," I said. "For you to ask."

"I know."

"You wrote it down. You said you'd ask in Lisbon. And we're in Lisbon. We've been in Lisbon for a week. I threw up on your tram."

"It's not my tram. It's the city's tram."

"Theo."

He looked at me over his tea. The light from the kitchen lay along one side of his face, the careful, serious face, and he looked tired, and happy, and more frightened than I'd ever seen him, all at once.

And then, somewhere behind me, very faintly, I heard a door.

Not ours. A flat below, the soft thump of wood on a frame in the stairwell. And my head turned. My whole body turned toward it, the way it had turned every night for three months toward the door of 4B at twelve-forty, listening for an envelope sliding across the floor. I looked through the terrace door, across the dark flat, at the front door. Just for a second.

He'd seen. Of course he'd seen. He sees everything, the way Carol does, the way good readers do.

"Not yet," Theo said gently. He reached over and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, and left his hand there for a moment, against my cheek. "I'm not going to ask you yet."

"Why?"

"Because you're not ready." He took his hand back and wrapped it around his cup. "I'll ask when you can say yes without looking at the

door."

CHAPTER THREE

Dr. Barata

SOFIA FOUND THE DOCTOR, because Sofia finds everything.

"My niece's doctor," she said on the phone, on the Monday, in the voice of a woman bestowing a kidney. "For both babies. Inês Barata. She trained in Scotland, her English is better than the Queen's, she's very serious, she never smiles, the babies come out perfect. Wednesday at three. I already made the appointment. Don't thank me. Thank me. Bring Theo, the waiting room is full of old women, they'll love him."

"How do you know I'm—"

"Claire," Sofia said. "Please. I have four sisters."

. . .

The clinic was on the second floor of a yellow building in Graça, up a staircase with a brass handrail polished by a century of hands, and it was not, as I'd imagined, a women's clinic. It was everything. Cardiology, orthopedics, a dermatologist, a man who did something with ears. They all shared one long waiting room with tiled walls and a television in the corner showing a game show with the sound off, and when Theo and I walked in at a quarter to three, nine women

over seventy looked up from their chairs at the same moment, like a row of birds on a wire.

I gave my name at the desk. The receptionist said, "Obstetrícia," loudly, in the way receptionists do everywhere on earth, and nine gray heads turned from me to Theo and back again, and I watched the whole row reach a conclusion.

"Oh no," Theo said, under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. Sit down. Don't make eye contact."

I sat. He sat next to me. Within ninety seconds the woman on his other side, who had a cane with a duck's head for a handle and a magnificent mustache, had asked him something, and he'd answered politely, and she'd asked something else, and he'd answered that too, and by the time I'd finished the first page of the intake form, three of them had moved their chairs.

I couldn't follow it. I could follow the shape of it, the way you follow a scene in a foreign film: questions, the head tilts, the clicking of tongues, a tangerine produced from a handbag and peeled in one long spiral and handed to him in sections like communion. One of them pinched his upper arm through his coat and said something to the others, and they all shook their heads.

"They say I'm too thin to be a father," Theo murmured.

"What did you say?"

"I said I was working on it." He accepted another section of tangerine. "The one with the duck says it's a girl. The one in the green says it's a boy, because you're carrying it high. I pointed out that you aren't carrying it anywhere yet, and she said I don't know anything, and she's right, I don't."

I looked at him. He was sitting with his knees together and his hands full of fruit and his glasses slightly crooked, surrounded by grandmothers, being scolded in two dialects, and his face had that look it got sometimes when he played something well and wasn't sure anyone had heard. Shy and lit up. A boy holding a shell.

The nurse came to the door and said my name.

I stood up. Theo started to stand too, and then stopped, halfway, because I'd put my hand on his shoulder.

. . .

We'd talked about it on the walk over. I'd said it badly, on the steep part of Calçada da Graça, out of breath and holding the railing.

"I want to go in by myself."

He'd stopped walking. He waited for me to say why. He's good at that. Most people fill a silence like they're bailing water; Theo just sits in a silence and lets it hold him up.

"It's not fair," I'd said. "If you're in the room, and Wes isn't. It's the first time anybody hears it. I don't know whose it is, and I'm not going to pretend I know by who's standing next to me. I don't want either of you to be a guest in the other one's moment. So I'm going to be the only one. Is that, I know it's, is that terrible?"

He'd looked at me for a long time, there on the hill, with Lisbon spread out below us gray and gold.

"No," he'd said. "That's exactly right."

He said it like he'd already thought of it. Like he'd been hoping I'd think of it too. Then he took my hand and we walked the rest of the way up.

So I put my hand on his shoulder in the waiting room, and he sat back down among the grandmothers, and the one with the duck

patted his knee, and I went in alone.

. . .

Dr. Inês Barata was about fifty-five and built like a heron: tall and narrow and very still, with a gray bob cut so straight it looked like it had been done with a ruler, and a pair of red reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She didn't smile when she shook my hand. Sofia was right about that. But she looked at me with such complete attention that I felt, for the first time in two weeks, like I'd been handed to someone competent.

"Miss Bennett," she said. Her English had Edinburgh in it, rolled r's and clipped vowels. "Sofia tells me you're American and a writer and that you have a very complicated life. She didn't tell me the complicated part. She said you would."

"Did she really say all that?"

"She said it at considerably more length." She sat down behind her desk and put the red glasses on. "Tell me only what I need. Dates first."

So I told her the dates. I'd told the story so many times in my head that I'd assumed it would come out long. It didn't. It came out in about four sentences. Two men. Brothers. A night at the end of November and a night in the middle of December. A test on the floor of an airport.

She wrote it all down in small, upright handwriting. When I said brothers, her pen paused for exactly one second, and then went on.

"All right," Dr. Barata said. "Let's have a look."

. . .

I won't describe all of it. Some things in a book are nobody's business, even when the book is yours. A paper gown, a cold room, a screen on a swinging arm, and the gentle, impersonal competence I've only ever met in doctors and very good editors.

Then she turned the screen toward me and said, "There."

It was gray. Gray and grainy and black, like a weather map of somewhere you'd never want to go, and in the middle of the black there was a small pale shape like a comma, like a bean, like nothing, really. I wouldn't have known what I was looking at if she hadn't pointed.

And in the middle of the nothing, a flicker. A tiny, fast, steady flicker of light, going and going.

"That's the heart," Dr. Barata said. "Would you like to hear it?"

I nodded. I couldn't do anything else.

She pressed something, and the room filled with it.

I'd expected something like a drum. Slow, grand, the way hearts sound in films. It wasn't. It was fast, so much faster than I'd imagined, a quick soft rushing gallop, whoosh-whoosh-whoosh-whoosh, like someone very small running down a long wooden hallway in socks, as fast as they could go, toward something they couldn't wait to get to.

I started to cry. Not the pretty kind. I lay there on the crinkling paper with my face going in every direction at once and the tears running sideways into my ears, and Dr. Barata, who never smiles, handed me a tissue from a box without looking away from the screen, and waited.

"It's strong," she said. "Good rate. Everything is where it should be."

"Okay," I said, into the tissue. "Okay. Okay."

"Now." She moved something on the keyboard, and lines appeared on the screen, small dotted crosshairs, and a row of numbers began to fill in along the side. "I'm going to take a measurement. At this stage, from crown to rump, we can date a pregnancy quite precisely. Within three or four days, usually. With the dates you've given me, which are nearly three weeks apart, I can tell you with a great deal of confidence which—"

"Don't."

She stopped. She looked at me over the red glasses.

"Please don't tell me," I said. "I'm sorry. I know that's, I'm sorry. Can you do it without telling me? Can you not let me see the numbers?"

Dr. Barata looked at me for a long moment. Then, without a word, she reached into the pocket of her white coat, took out a yellow Post-it note, and stuck it on the screen, over the column of numbers, and smoothed it down with one long finger.

"Better?"

"Yes. Thank you."

She took the measurement. I watched her do it. I watched the little dotted crosshairs move across the bean and settle, and something blink and register under the yellow square, and I lay there on the paper with my heart going almost as fast as the one on the screen, and I didn't lift my head. I want that on the record. I didn't try to see around it.

. . .

Afterward, dressed, I sat across from her at the desk with my hands in my lap, and she wrote something on a small white card in her upright hand.

She didn't hide it from me. She didn't have to. I wasn't looking. I was looking at a pigeon on the window ledge behind her.

"May I ask why?" she said, still writing. "You don't have to answer. I'm curious. In my experience, people in your situation want to know very badly. They come in here and they want the answer more than they want the baby, sometimes. Forgive me. That's not a judgment. It's just what I see."

I thought about it. I owed her a real answer. She'd put a Post-it on a machine for me.

"Because if I know," I said slowly, "I'll choose the answer. Instead of the person. Do you understand? I'll find out which one, and then I'll fall in line behind it, because it's easier, because it's a fact, because someone handed it to me. And I've spent my whole life falling in line behind things people handed me." I looked down at my hands. "I want to choose someone because I chose them. Not because of a measurement."

Dr. Barata stopped writing.

"And if you never choose?" she said.

"Then I'll be a woman with a baby and a card she didn't read. I've had worse."

She looked at me for a long time over the red glasses. Then she did something I didn't expect. She printed the scan, a little glossy strip of three gray pictures, and took a pair of small curved scissors out of her desk drawer, and very carefully cut off the margin down one side, where the measurements were printed in white. She handed me the pictures. She put the strip of numbers on top of the card.

Then she took a heavy cream envelope from the drawer, the kind used for the important letters of a small, old-fashioned practice, and slid the card and the strip of numbers inside, and licked the flap, and

sealed it, and pressed it flat on the desk with the side of her fist, twice.

On the front she wrote, in her upright hand: C. BENNETT. And under it, smaller, the date.

She held it out to me.

"For when you are ready," Dr. Barata said. "Or never. Both are allowed."

I took it. It was very light. It was the lightest thing I'd ever held that weighed this much.

"In my profession," she said, standing, the red glasses dropping on their chain against her chest, "we spend a great deal of time telling people things they didn't ask to know. It's a pleasant change, now and then, to be asked to keep something." She held out her hand. "Congratulations, Miss Bennett. It has a very good heart. Whoever it belongs to."

. . .

When I came out into the waiting room, Theo was singing.

Not loudly. He was sitting in the middle of a ring of chairs, and the woman with the duck-headed cane was conducting him with one finger, and he was singing under his breath, very carefully, in Portuguese, something slow and rocking with about four notes in it. Two of the others were singing with him. The one in green was correcting his pronunciation on every other word. The receptionist was watching over her computer with her chin in her hand.

He saw me in the doorway and stopped.

The whole room stopped. Nine faces turned toward me. Ten, counting the receptionist. Eleven, counting a man waiting for cardiology, who had no idea what was going on but didn't want to miss it.

I didn't know what to do, so I held up the pictures.

The room went up like a stadium.

I've never heard anything like it. Nine women over seventy cheering in a cardiology waiting room in Graça, clapping, calling out things I couldn't understand, the one with the duck banging her cane on the tile, the one in green crossing herself and then kissing her fingers and pressing them to the air in my direction. Theo stood up in the middle of them, his hands empty, tangerine peel on his knee, and looked at me across the room with his whole face open, the way it had been on the porch on Christmas morning, and I thought: if I were writing him. If I were writing him, this is the page where the reader falls in love.

I'm not sure I wasn't the reader.

"They taught me a lullaby," he said, when I reached him, a little dazed. "It's about a boat. I think. Or a goat. There's a verb I'm unsure about."

"It's a boat," said the woman in green, in perfect English, and went back to her magazine.

. . .

We walked home the long way, through the lanes behind São Vicente, where old men play cards at folding tables in the cold and argue as if the cards had insulted their mothers.

I had the pictures in my coat pocket, and the envelope in the inside one, over my heart, where No. 44 had been. I'd moved the letter to my bag to make room, and decided not to think about that.

Theo didn't ask about the envelope. He'd seen it. He'd seen it the moment I came through the door, the cream rectangle in my hand behind the pictures. He didn't say a word about it the whole way

down the hill.

At the bottom of the Beco do Chafariz, by the dry fountain, he stopped.

"Did you look?" he said quietly.

"No."

He nodded slowly. He looked at the fountain, where a gray cat was asleep in the basin, curled into the place where the water used to be.

"Good," he said.

I waited for something else. There wasn't anything else. He just said good, the way you'd say it about weather, and then he took my hand, and we went up the four flights together, past Dona Graça's shop, where she was pulling the shutter down and called something up the stairwell after us that made Theo laugh out loud.

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'Well?'" he said. "She says it's a girl. Everyone in Lisbon has an opinion about this baby, Claire. It's going to need an agent."

. . .

I sent it to Wes at five.

I stood on the terrace in the cold with the pictures on the stone wall in front of me and took a photo of the clearest one, the gray and the black and the pale comma in the middle of it, and the river behind going copper in the last of the light. I sent it with no words. I didn't know what words to send. I'd tried, on the plane, and gotten as far as here's mine.

It was noon in New York. He'd be on a job. Up a ladder somewhere in Brooklyn with a heat gun and a mouthful of glazing points.

He didn't answer.

He didn't answer at six, while Theo made caldo verde and got the potatoes wrong and said so. He didn't answer at eight, when Sofia called twice. He didn't answer at ten, when I took a bath with my knees up in the too-short tub and looked at the picture again with steam on the screen.

Theo went to bed at eleven. He kissed my forehead and said, "Wake me if you need me," and lay down on his side of the bed, on his narrow ledge, and was asleep in five minutes, the way people sleep when they've decided something.

I didn't sleep. I lay under the skylight watching clouds go over, lit orange from underneath by the city, with my phone on my chest like a hot-water bottle.

At ten past three in the morning, it buzzed.

A photo. It took a second to load.

It was Gerald. Gerald Fernando, in his terracotta pot, on the oak dolly Wes had built him, in the north-facing window of Mr. Ortiz's apartment, surrounded by Ortiz's spider plants like a minor celebrity among fans. And perched on the top of his highest branch, held on with what was clearly a twist tie, was a tiny yellow plastic hard hat. The kind that comes off a toy construction worker. It was slightly too big. It sat over one leaf like a jaunty beret.

I stared at it.

Then the second message came through, in capitals, because of course it did. He texts the way he writes, as if the phone might not hear him otherwise.

GOOD-LOOKING BLOB, BENNETT.

I put my hand over my mouth so I wouldn't wake Theo. It didn't work. Something came out of me that was half a sob and half a laugh, loud, in the dark under the skylight, and I rolled over and pressed my

face into the pillow and shook.

Beside me, Theo turned over in his sleep, toward the sound, and was still.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Orchestra

THE ORQUESTRA DO TEJO lives in a tobacco warehouse.

In my head, for three months, Theo's orchestra had lived somewhere gold and velvet, with cherubs. Instead, on the Friday after Dr. Barata, he walked me twenty minutes east along the river and stopped outside a long low building with a sawtooth roof and a faded sign above the loading doors: TABACOS DO TEJO 1889.

"Here," he said. Proudly. As if it were the Musikverein.

"It's a warehouse."

"It's a tobacco warehouse. The acoustics are extraordinary. Something to do with the brick, and the beams, and a hundred years of smoke getting into the wood. The maestro says it plays like an old cello. He also says that about his car." He held the side door open for me. "Mind the step. Everyone falls on the step. The principal oboe broke her wrist on the step in 2019 and she still sends it a card every year."

Inside, it was enormous. One long room, brick and iron and pale old timber, the sawtooth roof letting the river light down in long slanting bars, and at the far end, under a bank of work lamps, eighty chairs and eighty music stands arranged in a fan, and a raised wooden

box for the conductor, and a grand piano with its lid up like a mouth about to say something.

And the musicians, coming in out of the cold, unpacking, the room filling with that noise I'd only ever heard from the good seats: tuning, scraps of runs, a horn practicing the same four notes, a bassoon making a sound like a polite cow.

Theo walked in among them and the room changed shape around him.

I don't know how else to say it. Heads came up. People called out to him from across the chairs, Teo, Teodoro, maestro, which I'd learn was a joke, because he isn't one. A tall woman with a shaved head and a viola case hugged him around the neck without stopping walking. Two young men in the second violins applauded, slowly and sarcastically, the way you'd applaud a colleague who'd finally showed up to something, and Theo bowed to them, deeply, from the waist, and they howled.

He turned and looked back at me in the doorway, and his face had a look I'd never seen on it: a man walking into his own kitchen.

I'd never seen it. In three months, in two cities, in his bed and his kitchen and on a frozen beach and a hotel floor's worth of letters, I had never once seen Theo Marsh look like he belonged somewhere.

. . .

Sofia put me on a stack of chairs.

"The best seat," she said, steering me by the elbow to the back of the hall, where a tower of spare orchestra chairs stood folded against the brick. She unfolded one for me, and one for herself, and sat down beside me with a thermos and a tin of biscuits and the air of a woman settling in for a long film. "Here you can see everything and nobody

can see you eat. The maestro hates eating in rehearsal. He says it's disrespectful to Brahms. I say Brahms was a fat man, he'd understand."

"What are they playing?"

"Brahms. The second piano concerto. The pianist is a Russian, very handsome, very sad, he arrives on Tuesday." She pointed with a biscuit. "But today is for the orchestra. And the third movement, the slow one, it begins with the cello. Alone. Before the piano, before anything. Theo's solo. Everybody waits for it all year. You'll see."

"Is it hard?"

"It's not hard, Claire. It's naked." She bit the biscuit. "Anybody can play hard. Naked, very few."

The maestro came in at ten exactly.

Rui Valadares was seventy-four years old and five foot four, and he had the most spectacular eyebrows I have ever seen on a living person, two white storm fronts that moved independently of each other and of the rest of his face. He walked in with a cane he didn't use, a scarf he didn't take off, and a score under his arm so old and soft with handling that it flopped like a fish. The whole room stood up. He waved them down irritably, like a man swatting wasps.

Then he saw Theo, and stopped.

"Ah," said the maestro. "O meu violoncelo."

My cello. That's what Sofia said it meant, leaning in, her biscuit crumbs falling on my sleeve. "He calls him that. Only Theo. Thirty years he's been conductor, he never calls anyone anything, he calls Theo my cello."

Theo said something back to him in Portuguese, and the maestro barked out a laugh and reached up, because he had to reach up, and slapped Theo's cheek lightly, twice, the way an old man in a village

slaps a boy who has come home.

Then he turned and peered down the long brick room. At the back. At the stack of chairs. At me.

"Sofia," he called, his voice carrying perfectly in that warehouse built for sound. "Is that her?"

"That's her, Maestro."

The maestro put his score down on the stand. He walked the whole length of the hall, between the chairs and the music stands and the eighty musicians who had all turned to watch, his unused cane tapping on the boards, and stopped in front of me, and looked up at my face from under the storm fronts. Then he took my hand and kissed it. Actually kissed it. I hadn't known people still did that, outside of films about the Habsburgs.

"So," said Rui Valadares, in a heavy, delighted English. "You are the reason he came back."

"Well, I, um—"

"No, no." The left eyebrow went up independently. "You are the reason he left. In December he wrote me, I'm staying in New York, forgive me. Then he wrote me again, I'm coming back, I'm taking the chair. So you are the reason he came back after he left after he came back." He gave up and patted my hand. "Is very confusing. I'm an old man. Thank you, whatever you did. He plays better now. Like a man who has stopped apologizing."

He went back up the hall to his box, tapping, and the orchestra watched him go, and then about forty of them turned around in their chairs, as one, to look at me.

"Well," said Sofia, pleased. "Now everybody knows."

. . .

I watched them rehearse for three hours.

I'd heard Theo play in an apartment, and on a frozen beach, and once at Carnegie Hall as a sub. I'd never heard him play in his own place, with his own people.

He was different. That's the plainest way to say it. In 4B at two in the morning, he'd played like a man alone in a room with a thing he'd lost. Here he was the opposite of alone. He sat at the front of the cellos, on the outside, nearest the maestro, and the whole section breathed when he breathed. I watched it. I watched him lift his bow an inch before an entrance, and eight people behind him lift theirs, and come down together like one flock turning. When the maestro stopped them, which was often, and shouted something in a cracked tenor, and sang a phrase the way he wanted it, Theo would turn in his chair and say something low to the woman beside him, and she'd laugh, and then they'd play it again, and it would be different, and it would be right.

He laughed. A lot. He leaned back in his chair during a long rest for the brass and said something to the two sarcastic violinists that made one of them fall off his chair. Actually fall off it. The maestro didn't even turn around. He just said, "Duarte," wearily, the way you'd say a dog's name, and Duarte got back on.

And then, at a quarter to one, the maestro tapped his stand, and said, "O terceiro," the third, and the room went quiet in a different way.

Sofia put the lid back on her biscuits.

Theo didn't look at anyone. He set his bow on the string and waited. The whole warehouse waited with him, the river light slanting down through the roof, a boat's horn somewhere outside, very low, and then fading.

Then he played.

I don't know Brahms. I want to be honest about that. I know about four pieces of classical music, and three of them I learned from Theo in the last two months, and the fourth is the one from the airline commercial. I don't have the words a critic would have. I only have mine.

It was a man walking into a room where someone he loves is asleep. That was what it sounded like. Very slowly, very carefully, so as not to wake her, and not because he's afraid to wake her, but because he wants to stand there a while and look. It went up, and it stayed, and it came down so softly that you leaned forward in your folded chair at the back of a tobacco warehouse just to keep hold of it. And there was nothing sad in it. That was what undid me. I'd only ever heard him play grief. This wasn't grief. This was a man who had been given something, and knew it, and couldn't believe his luck, and was trying very hard to deserve it.

When it ended, and the orchestra came up underneath him like a floor rising to meet a dancer, I realized I was crying, and that Sofia was holding out a biscuit to me, and that I'd been holding her arm.

"Naked," Sofia said, very quietly, and put the biscuit in my hand.

. . .

On the walk home along the river he talked the whole way, which he doesn't usually do. The Russian pianist's punctuality, which was bad. The second violins, who were a menace and the best players in the building. The maestro, married to the same woman for fifty-one years, who still left her a poem under the sugar bowl on the first of every month.

I listened. I walked beside him with my hands in my pockets and the envelope from Dr. Barata against my chest and listened to him be happy, out loud, in his own city, and I felt two things at once, which I've noticed is the main thing I feel lately.

I felt so glad for him I could barely breathe.

And I understood, walking along the Tagus with the cranes on the far bank going gold in the afternoon light, that he'd never once needed me to be happy here. He'd been happy before I arrived. He'd built this. The chair, the section, the old man with the eyebrows who called him my cello. I wasn't the reason. I was a guest at it. A beloved one, maybe. But a guest.

I should have been relieved. A man who doesn't need you to be happy is the safest man in the world to love.

I didn't know yet why it felt like a door opening onto a staircase.

. . .

Lorraine called on Saturday morning, at what was, I worked out afterward, six a.m. in New York. I could hear the street behind her, a garbage truck, a bus, and the small fierce click of her lighter.

"Do you know how many people have called me about you?" she said. No hello. Lorraine Fisch does not believe in hello; she believes it wastes a sentence.

"Is this about Page Six?"

"It's about after Page Six. It's about the four editors who called me in the first week of January to ask if the ghost had a book of her own. One of them called me twice. One of them sent flowers. To me. I don't even like flowers, I like money." Inhale. Exhale. "They want you, Claire. Not your senator's wife. Not your chef. You."

I was sitting at the desk under the window. The one with nothing on it. I put my hand flat on the wood.

"I don't have a story, Lorraine."

There was a silence on the line. It went on long enough that I heard the bus go by and a man shout something about his dog.

"Honey," Lorraine said. "You're living in one."

I didn't say anything.

"A wedding ends at the rehearsal dinner. A woman sublets a stranger's apartment. Letters come under the door for the man who lives there. The man who comes home isn't him. Brothers. A broken engagement that wasn't. A cellist who fell in love through a photocopier. And now, I'm guessing from the fact that you sound like you just threw up, Portugal." Inhale. "Don't tell me. I want to read it."

"I can't write that. It's not mine. It's theirs. It's June's and Wes's and Theo's, it's Carol's, it's—"

"It's yours." The lighter clicked again, though she already had one going. "You've spent seven years writing other people's lives better than they lived them. I've watched you. You know where everybody's lying. You know exactly where it hurts. You give everybody their best sentence. And you've never once given yourself one." Her voice changed. Not softer. Lorraine doesn't do softer. More precise. "Write the true one, Claire. Under your name. I'll buy it before you finish it."

"I don't even know how it ends."

"Good," said Lorraine Fisch. "Neither do the good ones."

She hung up. She always hangs up first. It's the only way she can be sure she had the last word.

. . .

Danny called an hour later, and he was crying, which is not unusual for Danny, who cries at sauce.

"Preorders," he said. "Kiddo. I'm not gonna tell you the number, I'll jinx it, but Lorraine said a word I've never heard her say. 'Robust.' Lorraine." He blew his nose with a sound like a ferry. "It's your name too. Every time somebody buys one, I think, that's Claire's, too."

"Danny. That's wonderful."

"That's not why I called." I could hear the kitchen behind him. Pans, and a radio, and somebody shouting a ticket. "Nick's cooking. Here. At Gansevoort. Not visiting, kid. Cooking. On the line. He's got a dish on the menu. Braised short rib with polenta and a gremolata. It's my mother's short rib, but he does a thing with the orange I never thought of. People are ordering it. People are ordering my son's food in my restaurant." He couldn't go on for a second. "I stood at the pass last night and watched it go out. Eleven plates. I counted."

"Did you tell him? That you counted?"

"Are you crazy? He'd never let me forget it." A pause. "I told him."

I laughed, and he laughed, and then he said, in a different voice, "You okay over there? You sound different."

"I'm okay, Danny."

"Okay," he said, like he didn't believe a word of it, and was going to let me have it anyway. "Eat something. You never eat. I'm sending you my mother's soup. I don't know how, I'll figure it out. Portugal has mail."

. . .

Priya had known since the Lisbon taxi rank, where I'd texted her two words, you were right, and received in reply: I'm always right. Are you ok. Are you eating. Which one. Don't answer that. Marcus says

congratulations. I didn't tell Marcus, he was reading over my shoulder. It's his worst quality, along with his feet.

That night she texted again. Did you tell your mother.

I tried, I wrote back. Biscuit had a tooth out.

Three dots appeared and disappeared four times. Then: Of course he did.

. . .

At two in the morning, the music woke me.

I lay under the skylight and didn't move. It came through the bedroom door the way it had come through the door of 4B in November, the first time, when I sat on the floor in my socks and cried because it was exactly the man in the letters.

But it wasn't the Sarabande.

It was something I'd never heard him play. Quick and bright and rolling, the notes tumbling over each other in a long unbroken stream, up and down and up again, like someone going through an old house first thing in the morning and opening every single window, one after another, letting the air in. It didn't grieve. It didn't ask anything. It just went, glad, from one end of itself to the other, and then started over, as if it couldn't bear to stop.

I got up and found a sock and went out.

He was in the chair by the desk, in his undershirt, the terrace door open a crack and the cold coming in, the river black behind him and the bridge strung with its lights. He didn't stop when he saw me. He smiled over the scroll and kept playing, and nodded at the floor by the bookcase, and I sat.

"What is it?" I whispered, when he finished.

"The Prelude. The first suite. G major." He set the bow across his knees. "It's the first thing every cellist learns, and the last thing they get right. I used to play it when I was eleven, every morning, before school, and Dad would bang on the wall and say, 'Theodore, the birds are still asleep.'" He looked down at the cello. "I haven't played it at two in the morning since I was a boy. It's not a two-in-the-morning piece."

"Why tonight?"

He thought about it. He's the only person I know who thinks about a question before he answers it, every time, as if the question had been worth asking.

"I don't know," Theo said. "It's what came out."

He went back to bed, kissing my hair on the way past. "Don't stay up." I said I wouldn't.

I stayed up.

I sat down at the desk under the window. The one with nothing on it. I opened my laptop and the screen lit my hands, and I looked at the cursor on the white page for a long time, the way you'd look at a door you aren't sure is yours.

Then I typed two words, in capitals, because I'd caught that from someone.

THE SUBLET

The cursor blinked after them. On. Off. On. Like a heart on a gray screen, fast and steady, going and going, toward something it couldn't wait to get to.

CHAPTER FIVE

Senhora do Monte

THE HIGHEST PLACE IN Lisbon belongs to a saint, a bench, and a man who sells beer out of a bucket.

Theo took me there on the Wednesday, a week after the heartbeat, at five in the afternoon, up a hill in Graça so steep that halfway up I stopped holding the railing and started holding Theo, and he let me, and said nothing about it, which is the most romantic thing a man can do on a staircase.

The Miradouro da Senhora do Monte is a little terrace of crunching gravel and old pine trees at the top of everything, with a small white chapel at the back and a low wall at the front, and beyond the wall, the whole city, laid out below you like something on a tray. The castle, right across from us on its own hill, gold in the last light. The roofs of Alfama tumbling down to the river, and the river itself, wide and pink now, and the red bridge, and the Christ statue on the far bank with his arms out like a man describing a fish. Thousands of windows. Every one of them catching the sun at the same time, so that for about ten minutes the entire city looked like it had been lit from inside, room by room.

Somebody made every one of those windows, I thought. Somebody planed every frame. I don't know why I thought it. I put it away.

There was a boy by the chapel playing Beatles songs badly and beautifully, a couple from Lyon having a quiet fight in French, and an old woman feeding the pigeons with open contempt for the pigeons. Theo bought two beers from the bucket man, and handed one to me, and then took it back with a look of pure horror.

"I'm sorry. Reflex. Book chapter two."

"I'll hold it," I said. "For the aesthetic."

We sat on the wall with our legs over the side, Theo drinking a beer and me holding one, and watched the sun go down behind the bridge.

"Can I tell you something embarrassing?" he said.

"Please. I've been embarrassing on every form of public transport in this city. I'd love the company."

"I came up here last February. My first week. I'd just arrived, and I didn't know anyone, and the orchestra didn't start for ten days, and I walked up here because the guidebook said it was the best view in Lisbon, and I sat right here, on this wall." He turned the bottle in his hands. "And I tried to think of one thing I wanted. Just one. For myself. Not for June, not for Ma, not for anybody. A thing I wanted the way you want to sneeze. And I sat here for two hours, until the man with the bucket went home, and I couldn't think of one."

The sun touched the bridge. The whole river turned to brass.

"And now?" I said.

He was quiet for a long moment.

"Now I've got too many," Theo said. "It's very confusing. I keep wanting things in the shower."

I laughed, and he laughed, and the couple from Lyon stopped fighting to look at us, and the boy with the guitar started playing "Here Comes the Sun," as the sun went down, which is either irony or optimism, and I couldn't tell which, and decided it didn't matter.

. . .

He took me to hear fado that night, in a place in Alfama with no sign on the door.

Down a set of stairs off the Rua de São Pedro: a stone room with a low curved ceiling like the inside of a barrel, eight tables, candles in bottles, a smell of chouriço and wet coats. A woman behind the bar who looked carved from the same stone as the walls. Two men on stools in the corner, one with an ordinary guitar and one with a teardrop-shaped thing with twelve strings, the guitarra portuguesa, which sounded, when he ran his thumb across it, like a harp that had been told bad news.

Everyone knew Theo. Of course they did. The woman behind the bar said, "Ah, o triste," the sad one, which was what the women at the bakery in Belém called him, apparently, and then looked at his face and said something else, and laughed, and put down a glass of red for him and a glass of water for me without being asked.

"What did she say?"

"She said I'm not the sad one anymore and she'll have to think of something else to call me."

The lights went down at ten. The woman behind the bar said, very loudly, "Silêncio, que se vai cantar o fado," silence, someone's going to sing, and the whole room went so quiet I could hear the candle flames.

The singer was about seventy. She was small and broad, in a black dress and a black shawl, her hair pulled back so tightly it looked painful, and she stood in the middle of the room between the tables with her hands clasped in front of her and her eyes closed, and opened her mouth.

I don't know how to describe her voice. I'm going to try, because I'm writing this down, and if I'm going to write it down I have to try. It wasn't pretty. That was the first thing. It was rough at the edges, like linen, and it came up out of her from somewhere far below her ribs, and it didn't go up into the room so much as out across it, low and level, like water finding its way across a floor. She sang with her eyes shut and her fists clenched. She sang like someone telling you a thing that had happened to her, personally, that morning. And the twelve strings went under her voice, shivering, and caught it when it fell.

I didn't understand a word. I didn't need to.

Halfway through the second song, I looked at Theo, and he was crying.

Not loudly. He sat perfectly upright in his chair with his glass in his hand, and his eyes on the singer, and the tears just came down his face behind his glasses, steadily, one after another, and he didn't wipe them, and he didn't look away. He just let them come. Like a man standing in the rain on purpose.

I put my hand on his knee under the table. He put his hand over mine.

The song ended. The room roared. People banged on the tables and shouted, and the singer opened her eyes and nodded once, like a judge, and went to the bar for a glass of water.

"What was it about?" I asked, under the noise.

Theo took his glasses off and wiped them on his shirt, and put them back on.

"It's about a woman who goes down to the harbor every Sunday," he said, "to wait for a fisherman who's never coming back. She knows he's not coming. Everyone in the village knows. She goes anyway. She wears her good dress." He looked at the singer at the bar. "I've heard her sing that one maybe thirty times. Last year I used to come down here and sit in the back and listen to it and think it was about me. The one who'd gone out to sea. The one nobody could reach."

"And tonight?"

He was quiet a moment.

"Tonight I thought about the one on the bench," he said.

. . .

It was raining when we came out.

Lisbon rain in January comes in off the Atlantic sideways, warm and enormous, and turns the calçada into a skating rink and runs down the stone stairs like someone upstairs left a bath running. Neither of us had an umbrella. Neither of us had ever, in our lives, had an umbrella when we needed one, which we discovered we had in common in a doorway on the Rua de São Pedro.

"We could wait," Theo said.

"We could."

"It might stop."

"It won't."

He looked at me. I looked at him. Then he took my hand and we ran.

Up the lanes, slipping on the wet stone, laughing, my hair out of its clip and plastered across my face, his glasses so wet he put them in

his pocket and ran blind, so that for the last part of the hill I was leading, pulling a half-blind cellist up five hundred years of stairs, past doorways where old men sat smoking and watching us like the late film. We fell through the door of the flat and stood dripping in the dark, the water running down the sloping floor toward the terrace.

He was laughing. He was soaked and blind and laughing, and he put his hand up and found my face, the way he had on the green couch in December, by feel.

"There you are," he said.

And I kissed him.

. . .

I want to tell this right. I've written other people's love scenes for money, a senator's wife's and a tennis player's, and they were lies, beautifully constructed ones. This one I want to tell the way it was.

He kissed me back slowly, in the dark, with the rain loud on the skylight and the terrace and the whole hill. His mouth was cold and then it wasn't. His hands came up into my wet hair and held my head, gently, as if it were the most expensive thing in the room. I pulled at his wet shirt and the buttons wouldn't, and he said, "Allow me," very formally, and undid them himself, one by one, cuffs first, the way he always did, like a man getting ready to play.

"Claire," he said against my mouth. "Is this. Are you. I've read chapter four. It says it's allowed. I had to look up four words."

"Which four?"

"I'll tell you later. Two of them were very surprising."

I laughed into his neck, and he picked me up, which he'd never done, and which he did with the faint astonishment of a man lifting

something he's only ever seen lifted on television, and carried me into the bedroom, and set me down under the skylight with the rain drumming on the glass above us, steady as a held note.

My body was different. I need to say that. Seven weeks, or five, depending on who's counting, and nobody could see anything yet, but I could feel all of it. I was sore in places that had never been sore, tender as a bruise, so that when he peeled the wet sweater off me and put his hands on my breasts I gasped, and not entirely in a good way, and he froze.

"Too much?"

"Different," I said. "Gentle. Just. Gentler than you think."

So he was. He was gentler than I'd ever known a person could be, and still be touching you. He kissed me there the way you'd kiss someone's eyelids. He breathed on my skin and let that be enough, for a long time, until it was more than enough, until I was arching up off the bed toward him, asking with my whole body for something I hadn't figured out the words for. He was listening. That was always the thing with Theo. He listened like it was a religion. Every breath I took, every sound, every place my hand went on his back, he took it in, and changed something, and asked again without a word.

He went down the length of me unhurried, my ribs, my stomach. At my stomach he stopped. He laid his cheek on it, just below my navel, and stayed there, and I felt him breathing against the skin, and I put my hand in his wet hair.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

Then he moved lower, and I stopped being able to think about anything at all. I'd been so tired for weeks, so sick, so full of a new kind of exhaustion that felt like my bones had been filled with sand, and I'd thought my body had gone somewhere without me. It hadn't.

It had just been waiting. Everything was louder now. Everything was closer to the surface, as if someone had turned the volume up on every nerve I had, and when it built, it built so fast it frightened me, and I grabbed his shoulder and said his name, and he didn't stop, and it broke over me like the rain over the roof, enormous and warm and coming from everywhere at once.

I lay there shaking. He came up beside me with his hair in his eyes and an expression of absolute scholarly satisfaction.

"Well," he said. "That's chapter four."

"Oh my God. Shut up."

"There's a diagram in chapter five. I didn't understand it. I may need you to explain."

There was a moment, after that, of reaching, out of a year of habit, for the drawer of the nightstand. I watched him remember, halfway there, with his hand on the little knob. He stopped. He looked at the drawer. He looked at me.

"Ah," Theo said. "Right."

And I laughed so hard I cried, and he started laughing too, and said, "Horse, meet barn door," and lay down on his back next to me, helpless with it, and I climbed over him, still laughing, and that's how it went, both of us laughing, until we weren't.

I was on top of him. I wanted to be. It felt easier, and it felt like mine, and I wanted to see his face. He lay back on the white sheets with his hands on my hips and looked up at me without his glasses, and I knew I was a blur to him, mostly hair and skylight, and he looked up at the blur like it was something he'd been waiting to hear for his entire life. I moved, slowly. He let me find it. He let me take as long as I wanted, and I took a long time, rocking against him in the dark with the rain coming down on the glass over my head, and his

breath going ragged under me, and his fingers tightening on my hips and then remembering to be gentle and loosening again, every time, like a man correcting his grip on a bow.

"Claire," he said. Just that. Over and over. Not Bennett. He'd never once called me Bennett. My name, low, like a phrase he was learning by heart.

When it took me the second time it was slower and deeper and it rolled through me from somewhere so far down I didn't know I had it, and he held my hips and watched my face and followed me over, with his head pressed back into the pillow and his mouth open on a sound I'd never heard him make, half a laugh and half something else, like a man surprised by his own happiness.

I came down onto his chest. His heart was going fast. Faster than I'd felt it before.

We lay there with the rain on the skylight. After a long time his hand came up and moved slowly up and down my back, from my shoulder blades to the base of my spine and up again, steady, the way you'd smooth a sheet of music flat.

"You're here," he said, into my hair.

"I'm here."

He was quiet for a moment.

"All of you?" Theo asked.

He said it very softly. Not a test. Just a question, the way he asked them, with the door left open.

I lifted my head and kissed him instead of answering, and he let me, and he didn't ask again.

. . .

At two in the morning the music woke me, and it was joyful.

There's no other word. I lay there under the skylight, which had stopped raining and was full of stars now, the clouds torn open and the sky behind them scrubbed clean, and I listened to him in the next room playing something I didn't know, fast and lilting and bouncing, a dance, a thing you could have clapped to.

I went out in his shirt and one sock. He was in his chair by the desk in his undershirt and boxers, absolutely serious, playing something with a swing in it, and when he saw me he grinned over the scroll and played it faster.

"What is it?" I said.

"The gigue. Same suite. The last movement." He didn't stop. "Bach wrote it to be danced to, you know. People forget. They think it's all for cathedrals. It's not. Half of it's for a pub."

"Theo, it's two in the morning."

"Then dance quietly."

So I did. I danced in his shirt and one sock on the sloping floor of an attic in Alfama at two in the morning, badly, with my hair everywhere, while a principal cellist played Bach for me like it was a pub, and the orange I'd left on the counter that afternoon rolled off it and went, slowly and with enormous confidence, all the way down the floor to the terrace door, and he laughed so hard he missed a note, and didn't care.

Downstairs, someone banged on the ceiling with a broom.

He played quieter. He didn't stop.

. . .

On Friday, I went with him to rehearsal again, and at the break Sofia came out of her office at a trot, waving something over her head.

"Claire! Claire, post! For you!" She was flushed with the importance of it. "Here! To the orchestra! Like a love letter in a film, ai, I'm going to cry."

She put it into my hands.

It was a blue airmail envelope, the old kind, thin as onionskin, with a red and blue border around the edges and a row of American stamps across the corner, a little crooked, as if they'd been stuck on by someone with very large fingers. The paper was soft from traveling. One corner had been bent and flattened again.

And across the front, pressed into the paper so hard I could feel it from the back, in square, blocky, unmistakable capitals:

BENNETT

C/O ORQUESTRA DO TEJO

LISBOA, PORTUGAL

I stood there in the middle of the tobacco warehouse with eighty musicians eating sandwiches around me and the river light coming down through the roof, holding it in both hands.

Behind me, I heard Theo stop tuning.

CHAPTER SIX

Airmail

I DIDN'T OPEN IT in the warehouse.

I want credit for that. Eighty musicians eating sandwiches, Sofia with her hands clasped under her chin like a woman at a christening, Theo behind me not tuning, and I put the blue envelope in the inside pocket of my coat, over my heart, next to Dr. Barata's, so that I was now walking around Lisbon with my whole life in one pocket like a woman who doesn't trust banks.

"You're not going to open it?" Sofia said, betrayed.

"Later."

"Ai. Ai, Claire. You're as bad as him."

Theo started tuning again. A long A, very clean. He didn't say anything. At the end of rehearsal he packed up the cello and walked me home along the river and talked about the Russian pianist, who had arrived forty minutes late on Tuesday and played like an angel with a hangover, and he didn't mention the envelope once, and when we got to the flat he said he needed to go and buy bread, and went back down four flights of stairs for bread we already had.

I sat on the terrace in my coat and opened it.

It was thick. Thicker than one letter. When I slit the onionskin there were three sheets inside, folded separately, each one a page torn from a yellow legal pad, the ragged edge still on it, each with a date in the corner in the same square hand.

He'd written one every few nights. He'd waited until he had three. Then he'd mailed them all at once.

. . .

JAN 4

BENNETT,

I DON'T KNOW YOUR ADDRESS AND I'M NOT GOING TO ASK HIM FOR IT. JUNE USED TO SEND STUFF TO THE ORCHESTRA. SEEMS LIKE THAT'S HOW IT'S DONE IN THIS FAMILY. IF THIS GETS TO YOU, SAY HI TO WHOEVER OPENS THE MAIL.

TEXTING IS FOR PICTURES OF FIGS. THIS IS FOR THE REST.

IT SNOWED LAST NIGHT. FOUR INCHES ON VAN BRUNT, NOTHING ON PERRY STREET BECAUSE MANHATTAN THINKS IT'S TOO GOOD FOR WEATHER. I WENT BY TO SEE GERALD. HECTOR HAS HIM IN THE FRONT WINDOW ON THE DOLLY AND HE TALKS TO HIM IN SPANISH. NOT GERALD. HECTOR. GERALD JUST LISTENS. HECTOR PLAYS HIM HÉCTOR LAVOE IN THE MORNINGS BECAUSE HE SAYS A TREE NEEDS TO HEAR ITS NAME. I SAID HIS NAME IS GERALD. HECTOR SAID NOT IN THIS APARTMENT.

MRS. FELDMAN CAME DOWN IN HER ROBE WHILE I WAS THERE AND LOOKED AT GERALD FOR TEN MINUTES AND THEN WENT BACK UPSTAIRS. NOBODY KNOWS WHY. I THINK SHE CHANGED HER BET.

I'M NOT GETTING THE NEW TRUCK THIS YEAR. HEATER STILL ONLY DOES HIGH. WE'RE USED TO EACH OTHER.

THAT'S ALL I GOT. GO TO SLEEP, BENNETT. IT'S LATE THERE. IT'S ALWAYS LATE THERE.

W.

. . .

JAN 7

BENNETT,

PRIYA CALLED ME. I DON'T KNOW HOW SHE GOT MY NUMBER. SHE SAID SHE'S A DOCTOR AND DOCTORS CAN GET ANYBODY'S NUMBER, WHICH I'M PRETTY SURE IS NOT TRUE AND ALSO A CRIME.

SHE ASKED IF I WAS EATING. I SAID YES. SHE SAID WHAT. I SAID CEREAL. SHE SAID OUT OF WHAT. I SAID A BOWL. SHE SAID SHE DIDN'T BELIEVE ME AND THEN SHE HUNG UP. TWO DAYS LATER A BOX SHOWS UP AT THE GARAGE WITH SIX BAGS OF FROZEN BROCCOLI AND A NOTE THAT SAYS NO. NOT EVEN SIGNED. JUST NO.

SHE ALSO TOLD ME, AND I QUOTE, MARCUS SAYS HI. I MET MARCUS FOR ABOUT A MINUTE ON NEW YEAR'S. I DON'T KNOW WHY HE'S SAYING HI. SHE SAID HE SAYS

HI TO EVERYBODY AND IT'S ONE OF HIS WORST QUALITIES. THEN SHE SAID, YOU'D LIKE HIM, AND SHE SOUNDED SO MAD ABOUT IT I THINK SHE'S GONNA MARRY HIM.

I'M EATING THE BROCCOLI. TELL HER. ACTUALLY DON'T TELL HER. SHE'LL SEND MORE.

W.

. . .

JAN 10

BENNETT,

DANNY RUSSO HIRED ME TO FIX THE WINDOW AT GANSEVOORT. THE ONE BY THE BAR THAT'S BEEN STICKING SINCE 1987. TURNS OUT IT'S BEEN STICKING SINCE 1987 BECAUSE SOMEBODY IN 1987 PAINTED IT SHUT WITH A KIND OF PAINT THEY DON'T MAKE ANYMORE BECAUSE IT'S ILLEGAL. I GOT IT OPEN. DANNY CRIED. DANNY CRIES AT EVERYTHING. HE CRIED AT THE INVOICE.

NICK FED ME. A SHORT RIB WITH SOMETHING ORANGE ON IT. I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT WAS. IT WAS THE BEST THING I EVER ATE AND I'VE EATEN A LOT OF CEREAL. DANNY STOOD BEHIND ME THE WHOLE TIME I ATE IT, WATCHING ME CHEW, AND WHEN I SAID IT WAS GOOD HE SAID, MY SON MADE THAT, LIKE IT WAS THE FIRST TIME HE'D SAID IT OUT LOUD. I THINK IT WAS THE FORTIETH.

I READ THAT RIGHT NOW IT'S THE SIZE OF A RASPBERRY. I DON'T BELIEVE IT. NOTHING OF YOURS HAS EVER BEEN THAT SMALL.

W.

P.S. THE HARD HAT WAS HECTOR'S GRANDSON'S. HE WANTS IT BACK. GERALD SAYS NO.

. . .

I laughed.

I don't mean I smiled. I mean I sat on an iron chair on a terrace in Alfama in my coat with three pages of yellow legal paper in my lap and laughed out loud, the big unlovely honk, the one Ryan used to tell me to do something about at restaurants. At the broccoli. At NOT IN THIS APARTMENT. At DANNY CRIED AT THE INVOICE. The pigeons on the next roof took off all at once. A woman hanging laundry two buildings over leaned out of her window to see who was being murdered.

Then I got to the raspberry and I stopped laughing and sat there with my hand over my mouth for a long time.

When Theo came back up the stairs with the bread we already had, I was still sitting there. He put the bread on the counter. He didn't come out. Through the terrace door I watched him make two cups of tea, very slowly, and then stand in the kitchen with both of them in his hands, looking at the floor.

. . .

I wrote back that night.

I wrote it at the desk under the window, by hand, on a pad of squared paper I'd bought at a stationer's in the Baixa because I'd forgotten that Europeans think lined paper is for children. It took me three hours. It's two pages. It took me longer than most chapters I've been paid for.

Wes,

Your letters came to the orchestra. Sofia brought them to me in the middle of rehearsal waving them over her head like a winning lottery ticket, and now eighty Portuguese musicians think I'm having an affair with a man who writes exclusively in capitals. Which, in a sense.

Tell Hector I'll answer to whatever name Gerald does.

Tell Priya you're eating the broccoli. I won't tell her you told me not to.

Here's Lisbon, since you sent me New York. It's all stairs. I don't mean that as a metaphor, it's just stairs. There's a tram that tried to kill me and I threw up in a cone of chestnuts on it, in front of a row of Swedish people, and an old woman took the cone away and put it in her shopping bag like that was a normal thing to do. Theo's landlady sells tins of fish and knows everything about everyone, she knew about the baby before I'd said hello, she's Hector with a grill. The orchestra rehearses in a tobacco warehouse on the river. You'd love it. It's eighteen-eighty-something and it's got iron windows the length of a truck and half of them are painted shut, and every time I walk in I think, he'd have those open by lunch.

Theo is happy here. Really happy. I've never seen it before. I didn't know his face could do that.

I'm okay. I'm tired all the time and everything smells like fish, even things that are not fish, like clouds.

It's not a raspberry yet. It's a blueberry. I looked it up. I think you're right, though.

C.

And then, because I'd been carrying it in my notebook for three weeks, I took out the napkin from the plane. The little square one with the blue logo, damp once and dry now, soft as a dollar bill. Wes. Tell me one true thing. Here's mine.

And under that, finally, I wrote it.

The doctor here can tell. She measured it. She wrote it on a card and sealed it in an envelope and gave it to me. I didn't look. I'm not going to.

I folded the napkin inside the letter. I mailed it the next morning from the post office on the Rua da Graça, in a blue airmail envelope with a red and blue border, to a garage on Van Brunt Street, and I stood at the counter after the clerk had taken it, looking at the slot, like a woman watching a train pull out with somebody on it.

. . .

The Brahms was on the Tuesday.

I sat in the fourth row of the tobacco warehouse, which on concert nights is transformed: four hundred seats on risers, candles in iron lanterns along the brick, the river black outside the long windows and a ferry going by, lit up, at the exact moment the lights went down, as if the maestro had arranged it. Sofia sat next to me in a dress the color of a fire engine and held my hand through the entire first movement,

for no reason, like we'd known each other in another life.

The Russian was late. Of course he was. Eleven minutes. When he finally walked out onstage, tall and pale and visibly unrepentant, Sofia said something under her breath in Portuguese that made the man on my other side choke.

And then the third movement came, and the lights on the stage went down to almost nothing, one lamp over the cellos, and Theo played the solo.

I'd heard it in rehearsal. I'd cried in rehearsal. It wasn't the same. In rehearsal it had been a man walking into a room where someone he loved was asleep. Tonight it was a man who'd walked into that room and sat down on the edge of the bed, and was going to stay.

The whole warehouse held its breath. Four hundred people. I heard the ferry's horn, far off. Then nothing at all but him.

When it was over, at the very end of the night, the audience stood up. The maestro turned around and, very slowly, with his unused cane, pointed at the cellos. At the front chair. And Theo stood, and the room roared, and he bowed, a small stiff bow, embarrassed, with his glasses slipping, and then he looked out at the fourth row, at me, and put his hand flat on his chest, over his heart, for one second. Then he sat down.

"Ai," Sofia said beside me, weeping openly into a tissue printed with tiny cats. "Ai, Claire. I'm going to die."

. . .

The second envelope came the Saturday after.

Two letters this time. Sofia didn't bring it to rehearsal. She came all the way up to the flat with it, four flights, at a run, on a Saturday, and handed it to me at the door, and then stood there.

"Sofia," Theo said, from the kitchen. "Go home."

"I'm going, I'm going." She didn't move. "Read it here. Please. For me. My life is very boring."

"Sofia."

She went. She went the way she does everything, at a run, talking, and we heard her all the way down to Dona Graça's shop, where she stopped to tell Dona Graça something that made Dona Graça shout with laughter in the lane.

I took it out to the terrace. Theo stayed in the kitchen. I heard him start to cook something, onions in oil, and then stop, and then start again.

JAN 15

BENNETT,

WENT TO MA'S FOR THE WEEKEND. CAST COMES OFF IN THREE WEEKS AND SHE'S ALREADY BOOKED THE PHYSICAL THERAPIST. A GUY NAMED DOUG. SHE HAS NEVER MET DOUG. SHE HAS ALREADY DECIDED SHE HATES DOUG. SHE SAYS HE SOUNDED ON THE PHONE LIKE A MAN WHO OWNS A KAYAK.

I FIXED THE STORM DOOR AND THE THIRD STAIR AND THE THING IN THE UPSTAIRS TOILET THAT'S BEEN MAKING A NOISE SINCE THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION. SHE WATCHED ME DO ALL OF IT FROM A KITCHEN CHAIR WITH A MANHATTAN IN HER GOOD HAND AND TOLD ME I WAS DOING IT WRONG. SHE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE TOILET.

I DIDN'T TELL HER. THAT'S YOURS TO TELL. BUT SHE LOOKED AT ME OVER THE GLASS FOR A LONG TIME ON

SUNDAY AND SAID, YOU LOOK LIKE YOUR FATHER DID IN 1991. I SAID WHAT HAPPENED IN 1991. SHE SAID, NEVER YOU MIND.

I WAS BORN IN 1992, BENNETT.

SHE KNOWS SOMETHING. SHE ALWAYS KNOWS SOMETHING.

MA SAYS YOU OWE HER A SCRABBLE GAME. SHE SAYS SHE'S BEEN PRACTICING WITH HER LEFT HAND AND SHE'S BETTER THAN EVER, WHICH MEANS SHE'S FOUND NEW WAYS TO CHEAT.

W.

. . .

JAN 19

BENNETT,

BAD NEWS FROM PERRY STREET. MRS. ABERNATHY DIED. I DIDN'T KNOW WHO SHE WAS EITHER. TURNS OUT SHE OWNS THE BUILDING. OWNED. NINETY-FOUR. SHE LIVED IN RIVERDALE AND HADN'T BEEN TO 41 PERRY SINCE THE NINETIES. HECTOR MET HER ONCE, IN 1996. HE SAYS SHE GAVE HIM A FRUITCAKE AND TOLD HIM NEVER TO PAINT THE STAIRWELL GREEN. HE NEVER HAS.

HE'S PRETTY SHOOK UP. NOT ABOUT HER. ABOUT AFTER. HER KIDS ARE SELLING. HE DOESN'T KNOW TO WHO. HE SAYS WHEN AN OLD LADY WHO OWNS A BUILDING DIES IN THIS CITY, THE VULTURES ARE AT THE DOOR BEFORE THE FLOWERS ARE. HALF THE

BUILDING IS RENT STABILIZED. MRS. KAPLAN'S BEEN IN 3A SINCE 1971.

I WENT UP ON THE ROOF WITH HIM AFTER. THE CORNICE IS ORIGINAL. 1891. SO ARE MOST OF THE WINDOWS ON THE STREET SIDE, UNDER ABOUT FORTY COATS OF PAINT. NOBODY'S TOUCHED THEM IN A HUNDRED YEARS. THEY'RE GOOD WINDOWS, BENNETT. THEY'RE REALLY GOOD WINDOWS.

I DON'T KNOW WHY I'M TELLING YOU THAT.

YES I DO. I'M THINKING ABOUT SOMETHING. I'LL TELL YOU WHEN I KNOW IF IT'S DUMB.

GERALD IS FINE. GERALD DOESN'T KNOW. DON'T TELL HIM.

W.

I was laughing again before I got to the end of the first one. At Doug. At the kayak. At SHE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE TOILET. At I WAS BORN IN 1992, BENNETT, which I had to read three times, and then put the letter down on the stone wall and laugh into both hands with my shoulders shaking, and the woman with the laundry two buildings over didn't even look out this time. She'd gotten used to me.

Then Mrs. Abernathy, and I stopped. And then the windows. THEY'RE REALLY GOOD WINDOWS. And I sat there with a feeling I couldn't name, a feeling like hearing someone downstairs in a house you thought was empty, starting to work.

When I looked up, Theo was in the terrace doorway.

He had a wooden spoon in one hand and a dish towel over his shoulder. I don't know how long he'd been standing there. Long enough. He wasn't smiling and he wasn't not smiling. He was just looking at me, with his head a little to one side, the way he looks at a passage of music he's played a hundred times when he hears something in it for the first time.

"Sorry," I said. "Was I loud? I was loud. The laundry lady's used to me now, it's—"

"You laugh when you read his letters," Theo said.

I didn't say anything.

"Out loud. With your whole body. You put your hand over your mouth like a little girl in church." He looked down at the wooden spoon, as if it had asked him something. "The way I laughed on that hotel floor."

The onions were burning. I could smell them. He didn't move.

"He's funny," I said. "He's always been funny. You know he's funny."

"I know." His voice was gentle. "I grew up with it. He used to make me laugh so hard at the dinner table that milk came out of my nose, and then Dad would send him to his room, and he'd go, every time, without arguing, so I wouldn't have to." He turned the spoon over. "I'd forgotten that. I'd forgotten a lot of things."

Then he went back inside, and took the onions off the burner, and opened the window, and fanned the smoke out with the dish towel, and started again with new ones.

He didn't say anything else about it. Not at dinner, not after. He was perfectly kind, and perfectly himself, and he asked about the windows, and I told him, and he said, "That sounds like Wes. He'll be on that roof by March," and he laughed, and it was a real laugh.

That night, at two, he didn't play.

. . .

It was the Monday after when he told me. The first of February. I came out of the bathroom at seven in the morning, green, and he was sitting at the desk under the window in his coat, which was strange, because he never sits at my desk, he says it's mine now. He had his phone in his hand, face down on his knee. He'd been up a long time. I could tell from the tea, which was cold, and the light, which was still mostly dark, and his face.

"Claire," he said. "Sit down a second."

I sat on the edge of the bed with the door open between us.

He looked at me across the flat. The careful, serious face, the boy holding up a shell. He didn't look sad. That's the thing I keep coming back to, when I write this down. He didn't look sad at all. He looked like a man who had finally thought of one thing he wanted, on a wall at the top of a city, and was about to say it out loud.

"I've asked June to come to Lisbon," Theo said. "I need to finish something."

CHAPTER SEVEN

June in Lisbon

BY THE END OF my ninth week I had thrown up in seven of Lisbon's historic neighborhoods, and I'd started keeping a list, because I'm a writer, and if something is going to keep happening to me I'd at least like the data.

Tram 28, which you know about. A planter outside a bank in Baixa, which held a small, brave olive tree I will be apologizing to for the rest of my life. The steps behind a church in Graça, during a christening, at a distance I'd describe as respectful. A doorway in Mouraria where a woman was grilling something on an iron brazier at ten in the morning. Not sardines. Dona Graça has explained to me with great firmness that it is not sardine season, and whatever is on the grills of Alfama in winter, on every corner, at every hour, is not a sardine, and she takes no responsibility for it. And the Time Out Market, which I don't want to talk about.

The seventh was the arrivals hall at the airport, at eleven forty on a Friday in February, about four minutes before June Carver came through the sliding doors.

"It's the coffee," I told Theo, coming back with my face washed and my dignity left somewhere near the hand dryers. "Every café in

this country makes it like they're trying to wake the dead."

"That's the national project." He handed me a bottle of water he'd already opened. "Better?"

"Seven out of ten."

He'd ironed two shirts that morning and worn both, in sequence, and settled on the white one, buttoned to the top, under his good gray sweater. Now he stood at the rail with his hands in his pockets and his face doing a very convincing impression of a man waiting for a package.

I'd offered to make a sign. CARVER, in marker, like a driver. He'd looked at me with real horror. I'd made it anyway, on the back of a paper bag from the pastelaria by the taxi rank, and I was holding it under my arm in case of emergencies.

"I'd like it on the record that I'm not nervous," he said.

"Your left hand's been doing the C minor scale on your thigh for ten minutes."

He looked down at it. It stopped.

"That's not nerves," he said. "That's practice."

. . .

She came through the doors in the red coat.

A suitcase that had clearly been through a war, and a Duane Reade bag swinging heavy from one hand, the most New York object I'd seen in five weeks.

She found him first. I saw it happen. The same look I'd seen on the pier in November, the one with ten months in it, except it had thirteen months in it now, and she put it away faster, the way you'd fold a letter when someone walks into the room.

Then she found me, and smiled, and came straight over.

There followed what I can only describe as a choreography problem. Theo stepped forward with his hand out, to shake. June stepped forward with her arms out, to hug. Both saw the other's plan and changed their own, and for one long second the principal cellist of the Orquestra do Tejo stood in the arrivals hall patting his former fiancée on the shoulder like a man consoling a stranger at a bus stop.

"Hi," June said, into his sweater.

"Hello," said Theo, patting.

I held up my paper bag. CARVER.

June looked at it and started laughing, and so did I, and she let go of whatever she'd been holding onto and hugged me instead, hard, the Duane Reade bag banging against my back.

"That's for you," she said into my hair. "I'm a nurse. I couldn't come empty-handed. And I couldn't bring him anything."

Three sleeves of saltines. Two boxes of ginger chews. A pair of those wristbands with the plastic button that presses on a nerve and is either medicine or witchcraft depending on who you ask. Prenatal gummies shaped like small, sad bears. And at the bottom, a jar of Skippy.

"I didn't know if they had it here," June said.

"They don't," said Theo. "Not properly. I've looked."

"I know you've looked." She didn't look at him when she said it. "That's why I brought two."

There was a second jar under the first. I stood in arrivals holding a pharmacy and two jars of peanut butter and tried very hard not to cry, and failed, and blamed the coffee.

. . .

In the taxi Theo sat in front and talked to the driver about football in a Portuguese so polite it apologized for itself. June sat in the back with me, her face nearly against the glass.

The city came up to meet us all at once, the way it does: white and ochre and pink, roofs the color of flowerpots stacked on seven hills, laundry strung between windows like flags for a country made of bedsheets. Then the Tagus, so wide it barely looked like a river, the pale unbothered blue of a vein on the inside of a wrist.

"So this is where you went," June said, very quietly, to the window.

Theo heard. I saw him hear it in the back of his neck.

June turned and looked at me the way she had in the stairwell at Mount Sinai, and I watched the nurse come up behind her eyes and take my pulse.

"Nine weeks?"

"Nine and five days. I feel like a haunted house. Things move in me at night and I'm scared of my own kitchen."

"Ten, eleven, twelve are the worst. Then it mostly lets go." She patted my hand, briefly, a nurse's pat. "He told me on the phone, in January. He said, 'Claire's pregnant,' and then, 'I don't know,' and then he didn't say anything for about a minute and a half, and I just listened to the trams."

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'Okay.'" June smiled at the window. "I learned it from his brother."

. . .

Theo had arranged for her to stay downstairs, with Dona Graça, in the whitewashed spare room of her apartment, one floor below ours,

with a crucifix and a window full of geraniums. It had belonged to a nephew who'd gone to work in Luxembourg and was, in Dona Graça's opinion, never coming back, because Luxembourg had ruined him. Theo had negotiated for it over a month of buying tinned fish he didn't eat, and then discovered that Dona Graça had decided June was his sister.

"I told her she was a friend," he said on the stairs, carrying the war-torn suitcase.

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'Ah, yes, a friend,' in a way I didn't care for, and crossed herself."

June and Dona Graça did not share one word of any language. They got along immediately. Within twenty minutes June had established she was an enfermeira by miming a thermometer, a needle and, inexplicably, a baby being burped. Within thirty, Dona Graça had rolled up her sleeve to show June a lump on her forearm she'd apparently been ignoring since the Carnation Revolution, and June turned the old woman's arm in the light, calm and kind, and said, "It's a cyst, it's fine, but have someone look at it," and Dona Graça, who understood none of this, nodded with enormous relief, went down to the shop, and came back with a tin of sardines in a yellow paper wrapper, which she pressed into June's hands like a medal.

"Claire," June said, holding it in both hands. "What do I do with the fish."

"You say obrigada."

"Obrigada," June told her, like she was accepting a bouquet.

. . .

Theo made caldo verde for dinner, kale cut into threads as fine as grass clippings, a coin of chouriço floating on each bowl like a small red sun, and it was the first night that week I didn't have to leave the table. June ate two bowls. I ate one and a sleeve of her saltines. Theo ate nothing and watched us both, which is his version of eating.

Then he brought out the pastéis.

Attempt nineteen. They were, to be fair, his best yet. They were round. On top they were blistered in exactly two places, which was two more than usual, and in the middle of each the custard had sunk very gently, like a mattress somebody had sat on.

June looked at the plate for a long time.

"You still can't make these," she said.

"I'm aware."

"You set off the smoke alarm on Perry Street. Twice. Mrs. Kaplan called the fire department."

"She called them once," Theo said, with dignity. "The second time they just came."

"Theo. Why do you keep doing this to yourself?"

He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle.

"There's a place in Belém that's made them since 1837. The recipe came from the monks next door. Three people alive know it, and they're not allowed on the same plane." He looked at the tart in her hand. "I've been forty times. The women at the counter call me o triste. The sad one. They give me an extra one, out of pity." He set his glasses down. "I don't want to make them, really. I just want to know I could."

There was a small silence of the kind that happens when someone says something truer than he meant to, and everyone becomes very interested in their spoons.

"Then we'll go get real ones," June said. "Me and Claire. Tomorrow, while you're at rehearsal."

"We'll avenge you," I said.

Theo looked from her to me and back, and went a little pale.

"Both of you," he said. "Together. That's a lot of women who know things about me on one tram."

. . .

We took the 15 along the river in the morning. I'd thrown up early and efficiently before anyone was awake, so I was technically on the clock.

The line at Pastéis de Belém was already down the block at ten. Korean pensioners in matching red visors. A French toddler having a breakdown about a pigeon.

"Forty times," June said. "Alone?"

"I think so. I didn't ask."

She nodded. "He did that at Lincoln Center, when he was on the sub list. If he didn't get called, he'd go stand at the back of the hall and listen to someone else play his part. I asked him why once. He said, 'I want to hear what it sounds like when it's not me.'"

Inside was blue-and-white tile to the ceiling and the smell of burnt sugar and cinnamon and hot butter so strong I grabbed her sleeve and braced, and then, astonishingly, nothing happened. My stomach looked at the smell, considered it, and went back to sleep.

"June," I said. "I'm hungry. I actually want one."

She looked at me with pure professional joy. "Then we're getting twelve."

The woman at the counter boxed them in the blue cardboard boxes, then looked at me and frowned, the way you frown at a face in

the wrong place.

"You are the friend of o triste," she said. "The tall one. With the glasses."

"I am."

She leaned over the counter. "He is still sad?"

June stood beside me with her hands in the pockets of the red coat, very still.

"Less," I said. "Less sad."

The woman nodded with deep satisfaction, as if she'd arranged it herself, and put a thirteenth one in the box.

. . .

We ate them on a bench across from the monastery, warm and still too hot in the middle, shaking cinnamon and powdered sugar over them from little paper sachets until our coats looked like we'd been caught in a very small snowstorm.

The pastry shattered when you bit it into flakes that stuck to your lip, and the custard was barely set and tasted of lemon and something burnt and gold, and I ate three and kept all three, and could have wept in the street with gratitude to a monk who'd been dead two hundred years.

"Avenged," June said, with her mouth full.

Down by the water the monument to the explorers leaned out over the river, thirty-odd stone men on the prow of a stone ship, straining toward the Atlantic like a queue for a ferry that left in 1500.

June wiped sugar off her fingers one at a time. She'd chewed the nail on her thumb down to nothing.

"Can I say something?" she said. "Once. Out loud. So it isn't a thing in the room."

"Okay."

"I never stopped." She folded the napkin into a small square. "Loving him. Not on the bench in November, not at Christmas, not on the plane, not last night watching him cut kale. I'm not here to do anything about it. He asked me to come and I came because he asked." She looked at the river. "He's never asked me for anything, Claire. Not once in four years. He asks for directions. He asks if you'd like more tea. He doesn't ask for people."

A sachet of cinnamon blew off the bench and skittered away down the path, and neither of us went after it.

I'd like to tell you what I felt was jealousy, clean and simple, because I could have written that down and been done. There was some in it, the way there's salt in caramel. But mostly what I felt, on that bench with my coat full of sugar, was something I didn't have a name for yet, something that looked suspiciously like relief wearing jealousy's coat.

"You could have lied to me," I said. "Just come and been polite."

"I did that for a year." June almost smiled. "I'm retired."

"Why did he ask you? Did he say?"

"He said he needed to finish something." She turned the napkin over. "I think he means me. I think he wants to say goodbye properly, in the city he ran to, with you there, so it's real." She swallowed. "Which is fair. It's very Theo. He likes to close a piece on the right note."

I believed it. That was the funny thing, later. Two women who notice things for a living, the nurse and the ghostwriter, sat on that bench and believed it completely, and neither of us noticed a thing.

"Are you happy here?" June asked. "Honestly."

Across the road a bell started up in the monastery tower, slow and deep.

"I'm hungry," I said. "For the first time in a week. Let's get one more."

She let me get away with it. That was the most June thing she did all day.

. . .

That night, at the door of the flat, June took a bundle out of her canvas bag and held it out to him.

Envelopes, thirty or more, held with a thick blue post-office rubber band. The top one said T. on the front in the round, hurried hand I'd have known anywhere. The first letter that ever came under my door.

"Hector found them in the drawer under the kettle when he cleaned out the fridge," June said. "He gave them to me at the bodega. He said, 'Mija, these have your handwriting.'" She held them out a little farther. "They're not mine. I wrote them to you. Some went into a stove in October; Wes was keeping a promise. These are the ones that are left. You don't have to read them. I just didn't want them in a drawer."

Theo looked at the bundle for a long time. Then he took it, carefully, with both hands, the way he'd carried Gerald down four flights.

"Good night, June," he said.

We heard her go down, and Dona Graça's door, and Dona Graça saying something delighted, and a cat.

He put the letters on the shelf by the door, under his keys, and went to brush his teeth.

. . .

I woke at two because nothing woke me.

I lay in the slanting attic bedroom with my socks on and the window cracked and the river making its enormous quiet below, and I waited for the cello the way I'd waited for it every night for three months in two countries. In Lisbon it wasn't grief anymore. Here at two in the morning he played things that ran and laughed and turned corners, things that brought Dona Graça's cats up the stairs to sit outside our door.

Nothing.

His side of the bed was cool. The cello was asleep in its corner.

The terrace doors were open a hand's width, letting in the clean wet cold of a river city in February. Out there the one bare bulb he used for reading music swung a little on its cord.

He was sitting on the low wall with his back to the brick, in his coat, knees up.

The blue rubber band was looped around his wrist. The letters were in two piles on the tiles beside him: read, and not yet. He had one open, holding it up to the bulb, and his lips were moving very slightly, the way they did when he read a score, as if he could hear it.

I'd never seen him like that and I knew it anyway. I'd heard about it on a frozen beach on Christmas morning. A hotel floor in this same city, six weeks of mail in his lap, a man laughing out loud alone at four in the morning until the neighbor banged on the wall.

He wasn't laughing now.

He folded the letter along its old creases and set it on the read pile, and picked up the next, and looked at the T. on the front for a long time before he opened it. Beyond him the river was black, and a ferry

was going across, slow, lit up like a room nobody was in.

I stood behind the glass with my hand on the cold handle and didn't go out.

He was on a hotel floor again, reading letters meant for someone who wasn't there. Except this time she was. She was asleep one floor down under Dona Graça's crucifix, with a cat on her feet and a tin of sardines on her nightstand, while he read every word she'd ever written to an empty room, and didn't play a note.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Thing About Letters

HE CAME TO BED at ten past five, in his clothes, and lay down on top of the covers like a man who'd walked a long way and wasn't sure he'd be staying.

I kept my eyes shut. I breathed the way people breathe in movies when they're pretending to be asleep, which in real life fools nobody.

"I know you're awake," Theo said to the ceiling. "You breathe like a person writing."

"What does a person writing breathe like?"

"Like she's about to cross something out." He was quiet a moment. "Will you walk with me later? When it's light. There's somewhere I want to say something, and I'd like it to be outside, so neither of us can leave the room."

I opened my eyes. He was lying on his back with his glasses on and his hands folded on his chest, with the scrubbed look of someone who'd been crying a long time and had finished.

"Okay," I said.

"Thank you." He took his glasses off and set them on the windowsill. Then he turned his head on the pillow and looked at me, blurred, a very long look, as if he were memorizing something in bad

light. "Go back to sleep, Claire. It's not a bad thing. I promise. It's just a big one."

. . .

June had gone to Mass.

This had not been her idea. Dona Graça had knocked at seven forty in a black coat and a hat with a pin through it, and June, raised Catholic in Scranton and not inside a church since 2016, had been marched down the hill to the cathedral with her arm locked in an old woman's elbow, like a prisoner of war.

"She's going to come back engaged to the nephew in Luxembourg," I said.

"He's not coming back," Theo said. "Luxembourg ruined him." He handed me tea. Black, with lemon, which was the only thing my body would accept before nine. "Can you do the hill? If the grills start, we'll take the long way."

The not-sardines started at the first corner.

They always do. Alfama on a Sunday morning is a stone staircase pretending to be a neighborhood, the cobbles worn white and slick as soap, a little grill smoking on every third step. Theo took my hand without discussing it, and we went down the long way, the way he knew from a year of walking it alone: under laundry, past a canary on a windowsill singing as if it were paid by the note, past an old man shaving at an open window who raised his razor to us like a toast.

He didn't talk. He walked the way he played, as if he'd worked out the tempo in advance.

At the bottom the city opened up into the big yellow square by the river, empty on a Sunday morning except for gulls and a man hosing down the arcades, and across it, at the water's edge, two marble

columns standing in the Tagus.

"Cais das Colunas," Theo said. "The steps of the columns. For three hundred years this was the front door. Kings came in here. Anyone who mattered got off a boat and walked up these steps into the city." He let go of my hand and walked to the edge, where the marble went down into the river, the lower steps green with weed, disappearing. "Nobody knows how far down they go. I asked once. A man at the maritime museum said, 'Far enough.'"

He sat down on the top step. I sat beside him.

The light was coming up behind us and sliding out across the water, silver and then pale gold, and the two columns stood in it with their feet wet, like two people who'd waded in to talk and forgotten to come out.

"I wrote it down," Theo said. "What I want to say. I wrote it at three this morning on the back of one of June's envelopes. And then I left it on the kitchen table on purpose, so I can't hide behind it." He pushed his glasses up. "So you'll have to forgive the structure. I may repeat the theme. I may modulate at the wrong time."

"I'll allow it."

"Thank you." He looked at the water. "The thing about letters."

He stopped. Started again.

. . .

"The thing about letters," he said, "is that everybody thinks a letter is about the person it's addressed to. Dear Theo. Dear Subletter. Dear Claire. As if the name at the top is the subject." He shook his head slowly. "It never is. A letter is a picture of the person holding the pen. You don't learn anything about yourself from a letter. You learn what somebody else looks like when they're paying attention to you."

"I read all of June's last night," he said. "Thirty-four. The ones the stove didn't get. And every one of them was about me. Not about her guilt, not about the bench, not about what she'd done. Me. How I hum. How I apologize to the pan. How I play quieter and quieter for Mrs. Kaplan until it's like I'm only thinking the music." His voice was perfectly level. "In March she wrote, 'I hope you're playing for someone who claps in the wrong places.' And I laughed, out loud, on the terrace at three in the morning, because you clap in the wrong places, Claire. Between movements. Every single time. You did it at Carnegie. A man in the row in front of you turned around. I saw it from the stage."

"He was rude."

"He was right. That's not the point." He almost smiled. "The point is that I read thirty-four letters about a man I didn't recognize. He sounded lovely. He sounded like someone I'd want to know. And somewhere around the twentieth I realized that I wasn't reading about me at all. I was reading about her. That's what it looks like, to be loved by somebody paying that much attention. You think it's your portrait. It's theirs."

"And then I thought about the hotel floor," Theo said.

He took his glasses off and held them in his lap.

"I've been telling myself a story about that night for four months. I tell it beautifully." He turned the glasses over. "And last night, after June's, I went back through yours. In my head. I don't need the pages. They're in the cello case, tied up in a shoelace, and I know them better than the Bach."

He looked at me.

"I read every letter you wrote on that hotel floor. Do you know who I fell in love with?"

I shook my head. I couldn't do anything else.

"A woman writing very carefully about the man who swore at my radiator."

The river moved against the bottom steps, very softly, the sound of someone turning over in bed.

"I fell in love with a woman in love with my brother," Theo said. "That's who's in those letters. That's who made me laugh. The man who eats cereal out of the box at two in the morning. The man who said 'Morning, Gerald' to a fig. You wrote about him like you were trying not to, and you couldn't help it, it was in every line. I laughed so hard the man in the next room banged on the wall, Claire, at a sentence about my brother falling asleep sitting up on my couch with his boots on. I thought I was laughing at the joke." He shook his head. "I was laughing because you were so happy and you didn't know it yet. It was all over the page. I could see it from Lisbon."

"Theo."

"I think I've known since the boathouse." He said it gently, as if handing me something breakable. "Thanksgiving. I was at the window. I watched you come up from the boathouse at two in the morning, across the yard in the frost, and you weren't sad. You thought you were. You were walking like someone who'd been lit from the inside and was trying to keep the light off the neighbors." He put his glasses back on. "And I turned off the lamp. And I decided not to know. I'm very good at deciding not to know things. I come from a long line."

. . .

I was crying by then. Not delicately. The kind of crying where your face does what it wants and you just sit there and let it.

"I love you," I said. "Theo. I need you to hear that. I'm not lying. I didn't lie to you once, not here, not in that bed."

"I know." He took my hand. "I know you didn't. That's the whole thing. That's why this is possible instead of just sad. You love me. I love you. It's true and it counts and I'll be grateful for it for the rest of my life." He held my hand in both of his, the way he'd held it on the porch in Little Compton, the morning after he walked into the snow. "It's love, Claire. It's just not that one."

"You don't know that."

"You laugh when you read his letters."

I opened my mouth. He waited, very patiently, for me to find something to say that wasn't true, and I couldn't.

"You laugh at mine," he said. "You're very kind about it. You laugh in all the right places, like a good audience. But you read his on the terrace with your socks on the railing and you laugh like you've been surprised in the street by someone you love. Every time. Out loud. He sent you one photograph of Gerald in a hard hat and you had to sit down." He smiled, and it was the saddest and most fond thing I've ever seen on a face. "I know that laugh. I did it on a hotel floor. I'd recognize it anywhere."

A ferry was coming in from the far bank now, low and white, its wake fanning out behind it in a long silver V.

"I need you to understand something," Theo said, and his voice changed, got firmer, the voice of a principal giving the section an entrance. "This is not a sacrifice. I'm not being noble. I've been on the other end of someone being noble for me and I'll never do it to another human being as long as I live. Nobody asked me to do this. Nobody's managing me. June doesn't know. Wes doesn't know. Ma doesn't know, though she'll claim she did." He took a breath. "I'm

choosing. For myself. Out loud. It's the first thing I've ever wanted that wasn't the polite thing, and I brought you to the steps where the kings came in so that it would count."

"What do you want?"

He looked at the water a long time.

"I want to be loved the way June writes," he said. "And I want to love somebody the way you write about him. And I don't want to be anybody's good one anymore. I want to be somebody's actual one. I don't know if that's her. I read thirty-four letters last night from a woman who broke her own heart so I'd come to this city, and I don't know what that is yet. I'd like to find out. Slowly. Without anybody deciding it for me. Not her. Not you. Not me, in advance, out of fear."

I nodded. I couldn't stop nodding.

"And the baby," Theo said.

I stopped.

"I've thought about this one longest," he said, "so I'll say it best. Whoever's on that card. Mine, or his. I don't want to know. I decided that, too, last night, with the letters. If she's mine I'll be the most present father who ever lived on another continent. I'll be on every plane. If she's his, I'll be the most ridiculous uncle in the history of uncles. I'll play her to sleep over the phone at two in the morning, and when she's fifteen she'll come here for a summer to get away from all of you and I'll let her drink one glass of vinho verde and tell no one." He laughed, a little wet. "Either way she's a Marsh. Either way I'm hers. That part doesn't need you to live in Lisbon."

"You keep saying she."

"I have a feeling." He pushed his glasses up. "I'm usually wrong about feelings. Let me have this one."

. . .

The square behind us was gold now, all the way across, and church bells were starting up in three neighborhoods in three different keys, none of them willing to give way.

"I promised you," Theo said. "In number forty-four. That I'd ask you in Lisbon."

My heart did something terrible.

"I'm a man who keeps his letters," he said. "I'd planned it, you know. The terrace. The Brahms. A very good bottle of something I'd have had to drink by myself. I practiced it on Dona Graça's cats. One of them said yes. The gray one. I think he wanted the sardine." He smiled at the water. "So I'm going to ask you something in Lisbon. Just not that."

"Okay."

"When you read his letters," Theo said. "Where are you?"

I looked at him. He looked back, and he didn't help me. He didn't fill it in. That was the most loving part. He'd spent his life having his sentences finished for him, and he sat on that cold step and let mine stay open as long as it needed to.

"On the fire escape," I said finally. My voice came out of me in pieces. "On Perry Street. In his spot, by the ladder. With my socks on the rail."

He nodded slowly, like a man hearing the note he'd tuned to.

"Yes," he said. "That's what I thought."

Then he put his arm around me, and I put my face in the shoulder of his coat, and the two of us sat on the steps where the kings came in and cried like children until the ferry docked, and a man in a fluorescent vest came down to tie it off and looked at us and decided,

with great Portuguese tact, to tie it off somewhere else.

. . .

We walked back up the hill the short way, through the not-sardines. I didn't throw up. I think my body was too busy.

June came in at noon smelling of incense. "She made me light four candles. I think one was for the nephew." She looked at our faces and stopped. She didn't ask. She put the kettle on and went back downstairs, and I loved her for it.

Theo slept for three hours. I sat at the desk under the window with a document called THE SUBLET open and didn't type a word. I thought about the ghostwriter's first rule, which is that the subject always knows the ending before you do. Your whole job is to sit very still while they find the nerve to say it. I'd done that for strangers for six years. That morning, on a cold step, a man had done it for me.

. . .

He played at dusk.

Not at two. At dusk, on the terrace, the sky over the river going lilac and then the deep, astonished blue Lisbon does in February, the lights coming on below us one window at a time.

He started with the Sarabande.

The C minor. The first thing I ever heard him play, through a bedroom door on Perry Street, with my back against the wood and my face wet. He played it now on a terrace over the Tagus, and it wasn't grief anymore. He played it like a man thanking a house, room by room, before he hands back the keys.

He held the last note until it was barely there. Then, without lifting the bow all the way off the string, he started something else.

Nobody had ever heard it. I knew that the way you know a face is new. It began low and went down, step by step, like someone walking downhill toward water in the early morning, unafraid, each note set down carefully on a stone worn smooth by other feet. Then it turned. There was a little phrase in it that kept trying to go up and getting called back, patiently, the way you'd call back a dog who's run ahead, and every time it came back it was a little warmer. It didn't sound like me. It didn't sound like the woman in socks in "Subletter." It sounded like someone being listened to by someone who never stopped.

I looked down over the terrace wall.

One floor below, in the window full of geraniums, a woman in a green sweater was standing with both hands flat on the sill, looking up. She didn't see me. She wasn't looking at anything but the sound.

He stopped in the middle of a phrase. Not an ending. A breath.

"I don't know what that is yet," he said, to nobody.

"I do," I said.

He looked at me over the scroll. Then he looked down, over the wall, at the geraniums, and the window was empty, and the curtain was still moving.

. . .

He came inside when it was dark.

I was at the kitchen table. He set the cello in its corner, gently, and came and stood across from me, and reached into his trouser pocket and took something out, and put it in my hand, and closed my fingers around it with his.

Brass, warm from him. Long-shanked, old, worn smooth at the bow. The front-door key to 4B. The one he'd carried out of the building in February a year ago, when he left so he wouldn't have to

come back.

"I wrote to Mrs. Abernathy's lawyer this afternoon, while you were pretending to write," he said. "Hector's going to witness it. The lease goes in your name. Whatever the heirs do with the building, the apartment's yours." He kept his hand over mine. "The other key's still in Gerald. It always was."

"Theo."

"I'm staying," he said. "Here. In this city, in this chair, with that window downstairs. It's mine. I picked it." He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle, and his eyes were wet and steady behind them. "Go home, Claire. Go find out."

CHAPTER NINE

Last Night in Lisbon

I BOOKED THE FLIGHT on a Tuesday, at the desk under the window, with Theo making toast behind me and narrating the toast, quietly, to himself, the way he did when he was trying not to watch me do something.

"There's a TAP flight Friday at eleven," I said. "Gets into JFK at two."

"Aisle," Theo said, to the toast. "You'll want the aisle. You'll be up and down."

"I know I'll want the aisle."

"I'm just saying. In case anyone was managing you, which nobody is." He brought me a plate. The toast was perfect, the only thing he could make that came out the same way twice. "Who are you going to tell?"

I'd been thinking about that for nine days.

"Priya. Hector, because he'll be hurt if he hears it from the radiator. Lorraine." I clicked the aisle seat. "Not Wes."

Theo sat on the arm of the couch and ate his toast in very small bites.

"I'm not going to write it to him," I said. "I've written enough. Some things you deliver by hand."

"That's very good," Theo said. "Can I use that? Nobody will know it's yours. They never do, with you."

. . .

Priya, on FaceTime at four in the morning her time, in scrubs, in what appeared to be a supply closet:

"So he dumped you."

"He didn't dump me."

"He gave you a key and a speech on some steps that go into a river. Claire, that's a dump. It's a beautiful dump, I'd like to frame it, but it's a dump." She leaned in until her face filled the screen. "Are you okay? Do the lip thing. Let me see the lip."

"I'm not doing the lip thing."

"You're doing it right now. A little." She sat back against a shelf of gauze. "Does Wes know?"

"I'm telling him in person."

"Marcus made me a lasagna when I told him," she said. "Who hears his girlfriend's best friend is having a transatlantic brother crisis and makes a lasagna? I'm furious about it. It's in my freezer. It has a label. With the date."

. . .

On the Wednesday an airmail envelope came to the orchestra, the last of his I'd get in Lisbon, and Sofia brought it up four flights at a run, holding it over her head like a torch.

BENNETT.

BUILDING STILL FOR SALE. TWO GUYS IN SUITS CAME TUESDAY AND MEASURED THE HALLWAY WITH A LASER. MRS. FELDMAN ASKED IF THEY WERE FROM THE GOVERNMENT AND THEY SAID "SORT OF" WHICH IS THE WORST ANSWER A GUY IN A SUIT CAN GIVE.

ORTIZ IS NOT SLEEPING. GERALD IS FINE. GERALD DOESN'T KNOW.

I'M WORKING ON SOMETHING. DON'T ASK. IT'S A CARPENTER THING. IT INVOLVES A PERMIT I DON'T HAVE.

MA SAYS YOU STILL OWE HER A SCRABBLE GAME. SHE SAYS SHE'LL TAKE IT BY PHONE. DON'T DO IT. SHE CHEATS WORSE BY PHONE.

THAT'S IT. THAT'S THE NEWS.

W.

P.S. IT SNOWED. PERRY STREET LOOKED LIKE A CAKE. I THOUGHT ABOUT YOU ON THE FIRE ESCAPE IN THOSE SOCKS AND HAD TO GO SIT IN THE TRUCK.

I laughed out loud at the line about the government. Then I read the P.S. and didn't laugh at all.

Theo was in the doorway with his coat half off. He'd heard me laugh. He smiled, the private smile of a man hearing a piece he'd recommended played well by someone else, and went and hung up his coat.

. . .

June quit her job on the Thursday, in Dona Graça's shop.

I'd gone down for bread. She was standing between a wall of tinned octopus and a wall of tinned mackerel with her phone to her ear, saying, very calmly, in her parent-in-the-hallway voice, "No, I understand that you can't extend it. I'm not asking you to extend it. I'm telling you I won't be coming back."

A pause. A small, tinny voice from New York.

"Yes," June said. "I'm sure. Yes. Thank you for nine years. Tell Rosa on the night shift she can have my locker. There's a good sweater in it."

Dona Graça, who had understood nothing and everything, put down the tin she was wrapping and began, slowly, to applaud.

"What did I just do," June said to me.

"I think you just moved to Lisbon."

"I didn't mean to." She looked down at the phone and then up at the stairs, toward the top floor, where a cello was working through something low and slow behind a closed door. "I don't know what this is, Claire. He hasn't said anything. We've walked to the river four times and he's told me the names of nineteen kinds of fish."

"He played you something," I said.

"I know." She put her hand flat on her chest, like she was keeping a thing from getting out. "I heard."

"Then you know more than he does."

Dona Graça was still applauding. She pressed a tin of mackerel into June's hand, and crossed herself, for all of us.

. . .

Sofia's dinner was that night, at her cousin's place in Mouraria.

It was "a small farewell, very quiet, nothing." There were thirty people, under a vaulted brick ceiling, at tables pushed into one long

crooked line, with a photograph over the bar of a woman in a black shawl who Sofia said was the greatest fado singer of the twentieth century and also, distantly, her godmother.

Half the orchestra came. The second-desk cellist, a gloomy Hungarian named Bence, who told me Theo was the best section leader he'd ever had "and a terrible man to play cards with, he apologizes when he wins." Two violinists married to each other who argued in three languages. The maestro, for twenty minutes, who kissed my hand and left before the soup with a scarf around his neck like a man in an opera about leaving.

Sofia sat me at her right hand and fed me as if I were being fattened for a holiday.

"Eat. You eat for two. You eat for three, with him." She tipped her head down the table at Theo, who was explaining something to the married violinists with his hands. "Ai, Claire. You know I knew?"

"Knew what?"

"December. The telephone. 'I'm writing a profile, Sofia.'" She put more bread on my plate. "You asked about the fiancée, and the coast, and why he came back, and I heard your voice. I said to myself, this woman will come to Lisbon. And this woman will not stay." She shrugged enormously. "I've worked forty years with musicians. I know when someone is in the wrong key."

"You could have said something."

"To who? I'm the office. I don't tell people their lives. I tell them where to sit." She patted my hand. "Also it was very romantic. I wanted to see how it came out."

. . .

At ten the cousin turned off the lights.

Someone at the bar said "Silêncio," and the whole table stopped talking at once, even the violinists, mid-argument. "In a fado house you don't talk when they sing," Theo whispered. "It's the only rule in Portugal that everyone follows. Including the trams."

A woman stood up by the bar, fifty maybe, in a black dress and shawl, with silver hoops in her ears and a face like a closed door. Behind her a man held the Portuguese guitar, round-bodied, twelve strings, every one of them shivering before he'd properly touched it.

She closed her eyes and put one hand flat on her stomach, the way singers do, the way I'd been doing for weeks for a different reason. Then she sang.

I could order bread in Portuguese, apologize, and ask where the bathroom was with real urgency. I didn't understand a word she sang. It didn't matter. Her voice came out of her low and rough, the voice of a woman who'd been shouting across a street for her whole life and had just found out someone was finally listening. It went up and broke on purpose. It held a note so long the candle flames leaned toward her.

Theo's mouth was near my ear.

"She's waiting for a letter," he whispered. "From a sailor. Every day the boat comes in and there's no letter. She goes down to the water anyway. She says, the sea knows his handwriting better than I do."

I put my hand over my mouth.

"She says," Theo whispered, "if he never writes again, she'll read the waves."

I cried through the whole thing, the silent way, the way you cry in a library, with Sofia's napkin pressed to my face, and Theo didn't put his arm around me. He just put his hand on the table next to mine,

close, not touching, the way you'd leave a light on in a hall.

When she finished, the lights came up, and Bence the Hungarian was crying harder than I was, into the tablecloth, without shame.

. . .

Sofia gave a toast.

She stood on her chair, which her cousin begged her not to do, and said it first in Portuguese, at length, with gestures, and then in English, shorter.

"To Claire," she said. "Who came to Lisbon pretending to be a journalist, and leaves a writer. Who threw up on the twenty-eight, which is a tradition. Who saved our Theo from the Alentejo and then gave him back to us." She raised her glass higher. "Ai, Claire. Go home. We'll keep him. He's very polite. It's exhausting."

Thirty people drank to me. I've had toasts before. I'd never had one where nothing went wrong.

. . .

Sofia walked us home at midnight, carrying leftovers in foil, and Dona Graça was waiting at the bottom of our stairs in her black cardigan and slippers, with the cats arranged around her feet like a court.

She had a tin of sardines in her hand, in a yellow-and-blue wrapper with a drawing of a fishing boat on it. She pressed it into my hands. Then she put one hand flat on my stomach, over my coat, firmly, as if checking that a loaf had risen, and said something long and fierce.

"For the baby," Sofia translated. Dona Graça added something. "Also for you. You are too thin in the face."

"The baby can't eat sardines."

Sofia asked. Dona Graça answered at length, with scorn.

"She says that's not the point," Sofia said. "The baby should have something from here, so one day she opens a cupboard and there's Lisbon in it."

I looked at the tin in my hands. At the little drawing of the boat.

"She," I said.

Sofia asked her. Dona Graça shrugged with her whole body, a shrug that took in the lane and the river and the century, said one word, and went inside with her cats.

"She said obviously," Sofia said, and kissed us both, and went off down the lane with the foil.

. . .

We didn't go up. We walked.

"One more," Theo said at the bottom of the stairs. "Up, not down. I've done down with you." So we went up through the dark lanes, past a bar with one old man in it watching football with the sound off, until the lane opened onto the terrace at Santa Luzia and the whole of Alfama fell away below us to the river.

At midnight in February there was nobody there. The bougainvillea on the pergola was asleep, its branches tied up like a sleeper's arms. On the wall behind us, blue tile panels showed the city before the earthquake, ships in the harbor and tiny people on the quays.

We stood at the railing, side by side, with our hands in our pockets.

"What are we now?" I asked. "I keep trying to write it and I can't find the word."

"I think we're the people who were there," he said. "When the other one found out who they were. I don't think there's a word for that. I think it's just a thing you are to someone, for the rest of your life." He pushed his glasses up. "Like the person who taught you to ride a bike. You don't call them anything. You just know, every time you get on one."

"Did someone teach you to ride a bike?"

"Wes. In the driveway. He let go without telling me and I rode into Ma's hydrangeas." He smiled at the river. "I was furious. I'd been riding by myself for forty feet. He said, 'You weren't going to let me let go, so I didn't ask.'"

I laughed, and it hurt.

"I'm not going to tell you what to say to my brother," Theo said. "I want to be clear about that. I'm not managing anybody, ever again, and I'm especially not managing that. But I'm going to tell you one thing about him, as a matter of fact, the way I'd tell you a tram schedule. And then I'm done."

"Okay."

"He's never asked for anything. Not once. Not in his whole life." He looked at me. "He'll fix your window and drive you to the airport and sleep in his truck outside the hospital. He'll circle Departures for an hour. He'll carry anything you hand him up any number of stairs. But he doesn't ask. He thinks asking is a kind of taking, and he decided a long time ago he'd taken enough." He turned back to the river. "So if you're waiting for him to ask you something, Claire, you'll be sitting on a bench every Sunday for ten months. That's all. That's the tram schedule."

I stood there and let that go all the way down into me, the way you drop a stone down a well and listen for the bottom.

Then he took an envelope out of his coat.

Cream. Thick. My name on the front in that patient, forward-leaning hand, and under it, smaller:

No. 45.

"Open it when she's born," he said. "Or he. When they're born. Not before."

"You'll want to know when I've opened it."

"I'll know. I'll feel it in my left hand." He held it out. "And you'll open it anyway, in an airport bathroom, the second the plane lands."

"I won't."

"You read forty-four on the floor of a stall at JFK."

"That was different."

"It wasn't," Theo said, gently, and put it in my hand. "But this one, I'd like you to wait. It isn't for you. Not really. It's for her. I wrote it to someone I haven't met yet, who'll be the only person in this whole story who wasn't there for any of it. I'd like her to get one letter that wasn't meant for somebody else."

I put it inside my coat, over my heart, in the pocket with the button. Dr. Barata's envelope was already zipped into the flat pocket in the lid of my suitcase, the one for things you can't lose. Two sealed envelopes: one I'd promised never to open and one I'd promised to open at exactly the right time. I'd never in my life been trusted with so much unread mail.

He hugged me then, on the terrace at Santa Luzia, for a long time, with the city going down to the river under us in the dark. He held on the way you hold the last note of something, as long as it'll go. Then he let go first. On purpose. So I wouldn't have to.

"Thank you for telling me the truth," he said. "At the table. In the snow. I'll never be able to pay that back."

"You just gave me an apartment."

"That's not paying it back. That's rent." He wiped his glasses on his scarf, which made them worse. "Come on. You've got a plane, and you'll want the aisle."

. . .

June came up at seven the next morning with coffee for Theo, tea for me, and Dona Graça's hat pin still in her lapel, as if she'd been knighted.

She sat on the end of the bed while I packed and folded the same sweater three times.

"I'm staying," she said. "A while. I don't know what this is. I want you to know I don't know."

"I know you don't."

"He told me what he said to you. On the steps." She put the sweater down. "He told me the whole thing. He said, 'I'm telling you because I'm never again going to let anyone in this family find out something from the wrong person.'" She almost laughed. "Then he made me toast."

"It's very good toast."

"It's the only thing he can make." She looked at me with her whole open face. "Claire. I don't know what to say to you."

"You don't have to say anything."

"I'm going to anyway." She took my hands, the chewed thumbnail against my knuckle. "You wrote me back. Through a door. When I was the worst person I knew. Nobody else did. And then you came here, and you could have hated me for being on that plane, and you took me for pastries." Her eyes filled. "Go home. Don't tell Wes anything from me. Tell him from you."

. . .

Theo took me to the airport and kissed my forehead at security and stepped back.

"Aisle," he said.

"Aisle."

"I'll play at two. You won't hear it. It'll be nine at night in New York. But I'll know."

He didn't look back when he walked away. I'd stopped needing anyone to.

The X-ray woman at security held Dona Graça's tin up to the light for a long time, as if she might find Lisbon in it.

I was at the gate, aisle seat, boarding pass in hand, when my phone rang.

Hector Ortiz. Not the building. Him.

"Mija," he said. No hello. Behind him, his radio, a Spanish station, and something else, wind, as if he was standing at an open door. "You're coming home today? Theo called me. About the lease."

"I'm at the gate. I land at two."

"Good. Good." A pause, much too long for Hector. "Mija, listen to me. They sold the building."

I sat down.

"The new people come Monday," Ortiz said. "Some company. A man called me with a voice like a dentist. They want a walk-through, all the apartments, nine a.m." The wind got louder on his end. "And Wes is on the roof, mija. Three days. In this cold. He won't tell me what he's doing. And he won't come down."

CHAPTER TEN

The Roof

NEW YORK IN FEBRUARY doesn't welcome you back. It just notices you've been gone and decides not to mention it, like a cat.

The cab came over the Kosciuszko at three in the afternoon under a sky the color of a nickel. Everything was salt. The snowbanks along the BQE had gone the gray of old dishwater and were studded with things the city had thrown at them: a hubcap, a single glove, a Christmas tree still wearing its tinsel like a man who doesn't know the party's over. I sat in the back with my hand on my stomach and felt, for the first time in twelve weeks, completely fine.

June had been right. Twelve. It had let go somewhere over the Atlantic, the way a fist lets go in sleep. I'd asked the flight attendant for a second airline roll and she'd looked at me with something like respect.

I was hungry and home and frightened out of my mind, and I'd forgotten a hat.

. . .

Mr. Ortiz was on the stoop of 41 Perry Street when the cab pulled up, in his good cardigan and no coat, with his radio in one hand and the

street door propped open with his foot. He must have been watching from his window since two. He came down the steps before the driver had the trunk open and hugged me so hard my tote bag went sideways.

"Mija." Into my hair. "Mija, mija."

"Hi, Hector."

He held me back by the shoulders. His eyes went down to my coat, to where my hand had gone without asking.

"Theo told me," he said. "On the phone. About the lease. And the other thing." He nodded, slowly, three times, at nothing. "Okay. Okay. We have a baby in the building already, on three, we know how to do this. Mrs. Feldman will knit. You can't stop her. Don't try."

"Where is he?"

He didn't pretend not to know who I meant. He tipped his head back and looked up, past the fire escapes, past the four floors of old brick and the windows with their wobbly glass, to the top of the building, where a blue tarp was snapping in the wind over the cornice like a sail on a ship that had run aground.

"Since Tuesday," Ortiz said. "I said, Wesley, it's nineteen degrees, you'll die up there and I'll have to tell your mother. He said, Hector, tell her I died doing what I love, which was ignoring you." He shook his head. "He says he has a permit. I asked to see the permit, and he showed me his middle finger, and I don't think it was the permit."

"What is he doing?"

"Ask him." Ortiz picked up my suitcase before I could stop him. "I'm a super. I don't understand carpenters. They're like cats. They go up and they don't say why."

. . .

4B was cold and clean and smelled of nothing at all, which was the worst smell it had ever had.

Ortiz had been in to dust. The green couch had a sheet over it. The cello's corner was empty. I'd known it would be. It still stopped me in the doorway like a step that isn't there.

The kettle was on the stove. The dented red kettle, its handle still mended with the screws a man had put in it in October and never let me thank him for.

On the fridge, under the lemon magnet, curling worse than ever at the corner, was half a sheet of yellow legal paper. Square, hard capitals, pressed so deep you could feel them from the back. DON'T TOUCH THE CLOSET. NO TALKING BEFORE COFFEE. DON'T NAME MY PLANTS. And under that, in my own slant, too late, Gerald.

I'd left it up when I went to Lisbon. I hadn't been able to take it down. I put my palm flat on it and stood there until Ortiz cleared his throat behind me in the hall.

"I'll bring him up," he said. "Gerald. In the morning. When you've slept. He's waiting by my window like a dog, mija. He grew. I'm not saying I did anything. I'm saying he grew."

. . .

I didn't sleep. Obviously. I put my bags down and went out onto the fourth-floor landing, where the iron ladder goes up the wall to the roof hatch, and I stood at the bottom of it and looked up at the square of gray sky.

Twelve weeks pregnant. Eight hours of airplane. No hat. A ladder.

Somewhere under me a door opened on two and Mrs. Feldman's voice came up the stairwell, high and thrilled. "Is that her? Hector, is

that her? Does he know?"

"Go back inside, Edie!"

"I'm changing my bet!"

"You can't change your bet every time somebody comes up the stairs!"

"It's my five dollars!"

I went up the ladder.

. . .

The hatch was propped open with a brick. I came up through it into the wind, and the wind took my hair and my breath and threw them both at New Jersey.

The roof of 41 Perry Street is not large. Tar paper gone silver and bubbled. The water tank on its legs. The place by the parapet where forty people had counted down on New Year's Eve while I was one floor below them, on a green couch, with the wrong brother, which was the right one.

He'd turned the front of it into a workshop.

The blue tarp was strung over the parapet on a frame of two-by-fours, a rough tent open at the back, its edges weighted with sandbags. Inside it, two orange propane heaters were roaring at each other like dogs through a fence. Clamp lights on the frame. A folding table covered in tools laid out the way he always laid them out, in order, each one where his hand would go for it. A thermos. A camera on a tripod. And along the base of the parapet, in a neat row on a moving blanket, numbered with blue tape in square black capitals, the brackets of the cornice. Wooden, carved, each one as long as my forearm and curled at the end like a fiddlehead. Eleven of them. A twelfth was in his hands.

He was on his knees at the front edge of the building, his back to me, with a putty knife and a heat gun and that bracket held across his thighs like something he'd pulled out of the water.

He hadn't heard me. The heaters were too loud.

I stood in the wind and watched him work. I'd forgotten how he looked when he thought nobody was looking: completely unguarded, his whole face given over to the thing in front of him. He set down the heat gun. He ran his bare thumb along the curl of the bracket, slow, feeling for something. He said something to it. I couldn't hear what. I'd have bet my advance it was a swear word, and that it was affectionate.

Then he went still.

I don't know what told him. My shadow, maybe, or the change in the wind with the hatch open, or the thing that had always told him, in October, which side of the door I was on. He set the bracket down on the blanket, very carefully, in its place in the row. Then he stood up from the cornice and turned around.

"Bennett," he said.

. . .

The wind went between us. The tarp cracked.

He didn't move toward me. He stood in the mouth of his tent with the heaters roaring behind him and looked at me the way you'd look at a sky doing something you aren't sure you're allowed to name.

Then he took his gloves off.

One finger at a time. The left, then the right. He did it slowly, deliberately, the way you'd unbutton something for the first time, as if whatever came next was going to need his bare hands. He put the gloves in his jacket pocket. He walked across the tar paper to where I

was standing by the hatch, four steps, five, and stopped in front of me.

And he put one hand flat against my cheek.

That was all. A hand. Warm from the heaters, rough as a board, smelling of old paint and linseed oil and the inside of his truck. He held it there, against my face, as if he were waiting for glazing putty to set. His thumb didn't move. Nothing moved. I put my own hand up over his and held it there too, and shut my eyes, and the wind came off the river and went over us both and I didn't feel any of it.

"You're on the wrong side of an ocean," he said, very low.

"I know."

"You're not wearing a hat."

"I know that too."

"It's nineteen degrees." His voice cracked on the number. "Bennett. It's nineteen degrees and you're up a ladder with no hat."

"You've been up here three days."

"I'm not—" He stopped. His eyes went down, very briefly, to my coat, and back up. "I'm not carrying anybody."

I opened my eyes. His face was close. The scar through his eyebrow was white with cold. He looked like he hadn't slept since Tuesday, which he hadn't, and like he'd been crying, which I'll never know.

"Wes," I said. "I have to tell you—"

"Not yet."

He said it so gently. He didn't take his hand away. "Not up here. Not like this, with you off a plane and no hat and the wind trying to kill you. Whatever it is." He swallowed. "Not yet, Bennett. Okay? Go get warm. It'll keep."

. . .

He made me sit in the tent, on an upturned bucket between the two heaters, and wrapped a moving blanket around my shoulders that smelled of sawdust and gasoline, and poured me tea out of the thermos. Ginger. Of course it was ginger.

"Ruth Kaplan," he said, when I looked at it. "She sends it up with Hector. Every four hours. She thinks I'm a pregnant woman."

"Why would she think that?"

"Because she's seventy-nine and it's what she had in the house." He crouched down in front of me, his forearms on his knees, the way he used to sit on the fire escape. "Drink it."

I drank it. Then I pointed at the row of brackets on the blanket.

"Hector says you won't tell him what you're doing."

"Hector'd tell the building, and the building would tell the guy with the laser." He picked up the twelfth bracket and turned it in his hands. "This cornice is original. 1891. Wood, not tin, which almost never happens on a building this size. Somebody carved these by hand. Twelve of them, and no two the same. Look." He tilted it in the light. On the underside, half buried under a century of paint, the carving opened out into a leaf, and inside the leaf, so small you'd never see it from the street, a face. A tiny bearded man, laughing. "He's on every one. Different every time. Some carver in 1891 put his own face on the underside of the brackets where nobody'd ever look." He ran his thumb over it. "Hundred and thirty-six years, Bennett. Nobody looked."

"What happens to him?"

"Depends on who owns the building." His jaw worked. "There's a historic district. Greenwich Village. They drew the line in 1969.

Somebody with a ruler and a lunch to get to skipped this end of Perry. So this building's not protected. Anybody who buys it can rip the face off and put up glass and nobody can say a word." He set the bracket down. "Unless it gets calendared. Landmarks Commission. Ruth filed the request in January, the day after Mrs. Abernathy died. Wrote it by hand. Four pages. I've never been so scared of a document."

"And this?"

"Evidence." He nodded at the camera on its tripod. "Original fabric. Every bracket, every sash on the front, every pane of old glass. Photographed, measured, numbered, documented, in the file before Monday. If the Commission sees what's here, they calendar it. If they calendar it, nobody touches the front of this building without a permit." He looked at me. "That's the play. That's all I've got. A file and a hundred and thirty-six-year-old guy laughing under a bracket."

"Is that why you won't come down?"

He was quiet for a second.

"The guy who called Hector had a voice like a dentist," he said. "Walk-through's Monday, nine a.m. If I come down, I stop. If I stop, I think." He picked up the putty knife again. "I'd rather work."

. . .

I told him the other thing, though. Not the thing he wouldn't let me say. The other one.

"Theo sent me home," I said.

He didn't look up from the bracket. "I know."

"How?"

"He called. Wednesday." He worked the putty knife along the curl of the leaf, a sliver of salmon-colored paint coming away like a

fingernail. "We talked for an hour. Then he said, 'Don't be an idiot about it,' and hung up on me." He shook his head slowly. "He's never hung up on me in his life. Not once. Not even last year. I had to sit down in the truck."

"Were you upset?"

"I was proud of him." He looked up at me, then, and his face did something complicated and open, and he looked back down. "That's all I'm gonna say about it up here."

So I told him about the envelope instead. The waiting room in Graça full of grandmothers, and the heartbeat like someone very small running down a hallway in socks, and the card she'd written and sealed while I sat there saying don't tell me, don't tell me. I told him I'd never opened it. I told him I didn't think I ever would.

He listened to all of it with the putty knife still in his hand.

"Is it somewhere safe?" he said.

"Yes."

"Okay." He nodded, once, and went back to the bracket.

That was all. That was the only question he asked.

. . .

He came down on Saturday morning. Not for me. I want to be clear about that. For the fig.

Ortiz had Gerald on the dolly at the foot of the stairs at nine, and was standing over him with his hands on his hips, contemplating the four flights the way you'd contemplate the north face of something, when the hatch banged up top and Wes came down the ladder and the stairs two at a time, unshaven, in yesterday's flannel, and lifted Gerald, pot and all, onto his shoulder like a man carrying a sleeping child out of a car.

"Morning, Gerald," he said.

Gerald had grown. Hector was right. He'd put out four new leaves at Ortiz's north window, broad and pale and furred, as if he'd been reaching for the light so hard he'd had to grow hands.

Wes carried him up four flights without stopping and set him in his spot by the big window, in the light, and stepped back, and he and I stood on either side of the fig in the bright cold room and didn't look at each other.

"Key's still in there," he said.

"I know."

"Just checking." He brushed the soil off his hands onto his jeans. "Someone's gotta keep track of the keys in this family."

Then he went back up to the roof, and didn't come down again all weekend except to carry Mrs. Kaplan's soup up the ladder in a mason jar wrapped in a dish towel, with the face of a man transporting a live grenade.

I went up every few hours with tea and sat on my bucket while he worked. We talked the way we used to on the fire escape, in pieces, about nothing: Mrs. Feldman's bet, which had changed again since Friday; a pigeon who'd been watching him from the water tower since Wednesday and whom he'd named Councilman. He never asked me anything. I never told him the thing.

At night I lay in the low bed with my socks on, two pairs, and listened to him walking on my ceiling, the tar paper creaking, the heaters' long roar, and I fell asleep both nights with my hand on my stomach and a man I loved pacing the roof over my head like he was guarding it.

. . .

Monday came in gray and still.

I was at the kitchen table at ten to nine in my coat, drinking tea and pretending to read, when I heard the street door. It opened and banged. Voices in the hall, two floors down: Ortiz's, tight and polite in a way I'd never heard it, the voice of a man holding a door for someone he'd like to shut it on. And another one, a man's, easy and clipped.

Footsteps on the stairs. Good shoes. Leather soles on old wood. Mrs. Feldman's door opened a crack on two and closed again very fast.

Up, past the second-floor landing. Past three. Past Mrs. Kaplan's door, where they paused, and the easy voice said something about "the rent roll" and "a very senior tenant," and Ortiz said nothing at all.

I put my tea down.

Above me, the scraping on the roof stopped.

The footsteps came up the last flight. The top step creaked the way it always creaked. And through the gap in my door, which I had left open a hand's width so I could hear the roof, I saw him come round the turn of the landing into the gray light from the skylight.

A camel overcoat, beautifully cut. A haircut that cost more than my first month on Perry Street. A clipboard held against his chest at a slight, important angle, the way men hold clipboards when they want you to know there's a list and they're on the right side of it. He was looking down at it, checking something off, as he came.

Then he looked up, at the door of 4B, and at me through the gap, and his face did the thing faces do when a page turns and the next line isn't the one they were expecting.

It was Ryan.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Halvorsen

"CLAIRE," RYAN SAID.

He said it the way you'd read a name off a list and find it was spelled wrong. Then he recovered. Ryan always recovers. It's the thing he does best, better than golf. I watched his face go through the stages in about a second and a half: surprise, calculation, and then the smile, the LinkedIn smile, settling over the whole thing like a sheet over furniture.

"You're back," he said. "I heard Portugal."

"I was in Portugal."

"And now you're not." He glanced down at the clipboard, then back up. "That's funny. I've got 4B down as Marsh, T. Sole occupant. Unit vacant since January." He tapped the page with his pen. "Somebody's records are wrong."

Behind him, at the turn of the stairs, Mr. Ortiz stood with his hands at his sides and his face shut like a storm window. I'd never seen him without his radio. He looked smaller without it, and older, and angrier than I'd known a person could look without moving a muscle.

"What are you doing here, Ryan?"

"Working." He said it pleasantly. "Halvorsen closed on the building Thursday. I'm the asset manager on the residential side. This is the walk-through." He held up the clipboard, in case I'd missed it. "Eleven buildings below Fourteenth Street, all from the same estate. I didn't pick them out of a catalog, Claire. I didn't even know it was this one until I saw the address on the rent roll last week." He smiled. "I thought, huh. Then I thought, well, she's in Lisbon with the cellist, so who cares."

"Halvorsen," I said.

"You've heard of us."

"I've heard you. For three years. On the phone in the other room." I'd heard the word a hundred times, through doors, on Sunday nights, at dinner parties where I nodded. The deal team. The Henderson deal. Boston. "I never knew what it meant."

"It means," Ryan said, "that I own your building."

. . .

He came into the apartment without being asked. I've thought about that since. He didn't wait, he didn't knock on the open door, he just stepped through it the way he used to step into restaurants, as if the room had been expecting him and was relieved he'd come.

He looked around. At the slanted floor, the brick, the books, Gerald in his light by the big window. At the dented kettle. At the half sheet of yellow paper on the fridge, which he leaned in to read, and I wanted to put my hand over it so badly my palm itched.

"Charming," he said. "Original moldings. Fourth floor. Good light." He made a note. "Rent-stabilized, obviously, which is a whole thing, but people move. That's the thing about people. Sooner or later they always move."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Reposition the asset." He said it the way some men say grace. "The plan's a single-family conversion. Gut it, new windows, glass across the back, one owner, four floors, a garden. There's a buyer. It'll be beautiful, Claire, honestly, you'd love it. You always liked old buildings." He tapped the clipboard against his palm. "It's a much better use of the space than eleven people and a boiler older than Coolidge."

"There are people in this building who've lived here fifty years."

"And they'll be compensated." The smile again. "Generously. I'm being generous because it's you, if that helps."

"It doesn't."

"It should." For the first time something got under the smile and pushed it from beneath. "Do you know what it's been like? Since September? Do you know what they call me at the office?"

"I can't imagine."

"'Mads, sit down.'" He said it flatly. "That's what they call me. A guy on the deal team was at a wedding in Westchester with a woman who was at Bettina's. Forty people, Claire. You picked up her phone and slid it across the table to me in front of forty people and my mother." His jaw worked. "They say it in meetings. Someone stands up to make a point and someone else goes, 'Mads, sit down,' and the whole room loses it. In front of partners."

I looked at him. At the beautiful coat and the expensive haircut and the face that had gone, for one second, genuinely wounded, like a boy who's been laughed at on a bus.

"Ryan," I said. "You slept with my best friend for seven months."

"I'm aware of what I did."

"You called Page Six."

"I gave a quote." He straightened the clipboard. "And look how that turned out for you. Your name on Danny's cover. Editors calling. Everybody loves a ghost who comes out of the closet." He glanced at the hall closet door as he said it, the brass keyhole, and something in me went very cold and very still. "You're welcome, frankly."

. . .

Above us, the hatch banged.

I heard the ladder take a man's full weight, and boots on the landing, and then Wes was in the doorway, unshaven, in the canvas jacket, with the heat gun still in one hand like he'd forgotten he was holding it. He filled the door the way he'd filled it in October with a duffel bag and the rain behind him.

Ryan turned. I watched him place Wes. It took him a second.

"The window guy," he said. "From Danny's party. With the suit."

"Still the window guy," Wes said.

"You don't live here."

"No."

"Then you're trespassing on the roof of a property you have no lease in." Ryan looked at the heat gun. "And I'm guessing you have no permit for whatever you're doing to my cornice."

Wes looked at him for a long, calm moment. Then he looked at me. Then back.

"It's 1891," he said. "That cornice. It's been on this building through two world wars, a depression, four blackouts, a guy with a laser, and Mrs. Feldman. It's been here longer than your firm and it'll be here after." He set the heat gun down on the kitchen table, very gently, next to my tea. "So it's not your cornice. You're just the guy standing under it right now."

Ryan opened his mouth and closed it.

"Those windows come out in June," he said finally. "The front ones. All of them. New glass."

"Then you're gonna need a guy," Wes said.

. . .

Ryan left at nine thirty-five, with his clipboard and his coat and his dignity mostly intact, and on the second-floor landing, as he passed, Mrs. Feldman opened her door two inches and said very clearly, "Mads, sit down," and shut it again.

I asked her later how she knew. She said, "Darling, the walls are very thin and I'm very interested."

. . .

Mr. Ortiz called a meeting for seven o'clock, in his apartment.

He went door to door in his good cardigan with his radio turned off and tucked under his arm like a sleeping animal, saying the same thing at every door in a low voice: "Seven o'clock. My place. Bring a chair if you have a chair."

By seven there were fourteen people in Hector Ortiz's living room, which was built for four.

He'd moved his plants. That's how I knew it was serious. The whole crowd of them, the ones that had made room for Gerald in January, had been carried into his bedroom and arranged on the bed like patients in a ward, and in their place by the north window were folding chairs, a step stool, and a milk crate. Mrs. Kaplan had the good armchair. She'd come down three flights by herself, holding the banister, one step at a time, in her late husband's leather gloves, and refused all help in a tone that made the couple from 3B physically

step back.

"I've been going down those stairs since Lindsay was mayor," she said, lowering herself into the chair. "I'll go down them when I'm dead."

Mrs. Feldman had brought her knitting. It was yellow, and small, and getting longer.

"Who's that for?" I asked.

"No one," said Mrs. Feldman, not looking up. "Yellow is for no one. It's a neutral."

The young couple from 3B had the baby in a sling, asleep against the father's chest with its mouth open, and the mother had a legal pad and an expression I recognized from Priya before an exam. The band girls from 4A sat on the floor against the radiator, one of them with a bass in a soft case across her knees for no reason anyone could identify, both of them in enormous sweaters. Two men from 2B I'd only ever seen in the mail room, who turned out to be a retired court stenographer and a retired subway conductor, married thirty years, and who held hands on the step stool.

Wes came down from the roof and stood by the door with his arms folded and didn't sit, the way he'd stand at the back of a church.

And at ten past seven the street door banged, and Danny Russo came down the hall like weather, with two hotel pans of lasagna stacked in his arms and his reading glasses pushed up on his head.

"Nobody fights a landlord on an empty stomach," he announced. "That's a rule. That's in the book. Page two-eleven. Somebody find me a spoon."

"Danny, how did you even—"

"Hector called me. Hector calls me about everything. He called me about a squirrel once." He set the pans on Ortiz's little table, where

they took up all of it. "Where's this Halvorsen? I want to look at him."

"He's not here."

"Good, because I'd hit him with a lasagna." He kissed me on both cheeks and then held my face in his big hands and looked at it hard, a chef checking a dish. "You look good, kid. You look fed. Portugal fed you."

At seven twenty Priya arrived, straight off a shift, in scrubs under her parka, carrying a foil-covered Pyrex dish with a strip of masking tape across the top that said, in neat block print, LASAGNA, FEB 9, M.

She stopped in the doorway and looked at Danny's two hotel pans.

Danny looked at her Pyrex.

"Who made that?" Danny said.

"Marcus."

"Who's Marcus?"

"An anesthesiologist who labels his food." Priya put the dish down on top of one of Danny's pans, which he took personally. "He heard there was a meeting. He insisted. I'm furious about it."

. . .

Mr. Ortiz stood up at seven thirty with his radio in his hands. He didn't turn it on. He just held it, like a man holding his hat at a funeral.

"Okay," he said. "So. The building is sold."

Nobody said anything. Everybody already knew. But there's a difference between knowing a thing and hearing a man say it in his own living room with his plants in the bedroom.

"The company is Halvorsen," Ortiz said. "The man is Ryan Cole. Some of you know him." He didn't look at me. That was a kindness.

"He came today with a clipboard. He went to every door. He wants to know who's leaving, and when. He says nobody has to leave. He says the word 'voluntary' a lot."

"He asked me if I'd considered Florida," said Mrs. Feldman, knitting. "I said I considered it in 1974 and I didn't care for it."

"He asked about our lease," said the woman from 3B. "He said renewal is 'under review.' What does 'under review' mean? It's a stabilized lease. It can't be under review."

"He told us there'd been noise complaints," said one of the band girls. "We asked from who. He said, 'Various.'"

"There were no complaints," said Mrs. Kaplan. "I'd have made them. I'm the only one in this building who complains. I have a system."

"He asked me," Ortiz said, and then stopped. He looked down at his radio. When he spoke again his voice was very quiet. "He asked me to stay on. As the super. He said Halvorsen likes continuity. He said there would be a bonus, for every unit that goes empty by the summer. A thousand dollars a door." He turned the radio over in his hands. "He said, Hector, you know these people, you can help them see the opportunity."

The room was silent. The baby in the sling breathed through its open mouth.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I said I'd think about it." Ortiz lifted his chin. "Then I came downstairs, mija, and I threw up in my own sink." He looked around the room, at all of us, the stenographer and the conductor, the band girls, the baby. "Thirty years. Thirty years, I fix your toilets. I carry your Christmas trees. I hold your packages. I had keys to every apartment in this building since before some of you were born. I don't

sell doors."

Mrs. Kaplan took off one glove and put her bare hand on his arm.

"Sit down, Hector," she said. "You did fine."

He sat down on the milk crate. Danny, without a word, handed him a plate of lasagna. Then Priya handed him a second plate, of Marcus's, and Ortiz sat there holding two lasagnas with tears on his face, and nobody laughed, and then somebody did, and then everybody did, and it was the good kind, the kind that lets the air back into a room.

. . .

They talked for an hour. I listened.

That's my job. That's the only thing I've ever been truly good at. I sat on the floor by the radiator next to the band girls with a plate on my knees and I listened to fourteen people say what they were afraid of, and I watched their faces when they said it, and somewhere in the middle of it the fury I'd been carrying since nine o'clock that morning went very quiet.

It didn't go away. It went quiet, the way water goes quiet when it's deep.

And underneath it there was something else. Something cold and clear and steady, that I didn't recognize at first, because I'd only ever felt it at a desk, at two in the morning, when a book finally showed me its shape. I'd lived with Ryan Cole for three years. I knew what his voice did when he was lying. I knew he said "honestly" right before he wasn't. I knew Boston, and the Henderson deal, and spin class on Tuesday nights. I'd been the most observant person in his life and I'd spent three years choosing not to write any of it down.

Not anymore.

"Can I say something?" I said.

Fourteen faces turned.

"Write everything down." My voice was steadier than I expected. "Every knock on the door. Every notice. Every phone call. Every time the heat flickers, every time someone says 'voluntary.' Dates. Times. Names. Who said what, in what words." I looked at the woman from 3B and her legal pad. "If he says it on the stairs, write it down on the stairs. Take pictures of everything. Keep the envelopes."

"Why?" said the stenographer from 2B, though I could see on his face that he already knew.

"Because the person who writes it down gets to say what happened," I said. "That's the only thing I know for sure. I've made my whole living out of it. Everybody remembers things the way they need to. The one with the notes wins."

The room was very quiet.

"Also," said Priya, from the arm of Ortiz's couch, in her charting voice, "what he's describing is illegal. Pressuring rent-stabilized tenants to leave is tenant harassment under city law. I know because I looked it up on the train, and because I've treated two landlords."

"For what?" said one of the band girls.

"Things that happened to them," Priya said darkly.

Wes spoke from the door. It was the first thing he'd said all night.

"Ruth filed with Landmarks in January," he said. "If they calendar the building, nobody touches the front without a permit, and a single-family conversion needs the front. I'm documenting everything original up there. Every bracket, every sash, every pane." He looked at Mrs. Kaplan. "It's not enough by itself. But it's slow. It makes everything slow. And slow is bad for a guy who promised his partners empty by summer."

"How do you know he promised that?" I asked.

Wes shrugged. "Thousand dollars a door by summer. Nobody pays a bonus on a deadline they don't have."

Mrs. Kaplan was looking at me. She'd been looking at me for some time, with her glasses down her nose and her gloved hand on the arm of the chair.

"Finally," she said. "Somebody in this building with some sense." Then, to the room: "The girl's a writer. Do what the writer says."

. . .

They left at nine, in ones and twos, carrying lasagna. Mrs. Feldman paused at the door on her way out and turned back and said, to Ortiz, "I'd like to change my bet."

"Not during a crisis, Edie."

"It's because of the crisis," she said, and went upstairs.

Wes went back up to the roof. He touched my shoulder on his way past, at the foot of the stairs. Just that, and gone.

I went out onto the stoop for air. It was cold and clear and still, the kind of February night when Perry Street goes silver under the streetlights and the trees hold up their bare branches like they're being searched. Across the street the bodega cat was asleep on his crate in the window. Up above me, four floors up, a pale square of light from Wes's clamp lamps lay on the cornice, and I could just hear the scrape of a putty knife.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

Maddie. Still saved as Maddie, still in her paper crown from Priya's thirtieth.

I looked at it for three rings. Then I answered.

"Claire." Her voice was low and fast and very awake, the voice of a woman who has been sitting in a dark kitchen for a long time with her phone in her lap, deciding something. "Don't hang up. I know about the building. I know about Perry Street. He told me. He tells me things at three in the morning, when he's drunk and wants someone to tell him he's a genius."

I sat down on the cold stone step.

"He's lying to his partners," Maddie said. "And to you. To all of you." A breath. "I have the texts."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maddie

"NOT ON THE PHONE," Maddie had said, on the stoop, that Monday night. "I'm not doing this on the phone, Claire. I'm at my sister's in Hoboken till Sunday because my feet look like bread. Next Monday. Somewhere with no history in it."

So I had a week.

I spent them writing everything down.

There was a spiral notebook on the radiator cover in the downstairs hall by Saturday, with a pen tied to it on a string, like a sign-in sheet at a dentist. Ortiz had written LOG on the front in his careful capitals. Under that, someone had added, in glitter gel pen, the band girls' work, DEATH TO THE CLIPBOARD. By Saturday it had nine pages. The stenographer from 2B had taken to writing his entries in shorthand and then translating them underneath, in brackets, out of what he called professional courtesy. Mrs. Kaplan's were the longest. She'd written two full pages about a man in a Halvorsen fleece who'd stood on the landing outside 3A on Wednesday morning for four minutes looking at her door "in a manner I can only describe as real estate."

Wes was on the roof every day from eight until dark. He photographed every one of the twelve brackets from six angles. He measured the front sashes and drew them on graph paper in pencil, every muntin, every pane, and wrote the measurements in capitals so small for him they were almost lowercase. At night I'd hear him on the ladder, and the hatch, and then the street door, and the truck starting up on Perry Street, and going.

He didn't come up to 4B. I didn't ask him to. Every night at around ten I'd hear him stop on the fourth-floor landing outside my door, for about as long as it takes to decide something. Then the stairs.

. . .

The Athena is on Hudson at Bank, and has been about to close since 1979.

It has a revolving pie case with three pies in it that I've never once seen anyone order, a counter with stools that spin all the way around if you're nine or drunk, and booths in a shade of red vinyl that doesn't occur in nature. The menu is eleven pages long and laminated, and on the back, under DESSERTS, someone has written in ballpoint, years ago, DON'T. Nobody has ever wiped it off.

Maddie was already in the back booth when I came in at seven, out of the wind.

I saw her before she saw me. She was sitting sideways, the only way she fit, with her back against the wall and her feet up on the seat in a pair of men's thick socks, and she was enormous. I mean that with love, or with whatever I had instead of love for her by then. Twenty-five weeks, round and furious, her hand on the top of her stomach like it was a desk she was about to bang on. Her hair was in a

knot. She wasn't wearing makeup, which I had seen maybe four times in ten years, and three of them were hangovers.

She looked up. She saw me. Her face did a hundred things very fast, and then she put her feet down and sat up, which took a while.

"Don't," she said, as I slid in across from her. "Don't say anything about my ankles. Everyone says something about my ankles."

"I wasn't going to say anything about your ankles."

"Then you're the only person in New York." She pushed a menu at me across the Formica. "I ordered you a grilled cheese. With a pickle. You always get a grilled cheese here. You got one the night after the LSATs you didn't take."

"I could have ordered for myself."

"I know." She looked at the table. "I wanted to do one thing right before you got here."

. . .

The waitress was a woman of about seventy with a pencil in her bun and a name tag that said IRINA, and she called us both "girls" with an air of having seen every possible thing that two women could do to each other across a booth. She put a cup of coffee in front of me without asking.

I pushed it to the side. "Could I have a ginger ale, please?"

"Ginger ale," Irina said, and went.

Across the booth, Maddie had gone completely still.

I knew that stillness. I'd watched it happen at Bettina's, the half-second when a sentence realizes what it's just said. She was looking at the coffee cup, pushed to the edge of the table, steaming, untouched. Then at me. Then at my hands, which had gone, without asking, to rest flat on the table in front of me in a way they never had

in ten years of diners.

"You've had a cup of coffee in your hand every time I've seen you since 2015," Maddie said slowly. "You drank coffee at your grandmother's funeral. You drank coffee in the ER when I broke my wrist in Tulum. Claire."

I didn't say anything. I bit my lip. I felt myself do it.

"Oh my God," Maddie said. "Oh my God. You're doing the lip."

"I'm not doing the lip."

"How far?"

There are people you can't lie to, not because they know you well, but because they knew you first. I looked at Maddie Price across the red vinyl, at nineteen and twenty-nine at once, the girl at my door in Weinstein Hall with a box of Franzia and a fire extinguisher.

"Thirteen weeks," I said.

She put both hands over her face.

I thought she was crying. She was, a little. But mostly she was laughing, the helpless kind, shoulders going, and when she took her hands away her eyes were wet and wrecked and astonished.

"We said we'd do this together," she said. "Do you remember? Freshman year. On the roof of Weinstein, with the Franzia. We said we'd have babies at the same time and raise them on the same street and they'd hate each other and get married." She wiped her face with a paper napkin. "We said that. We made a pact. We spat on it."

"You spat. I just sort of agreed."

"And here we are," Maddie said. "Here we are, Claire. At the Athena. Both of us." She laughed again and it broke in the middle. "This isn't how it was supposed to go."

"No," I said. "It really, really isn't."

Irina came back with the ginger ale and set it down. She looked at Maddie's stomach. She looked at mine, where there was nothing yet to see. She looked at the two of us, crying and laughing in the back booth on a Monday.

"Girls," she said, in a tone of profound understanding, and brought Maddie extra pickles without being asked.

. . .

"Whose?" Maddie asked, later, when the grilled cheese had come.

"It's a Marsh."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I'm giving." I picked up half the sandwich. "I don't know, Mads. Nobody does. A doctor in Lisbon knows, and she wrote it on a card, and I've never opened it. And I'm not going to."

Maddie looked at me a long time.

"That's the bravest thing I've ever heard," she said. "Or the stupidest. I can't tell."

"Me neither."

She reached across the table and took the pickle off my plate.

I watched her do it. She didn't ask. She didn't even look at me. She took my pickle and bit it in half with a crunch you could have heard on Bank Street, and chewed, and looked out of the window at Hudson Street with an expression of total peace.

"That was mine," I said.

"The baby wants pickles." She took another bite. "The baby has no shame. The baby is her father's daughter."

"Her?"

Maddie put the pickle down. Her hand went to the top of her stomach.

"Rose," she said. "I'm naming her Rose."

"Mads. That's beautiful."

"He hates roses." She said it with deep satisfaction. "Ryan. He says they're what you buy at a gas station when you've forgotten something. He says it every Valentine's. He thinks he's being very original." She looked at me. "So every time he writes her name on a check, for the next eighteen years, he's going to have to write the word."

I laughed out loud. Irina, at the counter, looked over with approval.

. . .

It took her an hour to get to it. I let her. That's my job, too. You let people take the long way around to the thing, because the long way is where they tell you who they are.

She told me about Hoboken, and her sister, and the crib she'd bought on Facebook Marketplace from a woman in Weehawken who'd cried when she handed it over. She told me about the support checks. The memo line still said Support. One word. Like a bra.

And then she put both hands flat on the Formica and looked at them.

"I wrote it down," she said. "At Bettina's. The line. 'I know what you're like at three a.m.' I wrote it on an index card. I practiced it in the mirror in the bathroom at Bettina's, before dinner. I told myself it was a joke about snoring, and I wrote 'because Claire calls me, to complain about the snoring' underneath it, so I'd have the ending." She didn't look up. "And when I got to it, standing there, with everybody looking at me and you looking at me like I was the sunrise, I couldn't say the second line. I just stopped. Because the first line was

true, and I'd been dying for one person in the world to know it."

The pie case went around. Lemon meringue. Coconut. Something brown.

"That's the worst thing I've ever said out loud," Maddie said. "That part of me wanted you to know. That part of me did it on purpose."

I sat with that for a long time. The ginger ale fizzed against my teeth.

"I know," I said. "I heard the pause. I've heard it a hundred times. People stop right before the true part."

"Why didn't you ever say?"

"Because I wanted it to be an accident." I put the glass down. "It was easier to be the woman whose best friend made a mistake at a dinner than the woman whose best friend wanted to tell her."

Maddie nodded slowly, as if I'd confirmed a diagnosis.

"You always had a door," she said. "You know that? In every apartment. You'd go into your room and close the door and come out four hours later with a whole person on paper. Somebody else's whole life. I used to stand in the hall and listen to you type and think, she's got something that's hers. Nobody can take that." She turned her ring around on her finger. "I never had anything that was mine. I was the fun one. I was the one people liked at parties. And he looked at me like I was the thing in the room." Her mouth twisted. "He was yours. That was most of it. I'd like to tell you it wasn't. He was yours, and for seven months, for a few hours at a time, I had something of yours."

"That's horrible, Maddie."

"I know it is." She looked up, finally. "I'm not asking you to forgive it. I just didn't want to go the rest of my life without saying the true version once. You're the only one who'd know if I was lying."

I didn't forgive her. I want that on the record. Forgiveness wasn't on the table at the Athena; it wasn't on the menu, not even on the back under DON'T. But I reached across the table, and I took the other half of my own pickle off her plate, and I ate it.

She watched me do it. Something in her shoulders let go.

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

. . .

"He texts me," she said. "At three in the morning. Still."

The phone was face down on the table between us. She turned it over and didn't unlock it.

"He's drunk, usually. Or not drunk, just awake. He's never been able to sleep when a deal's on, you know that. And he can't text anyone at work at three in the morning, and he hasn't got any friends, Claire, he's never had a friend, he's got a squash partner and a guy he calls about watches. So he texts me. And I answer." She laughed, not a good one. "I've answered every single time. You'd think I'd have learned what three a.m. means by now."

"What does he say?"

"He says he's a genius. He tells me the deal. Every bit of it. He wants me to say, 'Wow, Ryan.'" Her jaw set. "I say, 'Wow, Ryan.' And then I screenshot it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I started in December. After Page Six. I thought, I want to have something. In case." She picked up the phone. "Then last week he texted about your building at two forty in the morning. And then he texted about an old lady in 3A. And then he wrote lol."

She unlocked the phone and opened our thread, the one with her photo in the paper crown at the top, and began sending them. One at

a time, with her right thumb, while she ate the last of Irina's extra pickles with her left hand, not looking, the way you'd deal cards.

My phone began to buzz on the table. And buzz. And buzz.

Forty-one times.

I read them while she watched me. I didn't paraphrase them in my head. When the source is that clear you don't touch it.

Closed on Perry. Told Peter it's vacant-ready. It will be by June.

Promotion's mine if I deliver it empty. Peter said "deliver" like it's a pizza lol.

Heat maintenance Fri thru Mon. Nobody's checking in March.

If the old lady in 3A goes to her daughter's in Jersey for the cold, that's a unit.

Super's a sentimental guy. Offered him a grand a door. Everyone's got a number.

Make them miserable till they take the money. Legally miserable. Lol.

And then, at 3:12 a.m., on Tuesday, a single line by itself:

Claire's back in 4B. Of course she is.

I put the phone face down on the table.

"He's lying to his partners," Maddie said quietly. "They think it's empty already. Basically empty. A couple of old ladies on a buyout. That's how he sold it to them in January, that's how he got Peter Halvorsen to sign. He promised them a building that doesn't exist. If they knew there were fourteen people in there, with leases, and a landmark filing, and a super who won't sell a single door—" She stopped. "And he's lying to you. He told you 'voluntary.' He wrote 'miserable.' You've got it in writing now. Every word. With the times."

"Maddie." I was holding the edge of the table. "If I use these, he'll know they came from you."

"I know."

"He'll be furious. He sends you a check every month. There's custody, there's—"

"I know, Claire." She looked at me with her whole tired face. "I've thought about it for a week in my sister's spare room with my feet on a pillow. He'll know. Let him." Her hand went to her stomach. "She's going to grow up. She's going to google her father one day, the way we google everybody. I'd like there to be one thing on that page where her mother did something right."

. . .

She paid. She wouldn't let me touch the check. She took it from Irina before it reached the table and held it against her chest like a hand of cards and said, "This one's mine," in a voice I hadn't heard her use since we were nineteen, and Irina looked at me over her head and gave a very small shrug, as if to say, let her.

At the door, getting into her coat, which didn't close anymore, she had to stop and lean on the pie case for a second. The pies went around under her hand. Lemon. Coconut. Something brown.

"You okay?"

"She's kicking." Maddie made a face. "She kicks like she's trying to get out of a cab."

I held the door. The wind came down Bank Street off the river and went right through both of us, and Maddie turned her collar up and stood there on the sidewalk under the diner's buzzing sign, the A in ATHENA flickering the way it had flickered since 1979, and looked at me.

"You didn't have to do this," I said. "You know that. You don't owe me anything."

Maddie looked at me for a long moment. Her nose was red in the cold. Her hand was on top of her stomach, on top of Rose, whose father would have to write the word on every check for eighteen years.

"Yes, I do," she said. "I owed you a toast."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Van Brunt Street

I DIDN'T GO HOME after the diner. I couldn't. Home was a building with Ryan Cole's signature on the deed, and I had his texts in my phone, forty-one screenshots that Maddie had sent me across a Formica table with one thumb while she ate my pickle, and I had the feeling that if I walked up those four flights holding them, the stairs would know.

So I stood on the corner of Hudson and Bank on the first night of March and did the thing I'd been not doing for ten days.

The cab driver had a dashboard Ganesh and strong opinions about the Battery Tunnel, which he said was the most dishonest tunnel in New York because it pretended to be short. I agreed. I was thirteen weeks pregnant and had eaten a pickle that wasn't mine, and I'd have agreed with him about God.

"Van Brunt," he said doubtfully, when the cobbles started. "Nothing here but water and men."

"That's what I'm counting on," I said, and he didn't charge me for the last block.

. . .

The garage looked the way it had in December, except the sleet had become a clean hard cold that came straight off the harbor and got into the seams of everything. Smoke from the stovepipe. A light behind the little high windows. The green truck nosed in by the door with frost on the windshield.

I put my glove on the hood for a second, for luck. I could hear him before I knocked. He was on the phone, and he was losing.

"Ma. I gotta go. Because somebody's here. I don't know who. Okay, I know who. No, I'm not putting her on, you're gonna ask her about Scrabble. I love you. I'm hanging up now. I'm doing it."

He opened the side door with the phone still at his ear and a box of cereal under his arm.

"She says you owe her a Scrabble game," Wes said, and hung up, and stood there in a flannel with sawdust on his forearms and looked at me the way he had on the roof of 41 Perry ten days ago, when I came up through the hatch and found him on his knees in the cold with a cornice bracket in his hands. Like a man reading the sky, and not liking to say what he saw.

"Bennett. You're not wearing a hat." He stepped back to let me in. "Why is nobody in my life wearing a hat."

. . .

It was warm inside, and it smelled of cedar shavings and woodsmoke. The pegboard with every tool in its marker outline. The terrible plaid couch. A Rangers game on the radio, the announcer sounding like a man describing a car accident he was enjoying.

What was new was the ginger. Ginger tea, ginger chews, saltines, a jar of crystallized ginger from a shop with a French name, ginger ale, two kinds of lemon drops, all lined up above the hot plate like a

pharmacy for one very specific disease. He saw me see them and did something embarrassed with his jaw.

"They were on sale," he said.

"All of them?"

"It was a ginger sale."

Next to the ginger, face down and open, was a paperback with a pregnant woman on the cover looking serene in a way no woman in history has ever looked while pregnant. It had Post-it flags coming out of it in four colors. I picked it up before he could stop me.

The margins were full of capitals. Small ones, for Wes, which meant they were only the size of a normal person's capitals. WEEK 13. BLOB = SIZE OF LEMON (?) SOME SAY PEACH. FIND OUT WHICH. And further down, next to a paragraph about nausea, underlined twice: NO COFFEE SMELLS. FIX TRUCK AIR FRESHENER.

I looked at him over the top of it.

"You annotated it."

"It's a manual. I'm a guy who reads the manual." He took it out of my hands and closed it. "There's disagreement in the literature, Bennett. About the lemon."

He put the kettle on the hot plate. Not a red one. A white enamel one with a chip on the spout, and something went through me at that, small and sharp, like a splinter.

. . .

I told him about Maddie while the tea steeped. Twenty-five weeks, round and furious, eating off my plate because she said the baby wanted pickles and the baby had no shame. I read him the screenshots off my phone, because I couldn't make myself paraphrase

them.

Heat maintenance Fri thru Mon. Nobody's checking in March.

If the old lady in 3A goes to her daughter's in Jersey for the cold, that's a unit.

Make them miserable till they take the money. Legally miserable. Lol.

"Lol," Wes said.

"He wrote lol."

"About Mrs. Kaplan." I watched his shoulders go up. "Ruth Kaplan told me in October I was too thin for grief and made me a brisket." He turned around. "I'd like to put him through a window, Bennett. A new one. Double-hung. So it takes a while."

That got a laugh out of me, the first of the day, and his face eased at the sound of it, the way a sash eases when it finally comes unstuck.

He brought me the tea and sat down on the other end of the couch. Not near. Not far. A man measuring a gap.

I drank half the tea. I put the mug down on the floor. Then I slid across the couch and took his face in my hands and kissed him.

. . .

I'd been planning it since the roof, since he stood up from the cornice and took his gloves off one finger at a time, as if he needed his bare hands for whatever happened next, and then all that happened next was he put one of them flat against my cheek. A hand. I'd been living on that hand for ten days.

He kissed me back. I want that understood. For about four seconds he kissed me like a man who'd been in a cold room a long time and somebody had opened the stove door. His hand found the claw clip and undid it, and the clip hit the floor, and I made a sound I would

not like quoted.

Then he stopped.

He didn't pull away. That would have been easier. He just went still, his forehead against mine, his hand still in my hair, breathing like he'd carried something up four flights.

"No," he said.

"No?"

"Not tonight." He sat back an inch. His eyes were very dark. "Not like this."

"Like what? I'm on a couch. You're on a couch. It's your couch. It's a horrible couch, Wes, but it's yours."

"Bennett." He took his hand out of my hair, carefully, a strand at a time, as if it were wiring. "Not while you might be running from him."

I stared at him. "Ryan? I ran from Ryan in September. In a silk dress. In the rain. There were witnesses. There was a hot dog."

"Not Ryan."

And then I understood, and something in my chest folded over on itself.

"I'm not running from anybody," I said.

"You got off a plane from Lisbon ten days ago."

"I know where I got off a plane from."

"Ten days ago, you were living with my brother." He said it plainly, the way you'd read a measurement off a tape. "He let you go. I know he did. And now you've had the worst day, with Maddie and that son of a bitch's texts, and it's ten o'clock at night, and you came here."

"Yes. I came here. Isn't that the point?"

"Every important thing you ever decided about me," Wes said, "you decided after midnight."

I opened my mouth. I shut it.

"The frying pan was one in the morning," he said. "The fire escape. The landing after Danny's party. New Year's, Bennett, that was eleven-fifty. You've never once picked me with the lights on." He looked at his hands. "I'm not something you do at night because the day was bad. I can't be that. I'll be anything else. I'll be the guy who drives you to the doctor. I'll be Uncle Wes who builds the bad bookshelves. But I'm not gonna be the thing you reach for in the dark and then look at in the morning like you don't know how it got in the house."

"That's not fair."

"Probably not."

"I'm not running from anybody," I said again, and my voice cracked down the middle of it.

He got up and picked my claw clip off the floor and handed it back to me, like a man returning a pen he'd borrowed.

"Then say it in daylight," he said.

. . .

So we didn't. We talked instead.

We talked the way you can only talk in a room with one lamp on, when the hours stop counting and become one long hour. The Rangers lost. He turned the radio off, and then there was only the woodstove ticking and the wind in the gaps of the roll-up door and a tugboat out on the harbor saying the same low thing over and over to nobody.

I told him about Lisbon. The trams climbing so steep you could feel them praying. Dona Graça throwing sardine heads to the cats. Theo on the terrace at two in the morning, playing, and how it didn't

sound like grief anymore. How it sounded like a man practicing being happy and getting better at it every night.

Wes listened with his elbows on his knees and didn't say anything for a long time.

"He sounds good," he said finally.

"He is good."

"Yeah." He rubbed his thumb along his eyebrow, over the scar. "He told me on the phone. What he said to you. That he fell in love with a woman writing about the guy who swore at his radiator." He looked at the floor. "That he knew since the boathouse."

"He saw us. From the window. At Thanksgiving."

"I know he did." Very quiet. "I saw the light go out."

We sat with that.

Then he asked me about my father. I'd said something about how sad songs in bars are always sung by people who are fine, and he said, "Your dad was in bars, right? You said once," and I must have, on a fire escape, with a beer that tasted like a lawn.

"He played piano in them," I said. "Hotel bars. A steakhouse in Upper Arlington where the men all looked like their own fathers. And he tuned pianos in the daytime, other people's. He had a tuning fork he kept in his shirt pocket. He'd tap it on things." I hadn't thought about that in years. I didn't know I was going to say it until it was in the room. "He couldn't keep a promise past about nine p.m. That was the thing. In the morning he was the best dad on the street. By nine he was somebody else's."

"Where is he now?"

"New Jersey, last I heard." I shrugged, and the shrug didn't come out right. "Which is the kind of thing you say about somebody who's dead."

"He ever call?"

"He sent one Christmas card. When I was nineteen. Signed in his new wife's handwriting." I picked at the blanket. "So, no. That's my father. A Christmas card from New Jersey in somebody else's writing. My mother talks about the dog."

Wes didn't say he was sorry. He didn't say anything about it at all. He just reached over, after a while, and fixed the blanket where it had come off my feet, and tucked it under my socks, both pairs, and left his hand on my ankle for a second, over the wool, and then took it back.

. . .

At about two he got up and said, "Okay. I'm gonna show you something, and you're not allowed to cry, because I don't have any more tissues. I've got paper towels. They're the rough ones."

"I never cry."

"You cried at a gecko. Priya told me."

He went to the far corner, past the truck, where a canvas tarp was draped over something the size of a large dog sitting up, and stood with his hand on it, deciding, and pulled it off.

It was a crib.

Half of one. The headboard and footboard were done, and one long side leaned against the wall, and the other was in pieces on the bench, spindles laid out in a row like piano keys. The wood wasn't new. It was a soft gray-gold, silvered where the weather had been at it, and in some boards were small dark nail holes, filled, a constellation of old mistakes.

"Wes."

"White oak, and cedar for the slats." He was talking fast, the way he never did. "Dad brought it home from the yard. Boat wood. That's why it lasted. Nobody puts boat wood in a treehouse, it's like building a doghouse out of a church."

I couldn't say anything.

"Gran's place is in Tiverton," he said. "Next town over from Ma. The people who bought it, the Pachecos, the oak's dying, it has to come down this spring. So in January I knocked on the door and said, I'm the kid who built that. Sort of. My brother built it. I held the hammer. I said I'd take it down for free if I could keep the wood. And Mrs. Pacheco looked at me for a really long time and then she made me a sandwich."

"You took it down in January."

"In the snow. By hand. I didn't want a saw on it." He touched the top rail of the headboard with two fingers. "I called Theo first. I'm not stupid. I said, I want to take down your treehouse and make it into something. And he said, 'It's crooked, Wes.' And I said, 'Not anymore.'"

He had a sheet of paper pinned to the pegboard above the bench. I'd seen it there when I came in and hadn't understood it. A child's drawing on graph paper, gone soft and brown. Careful ruled lines. NORTH WALL. SOUTH WALL. Little arrows. A list of materials down the side in a neat eight-year-old hand, and halfway down the list, a hole, rubbed clean through the paper.

"That's where plywood was," Wes said. "He spelled it wrong."

I put my hand over my mouth.

"There's no plywood in it," he said. "In the crib. I want that on the record. Not one piece. He'd never forgive me."

"Turn it over," I said, through my hand. "The headboard. I want to see the back."

He looked at me strangely. Then he lifted it, carefully, and turned it, and held it to the lamp.

On the underside of the top rail, where nobody would ever see it but whoever slept underneath, there was a pencil mark in the grain he hadn't sanded off. Faint, gray, in the same eight-year-old hand as the paper. N. WALL.

"I couldn't do it," Wes said. "I had the block on it and I couldn't."

I was crying. Obviously. He handed me the whole roll of rough paper towels and we sat on the floor with our backs against the bench and looked at half a crib in the lamplight.

"It's for whoever," he said, after a while. "You know that. Whoever she is."

"Could be a he."

"Could be. Blob's keeping it close to the vest." He pulled one knee up. "Uncle or whatever. It doesn't matter to the wood, Bennett. The wood doesn't care whose. Wood just wants something to hold up."

"Where's the board?" I said. "The one that did your eyebrow. The two-by-four."

He laughed. Out loud, his head back against the bench.

"Kept that one out," he said. "It's my doorstop. Bathroom. It's a trophy."

. . .

At four o'clock he rolled the big door up a couple of feet, because the stove had gotten the room too hot and I'd said I needed air, and we sat on the tailgate of the truck in the gap with our legs hanging out into the cold.

He'd taken a flannel off the hook and put it around my shoulders without asking.

So I wore the flannel, which smelled of him and of cedar, and Van Brunt Street was black and empty, and at the end of the block, past the warehouses, out on the water, very small and very green, holding her torch up like a woman who'd been told to wait right there and had, was the Statue of Liberty.

"Can I tell you one true thing?" I said. "I always ask you for one. Let me give you one."

He looked at me. The scar white with cold. "Okay."

"I'm not running from him." I said it to the water. My breath went out white. "I'm not running from Theo. I'm not running from Ryan, or from Maddie, or from that building. I'm running toward something. I've been running toward it since a man with a duffel bag walked into my apartment and lied about his name." I turned and looked at him. "It's four in the morning. I know. I know what time it is. But it's true at four. It's going to be true at noon."

He didn't say anything for a long moment. The tugboat said its one low thing again out on the harbor.

Then he put his hand on the side of my face, the way he had on the roof, and leaned over and kissed me. Once. Not hungry. Very slow, and very sure, his thumb on my cheekbone, like he was signing something.

And then he stopped. On purpose. I felt him make himself.

He rested his forehead on mine for one second, and I could feel him smiling, the crooked tooth against my lip.

"Daylight, Bennett," he said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

R.

FOR THE RECORD, I slept through daylight.

He drove me home at six-thirty in the green truck with the heater roaring, and somewhere on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway the sun came up over the Navy Yard, pink and then gold, an enormous unmissable sunrise of the kind that gets photographed for calendars, and I missed the entire thing because I was asleep with my face against the passenger window and my mouth open. He told me later that I snored. He told me I said "Gerald" once, very firmly, as if correcting someone.

"You could have woken me up," I said, on Perry Street, with the window print still on my cheek.

"I thought about it." He had both hands on the wheel. "It didn't seem fair. You can't say a thing in daylight if you're not awake for the daylight. There's rules."

"Whose rules?"

"Mine. I just made them." He reached across me and opened my door, because it sticks. "Go to bed, Bennett. I'll be on your roof at eight."

He was. I heard him. I lay in Theo's old bed with the linen sheets and listened to a man I was in love with walk around on top of me with a pry bar, and thought that if I'd written that sentence for a client I'd have cut it for being too much.

. . .

That week, 41 Perry Street started to feel like a house in a horror movie that had been bought by a dentist.

It began with the notices. Halvorsen Partners had a typeface. Of course they did. Something thin and gray and sans serif that looked like it had been designed to announce layoffs, and it appeared on Monday morning on a laminated sheet taped to the wall by the mailboxes, under the old brass plate that said ABERNATHY in letters worn soft by a hundred years of thumbs.

DEAR VALUED RESIDENTS. In connection with planned capital improvements, please be advised of the following scheduled works.

The scheduled works were listed. They began at seven a.m. They included, as far as I could tell, a man in a hard hat hitting the inside of the empty apartment on the first floor with a hammer for nine hours, for no reason at all. There was no renovation. There was no plan. Mr. Ortiz went in on Tuesday and came out and told me there was a man in there with a jackhammer and nothing to jackhammer, and he'd been reduced to the bathroom tile, which was from 1952 and had done nothing to anyone.

"He's very sorry," Ortiz said. "His name is Luis. He says he has three kids and they pay him by the day. He says, Hector, I don't want to do it, I know it's an old lady building. I said, Luis, then do it quieter. He says they gave him a decibel number. A minimum."

"A minimum?"

"A minimum, mija." Ortiz shook his head with real grief, a man who had kept a boiler alive through four mayors. "In thirty years I never heard of a minimum."

On Wednesday the envelopes came. Cream, heavy, with the thin gray typeface on the front, one slid under every door in the building. Mine said 4B in a printed label. Inside, a letter offering me twenty-five thousand dollars to vacate the premises by April 30, and a sentence about how Halvorsen valued "transitions that work for everyone," and at the bottom, in blue ink, an initial.

R.

Not even the whole name. Just the letter and a little flourish after it, a tail on the R that I recognized from three years of sticky notes on the bathroom mirror. Gym, back at 8. R. Don't forget the Hendersons. R. Picked up your dry cleaning. R.

R, with a red heart after it, lighting up on Maddie's phone at Bettina's in September.

I put the buyout letter in the recycling. Then I took it back out and put it in my notebook, with the screenshots, because I'm a writer and I keep everything, especially the things that hurt.

Mrs. Feldman in 2A got hers and came up two flights in her bathrobe to show me, out of breath and thrilled.

"Twenty-five," she said. "I'm holding out for thirty. And then I'm not taking it." She pressed her hand to her heart. "I've lived here since Carter, Claire. I'm going to die in this building and haunt that man."

"That's the spirit, Mrs. Feldman."

"Also, I moved my money," she said, lowering her voice. "On the board. Don't tell Hector I told you."

"I don't want to know."

"The carpenter." She winked. "Four to one. I've seen how he looks at your window."

. . .

So when the other envelope came, I knew who it was from. That's what I want to explain. I knew, the way you know the end of a movie you've seen.

It was Tuesday, eight days after Van Brunt Street. Twelve-forty in the morning. I was at the kitchen table with the one lamp on, typing, because Lorraine had told me to write the true one and the true one only came out after midnight, which I'd decided not to tell Wes. Gerald was a dark shape by the window. The radiator ticked.

Then the sound.

You don't forget it, once it's been yours. The whisper of paper over wood. A dry, soft, deliberate sound, like someone clearing their throat very politely in the next room.

I froze with my hands on the keys.

Footsteps on the landing. Then going down. Slow ones. Not June's quick light nurse's feet that I'd listened to in October. Not Wes, who took the stairs like he was mad at them. Not Theo, who'd always paused on the third-floor landing for some reason I never asked about. These were careful. A heavy step and then a lighter one, the way you go down stairs when you've learned not to trust your knees. A hand on the banister; I could hear it squeak where the varnish was worn. The creaking top step, the one that sounds like a cello's open C. The street door.

I didn't open the door. Don't answer the door after midnight. Some rules you keep because they're the last ones left.

The envelope was lying just inside, on the slanted boards, where they'd all landed. Plain. White. A drugstore envelope, the kind that comes in a box of fifty. My name on the front in pencil. Not CLAIRE BENNETT, not 4B. Just Claire, in a hand I didn't know: small and upright and careful, the letters joined but not quite, like someone who had learned cursive from nuns and then spent a lifetime printing on forms.

On the back flap, one letter. R.

I sat down on the floor with it. I was so angry I could feel it in my back teeth. He'd found a new way. The texts said make them miserable, and here he was at my door at midnight, a man who knew exactly which sound I'd never be able to hear again without my heart jumping, using it. Using June. Using all of it.

I opened it to find out how bad.

. . .

Claire,

You won't remember this. You were six. It was the yellow bike with the white basket, the one from the Schwinn store on High Street, and you would not let me hold the seat. I said, I'll just hold it till the corner. You said, Don't. You said it like a forty-year-old woman. So I didn't. I ran beside you all the way down Weber Road with my hands in my pockets so you could see I wasn't cheating, and you rang that bell at every single dog. There were nine dogs. You counted them out loud. You fell off at the bottom by the Kesslers' hedge and you got up before I could get to you and said, That didn't count.

When you were eight you got your library card at the Whetstone branch. You wrote your name on it so big it went out of the box. The limit was ten books and you had eleven, and you put them on the desk and looked at the librarian, and she looked at you, and she said, Well, I suppose. You read the first one in the car with the dome light on. I drove the long way so you could finish the chapter.

When you were ten I couldn't sleep one night, and you came downstairs and found me on the couch, and you didn't ask what was wrong. You went and got The Phantom Tollbooth and sat on the floor and read it to me. You did all the voices. The Humbug was English, for some reason. You read until it got light and then you fell asleep against my feet, and I didn't move until your mother came down, because I didn't want to wake you, and because it was the best night I'd had in a long time, and I knew it, even then.

I don't need you to write back. I wanted you to have those. They're yours. I've been keeping them for you.

R.

. . .

I read it three times on the floor. Then I got up and put the kettle on, because my hands needed a job, and stood at the stove with my back to it while the red kettle with Wes's handle on it ticked and began to sing.

It wasn't Ryan.

I knew that by the second line, if I'm honest. I'd known it from the envelope. I just didn't want to know it, because then I'd have to know the other thing, and I'd spent eighteen years building a very good wall in front of the other thing.

Ryan didn't know about the bike. I'd told him once, maybe, on some early date, the way you tell a man a few things about yourself like you're laying out a hand of cards. He wouldn't have remembered the basket. He definitely wouldn't have remembered the nine dogs, because I didn't remember the nine dogs, not until I read it, and then I could hear myself, high and furious and counting. Five. Six. Seven, that's a cat, it counts.

And Ryan wrote like a quarterly report. Ryan once ended a birthday card to me with Best.

I knew whose voice it was. A writer knows. You could give me any page from any of my five books and I could tell you in a paragraph whether it was the subject talking or me. This was nobody performing. This was a person who'd said those sentences to himself so many times they'd worn smooth.

There was exactly one person alive who had been on Weber Road with his hands in his pockets.

I didn't let myself think his name. I hadn't thought it in years. I'd stopped at nineteen, on a dorm bed on Third Avenue, looking at a Christmas card with his name on it in somebody else's handwriting. My father's name was something that had happened to me, like chicken pox. I didn't think it. I thought around it.

When a client won't say a name, that's always the name. I've written it in my notes a hundred times. The name they won't say is the book.

I sat at the kitchen table until three. I didn't type anything.

. . .

"Okay," Priya said, the next afternoon, on the phone from the ambulance bay, over the sound of someone yelling about a parking

spot. "Read me the Humbug part again."

I read it to her.

"Huh," she said.

"Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"You said huh."

"Huh is not a diagnosis." A siren went by on her end and she waited for it. "So either your ex-fiancé has hired a biographer and gone to Ohio to interview your childhood librarian, which, honestly, would be the first interesting thing he ever did, or—"

"Priya."

"Okay." A pause. A long one, for Priya. "Okay. I won't. You'll tell me when you want me to."

"I don't want you to."

"I know, babe." She never called me babe. She called nobody babe. "Eat something."

. . .

I showed Wes on the roof.

I hadn't meant to. I'd climbed up through the hatch at four with tea in a thermos, because he'd been up there since eight and the wind off the river was making the tar paper snap, and he was kneeling at the front of the building with a heat gun and a putty knife and one of the old window sashes from the fourth floor laid out on a blanket like a patient. He was taking a hundred and thirty years of paint off it, layer by layer. Gray, then green, then a terrible salmon, then cream.

"1891," he said, without looking up. "Original glass. Look." He tipped the sash toward the light and the panes wobbled the street, wavy and lilac-colored, the trees on Perry Street bending in them like

they were underwater. "That's the cylinder glass. They blew it in a big tube and split it and flattened it out. You can't get this anymore. When one of these breaks, it's gone."

"That's beautiful."

"It's evidence." He set the sash down. "Landmarks wants original fabric. This is fabric." Then he saw my face. "What happened."

I gave him the letter. I don't know why I'd brought it up. It had been in my coat pocket all day, the way Priya's test had been in January, my fingers finding the corner of it and going away again.

He read it kneeling on the blanket, with the heat gun ticking as it cooled. He read it twice. He was a slow reader, Wes. He read like he measured, every word once and then again to be sure.

He handed it back to me folded along its crease.

"Who's R.?" he said.

"Ryan."

He looked at me.

"You're biting your lip, Bennett."

I stopped. I hadn't known I was doing it. I'd done it my whole life when I lied, and the people who'd ever caught me at it would fit on one hand, and one of them was a man who'd lied to me every single day for three weeks and still noticed.

"I don't know who it is," I said. "That's the true thing. I don't know."

"Okay."

"I think I know. And I don't want to."

"Okay." He picked up the putty knife and put it down again. "You want me to sit on the stairs? Tuesday night? I'll sit on the third-floor landing in the dark like a creep. I'll just see who it is. I won't say anything. I won't even stand up."

"No."

"I'd be very quiet. I'm quiet when I want to be."

"You've never been quiet once in your life. You sneeze like a car backfiring." I put the letter in my pocket. "No, Wes. If you see him, then I'll have to know."

He looked at me for a while with the wind pulling at his hair and the wavy 1891 glass on the blanket between us, full of sky.

"Okay," he said. "I won't."

And he didn't. That's the thing about him. He doesn't argue with you about what you can take. He just takes the heat gun back out and goes back to work, and leaves the thermos of tea where you can reach it.

. . .

The second letter came on Friday.

I was waiting for it. I'd told myself I wasn't. I'd told myself I was up at twelve-thirty because I was writing, and at twelve-thirty-five because of the heartburn, which the book on Wes's workbench had promised me in a cheerful paragraph about the second trimester. At twelve-thirty-eight I was sitting on the floor of the hall, in two pairs of socks, with my back against the wall beside the door, not writing at all.

The street door. The careful steps. Heavy, then light. The banister's squeak. The third floor. The fourth.

And then he stopped.

He was right there. Through two inches of old wood, a hundred and thirty years of paint, he was standing on the landing. I could hear him breathing. Not loud. Just the slightly worn breath of a man who'd climbed four flights at an age when you feel four flights. I heard his

coat move. I heard something small and metal touch something, a key or a coin, in his pocket.

I could have opened it. I had my hand on the knob. I want to be honest: I put my hand on the knob, and the brass was cold, and I held it.

He stood there a long time. Longer than he needed to. I think he was deciding something too.

Then the envelope came under the door and slid across the boards and stopped against my sock.

The steps went down. Heavy, then light. The squeak. The cello C on the top step. The street door, and I heard it close carefully, the way you close a door on a sleeping house.

I didn't get up. I sat in the dark hall and opened it there, by the light that came under the door from the landing.

It was short. A half sheet, the same careful hand, the pencil pressed harder this time, as if he'd had to go over it.

> *Claire,*
>
> *I don't know if you read the first one. I hope it was all right that I came. I'll keep this short in case it wasn't.*
>
> *I've written you every birthday for eighteen years.*
>
> *I'm sorry none of them reached you.*
>
> *R.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Cold Snap

THE ARCTIC CAME DOWN the Hudson on the second Saturday in March, and Halvorsen Partners turned off the heat to meet it.

I want to be precise, because precision is the only revenge a writer gets. The forecast on Friday said a low of four degrees Saturday night, with a wind off the river that the weatherman described, with real enthusiasm, as "punishing." The notice by the mailboxes, in the thin gray typeface, said:

DEAR VALUED RESIDENTS. Scheduled boiler maintenance will take place Saturday 6 a.m. through Monday 6 p.m. We regret any inconvenience.

It had been taped up at eleven on Friday night. Mr. Ortiz found it at midnight taking out the recycling, and I know this because I heard him, from four floors up, through a closed window, say a word in Spanish that I later looked up and that does not translate so much as detonate.

. . .

They came at six. Two men in a white van with no name on it, who didn't look at anyone. They went down to the basement with Ortiz

behind them in his slippers, shouting, and they came back up forty minutes later carrying the burner assembly between them like a body, and a gray metal box under one man's arm with wires hanging out of it.

"Off-site refurbishment," the second one said, to the air in front of Ortiz's face. "It's on the work order."

"Refurbish what? I refurbish it! I refurbished it in November! It's refurbished!"

"Take it up with the owner, sir."

The van drove away down Perry Street with the heart of our building in the back of it.

And the radiator stopped.

I hadn't understood until then how much of the apartment it was. Since October that radiator had clanked and hissed and banged like a man in the basement hitting a pipe with a wrench, three loud knocks at the worst moments, the soundtrack of every important night of my life in 4B. I'd cursed it. Wes had cursed it more creatively. Theo had played a whole Sarabande over it once, in December, and it had joined in on the downbeats.

By eight o'clock it was cold to the touch and perfectly silent. It was the worst sound it ever made.

. . .

Wes was there by nine. I didn't call him. Ortiz did, and then Wes called me from the truck, and said only, "Put on the socks, all the socks," and hung up.

The basement of 41 Perry Street is the oldest part of the building, and it feels it. Stone walls sweating, a floor that slopes toward a drain, and the boiler squatting in the middle like an iron god that has been

asked to do one thing for a hundred years and has done it, grimly, without thanks. Ortiz calls it La Vieja. The old woman. He talks to it.

That morning there was a hole in the front of La Vieja where the burner should have been, and a ragged square on the wall where the controls had been, and Ortiz standing in front of it in his good coat with his hands hanging down like a man who's come home to find the door kicked in.

"I can rebuild the controls," Wes said, with his head inside the hole. "That's just wiring. I need a burner."

"Nobody has a burner on a Saturday."

"Somebody has a burner on a Saturday. Everybody's got a guy."

"I have a guy," Ortiz said slowly. "Stavros. In Maspeth. He sells parts out of his garage. He only answers the phone to me."

"Why only you?"

"Nineteen ninety-six." Ortiz took out his phone with great solemnity. "Don't ask."

In the corner, under a blue plastic tarp tied down with clothesline, something tall and square stood against the wall. I'd never noticed it. I put my hand on it while they argued about BTUs, and the shape under the tarp was familiar the way a word is on the tip of your tongue.

"What's this?"

"Mrs. Abernathy's piano," Ortiz said, dialing. "She taught lessons on the parlor floor, in the fifties. When she moved up to Riverdale she said it was too old to move, leave it with the building. Nobody's played it since Clinton." He put the phone to his ear. "Stavros. Hector. I know. I know what time it is. Listen to me."

. . .

I called Ryan at noon. I'm not proud of it. I knew it was a mistake while it was ringing.

He picked up. That was the first surprise.

"Claire." That voice. Warm and unbothered, a man answering from a brunch. "I was hoping you'd call."

"It's four degrees tonight, Ryan."

"I know. I saw. Brutal." I heard a fork on a plate. "The boiler work's been scheduled for weeks. It's in the notice. Everyone was informed."

"It was taped up at eleven last night."

"Then it's been scheduled since eleven last night." I could hear him smiling. "Look, I'm not the enemy here. Halvorsen made a very generous offer. Twenty-five thousand dollars is a lot of money to someone in your situation."

"My situation."

"You know. Single. Freelance." A pause, perfectly weighted. "Maybe it's a good weekend to visit your mother."

I hung up. I stood in the middle of 4B in my coat with my breath showing, and Gerald by the window with his few new leaves curled tight against the cold, and I thought about the forty-one screenshots in my phone. I could have read him one. Make them miserable till they take the money. Legally miserable. Lol. I could have heard his face change through the phone.

I didn't. I'm a writer. You don't read your best line to one person on the phone.

. . .

By seven the building was a refrigerator. The couple in 3B had their baby in a snowsuit indoors. The band girls in 4A were wearing every sweater they owned and practicing in fingerless gloves, very badly,

out of spite. Mrs. Feldman had gone to her nephew in Forest Hills "under protest, Claire, I want you to tell Hector it was under protest."

Mrs. Kaplan wouldn't open her door.

I knocked for five minutes before I heard her moving. When she finally opened it she was wearing a full-length mink coat from what I'd guess was 1971, a knitted hat with a pom-pom, and a pair of men's leather gloves, and her lips were a color lips should not be.

"I'm fine," she said, and coughed. It was a wet, deep, terrible cough, the kind that comes from somewhere you'd rather not know about.

"Mrs. Kaplan. You can't stay here."

"I stayed here in the blackout of '77." Her eyes were glittering in a way I didn't like. "I stayed here when my Leonard died, and in 2003 when the whole East Coast went dark, and in the hurricane. I am not leaving this apartment for a man with a font."

"It's a typeface," I said, uselessly.

"I know what it is." She coughed again and put a gloved hand on the doorframe. "Fifty-six years, Claire. I came here a bride."

I called Priya. She was finishing a shift. She came anyway, at eleven-fifteen, in scrubs under her parka, and stood in Mrs. Kaplan's freezing kitchen with a stethoscope she'd warmed in her armpit, listening to her back, and her face did the thing Priya's face does instead of panicking.

"Ruth," she said. "You're coming with me."

"I'm not going to a hospital."

"You're not going to a hospital. You're going to my hospital. It's different. The coffee's worse." Priya was already zipping the mink. "You have a fever of a hundred and two and a crackle in your right lung I could hear from Astoria. It's not a negotiation. You're a smart woman. Don't make me use the voice."

Mrs. Kaplan looked at her for a long moment.

"I like her," she said to me. "She's rude."

We took her to the ER on Seventh Avenue in a cab. It was pneumonia. They admitted her at two in the morning, and before they wheeled her upstairs she caught my sleeve with one gloved hand and pulled me down so she could see me without her glasses.

"You're the writer," she said. "Write it down. So it's not just old ladies complaining. Write it so they can't say it's old ladies complaining."

. . .

Danny answered on the first ring. I told him, standing outside the ER in the wind with my hands in my armpits.

"Everybody," he said. "The restaurant. Now. Bring the baby. Bring the old ladies. Bring the fig."

"Danny, it's three in the morning."

"I'm a chef. Three in the morning is when I'm nicest."

So that's where the tenants of 41 Perry Street spent the coldest night of the year: in a restaurant in the Meatpacking District with the chairs taken down off the tables and every space heater from the private dining room plugged into the bar. Danny made soup at four in the morning, the escarole and white bean his mother used to make, in a pot large enough to bathe a child. Nick made grilled cheese for anyone who wanted it and several people who didn't. The baby from 3B slept in a clean steel bus tub lined with forty linen napkins on the banquette, and Danny stood over it like a man guarding the crown jewels. The band girls played Joni Mitchell on an acoustic guitar under the meat hooks, quietly, actually well, and a dishwasher named Teo cried.

Gerald Fernando was given a two-top by the window. Danny put a reserved card on it.

Wes and Ortiz stayed at the building. Somebody had to keep the pipes from freezing. They ran space heaters in the basement off a cord from Ortiz's apartment and drained the lines on the top floor and took turns sleeping sitting up on the basement stairs. I know this because Wes texted me once, at four-fifteen: STAVROS HAS A BURNER. IT'S FROM 1994. HE WANTS TO BE PAID IN CASH AND PASTRY. HECTOR SAYS THIS IS NORMAL.

I didn't sleep.

I sat at the zinc bar where Danny had told me, in November, that he wanted my name on his book, and I wrote on the backs of Danny's order pads, the little green ones with carbon copies, because I couldn't wait for my laptop to wake up. I wrote until my hand cramped. Then I opened the laptop and typed it all, and kept going.

At five in the morning I called Maddie.

She picked up on the second ring. Pregnant women are always awake. It's a conspiracy.

"I'm going to use them," I said. "The texts. In something I'm writing. Under my name."

There was a long pause. I could hear her shift in bed, that heave and settle of a body with a whole other person in it.

"He'll know it was you," I said.

"Good," Maddie said.

. . .

I'll give you some of it. It's my book. I'm allowed.

THE BUILDING ON PERRY STREET

By Claire Bennett

The radiator in my apartment has been clanking since 1891. I know this because a carpenter told me, kneeling on the roof with a heat gun, that every pane of glass in this building is original, blown by hand in a long tube and split and flattened, so that when you look out at Perry Street the trees wobble like they're underwater. You can't get that glass anymore. Nobody makes it. The building has been holding it for a hundred and thirty-six years, the way it held all of us.

This weekend the new owners turned the heat off during the coldest night of the year, and the radiator stopped. My downstairs neighbor, who has lived here fifty-six years and came here a bride, sat in her kitchen in her late husband's gloves until her lips turned gray. She's in the hospital with pneumonia. She told me to write it down, so nobody could say it was just old ladies complaining.

So here it is, written down.

I'm a ghostwriter. For seven years I wrote other people's lives and kept my name off them. I'm putting my name on this one, because the man who turned off the heat has his name on something too. I've read his texts. Here is one of them, in full, exactly as he wrote it. Make them miserable till they take the money. Legally miserable. Lol.

I would like the record to show the lol.

I wrote about Mrs. Abernathy's piano under its tarp. About Luis with his decibel minimum and his three kids. About Ortiz talking to La Vieja. About letters under doors, because I couldn't write about that building without them. I didn't name Maddie. I named everyone else.

I sent it to Lorraine at six-forty in the morning with no subject line. She called me at six-forty-four.

"Who else has this," she said. Not hello.

"Nobody."

"Keep it that way for an hour. I'm calling someone." I heard her lighter click. "Claire. This is very good. Don't let it go to your head. It's very good."

. . .

The heat came back at twenty past seven on Sunday evening.

I was there. I'd come back from Danny's to see, with Gerald on his fig dolly in a cab, both of us wrapped in tablecloths. I was standing in the basement doorway when Wes, filthy to the elbows, said, "Okay, Hector," and Ortiz, in his good coat, crossed himself and flipped a switch.

La Vieja coughed. Choked. Thought about it.

Then she caught, with a sound like a lion turning over in its sleep, and blue flame showed in the little window, and somewhere above us, four floors up, the whole building shuddered and every radiator on Perry Street began to knock. Three loud bangs. A hiss. Bang.

Ortiz put both hands on the boiler's iron flank and leaned his forehead against it and said something to her in Spanish I didn't need translated.

Wes sat down on the bottom step. He looked like he'd been dragged behind the truck. There was grease in his eyebrow, in the scar, and his hands were shaking a little from cold and coffee and no sleep, and I sat down on the step beside him and put my head on his shoulder.

I almost said it. Right there. I had it in my mouth.

"Don't," he said, without opening his eyes. "Sun went down at seven-oh-four. Clocks went forward this morning. I checked. Doesn't count."

I laughed so hard Ortiz turned around.

. . .

It ran on Thursday online and on Sunday in print, in the big paper, the one with the crossword people do in pen. Lorraine had called someone.

I don't know how to describe what happened next except that it happened everywhere at once. By Thursday night the essay had been shared by a former mayor, two senators, an actress whose memoir I'd written and who wrote, "I know exactly who wrote this and she's right," and a man with four million followers who mainly posts videos of himself restoring cast-iron pans. Someone made the lol into a T-shirt. Someone made Mrs. Kaplan's gloves into a T-shirt. By Friday the city had sent inspectors to 41 Perry Street and they'd written up Halvorsen for eleven violations, and a city councilwoman stood on our stoop in a red coat for the evening news, and Mayor the bodega cat was photographed on his milk crate by a man from a wire service and became, briefly, a symbol of resistance.

Mrs. Kaplan gave a phone interview from her hospital bed on Saturday and told a radio host that she was "absolutely furious and having the time of her life."

Halvorsen's biggest investor turned out to be a teachers' pension fund in Ohio. In my mother's old state. Their spokesman said they were "reviewing the relationship." Ryan Cole did not post anything at all.

Theo texted from Lisbon at three in the morning his time: Sofia has printed it and taped it to the maestro's door. She is reading it aloud to the timpani section in Portuguese. They are very angry on your behalf. So am I. — T.

Under it, a second text, from June: He read it twice on the terrace and then went inside and played for an hour. That's his highest compliment. Also, lol. — J.

Wes didn't text. Wes came up the stairs on Friday night with a box of Stavros's pastries and set it on the kitchen table and said, "He says thank you. He says he cried. He says don't tell anyone."

. . .

Lorraine called the next Monday at eight in the morning, two cigarettes into her day.

I was eating dry toast at the kitchen table. Gerald had a new leaf. The radiator banged three times, and I'd stopped hearing it as an insult. I'd started hearing it as applause.

"Are you sitting down," she said.

"I'm eating toast."

"Put the toast down." I heard her inhale, and the long sound of her letting the smoke go into some cold Manhattan morning outside her office. "I've had six publishers on the phone since Thursday. Six. They read the essay. They want to know if there's more."

"There's more."

"I know there's more. I've seen the first eighty pages. I told them there's a great deal more." A pause. Lorraine never pauses. "Claire. Congratulations on your first byline."

"Thank you."

"Also," Lorraine said, "your book just sold."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Montclair

THERE IS A PARTICULAR kind of fame that happens to a building, and it is stupider than any other kind.

By the middle of the week after the essay, people were coming to look at 41 Perry Street. Not many. Enough. A woman with a tote bag that said BOOKS ARE MY LOVE LANGUAGE stood on the sidewalk for twenty minutes photographing our front door from several angles, as if it might do something. A walking tour that normally did the Friends apartment on Bedford added us to the route, and twice a day a young man with a beard and a microphone headset stopped a cluster of people in matching rain ponchos outside the stoop and said, "And this is the building where the lol happened."

A man was selling the lol T-shirts on Christopher Street for fifteen dollars. Mrs. Feldman bought four.

"For the grandchildren," she told me on the stairs, holding them up. "And one for Hector, he doesn't know yet."

Mrs. Kaplan came home on Tuesday in a wheelchair she didn't need, pushed by Priya, who'd taken her lunch break to do it. The band girls had made a banner. It said WELCOME HOME RUTH in glitter, and under that, smaller, because they'd run out of room, AND

DEATH TO THE TYPEFACE. Mrs. Kaplan read it from the bottom of the stoop for a long time with her chin up.

"Spelled correctly," she said finally. "That's something."

Luis, the man with the jackhammer and the decibel minimum, quit Halvorsen on Wednesday morning by walking out of the empty apartment on the first floor, crossing the hall, and knocking on Ortiz's door. Ortiz gave him coffee and the number of a contractor he knew in Sunset Park. They hugged in the hallway. Mrs. Feldman watched through her peephole and later described it to me as "very Italian, for a Puerto Rican and a Dominican."

Ryan didn't call. Ryan didn't post. Ryan, as far as anyone could tell, had gone to ground somewhere with good Wi-Fi, which was the only kind of ground he'd ever known.

And the letter came on Tuesday, at twelve-forty, the way I'd somehow known it would.

. . .

Claire,

Ellen read me your piece in the paper on Sunday. Twice. Then I read it myself at the kitchen table with my glasses on, and then I went out to the van and read it again, because I didn't want her to see my face.

You always did write your name too big. I'm glad you still do.

The thing about the glass is true. I've tuned pianos in houses with windows like that. You can hear old glass if you play loud enough. It hums at about a B-flat.

R.

. . .

I sat with that one for a long time.

I want to tell you that I put it together the first night, on the floor, with The Phantom Tollbooth in a stranger's pencil. A good narrator would have. In my books, the subject always realizes the thing in the right chapter, in a sentence I've polished until it looks like an accident.

But here's what I'd actually been doing for two weeks, which is what everyone does in real life, and what I've watched five clients do in front of a recorder. I'd been putting it together and taking it apart, over and over, like a child who's been told not to touch a clock.

It added up. It added up from the first line. And the sum was a sentence I wouldn't let myself finish, because the second letter had said every birthday for eighteen years, and none of them reached you, and if a man had been writing to me every birthday for eighteen years, the letters had gone somewhere. There was only one address on earth he could have known. A beige ranch house in Phoenix with a pug and a carpeted ramp and a woman who picked up the mail every morning at eleven, after the dog's walk.

I didn't finish the sentence. I put the letter in the notebook with the other two and closed it. I'm very good at not finishing sentences. It's a skill. Ask any of my clients.

. . .

Ortiz caught me on the stairs on Thursday morning with a bag of rock salt over his shoulder.

"Mija." He set it down on the landing. "Your mailman."

I stopped on the step.

"The Friday before the cold, the night of the notice, I'm taking out the recycling," he said. "Twelve-thirty, twelve-thirty-five. I didn't tell you, with the boiler and Ruth and everything. I'm telling you now. The cardboard, because Mrs. Feldman orders everything from the computer now, it's a sickness. And there's a man on the stoop. Older. Gray. Not homeless. A good coat, an old one, the kind with the buttons sewn back on by hand, you can tell. Nice face. Gentle. He sees me and he jumps a little, like he's caught. And I say, You need something, papá? And he says, No, no, I'm just dropping something for 4B. Very polite. And I think, okay, Hector, this is the R."

I held onto the banister.

"So I let him go up. I hold the door. I'm a romantic, mija, I can't help it." He shrugged with his whole body. "And when he comes down, he stops on the stoop. And he takes something out of his pocket. Like a little fork. Metal. Two prongs. And he hits it on the railing, ting, like this, and he holds it up to his ear and listens. And he smiles. Like he's checking the building is in tune." Ortiz shook his head, delighted. "And then he says, I have to make the last bus, and he asks me which way to the train, and he goes."

The stairwell was very quiet. Somewhere below us a radio was playing salsa.

A. Four-forty. Everything else is an opinion.

I hadn't heard that sentence in eighteen years. I heard it right then, on the stairs, in a voice I'd have told you I'd forgotten. He used to say it to me at the kitchen table in Clintonville, tapping the fork on the edge of the table, on the car door, once on my knee, so I squealed, and holding it to my ear. Hear that? That's an A. Four hundred and forty times a second. Everything else is an opinion.

I sat down on the stairs.

"Mija?" Ortiz bent over me. "Mija, you're white. You want water? You want Wesley?"

"I'm okay."

"You're not okay." He sat down beside me, heavily, on the step, with his rock salt. "You know him."

"I don't know," I said. "I think I knew him when I was six."

. . .

"We're not catching him," Priya said. "Let's be very clear. We're not doing anything. We're observing. Like birdwatchers."

It was Friday night, twelve-twenty, and we were in the bodega on the corner of Perry and Hudson, crouched behind the newspapers with a direct view of the stoop of 41 through the front window. Priya was in scrubs under her parka. She had brought a thermos of tea, a bag of almonds and, from somewhere, a pair of enormous binoculars.

"Where did you get binoculars?"

"My dad birds." She raised them and adjusted the focus. "He's very serious about it. He has a vest."

Amir, behind the counter, had stopped pretending not to watch us around twelve-ten. He'd turned the radio down. Mayor was asleep on the lottery tickets with one orange paw over his eyes.

"Is this about the building?" Amir asked.

"It's about her dad," Priya said, without lowering the binoculars.

"We don't know that," I said.

"We know that, babe."

Amir looked at me over the lottery tickets with the gravity of a man who has sold me four hundred coffees and seen me through two brothers. Then he reached under the counter and set a Snickers bar

on the newspapers in front of me, without a word, and went back to his phone.

At twelve-thirty-six a man turned onto Perry Street from the east.

He came from the direction of Seventh Avenue, walking fast under the bare trees, with his hands in the pockets of a long dark coat. A knit cap pulled low. A canvas bag over one shoulder, heavy, the strap worn white. He wasn't big. He walked a little stooped, the way tall men walk when they've spent their lives bending over things. When he got to 41 he stopped at the foot of the stoop and looked up at the building, all the way up to the fourth floor, to my window, where the lamp was on because I'd left it on.

He stood there for a second, looking up at the lamp.

Then he climbed the stoop, heavy step and lighter step, one hand on the railing, and let himself in through the street door that Ortiz, the romantic, had left on the latch.

"Claire," Priya said. She'd lowered the binoculars. "Breathe."

"I'm breathing."

"You're not. I can see you not doing it. I do this for a living."

Five minutes. I counted them on the clock above the beer fridge. Upstairs, in my building, a stranger was climbing my stairs, the squeak, the third floor, the fourth, and kneeling on my landing, and sliding an envelope under my door into an empty hall.

At twelve-forty-one he came back out. He stopped on the stoop. He took something small out of his coat pocket and tapped it on the iron railing, and even from across the street, through the bodega glass, I swear I heard it. Ting. He held it to his ear.

And then he walked.

. . .

We followed him. Of course we did. We had binoculars.

He went east along Perry, up Seventh Avenue, and down into the Christopher Street station, and took the uptown 1. We rode in the next car. I stood at the door between the cars and watched him through two panes of scratched glass. He sat at the end of the bench with the canvas bag on his knees and his eyes closed, and his lips moved a little, like he was counting, or singing.

"He looks tired," Priya said quietly.

He looked tired. He looked like a man who'd done a day's work and then another one.

At Times Square he got off, and we went after him through the long tiled tunnel to the Port Authority, past the shuttered shoe shine and the man playing saw with a violin bow, up the escalators into the bus terminal, which at one in the morning is the saddest building in the Western Hemisphere. Fluorescent light. A floor the color of old teeth. A man asleep across three seats with his shoes in his arms.

He went to a gate on the second floor. There was a bus waiting at it, engine running, the sign over the windshield glowing orange.

MONTCLAIR.

I stopped walking.

Priya almost ran into me.

I hadn't seen that word since I was nineteen. I'd seen it in the top left corner of an envelope, in a woman's round, careful hand, above a house number on Grove Street. I'd thrown the card away that night. I'd kept the envelope. I had it, still, in a manila folder in the tote bag of notebooks that I'd never let an airline touch, behind the drafts of five books with other people's names on them. I'd never asked myself why I kept it. You don't ask yourself things like that. You just keep moving the folder from apartment to apartment.

He showed the driver something and climbed on. I watched him through the big dark windows find a seat halfway back, on the side by me. He put the bag down. He took off the cap.

His hair had gone gray, nearly white, all of it. It had been brown when I was eleven, brown like mine, with a cowlick in the front that never lay flat, and the cowlick was still there, white now, still not lying flat, still refusing on principle. His face was thinner than I remembered and lined around the eyes, and there was a scatter of freckles across his nose that I had seen every morning of my life in the bathroom mirror and never once thought of as anyone's but mine.

He took the tuning fork out of his coat. He tapped it on his knee. He held it to his ear and closed his eyes and listened, in the orange light, on the last bus to Montclair, like a man checking that something in the world was still true.

Then the doors folded shut, and the bus pulled out, and he was gone down the ramp into the dark.

Priya had my arm. I don't know when she took it.

"That's my father," I said.

"I know, babe."

"That's my dad."

"I know."

. . .

I called Wes from a bench in the Port Authority at one-twenty in the morning. He picked up on the first ring, the way he always did, as if he slept with the phone in his hand. He probably did.

"Bennett."

"I'm at Port Authority."

"Okay." Not a question. I heard keys. "Which door?"

"Eighth Avenue."

"Twenty minutes."

It was eighteen. The green truck pulled up on Eighth Avenue with the heater roaring and the window down, and Priya climbed in first, into the middle, without a word, and I sat by the window, and Wes looked at me across her for a long moment and then put the truck in gear.

He didn't ask. Priya didn't tell him. We were going down Ninth Avenue past the dark warehouses before I said it.

"It's my dad. R. It's my father."

"Okay," Wes said.

"He lives in Montclair. He takes the last bus."

"Okay." He drove a block. "You want me to follow the bus? I can catch a bus. This truck's got more in it than people think."

"No."

"Okay."

Priya, between us, put her head on Wes's shoulder and closed her eyes. "I'm not sleeping," she said. "I'm resting my eyes. I've been awake for twenty-six hours and I just birdwatched a father."

"You did good," Wes told her.

"I know I did," Priya said, and was asleep by Fourteenth Street.

. . .

I did the math on Saturday morning, at the kitchen table, with a pencil, on the back of the Halvorsen buyout letter, the way I'd once done a timeline on Danny Russo's whiteboard out of a phone call and a date.

Eighteen birthdays. Twelve through twenty-nine. Columbus, then Phoenix. A girl who didn't know her own father's address, and a man

who only knew one of hers.

I knew whose hands the mail had gone through. I'd known since the second letter. It's not that I hadn't done the math. It's that I knew what the answer was going to cost, and I'd been very carefully not paying.

My mother calls on Sundays. She has never once in eleven years called on a weekday, and I'd never once called her on anything but a Sunday, either. We had a system. It was a good system. It worked like a pressure valve on a boiler; it let out exactly enough to keep the whole thing from going.

It was Saturday. I called her.

She picked up on the fourth ring, breathless.

"Claire? Honey? What's wrong? Is it the baby? Is it the building? Gary saw you on the news, the woman with the gloves, he said, isn't that Claire's building, I said, it can't be, Claire would have called—"

"Mom."

"—and Biscuit's been so anxious, I don't know if it's the weather or the new food, the vet says he can wear a little vest, it's like a hug, it's called a ThunderShirt, I ordered him one in navy, Gary says—"

"Mom. Did Dad ever write to me?"

And then there was a silence.

It was a Phoenix silence. I could hear every part of it. A golf tournament on the television in the den, a man murmuring about the green at Bay Hill. The ice maker in their big refrigerator dropping its ice into the tray, a small avalanche. Next door, a leaf blower going, because in Phoenix someone is always blowing a leaf somewhere. And under it all, close to the phone, the wet, labored, comfortable snoring of a pug, asleep in someone's lap.

It went on. Ten seconds. Twenty. I counted it the way I'd counted the nine dogs on Weber Road. Thirty.

At forty-one seconds, my mother spoke.

Her voice was a voice I had never heard her use. Not the dog voice. Not the Sunday voice. Not the voice she'd used at Bettina's, saying my name, half worried and half already disappointed. It was very small and very clear, and it came from somewhere that had been shut for a long time.

"I'm coming to New York," my mother said. "I'm bringing the box."

A pause. The ice maker. The pug.

"And Biscuit."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Box

MY MOTHER ARRIVED ON Monday at four in the afternoon in a quilted vest the color of a Creamsicle, which is what women in Phoenix believe people wear in New York in March.

She wouldn't let me meet her at LaGuardia. "I'll take a taxi," she'd said, in the voice of a woman announcing she would cross the Andes. So I waited on the stoop with Mr. Ortiz, who had put on his good brown jacket and swept the steps twice, and at four-ten my mother got out of a cab backwards, holding a quilted tote bag in one arm and a Dillard's shopping bag against her chest with the other, the way you'd carry something out of a burning house.

The tote bag growled.

"Mrs. Bennett," Ortiz said, coming down the steps with his hand out. "Welcome to Perry Street. I'm Hector."

"Oh, you're Hector." My mother looked at him as if he were a celebrity. "Claire says you know everything."

"Only about the building."

She held out the tote bag to him, and a flat, furious face with bulging eyes rose out of it, looked at Ortiz, and sneezed. "This is Biscuit. He's very anxious. He doesn't like men."

. . .

Biscuit liked Wes.

It was the last uncomplicated thing that happened that day. Wes had heard the cab from the roof, and he appeared in the street door with tar paper dust on his knees and said, "Mrs. Bennett. Let me get that," and took her suitcase.

Biscuit made a sound I have only otherwise heard from a teakettle. He came out of the tote bag like something out of a cannon and stood on his back legs with his front paws on Wes's knee, panting, adoring, his whole hind end going back and forth like a windshield wiper.

My mother stared.

"He doesn't do that," she said. "He doesn't do that for anyone. It took Gary two years."

Wes let the pug lick his chin with an expression of profound patience.

"Is this the carpenter?" my mother asked me, in a whisper that could have been heard in New Jersey.

"Yes, ma'am," said Wes, from under the dog.

At the top of the four flights, when my mother sat down on the green couch with the Dillard's bag on her knees and her vest zipped to the chin and began to talk, he looked at me once and picked up the leash.

"I'm gonna take him around the block," he said. "Show him the cat."

"He won't walk for anyone," my mother said.

Biscuit was already at the door.

. . .

She talked for eleven minutes. I timed it on the stove clock.

The man in 14C with the onion sandwich. The ThunderShirt, which a TSA agent had complimented. The new carpet in the den, which was called Desert Oat. A woman in her water aerobics class who'd had a facelift and now looked "like she was facing a strong wind on purpose."

I let her. I watched her hands holding the top of the Dillard's bag closed, the knuckles white, and I understood for the first time in my life what I was listening to. I'd spent six years in rooms with people who talked about the dishwasher so they wouldn't have to talk about the funeral. I knew the sound of a wall going up. I'd just never recognized it in my mother's voice, because I'd been hearing it since I was eleven, and you don't hear the radiator in your own house.

At eleven minutes she stopped in the middle of a sentence about the carpet.

She looked down at the bag. She took a breath, and then another one, a smaller one, the way you'd check bathwater with your wrist.

"I can't," she said. "I can't do it this way. I practiced on the plane. I had a whole thing."

"Mom."

"I wrote it on the back of the safety card." She almost laughed. "You're the writer."

She reached into the bag and took out a shoebox.

An Easy Spirit box, Women's 8 Wide, Taupe, the cardboard gone soft at the corners where it had been taped and retaped, packing tape over Scotch tape over masking tape gone brown, and two rubber bands around it, one red and one so old it had stopped being any color. She held it on her knees with both hands flat on the lid.

"Your father," my mother said, "loved you more than anything he ever loved. More than the drinking. I need you to know that first. And it was never enough. That was the whole problem. It was never enough to make him stop."

. . .

I'm not going to write all of it. Some of it is hers. But these are the truest things anyone in my family has ever said out loud, and it took her eighteen years.

He played hotel bars until one in the morning and got home at three, and some nights he didn't, and in the daytime he tuned other people's pianos with his hands shaking so badly he had to hold his own wrist to set the wrench. The night I read him The Phantom Tollbooth on the floor, when I was ten, he hadn't been unable to sleep. He'd been trying to stop. It was his first time trying. He'd been shaking on the couch for two days, and I'd come downstairs and found him, and he'd asked me not to get my mother, and I hadn't. I'd gotten a book.

"I came down at six," she said, "and you were asleep on his feet, and he was looking at the ceiling with tears running into his ears, and he said, Lynnie, she did the Humbug in an English accent. By that Friday he was drinking again."

And in October, when I was eleven, a month after my birthday, he picked me up from the Whetstone library on a Tuesday night and fell asleep at a green light on High Street. Not a red light. A green one. I was in the back seat with a library book, she said. A man in the car behind got out and knocked on the window, and knocked, and I don't remember any of it. I remember the book. It was about a girl who lived in a museum.

"I asked him to leave that night," my mother said. "And he went. He didn't argue. He packed a bag and kissed you on the head while you were asleep and he went."

"I know that part."

"No, honey. You know he left." She looked at the box. "You don't know I asked."

. . .

He got sober nine months later, in a church basement in German Village, with a man named Phil who drove him there every morning for a month.

The first letter came in September. My twelfth birthday.

"I opened it," my mother said. "Standing at the counter. I opened it because I thought it would be an excuse, or money, or the kind of thing he used to write on napkins at the Hyatt. And it was the most beautiful thing anyone has ever written about you." Her chin wobbled. She steadied it. "And I was so angry, Claire. I was so angry I couldn't see the page. Where had that man been? I'd been both of you for a year. I'd been both of you for twelve years, if I'm honest. And now he gets to be lovely? On paper? Ninety-one days, and he's lovely?"

"So you kept it."

"I put it in a shoebox. I said, when he's a year. When he's been a year, he's earned it, and I'll give her all of them." She pressed her lips together. "And then he was a year. And you'd stopped asking about him. Do you remember that? Eighth grade. You came home and put your backpack on the table and said, I don't want to talk about Dad anymore, ever. And I was so relieved I went into the bathroom and ran the water."

I'd forgotten I remembered.

"And every year it came. Every September. And every year the thing I'd done was a year older, and it was harder to pick up." She looked at me then, finally. "It's like a dent in the car. The first day you could just say it. By the tenth year you'd have to explain why you've been parking it nose-in against the garage for a decade."

"Did he write to you?"

"When you were seventeen. He asked where you were going to college. He asked if you were all right." She closed her eyes. "I wrote back one time. On the back of a Christmas card list, because it was the paper on the counter. I said, She's read every one. She doesn't want to answer. She's going to New York in the fall. Please let her be."

The radiator banged three times. Neither of us jumped.

"That's the worst sentence I ever wrote," my mother said. "I wrote it in about a minute. He believed it for twelve years."

"The Christmas card," I said. "When I was nineteen."

"His wife called me. Ellen. She was very nice. She said he couldn't do it anymore, write to somebody who never answered, and she wanted to try something that didn't need an answer. A card. I thought, a card doesn't say anything." She opened her eyes. "I gave her your dorm. I'm sorry. I didn't think about what it would look like, in her handwriting. I didn't think."

"Did you read them? The rest?"

"No." Very quietly. "Only the first one. Never again. If I'd read them I'd have had to know he was getting better."

. . .

I asked her why now. It came out hard, and I let it.

"Gary found the box in October," she said. "Clearing the hall closet for the carpet. He didn't say anything for a week. Then he sat down on the end of the bed and said, Lynnie, you have to. And I said, after the wedding. I said I'd give them to you after the wedding, when you were happy, so it wouldn't matter so much." She laughed, terribly. "And then there wasn't a wedding."

"And then I called you."

"And then you called me on a Saturday." She looked at the window, at Gerald, at the bare trees on Perry Street. "Gary said if I didn't get on the plane he'd mail them himself. Priority. With tracking."

I went to the window and stood by Gerald with my arms crossed, because I couldn't look at her and say it.

"Every Sunday," I said. "For eleven years. You called me every single Sunday and talked about the dog."

"Yes."

"You talked about the dog so you'd never have to talk about this."

Behind me my mother made a small sound.

"Biscuit never asks me anything," she said.

I put my hand over my mouth.

"Every Sunday I'd pick up the phone and I'd think, today. Today I'll tell her. And then I'd hear your voice, and you'd sound tired, or happy, or you'd be telling me about some book you were writing that you weren't allowed to tell me about, and I'd say, Biscuit had his teeth cleaned." She was crying now, finally, without any noise, the way I do. "Eleven years of Sundays, Claire. I'm not going to ask you to forgive me. I flew here so I wouldn't have to ask you anything. I just came to give them to you." She held out the box. "They're yours. They were always yours. I just held them."

. . .

I asked her to go to her hotel. I said it as kindly as I could, which wasn't very.

Wes came back with Biscuit at six, took one look at the room, and said, "I'll drive you, Mrs. Bennett. It's on my way," which it was not, Waverly Place being a ten-minute walk east and Red Hook being in another borough. My mother put the dog back in the tote bag and stood at the door of 4B in her Creamsicle vest and looked at me, and then at my stomach, which had started, that month, to show under a sweater.

Her hand came up halfway and stopped in the air.

"May I?" she said.

I'd told her in February, from the roof, on a Sunday, because I'd decided I wasn't going to be a person who kept things from her mother. She'd said, Oh, Claire, and then nothing for a while, and then that Biscuit had gained a pound. She had never once asked to touch anything of mine. She'd never asked me anything at all.

"Not tonight, Mom," I said.

She nodded. She put her hand down.

"That's fair," she said, and went down the stairs with Wes behind her carrying the dog.

. . .

He came back at eight with Chinese food and a bag from the hardware store, and didn't ask me anything either. I'd have married him for that alone.

"I'm not gonna read them," he said. "I'll be on the floor. Tell me if you want me to go."

"Don't go."

So I sat on the green couch with the box on my lap and my feet under me, and Wes sat on the floor with his back against the couch, near enough that I could feel his shoulder against my shin through the velvet, and he took a cedar spindle out of the hardware bag and a sheet of fine sandpaper and began, very slowly, very quietly, to sand it by hand. It made a sound like someone saying shh, over and over, for hours.

I took the rubber bands off. The old one broke.

Eighteen envelopes, in order. Addressed in his careful upright hand to me, care of her, first in Columbus and then, from my fifteenth, in Phoenix. The stamps went from forty-four cents to seventy-eight. Only the first one had been opened. The rest were sealed. Seventeen years of glue that had never been asked to give.

I opened them with Theo's brass letter opener, the one shaped like a heron.

. . .

Claire, today is ninety-one days. I know you don't know what that means yet, and I hope you never have to. It means I'm counting. I'm not asking to come home. I know what I did. I'm asking you to know that somewhere in Ohio a man is counting every day for you, and I'm going to keep counting where you can see it. Happy birthday. You're twelve. I bet you're taller than your library card.

Fourteen. I hope someone is nice to you at lunch. If no one is, eat in the library. It worked for me for four years and look how I turned out. Don't answer that.

Sixteen. Your mother says you're driving now. Please be better at it than me. Check your mirrors. Don't get in a car with anyone you'd be scared to be in a car with. I'm the reason I know that, and I'm sorry that I'm the reason.

At sixteen, Wes stopped sanding for a moment. Then started again.

Eighteen. Your mother wrote to me. She says you've read all of them and you don't want to write back. That's all right. You don't owe me an answer. You don't owe me anything. I'll keep writing in case you change your mind, and if you don't, I'll keep writing anyway, because I don't know how to stop, and Ellen says it's cheaper than a bar.

Twenty-one. You can buy a drink now. I'm not going to say anything about that. I'm only going to say I hope somebody who loves you buys the first one, and I hope you don't like it very much.

Twenty-five. I tuned a Steinway in a church in Nutley today that somebody's grandmother left them, and the whole time there was a little girl under the bench with a book, maybe six, in socks, reading out loud to herself, doing the voices. I finished the job. Then I went out and sat in the van for an hour. I've been sober thirteen years and that's the closest I ever came. I didn't. I want you to know I didn't.

I had to stop at twenty-five. I put the letter face down on my knee and sat there with my hand over it, and Wes put the sandpaper down without looking up and reached back and put his hand on my foot, over both pairs of socks, and left it there.

At four in the morning he made tea. I didn't drink it. I held it.

Twenty-eight. I read a book this year that a senator's wife wrote, and there was a sentence on page two hundred and twelve where she forgives her husband, and I thought, whoever wrote that sentence knew exactly what it cost. I don't know why I'm telling you. I just thought you'd like that sentence.

I laughed, out loud, at four-twenty in the morning, and Wes said, "What," and I said, "Nothing. He read my book. He doesn't know it's my book." And then I couldn't stop crying, and he turned around and knelt on the floor and held onto my knees, and I let him.

The last one had a September postmark. This past September. Two weeks before Bettina's.

Twenty-nine. Ellen found your wedding website. She's better at computers than me. I looked at the picture of you two on the beach for an hour. You look like your grandmother when you laugh. I hope he deserves you. I hope he knows you count the dogs.

I'll stop writing if you want me to. You only have to say. Just one word and I'll stop.

R.

I sat with it. Eighteen years, and all he'd ever asked of me was one word, and nobody had let me say it.

Then I saw there was something else in that envelope. A second one, folded in half and tucked inside the first, the way you'd hide a newer bill inside an older one so nobody sees the total. A December postmark, Montclair. Same hand. Same address in Phoenix. It had come to my mother three months ago. She hadn't opened it either. She'd just tucked it inside the last one, sealed, so the two of them would reach me together.

I slit it with the heron. Inside, a clipping. Page Six, December nineteenth. My face from Danny's Halloween party, laughing at something outside the frame. GHOST STORY. The secret pen behind five bestsellers. A West Village walk-up. Two brothers.

And under it, on a half sheet, in pencil, pressed so hard it had dented the clipping through the paper:

I didn't stop.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rob

I WROTE HIM BACK on Tuesday morning, on a yellow legal pad, at the kitchen table, in the sun.

It took four hours and eleven drafts. Seven years of putting other people's hearts into sentences and I couldn't get one of my own to stand up. The first draft was three pages. The fourth was a single line that said Why, which I tore off and chewed while I thought about the fifth. Wes came down from the roof at noon, looked at the floor around my chair, which was covered in balled yellow paper like a hailstorm had happened only to me, went back up without a word, and came down twenty minutes later and set a peeled orange next to my elbow.

In the end I wrote what June had written, in October, to a man who wasn't there. I stole it. I'm a ghostwriter. We steal from the best.

R.

I got them. All of them. Last night, on the couch, in one night. Wednesday, ten in the morning. The end of Pier 45, off Christopher Street. The last bench.

Claire

I taped it to the outside of my door at eye level, the way I'd once taped a note to it that said He isn't here.

. . .

He came at twelve-forty.

I was sitting on the floor of the hall with my back against the wall beside the door, the way I had on the Friday of the second letter, in two pairs of socks, and I heard him come up. Heavy step, lighter step. The banister's squeak. The top step's low C.

He stopped on the landing.

I heard the paper. The small dry tearing of tape coming away from old paint, very slowly, as if he didn't want to hurt the door. Then nothing. For a long time, nothing. I sat there and listened to my father read seven lines on a landing under a forty-watt bulb.

Then I heard him sit down.

I don't know how I knew. A change in the sound of the boards, a creak, the rustle of a long coat settling. He'd sat down on the top step with his back to my door. I put my palm flat on the wood and left it there. I don't know if he knew. I'd like to think he did. We sat like that, back to back, with two inches of 1891 between us, for nine minutes by the clock on my phone. Neither of us opened anything.

At twelve-fifty-one he got up. He had a bus.

A piece of paper came under the door. A half sheet, torn from something, folded once. I opened it in the light from the landing.

Yes.

. . .

He was there before me. Of course he was. I'd learn that about him later, that he was early for everything now, forty minutes, an hour, because for eleven years he'd been late for everything that mattered and he was still paying it off a little at a time, like a loan.

It was the last day of March and the river was bright and cold and enormous, the wind coming down from upstate with ice still in it. A man was doing tai chi near the entrance to the pier, very slowly, like he was underwater. And at the far end, on the last bench, where June had sat for a year of Sundays, a man in a long dark coat with buttons sewn on by hand sat with his hands on his knees, facing New Jersey.

He heard me on the boards and stood up.

Up close he was smaller than he'd been when I was six, which I suppose is the oldest trick in the world. Tall but stooped, a man who'd spent his life bending toward instruments. White hair, the cowlick still at the front, refusing. A thin face, lined, with my freckles on it. Bright blue eyes that watered in the wind. A tuning fork in his breast pocket where other men keep a pen.

He didn't move toward me. He stopped at the edge of it, whatever it was, the way I'd come to see he always stops, at the edge of anything he's afraid he hasn't earned.

"Hi, Claire," my father said.

His voice. I hadn't known I remembered it. It went into me at some angle I had no defense for, below the ribs, where the good lines come from.

"Hi, Dad."

He closed his eyes for a second. Just a second. Then he opened them and did something with his hands, a small helpless gesture at the bench, like a waiter showing you to a table.

"I don't know what I'm allowed," he said. "So I thought I'd ask you to sit down. And then I'll ask you about the rest. One at a time."

I sat down. He sat down. There was a foot of bench between us. The river slapped the pilings.

"You look like your grandmother," he said. "My mother. When she was angry. She'd sit just like that. I'm not saying you're angry."

"I'm a little angry."

"You're allowed." He looked at his hands. "You're allowed everything. That's the only thing I've figured out in seventeen years. Eighteen in July."

. . .

I'd written a list of questions on the back of the legal pad, in order, like an interview. I never took it out of my pocket.

He apologized. He did it the way he wrote, plainly, in full sentences, without decoration, as if he'd said each one to himself so many times on so many buses that they'd worn smooth. For the drinking. For the nights. For the Phantom Tollbooth, which he'd made me read to a man shaking on a couch. For the green light on High Street, which I didn't remember and he did, every day. For leaving without waking me. For the Christmas card in Ellen's handwriting.

"I couldn't sign it," he said. "That year. I couldn't put my name on one more thing that nobody answered. I'm sorry. I know what it looked like. Ellen did it because she loves me, and it was the worst thing I ever let anybody do for me."

"I kept the envelope," I said.

He looked at me.

"I threw the card away. I kept the envelope. I've moved it to five apartments. It's in a folder behind five books I wrote with other people's names on them." I laughed, and it came out wrong. "I know. I know what that says about me."

"It says you're a Bennett," my father said. "We keep the wrong half of everything."

Then he said, "I'm not sorry for the letters. I want you to know that's the one thing on the list I'm leaving off. I'd write them all again."

"Mom told you I read them."

"She did."

"She told you I didn't want you."

"She told me you didn't want to answer. I decided the rest myself." He was quiet. "Don't be too hard on your mother, Claire. I'm not saying don't be hard. Be hard. She earned some of it. But I gave her eleven years of reasons, and she only kept one. I've thought about that a lot. If I'd been her, I don't know what I'd have kept."

"How did you know?" I said. "That they didn't reach me. You wrote it. None of them reached you. How did you know?"

"Ellen," he said, and the smile came, slow and surprised, and I saw where mine came from. It's a strange thing, to see your own face on someone else's mouth. "She sat at the kitchen table in December with the Page Six and said, Rob. A girl who writes for a living doesn't go eighteen years without writing the word stop. And I sat there. And she was right. Ellen's always right. It's very hard to live with."

"So you came."

"So I came." He looked out at the river. "I don't drive at night. It's one of my rules. I've got a lot of rules. Ellen says I'm a refrigerator. I tune the piano at a club on Seventh Avenue South, Tuesday and

Friday nights, after the last set. Little place, a Yamaha that wants to be a Steinway. I finish around twelve-thirty. It's ten minutes to Perry Street if I walk fast. And the last bus out of Port Authority is one-ten." He shrugged, one shoulder, exactly like me. "So it was twelve-forty. It was the only twelve-forty I had."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. I'd built a whole theory of the hour, of letters and doors and the ghost of a woman in a red coat. It was a bus schedule.

"Why R.?" I said. "Why not Dad?"

He didn't answer for a long time.

"I signed the first ones Dad," he said finally. "Through about sixteen. Then I thought, she's read them and she doesn't want to answer. And I thought, you don't get to keep calling yourself that to somebody who's told you no. It's presuming." He turned the tuning fork in his pocket with two fingers without taking it out. "I didn't think I'd earned the other word. I still don't. I'll wait till you say it."

"I said it. When I sat down."

"I know you did," my father said. "I'm still sort of sitting with it."

. . .

He'd brought me something. He said it was stupid three times before he'd take it out of his coat, and then he held it out in his palm with his fingers half-closed over it, as if it might fly off.

A bicycle bell. Chrome gone soft and cloudy, a little lever on the side, a dent in the dome.

"I took it off when you outgrew the bike," he said. "You were nine. You were very upset about it, you wanted the bell on the new one, and the new one came with its own bell, and you said it was the wrong bell." He put it in my hand. "I kept it in my toolbox. It's been in

every toolbox I ever had. I take it out sometimes on a job and ring it, and people think I'm crazy."

I rang it. A small cracked sound in the wind, like a bird that's been in a cupboard. The tai chi man stopped, very slowly, and looked at us, and very slowly started again.

"Nine dogs," I said.

"Ten if you count the cat. You counted the cat."

I put the bell in my coat pocket and kept my hand over it.

And then I told him about the baby. I hadn't planned to, either. I unbuttoned my coat in the wind and showed him, under the sweater, the small hard curve that had shown up that month like a decision, and I said, "I'm pregnant. August. You're going to be a grandfather," and my father looked at it, and then at me, and put both of his hands over his face.

He sat like that for a while. He just held his own face.

When he took his hands down his eyes were wet and absolutely clear.

"I'll be sober for that," he said. "I'll be there sober. If you want me there."

"I want you there."

"Then I'll be there."

. . .

I saw Wes before my father did. A big man in a canvas jacket coming down the length of the pier from Christopher Street with his hands full, three cups in a cardboard tray and a paper bag, walking carefully into the wind. He'd said he'd come at eleven. It was eleven exactly. He was always on time for me in the way my father had learned to be early for everyone.

He stopped a few feet from the bench and stood there with the tray, not coming any closer, and looked at me, checking. I nodded.

"Mr. Bennett," Wes said. "I brought coffee. I didn't know how you take it, so it's black, and there's a lot of sugar in the bag." He held out the tray to me. "Bennett. Tea. Ginger. The guy at the bodega made a face."

My father looked up at him. Up, and up. Wes waited, holding the coffee, the scar through his eyebrow white in the cold.

My father took the coffee. He took four sugars out of the bag and put all four in, one at a time, without apology.

"We all take a lot of sugar," he said. "It's what we have instead."

Then he looked at Wes for a long time over the cup, the way he'd later look at Carol's piano, and at Theo's cello, and, months later, at the baby, with his head tipped a little to one side, listening for whether the thing was true.

"You the one?" my father said.

Wes didn't look at me. That's the part I keep. He didn't check with me first, or glance over, or make a joke about it. He just answered, standing there with his hands in his jacket pockets in the wind off the Hudson, to a man he'd known for forty seconds.

"I'm the one who's still here," Wes said.

My father nodded slowly.

"That's most of it," he said. "Take it from a man who wasn't." He moved over on the bench. "Sit down, son. You're blocking New Jersey."

. . .

It was Mr. Ortiz's idea, afterward. I'd told him about the bus and the club and the Yamaha that wanted to be a Steinway, and Ortiz had

stood in the lobby of 41 with his hand over his heart and said, "Mija. Mrs. Abernathy's piano," and taken us down to the basement himself.

So that was where the afternoon went. In the oldest room in the building, with the stone walls sweating and La Vieja ticking warm in the middle like a contented animal, and Ortiz holding a work light, and Wes and Ortiz pulling the blue tarp off an upright piano that nobody had played since Clinton.

It was a Steinway. Of course it was. A 1920s upright with the gilt worn off the name and the black finish gone cloudy and crazed, two keys missing their ivory. My father stood in front of it with his hands at his sides and said, very softly, "Oh, look at you," the way you'd say it to a dog someone had left on a highway.

He played one chord. It sounded like a drawer of cutlery falling down a staircase. "Okay," he said, and took off his coat.

It took him three hours. He had everything in the canvas bag: the tuning hammer, the rubber mutes, a little flashlight he held in his teeth. He took the front off and there were the hammers, like a row of small felt-headed men waiting for something. He struck the fork on his knee, ting, and held it to the wood, and then he struck one note, and listened, and turned the hammer a hair, and struck it again. Again. Again. The same note, over and over, coming truer by degrees you could barely hear and then suddenly could.

Ortiz turned the radio off. I've never seen him do that since.

Wes fixed the lid hinge without being asked and then sat on the basement stairs and watched my father work with an expression I'd only ever seen on him at a window from 1891. Mrs. Feldman came down with rugelach and stayed. Mrs. Kaplan came down in her mink, on Priya's arm. At some point Ortiz brought out the chalkboard and offered my father the chalk, and my father thought about it for a

while and wrote something on the back of one of Hector's paper slips instead and folded it, and Ortiz read it and put his hand on his chest and said, "Roberto. That's not how a pool works."

At ten to seven my father put the front back on, and wiped the keys with his handkerchief, and sat down on the bench.

He didn't say anything. He put his foot on the soft pedal. And he played.

I knew it from the first two notes. I don't know how. I'd have told you I didn't. It came up out of that cloudy old Steinway like water coming up through sand, slow, quiet, the left hand rocking under the right like somebody walking very carefully past a sleeping house. The moon song. I'd called it the moon song when I was six.

And I was under the piano.

I was six, in Clintonville, at two in the morning, in my nightgown and my socks, sitting on the cold floor under the bench of the old Baldwin in the front room, my back against his ankles. He'd come home from the Hyatt and he couldn't sleep, and he'd play with the soft pedal down so he wouldn't wake the house, and he never woke the house. He only ever woke me. And I'd come down the stairs in the dark, the fourth one creaking, and sit under there and listen until he finished, and he'd reach down without looking and put his hand on my head.

I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten all of it. I'd been awake at two in the morning for twenty-three years and I had never once asked myself why.

Debussy. Clair de lune. My mother had wanted to name me Clara, after her grandmother. My father had wanted the song. They'd met in the middle, which was how they did everything, right up until they didn't.

I'd sat on the floor of 4B in November with my back against a bedroom door and cried at a cello at two in the morning, and I'd thought it was because of the man playing it. And it was. It was. But it was also a girl in socks under a piano bench in Ohio, who'd been waiting up for somebody to play for her at two in the morning her whole life, and had forgotten who she was waiting for.

My father played it to the end. Softly, the soft pedal down, in a basement full of people holding very still.

Then, without looking, the way he used to, he reached his hand back toward where I'd have been, toward the floor, toward the space under the bench where a six-year-old would sit.

I was standing behind him. I was twenty-nine years old and four and a half months pregnant and I'd been standing there the whole time.

I put my head under his hand.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Twenty Weeks

ACCORDING TO THE LAMINATED sign in the imaging suite at Lenox Hill, a patient could bring up to two support persons into an anatomy scan. Animals, other than service animals, were not permitted on the premises.

I'd brought three support persons and a pug.

"He's emotional support," my mother told the woman at the desk, and patted the quilted tote bag on her knee, which growled.

"Does he have documentation, ma'am?"

"He has a raincoat," said my mother, as if that settled it, and the woman looked at the bag and at my mother and at me, twenty weeks pregnant in a sweater I'd bought in Lisbon and could no longer button, and made the decision a lot of people make about my family, which is that it would be less work to pretend we weren't happening.

My mother had been in New York for eleven days. She'd come at the end of March with a shoebox and a dog and had extended her stay twice, each time by phone to Gary in Phoenix, in the apologetic voice she used for returning sweaters. She was staying at a small hotel on Waverly Place where the night manager already knew Biscuit's birthday, and she walked to Perry Street every morning at nine with

two muffins and a list of questions.

The questions were new. She'd been reading a book called Reconnecting With Your Adult Child, with a sunrise on the cover, and she was on chapter six, which I gathered was about open-ended questions, because she'd been asking me nothing but.

"How are you feeling," she said now, leaning in, "about how you're feeling?"

"Mom."

"That's from the book."

"I know it's from the book."

"I'm trying, honey."

"I know you are." And I did. That was the hard part. For eighteen years my mother had asked me about nothing and told me everything about a dog, and now she was asking me everything and the dog was in a bag, and both of us were so frightened of getting it wrong that every conversation felt like two people carrying a mattress up a staircase. "I feel like a woman who's about to be told whether her kid has kidneys."

"Everybody has kidneys," said Priya, without looking up from her phone. She'd come straight off a night shift in scrubs and a fleece, with the waxy serenity she gets at hour twenty, like a saint who's been up too long. "It's one of the main things."

On my other side, Wes said nothing at all.

He'd taken the morning off from the windows. As far as I could tell he'd never taken a morning off from anything in his life, and he wore it like a borrowed hat: bolt upright in a plastic chair built for someone half his size, sawdust still in the creases of his knuckles. His knee was going. Not bouncing; Wes doesn't bounce. A small steady pulse, like an engine left idling.

I put my hand on it. It stopped.

"Bennett," he said, low.

"You're vibrating."

"I'm sitting."

"You're sitting at a frequency."

He looked down at my hand on his knee. He didn't move it and he didn't cover it with his own. That was where we were, that spring. That was the exact distance. I could put my hand on him in a hospital waiting room and he would let it stay, and he would not take it, not until I'd said a particular thing in a particular light, which he'd told me in his garage at four in the morning in March, and hadn't mentioned since, and was absolutely waiting for.

"Bennett, Claire?" said a woman in the doorway, with a tablet.

All four of us stood up. Biscuit barked once.

"Not the dog," I said.

. . .

Her name was Marguerite. She had reading glasses on a beaded chain and a Jamaican accent with forty years of the Upper East Side sanded into it, and she looked at the three of us crowding into her dark little room the way a lifeguard looks at a family wading in with inflatable animals.

"Two support persons."

"I'm her physician," said Priya, which was not remotely true. "Emotionally."

Marguerite studied her over the glasses. Then she studied Wes, who'd stopped just inside the door, filling the frame, trying to take up less room by force of will and failing, the way a piano fails at hiding.

"And who are you?"

A pause. It wasn't long. I've told you how much a pause can hold.

"I'm here," Wes said.

Marguerite looked at him one more second, and something in her face decided. I imagine you learn, in a dark room with a wand and a screen, that the shapes of families aren't always the shapes on the forms.

"Then sit where I can't trip on you," she said, and pointed at a stool in the corner, and he folded himself onto it with his knees around his ears, like a man in a treehouse built for someone younger.

The gel was cold. I lay on the paper sheet with my jeans unbuttoned under the bump and looked at the ceiling, where somebody had stuck a glow-in-the-dark star a long time ago and it had stopped glowing.

Then the screen came alive, and she was a person.

In Lisbon she'd been a flicker in a bean. In March she'd been a gray thumb with ideas. Now she was lying on her back with her knees up, like me, and I laughed out loud, and Marguerite said "Hold still, Mama" without any sympathy whatsoever. A forehead. The curve of a nose, small and decided. A spine, every bone of it, a row of bright beads along a dark curve, like the stitching on a baseball.

"Spine. Good. Four chambers." A flutter, rapid and fierce, a hummingbird in a jar. "Stomach. She's had a drink. Kidneys."

"Two," Priya murmured. "I'm just reporting."

Then a hand came up. A whole hand, five fingers, spread like a starfish and slowly closing near the face, as if she'd been interrupted while thinking.

On his stool, Wes made a sound. Not a word. The sound a man makes when he walks into a room he's walked into a thousand times and finds the furniture has moved. In the blue light his face was so

unguarded I had to look at the screen instead.

"Is her hand okay?" he said.

"Ten fingers," said Marguerite. "I counted twice. They all keep them by the face. Show-offs."

He nodded slowly, once, the way I'd seen him nod at a joint that had gone together clean on the first try. I'd never seen anybody so relieved about fingers.

"Do you want to know the sex? Some people don't. I won't even make a face."

I looked at Priya, who raised both hands: not my body. I looked at the corner.

"Your call, Bennett," Wes said.

Somewhere in my apartment, in a suitcase I still hadn't finished unpacking from February, there was a card in a sealed envelope that knew a different kind of answer. It would go on knowing. I wasn't asking it anything today.

This one I wanted.

"Yes," I said.

"She's a girl," said Marguerite. Then, apparently feeling she'd been too easy on us: "I've been saying she for ten minutes. You people don't listen."

. . .

I didn't cry. I'd expected to; I'm a woman who once cried at a bodega cat. Instead I lay on the paper and felt something go quiet in me, all the way down, the way a house goes quiet when the furnace shuts off and you realize you'd been hearing it for hours.

Priya put her cold hand on my ankle, over my sock, and said nothing, which for Priya is a eulogy.

When I turned my head to the corner, the stool was empty, and the door was just closing.

. . .

He was in the hallway, reading a poster about folic acid with tremendous attention. His eyes, when he turned around, were completely dry. I'd swear to that in court. He'd wrung them out somewhere in the last four minutes like a dish towel.

"A girl," he said.

"A girl."

"Okay." He kept nodding. "That's great. There hasn't been a girl in my family since ever. Marshes make boys. My dad had a brother. His dad had brothers. It's just guys, all the way back, guys in boats." He rubbed his thumb over the scar in his eyebrow. "Ma's going to lose her mind."

"Your mother is going to commission a quilt."

"She's going to commission a boat."

Marguerite came out behind us with a strip of glossy paper, a row of grainy squares like a tiny film reel, and gave it to me, and then, after a beat, held out a second one to Wes. He looked at it as if he'd never been handed anything.

"For your wallet," she said. "Or your truck. Fathers usually do the truck."

She went back into her dark room and shut the door. None of us corrected her. The fluorescent lights buzzed on.

. . .

In the waiting room, my mother had lost the dog.

We found him under the receptionist's desk eating a pamphlet about gestational diabetes, while the receptionist sat with her feet tucked up on the rung of her chair, in the posture of someone waiting out a natural disaster. Priya hauled him out by the harness. At the end of the hall, a security guard appeared, assessed us, and visibly remembered that he'd taken this job for the dental.

"It's a girl, Mom," I said, over the dog.

I watched it go into her. Most people take in news with their mouths first; they say oh, or what, or no. My mother did it with her shoulders. They came down an inch, both of them, as if she'd been holding something up for a very long time and had just been told she could set it on the floor.

"Oh, Claire." Her face crumpled. My mother's face does not crumple. It's been held together by sunscreen and willpower since 1998. "I'm going to do it right. Not with you, I know that's done, I mean with her. I'm going to send her every card. Every single one. She'll be sick of me."

A woman across the room with a toddler had lowered her magazine to listen.

"Mom," I said. "That's not from the book."

"No." She wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist, carefully, to save the mascara. "Chapter six doesn't have anything like that."

. . .

Priya took my mother and the dog downtown in a cab. Wes had parked in the hospital garage on Seventy-Sixth, level P3, because street parking on the Upper East Side, he'd explained at length on the drive up, was a lie the city told to keep men like him humble.

Concrete ramps, the smell of oil and wet tires, long humming tube lights in cages, every third one flickering. The truck sat between a Mercedes and a Range Rover like a farmhand who'd wandered into a country club and refused to leave.

He opened my door. He went around and got in. He put the key in the ignition.

He didn't turn it.

I waited. Somewhere down the row a car alarm whooped twice and gave up.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." He was staring through the windshield at a concrete wall with a yellow stripe and the number 3 on it, his hands on the wheel at ten and two, like a kid in driver's ed. "It's the lights."

"The lights."

"In here. They flicker. Sixty times a second or something, you can't even see it, but your eyes can tell. Gives me a headache."

There was a tear going down the side of his face into his stubble, very slowly, as if it had all the time in the world.

"Your eyes are leaking because of a headache."

"Industrial lighting, Bennett." His voice split on the word and he kept going anyway. "It's a known thing. OSHA's got studies."

"Okay."

"There's literature."

"Okay, Wes."

He put his forehead down on the steering wheel. The horn didn't go, thank God; it's only worked twice in that truck's life. His shoulders went, once, twice, and he didn't make a sound, and I didn't touch him, because he'd have stopped.

After a while he sat up and wiped his face with the heel of his hand, both sides, quickly, like a man wiping down a workbench at the end of a day. He took the scan photo off the dashboard and slid it into the strap on the sun visor, next to a gas receipt from 2024 and a parking ticket he was apparently keeping for sentimental reasons.

"There," he said. "Now she can see where we're going."

"Wes." It had been sitting in my mouth since March, since a garage in Red Hook at four in the morning, and every day it had gotten a little bigger and a little truer, and I had the feeling that if I didn't let it out it would come out on its own, somewhere worse, like the waiting room. "I need to tell you something."

He turned his head. He knew. He'd been reading my face across rooms since a doorway in October.

"Not in here," he said.

"I didn't say what it was."

"I know what it was, Bennett." Very gently. "And not in here. You're not telling me anything for the first time under these lights. Look at us. We look like hostages."

I looked. The tubes had turned us both the color of skim milk. I had gel on my sweater. He'd been crying into a steering wheel.

"There's no daylight in a parking garage," I said.

"That's the whole point of a parking garage." He turned the key. The truck coughed and caught and the heater came on, on high, in April, roaring. "That's what makes it a garage."

I laughed. He backed out past the Range Rover with about an inch to spare, and the corner of his mouth went up on the side with the crooked tooth.

"When I say it," I said, "you're going to feel very stupid about all this waiting."

"I'm counting on it," said Wes Marsh, and drove us up the ramp toward the square of white light at the top.

. . .

By the time we got back to Perry Street, the chalkboard in the lobby of 41 said GIRL across the top in Mr. Ortiz's careful capitals, underlined twice.

"Your mother called me from the taxi," Ortiz said, from a stepladder under the mailboxes, the Yankees losing on the radio at his feet. "She calls me every day. She brings me a muffin. We're friends." He climbed down and held my face in both hands. "A girl, mija. The first baby in 4B since anybody can remember. Mrs. Feldman has changed her bet."

"Again?"

"Nine times. I keep her money in a separate envelope. She moves it around like a lady at a Thanksgiving table." And he turned the chalkboard to face the wall before I could read a single line of it.

. . .

That night I sat on the green couch with my laptop on what was left of my lap and Gerald Fernando in his pot by the big window, and tried to write.

The book was called THE SUBLET. It had been called that since a blank page in Lisbon. The contracts had come back countersigned on Monday, and that morning, while I was lying under Marguerite's dead star, Lorraine had left a voicemail that said, in its entirety: "You're a woman with a signed contract and no more excuses. Write the thing."

I'd written four thousand words. Most of them were about a toast at Bettina's.

At ten-fifteen my phone lit up. Lisbon. Three in the morning there.

"I'm on the terrace," Theo said. Warm and clear and a little hoarse, the way he always was after two, and behind him the Alfama at night: a dog far down the hill, a tram bell, the enormous soft nothing of the river. "June's asleep. I've been sitting out here for an hour holding your text like an idiot. A girl, Claire."

"A girl."

"I told Dona Graça. I knocked on her shutter at midnight. She came out in a nightgown and hit me with a dish towel, and then she cried, and then she gave me a tin of sardines. This child has more sardines than anyone in Portugal."

I laughed, and cried a little, finally, eleven hours late, on my own couch where no one could see.

"Theo."

"I know." Quieter. "I'm going to be something to her. I don't know which word yet, and I've decided I don't need to. I'll learn whichever one it is. I'm very good at learning things. Ask anyone who's watched me make pastéis."

Down on Perry Street, a cab went by with its windows open, a burst of salsa and gone.

"There's something else," he said. "I wanted to tell you before Sofia does, because she's going to call you in four hours and cry and say ai, Theo, eleven times. She got the contracts signed. The orchestra's coming to America. Boston, Philadelphia, Washington. And New York." A breath, a man setting his bow on a string. "Carnegie Hall. April twenty-first. And the maestro's put my piece on the program.

Not 'Subletter.' It's grown up. It's for the whole orchestra now. It's called 'Perry Street.' It's a premiere, Claire. My name's on it."

I put my hand over my mouth.

"Ma wants everyone in Little Compton the weekend before. She says we're going to build something. She was vague in a very specific way."

"Theo, that's—"

"And Claire," he said. "June's coming with me."

He said it the way you'd set down something you'd carried a long way, both hands, so it wouldn't break on the last step.

"I'm bringing her home," Theo said. "To all of you. And I don't know what that's going to be like, and for the first time in my life, I don't need to know first."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Carol

CAROL MARSH MET US on the porch with a Manhattan in her right hand, which was the news. At Christmas the right had been in a cast to the elbow, signed by the entire Little Compton Garden Club and one lobsterman.

"Look," she said, and turned the glass in a slow rotation of the wrist, like a magician showing there was nothing up her sleeve. "Physical therapy. With a boy named Doug who calls me young lady. I've been plotting his death since February."

Then she came down the steps in her slippers, past her son and the bags, and put her free hand flat on my stomach without asking, the way you'd put a hand on the side of a boat to feel if the engine was running.

"Hello, granddaughter," she said.

I stood very still on the gravel.

Here is a thing I didn't understand until that second, in the April wind off the cove, with the forsythia going off like fireworks along the stone wall: in this whole story, Carol was the only one who didn't need an envelope. Whichever son. Whatever card in whatever suitcase. She was going to be exactly what she was going to be, and

she'd known it since November, and she'd simply been waiting for the rest of us to catch up.

"She kicks at night," I said, because I couldn't say anything else.

"So did Wesley. Theodore never kicked once. I thought he'd died in there. He was just listening." She took her hand back and looked at me over her glasses. "You're not eating enough. Come in. There's chowder."

. . .

Theo and June had driven down from Boston that afternoon in a rental car the color of a cough drop, the morning after the orchestra's first American concert, and they were in the kitchen when we came in.

I hadn't seen him since Lisbon. Eight weeks, a hundred phone calls, and I'd thought I was ready, and then he turned around from the stove with a dish towel on his shoulder, humming, tan for the first time in his life, his glasses steamed from the chowder pot, and I wasn't.

"Claire," he said.

He hugged me carefully, around the bump, at an angle, like someone embracing a woman holding a cake. Then he stepped back and looked at it, and pushed his glasses up with one knuckle, and said gravely, "She's grown. I'd like to file a formal objection to how fast this is going."

"It's been eight weeks."

"In Lisbon, eight weeks is a coffee."

Behind him June was laughing, in a striped fisherman's sweater with the sleeves pushed up over her freckled arms. She'd cut her hair to her chin. She looked like a woman who slept now. When she

hugged me she said in my ear, "Don't let him cook the fish," and I held on a second longer than either of us expected.

Wes came in last with all the bags and stopped in the doorway, and Theo turned, and for one second the kitchen held still.

Then Theo crossed it and put his arms around his brother. Not the back-slapping kind. The other kind. Wes stood there with a duffel in each hand and didn't put them down, and Carol watched over her Manhattan like a woman reading the last page of a book she'd been told she wouldn't live to finish.

"Hey," Wes said, into his brother's shoulder.

"Hey."

"You got tan."

"I live in a sunny country now. It happens to the body."

"You look like a guy who sells timeshares."

"Thank you," said Theo, and let go, and Wes put the bags down, finally, and stood there with his empty hands before he remembered what they were for.

. . .

The treehouse was Carol's idea, in the sense that Carol had announced it at breakfast as a fact of nature.

"There's an oak at the edge of the yard," she said, buttering toast. "By the wall. It's been doing nothing for sixty years. The child will need somewhere to go when she's sick of all of you, which will be early. Build her something."

"Ma, she's not born yet."

"Then you'd better start, Wesley. You know how long your brother takes to draw things."

So at nine on a bright cold Saturday, the two Marsh brothers stood under a white oak at the bottom of the lawn with a stack of lumber from Tiverton, a borrowed ladder, Frank's toolbox, and a sheet of graph paper.

Theo had drawn the plans the night before at the kitchen table, with a ruler and a protractor that had been his in second grade. He'd labeled everything. NORTH WALL. SOUTH WALL. DOOR (SMALL). WINDOW, which had a little arrow pointing to it and, beside it, in brackets, (WES). And down the side, a materials list, and halfway down it, in letters so careful they looked engraved, underlined three times:

PLYWOOD.

"He spelled it right," Wes said, holding it up to the light. "Thirty-two years old. Somebody call the paper."

"I've been practicing."

"For twenty-four years?"

"Some of us have long-term goals."

June and I sat on the stone wall with our coffee, mine decaf and a disgrace, and watched them the way you'd watch a nature documentary about two large animals who'd been separated as cubs.

They argued about the height of the platform (Theo: eight feet, for the view; Wes: six, "she's going to fall out of it, she's a Marsh, it's genetic"). They argued about bolting into a living tree (Wes, it turned out, had views on the feelings of oaks). And then they argued about plywood.

"We're not using plywood for the floor," Theo said.

"We're using plywood for the floor."

"Plywood is a lack of imagination glued to itself."

"Plywood is a material, Teddy. It's not a moral position."

"Everything's a moral position. You taught me that. You said vinyl windows were a sin against God."

"Vinyl windows are a sin against God." Wes put down the drill. "That's not the same. That's theology. This is a floor."

June leaned against my shoulder on the wall. "They do this every Sunday on the phone," she said. "Theo puts it on speaker and they argue about whatever's broken in the flat. Last week it was a cabinet hinge. Forty minutes. Dona Graça came up to see who was being murdered."

"Does it get fixed?"

"Never. They don't want it fixed. Then they'd have to find something else."

Her bitten nails were growing out, I noticed. Just past the quick.

"You're happy," I said.

"I'm terrified," said June. "Every morning I wake up and think, this is the morning he remembers." She watched Theo climb the ladder, his glasses sliding down his nose. "And then he makes coffee and hums, and I'm still there. I think that's what happy is. Being terrified and staying."

Under the oak, Wes held the ladder.

I'd heard the old story twice: Wes at ten, bleeding all over his brother's shirt, eleven stitches, a bag of frozen peas, and Theo at eight finishing the treehouse alone off his own plans. Now Theo was up the ladder, and Wes was at the bottom with both hands on the rails, braced, not taking his eyes off him once.

"You hold it this time," Theo had said, starting up.

"I held it last time."

"You were bleeding last time. That's not holding. That's being a fountain."

. . .

Carol found me after lunch in the upstairs hall and handed me a flashlight.

"The christening gown," she said. "It's in the attic and I can't do the ladder yet, Doug says. I want it for the baby. Not to wear. Just to have in the house. I'm superstitious about very little, and that's on the list."

So I went up the groaning ladder into the cedar and mouse smell, under the one bare bulb, past the boxes in Carol's slanted hand, XMAS and TAXES and DON'T, past the pegboard where Frank's planes still hung in their marker outlines, while Carol directed me from below like air traffic control. "Cedar chest. No, the other window. Under the other quilts."

The gown was there, wrapped in blue tissue, a hundred years of lace gone the color of weak tea. And under it, a flat tin box, the kind cookies come in at Christmas, with a sailboat on the lid.

"Bring that down too," Carol said. "I'd forgotten about that."

We sat at the kitchen table with it. The house had gone quiet; June was asleep upstairs, and through the window I could see the brothers under the oak, Wes on the platform now, Theo below, the two of them small and absorbed against the blue cove. Carol opened the tin.

Photographs, mostly. The square orange ones from the seventies and eighties, curling at the corners. And on top, a print bigger than the rest, black-and-white, sharp, the kind somebody had paid a real photographer for.

A man on the deck of a wooden boat, squinting into the sun with a rope coiled over one shoulder. Wide through the chest. A jaw like a shut door. A scar through one eyebrow, I thought for a second, and then saw it was only a crease in the print. Sawdust or salt on his

forearms. He looked like Wes so exactly that the back of my neck went cold, and then he smiled, slightly, at whoever was holding the camera, and he looked like Theo.

"Frank," said Carol. "At thirty. The summer of ninety-four, on the TEDDY, the day we put her in the water. I took that one. I was eight months pregnant and furious with him."

I bent closer. It was a good print. You could see everything. His eyes were two different colors: the left one dark, the right one so light it was nearly clear.

"His eyes," I said.

"One brown, one green. Green like the bottom of a beer bottle, he used to say. He said God ran out of paint." She touched the edge of the photo with one finger. "People used to stop him in the street. Children used to stare at him in church. He loved it. He'd stare right back until they laughed." She sat back. "Neither of my boys got them. I always figured it skipped a generation, like everything good in this family."

"What else skipped?"

"Patience. Spelling. The ability to say a single true thing before midnight." She took the photo out of the tin and set it face up on the table between us, and under it, in the tin, in a twist of yellowed tissue, there was a ring.

. . .

It was small. Gold, thin as wire, with a dark red stone the size of a lentil.

Carol looked at it for a long time without touching it.

"That isn't Frank's," she said.

I waited. I've learned to. I learned it from her son, at a different table, in a different house, in a city where it was always about to rain.

"Frank had a younger brother," said Carol. "Paul. Two years younger. He played the organ at St. Catherine's from the time he was fourteen. Beautiful hands. Gentle. The kind of boy mothers pointed at. Everyone said Paul Marsh was the good one." She turned her glass a quarter turn on the table. "I was engaged to him for a year. That's his mother's garnet."

The kitchen clock ticked. Outside, faintly, a drill.

"Frank was in Maine, building boats for a yard in Camden. He came home for the Fourth of July in 1989 to meet his little brother's fiancée. He swore at the grill. He swore at the fireworks. He fixed my car door, which had been sticking since I bought the car, in about four minutes, with a butter knife, without being asked, and then he swore at the butter knife." Carol almost smiled. "I gave Paul his ring back on the ninth of July. At a church supper. In front of everyone. Which I don't recommend, Claire, I really don't. There were deviled eggs."

"Carol."

"Paul didn't speak to either of us for twenty years. He went up to a church in Burlington and played Bach for Vermonters, who don't deserve it. Frank never said his name. I'd lie awake next to Frank for years wondering if I'd picked the wrong brother. The gentle one, everyone said. The good one. And then Frank would come up from the boathouse at midnight smelling like varnish and fix the stair that squeaked without telling anyone, and I'd lie there and know I hadn't."

She picked up the ring. Held it in her palm.

"When Frank died," she said, "in the boathouse, at his bench, I didn't call Paul. I couldn't. Somebody from St. Catherine's must have. Because the next afternoon there was a knock, and there he was on

the porch with a music case and gray in his hair, and he said, 'Carol,' and that was all. He'd driven down from Vermont through the night."

"What did he do?"

"He sat at the piano in the front room with Theodore for three nights." Her voice didn't change at all. That's how I knew. "Theo was fifteen and he'd stopped talking. He wouldn't touch the cello. And Paul sat beside him at the piano and played the Sarabande, the Bach, over and over, slow, and talked to him about it. How you play it at a funeral. Slower than you think. Like walking behind somebody you love, not falling down. And at the funeral, Paul played the organ, and Theodore played the cello, and Wesley sat in the parking lot in the truck with the engine running, and I sat in the front pew in between all of them like a woman who'd been handed the whole family to hold."

The Sarabande. Two in the morning, every night, through a door in 4B. I'd thought I knew where that came from. I'd thought it was grief. It was grief. It was also a gentle man at a piano, forgiving his brother's widow with the only language he had.

"Paul died three years ago," Carol said. "At the organ bench. In Burlington, in the middle of a Thursday rehearsal. Marsh men go at their benches. He left Theodore his metronome and me this." She closed her hand on the ring. "In an envelope. No note. He didn't need one."

Through the window, Wes said something up on the platform and Theo laughed below, head back, and the laugh came all the way up the lawn and in through the glass.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you're carrying something again, honey. I told you at Christmas to set it down. You didn't." She put the ring back in its

tissue, and put the tissue in the tin, and put the lid on, the sailboat. "The Marsh men have been doing this to women for two generations. Two brothers, one girl, everybody miserable and polite. I've been you. I sat at a church supper with a deviled egg and chose out loud, and I was sure God would strike me dead, and he didn't. He just sent me two sons who did it all over again."

"Theo let me go," I said. "In Lisbon. He chose it. He—"

"I know he did. He called me from the terrace. He cried for an hour and then he asked me how to make my chowder for June." Carol leaned across the table and put her small cold hand over mine, and gripped it, hard, the grip like a vise. "Paul forgave us at a funeral. It took him twenty years. Theodore's faster. Theodore forgave you in Lisbon in February." She held my eyes. "You're the only one in this family who hasn't, Claire. You're the one still waiting for permission. And nobody's going to write it for you. Not even a ghost."

I sat at Carol Marsh's kitchen table with a hundred years of lace in my lap, and the brothers outside under the oak, and I cried, the quiet kind, the kind that leaks out of a person like rain through an old window frame.

Carol let me. She made a fresh Manhattan for herself and set a cranberry juice in front of me and didn't say anything else at all.

. . .

By dark, the platform was up. Six and a half feet, a compromise reached after the two of them nearly came to blows over a level. A floor, two walls, a window frame Wes had planed by hand until it was smooth as soap. The floor, I noted, was plywood.

"He won," I said to Theo, on the porch.

"He thinks he won." Theo pushed his glasses up. "I've hidden a cedar plank under the plywood. He'll never know. Someday the treehouse will fall down, and in the wreckage they'll find one perfect piece of cedar, and that will be my legacy."

"That's petty."

"I've waited twenty-four years to be petty about a treehouse. Let me have this."

We played Scrabble after dinner, all five of us, with the woodstove ticking. Carol played ZYGOTE on a triple word score and looked straight at me while she did it, and June laughed so hard she had to put her head on the table. Wes played OAK, and then, two turns later, very slowly, DAYLIGHT, every tile on his rack, and didn't look at me at all.

At midnight the brothers went down to the boathouse with flashlights to check on the tarps over their father's boat, which didn't need checking, which was the point. June went up to bed. I stayed and helped Carol put the tiles back in their soft old bag, one at a time.

"Carol," I said. "How did you know? About the girl. Wes called you from the garage, and you already knew. He said you just said, 'Mm.'"

"Hector told me."

"You talk to Hector?"

"Every Tuesday at four. He's the only man in New York who tells me anything." She pulled the drawstring tight and set the bag on the shelf beside Frank's percolator. Then she turned around and looked at me over her glasses with an expression of total serenity, the face of a woman who has taught thirty-one years of sixteen-year-olds and has never once, in all that time, been caught.

"Also," said Carol Marsh, "I have five dollars in Hector's pool. Don't ask."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Carnegie

THE DRESS WAS CALLED a wrap, which was a generous word for it. The saleswoman at the maternity shop on Bleecker had called it "forgiving," and held it up against me in the mirror with the expression of a priest, and I'd bought it because it was midnight blue and because it was the only thing in the store that didn't have a bow on the stomach, as if the baby were a present I was planning to regift.

"Hold still," said Priya, behind me, with a mouthful of bobby pins.

"I am holding still."

"You're holding still like a hummingbird." She stabbed another pin into my hair. She'd come straight from a shift, with a garment bag over her shoulder and the fury of a woman whose boyfriend is "really excited to hear some strings." "Marcus has read the Wikipedia page. He's going to tell me facts in the cab. Did you know it opened in 1891?"

"That's the same year as the building."

"Please don't encourage him."

My mother sat on the edge of the green couch in a lilac suit she'd bought that morning at Saks, holding her purse on her knees with both hands like a woman waiting to be called into a principal's office.

Biscuit was not with her. Biscuit had been left at the hotel on Waverly Place with the night manager, under protest. The protest had involved the hotel's decorative pillow, which was now a former pillow.

"Will he be there?" she said, for the third time.

"Yes, Mom."

"With her?"

"With Ellen. Yes. She's nice. You'll like her. She makes jam."

My mother absorbed this as if I'd said Ellen was a sniper.

I had done the seating myself. Theo had sent a row of tickets in the Dress Circle, and I'd spent an evening arranging people on the back of a Con Ed bill like a general planning a beach landing. Rob and Ellen on the far left. My mother on the far right. Between them, in order, the most effective human buffer I could assemble: Hector Ortiz, Carol Marsh, June, Priya, Marcus, me, and Wes. A demilitarized zone made of people who loved me and Marcus.

"It's eighteen years," my mother said, to the purse.

"I know."

"I don't know what I'm going to say."

"You don't have to say anything. It's a concert. Nobody talks at a concert. That's the whole point of a concert."

"Your father talked at every concert I ever took him to," she said. "Under his breath. About the tuning." And then she pressed her lips together very hard, because she hadn't meant to say something true about him, out loud, in my living room, and it had gotten out anyway, like a bird through a window.

. . .

At five-thirty there was a knock.

I went to the door in my socks with half my hair up, and opened it, and Wes was standing on the landing in a suit.

I want to describe this properly. It deserves the space.

It was navy. It fit. That was the first shock, because the only other time I'd seen him in a suit was at Danny's Halloween party, in a borrowed charcoal thing that strained at the shoulders like it was trying to escape. This one had been made for him. The sleeves broke exactly where his hands began. White shirt. No tie; the tie was in his hand, crumpled, held out slightly away from his body, like a fish he'd been asked to identify.

He'd shaved. Properly. I could see the whole line of his jaw for the first time since October, and the scar through his eyebrow looked whiter against it, and he was standing there on the landing of 4B looking at me in my socks and half my hair, and his face did something slow and helpless.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi." He cleared his throat. "You look." He stopped. He tried again. "Bennett, you look."

"That's not a sentence."

"I know it's not a sentence."

"Where did you get a suit?"

"Court Street. A guy named Sal. I went in and said I needed something for Carnegie Hall and my brother, and he made me stand on a box for an hour and stuck pins in me and told me about his divorce." He looked down at himself, appalled. "I look like a guy at his own deposition."

"You look like a guy," I said, "who should be careful on stairs, because I might push you down them and climb on top of you."

Behind me, my mother made a small sound, like a teakettle starting.

Wes went red from the collar up. All the way. I watched it happen and it was one of the best things I've ever seen.

"I can't tie this," he said, holding up the tie.

"Give it to me."

"I'll do it," said Mr. Ortiz, appearing on the stairs below, in his good brown jacket, the one with the elbow patches he wore to weddings and court dates and the Puerto Rican Day Parade. "Come here, mijo. My father taught me on a fence post. You stand still."

So Hector Ortiz tied Wes Marsh's tie on the fourth-floor landing, while Mrs. Kaplan watched through the crack of 3A's door below, and I stood in my socks with my hair half up and thought: I'm going to remember this when I'm old. This, and not the concert.

"There," said Ortiz, and patted the knot. "Now you look like somebody's husband."

Nobody said anything. Ortiz looked at all of us, very innocently, and went back down the stairs.

. . .

Carnegie Hall from the outside is a brown brick wedding cake on the corner of Fifty-Seventh and Seventh, all arches and terra-cotta and banners, and that night there was a banner I couldn't stop looking at: ORQUESTRA DO TEJO, in red, and under it, smaller, the program, and under that, smaller still, a line I'd read online forty times and still wasn't ready for.

THEO MARSH, cello. "Perry Street" (world premiere).

"His name's on a building," said Carol, beside me on the sidewalk, looking up. She'd come in on the Amtrak from Kingston in pearls and

a black dress older than both her sons. "I always thought that would be Wesley, for knocking one down."

Inside it was gold and white and red velvet, five tiers curving up and away like the inside of a cello, if a cello had balconies. We took the elevator, because the Dress Circle is the fourth level and I was twenty-one weeks pregnant and had paid my dues to stairs. June met us at the top. She was in green silk, and she was shaking. She hugged me hard and said, "He threw up at four. He's fine. He always throws up at four. It's practically in his contract."

And there, in the curved red lobby outside the doors to the Dress Circle, by a marble bust of someone with a beard, I saw my father.

He was in a corduroy jacket with leather on the elbows, a cousin of Ortiz's. His white hair was combed wet. Ellen was beside him in a lavender cardigan, with her hand through his arm, and he had the tuning fork in his breast pocket where other men keep a pen. I'd seen it there on the pier bench. I'd seen it, I realized, when I was six, in a different pocket, on a different jacket, in Ohio.

He saw me first, and smiled, the slow surprised smile I was still getting used to having inherited.

Then he saw my mother.

I felt her hand close on my arm. Not hard. Just closed, like a door you shut quietly so as not to wake anyone.

Eighteen years. The width of a red-carpeted lobby. Forty people in evening clothes moving between them, and a child in velvet being told not to touch the bust.

My father didn't move. My mother didn't move.

And then he nodded. Once. Small. The way you'd nod to someone across a street in the town you grew up in, when you're both old and neither of you is sure of the other's name anymore.

My mother nodded back.

That was all. Ellen put her hand on his back and turned him gently toward the doors, and my mother's hand came off my arm, and she said, in a perfectly normal voice, "He's gotten so gray," and went into the Dress Circle with her purse held against her chest.

It wasn't a conversation. It was the first word of one. I've written enough books to know those are the hardest.

. . .

The first half was a Portuguese composer and then the Elgar, with a guest cellist I resented on principle for forty minutes because he wasn't Theo. Marcus clapped between the first and second movements, enthusiastically, alone, and three hundred people turned around.

"That's a flaw," Priya whispered to me, furious, glowing.

At intermission Carol pronounced the bar's Manhattan "a crime against rye." Wes didn't move from his seat. He sat there with his elbows on his knees and his big hands knotted together, staring down at the empty stage where a single chair had been set out in front of the orchestra, and a stand, and nothing else.

"He's going to be fine," I said, sitting down next to him.

"I know he's going to be fine. He's always fine. He played the Bach at Dad's funeral at fifteen and didn't miss a note. I listened to the whole thing from the parking lot." He didn't take his eyes off the chair. "I'm going to be fine, Bennett. That's the part I'm worried about."

. . .

The lights went down. The orchestra came back. And then Theo walked out.

He walked out the way he walked everywhere, quick and slightly hunched, as if apologizing to the air, in white tie, with his cello held by the neck. His glasses caught the light. Three thousand people clapped, and he looked up into the dark at them with an expression of pure startled courtesy, like a man who'd opened his front door to find a parade.

He didn't sit down. He went to the edge of the stage, and somebody had put a small microphone there, and he bent to it.

"Good evening," said Theo. His voice came out over the hall, quiet and clear, a voice that had never once been loud. "This piece is called 'Perry Street.' I started writing it on the floor of a hotel room in Lisbon at four in the morning, with forty letters on the carpet that weren't addressed to me." A small laugh went through the hall; they thought it was a joke. "It's for the subletter." He looked up, directly up, into the dark of the fourth tier, and I knew he couldn't see me, and I knew he knew exactly where I was. "And for my brother."

He sat down. He set the endpin. He put his bow on the string.

In the dark beside me, a hand found mine.

. . .

I'm not going to be able to do this properly. I've tried eleven drafts. I'll tell you what I can.

It started the way the old one had, on the floor of 4B at two in the morning in December: low, slow, walking. Someone heading home late in the rain toward a lit window. And then the orchestra came in under him, very softly, and it wasn't a street anymore, it was the building. I heard the radiator. I swear to God. Somewhere in the

percussion someone was tapping metal on metal in a stuttering rhythm, clank, clank-clank, and three people in the Dress Circle laughed out loud at the same time, and two of them were me and Hector Ortiz. The violas picked up something that was almost a salsa, the ghost of a radio on a windowsill. A flute went up the stairs in four creaking notes, all different.

And then the little phrase, the one I'd have known through any wall, that always took its wrong turn on purpose. The socks. My socks, two pairs if it's cold, in Carnegie Hall, played by eighty people. I put my free hand over my mouth.

Then something else came in.

Low. Down in the basses, rough, a little out of tune on purpose, a line that kept interrupting the cello. It was stubborn and blunt and it didn't resolve where you wanted it to, it barged in, it swore. You could hear it swear. And the cello argued with it. For a long time, the cello argued, the two lines climbing over each other and pulling apart, and the whole orchestra got involved, and it was loud and it was a fight and it was a family at a Mobil station in the rain.

And then, somewhere near the end, the cello stopped arguing.

It just stopped, and let the low line go on alone for a while, rough and patient, and then it came back in underneath it. Not over it. Underneath, holding it up, the way you'd hold a ladder. And the two of them walked together, the little socks phrase on top, the high clear cello and the low rough basses on either side of it, down the same wet street toward the same window with the lamp on.

In December, at two in the morning, "Subletter" hadn't resolved. It had stopped on a held note and left the door open.

"Perry Street" resolved.

It went home. It landed on a chord so simple and so full that I felt it in my back teeth, and the cello held the top of it, and held it, and let it go.

. . .

There's a silence after something like that, before the clapping. A second, two. Three thousand people deciding whether they're allowed to breathe.

In that silence, beside me, Wes said, very low, not to anyone: "That's me. The low part."

"That's you."

"He made me a tuba."

"Those are basses."

"He made me sound like a guy falling down the stairs."

I turned my head. His face in the dark was wet all the way down, and he wasn't wiping it, and he wasn't blaming any lights.

"He made you sound like a guy holding a ladder," I said.

And then the hall came apart.

People were on their feet, all five tiers, the noise of it rolling up from the orchestra floor like surf. Carol was standing, perfectly upright, not clapping, both hands pressed flat over her heart, looking down at her younger son with an expression I'd only ever seen on the faces of people at the end of very long books. Ortiz was crying into a handkerchief the size of a pillowcase. June had her face in her hands. Priya was clapping and furiously not crying, and Marcus was crying for both of them. Far down at the end of the row, my father sat with his eyes closed, the only person in the Dress Circle still sitting, his head tilted a little to one side the way a man tilts it toward a piano to hear if a string is true, and Ellen's hand was on his knee. At the other

end, my mother was standing up, holding her purse, and looking down the whole length of the row past all of us at him.

On the stage, Theo stood. He held his cello by the neck. He didn't bow. He looked up into the fourth tier, into the dark, and lifted his bow, just slightly, the way you'd raise a glass across a room.

. . .

Outside on Fifty-Seventh Street it had rained and stopped, and the sidewalk was black and shining and full of people in good clothes not wanting to go home. Yellow cabs hissed past. Someone was selling roses out of a bucket. Ortiz had gone to find the car service with my mother, who had taken his arm in the lobby without a word and was holding it like a railing.

Theo came around the corner from the stage door on Fifty-Sixth with his cello on his back and his white tie undone, and June ran to him, and he lifted her clean off the pavement, cello and all, and didn't put her down for a long time.

Then he set her down and looked past her at his brother.

Wes was standing at the curb in his navy suit with Ortiz's knot still perfect at his throat. He didn't say anything. He went to Theo and put both hands on either side of his brother's face, the way their mother did, and held it, and looked at it. Then he pulled him in, cello and all, and the two of them stood on Fifty-Seventh Street while the crowd parted around them and closed again, the way traffic does around a double-parked truck.

"A tuba," I heard Wes say, into his brother's hair.

"Basses," said Theo, muffled. "You absolute philistine."

When they let go, Theo's glasses were crooked and he didn't fix them. He kissed my cheek. He put his hand on the bump, briefly,

lightly, the way you'd touch a string to check it was still in tune, and he said, "Did she like it?" and I said, "She kicked through the whole second half," and he closed his eyes for a second, standing there in the wet street, as if that was the review he'd been waiting for.

Then June took his arm, and Carol took his other arm, and they went off toward Seventh Avenue in a knot of black silk and pearls and one cello, and it was just the two of us at the curb.

A cab honked at nothing. Wes stood beside me with his hands in his pockets, and I could feel him not touching me, the way I'd felt it in a garage on Van Brunt Street and in a hospital waiting room. Every inch of that gap. He was very good at it. He'd had a lot of practice.

He took his phone out of his pocket and looked at it. He put it back.

"Bennett," he said.

"Yeah."

He didn't look at me. He looked down Fifty-Seventh Street, west, toward the river, where it was dark, and where tomorrow, in a few hours, it wouldn't be.

"Sunrise tomorrow," said Wes Marsh, "is six-fourteen." A pause. "I checked."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Daylight

I DIDN'T SLEEP. I want to be clear that I tried.

He'd walked me to the door of 41 at a quarter to one and stopped on the stoop two steps down, so that for once our faces were level. He didn't kiss me. He said, "Six-fourteen," again, like a man confirming a delivery, and walked off toward Seventh Avenue with his hands in his pockets, and I went up four flights and lay on my bed in a forgiving dress and stared at the ceiling until the ceiling gave up.

At four-fifty I got up. Jeans with the stretchy panel, a gray sweater, and the flannel he'd given me on the tailgate of his truck in March, which I had never given back, which still smelled of cedar if you put your face in the collar, which I did, like an idiot, for a full minute. Two pairs of socks. It was April, but the river would be cold.

. . .

Perry Street at five-forty in the morning belongs to nobody. A man stacking milk crates outside the café on the corner. The sky over the rooftops the deep milky blue that comes before anything else does, the blue of a pilot light.

I walked west to the highway, six empty lanes, and waited for the light although nothing was coming. I wanted to do every single thing right.

Pier 45 goes straight out into the Hudson from the end of Christopher Street. I'd walked it so many times. Behind a woman in a red coat, in the wind. In the snow. I'd sat on the last bench and lied to June and lied to myself and watched two brothers and a cello come apart at the end of it. This was the first time I'd ever walked it toward someone I knew was waiting.

He was there. On the last bench, facing the river, in the canvas jacket, a paper bag beside him and two cups. He didn't turn around. He sat with his elbows on his knees looking at New Jersey, waiting, the way he'd waited all spring: absolutely still, like a man who'd been told the wait would be long and had packed for it.

I sat down beside him.

"Tea," he said, and handed me a cup. "With honey. The guy at the bodega says it's what pregnant ladies want. He said it like he'd done a study. There's a bagel. Butter, no cream cheese, because you said cream cheese tastes like a hospital now." He held up his own cup. "Two sugars."

"I know how you take your coffee, Wes."

"I know you know." He looked at the river. "I just wanted to say something out loud that I knew was true."

. . .

Here's a thing I didn't know about sunrise on the Hudson: it happens backwards. The sun comes up behind you, behind the whole city, so you sit at the end of Pier 45 facing west and nothing happens to you at all. You stay in the blue. The first thing the sun touches is New

Jersey.

It started at the top of the tallest tower in Jersey City. One pane went gold, then the one beside it, then a whole column down the face of the building, like someone running a match along a row of candles. The whole far shore lit up window by window, catching a sun we couldn't see and throwing it back across the water at us.

"Six-fourteen," Wes said, and showed me his phone. "Technically."

"Technically we're in the shade."

"Technically it's up." He put the phone away. "Technically it's day."

I set my tea down. A ferry was crossing toward Hoboken, and two gulls sat on a piling with the air of old men who'd been sitting there since Eisenhower.

I'd written it. I confess that. I'd written it in my head forty times since Van Brunt Street, and every draft had been good, and I'd thrown them all out on the walk down Perry Street, because I know what a speech sounds like when it's been written, and I didn't want him to hear one.

"You said I'd never once picked you with the lights on," I said.

He didn't move.

"You were right. You were completely right. The frying pan. The fire escape. The landing after Danny's party. New Year's. Every important thing I ever decided about you, I decided after midnight, in the dark, when the day had been bad. So." I took a breath of river air, cold and diesel and something green coming off the grass on the pier. "It's six-fifteen in the morning. I'm sober. I'm very pregnant. I'm eating a bagel. Nothing bad has happened to me in at least nine hours. Everyone I've ever written for is asleep, and nobody is managing anybody, and nobody's on a plane.

"And I choose you.

"Not instead of anyone. Not because anyone let me go. He did, and I'll love him for it for the rest of my life, and that's not why. I'd choose you if he'd asked me in Lisbon. I'd choose you if there were no baby, or if there were six. I think I chose you in a doorway in October with a frying pan in my hand, and I've spent seven months finding out it wasn't a mistake, which is the opposite of how it's usually done, I know, I'm aware, I've read the books, I've written some of them." My voice was going. I let it. "I love you, Wes. Out loud. In daylight. Technically."

He didn't say anything.

He was looking at the water, where a line of light was coming across the river toward us. The sun had cleared the buildings behind us, and the shadow of the whole city was pulling back off the Hudson like a sheet off a bed, gold on one side and gray on the other.

"Wait," he said, very quietly. He pointed. "It's not here yet."

So we watched it come.

It reached the railing, the boards. It came up over the toes of his boots and my sneakers, over our knees, and then it was on us, actually warm, on our necks and shoulders and hands, and the whole end of Pier 45 went gold.

He turned and looked at me in it.

His eyes in that light were a color I'd never seen, because I'd never seen them in that light. Almost amber. The scar white. Every line of his face laid out in front of me, nothing in shadow.

"Okay," he said, and his voice was gone. "Okay. Now say it again. It just got here."

So I did.

. . .

He kissed me on the bench at the end of the pier, in the sun, at six-nineteen in the morning, with two gulls watching. He held my face in both hands. I put my arms inside his jacket, around him, because I wanted to be as close as the bump allowed, and my hand went over his heart, and under the canvas, in the inside pocket, there was something small and square and hard.

He moved my hand. Gently. Down, to his ribs.

"Pencils," he said against my mouth.

"Wes, that's not a pencil."

"It's a very small pencil, Bennett." And he kissed me again until I forgot what we'd been talking about, which I suspect was the plan.

. . .

We walked back up Christopher Street holding hands, which we had never once done in seven months, which turned out to be almost unbearable.

Mr. Ortiz was out front of 41 with the hose. He looked at our hands. He didn't say a word. He turned off the hose, very slowly, and went inside, and as the door swung shut behind him I saw him take a piece of chalk out of his shirt pocket.

. . .

I'd lived in 4B seven months and never once seen it at seven in the morning with anyone, because every important thing in that apartment had happened at night. The sun comes straight down Perry Street at that hour, it turns out, and in through the big window at a slant, and lies across the slanted floor in long gold planks, and

lights every leaf of Gerald Fernando from behind like stained glass, so that the fig I'd been talking to since October looked, for the first time, like he'd been expecting this.

"Morning, Gerald," said Wes.

I laughed with my back against the inside of the door and his hands on my waist, and he watched me do it like he was memorizing the sound.

"Bedroom," I said.

"It's daylight."

"I mean I can see you," he said simply. "Every time before, it was dark. I never saw you, Bennett. I want to see you."

So I let him.

In the bedroom, the low bed with the linen sheets was full of sun. He undressed me standing in it. He did it slowly, the way he'd take apart something old and valuable that he meant to put back together better than he'd found it. The flannel first, his own, and he made a small sound when he saw it was his, and folded it, actually folded it, and put it on the chair. The gray sweater. The bra I'd had to buy in March, two sizes up, from a saleswoman who'd said "congratulations" in a voice of pure sympathy.

And then he stopped, and looked.

I was twenty-one weeks. I'm not going to pretend I didn't want to cross my arms. My body had become a place I was visiting: the round tight curve of my stomach, a faint dark line down the middle of it like a seam, my breasts heavy and tender and veined faintly blue in the light, the freckles on my shoulders gone darker, a softness everywhere that hadn't been there in October. In the dark it hadn't mattered. In this light it was all just there.

He went down on his knees in front of me on the slanted floor.

He put both hands on my stomach, flat, the way his mother had, and then he leaned in and pressed his mouth to the curve of it, just below my navel, and stayed there with his eyes shut, and his breath was warm and unsteady against my skin.

"Wes."

"Give me a second." Muffled. "I'm saying hello."

Then he kissed his way up. Slowly, the line down my stomach, the underside of my ribs, between my breasts, careful there, so careful, his mouth so light it was almost only breath, until I put my hand in his hair and said, "I'm pregnant, not a soufflé," and felt him laugh against my skin, and then he wasn't careful anymore, not that kind of careful. His mouth closed over me and I made a sound I'd never heard myself make in daylight, and had to hold on to his shoulders, and he steadied me with both hands on my hips like I was something tall he'd been asked to keep upright in a wind.

He got me to the bed. He got his own shirt off in a way that sacrificed a button. I lay back on the linen in a slab of sun and watched him take off the rest, and I'd seen him before, every inch, but I'd never seen him. The broad chest, the long pale scar on his forearm, the tattoo on his ribs, W.M. + T.M. '01, blurred a little with age. A body built by carrying things up stairs. A man who'd spent his life making old things hold, standing in the sun at the edge of my bed, looking down at me as if I were the most valuable thing he'd ever been allowed to touch.

"Come here," I said.

He lay down beside me, not over me, on his side, and pulled me against him, my back to his chest, the curve of my stomach in the curve of his arm. His mouth on the back of my neck. His hand moving down over the bump and lower, slow, and then not slow,

until I was arching back against him and gripping the linen and saying his name, not Wes, just a sound with his name somewhere in it, and he kept on, patient and relentless, his voice in my ear low and rough and telling me things, how he'd thought about this in the truck, on the roof, on every ladder in Manhattan, how I looked right now, how I sounded, until the light in the room broke apart into pieces and I came with my face turned into his arm and his name finally whole in my mouth.

He held me while I shook. He didn't hurry. He has never once in his life hurried me.

"Okay?" he said into my hair.

"If you ask me if I'm okay," I said, "I'm going to report you to OSHA."

He laughed so hard the bed moved.

When I turned in his arms and pushed him onto his back, he went, the way he always went, the way he'd let me do everything since October, and I climbed over him carefully, a knee on either side, my stomach between us like a third thing we were both holding. He put his hands on my hips. He didn't grip. He looked up at me in the full light, at all of it, and his face did the slow helpless thing it had done on the landing in his suit, except there was nothing between us now. No suit. No dark. No lie. No brother at the window. No midnight.

I took him in slowly, an inch at a time, and watched it go through him, his head pressing back into the pillow, his throat working, his eyes never once leaving mine. We found the rhythm without looking for it, as if our bodies had been keeping a correspondence all spring that we hadn't been allowed to read. The bed creaked. The radiator, which had no business doing anything at all in April, clanked twice, loud, like someone knocking on the pipes from the floor below, and

we both stopped dead and stared at each other and then laughed until I had to put my forehead down on his chest.

"Even the building knows," he said.

"The building," I said, "has always known."

Then we stopped laughing.

He sat up under me and wrapped his arms around me, my stomach pressed between us, his face against my throat, and we moved like that, holding on, slow and deep, with the sun on our shoulders and the leaves of the trees moving their shadows over the brick. His hands spread wide on my back. His breath going ragged. I held his face and made him look at me and he did, he looked at me the whole time, in the light, until I came apart again around him, and he followed me, with my name, Claire, said once and very clearly, as if he wanted the whole apartment to hear it in the daytime for once.

. . .

Afterward we lay in the bright tangle of the sheets with nowhere to be. Through the bedroom door I could see Gerald in the window, his leaves going on glowing like nothing had happened, which is Gerald's whole philosophy.

Wes had his palm flat on my stomach. He'd put it there and left it, idly, the way you'd leave a hand on a dog asleep beside you.

And she kicked.

I'd been feeling that small sharp thump every night for three weeks, alone, in the dark. This time he felt it too. His whole body went still against me, the way it had in a dark room at Lenox Hill when a hand came up on a screen.

"Bennett," he said.

"Yeah."

"She kicked me."

"She does that."

"She kicked me." He lifted his head off the pillow and stared down at his own hand on my stomach as if it had just been handed a medal. "Bennett. She kicked me in the hand."

"She has opinions."

He put his hand back and waited. And she did it again, harder, right into the middle of his palm, and Wes Marsh, thirty-four years old, put his forehead down against the curve of my stomach and laughed and cried at the same time, in broad daylight, and didn't blame a single light.

. . .

At eleven-forty, a letter came under the door.

We both knew that sound, the whisper of paper on old wood. I was in the kitchen in his flannel making toast. He was on the green couch reading the cereal box like a newspaper.

We looked at each other.

"It's not twelve-forty," I said.

"It's not even night."

He got up and went and picked it up. A long white envelope. Not capitals. Not a patient forward-leaning hand. Typed. A law firm's name in the corner, three surnames and an ampersand. Footsteps going down the stairs, fast and heavy, a man who got paid by the stop.

Wes read it standing by the door, and his face changed slowly, the way the far shore had at six-fourteen, in reverse.

"Bennett."

I came and read it over his shoulder.

HALVORSEN PARTNERS LLC v. 41 PERRY STREET TENANTS' ASSOCIATION, CLAIRE BENNETT, AND WESLEY MARSH.

Defamation, for an essay with my name on it. Trespass and unauthorized alteration of the facade, for a man who'd spent his winter on a roof putting back the windows of 1891. A hearing on an injunction to stop all work on the building, at 60 Centre Street, on Thursday, the sixth of May.

Downstairs the street door banged, and then Hector Ortiz was coming up the four flights faster than I'd ever heard him take them, a phone held out in front of him like a torch.

"Mija," he said, on the landing, out of breath. "Mijo. The Landmarks people called. They put us on the calendar. The hearing's Tuesday." He saw the envelope in Wes's hand and stopped. "The fourth of May. One Centre Street."

Two hearings. Two blocks apart. The same week.

Wes folded the letter in thirds, very precisely, along its creases, and handed it to me. Then he looked out the big window at the street, where the light was still pouring down through the trees as if it had no idea what it had started.

"Okay," he said. "Good. I was getting bored."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Hearing

THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION of the City of New York holds its public hearings on the ninth floor of the Municipal Building at One Centre Street, in a long beige room with a raised dais, a flag, and the air of having been designed by someone told to make a room where nothing beautiful could ever happen.

The tenants of 41 Perry Street arrived at nine-fifteen in a catering van with RUSSO'S painted on the side.

Danny drove the way he cooked, with enormous commitment and no regard for anyone around him. Mrs. Kaplan rode up front in a navy straw hat with glass cherries on the brim, last worn, she said, in 1986. Mrs. Feldman sat behind her and told her the hat was too much, the whole way. The band girls from 4A sat on milk crates in the back with the couple from 3B and the baby, who was holding a breadstick. Priya came straight off a shift and fell asleep against a sack of onions. I sat on an upturned bucket, twenty-three weeks, with my own essay folded in my coat pocket.

Wes wasn't in the van. He'd left Perry Street at six in the truck, with something flat and tall wrapped in a moving blanket and strapped in the passenger seat like a person, and wouldn't tell anyone

what it was.

. . .

Everyone came. I keep saying that in this book, and I keep meaning it. My mother, in the lilac suit from Carnegie, in the third row; Biscuit was not permitted in a city building, which she took as a sign of the decline of civic life. Lorraine at the back, unable to smoke, vibrating. And in the last row, by the door, in his corduroy jacket, my father, with Ellen beside him and his hat on his knee.

On the other side of the aisle sat Halvorsen Partners.

Three of them and a lawyer. The lawyer was a tall man named Brandt in a suit that had cost more than every window in our building. The partners were Peter Halvorsen, silver-haired and tanned in May in a way that suggested a boat; Dana Whitcomb, younger, in black, who'd been reading my essay on her phone in the elevator with her jaw set; and, at the end of the row, in a suit that didn't fit him the way his suits used to, Ryan.

He didn't look at me. He looked at his hands.

. . .

Brandt went first, because that's how it works. He had twelve minutes and used all of them.

He said that 41 Perry Street was an "undistinguished vernacular tenement." He said its windows had been "largely replaced with modern units in the late 1960s," and that whatever "nostalgic restoration" had been carried out by "an unlicensed individual" was the subject of separate litigation. He used the word fabric six times. He said the building had "a compelling story, recently, in the press," and that "a compelling story is not an architectural argument," and he

looked across the aisle at me.

I've been looked at by a senator's wife's lawyer. I looked back.

Then the Chair, a small woman with a silver bob and half-moon glasses named Dr. Helen Osei, called the public. You get three minutes. There's a timer on the dais with a red light, and it beeps when you're done, and it does not care who you are.

. . .

Mrs. Kaplan walked to the microphone without her cane, which she'd left in the van, she told me later, "for the drama."

She took the hat off. She put it on the table in front of her, cherries up.

"My name is Ruth Kaplan," she said. "I live in 3A. I came to that building as a bride in 1971. I'm not going to tell you how old I was, because it's none of your business, and you'd do the arithmetic, and then you'd look at me differently."

The commissioners laughed. Dr. Osei didn't, but her pen stopped.

"Fifty-six years, I've looked at Perry Street through the same glass. That man," and she pointed at Brandt, without looking at him, the way you'd point at a stain, "says the windows were replaced in 1968. They were not. I was there in 1968. I'd have noticed. I notice everything. Ask anybody. Ask Hector." In the second row, Ortiz nodded solemnly. "I watched my husband Leonard walk to work through that glass every morning for thirty-nine years. I watched him walk home. The trees on Perry Street wave in that glass even when there's no wind. Leonard used to say the building was waving him in." She stopped. "And one morning in 2010 I watched an ambulance through it. And then I didn't watch anybody for a long time."

The room had gone quiet.

"In March," said Mrs. Kaplan, "those people turned off the heat. I sat in my kitchen in my husband's gloves. I'm not here about the heat. The city's dealing with the heat. I'm here about the window. Because if you let them take the windows out, I don't know what I'll be looking through, and I'm too old to learn a new view."

The timer beeped.

Mrs. Kaplan looked at it.

"I'm seventy-nine," she said. "Beep all you like." And then she put her hat back on, with tremendous care, the cherries trembling, and went and sat down, and in the third row my mother, a woman who has never once applauded anything that wasn't a dog, put her hands together, and clapped, alone, until Dr. Osei, very gently, asked her not to.

. . .

I went third, after Ortiz, who said in two sentences that every window in that building was the one it had been born with, and sat down like a man who didn't trust himself. I didn't read them the lol. The lol was on T-shirts. I read them the end.

> *I came to 41 Perry Street with three rules taped to a stranger's listing, and a ruined dress, and no idea who I was. In seven months in that building I have been brought soup, lasagna, a fig dolly, a bag of rock salt and a dozen eggs. I have been lied to and told the truth on its staircase, sometimes by the same man. I've had letters slid under my door at 12:40 in the morning by four different people, and every one of them changed my life. A building isn't brick. Anybody can buy brick. A building is a hundred and thirty-six years of people sliding things under each other's doors.*

You can't gut that. You can only evict it.

When I looked up, Dana Whitcomb was checking the essay on her own screen as if to see whether I'd changed a word, and at the end of her row Ryan had put one hand over his eyes. I came in at two minutes fifty. I've been a professional a long time.

. . .

Wes went last.

He'd signed the sheet at the door in block capitals, WESLEY MARSH, and under Affiliation, after a long pause, CARPENTER. He'd sat in the back row next to my father with the thing in the blanket propped against his knees, and my father had looked at it and nodded, like one man in a trade recognizing another.

When Dr. Osei called his name he stood up, and carried it to the front of the room, and set it on the table beside the microphone, and took the blanket off.

It was a window. One sash, six panes in a frame gone the color of molasses. I'd walked past it every night since October: the window on the fourth-floor landing, above the top step, looking down into the back gardens. He'd taken it out at five-thirty that morning and covered the hole with plastic and Ortiz's blessing.

"Sorry," he said, into the microphone, which made a sound like a seal. He bent it down. He was too tall for everything in that room. "I'm not good at this. I'm good at windows. I'll try to talk about windows."

He put one hand flat on the frame.

"This is from the fourth-floor landing at Forty-One Perry. It's original. It's 1891. Mr. Brandt says the windows got replaced in the

sixties, and I get why he thinks that, because somebody painted them in the sixties, about nine coats, and paint makes everything look like it's lying. But I've had every one of them out on my bench this winter. Twenty-eight windows. I stripped the paint off by hand. Under it, every one, there's the same thing. Longleaf pine. Heart pine. You can tell by the grain, it's so tight you can barely count the rings. This tree was maybe four hundred years old when somebody cut it down in Georgia in the 1880s. There's none of it left. They cut it all. You can't buy this wood. You can only find it, in buildings like ours, and you either keep it or you throw it in a dumpster, and then it's gone, and that's it, there's no more."

He looked down at it.

"The glass is cylinder glass. Some guy blew it. Literally blew it, with his lungs, into a long tube, and cut the tube and laid it flat in an oven. That's why it's wavy. Claire wrote about that, so you know. That's why the trees move." He touched one pane. "People always say old glass is thicker at the bottom because it flows. Like it's melting real slow, over a hundred years. That's not true. Glass doesn't flow. It was just made uneven, by a guy with lungs, and whoever put it in the frame put the heavy edge at the bottom. Every time. Every pane in this building. Because that's what you do with something heavy. You don't fight it. You put it where it can rest."

The room was very quiet.

"There's a bubble in this one." He tilted the sash so the fluorescent light came through it. "Top left. See it? That's a breath. That's somebody's breath from 1890 that got stuck in there and never came out. Every time you look out that window, you're looking through some guy's breath."

Dr. Osei had stopped writing.

"So that's the window." He cleared his throat. "That's the part I know how to say. The other part." He stopped. He rubbed his thumb over his eyebrow. "When you put a vinyl window in, it lasts maybe twenty years and then it fogs up and you throw it out and buy another one. This one's lasted a hundred and thirty-six. It'll do another hundred if somebody puts new putty in it every thirty years and doesn't paint it shut. That's it. That's all it needs. It doesn't need anybody to be a genius. It just needs somebody to stay."

He looked up, then. Not at the commissioners. Down the room, over the rows, at me.

"I stood on this landing a lot," he said. "Last fall. At three in the morning, mostly, in the rain, trying to get up the nerve to knock. I'd stand there and look out this window into the gardens and think about how I'd wrecked everything I ever touched. And this window would just sit there. With the rain on it. Being a hundred and thirty-six years old, and still shutting right. And I'd think, okay. Some things you don't wreck. Some things you just keep putting new putty in."

He put his hand back on the frame, flat.

"They don't make them like this anymore," said Wes. "People say that like it's a saying. It's not a saying. It's a fact. The trees are gone. The guys with the lungs are gone. All that's left is the windows. That's the whole argument. That's all I've got." He paused. "Please let them stay."

The timer beeped.

He'd gone over by a minute and ten. Nobody had stopped him. I looked at the dais, and one of the commissioners, a heavy man in a bow tie who'd been checking his watch through Brandt's whole presentation, had taken off his glasses and was cleaning them with his

tie, very thoroughly, with his head down.

. . .

They don't vote on the day. The Chair says the Commission will vote at a future meeting, and that's it; after everything, it feels like being kissed on the forehead. But Dr. Osei, before she closed the item, took off her half-moon glasses and folded them and set them on her notes, and looked down the long beige room at Wes, who was wrapping the window back up in its blanket like a man swaddling something.

"Mr. Marsh," she said. "I've sat on this Commission for eleven years. I've heard testimony from four hundred architects, two mayors, and a man who chained himself to a carousel." She paused. "You're the first person who's ever made me want to go home and look out my own window."

. . .

In the hallway, Halvorsen Partners stood in a tight gray knot and spoke in the low urgent voices of people realizing that a quarterly projection has become a story about an old lady in a hat. Dana Whitcomb broke away and came over to me. Up close she was very tired, with ink on the side of her hand from signing things.

"Off the record, Ms. Bennett. When this asset was presented to us in January, it was presented as vacant-ready. A few elderly holdouts. A two-year path to market." She glanced back at Ryan, standing by the window with his back to everyone. "Nobody mentioned the texts. Nobody mentioned a pension fund in Ohio calling our general counsel at home on a Sunday."

"What do you want?"

"Honestly?" Dana Whitcomb looked, for a second, like someone who'd been awake since March. "My partners would very much like to be out of this building by June."

. . .

Danny told us on Wednesday at four, in the empty dining room at Russo's on Gansevoort, under the meat hooks, between lunch and dinner.

He'd pushed two tables together and put out bread and olives, and Nick stood behind him by the pass with a dish towel over his shoulder, trying very hard not to look proud of his father in front of witnesses.

"So," said Danny Russo. "Sunday Gravy's been on the list five weeks. Number two, behind a dog that solves crimes." He spread his big hands on the tablecloth. "I've got two partners who owe me their careers. I've got money I never thought I'd have, for a book I never thought I'd write, because a woman in socks made me tell the truth. And I've got a son." He didn't look behind him. "Who put in eleven thousand dollars. His savings. I said no. He said, Pop, you never let me in on anything. So."

"Danny," I said.

"Halvorsen's partners called my lawyer yesterday at six. Fair price. Real price, not a steal, I'm not a crook, I'm a cook. They drop the lawsuit, all of it, Claire's, Wes's, everybody's, as a condition of sale. Rents stay where they are. Every lease. Every stabilized unit. Nobody goes anywhere." He reached across the table and put a heavy set of keys down in front of Ortiz, on the tablecloth, with a sound like a judge's gavel. "And this guy's the managing agent. Because he's been running that building for thirty years anyway, and nobody ever paid

him for it."

Ortiz looked at the keys. He didn't touch them. His sad, wise super's eyes had gone very bright.

"I bought the building," said Danny Russo, and sat back in his chair, enormous and beaming, with a tear going into his beard. "Every story needs a fat guy with a checkbook in the third act."

At the end of the table, Lorraine Fisch put down her wine.

"That's mine," she said. "I said that. In March. On the phone. He's stolen it."

"You're in my book, Lorraine," said Danny. "Everything you say is mine now."

. . .

Ryan came to Perry Street on Wednesday evening, at a quarter to seven, with a cardboard file box.

I was on the stoop. Mrs. Feldman was pouring Manischewitz into Dixie cups on the second-floor landing for anyone who passed, and the band girls were playing "Here Comes the Sun" in 4A with the window open, and I'd needed air. I knew Ryan by his walk before I saw his face. He'd always walked like a man arriving at a room that was expecting him. Now he walked like a man arriving at the wrong address.

He stopped at the bottom of the stoop. He was carrying the box with both arms, the way you'd carry something that might break, and it said 41 PERRY — FILES on the side in a thin gray typeface.

"I'm supposed to give these to the super," he said.

"He's inside. First floor."

He didn't move. He looked at the bump, and at my face. Something had gone out of his jaw, some confidence it had been built

around, and without it he looked younger, and unfinished, like a draft.

"Maddie told me," he said. "About your father. The letters. That he wrote you every birthday and your mom kept them." He shifted the box. "That was him? At the hearing? In the back, with the hat?"

"That was him."

"He looks like you." Ryan swallowed. "Around the eyes. I kept turning around to look at him for an hour, thinking, I know that face, and I didn't know why."

The band girls hit the chorus, upstairs, loud and slightly flat.

"Three years," Ryan said. "We were together three years, Claire. We were going to get married. I picked the venue. And I didn't know about any of it. Your dad. The letters. The ghostwriting, I didn't even know about that, I thought you edited stuff." He looked up at the building, at the windows going gold in the evening, one of them his firm had tried to take out. "I didn't know anything about you."

I thought about it. I want that on the record. I sat on the stoop with my hands on my stomach and the building going on behind me with its Dixie cups and its flat guitars, and I thought about the man at Bettina's with his hand on the small of my back, and every question he'd never asked.

"No," I said. "You didn't."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Rose

AT ONE-TEN IN THE morning on the sixth of May, my phone lit up on the nightstand with a photo of two women in paper crowns.

I'd never changed it. I'd thought about it a hundred times since Bettina's. I'd never been able to decide what to change it to, and at one-ten in the morning, with Wes asleep on his stomach beside me and one heavy arm across my hip, I was glad all over again that I hadn't.

"It's happening," said Maddie, before I could say anything. "It's four weeks early and I haven't washed the onesies, the book says you wash the onesies, and my mother is on a cruise somewhere off Estonia, and you said. In February, in the diner. You said yes."

"I said yes."

"You said yes," Maddie said, and her voice broke into a long low groan I'd never heard her make, and somewhere behind it a woman said briskly, "Breathe, honey," and then Maddie came back, panting, furious. "Lenox Hill. They said five centimeters. I don't know what that means. It sounds like a sandwich."

Beside me, Wes was already sitting up and reaching for his jeans in the dark.

"I'm coming," I said.

. . .

It was sixty-one degrees outside. We drove up the West Side Highway with the windows down and the heater on high, because there is nothing to be done about that heater, nothing in this world.

"You don't have to come in," I said.

"I'm not coming in." He took the exit. "I'm going to sit in the waiting room. I'm very good at waiting rooms. Ask anybody."

"It could be hours."

"Bennett. I've been waiting since October. I can do a couple hours with a vending machine."

. . .

Labor and Delivery at two in the morning is a hallway of closed doors with a different sound behind each, like an apartment building where every tenant is having a different emergency.

Maddie was in the last room on the left. She was sitting up in the bed in a hospital gown with her hair in a knot and her face blotchy and wet, gripping the rail with both hands, and when I came in she looked at me, at my face and then at my stomach, and started to cry.

"Look at you," she said. "You're huge."

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry. I'm on drugs. Not the good ones yet."

A nurse came in behind me, a small fierce Filipina woman of about sixty with a name tag that said DOLORES and reading glasses pushed up into her gray hair. She took one look at me and pointed at the chair by the window.

"Sit, Mama. You're not due till August, I can tell from here. You stand up in my delivery room at two in the morning, you're going to end up in my other bed."

"I'm the support person."

"I know who you are. Sit down and support." Dolores checked something on a monitor, checked something on Maddie, said "Six. Good girl," and went out, and I sat down, because when Dolores tells you to sit down you sit.

. . .

There's a lot of waiting in labor. Nobody tells you. Hours of a woman breathing through something enormous every four minutes, then every three, while you hold her hand and watch a line on a screen and say things that don't help.

The anesthesiologist came at three and told Maddie a joke about a penguin while he worked, and she said, "Oh my God, I love you," with total sincerity, and he said, "Everyone does, for about twenty minutes," and left.

Afterward she lay back on the pillows with her eyes half shut, and the room went quiet except for the monitor, the quick watery gallop of the baby's heart.

"Can I ask you something?" Maddie said.

"You're going to anyway."

"Do you forgive me?"

I looked at her. A fire extinguisher in Weinstein Hall. Green silk at Bettina's. This same hospital in December, the other kind of night, and I'd sat with her until dawn. A diner in February, a phone slid across a table full of texts.

"No," I said.

She nodded slowly, against the pillow, as if I'd confirmed a price.

"I'm not here because I forgive you," I said. "I'm here because I said I would. I've started being a person who does what she says she'll do. It's new. I'm practicing on you."

Maddie stared at the ceiling for a long time.

"That's worse," she said finally. "That's so much worse. That's like being forgiven by a tax form."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. And she laughed too, weakly, wetly, and then a contraction came that the epidural apparently hadn't been told about, and she grabbed my hand and crushed it, and we stopped laughing.

. . .

At five-forty Dolores came back and checked and said, "Okay. Ten. Let's go have a baby," the way you'd say let's go get a coffee, and the room filled up: a doctor, a resident, another nurse, a warming table with a light over it, a little plastic bassinet, Dolores rolling up her sleeves.

"Leg," Dolores said to me.

"What?"

"You take the leg." She put my hand under Maddie's knee. "When I say push, you push it back. Toward her ear. Don't be shy. She's not going to remember you were shy."

So I took the leg. You picture holding a hand and murmuring. Instead I stood at the side of the bed, twenty-four weeks pregnant myself, holding the left leg of the woman who'd slept with my fiancé for seven months, pushing it back toward her ear every three minutes while she pushed and screamed and called Ryan names I'd only ever thought in private, and some I hadn't thought of, which I've since

used.

"That's it," said Dolores. "That's it. I see her. Look at all this hair. Oh, no, wait. That's no hair at all. That's just head."

"What?" Maddie gasped.

"She's bald, Mama. Bald as an egg. Push."

At six fifty-two in the morning, with the sun just coming up over the East River through the window behind me, and my hand cramped around the back of Maddie's knee, the baby came all at once, the way they do, slippery and gray-blue and furious, and the doctor lifted her up and she opened her mouth and screamed.

Maddie made a sound. It wasn't a word. It was the same sound Wes had made on a stool in a dark room in April, the sound of a person finding out the furniture has moved.

They put her on Maddie's chest. Tiny and slick and outraged, with a perfectly round, perfectly bald head, and fists like two walnuts, and a voice that could have stripped paint.

"Oh," Maddie said. "Oh. Hi. Hi. Oh, you're so angry."

"She's got lungs," said Dolores approvingly. "What's her name?"

Maddie looked down at her. She had her hand over the baby's whole back, and it covered almost all of her.

"Rose," she said. "Like I told you. Her father can write it on every check." Then, softer: "And because she's going to have thorns." She looked up at me over the baby's head, her face wrecked and wet and absolutely lit. "She's mine. She's going to need them."

. . .

I texted Ryan at seven-fifteen. Maddie had asked me to, at three in the morning, between contractions, in a voice so small I'd almost not heard it. "He should know. I don't want him here. I want him to

know. Will you do it? I can't make my thumbs work."

So I did. Four words. I'd like it on the record that I didn't write a fifth.

Rose. 6:52. Lenox Hill.

He came at nine-forty.

I was in the hallway with a cup of terrible tea, watching a man at the end of the corridor asleep upright in a plastic chair with his boots on, holding two coffees in his lap as if someone might try to take them. Every nurse who went past him smiled.

And Ryan came out of the elevator.

He was in the camel coat, in May, over a T-shirt and jeans, as if he'd grabbed the first thing by the door. He hadn't shaved. His hair was wrong on one side. He came down the hallway fast, reading the room numbers, and then he saw me, and stopped, a few feet away, the way you'd stop at the edge of a pool you weren't sure was deep enough.

"Is she," he said. "Are they."

"They're both fine. She's eight pounds."

"Eight pounds."

"Seven pounds, nine ounces. I rounded. She's very loud."

He looked like a man who'd had a building sold out from under him the day before and then been sent four words at dawn, and had driven in on no sleep, in a coat for a different season.

"Can I," he said.

"It's not my door, Ryan."

He knocked. Maddie said something I didn't hear. He went in, and the door swung most of the way shut behind him, and didn't latch, and so I saw it, through a gap of about four inches, from the hallway.

Maddie held the baby out. He took her. He didn't know how; nobody does. He held her too high and then too low and then Maddie said something, and he brought her in against his chest, against the camel coat, and looked down at her.

And Ryan Cole, who had once told me that crying at movies was "a choice," stood in a hospital room on East Seventy-Seventh Street holding his bald furious daughter, and his face came apart.

Not the headshot. Not the small, short look that's over before the person giving it knows it's happened. All of it. His mouth went, and his eyes, and he bent his head over her and his shoulders shook and he said something to her, over and over, very quietly, and I didn't need to hear it to know what it was, because it's what everyone says. Hi. Hi. Hi.

I stood in the hallway with my tea and watched him and waited to feel something.

I want to tell this right, because it matters, and because it's the thing I'd have gotten wrong if I'd written it in September. I'd have written rage. Or grief. Or that small mean satisfaction you get from watching someone who hurt you be hurt by something else. Or, worse, that old ache, the phantom limb of three years.

There was nothing.

I watched him the way you'd look at an apartment you used to rent, from across the street, years later. You can see which window was yours. You can remember where the couch went. You don't want to go in. You don't even want to knock. You just stand there for a second on the sidewalk with your hands in your pockets, and feel how light you are, and then you walk on, because someone's waiting for you at the end of the block.

That was the freedom. I'd been waiting seven months for it to feel like winning. It didn't feel like anything. That's how I knew it was real.

At the end of the hallway the man in the plastic chair woke up, all at once, the way he does, and looked around for me, and found me, and held up both coffees, with a face like a question.

I went to him.

. . .

Later, after Ryan had gone to find a pharmacy and diapers and a reason to stand up straight, Maddie lay in the bed with Rose asleep on her chest, and I sat in the chair by the window, and neither of us said anything for a while.

Then she said, "Thank you."

"I said I'd come."

"I know. You keep saying that." She was looking down at the baby. "I'm going to tell her about you, you know. When she's old enough. The real version. Not the toast version. That I did a terrible thing to the best person I knew, and she held my leg anyway."

"Tell her I was wearing socks."

"You're always wearing socks."

"That's why it's important."

Maddie laughed, and Rose stirred, and frowned in her sleep with her whole face, an expression of total disapproval, and both of us stopped breathing until she settled.

Then Maddie reached for her phone on the tray table with her free hand and held it out to me.

"Can you find a number for me? Hector Ortiz. You must have it."

"Why do you want Hector?"

"Don't ask," said Maddie Price, and took the phone back, and dialed, and put it to her ear, and covered the mouthpiece with her hand and looked at me until I got up and went out into the hallway, which I did, laughing, because it seemed like the least I could do for a woman who'd been in labor for nine hours. Through the door, before it shut, I heard her say, "Hector? Hi. It's Maddie. Maddie Price. Yes. That one. Is it still open?"

. . .

The party was Saturday, on the roof.

Mr. Ortiz had typed a notice on a typewriter I didn't know he owned and taped it by the mailboxes, where the Halvorsen notices used to go. It said:

TENANTS PARTY. ROOF. SATURDAY 7 PM. BRING A CHAIR. THE ROOF IS STILL NOT OPEN TO RESIDENTS. DANNY SAYS ITS FINE. – H. ORTIZ, MANAGING AGENT.

He'd underlined MANAGING AGENT three times, the third through the paper.

Everyone came. Danny and Nick with lasagna in hotel pans. Lorraine at the parapet with a cigarette. Priya and Marcus, who had a new flaw ("He's started saying 'nom.' Before he eats. Out loud."). My mother, on her last weekend before Phoenix, in a sun hat the size of a bicycle wheel. My father and Ellen, on the bus from Montclair, with a jar of Ellen's strawberry jam for every apartment, labeled by hand. My father said hello to my mother by the water tower, three words, and she said hello back, and they stood there a moment like two people who'd been handed the same umbrella, and then Ellen brought him a plate.

The band girls played. Mrs. Kaplan danced with Ortiz to a song about the sea, very slowly, with her cheek on his good brown jacket. Mrs. Feldman said the lasagna needed salt and had three helpings. The baby from 3B slept in a bus tub lined with napkins, which had become a building tradition. Mayor the bodega cat came up the fire escape and surveyed us like a landlord.

And the light went down over the river, gold, then pink, then the deep blue that comes right before the streetlights, and the strings of white bulbs Ortiz had zip-tied to the water tower came on all at once.

I stood at the parapet with a plastic cup of lemonade and Wes behind me, his arms around me and his chin on the top of my head and his hands linked over my stomach, and watched the city come on, window by window, the way New Jersey had at six-fourteen.

She kicked. He laughed into my hair. He was still not over it. I suspected he would never be over it.

. . .

At nine o'clock, Mr. Ortiz tapped a fork on a bottle of Danny's prosecco and stood up on a milk crate beside the chimney.

The chalkboard was propped there. The same one. POOL across the top in his careful capitals, eight months of names and numbers erased and rewritten underneath, faced to the wall, as always, so that all I could see was the back of it and a strip of masking tape that said DO NOT TOUCH — H.O.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Everybody. A few words."

The roof went quiet. The band girls put down their guitars.

"This building," said Hector Ortiz, "was sold two times this year. The first time, very bad. The second time," and he lifted the bottle toward Danny, who wept, "very good. Thirty years I'm in charge and

nobody pays me. Now somebody pays me, and I tell you, it's exactly the same, except now I have a stamp."

Laughter. Mrs. Kaplan clapped.

"So. Business." He put on his reading glasses. "The pool. Many people are asking me. When does the pool close? Mrs. Feldman, eight times you ask me. I have decided."

Somewhere behind me Mrs. Feldman said, "Hector, I'm changing again," and Ortiz held up a hand without looking at her.

"The pool," he announced, "closes the day the baby comes."

A groan went across the whole roof. Somebody booed. Lorraine said, "That's months, Hector, I'll be dead," and Ortiz said, "Then your money stays in the can, Lorraine, it's very simple," and climbed down off his milk crate with enormous dignity to a ragged round of applause, and went and stood guard by the chalkboard with his arms folded.

I laughed with everyone else. I leaned back against Wes and laughed, and felt him laughing too.

And then I stopped, because something had just occurred to me, standing there on the roof of 41 Perry Street with a lemonade going warm in my hand and the lights coming on all over the city.

In eight months, I had never once asked Hector who was winning.

Not once. Not in October, when I was sleeping with a man whose name I didn't know. Not in December, when I was in love with two brothers and couldn't have told you which one I'd wake up wanting. Not on New Year's Eve, with the chalkboard turned to the chimney and forty people betting on my life. I'd asked what it was. I'd asked who was in it. I had never asked who was ahead.

I read the last page first. I always have, since I was eight, standing in the aisle of the Whetstone library with a book open at the back,

needing to know before I could stand to begin. It was the oldest habit I had.

I looked at the back of the chalkboard, at DO NOT TOUCH — H.O. on its strip of tape, two feet away from me, unguarded for a second while Ortiz argued with Mrs. Feldman.

I could have turned it around. Nobody would have stopped me.

I didn't want to.

That was the strangest thing that had happened to me all year, and it had been a very strange year. For the first time in my life, I didn't want to know how it ended. I wanted to find out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Envelope

THE CRIB CAME UP the stairs on the last Saturday in May, four flights, sideways, with two men underneath it swearing in two languages.

"Left," said Wes.

"My left or your left?"

"Hector, there's only one left. It's the one by the wall."

"Then say wall, mijo. Say what you mean."

I stood on the fourth-floor landing with a glass of ice water and supervised, which is what you're allowed to do at twenty-seven weeks, when you're shaped like a woman smuggling a mixing bowl under her shirt and everybody in the building has opinions about your ankles. Mrs. Feldman had come out on two in her housecoat to say they were doing it wrong. Mrs. Kaplan had opened her door on three exactly one inch, which in Mrs. Kaplan is a standing ovation.

"You built it too big," Ortiz said, at the turn below me. "You built it like a boat."

"My father built boats," said Wes, through his teeth, and tipped his end up over the banister, and the crib came around the last corner like a horse taking a fence and landed at my feet.

It was beautiful. I want to say that plainly, because I've spent most of my life describing things that weren't, and I know the difference.

I'd seen it half-built in March, in pieces on his bench in Red Hook at four in the morning. I hadn't seen it whole. The crooked treehouse from the oak at Gran's place in Tiverton, white oak and cedar, boat wood Frank Marsh had brought home from the yard, taken down by hand in January in the snow. He'd oiled it since, and the silver had gone down into the grain and the gold had come up. Where the old nails had been, he'd plugged every hole with a little dowel of walnut, dark against the pale wood, scattered down the rails like a constellation somebody had drawn by hand.

"Eighty-one," Wes said, watching me look. "I counted."

"Of course you counted."

Under the headboard rail was his brother's eight-year-old pencil, N. WALL, which I already knew about. But near the end of the side rail, on the inside, where a baby lying on her back would be able to see it, there was a rough place he hadn't planed: two letters gouged into the grain by somebody small and determined with a tool too big for him.

W.M.

"I was ten," Wes said. "Theo designed it, so I signed it. Dad's awl. He made me sand the whole treehouse floor as punishment. I sanded around it." He shrugged. "So I planed around it."

"She's going to chew on it," Ortiz said, with professional interest. "They chew everything. My nephew ate a doorframe."

Wes looked at the rail. Something crossed his face so fast I'd have missed it if I weren't always watching for it.

"Yeah," he said. "That's my dad she'll be chewing on."

Then he picked up his end and said, "Door, Hector. Say door," and they carried it in.

. . .

The bedroom in 4B was not designed for a crib. It had been designed, as far as I could tell, in 1891, for one very thin person with no possessions who planned to die young of consumption. The plan, which Wes had drawn to scale on graph paper and stuck to the fridge under the lemon magnet, required the bed to move eighteen inches toward the wall.

He lifted the end of it, and I heard him stop.

"Bennett. What is this."

Under the bed, where it had been since the third week of February, was my blue suitcase. The one I'd packed in Alfama with the river going silver outside the window and Theo refolding my sweaters behind me because he couldn't bear the way I did it.

"You never unpacked it," Wes said.

"I unpacked the important parts."

"You've been living out of this for three months?"

"I've been living near it. There's a difference."

He didn't push. He never pushes. He slid the suitcase out with his boot and stood it by the dresser, kissed the top of my head, and went down to help Hector with the toilet in 2B, which had been making a noise Hector described as "spiritual."

I sat down on the floor, which at twenty-seven weeks is a process with several stages and a soundtrack, and unzipped it.

It smelled like Lisbon. I hadn't expected that. Oranges and diesel and salt off the Tagus, wax from the church at the bottom of the hill, laundry soap from the lines strung over the alleys where whole

families' underwear flew above your head like the flags of small, honest nations.

I laid things out in a ring around me. The tram ticket for the 28, kept from the ride where I threw up in front of eleven tourists and a nun, because you should always keep evidence of your finest hours. The orchestra program with PRINCIPAL CELLO on the second page. The tin of sardines from Dona Graça, who'd pressed it into my hands and said something long and fierce in Portuguese that Sofia had translated as "for the baby," and then, after a pause, "also for you, you are too thin in the face."

I put the tin on the windowsill next to Gerald.

Theo's letter wasn't in there. I checked anyway. No. 45 lived flat in my nightstand drawer under a notebook. Open it when she's born, he'd said. Or he. When they're born. I'd opened every letter in this story too early. That one I was going to open on time, if it killed me.

Then I unzipped the flat pocket in the lid, the one for things you can't lose, and found the envelope.

Small and stiff and clinic-white, the kind of envelope that has never held anything casual. On the front, in Dr. Barata's slanting hand, one line. On the back, she'd signed her name across the seal, half on the flap and half on the paper, so it couldn't be opened and closed again without anyone knowing. Like a woman who'd heard "Don't tell me" before and knew exactly what people do at three in the morning with things they've asked not to be told.

Para quando estiver pronta. Ou nunca.

For when you're ready. Or never. Both are allowed, she'd said, under the blue tiles of her office wall, sliding it across the desk.

I'm a writer, and I need you to understand what that means, because it's the only defense I have. I have never in my life not read

the last page. Three weeks ago, on the roof, I'd decided I didn't want to know who was winning Hector's pool, and felt very evolved. It turns out deciding a thing on a roof and deciding it with an envelope in your lap are different sports. And here it was, one line on a card, and every question anyone had asked me since a bathroom floor at JFK would have an answer.

The baby turned over, slow and enormous, like someone rolling over in a hammock. I put my free hand on her.

"Don't look at me," I said. "You started this."

I held the envelope up to the window. The light came through enough to show the shadow of a card, and on it a short dark line, a word, maybe two, and a number. I'd done exactly this once before, at a lamp, with a letter where a man had scribbled out a line so hard the pen went through, and I'd made out two words, IT WASN'T, and those two words had taken my whole life apart and put it back together facing a different way.

I got my thumbnail under the corner of the flap. It lifted a quarter of an inch. The tail of Dr. Barata's B stretched across the gap like a thread about to go.

"Hey," said Wes, from the doorway.

. . .

I didn't jump. I'd like credit for that.

He'd come back for the drill. He always forgets the drill. He stood there with sawdust on his forearms and looked at the ring of Lisbon on the floor, and the envelope in my hand, and he knew what it was. I'd told him in February, on the roof, the night I came home. He'd asked one question, "Is it somewhere safe?", and I'd said yes, and that was the last time either of us had mentioned it.

He set the drill down and came and sat on the floor across from me, inside the ring, his back against the crib, his big wrecked hands hanging between his knees.

"If you need to know, you open it," he said. "I'll go fix Hector's toilet for an hour and you can tell me or not tell me. That's yours. I'm not going to be the guy who decides it for you." The corner of his mouth went up. "We've tried that, in this family. It didn't go great."

"Do you want to know?"

He took a long time. Wes answers stupid questions instantly, what's for dinner, who'd win in a fight between Hector and a raccoon, but give him a real one and he goes quiet and turns it over like a board he's checking for warp.

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because I already know where I'm going to be." His thumb went along the walnut dowels on the rail behind him without his looking, one, two, three. "On the floor of this room. That's the answer. That's the only part I need." He nodded at the envelope. "If that says Theo, I'm the guy who built her crib out of her grandfather. If it says me, I'm the guy who built her crib out of her grandfather. That card doesn't get a vote."

The baby kicked, once, hard, right under my palm. A period at the end of his sentence.

"She agrees with me," Wes said.

"She doesn't get a vote either."

"She's a Marsh. She's going to think she does."

I laughed, and half of it came out as something else, and I put my wrist against my eyes.

Here's what I worked out, sitting there. I didn't want to know. I'd thought it was the writer in me, wanting the last page. But what I wanted was an ending where nobody lost anything, and that card couldn't give me one. Whatever it said, somebody I loved would read it and something in them would quietly close, not slammed, just shut, the way a door shuts somewhere in a house at night and you're never quite sure which room. Maybe not Wes. But Theo, on his terrace. Carol. Me. I wasn't going to put that in a drawer and live on top of it for the rest of my life.

"Okay," I said. "I'm not opening it."

He didn't look relieved. That's how I knew he'd meant every word. He just held out both hands and hauled me up, because standing at twenty-seven weeks is a two-person job.

. . .

Gerald was by the big window on the rolling oak stand Wes had built him. I knelt, also a process, and dug my fingers into the soil on the left side of his trunk, where it always is. Two knuckles down, I found the key, dark with damp earth, the loop worn smooth by everyone who'd ever held it. Everyone in this story had had their hands in this pot.

The lock was stiff; it always had been. I leaned on the door with my shoulder and turned and leaned again, and it gave, and I pulled the string on the bare bulb, and the closet was the closet. The garment bag on its hook with the charcoal suit inside, the one Theo had worn on top of a zinc bar in December and left behind when he left for good. The spare bow in its narrow case. Cedar and dust and old paper. I'd sat on this floor in November and read forty-three letters until the window went gray.

I put the envelope on the shelf, flat, behind the bow case, where you'd have to reach for it on purpose.

"Ou nunca," I told it.

I pulled the string, locked the door, and buried the key again under Gerald, two knuckles down, and patted the dirt flat the way you'd tuck in a child or bury a goldfish, both of which I was thinking about in roughly equal measure.

Behind me, Wes said quietly, "Don't open the hall closet."

"That's my line. That was the listing. Water the fig twice a week. Don't open the hall closet."

"I know. It was T.'s rule." He hauled me up again. "Now it's ours."

He went to the fridge, where his half of the old rules was still taped up, the square capitals from October, DON'T TOUCH THE CLOSET, NO TALKING BEFORE COFFEE, DON'T NAME MY PLANTS, and took the carpenter's pencil from behind his ear and pressed hard enough that I could hear it.

DON'T OPEN THE HALL CLOSET. (WE MEAN IT.)

"We," I said.

"We," said Wes, and went to get his drill.

. . .

Theo called at eight, which was one in the morning in Lisbon, which meant he'd been awake and lying about it.

I was on the green couch with my feet in Wes's lap, where my feet live now; he was rubbing them with the absent, competent attention he gives a door that sticks. Theo's face came up gold from a lamp, the lights of the far bank behind him, the white railing of the terrace where I'd stood every morning for seven weeks throwing up into a geranium.

"Claire. Is Wes there?"

"His hands are on my feet."

Then June leaned into the frame in his gray sweater, her short hair pinned back with a pencil, freckles gone dark from the Lisbon sun. She looked happier than I'd ever seen her and also like she'd been crying.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Nothing's wrong." She wiped her eyes on the sleeve, which was too long for her. "Theo. Tell them."

Theo took a breath like a man about to play something difficult in front of a lot of people.

"We're getting married," he said. "On the cove. At Ma's. The solstice weekend, Saturday the nineteenth. I know that's in three weeks. I know it's insane. We were supposed to get married in May the first time, and it's taken us a year and a half and two continents to get the date right, and I'm not waiting for a month with a nicer name." He paused. "Ma knows. She cried for nine minutes and then started a spreadsheet. She's sent four emails since dinner. One of them just says CHAIRS."

Wes's hands had stopped on my feet.

"Wes," Theo said. "I need a best man."

Wes looked at his brother's small gold face, and his hand stayed on my ankle, very still.

"You had one picked out last time," he said.

"I did. It was you." Theo's voice didn't change, which is how you could tell what it cost him. "I never un-picked you. I just didn't speak to you for a year. That's an administrative issue."

June laughed, wet. Wes looked down at my foot as if it were the only thing in the room he could trust himself to look at.

"Yeah," he said, rough. "Obviously."

"Good. Wear the navy one. Ma had the Carnegie photo framed. And speaking of suits." Theo turned the phone a fraction toward me. "Claire, is mine still in the hall closet?"

Wes and I looked at each other.

"Yes," I said.

"I want to wear it."

"I told him it's bad luck," said June.

"The bad luck already happened," Theo said mildly. "We had all of it. There's none left. I checked." He looked at me, and I could see him seeing something on my face, the way he always could. "It was always the right suit, Claire. It was just early."

I put the phone face up on the couch, so the two of them were looking at the water stain, and went back to Gerald.

"What's she doing?" I heard Theo say.

"Digging," said Wes.

"Why is she digging?"

"Long story. Gerald's fine."

Gerald was not fine. A fig has very little in the way of facial expression, but I swear that tree looked like it had been dug up twice in one evening and wanted to speak to a manager. The lock, leaning. The bulb. The garment bag, and above it, at eye level, behind the bow case, a small white corner.

I didn't look at it. I want that on the record. I looked at it with the side of my face, the way you don't look at the sun, and unhooked the bag and turned around, and Wes was right behind me with his arms out. He took it the way you'd take a coat off someone coming in from the rain. I locked the door. I buried the key.

When I picked up the phone, June was much closer to the screen.

"Claire. I need a maid of honor." She held up a hand before I could speak, and I saw her nails, chewed back down to nothing in a single evening, and loved her so much it startled me. "Before you tell me about your history with maids of honor, I know about your history with maids of honor. Everyone in Portugal knows. Sofia tells it at parties."

"Of course she does."

"I don't have a sister. My mother isn't coming. I've thought about it a lot, and I want you." For a second she was a pediatric nurse again, telling a scared six-year-old the truth about a needle. "I need someone there who isn't one of them."

I'd read that sentence before, on a text, on Priya's couch, the night before the bench. I'd said yes then too, and walked down a pier into the rest of my life.

"Yes," I said. "June. Yes."

"Obviously," Wes told my feet.

June smiled, the whole smile, the one I'd only ever seen in photographs from before.

"Good. Because Carol's already put you on the spreadsheet." She leaned in until her face filled the screen, freckles and wet eyes and a pencil sticking out of her hair like an antenna.

"And Claire," she said. "You're giving the toast."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Toast Problem

THE FIRST DRAFT BEGAN, "June and Theo met over a bicycle chain."

The second began, "Webster's defines marriage as," and I deleted it so fast I hurt my finger.

The third was a poem. We don't talk about the third.

By the second week of June I had eight drafts in a folder on my laptop called TOAST, and a ninth in a notebook, and every one of them was either a Hallmark card that had been left out in the rain or a deposition. I'd tried funny. Funny came out mean. I'd tried moving. Moving came out like a eulogy for two people who were very much alive and currently picking out linen napkins in Lisbon over FaceTime with a woman named Sofia who kept shouting "No! Ivory is for widows!"

I have written five bestselling memoirs. I wrote a senator's wife's account of her husband's affair so persuasively that people sent her flowers. I wrote an actress's first divorce in a voice so like hers that her second husband asked if she'd been keeping a diary.

I could not write four minutes about two people I loved, to be said out loud, in my own voice, by me.

"It's because it's yours," Wes said, the third night he found me at the kitchen table at two in the morning with the one lamp on. He was in boxers and a T-shirt with a hole at the collar, scratching his chest, squinting at me like I was a window that wouldn't close. "You've never had to stand behind one."

"That's very wise. Go back to bed."

"Read me one."

"Absolutely not."

"Read me the first line of one."

"'Webster's defines marriage as.'"

He looked at me for a long moment.

"Go back to bed, Bennett," he said, and took the cereal box off the top of the fridge, and went back to bed with it.

. . .

Carol was in command. There's no other way to describe it. In another life, Carol Marsh would have run a small country or a large ship, and either would have been on time.

The spreadsheet arrived the morning after Theo called. It had eleven tabs. One was called CHAIRS. One was called WEATHER (CONTINGENCY). One was called WESLEY (TIE), and contained only a link to a YouTube video titled "How To Tie A Four-In-Hand Knot For Beginners," and under it, in red, NO CLIP-ONS. I KNOW YOU.

She also started a group text. She named it WEDDING – PARENTS & RELEVANT PARTIES, and added me, Wes, my mother in Phoenix, and my father in Montclair. Within an hour my mother had renamed it WEDDING – PARENTS & RELEVANT PARTIES & BISCUIT, with a dog emoji, and Carol had renamed it back, and my

mother had renamed it again, and I sat on the green couch and watched two women in their sixties fight a cold war entirely through the "edit group name" function.

My mother had gone home to Phoenix in May. Gary's knee, she said, though I think it was also that chapter nine of the book with the sunrise on the cover was about boundaries, and she'd taken it personally. She called me every day now. She said "I love you" at the end of every call, abruptly, like a woman jumping off a diving board before she could think about it. Biscuit had been mentioned only twice in three weeks. I'd started to miss him.

LYNN: Carol, I wanted to ask whether Biscuit would be welcome. He's very well behaved at events.

CAROL: Is he housebroken?

LYNN: He's emotionally housebroken.

CAROL: I was married to a man like that for twenty years. Fine. He can come. If he eats anything that belongs to me, I'll have him made into a hat.

LYNN: ❤

CAROL: I don't know what that means and I refuse to learn.

My father had not said anything in the thread at all. On the fourth day he wrote, in full sentences, with punctuation, the way he writes everything: "Carol, I understand you have a piano. If you would like it tuned before the wedding, I'd be glad to. No charge, of course. I can come up on the train on a Saturday."

There was a long pause, the kind you can feel in a group text even though nothing is happening.

CAROL: Nobody has touched that piano since 2010.

ROB: Then it's time somebody did.

. . .

He went up on the second Saturday in June. Amtrak to Kingston, where Carol picked him up in the old Volvo. He doesn't drive at night, and he doesn't drive in Rhode Island, which he says is a state that was designed by someone who'd heard about roads but never seen one.

Carol called me at three that afternoon. She didn't say hello. She never does.

"I'm putting you on speaker," she said. "I want you to hear this."

What I heard was an A. One note, struck and held, struck and held, again, again, while somewhere behind it a small metal wrench turned with a sound like a very patient insect. Again. Again. I sat on the fire escape and listened to my father tune a dead man's piano a hundred and seventy miles away.

"He's been at the A for twenty minutes," Carol said, low. "I offered him a Manhattan. He said no thank you, he's seventeen years sober. Then I felt like an idiot, and he made me a cup of tea in my own kitchen, and I let him. Nobody makes me tea in my own kitchen, Claire."

"He does that."

"Frank bought this piano at a church sale in 1994," she said, in a different voice. "For forty dollars and a promise to build the pastor a dinghy. He couldn't play. He'd just sit at it after the boys were asleep and pick out the same three songs with one finger. I used to lie in bed and listen to him get the same note wrong every night." The A again. Held. "Your father says it hasn't been tuned since Frank died. I told him nobody's played it since the week Frank died. He said, 'Those are the same thing, Carol.'"

I didn't say anything.

"He's very good," Carol said. "Your father. He listens to it like it's going to tell him something."

The A stopped. There was a silence on the line, and then, very softly, one chord. Then another. Then a melody I almost knew, old and simple, going up and down like a person walking along a shore.

"Oh," said Carol. Just that.

She hung up on me without saying goodbye, which with Carol means she's crying, and I sat on the fire escape a long time with the phone in my lap.

. . .

Sofia called from Lisbon on Tuesday, at a volume that suggested she had not fully accepted the invention of the telephone and was still trying to be heard across the Atlantic by voice alone.

"Claire! Ai, Claire. I have booked. I land Boston on the Wednesday. I am bringing Theo's strings."

"He has strings, Sofia."

"He has strings, yes, but does he have six spare A strings? No. He breaks one at every important thing. Every one. The audition, the premiere in Porto, the night with the King of Spain's cousin. I have records. I have a spreadsheet. Carol and I are on the same spreadsheet now. We are sisters. Also, Dona Graça is sending sardines."

"For the wedding?"

"For the baby. She believes the baby is not getting sardines in America. I told her, Graça, there are sardines in America. She said, not real ones." A pause. "Also she asks if you are eating. I said yes. She did not believe me. Ai, I have to go, the maestro is crying in my office about a bassoon."

. . .

Danny insisted on catering. Nobody had asked him. Nobody ever has to ask Danny; he shows up like weather. "I own your building," he'd said. "Also Carol called me. She has opinions about chowder. I have opinions about chowder. We're going to settle this like adults, which is to say I'm going to make a chowder and she's going to tell me it's wrong."

So on the second Thursday in June there was a tasting at Gansevoort, under the meat hooks, after close. A long table in the back. Danny in his whites, Nick at the stove behind him with the focused calm of a young man whose father had finally learned to stop narrating his cooking. Wes and me. Priya and Marcus.

Wes was in the canvas jacket. It was eighty-one degrees in the meatpacking district and he was in the canvas jacket with the pockets, the one he wears on job sites in January. I'd stopped asking. He keeps a carpenter's pencil and a tape and a folding rule in it and about nine other things, and I think he feels about it the way I feel about socks.

Danny brought out littlenecks on ice, then a lobster roll so good Marcus closed his eyes and said "Oh, no," quietly, like a man hearing the song from his own wedding. Then a chowder, thin and milky and peppery, Rhode Island style, which Danny set down in front of me with enormous ceremony.

"Carol's recipe," he said. "She dictated it to me over the phone. Then she said, 'You'll get it wrong.' So I made it her way, and then I made it my way." He set down a second bowl. "Blind tasting. You tell me which one's better and I'll tell Carol you said hers."

I tasted both. They were both perfect.

"Hers," I said.

"I knew it," said Danny, devastated, and went to sulk at Nick.

That's when Priya stood up.

She stood up the way she does everything, with no warning, holding her water glass and a fork, and tapped it twice, and the sound went up into the meat hooks and rang around.

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

I looked up at her so fast my neck cracked.

Priya looked straight back at me, deadpan, eyebrows up. She knew exactly what she'd said. She'd heard the whole story on her couch in Astoria, at four in the morning, more times than anyone should have to.

"Marcus," she said, and turned to him. "Marcus says 'supper.' He alphabetizes his spices and not his books. He claps when the plane lands. He hums the Law and Order noise every time anything happens, including, once, during a code. He sneezes in threes, and it's always exactly three, and he waits for the third one with a little look of hope. He thinks cilantro is fine. He's going to be terrible at retirement. He takes forty minutes in the bathroom and comes out having read an entire Atlantic article and wants to tell me about it."

Marcus was looking up at her with an expression of total happiness, like a man watching his own house be described by a real estate agent who loves it.

"He reorganized my dishwasher," Priya said, "without asking. He calls Judge 'the gentleman.' Judge has never liked anyone and Judge sleeps on his chest. He drove to Astoria at four in the morning in February because I'd lost a kid on shift and I said 'I'm fine' on the phone in a voice he said was 'a little too fine,' and he sat on my kitchen floor with me until it got light, and didn't say anything, which

is the one thing nobody in my family has ever been able to do."

She stopped. She held up her left hand. There was a ring on it, a small square diamond, and I had been sitting across from her for an hour and hadn't seen it, which is the single greatest failure of observation in my professional life.

"He asked on Sunday," Priya said. "He did it badly. He knocked over a lamp. I said yes before he'd finished the sentence, which is a flaw, and it's mine." She raised her glass. "So that's my list. To Marcus. Who I'm going to marry, apparently, in spite of all of it, and because of it, and I'd like everyone to stop looking at me like that."

Nobody stopped looking at her like that. Danny wept openly into a dish towel. I got up, which took a while, and went around the table and hugged her, and she let me, for almost four seconds, which on Priya is a parade.

"You stole my toast," I said, into her hair.

"I improved your toast. You can have it back." She pulled away and looked at me with her ER eyes. "It's a good opening line, Claire. It just needed a better ending."

Over her shoulder, Danny was pointing a ladle across the table at Wes.

"And you," Danny said. "When are you gonna make an honest woman out of this one? She's carrying a baby up four flights in my building. I'm worried about liability."

The table laughed. I laughed, because you laugh.

Wes didn't look up from his chowder.

"Nobody's asking anybody anything, Danny," he said mildly. "Eat your bread."

And everybody laughed again, and Danny threw a dinner roll at him, and the night rolled on under the meat hooks.

I took a cocktail napkin off the table, one of Danny's, cream paper with a little black hook printed in the corner, and put it in my pocket. I don't know why. You pick things up on nights you want to remember. Or maybe I already knew I'd need something to write on.

. . .

Nobody's asking anybody anything.

It sat in me the whole cab ride home, down the West Side Highway with the windows open and the river black and glittering on the right. Wes had his arm along the back of the seat behind me, his fingers in my hair, his thumb moving behind my ear the way it does. He was humming. Wes doesn't hum. He was humming something tuneless and pleased, the noise a man makes after a good meal, and I sat beside him and didn't say anything at all.

I'd been proposed to twice in my life, and both times it had been written.

Ryan had done it on a rooftop in Williamsburg with a photographer hidden behind a planter. She sent us forty-one photos, eleven of them of my mouth open, and Ryan chose the one with the best view of the skyline.

Theo had done it in a letter. No. 44. Dear Claire, I'm going to ask you to marry me in Lisbon. He'd written it so I could decide with my eyes open, and it was the most considerate thing anyone had ever done for me, and I had read it on the floor of a bathroom at JFK with a pregnancy test beside my knee.

And Wes had asked me nothing.

Not once. Not on the roof in February, or in his garage at four in the morning in March, or at six-fourteen on a pier in April, with Jersey City going gold window by window, when my hand found

something small and square and hard in his inside pocket and he moved it, gently, and said, "Pencils." He asked every night, with his hand on the bump, "How's the blob." He'd built a crib. He'd moved his drill and eleven flannel shirts and a coffee can of screws into 4B, one at a time, like a man filling a jar with stones. He'd never asked me anything with a ring in it, or a knee, or a question mark.

I didn't need him to. I'd like to be clear about that. I'd had two men ask me, and look how that went.

But I wondered. In the cab, with his thumb behind my ear. I wondered if he was waiting for something. The baby. The envelope. A sign from God or Carol. I wondered if he thought I'd say no, and then I wondered if he thought I'd say yes for the wrong reasons, because I was seven months pregnant and frightened, which I was, and in love with him, which I also was, and whether he could tell those apart. Wes can tell a door that sticks because it's swollen from a door that sticks because it was hung wrong.

Or maybe he just didn't want to.

"You're quiet," Wes said, as the cab came off the highway at Christopher Street.

"I'm full of chowder."

"Whose?"

"Carol's."

"Liar," he said comfortably, and kissed the side of my head, and the cab turned onto Perry Street under the trees.

. . .

At three in the morning I was awake again. Of course I was.

The baby had decided that three was a good time to practice the backstroke, and my bladder had decided it agreed with her, and when

I came back from the bathroom I didn't get back into bed. Wes was asleep on his back with one arm flung over his head, like a man who's fallen from a great height onto something soft and decided to stay.

I went out to the kitchen and turned on the one lamp.

The laptop was on the table. The folder called TOAST. Eight drafts. I opened the laptop and closed it again. Then I put my hand in the pocket of the cardigan on the back of the chair, the one I'd worn to Gansevoort, and found Danny's napkin, cream paper, the little black hook in the corner, folded in quarters and soft from my pocket.

I smoothed it flat on the table under the lamp. I found one of Wes's carpenter's pencils in the jar by the stove, flat and fat and sharpened with a knife.

I didn't think about it. I want to be clear, because later people will say I workshopped it, and I didn't. It came the way the good ones always do, from somewhere below the ribs, fully formed, and my hand wrote it before my head had finished reading it.

One line. Pencil on paper. The whole thing took four seconds.

Then I sat there in the lamplight on Perry Street with the baby swimming slow laps under my hand, and I looked at it for a very long time.

I know what you're like at three a.m.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Little Compton, One More Time

WE STOPPED AT THE Mobil in Branford.

We didn't have to. I had to, in the sense that at twenty-nine weeks I had to stop at every gas station, rest area and reasonably private tree between Perry Street and Rhode Island, and had, four times since the Bronx. But Wes pulled off at Branford on purpose. I knew it from the way he signaled, early and deliberate, like a man pulling into a church.

"Your mother and father fought here in 1993," I said.

He turned off the engine. "Dad threw a windshield scraper into the woods. Ma says they went looking for it with a flashlight and found it and kissed in the ditch." He looked out at the woods behind the pumps, the same woods, green now, loud with June bugs. "I've always wanted to see the ditch."

He bought me a lemonade and a bag of pretzels and himself a coffee, two sugars, though the sugars are supposed to be mine. He didn't go into the woods. He stood by the truck with his coffee and looked at them for a while, and then he got back in, and we drove the

rest of the way with the windows down and Theo's wedding suit hanging from the hook behind my seat in its black garment bag, swaying at every curve like a passenger who'd had too much to drink.

The heater, which has one setting, had been joined for the season by the air conditioner, which has none. Wes said it was "thinking about it." It had been thinking about it since 2019.

. . .

The house came up over the last rise the way it always does, gray-shingled and crooked above the cove, like something that had been washed up by a storm and decided to stay. But it was June, and I'd only ever seen it in November and December and once in April, and I wasn't ready for it.

Everything was green. Wild roses on the stone walls, pink and white and enormous, smelling like a department store. The lawn went all the way down to the rocks, cut short and striped, and someone had set up a white tent on it, the poles still bare, the canvas rolled at the top like a sail waiting for orders. Below it the cove was a blue I'd only seen in brochures, and the boathouse sat at the edge of it with its gray shingles and its door.

I looked at the door. I didn't say anything.

And at the edge of the woods, in the big oak by the stone wall, there was a treehouse.

It had been a platform and two walls in April. Now it had four walls, and a roof of cedar shakes, and a window with a hand-planed frame, and a little railing around the platform, and a rope ladder and a real ladder, which Wes had insisted on and Theo had called "a lack of faith." Someone had hung a brass ship's bell by the door.

"You finished it," I said.

"Last weekend. Theo flew in early." He put the truck in park and looked at it through the windshield. "We only fought twice."

"About what?"

"The bell," he said darkly. "And whether a three-year-old needs a bell."

Carol came down the porch steps in her slippers with a Manhattan in her right hand, the hand that worked now, and behind her came Theo, tanned and barefoot, with a dish towel on his shoulder, and behind him June, in cutoffs and one of Theo's shirts, laughing at something, and then a small fawn-colored shape shot out between all their ankles like a cork out of a bottle and hit the gravel at full speed, barking.

"Biscuit," said my mother, from the doorway. "Biscuit, no. Biscuit, we talked about this."

. . .

Here is how it went with the mothers.

My mother had flown into Providence on Monday, a day early, so as to "be helpful." Carol had picked her up in the Volvo. On the drive back, by my mother's account, they had discussed the weather, the traffic on 24, the price of lobster, and Biscuit's digestive history, and Carol had said, in total, eleven words.

"She's very intimidating," my mother told me, on the porch, in a whisper you could have heard from the boathouse. "She has a lot of books."

"She was an English teacher, Mom."

"I asked her an open-ended question. Chapter six. I asked her how she felt about how she was feeling about the wedding." My mother lowered her voice even further. "She said, 'Fine, Lynn,' and gave me a

Manhattan."

Carol, for her part, came into the kitchen while I was eating a peach over the sink and said, without preamble, "Your mother asked me if I was feeling supported."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Nobody's asked me that since 1989." She took a peach from the bowl and looked at it suspiciously, the way she looks at everything she hasn't yet decided to love. "I said no. She looked so stricken I thought she'd lie down on the floor. Then she did the dishes. All of them. Without asking where anything went. She put everything back in the wrong place, Claire. My colander is in the drawer with the tea towels." Carol bit the peach. "I haven't had the heart to move it."

The war was about the dog.

Biscuit, it turned out, had no respect for property. Biscuit ate a tea bag on Monday, half a johnnycake on Tuesday morning, and a library book on Tuesday afternoon, a Trollope, which Carol said was "at least a book that could stand to lose a chapter." But on Tuesday night, while we played Scrabble on the porch with the citronella going and the cove going pink and then gray, Biscuit sat very quietly under Carol's chair for twenty minutes, like a dog who'd found God, and when Carol reached into the bag for her tiles, she counted, and counted again, and went perfectly still.

"Lynn," she said. "Your dog has eaten my Q."

My mother put her hand to her chest.

"He wouldn't."

"There is no Q in this bag. There's been a Q in this bag through two sons, a husband and a hurricane, and now there is no Q." She looked down at Biscuit, who looked back up at her with his enormous

wet eyes and his little black face, and licked his lips.

"Oh my God," said June, and put her head down on the table.

"He'll pass it," said Wes. "Probably."

"I'm not playing with a tile that's passed through a pug," said Carol.

"Then you'll have to play without a Q."

"I've never played without a Q," Carol said, and she sounded, for the first time since I'd known her, genuinely frightened.

By Wednesday night Biscuit was sleeping on her feet. By Thursday he was on her lap, and she was feeding him the edges of her toast and calling him "the defendant." She never said she'd forgiven him. She just stopped saying she hadn't.

. . .

Sofia came on Wednesday, in a rental car from Boston that she drove, Theo said, "like it owed her money." She came up the drive at forty miles an hour with fado playing, and put both hands on either side of my face and kissed me on each cheek, and then on each cheek again, for luck, and then held me at arm's length and looked at the bump and said, "Ai, Claire. Ai."

"Hi, Sofia."

"You are enormous. It's beautiful. It's the sardines." She turned and shouted at the house, "THEO. I HAVE BROUGHT YOUR STRINGS," and from somewhere inside Theo shouted back, "I HAVE STRINGS," and she said to me, in a normal voice, "He does not have enough strings."

She'd brought six A strings in a bubble mailer, a tin of Dona Graça's sardines for the baby, another for June, another "for the house," and a bottle of something clear and homemade from her

uncle's village that she said would "fix everything except death." Carol put it on the top shelf of the pantry, where things go that she intends to drink alone.

They got on immediately. I don't know why I'd worried. They sat in the kitchen on Wednesday night with the windows open and the moths coming in and talked about the seating chart in English, Portuguese and Manhattan, and by midnight they'd moved Danny twice, put my father next to Mrs. Kaplan "for safety," and seated my mother at the same table as my father, deliberately, after a long, quiet conversation I wasn't allowed to hear.

"Carol," I said, when I found out. "Are you sure?"

Carol didn't look up from the chart.

"Honey," she said. "I'm sixty-one. I've been to a lot of weddings. The only ones worth going to are the ones where somebody might cry for a real reason."

. . .

Mr. Ortiz and Mrs. Kaplan arrived Thursday by bus.

They wouldn't let anyone drive them. Mr. Ortiz said that he had taken the Greyhound for forty years and the Greyhound had never once let him down, and Mrs. Kaplan said that at seventy-nine she had very few pleasures left and one of them was looking out a bus window at New Haven and feeling superior.

So Wes picked them up at the bus station in Fall River at two in the afternoon, and they came up the drive in the cab of the green truck with Mrs. Kaplan in the middle, sitting very upright with her pocketbook on her knees, and Mr. Ortiz at the window in his good jacket with his radio in his lap, the Yankees losing faintly to the Orioles.

He got out and stood on the gravel and looked at all of it.

"Mija," he said. "This is where they grew up?"

"This is it."

"Both of them. Here." He shook his head slowly, the way he does at a boiler that has done something he can't explain. "No wonder."

"No wonder what?"

But he'd turned away to help Mrs. Kaplan down from the truck, and he didn't answer, and when Carol came down the steps to meet them, he took her hand in both of his and they looked at each other with the deep, guarded, mutual respect of two people who had been talking every Tuesday at four for six months and were now meeting for the first time.

"Hector," Carol said.

"Carol."

"You'll tell me who's winning."

"No, Carol."

"I have five dollars in it."

"Everybody has money in it," said Mr. Ortiz, with great dignity, and went inside with his radio.

. . .

On Thursday night the house was full in a way I'd never heard a house be full. Mrs. Kaplan in the study, Mr. Ortiz on the sun porch, Sofia in the attic among Frank's tools, my mother in the sewing room with the defendant. Wes and I in his old room at the top of the stairs, in a double bed with a Red Sox comforter he'd had since he was twelve and refused to apologize for.

Theo and June were at the end of the hall. The little room over the kitchen. I hadn't said anything about it, and neither had Theo, but

when I passed it on Wednesday and saw the two of them on the bed with a laptop between them, arguing about a playlist, the window behind them looking straight down the lawn to the boathouse, something in me that had been waiting since Thanksgiving put its head down and went to sleep.

At eleven, everyone else in bed, I went down to the dock.

The baby and I had agreed to be awake together somewhere with a view. I went down the lawn in my socks and Wes's flannel shirt, past the tent with its poles up now, past the boathouse, which I didn't look at, and out along the old gray boards of the dock, and sat down at the end of it with my feet hanging over the water, which at twenty-nine weeks is less sitting than lowering, like a piano being let down from a window.

The cove was black and perfectly still. Then I moved my foot, and the water lit.

Green. A trail of tiny green sparks, where my heel had gone, glowing and fading in the dark like someone writing in it with a finger. I gasped. I did it again. Every movement left a line of light behind it, and went out.

"Noctiluca," said Theo, behind me.

He was barefoot, in a T-shirt and old linen trousers, his glasses pushed up on his head. He came down the dock and sat beside me, not touching, his feet in the water next to mine, and moved one of them, slowly, and drew a long glowing curve that went out like a held note.

"It's plankton," he said. "It lights up when it's disturbed. Dad used to bring us down here in August. I didn't know it would be here in June. It's early."

"Like the suit."

He laughed, quietly. "Like the suit."

"I keep thinking about the hotel floor," Theo said. "In Lisbon. With all your letters in my lap. I didn't know your name. I didn't know what you looked like. I read about a woman who slept in two pairs of socks and named a fig, and some man who swore at a radiator, and I laughed so hard the man in the next room banged on the wall." He moved his foot. Green, and gone. "And I thought it was a love story. And it was. I just had the wrong idea about whose."

"Theo."

"I'm not sad. That's what I'm telling you. I've decided to just say it, plainly, which is apparently my thing now. I say things out loud. It's very alarming. Dona Graça says I'm turning Portuguese." He looked at me in the dark, his face pale and serious, the face of the boy in the Montauk photo with his arm around nobody. "Those letters brought me home. And then home sent me back to Lisbon. And Lisbon sent June. Everything you wrote went somewhere. Every one. Even the ones that weren't for me."

I couldn't say anything. I put my hand on the bump instead. She kicked, slow and sleepy, like someone knocking from the far end of a long hall.

"I'm not going to number anything anymore," Theo said. "To you, I mean. Forty-five was the last one. You've got it?"

"In my nightstand. Under a notebook."

"Good. Don't open it early."

"I opened forty-four early."

"I know. I'm counting on you having learned something." He drew a slow figure in the water, a curl like the scroll of a cello, and watched it go out. "After forty-five, I'm going to write June. That's the rest of the numbers. I've decided. I'll write her letters for the rest of my life,

and I'll mail them, and she'll actually get them, every one."

"That's the most romantic thing I've ever heard."

"It's very romantic. It's also cheaper than a ring." He pushed his glasses back down onto his nose with one knuckle. Then he turned and looked at me the way he had on the first day at his kitchen table with Gerald between us, as if I were a page he wanted to get right.

"Claire," he said. "Are you happy?"

I thought about it. Properly, for once. I didn't just say it. I sat on the end of a dock in the dark in Rhode Island in Wes's shirt and thought about a hot dog on Franklin Street, and a frying pan, and a closet with a brass key, and a terrace over a river, and a pier at six-fourteen in the morning, and a crib with eighty-one walnut stars in it, and a man asleep upstairs under a Red Sox comforter with one arm over his head.

"Yes," I said.

Theo nodded, slowly. He looked back out at the black water, and moved his foot, and the light came up around it, green and fierce and brief.

"Then it was worth every letter," he said.

. . .

I didn't go back to bed. I went to the kitchen.

The little light over the stove was on, and it smelled of woodsmoke and peaches and a pug who had recently been in a pantry. I sat at the long table where I'd stood up on Christmas Eve and taken a family apart, and I took the napkin out of the pocket of Wes's shirt.

I'd been carrying it for a week. Danny's napkin, the little black hook in the corner, soft now from folding and unfolding. I smoothed it flat on the table and looked at the one line in pencil, and took the

carpenter's pencil out of the jar by Frank's percolator, and held it over the paper, and didn't write anything.

"It's one in the morning," said June, from the doorway.

She was in a T-shirt, her short red hair flattened on one side from the pillow. She drank a glass of water at the sink, then came and sat down across from me at the table, and looked at the napkin, and then, deliberately, didn't.

I turned it over. Face down.

"I'm not going to read it," June said.

"I know."

"I'm a pediatric nurse. I can read anything upside down. Charts, labels, a seven-year-old's text messages. It's a professional skill." She put her hand out, flat, and laid it on top of the napkin, face down, on the table between us, and left it there. "I'm choosing not to."

"Thank you."

We sat there a while. The clock over the stove ticked. Somewhere upstairs, Biscuit sighed in his sleep, a long, theatrical, put-upon sigh, the sigh of a dog with a Q in him.

"Technically," June said, "it's after midnight. So technically my wedding is tomorrow."

"Technically."

"Claire." She looked at me across the table, the freckles, the chewed nails, the wet eyes, the woman who had once looked at a man she loved and decided to break her own heart on purpose so he'd go and play, and had never once, in a year and a half, said she was sorry she'd done it. "Whatever you're going to do tomorrow," she said. "Do it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Rehearsal Dinner

THE CHAIRS WERE WOODEN crossbacks.

I noticed them before I noticed anything else, which tells you something about me that I'd rather it didn't. Forty of them, borrowed from the Grange hall on the Commons, set down both sides of a long table on Carol's lawn, plain and pale and a little mismatched, the kind of chair that has held up a hundred years of church suppers and never once asked for a cushion.

Nine months earlier I'd had a twelve-minute phone call about chairs. The venue had sent gold chiavari to the walkthrough instead of crossbacks, and I'd stood in my kitchen and said, "No, I'm sorry, it really does matter," in a voice I'd thought was firm and was actually just frightened. It was the last normal conversation of my old life. I'd thought about it, since, more than I'd thought about Ryan.

"What," said Wes, beside me, holding a crate of hurricane glasses. "What's wrong with the chairs."

"Nothing," I said. "They're the right chairs."

He looked at me, and at the chairs, and decided, the way he does, not to ask.

. . .

They'd dragged the piano out at four.

It took Wes, Theo, Nick, Marcus, a dolly from the boathouse and a sheet of plywood that Theo refused to touch on principle, with Mr. Ortiz directing from a lawn chair like a man landing planes. "Your end, mijo. No, the other end. The end with the piano on it." My father walked alongside the whole way down the lawn with one hand flat on its side, the way you'd walk beside a horse being led into a trailer, murmuring to it. When they set it down at the edge of the grass, facing the cove, he sat on the bench and played one chord to see what the move had done to it, and winced, and took the tuning hammer out of his jacket.

"It's upset," he said.

"It's a piano, Rob," said Carol.

"It's upset, Carol," said my father gently, and she let him be.

The rehearsal itself took eleven minutes. Arthur Pell, who was seventy-six and had been a justice of the peace in Little Compton since 1979 and the harbormaster for longer, stood on a flat rock at the edge of the lawn with a clipboard and told us where to stand, and we stood there. Theo stood very straight. June stood beside him and kept laughing at nothing. Wes stood behind his brother with his hands clasped, like a bouncer at a very small, very exclusive club. I stood behind June with my hands on top of the bump, which is where my hands go now, like a woman resting her arms on a fence.

"And then I say the thing," said Arthur Pell, "and you say the thing, and then he says the thing, and then you kiss, and then everybody goes up to the tent and gets drunk. Any questions?"

"No," said Theo.

"Good," said Arthur Pell. "I've been doing this forty-eight years. The ones with no questions are the ones who make it."

. . .

Danny had brought a refrigerated truck. He'd driven it from Gansevoort Street with Nick and a hundred pounds of striped bass and enough corn to feed a small Midwestern state, and parked it on Carol's gravel with its motor humming, and Carol had looked at it from the porch for a long moment and said, "Well, I suppose we're not going to starve."

By seven the long table was set. Hurricane glasses down the middle with candles in them, the flames standing straight up in the still air. String lights from the oak to the tent to the porch, a loose gold net over everything. White cloths. Mason jars of the wild roses off the stone walls. The cove behind it all going from blue to violet to a soft, dark pewter, so smooth you could see the first stars in it upside down.

Thirty-one people. I'd counted. Of course I'd counted.

Theo and June in the middle of one side, Carol at the head, Wes on Theo's left, me on June's right. Priya and Marcus. Sofia, in something red and enormous, already crying at the corn. Danny and Nick, who'd cooked everything and refused to sit down until Carol told Danny that if he didn't sit she'd tell everyone the chowder was hers. It was, partly. They'd been fighting over it since Wednesday. Mr. Ortiz and Mrs. Kaplan, who had dressed for dinner, she in a navy silk with a brooch shaped like a bee, he in his good brown jacket with the elbow patches. A half-dozen of Carol's friends from the Garden Club. Arthur Pell, who'd been invited, Carol said, "because otherwise he'll stand on the rock and watch."

And at the far end, by the piano, my father and Ellen.

And beside Ellen, because Carol had put her there on purpose, with a quiet conversation in the kitchen on Wednesday that nobody else was allowed to hear: my mother.

They hadn't sat at the same table in eighteen years. Not at Carnegie, where they'd sat at opposite ends of the same row and looked straight ahead at the stage like strangers on a train. Not in New York, in the weeks after the box. Not ever, since a kitchen in Columbus when I was eleven and a door closing and a car that didn't come back. And now they were three feet apart, with Ellen between them in a lavender cardigan, being kind to both of them in two directions at once, like a woman holding open two doors.

My mother had Biscuit on her lap. My father had a glass of sparkling cider. Neither of them had touched their food.

. . .

Wes's phone was face up on the table beside my bread plate.

He'd set it there to look at the time, and forgotten it, and halfway through the bass it lit up. I saw it before I could stop myself; I'm a woman who has been trained, by one specific night, to look. One second of my body going cold, and then I read it.

MA

SIT UP STRAIGHT

I looked down the table. Carol, at the head, was holding her phone under the tablecloth and looking innocently at the candles.

I laughed so hard I had to put my fork down, and Wes looked at the screen and then at his mother, who raised her Manhattan an inch, and he sat up straight.

. . .

The toasts were small, which was the rule. Carol's rule. "Tomorrow's for speeches," she'd said. "Tonight's for anyone who's ever been fed in this house. Under two minutes. I'll be timing."

She went first and took fifty seconds.

"This end of the table is mine," she said, standing at the head of it with her glass. "My husband built it in 1990 out of a boat that didn't float. It has seen two boys grow up, one husband die, eleven Thanksgivings I'd rather not discuss and one Christmas Eve I'll never forget, and I want to say, on behalf of the table, that it's very glad to be outside for a change." She looked down it, at all of us. "The rule at this table is, nobody leaves till it's gone. I'm extending the rule to the lawn. To Theodore and June. Who took the long way. Most of us do."

Danny went next and talked about corn for ninety seconds and cried at the end and blamed the corn. Sofia stood up and gave a toast in Portuguese, English and gesture, of which I understood only "Ai, Theo," "the King of Spain's cousin" and "a broken A string, like a shot," and June laughed so hard she had to hold onto Theo. Mr. Ortiz stood, raised his glass, said, "To the people of 4B. All of them. Past, present and," and looked at the bump, and sat down, and refused to finish the sentence no matter how many people shouted at him.

Then my mother stood up.

. . .

I didn't know she was going to. I think she didn't either. She stood up very suddenly, the way you stand up when you've been sitting on something and finally decided to get off it, and Biscuit slid off her lap onto the grass and sat there looking betrayed.

She was in the lilac suit from Carnegie. She'd had her hair done in Tiverton that morning. She held her wine glass in both hands, like a woman holding a candle at a vigil.

"I'm Lynn," she said. "I'm Claire's mother. Hi."

A few people said hi back. Carol's Garden Club, mostly, who are polite to everyone.

"I'm going to talk about the dog," my mother said.

Several people laughed, and I closed my eyes.

"Biscuit ate a boutonniere this afternoon," she said. "Carol knows. He ate the Q out of her Scrabble set on Tuesday, and he ate a library book, and today he went into the cooler by the tent and ate the groom's boutonniere, the whole thing, the pin and everything, and we had to call the vet in Tiverton, and the vet said, and I'm quoting, 'Ma'am, he's a pug, he'll be fine, he's eaten worse.'" Laughter. "And I said, 'How do you know?' And she said, 'Because they always have.'"

More laughter, warm and easy. My mother smiled at it the way she smiles at waiters, grateful and a little surprised. I knew that laugh. It was the sound of a room that thinks it knows where a speech is going. I'd heard it once before, at a long table in Tribeca.

"I talk about him a lot," she said. "Claire will tell you. Every Sunday, for, oh, years and years, I'd call my daughter in New York and talk about the dog. His raincoat. His digestion. What he did at the groomer. Before Biscuit there was Pepper, and before Pepper there was a cat called Mr. Fitz, who I kept talking about for almost a year after he died, and Claire never noticed, or she was kind enough not to say."

She wasn't smiling now. The candle in front of her stood perfectly straight.

"I talked about the dog," she said, "because if I ran out of dog, there'd be a quiet. And in the quiet she might ask me something. And I had a box."

Nobody laughed.

At the far end of the table my father put his glass of cider down very slowly, without a sound.

"Her father wrote her a letter," my mother said. "Every birthday. Eighteen years. Starting the year after he left. And I took every one out of the mailbox before she got home from school, and I put them in a shoebox behind the wrapping paper, and I told him she'd read them, and that she didn't want to hear from him. And I told her he never wrote."

Her voice didn't break. That was the worst of it. It had held for eighteen years. It knew how.

"She asked me once," my mother said. "On her thirteenth birthday. She was sitting on the front step in Columbus with her library book, waiting for the mail, and she said, 'Mom, did Dad ever write?' And I said, 'No, honey.' And there was a letter from him in my purse. I'd taken it out of the box that morning before she woke up. It was in my purse, on my arm, while I said it."

Priya had put her hand on my wrist under the table. I didn't remember her moving.

"I could tell you why," my mother said. "The first year, he was drinking, and I was frightened, and I was protecting her. That's true. The second year he'd stopped, and I knew it, and I was still protecting her. By the fifth year I was protecting me. Because if I gave her one letter I'd have to give her all of them, and then she'd know what I'd done, and I couldn't." She looked down at the glass in her hands. "I kept every one. I don't know why. I think because throwing them

away would have meant admitting I knew exactly what I was doing."

The cove was so still. A gull went over very high, white and silent, catching the last of the light.

"Robert," my mother said.

She turned. She had to turn all the way, past Ellen. My father looked at her down three feet of white tablecloth and eighteen years, his hands flat on the cloth on either side of his plate, as if he were feeling it for a hum.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry I told you she read them. I'm sorry I told you she didn't want you. She always wanted you. She waited on the step."

My father didn't say anything. He nodded once, very slowly, the way he nods when a string has finally come true.

My mother turned back. She looked up the table, past the candles and the roses and the Garden Club and Sofia openly sobbing into a napkin, and found me.

"And Claire," she said. "You answer everybody's letters. You always have. When you were seven you wrote back to a girl in a magazine who'd asked for a pen pal and the girl was forty. You answered a stranger's letters through a door last fall, Priya told me. You write whole books so other people can say what they mean. And I sat on yours for eighteen years." She lifted her chin. "I talked about the dog because the dog was the only thing in my house I'd never lied to."

At her feet, on the grass, Biscuit sneezed.

Nobody laughed. Nobody could have.

My mother raised her glass, in both hands, to me.

"So," she said. "To my daughter. Happy birthday, honey." Her voice went, then, finally, all at once. "All of them."

. . .

I don't know how I got there. I know I knocked over a crossback chair, because I heard it go, and I know Priya let go of my wrist, and I know I came down the length of that table faster than any woman twenty-nine weeks pregnant has a right to move, and then I had my arms around my mother and her face was in my shoulder and she was saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," into my good dress, the way Biscuit buries his face in a pillow when there's thunder.

"Okay," I said. "Okay, Mom. Okay."

It wasn't forgiveness. Not yet. I'm not going to write it as if it was. It was a woman who'd been holding a box for eighteen years finally setting it on a table in front of everyone and taking her hands off it, and her daughter standing there with her, because somebody had to, and it was going to be me.

Behind me I heard a chair move. Then my father was standing beside us. He'd come around Ellen. He didn't touch either of us. He just stood there, close, the way he'd stood beside the piano on the way down the lawn, one hand not quite on it, keeping it company.

Then he raised his glass of cider, very slightly, to my mother. Just to her.

"Lynn," he said quietly. "She turned out wonderful. You did that part."

My mother made a sound I'd never heard her make, and put her hand over her mouth, and Ellen, God bless Ellen, got up and came around and put her arm around my mother's shoulders and held on.

Up at the head of the table, Carol cleared her throat.

"Well," she said, and her voice wasn't steady either. "That's four minutes. I'm letting it go."

. . .

At one in the morning I was on the porch.

Everyone was asleep. The candles were out, the string lights still on, swinging very slightly in a breeze that had come up off the cove after midnight, smelling of salt and cut grass. Danny's truck hummed in the drive. Down on the lawn the piano stood alone at the edge of the grass with a tarp over it, facing the water, like an old man who'd come down to look at the sea and stayed.

Wes was asleep upstairs. He'd gone up at midnight and was out before I'd finished taking off my earrings, flat on his back under the Red Sox comforter with one arm over his face, the way he sleeps the night before something he's afraid of. I'd stood in the doorway and watched him for a minute.

I had my notebook on my knees. The real one, the one I write in first, by hand.

The ninth draft of the toast was eleven pages long. I'd started it, in a way, on a stoop on Franklin Street. It had a beginning about bicycle chains, which I'd kept from the first draft out of loyalty. It had a part about letters, and a part about brothers, and a long part about June that made me cry every time I read it, which is either a good sign or a sign that I'm seven months pregnant. It had jokes. Good ones. It had my mother in it now, in the margins, in pencil, in a place I hadn't known I'd left room for.

I read the whole thing, by the porch light, with the moths banging softly into the bulb above me.

Then I took Danny's napkin out of the pocket of Wes's shirt, which I was still wearing, which I am never giving back, and unfolded it, and laid it on the open notebook, on top of the ninth draft, and

looked at the one line in pencil.

I sat there a long time.

Then I took the pen and went back to page one, and started crossing things out.

Not everything at once. One line at a time. The bicycle chains. The part about brothers. Good lines, some of them the best I'd ever written for anyone, going under the ink one after another, like streetlights going out down a long road at dawn. I didn't stop to read them. I knew what they said. I'd been writing lines like them for other people my whole life, and every one of them would have been true, and none of them was mine.

When I got to the end of page eleven, there was nothing left on the paper that I could read.

Just the napkin, lying on top of all of it, in the porch light, with its little black hook in the corner and one line in a carpenter's pencil that I hadn't crossed out, and wasn't going to.

I know what you're like at three a.m.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Wedding

AT SIX IN THE morning the sky over Sakonnet Point was the color of a bruise that has decided to get worse.

Carol was on the porch in Frank's old sweater with a cup of coffee and her phone held out at arm's length, watching the radar the way other people watch a horse race they've bet the house on. A green-and-yellow blob was sliding up from Long Island with a red heart in the middle.

"Three o'clock," she said, without turning around. "Thunderstorms. Possibly severe."

"What's the contingency?"

"The contingency," said Carol, "is the tent, and the tent is rated for forty-mile-an-hour winds, and the man who rated it was a Pereira, and I wouldn't trust a Pereira to rate a sandwich. Frank used to say a storm over Sakonnet either comes or it doesn't."

"That's not a forecast, Carol."

"It's the only forecast that's ever been right," said Carol, and went in to wake her sons.

. . .

By ten the house had become a single organism with eleven heads and one bathroom that worked properly.

Danny and Nick had the kitchen. Nobody else was allowed in, except Carol, who went in every twenty minutes to say "that's wrong" about something and came out looking pleased. Sofia had the dining room and a speakerphone to Lisbon. Mr. Ortiz had the porch and the radio. Mrs. Kaplan had a chair in the hall with a view of every room, like a judge. My mother had Biscuit, in a bow tie and an expression of total humiliation, already caught once with his head in the cooler where the replacement boutonniere was kept.

Priya and Marcus arrived from their B&B at ten-thirty. Priya looked at the house and said, "Okay. Who's dying and who's just dramatic," and was put to work.

At noon, June's dress split.

It was a simple dress, ivory silk to the floor, bought in a shop in Chiado where the owner had cried when June tried it on, and it had fit perfectly in Lisbon. But June had been eating Danny's food and being happy for four days, and a side seam gave up with a sound like a page tearing.

June stood in the middle of the room with her arms out and her mouth open.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. It's fine. I'm a nurse. I can close a wound."

"You're not suturing your own dress," said Priya.

"Move," said Mrs. Kaplan, from the doorway.

Nobody had heard her come up the stairs. She stood there in her navy silk with the bee brooch, seventy-nine years old and four foot eleven, and took a lozenge tin of needles and thread out of her pocketbook, and looked at June over her glasses with great professional contempt.

"Forty-one years," said Mrs. Kaplan, "I was a sample maker on Thirty-Eighth Street. I sewed Bill Blass into a ball gown with the model still in it, at a show, in the dark. Hold still, sweetheart. And don't breathe in until I tell you."

June held still. Mrs. Kaplan sewed. It took nine minutes, and when she was done the seam was invisible and June couldn't have gotten out of that dress with a crowbar, and Mrs. Kaplan bit off the thread with her own teeth, put the tin back in her pocketbook, and said, "There. Now you can't run away," and went back downstairs to her chair.

June looked at me in the mirror.

"I'm sewn in," she said.

"You're sewn in."

"I love that woman more than I've ever loved anyone," said June, and burst into tears, and we had to redo her eyeliner.

. . .

My dress was dusty blue silk, cut to go over the bump, which Sofia said was "the only color that has never ruined a wedding."

It went on fine. It would not close.

Somewhere around my shoulder blades the zipper stopped and looked at us with an attitude.

"Breathe out," said June.

"I am breathing out. This is out. I don't have any more out."

"Priya," said June. "Sofia."

So it took the bride, her two bridesmaids and, in the end, a butter knife from the kitchen, which Sofia slid under the tab to give it something to climb, while June held the two sides together and Priya counted down from three like we were moving a patient.

"Three. Two. One. Go."

The zipper went up with a long sound like a sigh.

"Ai," said Sofia, and kissed the butter knife.

. . .

At two, Theo's A string snapped.

He was warming up in Carol's study with the door half open, the Sarabande, slow, the way Paul had taught him at fifteen in the front room of this same house. And in the middle of a phrase there was a crack like a gunshot, so loud my mother screamed in the sewing room, and then a long, silly, descending twang, and silence.

"Ai," said Sofia, from the dining room, in a voice of total triumph. "I SAID."

She came through the hall at a run with the bubble mailer held over her head like a relay baton, and went into the study, and I heard her say, "Every important thing, Theo. Every one. The King of Spain's cousin," and Theo laugh, and Sofia say, "You are welcome, you are a disaster."

. . .

At three, the sky over the cove went green.

Not a little green. A thick, theatrical, end-of-the-world green, like the sky in a painting by somebody who'd been told about storms but never seen one. The wind came up off the water all at once and the tent breathed in and out like a lung. Down on the point, a long gray curtain of rain was walking across the water toward us, slow and very sure of itself.

Carol stood at the top of the porch steps in navy silk, Paul's garnet on her right hand, and watched it come.

"Ma," said Theo, from the doorway, in his charcoal suit, the one that had hung in the hall closet of 4B for a year and a half. "Should we move it inside?"

"No," said Carol.

"There's a storm, Ma."

"Either it comes," said Carol, "or it doesn't."

And she stood there. And we all stood there with her, on the porch, the whole wedding, in our good clothes, holding our breath, and the curtain of rain walked across the cove to the end of the dock, to the boathouse, to the first rocks at the edge of the lawn, and stopped.

It hung there for a long moment, gray and enormous, as if it were thinking about it.

Then it turned. It went out past the point, south, toward the open water, slowly, the way a large dog changes its mind about a stranger, and the wind dropped, and the tent went slack and quiet, and the sun came out over the field behind the house like somebody had opened a door.

"There," said Carol, and went inside to fix her lipstick.

. . .

At half past four, Wes couldn't tie his tie.

He was standing in front of the mirror at the end of the upstairs hall in the navy suit from Carnegie, with the tie around his neck and both ends in his hands, glaring at his own reflection as if it had insulted him.

"Mijo," said Mr. Ortiz, coming up the stairs. "Come here. My father taught me on a fence post."

"I've got him, Hector," said Theo.

He turned his brother around by the shoulders, away from the mirror, and took the two ends of the tie out of his hands. Mr. Ortiz looked at them, and quietly went back downstairs.

Theo did it the way he does everything, precisely, without hurry, his fingers moving like they were reading. Wes stood with his chin up and his arms at his sides and looked at the ceiling.

"You did mine," Theo said. "The morning of Dad's funeral. I was fifteen. I didn't know how. You were in the bathroom doorway in your suit that didn't fit, and you said, 'C'mere, Teddy,' and you did it, and you didn't say anything the whole time."

"I remember."

"Then you went and sat in the truck. In the parking lot of St. Catherine's. For the whole service. With the engine running." Theo pulled the knot up, slowly. "I was angry about that for years. I thought you couldn't face it."

Wes didn't say anything.

"I know why now," said Theo. "Somebody had to be there with the engine running. In case Ma needed to leave. In case I did." He straightened the knot, and flattened the tie down Wes's chest with the palm of his hand, once, and left his hand there. "You always keep the engine running. Even when nobody asks."

Wes looked down at him. His eyes had gone bright and wet and absolutely furious about it.

"If you make me cry before your wedding," Wes said, "I'll throw you in the cove."

"You'd have to catch me."

"You're wearing a suit from a closet, Teddy. You won't get far."

Theo laughed, and took his hand back, and Wes put his own hand on the inside pocket of his jacket, flat, the way he'd been doing all

day, every ten minutes, like a man checking for his wallet.

"Stop patting it," said Theo. "The rings are there. I watched you put them in."

"I know they're there."

"You've checked forty times."

"I'm the best man," said Wes. "It's the only job I've got."

. . .

Maddie came at a quarter to five, with Rose.

I watched from the upstairs window as she got out of a little silver rental in a green dress and stood looking at the house for a second. Then she leaned into the back seat and came out with a car seat, and in it, asleep under a muslin cloth, a person six weeks old.

I'd asked June in May if Maddie could come. June had looked at me over FaceTime for a long time and said, "She gave you the texts. She's family-adjacent."

I went down. Maddie was at the bottom of the porch steps, holding the car seat with both hands. She looked at the bump, and at my dress, and then at my face. "You look beautiful. Is that allowed? Am I allowed to say that?"

"You can say it."

Carol came out onto the porch behind me and looked down at the car seat, and at Maddie, and said, "Give me that baby," and Maddie, who had never met Carol Marsh in her life, handed her up without a word, because that's what people do when Carol tells them to.

. . .

The ceremony was at five, on the lawn above the cove, in the light that comes after a storm that didn't.

Everything was wet and shining. Ninety-some people in the crossbacks from the Grange, an aisle mown between them. Arthur Pell on his flat rock with his clipboard. The cove behind him so blue and so still it looked like the sky had lain down in it.

And at the edge of the lawn, under its tarp no longer, the piano, and my father at it, in his corduroy jacket, the tuning hammer back in his pocket at last.

He'd asked Carol what she wanted. She'd told him "The Water Is Wide," which she'd sung to both boys when they were small, and which Frank used to pick out on that piano with one finger after they were asleep, getting the same note wrong every night.

My father played it. Slowly. As if he were walking behind someone he loved, not falling down.

Theo was at the front, by the rock, in his charcoal suit, with his glasses on and his hands clasped, standing very straight. Wes was beside him, one step back, in navy. I came down the aisle first, slowly, carrying a bouquet of wild roses and a baby, which is the only way I go anywhere now, and took my place across from them, and turned around.

And June came down the aisle on Carol's arm.

She'd asked her on Wednesday, in the kitchen: "My mother isn't coming. I don't want to walk alone, and I don't want to be given away by anybody. Would you walk with me?" And Carol had looked up at her for a long time, the girl who had once called her in January to ask what she'd give up for her sons, and said, "I'd be honored, June," and then, because she's Carol, "Don't step on my hem."

They came down the aisle together, slowly, in step with my father's song, Carol with her chin up and her eyes perfectly dry and her hand locked on June's arm like she was bringing a boat in. At the

end of it Carol stopped. She kissed June on the cheek. Then she turned and put her hand flat on Theo's face, the way she had on the porch in November, as if she were checking the watermark, and sat in the front row with a handkerchief in her fist, not using it, just in case.

My father finished the song. The last note went out over the water and didn't come back.

"Well," said Arthur Pell. "Here we are."

. . .

June went first.

She didn't have notes. She held both of Theo's hands, and looked at him, and her voice shook at the start and then didn't.

"A year and a half ago," she said, "I did the bravest thing I've ever done, and the stupidest, and it was the same thing. I broke us so you'd play." She took a breath. "And you played. And I sat in New York and wrote letters to an empty apartment, and I'd do it again, and I'm not sorry, and you know that, and you married me anyway. Or you're about to, if Arthur hurries up."

Laughter. Arthur Pell nodded graciously.

"So this is my vow," said June. "I'll spend my life making sure you never have to choose between me and the music again. Not once. Not ever. If Lisbon calls, we go. If Berlin calls, we go. If they want you on the moon, I'll learn to breathe up there." She squeezed his hands. "You don't give anything up for me, Theo. Not one more thing. That's the whole deal."

Theo looked at her for a long time.

When he spoke, his voice was very quiet and very clear, and it carried, the way his cello carries, to the last row and out over the water.

"My whole life," he said, "people have chosen for me. Out of love. Every one of them. My mother, my brother, you. Even me. I chose for myself by giving things away and calling it a choice. I've been practicing this part. Out loud. On Dona Graça. She says it's very good, and that I'm too thin in the face."

The whole lawn laughed, and Sofia, in the second row, said "Ai" quite loudly.

"So here it is," said Theo. "No letter. No number. Nobody's deciding for me." He looked at June. "I choose. Out loud. You."

. . .

Wes had the rings out before Arthur Pell finished asking for them.

They went on. Arthur Pell said the thing. They said the thing. Theo kissed June on the lawn above the cove in front of ninety-some people and a seventy-nine-year-old sample maker and a pug in a bow tie, and the whole lawn stood up and roared, and out on the water a lobster boat that had been idling off the point the entire time, watching, sounded its horn three times.

. . .

Afterward, there were lobsters.

Danny's lobsters, a hundred of them, red as fire engines, on long tables in the tent under the string lights, with littlenecks and corn and Carol's chowder, which Danny served with a sign in front of it in his own handwriting that said CAROL'S (I GUESS). Priya cried into a lobster. Marcus sneezed three times and looked hopeful. Mr. Ortiz danced with Mrs. Kaplan before the band had even started, to the radio. Rose was passed around the tent like a very small, very important letter, until she reached June, who held her and looked at

Theo over the top of her head, and Theo looked back, and neither of them said anything at all.

Wes gave the best man's speech at seven.

He stood up in the navy suit and the tie his brother had tied for him and held his glass of beer and looked at a hundred people with the expression of a man who would rather be refitting a sash window in a hurricane.

"I'm Wes," he said. "I'm the brother. I'm the best man, which, historically, in this family, has been a little bit of a lie."

Laughter, the shocked kind.

"I've said a lot of things about my brother," Wes said. "A lot of them were cover for something else. But there's one thing I've said my whole life that was always true, and I'm going to say it one more time, and then I'm going to sit down." He looked at Theo. "He's the good one. He always was. And June, you're the bravest person I know and the worst liar I ever met, thank God." He lifted the beer. "To my brother, and the woman who sent him away so he could come back. Nobody leaves till it's gone."

He sat down. The tent went up in noise. Theo got up and walked around the table and put his arms around his brother's neck from behind and held on, and Wes sat there in his chair and let him.

Then someone tapped a fork on a glass.

Then someone else did. And then the whole tent, a hundred forks, a hundred glasses, the string lights swinging, a high silver ringing that went up into the canvas and out over the dark water.

"Maid of honor!" Priya shouted. "Maid of honor!"

I had a glass of sparkling cider in front of me. I had a napkin in my lap, folded in quarters, soft from a week of pockets. I had no notes. I'd crossed them all out.

The last time I stood up at a dinner with a glass in my hand, I ended something.

I picked up the glass. I stood up.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Toast

A HUNDRED FORKS WENT quiet one at a time, the way rain stops.

I stood at the head table under the string lights with a glass of sparkling cider in one hand and a napkin in the other, folded in quarters, and looked out at the tent. I read rooms for a living. Here's this one.

Carol, three seats down, with her Manhattan and her handkerchief. My mother at the next table with Biscuit asleep in her lap in his bow tie, and my father two seats along, and Ellen between them with a hand on each of their arms. Priya and Marcus. Danny in his whites with a dish towel over his shoulder, Nick beside him. Sofia already crying, preemptively. Mr. Ortiz and Mrs. Kaplan, upright and formal, like two people waiting for a promised train. And at the back, by the tent pole, in a green dress, with a sleeping baby on her shoulder: Maddie.

On my right, June, sewn into her dress, holding Theo's hand on the tablecloth. Beyond them, at the end, Wes, in the navy suit with his brother's knot at his throat.

I didn't unfold the napkin. Not yet.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Claire. I'm the maid of honor."

A ripple. Most of the people in that tent knew. Sofia had told it at parties.

"Which, if you know my history with maids of honor," I said, "is a very brave choice on June's part. Nine months ago, at my own rehearsal dinner, the maid of honor stood up and ended my engagement in about four seconds. So I want to start by reassuring the groom. I have checked everyone's phones."

The tent laughed. Theo pushed his glasses up and said, clearly, "Thank you," and they laughed harder.

"I'm a writer," I said. "For six years I wrote other people's books and put their names on them. I'm very good at it. I can make a senator's wife sound sorry. What I've never done is stand up and say something in my own voice, under my own name, to people I love. I wrote eleven pages for tonight. Last night, on Carol's porch, I crossed them all out. So this is a first draft. Bear with me. The ghost is off duty."

. . .

"June and Theo met over a bicycle chain outside Lincoln Center," I said. "Her chain came off. He fixed it with his bare hands and got grease up to his wrists, and he apologized to the bike."

"It was a very nice bike," said Theo.

"That's the first thing you need to know about Theo Marsh. He apologizes to things. Pans. Bicycles. Figs. He once apologized to his cello at two in the morning for playing it badly, and he wasn't playing it badly. He's never played anything badly in his life. Including, it turns out, the long game."

June laughed and put her face on his shoulder.

"The second thing you need to know is that this is a story about letters that went to the wrong person.

"June wrote letters for a year to an empty apartment. I know, because I was the person living in it. I opened them. I'm not sorry. I wrote back. And June took my letters, every one, and photocopied them, and mailed them to Lisbon, to a man who'd stopped answering anybody. And he read them on a hotel floor at four in the morning and came home." I looked at June. "For a while I thought he came home for me. He didn't. He came home for the woman holding the photocopier."

June had her hand over her mouth.

"Everybody in this story was reading mail meant for someone else," I said. "Here's what I've worked out. Love is the worst postal service in the world. It's late. It goes to the wrong address. It comes water-damaged, with somebody else's name on the front. And it still gets there."

I looked at the next table. I hadn't planned to. I just did.

"Some letters take a year," I said. "Some take eighteen. This spring I got eighteen birthday letters in one night, on a green couch, from a man who never stopped writing. So I can tell you for certain. They get there."

My mother made a small sound. My father didn't move at all, except to reach past Ellen and put his hand over my mother's on the tablecloth, which in eighteen years he hadn't done, and which she let him.

I turned back.

"June. You broke your own heart on purpose so the man you loved would go and do the thing he was born to do. People have called that a lot of things this year. I've called it some of them myself, to your

face, on a pier. Here's what I call it now. It's the bravest thing I've ever seen anybody do with a pen. You wrote his ending and left your name off it. I know what that costs. I did it for money. You did it for love, and you did it better."

June was crying openly now, in the way she does, with her whole face, not hiding any of it.

"And Theo. You spent your life having your choices made for you by people who loved you. Your mother. Your brother. June. Me." I made myself look at him. "For eight days in December I decided what you could handle, and I was wrong, and you forgave me on a terrace in Lisbon in four sentences. Today you stood on a lawn in front of a hundred people and chose. Out loud. It was the loudest thing I've ever heard, and I was in the house when your A string went."

"AI," shouted Sofia, from table four.

"June waited every Sunday at ten on a bench at the end of a pier," I said, "where you asked her. Today you asked her again. And she said yes before Arthur had finished the question." I raised my glass. "So. To Theo and June. Who took the long way, across an ocean and back. Carol said it last night: most of us do. Most of us just don't come back to the same bench."

The whole tent lifted its glasses with me. A hundred of them, catching the string lights.

I didn't drink.

"I'm not done," I said.

. . .

There was a small, confused pause. A hundred people lowered a hundred glasses, slowly, the way you lower your hand when you realize the cab isn't stopping for you.

"There's one more letter," I said, "that went to the wrong person."

I unfolded the napkin.

"Nine months ago, in the back room of a restaurant in Tribeca, a woman I loved stood up at my rehearsal dinner and said a sentence to a man at my table. Some of you were there."

At the next table, my mother went perfectly still. At the back of the tent, by the pole, Maddie's hand stopped moving on Rose's back. And Priya, who hadn't been there but had heard it on her couch at four in the morning more times than anybody should, put down her glass.

"It was the worst sentence anyone has ever said in front of me," I said. "I've carried it for nine months. I've told it at parties. I'm putting it in a book. And I was wrong about it." I looked down at the napkin, at the one line in a carpenter's pencil. "It's not a bad sentence. It's the best sentence about love I've ever heard. She just said it to the wrong man."

I folded the napkin back into quarters. I didn't need it. I'd never needed it. I'd only needed to work out who it was for.

I turned my head and looked down the table, past June, past Theo, to the very end, where a big man in a navy suit sat with his chair pushed back, the way he sits at every table, nearest the door, in case he's in the way.

"Wes," I said. "I know what you're like at three a.m."

. . .

It wasn't a gasp. Not at first. It was three of them, very small, from three directions: my mother's, Priya's, and from the back of the tent, by the pole, Maddie's. The only people under that tent, besides me, who would have known that sentence anywhere.

Then the rest of the tent caught up, and went quiet in a way I'd heard a room go quiet exactly once before. The last time, it was the sound of something ending.

Wes didn't move. He'd gone completely still, the way he goes still when a joint's about to take or not, his eyes on me.

"At three a.m.," I said, "you eat cereal out of the box, standing up, with the fridge door open. You talk to my fig like he's a coworker who's been there longer than you.

"At three a.m. you swear at radiators. By name. You've named them.

"At one in the morning, your first night on Perry Street, you sat on the stoop in the rain for an hour because you were scared to walk into your brother's apartment. I know. It's not three. It's a first draft. And then you walked in, and I was holding a frying pan, and I called you by the wrong name, and you said yes so I wouldn't be frightened.

"At three a.m. in November you sat on the landing outside my door, soaked through, and wouldn't use your key, because it felt like cheating.

"At three a.m. on a night in January, a year and a half ago, you slept on your own couch with your boots on while a woman cried on your bathroom floor, and in the morning you told your brother the worst lie of your life so he'd go and be happy. And then you let everybody in this tent think the worst thing about you for a year. And you never once asked anyone to stop."

Theo had turned in his chair to look at his brother. June had both hands over her mouth.

"At four in the morning in March, which I'm rounding down, in a garage in Red Hook, you told me to say it in daylight. At three a.m. now, every night, you wake up because I wake up, and you put your

hand on her and say, 'How's the blob,' and you're asleep again before I can answer.

"You're the man who takes the blame. For broken windows. For dented cars. For other people's cigarettes. You've spent your whole life paying for things you didn't buy."

My voice went then. I let it. I'd spent my whole career taking the cracks out of other people's sentences. I left this one in.

"You've never asked me for anything," I said. "Not once. I wondered about that, this month. I wondered what you were waiting for. And then I worked it out, on a porch, last night. You were waiting for me. You always have been. On a stoop. On a landing. In a truck at Departures with the engine running."

I put the glass down. I held on to the napkin.

"So I'm not going to make you wait anymore," I said. "Wesley Marsh. I know what you're like at three a.m. I want to know what you're like at three a.m. for the rest of my life." My hand was shaking so badly the napkin rattled. "Will you marry me?"

. . .

Nothing happened.

I'd like to tell you there was music. There wasn't. There was a tent full of people not breathing, and the string lights humming very faintly, and a long way off, out past the point, the sound of the storm that hadn't come, grumbling to itself.

Then Wes stood up.

His chair went over behind him on the grass. Nobody picked it up. He stood there at the end of the table in his navy suit, and he looked at me with his whole wrecked face, and then he put his hand inside the jacket, into the inside pocket, where he'd been putting it all day.

I thought, the rings. He's checking the rings. And then, for no reason at all, a word from a pier in April: pencils.

He took out a small box.

It wasn't the rings. The rings were on Theo's hand and June's. This was a different box. Old dark velvet, worn bald at the corners, rubbed down to the threads in two places, the way a thing gets when it's been in a man's pocket every single day, through a cold snap and a hearing and an anatomy scan and a pier at six-fourteen in the morning.

There had been two boxes in that pocket all day. There'd been one in it since January.

"I've been carrying this," said Wes, "since the airport."

Someone at table four sobbed out loud. It might have been Sofia. It might have been Danny.

"January third," he said. His voice was rough and very steady. "The day after JFK. You were on a plane. I went to a shop on Atlantic Avenue and bought it with the truck money."

"THE TRUCK MONEY," said Carol, from three seats down, at a volume I'd never heard from her.

"I've had it in my jacket every day since." He was looking only at me. "The last time a Marsh asked you anything, Bennett, it was in a letter, and you got on a plane. So I wasn't going to ask. I figured I'd wait till you asked me." The corner of his mouth went up, on the side with the crooked tooth, and his eyes were full. "That was supposed to be a joke."

"Wes."

"I didn't think you'd actually do it."

"Wes," I said. "Answer the question."

He came up the length of the table behind the chairs, behind his brother, who leaned out of his way, behind June, who didn't, and

then he was in front of me, and he opened the box.

It was old. Rose gold gone soft with years, a thin band, and a small old-cut diamond set high, the size of a raindrop on a window, catching the string lights and throwing them back.

"Eighteen-nineties," Wes said. "Guy on Atlantic said it's been repaired twice. I figured it knows how."

"Is that a yes?"

"Bennett," said Wes Marsh. "Yes. It's been yes since the frying pan."

He put it on my finger. His hands were shaking worse than mine. It fit.

. . .

I can't tell you what happened next in order. I've asked everyone who was there and they all tell it differently, and I've decided that's correct.

The tent came apart. That's the only way to say it. A hundred people on their feet, chairs going over, glasses, somebody's lobster. Sofia screaming in Portuguese. Danny crying into his dish towel, then into Nick. Mr. Ortiz on his feet with both arms up like a man who's just watched a home run clear the wall. Mrs. Kaplan, seated, applauding with tremendous restraint. Priya standing on her chair. My mother on her feet with Biscuit held up in both hands like a trophy, and my father beside her, laughing, the first time I'd heard him laugh since I was eleven, a high, startled, boyish sound I recognized, because it was mine.

And at the back of the tent, by the pole, Maddie, with Rose on her shoulder, looking at me over all of it. She didn't say anything. She just nodded, once. She'd told me in a diner this winter that she owed me a

toast. She'd paid it. Neither of us would ever say so.

Wes had both arms around me, as much of me as there was, his face in my hair, his chest going.

Theo was standing beside us. He looked at his brother. He looked at me. He looked at the ring. He pushed his glasses up with one knuckle.

"You proposed," he said, with tremendous dignity, "at my wedding."

"I know."

"At my wedding, Claire."

"I know, Theo."

June leaned in between us, mascara everywhere, sewn into her dress, beaming.

"Finally," said June.

And three seats down, Carol Marsh rose from her chair, set her Manhattan on the tablecloth, walked the length of the tent through the uproar to where Mr. Ortiz was standing, and held out her hand, palm up.

Mr. Ortiz looked at her hand. He looked at her.

"Pool closes when the baby comes, Carol," he said.

Carol held her hand there for a long moment. Then she took it back, picked up the nearest Manhattan, which was not hers, and drank it.

. . .

Theo got his cello.

Nobody asked him to. He went out of the tent and across the dark lawn to the house and came back with it on his back, and set a crossback chair at the edge of the dance floor, and sat, and took off

his jacket, his charcoal jacket from the closet, and laid it over the back of the chair.

The tent went quiet again. A different quiet.

"This is called 'Perry Street,'" Theo said. "I wrote it in an apartment where everybody was pretending to be somebody else. It used to be called 'Subletter.'" He looked at me, and then at his brother. "I changed it when I worked out who the story was about."

He put the bow to the string. The new A, Sofia's.

And it was 4B. All of it. I'd heard it at Carnegie in a hall of three thousand people, and I hadn't understood it there. I understood it now. The radiator was in it, the slow bored knock, one and then two. The stairs were in it, their four creaking notes going up. The kettle. A window over a fire escape whistling one thin note in a wind off the river. And under all of it, so soft you could almost miss it, a whisper, again and again, like paper sliding under a door.

Wes took my hand. The one with the ring. He led me out onto the dance floor and put his arm around me, around all of us, and we didn't so much dance as stand in the middle of the floor and sway, at thirty weeks, in dusty blue silk and a navy suit, while a hundred people stood around us and let us.

I put my face against his chest. I could feel the empty place in his inside pocket, where the box had been for six months.

I'd ended an engagement with a toast once. Nobody ever told me you could start one that way.

I had to write that part myself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Boathouse

BY ELEVEN O'CLOCK I had been engaged for two hours and forty minutes, and I had looked at my left hand roughly once every ninety seconds, which Priya timed.

"You're doing it again," she said.

"I'm checking it's there."

"It's there. It hasn't moved. It's a ring, Claire, it's not a hamster." She was on the lawn with her shoes off, drinking Carol's whiskey out of a teacup. "Also, you stole a wedding. You stood up at another woman's reception and took it home in your purse." She lifted the teacup. "Best thing I've ever seen. I cried into a lobster."

The long table looked like a battlefield where everyone had won. Rob was at Carol's piano, which had been dragged out onto the lawn for the ceremony and never dragged back, playing Gershwin for nobody in particular, Ellen beside him turning pages he didn't need. My mother was in a wicker chair with Biscuit asleep across her lap like a sandbag, weeping steadily, as she had been since nine, not from grief but because she'd found out, late in life, that she was allowed to.

Down by the water, Mr. Ortiz and Mrs. Kaplan were dancing to the Gershwin with tremendous formality, both of them in their bus

clothes.

And Carol was standing at the end of the table with her hand out.

Hector had told her at the toast that the pool closed when the baby came, and she'd taken it with the bright, tight face of a woman being told the rules of Scrabble by someone she intends to destroy at Scrabble. Every so often she drifted back to him and held out her palm again, like a tollbooth. Hector, dancing, shook his head without missing a step.

"Carol," I said. "What did you bet?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, honey." She took my left hand and turned the ring to the string lights. "He bought this with the truck money. That truck has no heat below high and the passenger window has been held up with a paint stirrer since the Obama administration." She kissed my knuckles. "Never let him forget it."

Theo found me by the tent pole, tie in his pocket, with the look he gets after a concert, as if someone had opened all the windows in him at once. June was behind him with her shoes in her hand, laughing at something Sofia had shouted at her in Portuguese across the lawn.

"You proposed at my wedding," Theo said again.

"You've mentioned."

"I'm going to keep mentioning it. When you're ninety I'll come to the home with a cello and say it. Thank you for doing it while I was in the room."

"Go," June said. "He's waiting for you by the stone wall and pretending he isn't. It's like watching a bear wait for a bus."

. . .

He was by the stone wall, pretending he wasn't.

He had the jacket with the inside pocket folded over his arm, and when I came across the dark grass with my sandals in my hand he straightened up off the wall and just looked. He'd been doing that all night, a little apart from everyone, as if he were memorizing the way back to somewhere.

"You carried a ring around Brooklyn for five and a half months," I said, "and you never asked."

"Kept patting the pocket on job sites. Guys thought I had a heart condition." He took my sandals out of my hand, the way he'd taken the tote bag at JFK, without asking, because he knew which thing mattered. "Come on. I want to show you something."

He walked me down the lawn until the grass went to rock and the rock went to shell, and the music behind us was a rumor of piano.

The boathouse door didn't stick.

I'd braced for it. At Thanksgiving I'd put my shoulder into that door with a bottle of wine in my other hand and it had dragged on the sill like it disapproved of me. Tonight it swung in, smooth and silent.

"You fixed it."

"The morning after." He didn't look at me. He went to the woodstove and crouched. "Thanksgiving. Ma thought I was fixing the porch steps. I did the steps after."

"Why?"

He struck one match. Of course it was one match. The light came up orange on Frank's skiff, still on its sawhorses with its ribs showing, and on the plaid daybed, and on his face, which was doing something careful.

"Because you had to fight it to get in," he said. "And then you had to fight it to get out at two in the morning, with him in the window. I didn't want it to be hard to get in here again. In case you ever wanted

to."

I loved him so much I had to put my hand on the frame.

. . .

It was June, but the cold came up off the cove at night like it had been waiting all day for the sun to leave. I sat on the edge of the daybed and he knelt in front of me, the way I had knelt in front of him here once, and put his hands on my bare ankles.

"No socks," he said.

"It's a wedding. I'm a maid of honor. There are standards."

"Your feet are freezing."

"Then fix it," I said, and heard it, and so did he. The exact words. That slow crooked grin started, the one that shows the tooth, and he sat back on his heels and pulled off his own socks, gray wool with a hole at one heel, and put them on my feet. Carefully, the way he'd fit a sash back into an old frame.

"There," he said. "Standards."

I laughed, and it turned into something else halfway out, and I put both hands on his face.

The first time we were here I'd kissed him like I was angry at the whole world and he was the nearest part of it. Tonight I just held his face and looked, and let him see me do it. His eyes closed. He turned his mouth into my palm, where the ring was, and kissed the band.

"Bennett."

"I asked you," I said. "In front of a hundred people and a lobster. I want it on the record that I asked."

"It's on the record. Ma's going to have it engraved on something." His thumbs moved on my ankles, over his own socks. "Ask me something else."

"Take me to bed, Wes."

"That I can do."

The dress was the problem. Dusty blue silk, cut to go over the bump and not to come off in a boathouse, with a zipper June had needed two bridesmaids and a butter knife to close. He turned me by the shoulders and swore at it, softly and with real artistry, and I laughed so hard I had to hold onto the skiff.

"Don't laugh. It's moving."

"It's a zipper, it's not a raccoon."

"It's fighting me." He got it. The silk loosened down my back all at once and he made a sound, low, and put his mouth between my shoulder blades, on the knot of my spine, and stayed there. The dress went down to the planks. I stood in the stove light in my underwear and his socks and seven months of a baby, and the cold air went over my skin and then his hands did, warm, wide, slow.

I'd worried about this, I'll admit. About the body I had now, with its new map: the dark line down my belly, the breasts that had become their own weather system, the ankles. I'd worried he'd be careful with me in a way that meant he'd stopped seeing me.

He turned me around and looked, in the orange light, for a long time.

"Jesus Christ, Bennett," he said, quietly, like a man in church.

That was the whole review. I've had worse ones in the Times.

He knelt and kissed the top of the bump, and then the side of it, slow, his stubble rough and his mouth soft, the way you'd greet someone you were going to know for a long time. Then lower, his hands on the backs of my thighs, and I held on to his hair, the only stable thing in a building with a boat in it.

"Bed," I said, when I could. "I can't stand up for this. I'm with child."

"You're with child," he agreed, into my hip, and I felt him laughing.

He got his shirt off. I got his belt. We were slower than we'd ever been, and clumsier, and it didn't matter. The daybed took us with a complaint from every spring, the old wool smelling of woodsmoke and salt. He lay down behind me, the way we'd learned to in the spring, in the eight careful weeks since Carnegie, since I'd finally said it in daylight, his whole length against my back and his arm over me, his hand spread over the bump, and his mouth at my ear.

"Okay?"

"Okay." I reached back and found his hip and pulled him closer. "I'm telling you."

He came into me by degrees, and we both stopped breathing at the same time and then started again together. Then he didn't move. He held me with his face in my hair while the fire talked in the stove, and I understood that the last time we'd lain here he'd been taking something he thought he'd have to give back, and neither of us had been sure there would be a next time.

There was a next time. It was this one. It was going to be all of them.

"Wes," I said. "I'm not going anywhere. Move."

He laughed, the low breaking one, and did.

It was slow and deep and almost lazy, like a tide coming in over flat sand, and then it wasn't lazy at all. His hand stayed on my belly the whole time, and his mouth went from my ear to my shoulder and back, and he said things into my skin I'm not going to write down, not because they weren't beautiful but because they were mine. I said his

name, and said it again, because I could, because nobody in this building was pretending to be anybody else and there was nothing left on earth I had to keep quiet about.

Halfway through, the baby kicked.

Hard. Right under his palm. A heel or an elbow, the kind that makes you put your coffee down.

He froze.

"Was that."

"That was."

"Is she," he said, horrified, "watching?"

I laughed until I was crying and he was laughing too, helplessly, into the back of my neck, and the baby kicked again, twice, as though she were knocking on a door to ask us to keep it down.

"She's got opinions," he said.

"She's a Marsh."

"She's a Bennett. Marshes don't knock." He kissed my shoulder. "We just let ourselves in."

And then the laughing went somewhere else, the way it does, and he moved again, and I held on, and the fire threw our shadow huge across the hull of his father's boat. When it broke over me it was long and slow and bright, and I said his name into the plaid wool, and he held me through every second of it, and then followed with his forehead pressed hard against the back of my neck and his hand never once leaving the place where she was.

Afterward we lay in the heat of the stove with the cold at the window, and he pulled the wool blanket over all three of us.

I didn't cry, this time. Let it be noted.

I laughed. For no reason. Just lying there.

. . .

"Can I ask you something," I said, a long time later. "You can say no."

"I'm marrying you. I'm going to have to learn to say no eventually."

"The envelope."

His thumb stopped on my belly.

"I'm not going to open it," I said. "And I know what you said in May, on the bedroom floor. I just want to know if you've ever wanted to. Even once."

He was quiet a long time. Out on the water a bell buoy rang once, lazily, as if it had been asked a question and didn't care for it.

"No," he said finally. "I've been the uncle of my own life for thirty-four years. Everybody else's kid brother's big brother. The guy who carves badly. I know how to be whatever she needs." His thumb started again. "What I don't know how to be is a guy who reads the card and finds out he's allowed to love her a little less. I don't want to know that's an option. So no."

I turned my face into the wool so he wouldn't see it. He saw it anyway.

"Okay," I said. "Then the name. I've had one since April. Since the attic." I found his hand under the blanket. "Since your mother showed me a man on the deck of a boat with a rope over his shoulder and a jaw like a shut door. I want to call her Frances. After Frank."

He didn't say anything for so long that I turned around, the way you turn at thirty weeks, like a ship coming about. He was lying on his back with the firelight on his face and his eyes open and wet and fixed on the ceiling beams his father had nailed up before either of his sons was born.

"Frankie," he said, roughly. "You'd call her Frankie."

"Only when she's in trouble. Or when you do."

"Ma's going to lose her mind."

"I know."

"Theo's going to—" He stopped, and swallowed, and put the heel of his hand against one eye like a man getting sawdust out. "Yeah. Okay. Frances. Yeah."

We lay there and made a future out of nothing, the way you can only do at two in the morning in a building with no clocks. Brooklyn, the garage, a baby in a car seat being roared at by the heater. Or 4B, the four flights, Gerald, the fire escape, a crib made of a crooked treehouse that would never fit through the door.

"Both," he said. "4B to live. Van Brunt for the shop. Here in August, when Ma lets us."

"The crib won't go up the stairs."

"Then I'll build it in the bedroom. I'm good at stairs."

. . .

When we finally walked back up the lawn, it was going on three, and the party was a few chairs and a few embers and Mr. Ortiz asleep upright on the porch swing with Mrs. Kaplan's shawl over his knees.

Halfway up the yard, I looked at the house.

My body did it on its own, the way your hand goes to a scar. A light was on upstairs, in the little room at the end of the hall that looks straight down the lawn at the boathouse door. Two people in it, this time. A slight man with wire glasses, his shirt untucked, and a woman with red hair coming down, her chin on his shoulder.

They weren't hiding.

Theo lifted one hand. Then he reached over, and the light went off. And on again. And off.

Wes stopped walking. "Did my brother just flash the porch light at us like we're sixteen."

"I think he did."

"I'm going to kill him."

"You're going to be his best man for the rest of your life," I said, and took his hand, and we walked the rest of the way up the wet grass in the June dark, laughing, two people who had been here before and come back different.

. . .

Seventy days later, at twelve-forty in the morning, the power went out on Perry Street.

It was the end of August, the kind of heat that sits on New York like a man on a subway seat who won't move his bag. The box fan in the bedroom had been running for nine days and had started making a sound like a small plane in distress. Frank's treehouse wood had become a crib in the corner, built in place, piece by piece, as promised, and it smelled of linseed oil and old summers.

Then the sky over the river split down the middle and the rain came all at once, like somebody upstairs had been holding a bucket for a week. The fan coughed and stopped. The stove clock went dark on 12:40, and every window on Perry Street went dark with it, and the street turned into a black river with the lightning standing in it.

"Candles," Wes said, in the dark. "Ma packed candles. Where did you put Ma's candles."

"Hall closet."

A silence. "Bennett."

"Kidding. Under the sink. Behind the thing you said you'd fix."

He went banging into the kitchen, swearing at the furniture by name. I went out the window.

The apartment was a shoebox full of hot air, and I was, depending on which calendar you believed, a week overdue or a week early, and I'd made very sure nobody ever told me which. I sat in my place by the window under the iron landing above, where the rain only got my feet. I had socks on. Of course I had socks on. It was the principle.

Perry Street was gone. Just the trees thrashing, the rain white in the lightning, and down the block a car alarm having a nervous breakdown.

You live in a place long enough and its hours get into your body. For ten months something had come under the door of 4B at twelve-forty: June's letters, then Wes's, then Theo's, then my father's. Everyone who'd ever written to me was asleep in my bed, or across a river, or across an ocean, happy. And I still listened for it, every night, the whisper of paper on wood.

So I was listening, out there in the rain, for an envelope that wasn't coming.

That's how I heard it. Not paper. A small, private, unmistakable sound, like a cork leaving a bottle somewhere inside me.

And then warm water, all at once, soaking through both pairs of socks.

I looked down at my feet on the wet iron for a long second.

"Wes," I said. Then louder, over the rain. "Wes. Forget the candles."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Frankie

THE THING NOBODY TELLS you about Wes Marsh is that he panics in the wrong order.

He panicked about the candles. He panicked, for nine days, about the box fan, and about the crib's back rail, which he'd sanded four times because he thought he'd felt a splinter that nobody else on earth could feel. He'd panicked in May about the car seat, and in June about the car seat's instructions, which he said were written by a man who had never met a car.

But when he put his head out the window into the rain, with his phone's flashlight in one hand and a box of Carol's emergency candles in the other, and looked down at my feet, and up at my face, he went completely calm. I watched it happen. It was like watching someone close a heavy door very quietly.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Give me your hand, Bennett."

"My water broke."

"I see that."

"On the fire escape."

"Course it did." He got me over the sill, which at that point was less like climbing through a window and more like docking a barge.

"Where else would it break. Bag?"

"By the door. Where it's been since August first. Where you check it every morning."

"I don't check it every morning."

"You check it every morning and you say 'okay' to it."

"That's a different thing," he said, and put a candle in my hand, and lit it with one match.

. . .

There are fifty-six stairs from 4B to the street door. I'd counted them, in April, in my socks, the night I came home from Carnegie and Wes said six-fourteen. I'd never counted them in the dark, in a thunderstorm, with a man in front of me walking backward holding a candle and a duffel bag and saying "step" on every single one like a priest saying a word he'd only just learned.

"Step."

"I know there's a step, Wes. It's a staircase."

"Step."

We'd made it to the landing on three when a light came up the stairwell from below, a huge white beam that turned the hallway into an interrogation, and behind it, in a bathrobe with palm trees on it and his reading glasses on his head, came Hector Ortiz with a flashlight the length of my forearm.

"I'm checking the building," he said. "Everybody okay? The power's gone from Hudson to the river, Con Ed says two hours, which means Tuesday." Then the beam found my face, and the wet hem of my nightgown, and Wes with the bag, and Hector stopped dead on the stairs.

"Mija."

"Hi, Hector."

"Is it?"

"It is."

He did not say anything for a full second. Then he crossed himself with the flashlight, so the beam swung across the ceiling and back like a lighthouse having a spiritual experience, and turned around, and went down the stairs ahead of us at a speed I didn't know he had.

"Nobody touch the pool!" he shouted, to the whole dark building. "Pool is FROZEN!"

Doors opened up and down the stairwell as we went. Mrs. Kaplan in 3A, in curlers, holding a menorah because it was the only candle she had, saying "Good luck, darling, breathe through your nose." The young couple on three, both holding their baby, both waving its hand at me. The band girls next door to 4B, who'd come out onto the landing above us with a headlamp and a tambourine for reasons I'll never know.

And Mrs. Feldman, on two, in her doorway with a flashlight under her chin like a girl at a sleepover.

"Hector," she said. "Hector, I want to change my bet."

"It's frozen!"

"It's not frozen until she's born, that's the rules."

"The rules are I make the rules!" he shouted from the bottom of the stairs, and Mrs. Feldman said, "Fine, but put me down that I tried," and then to me, very kindly, "You're going to be wonderful, sweetheart," and shut her door.

. . .

Wes's truck was on Bank Street. It might as well have been in New Jersey.

"You're not driving," Hector said, on the stoop, in the rain, in the palm-tree robe.

"I'm fine."

"Look at your hands."

We all looked at Wes's hands. They were holding the duffel bag and they were shaking so hard that the zipper pull was ticking against the buckle like a little clock. Wes looked at them too, as if they'd been issued to him by mistake. I'd seen those hands fit a hundred-year-old sash into a frame to a sixteenth of an inch. I'd seen them light a woodstove with one match in a gale.

"Huh," he said.

So Hector Ortiz, sixty-eight years old, super of 41 Perry Street for thirty-one years, walked out into the middle of Perry Street in a thunderstorm in his bathrobe and stood on the yellow line with his flashlight held over his head, sweeping it back and forth like a man flagging down the last boat off an island.

The first cab that came around the corner from Greenwich Street stopped so fast it fishtailed.

The driver's name was Mr. Adeyemi, according to the card on the back of the seat, and when Wes said "she's in labor" through the window, Mr. Adeyemi said, "Third one this year," with the weary pride of a man who has decided his cab is a kind of hospital, and put a towel down on the back seat from a stack he kept on the floor for exactly this.

Hector leaned in the window, rain pouring off his glasses.

"Mijo," he said to Wes. "Breathe. She's doing the work. You just carry the bag."

Then he slapped the roof of the cab twice, and we went.

. . .

The hospital had power, which felt like a personal favor.

They put me in triage, and a nurse with a Staten Island accent and forearms like a stevedore checked me and said, with a cheerfulness I found deeply hostile, "Two centimeters, hon. You're going to be with us a while."

"How long is a while?"

"Is this your first?"

"Yes."

"Then a while," she said, and patted my knee, and left.

It was one-fifteen in the morning on Sunday, August the twenty-ninth. I'd like to tell you that the next twenty-five hours were a single heroic arc. They weren't. They were mostly a hallway.

I walked it. I walked the hallway of the labor floor, up and back, up and back, in a hospital gown and two pairs of hospital socks with rubber treads, holding Wes's arm, for most of a day. I know every inch of that hallway. I could tell you the painting at the north end (a sailboat, badly), the vending machine at the south end (out of everything but pretzels), and the exact floor tile, ninth from the nurses' station, where every contraction seemed to find me, as if it had been waiting there.

Priya arrived at two-thirty in the morning in scrubs with her hair in a knot, having switched shifts with three people and threatened a fourth.

"I'm not your doctor," she said, at the door. "I want to be very clear. I'm your friend with a badge. If anybody here does anything I don't like, I'm going to be extremely polite at them until they cry."

"Hi, Priya."

"Hi." She took my hand. Her hand was cold and steady and I held onto it like a banister in the dark. "How far apart?"

"Eight minutes," Wes said, at once. "Eight minutes and twenty seconds, then seven-fifty, then eight-ten, I've got it on my phone, I made a spreadsheet."

Priya looked at him for a long second. "You made a spreadsheet."

"It's a list."

"It's got columns, Wes. I can see the columns." She turned back to me with an expression of tremendous restraint. "He's going to be a nightmare. You know that, right? He's going to be the dad at the playground with the knee pads."

"I know," I said, and then a contraction came up out of the floor, and I said several other things.

. . .

My mother arrived at nine in the morning with Biscuit in a tote bag.

She'd flown in from Phoenix on the twentieth to be here "for the week," which had become ten days, which had become her and Biscuit occupying a small pet-friendly hotel on Hudson Street and walking past 41 Perry twice a day in a sun hat to look up at my window. Gary had stayed in Phoenix with his blood pressure. She'd been calling me every morning since, and for the first time in my life, she'd been asking questions. Bad ones, mostly. How many centimeters is too many centimeters. Whether Biscuit could legally be in the delivery room as an emotional support animal. But questions, about me.

Biscuit was not legally allowed on the labor floor. Biscuit had been illegally allowed on the labor floor for about six minutes when Priya found them both in the hall, and looked at the tote bag, and looked at

my mother, and said, "I didn't see a dog," and walked away.

My father came at ten.

He'd taken the first bus from Montclair at six, because he doesn't drive at night, and he hadn't wanted to wait until it was day, and so he'd sat at Port Authority with a coffee for an hour, waiting for the morning to catch up with him. He came down the hall in his good cardigan with a tuning fork in his pocket, because there is always a tuning fork in his pocket, and a paper bag of the oatmeal cookies Ellen makes, and stopped in my doorway, and couldn't come in for a minute.

"Hi, Dad."

He came in. He held my hand in both of his, piano tuner's hands, dry and careful, and said, "You were three weeks late. Did your mother ever tell you? Three weeks. We thought you'd never come out. We thought you'd decided to stay in there and read."

"Rob," said my mother, from the doorway, with the dog.

They looked at each other. It had been two months since the rehearsal dinner, since my mother stood up at a long table on Carol's lawn and said everything she'd never said, and they'd been careful with each other since, the way you're careful carrying something hot across a kitchen.

"Lynn," he said.

"They have a waiting room," she said. "It has terrible chairs. I've been sitting in them since nine. I'll show you."

And she did.

I saw them at two in the afternoon, when Wes walked me past the waiting room on our fortieth lap. They were side by side in two terrible chairs under a television playing a cooking show with the sound off. My mother's head had tipped sideways in her sleep, almost

onto his shoulder, not quite, an inch away, the way two birds sit on a wire. Biscuit was asleep across both their laps, half on hers, half on his, snoring. My father was very carefully not moving. He was reading a magazine about boats, and he had been on the same page, I would bet my life, for an hour.

I stopped in the doorway. The contraction came and I held onto the frame and breathed through it, and neither of them woke, and when it was over I just stood there looking at them.

"Bennett," Wes said quietly. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm writing it down."

. . .

The storm came back after dark.

The forecast had said it would, the tail end of the same system, swinging back around over the river like a man who'd forgotten his keys. By nine o'clock the windows of the labor room were streaming and the thunder was rolling up the avenues, and by ten I'd stopped being funny.

I want to be honest about this part, because I've ghostwritten two birth chapters for other women and both times I made it sound like a sunrise, and I'd like to apologize to everyone who read them.

It was not a sunrise. It was work. It was the hardest thing my body has ever done, and it went on, and on, and on, and there was a point around eleven where I told the anesthesiologist I loved him and meant it with my whole heart. There was a point a little after that when I told Wes that if he said "you're doing great" one more time I'd have Priya remove one of his organs and sell it on the street.

"Okay," he said. "What do you want me to say."

"I don't know." I was on my side with my face against the rail. "Something true. Tell me one true thing."

He was quiet for a second. Then he leaned down, close to my ear.

"I fixed the boathouse door because I wanted you to come back," he said.

The contraction came. I held his hand. I held it so hard I heard something in it click. When it passed I said, "Another one."

"The cereal on the table on New Year's Eve. You told yourself you bought it for you. I knew you didn't."

Another contraction. Another one. Another.

"I cried at the anatomy scan and it wasn't the lights."

"I've never once beaten Ma at Scrabble honestly. Neither has Theo. She's a crook. She'll die a crook."

"I wrote you nineteen letters in Lisbon and only sent six. The other thirteen were worse."

"I sat on the stoop for an hour before I came up, that first night. You know that one. I'm telling you anyway."

He kept going. All night. One true thing for every contraction, low, in my ear, the way you'd feed a fire one stick at a time. Some of them were funny. Some of them I'd known for a year. Some of them I'd never heard, and some of them were so small and so private that I'm keeping them, the way he keeps the box his ring came in, in the inside pocket of his jacket where nobody looks.

Somewhere around midnight, Priya held my other hand and said, very quietly, to the nurse, "Look at him," and the nurse said, "I've been looking at him since three o'clock this afternoon, honey. I'd marry him myself."

. . .

At one-thirty in the morning the doctor said, "Okay, Claire. It's time."

And at one-thirty-five Wes's phone, propped on the windowsill against the rain, lit up with a call from Lisbon.

It was six-thirty-five in the morning there. Theo was on the terrace of the attic flat at the top of the Alfama hill, in a T-shirt, his hair standing up, with his cello between his knees and the phone propped against something, a teapot, I think. June was beside him in a sweater, holding her own face. Behind them, over the river, the sky was the gray of a pigeon's chest, going pale at the bottom.

"We're not staying," Theo said quickly. "We know. We're not watching. I'm pointing the phone at the sky. I only." He stopped and started again. "I only wanted to ask if I could play."

I couldn't speak. Wes said, "Yeah." His voice went. "Yeah. Play."

So Theo played.

Not the Sarabande. Not "Perry Street." The Prelude from the first suite, in G major. The one everybody knows, even people who don't know they know it, the one that sounds like someone opening every curtain in a house. He played it on a rooftop in Lisbon at dawn with the gulls going and the trams starting up the hill, and it came through a phone on a hospital windowsill in New York in a thunderstorm, small and tinny and absolutely clear.

I pushed.

I'd like to tell you what it was like, and I've tried, more times than I've tried anything else in this book. I can tell you that Priya was saying my name and the doctor was saying "good, good, good" like a woman counting money. That there was thunder. That Wes had both arms around my shoulders from behind and his forehead against the side of my head and he was saying "you've got it, you've got it, Bennett, you've got it," which was not one true thing but which I

allowed. That the Prelude ended, and Theo started it again from the beginning without stopping, the way you keep a light on for someone who's still on the road.

And that on the sixth time through, at 2:04 in the morning on Monday, August the thirtieth, with the lightning standing over the Hudson and the sun coming up over the Tagus, she arrived.

Frances.

They put her on my chest, wet and furious, and she was the loudest thing I have ever heard, louder than the storm, louder than the cello, louder than the toast at Bettina's. She was purple and then pink and she had a full head of dark hair plastered flat and a fist up by her face like a woman about to make a point.

Wes made a sound I'd never heard a person make. He put his hand on her back. His whole hand covered her.

On the windowsill, through the phone, very far away, I heard June say, "Oh," and Theo stop playing.

"Hi," I said to her. "Hi. Hi. It's you. Hi."

She stopped yelling.

She went quiet against me, all at once, the way a room goes quiet when someone sits down at a piano. Her little face screwed up, and smoothed, and she turned her head on my skin toward the sound of my voice.

And she opened her eyes.

She looked at me. Then, slowly, as if she'd heard him too, she turned her head and looked at Wes.

One brown. One green.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Frank's Eyes

NOBODY SAID ANYTHING FOR a while. I think that's right. I think when something enormous happens in a small room, the decent thing is to let it have the room.

The doctor was doing doctor things at the far end of me, which I've decided not to describe, and a nurse was saying numbers to another nurse, seven pounds, two ounces, and the rain was still coming down the black window in long crooked ropes. On the sill, the phone had gone quiet. Theo had stopped playing. I could see a corner of the Lisbon sky in the screen, pale gold, and part of June's sweater, and nothing else, because they had both, I found out later, sat down on the terrace tiles with their backs against the wall and put their hands over their faces.

And the baby looked at Wes, with one brown eye and one green, and Wes looked back at her.

I'd seen him look at a lot of things. A window painted shut in 1974. His brother on a frozen beach. Me, in a doorway, with a frying pan. I'd never seen this. His face didn't do anything. That was what undid me. It went absolutely still, the way water goes still when the wind drops all at once, and you can suddenly see all the way to the

bottom.

"Wes," I said.

"Yeah." His voice came out of somewhere low. "Yeah. I see 'em."

"Your dad."

He nodded. He didn't take his eyes off her. His hand was still flat on her back, covering most of her, rising and falling with her breathing.

Priya leaned over the rail with her ER face on, the one that has seen everything and is filing it. "Heterochromia," she said, gently, to no one. "It's not unheard of. They can change, in the first year. Newborn eyes settle."

"They won't," Wes said.

Priya looked at him. Then at the baby. Then she pressed the back of her wrist against her eyes, hard, and said, "Fluorescent lights," which was Wes's excuse and she knew it, and walked out into the hall.

. . .

My parents came in at three.

They'd been in the terrible chairs for seventeen hours, and they came through the door together, which I'm not sure either of them noticed, my father first with his cardigan buttoned wrong and my mother behind him holding Biscuit's tote bag against her chest like a carry-on she refused to check. Biscuit's head was out of the top. Nobody said anything about it.

"Oh," my mother said. "Oh, Claire."

I've known my mother for thirty years, nearly, and she has said my name in a lot of ways. Worried. Disappointed. On the phone, on Sundays, in the tone of a woman reading it off a list. Before the dog. After the dog. She'd never said it like this. Like she'd found

something she thought she'd lost behind a radiator.

She held her. She sat on the edge of the bed in her sun hat, which she hadn't taken off since nine in the morning, and held her granddaughter, and she didn't talk about the dog. She didn't talk about anything. She just looked, and touched one finger to the dark hair, and said, finally, "She's got your chin. You had that chin. You came out with that chin and looked at me like I'd done something wrong."

"You probably had," I said.

"I probably had." She didn't look up. "I'm going to do better with this one."

Behind her, my father had stopped just inside the door, the way he'd stopped that morning, the way I'm learning he stops at the edge of anything he's afraid he hasn't earned. Then he came over and stood behind my mother's shoulder and looked down.

"Hello," he said to her, very formally, as if she were a client with a Steinway. "I'm Rob. I'm going to be around."

Biscuit, from the tote bag on the floor, sneezed.

. . .

Carol arrived at six-forty in the morning.

Wes had called her at two-twenty, out in the hall, and I'd heard him through the door. Not the words. Just his voice, the sound of it, going up and cracking and coming back down. Then nothing for a minute. Then "Ma, don't drive in this," and then "Ma," and then "okay," which meant she was already in the car.

She'd driven down from Little Compton through the storm in three and a half hours, which nobody of sixty-one has any business doing on I-95 in that rain, and she came down the hall of the

maternity floor in a yellow fisherman's raincoat over her nightgown, with her good pearls on, because, she said later, "a person should dress for a thing."

She stopped in the doorway, dripping.

Wes was in the chair by the window, with the baby on his chest under a hospital blanket, her whole body the length of his forearm. He'd been sitting like that for an hour. He'd said, at one point, very quietly, "Morning, Frankie," the way he says morning to Gerald, and then not much else.

"Give her to me," Carol said.

He stood up and gave her to his mother.

Carol held her the way you only learn to hold one after you've held your own: low and sure and without any fuss, the head in the crook of her arm. She looked down at her. And Frankie, who had been asleep, opened her eyes.

I watched Carol Marsh see them.

She didn't make a sound at first. Her face changed, slowly, from the top down, like a page coming up out of developer in a darkroom. Her mouth opened. And then she sat down, all at once, in the chair Wes had left, with the baby held against her, and she bent over her granddaughter in her yellow raincoat and her pearls, and she sobbed. Not softly. Not the way she does anything else, with wit and a garnish. It came up out of her from seventeen years down.

"Frank," she said. "Oh. Oh, Frank."

Wes put his hand on his mother's back. He didn't say anything. He just stood beside her, the way he'd held the ladder for Theo in April, and didn't take his eyes off her.

"God ran out of paint," Carol said, into the blanket. "That's what he used to say. God ran out of brown halfway through and finished

him in green." She laughed, horribly, wetly. "He'd stare at children in church until they laughed. Oh, honey. Look at you. Look at you staring at me."

Frankie stared at her.

"I said it skipped a generation," Carol said. "Didn't I say it? I said it skipped, like everything good in this family. I've been waiting thirty-four years. I thought it was gone. I thought I'd buried the last of it in Little Compton with sawdust on his boots." She looked up at me, across the room, with her face wrecked and her mascara, which she had somehow applied at three in the morning in a moving vehicle, going down both cheeks. "Claire. Honey. Do you understand what she is?"

I did.

I'd been lying there for four hours understanding it.

Here's the thing about the envelope. It was on a shelf in a locked closet on Perry Street, behind a cello bow, with a key buried two knuckles down in the soil of a fig tree, and it had one line on it in a Portuguese doctor's slanting hand, and whatever that line said, it could only ever tell me half of something. Which brother. That's all a card can say. It can split a family down a seam that was never there.

But the eyes weren't Theo's. And they weren't Wes's. They were their father's. A man who built boats and swore at the grill and fixed a sticking car door with a butter knife and died at his bench. Either of his sons could have carried them, folded up somewhere inside, without ever knowing, the way you carry a letter in the lining of a coat. Either son could have handed them on.

So the eyes didn't answer the question. They did something better. They made it the wrong question.

"She's a Marsh," I said.

"She's a Marsh," said Carol, and kissed her granddaughter on the forehead, and then, for good measure, on each eye.

Wes turned around and went to the window and stood with his back to all of us, looking at the rain, with his hand over his mouth. Nobody said a word to him. We let him have the room.

. . .

It was nearly noon when everyone went to find coffee and I was alone with her for the first time.

Wes had gone down to move the truck, which he'd finally fetched from Bank Street at five, and which had been ticketed twice. My mother had taken my father to the cafeteria, and I'd heard her in the hall, saying, "They have a muffin, Rob, it's the size of a hat." Carol had gone to call Theo properly, from the parking garage, where she said the reception was better and she could cry in her car without an audience.

The storm had blown out to sea. The window was full of a clean, hard, rinsed blue, and the sun came across the blanket and across her face, and she slept in the crook of my arm with her fists by her ears, and I reached down very carefully, so as not to wake her, into the front pocket of the hospital bag.

I'd put it there on the first of August. I'd taken it out of my nightstand drawer, from under the notebook where it had lived since February, and I'd zipped it into the pocket with the phone charger and the lip balm and the socks, because he'd said when she's born, and I'd opened every letter in this story too early, and this one I'd decided to open on time.

The envelope was cream. Thick. Six months soft at the corners.

No. 45.

I slit it with my thumbnail and unfolded it on my knee, next to her, and read it in the sun.

No. 45

Dear _____,

I've left a space for your name. Your mother will fill it in. She is better at names than anyone I've ever met. She once named a fig tree in a stranger's apartment without asking anyone, and it took, and now it answers to nothing else, and frankly neither do I.

I'm writing this in February, on a terrace in Lisbon, at two in the morning, which is when I do my important work. Your mother is asleep inside. She doesn't know I'm out here. By the time she reads this she'll be in a room with bad light, tired in a way I can't imagine, and she'll cry, because she cries at letters. It's one of the best things about her. Someone should hand her a tissue. Not your father. He'll have used them all.

I want to tell you a few things before anybody else does.

You were very nearly a story about two brothers. You'll hear it one day, probably at Thanksgiving, probably from your grandmother after her second Manhattan, and it will sound complicated. It isn't. Here is the whole of it. Two men loved your mother, and she loved them back, and then she did the bravest thing I have ever watched a person do. She went and found out which kind of love was which. She did it carefully, in a city with very steep hills. She didn't hurt anyone who wasn't already hurt. I was there. I'm a reliable witness. I'm the one she was kindest to.

I don't know whose eyes you have, or whose hands. I've decided that isn't mine to know. I have spent my whole life being decided for, by

people who loved me, and the first thing I'd like to decide for myself, out loud, on paper, where it counts, is this: I am your uncle. That's the title I want. I asked for it. Nobody left it to me in a will.

So here's what you have.

You have an uncle who plays at two in the morning, and who will play for you whenever you can't sleep, from four thousand miles away if he has to, badly, through a telephone. You have a father who will fix anything you break, a window, a door, a bicycle, a heart, and who will never once ask you how you broke it. He'll swear at it. Only at the thing. Never at you. And you have a mother who writes everyone's story but her own, until you.

Until you. I'd like that written down somewhere she'll see it.

Some things I know, which you may have:

Water the fig twice a week. He's dramatic, but he's loyal.

Read the letter. Even the one you've been told not to read. Especially that one.

If someone asks you to tell them one true thing, tell them. It's the cheapest gift there is and it costs everything you have.

Your grandmother cheats at Scrabble. Watch the blanks.

Don't open the hall closet. That was my rule first. Everyone broke it. I'm glad they did.

I came home once because of some letters. I'd like you to know that it works. People really do come home because of what someone wrote them in the middle of the night. Write a great many letters. Send most of them.

And if you ever wake up and the house is dark, and it's very late, and you can't quite remember who loves you, put your ear to the

floor. Somewhere, someone in this family is up. Somewhere, someone is playing.

With all the love a person can fit in a numbered envelope,

your uncle,

— T.

P.S. Tell your father he was right about the plywood. Don't tell him I said so until you're at least twelve.

. . .

I read it three times. The first time I couldn't see the end of it. The second time I laughed at the plywood so suddenly that she startled in her sleep and flung both arms out like a woman falling off a ladder, and then settled again, outraged, with her mouth open.

The third time, I just held it.

Until you.

I'm a ghostwriter. I was, for six years, the best there was at sounding like somebody else. And here was a man who'd written the truest sentence anyone ever wrote about me, and addressed it to someone who couldn't read yet, and I hadn't known it was true until I saw it in his hand.

The door opened. Wes, with two coffees and a parking ticket in his teeth.

He saw my face and put the coffees down on the windowsill without a word.

"Theo," I said, and held up the letter.

He came and sat on the edge of the bed, carefully, the way you'd step into a dinghy, and read it over my shoulder, with his hand on her back again. I watched him read it. He read slowly, the way he reads

everything, his lips moving very slightly on the long words, and when he got to a father who will fix anything you break he stopped, and looked at the window for a while, and then kept going.

At the P.S. he made a sound in his throat.

"Plywood," he said. "Son of a bitch."

"There's a space," I said. "At the top. For her name."

He reached up, without a word, and took the carpenter's pencil from behind his ear, the flat red one, the one he'd been carrying since before I knew his name, and put it in my hand.

So I wrote it. On my knee, in the blank, in the gap Theo had left in February on a terrace over the Tagus without knowing what would go there. My handwriting, the anxious slant, in carpenter's lead.

Frances.

Wes looked at it for a long time. Then he leaned down and put his forehead against the top of her head and kept it there.

. . .

There was a knock at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Not a nurse's knock. Nurses knock like they're already in the room. This was a slow knock, three times, formal, the way a man knocks who has knocked on every door in a building for thirty-one years and has opinions about how it's done.

"Come in, Hector," I said.

He came in sideways. He had to, because of what he was carrying.

He'd put on his good jacket, the one from Carnegie, over a Yankees T-shirt. He had a bunch of supermarket carnations in one hand, still in the plastic, with the price sticker on. And under his other arm, propped against his hip like a man carrying a surfboard into the sea, was the chalkboard.

The chalkboard from the roof. From New Year's Eve, from the tenants' party in May. The one that said POOL across the top in careful capitals, with eleven months of names and numbers underneath it, erased and rewritten so many times the black had gone a pale ghostly gray, like a sky before snow. He'd carried it on the subway. He'd carried it up from the street and past the nurses' station, where, I found out later, three nurses had asked to put money in and been refused.

He stood at the foot of the bed and looked at Frankie in my arms. He looked for a long time. His sad, knowing super's eyes went to her eyes, and back, and to Wes, and back to me, and he crossed himself, slowly, and his chin did something, and he cleared his throat.

Then Hector Ortiz drew himself up to his full height in his Carnegie jacket, and turned the chalkboard around so the names faced the wall, and announced to the room, in a voice built for stairwells:

"Pool's closed."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Pool

HECTOR ORTIZ DID THE payout on Labor Day, on the roof, like the Academy Awards.

He'd put on the Carnegie jacket again. He'd borrowed a music stand and a microphone from the band girls in 4A; the microphone was not connected to anything, and he held it anyway, because, he said, "a microphone is about respect." The chalkboard was propped against the water tower, facing the chimney. On a folding chair sat a Café Bustelo can with a rubber band around it, and a spiral notebook with a kitten on the cover that he'd bought at the Duane Reade on Hudson Street last October and kept every entry in since.

"The ledger," he said, and patted it.

Frankie was seven days old. I'd climbed the ladder to the roof the way a woman of eighty climbs onto a bus, one rung at a time, with Wes below me with both hands up, not touching me, just there, in case. He had her strapped to his chest in a carrier he'd adjusted for forty minutes. She was asleep against him with her mouth open and one fist out, like a tiny union organizer at the end of a long meeting.

Everyone was there. Danny and Nick, with hotel pans. Lorraine at the parapet with a cigarette, delighted. Priya and Marcus. My

mother, in a new sun hat, with Biscuit in a sweater in September for reasons she declined to discuss. My father and Ellen, holding hands on a milk crate. Maddie, with Rose in a sling, four months old and bald as a judge. And Carol, who had been in New York for a week, staying in Mrs. Feldman's spare room, and was by Thursday no longer speaking to Mrs. Feldman, over Scrabble.

I was allowed to see the chalkboard. That was the main thing. For eleven months I'd been the one person in the building who wasn't allowed to look at the pool. Today I had a folding chair in the front row.

Hector tapped the dead microphone. Everyone hushed.

"Welcome," he said, "to the closing of the pool."

Applause. The boy from 1B, who'd turned twenty in July, whistled through his fingers.

"First, the rules." He put on his reading glasses. "The pool open October twelve, last year, when Claire moves into 4B and T. says water the fig. The question is: who does she end up with. Okay? Everybody put money. Everybody put opinions." He looked over the glasses at the crowd. "Too many opinions. So in November I make a new rule. I write it on the back of the board. Ruthie, tell them."

"Winner has to say who," Mrs. Kaplan said, from her chair, in a voice like a closing door, "and why."

"Who and why," Hector said. "Because it's not a horse race. It's a person. And when I say money back, it means back in the can. Not back to you."

He turned the chalkboard around.

. . .

It was eleven months of a building's imagination in chalk. Names, initials, apartment numbers, dollar amounts, arrows. Things crossed out so hard the chalk had smeared into clouds. EL MÚSICO and EL CARPINTERO across the top, still, in the faded original capitals, and under them, added later in four different hands, JUNE, PHOENIX, A DOG (BISCUIT?), HERSELF, THE FIG, and, at the very bottom, very small, HECTOR, with a heart.

"We go in order," Hector said, and opened the kitten notebook. "First bet. Ruth Kaplan, 3A. October fourteen. Ten dollars. NEITHER, open parenthesis, SHE'S SMART, close parenthesis."

Applause. Mrs. Kaplan nodded to the crowd like a queen at a window.

"November twenty: Ruth moves her ten dollars to EL MÚSICO. Before anybody knows anything. Everybody says, Ruth, how do you know? She says, I have a feeling." He turned a page. "January: Ruth says, 'Lisbon, obviously.' March: Ruth moves back to NEITHER, SHE'S SMART, and she underlines it three times, and she writes, I'm reading this exactly, 'I was right the first time, she's smart, and that baby is nobody's but her own.'"

"Ruthie," said Hector, gently, "there's a baby. You can't be neither."

"The baby," Mrs. Kaplan said, "is neither. The baby is herself. Look at her."

Everyone looked at Frankie, who chose that moment to sneeze into Wes's shirt.

"Disqualified," said Hector, with real sorrow. "Beautiful. Disqualified."

. . .

He went through them all. It took an hour. Nobody left. Danny passed the arancini twice.

"3B, the Okonkwos, October twenty-one. Twenty dollars. EL CARPINTERO." Hector held up the notebook so we could see the little hammer drawn beside it. "Very good. Very early. And the why?" He read it. "'Because he has a truck.'"

The couple from 3B looked at each other.

"We were moving that month," the wife said. "It seemed relevant."

"Wrong why," said Hector. "Money back. No profit."

"1B. Tyler. November two. Fifteen dollars. JUNE." He took off his glasses. "Tyler, explain to the people."

Tyler, twenty, stood up with great seriousness. "I just felt like she and June had a real connection through the door."

"She did," I said. "That's true."

"Thank you."

"And June married the cellist," said Hector. "Sit down, Tyler. Money back."

"4A. The girls. December. Twenty dollars between them. JUNE." He read it, and his lips moved, and he stopped, and he turned the notebook upside down to read it again, and then he closed it. "I'm not reading the rest of the girls' why. It's very modern. Money back."

The band girls high-fived.

"Danny Russo. December eighteen, the night of the book party. One hundred dollars." Hector looked up. "On THE FIG."

The whole roof turned to look at Danny, who spread his hands, a man with nothing to hide.

"Hundred to one," he said. "I'm a businessman. You take the long shot."

"The why, Danny."

"The why is, every story needs a fat guy with a checkbook in the third act, and I was already booked." He took a bow from his folding chair. "I just wanted to be in it, Hector."

"You bought the building, Danny," Hector said. "You're in it. Money back. Thank you for the boiler."

"Lorraine Fisch. January. Fifty dollars. HERSELF."

There was a murmur. I sat up. Lorraine didn't turn around from the parapet, but she lifted her cigarette.

"'She picks herself,'" Hector read. "'Obviously. I'm her editor.'" He lowered the notebook. "Lorraine. This is very close. This is almost the thing."

"I know it is," said Lorraine, to the river.

"But half the thing is not the thing."

"That," said Lorraine, "is the truest sentence ever spoken on a roof in this city." She tapped her ash over the side. "Keep the fifty, Hector. Buy the building a doorman."

. . .

And then Mrs. Feldman.

"Edie Feldman, 2A," Hector said, and the whole roof groaned in anticipation, and Mrs. Feldman, in her fur hat, in September, said "Oh, stop it," and looked thrilled.

"Mrs. Feldman change her bet eleven times." He held up the notebook. There was an entire page. "I'm going to read them all, because it's the rules, and because I want everybody to suffer like I suffer.

"October: the tall one.

"November: the skinny one.

"Also November: the tall one, but only because of the shoulders.

"December: the skinny one, because she heard him play from the stairs and cried in the laundry room.

"Also December: both. Which is not allowed. I tell her, Edie, this is a Catholic pool.

"January: 'She stays in Lisbon, marries a Portuguese, and we never see her again.'

"February: Phoenix. Edie, why Phoenix?"

"Her mother's in Phoenix," said Mrs. Feldman. "Girls go home."

My mother, under her sun hat, put a hand to her heart.

"March: the man from Con Ed, who came about the boiler." Hector didn't look up. "Very handsome, she says. A mustache.

"April: back to the tall one.

"May." He paused. He cleared his throat. He seemed, for the first time all afternoon, unsure. "May. 'Hector. Widower. Pension. Fixes things.'"

The roof exploded. Priya had to put her face in Marcus's shoulder. Carol laughed so hard she had to hold the water tower. Hector stood behind the music stand, crimson to the ears, holding the dead microphone, while Mrs. Feldman sat with her ankles crossed and her hands in her lap and an expression of absolute serenity, like a woman who has said a true thing in public and will not be taking questions.

"June," Hector said, over the noise, louder. "JUNE. She bets 'whoever has the ring.' And the night of the wedding in Rhode Island, eleven o'clock, she calls me on the telephone and asks me who has the ring. And I say Edie, I'm at a wedding, I'm dancing with Ruthie Kaplan, and she says, I knew it. Disqualified, for insider trading."

"I don't regret anything," said Mrs. Feldman.

"Money back," said Hector, with enormous dignity, and then, not looking at her, much quieter, into the dead microphone: "And we talk

about May later, Edie."

. . .

Then he got to the brothers, and the roof went quiet without anyone telling it to.

"Wesley Marsh," Hector said. "December twenty-one. Before he goes to Vermont. Twenty dollars."

I turned and looked at Wes. He was looking straight ahead at the chalkboard, with one hand flat on the baby's back, and his jaw doing the thing.

Hector held up the notebook, and I could see the capitals from where I sat. Square, pressed hard, the pen almost through the paper.

"THEO," Hector read. "'HE'S THE GOOD ONE.'"

Nobody laughed. Nobody said anything. Carol, at the water tower, closed her eyes.

"Wrong why," Hector said, quietly. "Not because Theo's not good. Because you're wrong about you, mijo. Money back."

Wes didn't move. I put my hand on his knee and kept it there.

"Theodore Marsh. February fifteen. By text message, from Lisbon. Fifty dollars, by the Venmo, which my nephew showed me." Hector put the reading glasses back on and read it off his phone, slowly, like a telegram. "'My brother. Because she laughs out loud when she reads his letters. She has never laughed like that at mine. I'd like it noted that I withdrew from the competition and then bet against myself, which Sofia says is the most Portuguese thing I've ever done.'"

The roof laughed then, all at once, the way you laugh at a funeral when someone tells the right story.

Wes put his head down, and laughed, and wiped his face with the heel of his hand, and said, very low, so only I could hear, "Bastard bet

on me."

"He bet on you in February," I said. "Before I knew."

"He always knew everything first. It's his worst quality."

"Very close," said Hector. "Very, very close. Right who. Right why. But he says it like a man waving from a train. The pool is not for goodbyes." He set the phone down. "Money back."

. . .

There were others. My father, from March, after the pier: "Whoever she wants. That's all I've got." ("Beautiful, Roberto. Not a who.") My mother, from April: "Whoever Biscuit likes," which Hector let her keep for sentimental reasons, since Biscuit, it emerged, liked Hector, and was at that moment asleep across his shoes. Priya, from November, in her terrible doctor's handwriting: "Wes. And I'm not explaining my reasoning to a superintendent."

"No why, no money," said Hector.

"I'm a doctor," said Priya.

"I'm the house," said Hector, and the roof cheered him, and Priya started laughing despite herself, which on Priya is like anyone else being carried out on a stretcher.

Maddie's was the last before the end. She'd placed it in May, a few hours after Rose was born, by calling Hector from her hospital bed, which Hector said was the most beautiful phone call he had ever received.

"'I'm not betting on her love life,'" Hector read. "'I've done enough damage. Put me down for: a girl, before Labor Day, seven pounds.'"

Maddie, by the chimney, went red, and Rose kicked in the sling.

"Seven pounds, two ounces," Hector said. "Born August thirty." He looked at Mrs. Kaplan. "This is the side pool. The baby-weight pool.

Ruthie runs it."

Mrs. Kaplan opened her pocketbook and took out an envelope and a foil-wrapped babka and held them both out toward Maddie without getting up, and Maddie came across the roof and took them, and for one second she looked at me over the babka, and I looked at her, and neither of us said anything at all. It wasn't forgiveness. It was a woman who'd once destroyed a toast being paid, on a roof, in front of everyone, for getting something exactly right about me. I'll take it.

. . .

Hector closed the kitten notebook.

He put his glasses in his breast pocket. He looked at the Café Bustelo can. He looked at Carol, at the water tower, who looked back with her hands folded, like a woman waiting for the last Scrabble tile to be turned over who knows exactly what it spells.

"One more," he said.

"Carol Marsh. Little Compton, Rhode Island. November twenty-one, the Saturday before Thanksgiving, by the telephone, on the line in 4B. Five dollars." He looked up. "She calls the apartment to talk to her son. She gets me instead, because I'm fixing the radiator. We talk for one hour about radiators and sons. And at the end she says, Hector, I hear you have a pool. And I say, Mrs. Marsh, how do you hear these things. And she says, honey, I taught high school for thirty-one years. Put me down for five dollars. And I say what's the why. And she tells me."

He didn't read it off the notebook. He didn't need to. He said it to me, across the roof.

"'She picks herself first,'" said Hector Ortiz. "'Then the one who stayed.'"

The roof was absolutely silent. Somewhere down on Perry Street a car went by with its windows open, playing salsa, and was gone.

I sat with my hand on Wes's knee and thought about Lisbon. A woman who went, not because a man asked her, but to find out. Who sold a book under her own name and wrote an essay about a boiler and walked to the end of a pier to meet her father. Herself first. Then a man who'd said, at a curb at JFK with the heater on high, "If it's not, I'll be here," and been there, every day, on a roof in the cold with his hands in an old cornice, without once asking for anything.

The one who stayed.

She'd known in November. Before Thanksgiving. Before the boathouse. Before any of us knew anything. She'd said it to a super on the telephone for five dollars, the way you'd mention the weather.

"Winner," said Hector, softly.

Carol came across the roof. She took the Café Bustelo can from the folding chair, and held it, and counted it with her thumb in a single glance, the way only an English teacher who's run a bake sale can.

"Six hundred and forty dollars," Hector said. "Two lasagnas. And one casserole dish, Pyrex, from Ruthie, March, the casserole is eaten, the dish is in escrow."

"Give it to the boiler," said Carol.

"Carol."

"The boiler fund. For the next cold snap. Ruth, nobody's ever going to make you sit in a building with no heat in March again. Danny, you'll match it."

"I'll match it," said Danny, at once, wiping his eyes with a napkin.

"Good." Carol handed the coffee can back to Hector, and the lasagnas to Nick, and kept the Pyrex dish, because she said the dish was the only part of this she'd actually wanted. Then she came and

bent over Wes in his folding chair and kissed the top of his head, and then the top of Frankie's, and then mine.

"I told you, honey," she said, into my hair. "I've been you."

. . .

At two in the morning I was on the fire escape with both of them.

Frankie had decided, at seven days, that two in the morning was when she did her important work. It's genetic. All sides. Wes sat with his back against the brick by the ladder, in his place, with her along his forearm, and I sat in my place by the window, and the city was doing its late summer hum below us, a cab, a dog, the river breathing somewhere past the trees.

"Your brother bet on you," I said.

"I know." He looked down at his daughter, who was looking at the streetlight with her two different eyes like it owed her money. "I bet on him."

"I know."

"Wrong why," he said, and almost smiled. "Hector's right. I've been wrong about the why for a long time."

. . .

The next night, at twelve-forty, I was lying awake in the dark with her asleep in the treehouse crib at the foot of the bed, and I heard it.

The whisper of paper on wood.

I lay there. I knew that sound like I know my own name. It had been five months since anyone had slid anything under the door of 4B. I put my hand out across the bed in the dark, and the sheet beside me was empty, and still warm.

I got up in my socks and went down the hall. On the floorboards inside the door, white in the light from the stairwell, was an envelope.

Square capitals, pressed so hard into the paper I could feel them from the back.

BENNETT.

BENNETT,

I'M ON THE LANDING. NOT FOR AN HOUR. JUST TILL YOU READ THIS.

I FIGURED SOMETHING OUT ON THE ROOF. YOU SPENT A YEAR WITH LETTERS COMING UNDER THAT DOOR FOR SOMEBODY ELSE. FOR HIM, FOR JUNE, FOR THE KID YOUR DAD THOUGHT WASN'T READING. NOBODY EVER WROTE ONE TO YOU THAT WASN'T ALSO SAYING GOODBYE OR SORRY OR PLEASE.

THIS ISN'T ANY OF THOSE. THIS IS JUST A LETTER.

HAD CEREAL FOR DINNER. OUT OF THE BOX. YOU WERE ASLEEP SITTING UP WITH HER AND I DIDN'T WANT TO RUSTLE THE BOWL.

I'M GOING TO DO THIS EVERY FEW NIGHTS. NOT EVERY NIGHT, YOU'D GET SICK OF ME. SOME NIGHTS. FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO ANSWER. YOU CAN'T TELL ME TO STOP THIS TIME. I'M NOT TAKING REQUESTS.

W.

P.S. SUNDAY THE NINETEENTH. THE BENCH. TEN A.M. HECTOR SAYS HE GOT ORDAINED ON THE INTERNET. I DIDN'T ASK HOW. BRING SOCKS.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Where You Asked Me

ON THE NIGHT I turned thirty, at twelve-forty, an envelope came under the door of 4B, and it wasn't in capitals.

I was up anyway, walking the slanted floor from the stove to the window with Frankie on my shoulder, the only route she accepts. The whisper of paper on wood. Then footsteps going down, slower than Wes's, careful on the creaking top step, a man who holds the rail.

I didn't open the door. Some rules you keep for sentimental reasons.

It was my father's handwriting. I'd read eighteen birthday letters in that hand on a green couch in March, all in one night, and this one was the steadiest of all.

> *Claire,*
>
> *This is number nineteen. It's the first one I've ever been sure would get to you, so I've had a very hard time writing it. It turns out I'm better at writing to someone I think isn't reading.*
>
> *You're thirty. When you were six, you told me thirty was when people got "serious hats." I've looked. You don't have one. I'm relieved.*

I wanted to write you something wise and I don't have anything. I tune pianos. Here is the only thing I know for certain: an instrument that's been left alone a long time doesn't need to be fixed. It needs to be brought back up to pitch, slowly, a little at a time, so the strings don't break. You have been very patient with me while I come back up to pitch.

I'll be on the pier on Sunday. Your mother says I'm to wear a tie. I don't own a tie. Ellen is handling it.

Happy birthday, sweetheart. Nineteen of these, and I finally got to bring one to the door.

Dad

I read it standing at the window with my daughter asleep on my shoulder and Perry Street dark under the trees, and then I read it again to her, out loud, quietly, because she was the only other person awake, and because I've decided she should hear all the letters in this family. Even the ones that arrive late. Especially those.

. . .

The wedding was at ten o'clock on Sunday morning, the nineteenth of September, at the last bench at the end of Pier 45.

Sunday at ten. I know. He chose it on purpose, and so would I have.

We walked there. That was Hector's idea; he said a building should walk a bride to a wedding, the way they did in his grandmother's town in Cayey, where the whole street followed you to the church and complained about the heat. So at nine-thirty we came down the stoop into a blue, sharp, early autumn morning, and the building came down behind us.

My mother first, holding Frankie in a white cotton thing Carol had bought at a shop in Tiverton that sold only white cotton things. Then Mrs. Kaplan, on Danny's arm. Then Mrs. Feldman, in the fur hat, which she said was for occasions and this was an occasion. The Okonkwos from 3B with their baby. Tyler from 1B, in a blazer. And the band girls from 4A with a tambourine and a melodica, playing something that I was told later was "Going to the Chapel" and which sounded, the whole length of Perry Street, like a brass band falling slowly down a flight of stairs.

People came out on their stoops to watch. The bodega on the corner sent out its cat, or the cat came out on its own, and fell in behind us with the grim neutrality of a priest.

I wore a dress I'd bought on Bleecker Street on Thursday because it fit and it buttoned down the front for feeding. Pale green linen. White sneakers. And socks, white ones with a little lace at the cuff that Priya had found and pressed into my hand that morning without comment, because the letter had said bring socks, and because some things are sacred.

Priya held my hand from the corner of West Street to the bench and didn't say a word the whole way.

. . .

He was already there.

Of course he was. The canvas jacket over a white shirt, his hands in his pockets, standing in front of the last bench with his back to the river. And my heart did what it had done once before, on this exact pier, on a cold bright Sunday in November, when I'd seen a man in a canvas jacket standing in front of this bench in front of a woman in a red coat.

I'd stopped walking that day. I'd stood at a distance and watched, and everything I thought I knew had come apart in my hands.

I didn't stop walking.

He turned around at the tambourine, and saw me, and his face went still, the water going clear. Then he saw the whole building behind me, and Mrs. Feldman's hat, and the melodica, and put his hand over his eyes and laughed.

"Bennett," he said, when I got to him. "You brought the building."

"Hector brought the building."

"Course he did." He looked at all of me, the green dress and the sneakers and the lace socks. "You look," he said, and stopped, and tried again, and couldn't, and gave up and just shook his head slowly, like a man looking at a window that had been painted shut for fifty years and had just come up on the first try.

. . .

Everyone else was there already, around the bench. Carol, in navy and the pearls, with a Thermos that I would bet any amount of money contained Manhattans. Lorraine, on the rail, smoking. Danny and Nick with an enormous red cooler between them. Maddie, with Rose in the sling, standing a little apart near the railing, as if she wasn't sure of her place, until Carol took her by the elbow and walked her right up to the front without asking. My father and Ellen. My father in a tie. It was green. It had sailboats on it. Ellen, behind him, met my eyes and mouthed: it was the only one.

And Hector, at the bench, in the Carnegie jacket, with his phone in both hands, already crying.

"I'm not crying," he said. "I'm ordained." He held up a laminated card that said UNIVERSAL LIFE CHURCH MINISTRY in gold.

"Mrs. Feldman laminated it. I'm very legal."

"He's very legal," Mrs. Feldman confirmed, behind me.

Then Wes looked past me, down the pier, toward the city, and went very still.

"Bennett," he said. "Don't turn around."

I turned around.

There was a woman coming down the pier in a red dress. Freckles. Hair pinned up and already coming down. Carrying a red wool coat over one arm, in September, as if she hadn't been able to leave it home.

And beside her, a slight man in glasses, a little unshaven from a long flight, with a cello case on his back.

He stopped at the edge of the loose, astonished half-circle and pushed his glasses up with one knuckle. He looked at Wes, and at me, and at the bench, and I watched him remember it. The cold November morning. The four of us. The sentence he'd said.

"You must be," said Theo Marsh, "the ones getting married on my pier."

. . .

Carol got to him first, which is to say Carol had known for a week and paid for half the tickets and told absolutely no one, including Hector, including God.

"Ma," Wes said, over Theo's shoulder, while his brother held onto him with the cello case sticking up between them like a third person in the hug. "You knew."

"I'm a mother, honey. I know everything. It's exhausting."

June found me and put both arms around me, the red coat crushed between us, and held on the way she'd held onto Wes's coat on this

pier, crying, last November, when none of us knew where anyone was. Now everyone was right here.

"You came," I said into her hair.

"I have a speech." She pulled back, streaming. "It's one word."

"Don't you dare."

"Finally," June said, and laughed, and wiped her face with the red coat.

Then Theo came and held my face in his hands, and looked, and then looked past me at my mother, who was holding out the baby as if offering him a cake.

He took her. He held her like a cello, and then, catching himself, like a baby, and she opened her eyes and looked up at him. One brown. One green.

Theo didn't say anything for a long time.

"Hello," he said finally, very formally, in a voice gone rough. "I'm your uncle. I asked for the job."

She sneezed on him.

"That's fair," said Theo.

. . .

My father had a tuning fork in his pocket. There is always a tuning fork in my father's pocket.

When Theo had the cello out and was turning the pegs with his ear bent to the strings and the river wind making a mess of it, my father stepped over quietly and struck the fork on the edge of the bench, once, and held its foot against the cello's body.

A. Clean and plain and true, ringing up through the instrument so the whole thing hummed with it.

My father held it there until the note died, then put it back in his pocket and went to stand beside my mother.

Theo tuned to it. Then he played.

The Sarabande. I knew it in the first bar, the way you know a voice on the phone before it says its name. The C minor. The one he'd played at his father's funeral when he was fifteen.

But it was different. He played it faster. Not fast, just forward. Leaning in, the way his handwriting leans.

"Paul told me you play it slower at a funeral," Theo said afterward, when I asked him. "Like walking behind someone. He never told me how to play it at a wedding. I had to work it out myself." He put the bow down across his knees. "You play it like you're walking toward someone."

And on the pier, while he played, my mother and my father stood side by side and held my daughter between them.

Nobody decided. My mother had her, and my father put his hand under Frankie's head, to help, and then neither of them let go: my mother's hand under her back and my father's under her head, two people who had not stood next to each other on purpose in eighteen years, who had a shoebox between them that neither of them could ever put down. They didn't look at each other. They looked at her. They looked at her through the whole Sarabande, and my mother cried, steadily, the new way she cries, and my father's sailboat tie blew over his shoulder, and he didn't fix it.

If you keep one picture from this whole story, I'd like it to be that one.

. . .

Hector married us off his phone.

He read from the screen in his stairwell voice, scrolling with one big careful thumb, stopping every few lines to wipe his eyes on the sleeve of the Carnegie jacket. "Dearly beloved," he said, and had to stop. Then he started again. "Dearly beloved. We are gathered here. On the pier. In the sight of God and the building."

"And the cat," said Mrs. Feldman.

"The cat came?"

Everyone turned. The bodega cat was sitting on the next bench, tail around its feet.

"And the cat," said Hector, and kept going.

Halfway through he put the phone down and took his glasses off and looked at us.

"I'm the super," he said. "Thirty-one years. People come in with boxes. People leave with boxes. Mostly the same boxes." He looked at me. "Mija, you came up my stairs with three boxes and a broken heart and a fig to water. And everybody in my building, we bet on you. Not on who. On you." His chin went. "Okay. That's all. I'm not crying. Vows."

. . .

Wes went first, because I made him.

He took an index card out of the inside pocket, the one where a ring had lived for five and a half months, looked at it, and put it back without reading it.

"I wrote it down," he said. "It's all capitals. I'll give it to you later. Under the door." He cleared his throat. "I'm no good at this, Bennett. You're the one with the words."

"You do fine with the words."

"I do fine on paper. Out loud I just say yeah." He looked at me. "So okay. Out loud. Here's what I've got.

"My brother asked somebody to marry him on this bench, once. I know because I got the phone call after. He said she said yes before he finished the question. He said it was the best four seconds of his life."

At the edge of the half-circle, June put her hand over her mouth, and Theo, beside her, took the other one.

"And you asked me in Rhode Island. In front of a hundred people and a lobster. And I said yes. But I never asked you back. I wanted to wait till you asked. And you did. So now it's my turn, and I want to do it here. Where everybody in this family has asked everybody anything that mattered. Where I saw you first, really saw you, the day you found out my name." He took a breath. "I've spent my whole life being the guy who says yeah. Yeah, it was me. Yeah, I'll take the blame. Yeah, I'm Theo. I'm done saying yeah to things that aren't true.

"So I'm asking. One true thing.

"Bennett. Claire. Will you."

He didn't finish it. He didn't need to. Some questions are complete without the end of them. My father would tell you it's like a chord that doesn't resolve; you hear where it's going.

"Yes," I said. "Yes. Obviously. I asked first."

Danny Russo, behind the cooler, made a noise like a kettle.

. . .

Mine was shorter. I'd written six versions of it in the notebook, at two in the morning, with her asleep on me, and in the end I'd crossed out everything except one page.

"I used to write everyone's story but my own," I said. "Somebody told me that in a letter. He was right. I was very good at it. I could make anyone sound like the person they wished they were. I could never figure out who I was. I kept waiting for someone to tell me.

"And then I moved into a stranger's apartment with three rules, and broke all of them, and a man came through the door in the rain and lied to me about his name. And then he spent a year telling me the truth. About everything. In capitals. Under the door. On a roof in the cold. At three in the morning, in a hospital, one true thing for every single contraction, all night, until the sun came up in Lisbon.

"You never once told me who I was, Wes. You just waited, in a truck, with the heater on high, until I worked it out.

"So here it is. I'm the woman who picked herself first." I looked at Carol, who was holding her Thermos against her chest with both hands. "And then the one who stayed."

. . .

The rings were in Hector's shirt pocket, with his blood pressure pills.

We put them on. They were plain gold, and Wes's hands shook putting mine on, and he swore at them under his breath, fluently, and the whole pier heard him, and the whole pier laughed.

"By the power vested in me," said Hector, holding up the laminated card like a badge, "by the internet and by the State of New York and by the building, I pronounce you. Kiss her, mijo. Pool's closed."

He kissed me.

I'd like to describe it. I can't. I can tell you a tour boat was going by and a hundred strangers in windbreakers on its upper deck stood up and cheered without knowing why. That the bodega cat left. That

Danny opened the cooler, which held arancini and cannoli packed in ice and nine bottles of prosecco and, at the very bottom, wrapped in a dish towel, a jar of his mother's Sunday gravy, "because it's not a wedding without it, I don't make the rules." I can tell you that Lorraine said, "Well. That's the ending," and then, after a moment, "Get me the pages by March," and my phone buzzed in my pocket with a voice note from Lisbon that turned out to be Sofia, at full volume, saying "AI, CLAIRE. FINALMENTE," and then a great deal more in Portuguese that Theo refused to translate.

But mostly I can tell you about his hand. On the back of my neck. Holding on. As if somebody had finally told him he could keep it.

. . .

We walked home up Christopher Street at noon.

The building had gone ahead in a long, loud, unbalanced line, with the melodica. Theo and June were in the middle of it, the cello on his back and his arm around her waist. My mother and my father walked together, a little apart from everyone, not touching, not talking, the sailboat tie over his shoulder. Every so often she said something, and he nodded.

Wes and I came last.

Frankie was asleep on his chest in the carrier, one fist out over the edge. The trees on Perry Street were just starting to think about turning. A woman on a bicycle rang her bell at us twice.

Wes took my hand. He laced his fingers through mine, with the new ring, and held on.

"Bennett," he said.

"Yeah."

"I'm going to write you tonight."

"I know."

"Don't wait up."

"I'm always up," I said. "I live here."

We turned onto Perry Street. 41 was halfway down the block, the stoop, the four flights, the slanted floors, the fig in the window, the fire escape where I'd sat with two brothers and a beer and a broken engagement and told myself stories about everyone.

I knew how the story ended now. Every page of it.

Except one.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Don't Open the Hall Closet

THE STRAND PUT US in the Rare Book Room on the third floor, which is where they put you, Lorraine said, when they're not sure if you'll draw a crowd and want the room to look full either way.

It was full. It was full by six-fifteen. By six-thirty they'd opened the doors to the stairwell and people were sitting on the steps, and a man from the store with a headset was saying "fire code" into it in the voice of someone who has lost an argument with a building before.

"Look at this," Lorraine said, at the side of the little stage, unlit cigarette in her fingers, because they'd told her twice. "Look at all these people who paid twenty-eight dollars to find out which brother."

"They're going to be very disappointed."

"Nobody's ever disappointed by a good ending, Claire. They're just surprised it was the one they wanted." She looked at me sideways. "Read the first page. Then the toast. Then shut up and sign."

It was a Tuesday in the middle of August, two weeks short of a year after a thunderstorm, and it was hot, and the old air conditioner in the Rare Book Room was making the sound of an elderly man trying to whistle, and I was standing behind a lectern with a book in

my hands that had my name on the cover.

Not "with Claire Bennett." Not in small type, under someone else's. Just mine.

THE SUBLET. A Novel. Claire Bennett.

I'd held it for the first time in Lorraine's office in June, when the finished copies came, and I'd been so frightened of it that I'd put it face down on her desk and asked her for a glass of water. Lorraine had brought me a glass of water and a cigarette, which I didn't take, and said, "Turn it over, honey. It's not a test," and I'd turned it over.

Then I'd opened it to the dedication, and read it, and had to put it face down again.

For everyone who ever slid a letter under a door.

. . .

I'll tell you who was there, because it's the last time I'll get to.

The building, in the first two rows, in its good clothes. Hector, managing agent now, in the Carnegie jacket, which he'd had let out. Mrs. Kaplan, eighty and furious about the stairs. Mrs. Feldman, in a summer-weight fur hat she claimed existed. Tyler from 1B, in a blazer, with a girlfriend he'd met through a door, which he wanted me to know. The band girls, who'd brought the melodica, and been asked to put it away, and had not put it away.

Danny and Nick, who'd closed the restaurant for the night and were now catering a bookstore, against several policies, out of the same red cooler. Priya and Marcus, married since May; at her wedding Priya had read her vows off an index card that listed every one of his flaws in alphabetical order and ended, at Z, with "zero intention of ever leaving," and the whole room had cried, including

the caterers. Maddie, at the end of the third row, with Rose on her lap, fifteen months old and chewing a bookmark. She'd caught my eye when I walked in and lifted her hand an inch off Rose's back, and I'd lifted mine.

My mother and Gary, in from Phoenix. Biscuit had stayed home this time, in what my mother described as "a very nice facility, he has a webcam." She had called me every Sunday for a year. She asked about Frankie first. Then about me. Then, if there was time, about Biscuit. I have never once mentioned the order. I'm afraid that if I do, she'll notice.

My father and Ellen, next to my mother and Gary, all four of them in one row, which a year ago I'd have told you was not a thing that could physically happen in the same room. My father had tuned the Strand's old upright in the corner that afternoon, for free, without being asked, because, he said, he couldn't stand to sit near it.

Carol, on the aisle, with a Thermos.

And Theo and June, who'd flown in from Lisbon on Sunday, and were standing at the back by the shelves of first editions because they'd come in late, from the airport, the cello on his back. June was in a loose blue dress, with her hand resting, the way it had been resting since Christmas, on the small round beginning of something. Due in October. A boy. Carol had already bought him a white cotton thing in Tiverton.

And Wes, in the front row, in a clean shirt with the sleeves rolled, with our daughter on his knee.

She was eleven months and two weeks old. She had his jaw, or Theo's jaw, or Frank's jaw; it's all the same jaw. She had my chin. She had a mouth that always looked about to correct your grammar, which my mother says is also mine. And she had her grandfather's

eyes, one brown, one green, exactly as they'd been at 2:04 on a Monday morning in a thunderstorm, because Priya was wrong and Wes was right, and they never changed. People stopped us on Bleecker Street about them. Children stared at her on the subway. She stared right back until they laughed.

. . .

I read the first page. Then the toast. Then they asked questions.

A woman in the fourth row asked if the cellist was single. I said he was married, and that his wife was standing at the back of the room, and the whole Rare Book Room turned around at once, and June waved, and Theo went pink from his collar to his hair.

A man asked if Hector was real. Hector stood up. He received a standing ovation. He sat down again, wiped his eyes, and said to no one, loudly, "I'm taller in person."

A girl who couldn't have been older than nineteen, with a dog-eared advance copy held together with a hair tie, asked if Gerald was still alive. I said yes. I said he was, as a matter of fact, at that moment, at home in 4B, sulking about being left alone, and that he had something going on I wasn't allowed to talk about yet.

And then a woman in the middle of the room stood up with a copy of the book held against her chest like a hymnal and asked the question I'd known someone would ask. I'd known since the day I sold it.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have to. Which brother is the father?"

The room went very quiet.

I looked at the front row. Wes looked back at me over our daughter's head, steady as a level, and didn't say anything. At the back of the room, Theo had his arm around June, and he didn't say

anything either. He just smiled at me, a little, the way he smiles at the end of a phrase.

"Yes," I said.

There was a pause. Then the room laughed, a little uncertainly, the way people laugh when they think they've missed a joke. The woman stayed standing.

"No, really," she said. "I'm asking."

"I know you are," I said. "And I'm telling you. Yes. She's a Marsh. That's the whole answer."

Frankie, on Wes's knee, chose that moment to point at the woman with one damp finger, and stare at her, one brown eye and one green, until the woman laughed, and sat down.

. . .

We walked home. The building walked home with us, the way it does now, in a long, loud, unbalanced line down Broadway and across Eighth Street and into the Village, with the melodica.

On the stairs, at the landing on three, Hector stopped me.

"Mija." He looked furtive. He had a piece of folded graph paper in his breast pocket. "Is nothing. Is a friendly thing."

"Hector."

"Her first word," he said, with tremendous dignity. "Twelve dollars so far. Mrs. Feldman says 'Hector.' Danny says 'gravy.' Ruthie says 'no.' Your mother says 'Biscuit,' God help her." He patted the pocket. "Pool's open."

. . .

The fig was ripe.

I'd like to tell you I found it. Wes found it. He'd found it two weeks ago, a hard green knot low down on the window side where I'd never think to look, and he'd been checking it every morning and saying "okay" to it, the way he used to say it to the hospital bag, and not telling me, because he wanted it to be a surprise for the night the book came out.

Gerald Fernando had lived in that terracotta pot by the big window of 4B for longer than anyone could remember. He'd been named twice and moved four times and survived a subletter, a carpenter, a cellist, a broken heart in each of them, a winter at Hector's, a cold snap with no heat, and a newborn who'd tried to eat his lower leaves. In all that time he'd never once given anyone a single fig.

This one was soft and purple-brown and split a little at the bottom, where the sweetness was coming out.

Wes picked it. He cut it on the kitchen table with his pocketknife into four pieces, very carefully, on the scarred wood, next to the cereal box.

One for me. One for him. One for Theo, who'd come up from Mrs. Feldman's spare room, where he and June were staying, because he said he had a legal claim to the fig and would be speaking to his lawyer. And one quarter, mashed with the back of a spoon, for Frankie, who ate it off Wes's finger in her high chair, and considered it with her whole face, and then opened her mouth like a baby bird for more.

June took a picture. She said Carol would want proof.

Theo ate his quarter slowly, with his eyes closed.

"Fernando," he said.

"Gerald," said Wes and I, at the same time.

"Gerald Fernando," said Theo, magnanimously, and wiped his fingers on a dish towel, and kissed his niece on the top of her head, and took his wife back downstairs to bed.

. . .

After they'd gone, I stood in the hall for a while.

The closet door was the same as it had always been. Painted white, gone cream with years. The brass knob. The lock that sticks. Frankie had discovered it in June, when she started crawling, and had spent the summer trying to pull herself up on its knob, and every time she did it, Wes said, gently, from wherever he was in the apartment, "Not that one, Frankie," and she let go, and looked at him with her two different eyes, and went to bother the radiator instead.

The envelope was still in there. On the shelf, flat, behind the bow case, where you'd have to reach for it on purpose. One line in a Portuguese doctor's slanting hand. Her signature across the seal, unbroken.

The key was still under Gerald. Left side of the trunk, two knuckles down. I'd felt it that evening, when I knelt to check the fig, the hard little shape of it under the soil, like a word you've decided not to say.

We never opened it. We never will. I'm telling you that as a woman who has never in her life not read the last page. Some things you leave in the closet. Not because you're afraid of what's in there. Because you already know everything it could tell you, and none of it is the point.

Don't open the hall closet. That was the very first rule. I broke every other one.

. . .

The fridge has new rules.

The old sheet of yellow legal paper is still there, Wes's half of it, curling at the corner under the lemon magnet, with my too late, Gerald squeezed in at the bottom, and under that, in heavier capitals, from the week the crib came, DON'T OPEN THE HALL CLOSET. (WE MEAN IT.)

Next to it there's a new sheet.

At the top, in my anxious slant:

Socks are not optional. Nobody reads my pages until they're done. (Exception: 3 a.m.) Water Gerald Tuesdays and Fridays. Tell me one true thing, every day, even a small one.

Under it, in the square capitals:

NO TALKING BEFORE COFFEE. TWO SUGARS. NOBODY TOUCHES THE TRUCK HEATER, IT'S PERFECT THE WAY IT IS. LETTERS GO UNDER THE DOOR, NOT IN THE MAILBOX. THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT.

And under that, in the middle of the page, in green paint, the exact green of an old Ford F-150, a handprint. Very small. Five fat fingers, spread wide, slightly smeared on one side where its owner had tried to eat the paint immediately afterward.

Under the handprint, in capitals: FRANKIE. NO RULES.

And in the margin, in a patient, forward-leaning hand, added on Sunday with a fountain pen when nobody was looking: I play at two. (By telephone, if necessary.) — T.

. . .

At twelve-forty I was lying awake in the dark, and I heard it.

The whisper of paper on wood.

The sheet beside me was empty and still warm. I got up in my socks and went down the hall in the dark, past the closet, and there it was on the floorboards inside the door, white in the light from the stairwell.

BENNETT.

And under it, smaller, because his brother had told him in March that it didn't count unless you numbered them:

No. 112.

BENNETT,

I READ IT. ALL OF IT. IN THE TRUCK, IN THE GARAGE, ON THE ROOF, ON THE PIER. I READ THE TOAST PART FOUR TIMES. I READ THE BOATHOUSE PART ONCE AND HAD TO GO FOR A WALK.

I COME OFF PRETTY GOOD FOR A GUY WHO LIED ABOUT HIS NAME.

YOU MADE MA FUNNIER THAN SHE IS, WHICH I DIDN'T THINK WAS POSSIBLE. YOU MADE HECTOR EXACTLY AS FUNNY AS HE IS, WHICH IS WORSE. YOU MADE MY BROTHER SOUND LIKE MY BROTHER. NOBODY'S EVER DONE THAT. NOT EVEN HIM.

YOU DIDN'T PUT IN THE PART AT THE END. I NOTICED. THE BOOK STOPS ON PERRY STREET WITH THE TREES TURNING AND YOU SAYING YOU STILL HAD ONE PAGE.

SO HERE'S MY QUESTION. IT'S THE SAME ONE IT ALWAYS IS.

TELL ME ONE TRUE THING.

W.

P.S. I'M ON THE LANDING. TAKE YOUR TIME. I'VE GOT CEREAL.

I sat down on the floorboards with my back against the door. Through two inches of old oak I could hear him on the other side, eating cereal out of the box as quietly as a man that size can, which is not very.

I didn't open it. He'd asked me in writing. He deserved an answer in writing, and I didn't have the right one yet.

. . .

At two o'clock in the morning, Frankie woke up.

She does that. She's a Marsh; two in the morning is a family tradition. I brought her out of the treehouse crib and walked her down the hall, the stove to the window and back, the only route she accepts, and she didn't settle, and she didn't settle, and then I remembered a letter.

If you ever wake up and the house is dark, and it's very late, and you can't quite remember who loves you, put your ear to the floor.

So I knelt down. On the slanted boards, by the radiator, in my socks, with my daughter in my arms. And I put her ear to the floor, gently, and then my own.

It came up through two floors. Through the old joists and the radiator pipes and Mrs. Feldman's spare room and a hundred and thirty-seven years of a building on Perry Street. Very faint. Very clear. A cello, in a room below us, playing at two in the morning. Not the Sarabande. Something I'd never heard. Something new, that leaned forward, the way his handwriting leans.

Frankie went still against me, and listened, with her two different eyes wide open in the dark.

Then she fell asleep.

. . .

I put her back in the crib. I didn't go to bed.

I went into the kitchen, and turned on the one lamp, the small one over the table, and sat down at the scarred wood, at the spot where the cereal box usually lives, in the circle of light, with the dented red kettle on the back burner and Gerald by the window with one fig fewer and Perry Street asleep beyond him. Wes was still on the landing. I could hear him not crunching, which takes real effort.

I opened my laptop. A new document. A white page.

The cursor blinked at me, on, off, on, the way it had on a desk in Lisbon over the river a year and a half ago, when I'd had a title and nothing else, and was more afraid of a blank page than of anything in my life.

I wasn't afraid of it now.

I typed the first line of my book. I didn't have to look it up. I never will.

For the record, it was a very good toast, right up until the part where it ended my engagement.

I read it. I read it twice. It was true. It had been true for two years, and it was still true, and it was going to be true for the rest of my life, in a bookstore on Broadway with my name on the cover, in the hands of a woman holding it like a hymnal and a girl with a hair tie.

But it wasn't the whole truth anymore. That's the thing about a first line. It's only ever where you started.

Somewhere below me, the cello found the end of its phrase and held it. On the landing outside the door, a man who had written me a hundred and twelve letters waited, with his back against the wall, for one.

I put my hands on the keys, and I told him one true thing.

For the record, it was a very good toast. This time, it was mine.

THE END

Thank you for staying until the last letter.

Thank you for reading. Every one of them was for you.

— Shay