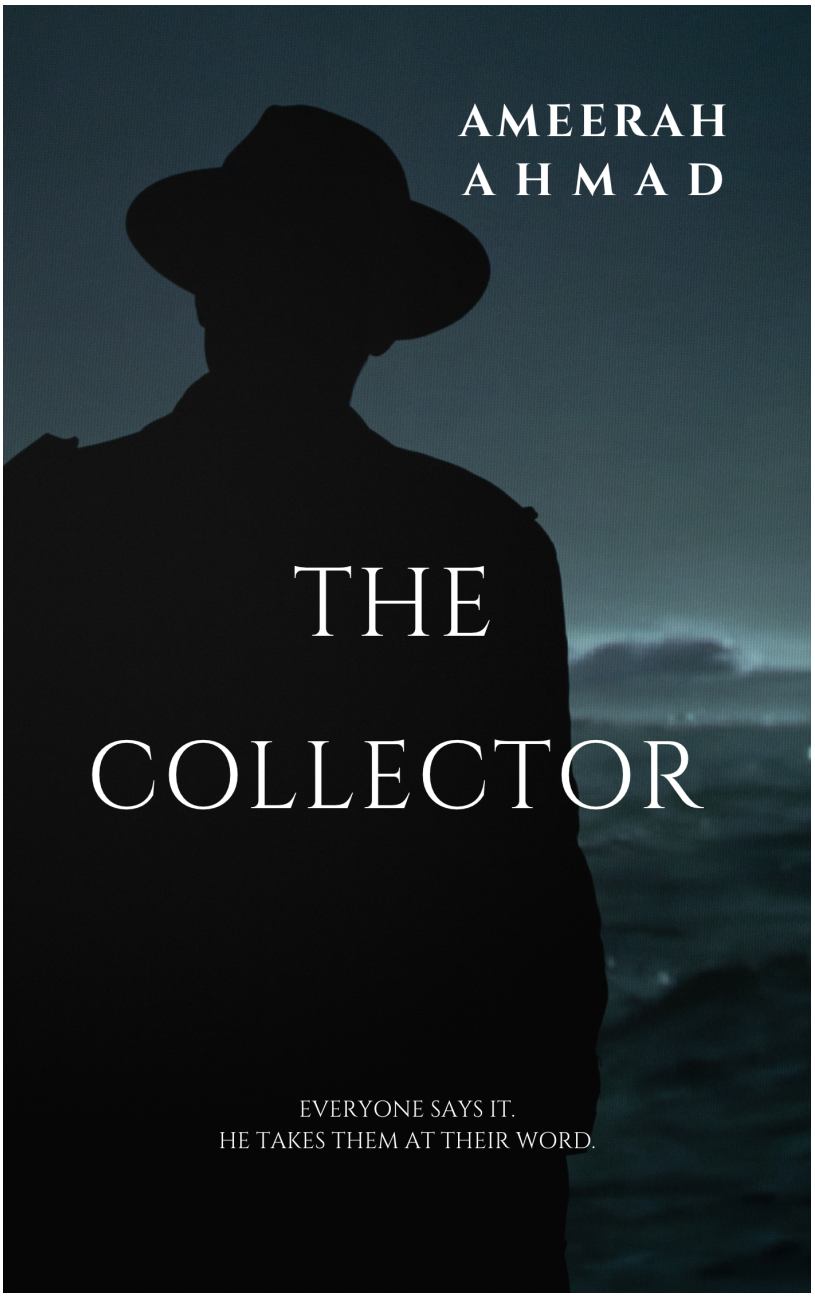
AMEERAH
AHMAD
THE
COLLECTOR
EVERYONE SAYS IT.
HE TAKES THEM AT THEIR WORD.

THE COLLECTOR

Chapter One

He was at the long mirror in the bedroom, working on the tie.

His hands would not do what he told them. The knot came out wrong twice — too loose, then crooked — and Cole was a man whose hands did fine work for a living, work other people's hands could not be trusted with. He undid it a third time and started over, slower, the way you would talk to something skittish. Black suit. Black tie. He kept his eyes on his own hands, because if he looked at his face he would have to see what was in it.

Lexi would have told him he looked sharp. She noticed things like that. She was fifteen, and she noticed everything, the way he did. She would have stood in this same doorway on a school morning doing her own last check in this mirror — the new shoes, the jacket with Northeast High on it, a freshman at a school she had been so ready for it practically glowed off her. Ready was the word for her. Ready for the halls, ready for the boys she had just started noticing, ready for all of it.

In the other room, Jessica had Lexi's clothes laid out across the bed — what she would be buried in. She had done it the way Lexi would have wanted it done, piece by piece, nothing wrinkled, nothing out of place, because their daughter was a tidy girl and this was the last time her mother would ever dress her. She did not call it that. She just kept smoothing things that were already smooth.

He was not in front of the mirror anymore. He was in Lexi's room.

He did not remember deciding to go in there. He was straightening her desk. Lining the pencils up. Folding the sweater over the back of her chair the way she folded it, and then folding it again, because it had not come out right — because when she came home, she would want it right. That was the thought, whole and calm inside the wrongness of it: when she came home. His mind had gone somewhere and left his hands to keep house for a girl who was lying across town in a funeral home.

Jessica found him there. She had come to check on him because of the two of them, he was the one Lexi had belonged to most, and everybody knew it — Jessica most of all. She did not say his name sharp. She took him under the arm the way you take somebody who is dizzy and does not know it yet.

"Are you alright?"

It was not the question people had been asking all week. It was not are you sad, are you holding up. It was quieter than that, and it went somewhere else. She was asking after the inside of his head, and they both knew it, and she did not press it past the asking. She did not know what he had seen in that hospital room the night Lexi went. He had never told her. She only knew that her husband had come out of that room different from the man who had gone into it, and that whatever it was had followed him home and was standing in their daughter's bedroom, folding a sweater.

"The car's here," she said.

At the service, he heard nothing.

Whoever stood up there and spoke — and people did speak, one after another, kind voices, prepared words — none of it reached him. It went past like weather on the other side of a

window. What he heard was Lexi. Lexi at the kitchen counter with her class schedule. Lexi calling to him from the other room. Lexi saying Daddy, save me, in a hospital bed, in a voice that got smaller every week for two months while he sat there with all his brilliance and could not save her from anything. He sat in the front row in his black suit, the tie finally straight, and he was not at his daughter's funeral. He was in the room where she had left.

The house filled up behind them when it was over. His mother and father. Jessica's mother and father. His sister, who had no children of her own and kept touching his sleeve, like she could hold him in the room by it. Jessica's brothers and sisters, and their children — children running through his hallways, children on his stairs, children's voices bouncing off the walls of a house that had gone quiet in the worst way a house can go quiet. He could not stand the sight of them. Not because they were doing anything. Because they were alive in the ordinary way, loud and hungry and careless, and not one of them was his.

People kept coming up to him with their faces arranged. They asked him things. He watched their mouths. He nodded in the places where a nod seemed to be the shape of the hole. And every chance he got, he went up to the bedroom to breathe.

It was up there, standing in the dark of his own room with the noise of the reception coming up through the floor, that it came back to him — not a memory, exactly. A flicker. The edge of a shape. A man in a black hat and a black coat, there and then not there, the way a word sits on the tip of your tongue and is gone. His heart went up into his throat.

The door opened, and he jumped — actually jumped, a grown man in a suit, flinching at his own wife.

Jessica did not turn on the light. She looked at him a long moment, and whatever she saw, she folded it away with everything else she was carrying that day. She sat down near him in the dark, and the two of them cried the way people cry when the shock is still bigger than the grief — quietly, with no show to it, tears that just came and kept coming while downstairs their families ate off paper plates and talked about his daughter in the past tense.

She had carried the whole day. He knew that, somewhere underneath everything. He had left her down there in it — left her to hold the door and pour the coffee and take the condolences into her own body one by one — and she had done it, all of it, while her own daughter was in the ground. When the last car finally pulled out and the house went still, she came up the stairs like a person coming up out of deep water.

She was wore out. That was the word for it, and it was the truest one. Not tired. Wore out — used up past the bottom of herself, in a house that finally, finally was quiet.

Cole was still sitting on the edge of the bed in the dark, his tie still knotted, his jacket still on.

He took two weeks off from the lab. He did nothing with them. He barely ate. He moved through the house like something haunting it ahead of time — there, but not really there. And in the middle of the quiet days, with Jessica back at the hospital and the world gone on without asking his permission, Cole sat in his daughter's silence and thought about Lexi.

There had been questions, in the days after the hospital. There are always questions when a child dies — forms to sign, a doctor's kind voice, a man whose job was asking, wanting to know if there was anything else, anything at all, Cole wanted to say. He had answered everything he was asked, in order, in his low, reasonable voice, the voice of a brilliant man holding himself together the way educated people are praised for holding themselves together.

He told them the hour. He told them the nurses had been kind. He did not tell them what had stood in the corner of the room.

Others had told. That was the whole of the difference, and in those quiet weeks he learned it the way such things are learned — mother to mother, through the grapevine of a school and a town. A woman named Linda. A girl named Becca, sixteen, from Lexi's own school, taken at her own kitchen table on an ordinary night. And the mother, who had told the police she had seen a man in a black hat and a black coat standing in her house, was in a ward now — in Waltham — being given pills for the crime of describing him.

Cole had seen the same man. Cole had seen his face.

And Cole knew — it must not be mistaken for luck — exactly what he had slipped past. Every day he did not speak was a day he stayed free: unmedicated, unexamined, a man with a job and a house and a wife in the next room, instead of a man in a locked place being quieted for telling the truth. He kept his mouth shut, and he chose it, the way he chose everything. In order. On purpose. Alone with it.

* * *

All the way down the coast to Marblehead, he said it out loud.

"What I would do for twenty-four more hours."

He said it to the windshield. He said it to the empty seat beside him. The navy blue Volvo carried him down the coast road with both his hands at the wheel, and the words kept rising in him the way water rises in a locked room — quietly, and without asking permission. He had read her ad until the newsprint went soft in his hands. He had called the number and heard her

voice, thin with a tiredness sleep had nothing to do with, and she had told him to come. She had something for him. That was the whole of it. Come and get it.

So he came.

Her house stood high over the water, one window lit against the evening, and he did not walk up to it the way a guest walks. He stopped on her porch, close — closer than a stranger had any right to stand — and she was there on the other side of the glass, and the world narrowed to the size of that window.

She was writing.

A pen moved in her hand. A glass of wine stood near her elbow, more gone than not, and she bent over the page the way people bend over gravesides, with her whole body in the listening. Grief had been at her for a week and it showed in the merciful places — she had not been eating. She had not been sleeping. Her hair had been left to do whatever it wanted, and it had wanted this: to fall around her face and be let alone. Every so often she stopped and looked up at nothing, at the middle of the room, at whatever a woman looks at when the house has gone too quiet around her, and the lamplight crossed her skin.

Gold laid over mahogany.

He had carried her voice in the car for an hour and built her out of it a hundred ways, and every one of them was wrong. There was no picture in the ad. There were only her words, three inches of newsprint, and they had not warned him about the color of her, or the soft, lived-in scent of that room that seemed to reach him even through the glass, or the way his own mind — the mind that could take anything apart and lay it out in order — simply stopped its work and stood still.

Five minutes he stood there. He knew it the way he knew everything, by counting without meaning to. He learned her the way he learned anything he intended to keep: completely, and in order, and forever. The pen. The glass. The fall of her hair when she turned her head. The light finding her and finding her again.

Then her eyes came up.

Not to him. Beyond him, into the room, into the dark at the edge of the porch light — the look of a woman who has heard a sound a house should not make. She had felt him. Whatever else she was, she was not a woman who missed things.

He stepped back from the window and knocked before the moment could change its mind.

She opened the door like someone surfacing — unsteady, and not from the wine. Sorrow and irritation stood in her face together and neither one gave way. Her look asked the question before her mouth bothered to.

"Cole," he said. "I'm Cole."

His voice didn't belong to Massachusetts. Florida was still in it — worn smooth by the years up here, but there in the vowels, in the unhurried way the words arrived.

"Well," she said. "You already know I'm Clarice."

Up close, the window had undersold her. Up close, she was breathtaking in a way that felt less like beauty and more like weather — something that happens to you. His hands hung at his sides. All his brilliance hung there with them.

"Give me a moment."

She turned and walked back past him, to her table, and took up the pages from under the salt — the ink still dark and fresh on them — and put them into his hands without ceremony, the way a woman hands a thing out of a house so the house can close again. The door shut before he could find a single word to say back to her.

That was all. No invitation. No softness saved up for him. And through the window the lamplight took her back to her table, her pen, her wine, her grief.

Cole walked down to the Volvo holding the poem in both hands, like a man carrying something that might spill.

He sat in the driver's seat with the engine off and the pages in his lap and did not read them. Not yet. Whatever she had meant to hand him, she had handed him more than that, and some part of him — the part that had cracked in a hospital room and never healed straight — understood it before the rest of him did.

He would call her. Not tonight — a man should let a thing like this settle before he opens his mouth anywhere near it. He turned the key, telling himself that all the way home.

* * *

He brought the Volvo into the driveway slow, the way a man carries a full glass through a dark house, and sat a moment with the engine ticking down before he went in.

The house was quiet. In the kitchen he poured a glass of wine — a good one, chosen the way he chose everything, like it mattered — and carried it through to the other room with the pages still folded inside his coat, over his heart, where he had put them on her porch.

His chair sat by the fire the way it sat every night. He took the pages out and held them a while without opening them, the firelight moving over the paper, and then he unfolded them the way you open a letter you have already decided will change something.

Dear Heart.

The breath went out of him on the first two words. Just that — a small sound, almost a gasp, there in the quiet room — and for a moment he wasn't reading at all. He was seeing her. Back through the window, bent over the table in the lamplight, the pen moving, the wine going down beside her — gold laid over mahogany, the shadows doing what shadows do to a face that has no idea it is being learned by heart.

He read the way a man walks a wire. One eye nearly closed against the flicker of the fire, the page tipped toward the light, taking in every last word — feeling every last word. [A few of the lines he read out loud to the empty room, low, the way a man reads something he believes was written to him alone — the lines as they stand at the front of this book, in her hand.]

He did not stop. He couldn't have said afterward whether the fire had gone down or the room had gone cold. He read to the end of it sitting forward in the chair, both hands holding the pages flat, and when the last line was done he sat back all at once, the way a swimmer surfaces — almost breathless, the wine forgotten at his elbow, trying to take in the whole of what she had handed him out of her house like it was nothing.

And that is when it started.

The racing. The poem was still in his hands and already his mind was going the way it went — glitching, jumping its banks — Lexi. Lexi in the hospital bed that swallowed her by inches. Lexi asking him the only question he had ever failed. The months of it, the dwindling of her,

the night the breath changed in that room and something in a black shape stood where no shape should stand. Everything came at once and kept coming, and he sat in the middle of it with her pages in his lap and let it run, because running was what it did, and stopping it had never once been in his power.

After a while the room came back. The fire. The chair. His own breathing, going in and out like a man's should. He picked up the wine and drank, and laid his head back, and looked at the pages where they lay open on his knee.

He would not call her tonight. That was the sensible shape of it, and he held to it the way he held to everything — completely, and in order. He was still processing. A man should process a thing like this before he opens his mouth anywhere near it.

The telephone was in his hand before the decision had finished leaving him.

She answered on the second ring, and her voice had the tiredness in it again, the kind sleep had nothing to do with, and everything he had rehearsed on the drive — the sensible things, the ordinary things — went out of him like air out of a cut tire.

"Clarice," he said. "It's Cole. I finished the poem. I don't think you know what you put in that paper."

On the other end of the line there was a silence — not empty, the way her silences were not empty. She could hear the grief in him. That much reached her, plain and whole: a man who had lost his child, undone by two words at the top of a page.

What she could not hear — what there was no way for her to hear, that first night — was everything underneath it, already moving.

* * *

He talked a long time that first night, and none of it came out in the order he intended.

The poem ran into the newspaper. The newspaper ran into Lexi. He told her the words had promised him something — twenty-four hours, that was what the paper said, twenty-four more hours — and then he was talking backwards, around it, under it, his voice low and even and never once raised, a man laying out the pieces of a thing in the wrong sequence and believing the sequence was the sense of it.

She did not interrupt him. That was the thing he would remember later, more than anything he said: she listened the way deep water listens. Now and then a small sound from her end of the line — not agreement, not alarm. Patience. When the rush of him finally spent itself against her quiet, she spoke like someone setting a cup down carefully.

"Get some rest, Cole. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

He slept the way a held note sounds. In the morning the house was already empty — his wife Jessica gone out to her work an hour before — and he moved through it gathering his things with his coat half on, ten-something and running late for the laboratory, a man who had taken half the morning and spent it standing in his own kitchen. He did not want to leave. That was the plain truth under the lateness. He was waiting on a telephone.

When it rang, he knew before his hand was on it.

"Clarice." She said it herself, first, like a woman reintroducing herself to a room she'd only stood in once. "It's Clarice."

She had the newspaper already. He could hear it in her voice — the small rustle of it near the phone on her end, a page being smoothed flat on a table. She had gone out and gotten it herself that morning, and she asked him, almost gently, to tell her what it was he had read. What the ad said. In his own words.

He took the folded clipping out of his coat pocket — he carried it there, the way he carried her pages — and read it to her the way a man reads out a deed.

That she would give anything. That anyone who would give anything would be given twenty-four more hours with the one they'd lost. That those were the terms, and they were hers, and he had come to her door under them.

On her end of the line there was a quiet he could not read. She was looking at her own copy of the same paper, at her own ad, in her own words — and it did not say what he was saying it said. Not the promise. Not the twenty-four hours, not like that. She sat with the two versions of herself, the one in ink and the one in his pocket, and she understood, the way you understand weather coming, that something in this man was not set right. And underneath that, plainer and truer: he was grieving. The same as her. Grieving had bent his reading, and she was not going to be the one to straighten it out over a telephone and make him feel the size of what he'd gotten wrong.

"I must have the wrong paper," she said.

"Clarice—"

"It's all right." She let the page settle. "Okay, Cole."

Okay. He heard it the way a key hears a lock. She asked him how his day was, and whether the laboratory was expecting him, and ordinary questions like those, and he answered them standing in his kitchen with his coat on and the clipping still in his hand, and if she was only calming him — only ending a call kindly, the way you set a stranger's cup down carefully — there was no instrument in him that could have measured it.

Before she let him go he asked if he could call her again. Later. Or — if they might sit down somewhere, that week, the two of them. A date was named. A place. A quiet place, a little above the ordinary, the kind with cloth on the tables — he wrote nothing down and forgot nothing. Three weeks, she said. She had things to put back in order first. Three weeks.

He went out to the Volvo late and light as a boy, and all the way to the laboratory the grief in him had company for the first time in six months, and he called it hope because he did not have another word for it.

* * *

He prepared for her the way other men prepare for judgment.

The shower ran long. The cologne was chosen, not grabbed. He stood in front of his closet a full minute longer than a man with his mind should ever need, deciding what a woman like her should find him in, and if there was madness in any of it — in a grieving father dressing for coffee like a bridegroom — it did not reach his face in the mirror. Prepping for his goddess, really. That was nearer the truth than anything he'd have said out loud.

She prepared like a woman defusing something.

Three weeks had not been errands. They had been a held breath, and on the morning of it she stood in her own bedroom in a temper with her closet — what am I going to wear — a question she had not had to answer for anybody in over a month of grief. She answered it the way she answered everything: plainly, and well. Then the bathroom, and the work of it — the blow dryer, the curlers, the iron drawn careful through her hair to bring it a little straighter — not vanity. Armor, of a soft kind. The last time this man had seen her she had been a week into widowhood with her hair doing whatever it wanted. She would not be seen that way twice.

He was already there when she came in. He had been first by twenty minutes, and the woman at the front had shown him to the table with a pleasant "table for two," and he had agreed to it like a man accepting a verdict.

Then the door opened, and Cole learned what the window had only promised him.

She crossed that room the way weather crosses water, and every step of it arrived in him separately. The coat. The hair, tamed and shining. Color in her face that grief had been keeping from her. He had memorized her at her worst, bent over a table in lamplight, and she walked in and revised the whole of it standing up.

"Cole," she said, as she reached the table. She said his name to him even though she knew him — said it like she was handing it back — and something in the way it came out of her, the North Shore in it, plain and unhurried, went through him like a hand through water. He liked the way she said it. He would have sat there all afternoon just to hear her say it again.

The waitress came. His hand went out — an old, courtly gesture, extended toward Clarice, her first, ladies first, the way his raising had put it in him — and the waitress turned to her.

"Coffee," Clarice said. "Black."

That was all. No cream, no sugar, nothing dressed on it — and it was done on purpose, though he'd have been the last man alive to know it. She was a woman who had already had one stranger read her grief like a deed. She would not hand this one a single extra thing to hold on to.

The waitress looked at him. He said nothing. He didn't want anything — wanting anything would have required a world outside the table, and he was not currently living in one.

Clarice laughed then. A small laugh, real, the first one he'd ever gotten out of her, and it changed her whole face. "Go ahead," she said. "Order something. Order something."

"I'll have the same," he said. "Coffee. Black."

They did not talk about the poem. They did not talk about the paper. All of it sat in the back of his mind where he kept it, folded and memorized, and for two hours it stayed there, because what was happening at the table was better than his plans for it: she talked, a little, about nothing with weight on it; he listened the way he had listened the night he stood on her porch in the dark; and it was enough — it was so much more than enough that it frightened the orderly part of him, the part that counted things, because there was no counting this.

Once, she rose. "I'll be right back." And he watched her go the length of the room to the ladies' room — watched her the way a man watches a parade he has waited all his life to see, every ounce of her, the coat's hem, the line of her shoulder — and when she came back he was still watching, and took her in all over again.

"You're wonderful," he said. It just came out of his mouth. He hadn't decided it; it decided itself.

She looked at him over the coffee gone cold, a little startled, a little measuring. She had given this man almost nothing — a black coffee, two hours, no thread of herself worth pulling. She could not imagine what he was seeing.

He was seeing all of it.

Afterward he held her coat for her at the door of the place, and she slid her arms into it the way women have let men do that small service since there were coats, and he took his wallet out of the top pocket of his suit jacket and laid the money down, and the tip with it, exact and generous both. Outside, the fall air had a knife in it, and the navy Volvo sat up front where the valet had left it, and they said their goodbyes like people who already know the goodbye is temporary — we'll speak again, yes, we'll speak again.

"Let me drive you," he said. "It's cold getting."

"No, thank you." She said it kindly, without a beat of deciding in it. "It's not far. I walked."

She watched him accept it the way he accepted everything from her — completely, and without argument — and then she turned and walked up the street toward home, and let the afternoon sort itself out at walking pace.

He got into the Volvo and sat a minute before he started it. Hands still on the wheel, engine cold. Watching her go up the street — taking all of her in, the coat moving with her steps, the tamed hair catching what was left of the light — until the street bent and took her out of his sight.

Coffee, black. She turned that over first. A man who orders nothing until a woman laughs and tells him to, and then orders the exact thing she ordered, like an echo that had been waiting for

its sound. *You're wonderful*, out of nowhere, over a cold cup — and her sitting there knowing to the ounce how little she had given him to build it on. She had spent a month inside her own grief with the shades drawn on the world, and the world, it turned out, had been standing on her porch the whole time, learning her by heart through the glass.

She did not dislike it. That was the part she walked slowest with. She did not dislike any of it.

The house came up ahead of her on the cliff, dark, the water going on beyond it the way it had gone on every day of her life there, and she climbed the steps thinking that for the first time since the funeral, she had spent two whole hours not once counting the minutes until she could be alone again.

* * *

The house was dark when he got in, and he did not turn on many lights.

He stood in the bathroom a long time with the shower running behind him, steam taking the mirror by degrees, and looked at what was left of his face in the part of the glass still clear. The man in the restaurant had been impeccable. He knew that man. He had built him the way he built everything, carefully and in order — the held coat, the courtly hand, the exact tip. Underneath the building of him there was another fact, and the steam reached it last: he was a man who had watched his daughter's breath change in a hospital room, and looked up, and seen a face that no living man was meant to see and stay whole after.

He talked, some. Low. To the man in the clearing glass. Rehearsing nothing, deciding nothing — the spill of it, the day played back and played wrong, her name said to an empty room. His hands came up once and struck at his own head, open-palmed, the way a man tries to knock a thought loose from the outside, and then again, harder, until the rhythm of it steadied into

something almost like music being composed in a room no one else could hear. Then his forehead, against the cool tile beside the mirror. He stood there breathing until the steam took the whole glass and there was nobody in it at all.

That was the whole of it. That was the man, at home, where Clarice would never see him.

He washed. He dressed. And Cole — collected again, precise again, the demeanor back on him like the suit jacket — went downstairs and began, methodically, to gather newspapers.

Not the reading of them. The placing. There was a mechanics to a thing like this that a chemist respects: a classified ad did not appear by wishing. It had an address it had to be sent to. It had a price. It wanted a check, or a money order, made out and mailed and waited on. He found the papers he already took and the papers he did not, and started a list in his clean hand — this one for home ground, this one for the city, an ad in every city a man might have business in — and he sat a long while with the list and the folded clipping from his coat pocket laid side by side, her words as he knew them by heart, waiting their turn to travel.

He would write it out tonight. Exactly as she had written it. Exactly as he had read it back to her, the morning she said okay.

He picked up the pen the way he had once watched a woman pick up a pen, in lamplight, through a window — and bent over the page.

* * *

He worked at the papers the way he worked at everything, in order, the pen moving down the columns and circling what mattered, the pen between his teeth when the thinking slowed him down. Three of the papers he could pick up with his own hands — the Globe, the Herald, the

Patriot Ledger. The rest he would have to order and wait on, the Times among them, and papers down the East Coast he had never held. He gathered their addresses the way other men gather tools. One ad, in every one of them. The same words, the way he had read them to her.

Two days into it, on his lunch hour, he went to the post office and opened a box. A small metal door with a number on it, and a key that fit in his palm like it had been waiting for him. That was where the letters would come, when the letters came. Not to the house. To the box.

The last morning, he stopped at the packy on the way out and bought the money orders — one for every paper. A check would have done as well, except for the book. The checkbook was for bills — the mortgage, the lights, the orderly money of the house, each number following the last the way it was supposed to. Nothing came out of that book out of order, ever. A family checkbook did not write checks to the Patriot Ledger. The ad was not a household bill. Checks to the papers would have run out of it in a string — 573, 574, 575, 576 — numbers gone to newspapers, the sequence altered for a thing that was not a bill, and Cole was not a man who could leave the sequence of that book altered. The money orders kept it clean. He slid them into the envelopes with the copy of what he wanted the ad to say, and he mailed them from a box in a different part of town, the way he did most things, at a little distance. He had not decided anything about anybody. Nothing had happened yet. There was nothing yet to hide from.

Then he drove to work with Clarice walking through his mind the whole way.

"Morning," he said to Mike and Jim at the desk. Mike and Jim were the two who stood at the front of the building, the first faces through the door, and they had stood there together long enough to finish each other's sentences. Mike was the handsome one — dark, easy in his own skin, the one the women from the offices upstairs found reasons to stop and talk to on their

way past, and more than one of those reasons had turned into a date. Jim was the heavyset one, a big white man who took up his half of the desk and then some, whose luck with women ran the other way entirely, and who covered the difference with jokes at his own expense before anybody else could get to them. Cole scanned his badge, and took the elevator up to his floor, and greeted the people he greeted, and went into his lab and shut the door on the world. Lunch was what he had packed from home, small and controlled, and coffee from his thermos. At five o'clock he walked to the parking garage without talking to anybody much, and got into the blue Volvo, and drove home.

He brought the Volvo into the driveway slow, killed the engine, and let the quiet settle for a minute before he touched the door handle.

Jessica was there when he came in — she was always there at that hour, moving through the kitchen with the familiar, steady rhythm of a life that ran on clean tracks. She kissed him on the side of the face as he set his keys down, a small peck the way you sign your name to an ordinary day.

They talked a little, about his day and hers, the ordinary currency of it. She made dinner in the kitchen and packed her lunch to take with her, leaving his plate on the stove the way she always did. There was no dark edge to it, no secret weight — he looked at her with the quiet, steady affection of a man whose marriage was a quiet room with the door shut. She put on her scrubs, told him see you later, and he saw her off into the night the way he always saw her off.

When the door clicked shut behind her, the house went back to its proper silence.

He didn't rush. He washed his cup, wiped the counter, and sat for a while in the living room with his hands resting open on his knees. The envelopes were out there now, moving through

the mail stream toward the papers, toward the Ledger, toward the small post office box with its numbered metal door and the key waiting in his pocket. That was where his focus lived — not on a telephone, but on that box, waiting for the first morning a letter would sit behind the metal.

And then the house was his, and he got to work on what he was planning.

He thought about calling Clarice. He had not called her since the dinner, and a man could call to make sure a woman got home safely — that was a respectable shape for it, a shape with clean edges. He turned it over and over, the receiver practically warm from his wanting to pick it up. She was the weather that had come through the crack of his door. Everything else in his life was a sealed room.

Five days passed. Six.

It was the same rhythm, repeated down to the minute: the car in the driveway, Jessica in the kitchen, the dinner on the stove, the thermos packed for the morning, and the quiet house waiting when she left for her shift. Nothing changed, because he was one of those people that nothing changes for. The same roads. The same desk. The same lab door closing on the same quiet.

And then, on the sixth day, the ad was in the paper.

His words, in print, in column inches, in cities he had never been to — sitting in the Globe and the Herald and the Ledger, and coming in the Times, and waiting in a small metal box at the post office for whoever had read them the way he had read hers.

Jessica worked nights.

He would be home.