RANDOM HOUSE LIBRARY MARKETING

FALL 2013 DEBUT FICTION SAMPLER

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Table of Contents

The Last Winter of Dani Lancing: A Novel
P. D. Viner
Crown, October 2013

Styx & Stone: An Ellie Stone Mystery
James W. Ziskin
Seventh Street Books, October 2013

Red Rising
Pierce Brown
Del Rey, January 2014

All Russians Love Birch Trees
Olga Grjasnova
Other Press, January 2014

The Wife, the Maid, and the Mistress: A Novel
Ariel Lawhon
Doubleday, January 2014

Shovel Ready: A Novel
Adam Sternbergh
Crown, January 2014

The Rathbones

A NOVEL

JANICE CLARK

"A remarkable tale, both epic and intimate.
Beautifully crafted and elegantly told. A siren song of a story."

–ERIN MORGENSTERN,
author of *The Night Circus*

The Rathbones

Janice Clark

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Table of Contents

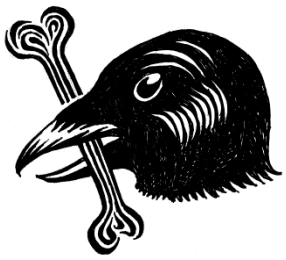
Prologue

Moses knows what will happen. Not just how the trials will go today, or what the fathers will do when their golden sons fail, and how the boys' mothers will bear it. The green of his eyes has long since been burned away by the sun on the sea, and there is no window in the little room. But he sees it all, anyway, from his high blue bed, he sees the whole sweep of it.

The great herds of Sperm Whales that once streamed along the coast have already thinned and will soon disappear. Fleets of ships are being built with holds deep enough to provision the long voyages required to find fresh pods, to the Pacific, to the Azores and the Indian Ocean. Boys no longer climb the watchtowers that line the shore to look for whales; instead they climb to crows' nests at the tops of masts. The towers on shore will soon be torn down, their timbers used to frame the houses of captains and merchants that will rise in the hills above the harbors as the whale gold continues to flow. Captains' wives will conduct their own searches of the sea from the widows' walks at the tops of the houses. Other towers will rise. Moses closes his eyes and sees them, the derricks, first of wood, then of steel, sprouting up across the sea of prairie. He feels the rumble as dark fountains surge up and spray across the sky; he sees black oil replace the white spermaceti. In a few years the captains will stop sailing. Some will move away and take up other occupations; some will linger, taking their wives' places on the widows' walks, staring out to sea. The houses will fall into disrepair. They will pass to city people who will use the walks for sun parlours, or to store old clothes.

Moses does not choose to see such things. He longs to look back instead, to the first morning that the Misistuck sailed. He wishes it were that day. He strains to lift his silver head and there it all is again: the watchtower at the end of the point that curls into the sea; his son high on the tower, pointing, crying out, his voice carrying clear and strong across the bay to his

brothers, already swarming up the masts and over the rigging. Moses sees the white sails billow out as the ship moves toward the bright water where the whales are sounding.



Chapter 1.

Widow's Walk

Naiwayonk, Connecticut, 1859.

{in which we meet the last of the Rathbones}

If I had not heard the singing voice that night, none of the rest might have happened.

Mama might yet be carving her bones; Mordecai lingering in his attic, leading me through the same old lessons on the Sperm; both of my crows would still accompany me everywhere. I could have drifted through my life, forgetful of the time passing, and stayed always undersized. Maybe Papa would have finally come home.

But it's not for me to say. Though I have the keen eyes which were once the gift of all the Rathbones—standing now on shore, looking out to the horizon, I see what I know you would not if you were standing beside me: a flock of terns, a league away, diving as one upon a school of bream that darkens the clear blue sea to cobalt—I cannot see into the future, as my forebears sometimes could.

I do know that, if we hadn't fled the house that night, I would never have met the worn wives, or visited my grim in-laws on the Stark Archipelago, or seen the sinking island, where Papa was born. The fate of my lost brother would have remained a mystery, as would what truly happened between Mama and Papa.

But I did hear the voice that night, and what I found when I followed it compelled me to flee the house with Cousin Mordecai, and to shed the fog in which we had both so long lived.

Though we were seeking Papa, we found our own history as we went, and that of all the Rathbones. It was a sometimes patchy tale, woven from such thread as I found: oral histories passed down and with each step altered, unfinished ship logs, journals washed and bloated by the sea until little could be read. Cousin Mordecai gathered much of it, while he could. Later, I took it up from him. What wasn't provided I had to surmise. You may think it would be difficult to assemble a story in such a way. I was used to such piecework, growing up as I did in a house populated only by remnants. It was as easy for me to see the golden wives arrive at Rathbone House four generations ago as it was for Moses to see a school of Sperm streaming through the deep.

The night I heard the singing voice began like any other that summer. I had gone to my mother's room, as usual, to help her undress. Mama's room, at the front of the house, had the best view of the sea. Its line of tall windows were kept always open, the white curtains swaying in every weather.

Each day, Mama wore a dress of deep-dyed indigo with a wide collar of white linen, boiled and bleached, starched and pressed, that lifted off her shoulders and unmoored her face when the wind rose. Her underclothes were sewn from soft muslin and smelled of the cedar chest in which she kept them. Her corset was of whalebone, fine strands borrowed from a fin that had once turned in the lightless deep.

When she lifted her gown and leaned to let me unlace it, I saw again how she was double-ribbed, bone on bone. When I lifted the corset off, her body kept the corset's form, as though she always held her breath, but when I pressed my face against her for a moment, I felt

the shallow rise and fall of her ribs. She placed the corset on the chair by the window. It stood sentinel there, a spare torso. For each year that Papa was at sea, she'd slid a slender bone from its channel and made me lace it tighter. The end of the ninth year was approaching. Soon Mama would be reduced. The next morning she would go down to the shore to find new sand for the hourglass she kept by her window. Her eyes turned to it whenever she walked by.

Suitors had begun showing up at the house in recent months—a retired captain, two lieutenants on leave—drawn by Mama's beauty, and by the stories of Rathbone wealth. After 10 years, Cousin Mordecai had told me, Papa would be considered by the law to be dead. But Mama never appeared for visitors. Each suitor was ushered into a golden parlor on the second floor by Uncle Larboard and Uncle Starboard, each served a plate of dry ship's biscuit and a pot of tea brewed from nettles and sawgrass, and then ushered out again, hat in hand.

Mama uncoiled her braids and let them down and waited for me to unwind them. In truth, she had only to shake her head and the braids unfurled, but she knew I loved to feel the tight plaits go soft and free in my hands. When she wasn't too tired she let me sit next to her on her bed and practice my seaman's knots on her hair: sheet bend and monkey fist, timber hitch and lineman's loop. Her hair hung in a long pale wave which she sometimes allowed me to brush. I counted the strokes slowly to make them last, her hair popping and crackling as the dark bristles moved through it. When I finished she let me step inside the curtain of hair, into her warm breath that smelled of cloves, close to the shine of her green eyes. They focused for a moment on me, and she smiled a little, then returned to her watch for Papa, her eyes trained on the sea. Long after sunset they held the horizon in each iris, split dark and pale.

I knew the tide was in when Mama smiled. I waited, hoping this would be a night for Arcady. She leaned back against her pillow, gazing out the window until the last light faded, then

turned her face to me. I lay back with my head on her breast and closed my eyes as she began. It was the only story she ever told, and one I had heard since I was very young. I was, it's true, too old by then for bedtime stories, but I took what was offered. She spoke slowly, her eyes still on the sea, her fingers fondling the fine silver chain she always wore around her neck, tucked under the collar of her gown. The story always started the same way.

"A race of giants once lived on a faraway island. It was a tall island, a high atoll of pink granite, thickly sown with pine and oak and blessed with soft winds."

Here she always paused and waited to be prompted. Her hand, which had been stroking my arm, stopped, her body went still.

"Tell me about the giants, Mama."

She breathed out, and began again to stroke me, her arm so soft, the palm of her hand rough from her work.

"They lived in caves high in the pink cliffs, side by side with the swallows in their nests. They wore garments woven of rockweed and slept on beds of gull down. For breakfast they milked the manatee. At dinnertime they leaned back on the sun-warmed rock, eyes closed, while perch and mackerel leapt from the sea into their mouths."

Mama paused. I held my breath, hoping she would follow one of the pleasant paths down which her tale sometimes led: the giants diving down a waterfall that plunged from the high rocks into the sea, sporting on the sandy beach, or singing each evening to the deer who came close at twilight. I lifted my head and turned to look out the window, down to the dock, and marked by starlight where the water stood: an inch or two lower on the pilings of the pier. Mama's hair went a shade paler, her eyes a duller green. The tide was on the wane. Mama's tale took a turn.

"The giants had enough to eat and more but still they were hungry. They scoured the sand with the nails of their hands for turtle eggs until the rock was bare. They lay in the surf and sieved the sea with their teeth for spawn until the fish swam no more. They sang to the stag at evening and when he reared up to dance they speared him. They grew so fat that they lay gasping on their backs on the rocks, arms waving, while the gulls pecked out their livers. The next day their livers grew back, and the gulls pecked them out again."

The sea moved back and forth in Mama's blood. Her moods could not be depended upon.

I had felt such ebbing and flowing before. One evening, a season earlier, she had let me stay longer than usual in her room. Warm spring had arrived, and she was shifting her summer gowns into her wardrobe, first taking them from her chest to air. They hung from hooks above the open window, swaying in a salt breeze. The slanting rays of the setting sun lit the gowns to a brilliant blue, though in daylight they were a deep indigo, all the same near-black hue. Like Mama's, my frocks were all alike, except that mine were a dun color, and still had the childish shape of a jumper, while Mama's conformed to her figure. I had, at 15, the first outlines of a figure of my own, of which I felt vaguely ashamed, but also curious. I would have preferred less shapeless frocks, but Mama made me wear them, as though I were still a little girl.

Mama seemed in good humor; at least, she had not yet sent me away. I took off my loose frock and pulled one of her sea-freshened gowns over my head. I fastened its long row of mother-of-pearl buttons up the front and stood in front of the tall mirror that leaned against one wall. The gown, though far too long in skirt and sleeves, fit well in the bodice, and I turned from side to side, pleased with what I saw in the mirror. My crows, who had been napping atop the wardrobe, dropped down to my shoulders, and began to preen. They had come with the last crate from Papa a year before and had followed me about ever since.

Mama turned from the trunk where she was rearranging clothes and stared at me. I hoped she would offer me a gown or two; it would have been easy enough to shorten them to fit. Her eye brightened, and she seemed about to pay me some small compliment. Then her eye dulled, and she gave my figure a hard gaze.

"It will do you no good," she said. "It will bring you no joy."

She took up an awl from among her tools and in three strides crossed the room to me. She grasped a handful of my skirt to hold me firm and sliced up the front of the gown. The buttons popped and my crows scattered, squawking. The gown gaped on my breast; I felt a stinging and looked down. The sharp point of the awl had cut through my gown and grazed a fine pink line from my belly to my throat. Mama looked stricken and seemed about to embrace me. Then she drew back, composed herself, and returned to folding her clothing.

We are all descended from the fishes, Mordecai had once told me, and are still subject to the ocean's tides. So I was not surprised, these three months later, when Mama's mood changed, and her story ended not with the giants romping on the beach but gasping on the rocks, their livers coming and going.

Her story finished, she rose from her bed and returned to her work. She sat at the long black table that stood at the center of her room. The table had once been as pale and salt-scoured as the floor and the walls, but Mama had it painted black, fresh every year, so that each detail in the white bones would shine clear against the dark surface as she worked.

Each day she carved the whalebone that Papa shipped home. The crates began to arrive a year after he disappeared. Once or twice a year, a freshly-docked seaman, legs still unsteady on dry land, would show up at our door, shouldering a crate trussed with chains and stamped with runes. Sometimes the crates were filled with whalebone: a single great jawbone snapped in half

and packed in seaweed, or a dozen smooth Sperm teeth, each as long as my forearm, nestled in a bed of kelp. Sometimes the crates held other gifts, souvenirs of Papa's travels: China Trade bowls from the Orient, cobalt blue and creamy white, big enough for me to bathe in; silk pyjamas woven thick with dragons; nesting dishes for a doll, the innermost so small a cricket could drink from it; a tiny Peking dog, wrapped in a length of paisley cloth, that died of the cold soon after it arrived, having known only the warm south seas.

Mama would question the sailors when they knocked on our door. Where did you sail from? Have you seen my husband? Do you know Benadam Gale? But the sailor never knew. His ship would have only stopped by Naiwayonk to deliver the crate, on the way home to Nantucket or New Bedford. The crate had been passed from some other ship, a brig in the South Atlantic, which had it from a clipper in the Java Sea, or was it the Indian Ocean? But the crates began to come less often, and it had been more than a year since the last arrived, with my crows.

Mama kept a bouquet of bones in a willow basket on the hearth, the long curved sections of a mammoth rib, their ends sawed clean. She was working on her boat that evening. She had for some years been shaping a boat of bone, as long as her, which grew slowly in the center of the table, resting on a frame of wood. The ribs and strakes were complete, lashed together with line made from whale baleen, so that the form of the boat was clearly limned against the black table, though it still lacked planking. Tonight she was grinding along the edge of the keel with a rasp, smoothing its shape. She looked up at me for a moment, then back at her work.

I sat down next to her and put my hand on hers. She stopped, her hands quiet on her tool. Her fingers were raw, bleeding on the tips and criss-crossed with scars. I took the white rasp from her, and felt its rough surface with a finger.

"Mama, wouldn't it be easier to use tools made from metal?"

She took the knife back from me and ran the rasp across her palm.

"Like finds like," she said. "Bone finds the true shape."

She carved no common items such as sailors made, no jagging wheels or ditty boxes, though most everything in her room but her bed and wardrobe was fashioned of bone. Her chair was bone with a caned seat, its seat posts capped with teeth. The mirror over her dressing table was framed in Sperm ribs trained into an oval. Tucked into the frame was a page torn from a book with a picture of the floor of the ocean, with all the sea sucked out; at the bottom stood a barren range of mountains. Scattered on the table around the boat were other objects on which she was working, among them a lantern, square-sided, its walls honed to a fine thinness.

Mama set her tools aside and walked to the hearth. She drew a soft piece of blue paper from her sleeve and held it up to the firelight to read. Light shone through the cracked seams where it had been folded and folded again. She finished reading and refolded the paper, tucking it into the sleeve of her gown. A moment later she took it out and again began to read, her eyes moving along the same lines.

I was sure the blue paper was a letter from Papa. I had often looked for other pieces of that blue paper around the house. Once, when Mama was in the walk, I had searched every inch of her room, every pocket and seam of her clothing, but found nothing. I wondered if there was only one letter, the one she kept tucked into her sleeve.

"Goodnight, Mama."

She looked up at me, and her eyes seemed to connect with mine for a moment, then slid away. She returned to her work, her rasp scraping along the edge of the boat's keel, stopping, scraping again.

Uncle Larboard and Uncle Starboard shuffled slowly around the room, dusting the furniture. Wherever Mama went, so they went, one to either side of her. Their bedrooms were to either side of Mama's, too. They were about her age, as tall as her, and neat in all their ways. One looked much like the other. They might have been twins. Their hair hung in tidy white queues down their backs. They wore sailor smocks washed until they were as thin as tissue, so that through the faded blue linen their old bones showed. Each had one eye slightly higher than the other, in heads that were overlarge, wobbling a little when they walked. They were mutes and never spoke, but I could usually tell what they wanted to say. Now they gently patted my head and led me to the door, pressing me away with long dry fingers. I headed for my room.

My bedroom, down the hall from Mama's, was one of the small white rooms that ran all around the perimeter of the third floor. Mama's room had been made from three or four such bedrooms as mine strung together. Some of the little rooms had unfinished walls, partially plastered or ribbed with raw joists. Others were missing their outer walls altogether, except for the tall white columns between which the blue sky burned. In winter the snow would fly in and drift on the floors. Larboard and Starboard swept it away each day.

When I reached my room I stretched, yawning, and leaned to pour water into a basin from the pitcher on the floor next to my bed. After washing, I undressed and took a clean shift from a hook on the wall and pulled it on. My room had no space for any furniture except the bed, whose posts were four fluted white columns, smaller versions of the tall columns that stood in each corner. My coverlet was loomed of plain wool with a border of crabs linked claw to claw, woven in a watery green. The walls were bare plaster, the floor scoured pale. The lintel was low, the window small; if anyone but me entered, he would need to bend to see the harbor through glass panes that rippled, remembering their former life as sand on the bottom of the sea.

The room matched my size. I was small: a guppy at birth, said Mama, and at 15 still no larger than a codling. I stood as high as Mama's breast, well-formed but of a scale like the funerary figures from a Chinese tomb.

I settled into bed, waiting for the footsteps to begin above me. Mama walked the widow's walk each night, watching for Papa's ship. The wide pine boards creaked beneath her, salt-ground and silvery. There was always the soft shuffle of sand underfoot, even up there, blown in from the shore, sloughing the wood away. Mama liked to walk above the trees, where she could look down through the leaves to see the harbor. Some nights I heard the tap of her boots above my head until dawn. She had taken to lacing them with a strand of line from an old harpoon. One day I watched her uncoil a rope, bleached white where it lay on the dock, and uncurl a strand from the center, still soft and saltless, fine enough to pass through the eyelets. Some nights she stayed up there until the fishing boats headed out from the docks and she saw them cast their nets against the first light. The boats moved to and fro, but no larger vessel appeared, many-masted and deep with sail; no foretopmast staysail, no moonraker, or mizzenmast fly. I watched from my window. I had no walk.

I had almost dozed off when my crows flew in. They often brought me treasures, gathered on their nightly patrol of the house: spoons from the dining hall, old bits of metal, any gleaming thing that caught their eye. This night one crow dropped a brass button on my bed, the other something that didn't shine, something which seemed so familiar, though I had no clear memory of it. A bracelet, woven from mariner's cord of white cotton.

I slipped the bracelet onto my wrist and turned it slowly. Its pattern alternated between simple square knots and Turks' heads. I put my nose to it: it smelled musty, not like the sea. I wondered if it was my brother's.

“Where is my brother?” I would ask Mama when I was younger, unable to shake the image of a boy, roughly my size, sturdy and dark-haired, always near the sea.

“He was smaller even than you, so we threw him back,” she once replied, with a frozen smile.

Most often Mama would simply not answer my question. When I asked where my brother was, she would slowly shake her head and walk away, or stare at me silently until, uneasy, I changed the subject. Our conversations were few in any case, and brief. She would ask how my lessons were progressing and, however short my answer—“Today we began the Platonic Solids” or “Mordecai is relating the woes of the queens of Iceland”—Mama’s eyes and attention had already drifted back to her carving before I had finished.

I had from time to time asked Mordecai about my missing brother, when Mama refused to answer. He, too, had always insisted that no such brother existed. He always said I must be remembering a boy from the village, some fisherman’s son I had seen on the dock.

Eventually I learned not to ask. But I knew better.

I didn’t remember very much, only a few flashes. A familiar form, kneeling in the surf, his fat hands filled with shells, wet hair shadowing his face. A small boy diving off the end of the dock in a cold wind, bare-chested, whooping as he hit the water. But those memories always wavered and broke apart, and then I would wonder if I had imagined him, or if he was only part of some story Mama used to tell that I had forgotten.

Not that I remembered much about Papa, either. He was always away when I was a child, Mama said, always whaling. When he did come home, it was never for long, only to load provisions and a fresh crew and sail away again.

One memory shone strong and clear, the only one that included Papa.

A ship rocks alongside the dock on a bright morning, ropes creaking, sea slapping against the hull. My legs dangle over the edge of the dock, swing back and forth over the water; a second pair of legs dangles next to me, brown and bare, skin warm against my thigh.

"Push the monkey through the hole, into the cave, thrice around, pull tight."

A scratchy rope moves through my fingers. A hand guides mine, a hand the size of mine.

"No, three times, tighter!"

The loose loops of rope in my hands suddenly snap into a tight sphere.

"That's right. That's a monkey's fist. Now for a timber hitch." The boy leans over the rope, intent, his dark hair thick and damp, smelling of salt.

Men move along the dock behind us, carrying provisions to the ship. I glance up to see baskets pass, full of fresh greens. Chickens' heads bob up and down from open crates. A pair of goats taps by, crying with the voices of babies. Further down the dock someone is playing a pipe and I hear the rhythmic thud of feet on wood, men singing, and chants from the rigging of the ship. Gulls wheel and cry overhead. Through the other sounds the clanging of a bell cuts sharply. The boy—my brother—jumps up and runs down the dock. As he runs the gulls scatter and swoop; between their beating wings I catch glimpses of a man high up on the deck of the ship, leaning out over the side, raising his arm to the boy who hurries to reach him. The anchor rises from the ship's stern, streaming weed and water. A sail swells huge above me; the ship begins to glide away. I don't know how long I sit there, but it's for some time, until the ship has disappeared and the gulls have gone and there's just an empty dock, and the sea, and the bright sky. I look up toward the house. Something moves on the roof. Mama stands up there on the top of the house, a dark, slender shape against the sky. Her gown ripples and snaps in the wind. She stands with one hand clutching a lightning rod, the other raised to her brow, staring out to sea.

That must have been the day Papa sailed away for the last time, 10 years before, when I was 5 years old. That day was the start of Mama spending her nights in the walk, drifting away from me, as though when Papa's ship cast off and sailed away, he'd taken her with him, in mind if not body. And he'd taken my brother with him, too.

How I wished my brother were home. Then there would be no more lessons in the attic with Mordecai. My brother and I would wake up with the fishermen at dawn and catch our dinner off the wharf, and on warm evenings row together in the sound. We would sail up and down the coast in our little blue skiff, stopping at each town, and visit the islands I could see from my window. If my brother were home, Mama wouldn't walk the walk or carve her bones. Papa would be home too.

But I knew Papa would leave again, and with him my brother. Sometimes I let myself imagine that I sailed with them. Papa would not let me go; I would have to stow away. I would curl myself tight inside a great coil of rope or crouch quietly behind an anchor, or hide in a barrel deep in the hold, only showing myself when we were too far away to turn back. I would sail away from Rathbone House, away from Mama, to the other side of the world, my brother beside me.

I lay in bed, turning the rope bracelet round and round my wrist, staring out into the dark night. Gulls called out over the water, and the curtains breathed softly in and out. I reached around to touch my back; among the scattered freckles floated a birthmark shaped like a ship. As I stared up at the black dome of the sky, Mama's boat of bone sailed slowly across. Its sails billowed out in great sighing curves. My brother, standing in the prow, turned to look at me. His hair was thick and dark, moving like the sails; his eyes as green as mine. Against a lead sky he held up Mama's carved lantern. The flame inside beat red against the white bone like a heart.

I buried my face in my pillow, my heart pounding. He was alive. I knew he was.

Some nights I heard the sound of a boy's voice singing. It sounded in my own body, as though it was I who had sung. The song made me feel like it had always been there, waiting for me to learn how to hear it. It was the high, sweet voice of a boy before it breaks to manhood. The melody was clear, the rhythm strong, but only shreds of words came through, like a voice torn by wind at sea.

As I lay there that night, halfway between sleep and waking, I heard it again. At the first faint note the crows left their perches on my bedposts and pulled the coverlet down. I pulled a frock on over my shift and rose to walk through the dark house, the crows on my shoulders. They nipped at each other, restlessly cleaning their feathers and whistling snippets of the song.

Our house was built like a seaworthy ship. No space was wasted, each odd angle fitted with drawers, shelves, small spaces locked against light and vermin. A lingering fear of running out of stores far from land showed in its design. Each nook and cranny held stubs of ropes or ends of candles, small hoards of the hardtack that will keep a man alive at sea when the last salted beef and moldering oranges have gone.

I moved along the hall on the third floor, flanked by cupboards containing outmoded forms of illumination: candlesticks of every size and sort, tin lamps half-full of old oils of vegetable origin. I was allowed to use only whale oil in my lamp, and that sparingly. The widow's walk, though, glowed at the top of the house like a great lantern, drenched in spermaceti. Mama burned as much oil as she liked. The light sprayed between the boards above us as I walked, the crows jittering and flapping on my shoulders.

The voice led us on, toward the back of the house. We passed the main stair, along which the portraits of my ancestors hung. The profiles were modeled in shallow relief of white wax and

set within austere frames of ebony. The earliest, toward the bottom of the stair, were all small like me, but the profiles stretched as they mounted higher up the stair. Foreheads expanded, hairlines rose, clumped features drew apart. I sometimes sat on the staircase, staring at my forebears, wondering what they were like. I would from time to time ask Mama about them, but, as with all questions about our family, I received a reply that taught me nothing.

"A question unasked is an answer unregretted," she said.

Along the bottom edge of each image was a paler patch and two small holes, evidence of a nameplate removed. Besides the pronounced stretching from generation to generation, I observed other details, such as could be seen in white wax: the hair of the lowermost was bountiful and wild, his forehead low, his features brutish. The second wore an elegant top hat distinctly at odds with features much like those of his predecessor. The third was just a boy, with a profile of balanced proportions and great beauty. The last, slender and attenuated, a little like Mordecai in profile, wore a high collar and a pomaded wave of hair leapt from his forehead. Though the nameplates were gone, the artist had incised in the wood of each frame the date: 1779, 1802, 1811, 1841. No Rathbone had been enshrined in wax for nearly 20 years. I thought the earliest portrait, the brutish one, might be my great-great-grandfather Moses; Mordecai had told me he was the first of the Rathbones.

Most of the Rathbones had long since died, though a few still lived who had moved away from the sea; a tall uncle or two sometimes visited from far inland, with a gift of maple syrup drawn from trees in the North Woods or a corn husk doll from the Great Plains. My uncles tended to forget that, though small, I was now grown. The few Rathbones besides me who remained in the house—Mama, Mordecai, Larboard and Starboard—were all tall. They teetered

around me mast-like, tilting on the stair treads, craning their necks at the sea. I was, it seemed, a throwback to earlier generations. Small and dark.

As I passed the stair I glanced down to the first floor. A chain of seven bedrooms stretched from the front of the house to the back, along a narrow hallway. Each bedroom had two doors, one that opened onto the hallway, one that opened directly into the next room. From the center of any bedroom you could look through the doorways, one behind the next, and see all along the chain: to the north, the shadowy back of the house; to the south, the bright sea. Though spare of furnishings, each room was fitted with built-in beds, one in every corner, curtained to keep the cold away. The family had once been large, Mordecai said. But no one slept behind the curtains anymore.

Now the voice seemed to be coming from the front of the house. I sent the crows ahead to scout each room, certain that if I came close enough the faint strains would strengthen and separate, that words would emerge and grow clear. The crows flew low and silent down the rooms, stopping now and then to perch above a door, to turn a head to catch some scrap of sound: the wind at a crack in a window, the creak of a floor long untrodden. The song stayed always just ahead as we made our way seaward. It was stronger that night than it had ever been, and I found my breath coming quick. Now that it seemed possible, I wasn't sure I wanted to find the source of the song. I nearly turned back.

Mama's room was by itself, on the left, near the end of the hall. Another door, directly at the end of the hall, led to the widow's walk. Coarser than the doors of other rooms, their panels planed smooth and painted in warm dark hues, this door was hinged in heavy brass, the planks broad and bare, never leveled. I was forbidden to pass through.

But the song was strong now, and coming from behind the door. The crows glided back from their scouting and touched down on my shoulders, muttering to each other, leaning out to peck softly at the door. There was nothing to quiet my step in that passage. Mama kept the floor clear of carpets there. She told me it was to save them from the strong light, so near the top of the house. But I suspected she wanted the floor clear so that she would hear my steps if I approached the walk. I had never been up to the walk, in all my 15 years. I had sometimes wondered what Mama was hiding, but before that day, when the singing voice had come so clear and strong, had never dared to try to find out. As it was, I hesitated at the doorway.

The crows clutched my shoulders and hunched their heads low. We entered a narrow well, cool and dank, and almost dark. At its center a rope ladder dangled. I stood just inside the door and leaned to peer up. The well brightened as it rose. Near the top was an opening, a doorway at one side.

I reached for the lowest rung but it was too high for me. I beckoned to the crows. They twined my hair around their beaks and lifted off, wings beating black in the gloom, until I could reach the bottom rung and pull myself up. The crows dropped to my shoulders, gasping. The gaps between the rungs were wide, but I was nimble, and my frock was light. Mama must have had to hike up her heavy skirts and hold them in her teeth to keep from tripping. The corset bones must have bitten her thighs as she lifted them.

I reached the top and stepped off the ladder, through the opening into the widow's walk. There was no banister or railing, just the narrow opening, a hole in the floor to one side of the walk. I pulled my arm across my eyes to block against the glare. Though I had seen the walk often, looking up from the lawn, the space was larger than I'd imagined. The walls were leaded

panes of glass tinged green, like sea spread thin, rough and bubbled. The panes rose and merged in a curved dome, thinning at the top until nearly clear, a bell glass.

The crows launched off my shoulders and circled high, knocking against the glass, startled by their reflections. A lantern hung from a hook in the seam of the dome. Its flame lurched and shuddered as the crows circled, their shadows careening around the glass walls and across the floor. I looked around me: near the ladder, a ship's wheel leaned against the glass, its spokes dark and glossy where gripped by many mates. Across the walk from the ladder stood a sea chest, strapped in leather and brass-nailed, its sides mottled green, its bottom thick with barnacles.

A sudden shrill sound from the crows, a sound I knew. I closed my eyes and saw the harbor, a flash of gold braid, a line of men. The crows copied the bosun's whistle, blown whenever a captain boarded his ship, his crew at attention and ready for review. The crows knew the notes well; how often they must have heard such a whistle, in how many ports on their way from Papa to me. They flapped to the wheel and lit there, then squared their shoulders, side by side, wings closed crisply, breasts out, beaks high. I hurried to the well and peeked over the side. No captain climbed the rope ladder. It was Mama, mounting from the dark below. There was the crown of her head, pale braids coiled tight, flashes of her feet, her gloved hands opening to catch each rung. She had dressed again; the wide white collar of her gown floated above her dark shoulders. The rope creaked and swayed under her. I felt the urge to salute. My hand snapped smartly to my brow and my heart beat hard.

Where could I hide? The sea chest looked too small, but it might be deep enough, and there was no other choice. Mama mustn't see me; she would be so angry. I motioned to the crows, opened the lid and jumped inside, curling myself tight. I barely fit, slight though I was.

The crows swooped down. I clutched one in each hand, stuffed them inside, and pulled the lid closed.

At first I heard only my breath, my heart pounding so loudly I was afraid she would hear it too. I kept as still as I could. Mama's boots began to click on the floor of the walk, back and forth, back and forth. As my eyes adjusted to the dark I could just make out the crows, tucked tight behind my knees. Each turned a beady eye to me and cocked its head, listening. The ladder began to creak again, the rope groaning and squeaking. Mama's boots stopped. The clump of a heavy step; loud breathing. Something bumped and rustled on the floor. Someone gasped. The sound I'd heard many times in my sleep began again, but stronger this time. Not a soft shuffle of sand but a harsh scraping, like a sailor swabbing the deck, down on his knees.

I opened the lid a sliver. A huge man rode Mama, his wide back arched over her body. A blue jacket stretched across his shoulders, but he soon tugged it off and threw it aside. His bare back was slashed with rows of pale scars that swelled with his ribs as he moved. Mama's body yawed beneath him, corset cracked open, breasts rolling on each rise. Faint crunches came from beneath her; on her lifted thighs shells had pressed their shapes: the spiral of a whelk, a cowrie's teeth. Through skin scraping against sand, I heard a faint click-click: at her neck bobbed a little trio of jointed bones on a thin chain, the chain she kept always hidden under her collar. With each new wave the bones moved in and out of the hollow of her throat, now sliding straight, now bent, beckoning.

The crows hopped up to my thigh, heads hunched low in the tight space, and leaned to dip their beaks into a deep bed of kelp under me, its bladders popping softly as the crows rummaged. They pushed something into my hands, a shape my fingers recognized: a long, smooth shaft, knobbed at both ends—a bone. I gasped and flinched. Something shifted beneath

me, a soft crunch like a bird's nest compressing. My hand closed on a small warm body. A crow, crushed.

I heard the singing voice again. Not just a scrap of the song, this time, but all of it.

Father, Father, sail a ship
Sail it straight and strong
Mother, Mother, make a bed
Make it soft and long
Sister, Sister, listen close
Listen to my song
    for it was Father sailed the sea
    for it was Mother murdered me
Sister, Sister, come and see
Come see and sing with me

I held my breath, heart hammering. The scraping sound outside the trunk had stopped.

A heavy step moved toward me, then stopped. Along the seam between lid and trunk two slices of leather appeared. Knees creaked; I caught a flash of white breeches, gold buttons glaring on blue, then the shine of two eyes. The lid lifted. A broad hand reached in with the light, clutched a handful of frock, plucked me out and held me up by my hem. My head dropped and I spun, squinting in the glare. My mother's lover inspected me, dangling upside down at the end of his thick arm. Pale eyes flared in his wide brown face. In my hand I clutched the crushed crow tighter, feather and bone squeezed between my fingers. Below me, Mama's skirts still frothed on

the sand, her skin still flushed with blood. She lifted her face from the floor and held her arms out, but not to me, to him. Her legs spread wider. Her neck swelled. Her mouth opened in a croak.

When he turned away from me, to her, I reached up and smeared his face with crow. Twin stripes shone across his eyes and down each cheek. He blinked and roared, then pulled me close to his breath, to his nose black with blood. When I kicked out he couldn't hold me. I dropped and found my feet, then lurched across the walk toward the well. I reached down for the ladder, first stuffing the crushed crow down the front of my frock, and called out for the other. I saw it circling above, beating against the dome. When its eye found mine it swooped down and buried its claws in my hair. I started to sink, the rope burning my hands and, before I dropped below the rim, looked back up to see Mama; her skirts settled, hissing as she slid away. The rope jerked above me. I jumped for the floor, ran to the door and heard the man fall heavily behind me.

I started running along the hall, toward my room, but my crow, tugging hard on my hair, pulled me down the main stair, to the bottom and into the hall of beds, my boots skittering along the boards as we turned. I heard someone behind me and looked back as I ran, but the dark swallowed everything. I kept running through the doorways, the rooms rushing by me, all the same, bed after bed, I felt my lungs would burst, until I finally reached the end of the hallway, the room farthest from the sea. I fell, gasping, onto the last bed. Legs shaking, pulse pounding in my ears, I turned and pulled the curtains closed.

My crow, just visible in the faint starlight that washed through the curtains, dropped down from my head to lumber along the bed. He first peered into each shadowed corner, then turned to me and pushed his beak at my breast. The stain there spread, a dark, wet patch on the

cloth. The crushed crow's warm body turned cold against my skin. I pressed my face further into the pillow. Still I heard no footsteps, only the beat of the sea, weaker now.

I raised my head at the sound of cloth tearing. I heard a few footsteps, then again the ripping sound, closer. My crow tugged at my gown, squawking, nipping at my hands. The man in blue was there, I felt more than saw him, a great bulk in the gloom. He walked to the bed across from mine and stripped the curtains down in one motion. Dust billowed up, along with the smell of salt and mildew.

I was shaking now, hard. The bed quaked under me, its legs chattering on the floor. The curtains ripped down. The man groped in the bedclothes and his hands found me. He reached behind my neck and lifted me, this time by the collar of my gown. His body seemed to fill the room. When I tried to push him away, my hands slipped on sweaty skin and I felt his stiff hair, matted with my crow's blood. My frock started to slide up my neck and over my mouth. The dead crow rustled at my breast, squeezed under the cloth as it slid by. The buttons popped, and crow and I slipped through the frock and dropped to the bed. The man's hot hands came again, this time around my waist.

Then my crow was there, screeching, his wings beating in my face. His claws dug deep into my shoulder and I felt him strike out with his beak, once, twice. The man bellowed and his hands let go.

I scrambled off the bed, tripped over the curtains that lay in a heap on the floor and fell. Fingers scrabbled along my thigh and tried to grasp my ankle, but I was too quick, I pulled away and struggled up off the floor, and lurched into the hall. Then I was running again, back down the long chain of rooms.

Only when I was almost to the main hall did I dare to turn around. In the faint light I could just see the man, far down the hall, his arms thrown over his face, see my crow swoop down on him, squawking and hissing, beak flashing down to peck his face again and again. The man groaned and clutched at his eyes, hunching away from the blows, trying to look up at me from under his raised arms. He dropped to his knees and called out in a deep, cracked voice.

"Wait, wait!"

Something in that voice thrummed through me, like a voice I had heard in dreams. I turned back around and kept running. As I reached the stairs and started up, my legs began to shake and I struggled up, panting, slowing to catch my breath, hurrying again. At the second floor landing I stopped, trying to hear over my thudding heart: nothing, only a thin whistle of wind from some window. Then my crow was flying up the stairs to me, wings beating black in the gloom. He landed on my shoulder and dropped something warm and wet on my shoulder: a slice of nose, or a bite of tongue, I couldn't tell.

When I had caught my breath a little, I pushed on, up to the third floor. At the top, I hesitated. I almost turned right, toward Mama's room. For just a moment I let myself believe that I would find her there, warm, smiling, that she would take me in her arms and comfort me. But when had she ever comforted me? I pictured her on the floor of the walk, her arms held out to the man in blue. I headed for the attic.

I turned left, toward the narrow switchback at the north end of the house that led up to the attic, stopping to rummage in a cabinet for a stub of candle, striking a flame and hurrying on. My crow's shadow flared and faded on the walls in the guttering light as we made our way. Between the rows of white columns that flanked the halls, dreary seascapes gleamed from the wainscoted walls. I had lost the way to Mordecai's attic before, with all of its turns and twists; when we

finally reached the base of the square tower that housed the last stair, I felt a wave of relief. The door stood open, and a silvery light drifted down.

When my crow realized where I was going, he hopped off my shoulder, croaking, onto the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. I half-ran, half-stumbled to the top.

I didn't see Mordecai right away. Under those beams it was always dark, except for the worn knots in the wood, here and there, where sunlight or moonlight entered in slender shafts. One such beam lit up a shock of white hair. There was Mordecai, standing at his blackboard with his back to me. My cousin always moved slowly, stiffly, his long thin limbs reluctant to bend, but that night he moved feverishly, his hand dashing out with its chalk in swift little jerks. He was drawing something, a diagram of some kind, ruling off lines with a yardstick, intently focused on what he drew, but he must have heard me come in.

"Mercy, what are you doing here? It's long past your bedtime."

He turned around. His cross expression softened and his eyes widened. He was so pale that it would have been hard to say whether he went whiter.

"What has happened?"

I wanted to tell him about the man in blue. But Mordecai's face began to slowly spin, and then the room was spinning too.

Ostrich

a novel

"IRRESISTIBLE! I dare you not to laugh, cry, and fall utterly in love."

— MARIA SEMPLE, author of Where'd You Go, Bernadette?

Matt Greene

Chapter One

In Assembly last year we learned about Rosa Parks, who was the black woman who sparked the Civil Rights Movement in America because she refused to move to the back of a bus. I think it's great that black people are equal now and we don't have racism anymore, but I honestly don't get why she was complaining in the first place. On our bus, sitting at the back is a privilege that is afforded to only the most senior pupils. It has taken me nearly four years to earn this position (during which time I have matured from the bright-eyed nine-year-old who arrived at Grove End with a song in his heart and raisins in his lunchbox to the worldly and cynical almost-thirteen-year-old I am today). Middle school was meant to be only a

stopgap. The bus thing is pretty much the only advantage of still being here after all this time. So when I see a Year 5 stumbling hesitantly down the aisle toward me, I know exactly what's going on. A mix of Fear and Excitement struggles to articulate itself on his face. He chews the inside of a cheek with a set of primary teeth and looks up at me, his eyes round with hope. (He knows who I am, but I don't know who he is. That's the way it works. School years are Semi-Permeable Membranes. (Moreover, everyone at school knows who I am.)) I decide to help him along.

"Yes?"

He rehearses one last time in his head and then asks what he's meant to ask. "How are your mum's piano lessons going?"

For a second I feel sorry for him. He's so small. (It's hard to believe I was once that young, even if it was three whole years ago.) He has no idea that he's about to learn a lesson he'll never forget, a lesson that will strip him of a faith in humanity he's so far never had to question. However, it's a lesson we've all learned in our time. I know my lines. I tear up a little, which I can do on demand. "My mum hasn't got any arms."

A breath dies in his throat. It's my second cue.

"Why would you ask me something like that?"

Now his face has no trouble with ambiguity. Terror sweeps across it, freezing his features in place and pricking his tear ducts. At the front of the bus, David Driscoll pops up like a Whac-A-Mole and blasts him with a "Waaaaah!" I knew he'd have had something to do with this.

Your Mum's Piano Lessons is a simple game that requires three players, Older Boy 1 (the instigator), Older Boy 2 (the

accomplice), and New Boy (the mark). It works like this. Older Boy 1 sidles up to New Boy on a bus trip or on the playground and asks him if he wants to be part of a really brilliant joke. New Boy, eager to please and slightly star-struck by Older Boy 1, who he instantly recognizes and reveres on account of his seniority, discerning a valuable opportunity to associate with a social superior (and perhaps recalling from a nature documentary he's seen the levels of protection afforded to those tiny birds that clean crocodiles' teeth), gratefully accepts. Older Boy 1 then points out Older Boy 2 (who may or may not have been previously briefed, depending on his familiarity with the game) and tells New Boy that if he goes over and asks him how his mum's piano lessons are going, Older Boy 2 will break into hysterical laughter and everyone will live happily ever after. Then what just happened happens (the crocodile snaps his jaws) and New Boy scurries back to his seat or his corner of the playground, and when anyone asks why he's crying blubbers something about the high pollen count.

Except this one doesn't. He couldn't move if he tried. He's staring at my head, transfixed.

"What happened to your hair?"

I'm the only one in school who's allowed to wear nonreligious headgear (there are four turbans in our year, and Simon Nagel wears a skullcap in the colors of Watford Football Club) because some of the younger kids don't understand why I'm bald and sometimes it's easier to hide things than explain them. I get a lot of looks, but it's okay. Once in Year 6 I forgot to wear my

own clothes on Own Clothes Day and for the whole day I was the only kid at school in uniform, so I already know what it's like to feel ostrichized, which is a better word for excluded (because ostriches can't fly, so they often feel left out). I took my sweater off and undid my top button, but that still didn't stop people from staring at me. It's weird how you can wake up one day exactly the same person as you were the day before except the world has changed around you and now you're the odd one out.

Being ill is a bit like forgetting Own Clothes Day.

(Analogies are also important in Composition because they help people relate things they don't understand to their own experiences (and to tell a good story, you need to write about things that not many people have experienced). Metaphors are just one type of analogy, but there are loads more you can use. Sometimes people don't even realize they're using a metaphor because they've heard it so often that they've forgotten that they're trying to relate to something they don't understand. These are called dead metaphors, and there are some examples below:

1) *Running* water
2) *Head* Master
3) Flower *bed*

Dead metaphors prove that we can understand the world around us only by pretending that it's human and it behaves

like us (which it isn't and it doesn't). That's why we pretend that chairs have arms and woods have necks and we're so used to doing it that we've forgotten that that's even a slightly weird thing to say (which is why you don't get extra marks for using dead metaphors in Composition).

When my doctor, Mr. Fitzpatrick, explained about my treatment he used an analogy. He told me to imagine that a suicide bomber had taken a group of innocent people hostage in Gamestation and that if we didn't stop him he was going to blow up the whole of the Harlequin Centre, which is the biggest shopping center in all of Hertfordshire. And then he told me that if we sent in a Specially Trained Armed Response Unit they would be able to "neutralize" the terrorist threat, however, they couldn't necessarily guarantee the safety of the hostages (who might accidentally get shot), but if we did nothing the terrorist would kill them all anyway, as well as everyone else in a 10-kilometer radius.

"And that's why we're sending in the SWAT team," he said. "That's why we're telling them Shoot to Kill."

And when I asked him why we didn't try negotiating with the suicide bomber first, he shook his head slowly like a cricket umpire and said, "It is our country's policy never to negotiate with terrorists."

(So I asked him what were the bomber's demands and he told me he didn't have any, which I told him was bullspit because the whole point of taking people hostage is getting your demands met, and if you didn't have any demands there would be no reason to take hostages in the first place. So then he told me that the terrorists hated our freedom and that actually the

suicide bomber did have some demands after all, and did I want to hear what they were, because all they were was the systematic destruction of Western culture and the entire American way of life (because Mr. Fitzpatrick is American).

"And besides, even if we could negotiate with him—*which we will not do*—it wouldn't do us any good anyway, because let me tell you something about the terrorist mentality, let me school you here a second, son. The terrorist believes he has God on his side. The terrorist *actually believes* that when he gets up to heaven-knows-where there's seventy-two virgins waiting for him, and every last one of them, they're big-time murder fans—and do you know whose side they're on, cos it sure as bacon ain't Team Infidel."

(And then I asked what a virgin was, because this was two years ago and I was young and naïve (and Mr. Fitzpatrick told me that a virgin was a really good friend with a PlayStation 2). (Being a virgin is like growing up Caucasian in Hertfordshire. You are one long before you know there's a word for it.))

So then I asked Mr. Fitzpatrick why they had to shoot to kill and why they couldn't use rubber bullets and shoot to disarm, which would ensure the safety of the hostages, and he told me that the terrorist has a thick hide like a rhinoceros and that the rubber bullets would just bounce off him. (Which I took to be an insult to my intelligence, so I asked him where exactly he thought the terrorist was from, because if he was threatening everyone in a 10-kilometer radius that would suggest he had nuclear capabilities, which was extremely unlikely, unless maybe he came from North Korea, in which case he'd

most likely be a Buddhist and not believe in heaven. And Mr. Fitzpatrick just said, "Exactly.")

But even then I didn't understand why we couldn't just try talking to him, because, after all, even if the suicide bomber did believe some weird stuff and even if he did have Weapons of Mass Destruction (which I sincerely doubted), at the end of the day he was still a person. And that's when the analogy stopped working, because my tumor is not a person.)

The Year 5 is still there. I tell him to get to fuck, which is not in the script.

Normally I try not to swear. I learned to swear when I was seven in Wales when we went to stay with Uncle Tony and he dropped a frozen leg of lamb on his foot. A few weeks later I was watching football with Dad and his team conceded, so to empathize I said "Shit!" Dad washed my mouth out with soap (because it was "dirty" (which suggests he doesn't understand metaphors)). But that wasn't half as bad as the time Mum heard me call Pete Sloss a cocksucker on the way to the cinema. She didn't get angry with me, but that night when she was tucking me in she asked if I knew what one was. And when I said no, she said she didn't have a problem with me using rude words if I felt they were necessary to express myself, but she'd prefer I didn't use words I didn't understand. So she explained it to me. She told me about oral sex and foreplay and lubrication and even flavored condoms (I had previously thought vaginas had taste buds), and finally when she was finished she made me

repeat it back to her. After that she kissed me good night, which made me feel queasy.

I can swear in sixty-seven different languages. But I can apologize in only three, which means I could get beaten up in sixty-four countries.

One of the languages I can do both in is French, which is my first lesson on a Monday. In French class we're not allowed to speak English. Instead, we have to do everything *en Français.* There are a lot of things I do *en Français* that I'd never do in English. For one thing, I help out around the house a lot more. Every weekend I spend a minimum of one hour passing the Hoover in my bedroom, and each night I set and clear the table before and after dinner (respectively (obviously)). I have a younger sister who calls herself Marie-Clare (who has nine years (whenever anyone tells you their age in French it sounds like they have a terminal disease) and enjoys horse-riding), and what is more, an older brother (Serge) who likes to play football. Moreover, I have a diet that consists exclusively of the potato in its various incarnations (plates of chips, bags of crisps, and baked), a father who is a doctor (because I don't know the word for a driving instructor), and a mother who works at home (because I don't know the word for sexism (or legal secretary)). Every summer the five of us go on holiday without fail, and always to the same place, La Rochelle, where we practice windsurfing and pass a fantastic week with one another and our dog, who calls himself Sausage. I even have a different name in French. (Madame Berger made us each choose one at

the start of the year and explained that in her class that is what we would be known as. At first it felt a bit like we were losing our identities, like we were going into prison and being given a number, but actually now I quite like my French name.) It's Marcel.

"Marcel?"

"Oui, madame?"

"Qu'est-ce que tu as fait le weekend dernier?"

At first the question confuses me because I don't know if last weekend means the weekend that's just passed or the weekend before that. Both are in the past. I can tell that because I'm in French class.

"Le weekend?"

"*Oui. Le weekend* dernier. *En* passé composé."

In truth, it doesn't matter which weekend. Madame Berger was only trying to be helpful. But in French I do the same thing every weekend: *"Samedi j'ai joué au foot avec mon frère et dimanche j'ai lu un roman."* (I am a much more active person in French, and I read novels only, because I don't know if the Internet is masculine or feminine.)

"Ah, oui. C'est vrai?"

This is *une question rhétorique*. However, I decide to answer anyway, because Marcel is a keen conversationalist. *"Oui. C'est vrai."*

"Et pour aider tes parents, tu as fait quelque chose?"

"J'ai passé l'aspirateur dans ma chambre pour deux heures."

"Comme un bon fils, n'est-ce pas?"

(Marcel is a good son. I take some vicarious pride from this, which is when you experience something as a result of something someone else has done.) Madame Berger is beaming.

"Et est-ce que tu as fait quelque chose hors de l'ordinaire *peut-être?"*

I pretend to scan my brain for an irregular past participle, but really I knew the question was coming. *"Oui, j'ai ri à un film."*

(In many ways, my life is so much simpler in French. I don't get headaches or déjà vu in French, because I don't know the words for them. Moreover, I don't worry about my parents' marriage or my own mortality or why I haven't had a wet dream, because these are emotions I am not able to express. Sometimes I'm jealous of Marcel. I think that if I moved to France I'd be a completely different person. (For one thing, I'd agree with people a lot more, and for another, I'd spend much more time in libraries and swimming pools.) Do you know what the French call a Lost Property Office? They call it a Found Property Office. (But then again, they call a Potato an Apple of the Ground.))

"*Et qu'est-ce que tu* feras *le weekend prochain? Dans* l'avenir."

I don't know the French for brain surgery. So I cheat.

"La même."

Our next lesson is the one I've been waiting for. English. Miss Farthingdale hands back our Compositions in reverse order,

starting with the worst and ending with . . . Simon Nagel's. *Effing eff-word!*

I come third, with 16 out of 20, behind Simon and Chloe Gower. As punishment, I decide I have to coat my forearm in the fluid from the white end of my ink eraser pen and rest my nose on it for the whole lesson. (It's made from pig urine.)

Simon Nagel is an Alkaline Jew, and his grandfather was in a concentration camp (I forget which one. It's definitely not Auschwitz, but it would be one of the other top answers in *Family Fortunes* if they ever did that round). He always finds a way to write about the Holocaust, whatever title we get set, which is why he always wins. Chloe Gower is an albino and comes from a Broken Home. Her skin is the same color as the correction fluid she uses to write *Manic Street Preachers* on her rucksack, and her parents split up a year and a half ago (which is about the time she dyed her hair black (which is not a good look for an albino (because it makes her face look like apartheid))). Every few months when her dad picks her up from school in his convertible there'll be a new woman in the passenger seat. They always look roughly the same, like younger, prettier versions of her mum. It's a bit like her dad's casting for an American Remake of his life. I tried to talk to her once about the Manic Street Preachers because I quite like that song they do about being tolerant, but when I told her this she sneered and told me she liked only the early stuff. Then she gave me one earpiece from her minidisc and played me a song

called "She Is Suffering" and asked me what I thought. I think that being a Manic Street Preachers fan who prefers "She Is Suffering" to the Tolerance Song is like being a Christian who prefers the carpentry to the miracles. But I told her it sounded cool, and now when we cross each other in the corridor we nod.

Chapter Two

(The Composition was A Life in the Day, which is absolutely not the same as A Day in the Life. A Day in the Life is a snapshot of a particular day from the time you woke up to the time you went to bed and all the things that happened in between. We don't do A Day in the Life anymore, because it's too easy.

A Life in the Day is much harder. In A Life in the Day you have to give an account of an average day in your life to show what it's like to be you. To do this, you have to focus on all of the thoughts and feelings you have about the places, people, and routines that make up an average day in your life.

On an average day in my life I have milk on toast for break-

fast (or maybe Honey Nut Cornflakes with Peanut Butter). There is such a thing as an average day in my life, but I don't think it tells you anything about who I am and what it's like to be me. In fact, I'm not sure that life really has all that much to do with days in the first place.)

Chapter Three

When the anesthetic practitioner came to visit, he weighed me like I was a fish he'd just caught and asked me if I had a phobia of needles, which I told him I didn't because a phobia is an irrational fear of something and my fear of needles is 100% justified. (I don't understand why people insist that they have phobias of things like heights and snakes and small spaces and open spaces and other people when all of those things can kill you. I hate how people think that not walking under ladders makes you superstitious, when actually it's just common sense. You wouldn't call someone superstitious if they didn't want to live under a flight path. (I am not superstitious.))

Then he asked if I had any questions. I could think of only

one, but it didn't seem relevant (If Stephen Hawking got his CapsLock key stuck, after a while would he start to lose his voice?), so instead I shook my head.

"It's a real game of chess," remarks Dad.

I have always wanted a TV in my room. There's a bed (which I'm in), a bedside cabinet with a call button, an armchair (which Dad's in), and an unusually high number of three-pin plug sockets (six). I thought about asking the nurse what they were for, but then I figured it out myself. (Three are for personal use, three for medical use. (Three to charge my minidisc and three to charge me.)) In the corner of the room, Chelsea are playing Liverpool.

I look up from my crossword (*24 across: uncooperative (9),* which is either difficult or *difficult,* in which case it's easy (and 19 down is *basic*)), because I prefer chess to football. At first I can't see any similarity, and I'm just about to dismiss Dad's claim as a bad metaphor when one of the Chelsea defenders reaches the opposition's goal line and is replaced by a better player who can move forward, backward, and diagonally. Dad seems pleased by this and lets me go back to my crossword. A few minutes later, Liverpool mount an attack that ends in an acrobatic save by the Chelsea goalkeeper. Dad tells me to look at the screen: "Because that's what a pedigree goalkeeper looks like, son."

This means that both of his parents were goalkeepers and you can trace his ancestry back through an unbroken line of them.

During the halftime analysis I get déjà vu while they are replaying the save, which is like having déjà vu squared.

When Mum returns with a cup of coffee, Dad turns off the game guiltily without her having to say anything. She asks if I mind her drinking in front of me (because I am NBM, which means I can't eat or drink anything), which I don't, and then she asks if I'm okay.

"Ah, he's all right," says Dad. "It's not like it's rocket science!"

I wonder when Dad last made Mum laugh.

Once when I was very young, Mum and Dad left me with Aunt Julie and Uncle Tony because they were going to the Alps for a weekend for their anniversary. I remember after dinner on the night before they went watching Dad count out some strange-looking notes at the table. "Are those Francs?" I asked, because I didn't recognize the markings, but I knew from the care that Dad was taking that it must be money.

"No," said Dad. "They're mine."

It was the best joke I'd ever heard. And Mum agreed. It took the legs from under her. I remember she was standing behind him and she skied her hands down his front in a snowplow until they crossed and she was draped over his shoulders like a knotted jumper. She laughed so hard nothing came out, and finally, when she had enough air in her lungs, she kissed the spot that's now his bald patch. It made me feel queasy to

look at them because it was the only time I can remember that they didn't look like parents.

For ages afterward, whenever I watched Dad counting out money he'd get a glint in his eye, which would be my cue. "Are those Francs?" I would call, melting into laughter before he even made the joke. Which didn't stop him.

"No, they're mine!"

Then he'd cheer and throw his hands up above his head like he was trying to start The Wave. When I'd join in, he'd swoop down to tickle my armpits or hoist me up onto his shoulders and parade me around the house until we found Mum. And then we'd restage the whole thing for her benefit. This time, though, he'd play around with the wording. Sometimes he wouldn't give us exactly what we thought we wanted. Instead, he'd just nudge us in the direction of the punch line and sit back as we raced to the end.

"Are those Francs?"

"Well, it's funny you should ask that . . ."

"NO, THEY'RE MINE!"

This was my favorite version of the joke. It was like we were running a relay and Dad was handing me the baton for the final straight. He'd already blown away the competition, and all I had to do was hold on tight and break the tape at the finish line.

Then it was Mum's turn to run with it. The joke became how much she liked the sound of this Frank fellow, and did we happen to know if he was single? After all, Frank was a billionaire. While Dad could claim ownership over only whatever amount he had to hand (and would happily do so whenever I

asked him to), Frank didn't need to boast. Whatever modest sum Dad wasn't joking about belonged to Frank. And then the joke became how much more eligible Frank was than Dad in other departments. By Dad's own admission, not only was Frank richer, he was better-looking, too, and a better listener and (as Dad got older) a better dresser and (as I got older) better in bed, until eventually Frank was Dad's superior in every respect and Mum would openly fantasize about the day he'd rescue her from her life with us and whisk her away to his private island (France).

However, none of this stopped me from pitying Frank. Because for every point he scored over Dad there was still one thing that he couldn't do. He couldn't make Mum laugh. (For everything that Frank had, my parents had each other.)

Around the time of my first seizure, Mum and Dad had another trip booked to France, to the same resort they'd gone to half my life before. In the end, they canceled it to be with me at the hospital, but not before Dad had changed some money over. The night they were supposed to leave, we ate together in the hospital canteen, and when it came time for Dad to pay I noticed in his wallet an unfamiliar note sandwiched between fifteen pounds.

"Are those Frank's?" I asked, expectantly.

"No, they're Euros," he replied.

———

I don't think my dad has made my mum laugh since the introduction of the Single European Currency. (I sometimes think all it would take for them to find what they've lost is if we all took a trip to Switzerland. (However, there's only one reason sick people go to Switzerland.))

"Why don't you get yourself a paper?" suggests Mum.

"From where?" asks Dad.

"From Smiths."

"Where's that?"

"You know where it is."

"So humor me."

"It's where you went last time to buy a pack of gum."

"Great. I'll just ask for the blue plaque."

When Dad's gone, Mum sits down on the edge of my bed and tells me I have nothing to be afraid of. Sometimes I think she's in denial. (It's the way she ruffles my scalp.)

For a long while we say nothing, which is the same as not saying anything only when you look at it from the outside in. Finally, Mum asks what I want to eat when I get home. I pretend to think about the question so as not to hurt her feelings.

Spaghetti Bolognese is my favorite meal, which is lucky, because it's the only meal Mum cooks. She doesn't follow a recipe, I think because she doesn't like being told what to do and recipe books are always full of imperatives. If you want Mum to finely chop two onions, then the worst thing you could do

is tell her to *Finely chop two onions.* (Instead, you should follow these instructions:

Spaghetti Bolognese

1 Kitchen
1 Chopping Board
2 Onions
1 Cutlery Drawer
1 Saucepan Lid

Preparation time: 5 minutes, Cooking time: 1 hour

Serves 3

1. Enter the kitchen, loudly. If anyone is in earshot, announce your intentions to make a Bolognese sauce. If no one is in earshot, loudly announce your intentions to make a Bolognese sauce.
2. Take out the chopping board and place the onions on it, loudly.
3. Clatter around the kitchen, being sure to make as much noise as possible. Pretend the cutlery drawer is a percussion instrument and play it, badly, in 5/4 time.
4. Await arrival of Mum.
5. Answer the question "What on earth are you doing?" with "I am looking for a knife."
6. Send subliminal message by playing F Sharp on the saucepan lid.
7. Leave for 1 hour and season to taste.

(If Jamie Oliver ever wrote a storybook about a kid who nicks an artery making a red-wine reduction, then Mum would be a Michelin-starred chef inside a year.))

Because Mum has never read a recipe in her life, her Spaghetti Bolognese isn't like any other Spaghetti Bolognese. She calls it her signature dish, which I suppose is appropriate, because it looks nothing like the thing it's supposed to represent and it's never the same twice in a row. (I think what she means, though, is that it's unique to her, which is definitely true.) Dad says Mum's Bolognese is the culinary equivalent of a black hole because everything gets sucked into it, which is true. Sometimes it's made of beef, other times lamb, sometimes it's got bits of broccoli in, or sometimes peppers, and once even frozen peas. He says we shouldn't even call it Bolognese, and that if we do we might as well throw a pillow out the window and call it a bird of prey.

I don't know what the rules are for what is and isn't a Bolognese (or for where one thing ends and another thing begins in general), but I don't think we ever could call what Mum makes something else, because for something to be a word at least two people have to have tried it separately. Otherwise, there'd be no point in naming it in the first place, because you wouldn't have anyone to discuss it with. (I try and remember this whenever David Driscoll tells me about rusty trombones or space-docking or munging. I know it's bullspit, because there's no way two people would ever have tried those things independently. So even if you were sick enough to give it a go,

you wouldn't bother giving it a name, because you wouldn't assume it was a thing. (Which means someone's just made up the word without doing the thing (which is like having a door without a room behind it).))

I suppose Dad does have a point, though. If you think about it (which I have), it is a bit weird we call Mum's sauce Bolognese, because if you asked anyone else in the world to make a Bolognese, theirs wouldn't even be close. However (thinking about it), that's probably why it's my favorite. It's like a really bad private joke that's funny only because no one else gets it. It makes me feel like we've got our own secret language, because only our family has that picture in our head when we hear the word *Bolognese.* (So even if it does always taste better in restaurants, my mum's Spaghetti Bolognese is my favorite meal because it makes me feel safe.)

I realize I haven't answered the question out loud.

"Spaghetti Bolognese," I intone.

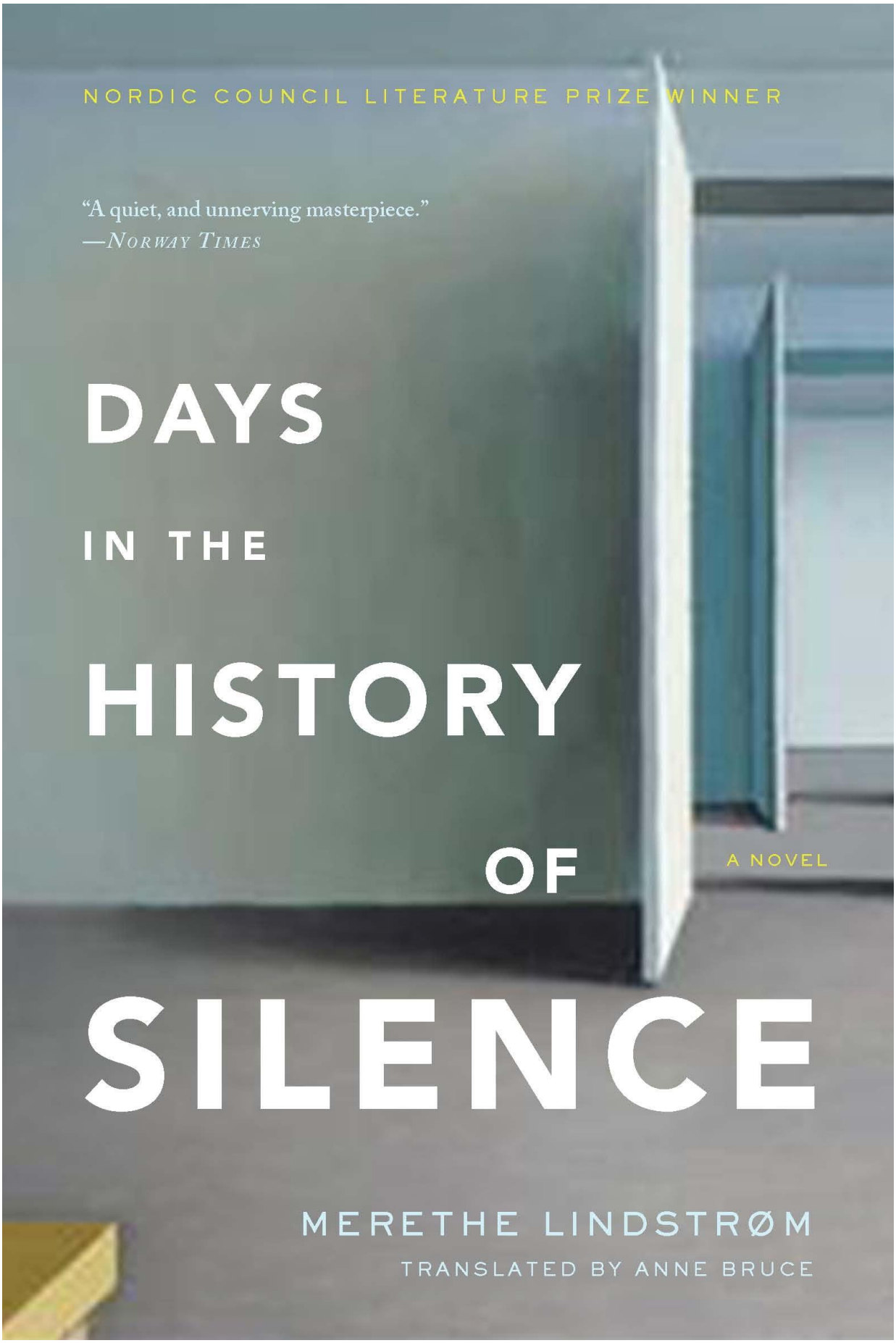
Mum smiles. "You mean my signature dish."

"Why do you call it that?" I ask.

Mum considers the question.

"Because by now I'm stuck with it."

And then we finish the crossword.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was the one who let him in.

Later I called him the intruder, but he did not break in. He rang the doorbell as anyone at all might have done, and I opened the door. It unsettles me still when I think about it. Really that could be what bothers me most. He rang the doorbell, and I opened the door.

So mundane.

Perhaps I had caught a glimpse of him that very morning at the bottom of the garden when Simon went to work. Standing down there between the trees. A young man, nineteen or twenty years old.

When I opened the door, he stood on the stairs just waiting to be let in. Anyone at all, he could have been anyone at all.

Good day, he said. I'd like to use the telephone.

There was something about *good day*. Nowadays there are not so many people who say that, it was more common at that time, in the middle of the nineteen sixties. But all the same he did not say it as if he meant it, as if there were something good about the day, or he wished me that. I felt it seemed like something he simply said, meant for everyone and no one.

We don't have a telephone, I wanted to answer. But that was clearly a lie.

I heard the children from inside the living room. Helena was just a baby at that time, she was lying in a sleeping bag while the other two were playing on the floor beside her. I heard the time signal on the radio, behind him lay the garden, at that early hour the air is motionless, the rain from the previous evening only a slight dampness on the leaves, the green grass, newly wakened, dazed, something quivering in the transition from shadow to the sudden touch of sunlight. I don't know what I was on the lookout for, perhaps an excuse to shut the door.

The connection's not very good, I remarked.

That's all right, he replied. I wondered whether it was up to him to say. Was it not me who should have said that?

We had already been standing there for a few minutes, and the feeling of being impolite eventually made me open the door and stand aside. When I let him in, as he walked past me, I noticed there was an odor about him. It was the smell of a different person, someone who has come too close, and

the impression was heightened by my unease. Inside the hallway he looked around, for the telephone or something else. I nodded toward the hall table, but he only lifted the receiver, the sound of the dial tone as he held it above the dial, and the click when he replaced it on the instrument.

He had not intended to use the phone. It was obvious now he had no intention of phoning. What he was looking for, it could have been anything at all.

Nice house, he said.

Yes, I replied.

I had spotted the case attached to his belt, a little container that might hold something, a tool, a folding pocketknife? He must have caught sight of the children then. Greta on her stomach with a large sheet of paper in front of her, concentrating on the drawing, beside her coloring crayons she had emptied out onto the rug. Kirsten's dress had slid up and the diaper she still wore, was visible, she was building a tower with bricks, stacking each one on top of the other. He must have watched them, standing like that looking for a little while before they noticed him, as I felt the unease increasing. I thought I should open the door and ask him to leave, but it was impossible to do so.

A quiet voice on the radio like a whisper, the long branches on the tree swaying in the wind outside, and giving the impression that something was approaching and pulling back again. I have often lain awake thinking about it, the children looking up, glancing inquiringly at him, at me. Helena's arms waving conspicuously above the edge of the sleeping bag. She

had been awake for a while, and I knew she would soon start to cry, from boredom or because she was hungry.

I walk past him through the living room door, a reflex making me lift the sleeping bag farther along the broad dining table, away from him, placing it there. At the far end of the room.

He has taken a couple of steps inside, standing focusing his eyes on the girls, the lines Greta is drawing become a big house, a girl with a triangular frock, the sun in the right-hand corner. She is still toiling over a flower.

Why are they sitting on the floor, he asked.

They are playing, I responded.

That wasn't what I asked, he said. The irritation in his voice. I heard it. We are approaching something, I thought, perhaps whatever he has come for. Maybe he intends us to be here, it is here he has wanted to be all along, on this very spot.

Would you like some coffee, I asked in an attempt to avoid it, take a step back to something this might have been, this visit of his.

He shook his head. I don't want anything.

It was not true that he did not want anything, I had understood that.

Helena's waving arms, she was trying to grasp her fingers. Greta who had stood up, who was standing looking at us.

It was a chance I took.

I have some money, I said. And felt how something contracted in my abdomen, it seemed at first he had not heard, or was not bothered, as though money did not clarify

anything either. I considered: if he only wanted money. He approached the windows overlooking the garden. The house was the same then, we have not rebuilt it much. Only the garden was smaller, there were several trees, more of the forest extended into the actual garden area, trees we later cut down.

How much do you have, he said as he turned around, standing like a silhouette with his back to the light, his face in darkness.

When I went toward my purse in the hallway, he followed me.

Twenty kroner, I said. That's all.

I placed them in his hand. A pale hand, I remember the hand, I think I will always remember that. He held it out as though he had not thought to take them, just accept them, as though there were a great difference. I noticed it. It was not much, but neither was it a small amount at that time. He thrust the coins into his pocket, and I looked at him, and for the first time had the sense of making eye contact. As though I had not reached his eyes earlier. I felt my heart, it must have missed a beat, thumping against the wall of my chest, faster and faster, unable to calm down again.

I think we both turned around at the same time as it happened. Greta is climbing up on one of the dining chairs, perhaps in an effort to comfort the baby who has started to cry. She tugs the light sleeping bag toward her, the chair tips over, and she just misses dragging the bag with her in the fall. Greta howls, gets to her feet and screams. The baby becomes

scared and screams even louder. I console Greta, holding her close to me, rubbing the angry red mark that has appeared on her shin. I lift the sleeping bag. I forget him, forget he is standing there right behind me.

And when I turn around, he is not. He is not there, and neither is Kirsten. For a moment all is silent. The children have stopped crying, the voice on the radio pauses, and only the branch outside the window stirs.

I want to cry out, but Greta is right beside me. I say it carefully. Kirsten, I say, Kirsten. I begin to search, peering around me as though only my own confusion is preventing me from seeing her. Just as I am about to run down the basement steps, I discover that the terrace doors are open.

There is a faint breeze in the garden, I don't know what I am wearing, a thin sweater and trousers, or a dress, perhaps with an apron on top, I used to wear one at that time. The garden is brightening up, I feel the moisture on the grass. At the bottom is the entrance to a little grove of trees. In the years to come we chop down the trees all around, but we leave some standing because we have a notion that the children should see trees, that it is something they need. I walk in between the bushes, into the grove.

She is sitting on a tree stump, it looks as though she is paying attention to something. At that moment she is sitting so motionless that I become frightened, I speak her name. She turns around, looking at me before pointing in between the bushes. Perhaps she has followed him, perhaps he brought her here.

But she seems unharmed. She is sitting on the broad stump and pointing into the forest. As though he has abandoned her and gone on ahead, vanishing in there among the dense branches.

LATER, I CALLED it the episode. When I talked about it with other people, Simon, our children after they had grown up. As though it comes from a place that is unfamiliar, like the intruder himself, a different place. The Greek word is constructed of several parts, of which one part means beginning, like the beginning of a story, a life, but also suggesting something is inserted, in tragedies it is the dialogue that is inserted between the choruses. The episode is the anticipation of something more. But there was nothing more, he rang the doorbell that day, and after that he disappeared.

I know nothing about the intruder. Later I saw a notice in the newspaper, the description of a young man who had entered several houses in the neighborhood, the description expressing the suspicion that he was confused. In a way it was as though nothing had happened. Kirsten was unharmed. But I did not stop thinking about him. Who he was. Sometimes I wake up and it feels as though he is standing in the doorway at that very moment, that I have let him in again. Then it is as if he will never leave, but instead stay here with us. He has just become more indistinct with the years. I must have swapped his face for others. While the incident in itself has become clearer, sharper, seeming to draw closer to me all the time.

The episode that has a hard and inevitable quality when I reflect on it. It is as though it is scored into or through something. A gash, like a tear in thick canvas, in the perfectly normal day, and through that hole something has emerged that should not surface, not become visible.

I OFTEN THOUGHT about it later when I began teaching. He was the same age as my pupils, the intruder. I worked at a senior high school in the city center, an old school. One of those schools with a long-established name and a building that has become rooted in its own convictions, just as unshakably encircled by them as by paving stones and asphalt. The years passed, and I knew that one day it would force me out. The school was sufficient unto itself. I walked around in the corridors, I think I moved around with the suspicion that it was so, that the building considered me superfluous.

I taught Norwegian and for a while literature too, an optional subject that was popular among the pupils. Myself, I was more uncertain. I used to look around the classroom at the pupils, I could hear my own footsteps in the corridors and think that time was passing, and my own excuse for staying there seemed less and less rational. All the same I clung tenaciously to that identity. I was a teacher, a high school teacher. That was how I dressed, how I moved, the role determined my vocabulary, my limitations. As though I could not simply be replaced. And eventually as the years went by the ranks of those of my own age diminished, while younger

and better-qualified colleagues continually streamed in. We used to meet at lunchtime, Simon and I, if the weather was good, his physician's office was not far from the school. I walked along Nygaten Street, past all the stores, Allehelgensgate, past Markesmauet Alley, down Peter Motzfeldtsgate to the city park, the Lille Lungegårdsvann Lake, where we sat on a bench overlooking the fountain. We gulped down our food and chatted a little before going back to work. He to his patients, I to my pupils. He often picked me up after the workday. In the car we listened to classical music, conversed about the day that had passed.

If I had a free period and he had cancellations, we could meet at the tearoom in the telegraph building, and when it was closed down after many years, we met at a café neither of us really liked.

I do not know if I miss the work, but I wish to be part of something, I always have the feeling of being left out, standing on the outside. Now that the children are no longer children, but grown women we see only now and again. Occasionally we have been in contact with a few colleagues, from time to time, sometimes a vacation with acquaintances. That was long ago.

For years I stood in the classroom and my eyes scanned what seemed to be the same pupils, all cast in the same brilliant mold after a few years in the building, ready for university. I made out as though I were taking part in it, that is how it feels now. Some pupils distinguished themselves, and every other year there may have been a pupil who was particularly

interested, one who did not consider reading Olav Duun to be a personal affront. Perhaps they also became more mature after those three years, I exaggerated the impression of how alike they all became. I regarded them as an expression of the place, everything I personally could not tear myself away from, instead continuing year after year. The work I suspected I was not suited for, was not what I really wanted to do. Without knowing what I ought to do about it. I always said to myself that I was lucky to be able to be there, work there. I used to say I enjoyed it.

And one day I received flowers, and the pupils had bought a special edition of Duun's novel, *Fellow Man*. There were a few words from the principal and lunch with coffee and cake. The days that suddenly altered when I finished. In the beginning it was good being just Simon and me. His gradual change started a couple of years ago. But perhaps his restlessness was present long before that, maybe it is an expression of something he has wanted for a long time. To go his own way.

I CAN AWAKEN in the belief that I hear Simon's voice, the one I am in the process of forgetting little by little as it is replaced by silence. I wake and realize I must have heard it in a dream. It is so rare for him to say anything.

Old age looks out over a gloomy landscape. Helena, our youngest daughter, telephoned a few weeks ago to say she had picked her father up at a bus stop where he seemed to be studying the timetable.

Dad, she had called out to him. Where are you thinking of going?

Where would he go? she asked me after driving him back home.

I could not answer her. I don't know, I said. It's worrying, she whispered so that Simon would not hear. He could have just gone off.

Several days later she dropped by with the envelope and application form. She placed it on the hall table.

I'll put it here, Mom, she said. I saw she was standing in the hallway, in the semidarkness. Helena who was only a baby when the episode occurred. I had forgotten to turn on the light. I found the light switch.

There are homes for the elderly where he would be comfortable. He needs to go somewhere, she insisted and pointed at the envelope as though underlining her words.

A place where people will look after him, she continued. I can't let you take all the responsibility on your own. Now that he's always going off, now that he's so silent.

She spoke for a long time, there was an echo of her voice in the hallway. She doesn't have such a strong voice, but it seemed she had thought about what she wanted to say. And she gave me a hug when she left. She always does that.

A home for the elderly.

I saw that it was lying there. I have left it lying there ever since.

The application form. It is going to occupy my thoughts, no matter what I do.

•

SOME DAYS I cannot remember the distinctive character his voice had, whether it was as deep as I believe, I cannot imagine it. His silence. The words become gradually fewer, as though something is drying up for want of nourishment. After he retired, he liked to go walking on his own, taking the bus into the city and walking up to the university at the top of the hill. Sitting in the old garden beside the Natural History Museum, with the voices of the students from the streets, plants, bushes and trees with their names and species displayed on little signs. Undisturbed, enclosed. Here he sits while the day rushes on across the city and comes to an end with the light sinking behind the trees, behind one of these mountains, perhaps he is reading or just staring at his fingers clutching the book, at the students walking past and giving an impression of sliced movements behind the high, green fence.

I used to phone him when he went out, after a few hours I phoned, and a conversation ensued about what he should bring back, as he usually bought some groceries on the way home. I mentioned what we required, and there was no need for him to write it down, he remembered it by heart.

He has never liked talking on the telephone, I have always been the one who did most of the talking. But a change came about, I did not notice it in the beginning, not for the first weeks or months, it crept in slowly. The pauses, the stillness. He ended the conversations so abruptly that I sometimes phoned back to ask if I had said something wrong.

No, what could it be, he replied. And it was these responses that made me anxious. He always gave the same answer. As though he had a short list of replies he used alternately and held the list up to his eyes, picking out the responses that might suit. And sometimes they did not suit.

He could return home with the groceries, or else he had forgotten them. I said I would make dinner, are you hungry, no, thanks for asking, he might say, or I hadn't thought about it. He went through and sat down with a book, until I placed the food in front of him and he would maybe take one mouthful and then another a while later, until the food was cold and by then it was late in the evening.

His silence came gradually over the course of a few months, half a year. He might say thanks for the meal or bye. He has become as formal as a hotel guest, seemingly as frosty as a random passenger you bump into on a bus. Only now and again do I see him standing gazing out the window or smiling at something he is reading or watching on television, and I think he is back. As though it really is a journey he has embarked upon. But if I ask what he is watching, what is amusing, he just looks at me uncomprehendingly. The physician, one of his junior colleagues, says he has quite simply become old. The solution, for of course there are solutions to situations like this, why should we consult a physician otherwise, is a center for the elderly, a day care center where Simon spends time twice a week.

I drive him. I always drive him places. He sits in the passenger seat of the car and waits until I arrive. The first time

we went there, we were greeted by a manager who escorted us along corridors reminiscent of tunnels with plastic walls, pale institutional gray, decorative graphics of anodyne subjects, doors with wooden hearts, and at the foot of one of the corridors a room with glass doors. Inside this recreation area was a little group of people. No one looked up when we entered. The old people sat at a table, two members of staff were conversing quietly. Simon got a chair at the table with the others. He continued smiling. But just as I was about to leave, his gaze followed me. His eyes, hands on the table, the slumped shoulders in that room, in that place. It is not a place where you belong.

When I come out again now, there are often two young care workers standing smoking at the entrance. I have seen one of them drop a cigarette butt on the ground and tramp on it as I walk past. Such a disheartening motion. Several times I have remained standing in the parking lot, like a mythological figure, filled with doubt, this is the border between the underworld and our own world, I walk across the little stretch of asphalt, with Simon in the corridors inside, if I turn around now, he will disappear forever. I need to tell this to someone, how it feels, how it is so difficult to live with someone who has suddenly become silent. It is not simply the feeling that he is no longer there. It is the feeling that you are not either.

I look around the house, everything has its place here too, part of an order. It is so tidy, like a museum or a church, the objects seem to be on display. Few of them do I still have any use for, or have any practical value. They belong to social rituals that are no longer performed to any extent, or if they are performed, rarely have any meaning. They are reduced to a striking series of memories. The old clock above the table, the tea service in the cabinet behind glass doors. It might even be that the house exists to provide a home for these items, to a greater degree than it exists for us.

It was because of the house and all it contains, these artifacts, that four or five years ago we employed a cleaner. I had never had any help before, I did not want home help. Our daughters suggested that we obtain paid help. It is not unusual

in this neighborhood. On a few afternoons a week I have seen a little army of young and middle-aged women walking between the villas, letting themselves into the well-protected houses, turning off alarms, security systems. Inside the empty houses I expect they take out washing buckets and scouring cloths, fill them with water and chemical detergents, waltzing around in a miasma of bleach, washing the muck off toilet seats and bathroom floors, feeding pet animals confined indoors, emptying the contents of the trash cans, tidying away toys from the floor in the children's rooms. After a few hours they let themselves out and disappear down the road. I did not want to have a stranger in, but there were no arguments I could use to rationalize this opposition. The girls, our daughters, were of the opinion that we *needed help*. It is a large house, they said.

Simon was not keen either to allow a stranger into our house, into our rooms. He was still the same old Simon at that time. It was before the silence took over. We were agreed that we would do the work ourselves.

But in the end we gave in to the nagging and employed a helper. For the meantime, was the intention. It is strange to use the word *employment* about our relationship with Marija. Although it was of course a form of employment. After a while it seemed far from being anything to do with the relationship between an employer and an employee. The cleaner was more like someone who had come to visit us, a guest we would like to come again.

Everyone liked her. Marija.

She had been with us for almost three years when we had to let her go. Something happened, something that was impossible to get over. When I think about it now, I know it might perhaps have been overlooked by other people. Despite its gravity. Maybe by us too, perhaps we could have ignored what happened. It was the closeness that made it impossible, we had become too familiar. Precisely that she was more like a friend and guest. I think that was it.

The girls were disappointed and angry all the same, the two older ones still are. Although it was over a year ago.

But it was worse for us. For Simon and me.

Dear Marija. I still sometimes formulate that sentence, composing a letter, finding the sentences for myself. I would never write it to her, and I would not write *dear*, not now afterward. If I should write a letter, I would begin in a neutral fashion, with the date and year, and I would swiftly come to the point, whatever that now would be. But why then write to her at all, just to say that she continually manifests herself as a word, a sentence. A glimpse of her can even turn up in my thoughts; I see her sitting in the kitchen buttering slices of bread, drinking tea with sugar and milk, extending her long legs underneath the table and smiling at me. I have tried to convince myself it is more like an obsession, that she still occupies her place here with us, even if it is only a mental place, as when you cannot step on lines, and the lines appear everywhere. You try to think about something else, and the same thought continues to whirl around and around in your consciousness.

I do not miss her. I have a lot to do.

But there is something. Something I miss or perhaps I should rather say lack. She must have served a function, something more than I realized, since I notice this lack. Is that what we are for each other, a function others also can fulfill. I do not like that thought.

I CATCH SIGHT of the empty chair where Simon usually sits and sleeps. As recently as yesterday I watched him. His face, with sleep smoothing out all his facial features, I looked at the shoulders that seem shrunken, and the one leg he always stretches out a little, the hand with the wedding ring. When I left him this morning at the day care center, I felt an impulse to take his hand and feel it, I had the idea that if I held it exactly like that, it would be like an unbreakable bond, not skin and bone, but a different contact, that other contact, the one that has always been there. Before the silence. But I had problems holding his hand, I could not manage it because I was afraid of being seen or of seeing myself in that way. Perhaps it is only me who feels that gaze upon us.

It makes you feel naked, seeking out others and asking for help. Suddenly you are walking along unfamiliar corridors and opening doors. A group of people sits just waiting for you, but no one thinks there is anything wrong, at least anything unexpected. Only this silence.

I recall something Simon told me before he became old, before this irritating silence, that one of the earliest impressions

he remembered clearly, was the worn timber floor in the apartment where his family lay in hiding during the Second World War, how the rooms were tiny like boxes with doors, a playhouse where it was rarely possible to play. The walls of brown wood, the roof where he could lie looking up, with a feeling that everything was sinking or being sunk, toward them, inside them, through them, and everything linked to a feeling of guilt the origin of which he did not know, but that probably had a connection with his impatience at that time. The hiding place in a middle-sized city in Central Europe, a place where they stayed week after week, month after month. A place of safekeeping he could not endure and had begun to regard as a threat, since he seldom noticed anything of the actual danger. He quarreled with his parents, his younger brother, he was ten years old and hated being cooped up inside the tiny rooms. It felt as though the world had shriveled, as though it had contracted and would never contain or comprise anything other than these three small chambers, of a size hardly bigger than closets and the few people who lived in them, in addition to the helpers or wardens who came and went.

While they lived in this condition that has to be called imprisonment, Simon told me, they had to remain quiet. Silence was imposed on them, him, his brother, his parents and the two other people who stayed there. Their bodies had already adjusted to a subdued way of moving that never released its grip later, but became part of them, of their body language. They obtained a greater understanding of subtle changes in expression, becoming accustomed to observing others in

that way, he noticed how his parents could look at each other as though they were able to transfer thoughts between them, nodding at what the other seemed to be saying; the adults could conduct what appeared to be lengthy conversations in this fashion, simply consisting of facial expressions, fleeting nods or other movements of the head or face, a raised eyebrow, a grimace. It was especially important at certain times of day when there were lots of other people moving around in the building, for example a physician whose office was directly below, who no longer had a large practice actually, but still received the occasional patient. At these times, that eventually stretched out to apply to the entire day, the night, they had really only each other to react to. Simon and his brother. The restrictions, being kept indoors, affected everything they did, everything felt constrained, everything they thought, drew, wrote, and tentatively played. Often these continual irritations degenerated into arguments, insults, quietly and curiously conveyed through gestures, finger spelling, or expressed via furious messages written in chalk on a little blackboard, sometimes with the remains of a pencil, while their parents admonished them in similar silence.

The silence was built in, part of their orbit inside these rooms. At the beginning of course the children posed questions about the curtailed opportunity for movement and expression, while their parents patiently explained. But if one of them, Simon or his brother, was angry and for example began to scream, a handkerchief was held over his mouth, and the feeling of being smothered by this handkerchief,

used less as a punishment than through sheer necessity, prevented him from repeating it. Simon recounted that he could still awaken with the feeling of being inside that handkerchief, covering his mouth or being held as a gag. And one day he caused a commotion, by going off on his own. One early evening he had walked through the apartment block of which their hiding place was part, and out onto the stairway, he does not remember how he managed it, but thinks he had escaped by following one of the helpers. It was something he had planned earlier too, without believing it possible. He considered the possibility of running away especially after arguments with his parents and brother. He had planned to go right out, down to the street, but nevertheless came to a halt on the landing. He sat at the window on the staircase and watched people on the sidewalk below, it was a summer evening, people were outside, and everybody had apparently slowed down because of the warmth of the evening sunshine. It looked as though their movements were synchronized in the heat, they resembled waves surging in a peaceful, leisurely rhythm over the paving stones toward the park on the other side of the street. He felt how something of the barrier of anxiety and uncertainty that had seemed to keep him shut off from the street outside, from his friends, school, from recreation activities, the simple ability to walk down a street like this, disappeared. He ran upstairs, opened the door to the drying loft, and heard the pigeons in the pigeon loft close by, the sound was just as reassuring as the sight of the waves of people

out on the street, up there he saw the roofs and spires of half the city, and the façades on the other bank of the river, illuminated by a ray of sunshine. A couple of pigeons were treading softly on the ledge. The loft was empty, it smelled of tar, between the bare walls the floor was wide enough that he could have run a few circuits, perhaps he did that too. He kept his eyes on the buildings across the way for a while, the windows on which the sun was still shining, their blinds, their curtains. The people who were probably living inside, balconies with enough space for a family. Simon felt an urge to venture onto the roof, slide down the roof tiles. He opened a narrow window and felt the fresh air outside for the first time in this entire spell he had been kept inside, at least as far as he could later remember. Removing his shirt, he sat down wearing only his thin undershirt and noticed that he was falling asleep. When he woke up, it was to the same feeling of security, not anxiety, he told me. He did not know exactly how much time had passed, but neither had he any desire to know. A car door down between the houses, and yet another. Did he hear it? He still had the same feeling of serenity from his sleep and the heat of the loft when he opened the door to the stairwell. From where he stood on the top step, there was a view out through the stair window down to the street. Two cars, one directly in front of the other, had stopped at the curb on the opposite side. He saw what was happening, that the doors opened, people in uniform, a couple of them police officers, crossed

the street, as though one of the waves he had seen earlier was now changing direction and coming toward him. And before the fear, before the dread, he said that he felt eagerness, almost happiness, at the prospect of becoming part of the world down there once again.

Early in the morning I enter the living room and look out at the garden. It is still only a few hours since I drove Simon to the day care center. Recently he has started to eat less, and that worries me. I am trained to worry. The important things are to get dressed, go to the toilet, eat, drink, and talk.

No matter how painful it feels, all that other stuff.

You'll worry, Simon said. He used to say it, before. Always slightly teasing. I wish he would say it now. That I worry too much, that this is not so important after all, just a phase we have to go through.

In the mornings I always try to be the first one up, to steal a march on him, but he needs so little sleep now. He can rise before the night is over or at daybreak, but fall asleep again in

the middle of the day. I don't like him nodding off again, and he notices that, for when I catch him sleeping, he always has a book on his lap. I think he does that for my sake, pretending he is reading. We have always read, I used to read Simon's textbooks and he mine.

Before, while he was still talking to me, coming out with more than a word here and there, he used to smile and apologize. I must have dropped off, he said. He still straightens his back when I look at him. The books are always the same ones. History books about well-known battles, especially about the First World War. He has a special interest in that, the First World War and old maps.

One day not so long ago, when he came into the kitchen, I had a feeling he thought she was here, Marija. It seemed as though he looked around and thought there was something missing. Is everything all right, I asked. He nodded, but I think he was disappointed. Perhaps he thought he had heard something, her voice, and then it dawned on him that it was only the radio.

He misses her. He told me that some time after she had gone. Not the work she did, or at least not only that. That kind of work can be done by others. He misses *her*.

The first home help we had was a young girl from Poland. Capable and pleasant, but preoccupied. She used to stand in the middle of the living room and talk on her cell phone, the phone was like an extension of herself, an extra sense. If it rang, she had to run immediately to answer it, no matter what else she was doing at the time. I never saw her without

that phone, she talked as if there were nobody else present, absorbed in the conversations, both laughing and shaking her head like a schizophrenic would have done, someone who has exchanged his surroundings for the constant voices in his head. It seemed as though she continually found herself in a public space where people nevertheless did not need to pay attention to one other. In contrast with all the arrangements we heard her make on the phone, she never said a word to us when she was coming or going, she was suddenly standing there in the kitchen when I came in of a morning or appeared in the evening when I was about to go to bed, we never knew when she would be there next.

Lying in the kitchen are the remains of the breakfast and slices of bread Simon did not eat. I pull on my boots to fetch the newspaper and notice that it is going to be a glorious day. The house is situated at the end of a long cul-de-sac with trees on either side. The garden extends around the entire house and forms part of the little wooded area. I was the one who found it when we were house hunting many years ago, I had known for a long time that it was for sale.

I walk to the mailbox, and find the newspaper damp. The newspaper and two letters. Before we moved in here as newly-weds, we had been living for a short time on the other side of the city, down beside the harbors and the massive bridge. During our first days here, we simply walked about from room to room, and wondered where we should place our furniture. All these rooms, all these things. Like the nearby church the house is built of stone, it dates from around 1930.

Both buildings are almost empty most of the time, it strikes me, apart from the few fleeting moments on feast days and special occasions when they rapidly fill up with other people. Holy days. Christmas Eve. Wedding days.

Our name is on the far too shiny mailbox, it was a gift. A present from her, from Marija. The first time I saw her, she was standing right there, with her back turned, beside the old mailbox. I saw from the window that she put something into the box, before walking off. The postman, who was on his way to us, must also have seen what she did, because after she left, he remained standing there and waited for me with the mail in his hand. I think he was pleased. Perhaps at the opportunity to say something he had long wanted to say. He didn't smile, but he could have smiled. He had the expression of someone who wanted to smile.

I asked her, the postman said to me, what she was doing here.

Oh yes, I replied.

She didn't answer, he went on. Perhaps she doesn't speak Norwegian. She might be one of those East European girls who do cleaning. I think so. They're always putting notes into the mailboxes, filling them up with trash.

He peered at the yellow note I was raking out of the box. You should phone the police, maybe she's one of those who shouldn't be here. What do you mean, I said, although I knew what he was getting at. It was an attempt on my part to create a kind of distance from him, what he was, that kind of person. I wanted him to understand we had nothing in

common. I have seen him speaking to other neighbors once or twice, he is obviously well liked, although he delivers the mail at his own pace, it never seems to be an urgent task. Sometimes he leaves the lid of the mailbox open, with no regard for whether it is raining.

He shook his head. Now he was staring into space as though a clearer, more meaningful picture was taking shape there. Asylum seekers, he said, without legal permission to stay.

I don't know, I said, turning away and saying thanks for his help. *Thanks for helping.*

Perhaps, he said, checking me with his voice just as I was about to go back inside. Perhaps you should be careful.

It sounded more like a vague threat than concerned advice.

I read her note the next day, coming across it in the kitchen where I had slipped it underneath the microwave. A short printed message. I can help you with washing and housework, looking after children. Good references. *Phone me.*

A couple of weeks went by before I called.

THE NEXT TIME I saw her, she was standing in front of the bookshelves in the part of the living room we like to call the library, even though that formal name is an exaggerated description of our book collection, which is undeniably large, but arranged in a completely chaotic way, with books in both rows and stacks. She was tall, unusually tall, I remember thinking she was a woman who could lift any man without a

problem. She wanted to tell me about herself, she spoke good Norwegian.

She shook my hand. Marija, she announced clearly and with stress on each syllable, as though I would need help to remember it. Her short hair, the side parting and the fringe I remember used to fall over her face anytime she turned to look at me, she wheeled around or glanced upward and her hair would drop like that. A face of the type that people would certainly have called attractive, not too much makeup, aged around fifty or a couple of years younger, I never asked her about her age. Her handshake, a soft hand that did not release its grip immediately. She did not want coffee, but when Simon said he was going to make some anyway, she said yes please all the same. Just a little cup. Always just a little cup. She had a kind of rational modesty that did not seem to be an affectation. This is my husband, I said. Simon.

We agreed she should clean the house once a week, and probably wash some clothes. She seemed pleased, she said she was happy to get as much work as possible. I'm not afraid of working, she commented, speaking in all seriousness.

All the same we were content with the meeting, with ourselves, Simon and I.

I am standing in the garden and feeling the heat. One or two of the windows are slightly ajar. Helena phoned early today, asking if there was anything I needed. I stand there looking at the wide lawn and the two trees at the end beside the low wall, the entrance to the little grove of trees where the intruder may have disappeared.

No, I said to her. I don't need anything in particular.

But now I'm wondering if I should perhaps have asked her to come over, maybe she wanted me to ask her, she has always been circumspect, there was something she wanted to say to me. Her expression is cautious, unassuming, she has been like that ever since she was small, the complete opposite of her two older sisters. She resembles her father, she resembles Simon. There can be so much I miss out on, that I do not understand. The application form she gave me is still lying on the hall table. The application about residential care for Simon. Somewhere he can stay. A so-called home for the elderly. She no longer wants him to stay here with me. If only he would keep calm, she says. And if you had talked together like before. Yes indeed, I miss Marija. It is a lie that I don't, I would have asked her what she thought. The conversations we would have had about Helena, about the recent silence, Simon's silence. All the same it seems as though his silence and her absence are connected. If Marija had never left, everything would have continued as before. I sit down on one of the garden chairs on the terrace. I eat a candy, it seems strangely insubstantial, it does not remind me of anything I have ever tasted before.

Mom, Helena said on the phone. I'm so worried about you, you and Dad.

SHE HAS NO idea that I nearly gave him away once before, many years earlier. How would she have remembered that time, his depression, she was so little then.

It began with some letters arriving, several letters. He found out more about what had happened to his relatives during the war. Almost all his relations apart from his mother, father and brother were sent to extermination camps in the course of the war years. It was only thanks to the hiding place he hated so much that they were saved, he and his parents, his brother. The others are crossed out of history. Friends he played with, girls he liked, neighbors, the man in the store, teachers, classmates, every single member of his mother's and father's family, they are all gone. He felt guilty, I think he felt guilty to be alive, as perhaps everyone would have felt guilty. One day you awaken, and it is like an eclipse of the sun, one of those rare ones when the surface of the full moon covers the sun completely and it becomes dark at midday. You go out with your sandwiches at lunchtime and sit down in the park, beside the lake, looking at the trees, at the texture of the leaves, at the people walking past, now and again someone you know, who perhaps says hello, recognizing you, everything is so indisputably alive, you do not go home, you do not go anywhere. You wish for nothing more than to sit there. For hours. Before someone catches sight of you, becomes concerned and phones somewhere.

And then the dreams. Performances just as clear and transparent as daylight, reproductions of events. They come more and more often when you are awake. The hiding place, the mustiness, the listening silence. The stairway.

He could still feel it in his body, Simon said, the moment on the stairs, as though he were still standing on the stair

outside the hiding place that afternoon, looking at the men in uniforms down in the street. Heard their shouts, heard them running up the stairs, at that time when he thought they were surely about to spot him. He is sitting on the same step, not knowing what he should do now that everything is over. The moment lasts, he hears them distinctly, thinks he notices them standing above him with their weapons trained on his head. He looks up, there is no one there. He still hears them, but they are not here, they are in the entry next door, running up the stairs, shouting, knocking, he thinks they smash down a door. He can still see a glimpse of the street through the window. From the corner where he has curled up, he sees a family being led out. An elderly couple, three younger women, a middle-aged man carrying a baby on his arm. One of them drops something, a scarf, a blanket, or a jacket, he sees anyhow one of them dropping something on the cobblestones, and being shoved forward. Simon does not know who they are. He has been shut inside all the time he has been living here in this street. He cannot manage to feel sorry for them. He is relieved of course, although that word is a simplification compared to what he is feeling. In his thoughts this is not only something he observes, he wonders if there is not some kind of connection, a causality between his forbidden interlude on the stairway outside the hiding place and these people, the old couple, a family being picked up by the police. Perhaps he is one of the last to see them together.

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IT WAS NOT possible to explain. He could not explain it to anyone, it happened so suddenly. The depression. In those difficult periods he could continue for several weeks without being present, without noticing the days pass. I was the only one who knew. Not the children. I haven't told them about it, about the eclipse of the sun. About their relatives, all the people from his past who are gone.

Our conversations about it later, when he had changed his mind and felt that we should talk, tell them. I recall it as a clear picture, an imprint on my retina. I remember he was young, that he was still a young man, and we two were sitting beside each other, he in the driver's seat, I beside him, we were driving along a stretch of straight road with summer cottages and cabins, extensive fields, small gardens, huge farms with barns and farmhouses.

We had been at our summer cottage that day. The cottage was new, and we were so proud of it. An ordinary little cottage by the sea. It had been hard work to pack everything into the car when it was time to drive home. The children, tired out after swimming, falling asleep in the rear seat.

Simon's hand on the steering wheel. I remember it having a pale synthetic leather cover. That bright afternoon. And what he was talking about, the thoughts he was struggling with, that continued to bother him. It was like driving into a tunnel, shutting out the light.

I don't think we should talk about it now, I said.

But when will we talk about it, he whispered.

Once I turned away. I glanced at the girls sleeping on the backseat. They were lying in a heap, their skinny arms, breastbones, knees, brown from the sun. Only Helena was moving in her sleep, her tummy had been a bit sore before she dropped off, like the others she had hauled off her T-shirt and was lying with her top bare, it was before seat belts were compulsory, they were just lying there, as though we had flung them down, almost naked, they liked to snooze like that. The warm August sunlight was shining all around us. Simon by my side. He was wearing rectangular, black sunglasses, a severe style I thought emphasized his gravity when he talked. I did not want that seriousness. I have a memory of turning around and stretching my arms behind me, covering the girls with a sheet because of the open window.

What he talked about. The children sleeping. I wanted to keep it separate, keep them outside that dark tunnel. They are going to want it themselves, he said, to get to know something about it.

I looked around at the stores we were driving past, the tiny houses and gardens. I wanted to be a part of all that outside, that was what I wanted.

They are so little, I said.

Yes, but later, he replied.

He asked if I wanted them to grow up without knowing who he was, his background, the Jewish family. He turned to face me.

I do not remember if I returned his gaze, he had taken off the sunglasses, the deep impression on his nose left by the plastic, or whether I turned away, toward the window. I was scared. I visualized him on the bench in the city park when the darkness descended. I thought of the young women he had told me about, being led across the street toward the waiting vehicle. The baby.

He had already spoken a few times about the possibility of finding out more about his own family, there had been several relatives, a young aunt, a cousin too. He knew nothing about them, no one knew anything about them, what had happened after they had been discovered. They were gone, they were sent off in the same way as the family he had seen on the street that day. Probably for extermination, the atrocities in the camps.

Why now, what good will it do, I think I said. There's nobody left, why should you keep looking?

Once he had shown me photographs of children on their way to a gas chamber, they could have been pupils in single file on a school outing, eight or nine years old and carrying what I recall as bags or small bundles in their hands, dressed in warm coats, but with bare, skinny legs above their shoes. Youngsters glancing at the photographer as they walked past. He had asked me what I thought, how anyone could kill a child. Do you practice in advance, he asked, do you calculate how long it will take? And what do you do afterward. Do you just make your way home?

He was talking about it again as we drove. I thought there was something tactless about it, as though he were being

indiscreet, coarse, as though he were relating something inappropriate. It was not suitable.

The movement of the car. Our daughters sleeping.

I shushed him.

Don't drag all that darkness in here, I said.

I don't understand, he said. How it's possible to stop thinking about it.

And when he said that, it felt like a complaint, I felt insulted. He continued to talk for a while longer there in the car, until perhaps I asked him to stop, or perhaps he stopped by himself.

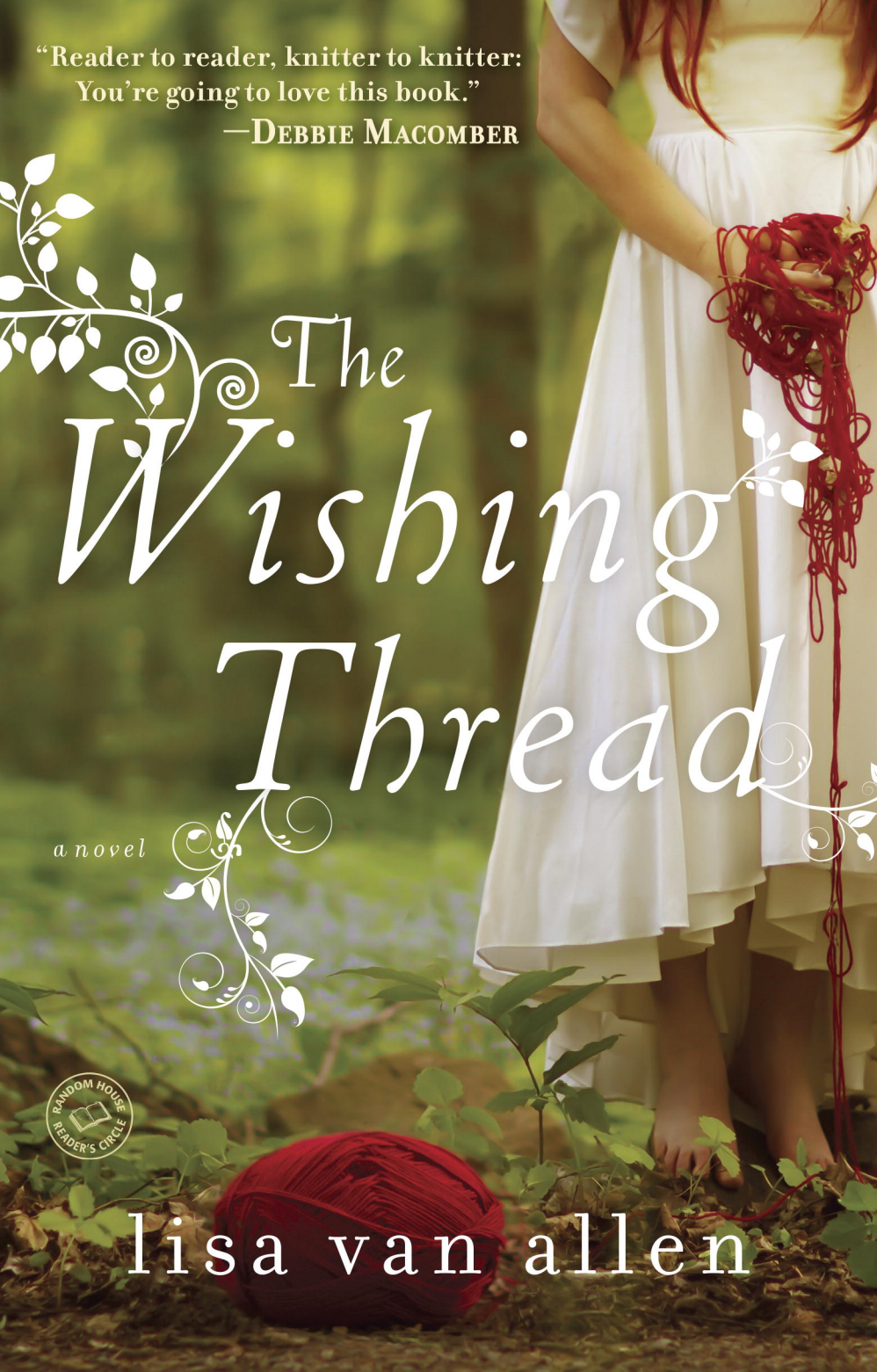
I looked nervously behind me at the children, at him with his suntanned hand on the steering wheel. The August sunlight through the car window. At any rate that is how I picture it now, afterward.

Later, when the girls were teenagers, they wanted to know things about us, they wondered why we never visited any of his relatives. It is surprisingly easy not to say anything, not to tell, to remain silent. I did not want to be part of it. For the girls to become part of it. We told them it had been a small family, we said nothing about the brother Simon had lost contact with, we stated that his parents had been old, they were gone now. Which of course was also true. His parents were already old immediately after the war.

We waited so long to tell them about it. I think we waited too long. By a certain point it had become too late.

I look at Simon and it strikes me that the worry caused his face to age many years before its time, his frontal bone

marked with a fine horizontal line I have always assumed to be a scar from his childhood, a little wound that has healed. The kind of scar children get easily when they are playing. But it could also be an expression he often has, a way of wrinkling his brow, that has left its mark.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You're going to love this book."
—Debbie Macomber
The Wishing Thread
a novel
Random House Reader's Circle
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"Long-Tail Cast On"

Mariah Van Ripper had never done things in life on anyone else's time line, and dying had been no exception. On Mariah's last earthly day in Tarrytown, her niece Aubrey had been sitting in the yarn room, the stitches of a lacy mohair shawl waltzing between her fingers. She hadn't realized she'd been dozing, her mind wandering dreamy byways even while her fingers danced through stitch after stitch, until the moment that Mariah appeared in the doorway.

"Oh good. Aubrey! There was something I wanted to tell you."

Aubrey looked up from her knitting. Framed by the doorjamb, Mariah listed slightly to the side like a wide flag waving in a gentle wind. She wore a long shapeless dress made of cotton so crisp and white that it nearly glowed.

"What are you doing back?" Aubrey asked. "I thought you had an appointment with Councilman Halpern. Did you forget something?"

"Yes . . . I believe I did."

"Well, whatever it was, I would have brought it over to you if you'd called me," Aubrey said, chastising a little. "What do you need?"

Mariah didn't answer. Her eyes were wide and confused as a sleepy child's. She murmured between half-closed lips.

"Mariah?" Aubrey stopped knitting at the end of a row, dropped her hands. The shawl lay sunlit and rumpled as yellow fall leaves in her lap. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Something I was going to tell you . . ."

"Well, let's hear it."

"Something . . ."

"Hey. You feeling okay?"

Aubrey watched her aunt's pupils telescope into tiny black points. She seemed focused on something Aubrey couldn't see, a speck of dust perhaps, dancing in the air, or some secret thought of her own, anchored so deep in her gray matter that her unseeing eyes drifted like boats from their moorings. Mariah was of middling height and impressive girth, with hair like long runny drippings of pigeon-gray paint. Although she had not been a beauty even in her youth, she had kind eyes, a generous smile, and deep, appealing wrinkles. The sun coming from behind her silvered her hair and the white hem of her dress.

"Ah, well," Mariah said. "I guess you'll have to figure it out." She sighed, not unhappily. And then she stepped out of the yarn room and out of sight.

Aubrey set aside her knitting and crossed the wide wooden floorboards. She felt light-headed, caught up in the swill of her own worry. Mariah's health had been in decline for the last few years, and it occurred to Aubrey that her aunt might be having a stroke. The doctors had warned them. Aubrey peered around the doorjamb; Mariah had vanished without the sound of a single footfall to mark the direction she'd gone.

Not even possible, Aubrey thought.

But she called up the stairs anyway. "Mariah?"

She called down the hall. "Hey, Mari?"

She jumped when the phone rang. The hair at the nape of her neck stood on end.

She picked up the receiver very slowly. "Yes?"

"Aubrey Van Ripper?" a stranger asked.

It was then that Aubrey knew—knew before she'd been told—that her aunt had not returned to the Stitchery for some forgotten item. In fact, she was not in the Stitchery at all. And Aubrey thought of how vulgar it was that news of death, such an intimate and private thing, should be borne on the lips of a stranger.

For the first time in her life, Aubrey was alone, fully and finally and unexpectedly alone, alone in that moment and forevermore alone, her knitting needles stilled on a table in the yarn room, her ear hot from the press of the phone, and a stranger's words floating to her from somewhere, not here, explaining a thing that had happened all the way across town.

In his private office not far from the Tarrytown village hall, safely ensconced behind neocolonial pillars and Flemish brickwork, Councilman Steve Halpern poured himself a drink from the small flask he kept for emergency use in his bottom desk drawer. The ambulance had left only moments ago, bearing Mariah Van Ripper's body away from his office for the last time. He leaned back in his cigar-brown chair. It whined under his weight.

"You know, a person never *wants* to see a thing like this happen," he said.

Jackie Halpern, who managed his electoral campaigns, his accounting, his sock drawer, and his blood-pressure medication, smiled. "Of course not."

"But if it *had* to happen—"

"Don't say it," she told him. "I know."

* * *

Slowly, like a thin vapor snaking its way inch by inch through Tarrytown's friendly suburban streets, rumors of Mariah Van Ripper's death spread among people who knew her and people who did not, until finally the fog of bad news wafted thick as raw wool down toward the river, down into the ramshackle neighborhood that Mariah had called home. The dogs of Tappan Square, mangy rottweilers and pit bulls that barked through closed windows, grew uniformly silent and did not so much as squeak at passersby. The oxidized old rooster atop the Stitchery's tower spun counterclockwise in three full circles before coming to point unwaveringly east, and if any of Tappan Square's residents had seen it, they would have known it was not a good sign.

Tappan Square was not Tarrytown's best-kept secret. It did not factor into the region's well-known, accepted lore. When visitors pointed their GPS systems toward Tarrytown and its sister, Sleepy Hollow, they always bypassed Tappan Square. Instead, they flocked to Sunnyside, the ivy-choked cottage where Washington Irving lived and died and dreamed of the Galloping Horseman and Ichabod Crane. They cowered happily at the foot of that tyrannical gothic castle, Lyndhurst, lording over the Hudson River with its crenellated scowl, and they pointed out landmarks from vampire horror movies in its dim, hieratic halls. They trudged among the lichen-flecked soul effigies at the Old Dutch Church, picking their way with cameras and sturdy shoes among tombstones that said BEEKMAN, CARNEGIE, ROCKEFELLER, and SLOAT. They searched for what everyone searches for on the shores of the Hudson River: enchantment. Some of that good old-fashioned magic. And yet, rarely did outsiders make their way to the neighborhood of Tappan Square, where salsa beats blared hard from the windows of rusting jalopies, where illegal cable wires were strung window-to-window, and where magic, or some

semblance of the thing, still found footing on the foundation of the building that the Van Ripper family had always called home.

The Stitchery, as it came to be called by neighbors and eventually by the family within it, had always been filled with Van Rippers. To its neighbors, the Stitchery was a curiosity like a whale's eyeball in a formaldehyde mason jar, a taxidermied baby horse with wax eyes coated in dust, a thing that should have been allowed to vanish after the life had passed out of it but instead was artificially preserved. With its architectural hodgepodge cobbled together over the centuries—its temperate Federalist core, its ardent mansard garret, its fish-scaled tower with witch's hat roof—the house did not offer the most welcoming appearance. The latest batches of Van Rippers, most recently led by Mariah, did not believe in renovation. They did not repaint over the awful cabbage-rose wallpaper in the parlor, or fix the scrolling black gate in front of the house that had been knocked crooked during the Great Blizzard of 1888, or replace the sign on the front door that read YARNS even though it was nearly illegible with age. In fact, they vehemently protested such alterations and "unnecessary" upgrades as affronts to history. Mariah Van Ripper was said to have wept, actually wept, when one of the Stitchery's great old toilets needed its innards gutted, and exact replacements for the old digestive system could not be found.

And so the Stitchery was allowed to fall out of fashion, then out of respectability, until it became a mote in an eyesore of a neighborhood, because Mariah had professed too much respect for her ancestors to fix a cockamamie shutter or tighten a baluster. This was the accretion of history that built up like dandruff or snow, and Mariah had always allowed it as one allows the sun to rise in the morning and set at night. Of course, her philosophy fit in nicely with her hatred of house-

work and her unwillingness to spend what little money the Van Rippers made on such a frivolous thing as a new doorbell. But whatever the root motivation, the result was that the Stitchery—regarded by some as the heart of Tappan Square, and regarded by others as the tumor—was ugly, dilapidated, and falling down.

As news of Mariah's death reached its tentacles into her neighborhood, a handful of Tarrytown transplants who had come from all corners of the world began to gather before the Stitchery's façade. The religious among the crowd crossed themselves and said their prayers, prayers that were not entirely altruistic, for Mariah's soul to be scooped up and deposited quickly in its final landing place, so long as it wasn't roaming the earth with the more well-mannered ghosts of Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown. Women who were friendly toward the Van Rippers set colorful candles in tall glasses on the sidewalk and fixed carnations to the Stitchery's crooked gate. They did not need to speak a common language to share a common worry: What would happen to the Stitchery? And worse: With Mariah gone, what would happen to them all?

The Van Rippers were charlatans to some, saviors to others. Crooks or angels. Saints or thieves. But even if the gossip about the Stitchery was just and only that—if the strangeness of the Stitchery began and ended with the things that were said about it—uncertainty had never stopped many generations of Tarrytown women from dragging themselves in desperation to the Van Rippers' doorway, begging for help. *Make me a sweater, make me mittens, make my baby healthy, make my husband love me again.*

The magic of the Van Ripper family, they said, was in the knitting.

If it was magic at all.

2

"Make a Knot"

There were only a handful of places in the area of Tarrytown where Aubrey Van Ripper appeared with any regularity: the grocery store, the library, the pet store, the sushi house, and sometimes—when the evening was clear and cool—the park. And so when she made her appearance at the hospital on the day that Mariah died, locals looked on with curiosity, half fearful and half intrigued. She wore clunky white orthopedic shoes like an old lady—though she was only twenty-eight—a horrific polyester blouse dotted with tiny forget-me-nots, and thick black glasses with plastic frames. Her hair was a pretty blond that swept to her shoulders, but it was frizzy and kinked with knots.

As for Aubrey, she wasn't nearly as interested in the hospital as it was in her. To her mind, the hospital should have been lively, frenetic, caught in the teeth-gnashing clench between death and life. Instead, it was dull. Bored administrative types chewed gum and watched the game show channel on the TV in the waiting room, which played a rerun of *Wheel of Fortune*. The lobby would have looked just like this—sterile and sleepy—whether or not her aunt had just died.

"Sign, please." A woman behind the counter thrust a translucent purple clipboard toward her. "If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask—anyone else but me."

Aubrey complied. There were so many words on every piece of paper, tiny words made of tiny letters, one running into the other. If she could unwind all the words out into a long, single thread, they would reach around the building and back again. She could knit them into a sweater. Or a heavy black shawl.

Out of the corner of her eye, Aubrey noticed a couple of the nurses standing together in a distant corner of the room, whispering softly with their heads bent low. They wore slouchy bright scrubs bedecked with cartoon flowers. One of them was Katrina Van der Donck, who liked to claim she was descended from the great seventeenth-century documentarian of Sleepy Hollow, Adriaen Van der Donck, who first recorded *Slapershaven* as name of the Hudson tributary that ran through the glen. The other woman was a stranger. They were trying not to glance Aubrey's way but were unable to avoid the temptation.

Aubrey bore their scrutiny as long as she could. Their whispers scratched at her eardrums like a dog at a door. Finally, she could not stand it. She glanced up, and both women winced. Aubrey spoke as loud as she dared. "You do realize I know what you're saying, right?"

"Oh my God. She's a mind reader, too?" the stranger said, loudly enough for Aubrey to hear. "You didn't say she was a mind reader."

"She's not a mind reader," Aubrey said.

"Oh no?" Katrina smirked. "What am I thinking now?" She crossed her arms and glared.

Aubrey lowered her eyes back to her paperwork. Her face was burning red; she could feel it. Her armpits were prickly with sweat. She did not know precisely why Katrina Van der Donck had come to hate her, but she guessed it had to do with the magic and that perhaps Katrina had paid for an ineffective

spell. Aubrey hated confrontation more than she hated squishy white bread in long plastic bags, more than she hated laugh tracks in sitcoms, more than she hated Steve Halpern. Mariah would have known what to say.

The Stitchery—and the women in it—had always been touched by a vague darkness, a miasma of speculation. Aubrey's ancestors trailed all the way back to the first settlers who lived in ditches in New Netherland earth, and the more distant the modern world became from those starved and lice-ridden adventurers, the more mysterious and alluring they began to appear, so that the effect of time on the progenitors of the Stitchery was like the effect of atmosphere on the stars.

Unfortunately for Aubrey, the gossips of Tarrytown didn't think the village librarian's assistant, who shopped for beets in the grocery store and who carried a picture of her pet hedgehog in her wallet, was especially captivating. The lore of the Stitchery was mysterious. Mariah had been its peculiar but venerable old maven. Aubrey—poor Aubrey—she was just weird.

Her appearance didn't help her reputation. As the next in line to be the guardian of the Stitchery—the next in line after Mariah—she bore the Stitchery's Mark. In Mariah, the Mark had manifested itself discreetly: Even with no perfume on, even when it was a hundred degrees in August, Mariah's skin smelled strongly of flower petals. The scent glands that made other people stink like horses had literally made Mariah smell like a rose—granted, a cheap rose that sometimes put one in mind of an Old West hooker, but a rose nonetheless. The people of Tarrytown had assumed that Mariah was just another old lady who drowned her sorrows in drugstore perfume. And although there were always exceptions, people liked her as well as any Van Ripper could be liked.

But Aubrey's Mark—the thing that had established early on that *she* would be the Stitchery's next guardian—was not so inoffensive or so easily explained away. Her Mark made people uncomfortable. Her Mark couldn't be disguised. Although Aubrey herself could not see what was wrong with her when she looked into the mirror, she'd been told often enough what other people saw: Her eyeballs, far too big for her face, were such a bright, bright blue that they were very nearly nauseating. They were blue as a spring robin's egg, if that egg were dipped in blue food coloring, then rolled in metallic blue glitter. They were, in fact, aggressively blue, and a person could not stare at them for very long before he had to look away.

Now, Aubrey missed the act of eye-to-eye communication no more than an adult might miss a half-remembered imaginary friend—with one exception. His name was Vic; and once, just once, she wished she could look at him straight-on.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. And when she turned, Jeanette Judge was there, fresh off her shift at the library and still smelling vaguely of old books. Jeanette's eyes, wet black eyes that never cared to hide a feeling, were wild with concern.

"I just heard. Are you okay?"

"I'm actually doing fine."

"Don't you lie to me, Aubrey Van Ripper," Jeanette said. She wore a gray poncho that Aubrey had knit for her years ago, when Jeanette had been having some trouble getting a loan to buy a car, and the way she stood now, with her hands on her hips, her dark forearms poking out below gray woolen fringe, and her elbows jutting to the sides, it struck Aubrey that she looked a bit like a gray knight holding a diamond-shaped shield. "Come here." Jeanette wrapped her up in strong arms, and Aubrey hugged her back, languishing in the

warm circle of her friend's strength, half tempted to see if she might lift her feet off the ground.

"What happened exactly?" Jeanette asked when at last she pulled away.

"Her heart blew out."

"Blew out? A heart isn't a spare tire."

Aubrey shrugged. She didn't want to say *heart attack*. A heart was not a thing that should have an *attack* mode. She might have explained herself, but Jeanette was glaring over her shoulder with murder in her eyes.

"Whatchoo looking at, Katrina Van der Donck?"

Aubrey turned slightly, saw the glint of wary pleasure in Katrina's eyes.

"Nothing much," Katrina said.

Jeanette's nostrils flared. "You like a good piece of gossip, huh? Well, I got one. It's about a certain person we both know who showed up on the Stitchery door looking for some of that Van Ripper voodoo."

"You wouldn't dare," Katrina said.

"I would, too," Jeanette said. "Now, why don't you go empty somebody's bedpan."

Katrina's upper lip lifted, showing her teeth. "Better than dealing with this crap." She grabbed her friend by the cotton elbow of her scrubs, and they disappeared into the labyrinth of hospital halls.

"You didn't have to do that," Aubrey said.

"Believe me. It's my pleasure."

Aubrey felt a smile crimping her lips despite the day's sorrow. *"Van Ripper voodoo?"*

"Bitch better not mess with me," Jeanette said.

Aubrey laughed. "I love your diction when you're angry."

"Just trying to do my college professors proud."

Behind the desk, the woman who had given Aubrey the

purple clipboard cleared her throat. Aubrey turned back to the paperwork with a sigh. She wondered how many times she would have to be reminded that Mariah was dead before she stopped needing reminding and before she stopped feeling surprised.

Years ago, Mariah had paid for her fortune to be told by a psychic—a chain-smoking single mother who had sworn that Mariah would be struck by lightning on her hundredth birthday. Instead—twenty years shy of a hundred—Mariah had dropped dead in the village hall on a day when there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Aubrey could imagine it: Mariah giving Steve Halpern a piece of her mind about the new shopping center that would replace Tappan Square, her fist raised dramatically in the air and her face as purple as an eggplant, when she'd collapsed on the floor never to get up again. If only there had been a curtain to drop, a crowd to throw roses and shout *brava!*—it would have been a more fitting ending.

Aubrey signed her name by yet another X.

"We're sure there was no foul play here, right?" Jeanette said.

"Of course not."

"I'm just saying. The guy might not have had a gun, but he killed her."

"Steve Halpern's a scumbag, not a murderer."

"He's a politician. And he killed her with stress."

"Well, he—"

"He did. He killed her. Over a damn shopping center. For God's sake, Mariah *died* fighting to keep him from demolishing her home!" Tears stained Jeanette's ocher-dark cheeks in giant rolling globules, the white of her irises shot through with red. "I don't understand how you're even here, Aubrey. Why aren't you home? Why aren't you crying into a cup of

peppermint tea? This is *Mariah* we're talking about. The woman who brought you up. The only family you have left—"

"My sisters—"

"Don't count. Come on, Aub. You're telling me you don't have one tear? Not one?"

Aubrey thought for a moment. Sometimes, when people lost a loved one, they said they felt numb. They said things like *It just hasn't sunk in yet*. Aubrey understood full well what it meant that her aunt had died; already, there was a kind of off-ness to everything she did and saw. She could look at a tree—like the gnarly little dogwood in front of the high school that she'd seen a thousand times—and even though it was the same tree it had always been, she could feel that something was different about it. Different, but not changed.

Already the Stitchery was calling, pulling like a thousand little hooks under Aubrey's skin. She'd known since she was thirteen and her eyes had transmogrified into medical-miracle blue that she would one day be married to the Stitchery, just like her Aunt Mariah had been, and just like her grandmother had been before that, and her great-grandmother before that, and her great-great-grandmother's sister before that, and whoever else before that, going all the way back to Helen Praisegod Van Ripper who first had doomed them all. Aubrey was just the latest Van Ripper to be chosen by the Stitchery as the guardian of its secrets—her life no more or less important than the other guardians'. And she'd forced herself to reconcile with her fate at society's fringes—even embrace it—years ago. She lived daily with the understanding that, eventually, someday, when she was ready, years and years from now, she would assume her aunt's role in the Stitchery and the community. The women of Tarrytown would come to her and heap their secret woes and griefs and desires on her shoul-

ders, and after a spell they would revile or revere Aubrey as they had reviled or revered Mariah, and Aubrey would grow old between the Stitchery's walls like a flower pressed between the pages of a book.

But all of that was supposed to have happened in the distant future—not the present, not while Aubrey was still so young. Mariah, who had shouldered Tarrytown's secrets with formidable resilience, was no longer around to help her. And her sisters, once as close to her as seeds in the heart of an apple, were gone.

"You want me to come home with you?" Jeanette asked, rubbing her back. "We'll order some pizza and stay up watching movies in our PJs?"

"It's okay," Aubrey said.

"I just don't think you should be alone right now."

"Thank you. But I want to," Aubrey said.

After she'd finished making arrangements for Mariah's body, and after she'd hugged Jeanette one last time, she dragged herself back to the Stitchery. She opened the door and realized she'd forgotten to lock it behind her when she'd left all those hours ago. She stood in the entryway. She stood still. The hallway stretched before her as it always had, with its brown shadows of water stains, its ghost lines where paintings once hung, its mottled blue wallpaper curling up along the seams. To her right was the parlor that no one used anymore. To her left, the knitting room, with its baskets and barrels, its profuse hanks and skeins and cakes of yarn. The house settled around her shoulders like a dusty pall.

She decided it was best not to think. She made an elaborate tofu sushi dinner—just for herself—then found she had no appetite. She took a long shower. She polished old silverware. She cleaned and cleaned. She gave her pet hedgehog,

Ichabod Van Ripper, a rinse in the bathroom sink, brushing his brown-flecked little quills with an old toothbrush as he snuffed in indignation. She attempted to read. But try as she might to keep her hands busy, she still felt her fingers moving of their own accord, stitching the air.

She wandered down the hall, her slippers shuffling because they felt too heavy to lift. Mariah had said, *I won't be gone long*, and her bedroom seemed to be expecting her any moment now. The splashy dahlia wallpaper. The vintage postcards tucked into the mirror's thick frame. Death had not come as some sinister shadow, some ponderous and brooding thing. It had taken Mariah as lightly and as absentmindedly as if the Grim Reaper himself had done no more than lift his hand to swat a gnat in the air.

Aubrey sat on Mariah's bed, her shoulders bent with sorrow but her eyes dry. On the bedside table, Mariah's last project, a Fair Isle beret, lay just as Mariah had left it when she'd had every intention of coming back to it again. The stitches were tiny and even, the pattern of burnt orange, navy, and buttermilk just starting to emerge. The beret was not a spell, Aubrey knew. Just a way to pass the hours. Aubrey picked up the unfinished project, which was more like a floppy Frisbee with a missing middle than a hat, and drew it onto her lap. How many times in her life had she heard her aunt say to no one in particular, "Where did my scissors go?" How many times had she seen her aunt tucking in loose threads from finished projects, hiding beginnings and ends?

Without Mariah, without her sisters, Aubrey's future in the Stitchery stretched out long and bleak as a winter shadow.

She thought: *Mari . . . I'm not ready.*

If there really were Fates, those ancient sisters who measured men's lives in yards of yarn or twine, Aubrey knew

them intimately, knew them with a knowledge that ran as deep as her own DNA: women dyeing and spinning, women pulling fibers through their fingertips with educated scrutiny, women considering and cutting, talking things over, putting down their scissors, and then forgetting—just for a moment—where.

From the Great Book in the Hall: *We must never knit when we're feeling sad, or hopeless, or mean. Our stitches get filled up with our thoughts and emotions, and so we must be careful. Blessings are often made with trumpeting and pomp—our hearts cry out to God, to the Universe, and say "Blessed be!" Our blessings bless us because we feel so pleased to utter them.*

But curses do not always come from such places of drama, like King Lear rushing out into the storm, his fist raised to the heavens and damning words on his lips. No—curses can come easily. We mutter them every day: at drivers who cut us off, at long lines in the grocery store, at ourselves when we do something as frivolous as dropping a pen on the floor.

Curses can be carried around in our hearts with no more fanfare than a cocklebur catching a hiker's sock in the fall. They are as malevolent as a tiny new freckle, a contamination like a single black ant in the sugar jar. And so we must not knit if we feel negativity or sadness. Otherwise, a curse, even the smallest of bad wishes, may be passed on.

3

"Increase 4 Sts"

The second Friday of October brought rain to Tarrytown: The sky was gray, the Hudson River had hardened into pewter, the iron girders of the Tappan Zee Bridge were made melancholy by the clinging of raindrops, the trees were grisaille sketches of charcoal and lead.

It was pouring when Bitty woke her son and daughter. They were sleeping in the backseat of the minivan, Carson with his cheek flattened against the window, his breath making white flames dance on rain-flecked glass, and Nessa with her jacket bunched like a pillow, her bright red hair hanging around her shoulders. Neither child looked comfortable.

"Come on, guys," Bitty said. "Wake up. Grab your things."

She did not wait to see them come sleepily back to life. She flung open her door, a cold, heavy rain soaking her jeans even before her foot made contact with the ground. Water ran in little rivulets down the street, miniature rivers dragging sticks and fallen leaves. She looked through the telescoping alleyway between the Stitchery and the neighbor's house, but she couldn't see the Hudson River. Too much fog.

She lifted open the back hatch and stuck her head inside. "Guys. I said come on."

"God, Mom." Nessa's voice was tired and young. Bitty

could barely hear it over the pounding rain. "It's . . . what . . . like, seven o'clock in the morning?"

"Please just help me," Bitty said.

She grabbed all the bags she could—the duffels and backpacks, a grocery-store bag stuffed with Carson's sneakers, her brown leather luggage that she'd never used before. Her kids climbed out of the car.

Nessa complained. "I'm getting wet."

"We all are, stupid," Carson said.

Bitty shut the hatch. "Hurry! Come on."

She ran—galumphing along with all that she could carry—to the safety of the porch. For a second, she was transported. She was racing her sisters to the top of the stairs. She was running, breathless, from the bullying kids who sometimes chased her home before she learned to stand up to them. She was standing on the stoop in the darkness, secretly kissing the man who swore to love her forever.

When she turned around, she saw that her children hadn't followed. They were staring up at her from the ground, grassy brown puddles of mud rippling around them. The Stitchery lorded over its patch of soggy yard, its Depression-era porch drooping in a disapproving frown.

"Guys . . . come on. It's okay."

She saw them trade a glance—her two children who had already started to look to each other for comfort in the way that children did when they came from troubled homes—and then Carson hitched up his backpack and led the way. Nessa walked slowly, twelve years old and too cool to bother with a thing as trifling as rain.

"This place is a shit-hole," Nessa said.

"Language—"

"She meant to say *poop*-hole," Carson said.

Bitty looked around, thinking of some encouraging and motherly thing to say, like *It's not that bad*. But the house was crumbling, the yard was overgrown, and the neighborhood was on the brink. "Fine. It's a poop-hole," she said.

Aubrey had not yet dressed for the day when Bitty and her children arrived. She'd spent the entire night in Mariah's room. She'd picked up *Northanger Abbey* where it had been open at the foot of Mariah's bed, and she'd started reading where her aunt had left off. Sometime in the night she'd pulled on Mariah's fuzzy pink bathrobe for warmth against the autumn chill. And in the morning, she did not throw off the covers. She stayed in bed, fighting to stay asleep. She dreamed she was knitting a sweater for a tree and she couldn't figure out the proportions. When she heard her older sister calling up the stairs—*hello? hello?*—she wasn't startled. She'd called her sister and had been expecting Bitty to arrive. She tied Mariah's robe tighter around her middle and walked downstairs.

The last time Aubrey had seen her sister, Carson had been a toothless preemie, so small he might have fit in a shoe box, crying and wriggling in Aubrey's arms. And Nessa had been just two years old, dressed in pink and put out by all the attention that her new brother got just for being born.

In the weeks before Carson's birth, Aubrey had made a sweater—a simple top-down hand-knit in a cream-and-blue stockinette. As she knit, she'd cast her wish for him: She envisioned him discovering things that would brighten his childhood—books and bugs and mushrooms and games of tag among friends. She pictured him being handed a diploma, being offered his dream job. She imagined for him a partner, a perfect complementary heart, and she wished for him all

the nerves and joy and anticipation of having children of his own. She knit all these visions as vividly as possible into the sweater she made for him, all these and more, and when it finally came time to bind off, she prayed that he one day would be received into heaven with perfect peace and ease, his great-grandchildren beside him, his cup running over for all he had lived, seen, and done.

The sweater had been beautiful—tiny stitches on size three needles, a neckline that opened with a birch button at the shoulder, nearly invisible seams. But when Bitty opened the brown paper package at the baby shower and took the sweater out right there in front of everyone—wealthy in-laws and fashionable playdate moms—her face fell.

"Oh, thanks," she'd said. And she'd gone on to the next gift as awkwardly as if Aubrey had given her some raunchy little nightie, or a subscription to a weight-loss magazine, or some other publicly embarrassing thing.

That day, Aubrey had no choice but to notice what she otherwise would have denied: Bitty had rejected the ways of their childhood, the ways of the Stitchery, once and for all. Soon her sister's trips home became phone calls, and her phone calls became greeting cards, and her cards became emails, her emails grew few and far between, until somehow all the long elisions of the years clouded over with fog, obscuring and isolating them one from the other—and the woman who stood in the Stitchery entryway, calling *Hello? Anyone home?* was no longer the same sister who used to braid Aubrey's hair, and tuck the covers around Aubrey's legs so she could feel like a mermaid, and make Aubrey peanut butter milk shakes when she scraped her elbow and cried.

Aubrey paused—a bit dramatically, as Mariah might have done—with her hand on the newel post. She looked at her sister standing in the front hall. "You're here."

"Yes," Bitty said. Water dripped from her hair into her coat collar. She had set down her bags—so many, many bags—but her children gripped theirs in clenched hands. "I got your voice mail. And I came as soon as I could." Bitty smiled tightly. "We tried to get a hotel but there's some kind of convention in town."

"The Descendants of Dutch Boerers Society," Aubrey said. "What about your husband. Is he . . . ?"

"We left a note for Craig. We didn't want to wake him." Bitty cleared her throat then turned to her children. "Anyway, guys, don't be rude. Say hello to your aunt Aubrey."

"Hello to your aunt Aubrey," Carson said.

Aubrey laughed.

Nessa murmured a hello.

"Nice to mee—*see*—you," Aubrey said.

She gripped the round ball atop the newel post. She was glad to see her niece and nephew; some of the emptiness in her heart eased. And yet there was some other feeling sloshing around inside her, too—one she couldn't perfectly name. Here were Nessa and Carson—Nessa with her lion's mane of red hair, Carson still boyish but becoming handsome—and already she loved them with all she had in her. But she hardly knew them at all.

"That's a great scarf," she said to Nessa.

Nessa reached up and touched the slouchy knit hanging around her neck. The scarf was the color of toasted oats, flecked by bits of hunter green and brown. Cables twined like snakes around one another, and dozens of little bobbles nestled among the braids. Nessa unwound it from her neck. "Thanks."

"Did you make it?"

"Mom got it for me."

"May I?" She reached out to touch the scarf. But no sooner

had she brushed it with her fingertips than she pulled her hand away, her suspicions confirmed. "Acrylic." She shot a glance at her sister. "You have her wearing *acrylic*?"

Bitty shrugged. "It was on sale."

"I'll knit her a new one while she's here. Or better yet—I'll teach her to make one herself."

"You can teach me?" Nessa's eyes lit up. "Really? You could, like, *make* this thing?"

In the space of a moment, Aubrey felt the room change, the air itself going lighter on her skin. When Aubrey was young, so young that she didn't know words like *expectation* and *estrangement*, her aunt Mariah had sat her down on a small footstool, then she'd sat behind her and pulled the stool backward until Aubrey's torso was nearly between her knees. A moment later, Mariah's arms were around Aubrey's shoulders and her hands were in front of Aubrey's face. A knitter's-eye view. To this day, Aubrey could think of no place that she'd felt safer, no place more loved. A thread of strong wool was wrapped around Mariah's left hand, her pointer finger extended and yarn dangling from the tip like twine from a fishing pole. Aubrey had held her breath.

Now, Mariah had said. *Watch this.*

Aubrey tightened Mariah's fluffy pink robe around her middle. Outside, the wind blew harder and faster, rattling the sidelight windows like loosened teeth. Nessa lifted a little on her toes while she waited for an answer.

Aubrey smiled. "Of course, Nessa. I'd love to teach you to knit. I'd be honored."

But Bitty put her arm around her daughter and tugged her close. "Sorry. No can do. We're just staying for the funeral. And then we're gone."

* * *

The three Van Ripper sisters may not have always seen eye-to-eye, and in their younger years they could often be heard by the neighbors bickering over the most peculiar things—their collection of pet worms, whose turn it was to cut Aunt Mariah's toenails, the right way to hold a frog. But there was one thing the Van Ripper girls had learned to do together without argument very early on, and that was knitting.

During the knitting hour, which usually took place after dinner and homework but just before bed, Aubrey and her sisters met with their aunt in what was once supposed to have been the Stitchery's front parlor for receiving guests. In the shop, yarns were just yarns. But when Mariah knit, they were transformed into sweaters, scarves, hats, first kisses, passing grades, newborn babies, and any number of desperately wished-for things.

In her brightly patterned dresses of the most god-awful colors, and with her gray hair hanging like seaweed around her face, Mariah would light a candle, say a prayer. Then the knitting would begin, each sister alone with the sound of her own breathing, with the stitches that dropped like pebbles into a quiet pool.

The trick, Aunt Mariah had said, *is to clear your mind.* To let your thoughts drain. At any given moment, a knitter was always knitting with at least two yarns: one that was the actual fiber, and another that was an invisible thread, the essence of the knitter, that accompanied every stitch. A wish held and sustained with clarity of mind while knitting would somehow wend its way into the fabric, and later when the fabric became a sweater or a hat, that wish would materialize. In this way, making magic was nothing more than intense, focused wishing. It all seemed very simple. It was not simple at all.

And so from a very young age, the girls learned to knit in

silence, to embrace the paradox of thinking of nothing as a mental preparation for the day when one of them, the chosen guardian, would actually knit spells.

Of all three Van Ripper sisters, Meggie, the youngest, had been the most restless each evening when Mariah had gathered them into the parlor for knitting hour. In kindergarten, other children were learning to tie their shoes, but Meggie was already an expert at both the knit and purl stitches—whether she liked it or not. She fidgeted and huffed, she curled her toes, she clamped her teeth. And it never failed that once she finally, *finally* began to give herself over to the knitting—to her, the rhythm sometimes felt like being lifted by ocean waves and set gently on her feet again—the session ended. The older she got, the more she understood: There was a beauty to be had by the simple working of her fingers, the stilling of her mind. But she'd never been able to do more than open the door to that peaceful place before it was shut again.

On some days she resented Aubrey, who seemed to knit so effortlessly, so *fast*. With her fingers working a pair of rosewood needles and a ball of soft gray yarn, Aubrey looked quite pretty, almost nun-ish, her eyelids drooping but her eyes glowing blue like the Chagall windows of Union Church on a dark night. Meggie, meanwhile, could not wrestle peace out of a brain that was always jammed up with other things: how her aunt had taken her out of school, how normal kids her age got to do plays in an actual auditorium as opposed to a living room, how normal kids had trophies from soccer, or ballet, or even math leagues, and how Meggie had only the knitting—the endless knitting—chains of stitch after stitch.

The older Meggie got, the more restless she became. When Meggie was twelve, Bitty, who had been out of high school for

about eighteen months, ran away with the man who would become her husband. The evenings of knitting continued just like they always had, except without Bitty. Meggie wasn't surprised that her sister had flown the coop: Bitty had been skipping the knitting hour on and off for many of her later teen years, wiggling herself out of the Stitchery even as Meggie was wiggling out the last of her baby teeth, so that by the time Bitty's separation was complete, Meggie was prepared to bear it. She, like Bitty, was destined to leave the Stitchery. But she would not travel in her oldest sister's footsteps: She would cut and mow and bushwhack a path of her own. Aubrey and Mariah—they were the ones who would stay.

One day when Meggie was almost eighteen, Mariah found the old red backpack that Meggie had hidden in her closet in case of an emergency, stuffed with all the things she needed to run away. *You might go*, Mariah had said, *but you'll never really go. The Stitchery will call you back, and when it does, you'll need to drop everything. Whatever you're doing. And come home.*

It wasn't until Meggie was twenty-two, four years away from the stuffy strictures of the Stitchery, that she realized Mariah's warning had not been entirely metaphorical. She and her newest guy-friend were lying in his bed, pleasantly exhausted and sticky with sweat. They'd been at his place in Savannah for all of ten minutes. Meggie's shirt had landed on Phil's guitar case. Phil's boxers hung from a huge black amp.

Meggie plucked up a thread that had dislodged from the frayed black edge of her T-shirt, and she traced the loose end over the tattoos on Phil's chest—a dragon, a music note, a small black bat. He'd been talking for the last week about getting her name inked over his heart, but she warned him: *Don't.*

"What do you feel like for dinner?" he asked her.

"I don't know."

"Chinese? Italian?"

"Whatever," she said. "I'm not really that hungry." Conversations about food, especially ones that went on and on, were bad omens. Already, the heady rush she'd felt after she met Phil, the feeling of having held her breath for too long, was fading. She knew herself. She knew that once she got her feet under her again she usually started walking.

She sighed and traced the thread around his small pink nipple. She plucked up a few more threads and thought, *It's time to throw that shirt away.* She lifted the threads over his chest and then let them fall one by one. Slowly, they curled against Phil's sternum, forming loops and swags.

She lifted up on her elbow.

"What is it?" he asked.

She grasped all the threads at once, in one fist, raised them, and let them fall again. Still, the threads fell slowly, and slowly formed improbable scrolls. Her head felt simultaneously heavy and light.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Don't you see it?"

He ducked his head, his chin disappearing into his chest, to scowl at the threads that had settled on his breastbone. "See what?"

"Nothing," she said.

By midnight, she was on a bus north, the soft Georgia Low Country trailing like half a dream behind her, and a vision of the Palisades—five hundred feet of craggy Triassic diabase—before her like a battlement in her mind's eye. The man in the seat next to her was snoring and drooling on his suit.

Did it freak you out when you were a kid? the people she

met sometimes wanted to know when they found out she was from Tarrytown. *Growing up with all those stories about the Headless Horseman? Were you afraid?*

Meggie leaned her head against the bus's window.

Was I? she told them. *I still am.*

The message in the threads had been simple:

go

From the Great Book in the Hall: *There is, of course, always a question—a question of the difference between what is real and what is true. A thing can be true without being real. You may not grasp this entirely, but don't worry. This is the nature of faith, of magic, of art, of a good life's work: If you ever understand perfectly what you're doing, you should stop right away.*

FOREVER FRIDAY

A Novel

TIMOTHY LEWIS

Timothy Lewis

WaterBrook
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The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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For Dinah:
my wife, my soul mate,
my Forever Girl

Hope is not a granted wish or a favor performed; no, it is far greater than that. It is a zany, unpredictable dependence on a God who loves to surprise us out of our socks.

–Max Lucado, *God Came Near*

Prologue

Summer 2006
Adam Colby

Some great romances worth the telling are never told, their lovers slipping silently between life's timeworn cracks only to be pitched with yesterday's trash. As owner of a small estate-sale business, I'd witnessed evidence over the years of various couples' love lives. So I'd learned to sift through the piles of forgotten memories. Learned to appreciate a second look…and perhaps ease my pain.

That was how I discovered the postcards.

Bargain hounds and treasure hunters pushed through the heavy front door of Gabe and Pearl Alexander's beloved home early before rushing away to their next classified find. Antique buyers, who were more savvy, missed the cards because they were camouflaged among several dozen identical photo albums. Inside their vinyl maroon covers, these albums held not the usual faded family snapshots, but hundreds of colorful postcards revealing six decades of married passion recorded in rhyme beside canceled postage stamps.

Surprised to find postcard poems instead of photos, I began reading them in between my dealings with customers. As a thirty-eight-year-old man who had once committed to "forever," I was intrigued. What was

this couple's secret? In a fast-food world of abbreviated relationships, what supernatural love potion kept Gabe and Pearl enamored with each other for more than half a century?

So I continued reading through lunch and into the sale's afternoon lull. I'm not sure I believed in love anymore, especially married love, but found myself becoming more entranced as each minute passed. Even though the Alexanders had lived together in the same house, the postcards were sent over the years from Gabe to Pearl, beginning in 1926. Each unique card was signed "Forever, Gabe," the poem connecting an episode of their love to the picture on the front.

My guess was Gabe died in the mid-1980s, because that's when the cards stopped.

One of the earliest cards was dated September 4, 1927. On the front was a picture of two colorful seashells. On the back, this poem:

```
Two tiny shells, together side by side
Wandering to and fro about the morning tide.
Two tiny shells, now picked up by a man
Who sets them out to dry upon the glistening
      sand.
Two tiny shells, how delicate, how proud
To be created by the One whose throne's above
      the clouds.
And these two tiny shells are sent to you
      by me
Because I know you understand God's wonders
      by the sea.
Forever, Gabe
```

I was curious if he'd mailed Pearl two actual seashells along with the postcard and, if so, what had happened to them. Surely she'd have treasured them, but the only seashells in their belongings were large and obviously store-bought. The ocean must have played a significant role in their marriage because there were several cards with sailboats and beach scenes, and with Galveston so close by.

"What kind of man invests this much time in his marriage?" I said aloud, feeling a little betrayed by a guy I'd never met. Love wasn't a competition, but Gabe had left me floundering in the dust, and most other men as well. Men who loved their wives, or *said* they did, even though many times their actions proved otherwise.

At least I wasn't a hypocrite.

Or was I?

Just before the sale ended, a customer declared himself the Alexanders' next-door neighbor, so I discreetly asked about their interest in the sea.

"Wouldn't know," he said, then shrugged. "Gabe died shortly after I bought my place. Pearl would speak to me from across the yard, but she wasn't keen on in-depth conversations."

"Why?"

"Valued her privacy, I guess." He shrugged again. "Spent the last year of her life confused and in an extended-care facility."

"Can you tell me anything else?" I asked.

"Pearl had an unusual nickname."

"Nickname?"

"Yeah, like a man's, but I can't remember it." The neighbor paused. "Do you know what happened to their car? A big 1940s model Oldsmobile. Mint condition."

I shook my head, wondering if the postcards contained Pearl's nickname.

"The old gal probably needed the money and sold it," the man continued. "Shame. I'd have bought it." He rubbed his chin. "Any tools left?"

"Out in the garage," I replied.

"The Alexanders were nice folks," the man added before walking away. "Too bad you never met them."

The neighbor was correct. I'd never met them, but had heard from the attorney who hired me that they had no children and were donating the bulk of their estate to charity. However, their will included detailed instructions that certain sentimental items be delivered to various relatives still living in the Houston, Texas, area. I usually contracted that job to a moving company, but since the Alexanders' home was only a few miles from mine, and the items were small, I elected to deliver them myself. After reading the postcards, I felt strangely invested in Gabe and Pearl and was more than happy to oblige.

Over the next few weeks I made deliveries and asked questions. Some thought it odd that a total stranger would take such an interest in their kin. Others spilled all they knew to me, even digging up yellowed newsy letters. I selfishly decided not to mention the postcard albums unless someone asked about them, and no one did. So I concluded they were kept secret. In some ways, it even seemed the postcards had been written for me. But I couldn't keep them, not in good conscience anyway. At the end of my quest, I'd take them to an Alexander relative as "accidentally overlooked."

Gabe's typewriter went to their niece, Alice Davis. Alice recently had knee replacement surgery and was, in her words, "convalescing

nicely." I spent a rainy afternoon wrapped up in her thoughtful recollections. She also told me about the Alexanders' deceased longtime housekeeper, Priscilla Galloway, whose daughter, Yevette, looked after Pearl during that final year. I contacted Yevette and scheduled an appointment to meet with her the following week.

I suppose my obsession with the postcards was as much a matter of timing as anything. The stinging loneliness of my divorce still lingered, the blunt ache of a failed marriage. As I sent a confirmation e-mail to a somewhat reluctant Yevette, my eyes settled on a folder I'd saved with messages from my ex-wife. I opened it and clicked on her final e-mail. Even though it was dated approximately two years prior, devastation washed over me as though I were reading it for the first time.

Adam,

Today we're officially over. Thanks for respecting my wishes. If you're still hoping I'll change my mind, don't. I need my own life. You need to move on. So please, no more questions. When did I stop loving you? I'm not sure. Is there someone else? Yes. That's why I didn't contest the house. I never intended to hurt you.

Haley

The words "someone else" were, unsurprisingly, still the most painful.

Someone else?

In twelve years of marriage we'd had our share of difficulties, but hadn't everyone? I had never doubted our love, nor envisioned a life

without her. Other than what couldn't have been helped, where had we gone wrong? What could we have done to prevent disaster?

For each hour I pored over the Alexanders' postcards, I wondered if I could ever love another woman. Worse, after striking out in my first marriage, did I deserve a second chance?

I didn't know. I thought I should have the best that life offered until the woman I loved walked away. At first I blamed her. Then I blamed myself. But one thing was clear: Pearl and Gabe knew something Haley and I'd missed. So I'd seek the source of the Alexanders' wisdom. And learn from past mistakes. My gut told me that time was my friend *and* my enemy. If I bogged in my quest, despair could scar into bitterness.

Years ago I discovered that jotting my thoughts on paper, then punching them into a computer, helped me organize. Helped me process. So by recording the Alexanders' story, I hoped to uncover their secret. I suspected that something Gabe called "The Long Division" in the poems was key to their marital longevity. But I still had many postcards to contemplate, along with a few loaned letters and whatever I might glean from Yevette. If feeling bold, I'd fill any remaining blanks in the Alexanders' story with my own interpretations…or longings.

Could a man turn an about-face after marching in the wrong direction for more than a dozen years?

At this point, I could only hope.

One

Bayshore Extended Care Facility, 2004
Mrs. Alexander

Mrs. Alexander lay in her hospital bed at Bayshore Extended Care and daydreamed of being anywhere but there. She despised the bland food, her beige room, and the incessant talk-show tripe from a television across the hall. Living in the same building with a bunch of elderly people was taxing at best.

To make matters worse, the patient roster listed her as Pearl Garnet Alexander. She'd hated the name for most of her ninety-nine years. Not the Alexander part. Alexander was her married name and had been since 1926. Before that she'd been a Huckabee.

Pearl Garnet Huckabee.

One jewel-encrusted name was bad enough, but she'd had to endure two. That was until her seventh summer birthday when she decided her family must call her Huck.

Huck Huckabee.

Her mother, Annise, refused at first, saying she'd spent many precious hours considering a fancy name for each of her thirteen children. And now her youngest daughter insisted on a plain name like Huck. A boy's name. It would remind folks of that poor orphan in

Mark Twain's novel who smoked, drank, and caroused up and down the Mississippi with a runaway slave.

But Pearl argued that slavery, thank goodness, had ended during the last century and borrowing a name from a grand tale like *Huckleberry Finn* only made one appear just as grand.

So at age seven and a half, the name Huck stuck.

Stuck like globs of grammar school paste, gently smoothed, then hardened over time. Somewhere in that half year, the glorious transition occurred. Family first, then friends. By Thanksgiving, using her given name was unthinkable.

Huck sat up in her bed. She adored the name Huck; its carefree, adventuresome aura defined her. Lamar, her good-natured twin brother who was six minutes older, had wanted a nickname too, but nothing caught on until they were in high school. He was a natural at baseball, especially when it came to hitting well-placed grounders. And since a fast ground ball was labeled a *daisy cutter,* Huck had immediately dubbed him Cutter. A few of their classmates had mischievously tried to call him Daisy, but without success. He carried the name Cutter for the rest of his life. After Huck married Gabe Alexander, they'd ardently followed Cutter's career from the minor leagues into the majors.

So just where was Mr. Gabe Alexander? It was Friday. He would leave work soon and she should be ready. The nurses had lied about last week's postcard. Said there was no mail, even though she'd later heard snippets of truth sprinkled among condescending little whispers. And here it was Friday again. There would be a new card with a lovely picture on the front. On back, a wonderful verse composed just for her. Over the years Gabe had missed only one Friday…that dreadful week he'd slept alone in intensive care.

Huck peered out the window. A budding mixture of pink and white azaleas signaled the end of the mild Houston winter. She smiled, recalling a glorious spring day from long ago. She'd boarded a Main Street trolley engaged to Clark Richards and disembarked enamored with Gabe, falling heart-long in love that night on a deserted Galveston beach. Each time he breathed her name his eyes twinkled. Even after sixty years when he could barely catch his breath.

She refocused her attention back inside the room and reached for the phone, thankful to have it back. The nurses had removed it until she'd promised them—and Yevette—that any future calls would be made in a responsible manner. It was embarrassing to have bothered that sweet child with such trivial matters. But an entire month without a trip to her own hairdresser had been a true emergency. A lady's hair style and color set her image.

The current postcard situation was equally dire and Yevette must agree. Hiding someone's private mail was the same as stealing. It was a federal offense and there was only one responsible thing left to do.

For the second time within a week, Huck Alexander dialed 911.

It took only minutes for the wail of sirens to reach her ears. She lay back and smiled…remembering the first time she saw Gabe.

MOTHER, MOTHER

KOREN ZAILCKAS

A NOVEL

New York Times bestselling author of ***SMASHED***

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First Edition

William Hurst

Her face was the first thing William Hurst saw when he opened his eyes from his not-so-sweet dreams. His mother, Josephine, was smiling down at him, her blue eyes misty-soft, sunlight streaming through her hair, the same way it did to the happy Jesus in Will's *Storybook Bible*.

On this particular Saturday, *mother* was both a noun and a verb.

Behind her, at the end of Will's bed, was the frog habitat he'd begged for all summer. It had a paddling pond for tadpoles and a rocky ledge where frogs could doze beneath a canopy of green plastic clover.

Will knew he should be jabbering with excitement. There she was, waiting for him to pump his fist and thrash with glee (not that he would *ever* dare jump on the bed). But something was off. The timing didn't add up.

"Is today my birthday?" Will asked. "Did I do something to deserve an extra-special reward?"

"No," Josephine said. "Today isn't your birthday. And *you*, little man, are *my* extra-special reward."

She reached for the boy's face, as if to give his bandaged chin

a playful pinch or tuck his too-long hair behind his earlobe. But then the phone rang and her freshly moisturized hand froze, suspended in the space. She pulled away and padded off in her slippers to answer it, a Velcro roller tumbling out of her hair and sticking, burr-like, in the carpet.

The house should have been quiet now that Will's sixteen-year-old sister Violet had been banished. Oddly, the Hurst family home was louder. Even after his mother hung up her cell phone, her voice remained nervous, her actions rackety. Will followed her downstairs to the kitchen, where the radio was already on, cranked to WRHV. Cupboard doors slammed. Silverware barrel-rolled as she jostled the drawers.

The rotten-egg smell of his father's morning shower wafted down the staircase. The well water was sulfuric. Violet liked to say that hell smells like sulfur. So do places infested with demons. If Will believed his mother—and he had no reason not to—demons were rebels like Violet. They fell from grace when they looked into God's gentle eyes and announced they didn't need him anymore.

At the kitchen table, Josephine asked, "Is a noun a doing word, a describing word, or a naming word?"

"A describing word," Will told her between swallows of oatmeal.

Josephine's smile—a bright sideways sliver of moon—made it impossible for him to know whether he'd answered right or wrong.

"Let me put it this way," she said. "Which word is the noun in this sentence: 'I always know what I am doing.' "

"What."

"I said, which word is the noun in this sentence—"

"No, Mom. I wasn't asking, What? I was trying to tell you 'what' is the *answer*."

"Oh," Josephine said. "Oh, I was expecting you to say 'I.' But I suppose 'what' is right in this instance too."

The portable phone screamed in its cradle. Josephine picked it up and wandered out of the kitchen saying, "No, I told you. I have a twelve-year-old special-needs son. She's a danger to him. I can't have her here."

Will had autistic spectrum disorder with comorbid epilepsy. To him, that always sounded like a good thing—the word *spectrum* being halfway to *spectacular*. But Will knew his differences secretly shamed his family, his father, Douglas, in particular. At Cherries Deli, Will was always aware of his dad's gaze lingering on the youth soccer leagues eating postgame sundaes. Probably, Douglas longed for a sturdier and more social son—a buzz-cut bruiser who could shower and climb stairs unsupervised, without the nagging threat of seizures.

Will's mother tried to put a positive spin on his health conditions. Once when Will was in a wallowing mood, he'd blubbered, "I'm not like normal people!" And Josephine had consoled him by saying, "No, you're not. And thank God for that. Normal people are dim-witted and boring."

Will had received his dual diagnosis nine months ago, and his mother had been homeschooling him ever since. A onetime academic, Josephine was every bit as good as Will's former teachers. Plus, she custom-made his curriculum. She was patient with Will in math, where it took him ages to grasp square roots, and rode him relentlessly in language arts, where she prided herself on the quality of his writing and his ability to read above grade level.

Violet used to tell Will that he was blessed to have autism. She was studying Buddhism, and she said that Will must have been an

exceptionally good person in a past life. A patient, selfless, saintly sort of person. So in this life, he'd been rewarded for his past goodness with heightened sensitivities. According to Violet, Will felt things more deeply and understood things most people overlooked, and this made his everyday more like Nirvana.

Josephine didn't appreciate his sister's interest in Eastern religion. She didn't like the humming sound of Violet's Tibetan singing bowl, her woodsy incense, the picture of Geshla in a glitzy gold frame on her bedside table.

The Hursts were Catholic. Whenever Violet sat cross-legged with a strand of mala beads, Josephine told her to put away her "faux rosary." Back in August, Violet had shaved off all her hair with their father's electric beard trimmer. Will remembered Douglas storming into the family room, a long brown wisp threaded through his fingers, shouting, "Violet! What is the meaning of *this*?!" Without so much as turning her bald head away from her guided-meditation DVD, Violet had said: "Meanings are the illusion of a deluded mind, Dad. Stop trying to squeeze reality into a verbal shape."

Violet would not allow herself to be squeezed into anyone's reality.

"Violet is unpredictable," Josephine liked to say. "Just when a person thinks she's got Violet pegged, she transforms like ice into water."

That was when the trouble started, with one of Violet's transformations. His sister's "extreme personality changes" were one of the reasons Josephine had spent the last forty minutes on the

phone, whispering about "crisis wards," "involuntary commitment," and other words Will couldn't find in his *Scholastic Dictionary*.

"Violet is sick," his mom had explained weeks earlier, after Violet had once again made her dissolve into tears. "You know how parts of our bodies get sick sometimes?" she'd added, dabbing at her eyes. "Like, we get stomachaches or sore throats? Well, Violet is sick in the part of her brain that controls her feelings."

Will assumed Violet's brain was sick because she had stopped eating food. Well, not all food. Violet had recently stopped drinking everything except pomegranate juice or milk, and stopped eating everything besides Uncle Ben's instant rice or a stenchy combination of mung beans and sugar.

As her body got smaller, all of Violet's clothes started to look like disguises. She wore long-underwear tops, Douglas's dress shirts, and low-crotched pants that made her look like one of Ali Baba's forty thieves. Their mother said Violet wore a gauzy kerchief because people at school made fun of her bald-headedness. But when Will asked Violet, she told him she was covering her head because she was doing *sallekhana*.

"Is that Buddhist?" Will had asked.

"No," Violet said. "It's Jainist."

"But she *is* suicidal," Josephine told the person on the phone now. "I've done some research, and this Jainist thing—or however you say it—is a ritual fast to *death*."

Still in her bathrobe, Josephine was hunched on a stool at the kitchen island. The remaining rollers were gone from her Bambi-brown hair, but she'd been too distracted to reach for her comb. Curls corkscrewed from her scalp at bonkers angles. "Presentation

counts": that was what she'd always taught Will. Seeing her unkempt disturbed him more than almost anything else, and that said a lot given the circumstances.

Will hovered by the stove, trying to feel the stitches beneath the surgical tape on his chin. He made no attempt to disguise his eavesdropping.

"I feel like you're asking me to choose between my children," Josephine told the mystery caller. "I love my daughter more than words can express, but I'm terrified of her. She critically injured my son. Uh-huh. Yes. I am afraid for our lives."

Whumpa whumpa whump. Josephine's ballpoint pen was the only sound while the person on the line spoke at length.

"I know we're not the only victims here. Violet suffers the effects of her condition more than anyone. Uh-huh. I agree. We've tried to get her the medical attention she needs, but she flies into a rage at the very suggestion of it." She paused and listened briefly. "That—" Josephine's voice splintered. She jotted down *5150 hold* on her notepad and framed it with stars. "That breaks my heart. But if you're telling me this is her best chance at recovery, then I guess I don't have much choice."

Will's chest twanged with pity and helplessness. He wanted to protect his mother every bit as much as she wanted to safeguard him. It was Will who got hurt last night, but their mother was the one Violet really wished dead.

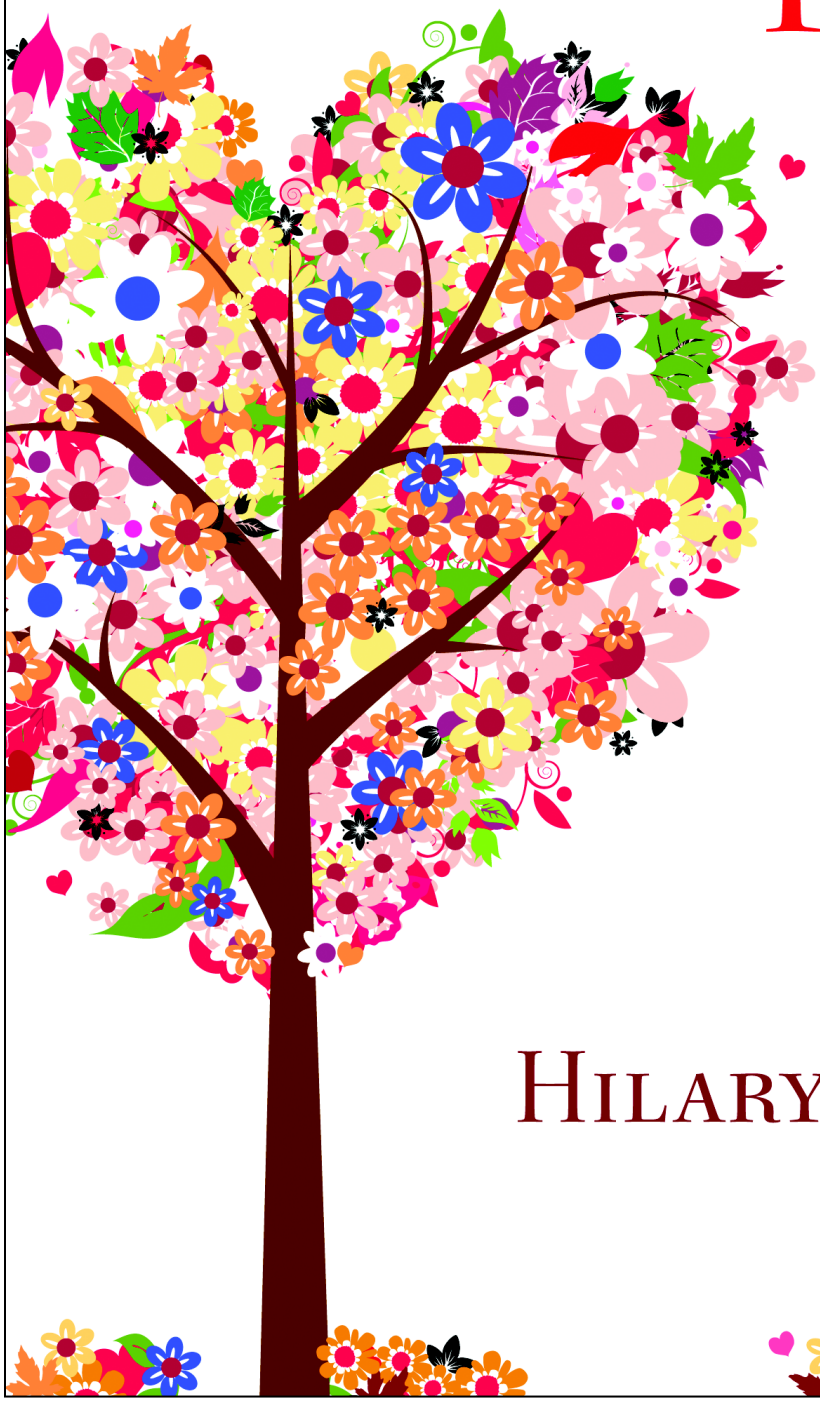
Of all the crazy that had transpired the night before, Will had felt most unsafe when he saw the way his sister eyed his mother across the dining room table. How Violet-like she'd been, glowering with her hangdog neck and hooded eyes. Anyone else might have mistaken her for someone meek and self-punishing. But Will knew the truth: Violet thought she was proof of nature over nurture. She didn't need their mom's loving care to survive.

Will crossed the kitchen and put a supportive arm around his mother's sashed waist.

Josephine cupped the mouthpiece with her palm and whispered, "Don't worry, sweetie. You're safe now. I promise. I won't ever let her hurt you again."

"A tender and intriguing love story." — *Daily Mail*

Thursdays IN THE Park



HILARY BOYD

THURSDAYS IN THE PARK

By Hilary Boyd

EXCERPT

George did not reply, just stood there. “I mean . . .” He spoke like a drowning man refusing rescue. “I can’t do it anymore.”

“Can’t do what? George?”

He turned away from her, picking his glasses up from the bedside table as he made for the door. Jeanie jumped up and raced after him. “Where are you going? George? You can’t just leave me like that. Is it something I’ve done? Please . . . tell me.”
But George shook her off, barely glancing at her. “I’ll sleep in the spare room.”

I can’t do it anymore. His words haunted her as she lay alone in the crumpled bed, shocked and above all, bewildered. Their life together, twenty-two years of it now, was orderly, you might even say a little dull. They never argued, as long as Jeanie accepted George’s benign need to control her. Then tonight it felt as if she had been unwittingly perched on top of a volcano that had suddenly decided to erupt. What had got into her husband?

In the morning, George behaved as if nothing had happened.

—≡—

Jeanie stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror and looked hard at her body. She tried to imagine showing it, herself, to Ray, but the cold strip of lighting seemed to mock her. It wasn’t that her body embarrassed her. The pad of postmenopausal fat on her stomach drove her crazy but refused to budge, her small breasts were definitely bigger since the hormone shift, but she was still slim and fit. Unlike some of her friends, she’d never considered hormone replacement therapy. She thought it was a sort of vanity if you weren’t actually tormented with hot flashes,, which she hadn’t been. But would she look better now, younger, if she were taking hormones? She scrutinized her face. It was a little lined, but she had good skin; strong, slightly fierce blue eyes; and her dark auburn hair, through helped by the bottle, was shiny and well cut to her chin. No, the problem was that her sexuality seemed to have vanished. Here was a woman in the mirror who could be proud of a body, but that was all it seemed to be now—just a body.

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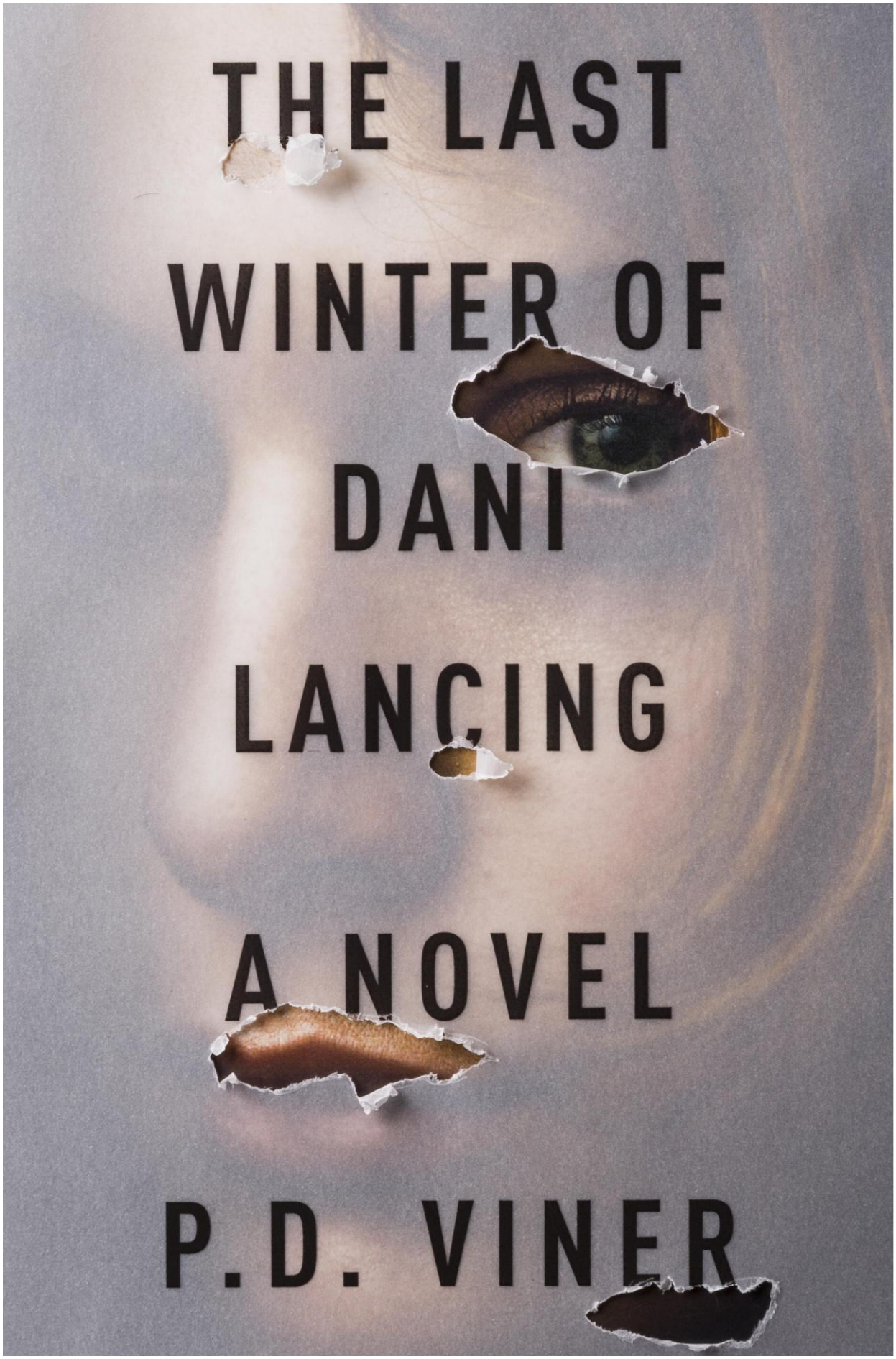
THE LAST
WINTER OF
DANI
LANCING
A NOVEL
P.D. VINER

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First American Edition

ONE

Saturday, December 18, 2010

"There's no such thing as monsters," he tells her.

The girl screws up her nose. "Look anyway. Please."

"Okay."

She hugs Hoppy Bunny tight as her dad slides sideways off the bed and onto the floor, pulling the duvet to one side and peering into the shadows.

"Nothing there."

"Are you sure?"

Even at five years old she knows that grown-ups can't be trusted with this stuff. They aren't clear about what is and isn't in the dark.

"I am absolutely, totally sure there's nothing under your bed."

"Check the wardrobe."

With an exaggerated sigh, he moves across the room and pulls the doors open quickly. Dresses and coats sway violently, like zombie hordes.

"Dad!"

"It's okay." He grabs the clothes. "Nothing to worry about." He pushes them aside and peers into the back of the wardrobe. "Just clothes, no lions or witches."

Her eyes widen. "Did you think there would be?"

"No. No . . . I was just being silly." He sits back on the edge of her bed. "There's nothing there, darling."

"Nothing now! What if a monster slides under the door when I'm asleep?"

"Once I kiss you good night the room is sealed, nothing can come into your bedroom in the night."

She frowns. "What about the tooth fairy?"

"Well . . ."

"Santa?"

"I meant . . ." He frowns too. "Nothing bad can come in, and Hoppy Bunny's here to keep you safe."

"How?" She looks dubiously at the small stuffed rabbit.

"Hoppy was specially trained, he only lets in good fairies or Santa."

"Hmmm."

"Don't worry, Dani. Mummy and I are downstairs. Nothing bad is going to happen. I promise." He kisses her forehead . . .

. . . and the memory starts to fade.

Dani watches her younger self melt into the shadows of the night. Frozen in time, for a moment longer, is her father. The sight of him, so young and handsome, makes her smile—a sad smile. Slowly, the black hair, smooth face, elegant clothes slip away. Left behind, lying in the bed, is the older version. His hair is salt and pepper now, his face craggy and lined. He sleeps, but it's not the sleep of the just. His nights are pained by visions. More than twenty years of night terrors—and she is the cause.

She sits in the chair by the door and watches him sleep just like she does every night, watching for the shadows to take his dreams. When they come, she will sing to him. Sometimes, when he whimpers or calls out, she aches to lean forward and kiss his forehead—but she can't. Nearly forty years have passed since he

banished the monsters from her room. Now it's her job—to keep him safe in the night.

She curls her arms around herself. The room is cold, though she doesn't notice, she just likes to feel arms around her. She wishes she could call the child back, see herself again from all those years ago. How old—five? So serious and confident, when had it all disappeared? But of course she knows the answer to that. "Dani . . ." he calls out in his sleep.

"Shh, sleep safe. I'm here." And softly she sings a lullaby she remembers from all those years ago.

"Care you not and go to sleep, Over you a watch I'll keep . . ."

"Not her!" He calls out in pain from the thickness of his nightmare.

"Shh, Dad." She slides off the chair to kneel by his bed.

"Dani . . ." he calls softly.

"It's okay."

"I can't find you."

He's sweating. His face is pinched and his legs begin to jerk like he's running.

"Dani!" he yells, his hands flail, jaws grind.

"I'm here, Dad," she tells him, hoping her voice might worm its way down into his dream.

He twists sharply and cries in pain. "Are you safe?"

She hesitates. "Yes, Dad, I'm safe."

He shakes, whimpering like a child. "Dani. Where are you?"

"Dad, I'm here," she whispers. "I came back."

His face contorts and he moans loudly.

"I can't see through the snow. Dani, I can't—" His body is suddenly rigid. His jaw grinds and darkness knits his brow. His back arcs—like he is having a seizure.

"Sleep, Daddy. I'm here."

He makes a low moan and, like a sudden storm, the danger passes as tension slips away from his body and he slides deep into the undertow of sleep. She watches him, listens as his breath softens until it's barely audible. He's still. He's safe. The monsters have left him alone—for tonight. He should sleep until morning.

She stretches in the chair. Her back aches and the pain in her hip cuts through her. She can't sit any longer, so lies on the floor beside him. She rocks from side to side, trying to get comfortable. It was such a long time ago, surely it shouldn't still feel like this. Phantom pains. On the ceiling, the faintest movements of shadow—grays and blacks—skirmish above her head. Slowly, the pain recedes and she sinks into the floor. She lies still, missing her night-light, wants something to eat the darkness away. She longs for dawn, for her dad to wake. She wants to talk, go for a walk, maybe see a movie? What time is it now—2 a.m.? Tiredness sweeps across her. He'll sleep—she wishes she could.

She lies still for a long time, listening to his breath rise and fall. Finally she rolls over onto all fours—stretches like a cat—and leaves. Outside his door, she pauses for a few moments, continuing to listen to his breath. One day it will end. Will she be there at that moment? Hear the body draw its final inhalation, the lungs expand and then just stop so that the air seeps away and there is nothing. Nothing. The thought scares her. The loneliness terrifies her.

She turns to her own room. Inside is her single child's bed, the same bed her father knelt under to check for monsters all those years ago. She feels a tiny shudder run through her.

"Someone walked over your grave." That's what her gran would have said.

The room is too dark, only a little moonlight spills in from the

hallway. She isn't sure she can stay there. The shadows are alive sometimes.

"Be brave, Dani," she tells herself. But the old fears are strong. What would Dad do?

She bends down and looks underneath the bed. Cobwebs. No monsters—unless you're a fly. She smiles a fake smile, even though there's nobody there to see it, and she feels braver.

"Go on, Dan," she whispers, and stretches out her fingers to the wardrobe door. It swings open with a little haunted-house creak. The dresses and coats are long gone. It is totally empty. Of course it is. Real monsters don't hide in wardrobes.

TWO

Saturday, December 18, 2010

She cuts him.

His body twists. She tightens her grip on his hand as the pain draws him back from the oblivion of sedation. Eyes flicker. For a second they open: confusion, pain, fear. His palm pools with blood.

"Shh," she whispers, as if to calm a baby, squeezing his fingers tight.

He struggles one final time, but the tape she's wrapped around his body holds him securely. He drops back into the darkness.

With an unsteady hand she fumbles in her pocket for the sterile swab.

"Damn," she spits, frustrated by the delicate touch needed. With a bloodied finger she pokes her glasses, holding them in place so she can peer through the oval at the bottom. His blurred hand sharpens into focus.

She dips the bud into his palm; the cotton bloats, gorges itself. She lets his hand drop—it arcs to the floor and swings, splattering red like a child's painting, and then comes to rest, weeping onto the carpet. She's cut far deeper than was needed; bone shows through the deep trench of flesh. She doesn't care, just runs the swab across the slide, leaving a bloody smear. Done. She feels giddy. Finally she's done it. Patricia Lancing has her man. She leans forward, her mouth brushing his ear to whisper, "You are a monster."

"He needs a plaster," a small voice says.

Patty looks across at Dani, who with a shy smile holds up the toy she's squirted with ketchup.

"Hoppy Bunny needs a plaster. He's poorly."

"Oh dear, let's get him one. Maybe Doctor Duck should take a look."

"Oh yes, Mum. I'll go get him." Her daughter pads away, the memory fading.

"Danielle," Patty calls to her five-year-old daughter, but she is gone. Long gone.

She looks back to the man tied to the chair. "Why Danielle?"

The question hangs in the air between them as it has done for over twenty years, poisonous and all consuming.

"Why my daughter?"

There is no sound from him. She looks at her watch. 3:42 a.m.

She takes the slide with his blossom of blood, puts it back in its box and seals it. With reverence she walks it over to the cooler and places it inside. All is done. She hears her husband's voice slide back to her through the years: "Now what, Patty? Now what will you do?" Jim asks, but she doesn't know what to say to him, her mind too full of shadows.

She turns back to the man she has abducted. With a finger, she reaches out and tips his head. His skin is waxy, lips flecked with the drool of insensibility. She takes his eyelid and peels it back; there is nothing but a poached-egg smear. He sickens her. She raises the knife and presses it into his soft throat. It would be easy . . . so . . . she closes her eyes.

She opens them. The hotel room has gone. She coughs and the shop assistant looks up from what he's reading.

"Yeah?" He looks fourteen, all spots and surly resentment.

She points behind his head, to the serious hunting knives in the locked cabinet. He grunts, then takes a stubby key from his pocket and slides the glass away. He points to one and she nods. It's vicious, designed to slice through flesh and muscle, hack through bone. One edge a razor, the other a saw. She's come all the way across London to this little shop in Wimbledon, somewhere nobody knows her, to buy a specialist hunting knife. She carries no ID, just cash—a cover story all worked out: her husband will be hunting for the first time, big promotion up for grabs and he needs to impress. So she will have to gut, slice and cook whatever he manages to shoot. She's pleased with her invention and has topped it off with a disguise: waxed jacket and riding boots she bought from Oxfam yesterday. She's also wearing lots of make-up. Mutton dressed as mutton. She spent all morning in front of a mirror perfecting her cut-glass home-counties accent, reborn as Hilary Clifton-Hastings. Nobody can refuse to sell a hunting knife to a Clifton-Hastings.

"That will do nicely" she says and hands it back. The shop assistant peels the price sticker from the back with a fingernail that is almost pure soil.

"Thirty-five fifty."

Hilary Clifton-Hastings slides the cash across the counter; he scoops it up and scatters it in the till. No questions, barely a glance from him. She does not need her alter ego. He sizes her up in a microsecond; small, thin, gray woman in her sixties: harmless.

Harmless!

That was two days ago.

She opens her eyes. She's cold. That afternoon's snow falls on her once again. The watery sun's dipped below the horizon and the

light has died. She stands, a statue, alone in the long-stay car park alongside the metal carcasses that poke from the growing carpet of snow. If anyone were watching her, they'd think she was a crazy woman. But nobody is watching, not even on CCTV. Broken yesterday and not repaired, tut-tut.

She hasn't dressed for the weather. The ferocity of the cold has surprised her: Siberia in southeast England. She knows she should go and sit in her car but everything looks so beautiful in its white coat. All around the ground is pure, unmarked, as if no living thing exists to disturb the peace. It would be terrible if she destroyed it. So she stands still and waits.

She sticks out her tongue and counts . . . one elephant, two elephants . . . a swirling snowflake lands and dissolves, wet and slightly metallic. Others fall on her eyelids and trickle away as mock tears, some alight on her skin and nuzzle into her silver hair. Each flake is perfect—an intricate and exquisite ice world—unique. Some see the hand of God in this. Not her.

Fewer and fewer planes have been landing over the last few hours as the snow has got heavier. If she had her phone she could check the weather report, check the plane schedule, but she doesn't have it. She carries nothing that could identify her if . . . if things don't go to plan.

"Shall I just stand here and wait?" she thinks. "But for how long? He's already hours late, may not come at all." Does she wait until she freezes?

She watches the snow and listens for the first mutterings of an engine. She feels as if she's been placed in a magician's cabinet, waiting to be sawn in half.

Then, in the darkness some way off, she hears the chug of a

motor. She shakes a little, though not her sickness shakes. She doesn't need her medication—this is first-night nerves.

All is dark. Jim flicks the light on. He stands in the doorway, holding a tea towel where the door should be. "Ladies and gentleman. I now present for your delectation and delight a master of the art of prestidigitation . . ."

"Dad!" Dani shouts from the hallway. "I'm doing magic."

"Sorry. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Magic of Madame Danielle Lancing."

The tea towel is pulled away with a flourish and a six-year-old Dani enters, wearing a black top hat made from an old porridge container and a paper plate. She sports a black cape that was once a towel and waves a cardboard wand that came free in a Rice Krispies packet and has been sat on quite a few times.

"I am Mystical Dani and you will be amazed," she says in as low a voice as a six-year-old can manage.

She whips the wand into the air.

"Abracadabra!" She pulls off her hat and Hoppy Bunny is on her head, dressed in a tutu.

Jim claps wildly. Dani grins, showing her missing front teeth. She waves her dad over, and once again they whisper.

Patty watches them with pleasure, and perhaps a twinge of jealousy. They're thick as thieves those two. Always have been, always . . .

"Now my beautiful assistant will help me," Dani shouts as if she were in a real theater, and Jim bows and blows kisses to the crowd, "with the Many Knives of Doom illuj-ion." She waves a plastic knife in the air.

Patty feels the weight of the hunting knife in her own hand, its edge bloody. Her husband and daughter dissolve—smoke and mirrors. They were not real, a thirty-five-year-old memory that rose to the surface; the heft of the blade in her hand is real though. What she must do with it is real. She grips it tight.

Headlights arrive, arresting the freezing flakes in mid-air. It's too big to be a car, it must be the shuttle. The excitement thaws her toes and fingers; she moves slowly toward the line of cars that will hide her from view. Finally the shuttle reaches the entrance to the car park and turns in. She feels her heart slow as the bus crawls toward her.

"Let him be on it," she speaks aloud, though the wind rips her words to shreds the moment they emerge from her mouth. The bus skids a little as the driver applies the brakes. Inside it's dark. There is no movement. She ages and dies many times before the door finally cracks open and the interior is illuminated. The driver hops down the stairs quickly, keen to get this done and get back to the warmth of the terminal. He opens one of the luggage stores under the bus and pulls out a set of golf clubs.

"How funny," she thinks as she watches him struggle with them. Shivering, the driver holds them out, as a single passenger alights. The metal whale then pulls away with a little slide of the wheels, heading back to civilization.

She watches the passenger wrestle with the golf clubs and a little pull-along suitcase. She cannot see clearly; he's too far away and in the shadows. She holds her breath while he inches toward her. From somewhere she hears:

"Mum." A voice from the dark.

"I'm nearly there, Dani. So close."

"Patty." Jim's deep voice rattles in her rib cage.

"Please don't ask me to stop, Jim."

Patty digs her gnawed fingernails into the skin of her arm—as hard and deep as she can—and the passenger stumbles closer. Face still hidden, snow billowing around him. There is a yellow pool of light and he is almost there . . . he steps into it, like an actor moving into a spotlight: Duncan Cobhurn.

He's not tall but he's stocky. He looks like a rugby player who's stopped exercising but still enjoys his food and beer. Mostly bald, just a clipped halo above his ears, black flecked with gray. His face is fleshy and pink—a mix of blood pressure and sun. He has a few days' growth of beard, which is mostly white. He's dressed in linen, a stylish white suit that might have looked great in Lisbon but is going to get ruined in the snow. He looks frozen already.

"Good," she thinks. "That will make my job easier."

The clubs are on his shoulder and swing heavily as he walks. He has to stop every few feet to clear away the little snowmen his case keeps building. As he approaches she slowly draws back into the shadows and slides toward her car.

She opens her eyes. She's back in the hotel room with Duncan Cobhurn—a sedated and bleeding Duncan Cobhurn. The room is stifling. She misses the clean sterile cold of the afternoon. No snowflakes fall here; instead motes of dust dance. She remembers how Dani, when she was about five, believed they were sugarplum fairies dancing in the moonlight. The imagination of a child . . . It's just dirt and decay. This room is filthy. The walls are beige but speckled with greasy spots and chocolate-colored scabs. The

ceiling was probably white once, but is now nicotine beige, and the floor . . . Christ knows what bodily secretions have seeped into it. There's a stain, just by the foot of the bed, that she thinks is the spitting image of Gandhi. Now, what would he have done? Forgiven Duncan Cobhurn? She is not Gandhi. She cuts him.

THREE

Saturday, December 18, 2010

"Wha—?" Jim Lancing wakes with a start. No idea where, frozen—panic.

"Dad." Dani is beside him in an instant.

"I'm okay, darling. Go back to your room, I'm fine. It was just a nightmare, just another nightmare."

"I should stay."

"No, no really. Please, Dani. I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Please."

She nods, a little reluctantly, and leaves him.

He lies back down and concentrates on slowing his heart, pulling himself back from wherever his dream had taken him. He pictures a lake in his mind, mountains surrounding it—a calm place. Slowly the fear recedes and he is himself again. He rubs his hand, it hurts. He looks across at his bedside table. Glowing numbers read 3:42.

"Damn."

He really needs more sleep than this, but he knows that won't happen. He lies there in the dark. On his tongue there's the faintest taste, and in the air there seems to be something, tangible and smoky, but he can sense it rather than smell it. He feels sweaty from his nightmare and already the prickles of sweat are turning cold; he realizes what the taste in his mouth is: blood.

He rolls over onto his side and then out of bed and onto the floor. The first few steps are little more than a hobble until his creaking joints and muscles warm up. He walks down the hallway to the loo. This is the biggest show of how age has crept up on him: that he can't go through the night without the need to pee. And then, once he's there, he stands longer than ever before. Sometimes he even sits, like a girl. Tonight he sits immediately, knowing he will be in there a long time. After a couple of minutes he takes a newspaper that's folded under the sink. He looks at the Sudoku.

"I haven't got a pen," he calls out.

"Isn't there one in the medicine cabinet?"

He looks and finds a stubby pencil in with his razor.

"Got it. Thanks," he shouts to his daughter.

"Okay," she calls back. "I'll be downstairs. Waiting for you."

He finishes the Sudoku and Killer Sudoku while he's there, then cleans his teeth, trying to remove the taste of blood. He looks at himself in the mirror and isn't unhappy with the reflection. He's got pretty terrible bed-head and his eyes look saggier than usual, but generally he's not too bad for a man of sixty-four, especially at this time of night. Not gone to seed, like many others he could name—he's pretty lean. He can bend over and touch his toes without too much huffing and puffing. He would be the first to admit that his stomach isn't flat like it once was; there's a slight paunch but it's not bad, just a little loss of muscle tone to show how gravity hates the old. He rinses his mouth and then runs his wet fingers through his hair. It's still a pretty good crop, even if it has gone stone gray at the temples and the rest, once raven black, is now dusted with gray. He has always thought his features a little too pronounced, his nose

too big and his mouth too wide, but he seems to have grown into them over the years.

He shivers, the chill of the morning creeping into his bones. He runs a shower, nice and hot, and steps into it. The pressure is strong—it pounds and buffets him, releasing knots.

"Jim," a voice breathes from inside the cascade of water.

"Patty?" He strains to hear—can her voice be in the water?

"Help."

He feels something deep in his heart—a tug that says something's wrong with her, his wife. A wife he has barely seen in twelve years. In the churn of the water his nightmare comes back to him.

"Are you coming down yet?" she calls up the stairs.

"Just coming," he replies, feeling guilty for not going down before now. He knows how much she longs to talk after a sleepless night, how lonely she gets during the long stretch of darkness. But right now he's too rattled by the images in his head to talk to her. He tries to push them back inside the box and paste a smile on his face.

"You need to get down here," Dani shouts.

The smile wastes away on his face. He heads downstairs. "Where are you?"

"Hide and seek" is her reply.

He finds her curled up in the big leather armchair in the room they laughingly call his den. When she was a child it had been the family dining room. But he couldn't remember the last time the house had any actual dining in it. Instead the room had become a sort of den-slash-library-slash-watching-the-world-slide-by room. It's pretty Spartan: two chairs, a small table and an old fish tank. Once, a long time ago, the tank had been home to Dani's tropical friends but now has some very creepy-looking cacti in among

multicolored stones. It's the only room in the house that's allowed to be a little untidy. Newspapers are on the floor; he only buys the Saturday *Guardian* and Sunday *Observer* each week but they certainly mount up. Books and correspondence are piled on a small coffee table. Every couple of months he forces himself to sit down and catch up with the world; he should probably do that pretty soon, he thinks.

She turns in the big chair to look up at him. Her long dark hair curling over her shoulder, pale skin flawless and her large brown eyes glittering with excitement. It shocks him a little—probably the aftermath of his nightmare—that she still looks so young. He forgets that sometimes . . . after all that has happened to her.

"You okay?" she asks with a half smile.

He nods a yes.

"Then sit down and buckle up—you are in for a treat."

She swings back in the chair to face the doors that lead to the garden. Jim sits in the other, less comfortable chair and angles it to match Dani's view. Outside it's black but he can just see someth— a light snaps on in the garden next door, bleeding across their lawn, revealing an amazing vista. Huge flakes of snow drift on the wind, buffeted and brawling like bumper cars at the fair.

"Oh my God." He's amazed by the sight.

The two of them sit watching the snow until the sensor light turns off.

"It'll go back on soon."

They sit in the dark, waiting. Jim suddenly thinks of the animals out there: Willow, Scruffy, George and others—guinea pigs, hamsters, cats and two dogs buried over the years in solemn services. He has never seen their ghosts, which he's glad about. If Scruffy came back to be stroked, like some zombie Disney cartoon, that would scare the life out of him. But he wonders where they are

now. Is there an animal afterlife? Do they have souls like he does, like Dani does?

The light flips back on—catching a squirrel in mid-scurry—and Jim is once more in awe of the scene before him. The snow swirls like the Milky Way, so close he could reach out and touch it.

"Are you out there, Patty?" he thinks. "Somewhere in the snow?"

FOUR

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Tom stops to get his bearings. Peering into the dark, he can see the mouth of the bridge stretching over the Thames but by halfway across, it fades to nothing. A wall of blackness with snow rippled through it. The streets are empty but for a second he thinks he sees someone walking toward him across the bridge. It looks like . . . but then there's no one. Just snow whipped up by the wind. Who? Something scratches at his thoughts, tugging at strands of memories that just refuse to come. For a second, he knows . . . but it just fades from his mind.

He looks at his watch, it's 3:42 a.m. Everybody's asleep, except him.

He turns back to the path and kicks at the snow. For days he's been dragging a heavy heart along in a sack but now there's snow. How can anyone feel depressed when faced with this? He feels like a kid who's bunked off school to see the circus come to town, "oohing" and "ahhing" as the tufts of candyfloss parachute toward him.

"I love snow," he tells the world.

He looks over the sluggish water to the park; it could be anywhere, anywhen. The snow is already quite thick, deadening all sound, building banks and drifts. The moon's fat, nearly full, but half-hidden behind skyscrapers of cloud. He stands for a long time,

a solitary figure in a snow globe, then finally turns toward the ark of glass that juts out over the river and trudges toward home.

He's left his car outside her house. He's already thinking he'll send a constable to collect it in a day or two, in case she's watching out her window.

"What a mistake," he tells the snow.

He'd known she was divorced, had two children—and that could have been fine, he's good with kids. The problem was that he'd not seen how needy she was. They'd had dinner a week ago—she'd drunk a little too much and been a little loud by the end of the evening, but he thought that was nerves. She was at least ten years younger than him, thirty, with long, deep brown hair and tall, long-limbed. That was what had attracted him to her profile. And in her picture she smiled quite beautifully—genuine, unconcerned. Just like *her* smile had been.

"And?" he asks himself. "The truth?"

Truth? He thinks. It has nothing to do with truth, or admitting anything. He knows why he'd been drawn to this woman. He knows why some women draw his eye and not others. Why he'd turned down at least two women who could have made him happy, who could have loved him. The truth was because he was in love. Still in love after all these years.

And that photo on the website had been so like her. So like Dani. He had made the date, wanting to see her smile again. Except in real life he didn't see Dani's smile. Instead there was a thin half smile, darting across her lips like an apology, and she dipped her head to hide how tall she was. Her voice had grated on him from the start too—rough sloppy diction—*you know*, *you know like*. But dinner had been fine. At the end they had walked to the Tube and she'd leaned into him and kissed him. He felt her small breasts push into his chest and a flick of her tongue brush his lips. She

called him the next day and they had agreed to meet again. She invited him to dinner at her place. Stupid. Her place—it was obvious where that was heading. Stupid to go to bed with her. Out of her clothes she was so unlike Dani. She had tattoos, which he hated. From the start she apologized for everything. Sorry for her M&S knickers, the sheets, the children down the hall, her inexperience, how cold her hands were. "Next time it will be perfect," she whispered in his ear as he pushed himself into her.

Afterward she went to the toilet. He imagined her in there, crying for her lost life and the desperate compromises she'd been forced to make. He had to get out of the house. When she returned with minty breath, he told her he had to leave, still had a test to prepare for Year Four. He saw her flinch as he lied to her—clearly she was a woman who'd heard a lot of lies and had good radar for them—but he couldn't bear to snuggle up with her and talk about the future. It actually made it worse that she looked like Dani. Only skin-deep though. He smiles at the thought of Dani and his cheeks tighten and ache. His eyes have little frozen lakes in the corners.

It wasn't his first lie to this woman either. His profile on the dating site says he's a teacher of history at an under-performing comprehensive. He never tells anyone he's a policeman. Even those few people close enough to him to know he works for the police don't know exactly what he does. Only a few other high-ranking officers know he heads a special unit, and that he looks into the eyes of dead girls and promises them he will try to find the men responsible. And he tries. He tries. Detective Superintendent Thomas Bevans. The Sad Man.

He walks, feeling the snow give way under his feet.

"I should've put a bet on a white Christmas—the odds will be useless now," he tells the trees.

He loves the silence. Of course, at almost 4 a.m. on a Saturday morning, it is going to be pretty quiet—but the deadening effect of the snow and the low cloud has removed all trace of the world. No music of the spheres. He stops and closes his eyes. He's a boy again, remembering the first time the silence descended, a truly white Christmas. 1976.

He was eight and pretty sure he'd never seen snow before—not real snow that settles on the ground. But he remembers the rush of excitement that morning, like man had landed on Mars or something. The road outside their flat was amazing. Nothing had driven through it, not even a bike. Pure. Virgin. White. He ran out. His mum was still asleep and he ran and ran through the snow, then turned to see his tracks—the only human being on earth. Until he got to the park. And there she was. He remembers thinking, "What the bloody hell is she wearing?" She was in a white nightdress, flimsy and sheer. He could see the curves of her body beneath it—but is that just wishful remembering? No, she was fully clothed underneath, with a big sailor's jumper. She wore the nightdress over the top. She was lying in the snow waving her arms. He saw her and hid in some bushes, watching. She lay there for a while and then got up and walked away—her dark hair streaked with snow. He waited until she was out of sight and walked over to where she'd lain. There was an angel in the snow.

Christ, even at eight years old, she had done something to him. Danielle Lancing, the girl he loved. Loves.

As memories of her flit through his mind he feels a shiver run though him as if somebody is dancing on his grave. But it's just the vibration of his mobile on silent. He pulls it out and reads the short message, a missing person report. Normally he wouldn't be notified unless it was a high-profile victim. This isn't, just a Durham businessman who'd been reported missing by his wife. But the name is

one that he'd recently added to a high-security alert list: Duncan Cobhurn. And the memory slots into place—the woman he thought he saw in the swirling snow on the bridge, Patricia Lancing. Dani's mother. He feels lost.

"Christ."

He turns to head back the way he's come. He begins to run.


james w. ziskin
STYX & STONE
An
ELLIE STONE
MYSTERY

Chapter One
Sunday, January 24, 1960

About halfway between New Holland and Schenectady, a narrow road cuts through a fault in the wooded hills above the Mohawk: Wolf Hollow Gorge. Local lore has it that Iroquois Indians, poised on the lip of the ravine, ambushed a party of Algonquin invaders early one morning in 1669. The attackers poured down the walls of the dark glen in waves, whooping like demons, and slaughtered the Algonquins trapped below.

One mild Sunday evening in January, I found myself in Wolf Hollow, a willing prisoner in the backseat of a black Chrysler 300. I'm what people call a modern girl. The kind who works for a living in a man's world. I can hold my drink and I'm a good sport. I'm the kind who has her own place and sometimes invites a gentleman in for a nightcap. The finer the gentleman, the faster he slides from his end of the sofa to mine, the more roughly he gropes me. But his lips are soft, his tie is loose, and his arms have me pinned anyway.

Steve Herbert, barracuda lawyer with a square jaw and sharp, white teeth, had been pursuing me—the object of his baser desires—with devoted attention for some time. In the absence of a more suitable escort, I had recently been spending the odd evening with Steve, who was divorced, morally bankrupt, but good-looking and a fun time. I was too old for sock hops and earnest teenage boys, and my romantic options were otherwise few. Over his warm, heavy breathing, I became aware of an approaching noise outside the car.

I lifted my head to investigate, but Steve wrapped his big hands around my hips and pulled me back down on the seat. He planted the sting of gin on my lips, and his prehensile tongue drew me inside his mouth in an oral tug of war.

Then a light flashed in the window, and someone began tapping on the glass. I shrieked and elbowed Steve in the eye as he scrambled to right himself in the seat. The pint of Gilbey's fell to the floor and emptied at my feet. My heart thumping in my chest, I squinted into the light at the large shape outside the fogged-up window, shielding my eyes with one hand while I wiped the glass with the other.

"What the hell?" bellowed Steve as he caught sight of the figure outside the car.

Once the window was clear and I could see the dullard's grin, I knew we were in no danger.

"It's all right, Steve," I panted. "It's just Stan Pulaski."

"Who's he?"

"Deputy sheriff."

"Damn! The gin!"

“Don’t worry,” I said as I adjusted my brassiere and smoothed my hair—long, curly, and quite unruly in situations such as this. “He’s not a real cop. It’s Stan Pulaski.”

I rolled down the window, and Stan stuck his melon head inside.

“Ellie? What are you doing in there?” He craned his neck to view Steve better. He pursed his lips then announced that the car smelled like a distillery.

“What can we do for you, officer?” asked Steve, barely concealing his annoyance.

“The sheriff wants us to shut down this lovers’ lane, sir.” Then he turned to me. “Where have you been, Ellie? Sheriff Olney’s been looking all over the county for you.”

Steve wasn’t happy when I left him in the lurch for Stan Pulaski and his cruiser. Twenty minutes later, Stan roared into the parking lot of the Montgomery County Administration Building and pulled to a gentle stop before the door to let me out.

“You should steer clear of fellows like that, Ellie,” he said. Stan was a little sweet on me. “There’s no future there.”

“I’m a big girl now, Stan,” I said.

He nodded, then his eyes rather glazed over slowly. “Your hair sure is pretty,” he said.

“Stan, tongue in mouth, please.”

“Sorry,” he said, taking up an official tone again. “Frank’s waiting for you. You’d better hurry.”

“Will you drop me home later? I lost my chauffeur.”

He smiled. “Sure, Ellie. Anytime.”

The outer office was empty except for Deputy Pat Halvey, who, bent at the waist, had thrust his head out the window and was looking at something across Route 40.

My voice surprised him and he jumped, whacking his crew-cut skull against the sash. The window, in turn, fell like a guillotine on his shoulders and pinned him to the sill.

“Darn it, Ellie,” he said, rubbing his neck once I’d freed him. “Make some noise when you come into a room, will you?”

“Stan says Frank’s looking for me.”

“In there,” he grumbled, throwing a thumb over his shoulder towards the sheriff’s office.

Frank Olney sat wedged between the arms of the swivel chair behind his desk, flipping through some papers. The chubby forefinger of his right hand was stuffed into the ringed handle of a mug of coffee, which he held aloft as if he had forgotten to drink once he had raised it. He struggled to his feet, managing to lift himself from his chair without resorting to the use of a derrick, and waved me inside with his left hand.

“Sit down, Eleonora,” he said, motioning to the aluminum chair in front of his desk.

I hate that name. It was a cruel joke of some kind, intended to make me seem interesting, but it sounds like something pulled out of a dusty, old carpetbag instead. My father said I was named for Eleonora Duse, the great Italian stage actress, and Eleonora of Toledo, wife of Cosimo I de’ Medici. I remember standing before a Bronzino painting in the Uffizi when I was ten, my father proudly pointing out my namesake. Eleonora was a beautiful, elegant lady with a fat little boy at her knee: her son Giovanni. Not far away, the same little boy, beaming from another Bronzino canvas, clutched a small, half-strangled bird in his chubby hand. I prefer to go by Ellie.

“Charlie Reese’s been looking for you for two days,” said the sheriff, retaking his seat. “Where do you disappear to?”

“I’ve been off since Thursday night,” I protested. “And I’m always around.”

He frowned. Frank was a prude who didn’t quite approve.

“Anyways, Charlie called me yesterday,” he said, setting the coffee on the desk. “He needed to find you right away and thought maybe I could put out a goddamn APB on you.” He pushed his coffee to one side, rearranged a paper, then fixed his eyes on mine. “I’ve got some bad news for you. Your old man called the paper Friday morning from New York to tell you your brother’s grave was vandalized.”

A rotten thing for someone to do, for sure, but hardly deserving a statewide manhunt. “I see.”

“And they painted some swastikas on the stone.”

Worse. No Jew, no matter how assimilated, no matter how secular, can escape the morbid awareness that, born at another time in another place, he could have been one of six million. It’s a feeling of impotence in the face of a hatred you can do nothing to change. And while I had grown a thick skin about being Jewish in a Christian society, swastikas still stung me with waspish fury.

“Do they know who did it?” I asked.

The life drained from Frank’s eyes, betraying the weight of another obligation to fulfill.

“What’s this really about, Frank?”

The sheriff rocked nervously in his chair. “Charlie Reese says you got a wire from New York yesterday. Someone named Bernard Sanger. You know him?”

I shook my head.

Frank winced a bit, as if I were putting him out. “He said your father’s in the hospital.”

My father was an aggressive, dynamic man, impatient of the perceived failings of those around him. His frustration had always raised his hackles and his blood pressure, too. Had he finally blown his stack over some student’s ignorance of the differences between a Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet? When I professed my indifference to those very distinctions one evening at dinner years before, he dismissed my argument with a wave of his hand.

“I know you relish the role of mock primitive, Ellie,” he bristled. “But you’re not as ignorant as you wish to make people believe.”

My mother scolded us for baiting each other.

“What was it, a stroke?” I asked the sheriff, who shook his head. “Did Charlie give you any details?”

Frank drew a deep breath, swiveled in his chair a bit, then explained in his typically delicate fashion that someone had broken into my father’s apartment and clubbed him on the head.

“The cleaning lady found him unconscious yesterday morning. This Sanger fellow says he’s at Saint Vincent’s Hospital.” He paused. “Critical condition.”

I stared dumbly at the sheriff for several seconds, struggling to reconcile his words with a reality I could accept. Finally Frank spoke.

“Can I get you some water, Ellie?”

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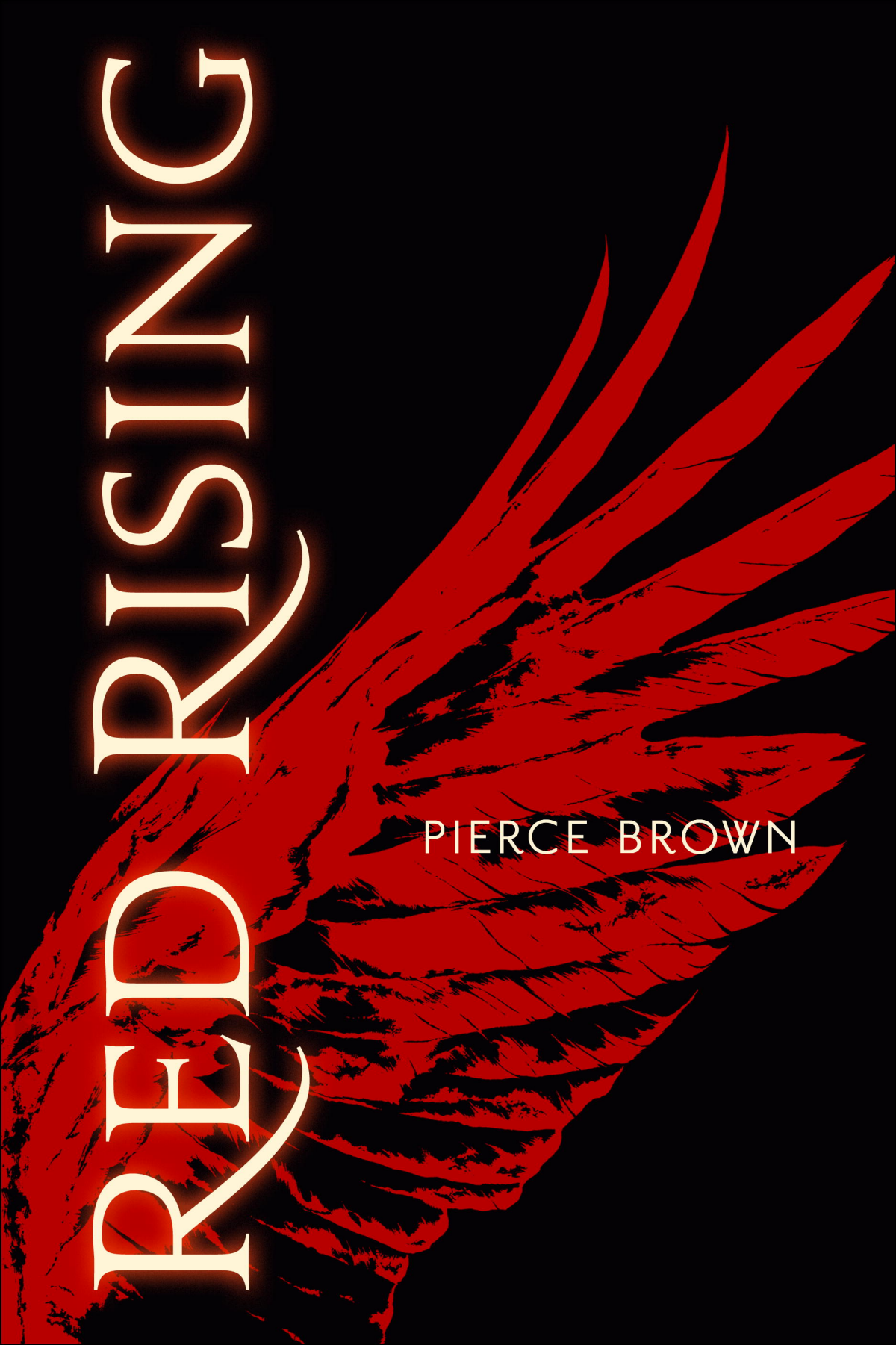
RED RISING
PIERCE BROWN

16

THE INSTITUTE

My test results come when I am practicing my cultural recognition and accent modulation with Matteo in our high-rise penthouse. We have a view of the city, the setting sun behind. I'm midway through a clever retort about the Yorkton Supernova faux-War sports club when my datapad beeps with a priority message sent to my datapad stream. I almost spill my coffee.

"My datapad has been slaved by another," I said. "It's the Board of Quality Control."

Matteo shoots up from his chair. "We have perhaps four minutes." He runs into the suite's library, where Harmony is reading on an ergocouch. She jumps up and is down and out of the suite in less than three breaths. I make sure that the holopictures of me with my fake family are arranged in my bedroom and throughout the penthouse. Four hired servants—Browns and a Pink—go about domestic tasks in the penthouse. They wear the Pegasus livery of my fake family.

One of the Browns goes to the kitchen. The other, a Pink woman, massages my shoulders. Matteo shines my shoes in my room. Of course there are machines to do these things, but an Aureate would

never use a machine for something a person could do. There is no power in that.

The towncraft appears like a distant dragonfly. It grows as it buzzes closer and hovers outside my penthouse window. Its boarding door slides open and a man in a Copper suit gives a bow of formality. I let my datapad open the duroglass window and the man floats in. Three Whites are with him. Each has a white Sigil upon their hands. Members of the Academians and a Copper bureaucrat.

"Do I have the pleasure of addressing one Darrow au Andromedus, son of the recently deceased Linus au Andromedus and Lexus au Andromedus?"

"You have the honor."

The bureaucrat looks me up and down in a very deferential, but impatient manner. "I am Bondilus cu Tancrus of the Institute's Board of Quality Control. There are some questions we must beg to ask of you."

We sit across from one another at my oak kitchen table. There, they hook my finger to a machine and one of the Whites dons a pair of glasses that will analyze my pupils and other physiological reactions. They will be able to tell if I am lying.

"We will start with a control question to assess your normal reaction when telling truths. Are you of the Family Andromedus?"

"Yes."

"Are you of the Aureate genus?"

"Yes." I lie through my teeth, ruining their control questions.

"Did you cheat in your admissions test two months prior?"

"No."

"Did you use nervenucleic to stimulate high comprehension and analytical functions during the test itself?"

"No."

"Did you use a network widget to aggregate or synthesize outside resources in real time?"

"No." I sigh impatiently. "There was a jammer in the room, ergo it would have been impossible. I'm glad you've done your research and are not wasting my time, Copper."

His smile is bureaucratic.

"Did you have prior knowledge of the questions?"

"No." I deem an angry response proper at this point. "And what is this about? I'm not accustomed to being called a liar by someone of your ilk."

"It is procedure with all elite scorers, Lord Aureate. I beg your understanding," the bureaucrat drones. "Any upward outlier far removed from the standard deviation is subject to inquiry. Did you slave your widget to that of another individual during the test?"

"No. As I said, there was a jammer. Thank you for keeping up, pennyhead."

They take a sample of my blood and scan my brain. The results are instantaneous, but the bureaucrat will not share them. "Protocol," he reminds me. "You will have your results in two weeks."

We receive them in four. I pass the Quality Control examination. I did not cheat. Then comes my exam score, two months after I took the damn thing, and I realize why they thought I did cheat. I missed one question. Just one. Out of hundreds. When I share the results with Dancer, Harmony, and Matteo, they simply stare at me. Dancer falls into a chair and begins to laugh; it's an hysterical sort.

"Bloodyhell," he swears. "We've done it."

"He did it," Matteo corrects.

It takes Dancer a minute before he has wits enough to fetch a bottle of champagne, but I still feel his eyes watching me as though I am something different, something strange. It's like they suddenly don't understand what it is they have created. I touch the haemanthus blossom in my pocket and feel the wedding band around my neck. They didn't create me. She did.

It is when a valet arrives to escort me to the Institute that I say my goodbyes to Dancer inside the penthouse. He holds tight to my hand as we shake and gives me the look my father gave me before he was hanged. It's one of reassurance. But behind that is worry and doubt. Did he prepare me for the world? Did he do his duty? My father was twenty-five when he looked at me like that. Dancer is forty-one. It makes no difference. I chuckle. Uncle Narol never gave

me such a look, not even when he let me cut Eo down. Probably because he'd taken enough of my right hooks to know the answer. But if I think about my teachers, my fathers, Uncle Narol shaped me the most. He taught me to dance; he taught me how to be a man, perhaps because he knew this would be my future. And though he tried to stop me from being a Helldiver, it was his lessons that kept me alive. I've learned new lessons now. Let's hope they do the trick.

Dancer gives me the knifeRing he used to slice my finger months before. But he's reshaped it to look like an *L*.

"They will think it the chevron the Spartans bore on their shields," he said. "*L* for Lacadaemonia." But it is for Lykos. For Lambda.

Harmony surprises me by taking my right hand, kissing where once my Red sigil was emblazoned. She's got tears in one eye, the cold, unscarred eye. The other cannot cry.

"Evey will be coming to live with us," she tells me. She smiles before I can ask why. It looks strange on her face. "You think you're the only one who notices things? We'll give her a better life than Mickey would."

Matteo and I share a smile and a bow. We exchange proper honorifics and he extends his hand. It doesn't grasp mine. Instead, it snatches the flower from my pocket. I reach after it, but he's still the only man I've ever met who is faster than me.

"You cannot take this with you, *goodman*. The wedding band on your hand is queer enough. The flower is too much."

"Give me a petal then," I say.

"I thought you would ask for that." He pulls out a necklace. It is the sigil of Andromedus. My sigil, I remember. It is iron. He drops it in my hand. "Whisper her name." I do and the Pegasus unfurls like a haemanthus bud. He sets a petal in the center. It closes again. "This is your heart. Guard it with iron."

"Thank you, Matteo," I say, tears in my eyes. I pick him up and hug him despite his protests. "If I live more than a week, I'll have you to thank, my *goodman*." He blushes when I set him down.

"Manage your temper," he reminds me, his small voice darkening. "Manners, manners, then burn their *bloodydamn* house to the ground."

I clutch the Pegasus in my hand as the shuttle crosses over the Martian countryside. Fingers of green stretch over the earth I've lived to dig. I wonder who the Helldiver of Lambda is now. Loran is too young. Barlow is too old. Kieran? He's too responsible. He's got children to love, and he's seen enough of our family die. There's no fire in his belly. Leanna's got enough, but women aren't allowed to dig. It is probably Dain, Eo's brother. Wild, but not bright. The typical Helldiver. He'll die fast. The thought makes me nauseous.

It's not just the thought. I'm nervous. I realize it slowly as I look around the shuttle's interior. Six other youths sit quietly. One, a slender boy with an open gaze and pretty smile, catches my eye. He's the sort who still laughs at butterflies.

"Julian," he declares properly, and takes my forearm. We have no data to offer each other through our datapads; they took them when we boarded the shuttle. So instead I offer him the seat across from me. "Darrow, a very interesting name."

"Have you ever been to Agea?" I ask Julian.

"Course," he says, smiling. He always smiles. "What, you mean you haven't? It's strange. I thought I knew so many Golds, but hardly any of them managed to get past the entrance exams. It's a brave new world of faces, I fear. Anyway, I envy you the fact you haven't been to Agea. It's a strange place. Beautiful, no doubt, but life there is fast, and cheap, so they say."

"But not for us."

He chuckles. "I suppose not. Not unless you play at politics."

"I don't much like playing." I notice his reaction, so I laugh my seriousness off with a wink. "Not unless there's a wager, man. You hear?"

"I hear! What's your game? Bloodchess? Gravcross?"

"Oh, bloodchess is all right. But fauxWar takes the prize," I say with a Golden grin.

"Especially if you're a Nortown fan!" he agrees.

"Oh . . . *Nortown*. I don't know if we'll get along," I say, wincing. I jab myself with a thumb. "Yorkton."

"*Yorkton!* I don't know if we'll *ever* get along!" he laughs.

And though I smile, he doesn't know how cold I am inside; the conversation, the jibes, the smiles, are all a pattern of sociality. Matteo's done me well, but to Julian's credit, he doesn't seem a monster.

He should be a monster.

"My brother must already have arrived at the Institute. He was already in Agea at our family's estate, causing trouble no doubt!" Julian shakes his head proudly. "Best man I know. He'll be the Primus, just you watch. Our father's pride and joy, and that's saying something with how many family members I have!" Not a flicker of jealousy in his voice, just love.

"Primus?" I ask.

"Oh, Institute talk; it means leader of his House."

The Houses. I know these. There are twelve loosely based on underlying personality traits. Each is named for one of the gods of the Roman pantheon. The SchoolHouses are networking tools and social clubs outside of school. Do well, and they'll find you a powerful family to serve. The families are the true powers in the Society. They have their own armies and fleets and contribute to the Sovereign's forces. Loyalty begins with them. There is little love for the denizens of one's own planet. If anything, they are the competition.

"You sobs done beating each other off yet?" an impish kid sneers from the corner of the shuttle. He's so drab he is khaki instead of Gold. His lips are thin and his face like a cruel hawk just as it spies a mouse. A Bronzie.

"Are we bothering you?" My sarcasm has a polite nip.

"Does two dogs humping bother me? Likely, yes. If they are noisy."

Julian stands. "Apologize, cur."

"Go slag yourself," the small kid says. In half a second, Julian has drawn a white glove from nowhere. "That to wipe my ass, you golden pricklick?"

"What? You little heathen!" Julian says in shock. "Who raised you?"

"Wolves, after your mother's cootch spat me out."

"You beast!"

Julian throws the glove at the small kid. I'm watching, thinking this is the height of comedy. The kid seems pulled straight from the Lykos crop, Beta maybe. He's like an ugly, tiny, irritable Loran. Julian doesn't know what to do, so he makes a challenge.

"A challenge, *goodman*."

"A duel? You're that offended?" The ugly kid snorts at the princeling. "Fine. I'll stitch your family pride together after the Passage, pricklick." He blows his nose into the glove.

"Why not now, coward?" Julian calls. His slender chest is puffed out just as his father must have taught him. No one insults his family.

"Are you stupid? Do you see razors about? Idiot. Go away. We'll duel after the Passage."

"Passage . . . ?" Julian finally asks what I'm thinking.

The scrawny kid grins wickedly. Even his teeth are khaki.

"It's the last test, idiot. And the best secret this side of the rings around Octavia au Lune's cootch."

"Then how do you know about it?" I ask.

"Inside track," the kid says. "And I don't know about it. I know *of* it, you giant pisshead."

His name is Sevro, and I like his angle.

But the talk of a Passage worries me. There is so little I know, I realize, as I listen in as Julian strikes up a conversation with the last member of our shuttle. They talk about their test scores. There is a severe disparity between their low scores and mine. I notice Sevro snort as they say theirs aloud. How did applicants with such low scores get in? I've got an ill feeling in my gut. And what did Sevro score?

We come to the Valles Marineris in darkness. It is a great scar of light across Mars's black surface, going as far as eyes can see. At the center of it, the capital city of my planet rises in the night like a

garden of jewelswords. Nightclubs flicker on rooftops, dance floors made of condensed air. Scantily-dressed girls and foolish boys rise and fall as gravMixers play with physics. NoiseBubbles separate city blocks. We cut through them and hear worlds of different sounds.

The Institute is beyond Agea's night districts and is built into the side of the eight-kilometer-high walls of the Valles Marineris. The walls rise like tidal waves of green stone cradling civilization with flora. The Institute itself is made of white stone—a place of columns and sculpture, Roman to its core.

I have not been here before. But I have seen the columns. Seen the destination of our voyage. Bitterness wells in me like bile rising from stomach to throat as I think of his face. Think of his words. His eyes as they scanned the crowd. I watched on the HC as the ArchGovernor gave his speech time and again to the classes before my own. Soon I'll hear it from his lips myself. Soon I'll suffer the rage. Feel the fire lick over my heart as I see him in person once again.

We land on a drop pad and are shepherded into an open-air marble square looking over the vast valley. The night air is crisp. Agea sprawls behind and the gates of the Institute stretch before us. I stand with over a thousand Goldbrows, all glancing about with the cocksureness of their race. Many clump together, friends from beyond the white walls of the school. I did not think their classes so large.

A tall Golden man flanked by Obsidians and a coterie of Gold advisors rises on a pair of gravBoots before the gate. My heart goes cold as I recognize his face and hear his voice and see the glimmer in his ingot eyes.

"Welcome, children of Aureate," ArchGovernor Nero au Augustus says in a voice as smooth as Eo's skin. It is preternaturally loud. "I assume you understand the gravity of your presence here. Of the thousand cities of Mars. Of all the Great Families, you are the chosen few. You are the peak of the human pyramid. Today, you will begin your campaign to join the best caste of our race. Your fellows

stand like you in the Institutes of Venus, of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres of Earth, of Luna, of the Gas Giant Moons, of Europa, of the Astrodian Greek Cluster and the Astrodian Trojan Cluster, of Mercury, of Callisto, of the joint venture Enceledas and Ceres, and of the farpioneers of Hildas."

It seems only a day ago that I knew I was a pioneer of Mars. Only a day ago that I suffered so that humanity, desperate to leave a dying Earth, could spread to the red planet. Oh, how well my rulers lied.

Behind Augustus, in the stars, there's movement, but it is not the stars that move. Nor is it asteroids or comets. It is the Sixth and Fifth Fleets. The Armada of Mars. My breath catches in my chest. The Sixth Fleet is commanded by Cassius's father, while the smaller Fifth Fleet is under the ArchGovernor's direct control. Most of the ships are owned by families who owe allegiance to either Augustus or Bellona.

Augustus shows us why we, they, rule. My flesh tingles. I am so small. A billion tons of durosteel and nanometal move through the heavens, and I have never been beyond Mars's atmosphere. They are like specks of silver in an ocean of ink. And I am so much less. But those specks could ravage Mars. They could destroy a moon. Those specks rule the ink. An Imperator commands each fleet; a Praetor commands squadrons within that fleet. What I could do with that power . . .

Augustus is haughty as he gives his speech. I swallow the bile in my throat. Because of the impossible distance of my enemies, my anger was once a cold, quiet sort. Now it burns in me.

"Society has three stages: Savagery, Ascendance, Decadence. The great rise because of Savagery. They rule in Ascendance. They fall because of their own Decadence."

He tells us how the Persians were felled, how the Romans collapsed because their rulers forgot how their parents gained them an empire. He prattles about Muslim dynasties and European effeminacy and Chinese regionalism and American self-loathing and self-neutering. All the ancient names.

"Our Savagery began when our capital, Luna, rebelled against

the tyranny of Earth and freed herself from the shackles of Demokracy, from the Noble Lie—the idea that men are brothers and are created equal."

Augustus weaves lies of his own with that golden tongue of his. He tells of the Goldens' suffering. The Masses sat on the wagon and expected the great to pull, he reminds. They sat whipping the great until we could no longer take it.

I remember a different whipping.

"Men are not created equal; we all know this. There are averages. There are outliers. There are the ugly. There are the beautiful. This would not be if we were all equal. A Red can no more command a starship than a Green can serve as a doctor!"

There's more laughter across the square as he tells us to look at pathetic Athens, the birthplace of the cancer they call Demokracy. Look how it fell to Sparta. The Noble Lie made Athens weak. It made their citizens turn on their best general, Alcibiades, because of jealousy.

"Even the nations of Earth grew jealous of one another. The United States of America exacted this idea of equality through force. And when the nations united, the Americans were surprised to find that they were disliked! The Masses are jealous! How wonderful a dream it would be if all men were created equal! But we are not.

"It is against the Noble Lie that we fight. But as I said before, as I say to you now, there is another evil against which we war. It is a more pernicious evil. It is a subversive, slow evil. It is not a wildfire. It is a cancer. And that cancer is Decadence. Our Society has passed from Savagery to Ascendance. But like our spiritual ancestors, the Romans, we too can fall into Decadence."

He speaks of the Pixies.

"You are the best of humanity. But you have been coddled. You have been treated like children. Were you born to a different Color, you would have calluses. You would have scars. You would know pain."

He smiles as if he knows pain. I hate this man.

"You think you know pain. You think the Society is an inevitable

force of history. You think Her the end of history. But many have thought that before. Many ruling classes have believed theirs to be the last, the pinnacle. They grew soft. Fat. They forgot that calluses, wounds, scars, hardship, preserve all those fine pleasure clubs you young boys love to frequent and all those fine silks and diamonds and unicorns you girls ask for on birthdays.

"Many Aureates have not sacrificed. That is why they do not wear this." He shows a long scar on his right cheek. Octavia au Lune has the same scar. "The Scar of a Peer. We are not the masters of the Solar System because we are born. We are the masters because we, the Peerless Scarred, the iron Golds, made it that way."

He touches the scar on his cheek. I'd give him another if I were closer. The children around me suck down this man's garbage like oxygen.

"Right now, the Colors who mine this planet are harder than you. They are born with calluses. Born with scars and hatred. They are tough as nanosteel. Fortunately, they are also very stupid. For instance, this *Persephone* you have no doubt heard of is nothing more than a dim girl who thought singing a song was worth a hanging."

I bite a bloody hole in my cheek. My skin shivers from rage as I find out that my wife is part of this bastard's speech.

"The girl did not even know the video would be leaked. Yet it is her willingness to suffer hardship that gave her power. Martyrs, you see, are like bees. Their only power comes in death. How many of you would sacrifice yourself to not kill, but merely hurt your enemy? Not one of you, I wager."

I taste blood in my mouth. I have the knifeRing Dancer gave me. But I breathe the fury down. I am no martyr. I am not vengeance. I am Eo's dream. Still, doing nothing while her murderer gloats feels like a betrayal.

"In time you will receive your Scars from my sword," Augustus closes. "But first you must earn them."

17

THE DRAFT

"Son of Linus and Lexus au Andromedus, both of the House Apollo. Would you prefer to mark yourself as requesting House Apollo preferentiality?" a tedious Aureate administrator asks me.

Goldbrows' first loyalty is to Color, then family, then planet, then House. Most Houses are dominated by one or two powerful families. On Mars, the Family Augustus, the Family Bellona, and the Family Arcos influence all others.

"No," I reply.

He shuffles over his datapad. "Very well. How do you believe you performed on the slangSmarts test? That is the extrapolational test," he clarifies.

"I think my results speak for themselves."

"You were not paying attention, Darrow. I shall mark that against you. I'm asking for *you* to speak for your results."

"I think I took a gory piss on your test, *sir*."

"Ah." He smiles. "Well, you did. You did. House Minerva for brains might be right for you. Perhaps Pluto, for the deviousness. Apollo for the pride. Yes. Hmm. Well, I have a test for you. Please

complete it to the best of your ability. Interviews will commence when you have finished."

The test is quick and it is in the form of an immersion game. There is a goblet on a hill that I need to acquire. Many obstacles stand in my way. I pass them as rationally as possible, trying to hide my anger when a little elf steals a key I acquire. But every step of the way, there's some damn setback, some inconvenience. And it is always unforeseen. It is always something beyond the bounds of extrapolation. In the end, I reach the goblet, but only after killing an annoying wizard and cruelly enslaving the race of elves by means of said wizard's magic wand. I could have left the elves be. But they annoyed me.

Soon, the interviewers come in intervals. I learn they are called Proctors. Each one of them is a Peerless Scarred. They are chosen by the ArchGovernor to teach and represent the students of the House within the Institute.

All said, the Proctors are impressive. There's a huge Scarred man with hair like a lion and a lightning bolt on his collar for Jupiter, a matronly woman with gentle golden eyes, and a quick-witted man with winged feet on his collar. He can't sit still and his baby face seems immensely fascinated by my hands. He makes me play a game with him in which he puts out both hands flat and facing up and I put mine atop facing down. He tries slapping my hands, but never quite manages. He leaves after clapping his hands together in joy.

Another strange encounter comes when a beautiful man with coiled hair interviews me. A bow marks his collar. Apollo. He asks me how attractive I believe myself to be and is displeased when I undershoot his estimate. Still, I think he likes me, because he asks me what I would like to be one day.

"An Imperator of a fleet," I say.

"You could do great things with a fleet. But a lofty notion," he sighs, accenting every word with a feline purr. "Perhaps too lofty for your family. Maybe if you had a benefactor of better familial origin. Yes, maybe then." He looks at his datapad. "But unlikely due to your birth. Hm. Best of luck."

I sit alone for an hour or more till a sullen man comes to join me. His unfortunate face is pinched like a hatchet, but he has the Scar and a razor hilt hangs on his hip. His name is Fitchner. A wad of gum fills his mouth. The uniform he wears is black with gold, and it nearly conceals the slight belly paunch that sticks outward despite the faint smell of metabolizers. Like many of the others, he wears badges about his personage. A golden wolf with two heads decorates his collar. And a strange hand marks his cuff.

"They give me the mad dogs," he says. "They give me the killers of our race, the ones full of piss and napalm and vinegar." He sniffs the air. "You smell full of shit."

I say nothing. He leans against the door and frowns at it as though it offended him in some way. Then back to me, sniffing improperly.

"Problem is, we of House Mars always burn out. Kids rule the Institute at first. Then they find out that napalm lasts about . . ." He snaps his fingers. I have no reply. He sighs and plops down in a chair. After a while of watching me, he stands and punches me in the face. "If you punch me back, you will be sent home, Pixie."

I kick him in the shin.

He limps away, laughing like a drunk Uncle Narol.

I'm not sent home. Instead, I find myself escorted with one hundred others into a large room with floatChairs and a large wall dominated by ivory gridwork. The gridwork forms a checkerboard square on the wall, ten rows high, ten rows across. I'm taken on a lift to the middle row, some fifty feet off the ground. Ninety-nine other students are ushered in till each box is filled. This is the prime crop, the best of the students. I look out from my box, peering up above me. A girl's feet dangle out of the box above my head. Numbers and letters appear in front of my box. My statistics. Supposedly I am very rash and have upper-outlier characteristics in intuition and loyalty and, most noticeably, rage.

There are twelve groups in the audience. Each group sits close together in floatChairs around vertical golden standards. I see an archer, a lightning bolt, an owl, a wolf with two heads, an upside-down crown, and a trident, amongst others. One of the Proctors

accompanies each group. They alone do not have their faces covered. The others wear ceremonial masks, featureless and golden and slightly like the animals of their Houses. If only I had known this was going to happen, I might have brought a nuke. These are the Drafters, the men and women of highest prestige. Praetors and Imperators and Tribunes and Adjudicators and Governors sit there watching me, trying to choose the new students for their House, trying to find young men and women they can test and offer apprenticeships. With one bomb, I could have destroyed the best and the brightest of their Golden rule. Maybe that's the rashness speaking.

The Draft begins when a titan of a genAlt boy is chosen first to the House of the lightning bolt. House Jupiter. Then go more girls and boys of unnatural beauty and physical prowess. I can only guess they are geniuses as well. The fifth pick comes. The baby-faced interviewer with the winged feet floats up to me on golden boots. Several of the Drafters of House Mercury float along with him. They speak quietly amongst themselves before asking me questions.

"Who are your parents? What are their family's accomplishments?"

I tell them about my modest false family. One of them seems to think highly of a relative of mine who has long since passed away. But despite the Proctor's objections, they pass me over for another student from a family with the ownership of ninety mines and a stake on one of Mars's southern continents.

The Mercury Proctor curses and shoots me a quick smile.

"Hope you're available next round," he says.

Next goes a delicate girl with a mocking smile. I can barely pay attention, and, at times, it is difficult to see who else is being selected. We're arrayed in an odd way. With the tenth pick, the Proctor who struck me in the interviews floats my way. There is disagreement amongst the Drafters. I have two ardent advocates: one is as tall as Augustus, but her hair flows down to her spine in three golden braids. And the second is broader, not very tall. He's old. Can tell by the scars and wrinkles on his thick hands. Hands that bear the signet ring of an Olympic Knight. I know him immediately

even without seeing his face. Lorn au Arcos. The Rage Knight, the third-greatest man on Mars, who chose to serve the Society by safeguarding the Society's Compact, instead of reaching for crowns in politics. When he points to me, Fitchner grins.

I am chosen tenth. Tenth out of one thousand.

18

CLASSMATES

I feel a sinking in my stomach as I walk with the chattering mass into the dining hall. It is overgrand—white marble floors, columns, a holosky displaying birds in flight at sunset. The Institute is not what I expected. According to Augustus, the classes are to be hard on these little godlings. I snort down a laugh. Let the lot of them spend a year in a mine.

There are twelve tables, each with one hundred place settings. Our names float above the chairs in golden letters. Mine floats to the right of a table's head. It is a place of distinction. The firstDraft. A single bar floats to the right of my name. A -1 is to the left. The first to get five bars becomes Primus of his House. Each bar is bounty for an act of merit. Apparently my high score on the test was the first bit of merit.

"Wonderful, a cutter in the lead for Primus," a familiar voice says. The girl from the exam. I read her name. Antonia au Severus. She has cruel good looks—high cheekbones, a smirking smile, scorn in her eyes. Her hair is long, full, and golden as Midas's touch. She was born to be hated and to hate. A -5 floats beside her name. It is the second-closest score to mine at the table. Cassius, the boy I met

at testing, sits diagonally across from me. A -6 shimmers by his broad smile. He runs a hand back through his curls.

Another boy sits directly across from me; -1 and a golden bar float by his name. While Cassius lounges, this other boy, Priam, sits as straight as a blade. His face is celestial. His eyes alert. His hair coiffed. He's tall as me, but broad in the shoulders. I don't think I've ever seen a more perfect human being. A bloodydamn statue. He wasn't in the Draft, I discover. He is what they call a Premier; they cannot be drafted. His parents choose his House. Then I discover why. His scandalous mother, a bannerwoman of the House Bellona, owns our planet's two moons.

"Fate brings us together again," Cassius chuckles to me. "And Antonia. My love! It seems our fathers conspired to place us side by side."

Antonia replies with a sneer, "Remind me to beam him a thank-you."

"Toni! No need for nastiness." He wags a finger. "Now toss me a smile like a good doll."

She flips him the crux with her fingers. "Rather toss you out a window, Cassi."

"Rawr." Cassius blows her a kiss. She ignores it. "So, Priam, I suppose you and I will have to play gently with these fools, eh?"

"Oh, they look like swell sorts to me," Priam replies primly. "I fancy we'll do very well as a group."

They talk in highLingo.

"If the dregs of the Draft don't weigh us down, my good man!" He gestures to the end of the table and starts naming them: "Screw-face, for obvious reasons. Clown because of that ridiculous puffy hair. Weed because, well, he's thin. Oy! You, you're Thistle because your nose looks hooked as one. And . . . that itty-bitty one right there next to the Bronzie-looking fellow, that's little Pebble."

"I think they will rather surprise you," Priam says in defense of the far end of the table. "They may not be as tall or as athletic or even as intelligent as you or me, if intelligence really can be measured by *that* test, but I do not think it charity to say that they will be the spine of our group. Salt of the earth, if you will. Good sorts."

I see the small kid from the shuttle, Sevro, at the very foot of the table. The salt of the earth is not making friends. And neither am I. Cassius glances at my -1. I see him concede that Priam might have scored better than he, but Cassius makes a point in saying he's never heard of my parents.

"So, dear Darrow, how did you cheat?" he asks. Antonia glances over from her conversation with Arria, a small girl made of curling hair and dimples.

"Oh, come now, man." I laugh. "They sent Quality Control after me. How could I have cheated? Impossible. Did you cheat? Your score is high."

I speak the midLingo. It's more comfortable than that highLingo fartdust Priam jabbers on in.

"Me? Cheat! No. Just didn't try enough, apparently," Cassius replies. "If I had my wits, I'd have spent less time with the girls and more on studying, like you."

He's trying to tell me if he tried he could have done just as well. But he's too busy to put in as much effort. If I wanted him as a friend, I'd let him get away with it.

"You studied?" I ask. I feel a sudden urge to embarrass him. "I didn't study at all."

A chill goes through the air.

I shouldn't have said it. My stomach plummets. *Manners*.

Cassius's face sours and Antonia smirks. I've insulted him. Priam frowns. If I want a career in the fleet, then I will likely need Cassius au Bellona's father's patronage. Son of an Imperator. Matteo drilled this into me. How easy it is to forget. The fleet is where the power is. Fleet or government or army. And I don't like government, not to mention that, this sort of insult is how duels begin. Fear trickles down my spine as I realize how thin a line there is to tread. Cassius knows how to duel. I, for all my new skills, do not. He would rip me to pieces, and he looks like he wants to do just that.

"I joke." I tilt my head to Cassius. "Come on, man. How could I score so high and not have studied till my eyes were bleeding? Wish I'd spent more time fooling off like you—we're in the same spot now, after all. Fat lot that studying did for me."

Priam nods his approval at the peace offering.

"I bet it was a slog!" Cassius crows, tipping his head to acknowledge my peculiar breed of apology. I expected the play to go over his head. Thought his pride would blind him to my sudden apology; the Gold may be proud, but he isn't stupid. None of them are. Have to remember that.

After that, I do Matteo proud. I flirt with a girl named Quinn, befriend and joke with Cassius and Priam—who has probably never sworn in his life—throw my hand out to a tall brute named Titus whose neck is as thick as my thigh. He squeezes too hard on purpose. He's surprised when I nearly break his hand, but damn is his grip strong. The boy is even taller than Cassius and I, and he's got a voice like a titan, but he grins when he realizes that my grip, if nothing else, is stronger than his. Something strange about his voice, though. Something decidedly disdainful. There's also a feather of a boy named Roque who looks and speaks like a poet. His smiles are slow, few, but genuine. Rare.

"Cassius!" Julian calls. Cassius stands and throws an arm around his thinner, prettier twin. I didn't piece it together before, but they are brothers. Twins. Not identical. Julian did say his brother was already in Agea.

"Darrow here is not what he seems," Julian tells the table with a very grave face. He has a knack for theatrics.

"You don't mean . . ." Cassius puts a hand to his mouth.

My finger grazes my steak knife.

"Yes." Julian nods solemnly.

"No." Cassius shakes his head. "He's not a *Yorkton* supporter? Julian, tell me it isn't so! Darrow! Darrow, how could you be? They never win a game! Priam, are you hearing this?"

I throw my hands up in apology. "A curse of birth, I suppose. I am a product of my upbringing. I cheer for the underdog." I manage not to sneer the words.

"He confessed it to me on the shuttle."

Julian is proud to know me. Proud his brother knows he knows me. He looks for Cassius's approval. Cassius isn't oblivious to this either; he gently doles out a compliment and Julian leaves the high-

Drafts and returns to his midDraft seat halfway down the table with a content smile and squared shoulders. I didn't think Cassius would be the kind sort.

Of those I meet, only Antonia openly dislikes me. She doesn't watch me like the others at the table. From her, I feel only a distant breed of contempt. One moment she is laughing, flirting with Roque, and then she feels my gaze and becomes ice. The feeling is mutual.

My dormitory is from a dream. Gold trim lines a window that looks out into the valley. A bed is laden with silks and quilts and satins. I lie in it when a Pink masseur comes in and stays for an hour kneading my muscles. Later, three lithe Pinks file through to tend to my needs. I send them to Cassius's room instead. To calm the temptation, I take a cold shower and immerse myself in a holoexperience of a digger in the mining colony Corinth. The Helldiver in the holoexperience is less talented than I was, but the rattling, the simulated heat, the darkness and the vipers, they comfort me so much that I wrap my old scarlet rag around my head.

More food comes. Augustus was all talk. Gob full of exaggerations. This is their version of hardship. I feel guilty as I fall asleep with a full stomach, clutching the locket with Eo's flower inside. My family will go to bed hungry tonight. I whisper her name. I take the wedding band from my pocket and kiss it. Feel the ache. They stole her. But she let them. She left me. She left me tears and pain and longing. She left me to give me anger, and I cannot help but hate her for a moment even though beyond that moment there is only love.

"Eo," I whisper, and the locket closes.

19

THE PASSAGE

I vomit as I wake. A second fist strikes my full stomach. Then a third. I'm empty and gasping for air. Drowning in my sick. Coughing. Hacking. I try to scramble away. A man's hand grabs me by the hair and throws me into the wall. God, he's bloody strong. And he's got extra fingers. I reach for my knifeRing, but they've already dragged me into the hall. I've never been so manhandled; even my new body can't recover from their strikes. There's four of them in black—Crows, the killers. They've discovered me. They know what I am. It's over. All over. Their faces are expressionless skulls. Masks. I pull the knife I took from dinner from my waist and am about to stab one of them in the groin. Then I see the flash of gold on their wrists and they hit me till I drop the knife. It's a test. Their strikes against a higher Color are sanctioned by the issuer of the bracelets. They haven't found me out at all. A test. That is what this is. It is a test.

They could have used stunners. There's a purpose to the beating. It's something most Golds have never experienced. So I wait. I curl up and let them beat me. When I don't resist, they think they've done their job. They sort of do; I'm raggedshit by the time they're satisfied.

I'm dragged through the hallway by men nearly three meters tall. A bag is shoved over my head. They're staying away from technology to scare me. I wonder how many of these kids have felt physical force like this? How many have been so dehumanized? The bag smells like death and piss as they drag me along. I start laughing. It's like my bloodydamn frysuit. Then a fist hits my chest and I crumple, gasping.

The hood also has a sound device installed. I'm not breathing hard, but my breaths come back louder than they should. There are over a thousand students. Dozens at a time must suffer this same fate, yet I hear nothing. They don't want me to hear the others. I'm supposed to think I'm alone, that my Color means nothing. Surprisingly, I find myself offended that they dare strike me. Don't they know I'm a bloodydamn Gold? Then I snort back a laugh. Effective tricks.

I'm lifted up and thrown hard onto a floor. I feel a vibration, the smell of exhaust. Soon we're in the air. Something in the bag covering my head disorients me. I can't tell which direction we're flying, how high we've risen. The sound of my own raspy breath has become terrible. I think the bag also filters out the oxygen, because I'm hyperventilating. Still, it's not worse than a frysuit.

Later. An hour? Two? We land. They drag me by my heels. Head bumps on stone, jarring me. It's not till much later that they take the bag off of my head in a barren stone room lit by a single light. Another person is already here. The Crows strip away my clothing, rip away the precious Pegasus pendant. They leave.

"Cold in here, Julian?" I chuckle as I stand, unclenching my left hand from the dirty red Helldiver sweat band. My voice echoes. We're both naked. I fake a limp with my right leg. I know what this is.

"Darrow, is that you?" Julian asks. "Are you well?"

"I'm prime. They busted up my right leg, though," I lie.

He stands too, pushing himself up with his left hand. That's his dominant one. He looks tall and feeble in the light. Like bent hay. I caught more kicks and punches than him, though, loads more. My ribs might be cracked.

"What do you think this is?" he asks.

"The Passage, obviously."

"But they lied. They said it would be tomorrow."

The thick wooden door squeals on rusted hinges and Proctor Fitchner saunters in popping a gumbubble.

"Proctor! Sir, you lied to us," Julian protests. He brushes his pretty hair back out of his eyes.

Fitchner's movement is sluggish but his eyes are like a cat's. "Lying takes too much effort," he grunts idly.

"Well . . . how dare you treat us like this!" Julian snaps. "You must know who my father is. And my mother is a Legate! I can have you up on charges for assault in a moment's notice. And you hurt Darrow's leg!"

"It's one A.M., dipstick. It's tomorrow." Fitchner pops another gumbubble. "There are also two of you. Alas, only one spot is available in your class." He tosses a golden ring emblazoned with the wolf of Mars and a star shield of the Institute onto the dirty stone ground. "I could make it ambiguous, but you look like rustyheaded lads. Only one comes out alive."

He leaves the way he came. The door squeals and then slams shut. Julian flinches at the sound. I do not. We both stare at the ring and I have a sick feeling in my gut that I'm the only one in the room who knows what just happened.

"What do they think they are doing?" Julian asks me. "Do they expect us to . . ."

"Kill each other?" I finish. "Yes. That's what they expect." Despite the knot in my throat. I ball my fists, Eo's wedding band tight on my finger. "I intend to wear that ring, Julian. Will you let me have it?"

I am bigger than he. Not quite as tall. But that doesn't matter. He doesn't stand a chance.

All Russians Love Birch Trees

Olga Grjasnowa

ALL RUSSIANS LOVE BIRCH TRESS
by Olga Grjasnowa

EXCERPT

Back in the day, when my mother was still young, gorgeous, and successful, and before she married my father on a whim, our living room had held a grand piano. Preparing for a performance, my mother would practice for days on end. Because of hygienic concerns and the general situation, I'd gone to kindergarten only for a few weeks. Instead, I'd stayed in the living room, sitting under the grand piano and listening to my mother play.

Whenever I saw my parents now, I always assured them that I was fine. I talked about my stipends, summer academies, internships, and stays abroad. I told them about my plans: where I would work and how much I would earn. I told them about Sami and then about Elias, and my parents believed every single word because I played my role well. When we got around to the meat dish, lamb with steamed chestnuts, dried fruit and dolma (those vine leaves stuffed with rice, round lamb, finely minced onions, and nuts), my mother laughed. I told her hospital anecdotes that I made up as I went along.

She finally left, leaving behind pomegranates, oranges, pears, bananas, stuffed puff pastry, and the last piece of chocolate cake. I turned on the TV. A rerun episode of *Tatort* flickered across the screen. In Hannover all signs pointed toward the detective soon spending a hot night with a Southern European. I cranked up the volume and went off to take a shower. I thoroughly scrubbed away dead skin cells and the faint smell of hospital. I tried to recall Elias's body without the screws and the long scar on his thigh. Then I imagined kissing a woman in the staircase, in the midst of banging doors, cooking smells, and screaming children, and how I would slip my hands between her thighs. I was back on the couch, putting cream on my legs before the murderer was caught. I had a suspicion and awaited the solution.

****

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CLUB ABBEY

Greenwich Village, August 6, 1969

There is, in the city's sun-blistered canyons of concrete, a storied section known as Greenwich Village. And into it on August 6, this tall, stately woman walks, utterly disregarding the heat, on a pilgrimage out of the past. She isn't alone. She is accompanied by a ghost. Her name is Stella Crater.

—*Oscar Fraley, preface to* The Empty Robe

We begin in a bar. We will end here as well, but that is more than you need to know at the moment. For now, a woman sits in a corner booth waiting to give her confession. But her party is late, and without an audience, she looks small and alone, like an invalid in an oversize church pew. It's not so easy for her, this truth telling, and she strains against it. A single strand of pearls, brittle and yellowed with age, rests against the fl at plane of her chest. She rolls them between her fi ngers as though counting the beads on a rosary. Stella Crater has avoided this confession for thirty-eight years. The same number of years she has been coming to this bar.

At one time, this meeting would have been a spectacle, splashed across the headlines of every paper in New York: wife of missing judge meets with lead investigator, tells all! But the days of front-page articles interviews, and accusations are over, fi led away in some distant archives. Tonight her stage is empty.

Stella looks at her watch. Nine-fifteen.

Club Abbey, once a speakeasy during the Jazz Age, is now another relic in Greenwich Village, peddling its former glory through the tourist guides. It sits one floor below street level, dark and subdued. The pine floors are scuffed. Black-and-white photos line the walls. An aging jukebox has long since replaced the jazz quartet. The only remnant is Stan, the bartender. He was fifteen when hired by the notorious gangster

Owney Madden to sweep the floors at closing. Owney took a liking to the kid, as did the showgirls, and Stan's been behind the bar ever since. He's never missed Stella's ritual. His part is small, but he plays it well.

Two lowball glasses. Twelve cubes of ice split between them. Whiskey on the rocks. Stan arranges napkins on her table and sets the glasses down. Her eyes are slick with a watery fi lm—the harbinger of age and death.

"Good to see you again, Mrs. Crater."

Stella swats him away with an emaciated hand, and he hangs back to watch, drying glasses with a dish towel. It's the same thing every year: she sits alone in her booth for a few minutes, and then he brings the drinks. Straight whiskey, the way her husband liked it. She'll raise one glass, saluting the empty place across from her, and say, "Good luck, Joe, wherever you are." Stella will take her time with the drink, letting it burn, drawing out the moment until there's nothing left in her glass. That is when she'll rise and walk out, leaving the other drink untouched.

Except tonight she does none of these things.

Fifteen minutes she sits there, rubbing the rim of her glass. Stan has no script for what to do next, and he stares at her, confused. He doesn't see the doors swing open or the older gentleman enter. Doesn't see the trench coat or the faded gray fedora. Sees none of it until Detective Jude Simon slides into the booth across from Stella.

She lays her palm on the table, inches from a pack of cigarettes, and sits up straighter. The booth is hard against her back, walnut planks pressing against the knobs of her spine. "You're late."

"Stella." Jude touches the brim of his hat in greeting. He takes stock

of her shriveled body. Tips his head to the side. “It’s been years.”

“You were here the first time—makes sense that you’d be here the last.” Stella lifts her glass and takes a sip of whiskey. Shudders. “Call it a deathbed confession.”

Jude surveys the room through the weary smoke. The regular Wednesday night crowd—a few women, mostly men—scattered around in groups of two and three drinking longnecks and griping about the stock market. “This isn’t exactly a church, and I’m not much of a priest,” he says.

“Priest. Detective. What’s the difference? You both love a good confession.”

His shoulders twitch—a doubter’s shrug. “I’m retired.”

Stella draws a cigarette from the pack and props it between her lips. She looks at him expectantly.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a tarnished silver lighter. Something like a smile crosses his face and then melts away. He stares at it, cupped there in his palm, before striking it with his thumb. Jude used to be handsome, decades ago when Stella first met him, and the traces are still there in the square line of his jaw and the steel-blue eyes. But now he looks tired and sad. A bit wilted. It takes three tries before a weak flame sputters from the lighter. Perhaps his hand trembles as he holds it toward her, or it could be a trick of the light.

Stella tips her cigarette into the flame, and the end glows orange.

“You would be here tonight even if I hadn’t asked you to come.” Her eyes shift toward the bar, where Stan pretends not to eavesdrop. “You have your sources.”

“Maybe.” Jude hangs his fedora on a peg beside the booth and pulls a pad and pen from his coat pocket. He waits for her to speak.

Stella lured him here with the promise of a story—the real version this time. He has been like a duck after bread crumbs for thirty-nine years. Pecking. Relentless. Gobbling up every scrap she leaves for him.

Yet the truth is not something she will rush tonight. He will get it one morsel at a time.

Stella Crater picked her poison a long time ago—unfiltered Camels—and she takes a long drag now, sizing up her pet duck. Her cheeks collapse into the sharp angles of her face, and she holds the smoke in her lungs for several long seconds before blowing it from between her teeth.

Oh, she’ll tell Detective Simon a story all right.

Thirty-nine years earlier . . .

Chapter One

belgrade lakes, maine,

saturday, august 2, 1930

Stella slept with the windows thrown

open that summer, a breeze blowing back the curtains. The sounds of nature lulled her to sleep: frogs croaking in the shallow water beneath her window, the hum of a dragonfly outside the rusted screen, the call of a loon across the lake. She lay there, with one arm thrown across her face in resistance to the burgeoning sunlight, when she heard the Cadillac crunch up the long gravel driveway.

Joe.

Stella sat up and threw her legs over the edge of the bed, toes resting against the cool floorboards. She pushed a tangle of pale curls away from her eyes with a fine-boned hand. Yawned. Then grabbed a blue cotton shift from the floor and pulled it over her tan shoulders. She hadn't expected her husband to come—hadn't wanted him to—but there was no mistaking the familiar rumble of that engine. She went out to meet him wearing yesterday's dress and a contrived grin.

"You're back."

Joseph Crater leaned out the open window and drew her in for a kiss. "Drove all night. We beat the Bar Harbor Express by an hour!" He

clapped their chauffeur on the back. “We’ll have to paint a racing stripe down the side of this old thing.”

Stella pulled the car door open and saw two things at once: he’d brought her flowers—white peonies, her favorite—and he wasn’t wearing his wedding band. Again. The sight of that naked finger stripped the grin from her face.

Joe climbed out and reached for her with one arm, but she took a small step backward and looked at his pants pocket. The imprint of his ring pressed round against his cotton trousers. The question that surfaced was not the one she really wanted to ask. “Did you have a pleasant trip?”

He nodded.

“Where did you go?”

Joe’s answer was cautious. “Atlantic City. With William Klein.”

Her voice was even, almost carefree. “Just the two of you?” Joe hesitated long enough for her to rephrase the question. “Were you and William alone?”

He glanced at Fred Kahler, stiff behind the wheel, eyes downcast, and responded with a single sharp word. “*Stell.*”

It took a moment to find her breath. All that fresh air and she couldn’t pull a stitch of it into her lungs. “Must you be so *fl agrant* about it?”

“We’ll talk about this later.”

Stella heard the warning in his voice, but didn’t care. She rose up onto the balls of her feet, the gravel digging into her bare skin, as anger ripped through her voice. “We have *nothing* to talk about!”

His eyes went small and dark.

Stella grabbed the car door and, with a rage that startled them both, slammed it shut, crushing Joe's hand in the frame. She heard the crunch before he screamed, and when he yanked his hand away, two fingers were bloody and mangled.

Stella waited for Joe on the deck of the Salt House. It was Belgrade Lakes' only fine-dining establishment, and they'd been late, thanks to his difficulty dressing with one hand. She had refused to help him.

Joe hadn't yelled at her after the incident. Hadn't called her names or lifted a hand to strike her. All he said was, "I'll need your help with this mess." Almost polite. Then he soaked his hand in the kitchen sink and waited for her to gather ointment and gauze. She had wrapped the bandage tighter than necessary, angered anew by his cavalier attitude and the way he expected her to accept that a man of his position would have a mistress. As though some skirt on Broadway was the same thing as a membership in the City Club.

By the time they arrived at the restaurant, he'd created a plausible fiction for his injury. "Had a beastly run-in with a Studebaker," Joe explained to their waiter, wiggling his fingers for effect. "Damn thing tried to eat my hand for lunch." And then, shortly after being seated, he excused himself to make a phone call.

Stella ordered their meal from a menu of summer fare: grilled fish, steaks, roasted vegetables, and fruit. A pleasant breeze rolled off the lake, rocking the Chinese lanterns that were strung around the deck. The red-and-yellow globes sent dancing spheres of amber across the linen

tablecloths. Only a handful of the tables were occupied, and the diners leaned close over the candles, lost in conversation or in silence as they enjoyed the view. The longer she waited for Joe to return, the more they sent sympathetic glances her way.

The meal arrived with wine and bread, and Stella shifted candles and silverware to make room for the ample dinner. She waited until their server departed with his tray before taking a long drink of merlot. Steam rose from the pan-seared trout with lemon-caper sauce on her plate, and she wondered what sort of mood Joe would be in when he finished his call.

Minutes later, the door banged open on loose hinges, and Stella forced a smile as Joe strode toward the table, shoulders rounded forward like an ox. It was a look Stella knew well. Fury and determination and arrogance.

He yanked his chair away from the table with his good hand. “I’m leaving in the morning.”

“Why?”

“I have to go back to the city tomorrow. Straighten a few things out. I’ll be back on Thursday, in plenty of time for your birthday.”

“But—”

“Don’t snivel. It doesn’t become you.” Joe unfolded the crisp black napkin and spread it over his lap. “You shouldn’t have waited. Food’s getting cold.”

Stella stayed in bed when Joe pushed back the covers at six the next morning. She stayed there while he

bathed, the water turning on with a groan of rusted pipes. When his toothbrush tapped against the sink. Stella stayed, curled around her pillow, when he rattled through the dresser and yanked his clothes from the closet. Didn't move when he nudged her shoulder or when he cursed or when he brushed dry lips against her temple—a rote farewell—his freshly shaved chin rubbing against her cheek. Not until she heard his footsteps on the stairs did she open her eyes. And only when the Cadillac roared to life outside did she sit up. Four steps brought her to the window. She wiped his kiss from her temple. "Goodbye."

The last Stella Crater ever saw of her husband was a glimpse of his shirt collar through the rear window as Fred eased the Cadillac down the gravel driveway.

Chapter Two

97 orchard street, lower east side,

monday, august 4, 1930

Maria and Jude lay in a breathless tangle,

watching the sky lighten to the color of ash outside their bedroom window. *Wanton,* he called her, throwing an arm above his head and dragging air deep into his lungs.

Maria pressed closer. “Our marriage is doomed to fail.”

Jude tugged at her earlobe with his teeth and buried his face in her hair, inhaling the scents of lemon peel and lavender. “Why’s that?”

“We are totally incompatible.”

“You’ve been saying that for years.”

Maria’s father considered Jude profane, and her mother interceded daily for his inevitable visit to purgatory, but their different religious beliefs—or his lack thereof—had never been an issue for them. Despite the fact that she’d chosen an agnostic husband over her parents’ objections.

“When the baby comes, we’ll fight.”

Jude moved the sheet away, exposing her fl at stomach. He circled her navel with the tip of one finger and then placed his palm on her belly. The hope in her copper-penny eyes was too much for him. He turned away.

“We never fight.”

“But we will. Because I *will* be pregnant. One day.”

“When is your appointment?”

“Fourteen days.” She breathed the words against his skin.

“And you think this doctor can help?”

“It’s a start.”

In the distance they could hear the rumble of the El where Park Row met the Bowery. Jude groaned and pushed the sheet away.

“Don’t.” Her breath was warm against his neck.

“I have to.”

“You should stay.”

“Tell that to the sergeant.”

Maria curled into him and wrapped her leg around his. His pulse throbbed against her thigh. “I could convince you.”

“You could convince the pope to take a mistress.”

“Don’t say that.” Her hands flew over her chest in the sign of the cross. She grabbed her rosary—pale blue beads on a silver chain—from the bedside table and slipped it around her neck. It hung between the swell of her breasts, carnal and reverent.

“It’s true. If Pius the Eleventh saw you right now, he’d reconsider his vow of celibacy.” Jude sat up, reluctant. “I could lose my job.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” She regretted the words as soon as they were out. A shadow crossed his face, and Maria crawled toward him. She slid her hand along his thigh and offered a coy smile. “Consider the alternative,” she whispered.

Jude laughed and dropped back to his elbows. “You’re wicked.”

“Stay there.”

Maria leaned over the bed and reached for something underneath.

The heavy silver cross around her neck clanked against the fl oor as she stretched farther, balanced precariously on her hips. She could feel the heat of his gaze on her spine, could almost sense its caress in the small of her back. Finally, she felt the square edge of the box she'd stashed the night before.

"For you, *Detective.*" She handed him the small brown package.

Jude took the gift and peered at the hastily tied string. "Is that my shoelace?"

"We were out of ribbon."

"What's the occasion?"

"I wanted to give it to you back in March, when you got the promotion." She smiled, embarrassed. "It took a while to save up."

Too excited to wait for her husband, Maria ripped off the paper and held up a cigarette lighter.

He took it and flipped the lid. A bright orange flame leapt up.

She pointed to the side. "Your initials."

The letters j.s. were engraved across the metal in script and filled with black patina. Jude ran a thumb across them.

"Do you like it?"

Jude cupped the lighter in the palm of his hand. It was warm against his skin. "I love it."

"Then what's wrong?" She tapped the sudden crease between his eyebrows.

"You shouldn't have to work two jobs. It's not right."

She pulled away to better see his face. "You know Smithson won't hire a woman tailor full-time—too big of a hit to his pride. So I keep the

housekeeping for now. Besides, we need the money. Rent just went up."

"Not *again*?"

"The notice came in the mail yesterday."

Jude sat up and stretched. He looked like a kitten, tongue curled and back arched. She laughed.

"Not so fast." Maria caught him off balance and tipped him back onto the mattress. She pinned him down with her hands and knees and kissed him with the deep warmth known only to seasoned lovers. He didn't resist.

Maria slipped through the entrance of 40 Fifth Avenue and paused to catch her breath. She twisted her watch around her thin wrist and noted the time. Eight-thirty. She winced and rushed toward the elevator. Her lust and Jude's shoelaces had made them both late for work, but she could always blame the incessant construction-induced traffic along Fifth Avenue. There were over seven hundred buildings under construction in Manhattan that year, turning her well-laid route into a maze of cracked concrete and cordoned-off streets. It seemed every building, cellar, subway, and foundation was undergoing some sort of alteration to make room for the relentless swell of people. The air was a broken symphony of shovels, rock drills, jackhammers, and cranes pecking, breaking, and thundering New York City into the twentieth century.

Maria wiped a bead of sweat from her upper lip and leaned against the cool wall of the elevator as it rose to the fifth floor. Her uniform, a black rayon dress with lace collar and cuffs, stuck against her back

with the humidity and chaffed her skin. She fished for the keys to apartment 508 inside her purse, thankful that the owners were on vacation in Maine and wouldn't know she was late.

She let herself into the apartment and eased the door shut. Four times the size of the efficiency she shared with Jude, the Craters' home spread before her, wood floors and cream-colored walls dotted with oil paintings in gilded frames. The living room was anchored by a stone fireplace with a stained mantel and a painting that cost more than she made in six months. Mrs. Crater had beamed the day they won the Monet at auction, confiding that it would be worth a small fortune in a few years—not that they hadn't parted with a decent sum, mind you, but it was a luxury now that Mr. Crater had his seat on the bench. She had shown Maria the signature in the bottom right-hand corner, insisted she trace it with her fingertip to *feel* his name on the painting. They both knew it was the closest Maria would ever come to a Monet.

The rest of the apartment was compact. A small kitchen and dining room were off to the side, an empty pewter fruit bowl and place settings for six on the table. Vacant elegance. Maria stood in the entry and inhaled the smells of oiled furniture and floor wax. The heavy must of velvet drapes. One day she hoped to have a home as lovely. Jude's promotion brought them a step closer, but the reality was that even if he made sergeant in a few years, they would never be able to afford something like this. She pushed aside a swell of envy and got to work.

The Craters kept the cleaning supplies beneath the cabinet in the guest bathroom, and she was about to collect them when she heard the Victrola playing softly in the master bedroom. Mr. Crater often left it

on—a habit that irritated Mrs. Crater to no end—and must have forgotten to turn it off when he left for Maine on Friday evening.

Maria pushed open the dark wood door that led from the living room into the master bedroom. It was furnished, as was the rest of the apartment, thoughtfully and expensively. Sturdy walnut furniture. Red-and cream bedclothes. Curtains puddled on the fl oor.

But stretched across the bed was a naked woman, twenty years younger than Mrs. Crater and a great deal more buxom. She and Maria stared at each other for one horrified second. The woman screamed and hurried to cover herself as Joseph Crater emerged from the bathroom, dripping wet, a towel around his waist. Maria gasped an apology and shut the door. She stood, paralyzed, listening to the tumult in the other room.

"The maid," Crater said.

A whisper. "What is she doing here?"

"Cleaning, obviously." He tripped over something. Cursed. "I forgot to tell her not to come."

"You *forgot*?"

"Stay here."

Maria looked at the front door, wondering if she could grab her purse and leave before he came out. Mr. Crater charged from the bedroom, holding on to his towel with one hand. Barrel chest. Pasty skin.

And behind him, the woman, pushed up against the headboard with the bedspread yanked up to her chin. The look on her face was desperate and ashamed. Pleading. Maria shifted her gaze to the floor. She backed up as Mr. Crater strode toward her.

“I’m so sorry. I thought you were in Maine. That’s what you said Friday, that you’d be gone.” The words tumbled out, and she was afraid to meet his furious gaze.

“Get out!” He pointed at the front door.

Gladly. She stumbled backward, eyes still on the floor.

“Don’t come back until Thursday when I’m gone, you understand?”

“Yes.”

“One word of this to my wife and you’re fi red.”

“Of course.”

Mr. Crater leaned in, his voice hoarse with anger. “You know what I did for your husband. I will take it all away if you don’t keep your stupid mouth shut.”

Maria couldn’t look at him for fear the hatred would be evident on her face, but she gave a quick nod and blinked hard.

“It’s not her fault. She was just doing her job.” The mistress now stood in the doorway, hair mussed, eyes large, and ample curves hidden by the bedclothes. Maria startled at the protective note in her voice.

Mr. Crater shifted his gaze between the two. “Stay out of this.”

Maria grabbed her purse from the side table.

“You won’t say anything? Please?” she said in a stage whisper, and took a step toward Maria. *Don’t start trouble with him,* the look said. *Please go.*

Mr. Crater had hired Maria three years earlier as a gift to his wife. She cleaned their home and cooked their meals and ran their errands. Mr. Crater signed her paychecks and gave her a small Christmas bonus every year. He had once pinched her bottom when his wife wasn’t home. Maria felt no loyalty to him and didn’t care to guard his secrets. But

there was a depth of sadness in the girl's hazel eyes that she could not turn from. An unspoken agreement passed between them.

"I have nothing to tell," she said, and left the apartment, locking the door behind her.

manhattan, february 15, 1930

"Thank you, Mr. Crater!"

"For?"

"Putting a good word in for Jude with Commissioner Mulrooney. He's got an interview with the detective bureau next week."

He glanced up from his paper, impassive.

Maria twisted the cleaning rag in her hands and shot an uncertain look at Mrs. Crater "If he gets the promotion, he'll finally get off the vice squad. We want to start a family, and that's a hard job for a father to have."

"I do wonder," Mr. Crater said, rising from the table with a sneer, "how the daughter of Spanish immigrants managed to snag one of New York's fi nest. It's an odd match, don't you think?" He folded the newspaper in half, tossed it on the table, and retreated to the bedroom to dress for work.

Maria busied herself with his dirty breakfast dishes so Stella wouldn't see the shame spread across her cheeks.

"Ignore him," Mrs. Crater said. "He's all piss and vinegar because his own promotion looks a bit tentative right now."

"He's right." Maria swallowed. "I married above myself."

Mrs. Crater placed a cool hand on the back of Maria's neck. She patted.

"Your husband is obviously a wise man. Look at you, lovely thing!"

"I'm a maid."

"You," she said with emphasis, "are smart enough to know that a woman is only as good as her husband. The better off he is, the better

off you are. Many women don't understand that."

Maria turned and peered at her. "You convinced Mr. Crater, didn't you?"

"He's never been good at telling me no." Her eyes crinkled at the corners. "I'll listen to the back channel and see how things go for Jude. How's that?"

"Back channel?"

"The political wives, dear. Chances are, I'll know something before Joe."

Maria smiled, bright and grateful. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

"We're in this together. Where would women be if we didn't look out for one another?" She returned to the living room, where her novel waited, cracked open at the spine.

"Mrs. Crater?"

"Yes?"

"Jude would be furious if he ever found out I did this. He wants to succeed on his own merit. Not on favors. Certainly not those begged by his wife."

Mrs. Crater spread her skirt across the couch with a flourish. "Well, that's silly. Everything in this city is based on favors. In one way or another."

Maria opened the door to Smithson Tailors and reached up to steady the bell. To her left, she could see the city's newest structure, a monolith dubbed the Empire State Building, dwarf the skyline. The papers said it would be a mind-boggling 102 stories

when finished. Construction began less than six months ago, and already the building was fifty-fi ve stories high. Over three thousand workers were employed full-time. Maria could not imagine anyone wanting to be that high above the ground.

Donald Smithson glanced up in his office. Tapped his watch. “Your appointment will be here in five minutes,” he said.

Maria nodded and wove her way through the bolts of fabric in the showroom, gray wool and brown tweed, pinstriped cotton and, most popular during the brick-oven summer months, linen.

She took her sewing bag to a small alcove set into the front window. When she’d inherited the job from her father, she had no intention of becoming the store display. It happened by accident. With square footage in high demand on Fifth Avenue, Smithson could not expand as he’d wished, at least not without securing a second mortgage. So he set his new tailor in the window behind a small desk until space could be made for her in the back with the others. But he soon found an increase in foot traffic as people stopped to watch her nimble fingers work a needle with rapier accuracy. Once settled into her space, she became a living advertisement for the quality offered by Smithson Tailors.

Maria’s real genius, however—and the reason she secured a position in the all-male establishment—was her dual talents as both cutter and stitcher, a rare combination on Savile Row, much less in New York City. Though she could never explain it, Maria could *feel* the fabric. Not only the texture and the thread count beneath the pads of her fingers, but the proclivity of the material itself, whether it wanted to bunch or snag, whether it would hang well on a particular frame. A natural intuition

allowed her to make adjustments in a pattern for a client with a pronounced stoop, a paunch, a barrel chest, a limp, or some other physical quirk that wasn't taken into account by standard measurements. The warp and weft of fabric softened beneath her touch, like strings for a cellist. Her chalk lines were light and fluid, almost a language of her own, a dot here for buttonholes, a line there for slanted pockets, a streak to allow for extra material that would form the inlay. Nuanced as her cutting skills were, it was in her stitching that Smithson made his real profit. She produced no less than five thousand stitches per suit—she counted—every one equal in size. A straighter hem or tighter seam could not be found in Manhattan. Smithson knew this, of course, and monopolized her abilities for himself. Yet he would not give her the dignity of a fulltime position—and therefore the salary that would accompany it—or a referral that would send her to a competitor.

Donald Smithson stuck his head out from his office. "This client is priority, Maria. I expect you to behave accordingly."

Maria forced herself to respond with a smile. "Of course." *Priority*, she knew, meant wealthy beyond the normal standards of their clientele. It meant a man willing to buy five or more suits at one time. It meant a level of flattery by Smithson that would nauseate any human with a shred of dignity.

"I suggested he use one of our more *experienced* tailors, but he insisted on you. Requested you by name, as a matter of fact."

Smithson pulled a tin of Altoids from his pocket. He placed one mint on the tip of his tongue and drew it in with a grimace, straightened his tie, then said, "Get the fitting room ready. And unlock the humidor.

Top shelf."

Maria grabbed her sewing bag and inspected the contents: measuring tape, pins, cushion, chalk, pinking shears, scissors, and needles in three different sizes. Then she made her way across the showroom and through a side door. What expense her employer spared in her work area he made up for in here. Heavy green carpet covered the floor and the dark paneled walls were adorned every eight feet with a mannequin dressed in the latest menswear. Between each mannequin was a mirror almost seven feet tall, self-admiration available from all angles. In the middle of the room, a round mahogany platform was positioned directly beneath a chandelier. Two leather chairs rested off to the side, an end table between them. Tiffany lamps in masculine shades of blue, yellow, and green, and a gold ashtray completed the opulent decor. Along the back wall sat the built-in humidor. Maria unlocked the doors and swung them open, revealing a generous display of cigars behind a glass case. Her fingers trembled slightly, nerves still on edge from finding *that* woman in Mr. Crater's bed. She closed her hands into fists and took a deep breath before she slid the glass open and pulled out the top shelf. The Cubans—Romeo y Julieta being Smithson's preferred brand. He paid extra for the personalized silver band embossed with the company logo, but he never smoked them himself. She made sure they were straight and that the cigar clipper was clean and polished.

Panatelas, she called them, the saboteurs of fabric. "Can't get the smell out of wool," Maria had complained to Jude more times than she could count. "Ruins a suit every time."

She unloaded her sewing bag and set the contents on the edge of

the platform. Even in this she was orderly. Pins placed in a perfect swirl around the red cushion. Tape folded in eighths. Scissors laid out neatly.

As she finished, the door swished open behind her. She took a quick breath and turned to see the wide eyes and cleft chin of her client.

"Maria, this is Owney Madden. Owney, Maria Simon."

He swaggered the five steps between them, grabbed her hand, and rattled out his greeting in an almost incomprehensible Liverpool accent.

"Your reputation precedes you."

Coming from one of the city's most notorious gangsters, the comment could easily be applied to him as well. "Mr. Madden." A quick nod and Maria lowered her eyes.

"Have we met before?" His studied her face. "You look familiar."

"No. I don't see how that's possible."

"It must be the name, then. I hear you're the best tailor in the city."

He paused. "Seamstress? What exactly are you?"

Maria caught the waver in her voice and forced it back. "*Costurera.* There is no English equivalent. *Tailor* will do just fi ne."

"Are you as good as they say?"

She answered the question as honestly as she could without sounding arrogant. "Yes."

Owney looked at Smithson. "I like her."

A bored smile. "Her talents are unrivaled."

Heat crept up Maria's face as Owney's eyes traveled down her body and paused at her breasts. "I'm sure they are."

Smithson leaned forward eagerly, clipboard in hand. "How can we serve you today, Mr. Madden?"

The Liverpool accent, derogatorily referred to as Scouse by most, sounded to Maria's untrained ears like the bastard child of Ireland and England, and though she'd often heard it mocked, Owney was the first person she'd ever met who had one. She tipped her head to the side, intrigued and slightly unnerved. Given his reputation, the accent only made him appear that much more sinister.

"I need a new fall and winter wardrobe. The latest styles. Top-notch, hear?"

"Of course." Smithson practically trembled with joy. "Why don't we look at our newest trends? Maria, go get the fabric. Bring the handfinished wool. Chocolate and charcoal. The merino wool." He paused to think. "In navy and black. The gray tweed. And the vicuña."

Maria parted her lips to speak but then pressed them together again. She nodded and walked toward the door.

"What were you going to say?" Owney asked.

"Nothing."

"Yes you were. Go ahead."

Maria avoided Smithson's gaze and debated for a moment before she said, "The vicuña doesn't hang well. Especially in winter. And I doubt it would suit a man such as yourself." She cleared her throat. "It's a bit effeminate."

Owney looked from Smithson to Maria and grinned. "What would you recommend?"

"A classic English wool would drape better across your shoulders." The suit he had on looked worse for the wear, wrinkled and stretched. Typical of cotton. Certainly not up to her standards of craftsmanship.

Smithson stepped forward with a little cough. “She does know her fabrics.” A sharp glance in her direction. “Fetch them. Would you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But leave the vicuña.”

Maria nodded and left the fitting room. Vicuñas, like llamas, had long woolen strands that were wonderful for weaving but terrible for holding shape. Smithson knew this but did not care. The fabric was rare, so he could charge three times as much as for standard sheep’s wool. She’d worked with it on a number of occasions and resented its defiance. It fought against her as she sewed, bunching beneath the thread. It took a great deal of tension on the stitch and patience on her part to make vicuña cooperate.

Glad for the chance to escape, Maria went to the showroom, running her fingers over the bolts as she searched. She collected all the samples that Smithson requested, in various colors, and also grabbed three shades of satin for the lining to save herself a trip later. He would ask for it. She was certain of that.

She slid back into the fitting room, holding the door open with one foot, while they discussed the latest fashion in men’s suits. Owney held a newly lit cigar between thumb and forefinger, puffing out small bursts of smoke.

“There she is,” Smithson said. “Let’s get your measurements.”

She set the fabric bolts on one of the leather chairs and stepped up behind Owney on the platform. “Jacket, please.” He shrugged out of it and she laid it aside. “Stand still if you can. The more accurate your measurements, the better the fi t.”

“I heard you go more on sight and feel than numbers.”

His words came so quickly that she had to sort through each syllable after the fact, disentangling them from one another. “The numbers never lie, Mr. Madden.”

“Well, feel free to look and touch all you like regardless.”

Maria turned her face away to hide the furious blush that swept across her cheeks. She tapped his elbows quickly. “Arms up.”

As Owney raised his arms above his head, she wrapped the tape around his chest. Smithson recorded the measurements on the order form when Maria called them out. “Chest, forty-three inches.” She stretched the tape between her fingers and stood back. Owney was well muscled but not lean. “Make that forty-four. He’ll want the extra room for movement. He’s broad through the torso.”

“Was that a compliment? Or a complaint?”

Maria placed her first and second fingers on the protruding bone at the top of his spine and did her best to ignore the innuendo. “Chin down, please—your sleeves are next.” She set one end of the tape against the bone and ran the rest over his shoulder, down his arm, and all the way to his wrist, then added another inch for the shirt cuff. “Sleeve, thirty-three inches.”

Owney raised his arms again as Maria stepped in front and brought the tape around his waist. He tried to catch her glance, but she did not look at him. “Waist, thirty-six.”

There were few things more awkward in her experience than measuring a man’s inseam. The near groping aside, her position—kneeling at crotch level—was compromising. It was a rare client that did not squirm

beneath her touch or make an off-color remark. Owney did neither. He stood, hands on his hips, searching her face with a curious expression.

"How did you end up here? Aren't most of your kind sewing scraps down in the garment district?"

Her embarrassment was replaced with a sudden anger, and Maria clenched her jaw to suppress a sharp retort. As though there were much difference between his kind or hers: limey or grasa. They'd all crossed the Atlantic the same way, penniless and desperate. At least she'd been born on this continent. Owney clearly had not. He couldn't have acquired a dialect like that anywhere but the docks in Merseyside. Maria sniffed, unwilling to dignify him with a response.

"She replaced her father when he went blind," Smithson explained when the silence stretched on longer than was comfortable. "An unconventional arrangement, to be sure, but there is no doubting her abilities."

Maria sat back on her heels and looked up at Owney Madden.

"Inseam, thirty-four."

"Sure you measured that right?"

She didn't blink. "I was generous."

"Maria!" Donald Smithson stepped forward.

Owney laughed, a deep sort of thing that left no doubt as to his humor.

"It's my fault. I provoked her. Just wanted to see if she'd bite back." He grinned. "Nice sharp teeth on that one." He stepped off the platform and grabbed his jacket from the chair. "Now, why don't we talk style?"

"I think what you want"—Smithson walked Owney to the nearest mannequin—"is the drape cut. Or the London drape, as they call it on Savile Row. It has a softer silhouette. Extra fabric in the shoulders for

movement, and a narrowed waist. We have found this style to greatly enhance a man's figure."

Maria laid out the fabric bolts on the platform and stepped aside, waiting.

"What do you think?" Owney asked, looking over his shoulder at her.

"You're the expert. Or so I've been told."

"And what friend referred our services, Mr. Madden? I'd like the opportunity to write and thank him." Smithson made a note on the corner of his clipboard.

"Simon Rifkind, an attorney downtown." He prodded Maria again, undeterred by Smithson. "Go on."

Simon Rifkind. The toothy, obnoxious associate of Mr. Crater's. It made sense that the three of them would run together. Maria kept her voice steady, nonchalant. "I think the London drape looks pompous. I prefer a simple double-breasted suit with a waistcoat and a strong, bold tie in an accentuating color. A matching fabric square in the breast pocket for evenings. Classic. Nothing showy."

Smithson forced a laugh. "Leave it to a woman to try and get out of hard labor. The London drape requires more craftsmanship than the double-breasted. Why don't we look at those fabrics?" He cupped Maria's elbow in his palm and bent closer. "What's wrong with you?"

"He asked my opinion."

"Your *opinion* is irrelevant." Smithson released her and stepped away. "Thank you for your help, Mrs. Simon. I will take it from here. I put some piecework at your station."

She placed her sewing materials back in her bag and gave Owney a

courteous nod. “Mr. Madden.”

“A *pleasure* to meet you.”

Again, she thought as she turned away. Maria had the distinct impression that he watched her backside as she left the room. In the last few hours, Maria had found Joseph Crater in bed with a woman half his age and herself measuring the inseam of one of New York City’s most reviled gangsters. She was overcome with a sudden need to wash her hands. After a quick trip to the restroom, she returned to her workstation and dropped into her seat. She set her face in her hands. *What have I gotten myself into?*

Chapter Three

club abbey, wednesday, august 6, 1930

Ritzi and Crater sat at a small table in a

corner of Club Abbey and listened to the jazz quartet. She slipped one shoe off under the table and rubbed a blister on the side of her big toe. Rehearsal ran long that afternoon and her feet ached, but she hid it with a smile. Crater couldn't stop looking at her. Couldn't stop touching her.

"Where is she?" Ritzi asked, looking at his wedding ring. "This wife of yours?"

"In Maine, at our lake house. She spends summers there."

She brought her bare foot up the front of Crater's leg. "That must be nice. A vacation home. You should take me there sometime."

He caught her gaze, still on the ring, and spun it around his finger. "I can take it off if it bothers you."

"Doesn't make a difference, I suppose."

He slid the ring off and put it in his pocket.

The room smelled of pipe smoke and wood polish and anise. Area rugs and lamps with red shades were scattered around the bar. Warm. Seductive. Flickering candles cast halos of soft light across the center of each table. Young couples lounged close together, arms draped over shoulders and hands resting on thighs. The nuzzle of a neck. A brazen kiss. On the other side of the room, Owney Madden sat in his corner booth. He nodded at Ritzi and continued to study Crater. She shifted a

little closer to the judge.

The bartender arrived at their table, a fresh-faced young man with red hair and a wrinkled apron. He still looked to be in his teens. “What’ll you have?”

“Bring her an absinthe,” Crater said. “And one for me as well.”

Although Joseph Crater always imbibed in the evening—straight whiskey on the rocks being his drink of choice—this was the first time he ordered absinthe. Perhaps he was feeling a bit cosmopolitan, or maybe just giving in to the trend. It arrived several minutes later on an elaborate silver tray with two reservoir glasses, slotted silver spoons, a bowl of sugar cubes, and a carafe of ice water. The bartender set the paraphernalia on the table and was about to slip away when Crater asked, “What’s your name, kid?”

“Stan.”

Crater tucked a dollar bill into his hand and said, “Keep them coming.”

“Sure thing, mister.” He stuffed the money in his pocket and went back to the bar.

“I don’t want to drink tonight,” Ritzi said.

Crater dismissed her with a glance. “I don’t care.”

Fine, then. Ritzi lifted her glass and would have taken a swig had Crater not grabbed her wrist.

“Easy. You’ll be on the floor in two minutes if you take it like that.” He took the glass from her and held it up to the candle. “Let me educate you.”

“By *educate,* you mean corrupt.”

“Semantics.”

Crater lifted a sugar cube from the bowl and set it on the slotted spoon. He rested the spoon on the glass of absinthe and poured a small amount of ice water over the top. “Look,” he said. The liquor was the color of green apples, and the sugar created a small white cloud as it dripped into the glass. He stirred the absinthe with the slotted spoon and then handed it to her to taste.

Ritzi wrapped her lips around the spoon. It tasted of licorice. Her tongue curled away from the bitter alcohol. “How can you drink that?” She coughed.

“I just wanted you to try it.” Joe laughed, seemingly delighted by her naïveté. He poured more ice water into the glass, filling it two-thirds full. “You don’t drink it straight.” He handed it to her again.

She sipped. “Better.” Ritzi took another, and then another. The sugar replaced the bitterness with a sweet tang, and the absinthe slid down her throat in a cool rush. Her head felt a bit light before the glass was half empty.

According to the Eighteenth Amendment, this was illegal. And therefore highly desirable. For a decade, Owney Madden had taken advantage of the Volstead Act and added bootlegger to his list of lucrative careers. Prohibition was good for business, and those with enough clout to get through the doors could quench a variety of thirsts at Club Abbey.

By the time William Klein joined them at the table, Ritzi was nursing her second absinthe. *Pompous prick,* she thought, knocking back her glass to avoid his lewd gaze.

Crater ran a finger under Ritzi’s chin and tipped her face upward. “Why don’t you go powder your nose?”

“But—”

“Now.” He squeezed her chin between thumb and forefinger, pinching just enough to make her eyes sting.

Ritzi grabbed her purse, smoothed the anger from her face, and carefully wound her way through the dance fl oor, ignoring the appreciative glances that followed her.

The ladies’ room in Club Abbey had dark paneled wood and low lighting. Ritzi looked at her reflection in the mirror. It always seemed distorted in there. Like she was a cheap imitation of herself.

Ritzi took her time primping. She adjusted the neckline of her black satin gown away from the deep plunge of cleavage, painted her lips red, and pinned a stray curl behind her ear. Looped the pearls around her neck three times instead of twice so the eye would be drawn to her clavicles rather than her breasts—no small task. Rearranged stockings and garters. Emptied the trash from her purse: ticket stubs, broken cigarettes, and a matchbook with the Club Abbey logo. Then she settled into one of two purple velvet chairs and drew a pack of Pall Malls from her purse. Only two smokes left. Ritzi drew one out and set it in a motherof-pearl holder. *Eveningwear,* Vivian had said. *Make sure you don’t use the silver one after six.* So many damned rules to this gig. She struck a match and cupped her palm around the flame, watching the paper curl and burn black.

God, Mama would die if she saw me smoke. She smiled. Her mother had always said it was a filthy habit, something tramps did in the big city. *Poor Mama. She don’t know a thing about the big city. Or tramps, for that matter.*

Waiting was an art Ritzi had mastered in the last three years. Men needed time to talk shop. Return to the table too soon and she'd be dismissed again. Too late and they'd get suspicious. Fifteen minutes was her general rule, long enough for their conversation to turn elsewhere. So she rested her head back on the chair and let her mind wander to her childhood and a farm and days when she could smell the barn from her open bedroom window. She recalled the brown eyes of a dairy cow. Long lashes and a knowing gaze. Udders full and dripping in the predawn chill of morning. One of countless mornings that Ritzi was sent out to milk and feed and gather eggs, her fingers numb and red from cold. The rough patches on her hands. It had taken her months to pumice away the calluses. She was careful that first year in Manhattan how she shook hands. A delicate greeting, all fingertips and none of the crushing grip Daddy had taught her to give. Three years in this place and she still had the pad of muscle between thumb and forefinger earned from years in the milking stall. She'd grown her fingernails long and kept them painted, but they were still farmer hands. Strong hands. Not pretty and slender like the rest of the girls' in the chorus line. But she made up for that lack with a multitude of other things. And Crater didn't complain at night when she kneaded his shoulders and back and thighs with her farm-girl hands.

Legs crossed and eyes closed, Ritzi finished the cigarette and prepared herself for what would surely be a wretched evening. A few more minutes and she stubbed out her cigarette in the sink and washed the ashes down the drain.

Time to get back out there.

Ritzi caught fragments of their hushed conversation as she approached the table. “Do you know how close Seabury is to figuring this thing out . . . And that damn reporter George Hall . . . Could kill whoever tipped him off . . . Have to leave town for a while.” Crater went silent when he caught sight of Ritzi.

Crater shoved another glass of absinthe into her hand as soon as she sat down. Ritzi already felt dizzy and nauseated, and what she really wanted was a steak and hot rolls with butter and then a piece of chocolate cake as big as her fist. Real food. Something she rarely got the chance to consume.

Ritzi wrapped her hands around the absinthe to stop them from trembling. She winked at Crater. “Look at Billy licking that glass.”

“Never heard him called that before.”

“I nickname all you boys. Isn’t that right, Billy?” Ritzi had caught the *ain’t* on its way out of her mouth and swallowed it with a sip. She set her glass on the table. Grimaced. Wiped her palms on her lap and then laced her fingers together.

Klein slid a littler closer and patted her thigh. “You can call me whatever you want, baby doll. But for the record, it’s not the glass I want to lick.”

“What do you call me?” Joseph Crater asked.

Uncircumcised donkey pizzle. Ritzi grinned, lopsided and charming.

“Your *Honor*.”

Crater waved for the bartender. “Put this on my tab,” he said when Stan arrived.

Stan shot a glance at the corner booth. “Did Owney clear you for

that?"

"Do I look stupid enough to try a stunt like that if he hadn't?"

Stan smiled apologetically. "Just checking."

Ritzi followed Crater and Klein out the front door and up the steps onto the sidewalk. They stood in the waxy light and searched the street for a cab.

Crater tipped his hat to Klein. "Probably won't see you until session starts. Headed back to Maine first thing in the morning."

"And tonight?" He spoke to Crater but looked at Ritzi.

"We're off to see *Dancing Partner*."

"Again? It wasn't that great the first time."

"That was Atlantic City. Thought I'd see if they worked out the kinks for the Broadway run. Besides, it wasn't *that* bad."

Depends on who you ask, Ritzi thought.

Crater stepped into the street to hail a passing cab. The whistle was shrill, and heads turned up and down the block.

Klein pulled Ritzi in for a hug as Crater's back was turned. "Why don't you come over to my place when Joe's done with you?" He ran a finger down her spine. One finger slipped inside her open-backed dress, seeking territory farther down.

"You're not my type."

"Word on the street is that you have a price tag, not a type."

She stepped away, repulsed. "Apparently, you spend too much time on the street."

"With the right connections, you could lead on Broadway. A girl like you is too pretty to stay in the chorus line." Klein shifted away as Crater

came back to fetch Ritzi. “Keep that in mind.”

Heat still radiated from the pavement in waves, even though the sun had set almost two hours earlier. The temperature neared one hundred degrees that day, and with nary a breeze, fire hydrants were loosed, turning streets into shower baths. Fountains were commandeered citywide as adults and children alike rolled up their pants and splashed with mass indignity.

“To the Belasco Theater,” Crater told the cabdriver. He slid into the backseat next to Ritzi, their thighs touching.

The cab eased away from the curb and melted into traffic, keeping in the right lane. Several minutes later, it rolled to a stop in front of the Belasco. A black Cadillac pulled up beside them and emptied its passengers onto the sidewalk. Ritzi watched the pale disks of two straw Panama hats disappear into the theater. People rushed by on the sidewalk, all of them dressed for a night on the town.

“Wait here,” Crater told her.

Ritzi watched him jog up to the ticket booth. He leaned in, exchanged a few words with the teller, and took an envelope. Crater glanced back at Ritzi and frowned. Then he searched his wallet, slid a bill across the counter, and waited. Light from the marquee across the street bounced off the ticket window, reflecting strike up the band backward.

Somewhere behind the glass the teller must have refused Joe’s offer, because he took the money and stuffed it back in his wallet. Crater returned to the cab.

“What was that about?”

“I only had one ticket at will-call.” He lifted the envelope. “But they’re sold out and I couldn’t get another. Bribery aside.”

“You could stay. I’m tired. I can take the cab home.”

“No.” Crater tapped the ticket against his bandaged hand, then reached over the seat. “Change of plans, cabbie. Take us to Coney Island.”

“Why don’t we go back to your place? Get some sleep?”

“Not after what happened Monday.” Crater shook his head. “We don’t sleep at my place again.”

The air inside the cab was warm and still, and Ritzi mumbled her displeasure at the change of plans. As they swung into traffic, a car behind them washed the cab in its headlights, and Ritzi squinted at the glare that bounced back from the rearview mirror. Her eyelids resisted efforts to open again. She was asleep before they reached Brooklyn.

She woke to the smells of salt air and fried food. They parked near the Boardwalk, in front of Nathan’s Famous. She stretched and yawned as Crater helped her from the cab. Her sleep-addled brain skipped from one sound to another while he paid the fare.

“A nickel, a nickel, half a dime! Come get your frankfurters—red hot, red hot!” The vendor stood on the Boardwalk outside Nathan’s, wearing a grease-stained apron and waving a hot dog in the air.

“Shoot the chutes for a dime!”

“Boiled peanuts. Get ’em while they’re hot!”

The calls bounced and tumbled around her. She blinked into the chaos. Though it was ten o’clock, the party at Coney Island showed no signs of slowing down. Crater took her elbow and escorted her along the Boardwalk. Luna Park loomed before them, flashing lights and

spinning wheels, a cacophony. Behind the gates rose the Cyclone. The roller coaster chinked and rattled up the wooden frame, and they stood, eyes locked on the cars as they hovered in a moment of suspended gravity. Then they thundered down at a stomach-lurching angle to the delighted shrieks of their passengers. Ritzi could feel the rumble in her feet.

A barker, somewhere deep in the park, shouted into a microphone, "Never take your wife on the roller coaster. It's every man for himself!"

Ritzi lifted the hem of her dress and looked at her three-inch heels. Surely he didn't expect her to ride the roller coaster dressed like this?

"Maybe tomorrow," Crater whispered, pulling her close. "We're over there." He pointed to a hotel, right across the street from Luna Park. Five stories tall, it reflected the garish lights of the amusement park in its many windows. She was too tired to read the name. He took her hand and wove through traffic on Surf Avenue. As they neared the hotel, she felt exposed and vulnerable, as though standing beneath a spotlight. *You could end this right here.* But she had long since passed the point of no return. Sally Lou Ritz let Crater lead her toward the revolving glass door.

The lobby was empty, and she stood off to the side as he secured a room. They crossed the tile floor and slid inside the elevator. His lips were on her neck before the doors were closed. She shut her eyes, willed herself to relax. To respond.

Several long seconds later, the doors opened to reveal the burgundy carpeted fifth-floor hallway. Their room was at the end, facing the Boardwalk.

He took the key from his pocket and slid it into the lock.

Six windows spread across the wall in front of them, looking down at the spinning display of Luna Park. He pushed back the curtains, and lights from the Ferris wheel danced red, blue, and green on the ceiling. The rumble of the roller coaster vibrated the walls. Ritzi stood next to the window, fingertips resting against the glass. She could feel Crater's breath on her neck.

For once she allowed herself to wonder what it would be like to walk into this hotel as his wife instead of his mistress. But the thought tumbled down as soon as she'd constructed it. The truth was, she didn't even want to be here as the other woman, much less the only woman. She didn't want to be here at all.

Crater touched the base of her neck with one finger, tugging at a curl, and then ran it down her spine, to the deepest plunge of her dress. She fought the shiver that swept over her skin.

The question popped out before it had fully registered in her mind, and she would have taken it back had it not hung in the air between them. "Do you love her?"

His finger drifted to a stop. "Who?"

Ritzi struggled to collect the words, to say them aloud. "Your wife."

A long silence, and then, "What's it matter to you?" The tip of that one finger rested at the base of her spine, like a red-hot poker.

Crater never discussed Stella except in passing and never in a personal way. As though she were a notch, an accomplishment. An irritant.

She took a deep breath and spun to face him. His eyes were pinched.

"I'd like to think that you love her." She shrugged. *I'd like to think that you're sorry about this.*

Crater looked out the window behind her. “She’s a good wife.”

Ritzi could hear the edge in his voice. She reached up and loosened his tie. Her voice was a hum, deep and sultry. “Does she know?”

He lifted his bandaged hand. Turned it as though waving in a parade. A what-the-hell-do-you-think motion.

A perverse sort of pride erupted inside Ritzi. *Good for her.* She kissed the tips of his fingers to hide the smile that threatened to spread across her face.

“I’m going back to Maine first thing in the morning,” Crater said, tugging at the straps of her dress. It dropped to the floor in a puddle of inky satin. “I don’t want to talk about my wife.”

Ritzi lay on her side, the sheet bunched beneath her chin. Crater was sprawled next to her, the rise and fall of his breath rhythmic. One arm thrown over his head and the other resting against the soft skin of her back. He twitched in his sleep, limbs responding to some dream. *Just like a dog.* Ritzi lay there until she was certain he’d dipped into heavy slumber. Then she slid away from his reach and out of bed. She gathered her things and tiptoed into the bathroom. She stood, garter and hose dangling from her fingers, and willed herself not to be sick.

God, I hate that man.

Time to leave. She did not want to be there when he woke up. Ritzi pulled on her lingerie and slipped the dress over her head. She reached for her shoes but startled when someone banged on the hotel room door. A heavy fist pounded, one, two, three times. She sucked in a sharp

breath and listened.

Another knock. Louder. More insistent.

She instinctively flipped off the bathroom light and tugged the door shut with a soft click.

Somewhere on the Boardwalk below, a big band trumpeted show tunes. She could feel the music vibrate through the floor and into her bare feet.

Her mama always said that God gave women a way to know when something wasn't right. A sense. An intuition. It rushed in on her then, a whoosh right up the spine. She spun around the small bathroom looking for a place to hide. There was no linen closet only a cast-iron tub, a toilet, and a small cabinet beneath the sink, hardly large enough for a child, much less a buxom woman on the edge of panic.

Out in the bedroom, Crater mumbled something in response to the knocking, but he didn't get up. He was too far beneath the weight of sleep. Ritzi stuffed her purse and shoes into the cabinet even as she heard a shudder followed by splintering wood.

Someone kicked the door open. Crater, now awake, was groggy.

"What? What is it?" She imagined him blinking into the darkness of their room, eyes slowly focusing on the silhouette in the doorway.

Ritzi ran a hand along the base of the cabinet and felt nothing but toilet tissue. Whatever sense of foolishness might have caused her to hesitate, to reconsider, was abandoned when she heard the scuffle on the other side of the door. The thud of fists on flesh and the low groan that followed. Then an order: "Close the door." More voices. And footsteps inside the room.

Sally Lou Ritz dropped to the floor and maneuvered into the cabinet, tucking the hem of her dress around her ankles. She had to press her chin against her collarbone and pull her knees into her stomach. She wriggled and squirmed, drawing all her limbs into the cabinet, praying that she couldn't be heard outside the bathroom.

On the other side of the door, Crater let out a bovine grunt. "Son of a—"

"Court's in session, Judge. My court." The voice was low, controlled. "And you don't speak unless called upon."

The sound of Crater being dragged out of bed.

"Get him up." Had she been able to pull herself smaller and smaller until she was a mite of dust, Ritzi would have at the sound of that voice. "And find the girl he came in with."

"Nothing on the balcony, boss."

"Check the bathroom."

The door banged open and Ritzi froze. The light popped on, an L-shaped wedge of yellow light appeared around the cabinet door, and there, at the bottom, a small corner of her dress peeked out. The trash can toppled over, followed by silence until she heard the rustle of a belt and the whiz of a zipper. She had plenty of time to anticipate the worst before hearing a splash in the toilet. He approached the cabinet with a heavy tread. One ear was pressed against the pipes beneath the sink, and she heard the rush of water as he washed his hands. He stood at the sink for a long time and Ritzi could clearly see the brown leather shoes in the crack of the door.

"She ain't in here."

Crater groaned out in the bedroom.

“What’d you do with the girl?” the intruder asked.

Crater’s voice was thick, confused, as though stuffed with cotton. He spit something onto the floor. “She was here.”

A pause. “Well, she ain’t here now. Did she go home?”

“I don’t know where she went.”

Stuffed in that cabinet like a coat in winter storage, Ritzi’s muscles began to cramp. Her feet, bent at irregular angles, tingled as her circulation slowed.

“Wrap him up.”

The sound of the bed being stripped, peppered with Crater’s pleas.

“Don’t. This isn’t necessary.”

The beating began in earnest then, and Ritzi trembled inside the cabinet unable to block out the sickening screams of Joseph Crater. He thrashed and howled like the tourists on the Cyclone outside. After several minutes, he begged, “Please, whatever you want, I can make it happen.”

A short gasp, and then, “You know I can. I’ve pulled strings before. Settled that last mess.”

“Seems you been causing trouble for my friends, Joe. And they don’t appreciate that. Then they come asking me questions, which I don’t appreciate. Don’t like it when Samuel Seabury starts sniffing around. Way I see it, you’re the common denominator.”

“We can sort it out.” Crater’s composure was gone, and Ritzi heard the terror in his voice.

“That deal we made with Martin Healy was supposed to be taken care of clean and quiet. But now”—the slap of a newspaper across Crater’s

face—“it’s front-page news. How the *hell* did George Hall sniff out that story?”

“I don’t know shit about that. Nothing.”

“You’re taking a ride with us, Joe.”

“No—”

“Clean the place up, boys. No one needs to know we were here.”

SHOVEL READY

ADAM STERNBERGH

A NOVEL

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1.

My name is Spademan. I'm a garbageman.

—this fucker.

I don't care.

Don't you want—

Just a name.

I have his address.

Great.

See this fucker—

I said don't.

Okay.

The less I know, etcetera.

How much?

What I said. To the account I mentioned.

And how will I—

You won't hear from me again.

But how do I—

The dead guy. That's how.

I don't want to know your reasons. If he owes you or he beat you or she swindled you or he got the promotion you wanted or you want to fuck his wife or she fucked your man or you bumped into each other on the subway and he didn't say sorry. I don't care. I'm not your Father Confessor.

Think of me more like a bullet.

Just point.

—best friends. At least that's what I thought. Then it turns out *she's* fucking *him*.

Please, ma'am. I will disconnect. And this number doesn't work twice.

Wait. Is this safe?

Which part?

Aren't they listening?

Of course.

So?

Doesn't matter.

Why not?

Picture America.

Okay.

Now picture all the phone calls in all the cities in America.

Okay.

Now picture all the people in all the world who are calling each other right now trying to plot ways to blow America up.

Okay.

So who the fuck do you think is going to care about you and your former best friend?

I see. Will you tell her—

No.

Will you tell her when you see her that it was me who sent you. It was me.

I'm not FedEx. I don't deliver messages. Understand?

Yes.

Good. Now the name. Just the name.

I kill men. I kill women because I don't discriminate. I don't kill children because that's a different kind of psycho.

I do it for money. Sometimes for other forms of payment. But always for the same reason. Because someone asked me to.

And that's it.

A reporter buddy once told me that in newspapers, when you leave out some important piece of information at the beginning of a story, they call it burying the lede.

So I just want to make sure I don't bury the lede.

Though it wouldn't be the first thing I've buried.

It might sound hard but it's all too easy now. This isn't the same city anymore. Half-asleep and half-emptied-out, especially this time of morning. Light up over the Hudson. The cobblestones. At least I have it mostly to myself.

These buildings used to be warehouses. Now they're castles. Tribeca, a made-up name for a made-up kingdom. Full of sleeping princes and princesses, holed up on the highest floors. Arms full of tubes. Heads full of who knows. And they're not about to come down here, not at this hour, on the streets, with the carcasses, with the last of the hoi polloi.

Yes, I know the word hoi polloi. Read it on a cereal box.

I never liked Manhattan, even back when everyone still liked it, when people still flocked from all over the world to visit and smile and snap photos. But I do like the look of Tribeca. Old industrial neighborhood, a remnant from when this city used to actually make things. So I come across the river in the early morning to walk around here before dawn. Last quiet moment before people wake up. Those who still bother waking up.

Used to be you'd see men with dogs. This was the hour for that. But there are no dogs anymore, of course, not in this city, and even if you had one, you'd never walk it, not in

public, because it would be worth a million dollars and you'd be gutted once you got around the corner and out of sight of your trusty doorman and your own front door.

I did see a man once walking a million-dollar dog. On a treadmill, in a lobby, behind bullet-proof glass.

Feed-bag delivery boy on a scooter zips past me, up Franklin, tires bouncing over the cobblestones. Engine whines like he's driving a rider-mower, killing the morning quiet. Cooler on the scooter carries someone's liquid breakfast. Lunch and dinner too, in IV bags.

Now it's just nurses and doormen and feed-bag delivery boys out at this hour. Tireless members of the service economy.

Like me.

Phone rings.

—and how old is she?

Eighteen.

You sure about that?

Does it matter?

Yes. Quite a bit.

Well, she's eighteen.

Got a name?

Grace Chastity Harrow. But she goes by a new name now. Persephone. That's what her friends call her, so I hear. If she has any friends.

Where is she?

New York by now. I assume.

That's not much to go on.

She's a dirty slut junkie—

Calm down or I hang up.

So you're just a hunting dog? Is that it?

Something like that.

Just a bloodhound in a world of foxes?

Look, you need a therapist, that's a different number.

She's somewhere in New York, so far as I know. She ran away.

I have to ask. Any relation?

I thought this was no questions.

This matters.

To whom?

To me.

No, I meant any relation to whom?

T. K. Harrow. The evangelist.

Now why should that matter?

Famous people draw attention. It's a different business. Different rates.

As I said, I'll pay double. Half now, half later.

All now, and as I said, I need to know.

Yes. She betrayed his—

I don't care.

But you'll do it?

A fake name in a big city. Not exactly a treasure map. More like a mile of beach and a plastic shovel.

She said she was headed to New York. To the camps. They call her Persephone. That's a start, right?

I guess we'll find out.

May I ask you another question?

Go ahead.

You can kill a girl, just like that?

Yes I can.

Fascinating.

Before you transfer that money, you better make sure you ask yourself the same thing.

I hang up and write a single word on a scrap of paper.

Persephone.

Pocket it.

Then take the SIM card out of the phone, snap it, and drop the phone down a sewer grate, hidden beneath the cobblestone curb.

No motives, no details, no backstory. I don't know and I don't want to know. I have a number and if you've found it, I know you're serious. If you match my price, even more so. Once the money arrives, it starts. Then it ends.

Waste disposal. Like I said.

It's an old joke, but I like it.

Truth is, I never spend the money.

2.

I start at the camps. The biggest one's Central Park. At first the rich at the rim of the park hired private guards to chase them out, tear down their tents, send them scurrying, by any means necessary. Then there was a couple of incidents, a few headlines, then a skinning. Private guards got creative. Peeled a kid and hung him upside-down from a tree. That didn't play well, even in the *Post*.

All that's over now. The rich never come out to the park anymore, could give a shit about Strawberry Fields, the camps have been here three, four years, long past anyone caring.

Dozens of pup tents, like rows of overturned egg cartons. Dirty faces. Drum circles and dreadlocks.

I ask around.

The first person who knows her has a forehead full of fresh stitches.

Bitch cut my face.

Band of white peeks up over his waistband. Not boxers. Bandages.

Looks like she didn't stop there.

He picks at a stitch.

Hardy-har-har.

Kid nearby pipes up.

I knew her. Cute girl. Quiet. Pink knapsack. Wouldn't let anyone near it.

You know what was in it?

Drugs, be my guess. That's what most people hold on to tightly around here.

He's a skinny kid with a shaved head, sprawled out on a ratty towel. Sleeveless t-shirt and sweatpants and thousand-dollar sneakers, barely smudged. The kind of kid who's used to having other people run his errands for him.

I ask him the last time he left the park.

Me? Why? Truce with the cops seems cherry enough.

You have everything you need right here?

More like I don't have anything I don't need, you feel me?

Pretty girl peeks her head out of his tent before he shoos her back inside. Then he shoots me a look like, What can you do? Duty calls. I ignore it.

How well did you know her?

Persephone? Not as well as I would have liked. Common theme among the dudes living here, by the way.

You make a move?

Ask my friend with the stitches how that would have worked out.

So where did she go?

Just left in the night, far as I know. I woke up and all her stuff was gone. Most of my stuff too.

Any clue where she was headed?

No. But if you find her, tell her I want my blanket and my stash of beef jerky back.

You mind if I talk to your friend in the tent?

Smiles. Shrugs.

She's all yours.

Pretty girl. Young. Far from home. Overalls and a red bandana tied over hair she cut herself. Seems sisterly. Figure she's more the type Persephone might have opened up to.

I tap on the tent, then we walk out of earshot.

—we weren't close. Talked a few times. Then I heard she left.

Why?

Made too many enemies. Or rather, unmade too many friends. Headed to Brooklyn, was what I heard. Maybe towards family.

That helps.

By the way, you're not the only one come asking around for her.

Do tell.

Southern guy. Buzz cut. Those mirrored glasses, what do you call them—

Aviators.

That's it.

How long ago?

Maybe a day. Maybe yesterday.

I say thanks. Then ask her a few things I shouldn't.

How long you been here?

Me? A year, give or take.

Where's home?

Here.

Before that?

Don't matter.

And how old are you?

Look, you can't fuck me, if that's what you're asking.

That's not what I'm asking.

Well, maybe you can. Don't give up too easy.

Thanks for your time.

Viva la revolución.

So it turns out my Persephone has a reputation. Everyone knows someone who knows someone who knows. The people who got too close to her usually have some memento. Something permanent, in the process of healing.

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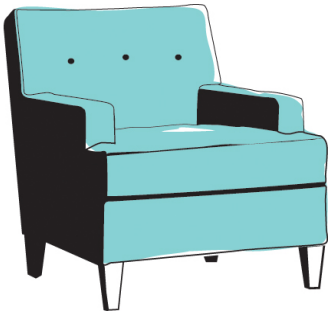

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