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Debut Fiction Sampler

— FALL 2019 —

What Will You Read Next?

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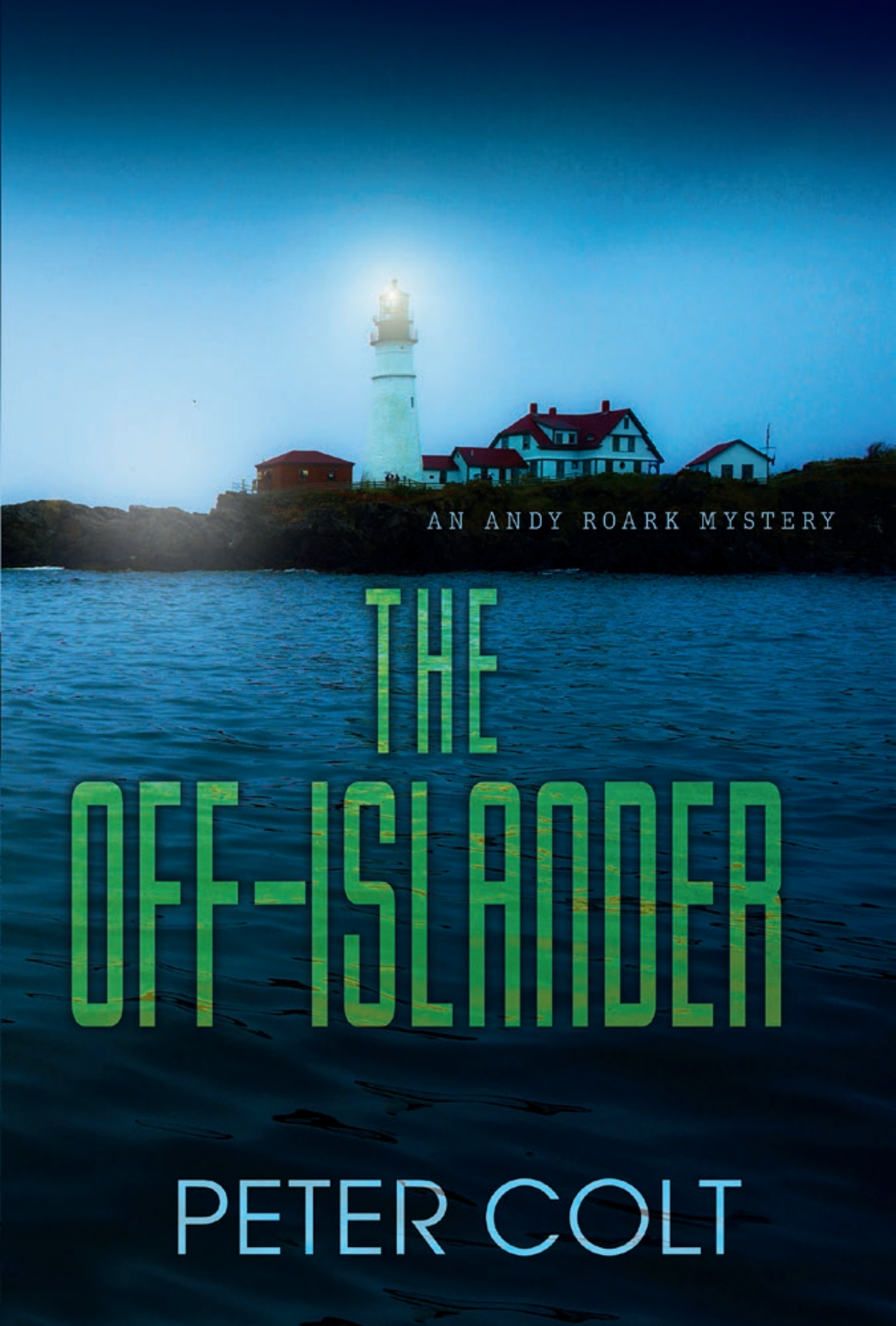
AN ANDY ROARK MYSTERY
THE
OFF-ISLANDER
PETER COLT

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Prologue

"No shit, there I was . . ." All good war stories began that way. FWAP. *A bullet smashed into the wood above my head. Then the crack of the rifle. I had heard it before, but I never quite got used to being shot at. The sound of the bullet as it whizzes by you and then impacts on something.*

No shit, there I was. I shouldn't have been there. I got home after three years of fighting in Vietnam and I was never going to get shot at again. That was what I told myself. FWAP. *Another fucking bullet. I'd promised myself!*

I glanced over at her. The girl was next to me. She wasn't bleeding and seemed unhurt. That was good. I had dragged her into this, and I didn't want to see anything bad happen to her. FWAP. *He was a persistent fucker, and I was a stupid one.*

I wasn't going to be shot at again. That was the plan leaving Vietnam. Part of my not being shot at again plan had been going back to college. Somehow, in my head, the college-educated get shot at less than guys like me from South Boston, Southie. Then I left college. I became a cop.

I fucked that plan up again. For five years, almost six, I was a cop in Boston.

In the army the people trying to kill me were hard-core professional killers, Viet Cong, North Vietnamese Army, they were good. Elite. In the cops, everyone was trying to kill me. Either it was criminals with varying degrees of skill, or random shit like car accidents, or other cops just doing stupid shit, or the most dangerous of all—amateurs who just got lucky.

The cops was dangerous, Vietnam had been dangerous . . . but there had been an order to the chaos. There was a beautiful symmetry to Vietnam. Yes, death could be random or accidental, but usually it wasn't. In the cops it was so random, so chaotic that it made no sense at all. Then I quit. I vowed that no one was ever going to shoot at me again.

Now I was lying facedown on wet grass. I was wondering how what seemed like a simple missing person case had turned into something where people were shooting at me again. This wasn't supposed to happen anymore . . . that was the plan. I wasn't a tough guy. I was supposed to spend my days working a little and my nights drinking and trying to bed women. That was the plan.

Oh well, to hell with the plan.

Chapter 1

Danny Sullivan had a wedge-shaped face, narrow, pointy chin, and a brain that put to shame anything made by IBM. He wore a beard and mustache that were thin and neatly groomed. Danny's red hair, pale, freckled skin, and green eyes left no doubt that he was more Irish than the leprechaun on Notre Dame's uniforms. His suit came from Brooks Brothers, a lightweight summer one in a shade of tan that reminded me too much of the army. It was well tailored and spoke of Danny's unstoppable upward mobility.

Danny is my oldest and closest friend. It has been that way since kindergarten. We ran track together in high school. He stayed the course, went to Harvard Law, and later went on to protest the war with legal opinions and pro bono work for anyone against it. I swerved in the other direction. I quit school and found myself in a recruiter's office, then in the army. Danny traded defending war protestors for free for defending real criminals for real money. I traded textbooks for a free membership to the local VA hospital, marred skin, and dreams I don't like to talk about. Danny eventually became a respectable Repub-

lican and was working his way deeper into the upper crust. In keeping with being raised in South Boston, Southie, we referred to each other as Andy and Danny, not Dan or Daniel, and certainly never Andrew. It was a Southie sign of familiarity. Michael was a saint, Mikey was your friend. Nicholas was the name your parents used when you got in trouble, later when you were in court. To your close friends, you were Nicky. It was our only concession to the old neighborhood.

"Andy." He pointed a finger at me like it was a pistol; the other three fingers were wrapped around a glass of scotch with a name I couldn't pronounce and price I could only afford when a relative died. "Andy, the client wants an investigator, one that can keep his mouth shut and is willing to break a rule or two." Danny was all class. Now he said things like investigator instead of private eye. I knew him before there was a gas tank with HO CHI MINH painted on it casting shadows over the old neighborhood. These days, Danny acts as though he has to look out for me. He feels guilty that I went to Nam and he didn't. He is annoyed because I haven't had much interest in trying to catch the middle-class brass ring—a stable job, a wife, kids, house, a mortgage, and a dog. I have tried to explain to him, but he just thinks that I am using Vietnam as an excuse to be a fuckup.

I lifted the pilsner glass of Löwenbräu to my lips and listened to his sales pitch. I didn't need much of one. I was between jobs and had time to spare. I don't do well with too much time off. My apartment seems too big, too dusty, and too empty these days. The Karmann Ghia was going to need a new clutch soon, and I had known Danny long enough that when he wanted me to take a job for a client, I took it.

"Andy, she is a little idiosyncratic—she wants you to fly

out to San Francisco to meet with her. Fly out on her nickel and hear what she has to say."

"Why doesn't she come out here if the case is here?" Usually clients come to the investigator; it is what makes all those detective novels so interesting in the beginning. The leggy brunette with a husky voice and trouble written all over her walking through a frosted-glass-paneled door.

"Andy, she is rich and she has commitments, and you like San Francisco. Go out there, hear what she has to say, see if you can help her. Have a nice meal, stay in a nice hotel, and go out to Alcatraz, play at being a tourist, maybe meet a nice lady for a night . . ." He trailed off at that.

"I haven't been back to San Francisco in years." I remember getting off of the chartered Pan Am flight, walking up the Jetway and into the airport. People stared at my uniform, stared at me. No one spat on me or anything dramatic. I just knew that I was in a strange, unwelcoming land. In the bars, my tan and my short hair gave me away, and there were a lot of ladies who didn't want anything to do with me. I remember a dark bar, someone saying "Baby Killer," and a fight. I remember the feel of a nose giving way under my fist, a leg giving way to a knee in someone's crotch, and the cop's nightstick against my head. I never held any of it against the city.

"Yes, man, that is it. Go hear her out and take the case." Danny was pressing hard.

"Important client?" He wore glasses, and the light played off of them, making it hard to see his eyes.

"A rich client, whose rich husband has a bright political future." Danny had given up liberalism and the antiwar movement to drive a Cadillac to work and have a Mercedes in the garage for the wife. Danny's wife had the type of ambition that had dragged them out of Southie. It would have made Danny's very Catholic mother angry, ex-

cept for the fact that the Protestant wife was a Republican and the mother of their two daughters, who are already going to the right schools in first grade.

"Political future in California? I thought that was for Democrats only?"

"Look at Reagan. Andy, people aren't stupid anymore. They gave up on peanut farmers who can't get them gas for their cars or keep the mullahs in check. I am telling you, California . . . well, maybe not LA, but California is going to be the next Republican state." Ronald Reagan had beaten Carter, and we were a couple of years into his first term. I liked his hair—that was about all I could say.

"Okay, call her and tell her I will make arrangements to fly out." I raised the pilsner glass to my lips, and when I looked back at him, Danny was grinning the grin that prosecuting attorneys had come to hate. He reached down and swung his briefcase up onto the table with the same ease that Bjorn Borg served. I listened to the double snap of the catches opening and lost sight of his face when the lid went up. A Pan Am ticket envelope landed in front of me next to my empty glass.

"She wants to meet you tonight. I booked you on the 2:15 from Logan."

I picked up the envelope and held it pinched between my fingers.

"You knew I would say yes."

Danny smiled that smile that reminded me of sharks and wolves. "I knew you would. You have never let me down before." The way he said it I wondered how much this client meant to him. I slid the envelope in the pocket of my corduroy sport coat.

"I guess I should run, then." I stood and we shook hands. I made my way through the restaurant to the street. The Ghia was where I left it. It was hunter green with a

tan interior. I bought it used, a couple of years old from a coed in Cambridge whose father bought it for her new the last year they made them. She wanted to follow the Grateful Dead around. I wanted a car. I just loved the look of the car. I got in the Ghia and fought my way through lunchtime traffic to my apartment. I was living in a part of Back Bay that was nice but still affordable. I parked and hustled up the back stairs.

The apartment was a fourth floor one-bedroom that was hot in summer and cold in winter, but it did have a view of the Charles River. The building wasn't in the best shape, but you couldn't beat the location or the view. The door opened, and I walked into half an apartment. The bookshelves looked as though they had been ransacked by a burglar who specialized in fiction. I did have a TV, a small color one that I could watch the Red Sox on, but it wasn't good for much else.

In the bedroom, I had a bed but no bureau, a mirror but no bedside table. This was how my furniture looked after Leslie. It had been almost two months. I was still finding her hair stuck to my clothes and had just gotten past the point where the phone was in my hand and I had almost dialed her number.

In the closet, I found a canvas mailman's bag that I used as luggage. Into it went my shaving kit, a white button-down shirt, T-shirts, and everything else for two nights—a trio of Raymond Chandler's novels in one omnibus and a book about the Battle of Thermopylae. I slid off my sport coat and took off the shoulder holster with the Colt .32 in it. It had been my father's once and now it was mine. The pistol was flat, with art deco lines and sensibilities—like the Ghia, I fell in love with it at first sight. It didn't hurt that it seemed to be in every Bogie movie. I picked up my jacket, put it back on, and was off to Logan.

Chapter 2

I parked in the long-term lot, made it into the terminal, and made my way through all the counters and the security checkpoint in short order. I stopped to present my ticket; then I was down the Jetway and into the plane itself. The door closed behind me, and I leaned back in my seat. I am not fond of flying. There is always some screaming baby or kindergartner kicking my seat. I don't like being trapped in my seat in some aluminum cylinder for hours on end. At least in the army they would open the doors and let us jump out.

The stewardess was wearing a blue skirt that showed enough leg to make me look up from Philip Marlowe's misadventures whenever she swished by. She brought food and drinks, and smiled at me with a smile that was all plastic and no real warmth. The movie was something about the guy from that disco movie, but now he was a sound effects man. It had conspiracies and guns and Philadelphia. It seemed frantic, and I preferred peeking into Marlowe's world. The dialogue was crisper and classier. At times, I tried to sleep, and mostly my ears hurt from the pressure.

The plane landed with a thump, and after a lot of wait-

ing, I was emancipated into a terminal that had carpets of burnt umber. I walked up the Jetway, and this time no one in the terminal looked at me like I was a criminal. Now my hair was longer, and I had a beard. No one could see the scars, and I could pretend that they weren't there. I was wearing penny loafers with blue faded blue jeans, a white shirt, and a corduroy blazer that was technically fawn colored. My watch was a simple Timex, and the only jewelry I wore was my old dog tags and my old St. Michael medal. I wasn't religious, but he was the patron saint of paratroopers, and the combination of that medal and the dog tags got me through Vietnam. I followed the signs, and by the time I made my way to the street, there was a man in a dark suit and aviator glasses holding a sign with my name on it. I walked up to him and said, "I'm Roark." He nodded his mirrored head and his ample blond, layered hair.

He opened the door to a dark blue Lincoln that was big enough to land helicopters on. We took the expressway and then angled down into the city. It was early evening and dark had set. The closer we got to the city, the more it seemed the show was on. Hippies, punks, addicts, and cops; they were all out doing their part of the elaborate social dance on the street. The car pulled up to a hotel that was old and dripped class. The glass partition between us hissed down, and he told me what room to go to. He didn't get out and open the door for me. I wasn't a guest—I was the help.

I stepped outside. We were only a few nights from Halloween. In Boston, it was an Indian summer and warm. In San Francisco, I shivered on the sidewalk, wishing I had the trench coat that Leslie had given me for my last birthday.

I went into the hotel, slowing only to gauge where the elevators were. I made my way up to the room. I knocked. She opened the door to the suite.

"Mr. Roark. Our Boston attorney recommended you

quite highly." She was blonde, more Lauren Bacall than Farrah Fawcett. She was probably thirty and looked twenty-five. She took my hand in a firm grip that let me know how the tennis racquet must feel.

"I hope you mean Danny Sullivan?" I was conscious of my accent, Boston steam-rolled with U.S. Army Southern into something flat and vaguely East Coast. She sat in a wing chair in front of an unlit fireplace and gestured for me to sit across from her in a matching one. She held a file folder, and there were more next to her on a small table. There was a glass of white wine on the table, and her hair was perfect. She was wearing one of those pantsuits that only look good if they are expensive, and your body is long and lean. Hers was very expensive and looked very good. She crossed one long leg over the other, and I knew without being told that horses and tennis had been a major part of her upbringing.

"Dan Sullivan is a bright man." She was younger than Danny or me, but she owned everything that lay before her. The worst part was that she knew it. She made me feel like I was in the principal's office for writing dirty words on the boys' bathroom wall.

"He has a very bright future with us." I'd bet good money that she had graduated from Radcliffe or Vassar. Her voice had a huskiness that would have been cheap on anyone else.

"Us? Who are you?" She had a quality that would make a man become ruthless just to keep her happy. I was with her for two minutes, and I was sure of it.

"My name is Deborah Swift. My husband is Geoffrey Swift of the San Francisco Swifts, as in Swift Aeronautical."

"Oh, those Swifts, of course." Swift Aeronautical had been Swift Marine, which had made wooden PT boats for the navy in World War II. In Korea, they had graduated to

bigger boats and parts for jet planes. By Vietnam, they had given up on the boats and just focused on parts for jets. Those parts had made the Swift family millions to keep their existing millions from getting lonely.

"My husband, despite his unlikely name, has a prospect of becoming the first Republican senator from the Bay Area in a long time."

"Bully for him." Her eyes were big and green and distracting.

"I would like to see that he succeeds. To that end, I require the services of someone who is capable and, more importantly, discreet. Dan Sullivan says that you are that person. Are you?" The big green eyes were focused on me, and I was aware that the two top buttons of her blouse were not buttoned and that pale flesh was showing in contrast to tanned skin.

"I am discreet, and I am capable. The caveat is that I am also somewhat moral, and there are things that I won't do."

She laughed.

"Good, I like a man with a sense of morals. However, Dan also told me that you frequently bend the rules." Her ears were perfectly shaped with diamond-accented lobes that you wanted to take between your lips, your teeth.

"I believe in right and wrong, and that doesn't always conform with the rules and regulations." She had a freckle at the beginning of the valley that was formed by the two buttons being undone on her blouse. She looked at the folder in her hands and looked up at me.

"Andrew 'Red' Roark, 10/13/1949, of Boston, Mass., attended Catholic high school in South Boston, a year and a half at the University of Rhode Island . . . Rhode Island?" She looked at me over the top of the folder. I shrugged. What could I say, I wanted to be an engineer, and it was close to the beach. "Voluntarily enlisted into

the U.S. Army, February 1968 . . . voluntarily?" It was said the same way as "Rhode Island" was said, the way one might correct a particularly slow third grader. "Attended basic infantry and airborne training Fort Benning, Georgia, Army Special Forces training Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Command and Control North, Republic of Vietnam." Cool green eyes looking down rifle sights at my face. "What was Command and Control North, Republic of Vietnam?" A breath and the freckles heaved, and I was slightly weak in the knees.

"I can't actually talk about all of that." She gave me a look that made me feel like I should be waiting in line for the swings at recess. There would not have been much point in talking about it. It was like all wars, only those who fought in it understood any of it. She made mention of the rank I had earned and the medals I had been awarded, but none of that meant much. Friends who were gone, scars that covered wounds that ached when it got cold, and dreams that came by to visit more than poor relatives looking for a handout. That is all the war meant now. Not much of a war to talk about in a hotel suite in San Francisco.

"Ooooh, it's secret. Honorable discharge 1972, Boston University for a semester, a few months off, and then the Boston Police Department for five years, all the time going to night school, almost eking out a degree. 1979, resigned from Boston Police Department, minutes before being fired for insubordination, and then off on your own as a private detective." Her green eyes zeroing in on my blue ones and me not having anywhere to look or to hide. "Is that accurate?"

"More or less." I didn't like having my life summed up like that. It sounded cheap.

"My father was a marine." After a pause, "He fought in

Korea." She said it in the same way that she summed up my life. Short and inexpensive.

"He came home from the war when I was a little girl." I nodded, not knowing what else to do or say. "He was home for a while and everything was wonderful, my parents dancing in the kitchen and songs on the radio all the time. It did not last long. One night he went out for a pack of cigarettes, and we never saw him again. My mother eventually remarried, and I took my stepfather's name. The best thing that my mother had to say about my father was that he was tall, and after a short time I stopped asking." Light flashed off of the diamonds in her earlobes, and she shifted her slim body in the wing chair, then one long leg over the other. "My husband is going to announce his candidacy soon. We hope that in time he can run for president." I had to stop for a second, because I was pretty sure that Reagan had it locked up until '84.

"We have an excellent chance of representing the state, but I am, of course, careful. I don't know what became of my father, but I would like you to find out. I do not want to read about any unpleasant surprises in the *Chronicle*." I nodded as though I had all the answers. If she was talking about the 1968 Democratic Convention, I could see where having a missing marine father might be a black spot to avoid. Now being a veteran was no longer considered a sin. "I hired a large firm out here, but they were not able to find much. They did trace my father to a town on Cape Cod, but the trail ran cold for them. That is why I needed you. You are local, and people will tell you things they won't tell a Pinkerton man from San Francisco."

"What do you hope I will find?"

"I want to know if there is anything to find. I want to know that my father hasn't done anything that can hurt Geoffrey."

"Your father, the former marine?"

"Yes." Breathless, now more Ingrid Bergman than Bacall, more vulnerability than sex appeal. "I would hate to think that he committed a crime or is some gin-soaked veteran slowly dying on a barstool somewhere."

"Why do you need me? Pinkerton is more than capable. If they didn't find anything, there probably isn't anything to find."

"You are one of them. You probably root for the Red Sox and think that Manhattan clam chowder is basically clam minestrone. That is why I need you. You understand the lay of the land, but more than that you speak the same way the locals do. I doubt that the Pinkerton men did."

"You think that people on the Cape might not open up to strangers from California?"

"That is part of it. I also think that they didn't understand the terrain that they were operating on."

"Okay, that makes sense. How did you establish that he has something to do with Cape Cod?"

"The Pinkerton men started with records from the Veterans Administration. They found an address in Hyannis, Massachusetts, where the VA sent a few checks." She was the type of woman who couldn't bring herself to just say Hyannis.

"When was that?"

"In 1968. Prior to that it was Las Vegas, before that Los Angeles, even Seattle for a brief time. Three checks in 1968 were sent to an address in Hyannis, Massachusetts, and then nothing. He stopped getting checks from the VA."

"Why do you think that there will be something potentially damaging in his past?"

She sighed and then laughed. "You do not know much about politics, do you, Mr. Roark? Everything is a potential scandal; even simple or innocent things can turn out to be damaging."

"Like a missing father."

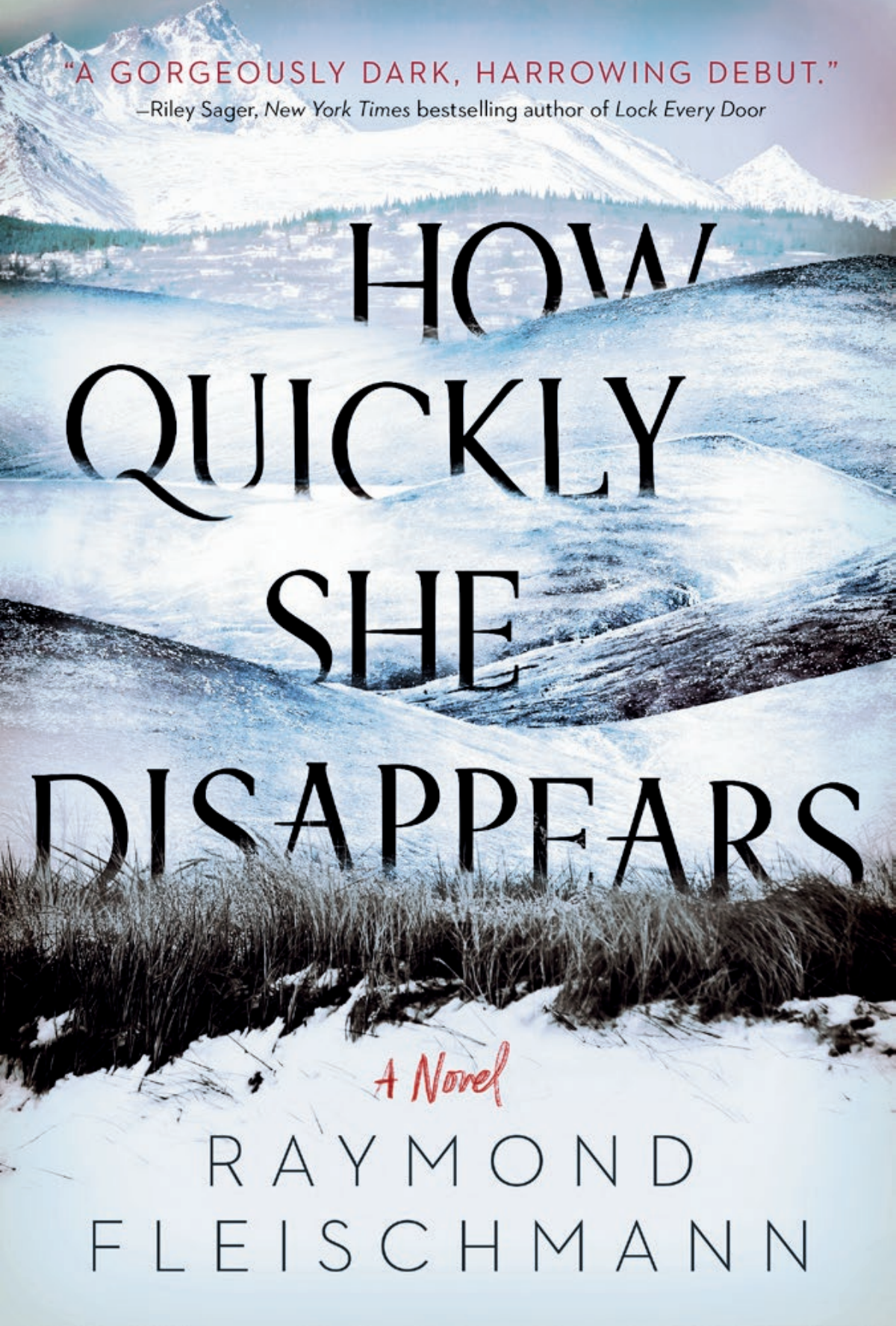
"Exactly. Are you going to take the case?"

"Sure. I'm between jobs." She smiled, and it reminded me of Danny's smile. She handed me a large manila envelope with the Pinkerton name on it in one corner. I took it, and it weighed as much as a first edition of *Gone with the Wind*.

"That is everything that Pinkerton came up with. They used a great deal of paper to say very little." She handed me another smaller envelope.

"That is five thousand dollars. That includes your retainer, fee for coming out here, a week's worth of salary, and some for expenses. If you need anything else, or if you have expenses, contact Mr. Sullivan. He has been temporarily retained to represent our interests on the East Coast. He will also see that you are paid on a weekly basis should things drag on. There is a ticket waiting for you at the Pan Am counter. My man should have you there in time to catch the red-eye." She stood and stuck out a cool hand. I stood and shook hers, then turned and walked away.

"A GORGEOUSLY DARK, HARROWING DEBUT."
—Riley Sager, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Lock Every Door*



HOW QUICKLY SHE DISAPPEARS

A Novel

RAYMOND FLEISCHMANN

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CHAPTER 1

July 1941

The rattling buzz of a bush plane awoke her that morning and, as it just so happened, Elisabeth had been dreaming of her sister.

She had been back at her childhood home in Lititz, Pennsylvania. Like all of the dreams about her sister, Elisabeth imagined Jacqueline as she was when she was eleven years old, when *they* were eleven years old, 1921, the year that Jacqueline disappeared forever.

But beyond the broadest details—her sister's sad eyes; the vast, creaking farmhouse; the clattering stalks of corn that surrounded their yard like an interminable forest—the rest of the dream was lost to Elisabeth as soon as she opened her eyes, that distant world and all its distant comfort obliterated by a postal plane grinding through the sky on its way into town.

Wait, Elisabeth thought, blinking sleep away. *Oh, yes.*

She was back in Alaska—Tanacross, Alaska, a village with a population of eighty-five people. About two hundred miles southeast of Fairbanks, Tanacross was a place so far from Pennsylvania that it sometimes felt like a different world.

Elisabeth sat up, one hand sweeping through her hair. Her husband,

John, had been away at a seminar in Juneau for almost a week, and she never slept soundly without him, purely out of habit. And then there was the light, that ceaseless summer light. In Alaska in July, the sun hardly ever went away. More often than not, Elisabeth's nights were filled with dreams: sometimes about her sister; sometimes nonsense; sometimes music, just music, an indistinct melody playing in circles. No matter the dream, she rarely slept well in the summertime. They had been living in Alaska for three years, and each passing summer had been more difficult than the last.

"Mama, are you awake?"

Margaret was standing in the frame of the bedroom's open door. She was dressed in the cotton nightgown that Elisabeth had made for her last Christmas. Glinting white light shined through the windows beside the bed, and Margaret's blond hair and pale skin made her look like a ghost. She looked, Elisabeth thought, very much like she and Jacqueline had looked when they were eleven years old, the same age that Margaret was now.

"Yes, honey, I'm awake," Elisabeth said. "I'm sitting up, aren't I?"

Margaret padded across the room. "I thought you might be a somnambulist," she said, hopping up onto the bed. Margaret leaned back against Elisabeth, collapsing into her arms like a happy cat.

"I might have thought the same about you," Elisabeth said, smiling, pulling her close. She glanced at her wristwatch on the nightstand. It was five fifteen in the morning. "What are you doing up so early? Studying your vocabulary?"

"No, I memorized everything last night. I've already . . ." Margaret paused, tugging at a loose button on her gown. "I've already learned all the requisite words."

"I can tell." Elisabeth leaned closer to the top of Margaret's head. Her daughter smelled like sleep: musty yet also vaguely sweet. "From what I hear," Elisabeth added, "I'm sure you'll do very well on your test. You always do."

That she did. Though Margaret was just eleven years old, she acted

and read well beyond her age. Since moving to Alaska, Elisabeth and John had educated her themselves, at home, and Margaret took to everything they taught her with a speed and retention that was sometimes shocking. She eschewed Nancy Drew for H. G. Wells, traded toys for books of logic problems. For Christmas, in addition to the nightgown, Elisabeth and John had given her the first three letters of an encyclopedia series, a massive book that she read from one cover to the other as if it were a novel.

Tilting back her head, Margaret looked up at her. "Was that Mr. Glaser's plane?"

"Probably," Elisabeth said. "He's supposed to come by today. He's awfully early, though."

"He woke me up."

"Me, too."

"Will he have my book?"

For weeks, Margaret had eagerly awaited the arrival of a science book Elisabeth had bought through a catalogue. It contained instructions for thirty different experiments that children could conduct at home. Baking soda and vinegar became volcanic lava; paper clips defied all logic and floated on water; vegetable oil and club soda mixed to make an alien sea, its waters churning with fluorescent yellow globules. Once a week, the post office delivered mail, groceries, clothing, books, and medical supplies—anything they ordered, though certain requests took longer than others. They had sent for Margaret's book six weeks earlier.

"Maybe he'll have it," Elisabeth said. Closing her eyes, wishing for sleep again, she pulled Margaret tighter. "We'll just have to wait and see."

"If he doesn't have it, can you ask him what's taking so long?"

"I'm not going down there right now. I'm not meeting him."

"But Mr. Glaser—"

"He'll leave his deliveries on the landing strip," Elisabeth said. "He doesn't need any help."

And Elisabeth didn't want to give it. Walter Glaser was nice enough—nice, though always in a hurry—but there were few things that seemed

less appealing right now than getting dressed, stepping out of bed, and meeting someone, *anyone*, on the landing strip at five fifteen in the morning. But Margaret wouldn't let it go.

"Please," she said, "please," and she wiggled out of Elisabeth's arms. Margaret knelt, bouncing lightly in front of her. "I need the book for my lessons," she said. "I have a lesson next week I need it for."

"Which lesson?"

But Margaret didn't hear the question. "Please ask him what's taking so long, Mama. Please. Mama—"

"If he doesn't have it, he doesn't have it."

"But you can ask him why."

"He's probably already left."

Margaret hopped off the bed and pulled a curtain aside from the nearest window. "He's still there," she said. "I can see the tip of his tail fin over Mr. Wallis' house."

Elisabeth was pushing the sheets away from her legs.

"Mama, please," Margaret said, bouncing on her toes. "Mama—"

"Let me think about it," she said, but they both knew that this was code for, *Okay, okay. I'll do it*. If she took her time going to the bathroom and pulling on her clothes, by then Mr. Glaser really would be gone. Raising children, and Margaret in particular, was partly a question of winning battles by sleight of hand, and at times Elisabeth could be masterful in that respect. Margaret dove onto the bed.

"Thank you, Mama," she said, beaming. "I'm so obliged."

Elisabeth dressed, fed the dog, did her business in the outhouse. Then she headed for the landing strip. Tanacross shined in the morning light, the sun already high and hot in the sky. About twenty-five homes comprised the town, each of them squat and square, single story, their walls built from the hewn trunks of pine and hemlock trees. There were no paved roads in Tanacross, only roads made of dirt, and these were as hard as rock in the winter but almost liquid in the summer. Elisabeth

moved quickly, her Oxfords sucking against the mud. She walked with her head down, both hands pulling her cardigan up and over her chin and nose. The summers in Tanacross were filled with swarms of mosquitoes unlike anything she had seen in Pennsylvania. Here, the insects flew in bunches as dense as floating ink. In the summertime, it was always best to move quickly and dress in layers. Today Elisabeth wore a pair of wide-leg slacks and a plain cotton blouse beneath her cardigan.

The landing strip lay on the north side of town. It seemed that everyone was still asleep, everyone except for Henry Isaac and his grandfather, who were splitting wood in front of their home. Though Henry was strong and young—twenty-nine, two years younger than Elisabeth—his grandfather was doing all the chopping. Henry just stacked the pieces of wood. Both of them nodded and smiled as Elisabeth approach, and Elisabeth did the same.

"Why aren't you the one chopping?" she said, pausing in the road a few feet away.

Henry threw up his hands. "He insisted. I couldn't stop him."

"Lies," Elisabeth said, and she smiled again. "Tell *ch'endëddh'* he's got a lazy grandson."

Chuckling, Henry turned to Mr. Isaac and said a few words in their native Athabaskan. Mr. Isaac laughed, speaking quickly in response, too quickly for Elisabeth's meager understanding. Henry turned back to her.

"He says if it wasn't for lazy grandsons and all the extra work they make, he'd probably be dead."

Elisabeth laughed. "Fair enough," she said, and she started walking again. "*Naa su'eg'ęh*, both of you."

She knew that wasn't quite the right phrase. She had told them *Good luck*, or something to that effect, an expression as close to *Have a good morning* as she could manage. But even if she was far from the point, Henry and Mr. Isaac didn't seem to hold that against her.

"Naa su'eg'ęh," Mr. Isaac said, nodding and smiling. Then he raised the ax once more.

Twenty minutes had passed since Mr. Glaser arrived, and Elisabeth

had every hope that he would already be on his way out of town. He wasn't airborne yet—she would have heard the plane taking off—but, as she turned the corner and approached the landing strip, she felt certain that she would hear the first catch and clunk of the plane's engine, and a minute after that Mr. Glaser would be gone.

But when she stepped onto the gravel runway, Elisabeth found that it wasn't Mr. Glaser who had landed. About two hundred feet down the landing strip stood an unfamiliar plane, its nose slightly crooked, its front left wheel resting in the grass. Equal parts white and canary yellow, the plane resembled most others that Elisabeth had seen in the Alaskan bush, except for one detail: Painted to the left of the propeller was a black-and-white German *Balkenkreuz*, which stood out like a mole on the side of someone's nose. The plane's wings stretched across the top of the fuselage like a huge rounded paddle and, directly in the center, just above the cockpit's windshield, a man sat with his knees pulled up against his chest.

For a moment, Elisabeth thought that he was fixing something—tightening a bolt, adjusting a panel, aligning this or that. No matter the season, the conditions in Alaska were tough on planes, and she had seen Mr. Glaser fix such things in the past, sometimes with the help of Teddy Granger, a local who had briefly served as a mechanic in the army.

But this man was just sitting there, motionless, his back turned toward her. He was staring at the trees that lined the landing strip, woods as dense as the cornstalks that had once encircled Elisabeth's home. He didn't notice her approaching. A haze of mosquitoes flickered around his head, but he didn't seem to notice that either.

"Good morning," Elisabeth said, and she came to a stop a few yards from the plane.

The man jolted, sitting straighter. Then he turned his head and gazed over his shoulder. His eyes were wide and dazed.

"Hello," he said. "Oh my goodness. Hello." His voice was a peculiar blend of German and British accents, quick and sharp with the consonants, slow and soft with the vowels. He pushed himself to his feet and

stood staring at her from atop his plane. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you walking up." He flashed a nervous smile. "My apologies."

For the most part, he looked normal enough. Mid-forties. Tall and rather slender. He wore a plain white button-up shirt, brown slacks, black suspenders, knee-high boots. He parted his hair to the right with his bangs swept up in a wave, a match for the neat, curving moustache that bent across his face. Elisabeth could tell that he had once been very good-looking. He certainly wasn't ugly in his middle age; it was just that his cheeks and nose were too pointed, too bony, though it was easy to imagine how he might have looked as a softer, younger man. As it was, from his angle high above her, the man owned a certain look of intensity that wasn't especially inviting. He reminded Elisabeth of a falcon or an eagle. Somehow, even as he smiled, he seemed to scowl.

"I'm sorry I startled you," Elisabeth said.

"No, no," the man told her. "That's all right. I'm fine. That's quite all right."

An awkward second passed between them. Still smiling, the man stared at Elisabeth as if waking from a trance. She wondered if he had been drinking.

"I'm Elisabeth Pfautz," she said.

Cordially, the man bowed his head and lowered his eyes. "Alfred Seidel," he said. "Very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Pfautz."

She took a single step forward. "What were you looking at?" Elisabeth turned to the woods, half expecting to see the hulking shadow of a moose or a caribou. But there were only trees—ragged, tired trees—endless as ever. Tanacross was the largest settlement for a hundred miles.

Alfred lowered his eyes again, bashfully. "I was just looking at . . ." he began, and paused for a second, "oh, just everything." He started walking down the spine of the plane.

"Everything?"

"Yes, you know," he said, gesturing with one hand, "all of it. The woods. The bush. All the beautiful world." He hopped to the ground, facing her now. His eyes were an iridescent shade of blue, and they

narrowed at her as he walked a few steps forward. "Did you say your name is Pfautz?"

"I did."

Alfred set his hands on his hips. "You're a German, then?"

"Pfautz is my husband's name," Elisabeth said, "but yes, I'm German, at least by stock. My father was from Hamburg, and my mother was from Bremen."

"Munich," Alfred said, and he tapped two fingers against his chest. "I'm a German, too."

"I can see that," Elisabeth said, motioning at the German cross on his plane. Alfred briefly turned.

"Oh, that," he said. "You wouldn't believe how uncomfortable that makes some people. But I have no shame in my heritage, never mind what's going on now." He grinned, and his eyes flashed as if they had just shared a secret. "I'm sure you understand," he said. "As a countryman, I mean. By God, it is good to meet you, Mrs. Pfautz. I'll tell you: Countrymen are rare up here in the wilds." And as he said that word—*wilds*—he puckered his lips as if the word itself tasted foul.

Elisabeth shook it off. "What brings you to Tanacross?"

"The post office," Alfred said. He paced back to his plane and unlatched the cabin door.

"Where's Mr. Glaser?"

"In Lincoln, Nebraska." Alfred leaned inside the cabin and retrieved a single white box of mail, filled only halfway with envelopes and packages. He set it on the ground between them. "I fly a route west of Fairbanks, but I'm pitching in for Glaser this week. His daughter is getting married."

In a flash, it came back to her. Months ago, Mr. Glaser had mentioned his daughter's coming marriage. He had been unhappy about the location and how far he had to travel. *But your little girl getting married only happens once,* he had said, and then paused, adding, *Or it damn well better.*

"Well, it's good of you to fill in," Elisabeth said.

Alfred shrugged. "It's only my job," he said, but then a shadow seemed to pass across his face, and he rolled his head side to side like a boxer dodging punches. "I do have a favor to ask, however."

"A favor?"

He nodded. "I've been flying all day and all night. My route and Glaser's, you see. I'm exhausted. I need to rest. I need a place to stay, Mrs. Pfautz, and I've been told that you have a guest room." He lowered his chin, and his eyes steadied on hers. "So, if you'd be so kind, I'd like to stay with you."

A place to sleep. It wasn't an odd request in itself. Elisabeth and John's home was the largest in Tanacross: three bedrooms, two fireplaces, a dining room adjacent to the kitchen, and a living room not far from that. And all of this was only one half of the house; the southern half served as the local school, the reason they had come to Tanacross in the first place. Their move was John's first post with the Office of Indian Affairs. During the past three years, he had helped renovate and update the school, both the building itself and its curriculum. He taught writing, mathematics, and biology, the last of which involved monthly field trips to study the flora and fauna of Glaman Pond, a sickled body of water not far from the house. They had hosted many guests in the past: officials from the Department of the Interior, officers in the army, other teachers on their way to other posts throughout the territory. The third room was meant to be a guest room, particularly for those connected in some way to the government.

But there was something about this man that unsettled her, and there was something strange in the way he had looked at her and spoken to her. He wasn't inviting himself into her home, and he wasn't demanding an invitation. He *desired* it—*I'd like to stay with you,* he had said—and somehow a desire felt more unnerving than a demand. Elisabeth had no wish to know anything about this man's desires, and she had no wish to fulfill them.

And yet she felt trapped. The guest room was intended for exactly this type of stay. Even with John out of town, what option did she really

have? It was her job—hers and John's—to put Alfred up. She felt trapped by obligation, trapped by situation, trapped by a dozen different things at once. But mostly, her eyes locked on him now, she felt trapped by Alfred Seidel.

"The room is free," she said, hoping that he would hear how this wasn't the same thing as an outright invitation, "but don't you have more deliveries to make?"

"You're my last."

Elisabeth shuffled her feet, briefly glancing down. "The room isn't much," she said. "It's not exactly the Ritz. Are you sure you'll be comfortable?"

He smiled. "I'm always comfortable with my countrymen."

"I see," Elisabeth said. "Well, you should know that my husband is away on business, so it's just me and my daughter," and again she hoped that this would dissuade him, that he would understand her awkward position and all its implicit discomfort.

He didn't. Alfred smiled merrily, holding up both hands.

"That's fine," he said. "Countrymen. Countrywomen. I'm sure I'll feel right at home." Turning back to his plane, he reached inside the cabin again, this time retrieving a large green duffel bag. He began to close the cabin door, but then he stopped himself. "Oh, I nearly forgot," he said, and he dropped his bag to the ground. He leaned inside the plane and started digging around a mass of empty boxes and padding blankets.

Elisabeth leaned to the side, trying to sneak a better look. "Do we have another box?" she said.

"Not quite," Alfred told her, "but I do have a special delivery." He turned to her and handed Elisabeth a flat package wrapped in brown paper. A note was affixed to it. *For Margaret Pfautz,* it read. "Our dear Mr. Glaser set it aside," Alfred said. He grinned, and again his eyes seemed to flash. "Margaret. Your daughter, I presume? Such a pretty name."

CHAPTER 2

To his credit, Alfred Seidel wasn't rude or unfriendly in any way. He wore a daft, cheerful smile almost constantly, and he chatted good-naturedly about the weather, Alaska, Bob Hope's performance in *Road to Zanzibar*. He thanked her effusively for everything; judging from his reactions, the guest room may as well have been the Ritz, and the coffee may as well have been champagne.

Not the least bit rude, no. But he was peculiar. During bouts of silence in a conversation, his lips would continue to move as though he was still speaking, though Elisabeth could never quite discern what he was saying to himself. In the guest room, he removed his boots and set them on his pillow—muddy soles and all—and he pushed his hands against each of the four walls as if testing their sturdiness. Before breakfast, in the midst of describing his favorite recipe for mincemeat pie, he reached inside his shirt pocket and retrieved a handful of pebbles, which he tossed into his mouth like grapes.

"Good for digestion," he said, answering Elisabeth and Margaret's puzzled stares.

Minutes later, after learning that Margaret had recently read *The*

War of the Worlds, Alfred described at length how he had sometimes seen enormous, faraway aircraft hovering above battlefields during the Great War.

"The men on the ground couldn't see them, but those of us in the air certainly could," he said, calm and matter-of-fact, undeniably serious. "They weren't zeppelins or observation balloons. These were made of metal. Shining steel. I can't guess what they were. I can only say that it seemed as if they were watching us—just watching the show."

Even Margaret, credulous and always curious, bowed her eyes and went on eating her eggs and hard roll without offering much of a reaction. Elisabeth cleared her throat.

"You were a pilot, then?" she said. "In the war, I mean?"

Alfred nodded. "Two years," he said. "I flew a Fokker *dreidecker*. Wonderful plane. I miss it every day."

"Did you ever meet the Red Baron?" Margaret asked.

"No, little one," Alfred said. "I'm afraid I never had the chance." He looked at Elisabeth. "Such a delightful child. So bright and well-informed. And your spit and image, Mrs. Pfautz. Your absolute twin."

At that, both Elisabeth and Margaret tensed, but Alfred didn't seem to notice any hint of awkwardness. He turned back to Margaret.

"I suppose you could teach me all sorts of things," he said, and then made a show of scrunching up his face in thought. "Let's see. Who was the fifth president of the United States?"

"James Monroe," Margaret said, "but that's an easy one."

"Well, then, who was the thirty-fifth?"

Margaret chewed, thinking. "We've only had thirty-one," she said. "President Roosevelt is number thirty-two."

"Ah, so I've stumped you," Alfred said. "You see, my dear, *you* will be the thirty-fifth. You, my darling," and with one finger he touched her nose and roared with laughter.

Finally, with breakfast finished, Alfred went to the guest room and slept. And almost at once, his sleep was a presence like nothing else in their home. His snoring howled through every room, his sleep so loud

that it sounded greedy, as if he was sucking up all of the home's air for himself alone. And it was endless. Hour after hour passed, and the snoring went on. No more meals. No trips to the bathroom. Not a single, silent pause. By lunchtime, it was humorous. By evening, annoying.

"How long is Mr. Seidel staying?" Margaret asked as Elisabeth cooked dinner, a meal of seasoned pork chops and thyme-sprinkled radishes from the greenhouse behind their home. Margaret sat on the floor with her back against the icebox, reading her encyclopedia while idly stroking Delma, their three-year-old malamute.

"Just tonight," Elisabeth said. She flipped the pork chops in the enamel pan, and they fizzled in their pool of lard. Grease nipped at her knuckles. "Perhaps he'll leave even sooner. He's slept a lot already."

Margaret turned a page. "He said I look like your twin." She didn't look up from her book. She kept on reading, or pretending to read. "Is that true? Do I look like Jacqueline?"

Margaret knew only the basics about Jacqueline. She knew that Elisabeth had once had a twin sister, and that Jacqueline had disappeared when they were children. But apart from the simplest facts, Margaret didn't know much, though she knew that her mother rarely spoke of the matter. She knew to tread lightly, and Elisabeth was glad to do the same.

"I'd say you look like me," she told Margaret, poking the chops around the pan. "But in a sense you look like her, too, yes."

Margaret nodded, still reading. "I hope Mr. Seidel leaves soon," she said. "He smells bad," and the moment passed, to Elisabeth's relief.

After dinner, both of them were itching to leave the house. Elisabeth went to visit Mack Sanford, and Margaret went to Betty Northway's house to play Which, What, or Where?, a geography trivia game that they had inherited from their predecessor at the OIA school. Though Margaret excelled at so many things, geography had never been one of her strong suits.

It was strange; geography seemed so much easier than everything else, so much simpler, yet Margaret struggled with it more than any other subject. She could recite the definition of *acrimony* and rattle off

the multiplication tables without missing a beat, but when it came to correctly labeling Alabama and Mississippi, suddenly she would find herself at a loss. Elisabeth chalked it up to a simple lack of interest.

"Why do I have to learn about places so far away?" Margaret had asked her once. She was staring down at a map of the South Pacific.

"Because those places aren't actually far away at all," Elisabeth had told her, trying to whet her interest. "Think about it. Everyone lives on the same globe. If an earthquake happens on one side of the world, it can make a wave that travels across the whole ocean. Those places may seem far away, but they're not as far as you may think."

Margaret was quiet, still staring at the map. Then she looked up. "Can I just learn about earthquakes?" she said. "Those are much more interesting than maps."

Spelling, math, and science—those were the subjects that Margaret enjoyed, and that was why Elisabeth was visiting Mack. She needed motor oil for Margaret's first experiment, and Mack was the only person in town who owned a motorized vehicle: a small bulldozer speckled with constellations of rust. There were no cars in Tanacross, no plumbing or running water. The town's only source of electricity was a small hydroelectric generator in the Tanana River, and this powered one thing only: the army radio intended strictly for emergencies. During Christmas, Father Ingraham, the priest who had run the town's Episcopalian mission for nearly thirty years, would sometimes play choral music from a crackling windup gramophone, but apart from that, as far as technology went, Mack's bulldozer was the beginning and the end.

Mack was their closest friend in Tanacross. Witty and gregarious, quick to laugh, quick to joke, he had always reminded Elisabeth of John—John in the early years of their marriage, the good years, before they had soured, before they had gotten too used to each other. Mack and John even looked alike in certain respects: broad shoulders, barrel chest, thick legs. Mack was shorter than the other Athabaskan men, most of whom were tall and lanky. Still, he was all Athabaskan, and he bore many of the traits so common among the people in Tanacross:

almond eyes, dark skin, wavy black hair, eyebrows that were thick and flat—qualities that made them look almost Asiatic, much different from those of the Indians outside of Alaska, or, rather, much different from the pictures and drawings Elisabeth had seen of them.

And that, it seemed, was a fair enough summation of the town as a whole: different, unexpected. Before moving to Tanacross, what Elisabeth had known about the Athabaskans was what little she had learned from books and pictures—grainy photographs of dour-faced men clad in heaps of fur, dogs pulling rickety sleds, hollow-eyed children huddled against their unsmiling mothers. The pictures always showed a place untouched by the rest of the world, and that was what Elisabeth had expected to find. The frontier. The edge of civilization. A town the world had yet to reach.

But instead, what she had found was this: The rest of the world had already gotten here. Yes, Tanacross was isolated. Yes, it was free of certain conveniences, and, yes, Tanacross existed inside a kind of bubble, but that bubble wasn't as impenetrable as she had been led to believe. Away from the cold, the men wore slacks and button-up shirts. The women wore blouses and tulip skirts and fussed about their hair. People gossiped, fought, worried about the war and the sons and brothers who might soon be fighting in it. They went to church, smoked cigarettes, played cards, read the newspaper. Of course Tanacross had its own culture—in writing letters to friends and family back home, Elisabeth still used quotation marks whenever she mentioned sweat baths or potlatches—but the town didn't feel as foreign as she had thought it would. It still felt lonely. It still didn't feel like home, and Elisabeth was certain that it never would. But foreign? Not exactly. Not entirely.

Mack lived a few hundred feet from the landing strip, on the north side of town. His house was smaller than most of the other homes in Tanacross, but Mack didn't need much space. Years ago, his wife and infant daughter had died from tuberculosis, and now he lived alone. He had scores of family in Tanacross—brothers, nieces, nephews, cousins near and distant—and he could lend an able hand for nearly any task or

problem. He could fix chairs, clocks, lanterns, guns, boats, fishing reels, traps, and sleds. Two summers ago, he had helped John reinforce the roof and windows of the school. Not long after that, he and John had built the greenhouse out back.

Mack also bred dogs. Malamutes. It was Mack who had given them Delma—the runt of a litter who would have been drowned had they not taken her in. Mack kept the dogs in three large kennels beside his house: one for the males, one for the bitches, and one for the mothers and their pups. The kennels were long and narrow and lined with chicken wire.

The dogs began to stir as Elisabeth approached. Some of them paced while others jumped against the mesh, bracing their front paws on the wire and wagging their tails as if they expected Elisabeth to feed them. Despite their excitement, none of the dogs barked; the dogs in Tanacross only howled, and this they did at night, howling for ten or fifteen minutes straight, a chain of call-and-response with the wolves way out in the bush.

"What the heck's going on out here?" Mack said, smiling as he opened his door and walked down the steps of his stoop. "You stirring up my dogs, Else? Causing trouble?"

"I'm always causing trouble," Elisabeth said. "Don't you know that by now?"

"I do. I do," Mack said. "And I'll admit it: As long as it's got your name attached to it"—he winked—"trouble doesn't seem so bad."

Elisabeth felt her cheeks flush, and she bowed her head. She was smiling—she couldn't help it—but instantly the air around her and Mack seemed to shift. They were quiet for a beat. Then Mack cleared his throat, and he tapped one foot against the stairs' bottom step.

"So," he said, straightening up, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Mack dug around inside for a while. The bulldozer, he said, hadn't been used since last May, and it wasn't something he regularly maintained.

"It's not exactly a Cadillac," he told her. "I change its oil about as often as I take it to a car wash."

Mack's home was more or less a workshop. Tables were piled high with half-completed projects. Bookshelves were crowded with cans of grease, paint, and oil. Sawdust covered the floor like a blanket of snow. On every wall hung rows of tools, wrenches and saws and measuring instruments of all shapes and functions. *Why in the world do you need so many collets?* Elisabeth had asked Mack one of the first times she visited his home. *Why in the world do you know what a collet is?* he had replied, and with that she had reminisced about her father—a tool and die maker with the graceful touch of an artist. Before her sister's disappearance and her father's passing not long after, his workshop behind their home had been one of the mainstays of her and Jacqueline's childhood.

A toolmaking shop was a strange place for children to enjoy, but its strangeness was exactly the reason why their father's shop had been so interesting. It seemed like the laboratory of a wizard or Dr. Frankenstein, a place of tricks and odd little gadgets, a place of invention and, sometimes, a place of mystery. Their father used to make them toys in that shop, and once, when they were eight years old, he made them a doll built from wood and glass and metal pins that held its limbs together. The doll's eyes were wide and unmoving, but when you held it up to the sun or another bright light, they would slowly close as though the brightness was too much to bear. *How does it do that?* Elisabeth had asked. *Magic,* her father said.

"Ta-da!" Mack called out, lifting up a canister of motor oil. He was crouched beside a workbench near the door, and now he rose to his feet. "What's she need this for, anyway?" he said, clomping across the room. Mack swayed stiffly when he walked, hardly bending his knees at all. *Car accident,* he had once explained, and left it at that.

"We're learning about viscosity," Elisabeth said.

"Oh, sure." Mack handed her the canister. "Everybody's got to learn about viscosity."

"Absolutely," Elisabeth said. She smiled a little. "Well, thank you for this. I'll bring it back in a few days."

"Take your time, take your time." Slowly, wincing, Mack lowered

himself into a chair beside his stove, a cast-iron Favorite that sat in the middle of the room. "So," he said, "I hear you got a guest."

"Word travels fast."

"Word doesn't have far to go. Sometimes folks know what I'm doing before I've even done it."

"Is that so?" Elisabeth said, feigning an impressed frown. "Well, yes, we've got a guest, and what a guest he is."

She filled him in on all the details—the snoring, the boots on the pillow, the stones that Alfred gulped down like hors d'oeuvres. When she got to the part about spacemen, Mack just shook his head.

"Martians," he said. "I've always hated how nosy they are."

But his joking belied something else. The longer she spoke, the more she saw it: a pinch in Mack's eyes, a shadow of unease. He was judging Alfred, but in that process he was also judging her. Suddenly, Elisabeth didn't want to talk about her guest. Suddenly, she realized that Alfred wasn't the only one being cross-examined. She was, too, and with that realization she felt an unexpected compulsion to defend Alfred's stay—and her decision to allow it.

"Suffice it to say, he's an eccentric," she said, hastily coming to an end. "He's an interesting fellow."

"Eccentric?" Mack said. "Is that what you'd call all that?"

Elisabeth shrugged. "I don't know what else to call it. Some people are just a little off-kilter, you know? Especially in the summertime."

"Ain't that the truth?" Mack said, turning his head toward the window. It was eight o'clock at night, but the world outside was awash in a mustard-colored glow. "But honestly," he said, "are you sure this guy should be staying with you?"

"Do I have a choice in that? It's my responsibility, isn't it?"

"Maybe," Mack said. "Maybe. But don't you think these are—I don't know—*exceptional* circumstances?"

"Because of his—"

"Because of everything," Mack said, and he chuckled briefly, though his eyes had no sense of humor in them. "John is out of town, and it's

only you and Margaret in that house with the guy. And he's not the most . . ." He shook his head. "Well, he's not the most normal guy, obviously, and on top of that there's his background."

"His background?"

"Yeah, you know."

He stared at her, waiting for a cue, her flicker of understanding, but Elisabeth gave him nothing. Mack wilted. The skin on his face was pocked with acne scars, decades-old marks that made him look older than he really was—thirty-seven, only two years older than John was.

"Okay," he said. "If we're leveling with each other, I'm not sure I'd trust any of them these days."

"Them?"

"Sure," Mack said. "You said it yourself. Where he's from, I mean. They're fanatics, you know."

Ah, Elisabeth thought, *that.* She couldn't help but feel stung. She leaned back on her heels, shifting the oil canister from one hand to the other.

"And I'm not talking about you guys," Mack said, holding up both hands. "Obviously, I'm not. But it's something that's been on my mind. That's all. Especially with John out of town, I just don't know how good this is, Else."

"Well, eccentricities aside, I'm not too concerned about that. Sometimes people just find themselves on the wrong side of a war. That was the case for a lot of people." *Like my entire extended family,* she could have added, *and John's, too.* But she decided against mentioning that. "Besides, the war was a long time ago."

"A long time? I'm talking about now, Else. There's a war going on right now. Don't you remember?"

Elisabeth bobbed her head. "So you think he's, what, spending his weekends at rallies in Nuremberg?"

"I think," Mack said, "that you should simply be careful." He slouched back in his chair. "I'm not telling you to kick the guy out. I'm not telling you your business."

"I don't want him staying with us either, you know. Believe me, I don't."

"I know," Mack said. "I understand the tough position you're in. And again, I'm not telling you your business. I'm not telling you to do anything, really. I'm just saying my bit. I'm saying what's on my mind, one friend to another."

Elisabeth was quiet for a while, thinking. She was studying the tools that lined the walls of Mack's home. Some were rusted and warped—hammers that bent like crippled limbs, saws so tarnished that they looked like strips of bark—but, mixed among those, other tools were gleaming and new, each of their various teeth and chiseled edges still sharp and stiff and strong. No matter. They would all wear away with age. Even if Mack never used them, they would all wear away. Everything did—everything and everyone.

"Well, I appreciate your concern," Elisabeth said. "I appreciate your bit."

But I can take care of myself, she wanted to say, but didn't.

"Good," Mack said. "Thank you."

Slowly, cupping his knees, he stood up, and together they walked to the door.

"Tell Margaret I said hello, okay?"

"I certainly will."

"And tell Delma the same," Mack said.

"I'm sure she'll appreciate that."

Mack reached for the doorknob, but then his hand paused, and his face went slack with seriousness. "Just let me know if you need any help," he said. "I'm not far away. Remember that, will you?"

"I will," Elisabeth said. "And thank you again for the oil."

"That's no trouble," Mack said, smiling as he opened the door, and his eyes were sweet and sad and deeply sincere. "No trouble at all."

CHAPTER 3

It was almost real. She and Jacqueline were sitting in the middle of Mr. Stouffer's cornfield, a rolling swatch of land that stretched for twenty acres behind their home. Facing each other, they sat on the ground in a circular clearing. The corn towered above them, stalks as thick as baseball bats, all of them swaying in the wind with the singular motion of water.

"Drift pin," Jacqueline said, and she held up a tool that resembled a dart. On the ground between them lay an array of other tools, smithing and machining instruments whose names and functions Elisabeth had once learned, in reality, from their father. "Drift pin," Jacqueline repeated, speaking slowly, the way that someone teaches words to an infant.

Elisabeth nodded. "Drift pin."

Jacqueline put the tool back in its row, and Elisabeth watched her sister consider her next selection. In this dream, they were wearing the same clothing: light blue dresses, knee-high socks, canvas shoes, tortoiseshell barrettes clipped in their hair. Even then, a time when they were

nearly adolescents, they sometimes dressed exactly the same. They were twins, after all, and matching clothes only added to the novelty.

Jacqueline reached for another tool. "Broach," she said, holding up a narrow flank of metal with angled teeth carved into one side of it.

"Broach," Elisabeth repeated, and her sister set it down.

Now Jacqueline raised a tool that looked like a pair of tweezers—two tapered prongs held together at their hinge by a wide pin. "Calipers," Jacqueline said.

But this time, when Elisabeth tried to speak, the word simply didn't come. She felt as though she was speaking into a vacuum, her words swallowed up before they had even had a chance to form.

"Calipers," Jacqueline said, more insistently now. She bounced her hand, gripping the tool tighter in her fist. "Calipers."

But the word wouldn't come. Elisabeth opened and closed her mouth, her lips popping speechlessly against each other. She could muster nothing more.

Jacqueline sighed. Setting down the tool, she bowed her head. Then she held out her hands, palms down, and Elisabeth saw that they were the hands of an elderly woman: wrinkly and calloused, their veins rising up from her flesh like earthworms.

"I hardly even recognize you now," Jacqueline said, looking up. Though her hands had suddenly aged, her face was still young, eleven years old, always eleven years old.

That was the point in the dream when Elisabeth woke up. She was lying in bed with the sheets pulled up to her chin. Her pillow was damp. Her heart was beating fast. But in spite of the sweat and her racing pulse, she felt very calm. However cryptic her dreams could be, she had come to welcome these visions of her sister. Her dreams had once been distressing; she would wake up with tears streaming down her face, and for days thereafter her teeth would ache from unconscious gnashing. But, since moving to Alaska, Elisabeth had come to appreciate whenever Jacqueline deigned to visit her. The dreams were never long, and they were often sad. But they were all she had left, and because of that she

was thankful for them. They brought her back to a place—and a time—that now felt impossibly distant. Elisabeth lay flat on her back, arms outstretched, and she listened to her own breathing. She tried to picture Pennsylvania, and she tried to sleep.

But she couldn't. She would slip into a dream and then slip straight out of it, dreams that weren't as much sleep as momentary visions forgotten the same second they occurred. She awoke with a start each time—twitching, jerking. One moment she was lying on her side. The next, her stomach. The next, her back.

However she lay in bed, she couldn't escape the glow of her window, sunlight that filled every inch of the room with a soft, fiery haze. The Alaskan summer never failed to wear her down. At first, in April and May, the nights were still long enough that she hardly noticed their shortening. Then June came, and bit by bit it pulled the energy out of her. In increments of five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen, she slept less and less, and she carried these minutes through each waking day like weights fixed to her body. By July, she felt her lack of sleep in every labored step she took. It pulsed behind her eyes, a swelling pressure that made her feel as though she might explode. In bed, time didn't flow, but skipped. It was midnight. One o'clock. One forty-five. Sometimes, like tonight, there was no point in even trying. Elisabeth kicked the sheets away at two o'clock, and she pushed herself up.

Even in the summertime, the house was chilly at night, so she wore a quilted dressing gown on top of her pajamas. She spent half an hour at the dining room table, reviewing Margaret's latest work and preparing for the next day's lesson. It was true that she and John had taught Margaret together, but it was also true that Elisabeth had long ago assumed the lion's share of their daughter's education. During the school year, John was busy with the Athabaskan children. Even now, when school was in recess, it seemed as if his time was always occupied with other tasks: clerical duties, repairs, seminars, interim teaching assignments elsewhere in the territory. No matter the time of year, Elisabeth was left with Margaret almost all to herself.

And it was difficult to keep pace with her. Margaret learned her lessons quickly, and she learned them relentlessly. At Margaret's own request, Elisabeth continued to teach her during the summer; Margaret's education hadn't ceased for more than two years straight. They did take it easier in the summer—fewer tests, more tasks—but it still sometimes felt like too much to manage.

Teaching one person was more difficult than teaching entire classrooms of them. That was what Elisabeth had been trained to do. That was what she had *wanted* to do, and that was what she had done before moving to Alaska. For six years, she had taught eighth-grade history and English at Lititz Public School, where John taught arithmetic and biology. It was hard work, and sometimes it made her feel neglectful—they counted on John's mother to care for Margaret during the day—but teaching gave Elisabeth a sense of satisfaction she couldn't deny. She felt that she was doing a job she needed to do, a job she was downright obligated to do. She had graduated at the very top of her class at Franklin and Marshall College, finishing even ahead of John. Elisabeth still shared letters with some of her professors, including Dr. Mueller, who had encouraged her to continue her studies and receive a bachelor's degree instead of just an associate's.

"What a privilege for your daughter to have a teacher as gifted as you," Dr. Mueller had written after they moved to Alaska, "and what a pity it is that the child should have your teaching all to herself."

Elisabeth had blushed when she first read that letter, and she told herself that Dr. Mueller was simply being kind—more than kind. Hyperbolic, really. She was just a novice when it came to teaching, and Dr. Mueller had observed only a handful of her classes. But especially now, especially here, Elisabeth often found herself thinking of that letter, remembering it most often when she was struggling to devise yet another lesson for Margaret, restless little Margaret.

That was the case now. Seated at the dining room table, her books and papers lit by a Coleman gas lantern, Elisabeth was at a loss. She paged through one of her handbooks, then paged through it again,

forward and back. She knew that she should devise a lesson of her own, but she just didn't have the energy. Fast asleep, Delma was lying beside her chair, inches from her feet. Every now and then, Delma would shift or sigh, but other than this, the house was quiet. Outside, the world held its breath. The wind didn't blow. The trees didn't rustle. As she had so many times since coming to Alaska, Elisabeth felt the uncanny sensation that she was alone—completely alone, the last person on a desolate earth.

She set to work on Margaret's next spelling test. In the past Elisabeth had always used her own dictionary, but tonight she used Margaret's encyclopedia, her daughter having left the tome at her place at the table. *Braille,* she wrote in her notebook, flipping through pages at random. *Crevasse. Cittern.* Maybe, she thought, they would do a unit on words with two of the same letter side by side, tricky words to spell, even for a child as clever as Margaret.

But soon Elisabeth was just reading the encyclopedia's entries. She couldn't help it. The illustrations caught her tired eyes, and she found herself reading about baize, calcium, Marcus Aurelius. She turned page after page, her eyes drifting from entry to entry the way someone scans a newspaper, the act of learning and the loss of forgetting only half a second separated. She was almost at the end of the encyclopedia when one illustration made her pause—a picture of a pair of calipers—and, in a rush, Elisabeth remembered her dream.

Calipers, Jacqueline had said, teaching her the word. *Calipers.* Repeat after me. But she couldn't, could she? Elisabeth could only move her lips, silent, speechless.

How vivid Jacqueline had looked in that dream—how present, how real. To this day, she could picture her sister with absolute clarity, though she supposed that wasn't surprising. She had only to imagine herself, or someone quite like her, more alike than any other person could ever be.

To the month, twenty years had passed since her sister disappeared. Twenty years a missing child. A stolen child. Twenty years since that

summer, that evening in the yard when Jacqueline told her, *I'll come right back,* and never did.

But was she dead? No. Taken, abused, enslaved—Elisabeth could only guess—but not dead. She was certain of it. For a while, her certainty had been unexplainable. It was something that she felt in her bones—her sister was alive, alive, alive—a fact that she felt like heat in a room, something she knew not by a single source but with every inch of her body and every breath that she inhaled.

Then the dreams started, and at once she understood that these were more than merely fantasies. They were proof that she was right. She and Jacqueline were identical twins, and their connection went deeper than appearance or voice. These weren't dreams. They were contact. They were moments in which her sister was reaching out to her, perhaps not literally but at the very least spiritually. Elisabeth was not a religious person; this wasn't an act of God. It was an act of sisterhood, a bond that they had held since birth and held to this day. Her sister was alive, and no one could tell her otherwise. Reaching out, Elisabeth touched the calipers on the page, feeling the tiny ridges of ink on paper, lines so subtle that they were nearly imperceptible. Then, slowly, she closed her eyes.

"Mrs. Pfautz?"

Alfred's voice made her jolt. Elisabeth sat straight, pivoting in her chair and pulling her hand away from the encyclopedia. Alfred was across the room, standing in the hallway near his open bedroom door.

"Alfred," Elisabeth said, and it was all she could do to stop herself from standing up and running from him, strictly on an impulse. "You startled me," she said. "Jesus. You startled me."

But Alfred only hushed her. Walking quickly forward, he hissed—*"Shh! shh!"*—holding up one hand and pinching his fingers together as if squeezing her lips shut. "Did you hear that?" he said, approaching the table. "Just seconds ago. Did you hear those sounds?"

Alfred was dressed in an undershirt and denim overalls. His hair was disheveled and his eyes were bulging and white, as large as billiard balls. Within the dusky light of the room, Alfred seemed to glow.

"Sounds?" Elisabeth said, still catching her breath. Sitting rigid, she listened. "I don't hear anything."

"But a moment ago," Alfred said. "A moment ago—" He stepped toward the window. His eyes grew wider. His head craned forward. He looked at her. "You didn't hear it?"

No, she certainly hadn't, whatever *it* was. The house had been quiet and was quiet still, silent except for Delma softly grunting, huffy little noises that she made whenever she was curious. Her "houndy humphs," John called them. Delma had raised her head when Alfred first walked into the room, and now she was watching him intently. "No," Elisabeth said. "I didn't hear anything. What did it sound like?"

Alfred stepped closer to the window. "Hammering," he said, lifting back the window's curtain and peering out. His hands were trembling. "Someone was hammering. Just a moment ago. Just outside. The whole house was shaking." Pale with panic, he glanced at her. "You really didn't hear it?"

"Alfred," Elisabeth said, "it's almost three in the morning. Everyone is asleep."

"Not everyone." Alfred swallowed, motionless, still listening. "It was the door," he said, and he dashed across the room, fast enough that the papers in front of Elisabeth briefly lifted, jostled by the rush of his movements. He yanked the door open without a moment's pause—the doors in Tanacross had no locks—but there was only emptiness outside, nothing more than the vacant wooden stoop. A wash of sunlight poured inside the house and the air smelled suddenly sweet, tinged with the Alaskan summer, woodsmoke and damp dirt mixing strangely with the acrid fumes of the Coleman lantern.

"Someone was knocking," Alfred said. "Someone was absolutely pounding."

He took a single step outside, looking right to left. Then, very slowly, as if he had just remembered something long ago forgotten, he bowed his head and walked back inside. His mouth gaped open. His eyes stared down.

"Alfred—" Elisabeth began, but her voice disappeared.

With his arms uncovered to his elbows, Elisabeth noticed something

about Alfred that she hadn't seen before: Dozens of scars covered his arms, scars that were ropy and wide. Crisscrossing in a hundred different directions, they rose from his skin in angry red slashes. It looked as though hives of insects were burrowing through his flesh.

"Good God," Elisabeth said. "What happened to your arms?" But immediately she caught herself; immediately she felt ashamed for asking such a thing so bluntly.

No matter. Alfred didn't seem to hear her. He turned away from the door and, still bowing his head, closed it behind him. Then he began to move back across the family room, shuffling—limping—in the direction of the bedrooms.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Pfautz," he said, breathing harder now. He sounded as if he might break into tears. "I'm so very sorry." Then, not far from the hallway, he paused in midstep, turning his head and staring straight at her. "What can you say about such a thing?" His voice was a breathless whisper. "What can you possibly ever say?"

And with that he shambled away, dragging his feet, and the house was suddenly silent again.

The following day, Alfred acted like a different person. He was quiet and aloof, but more than anything he seemed dejected. His head hung low and his eyes were glassy and distant, the eyes of a much older man. He looked weary and hopeless. He reminded Elisabeth of how her father had looked in the final year of his life.

At breakfast, Alfred said very little, ate very little. Seated at the table across from Margaret, he stared almost constantly at the red leather cover of her encyclopedia, its golden letters glinting in the sunlight pouring through the widows. When Elisabeth asked if he was feeling ill, Alfred only shook his head.

"Not so much ill, no," he told her. "I've just lost my appetite."

He certainly had. Alfred mostly poked at his food—over-easy eggs and cracked wheat—and he drank only a few sips of black coffee. He

never mentioned the episode from earlier that morning, and Elisabeth didn't have the nerve to bring it up herself.

"Mrs. Pfautz," Alfred said now, looking up from his food, "I really do appreciate your hospitality." He waited for a second, studying her. "You know that, don't you?"

Elisabeth swallowed a bite of egg. Beside her, Margaret ate as though she wasn't listening to the conversation. Her eyes were trained on Delma, who sat in front of the door, head high, tongue hanging, hot from the heat spreading out from the kitchen and the wood-burning stove.

"Yes," Elisabeth said. "I know that." She made herself smile. "And I appreciate the thanks."

"You're very kind," Alfred said. "Very, very kind, Mrs. Pfautz, so I really do hate to ask for anything else, but I have something more."

Something more, Elisabeth thought, and she realized that she had been expecting *something more* all along, expecting it from the first moment Alfred had spoken to her on the landing strip.

"What is it?" she said, and she tried to seem more concerned than reluctant, more intrigued than apprehensive.

"I need to stay a little while longer," Alfred said. "One of my ailerons isn't working quite right. I could fly with it unrepaired, and that was what I had planned to do, but the more I think of it, the more I'd rather fix it. Not take the chance, you know." He stammered for a second, shaking his head. "I'll need to stay another night, maybe two, if that would be all right." He paused, blinking. "Would that be all right?"

And again Elisabeth felt cornered, as though there was only one answer she could give. But as much as she felt trapped by the obligations of their post, she felt even more trapped by her own recalcitrance. She had dug in her heels with Mack—shrugged away his worries—and in doing so she had already given her answer to Alfred. She had already made her commitment. *Yes, of course. Stay as long as you need to stay. That's fine. Everything is fine.*

"Ailerons," Margaret said, now holding her encyclopedia, "are hinged airfoils located on the trailing edge of aircraft wings. They control lateral balance and are necessary for banking turns."

A COSMOLOGY OF MONSTERS

"IF JOHN IRVING EVER WROTE A HORROR NOVEL, IT WOULD BE SOMETHING LIKE THIS. I LOVED IT." —STEPHEN KING

SHAUN HAMILL

A NOVEL

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1

I started collecting my older sister Eunice's suicide notes when I was seven years old. I still keep them all in my bottom desk drawer, held together with a black binder clip. They were among the only things I was allowed to bring with me, and I've read through them often the last few months, searching for comfort, wisdom, or even just a hint that I've made the right choices for all of us.

Eunice eventually discovered that I was saving her missives and began addressing them to me. In one of my favorites, she writes, "Noah, there is no such thing as a happy ending. There are only good stopping places."

My family is spectacularly bad at endings. We never handle them with grace. But we're not great with beginnings, either. For example, I didn't know the first quarter of this story until recently, and spent the better part of my youth and young adulthood lingering like Jervas Dudley around the sealed tombs of our family's history. It's exactly that sort of heartache I want to prevent for you, whoever you are. For that to happen, I have to start at the outermost edges of the shadow over my family, with my mother, tall, fair-skinned, and redheaded Margaret Byrne, in the fall of 1968.

2

Like me, my mother was born somewhat late into her parents' marriage. Unlike me, however, she reaped the benefits of being born to financially successful parents. Her father, Christopher Byrne, was a

women's clothing buyer for Dillard's department stores, and had a close personal relationship with William T. Dillard himself.

Margaret didn't know her father well; she thought of him as a handsome stranger who smelled of cigarettes and who always brought home gifts from trips to New York—mostly original cast recordings of the Broadway musicals he saw while away—but she never wanted for anything. She grew up in a big house in the suburbs of Memphis, Tennessee, and always had a generous allowance, nice clothes, cars, and, when the time came, tuition at her parents' alma mater: Tilden University, a small conservative Christian school in Searcy, Arkansas.

You'll never have to worry about money, Margaret's mother told her, and in 1965 that seemed true. My grandfather had been so successful at Dillard's that in 1966, as my mother matriculated for her freshman year of college, he left the company to open his own store. However, by the winter of 1967, the store was off to a slow start, and in the summer of 1968, while Margaret was home for summer break, her mother broke the news: the store was failing. The Byrnes would pay Margaret's tuition for another year, but would have to take away her car, her monthly allowance, and the dorms.

When Margaret reminded her parents that she would need at least two more years to finish her bachelor's in English, never mind her master's in library science, her mother said, "I'd suggest you speed up work on your M-R-S before you worry about your B.A."

Only somewhat daunted, Margaret did her best with a near-impossible situation. When she returned to Searcy in the fall, she'd secured a job at Bartleby's, the town's only bookstore, and rented a room from the owner, Rita Johnson, a widow whose only religion was the written word, and whose politics were more Betty Friedan than Richard Nixon. Mrs. Johnson lived in a cozy two-story house near campus, charged a pittance for rent, and laid down almost no rules. She didn't care what hours Margaret kept as long as she didn't bring boys to the second floor of the house, and Margaret could use the TV and the record player as much as she wanted as long as she kept the volume low.

All of this new freedom was an abrupt, almost startling change

from the stringent rules of the old residence hall. Margaret had never wanted to come to Tilden, with its mandatory signed morality pledges and heavily enforced attendance at Sunday morning worship services. She'd enrolled because it was the only school her father would pay for. She'd suffered through all the religious ritual in the hopes of a college degree, a career, and a life of her own. And now, living with Mrs. Johnson, she got her first taste of what that life might look like.

Margaret loved her new quarters, her new freedom, and, best of all, she loved the dim lighting and narrow aisles of Bartleby's. She loved stocking the new arrivals, setting up themed displays, and helping her customers, kindred spirits on the hunt for stories. The only burr in her work life was a young man named Harry, who came in maybe twice a week and asked her questions to which she suspected he already knew the answers: *Who wrote* Great Expectations*? Where do you keep your biographies?* He always thanked Margaret for the information, but regardless of what he claimed to be interested in, he would inevitably camp out on the floor in the science fiction section, where he read books without ever buying anything.

He looked young, about Margaret's age, and she assumed he must go to Tilden as well. She wondered how he found time to read so much *and* go to school. Also, if he went to Tilden, he could probably afford books. Why loiter? It got on her nerves, but whenever she confronted him about it, he replaced the unpurchased merchandise on the shelf, apologized, and left.

For a while, she worked thirty-two hours a week at the store, attended class, and studied in the downtime, but this routine proved more difficult than she'd anticipated. Work—even relatively easy work, in the tranquility of Bartleby's—was draining. After a full shift, her feet ached and her brain felt like a wrung-out sponge. All she wanted to do was lie down on Mrs. Johnson's couch and watch TV. On the nights she did force herself to study, she found it a slow, repetitive, laborious process. She had trouble focusing, and had to read paragraphs (or single sentences) over and over again to glean any approximation of meaning. She felt tired all the time, overslept, missed

classes, and turned in assignments late or not at all. By late September her grades were worse than ever.

Her safety net, sewn by her mother's phantom, taunting voice, came in the form of Pierce Lombard, a boy from her Western Civ class. Tall and skinny with close-cropped hair ten years out of fashion and heavy-lidded eyes underscored by dark bags, he looked perpetually sleepy and about a decade older than his actual age (twenty), but he asked Margaret on at least one date a week and he came from a wealthy family of chicken tycoons. If you did your shopping at grocery stores in the southern United States in the mid–twentieth century, chances were you'd purchased at least one Lombard chicken. Pierce sometimes tried to explain the business to Margaret, but every time he did, her attention wandered.

They didn't go to the movies often, because Pierce disapproved of most films (he was conservative and devout even by Tilden standards), but when they did go, he sat at attention, and never smiled or laughed. Sometimes, in the dark, Margaret watched him instead of the film. He looked thirty now. What would he look like in another ten years, or twenty, when the pressures of chicken entrepreneurship began to wear on him?

He was polite, always opened doors for her and said "Please" and "Thank you." When they took his Mercedes someplace to neck, his kisses seemed mathematically calculated to ride the line between passion and good manners, his hands on her waist, stomach, or face. Margaret, a "good girl" and still a virgin, imagined that real love ought to be a full-contact sport, intense and dangerous, the kind of thing that happened on railroad tracks or forest floors, two bodies struggling to express purity of spirit. She wondered if Pierce, a "good boy" himself, was waiting for her to show a spiritual kinship before demonstrating that kind of passion, so one night in early October, she reached into his lap and squeezed his groin. He startled, pushed her away, and retreated to the far corner of the driver's seat.

"Why did you do that?" he said.

"Because I wanted to," she said.

"That's not the point," he said. "We shouldn't."

He took her home after that and didn't kiss her good night.

She'd always assumed that religion was something you did in polite company, not in private. Surely nobody actually believed any of the stuff they agreed to on Sundays. Pierce was a boy. Shouldn't he push for more, trying to see what he could get away with? Did anyone think Jesus Christ gave a damn how they used their private parts? Pierce should be overjoyed that she'd shown some interest in his penis, shouldn't he?

Pierce stopped calling after Margaret groped him, and sat far away from her in class and worship services. Her newfound free time didn't help her grades; she failed three tests in a row. When her Algebra professor handed back her midterm with a big F– on the front page, he murmured, "Get it together, Miss Byrne."

She felt a growing directionless fury at the unfairness of it all. Why was it her problem her father was a bad businessman? Why was it her responsibility to convince some sleepy-faced pinhead to enjoy her body? How was anyone supposed to succeed in these circumstances?

The day she got the Algebra exam back, she carried her anger to her shift at Bartleby's. Mrs. Johnson read the emotional weather and left her alone to restock the science fiction section, which would have been fine, but Harry was blocking the aisle with his back to the shelves, a hardcover book open in his lap, a Please Don't Read the Books sign hanging directly over his head.

She crossed her arms and glared at him. The sun came through the window behind her, and her shadow stretched forward down the aisle, shading him.

"Hi, Margaret," he said. He smiled at her. "I've been meaning to ask—do you have anything by Philip Roth?" When she didn't return the smile, he said, "What's the matter?"

"Can you read?" she said. "Do you understand the words on the pages you're turning? Or do you sit here because you want to look smart for passersby?"

"I can read," he said.

"Then why don't you—" She tore the Please Don't Read the Books sign from the shelf over his head and tried to pitch it at him. The flimsy paper fluttered through the air between them like a fallen leaf, making its lackadaisical way to the floor. Harry watched it land before looking up at her.

"Why don't I what?" he said.

"Why don't you—you—*you read it, you bought it*!" She grabbed him by the shoulder. "Get up."

Perhaps surprised by the force of her anger, Harry did as commanded, and allowed Margaret to march him to Mrs. Johnson at the front counter, book still open in his hands.

"Harry's ready to check out now," Margaret said. She pushed him toward the register.

He gave her a plaintive look but put the book on the counter. It was a big glossy hardcover, something you might find on someone's coffee table.

Mrs. Johnson took the book and checked the price on the front flap. "Are you sure, Harry?"

He grunted an affirmative. Mrs. Johnson rang up the total. He grimaced when she read it off, but pulled out his faded, cracked wallet and paid. Mrs. Johnson put the book in a bag for him. He mumbled his thanks and left.

She watched him go before speaking to Margaret. "What was that about?"

"Nothing," Margaret said.

"Actually nothing, or you-don't-want-to-talk-about-it nothing?"

"Take your pick, Mrs. Johnson."

"Watch your tongue, young lady."

Margaret returned to work stocking the shelves. As her shift wore on, her anger ebbed away until it disappeared altogether and left her mystified by the strength and force of her outburst. Certain details kept presenting themselves to her, things she'd never noticed about Harry before: the ragged sleeve on his button-down shirt, the fabric rough from too many washings; the faded knees of his jeans; some vague, greasy smell she couldn't place, inescapable when in his proximity.

By the time her shift ended that evening, she felt a dull shame, which only intensified when she found Harry waiting in the parking lot. He sat cross-legged on the hood of an old, beat-up Chevy, hands in his lap. She almost never saw cars that old on campus. Maybe he was a scholarship kid? Or, like her, trying to work his way through school? Face hot, she forced herself to approach.

"That was an expensive book," he said.

"You can return it. If you have the receipt you can get cash."

He made a face. "I couldn't do that to Mrs. Johnson. She's always nice to me."

"Can I pay you back?" she said. She dug for her wallet in her purse.

He moved his head from side to side as though arguing with himself. "I *was* going to go to the movies tonight. I guess if you really want to set things right, you could buy the tickets."

"You want me to go to the movies with you?"

"I'll drive," he said. "You pony up for admission."

"What do you want to go see?"

"*Rosemary's Baby* just opened in Little Rock," he said.

Margaret had heard of the film. The preacher had denounced it in chapel last week, with broad, exciting terms: *blasphemous*, *profane*, *hideous*. Any student caught attending the film (or reading the Ira Levin novel on which it was based) would be expelled. But nowhere in Dr. Landon's warning (or the memo posted all over campus) was the film described in any detail. What made it profane? What made it blasphemous?

If Margaret had still lived in the dorms, she wouldn't have even considered the idea. But Mrs. Johnson wouldn't rat her out; the proprietor of Bartleby's thought all stories ought to be accessible to everyone, regardless of inherent morality. She'd be proud of Margaret for making up her own mind.

However, Little Rock was a fifty-mile drive from Searcy, and Margaret still had unfinished Chemistry homework, which she told Harry.

"I'll drive fast all the way there and back," he said.

She looked down at her plain sweater and the skirt she'd worn to

class that morning. Not exactly a prime first date ensemble, but this was about reparations, not romance. The clothes would help set his expectations accordingly.

"Let's go then," she said.

3

It was a horror picture starring that girl from *Peyton Place,* about a young married couple that moves into a new apartment and ends up ensnared by the elderly, doting Satanists next door. Margaret bought the tickets, and Harry paid for the popcorn and soda. Their fingers touched in the popcorn bucket a few times during the movie, but Harry didn't try to hold her hand or put an arm around her. He stared at the screen, engrossed.

The movie wasn't jump-out-and-scare-you terrifying, but unsettling on a deeper, more primal level. Margaret found herself identifying with the title character as Rosemary was bullied and isolated by her husband and neighbors, raped by the devil, and helpless to do anything in the end but be a mother to the spawn of that unholy union. As Rosemary rocked her baby in its black bassinet and the credits began to roll, Margaret sat back in her seat, stunned. Were movies allowed to end this way? With the devil triumphant, and the heroine defeated?

The film's spell lasted until Harry broke the silence in the parking lot. "If we speed, I can have you home by ten thirty."

Margaret let him open her car door and studied his face. He had a long nose over a small mouth and pointed chin, and brown eyes capped with thick, dark eyebrows. She wouldn't have noticed him across the room at a party, but his face *was* pleasant, genial. She felt the haze of the movie dissipating.

"Are you hungry?" she said. "I'm starving."

"I could eat," he said.

He took her to a McDonald's a few blocks away, probably the only

open place in town. As they climbed from the car, Margaret grabbed the Bartleby's bag from the seat between them.

"I want to see what cost me so much study time tonight," she said.

"You might want to wait until you're finished eating before you dive in," Harry said. "It's kind of gross."

He asked her to go find a seat while he ordered. She took a booth by a window, pulled the book from the bag, and laid it flat on the table: *Visions of Cthulhu: Illustrations Inspired by the Work of H. P. Lovecraft*. The cover featured a painting of a great, hideous beast, roughly human in shape, with thick, muscular green arms and legs, its hands and feet ending in talons rather than fingers and toes. It had the head of a nightmarish squid, bulbous and many-eyed, ending in a mass of tentacles, which hung down over the creature's chest and giant, round belly. A pair of sharp but somehow fragile-looking wings sprouted from the creature's back, and Margaret wondered how such an obese creature could possibly take flight.

"I hope you're still hungry for this stuff." Harry stood next to her with a tray of burgers, fries, and sodas.

Margaret tapped the cover of the book. "Is this Cthulhu?" She pronounced it *kit-hooloo,* and knew from his smirk that she'd said it incorrectly.

"One artist's rendition, yes," he said. "And it's pronounced *kuh-thoo-loo*."

She pulled the book toward herself, making room for him to set down the food. "He doesn't look scary. Just sort of gross, like the monster version of a fat Buddha from a Chinese restaurant."

He laughed and angled his head for a better look. "Yeah, I guess he kind of does."

"Is he supposed to be scary?"

He sat down across from her. "In the story he's scary. But maybe it's one of those things you can't translate without losing some essential piece. Like, it only works in the imagination."

She opened the book, flipped to a random page, and found a painting of another monster—this one more indefinite and amorphous, a

single mass of flesh with four black eyes; a glowing, vulva-shaped mouth lined with sharp teeth; and a mass of tentacles waving from its back. It floated among the stars, dwarfing a small planet in the foreground.

"And this fellow?" she said.

"Azathoth." He picked up a cheeseburger and unwrapped it.

Margaret closed the book with some reluctance and laid it on the seat next to her. She plucked a fry from one of the greasy little sacks on the tray. "So, every picture in the book is based on a story by this Lovecraft guy."

Harry nodded, chewing his food.

"It's a thick book," she said. "He must have created a lot of monsters."

Harry covered his mouth with one hand and spoke around his food. "A bunch. And they're all connected, too."

"What, like they're related to each other, like family?"

He swallowed and took a drink of his soda. "Some of them are, yeah. But I meant that they all exist in a shared world. Sort of like those movies where Dracula meets Frankenstein's monster, you know?"

She shrugged. "I saw the one where Abbott and Costello met the Wolfman."

"Same basic idea. They're all out there, sharing space, breathing the same air. Like how so many of William Faulkner's books take place in the same county."

"You ever make that comparison in an English classroom?"

"Not for a while now," he said. "I learned my lesson."

"Professors don't care for it?" she said.

He started to say something, then stopped and shoved a fry into his mouth.

4

They arrived back at Mrs. Johnson's a little before midnight and sat in the car trying to figure out what to say to each other.

"Well," Harry said, at last. "Thanks for the movie."

"Thanks for buying an expensive book," Margaret said. "We appreciate your business." She laughed at her own joke, the sound shrill and too loud.

He stared straight ahead, mouth piled up on the left side of his face. "I guess I'll see you at the store."

"Good night, Harry." She slid across the seat and kissed his cheek. It was rough with new stubble.

She got out of the car and walked up the drive, trying to decide if she was relieved or happy he hadn't tried anything. This train of thought quickly collided with homework stress—her American Lit paper still unstarted, her Chemistry equations in math limbo.

"Hey!"

She turned to see Harry running toward her, something clutched in one hand. He stopped about a foot away and extended a small paperback with a cracked spine: *The Tomb and Other Tales* by H. P. Lovecraft. The cover was black with white type and featured a picture of a man's forehead split down the middle, red bugs pouring from the place where his brain ought to be.

"So you can try him out," Harry said. "My mom gave me this book for my thirteenth birthday."

Margaret took the book. "Okay, sounds good—" she started to say, but he cut her sentence short, closing the distance between them, grabbing the sides of her face, and kissing her. It ended before Margaret had a chance to think about what was happening. He jogged back to his car and left her to wander, dazed, up the stairs to the house, fumbling with her keys and wishing she'd asked for a burger without onions.

5

Margaret stayed up all night to finish *The Tomb*, as though the book's cast of geniuses, madmen, and near-indescribable horrors held the key

to deciphering the strange young loiterer with whom she'd shared a brief, oniony kiss.

The book didn't help. Harry didn't seem like a madman, a monster, or, no offense, a genius. All she learned about him was that he had a taste for the macabre, and an extraordinary patience for dry, overwrought prose. She found Lovecraft almost unreadable. The stories had characters inasmuch as there were named people who existed on the page, but they never grew or changed or engaged in any meaningful human interactions. Whenever they spoke, they sounded like anthropomorphized textbooks from alternate dimensions. Most of the stories seemed to be about a single survivor relating the tale of an exploration of some ancient ruin and going mad as he realized that the ruin had been built (and was sometimes still inhabited) by some primordial horror. It was all florid, adjectival language, with nothing approaching the awesome horror and dread of the paintings in *Visions of Cthulhu*.

On the other hand, many of the tales had a compelling sense of dark revelation, the gradual realization by the narrator that the comforting "real world" humans inhabited was in fact nothing but weak gauze ready to be pulled aside to reveal an abyss of terrors underneath. It was sort of the opposite of Moses and the burning bush, or Paul on the road to Damascus. The same basic concept as religion—*the world is not the world*—but twisted.

She was still wrestling with this idea when she staggered into Western Civ the next morning, and didn't notice Pierce approach until he sat down beside her.

"You're talking to me again?" she said.

He sighed, and his nostrils flared. "I admit maybe I overreacted. But what you did—"

She leaned back in her chair, eyebrows raised. This ought to be good.

He put a hand to his brow. "I'm trying to apologize." His forehead creased, and it looked familiar somehow.

"You're amazing at it. Spectacular."

"Can I take you out tonight? And have a real, adult conversation? Please?"

For the first time in almost a week, Margaret felt the uncomfortable tug of her mother's voice at the base of her skull. The letters M-R-S burned in her mind's eye like a brand. She was too tired to say no.

He took her to Searcy's most expensive restaurant, a surf and turf place named Captain Bill's with old fishing nets and harpoons hung from the walls and ceilings. He encouraged her to get whatever she wanted and ordered the lobster to prove his point. Margaret ordered a salad. She'd never eaten lobster. When she watched her parents do so, she found the whole messy business—the bibs, the excess of fluid, the cracked shells with paltry meat inside—revolting. Her mother and father might as well have eaten giant red bugs. The thought put her in mind of the cover of *The Tomb* and made her glad for her salad all over again.

She finished her food before Pierce finished cracking and digging and dipping and chomping. His forehead shone even in the low restaurant light, and she tried to decide if he was already going bald. Also, had he worked up a sweat over lobster? That couldn't be good, right?

When the waiter brought the check, Pierce set it down in the middle of the table as he pulled his wallet from his jacket. She looked from the bill to Pierce and caught him watching her, making sure she'd seen the total. He pretended not to have seen, threw down several bills, and told the waiter to keep the change.

He's trying, she scolded herself.

After dinner (and a handful of complimentary mints), they drove out to the parking lot by the city park. It was a clear night with lots of stars. The constellations put Margaret in mind of Azathoth from *Visions of Cthulhu*, the vagina monster propelled through the heavens by tentacles. She sleepily wondered what Harry was doing right now, and wished she could have napped before the date.

She'd almost drifted off when Pierce said, "You don't have to sit so far away." She started as he patted the space next to him.

She scooted closer. He put an arm around her, and she made herself

lean into his body. It wasn't so unpleasant. There was something comforting about it. Human.

"Are you still angry at me?" he said.

"No."

"I understand if you are. I acted like a real dingbat."

"It's fine." She patted his chest. Honestly, she realized, she didn't care.

He took a deep breath. "The truth is, it scared me when you—did what you did. We haven't been seeing each other for very long, and it happened so soon. I didn't handle myself like a man. Instead, I ran away like a little boy, and hid from you. I asked God, 'Why would she do this? She's a good girl.' And finally, He answered me: *She did it because she loves you*."

Margaret's body went rigid. "You talk to God a lot?" She never prayed outside of church or meals with other Christians, and even then she only bowed her head, closed her eyes, and said *Amen* when appropriate. Her mind wandered during prayer. She assumed everyone's did, although you weren't supposed to say so.

"All day, every day," he said. "Anyway, my point is, God told me that you love me, and furthermore, that the reason I ran away was that I love you, too, and I wasn't ready to admit it." He shifted in his seat and peered down at her, his forehead nearly blinding in the moonlight. A vein stood out near his scalp. Was it pulsing? Was he okay? "I love you, Margaret. I know it's fast, but my parents say that when you know, you know. If you're ready to get serious, then so am I. I want you to come home with me during the Thanksgiving holiday. I want you to meet my family."

Margaret sat up. Pierce smiled at her with a sort of benevolence—an expression she associated with her father's face on Christmas morning, the look of a man bestowing a great gift.

"That's—that's a big step," she said.

"I love you, Margaret," he said. He leaned down and kissed her. She let him push her down on the seat and crawl atop her. She accepted his kisses and clumsy hands. As he bit her ears and neck, she caught something out of the corner of her eye—something at Pierce's window.

When she moved for a better look, though, it was gone. She tried to settle back into the rhythm of necking, put her hands on his face, kissed him, let him push his tongue into her mouth like a fat, slimy worm. She opened her eyes, and this time the vein on his forehead really was pulsing as he worked himself into a passion on her mostly passive body. She looked up, away from him, and saw something else outside, this time on her side of the car—a large shape with wide, hunched shoulders, and two eyes that glinted orange through the glass.

She made a muffled sound of panic, put her hands on Pierce's shoulders to try to push him off, to get his tongue out of her mouth so she could warn him, but he only moaned and fumbled at her harder. The vein on his forehead had stretched across his brow, dividing it into two separate planes of sweaty, pale skin. She wriggled, trying to get free. Something moved beneath the skin of his forehead. The vein pulsed twice and then burst.

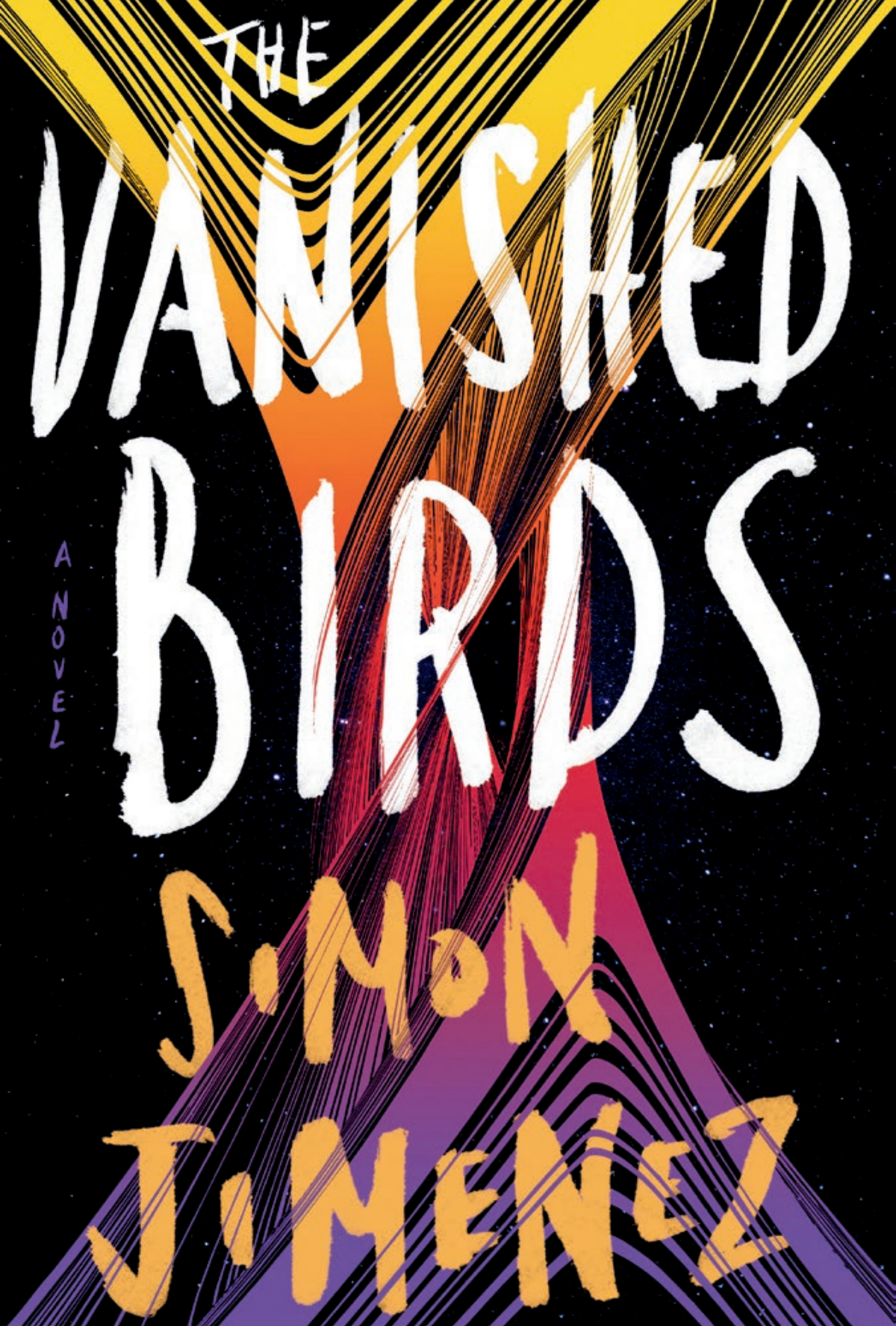
Pierce's head cracked open, and hundreds of tiny red insects came spilling out onto her face, into her hair, down the cracks between her dress and her flesh, thousands of tiny legs wriggling in a bid for freedom. She kicked Pierce off of her, screamed, and scrambled backward, swiping at herself. She had to get them off, she had to get out of the car, she was going to die in here if she didn't get out—

She grabbed the door handle behind her and pulled. The door popped open and dumped her on the ground outside. Pierce came crawling across the seat toward her, and she tried to get up and move, to get away before she had to see his face, to see spiders digging into his eyes, flooding his nostrils, and pouring into his mouth to eat him from the inside out—but she was too tired from her all-night reading marathon, too winded from screaming, and moved too slowly. When his face emerged into the moonlight, she couldn't help but look.

He was a little sweaty and flustered, his face flush with interrupted arousal (and possibly alarm), but otherwise okay. The vein had vanished, leaving his waxy forehead plain and flat.

"What's wrong?" he said. He got out and knelt in front of her.

She blinked a few times, breathing hard. "I'm fine," she said, as much to herself as to him. "I'm okay."


THE
VANISHED
BIRDS
A NOVEL
SIMON
JIMENEZ

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2

THE FLUTE FROM MACAW

"Sneaky bastard," Nia muttered, as the flute slipped from her fingers and dropped into the travel bag. She stood up from her crouch with a smile even she did not understand, and palmed the sweat off her brow, her skin hot to the touch. Feverish. It was when the pressure began to bubble behind her eyes that she knew what was happening. She gave the quiet boy in the corner of the room a curt nod before she stumbled out of the hatch, gripping the causeway railing for support as she made her way to the ship's lav, the veins thick in her neck. She slammed the door shut behind her and doubled over the toilet. Counted out the beats in her head as she breathed, and with each breath returned the paste in her veins to liquid, and the drumbeat in her ears to a melted drone, until the Compression Panic left her system and she was able to smother it, this sudden sense of lost time.

She grimaced, ashamed that even after her many routes through the fold that time loss could still get to her; that it could still startle

her from behind and squeeze the air from her lungs. She cleared her throat and spat into the toilet. Flicked on the faucet. Splashed cold water on her neck. The walls were throbbing, but she told herself it would soon pass; that the ocean waves would settle and she would stand on solid ground again. This was known territory.

But for the rest of the afternoon the effects of the attack lingered. A ball of fingers in her gut as she moved through the ship, checking in on her crew while they prepared for the coming fold into the Pocket. She nodded through a joke Durat learned from the dhuba farmers the night before, and she made use of the railing as she walked herself across the ship to the medica, where Nurse was performing her diagnostic tests on the boy and delivering him any needed vaccinations.

The boy was perched on the edge of the metal table, with the flute gripped tight in his right hand while Nurse asked him simple questions about his health and history. He nodded, and shook his head, to the questions.

Yes. He felt fine.

No. He did not know where he was.

Yes. He had a name.

No. He could not write it.

No. He did not know how to write.

No.

No family.

Outside the medica, she and Nurse spoke in hushed tones about their newest crew member.

"So he understands Station Standard?" Nia asked.

"Yes," Nurse said as her eyes fixed on a bead of sweat trickling down her captain's temple, "but he seems unable to speak it. Or won't."

Nia thumbed away the sweat. "Won't?"

"Might be he just needs more time. He's been through a lot. Long

past of broken bones: legs, arms, even his ribs. Signs of repeated fractures, none of them caused by the crash. Too healed for that. Nothing is broken now, nothing physical, but mentally"—she glanced at him through the hatchway—"the only person who knows how bad it is, is him." She leaned against the wall, as if weighted by her own sense of empathy. "He might speak, he might not. Some trauma patients take a while to find their voice again."

"They found him months ago. How much more time does he need?"

"You know I can't answer that." Then, "Captain—Nia, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, self-conscious as she wiped her shirtsleeve against her damp face. The boy played a quick note on the flute. A piercing F. She winced.

"I would suggest not worrying about him too much," Nurse said. "There are facilities on Pelican. He'll be taken care of by people trained for such situations. And in the meantime, the flute should keep him occupied." She hummed. "It's funny. You have one just like it, don't you?"

"I did. I gave it to him," Nia lied. She was in no mood to explain the story of Kaeda. "I thought it'd be something he could play with."

Nurse smiled. Surprised. "That was kind of you," she said.

Kaeda's words rang in her ears: *You never struck me as the generous type*. "I can be kind," Nia said.

"I didn't say—"

"Captain," Durat interrupted over the intercom, "ship's ready to fold on your order."

"I'll be right there," she told him. Then, to Nurse, "Can you bring him back to his room when you're done?"

"Of course," she said. "And Nia. About tonight?" She made a subtle drinking gesture with her right hand.

Nia placed a hand on her stomach. "Later this week maybe."

Nurse chuckled. “Now I know you aren’t feeling all right.”

An understatement. It was like she had swallowed a bag of glass. With a hand on the wall railing, she made her way to the cockpit and sat down in the copilot’s chair, leaning back with eyes shut as Durat told her all the things he would do, and the people he would do, during their furlough on Pelican Station. “Did I tell you the joke the dhuba farmers told me?” he asked. “Yes,” she said. But he told her again anyway. One-armed man goes hunting with his nephew, it began. And as he explained to her for the second time that day why it was funny the nephew ended up in bed with the one-armed man’s wife, she rubbed one hand against the armrest of her chair, centering herself on the tactile sensation, and told herself that what happened in the boy’s room was just a trick of body chemistry, an explainable thing, and because it was explainable, it was something she could control. She told herself this, and many other stories, as she gave Durat the go-ahead, and he in turn gave Baylin confirmation to pull the rip cord, and the ship began to sandwich in on itself, like an infinitely folding sheet of paper, until they had left that reality and entered the next, where the sails billowed open in great swells and rocketed along the energetic waves of the Diffident Current.

Let me finish this contract and move on, Nia thought sickly as her boat rode the black waves. *Let this last leg be easy.*

But then, like a curse answered, the music began.

It started an hour after the fold. The crew was still shaking off the wobble effect, stretching out their jaws, vomiting in the lav, when they heard the thin, reedy notes of the boy’s flute coming in through the vents. It was fine in the beginning, most of the crew agreeing that the boy was very talented. The problem was the music didn’t stop. Their guest played regardless of the hour, and since the *Debby* was an old gossip of a ship and carried sounds from hatch to hatch with giddy talent, nowhere was safe.

The flute song had a life of its own. It seeped into the kitchen

from behind the cold-stasis container, and drifted across the counter into the common room, where it lay over the sofas and the shelf filled with old books. It fell through the grates to the engine room, following the tendrils of thick cable that ran straight to the heart of the ship, where the fold-core clicked its brassy gears, and where the engineer sat on the workbench, so distracted by the music that he stripped the wrong wire and killed the backlights under the causeway grating. It flumed through the c-path vents, into the cavernous cargo bay, around the twenty crates stuffed with purple seed and the veteran who sat cross-legged on a mat, scowling at the music as it kicked her out of her meditations. Leaked into the cockpit, where the pilot leaned back on his throne, his legs kicked up on the console, eyelid twitching as the music disrupted his dreams of sexual exploits. And it whispered through the cracks of the paneled walls, into the captain's quarters, where it found Nia sitting at her desk, staring up at the air around her as she listened to the music that haunted the *Debby*, wondering why the notes put her at ease, and how it could be that she did not hate it.

It was in the cargo bay where the music was loudest, and where the veteran was most tormented. The sounds of the *Debby* trended downward, collecting like sediment among the crates and catwalks of the bay; an ecosystem of sound, amplified by the concave walls and the cathedral ceiling. Footsteps and plate clatter and muffled causeway conversations—the white noise of ship life the veteran had no problem phasing out when she rolled out her mat, sat with pretzeled legs, and fell inward, unfurling in her mind the bloodied knots of her post-trauma. This was the hour in the day Sonja most looked forward to. The hour she could breathe. But with the white noise now came the music, and she soon found she could not phase it out, for unlike the step and clatter of the crew, the music had shape, and story. It had pain. It shattered the temple of peace she

made for herself in her meditations, and left behind only her agitations. She cursed. She stormed the causeways, proclaiming her displeasure as she banged plates in the kitchen when she was making her meals. She went further. When Nia got word that she'd kicked the boy's door one night to get him to stop, she confronted her in the cargo bay, interrupting her railing pull-ups with a single warning. "I'm only going to tell you once. Do not kick our guest's door again."

Sonja let go of the railing, her boots thudding onto the grating below. "I was trying to get some sleep."

"You have plugs. Use them."

"Plugs. I have plugs." Sonja slapped her towel over her shoulder, her face screwed up like she was about to let fly some choice words, before she saw Nia's humorless smile and checked herself, blunting her sharp tone. She was nothing if not respectful of hierarchy. "It's not just me, Captain," she said, looking away. "The others won't say it, but they're just as pissed as I am."

"None of them kicked his door."

"Someone will."

Nia knew she was right. The proof was in Durat's sleep-deprived eyes, and Baylin's skittered mind as he fumbled through his repairs of the rotting ship. When she met with Baylin to discuss his work for the week, she learned of all the tasks he had fallen behind on; the tertiary lav door that was still jammed and the fried sublights of the causeway. "And the Grav?" she muttered. "Please tell me you haven't forgotten about the Grav."

"I didn't forget," he said. "But it's not fixed."

Nia breathed through her nose. "I thought you said you'd fix it."

"I tried. But it's old—can only do so much. We'll need to buy a replacement when we get to Pelican."

"Will we be safe till then?"

The young man nodded, playing nervously with some small ob-

long tool in his gummed-up hands. "Worst that should happen is some light carbonation—zero-G bubbles popping up around the ship. Expect a few lunches to float off your plate, but that should be the extent of it." In a small voice, he added, "I hope."

She sighed. "Add it to the requisitions list."

"Yes, Captain."

Before she walked up the steps that led out of the engine room, she turned. Said, "You're the most important person on this ship. We don't fly if you don't."

He blushed. "I understand."

"So be honest: is the boy's music distracting you?"

He smiled confidently. "I've lived in loud places all my life," he said. "This is nothing."

But she saw the truth behind his words. The hesitation before the smile. She climbed the steps with a sigh, knowing something would have to be done about the music, and that it would have to be done soon.

But not yet.

She was still listening.

The music played while she made him his meals. Before they left Umbai-V, Kaeda had told her the boy liked sweet things, so she served him a bowl of sweet rice for breakfast, and flavored nutrient porridge with zucar for lunch. Dinner was reconstituted vegetables and vat-meat slices, with a candied fruit for dessert. Three times a day she brought him his meal, and would lean against the wall and observe him as he ate his food one-handed, his free hand gripping the flute. They wouldn't speak during these meals, or make eye contact, and when he was done eating, she would gather his plates and slot them into the kitchen wash like giant coins while from the vent above her head she would hear the opening notes to his song. The terrible, insistent beauty of it.

The music was her constant companion. It was there when she

exercised with Sonja, or chatted with Durat in the cockpit, or read old books in her quarters. Sometimes she would stop what she was doing and just listen. Would allow the music to seep into the folds of her and bring forth thoughts of Kaeda. Would relive the midnight memories of sweat on skin, and the taste of his mouth sweetened by a lifetime of dhuba—memories that were paired with the dark suspicion that he had returned the flute to her as an insult.

No one knew about their affair, not even Nurse, who prided herself on being the captain's closest confidante. During their clandestine drinking session near the end of the week, when the lights were off and they were the last two women awake within millions of kilometers, sipping bourbon from tin cups and playing a few hands of Tropic Shuffle by the light of Nia's desk lamp, Nia made no mention of Kaeda. She let Nurse lead the conversation.

"I'll deal," Nurse said, shuffling the cards.

The games were played in quiet as Nia worked through troubling thoughts. And though Nia knew all of Nurse's obvious tells—the way she rubbed the material of her sari between finger and thumb when she had a good hand—that night she was too distracted to use this knowledge to her advantage, surprising them both as she lost each of the rounds. "You've lost your edge," Nurse said as she poured herself a winner's cup.

Nia smiled weakly. "Just giving an old woman her due handicap."

"How kind you are. Another round then." She gave Nia the warning look. "*Without* help."

After the last hand was dealt and Nia had lost for good, she swallowed the rest of her bourbon, held the glass to her lips, and said, "You're staring at me."

"You have a face worth staring at," Nurse said.

Nia smiled. "Say what it is you want to say."

"Even if it's the obvious?"

"I could use obvious right now."

"Something has to be done about the music," Nurse said. "We all know this." She slid the cards back into the box. "There are compassionate ways of putting a stop to it. The boy may not be able to speak, but he understands us well enough. We can set up certain times in the day that he's allowed to play, decide areas in the ship where the sounds don't travel so far. But I know this has already occurred to you." She tossed the box of cards onto the desk and looked into Nia's eyes. "You're stalling."

"You're right," Nia said.

"So she admits it," Nurse said playfully, "but she doesn't say why."

"The why is . . . difficult." Nia was about to pour herself another glass, but stopped as soon as she touched the bottle. "I realized something recently."

"What did you realize?"

"I'd forgotten what day my sister had died." Nia smiled, embarrassed, but Nurse was attentive, and nodded for her to continue. "Something I should remember, right? I checked once, years ago. Saw the day and date on the Feed. Thought I'd carry that number with me till the end . . . but I just let myself forget." She gazed into the lamplight, the burn of bulb on her retina, the echo of a young woman's shout as she begged Nia not to leave. A little sister who grew up without her; an entire life, spent and emptied, while Nia whittled away the years in the Pocket, running as far as she could from home. The day she learned her sister had died decades her senior was the first time she experienced Compression Panic. She thought that day would stick to her heart like a tumor. But somehow it receded, became just another shadow in the attic. One among many. She sighed. "I've let myself forget a lot of things."

"Like what?" Nurse asked.

Like the flute, she wanted to say, but the moment was over, and

her heart's door shut without ceremony. "I'm sorry," she said with an awkward smile. "I don't know where that came from." When Nurse reached out to touch her hand, she pulled away. "I think I'm going to call it for the night."

At the hatch, Nurse stopped the door from closing with her hand.

"Please," she said. "For my sake, if not yours. Take it easy on yourself."

"I will," Nia promised. "And congratulations on winning the game."

"I don't think my wins tonight count." Nurse walked down the dark causeway, back to her hatch, a hand raised in good night. "Save your congratulations for when I earn it."

Nia returned to her desk, rubbing the bourbon throb from her brain as she flicked on the lamp. She opened a fresh notebook, in the mood to write. During their last voyage to Pelican Station, she struck up a conversation with a historian in one of the greenery pubs on Schreiberi Wing, who with wild red eyes taught her the craft of the haiku, claiming such art would open her senses and make her more receptive to the spirit channels that were woven into the station transmission signals by beings they could not see. Now there were journals on her desk filled with practice poems, some better than others, and most, in her opinion, terrible. But regardless of skill or spirit channel, she'd discovered that she liked writing the damn things. The words helped her organize the hurricane. And so, that night, she put pencil to paper, and wrote:

The flute from Macaw,
Cheaply made and out of tune,
~~Was a terrible~~
~~Was without~~
Had no

She tore the sheet from the notebook, ripped it up into many pieces. Dropped the confetti into the wastebasket. She had started a new piece when she noticed in her periphery the shreds of paper rise up, and hover over the rim, suspended in air. They twirled in the lamplight like sprites.

For a moment she feared the haunting of old ghosts before she remembered the malfunctioning Grav that Baylin had yet to fix. With a sigh she waited for the bubble to pass, and when the shreds of paper drifted back down into the basket, where they were meant to be, she undressed and slipped into bed, the writing mood gone. She lay staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, no closer to sleep than she had been at the desk, her legs so restless they could've gotten up on their own and walked out the hatch had she let them. Like she had with the panic attack, she told herself the feeling would pass, that it was just the alcohol, and that, as with all her nights, it was just a matter of waiting it out. But it didn't pass. She lay with her fists curled tight against her eyes, pressing against the boil of troubled thoughts in her head, the what-ifs and should've-beens, all the bad things she was made of, until she heard from the vents the notes of the boy's music.

They were soft, the notes; barely audible, but there. She didn't know the song, but she knew the feeling. Took comfort that there was at least one other person who was kept awake by the past. Her shoulders relaxed. Her fists bloomed into open palms, and the blood returned to her knuckles. From the back of her throat, she murmured along with his melody. Their voices in a tentative dance as she hummed her way into a calm and dreamless sleep.

For a week the boy played his flute.

And then someone broke it.

It was the morning of the eighth day in the Pocket. A distant, omnipresent rattle in the *Debby*'s bones as it sailed the rapids of the Dif-

fident Current. With his breakfast balanced in the crook of her arm, Nia opened the boy's hatch, her eyes widening when she found him sitting on the floor by the cot, with the two broken halves of the flute laid out before him. She put the bowl of sweet rice down on the table and crouched at his side. "Did you break it?" she asked.

He limply shook his head.

"It's okay if you did. It's okay if it was an accident."

But still he shook his head.

"Did you find it like this?"

He nodded.

Nia silently gathered up the flute halves and gave him a curt gesture to eat. As he lamely played with his spoon, she walked across the corridor, and let the anger fly as she punched the ship-wide channel.

"Everyone to the kitchen. Now."

They knew better than to delay. In five minutes, her crew filed into the communal seating area, trading confused murmurs. The confusion was cut to the quick when she tossed the broken flute onto the table, the pieces skittering.

"Who did this?" she asked.

Bodies stiffened. They traded suspicious looks as they decided the likelihood of who was to blame, a silent play of one act that ended with all the actors pointing at Sonja. The veteran let out a harsh laugh. "Yeah, I get it. I do. But this one wasn't me."

"Of course it was you," Durat said. "You've been threatening to break it ever since we folded."

"Fuck off. It was a joke." There was a rare panic in her voice as suspicions sharpened on her—if there was anything Sonja could not abide, it was someone thinking she had broken the captain's rule. To Nia, she conceded, "I hated the music. You knew that. Everyone knew that. But I knew it was the only thing the cracked kid had." She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. "I'm not a damn

monster."

"'I'm not a monster'—fantastic defense."

Sonja glared at Durat.

"I can't even imagine doing something like that," Baylin said, his legs jouncing under the table. "Not like I'd have the time to go and break his flute; like you said, Captain, I'm the busiest person on the ship—"

Durat rolled his eyes.

"Unlike others," he continued, staring pointedly at Durat, "who do nothing but play games in the cockpit."

"Dexterity exercises," Durat said. "They're dexterity exercises." His grin wavered. He patted his hands on the table. "Regardless. Captain. I'm not sure why this is an issue. I doubt there's anyone here who wasn't at least a little bothered by the noise. Maybe we should just let it go?"

She slammed her palm on the table; the flute halves jumped.

"My ship," she said, her eyes as cold as moons. "Nothing happens on my ship without my say-so. You disrespect our passenger, you disrespect me."

Durat lowered his head, cowed.

Nurse, who had up until that point been leaning on the wall, listening, said, "The captain's right. Someone acted way out of line. There's no disputing the point. But"—her arms uncrossed, then recrossed—"the fact of the matter is it happened. The flute's broken. This minor inquisition isn't going to reverse that."

"'Minor inquisition'?" Nia bared her teeth. "You think I'm being unreasonable."

"Of course not," Nurse said. She brushed a lock of gray hair from her eyes. "All I am saying is that you have made your point. Unless you plan on jettisoning the culprit out the airlock for a moment of stupidity, I think Durat's right. We should move on."

The two women stared at each other.

"I'd like to speak to you alone," Nia said.

The crew scattered. Within seconds, only Nia and Nurse were in the dining area, staring at each other from across the table, their faces half-lit by the bulbs that hung above the counter. Nurse put on a brave face, defiant even, but Nia could see she was anxious; how one hand rubbed the hem of her red sari as if to furrow a hole through the fabric.

"Did you do it?" Nia asked.

"Yes," Nurse said.

Nia smiled, not believing any of this. "Why?"

"Does it matter?"

"I wouldn't have asked if it didn't."

"We have four months till we reach Pelican Station," Nurse said. She spoke quickly. It was obvious the words were rehearsed beforehand. "Four months stuck in this ship, together. I've served in many ships, I've seen crews fall apart. You know what I've seen. That I know what can happen when . . . it's never because of any one thing, but an accumulation of tiny cuts. I felt that the boy's flute was a cut. So I did my job and I healed it."

"You broke it."

"For the better, Nia."

"Captain," she corrected, "and what's for the better is not for you to decide. That's my job." She stepped toward her. "I'm docking your paycheck by ten percent."

Nurse scoffed. "That seems extreme. What I did was in the best interest of the crew and endangered no one."

"Ten percent."

Nurse opened her mouth.

Closed it.

"Yes, Captain," she replied with a tight smile, then walked out of the kitchen.

Nia let out a breath. She rolled her neck, her bowstrung muscles.

She scooped up the cracked halves of the flute and tucked them into the drawer of her bedroom desk, believing it was better the boy did not see it again, not like this.

His bowl of sweet rice was empty when she returned. He was scraping the spoon against the bottom of the bowl, scooping whatever grains still remained. She was never good with children. Comforting them was a skill she never had any cause to practice. So with an awkward lightness, she patted him on the shoulder, and hoped that would suffice.

The spoon stopped. He went still at her touch.

She almost admired his disquieting ability to remain silent. Even as he cried.

For three days, there was no music. The hatch to the guest quarters remained shut. On strict orders, no one but Nia was to enter the room—she made it clear that should they disobey, they would be discharged upon arrival at Pelican. The crew complied; they had no more business with their guest, their moods having lightened considerably with the newfound silence.

For those three days, only Nia was privy to the boy's slow retreat into the corner of the room. She sat with him when she had the chance, would read to herself while he lay in bed not moving but for the soft rise of his breath. And every lights-on, as she blinked herself awake, and fixed his breakfast, she asked herself what she was doing, what difference she was making with her company; asked herself why she cared. As angry as she was with Nurse, she knew the woman was right—once they arrived at Pelican, the boy would no longer be their problem. All she had to do was keep him eating, keep him clean. There was no need to attempt these clumsy jabs at comfort. But still she would find herself coming back to his room, pulled there as if by the force of empathy, or something else, a responsibility, maybe; oblivious that every now and then the boy would look

up from under his blanket, like a small animal from its burrow, to make sure that she was still there.

On the fourth day, his room was empty.

Nia gripped the frame of the hatchway, but she stopped herself before she conjured up worst-case scenarios. She searched the ship, starting with the most dangerous areas first, the engine room and the cargo bay, but neither Baylin nor Sonja had seen him. Nurse hadn't seen him either in the medica. She offered to help Nia look for the missing child, but she declined, the betrayal still too fresh. "Thank you," she said, backing out of the medica, "but it's fine. I'll find him."

And she did. With a breath of relief she discovered him in the cockpit, seated in the pilot's chair, dressed in one of the field outfits that Kaeda had packed for him—a magma-red, one-shouldered robe that cut across his torso diagonally, cinched at the waist with a black rope belt, dropping into a skirt that touched the tops of his small knees. His hands were enmeshed in the cat's cradle of taut strings that were the *Debby*'s controls, while Durat stood behind him, instructing him on which string to pull for the back thrusters. In truth the boy piloted nothing, the cat's cradle locked in autopilot, the strings dead to his touch, but his eyes nevertheless focused straight ahead at the shuttered viewport as he listened to Durat's instructions and pretended that in each movement of his agile fingers he commanded the fate of a ship and her crew. Their lessons ended at the sound of Nia's cough. Durat turned, saw her standing in the hatchway. "Captain," he said with a grin.

The spell was broken. The boy returned to himself. He pulled his hands from the well of the ship's controls and slipped off the seat. His sandaled feet slapped across the floor as he went to stand by Nia's side, staring up at her.

"I found him in here," Durat said. "Kid almost gave me a heart attack."

Nia cracked a smile. "You taught him to fly?"

"The cursory basics. Years to go till he's good as me."

"Maybe not. Maybe I just found myself a new pilot." She grinned, the whole situation strange but welcome. She looked down at the boy. "Are you available for hire?"

The boy shrugged.

Her ex-pilot dropped his head. "And so I die the quiet death of obsolescence."

"Doesn't seem that quiet," Nia said, chuckling. "I didn't mean to interrupt. You two can keep playing if you want."

"This is no game."

"Right. Dexterity exercises."

She turned to go, but she got no farther than the steps to the causeway when she heard the sound of the boy's sandals in pursuit. He stood there, looking up at her again with that penetrating gaze, like it was a matter of course that he would follow her.

"I wouldn't recommend coming with," she said. "My routine isn't as exciting as flying through the Pocket. Stay here and play." She led him back into the cockpit and sat him in the chair. "Keep playing with him," she said to Durat firmly.

She was halfway down the steps when the sandals slapped up behind her.

"Sorry, Captain." At the head of the steps, Durat smiled in a way that suggested he wasn't sorry at all. "Unless we strap the kid down, I think you're stuck with him."

"I'm realizing this," she muttered.

So it was that she had a partner for the day. Their first stop was the back of the ship, where Sonja was performing her post-workout ritual of disassembling her gauss rifle and polishing the pieces over a sheet of tarp. While Nia asked her if she had updated their food inventory like she'd asked her to do days ago, Sonja raised her eyebrows as the boy appeared from behind her captain's back and

wandered the cathedral hollow of the cargo bay like a cat, pawing at everything: the netting on the wall, the thick black straps that lashed the containers of seed to the grated floor, the ammo clip to her rifle—she slapped his hand away. He looked at her, affronted. "I'll do inventory today," she said, unnerved. "Just get him out of here."

On their way to the common room, they ran into Nurse, who was headed in the opposite direction. Nurse brightened with what seemed to be genuine delight at the boy's presence, opened her mouth to say something about this, but Nia continued on without stopping, the boy close on her heels. In the common room they moved the couches against the paneled walls, rolled up the rug, and brought it to the catwalk. They draped the rug over the railing and beat the dust with brooms while, below them, Sonja sneezed. It would've been quicker to run the rug through the vac, but Nia thought the boy might enjoy the activity, and took pleasure in it herself, reminding her as it did of home; how her sister would watch the clouds of dust bloom from the fabric as Nia beat their mother's rugs on the balcony railing, the City Planet skyline their view, the little girl delighted by how the particles glimmered against the chemical orange light of the false sun. Unlike her sister, the boy paid no attention to the play of dust. As he was with the flute, every ounce of his focus was directed on the task at hand. A single-mindedness that Nia found endearing.

After they unfurled the rug on the common-room floor, she gave him a tablet and stylus, and let him doodle while she read one of the old books in the shelf, the sweeping epics from Old Earth her mother once loved. While on the page the warrior queen Faydra Faneuil fought for the freedom of her principality, Nia's gaze drifted above the brim of the book, and she watched for a time as the boy drew long, spiraling lines on the tablet's screen—lines that didn't cohere into any particular picture or shape, but spiraled again and again,

each intersecting with itself until the screen was one large black coil.

The boy stopped drawing when the lamp on the coffee table rose from its platform. The lamp held its position in midair, as if it had got up on its own, only to forget where it had wanted to go. He looked to Nia for an explanation. She told him that the ship was old and that there were parts that needed to be replaced. She got up and clasped the lamp's body with both hands and was about to remove it from the zero-G bubble when the boy stood up and gazed at his warped reflection in the lamp's brown, oblong body; the wide, dark eyes; the black hair that fell over his head in long, frizzy bangs. When he reached out and touched the reflection, the lamp dropped into Nia's hands, safe.

For dinner, she ripped open a foil bag of jerky and plumped the strips in the boil. She fanned them over a bowl of sweet rice and observed the way he ate, his deliberate movements, not one grain of rice dropped or left forgotten on his lips, the bowl polished clean by the end. His body so still and controlled he blended in with the furniture, nearly unnoticed by the crew that filtered in and out of the kitchen. Baylin didn't see the boy at all, giving Nia a polite "Captain" as he grabbed some protein noodles from the fridge, going on about leaking engine filters as he walked back out. When he was gone, Nia looked at the boy with a wry smile, impressed by his uncanny ability to disappear.

"You'll have to teach me how to do that," she said.

The boy held up his empty bowl. Looked around.

"It goes over here," she said, showing him the wash.

She waited outside the lav as he showered, and helped him dress for bed; a white sleeping shirt that swallowed most of his body, a hand-me-down from Durat, as the clothes Kaeda had packed were not suited to the cold nights aboard the ship. She leaned against the frame of his hatch as he lay in bed, his small body curling into itself under the thick woolen blanket. Despite herself, she smiled at the

sight.

"Sleep easy," she said.

His hand lifted up in a small wave as the nonessential lights switched off throughout the ship and brought them the night.

Weeks passed with the boy as her shadow, he stitching himself slowly each day to the soles of her feet. He helped her do loads of laundry, dropping them into the mouth of the vac, waiting ten minutes for the *ding!* and the clothes that smelled like steel flowers. He sat beside her as she played Tropic Shuffle with Durat and Sonja, studying her hand of cards, and with each game picking up the convoluted rules as they explained to him why certain birds beat others, and what the difference was between a gaggle and a flamboyance; why Sonja insisted that Durat keep his hands above the table at all times.

"Cheat once, always a cheater, apparently," Durat said bitterly.

During the afternoons he listened as Nia explained why there were handlebars running along the walls and ceiling. He listened to her stories in the common room, old contracts like the Roman treeplant they shipped across three systems, not realizing the treeplant was in its fruiting season, and was pollinating their ventilation system with neurotoxins, giving the whole crew a delirious and happy high for a few hours before they had enough wherewithal to grab the gas masks and move the treeplant into the sealed airlock. "We found Ponchi in the kitchen massaging rice into his face," she said, mushing her face in her hands in demonstration, which made him smile. He listened to the fun stories, for those were the only ones she shared. And when, one day, she and Durat brought him to the cockpit and placed the headset over his ears, he listened to the sounds of the Pocket, his eyes widening to the symphony of crackles and finger snaps. Nia studied his tranced expression, wondering what thoughts were going through his mind as he listened to the black

materials rush past the hull sensors of the *Debby*; and after that day, when she would sometimes find him in the cockpit in the early morning, asleep with the headset on, she would carry him back to bed, his arm limp and swaying, and would ask herself what it was that strange boys dream of.

But most mornings, he was awake, and waiting for her. In the fringe of lights-on, Nia would lie in her bed and listen while outside her hatch she heard the familiar slap of his sandals make their eager approach. She would smile and find it strange that she was smiling. She would get out of bed and dress, leisurely, her pants first, her tank top last, drawing out the moment when she would throw open the hatch, delighting in the fact that on the other side was a person who could not wait to see her. Sometimes during this morning ritual she would stop, and would think of Kaeda, standing at the edge of the purple-stalked field, staring up at the sky as he gripped the flute she had left behind, and she would feel shame as she remembered how good it felt each time she left him, a throb of dark satisfaction in her heart for every ounce of her he was left wanting. And though the relationship between her and the boy was different, the notion remained: he was sustained by her presence, and she knew it.

There were the rare days when she exploited this, when she told him she was busy and locked herself in her room to write her haikus or write nothing at all while she indulged in the youthful vanity of withholding. But there would come the hour when she saw herself from the outside, and knew that she was too old to be playing these games. She would go to find him—there, sitting at the kitchen counter, staring hard-eyed at some unknown memory in the corner of the room. Smiling at the sight of her. The cloudbreak, and a nod.

Yes.

Let's do something today.

She learned his mannerisms. How his right foot tucked itself behind his left leg when he ate, and how he picked at his nails when he

was nervous. How he tugged at his hair with impatience—hair that they had by that point sheared off, leaving an inch of black on top—and how, when he dropped a plate or bumped into her or messed up whatever small task she had assigned him, his shoulders would hunch as if braced for a blow. And in these moments, she would catch a glimpse of his past. A history of silence that existed long before the trauma of the wreckage. A learned pain.

On the third month and third day, after she had put the boy to bed, there was a knock on Nia's hatch. She knew who it was even before she opened it. The talk was a long time coming. "This is absurd," Nurse said, standing in the dark corridor, fuming. "Can we stop this now?"

For a while now they had been civil, their conversation in the causeways light and without meaning. They had made feints toward reconciliation, but they never made it past the awkwardness of casual conversation. Nia had been so preoccupied with the boy that it wasn't until now, seeing her friend standing outside the door, that she realized how much she missed Nurse, even though her pettier side still considered shutting the door in her face. She stepped aside and let the sari flit past her. There were four fingers left of the bourbon. She poured two cups and dropped the bottle in the wastebasket. "How've you been?" she asked.

Nurse laughed as she sat on the bed. "Lonely," she said.

They drank.

"We're almost out of Sonja's injections," Nurse said. "You'll want to add that to the requisitions list, unless you want her leg to fall off."

"Maybe we should let it," Nia said with a sigh. "Maybe then she'll stop kicking in all of my doors."

Nurse nodded. "Speaking of: when is Baylin going to fix the door to the tertiary lav?"

"He says he can't. Says the door needs to be replaced at Pelican, though part of me is convinced he doesn't know how."

"That curtain he set up . . . Every time I sit on the toilet, that's when the ventilation decides to restart and the curtain blows open and somehow Durat is always passing by just in time to see me." Nurse shook her head as Nia laughed. "Every time. It's humiliating."

"I'll fire him when we land. Him and Baylin. Sonja for good measure. We can start again with a fresh crew."

"Fresh crew. Fresh start. That's exciting."

They drank again. During the quiet that followed, Nurse played with her fingernails, which Nia could see were recently chewed, though she made no comment about it, knowing how sensitive she was on the matter. "But I didn't come here to talk to you about the door, or Sonja's medicine," Nurse said almost in a mutter. "I came here to say that I acted out of line. I recognize that."

Nia leaned forward. "Why did you do it?" she asked.

"I told you why. The flute was affecting crew morale, yet nothing was being done about it."

"I mean why did you break it? Why didn't you just tell him to stop? Isn't that what you suggested I do?"

Nurse hesitated. "I wasn't clearheaded that night," she said.

Nia knew what she was getting at. "A flashback?"

"Yes."

It had been five years since Nia found Nurse in the wreckage of a derelict in fringe space, and though the starved body had by then filled out, and the mouth remembered how to smile, and the mind rediscovered its wit, there were still the flashbacks of the time before, when the food had run out, and the meat was the bodies of the volunteers she'd served with. "I make no excuses for how I behaved," she said, "only an explanation: that at two in the morning, in the state of mind I was in, I felt there was no option but to break

the flute in half."

"I understand that," Nia said. "I do. Just so long as you understand that what you did was in direct violation of my command."

"With clarity," she said.

Nia nodded. "Okay then."

A third drink. There was something else on Nurse's mind; Nia could tell by the play of her hand on her sari. "He is a sweet child," she said. "And I'm glad that despite my best efforts, he's getting on well here"—she put her cup down on the nightstand—"but I'm worried about how much time you're spending with him."

Nia gave her a funny look while she drank. "He's a guest on our ship. I'm entertaining him."

"You know you can't keep him."

Nia put her cup down beside Nurse's. "No one said I was going to."

"No one needed to. It's obvious you've become attached."

"Why are you talking about this?"

"You know exactly why," she said. "The moment we reach Pelican Station, Umbai is going to take their cargo. That includes the boy. He trespassed on their property. They have first rights."

"He crash-landed. Intention counts for something."

"And they might let him go and that will be the end of it—but if it isn't, if there's something else going on, you won't see him again. You know this."

Nia held up her hands. "Then we all go on living our lives as happy and legal citizens of Allied Space."

But Nurse wasn't finished. "Even if they let him go, what then? Are you going to adopt him? Raise him on this ship and make this tin can his home?"

Nia's lip curled. "This tin can saved your life."

"I will never forget that, Nia." Nurse shook her head. "Never. Which is why," she continued, leaning forward, beseeching, "I'm

telling you now, in no uncertain terms, that this child is just that—a child. He's not your pet, he's not your plaything. He's a child who needs a home."

"This is a home," she said.

"It's a cargo ship. Barbet Class. Carries fifty tons and upwards of ten passengers. A mercenary's den. My savior. This ship is many things, Nia." Nurse grasped her hand. This time she did not let Nia pull away. "But it is not a home."

The trip was almost over. The end of the fourth month approached, and with it, an excitement that electrified the recycled air. For the last crew meal of the trip, Baylin pulled a trout from stasis and grilled the fillet on the crosshatched element until the skin blackened. He unzipped the belly with a knife, and served the fish whole on a platter, with stewed tomatoes, spicy gurcoli flowers, and fist-sized florets of sautéed cauliflower. The crew applauded. After reconstituted meat and vitamin pellets, everyone was ravenous for something substantive. Their eyes were close to tears as their tongues rediscovered taste.

Spirits were high. Durat and Sonja were at a cease-fire, the barbs they traded blunted by good-natured smiles, even when there was one last strawberry on the platter and the teeth came out. The boy sat between Nurse and Nia. He had no taste for the fish and ate the cauliflower with his sweet rice, his usual stillness not as guarded, his feet letting out a playful kick under the table. Nia served him more rice. She did not think about the coming days as she watched him eat, just listened to the sound of his thoughtful chewing, and the clink of the glasses around her as a third toast was made to a safe journey. It was a nice, uneventful meal, until the end, when Sonja had launched into one of her old war stories, a time she was hunkered in a diamond trench while green gunfire serrated the air, and her story was interrupted by the lights flickering above them, and

the trout's skeleton rising from the plate as if by fishing wire. Conversation stopped as they watched the fish fly up to the ceiling. Nia sighed, and asked Baylin how expensive a new Grav would be—but before Baylin could answer, the zero-G bubble expanded, and with it, a kick in the ship that threw it all up into the air, the last of the tomatoes, the cups of booze, the table itself, and, with a yelp, the crew; Baylin, Sonja, Durat, Nurse, the boy, and Nia, all of them floating off their chairs—with their chairs—Sonja cursing as they twirled, the tail of a fish smacking Durat in the face, Nurse fighting to keep her sari over her legs, none of them close enough to the walls or ceiling to gain purchase on the safety rails, struggling, red-faced, to reach a hard surface until, one by one, they stopped struggling, their attention caught by the sound of laughter, and they craned their heads and looked at the boy drifting in the center of the madness, his small body framed by a sea of floating bones and silverware as he clutched his sides that ached from hiccupping laughs, his joy so vicious it made Nia's heart leap, and she gazed up at him, until the gravity returned and they crashed to the floor.

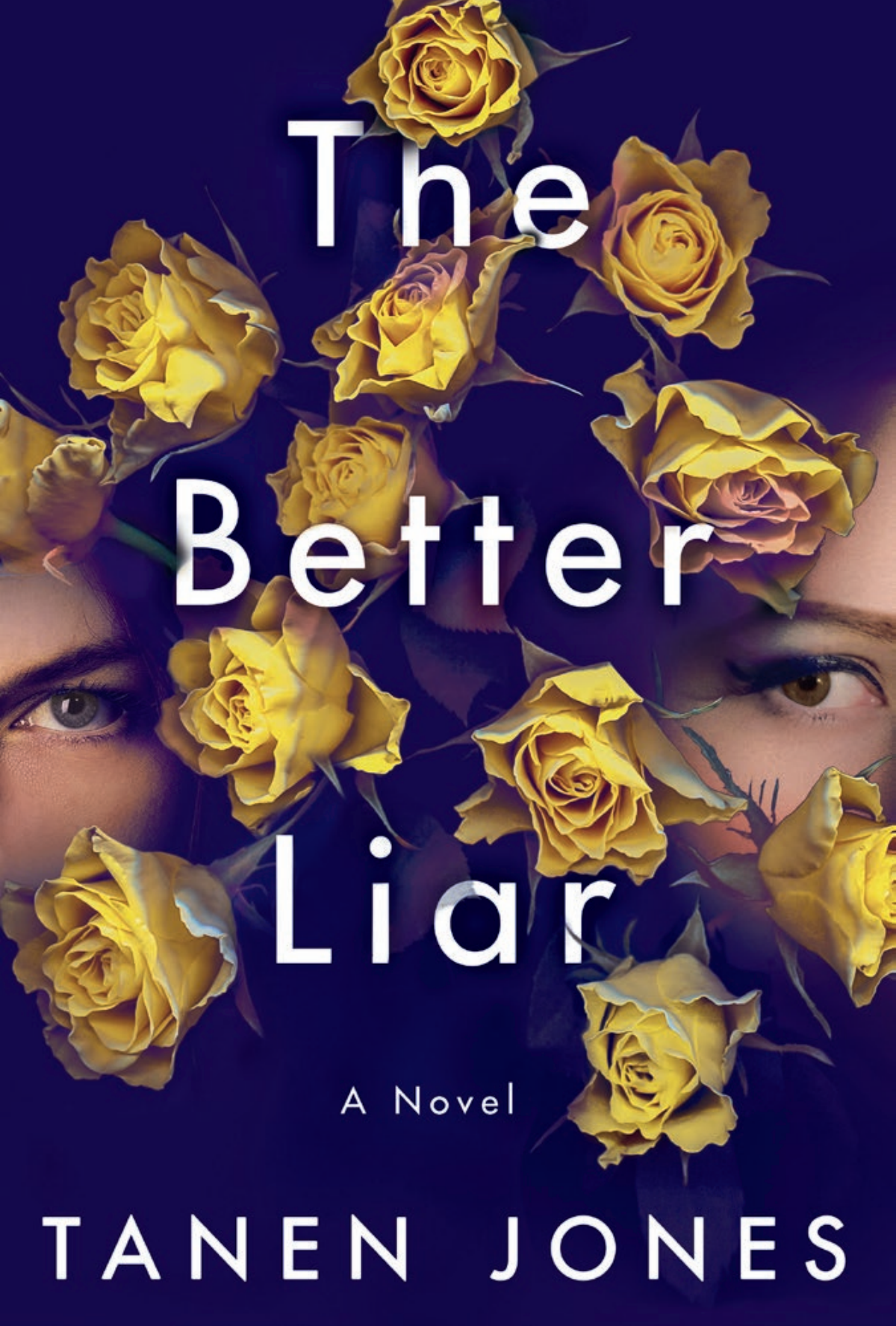
After they cleaned up the splattered food, the cracked plates, and upturned chairs, grinning at what had just happened; after the boy was showered and put to bed; after he sighed under his blanket, and she told him that she would see him in the morning; only after all of this did Nia return to her quarters and finish the haiku she had scrapped months ago.

The flute from Macaw,
Cheaply made and out of tune,
Still plays.

In a matter of days they would emerge from Pocket Space. To curb the nauseous effects of the unfolding, they stretched each morning

and night, ate non-acidic foods, and drank as much water as their stomachs would allow—things that wouldn't stop the nausea altogether, but would round it into bearable. As Nia and the boy pounded glass after glass of water and followed Sonja's exercise routines, she told him about Pelican Station. What the nexus station of Allied Space was like, and of the days she spent on its east wing, watching the half-light of the Perseus sun. And as he listened to her stories and together prepared for the coming arrival, ten million kilometers away, on the wings of their destination, the people of Pelican Station underwent preparations of their own for a celebration that was centuries in the making.

Nerves were frayed from the stress. Umbai representatives oversaw the construction of the fairgrounds in Izuni Park, and they coached the different culture groups performing in the Avenue Parade, going so far as to critique the act of a famous starlet, telling her to resist her usual flourishes and sing the notes on the page and no more. When she told them they could not hobble inspiration, they replaced her with a second-tier singer who was willing to follow their directions. In the schools, the teachers told their students the whys of the celebration: why it was important for them to dress well, and why they must have fun while also being respectful of the festival's significance. On the quicksilver screen, they traced for the students the lineage of this historic day, and led them back through the centuries, to the time before the province of stars. Back to when Earth was old, but not yet done, and Fumiko Nakajima was still dreaming up her stations.


The Better Liar
A Novel
TANEN JONES

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PROLOGUE

Robin

Like most of the dead, I want to be remembered.

The lucky dead leave ghosts of themselves everywhere: an impression on a mattress, a name in the mouth. My name has almost disappeared now.

Robin Voigt—my old boss said it this year, going through the tax folder for the fiscal year 2011–2012, preparing to throw it out. It was one in a list: Krista Ungert, Maria Villanueva, Robin Voigt. My face rose up briefly before him, half-remembered; I had reminded him of his daughter.

Robin Voigt, written in eight-point font underneath my name in the yearbook. Kevin Borrego's youngest daughter smeared her finger over my face. *Who's that?* she asked. *She's pretty.* Kevin said, *Oh, Robin. She was a couple years below me. I think she moved away.*

Robin, in script high on my ex-boyfriend's inner arm, so that I pressed into the ripe furry creases of his armpit, pocked with eczemic scars.

Flimsy, shitty ghosts. I'm fading.

The only people who can keep you alive are the ones who loved you. Not the ones who panted after you, bought you flowers, thumbed your nipples. I mean the ones who saw your disgusting

insides and loved you anyway. The people who really knew you.

I only had one person like that. Leslie, my sister.

My ghost wakes up with her in the morning, chews on her hair like I used to when we were children. It holds her hand at night. I'll never leave her. No one loved me more than Leslie. She loved me so much she sat my ghost up and breathed into it, made it walk around our home again, the way the living do. She bound herself to me a long time ago, but she won't say my name aloud anymore.

If I tell you how it happened, maybe you'll remember me as well.

Maybe you'll say my name to each other, a little chant, like a dirge.

1

Leslie

By the time I found her she was dead.

I groped for somewhere to sit down. The only place other than the bed, where the body lay, was a wooden dining-room chair half-buried under a pile of wrinkled clothes. It had a cushion hanging off the seat, patterned with cartoon bees, and as I moved to straighten it a cockroach, startled by the movement, hurried up the chair leg. I jerked my hand back and closed my eyes. Then I opened them again—helplessly.

I didn't want to look at the body. The body—Robin—Rachel. I'd never seen her as an adult, but as a teenager she'd been round-faced, milk-fed. Now she was so thin as to be impossible to look at. My vision unfocused itself when it encountered her ribs, visible through both the fabric of her RUNNIN' REBELS T-shirt and the sheet in which most of her body below the shoulders was tangled. Her hipbones, too, projected, cradling the vacant, starved abdomen.

A little vomit had dried in the corner of her mouth and on her tongue, the color of burnt things. She had been unconscious when she'd choked on it.

Iker was panicking. "Should I call the police?" he said, directing his gaze at the close yellow walls, the popcorn ceiling. "I'm really

sorry about this, I'm so sorry. I'll call the police. I'll call." He wore a white polo with the logo of the housing company on it. Crescent-shaped sweat stains gathered underneath his sagging pectoral muscles, like a pair of closed eyes. They twitched as he began digging in the pockets of his khaki pants for his cellphone.

"No," I said, trying to think fast. "No, I'll call. You go outside. I just want—" I swallowed. "I just want to be with her for a minute."

"Yeah," Iker said, wiping his upper lip. "Okay. Okay. I'll wait. Outside. I'll be . . ." He pointed. "I'll be right down there if you need me."

He went down the stairs into the living room below, taking his proprietor's key but leaving the door ajar. After a minute I could hear him shuffling on the front porch, audible through the mosquito screen on the open window.

She was still on the bed. The fact of her was as sweltering as the room.

In my imagination I reached for my phone. In another version, I didn't. I lived these two visions simultaneously for several long minutes, my hand twitching in the air above my purse, unable to choose between them.

If I called the police, then Robin would be dead—absolutely dead. Legally, governmentally dead. I would have to identify her, and arrange somehow to take her body back to Albuquerque to be buried, and have a funeral, and then everyone would know she was dead and it would be over.

I could contest, maybe—but contesting could take a year or more. I couldn't wait a year. If I didn't call the police, then she would still be dead, but—

I took her wallet off the dresser and looked at her ID. "Rachel Vreeland" stared out at me from the hypersaturated photograph. She'd been pretty as an adult, the pale skin I remembered from childhood turned slightly orange by the sun or the DMV's printer. *5'-09",* the text next to her face said. *Eyes: BRO*.

Her real name wasn't anywhere in the wallet, or anywhere in the rest of the room. She had a lot of stuff, but most of it was clothes, strewn across the floor and piled in the closet. I picked through the

items with pockets, careful of cockroaches, but turned up only old movie tickets and gas-station receipts. The walls were covered in movie posters and a corkboard with photographs of friends with red Solo cups, a scruffy orange cat, a long-lost boyfriend from whenever the last time was she was weighty enough to crush to his side while he held the camera out in front of them. The dresser drawers held dozens of bottles of disintegrating nail polish and depleted pans of eye shadow. At least fifty pairs of underwear, which I pushed aside with a clothes hanger, scraping the bottom of the drawer: nothing underneath.

I shook out each of her shoes next—cowboy boots, Toms, slip-on sneakers—turning the left and then the right upside down.

Something fell out of the right one. I'd been expecting Robin's real ID, or maybe a baggie, so the anticlimax startled me: a pair of pearl earrings, so light that they made barely any noise against the carpeted floor. For a moment I thought they must be insects, moths, alive inside Robin's shoes, and their brief bouncing trajectory across the floor was translated by my gaze as mad, frenzied flapping; then I blinked, and they resolved into dead objects.

It took me several seconds to realize why I was staring at them. When it came to me I snatched them up so quickly that my fingernails scraped the carpet. My mother's earrings. Five-pointed, like stars, each seed grasped by a minuscule gold claw. I hadn't seen them since I was a little girl. I suppose I thought they'd been buried with her, or my father had sold them. But here they were in Robin's cramped rented room in Las Vegas.

Had Daddy given them to her and never told me?

He wouldn't have done that. She didn't deserve them. I was the one who'd made his doctors' appointments, helped him swallow, taken him to the movies every Sunday. Robin had done nothing but call occasionally, after she turned sixteen and disappeared.

He hadn't given them to her. Probably she'd stolen them the night she left. She'd taken forty dollars out of my purse that night too.

I rubbed my thumb along the surface of the pearls, feeling several faint scratches on the curvature of one of the seeds, invisible to

the eye but evident to the touch. Pearls were easily scratched. My grandmother had taught us to polish her pearl jewelry with olive oil and a chamois cloth, pushing our cloth-covered fingernails into the crevices where each pearl was secured. But Robin was careless.

I closed my fingers around the earrings. The backings dug into my palm like children's teeth. If I didn't call the police, Robin Voigt could stay Rachel Vreeland. Rachel Vreeland could have a crappy City of Las Vegas burial, a heroin addict with no family, the person she had chosen to be when she was sixteen. It gave me a thick, sick pleasure to think about. I wanted her to be alone in the ground.

But it wouldn't matter. Either way, I couldn't get what I needed from her.

She would have loved that.

I had been in the room with her body for almost five minutes now. The pacing on the porch had stopped; Iker was considering whether to come back upstairs for me.

There was a series of faint rusty creaks as someone else came up the second set of stairs, which clung to siding on the rear of the house, allowing access to the upper floor from the backyard. Whoever had come in went into the second bedroom and slammed the door.

Her roommate. Yes. Iker had said there was another tenant.

I heard the muffled noises of quick movement from the second bedroom. The roommate could come into the hall at any moment and see me—see Robin's body—wonder where the police were, who I was, why Iker hadn't called—

The front door opened into the house, and Iker's voice came floating up the inner stairs. "Miss, um . . . Leslie? Did you . . . Leslie . . . ?"

I didn't reach for my phone. I slipped the earrings into my purse and walked quickly toward the back door. I was out before anyone saw me, making as little sound as I could manage on the metal stairs.

At the noise of the ignition, Iker ran back out onto the front porch, waving his arm at me to stop. He shouted something after me, something I couldn't hear as I drove away.

2

Leslie

I glanced in the rearview mirror again. The same blue sedan kept pace with me until I got on the freeway, then disappeared into the crush of cars heading into the city for Saturday night. That wasn't Iker, I told myself. He drove a different car. A black one.

Gradually my ears picked up a dull buzzing noise. Coins rattling in the cup holder. No—my phone ringing. I fished it out of my purse. Two missed calls. Iker was trying again. The screen lit up as he left a message.

Why had I left? I'd run out of there as if I'd killed her myself. Stupid—stupid—

It was the earrings. I drew in a breath and felt blindly around the car for them, trying to keep my eyes on the road. They weren't in my purse. Had I dropped them? At last I thought to pat myself down and found that I was wearing them. I didn't remember putting them in my ears.

She'd just stuffed them in her shoe. I couldn't understand why it upset me so much. I hadn't even thought about these earrings in at least fifteen years. But the idea that Robin had helped herself to my mother's jewelry box on her way out—and hadn't even taken care of them—

I touched the scratch again, compulsively, like an itch. How could she have let it happen?

I was forced to stop at a light. The image of my sister's body floated up before me, more bone than flesh.

How could she have let it happen?

The exultation of my escape began to leach out of me. All the way into the city that morning I'd felt myself pushed forward as if on a wave. I'd never driven so far alone before. The highways between New Mexico and Nevada were dwarfed periodically by mesas, and the traffic was so infrequent that the cars resembled a thin rushing stream between the lowering rocks. The whole way here I'd been thinking to myself: I'll talk to her—I'll explain—and then everything will be all right—

I pulled off the freeway at the next exit and turned into the first open parking lot I saw. Three cars took up the only spots shaded by the single tree. The sun hung just past the visor, turning the dust on the windshield opaque, so that I could barely see beyond the confines of the car. The illusion of privacy gave me a little comfort, and I picked up the phone to call Iker back.

My hands shook. I tried to press the home button, but my fingers were stiff from gripping the steering wheel so tightly. I fumbled and dropped the phone into my lap.

I clenched my teeth and let the air escape in a hiss. Maybe it was hunger. The last time I'd eaten was breakfast. It was just past five now.

Past the windshield I could make out the sign on the building I'd parked in front of. GEORGE'S. Some kind of steakhouse. The building wore a badly constructed stone façade, like a Macaroni Grill, and all the blinds were drawn, but the outer doors stood open.

The bottoms of my shoes warmed as I crossed the parking lot into the stuffy little vestibule and pushed through the inner set of doors. It was cooler inside, with a large exposed air vent near the ceiling whuffing away; despite that industrial fixture, the rest of the restaurant was outfitted like a midcentury men's club, with dark wood paneling and heavy curtains flanking each window. At the edges of the room were large plush booths with gold hooks for

coats and hats; the rest of the dining room was taken up by free-standing tables set with white tablecloths and upended water glasses. No one was in the restaurant, not even any workers; except for the air vent, I was the only thing breathing.

I went up to the host stand, feeling underdressed in my slacks and blouse. "Hello?" I said. "Are you open?"

There was a clanking noise from the kitchen, and a rat-mustached teenager leaned out from between the swinging doors, his head suspended briefly midair. "One second."

I edged behind the host stand and took a menu. It was expensive to eat here. Vegas prices. Ordinarily I wouldn't. The red meat. But my hands wouldn't stop shaking; the menu fluttered as I held it. Didn't they say you should eat protein if you felt faint?

The teenager returned and crept around me to reach the wrapped silverware. "Just one?"

"Yes," I said, trying to fit the menu back into its stack and knocking several others to the floor. The kid scrambled to pick them up for me. "A steak. A porterhouse. And a glass of wine. No—I have to drive. Water."

"Do you want it to go?" His forehead wrinkled.

"No." I gripped the edge of the host stand. "I want to sit down."

"Okay—uh . . ." He led me to a booth and leaned across one of the seats to open the blinds for me. I blinked as the late-afternoon light hit the varnished table. "We're still firing up the grill, so it'll be a half a minute."

I nodded. He went away, his too-large oxford shirt hanging off his shoulders. I sat down and put my head in my hands.

If I had shown up even a day earlier, she would have been alive.

A different oxford shirt appeared in my peripheral vision. "One glass of water. I'm Sherrod, I'll be your server today. Can I get you anything else to drink?"

My gaze drifted to the window. Outside, a man in the parking lot got out of his SUV and went around to its rear door, where he lifted out a little white boxer puppy, which he set on the asphalt next to a water bowl. He filled the bowl from a small water bottle and squatted down next to the dog as it drank, stroking its ears.

"Ma'am?"

I jerked to face him, spilling water. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'll get it." He lifted my glass and mopped the dripping table with the rag he carried at his side. "Can I get you anything else? Your order should be out shortly."

"No. Thank you."

When I looked up again, the waiter was gone.

It had taken me two months to track Robin down. The last number I'd had for her had been picked up by someone named Andre, who said he thought Robin had moved to Las Vegas but he wasn't sure, and if I found her to tell her to go fuck herself. I'd searched *Robin Voigt* as well as the fake name she'd been using to avoid her creditors, but found nothing. At last someone had left a message on my father's answering machine regarding a new credit card registered to my father's address. The name on the card was Rachel Vreeland. I searched this new name and found an address. The property was part of the SweetHomes rental company. Iker picked up when I called. *I need to find my sister,* I'd told him. *Rachel Vreeland. Our father left her a lot of money in his will.* Iker had said, *Yes, yes, Ms. Vreeland. Yes, in Henderson.*

If I told her I was coming she would only leave town. I said, *Can you come with me to her house to wait for her tomorrow? I can't get her on the phone. I think something might be wrong.*

My brain skipped ahead to the body on the bed, the smell of the hot little room.

"All right, here we go." Sherrod had returned. He set the plate in front of me.

"Thank you," I said to his back.

The steak lay in front of me, bleeding juice onto the ceramic. Someone had arranged it so that it lay artfully over the bed of potatoes and asparagus. A bloody runnel cut its way through the mashed potatoes, pooling on the rim of the plate.

I picked up my knife and fork. It took me several tries to cut a sliver from the edge of the steak, but at the first bite my hands stopped shaking. I'd been too nervous to eat lunch. Thinking I was going to see Robin for the first time in a decade. I'd practiced talking

to her: *Daddy died a few months ago. He left us both some money, but you have to come home to do the paperwork.*

Why didn't you tell me? I had imagined her saying, or maybe *How much?*

I tried to find you. It took me forever.

She was good at reading faces, especially mine. Eerie, with an animal quickness. *You weren't going to tell me at all. You're only here because you need something from me. What do you need, Leslie?*

I'd spun through conversation after conversation in my mind, trying to keep her at bay.

My purse shuddered as my phone buzzed in the outer pocket. I felt my shoulders tighten, but it was my real phone, not the prepaid I'd used to call Iker. I pulled the phone out and hesitated, my finger hovering over the caller ID. Dave.

If I rejected the call he would know I'd sent him to voicemail.

I didn't do anything. I just sat there, holding the phone, until the ringing stopped. Then I put it back in my purse.

The man with the dog was gone, giving me an unobstructed view of the Target across the street. Farther away, billboards advertising tooth-whitening gels and children's hospitals flanked the road toward the city. Las Vegas had no firm vanishing point; the heat created a kind of mirage that forced my eyes to focus and refocus. A visual vacuum. I imagined myself driving past the city, toward the Amargosas, reduced to a shimmer in the late-afternoon light.

I imagined myself not going home at all.

"No rush," Sherrod said, dropping the bill beside my plate. The steak was gone; I'd been holding the knife loosely in one hand for several minutes now, looking out the window.

I put the knife down and paid the bill.

I should go back to Henderson, I thought as I pushed open the doors and went out into the blinding day. I should get Robin's body.

But the skyline sucked me toward it.

I could have gone anywhere.

I didn't, because there was someone sitting on my car.

3

Leslie

She was sitting with her ankles crossed, digging for something in the pocket of her oversized utility jacket. As I got closer to my car I saw she was only a kid, maybe twenty-two, with the twice-burned skin that true redheads get in the desert. There were patches of freckles scattered unevenly across her chest and on top of one visible shoulder, where her jacket had fallen to her elbow. She found a lighter in her pocket and lit a cigarette, closing her eyes and leaning back on one hand to inhale. From a distance her features had seemed too large for her face; closer, as her eyelids lifted, I saw that it was an effect of her makeup, which weighted her lower lashes, giving her a gentle, drooping quality. "He-ey," she said, taking the cigarette out of her mouth as I approached. "What's up?"

I stopped ten feet away. "That's my car."

She frowned and lifted one of her hands from the hood, checking underneath it as if she might have left a print. "Your car, huh?"

"Yes," I said. "I need to go, please. Can you . . ." I hesitated, in case she got angry.

She tilted her head; her bun was loose enough to tilt with her. Then her face cleared and she laughed. "Oh my gosh," she said, scrambling down the hood and brushing herself off. "I'm so sorry. I

didn't realize it was your car. I'm Mary," she added, extending a dusty hand. "I thought it was my boyfriend's car. You guys have the same one, I guess."

"Leslie," I said, shaking it quickly. She was as tall as I was, but fine-boned, with narrow shoulders and small hands, so that she seemed to take up less space than I did. "I'm just—I need to—" I headed for the driver's side, then stopped. "Can I have one of those?"

She'd stuck the cigarette back in her mouth. "One of these?" she asked through compressed lips, pointing at it.

I nodded. "I'll pay you for it." I groped inside my purse. There had been a quarter at the bottom earlier.

"Oh, you're fine," she said. She sounded like she was from Texas. "Don't worry about it. You need a light?"

"Yes. Please."

She dug in the box and handed me one, then held out her lighter.

I took it from her. It was one of the ones with the buttons. I pressed the button with my thumb, but the flame wouldn't catch. I tried another three times; on the third time I let out a noise of frustration, one that I hadn't been expecting to make, and so it came out with absolutely no modulation.

Mary flinched, and I rushed to say, "I'm sorry. Sorry. Sorry. I can't—"

She took the lighter from me. "It's okay. I'll do it. You all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. She lit the cigarette easily and handed it back to me with two delicate fingers. "Thank you." I sucked in smoke and tried not to cough. I had never smoked a cigarette before, but it seemed to calm other people.

She eyed me. "You really needed that, huh? Trying to quit?"

"I needed a drink more," I said, "but I have to drive."

"Aw, you could have one," she said. "My boyfriend comes here all the time—that's why I was sitting on his car—well, I thought it was his car. I passed by and saw it and I thought I'd surprise him." She ducked her head. "They make a real good martini here, if you're a gin drinker."

I shook my head. "I don't really drink much."

"Cheap date."

There was a pause. She didn't look like she was about to leave, and I wasn't finished with the cigarette. "Do you work around here?" I said, for lack of anything better.

"No, it's just on the way. I work over there." She tilted her cigarette in the direction of the city. The sun had dropped below the roofs of the buildings, sharping their outlines from behind so that now the skyline seemed only feet away, like the backdrop of a stage.

"Oh," I said. Mary squatted to stub her cigarette out on the pavement. "At a casino?"

"Sort of," she said, getting to her feet. "The restaurant attached to it. I serve a lot of lobster." She made a face. "I hate waiting tables, but I don't hate it the way the other girls hate it, so I feel like I should keep doing it, you know?" She glanced at me and I nodded.

"What would you rather be doing?" I asked after a moment.

"I want to move to LA," she said, dragging out the last syllable for comic effect. "I want to act. I've been saving up to move out there for forever. I want to have enough money that at least if I end up working in the service industry again, I'll be able to pick and choose a little, you know? Not worth it to move and make less than at the Strip. I'd feel like it was for nothing."

"I think you'll make it," I said, trying to be nice. "You look like an actress."

"Stop it," Mary said, grinning. She had rippling lines bracketing her mouth, which were invisible otherwise. "What do you do? Are you in the city to gamble?"

My laugh surprised me; it sounded hoarse. "I'm actually," I said, trying to compose myself, "I'm actually in the city to see my sister."

"Oh yeah?" Mary asked. "How's that going?"

"She's dead," I said, forcing back an idiotic, nervous smile. "She just died a few hours ago."

"Oh my gosh," Mary said. "I'm sorry. Wow."

"Yeah," I said. "I was just a couple hours too late. Isn't that crazy? And I really—I really needed to see her." I tried to take a drag, but it went up my nose and I teared up. "She owes me money."

Mary took this in. At last she said again, less kindly, "Oh, well, I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to explain all that. Thank you for giving me this," I added, holding up what was left of the cigarette. "That was really nice of you."

"Yeah, sure. Listen, I'm going to go text Paul and see where he's actually hanging out, but if you come by Letourneau's in the city tonight, flag me down and I'll sneak you a couple of shots."

"You mean come to where you work?"

"Yeah, off Harmon. It's pink, you can't miss it. Well, you can, but don't." She patted me familiarly on the arm.

"I can't," I said. "I have to . . ." I made an inarticulate gesture.

She watched my hands. "Well, if you end up dropping by," she said, and didn't finish.

I got into the car and started it. Something touched my leg, like a finger; when I looked down, I saw that it was the cigarette butt, which had fallen from my hand.


ALL THAT'S BRIGHT AND GONE
a novel
ELIZA NELLUMS

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Chapter One

I know my brother is dead. I'm not dumb like Hazel Merkowicz from up the street says.

Sometimes Mama just gets confused, is all.

Like every year on the feast of Saint Theodore, his birthday, Mama sets out an extra plate for Theo, with a candle on it instead of food, because I guess Theo isn't hungry. And Mama says, "Isn't this nice? It's like we're all together again."

I guess it's nice.

"Alfie? Uh, Alfie Scott?"

That man with the clipboard probably means me. I stand up. "C'mon, Teddy," I whisper. I cover my mouth with my hand, because Mama always tells me not to talk to Teddy out loud where strangers can hear me.

Teddy gets up when I do, walking on all fours behind me with his big head hanging down. We go over to the clipboard man, who is wearing pale-blue pajamas, and I say, "Here I am."

"Is it Alfie, sweetheart? Did I get that right?"

"It's *Aoife*," I say. *EE-fah*. I have to say it a lot. Grown-ups never get it right.

"Oh, okay. Eva. Why don't you come along with me and we'll go see the doc, okay?"

Teddy growls, but I pretend not to hear him. "Okay," I say.

We walk together down a white hallway that smells like bleach. "That's a real interesting name you've got," says the clipboard man. "The spelling of it, I mean."

"My mama's name is *Sha-VOHN*," I say. "It's spelled S-I-O-B-A—I mean, B-H-A-N."

"Wow, I guess you-all must be Irish, huh?"

"No," I say politely. "We're from Chicago."

The man stops at a white wooden door and knocks. "Come in," someone says from inside.

"Dr. Pearlman, this is Eva Scott," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder and guiding me in. "She's the little girl who was brought in from Westgate Mall."

"Oh yes. Eva. Hello," says Dr. Pearlman. She's a gray-haired lady with a big necklace of yellow glass. There's yellow beads hanging from her ears, too.

Teddy doesn't like her.

"It's with an *f*," I say quietly. "*Ee-fah*."

She looks down at her file. "What an unusual name," she says. "I've never seen it before!"

"It's after my grandmother," I say, because that's what Mama always says. "And my middle name is Joan because my birthday is on her special day." I like that Joan is my saint, because she was brave. Mama says Joan was a warrior and Aoife is a warrior's name, too, back in the old country.

"How lovely." Dr. Pearlman doesn't know it, but Teddy is biting her shoe. He's going to pull it right off her foot if she's not careful.

"How old are you, Ee-fah?"

"Six."

"That's great," she says.

I'm not really sure why it's great, but I nod anyway.

"Well, come on inside. Why don't we sit down over here?"

She was sitting behind a desk, but she gets up to walk over to another table and chairs that are my size, like they have at school. She sits in one of the chairs—I think it's going to topple over, but she's good at balancing on it—and I pull out the other one. Teddy tries to sit in the third chair, but he's fat, and he kind of splodges over the side.

"I think I have some play dough here," she says. "Would you like that?"

I nod. Mama doesn't like me to play with play dough because it makes a mess, but Dr. Pearlman doesn't have to know that.

She hands me a carton with a blue lid. My favorite color is red, but I can be a big girl, so I don't complain. I peel back the lid and stick my nose in, because I like how it smells like melted crayons. Then I dump it out on the table and start to make snakes. I always start by making snakes.

"Would you like to play too?" I ask, because Mama says you should be polite, even when there's not enough clay in one carton for two people to make a lot of snakes.

Dr. Pearlman picks off a little corner. I guess that's okay. She pinches it between her fingers and makes it into a little Frisbee.

"So Aoife, can you tell me about what happened this morning?" she asks. She says my name pretty close to right. I can hear the *f*.

Still, Teddy shakes his head no. He doesn't want me to say.

"I don't know," I say.

Dr. Pearlman sighs. I look down at my hands and flatten one of the snakes.

"Tell me about your mommy," she says.

I don't call her *Mommy*, I call her *Mama*. "Her name's Siobhan," I say. "She's trying to teach me cartwheels. But I can't do them yet."

"My mommy and I used to turn cartwheels too," says Dr. Pearlman, smiling.

I try to think of how to describe Mama. If she was an animal, she'd be a horse, because she's pretty and nice and has long hair.

If I could *pick* any animal, I'd be a bear for sure—as big as a house. But if I had to be the animal that is most like me, I'd probably be . . . maybe a squirrel? Or a chipmunk.

But I'd rather be a bear.

"She likes going to church a lot," I say. "And she's going to take me to see the fireworks for the Fourth of July, and I can't wait." We watched the Canada Day ones on TV, but these ones will be even better because we're going to see them *live and in person*. "Mama is the best."

"That sounds really fun!" says Dr. Pearlman. If she was an animal, she'd be one of those birds that deliver babies. She has skinny arms and a big head. "I bet your mommy is the best. But I guess she gets mad sometimes, too, right?"

"I guess," I say. "But not very often." She mostly gets mad at Mac, who she calls *an old cuss* when they are speaking. They are usually not speaking.

"Was your mommy angry this morning?" asks Dr. Pearlman.

"*Aoife, I want to talk to you about something important*," Mama said. But she never told me what it was.

"She wasn't mad," I say. "But she doesn't like it when I talk to Teddy. And I was talking to him."

"Who's Teddy?" Dr. Pearlman asks, looking around like she expects to see him. Which is dumb, because no one can see Teddy but me.

I motion to the chair where Teddy is sitting. "He's there," I say.

"Ahh." Dr. Pearlman nods wisely. "Hello, Teddy. I apologize, I didn't notice you there."

I giggle. Dr. Pearlman is funny. Mama never, ever talks to Teddy.

"You know, it's interesting, I notice in my papers here that you have a brother named Theodore," says Dr. Pearlman, motioning to the file in front of her. It's full of black boxes and squinty little letters. Even though I can read some things some of the time, I can't read the little words on those pages.

"Yeah," I say, nodding.

She reads a little further and frowns. I figure the papers are telling her Theo died. That's one of the things that makes Mama sad. She goes to visit him every other week, and sometimes I can tell she's been crying when she comes home. One time we went to visit Gramma Aoife, and I was excited, but when we got there it was just a big field full of rocks, so I'm glad I don't have to visit Theo with Mama.

"Did you call your brother Teddy too?" asks Dr. Pearlman, her voice softer now.

I don't know. I shrug. I don't really remember when my brother was around. "Mama always calls him Theo," I say. "But I call my Teddy that because he's a bear."

Right now Teddy is almost as big as the ceiling. That's why he doesn't fit in the chair so good.

I don't really miss Theo at all, because I have Teddy.

"I see," says Dr. Pearlman thoughtfully. "So, your mommy doesn't like it when you talk to Teddy?"

"She tells me not to do it," I say.

"Sometimes mommies have their own opinion about what is good behavior," says Dr. Pearlman.

I know what *opinion* means because Sister Mary Celeste, my teacher at Sacred Heart, told us. An opinion means, *what do you think*.

"It's rude to talk to people when other people can't see them," I explain. "But Mama broke the rule, and that's why she got in trouble."

Dr. Pearlman puts down the file. "She broke the rule?"

"Yeeeah," I say slowly. Teddy is watching me with his arms crossed. He's pouting. But this time he doesn't tell me not to say anything. "She was talking to Theo in the car. She was yelling."

"Your mommy was talking to your brother?"

"Yes. But Theo wasn't there," I say. Because he's *dead*.

Dr. Pearlman has made a heart out of her piece of play dough. "I bet that was scary for you, when your mommy was confused," she says.

"*Where is he, Aoife? What happened? What happened to him?*"

"She was yelling," I say. "She got in trouble because she wasn't using her indoor voice, and that makes people mad."

In school Sister Mary Celeste tells us to use our indoor voices, and I'm very good at remembering. In fact, I'm the best in the class because I don't like to yell. I like to whisper. But now it's summer, and I won't see Sister Mary Celeste again until the fall.

I start making my snakes into a dog. One snake, folded in half, becomes the front legs, and one becomes the back legs. Then a really fat one becomes the body. That's why it's good to start with snakes. You can build anything out of snakes.

"Sometimes Mama doesn't sleep so well, or she has bad dreams," I say, trying to make a head out of a lump. My fingers are turning blue, and it gets under my nails. I don't like that. "And sometimes she yells and stuff. My friend Hannah says she's scary and she won't come over to our house anymore."

Dr. Pearlman looks sad.

"Hannah wants to be a detective," I say. She's my best friend, even though she's already eight. She reads lots of books about

kids who solve crimes, and she's always finding us mysteries, too. She calls regular things like umbrellas or apples *clues*, and she says muddy tire tracks are *evidence*.

When I told Hannah I used to have a brother who died, she asked what killed him. I said I thought there was an accident.

"Maybe it wasn't *really* an accident," Hannah said, looking excited.

"*What happened? What happened to him?*" Mama said.

"Aoife, sometimes even really nice mommies get confused about things, and sometimes they need some help figuring out what's real," says Dr. Pearlman. "I bet there's times when you've been confused and needed someone to help you?"

I nod my head, because there's lots of times I'm confused. But that's why Teddy is here, to tell me what to do. He's really good at that.

"My friends and I here at the hospital want to help your mommy," Dr. Pearlman continues. "Does that sound okay to you?"

I don't know what she means, but I nod my head anyway because that's polite. I look down at my clay doggy. It doesn't look right. I bet Dr. Pearlman can't even tell if it's supposed to be a dog or a horse or a cat. I wish I was better with play dough, like Hannah is. I squish the doggy back into a lump of clay.

"I'm going to make a basket," I tell Dr. Pearlman.

"That sounds like a good idea," she says. She gets up from the table, and I work on making a little bowl out of clay, pushing my thumb in the middle to make the hole.

When Dr. Pearlman comes back, she's carrying a blue purse by the leather strap.

"That's my mama's purse," I say. I'm not supposed to touch Mama's purse without asking. "You shouldn't play with that."

"Well, your mommy said it was okay if I was very, very careful," Dr. Pearlman explains. "Because my friends and I are trying to help her, remember?"

Teddy thinks it would be fun to look in the purse, even though I know I'm not supposed to. But since Dr. Pearlman is opening the top of it anyway, I figure it can't hurt to look inside just once. "Okay."

There's not much in there. Just Mama's pill bottles that I'm not supposed to touch. Although sometimes Teddy likes to rattle them, and they make a lot of noise. That's fun.

Dr. Pearlman puts them to the side, though, and reaches into the bottom of the purse to dig around down there. She pulls out Mama's cell phone and her wallet.

"Do you recognize this phone?" she asks me.

Sure I do. Teddy loves Mama's phone, and sometimes Mama will give it to us to play with. "You can play games on there," I explain. "I like the one with the little candies."

"I like that one too," says Dr. Pearlman. "Do you know how to open the phone?" She shows me the home screen, where you put in the password.

"Yeah!" I say. I take the phone and show her how to slide the bottom so the password window comes up. "You put the code in here," I say, punching it in. 1113. Mama plus me plus Theo equals three. Or as Mama says, one for the Father, one for the Son, and one for the Holy Ghost.

The phone starts up, but Dr. Pearlman takes it back before I can open a game. "Thank you very much, Aoife," she says. "It's a big help to us that you know how to open up your mommy's phone. Your mommy is going to be very proud of you when I tell her how you helped us."

"What are you doing?" I want to know. "Are we going to play a game now?"

"I was hoping you could tell me about some of the people your mommy has in her phone," Dr. Pearlman explains. That doesn't sound like a very fun game to me. "The number we have in this file is disconnected. It would be a big help to your mommy if we could call someone she knows to help us take care of you. Can you tell me if your daddy is in this phone? Or your grandma, maybe?"

"My gramma's dead," I explain. "I don't have a daddy." That's what Mama always says. She says I'm like a Cabbage Patch doll, that she found me growing in a garden and took me home.

"I see," says Dr. Pearlman. "What about this person . . . 'Stephanie'? I see that your mommy called Stephanie this morning. Is that a member of your family?"

"Stephanie babysits for Hannah and me," I say. Stephanie comes almost every day in the summer. My mama and Hannah's mom split the money to pay her, even though Hannah told me once that really she could stay with her cousins and her mom is just doing it to help Mama.

"Ah. How about 'Mac' . . . do you know who Mac is?"

"That's Mama's special friend," I say, although I don't think they're friends right now.

Sometimes Mac is around a lot, but most of the time he's not. Sometimes he goes away for months and months, and Mama says *we're well clear of him this time*.

Dr. Pearlman keeps scrolling. "How about 'Donny'?"

"That's my uncle Donovan. He's nice."

"Oh? Is Donovan your mother's brother?"

I have to think about this. I think he is. I shrug and put my basket upside down on the table so it's a roof.

"Does he live nearby?"

I don't know where Uncle Donny lives. "He comes around a lot," I say. "But not so much lately."

"I'm going to give your uncle Donovan a call. How does that sound?"

"That sounds good," I say. I like Uncle Donny, and so does Teddy.

Dr. Pearlman stands with the phone pressed to her ear. I can hear it ringing. I'm bored of playing with play dough, and I want to play on the phone. "Can I have it back when you're done?" I ask.

Dr. Pearlman puts her finger on her lips. "Hello? Is this Donovan? Yes, hello, this is Dr. Louise Pearlman at Botsford Hospital. Do you know a Siobhan Scott?"

She stands up with the phone squished between her shoulder and her ear. "Aoife, do you think you can play here like a good girl for just a minute while I talk to your uncle?"

I shrug again. Sometimes when grown-ups ask if you can do something, they are really just telling you to do it. I don't think Dr. Pearlman is going to let me play with the phone no matter what I say, so who cares.

"Thank you, sweetheart," says Dr. Pearlman. She picks up the papers on the table and puts them back in the folder. Then she takes the phone and the folder and goes out into the hallway. I can hear her talking, but I can't make out the words.

Teddy leans against the doorframe with his ear pressed up against the door, but he can't hear anything either.

"Teddy, do you think we should look in Mama's purse for some gum?" I say. Because the purse is right there by Dr. Pearlman's chair, even though she hasn't told me it's okay to play with it. I don't like to get in trouble.

But Teddy thinks it would be okay.

"Do you want some?" I ask when I find the pack and open it up. The little pieces spill out of the foil faster than I expected, and some of them fall on the floor. I blow them off like Mama

showed me before I put them in my mouth. One, two, three times so it's clean now. Three is Mama's special number. Teddy says he doesn't like gum, so I have to eat all of it myself. For a little while it's fun to chase the pieces around on my hands and knees. The last piece is almost under Dr. Pearlman's desk.

I have a loose tooth, and it squishes between the other teeth when I push the gum against it. I can feel it tugging on the threads that connect it to my head, and it feels good.

"Good news, Aoife," says Dr. Pearlman, coming suddenly back into the room. I am still on the floor, but I stand up and brush myself off when I see she's looking at me.

"I talked to your uncle." I can see she's looking at Mama's purse, which I notice now is spilled all over the table. Her wallet has fallen out on the seat of Teddy's chair, and the empty gum container is torn open on the floor.

"Oops," I say. Bad Teddy.

"Ah. As I was saying . . . I talked to your uncle, and I have good news for you, sweetheart." It sounds funny when she says that. No one calls me that. Sometimes Mama calls me Jumping Bean, but mostly she just calls me Aoife. "Your uncle Donovan is going to come here to the hospital and pick you up. Would you like to go home with him? Just for a little while."

"Is Mama going to be there?" I ask. I haven't seen Mama since the blue men helped her into the back of the van.

Dr. Pearlman's mouth curls down. "Sit down, Aoife," she says, putting her hand on the back of the little chair. So I do.

"Because we want to help your mommy, we want her to stay here at the hospital with us for right now. Okay?"

It's not okay. I look at Teddy, who is chewing on the blue strap of Mama's purse. *Stop that, Teddy*, I think. *You'll get us in trouble.* But I don't say it out loud, and Teddy never listens to me.

"Can I stay too?"

"I'm sorry, dear, but that's not possible. It would be better for you to go back to your house with your uncle, where you can be more comfortable."

When will Mama be home? Teddy wants to know. She promised we'd see the fireworks, so it has to be before then. Right?

"My friend Hannah says that if your parents go away and leave you alone, then men come and take you," I tell Dr. Pearlman. "And she said you might have to live with another family and you might never see your parents again."

"That's not what anybody wants," Dr. Pearlman says. She puts her hand on my shoulder, and it's light but it's hot and big. I don't like it, but I don't make her take it away. "Remember, we want to help your mommy, and you, too."

"And Hannah says if you're bad, you get taken away from your family and have to live in Children's Prison," I say.

"This Hannah sounds like she has a very vivid imagination," says Dr. Pearlman. "Do you think that's going to happen?"

I look at Teddy. He nods his head at me.

"It doesn't seem to me that you have been a bad girl, Aoife," says Dr. Pearlman. "You helped us with your mommy's phone, didn't you?"

That's true.

"I talked to Teddy out loud," I admit. "I make Mama angry when I do that, and sometimes she yells and tells me not to. And today she was yelling, but it was to Theo and he wasn't there, and she didn't make any sense after that."

Dr. Pearlman hugs me. The only people who hug me usually are Mama and one time Sister Mary Celeste at the end of the year, after we had kindergarten graduation.

It feels okay though. Dr. Pearlman smells like oranges.

"Aoife, I know today's trip to the mall was scary," says Dr. Pearlman. "But I really don't think your mommy is angry with you, okay? In fact, I bet she's very proud of you. Now, do you want to go wait for your uncle Donovan?"

Teddy says he's ready to play, so I figure we'd better go before he starts causing trouble.

The SECRETS We KEPT

a novel

Lara Prescott

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PROLOGUE

THE TYPISTS

We typed a hundred words per minute and never missed a syllable. Our identical desks were each equipped with a mint-shelled Royal Quiet Deluxe typewriter, a black Western Electric rotary phone, and a stack of yellow steno pads. Our fingers flew across the keys. Our clacking was constant. We'd pause only to answer the phone or to take a drag of a cigarette; some of us managed to master both without missing a beat.

The men would arrive around ten. One by one, they'd pull us into their offices. We'd sit in small chairs pushed into the corners while they'd sit behind their large mahogany desks or pace the carpet while speaking to the ceiling. We'd listen. We'd record. We were their audience of one for their memos, reports, write-ups, lunch orders. Sometimes they'd forget we were there and we'd learn much more: who was trying to box out whom, who was making a power play, who was having an affair, who was in and who was out.

Sometimes they'd refer to us not by name but by hair color or body type: Blondie, Red, Tits. We had our secret names for them, too: Grabber, Coffee Breath, Teeth.

They would call us girls, but we were not.

We came to the Agency by way of Radcliffe, Vassar, Smith. We

were the first daughters of our families to earn degrees. Some of us spoke Mandarin. Some could fly planes. Some of us could handle a Colt 1873 better than John Wayne. But all we were asked when interviewed was "Can you type?"

It's been said that the typewriter was built for women—that to truly make the keys sing requires the feminine touch, that our narrow fingers are suited for the device, that while men lay claim to cars and bombs and rockets, the typewriter is a machine of our own.

Well, we don't know about all that. But what we will say is that as we typed, our fingers became extensions of our brains, with no delay between the words coming out of their mouths—words they told us not to remember—and our keys slapping ink onto paper. And when you think about it like that, about the mechanics of it all, it's almost poetic. Almost.

But did we aspire to tension headaches and sore wrists and bad posture? Is it what we dreamed of in high school, when studying twice as hard as the boys? Was clerical work what we had in mind when opening the fat manila envelopes containing our college acceptance letters? Or where we thought we'd be headed as we sat in those white wooden chairs on the fifty-yard line, capped and gowned, receiving the rolled parchments that promised we were qualified to do so much more?

Most of us viewed the job in the typing pool as temporary. We wouldn't admit it aloud—not even to each other—but many of us believed it would be a first rung toward achieving what the men got right out of college: positions as officers; our own offices with lamps that gave off a flattering light, plush rugs, wooden desks; our own typists taking down *our* dictation. We thought of it as a beginning, not an end, despite what we'd been told all our lives.

Other women came to the Agency not to start their careers but to round them out. Leftovers from the OSS, where they'd been legends during the war, they'd become relics relegated to the typing pool or the records department or some desk in some corner with nothing to do.

There was Betty. During the war, she ran black ops, striking blows at opposition morale by planting newspaper articles and dropping propaganda flyers from airplanes. We'd heard she once provided dynamite to a man who blew up a resource train as it passed over a bridge somewhere in Burma. We could never be sure what was true and what wasn't; those old OSS records had a way of disappearing. But what we did know was that at the Agency, Betty sat at a desk along with the rest of us, the Ivy League men who were her peers during the war having become her bosses.

We think of Virginia, sitting at a similar desk—her thick yellow cardigan wrapped around her shoulders no matter the season, a pencil stuck in the bun atop her head. We think of her one fuzzy blue slipper underneath her desk—no need for the other, her left leg amputated after a childhood hunting accident. She'd named her prosthetic leg Cuthbert, and if she had too many drinks, she'd take it off and hand it to you. Virginia rarely spoke of her time in the OSS, and if you hadn't heard the secondhand stories about her spy days you'd think she was just another aging government gal. But we'd heard the stories. Like the time she disguised herself as a milkmaid and led a herd of cows and two French Resistance fighters to the border. How the Gestapo had called her one of the most dangerous of the allied spies—Cuthbert and all. Sometimes Virginia would pass us in the hall, or we'd share an elevator with her, or we'd see her waiting for the number sixteen bus at the corner of E and Twenty-First. We'd want to stop and ask her about her days fighting the Nazis—about whether she still thought of those days while sitting at that desk waiting for the next war, or for someone to tell her to go home.

They'd tried to push the OSS gals out for years—they had no use for them in their new cold war. Those same fingers that once pulled triggers had become better suited for the typewriter, it seemed.

But who were we to complain? It was a good job, and we were lucky to have it. And it was certainly more exciting than most government gigs. Department of Agriculture? Interior? Could you imagine?

The Soviet Russia Division, or SR, became our home away from

home. And just as the Agency was known as a boys' club, we formed our own group. We began thinking of ourselves as the Pool, and we were stronger for it.

Plus, the commute wasn't bad. We'd take buses or streetcars in bad weather and walk on nice days. Most of us lived in the neighborhoods bordering downtown: Georgetown, Dupont, Cleveland Park, Cathedral Heights. We lived alone in walk-up studios so small one could practically lie down and touch one wall with her head and the other with her toes. We lived in the last remaining boarding houses on Mass. Avenue, with lines of bunk beds and ten-thirty curfews. We often had roommates—other government gals with names like Agnes or Peg who were always leaving their pink foam curlers in the sink or peanut butter stuck to the back of the butter knife or used sanitary napkins improperly wrapped in the small wastebasket next to the sink.

Only Linda Murphy was married back then, and only just married. The marrieds never stayed long. Some stuck it out until they got pregnant, but usually as soon as an engagement ring was slipped on, they'd plan their departure. We'd eat Safeway sheet cake in the break room to see them off. The men would come in for a slice and say they were awfully sad to see them go; but we'd catch that glimmer in their eye as they thought about whichever newer, younger girl might take their place. We'd promise to keep in touch, but after the wedding and the baby, they'd settle down in the farthest corners of the District—places one would have to take a taxi or two buses to reach, like Bethesda or Fairfax or Alexandria. Maybe we'd make the journey out there for the baby's first birthday, but anything after that was unlikely.

Most of us were single, putting our career first, a choice we'd repeatedly have to tell our parents was not a political statement. Sure, they were proud when we graduated from college, but with each passing year spent making careers instead of babies, they grew increasingly confused about our state of husbandlessness and our rather odd decision to live in a city built on a swamp.

And sure, in summer, Washington's humidity was thick as a wet blanket, the mosquitoes tiger-striped and fierce. In the morning, our curls, done up the night before, would deflate as soon as we'd step outside. And the streetcars and buses felt like saunas but smelled like rotten sponges. Apart from a cold shower, there was never a moment when one felt less than sweaty and disheveled.

Winter didn't offer much reprieve. We'd bundle up and rush from our bus stop with our head down to avoid the winds that blew off the icy Potomac.

But in the fall, the city came alive. The trees along Connecticut Avenue looked like falling orange and red fireworks. And the temperature was lovely, no need to worry about our blouses being soaked through at the armpits. The hot dog vendors would serve fire-roasted chestnuts in small paper bags—the perfect amount for an evening walk home.

And each spring brought cherry blossoms and busloads of tourists who would walk the monuments and, not heeding the many signs, pluck the pink-and-white flowers and tuck them behind an ear or into a suit pocket.

Fall and spring in the District were times to linger, and in those moments we'd stop and sit on a bench or take a detour around the Reflecting Pool. Sure, inside the Agency's E Street complex the fluorescent lights cast everything in a harsh glow, exaggerating the shine on our forehead and the pores on our nose. But when we'd leave for the day and the cool air would hit our bare arms, when we'd choose to take the long walk home through the Mall, it was in those moments that the city on a swamp became a postcard.

But we also remember the sore fingers and the aching wrists and the endless memos and reports and dictations. We typed so much, some of us even dreamed of typing. Even years later, men we shared our beds with would remark that our fingers would sometimes twitch in our sleep. We remember looking at the clock every five minutes on Friday afternoons. We remember the paper cuts, the scratchy toilet paper, the way the lobby's hardwood floors smelled of Murphy Oil

Soap on Monday mornings and how our heels would skid across them for days after they were waxed.

We remember the one strip of windows lining the far end of SR—how they were too high to see out of, how all we could see anyway was the gray State Department building across the street, which looked exactly like our gray building. We'd speculate about their typing pool. What did they look like? What were their lives like? Did they ever look out their windows at our gray building and wonder about us?

At the time, those days felt so long and specific; but thinking back, they all blend. We can't tell you whether the Christmas party when Walter Anderson spilled red wine all over the front of his shirt and passed out at reception with a note pinned to his lapel that read DO NOT RESUSCITATE happened in '51 or '55. Nor do we remember if Holly Falcon was fired because she let a visiting officer take nude photos of her in the second-floor conference room, or if she was promoted because of those very photos and fired shortly after for some other reason.

But there are other things we do remember.

If you were to come to Headquarters and see a woman in a smart green tweed suit following a man into his office or a woman wearing red heels and a matching angora sweater at reception, you might've assumed these women were typists or secretaries; and you would've been right. But you would have also been wrong. *Secretary:* a person entrusted with a secret. From the Latin *secretus, secretum.* We all typed, but some of us did more. We spoke no word of the work we did after we covered our typewriters each day. Unlike some of the men, we could keep our secrets.

What Red Was

A Novel

"Dazzling."
—Alexandra Kleeman

Rosie Price

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4

Kate came home for Easter of her second year with a subscription to *Sight & Sound* and a new pair of Nikes. Alison decided to ask her if Max was coming to stay in Bisley. She had ascertained that his grandmother owned the large house just over the other side of the valley.

"No," Kate said. "He's away."

"Have you been to the house?"

"No," Kate said bluntly, which Alison took to mean that she had not been invited.

"He's welcome here anytime, you know. We can make up the sofa bed."

"Thanks," Kate said, before softening a little. "I don't know

when he'll next be in Gloucestershire. Maybe I should ask Claire to come over. I'm sorry," she said suddenly. "Have I been annoying?"

"No comment," said Alison.

Claire arrived after dinner with a four-pack of fruit cider and a spare pair of underwear. "In case I get too pissed to drive," she said, waving them, when Alison opened the door. Alison always appreciated Claire's refreshing lack of subtlety when it came to the subject of her former alcoholism.

"They'll help you sober up, will they, love?"

"No, Mum," Kate said, from the kitchen doorway, "obviously they're so she can stay over."

"That was a joke," Alison said, with only moderate exasperation.

Kate shut the door to the kitchen and they sat at the table, talking and drinking.

"I'm supposed to be revising again," Kate said to Claire.

"Aren't you just bored with having to do work?" Claire said. "I would be by now. Jesus, you've got a whole other year."

"Two," Kate said. "And a bit. I've got a year abroad next year."

"This is exactly why I didn't go to university."

Claire had instead taken a promotion from waitress to bar manager at a local pub. She was doing a course in hospitality management and had never expressed disappointment about her decision. But whenever Kate talked about university, she was always careful to focus on the negatives—on the abundance of privilege, the overload of work, the stress—more than the things she valued.

"You were wise," Kate said wryly.

"How's your mate?" Claire said.

"Max?"

"The one with the drunk uncle."

"The Drunkle." Kate, laughing at her own joke, got out her phone. "I can't believe I haven't come up with that already. I need to tell Max."

"Is that maybe a bit insensitive?"

"He won't mind. He's got a dark sense of humor."

"Humor is a defense mechanism."

Kate put down her phone. "His family are all kind of repressed," she said. "So I suppose that makes sense. Apart from the mum. She's a filmmaker, did I tell you?"

"You did," Claire said. "Several times."

"Oh. Well. She's the exception. As far as I can tell she's the one trying to get everyone to open up. Not sure how well that's going."

"Max talks to you, though, right? Because of—" Claire nodded her head in the direction of the closed door.

"Yeah, he does," said Kate, her tone casual. "I'm not really sure if he talks to anybody else, though."

Since Rupert's car crash, Max had become less elusive about his uncle's addictions, and his family generally. Kate remembered what he had said the year before, about being used to people feeling as though they had ownership of his mother, and she had been careful, since then, to give Max far more than she took. And there was a lot she could give: despite what Claire had just said, Kate knew humor was the way through Max's defenses. Whenever he was in danger of withdrawing, or keeping private whatever mishap Rupert had most recently brought on himself, she knew how to put him back at ease, to make him feel as though whatever disaster might have taken place was instead a minor, passing calamity. When Rupert had slipped and fallen down the concrete steps outside his building, when he'd been found wandering down Albert Bridge Road in the early hours of a cold December morning, when he'd sliced open an artery in his hand breaking through the window of his own flat, Kate was always on the other end of the phone. Even though Claire might not have realized it, she herself had always done the same for Kate when Kate's own mother was in the grip of her addiction.

"Do you remember sitting here," Kate said now, "when I got my offer letter? The neighbors came over, you screamed so loudly."

"Oh, shit, I do remember."

Kate drank from her cider. Claire never went to the effort of trying to hide her emotions, and once she'd stopped screaming she'd burst into tears. Alison, who did not cry but whose eyes had glittered, had hidden a bottle of champagne at the back of the fridge just in case the news was good. She'd opened the bottle with an expertly soft pop: it had been the only time either girl had seen Alison drink in the last three years, and she had sipped a careful quarter glass in the time Claire and Kate took to finish the rest of the bottle.

"That was a good day," Kate said. She felt guilty, now, about shutting the door, and she leaned across and opened it just an inch.

5

Max had missed Easter in Bisley House that year because he'd gone with his mother and sister to southern Italy. Zara had been consulting on a film there and had managed to get a room for Nicole and Max covered by expenses. He had spent most of the week by the pool, he told Kate over FaceTime when he got back, and hadn't done any of the work he was supposed to.

"So there's that," he said. He was sitting in his kitchen; behind him Kate could make out a tall silver fridge and a cream wall. "And Granny's cross I wasn't there with her, but then she's always cross about something. How are you?"

"I'm fine," Kate said. "A bit sick of home, and I keep being horrible to my mum, I don't know why."

"That can happen sometimes," Max said. "How long have we got left?"

"A whole week."

"Is it only a week?" He was turning to look at something on the wall, out of view. "You should come and stay."

"In Bisley?"

"No." Max pulled a face. "I've been exiled for missing Holy Week. Come to London."

"To your house?"

"Yes! And bring some work as well. I should do some of that."

"OK," said Kate. She couldn't stop herself from grinning into the camera. "When? I'll look at trains."

"Great, wait, no, don't get the train. My cousin can drive you, he's over at Bisley. Let me find out when he's going back to London. I'll text you."

He messaged that afternoon to tell Kate that Lewis could give her a lift the following day. Kate gave Max the postcode and waited for Lewis outside her mother's terraced house, with a bottle of water, her backpack, and a suitcase full of books. She couldn't tell whether she had equipped herself for a school trip or a romantic mini-break; perhaps, perversely, it was both.

Lewis drove a red Golf with a low, growling engine. He was better-looking than she had expected: a square jaw, straight nose. He had short, sandy hair and his face was clean-shaven. The windows were down—it was one of the first warm evenings of the year—and Lewis stayed in his seat, one of his hands on the steering wheel, the other on his phone, as he waited for her to get in the car. Kate struggled with her suitcase, heaving it into the boot, and got into the passenger seat.

"Hello," he said.

"Hi," said Kate.

Lewis took Kate's backpack from her lap and put it on the back seat. As she buckled her seat belt, he pulled away from the curb and turned down the hill back through the center of Randwick, whose red-brick buildings and rust-faded cars made Kate feel embarrassed.

"Thanks for coming to collect me," said Kate.

Lewis said nothing, but leaned across her, and reached into the

glove box, searching with one hand while he kept the other on the wheel. Kate leaned back to make room for him. He was wearing a black T-shirt, the sleeve of which rode up a little to show the muscle of his upper left arm as he reached over her. He found what he was looking for: a cable, which he plugged into the stereo at one end and his phone at the other, while they waited at the traffic light at the bottom of town.

"My price," he said, passing Kate his phone and reciting his passcode. "You have to keep me entertained."

Kate didn't mind choosing the music, particularly since it meant they didn't have to speak. Lewis seemed like the kind of person who would put the conversational burden on whomever he was with; the kind of man who said things like "tell me something interesting about yourself." As they turned onto the motorway Lewis closed the windows and turned up the music. He was driving quickly, but that seemed appropriate to the mood and the music, to the fresh spring evening. Kate chose not to feel anxious whenever he had to slam on the brakes, but forty miles from London Lewis reached behind his seat with one hand and, after a moment or two of rooting around in what sounded like a box of ice, retrieved a bottle of beer from the cooler he had stashed there.

"Open this?" he said.

"What, for you?" said Kate.

"Oh, yeah," said Lewis, not looking at Kate but glancing in the rearview mirror. "There's probably enough for you to have a couple too."

"You can't drink while you're driving."

Lewis shrugged. "I'll open it, then," he said, positioning the neck of the bottle in the corner of his mouth between his straight, white teeth.

Kate, who had once had to go to the hospital with Max after he'd attempted to open a beer with his teeth and had bitten off the

neck of the bottle, slicing open his gum and one side of his lip, grabbed Lewis's before he had a chance to bite down.

"Fucking hell," she said. "I'll do it."

So Lewis drank, and he drove, and Kate, defeated, drank more, as if sobriety were a question of context. By the time they reached the M25 she had relinquished her anxieties, content in the perfect powerlessness of the passenger seat. In fact, Kate liked Lewis. He didn't have Max's warmth, but his reticence made her feel that it was important he should like her. He did use the word *cunt* more than was comfortable. Somewhere outside Swindon, Kate thought about calling him out on it with a joke she'd once heard.

"Utter cunt," Lewis said, overtaking a lorry that was sitting in the middle lane. Kate heard the voice of her old Spanish teacher, who she'd stayed in touch with after leaving school: "He's neither warm nor deep enough to be called a cunt," she had said serenely, her soft accent draining the word of any threat. But Lewis had already cut back in front of the lorry, which receded in the wing mirror, and she thought the joke would be lost on him.

She did not tell Lewis that this was the first time she had been to Max's house, but she knew they must be getting close when he turned off the main road they had taken into London, and then again onto an even smaller road that curved round into Latimer Crescent. The houses here were large and white-fronted, the road lined with magnolia trees whose large pink petals had not yet fallen to the pavement where they would later turn to mulch in the rain. The cars here were all Mercedes or BMWs or Porsches, parked in gated driveways. Kate leaned forward a little in her seat, trying to guess which was Max's house. Lewis parked and sat in the driver's seat looking at his phone.

"I'll be there in a second," he said to Kate.

Kate, who had been waiting for him to get out so she could follow him to the right house, unbuckled her seat belt. "I can't remember which number it is."

Lewis looked up at her now, then nodded in the direction of the house closest to them.

"The buzzer's on the gate," he said.

"Right."

Kate had not met Nicole before, but she knew as soon as she opened the door that she was Max's sister: she had his thin wrists, green-gray eyes, the same warm skin tone. Nicole looked past Kate to see where Lewis's car was, ignoring the large dog that skittered past her and hurled himself at her guest. Kate crouched down, holding his scruff as his tongue flailed toward her mouth.

"Is this Titus?" Kate said.

"Yes, he's a terror really. Did Lewis drive you?" she asked. "Did he manage not to crash?"

"Just about," Kate said.

Nicole stepped back into the hallway. "I can't get in the car with him. Gives me anxiety. You're Kate, right?"

"Yes. You're Nicole."

Nicole showed Kate into the kitchen, which was bigger than it had looked on Max's camera: a large, high-ceilinged room with a large iron range and a marble island, in the middle of which stood a large bunch of fresh-cut flowers, peonies and white roses.

"Such pretty flowers. Is it somebody's birthday?"

"Someone Mum worked with," Nicole said, waving her hand. "Max is somewhere." She looked back out onto the road. "Is Lewis coming in?"

"Oh, I don't know," Kate said, glancing behind her at the front door.

"So rude." Nicole went outside, and Kate heard Lewis's voice a few minutes later, the sound of footsteps going upstairs, and Nicole shouting Max's name again. There were no other sounds in the

house, so she supposed that Zara and William were out. It seemed slightly absurd, she realized, that she still had Zara's number saved from that emergency phone call last summer, and she felt suddenly conscious of the contrast between her battered backpack and her worn trainers against Zara's immaculately tiled floor.

"Kate!" A door at the far end of the kitchen burst open, and Max came in, wearing gym kit and headphones. He grabbed her, pulling her into a sweaty hug. "You're here," he said.

Kate pushed him off. "I'll hug you when you're less disgusting. Have you been running?"

"Gym," Max said. He stepped back and, unabashed, sniffed his underarm. "What's the time? Can we have wine yet?"

After dinner, Max put Kate in the spare room opposite his. She slept deeply and drunkenly, but the wine had been good and in the morning she woke with only the slightest of headaches. She took a long shower in the shared bathroom. There was no lock on the door, but the water was hot and the jet was powerful, and Kate felt so unusually at ease with the possibility that she might at any point be interrupted that she stayed standing under the spray until the mirror had completely steamed up.

It was while Max was making elaborate pancakes that Zara—who had got back late the night before—came downstairs, wearing a long cream dressing gown and with her hair loose around her shoulders. Kate found herself sitting up a little straighter when Zara came into the kitchen, half expecting to have to reintroduce herself, but she leaned down and kissed Kate on both cheeks, asked her if she'd slept well in the spare room. She smelt of moisturizer and powder.

"I put out new pillows—did Max change them? The others were very old, I'm sure William and I had them when we moved here. Max, did you give Kate the new pillows?"

"Uh," said Max. He was pouring thick batter carefully from a mixing bowl into a butter-saturated frying pan.

"I'm sorry," Zara said. "It must have been so uncomfortable. Make sure he changes them for you."

"I slept well, honestly. I was exhausted."

Zara sat down with Kate at the breakfast table. "How is your mother?" Zara said.

"She's fine," Kate said, only a little disconcerted by Zara's familiar tone, which made her feel as though she ought to have something more to offer. She added: "She's working. I think the routine is helping her."

"I'm sure she's loved having you home," said Zara, nodding.

"I think I've probably been a bit of a nightmare," Kate said.

"Nonsense. She'll have loved having you there, and here we are, stealing you away. Now, what work do you have to do? I'd say you can use my office but I'm afraid I have a deadline. Your exams are next week?"

"Not for another month, actually," Kate said.

"And you're revising already? You'll have forgotten everything in a month."

"I've promised Kate we'll work," Max said. "It was a condition of her coming to stay."

"I don't mind," Kate said hurriedly.

"Well," said Zara, standing up and adjusting the tie of her dressing gown, "if you can possibly tear yourself away from your books, there's an exhibition you must go and see."

Now that they were both here in London, it seemed unfeasible that they should study. Apart from their holiday in France, it was the first significant stretch of time Kate and Max had spent together outside of term. From her first morning she knew that this time—in which Max's family passed in and out of the house, too absorbed by their own routines to be fazed by Kate's presence—was precious. On their second night, Max gave her a tour of his neighbor-

hood, taking her to a Greek restaurant at the end of his road where they drank ouzo and he laughed into his menu while the waiter tried to flirt with Kate. On the third night, they headed to a bar in Soho where Max overrode Kate's embarrassment at the cost of the bottle they'd bought—the cheapest on the menu—by insisting that he'd drunk more than twice what she had and picking up the whole bill himself.

"You can get a bottle for us on the way back," he said, as if it were in any way comparable. "There's a corner shop by the Tube."

In the mornings they ate pastries and drank coffee, sitting at the kitchen island, listening to music and talking until long after their mugs had grown cold. Each of the family members would come downstairs in turn and make themselves breakfast: cereal for Zara, an English muffin for William, and a kale smoothie for Nicole, who didn't seem to want to go back to her flat in Camden.

"Why are you still here?" said Max to his sister on the third morning, as if he had only just noticed that she was living there.

"I'm avoiding Josh."

Nicole had decided that she was breaking up with her boyfriend, but their lease didn't end until September, so in the meantime, instead of telling him that she was no longer in love with him, she had decided to disappear for days at a time without explanation. Max asked his sister coyly whether her appearance at Latimer Crescent had anything to do with the fact that it was nearly the end of the month, a few days before payday, but was ignored.

In place of studying Max and Kate held film screenings in the first-floor living room of the house, which contained a six-seater sofa and the projector that had replaced the older one Max had installed in his first-year room. The image on this screen was bolder and sharper than the one Kate and Max were used to, and speakers surrounded the linen sofa. Now that Kate saw what Max was used to, their grainy projector seemed far less extravagant than when he'd first set it up. On their last night, once they'd

worked their way through the films they'd been studying, Kate suggested that they watch *L'Accusé*.

"Do you ever think about making films?" she said, as they waited for it to load. "You and Zara could be the next Coppolas."

Max shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "I don't know if it's as fun as it looks."

Momentarily, Kate regretted putting *L'Accusé* on. But it was not long before Max paused the film and rewound it.

"I love this shot," Max said. "It's so intense. Look at the way the camera stays on her while she watches him."

Lucille's face filled the screen: she was eating spaghetti Bolognese, little pieces of minced beef and tomato flecking her chin as she sucked tubes of spaghetti between her lips, watching her lover across the dinner table. Max sat forward in his chair, silhouetted against the blue and red light, and Kate said nothing, not wanting to disrupt his concentration. In that moment the door to the living room swung open, and the lights came on.

"No," Max said, waving his hand at his father, who stood in the doorway. "We just started watching."

"Max," William said. His voice sounded unnaturally steady. "Will you pause it, just for a moment? It's your grandmother."

6

On the way to Bisley William listened to repeats of a panel show Max had downloaded onto the car's stereo. Though he was only distantly aware of the voices of the panelists and the applause of the studio audience, once or twice he heard himself laughing at a joke he would not have been able to recount if anybody had asked him what was so funny. Thoughts surfaced and sank: the conversations he'd had with his mother over Easter about Rupert; her disappointment that Nicole and Max had gone to Italy instead of coming to stay; her complaints of heart palpitations. William knew that for years Bernadette had been fabricating ailments that would justify twice-monthly visits to Dr. Woodfine, who had kind eyes and was rumored to be a distant relation of the Windsors, but her long-standing hypochondria did not assuage his guilt. There was little hope of recovery. William, himself a doctor, knew that the ambulance, the attempts at resuscitation, were only nominal. In his professional life, he had always thought it a cruelty to draw out a life when it had reached its natural end, but nonetheless he drove at an anxious speed, praying to Bernadette's God that he would reach Bisley before she was declared dead.

When Alasdair arrived that evening, William had just got back from the hospital. They ate dinner together—a ravioli dish Bernadette's housekeeper had made and refrigerated in a Tupperware labeled with today's date—and Alasdair chose wine from the cellar. As they drank their way through the first bottle of red, the two brothers began to talk instead of their father, who had always been amused by Bernadette's hypochondria. The irony surrounding her unexpected death would have delighted the man who had once convinced his wife that oregano, a distant relation of marijuana, could cause psychosis if consumed in excessive quantities.

"He would have been glad that she didn't see it coming," William said to his brother. "She was always so afraid of death."

Rupert arrived the next day. He'd lost his license after his car accident, so William picked him up from the station and the three of them read through the will. Afterward, Rupert took a long walk around the grounds, leaving his brothers with the family lawyer. When they were finished, William went outside to find Rupert, who was sitting on the wall at the top of the garden, smoking. William sat down next to his brother but couldn't think of anything to say that would comfort him.

The time between death and burial was filled with administration: William and Alasdair took meetings with their accountant, William booked the parish church for the funeral, and Alasdair negotiated caterers' fees. They took turns fielding calls from Dr. Woodfine, who was trying, without integrity, to establish whether he was about to be sued for professional negligence.

At the funeral reception Max sat with Rupert. They were both drunk, but Rupert more so: he was holding on to a glass of the free bar's Scotch as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. Max sympathized. He and Lewis had been among Bernadette's pallbearers, and when they'd stepped through the doors of the church and the Requiem Mass had started to play, his shoulders had tensed beneath the weight of the coffin and, for the first time, he

had understood that Bernadette was really dead. Now, though, at the bar with Rupert, he was fully subsumed by his bereavement, free to wallow without being taken by surprise.

"I missed Easter," he said to his uncle. "I knew she would be upset, but I still missed it."

"She was a very sensitive woman," Rupert said, shaking his head and swilling his glass. The movement was too vigorous, and he slipped a little on his stool. He paused, and righted himself, before he spoke again, and Max did not notice the look Rupert had of biting something back. "She tended to take things to heart."

Rupert was drunk the next morning, too, and came down to breakfast wearing Gregor's silk dressing gown tied loosely around his thin waist. He stood swaying by the Aga, peering into the bowl of eggs collected that morning by William.

"Did you know," Rupert said, turning to face the kitchen table, "that if you squeeze an egg like this"—he held the egg at both ends—"you can't break it. But if you squeeze it this way"—he laid the egg flat on his palm now and closed his fingers around it—"it will . . ." He squeezed as tightly as he could, screwing up his eyes as he did so, and they waited for the crack—but the egg remained whole. The noise of William pushing his chair back jolted Rupert, so that he swung his arm down and smashed the egg against the edge of the worktop. The yolk split, dribbling between his fingers as he lifted his hand, bemused. Zara was instantly at his side with a tea towel in her hand, and she wiped his fingers as she would a child's, while Max and Nicole looked on. Nicole bit her lip and caught her mother's eye; Zara shook her head gently. William stood halfway between the table and the counter, momentarily paralyzed.

"Have you showered?" Zara said. "Why don't you have a shower? Come on, William will bring you some coffee." She glanced round at her husband as she led Rupert from the kitchen. William walked slowly to the sink and put the kettle on, then he

stood, his hands resting on the countertop, his head bowed, waiting for the water to boil.

After the funeral, Max returned to complete the final term of the year. During these weeks, he sat with Kate in the library while she passed him notes and helped him memorize them, lifted his head from his hands and made him tea even though he rarely drank it. Kate did not remember her own grandparents, three of whom had died before she was born, but she knew how close to Bernadette Max had been, and his childlike desire to uncover his memories of her—old photographs, letters, gifts she had given him that he had not wanted at the time but which now he treasured—was something Kate was careful to indulge. He was separated from his family, here, and Kate understood that she needed to be more than a friend to him. If she came home from the library late and saw that his light was still on, she would climb the stairs to his room and knock, and, just as she had done when they'd been together in France, she would clamber into bed with him and talk until he fell asleep.

"I just keep thinking that she died angry with me."

"Surely she wouldn't have actually been angry, would she?"

"I don't know," Max said. "She was quite Old Testament, sometimes. One of my earliest memories is of her putting salt instead of sugar in my grandad's coffee. He threw up on the drawing-room carpet."

"She did that on purpose?"

"Apparently he didn't vote for her roses in the Bisley Blooms Contest."

"Wow."

"So, she died with a wrath."

"Well." Kate paused. They were both looking up at the ceiling of Max's room, arms tucked by their sides. "When people are gone

it's easy to romanticize them. But I think there is a value in being true to her memory."

"If she was a cantankerous bitch, you mean?" Max was laughing now.

"I wouldn't go that far. She's gonna have friends in high places," Kate said, pointing to the sky.

"Granny, mea culpa." Max turned to Kate. "I'm tired. Can we watch something? Will you stay here and sleep?"

Apart from his grandfather, who had died when Max was twelve, Max had never lost anybody he'd been close to. The realization of loss arrived in small, unexpected waves: when Max found a shopping list in her handwriting at the bottom of a carrier bag, when the email address he had set up for her auto-filled on his phone, when old acquaintances of Bernadette's got in touch through William. On one such occasion, when an automated subscription letter for Bernadette arrived at his parents' house, Max took it to his father.

"For Granny," he said solemnly, holding it out to him.

William, who was drinking coffee and reading the paper, looked at his son over the top of his glasses and took the letter. He turned it over and glanced at the addressee but didn't open it.

"We should cancel that," he said.

During the summer, Kate came up again to stay with Max in London. They would both be abroad for their third year, and because they had no work to do, the July and August days seemed simply to hollow out, each becoming indistinguishable from the next. They needed each other: she him, to escape the monotony of her life at home, as much as he her, and they filled those long days with afternoons on the sofa, curtains drawn against the sunlight, Max circling around Bernadette's memory while Kate nudged him gently ever closer to accepting the loss of her.

For Kate, staying in Latimer Crescent had lost none of its charm. She loved the evenings when William would cook for them, when the five of them would eat together, Max and William quiet, Zara carrying the conversation, telling Kate anecdotes from the set that her husband and children had already heard countless times, while Kate listened intently. At home, Kate often ate on her knees in front of the television, and every day she was at Max's house she could hardly wait until William started pouring out a bottle of wine and handing round snacks before dinner, which, in its formality, was more intimate than any of the meals Kate could remember experiencing with her own mother. Later, Max and Kate experimented with William's drinks cabinet, inventing cocktails that were only occasionally superior to the cheap red wine they were used to drinking during term time. Max always peaked after the first couple of drinks; his skin flushing and his quick speech quicker still, his reminiscences becoming freer. Kate loved the story of the time he'd fallen from an apple tree in Bernadette's garden and his grandmother had driven him in her Sunday best to the hospital.

"It was the only time I ever heard her swear," Max said, smiling as he sat back on the sofa. "She wound down her window and told this woman that I was gravely wounded, and she needed to get out of the way so we could go to the hospital. Then she called her a whore as we were about to drive off, but the window needed winding back up with both hands so it took us ages to actually go anywhere."

"I would've liked to have met her," Kate said. "She sounds brilliant. And mad."

"She would have loved you," Max said.

Toward the end of the summer Max went back to Bisley House to help his father and Alasdair sort through Bernadette's possessions. They pulled up into the drive, and Max found that he was expecting his grandmother to open the kitchen door. The house

was still and quiet, and Max saw that the ivy had been stripped from the front wall, leaving fossil-like markings on the limestone. On the first afternoon, he walked to the apple tree and found the spot where Rupert had once helped him add his initials to those—Rupert's, William's, Alasdair's, and Gregor's—already on the trunk. Later, he moved among the upstairs rooms of the house with a set of cardboard boxes into which he intended to organize both his grandmother's possessions and all the constituent parts of his grief. His grief, though, lacked loyalty, and as he opened up her dressing table, her large oak wardrobe, and the embossed shoeboxes stacked against its back panel, it was not Bernadette he thought of but his grandfather, who had died eight years earlier. There was the razor Bernadette had kept in its leather case, whose red handle was engraved with Gregor Rippon's initials, and which felt heavy in Max's hand. He held up the razor, one side of his face reflected in its blade, and it occurred to him that he could not remember what his grandfather had looked like, much less whether he'd been clean-shaven or bearded.

"Just leave it in the cupboard," said a voice behind him. Alasdair had been standing in the doorway. He had a black trash bag in his hand. "We'll sort through the bedrooms later."


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THREE

The valley

Muriel loves best those days when there are no races and the horsemen tell stories of fiasco and anomaly. At the lounge one afternoon she hears of a claiming race some years before, when a six-year-old broke a Del Mar track record and promptly dropped dead. Another, in which a redhaired boy from Montreal rode with his broken leg taped to the saddle girth. Or the story about the potbellied paint named Gingersnap who made such fast friends with an Angus bull that the two could not be separated and had to travel cheek by jowl in a special trailer widened for them.

Or, better: The horsemen in their leisure speak of things that cannot happen, that simply won't. There will never be another Seabiscuit, not because he was built by God, as the papers said, as the trainers claimed, but because the universe allows only so much improbability. Nor another corker like the half-bred filly Quashed, who beat a Triple Crown winner by a short head over two and a half endless miles. Likewise the storied beasts of another era, National Velvet and Sergeant Reckless,

warhorses on the eastern front, creatures from a dream an entire culture had once shared and woken from.

Through March of 1957 Muriel plays the late afternoon races ten dollars at a time. The winnings are limited by the stakes, which are mean and provincial, and though she knows now the names of stables and jockeys and colts gone early to stud still each new detail excites her. Each new detail is a familiar shape in a dark room. The high stakes are coming when the spring season opens, and most days the men drink more and longer and sit with their knees spread wide and out from the tables, taking account of the odds.

"Hoo now, in a couple weeks we'll have some real money in play," says the man with the mustache.

"Just think about that Lakes and Flowers race last spring at Hollywood Park," says another.

"God that was gorgeous."

"Like watching a sunset, but faster."

"You got all the same riders as that race coming to Del Mar, and almost all the ponies, but no Misrule and no Porterhouse, so our field will be smooth as honey."

"We'll see where the odds end up. Eight races, I'll be damned if one of them doesn't come in double digits over the stilt."

The old jockey called Rosie, given to water metaphors, says, "Tide's coming in, bringing glad tidings."

"Since when do tides bring that?" says the mustache.

"It's called a pun, friend," Rosie says darkly, but all the men laugh because the future is so bright.

AT HOME Muriel is distracted. One night she burns the meat and then the bread and when Lee touches her arm she cries out because she had forgotten him in her speculations. Lee tilts his head but says nothing and

together they walk to the diner around the corner. Muriel feels a restful invisibility there, among the other patrons, who eat and talk and worry not at all about horses or progress or the passage of time. Lee orders pie and when the woman brings it he cuts the piece down the middle and slides the smaller half onto his saucer and pushes the rest across the table and Muriel makes a show of eating it and then a show of being full. When he's finished his half and a third cup of coffee she pushes the plate back, barely touched. He winks at her and calls the waitress for the coffeepot and when she doesn't acknowledge him he takes the cup and stands at the counter for a long time. The radio behind the counter plays heartache music. He holds his cup out like a pauper and finally the woman fills it. When he sits to eat he says, "Can't have pie without coffee," as if he were apologizing for this mere fact, for both the waitress and himself.

After dinner they walk back to their building and as they cross the common foyer they can hear the ringing phone. Lee wings the door open and takes the hallway in three long steps and Muriel listens for his reaction. He waits only a moment before he hangs up and turns to her and threads his fingers behind his head. He says that some husky voice has offered him life everlasting.

"That's what she said." The hands behind his head like a man being marched somewhere terrible. "Over the telephone, no less."

Inside the apartment the smell of burned bread is chalky and unpleasant. Muriel opens the window above the sink.

"How long's it been?" she asks.

"A month now."

"Has it ever been this long before?"

"Not that I recall."

Through the open window come the sounds of the street below, cars idling at the curb and voices from the sidewalk and between these noises the high call of gulls making a last round before the full darkness. Lee cracks a beer and sits at the table and takes a drink.

"I guess he's doing fine on his own, wherever he is. Los Angeles or wherever."

He tips up the can and looks at her over the rim like a man making a point and when she doesn't answer he rises. He stands with his back to the counter.

"I guess you don't think so," he says.

"I don't know what I think," she says.

And she doesn't. She remembers Julius's voice down the line and what she'd told him about the races. She feels foolish, knowing she was not believed. Julius had not called since then. Lee looks at her as if he hopes she might speak again and explain away his worry or his bitterness but she says nothing more. Instead she goes to him and takes the beer and drinks and hands it back. It pleases him when she does things like this, simple things that suggest their shared lot in life, an easy intimacy.

"I told you he was always disappearing, even before our old dad was gone," he says. He hands the can back to her and she jigs it to judge its fill and drinks all but the last swallow.

"But it turned out all right before," she says.

"But it always happened again."

He crosses his arms and leans against the counter. Muriel cracks another beer and hands it to Lee and takes one for herself.

"We've been here nearly seven months," Lee says. "I'm not sure what else I can do."

He closes his eyes and opens them again. Muriel thinks of that Christmas Eve and the men's plans. How Lee had told her, as they lay together in her mother's room, that he would always take care of Julius. He'd said this the way any courting man might, as a stay against his own misfortune. She knows that Julius's absence changes what he's able to declare about himself.

"It isn't your fault," she says to him.

"You tell that to our old dad. Not that you could've even when he was alive."

Muriel nods remotely. She puts her head on his shoulder and sighs pleasantly, though his smell and this contact are at odds with her thoughts.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I caught Julius on Kansas Avenue in a bar the Del Monte guys used for faro?" Lee says.

"I don't think so."

"Our father was not dead but nearabouts. I guess I was eighteen then because it wasn't long after this that I signed us both up, though Julius was too young. I was out looking for him, down in the factory bars, and in the third or fourth one I tried there he was in a pair of overalls, cleaning the heads. You wouldn't believe the filth of that place. And it turned out he was working off a debt and he didn't want to tell me, because he'd stolen from that bar, right from the till, to play into their card game."

In the hallway the phone rings again but Lee does not move toward it. Soon someone else answers, speaking in a scolding voice.

"I'm not sure I realized it then, but I did soon after—my brother knew things I didn't, he had passions of his own," he says. He makes a face. She thinks of the story Julius told of the rabbit man and how he'd held her look for so long across the table. She does not share Lee's fraternal resentment but she does feel betrayed, and also that she has been the betrayer. She had told Julius her secret and sent him that money and after that he disappeared. She wonders if her confidence was a kind of permission, the way even bluffs could close the distance between people.

Lee finds a cigarette and lights it and blows the smoke hard toward the open window. He says, "You know, after I'd been let off here, in San Diego, I couldn't find him for two weeks. He'd been back himself already a month. I was sure of his date because I had a friend in the same crew and he told me they'd come back. Two weeks." Lee holds up two accusing fingers. "Then finally he got my number from somewhere and he called me. He'd spent all the money he had and he asked me to wire more to a motel in Palm Desert. This was before you got here, you was probably on that bus in Arizona or someplace."

For a moment Muriel looks at him without speaking. He holds out

the cigarette for her and she shakes her head and reaches for the pack and lights her own.

"Why didn't you tell me that?" she says.

"I didn't see why it would matter to you."

"I thought you all got back at the same time," she says. She turns away and blows her smoke into the room.

"Well, we didn't."

She knows he wants to say more but she doesn't want him to say it. She doesn't want to know any more than she already does. She thinks of the time passing and Lee's worry. She sees him need her more because of all this. She steps forward and kisses him and before he can speak again she presses him toward the bedroom and unbuttons his top button and asks for his haste and his force.

THE NEXT DAY, Muriel stands at the end of the bar with a newspaper crossword folded neatly, jotting notes in the margins. In a week the season will open, and the undercard and then the Monday stakes are thick with good horses and riders known for putting on a show. For now the track is fast and the weather fine and the men speculate openly. Rosie is thinking through the chances of a newcomer named Willie Declan, who by all accounts will mount the favorite.

"You know the line, water everywhere and nothing to drink. That's how Declan is on that California Star," Rosie says.

"Hardly matters in that field. In with all those real riders, he'll be as lost as a girl," another man says, and drains his glass.

W. D., Muriel writes, *lost at sea*. But the horsemen are not done with Willie Declan.

"He's a cement brick," the mustache says. "Sure you can fit him in your hand, but you can hardly lift him." He gives the table a look.

"But the hunnerd-granner," says Rosie, who always stands up for the jocks.

"In the hundred-grander he ran on Whittleman's Bitty King, and that was a gift of a fine match. Bitty could've carried a Mark 7 and won on slop."

"But you can't say Declan isn't ready for a big race like this."

Rosie again, and at this a few of the men make kissing faces at him.

"Maybe not. But I can say that he's been a little light after that flu he had, and with Roustabout kicking up the way he is these last weeks no one will beat him who won't ride the rail for a halfie."

"I'll wait for positions. At six Declan could take two from the rail, especially if Sayonara gets anywhere under five, and Declan could squeeze in that way. That's how I'd run it, I'd sail the inner harbor," says Rosie, but his voice is lowering now. He is fifty years old and still fit but he carries some sorrow the other men find disquieting.

"I'm sure you would but that don't mean you *can*," the mustache says, and leans across the table and flicks Rosie on the chin.

The talk goes on this way. At this first stage the odds are fluctuating, and a late El Niño rain would bring a scratch or two, from the finer runners whose trainers won't race them on mud. Anyone glancing at Muriel's notes would see a set of names and numbers and track slang coded into her own shorthand: *'Nara if under five see W. D. Whittle on the wire if cuppy. Too Young 4–8. Roust at center post breaks 'Nara.*

The week goes on. The odds begin to calcify, then a horse falls ill and a jockey gets bumped and another disappears for two days downtown. The men grumble and reset their charts. The hot clear weather brings a strange nothingness: no moths against the screens, no hum of insects, neap tides quiet all night. Instead there is a permeating blueness like the inside of an eye. The heat brings people out of the houses and shops and back rooms. Along the narrow streets of Muriel's neighborhood, workmen cart flowers and crates and white heaps of ice. In the tiny front yards women dump wash water into short stemmy stands of geraniums. The children spill from stoops and curbs in overalls and short sleeves, the coastal sun catching them and turning them divine, in that instant freed

by the sun from work and peril. Their mothers in dresses the color of unready peaches, sweating over the wash.

Downtown the dice players and cigarette men and men in tight pants, shirts unbuttoned to their navels. Walking from home to work is like passing between two worlds. Muriel finds herself one afternoon standing a long time in front of a shop window, thinking about the races. Behind her a newspaper vendor and two men in denim jackets are reflected in the window. The men are young and she can smell their cigarettes and their cologne. She looks up at the store window and draws herself away from their attention. She remembers her mother in the summer cooking chops and onions in her underwear while a man sat fully dressed at the table, watching her. The way this distinction between them, between nakedness and not, seemed to confirm something her mother believed about love: that vulnerability existed only in asymmetry, that two people could not be vulnerable together. Her mother believed if she gave men this small advantage she would not be harmed.

In the shop window a large television plays a game show. A man in a glass booth on a soundstage gazes outward in concentration while a clock ticks away in the corner. Muriel thinks of Julius and where he might be and why he hasn't come. The show gives way to an ad for Convair, a woman standing with a suitcase in her hand watching an airplane take off. Though she can't hear the TV Muriel realizes she is hearing an airplane and she looks up and sees a real airplane in the sky, reflected in the store window. She turns and tracks it as it flies over the city headed east. This confluence seems like luck or validation or something mystic. When she turns back to the television the plane is gone, but the other plane is still reflected in the window, as if it had flown off the screen and into the actual sky. She imagines the airplane flying past the rough buildings of this city, over the vendor and the smoking men and the mothers in their collared dresses. Out past the central mountains, then further east across the desert and into the scrub, rich and minty and full enough

to hide a child, then over the irrigation circles and tired motels of her youth and down into the endless prairie and over her mother's house. The plane disappears in this direction and the sound goes and then it is just the men and the contrail, reflected in the glass.

That night, after Lee has fallen asleep, she peels open the envelope and counts the money there and thinks through the odds. She does a bit of math on the envelope flap. She thinks of Lee's story, of Julius in overalls working off a debt, and then about his discharge. She worries she's misunderstood them both. She thinks of Lee standing so long at the counter with his coffee cup, waiting for the woman to fill it. She studies the envelope and her arithmetic and she's not sure what she might need the money for, only that she does, only that winning would prove something vital that she cannot otherwise prove, and that no one else can see.


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One

That night, when Mrs. Chamberlain called, Emira could only piece together the words ". . . take Briar somewhere . . ." and ". . . pay you double."

In a crowded apartment and across from someone screaming "That's my song!," Emira stood next to her girlfriends Zara, Josefa, and Shaunie. It was a Saturday night in September, and there was a little over an hour left of Shaunie's twenty-sixth birthday. Emira turned the volume up on her phone and asked Mrs. Chamberlain to say it again.

"Is there any way you can take Briar to the grocery store for a bit?" Mrs. Chamberlain said. "I'm so sorry to call. I know it's late."

It was almost astonishing that Emira's daily babysitting job (a place of pricey onesies, colorful stacking toys, baby wipes, and sectioned dinner plates) could interrupt her current nighttime state (loud music, bodycon dresses, lip liner, and red Solo cups). But here was Mrs. Chamberlain, at 10:51 p.m., waiting for Emira to say yes. Under the veil of two strong mixed drinks, the intersection of these spaces

almost seemed funny, but what wasn't funny was Emira's current bank balance: a total of seventy-nine dollars and sixteen cents. After a night of twenty-dollar entrées, birthday shots, and collective gifts for the birthday girl, Emira Tucker could really use the cash.

"Hang on," she said. She set her drink down on a low coffee table and stuck her middle finger into her other ear. "You want me to take Briar right now?"

On the other side of the table, Shaunie placed her head on Josefa's shoulder and slurred, "Does this mean I'm old now? Is twenty-six old?" Josefa pushed her off and said, "Shaunie, don't start." Next to Emira, Zara untwisted her bra strap. She made a disgusted face in Emira's direction and mouthed, *Eww, is that your boss?*

"Peter accidentally—we had an incident with a broken window and . . . I just need to get Briar out of the house." Mrs. Chamberlain's voice was calm and strangely articulate, as if she were delivering a baby and saying, *Okay, mom, it's time to push*. "I'm so sorry to call you this late," she said. "I just don't want her to see the police."

"Oh wow. Okay, but, Mrs. Chamberlain?" Emira sat down at the edge of a couch. Two girls started dancing on the other side of the armrest. The front door of Shaunie's apartment opened to Emira's left, and four guys came in yelling, "Ayyeee!"

"Jesus," Zara said. "All these niggas tryna stunt."

"I don't exactly look like a babysitter right now," Emira warned. "I'm at a friend's birthday."

"Oh God. I'm so sorry. You should stay—"

"No no, it's not like that," Emira said louder. "I can leave. I'm just letting you know that I'm in heels and I've like . . . had a drink or two. Is that okay?"

Baby Catherine, the youngest Chamberlain at five months old, wailed in the receiver. Mrs. Chamberlain said, "Peter, can you please

take her?" and then, up close, "Emira, I don't care what you look like. I'll pay for your cab here and your cab home."

Emira slipped her phone into the pouch of her crossbody bag, making sure all of her other belongings were present. When she stood and relayed the news of her early departure to her girlfriends, Josefa said, "You're leaving to *babysit*? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Guys . . . listen. No one needs to babysit me," Shaunie informed the group. One of her eyes was open and the other was trying very hard to match.

Josefa wasn't through asking questions. "What kind of mom asks you to babysit this late?"

Emira didn't feel like getting into specifics. "I need the cash," she said. She knew it was highly unlikely, but she added, "I'll come back if I get done, though."

Zara nudged her and said, "Imma roll witchyou."

Emira thought, *Oh, thank God*. Out loud, she said, "Okay, cool."

The two girls finished their drinks in one long tip as Josefa crossed her arms. "I can't believe you guys are leaving Shaunie's birthday right now."

Emira lifted her shoulders and quickly dropped them back down. "I think Shaunie is leaving Shaunie's birthday right now," she said, as Shaunie crawled down to the floor and announced she was taking a quick nap. Emira and Zara took to the stairs. As they waited outside for an Uber on a dimly lit sidewalk, Emira did the math in her head. *Sixteen times two . . . plus cab money . . . Fuck yes.*

Catherine was still crying from inside the Chamberlain house when Emira and Zara arrived. As Emira walked up the porch stairs, she spotted a small jagged hole in the front window that dripped with something transparent and slimy. At the top of the landing, Mrs. Chamberlain pulled Briar's glossy blond hair into a ponytail. She

thanked Emira, greeted Zara the exact same way she always did ("Hi, Zara, nice to see you again"), and then said to Briar, "You get to hang out with the big girls."

Briar took Emira's hand. "It was bedtime," she said, "and now it's not." They stepped down the stairs, and as the three girls walked the three short blocks to Market Depot, Briar repeatedly complimented Zara's shoes—an obvious but unsuccessful ploy to try them on.

Market Depot sold bone broths, truffle butters, smoothies from a station that was currently dark, and several types of nuts in bulk. The store was bright and empty, and the only open checkout lane was the one for ten items or fewer. Next to a dried-fruit section, Zara bent in her heels and held her dress down to retrieve a box of yogurt-covered raisins. "Umm . . . *eight dollars*?" She quickly placed them back on the shelf and stood up. "Gotdamn. This is a rich people grocery store."

Well, Emira mouthed with the toddler in her arms, *this is a rich-people baby*.

"I want dis." Briar reached out with both hands for the copper-colored hoops that hung in Zara's ears.

Emira inched closer. "How do you ask?"

"Peas I want dis now Mira peas."

Zara's mouth dropped open. "Why is her voice always so raspy and cute?"

"Move your braids," Emira said. "I don't want her to yank them."

Zara tossed her long braids—a dozen of them were a whitish blond—over one shoulder and held her earring out to Briar. "Next weekend Imma get twists from that girl my cousin knows. Hi, Miss Briar, you can touch." Zara's phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her bag and started typing, leaning into Briar's little tugs.

Emira asked, "Are they all still there?"

"Ha!" Zara tipped her head back. "Shaunie just threw up in a plant and Josefa is pissed. How long do you have to stay?"

"I don't know." Emira set Briar back on the ground. "But homegirl can look at the nuts for hours so it's whatever."

"Mira's makin' money, Mira's makin money . . ." Zara danced her way into the frozen-food aisle. Emira and Briar walked behind Zara as she put her hands on her knees and bounced in the faint reflection in the freezer doors, pastel ice cream logos mirrored on her thighs. Her phone buzzed again. "Ohmygod, I gave my number to that guy at Shaunie's?" she said, looking at her screen. "He is so thirsty for me, it's stupid."

"You dancing." Briar pointed up at Zara. She put two fingers into her mouth and said, "You . . . you dancing and no music."

"You want music?" Zara's thumb began to scroll. "I'll play something but you gotta dance too."

"No explicit content, please," Emira said. "I'll get fired if she repeats it."

Zara waved three fingers in Emira's direction. "I got this I got this."

Seconds later, Zara's phone exploded with sound. She flinched, said, "Whoops," and turned the volume down. Synth filled the aisle, and as Whitney Houston began to sing, Zara began to twist her hips. Briar started to hop, holding her soft white elbows in her hands, and Emira leaned back on a freezer door, boxes of frozen breakfast sausages and waffles shining in waxy cardboard behind her.

Briar Chamberlain was not a silly child. Balloons never sent her into hysterics and she was more concerned than delighted when clowns threw themselves on the ground or lit their fingers on fire. At birthday parties and ballet class, Briar became sorely aware of herself

when music played or magicians called for screaming participation, and she often looked to Emira with nervy blue eyes that said, *Do I really have to do this? Is this really necessary?* So when Briar effortlessly joined Zara and rocked back and forth to the eighties hit, Emira positioned herself, as she often did, as Briar's out. Whenever Briar had had enough, Emira wanted her to know that she could stop, even though sweet things were currently happening to Emira's heart. For a moment, twenty-five-year-old Emira was being paid thirty-two dollars an hour to dance in a grocery store with her best friend and her favorite little human.

Zara seemed just as surprised as Emira. "Oop!" she said as Briar danced harder. "Okay, girl, I see you."

Briar looked to Emira and said, "You go now too, Mira."

Emira joined them as Zara sang the chorus, that she wanted to feel the heat with somebody. She spun Briar around and crisscrossed her chest as another body began to come down the aisle. Emira felt relieved to see a middle-aged woman with short gray hair in sporty leggings and a T-shirt reading *St. Paul's Pumpkinfest 5K*. She looked like she had definitely danced with a child or two at some point in her life, so Emira kept going. The woman put a pint of ice cream into her basket and grinned at the dancing trio. Briar screamed, "You dance like Mama!"

As the last key change of the song started to play, a cart came into the aisle pushed by someone much taller. His shirt read *Penn State* and his eyes were sleepy and cute, but Emira was too far into the choreography to stop without seeming completely affected. She did the Dougie as she caught bananas in his moving cart. She dusted off her shoulders as he reached for a frozen vegetable medley. When Zara told Briar to take a bow, the man silently clapped four times in their

direction before he left the aisle. Emira centered her skirt back onto her hips.

"Dang, you got me sweatin'." Zara leaned down. "Gimme high five. Yes, girl. That's it for me."

Emira said, "You out?"

Zara was back on her phone, typing manically. "Someone just might get it tonight."

Emira placed her long black hair over one shoulder. "Girl, you do you but that boy is *real* white."

Zara shoved her. "It's 2015, *Emira*! Yes we *can*!"

"Uh-huh."

"Thanks for the cab ride, though. Bye, sister."

Zara tickled the top of Briar's head before turning to leave. As her heels ticked toward the front of the store, Market Depot suddenly seemed very white and very still.

Briar didn't realize Zara was leaving until she was out of sight. "You friend," she said, and pointed to an empty space. Her two front teeth hung out over her bottom lip.

"She has to go to bed," Emira said. "You wanna look at some nuts?"

"It's my bedtime." Briar held Emira's hand as she hopped forward on the shiny tile. "We sleep in the grocery store?"

"Uh-uh," Emira said. "We'll just hang out here for a little while longer."

"I want . . . I want to smell the tea."

Briar was always worried about the sequence of upcoming events, so Emira began to slowly clarify that they could look at the nuts first, and then smell the tea after. But as she began to explain, a voice cut her off with, "Excuse me, ma'am." Footsteps followed and when Emira turned around, a gold security badge blinked and glittered in

her face. On top it read *Public Safety* and the bottom curve read *Philadelphia*.

Briar pointed up at his face. "That," she said, "is *not* the mailman."

Emira swallowed and heard herself say, "Oh, hi." The man stood in front of her and placed his thumbs in his belt loops, but he did not say hello back.

Emira touched her hair and said, "Are you guys closing or something?" She knew this store would stay open for another forty-five minutes—it stayed open, clean, and stocked until midnight on weekends—but she wanted him to hear the way she could talk. From behind the security guard's dark sideburns, at the other end of the aisle, Emira saw another face. The gray-haired, athletic-looking woman, who had appeared to be touched by Briar's dancing, folded her arms over her chest. She'd set her grocery basket down by her feet.

"Ma'am," the guard said. Emira looked up at his large mouth and small eyes. He looked like the type of person to have a big family, the kind that spends holidays together for the entire day from start to finish, and not the type of person to use *ma'am* in passing. "It's very late for someone this small," he said. "Is this your child?"

"No." Emira laughed. "I'm her babysitter."

"Alright, well . . ." he said, "with all due respect, you don't look like you've been babysitting tonight."

Emira found herself arranging her mouth as if she'd ingested something too hot. She caught a morphed reflection in a freezer door, and she saw herself in her entirety. Her face—full brown lips, a tiny nose, and a high forehead covered with black bangs—barely showed up in the reflection. Her black skirt, her slinky V-neck top, and her liquid eyeliner refused to take shape in the panels of thick glass. All she could see was something very dark and skinny, and the top of a small, blond stick of hair that belonged to Briar Chamberlain.

"K," she exhaled. "I'm her babysitter, and her mom called me because—"

"Hi, I'm so sorry, I just . . . hi." From the end of the aisle, the woman came forward, and her very used tennis shoes squeaked against the tile floor. She put a hand to her chest. "I'm a mom. And I heard the little girl say that she's not with *her* mom, and since it's so late I got a little nervous."

Emira looked at the woman and half laughed. The sentiment felt childish, but all she could think was, *You really just told on me right now?*

"Where . . ."—Briar pointed to one side of the aisle—"Where these doors go?"

"One second, mama. Okay . . ." Emira said. "I'm her sitter and her mom asked me to take her because they had an emergency and she wanted me to get her out of the house. They are three blocks away." She felt her skin becoming tight at her neck. "We just came here to look at the nuts. Well, we don't touch them or anything. We're just . . . we're really into nuts right now, so . . . yeah."

For a moment, the security guard's nostrils expanded. He nodded to himself, as if he'd been asked a question, and said, "Any chance you've been drinking tonight, ma'am?" Emira closed her mouth and took a step back. The woman next to him winced and said, "Oh, geez."

The poultry and meat section came into view. There, the Penn State shopper from earlier was very much paused and attuned to Emira's conversation. All at once, on top of the surreptitious accusations, this entire interaction seemed completely humiliating, as if she'd been loudly told that her name was not on a guest list. "You know what—it's cool," she said. "We can just leave."

"Now wait a minute." The guard held out his hand. "I can't let you leave, because a child is involved."

"But she's *my* child right now." Emira laughed again. "I'm her

sitter. I'm technically her nanny . . ." This was a lie, but Emira wanted to imply that paperwork had been done concerning her employment, and that it connected her to the child in question.

"Hi, sweetie." The woman bent and pressed her hands into her knees. "Do you know where your mommy is?"

"Her mom is at *home*." Emira tapped her collarbone twice as she said, "You can just talk to *me*."

"So you're saying," the guard clarified, "that a random woman, three blocks away, asked you to watch her child this late at night?"

"Ohmygod, no. That's not what I said. I'm her *nanny*."

"There was another girl here a few minutes ago," the woman said to the guard. "I think she just left." Emira's face checked into amazement. As it seemed, her entire existence had become annulled. Emira felt like raising her arm as if she were finding a friend in a large crowd, with a phone to her ear, and saying, *Do you see me? I'm waving my hand.* The woman shook her head. "They were doing some . . . I don't even know . . . some booty dancing or whatnot? And I thought, okay, this doesn't feel right."

"Ummm." Emira's voice went high as she said, "Are you serious right now?" Briar sneezed into the side of her leg.

The Penn State man came up and into view. His cell phone was raised and recording in front of his chest.

"Ohmygod." Emira shielded her face with chipped black nails as if she'd accidentally walked into a group photo. "Can you step off?"

"I think you're gonna want this filmed," he said. "Do you want me to call the police?"

Emira dropped her arm and said, "For what?"

"Hey, big girl." The security guard got down on one knee; his voice was gentle and practiced. "Who's this right here?"

"Sweetheart?" the woman said softly. "Is this your friend?"

Emira wanted to bend down and hold Briar—maybe if Briar could see her face more clearly, she'd be able to deliver her name?—but she knew her skirt was gravely short, and now there was a cell phone involved. It suddenly seemed like her fate was in the hands of a toddler who believed broccolis were baby trees, and that placing yourself underneath a blanket made it difficult to be found. Emira held her breath as Briar stuck her fingers in her mouth. Briar said, "Meer," and Emira thought, *Thank God*.

But the guard said, "Not you, honey. Your friend right here. What's her name?"

Briar screamed, *"Meer!"*

"She's saying my name," Emira told him. "It's Emira."

The security guard asked, "Can you spell that for me?"

"Hey hey hey." The man behind the cell phone tried to get Emira's attention. "Even if they ask, you don't have to show your ID. It's Pennsylvania state law."

Emira said, "I know my rights, dude."

"Sir?" The security guard stood and turned. "You do not have the right to interfere with a crime."

"Holup holup, a *crime*?!" Emira felt as if she were plummeting. All the blood in her body seemed to be buzzing and sloshing inside her ears and behind her eyes. She reached down to swing Briar into her arms, placed her feet apart for balance, and flipped her hair onto her back. "What crime is being committed right now? I'm *working*. I'm making money right now, and I bet I'm making more than you. We came here to look at some nuts, so are we under arrest or are we free to go?" As she spoke, Emira covered the child's ear. Briar slipped her hand into the V of her blouse.

Once again, the tattletale woman took her hand to her mouth. This time, she said, "Oh man, oh shoot."

"Okay, ma'am?" The security guard widened his stance to match hers. "You are being held and questioned because the safety of a child is at risk. Please put the child on the ground—"

"Alright, you know what?" Emira's left ankle shook as she retrieved her cell phone from her tiny purse. "I'll call her father and he can come down here. He's an old white guy so I'm sure everyone will feel better."

"Ma'am, I need you to calm down." With his palms to Emira, the security guard locked eyes with Briar again. "Okay, honey, how old are you?"

Emira typed the first four letters of *Peter Chamberlain* and clicked on his bright blue phone number. Against Briar's hand, she felt her heart bounce underneath her skin.

"How many are you, honey?" the woman asked. "Two? Three?" To the guard she said, "She looks about two."

"Ohmygod, she's almost three," Emira muttered.

"Ma'am?" The security guard pointed a finger at her face. *"I am speaking to the child."*

"Oh right, okay. 'Cause she's the one to ask. BB, look at me." Emira forced a gleeful expression into her lips and bounced the toddler twice. "How many are you?"

"One two fee four fie!"

"How old am I?"

"Happy birfday!"

Emira looked back to the security guard and said, "You good?" In her cell phone, the ringing stopped. "Mr. Chamberlain?" Something clicked in the earpiece but she didn't hear a voice. "It's Emira, hello? Can you hear me?"

"I'd like to speak to her father." The security guard reached out for her phone.

"The fuck are you doing? Don't touch me!" Emira turned her body. At this motion, Briar gasped. She held Emira's black, synthetic hair against her chest like rosary beads.

"You don't wanna touch her, dude," Penn State warned. "She's not resisting. She's calling the kid's dad."

"Ma'am, I am asking you to kindly hand over the phone."

"Come on, man, you can't take her phone."

The guard turned with a hand outstretched and yelled, "Back up, sir!"

With her phone pressed to her face and Briar's hands in her hair, Emira screamed, "You're not even a real cop, so you back up, son!" And then she watched his face shift. His eyes said, *I see you now. I know exactly who you are*, and Emira held her breath as he began to call for backup.

Emira heard Mr. Chamberlain's voice at the top of her cell phone. He said, "Emira?" and then, "Hello?"

"Mr. Chamberlain? Can you please come to Market Depot?" In the same controlled panic that started her night, she said, "Because they think I stole Briar. Can you please hurry?" He said something between *What* and *Oh God*, and then he said, "I'm coming right now."

Emira hadn't anticipated that the heated accusations would be favorable to the silence that followed. The five of them stood there, appearing more annoyed than justified, as they waited to see who would win. As Emira began a staring contest with the floor, Briar patted the hair on Emira's shoulders. "Dis is like my horsey hair," Briar said. Emira bounced her and said, "Mm-hmm. It was very expensive so please be careful." Finally, she heard the glide of an automatic door. With quick footsteps, Mr. Chamberlain emerged from the cereal aisle. Briar pointed with one finger and said, "That's Dada."

Mr. Chamberlain looked as if he'd jogged the whole way—tiny

beads of sweat on his nose—and he placed a hand on Emira's shoulder. "What's going on here?"

Emira responded by holding out his daughter. The woman took a step back and said, "Okay, great. I'll just leave you guys to it." The security guard began to explain and apologize. He took off his hat as his backup arrived.

Emira didn't wait for Mr. Chamberlain to finish lecturing the guards about how long he had been coming to the store, how they cannot detain people without reasonable cause, or how inappropriate it was that they question his decisions as a parent. Instead she whispered, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Emira," he said. "Wait. Let me pay you."

She waved no with both hands. "I get paid on Fridays. I'll see you at your birthday, Bri." But Briar had begun to fall asleep on Mr. Chamberlain's shoulder.

Outside, Emira jogged around the corner, in the opposite direction of the Chamberlain home. She stopped and stood in front of a closed bakery with cupcakes on display behind a gridded security gate; her hands were still shaking as she texted no one. Breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth, Emira scanned through hundreds of songs. She shimmied her hips and pulled her skirt back down.

"Hey hey hey." Penn State appeared at the street corner. He made his way toward her and said, "Hey, are you okay?"

Emira slumped her shoulders in a miserable lift that said *I don't know*. With her phone in front of her stomach, she bit the inside of her cheek.

"Listen, that was super fucked up," he said. "I got the whole thing on tape. I would turn it in to a news station if I were you and then you can—"

"Oof. Yeah . . . no," she said. She pushed her hair out of her face. "No way, but . . . thanks anyway, though."

He paused and ran his tongue over his front teeth. "Okay, that guy was a dick to you. Don't you wanna get him fired?"

Emira laughed and said, "For what?" She shifted in her heels and put her phone back in her purse. "So he can go to another grocery store and get some other nine-dollar-an-hour bullshit job? Please. I'm not tryna have people Google my name and see me lit, with a baby that isn't mine, at a fucking grocery store in Washington Square."

The man exhaled and held up one hand in surrender. Underneath his other arm was a Market Depot paper bag. "I mean . . ." He put his free hand on his hip. "At the very least, you could probably get free groceries for a year."

"Oh, right. So I can stock up on kombucha and shit?"

He laughed and said, "Fair."

"Lemme see your phone." Emira jiggled her ring and middle finger as she held out her palm. "You need to delete that thing."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" he asked carefully. "I'm serious. This would definitely get you an op-ed or something."

"I'm not a writer," Emira said. "And I don't mess with the Internet, so give it."

"Wait, how about this?" He took out his phone. "It's your business and I'm happy to delete it. But let me email it to you first, in case you ever change your mind."

"I won't, though—"

"Just in case . . . here. Type your email in."

Because it seemed easier to share her email than convince him otherwise, Emira held the strap of her purse in one hand and began to type with the other. When she saw the email address in the From

section, reading *KelleyTCopeland@gmail.com*, she stopped and said, "Hold up, who the fuck is Kelley?"

He blinked. "I'm Kelley."

"Oh." As she finished typing her email, Emira looked up and said, "Really?"

"Alright, alright." He took the phone back from her. "I've been to middle school so you can't really hurt me."

Emira smiled. "No wonder you shop here."

"Hey, I don't usually shop here." He laughed. "But don't make me feel worse. I have two types of kombucha in this bag right now."

"Uh-huh," she said. "Did you delete it?"

"It's gone." He showed her the screen and scrolled backward. The most recent photo was a man she didn't know with a Post-it stuck to his face. She couldn't read what it said.

"K." Emira pulled a string of hair from the gloss on her lips. She gave him a sad *I don't know* grin, and said, "K. Bye, then."

"Okay, yeah, have a good night, take care." It was clear he hadn't seen this exit coming, but Emira didn't care. She walked toward the train while texting Zara, Come over when you're done.

Emira could take cab—Mrs. chamberlan would certainly pay her back—but she didn't because she never did. She kept the twenty-dollar bill and took the train to her Kensington apartment. Just after 1 a.m., Zara buzzed from downstairs.

"I can't handle any of this." Zara said this from Emira's toilet seat. Emira wiped her makeup off and locked eyes with her friend in the mirror. "Okay, because like . . ." Zara raised both of her hands up by her face. "Since when is the Running Man considered booty dancing?"

"I don't know." Emira removed her lipstick with a washcloth as she spoke. "Also, we all talked about it?" She said this with an apologetic wince. "And everyone there agreed I'm a better dancer than you."

Zara rolled her eyes.

"It's not a competition or anything," Emira tried again. "It's just that I'm the winner."

"Girl," Zara said, "That could have been *bad*."

Emira laughed and said, "Z, it's fine," but then she put the back of her hand to her mouth and silently started to cry.

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