

# THE QUIET GIRL

S. F. KOSA

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For Peter, who held my hand  
as we leapt into the unknown together.

## MONDAY, JULY 27

**T**he batter flowed in undulating ribbons and melted into a smooth, creamy lake. Mina scraped every bit from the bowl before shaking each cake pan to settle the contents. Everything had to be perfect.

When the pans were safely ensconced at 350 degrees, she moved to the next step. Humming a long-ago tune, she poured the premeasured and sifted powdered sugar into the mixing bowl over the softened butter and the extract, just enough to do the trick without overwhelming the flavor.

Baking was chemistry. Baking was precision. Never more than today.

When the frosting was the right consistency, she separated half into three bowls and used the droppers to apply the colors. Blue for innocence. Yellow for youth. Pink for so many things. Love. Warmth. Pain.

The effect would be neat. Cheerful. Enough to leaven a sultry summer night, draw the hands to the plate, the fork to the mouth, a smile to the lips.

Once the frosting bags and tips were assembled, she sat on the floor in front of the oven. The cakes had turned golden, but she

would wait for the timer. She'd learned to trust herself in most things, but time was an entity she'd never mastered. She was always losing track. She couldn't keep it still or reliably pin all the bits of her past into proper temporal position. Even now, now of *all* times, she could feel it turning slippery.

She closed her eyes. Not long now.

The timer went off. She jerked, startled even though she had known it was coming. Wasn't that always the way of it?

Waiting for the cakes to cool was the hardest part, but she filled the time with cleaning. She was so good at it, good at making things pristine. The dishes. The counters. The floors. Herself. She smiled as she remembered how recently it hadn't been necessary. Every second of messiness, at once hard-earned and effortless, had been worth fighting for. It had given her hope. But she'd been foolish to think she could escape that easily.

Once the heat had bled from the layers, she placed the first on the plastic base and topped it with a generous layer of icing, to be sandwiched between slabs of cake. Of course, that part had to be pink. A nice effect during the cutting process, like slicing deep enough to reach a vein.

After adding the top layer and completing the crumb coat, she applied the white outer layer. Thick and even like new snow, covering all that lay soft and fragile beneath. Next, the frosting bag and Russian piping tip. It had taken a lot of practice to keep the flowers from looking like spiky piles of chaos, but now she was a pro. Soon, the cake was a garden of delight, a riot of color, a treat for the senses.

She donned dishwashing gloves and washed all the extra frosting down the drain, then cleaned the bags and tips by hand, lots of soap, once, then again. She tucked each piece into her decorating kit and

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slid it into its slot in the cupboard. Alex complained that she didn't put things away properly, but he was wrong.

She did, when it mattered.

The cake was perfect. She turned it this way and that, making sure it didn't have a bad side. Just like she'd been taught. Then she trapped it under the floral tin dome and attached the wire handles. Ready for transport.

She poured herself a glass of wine and drank it down. One for the road. It unfurled in her bloodstream, loosening knotted muscles, allowing her to breathe, allowing her to move.

She reached for her keys, then caught a glimpse of her hands. No, this wasn't right.

He would never understand, but he didn't need to. Because he would never know.

She made the necessary adjustments and stepped into the bathroom. That face in the mirror. *Her* face, every feature and flaw. And then she recited the line, the one that resonated even now. Especially now. "I know who you are," she whispered.

The minutes were slipping away, but she allowed herself to stare until her eyes shone.

Then she blinked.

Time to go.

## WEDNESDAY, JULY 29

I make it to the pier with five minutes to spare, thanks to the driver's valiant swerving along Seaport Boulevard. With a quick *thanks*, I'm out of the Lyft and charging for the Bay State ticket booth, phone chiming in one hand and a backpack clutched in the other.

"Zarabian," I say to the attendant before he has a chance to ask. "Alex." After glancing at the screen of my phone and seeing it's not Mina, I silence the damn thing. Everything else can wait.

God, how I wish that were true. I set the phone on vibrate, and it instantly buzzes against my palm. Still not Mina. It's going to take more than a slew of conciliatory texts to fix this, and that's why I'm skipping town forty-eight hours early. "I called this morning," I say to the guy in the booth. "To change the ticket."

He squints at his screen and hesitantly types a few letters. "Arabian, you said?"

I say my last name again, then spell it. "I'd hate to miss the boat," I add, as if that's going to make a difference to him.

He shifts his weight as he taps the keys. "Round trip. Coming back Sunday."

"Yeah. Yeah." I watch as the printer extrudes my ticket, as he plucks it from the slot in no apparent hurry.

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“Make sure you keep the return part,” he drones. “You’ll have to pay if they need to reprint it for you in Provincetown...”

I’ve snatched it from his fingers before he’s finished talking. His voice fades as I jog down the walkway. The usual line has dissipated; everybody else is already on board, and the boat’s engines are running. I offer my ticket to the guy standing near the gangway, and he tears off the top and hands me the rest. He’s a young, bored bro sweating under the summer sun, and as my phone buzzes again, I feel envious of him and the job he can simply leave behind at five every day.

“Have a great trip,” he mumbles.

A tangle of bikes clogs the bow, and the strap of my pack catches on a handlebar when I try to edge by. My T-shirt is sticking to my back, and the bar is singing my name. I duck into the first-floor cabin and toss my bag onto one of the last available seats. It’s a booth, and there’s a couple already sitting there, two guys with their tans and their polos and their boat shoes and their shorts, one pair pink with embroidered skulls and crossbones, the other yellow with martini glasses.

Yellow Martini looks startled when my bag lands next to him, but Pink Pirate smiles. “Plenty of room,” he says. He sees me eye the line stretching from the bartender to the bow, then lifts his own Bloody Mary. “Not gonna win any awards, but still worth every penny.”

I give him a quick nod, already contemplating standing on the top deck for the ride. Not in the mood to make new friends. There’s been a knot in my gut since Mina left Monday morning, shoving her laptop and legal pads into her bag, murmuring that she needed time while I sat at the table with my lukewarm coffee and my tongue cocked, ready to pick up the fight where we left off.

With every hour between that moment and this one, all my righteousness has been sanded off. I’m raw now, stinging with the



memory of the words I spat at her and the way she looked as they struck home, eyes wide and vacant like her brain was already on Route 6, miles away from me, from us. I pull out my phone and tap the messages icon, then her name.

Monday, 12:53 p.m.: Mina, we should talk. I was too harsh last night.

Monday, 11:17 p.m.: I love you. I don't like the way we left things.

Tuesday, 8:01 a.m.: Please respond. I'm sorry.

Tuesday, 11:42 a.m.: Don't punish me like this. I asked when we could start a family and you're acting like I ordered you to murder a puppy.

Tuesday, 4:35 p.m.: Sorry for being a dick. This is difficult for me. I'm trying to give you space. I love you.

Tuesday, 9:26 p.m.: I love you. Please let me know how you're doing.

Tuesday, 11:48 p.m.: Mina?

I'd be more worried about her, but she can be this way, especially when she's on deadline. She disappears into her stories, her characters. She goes off to her cottage, lets her phone die, and sometimes forgets to eat. I knew this was part of the deal, and I do my best not to take it personally, but Jesus. This time, it's hard.

The ferry lurches into motion and glides through Boston Harbor, beginning its swoop along the South Shore before angling toward the tip of Cape Cod. Ninety minutes to MacMillan Pier, less than two hours to Mina. As the line for the bar inches forward, I consider texting her one last time to let her know I'm on my way, but then I think better of it. Though I'm not great at romantic gestures, this situation seems to call for one, and my texts haven't yielded results thus far. I pull up a browser, find the florist closest to the pier, and order a bouquet. I'm not even off the phone before it buzzes with a text.

Not from Mina, but just as good, which is a weird thing to say about a message from one's ex. I smile as a picture of my daughter

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fills the screen, gap-toothed grin, dark eyes bright, hair wet, and skinny arms encircled with orange floaties. She ducked her head under water today. She wanted me to tell you that she's not scared anymore!

I run my thumb across the image of my kid—this perfect little person who inexplicably thinks I know everything and am the best person in the world, who has my eyes but her mother's dimples—and tap out a reply. Tell Devon I'm proud of her. I'll take her to the pool next weekend.

Caitlin's response comes within seconds, leaving me to wrestle aside the irony that my ex-wife is speaking to me when my current wife is not. You should have seen her today. It all just clicked and now she's like a little fish. The instructor is great. You were right that we shouldn't let her avoid the water.

"You were right." Why didn't you realize that when we were married? I add a winking emoji to convey the obvious, which is that even if she had and despite the fact that we seemed to have everything in the world going for us, we were probably doomed from the start.

Very funny. See you on Monday? Or is Mina picking her up next week?  
My stomach goes tight. Not sure yet. I'll let you know.

I've only just gotten my beer when the phone buzzes yet again, and yet again, the text is not from my wife.

It's from my boss: Hey, asshole.

My reply: Why are you bothering me right now?

He's also my best friend. My phone rings a second later.

"Our new assistant was just dippy enough to tell me you were headed out of town."

I roll my eyes. "Please fire him. Harvard doesn't make 'em like they used to."

"Says the guy who went to BU. Everything okay?"

I take a gulp of my beer and step out onto the rear deck of the ferry. “I’ll do the board meeting by phone tomorrow.”

Drew is quiet for a moment. “You didn’t answer my question. Is it your mom?”

“Nah. I talked to her yesterday. Her scans still look good. She wants to take Devon for a few days next month.”

“Caitlin’s on board with that?”

“Hell yeah. She wants to take off for a week with her new guy.”

“Brad?”

“You’re behind the times. Ryan. I met him a week or so ago. Quite a beard.”

“Sounds like a dick. And speaking of—you have to be on top of your game for the Pinewell meeting tomorrow.”

I bow my head. “I had Raj reschedule for Monday.”

“Alex. What the hell. *Now* I’m worried.”

“Don’t be.” I’d never get away with this if I hadn’t known Drew since we were in diapers. Any other CEO would be screaming. “I’m on this.”

“I’m still wondering if there’s a way to do this without VC funding. Those smug bastards undervalued us by 90 percent. They’re fucking sharks.”

I keep my voice level as I talk Drew off the ledge for the hundredth time. “We’re never going to get CaX429 to the clinic without learning how to swim with them. And if they do walk, that’s it for Series A, and we’re not the only ones who’ll be fucked.” My mom will lose her investment—along with about twenty other family members and friends we convinced to hop on board. Guilt rises like bile in my throat.

“How about I meet with them in your place?” he suggests. “Try to get through to them. I’m the fucking CEO! And I’m—”

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“Drew.” I bark his name loud enough that it swivels the heads of a couple leaning against the rail in front of me. I turn away and lower my voice. “The meeting is with their number cruncher, not the partners. It’s below your pay grade, and they were fine when I asked them to reschedule.” Not to mention, if Drew goes in there and acts all outraged that they don’t think we’re a unicorn that shits diamonds, it could actually finish us off. We’ve struck out with every other VC firm in Boston, and we’ll burn through the last of our angel funding by January, easy.

“I’ve gone over my model a thousand times,” I tell him. “It’s solid. I’ll call in tomorrow for the board meeting. Everything’s fine. I just needed to step away for a minute.”

“Something going on with Mina,” he says. It’s not even a question.

“It’s fine.” With my eyes squeezed shut, I add, “It’s probably fine.”

“You guys’ll settle into it. You knew it would be an adjustment.” He’s too loyal to say what he’s probably thinking and what my mom, who has no filter to speak of, straight up said to me a week before the wedding: *Whirlwind romances are a wonderful thing, but sooner or later, reality bites you in the butt.*

“Just don’t panic,” he adds. “It’s not like this is the rainbow flame.”

I laugh as he invokes an inside joke that runs all the way back to the day our high school chemistry teacher accidentally set his entire desk ablaze while trying to inspire a roomful of bored sophomores to appreciate the mystical joys of atomic composition.

“Definitely not the rainbow flame.” The knot in my gut loosens.

Another beat of silence. “Let me know if you want to get a beer after the Pinewell thing,” he says. “Whether things are on fire or not.”

“Thanks. I’ll be on the call tomorrow, and I’ll be ready for Monday. I’m not about to drop this ball.”

“Good. Because we’re gonna fucking cure cancer, my friend, and get bloody rich in the process.”

“Yup.” I’m surprised the weight on my shoulders hasn’t capsized the damn ferry.

He hangs up. I glance at my inbox—thirty new messages. Not a good time for the CFO to take off midweek. Worst possible time, to tell the truth.

I shove the phone in my pocket, drink my beer, and wonder if I’m being a total idiot. Am I being strategic, or am I just flailing here?

I’m *not* panicking about my marriage. I’m simply unwilling to let things fester. That’s what Caitlin and I did, always. I won’t do that with Mina, even if it means pushing into her space a little. She’s told me she wants that. Needs it, even.

I’ve finished my second beer and answered ten emails by the time we glide past the seawall, waves lapping against the giant concrete blocks, and into the Provincetown Harbor. Along with a few hundred sweating men, women, and children, I shuffle my way off the boat and swing my pack onto my back. I’ve kept some stuff at the cottage, but it’s Mina’s place, her sanctum, purchased with the success of a dozen Mina Richards romances, furnished with the royalties from half a dozen more.

She says it’s ours now, but I know better.

As I cross the street to the florist shop, I’m hit with a suffocating wave of what-the-hell-have-I-gotten-myself-into. Not this trip, but my entire fucking life. In the last two years, I quit my stable-but-boring job and joined a risky startup run by my brilliant but incurably impulsive best friend, and I married a woman I’d known for only six months. I pause on the sidewalk and take a breath. *Uber-rational*, that’s what Caitlin always called me, though it was

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never a compliment. Near the end of our marriage, she dropped the euphemism and just called me a cold, unfeeling bastard.

I enjoyed watching her jaw drop back in April when I told her I was getting married again. *I guess it's the new you*, she said.

At the time, I was smug about it. I'd toed the line my entire life, and there I was, making my own rules, embracing the risk, and finally living.

Now I'm wondering if the new me is merely the old me gone temporarily insane.

Fuck. My mom has gotten inside my head. *Honey*, she said to me when I told her I was engaged, *are you sure this isn't a midlife crisis?* But Mina was worth a leap into the great unknown. She's worth a thousand more after that.

I pick my way through the crowd of tourists queuing up for lobster rolls, window-shopping for everything from cheap T-shirts to local artists' paintings of Race Point and the towering Pilgrim Monument, and peering at their phones for directions to their Airbnb or the nearest bike rental shop. After edging past two guys arguing about whether they should go to Monkey Bar ("You only want to go because you were hot for that bartender!") or Purgatory ("I'm just not as into leather as you are, okay?") tonight, I duck into the florist's shop and pick up the bouquet I ordered. Roses, tulips, peonies, sweet peas. A middle-aged woman with thin lips gives me a wistful smile as I turn for the door.

The walk through the West End is slow-going, a clog of sandaled feet, beach bags, ice cream cones, leashed pooches, and no one in any particular rush. Cars inch along Commercial Street, patiently waiting for wandering pedestrians to realize they're in the way and move aside. Rainbow flags flap in the salty breeze as I trudge past the

Boatslip, the afternoon Tea Dance just getting started, upbeat rave music pumping. Now that I've escaped the center of town, the streets become residential, a mix of quaint homes and B&Bs, folks lounging in rocking chairs on their porches or in fenced-in front yards, sipping on beers and watching the constant flow of human traffic. Mina's cottage is a ten-minute stroll away, nestled in a warren of hundred-year-old homes between Commercial and the lapping waters of the bay. The gray shiplap siding always looks damp and drab to me, but Mina says it makes her as happy as a hobbit in a hobbit-hole. I'm thinking the million-dollar view has a lot to do with it.

As I draw within a block of the place, everything in me is wound tight. I don't want to screw this up. I didn't come all the way here to rehash our last fight or start a new one. I need to be understanding if she's in the middle of a scene or a chapter or even one of her reveries where she sits there, fingers resting lightly on her keyboard, expression blank, eyes unfocused. If she's into her work, I'm going to smile and tell her I love her and I'm sorry and we'll talk later, and then I'll head to the Governor Bradford for a drink, maybe find someone to play a game of chess on one of the boards they have set up by the front windows. I'm not going to make it a thing.

I pause in front of the cottage. The curtains are drawn. I look down at the bouquet in my hand and reach for my key.

I step into the cramped entryway populated by colorful umbrellas, a few pairs of rain boots, and a basket brimming with scarves and gloves and hats. A bottle of sunblock rests on a little wooden bench. "Mina?" I call out, not too loud, not wanting to startle her. "It's me."

I glance through the living room windows toward the alley next to the house. Her car is gone. I have time to pull myself together. If I'm emanating tension, she'll pick it up immediately.

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I kick off my shoes, then carefully align them on the mat beneath the bench before heading to the kitchen. I wrestle the flowers into a vase and consider where to leave them for maximum romantic effect. The dining table? Bedside table? Her desk?

There's a corked, half-empty bottle of pinot on the counter and a wineglass in the sink, lipstick on its rim and deep purple dregs in the very bottom. After cleaning up the flower scraps, I grab a wineglass from the open dishwasher, which is only partially unloaded, like Mina got distracted halfway through. Maybe she got inspired. I pour myself a splash of wine, then a plug.

After taking my first sip, I carry the vase of flowers to the living room. I'll put them where she'll see them right away, as soon as she comes through the front door. She'll know I'm here to fix things, and probably she'll let me. Hopefully this ends with us upstairs, in bed. We've both got other things to do, but I can't think of anything I want more than to waste the rest of the day with my wife, preferably with a bottle of champagne on ice and her thighs wrapped around my hips.

Mina's writing desk sits facing the grassy boardwalk path to the ocean, offering her glimpses of shimmering water as she writes stories of fiery women and the alpha males they alternately fight and fuck. She puts out two or three romances a year, and her readers devour them despite the fact that they already know how each story will end. Or perhaps because of that. I skimmed a few while we were dating. I didn't even have to buy them—I swiped the paperbacks off my mom's bookshelf.

I don't know what was more awkward, knowing Mom had read all those sex scenes my girlfriend had written or, the very first time I introduced them, overhearing Mom ask Mina if she planned to base any of her future heroes on me.



Now that I think about it, definitely the latter.

I take a gulp of my drink and move toward Mina's desk. A legal pad sits atop her closed laptop, pages filled with looping scrawl; she always writes in longhand before typing out her scenes. I don't look too closely; Mina's sensitive about that. She likes her words to be perfect before they escape her control.

She could walk in at any moment, back from a late lunch or a quick trip to the grocery store, maybe planning a dinner for one after a solitary afternoon of writing. Hopefully feeling lonely. Hopefully missing her husband. Maybe regretting her flat refusal when I broached the topic of starting a family, wishing she hadn't shut me down and shut me out. I'll apologize, and she'll apologize, and then she'll hook her finger through one of my belt loops and tell me that she hopes I took my vitamins this morning, because she's in the mood to do a little "literary research."

It's a rough job, being the husband of a romance author.

This desk is the place to leave the flowers, the first place her gaze will travel when she gets home. As I shuffle aside a couple of credit card statements and a playbill for *The Laramie Project* at the Provincetown Theater, I uncover a little ceramic bowl, chipped and quaint and exactly the kind of whimsical, antiquated thing Mina likes.

The sight of its contents hits me like a punch in the gut.

There, glittering in the sunlight filtering through the window facing the sea, left behind with as much care as that abandoned wineglass in the sink, are my wife's wedding and engagement rings.

## CHAPTER ONE

**S**he hummed quietly as she watched the churning waves. It was a song with words she couldn't quite remember, though surely she had known them at some point—the tune came to her as easily as breathing. The ocean folded over on itself, again and again, and she felt the relentless movement inside her. She swayed, her bare feet embedded in the sand, while the salty wind whipped her hair across her face. Sandpipers sprinted by on their toothpick legs. A gull cried out as it swooped overhead.

She hummed a little louder. The tune had been looping through her mind ever since she'd gotten up this morning, but she couldn't dredge up the name of the song or recall who sang it. Annoyance pricked at her once, twice, then faded to a dull twinge as she let the sight of the waves lull her again.

She'd stay here all day if she could. Race Point was the very edge of Cape Cod, surrounded by infinite water and sky. From here, she could drift away on the wind. She turned her face to the sun, closing her eyes and spreading her arms. The tune had fallen silent in her throat; she was a wisp of smoke, a silky ribbon spiraling in the breeze.

Somewhere to her left, a man shouted. She spun around, arms winding instinctively over her middle before falling to her sides. Just

two guys playing Frisbee. They didn't even seem aware of her. She turned back to the ocean and stared as a wave deposited a swath of foam a yard from where she stood. She could float away. She could fly. She was a song on the breeze. Her mind was empty. Empty.

As the waves spread themselves thin along the sand, she tried to reclaim the soaring freedom that had seemed within her grasp only moments before.

After a few minutes, she gave up.

Her hair had coiled around her throat; strands were caught in her eyelashes and had wormed their way between her lips. Her cheeks felt warm; she'd been so eager to get here that she hadn't bothered to slather on the sunblock. Her bare calves stung with the scrape of sand. Suddenly, she felt it all a little *too* much—her body, her skin, her hair. The tune she'd just been humming was gone, crowded out by tiny shocks of irritation.

She had no idea what time it was, and Lou had warned her about being late. His words scrolled through her mind: *Easy hire, easy fire. Under the table works both ways.*

She took a step backward, trying to shed the sight of the ocean, until finally it let her go like an egg white slipping free from its yolk. She felt her brain quivering in her skull, a delicate membrane holding everything in place. One prick and all her thoughts might come dribbling out her ears.

Her shift started at five. When had she left the boardinghouse? As she slogged through the shifting sand toward the parking lot, past the Frisbee boys, shovel-and-pail-wielding kids hunched over mounds of sand, and their exhausted parents floppy as seals in their loungers, she tried to remember the morning. It was like fishing through the grease trap at Haverman's, coming up with a few

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chicken bones and a lot of sludge. She recalled the musky scent of Esteban's skin as she crawled from the bed. Rough granules of sand sticking to the bottoms of her feet as she headed for the bathroom. Frigid spray from the shower hitting her shoulder blades. Hanging the towel on the wobbly hook behind the door. Buttoning her shorts, feeling them sag down to her hips. Sliding her feet into flip-flops, the strap between her toes. Blinking in the sun as she stepped outside into the already-sweltering day.

She fiddled with her bike lock, her fingers automatically poking the numbers into place. One-two-zero-four. She maneuvered the bike away from the crowded rack as more riders rolled off the trail and came toward the railing. One of them, a middle-aged man in blue spandex, halted his bike right next to her and reached for his helmet. His gold watch glinted in the sunlight.

"Excuse me," she said, and then she pressed her lips together, startled by the sound of her voice. Was that what she always sounded like? Was that her actual voice?

The man was looking at her, expecting something. What did he want? Oh.

She smiled. "Do you know what time it is?"

He checked. "About four thirty."

She swung her leg over the seat and steered the bike onto the trail. Can't. Be. Late. One word per heartbeat, thumping against the inside of her skull. She pedaled up the hills and leaned into the curves, weaving around families with wriggling toddlers, older women in wide-brimmed hats, and a few cyclists struggling to figure out the gears on their rented bikes.

She didn't have time to shower or change for her shift, but it didn't really matter. She would be spending the next eight or so hours in

a steamy kitchen, loading and unloading the dishwasher, her hair curling along her temples and sticking to her face, trying to avoid Amber, who always made her uneasy. Amber's days off were her favorite days to work. Hopefully today would be one of them.

She nearly rolled through the red light on Route 6 as she pondered what day it was. She'd lost track again, maybe because she'd been working seven days a week lately, five to closing, five to closing, five to closing. The only thing she really had to keep track of was the five part, and she could barely manage that.

She picked up speed as she pedaled along Conwell, nearly got winged by a pickup as she hooked left onto Bradford, and swerved to miss a lady with a stroller as she bumped up onto the sidewalk on Commercial, right out front of Haverman's. The restaurant consisted of a covered beer garden patio snugged up against a narrow old house that used to belong to some fishing captain but was now taken up entirely by the kitchen, storage room, and Lou's upstairs office and apartment. The high-tops and bar seats were already full, and several folks were standing at the vine-covered arch marking the entrance to the patio, giving their names and numbers to Jenn, the hostess for tonight. As she chained her bike to the rack on the sidewalk, she gave Jenn a quick wave and was rewarded with a blank, stone-faced look.

She ducked her head as she went around the other side of the house and opened the employees only door in the alley. It might be hot and humid outside, but the climate inside was positively tropical. She closed her eyes as the familiar steamy funk enveloped her.

"Hey, Layla! I was just asking Jaliesia if you were working today!"

It wasn't one of Amber's days off.

Layla hung her bag on one of the hooks along the wall, noting the other purses and backpacks and registering who each belonged

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to. Purple pack—Jaliesa, the nice bartender. Pink hobo bag—Amber, the nosy waitress. Worn leather pack with the little hole that always tempted Layla to stick her finger in it—Arthur, the cute line cook. Her tongue itched as she considered his bag for the thousandth time. The material was so thin, so ragged, that it didn't stand a chance if she decided to jab her finger right through.

“Hey there, space cadet.”

She flinched and turned her head. Amber was right next to her. Her mascara was smudged. Layla glanced at the wall clock above the hooks. “I'm not late,” she said and smiled with relief. Her voice no longer sounded like that of a stranger.

Amber returned her smile, probably thinking it had been meant to be friendly. “We're short-staffed. Reese is out tonight. Lou wants you out front.”

The words splashed over her like a bucket of ice water. “Whoa. No. I d-don't think—I mean, I'm not—” She looked down at her flip-flops, her too-loose shorts, her secondhand T-shirt with a whale surrounded by plastic bottles. There was a faded brown stain on the blue fabric, right over her left boob. She raked her fingers through her hair, but they got caught in the tangles.

Amber gave her an appraising once-over. “No worries. I got you.” Amber grabbed her by the elbow and snagged the pink hobo bag as they sailed toward the employees' bathroom.

Layla's skin had gone goose bumpy. “I'm a dishwasher,” she mumbled. “I wash dishes.”

“Honey, it's Friday night, and you're about to make ten times more an hour than you ever could loading greasy plates into the monster machine.”

“Why can't Arthur or Serge—?”

“Lou wanted another female server. Lesbians deserve eye candy, too, ya know.” She whipped a T-shirt out of her bag, *Haverman’s Helles House* emblazoned across the chest, and motioned for Layla to strip off her shirt.

She crossed her arms over her middle. “I’m not a waitress.”

“You are now.” Amber held up the shirt. “And if you’re not, you can go tell Lou yourself.”

She took off her shirt and yanked the other over her head. She wished she’d stopped to put on a bra this morning. Her eyes and nose burned. A droning buzz filled the space between her ears. Her vision flashed with blotches of red and black. She braced her palm against the wall.

Amber slapped lightly at her cheeks. “Hey. Hey. Layla. Stop having a panic attack. Jenn and Wanny and Oscar and me’ll all be out there, and we’ll look out for you. We need the help tonight.”

*Help.* “Is—is Esteban—?”

“Your guard dog ain’t here tonight, though I expect you know his schedule better than I do these days.” Amber took her by the shoulders and gave her a brisk shake. “Come on. You’re a big girl. Act like it.”

Layla blinked. Amber had a sinewy neck and yellow hair with black roots. Amber had big dangly earrings that bobbed and swayed and clinked. Amber had a narrow nose and a triangle face and eyes that were murky green. Amber had a voice that sounded like barbecue and corn bread, not lobster and quahogs.

“If I screw up—” Layla began.

“Then don’t.”

Amber turned her around, and a moment later, Layla felt a brush run through her hair. She clasped her hands together and squeezed, fingernails digging into skin. She swore she could feel every single

bristle slicing across her scalp, but somehow, with each stroke, she relaxed a little. The sensation was like a weight pressing down, down, down, submerging the words and thoughts that had been crowding to the surface a moment before. By the time Amber yanked Layla's hair back into a ponytail, her cold sweat had gone warm.

Amber handed her an apron. She pointed to the pocket. "Tablet's already in there. Just tap on the right table number, then the menu items. Keep an eye out for your table numbers at the counter and the bar so you can get stuff to the diners quickly. Lou hates it when stuff sits for longer than a minute, and I swear he times us. Check in on your tables just before they've got an empty glass, always offer another round, always offer dessert, and pretend like the sea scallop crudo has given you multiple orgasms. Lou wants us to push that one."

Layla cringed at the thought of putting scallops, or any other seafood for that matter, in her mouth. She couldn't imagine ever having liked it, but the nights she'd spent scraping the half-chewed and picked-over remainders off customers' plates had only deepened her aversion.

Amber scowled as she read Layla's expression. "I don't care if the slimy little things give you hives, for heaven's sake—*pretend*. It's all about selling, okay?"

Layla tied on the apron over her shorts and pulled out the tablet as Amber continued to rattle off instructions. Her mouth moved a lot as she spoke, but her eyes and cheeks and brow were completely still somehow. Layla stared until a clatter from the kitchen startled her back to attention. The tablet was in her hands. The one she would use to punch in the orders. This would be fine. Just fine.

"Of course it will," Amber said, making her realize she'd spoken aloud.



It was fine until it wasn't. The hours whooshed by as she concentrated on making it through each individual minute. She mixed up a few orders and spilled a drink at the bar, but the patrons were mostly sweet. It was better than dishwashing, because there were no blank times. Every second demanded her complete focus, and it was all she could think about. Nothing else. Nothing but pressing the right button, picking up the right glass, saying the right words, and smiling the proper smile, even as she handed over plates of raw oysters and scallop crudo that made her stomach turn.

She had no idea how many tables she had turned over, and the faces of the customers were all a blur. The air had gone cooler as the night progressed, as the lanterns drooping over the space came on, the sky beyond went dark, revelers strolled past, and drag queens stalked by, waving regally and pausing for photos with admiring patrons. She liked watching them—there was no telling what the face beneath all that makeup really looked like. It was as if they came out of nowhere and disappeared just as easily.

The crowd thinned out as midnight approached, and she paused at the bar to sip a glass of water Jaliesa had set there for her. Her shirt and shorts were damp with sweat, and her ponytail had slipped down to the base of her neck, where her hair stuck to her nape.

“Almost there, girl, and then it's time to count tips over a double G&T.” Jaliesa shook a silver cocktail shaker in each hand while her ebony curls jiggled around her face. “My favorite part of the night.”

Layla smiled into her water glass, enjoying the feel of ice on her tongue. Her mind was a quiet hum of white noise.

“Hey,” said Jenn, tapping her on the shoulder. “I just seated three at six.”

She took a final gulp of her water. “Okay.” She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. Table six was in the back corner of the narrow patio. Seated there were one woman and two guys who looked about Layla’s age. One of the guys had his muscular, tattooed arm around the woman, whose curly black hair hung loose around her shoulders. The other guy, whose back was to her, had short red hair. They were dressed casually—shorts and T-shirts—not for clubbing.

She threaded her way across the patio and approached the table where the three of them were absorbed in conversation.

“—don’t really want to go back until Saturday, but my parents leave for Paris on Thursday, and there’s no way they’re taking Mr. Drillby to a kennel,” the redhead was telling his friends. He was talking fast, but his words were a little slurred, his voice a little loud.

“Hi there, and welcome to Haverman’s. My name’s Layla, and I’ll be taking care of you tonight,” she said to his companions, who had seen her standing there. “Can I start you guys off with something other than water?”

“I’ll have the house margarita,” said the woman.

“I’d love a Cape Cod *Blonde*,” said her partner, grinning at Layla while his companion rolled her eyes.

As his friend spoke, the redhead turned his head and looked up at her. The loose smile he’d been wearing dropped away. “Maggie?”

“Nope. Can I—”

“Maggie Wallace,” said the redhead. His eyes were bloodshot. He smelled like pot and whiskey. He grabbed her wrist.

The tablet in her hand clattered to the ground, and she let out a cry. She pulled her arm free of the guy’s sweaty grasp. People’s

heads were turning. Eyes were on them. She scooped the tablet up, peering at the screen. It hadn't cracked, thank God. "A margarita and a Blonde," she said, breathless. "Anything else?"

The guy had turned back to his friends, who were giving him concerned looks. The tattooed guy had put his hand on the redhead's arm.

"I swear it's her," the redhead was saying. "I was telling you. Remember?"

"He'll stick with water," the woman said.

"I'll get those orders in right now," she replied, but her voice had gone weird again. Strange and unfamiliar. It made her wish she didn't have a mouth at all.

The redhead turned in his chair again. "You look exactly like her," he said. "My girlfriend was talking about you the other day. Come *on*. Reina Ramirez. You know her, right?"

She realized she'd been shaking her head vigorously. She stopped when the tattooed guy said, "Let it go, dude." He hadn't released his friend's arm. "Let the lady do her job."

Before the redhead could free himself, she headed for the kitchen. Jalesa's mouth was moving as she walked by, but she couldn't hear what the bartender was saying. Inside her head, there was a low buzz and snatches of a song that seemed familiar yet impossible to place.

"Layla?" called out Amber, poking her head into the back as Layla reached for her bag. "Wait—you're *leaving*?" She pushed through the swinging door and dropped her tablet into the pocket of her apron. "What the hell happened?" She looked over her shoulder. "Did one of those guys grope you or something? Because—"

"No." She tugged the Haverman's shirt over her head, which was buzzing, buzzing, buzzing. She could make out Amber's words, but

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only barely. The shirt fell from her loose fingers, where it landed crumpled at their feet.

“You’re kinda pale,” the waitress said. “Are you sick?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “I’m...done.”

“Oh, honey.” Amber sounded sympathetic as she watched Layla tug her stained blue shirt over her head. “I know it’s been a long night.” Amber sighed. “You really did great. We’ll set aside your—”

But she was already out the door, down the alleyway, unlocking her bike—one-two-zero-four—and pedaling down the road. She didn’t even know where she was going. All she knew was that she needed to get away.

## WEDNESDAY, JULY 29, TO THURSDAY, JULY 30

The first time I saw Mina's face was on December 17 of last year, on a poster outside the Brookline Booksmith. *Join us for an evening with Mina Richards*, I think it said. That part I don't remember so well, because I was too busy staring at her photo. Her eyes invited mischief.

"Look," I said to Devon, who I'd just picked up from her mom's—a cordial enough exchange but one that always left me in the mood for a strong drink. "There's an author here tonight, signing her books. Kinda cool, huh?"

Bundled into her winter coat, a woolly scarf covering half her face, Devon said sternly, "You're not supposed to write in books!"

"If you *wrote* the book, I think it's allowed. Lots of people like to have an author sign a book for them. It makes it special."

Devon looked intrigued. "Will she sign a book for me?"

I peered at the poster, which displayed the cover of the book in question. A man's muscular bare chest featured prominently. "I don't think she writes the kind of thing you like to read."

"But she looks nice," my daughter said. I agreed. Then I suggested that we go inside, get warm, and find a new picture book to read that evening. Always the bookworm and already starting to read on her own, Devon jumped at the chance.

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“I’m tired of *I Want My Hat Back*,” she said. “But we can still read it sometimes,” she offered when she saw my face fall. I’d memorized every word of that one, and so had she, and we had taken to doing different animal voices as we read the story of a bear in search of his beloved, missing hat. Every time, it made me feel like I was about to win a Dad of the Year award.

“I’m sure we’ll find something just as good,” I said, even though I doubted it.

Pulling my gloves off and tucking them into my jacket pockets, I glanced around the bookstore as Devon guided me to the children’s section at the back. On one side of the space, the employees had a table set up with several stacks of books—all the same title—lined up along its front edge. Another copy of that poster with Mina’s picture was on an easel next to the table. *Beyond the Threshold*, the book was called. Obviously a romance novel. My mom had read at least four a week for as long as I could remember. My dad had loved to gripe that one day, he’d open his front door and be killed by an avalanche of smut, and didn’t she have anything better to do all day? After he died, my mom frequently joked that she was glad she didn’t have to sneak them into the house anymore, but she looked like she was about to cry every time she said it.

“We’re about to have our Mina Richards book signing,” said a woman over the PA. “Purchase your books at the front, and Ms. Richards herself will be over there at the table, ready to personalize them for you!”

Four or five women were already lined up at the checkout, each with at least one copy of *Beyond the Threshold* in hand. “Do you want to go look at books while Daddy buys Grandma’s Christmas present?” I asked Devon.

“Yes! You *always* rush me.” She happily let go of my hand, and I watched my independent daughter skip back to the kiddie section.

A few minutes later, I was standing in a short line, watching the author herself. She looked a little different from her picture. Her hair was longer, brown waves that fell past her shoulders. Her face seemed a bit fuller, as if she’d put on a bit of weight, but it looked good on her. She was younger than I was by maybe ten years, I thought (it turned out to be twelve). But those eyes—those were the same as in the poster. An eerie light gray, flashing with a vibrant, wicked playfulness. She was friendly with each fan, asking them how they were doing, thanking them for being there. Each time, it sounded like she actually meant it. She spoke with each person for a minute or so as she signed, and then it was on to the next fan, who she seemed equally happy to see. I had to remind myself of that when I reached the front of the line and her eyes skimmed up my body to my face. She grinned and let out a laugh so warm that I nearly melted right there in front of her.

“You’re my first guy,” she said, arching an eyebrow as she accepted the book I offered.

“Well, hey, I’m honored to be your first,” I said, then automatically recognized that what I’d said could be read as anything from charmlessly awkward to hideously creepy. “I mean—”

“I’m a romance author, mister,” she said. “And that’s *totally* the line I would have written.” She winked at me, and right then, I *knew*. I had to know her.

“Are you on a book tour?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I actually live nearby, and these folks are kind enough to have me in for my new releases. Publishers rarely pony up for tours anymore, especially because a lot of my sales are

ebooks.” She pursed her lips. “That was probably more information than you actually wanted to know.”

So, so wrong. “We’re neighbors,” I said. “I didn’t realize there was a famous author living in the area.”

“Oh, come on. There are at least twenty famous authors living in the area! This is Boston!”

I put up my hands in surrender. “I’m clearly not as hooked into the literary scene as I should be.”

“Get right on that.” She held up the copy I’d given her. “Who can I make this one out to?”

“Sherri.” I spelled out her name. “My mom. She loves this kind of book.”

“*This* kind of book. Hmm.” She bowed her head as she scrawled something on the page, quick and sure, no hesitation at all. A moment later, she handed it back to me.

*For Sherri, it read. Your son says you have excellent literary taste.*

I laughed. “She’s gonna love this.” Then I handed her the second copy I’d purchased.

“And who is this one for?” she asked, waving her Sharpie. “Sister? Girlfriend? Wife?” She was so goddamn cute, eyes and cheeks, that smile. When her gaze flicked to my bare ring finger, it felt like a triumph.

“None of the above. This one’s for me. Literary research.” I glanced over my shoulder to find a line of women beaming at me, the novelty. “I’ve never read a romance novel, but right now, I’m feeling inspired.”

“I see,” Mina murmured. “Can I personalize it for you, then?”

“What?” My voice had gone hushed, too. I leaned forward, almost in her space. Her perfume smelled like lavender and vanilla. It temporarily scrambled me.



I know, because she told me later, that I was staring at her mouth.

“I meant, what’s your *name*?” she asked after a few seconds, looking like she was about to laugh.

“Oh. Alex.”

She hunched over the book, shielding the words with one hand. “You’ll have to wait until later to read this, Alex. It’s top secret literary research stuff.” She closed the book and handed it back to me with a conspiratorial look. “Thanks for coming.”

It took every brain cell I possessed to make it to the back of the store and find my daughter, whose existence I had all but forgotten for a moment there. Her scarf, coat, and mittens were strewn along an aisle, and she was squatting at the end, surrounded by at least a dozen picture books. I bought Devon five of them, hustled her out of the store, and took her out for sushi because, for some reason, that is my otherwise-picky five-year-old’s favorite food.

Once we were safely seated, I had ordered a bottle of sake, and Devon had buried her nose in one of her latest literary acquisitions, I pulled out Mina’s book and opened it up.

*For Alex, it said. I’m honored to be your first.*

And underneath that, she’d written her phone number.

In that moment, I knew I was already in love with her.

My fingertips brush over Mina’s rings as I sink into her desk chair. I pick them up and hold them in my palm. I remember putting each one onto her finger, the first at Race Point, right on the frigid beach in March, with icy ocean water seeping into the fabric of my jeans as I knelt in the wet sand, with the waves pounding and the wind howling, with Mina’s wild laughter and her mittened hands

on either side of my face. Mina doesn't just smile when she's happy; she full out laughs, something that used to confuse me. But by the time she broke into uncontrollable giggles at the altar, right after I slid the wedding ring past her knuckle—with my mother watching, looking as baffled as the minister, and Mina's mother watching, looking as if she wanted to sink through the floor—I knew what it meant. As Mina doubled over, red-faced and out of breath and still bubbling with laughter, I thought I might explode with happiness and triumph.

And now here I am, and these two rings feel so heavy that I have to put them down again. They plink into the bowl, rattle, and go still.

Why would Mina take them off? Me, I take off my wedding ring when I work out, because I don't want the weights to bend it out of shape. I take it off to shower, too, and at night. The few times I've forgotten to wear it out, Mina has given me grief for it, and with an impish smile, she's insisted on placing it back on my finger herself.

But Mina never takes her rings off. She wears them all the time. Or at least I thought so.

It's another thing I'll have to be careful about when she gets back. We're not going to fight about something this stupid. It's not like taking off the rings means we're not married anymore. That's what I always say to her when I forget.

It shouldn't hurt like it does.

I help myself to another glass of wine, and then I wait. I read the opening pages of a book I find on the shelf—believe it or not, a thriller about a man whose wife goes missing. The police, of course, suspect he's killed her. After a chapter, I have to put it down.

By the time it gets to be six o'clock, I'm in a terrible mood, and predictably, that's when my mother calls. "I got an email from Drew

asking me to invest another \$200,000 in Biostar,” she informs me. “I expect to hear that kind of thing directly from you.”

What the hell? Drew is panicking—and he went around me. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” I say. “I was going to call you tomorrow. After the board meeting.” I have to smooth this over. She’s my mom, but she’s also an investor—one who talks to other investors.

“Is everything going okay?” she asks. “I thought the next step was getting venture capital money.”

“It is. Drew just wants to make absolutely sure we’re able to fund the trial that’s set for spring. He doesn’t want a delay.”

“None of us want that. If my damn cancer comes back, CaX429 may be my only chance.”

“Don’t say that, Mom. You have lots of options.”

She laughs. “And if Biostar goes down the tubes, I won’t be able to pay for them!”

I grimace. I’m the one who convinced her to invest. Drew sold me on the idea. God, he’s a great salesman. Immunotherapies for solid tumors are the holy grail right now, and he’d partnered with a guy who’d identified a certain ion channel as an ideal target, one that could be boosted to supercharge the cells that might attack the cancer. It just so happened to be promising as a treatment for the same type of cancer my mom had been fighting for the past year and a half—she was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma in her salivary glands right before my dad died abruptly from a goddamn aneurysm, a double gut punch that had left me reeling.

I’m no scientist, but CaX429 sounded like some kind of miracle, and there was my best friend, pushing me to be his financial guy in the company he’d founded to bring it to market. I left the accounting firm where I’d worked for ten years to help him make it happen.

I convinced a lot of people I knew to invest in our company so that we could run a pilot—Drew and I grew up in Weston, which is thick with people who have more money than they know what to do with.

Our angel investors are still waiting for their returns. Our pilot data were really promising—enough so that we thought every VC in Boston would jump on us in a hot minute. Hasn't turned out that way, but I'm not giving up yet. "Don't jump straight to the doomsday scenario, Mom. Biotech is expensive, and Drew is trying to cover all the bases. He's being cautious."

Impulsive and reckless is what he's being, but it'll hurt the company if I ever say that aloud.

"I didn't realize money was such a problem. Can't Caroline give Biostar some positive publicity or something? I keep hearing about these viral online things where people raise boatloads of cash. You only need the right push."

Caroline, Drew's wife, is an on-air reporter for the Boston NBC station. "That's kind of a conflict of interest for her, Mom. And start-ups don't really raise money that way, not the ones that need millions of dollars, anyway. Look, we're on top of this, I promise. I'm sorry if his email worried you."

"I want to hear news like this from my son," Mom says.

"You do understand that I'm the CFO, and that means a lot of this is on me? I've been kinda busy."

"Poor Mina," she says. "I hope she's not feeling neglected."

"Did you call just to make me feel shitty?"

As soon as the words are out, I regret them, especially when my mom says, very quietly, "I didn't mean to make things worse. The pressure must be crushing."

She's trying to make me feel better, but somehow, it's only making my heart beat faster. "I'm handling it okay," I tell her, softening my tone. "Sorry for snarling at you."

"The last thing you need is to feel guilty. You go ahead and snarl if you need to."

How is this only making me feel *guiltier*? "I'll call next week to explain the investment stuff to you, okay? I'm still working on the numbers and negotiating with potential VC partners, and I want to make sure I give all our investors, and especially you, the right information. Make sense?"

"I'm lucky to have a son like you," she says, sounding wistful.

"And I'm lucky to have you for a mom." I actually mean that. She's a pain in the ass, my mom, but she'd lie down in traffic for me without a moment's hesitation.

"Oh! Oh. Is Mina there?"

"What?"

"Is your *wife* with you, silly? I read her newest, and I wanted to talk to her about it. I tried calling her a few days ago, but she hasn't gotten back to me yet."

I sit up in my chair. "When did you call her, exactly?"

"Hmm? Oh, Tuesday morning, I think? Yes. It was before my hair appointment. Went straight to voicemail. She didn't mention that I called?"

I close my eyes. "Like I said, I've been busy. So has she."

"My book club is next week, and my girls and I are discussing *Bound for Life*. I promised them I'd have insights from the author!"

"Mina's not here right now," I say, feeling hollow. Part of me wants to tell my mom what's happening, but the rest of me knows that won't help at all. "I'll have her call you."

## THE QUIET GIRL

“Before Tuesday would be great. This is one of the perks of having a famous author for a daughter-in-law!”

“Sure thing. Love you.” We hang up, and I lean back in Mina’s chair. Mina’s always seemed super eager to please my mom, so I’m surprised she hasn’t called or texted her back. She actually worries what Mom thinks of her, no matter how many times I’ve assured her that my mom loves her. I think it’s because Mina hardly ever speaks to her own parents, and the first and only time I met them was at the wedding. They seemed perfectly normal and pleasant to me, and they live right nearby—in Truro, only a couple of miles down the road from Provincetown. But whenever I’ve suggested inviting them over or visiting them, she changes the subject.

Same strategy she’s used when I ask about starting a family, too, until I forced the issue on Sunday.

It feels like the walls are closing in on me. Launching myself out of the chair, I shove my feet into my shoes and head out the door. I end up at this beer garden on Commercial Street that Mina loves. Not just for the drinks—they’ve got great burgers and several vegetarian options, which is great because Mina absolutely despises all forms of seafood, an unfortunate characteristic for a native New Englander. We’ve been there at least four times this summer, and the last time, the grizzled Italian guy who owns the place even came out to tell her he’d made sure to stock this one brown ale from Jester just for her.

The serious-faced blond hostess tells me there’s a spot at the bar, and I squeeze myself between two couples to peruse what’s on tap. I watch one of the bartenders, his black hair slicked away from his tanned face, as he shakes a cocktail into a glass. I’m almost sure he’s been behind the bar when Mina and I have eaten here before. When he notices me, I order a Night Shift IPA. As he hands me my drink,

I say, “My wife and I come in here all the time. She’s a big fan of this place. Mina Richards?”

“Lots of people come in here, man. It’s Provincetown in the summer.”

“The owner here stocked a beer she really likes. The Feste.”

“I know who you’re talking about now! The writer, right? She orders Feste every time.” He chuckles. “About the only one who does.”

“When was the last time you saw her?” I blurt out.

The relaxed smile disappears, and his gaze slides to the other bartender, a black woman with a tangle of ringlets pulled into a loose bun, who has her back to him as she banters with customers. “Um,” he says. “I’m not sure. Like I said, it’s pretty busy.” He focuses on rearranging little jars of cocktail condiments lined up along the edge of the bar.

“I was supposed to meet her here for lunch, but I missed her,” I improvise. “I just thought—”

“Haven’t seen her today,” he says, keeping his eyes on the jars, probably thinking I’m some jealous abuser he needs to save her from. “She always seems to have her phone with her, though, so...”

“Text her. Yeah. I will. Thanks.”

I down my beer in about three minutes flat, pay in cash, and slink out of there before he has a chance to slide the bills off the bar.

I wake up alone. I know it before I open my eyes. My fist clenches over the sheets. My thoughts are a scrum of worry and anger.

Why is she doing this to me? Punishing me for wanting to have a *kid*, for fuck’s sake? It’s not like I demanded that we try to get

pregnant immediately. I just asked a question. And now my wife has fucking ghosted me.

Fuck this. I won't let her blow up more of my life than she already has; I have a company to save. I was up working on my financial model until two, in part because I had a hell of a time getting to sleep—I was too busy listening for her car pulling into the drive, her key turning in the lock. In that grinding, oppressive silence, I pulled the model apart and put it back together a thousand times. On Monday, when I go to meet with the Pinewell guys and show them the details, it's going to turn things around. Our first meeting with them was generalities, just the beating heart, but I've got the bones. And the brain.

I make myself coffee, rifling through the kitchen for the filters and the beans, which Mina never seems to leave in the same place twice. Then I call in to the board meeting, which goes surprisingly well. Drew is buttoned down. He explains his email to our angel investors, including my mom, as a strategy to entice them to up their ownership in the company because the opportunity is too good to miss. Since half of them sit on our board, they're intrigued by the chance, but they want to know who else is going to offer up the big funds—the fifty million we want to keep us running and completing studies all the way to FDA approval. It's not the right moment to hand Drew his ass for going behind my back. It won't matter too much if Monday goes well, anyway.

When the phone call ends, I hang up and face the day. It's late morning and already hot as hell outside. My anger has cooled, though. Mina is a lot of things—she can be flighty sometimes. She's left the stove on more than once, and she even left one of Devon's plastic cups sitting on a hot burner one time, not noticing



until the smoke alarms began to blare and the condo filled with acrid smoke. She sometimes waits to tell me that she parked my car in the town lot until I'm late for a meeting, and twice we've shown up at a restaurant only to discover that she never actually made the reservation. And she can be a little focused on herself, sure. If she's got a deadline or an appointment with her therapist that day or even just a new idea or a political bug up her ass, then good luck holding her attention for more than thirty seconds straight.

But she's not cruel.

I try calling her. Straight to voicemail. "Mina, call me when you get this. I'm in Provincetown—I came early to surprise you..." I sigh. "Surprise! Anyway, I'm sorry for being a dick on Sunday. Whether you're still mad or not, give me a call or text to let me know you're safe, all right?" I'm connected to her by this thin electronic thread, and I don't want to cut it. "We can work this out," I finally say. "I know we can."

I force myself to end the call, and then I sit there, fighting the urge to hit her number all over again. Where the hell *is* she? Being away all day is one thing, but overnight? And she left her rings behind. It takes a fierce mental push to shove from my mind images of Mina fucking another man. Or woman. Not that it matters. She wouldn't do that to me. She couldn't do that.

I grab the legal pad she left behind and read the first page—it's a scene in which two characters are fighting, and the heroine is enraged but still feels inexplicably and irritatingly drawn to the guy she's arguing with, who I assume is the romantic hero. I turn the page and keep reading. Scrawled in the margin of the second page is a list:

## THE QUIET GIRL

*Eggs*

*English muffins*

*Bacon*

*Cheese*

*Seltzer*

*Bills*

*Cash*

*Stef*

*Emily*

I know Emily—that’s Mina’s therapist in Boston. But Stef? Is that one of her friends? She doesn’t have many; she’s told me she’s always been an introvert, and she’s not good at staying in touch with people. Her best friend lives in Boston—another writer named Willa Penson, which I think is her real name even though it’s always sounded to me like a pseudonym. I know she has other writer friends, too, mostly on the internet, because they live all over the place, but I think she mostly chats with them online. Perhaps Stef is a friend here in Provincetown, or it could be someone from her publisher.

For all I know, it could be her dentist.

I wonder if I should know all these details of my wife’s life. It seems like I should. Especially now. After glancing toward the front door and half expecting her to be standing there, glaring at her obnoxious husband holding her precious legal pad and sitting at her writing desk, I put the pad down and open her laptop.

It’s a lock screen. I type in my own name as the password. Nope. I try a few other things: our anniversary date, her birthday, my birthday, and the name of a dog she mentioned having when she was a kid. Byron, his name was. No joy.

I give up and retrieve my own laptop from the bedroom. I'm not a big social media person. Never have been. I don't understand the pull to share the mundane details of one's life with a bunch of people on the internet. I have a Facebook account, but I think I've posted a grand total of five times. The last time was when Mina and I got married. I changed my status and posted a picture of us together, and I was deluged with several dozen friend requests from people I didn't know.

They all turned out to be my new wife's fans.

Mina is active on Facebook. She's got almost five thousand friends, but the vast majority of them are people she's never met in person and doesn't know at all. To me, that's like inviting a bunch of strangers to peer into our bedroom window, but Mina claims it's not like that because she doesn't post a lot of personal stuff.

The last time she posted was Sunday morning. The day of our fight and the day before she came to Provincetown. It's a picture from the Caffè Nero in Washington Square, a selfie of Mina at a tiny wooden café table with her coffee and her legal pad. I stare greedily at the image, pulling up the photo and zooming in. She looks tired despite the usual bright smile. *Up late writing a new scene. Now, like all passionate affairs, we'll see if it survives the morning after*, she's written. I squint at the image of the legal pad and then grab the one from her desk and compare the general outline of the prose on the page. I think the picture shows the same pad I've got in my hand. I zoom in as close as I can—the list is there in the margins, but the bottom three items are missing. She must have written those—cash, Stef, Emily—later.

I read the comments beneath. One is from my mother, saying she'd be more than happy to read the scene for Mina and offer

feedback, which makes me roll my eyes so hard that I think I strain a muscle. The rest are friendly comments from readers, questions about when her next book will come out and whether it's a sequel or a stand-alone, stuff like that. Her friend Willa left a heart emoji and a comment about how they should get together this week.

I instantly click on Willa's name. Even though I've only met her once in person—at the wedding—we're Facebook friends, too, and her dot is green. Hi, I type, then pause. What the hell am I supposed to say? Embarrassment paralyzes me for a solid minute, but then my worry sets me back in motion. *When was the last time you heard from Mina?*

Her response is slow, and it seems like she's typing a lot, but then it turns out to be only four words: *Why do you ask?*

*Just wondering,* I type.

...? That's her response, and I don't blame her. I consider myself a strategic thinker, but right now, I'm acting as impulsively as Drew. I don't want to admit that I don't know where Mina is. We've been married for only two months after knowing each other for only half a year, and there's already trouble in paradise. I'm imagining the *I told you so's* coming in fast and furious, and I don't want to deal with that. This is between Mina and me, and the rest of the world can mind its own damn business.

*Seems like the kind of thing you should ask her, not me,* Willa adds, and that clinches it for me.

*I will,* I type and sign out.

But two hours later, after the silence of the cottage turns oppressive, after reading Mina's handwritten scene four more times, after Googling "Mina Richards Stef" and finding nothing, after finishing the bottle of red, and after reminding myself that Mina *loves* me—she

wouldn't let me worry about her for this long—I pick up the phone and call the Provincetown Police Department.

“Hello,” I say to the woman who answers. “I need to file a missing person report.”

## CHAPTER TWO

**S**he stared at her knees. Both skinned up, pink and abraded, twin trickles of blood diluted by the steady, warm rain. Drops slid along her nose and cheeks as she rocked slowly, her fingers curled over her shins.

Her butt hurt. She shifted on the brick steps and winced. Her back hurt, too. Her fingernails were filthy, broken, and crusted with grime. Grit crunched between her teeth.

She raised her head as a memory came to her: teetering as her bike hit soft, loose sand. Her shoulder and hip hitting the ground. She lifted her left arm and hissed at the deep, dull ache.

In front of her was a narrow street, water carving its path through the silt at the edge of the asphalt. On either side of her were small cottages. Everything was gray. The buildings. The sky. Even her hands were tinged with it. She peered at them, wondering if she was actually alive or dead and in some weird in-between, a hazy, wet waiting place where she was all alone, the only soul in the world.

From behind her came a metallic squeak. She whipped around, ending up crouched at the bottom of the brick steps, looking up at a white-haired man wearing a blue robe and pajama pants who was

leaning out the front door of his cottage, the stoop of which she'd apparently been sitting on. Number thirty-nine.

His eyebrows were raised. "Hi there," he said quietly. "Can I help you?"

She backed off the porch and stood up. Her tongue writhed inside her mouth like an earthworm in rain-soaked dirt.

A younger, shirtless man with pink hair and black roots leaned around the white-haired guy, laying a hand on the older man's arm. "Who—?" the younger guy began, then frowned when he caught sight of her. "Honey, is she okay?" he asked, looking up at his partner.

"Are you okay?" the white-haired man asked her, his gaze traveling from the top of her head down to her knees. He frowned. "Do you need anything, sweetheart? We have some croissants if you want something to eat."

"How long has she been here?" the younger man whispered, but she heard it loud and clear.

Her fingers dug into her biceps as she waited for the answer.

The older man shrugged. "Did someone hurt you, dear? Do you have a phone? Need us to call someone for you?"

She shuddered and took another step back. Wiped the rain from her eyes. Smoothed her hair from her face. "I'm sorry," she said, licking raindrops from her lips. "S-sorry to bother you."

She turned and jogged onto the road. The two men didn't chase after her. She heard the squeaky cottage door closing as she made it to an intersection. She was back on Commercial Street. The Pilgrim's Monument was off to her left, and the ocean was in front of her, which meant she was in the West End.

Haverman's was in the East End. When had she left work? Where had she left her bike?

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She began to meander toward the center of town, pausing only to observe a lone pigeon, its purple-tinged neck puffed out with seeming determination, bobbing along the sidewalk as if it was setting out to see the world. The rain tapered to a sprinkle and then to a mist, and she breathed it in, imagining the tiny specks of water gathering on the inside of her nose, her throat, her chest. Filling up every space, every cell. She wrung out her soggy shirt. With every step, her heels exacted a sad, distressed squish from her saturated flip-flops.

She was not alone here. If she were dead, then these other people were, too, the ones out walking their dogs and carrying cups of coffee and folding up their umbrellas and squinting at the sky. She flinched as the ferry's horn sounded off, a deep bellow of warning before the vessel shoved off into the bay. Unless the 8:30 a.m. fast ferry to Boston was piloted by Charon himself, she probably wasn't dead.

But she was tired. Her pace slowed to a zombie shuffle, and she plopped down on the steps of a T-shirt store. Her hands found her face, sliding over the planes of her cheeks and forehead, over the dome of her skull and down to her scraggly, loose ponytail.

"Layla?"

A guy was standing in front of her, clutching a paper coffee cup and frowning. His name floated up to the surface of her thoughts, alone and unaccompanied. "Matt?"

Her voice was small and hoarse but hers.

"What are you doing?" Matt asked. He had curly brown hair that was thinning on top and a few days' worth of stubble. He wore a shirt with *Cory's Bike Rentals* emblazoned across the chest. He looked up and down the street. "Have you been out all night?"

"Yes." Better than telling him she wasn't sure.



“Doing what?” He glared at her skinned-up knees as he fished his phone from his pocket. “Jesus,” he muttered.

She wanted to ask how they knew each other, but she understood instinctively that it would make things worse. “Who are you texting?”

His thumb marched over the screen of his phone. “Who do you think?”

She began to push herself up from the steps, but Matt’s hand clamped over her shoulder. She yelped, and he drew his hand back as if she’d bitten him. Her butt hit the steps again. Matt shook his head. He said something she couldn’t catch because the buzz between her ears was too loud.

“I’m going to go get you something to eat,” he said, louder this time, pointing to the Portuguese bakery right across the street. “You want a muffin? Or one of those fried dough things?”

She put her hand on her stomach, then peered down at it. When she raised her head, he was gone, but then he was back, carrying a wax paper sack. He shoved it at her. “You can pay me back later.” His look said he doubted she was good for it.

The smell of cinnamon reached her, and she pushed her nose into the bag. Then she was shoving chunks of sweet, chewy pastry into her mouth. She couldn’t eat fast enough. She needed five more just like it. She needed a million of them.

“What the fuck.”

This voice she recognized, but she was too busy chewing to name its owner.

“That cost me three fifty,” Matt said to Esteban, who was now standing next to him, wearing worn-out boat shoes and khaki shorts and a Haverman’s T-shirt. His black hair was wet-looking, slicked back.

## THE QUIET GIRL

“This is where you found her?” he asked Matt as he took her by the arm. He pulled her up and steadied her with a hand on the small of her back. The wax paper sack crumpled in her fist.

“Ask *her*, dude,” Matt said. “I have to get to work.” He tossed an exasperated, disapproving look over his shoulder as he headed up the street toward the East End.

“I was out looking for you until three,” Esteban snapped, steering her up the sidewalk. “I called Jaliesa, and she said you took off before your shift was even over. Where the hell have you been?”

“I worked last night,” she said. The memories were hazy but there, a relief and a worry at the same time.

Esteban sighed, but he didn’t say more. He simply guided her along, and she didn’t fight him. She even knew where they were going. The boardinghouse. Robin’s egg blue, paint peeling from the wooden siding, narrow stairs. He unlocked the front door and pushed her upward, to the third floor, and then to the second room on the right, with a loose doorknob that he had to twist a few times to open. The place was hushed, though she could hear strains of Led Zeppelin coming through the door next to Esteban’s.

The cramped room was taken up almost entirely by a double bed, its headboard a shuttered window, the walls tilting inward as if they were about to collapse on top of them. She was several inches shorter than Esteban, and still she wanted to duck her head. He pushed her onto the bed and removed her flip-flops, then her shirt, his movements brusque. He knelt by the bed and pulled a battered suitcase from underneath. “Do you want a shower or just dry clothes?”

When she didn’t answer, he sighed again and pushed a red shirt at her chest. She put it on. It was huge, the hem hitting her mid thigh.

She rose and unbuttoned her shorts. They slid down her legs, soggy and cold, and suddenly she was desperate to get them off, to get them away. She kicked them toward the door. Underwear, too, because it was soaked through. She sat down on the foot of the bed again.

Esteban slid the suitcase under the bed. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Matt said you were messed up. Did you party last night?" He rose and took her face in his hands, turning her head up so she was looking at the old glass light fixture on the ceiling. "Did you take something?"

She tried to shake her head, but his hands prevented much movement. "I need to sleep," she said. "I'm tired."

He let her go. "I have to be in at ten anyway." He worked days at Haverman's and the occasional double. "Did Lou pay you last night?"

Her gaze flicked to her shorts, in a heap by the door. "I don't think so."

"It's the end of the month, and I need to pay rent. It'd be nice if you chipped in."

"Oh. Okay."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You've been here longer than I expected."

"Sure." She frowned. "You told me I could stay for as long as I wanted."

It was more of a question, a need for confirmation, but it was also the wrong thing to say. "I've done everything for you that I could, Layla! I stuck my neck out for you with Lou. I gave you a place to stay." He looked at her there, the edge of the red shirt barely covering her upper thighs. "I've been your friend."

Layla tugged the hem all the way down to her knees.

He let out an exasperated groan. "How long do you think you'll need a place?"

## THE QUIET GIRL

She shrugged, gaze focused on her own feet. Her knees were stinging. Her left arm ached. She had no idea where her bike was.

“Look,” he said, then paused. “Okay, look. Do you *have* anywhere to go? Did your folks kick you out or something? Are you from the Cape? You got people who might come get you?”

He had asked her this before.

“Because you don’t seem like you should be on your own,” he continued. “I mean, look at you.”

She raised her knees, tucking them under the shirt until it stretched over her legs like a tent, pulling at the raw skin underneath. The pain was warm. It connected her to her body. “I can go.”

“I’m not asking you to go, dammit! I’m just trying to know you, okay? I figured you’d talk to me when you got comfortable, but you’re... I don’t know. I can’t figure out what’s up with you.” He sank down on the bed next to her, shoulders slumped. “You can trust me. I’ve been looking out for you, haven’t I?”

She nodded.

He made a pained face. “Oh, honey. Look. I’m sorry.” He put his arm around her, pulled her to him. It hurt her shoulder and arm, but she didn’t resist. Her gaze rested on the loose doorknob. It still worked, but not well. Like her, she supposed.

“I can give you some money,” she said.

“Forget I mentioned it. It was just—it was a rough night. I was worried about you.”

“Why?”

“I like you.” He looked down at her. “I care about you. I wish you’d trust me enough to let me in. And I thought we were headed in the right direction, but then last night...”

“I’m sorry.”

“Forget it. I’m glad you’re okay. You really should have a phone, though. I can probably get you one if you want. For cheap. I know a guy.” He smiled. His upper left canine was gray. He let her go and stood up again. “I’d better head out, though. Gotta sling the drinks and pay the bills.”

He was still smiling, but she could tell he wasn’t actually happy. She didn’t move as he opened the door, as he stepped into the hall and then turned back to her. “I’m gonna see you tonight?” he asked. “We could go for a walk. Talk a little more?”

She smiled at him. He nodded and closed the door.

She fell back onto the bed and stared up at the light fixture. Assorted bug carcasses littered the glass bowl that covered the light bulb. She wondered if the heat had killed them. Or the light, flooding every inch of that space, magnified by the glass, too bright and confusing.

Esteban wanted to talk. Wanted to know her. Where she came from. What she was doing in Provincetown. Where she was headed next. He thought she didn’t trust him, and that was why she’d kept to herself, hadn’t told him a thing.

But that wasn’t it.

She *couldn’t* tell him about herself.

Because she honestly didn’t know.

## FRIDAY, JULY 31, TO SATURDAY, AUGUST 1

I don't regret calling the police last night, even though I could practically hear the dispatcher's eye roll through the phone. She asked if I knew whether Mina had even made it to Provincetown—maybe she went somewhere else. Free country, right? She asked when I was supposed to meet Mina, and when I confess it was today and that I showed up early, it only seemed to confirm her skepticism. She told me that I should call back if I had any new information, but that right now, with so little to go on and the high likelihood that everything was a miscommunication between me and my wife, there's not much the police can do.

I think about taking the ferry back to Boston, meeting with Drew in person and having it out with him, but I'm not up for that. Instead, I stay put, hoping that my wife will come through the doorway of the cottage, carrying with her a completely logical and innocent explanation of where she's been.

She doesn't.

Around noon, I try to track her iPhone, and I realize that Mina has her privacy settings efficiently and thoroughly geared to prevent those kinds of shenanigans. I don't know if they've always been that

way—the perils of celebrity—or if she only recently changed them (the perils of...me?).

I've never thought to track her before.

Perhaps I should have.

On Friday afternoon, I call the only hospital on the Cape and several along the South Shore, as well as every hospital in Boston. I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed when it turns out she isn't at any of them, when there aren't even any Jane Does admitted since Monday.

I also check with her neighbors. The couple who lives next door on the right, a slender older man and his younger, buff, pink-haired partner, invite me inside and offer me a drink. Their home is an ode to P-town, maritime and quaint, the walls bedecked with local art and old photographs of the docks and supper clubs. The older guy, whose name is Chris, tells me that he's been spending summers here since the eighties, and his partner, Aaron, explains that they met at the A-House about five years ago and have been inseparable ever since. They tell me they bought this place three years ago and did a whole gut rehab, and that Mina showed up with cake and lemonade to welcome them when they finally moved in last year. Over martinis made with, they inform me, South Hollow's Dry Line gin, which is a favorite of Mina's, Aaron tells me that he saw her leave in her car, but he can't remember if it was Monday or Tuesday evening. And he doesn't know if she came back after that. Chris asks if it's possible that Mina and I crossed wires—perhaps she's returned to Boston? I'd love to believe that, but surely she'd have at least texted me by now if she were back in our Brookline condo.

The elderly widow who lives in the cottage to the left says she saw Mina loading a cake carrier into her car on Monday evening. She says

I'm lucky, that Mina is a wonderful baker, that my wife has dropped off a batch of cookies on more than one occasion—raspberry shortbread and lemon butter the last time, about two weeks ago. And I smile and agree, yes, Mina's an awesome baker, no shortcuts, no mixes, and I accept her invitation to come over for tea the next time Mina and I are in town for the weekend. It's all very nice, but as I turn away from her door, my heart is pounding.

Before I'm even back inside the cottage, I'm dialing the police again. I tell the dispatcher I have new information. This time, she puts me through to the detective, who answers with a gruff, "Correia here."

I introduce myself. I explain everything. I tell her that Mina was definitely in Provincetown on Monday and that several of her neighbors saw her. That puts the disappearance in their jurisdiction.

Detective Correia is relatively unimpressed. Adults are allowed to disappear if they want to, she tells me. Mina took her car, her wallet, and her phone, and she could be in Florida or California by now, which is totally within her rights. She takes down all the usual information, though. I give her Mina's vital stats and email her a picture of my wife, links to her website and social media, our addresses in Brookline and here in Provincetown, my phone number and hers, all of it. I give her the color and plate number of Mina's Prius. I describe the last time I saw Mina. When the officer asks if we were having "relationship issues," I say we weren't, because we weren't. One fight is not a "relationship issue." It's just a fight. Every couple fights. And besides, it was barely that.

What happened: I asked Mina a question about when we could get pregnant, and Mina refused to answer it, and then I lost it and accused her of having second thoughts about sharing a life with me.



She said, “That was a shitty thing to say,” and I said, “That wasn’t exactly a denial,” and then she withdrew into her shell, not even making eye contact, while I sulked and drank Macallan and fell asleep on the couch, and the next morning, she left.

Is it a fight when only one person participates?

The detective asks if Mina has any family. When I tell her, she asks if I’ve checked in with Mina’s parents, especially because they live nearby—maybe Mina simply went to visit them for a couple of days? The detective’s tone gives me the sense that she doesn’t think much of the efforts I’ve taken to contact Mina so far. As if I expected the police to do my work for me, to handle my personal life because I can’t quite manage it. I have trouble blaming her for that.

She promises they’ll put out a BOLO for Mina and inform Truro police to be on the lookout as well, then reminds me that it’s the middle of the summer season, which means that they’re dealing with ten times more disruptive drunks, tweaked-out partiers, sex assaults, thefts, and yes, people temporarily going missing, than at any other time of year. Then she gives me her full name—Detective Felicia Correia—and asks me to let her know if Mina turns up or if anything else comes to light. She assures me Mina will probably show up soon, as most people do, and she hangs up. Busy, busy, on to the next caller.

Shamed by Correia, I dial Mina’s parents next, more out of obligation than confidence that they’ll be helpful in telling me where she is. I’ve always been close with my parents, and I talk on the phone with my mom at least once a week now that Dad’s gone. Mina marvels at that and has said on more than one occasion that she’d literally go nuts if she had to spend that much time speaking to her own mother. When I joked one time that my mom isn’t exactly

## THE QUIET GIRL

a boon for my sanity, Mina gave me what I can only describe as a patronizing smile. So I brace myself for tension and unpleasantness as Rose Harkin Richards answers the phone.

What I get is the opposite: Mina's mother sounds surprised when I say my name—she hasn't spoken to me often enough to know my voice—but when I tell her I'm in Provincetown, she immediately invites me out for a visit the next day. She seems truly excited and asks me whether I have any allergies or food sensitivities. Although it's the reason I called, I don't ask if she knows where Mina is or tell her that Mina is missing, her pleasant tone proving to me that she doesn't know anything's amiss. Then she tells me she really must go because she has to visit a friend who's in the hospital all the way down in Hyannis and visiting hours end at eight. I hang up without managing to wedge more than a few words into the conversation. Rose's bubblyness shunted me along like a fast-moving current, and I didn't end up anywhere near where I thought I would.

On Saturday morning, after another near-sleepless night spent waiting for my wife to show up, I get out of my Lyft and turn to the front door of my in-laws' house. I'm keenly aware of the strangeness; Mina never brought me out to meet them or visit, even though she owns a home only ten miles away. And now I'm about to tell these nice people that I have no idea where their daughter has run off to.

As my ride pulls away, I stand frozen in the drive, bleached white shells crunching beneath my shoes as I shift my weight from foot to foot. Scott and Rose live right on the border of the National Seashore lands, only half a mile off Route 6, in a charming old Cape house surrounded by wax myrtles and evergreens on all sides. You can't even see the house until you pull into the drive, so even though we're in the middle of high season and the population around here has

quintupled, right here, you wouldn't think there was another soul around for miles.

The only car in the carport is a Cadillac that's at least ten years old, if not fifteen. There's a pickup parked at the side of the house, and an old brown Mercedes in the drive. Mina's Prius isn't anywhere to be seen, and I swallow back a sour pang of disappointment. It would have been so easy, so obvious, so nice if she had just been here.

"Hello?"

I turn to see a woman with shoulder-length silver hair coming out the front door, but it isn't Mina's mom. "Hi," I say.

Her eyes go wide. "I know who you are! Your picture's on the mantel." She jerks her thumb back toward the house and then comes toward me, her hand outstretched. A broad, flat, cloth-covered basket hangs from the crook of her other arm.

"I'm Sharon Rawlings. I live next door." She waves her fingers vaguely at the thick, scrubby wall of wax myrtles to my right, then gives my hand a quick squeeze. "Rose was just telling me that you were coming over. She showed me the wedding album, too. Such a lovely, lovely day it must have been."

"It's really nice to meet you," I say, wondering if we should have invited her to the wedding. Mina only had a few guests on her side, mostly friends from the Boston area.

Sharon holds up her basket as I glance down at it. "Rose is the sweetest lady." She flips up a corner of the flowered tea towel covering the basket's contents, revealing a large plate of scones, complete with crocks of what appear to be clotted cream and raspberry jam, garnished with little pink and yellow flowers. "These are our favorite," Sharon says. "Strawberry almond. She knew we needed the lift."

"Is everything okay?"

“Oh, my Phillip is under the weather. He’ll be fine, but this week hasn’t been easy.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“He should be out of the hospital by tomorrow night.”

“Rose did say she had a friend who’d been hospitalized. I’m glad he’s on the mend.”

Sharon nods, looking fretful. “We were lucky. Terrible bout of food poisoning, if you can believe it.”

“Seafood?”

“You’d think it, wouldn’t you? Around here?” She covers the scones again. “I had told Rose he’s hesitant to try solid foods just yet, and look what she did! He won’t be able to help himself once he sees these.”

“Mina told me that her mother’s always baking something.” It’s one of the few concrete things she’s actually said about her mom and the one thing Mina’s been willing to admit they have in common.

“Oh, *always*.” Sharon’s smile almost looks like a grimace. “Rose is a tough lady to keep up with. Always has been.” Then her expression turns mischievous. “One day I thought to myself, why even try? Especially when I can benefit from the fruits of my friend’s labor?” She pats my arm. “She was telling me she hadn’t gotten to spend much time with you before the wedding. It sounded like quite a whirlwind affair! I actually wondered if...”

“What?”

Sharon’s cheeks have gotten a little pink. “A shotgun wedding? Not that Scott would ever—”

“No,” I say. “That’s not... No.” I let out a burst of awkward laughter.

Sharon drops her face into her hands, looking like she wants to sink into the ground. “Oh, dear Lord. I always manage to put my

foot in my mouth,” she says, her voice muffled against her palms. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s totally fine.”

“Please don’t tell Rose or Scott.” She peeks up from her hands and glances toward the ruffled curtains that grace the windows at the front of the house. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they wondered about it themselves, now that you mention it.” I’d never even considered that people might think that about us. I don’t think it would have occurred to any of our friends.

“They have some strong beliefs in that department. They were thrilled when you two decided to tie the knot before living together.”

“They’d actually care about that? I don’t really know them that well.”

“Oh, honey.” Her laughter is throaty this time. She shakes her head. “Rose Harkin Richards is a Southern belle, from skin to soul. Loves God, country, and a perfectly set table. And Scott, he loves Rose. Once you know that about them, the rest makes sense. I’d better get going.” She gives my arm another pat and heads for the Mercedes, pausing to wave toward the front door as she gets in.

Rose emerges from the house as Sharon pulls out of the drive. Mina’s mother is wearing a flowered sundress and pink cardigan. She’s a formidable woman, much taller than her daughter. I’m six two, and Rose has got to be only an inch or two shorter than I am. Her shoulders are broad. Everything about her is broad, in fact, including her smile. She holds out her arms. “It’s *so* good to see you again,” she says warmly as she envelops me in her perfumy embrace and voluptuous accent. “Your visit is an answer to prayer. We were hoping to get to know our new son! You met Sharon?”

“She was telling me how much she appreciated the scones.”

Rose releases me, shaking her head. “It was a close call, apparently. Closer than she’s making it out to be. She’s such a tough lady, and she doesn’t like to make a big deal when things are troubling her. He’s been in the hospital for days, though! I visited with him last night for a little while, and the poor man looked downright hollowed out. I’m hoping he’ll be willing to choke down a few crumbs.”

“She seemed to think the scones would bring him around. They looked great to me.”

“Well, I’ve got something else for us.” She releases me and holds the front door wide. “Scott’s making drinks. Bloody Mary?”

“Sure.” I follow her into the immaculate living room. Wooden floors, rattan area rug, a chipped antique coffee table painted sea green, squashy beige couch and chairs in front of the fireplace. One of our wedding pictures is on the mantelpiece, black-and-white with me and Mina in the center and her parents on either side of us. Right next to it is a poem about footprints in the sand, words printed over a beach scene, a cross Photoshopped into the corner of the image.

“Sit down, sit down. Are you hungry?”

I shake my head, and her smile sags a bit.

“I’ve made a giant batch of zucchini bread, and I just finished the blackberry compote,” she informs me. “Picked the zucchinis and berries right out back this morning.”

“Now that I think about it, I’m famished.”

Rose looks delighted. She leaves me in the living room and disappears into the kitchen, where I hear her murmuring to Scott. A moment later, he emerges with a Bloody Mary, which he hands to me. “We’re glad to have you here, Alex,” he says quietly. “It’s nice to see you again.”

From what I can tell, Scott says everything quietly. At the wedding, Rose did the talking for both of them while he stared into his drink and let her tow him around. The only time he smiled was when he looked at Mina. Meanwhile, as far as I could tell, Rose and Mina barely interacted after we got through with the wedding pictures. While Mina and I danced and celebrated with our friends, Rose circulated, seeming to enjoy being the mother of the bride and determined to make friends with every single guest, including my mom, who didn't quite seem to know what to make of her.

Scott seems like the perfect match for his wife—he's as big as she is. Same height, same width. But in every other way, he's her opposite, as if he'd been built to complement her. He rarely makes a noise while she fills the room with the sound of her voice. His stillness is the inverse of her bustling energy. When she walks into the room carrying a tray laden with thick slices of bread beside a crock of butter and another of compote, Scott fetches a vase of flowers and brings it to the coffee table. When she sits down next to me and leans forward attentively, he stands behind her chair like a butler.

They bow their heads at the same time and mutter quietly for a moment. A prayer, I realize, too late to at least bow my head in respect. They clearly don't expect me to join in; maybe Mina told them I'm not religious. Mina describes herself as a recovering Protestant, but I think she's careful around her parents. After talking with Sharon, I can see why Mina insisted we have a minister perform the wedding.

Once Rose has served me a plate of bread, once I've taken a sip of my drink and been informed the mix was made from scratch with heirloom tomatoes from the garden, she fixes me with a look. She has the same pale-gray eyes as her daughter, the only physical similarity they share. "She didn't come with you," she says. Her tone is pleasant,

as if she were simply commenting about the weather. “Did she send you over by yourself, or did you decide you needed to independently verify that we’re exactly as monstrous as she’s told you?”

I blink at her. “She hasn’t—”

Rose’s face breaks into a smile once more, and she lets out a laugh. “You poor thing. I’m joking!” She grins and shakes her head as she plucks crumbs from the coffee table and places them back on the scone plate, one by one. “I’m sorry. We finally have a chance to visit with you, and I’m already scaring you away!”

“No, it’s all right,” I say. “I was actually hoping to talk to you about Mina.” Then I pause and glance up at Scott, who is once again looking into his drink.

“Scott,” says Rose. “Why don’t you go make those bouquets and get them into the fridge?” As her husband obeys, she turns back to me. “It’s for one of the ladies in my Bible study. Her mother passed, and the wake is tonight. We’re providing the flowers.”

Startled by the change of subject, I stammer, “That’s really kind of you.” Rose is one of those church ladies, always whipping up a casserole for a funeral or a cake for a baby shower or meals to freeze for families with a loved one in the hospital. She’s the one who coordinates the socials and the bake sales and the youth groups and the fund-raisers for missionaries. She’s the one who drives the children of undocumented landscapers to their medical appointments and runs boot and coat drives for the poor in the winter. I know all this not because Mina told me or because I’m seeing it live and in person today. Rose friended me on Facebook just after the wedding, and I’ve seen post after post about her good deeds and how each blesses her just as much as those she serves. “I don’t know how you find the time, but I’m sure it’s really appreciated.”



She pats my knee. Despite all her gardening and baking, her fingernails are perfect ovals, shimmering with a pearly white polish. I'm thinking Scott does most of the dirty work. "I do what I can to help people, but I'm not exactly saving the world from cancer like you are."

I take a bite of my zucchini bread. "This is delicious."

Rose is practically glowing with the compliment, and it makes my chest hurt, because now I have to tell her why I'm here. "Rose, have you heard from Mina this past week?"

"She didn't tell you? She came to dinner on Monday, right out of the blue! Such a treat, since we hadn't seen hide nor hair of her since the big day." She gives me a perplexed look. "She's not in Provincetown with you?"

When I don't immediately answer, she says, "I'm surprised you newlyweds are choosing to spend so much time apart!"

"She was here Monday?" I sit back in my chair. One of Mina's neighbors saw her putting a cake carrier into her car, and another saw her leaving on Monday or Tuesday night, and it could have been to visit her parents. "Did she say anything about her plans?"

"Plans?" Rose's glow has dimmed. "Why? Are you two having problems already?"

Now, this is awkward. I have no idea whether Mina told her parents anything about our fight or our marriage. I don't see why she would have, given her general pattern of parental avoidance, but then again, I wouldn't have predicted she'd choose to spend her Monday evening with them, either.

"No," I say. "I mean, we're both adjusting to married life, but nothing serious. It's just that..." I pause. There's no way to say this that sounds okay. No way to smooth it over or keep up appearances.

## THE QUIET GIRL

“Mina left Boston for Provincetown on Monday morning, Rose, and I haven’t heard from her since.” I say it all quickly, like ripping off the proverbial Band-Aid. “I took the ferry from Boston on Wednesday, but she wasn’t at the cottage. She’s not answering her phone. And I guess now I know that she visited you on Monday, but I’d sure like to know where she went after that and where she is now. Because I have no idea.”

Scott appears in the doorway to the kitchen, but Rose doesn’t seem to notice. Her hand has risen from her chest to her throat, and it seems like there’s something caught there. “Do you think something happened to her?” she asks hoarsely.

“I don’t know. Did she seem worried or upset on Monday?”

“She seemed perfectly fine, didn’t she, Scott?”

Scott’s nod is barely perceptible.

“When did she leave that night?” Rose asks him. “I didn’t see her after the two of you went out to your workshop.” She gestures at her husband and tells me, “This one is always working on a project, and he loves to show off for his daughter.”

“She left around nine,” Scott says, looking like a man who has never shown off for anyone ever.

“She seemed perfectly fine,” Rose says again, and it makes me glad I didn’t mention the fight. “Oh, do you think she’s been in an accident?”

“I called all the hospitals in the area,” I offer. “She wasn’t at any of them. Not a Jane Doe, either.”

Rose’s fingers are worrying at her throat, and I realize she’s rubbing a crucifix pendant on a thin gold chain. “We could call hospitals a little farther away,” she says. “Just to make sure.”

“Have you reported this to the police?” Scott asks.

I nod.

“Let me guess,” Rose says bitterly, locking gazes with her husband. “They told you that she’s an adult and has a right to disappear.”

“How did you know?” I ask.

“Hmm?” Rose whips around to focus on me again. “Oh. I’ve seen every episode of *Law & Order* they ever made. The real ones, anyway. I don’t count the ones after Lennie Briscoe died.”

“I really hope this isn’t headed in that direction,” I say.

“My daughter is a free spirit,” Rose says, jabbing at the ice in her glass with a stalk of celery. “You understand that. She’s a creative person.” She takes a long pull from her drink, looking like she needs the fortification.

“I do understand that,” I say. “I’ve seen her get lost inside her own head sometimes, but never actually lost.”

Rose lets out a choked little grunt before waving the noise away and setting her glass onto its marble coaster with a hard *clack*. “A bit of spice in my throat,” she says hoarsely.

“I’m worried about her, Rose.”

“And now we are, too. Sometimes I think she forgets that kind of thing,” Rose murmurs. “How other people worry. How it affects us.” Tears shine in her eyes. “None of her Boston friends have heard from her?”

“They might have. I’ll check.” Until now, I’ve been telling myself it was all going to be all right, but Rose’s reaction is making this real. “And I’ll call the police again. Maybe the Truro police?”

“Try the state police,” says Rose. “Do you have any shared credit cards?” When I nod, she says, “Check to see if she’s made any purchases. That could give you a hint as to where she’s been.” She looks at Scott again, but the man is still standing there like he’s been carved out of ice.

“I’ll do that,” I promise Rose, feeling stupid for not having done it already. “I’ll check the bank account to see if she pulled anything out, too.”

Rose is nodding, pressing her lips together like she’s trying not to cry. I feel like a dick for coming to her like this, without having made enough of an effort first. I want to explain that I was hoping Mina was here, but that sounds so lame that I’m sure it would make things worse.

“Her phone,” Rose says. “What about her phone? Can’t you track it?”

“We haven’t changed that account yet. She’s still got her own.” And come to think of it, Mina has credit cards of her own, too, so if she’s trying to avoid being found, it’s unlikely she would have used the one we share. I’m still going to check it, but helplessness is already strangling me. “I’m sorry for worrying you two.”

“It’s our job to worry,” says Rose. She lets out a weak chuckle. “We’ve been worrying about her for her entire life, whether she wants us to or not.”

Scott is looking out the window now, to their lush garden plot, a riot of red and orange and purple and green. Then he walks to the double doors that lead out to the patio. “I’ll be in my workshop,” he says. “Nice seeing you, Alex.”

He leaves, closing the doors gently. I watch him trudge across the patio toward a shed beyond the garden. It’s painted to match the house, right down to the shutters.

“I’m sorry for my husband’s rudeness,” Rose says. “He’s a good man. The most wonderful man. Always took care of us. Worked himself to the bone. He’d do anything to provide, especially for his daughter. But social graces...” She smiles. “Not in his DNA.”

She offers me another slice of zucchini bread.

Again, it feels like the walls are closing in. I don't know why I thought Mina's parents might have the answers. Maybe because it was better than facing what's in front of me now—a missing wife, police who don't seem to give a shit, and not many places to look.

Rose is back to picking tiny crumbs from the coffee table. "I'm sure we'll find her," she says. "She's fine." She nods as if she's made a decision. "I know it might not be your thing, but will you pray with me, Alex? I wouldn't normally ask, but right now..." She looks like she's about to burst into tears. "It would mean a lot to me."

The next minutes are among the most uncomfortable I've ever endured. I hold hands with Mina's mother, bow my head, and listen to her beg the Lord Jesus to bring her baby home to her family and the husband who loves her.

Unbidden, I'm reminded of Mina's rings, left abandoned in her cottage.

What if Mina doesn't *want* to come home to me?

Anything could have happened to her. An accident. A kidnapping. But I also can't avoid a possibility that's both more plausible and probable: she chose this. She wanted to get away from me, and she decided to disappear. She's a writer. A creative person. Has a flare for the dramatic. Her mother literally just said as much. Maybe Mina figured this was the best way to punish me for being an asshole.

I never thought she would do something like this. But then again, I met her less than a year ago. How well do I know her, really?

After Rose says "amen" and releases my hand from her warm, strong grip, I make my excuses, offer my apologies, promise to keep her updated, and leave as quickly as my legs will carry me.

## CHAPTER THREE

**T**he sun had come out by the time she emerged from the boardinghouse. She'd showered and changed into a clean set of clothes that had been left folded on a shelf in the bathroom. She was pretty sure they were hers—they fit reasonably well, and the shirt said Haverman's on the front. Her flip-flops still squished with every step as she set out along the sidewalk, but the rest of her was dry. She enjoyed the warmth of the summer sun on her skin for a moment, and then she began to sweat. She tromped along Commercial back to the West End, looking for her bike—until she remembered that there was nothing that really set it apart from any other bike. Nothing except the combination on her lock. One-two-zero-four. That, she could remember. The rest of...everything...was like a murmured conversation coming from behind a closed door.

Sometimes that frightened her. It wasn't as if she didn't care at all. She knew she was supposed to have the answers to questions people asked her, like where and whether she was going to school or what had brought her to Provincetown. Sometimes she tried to remember, but that trying made her head throb and her teeth hurt. It made her heart pound and her skin tingle. She could only bear to do it for a few minutes at a time before giving up. And did it matter,

really? She was here, and she was alive, and she had a place to stay, and she wasn't hungry, and nobody was hurting her, and she even had a job. That was more than a lot of people had.

She gave up searching for her bike and wandered for a while. The streets around the pier were packed with milling tourists, straight couples, gay couples, families with kids, groups of friends heading for the bars, and the drag queens with their impossibly high heels and big hair and impressive masks of makeup. They were like walking works of art, and she couldn't help but watch them and smile. The air was filled with the scent of fried things and saltwater taffy, and people walked by with ice cream cones stacked with fat scoops of colorful, melty gelato. She wasn't sure when she'd eaten last. She wished she had some money so she could buy something to eat.

Money.

She was pretty sure she was supposed to be at work. Her pace quickened as her thoughts jolted out of their sluggish drift, crystallizing into anxious splinters. The boardinghouse was a good place to stay. She didn't want to lose it. She wasn't sure where she'd go if Esteban kicked her out, and it seemed like he was thinking of it. She should get some money and give it to him, to help pay the rent. She looked down at the shirt. She worked at Haverman's, and Lou was supposed to pay her.

She marched up Commercial as the ferry horn sounded off. She knew the sound, almost knew the schedule, wondered what it was like to get on that boat and float away to Boston. Maybe she'd do it someday. She frowned—had she done it before? She pushed the question away and skipped up onto the sidewalk to allow a car to squeeze through the crowded street.

She paused in front of Haverman's, packed and bustling with

its weekend crowd. Esteban was behind the bar, apron on, mixing drinks and smiling at a customer as a rivulet of sweat made its way down his temple. Jaliesa was there, too. And Amber—

“Hey, kitty,” said a gruff voice. She looked toward a screened window on the second floor of the Haverman’s house. “Yeah, you. Get up here. We need to talk.”

Lou. Well, she needed to talk to him, too. She made her way to the alley, through the kitchen, and up the stairs to the un-air-conditioned second floor. The stale air pressed against her like an overfriendly dog. Lou, a big man with black, squiggly chest hair poking up from the collar of his shirt, leaned out of his office. “You always turn up, like a stray.”

She paused.

He rolled his eyes and beckoned her into his office. She stood on the threshold; the cramped, cluttered room—rickety chair, old wooden desk nearly buckling under the weight of stacks and stacks of ledgers, filing cabinets covering every inch of remaining wall—didn’t seem able to accommodate another body. Lou sat on the edge of his desk, steadying a teetering pile dislodged by his butt. He folded his arms over his chest. “You walked off yesterday in the middle of table service, Layla girl. Give me one reason why I should let you come within twenty feet of my establishment again.”

Suddenly, her mouth was filled with too much saliva, and she swallowed noisily. The sound filled her whole head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I...I felt sick.”

“Amber said as much, but you left us scrambling.” He chuckled. “And you don’t even work here!”

“I...” Confusion pushed too many words into her throat at once, where they got caught in one big pileup. She remembered closing her eyes as steam wafted up from the dishes in the dishwasher, the



plates and glasses ready to sear the fingertips off anyone stupid enough to grab them before they cooled. She remembered standing next to the ovens, watching the cheese melting and bubbling over pizzas and crocks of French onion soup.

“Oh, don’t wet yourself. Officially, I meant.” He muttered something about his heart being soft. “It’s hard to find good bartenders. I needed to keep Esteban happy. But it looks like he’s got buyer’s remorse if you ask me.”

“I want to give him some money for rent.”

Lou’s eyebrows shot up. “I figured you were working that off already. Amber told me you were shacking up with him.”

Her heart was beating too quickly, and it made her short of breath. She shook her head.

“None of my business anyway.” He opened a file drawer and pulled out an envelope, which he held out and shook. “For the last two weeks. You did pretty good. But if you ever disappear before a shift is over again, you better not come back.”

She took the envelope and peeked inside. It contained a healthy stack of twenties. She had no idea how many, but it seemed like a lot of money. Enough to pay Esteban and have plenty left. Happiness warmed her chest, and she let out a laugh.

“What are you laughing at?” Lou said, scowling. “That’s a fair wage right there.”

“No, it’s not that at all.” Still giggling, she folded the envelope and stuffed it into the pocket of her shorts. “I appreciate it, that’s all.”

Lou grunted. “Speaking of not coming back, I got a busboy out. Another one bites the dust. You’re up. Now get out of my sight.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Elation carried her down the hall. She had *money*. Maybe she could get herself a new bike. And a phone. Maybe

a ferry ticket. She skipped down the stairs, all the way into the steamy kitchen. She grabbed an apron from the stack in the closet and headed for the outside, snagging an empty basin from next to the dishwasher as she went. The beer garden was so packed that the waitresses, including Amber, had to hold the trays high to avoid beaming the customers. People were clustered along the bar like barnacles, shoulders pressed together and drinks sweating in their hands.

She threw herself into her work, loading up dishes as soon as customers pushed their chairs back, shuttling full basins to the dishwasher, carrying fresh settings back out and laying the tables just as quickly. The work absorbed her, and she got lost in watching her own hands moving like bees over honeysuckle, almost as if they were someone else's and she was an observer, safe and swaddled behind her eyes.

A couple of hours later, she emerged from the bathroom, her hands still wet. Amber was standing there, blocking her path back to the kitchen. "I'm surprised Lou let you come back," she said, the sinewy lines of her neck moving with every word. "He was absolutely rippin' last night."

"I won't do it again."

"Good, because I had to clean the whole thing up." Amber made a gagging noise. "One of your customers puked all over the floor about two minutes after you took off. Jalesa said he was giving you a hard time—the red-haired guy? Kind of cute but totally sloppy. What a mess."

Red-haired guy. She peered down at her own arm as the memory wrapped its fingers around her limb. She could picture his bloodshot eyes and feel the shaky strength of his grip. The skin of her left forearm went rough with goose bumps.

Amber poked her in the shoulder. “His friends said he mistook you for someone else.”

She rubbed her forearm against her side, smoothing everything down. “Happens all the time.”

“Really?”

“I must have a familiar face.”

Amber’s eyes narrowed. “I Googled you last night. Couldn’t find a single Layla Watersley anywhere. No Facebook, no Twitter, no Instagram, no nothing.”

“You probably didn’t spell my name right.”

She made to slide past Amber in the narrow hallway, but the woman barred her way with a skinny arm. “I want to help you, Layla! I’m trying to be your friend. Lots of people change their names or whatever—I’m not saying you did anything wrong. You seem...like you need a friend.”

“Esteban is my friend.”

Amber arched one eyebrow, and it wrinkled half her forehead. “Esteban wants a blond blow-up doll, doll. Been there, done that. Probably in the same place you did. You bump your head on the walls yet?”

There had been only one bed in his room. Suddenly, the blank spaces in her memory weren’t a source of comfort. They were dark alleys where anything could happen.

“I need to get back to work,” she said, and then her throat constricted. It sounded like someone else had said those words, someone she didn’t like.

Amber moved her arm. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she muttered at Layla’s back.

Sweat dampened her armpits as she plowed through the swinging

door to the beer garden and was greeted by a “Whoa!” from the other side. Esteban stood there, holding the door. He gave her a smile. “You nearly broke my nose.”

“Sorry,” she said and winced. This voice.

He gave her a concerned look, then glanced over her shoulder. “What did you say to her?”

“Nothing but a little truth, *Tebi*,” Amber said from behind her. *Her* voice had gone flinty. She edged past them, her face morphing from grimace to grin as she crossed the threshold. “Excuse me now.”

Esteban gripped the door and shook his head. “Bitter as hell.”

She looked back and forth from Esteban to Amber and back again. “I didn’t know...”

He drew his head back. “I told you about her, soon as you came to work here. I was totally honest with you.”

“Oh yeah.” It made sense, didn’t it? But suddenly, everyone around her looked like a stranger, including Esteban.

“She was telling me she tried looking you up earlier,” he said. “I think she’s just trying to stir shit up.” But his eyes said something else. It was one more way to ask the same questions all over again.

“I need to get back to work. Lou is mad at me about last night.”

His shoulders slumped. “I have to go to the basement for another case of Tito’s. I’ll talk to you later.” He opened the door wider to let her by, then disappeared behind it.

Before he came back, as Layla cleared used cocktail glasses from the bar, Jaliesa leaned forward and spoke quietly. “He really does care about you.”

Layla ignored her. She had no idea what she was supposed to say. Lou thought she and Esteban were sleeping together in exchange for rent money. Amber had accused her of being a blond blow-up doll.

And Jaliesa was making it sound like Esteban was just a nice guy. Layla had thought he was, but her own mind wouldn't give her the answers, and her stomach churned with the uncertainty.

"Hey, Maggie!"

She loaded the glasses into her brown plastic basin.

"Maggie Wallace!"

"Oh, here he is again," Amber said as she edged up to the bar. "Layla, look, it's your friend from last night." She and Jaliesa were staring out at the street, but Layla picked up her basin to head to the kitchen. She'd taken two steps in that direction when Esteban pushed his way through the swinging door with a box of Tito's bottles in his arms. He squinted toward the street as a man shouted "Maggie Wallace" yet again.

Amber tugged at Layla's arm. "You should go talk to him."

"Why me?" she asked, turning around to see a redheaded guy standing right at the half wall that ran between Haverman's and the sidewalk. "I don't know him."

"Who is that guy?" Esteban asked right as Amber said, "But *he* thinks he knows you." Right as Jaliesa said, "Lou's not gonna like this at *all*."

Several patrons sitting at the bar had gone quiet and watchful, an eager audience as the redhead shifted to the side, trying to get a view of Layla. Amber pulled her forward, and Esteban said, "Hey!"

"She says she's not who you're looking for," Jaliesa said, flicking her fingers at the guy. "Step off now."

Layla dug in her heels as Amber tugged on her. "I'm trying to work!"

"Why do you think she's Maggie?" Amber asked the redhead, but then she grunted as Esteban took hold of her arm.

"Lay off," he snapped, wrenching Amber's hand away from her and

turning to the redhead guy. “What the fuck is your problem, man? Layla says she doesn’t know you.”

The redhead scanned the faces before him—Esteban, Jaliesa, the staring patrons. He seemed to be clenching his jaw. Then he pulled out his phone, held it up, and tapped at its screen.

Taking a picture.

“Fuck this guy.” Esteban lunged for the arch.

The redhead took off running, shoving through a gaggle of men who had been admiring the paintings in the storefront of the gallery next door. Esteban charged after him, and both disappeared into the crowd.

“Well, that escalated quickly,” Amber said. Her tone was as dry as cracked earth.

Layla’s fingers were locked over the edges of her basin. Shock and confusion jittered along her spine, up into her skull, and along her limbs. Jenn was staring at Layla, questions in her eyes. Jaliesa, too. And Amber stood next to her, smirking.

“I have to get back to work,” Layla said. She turned around and marched back to the kitchen with her load of dishes.

## SUNDAY, AUGUST 2, TO MONDAY, AUGUST 3

I return to Boston Sunday afternoon, across water so choppy that people are throwing up all over the damn ferry, not even able to make it to the bathrooms at the back. Me, I haven't eaten since the zucchini bread on Saturday, so I sit in my seat, filled with a queasiness that has nothing to do with seasickness.

Mina hasn't used our joint credit card, but she withdrew \$400 in cash from our bank account on Monday at 10:36 a.m. from an ATM in Barnstable, probably on her way to the cottage. At some point, she drank a glass or two of wine and left it, empty and stained with her lipstick, in the sink. She took off her engagement and wedding rings. She loaded a cake carrier into her car, presumably after baking said cake and cleaning up the kitchen, because there wasn't a trace of mess to be found apart from that wineglass. And then, on Monday or Tuesday night, she drove off and disappeared into the ether.

When I get home to our condo in Brookline, I go through her office, starting with her calendar. She has a therapy appointment scheduled for Tuesday, August 4. With Emily, who Mina told me she'd been seeing for the past several years. When I'd asked why she was meeting with a shrink, especially for so long, she laughed it off. She told me everyone needs a therapist, and writers especially. She

said that she was fine but felt like it was healthy to pay attention to one's mental well-being. She sounded so confident that I'd even wondered if I should go see a therapist, too.

I plan to call Emily, but I put it off. It's Sunday, and it's late, and tomorrow morning, I have the most important meeting of my life. If I'm not sharp, it's not just my job on the line.

I go to bed, trying to ignore the impotent fury clawing its way up from the pettiest corners of my mind. Did Mina have to pick this week to do this? She knew what I was going through. She knew the stress was stealing my sleep and appetite. She knew I was worried about my mom and my best friend and the company we're trying to keep afloat. I was already texting her an apology by early Monday afternoon, and I know she was okay then, baking that damn cake, heading over to her parents'. She had to have seen it and probably all the others I sent after that. And still, she never replied. Still, she left. Still, she's gone.

And it doesn't fucking matter. I've already put this meeting off once, and the Pinewell guys are our last chance. I go over my financial model one more time, down a slug of Macallan, then another, and tumble into sleep.

I wake up early, groggy and confused, but it all comes back quickly. Too quickly. I have no space to think about Mina right now. Biostar is all that matters this morning. I get ready on autopilot, tending to my body as if I'm on the outside of it, scrubbing and shaving and draping it with clothes. Double-checking my model, stowing the laptop, driving up Memorial to Kendall Square in Cambridge.

Pinewell is on the tenth floor of one of the gleaming glass buildings that line the street. As I ride up in the elevator, I silence my phone. If Mina hasn't called yet, she's unlikely to in the next hour.



When I step out into the Pinewell office, I am greeted with a nice view of the Charles sparkling in the summer sun and the partner Drew and I met with at the beginning of last week. Blake Pierce looks relaxed in his jeans and sports jacket, all smiles and well-trimmed beard. During our first meeting, he joked about how his Model S is smarter than he is, that he was considering making *it* a partner, but I've looked the guy up. He's an MD from Harvard, just one who doesn't whip it out and lay it on the table first chance he gets.

He gives my hand a vigorous double pump. "Feeling better today? Your assistant said you had an awful cold last week."

A nice, easy excuse, and far preferable to the truth. "Much better, thanks. Appreciate the reschedule on such short notice."

"Happy to accommodate. Now, don't take this the wrong way, but you look like a man in need of really good espresso." He gestures eagerly toward a coffee bar that takes up the back half of their reception area. On one side, atop the glazed concrete counter, sits a beer tap—Trillium, of course, a source of bragging rights in these here parts—and on the other end is a machine that looks a lot like an engine, slick and chrome with the word *Speedster* emblazoned on one end.

"They only make four hundred of these babies a year," he says as he snags a little ceramic cup from the cabinet. "Best rocket fuel on the planet."

"Can you make it a cappuccino?" Any more acid and it'll probably burn a hole right through my stomach.

"Can do, but I'm telling you, it's a shame to dilute it. Nectar of the gods." He's grinding beans to powder, packing it down into the little metal cup, slotting it into the machine.

"He always wants to show off the Speedster" comes a deep voice

from behind us. I turn to see a middle-aged Indian guy, also casually dressed, also smiling. “If we cut back on our espresso budget, we could probably invest in one or two more companies this year.”

“Nah. We’d all be asleep at our desks,” Blake says as he steams the milk. “You have to be alert if you want to spot the real gems.” He claps me on the shoulder. “Alex, this is Francis, our finance director. As I told Drew last week, if we’re going to go forward, I figured it was best to make sure we’re speaking the same language.”

I pat my laptop bag. “Ready when you are.”

Blake presses the cappuccino into my hand, laser focused. “*Now* you’re ready. I have another meeting, but you two have fun. Francis, make the sausage.” And then it’s like someone’s cut the string, and he’s moved on to the next agenda item for his day. He strides down the hall, presumably toward his corner office.

I like him, but I also understand why Drew hates his guts. He’s ten years younger than we are and already where Drew wants to go.

Francis leads me to a tidy office at the other end of the hall. The space is populated by orchid plants on every available flat surface. There’s a Yankees pennant on the wall, and I wonder if he’s a diehard fan or just likes to bait people. On the desk next to his laptop is a picture of him with what I assume is his family, solemn-looking wife, two smiling teenagers. He sees me looking and nods. “I’ve got one at Harvard and the other at Hopkins. I won’t be retiring anytime soon. Do you have children?”

“A daughter. She’s five.”

“That’s a fun age,” Francis says, efficiently concluding the obligatory small-talk portion of the program as he moves us to a conference table across the office. “Let’s set up here.”

I fire up my laptop, pull up the model, and walk him through. Of

all the Cambridge VCs we've met with, Pinewell is the only one we've gotten into the details with, mostly because Drew walked away from the others in search of a better deal. He thought they'd come crawling back to us with offers to sweeten the pot, but it's obvious—to me, at least—that these guys have plenty of options.

For Biostar, Pinewell is the only option we have left.

“So here you can see how I got to our valuation,” I say after I run through the fundamentals. “We've got a risk-adjusted NPV of three fifty, and we estimate \$80 million to get to market.”

Francis has a pair of glasses perched on the tip of his nose as he peers at my screen. He sighs and sits back.

“I've been pretty conservative,” I say quickly.

He shrugs. “Your modeling is solid. Your assumptions are rational.”

“But.”

“They do not take the true risk into account.”

“I factored it in.” I nod toward my screen. “Sixty percent chance of FDA approval. We understand that this isn't a sure thing, but if it pans out, it's really going to be something.”

He chuckles. “Off the top of my head, I can name ten companies we've invested in that have cured cancer—in mice. Just like you did.” He takes off his glasses, folds them, and slips them into the inside pocket of his jacket. “We have a graveyard in the basement for all those companies, with a slick logo on every tombstone. Every single one went under.”

I decide that now is a good time to drink my cappuccino.

“Allow me to explain,” he continues. “While it's truly wonderful to heal the ills of our furry little friends, mice are not people.”

“I think I went to business school with a few rats.” I'm smiling, but I'm also grinding my teeth.

“Yes,” he says. “I looked you up. You have deep experience, Mr. Zarabian, but not in biotech. This business is all about risk.”

“All business is about risk. Preferably calculated.”

“Is that what you did when you made the leap into this industry? Took a calculated risk?”

I drain my cup while Francis chuckles.

“Forgive me,” he says. “I am simply trying to impress upon you the unique nature of our business. Let’s say, for argument’s sake, this ion channel that Biostar has identified is the golden ticket. Okay? You’ve got yourself a treatment! You’ve gotten CaX429 through clinic! You’ve gotten FDA approval!” He’s been waving his arms, grinning, but then the smile drops away. “Look out the window, my friend. Within one block of here, there are twenty other MIT startups, perhaps fifty. Immunotherapy is very hot right now. If even one comes up with a treatment for squamous cell carcinoma that’s 10 percent more effective than Biostar’s, please tell me the name of one doctor who will choose you over the competition.”

I set my coffee cup on the table next to my laptop. “The pilot data were impressive. You have to admit that, at least. And the market potential is high.”

He puts his hands up. “I don’t make the decisions—I’m not a partner. Blake is intrigued, and that’s why we offered \$25 million, pre-money, in exchange for 50 percent. It was a good offer.”

“But that’s less than 10 percent of our valuation—”

“And fully half of *my* valuation.”

“—in exchange for control of the company!” This is the point in every past meeting where Drew’s head nearly exploded. Biostar is his baby, and he’s gotten us this far. He’s not about to hand over the keys.

Francis gives me a look that says he's had this conversation a dozen times at least. "Alex, my friend, we have invested in sixty-three companies so far, and nearly 70 percent have gone under within five years. Do you know what that means?" He aims a finger at the picture of his family. "If I want to get those little geniuses of mine through school, the remaining 30 percent of our investments had better fly. To grow wings, you need our help. We are the opposite of dumb money—we know how to get things to market. And by necessity, we're not in the business of handing out cash without being able to pull the levers. I can tell you right now that no other sophisticated VC will either. This is how the game is played."

"Drew isn't going to like this," I mutter, snapping my laptop shut.

Francis pushes his chair away from the table. "You can always go out and find that dumb money. But another \$25 million will be difficult to come by unless you have best friends in Silicon Valley or Saudi Arabia." His eyes narrow. "And I've seen a list of your board members. It's *already* full of dumb money."

"Well, I wouldn't say *dumb*—"

"Friends and family, yes? You have a lot of people who believe in you, and that's wonderful."

He makes it sound like we're a couple of college kids with a garage band. "They believe in the data," I remind him. "They want to see this therapy get to the people who could benefit from it."

"Sherri Zarabian. Your mother by any chance?" When I nod, he says, "I thought so. Does she have a PhD in immunology? How many companies has she started?"

"Look, we'd be happy to have some guidance from Pinewell. Blake knows what he's doing, and he's got an awesome reputation. But even if I convince Drew to agree to this, when we go for Series B funding in

a year or two, this is going to be a problem for him.” Drew’s not going to want to see his shares diluted like that.

Francis waves my concern away. “He won’t be around for Series B. By then, Blake will have recruited someone with market experience.”

I go still. “What?”

Perhaps seeing the unguarded shock on my face, he stands up and pushes his chair in. “I have said too much. But startup CEOs are merely that, Alex.”

“And startup CFOs?”

He laughs. “Like I said, my friend, your modeling is solid. Once you understand the biotech terrain a bit better, you’ll do beautifully. And don’t worry about your CEO. He’ll make enough money on this to buy a craft distillery if he needs to drown his sorrows. But without funding...”

Without funding, he’ll have 50 percent of nothing. So will my mom. And all those stock options I took in lieu of meeting the salary at my old job, all in the hope that the risk would pay off? Garbage.

“I appreciate your candor.”

He’s already out in the hallway. “Explain the logic to your CEO. Most of them don’t mind letting go once they understand that someone else will carry the ball into the end zone. There is tremendous risk here but also great potential. Biostar has promise, and we’d love to see it succeed.”

I follow him out to the lobby. I shake his hand. I ask him to thank Blake and assure him that I’ll be in touch after I go over the offer with Drew and our board. Once I’m on the elevator, shell-shocked and already dreading the next several hours, I check my phone.

Four new messages.

One text is from Drew. He wants to meet me to celebrate.

Confident and oblivious bastard that he is, he assumes that I've set Pinewell straight and walked away victorious.

Another is from my mom, complaining that Mina still hasn't gotten back to her and asking if I'll have her call tonight—the book club meeting is tomorrow.

I also have a text from Caitlin, asking whether I'll be picking up Devon or if Mina will be doing it. Apparently Devon has a surprise for Mina. Something she made at her day camp yesterday.

And I have a voicemail from Detective Felicia Correia, asking me to call her back as soon as I can. Still in the shadow of the Pinewell offices, I dial the detective's number, my hands trembling.

"Mr. Zarabian," she says when I get through. "Thank you for getting back to me so quickly."

"You found her," I say. I should probably sit down. I'm feeling light-headed.

"No," she replies. "We haven't found Mina. We found her car."

"Where?"

"Park ranger called it in from Beech Forest. The car was there overnight, maybe the past two nights. Your wife's wallet and keys were locked inside."

## CHAPTER FOUR

**L**et's get out of here," Esteban said. "There's a place I want to take you."

She jerked her head from the pillow. Esteban was dressed and showered. She glanced at the empty expanse of bed next to her.

"I slept on Matt's couch last night," he said. "You seemed like you needed space."

She sat up, holding the sheet to her chest. "You want to take me somewhere?"

He held up a key. "Borrowed a set of wheels and everything. Come on. Nice day for a Sunday drive."

She eyed the key and then Esteban himself. She remembered the previous evening, Amber making her uncomfortable as usual, Jalesa being nice, and Esteban chasing that redheaded guy down the street. By the end of her shift, her entire body had been drooping with exhaustion, and the rest of the night was a fog. But it seemed like Esteban had left her alone, and it eased the anxiety she'd felt upon seeing his face. "Okay," she said. "I'll get ready."

"I'll be outside." He closed the bedroom door, and his footsteps retreated down the hall.

She showered and dressed in the same clothes she'd worn the



previous night. They weren't the freshest; she would wash them in the sink when they got back. She slathered on some deodorant she found in the cabinet and headed downstairs. She tucked her hand into her pocket and pulled out an envelope full of twenties. It made her feel powerful. Smiling, she slid the money back into her shorts and found Esteban waiting in the street outside the guesthouse, leaning against an old silver Corolla with a crumpled back bumper.

"Where are we going again?"

"Can't it be a surprise?" He opened the passenger door for her. She eyed the seat, and he bowed and gestured grandly. "Your chariot awaits."

A warm breeze gusted around her, and a gull cried overhead. Fluffy clouds glided across the vibrant blue of the sky. "Are we going to the beach? Do I need my swimsuit?"

He looked startled for a moment. "Oh. No. We're going to a restaurant."

"Where?"

"Come on," he said. "Just get in." He cleared his throat and chuckled. "I already told you more than I meant to! Leave me some mystery. You like that, right? Mystery?"

She took a step back.

He groaned. "Layla, just go with this, okay? It's my treat."

She put her hand on her stomach. The sun was already high in the sky, and she was hungry. Really hungry. She slid into the car.

Esteban closed the door gently and plopped into the driver's seat a moment later. The car was filthy, the back seat cluttered with empty pizza boxes and grease-spotted paper bags, the floor littered with empty soda cans and a few beer cans, too. "Sorry about the mess," Esteban said as he pulled onto the road.

## THE QUIET GIRL

“There are a bunch of restaurants we could have walked to,” she commented when he turned onto Route 6 a minute later.

“I thought it would be good to get out of Provincetown.” He opened the center console, which was packed with CD cases. “Remember how we met?”

She nibbled at a hangnail on her thumb.

“You said you weren’t from Provincetown, and I said I wasn’t either? Remember that?”

“Of course I do,” she said. Though she didn’t, not clearly. Playing along was often easier than confessing, as most people would fill in enough gaps that she could pretend well enough.

“You remember the song that was playing, outside of Haverman’s?”

“When?”

“When we *met*. Jesus, girl. Your memory is shit. Like someone hit you in the head.” He slid a CD into the player and punched the button to move to a specific track. “I remember it like it was yesterday. You were sitting on the curb, right outside the restaurant, and Lou sent me out to get rid of you because we didn’t need a homeless person scaring away customers. You remember the song that was playing?”

“You do?” she asked.

A song began to play, the first notes washing over her, the next couple catching like cogs. It was familiar, so familiar. It was the tune she’d been humming for...as long as she could remember. “Oh! Yeah. I know this one.”

He grunted. “Not sure how you’d forget. You remember what you said to me?”

“When we met?”

“I didn’t think you were high, but now I wonder.”

*Had* she been high? That might explain a thing or two. “Let me

listen,” she said. It was a rock tune with soaring guitar, and the singer began to wail. She was greedy for the lyrics, as all she’d had was the melody. She tittered as she caught a few words—lonely, running, hiding... “Are you trying to tell me something?” Her voice had gone weird again.

He paused. “Are *you*?” He went quiet again just as the singer belted out, “Layla!”

Cold prickles spread across Layla’s chest as the chorus went on and Esteban began to sing along with it. “Like a fool, I fell in love with you,” he practically shouted, off-key. His grin sent a chill through her. It was too wide, too sharp.

She slapped her palm against the buttons on the dash, sending the tracks skipping forward before the sound cut off entirely.

“Now do you remember what you said?” he asked. “I asked you what your name was. And you said it was Layla. Right as the song was playing. I asked you if you were for real, but I knew you were just making it up.”

“But that *is* my name.” Her voice was thick with irritation.

“Uh-huh.”

Layla watched the scenery go by; the dunes and cottages by the bay had disappeared, leaving scrubby forest on either side. “I want to go home.”

“And where is that, exactly?”

“I want to go back!”

“Calm down. I didn’t mean to upset you.” He reached to pat her thigh but drew back, and she pressed herself against the passenger door. “Jeez.” His thick fingers were white-knuckled as they gripped the steering wheel. “I should have asked more questions. Earlier,” he said after several tense seconds.

## THE QUIET GIRL

“Why are you giving me such a hard time?”

“I’m trying to be your friend. Why can’t you believe that?”

Her vision was hot with tears that she instinctively knew she wasn’t supposed to shed. She turned in her seat. “Amber said you were just looking for a blow-up doll.”

“Jesus Christ. Amber is a first-class bitch.”

“But an honest one?”

“What the fuck?” He leaned his head back and bumped it against the headrest several times. “You’re driving me crazy.”

“Did we sleep together?” Her whole body had gone tense. She clutched the seat like it was about to jettison her.

He rolled his eyes and muttered a curse. “And now you’re going to tell me you don’t remember that either? That’s fucking convenient.”

“Is that a yes?” she asked, her voice little more than a squeak. There wasn’t enough air in the car. She rolled down the window and let the wind yank at her hair. “I’m going to be sick.”

“Breathe.” He sounded so sad. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Just tell me what happened!”

“I thought you were into it, okay?” he said. “You seemed like you were cool with me. And sober. I mean, I don’t take advantage of drunk girls. I’m not some frat boy rapist if that’s what you’re thinking.”

There was a dead stinkbug, legs up, caught between the dash and the windshield. Only five legs.

“I stopped when I realized you were just...gone,” he continued. “Okay? That’s what happened. You stopped responding and just lay there like a corpse, and I don’t take advantage of those either. I tried to talk to you about it, and you just gave me this blank, dead stare. I know something happened to you.”

“Nothing happened to me!” shouted Layla, her voice filling the whole car, her whole head. She reached for the door handle.

His hand closed around her wrist as the car swerved. “You want to kill both of us?”

“Let me out!” She struggled against his grip, but he was using his whole arm to press her back into the seat. She tried to reach for the button to release her seat belt, but he jammed his elbow against her upper arm, making her shriek with pain.

“Calm down,” he bellowed as he steadied the wheel. A car passed them on the other side, speeding up to get around them before the dotted yellow lines became solid once more. She caught a flash of wide eyes and white faces. The car was going over fifty miles an hour on this two-lane highway, scenery whipping by, wind gushing through the open car window.

She slumped in the seat, her muscles going slack, her eyes on that dead stinkbug.

“If I let go of you, are you gonna do something stupid?” he asked, breathing hard.

She shook her head.

“Good.” He moved his arm. “I didn’t want it to go like this.”

“You thought we’d just go out on a date and then I’d hop into bed with you?”

“This wasn’t how I wanted it to go.” He almost sounded like he was pleading with her. “I’m trying to do the right thing here. Believe that.”

She didn’t believe a single word he said.

Ten minutes later, his gaze flicked to an orange rooftop up ahead. “It’s right here.” He slowed the car. Then he looked at his phone, where the lock screen displayed the time.

## THE QUIET GIRL

Everything inside her pulled tight. “It looks nice,” she said, focusing on getting every word out the right way.

“Everything’s gonna be fine,” Esteban said as he turned off the road. The car’s tires crunched over the white shells that graveled the lot of Moby Dick’s Restaurant—*For a whale of a meal.*

Before he reached the parking area, she had unbuckled her seat belt and thrown the door open. As she leapt from the car, she stumbled but kept her footing, and then she was running and running and running, panic drumming in her ears and tears bursting loose.

“Layla, no,” he shouted.

His footsteps sounded off behind her, and she screamed, terror exploding inside her, up from the lightless recesses of her mind, bringing with it a torrent of images and sounds and words and faces. Her feet pounded against the ground. One of her flip-flops was gone, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting away. Escaping. Outrunning the monster behind her, the one bellowing and roaring and snapping at her heels. She didn’t know where she was going, but as long as it carried her farther from him, it was salvation. Confusion squeezed at her lungs and billowed inside her head.

How had she gotten here?

Where the hell was she?

She screamed again. The sound merged with that of other voices, all raised high and loud and yet not enough to penetrate the din of memories inside her head.

She didn’t hear the skid or the horn. There was only a blast of pain, the whoosh of air, and then nothing at all.

## MONDAY, AUGUST 3

**D**o you think someone abducted her?” I ask the detective. The sky is such a bright, heartbreaking blue, and it’s making my chest hurt. For days, I’ve been thinking she probably did this on purpose, trying to punish me. Suddenly, in one devastating moment, I realize I was wrong. And I know she’s in trouble.

“Mr. Zarabian, right now there’s no way of knowing—”

“No way of *knowing*? Isn’t that your job? Who leaves their wallet and keys locked in their car voluntarily?”

Detective Correia lets my question hang between us for a moment before asking, “Has your wife been under any stress lately? Has she been feeling depressed?”

“No, why?”

“She got any emotional problems? Was she taking any medication?”

“*Why*?”

Detective Correia sighs. “I have to cover these bases, sir. We’re trying to figure out what’s happened. Does she receive any mental health care? Has she been—”

“She’s got a therapist, just to talk.”

“Just to talk.”

Irritation flashes hot across my skin. “Are you guys actually looking for her?”

“We’ve got Provincetown and Truro force here, along with National Park Service and State Police. We’re combing the perimeter of the park. Have you been here? Pretty big pond right in the middle.”

“I know,” I say, remembering. “Mina took me on a walk there earlier this summer.” There’s a trail around the pond, and the whole thing is thick with trees and scrub right to the edge of the water. If you hold out handfuls of birdseed, a bunch of adorable little birds will come down and alight on your fingers. Mina said we’d get ticketed if we were caught, but she couldn’t help herself. She called it magic. She couldn’t stop laughing as those little birds pecked at her palms.

“So she’s familiar with the place,” Detective Correia says.

“What exactly do you think happened, Detective?”

“We’re trying to suss that out, Mr. Zarabian.”

“Have you gone through the car? Are there signs of a struggle?”

“None that we can see. Her wallet’s there, cash and credit cards inside.”

“Don’t you guys have a forensic lab or something?”

“It’s a little early for that.”

“A little *early*? If someone has her, every minute counts!”

Another sigh. “Mr. Zarabian, have you considered the possibility that no one else is involved here?”

I stare out at the traffic. Watch an Uber pull up and spit out a guy in a suit and sunglasses.

“Are you in Provincetown, Mr. Zarabian? I think it would be good if we spoke in person.”



“I can be there later today,” I mumble. We arrange to meet at the cottage at six, then I listen to the call cut off.

I hadn’t considered suicide. The thought hadn’t even entered my mind. But now, as I once again wonder why Mina left her rings behind, there’s yet another awful possibility.

But I’ve never met anyone so alive.

I drive to Caitlin’s in a daze. My ex-wife is smiling when she answers the door, but the look fades soon as she sees me. “What’s wrong?”

“Can you keep Devon tonight?”

“Daddy!” My little girl squirms past her mom and wraps her arms around my legs. “Sushi night!”

I look up at the eaves of the house where I used to live, on this quiet Brookline street where tragedy is a stranger and nobody disappears into thin air. Caitlin really needs to have the gutters cleaned. My hand is on Devon’s head, and my throat is so tight. But I manage to say, “Something’s come up, kiddo.”

Devon starts to whine, but Caitlin already has her by the shoulders, gently prying her arms off my legs. “Daddy needs some space, Dev.”

“I have to get Mina’s present!” Devon whirls around and disappears back into the house.

I bow my head. It feels like I’m going to throw up. Caitlin touches my arm.

“It’s Mina,” I whisper.

“Oh my God, Alex. Is she—”

“She’s missing. I have to go to Provincetown.”

“Okay,” she says. “Ryan and I were headed to Portland, but we can stay—”

“Don’t tell Devon, okay? I don’t want her to worry.”

“*Should* she be worried?”

“Don’t you think I’d tell you?” I snap.

“I didn’t know your mom had cancer until you told me she’d started chemo,” Caitlin murmurs. “I didn’t know your dad was in the hospital until you told me he’d passed away.”

“I don’t need this.” I take a step back. “Last thing I need.”

She takes a quick look over her shoulder and moves onto the porch. She’s got her chin up like she always does when she’s royally pissed. She doesn’t yell, though. She *hisses*. “I’m not trying to make this harder for you, Alex. I’m trying to take care of *our* little girl.”

“Then take care of her. She doesn’t need to know anything until there’s something to know.”

Our eyes meet, and I can’t read Caitlin’s face. Suddenly, I remember loving her, though. I remember when her arms were a refuge, when the sound of her voice smoothed my edges, and I don’t know why, and I shouldn’t be, but I’m wishing for that comfort now, when it’s years past and long since dead.

She tilts her head. The chin is down now. “I don’t know everything that’s happening, and I don’t need to,” she says. “But you have to believe me—I hope Mina’s okay. And I’m here if you want to talk.”

She was always talking about magic, my wife. The first time she met Devon, Mina knelt down so they were at eye level, and she pointed to the book my daughter held cradled against her chest. “I haven’t read that one,” Mina said, then poked at the image on the cover. “That pigeon looks like he’s up to no good, though.”

Devon accepted Mina’s request to read it with her, and a few hours later, after they’d become fast friends, after my daughter

insisted Mina tuck her in, and after watching Mina do exactly that had filled my head with fantasies of our future children, we sat in the living room and shared a bottle of wine. “Devon is so much fun,” Mina said. “She told me a whole story about this pigeon in her book, and how he wanted so badly to learn how to drive the bus so he could go visit his grandma in New York.”

“Caitlin’s parents live upstate,” I told her. “I hope Devon isn’t considering hijacking a vehicle to go visit them.”

“I love that,” she said. “I love that she lets herself live through this character, even though it’s a pigeon.”

“Have you spent a lot of time around kids?” I poured a little more wine for her as she turned to look at the fire I’d built. I knew we were both only children, and I wondered if growing up without siblings had done to her what it had done to me.

Mina gave me a bashful smile. “I never even babysat.”

“You seem like a natural, though.”

She sipped at her wine and turned the conversation back to the pigeon. “Where do you think he wanted to go, Alex?”

“I don’t know—joyride? Never thought about it, honestly.” I slid a fingertip along her shoulder. “What about you?”

Mina held up her glass and gazed into the ruby depths of her wine. “Maybe he wanted to step out of his old life and go find the magic in the world.”

“Is his current life so bad?”

She shook her head. “And he knows he should stay put. But he always wonders what’s out there.”

“Are we still talking about the pigeon?”

She grinned. “I should slip him into the book I’m working on right now.”

## THE QUIET GIRL

She's a master at the art of changing the subject, and I fall for it almost every time. I'm so clueless sometimes—I don't even realize until later that what we *didn't* talk about might have been more important than what we did.

I could take the ferry to Provincetown, but I want to have my car, so I drive south out of the city and along the South Shore. Even though it's midday on a Monday, the Cape traffic is still enough to make me sweat. On the way, antsy as hell, I call Emily, Mina's therapist, and I leave a message. She calls me back an hour or so later as I'm rolling along Route 6, past shops and restaurants with charming names like Lobster Shack and Moby Dick's. I explain to her what's happened, when I last saw Mina, how Mina apparently made a cake and took it to her parents' for dinner, how she disappeared into the night and no one has seen her since. How her car was found at Beech Forest, and how there's an ongoing search, and how they asked if Mina was depressed. "Was she?" I ask.

"You must be so incredibly worried," she says. "I'm worried, too."

"That's a great way of talking and saying absolutely nothing."

"I can understand your frustration, Alex. But I hope you can understand my obligation to Mina and her privacy."

"Her privacy?" The center line of the highway is solid, telling me not to pass. I swerve around a minivan that's going five under the speed limit. "What about her safety?"

"Alex, if I had information that Mina planned to hurt herself, I would have taken action already. I can promise you that."

I hate this woman, even though she sounds nice. My wife has been going to her almost every week since before we met, and she

probably knows all the most private moments of our lives. Feeling stripped bare and surly, I blurt out, “The last time I saw Mina, she was walking out the door after we argued. About having kids.”

“You blame yourself.”

“No,” I say, braking to avoid colliding with the back of yet another car that’s moving too goddamn slow. “I just want to know where she went. And why. I thought she was leaving me, and now I’m afraid something’s happened to her.”

“Do you have anyone with you?” she asks. “It must be difficult to be alone with such stress and uncertainty.”

I hang up on her. It seems better than shouting. I make it to the cottage with eight minutes to spare, but the detective is already out front, waiting by a squad car. She’s a tall, slender woman, with cropped black hair and dark-brown eyes that size me up as I get out of my Lexus. We exchange terse greetings and head inside where she turns down water, tea, and coffee. I consider offering her a scotch because I’m badly in need of one myself, but then I wonder if she’ll think I’m a drunk and start making assumptions.

We sit in the living room. I watch her scan the place and take in the wilted bouquet on Mina’s desk. “We haven’t found any trace of Mina yet,” she tells me. “If there’s nothing by tomorrow, we’ll call in the dive team.”

I’m glad my stomach is empty. “You think she’s in the water?”

“We’re doing all we can to find her.”

“Including combing her car for clues?”

“Yes, but there’s no sign of anything unusual in the car, Mr. Zarabian.”

“She’s been missing for a week, Detective. Plenty of time for someone to clean it out or something.”

## THE QUIET GIRL

“Right,” she says. “That’s possible.”

“Was everything still in her wallet? Cash? Credit cards?”

“You can give me a list of what you think should have been in there. I can tell you that there were a few credit cards. No cash.”

“She took \$400 cash out of our account late Monday morning.”

The detective pulls out her phone and makes a note of it, but doesn’t speculate. When she raises her head, I don’t like the way she’s looking at me. I get up and get myself a glass of water in the kitchen.

“Can you walk me through your understanding of where she might have been since you last saw her?” she asks when I return.

I do, including her going to her parents for dinner on Monday. “Did you find a cake carrier in the car?”

“Cake carrier?” She shakes her head. “Nothing in the cab or the trunk.”

“She must have left it with her parents. Are you going to talk to them?”

Detective Correia leans her elbows on her knees. “I will. I’ve also filed for a search warrant for her cell phone and local cell towers. Her phone wasn’t in the car, so wherever she is, the phone could be with her.”

“It’ll let you track her movements?”

She grimaces, almost apologetic. “This isn’t Boston, cell tower on every block, practically. It may tell us if she’s still in Provincetown or not, but that’s about it.”

“What about surveillance cameras in the area?” I feel like I’m always seeing viral videos of crazy incidents.

“Like I said, this isn’t Boston. There’s really nothing nearby.”

“*Nearby*?” I roll my eyes. “How nearby are we talking? Which streets? Any businesses with cameras that might capture images of the road? Did you even try?”

She spends a full ten seconds watching me. “We can get a search warrant for the credit card records as well. Unless they’re all joint?”

“No.”

“You guys didn’t share finances?”

I’m reconsidering the scotch. “We’ve only been married for a few months.”

“How’s married life been treating you?”

“We’re fine,” I tell her. “We’re happy.”

“It can be quite an adjustment, am I right?”

I recall reading somewhere that the husband is always a suspect when a wife disappears. “Of course.” I open my mouth to say more, but any words are crushed by the realization of being here, in Mina’s cottage, speaking to a detective while her car sits abandoned. While police are looking for her body in the woods. It’s fucking obvious they don’t expect to find her alive.

“Jesus.” I stand up and head for the window, nausea churning in my gut. “This can’t be happening.”

“We’re doing all we can.”

“You keep saying that,” I mutter from between clenched teeth.

“It would be helpful to understand anything that’s been stressing her out lately.”

She’s looking for evidence that confirms her suicide theory. “Mina wasn’t depressed. She wouldn’t hurt herself. But she’s a well-known romance author. How do you know some sick fan wasn’t stalking her?”

I glance over and see Mina’s wedding and engagement rings in the bowl. For all I know, she’s run off with that fan. Our conversation about the damn bus-driving pigeon takes on a whole new, horrifying meaning.

“I’ve got someone combing her public social media for any threats,” says the detective. “If you have access to her account, then I can—”

“I don’t, okay? I don’t have any of that.” And I’m sweating now. Probably bright red in the face. “What about the news media? Are they on this?”

“I’m not sure you want a lot of public attention, Mr. Zarabian. If it’s what we think—”

“And if it’s not?” I know I shouldn’t be raising my voice, but this is too much. “Are you guys hoping no one will pay attention while you do as little as possible to find her?”

The floor creaks as the detective shifts her weight. “I’ll be going, Mr. Zarabian. I appreciate you talking to me, and we’ll be in touch as soon as we know anything at all.”

I turn to face her. “You’ve got to look at the car.”

“I’ve requested a state mobile forensic unit. And if you happen to come across any of her passwords, in a file, maybe, or—”

“Sure thing.” I see the detective to the door, and when she’s gone, I barely make it to the couch before my legs give out. Mina’s gone, the police think she’s dead, and the whole world is humming along as if that doesn’t matter.

I have no fucking idea what I’m supposed to do, but I have to do something. If I stay still for another minute, I’m going to go insane. I head back over to Mina’s desk. Her laptop could hold the answers to everything, if I can figure out how to get past the lock screen.

I think back to all the times I’ve seen Mina type in her password to access the machine. It’s not a long one—I’m almost sure it has six characters or less. I recall her fingers dancing over the keyboard, unlocking the device in the space of a second. I never asked her what



it was. Why would I? It's always seemed very much *hers* and no one else's, and she's always got it with her. In fact, I remember teasing her recently when she mentioned that she'd let Devon use it to play a game... Holy shit.

My heart is rattling my entire body as I reach for the phone and call Caitlin. When she answers, she tells me that my daughter is right there, and they've gotten takeout sushi, and on a normal day, that would probably send a twinge through me because sushi is *my* thing with Devon, but today, I'm just glad to have reached them. "Can I talk to Devon?"

"She's in the middle of dinner—"

"Put her on the phone, Caitlin."

"If this is news about Mina, then you should tell me first," she says quietly.

She assumes the fucking worst of me, every time. "*If* I had news, I would tell you. Put my daughter on the phone."

"Daddy!"

My voice instantly morphs into the lilting and playful tone that only my little girl can pull from my mouth. "Hi, silly girl. You're eating sushi?"

"From Genki Ya! I got the salmon roll."

She always gets the salmon roll. "I wish Mina and I had been able to take you out."

"I made a drawing for Mina."

"Mommy told me. I bet she's going to love it." I consider for a moment, trying to figure out my approach. "Baby, you like to play with Mina, don't you?"

"We like to play games."

"What kind of games?"

“Lots of kinds. But not board games!”

“Oh, I know all about that.” Mina refuses to play board games of any kind. And for some reason, she particularly hates chess, which happens to be my favorite. *Too much strategy for my poor brain*, she said, brushing me off with a laugh. *I can tell just by looking at the board.* “You play other games with her, though!”

“*Plants vs. Zombies!*” She sounds so adorably excited that it makes my eyes burn. “Mina thought it was scary, but I think it’s funny!”

I can hear Caitlin muttering in the background and suddenly wonder if she’s thinking Mina’s a bad influence or something. “I love that game,” I tell her. “You played it on Mina’s computer?”

“Mm-hmm,” my daughter says. Now she sounds distracted.

“Baby, I need your listening ears. Did Mina let you unlock her computer?”

“Unlock?”

“Did she let you type in her password?”

“Mm-hmm. I had to type in the magic word. I spelled it wrong, and then she told me the right way.”

“The magic word,” I say slowly. The fingers of my left hand tap on the keys of my wife’s laptop. *P-L-E-A-S-E*. Nope. “What’s the magic word, Devon?”

She giggles. “She said it was a secret. I’m not supposed to tell anyone.”

I speak slowly, keeping my voice level. “Mina needs you to tell me her password, honey. It’s important.”

“Did she forget it?”

“Yes!” Out of the mouths of babes—the kid has given me an innocent explanation. “Yes. She forgot it, and she needs you to tell me what it is so that I can give it to her.”

Devon seems to ponder this for a moment, and then she says, very solemnly, “She told me the password is magic, Daddy.”

“I know, I know. Mina loves magic. So what is it? The magic word?”

“I have to go. Mommy wants me to take a bath.”

“Devon,” I snap. “I—” The call cuts out. My thumb jerks over my screen, about to jab the number and redial, when it hits me. Magic. Mina loves magic.

What the hell. I type it in. *M-A-G-I-C*.

And I’m in.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The sky overhead was a cheerful and cloudless blue. She stared up at it while her ears throbbed and buzzed.

“Did someone call 911?” Sound returned, the shield of white noise pierced by a man’s shouted plea. He hunched over her, blocking her view of the sky. “You ran right out in front of me!”

Her lips moved, but she couldn’t get enough air to speak.

“Stay awake, okay? Don’t pass out.” The man jerked up to his knees. “Are any of you doctors?”

She slowly turned her head. She was lying next to a road, at the mouth of a parking lot. A large beige car was parked at a diagonal only feet away. Exhaust puffed from its tailpipe.

“Should I be letting her turn her head?” Beads of sweat sparkled on the dome of his bald head. It was almost pretty. “Should I keep her from moving?” His voice cracked with strain.

She turned her head to the other side and saw who the man was speaking to. A small crowd had gathered, coming out of what looked like a restaurant behind them. They were speaking urgently. Gesturing at her and then at something several feet away. She shifted her gaze, struggling against the balding man who was now trying to turn her face to the sky again. Just before he succeeded, she caught sight of two men on top of a third guy, a young man

with black hair who was struggling and shouting. The two men holding him down—one in an apron and hairnet and the other with tattoos down both his muscular arms—looked tense and angry. The tattooed guy had his knee planted in the black-haired guy's back and was pressing the young man's anguished face to the gravel.

"The ambulance'll be here in a few minutes," said a man with a Spanish sort of accent. She couldn't turn her head to see who was speaking exactly. "Police, too. Can you guys keep hold of him?"

"No problem" came the gruff reply.

"I don't know what... I don't know..." she whispered. Confusion was smothering her; she could barely breathe. Her legs and arms were moving on their own, aimless but determined. Like they wanted to run away and leave her behind. Somewhere in the distance, sirens wailed. She was lost in it, lost in the noise and the pain and the light and the faces all around her, not a one of them familiar.

Another stranger leaned over her, this one in a uniform. EMT, she guessed. "Hey there. Keep still for me," the guy said as he braced her head and strapped rigid plastic around her neck, chin to shoulders. "What's your name?"

Her name. That was the one thing she did know. "Maggie," she whispered.

The EMT smiled. "You're gonna be fine, Maggie. I'm gonna make sure of it."

As the ambulance turned onto Route 6, the EMT sat next to her gurney. "Quite a day, huh?"

"Someone needs to call my mom," she said, her voice rasping. "She was expecting me."

## THE QUIET GIRL

“We’ll do that as soon as we get to the hospital,” he told her as he wiped an alcohol swab over the crook of her elbow. “What’s your last name, sweetheart?”

“Wallace.”

“And how old are you?”

“Twenty.”

“Your birth date?”

“December 4.”

“Great. Any medical problems we need to know about? You on any medications?”

“No.”

“You know where you are right now?”

“In hell?” She glanced around the ambulance. “Sorry.”

He chuckled. “No, that’s great. Humor. Perfect. Where were you born?”

“Boston. My mom lives in Yarmouth.”

“Nearby, then. That’s great. And your dad?”

It felt like someone was strangling her. She closed her eyes and sucked in a tight, squeaky breath.

“Just relax. The IV pinches a little going in.” He thought he understood. “You know what day it is?”

“No,” she whispered. Then she thought about it. “Wednesday?”

“That’s okay. No worries.” But his brow was furrowed when she opened her eyes to look. “Do you know what happened to you?”

“Hit by a car?”

“The guy who hit you said you were running.” He chewed at the inside of his cheek. “Because someone was chasing you. You remember that?”

Maggie blinked. “Who was chasing me?”

“You got a bump on the head,” the EMT said as he hung the IV bag from its pole. “Probably a concussion. That can interfere with memory for sure. What’s the last thing you remember before getting hit?”

Maggie searched the earnest lines of his face as if they held the answer. She shifted her gaze to the small back window of the ambulance, through which she could see a slice of blue sky. Then she pondered her bare feet poking out from under the thin blanket, wobbling with every bump in the road. “I remember...I remember getting in my car. In the parking lot.”

“Which parking lot?”

“Student lot. A, I think.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “And when was that?”

“After my last exam.”

He tilted his head. “Where do you go to school?”

“UMass.”

“Boston?”

“No, Amherst...” She paused when she saw the concern flicker in his eyes. “That’s not where we are?”

“*When* was your exam, kiddo?” His voice was light, but there was something coiled inside each word, a snake preparing to strike.

“You’re in summer school?”

“No. Why?”

He smiled and patted her hand. “We’ll be at the hospital soon. You’re going to be fine, sweetheart. Just fine.”

Maggie stared at the side of his face as he busied himself typing notes. He was an absolutely terrible liar.

## THE QUIET GIRL

They drew blood. They took X-rays. They called her mom. They took off the plastic collar, but then they put her in a noisy tube and told her to stay still so they could take pictures of her brain. They asked her question after question after question. The whole time, they were cheery and sweet and positive.

Maggie did as she was told, and she *didn't* ask questions. She took the pills, Tylenol or something, for the headache. She let them probe and prod everywhere. She put her feet in stirrups and closed her eyes and forced her mind away and away and away. Fatigue lay over her like a weighted blanket, and the things they did to her body couldn't lift it. Only the questions threatened to strip it off.

She remembered getting into her car. She remembered looking at the gas gauge and thinking she needed to fill up before she hit the road for the three-hour drive back to Yarmouth. And now she was in the hospital in Hyannis. She'd seen a sign as the ambulance pulled up—Cape Cod Hospital. Only a few miles from her mom's house. She'd ended up back on the Cape, but she had no idea how.

No worries, the nurses said. No worries, the technicians said. It'll all sort itself out. Mild concussion. Memory issues. Now she lay on the gurney in a little room, door closed, lights low, trying to sleep. They were going to admit her for overnight observation, and all she needed to do was wait until someone came to wheel her upstairs. The doctor would come and speak to her soon, to let her know the results of the MRI. No worries, no worries.

Her mom would be here soon. A familiar feeling gripped her, a jittery and uneasy mixture of dread and need, of craving and the desire to run fast and far. A squirmy feeling, but also comforting in a weird way.

It was familiar when nothing else was.



“Ms. Wallace?” She turned to see an Indian man in a lab coat come through the door, a friendly smile on his bespectacled face. “I’m Dr. Mehta.” He reached her bedside and offered his hand. She shook it gingerly. “We’re going to be transferring you up to another floor here in a minute, and your mom is going to meet you up there.”

“You talked to her?”

“I told her that you’re going to be fine and that you’ll be able to talk to her yourself in a little bit.”

She watched his face. “Was she mad?”

He looked a bit perplexed. “She’s worried, like any mother would be.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “You don’t have any fractures or spinal injuries. And as far as we can tell, you don’t have any neurological injuries. No brain damage.”

“I know what neurological means.”

He smiled. “You’re a student at Amherst?”

“UMass Amherst. I just finished my sophomore year.”

“Your MRI revealed no swelling, no hemorrhages. It’s possible you have a mild concussion, and I’ve been told you’re having some issues with memory.”

“I don’t know how I got to the Cape.” She bit her lip. “And it’s not May anymore, is it?”

He shook his head. “It’s July 31.”

A rushing sound filled her ears. “Two *months*?”

“Your mother said she expected you to arrive home from school in May, but you never did. She began a search and talked to some friends of yours, and I guess they told her you’d had a rough end of the year. Do you remember telling your roommate that you were dreading going home?”

“Mom thinks I ran away or something?” The rushing sound had

enveloped her in a kind of auditory fog, dimming the sound of his voice. “I think I did well on my finals. My grades are good. Everything was fine.”

“You have no sense of where you’ve been all this time? Who you’ve been with?”

A shaky breath escaped her, though it couldn’t quite expel the horror of her thoughts. “I was told someone was chasing me,” she whispered. “In that parking lot where I got hit.”

“There was a police officer here. He told us the suspect is being questioned.”

“Do they think he abducted me? What...you think he’s had me tied up in a basement somewhere? Why don’t I remember?”

“I’m in no position to speculate right now, Ms. Wallace. But our consulting neurologist—you remember the lady who came in here and asked you all those questions? She and the radiologist took a look at your scans and confirmed that there’s nothing physically wrong with your brain. So what I can tell you is that you’re generally in very good health, though a bit undernourished. Your bloodwork seems to suggest that you’re not under the influence of alcohol or opioids.” He met her eyes. “And you don’t have any obvious injuries apart from a few contusions. Your HIV status is negative. We’re still waiting on other blood tests, though, just to make sure.”

“Can you tell whether he... Did he...” Her voice faded away, strangled and small, too quiet to make any kind of difference, to ask the questions that might blow up her entire world. And maybe that was best. *Why open old wounds?* That’s what her mother always, always said.

“I think the thing to do is to focus on helping you figure out what’s happened, Ms. Wallace, and to give you the chance to talk to

someone about it. Medically, you are fine. But I do have a piece of information that you need to know before you go speak with your mother. Although it may not be news to you at all.”

She could barely hear him now; the rush had become a roar. “Okay.” Her mother would be waiting upstairs. Maggie had been planning to live with her over the summer. She’d had a job lined up at Flour Child, the bakery on Main. She’d made sure to let them know that she wanted to work on Sundays and then told her mom that they’d demanded it. She’d felt so clever.

“Your blood test was positive for hCG.”

This time, she didn’t have a smart-ass response. “Is that a disease?”

Why was he looking at her like that? Not as if she was stupid—as if she might explode.

“It means, Ms. Wallace, that you’re pregnant.”

## MONDAY, AUGUST 3, TO WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 5

Ignoring about a dozen calls from Drew, I start with Mina's email. Luckily, the screen is the only thing that's locked, and everything else is pretty much logged in already. Her Gmail account contains some emails from her agent, Bridget Cameron, about a new three-book deal she's about to sign with Diva, the romance imprint of Granite Square. Apparently, they're pleased with the sales of her last several books and want to lock her in for more. It sits like cement in my stomach, reading my wife's words, especially when Bridget gushes about how gorgeous the wedding was, and Mina replies that she couldn't have written a better ending even if she tried.

I know what she means—a lot of romances end when the love story is just beginning. That has to be what she meant.

The final email exchange, which is from July 24, is about the publishing timeline being negotiated for the deal. It includes Mina telling Bridget that there has to be an understanding that she's not going to start another book until March—eight months from now. Mina writes about three books a year, and she didn't mention slowing down, so I expect surprise or pushback. But Bridget replies that she thinks they'll understand, given the circumstances. She suggests that Mina talk the timing over with Lauren, her editor at Diva.

What circumstances? After doing the mental math, I have a moment of simultaneous hope and fear, wondering if it has anything to do with us, with having kids. Could Mina *already* be pregnant? It took me and Caitlin a painful four years to conceive, and by the time Devon was born, our marriage was headed for the cliff. It lasted for another three years, but we were in no place to try for another baby, which only deepened my unhappiness. I'd always imagined two or three kids, filling our home with a joyful kind of chaos, so different from the smothering isolation and boredom I grew up with as an only child.

I didn't hide any of that from Mina. When we first started talking about a future together, I was honest about wanting more kids. And I thought she wanted the same thing, but now, as I think about it, I wonder if she kept changing the subject without me even realizing it.

I wonder what else I missed, all the conversational on-ramps we blew past without me even noticing.

So even though Mina's requested writing timeline instantly stands out, after I think about it for more than a second, I realize it probably has nothing to do with her being pregnant. Why would she be starting a new book right around the time she gave birth? After our fight, the first one in which I wouldn't let her change the subject, the one where I tried to pin her down, I wonder if having a baby with me was the last thing Mina wanted.

I love her anyway. I love her more than that fantasy.

Why didn't I say that to her when I had the chance?

As I continue to shuffle through her email, as the sky outside turns purple then black, I silently promise her that I'll tell her once I have her back.

Her email inbox contains little else useful that I can see, though

I give up after an hour and turn to her social media accounts. Her Twitter DMs are all interactions between her and her fans, mostly questions about release dates and sequels, along with lots of love for Garrett and Blain and Sly and Finn, all heroes of her most recent books. Nothing threatening or weird. Same with Instagram. All book stuff, nothing personal. And then there's Facebook.

Within seconds of pulling up the page, Willa Penson opens a chat.

Hey, lady! Where have you been? Did you finish it?

She thinks I'm Mina, of course. Why wouldn't she?

I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't. Almost, I reply. I instantly rethink it, though, because this isn't cool. I'm about to fess up when her next response comes through:

I need to tell you something. Your hubby chatted me up the other day. He wanted to know when I'd last spoken to you.

She's a fast typist, though I guess that's unsurprising, given her profession. Seemed a shade controlling, she continues. I know you love that buttoned-up smolder he's got going, but I need to be honest—it gave me the chills. I've been thinking about it for the last couple days.

Controlling? *Fuck you*, I almost type. He just worries about me, I type instead.

Have you told him yet?

"Tell me *what*?" The sound of my own voice startles me. My hands are shaking as I tap out a careful answer. I can't quite figure out how to say it.

Oh, come on. You're good at that.

I groan. Not this time, I try. Any suggestions?

Just be honest. And brave.

Jesus. My heart is beating so fucking hard. I know I'm digging the hole deeper, but I can't help it. I don't want to hurt him.

You're being true to yourself, she writes. He's a grown-ass man, and he'll deal with it. Are you worried about how he'll take it after what I just told you?

I want to say *No*. But I need an answer, and that doesn't seem like the way to get it. How do you think I should frame it?

LOL "frame it"?

I frown. What's so funny?

She goes silent, and I'm sweating again. Finally, she types, Are you sure you're okay?

Shit. That was probably some inside joke. Yeah. Just tired.

Me, too. I'm shutting down for the night. Chat soon?

I whisper a curse under my breath. Sure. Good night.

The green dot next to her name disappears. I don't know whether I dodged a bullet or got hit square between the eyes. Mina was going to tell me something. Whatever it was, it scared her, enough so that her friend thought it would take some courage to get it out. But I can't just chat Willa back and explain what's happened, because if she thought I was controlling before, now she's probably going to think I'm an utter psycho for impersonating my wife on Facebook. Hell, she'll probably think I *caused* Mina to disappear.

I go through the rest of Mina's recent messages. Most are incoming, in that someone wrote to her and she replied, usually a fan, like on Twitter. She initiates messages with a few people, Willa and other writers, all discussing their deadlines, agents, editors, and creative blocks. In one case, Mina advises an author who's thinking of leaving her agent and offers to put in a good word with Bridget. My vision blurs as I skim down the list of names. She gets so many messages. And then one sets in my brain like a hook.

## THE QUIET GIRL

It's a message that Mina sent two weeks or so ago. July 16. When I read my wife's words, my skin runs hot. It reads: *Is that really you?*

The response, sent almost immediately: *Seems like I'm the one who should be asking that.*

And then hers, instant: *I need to see you. I have to talk to you. Please.* Then she offers her cell number.

There's no correspondence between them before or after that.

The user who she's writing to: Stefan Silva.

*Stef.* I click on the name. He and Mina aren't Facebook friends, so I can only see what's public. There's not much in the profile; the pic is of a cocktail, amber and ice in a highball glass. The only public posts are about a place called the Mariner, which turns out to be a bar in Harwich on the lower Cape. There's no number in his basic information and no birthday.

He's not online right now.

I Google his name. This guy my wife just had to see. And wouldn't you know it, there are six Stefan Silvas in Massachusetts, but only one of them lives in Harwich, and he's thirty-four years old. I'm operating on pure impulse again as rage and suspicion tangle in my chest. She had to see him. *Please*, she said. *Please*.

"Fuck," I whisper. I should be calling Correia right now and telling her I've accessed Mina's account, but knowing she'll immediately see I've been impersonating my wife online, it would only be a distraction. I'll find another way to tell her about this asshole. But first I type in my credit card number and buy the full report on him.

Stefan G. Silva lives on Driftwood Lane in East Harwich, Massachusetts. He's married, too, to a woman named Melanie Silva, formerly Melanie Fogerly.



He's also an ex-con. He was arrested twelve years ago on suspicion of assault, ten years ago for DUI, and has a conviction for felony possession with intent to distribute. He sounds like a first-class loser, and yet Mina wanted to see him. Needed to see him.

Buzzing with the same jittery, dangerous energy that's kept me going ever since this morning, I dial his number.

"Silva," he answers, his voice low. There's a lot of noise in the background. Music. People talking.

"Hi," I say. "This is Alex Zarabian."

"Who? Hang on." After a moment, there's a snap, like the sound of a door closing sharply. The background noise fades. "Who did you say you are?"

"Alex Zarabian. Mina Richards's husband."

Five solid seconds of silence. "Um," he finally says. "Why are you calling me?"

"Mina's missing. The police are searching for her. If you know anything—"

"I don't have a fucking clue what you're talking about."

"You know Mina, right? I know she contacted you."

"She told you?"

"Does she have a reason to keep secrets?"

He *laughs*. "I really can't help you. Sorry."

Determined to get the words out before he cuts off the call, I say, "If you have any idea where she is or where she might have gone, the police—"

"I don't," he says. "I don't know her. Never really did. And I don't know you, and I don't have anything to do with your wife. Okay?"

"But you did," I guess. "At some point, you did."

"I can't help you. Sorry."

He ends the call. It's all I can do not to hurl my phone against the wall.

Instead, I'm up with keys in hand and a vague plan to go to the Mariner and see if I can hunt the asshole down. I pull onto Commercial and head for Route 6. Provincetown is home to upward of a hundred thousand in the summer, but it's a tiny place. Minutes later, I brake suddenly at Beech Forest, and I turn into the parking lot. I need to catch my breath. I need to *think*. I look around, expecting to find the whole place lit up, floodlights and search parties, but there's only one patrol car in the lot, parked next to a silver Prius. Mina's car.

As I get out of my Lexus and approach through the close, humid night air, the cop gets out of his cruiser. "Can I help you?" he asks.

"I heard you guys were conducting a search," I say. "Where is everyone?"

"The guys just left—rain's coming in. They'll pick it up first light tomorrow."

Rage pulls me tight, but I keep my voice light as I say, "Seems to me every minute counts."

He nods. "But we've covered every inch of terrain inside the trail and plenty outside, too. No trace, at least, not in the usual places."

"Usual places."

"We get at least a few of these a year." Then he seems to catch himself, and his eyes narrow. "You a reporter or something?"

"Why? Afraid of a little publicity?"

He gives me a baffled look.

"I'm her *husband*." And for all I know, my wife is off with some asshole in Harwich. Or she was, and he fucking killed her. Before I can say any of that, I slide my hand down my face and look away.

“I didn’t mean any disrespect,” he says quickly. “Like I said, dive team’s gearing up for sunrise.”

“What about the car?” I walk over to the Prius, but he heads me off.

“The vehicle has been sealed until it’s processed, sir, so I’m going to have to ask you to step away.” He touches the receiver at his shoulder. “I’ll let Detective Correia know you’re here.”

“Do that. I need to talk to her anyway.” I stalk back to my car, because the urge to punch someone is rising fast. I’m going to take this to the next level. I need a little sunlight, and I don’t care what it reveals, as long as I find Mina.

My phone rings before I pull out of the lot again. “We just spoke to a detective about our daughter’s disappearance,” comes the rigid, prim reply when I answer. It’s Rose.

“I’m glad she actually followed up with you.”

“So you knew she would be contacting us. It would have been nice to have some advance notice before she simply showed up at our door.”

“I’m sorry, Rose. It’s been a rough day.”

I hear the muffled sound of a snuffle. “I forgive you,” she says. “But we’re going through this as a family, and I want us to help each other through it until we find her.”

I can hear the tears in her voice, and suddenly, I realize that *I’m* the asshole. “I’m here at Beech Forest, where they found her car. They’re bringing a dive team in tomorrow.”

“They won’t find her there,” she says fiercely. “That’s a dead end. I’m sure of it.”

“She wasn’t suicidal. She wasn’t depressed. Right?”

“I don’t think she was. Really, I don’t know!” She stifles a sob. “Try as I might, and believe me, I have, I’ve never understood her way

of looking at the world. I don't want to mess this up and put her in danger."

Mess this up? "Wait—do you know something about where she is?"

She clears her throat. "She could be anywhere, so no, not really."

"Not *really*?"

I almost mention Stefan, but before I can, she says, "Come to the house tomorrow afternoon." Her tone goes bright as she dives back into her comfort zone with a force that nearly gives me whiplash. "I'm making scones and cookies for the search teams, and you can help me bring them over. It will be good to show the officers that we appreciate their efforts."

A thousand biting comments crowd my thoughts. This woman's daughter is missing, and it's obvious, to me at least, that Mina's in trouble. But Rose is babbling to me about various flavors of scone and jam as if she's preparing to go to a church picnic. I know this might just be the way she copes with extreme stress, but from where I sit, it also looks like she's laser-focused on being the perfect hostess, the perfect worried mom, the perfect, well-behaved, grateful victim-by-proxy. Something I don't give a shit about. I'll blow things up if it means we find Mina faster. So I have to wonder, is the hostess act just one more way to change the subject, just like Mina does? And if so, why would she want to at a time like this? What's Rose hiding beneath that perfect veneer?

In hopes of finding out, I agree to stop by the Richardses' house on Tuesday. I'm almost certain that there's something Rose isn't telling me, and a face-to-face might help her spit it out. But when she tells me she's praying for me, I tell her I've got another call.

Which is not a lie. "What the fuck, Alex? I've been trying to reach you for hours."

“Mina’s missing, Drew. I had to take off.”

“Caitlin told me there was something going on. And I’m here for you, but I’ve also got the entire board up my ass.”

I give him the thirty-second rundown on my Pinewell meeting, but I don’t mention that they’re planning to oust him. I need my friend to be on my side. “So right now, they’re wanting our okay, and I honestly don’t think we’re going to get a better deal. This is why the other shops didn’t swing at our pitch, either, Drew. But they’re offering to help us get CaX429 through the next steps, and without that, we’re going to have trouble paying the rent after New Year’s.”

He curses. “I need you here. Do you have any idea where Mina’s gone?”

I tell him what I know, including this mysterious Stefan. But as I get ready to tell Drew my plan to drive down to Harwich and confront him, I realize how idiotic it is and how idiotic I’ve already been. I have to be more strategic than that. “I’m going to tell the police all of it,” I say. “But now I need a favor, because this situation is pretty much the definition of rainbow flame.”

To his credit, Drew doesn’t waste time asking me any more questions. He doesn’t even hesitate. “Name it.”

“I need to talk to Caroline.”

If the cops aren’t going to consider any other explanation for Mina’s disappearance apart from suicide, I’m going to light a fucking rainbow flame under their asses. Caroline agrees that it’s an important story, and though she doesn’t feel comfortable covering it herself, she gets a colleague to work with me. She doesn’t make any promises, but she says the attention might help.

Might, because there's always the possibility that Mina really did commit suicide. It doesn't sit right, though. Her emails with her agent more or less cinched it—she was planning for the future. New book deal and everything. And obviously, she had something big to tell me, and if she'd been about to kill herself, why bother? On top of that and even though I took an instant dislike to Mina's therapist, I believed Emily when she said she would have taken action if Mina were suicidal. Even if it was just to cover her ass.

So after leaving a message for Detective Correia about how she needs to check out Stefan Silva, I talk to a producer from the NBC station. She says they'll come out to Beech Forest tomorrow morning, early. And after a rough couple hours of sleep, I meet the news team in the muggy parking lot. True to their word, the police are already there, including the dive team. Apparently, they're using sonar and have a team of three sweeping the pond. Their flippers and heads break the surface every once in a while, and other groups search the woods again.

A mobile forensics unit comes and combs through the Prius. Detective Correia catches my eye and heads in my direction. No attitude, no friendliness. She's simply doing her job. Keeping her promises. Possibly keeping an eye on me. She tells me that she's gotten the search warrant for Mina's phone and expects to have some information no later than tomorrow. And then: "I got your message. Stefan Silva."

"Yeah. He lives in Harwich. I found a list in one of Mina's notepads, and his name is on it."

Detective Correia arches one black eyebrow. "A list?"

"It was a grocery list, eggs and English muffins and stuff, but there were two names on it. One was her therapist. And the other was this Stefan guy."

“Someone you know?”

I shake my head.

“But you know he lives in Harwich.”

I put my hands up. Guilty. “I looked him up.”

“So she had a list with this guy’s name on it. A guy you don’t know. And you looked him up. Anything else you want to tell me?”

“She added his name to the list at some point between Sunday and Tuesday.”

“And you know this how?”

“Facebook post. There’s a picture of the notepad on Sunday morning with no names. On Wednesday, I found the notepad in the cottage, names added. Last time the neighbors saw her was Monday or Tuesday.”

“Fancy yourself a detective, Mr. Zarabian?”

“I fancy myself a husband who’s worried sick.”

Correia nods. “I checked with the neighbors. The couple across the street—the one guy, pink hair? He said he told you it might have been Tuesday, but he remembered that he was heading out to a boot camp class at Mussel Beach, which is a class that only happens on Monday. So he thinks it’s Monday.”

*He thinks it’s Monday.* What she means is that’s the last time anyone saw my wife. Eight fucking days ago. I shake my head. “You’re going to check out this Stefan guy? What if he has her? He’s got a criminal record.”

I can’t tell if Correia thinks I’m a jealous, murderous husband, a sane, concerned spouse, or something in between. This woman is inscrutable. She types a note into her phone and tucks the device into her pocket. “I’ll give him a call. Let me know if you come upon anything else.” Her dark eyes lock onto mine. “Like her passwords and such.”

I don't blink. "Of course."

"I'm following every lead, Mr. Zarabian." Her voice is dead level. "You understand that, don't you?"

"Yeah," I say. "Keep it up, please."

With a tight nod, Correia heads back to the scrum of law enforcement at the pond's edge. I give a brief on-camera statement about how I believe Mina's out there somewhere, how I don't believe she's hurt herself. I say that I appreciate the dedicated work of the searchers and the police, but I hope they'll continue to investigate *every* possible lead, including any forensic evidence in her car and all her last-known contacts.

It occurs to me, as the camera lens glints and the lights shine down on me, that I sound robotic. Like I'm talking about a business deal. Next steps. Points of negotiation. Contract terms. I have the distant thought that people will expect me to cry and be emotional. But it all feels like it's happening outside me, like I'm watching along with everyone else. It reminds me of my dad's funeral, when I sat there numb while my mom sobbed against my chest. And the moment Caitlin announced she wanted a divorce. And the morning Mina walked out the door, and I let her.

That day, I failed her. Today, I have no time to indulge in a breakdown. She needs me.

It's on the news at noon, and that's when I start to get calls. The CBS station. ABC, too. Also, the one that used to call itself FOX but dropped the label because this is Massachusetts and it was killing their ratings. They're skeptical about this case being anything other than a suicide—I can tell. But they're interested because Mina's a reasonably well-known author, and hell, if that's what they need to latch onto, fine with me.



I'm so crushed with calls and interviews that I forget all about going over to the Richardses'. Rose shows up early Tuesday afternoon, chauffeured by Scott and dressed in her Sunday best, looking unsurprised at the presence of several news crews in addition to the police. My first thought is that she saw it all on television and decided to get out here for her close-up. But instead of basking in the spotlight, she gives a brief statement about wanting her daughter to come home safely, hands a few plates of treats to Correia, and then retreats back to her car, where Scott is waiting. By the time I extricate myself from yet another interview, they're gone. I suspect I've got some apologizing to do.

But only after I blow this thing up as big as it needs to be.

Unexpectedly, my mom helps. After getting yet another text about how Mina hasn't gotten back to her, I call her late Tuesday night to fill her in. Without giving me a heads-up, she hangs up and goes straight to her second home—Facebook—and makes an emotional post about her talented, beautiful, famous daughter-in-law. It earns her a viral moment. When I start getting calls on Wednesday morning from people at the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, as well as CNN, the *Daily Beast*, *BuzzFeed*, and several other online sites, they all say they got my number from my mom.

It takes up all my time. All my energy. It keeps me from thinking about what I'm going to do if they find my wife in that pond. It keeps me from wondering if she really left me on purpose, because even if she did, even if she ran off to fuck this Stefan guy's brains out, I don't think she would have left everything—wallet, keys, car—behind. She's in trouble. She needs me. That's what I say over and over. I won't just accept suicide as an explanation and give up.

## THE QUIET GIRL

At some point during the afternoon, Detective Correia comes over to tell me that she's talked to Stefan Silva, and he has a solid alibi for Monday night through Tuesday morning, one that she's already checked out. Everything in her manner tells me she thinks that lead is dead. I question the timing—how is she so sure? I mention the guy's criminal record again—suspicion of assault. She tells me she'll let me know if she has any other pertinent information and reminds me to keep her informed as well.

She's holding me at arm's length. I don't know what that means.

By six, the reporters look bored, the cops look grim, my phone is almost dead, and I'm about to drop. Despite the news about Stefan, I feel a certain savage happiness that they've found absolutely no trace of Mina in the water or the park after three days of searching. But my hope that it will energize the detective to keep digging for other explanations dies when I overhear one officer tell another that it would have been easy for Mina to walk up the trail to the beach at Race Point and go into the water there. Into the ocean, where she'll never be found, where the current will carry her body for miles and where white sharks are increasingly common. So basically, they've found a way to write this off even if they don't find anything. Ocean, shark, done. I guess it saves them a lot of work.

Though I'm more queasy than hungry, I need to get something to eat and probably take a shower, so I head for my car. I connect the phone to its charger, noting that I've gotten eight missed calls in the last hour from an unknown number. Probably another reporter. I'm not really in the right headspace to give yet another interview, but when the phone rings again, I answer. I owe it to Mina.

"Mr. Zarabian? Is this Alexander Zarabian?"

"Yeah. Who's calling?"

She clears her throat. “My name is Hannah, Mr. Zarabian.” She’s quiet for so long that I have time to wonder if the call dropped. Then she says, “I work for Granite Square. And I just saw a report that Mina Richards is missing.”

Granite Square is Mina’s publisher, but her editor’s name is Lauren, not Hannah. “Is this about one of her books? If she’s got a deadline or something, that’s going to have to—”

“No, that’s...not why I’m calling. Can we meet?”

“I’m a little busy at the moment. Try calling her agent.” There’s another call waiting, probably that CNN reporter who’s been trying to connect with me. “Look, I have to go.”

“No!” She sounds almost panicked and also young, right out of Wellesley or something. “No, please. I need to meet with you. In person. As soon as possible.”

“Aren’t you in New York?”

“I can come up on the train.”

“You’re gonna need to tell me why, Hannah. I’ve got a lot going on, and I seriously have no time or patience for bullshit.”

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly. Her voice is shaking. “I’m not supposed to be doing this.”

Now I’m curious. As gently as I can, I say, “I’m listening.”

“Okay.” She lets out a deep breath. “I think I might have information about what’s happened to Mina.”

## CHAPTER SIX

**S**he snapped back into awareness, looking back and forth between the doctor and a woman in scrubs at the foot of her bed.

“—to see you,” the woman, probably a nurse, said. She was looking right at Maggie, eyebrows raised.

“What?”

Dr. Mehta moved toward the doorway. “We’re transferring you up to the room now,” he told Maggie. “Your mother will be able to come up to visit.”

The sudden collision of what he’d just said and the news he’d dropped on her sent a shock through her body. “Does she know? Did you tell her?”

The sharpness of her demand led his eyes back to hers. “This is your news to tell,” he said gently. “And it’s your body. You have choices, and we won’t make them for you. But I’ve notified our on-call psychiatrist that you may need some support tonight, all right?”

“I’m not crazy.”

“Of course you’re not,” the nurse said. Her name tag said her name was Jamie. “You’ve been through a lot, though.”

“But I’m fine,” said Maggie, even as her breath came fast and uneven. Even as hot tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Dr. Mehta and Jamie gave each other a look, one that made Maggie cover her face with her hands. She heard the door to the room open and a clanking sound that shook the bed. Next, she was rolling, and the noises of the hospital grew louder, snatches of conversation, beeping monitors, metal rattling on metal, raising images of bloody instruments on trays. She felt laid open, her organs exposed, and she rolled onto her side and drew her knees up to her chest. It hurt. Every muscle and limb seemed scraped or bruised, and suddenly, every breath and movement stung and ached. They'd told her she didn't have any broken bones, but it felt like every single one was webbed with little cracks. Ready to shatter.

Behind her, Jamie murmured soft, supportive things. Sounds that didn't translate fully, because Maggie's heartbeat was too loud. Then a hand stroked over her head. "Your mother's here," the nurse said. "Are you ready to see her? Do you want me to stay?"

"I'm fine," Maggie mumbled against her palms. "I'm fine."

She peeked through her fingers at the sound of whispered conversation. Jamie was in the doorway—they were in a different room now, the door on a different side, the hallway outside a pale blue instead of creamy white—and she was talking to Maggie's mother. Ivy Wallace-Gainer nearly blocked out the light. Her blond, highlighted hair was styled in soft waves around her face. She wore a shimmery green shawl over her broad, sloped shoulders and was holding the fabric closed over her décolletage. She looked like she'd come from a social occasion. She probably had.

She was frowning, and the sight made Maggie's stomach pulse with nausea. Of course, that was the moment her mother noticed her looking. Her face transformed, caught between grimace and smile, tears and choked laughter, but all glowing with perfect concern and

perfect highlighting along her cheekbones and brow. “Oh, my baby,” she said, words tumbling over each other as she threw out her arms and rushed to Maggie’s bedside, and then it was the overpowering scent of jasmine and orange and cedar, the smothering warmth of her soft but strong body, and the scratch of the sequins dotting her shawl.

Maggie squirmed as her mother enveloped her, as her ample arm slid beneath Maggie’s shoulders and pulled her up to be pressed against that neck, the epicenter of the scent. She turned her head and breathed through her mouth. It wouldn’t be good if she threw up.

Her mother released her. “She’s too weak to even hug me back,” she said to Jamie, who watched them from the doorway. “What did you give her? A sedative?”

Jamie glanced over at Maggie. She looked conflicted, and Maggie remembered what Dr. Mehta had said about all this being her story to tell.

“I’m fine, Mom,” Maggie said quietly.

Her mother turned back to her and took her hand. She patted it. Ivy’s fingernails were short but immaculate ovals, painted a tasteful, shimmery summer pink. “My poor lamb,” she said, her voice tight. “You’ve been through so much. But I’m here now.” She nodded toward Jamie. “Thank you for taking such good care of her. I want to speak with the attending as soon as possible about when I can take her home.”

“I’ll let Dr. Atkinson know.” Jamie looked eager to escape the room. Her fingers were wrapped over the door handle.

“You’re an angel,” Ivy said to her. “I’m so thankful for you.”

Jamie disappeared, leaving Maggie to heft the weight of her mother’s complete attention. The face that swung back toward hers was no longer wreathed in a beatific smile. Lines bracketed her

mother's mouth. "Where have you been?" The sharp whisper knifed into Maggie's ears, raising echoes of overlong church services and a firm hand clamped over her skinny thigh in warning.

*Good girls are quiet girls.*

Maggie flinched. "I don't remember."

Ivy shook her head. She pulled a chair over to the bed. Its feet shrieked and moaned along the floor, and Maggie almost looked to see if they had drawn blood from the linoleum. Maggie let out a breath as her mother sank into the chair. Her face was close, but at least she wasn't leaning over Maggie anymore.

"Do you have any idea what you've put me through the last few months?" Ivy asked, pulling a lacy handkerchief from her purse. She carefully dabbed at her eyes. The fabric came away flecked with mascara. "When you didn't arrive, I called the university and then the police. They found your car in a lot at Wachusett Mountain."

Wachusett. About an hour from the university and in the opposite direction of where she'd intended to go, north instead of south... happiness instead of dread. Cold wind and fluffy snow. Pure joy. Her feet dangling, skis clacking together, as the lift carried them upward, lights twinkling over a blanket of pristine white. Her hand enveloped in her father's warm grip.

"Your phone and keys and wallet were all inside the car," her mother continued, jarring Maggie out of the memory. "We thought you might have been kidnapped, but then I spoke with your roommate, and she told me what you said. About not wanting to come home."

"I never said that!"

"I just knew," Ivy said. "I knew you'd run away, and probably with some man. Sure enough, I was right."

“I had every intention of coming home for the summer! I don’t know what happened.” And now she was pregnant. *Jesus Christ*. At the thought, she tensed for a moment. It had been years, but she still felt the automatic kick of guilt at taking the Lord’s name in vain, internalized and bone deep. “Did they tell you about the guy in the parking lot? How he was chasing me?”

“The Wellfleet police let him go. He said you’d been *living* with him.”

“No. That... I don’t know who he is.” She remembered the guy they’d been holding down in the parking lot. Olive skin and dark hair. “I’d never seen him before in my life.”

“Lying is a sin,” her mother said quietly. “You’re not just hurting me, and you’re not just dishonoring your poor father. You’re breaking your savior’s heart.”

Maggie looked out the window, wishing she could beam herself right through it, into the open air, over miles and miles until she was far from this place. “I’m not lying. I don’t remember. And I don’t know why.”

“I heard them mention a psychiatrist.” Ivy spat it out like a dirty word. “What on earth did you tell them?”

“Mom—”

“Because you don’t have to lie, and you don’t have to pretend.” Her hands shook as she dabbed at her eyes again. “Haven’t I always told you that forgiveness is a gift? Just tell the truth, and it’s yours. We can pretend this never happened.”

Maggie pressed her lips together.

“Whatever you’ve done and wherever you’ve been, whatever you’ve gotten into and whomever you’ve been with, I’ll forgive you. We all will. Haven’t we always, even when you were at your absolute



worst? Claiming you don't remember only draws more attention to all this."

Maggie jerked her hand away from the bed rail as her mother reached for it.

Ivy's eyes narrowed. "You *want* attention," she snarled. "That's what this is all about, isn't it? Some sick little revenge? Haven't you punished me *enough*?"

Spit pooled under Maggie's tongue. "I'm going to throw up."

"I won't let you turn this around on me," Ivy was saying, her voice a quiet venom that no one in the hall would ever hear. "If you decided to live in sin with some man..."

Maggie wasn't listening anymore. She was too busy leaning over the other side of the bed rail, reaching for the kidney-shaped basin on the bedside table. She yanked it over beneath her chin and began to heave. The world turned black, and her body folded in on itself. She imagined the tiny creature inside her, pushing its way up through the coils of her organs, forcing itself along the tunnel of her throat, climbing from her mouth in all its malevolent and bloody glory. It was all noise and chaos and way too much light, and she had nothing to shield herself. Everything burned. Everything hurt.

And then, second by second, the pain receded. Her exhausted muscles went loose, and she sagged against the pillow. Jamie had reappeared and was holding the basin for her now. Her mother was stroking Maggie's stringy, greasy blond hair away from her face. Both were making sympathetic, comforting noises, and the mismatch between her mother's tone in this moment and the last few was so jarring that Maggie started to cry.

"My poor baby," whispered Ivy, still stroking. "My poor, poor baby."

Jamie offered a cup of water, poking its straw at Maggie's dry lips.

Maggie took a weak pull and let her head fall to the pillow again. “I’m tired.”

“Of course,” her mother said. “Of course you are. You’ve been through so much.”

“I want to sleep.”

“I’ve got my Bible study tonight anyway,” her mother said. “I can come back afterward. Nurse, can you roll in one of those sleeper chairs for me?”

“We don’t generally allow visitors to sleep—”

“I’m her *mother*.”

“Mom,” Maggie rasped. “Go home. I’ll be fine.”

“We’ll be watching over her tonight, Mrs. Gainer.”

“Wallace-Gainer,” her mother corrected. “I want you all to call me if there’s any change. I’m all she’s got.”

Maggie put a hand on her belly. It felt hollow now. She glanced at the basin, which Jamie had set over on the counter near the sink. She’d been invaded, and it would take a lot more than a few heaves to have her body to herself again. She rolled on her side and pulled her legs to her chest. She wished she could ball up tiny enough to be invisible. She pressed her forehead to her knees. Tightened her arms around her thighs and calves. Wished herself unseen.

There were more murmurs and mutterings, but then the room went quiet save for distant beeps and shufflings and intercom messages filtering in from the hallway. She peeked over her shoulder. Her mother’s chair was still there, vacant now. She’d gone off to commune with her church friends. Maggie wondered how Ivy would spin the situation, how she would sculpt and mold it for maximum sainthood and minimum embarrassment.

Maggie examined her hands, her fingers. Her nails were filthy and

ragged. Her knuckles and the heels of her palms were all scraped up. She imagined herself trying to claw her way out of a dark, closed box. Or the dirt walls of a basement. She imagined herself handcuffed to a rusty old radiator or tied to a chair, a gag over her mouth. She tried on those images like dresses, checking to see if any fit, if any clung to the curves of her brain and the angles of reality.

The police had released the man who'd chased her. He'd convinced them she'd been living with him. What had he done to her? Why had she been running from him? She remembered the terror of those moments, when she'd crashed into awareness and onto the hood of some guy's car.

Would the man who'd chased her come here?

She gasped as the door opened and Jamie peeked in. "I know you said you wanted to sleep, but there's a friend here to see you. I thought it might cheer you up?"

Behind her, out in the hallway, stood Reina, petite with her brown hair in a pixie cut, hugging herself as if she was cold. Next to her was a redheaded guy Maggie recognized from pictures that had hung in their dorm room. Reina's boyfriend, Dan. The two of them had gone to high school together in Lowell, and Reina had frequently driven up to visit him at Dartmouth. Dan from Dartmouth, that was how Maggie had referred to him all year. She didn't like the way he was staring at her now. He turned to whisper something in Reina's ear. She raised her head and saw Maggie watching them.

"Okay," Maggie said to Jamie. "It's fine." It would be awkward to send them away now. It might cause a scene. They might talk and tell people that Maggie had been rude or weird. She didn't have the energy to deal with that.

Jamie ushered Reina and Dan into the room. Both of them were

looking at her like Dr. Mehta had, as if she were about to detonate. “Hey,” Reina said in a hushed voice. Like her mother’s had, Reina’s eyes were sparkling with tears. “How are you?”

“Fine,” said Maggie. She pulled the thin blanket at the foot of her bed up over her body while Dan hovered near the doorway. “Hi, Dan.”

He grinned. “You remember me now?” He came forward as if Maggie had issued an invitation to sit on her lap, but he paused when Reina clutched at his arm. He gave her a questioning look.

“He called me three nights ago,” Reina said. “He claimed he’d seen you in Provincetown.” She rolled her eyes. “But he was drunk off his ass, so I didn’t believe him.”

“So I went back the next day and took a picture of you, to prove it to her,” he said, clearly pleased with himself. He had his phone out, and he turned its screen to show Maggie.

It was indeed a picture of her, in what looked like the patio of a restaurant. Standing next to a bar, holding a basin full of dishes, circles under her eyes, looking guarded and scraggly and lost. The black-haired guy who’d been facedown in the parking lot—he was next to her in the picture, scowling.

Maggie stared, nausea bubbling inside her once again. “That’s in Provincetown? Two days ago?”

Dan nodded. “That guy—Esteban. He chased me down the street right after I took that. But when he caught up with me, he gave me a chance to explain, and I told him about you and how you’d been missing for months. He didn’t seem all that surprised, actually. He agreed to help me get you back. He didn’t think you’d just go with me if we told you all that.”

“We said we’d meet him at the Moby Dick,” said Reina. “We were ready to do a whole intervention. But either you were early or we

were late, because by the time we got there, they were taking you away in an ambulance and him away in a police car.”

“Because he was *chasing* me. I was trying to get away from him.”

“Yeah, he said you freaked out,” said Dan.

“Who is he?”

“To hear him tell it, he’s the guy who’s kept you safe for the last three weeks.”

“Three weeks,” said Maggie. “But I’ve been gone since mid-May.”

“He said you just showed up about three weeks ago,” Reina said. “You wouldn’t say where you’d come from. He doesn’t know how you got there. We hoped you might be able to explain what happened.”

A noise came out of Maggie, part groan and part bitter laugh. “What the hell is happening to me?”

“You’re okay,” said Reina. “I’m so glad you’re okay. I was so worried about you.”

“She’s been obsessing about it the whole summer,” said Dan.

“I felt so guilty,” Reina said. “I should have done more. You were acting so weird.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Maggie. “When?”

“Before you took off. You were stressed about finals, and then that jackass decided it would be the perfect week to break up with you—”

“Wes,” Maggie whispered. This, she remembered. They’d met in Romanesque and Gothic Art class last semester. She’d instantly spotted him, dark hair flopping over his forehead, intense blue eyes. They’d started going out in February, and she’d been convinced she was in love.

Then so many things had gone wrong. All her fault. And he’d broken up with her just before finals started. She’d been hurt, but... “I was okay,” she said. “I was fine.”

## THE QUIET GIRL

Reina shrugged. “You seemed like it until the day before your last final. After that...it was weird, Maggie. You said you didn’t want to go home, that everything was ruined. You were like this zombie girl, barely responding when I spoke to you. I was surprised you even made it to that final. You were like a different person.”

“Did she call herself Layla?” asked Dan.

“Don’t make fun of me,” said Maggie. “That’s shitty.”

“I’m not making fun of you! You *told* me your name was Layla when I first saw you in Provincetown. You were waiting tables at the restaurant in the picture.”

“Esteban said he knew it wasn’t your real name,” Reina explained. “He was pretty sure you stole it from that Eric Clapton song.”

“I swear, I don’t remember any of this,” Maggie said. She couldn’t quite catch her breath, and terror nibbled at the edges of her, raising goose bumps. “How do you know he’s not lying?”

“I believe him,” said Dan. “I told the cops as much.”

“They called the owner of the restaurant where you guys worked,” Reina said. “He vouched for Esteban, too. So did one of the waitresses. They both swore up and down that you were there of your own free will and that Esteban had only been looking out for you. And when we showed the police our texts about you and how Esteban was trying to get you back to your family, that was enough for them. They couldn’t hold him.”

Maggie’s heels rubbed back and forth against the sheets, and she watched the movement, letting it hypnotize her. “I’m a nothing,” she mumbled. “I feel sick.”

Reina frowned. “Do you want me to call the nurse?”

She nodded, if only to make them leave. “I’m going to be sick.” She grabbed the call button and pressed it.

Reina and Dan left a minute later, wishing her well, Reina saying they could get together once she was back home at her mom's. She mentioned registering for fall semester classes, which caused Maggie to lunge for the clean basin at her bedside. She hunched over it as her friends left, certain she was going to puke again. Several dry heaves later, she fell back onto her bed. Her breath came in desperate squeaks, and tears slipped from her eyes, running into her hair.

"Knock, knock," said a jaunty voice from the doorway. A woman stood there, with wiry, corkscrew-curly hair and a heart-shaped face. "Maggie?"

"Are you the nurse?"

The woman entered the room. "I'm Lori Schwartz. I'm the on-call psychiatrist, and Dr. Mehta let me know that you might need a little support tonight."

"I'm fine," Maggie said, putting the basin back on the table next to her bed.

"I took a peek at your chart," Lori said. "It must be so scary, not knowing where you've been or what happened."

"I hit my head. They said that could interfere with memory."

"It wouldn't quite explain what you're experiencing, though. Especially because your scans were completely unremarkable." Lori moved a little closer. She wasn't wearing a lab coat, just navy slacks and a floral shell with a light cardigan. Her ID badge hung from a lanyard around her neck. "Besides, a mild concussion might make sense if we were talking about a few hours of amnesia. But months?" She shook her head, making her curls jiggle around her face. "There's another reason."

"Maybe I was drugged," said Maggie. "I know they said that guy didn't kidnap me, but—"

“I heard about that. Dr. Mehta put a note in your chart after getting updated by the Wellfleet Police Department. Lots to figure out there. But if drugs were the culprit, I’d expect you to have some hazy recollections at least.”

“I’m not lying,” Maggie snapped.

Lori’s eyes went wide. “Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s obviously what everyone thinks. You don’t believe the concussion explains it. You don’t believe me when I say that guy might have drugged me—”

“But you just said that’s what *everyone* thinks,” Lori said. “Who are we talking about?”

“My mom,” she whispered.

“Ah.” Lori leaned forward. “Is there any reason why you’d lie to her?”

Maggie felt like an amber-eyed animal trapped in the beam of oncoming headlights. “No.”

“I think we should talk about what you were dealing with. *Before* you walked away from your life.”

“Because you think I’m only pretending to not remember?”

“I guess that’s a possibility. And if that’s true, I want to understand what happened to make you feel like you needed to go out of your way to tell this story. But also, I want to know if something happened that your mind *needed* to forget. Because that’s another possibility.”

Maggie thought back. She remembered walking toward her car in the student lot. She remembered hitting the button to unlock. Sliding into the seat, breathing in the hot air, turning on the AC. Checking the gas gauge, thinking she needed to fill up on the drive home. And that was it...until she found herself running through a completely different parking lot, riven with terror, over a hundred and fifty miles away. “There’s literally nothing there. I sort of...”



blacked out? But my roommate told me I was going by another name and waiting tables in a restaurant. They showed me a picture, and there I was. So suddenly I became this other person?”

Lori didn't look surprised. “It's more complicated than that, but it's also one of the possibilities here. We have more evaluation to do in order to confirm it.”

She knew Lori was a psychiatrist and knew the last thing she should do was talk to one, but she needed to know as much as she needed to breathe. “Can you help me get my memory back so I can figure out what happened to me?”

“It depends on what caused you to lose it in the first place.”

“Can you give me any actual answers? Something other than ‘possibly’ and ‘it depends’? God, you're all alike.”

“Who?”

Maggie rolled her eyes and kept her gaze rooted on her feet, shifting beneath the sheet and blanket. “Real doctors can do a blood test. A scan. An X-ray. They can tell you what's going on. All you do is sound smart without ever actually saying anything.”

“You want a definitive answer.”

“Duh?”

“Have you ever heard of dissociative fugue?”

“Isn't fugue a music term? Like a kind of music?”

“One definition of fugue is music related. But the other is psychological. Sometimes, a person just kind of forgets who they are, and they walk away from their life. Sometimes, they even adopt a new identity. A new name.”

“That's actually a thing?”

Lori smiled. “Not a common thing, but yeah, definitely a thing.”

“Why does it happen? Why would it happen to me?”

"I'm not saying it did, but I was hoping we could figure that out together. May I?" She gestured at the chair where Ivy had sat only an hour or so ago.

Maggie looked away, toward the window. "Go ahead."

"Maggie, I know this must be confusing. And frightening. Understanding will help, I think. You must feel so out of control."

"I'm fine," she whispered.

"You've said that twice now, and honestly, you're not convincing me." Her expression was kind when Maggie whipped around to glare at her. "Maggie, it wouldn't be *normal* to be fine after what happened to you today. It wouldn't be normal to feel fine after finding out that you've been missing for two months and have no idea where you've been. It would be normal to be completely freaked out."

"I'm just tired."

"That's fair. But I can tell you're also wondering. And you're worried."

"I'm pregnant," she whimpered.

"I know."

Maggie squeezed her eyes shut, her mouth shut, her knees together. Everything, closed up tight. But it didn't make her feel safer. She knew it was only a matter of time until she was pried open again.

Lori cleared her throat. "Do you know how it happened?"

Maggie shook her head.

"We'll work on figuring that out," said Lori. "And as we do, you can decide what to do about the pregnancy. But, Maggie, there's something you have to know about fugue, if that's what's going on here. It's going to be an important part of getting better and making sure it doesn't happen to you again."

"It could happen *again*?"

“It’s possible,” said Lori. “But it’s unlikely if you’re willing to take a good look at how it happened in the first place.”

“I don’t know how it happened!”

“With your permission, I can help. This type of event...it’s often caused by some type of severe stress or trauma.” Lori’s gaze was unwavering. Unapologetic. Gentle and merciless at the same time. Her gaze was a scalpel, Maggie realized, cutting right into her mind.

She turned over to face the window. “I didn’t go through a trauma,” she said. “I was under some stress, and my boyfriend broke up with me, but it wasn’t a trauma. I’m not crazy.”

“Experiencing a trauma doesn’t make a person crazy, Maggie. It means they’ve suffered an injury, one that needs some treatment to ensure recovery.”

“Whatever.”

“I think you might have suffered an injury, Maggie. I think it might be what drove you away from your life in May. If you’ll work with me, I can—”

“Get out.” She was curled into a ball again, shaking and doing her best not to cry. “Get out.”

“I’ll be on my way,” said Lori. “I can see that you’re tired. Would you like me to prescribe something to help you sleep tonight?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “Please.”

“I can do that. But you’re probably going to be discharged tomorrow morning, and it may be difficult for you to adjust without some help.” She pulled a business card from her pocket and set it on the folds of Maggie’s blanket. “Please consider talking to me again, Maggie, or, if I’m not your cup of tea, letting me refer you to someone else who could help. You deserve that. You deserve the chance to puzzle through what happened to you, with support. And without judgment. Good night.”

## THE QUIET GIRL

Maggie stared out the window until she heard the door close behind the shrink. There was no trauma. There never had been a trauma.

This is why she couldn't talk to a psychiatrist. They were just as crazy as the people they were trying to help.

She shifted her knees and flicked the business card off of her blanket like the rubbish it was.