

An aerial photograph of a two-lane road winding through a dense forest. The trees are in peak autumn foliage, with vibrant shades of orange, red, and yellow. A silver car is driving away from the viewer on the road. The title 'LOCUST LANE' is overlaid in large, bold, yellow-to-orange gradient letters.

# LOCUST LANE

*A NOVEL*

STEPHEN  
AMIDON

# LOCUST LANE

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STEPHEN AMIDON



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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## Prologue

PATRICK

He hit the dog on Locust. It came out of nowhere, a blur of dark motion. He swerved, but not enough—the bumper’s edge caught the animal’s hindquarters, sending it spinning back into the night. Its yelp harmonized with the shriek of braking tires. And then he’d stopped in the middle of the road, his heart racing, thinking that maybe going out for a drive wasn’t such a good idea after all.

It took him a moment to locate the stricken animal. It had fled back the way it had come, but only made it as far as the nearest lawn, where it was now turning in circles, nipping at its flank, locked in futile pursuit of its pain. It finally lay down and began to lick furiously at the point of impact. The dog was big and black. A Labrador, maybe, or a Labrador and something else. Patrick didn’t know dogs.

He checked the nearby houses to see if lights were flaring as homeowners in robes emerged onto front porches. All was quiet. The dashboard clock read 3:11. It was entirely possible the event had gone

unnoticed by the residents of Locust Lane. The setbacks here were deep, the windows tightly sealed. Trees shrouded most of the housefronts. Things that happened on the street were a long way off.

The dog continued to nurse its wound, though its movements suggested a recovery was in progress. Patrick told himself to drive on. He wasn't at fault. Dogs weren't allowed to run free in Emerson. Everybody knew that. A six-foot leash was required. There were signs everywhere. And he was not necessarily under the legal limit. The last thing he needed was to wind up walking the sobriety tightrope for some yawning cop. *Go home*, he thought. *Finish the bottle, hit the sack. You know the drill. Dawn will come, followed by another barren day.*

But he couldn't do it. He'd injured a living thing. That made him responsible for it. He had to help. He didn't need another item in the overladen shopping cart of guilt he was pushing around. He'd made a deal with himself not to abandon decency. He could leave behind everything else, but not that.

He pulled the car to the side of the road. The dog remained curled on the grass, although it was fussing with its flank less avidly. Having committed himself to helping, Patrick now understood that he had no idea what to do. Loading a large, frightened, and potentially bloody creature into his M3 and transporting it to an all-night animal hospital was out of the question. And he certainly wasn't dragging it back home. Whatever he was going to do would have to be done right here. The best he could come up with was to see if there was a tag on its collar, a number to call.

He got out of the car. The dog watched him, waiting for the human being to define the situation.

"Good boy," Patrick said, although he had no evidence that the dog was either of these things.

It emitted a brief whine, more of a radar ping than a call for help.

It was taking the measure of this creature who'd brought the pain. Its tail quivered in an unfriendly way. Patrick held out his right hand as a gesture of peace, palm down, fingers dangling, like royalty expecting a kiss. This was more or less the extent of his knowledge of canine communication. He'd never had a dog.

The wounded animal rose shakily, holding its back right paw a few inches off the grass. Standing was a good sign. No spinal damage; presumably no vital organs ruptured. It could limp back home to be cared for by the idiot who let it run free in the middle of the night. Patrick turned back to his car but froze when the dog growled. Low and ominous, like a waste disposal ready for debris. He turned to face it. Previously flat fur on the back of its neck had risen into a staticky bristle. It took a menacing step forward. That injured leg seemed to be getting better by the second.

Okay, Patrick thought. *Time to call it a night.* He showed the dog his hand again, this time offering his flat palm, a cop stopping traffic. There was no need for drama. Whoever's name was on that collar could take it from here. Get themselves a six-foot leash and obey the damned law.

He took a backward step. The dog took a mirroring step forward. Patrick wondered if his hand gestures meant something different to the dog than what he'd intended. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder. He'd left the car door open. That was good. Safety was just five quick strides away. He was pretty sure he could make it there before a three-legged dog.

But then the animal turned its head, its attention drawn to something in a thick copse of trees that separated the residential behemoth directly in front of Patrick from the even larger house next door. Patrick followed its gaze. At first, all he could see was varying degrees of nothingness. The trees were dense, knotted together by a network of

vines. But then something defined itself. A man-sized delineation of the darkness. A human being—tall, broad shouldered—watching from a hundred feet away.

*What the fuck?*

“Is this your dog?” Patrick called out.

There was no response.

“Hello?”

Nothing. This made no sense. Why would the dog’s owner be hiding in the trees? The town’s leash law penalties weren’t *that* harsh. Unless it wasn’t the dog’s owner. But vagabonds and lurkers weren’t exactly common in Emerson. As far as he knew, the town’s homeless population consisted of a small, ever-shifting squad of men cooling their heels at the Hilton after getting booted by aggrieved wives. He should know, having been one of them last year.

He looked back at the dog just as it made up its mind about whom-ever it had seen in the shadows and turned back to Patrick. At which point it made up its mind about him as well, and not in a positive way. Its growl deepened. It took another ominous step forward, the kind of murderous stealth on display in cable shows about the Serengeti. That injured leg appeared to have undergone a full recovery.

Time to go. With haste. Resurrecting a move from his wide receiver days, Patrick emphatically stamped his right foot forward, then pivoted and headed in the opposite direction. All he needed to be home free was five strides, a nifty spin into the car, and a slammed door. And he almost made it. His front foot was already in when there was a sharp explosion of pain on his trailing hamstring. The dog had bitten him. Luckily, its jaws didn’t find purchase. Patrick’s momentum allowed him to reach the driver’s seat and pull the door shut behind him. It didn’t latch, however, slamming instead into a cushion of bone and tissue. The dog’s head. There was an ear-shattering yelp, followed by a whimpering



retreat. Patrick pulled the door all the way closed as the dog limped off toward that dense copse, where a hidden man had just impassively watched it attack another human being.

Patrick gingerly probed the back of his injured thigh. The trousers were torn but there was no evidence of blood. The adrenaline continued to pump, fueling anger now. What the hell had just happened? Why hadn't that asshole intervened? Had he given the dog some sort of secret attack command? Patrick turned on his engine and maneuvered until his high beams illuminated the woods. But there was no one there. Just trees and vines. And of course the darkness, patiently waiting for the end of this frantic little interruption of its dominion.

Back at the town house, Patrick stripped off his torn pants and inspected the wound. The skin hadn't been broken, though he suspected there was a nasty bruise to come. He slathered it with antiseptic cream just to be safe, then applied an ice pack. For the relief of pain, a large tumbler of Suntory and two ibuprofen.

It was now approaching four. He should be in bed. He should have been in bed when the dog was biting him. He should have been in bed when he decided to go for a drive. But a dream had awakened him, driving him clean out of the house. Not a dream, really, but a disembodied voice, clearer and closer than any dream could ever be. *Dad, can you come get me?* It had not been from when Gabi was a girl, sunny and carefree, needing to be picked up from soccer practice or an afternoon at the mall. Nor was it her latter self, pleading and ravaged and shattered, calling from a borrowed burner or reversing the \$24.99-a-minute charge from a jailhouse pay phone. No, this call came from the here and now, from the young woman she would have been. Confident and a little impatient. On the cusp of her adult life. Doing her father a favor by allowing him to do this favor for her.



He wasn't in bed when she spoke to him, but rather in his old recliner, the only piece of furniture he'd extracted from his vanished life. It took him a minute to find his bearings. He wore the clothes he'd changed into after work, Dockers and a polo shirt. There was a tumbler filled with whisky-tinted ice melt and a bowl of pistachio shells on the table beside him. The Discovery Channel was broadcasting a muted show about bearded men on a boat, fighting the elements.

Sleep banished, he'd driven. He followed a random course through town. He turned left, he turned right. It didn't matter as long as he kept moving. Adams to Cabot; St. James to Smith, and then on to Rockingham. On Centre through the town's center, where nothing was open but everything was brightly lit. Past the high school, where a lone car sat in the vast lot, sodium light raining down over it like warm drizzle. Past the Mobil Mini Mart, where a Hopperesque figure sat encased in bulletproof glass. And then onto Locust, where the black dog crossed his path.

He should try to get some sleep in the small patch of night remaining, although that wouldn't come unassisted. Not with the pain in his leg, the residual adrenaline still coursing through his veins. And so he topped up on the Japanese wonder drug and contemplated that figure in the woods. The more he thought about it, the more it pissed him off. He couldn't imagine anyone in this town failing to intervene as their pet got hit, attacked a stranger, then was pancaked by a slamming car door. That animal had probably had more spent on its well-being than three-quarters of the world's children. And yet, not a peep from the woods. If the man just happened to be there by coincidence, then *what* was he doing there? It didn't add up.

He contemplated calling the police to report a prowler, a dog on the loose. But he could see how such a call would go. They'd listen patiently, send a patrol car to Locust, find nothing. Besides, Patrick wasn't

exactly on the best of terms with the local cops. No, this was over and done with. He decided to allot himself two more drinks. That would do the trick, filling in the three looming hours before he'd have to rise and shine; before the wasteland of the morning would finally creep into view.

## Midday Wednesday

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DANIELLE

She was on duty when they came through the door. Everybody was—lunch was their heaviest time for traffic. People liked to buy jewelry in the middle of the day. Mostly office workers on their lunch break. Couples, single men—you got a good mix. If you wanted to make sales, you either ate early or you ate late or you didn't eat at all.

But these two weren't customers. She saw that right away. They weren't even a couple, at least not the sort of couple who usually rolled into a jewelry shop. A middle-aged Black woman who looked like a high school principal accompanied by a white knucklehead who could have been the wrestling coach. The woman was a little on the heavy side but carried it well, her clothes spotless, not a hair out of place. The man had a body built of free weights and beer; his hair was shaped by electric razors and gel. No, they were definitely not here to buy an engagement ring. There were credentials dangling from their necks she couldn't read from this distance. Tax people, she guessed. Steve would have seen them on the CCTV in his office. He was probably shredding documents already.

Tomi was closing a deal on what looked a half-carat solitaire, so that left Britt up. The little dummy thought they were customers, so she came at them with that shitshow she called charm. But her smile vanished the moment the woman explained herself. She turned and pointed to Danielle.

*Here we go*, she thought. Again. Eden had called last night, just after midnight, but Danielle missed it. She'd gone to bed early, turning her ringer off because of a recent spate of Scam Likely calls. So she didn't see that her daughter had called until she woke this morning. She hadn't left a message. Danielle tried to call back but there was no answer. Which meant she'd been unable to forestall whatever nonsense was about to be laid at her feet.

Danielle had no issues with the tax people and her daughter had no money, so maybe they were social services. Although they tended not to come in pairs. The snakes who served summonses and warrants tended to work alone as well. And then she saw the gold shields and that feeling of annoyance shifted to something deeper.

It was the woman who spoke.

"Danielle Perry?"

Her voice was surprisingly kind. In most situations you could say it was soothing. Just not in this one.

"What has she done now?"

"My name is Dorothy Gates. I'm a detective with the state police. This is Detective Procopio from Emerson."

Gates looked around. Another couple had just been buzzed in. The showroom wasn't that big. It was getting crowded.

"Is there somewhere we could talk?"

The fear was starting to come harder. Eden had been in trouble, God only knew, but it had never required two detectives and privacy to explain.

"Ms. Perry?"

There was the storage room, but that was just a walk-in safe with no seating. Which left the manager's office. Steve wouldn't be happy having cops in there.

"I'm not . . ."

And then, on cue, he appeared, Steve Slater himself, with his chest hair and loafers. His eyes were locked on the cops; his frown was so profound it looked like he was in the early stages of a stroke. He said nothing as he approached, as if already following his lawyer's advice.

"These are Detectives Gates and Procopio," Danielle, good at names, explained. "Could we use your office for a minute?"

"My office," he repeated flatly.

Among the many things in Steve Slater's office that he wouldn't want the detectives to see was a gleaming Colt 1911 tucked in a holster he'd affixed to the well of his desk, an instrument of mayhem that may or may not be licensed with the Commonwealth. On the rare occasions he buzzed in suspicious characters, he had a charming habit of stuffing the pistol into the front of his action slacks.

"Yes, I would appreciate that," Gates said.

Which put Slater on the spot. A refusal would get the cops wondering.

"Certainly," he said, sounding like someone had superglued his molars together.

He unlocked the door with the key at the end of his elastic chain and held it open for them.

"Do you know how long this will take?" he asked as they passed by.

Gates turned and smiled sweetly, her face just inches away from his.

"We'll take just as long we need."

If honey were corrosive, that was her voice. The security door shut heavily behind them. There were two chairs facing his desk. Gates, immediately and fully in charge, motioned to one of them.

"Ms. Perry, I'd like you to take a seat."

That's when Danielle knew it was the worst kind of bad. She'd been asked to take a seat once before. Her grandmother after the heart attack.

"I'd prefer to stay standing," she said, as if remaining on her feet could ward off what was coming.

"Please," Gates said, her voice absolute in its kindness.

And so she sat. Gates took the other chair, perching right on its edge, ready to get back to her feet at a moment's notice. Procopio remained standing, his arms crossed in front of his chest. His eyes had not left Danielle since Britt had pointed her out. They betrayed no emotion. It was as if she was a test he was studying for.

"Ms. Perry," Gates said. "There's really no good way to say this. I'm afraid Eden is dead."

Danielle held the woman's eye for a moment, just to be sure, then looked around for something to focus on beside that unbearable sympathy. Her gaze landed on a photo of Slater and his daughters in front of a muscle car. She looked back at the detective.

"I'm so sorry," Gates said.

Danielle wondered why she wasn't crying and carrying on. She knew it was happening somewhere inside her but it hadn't arrived yet.

"What happened?"

"Again, this is hard news, but we believe she was murdered."

"How?"

"It appears she suffered a blow to the head."

"Where was she?"

"At a house in Emerson. Do you know . . ."

"Wait, were Bill and Betsy . . ."

"They were out of town."

"You're sure it's her?"

"Her driver's license was at the scene. We've spoken with the homeowners. Danielle, it's her."

"Was she . . ."

"We're looking at that."

Danielle had run out of questions.

"When did you last speak with your daughter?" Gates asked.

"Last night. Around seven."

"Did she indicate there was anything wrong?" Procopio asked, his voice what she'd expected, practice fields and dive bars and roofing gigs.

"No," Danielle answered. "Where is she now?"

"We're looking after her."

There was a knock on the door. Procopio answered it. His conversation with Slater didn't last long. And then it was just the three of them again. Danielle remembered something.

"She called. I mean, a second time. Last night."

"And when was that?"

"Just after midnight."

"What did she say?"

"I missed it. I was asleep."

"Did she leave a message?"

Danielle shook her head.

"I tried to call back this morning but . . ."

But she was dead.

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

"We're going to need to ask you some questions," Gates said.

"Can it be later? I'm not . . ."

She didn't know what she wasn't.

"It has to be now and let me tell you why. At this point in time we're still trying to piece it all together. And every moment that passes makes that a little harder to do."

"Can we not do it in here, at least?"

"Tell you what. Come down to the station with us. I think that would be best all around."

"Is she there?"



"No, she's being looked after by the Medical Examiner."

"Can we go there first?"

"We can talk about all of that after we get to the station."

In the showroom, whatever everyone was thinking vanished when they saw the look on Danielle's face. Steve said something and then Britt said something but she couldn't process their words.

Eden.

Their car was double-parked just outside the door. There was a Watertown cruiser as well. It took off after a nod from Gates. Danielle sat in the back. It wasn't far to Emerson. Procopio drove. He used his lights and siren a few times to clear people out of the way. They didn't speak, though Gates turned around every minute or so to check on her. Danielle was finding it hard to hold on to her thoughts. It felt like that moment right before you fell asleep, when your mind was pulling you into dreams. Things were still familiar but also completely different from your normal life. You could imagine Eden being just about any old thing. Under arrest. In the ER. In need of rescue from a fender bender or a disastrous one-night stand or angry people who'd been dumb enough to trust her. Laughing her head off over something nobody else even understood. But not dead. She was always alive when you thought about her. More alive than anybody. Fidgeting and talking and asking. Sipping your beer, taking food off your plate. Never quite getting it but plunging ahead anyway, as if the world was a big, rubberized playground where nothing truly bad could ever happen.

"You wouldn't happen to know the password to her phone?"

"1526," Danielle answered immediately.

Gates was surprised.

"It's her birthday plus mine," Danielle explained. "I bought it for her on the condition I knew the password."

Gates sent a text and then the silence resumed. They arrived in

Emerson. Big houses, big cars, quiet streets. As always, Danielle was struck by how *safe* it all looked.

"This must not happen here much," she said. "People getting killed."

"Things happen all over," Gates said, a trace of weary wonder in her voice.

Emerson Police Headquarters looked more like some high-tech firm on Route 128 than a place where the grubby business of law enforcement took place. There was a van parked outside emblazoned with the name of a local news affiliate. A tiny bottle blonde in skyscraper heels spoke into a camera beside it.

"Terrific," Procopio muttered.

They parked in a spot near the back entrance. Inside, there was an open-plan office that was both busy and hushed. People glanced at her as she passed, only to look quickly away. A uniformed man—tall, older, silver-haired—awaited them at the door of a glass-walled conference room. He introduced himself as the chief of police; she couldn't catch his name through the oceanic buzz now filling her ears. When he shook her hand, he covered it like it was a waffle in an iron.

"I am so sorry about your child," he said.

A strange choice of words given the fact her daughter was twenty, but unintentionally accurate. Eden was nothing if not a child. They entered the room. She was once again shown where she needed to sit. Gates and Procopio sat across from her; the chief remained standing. There was a manila envelope on the table. Gates produced a small tape recorder, pressed a button, then placed it on the table between them.

"I'm going to be recording our conversation. There's also a camera."

Danielle nodded. As if she had a say in any of this.

"Okay, what I'm going to do is show you two photographs. We're going to need you to look at them and tell us if they're your daughter. I have to warn you that this is not an easy thing. But it has to be done."

"Yeah, I get it."

"Okay. Here we go."

Gates pulled two big photos from the envelope. She looked at them for a moment, as if having second thoughts, then placed them on the table in front of Danielle. They were close-ups of Eden's face. Her eyes were half-open. The white of the left one was purply red; its lid was swollen like waterlogged bread. You could see the smallest bit of her tongue.

"Her eye."

"That would be from internal bleeding," Gates said.

Danielle touched the edge of one of the photos, adjusting it so it squared up with the other. She nodded. There was silence.

"You're confirming that the person in these photographs is your daughter, Eden Angela Perry?"

"Yes."

There was movement behind her. The chief. He put something on the table next to her. A pen. A very nice pen.

"We're just going to need you to initial the back of each photo."

She did as told. Gates collected the two photos and put them back in the envelope.

"Can I see her?"

"Not quite yet."

"I'm going to need to do that."

"We understand." The detective shifted in her chair. "Now, when you spoke to your daughter last night, what did you talk about?"

"Nothing, really. I was mainly after her to, well you probably know this, she has a court date coming up."

"The shoplifting thing."

"Which is a crock. Anyway, she needed to touch base with the lawyer."

Gates gestured dismissively. Nobody cared about shoplifting now.

"Did she mention if she was seeing anyone last night?"

"No."

"What exactly was she doing at the Bondurants'? On the phone they said something about them being relations."

"Distant cousins. Betsy can tell you the exact number. We were connected through my aunt Nancy. We met at her funeral . . ."

Her voice caught for a second on that word.

"Take your time."

"The Bondurants had taken Eden under their wing. She's . . . a handful. She's not bad. She's just, sometimes she does dumb stuff because the dumb stuff is easy. She trusts people who should have never been trusted. But she wouldn't hurt a fly."

"I'm sure," Gates said.

"She drives you crazy about ten times a day, but she's also kind of an angel. It's hard to explain. You have to know her."

Danielle started to cry. She never cried, but there it was. The tears were like hard little stabs to her eyes. A box of tissues materialized—the chief again. *Okay*, she told herself after twenty or thirty seconds. *That's that. You've cried, and it did all the good it usually does.* She dabbed at her eyes, turning the snowy-white tissue coal black.

"How long had she been there?" Gates asked.

"Almost three months."

"And she seemed happy?"

"She did."

"And what did she do, exactly?"

"Well, Betsy just needed a companion. Somebody to help her get around. I think mostly she was just lonely for her own kids. I guess you know about their eldest."

"Yes. Very sad."

"And the others grown and gone. She just wanted someone to fuss over. I was skeptical at first. Eden isn't exactly a seasoned caregiver. But

they really hit it off. Oh, and there was the dog, too. She looked after that. Was it . . . ?”

“The dog’s fine. What did you know about Eden’s social life?”

“Not a lot. She didn’t like to tell me things. We were often at odds on that particular subject.”

“Why was that?”

“She’d made some poor choices in the past and so I guess I could be kind of hard on her about the company she kept.”

“So no friends that you knew of? I mean out here in Emerson.”

“Not that I knew of. Though I’m sure there were, knowing her.”

“So she didn’t have a job? I mean, outside of the Bondurant house?”

“Beyond walking the dog and keeping Betsy company, no. They paid her. A lot. And gave her a room. It had its own bathroom and a king bed and a big TV. I mean, you saw the place. Maybe that’s what it was? A robbery or something?”

“We’re certainly looking into every possibility. Back to something you said, about poor choices. Is there anyone from Eden’s past who you think might have wanted to harm her in any way? Like an ex-boyfriend?”

“They’re pretty much a bunch of losers, but none of them seemed violent.”

“Do you have names?”

“There’s Matt and Rayshard . . . you know, I’d have to think.”

“If you could come up with a list, that would be helpful.”

“I can do that.”

“Now, did your daughter do drugs?”

“Not to the point of it being a problem. No needles or anything like that.”

“And so, this midnight call, you don’t know what that was all about?”

“No.”

“Was it like her, to call that late?”

“Not recently.”

Gates looked at her for a bit.

"So how would you characterize your own relationship with your daughter."

"I'm her mother."

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"I guess you can say that Eden and I were taking a time-out. I mean, saying that, it sounds worse than it was. It was just, you know, after twenty years, I think we decided a break might be in order."

"Oh," Gates said, as if the thought had just occurred to her. "Where were you last night? I know you said you talked to her at seven . . ."

Danielle knew it was only natural that they would suspect her. They didn't know her. She knew how she looked, with the tats and the dyed-black hair. But still.

"I was at home."

"Doing what?" Procopio asked.

"I had dinner and then I watched a movie and then I went to bed."

"What movie was that?"

"It had Julia Roberts in it. She pretends to fall in love with a gay guy to get another guy jealous. I can't remember the name."

"*My Best Friend's Wedding*," Procopio said immediately.

The two women looked at him. Gates turned back to Danielle.

"You didn't go out at all?"

"No."

"Okay. Good to know."

They spoke for a while longer. The chief left them to it. Gates asked her about Eden's ex-boyfriends and her habits and if she said anything more about her weeks in Emerson. They asked about her daughter's moods, which was a bit like asking about the flight plan of a housefly. Danielle knew she wasn't being much help. They started repeating themselves.

And then the chief reappeared, summoning the detectives for an ur-

gent conversation outside the door. After that, they couldn't get rid of her fast enough.

"Can I see her now?" she asked.

"Tell you what. We'll let you know as soon as possible."

"That will be today, right?"

"They got their own way of doing things over there. But should be."

"Thank you."

"We'll get an officer to take you home now. Is there someone you can be with?"

"I'll be all right."

"Are you sure? There are people we can call."

There was only one person she needed to be with. For a long time, there had only been one.

"I'll be all right," she repeated, even though she suspected she'd be anything but.

## CELIA

She'd spent the morning waiting for Alice to answer her text. It was odd. She usually responded right away. But it had been almost three hours. Of course, it was possible that she was still asleep. Alice was not exactly a morning person. It would be a shame if they were unable to meet. They really needed to talk about the kids.

She also had to get out of the house for a while. The builders were making much more of a racket than she'd anticipated. They'd started to destroy the patio just after seven. By doing so, they were violating the Emerson ordinance that prohibited yard work before eight. Not that it mattered. Nobody was going to complain about noise at the Parrish house at any hour. After all, it was Oliver who'd drawn up the rules.

There were four workmen in all. One wielded a jackhammer. Another drove a backhoe. The remaining two watched with analytical expressions,



like Olympic judges. Celia was already sitting in her sunny kitchen nook when they arrived, a cup of coffee in front of her. Oliver was away and she found it hard to sleep past dawn when alone. She'd felt a brief shudder when they started cracking the corrupt stone, not unlike the feeling that accompanied the first snip of a major haircut. But then there was no turning back and she could think about the next thing, which this morning happened to be her youngest son. Specifically, his nightlong absence from the house. He'd texted just after midnight. *Staying at Hannah's*. She'd asked if he meant the entire night. He'd responded, eventually, with a simple *yeh*, thereby putting her in a difficult position. She could try to continue the conversation by text, although that would go nowhere. She could call him, but he was with his girlfriend, and that would cause trouble. Provided he even picked up. No, she'd simply have to wait for him to return.

And so she let it be, then woke early the next morning and perched in her favorite place in the house, the kitchen alcove, which afforded her a panoptic view of the house's front, garage, and French doors. When all the boys had still been living at home she'd felt like an air traffic controller, directing landings and takeoffs on multiple runways. With Jack, her youngest, leaving at summer's end, she supposed she'd soon feel more like the lighthouse keeper in some sad movie. She caught herself immediately. Where on earth had *that* dreary thought come from? He was going to Dartmouth, not Afghanistan. She'd still see him plenty, as she did Drew and Scotty. Just not in the daily manner that had her doing things like waiting for him to get home at the crack of dawn.

What exactly she intended to say when he stepped through the door remained an open question. She wasn't ready for this. A sleepover. With a girl. It wasn't expressly forbidden, but only because it had never been discussed. Hannah was Jack's first actual girlfriend, provided you discounted last year's entanglement with Lexi Liriano, which Celia was only too happy to do. She knew they were doing the deed and it didn't

bother her. She'd already raised two sons. She was neither a fool nor a prude. She hoped she never got too old or too jaded to forget what it was like, the unrepeatable bliss of those early lovers. Giving every inch of yourself over to someone else. In her case it had been Teddy Vier in the chalet at Killington while their families were off on the slopes. Doing just about every last thing they'd been warned against. Teddy, with his mop of unruly blond hair, his muscular arms encased in sheaths of baby-soft skin.

But they would have never spent a whole night together. Not in high school. It was too much, even for second-semester seniors. There were rules, unwritten but indelible, and everyone needed to follow them, even a family as unconventional as Hannah's. Celia would have to intervene. But she'd need to tread lightly. She didn't want to jeopardize things. There was Jack's temper to consider. And Hannah was proving good for her son. Unexpected, but good. Quiet and sweet. A bit passive, a bit *poetic*, perhaps. Not the prettiest girl in the world, but there was nothing wrong with that. And she certainly adored Jack. Frightening her off would be a mistake.

Truth be told, it wasn't as if he had other choices. He'd never had much luck in the romance department. Drew and Scotty always had some loyal lissome creature who hung on their every utterance, but Jack never could attract much interest from girls. At first, she put it down to his youth. But then he sprouted to over six feet and his voice deepened and he was too old to be seen as being just young. As hard as it was for a mother to admit, he didn't share the undeniable male beauty of his brothers and father. He was not-quite-handsome, which could be as bad as ugly. Eyes too close together, lips a little too thin, lacking his brothers' grace when he moved. And there was something a little too spiky about his personality—that piercing laugh, and the way he resorted to sarcasm when nervous or insecure. She'd hoped that things had changed last year with Lexi. After that ended so disastrously, she was forced to

consider the prospect that girls were going to be a long-term issue for her youngest son.

But then Hannah arrived and his girl troubles really did seem to be a thing of the past. She had the patience of a saint, seeing all his good qualities, putting up with the stubbornness and peculiar views and flashes of temper, smoothing out his rough edges with her gentleness and quiet manner. They really were a perfect young couple. It would be a mistake to upset their odd equilibrium. Celia would definitely have to finesse this one as she figured out a way to communicate to Jack that there were boundaries.

Her phone made one of its noises. It was Oliver, calling on Facetime. Which was unusual. She walked into the quieter living room before accepting the call. And there he was, his face too big for the tiny screen.

"Good morning from deepest darkest Connecticut," he said. "What's that unholy racket?"

"The men are here for the patio."

"Oh, that's right. How's it looking?"

"They're still in the destruction phase. How's Stamford?"

He twisted the phone so she could see out his hotel room window. It looked like just about everything else down there.

"You look a little beat."

"We were at it until midnight," he said. "From boardroom to bar."

"How's the deal going?" she asked with trepidation.

Oliver was in the final phases of enabling his clients, a massive German conglomerate, to merge with a Connecticut-based machine-parts manufacturer. It had not been smooth sailing, which meant long hours worked, but also long hours billed. The Faustian bargain of his profession.

"We're getting there. These guys are funny to socialize with. They tell terrible jokes. Everything basically comes down to passing wind and large breasts."

“Hopefully not in the same joke.”

He laughed. That was better.

“So when will you be home?” she asked.

“Meetings all morning and then lunch. I’ll be there for dinner at the absolute latest.”

There was a brief pause. This was the part of the conversation where she should have told him about Jack’s absence, but there was no reason to pile anything else on his plate. She’d sort it out with her son first, then present it to her husband as a *fait accompli* tonight over Manhattans.

“Okay, I better get back to it. I’ll let you know when I set out.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I reciprocate,” he answered, their old mantra.

They broke the connection. She stayed where she was, fretting over her husband. He really shouldn’t be working so much, especially after that decidedly ambiguous read-out from last year’s treadmill test. But old habits die hard. As long as there was a child in the house, he would feel the obligation to provide, no matter how much money they had socked away. Possessed by the need to be everything his own father wasn’t. It was simply how he was built.

And then Jack walked through the front door, even though he usually used the garage. His expression was grim, somewhere between troubled and confused. His eyes were on the kitchen as he clung close to the far wall and started tiptoeing upstairs. He was trying to avoid her.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she said after he’d taken two steps.

He turned in surprise.

“Oh,” he said. “Hey.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Tired,” he mumbled, avoiding eye contact.

The jackhammer started.

“Come on in here,” she said.

After releasing a theatrical sigh, he obeyed. He collapsed on the sofa opposite her.

"Are you sure everything's all right?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" he asked, a sharp edge to his voice that she chose to ignore.

"You look upset."

"Just tired."

"What did you guys do last night?"

"Just hung out."

"At Hannah's?"

"Yeah." He finally made eye contact. "Is that a problem?"

More defiance. She decided not to get into it now. It was useless trying to reason with him when he was like this.

"We can talk about that later. You want breakfast?"

"I'll grab something at school. Can I go now?"

She nodded and he fled upstairs. Celia wasn't thrilled about the attitude, but she told herself he was only tired. After all, he'd just spent the night in bed with a girl for the first time. It would be strange if he didn't look and act like he'd been put through the wringer.

She went back to the kitchen. The workers continued to wreak havoc. It had taken them just over an hour to turn the majestic old patio into six hundred square feet of rubble and churned earth. She surveyed the rest of the yard. The slate pool, the recently painted gazebo, the maze of rose trellises, the tastefully tarnished birdbath. The lawn itself, a tranquil sea of green from which periscope-like sprinklers emerged every evening. A place for games and barbecues and parties. Twenty-five years they'd been here, since just before Drew was born. She wondered what it would be like when it was just the two of them. She'd envisioned them on the new patio on a summer Sunday morning, their bare feet on cool slate, sipping coffee as they passed the sectioned *Times* back and forth. Or entertaining in the evening beneath bug-zapping devices that would spit-roast

interloping mosquitoes. *But would it really be like all that? Or would it just be two aging people rattling around a house far too grand for them?*

Once again, she had to catch herself. *Where on earth is all this gloom and doom coming from? They'd be fine. They'd have a blast. A few months in Italy, nights in the city, trips to Broadway or Jackson Hole or wherever they pleased. They'd be fine.*

Jack thundered downstairs and vanished out the front door after a shouted goodbye. So much for that heart-to-heart. And then the jackhammer resumed its bone-rattling chatter. That's when Celia decided to text Alice. They could discuss this sleepover business over lunch. Establish some guidelines; forge a united front. It had been a long time since she'd seen her crazy friend. Too long. She felt guilty about that, even though Alice had been the one making excuses the last few times she tried to get together. This time, however, Celia would insist.

And then there was nothing to do but try to escape the noise and not think about that look on her son's face. Finally, just when it seemed like it was going to be too late, her phone lit up.

"Papillon?" Alice wrote.

"That would be lovely," Celia replied.

## ALICE

The Ambien-and-Chablis nightcap had not been a good choice. There was no reason to pretend otherwise. She'd had it sometime around midnight, after hearing Hannah get home. It had bought her four hours of dreamless, deathlike sleep. She checked her phone the moment she woke, although she knew full well that there was no way he was going to message her in the middle of the night. He wasn't even doing it during the day, for God's sake. She kicked free of the twisted covers and went downstairs to irrigate her sandblasted tongue. Light leaked from beneath Geoff's office door. He'd been working later and later, fueled,

no doubt, by nootropics he scored from his buddies, the buzz-feeders and focus-pullers that were too new to even have nicknames. His all-nighters had evolved from the exception to the rule. Which was okay by Alice. She was perfectly fine conducting her marriage in shifts. There was light edging through Hannah's bedroom door as well, but she often slept with the lights on, darkness being high on the long list of things she feared.

Alice went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. She pondered another glass of Chablis. It wasn't as if she had anywhere to be in the morning. Or the afternoon, for that matter, now that Michel had dropped off the face of the earth. But that would kill the bottle, and she'd then have to deal with her husband knowing she'd killed the bottle. Geoff could be a real substance snob. Ingest an oblong pill freshly minted in a Malaysian lab and you were a consciousness pioneer, kicking open the doors of perception; drink a couple of shots of stomped grape or fermented potato and you had a problem. She should just get a liter of Stoli and keep it in her underwear drawer, like her mother. It wasn't as if Geoff was going to be getting into her panties anytime soon.

Although maybe it wasn't time for her to turn into her mom quite yet.

She reached for one of the exquisitely packaged bottles on the top shelf. Glacier water. For God's sake. It was like eating a polar bear burger. Ah well. If the world was going to melt, she might as well put it to good use.

"Hey," a voice said behind her.

As she spun in surprise, her hand struck a glass jar in the fridge, propelling it to the floor, where it shattered emphatically, leaving a viscid, bright red substance smeared across the tile. A sharp smell now filled the air. Harissa. Not the thing you wanted to deal with on an iffy stomach.

"What the fuck!" she whisper-shouted.

It was her stepdaughter, as tentative and spectral as ever.

"God, Hannah, you scared the shit out of me."



As she watched the girl's expression collapse, Alice regretted her harsh tone.

"Sorry," Hannah said, miserably.

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes."

And then she started to cry. She collapsed into Alice's body with such force that she almost sent them both tumbling down into glass-studded harissa. The sobs moved through her like a shaken rug.

"Hannah, sweetie, what is it?" Alice asked, truly alarmed now.

"Nothing," she whimpered.

The girl pulled back and swatted at the tears covering her cheeks.

"I'm just being stupid."

"Did you fight with Jack?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know. Just . . . never mind."

"Well, is there anything I can do? I'd offer you some harissa, but . . ."

It was a pretty funny remark, but Hannah wasn't laughing.

"He's here," she whispered, like an actress with a single line in a horror film.

"Who? Jack?"

"He's staying over. Is that okay?"

"Of course it's all right. As long as you don't have sex or anything."

Hannah's eyes widened.

"I'm *joking*," Alice said as she thought: *Stop joking*. "I mean, do you *want* him there?"

"Yes!"

"Then it's fine."

"Do you think Dad will be okay with it?"

"I'll handle your father. But I am a little worried about you being upset. You're sorta supposed to have the opposite reaction to these things."

"I guess I'm just being emotional."

"Emotions are good, right? We like emotions."

Finally, a wan smile. Hannah looked at the floor, illuminated by light from the still-open Sub-Zero, which had started ping-pong like an elevator locked in endless descent. The harissa glistened thick and red. Shards of glass emerged like broken teeth. It looked like a gangland slaying photo.

"I should clean this up," Hannah said.

"I'll get it. You go back to your boyfriend. And cheer up. These are the good times, kiddo."

Hannah grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge and vanished. Alice was tempted to leave the mess for the morning, but Geoff was given to barefoot nocturnal wanderings, and their relationship had not yet entered the boob-trap phase. It took half a roll of paper towels to clean up. As she worked, she contemplated what she'd just learned. Jack was staying over. This was new. The tears weren't necessarily cause for alarm. Her stepdaughter was prone to weeping, barely able to last through a Sally Struthers commercial without dissolving into a puddle of sentiment. It was probably just an excess of feeling bubbling to the surface.

On the other hand, Alice still wasn't so sure about Jack. Although she'd never seen concrete evidence of bad behavior, there was a faintly sulfuric whiff about him that needed to be watched. Those creepily close-set eyes had a way of cutting into you that didn't feel accidental; his default tone was dismissive sarcasm. He'd recently expressed some strange opinions about what women wanted that Alice hoped he'd be growing out of soon. And there was a lacerating tone to his laughter that gave her pause. Alice had taken her eye off the ball during her recent adventure, but that didn't mean it was no longer something that needed to be watched.

She walked to Geoff's office and paused outside the door. She listened for a moment—he was never happy to be disturbed while working. But

he needed to know what was going on under their roof. It was unusually silent inside. She knocked gently. Nothing. She knocked again. More nothing. She opened the door a few inches.

“Geoff?” she whispered into the gap.

There was no response. She poked her head inside. He lay on the sofa against the far wall, dead to the world beneath the Hüsker Dü poster. The slack cadence of his breathing suggested he’d recently visited the deep end of his pharmaceutical pool. Trying to wake him would be futile. She backed out of the room. They’d discuss Hannah in the morning.

Back in bed, glacier water in hand, Alice pondered her own romantic travails. She should go ahead and text Michel, even though she’d resolved not to. It had been three days. Well, four, now that morning approached. She’d written him eight times during that spell, usually in midmorning, the quietest time of his day. Each message had gone unanswered. It was starting to frighten her.

She typed, *hey can't sleep thinking about you*. Not exactly a sonnet, but it got the point across. Her thumb hovered over the arrow. Something was stopping her. She could tell herself it was prudence, but she knew it was really fear; fear that this, too, would go unanswered. And so she erased the feeble girlish words and nestled the phone against her stomach. Just in case. Her eyes came to rest on the canister of Ambien on her nightstand, nestled inconspicuously between the Xanax and Excedrin Plus. *What the hell*, she thought as she reached for it. *That's what it's there for*.

The next thing she knew it was 11:17. Harsh, headachy light poured into the room. Her limbs felt like they’d been filled with cement. Geoff’s side of the bed remained unoccupied, extending his three-week absent streak. Her phone had wound up beneath her body, like an egg she was trying to hatch. There was a single message, but it was only from Celia.

“Lunch?”

She was tempted to decline and go back to sleep. Pull the plug on the

day. Maybe take a Xanax this time, just to make sure she didn't develop any bad habits. But that was another of her mother's tricks, sleeping the day away. Not-turning-into-Mom might not be the most laudable of goals, but at least it got her out of bed in the morning.

She had the idea while seated on the toilet. It was brilliant. She snatched the phone from the counter.

"Papillon?" she wrote.

"That would be lovely," came the immediate reply.

Which was pure Celia. Anyone else would have sent her back a simple thumbs-up. But Celia was not one for emojis or partial sentences or conflated spelling. If you sent her a text, you got a reply, usually immediate, always grammatically sound and perfectly punctuated. They settled on noon. A bit early, but Alice was suddenly extremely eager for lunch.

It was a smooth move, choosing Papillon. Showing up at Michel's restaurant alone was out of the question. She'd pulled that stunt one time too many. But rolling in with Celia Parrish could not be criticized. It would be frustrating, of course, to inhabit the same space as him without any intimate communication. Especially that space. Their space. And she'd have to be careful around Celia. She still had no idea how she'd react to news that Alice was having an affair. Although Celia clearly took vicarious thrills in Alice's tales of a wild past, this might be a transgression too far.

Most decisively, Michel had made her swear to keep their secret. It was deeply important to him, even though she'd tried to convince him that people wouldn't care as much as he thought. This wasn't the 1600s. And if he was worried about the racial thing—people didn't give a shit. Not these people, with their Ivy League educations and their third-generation Kennedy congressman. Michel might not be a WASP, but he was a French-educated Lebanese Catholic who owned a restaurant you needed to book weeks in advance for a Friday-night table. The only flak he was liable to get from this crowd was for putting an unhealthy amount of butter in his béarnaise.

She needed to get a move on. Her instinct was to throw on a pair of jeans and a sweater. Michel liked it when she dressed young and American. Last week, when they finally got to spend some quality time together, she'd worn a pair of Daisy Dukes and he'd more or less flipped his wig. That had been one for the books. But this was Celia they were talking about. Conversation might be relaxed with her, but not appearances. You brought your A game with Mrs. Parrish. The woman could stroll through a car wash and come out perfect. When they met, Alice's first thought was *God, I hope I look like this in twenty years. Fuckable at fifty*. The porcelain skin that carried a fine network of lines like an artwork that would just keep increasing in value. The extra few pounds that had accumulated in all the right places, distinguishing her from the anorexic voodoo dolls who populated Emerson. Most of all, those sparkling blue eyes, which still made men of all ages sit up and take notice.

Alice chose a simple black skirt and a tan cardigan; a touch of lipstick and blush. She'd do hair and mascara on the drive over. She swung by Geoff's office on the way out—she still needed to alert him to his daughter's middle-of-the-night distress. His door was shut tightly. She heard him clacking away. She really wished he'd bury the hatchet with his boss. Having him around the house 24/7 was getting oppressive. She knocked twice. It took him several annoyed seconds to answer. In his Clam Shack T-shirt and food-stained sweatpants, his too-long hair and unshaven cheeks, he appeared to be exactly what he was: a dweeb desperately trying not to look like a dweeb.

"How's the work going?" she asked.

"No, yeah, it's good. You going out?"

"Ladies who lunch. So Hannah was up in the middle of the night. She seemed pretty upset about something."

"Did she say what?"

"Not sure. You know that Jack stayed over, right?"

"Yeah, I saw him head out around seven."

"And we're okay with that?"

"She's a big girl," he said.

Alice could have debated the point, but she let it go.

"So you got this? You're going to talk to her?"

"It's all good," he said.

Having discharged her stepmotherly duty, Alice headed out into what proved to be a fine spring day. As she rocked over the formidable array of speed bumps that stood between her and the town's center, she allowed herself to get excited by the prospect of seeing Michel. Their last time together had been so perfect. Six blissful hours spent alone in his house last Friday, luxuriating in the knowledge that his son, Christopher, was attending a concert in Boston with Jack and Hannah and then staying at Jack's grandmother's Back Bay mansion. If not for Geoff, she could have spent an entire night with her beloved. Although her husband probably wouldn't have noticed if she rolled in after dawn. These days, he wouldn't notice if her hair was on fire, except to complain about the smell.

It had been the longest period of time they'd spent together. Before that, their encounters had always been brief. Usually in the morning, after the kids were at school and Geoff was at the lab. Or late at night. Sometimes they'd use their homes, although it was impossible to relax at either place. Geoff kept odd hours, even before falling out with his boss. And, because of his son, Michel was weird about using his own place. They'd rented a room at the Hilton once, but that felt as gross as some no-tell motel out on Route 9. Mostly, they'd been confined to his office at the restaurant, with its massive, redolent sofa she liked to imagine he'd brought with him from Beirut, even though he'd only lived there as a boy. *Their divan*, as she came to think of it. Once, after closing, they wound up in the kitchen, where she'd gripped the smooth hot steel bar on the oven door as he had at her.

They'd met at Papillon, during her first visit. She'd gone for lunch with

Celia. Michel had emerged from the kitchen; their eyes had met; he'd come over to say hello. It turned out his son was Hannah's friend Christopher, a slight boy with a shy smile he'd figure out how to use one day.

She'd spent the next hour catching him staring at her through the swinging door. She'd stare back, their eyes launching darts of passion through the food-perfumed void. She'd returned a few days later, alone, and he'd joined her at her table. They talked and then she left her number on a napkin. It was cotton, fine quality, like everything at Papillon. Not the sort of thing you'd normally jot a note on. But he'd handed her a Sharpie and told her to go right ahead. It belonged to him, after all.

He'd texted her that night, inviting her to dinner on Monday, when the restaurant was closed. Her own private meal. The menu was etched eternally on her parietal lobe. Fillet de Cabillaud in a saffron broth, jasmine rice laced with thinly sliced almonds, steamed mangetout that seemed like so many little green dirigibles ready to float away. White wine whose austere label made it clear it was doing her a favor by letting her drink it. They ate and they talked and then he took her back to his office and fucked her brains out. He wasn't particularly gentle. He didn't dilly-dally, didn't ask permission, didn't try to find out what it was she was into. He just let her have it; rough because he was not necessarily in control of himself. Which made her lose control as well. The result of this onslaught was her first non-auto-induced orgasm in a long time. In fact, she had four of them, one after the other. A pileup on a foggy highway with no survivors except the lone woman who staggered from the wreckage, eyes glazed, hair and clothes in disarray.

Driving home that night, all she could think was that she had done this terrible, forbidden thing and there was going to be hell to pay. When she encountered Geoff she expected him to see right through her lies about a girls' night out. But he was too lost in the neural pathways he was fabricating. And so she kept it under wraps. It wasn't easy. It required strategy. She had to create a counter story for everything



she did. Another self, a double to provide her with cover. And thus was Good Alice born, a virtuous version of herself who would be out doing Pilates or lunching with a friend while the real her, Bad Alice, was in the arms of an absurdly handsome restaurateur with a French accent and slightly aloof manner. Sometimes she wondered what Good Alice would have made of her bad version had they ever met. Would she be jealous? Loathe her? *Judge* her?

And then came last Friday. He'd finally overcome his reservations about his place, at least for one night. Luxuriating at his sweet little house had changed the way she thought about what they were doing. Before that, she hadn't seen the need to give it a name. It was just another crazy thing that was happening to Alice A. Hill. But that night had made it real. They were a couple. She suddenly saw how this might actually work. No longer having to borrow time or steal moments. No longer having to lie. And so, as they lay entwined, she'd let herself get carried away by the moment.

"Do you ever think about buying the restaurant?" she'd asked. "The building itself, I mean?"

"Only about ten times a day. But property values here . . ."

"I have money."

"What do you mean?" he asked after a surprised silence.

"Geoff and I have a prenup. I get half of everything."

"But you would have to get divorced for that."

She rose herself onto an elbow.

"Yes, Michel. I'd have to get divorced. That's how a prenup works."

"I might not be so popular around here after that," he said.

"Are you serious? Nobody would care. But if that's really an issue for you, then we could move somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Boston. Paris. You name it."

"How much is this prenup?"

“My part’s like nine million.”

The sum had driven him into a silence she couldn’t fathom. She decided to leave it at that. She wondered if it had something to do with him being raised Catholic. And then there was the matter of his dead wife, who’d undergone an apotheosis to saint since succumbing to breast cancer. The Virgin Maryam. There’d been a photo of her in his office that had vanished after their first romp. She was hot as hell, surprise surprise, but there was something in those obsidian eyes that frightened Alice, reminding her of the moralizing zealots in the benighted Pennsylvan shithole she’d fled as a seventeen-year-old. Forget about that death-do-us-part business, said those eyes. Your narrow ass is mine ’til kingdom come.

In the days that followed, he hadn’t answered. There had been no “yes,” no “no.” Time became a slow, corrosive drip that ate away at her initial elation. She’d pushed too hard, too soon. But every time she’d reached the edge of despair, she’d console herself with a simple thought. He loved her. He understood they were a perfect match. He also loved his restaurant—and hated paying rent. His four-day blackout had to have a perfectly good explanation. A problem at work, an issue with his extended family, spread out as it was over three continents. *Stop worrying*, she told herself. She’d see him; they’d find a few whispered seconds together and he’d touch her and let her know that everything was all right.

Papillon was still mostly empty when she arrived, a few minutes early. Michel would already be in the kitchen, working his wizardry. He’d emerge at some point in his white smock to take a tour of the dining room. It was Sofia, the hostess, a raven-haired, liquid-eyed beauty, who emerged from the kitchen, carrying a stack of menus like a warrior princess’s shield. She was some sort of relative of Michel’s. She was also on to Alice—there’d been the tiniest trace of a knowing smile the last time she’d come alone. Which had spelled the end of those solo lunches.

"You're our first," she said, a seemingly benign greeting that she managed to infuse with quasi-pornographic insinuation.

Alice felt like giving her waterfall of black hair a quick yank. Instead, she silently followed her to a booth, thinking what she wouldn't give for a caboose like that. She positioned herself so she could keep an eye on the kitchen. It didn't take long until the door swung open and there he was, bent over a tray like a surgeon. She tried to catch his eye but he was totally absorbed in his work. *Look up*, she willed him. *See me. Toss your head slightly toward the office and let's sort this out the good old-fashioned way, with some panting and friction.* But he continued to work, creating delicious things for others to eat.

Water arrived, reminding her that she was actually about to have lunch. Despite all the tension and drama, she was looking forward to seeing Celia, the one and only true friend she'd made since moving to Emerson. They'd bonded immediately at their first meeting. This was early last autumn, not long after Hannah and Jack had started dating. Alice was thrilled for her stepdaughter, who hadn't exactly moonwalked through puberty. To bag a guy from one of the town's dynastic clans was quite a turnaround. She'd started combing her hair instead of using it as a veil; she began wearing clothes that actually fit. The bingeing and purging and cutting appeared to be a thing of the past. She even managed a smile every once in a while.

And then Celia had called, professing a similar delight that the kids were together. She suggested they meet the next day so they could get to know each other. She proposed the Emerson Country Club, a place Alice had passed a thousand times but never entered. It was every bit as neo-puritanical as she'd expected. The dining room was saturated with the impossibility of audible laughter. She briefly suspected Celia's choice of venue was to gain home field advantage for some sort of attack, perhaps her opinion that Hannah was not good enough for her princeling. Well, if the woman wanted a scrap, she'd get one. Hannah might not be

a show pony, but she was sweet and constant and had a heart of gold. Jack was lucky to have her.

But she couldn't have been more wrong. The first words out of Celia's mouth expressed the obviously sincere opinion that Hannah was a fine young woman.

"I wish I could take more credit," Alice said. "You know I'm not her actual mother."

"Yes, she told me. Terrible thing for a girl to experience."

"I don't know. Sometimes I wish my mom had abandoned me."

Celia scrutinized her for a moment, and Alice thought she may have blown it before the raspberry iced tea even arrived.

"But then who would we have had to belittle us?" Celia asked with a smile.

*And what have we here?* Alice thought. After that it turned into a regular lovefest. At one point, Celia asked what it was like to be a step-mother. Alice gave a potted version of her history with Hannah. She was ten when they met; Alice was twenty-six. They hit it off from the first. They shared secrets, they did things together. They talked and often laughed. They shopped, they rated guys, they snuck wine, like a couple of naughty teens. She left out the stuff about Hannah's weeklong speechless sulks and her capacity for self-harm, which shocked even Alice, who'd been around some crazy bitches in her day. Razors, she got. But pliers?

"She sounds like a very lucky kid," Celia said. "It's just so gratifying for Jack to be with a nice girl after . . ."

She caught herself.

"After . . .?" Alice prompted.

"Oh, he just had an unfortunate experience with a girlfriend last year. Bad breakup."

"I've had my share of those," Alice said.

"Well, I imagine you were never as hurtful as the girl in question."

"That's what you think," Alice said with a jolly little laugh.

But Celia clammed up after that. Alice wanted to press her for more, but it was too early in their relationship. That night, Alice plied Hannah with Pinot Grigio and asked her to spill the beans, which she did only after making Alice swear never to tell a living soul. It turned out there'd been an incident the previous spring between Jack and his erstwhile girlfriend, a senior named Alexa Liriano.

"Lexi? She's a hottie."

"Not that hot," Hannah said.

"No, right," Alice said.

They'd dated for a few weeks and it had ended badly. There'd been a big argument, followed by Lexi accusing Jack of inappropriate conduct.

"Inappropriate as in . . ."

"Nothing happened. Lexi made the whole thing up. She was just butt-hurt because he dumped her. Typical female bullshit."

*Typical female bullshit?* Alice thought.

"But what did Lexi say happened?" she asked.

"She said he got rough with her. Which if you knew Jack, you'd know was totally ridiculous. His parents only paid because there are people out there who are jealous of the Parrishes."

"Wait, his parents *paid*?" Alice asked as she reached for the corkscrew.

"Yeah. Like, a lot."

It took her several more heavy pours, but she finally got the whole story. Despite Jack strenuously maintaining his innocence, money had indeed secretly changed hands between the Parrishes and the Lirianos. An NDA was signed. And so the accusation never became public, even as gossip. Although Hannah continued to swear that Jack was the victim in all this, Alice kept an eye on him. Because she could kind of see him strong-arming some young thing. He had a hint of the bully about him. Those

big hands and the harsh laugh that erupted at strange moments. And once or twice he'd hinted at a worldview that sounded a tad Paleolithic when it came to matters romantic.

But he'd always proved a perfect gentleman to her stepdaughter, even though there were times when Alice suspected it was something of an act. And then there was the fact that Hannah's rules as to what constituted abusive behavior might be a bit more elastic than the norm, given her own history of self-harm. But look though she might, there were never any actual grounds for complaint. So Alice kept out of it. No way was she going to jeopardize the girl's happiness on a hunch.

Meanwhile, her friendship with Celia blossomed. They exchanged texts, they shared stuff they found online. The only bump in the road had been the strange dinner party with the husbands. With Oliver, she'd expected some sort of white-shoe Visigoth, but he turned out to be witty, handsome, gracious, and utterly charming, with a voice aged in oak and a face etched in granite. Even his eye-to-temple scar was magnificent—it looked like a dueling wound worn by a dashing archduke. Geoff, clearly cowed by the setting, wound up playing the rebel, provoking the other guests with opinions Alice knew he didn't really hold. But Celia had handled it all with surpassing grace. She was the best. Alice didn't know what she'd do in Emerson without her.

And then, there she was, arriving right on time, looking as poised and perfect as ever.

"Are you all right?" Celia asked after the hug. "You look a little stressed."

"Just the usual stuff at home."

"So Geoff's not being any more responsive?"

"As if."

Celia frowned sympathetically. She knew things weren't great with Geoff. The waiter swooped immediately; they ordered salad specials, as

was their habit. And then they caught up. Colleges and summer plans. Celia's renovation of her back patio; Oliver's herculean travails at work, which had just forced her to spend another night alone.

"How long's he gone for?"

"Just until this afternoon," Celia said. "Actually, I'm kind of glad he wasn't there last night."

"Why's that?"

"I'm not sure what he would have made of Jack spending the night with Hannah."

"Oh. Right."

"I mean, are we okay with that?" Celia asked.

"I am, but I get the feeling you might not be."

"It's just, I'm not sure they're ready for this yet."

Normally, Alice would put this down to Celia being a fuddy-duddy, but then she recalled Hannah's stricken expression in the Sub-Zero's spooky light.

"You might have a point. I found Hanns wandering around the kitchen in the middle of night in floods of tears."

"Oh dear. Did she say what it was about?"

"Not really."

"Because something was eating at Jack as well when he stumbled in this morning."

Alice waited, correctly guessing that more was coming.

"It just seems that we shouldn't be sanctioning it," Celia continued. "Obviously they're going to do what they're going to do, but allowing them to spend the night together seems a bit extreme for high schoolers."

Alice could have debated the point, but she understood she might not be in the mainstream on this one. Her first sleepover with a guy had been when she was fifteen. The fact that he was the associate pastor at her father's church complicated matters. As did the fact that he was married.

"I'll have a word with Hannah," she said.

"I'd still like to know what all the drama was."

"I'll ply her full of wine and get the full scoop."

Celia smiled. She thought Alice was kidding.

"So I presume that everything was hunky-dory when they were at your house," Alice said.

Celia looked confused.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean before they showed up at our place. They were with you, right?"

"No. Jack left right after dinner. He said he was going to your house."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. In fact, he said it again this morning."

"No, it was definitely after midnight when they wandered in."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"Maybe they were at Christopher's," Alice said.

"Then why wouldn't they say that?"

"Oh well," Alice said. "As long as they were together."

Celia didn't seem particularly mollified by the words.

"It just seems odd they would mislead us."

"Not to me. The only time I told my parents the truth is when I said I hated them."

Alice had intended the remark to lighten the situation. It didn't.

"So you're not bothered by this?" Celia asked.

"Not really."

"Well, I suppose it's different with you."

Alice reared back.

"Different how? Because I'm not her mother?"

"I'm sorry," Celia said. "That came out wrong."

"Because, you know, I'm trying here."

"I know. You're wonderful with her. Strike that remark. It was a stupid thing to say."



Alice let it drop, though it was hard to see how that could have been a slip of the tongue. It was clearly something Celia had been thinking. Their salads arrived. They chatted as they speared lettuce, although things had suddenly turned awkward. Now Alice was wondering what else Celia secretly thought about her. The woman had hidden depths, there was no doubt about that. Alice just wasn't sure she necessarily wanted to navigate them.

And then Michel stepped through the swinging door to survey his kingdom and Alice wasn't thinking about Celia's depths anymore. He saw her but, after a momentary pause, made his way to another table, engaging the people there in that serious-but-friendly manner he had. Making you feel like you were the only diner in the place. Celia kept talking, now about some woman or other who'd done some thing or another. Alice picked distractedly at her vegetation. He stopped at another table and then another. Taking his merry old time. Finally, he arrived.

"So how are the salads?"

"Amazing, as always," Celia said. "You hardly ever see actual fresh beets anymore."

He looked at Alice's plate.

"But you aren't such a big fan."

*Really?* Alice thought. *Four days I hear nothing from you and now we're talking about root vegetables?*

"Oh, Michel, maybe you can clear something up for us," Celia said. "Were the kids at your house last night?"

His polite smile disappeared.

"They weren't with you?"

Celia shook her head.

"But Christopher said . . ."

Michel stopped himself from finishing the sentence. He seemed genuinely aggrieved by the news. Celia and Alice waited. But he said nothing

more. And then the kitchen door opened and his beleaguered assistant was beckoning to him. He disappeared with a polite nod that was calibrated equally between Celia and Alice. They looked at each other in confusion.

“So where on earth were they?” Celia asked.

## MICHEL

He did not like abandoning the two women so abruptly. Alice would certainly not be happy about it. Even Celia, always so proper and gracious, had been bewildered by his flight. But he needed to figure out what was happening with his son before he started discussing the situation with others. Better just to leave now and face the music later.

In the kitchen, he was immediately engrossed in work. The day’s specials were Salade de Betterave and Sole Véronique, but there were always plenty of à la carte orders. Usually, cooking was enough to drive away bad thoughts. The world would shrink to the size of the next plate. But not today. There was no escaping it: Christopher had lied to him. He’d said he was at Jack’s house when he was not at Jack’s house. Michel now wondered if this was his only deception. There had been other times recently when he’d been out late, supposedly at the homes of friends. Last Saturday he’d spent the night at Jack’s grandmother’s house. Had that been a lie as well?

He badly wanted to go straight home; he wanted to wake his son and force him to explain where he’d been, what had caused him to return so late and in such a state. But Wednesday was his busiest lunch, and leaving Jerome and Sofia to handle things courted disaster. So it would have to wait. But the moment he was free, he’d confront the boy. How many times had Michel told him? *I need to know where you are.* That was the first rule. Followed closely by rule number two: he was due home

by midnight. Period. No exceptions, unless they'd made other arrangements.

Christopher had finally arrived at four in the morning, just as Michel was contemplating getting in touch with Jack's parents, a prospect he did not relish. He looked tired and upset and unhappily surprised to find his father awake. His shirt's collar was flipped up and he kept his jacket on throughout their conversation. Michel's first reaction was relief, followed closely by confusion. No car had pulled up outside. Did this mean he'd walked the two miles back from Jack's? Why hadn't he called? When this first round of questions was met by silence, Michel—hardly believing the words were coming out of his mouth—asked if he'd been drinking or doing drugs. This was denied with a terse shake of the head. And so it went. Question after question was answered by silence or shrugs or muttered meaningless words. Michel could feel his anger rising. His son had never been like this. There might be occasional tears; every once in a while he might be sullen or talk back. But they always spoke.

"Do you even remember the last few hours of your life?" Michel finally asked. "Are you suffering from amnesia? Do you need to have your brain examined?"

Cruel questions, born of desperation. And futile, as well.

"Christopher—talk to me!"

But he simply sat there, sinking deeper into some inexpressible torment. Michel finally backed off. Confrontation clearly wasn't working. The boy was out on his feet. He needed to sleep. So Michel sent him to his room after ordering him to stay in the house until he got back from Papillon. Michel would call school with an excuse. They'd talk the moment he returned, and silence and shrugs would no longer be acceptable.

It was a girl. It had to be. That would explain why Christopher had become so edgy and secretive of late. Michel had suspected that there was somebody for the past few weeks, even though Christopher said nothing about it. The math just didn't add up. There were Jack and Han-

nah and Christopher. There needed to be one more. There needed to be a girl.

Time and again, he'd been tempted to challenge his son about his moody distraction. But that was difficult when Michel was hiding something of his own. How could he advise openness when he was secretly sleeping with another man's wife? How could he speak to his son about right and wrong when he himself was sinning? Perhaps Christopher knew. There'd been a chance sighting, an overheard conversation. Although it was more likely that he felt his father's hypocrisy in his bones. All those lessons about right and wrong were lies. You could be secretive and evasive, after all. You could let yourself be ruled by irrationality and lust.

Now, as he labored over *blanquette de veau* and *fattoush* and the sole, Michel understood that it all came back to Alice. The matter of Alice. Until that situation was resolved, it would be impossible for him to deal with his son. Or anything else. And that wasn't going to happen by avoiding her. Her unexpected arrival at the restaurant today made that clear. A woman like Alice wouldn't just disappear.

He still couldn't understand how he'd let things go this far. He wasn't looking for a lover. She was there, suddenly, and things began to happen that neither of them could control. For the first time since Maryam's death, emotion ruled him. And it had been good. Better than good. It would be a lie to say otherwise. They laughed together. When was the last time he'd laughed? And the sex, the abandonment. It was sacrilege to say it, but it had never been like this with his wife.

But it couldn't last. It would run its course; the flames would burn out. He knew it and he thought she'd known it as well. But then, four nights ago, she'd made her proposal. Divorce. And not just divorce, but one that would allow him to realize a dream he'd had since he was a young man. But it was wrong, to take another man's wife and money. Wrong to destroy a marriage, even one as unhappy as hers.

He'd said nothing at the time, even though the answer was obviously no. He told himself he wasn't saying it because he didn't want to hurt her. But in truth, he was deeply tempted by the prospect of being with her, fully and without secrets. In his heart, he didn't want to lose her. He didn't want to go back to being the man he was before meeting her, his empty days following each other like ants, dutifully building a colony without knowing why. The loneliness would be even worse this time, with his son starting college. He wasn't sure he could bear it.

But still, it was wrong. Not in the burn-in-hell sense he was taught as a little boy. He'd abandoned all of that after his wife took her last breath. And yet this was still wrong, cheating and sneaking around and now, possibly, taking another man's money. No matter what he and Alice did after they stepped out of the shadows, the original sin, the stain and the stink of it, would still be there for his neighbors and his customers and his son to see and smell.

The rush ended. The restaurant emptied. Alice was long gone; Sofia had left for her break. He checked his phone to see if there were any messages from his son. Nothing. He was still asleep. There was nothing from Alice either, which he supposed was good as well. Amid the usual spam and work matters, he saw a lockdown notification for the high school that had arrived a couple of hours ago, followed by news that it had just been lifted. Michel wouldn't have been particularly concerned even if his son had been there. Americans and their paranoia. If people had been this sensitive when he was a boy in Beirut, he'd have never been allowed out of his house. No one would have. Although maybe that would have been a good thing.

He spent an hour prepping dinner and dealing with deliveries, then headed home. This was not his normal practice—he usually stayed at the restaurant straight through dinner. Working or, recently, seeing her. As he drove across town, a familiar, nagging feeling settled over him. It was something he'd experience from time to time, ever since he moved here

almost four years ago. A sense that there was something not quite right about his new hometown. He knew it was irrational. Emerson was a perfect place to live. There was little crime and no litter, and traffic would only snarl briefly when school was letting out. There was money—a lot of it—but you never really saw it, certainly not like you did in the cities. You felt it, like a cooling breeze, a reassuring hand. And besides, Michel had inhabited fine restaurants his whole life. He moved among the rich without friction. The town was white, yes, but not exclusively. There were Blacks and Chinese and Arabs and Latinos. And in the morning they, too, emerged from their million-dollar houses and piled into their Suburbans to take their beloved children to the beautiful shining schools; firing up their German sedans to head off to the hospitals and banks and law firms where they worked.

Moving here was the easiest decision he'd made since Maryam died. When he'd heard that a main street restaurant space was available, he'd called in every favor he possessed to raise the capital. He'd timed the move so Christopher would start high school from the beginning, as a freshman. And after a few terrified weeks the boy had settled in. True, Michel would have preferred another best friend than Jack Parrish, but Christopher was happy enough. And the restaurant succeeded beyond all expectations. After a year, they were booking weekends a month in advance. He was able to cook what he wanted. His mountain of debt slowly began to shrink. He had started thinking that maybe this place could wind up feeling like home.

It didn't take him long to get to Smith, the strange and singular street whose small brick houses had been built by the Italian stone masons who'd settled here to build mansions for the natives. Now, they were seen as starters for young families and odd cases like him. Not that they were cheap. His own modest three bedroom had cost almost eight hundred thousand. The house that backed onto his was worth three times that much. But it was quiet and clean and safe. And no one bothered you here.

Except today. As he drew close to his house he saw two people standing on the front porch. A man and a woman. She was Black; he was white and in the act of swinging the brass knocker. Both turned as Michel pulled into his driveway. Their expressions made clear what he already knew. They weren't selling anything.

He got out of the car and approached them slowly, warily, as if holding out the possibility of retreat.

"Michel Mahoun?" the woman asked when he was in earshot.

"Yes."

He could see now the gold shields dangling from their necks.

"We're with the police," she continued. "We're going to need to speak to your son."





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