

# Love at First

kate clayborn



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*For Noni*

*You were so loved.*

*You are so missed.*

*You (and your Romeo) are so alive in our memories.*



# Prologue

The first time Will Sterling saw Nora Clarke, he could barely see at all.

In the cool shade of the large maple tree he leaned against on that bright summer day, the whole world looked blurry to him—the leaves above him green but shapeless, the patio furniture to his left dull black but soft-edged, the building in front of him tall and sand-colored, the back doors for each apartment little more than dark, smudgy rectangles leading out to wood-built balconies whose slats looked wavy unless he squinted.

He'd gotten used to it, the blurriness, or maybe he'd never really *had* to get used to it. He couldn't quite remember a time when he didn't have to narrow his eyes to bring things into focus, though he knew it'd been getting worse. He knew that sitting in the second row of most of his classes didn't cut it anymore; he knew that last year he sometimes left third period—AP Lit, his only class with Caitlin, who liked to sit way in the back—with a thudding headache. He knew the dull white leather of the baseball had become the most important thing about it, that he saw

it best against the bright blue of a clear sky, that he was more likely to get chewed out by Coach on cloudy days.

He knew he couldn't always tell anymore, unless he was really up close to her, whether his mother was smiling.

But . . . *glasses*? Will Sterling in glasses? Out on the field, in those huge, sweaty-looking sports goggles Brandon Tenney wore?

He couldn't come around to the idea, not yet. So all last year, he'd dodged the school nurse when she did eye exams, took notes off the person next to him instead of from the board or the projector screen, always asking—politely, he hoped charmingly—first. He crossed his fingers for sunny days.

He let his unreliable eyes drift back to the smudgy black rectangle he'd been trying his best to watch most closely, the one from which he'd made his unceremonious exit barely twenty minutes ago.

"Wait outside," his mother had said in a sharp, unfamiliar voice, once it'd been clear that things weren't going according to whatever plan she'd had when the day started. A two-and-a-half-hour drive into Chicago, a city Will had never been to before, a promise not to tell his father, and not a single word of preparation for that moment when they'd stood in the dim first-floor hallway of this apartment building and she'd knocked on the door with a determined insistence that had almost felt rude.

"This is your uncle," his mother had told him when a short, barrel-chested, wholly unfamiliar man answered. Will was close enough, eye level enough, to see the way the man's mouth had dropped open slightly and briefly before he'd closed it and set his jaw against them both.

"My brother," she'd added softly, a crack of emotion in her voice.

*You have a brother?* he'd thought, confused, blurry in his head, too, but still he'd stuck out his hand for the man—his *uncle*—to shake.

"I'm Will," he'd said automatically, politely, glad that his own

voice had mostly stopped cracking over the last few months since he'd turned fifteen. It came out, to his own ears, sounding more grown-up and unsurprised than he felt inside.

But the man—his *uncle*, his uncle he'd *never heard of*—hadn't taken his hand. Hadn't looked at him at all. Instead, he'd stared at Will's mother like she was a ghost, or maybe like she was alive, but back from the dead.

Inside the apartment, which smelled like cigarettes and the same furniture polish his mother used at home, no one had moved to sit down; no one had spoken. His uncle—Donny, his mother had finally supplied, since the man himself had shown no interest in further introductions—stood beside a brown recliner (lumpy but undefined, to Will's unreliable eyes), his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his jeans. His mother had stayed near the door, and so had Will. She'd been waiting, he thought, to be well and truly invited in.

But even Will could see that wasn't going to happen.

"I won't do this with your kid here," Donny had said finally, the first words Will ever heard him say.

*Your kid*, Will had repeated in his mind. He'd always been a good listener, at least, and he got the message. Maybe this guy Donny was Will's uncle, but he sure didn't intend to be any kind of family, and Will tried to tell himself that was fine by him anyway. After all, he was an only child, and up until this moment he'd thought his parents were only children, too. Other kids in his school had grandparents, cousins, big gatherings at the holidays. But the Sterling household, it was a small unit. Just the three of them. Not even a dog or a cat or a goldfish to complicate things.

Still, Will had felt a flush creep up his neck, a hot fire in his stomach, a tightness in the muscles of his arms. He was quick-tempered lately, easily angered. When he wasn't preoccupied with thoughts of girls—Caitlin, mostly, but if he was honest he had a real wandering eye—he could be moody and distractible and sullen. If all the stuff his health teacher said in class was

right, it was all part of growing up, but right then, he felt like there was a purpose to all his confusing, quick-fire emotions. Maybe he was only fifteen, but he was already taller than this Donny person, and he lifted weights for baseball. He didn't like anyone speaking to his mother so sharply.

But that's when she'd given her *Wait outside* directive, and he'd been so surprised to be directed that way, to be . . . almost *disciplined* that way. At home his parents had always been loose, accommodating, a little absentminded, and if Will thought it was less about a parenting style than it was about wanting some time for the two of them and their constant, sometimes exhausting affection for each other, well . . . at least he got to stay out later than other kids; at least he didn't have to ask permission for everything, or to show anyone his homework at the end of the night, or to call when he'd be late coming home from practice.

So in his shock—from that moment, from all the moments that had led up to it—he'd gone. Out the back door instead of the front, the same smudgy black rectangle he watched now. He couldn't rely on his eyes or on the bright July sunlight enough to count on being able to see if anything went wrong in there, so he'd left the glass door open behind him when he'd gone, only shutting the screen. He'd turned to the left on the rickety wood beneath his feet and taken the few short, also-rickety steps down from the first-floor balcony. He'd crossed a stretch of sunbaked grass to a leafy, too-large-for-the-yard tree.

And he'd waited.

Tried to focus his eyes and his mind.

What did it mean that he had an uncle he'd never heard of? What did it mean that his mom had come here—and brought Will along—without telling his dad? Come to think of it, what did it mean that things had been quiet at home lately, that his mom and dad sometimes seemed to have sullen moods to match his own, that they seemed to retreat even more often



than usual into each other, closing their bedroom door and shutting him out, brushing off his questions when they'd finally emerge?

Maybe someone else would say divorce. A lot of Will's teammates had divorced parents, one of them with a real messy situation that involved court appearances and social workers, the mom and dad constantly trying to out-parent each other, even from the bleachers on game days. But Will knew better than to think his own parents would split. The Sterlings were devoted to each other, devoted enough that in all their secret, usually smiling looks for each other, in the way they sat close all the time, in their touches and kisses and whispers, Will sometimes felt like a complication himself. Like an unwanted dog or cat or goldfish.

An interruption.

"Hey!" interrupted a voice from above.

A girl's voice.

A perfect voice, somehow, even from that short, everyday word. It sounded like a laugh at liftoff.

He turned his head up toward it—on instinct, in anticipation.

And then . . . a laugh that *did* lift off. It burst into the air above him, then trailed down from one of those balconies above like ivy, making his whole body go still, making his adolescent heart stutter-stop in his chest in a way it never had before. Later, much later, when he allowed himself to think about this day, this day on which almost every single thing in his life had changed, he'd remember that the girl's laugh had been the only thing that had felt familiar to him in that strange backyard, with his never-before-seen uncle inside, with his mother secretive and sad and angry and scared. It'd felt familiar enough, *welcome* enough, that he'd forgotten—for that short space of time—everything else that was confusing about that day. He'd certainly forgotten, however shameful it was, about Caitlin.

"Hey," she repeated, louder this time, another laugh follow-

ing, and he pushed off the trunk of the tree, took a step forward to the edge of the canopy so that he could see her, or see what he could of her.

*Be cool*, he told himself, pushing his hair back from his forehead. He hadn't known anyone on those upper floors would be able to see him where he'd been standing, but clearly—

"Get away from there!" she called, right as he stepped from the shade, and he stilled again. Disciplined twice in one day? That was certainly unusual, and this time he was even more confused about what he could've done wrong.

But then.

Then, he saw her.

Third floor, right side. She was blurry—of course she was blurry—but the sky was bright blue behind her, and the blurriness seemed as much about her movement as it was about his eyes. Arms waving in front of her, her long, straight ponytail a light brown rope that swung forward over a shoulder covered with a bright white T-shirt. The balcony slats prevented him from seeing anything of her lower half, but he knew it when she jumped up and down—saw her ponytail swing again, heard her feet thud on the wood beneath her feet.

"Get, *get!*" she yelled, and he almost took a step back, feeling his breath leave his body in shock and disappointment at having been so . . . dismissed. By her, specifically. But when he saw two brown, furry shapes—bushy, curving tails trailing behind—leap from the balcony and onto a power line that crossed the yard, scurrying away, he realized, with relief and happiness, that she hadn't been yelling at him at all.

She'd been yelling at—

"Squirrels, Nonna!" she called over her shoulder, toward the smudgy black rectangle behind her, and he wrinkled his brow, curious at that second word, one he'd never heard before. He took another cautious step forward. He narrowed his eyes, saw that her face was like an oval. Saw her set her hands to her hips, saw her turn her body toward the retreating squirrels, as

though to ensure they were really leaving. If his heart stutter-stopped before, now it took on a quick, desperate rhythm.

It wasn't how he felt when he saw Caitlin; it wasn't how he felt when he saw any of the many crushes he'd had over the last couple of years. Something felt so *different*. Different in his head and in his heart.

She made a noise of frustration, a gusty sigh-groan, dropping her hands from her hips and bending forward to look at something. For the first time, Will paid attention to what surrounded her on her balcony, more indistinct greenery peeking out between the slats and above the top railing. He lost sight of her behind it all, cursed it as well as his vision. Would he even know if she looked down toward him? Was it possible she could see him now, through all that wood and all those plants? He should absolutely think of something to say to her. Should he bring up the squirrels? Should he ask her what *nonna* meant? Could he think of *anything* that didn't make him sound like a backyard creeper, which is probably exactly what he was at the moment?

He cleared his throat softly, insurance against any rogue voice cracks, right at the moment she straightened herself again.

Maybe if he just said hello. That wouldn't be creepy, would it?

He opened his mouth to speak, but then something . . . *pelled* him. Right on top of his head. Even as he reached up, another pelt, and then another. Not painful, not forceful. Like the first big drops of a thunderstorm. Bouncing off him and onto the grass.

Was she *throwing* things at him?

*Pelt, pelt, pelt.* In his hair, he felt something warm and wet. For the first time since he heard her voice, he looked toward the ground. At his feet, he saw small, bright red globes, and he crouched to pick one up. Perfectly ripe cherry tomatoes, marred by the bites of two intrepid squirrels who'd been chased away by the girl on the balcony. He smiled for the first time in what felt like hours. He gathered a few of them up in his hands,

even as she continued to rain half-eaten ones into the yard. He stood, his cupped hands held at his waist, and looked up to see that her face wasn't turned anywhere near his direction. She was throwing these homegrown, city-grown, balcony-grown tomatoes over the railing without even looking, and for some reason, that made him want to meet her, to talk to her, even more now.

He crossed the yard again, back the way he came. He didn't climb the few steps back to his uncle's balcony, but he stood beside it, thinking she might be able to see him better from there, thinking he might be able to see *her* better from there. He'd call up to her. He'd say, *Hey*, just like she'd said not to him. He'd say, *Did you drop something?* and he'd smile and hold up his hands. He hoped *hervision* was sharp enough to see the tomato seeds he was sure were still in his hair.

But then he heard his mother's voice through the screen, through the smudgy black rectangle he'd forgotten he was meant to be watching.

"We need help," she was saying. "My husband and I, both of us . . . we are begging you for help."

And for the third time that day, Will's heart changed inside his chest.

He made himself listen; he made himself completely still. If the girl saw him now, she might mistake him for a statue. A tomato-catching lawn ornament she'd never noticed before.

But for those long, life-altering minutes while he listened to his mother and to the uncle he'd never met, while he heard a conversation that made his skin turn clammy with shock, he didn't think about the girl at all.

He'd remember later how loudly and abruptly it had ended: his mother raising her voice to tell Donny that he was cruel and stubborn, that he would regret this. That if he let her leave now, he would never see her or Will again.

He'd remember that there was absolute silence in response.

Will had dropped his hands when he'd heard that silence, barely noticing the tomatoes tumbling to the ground. He'd moved to the stairs, moved to get his mother, to make sure they started making good on that ultimatum immediately, but she beat him to it, opening the screen and following his same path out of the apartment, her face pale. When she was close enough, he could see her cheeks were wet with tears. She did not look at him as she passed him by, but somehow, he could tell.

He could tell she knew that he'd heard.

He followed her to the car, for the first time in a long time feeling like he had to make an effort to keep up with her short-legged stride as she crossed the yard—under the tree and out the other side, into the rear alley where they'd parked not even all that long ago.

He was in the passenger seat, watching his mother's hands shake as she fumbled with her keys, before he even thought of the girl. Her voice, her laugh, her nonna and squirrels and spoiled tomatoes. He thought of how silly it was, that he had noticed her. That she had felt so important to notice. Everything about his world felt silly—school, summer, Caitlin, baseball—everything that wasn't this, what he'd heard his mother say and what she and his dad were desperate enough to ask. Everything about *himself* felt silly—his restlessness, his moods, his absurd crushes on tomato-throwing strangers, his stupid fucking *eyes*, and his ridiculous, immature vanity.

He reached out and touched his mother's wrist.

"Mom," he said, and he made a decision right then, right when he heard his own voice again. He decided he would catch up to the way his voice had grown up. He decided that what he had overheard being said in that apartment meant that he had to.

"We're okay," she said, and he thought maybe she said it more to herself than to him, but still she moved to clutch his hand, squeezing it and steadying herself.

“We’re okay,” she repeated.

He said it back to her. Multiple times, until she was calm enough to start the car.

When she backed out, he wanted—for a desperate, fleeting second—to look back up toward the sky, toward that third-floor balcony. Toward the girl with the lovely voice and the long ponytail. The girl he hadn’t really been able to see at all.

But he didn’t.

He was done with blurry distractions. He was done with being a kid.

On Monday morning, he called an eye doctor with an office in a strip mall close enough that he could ride his bike to it and made an appointment, knowing already he’d fail every single test they’d surely give him. That same afternoon, he showed up for summer practice only so he could quit the team, and he ignored every one of Coach’s shocked, confused protests, the same way he ignored Caitlin’s when he broke up with her only a few hours later.

He didn’t let himself think about the girl on the balcony at all.

He was seeing clearly now.

# Chapter 1

*Sixteen years later*

For Eleanora DeAngelo Clarke, the best time of day was, many people would argue, not daytime at all.

The best time of day was before dawn.

It was a fairly recent development, this fondness for 4:00 a.m. When she'd first come back, it hadn't been so much a choice as a necessity, the demand of days that started early and stretched long, the fallout from frequently disrupted sleep. During those times, 4:00 a.m. had felt indistinguishable from every other hour of the day: darker in quality but not really in character, another part of the grim, human process of saying goodbye that she hadn't felt—wouldn't have ever felt—prepared to go through.

When it had been over, though, when the daylight hours became busier and more bureaucratic, when the reality of her new life had started to sink in—4:00 a.m. had started to transform for her. Sometimes, she'd do little more than sit and stare, a mug of hot coffee cupped in her palms, steaming straight into her puffy, tear-stained face. Sometimes, she rose from a

restless, unsatisfying sleep and walked to the back door, sliding it open and taking a single step onto the balcony, breathing in the crisp, cold autumn air like it was medicine. Sometimes, she'd sit at the old rolltop desk in the living room, making lists to help her move through the day, to help her feel in control in this place where she'd never once, not in her whole life, had to be in control before.

But day by day, 4:00 a.m. took on a softer rhythm, and Nora moved to its beats with some improved version of those early, impulsive behaviors. In the pitch dark and perfect quiet, she sipped at her coffee and stayed inside when it was cold, letting her body and brain wake up slowly, softly. She left the lists to later, letting herself breathe. She let herself think and not think, remember and not remember. She let herself *be*.

Eight months on and 4:00 a.m. had become habit, a secret practice she'd even put a name to. At night, when she got in bed, she'd open the clock app on her phone and toggle on the alarm she'd titled "Golden Hour." She'd close her eyes and look forward to it, to the reset it always seemed to provide her, to the gentle welcome it always seemed to give her to the day ahead.

Four in the morning, she'd started to think, could fix pretty much anything.

Except.

Except for this.

It'd been two and a half weeks since it'd happened, and every day since, Nora had spent 4:00 a.m. exactly like she was right now: sitting on the balcony, still in her pajamas, fretting.

And it was all Donny Pasternak's fault.

Nora knew it was a terrible thing to think, a terrible thing to *feel*. Who could blame a man for dying, after all, especially a man so quiet and kind as Donny? Who could sit in judgment of someone—a neighbor, a friend, practically a family member—who'd left this world so suddenly, so unexpectedly, so prematurely? Who could be so . . . so *angry*?

Well, the answer was Nora.



Nora could.

*You're not angry at Donny*, she scolded herself. *You know that's not it.*

She took a sip of her coffee, trying to get that golden hour feeling again. It was a perfect not-quite-morning, warm and dry and pleasant, the kind she'd waited for all through her first dark, brutal Chicago winter.

But it didn't work.

She *was* angry. She was angry and stressed and scared, because quiet, kind Donny Pasternak was gone, and that was bad enough, especially so soon after Nonna. But beyond that—beyond that, there was the terrible realization that being Donny's neighbor and friend and *almost* family member turned out to mean exactly nothing when it came to finding out what would happen to his apartment.

Nora had never been naive about how outsiders judged the old, brick, blocky six-flat that was, for the first time in her adult life, her full-time home, though the precise nature of the judgments had changed over the years. When she'd first come to visit, her parents had spent the whole drive from the airport speaking quietly—well, not *that* quietly—to each other about Nonna wasting years of money and effort on this “little building” when she could've stayed in her perfectly nice, paid-off house in the suburbs after her husband, Nora's grandfather, passed. Two decades later and the judgments were different: Wasn't it the most dated-looking building on the block? Shouldn't it try to do a little better to keep up? Hadn't anyone considered making it brighter, more modern? Was that striped wallpaper in the hallways made of . . . *velvet*?

The problem was, people didn't appreciate a classic. People had no loyalty!

Nonna had always been saying that.

Nora closed her eyes, thinking of what Nonna might say now. She probably would say that Donny wasn't *people*. She would say that she trusted Donny—that Donny, like everyone else in

the building who had been her neighbor, her *family* (no almost about it!), for years and years, would've made sure the apartment would be left in good hands, left to someone who understood what it was all about here. In fact, that's what everyone else in the building seemed to think, too. Nonna, after all, had left her apartment to Nora, because she'd known that Nora would take extra care. She'd known that Nora loved the building as much as she did.

"Maybe he'll have left it to one of us," Jonah had said only the week before, during their first building meeting since Donny's passing. Nora had stood at the front of the room, the concrete floor of the basement laundry room a hard press of reality against the soles of her sneakers. She watched the faces of her neighbors light in hope, and she'd thought of the three unreturned phone calls she'd made to Donny's attorney.

*I think we would've already heard,* she'd thought. *I think we would've heard if it was one of us.*

But she hadn't said that. She'd pasted on a smile and said, "I guess we'll have to wait and see," clutching the building bylaws in her hand with a sense of impending doom. If it wasn't one of them, she didn't know who it could be, because in addition to being quiet and kind, Donny was also, for as long as she'd known him, alone. No girlfriend, no boyfriend, no friends or family outside these walls.

Was 4:00 a.m. too early to try calling that attorney again?

She let out a gusty sigh, rippling the surface of her still mostly undrunk dark roast. The fact of the matter was, it was long past time to stop her 4:00 a.m. fretting. Maybe she needed to go back to list-making for a while, because those unreturned phone calls almost certainly meant something bad was in the offing: some faceless property investment firm was probably combing through Cook County death records even as she ruminated, looking for opportunities to do one of those quick turnaround "flips." They'd show up and park a dumpster out

front and toss all of quiet, kind Donny Pasternak's things, and they would absolutely complain about the hallway wallpaper (*No loyalty!* Nonna sniffed, from somewhere). A month later there'd be a "For Sale" sign for Donny's apartment in the front courtyard with a sticker price that'd start spelling the end for this building that Nonna had made a second life in, this building that had—with a bit of fate and a lot of effort—become a family all its own.

She sighed again—it was a real *woe is me* situation during this particular golden hour—untucked her feet, and stood from her chair, stretching into a posture that was stiff, upright, preparatory. There had to be something she could do other than simply . . . *waiting* like this.

But right then, she heard a door slide open somewhere below her.

Nora knew 4:00 a.m.

Nora knew 4:00 a.m. *in this building.*

And she knew no one—besides her—ever came out onto their balcony at this hour.

No one except.

No one except . . . someone new.



Nora realized that it would be, by all accounts, extremely inappropriate to rush to her balcony railing, hang her head over the side, and ask whomever was down there how they felt about vintage wallpaper. First of all, the sun wasn't even up yet. Second of all, she was not wearing a bra beneath her pajamas. Third of all, if wallpaper was the only conversation opener she could think of at that moment, it was truly time to make good on her intentions to start getting out more.

Maybe it was the attorney with questionable phone etiquette? Or worse! The actual face of the faceless property investment firm? Sure it was early, but maybe these people needed the whole twenty-four hours in any given day to carry out their ter-

rible, wallpaper-hating plans? She was absolutely not prepared to have this confrontation, not without a bra and a PowerPoint presentation about the mercenary nature of real estate trends.

*Bra first*, she told herself, reaching a hand toward the door handle before pausing again.

*What if it's not one of those two people?*

She couldn't really explain it, the feeling she had—the feeling that she shouldn't go inside quite yet, the feeling that the person who'd slid open that door was someone she should meet.

Of course, there remained the problem of the early hour, and her lack of supporting undergarments, and also her apparently limited ideas for what she might actually *say*, so she decided that, at least for the time being, she'd try to make this meeting one-sided. Carefully, she set down her coffee on the small patio table beside her chair, and—grateful for the quiet of her bare feet against the wood and her long-honed awareness of which boards were likeliest to creak—silently stepped toward the railing, tucking herself into one of the empty spaces between her many potted plants.

And then she peeked over the edge, down and across to Donny's balcony.

She saw him first as a dark outline, limned by the lights left on in the apartment, her perspective from above him giving her only an impression of his body—hands gripping the railing that jutted out slightly farther than her own; long arms spread wide, triangles of empty space between them and the lean waist that fanned out into a broad, curving back; head bowed low between the tense set of his shoulders.

It was like looking at a sculpture, a piece of art, something that took all of your attention. Something that insisted you stay right in the moment you were in, something that told you to memorize what you were seeing. She could've looked and looked. Until the sun came up. Until the golden hour was over for real.

But then, it hit her.

This was not the posture of a property man who needed a PowerPoint presentation.

This curved-back, bowed-head balcony lean was the posture of a man who was . . . grieving?

She sucked in a surprised breath and, too quickly, stepped away from her railing.

And knocked over one of her plants.

The sound of the terra-cotta hitting the wood, the sound of a clump of dirt scattering in its wake, the sound of the waxy leaves swishing in the trembling aftermath of their fall—all of it, Nora thought, sounded like the actual loudest noise that had ever been released in the entire history of the known universe.

She squeezed her eyes shut tight. She tried to make herself completely still, the way he had been. If she pulled it off, maybe the man on the balcony would think a rogue, third-floor-exclusive wind had knocked over the pot. Or some kind of critter? Yes, that made sense. A raccoon, or a particularly forceful sq—

“Hello?”

His voice was deep, but he spoke the word quietly, cautiously, and Nora supposed she could ignore it, keep on with the whole sculpture-posture idea until he went back inside. Later (*with* bra), she could go down and introduce herself, express her genuine condolences, and keep secret her nascent, selfish sense of hope that Donny may have done right by them after all.

It felt a little mean to ignore him, though, after she’d been spying and all, and also after she’d spent the past half hour being unjustifiably angry in the general direction of his recently deceased possible relative. A quick hello, then. An apology for disturbing him. No questions about his feelings regarding classic wall coverings.

She stepped back toward the railing, at the last second remembering to cross her arms over her chest.

This time, when she peeked over the edge, he was looking up at her.

He was tall; she could tell even from high above, and that

was down to how well she knew this building, how every person in it looked in relation to its various structures—its railings, its overhangs, its doorways. Standing upright, his shoulders still looked broad, but overall, he seemed leaner to her outside of that bent-over posture she'd first seen him in. Maybe it was something about the clothes he wore—too dark to see him well, but they seemed to fit him loosely, pajama-like, and she liked that, thinking that they might both be out on their balconies, still in their sleepwear.

But it was what she could see of his face—bathed in the warm, golden light from the apartment—that made her breath catch, that made time stop. He was clean-shaven, his jaw square, his brow lowered in an expression to match the question that had been in his voice. Those sharp outlines might have been attractive all on their own, but they were improved—they were made stunning, really—by the soft curves that complemented them. Thick, wavy hair, messy in a way that made Nora wonder if there was perhaps an extremely flattering first-floor-exclusive wind. Full lips, slightly parted. She could only assume about his eyes, because they were hidden from her by the glare off his dark-rimmed glasses.

She swallowed.

"Hey," she finally whispered back to him.

For a few seconds, he didn't move at all, and she thought he seemed so good at that, staying still. Like, professionally good at it. *Maybe he's a mime*, said the extremely stunned part of her brain. *No, a castle guard*, she amended. Still stunned, obviously, given the absolute dearth of castles in, you know, Illinois.

But then he lifted his right hand. Slowly, he raised it to the center of his chest, his broad palm rubbing once across his sternum, toward his heart.

"You . . .," he said, his hand resting there, right over his heart, and Nora had the wild urge to count the beats of her own. *One-two, one-two.*

"Startled me," he finished, though nothing about his tone, or

his still-quiet voice, suggested that he'd been startled at all. He shifted, finally letting his hand fall back to his side. There was still that glare shielding his eyes, but she could feel his gaze on her all the same.

"I'm so sorry," she said, inching closer to the railing, resting her still-crossed arms against it. "I didn't mean—"

"No, I'm—" he began, and then paused. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter. "I'm sorry if I woke you, coming out here."

"It's okay," she said, nodding her head toward the building. It felt like they were in a conspiracy of two out here, whispering in the dark. "You won't wake anyone."

Three of the six units in this apartment were occupied by people with hearing that was . . . not sharp, to put it mildly. And Benny, in the apartment below hers, waxed poetic about his white noise machine at the barest provocation, so he certainly wouldn't hear them.

"And I'm always up at this time," she added, then promptly pressed her lips together. Why had she told him that? It was a *secret*.

He cocked his head to the side, and it was like everything expressive about his face tipped with it—one eyebrow raised, one side of his mouth quirked. Something about it—something about this expression of genuine interest, of curiosity—hit Nora in such a vulnerable, neglected place.

It had felt like such a long time—months and months, really—since she'd felt interesting. Since she'd met anyone new. Her cheeks warmed with pleasure.

"You are?" he said.

"Yeah." She meant to leave it at that, especially because it'd come out decidedly more . . . breathy than she'd intended. But before she could stop herself, she added, "It's the golden hour."

*Nora!* her brain shouted (not breathily). *What! Are! You! Saying!*

She had a fleeting hope he might not have heard her. Like, over the sound of his first-floor-exclusive hair breeze.

“Golden hour?”

Okay, well. He’d heard her.

She cleared her throat. She would answer this, briefly, not weirdly (or breathily). Then she would somehow find a way to bring up Donny, offer the condolences that she was sure were necessary.

“It’s what I call this time of day . . . or, I guess, sort of not quite day?” *Brilliant*, she thought, inwardly rolling her eyes at herself. “It’s peaceful, I’ve always thought.”

He was unmoving again, nothing but his brow furrowing, as though he had to consider the definition. Then he sent her a lopsided grin that managed, somehow, to be both self-confident and self-deprecating.

“Not so peaceful now,” he said, taking a step closer to the railing, and she tried not to notice how his smile, his still-soft voice, made her feel. Specifically, in the area beneath her crossed arms.

*Yikes*, she thought. *Better do something about that.*

She tucked them tighter against her chest.

“It’s okay,” she repeated, feeling her own lips curve into a smile.

“It means something different in my line of work. The golden hour, I mean.”

“You’re a photographer?” That was the only other context in which she’d heard the phrase—something about the light at a specific time of day. A time of day that was not, of course, 4:00 a.m.

The grin—and the confidence—faded. “Uh. No. Never mind. It’s not . . . very pleasant.”

Now it was Nora’s turn to tilt her head in interest. What could be unpleasant about a phrase like *the golden hour*, in any context?

“What do you mean?”

*Definitely* after this she would find a way to bring up Donny. Absolutely she would.



His chest rose on an inhale before he spoke again. When he finally did, he seemed almost sheepish. Apologetic.

"It's what we call the hour after someone's been injured. Uh, traumatically injured. It's the time where you have . . . it's the best window you have to treat them."

"Oh." She lowered her eyes from his face, took in a detail that made more sense to her now. Those weren't pajamas he was wearing; they were hospital scrubs. "You're a doctor?"

"Yeah."

Wow, good thing Mrs. Salas from 2B wasn't up. Nora could practically hear her now. *A doctor, Nora!* she would say. *Wouldn't you like to marry a doctor?*

Nora cleared her throat again, course-corrected that train of thought. She should bring up Donny. Now was as good a time as any.

Instead, she said, "Do you work nights?"

"I work whenever," he said, and she thought she could *hear* the exhaustion in his voice. "I work all the time."

He sounded so . . . defeated, the way he said that. So weary. She opened her mouth to say something—that she was sorry, that it sounded difficult. But he spoke before she could.

"Do you?"

"Do I work all the time?"

He smiled up at her, a different one, this time. She thought it looked like a sunrise, this smile, for all that it was still dark around them. It shined out every other thought in her head: Donny, the apartment, the building.

"Do you work nights?" he clarified.

"Oh, no. I'm an early riser, I guess. I work during the day. From home."

He hadn't asked that, had he? But suddenly, to Nora, this conversation had taken a golden-hour quality all its own. Secret and special and hers alone.

"Oh yeah?" he said, that delicious note of interest in his voice. He reached up and adjusted his glasses, and in that sec-

ond Nora let herself be absurdly, giddily attracted to him. She almost missed it when he asked his next question.

“What do you do?”

She smiled down at him, shifting her feet against the wood in something like anticipation. She hadn’t had an opportunity to talk about, *really* talk about, her work, with someone who wasn’t an actual coworker, in a long time. She liked what she did, for all the headaches it had given her recently, what with her new situation and all. All right. She would answer this one question, *then* she would bring up Donny.

“I design w—”

But before she could finish, a scream rent the air.

“What the hell?” the man said, his head snapping to the side, out toward the inky-black no-longer night.

Nora couldn’t help it.

She laughed.

He looked back up at her, his hand coming to his chest again, that same gentle rub over his heart. Easily startled, this tall, handsome, bespectacled man, and she was so . . . *delighted* by that. So thoroughly, completely charmed.

“It’s a cat,” she said, the laugh still in her voice. “A stray. Probably one of the big toms.”

Her laughter faded as she realized something. She hadn’t heard them in a couple of weeks, not since . . .

“Donny,” she blurted.

The man on the balcony dropped his hand away from his heart.

There was a long, awkward pause, during which Nora’s soul certainly left her body. *Not sticking around for this!* it probably said, adding a cheerful wave as it went.

She cleared her throat. “He—um. He used to put food out for them.”

The pause that followed was even longer. Even awkward-er. What a terrible way to bring up the condolences conversation.

The man turned his head again, out toward the yard, out

toward where the frustrated feline scream had come from, his hands curling around the balcony railing again, as though he needed to ground himself. She was desperate to say something, *anything*, but she also wanted to give him a minute, if he needed it. God knows she'd needed a lot of minutes, over the last few months. That's what 4:00 a.m. was good for, wasn't it? The poor guy.

It nagged at her, a little, that she'd never seen him before, never heard Donny mention him. But that didn't necessarily mean anything. Donny wasn't a talker, wasn't a sharer, not even with Jonah, whom he'd known the longest. And he'd worked up until the day he died, leaving every weekday morning at seven and not returning until five thirty. He had a whole life away from here that Nora didn't know about. Maybe he knew tons of people, but just never brought any of them to the building.

"Did there used to be a tree out there?" the man on the balcony said, interrupting her thoughts.

"Yeah," she said automatically, her eyes going immediately out to its former spot. "We had to have it removed a couple of months after I moved in last year."

She'd been devastated, getting that tree cut down. Her first official act as the building's association president, and it'd felt foreboding, damning, especially so soon after Nonna had passed. *I don't want to do it*, she'd told everyone, afraid of what they'd think. *I wish I could keep it exactly as it is*. But it'd been rotten to the core, that tree, and frankly they'd been lucky it hadn't fallen on its own. In the end, she'd watched it come down—a whole day of chain saws running, men in truck lifts, wood shavings in the air like snowfall. She hadn't cried, but she'd really, really wanted to.

"Wait," she said, realizing that she'd neglected the most important part of what he'd said. She looked back down, found him watching her. "You've been here before?"

"Once. When I was a kid." Something had changed in his voice, though she wasn't sure she could've said what. Maybe it

was that the *air* was changing all around them—the sky lightening, the predawn pitch transforming into a velvet blue-black. She knew it well enough to know: golden hour, almost over.

He cleared his throat. “He was my uncle.”

Nora blinked down at him, shock and relief coursing through her. So it *was* a relative, then. *Loyalty!* Nonna was saying smugly, from somewhere, but it also wasn’t really the time to be counting chickens.

“I’m so sorry,” Nora said. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

The man dropped his head, something like a nod of acknowledgment, or maybe some kind of bow of respect for the mention of Donny. Inside her chest, she felt her heart squeeze in sympathy, in recognition.

*I hate that I’m all the way up here*, she thought, though definitely being down there would be weird. What would she do, hug him? Without a bra on? Disastrous. Extremely inappropriate! Nonna, obviously, would never.

“I didn’t know him very well,” he said, and *there . . .* there she could’ve said what. His voice sounded a little clipped. A little frustrated.

A little . . . disloyal.

*No, Nora*, she told herself. *That’s only your 4:00 a.m. fretting talking. He’s probably still in shock, same as you.*

Below her, the man reached up, scratched at that same spot on his chest. He cleared his throat again. “Do you like it here?”

Did she . . . *like* it?

What a question. This place held the best memories of her childhood, her adolescence. And now, she’d happily moved her whole life here for it. She could talk all morning about this building, thus her PowerPoint idea. Maybe *this* was an opportunity to bring up the wallpaper! Though probably it made more sense to talk about the people first, and—

They were interrupted again, this time by a shrill, urgent beeping, and the man quickly patted his leg.

“Shit,” he said. “Sorry.” Within seconds, what she could see

of his face was being lit by the bluish screen of his phone. The hand that wasn't holding it rubbed absentmindedly through his hair, and she watched, transfixed. He had lovely hair, which was a compliment she absolutely would not offer out loud.

"I gotta run," he added. "Other type of golden hour, I guess."

"Right." She felt suddenly, overwhelmingly flustered. She hadn't had time to say that *she* had known Donny. She hadn't had the chance to ask him so many things—what he knew about the apartment, for one, but also the small matter of his actual *name*. And she hadn't had time to answer his question, which seemed like the most important thing of all.

She *loved* it here.

"Wait," she began, wanting to say this one last thing before 4:00 a.m. was finished.

It was clear he hadn't heard her, though. He was already moving toward his door.

Before he ducked inside, he looked up at her one last time, the glare still winking off his glasses.

"I'll see you," he said.

But he didn't stick around for her answer to that, either.

## Chapter 2

Well, he figured he already knew the answer.

You couldn't like it there.

First of all, there was a smell. Not a terrible smell, Will had to admit, but not the kind of smell you'd want greeting you every time you walked through the front door. It was sort of like opening a musty wooden box and sticking your face inside it. The only thing in the box would be dust bunnies and maybe a handful of old pennies.

Second of all, there were the lights. Like any person who spent the majority of his days (and often nights) under the grim, fluorescent tray lighting inside most hospitals, Will appreciated a good old-fashioned incandescent, or even a modern-day LED. What he did not appreciate, however, was a bronze chandelier—hung low and made lower by a bunch of dangly glass things—that he hit his head on in the entryway, or a series of also-bronze wall sconces where round-cheeked cherubs seemed to watch his entire journey down the hallway.

And speaking of the hallway: the wallpaper. It was . . . gold,

or at least it'd once been gold, though under the lights from the (dangerous) chandelier and the (creepy) wall sconces, the color looked more faded mustard than fancy metallic. Every six inches or so, the texture changed, and Will had set his palm on it and thought, *It couldn't be.*

But it was. It was *velvet* wallpaper. Striped velvet wallpaper.

Who could like that?

*It couldn't be*, he thought again, but this time, he wasn't thinking about the wallpaper.

*It could not be her.*

The girl on the balcony from sixteen years ago, and the woman he met this morning. That . . . could not be.

She'd said so, after all, or at least she'd said as much. Last year, that's when she'd moved in.

So it couldn't be clearer, obviously.

It could not be her.

It was only that . . . there had been something about her. Something about her voice when she'd said *Hey*, something about the sound of her laugh, something about the ponytail that had slipped over her shoulder as they'd talked. Something about the way she'd *looked* up there on that balcony, no matter that she'd been far away, no matter that it'd been dark. Something about the way his heart had moved when he'd seen her, like a hiccup in his chest.

But he could not let himself think about that.

"Could I, uh—?"

A voice interrupted, and Will blinked up to see the familiar barista he'd given his order to reaching gently for the travel mug he held in one hand. She gave him an understanding smile, used to seeing staff from all corners of the hospital space out in front of her while they waited for their next fix, while they recovered from whatever made them require it.

"Yeah, sorry, Janine," Will said, handing it over. "I'll take an IV bag of the same, if you've got it," he added, which was a bad joke, the coffee shop equivalent of *Hot enough for ya?*, but it was

the best he could do under the circumstances, and the circumstances were that he'd been up since three o'clock in the morning, he'd seen about twenty patients since he'd shown up here four hours ago, and he also could not stop thinking about the woman on the balcony.

No, not the woman. He could not stand around thinking about the woman.

He would think about the *apartment*.

He moved down the counter to wait for his order, willing himself to focus his attention on where it should be, at least for however many minutes he had until he got paged again.

The apartment, okay. He had to unload it. As soon as possible.

Which was in twelve months.

*Fucking Donny.*

It was a phrase he'd been repeating to himself with a fair bit of regularity since he'd gotten the attorney's call last week. Donny had apparently already been gone for several days by then, and Will had tried to take the news of his death in the only spirit his uncle really deserved: neutrally, and with the detachment of a person who dealt with death on a fairly regular basis. What did it have to do with him, after all, that Donny was dead? Exactly nothing, that's what, which is what he'd tried to politely tell the attorney.

But as it turned out, when you were both the sole executor and sole beneficiary of said uncle's estate, it actually had a lot to do with you. And when that estate was tied to a petty, passive-aggressive, hostage-holding last will and testament, it was going to *keep* having a lot to do with you.

Twelve months before he could sell the apartment. Twelve months of musty-smelling hallways, must-avoid light fixtures, and mustard wallpaper.

*Twelve months of the woman on the balcony*, he thought, then clenched his jaw against it.

*Focus, Will.*



“Here you go, Dr. Sterling,” Janine said, saving him from himself.

Any other day, he’d probably correct her. *You can call me Will*, he’d say, same as he always did, because almost six years out of medical school and he still didn’t much like being called “Doctor” outside the bay, and even there he sometimes—when he thought it’d make a difference, when he thought it’d make someone more comfortable—led with his first name.

Today, though. Today he only smiled and said thanks. Today he’d get Dr. Sterling—ed all day if it kept his head on straight, if it helped give him the kind of distance he wanted: the distance between the man he was here in this hospital cafeteria, and the boy he’d felt like early this morning. First, when he stepped inside that stuffy, stale-smelling apartment he hadn’t seen in sixteen years.

And then when he’d stood outside on that cool, dark balcony and seen the woman look down at him.

He’d actually been *nervous*.

“Fucking Donny,” he muttered.

“And who is Donny?” said a voice from beside him, and he let his eyes close briefly.

*Of course*. Of course it would be the person in this hospital most likely to make him nervous.

“Good morning, Dr. Abraham,” he said, hating himself a little for the way he pitched his voice lower. He already had a pretty deep voice; when he talked to Gerald Abraham he sounded like he was auditioning to play Darth Vader. He’d never wanted to get paged so bad in his life, but unless he heard the chime on his phone, he knew he was well and truly stuck. Dr. Abraham was his direct superior in the emergency department, but even if he wasn’t, pretty much everyone in this hospital knew what Will had learned in the eight months since he’d been hired out of his fellowship as an attending physician at this hospital: you could not walk away from this guy, not when he asked you a question. He was five foot six of fifty-six-year-old dead serious-

ness, with an encyclopedic knowledge of hospital policy and absolutely zero sense of humor.

"A person called Donny, you mentioned?"

Will turned to look down at his boss, but the man was doing what he was usually doing when they stood anywhere together, which is to say: not looking back at him. Unless Will was seated and Dr. Abraham was standing, eye contact in general was a no-go, though Will had learned not to take it personally. Right now Dr. Abraham was staring at the coffee counter with absolutely fixed concentration, but Will knew the truth.

He was waiting on an answer.

"No one important," Will tried.

"I certainly hope you are not referring to a patient."

"Certainly not."

Will drank a too-hot gulp of coffee instead of wincing. In addition to the Vader voice, he also hated the way he always ended up weirdly mimicking Dr. Abraham's formalities. *A lately deceased kinsman*, his Abraham-infected brain said, and out of sheer annoyance at his inner voice he blurted, "My dead uncle."

That almost got the man to turn his head. Instead, he cleared his throat, rocked back on his heels in that way he had. If he did this while you were on the floor, giving orders for meds or settling on a diagnosis, you knew you'd done something he didn't like, something he'd tell you later was an "unusual choice" or a "departure from our normal procedures."

Will waited.

"I assume he's done something pre- or postmortem to deserve this language?"

*Where to begin?* Will thought. But he only took another sip of his coffee and said, "He left me his apartment."

Everything in it, too. Near as he could tell, the same brown recliner was still there. It *smelled* the same, a fact that flooded him with terrible memories of that terrible day. Getting out of there, it's what had sent him onto the balcony in the first place. Where he'd met the—

“An unusual reason to curse someone,” Abraham said. Janine was handing him his coffee across the counter. Frankly, she looked nervous, too, so Will sent her what he hoped was an *I get it* smile when Dr. Abraham stepped forward to take it, briefly nodding his thanks. Abraham wasn’t just a know-it-all; he was also bare-minimum polite, a fact that was confirmed when he turned to leave the cafeteria, clearly intending for Will to follow.

And since the man wrote his performance reviews, Will did.

“The apartment is here?” Abraham said, once Will was in step with him again.

Will felt himself clenching his jaw again, his back teeth grinding together, a knee-jerk instinct to shut down this conversation. This was the problem, really. Since he’d gotten the call he’d known he *should* be thinking about this, the situation with Donny’s estate—paperwork, probate, everything—but instead he’d stayed busy, stayed moving. He stayed late here, or he took an extra shift at the clinic where he worked as a doc-in-the-box on his off days, crowding out the noise that kicked up in his head every time he thought about Donny and his damned apartment. Last night, lying wide awake in his bed, counting the hours until his alarm went off, he’d decided he’d had enough of the ruminating, ridiculous avoidance. He’d taken the shortest of showers, thrown on his scrubs, and made his way to the address he’d been staring at on legal paperwork for more than a week.

He’d been determined to do the practical thing. The responsible thing.

But then there had been that bolting desperation to get out onto the balcony, away from Donny’s things. And ever since, this unruly instinct to keep his mind fixated on a woman whose *name* he didn’t even know, instead of on the problem at hand. And now, this pressured impulse to shut down a completely innocuous conversation about it?

He was being a fucking *child*.

“North,” he answered, determinedly. “Up around Logan Square.”

“That would add considerable commuting time each day, but—”

“I can’t live there,” Will said, more sharply than he intended. He thought of the mustard wallpaper, the unnerving, possibly haunted wall sconces, the messy detritus of Donny’s life. “I need to get rid of it.”

“My sister is a Realtor,” Abraham said, clearly unfazed by Will’s tone. Probably because ninety-three percent of his own sentences were delivered sharply. Once Will had seen Dr. Abraham tell a crying, concussed twelve-year-old that football was a “fool’s sport.”

“The terms of the will say I need to keep it for a year.”

Abraham cocked his head, his brow furrowing. “Odd, that. Is it legal? You know, my brother is a lawyer.”

How many conveniently employed siblings did this man have? Will figured he’d better not bring up his recent insomnia, or else he’d be learning about a sleep therapist sister next. He also better not mention the fact that he’d briefly entertained the idea that the woman he’d had a conversation with at four thirty this morning had also been the girl who’d thrown tomatoes at his head one summer day sixteen years ago.

That’d mean a regular therapist sister, probably.

“I spoke to a lawyer. He said I could contest it while it’s in probate, but that might end up delaying things even more.”

*I’ll bet you a hundred bucks you end up keeping it the twelve months,* the attorney had said, blustering and genial. *Donny loved that apartment.* Will was pretty sure that couldn’t be true, and that was before he’d even seen the place.

It couldn’t be true because he didn’t think Donny could love anything.

He thought of the stray cats, felt another spike of anger. What an insult.

They turned a corner down the long hallway that would lead them back to the ED, and out of habit, Will's pace increased. The ED was like that, sort of a speed vortex, even when not all that much was going on. You got close to it, you moved faster, your attention necessarily pulled to whatever problem was right in front of you. Will had always liked that about it.

But then Dr. Abraham stopped.

So Will stopped, too. They were, obviously, still standing, so no eye contact allowed. They both simply stared at those double doors, like they were preparing to storm a castle.

"My ex-wife," Abraham began, and Will almost, almost laughed. Another relative, Jesus. This was an extremely unrelatable area for Will personally.

"She owns three apartments in this city."

Will raised his eyebrows. Must be nice. Up until a few days ago, he owned exactly zero apartments, and hadn't planned to until he'd paid off some more of his truly astronomical student loan debt. Before he'd learned about this twelve-month condition, the best thing he could say about inheriting Donny's apartment was that selling it would at least help him put a sizable dent in his monthly bill from the federal government. It still would, he guessed, but not soon enough.

"Short-term rentals, all of them. She's quite successful."

Will looked over then, something about Abraham's tone less pedantic than usual. The man was smoothing the lapel of his white coat, and for one second—not even one second, probably not even half a second—he looked entirely unsure of himself.

*Odd, that,* Will thought, Abraham-echoing. He took another sip of coffee, wondered if Janine had accidentally given him decaf.

"That's—" he began, once he'd swallowed, but it was clear this was the kind of conversation where he was not supposed to participate with actual replies, because Abraham talked over him.

"She uses a website. It seems that once one gets the units up and running, they rather pay for themselves. And they must require very little intervention. She travels a lot."

There was that lapel-smoothing again. Abraham was the only doctor in the ED who even wore the white coat with any regularity, which up until this minute Will had always chalked up to the man's pathological insistence on something he called "professional rectitude." But clearly there was also a lapel-smoothing pathology happening, too.

It was a good idea, a short-term rental. He'd stayed in a few during his fourth year of med school, four weeks at a time at various programs where he'd done his acting internships. But those places had been bland and sterile, the furniture inside neutral and inoffensive, the hallways outside entirely absent of dangly chandeliers and cherubic sconces and textured wallpaper.

He thought of the woman on the balcony again, felt that stubborn hiccup in his heart.

"I'll call her for you," Abraham said.

Will blinked. "Wait, who?"

Abraham broke the no eye-contact rule to look over and up at him, his expression annoyed. "My ex-wife," he snapped.

"Right," Will said, the back of his neck heating. "My apologies."

*My apologies*, Christ. He pushed up his glasses. It *was* a good idea, the short-term rental. Maybe exactly the right idea. It was absolutely more productive than insomnia, or than thinking compulsively about ten minutes of conversation with a woman who'd made him feel like a teenager.

"It couldn't hurt to take a phone call," Abraham said. He was using his full-on "professional rectitude" voice, which meant Will was taking too long to answer.

"No," he said finally. "It couldn't."



A phone call was the least of it.

At the end of his shift, Will was back in the cafeteria, sitting across from a small, brightly clothed woman who'd introduced herself as "Sally no-longer-Abraham" and who preferred hugs to handshakes as a form of greeting. She was a day and a half away from a two-week Caribbean vacation, and despite Will's insistence in their initial phone call—during which Dr. Abraham had stayed unnervingly close—that there was nothing urgent about his situation, she'd insisted on an in-person meeting.

"Time is money!" she'd said, assuring Will that she loved nothing more than "talking about the biz."

And based on the way this meeting had gone so far, that was . . . absolutely true.

She had not stopped.

Sally's three units were all in Wicker Park: a basement apartment on North Elk Grove, quiet but close to a bunch of shops on Milwaukee; one on West Le Moyne; a "problem child" for its window AC and its unreliable building elevator; and finally, her prized showpiece, a loft on Western Avenue with free parking and a per-night price that soared in the summertime. She had pictures of each one on her tablet, queued up on the rental website she used and ready for Will's inspection, and as he swiped through, she provided commentary that could only be described as *thorough*. Will now knew where she'd gotten every carefully chosen area rug; he also now knew, incidentally, about the incredibly detailed thought processes Sally had for placement of said area rugs. He might not have needed to know about the area rug placement, but he appreciated it, all the detail. Already he felt invested in this idea, focused on it.

But he was still harboring some doubts, especially when Sally handed the tablet over so that he could scroll through the truly impressive number of five-star reviews she'd racked up on each unit, even the window AC one. As Will scanned the all-caps parade of them ("AMAZING!" "CHARMING!" "STEPS FROM

THE BLUE LINE!”), he started to feel guilty, as though it was his fault that there was such a gigantic, insurmountable gap between Donny’s apartment and the ones Sally was so deservedly proud to show him.

He felt like he was about to break bad news to a patient.

He set down the tablet, cleared his throat.

“The thing is,” he said, while she paged through a neon-pink three-ring binder she’d brought along, “the place I have . . . it’s not in as good of shape as what you’re showing me here. It needs a lot of work.”

Sally waved a hand, used the other to reach over the binder to take the tablet back. “That’s easy. I’ve got names of contractors out the wazoo, and they’re loyal to me. You could have it fixed up before I get back from sunning myself in paradise!”

He shifted in his chair, the bad-news-breaking feeling even heavier now.

“That’s probably not in the cards,” he said, trying to keep his voice light. He couldn’t blame her for thinking that hiring a bunch of contractors to do speedy work would be easy for him. A lot of people thought doctors wiped their asses with money, and Will guessed some of them probably did. But that was so far from his own experience it was almost comical. “I wouldn’t have a lot of start-up costs for something like this.”

Sally looked up at him, fixed him with a problem-solving stare. Will thought the contractors were probably a little afraid of her, in addition to being loyal. He almost wished Dr. Abraham had come down to this meeting, too. It might’ve been nice to see the guy get put in his place, for once.

“Do you have time? Because time is almost as good as money when it comes to something like this. My places”—she tapped at the tablet with her index finger—“they look sharp now, but they didn’t always.”

She turned the tablet, showing a picture from her personal photo gallery—the cluttered living room of what he thought was the North Elk Grove place. It looked dark and neglected,



the furniture sagging and the walls stained. It looked . . . not all that different from Donny's place.

Sally swiped once, revealed the same room, freshly painted, light-colored furniture in a different arrangement.

"Bright walls and sturdy slipcovers did a lot for this one. After a while I started to turn enough profit that I could do more, but at first it was only me and my elbow grease."

"It's impressive," Will said, focusing on the photo, imagining the truly outrageous elbow grease this must've taken. He didn't even know what a slipcover was. Well, he didn't mind hard work. And not minding it meant he was basically a workaholic, so he had a lot of personal leave stacked up. He could probably swing two full weeks. Maybe not before Sally's vacation was over, but still. He could get the job done.

He reached out a finger, swiped back, and then forward again. He liked it, seeing this transformation. He absolutely didn't relish spending two weeks in Donny's apartment, going through all his things, but something about this—the stripping of it, the sanitizing of it, the starting-over feel of it—appealed to him. Two weeks to everything in that apartment boxed up and out of sight, out of mind. Two weeks to money in his pocket and a countdown started to this ridiculous condition's end date. Two weeks to Donny being nearly nothing to him.

Two weeks was so much more manageable than twelve months.

"What about the registration?" he asked, intent now. He'd done a little reading when he had lulls in the action today. The site Sally used was locally owned, Chicago-specific, and for that reason it had a better reputation around here than the huge, international short-term rental sites that had run afoul of pretty much every building code in this city. But Will had skimmed a few *Trib* articles that'd suggested there'd been no shortage of attempts to block their licensing process, too.

"I've got an in on that, too," she said, shrugging. "And if the association hasn't already put itself on the prohibited-buildings list, they can't do it once you've put in for the registration."

She tapped her chin, her brow furrowing. "You said your place needs a lot of work, but what about the rest of the building? Has it been fixed up?"

Will snorted, thinking of the wallpaper. "God, no."

But as soon as he said it, he felt oddly guilty. Not unlike the feeling of being watched by sentient, cherubic wall sconces.

Or by a woman on a third-floor balcony.

He shifted in his seat, frustrated. He'd been doing so well the past few hours, putting her out of his head, focusing on the right thing about this whole disaster. He did not have the time or inclination to be distracted. He did not have the time to be who he'd been this morning. He had to be responsible. To focus.

"That's good, in terms of bylaws," Sally said. "If the building's neglected, their documents probably are, too."

"I wouldn't say neglected, exactly," he said, for no good reason. He had no idea about the bylaws; they were in the same pile as all the other documents he'd taken with him from the attorney's office. But still, he had that guilty feeling again.

Sally ignored him, picking up the tablet again.

"What's the address?"

He rattled it off without thinking, then furrowed his brow as she tapped away. "What are you looking up there?"

"I'm seeing if any LLCs are already listed as unit owners. If so, it's almost certain you won't be the first to do a short-term rental."

"You can see that?"

"Cook County website," she said, *tap tap tapping*. She frowned. "Hmm."

That didn't sound great.

"Privately owned, all of them. That's a bummer, but it's not the worst thing. My place on Western was like that when I bought in. You'll probably have to do some campaigning."

*Campaigning*. He had a vision of himself in the now-treeless

backyard, staring up at that third-floor balcony. His heart hiccupping, his hands full of half-eaten tomatoes.

But that was ridiculous, because he wasn't that kid anymore.

And anyway: *It. Wasn't. Her.*

"Have you had any contact with anyone in the building?" Sally asked.

He coughed. "Uh. Briefly. I spoke to a woman on the third floor this morning." *During the golden hour*, his brain supplied, unhelpfully.

"Hey, no," Will said, once he realized Sally had gone back to typing. Looking for an LLC, that was one thing. It didn't feel right to get details about individual people who lived in the building this way, let alone about the woman on the balcony. "You don't have to—"

"Eleanora DeAngelo Clarke," Sally said, before Will could finish.

His heart hiccupped; his hands twitched. He would not do the chest-rubbing thing.

That was a beautiful name, though. *Eleanora.*

Sally barreled right on, which was for the best. What did her name matter, after all?

"I mean, I'm assuming. The other third-floor resident is a guy called Jonah. Eleanora, she's probably the one."

Goddamn these hiccups. Medicine had really never found a cure for them, not that his were the typical kind.

"Anyway," Sally said, "Gerald told me—grudgingly, if I'm being honest, but you know how he is—that everyone here thinks you're *real* charming. You gotta translate some of that famous bedside manner into this job! Some smiles and reassurances while you clean up the place, and you could have this whole thing sewn up quick."

Will cleared his throat, straightened in his chair. Right. Two weeks, basically. He could do that. And he *was* charming! Witness his coffee jokes, or the way he always got called in for cry-

ing kids. Or crying adults, frankly. He could do this. Get some goodwill, get the apartment into shape, get money, get Donny out of his head. The woman on the balcony had nothing to do with it.

He just had to stay focused.

Sally snapped the tablet shut, smiled across the table at him as though they'd shaken hands on a deal. "If I were you," she said cheerfully, "I'd start with Eleanora."