

The Friday Cage

Andrew Diamond

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For Lindsay, who is every bit as hardheaded as Claire.

1

Am I paranoid to think someone is following me? And if they are following me, why would they be so obvious about it? A 1971 burgundy Lincoln Continental sticks out, even on a busy avenue in Washington, DC.

She could see it in the rearview. The knocking engine and the blue smoke from the tailpipe—it was the same sound, the same acrid smell of burning oil she had noticed in front of her house that morning, and the morning before.

As they waited for the light at Wisconsin and Calvert, Claire studied the driver's reflection in her mirror. He was a big man, tall and fat, with light brown hair and enormously broad shoulders. Was that why he drove the old Lincoln? Because he wouldn't fit into a smaller car?

He was stuffing what looked like the last bite of a sandwich into his mouth, licking his fingers greedily, like a dog devouring its treasure before anyone could snatch it away. The pale January sun flashed in his blue eyes and lit the golden stubble on his fat cheeks. Eyes that close together, Claire thought, in a face as broad as his, made him look crude and thuggish, like an enforcer or a goon.

The impatient honking of the cars behind told her that the light had changed. She hit the gas.

Is he following me just for fun, she wondered. A stalker, or a perv? Or did someone hire him?

She looked again in the rearview. He was tearing the Subway wrapper from a new sandwich, stuffing it into his mouth as fast as he could get the paper off.

Peter wouldn't hire anyone to follow her. If he wanted to know what she was up to, he would call, as he had done so many times in the weeks since she'd left. She didn't answer, and she didn't listen to the messages. The sound of his voice would cut too deep, and she would resent his wounded tone because she knew she had caused it. It was easier to delete the messages unheard than to acknowledge her guilt. After four weeks, the calls stopped. He'd given up.

She turned her eyes back to the road just in time to avoid rear-ending a taxi.

Maybe it was the cop, she thought. Maybe the cop assigned the goon to follow me. But wouldn't a cop just send another cop? I mean, a professional? Someone who knows how to be discreet?

Cops usually keep a low profile, don't they? Unless they want to pressure you. When they think you've done something wrong, they *want* you to know they're watching. But what have I done wrong?

She glanced in the sideview and thought back to her interview with the police detective. He was neither professional nor discreet, showing up at her door, giving her *the look*, and then peppering her with questions about the circumstances of Gavin's death without first telling her that her friend had died. She had to glean that bit of information from his questions, and when she did, it was a shock the detective did nothing to soften.

The thought of that encounter still angered her, even now, six days later. First of all, a man doesn't look at a woman that way when he's coming to talk about her friend's death. Though she did nothing to encourage it, she received that look from men old and young. The look that lingered a little too long, that took in the chestnut brown hair and eyes, the fair skin, the

splash of pale freckles across the bridge of the nose, the look that approved of the face that was objectively pretty even as it coldly discouraged familiarity.

The detective had shown up on the doorstep of her grandmother's house on Oregon Avenue as she was getting ready for work. Backlit by the sun rising through the bare trees of Rock Creek Park, he was a dark silhouette in a cloud of steaming breath.

"Can I help you?" Claire asked.

She wore a simple grey pants suit, her bare feet washed in the flood of cold from the open door. Without shoes, she was five foot six, a deficiency she corrected with heels that brought her closer to eye-level with the men at work.

The detective was a big man. Six two or six three. Over two hundred pounds, probably in his early thirties, with close-cropped reddish-blond hair, a red pock-marked face, and small ears that stuck out like clay pinched from the sides of a child's sculpture. He wore civilian clothes, black sweater and slacks, with the black jacket of the Prince George's County Police department. On his belt was a golden badge but no gun.

He hesitated a second, giving her the familiar, unwelcome look that first registers attraction and then searches for a sign of reciprocated interest.

"Miss Chastain?"

"Mizz," she corrected.

"Did you receive a call from Gavin Corley last night?"

"Excuse me," she said coldly. "You are?"

"Darrell Gatlin. PG County Police." He peered over her shoulder into the living room strewn with packing boxes, books, papers, photos, and old vinyl LPs—remnants of the life she was dismantling now that she had moved her grandmother into assisted living.

His curiosity was intrusive, a desire he was going to satisfy regardless of her wish for privacy. She pulled the door against her shoulder to prevent him looking in.

"Did Gavin call you last night?" he asked.

"What business is that of yours?"

The expression she wore in this encounter was one she had cultivated during her years in the corporate office in New York, when she was often the only woman in the room, usually the youngest, and always the least powerful. Her business face showed an unmistakable edge of hardness that quietly told the men who needed to be told exactly where her boundary was, and that they would always be on the other side of it. After so many years of putting on that face, she had become the person it projected.

Still, there were some, like this one, who just wouldn't get it. They kept searching for a way in, for an indication of interest or some weakness to exploit.

"You're the last person he called before he died," the detective said.

Died?

He didn't register her shock because he wasn't looking at her face. His eyes went first to her hand, checking for a ring, then to her thighs, which no longer filled out the pants she had bought just last fall. Stress and anxiety had prevented her from eating in the six weeks since she'd left New York. At her normal weight of one-thirty-five, Peter could still see in those pants the curve of her muscle. If this cop saw something he liked in the slacks that now hung loosely on her, it was a projection of his own desire.

Three weeks ago, when her weight dropped to one-eighteen, she stopped weighing herself. She was several pounds below that now. What kind of man is attracted to a woman who isn't well? Fixers, she thought. Caretakers who want to heal you. And stalkers. Creeps looking for someone they think they can dominate.

She took him for the latter.

"I'm sorry, did you say Gavin is dead?" Dismay and anger stirred in her voice.

"You didn't know?" He sounded almost annoyed, as if death were a technicality, a distraction from some more important point.

What kind of response was that, Claire wondered. What

kind of detective starts hurling questions without first informing you... without offering condolences... Her eyes were already narrowing. The crease between them was beginning to show, the one her friends knew to look out for.

“He passed away last night. In an accident.”

Passed away? Is that the term police departments train their detectives to use?

She glared at him as her heart sped. Her blood pressure was rising quickly.

“This is how you tell me? This is how you tell me my friend is dead? Who are you? How did you even find me? This is my grandmother’s house. How did you know I’d be here?”

“Miss Chastain.” The conciliatory tone meant to soothe her sounded condescending.

“Mizz.”

“What did Gavin say to you?”

“Fuck off.” She shut the door in his face.

She read about the crash later that day on the *Washington Post* website. *One Dead in Single Car Accident*. Gavin’s Chevy Equinox had run off a wooded road in Prince George’s County, flipping down an embankment before coming to rest upside down. An early-morning commuter had spotted the car around 5 a.m.

At work that afternoon, she rehearsed in her mind how she would have described the detective to Peter, if Peter were still around to talk to. First was the issue of professionalism, or lack thereof. Can a police detective show basic courtesy? Or is it beneath them to try?

Second, how could that cop have expected her to know at 7:30 a.m. that Gavin was dead when he’d only been found two hours earlier?

And third... Third...

This was what chilled her now as she approached the entrance to the garage on 18th Street. A quick glance in the sideview showed that after two miles and half a dozen turns, the fat goon in the old Lincoln was still behind her.

Third, how did the cop know Gavin had called her? Even

if he had Gavin's phone, he couldn't have unlocked it to look at the call history because Gavin, the ultraparanoïd computer security expert, used a six-digit passcode.

The Lincoln didn't follow her into the underground lot. She checked her mirrors as she descended to the second level, checked them again as she pulled into her spot. She cut the engine and sat quietly for a moment, listening for the knocking of the old Continental. When she was satisfied there was no one else around, she got out.

On the solitary walk from her parking spot to the elevators, a chilling image flashed in her mind—that rude cop pressing Gavin's dead finger against the phone, scrolling through the call history, finding her name.

She pressed four inside the elevator, watched the doors slide shut, and wondered again what had led the detective to look for the owner of a New York phone number, area code 646, in a house on Oregon Avenue.

If they know he called, she wondered, do they also know what he said? And if they know what he said, why haven't they been back to follow up?

She had deleted the message, but she remembered it verbatim. His last words to her:

"I'm pretty sure I screwed this up, so I'm passing the torch to you. If worse comes to worst, I know you'll see this through. Love ya, babe. Sorry for the trouble."

2

Her boss was standing at the reception desk when she left the elevator on four. He tried to look like he wasn't waiting for her, a ruse she had bought last Friday.

"Claire!"

"Good morning, Anoop."

She brushed past him without breaking stride, and he followed her into the carpeted hall. Long-limbed and thin, with a black mustache and an easy manner, he struggled to keep up.

"Li tells me you're almost done."

Almost done with a month-long assignment, certifying the year-end financials of a generic pharmaceutical manufacturer.

"I'll have it to you tomorrow," Claire said.

"It's not due till the end of the month." He held his coffee high as he dashed along behind her, as if an extra foot of altitude would prevent a spill.

"Then we're ahead of schedule." She turned left into her office, sliding her shoulder bag down her left arm as she entered.

"*You're* ahead of schedule," Anoop said. "After tomorrow, you take a few days off."

"I didn't ask for time off, and I don't want it." She dropped her bag on the desk and pulled off her coat.

“You’ve worked twenty-eight days in a row.”

She pushed the door halfway shut, forcing him to step back into the hall, so she could hang her coat on the hook. It was an act of simple efficiency. Her coat was off and she had to put it somewhere, and if he happened to be in the way of what she had already decided to do, that was just bad timing on his part. If her action had the added benefit of keeping him outside the office, where she wanted him, he was too good natured to suspect it, and too polite to call her out on it.

“And you’re complaining?” she asked impatiently. “That I get things done?”

“You worked on Christmas day. *In the office.*”

Because I didn’t want to spend the whole day alone with Leona, Claire thought. You would have done the same thing if you had a grandmother like her.

“This is how people burn out.” Anoop pushed the door open.

He would have stepped in if she hadn’t stood in his way with that look of impatience that made him feel he was wasting her time. It was a useful look that almost always had the intended effect.

“I’ve worked a lot harder than this.”

Anoop understood that when he interviewed her for the job. He knew she was overqualified, that she belonged a rung or two above him on the ladder, that someday he might be reporting to her. He had hired her because she was the kind of person he would *want* to report to—sharp, competent, to the point. The only thing that bothered him was why a woman as intelligent and ambitious as Claire Chastain would take a step down from the complexities of corporate valuations and due diligence to certifying numbers in a revenue report.

“You have degrees in business and accounting?” he asked in the interview.

“It’s all there on my résumé.”

“This is more like the work you did early in your career. Straight numbers. You OK with that?”

“I read the job description.”

When he asked her why she left New York, she told him she needed to care for her grandmother. That was partially true. She needed to move Leona into a facility before Leona assaulted another grocery clerk, tore up another month's bills, smashed up another car. Beyond the move and the visits to help her grandmother make the transition, there would be no caretaking. Leona wouldn't let anyone help her, and Claire was not a caretaker.

The answer had satisfied Anoop. She started the job nine days after moving to DC, a week before Christmas, and hit the ground running.

"After tomorrow," Anoop insisted now from his place in the doorway, "you'll take the rest of the week off."

She looked him in the eye and shook her head. No.

Anoop hadn't known her long enough to be able to read her. Peter would have understood the anxiety that underlay her defiance. He would have known that with a few gentle pushes, given at the right time, in the right way, she would relent. The report that she had already completed, that she was reluctant to turn over, represented the end of an assignment into which her troubled mind had retreated from the spiraling chaos of an unraveling life. The thought of time off, of days during which her mind would have no external focus, no deadlines, no objectively measurable goals, worried her.

Peter would have seen the worry, would have recognized it as the root cause of her refusal. He would have addressed it directly.

"There comes a time when you have to slow down," he would tell her. "You have to look at the questions that don't have easy answers."

"Leave me alone."

Her face hid every emotion but anger and annoyance, the two that were most useful in getting people to back off. If there was more to her inner life than that—and there was—she would choose whom to show, and how much they could see.

When people can't read you, can't understand what you're feeling, Claire thought, they can only guess what's going on

inside. And from their guesses, you can figure out who they are, how they think, because they fill in the blanks by projecting what they would feel if they were in your shoes.

Anoop, she knew, was a fundamentally decent person. So was Peter. Anoop was easier to get along with because they had a simpler arrangement: do good work, do it on time, and all is well. Anoop was also intimidated by her just enough to accept the boundaries exactly as she defined them. She could see him calculate now and then the cost (high) and the potential benefit (uncertain) of trying to develop a more personal relationship.

Peter, on the other hand, was more difficult. Sharing a bed entitled a person to more intimate access. She was willing to accept that. But she often found him looking into her, and she felt the person he saw was not the one she wanted to project. The thoughtful looks that had once flattered her as signs of his infatuation had, over time, come to feel intrusive. He was prying behind the façade, trying to gain some insight into her, some understanding of who she was, and that, to her, amounted to taking something without her consent.

Worse yet, her anger didn't intimidate him.

"Listen," Claire told Anoop, softening her tone and posture. "I know you think you're doing me a favor, but I need the work."

"You need rest," Anoop said. "Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

Wrong response, she thought. When a woman is struggling, you don't ask her how she feels about her looks.

She had stopped looking at her reflection during the week between Christmas and New Year's, when her ribs had begun to show. Now when she got out of the shower, she left the steam on the mirror.

"I understand you're concerned for my health," she said. "But I need something to do. I can help Li with whatever she's working on."

"Li's working on entry-level stuff. She doesn't need your help."

"I'm telling you what I need," Claire said. "I'm being very

clear, and if you don't start listening, I'm going to lose my temper. Try to get the message before that happens."

She had him on his heels now, so she pressed her point.

"Li needs a mentor, and I'm going to be that person. Now are we done?"

Anoop stepped back and let out a sigh of frustration. She turned to the desk and kept her back to him as she slid the laptop from her bag.

When he left, she picked up the two letters beside her keyboard. The first was from her old firm in New York. She opened it to find another letter inside, a reminder from a professional organization to renew her membership. One more thing that had slipped through the cracks during the upheaval of the past six weeks.

The second letter was from a bank, addressed to Claire C. Chastain. She wondered what marketing list they had gotten her name from. She never used her middle initial. The name of her firm was on the second line of the address, and she could feel the rigid outline of a credit card inside. That would be her company MasterCard for business expenses. Anoop must have ordered it.

She felt someone else standing behind her now as she dropped the letter onto the desk beside her bag.

"Claire?"

She turned to see Li in the doorway, open laptop in hand, wearing the same anxious-to-please smile she showed to every person she considered her superior.

You don't have to take that submissive attitude, Claire thought. It only works against you in the corporate world. And don't stand at the threshold waiting for permission to enter. Walk in. People give you only as much respect as you demand, so aim high.

Li seemed to sense her annoyance, and to shrink from it.

"Yes, Li?"

"These numbers do not make sense." She overenunciated each syllable of her textbook English, inadvertently drawing attention to the Taiwanese accent that made her self-conscious.

You're a project, Claire thought. When I was twenty-two, in my first job out of college, I didn't take shit from anyone. And I certainly didn't invite it. You have to set the tone from the get-go, or people will walk on you.

"What numbers?" Claire asked.

Li nodded her head—a little bow, Claire thought—and smiled. "In this spreadsheet you sent me."

"Jesus, come in, will you?"

Li stepped in and nodded again. "Thank you!"

She set the laptop on Claire's desk and pointed to the columns on the left of the sheet.

"You see here? These are raw materials. And here..." She slid her finger to the right. "These are outputs. The outputs don't match." Li looked at Claire to see if she was following.

"What are these numbers?" Claire asked. "I need some context."

"Manufacturing. Amount and cost of materials in the left columns. Output units on the right. They are measured in doses."

"Why is that in a spreadsheet?" Claire squinted at the numbers. "PharmaCore tracks manufacturing in a central database."

Li shrugged.

"Where did you get this?" Claire asked.

"From you."

Claire vaguely remembered receiving it, not wanting to waste time on it, forwarding it to Li for vetting.

"Look." Li pointed to the left. "Enough inputs for twelve million doses, but only ten million units produced."

"OK, we don't need to get into that level of detail. All we have to do is certify the year-end numbers for the Securities and Exchange Commission. Cash in, cash out, assets, and liabilities."

"But they are trying to be acquired, yes?"

"Yes, they're considering that."

If Claire were still in New York, she might be working on behalf of a prospective buyer, a multibillion-dollar corporation,

uncovering details of the target company's manufacturing processes and facilities, its management structure, intellectual property, market position, products in development, jobs that could be cut after the acquisition—every aspect of the giant, multidimensional enterprise that could be classified as value, risk, or opportunity. Compared to that, the financial auditing she was doing now was boring and one-dimensional.

“Their prospectus says their manufacturing process is the most efficient in the industry,” Li said.

“That’s not our concern.”

“It says less than one percent of raw materials are wasted in production.”

You are very sharp, Claire thought. And thorough, for even bothering to read the prospectus. You need to *make* people listen to you instead of *asking* them to listen. I know what you’re going to say next.

“These numbers show they waste sixteen point six-seven percent of raw materials in production. That is a large discrepancy.”

Thank you for getting the numbers right, Claire thought. Thank you for being precise.

“OK, but it’s not our concern,” Claire said. “If a buyer comes along, they’ll discover that information on their own during due diligence. Our job is just to double-check accounting and certify the numbers.”

“Then why did they send us this?” Li asked.

Now that’s how you ask a question, Claire thought. Direct and to the point. Don’t leave the person any way out other than a direct response. Why can’t you talk to Anoop that way? Or any of the other men? So much mindpower goes to waste because women like you and me are taught to doubt ourselves before we even speak. We hold our tongues for fear of being wrong and half the world’s truth goes unsaid. Trust your mind, speak your piece, and if you’re wrong, make whoever disagrees with you prove you’re wrong. I’m going to toughen you up, Li Ming, whether you like it or not.

“I don’t know,” Claire said. “We’re just about done with

this audit, and whatever's in that spreadsheet is beside the point. Don't waste your time on it."

Claire could see Li's relief. Li thanked her—a little too profusely, Claire thought—with a nod and an anxious smile.

Ten minutes later, when she was seated at her desk with her laptop plugged into the big monitor, Claire emailed her copy of the spreadsheet back to the PharmaCore manager who had sent it. "I think you sent this to the wrong person."

She studied the message for a moment, then removed the two words that weakened her assertion. "You sent this to the wrong person."

3

At noon, she told Anoop she'd be out for a long lunch with her grandmother. She knew Anoop wanted twenty-four hours' notice before such an absence, but when he hired her, she told him she wasn't a nine-to-fiver. She would meet her deadlines on her own schedule, as she had done in New York.

Now she wanted to see how he'd react when she asserted the privilege they'd agreed upon. She knew he wouldn't openly object, because he was scared of her. But if his tone or his body language showed any hint of discomfort with the arrangement, she would confront him and make sure they both explicitly understood the nature of their relationship. This was the kind of boundary she had to enforce clearly and early, and she knew she could because she was always ready for a fight and he wasn't.

"I'll be gone at least three hours," she said.

"Take the rest of the day off if you want. Get some rest."

Good, she thought. I don't have to waste energy on that battle. I can save it for Leona.

Half an hour later, her blue BMW arrived at the home in north Bethesda. The original Rollingwood had burned in the 1980s, and the rolling woods had been replaced by rows of million-dollar homes for the lawyers and lobbyists who didn't

want to put their kids into the DC public school system.

The new Rollingwood, a three-story brick colonial at the apex of a long, curved lane, looked like an oversized realtor's office or a suburban bank, with wings on either end to house the elderly inmates who couldn't remember what offense had landed them there. The elaborate winding paths in back pleased the firm of mind and confused the residents for whom the facility was designed. In summer, birds flitted in the fountains, and the pathways were bright with roses, hydrangeas, and peonies. In winter, the dry fountains and cropped stalks reminded the occupants of what they had once been and where they were going.

"How is this better than where I am now?" Leona raged when she first saw the place.

January wasn't the best time of year for this kind of move, Claire realized. But what was the alternative? To let Leona kill herself on the road? Or kill someone else?

She parked and went to the psychiatrist's office first. She had met him twice before. An even-tempered, reassuring man with greying hair and photos of the twins—one boy, one girl—in their high school graduation gowns. A widower not yet old enough to stop noticing a pretty face.

"The combativeness," said the doctor, "the aggression and abuse—those are all symptoms of the disease."

Claire shook her head. "No. She's always been like that. Has she hit anyone yet?"

"A little smack when one of the nurses annoyed her. Not too bad compared to what we sometimes see. Why did you ask about hitting? Did she—"

The doctor trailed off, but she knew from his look where this was going.

"Used to hit me?" Claire said. "Is that what you were going to ask? Is it really any of your business?"

Don't look at me like that, she thought. You must be over fifty. I'm thirty-two. This is business. This is your job. Keep your mind on the patient. That's what we're paying you for.

"I'm more concerned about the bewilderment," Claire said.

“She can be lucid for two or three hours at a time. Then all of a sudden she doesn’t know where she is.”

“That’s only going to get worse.”

“And she tries to hide it. She’s too proud to admit it, even when it’s happening.”

“That’s not unusual.”

“You have to be stern with her,” Claire said. “Gentle doesn’t work. She doesn’t respect that.”

You could tell that just by looking at the woman, Claire thought. Scowling and rail thin, with razor-straight bangs she cut herself and that crease of anger etched permanently between her eyes, she’s a model of severity.

She’s worn the same coat for twelve years, and not because she likes it. Some people who grow up poor want everything money can buy as soon as they have the money to buy it. Others, like Leona, internalize their poverty. They continue to inflict it on themselves and their household because they know no other way of being. Try growing up with *that*.

Gavin knew what she was like. Gavin’s father knew too. Old Ben Corley. That’s why Claire was always over there. To remind herself that not everyone in the world was as mean as Leona.

One Saturday morning when she was sixteen, she hovered in the Corleys’ kitchen as Ben cooked breakfast for her, Gavin, and himself.

He didn’t ask what was bothering her. He just puffed at his cigarette, stirred the eggs, turned the bacon, and waited until she was ready to speak.

“I hate her,” Claire said at last. “I fucking hate her!”

“Don’t.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because she’s your teacher. She’s a model of everything you must not be in this world, and you’ll never find a better teacher than the one who makes you feel the lesson to the bottom of your soul.”

“I never want to be like her.”

“You won’t be.”

Ben Corley's vote of confidence was a memory she turned to in times of doubt to reassure herself that her heart wasn't as cold as the persona she projected. But lately, she had begun to doubt his assessment.

I'm exactly like her, Claire thought. I don't trust anyone. I'm always on guard. How could Peter have tolerated me? Why would anyone want to marry a person like that? It's like living with a porcupine.

The only difference between Leona and me is I don't attack people who don't deserve it. I don't go after the ones who can't defend themselves.

But I have just as much anger, just as much hostility, and sometimes I find myself hoping someone will come along who deserves to be on the receiving end of all that rage, just so I can let it go.

She stopped her train of thought when she felt the doctor's eyes on her. My thoughts must be showing on my face. She touched her cheek, as if to check. Stop looking at me, will you? It's intrusive.

"You have some issues to work out with her?" the doctor asked.

"I'm not your patient."

"No, but this is a difficult time and a difficult process. You have to remember you're dealing with a person who's not all there. She'll continue to fade, and you're going to have to come to terms with the fact that you may not be able to resolve all of your..."

"My what?" Claire asked. "Differences? Issues? Grievances? Which word were you going to choose?"

"Why don't you choose the word, Claire? You don't have to tell me." He turned and picked up the iPad from his desk. Pulling up the record of his next patient, Claire assumed. Without looking at her, he said, "She's in her room. It's kind of you to take her out. I think it'll do her good."

He sat on the edge of the desk scrolling through the iPad, pretending not to notice her lingering at the door.

After a long moment, he asked without looking up, "What

is it, Claire?”

“I’m sorry I’m such a bitch.”

“You’re not a bitch.”

“Oh, but I am.”

“Well, like I said, this is a difficult time.”

* * *

At lunch, Leona’s first jab came as soon as the maître d’ had seated them.

“Why did you leave New York?” she barked.

“Can you please speak in a civil tone?”

“Answer my question!”

“I hated it,” Claire said flatly. “It was all about winning. That’s all anyone cared about.”

She had explained this to Leona several times, but she didn’t mind saying it again for her own sake, to reassure herself that she had made the right decision.

“You didn’t hate it when you got there. What changed?”

“I don’t know, Gran. I honestly don’t.”

When the waiter came to take their drink order, Claire asked for water while her grandmother insisted it wasn’t right to order until Peter was seated.

“Peter’s not coming.”

“Why not?”

“We’re not together anymore. I’ve told you that a dozen times.”

“What did you do to him?”

“I didn’t do anything, Gran.”

I left him.

“If you two are having a fight, call him and make up. This is stupid. Us sitting down to lunch with no Peter.”

“I’ll call him, Gran.” She wouldn’t, but Leona would forget in a few minutes and drop it. To the waiter, Claire said, “She’ll have an iced tea.”

When the waiter left, her grandmother stared at her, confused. Claire raised the menu to avoid looking at her. In

Leona's more contentious moods, a simple look could provoke a fight.

After a few seconds of silence, Claire lowered her shield and watched as Leona scanned the faces at the surrounding tables. She seemed to be trying to place them in her memory. Leona Chastain, in her lucid days, had been a journalist on Capitol Hill. She seemed to know everyone—congressmen, senators, lawyers, and lobbyists—but had had no friends that Claire could recall.

Her mind had been sharp enough to carry her to the top of her field, but her abrasive manner and bitter cynicism offended enough people over the years to assure she'd never be more than a mid-level information gatherer. She could dig facts out of people, but she couldn't make them comfortable enough to open up and spill the meaningful story.

Her failure to rise, Leona used to proclaim proudly, was due to her uncompromising honesty. "People in power don't like people who speak the truth."

No, Claire thought. People in general don't like people who are rude.

"How can you stand living with her?" Gavin used to ask. "She's always accusing you of things you didn't do. She never stops picking on you. She's just downright mean."

"What am I supposed to do?" Claire asked testily. "I deal with it, OK? That's all I *can* do until I get out of here."

"Well, if you can defend yourself against her, you can defend yourself against anyone."

Now as Leona struggled to pick out an acquaintance in the sea of strange faces, Claire could see the bewilderment in her eyes, the welling sense of defeat. She found no joy in seeing the tyrant of her youth humbled.

No, humbled isn't the right word, she thought. It's humiliation. She's humiliated, and no one deserves that.

"What are you looking at?" Leona growled.

"Are you going to order?"

"I would if I could read the menu. Why is the print so small? Do they think we're leprechauns?"

“The curried chicken looks good.”

“Then I’ll have that.” Leona dropped her menu on the table and turned to look behind her.

“Where’s the waiter?” she barked. “Waiter!”

“Gran!” Claire laid her hand on Leona’s. “Keep your voice down.”

“How can you want to take care of her?” Gavin had asked on the day Claire returned to DC.

“Who else is going to do it?”

“She never took care of you.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Abandon her? You don’t do that to someone who needs help. Besides, I have things I want to ask her.”

“About your father?”

“I want to know who he was.”

“Good luck digging that out of her.”

On a good day, Leona would answer questions if she liked the topic. Claire’s parentage wasn’t a topic she liked, and today wasn’t a good day.

All that knowledge is going to the grave with you unless I dig it out, Claire thought, but how do I even broach the topic without setting you off?

Leona looked at the empty place beside her.

“Where is Grace?”

Claire rubbed her temples and took a deep breath. Her mother, Grace, had died twenty-seven years ago, when Claire was five. Drunk, in a car with an even drunker married man fifteen years her senior. “Slutting around with someone else’s husband,” as Leona put it.

She was with a lot of men, Ben Corley had told her. Looking for the love she didn’t get at home.

“Grace isn’t here, Gran.”

“Why hasn’t anyone set a place for her? What’s going on? Where is the waiter? Why are we here?”

Oh, God, Claire thought. Her stomach began the familiar churn of the past six weeks, her headache was coming back, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to eat anymore.

4

On her way back to the office, Claire stopped at Staples in Bethesda, and then at the house on Oregon Avenue. She passed the half-packed boxes in the living room, threading through stacks of books and photos and old LPs. She set her shoulder bag on the kitchen counter. The kitchen was *her* space, for *her* things, which were not to be mixed with Leona's things, which were all on their way out.

She fished a dime from her coat pocket and fit it into the slot on the bottom edge of her phone. One twist and the back came off to expose the electronic innards.

She took the battery out. The chip beneath it said SanDisk 64GB. She marveled as she pulled it from the phone. No larger than the nail of her index finger, it had once held two years' worth of photos and videos, plus data for half her apps.

Is it a sign, she wondered, that it went bad now? That I lose all my photos right after leaving New York? Was this whole chapter of my life meant to be erased?

She tore open the package of the replacement chip she'd bought at Staples.

She pushed the new chip into the slot, replaced the battery and the rear panel, then flipped the phone over and turned it on.

New storage device detected. Format now?

She tapped yes, laid the phone face-down on the counter, and left it to do its work.

An animal rustled the leaves out back. Probably a deer from the woods across the street. They had been a rarity when she last lived here, fourteen years earlier, but now they wandered out from Rock Creek Park to forage in people's gardens. She took off her coat, laid it on a chair, and made a mental note to have the yard cleaned up.

She walked down the hallway to the second bedroom, the one she had grown up in and swore she would never return to. On the floor beside the dresser she found a second pair of heels, ones that didn't dig into her Achilles tendons. They were a quarter-inch higher than the ones she was wearing. She took off the one pair and put on the other.

It was strange to be in that house alone. Even with the clutter of what remained to be packed, it seemed impossibly empty in the absence of the hostile spirit that had once dominated it. The echoes from the bare floors and walls reinforced the feeling of emptiness, and the memories came trickling back.

"You fell because why?" Leona asked, her bony fingers digging into the flesh of Claire's six-year-old shoulders. "Because you went up on the wall where I told you not to go, and you were twirling around like a fool, and this is what happens to stupid people. Go clean yourself up, and then go to your room where you can't get into any more trouble. I'll call you when dinner is ready."

In her room, she vowed that the next time she got cut, she would clean herself up without telling her grandmother.

In the last year of grade school, when the boys started noticing girls, she provoked feelings they didn't know how to express. She was the pretty one who didn't try to be pretty, the quiet one who had a lot to say but didn't say it. She didn't understand their crude attempts at flirtation, and didn't respond. Some of the boys began to hate her.

When she complained about the way they teased her,

Leona's unsympathetic response was, "Why do you *let* them be mean to you? Weakness invites abuse. You have to make them understand they won't get away with it."

When her teacher assigned her to a group project with those same boys, she stayed after school and asked to be put in another group. The teacher called Leona and explained the situation, and when Claire got home, Leona laid into her.

"Why do you bother that woman with your complaints? Why do you make yourself look weak and make me look like a fool?"

"I don't like those boys, Gran. I don't know why they pick on me."

"Boys are assholes," Leona replied. "They're practicing to be men. I told that teacher to put you back in the group."

"Why?"

"So you can figure it out for yourself."

Claire folded her arms across her chest and said defiantly, "Then I'm not going. I'm not going back to school."

She recognized that was a mistake half a second too late to avoid the bony backhand on her cheek. Leona put everything she had into that one. The strike knocked Claire off balance, and the fall hurt worse than the blow.

She spent the evening stewing in her room, angry with herself for forgetting the fundamental lesson Leona had drilled into her. Weakness invites abuse. She had asked her teacher for help. That was a show of weakness, and Leona had delivered the punishment.

The lessons repeated over the years. She learned to close herself up, to hide everything from everyone. She told herself that when she graduated high school, she would leave the city and never come back.

And now here she was.

She looked at the suitcase atop the dresser, the one she hadn't unpacked, because putting her clothes away would mean she'd settled in, and she wasn't going to do that.

"Why don't you use the drawers?" Leona had snapped as she watched, eagle-eyed, from the hallway the day after Claire

returned. It wasn't a real question. The point was simply to convey how strongly she disapproved.

"Mind your own business," Claire shot back. That was the tone that made the men back off at work. Growing up with Leona had taught her that defense didn't work against bullies. Offense did. Meet aggression with aggression.

Along with the toughness she had intended, Leona had unwittingly instilled in her granddaughter a hatred of cruelty, intimidation, and oppression. Since she had moved her grandmother out, Claire had thought more than once of burning down the house, but instead of allowing herself to indulge in a cathartic daydream, her practical mind went straight from the fire to the fire inspector to the police and lawyers. The fantasy ended with the insurance adjustor denying her claim and the fire department handing her a bill for putting out the flames.

Get out of this house, she told herself. It poisons your mind.

On her way back to the kitchen, she felt a draft wafting through the crack beneath the basement door. She opened it and was surprised to feel how much colder the air was on the other side. When she flipped the switch at the top of the stairs, no light came on. She went down anyway.

She had visited the basement frequently enough in recent weeks to navigate it in darkness. Why, then, did she bump into something in a passage that should have been clear? And what was it?

She extended her hand and felt the rigid surface. A suitcase.

If she had had her phone with her, she would have turned on the flashlight. But her phone sat on the counter in the silence upstairs, and she stood alone in the silence below. The air began to move. The draft came from the rear of the house, from the window in the northwest corner, where the dim winter light filtered through the dried spatter of heavy summer rains.

On her way to the window, her foot thudded against something else she hadn't remembered being there. It was

heavy and soft, like a body. The direction of the draft reversed, sucking the door shut at the top of the stairs. She pressed her foot into the long, semi-soft thing she had almost tripped over. The rug from the living room. She had rolled it up more than a week ago, leaned it against the wall, and now it had fallen.

She stepped over it and examined the window. It was open at the bottom. The wood casing around the latch showed someone had pried it with the flat edge of a screwdriver.

She shut the window and secured the latch. Then she turned again into the darkness and stood listening, wondering if the heartbeat she heard was her own or someone else's. The more quietly she tried to breathe, the louder and faster came the beat, until she decided at last that she was alone, listening to her own fear.

She thought back to when she'd put her phone down in the kitchen. Was that really a deer she'd heard in the leaves out back? Or was it a person crawling out of the window she'd just closed?

She stood the rolled-up rug against the wall, made her way back to the suitcase, pushed it back into place. She ascended the stairs with a slow dignity, as if someone might be watching and she wanted them to see she wasn't scared.

Upstairs, she checked the windows and doors. Her iPad was where she had left it, beside the stove. Nothing in Leona's office had been disturbed. Her mother's bracelets were in the box beside her bed.

On the nightstand, she found the diamond studs Peter had given her. She sat on the bed and put them in and was surprised to find they still had the power to comfort her, to make her feel less alone.

At the thought of Peter, the emotion came too strong and too fast. Shame, regret, uncertainty, confusion, longing. She stood abruptly, cut off the unwanted feelings, and marched to the kitchen, her heels clomping in the empty hall. She picked up her bag, her phone, her keys, and headed to the car, to work, where all the world's problems were reduced to numbers neatly aligned in rows and columns, numbers that either added up or

didn't. And when they didn't, it was someone else's problem because she was just the auditor.

On the step outside, she locked the door, tested it to make sure the deadbolt was set.

The mailman was walking up the driveway with a handful of letters. They met by the door of the BMW, and he handed her Leona's mail.

"Only five?" Claire asked.

The mailman pulled his headphones off. "Only five. How's she taking to life in the new place?" He looked to be sixty or so, a light-skinned black man with a full head of grey hair. His walk had the bounce of a fourteen-year-old.

"Not too well, but it's only been a couple of weeks. Is this all there is?"

"That's all. You tell Leona old Bernie says hello."

"I thought there'd be more," Claire said. "Water, gas, electric. Nothing's come for days."

"I've filled that box every day but Sunday. Gas came Saturday for the whole neighborhood. Electric was Friday. You should have a pile."

Claire shook her head. "I check it every night when I get home. The box is empty."

He told her which papers to file if she suspected someone was stealing her mail. "Or you can do it online. It's faster."

He pulled his headphones back on and walked across the lawn to the next house.

The clock on the dash of the blue BMW said 3:15 when she backed onto Oregon Avenue with her phone to her ear. Anoop picked up on the third ring.

"I'm taking the rest of the day off."

"Relax," he said. "Get some rest."

"Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow."

She passed Daniel Lane and Dogwood Street. At Chestnut, the old Lincoln idled roughly by the stop sign to her right. She was too preoccupied to notice.

The mail. The basement window. Your mind is starting to slip, she told herself. You have to stop believing everything is

a threat. This is how you ruined it with Peter.

When she turned left and headed into the woods, the rumbling beast sprang into line behind her.