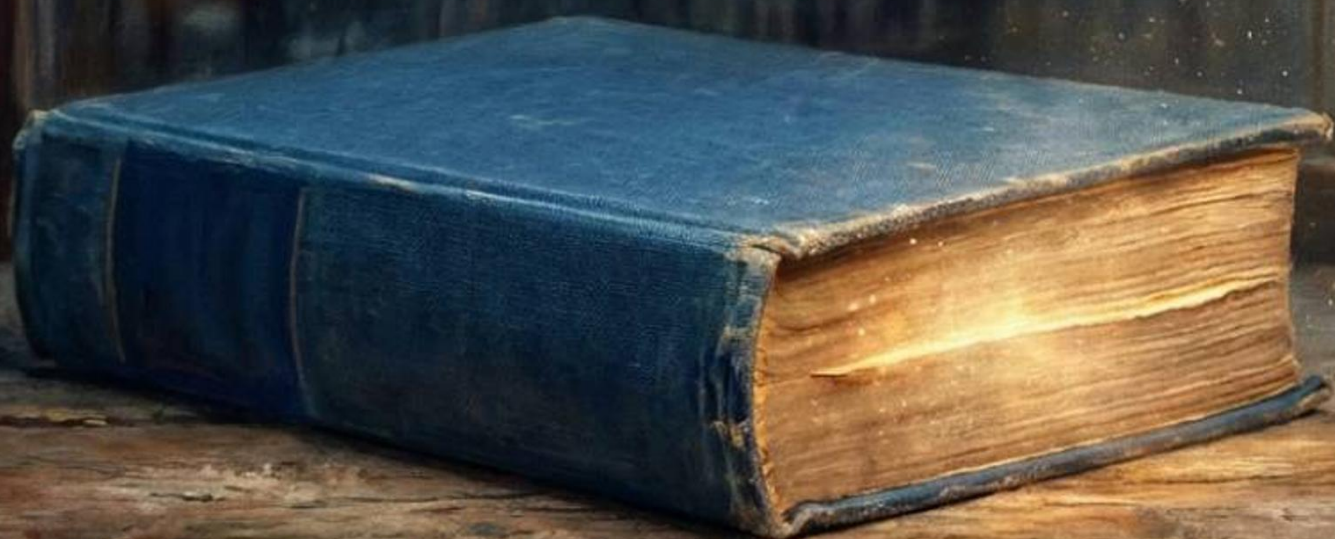


«The Book That Might...»



TAKE ONE — LEAVE ONE

Николай Болатаев

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«The Book That Might...»

«Автор»

2026

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«The Book That Might...» / Н. Болатов — «Автор», 2026

It appears on a rain-soaked courtyard shelf — no author, no title, no cover. Just a book, warm to the touch, as if someone just closed it. And it always opens to the same page: the one holding the truth you've spent years avoiding. A courier afraid to stay anywhere long enough to be found. A mother who has rehearsed one phone call for fifteen years. A teenager who buried his talent at fourteen. Sisters who haven't spoken since their father's funeral. A widower still writing one letter, fourteen years on. Five strangers — and one book, reaching each of them exactly when it can no longer be ignored. It performs no miracles and promises nothing. It only asks: what haven't you said, while someone was still there to hear it? Someone is behind the book. Six years, dozens of copies, and an old man in a gray coat who has never once told the truth about himself.

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Николай Болатаев
«The Book That Might...»

THE BOOK THAT MIGHT...

a novel

PART I: PARCELS AND SILENCE

Chapter One

The rain found Portland the way it always did in October — not arriving so much as remembering it had never really left.

Emma had four minutes to make the Hawthorne delivery and eleven to make the one after that, and the app didn't care that both of those numbers were lies the moment she hit the bridge traffic. She weaved the scooter between a delivery van double-parked outside a bakery and a cyclist who flipped her off for it, the insulated bag on her back swinging wide with every turn — bright yellow, QUIKBASKET stitched across the flap in letters big enough to read from across the street, because the company had decided visibility mattered more than her dignity when they picked the color.

Somewhere around 22nd and Belmont a kid stepped off the curb without looking, hauling a stepladder like it owed him money, and she had about half a second to choose between the kid and a parked Subaru. She chose the Subaru's side mirror, missed that too by an inch, and came out the other side of it swearing, the bag's strap biting into her shoulder where she'd grabbed it to keep her dinner-smelling cargo off the wet asphalt. The kid didn't even turn around. Neither did she, really, already checking the app for the address, already three streets past being annoyed and back into the low hum of just get there.

She did not get there in time.

The buzzer at the Hawthorne address didn't work — she found that out by standing under a dripping ficus for six minutes, thumbing the button until her finger ached, calling a number that rang through to a voicemail box that hadn't been set up. The app's timer bled from green to yellow to a red that felt personal. When she finally gave up and marked it as *customer unavailable*, the algorithm's small mercy was that it didn't dock her for the rain, only for the twenty-two minutes she couldn't get anyone to answer a door for.

She stood there a second longer than she needed to, the carbonara going lukewarm against her back, and thought — not for the first time this year — about how much of her life had come to consist of standing outside places other people lived, holding something they'd ordered and then stopped wanting.

The thought had a shape she recognized. She didn't examine it. She never did.

The rain picked up on her walk back toward the pickup zone, going from the fine Portland mist that everyone pretended not to notice to something with actual weight behind it, and she ducked under the first awning she came to without checking what it belonged to — a squat brick building, five units, the kind with a courtyard you could see through a wrought-iron gate if you cared to look, which she didn't, until she did.

There was a shelf against the wall just inside the gate. Little wooden thing, glass-fronted, a hand-painted sign nailed above it: *TAKE ONE — LEAVE ONE*. The door hung open an inch, off its latch.

She noticed the latch itself only because it was, unmistakably, closed. Not broken. Closed, with the little brass hook sitting in its eye the way it would if someone had just fastened it — except the door was open anyway, book-width, like something inside had shouldered it loose without disturbing the lock at all.

She had four minutes of stranded time and a phone with 9 percent battery she didn't want to waste checking the app for her next assignment in this weather. She went in through the gate, mostly for the awning it offered, and looked at the shelf mostly because it was there.

Most of what people left in these things was what you'd expect — swollen paperback thrillers, a water-stained cookbook, two copies of a self-help title with a woman on the cover mid-stretch on

a yoga mat, looking pleased with herself in a way Emma found instantly irritating. And on top of the little stack, alone, spine-out but with no title printed on it anywhere she could see: a book with no jacket at all. Cloth-bound, gray gone soft at the corners, no author, no publisher's mark.

It was warm.

She noticed that before she noticed anything else about it — before the missing pages number, before the ink, before any of it. Books left in a box on a wet October evening should have felt like everything else on the shelf: clammy, a little swollen, cold enough to make you want to wipe your hand on your jeans after. This one felt like it had just come out of somebody's lap.

She told herself it was the plastic sleeve underneath it, catching whatever warmth radiated off the brick wall behind the shelf. She picked it up anyway, mostly to see if that was true, and it wasn't — there was no sleeve, just the book, sitting directly on bare wood, warm as a held hand.

She opened it to the middle. Habit, more than curiosity — you flip to the middle of a book the way you check the depth of a pool before you commit to the water.

The paper was heavier than it should have been for the size of the spine. She thumbed toward the back to see how many pages there actually were, and lost count somewhere past what the width of the thing could reasonably contain, the way you lose count of stairs in the dark — not because the number is large, but because it keeps not resolving into a number at all.

The handwriting in the margins was the second thing. Not printed text — handwriting, crowding the white space around blocks of type she hadn't read yet, in a dozen different hands. A child's careful, too-round letters on one page. Something cramped and arthritic two pages later. On one spread, near the gutter, marks that weren't letters at all, just a kind of scratching, urgent and illegible, like someone had tried to write faster than a hand could move.

She should have put it down there. She thought, distantly, days later, that this was the exact moment she should have put it down.

Instead she read.

Portland. The apartment on Alberta you left a month after it finally, finally started to feel like somewhere you could stay.

She had lived on Alberta for fourteen months. She'd left because the lease was up and moving felt easier than deciding to renew it, which was what she'd told Kyle, and what she'd told her mother, and what she still, if pressed, would have told a stranger on the bus. It had never once occurred to her, in the two years since, to ask herself why leaving had felt easier than staying somewhere good.

The travel agency. You quit seven days before the promotion went through.

That one she remembered with her whole body — the specific, hot shame of typing the resignation email at 11:40 p.m., sending it before she could reread it, turning her phone face-down like that would stop the message from existing. She'd told everyone the commute was killing her. The commute had been eleven minutes.

Kyle, the kitchen on Alberta, the last real conversation you had. His voice: "But seriously — are we okay?" And instead of answering, you remembered, with real and total conviction, a package you needed to pick up. You were not expecting a package.

She shut the book on her own thumb hard enough that it hurt, which was, in its way, useful — pain is a very good way of confirming you're not asleep.

She stood there under the awning with her heart going harder than the twenty-two futile minutes at the Hawthorne buzzer had earned, and made herself open the book again, because some stubborn, professional part of her — the part that had once, briefly, been good at selling people vacations they couldn't afford — needed to know how the trick worked.

She flipped forward instead of back this time, toward the last pages she could find before the paper ran out into blank stock. Near the end, in yet another hand — old-fashioned copperplate, the kind nobody's grandmother had been taught to write in decades — there was a name.

Not hers. A woman's name, formal enough to belong to another century. Beside it, in the same looping hand, a date: sixty-two years ago.

She had no idea, standing there, what any of it meant. She only knew, with a clarity that felt less like deduction and more like something being handed to her, that the date mattered more than the name did — that whoever this book was for, it kept its real business measured in decades, and everything it had just shown her about her own life was, to it, a kind of small talk.

The rain stopped the way Portland rain always stopped, without ceremony, mid-drop. She closed the book, set it back on the shelf exactly where she'd found it — some instinct insisting this mattered, though she couldn't have said why — and looked back once before she stepped out from under the awning.

The little glass door was shut. Latched. The small brass hook sitting snug in its eye, the way it had been when she first saw it, as if it had never once occurred to that door to be open.

Across the street, under the striped awning of a shuttered flower shop, an old man in a gray coat stood very still, watching her — she would have sworn to it in court, sworn to the specific weight of being looked at, the prickle of it starting at the back of her neck before her eyes even found him. She blinked, the way you blink at something too strange to hold steady in your vision, and the sidewalk across the street was empty. Not walking away. Not turning a corner. Just — the space where a person had been, now occupied only by rain-dark pavement and a newspaper box someone had wedged a real estate flyer into.

She thought, absurdly, of the security camera she'd noticed bolted above the courtyard's mailboxes — the kind of thing a property manager installs after somebody starts dumping furniture in a shared space, more deterrent than surveillance. She thought about it hard enough that three days later, on a slow Tuesday between deliveries, she actually did knock on the building super's door and ask, in her best casual-not-crazy voice, whether she could take a look at the footage from that little courtyard shelf — said something about thinking she'd left a library book there, which was, if you squinted, not even really a lie.

The tape showed the shelf. It showed the rain. It showed, for ten full minutes before the little glass door swung open on its own, absolutely no one — not her, not the old man in the gray coat, no one at all, just an empty stretch of brick and wet pavement, sitting there being ordinary. And then, between one frame and the next, with no visible hand and no visible cause, the door was open, and the book was on top of the stack, sitting there as if it had simply always been that way, and the camera — an unremarkable, off-brand thing that had never given the super a single reason to distrust it — had somehow just failed, for ten uneventful minutes, to notice.

She thanked the super, said something about it probably being a different shelf after all, and walked out into the ordinary noise of the street with her heart doing something she didn't have a good word for.

She never told anyone about the book. Not that week. Not for a long time after.

But she thought about the date in the margin more than she thought about the parts that had been about her — thought about it on the scooter, thought about it at 2 a.m. with her phone's blue light in her face, thought about it, uselessly, every single time she found herself standing outside a door that wouldn't answer, holding something meant for someone who no longer seemed to be home.

When do you usually decide it's time to leave?

Chapter Two

Claire had a system for the silence, and the system worked as long as she didn't examine it too closely.

The system went like this: Ethan was busy. Ethan had always been the quiet one, even as a boy, the kind of kid who did his crying in the bathroom with the fan on so nobody would have to manage it for him. Ethan worked long hours at a job Claire only half understood the shape of — something with spreadsheets and other people's marketing budgets — and busy people let calls go two weeks, sometimes three, and it meant nothing, and if she called first it would look like she was checking up on him, and he hated being checked up on, always had, and so the correct, respectful, mother-of-a-grown-man thing to do was wait.

She had been waiting for nineteen days when Denise from 4B knocked on her door holding a book with no cover on it, rain still beaded on her shoulders like she'd walked straight over without an umbrella.

"Found this at that book stall by the crosswalk on Fremont," Denise said, holding it out the way you'd hand someone a stray cat you weren't equipped to keep. "There was an old man running it. Gray coat. Didn't say two words the whole time — just handed me a stack of these and pointed, if you can believe it, straight at your building. I've got three of the things at home now, no idea why I took so many. You want one? Take it off my hands."

Claire took it because refusing felt more effort than accepting, and because Denise had brought her soup twice last winter without being asked, and you didn't turn away a woman like that over something as small as a book.

She didn't think about the strangeness of it — the crosswalk stall, the pointing — until that evening, when she called Denise to ask, mostly out of politeness, whether the stall had had a name, whether it was there most days, whether she should walk over and look for more.

"What crosswalk?" Denise said. "What book?"

Claire held the phone away from her ear for a second, the way you do when you think you've misheard something, though she hadn't. "The one you gave me this afternoon. The one with no cover."

"Claire, I've been down with this cold since Sunday. I haven't left the building in five days." A pause, not defensive, just genuinely searching. "Did I really give you a book?"

Claire looked at it, sitting on the kitchen counter where she'd set it down without a second thought, and said something about maybe mixing up her afternoon, and let Denise go back to her tea and her cold, and stood in her kitchen for a while afterward not thinking about it, which was its own kind of thinking about it.

She opened the book two nights later, not for any reason she could have defended — she was looking for something to prop open the kitchen window, which stuck in the humidity and wouldn't stay up on its own hinge, and the book was close to hand, and its spine looked sturdy enough for the job. She picked it up, and it fell open in her palm to a page somewhere near the middle, the way a well-read paperback falls open to its most-thumbed chapter.

Except she hadn't read it. Except the page it fell open to described, in plain, unhurried prose, her own kitchen.

Fifteen years ago. A different kitchen — the house on Larkspur, before the divorce, before the sale, before any of it. Same layout, though. Same window that stuck. Different wallpaper, a busy sprigged pattern she hadn't thought about in a decade and could suddenly, appallingly, see in perfect detail.

Ethan at the table, fourteen years old, turning a fork over and over in his hand the way he did when he was working up to something. *Mom, I want to talk about you and Dad. I want to talk about what's actually —*

And Claire, in the book, watching herself the way you'd watch a stranger through a lit window at night, heard not the version of that evening she had carried around for fifteen years — the version where there had simply been no real conversation to interrupt, where Ethan had said something vague and drifted off to his room the way teenagers did — but the actual sentence she had said, flat and immediate, cutting him off before the second half of his sentence could land.

Not now. The soup's about to boil over.

There had been no soup. There had been no pot on the stove at all. She remembered that now with the same appalling clarity as the wallpaper — remembered standing at the counter doing nothing, needing an exit line, reaching for the nearest available lie because the alternative was staying in that chair and hearing what her fourteen-year-old son had gathered the nerve to say to her.

The page didn't stop there. It went on, into a room Claire had never once set foot in on the night it described — Ethan's room, the same evening, the door shut, a spiral notebook open on his knees that she had never seen before and never would see, not really, except now, on this page, in handwriting she somehow recognized as his even though she had nothing to compare it to.

Three lines. The book gave them to her exactly, the way it might have handed her a photograph.

If she won't hear me now, maybe she never will. So there's no point trying again. I'll just stop bringing it up.

She had spent fifteen years explaining her son's silence to herself as a fact of his temperament — he'd always been quiet, he took after his father that way, some people just weren't talkers. She had never once considered that the silence had a start date. That it had been decided, on a specific Tuesday, by a fourteen-year-old boy sitting alone in his room with a notebook, because his mother had chosen a fictional pot of soup over the truth.

Claire closed the book. Her hands were doing something she didn't like — not quite shaking, but not steady either, the particular unsteadiness of holding something you suddenly understand is heavier than its size.

She set it down on the counter, where it had been propping nothing, doing nothing, just sitting there being an ordinary object again, and she did not call Ethan that night.

She told herself it was late. She told herself nineteen days had already passed and one more wouldn't matter, that she needed to think about what she'd say, that a call made in the state she was in right now — hands unsteady, throat tight, the wallpaper from a house she'd sold a decade ago still vivid behind her eyes — would come out wrong, would sound like an accusation of herself that she wasn't ready to make out loud to the one person it was actually about.

She went to bed instead. She left the book on the counter, closed, ordinary-looking in the dark kitchen, and lay awake for a long time listening to the house do the small settling noises houses do, and did not examine, closely, why doing the harder thing had once again turned out to be so easy to postpone.

Who did you last not call — because you didn't know where to start?

Chapter Three

The folder had been sitting on the kitchen table for two days, and Jake's father had taken to touching it whenever he passed — not opening it, just resting two fingers on the corner the way you'd check a stove was really off.

"Early decision deadline's the fifteenth," his father said again that night, over dinner, in the voice he used for facts he'd already stated and didn't trust to have landed. Dennis Reyes had spent twenty-six years doing HVAC work out of a van with his name on the side, had put a knee and most of a shoulder into that van, and had exactly one plan for his son that didn't involve either: a desk, a suit, a profession nobody could downsize out of a recession. Pre-law wasn't a dream. It was a hedge. Jake understood that, and understanding it didn't make the folder weigh any less.

"I know," Jake said, and ate his rice, and didn't say the other thing, which was that he'd started having the same dream three nights running — himself at forty, in a gray office, unable to remember the last time he'd drawn anything at all.

He didn't think about the drawing thing on purpose. It lived in the part of his head reserved for things that were embarrassing to still want.

Marcus caught him at his locker the next morning holding a book with no cover on it like it might be contagious. "Yo — this yours? Somebody left it on the bleachers after practice. Had this." He held up a yellow sticky note, curling at the corner: *For Jake* in handwriting that belonged to no one Jake recognized, small and old-fashioned, the kind you saw on birthday cards from relatives you only met twice a year.

"Not mine."

"Well, it's got your name on it, so." Marcus shrugged and put it in Jake's hands before he could refuse a second time, the way you hand someone a spider you've already decided you don't want to be holding. "Some old guy was out there when I grabbed my bag. Gray coat. Didn't say anything, just kind of — pointed. Freaked me out a little, not gonna lie."

By lunch Marcus had no memory of any of it.

"What book?" He looked at Jake like Jake had made up a whole conversation to mess with him. "I didn't give you anything. I've been trying to find my calc notes all day, man, I don't have time for whatever this is."

Jake reminded him three separate times over the course of the afternoon. Three times Marcus looked at him with the specific, careful patience people use on someone they've started to worry about.

He didn't want it. He hadn't asked for a book with a sticky note bearing his name from an old man nobody but Marcus had seen and Marcus didn't remember seeing. On the walk to school the next morning he took the long way past the gym, lifted the dumpster lid, and dropped it in — cover-side down, under a flattened pizza box that had clearly been there a while, so that it disappeared into the general architecture of trash rather than sitting on top like a decision. He felt unreasonably good about it. He felt good about it through first period and second period and most of third.

Fourth period, reaching into his backpack for a pencil during a quiz he hadn't studied enough for, his hand found the book instead.

It was warm through the canvas of the bag, which he registered before he registered anything else — a warmth that made no sense for something that had spent a night and a morning in a dumpster and then, apparently, however many more hours in transit to a backpack he'd zipped shut himself before leaving the house. The spine was bent now, in a new way, and there was a rust-colored smear near the corner that hadn't been there before and that he understood, with a lurch, to be pizza sauce.

He sat with his hand still in the bag for a long moment. Around him the rest of the room kept quietly failing the same quiz he was failing, pencils scratching, the clock over the whiteboard doing

its stiff, arrhythmic click. He did not take the book out until the bell rang and the hallway had mostly cleared, and even then he held it like it might still, somehow, decide to be someone else's problem.

It fell open on its own outside the door of the boys' bathroom, which was, if nothing else, a private enough place to have whatever was about to happen to him.

The attic. Three years ago. Your grandmother's boxes, the week she moved into Willowbrook and the house had to be cleared out in a hurry, because the house sold faster than anyone planned for.

He remembered the attic — the heat of it in June, the smell of cedar and old carpet, his mother directing traffic from the bottom of the ladder while he and his cousin hauled boxes down two at a time. He remembered, less willingly, the folder he'd found near the bottom of one box: his own drawings, going back years, some of them embarrassingly earnest, a few he still, in some hidden room of himself, thought were actually good.

The hallway outside the art room, the same week. Tyler Boyd, laughing, not unkindly, not even that loud: "What are you, Picasso?" — because the sketchbook had slipped out of your bag when you bent to tie your shoe, and it had fallen open to the page you were proudest of.

He remembered that too, in the specific, humiliating detail memory reserves for the things you'd rather forget: the way the sketchbook had landed face-up, the way three people had looked at it before he could scoop it back into his bag, the particular quality of Tyler's laugh, which really hadn't been cruel, which had probably meant nothing at all to Tyler by the next day. Jake had gone home that afternoon, climbed into the attic on his own, and put the whole sketchbook into a box that got taped shut and never opened again. Three years. He had not drawn anything since that he'd let another human being see.

The book did not stop there. It went somewhere Jake had never been at all.

Ms. Alvarez, the art teacher, that same evening — after the halls had cleared, after the janitor had already started on the far wing. Three of your pieces were still pinned to the display board outside her room, left there because you'd been too embarrassed to take them down yourself, too embarrassed to leave them up either. She photographed all three on her phone before she left the building. Sent them, without telling you, to the citywide student exhibition the following week.

They made the shortlist. An invitation to the final round arrived at the school two weeks later, addressed to you — and got lost somewhere between the front office and the vice principal's desk, because by then you had already withdrawn from the art elective, and nobody left standing in that office had any idea whose name to attach the envelope to.

Jake stared at the date printed faintly in the corner of the page, doing math he didn't want to do. Then at another line, beneath it, that hadn't been in the vision at all — just a fact, stated the way the book seemed to state everything, without emphasis, without asking him to feel any particular way about it: *Submissions for the same exhibition open again this week.*

He stood in the empty hallway with the book in one hand and, for reasons he couldn't have explained to anyone, his backpack suddenly feeling ten pounds heavier than it had that morning, though nothing else was in it that hadn't been there before.

He thought about the folder on the kitchen table. Signed. Waiting.

He thought about the hatch in the hallway ceiling at home, the one that led up into the crawl space above the garage, the one he hadn't opened since he was thirteen because he'd stopped being able to reach the pull-cord without a boost he was too proud to ask for.

He went and found the janitor's supply closet, borrowed a stepladder without really asking, and carried it home slung over one shoulder the whole two miles, the book tucked under his other arm, already — though he told himself this was his imagination — a little heavier than it had been an hour ago.

What did you give up, the one time somebody laughed at you?

Chapter Four

Olivia Chen had built a career on other people's worst weeks — custody battles, contested wills, the particular civil war of divorce when there were children involved — and she had never once, in nine years of practice, lost her composure in front of a client.

She had lost it exactly once at her own father's funeral, and the person who'd seen it was her sister.

Three years now. Three years since Anna had stood over the casket, ashen and furious in the specific way grief makes people furious at the nearest available target, and said, in front of the minister, in front of an aunt who still brought it up at holidays neither of them attended anymore: *You couldn't even show up on time. Did you even care about him when he was alive?*

Olivia had not answered. She had a closing argument ready for nearly any accusation a person could level at her — it was, in some tired way, the whole of her professional skill — and she had stood there at her own father's funeral with nothing at all to say, because the accusation wasn't wrong, exactly, only aimed at the wrong reason.

She'd stopped by the used bookstore near her office that Thursday out of a habit she barely noticed anymore, the kind of errand you run on your feet without asking your brain for permission — coffee, dry cleaning, ten minutes browsing the dollar cart while she waited for a text back from a paralegal. She picked a book off the top of the discount stack without reading the spine, more out of politeness to the cashier, who'd spent five unhurried minutes helping the customer in front of her choose a birthday gift for someone's nephew, than out of any interest in owning it.

"Funny thing," the cashier said, ringing it up, not looking up from the register. "Some old fellow dropped that whole stack off first thing this morning. Told me not to charge much for them. Said someone would come along for the right one." She said it the way you'd repeat any small, forgettable oddity of a retail shift — not expecting it to mean anything, and it didn't, not until Olivia got it home.

The price sticker had been rubbed nearly blank, the numeral underneath illegible. Where a barcode should have been, there was instead a short string of digits that resolved, when she looked at it twice, into something that read less like a product code and more like a date — one too old to belong to any inventory system the shop could plausibly still be running.

She almost didn't open it that night. She had a deposition to prepare for, leftover pad thai she hadn't eaten yet, a bath she'd been meaning to take since Tuesday. The book sat on her counter through all of it, and she opened it, finally, close to midnight, mostly to have something to do with her hands while the tub filled.

It fell open somewhere past the middle, to a page that was — impossibly, precisely — the morning of her father's funeral.

Not the cemetery. Not the argument. Ninety minutes earlier: her own bathroom, the blouse she'd ironed twice though it hadn't needed it the first time, the shoebox of expired coupons and old receipts she'd sorted through at her kitchen table with a focus that made no sense for objects nobody would ever need again. She had told herself, for three years, that she'd simply lost track of time that morning. Grief did that. Everyone had told her so, kindly, more than once.

The book did not describe grief. It described fear — plain, specific, and entirely her own: the particular terror of walking into that room first, of being the one to see him in the casket before anyone else had absorbed the sight and made it, however slightly, more survivable to look at. She had not been late because she didn't care. She had been late because she was standing in her own bathroom, ironing a blouse that was already flat, trying to postpone the moment she would have to see her father's face and know, with her whole body, that it was really true.

She had never told anyone that. She had certainly never told Anna, who had needed, that morning, someone to be angry at more than she'd needed to be right.

The book kept going, into a room Olivia had never set foot in: an office she didn't recognize, a filing cabinet with a drawer she'd never opened, containing an envelope addressed, in her father's handwriting, to both his daughters. *Together. Not separately.* A line beneath it, in the same hand: *Deliver only when they can sit at the same table again.*

Her father had rewritten his will a month before he died. She had known that — the estate attorney had mentioned it in passing during probate, a routine addendum, nothing that had changed the substance of the division. She had not known about the letter. She had not known that whoever was holding it had been holding it, patiently, for three years, on the strength of an instruction that assumed she and Anna would eventually, on their own, find their way back to speaking.

She picked up her phone before she'd fully decided to. Not her sister — she wasn't ready for that, not at eleven-forty at night with her hands still faintly shaking — but the number for the notary who'd handled the estate, saved three years ago under a plain, forgettable "N" and never called since.

It rang twice.

"Olivia?" The voice was old, unhurried, warmer than she expected from a man she'd met exactly once, briefly, at a conference table full of paperwork. "This is Edmund Hale — I handled your father's estate. I have something for you and your sister. I've had it rather a long time." A pause, a beat too long to be nothing. "You sound like you've been carrying something heavier than usual this week."

Olivia went very still, standing in her kitchen with the bath running unheard in the next room. "What did you just say?"

"Only that these things weigh on people. I meant it generally." Another pause, and then, oddly, a question rather than an answer: "Have we spoken before, Ms. Olivia?"

"No," she said, slowly, hearing her own voice come out steadier than she felt. "But you already sound like you know exactly who you're talking to."

"Old habit," he said, and moved on before she could press it — gave her an address, a time, an apology for the delay that seemed, underneath its ordinary phrasing, to be an apology for something considerably larger than three years of a will sitting in a drawer.

She hung up with the specific, unsettling sensation of having been *known* by a stranger — not guessed at, not read, but known, thoroughly, the way you're known by someone who has already decided to care what happens to you — and no way to explain to herself why that frightened her more than it comforted her.

The bath had gone cold by the time she remembered it was running.

Who have you not spoken to for longer than you're willing to admit?

Chapter Five

Anna hated flying, which was inconvenient, given that her job required roughly one flight a month and this particular one — three days at a marketing conference in a hotel ballroom that smelled permanently of carpet cleaner — had been, by any objective measure, a waste of both.

She bought the book at her gate out of the specific, low-grade boredom of a delayed flight, from a kiosk she couldn't afterward have described in any detail beyond *small* and *unmarked*, the kind of cart that sold water and gum and phone chargers to people who'd forgotten theirs. She paid cash because the card reader was down. She didn't ask for a receipt.

She went back twenty minutes later, once boarding had been pushed a second time, meaning to ask the vendor for the title — there'd been no cover, and something about that had needled at her the way an unlabeled leftover in the fridge needled at her, a small unresolved thing she wanted closed. The cart wasn't there. Not closed, not relocated to another gate — simply absent, the space where it had stood now occupied by two empty chairs and a dropped boarding pass someone hadn't noticed yet.

"Carts rotate through on some schedule I've never managed to figure out," the guy at the neighboring newsstand told her, not looking up from restocking a rack of phone cases. "There's an old man who sits on the bench by gate 14, though. Always has a stack of books with him. Try him."

She didn't try him. Her flight was called before she could decide whether she wanted to.

She read on the plane, mostly to avoid the woman next to her, who had the specific, unstoppable friendliness of someone three drinks into a trip they were excited about, and it took her three separate attempts to actually fall asleep — book open in her lap, eyes closing, jerking back awake each time at some small turbulence or overhead announcement — before the page finally held her attention instead of just occupying her hands.

It was her father's funeral. Not the argument at the graveside, not Olivia's face going white and then furious. Earlier: the viewing, twenty minutes before anyone else arrived, Anna standing alone at the casket because the rest of the family — the aunts, the cousins, Olivia — were still stuck in some traffic none of them had planned around.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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