

“Part of the reason for the ugliness of adults, in a child’s eyes, is that the child is usually looking upwards, and few faces are at their best when seen from below.”

GEORGE ORWELL

# One

The boys are waiting for the beheading. They sit raptly, like impatient jackals, waiting for the blade to fall. But if they'd bothered to read the book, they'd know it wasn't coming. The book just sort of ends. Like a movie clicked off before the last scene. Or like life, really. You almost never see the blade coming, the one that gets you.

Our teacher, Mr. Lawrence, reads the words slowly, stroking that awful little patch of beard under his lower lip as he paces. The soft drumbeat of his footsteps on the linoleum floor—heel-toe, heel-toe—makes it sound like he's trying to come up on the words from behind. *“As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the world.”*

The footsteps stop when Mr. Lawrence arrives at Luke Bontemp's desk, and he taps the spine of the book on the kid's head. Luke is texting someone on his phone and trying to hide it beneath his jacket.

“Put it away or I take it away,” Mr. Lawrence says.

The phone disappears into Luke's pocket.

"What do you think Camus is talking about there?"

Luke smiles with that smile that has gotten him out of everything his entire life. Poor Luke, I think. Beautiful, useless, stupid Luke. I heard his great-great-grandfather made a fortune selling oil to the Germans and steel to the British during World War I and no one in his family has had to work since. He won't have to, either, so what's the use of reading Camus?

"Benign indifference of the world," Mr. Lawrence repeats. "What is that, you think?"

Luke sucks air into his lungs. I can almost hear the hamster wheel of his brain squeaking away beneath his excellent hair.

"Benign," Luke says. "A tumor or whatever can be benign. Maybe Camus is, you know, saying the world is a tumor."

Twenty-eight of the twenty-nine kids in the class laugh, including Luke. I'm the only one who doesn't. I read this book, *The Stranger*, when I was fourteen. But I read it in the original French, and when Mr. Lawrence assigned an English translation of it for our World Literature class, I didn't feel like reading it again. It's about a guy named Meursault whose mother dies. Then he kills an Arab man and gets sentenced to death, to have his head cut off in public. Then it ends. Camus never gives us the actual beheading.

I turn back to the window, where rain is still pattering, the rhythm of it pulling everyone in the room deeper into some kind of sleepy trance. Beyond the window I can see the outlines of buildings down Sixty-Third Street, their edges all smeared and formless through the water beading against the glass, more like the memory of buildings than the real thing.

Though we're discussing the last part of *The Stranger*, it's the opening lines of the book that always stuck with me. *Aujourd'hui*,

*maman est mort. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas.* It means: Today, Mother died. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know.

But I do know. I know exactly when Mother died. It was ten years ago today. I was only seven at the time, and I was there when it happened. The memory of it comes to me now and then in little sketches and vignettes, individual moments. I hardly ever play back the whole memory start to finish. The psychologist I used to see said that was normal, and that it would get easier with time. It didn't.

"What's your take, Gwendolyn?" Mr. Lawrence asks.

I hear his voice. I even understand the question. But my mind is too far away to answer. I'm in the backseat of the old Honda, my eyes barely open, my head against the cool glass of the window. The rhythm of the car as it bounces down the dirt track on the outskirts of Algiers is pulling me toward sleep. Then I feel the thrum of the tires over the road slow and hear my mother gasp. I open my eyes, look out the windshield, and see fire.

"Gwendolyn Bloom! Paging Gwendolyn Bloom!"

I snap back to the present and turn to Mr. Lawrence. He holds his hands cupped around his mouth like it's a megaphone. "Paging Gwendolyn Bloom!" he says again.

"Can you tell us what Camus means by 'benign indifference of the world'?"

Though part of my mind is still back in the Honda, I begin speaking anyway. It's a long answer, and a good one, I think. But Mr. Lawrence is looking at me with a little smirk. It's only after I'm speaking for about twenty seconds that I hear everyone laughing.

"In English, please," Mr. Lawrence says, arching an eyebrow and looking at the rest of the class.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, fidgeting with my uniform skirt and tucking a strand of my fire-engine-red hair behind my ear. "What?"

“You were speaking French, Gwendolyn,” Mr. Lawrence says.

“Sorry. I must have been—thinking of something else.”

“You’re supposed to be thinking about the benign indifference of the world,” he says.

One of the girls behind me says, “Jesus, what a pretentious snob.” She draws the words out and adds a roll of her eyes for effect.

I turn and see it’s Astrid Foogle. She’s also seventeen, but she looks at least twenty-one. Her dad owns an airline.

“Enough, Astrid,” Mr. Lawrence says.

But I’m staring at her now, drilling into her with my eyes. Astrid Foogle—whose earrings are more valuable than everything in my apartment—is calling me a pretentious snob?

Astrid continues. “I mean, she drops in here the beginning of the year from wherever and thinks she’s all superior, and now, oh, look, she’s talking in French, not like us dumb Americans. Just *look* how sophisticated she is. Queen of the trailer park.”

Mr. Lawrence cuts her off. “Stop it, Astrid. Now.”

A few of the kids are nodding in agreement with Astrid; a few others are laughing. I can feel myself trembling, and my face is turning hot. Every synapse in my brain is trying to force the reaction away, but I can’t. Why does anger have to look so much like humiliation?

The guy sitting next to Astrid, Connor Monroe, leans back in his seat and grins. “Check it. She’s crying.”

Which isn’t true, but now that he said it, it’s as good as reality in the minds of the other kids. *lolololol gwenny bloom lost her shit and cried in wrld lit #pretentiousnob #212justice*

The school bell in the hallway rings and, like a Pavlovian trigger, sends everyone scrambling for the door. Mr. Lawrence holds his book up in the air in a sad little attempt to keep order, shouting, “We begin again tomorrow, same place.” Then he turns to me. “And you’ll be up first, Bloom. You have all night to meditate on the benign indifference

of the world, so come up with something good. And in English, *por favor.*”

I nod that I will and gather up my stuff. Outside the classroom, Astrid Foogle is at her locker, surrounded, as always, by her disciples. She’s doing an imitation of me, a monologue in fake French, her shoulders hunched, nose squashed with her index finger.

My eyes down with the proper beta deference, I slide by her and her friends on my way to my own locker. But Astrid spots me; I can tell because she and her friends go silent and I hear the heels of their shoes—*they’re Prada pumps, you little sow*—accelerate toward me, her friends just a pace behind.

“Hey, Gwenny,” she starts up. “Translation question for you. How do you say ‘suicide is never the answer’ in French?”

I ignore her and keep walking, hoping for a sudden fatal stroke—hers or mine, doesn’t matter. The heat radiates off my face, anger becoming rage becoming whatever’s stronger than rage. I can only imagine what it looks like. I fold my shaking arms over my chest.

“Seriously,” Astrid continues. “Because someone like you has to have thought of suicide from time to time. I mean, why wouldn’t you, right? So, *s’il vous plaît*, how do you say it, Gwenny? *En français?*”

I spin around, and the words come bursting from my mouth. “*Va te faire foutre.*”

Astrid stops, and for a half second—no, less than that—fear snaps across her face. But then she realizes where she is, in her kingdom surrounded by acolytes, and the real Astrid returns. She arches her beautifully pruned eyebrows.

One of her friends, Chelsea Bunchman, smiles. “Astrid, she just told you to go fuck yourself.”

Astrid’s mouth opens into an O and I hear a little gasp sneak out. “You little piece of trash,” she says, and takes a step closer.

I see the slap while it’s still in midair. I see it, but even so, I don’t

do anything to stop it. Instead, I cringe, shrinking my head down into my neck and my neck down into my shoulders. It's a hard slap—Astrid really means it—and my head twists to the side under its force. The nail of one of her fingers catches my skin and stings my cheek.

A crowd is forming. I see the grinning faces of Luke Bontemp and Connor Monroe and maybe a dozen other students staring wide-eyed, less in shock at what they've seen than in glee. They're standing around Astrid and me in a semicircle, as if in an arena. This is entertainment, I realize, a time-honored kind. I take note that Astrid didn't punch me, didn't kick me, didn't pull my hair. She very calmly, very deliberately, slapped my face. It was the uppercase-*L* Lady slapping the lowercase-*m* maid.

Instead of slapping her back—and, who am I kidding, Gwendolyn Bloom would never slap back—I close my eyes, the humiliation like the winds I remember from the Sahara, hot and hard and lasting for days. An adult voice orders everyone to move along, and when I open my eyes, there's a middle-aged teacher whose name I don't know standing there with his hands in the pockets of his khakis. His eyes travel from Astrid to me and back again.

"What happened?" he asks Astrid.

"She told me to—I can't say the word. It was a curse word, *f* myself." Her voice is demure and wounded.

"Is this true?" he says, looking to me.

I open my mouth, about to rat her out for slapping me. "It is," I say instead.

*L'Étranger*, the title of the book we're studying in World Lit, is usually translated into English as *The Stranger*. But it could also mean *The Outsider* or *The Foreigner*. That's me, all of it—stranger, outsider, foreigner. I'm technically an American. That's what my passport says. But I wasn't born here and, until the start of junior year this past

September, I had lived in the United States for only eighteen months, right after my mother was killed. We—my dad and I—came to New York so he could take up a post at the United Nations, which isn't too far from my school, Danton Academy.

There's no way in hell my dad could have afforded a place like Danton on his own. But my father is a diplomat with the Department of State, and private school for us diplobrats is sometimes one of the benefits. Depending on which country you're in, that private school might be the only good school for a thousand miles and you're sitting in class with the son or daughter of the country's president or king or awful dictator. That happened to me once. The asshole son of an asshole president sat next to me in my math class. He wore shoes that were made specially for him in Vienna and cost five thousand dollars a pair, while kids were starving in the streets just beyond the school's stucco walls.

Not that it's so different at Danton. The kids here are the children of presidents and kings and dictators, too—just of companies instead of countries. Most of my classmates have always been rich. Usually, the only poor person they ever meet is the foreign kid who delivers their groceries for them or brings over the dry cleaning. My dad makes what would be a decent living anywhere else in the world, but to the kids at Danton we're poor as dirt.

Sitting on the bench outside the assistant director's office, I fuss with my uniform skirt—God, I hate skirts—pulling at the hem so that it falls lower on my black tights, flattening out the little pleats. The uniforms are an attempt to equalize us, I suppose, but there are no restrictions about shoes. Thus, wealth and tribal loyalties are displayed with the feet: Prada pumps and Gucci loafers for old money versus Louboutin flats and Miu Miu sneakers for new money. I'm one of the irrelevant two-member Doc Martens tribe. Mine are red and beat-up, but the other member, a quiet artist's kid from downtown who's

tolerated by the others insofar as he's a reliable source of Adderall, goes with polished black.

Not that if I suddenly showed up in Prada it would make a difference. I don't look like Astrid Foogle, or any of them, really. I'm too tall, too thick-waisted. Nose too rectangular, mouth too wide. Everything some kind of too. My dad and my doctor say I'm just fine the way I am—say it's hormones, or muscle from all my years of gymnastics. Everyone's built differently, don't accept anyone else's definition of beauty, et cetera, ad nauseam. But it's their job to say things like that. So I color my hair at home with the very finest CVS store-brand dye, lace up my Doc Martens, and pretend not to care.

When the assistant director finally steps out of her office, she's all patronizing smiles and fake concern. Mrs. Wasserman is her name, and she's forever wearing a cloud of perfume and sugary joy, as if any second she expects a cartoon bluebird to fly out of the sky and land on her finger.

"How are we today?" she asks as we go into her office.

"Amazing," I say, sinking down into a chair upholstered in blood-colored leather. "Just perfect."

Mrs. Wasserman steepled her fingers in front of her as a signal we're getting down to business. "I'm told that you're facing some interpersonal challenges with one of your classmates."

It's all I can do to not roll my eyes at her euphemistic, bullshit tone. The thing is, 95 percent of this school is made up of kids who are very rich and very white. The 5 percent who aren't are either here on scholarship or because their parents work at the UN. The others don't like us Five-Percenters, as we're known, but we help people like Mrs. Wasserman pretend Danton Academy is something other than an elitist bitch factory.

Mrs. Wasserman consults a file folder. "Do you go by Gwen or Gwendolyn, dear?"

"Gwendolyn," I say. "Only my dad calls me Gwen."

"Gwendolyn it is, then," Mrs. Wasserman says with a cookie-sweet smile. "And is what it says here correct, Gwendolyn—you tested out of the AP exams in, my goodness, five foreign languages?"

I shrug. "We move a lot."

"I see that. Moscow. Dubai. Still—quite a talent." She runs her finger along a line in the file. "Must be tough, having a stepfather in the State Department. New city every couple of years. New country."

"You can just say 'father.'"

"Sorry?"

"He's not my stepfather. He adopted me when he married my mom. I was two."

"Father, yes. If you like." Mrs. Wasserman shakes her head as she makes a note on the paper in front of her. "Now to why you're here: Danton is a safe space, Gwendolyn, and we have a zero-tolerance policy on emotionally abusive behavior."

"Right. Just like the handbook says."

"That includes cursing at faculty or students, which means when you swore at another girl in French, you were in violation."

"Astrid didn't understand a word of what I said until Chelsea Bunchman translated it."

"The point is you said something hurtful, Gwendolyn. Whether you said it in French or Swahili it doesn't matter."

"It matters if she didn't understand it."

"That's just semantics," she says. "Do you know that word, 'semantics'?"

"The study of what words mean. Which would seem to apply."

I see the muscles in her face tighten. She picks up a pen and holds it so tightly I think it might break. "I understand it's the anniversary of your mother's passing. I'm sorry to hear about that," Mrs. Wasserman says gently. I can see the idea of it makes her uncomfortable, makes

her wonder what do with me. Punish the girl because of her *interpersonal challenges* on the anniversary of her mother's *passing*?

Mrs. Wasserman coughs into her hand and continues. "The normal consequence for swearing at another student is a day's suspension. But under the circumstances, I'm willing to forgo that if you issue a written apology to Miss Foogle."

"You want me to apologize to Astrid?"

"Yes, dear."

It's an easy out and the obvious choice. I lean back in the chair and try to smile. "No thanks," I say. "I'll take the suspension."

It's still raining, the cold kind that might turn to snow later. March is bad this year, no sunshine at all and not even a hint of spring. Just skies the color of steel and the stink of New York's own garbage soup running through the gutters. Black SUVs are lined up at the curb, Danton Academy's version of school buses. The very richest kids use these—private mini limos that pick them up at the end of the day so they don't have to suffer the indignity of walking home or taking the subway.

I'm headed for the station a few blocks away. I don't have an umbrella, so I pull up the hood of my old army jacket. It used to be my mom's from when she was a lieutenant way before I was born. When my dad and I were moving a few years ago—Dubai to Moscow, maybe, our two most recent posts—I found it in a box. My dad got teary when I put it on, so I started to take it off. Then he said it looked good on me, told me I could have it if I wanted.

My mom. I'd been avoiding the subject all day and mostly succeeded until World Lit. Hard not to think about it when you spend an hour talking about Algerian justice.

The rain patters against my face, and it makes me calm. A guy with a black-and-green kaffiyeh around his neck shelters beneath the

awning of his gyro cart on Lexington just outside the subway station. I order my food in Arabic—a gyro with everything, I tell him, and don't be cheap with the lamb.

He squints at me with a surprised smile, and I wonder if he understood me. My Arabic is rusty as hell, and the formal kind no one really speaks except on TV.

"You Egyptian?" he says as he takes a pair of tongs and starts arranging pieces of lamb on a pita.

"No," I answer. "I'm—from here."

I get variations of that *are you x?* question a lot, though. My eyes are umber brown, while my skin is a pale, translucent sheath pulled over something else—brass under tracing paper, a stoned boy on the Moscow subway told me once. What *x* is, though, I have no idea. My mom's not around to ask, and the dad I call dad, because he is my dad legally and in every sense but one, says he doesn't know. My bio father's name isn't even listed on my original birth certificate from Landstuhl, the American military hospital in Germany where I was born.

"Special for Cleopatra," the man says, tossing on some onions and smothering the whole mess with the bitter white sauce that I love so much I would drink it by the gallon if I could.

On the subway platform, I devour the gyro. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. Maybe getting slapped like a peasant does that to you. I'm waiting for the N or Q out to Queens. I wish a train would come already. I wish it would come so that I could put some physical distance between me and this island and the memories Camus dredged up.

Just then, as if I'd willed it to come, the Q train screeches mournfully to a stop in front of me. I shoot the soggy tinfoil-and-paper wrapping of the gyro into a trash can and climb on board.

Most people hate the subway, but not me. It's a strange, wonderful thing to be alone among the hundred or so other people in the

car. I pull a book out of my backpack and lean against the door as the train shoots through the tunnel under the river toward Queens. It's a novel with a teenage heroine set in a dystopian future. Which novel in particular doesn't matter because they're all the same. Poor teenage heroine, having to march off to war when all she really wants to do is run away with that beautiful boy and live off wild berries and love. Paper worlds where heroes are real.

But as the train screeches and scrapes along in the dark, rocking back and forth as if any moment it might fly off the rails, I find myself suddenly unable to follow the story or even translate the symbols on the page into words. The memories just aren't going to let me get away this time. They demand to be recognized, insistent as Astrid's slap.

Today's my dad's birthday. The worst possible day for a birthday. Or rather, the worst possible day *because* it's his birthday. That's how it happened, ten years ago today. Coming back from the birthday dinner his work friends were throwing for him at a restaurant in Algiers.

I have to think about it, right? It makes you sick if you press it down inside, right? Okay. No more fighting it off. Go back there, I tell myself. Live it again, I tell myself. Be brave for once. Ten years ago today.

My mother gasps as we round a corner; the sound of it wakes seven-year-old me from sleep. I look out the windshield and see fire. I make out the faces illuminated in the light of a burning police truck. They're men, a dozen, twenty. Mostly bearded, mostly young, their skin orange in the glow of the flames. We've stumbled across something that doesn't concern us. A beef with the military police that's gone in the mob's favor. But the men are made curious by us newcomers, and they peer into the windows of our car, trying to make out the nationalities of the faces inside.

My mother yells at my dad to back up. He shifts into reverse and

looks over his shoulder and guns the engine. For a second, the Honda shoots backward but then jerks to a stop. There are people back there, my dad shouts. Run them over, my mom shouts back.

But he won't. Or maybe he will, but he doesn't have time. He doesn't have time because a glass bottle shatters on the roof and liquid fire cascades down the window on the driver's side of the car. A Molotov cocktail is what it's called, a bottle of gasoline with a burning rag jammed in its mouth. The poor man's hand grenade.

The rule taught to diplomats about what to do if a Molotov cocktail breaks over your car is to keep driving, as far and as fast as possible, until you're out of danger. A car doesn't really burn like it does in the movies. It doesn't explode right away. It takes time. And time is what you need if you want to stay breathing.

But the crowd gets closer and something happens, something that makes the car stall out. My dad tries to restart the engine, but it just turns over and over and over, the ignition never quite catching. My mother's door opens, and she yells at the man outside who opened it. She doesn't scream; she yells. Yells like starting her car on fire and yanking open her door was very rude and, by God, she'd like to speak to whoever's in charge.

I don't see what happens next because my dad is reaching over the seat and unbuckling my seat belt. He pulls me like a rag doll into the front with him. I remember how rough he was being, how much it hurt when he yanked me between the front seats. He clutches me to his chest like he's giving me a big hug and leaves through the same door as my mom, the door that's not on fire.

Blows from clubs and bats rain down on him. I feel the force of the blows traveling all the way through his body. He's taking them for me, or most of them. Three or four strikes land on my legs, which are sticking out in the open from beneath my dad's arm. I try to scream

in pain but can't because my dad is pressing me into his chest so hard.

My dad doesn't stop running until he's away from the mob, and I'm dangling over his shoulder and he's turning around for some reason, turning around and running backward. Then I go deaf because the pistol he's firing is so loud. It's like the end of the world is happening two feet from my head. He fires again and again and again and again. My vision narrows to almost nothing, then disappears altogether as I black out.

Fourteen stab wounds to the chest and neck. That's the official cause of my mother's death. That's what the report from the autopsy says, and that's what my dad told me when I was old enough to ask him about it. I was nine years old, or maybe ten, when I asked. But there was more, of course. Stuff that happened to her in the time after she was pulled from the car but before she was stabbed. Stuff my dad said he'd tell me about when I got older. I never did ask him about the other stuff, though, and he never brings it up. It's probably easier on him if he doesn't have to say it, and it's probably easier on me if I never have to hear it.

We're in Queens now, and the subway rockets out of the tunnel and into open air. It lurches around a corner, the wheels screaming like demons, so loud I can barely hear my own thoughts. I squeeze the bar over my head tighter so I don't fall over. My body bends with the momentum of the train. Then it slows and its wheels shriek on the wet tracks as we come up on Queensboro Plaza, all gray industrial buildings and new apartment towers and brightly lit shops with windows advertising lottery tickets and cigarettes and beer.

I hoist my backpack on my shoulder as the train stops and bolt out onto the platform, leaving the memories to slouch and hobble after me. I take the stairs two at a time, then three at a time, a race to the bottom. When I reach level ground, I needle and veer through the slow

and old taking their sweet time until I push through the turnstile. Guys out on the sidewalk in front of the shops whistle and catcall after me. They love this—the school uniform, the flash of seventeen-year-old legs.

I start running and keep running. I bolt across a street and a yellow cab swerves and honks. I run until my lungs burn and I'm soaked with rain and sweat. I run until the blind rage has washed me clean, rid me of hope. And for the first time, on this afternoon alive with neon signs and stars, I lay my heart open to the benign indifference of the world.

# Two

And for a fraction of a second, I'm arcing through the air above the earth, apart from it, an arrow neither in the bow nor yet in its target. I wish I could stay like this, free of the earth, floating.

But gravity won't hear of it. Gravity pulls me down from my back handspring, bluntly, unskillfully, like the big dumb magnet it is. I'm too fast for it, though, and I won't let it wreck me. My hands touch down on the surface of the balance beam. It's a thin layer of suede over wood, and it'll break your neck if you're not careful. Then my legs arc back up, over my body, one, two.

When you're standing on your hands, the center of gravity is the thing. The balance beam is ten centimeters wide, so you don't have much room to play with. Even being off by a centimeter or two is too much. A centimeter or two is the difference between a gold medal at the Olympics and driving your spine into the ground like a javelin with the force of your entire body weight. Gravity doesn't much care. Gravity is benignly indifferent.

I cartwheel to the side, back to my feet, then pause just long enough to catch a single breath. Bracing my hands on the edge of the suede and wood of the beam, I push back, then up into a handstand. I waver for a moment, my left leg thrashing out as I feel myself begin to fall. So then I right myself, balance restored, no problem.

But a wave of uncertainty that begins in my arms rolls up through my chest and tips me forward. I rock my hips back to correct it, but I overcompensate and now my legs tip too far in the other direction. My right arm quakes, and I see the world around me bend and tilt. I try to kick my legs around to break the fall, but it's too late. I smash into the mat chest first and my rib cage slams into my lungs, blasting all the air inside me out through my mouth.

A boy who was practicing on the rings—a Ukrainian kid from Brooklyn I've seen a few times—drops to the ground and scrambles over to me. "You hurt maybe? Handstand maybe too much hard." He helps me to my feet, hands me a towel. I close my eyes and breathe into it. "Is okay," he says, and places a hand on my trembling shoulder.

I thank him and stagger away like a drunk. My body is spent and it feels like someone has injected Drano into my muscles. When I get to the locker room, I throw a towel over my head and collapse onto a bench, elbows on knees, breathing so ragged the air whistles when it goes in and out, leaving a faint taste of blood on my tongue. It sounds strange, but I like this—the pain, the ragged breathing, the little taste of blood. It reminds me I have a body, that I am a body. That I'm something real, instead of just the thoughts in my head.

I drop the towel to the floor and strip out of my leotard. When I reach the showers, it takes a minute for the water to come out hot, but I stand under the cold rain anyway. It's harsh water that smells like chlorine and rust, and it comes out hard. It beats against my skin, billions of little stinging needles.

. . .

I started gymnastics after my mom was killed. I was seven years old, and for a month or two afterward, all I did was lie in bed rolled up in a ball, rolled up inside myself, screaming as loud as I could into a pillow saturated with tears and snot. My dad would hold me, of course, but then he would cry, too. We fed off each other like this for a while until we both dried out. That was right after moving from Algiers to Washington.

One Saturday, we drove to an electronics store because my dad knocked his cell phone into the sink while he was shaving and he needed a new one. Next to the store was a gymnastics studio. We stood there at the window watching a boy on a pommel horse, swinging around like gravity didn't apply to him, like he had been exempted from the rule that eventually everything goes crashing down to the ground. A teacher came out, an Asian woman. I thought she was going to tell us to go away, but instead she asked if we wanted to come inside and take a look.

The addiction was born, and when we left for our next post, I discovered that most countries have Olympic training centers in their capital cities, where my dad would be stationed with the embassy. The best coaches were always willing to take on a new American student, especially if the new American student paid in American dollars.

No one ever pretended I was Olympics material. Too tall, too big they all said, and no grace at all. I was all gangly raw power, like a thick chain instead of a whip. But getting to the Olympics, or even competing at all, wasn't why I started and it wasn't why I continued. I chased those bits of seconds spent in the air, those moments cheating gravity, for the drug called freedom. So what if the high of not having to think about anything else only lasted a tenth of a second? So what if the bullies and the loneliness and the memories were waiting for me on the ground? I could always get back on the beam.

. . .

Back in the city, the rain has stopped, and in the dark of early evening, the streets feel clean. Surfaces glimmer, and Manhattan smells of cold, clean water instead of garbage and gasoline for the first time in months. I make my way across Third Avenue and down to Second, where I turn left. My first stop is the bakery on the corner, where I take ten minutes to choose just two cupcakes: one chocolate with red icing, the other lemon with pink icing. The shopkeeper wraps them up in a little box.

A few doors down, the lights are still on inside Atzmon's Stationers. I press the doorbell and see a figure shuffling slowly at the back of the shop. Then the door buzzes for me to enter.

"*Guten Abend, Rotschuhe!*" says Bela Atzmon loudly from the back of the shop. Good evening, Red Shoes, is how he greets me because of my red boots. He's Hungarian by birth, but spoke German in school.

I make my way through the dark wood shelves lined with stacks and stacks of writing paper in every possible color and texture. Brass lamps with green shades cast everything in a warm, old-fashioned kind of light, as if the store had been here, unchanged, for a hundred years. I hope this place never has to close, but who writes letters anymore?

At the front of the shop is a glass display cabinet full of pens, and it's here that Bela meets me, peering at me over the top of his glasses.

He's somewhere north of eighty, maybe even ninety, but he's still thick and strong. He was a farm boy, he told me once, from a little village far from anything anyone would call a big city. "Is today the day, Red Shoes?" he asks, his accent thick as peanut butter.

In addition to the stationery store, Bela and his wife, Lili, own the apartments above it. My dad and I live on the fourth floor, and the Atzmons on the fifth. We became friends with them almost as soon as we moved in, and we go to their apartment at least twice a week for dinner. Afterward, Bela always forces a Hungarian fruit brandy

called palinka on my dad, and the four of us sit and talk. Politics. Religion. The lives they'd led—first in Hungary, then in Israel, where they'd made their home for thirty years before coming to the States. Bela waves his fourth or fifth or sixth brandy of the night around like a conductor's baton as the stories get darker. Then Lili scolds him and he stops. After a while, I usually go downstairs to do my homework, and as I leave, Bela and Lili always squeeze my hand and give me a little kiss on the cheek. It's the kind of thing I imagine grandparents do. Always looking at me like I'm treasure.

It takes me a minute to dig through the pockets of my jacket and find the thin envelope I put there this morning. I take it out and remove the contents—ten twenty-dollar bills—and spread them out on the counter.

Bela clicks his tongue and shakes his head. "Too much, little one. Didn't you see the sign in the window? Today only, fifty percent discount for any young woman wearing red shoes."

"That's not fair to you."

Bela takes up the money and gives me back half. "If the world were fair to me, I'd be driving a Bentley home to a mansion in Beverly Hills." From a drawer beneath the counter he removes a slender plastic box. "But then I would be in California and you'd be here, paying full price."

He sets the box down on a little velvet mat and opens it. The fountain pen—piano black with the words *To Dad, Love G* engraved in script down the side—actually glistens as if it were wet. I pick it up and remove the cap, rotating the pen in my hand, watching the silver nib at the end catch the light like the blade of a scalpel.

I climb the four flights of stairs to our apartment. There's only one apartment per floor, each running from the front of the building all the way to the back. I enter and hear Miles Davis playing softly, an

elegantly melancholy piece, a trumpet alone in a dark room, talking to itself: *It's not so bad, no, not so bad*. My dad says it lifts his spirits to think someone at some time could handle sadness with such grace.

I kick off my boots and pass through the kitchen, where on the small table in the corner there are take-out boxes from the Indian restaurant we like.

"Dad?" I call. "What's with the Indian food? Spaghetti a la Gwendolyn, remember?" Every year since I was eight I made spaghetti for him on his birthday. He was too sad to go out that first year after my mom was killed, and it just sort of became a tradition after that.

He's lying on the couch, almost flat except for his neck, which is bent a little so he can see the screen of the laptop resting on his chest. This is how he is most of the time when he gets home from work: worn out, ground down after a day of heroically battling memos and reports. His title is political officer, which sounds interesting, but he says all he does is shuffle papers and go to meetings. They're top secret papers, or so he tells me, and the meetings sometimes have him leaving for Nairobi or Singapore on a day's notice. But they're papers and meetings nonetheless, and how interesting can that be?

"Hey, kiddo." He smiles, the laptop's screen reflecting in the lenses of his glasses. He's been losing weight lately, and his face is long and narrow. *Stress*, he answered me last week when I told him I was concerned. *Stress is the key to staying thin*.

I drop to the floor next to the couch. "Happy birthday, old man."

He looks down at me over his glasses with a dorky expression of confusion on his face as if he had no idea today is his birthday, just like he's done every birthday. He reaches over and rubs my head. "Sorry about the Indian food. I was just tired of spaghetti. I thought we'd try something new tonight."

"Indian isn't new."

"So—kale soup from the vegan-hipster place? Fine with me."

I smile, pull his hand away from my hair. On the laptop screen is small type I can't quite make out and a picture of a fat man with a shaved head, eyes open, a black dot the size of a dime near the center of his forehead. It takes me a second to recognize that the black dot is a bullet hole. "Ew," I say. "What the hell is that?"

My dad closes the laptop. "Viktor Zoric. Shot by a cop two days ago at his home in Belgrade," he says as he stands. "It'll be in the paper tomorrow. *Serbian crime boss killed during arrest.*"

"What'd he do?"

"Very bad things," he says as he plods into the kitchen.

I get up and follow. "What kind of bad things?"

"The worst things," he says.

"That's not what I asked."

He twists the cap off a bottle of cheap red wine and sniffs at its mouth, then pours himself a glass. "Doesn't matter. Just be a teenager, Gwen."

I take the wine from his hand and sip it. Our deal is I can have a single glass of wine with dinner if the adults are drinking it, too.

"So, arresting Viktor Zoric," I say. "Were you involved?"

My dad takes down two plates and hands them to me. "I moved some papers around and wrote a little report. This time, someone actually read it."

I set the plates across from one another on the table. "So was he a murderer? Drug lord? What?"

"Enough, Gwen."

"I read the news. I'm vaguely aware that the world isn't all rainbows and butterflies."

"You want to know? Fine." He hands me another wine glass. "Murder, drugs, all that. But Viktor's main things were arms dealing and human trafficking. For prostitution. Women. Kids."

I wrinkle my nose. "Okay. I get it."

“Mainly they were sent to Europe, but also to Abu Dhabi, Shanghai. Los Angeles, too. Cargo containers on ships. That’s how he sent them to LA.”

“Thank you for that picture in my head.” I scoop rice and vindaloo onto the plates.

“Put in a metal box with a little food and water and a bucket for a toilet,” my dad says. “They were dead when Customs found them. Fourteen girls from Russia and Ukraine.”

“Jesus. Stop already,” I say. “Inappropriate dinner conversation.”

“You asked, so I told you.” He gestures to my chair. “Put it off as long as possible, Gwen. Finding out how shitty the world is.”

As I sit, my dad pours wine into my glass with a flourish like a waiter in a fancy restaurant. “*Votre vin, mademoiselle,*” he says.

“Why, *merci,*” I reply, and tuck into the vindaloo.

We eat without speaking for a few minutes, and the room is quiet except for the sounds of our chewing and the buzzing of the refrigerator and the thrum of the city outside our windows. The city’s always there, reminding you with horns and sirens and shouts and screams that even when you’re alone, you’re alone in the middle of a hive filled with a billion other bees.

“So something happened today. A thing at school,” I say. “I’ll need you to sign something.”

He raises his eyebrows as he wipes sauce from his chin with a paper towel. I reach over to my jacket hanging on a peg by the door and pull out the suspension form from Mrs. Wasserman.

My dad unfolds the paper and studies it for a second. “What the hell, Gwen?”

“It’s just a one-day suspension.”

“*Just* a one-day suspension? That’s not a small thing.”

I inhale deeply. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“What happened?”

"Astrid Foogle, she said some things. So I swore at her in French and this teacher heard it and—now I'm suspended. Can you just sign it, please?"

"What did Astrid Foogle say, exactly?"

"Dad, they were nasty things, all right? Can we leave it at that? Please?"

"What concerns me, Gwen, is that you know better than to take the bait. Don't take it, and there won't be a problem."

A sort of electric fog comes over me. I look away, grip the edge of my chair. I'd love nothing more than to tell him about Astrid slapping me, but then he'd just be disappointed I didn't fight back, or at least rat her out.

"I mean, Gwen, this isn't the first time. There was that kid in Dubai, remember? What was his name? And that girl in Moscow, Sveta. Same thing there, really."

"Goddammit, just sign it!" The words explode out of me before I can stop them. I stand, the air catching in my throat when I try to breathe. I turn and head off in the direction of my room. My dad follows, calling my name, but I slam the door shut just before he reaches it.

He knocks politely, then asks if I'm all right. Sure, I answer. Perfect. What's wrong? he asks. This time I don't answer. I see the shadow of his feet in the small space beneath the door as he waits for a second, debating with himself whether or not to give me my space or keep pressing. In the end, he walks away.

What's wrong? he wonders. What's wrong is that I hate this place. I hate Danton and everyone in it. I hate his job and everything to do with it. There are people my age who've spent their entire lives in the same house. There are people my age who've had the same friends since kindergarten. They have a dog and a yard and a tennis ball on the roof that bounced there when they were ten.

I fumble through my nightstand drawer for my bottle of Lorazepam, work the spit up in my mouth, and swallow one of the tiny pills. It's a sedative for anxiety I've taken for a few years. *As needed*, it says on the label. But I'm running out because *as needed* has been way more often since coming to New York. It'll kick in about twenty minutes from now, putting a warm blanket over my shoulders and telling me Astrid Foogle and the slap and the humiliation don't matter as much as I think they do. It's like having a best friend in pill form.

Next to the pill bottle is my other sedative, a deck of playing cards. I slide the deck out of the tattered box and begin shuffling them, over and over. The tangible, mathematical rhythm of the plastic-coated paper against the skin of my fingers and palms is calming in a weird OCDish sort of way. I picked it up after watching street hustlers in Venezuela fleecing tourists with air-quote "games" that are really just cons. I got good at all sorts of tricks over the years, and now cards serve as a little therapy session while I'm waiting for the Lorazepam to start smoldering.

Through my window I hear sirens, big deep voices like those of fire trucks. Somewhere, something is burning. Collecting the cards and shuffling them again, I hear the shushing of a bus's air brakes and the honking of a taxi's horn. I hear a drunk on the street howling about how someone took his money, about how Jesus is coming back. Jesus, I want to get out of here. I push the thought out of my mind and work the cards, my fingers creating and re-creating and re-creating again an orderly, plastic world of chance and probability, a new universe of winners and losers every time.

It's 11:36 p.m. when I wake up—fucking Lorazepam—and now his birthday's almost over. I climb out of bed and open the door.

He's sitting on the couch with his glasses on, laptop open. I slip into the kitchen and get the box from the bakery out of the refrigerator.

Inside, the cupcake with the red frosting has fallen over onto its side and is sort of a mess. I take that one for myself. I dig through the drawers, find matches and a birthday candle—it's in the shape of 5, brought back with us for some reason from Moscow where I'd had my fifteenth birthday. Strange, my dad's sentimentality for little things.

I stand in the kitchen doorway, holding the plate with the two cupcakes until he looks up and notices me. He closes the laptop and puts his glasses in his pocket.

"Sorry for the crappy birthday," I say, sitting down on the edge of the couch next to him.

"Aren't you going to sing?"

"Absolutely not. Make a wish."

A second passes as he thinks, then he blows the candle out. With careful fingers he lifts the cake off the plate and takes a bite. "Lemon," he says. "You remembered."

I notice a paperback book sitting on the couch, half covered by his laptop. "What were you reading?"

With his free hand, he pulls it out and shows me. *1984* by George Orwell, an old paperback, worn out and shabby. "I wasn't. I'm loaning it to a friend," he says. "You ever read it?"

"No."

"You should. Dystopian future. Or maybe dystopian present."

*The present.* I grab my backpack from the floor and fish through it until I find the little box. "I got you something this year."

He takes it from me, squints at it, and wrinkles his nose. "Is it—a fishing pole?"

"Stop."

"No. A new car."

"Stop!" I say. "Just open it!"

My dad lifts the cover a little bit and peeks inside as if whatever is in there might bite him. Then his face goes slack. "Gwendolyn

Bloom, what have you done?" he says, the same tone as when he's angry.

He drops the box to his lap and holds the pen as if it were as delicate as a baby chick. I pull a notebook out of my backpack. "Here," I say. "Write with it."

He puts the pen to the paper and scratches out something like a signature, but there's no ink at first, just a dry scribbled indentation. Then it starts to flow, elegant blue, royal blue. *Love it!* he writes.

"Really? Are you sure?"

"More than love it. I'm crazy about it. It makes me feel like—a *real aristocrat*," he says with a bad English accent.

I laugh, and he puts his arm around me. With my head on his shoulder, I can hear his heart beating slowly and evenly. Strip away the house in the suburbs, strip away the scads of friends who'd just turn on you anyway, and so what? A family of two is still a family. It's enough. I'm about to tell him this, and even though it's corny as hell, I'm about to say it out loud, but he stops me by speaking first.

"I'll bring it with me tomorrow on my trip," he says. "I'll be the fanciest guy in the meeting."

Tomorrow? I pull away and sit up. "Where are you going?"

He cringes like he does when he forgets something. "I was going to tell you, but you fell asleep. I have to go to Paris tomorrow."

My shoulders sink.

"Just two days," he says. "Fly out tomorrow morning, have a meeting tomorrow night, and by bedtime the day after, I'm home."

# Three

It's the same note he always leaves—*Don't eat junk food. Here's forty dollars for emergencies. Go to Bela and Lili's if you need anything*—but this time, scrawled in that elegant royal-blue ink from the pen I gave him. I lean back against the seat of the 6 train headed downtown and turn the note over to where I'd written the address of the used record store on St. Mark's Place.

On almost everything having to do with music, my dad and I disagree. But jazz is the exception. He'd taken me to the clubs sometimes overseas, and I'd pinch my nose against the cigarette smoke and listen intently for two shows in a row. We made a kind of sport in the foreign cities we'd visit by trying to find the smallest, weirdest venues and most obscure local recordings. Too bad about his turntable that arrived in New York smashed to pieces. I'll get him a good one someday, when I'm rich.

It's a little before noon, and I already wasted my morning eating

cold leftover vindaloo in front of the TV. But I'm going to make the most of the rest of this rare weekday sans school. So I get off at Astor Place and head toward St. Mark's. Little hipster bars, tattoo parlors, a taqueria with a sombrero-wearing mannequin out front. Maybe I should get a tattoo.

My dad told me his family settled in the tenements here more than a century ago, a dozen people to a room or something absurd like that. That was the way most Jews fresh off the boat lived then, my dad explained. His family is Lithuanian, and Blumenthal became Blum at Ellis Island, then sometime later, Bloom. Technically, they're not my ancestors, not by blood, but I say they still count.

My dad's an only child, and both of his parents died before I was born. A car crash in San Diego, where he grew up. The only real, true, DNA relatives I have are my mom's sister and her daughter. My aunt is married to a rabbi in Texas. I met her and her husband only once, right after my mom was killed, but I don't even remember what they look like.

There's a little bell over the door that rings as I step inside the record shop. A guy with a shaved head and gauge earrings looks up from the counter. The place smells good, like dust and vinyl and ozone. Long rows of low counters loaded with bins run up and down the length of the store.

I take some vinyl out of a few bins: *Bitches Brew* by Miles Davis, *Ellington at Newport*. Then I see hands flipping through the bin next to me and follow them up to a body and a face.

It's the clothes that throw me off. I'm used to him in the Danton uniform of white shirt and striped tie. Today he's wearing a red turtleneck sweater and khakis with a sharp crease, like he just stepped out of a Ralph Lauren photo shoot. His skin is smooth and dark brown, with a warm glow from inside him, like there's a lantern in

his chest. At Danton, he keeps to himself, eats alone, talks to almost no one. His real name is Terrance, but the other kids call him Scholarship because the story is he got a full ride for computer science.

"Hey," I say.

Terrance looks up. "Hey," he says back.

"Terrance, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Gwendolyn."

"I know."

For a moment, there's an awful silence. A silence that's so awful I remember this is the reason I never talk to guys. Then Terrance smiles. "Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

"Aren't you?"

"Three-day suspension for altering attendance records," he says. "No sense of irony, those people. How about you?"

"One-day suspension," I say. "For telling Astrid Foogle to go fuck herself."

He arches an eyebrow as if genuinely impressed. "Brave girl," he says. "What are you getting?"

I look down dumbly at the album I'm holding and notice my hands are shaking. "Sonny Rollins. But I'm just browsing," I say.

"Sonny's cool," he says. "Charlie Parker is better."

"Of course he is," I say. "That's cheating. Try again."

He shrugs. "I've always been a Coltrane man."

I smile involuntarily. "I'm a Coltrane man, too."

He laughs, and my face turns red as his sweater.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to . . ." His voice trails off. "So—you like jazz. We must be the only two."

I gesture around the shop.

"At Danton, I mean." Terrance looks down, adjusts his backpack.

"I'm—I'm just hanging out," he says. "So if you want to—I don't know what your schedule . . ."

"Love to," I say before I can think.

Outside the shop we discover the sun is gone, replaced with inky purple clouds that seem to be creeping across the city, over the tops of the buildings. Neither of us has anyplace to be, and that's good because both of us seem content to be here. We walk along St. Mark's for two more blocks. Is the city strangely empty today, or have I just not noticed anyone else?

We talk about music we like, books we like, Danton students we hate. He says he thought I was "Greek or something." No, I tell him. American by passport, but just another diplobrat, same as the others. Cool, he says.

At some point, we cross Avenue A and end up in Tompkins Square Park. We stroll along a paved path beneath a canopy of bare trees. To one side, a homeless guy is sleeping between sheets of cardboard, dirty hands and shoes and bundles of clothing sticking out from the sides like an overstuffed sandwich.

"So—you have a scholarship to Danton?" I ask.

His eyes narrow. "What?"

"Your nickname. The others, they call you Scholarship."

"They call me Scholarship because I'm black. Ergo . . ."

"Ergo what?"

"Ergo how else could I get into Danton?" He shakes his head. At them. Maybe at me, too. "Only time I even exist is when they need a weed hookup. But fuck them. I'm not playing that part. My life isn't their movie."

My hand accidentally brushes his. "So make your own. You can be whatever part you want."

A grin flickers as if he likes the idea. "Who do you play, in yours?"

"My movie?" I shrug. "I don't really have one, I guess. It's just—random scenes, edited together."

"Even so," he says. "You still get to be the hero."

"The hero?"

"You know. Kicking ass, saving the world, looking fine doing it." He shadowboxes the air in front of him playfully.

It's a compliment, kind of: Me, saving the world. Gwendolyn Bloom, looking fine. I give him a thin smile. "Sure," I say.

But Terrance has stopped and is looking at two boys next to the dog run. They've set up a cardboard box and are dealing three-card monte. It's a street game that's not really a game at all, but looks like it is and that's where the con comes in. One of the kids shuffles three playing cards and calls out, "Find the lady, find the lady," to the passing joggers and office workers on lunch break.

The game used to be all over New York in the old days, my dad told me, but I guess not anymore because Terrance says he's never seen it. I've seen it lots of places, though, all around the world, and used to love watching the dealers fleece the tourists. With the help of some YouTube videos, I even learned to do it myself, practicing on my dad for Monopoly money.

While one of the kids deals, the other makes a big show of winning. He has a fat wad of cash in his hand and seems to be cleaning up.

"You want to try?" Terrance asks.

"It's a scam," I say. "You can't win."

"The other guy is winning."

"Because that's his job," I say. "He's called the skill. They're working together."

But Terrance is undeterred and sidles up to them anyway. He pulls out a twenty and lays it on the cardboard box. The dealer takes it and shows him the cards, a queen and two jacks bent slightly on the long

axis so they're easier to pick up. Then the dealer flips the cards over and juggles their position, shifting the queen to the left, to the right, to the middle.

It's easy at first, which is the idea. But the trick, the key, the very core of the con, is to pick up the queen and another card with one hand, then release the second card while making the mark, the person being conned, believe you've just released the queen. The dealer is so fast, I don't even see him do it. Now Terrance is following the wrong card.

When the dealer stops, Terrance taps the card on the left. With a little smile, the dealer turns it over. Jack of clubs.

Another twenty comes out of Terrance's pocket, but this time the dealer tells him double or nothing. So out comes forty, and a round later, eighty.

"How'd you know?" he asks when we finally walk away.

"YouTube, a deck of cards, and lots of time. Ten thousand rounds later, I was as good as those guys."

"Then we should set up a game ourselves," he says. "You and me."

We wander deeper into Tompkins, past the crowded basketball court and a homemade sign taped to a post about a missing guinea pig named Otto. We find a bench that's clean, or cleanish, beneath some skeletal trees, and sit.

"So is it your dad who's at the State Department, or your mom?" Terrance asks.

"Dad," I say.

"What does your mom do?" he asks.

I consider lying. Usually it only gets awkward after I tell the truth. But this time, for some reason, I don't. "She's dead," I say. "Ten years."

"Mine, too," Terrance says. "Eight years. Sailing accident."

I open my mouth to fill in the how part, but he stops me with a hand on top of mine.

"It's okay. If you don't want to," he says.

"Thanks," I say.

Then the fact of both our moms being dead just sits there for a second, okay with itself. No fuss. No drama.

"So where do you want to go?" he asks.

"I'm fine just hanging out here," I say.

"No. For college."

"I haven't really thought about it," I say. "University of Someplace Warm. How about you?"

"Harvard. My dad, he endowed a chair there, so . . ."

"A chair?"

"Not a literal chair. It's, like, a faculty position. The Mutai Chair for the Study of Economic Something Something. I can't remember the whole name."

From somewhere deep in my pocket, my phone rings. I steal a look and see it's my dad. But instead of answering it, I turn off the ringer. I'll call him back later; no need to interrupt the moment and break the spell. The clock on the phone reads 2:42 p.m. Where did the time go? The wind whips through the slats on the wooden bench. I turn the collar of my army jacket up and cross my arms tightly.

"What's wrong?" Terrance says.

"Cold," I say.

"Want to get going?"

"No."

Then his arm is around me and he pulls himself close. My muscles go stiff. I feel the warmth from his body traveling all the way through his jacket and mine. Is there something I'm supposed to say? No, I tell myself, just shut up and let things be. I tilt my head to the side so it's resting on the shoulder of his suede jacket. He smells like fancy soap, the kind they have in expensive hotels.

“And after college?” I ask. “What then?”

“My dad says anything I want as long as I don’t go into hedge funds like he did,” Terrance says, running his hand along my arm. “But I’ll probably, I don’t know. I love writing code, the mental precision. There’s beauty there. Math as art. Is that weird—math as art?”

I let out a little laugh. “Math music.”

“What?”

“Math music. It’s stupid, but that’s what I call, like, Dizzy and Charlie Parker together, or Coltrane and anyone. It sounds like chaos, but it isn’t. It’s calculus.”

“Math music,” he repeats. “I like that.”

Then his arm tightens around me, and I slide an inch closer, then another inch.

A fat drop of rain lands on my knee; a second lands on my hand. They start to explode and pop all around me, darkening the sidewalk like drops of brown paint. We both know we should get up and head for shelter—it’s going to start coming down hard in a minute—but neither of us move. A low rumble of thunder turns into a sharp crack. A purple cloud over the buildings in the distance flashes brightly, as if lit from within.

“The gods are conspiring against us,” I say.

“Better go,” Terrance says.

We dash through the park, the sky opening up above us, letting down sheets of rain in contoured waves that look like furious ghosts. If I believed in God, it would almost seem like a punishment for stealing a few hours of fun with a strange, interesting boy. We make it across Avenue A to the shelter of a tenement entrance. There’s only a few square feet of space here, and we lean against the black steel door to get away from the ricocheting raindrops.

"You're shivering," he says. "Come here."

I hadn't noticed and I don't feel cold anymore, but I do it anyway. He presses his chest to me and wraps his arms around my back.

"So let me get this straight," I say. "It's the Mutai Chair for Something Something Economic . . ."

He laughs, and I feel his chest move against the side of my face. "Technically, it's the Terrance Mutai the Third Chair."

"The third chair?"

"No, my dad's name is Terrance Mutai the Third. That makes me Terrance the Fourth."

Now it's my turn to laugh. I hope he doesn't think I'm an asshole. "There's a number in your name? Are you royalty or something?"

"No," he says. "Just a pretentious snob."

"That's okay," I say. "Me too."

Then, tragically, and against all the statistical odds that apply to New York in a rainstorm, a taxi pulls to the curb and a woman climbs out. I could have stayed where we were, as we were, all day, maybe all week, but before I can protest, Terrance is pulling me by the hand into the back of the cab.

He directs the driver north along First Avenue toward my address. "Then a second stop," Terrance says. "Seventy-Second and Fifth, the Madisonian." I haven't been in the city that long, but I know enough to recognize one of the most prestigious blocks on the whole island of Manhattan. Here, even the very rich live on blocks like mine, in apartments that are too small, looking down on streets that are too busy. Terrance's neighborhood is reserved for the astronomically wealthy. Even most of the snobs at Danton would look at his address with envy.

The cab scurries along and the streets gleam black in the rain. Terrance and I are crouched down low in the backseat, the heat vents

blasting. I notice my fingers are red and numb. He takes my hands in his and rubs them.

We turn down my street, and I tell the driver where to pull over. As we roll to a stop, I reach into my pocket for money, but Terrance says to forget it, the cab ride's on him. I turn to say thank you but find him right there, mere inches from my face. It's over before I know it, a quick, chaste kiss on the lips. I wonder what my expression must look like because he laughs. "Later," he says.

My mind races to break down and analyze every second of the past few hours as I enter the front door of my building and start climbing the stairs, second floor, third floor, fourth floor, Terrance the Fourth.

I lock the door behind me, two dead bolts and the chain. Had Terrance really just leaned over and kissed me? My God, what does that mean?

For a few hours, I wrestle with my homework. There's the regular Friday calculus quiz tomorrow, and even though I've only been out a day, I'm still behind. It's hard work, made harder by my mind constantly flying like a ghost back to the feel of his hands as they rubbed mine in the back of the cab, hands with long, thin fingers, hands befitting an aristocrat with a number in his name. That was the important part, wasn't it? Not the kiss. The way he rubbed my hands. God, he's literally the only thing I've found in this city that doesn't hurt.

Somehow I manage to get through the homework, and at eleven o'clock, I make a sandwich and pour what's left of last night's wine into a plastic cup and turn on the Mexican soap opera I watch to keep my Spanish tight.

Two secret lovers at a grand party—she in an evening gown, he in a tux—agreeing to meet in the *cobertizo*. Cabin? Shack? No, not in this rarefied world. It's an elegant boathouse, richly appointed in brass clocks and chubby leather chairs and a stuffed falcon on a shelf.

Dangerous, meeting like this, they both agree, what with the party so close, still audible, even. Do you love me, he asks. *Sí, Emilio*, she says, *siempre, siempre*.

The wine is warm in my stomach, and my brain is feeling furry. I slide down on the couch, my head sinking into a throw pillow, and think about Tompkins Square for the eight thousandth time tonight, how the rain looked like blobs of paint on the sidewalk. He's rich, I think—he must be, to live where he does. But so what? How much was holding me like that in the doorway as we hid from the rain worth? I don't know, but you don't measure it in money.

And that's what I'm thinking about as my eyes close and I feel myself falling backward, just falling backward through the warm wine buzz and into sleep. The soap opera is still on, a heated argument now. Emilio and someone—her father? And on the show, someone else is knocking at the door, but Emilio and the other guy just keep talking over it. Jesus, answer it already.

Then I snap awake. The knocking isn't on the TV; it's at the door to my apartment, firm and urgent. *Come now*, it says. I approach the door groggy but wary, and look through the peephole. It's Bela, dressed in a bathrobe. Behind him stand two figures in cheap-looking suits. One's a woman, and her dishwater-blond hair is tied back in a ponytail. She's pretty, I think, athletic, maybe forty. The other one is a guy, maybe late twenties. He has a heavy red face and his black hair is cut short like a military recruit's.

I unlock the two dead bolts and open the door as far as the chain will let me.

Bela wrings his hands. It's not nervousness, but something else. "These people—they need to speak with you."

"Can you open up, please, Gwendolyn?" says the woman.

I close the door, unlock the chain, and open it again. The woman

steps forward and unfolds a wallet showing a badge and an ID card with her photo on it.

“Gwendolyn, hi. My name is Special Agent Kavanaugh and this is Special Agent Mazlow. We’re from the Bureau of Diplomatic Security.”

Now it’s the man’s turn to show his badge and ID, but I don’t need to look at it. I know them already—not these two specifically—but I know their kind, what they do, what it means when they show up. I know the next words out of their mouth before they even say them.

“My dad,” I say, my voice low, almost a whisper. “What happened to my dad?”

Agent Kavanaugh places a hand gently on my shoulder. “We’d like you to come with us, okay? Can you do that, Gwendolyn?”

I knock her hand off my shoulder. “What happened to my dad?” I repeat, louder now, almost a shout. “Is he all right?”

“Gwendolyn,” Agent Kavanaugh says. “Your dad is missing.”

# Four

Kavanaugh and Mazlow stand on either side of me in an elevator that smells like disinfectant. The button for the sixth floor is lit up. BUREAU OF DIPLOMATIC SECURITY it says next to it.

When I visited my dad here in the drab concrete office building downtown where the State Department has its field office, there were metal detectors at the front entrance, and I had to wear a red badge marked VISITOR. But there's none of that now. As we climbed out of the big SUV with sirens and lights that Kavanaugh and Mazlow used to get us here, the security guards just waved us through.

I'm deposited in a small conference room where mismatched tables have been pushed together and a collection of ratty chairs lines the walls. "Stay put," Kavanaugh says. "Mazlow will be right outside the door if you need anything."

She disappears, and I'm alone in the room, wishing they'd let Bela come with me. The fluorescent lights above me buzz and flicker,

casting a sickly light over everything. The only window in the room is covered with closed blinds. I lift one of the metal strips and find that the window faces a hallway, and from here I can see into the room across from me. Kavanaugh is there, along with six or seven others. They're gathered around a whiteboard where they've written some sort of timeline:

20:37 SMS from Bloom at Café Durbin to Paris Station all clear

20:42 Phn from Bloom to daughter no answer/no vm

20:55 Call from Bloom to Feras/confirm

21:22 Leave Feras Meeting at Café Durbin/SMS to Paris Station  
all clear

21:32 Phn offline/dead

Kavanaugh is speaking to two men I recognize. One is Joey Diaz, a political officer like my dad. He's a handsomely stocky black guy who's been a friend of my dad's for years. They were stationed in Dubai together, and Joey, along with his wife and two kids, spent Thanksgiving and Christmas at our apartment there two years in a row. The other guy I've seen, too. Chase Carlisle is his name, and he's my dad's boss. I know little about him other than that my dad says he's from an old southern family and knows everyone in Washington.

Carlisle's about fifty or fifty-five, I think, pink-skinned and wearing the standard-issue tired suit, buttoned uneasily over his middle-aged bulk. His hair, though, is the same as I remembered, sharp part on the side, dyed perfectly brown. As Kavanaugh speaks to them, Carlisle looks over in my direction, and I pull back instinctively, letting the blind fall back into place.

A moment later, Diaz and Carlisle come through the door to the conference room. Joey gathers me into a hug. "It's going to be all right, Gwendolyn," he says. "It's going to be all right."

"Why don't you sit, Gwendolyn," Carlisle says, his Virginia accent pleasant and soft.

"I'll stand, thank you," I say, trying to make my voice as calm as I can.

"Gwendolyn," Joey says, hands on my shoulders, eyes directly into mine. "Your father disappeared shortly after meeting a colleague of ours in Paris, someone we—"

"*Very* misleading, Joey," Carlisle says, cutting him off. "You're implying it's a kidnapping, and we have no evidence of that."

I lower myself into a chair and grip the armrests.

Carlisle stares right at me as if he's trying to remember my reaction. "All we know so far is that he's missing. That's it. That's all we have. Could he have been kidnapped? It's a small possibility. But there are other reasons he may have gone off the grid."

I feel my face clench like a fist, eyes pinched shut, mouth open, teeth bared. I hide behind my hands. Over the course of my life, I've prepared myself for the eventuality that he would end up in the hospital or even die on the job, but this—my mind stretches, picturing a thousand scenarios and tortures. Two tears break free from the inside corners of my eyes, run down along the crevices next to my nose. I force myself to look up. "Tell me exactly what you're doing to find him."

Carlisle's face is blankly professional. "You have my assurance that State is doing all it can. The FBI field office in Paris is already scouring the area. So are the French police, local and federal—"

I cut him off. "You have to assume he was kidnapped, though, right? I mean, that's how you're treating it, right? As if he were?"

"Of course," Carlisle says. "Yes. Absolutely. Right now, SIGINT is

looking for what we call ‘chatter’—intercepted conversations—about a missing American diplomat. But so far there’s nothing. Which is a good sign.”

“What is SIGINT?” I ask, blotting my eyes with a tissue.

“Signals Intelligence. They deal with cell phone interceptions, any sort of electronic communication.” Carlisle takes a seat and consults his notepad. “Gwendolyn, did your father talk to you about work at all? What he does? Maybe he mentioned certain troubles he was having at the office?”

“No,” I say. “I mean, the usual stress. And he was sad the last few days. The anniversary of my mom’s death. But he never mentioned much about work. Just that he looked at papers a lot, wrote some reports.”

Carlisle nods and makes a note. “Has your father spoken at all about a desire to, I don’t know, retire? Leave the State Department and move abroad?”

Joey’s hand slaps the table. “That’s enough, Chase.”

Carlisle fires a look at Joey, then turns back to me. “Gwendolyn, we know your father phoned you yesterday afternoon but didn’t leave a message. Have you had any contact with him since then? E-mail, maybe. Social media.”

“No,” I say. “Nothing at all.”

“Thank you. That’s helpful.” Chase sets down his pen and folds his hands in front of him. “I know this must be so hard for you. Do you have any relatives you can stay with for the time being?”

“I have an aunt and uncle in Texas. Georgina and Robert Kaplan. He’s a rabbi in, I don’t know where. A suburb of Dallas, I think.”

“No one local?”

“I’m sure I can stay with Bela and Lili. The Atzmons. They’re friends of ours who live in our building. Fifth floor.”

“The Atzmons will do for the near term,” Carlisle says as he stands.

“Probably best if you stay with them tonight. We’ll be sure to come get you if there are any developments.”

I open my mouth to speak, but Carlisle’s already disappearing through the door.

The wipers tango quickly across the windshield, sweeping away the rain, pulling back, sweeping again, pulling back. I try to hypnotize myself with the motion, try to lose myself in it. The SUV Joey borrowed from the motor pool is creeping up Third Avenue through the 3:00 a.m. traffic. He doesn’t bother with the lights or siren now, as if he senses I’m grateful to be here with maybe the one friend my dad has in the world who can actually do something to help.

“How’re your kids?” I ask. “Christina is the oldest, right?”

“Yeah,” Joey says. “She’s twelve next month. And Oscar just turned nine.”

“Oscar. I always liked that name.”

It sounds like small talk, but it’s a test. I’m closely watching Joey’s face for his reaction when I say, “We’ll all have to get together, you know, when my dad is back.”

His head retreats a little, and I see him breathe in slowly. “Sure,” he says with a smile that isn’t real.

“My dad’s not coming back, is he, Joey?”

“Of course he is,” Joey says, but the words are hopeful and empty, the way you tell a cancer patient to get well soon.

I feel my face starting to clench up again. I turn away and lean into the cold glass of the window, where the rainwater is flowing down in little rivers. “What happened to him, Joey? Please tell me. No bullshit. I think I have a right.”

Joey drums his fingers on the wheel. “Your dad was at a meeting with a contact of ours, someone we work with. The meeting was at a

café. After the two of them left, he texted our office in Paris to say he was all right. But a little while later, his phone was either turned off or just stopped working. There were no police reports from the area, no signs of violence. That's all we know for sure."

I think of the timeline I saw on the wall of the room across the hallway. "Was the meeting with someone named Feras? I saw his name on the whiteboard."

"Yes," Joey says. "We have someone en route to speak with him now. But we don't know what role he played, if any."

"There was a guy, a Russian or Serb, I can't remember. I saw a picture of him the other night on my dad's computer. Viktor Zoric. Is he connected to Feras?"

"Not likely. But you can be sure it's being looked into anyway."

I press the palms of my hands into my eyes, and Joey reaches over to squeeze my shoulder.

"I don't get it, Joey," I say, my voice broken, barely there. "My dad shuffles papers around. What would anyone want with someone like him?"

A long moment of silence. "I think I need a cup of coffee," Joey says finally. "Come on, I'll buy you a Coke or whatever."

Suddenly the SUV veers to the right, cutting across two lanes of traffic. Car horns sound furiously behind us. He pulls to the curb in front of a little bodega, shuts the ignition off, and motions for me to follow as he exits.

The rain batters against my head in fat, frigid drops and runs down my face and neck and into my shirt collar. I raise my hood as Joey pulls me along by the upper arm like he's leading a prisoner. "It's not safe to talk in there," he says. "The radio. It's never really off. You understand?"

We stop beneath the awning of a twenty-four-hour corner store

and stand before wooden shelves lined with bananas and oranges and apples and buckets of cheap flowers in plastic wrapping. There's no one around, not at this hour, and Joey grips me by the shoulders.

"Your dad," Joey says. "What is his occupation?"

"He's a political officer with the Department of State, a diplomat."

"Come on, Gwendolyn," Joey says. "What is your father's job? What does he do for a living?"

"Christ, Joey, what are you getting at?"

He breathes slowly for a moment. "Your dad doesn't work for the State Department, Gwendolyn. He has never worked for the State Department. It's called 'official cover.'"

He pauses a moment, eyes locked onto mine until the words sink in. If my dad doesn't work for the State Department, then there's really only one possibility left. I open my mouth to speak but have trouble forming the words. "He's a spy," I say finally. "He's CIA."

Joey gives me a sad smile. "Remember, you came to that conclusion on your own, got it? I never told you."

The only thing that shocks me is that I'm not shocked at all. It hits me like an answer to a riddle I've heard before but forgotten, the punch line of a joke I saw coming a mile away. Part of me always knew this, at least as long ago as our time in Egypt, maybe earlier, maybe Venezuela. I didn't know what the letters CIA stood for when I was ten or eleven, but I knew what my father did was different. None of the other parents took an hour to drive their kids to school, a different route every day. None of the parents had meetings at 3:00 a.m.

"And you?" I ask. "Are you a spy? How about Chase Carlisle?"

"What we are doesn't matter."

"So the answer is yes."

"You're free to believe whatever you want," he says. "Just keep your conclusions to yourself."

I turn away, unable to look at him. There's an old couple shuffling

toward us, huddled together under an umbrella. I wait until they pass. “So all those postings overseas, my dad was spying?”

“He was a political officer for the Department of State, just a diplomat filling a desk job. Officially, that’s all he ever was.”

“But unofficially?” I ask.

“Unofficially he was a patriot, the best man I’ve ever worked with,” Joey says.

Bela and Lili Atzmon have done this before. Or at least, that’s how it looks to me as Joey tells them the official version—disappearance in Paris, circumstances unknown. Standing beside each other, they nod along coldly at the news, like doctors brought in for a consultation, their bathrobes like lab coats.

There is, I learn when Joey leaves, a ritual to be performed when a father goes missing. Lili builds what can only be described as a nest—a ring of quilts and pillows on the couch in her living room with me at its center, like a choked-up baby bird. Tea is prepared, the gentle herbal kind.

After the first hour, I’m cried out, my wells of everything run dry. Eyes hurting, nose raw and red, I stare down blankly, weaving my fingers through little holes in a crocheted blanket, trapping them like a net. Bela sits in his armchair, a glass of palinka in hand, while Lili is perched next to me on the edge of the couch.

“You’re good at this whole comforting thing,” I say.

Lili smiles, fusses with the blanket over my shoulder. “Where we’re from, fathers sometimes disappear,” she says.

My dad lied to me. In fact my dad has done nothing but lie for as long as I can remember. I think of all the times he would come home from Khartoum or Islamabad—or is that even where he really went?—and I’d ask him how his meeting had been, or how the official dinner had gone down, or how they’d liked the presentation he’d

given. He'd just roll his eyes clownishly. "Like drowning in beige paint," he'd say. "Cause of death: boredom." Well, screw him, I think. Screw him and the years of lies. The years where the one person in the world he shouldn't lie to, he lied to.

My mind goes to the timeline written on the whiteboard at my dad's office, then to the conversation with Joey out on the street. I know I'm not supposed to say anything about that. I know it's supposed to be a secret. But Bela and Lili know the world, and they're all I have now. My mouth flutters open, as if I can't stop myself from speaking. "He's not a diplomat," I say.

Bela holds up his hand. "Of course, child. You don't need to say it."

I peer at him closely. "He told you?"

Bela shrugs. "He didn't need to tell me, just as I didn't need to tell him. Spies can smell one another across a room. Like dogs."

There's something strange in his eyes as he looks at me, apology and mischief.

"You—you worked for the CIA?" I ask.

From Bela, a genuine laugh. "Thank God, no. Someone else."

And it's all he needs to say. He'd spent thirty years in Israel. "Mossad," I say quietly.

No response from Bela.

So the kindly old shopkeeper had once belonged to one of the best and fiercest intelligence organizations in the world. Sure. Why not? Let's just pull back the curtain on the entire world today.

Bela clears his throat. "Your father made an arrangement with Lili and me. We are to provide help to you."

"I know. Keep an eye on me while he's away."

"No. Another sort of arrangement." He leans forward, hands gripping his knees. "The clandestine services, his and mine, can be cruel to the families of those who serve them. So in the event of—of something like this—he wanted us to make sure your interests were looked after."

“Like what?”

“Like that you’re not fed bullshit.”

My eyes clench again, but I force it away. There’s really only one question worth asking. “I want you to—be honest, Bela. The truth.”

“You want to know if he’s dead.”

I nod.

“If their intention—their immediate intention—was to kill him, you’d know. His body would have been found there on the street already. I’m sorry to be blunt.”

“Do you think they’ll let him go, whoever has him?”

“If whoever took him is given the money or favors or whatever they’re looking for, then maybe,” Bela says.

I look at him. “And if not?”

He shakes his head.

In the photo, Bela is a young man, thin as a rail, but good-looking despite the boxy suit. He had just gotten out of prison, Lili says, and was lucky not to have been shot. Shot, I ask? She tells me about the revolution of 1956, of Soviet troops and massacres in the streets of Budapest. Lili was a student of biology at the time, and Bela was a young professor of chemistry, barely out of school himself. He was sent to prison for two years after that, she tells me, and nearly died of tuberculosis.

I’m truly grateful to them for the distraction. And they’re so clever about it, Bela and Lili. Distraction is an art, and they know a card game or silly movie would never keep my mind off the swirling tragedy in my head. So here is someone else’s tragedy, someone else’s tough times, close enough to my own, yet far enough from my own, so that I can absorb myself in it without guilt.

Lili refills my tea, while Bela yawns and opens another album. People around a swimming pool. Shirtless men with hairy chests and

wives in dowdy swimsuits toast the camera with bottles of beer. "Tel Aviv," Bela says. "1973." He taps a man and woman. "This is us, of course." Then he taps a squat, balding man with a wicked smile and a cigarette between between thumb and forefinger. "This one was like a brother to me. He went on to become head of my service."

"These are your spy friends?" I ask.

"Every one of them," Bela says.

Lili closes the album. "Enough," she says. "No war stories tonight, Belachik. The girl must rest."

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep," I say.

"Of course you won't," Lili says, spreading the pillows and blankets on the couch into something resembling a bed. "But you must try."

They go to bed, and the tears come again a few minutes later, a slow, feeble stream that I hardly notice at first. I know if I just sit here the crying will get worse, so I reach for my backpack and pull out the book I'd been reading.

I open it to where I left off, but I see right away it's hopeless. There will be no fiction now. The letters on the page scatter like roaches and rearrange themselves into truth, covering the whole page with the only thing that needs saying tonight: **he is already dead and you are alone he is already dead and you are alone he is already dead and you are alone**

I slam the book shut, slam my eyes shut, and, goddammit, if I had a gun I'd put the muzzle in my mouth right now and blow the top of my head off. It is unbearable. Literally unable to be borne. The roof above me is collapsing. For the first time since I was seven, I fold my hands together and pray to a god that I know isn't there.

# Five

For the second time in twelve hours, it's an urgent *come now!* knock on the door that wakes me. I spring up from the couch, nearly falling face-first onto the coffee table as I catch my foot in one of Lili's blankets. Whatever news the urgent knocking means, it can be only one of two things. He's dead or he's alive.

Bela shuffles in, angrily tying his bathrobe belt, and opens the door. The man on the other side is very young with red hair and pale skin dotted with freckles. He introduces himself as Special Agent Fowler and shows his badge and ID. Good news or bad news, it's Joey or Carlisle who would've come by. So why this Agent Fowler?

He unfolds a thick, densely worded document in front of me. "This is a search warrant for the home of William and Gwendolyn Bloom," he says.

I push past him and hear Bela and Fowler arguing behind me as I head down the stairs. On the landing below, another agent grabs my arms from behind as I try to get into my apartment.

Through the door, I see four guys in Windbreakers with *Bureau of Diplomatic Security* written on the back pulling drawers out of cabinets, piling papers into cardboard boxes.

I hear a voice call from inside, a voice with an elegant Southern lilt. "Take the photos, too. Everything means everything." Carlisle, hands deep in the pockets of his pants, appears at the entrance of the hallway along with Joey Diaz. Carlisle nods when he sees me. "It's all right, Mike," he says to the agent at the door. "Let her in."

As the agent releases my arms, I rush inside but freeze at the sight of a cardboard box sitting on the kitchen table. It's filled with my school notebooks and my diary. "You have no right!" I shout at Carlisle, and snatch the diary out of the box.

Carlisle appears next to me and takes the diary back. "I am very sorry, Gwendolyn. I know how traumatic this must be, but I'm afraid it's necessary."

"What are you even looking for? My dad's the victim here!"

"Well, that's what we'd like to determine," Carlisle says. "I want you to know, your father is a friend of mine, a dear friend. That's why it pains me to do this."

"So why are you doing it?"

He leads me into the apartment by the arm and nods to the couch. We both sit. "Gwendolyn, I have to ask you something now. Can you foresee any circumstances under which your father would choose to leave us?"

"Leave us?"

"Has he ever talked to you about defection. To another country."

My mouth hangs open like a fool's. "Fuck you, Chase."

"There are people who have concerns about your father. Not me, not Joey. People in Washington." He looks at me sternly. "So answer the question, please. Has your father ever spoken to you about defection?"

I stand and walk out onto the landing, into Bela's arms. He takes me back upstairs. "*Fascists,*" he whispers.

I'm standing alone in my apartment two hours later, seeing what's been taken and what hasn't. Missing are all his papers and many of mine, all photos, all computers, and even the TV and Wi-Fi router. My clothes all seem to be there, though I can tell the drawers were searched. My books are mostly there but taken off the shelves and piled in precarious stacks on the floor. The rage boils in my veins, and even though the searchers wore rubber gloves, everything is now soiled, as if they'd coughed their accusation—*defection, treason*—over everything they touched.

The rage boiling in my veins is useless, though. I know this. The Diplomatic Security thugs have search warrants and holstered guns and declare their authority over my life with the words on the back of their official Windbreakers, while I'm just a quavery-voiced child, hissing her tantrum to ears that give not a shit. How dare they accuse my dad? How dare they run rubber-sheathed fingers over my things? But power doesn't dare; it simply does.

Still, I will remake what they've taken apart, put back some order to my world. I will start here, in the bedroom, in *my* bedroom, with *my* books. My hands shake so badly as I pick up the first handful of them, I can barely put them back on the shelf. On the covers are the heroes from paper worlds who've kept me company in Paris, Dubai, Moscow, New York. If they were real, these brave girls, they'd stare at me with pity and disgust in their eyes.

But there are no heroes. There is no courage. Just diplomats who write reports. Just fat Chase Carlises who tell you your father's a defector. Just security agents who wave search warrants about and paw through your life. Just me, a little girl with rage in her veins who burns it off by cleaning her room, like a little girl should.

Once the apartment is back in order—cushions back on the couch, the ring of dust around where the TV had stood wiped away, shoe-prints on the IKEA rug scoured with baking soda and paper towels that shred in my hands—I go to the toilet, bend over it, and vomit. For a while, I sit on the bathroom floor, back to the wall, my skin buzzing, my mind repeating the only truth that matters: He is already dead and you are alone.

It feels like an electric shock every time the phone rings. So Lili answers for me, and I stare at her expression for clues. But it always ends with her hanging up and shaking her head as she says, “Nothing new.” You’d think these non-updates would get easier after three days, but they don’t.

What I need is sleep, Lili tells me. And she’s right. I haven’t slept for more than a few hours since the night before my dad was taken. The exhaustion is now hallucinogenic, with swirls of purple and pink filling the world like ghosts. Lili walks me to my apartment and actually tucks me into my own bed. The grief, the shock, all of it fades behind Lili’s stroking of my arm and the narcotic fog of a triple dose of my sedatives.

Sixteen hours after I’d fallen asleep, I wake, still exhausted. But it’s nearly noon, so I get up anyway, shower, take another pill. I pull a chair to the window and stare out at the world, trying not to think or feel. Let today be a quiet day. Let today be silent. But no.

The apartment intercom startles me with its grating electric warble. Someone’s on the street below, demanding I get off my ass to see what they want. I actually laugh out loud. Such a quaint idea, asking permission to burst into my life. Why not just force your way in like all the others?

I shuffle to the intercom and press the button. “Yes?”

"I'm—I'm looking for Gwendolyn Bloom. Is this she?" It's a woman's voice I don't recognize.

"I'm Gwendolyn," I say. "Who are you?"

A pause, only the sounds of the street coming through the static of the speaker. "It's Georgina Kaplan," says the voice. "Your aunt."

It takes me a few seconds to process the idea of it, as if I'm not quite sure what the words mean. My aunt. My mother's sister. I press the button to let her in, then wait in the open apartment door. I haven't seen my aunt since I was, what, seven, right after my mom was killed? And why has she come?

I hear her moving tentatively up the stairs, heels clicking on the gritty tile floor, then she appears on the landing in front of me. She's a fit, pretty woman of maybe fifty. Her hair is a salon-bought auburn helmet that matches the perfect French manicure. She smiles with very white teeth. "Wow, Gwenny. It's been so long."

When she hugs me, I feel the firmness of her five-workout-a-week muscles. Hanging on her clothes is yesterday's perfume, and the smell of an airplane cabin, plastic and coffee.

"Gwen, Gwenny, I'm so sorry about your dad," she says, the Texas accent round and sweet as an apricot. "So sorry."

She holds me for a long time, then takes me by the shoulders and studies my face while I study hers. Thin wrinkles form deltas at the corners of her eyes and mouth, the only flaw in skin that's otherwise a mask of tasteful earth tones painted with department-store makeup.

"You're very pretty, Gwenny, like your mother," she says. "I'm sorry, can I call you that, or do you prefer Gwendolyn now?"

"Gwendolyn."

"Then that's what I'll call you," she says. "The man on the phone, Mr. Carlisle, he said you're being looked after by neighbors."

"Yes. Bela and Lili."

"I'm sure they're doing a great job, a *great* job, but Mr. Carlisle said maybe it would be better if you were with family. You know, if the situation with your father lasts longer than a few days." Georgina twirls a lock of my hair with her finger. "Well, isn't this just the prettiest shade of red?"

"Look, I appreciate your coming all this way," I say as I pull away from her. "But I'm sure you have a life back in Texas. There's really no need—"

"Oh, I don't mind. Really," she says, pursing her lips into something between a pout and a smile. "Robert's taking the synagogue youth group on a horseback-riding trip and Amber's going with him. Myself, I can't stand horses."

"It's really not necessary," I say. "My dad could be back anytime."

She pulls me into a hug, a hug full of pity and sadness, the kind reserved for funerals. "Of course he will, dear."

We avoid one another for the rest of the day. Or rather, I avoid her by hiding in my room while she keeps a patient, respectful distance. There's nothing wrong with her. Nothing evil. But this is *my* apartment, where I deal with *my* shit, which, maybe you've heard, Georgina, is pretty fucking significant right now. I hate the idea of her being here. How embarrassing to have a stranger hear you cry. In the morning, I try avoiding her again, but then, a moment before I'm out the door, she stops me.

"Sit a minute," she says, patting the spot next to her on the couch.

I'm about to say no, but I have no legitimate reason to be rude to her. She's come all this way for me. That's worth at least a conversation. I take off my jacket and sit down in a chair across from her.

"School," she says.

"What about it?"

“It might be a good distraction. When do you think you’d like to go back?”

I hate to admit it, but she’s right. “A few days,” I say. “Later this week.”

“I’m so glad you agree.” Then Georgina inhales sharply like there’s something else she wants to say. “Look, Gwendolyn,” she manages finally. “If this sounds premature, I’m sorry. But if this situation—the situation with your father—should go on more than, I don’t know, a few weeks—”

I cut her off. “You can go back to Texas whenever you want.”

“That’s just it,” she says. “I was thinking you might come with me. Temporarily. Until he comes back.”

I stare at her, tamping down my anger, resisting the deep desire to tell her to get the fuck out. “Look, I appreciate you coming here. I do. But why would you want a stranger in your house? I mean, honestly, what am I to you?”

“But you’re not a stranger, Gwendolyn,” she says. “You’re family. I’m sorry, but no matter how you feel about us, that’s God’s own fact right there.”

“I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.”

Georgina clears her throat, presses her hands down on her knees. “A burden? Honey, you could never be a burden. I know it won’t be New York City or Paris, but if you give it a chance, I think you’ll like it there. And anyway, it’s just for a while.”

She comes over to me and sits cross-legged on the floor at my feet. Then she pulls her Louis Vuitton tote bag—the real thing, not a Chinatown knockoff—onto her lap and removes her phone. She opens the photos and turns the phone so I can see. There on the screen is a large suburban house in the middle of an impossibly green lawn, a white Cadillac SUV the size of a tank parked in the driveway. “You’d

have your own room, of course—there’s plenty of space where we are. You’d share a bathroom with Amber, but she’s tidy, don’t worry.”

She scrolls to the next photo. A pretty girl with curly black hair in a cheerleading outfit standing atop a pyramid of other girls. “And there she is,” Georgina says. “Amber’s captain of the cheerleading team, but she’s also a very good student. She leads a Torah study group at the school. You could go with her, if you wanted.”

“I’m not religious.”

“Just to make friends, then. Look, we’re Reform all the way, very casual about it. You wouldn’t even have to come to temple with us unless it was your choice.” She puts the phone away and digs through the bag, looking for something else. “You’d be free to be your own person there. Be whoever you wanted.”

I’d be lying if I said the sales pitch didn’t work, at least a little. Life sounds easy there. Warm weather and nice people and space.

She pulls something else from her bag and sets it on my knee. It’s an ancient, fraying black-and-white photo of an old woman with her large family spread out on the porch of a run-down house. There must be a dozen kids and grandkids. Some are sitting, some are standing, no one smiles. The date on the bottom of the photograph says 1940.

Georgina taps the old woman with her perfect nail. “Alona Feingold—your great-great-grandmother—goodness, do I have that right? I did all the research about her online. Born 1882 in Odessa. That’s in the Ukraine, or maybe Russia now, I can’t keep it straight. Anyway, she came over to America in 1913 with her husband and five children. This is Alona as an old lady with her children and grandchildren at their home in Fenton, Missouri. Only Jews in town, I’d bet.”

On a young man’s lap sits a toddler who looks vaguely like a picture I remember of me at that age. She’s about two or three and wearing

a clean white dress. “That’s your grandmother Sarah. You never met Sarah because she died when you were just little. Lovely woman. Strong-willed.”

My breath trembles, and I stifle it to keep Georgina from hearing. I had been only academically aware that I had an aunt and a grandmother and a cousin and family. A few lines of a sketch. But now, here they were, real people in all their detail. I brush my hair back behind my ear. “I’ve never seen pictures of them before,” I say.

“Your mother wasn’t very sentimental about family,” Georgina says. “It was probably our fault, mine and your grandmother’s. We were too conventional for her. So off she goes at eighteen to join the army. What a scandal it was for your grandmother—a nice Jewish girl joining the army! But she was always the brave one, your mom. Always the intrepid explorer.” Georgina reaches up, touches my cheek. “Bet you’re the same way, aren’t you? Fearless. Always looking for adventure.”

She has no idea how wrong she is. “It must skip a generation,” I say.

Mrs. Wasserman’s saccharine pity is in fine form as she looks at Georgina and me across the desk. She is a stage actor, projecting her sorrowful eyes all the way to the balcony. The staff, she says, has been informed that my dad went missing while on a business trip in Europe. But hanging in her voice is the busybody’s question mark, an implicit plea for details, mundane or salacious. Neither Georgina nor I give her any, though, and I can see Mrs. Wasserman is disappointed. Still, she purses her lips in kabuki warmth and presses her hands over mine as she tells me Danton will, as always, be a safe space for me in this period of emotional challenges.

As I leave Mrs. Wasserman’s office and walk to my locker, it’s clear to me that news of my dad’s disappearance evidently spread further than the staff. Conversations slam shut as I pass, and all eyes turn to me. Only when my back is to them do the whispers start. Rumors of

intrigue and murder? It may be the case that my stature has actually risen. That I am now at least interesting.

Terrance approaches me at my locker. There's concern and empathy on his face, as if someone he cared about had been hurt. I almost ask him what's wrong. Then I realize the look is for me.

"Hey," he says as I stand in front of my open locker. "I heard about your dad. That he was captured or something. I mean, holy shit, Gwen, are you all right?"

Something good and warm pulses inside me at the sound of his voice, but right away I feel guilty and push it away.

"He wasn't captured. He's just missing." My voice is flat and cold. I don't mean it to come out that way, but it does.

"Do you need anything? Can I help?"

"I'm fine," I say as I close my locker. "Sorry. Gotta go."

I head to class and wonder if things would have turned out differently had I answered my dad's call when I was with Terrance in the park. Probably not. But maybe. It's all your fault, Gwen.

But it's to avoid thoughts like these that I'm back in school in the first place, and it mostly works. It's been eight days without news, eight days of nothing except the torture of my thoughts at what it means to have no news. Luckily, calculus cares not a whit about my troubles, and neither does the civilization of ancient China. To dwell on hard facts and long-ago events is the closest I've come to actual pleasure.

After the last class ends, I take the train downtown to my dad's office, where it's nothing but the same shit as all the days before. The only difference now is that I can sit and do homework in a conference room between interrogations. *Why did you write in your diary about Syrian refugees on April 23? Why did your father charge \$79 at a flower shop on June 12?*

But it's clearer to me with each day that passes, with each pointless question, that they have no idea what they're doing, or even what

they're looking for. It's obvious that looking for clues in a schoolgirl's diary entries and old credit card statements is the best they can manage.

I see Joey Diaz rarely, and when I do, he only squeezes my shoulder and tells me, "It's a marathon, not a sprint." I see Carlisle even less often. It's always some variation of *nothing new today*, said with a brusque, dickish tone as he stirs his coffee with a pen.

It goes this way for yet another week. Monday through Friday, I go to school, then to the building downtown. There they don't even bother with the interrogations anymore. I study in a conference room, the red VISITOR badge dangling around my neck, and the only time I talk to anyone is when an agent peeks in and asks if I want coffee. Gradually, I realize the badge is right. I'm just a visitor who happens to be there, not the object of inquiry, not even an object of interest. The automatic looks of pity I used to get from everyone have turned to looks of polite tolerance. And one day, when I catch Carlisle in a hallway and ask if he's heard anything new, he says, "About what?"

Every night, I return home to Georgina, where there is dinner waiting for me, and a recap of her day's adventures in the city. Every night, I look for a reason to hate her, this interloper, this stranger. But I come up empty.

The truth is, she's been nothing but kind to me. Nothing but sweet. Nothing but generous. And here, this part, this is where it gets weird: It's her love that she's generous with most of all. We're nothing to each other besides a strand of shared DNA, but that's not how Georgina sees it. She helps me with my calculus, and turns out to have majored in mathematics in college. She shares the dirty joke she overheard in the salon, then giggles along with me. She holds me when I break down, whispering into my ear *it's okay it's okay it's okay* until I dry out. And it's as she holds me that I realize I have to amend that conclusion

I came to that first night on Bela and Lili's couch, that truth I replayed like a chanted mantra a million times a day: He's already dead and I'm alone.

Because that last part isn't quite true.

As I play with my VISITOR badge and work through a chapter on the Zhou dynasty in my history textbook, Chase Carlisle enters the conference room. He is different today. No more implied *fuck off* when he sees me. No more brusque, dickish tone. Instead, he smiles warmly, like a real human, and inquires after my health and the health of Georgina. When I tell him we're both good, he smiles warmly again, as if he cares about the answer. Then he sits.

"Gwendolyn, I need to speak with you about your father now," he says.

I ball my hands into fists under the table. "You have news," I say, a statement, not a question.

Carlisle inhales through his nose, places his palms flat on the table. "We do not," he says.

"You do not what?"

"Have news."

I blink at him. "So then . . ."

"Gwendolyn, for twenty days the NSA has monitored all communications from all possible sources—terrorists, suspected terrorists, criminals, suspected criminals—everyone. There have been no mentions of your father, nothing related to your father."

My lip trembles. "Look harder."

"French intelligence, French police, our own FBI—they've scoured every inch of Paris. They've interrogated the man your father met there. They've interrogated everyone that man knows, from his brother to the person who delivers his mail."

"And?"

Carlisle turns his hands, palms up. “Nothing.”

“Nothing,” I repeat in a breathy whisper.

“There is no evidence, Gwendolyn—none—that your father was kidnapped. If there were, we would go to the ends of the earth to find him. But right now, nothing indicates anything other than that he—walked away.”

The buzz of the fluorescent lights above us is deafening. I bite my lower lip and feel my face expand into the tortured version of itself that’s become so familiar to me. I force myself to breathe slowly. I count to ten in my head and open my eyes. “But you have no evidence for that, either,” I say. “That he just walked away. You don’t *know* that. You have no *proof* of that.”

“No,” Carlisle says. His eyes are wide, sorrowful. “But such cases—such instances when people simply walk away—rarely provide anything like proof.”

The words burst out of me in a furious shout. “So keep looking!”

He nods slowly. “And we will. I promise.” He folds his hands together, as if in prayer. “But on a different scale.”

“What does that mean, ‘a different scale?’”

“Interpol—it’s a police network, worldwide. . . .”

“I know what fucking Interpol is.”

“Interpol has issued alerts. His passports—diplomatic, civilian, both—have been flagged. And border agents have his photo and biometrics in case he’s traveling as someone else.”

I stare down at my hands, trembling with a sudden violent palsy. “So—a missing person flyer on a telephone pole. That’s what you’re doing. That’s the best you got.”

“A question of resources, really. Manpower. So many threats in the world today. We just can’t afford to—”

“You can’t afford to save your own agent,” I gasp, pushing myself back from the table.

Carlisle grimaces as if the words hurt him. “Unfortunately, without a crime, our best hope is waiting for him to surface on his own. Which means this may take a while.” He leans forward, waits for me to look at him again. “In the meantime—”

“Go to hell.” I cross my arms over my chest, squeeze tight.

“In the meantime, your aunt Georgina. I called her today, explained the situation. We are both in agreement that you should go with her back to Texas. Is it ideal? No. But on a temporary basis—look, Gwendolyn, it’s the best option.” He pulls a thick packet of paper folded in thirds and opens it on the table in front of me.

“What’s this?”

“A court order. Giving your aunt and her husband temporary custody. Until you turn eighteen or your father comes back.” Carlisle coughs, frowns. “Or is declared dead. Legally, I mean.”

I get up to leave. Fuck him. Fuck Georgina. Fuck legally dead. “I know my rights. You can’t just do that. There’s—court hearings. Lawyers. Speaking of which . . .”

He intercepts me at the door, grabbing hold of the handle before I can. “It’s an emergency order. Government attorneys met with the judge in her office this morning.” He looks at me sadly. “Your attendance wasn’t required.”

“Get out of my way.”

“There is no more you can do for you father here in New York,” Carlisle pleads. “You are still a child, Gwendolyn. An intelligent one, absolutely, but per the law, still a child.”

I push past him and through the door, stab the elevator button, and stab it again when it doesn’t come fast enough. I turn around, thinking Carlisle might be coming after me, but he’s not. He’s just standing there in the doorway of the conference room, hands in his pockets, looking at me with what may actually be real human pity.

. . .

In my apartment, I find Georgina sitting on the couch, an empty suitcase open beside her. "It's just temporary," she says like she believes it. "Until he comes home."

"How could you do that?" I seethe. "Your fucking signature. Right there on the court order. While I was at school."

"I'm sorry, Gwendolyn. I am." Her eyes squint like she's about to cry, like she's the fucking aggrieved one here. "This is—it's for your own welfare. The only choice. You know that. In your heart."

I break down again. And once more, there she is, holding me, as if holding me was her right. But she is right. She is. And I know it. Or think I do. Maybe.

"When?" I say into her shoulder.

"This weekend," she says softly. "Sunday morning."

When I'm finally dry and done honking snot into a paper towel, she places her hands on my shoulders, "I have an idea," she says. "Let's go to dinner, my treat, and—you know I've never been to a Broadway show?"

"Tickets are, like, two hundred dollars or something."

"Dinner and a movie, then. Girls' night out!"

Her smile is so damn bright.

At the fancy Thai place Georgina picks out a few blocks from the apartment, I order soup and a Sprite, while she orders crab cheese wontons and pad something and a cosmo.

"All the ladies in New York drink cosmos," she tells me.

*Maybe in 1997*, I want to say. But it's a catty thought. She's sweet and trying so hard. So I say, "Oh, all the time," instead, and touch her hand. "I want to—I want to tell you—that I appreciate it. What you're doing."

She sets down her drink and blinks at me. I can see her eyes are wet. She wants me to come with her, maybe for only a little while, but

maybe forever. And she's cool with that. She and Amber and the good rabbi are cool with that. I marvel at how big their hearts must be.

We finish and go to a movie. A comedy. Part two to a part one neither of us saw, but it was just about to start and there were tickets available, and who are we kidding, that it was really about the movie in the first place. The popcorn is warm and the crowd not too talky. We laugh a little, and I even manage to get lost in the story for a few seconds now and then. The ugly girl isn't ugly after all. See what a new wardrobe and a sassy gay friend can do? This time, she'll get the promotion *and* the man. I just know it.

By ten, we're back in the apartment, and Georgina drinks a glass of white wine and reads the *New York Post*, clucking her tongue and shaking her head at things she says never, ever happen in Texas.

I tell her I'm going to read in my room and kiss her on the cheek as I leave. She jumps a little at the kiss, and then smiles. I close the door to my bedroom behind me, bury my face in the pillow. Fuck you, Dad. Fuck you for doing this to me. Fuck you for taking a job that can get you kidnapped. Fuck you for keeping the only other family I have from me so that they're nothing but strangers and photographs. Fuck you for making me choose.

But he had his reasons. Must have. Right, Dad? I look for a photograph that I always kept on my dresser—of my dad, mom, and me sometime around when I was five. We were on vacation somewhere, Crete maybe, just before we left for the post in Algeria. My mom is in a bikini and wide-brimmed straw hat. My dad is in a pair of baggy swim trunks, and his skin is red from the sun. But this, too, is missing, another item seized in Carlisle's raid. Where are you, you asshole?