

The Bookstore on Willow Creek



Zigmars Berzins

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A Willow Creek Welcome

The gravel crunches under my tires in a way I haven't heard in twelve years — that particular sound of New England driveway stone, sharp and shifting, nothing like the smooth hum of highway asphalt or the silent glide of airport rental-car ramps. I kill the engine and sit for a moment, hands still on the wheel, watching dust settle in the rearview mirror.

The cottage is smaller than I remember. The white clapboard needs a fresh coat, and one of the shutters hangs at a slight angle, just enough to catch my eye and whisper *neglect*. But the maple in the front yard is already turning, edges of the leaves gone rust-red, and the air that seeps through the cracked window carries pine and wet earth and the first real chill of autumn.

I don't get out right away. My body has learned to resist arrivals. For three years I've landed in cities the way a stone skips across water — touch down, lift off, never long enough to sink. Bangkok. Lisbon. Marrakech. Places where I knew no one and no one knew the name of the magazine that fired me. That last part mattered more than I wanted to admit.

The driver's seat has molded itself to my spine over the six-hour drive from Boston, and when I finally push the door open, my legs feel foreign underneath me. I stand

in the driveway and let the quiet press in. No traffic. No sirens. No hotel lobby muzak. Just the wind working through the pines at the edge of the property and, somewhere farther off, the low murmur of the river.

I grab the first box from the backseat — books, mostly, the ones I couldn't leave in storage — and carry it up the flagstone path to the front door. The key is under the mat where Mrs. Delaney, the rental agent, promised it would be. Small towns. Some things don't change.

Inside, the cottage smells like cedar and old wallpaper and the faint ghost of someone else's woodstove fires. The furniture is mismatched but clean: a floral sofa that probably belonged to someone's grandmother, a pine coffee table scarred with water rings, a braided rug in shades of blue and cream. I set the box on the kitchen counter and do a slow walk-through, touching things. The faucet drips. The refrigerator hums. The window above the sink looks out on a backyard I'd forgotten existed — a narrow strip of grass giving way to woods, birch and oak and the dark green of hemlock.

It takes four trips to empty the car. Four boxes, one suitcase, a laptop bag with a broken zipper. Everything I own right now fits in the trunk of a Honda Civic. That fact sits in my chest like a stone I can't quite swallow.

I unpack the books first because books are easy. They

go on the small shelf beside the fireplace in alphabetical order, a habit I picked up from my mother and never shook. *Travels with Charley. The Sheltering Sky. West with the Night.* Titles that used to feel like road maps and now just feel like evidence of a life I'm not sure I'm still living.

The journal goes on the bedside table. It's leather-bound, soft with use, the pages swollen from humidity in a dozen countries. I haven't written in it for six weeks. The last entry is from a hotel room in Chicago, the morning after the *Voyager* piece ran — the one that ended everything, the one where a fact-checker caught three fabricated sources and an interview subject who didn't exist. I don't open it. I just set it down and turn away.

The next box is harder.

I know what's in it before I peel back the packing tape. I packed it myself three weeks ago in my ex's apartment in New York, the one we shared for fourteen months before he decided I was "emotionally unavailable" and "married to the road" and, apparently, also to a coworker named Jenna. I'd thrown things in without looking — a grab-and-run through the life we'd built, or tried to build, or pretended to build. Now, kneeling on the braided rug in a rented cottage in the town I swore I'd never come back to, I have to look.

The yearbook is on top. Willow Creek Regional High School, Class of 1985. I open it to the middle, to the page I knew would be there, the one with the bookmark ribbon I put in at seventeen and never moved. Emily Peterson grins up at me from a black-and-white photo, her red hair a shade the camera couldn't capture, her glasses already the quirky cat-eye frames she'd wear for the rest of her life. Beside her, me. Sarah Miller. Hazel eyes, light brown hair pulled back, smile a little too tight. *Most Likely to See the World*, the caption reads. I close the book.

Underneath: the mug from The Written Word. I pull it out and hold it in both hands. Cream-colored ceramic, the bookstore's logo in faded burgundy ink, an open book with a quill curling through the pages. I bought it the summer before I left for college, the summer Emily and I spent every Saturday morning in the back corner of Mrs. Gable's shop, drinking hot chocolate and reading travel memoirs and planning the lives we were going to have. I trace the rim with my thumb. A chip on the handle I don't remember making.

At the bottom of the box, wrapped in a scrap of tissue paper: the skipping stone. Flat and smooth and gray, small enough to fit in my palm. I picked it up from the bank of Willow Creek itself, the actual creek, not the town, on a September afternoon when I was fifteen and

restless and already dreaming of anywhere else. I'd kept it because it was perfect. Because it had let me skip across the water seven times before it sank, and that felt like a promise.

I set the stone on the windowsill above the kitchen sink, next to the mug. The yearbook goes on the shelf with the travel books, a different kind of journey. Then I stand back and look at the room I've assembled, these few objects arranged in a space that isn't mine, and I feel something shift behind my ribs. Not quite hope. Not quite grief. Something in between, something that doesn't have a name yet.

I'm here. I'm actually here.

The voice drifts through the open kitchen window before I register what I'm hearing. It's high and carrying, the kind of voice designed by nature or habit to travel distances.

"—well, I saw the car pull in about an hour ago. A Honda. Nothing fancy. You know she used to write for those big magazines, the travel ones? I heard she got let go. Something about making things up. Can you imagine?"

I freeze with my hand on the faucet. Mrs. Henderson. I don't need to see her to know. That voice has been the

soundtrack of Willow Creek gossip since I was in pigtails, I remember her holding court on this same porch, same house next door, same relentless cataloguing of everyone's business. The porch is maybe thirty feet from my kitchen window. She's not even trying to be quiet.

"And that new man at the bookstore," Mrs. Henderson continues, and I can picture her on the other side of the hedge, phone cord wrapped around her finger, rocking chair creaking. "The one who took over the café. Thomas something. Vance, I think. Moved here in June, nobody knows where from. Keeps to himself. Eleanor Gable won't say a word about him, which tells you something right there."

A pause. The creak of the rocking chair.

"Well, I'm just saying. First the Miller girl shows up out of nowhere, and now this mysterious café owner who doesn't go to church and doesn't come to town meetings. Something's off. Mark my words."

I turn the faucet on. Cold water, the pipes groaning before they deliver. I let it run over my wrists, a trick I learned in a yoga class in Bali that was supposed to calm the nervous system. It doesn't work, but it gives me something to do with my hands while the heat climbs up my throat.

The Miller girl. I'm thirty years old. I've filed stories from war zones and navigated customs in six languages and once talked my way out of a detention center in rural Myanmar. But here, in Willow Creek, I will always be the Miller girl. The one who left. The one who came back. The one who apparently made things up.

I close the faucet. Dry my hands on my jeans. Walk to the window and pull the curtain closed, not hard, not angry, just final.

The cottage goes dim. Late afternoon light filters through the floral fabric, casting the room in shades of gold and rose. I sit on the sofa, the grandmother sofa, the one that smells like someone else's history, and pull my knees up to my chest.

Emily. I need to see Emily.

The thought arrives fully formed, and once it's there, I can't unthink it. She'll be at The Written Word tomorrow morning. She works the Saturday shift, always has, I know this because we still exchange letters, actual letters on actual paper, the one thing I never let slide no matter where I was. Her last one arrived two weeks before the *Voyager* disaster, and she'd written about the new café owner in her usual Emily way: *He's quiet, Sarah. The kind of quiet that makes you want to know what he's thinking. Also he makes a latte that could*

bring about world peace.

I'd laughed when I read it. I'd been in a hotel room in Chicago, the article still a draft on my laptop, the fabrications not yet woven in, the disaster not yet unfolding. I'd laughed and thought, *I should visit*, and then I'd closed the letter and gone back to work.

Now I'm here. Now I'm sitting in a rented cottage with a skipping stone on the windowsill and a neighbor who's already narrating my failure to the entire town.

I let my head fall back against the sofa cushion. The ceiling has a water stain in the corner, shaped vaguely like a bird in flight. I stare at it until my eyes blur.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll walk to The Written Word. I'll order whatever world-peace latte this Thomas Vance is making. I'll find Emily in the back corner where we always sat, and I'll let her hug me, and I'll tell her everything, the magazine, the breakup, the six weeks of silence where I couldn't write a single word that felt true. Or maybe I won't tell her. Maybe I'll just sit there and let the bookstore wrap around me like it used to, all those Saturday mornings when the world was still something I wanted to see.

Outside, Mrs. Henderson's voice has gone quiet. The pines whisper against the roof. The river murmurs

somewhere beyond the trees, the same river where I found a perfect skipping stone and believed, at fifteen, that perfection was something you could hold onto.

I don't know what I believe now. But I know the bookstore will be warm tomorrow, and Emily will be there, and for the first time in months, that feels like enough to move toward.

The Written Word's Embrace

I pull the door handle before I've decided whether I'm ready to walk in. The brass is cold against my palm, worn smooth in the center where decades of hands have gripped it. The bell above the door chimes. I step inside and the smell hits me first. Old paper and coffee and something else. Lemon polish. Mrs. Gable has been at the shelves again.

The Written Word opens around me like a room I've been walking toward without knowing it. Morning light slants through the front windows and catches the dust floating in the air, and for a second I just stand there with my hand still on the door, breathing in the place. The floorboards creak under someone's weight in the back. A stack of new arrivals sits on the front table, spines facing up, little handwritten recommendation cards tucked under each one. The fireplace isn't lit yet but the smell of last night's ash lingers, cool and faint.

I didn't plan to come here this morning. I told myself I was walking to clear my head, to shake off the restless half-sleep I'd dragged myself through since getting back to town. My feet found Main Street on their own. My hand found that door handle the same way.

"Sarah Miller."

Emily's voice cuts across the café side of the store before I see her. She's behind the counter, red hair braided over one shoulder, those ridiculous cat-eye glasses perched on her nose. She's already grinning. She sets down the mug she was wiping and comes around the counter with her arms out, and I don't have time to brace before she pulls me into a hug that smells like cinnamon and espresso grounds.

"You're here," she says into my shoulder. "You're actually here."

"I'm actually here."

She pulls back and holds me at arm's length, studying my face the way she used to in high school when she knew I was lying about being fine. "You look tired."

"Thanks."

"I mean you look like you haven't slept in a week, which is probably accurate, but you're still you." She squeezes my arms and lets go. "Coffee?"

"God, yes."

I follow her to the counter and lean against it while she works the espresso machine. The hiss of steam fills the quiet. The café side of The Written Word is small. Four tables, mismatched chairs, a battered leather armchair

near the fireplace that's been there since I was a kid. Mrs. Gable added the café six years ago, Emily told me in one of her letters. I remember reading that letter in a hostel in Prague, trying to picture it. The reality is better. It feels like it's always been here.

"So," Emily says, sliding a latte across the counter toward me. The foam is shaped into a clumsy leaf. "How bad was the drive?"

"Long. I stopped twice for coffee that tasted like regret and once because I thought I saw a moose."

"Was it a moose?"

"It was a mailbox."

Emily laughs, and the sound of it loosens something in my chest. I wrap my hands around the mug. The warmth seeps into my palms.

"I'm glad you came back," she says, quieter now. She's not looking at me. She's wiping down the counter with a rag, even though it's already clean. "I know things got messy. With the magazine, and with what's-his-name."

"We don't have to talk about it."

"We don't." She looks up. "But I want you to know I'm glad you're here. Whatever the reason."

I take a sip of the latte. The foam is perfect. "I missed you, Em."

"Obviously. I'm a delight." She tosses the rag over her shoulder and leans her elbows on the counter. "So what's the plan? How long are you staying?"

The question lands heavier than she meant it to. I've been asking myself the same thing since I crossed the town line. A week? A month? Until the money runs out? Until I stop waking up at three in the morning with my heart racing and no idea why?

"I don't know yet," I say. "A while, maybe. I picked up a freelance gig. A series of articles about small New England towns. I figured I'd start here."

Emily's eyebrows go up. "You're writing about Willow Creek?"

"Is that weird?"

"It's perfect." She pushes off the counter and gestures around the store. "You've got the bookstore, the river, the covered bridge, the apple orchard. You've got the fall festival coming up in three weeks. You've got enough material for a whole book, let alone an article."

"I don't know about a book."

"I do." She points at me. "You've been running around writing about places you don't care about for years. Write about somewhere that matters."

I don't answer. I drink my coffee and let the warmth fill the space where words would go.

The bell above the door chimes. A woman in a wool coat steps inside and makes her way toward the fiction shelves. Emily glances over, then back at me.

"Mrs. Gable's in the back," she says. "She'll want to see you."

"I should say hi."

"She's been talking about you since I told her you were coming. In her way." Emily's mouth twitches. "She said, and I quote, 'It will be nice to see if Sarah has grown into herself.'"

"What does that even mean?"

"With Mrs. Gable? Who knows. But she meant it as a compliment."

I leave my half-finished latte on the counter and walk toward the back of the store. The office door is open a crack. I knock once, lightly, and push it open.

Mrs. Gable is at her desk, a ledger open in front of her, a fountain pen in her hand. Her silver hair is pinned up in its usual bun. A cameo brooch sits at the collar of her blouse. She looks exactly the same as she did when I was fifteen and coming in here to hide from my parents' fighting. Smaller, maybe. The years have pulled her inward. But her eyes are the same. Sharp. Knowing. The kind of eyes that make you feel like you've already told her everything.

"Sarah." She sets the pen down. "Close the door, please. The draft from the front makes my hands ache."

I pull the door shut and stand there, suddenly unsure what to do with my arms. Mrs. Gable studies me for a long moment. Then she nods, once, as if confirming something to herself.

"You look well," she says.

"I look tired. Emily told me."

"Emily is young. She thinks tiredness is a condition to be cured." Mrs. Gable folds her hands on the desk. "I think it's a sign of having lived. Sit down."

I take the chair across from her. It's a wooden thing with a thin cushion, the same chair that's been in this office for as long as I can remember. My back finds the same uncomfortable ridge in the slats.

"Emily mentioned you're writing about the town," Mrs. Gable says.

"I'm thinking about it. Starting here, at least."

"Willow Creek has a way of pulling people back." She says it evenly, without emphasis, but her gaze doesn't leave my face. "Some things find their way home eventually. People too."

The word *home* sits in my stomach like a stone. I shift in the chair. The wood creaks.

"I'm just visiting," I say. "For now."

"Of course." Mrs. Gable's expression doesn't change. "That's what I told myself too, when I came back. I was twenty-four. My mother had fallen ill, and I planned to stay for six months. Just long enough to get her back on her feet and sell the store." She glances around the office, at the shelves of old catalogs and the framed photographs on the wall. "That was forty-six years ago."

I don't know what to say to that. I look down at my hands. There's a callus on my thumb from gripping the steering wheel.

"I'm not saying you'll stay," Mrs. Gable continues. "I'm saying that plans have a way of changing when you

stop running long enough to breathe."

"I wasn't running."

She tilts her head. The light from the desk lamp catches the silver threads in her hair. "Weren't you?"

The silence stretches. Somewhere in the front of the store, Emily laughs at something the customer says. The radiator ticks.

My eyes drift to the corner of Mrs. Gable's desk. There's a photograph there, half-hidden under a stack of invoices. A black-and-white print in a tarnished silver frame. I can just make out two figures. A young woman with dark hair and a wide smile. Mrs. Gable, I realize, decades younger, her face unlined and bright. And beside her, a man I don't recognize. Tall. Broad-shouldered. His arm around her waist. They're standing in front of the bookstore, but the sign above the door is different. Older. The paint is fresh.

Mrs. Gable follows my gaze. Her hand moves, quick and deliberate, and slides a folder over the frame. The photograph disappears.

"Old things," she says. "Nothing to trouble yourself with."

But her voice has changed. A door has closed

somewhere inside it.

I want to ask who he is. The question is right there on my tongue. But Mrs. Gable is already straightening the papers on her desk, and the moment passes, and I tell myself it's none of my business.

"Emily mentioned the new café owner," I say, because it's the first thing that comes to mind. "Thomas something?"

"Thomas Vance." Mrs. Gable's composure settles back into place. "He'll be in tomorrow morning. You should come by. He's done remarkable things with the café since he took it over last spring."

"What's he like?"

Mrs. Gable considers the question. "Quiet," she says finally. "Capable. He keeps to himself, mostly. But he's kind. The sort of kindness that doesn't need to announce itself." She picks up her pen again. "You'll see."

I stand up. My legs feel stiff from sitting. "It was good to see you, Mrs. Gable."

"Eleanor," she says, without looking up from the ledger. "You're not a child anymore. Call me Eleanor."

"Eleanor." The name feels strange in my mouth. I try it again silently. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"I know you will."

I let myself out of the office and pull the door shut behind me. Emily is at the front counter now, arranging a display of autumn-themed books. Pumpkins and golden leaves and covers in shades of orange and burgundy. She looks up when I approach.

"How'd it go?"

"She told me to call her Eleanor."

Emily's eyes go wide. "She never lets anyone call her Eleanor. I've worked here for six years and I still call her Mrs. Gable." She sets down the book she's holding. "What did you do?"

"I don't know. Sat there. Answered questions."

"Well, you've been anointed." Emily grins. "So. Tomorrow morning. Thomas will be here around eight. You should come by. I'll make you a real latte, not the sad foam thing I gave you today."

"The foam thing was good."

"It was adequate. Tomorrow will be good." She leans

forward and lowers her voice. "He's worth meeting, Sarah. I'm not saying anything. I'm just saying."

"You're always saying something."

"I'm a librarian. It's a professional hazard."

I laugh, and it surprises me. The sound comes out easier than I expected. I look around the bookstore one more time. The morning light has shifted, brighter now, pooling on the floorboards. The woman in the wool coat is at the register with a stack of paperbacks. The fireplace is still cold, but I can imagine it lit. I can imagine sitting in that leather armchair with a book and a cup of coffee and nowhere to be.

"Tomorrow," I say. "Eight o'clock."

"I'll be here." Emily reaches across the counter and squeezes my hand. "It's good to have you back, Sarah. Really."

I squeeze back. Then I let go and walk toward the door. The bell chimes above me as I step outside. The autumn air hits my face, cool and sharp, carrying the smell of dry leaves and woodsmoke from someone's chimney. Main Street stretches out in front of me, quiet and familiar. The hardware store. The post office. The white church steeple rising above the maples.

I pull my sweater tighter around my shoulders and start walking. My feet know the way. They've known it all along.

Coffee and Conversation

"You came back."

Emily's voice reaches me before I've even cleared the threshold. She's behind the counter, wiping down the espresso machine with a rag, her red braid swinging as she looks up. The morning light slants through the front windows of the bookstore, catching the dust motes floating above the fiction section.

"I said I would," I say, letting the door swing shut behind me. The bell chimes once, then settles.

"People say lots of things." She tosses the rag into a bin under the counter and grins. "You're early. I haven't even put the muffins out yet."

The shop smells different this morning. Yesterday it was all old paper and wood polish. Today there's something else underneath. Cinnamon, maybe. Butter and flour and sugar heating through. My stomach answers before I do.

"Mrs. Gable in yet?"

Emily shakes her head. "Eleanor doesn't come in until ten on Thursdays. Bridge club at the community center." She leans forward on her elbows, lowering her voice. "Which means you get the full tour without the

interrogation."

"She wasn't interrogating me."

"She was absolutely interrogating you. She just does it with charm." Emily straightens up, her gaze shifting to something over my shoulder. "Oh. Perfect timing."

I turn.

Thomas Vance is walking toward us from the back hallway, a sheet tray balanced on both palms. He's taller than I expected. Six feet, maybe a little more, with the kind of lean build that suggests he forgets to eat when he's busy. Dark brown hair, slightly too long, pushed back from his forehead but already falling forward again. He's wearing a gray henley with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, and there's a dusting of flour on his left forearm.

He looks up and sees me. His stride falters for half a beat. Not awkwardly. Just a pause. The kind of pause that means he's placing me, cataloguing, deciding something.

"Sarah," Emily says, "this is Thomas. Thomas, this is Sarah Miller. The one I told you about."

"The travel writer," he says. His voice is quieter than I expected. Lower. He sets the tray on the counter and

brushes his hands together. Flour dusts the air between them.

"Former travel writer," I say. "Currently unemployed and reconsidering all my life choices."

The corner of his mouth moves. Not quite a smile. "That sounds like a more interesting story."

"Depends who's telling it."

His eyes meet mine. Blue. Not the pale, watery blue some people have. This is deeper. Lake water in late autumn, when the surface goes still and you can't tell how far down the bottom is.

He holds the look a moment longer than necessary. Then he turns to the tray and starts transferring muffins into a glass display case. Blueberry. The smell hits me properly now. Warm fruit and brown sugar and something with a sharp edge. Lemon zest, probably.

"Coffee?" Emily asks me, already reaching for a cup.

"Please. Whatever's strongest."

"She means the dark roast," Emily says to Thomas. "Sarah's been drinking jet fuel since high school."

Thomas glances at me. "We have a Sumatran that might

work. Earthy. Low acid."

"That sounds perfect."

He moves to the espresso machine. I watch him tamp the grounds. His hands are steady. Methodical. He doesn't rush and he doesn't fumble. Every motion looks practiced without looking mechanical.

"Emily says you've been here a few years," I say.

"Five."

"And before that?"

The question hangs. He doesn't look up from the portafilter. "Before that I was somewhere else."

Emily catches my eye from behind his shoulder. Her expression says *see what I mean?*

"That's very specific," I say. "Thank you for the detail."

He does smile then. Just barely. It changes his whole face. The guardedness doesn't disappear, but it shifts. A door opening an inch.

"I moved around," he says. "Nothing as interesting as travel writing."

"You'd be surprised how uninteresting travel writing

can be. Mostly it's delayed flights and food poisoning and trying to describe sunsets without using the word 'breathtaking.'

"Did you ever use it?"

"All the time. Editors cut it out."

He sets the cup on the counter between us. A small white ceramic mug with the shop's logo stamped on the side. The crema on top is the color of caramel.

"On the house," he says.

"You don't have to—"

"First cup is always free for new customers." He pauses. "Or returning ones. Emily's rule."

"It's a very good rule," Emily says from the register. "I have excellent instincts."

I wrap both hands around the mug. The warmth seeps into my palms. I take a sip. It's good. Really good. Smooth and dark and exactly strong enough.

"Emily mentioned you're working on a writing project," Thomas says. He's leaning against the back counter now, arms crossed. Not closed off. Just settled. "Something about small towns."

"A series of articles. New England communities, the ones tourists miss. I'm starting with Willow Creek."

"What angle?"

The question catches me off guard. Most people ask *what's it about* or *how much does it pay*. Not *what angle*.

"I'm still figuring that out," I admit. "I thought I'd start with the obvious. The history. The landmarks. But I want to get past the postcard version. The things only locals know."

He nods slowly. "There's the old mill road. It's not on any town map. Follows the creek about two miles west of the covered bridge. There's a stone foundation out there from the original gristmill. 1780s, I think. Nobody talks about it because the land's technically private, but the owner doesn't mind hikers."

I set the mug down. "How do you know about that?"

"I walk a lot."

"You walk a lot and you found a two-hundred-year-old foundation that isn't on any map."

"I pay attention."

I reach into my bag. The notebook is there. A small spiral-bound thing I bought at the drugstore yesterday. I pull it out and flip it open.

"Mill road," I say, pen poised. "Two miles west of the covered bridge. 1780s."

I look up and catch it. A flicker. Something tightening around his eyes. It's gone before I can name it, but I saw it.

"You're taking notes," he says.

"That's what writers do."

"I thought you were still figuring out the angle."

"I am. But I don't want to forget anything."

He doesn't respond. His gaze drops to the notebook, then back to my face. The ease from a moment ago has thinned. He's still standing there, still relaxed against the counter, but something has shifted. A door closing.

I close the notebook. Slide it back into my bag.

"Old habits," I say. "I spent twelve years writing everything down. It's hard to turn off."

"I understand."

He says it evenly. But I don't think he does understand. Or maybe he understands too well.

Emily reappears at my elbow with a muffin on a small plate. "Blueberry. Fresh out of the oven. Thomas has been experimenting with the recipe for three weeks."

"It's not an experiment anymore," he says. "I'm satisfied with it."

"He says 'satisfied' like other people say 'ecstatic,'" Emily tells me. "You'll learn to translate."

The muffin is warm. I break off a piece and the steam rises. The crumb is tender. Buttery without being greasy. The blueberries have burst and stained the batter purple in streaks.

"This is incredible," I say.

Thomas gives a small nod. "Good."

"That's it? 'Good'?"

"I'm satisfied," he says, and this time the smile reaches his eyes.

A woman approaches the counter. Gray hair, wool coat, a stack of books pressed against her chest. Thomas straightens up and moves to the register. I step aside,

taking my coffee and my muffin to one of the small tables near the window.

The morning light is brighter now. It catches the steam curling off my cup and makes the wood of the table glow. I watch Thomas ring up the woman's books. He handles them carefully. One at a time. He doesn't slide them across the counter. He lifts each one, turns it over, checks the price on the back cover, and sets it down gently. Like the books matter.

My gaze drifts across the counter while he's occupied. The espresso machine. The glass display case. A small ceramic tip jar with a hand-lettered sign that says *For Emily's book fund*. A stack of napkins. A framed photograph, half-hidden behind the napkin dispenser.

I lean forward slightly.

It's a landscape. Black and white. A coastline. Not the gentle, sandy coast of Cape Cod or the rocky beaches of Maine. This is something else. Cliffs. Jagged and raw, dropping straight into the sea. Waves breaking white against the base of them. No houses. No boats. No people. Just rock and water and a sky that looks cold even in monochrome.

I've been to a lot of coasts. I've written about a lot of coasts. This one doesn't look like New England. It looks

like the Pacific Northwest. Or maybe farther north. Alaska. British Columbia. Somewhere remote. Somewhere you go when you don't want to be found.

"Sarah?"

Emily is beside me. I didn't hear her approach.

"Sorry." I sit back. "I was looking at the photograph."

She glances at the counter. "Oh. That's been there since he opened. He never talks about it."

"It's beautiful."

"It's lonely," she says. Then she shrugs. "Anyway. What do you think?"

"About what?"

She tilts her head toward Thomas, who is still with the customer. "About him."

"I've known him for ten minutes."

"And?"

"And he's interesting."

"Interesting," she repeats. "That's a very careful word."

"It's an accurate word."

She grins. "He gave you a free coffee."

"He said it was your rule."

"I've never made a rule about free coffee in my life."

I look at her. She looks back at me, her expression entirely too pleased with itself.

"Don't," I say.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're doing the thing. The matchmaking thing. You did it in high school with Jason Brewer and it was a disaster."

"Jason Brewer was a disaster. I just facilitated."

The customer leaves. Thomas returns to the espresso machine and starts cleaning the steam wand. His back is to us now. The flour is still on his forearm. He hasn't noticed it or hasn't bothered to wipe it off.

I finish my muffin. The coffee is cooling but still good. I drink it slowly, watching the street outside the window. A woman walks past with a golden retriever. A man in a flannel shirt is sweeping the sidewalk in front of the hardware store. The church bells haven't started yet, but they will. I remember the rhythm. Ten o'clock.

Noon. Six in the evening. The town moves to them without thinking about it.

"I should go," I say eventually. "I have notes to organize. Research to pretend I'm doing."

Emily hugs me. Quick and tight. "Come back tomorrow. I'll make you something with caramel. Thomas has been working on a new syrup."

"I thought he was satisfied with everything."

"He says he is. He keeps tinkering anyway."

I gather my bag and my empty mug. I carry the mug to the counter. Thomas turns as I approach.

"Thanks for the coffee," I say. "And the mill road tip."

"You're welcome." He takes the mug from my hand. His fingers don't brush mine. They come close. Close enough that I notice the near-miss.

I hesitate. The photograph is still there, half-hidden. I don't ask about it. It's not my question to ask. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"I'll see you around," I say.

"Sarah."

I stop.

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a small card. Cream-colored. The shop's logo. He sets it on the counter between us.

"Your next coffee is on me," he says. "Not Emily's rule. Mine."

I pick up the card. It's blank on the back except for a single handwritten word. *Sumatra*. His handwriting is neat. Small. Careful.

"You don't have to—"

"I know."

I tuck the card into my bag. "Thank you."

He nods. Then he turns back to the espresso machine, and I walk toward the door. The bell chimes above me. Outside, the autumn air is sharp and clean. I pull my sweater tighter and start walking toward the cottage.

Half a block later, I realize I'm smiling. Not at anything in particular. Just smiling. The way you do when a song you'd forgotten comes on the radio and you remember all the words.

The card is in my bag. I'll use it tomorrow. I already

know I will.

An Offer of Stories

Two days. I've been thinking about the way she looked at the photograph behind the counter — the coastline one, the one that doesn't belong here — for two days. Not constantly. I'm not that far gone. But the thought surfaces at odd moments: while I'm steaming milk, while I'm wiping down tables, while I'm locking up and the street is quiet and the autumn air smells like woodsmoke from someone's chimney.

She noticed it. Most people don't.

The morning rush has thinned. Emily's at the front of the shop reorganizing the window display — I can hear her muttering about the dust jacket on the new Atwood — and I'm restocking the pastry case when the bell above the entrance chimes. I don't look up right away. Habit. Give people a moment to orient themselves before you ask what they want.

But I know it's her.

I know because the rhythm of footsteps is different — slower than a regular's, someone still learning the geography of the place. I know because Emily's muttering stops, which means she's seen someone worth stopping for. And I know because my hand, reaching for the tongs, pauses half a beat longer than it

should.

"Morning," Sarah says.

She's at the counter now. Same jacket as Tuesday, hair pulled back, a notebook tucked under her arm. There's something different about her posture today — less braced, less like she's expecting the floor to give way. Her eyes find mine and she smiles, and it's not the polite smile from her first visit. It's smaller. Realer.

"You came back," I say.

"I had a card." She pulls it from her jacket pocket — slightly bent at one corner now, like it's been carried around. "Seemed wasteful not to use it."

"Thrift. Admirable quality."

"I'm full of them."

Emily appears at my elbow, her braid swinging. "Sarah! I was hoping you'd come in. Did you try the cinnamon scone yet? Thomas makes them on Thursdays. They're life-altering."

"I haven't," Sarah says. "But I'm open to alteration."

"See?" Emily gestures at me. "This is why I like her. She gets it."

I pour Sarah's coffee without asking — she takes it black, I remember — and add a scone to the plate. When I set it on the counter, her eyebrows lift.

"On the house," I say. "Research incentive."

"Research?"

"You mentioned a writing project. Small towns, local color." I lean my forearms on the counter. "Figured you might need sustenance."

She wraps her hands around the mug. The steam curls up past her wrists. "You remembered that."

It's not a question. I don't treat it like one.

She takes a sip, and something in her shoulders settles. We're quiet for a moment, not the awkward kind, the kind where two people are deciding whether they want to say more. Emily has drifted back to the window display, but I catch her glancing over once, twice, cataloguing.

"So," Sarah says, "about that project."

I wait.

"I'm writing a series. New England towns, the ones that don't make the postcards. What makes them tick, what

holds them together." She pauses. "Willow Creek is my first."

"Your hometown."

"That's the idea. Start with what you know." She says it lightly, but there's a weight underneath. I've heard that weight before, in my own voice, usually, when someone asks where I'm from.

"What do you know so far?"

She laughs, a short exhale. "Less than I thought. I've been gone a long time."

"How long?"

"Twelve years. Give or take."

I nod. Twelve years is a specific kind of absence. Long enough that the town has changed without you. Long enough that you've changed without it. Long enough that coming back feels like putting on a coat you outgrew and finding it fits differently than you remember.

"You want the hidden stuff," I say. "Not the chamber of commerce version."

"Exactly." She leans forward, and her eyes do

something, sharpen, focus. It's the first time I've seen her look like this, like she's found a current and decided to swim with it. "Emily mentioned you know the area. The mill road thing, that's exactly the kind of detail I need. Places with stories. People who've been here forever and people who showed up yesterday. The layers."

I think about it. I've been here five years, which makes me neither old guard nor newcomer. Long enough to know things, not long enough to belong in the way Mrs. Gable belongs. But I pay attention. It's what I do.

"There's a woman out on Route 7," I say. "Margaret Hale. She's eighty-three and she's been keeping bees since she was nineteen. Her honey shows up at the farmer's market, but nobody knows she also kept a journal every single year. Weather, blooms, swarm patterns. Sixty-four years of notebooks in her attic."

Sarah has her notebook open now, pen moving. "Sixty-four years."

"She'd probably let you see them. She doesn't get many visitors."

"How do you know about her?"

"She comes in for tea sometimes. Earl Grey, two sugars. She likes to talk about the winters." I shrug. "I

like to listen."

Sarah's pen stops. She looks at me, and there's something in her expression I can't quite name, surprise, maybe, or recognition. "You're good at this."

"At listening?"

"At paying attention."

Before I can answer, the bell chimes again and a cluster of customers comes in, two women in their sixties, a man with a newspaper folded under his arm. I straighten up and Sarah steps aside, but she doesn't go far. She takes her coffee and her scone to the corner table by the window, the one with the good light, and she watches me work.

I make lattes and ring up muffins and listen to the women discuss the upcoming Fall Festival with the intensity of generals planning a campaign. When the rush passes, I glance over. Sarah is writing, her head bent over the notebook, and she's chewing on the end of her pen in a way that makes her look about nineteen.

Mrs. Gable emerges from the back office. She's wearing her usual, cardigan, brooch, hair pinned up like she's expecting a state visit, and she surveys the room with the slow, deliberate gaze of someone who has owned this building for four decades and considers

every corner of it hers.

Her eyes land on Sarah.

"She's back," Mrs. Gable says, not to me, not to anyone in particular. She says it the way you'd note a change in the weather.

"She's working on something," I say. "Writing project."

"I know." Mrs. Gable adjusts a stack of napkins that didn't need adjusting. "Emily told me. Small-town profiles." She pauses. "Starting here."

There's something in her tone, approval, but also a sharper edge, like she's testing the idea for weaknesses. Mrs. Gable doesn't miss much. She's been watching Sarah since the moment she walked in three days ago, and I suspect she's been thinking about her longer than that. The Miller family left a mark on this town, and Mrs. Gable has a long memory.

She crosses to Sarah's table. I don't follow, but I don't look away either. I'm wiping down the espresso machine, which puts me within earshot.

"Sarah," Mrs. Gable says. "May I?"

Sarah looks up, startled, then gestures at the empty chair. "Of course."

Mrs. Gable sits. She folds her hands on the table, rings on three fingers, knuckles just beginning to show their age. "Emily tells me you're writing about us."

"Trying to." Sarah closes her notebook. "I'm still figuring out the angle."

"You'll find it. You always had a good eye."

"You remember?"

"I remember everyone who came through this shop as a child. You used to sit in that exact corner." Mrs. Gable nods toward the children's section, now occupied by a rack of greeting cards. "Horse books, mostly. You checked out *Misty of Chincoteague* four times."

Sarah's face does something complicated, pleasure and embarrassment and something else, something closer to pain. "I'd forgotten that."

"Most people forget." Mrs. Gable's voice is gentle but unrelenting. "Tell me something, Sarah. Why did you leave?"

The question lands like a stone in still water. Sarah's hand moves toward her coffee cup, then stops. "I wanted to see more of the world."

"That's the polite answer."

"It's the true one."

"Is it the whole one?"

Sarah doesn't answer right away. I keep my hands busy, wipe, rinse, wipe, but I'm listening. I shouldn't be. It's not my conversation. But I am.

"I wanted broader horizons," Sarah says finally. "I wanted to be someone who'd been places, not someone who'd always been here. No offense."

"None taken." Mrs. Gable studies her. "You're not the first person to feel that way. You won't be the last. But most people who leave don't come back."

"I'm just visiting."

"That's what I said too." Mrs. Gable's mouth curves. "Forty-six years ago."

She rises, pats Sarah's hand once, and walks back toward her office. At the doorway she pauses and looks at me, a quick, knowing glance that says *I see you listening* and *I'll be asking you questions next* in equal measure.

I go back to wiping the machine.

An hour passes. The shop empties out, then fills again,

then settles into the mid-morning lull. Emily leaves for her lunch break, waving at Sarah on her way out. I'm restocking the coffee beans when Sarah approaches the counter again.

"Thank you," she says. "For the suggestions. I'm going to call Margaret Hale this afternoon."

"She'll like that."

"You know," Sarah says, and she's fidgeting with the corner of her notebook, bending it back and forth, "I was going to work from home. My rented place, I mean. But the light is terrible and the heating makes this noise like a dying accordion."

I wait.

"I was wondering, would it be strange if I worked here? Sometimes. Not every day. Just when I need to be around people, or caffeine, or both."

I consider this. She's asking permission, which means she's already decided to stay. Not just in Willow Creek, here, in this shop, in my line of sight. The thought settles somewhere in my chest, warm and slightly dangerous.

"That corner table," I say. "The one you're at now. Best light in the place. Nobody uses it after ten."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's an office offer. Unofficial. No lease."

She smiles, and it's the real one again. "What's the rent?"

"You buy coffee. Occasionally you tell me something interesting about what you're writing."

"That's it?"

"I'm a simple landlord."

She laughs, a real laugh, surprised out of her. "Deal."

She goes back to her table. I watch her settle in: notebook open, pen uncapped, coffee cooling at her elbow. She's not pretending to work anymore. She's actually doing it. Her hand moves across the page in steady lines, and every so often she stops, stares out the window at the maple tree dropping leaves onto the sidewalk, then writes again.

Something shifts in the room. It takes me a moment to identify it: the quality of her presence. She's not a customer anymore. She's not just passing through. She's planted herself here, in this corner, with her coffee and her questions and her twelve-year absence, and she's decided to make something of it.

I know that feeling. I did the same thing five years ago, walking into this town with nothing but a skill set and a need to be somewhere nobody knew my name. It worked. Mostly.

The afternoon stretches on. More customers come and go. Mrs. Gable reappears to handle a shipment of new releases, and I hear her chatting with Sarah briefly, something about the town archives, a suggestion for historical research. Sarah writes that down too.

At four o'clock, Sarah packs up her things. She brings her empty mug to the counter and sets it down carefully, like it's made of something breakable.

"Productive day?" I ask.

"Productive start." She tucks her notebook into her bag. "I have about six pages of notes and three new leads. Margaret Hale, the town archives, and apparently there's a man who carves duck decoys out of driftwood and sells them from his garage."

"Walter. He's been doing that for thirty years."

"You know him too?"

"He drinks black tea. No sugar."

She shakes her head, but she's smiling. "You really do

know everyone."

"Not everyone." I pause. "Just the ones who come in here."

She's about to turn away when I remember. "There's something else. This weekend, Saturday, there's a history fair at the old Grange hall. It's not the big one. Not the Fall Festival. This is smaller. Local historians, family records, old photographs. The kind of thing that doesn't make the newspaper but everyone shows up for anyway."

"And you think it would help my article."

"I think you'd find things there you won't find anywhere else."

She considers this. "Are you going?"

The question is casual, but it's not. I can feel the weight of it, the way it's offering something, a chance to be in the same place, outside of here, without the counter between us.

"I might," I say. "If business is slow."

"Right." She nods. "Well. Maybe I'll see you there."

"Maybe."

She leaves. The bell chimes. Through the window I watch her walk down Main Street, her bag over her shoulder, her hair catching the late-afternoon light. She doesn't look back.

I pick up her empty mug. There's a faint lipstick print on the rim, not the color, she doesn't wear any, just the ghost of where her mouth was. I stand there holding it longer than necessary.

"You're staring," Mrs. Gable says from behind me.

"I'm working."

"You're staring at a coffee cup."

I set it in the sink. "Inventory."

She makes a sound that's halfway between a hum and a laugh. "She's good for this place. For you, maybe."

"She's writing an article."

"Is that all she's doing?"

I don't answer. Mrs. Gable pats my arm, a gesture so maternal it makes something in my chest tighten, and walks back to her office. The door closes behind her with a soft click.

I finish closing up. I wipe the counters, restock the

cups, count the register. At the end, I stand behind the counter and look at the corner table where Sarah sat all afternoon. The light has shifted, gone golden and low, and it falls across the empty chair in a way that makes the whole corner look like a painting someone forgot to finish.

Saturday. The Grange hall. She might be there.

I turn off the lights. The shop goes dark except for the streetlamp glow through the front window. Outside, a car passes, and someone's laughing on the sidewalk, and the maple tree is still dropping leaves onto the pavement.

I lock the door and walk home with my hands in my pockets, and I don't think about Sarah Miller. Not much. Only twice. Only the whole way.

Whispers on Main Street

The bandstand is empty. That's the first thing I notice. Not wrong, exactly — it's a Tuesday morning in late September, no reason for anyone to be up there with a tuba. But the emptiness has a quality to it, a kind of held breath, like the whitewashed octagon is waiting for something that's running late.

I find a bench on the east side of the square, where the sun has warmed the wooden slats enough that I can feel it through my jeans. My writing pad is open on my knee. I've written exactly four words: *Willow Creek town square*. Underneath that, nothing.

The square does its morning business around me. Mr. Kowalski from the hardware store wrestles a sandwich board onto the sidewalk — *Fall Special: Paint Sale* in blocky chalk letters. Two mothers with strollers pause near the war memorial, heads tilted toward each other in that particular angle of shared complaint. A golden retriever tied to a bike rack watches a squirrel with the tragic patience of the perpetually disappointed.

I should be taking notes. Local color. Rhythms of small-town life. That's the assignment I gave myself, sitting in Emily's kitchen yesterday afternoon with a second cup of tea and a sudden conviction that I needed to *do* something, produce something, prove that this series of

articles wasn't just a convenient excuse to linger.

Instead I'm watching the bandstand not have a band in it.

The coffee I bought from the bakery across the street has gone lukewarm. I take a sip anyway, and the bitterness coats my tongue. Thomas's coffee is better. I push that thought aside and pick up my pen.

Tuesday, 10:30 AM. Square moderately busy. Hardware store running paint sale. Mothers, strollers, dog.

Riveting stuff. The *Globe* will be beating down my door.

A breeze kicks up, sending a scatter of maple leaves across the brick path in front of me. One of them — bright orange, edges just beginning to curl — lands on my shoe. I leave it there. The air smells like woodsmoke and the last of the summer grass, that particular autumn combination that always makes me think of new school supplies and old griefs, for reasons I've never quite untangled.

Behind me, on the other side of the low hedge that separates the bench from the sidewalk, two women have settled onto their own bench. I registered them when they arrived — the soft grunt of effort, the rustle of shopping bags being redistributed — but I didn't turn

around. Now their voices carry through the hedge, pitched for public consumption in the way of people who've spent decades being heard across kitchens and church basements.

"— and I said to her, I said, you can't expect a man like that to just appear out of nowhere and not have people wonder."

The voice is reedy, emphatic. I'd place its owner in her seventies, give or take. The response comes in a lower register, almost a rumble: "Well, Martha, people do move. It's not a crime."

"Moving is one thing. Buying a business inside of a week is another."

My pen stops moving on the page. I don't turn around.

"Eleanor Gable liked him well enough to sell," the lower voice says. Reasonable. A peacemaker, or someone who enjoys playing one.

"Eleanor Gable," Martha says, and the name lands with the weight of a gavel, "has a soft heart and you know it. A man comes in with a sad story and a checkbook, and she's not going to ask the hard questions. That's what the rest of us are for."

I set my coffee cup down on the bench beside me. The

breeze has picked up; the leaf on my shoe trembles but holds.

“What hard questions?” The lower voice sounds skeptical now. “He runs that café beautifully. Emily adores him. Half the town’s in there every morning.”

“And nobody knows a thing about him. Not really.” Martha’s voice drops, and I have to strain to catch the next words. “He showed up two years ago — *two years*, Eleanor — from somewhere up north. Maine, maybe. Or Canada. No family, no references anyone can find, no explanation for why a man his age would leave everything behind and start over in a place where he didn’t know a soul.”

Eleanor. The other woman is named Eleanor. Not Mrs. Gable — a different Eleanor. The name is common enough in a town like this. Still, I file it away.

“People start over,” the second Eleanor says. “It happens.”

“People start over when something’s gone wrong.” Martha’s voice is sharp now, the reedy quality tightening into something harder. “You don’t walk away from a whole life unless you’re running from it. I heard he was married. I heard there was an accident. I heard — ”

"You've heard a lot of things."

"I pay attention. Someone has to."

My hand has gone still on the writing pad. The four words I wrote earlier blur a little at the edges, and I realize I'm pressing the pen into the paper hard enough to leave an indent.

Thomas. Married. An accident. Running from something.

The words arrange themselves in my mind like puzzle pieces that don't quite fit but suggest a shape anyway. I think about the photograph behind the espresso bar — that rugged coastline, not New England, not anywhere I recognized. I think about the way he paused before answering my question about how long he'd owned the café, the careful calibration in his voice when he said *a couple of years*.

I think about the card he gave me. The free coffee. The invitation to the history fair.

And then I make myself stop thinking about it, because I am doing exactly what Martha is doing, assembling a story out of fragments and silences, treating a person's life like a jigsaw puzzle I'm entitled to solve.

The breeze dies. The square goes quiet for a moment,

the stroller-mothers having moved on, the golden retriever having abandoned its squirrel vigil in favor of a nap in a patch of sun. In the stillness, Martha's voice carries perfectly.

"And then there's the Miller girl."

My stomach drops. A physical sensation, unmistakable, the floor giving way in a dream.

"Sarah?" The second Eleanor sounds surprised. "She's been back, what, a week?"

"Long enough. She's in that bookstore every other day, talking to Thomas Vance like they're old friends. Emily says — "

"Emily should know better than to gossip about her best friend."

"Emily didn't say anything unkind. She just mentioned Sarah's been spending time there. Working on some writing project." Martha pauses, and I can almost hear the arch of an eyebrow. "Convenient, isn't it? A writing project that keeps her in the café all day."

I want to stand up. I want to walk around the hedge and introduce myself and watch Martha's face do whatever faces do when the subject of gossip materializes three feet away. But my legs don't move. Some part of me

needs to hear the rest.

"She's a travel writer," the second Eleanor says. "It's what she does."

"She *was* a travel writer. Before that business with the magazine."

My jaw tightens. The business with the magazine. Such a tidy phrase for the worst six weeks of my professional life, the accusation of fabricated sources, the investigation, the exoneration that came too late to save my reputation or my job. The editor who threw me under the bus and then resigned himself, leaving me to carry a stain that no amount of truth could wash out.

"I heard she made the whole thing up," Martha says. "Quotes, interviews, all of it."

"I heard she was cleared."

"Cleared doesn't mean innocent. It means they couldn't prove it."

The pen is shaking in my hand. I set it down on the pad, carefully, before I snap it in half.

Cleared doesn't mean innocent. I've turned that sentence over in my own head a hundred times, at three in the morning in a series of rented apartments in

cities I was supposed to be writing about but couldn't see anymore. I know its weight, its particular cruelty. Hearing it from a stranger's mouth, in the town where I grew up, where my mother's garden still blooms every spring and my father's name is still on a plaque in the library, that's something else entirely.

"Well," the second Eleanor says, and her voice has gone cool, "I don't think we know enough to judge."

"That's the problem, isn't it? Nobody knows enough. About her, about him. This town used to be a place where people didn't have secrets."

I almost laugh. Willow Creek has always had secrets. It just used to be better at keeping them.

The bench creaks behind me. Shopping bags rustle. "I should get to the post office before it closes for lunch," the second Eleanor says, and the relief in her voice is audible. She's done with this conversation. I don't blame her.

"Tell your sister I'll bring the casserole on Thursday," Martha says, as if they'd been discussing nothing more interesting than dinner plans. As if she hadn't just dismantled two people's lives in the space of ten minutes.

Footsteps recede. The hedge shivers as one of them

brushes past it. I stay perfectly still until the sounds fade, until the square reassembles itself around me, a man unlocking his bicycle, a teenager slouching toward the bakery with headphones clamped over his ears, the golden retriever waking up to investigate a new smell.

I close my writing pad. The four words are still there. I draw a line through them.

The sun has moved while I've been sitting here; my bench is half in shadow now, and the warmth that felt pleasant twenty minutes ago has given way to a chill that works its way through my sweater. I should go back to the cottage. I should call Emily and ask her, carefully, what she's been telling people about me. I should do something with the knot of unease that's tightening in my chest.

Instead I sit there, watching the bandstand, thinking about Thomas Vance.

Somewhere up north. Left everything behind. An accident, maybe. A marriage, maybe. A life that was abruptly cut short.

It's not the details that bother me. It's the shape of the story, the way it mirrors my own. I came back to Willow Creek because something ended. Because I needed a place to hide while I figured out what came next. I told

myself it was temporary, a pit stop on the way to the next version of my life, but sitting here on this bench with Martha's voice still ringing in my ears, I wonder if that's what Thomas told himself too. Two years ago. And he's still here.

Is that a warning or a promise? I can't decide.

The golden retriever ambles over and sniffs my shoe. The maple leaf dislodges and flutters to the brick path. The dog watches it fall, then looks up at me with an expression that suggests I've disappointed us both.

"I know," I say. "Me too."

The dog's owner whistles from somewhere across the square, and it lopes off without looking back.

I gather my things, coffee cup, writing pad, pen, the scarf I'd taken off when the sun was still warm. My fingers are stiff. The chill has settled in, or maybe it's something else, something that has less to do with the weather and more to do with the realization that I am not invisible here. That my past has arrived ahead of me, unpacked its bags, and made itself comfortable in the town's collective imagination.

And Thomas's past is here too, even if no one knows exactly what it contains.

I think about the history fair on Saturday. His invitation, offered casually, the words almost an afterthought, *if you're interested*. I'd felt a small flare of something then. Anticipation, maybe. The pleasant weight of being singled out.

Now I feel something else. A guardedness, settling over that anticipation like a sheet over furniture in a house that's about to sit empty for a while.

I don't know Thomas Vance. I know he makes good coffee and remembers my order and looks at me in a way that makes my skin feel a half-size too small. I know he has kind eyes and a scar above his left eyebrow and a photograph of a coastline that isn't New England. I know he offered me a card for a free coffee that Emily claims isn't standard policy.

I don't know what he's running from. I don't know if he's running at all. And I don't know whether the version of himself he's built in Willow Creek, the quiet café owner, the reliable presence behind the espresso bar, is a fresh start or a careful disguise.

The same questions, I realize, that the town is asking about me.

I stand up. My legs have gone stiff from sitting too long. The square is emptying out now, the lunch hour

approaching, the morning's errands completed or abandoned. The bandstand is still empty. Still waiting.

I walk toward Maple Street, where my rented cottage sits at the end of a row of similar cottages, all of them built in the 1920s and all of them wearing their age with varying degrees of grace. Mine is the one with the peeling shutters and the overgrown hydrangea, the temporary abode that's starting to feel less temporary than I'd planned.

The front door sticks. I shoulder it open and drop my keys in the bowl on the hall table, a habit I'd forgotten I had until I moved back and found myself doing it automatically. Muscle memory. The body remembers what the mind tries to leave behind.

In the kitchen, I fill the kettle and set it on the stove. The cottage is quiet except for the tick of the radiator and the distant hum of a lawnmower somewhere down the block. I lean against the counter and watch the kettle, waiting for the first shiver of steam.

Martha's voice, replaying in my head: *Cleared doesn't mean innocent.*

Thomas's voice, from two days ago: *I'd like that.*

Two sentences, unrelated, tangled together now by the simple fact that I overheard them in the same hour of

the same morning. The town's gossip network, doing what it does best, weaving separate threads into a fabric that covers everyone, whether they want to be covered or not.

The kettle whistles. I pour the water over a tea bag and carry the mug to the small desk by the living room window. My laptop sits there, closed, the screen dark. I haven't opened it since yesterday.

I should write. I should take the notes from this morning, the square, the bandstand, the dog, the mothers with strollers, and shape them into something usable. The first article in the series isn't going to write itself.

But when I sit down and open the laptop, the cursor blinks at me from a blank page, and all I can think about is the way Martha said *Thomas Vance*, like the name itself was a question she intended to answer.

I close the laptop. The tea steams against the window glass, fogging a small circle on the pane.

Outside, the maple tree in the front yard is losing its leaves in earnest now. They drift down one at a time, yellow and orange and red, covering the grass in a patchwork that will need raking soon. Another thing to add to the list. Another small task that anchors me here, that makes this cottage feel less like a way station and

more like a place where someone lives.

I think about calling Emily. I think about calling my mother, who would want to know what I'd heard and would probably have opinions about Martha that she'd be happy to share at length. I think about walking back to the bookstore and ordering a coffee from Thomas and watching his face for signs of the story Martha told, the accident, the marriage, the life left behind.

I don't do any of those things. I sit at the desk with my tea cooling beside me, and I let the guardedness settle in, a new layer between me and the town I thought I knew.

The bandstand is still empty. I can't see it from here, but I know it is. Waiting for something that's running late.

Shared Trails, Shared Smiles

The photograph sits on the corner of my desk where I left it two nights ago. I pick it up, not for the first time today, and not for any reason I can name. The coastline is still there. Rugged, remote, the water a gray that doesn't exist anywhere in New England. I set it back down, face-up, and reach for my phone.

The text to Sarah takes three attempts.

Still planning to check out the trails today? I could use some fresh air myself. If you want company.

I delete the last four words. Then I put them back. Then I delete them again and hit send before I can rewrite the whole thing a fourth time.

Her reply comes faster than I expect. *I was just heading out. Meet you at the Mill Road trailhead in twenty?*

I'm already reaching for my jacket.

The morning's been slow. Emily's handling the front, Mrs. Gable is cataloguing a box of estate-sale books that came in yesterday, and I've been pretending to work on inventory while actually watching the clock. I tell myself the walk is about getting outside before the weather turns. The forecast says rain by Thursday. The forecast is not what sent me to my phone.

Mrs. Gable glances up from her box as I pass the front desk. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't need to. The slight lift at the corner of her mouth is commentary enough.

"Inventory," I say.

"Of course, dear."

I'm out the door before she can add anything else.

The trailhead parking lot is empty except for Sarah's rental car. She's leaning against the driver's side door, hands pushed into the pockets of a fleece jacket, her hair pulled back in that way she does when she's working. There's a notebook tucked under her arm. She looks up at the sound of my truck and something in her expression shifts, a guardedness easing, and I realize I've been holding my own shoulders tighter than I meant to.

"You found it," she says.

"I know the back roads." I close the truck door and walk over. "Most of them, anyway."

"A man of mystery." She says it lightly, but there's a flicker behind it. I catch it and let it pass.

The trail opens in front of us, packed dirt and exposed

roots, the canopy overhead a patchwork of orange and red and the last stubborn green. The air has that autumn smell, leaves starting to break down, woodsmoke from someone's chimney a half-mile off. We fall into step without discussing pace, and that ease surprises me. I've walked these trails alone for years.

"So," she says, "what am I looking at?"

"In what sense?"

"The article sense. If I'm going to write about Willow Creek's walking trails, I need to know what makes them worth writing about."

I consider this. "That depends on whether you want the brochure version or the real one."

"I've never been much good at brochures."

We walk another twenty yards before I answer. "The brochure version is that these trails date back to the early 1800s, originally used by farmers moving livestock between pastures, later maintained by the conservation commission. There are historical markers every half-mile, most of them accurate, one of them wrong."

"Which one's wrong?"

"The one that claims a Revolutionary War skirmish

happened in that clearing." I nod toward a break in the trees ahead. "It didn't. The skirmish was two miles east. But the landowner in the 1970s wanted his property to be more interesting, so he petitioned the historical society. They said no. He put up his own marker anyway."

Sarah laughs. "That's the real version?"

"That's the start of it."

We pass the clearing. The false marker is still there, weathered and leaning, its brass plaque gone green with age. Sarah stops to read it, and I watch her take it in, the way her eyes move across the words and then drift to the trees beyond, as if measuring the story against the landscape.

"You know a lot about this place," she says, not quite a question.

"I've had time to learn."

We keep walking. The trail narrows, and I move ahead to push a low branch aside, holding it while she passes. She smells like coffee and something floral, shampoo maybe, and I'm aware of the six inches of space between us in a way that feels disproportionate to the moment.

"What about you?" I ask. "How's the article coming?"

"Slowly. I keep getting distracted."

"By what?"

She hesitates. "By everything. The town. The people. The fact that I can't walk through the square without hearing my own name in someone else's conversation."

I know what she's referring to. Martha's voice carries. It always has. "Small towns have long memories."

"And short tempers, apparently."

"Martha's been nursing a grudge since the bicentennial committee rejected her float design in 1996. It's not personal."

Sarah looks at me, and I can see her deciding whether to let the deflection stand. She lets it. "What was the float design?"

"A giant papier-mâché teapot. She wanted it to pour actual tea."

"That's not a bad idea."

"The tea was supposed to be hot. And aimed at the crowd."

She laughs again, and the sound loosens something in my chest. We've reached the first of the historical markers, the legitimate one, a granite post with a bronze plaque describing the original mill that gave the road its name. I point out the foundation stones visible through the undergrowth, the way the stream was diverted to feed the millrace. She asks questions. Good ones, the kind that show she's actually listening.

"You could do this for a living," she says. "Trail guide. Local historian."

"I already have a job."

"Two jobs, then."

"The bookstore keeps me busy enough."

She doesn't push, but I feel the weight of what she's not asking. *Why here? Why this?* The questions everyone has. The ones I've spent years not answering.

The trail opens onto a ridge, the trees falling away to reveal the valley below. Willow Creek sits in the hollow, white steeples and clapboard houses, the green of the common a small rectangle from this distance. Sarah stops walking. I stop beside her.

"This is the part they don't put in brochures," I say.

She's quiet for a moment. "I forgot how beautiful it is. I spent so many years trying to get away from it, I forgot what I was leaving."

I don't answer. I know something about leaving places. About what you carry with you and what you don't.

"There's a new assignment," she says, still looking at the valley. "A travel piece. Two weeks in the Pacific Northwest. They want me to do it."

The words land and settle. I keep my eyes on the view. "That's what you do."

"It's what I did."

"You're considering it."

"I don't know what I'm considering." She turns to face me. "I've been running on assignments for a decade. A new city every few months. A new hotel room. A new set of people I'll know for six weeks and never see again. I thought that was freedom."

"And now?"

"Now I'm standing on a ridge in my hometown, and I'm not sure what freedom looks like anymore."

The tension axis surfaces between us, unspoken but

present. Rootedness versus wanderlust. The life I've chosen, the stillness I've built, against the pull of the road that still lives in her. I don't have a claim on her choices. We've known each other for days, not years. But I feel the quiet in my own chest, the way I go still when she talks about leaving.

"I came out here a lot," I say, "when I first moved to Willow Creek."

She waits.

"I'd walk this ridge at sunrise. Before the shop opened. Before anyone was awake to ask questions I didn't want to answer." I pause. The memory is clear, sharper than I usually let it be. "There was a morning in October, maybe my third month here. Fog in the valley. You couldn't see the town at all, just the tops of the steeples poking through. And I stood right here and realized I hadn't looked over my shoulder in three days. First time in years."

Sarah doesn't speak. Her eyes are on me, and there's something in them I can't quite read.

"That's what rootedness is," I say. "Not staying in one place. It's not needing to leave."

A squirrel chooses this moment to launch itself from an overhead branch, misjudge the distance to the next

tree, and land in a pile of dry leaves with an indignant chitter. The sound breaks the tension, and Sarah's laugh is sudden and bright. The squirrel rights itself, gives us a look of profound offense, and scrambles up the nearest trunk.

"Graceful," Sarah says.

"He's new. Still learning the routes."

"You know the squirrel?"

"I know the regulars."

She shakes her head, still smiling, and the moment shifts. The heaviness lifts. We start walking again, and the conversation turns easier. She asks about the mill, about the families who lived in the valley before the town incorporated. I tell her what I know, and she writes some of it down in her notebook, her handwriting quick and uneven.

"I had a friend," she says, after a while. "In high school. Her name was Becca. Becca Torres."

I nod. The name is vaguely familiar, one of those Willow Creek names that surfaces in old conversations.

"We were close," Sarah continues. "The kind of close where you think it'll last forever, because you're

seventeen and you don't know any better. And then I left for college, and she stayed, and we promised to write, to call, to visit." She pauses. "I didn't do any of those things. Not really. A postcard here and there. A text on her birthday. And then she got sick, and I was in Bangkok, and by the time I found out, it was too late to come back."

The words hang in the air. We keep walking, but I can feel the weight of what she's just given me.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"I didn't go to the funeral. I told myself it was the distance. The cost. The assignment I couldn't drop. But the truth is, I was scared. Scared of coming back. Scared of what I'd find. Scared of facing her family when I'd been gone so long." She exhales. "I've never told anyone that."

I don't fill the silence. Some things don't need filling.

"That's why I'm here," she says. "Not just the article. Not just the job falling apart. I've been running from that moment for six years, and I'm tired."

We've reached the end of the loop, the trail curving back toward the parking lot. The light has shifted, afternoon sliding toward evening, the shadows longer now. We slow without discussing it, both of us

stretching the last quarter-mile.

"Thank you," she says. "For the walk. For the history lesson. For not asking me why I was really out here."

"I knew why."

She looks at me, and I hold her gaze. The air between us is charged with something I'm not ready to name.

"There's a diner on Route 12," I say. "Nothing fancy. But the pie is good, and the coffee's better than mine, which I'll deny if you quote me."

"Is that an invitation?"

"Dinner. Next week. If you're still here."

The last three words come out before I can stop them. *If you're still here.* The possibility of her leaving, given shape by my own voice.

Sarah doesn't look away. "I'll be here."

We reach the parking lot. Her car is still the only one besides my truck. The sun is low enough now to turn the windshield gold. She pulls her keys from her pocket, then hesitates.

"Thomas?"

"Yeah?"

"The photograph on your desk. The coastline. Where is it?"

The question catches me off guard. She's been in my office, I realize. At some point, she's seen it. "Maine," I say. "A place I used to go."

She nods, and I can see her filing the information away, not pushing, not yet. "Goodnight, Thomas."

"Goodnight, Sarah."

She gets in her car and pulls out of the lot. I stand by my truck and watch her taillights until they disappear around the first bend. The trailhead is quiet. The squirrel is gone. The ridge is still there, holding the valley in its palm, the town lights beginning to flicker on below.

I get in my truck and sit with my hands on the wheel. The photograph in my office is not of Maine. I've never been to the place in that picture. I bought the frame at a thrift store in Portland and kept the image that came with it because it looked like somewhere I might have wanted to go, once, before I stopped wanting to go anywhere at all.

I don't know why I lied. Or I do know, and I don't want

to look at it too closely.

The engine turns over. I pull out of the lot and head back toward town, toward the bookstore, toward the life I've built out of stillness and careful silences. Behind me, the trail waits. Ahead of me, a dinner I've just promised to show up for.

And somewhere in between, the question I can't stop turning over: what does it cost to let someone in, and what does it cost not to?

A Dinner Invitation

The diner's heat hits my face before the door fully closes behind me. Not the dry, blowing heat of an airport terminal or a hotel lobby. This is the wet, onion-sweet warmth of a place that has been serving soup since lunch and hasn't bothered to open a window. My glasses fog instantly.

I pull them off and wipe them on the hem of my sweater, standing just inside the entrance like a woman who's forgotten how restaurants work. Through the blur, I make out the long counter with its row of red vinyl stools, the pie case glowing under a fluorescent tube, the booths along the far wall with their cracked upholstery and miniature jukeboxes that haven't worked since I was in high school. The place is half-full. Tuesday night in Willow Creek doesn't exactly draw a crowd.

And there's Thomas. He's already seen me. He's standing beside a booth near the back, one hand resting on the table, the other lifting in a small wave that's more wrist than arm. He doesn't call out. He waits.

I slide my glasses back on. The world sharpens. His expression is the one I'm starting to recognize — that slight, almost private curve at the corner of his mouth,

like he's holding onto a thought he hasn't decided to share yet.

"You're early," I say, crossing to him.

"You're on time." He gestures at the booth. "Which means I'm early."

"How long have you been sitting here?"

"Not long." The pause before he says it tells me otherwise.

I slide into the booth across from him. The vinyl exhales under my weight. A laminated menu is already waiting in front of me, the kind where the specials are printed on a slip of paper stapled to the corner and the plastic has gone cloudy with age. I don't need to look at it. I've been eating here since I was twelve. The turkey club. The meatloaf on Thursdays. The pie rotation — apple on Mondays and Tuesdays, cherry Wednesday and Thursday, coconut cream on Fridays until it runs out, which it always does by six.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," Thomas says.

"I said I would."

"People say things." He shrugs. The gesture is easy, but his eyes stay on me a beat longer than casual.

"Doesn't always mean they show up."

There's a history folded into that sentence. I can hear it in the way his voice drops on the word "always," a small weight he's carried long enough that he doesn't notice it anymore. Or pretends not to.

"Well," I say, unfolding my napkin, "I'm here."

"You're here." He says it like he's confirming something to himself.

Darlene appears beside the table with a water pitcher and two glasses already in her free hand. She's been working at the diner since before I left for college, and her face registers me without surprise — Sarah Miller, back in town, sitting across from the bookstore man. If she's curious, she doesn't show it. Darlene has seen everything.

"Coffee for both of you?" she asks.

Thomas looks at me. I nod.

"Two coffees. You eating, or just flirting?"

Heat climbs my throat. Thomas doesn't flinch.

"Eating," he says. "Give us a minute on the food."

Darlene pours the coffee and leaves. The steam curls

between us. I wrap both hands around my mug, not because I'm cold, but because it gives me something to do with them.

"So," Thomas says. "The diner. I realized after I suggested it that maybe you'd been here a thousand times growing up and this was the least imaginative dinner invitation possible."

"It's perfect." I mean it. "I haven't been back since I got to town. I kept meaning to."

"Why haven't you?"

The question is simple. The answer isn't. I take a sip of coffee to buy myself time. It's diner coffee — thin, hot, slightly burnt, exactly the way it's always been. The taste lands somewhere in my chest, a small ache of recognition.

"I think I was afraid it would feel too familiar," I say finally. "And that would make everything else feel too strange."

He nods slowly. "Familiar things can do that. Hold up a mirror you weren't ready to look into."

"Is that why you came to Willow Creek? To stop looking in mirrors?"

The question slips out before I can weigh it. His expression shifts — not a flinch, exactly, but a stillness that wasn't there a moment ago. His fingers, which had been turning his coffee mug in slow quarter-rotations, stop moving.

"Something like that," he says.

I wait. The silence stretches. Darlene passes behind me with a tray of plates, and the clatter fills the space where his next words should be.

"I needed quiet," he says eventually. "I'd been living somewhere loud. Not just the city — I mean my life was loud. A lot of noise. A lot of people who wanted things from me, or wanted me to be someone I wasn't." He pauses. "One day I just... left. Drove until I found a place where nobody knew my name."

"And that was Willow Creek."

"That was Willow Creek."

He picks up his coffee. Drinks. Sets it down. The whole sequence feels deliberate, like he's giving his hands something to do while his mind decides whether to say more. It doesn't.

I recognize the shape of what he just did. The broad strokes, the careful omission of details that would turn a

story into the story. I've done it myself a hundred times. At parties, at press events, on first dates with men who asked about my career and got the highlight reel instead of the outtakes. The travel writer version of Sarah Miller: adventurous, independent, unbothered. Not the one who spent six weeks unable to open her laptop because every sentence she typed felt like a lie she was about to get caught in.

"I get that," I say. "The noise thing."

His eyes meet mine. Something in them softens. "I thought you might."

Darlene returns with her order pad. We both order without looking at the menus, turkey club for me, a burger for him, fries to share. She collects the laminated sheets and disappears into the kitchen, and the booth feels smaller than it did a minute ago. Not in a bad way. In the way a room feels smaller when you turn off the overhead light and switch on a lamp.

"Can I ask you something?" Thomas says.

"You just did."

He smiles. It's the first full one I've seen tonight, and it changes his face, the guardedness recedes, and for a second he looks younger, less careful. "Fair. Let me try again. What happened with your work? You mentioned

the article about Willow Creek, but I get the sense there's more to it. Why you're really here."

There it is. The question I've been dodging with everyone except my own reflection at three in the morning. Mrs. Gable didn't ask. Emily didn't ask. The women in the town square gossiped about it behind my back, but no one has looked me in the eye and said tell me what happened.

I could deflect. Make a joke. Change the subject. I've been doing it for months.

Instead, I hear myself say, "I got fired."

The words land on the table between us. Ugly and plain and true.

"From the travel magazine?"

"From Voyager, yeah. I was a senior writer there for four years. It was —" I stop. Start again. "It was everything I wanted. The bylines, the assignments, the places. I built my whole identity around being the person who could go anywhere and write about it. And then I wrote a piece about a small coastal town in Maine, and a source I'd quoted turned out to be..." I exhale. "Not real."

Thomas doesn't interrupt. His attention is steady,

undemanding.

"I didn't fabricate him. I didn't. But I should have verified him better, and I didn't, and when the fact-checkers started digging, he unraveled. So did the piece. So did my reputation." I pick up my coffee, put it down without drinking. "The magazine ran a correction. Then they ran a retraction. Then they ran my resignation, which wasn't technically voluntary. And after that, nobody in the industry would return my calls."

"How long ago?"

"Eight months."

"And you've been..."

"Drifting," I say. "That's the word for it. I took a few small assignments under a different byline. I crashed with a friend in New York for a while. I told myself I was fine, that I didn't need anyone, that I was just between chapters. But the truth is I ran out of money and I ran out of places to pretend I was okay, and Willow Creek was the only place left that would take me without asking too many questions."

The confession hangs in the air. I feel hollowed out and strangely light, the way you feel after donating blood. A little dizzy. A little proud of yourself for not passing out.

Thomas is quiet for a moment. Then he says, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For telling me the real version."

"You asked."

"Most people don't answer."

The food arrives. Darlene sets down the plates with the efficiency of someone who has been balancing hot ceramic on one arm since before I was born. The turkey club is exactly as I remember it, toasted white bread, too much mayo, a pickle spear that's been sitting on the plate long enough to leave a wet green shadow. I pick up half the sandwich and take a bite, and the taste is so precisely identical to a hundred Tuesday nights in high school that I have to put it down again and blink.

"You okay?" Thomas asks.

"Yeah. It's just —" I gesture at the sandwich. "Memory is weird. You eat something you haven't eaten in twelve years and suddenly you're seventeen again, sitting in this exact booth, complaining about Mrs. Hendricks' chemistry homework."

Festival Shadows

The cider donuts hit me first. That particular sweetness, fried and powdered, cutting through the woodsmoke that drifts across the common in lazy ribbons. A week of waiting, of replaying Sarah's confession at the restaurant booth, and now we're here — the Fall Festival in full riot around us, and she's walking beside me with her journal tucked under one arm.

"You're smiling," she says.

"Am I?"

"Like someone who knows where the good donuts are hidden."

I steer us left, past a stall selling beeswax candles. "Margaret Hale's booth. Third row, near the kettle corn. She uses her grandmother's recipe and she only brings four dozen. When they're gone, they're gone."

Sarah's eyebrows lift. "You've been holding out on me."

"Strategic information."

The common has transformed since yesterday. White tents in staggered rows, the kind that snap and ripple when the wind picks up. Bunting strung between the lampposts — orange and gold, the colors of a New

England postcard. Somewhere near the gazebo, a folk band is tuning up, the scrape of a fiddle bow cutting through the crowd noise. Children dart between legs, faces painted like butterflies and tigers. Mr. Kowalski mans his usual spot by the war memorial, selling mums in terra cotta pots, his hands black with soil.

Sarah's journal comes out before we've gone ten paces. She flips it open one-handed, pen already moving. I watch her scan the crowd, her gaze catching on details — the ribbon-tying contest at the Grange table, the woman spinning wool on a wheel that looks older than the town charter. She's working. I recognize the set of her jaw, the way her eyes go slightly unfocused while her hand keeps scribbling.

"Interviewing anyone in particular?" I ask.

"Everyone. No one." She caps the pen with her teeth, a gesture so unselfconscious I feel like I've caught something private. "I'm trying to figure out how to write about this place without sounding like a tourism brochure."

"What's wrong with tourism brochures?"

"They don't tell you what a town is *actually* like. They tell you what the Chamber of Commerce wants you to think it's like." She gestures at the tents, the band, the

children. "This is real. The brochure version would airbrush out the fact that Mrs. Henderson is probably somewhere in this crowd, cataloguing who bought whose jam."

I laugh before I can stop myself. "She's by the pie tent. I saw her on the way in."

"Of course you did."

We stop at a stall selling carved wooden birds — cardinals, chickadees, a blue jay mid-scold. The carver, a man named Walter who sells from his garage most of the year, nods at me. I've bought three of his birds. They're on the windowsill in my office, collecting dust I should wipe off more often.

Sarah interviews him. I stand back and listen. She's good at this — better than I expected. She doesn't lead with questions about craft or technique. She asks him what he was doing before he started carving, and he tells her about the factory job he lost in '08, the year his wife got sick, the way his hands needed something to do during the long nights at the hospital. Sarah writes none of this down while he's talking. She just listens, her pen still, and I watch Walter's shoulders drop an inch.

When she does write, after we've moved on, her script

is small and fast.

"You're good at that," I say.

"At what?"

"Making people forget you're a reporter."

She glances at me, something flickering behind the hazel. "I'm not a reporter anymore. I'm just —" She stops. Starts again. "I'm just paying attention."

The band launches into something with a banjo. The crowd thickens near the gazebo, and I let my hand brush her elbow, guiding her toward the food stalls. She doesn't pull away.

"So," she says, after we've acquired two of Margaret's donuts and found a relatively quiet spot near the old horse trough, "what's your favorite festival tradition?"

"Mine?"

"You've been here, what, five years? Six? You must have one."

I take a bite of donut to buy time. The powdered sugar dissolves on my tongue. "I like the pumpkin weigh-off."

"The pumpkin weigh-off."

"It gets competitive. Two years ago, the Garrett brothers almost came to blows over a Hubbard squash."

"That's not an answer."

"It's an answer. It's just not the answer you wanted."

She's watching me with that journalist's focus, the one that makes me feel like a document under glass. "I'm trying to understand how you fit here. You're part of this town, but you're also —"

"Also what?"

"A little apart from it. You watch. You don't really participate."

The donut has gone dry in my mouth. I swallow anyway. "I participate."

"You're participating right now by dodging the question."

She's smiling, but the smile has an edge. I recognize the shape of this conversation. She's circling something, and I'm the thing being circled.

"The festival's not about me," I say. "It's about the town. The Garrett brothers and their vendetta squash. Mrs.

Gable's book stall — she's over by the library tent, if you want to interview her. She's been here since before the festival existed. She'd give you better material."

Sarah's pen taps once against her journal. "You're deflecting."

"I'm redirecting."

"There's a difference?"

"Deflecting is dishonest. Redirecting is —" I search for the word. "Editorial."

She laughs, and the edge softens. But I see her make a note in the margin of her page, and I don't think it's about the pumpkin weigh-off.

The afternoon stretches. We drift from stall to stall. Sarah buys a jar of apple butter from a woman who's been making it since before either of us was born. I buy a raffle ticket for a quilt I don't need, because the raffle funds the library's children's section and Emily would never forgive me if I didn't. The sun slides lower, turning the tent canvas gold.

Near the bandstand, the folk band shifts into a waltz. A few couples take to the patch of grass in front of the gazebo — older pairs mostly, moving with the muscle memory of decades. I watch a man in his seventies spin

his wife, her skirt flaring, her laugh carrying across the common.

"I want coffee," Sarah announces. "Real coffee, not the weak stuff they're selling at the refreshment tent."

"There's a stall by the east entrance. They use beans from a roaster in Northampton."

"Of course you know that."

"I'm a professional."

She hands me her journal. "Hold this. I'll be right back."

And then she's gone, swallowed by the crowd, and I'm standing alone with her notebook pressed against my palm. I don't open it. I want to, the wanting surprises me, a quick sharp pull of curiosity, but I don't. I tuck it under my arm and watch the dancers.

The fiddle climbs. The light turns amber. Somewhere behind me, a child shrieks with joy.

I don't know how long I stand there before I realize Sarah hasn't come back. The coffee stall isn't far, two minutes there, two minutes back, maybe five if there's a line. It's been closer to ten.

I find her near the east entrance, half-hidden behind a

tent pole. She's not in line for coffee. She's standing very still, her face turned away from me, and something about the set of her shoulders makes me stop.

"Sarah?"

She turns. Her expression is wrong, closed in a way it wasn't ten minutes ago. The easy warmth from the donuts and the waltz is gone, replaced by something I can't read.

"Hey," she says. "Sorry. Long line."

She's not holding a cup.

"You didn't get your coffee."

"Changed my mind." She reaches for her journal, and I hand it over. Her fingers are cold. "It's getting late. Maybe we should —"

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

She's lying. I've watched her lie before, the small polite lies everyone tells, the ones that smooth over awkwardness, and this isn't that. This is a door closing.

"Sarah."

"I'm fine. Really. Just tired. Festival fatigue."

Festival fatigue. The phrase is too neat, too ready. She's been preparing it since before I walked over.

I don't push. I want to. The question is right there, balanced on the edge of my tongue, but I've spent years learning not to ask questions when someone's already building a wall. You can't knock down a wall by asking it nicely to fall.

"Okay," I say.

She looks relieved, and the relief hurts more than the lie.

We walk back toward the center of the common, but the rhythm between us has broken. She's still beside me, still close enough that our shoulders almost touch, but she's somewhere else now. Somewhere I can't follow.

The band has stopped playing. The sun is almost down, the sky going purple at the edges, and the tents are starting to glow from within, lanterns and fairy lights flicking on one by one. Long shadows stretch across the grass, and the crowd is thinning, families with young children heading home, vendors beginning to pack up their displays.

I'm trying to think of something to say, something that will pull her back, when she stops walking.

She stops so suddenly I take another step before I realize she's not beside me anymore. I turn. She's frozen, her journal clutched against her chest, her face pale in the dying light.

"Sarah?"

She doesn't answer. She's staring across the common, toward the war memorial, where the last few festival-goers are drifting toward the parking lot.

I follow her gaze. I don't know what I'm looking for, someone she recognizes, maybe, an old classmate or a former teacher. The town is full of people who knew her before she left.

But the way she's standing, this isn't recognition. This is something else. Something closer to dread.

"Who is it?" I ask.

She shakes her head, a tiny motion, barely there.

"Sarah."

"I thought I saw —" She stops. Swallows. "It's nothing. I was wrong."

She's lying again. Her knuckles are white on the spine of her journal.

I look back at the crowd, but whoever she saw is gone now, lost in the shadows that have swallowed the far end of the common. The lanterns are on, but they only push the dark back so far.

"We should go," she says.

"Okay."

She doesn't move. For a long moment, she just stands there, staring at the place where someone used to be. Then she blinks, and whatever was holding her releases its grip. She turns to me, and her face is almost normal again, almost, but not quite.

"Walk me home?"

"Of course."

We leave the festival behind us, the music and the lanterns and the smell of cider donuts fading into the autumn dark. She doesn't take my arm. She doesn't say another word until we reach her doorstep, and then all she says is goodnight.

I watch her door close. I stand on the sidewalk for longer than I should, the cold seeping through my

jacket, and I think about the two women by the coffee stall, the ones I saw when I went looking for her, the ones who were leaning close together, their heads bent in the particular way of people sharing something they shouldn't. I didn't hear what they said. I didn't need to. I've been in this town long enough to know what gossip looks like.

And I've been here long enough to know that sometimes, the thing people are whispering about is you.

The street is quiet. The festival is over. Somewhere in the dark, a car engine turns over and pulls away, and I am left alone with the question I didn't ask her, the one that's been waiting in my throat all evening.

"What did you hear?"

A Ghost from the Past

The air inside The Written Word smells like old paper and the faint burnt-sugar edge of whatever Emily has baking in the back. I push the door open with my shoulder, the bell chiming overhead, and the warmth of the place settles against my skin. Outside, the morning is sharp with the first real bite of autumn. Inside, the radiators are working. I can hear them ticking.

I didn't sleep. The festival ended and I walked home with Thomas's question still hanging in the dark between us, the one he didn't ask out loud, and when I got to the cottage I locked the door and stood in the kitchen with the lights off until my feet went cold. Then I lay in bed and stared at the water stain on the ceiling, the one that looks vaguely like a bird in flight, and I tried not to think about the two women by the coffee stall. The way their voices dropped when I walked past. The way one of them said *Thomas Vance* and the other one said something I couldn't catch, something that made the first one glance at me and stop talking.

And then Mark Jenkins. Across the common. His face swimming up out of the crowd like a fish rising to bad bait.

I pull my scarf off and head for the counter. Emily is behind the espresso machine, her red hair in its usual

braid, a pair of glasses perched on her nose that I haven't seen before — green frames, speckled with gold. She looks up and grins.

"You look like death warmed over."

"Good morning to you too."

"I mean that lovingly. As a friend. A friend who has seen you look worse." She tilts her head. "Eighth grade. The bake sale."

I know exactly what she's doing. She's reaching for the thing that ties us together, the shared language of twenty years of knowing each other. The bake sale. The one where I volunteered to make three dozen brownies for the PTA fundraiser and somehow used salt instead of sugar. Mrs. Henderson took one bite and spat it into a napkin in front of the whole gymnasium. Emily has been bringing it up for fifteen years.

"That was a long time ago," I say.

"It was iconic. You were iconic. The look on her face —"

"I'm going to need caffeine before we do this."

Emily's grin falters, just for a second. She catches it, covers it with a nod, turns to the machine. "One world

peace latte, coming up."

I lean on the counter and watch her work. The hiss of steam. The precise way she tamps the grounds. She's good at this. She's good at a lot of things I never noticed when we were teenagers, back when I thought knowing someone meant knowing their favorite band and whether they'd cheated on the geometry final.

"You want to talk about it?" she asks, not looking up.

"Talk about what."

"Whatever made you look like that when you walked in."

I could tell her. I could tell her about the women by the coffee stall, about the way Thomas's face changed when he realized I'd heard something. I could tell her about Mark. But Emily works for Thomas. And Emily has known me since I was twelve, and sometimes that feels like a foundation and sometimes it feels like a box I can't climb out of.

"Didn't sleep well," I say. "That's all."

She hands me the latte. The foam is perfect. She's drawn a leaf in it.

"You're a terrible liar," she says.

"I know."

"Okay." She doesn't push. That's one of the things I've always loved about her. She knows when to let me be a coward. "I'm here. When you're ready."

I take the latte and retreat to the corner table by the window, the one I've claimed as mine over the past week. My laptop is in my bag. I should open it. I should write something — the article on Willow Creek that I pitched to the travel magazine, the one that's supposed to be my first step back into a career I'm not sure I still want. The deadline isn't for another three weeks, but the editor emailed yesterday asking for an outline. I haven't replied.

I open the laptop. The screen glows. I type the date at the top of a blank document and then I stop.

The cursor blinks.

Outside the window, Main Street is quiet. A man walks past with a golden retriever on a leash — the same one from the square last week, I think. The dog's tail wags in a slow, contented arc. A woman in a wool coat stops to pet it. Normal. Peaceful. The kind of small-town scene I'm supposed to be writing about, the kind that's supposed to make readers feel warm and nostalgic and maybe a little envious.

I can't make myself care about it.

What I care about is the question Thomas didn't ask. *What did you hear?* And the question I didn't ask back. *What is there to hear?*

I take a sip of the latte. It's good. It's always good. Thomas makes the best coffee in town, and I don't know if that's a small thing or a large thing, but right now it feels like both.

The bell over the door chimes. I don't look up. Footsteps cross the wooden floor, heavy, a man's gait. Emily says something from behind the counter, her customer-service voice bright and automatic. The man answers, and his voice is familiar in a way that makes my stomach tighten before my brain catches up.

I know that voice.

I look up.

Mark Jenkins is standing at the counter, ten feet away, ordering a black coffee. He's older, of course. We all are. His shoulders have broadened, and there's a shadow of stubble along his jaw, and he's wearing a jacket that looks expensive. But his face is the same. The same sharp chin, the same eyes that always seemed to be calculating something. The same way of standing, weight shifted to one hip, like he's waiting for

someone to notice him.

He turns. He sees me.

For a moment, neither of us moves. Then his mouth curves into something that isn't quite a smile.

"Sarah Miller."

"Mark."

He walks over. I don't stand. He stops at the edge of my table, coffee in hand, and looks down at me with an expression I can't read. Amusement, maybe. Or something sharper.

"I thought that was you at the festival yesterday," he says. "You disappeared before I could say hello."

"It was crowded."

"It was." He takes a sip of his coffee. His eyes don't leave my face. "You're back in town. Didn't think I'd see that."

"Just visiting."

"Right. The travel writer. I read about that. The thing with the magazine."

He says it casually, like it's small talk. But he knows

what he's doing. He's always known.

"That was a while ago," I say.

"Still. Tough break." He pulls out the chair across from me and sits down without asking. "Willow Creek must feel pretty quiet after all that. After everywhere you've been."

"Quiet is what I wanted."

"Sure. I get that." He leans back. The chair creaks. "Funny, though. You were always the one who couldn't wait to leave. Remember? You used to talk about it all the time. Getting out. Seeing the world. Not ending up stuck here like everyone else."

I remember. I remember saying those things, in this exact building, back when it was just the bookstore and not the café, back when Mrs. Gable would let us sit in the aisles and read for hours. I remember saying them to Mark, specifically, one night in the summer before senior year, when we were sitting on the hood of his car in the parking lot behind the old Grange hall and I was full of the particular arrogance of being seventeen and certain that the place I came from was too small to hold me.

I also remember what happened after that. What I did. What I let him do.

"People change," I say.

"Do they?" He tilts his head. "Some things never change. Some people, either."

There it is. The pointed comment. The hint. He's not talking about my travel writing or my career or my opinions about small towns. He's talking about something else, something specific, something that happened between us and to us and because of us, and he wants me to know he hasn't forgotten.

My hand is on the table. I make myself keep it still.

"What are you doing back in town, Mark?"

"My mom still lives here. I come up a few times a year." He shrugs. "I'm in Boston now. Finance. Married. Two kids." He says it like he's reciting a résumé. "The whole thing."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." He watches me for a beat too long. "You ever think about it? How things turned out?"

"Not really."

"No." He smiles. It's not a warm smile. "I didn't think you would. You were always good at that. Moving on."

Leaving things behind."

The accusation is there, under the words, thin as a blade. I feel it slide in. I don't let myself flinch.

"Some things are worth leaving," I say.

His smile tightens. He stands up, coffee in hand, and for a second I think he's going to say something else — something sharper, something that will cut in a way I can't ignore. But he doesn't. He just nods, once, and steps back from the table.

"Good to see you, Sarah. Take care of yourself."

He walks out. The bell chimes. The door swings shut.

I exhale. I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath.

Emily appears at my elbow. Her face is creased with concern. "Who was that?"

"Mark Jenkins. He was a year ahead of us in school."

"I remember him. Vaguely." She frowns. "He seemed —"

"He's fine."

"Sarah."

"I'm fine."

She doesn't believe me. I can see it in the set of her mouth. But she doesn't push. She squeezes my shoulder once and goes back to the counter, and I am left alone with the blinking cursor on my laptop and the taste of coffee gone cold in my mouth.

I close the laptop. I can't write. Not now. Not with Mark's voice still echoing in my head, the particular way he said *some things never change*, the way he looked at me like he was holding something over my head and waiting for me to ask what it was.

I know what it was. I've spent twelve years trying not to think about it.

The bell chimes again. I don't look up this time either, but the footsteps are different — lighter, more deliberate. I know them before I hear his voice.

"Sarah."

Thomas is standing beside my table. He's holding a fresh cup of coffee, and his blue eyes are steady on my face. He must have come in from the back room. I didn't see him behind the counter when I came in, and I assumed he wasn't here yet. I was wrong.

"I saw that," he says. "The man who just left."

"Mark Jenkins."

"Old friend?"

"Old something."

Thomas sets the coffee down in front of me. It's not a latte. It's black, the way I drink it when I'm not performing being fine. He knows that. He's been paying attention.

"You looked like you needed this," he says.

"Thanks."

He doesn't leave. He stands there, his weight balanced, his hands loose at his sides. The scar above his left eyebrow catches the light from the window. I wonder, not for the first time, how he got it. I wonder if it's connected to the things the women at the festival were whispering about. The things Martha has been saying. *Married. An accident. Running from something.*

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asks.

The same question Emily asked. But it lands differently coming from him. Heavier. More dangerous.

"I don't know," I say. And then, because he's still standing there, because his eyes are kind and his

presence is steady and I am tired of holding everything in: "He's someone I knew a long time ago. Someone I did something to. Or with. It's complicated."

Thomas pulls out the chair Mark vacated and sits down. He doesn't lean back. He leans forward, his elbows on his knees, his attention entirely on me.

"Complicated how."

I wrap my hands around the coffee cup. The heat seeps into my palms. "There was a night. The summer before senior year. Mark and I were — I don't know what we were. Friends, I guess. He wanted more. I didn't. And there was a party, and I drank too much, and he — "

I stop. The words are there, waiting, but they feel too large for my mouth.

"He what," Thomas says. His voice is quiet. Careful.

"He didn't hurt me. Not the way you're thinking." I look down at the coffee. The surface is still, dark, unreadable. "But he could have. And I knew it. And I never told anyone. I just left. I went to college and I never came back and I never talked about it. And now he's here, and he looked at me like he knew I'd been carrying it all this time."

Thomas doesn't say anything for a moment. Then he

reaches across the table and puts his hand over mine. His palm is warm. His fingers are long and steady.

"You don't owe him anything," he says.

"I know."

"Do you?"

I look up. His eyes are so blue. So focused. There's something in them I can't name — concern, yes, but also something else. Something that looks almost like recognition.

"You're not the only one with things you'd rather not talk about," I say. The words come out before I can stop them.

His hand tightens on mine. Just slightly. Just for a second.

"No," he says. "I'm not."

The silence between us is full of things neither of us is saying. The women by the coffee stall. Martha's gossip. The photograph of the coastline that isn't New England. The way he pulled back when I started to trust him. The way I'm pulling back now, even as his hand is still on mine.

I want to ask him. *What did they mean? What are you running from?* But the words won't come. Because if I ask him, he might answer. And if he answers, I might have to decide what to do with the truth. And I'm not ready. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"Thank you," I say instead. "For the coffee. For — this."

He nods. He takes his hand back, slowly, and stands up. "I'll be here. If you want to talk more. Or not talk. Whatever you need."

He walks back to the counter. Emily catches his eye as he passes, and something unspoken moves between them — a question, an answer, I can't tell. Then he disappears into the back room, and Emily turns to the espresso machine, and I am alone again with my cold coffee and my closed laptop and the weight of everything I didn't say.

Mark Jenkins is back in Willow Creek. He remembers what happened. He remembers what I did, and what I didn't do, and what I let almost happen. And he's not going to let me forget.

I look out the window. The golden retriever is gone. The street is empty. The sky is the color of old pewter, heavy and low, and the wind is picking up, stirring the last of the leaves on the sidewalk.

I can't outrun this. I've been trying for twelve years, and it's still here, waiting for me, in the town I swore I'd never come back to.

And somewhere in the back of my mind, quieter than the dread but just as insistent, is the thought I don't want to look at directly: that Thomas's hand on mine felt like the only solid thing in the room. And I don't know if that makes him the safe choice or the dangerous one.

Distance and Doubt

I press the spacebar and watch the cursor blink against a white screen. Two hours. Two hours of this, and the sum total of my work is a header — *Willow Creek: A Traveler's Guide to Coming Home* — and a single sentence beneath it that I've deleted and retyped six times.

The cottage settles around me. A draft works its way through the window frame, lifting the edge of a curtain. Outside, the street is dark and quiet. Somewhere down the block, a dog barks twice and stops. The sound carries the particular emptiness of a weeknight in a small town, the kind of quiet I used to find comforting and now find myself questioning.

I type: *There is a particular quality to the light in Willow Creek in October.*

I delete it.

What I want to write is the truth. The truth is that the light here makes me feel exposed. That the familiar storefronts on Main Street have started to feel less like a homecoming and more like a lineup of witnesses. That I cannot walk into The Written Word without scanning the room for Mark Jenkins, without cataloguing who might be watching me and what they

might know.

My phone buzzes against the desk. Emily.

Coffee tomorrow? 9:30 at the shop? Everyone's still buzzing about the festival and how you and Thomas seemed so close. 📱

I read the message twice. The emoji lands wrong. Emily means it playfully, I know she does, but the word *buzzing* sticks in my chest like a burr. I imagine the conversations I wasn't there for: Martha at the post office, Eleanor Gable at the library desk, the two women from the coffee stall at the festival. *Did you see Sarah Miller with Thomas Vance? What do we actually know about him, anyway? And after what happened with that Jenkins boy back in high school...*

I set the phone down without responding. The screen dims, then goes black.

The article is not going to write itself. I know this. I also know that the angle I pitched to my editor — *rediscovering the charm of small-town New England, a personal journey of reconnection* — requires me to feel something I am not feeling tonight. What I feel is watched. What I feel is the weight of twelve years of careful distance collapsing into a single week.

I try a different opening. *Every small town has its own*

rhythm, its own memory.

Better. But the sentence sits there, inert, and I know why. I am writing around the thing I actually need to write about. The thing that has been pressing at the edges of my thoughts since the festival, since Mark's voice in the café — *you've always been good at leaving things behind, Sarah* — since Thomas's hand on mine and the way I pulled back without meaning to.

I close the laptop. The quiet rushes back in, louder than before.

My suitcase is still half-unpacked in the corner. A box of books sits beside the dresser, the top flap open, spines facing up. I have been living here for nearly a week and I have not hung a single picture. The walls are bare. The kitchen counter holds exactly three items: a coffee maker, a mug, and a box of granola bars. I have been treating this cottage like a hotel room, like a place I am already preparing to leave.

Old habit. I learned it from my mother, who kept our house in Willow Creek perpetually staged for an exit that never came. Fresh flowers on the table, nothing on the refrigerator door, suitcases stored under every bed. *You never know when you'll need to go*, she used to say, and I never questioned it until I was twenty-five and realized I had been living out of a suitcase for

seven years and calling it freedom.

The phone rings.

Not a text. A call. The screen lights up with a name that makes my stomach tighten: *Thomas Vance*.

I let it ring twice. Three times. I watch his name pulse on the screen and I think about the festival, about the way his shoulder brushed mine at Walter's booth, about the coffee he brought me after Mark left the café, about the question I didn't ask him — *what are you running from?* — because I was afraid he might ask me the same thing.

I answer on the fourth ring.

"Hey," I say. My voice sounds normal. I am proud of how normal it sounds.

"Sarah." The way he says my name is careful, like he's testing the weight of it. "I wasn't sure you'd pick up."

"Why wouldn't I?"

A pause. I hear something in the background on his end — the clink of a cup, the low hum of an espresso machine. He's still at the shop. Closing up, probably. I picture him leaning against the counter, phone tucked between his shoulder and his ear, sleeves pushed up to

his elbows.

"You seemed distant yesterday," he says. "After the festival. I wanted to check in."

Distant. The word is accurate and it stings. I was distant. I am distant now, sitting in my rented cottage with my laptop closed and my suitcase still open, holding the phone like it might burn me.

"I'm fine," I say. "Just buried in work. This article is kicking my ass."

"The Willow Creek piece?"

"Yeah."

"How's it going?"

"Slow." I lean back in my chair. The ceiling has a water stain in the shape of something I can't quite name. "Turns out writing about a place you used to live is harder than writing about a place you're just passing through."

He doesn't respond right away. The silence stretches, and I feel the shape of the things I'm not saying. *I saw someone at the festival. Someone from my past. Someone who knows things about me that I haven't told you. And I overheard two women talking about*

your past, Thomas, and I don't know what to do with any of it.

"Sarah," he says, and his voice is lower now, "if something's going on, you can tell me."

The offer lands in my chest and stays there. I want to take it. I want to tell him about Mark, about the summer before senior year, about the thing I let almost happen and then ran from. I want to ask him about Boston, about the rumors Martha was spreading, about the photograph of the coastline that isn't New England and the way he lied about where it came from.

But wanting and doing are different things. I learned that a long time ago.

"It's just the article," I say. "Deadline pressure. You know how it is."

Another pause. This one feels different. He knows I'm lying. I know he knows. Neither of us says anything about it.

"Well," he says finally, "if you need a break from the deadline pressure, I'm closing up Thursday night. We could grab dinner. Somewhere that isn't the café."

Thursday. Two days from now. The part of me that still remembers the warmth of his hand on mine wants to

say yes immediately. The part of me that has spent the last two days cataloguing every reason this is a bad idea wants to say no and hang up before he can ask why.

"Maybe," I say. "Let me see how the writing goes."

"Maybe," he repeats. The word hangs between us, thin and unsatisfactory.

"I should get back to it," I say. "The article."

"Right. Of course." He clears his throat. "Good luck with the writing, Sarah."

"Thanks, Thomas."

I hang up before he can say anything else. The phone goes dark in my hand. I set it on the desk, face down, and stare at the back of it like it might ring again.

It doesn't.

The cottage feels smaller than it did five minutes ago. The quiet is heavier. I press my palms against my thighs and breathe out slowly, the way my therapist in New York taught me to do when the anxiety started to spiral. In for four. Hold for four. Out for six.

It doesn't help.

I think about Thomas's voice on the phone, the careful way he said my name, the pause before he asked me to dinner. He was giving me an opening. I closed it. I closed it deliberately, and now I am sitting here regretting it, and the regret feels almost worse than the fear that made me do it.

My gaze drifts to the box of books beside the dresser. The top flap is open. Beneath a stack of travel guides and a dog-eared copy of *Bird by Bird*, I can see the corner of something that isn't a book. A spiral notebook. Blue cover. The edges of the pages are soft and worn, the way paper gets when it's been handled too much.

My high school journal.

I haven't opened it in years. I brought it with me almost by accident, tossed into the box at the last minute when I was packing up my apartment in Brooklyn. I told myself it was for research. For the article. For remembering what Willow Creek felt like when I was seventeen.

I cross the room and pull it out. The cover is bent at one corner. There's a coffee stain on the back, old and faded, from a study session at the library with Emily. I remember that day. I remember the way Emily laughed when I spilled my drink, the way she handed me napkins and said, *that's going to be there forever, you*

know.

She was right.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and open the journal. The handwriting is mine but it looks foreign, the letters rounder and more careful than my current scrawl. I flip past entries about exams and college applications and a boy named Derek who I'd forgotten entirely. Then I find what I didn't know I was looking for.

June 15

Mark Jenkins talked to me after the bonfire tonight. He was different than I expected. Quieter. He said he'd noticed me watching him at the lake last week. I didn't think anyone had noticed. He asked if I wanted to go for a walk sometime, just the two of us, and I said yes before I could think about it. I don't know why I said yes. I don't even like him. But there's something about the way he looks at me that makes me feel like I'm already in trouble and I don't care.

My chest tightens. I turn the page.

June 22

We went to the old mill road today. Mark brought a blanket and a bottle of his dad's whiskey. I only had a little but he kept drinking and his voice got different,

harder. He told me about his parents' divorce and the way his dad used to hit him, and I felt bad for him, I really did, but then he put his hand on my knee and I didn't want it there. I moved away and he said, "What, you think you're too good for me?" I laughed because I thought he was joking. He wasn't joking. He grabbed my wrist and held it too tight and said, "You don't get to lead me on and then change your mind, Sarah." I pulled away and ran back to my car. He didn't follow me. I haven't told anyone. I don't know why. It wasn't that bad. It just scared me.

I close the journal. My hands are shaking.

It wasn't that bad. The words sit on the page, written by a girl who didn't know how to name what had happened to her. A girl who had already learned, at seventeen, that the easiest way to survive something was to pretend it didn't matter.

I think about Mark in the café yesterday. The way he leaned against the counter, casual and composed, like he had every right to be there. The way he said *you've always been good at leaving things behind*. The way I felt seventeen again, small and scared and desperate to get away.

And then I think about Thomas. About the question I didn't ask him. About the rumors I overheard at the

festival — *married, some kind of accident, running from something*, and the way I've been holding those words against him without knowing if they're even true.

I don't know Thomas's past. But I don't fully know my own, either. I've spent twelve years not looking at it. Not naming it. Not letting myself understand what happened that summer, or what it did to me, or how it shaped every decision I've made since.

How can I ask Thomas to trust me with his secrets when I can't even face my own?

The journal is heavy in my lap. I open it again, to a different page, and find an entry from early July, a few weeks after the night on the mill road.

July 8

I've been avoiding Mark. He's called three times and I haven't answered. Emily asked me what was wrong and I told her nothing. I'm getting good at that. Mom says I've been quiet lately but she doesn't push. She never pushes. I think about telling someone but I don't know what I'd say. Nothing really happened. I just don't want to be here anymore. I want to go somewhere where nobody knows my name and nobody expects anything from me and I can just be whoever I want to be. Is that running away? Probably. I don't care.

I read the last line twice. *I don't care*. But I did care. I cared so much that I built an entire life around not caring, around not staying, around leaving before anyone could leave me first.

I set the journal on the bed beside me. Outside, the wind has picked up. The curtain lifts and falls. Somewhere in the distance, a car engine turns over and fades.

My phone is still on the desk, face down. I think about calling Thomas back. I think about telling him the truth, not all of it, not yet, but something. Enough to explain why I've been distant. Enough to let him know that the distance isn't about him.

But I don't pick up the phone. Not yet. There's something I need to do first.

I reach for my laptop and open a new document. Not the article. Something else. A list.

Things I know about the summer before senior year:

I type for ten minutes. The list is longer than I expected. When I'm done, I read it through once, twice, and then I open a browser window and search for the Willow Creek Historical Society archives. The article research gave me access last week. I haven't used it yet. I was saving it for the piece, for the section about the town's

founding families and the old mill and the Revolutionary War marker that might not be real.

But that's not what I'm looking for tonight.

I type *Jenkins* into the search bar and wait.

The results load slowly. Property records. A marriage announcement from 1985. An obituary for a Harold Jenkins, died 2003. And then, near the bottom of the page, a scanned newspaper article from the *Willow Creek Gazette*, dated August of my senior year.

The headline reads: *Local Teen Hospitalized After Incident at Mill Road.*

I click on it. The image loads in pieces, slow and grainy. I read the first paragraph. Then the second. My heart is beating in my throat, but my hands are steady.

I was not the only girl Mark Jenkins hurt that summer. I was just the one who got away before it was worse.

The article doesn't name the other girl. It doesn't have to. I know now why I buried that summer so deep I almost forgot it. I know why Mark's face in the café made me feel like the floor was dropping out from under me.

And I know what I need to do next.

I close the laptop. The journal is still open on the bed, the pages bent back to June 22. I pick it up and read the entry one more time, and this time I don't flinch. This time I let myself feel it. The fear. The shame. The way I told myself it wasn't that bad because the alternative, admitting it was, felt like something I wouldn't survive.

I survived it anyway. I just didn't know it until now.

I pull out my phone and text Emily back.

9:30 works. And Em? I need to ask you about something. Something from high school.

I hit send before I can second-guess myself. Then I pick up the journal and the newspaper article and carry both of them to my desk, where the blank article document is still waiting.

I don't open the article. Not tonight. Tonight, I open a new file and start writing something else entirely.

An Unfinished Story

"You've been in here for three hours."

Mrs. Gable's voice reaches me from the doorway of the archive room, and I look up from a stack of yellowed newspapers to find her watching me with an expression I can't quite read. Not disapproval. Something closer to recognition.

"Has it been that long?" I rub at my eyes with the heels of my hands. The overhead fluorescent hums. The air in this back room tastes like dust and vanilla, which I'm learning is just how Mrs. Gable smells, as though the bookstore has seeped into her skin over the decades.

"Longer, if you count the coffee you ignored." She nods toward a mug on the corner of the table. The surface has gone cold and filmy. "Thomas made that for you an hour ago. He's been pretending not to watch the door."

I glance toward the hallway that leads back to the café. I didn't hear him come in. I didn't hear him leave. The thought that he stood here, set down a mug, and retreated without a word settles somewhere behind my sternum.

"I got caught up," I say.

"I see that." Mrs. Gable steps into the room and lets her

gaze travel across the chaos I've made. Boxes pulled from shelves. Yearbooks stacked in uneven towers. A sprawl of local newspapers dating back three decades. The Willow Creek Historical Society keeps the official archives, but Mrs. Gable told me this morning that she'd held onto certain things over the years. Things that didn't belong in a museum but didn't belong in a landfill either. She'd gestured toward the back room with a vague wave and said, "Help yourself. You might find something useful for your article."

I'd come looking for historical context. Charming anecdotes. The kind of small-town color that travel editors love. Instead I've spent the last hour with my senior yearbook open to the index, tracing my finger down the J's.

Jenkins, Mark. Pages 14, 27, 42, 88.

I close the yearbook now, too fast, and the sound makes Mrs. Gable's eyebrows lift.

"Find what you were looking for?" she asks.

"Not yet."

She doesn't push. She moves past me to a shelf on the far wall and runs her fingers along the spines of a row of thin, staple-bound booklets. I watch her for a moment, then return to the box in front of me. It's

labeled in fading marker: *WCHS Lit Mags — 2008–2012*.

My years.

I pull out the first one. The cover is a photocopied pen-and-ink drawing of the school's front entrance, the oak trees flanking the walkway rendered in shaky adolescent lines. *The Willow Creek High School Literary Review, Fall 2008*. I remember these. We all had to submit something for English class. Most of us forgot about them the minute they were printed.

I flip through. Bad poetry about autumn. A short story involving a vampire and a locker combination. An earnest essay about climate change that uses the phrase "our planet's future" six times in three paragraphs. I'm smiling a little, despite myself, when I turn a page and the smile drops.

The poem is untitled. It sits in the lower right corner of page seventeen, and the byline reads simply *Anonymous*.

I know it's mine.

The recognition hits before I've read a single line. It's physical. A cold flush that starts at the base of my skull and travels downward, settling in my stomach. My hand, resting on the open magazine, has gone still.

*the gymnasium floor was polished to a mirror / and i
watched my reflection shatter / when you turned away
/ in front of everyone / in front of no one / the music
kept playing / someone laughed / i don't remember who
/ i remember the exit sign glowing red / and the cold of
the parking lot / and the way a public unmasking / feels
exactly like drowning / except louder*

I read it twice. The words arrange themselves and rearrange themselves and refuse to become anything other than what they are.

The Fall Formal. Junior year.

I'd asked Mark Jenkins to go with me. We'd been circling each other for weeks. Study sessions that ran too long. A hand on my lower back during a crowded assembly. I thought I'd read the signs correctly. I thought the softness in his voice when he said my name meant something. So I asked him, in the hallway between third and fourth period, my voice too bright, my hands clasped behind my back so he wouldn't see them shaking.

He'd said yes. He'd smiled. He'd touched my shoulder and said, "Wouldn't miss it."

And then he didn't show up. I stood near the punch bowl in a dress my mother had driven two towns over

to buy, and I waited. Forty-five minutes. An hour. Long enough for the chaperones to start glancing at me with that particular mixture of pity and discomfort. Long enough for Becca Torres to walk past with her date and not meet my eyes. Long enough to understand, with a certainty that felt like a door closing, that I had been a joke from the beginning.

Mark arrived at the end of the night with a group of friends, laughing about something, his tie undone. He saw me. I know he saw me. He turned away.

I'd written the poem the next morning, sitting on my bedroom floor, still wearing the dress. I'd submitted it to the literary magazine under *Anonymous* because even then, even at sixteen, I understood that some humiliations cannot be claimed out loud. And then I'd buried the memory so completely that I'd forgotten the poem ever existed.

Until now.

"That's a face I know."

Mrs. Gable's voice is closer than I expect. She's moved to stand beside the table, her hand resting on the back of the chair across from me. The vintage brooch at her collar catches the light. A small silver bird, wings spread.

I close the magazine. "Just old high school stuff."

"The worst kind of stuff." She pulls out the chair and sits, her movements slow and deliberate. "I found my own yearbook in here once, years ago. Opened it to a photograph of a boy I'd spent an entire summer pretending I wasn't in love with. His name was Arthur. He played the clarinet. He moved to Ohio the following spring, and I never told him."

I look at her. She's not looking at me. Her gaze is somewhere on the middle distance, on the shelves, on the past.

"Did you regret it?" I ask.

"Every day for about five years. Then every other day for another five. Now I regret it mostly when it rains." She folds her hands on the table. "The point isn't the boy, though. The point is that I spent a great deal of energy convincing myself I hadn't missed anything important. That I was perfectly fine. That silence was the same thing as safety."

The word *safety* lands in the room and stays there.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I say, though I do.

Mrs. Gable tilts her head. The knowing look in her eyes is gentle but unflinching. "I think you are."

I don't answer. I reach for the cold coffee and take a sip just to have something to do with my hands. It's bitter and stale, and I swallow it anyway.

"I should get back to these," I say, gesturing at the boxes. "Deadline and all."

Mrs. Gable studies me for a moment longer. Then she nods, once, and rises from the chair. "Of course. But Sarah?"

"Yes?"

"The boxes will still be here tomorrow. The things we don't say have a way of getting heavier, not lighter."

She leaves before I can formulate a response. The door clicks shut behind her, and I'm alone again with the dust and the fluorescent light and the poem I wrote when I was sixteen and thought I could make pain beautiful if I just arranged the words right.

I don't open the magazine again. I slide it into my bag, between my laptop and the notebook I've been using for article research. I'm not sure why. Evidence, maybe. Proof that the thing I remember actually happened.

The next box is full of photographs.

Loose prints, mostly. Some in envelopes labeled with

years and events. I sift through them with less focus than before, my mind still half-stuck on the poem, on Mrs. Gable's rain-streaked regret, on the way she'd said *silence was the same thing as safety* and looked at me as though she knew exactly what I'd been doing for the past decade.

And then I find the photograph.

It's a group shot. Six teenagers clustered around a picnic table at what looks like the town green, the bandstand visible in the background. Fall, judging by the sweaters and the color of the leaves. Someone's birthday, maybe. There's a cake on the table, half-eaten, the frosting smeared.

I recognize Emily immediately. She's on the left side of the frame, her red hair in the same braid she still wears, her glasses different but her smile exactly the same. Beside her is a boy I vaguely remember from chemistry class. Beside him, a girl whose name I've lost.

And on the right side, his arm draped across the shoulders of a girl who is me, is Mark Jenkins.

I'm laughing in the photograph. My head is tilted back, my eyes half-closed. I look happy. I look young. I look like someone who doesn't know what's coming.

Mark is looking at the camera with an expression I can't

decode. Not quite a smile. Something sharper. Something that, knowing what I know now, makes my skin go tight.

I turn the photograph over. On the back, in Emily's handwriting: *September, senior year. Last good day before everything got weird.*

Before everything got weird.

Before the incident on Mill Road. Before the girl in the newspaper article. Before I left Willow Creek and didn't look back.

The door opens behind me, and this time I do hear it. The shift of air. The faint scent of roasted coffee beans and something else, something clean and sharp like cedar.

"Mrs. Gable said you might need a refill."

Thomas's voice is careful. Measured in a way that tells me he's not sure of his welcome. I turn in my chair and find him standing in the doorway, a fresh mug in one hand, the other tucked into the pocket of his jeans. He's wearing a gray sweater with the sleeves pushed up, and there's a smudge of something on his forearm. Chocolate, probably. Or cinnamon.

"You don't have to keep bringing me coffee," I say.

"I know." He doesn't move. "Do you want me to go?"

The question is simple. The answer should be simple. But I think about our last conversation, the one that ended with me giving him a non-committal answer about dinner, the one that left a distance between us I haven't known how to cross. I think about the way he'd said *I'd like to cook for you* and the way I'd heard *I'd like to let you in* and the way both things had scared me equally.

"No," I say. "You can stay."

He crosses the room and sets the mug on the table beside the cold one. Then he pulls out the chair Mrs. Gable vacated and sits. He doesn't ask what I'm working on. He doesn't fill the silence with small talk. He just sits, his presence steady and undemanding, and waits.

I look at the photograph still in my hand. At my seventeen-year-old face. At Mark's arm around my shoulders.

"I found something," I say. "A poem I wrote in high school. About something that happened at a dance."

Thomas doesn't respond. He's watching me, his gaze patient, his hands resting loosely on the table.

"I'd forgotten I wrote it. I'd forgotten the whole thing, really. Or I thought I had." I set the photograph down. "But I didn't forget. I just got very good at not thinking about it."

"What was the poem about?"

"Being humiliated in public. Waiting for someone who never showed up. The usual teenage stuff." I try for a laugh, but it comes out wrong. Hollow.

Thomas doesn't laugh. He says, "That doesn't sound like the usual teenage stuff."

"No," I admit. "I guess it doesn't."

The silence that follows isn't uncomfortable. It's the kind of silence that makes room. I pick up the fresh coffee and take a sip. It's exactly right. The temperature, the bitterness, the faint sweetness at the end. He's been making my coffee for weeks now, and he's never once gotten it wrong.

"I used to write things down and then pretend I hadn't," Thomas says. His voice is low, almost to himself. "Journals. Letters. I'd fill pages and then throw them away before anyone could find them."

"Why?"

"Because writing something down makes it real. And I wasn't ready for certain things to be real." He meets my eyes. "I think you understand that."

I do. I understand it so completely that for a moment I can't speak.

"The poem," I say finally. "It was about Mark Jenkins."

Thomas's expression doesn't change, but something in his posture does. A subtle tension. A stillness that wasn't there before.

"The man from the café," he says.

"Yes."

"The one who upset you."

"Yes."

He nods slowly. He doesn't ask for details. He doesn't push. He just reaches across the table and, very lightly, touches the back of my hand with his fingertips. The contact lasts maybe three seconds. Long enough for me to feel the warmth of his skin. Long enough for my breath to catch and release.

"I'm glad you're looking at it," he says. "Whatever it is. I'm glad you're not throwing it away."

He withdraws his hand and stands. "I should get back to the counter. Emily's covering, but the afternoon rush is starting."

"Thomas."

He pauses.

"Thank you. For the coffee. And for—" I gesture vaguely, encompassing the silence, the presence, the three-second touch that I can still feel on my skin.

He gives me a small, crooked smile. "Any time."

After he leaves, I sit for a long moment staring at the closed door. Then I pull out my phone and open my messages with Emily.

Are you free tonight? I found something in the archives. A photo of us. And Mark. I think I need to ask you about that fall.

I hit send before I can talk myself out of it. Then I look at the photograph again. At my laughing face. At Mark's arm. At Emily's handwriting on the back.

Last good day before everything got weird.

I slide the photograph into my bag next to the literary magazine. Two pieces of a story I've been refusing to

read for over a decade. Tomorrow, maybe, I'll be ready to open it. Tonight, I'll start with Emily.

My phone buzzes. Emily's reply is a single line: *My place. 7:00. Bring wine.*

I pack up the archive boxes, return them to their shelves, and gather my things. The café is bustling when I pass through. Thomas is behind the counter, pulling shots, his movements efficient and practiced. He catches my eye as I reach the door and lifts his chin in a small nod. I nod back.

Outside, the afternoon light is thin and golden, the kind of autumn light that makes everything look like a memory even while it's happening. I pull my sweater tighter and start walking toward the cottage, my bag heavy with the weight of what I've found.

For the first time since I came back to Willow Creek, I'm not thinking about leaving. I'm thinking about staying long enough to finish what I started.

A Hard Truth

I didn't want to look at it.

The bag sits on the kitchen table where I dropped it ten minutes ago, canvas slumped against the salt shaker, and I've walked past it four times now without touching the strap. The cottage is too quiet. The radiator ticks. The light through the window above the sink has gone that particular autumn gold that makes everything look like it's already been remembered, and I don't want to look at what's inside the bag.

I make tea instead. Fill the kettle, set it on the burner, watch the flame curl blue around the bottom. My hands are steady but there's a tightness behind my sternum that won't ease, a thing with teeth. The kettle begins its low hum. I pull a mug from the cabinet, drop a teabag in, wait.

The bag hasn't moved. Of course it hasn't moved.

Steam rises. I let the tea steep too long, until it's bitter and dark, and then I carry the mug to the table and sit down and pull the bag toward me. The zipper sounds louder than it should. Inside: the literary magazine from Mrs. Gable's archive, the photograph of me and Emily and Mark from senior year, and my old journal with the blue cover and the coffee stain on the corner. I take

them out one at a time, line them up like evidence.

The photograph first. Emily's handwriting on the back: *Last good day before everything got weird.* We're standing by the football field, the three of us, and I'm laughing at something off-camera. Mark's arm is around my shoulder. His smile is real. I remember that smile. I remember thinking it meant something it didn't.

The magazine next. Fall 2009. I open to the page I found in the archive room, the anonymous poem I wrote after the Fall Formal, and I read it again, slower this time. The words are mine but they feel like someone else's now, a girl I used to know who thought humiliation was the worst thing that could happen to a person. She wasn't wrong. She just didn't know there were worse things.

You stood me up in front of everyone.

I watched the door. I watched the door.

You never came.

I wrote that. I sent it to the literary magazine and they published it and I never told anyone it was mine, and for twelve years I've carried the weight of that night like a stone in my pocket, polished smooth by repetition. Mark Jenkins humiliated me. Mark Jenkins made me a joke. Mark Jenkins was cruel.

But the poem doesn't tell the whole story. I know that now. I knew it this afternoon in Mrs. Gable's archive room, when I found the newspaper article about the other girl, the one Mark put in the hospital on Mill Road. The timeline doesn't work the way I remembered it. The poem came first. The poem came before everything.

I reach for the journal.

The blue cover is softer than it used to be, worn at the edges. The coffee stain has faded to a pale brown ring. I flip past pages I haven't read in years, past entries about homework and Emily's crushes and my mother's disappointment that I wasn't applying to colleges closer to home, and then I find it. October 15th. Two weeks before the Fall Formal.

My handwriting was terrible in high school. Loopy and rushed, the letters slanting forward like they were trying to escape the page.

I did something stupid today. Really stupid. I can't stop thinking about it and my face gets hot every time I remember.

Mark was at his locker after fifth period and I walked up to him and I had this whole speech prepared, I'd practiced it in the mirror like an idiot, and then I opened my mouth and none of it came out right. I told him I

liked him. Not just as friends. I said I thought maybe we could go to the Fall Formal together, like, as a date, and he just stared at me.

He didn't say anything for a really long time. People were walking past us in the hallway and I could feel them looking. And then he said "I don't think that's a good idea" and his voice was weird, like he was scared or something, but I didn't notice that then. I just felt my whole face go red and I said "okay, fine, whatever" and I walked away as fast as I could.

I hate him. I hate that I said anything. I wish I could take it all back.

I set the journal down.

The radiator clicks off. The silence that follows is thick enough to feel, a pressure against my eardrums. Outside, a car passes on the street, tires crunching over dry leaves, and then the quiet comes back and I'm sitting at my kitchen table staring at a seventeen-year-old girl's humiliation and seeing it for the first time with adult eyes.

I asked him. I asked him to the dance, and he said no, and I turned that no into a public betrayal because it was easier than admitting I'd been rejected. I wrote the poem. I sent it to the magazine. And everyone at school

read it, and everyone knew it was about Mark, because everyone knew I'd asked him and he'd turned me down. The gossip had already spread by then, the way gossip spreads in a town the size of Willow Creek, fast and hungry and impossible to stop.

I made him the villain of a story where I was the victim.

And then, two weeks later, he stood me up at the Fall Formal. He said he'd come and he didn't, and I stood by the punch bowl in my mother's borrowed heels and watched the door until Emily put her arm around me and said *let's just go, Sarah, he's not coming*.

But why did he say he'd come? Why did he change his mind?

I flip forward in the journal. November 3rd. The entry is short, barely three sentences, written in a hand so tight and small I have to hold the page close to the lamp.

Everyone's talking about the poem. Mark won't look at me. Someone wrote "liar" on my locker and I don't even know what they think I lied about. I just want to disappear.

There it is. The thing I've spent twelve years not remembering. The poem came out before the dance. Mark would have read it. The whole school would have read it, would have known it was about him, would have

whispered about it in the hallways and the cafeteria and the parking lot. And then I expected him to show up at the Fall Formal with a corsage and a smile, to be my date, to pretend none of it had happened.

He stood me up because I'd already humiliated him in front of everyone we knew.

My tea has gone cold. I drink it anyway, the bitterness coating my tongue, and I think about the newspaper article from August of that year, the girl on Mill Road, the hospital. Mark Jenkins had a father who hit him. Mark Jenkins was drowning in a kind of pain I couldn't see because I was too busy cataloging my own. And I added to it. I took my rejection and I sharpened it into a weapon and I used it in front of the entire school.

The shame comes in a wave, hot and physical. My stomach clenches. I press my palms flat against the table and breathe through it, in through the nose, out through the mouth, the way my therapist taught me before I stopped going to therapy. It doesn't help much.

I think about Thomas. I think about the way he looked at me this afternoon in the archive room, patient and steady, asking nothing. He told me he used to destroy his own writing, that he was afraid of what it might reveal. I understood him then, or thought I did. Now I wonder if I understand anything about anyone,

including myself.

If I could be this wrong about Mark Jenkins, if I could carry a version of events for twelve years that was so incomplete it was practically a lie, then what else am I wrong about? What am I missing about Thomas, about the things he won't tell me, about the scar above his eyebrow and the photograph of a coastline that isn't New England and the way his face closes off whenever someone mentions Boston?

I've been guarding myself against him. Building walls, taking notes, cataloging his evasions like evidence. But what if his secrets aren't a threat? What if they're just pain he doesn't know how to share?

I don't know. I can't know. That's the problem with other people's interior lives. You can't flip through them like a journal and find the entry that explains everything.

I close the blue notebook and set it on top of the magazine. The photograph goes on top of that. A little stack of things I thought I understood.

The light through the window has shifted from gold to gray. Clouds moving in. The cottage feels smaller than it did an hour ago, the walls closer, the ceiling lower. I should eat something. I should call Emily back, actually talk to her instead of just texting. I should do a lot of

things I'm not going to do tonight.

I pick up the poem again. Read it one more time, slowly, letting each line land.

You stood me up in front of everyone.

I watched the door. I watched the door.

You never came.

There's regret in those lines. I can feel it now, a quiet pulse beneath the anger. Not just regret that he hurt me. Regret that I'd made it impossible for him to do anything else. The poem isn't just an accusation. It's a confession, if you know how to read it. I didn't know how to read it. I was seventeen and I was hurting and I didn't have room for anyone else's pain.

I set the magazine down. My hands are trembling now, a fine vibration I can't seem to stop. I fold them in my lap and stare at the stack of artifacts on the table and try to figure out what I'm supposed to do with this new knowledge. Apologize? To Mark Jenkins, after twelve years, after everything that happened afterward? What would I even say?

I'm sorry I made you the villain of my story. I'm sorry I didn't see you. I'm sorry I was so busy being hurt that I never noticed you were drowning.

It's not enough. It would never be enough.

But maybe that's not the point. Maybe the point is that I see it now. That I can't unsee it. That the story I've been telling myself about who I am and what was done to me has a hole in the middle of it, and the hole is shaped like my own choices.

A knock at the door.

I freeze. My hands stop trembling and go still, the way small animals go still when they sense a predator. The knock comes again, three soft taps, unhurried. Not a neighbor. Neighbors in Willow Creek knock louder, more confident, with the assumption of welcome. This is someone who isn't sure they should be here.

I don't move. The stack of artifacts is spread across the table like a confession I haven't finished making. My eyes are probably red. I haven't checked my reflection since I got home.

The knock comes a third time, and then a voice, muffled through the door.

"Sarah? It's me."

Thomas.

The Weight of Secrets

The knock is wrong.

Not wrong in the sense of threatening. Wrong in the sense that I am not ready for anyone to be on the other side of my door, and the sound of knuckles on wood splits the quiet of the cottage like a stone dropped into still water. I freeze halfway between the kitchen counter and the window, my hand still wrapped around a glass I don't remember filling.

Three raps. Firm. Familiar.

I know before I look. The silhouette through the frosted glass panel is tall, shoulders slightly hunched against the early-evening chill, one hand still raised near the frame. Thomas.

My chest does something complicated. Not a flutter. A tightening, like a fist closing around something fragile.

I set the glass down on the counter and wipe my palm against my jeans. The fabric is soft from too many washes, and the gesture is stalling, and I know it's stalling, and I do it anyway. The cottage feels smaller than it did ten seconds ago. The lamp in the corner throws a yellow circle onto the floorboards, and the rest of the room sits in shadow, and I am standing in the

shadow part, and that feels about right.

Another knock. Softer this time. Hesitant.

"Sarah?"

His voice comes through the door muffled but unmistakable. The same voice that said *it's me* on the phone not two hours ago. The same voice that sat with me in Mrs. Gable's archive room while I tried to explain a poem I wrote when I was seventeen and stupid and hurting in ways I didn't have words for. He'd listened then. Really listened. And now he's here, on my doorstep, and I haven't invited him, and I don't know what to do with the fact that part of me wants to open the door and part of me wants to turn off the lamp and pretend I'm not home.

I open the door.

The cold air hits my face first, then the smell of fallen leaves and woodsmoke from someone's chimney down the street. Thomas stands on the stoop with his hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket, a dark wool thing I haven't seen before. His hair is messier than usual, the way it gets when he's been running his fingers through it, and there's a crease between his brows that wasn't there this afternoon.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi."

A beat. The kind of beat where neither of us knows who's supposed to speak next.

"I was in the neighborhood," he says, and then winces, almost imperceptibly. "That's not true. I wasn't. I came here on purpose."

The honesty catches me off guard. I step back from the doorway, and the movement is an invitation whether I mean it to be or not. He takes it, crossing the threshold with that particular carefulness tall men have in small spaces, ducking slightly even though the doorframe clears his head by a good six inches.

The cottage feels different with him inside it. Fuller. I close the door and the latch clicks, and suddenly we are two people in a room that has held only one for days, and the air rearranges itself around us.

"I wanted to check on you," he says. He's not looking at me. He's looking at the stack of books on my coffee table, the blanket I left crumpled on the arm of the couch, the notebook lying open on the kitchen counter with its pages blank. "After this afternoon. You seemed—" He pauses, searching for the word. "Unmoored."

Unmoored. The word lands somewhere in my sternum.

It's accurate in a way that makes me want to argue with it.

"I'm fine," I say.

He turns his head then, and his gaze finds mine, and I watch him not believe me. It's all there in the slight tilt of his jaw, the way his eyes hold steady without pressing. He doesn't say *you're lying*. He doesn't have to.

"Can I make you some tea?" I ask, because offering something feels like the right move, the normal move, the move a person makes when they're not falling apart.

"You don't have to."

"I know."

I move to the kitchen anyway. It gives me something to do with my hands. The kettle is still warm from earlier, and I fill it again and set it on the burner. The click of the gas igniting is loud in the quiet. Thomas hasn't moved from the entryway. I can feel him there, a presence at the edge of the room, watching me fill a teapot and measure out loose leaves with the kind of attention that makes my fingers clumsy.

"You didn't answer my text," he says.

I didn't. I saw it come in—*Thinking of you. Hope you're okay.*—and I stared at it for a long time, and then I put my phone facedown on the table and walked away. I don't know how to explain that the kindness in those six words felt like a weight I couldn't lift.

"I got busy," I say. "Writing stuff."

The lie is thin. He can see through it. I can tell by the way he doesn't respond right away, the way he lets the silence stretch until it becomes a question in itself.

"The article?"

"Yeah. The article." I keep my back to him, watching the kettle. A small tremor runs through the water's surface. "It's harder than I thought. Writing about this place."

"Willow Creek?"

"All of it. The town. The people. Figuring out what's worth saying and what's—" I stop. The word I want is *buried*, and I can't say that. "What's not."

The kettle begins its low hum, building toward a whistle. Thomas takes a step into the room, then another. I hear the floorboard creak under his weight, and then he's closer, close enough that I can smell the faint trace of coffee beans and something else, something clean like cedar soap.

"Sarah."

My name in his mouth. Careful. Like he's holding it out to me and waiting to see if I'll take it.

I turn around. He's stopped at the edge of the kitchen, one hand resting on the back of a dining chair, and the space between us is maybe four feet, and it feels like a canyon and a thread all at once.

"You don't have to tell me what's going on," he says. "But you also don't have to pretend nothing is."

The kettle screams. I pull it off the burner, and the sound dies, and the quiet that rushes back in is worse.

"I found some things today," I say. The words come out before I've decided to say them. "In the archives. About—" I pour the water into the teapot, watch the leaves swirl and darken. "About someone I used to know. Someone who hurt people. And I didn't know. Or I did know, but I didn't let myself know. I made it about me instead."

I'm not making sense. I can hear myself not making sense. The steam rises from the teapot and dampens my face, and I blink against it, and Thomas doesn't interrupt.

"There was this girl," I say. "She ended up in the

hospital. Because of him. And I was so busy being angry about a stupid dance that I never—" I stop. Swallow. "I never even wondered what happened to her."

The confession hangs in the air between us. Ugly and honest and too big for my small kitchen.

Thomas is quiet for a long moment. Then he says, "You were a kid."

"I was seventeen."

"That's a kid."

"It doesn't feel like an excuse."

"Maybe it's not an excuse. Maybe it's just true."

I look at him. He's still standing by the chair, and his hand is still on the back of it, and there's something in his expression that I can't quite read. Not judgment. Something closer to recognition.

"I did something similar once," he says.

The words are offered quietly, almost reluctantly, like he's setting down something breakable on a table between us.

"Not the same situation," he continues. "But the shape

of it. Knowing something was wrong and looking the other way because looking at it head-on would have cost me something I wasn't ready to lose."

He doesn't elaborate. I can feel the boundary there, the line he's drawn around the specifics, and I understand it in a way that makes my throat tight. He's giving me what he can. A sliver of his own locked-away history, held out like a hand in the dark.

"What did you do?" I ask. "After. When you couldn't look away anymore."

His jaw tightens. A muscle moves near his temple, small and involuntary. "I left."

"Left where?"

"Everywhere I'd been." He exhales, and it's almost a laugh, but not quite. "I burned a lot of bridges. Metaphorically. And some journals. Literally."

I remember him telling me that. In the archive room, this afternoon. *I destroyed them.* The writings he couldn't face. At the time it had felt like solidarity. Now it feels like a warning.

"Did it help?" I ask. "Burning them."

He considers the question longer than I expect.

"Temporarily."

The teapot sits between us, steaming and ignored. I should pour it. I should hand him a cup and let the warmth of it fill the spaces where words aren't working. But I don't move, and he doesn't push, and the moment stretches until it becomes something else entirely.

"I've been thinking about leaving," I say.

The admission lands hard. I didn't know I was going to say it until the words were already out, and now they're in the room, and I can't take them back.

Thomas's hand drops from the chair. "Leaving Willow Creek?"

"It was supposed to be temporary anyway. A few weeks. Catch my breath, write the article, move on." I wrap my arms around myself, and the gesture is defensive, and I hate that I can feel myself doing it. "I didn't plan on—"

I stop. *I didn't plan on you.* The words are right there, behind my teeth, and I can't say them.

"On what?" he asks.

"Any of this. The archives. The memories. Running into people I thought I'd never see again. Finding out that

the story I've been telling myself about my own life has holes in it." I shake my head. "I'm good at leaving. It's kind of my thing. Show up, write the piece, get on a plane. I've done it for years."

"Is that what you want?"

The question is simple. The answer isn't.

"I don't know what I want," I say. "That's the problem. I thought I did. I thought I wanted to come here, do the work, prove I could still write something that mattered, and then go back to my real life. Except my real life was a disaster. And being here—" I gesture vaguely at the cottage, the window, the town beyond it. "It's making everything I ran away from feel closer instead of farther."

Thomas takes a step toward me. Just one. But it changes the geometry of the room.

"Maybe that's not a bad thing," he says.

"It feels bad."

"I know."

He says it the way someone says something they've learned from experience. Not theoretical. Not comforting. Just true.

And that's the problem. That's exactly the problem. He understands. He's standing in my kitchen offering me pieces of his own broken history, and I should feel less alone, and instead I feel like I'm standing on the edge of something I'm not brave enough to jump into.

"I think I need some time," I say.

The words are a door closing. I hear it happen. I'm the one closing it, and I'm watching myself do it, and I can't stop.

Thomas doesn't move for a moment. Then he nods, slowly, and something in his face shifts. Not anger. Not hurt. Something quieter. Resignation, maybe. Or the particular sadness of someone who has been on the other side of this conversation before.

"Okay," he says.

"I'm sorry. I just—"

"You don't have to explain."

He says it gently. That's the worst part. He says it gently, and he steps back, and the space between us widens again, and I let it.

At the door, he pauses. His hand is on the latch, and he turns his head, and his gaze finds me across the room.

There's something in his eyes I can't name. A question he's not asking. A thing he's choosing not to say.

"Whatever you're running from," he says, "make sure it's not the thing that might actually save you."

Then the door opens, and the cold air rushes in, and he's gone.

The latch clicks. His footsteps fade down the path. I stand in the kitchen with the cooling teapot and the untouched cups and the weight of everything I didn't say pressing against my ribs.

I don't cry. I want to, but I don't. I pick up my phone instead and open the browser and type *flights out of Boston* into the search bar. The screen glows white-blue in the dim room. I scroll through departure times and gate numbers and connection cities, and the whole time I'm doing it, I can still smell cedar soap and coffee, still hear the echo of his voice saying *unmoored*, still see the way he looked at me before he left.

Like he knew something I didn't.

Like he was already bracing for the goodbye.

The cursor blinks in the search field. I set the phone down on the counter, facedown, the same way I did with his text. Outside, the wind picks up, rattling the

bare branches of the maple tree against the window. A car passes on the street, its headlights sweeping across the ceiling and vanishing.

I don't book the flight. Not yet.

But I don't close the browser either.

A Quiet Plea

The coffee mug is still warm. I set it down on the counter and watch the steam curl upward, thin and white against the dark wood of the shelving I built myself three years ago. The mug is one of the handmade ones Mrs. Gable ordered from a potter in Vermont — slightly uneven at the rim, glazed in a blue that reminds me of the ocean off the Oregon coast. I haven't thought about that coastline in months. This morning, for some reason, I can't stop.

The Written Word is still half-dark. I come in early on Thursdays to restock the pastry case and run the first cycle of espresso before the morning regulars trickle in. The quiet of the bookstore at this hour is different from the quiet of my apartment above the garage. Here, the stillness has texture — the smell of old paper and roasted beans, the faint creak of the floorboards near the history section, the way the light from Main Street filters through the front window and catches the dust motes floating above the fiction tables. I know every sound this building makes. I learned them one by one, the first year I was here, when I couldn't sleep past four in the morning and would come down to organize the stockroom just to keep my hands busy.

The bell above the door chimes.

I don't turn around right away. I know the rhythm of that entry — the hesitation before the door swings fully open, the soft scuff of boots on the mat, the way the bell's ring cuts off a half-second early because the door is being closed carefully, not let to swing shut on its own. Sarah.

"You're here early," I say, reaching for a towel to wipe the espresso wand.

"I could say the same to you." Her voice is steadier than it was last night. That's something. "I thought you didn't open until seven."

"We don't." I turn now. She's standing near the entrance, her canvas tote slung over one shoulder, wearing a gray sweater that's a little too big for her. Her hair is pulled back, but a few strands have escaped and she keeps tucking them behind her ear. She looks like someone who didn't sleep much. I know that look. "But the scones don't bake themselves."

She almost smiles. Almost. "Mrs. Gable has you baking now too?"

"Mrs. Gable has me doing a lot of things I didn't expect." I hang the towel over the edge of the sink. "You want coffee? The good stuff's ready."

She hesitates. I see it in her shoulders first, then in the

way her fingers tighten on the strap of her bag. She came here to gather something — research materials, she'd said last night, before everything else came spilling out — and she didn't plan on me being here. I can read the calculation behind her eyes: *stay polite, get what I need, leave.*

"Sure," she says. "Coffee would be good."

I pour her a cup without asking how she takes it. I remember. She notices that I remember — her gaze flickers to my hands, then away — and something in her posture shifts. Not softening, exactly. More like a door that's been locked for a long time rattling in its frame.

"You're still thinking about leaving," I say.

It's not a question. She takes the mug from me, wraps both palms around it, and doesn't answer. The steam rises between us.

"I'm not trying to corner you, Sarah. I just—" I stop. The words I want are the ones I've spent years not saying to anyone. *I recognize what you're doing because I've done it. I recognize the way you're looking at the exit because I used to measure every room by how fast I could get out of it.* "I don't think you should go. Not yet."

"You don't know why I'm considering it."

"No," I admit. "I don't know all of it. But I know what running looks like."

Her jaw tightens. She sets the mug down on the counter between us, and the small sound of ceramic on wood is louder than it should be in the empty bookstore. "That's a big assumption."

"It's an observation." I lean back against the espresso machine, giving her space. "When I first came to Willow Creek, I wasn't looking for a new life. I was looking for a place to hide."

The words land. She goes still, her hand still resting near the mug, and I can feel her attention sharpen. I don't talk about this. Mrs. Gable knows fragments. Emily has guessed at others. But I've never said it outright, not to anyone, and the fact that I'm saying it now to Sarah Miller, a woman I've known for less than two weeks, a woman who might be on a plane to anywhere by tomorrow, makes my pulse beat hard at the base of my throat.

"The Written Word was the first place that didn't ask me questions," I continue. "Mrs. Gable needed help. I needed a reason to get out of bed in the morning. It was supposed to be temporary. Six months, maybe. Long enough to figure out what came next." I pick up my own mug, more for something to do with my hands than

because I want the coffee. "That was five years ago."

Sarah is watching me now. Really watching. Her eyes are the color of the woods in late autumn, green and brown and something darker underneath. "What were you hiding from?"

I shake my head. "That's a longer conversation. But the point is, I almost left too. A dozen times, that first year. I had a bag packed. I had the car keys in my hand. And every time, something kept me here. A customer who remembered my name. A book Mrs. Gable pressed into my hands and said, *read this, it'll help*. The way the light hits the river in October." I pause. "Small things. But they added up."

"And now?"

"Now this place is home. I didn't plan it. I didn't want it, at first. But it happened anyway." I meet her eyes. "I think it could happen for you too. If you let it."

The silence stretches. Sarah looks down at her coffee, and I can see her wrestling with something, whether to tell me more, whether to trust the openness I've just offered. Her fingers trace the rim of the mug, around and around, a nervous habit I've noticed before.

"It's not that simple," she says finally.

"It never is."

From the back of the store, I hear the soft click of the office door. Mrs. Gable emerges, her silver hair pinned up in its usual bun, a vintage brooch, a small enameled bird, fastened at the collar of her cardigan. She moves through the bookstore the way she always does, with the unhurried certainty of someone who has walked these aisles for decades and will walk them for decades more.

"Thomas," she says, nodding at me. Then her gaze shifts to Sarah, and something passes between them. It's brief, a flicker of recognition, a knowing that doesn't require words. Mrs. Gable's expression doesn't change, but her eyes linger on Sarah's face a moment longer than casual observation requires.

"Good morning, Sarah. You're here early."

"I was just picking up some notes," Sarah says, and her voice is different now, brighter, more guarded. The shift is so subtle I almost miss it. "For the article."

"Of course." Mrs. Gable moves toward the pastry case and begins arranging the scones I pulled from the oven twenty minutes ago. "Take whatever you need. The archives are always open to you."

She doesn't look at me. But I catch it anyway, the slight

tilt of her head, the way her hand pauses on a cranberry scone before setting it in place. She heard us. Or she heard enough. And she's choosing not to intrude.

Sarah notices too. I can tell by the way her shoulders draw in, the way she suddenly seems aware of how exposed she is, standing at the counter with her coffee and her unsaid things. The bookstore feels smaller than it did a minute ago. The town feels smaller.

"I should get to work," Sarah says, reaching for her bag.

"Sarah." I say her name before I can stop myself. She pauses, her hand on the strap. "Come for a walk with me. Later this afternoon. The trails by the river, the ones we talked about at the festival."

She blinks. "A walk."

"Low stakes. Fresh air. No pressure." I hold her gaze. "Just a walk."

I reach for her hand. It's a simple gesture, the kind of thing I've done a hundred times with customers, with friends, a brief touch to reassure or connect. But this is different. My fingers brush the back of her hand, and I feel the warmth of her skin, the slight tremor that runs through her knuckles. For half a second, she doesn't move. Her hand stays where it is, and I feel the possibility of her fingers curling around mine.

Then she pulls back.

It's not dramatic. It's barely a movement at all, just a withdrawal, her hand sliding away and tucking against her side like something she needs to protect. But it's unmistakable.

"I don't know if I can," she says. Her voice is quiet, almost apologetic. "The walk. I don't know if I'm—" She stops. Swallows. "I'll think about it."

I don't push. I let my hand fall to the counter and nod. "Okay. The offer stands."

She looks at me for a long moment, and I can see the war happening behind her eyes, the part of her that wants to say yes fighting against the part that has spent years saying no to anything that might matter. Then she turns and walks toward the archive room, her footsteps quick and light on the old floorboards.

Mrs. Gable finishes arranging the scones. She doesn't say anything, but when she passes me on her way to the office, she pats my arm once. Just once. Her hand is dry and cool, and it carries the faint scent of lavender.

"Patience," she murmurs, and then she's gone, the office door clicking shut behind her.

I stand at the counter and listen to the sounds of the bookstore waking up around me. The hum of the refrigerator. The tick of the clock above the history section. From somewhere in the back, the rustle of paper, Sarah, gathering her research, or pretending to. I think about what I told her. About the bag I kept packed. About the car keys in my hand. About the small things that added up until leaving felt like more of a loss than staying.

I didn't tell her the whole truth. I didn't tell her about Boston, about the life I burned down, about the people I failed before I came here. That's a conversation for another day, if she stays. If she lets me have another day.

The morning light shifts through the front window, and the dust motes rearrange themselves into new constellations. I pick up my coffee mug. It's gone cold.

From the back of the store, I hear the archive room door open. Sarah's footsteps cross the main floor, slower now, and I don't turn around. I don't want to make her feel watched. But I listen. I listen to the pause near the entrance, the soft exhale of breath, the way her hand rests on the door handle for a full three seconds before she pushes it open.

The bell chimes. The door closes. She's gone.

I look down at the counter. She left her coffee. The mug is still half-full, the ceramic cool to the touch, a faint ring of lip balm on the rim. I pick it up and pour the rest down the sink, then rinse the mug and set it in the drying rack.

Three o'clock, I told her. The river trail. I'll be there. I don't know if she will be. I don't know if the part of her that pulled her hand back this morning is stronger than the part that almost let me hold it.

But I'll be there.

The Path Less Taken

The cold has settled into my fingers despite the gloves I pulled on before leaving the cottage. I stop on the trail and flex them, watching the blood return in slow prickles. The air smells like wet leaves and woodsmoke from someone's chimney further down the valley, and the sky through the bare branches is that particular October blue that makes everything look sharper than it is.

I shouldn't have come out here alone.

Thomas didn't say it outright. He stood in my doorway last night with his hands shoved in his coat pockets and his gaze moving across my face like he was trying to read something I hadn't written yet. *Take the river trail tomorrow*, he said. *It helps*. He didn't say *I'll come with you*. He didn't say *let me*. He just planted the suggestion and left, and I spent the morning pretending I wasn't going to take it.

But here I am.

The trail curves ahead, following the old mill stream, and I let my boots find the familiar ruts without thinking. I walked this path a hundred times in high school. Emily and I used to cut through here after last period, our backpacks heavy with books we'd already read, talking

about boys we didn't understand and futures we couldn't picture. I'd forgotten how the light falls through the oaks at this hour, dappling the ground in coins that shift when the wind moves.

I stop at the split in the trail. Left goes to the old footbridge. Right climbs toward the ridge. I used to take the left, always, because it was faster to get home. Today I turn right.

The climb is steeper than I remember. My thighs burn by the time I reach the first outcropping, a flat shelf of granite that overlooks the stream below. I sit on the cold stone and pull my knees up, and for a long moment I don't think about anything at all except the sound of water over rocks and the way the wind combs through the pines on the far bank.

Then the quiet does what quiet always does. It lets everything in.

I think about Thomas standing in my kitchen. The way he said *don't run from something that might save you* and then walked out before I could argue. The way I wanted to argue and couldn't find the words, because some part of me recognized the truth in it and hated him a little for seeing it first.

I've been running for years. I told myself it was

freedom. A new city every few months, a new byline, a new set of faces I'd never have to know well enough to disappoint. After the *Voyager* piece imploded and Derek decided I wasn't worth the trouble, I told myself I was coming back to Willow Creek to regroup. To catch my breath. Temporary. Always temporary.

But I've been here over a week and I haven't booked a flight.

The browser tab is still open on my laptop. Boston to Seattle. Seattle to Portland. I looked at the prices and closed the screen and made tea instead.

A branch snaps somewhere behind me and I turn, half-expecting to see a deer. Nothing. Just the woods settling into the cold. I face forward again and let my shoulders drop.

Thomas asked me once why I stopped keeping a journal. I told him the truth, or part of it: that after the controversy, after the comments section turned into a landfill of accusations and my editor stopped returning my calls, I couldn't bring myself to put anything down on paper. Every sentence felt like evidence. Every thought felt like something that could be used against me.

What I didn't tell him was that the fear started long

before the *Voyager* piece. It started here. In Willow Creek. With a poem I published in the literary magazine and a boy I humiliated because I couldn't handle being rejected.

I press my palms against the granite. The stone is rough and real and doesn't care about anything I did twelve years ago.

Mark Jenkins asked me to the Fall Formal. That's what I wrote in my journal, and that's what I believed for more than a decade. He asked me, and then he stood me up, and I was the victim of a casual cruelty I never deserved. I built a whole identity around that story. The girl who was wronged. The girl who left and never looked back.

But the journal didn't lie. I read it three times in Mrs. Gable's archive, my hands shaking so badly the pages blurred. *I asked Mark to the dance today. He said no. He was nice about it but I could tell he felt sorry for me.*

I asked him. He said no. And then I wrote a poem about him standing me up and published it where everyone could read it.

The poem didn't name him. It didn't have to. Everyone knew. Everyone recognized the details: the corsage left waiting, the empty chair at the table, the girl in the blue

dress crying in the bathroom. I made Mark Jenkins the villain of a story where I was the author, the narrator, and the victim, and I never once stopped to ask what it cost him.

He had an abusive father. He was barely holding himself together. And a few months after the formal, he was involved in something on Mill Road that put a girl in the hospital. I don't know the details. I don't know if he was responsible or just present. But I know I added to whatever weight he was already carrying, and I never apologized. I never even acknowledged it.

I left for college and I kept leaving, and Mark Jenkins became a footnote in a story I told myself about why I could never come home.

The wind picks up and I shiver. My gloves are thin and my nose is running and I should head back before the sun drops below the tree line, but I don't move. I'm thinking about Thomas again. About the way he looked at me when I admitted I'd been searching for flights. Not angry. Not hurt. Just tired. Like he'd seen this before. Like he'd been the one left standing in a doorway before, watching someone choose the exit.

He told me he burned his journals. He told me he left a life behind. He didn't give me details and I didn't push, because pushing would mean inviting him to push back,

and I wasn't ready to answer the questions he might ask.

I'm still not ready. That's the problem.

I want to be the kind of person who can sit across from someone and say *here's the worst thing I've ever done, here's the part of myself I'm most ashamed of, do you still want to know me?* But every time I get close, my throat closes up. My hands find something to do. I change the subject or make a joke or find a reason to leave the room.

Thomas deserves better than that. I don't know what we are yet, or what we could be, but I know he deserves someone who doesn't flinch when the conversation turns toward the truth.

I think about Emily, too. Emily, who kept the photograph of the three of us. Emily, who wrote *we were all so young* on the back like an apology for the people we used to be. She never blamed me for what happened with Mark. She never even brought it up. But she kept the picture, and I wonder now if she was waiting for me to be ready to talk about it.

A crow calls somewhere above me and I look up. It's perched on a dead branch, black against the pale sky, watching me with the kind of disinterest that feels

almost generous. I watch it back until it lifts off and glides toward the ridge.

I could find Mark Jenkins. It wouldn't be hard. Willow Creek is small, and someone knows where he is. Someone knows what happened after I left. I could reach out and say the thing I should have said twelve years ago. I don't know if he'd want to hear it. I don't know if it would matter. But maybe the apology isn't for him. Maybe it's for me. Maybe it's about learning to stop running from the messes I've made and start cleaning them up.

The sun is lower now, the shadows stretching long and blue across the trail. I stand up and my knees crack and I feel older than thirty. I feel like I've been carrying something heavy for so long I forgot I was holding it.

I start walking back down the trail. The descent is easier, gravity doing half the work, and by the time I reach the split again the light has gone golden and soft. I take the left fork this time, toward the footbridge, because it's faster and because I'm cold and because I want to be home before dark.

Home. The word catches in my mind and I don't push it away.

At the bridge I stop and pull out my phone. The screen

is bright in the dimming light. I open my messages and scroll to Thomas's name. The last text is from three days ago: *Coffee's on the house if you finish that article.* I never replied.

My thumbs hover over the keyboard. I could say anything. I could say *I took your walk* or *I'm still here* or *I'm sorry I'm so bad at this.* I could ask him something real. I could tell him something true.

I type: *You were right about the river trail.*

I stare at the words. They're not enough. They're not the thing I want to say. But they're a start. They're a door I'm choosing not to close.

I press send before I can talk myself out of it.

The phone buzzes almost immediately. *I usually am. You okay?*

I read the message twice. The question is simple and I don't know how to answer it. I'm not okay. I'm better than I was yesterday. I'm trying. I'm standing on a footbridge in the town I swore I'd never come back to, and I'm thinking about staying, and that terrifies me more than any flight I've ever taken.

I type: *Getting there.*

Another pause. Then: *Same time tomorrow? I'll bring the coffee.*

The river moves beneath me, steady and cold, and the last light catches on the water in ribbons of copper and gold. I can hear the traffic on Main Street now, faint and far away, the town settling into evening. Somewhere a dog barks. Somewhere a door opens and closes.

I type my answer and put the phone back in my pocket and walk toward the lights.

The Unspoken Truths

The morning light through the front windows of The Written Word is thinner than yesterday's, a pale gold that hasn't decided whether it means warmth or warning. I unlock the door at seven-fifteen, thirty minutes before we open, and the familiar smell of old paper and coffee grounds settles around me like a coat I've worn for years. The espresso machine hums when I flip the switch. I run a cloth over the counter, check the pastry case, line up the mugs. Routine. The shape of a life I built brick by brick, quiet by quiet.

I don't know if she'll come this morning. After yesterday—the river trail, the coffee she left behind, the way her fingers curled away from mine—I stopped trying to predict Sarah Miller. But I hope. The hope sits under my ribs like a stone I've learned to carry.

The bell above the entrance chimes at seven-forty. Emily. Her red braid swings as she shrugs off her coat, and she's already talking before the door clicks shut.

"You'll never guess who I saw at the post office yesterday." She drops her bag behind the counter and reaches for an apron. "Martha. Holding court by the P.O. boxes. She was telling everyone within earshot that the history fair is going to be a disaster because the Grange hall has mice."

"Does it?"

"One mouse. In 2019. She's been dining out on it for five years." Emily ties the apron strings and grins at me. "You're here early."

"Couldn't sleep."

She tilts her head, and I can feel the question she doesn't ask. Emily is good at that—noticing without prying. It's why I hired her three years ago, and it's why she's still here. But this morning, her curiosity feels closer to the surface than usual.

I change the subject. "The new shipment of local history books came in yesterday. They're still in the back. Mrs. Gable wants them displayed by Saturday."

"On it." She disappears through the storeroom doorway, and I'm alone again with the espresso machine and the thin gold light.

The bell chimes at eight-oh-two. Not a customer—we're not open yet. I look up, and there she is.

Sarah stands in the entrance, one hand still on the doorframe. She's wearing the same green sweater from yesterday, her hair loose and a little tangled, like she walked here fast. Her cheeks are flushed from the

morning chill. She looks at me, and something in her expression has shifted overnight. The guardedness is still there, but it's thinner now. Behind it, I catch a glint of something steadier.

"You're early," I say.

"So are you."

"I'm always early."

"I know." She steps inside and lets the door swing shut. "I wanted coffee. The real kind."

I reach for a mug before she has to ask. The ceramic is warm from the machine. I pour the shot, steam the milk, and set the cup on the counter between us. She wraps her fingers around it and doesn't pull away this time.

"Thank you," she says. "For yesterday. The walk suggestion. I went."

"I know."

She raises an eyebrow.

"You texted," I say. "I assumed you'd gone."

"I did. The whole loop. All the way to the ridge." She takes a sip, and her eyes drift toward the window. "It helped. More than I expected."

I want to ask what she thought about, what she found out there, but I don't. The stone under my ribs shifts. I wipe the counter again, though it doesn't need it.

"I'm glad," I say.

Emily emerges from the back, a stack of books in her arms. "Sarah! You're here early too. What is this, a conspiracy?" She sets the books down and hugs Sarah with one arm, the stack wobbling. "I was just thinking about you. Did you get my text about the history fair?"

"I did. I'll be there." Sarah's voice is lighter than yesterday, but there's something underneath it—a tension she's holding at bay. "Actually, I wanted to ask you something. Later, maybe. When you have a minute."

Emily's eyes flick to me, then back to Sarah. "Of course. Lunch?"

"Sure."

The bell chimes again. Mrs. Gable. She enters with her usual precision—coat hung on the hook by the door, silver bun immaculate, a brooch shaped like a small bird pinned at her collar. Her gaze sweeps the room and lands on Sarah.

"Good morning, dear." The words are simple, but the

look that accompanies them is not. It's the same look she gave us yesterday, when she walked in on our conversation. Knowing. Patient. A little sad, maybe. "You're here early."

"Everyone keeps saying that," Sarah says.

"Perhaps because it's true." Mrs. Gable moves toward her office, then pauses. "I heard you took the river trail yesterday. The ridge path."

Sarah's grip tightens on her mug. "How did you—"

"Walter mentioned it. He saw you coming down from the ridge while he was walking his dog." She smiles, and it's kind, but it's also a reminder: this town sees everything. "He said you looked like you'd found something up there."

Sarah doesn't answer. The silence stretches a beat too long.

"Well," Mrs. Gable says, "I'll be in the office. Thomas, the order for the history fair display needs your signature before noon." She disappears through the office door, and the room exhales.

Emily busies herself with the new books. Sarah stares into her coffee. I stand behind the counter, a cloth in my hand, and feel the weight of everything unsaid pressing

against the windows.

The morning crowd trickles in. Regulars, mostly. Mr. Kowalski buys a black coffee and a copy of the local paper. Two women I don't recognize order lattes and linger by the fiction section. Sarah stays at the counter, nursing her drink, watching the room. I catch her glancing at me twice, three times, each look a question she hasn't figured out how to ask.

At ten, Emily's shift ends. She unties her apron and grabs her bag. "Lunch at Darlene's? Noon?"

Sarah nods. "I'll meet you there."

Emily waves and heads out, and the shop settles into a mid-morning lull. The two women leave. Mr. Kowalski folds his paper and follows. For a moment, it's just us.

"You asked me yesterday," I say, "about why I came here."

She looks up. "You told me. You needed quiet."

"I did. I still do." I set the cloth down and lean against the counter. "But I didn't tell you the whole story."

She waits. Her eyes are steady, hazel catching the light.

"I used to live in Boston," I say. "I had a different life

there. A different name, in some ways. Not legally—I'm not in witness protection or anything dramatic. But I was someone else. Someone louder. Someone who made mistakes."

"What kind of mistakes?"

The question hangs between us. I could answer it. I could tell her about the restaurant I co-owned, the partner I trusted, the money that vanished. I could tell her about the woman I loved who left when the money did, and the months I spent staring at a ceiling in a one-bedroom apartment, wondering if I'd ever feel like myself again. I could tell her about the fire, not literal, but close enough. The bridges I burned. The people I hurt. The person I was.

But the words stick in my throat. Five years of silence have made them heavy.

"The kind that make you want to start over," I say. "In a town where no one knows your name."

She doesn't push. I see the effort it takes her not to. Her fingers trace the rim of her mug, and her jaw tightens, and then she exhales and lets it go.

"I get that," she says. "The starting over part."

"I know you do."

The bell chimes. A man in a wool coat enters, and the moment fractures. Sarah finishes her coffee and stands.

"I should go. Emily's waiting." She pauses at the door.
"Thomas?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for the coffee. And for yesterday." She hesitates, and I can see her weighing something.
"Maybe we could do it again sometime. The walk. Together."

The stone under my ribs shifts and settles. "I'd like that."

She leaves. The door swings shut, and the shop is quiet again. I pick up her empty mug and rinse it in the sink. The water runs hot over my fingers, and I stand there longer than I need to, thinking about the questions she didn't ask and the answers I didn't give.

Mrs. Gable emerges from her office around eleven. She watches me dry the mug and set it on the shelf.

"You didn't tell her," she says.

"Not yet."

"She'll find out eventually. Secrets have a way of surfacing in this town." She adjusts her brooch, the little bird tilting sideways. "You know that better than most."

"I know."

She studies me for a moment, then nods once and retreats to her office. The door clicks shut.

I spend the next hour restocking the pastry case and organizing the history fair display. My hands move through the motions while my mind circles back to Sarah's face at the door, the way she looked at me like she was trying to read something written in invisible ink. She's getting closer. I can feel it. And part of me wants her to find the truth, wants to stop carrying it alone. But the other part, the part that burned everything down five years ago and ran, still believes that silence is safer.

At noon, Emily returns from lunch. She's quieter than usual, her cheerfulness dimmed at the edges.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Yeah. Just... Sarah asked me about you."

I keep my expression neutral. "What about me?"

"When you moved here. What you were like back then.

If I knew anything about your life before." She meets my eyes, and there's an apology in hers. "I didn't tell her anything. I don't know much to tell. But she's curious, Thomas. More than curious. She's looking for something."

"I know."

"Are you going to tell her?"

"Eventually."

Emily nods, but her brow stays furrowed. "She's my best friend. I don't want to keep things from her. But I also don't want to betray your trust. So... whatever it is you're holding onto, maybe figure out how to let it go. Before she figures it out on her own."

She turns away before I can respond and starts arranging the window display. I watch her for a moment, then go back to the pastry case.

The afternoon drags. Customers come and go. The light through the windows shifts from gold to gray as clouds roll in from the west. By four o'clock, the shop is empty again, and I'm alone with the hum of the espresso machine and the faint smell of rain in the air.

I think about Sarah on the ridge trail, walking through the quiet, finding something she'd lost. I think about the

questions she asked me this morning and the ones she didn't. I think about Emily's warning and Mrs. Gable's knowing look and the way this town holds onto secrets like stones in a river, smoothing them over time but never letting them disappear.

She's going to find out. Sooner or later, she'll piece it together, the Boston connection, the burned bridges, the reason I flinch when anyone asks about my past. And when she does, I'll have to decide whether to let her in or watch her walk away.

The bell chimes. A woman in a raincoat steps inside, shaking droplets from her umbrella. "Are you still open?"

"For another hour."

She orders a tea and settles into the armchair by the window. I make the tea, hand it to her, and return to my place behind the counter.

Outside, the rain begins in earnest. It taps against the glass like a question repeated until it becomes an answer.

Confessions Under the Stars

The kettle clicks off. I don't move to pour it. Outside the cottage windows, the light has gone the particular gold of early autumn evening, the kind that makes the white clapboard of the neighboring houses look almost lit from within. A dog barks two streets over. The sound carries in the cooling air like something dropped into still water.

I've been home for an hour. Home. The word still sits strangely in my mind, a borrowed coat I haven't decided fits. But the cottage smells like the cinnamon candle Emily left on my doorstep yesterday, and my laptop is open on the kitchen table with twelve hundred words of a new article already written, and the restlessness that followed me back from The Written Word hasn't settled. It's changed shape. It's become something sharper.

Determination, maybe. Or impatience with my own caution.

I pick up my phone before I can talk myself out of it.

Do you want to come over? I have wine. Well, I can acquire wine. The cottage. Seven?

I stare at the screen. The message is already delivered.

Three small dots appear, disappear, appear again. I watch them flicker and realize I'm holding my breath.

I'll bring the wine. Seven.

No question mark. No hedging. Thomas Vance, I'm learning, doesn't hedge when it matters. He only hedges when it doesn't.

I set the phone down and look around the cottage with the sudden, sharp awareness that someone else will be inside it soon. Someone who isn't Emily, who's seen my mess and my mismatched mugs and the stack of unread books on the nightstand. The throw blanket on the couch is bunched in a corner. There's a coffee cup in the sink from this morning. I move through the small rooms straightening things that don't need straightening, my fingers brushing surfaces as if I can erase the evidence of my solitary hours here.

At six fifty-three, headlights sweep across the front window. I watch through the curtain as Thomas's car pulls up. He sits for a moment before getting out, and I wonder what he's thinking. Whether he's nervous. Whether this feels like a threshold to him too.

The knock is two soft taps, unhurried.

I open the door.

He's changed out of the shirt he wore at the bookstore. This one is dark blue, the sleeves rolled once at the wrists. In one hand he holds a bottle of wine with a label I don't recognize, something local from the look of it. His hair is still that particular disheveled that seems less like carelessness and more like he's been running his fingers through it.

"You found it," I say.

"You gave good directions." He holds up the bottle. "Apple wine. From the orchard out on Mill Road. It's not fancy."

"I'm not fancy."

His mouth tilts. "I've noticed."

I step back and he comes inside, bringing the smell of evening air and something else, something clean and faintly woody. He pauses in the small entryway, taking in the cottage with a slow, careful attention that makes me suddenly aware of every detail he's seeing. The watercolor of the river I bought at a craft fair years ago. The bookshelf I assembled myself and never quite got level. The blue notebook on the arm of the couch that I should have put away.

"This feels like you," he says.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know yet." He turns to look at me. "I'm figuring it out."

I take the wine from his hand and go to the kitchen to open it. The corkscrew is in the third drawer I try, and I'm aware of him moving through the living room behind me, not hovering, just looking. His footsteps are quiet on the old floorboards.

"The river painting," he says. "Is that local?"

"Vermont. I bought it at a craft fair when I was twenty-three. It was the first thing I ever hung in a place that was mine."

"And you've kept it."

"I've kept it."

The cork comes free with a soft pop. I pour two glasses, the wine a pale gold in the evening light, and carry them to the couch. Thomas settles into the armchair across from me, and for a moment we just sit there, the silence not uncomfortable but expectant. Waiting for one of us to decide what this is.

"You were quiet this afternoon," I say. "After Emily left."

He doesn't pretend not to know what I mean. "I was thinking."

"About?"

"What you asked me. What I didn't answer."

I set my glass down on the side table. My fingers stay wrapped around the stem for a beat longer than necessary. "Thomas, I'm not trying to interrogate you. But I can't—" I stop, find the words. "I've spent years not letting anyone close enough to ask the hard questions. And then I came back here, and you were so careful with me. So patient. And I thought, maybe this is different. Maybe I can be different. But I can't be the only one."

His eyes are on me, steady and blue. The scar above his eyebrow catches the lamplight. "You're not."

"Then help me understand. You said you burned bridges. You said you made mistakes. But you didn't tell me what kind. You didn't tell me why you came here specifically, or what you were running from, or—"

"I wasn't running." The words come out sharper than he intends; I see him pull back, recalibrate. "I was. But not from the law, if that's what you're wondering. Not from anything criminal."

"I wasn't wondering that."

"Weren't you?"

I open my mouth to deny it, then close it. "Maybe a little."

He almost smiles. "I appreciate the honesty."

"I'm trying something new."

The almost-smile fades. He looks down at his glass, turning it slowly in his fingers. Outside, the last light is draining from the sky, and the cottage has grown dimmer. I should turn on another lamp. I don't move.

"I was married," he says.

The words land in the room like a stone dropped into the center of the table. I don't speak. I don't think I could.

"Her name was Claire. We met in culinary school. She was—" He stops, and I watch him search for a word that will contain everything and find none. "She was the kind of person who made you believe things would work out. Not because she said it. Just because she was there, and she was certain, and it was contagious."

I can feel my heartbeat in my throat. "What happened?"

"We opened a restaurant together. In Boston. It was good. It was really good for a while. And then it wasn't." He sets his glass down. His hands rest on his knees, palms down, very still. "She got sick. It was fast. Six months from diagnosis to—" He doesn't finish. He doesn't need to.

"Thomas."

"I couldn't stay. In Boston. In the restaurant. Every corner of that city had her in it. Every street, every restaurant, every morning I woke up and reached for someone who wasn't there." His voice is even, but it's the evenness of something held very carefully. "So I left. I sold the restaurant, I packed what would fit in the car, and I drove until I found a town where no one knew my name. Where no one would look at me and see the man whose wife died."

I think of the photograph behind the counter at The Written Word. The rugged coastline. Not New England, I'd thought. Not anywhere I recognized. "The picture," I say. "The one in the frame."

"Oregon. We went there once. She wanted to see the Pacific."

I want to go to him. I want to cross the space between the couch and the armchair and put my arms around

him, but something in the way he's holding himself tells me to wait. This is not a wound that wants immediate pressure. This is a wound he's learning to let air touch.

"How long?" I ask.

"Five years. Since I came here. Seven since she—" He picks up his glass, takes a swallow. "I told myself I was starting over. Building something quiet. Something safe. And I was. But I was also hiding. From the grief, from the memories, from anyone who might ask the questions you're asking now."

"And then I showed up."

"And then you showed up." He looks at me, and there's something in his face I haven't seen before. It takes me a moment to name it. Relief. "And you kept asking. And I kept deflecting. And Emily kept telling me I was an idiot."

"Emily said that?"

"Emily says a lot of things."

I laugh, a small surprised sound, and the tension in the room shifts. Not breaking, but loosening. Thomas leans back in the chair, and I see his shoulders drop a fraction of an inch.

"I'm sorry," I say. "About Claire. About all of it."

"Thank you." He says it simply, without deflection. "I should have told you sooner. I wanted to. I just—"

A knock at the door.

We both freeze. The sound is loud in the quiet cottage, three sharp raps that don't match the gentle rhythm of Thomas's arrival. I look at the clock. Seven forty-three. I'm not expecting anyone.

"Are you?" Thomas asks, reading my expression.

"No."

I stand, cross to the door, and open it.

The man on the doorstep is about my age, maybe a year or two older. He's broad-shouldered, wearing a canvas jacket and a baseball cap pulled low. For a moment I don't recognize him. Then he lifts his head, and the porch light catches his face, and twenty years collapse into a single heartbeat.

Mark Jenkins.

He looks different than he did in high school. Older, of course. Heavier in the jaw. There are lines around his eyes that weren't there before, and his hair is thinner,

and his expression is not angry, exactly, but it's not friendly either. It's the expression of someone who has been carrying something for a long time and has finally decided to set it down.

"Sarah," he says.

"Mark." My voice comes out steadier than I feel. "How did you—I didn't know you were still in town."

"I'm not. I live in New Hampshire now. But my mom still goes to the same hairdresser as Mrs. Gable, and Mrs. Gable mentioned you were back." He pauses. "Can I come in?"

I don't move. "Mark, this isn't really a good time."

"I've been waiting fifteen years for a good time." His voice is quiet, but there's something underneath it. Something that's been compressed for a very long time. "I'm not asking for an hour. I'm asking for five minutes. Then I'll leave, and you'll never have to see me again if you don't want to."

Behind me, I hear Thomas stand. His footsteps approach, and then he's at my shoulder, a solid presence in the doorway. Mark's eyes flick to him, assess, return to me.

"This is Thomas," I say. "Thomas, this is Mark Jenkins."

We went to high school together."

Something passes across Thomas's face. Recognition. He knows the name. He knows what I told him about the river trail, about the poem, about the memory I'd gotten wrong for fifteen years. He looks at Mark, then at me, and I see him make a decision.

"I can step outside," he says.

"No." The word comes out before I can think about it. "No, stay. Please."

I step back from the door. Mark comes inside. He nods at Thomas, a brief acknowledgment, and then his attention is entirely on me. The cottage feels smaller with the three of us in it. The wine glasses on the table. The interrupted conversation hanging in the air.

"I heard you were asking about me," Mark says. "At the historical society. Looking at old yearbooks."

"I was."

"Why?"

I could deflect. I could give him a polite version, something about research, about an article. But Thomas is standing three feet away, and he just told me about his dead wife, and I am so tired of the polite versions.

"Because I remembered something wrong," I say. "For fifteen years, I remembered something wrong, and I only figured it out a few days ago."

Mark's jaw tightens. "What thing?"

"The Fall Formal. Senior year. I thought—" I make myself say it. "I thought you asked me to the dance and then stood me up. I thought you humiliated me. I've been telling myself that story for half my life. But it wasn't true. I asked you. And when you said no, I wrote that poem. The one that got published in the school paper. The one that made everyone laugh at you."

He doesn't say anything. His hands are at his sides, and I notice his right fist is clenched, not aggressively, just tight, like a reflex he doesn't know he has.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I am so sorry, Mark. I was hurt and I was sixteen and I wanted to hurt you back, and I did, and I never apologized. I never even let myself remember it clearly. I just turned you into the villain in my head and moved on."

The silence stretches. Thomas doesn't move. Mark stares at the floor for a long moment, and when he looks up, his eyes are wet.

"Do you know what that poem did?" His voice is hoarse. "It wasn't just the dance, Sarah. It wasn't just people

laughing. My dad— my dad already thought I was weak. He already thought there was something wrong with me. And then that poem came out, and everyone was talking about it, and he—” He stops. Swallows. “He decided I needed toughening up. That summer, he sent me to this camp. This place in the woods that was supposed to make boys into men. I was there for eight weeks. I came back with three cracked ribs and a stutter I didn’t lose until I was twenty-two.”

I can’t breathe. The room is too bright and too small and I can’t breathe.

“I’m not saying that’s your fault,” Mark says. “My dad was the one who sent me there. My dad was the one who—” He shakes his head. “But that poem was the excuse he needed. That poem was the proof, in his mind, that I was a joke. That I needed to be fixed.”

“Mark.” My voice is barely a whisper. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know any of that.”

“I know you didn’t.” He unclenches his fist, slowly, deliberately. “I’m not here to blame you. I’ve had a lot of therapy. I’ve done a lot of work. But I needed to hear you say it. I needed to hear you say you knew what you did.”

“I know what I did.” The words are shaking. “And I’m

sorry. I can't undo it. I can't go back and not write it. But I'm sorry, and I'll say it as many times as you need me to."

He looks at me for a long time. Then he nods, once, a small sharp motion. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. That's what I came for." He glances at Thomas, then back at me. "I should go. I've got a long drive back."

He turns toward the door, and I take a step forward without thinking. "Mark. If you ever want to— I don't know. Talk more. Or not talk. Whatever you need. I'm here. I'm staying here."

He pauses with his hand on the doorknob. "You're staying?"

"I think so. Yeah."

A ghost of something crosses his face. Not forgiveness, not yet. But maybe the possibility of it. "Good for you, Sarah."

And then he's gone, and the door clicks shut, and the cottage is silent.

I stand in the middle of the room, shaking. Thomas doesn't rush to me. He waits, and after a moment I feel his hand on mine, warm and steady, his fingers threading through my own.

"That was brave," he says.

"That was fifteen years overdue."

"Still brave."

I turn to look at him. His face is open in a way it wasn't before, the guardedness stripped back. He's still holding my hand.

"You told me about Claire," I say. "And then Mark showed up. And you stayed."

"You asked me to."

"I know. But you stayed."

He lifts his free hand and brushes a strand of hair from my face. The touch is light, barely there, but I feel it everywhere. "You showed me something tonight," he says. "You showed me what it looks like when someone stops running. I've been running for seven years. Maybe it's time."

"Time for what?"

"To tell you the rest. Not tonight. Tonight's been enough. But soon." He squeezes my hand. "If you still want to hear it."

I look at him, at the scar above his eyebrow, at the kindness in his eyes, at the way he's holding himself now like a man who's set down something heavy. And I feel it rise in my chest, that thing I've been afraid to name, that thing I've been calling hope because the other word was too big.

"I want to hear it," I say. "All of it. Whenever you're ready."

Outside, the stars are coming out. I can see them through the window, cold and bright and very far away. But here, in the cottage, Thomas's hand is warm in mine, and the wine is still on the table, and the night ahead of us is quiet and full of something that feels, finally, like a beginning.

Forgiveness and Foundations

The morning light through the front window of The Written Word is thin and golden, the kind of October light that makes everything look like a memory even while it's happening. I unlock the door at 7:02, two minutes later than usual, because I stood outside for a full sixty seconds with the key in my hand, not quite ready to break the spell of the night before.

Sarah's car isn't in the lot yet. She said she'd come by after her morning walk. I told her to take her time. What I didn't say: I need an hour to settle into my own skin again, to let the words I spoke in her cottage finish landing inside me. Claire's name, spoken aloud to someone who wasn't a therapist or a memory. The restaurant. The seven years. All of it, or nearly all of it, laid out on Sarah's coffee table between two half-empty glasses of apple wine.

I flip the espresso machine on and listen to it build pressure. The hiss and gurgle are the same as yesterday and the day before. That's the thing about routines. They hold.

The door chime sounds. I expect Emily, early for her shift, but it's Mrs. Gable, her silver bun pinned tighter than usual, a wool cardigan the color of dried lavender buttoned to her throat. She carries a small paper bag in

one hand and a look in her eye that I recognize. The look that says she already knows something.

"You're here before me," I say. "That's new."

"I couldn't sleep." She sets the bag on the counter. "Scones. Lemon and rosemary. Margaret Hale dropped them off at my door at six this morning with a story about Mark Jenkins visiting Sarah's cottage last night."

I don't react fast enough. My hand pauses on the portafilter, half a second too long.

Mrs. Gable notices. Of course she notices. "You were there."

"I was."

"And?"

"And Sarah apologized to him. For something that happened in high school. It was hard, and she did it anyway."

Mrs. Gable studies me. Her eyes are sharp behind her glasses, but the set of her mouth is soft. "That girl has been carrying more than she lets on."

"She has."

"And you?"

The question lands gently, the way Mrs. Gable's questions always do, which is why they're so difficult to deflect. I tamp the grounds and lock the portafilter into place. "I told her about Claire."

Mrs. Gable doesn't say anything. When I turn, she's pulled a scone from the bag and set it on a napkin, nudging it toward me like an offering. Or a bribe.

"I'm fine," I say.

"I didn't ask if you were fine."

The espresso machine finishes its cycle. I swap cups, start another shot. The silence between us fills with the smell of coffee and lemon and something older, something that lives in the floorboards of this shop.

"You've been taking care of everyone else for five years," she says. "Emily's schedules. My inventory. The customers who need a listening ear with their latte. It's allowed, Thomas, to let someone take care of you."

I wipe the steam wand with a cloth. Fold it. Fold it again. "Sarah's coming by this morning. We're going to talk more."

Mrs. Gable nods once, a small, satisfied dip of her chin. She doesn't push. She picks up her scone and moves toward the office, pausing at the doorway. "The history

fair is tomorrow. Margaret asked if we'd set up a table for the historical society. I told her yes."

"You could've asked me first."

"I could have." She smiles, and it transforms her whole face. "But you would've said yes anyway."

She disappears into the office, and I'm left standing at the counter with a scone I didn't ask for and a warmth in my chest I didn't earn.

The door chime sounds again. This time it's Emily, her red hair in a braid over one shoulder, her glasses slightly askew. She stops three steps inside the door and looks at me like I'm a puzzle she's just figured out.

"You look different," she says.

"Good morning to you too."

"No, I mean it. You look like you slept. Or didn't sleep. One of those." She hangs her jacket on the hook behind the counter and ties her apron in two quick motions. "Sarah texted me. Said last night was intense. Said Mark Jenkins showed up."

"He did."

"And?"

"And she handled it. She apologized. He accepted."

Emily's face does something complicated. Relief, mostly, but also a flicker of something else. Protectiveness, maybe. The fierce kind that comes from loving someone since childhood. "I knew she had it in her."

"She did too. She just needed to prove it to herself."

Emily starts arranging the pastry case, her movements automatic. "And you? How are you doing with all of this?"

"I told her about Claire."

Emily's hands stop moving. She turns. "The whole story?"

"Most of it. Enough."

"Thomas." She says my name the way Sarah might, with warmth and a little exasperation. "That's huge."

"I know."

"Are you okay?"

I consider the question. The espresso machine hums. The morning light shifts, catching the dust motes floating above the counter. "I think I will be."

Emily grins, and it's the kind of grin that makes you believe things might actually work out. "Good. Because Sarah's car just pulled up, and if you break her heart, I will make your life very inconvenient in ways you can't anticipate."

"Noted."

Sarah pushes through the door a moment later, and the whole shop seems to exhale. She's wearing a sweater the color of oatmeal, her hair loose around her shoulders, and there's something different in the way she holds herself. Straighter. Less braced for impact.

"Hi," she says, and the word carries weight.

"Hi."

Emily materializes at Sarah's elbow, squeezes her arm once, and then vanishes toward the office with a murmured excuse about inventory. The door to the back clicks shut, and we're alone.

"Mrs. Gable brought scones," I say.

"I saw her car out front. Is she—"

"She knows. About Mark. About some of it."

Sarah nods, not surprised. "Margaret Hale saw his truck

at my place. I figured it would get around." She moves toward the counter, close enough that I can smell her shampoo. Something floral. Lavender, maybe. "I'm not sorry people know. I spent so long hiding from this town, and all it did was make me tired."

"I know the feeling."

She meets my eyes. "You said last night you were ready to tell me the rest."

I pull two cups from the shelf. Pour the espresso. Steam the milk. The ritual buys me thirty seconds, and I use every one of them. When I set her latte in front of her, the foam is shaped like a leaf. My hands are steady. My heart is not.

"Let's sit," I say.

We take the table by the window, the one where Sarah sat on her first day back, when she was still a stranger to me and I was still a man with a carefully constructed silence. The morning light catches the scar above my eyebrow, and I see her notice it. She doesn't look away.

"I told you about Claire," I begin. "About the restaurant. About her getting sick."

Sarah wraps both hands around her cup. "You did."

"What I didn't tell you is what happened before she died. About six months before."

I pause. A customer walks past the window, a man with a golden retriever on a leash. The dog's tail wags. The man doesn't look in. The world outside keeps moving, oblivious to the fact that I'm about to dismantle the last wall I've been hiding behind.

"We had a business partner," I say. "His name was Derek. He and I went to culinary school together. He was my best man at the wedding. When Claire and I decided to open the restaurant, Derek came on as an investor and co-owner. He handled the books. I handled the kitchen. Claire ran the front of house."

Sarah's expression doesn't change, but her fingers tighten on the ceramic.

"For three years, everything worked. The restaurant got good reviews. We were breaking even, then turning a profit. Claire and I were talking about expanding, maybe opening a second location." I take a breath. "Then Claire got sick. It was fast. Lymphoma. One month she was fine, the next she was in treatment, and six months after that she was gone."

"Thomas," Sarah says softly.

I shake my head. "Let me finish. While Claire was in the

hospital, I wasn't at the restaurant much. Derek was running things. I trusted him. He was family." The word tastes bitter. "A week after the funeral, I went back to work. I thought it would help. Keep me busy. Keep me from drowning."

I can still remember the smell of the kitchen that day. The industrial cleaner they used on the floors. The way the lights buzzed overhead. The silence where Claire's voice should have been.

"The accounts were empty. Derek had been siphoning money for months. Small amounts at first, then larger ones. By the time I figured it out, he'd cleaned out the operating account, the savings, even the account we'd set aside for Claire's medical bills."

Sarah sets her cup down. "He stole from you while your wife was dying."

"He stole from us. And when I confronted him, he didn't deny it. He said the restaurant was failing anyway. Said I'd let it fall apart. Said Claire's illness had made me unreliable." I press my thumb against the edge of the table. The wood is smooth from years of use. "I lost it. I didn't hit him, but I came close. I screamed at him in the middle of the dining room during dinner service. Guests left. Staff quit. It was ugly."

"What happened to him?"

"Nothing. I couldn't prove anything without a long legal battle, and I didn't have the money for a lawyer. He'd covered his tracks. The restaurant closed three weeks later. I sold everything I owned to pay off the debts. The equipment. The furniture. The apartment Claire and I had bought together." I look down at my hands. "I burned my journals. All of them. Years of recipes, notes, ideas. I couldn't stand to look at any of it."

Sarah reaches across the table and covers my hand with hers. Her palm is warm from the latte. "That's why you don't talk about your past."

"That's why I didn't talk about anything. I came here because I needed to be someone else. Someone who hadn't been gutted by the person he trusted most. Someone who could pour coffee and make small talk and not have to explain why he flinched every time someone asked about his life before Willow Creek."

"Five years," she says.

"Five years of keeping everyone at arm's length. It worked. Until you."

Her hand tightens on mine. "I'm sorry. For what he did to you. For all of it."

"I'm not telling you this so you'll feel sorry for me."

"I know." She doesn't look away. "You're telling me because I asked. Because I pushed. Because you're finally ready to stop running."

I turn my hand over under hers so our palms meet. "I watched you apologize to Mark Jenkins last night. I watched you stand there and own something you did when you were seventeen, something that hurt him in ways you couldn't have predicted. And I thought, if she can do that, I can do this."

"I didn't do it to be brave."

"That's what makes it brave."

Sarah's eyes glisten, but she doesn't cry. She holds my gaze, and I feel something shift between us. Not a wall coming down. A door opening.

"I spent ten years avoiding this town," she says. "Avoiding the person I was here. The girl who wrote that poem, who hurt Mark, who made mistakes and ran away instead of fixing them. I told myself I was too big for Willow Creek. Too restless. Too ambitious." She laughs, a small, self-deprecating sound. "The truth is, I was scared. Scared that if I came back, everyone would remember the worst version of me. And they did. Some of them still do."

"Martha," I say.

"Martha and half the post office. But last night, when Mark left, I realized something. The people who matter don't care about the worst version of me. Emily doesn't. Mrs. Gable doesn't." She pauses. "You don't."

"No," I say. "I don't."

"I want to stay," she says. "Not because I'm out of options. Not because I'm hiding. Because this is where I want to be. With you. With this ridiculous town and its gossip and its history fair and its scones at six in the morning."

I don't say anything. I don't need to. I lift her hand and press my lips to her knuckles, and the gesture says everything I can't put into words.

The door chime sounds. Emily emerges from the office, followed by Mrs. Gable. Neither of them looks surprised to find us holding hands across the table. Emily's smile is wide and unguarded. Mrs. Gable's is quieter, but it reaches her eyes.

"The historical society called," Emily announces. "They want to know if we can host a post-fair reception here tomorrow night. Coffee, pastries, the whole thing. Margaret says half the town is planning to come."

"Half the town wants to see Sarah," Mrs. Gable corrects gently. "Word travels fast. People know about Mark's visit. They know she apologized."

Sarah tenses beside me. "What are they saying?"

Mrs. Gable adjusts her brooch, a small silver bird with a chip of turquoise for an eye. "They're saying it took courage. They're saying they misjudged you. Some of them, anyway. The rest will come around."

"Willow Creek has a long memory," Sarah says.

"It does. But it also knows how to forgive. Give it time."

Emily is already pulling out her phone, scrolling through a list of supplies. "I'll handle the setup. Thomas, can you do the coffee station? Sarah, you're on pastry duty whether you like it or not."

"I don't work here," Sarah says, but she's smiling.

"You do now," Emily says. "Unofficially. Congratulations."

Mrs. Gable moves toward the counter, then pauses beside our table. She looks at me, and her expression is the same one she wore when she hired me five years ago. Knowing. Patient. A little sad, a little hopeful. "I'm glad you told her," she says quietly. "You've been

carrying that alone for too long."

"I had help," I say. "You've been looking out for me since the day I walked in here."

"Someone had to." She pats my shoulder once, a brief, maternal touch, and then she's gone, disappearing into the aisles of bookshelves.

The morning stretches into afternoon. Customers come and go. A woman in a raincoat buys a mystery novel. Mr. Kowalski stops in for his usual black coffee and a cranberry scone. Two teenagers order hot chocolates and whisper in the corner booth. The rhythm of the shop is steady and familiar, but underneath it, something has changed. I feel lighter. Less like I'm performing a role and more like I'm actually here, present, visible.

At three o'clock, Margaret Hale herself walks through the door. She's a sturdy woman in her sixties with short gray hair and the efficient manner of someone who has organized every town event since the Bicentennial. She makes a beeline for Sarah.

"I heard about last night," Margaret says, without preamble. "Mark Jenkins is a good man. What you did took guts."

Sarah blinks. "Thank you."

"I also heard you're a writer. The historical society could use someone to document the fair tomorrow. Photos, a write-up for the town newsletter. Interested?"

Sarah glances at me. I nod. "I'd love to," she says.

"Good. Be at the Grange hall at nine." Margaret turns to leave, then stops. "And Sarah? Welcome home."

The words hang in the air after she's gone. Sarah stares at the door for a long moment, and when she turns back to me, her eyes are bright.

"Welcome home," I repeat.

"It's starting to feel like it."

By closing time, the light outside has gone soft and amber. Emily wipes down the tables while I count the register. Sarah sits at the window table with her laptop open, typing notes for tomorrow's fair. The scene is so ordinary. So unremarkable. And yet I want to memorize every detail: the way Emily hums while she works, the clink of coins in the drawer, the click of Sarah's keyboard, the smell of old books and fresh coffee and lemon.

Mrs. Gable emerges from the office, her cardigan draped over her arm. "I'm heading home. Thomas, lock up when you're done?"

"Always."

She pauses at the door. "You did well today. Both of you."

And then she's gone, the door chime trailing behind her like a benediction.

Emily finishes her closing duties and grabs her jacket. "I'm meeting some friends at the diner. You two want to come?"

Sarah looks at me. I shake my head. "Rain check."

"Suit yourselves." Emily grins and disappears into the evening.

The shop falls silent. Sarah closes her laptop and comes to stand beside me at the counter. "Today was a lot."

"It was."

"Are you okay?"

I consider the question. The register is balanced. The espresso machine is clean. The chairs are up on the tables. Outside, the streetlights are flickering on, one by one. Inside, Sarah's hand is resting on the counter, inches from mine.

"I'm better than okay," I say. "I told you everything. And you're still here."

"I'm still here."

I close the distance between us and kiss her. Not the tentative kiss of a man testing the waters. Not the desperate kiss of someone afraid of losing what he's found. A steady kiss. A certain kiss. The kind that says I'm not going anywhere.

When we pull apart, Sarah's cheeks are flushed. "What was that for?"

"For staying. For pushing. For being braver than I was."

"You're brave too," she says. "You just forgot for a while."

I reach for the light switch, then stop. Through the front window, I can see the first stars coming out above Main Street. The same stars that were over Sarah's cottage last night. Cold and bright and very far away. But here, in the shop, the air is warm, and Sarah's hand finds mine, and the future ahead of us is no longer something to dread.

"Tomorrow," I say. "The history fair. Margaret's write-up. The reception."

"Tomorrow," Sarah agrees.

I flip the switch, and the lights go out, and we step together into the autumn evening.

Home at Last

"You're actually glowing," Emily says, sliding into the chair across from me.

I look up from my laptop. The screen's been dimmed for the last ten minutes. I haven't written a word. I've been watching Thomas pull espresso shots, the way his shoulders move under his shirt, the quick flash of his grin when old Mr. Kowalski says something that makes him laugh. Late-spring light pours through the front windows of The Written Word, catching the dust motes floating above the pastry case. The whole place smells like fresh croissants and something floral Emily's put in a mason jar on the counter.

"I'm not glowing," I say. "I'm caffeinated. There's a difference."

"There really isn't, with you." Emily sets down two ceramic cups. One's my usual latte. The other is something frothy and cinnamon-dusted for herself. She's wearing a dress printed with tiny yellow bookshelves, and her red braids are twisted into a crown. "I read the piece. The one in *New England Living*."

"Which one?"

"The one about the history fair. Margaret Hale left three copies on the counter this morning. She's been showing everyone who walks in." Emily's voice is bright, but her eyes flick down to her cup. "You mentioned the bandstand. And the Garrett brothers' pie contest. And Mrs. Gable's book collection."

"I mentioned you, too."

"I know." Her smile does something complicated. "You called me 'the keeper of Willow Creek's literary heart.'"

"You are."

"It's a beautiful line." She traces the rim of her cup with one finger. "I just—sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be the one *writing* the line, instead of the one it's written about."

The words hang between us. A woman at the next table glances over, then returns to her paperback. Thomas is steaming milk now. The hiss of the wand fills the pause.

"You could," I say. "Write something, I mean."

"Maybe." Emily pushes her glasses up her nose. "Or maybe I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be, and I just need to stop comparing." She takes a quick breath and her smile returns, more genuine this time. "Anyway. The article is wonderful. You made us sound like a place

people would actually want to visit."

"You *are* a place people want to visit."

"Tell that to the tourists who get lost on Mill Road and end up at the old quarry."

I laugh. The sound surprises me. It's easy now, laughter. It doesn't catch in my throat the way it did last autumn, when I first came back, when every conversation felt like stepping onto thin ice.

Margaret Hale appears at my elbow before I can say anything else. She's wearing a lavender cardigan and holding one of the newsletters, rolled up like a baton. "Sarah Miller," she says, and her voice carries the particular authority of someone who has chaired too many committee meetings. "I've had three phone calls this week about your article. *Three*. One from a woman in Rhode Island who wants to know if the bandstand is available for weddings."

"Is it?"

"It is now." Margaret taps the newsletter against her palm. "Walter's already talking about building a trellis. You've started something."

"I'll apologize to Walter next time I see him."

"Don't apologize. This is the most excitement we've had since the Garrett brothers' goat got into the Fall Festival." She nods once, decisive, and marches toward the door. The bell above it jingles as she leaves.

Emily watches her go. "She's not wrong. You've been good for this place."

"This place has been good for me."

I mean it. The words don't feel large enough to hold what I'm trying to say, but Emily's expression softens. She reaches across the table and squeezes my fingers once, quick, before standing up.

"I have to restock the poetry section. Darlene from the diner brought over a box of her late husband's collections. She said she'd rather they live here than gather dust."

"Tell her I'll stop by the diner later."

Emily grins. "She'll hold you to that. She's been experimenting with a rhubarb pie and needs test subjects."

She heads toward the back room, her skirt swishing against the bookshelves. I close my laptop. The screen's been dark long enough that it's gone to sleep.

Thomas catches my eye from behind the counter. He lifts his chin, a question. *You okay?* I nod. He holds up two fingers. *Two minutes.* I nod again.

We've gotten good at this. The silent language. The small gestures that carry whole conversations.

I lean back in my chair and let the bookstore settle around me. The woman at the next table turns a page. Two teenagers are huddled in the travel section, arguing quietly about whether Portugal or Japan is the better graduation trip. Mrs. Gable's voice drifts from her office, a low murmur on the phone with a book distributor. The radiator in the corner gives its familiar clank. Somewhere upstairs, in the apartment above the shop, a floorboard creaks.

The apartment. We've been talking about it for weeks now. Months, really, ever since the snow melted and the first crocuses pushed up through Mrs. Gable's garden. Thomas has been living in the small rental on Cedar Street since he arrived in Willow Creek, but the apartment above The Written Word has been empty for years. Mrs. Gable used it for storage. Boxes of old ledgers, out-of-print editions, a dress form draped in yellowed lace.

"It needs work," she told us, the first time she unlocked the door and let us look. "The plumbing is original. The

windows stick. The wallpaper is—well, you'll see."

The wallpaper was roses. Floor-to-ceiling roses, faded to a color somewhere between pink and dust. The kitchen had a porcelain sink deep enough to bathe a small dog. The bedroom windows faced east, toward the mill pond, and when I stood there at sunrise the light came through the glass and made the whole room gold.

"I want to live here," I said.

Thomas was behind me. I felt his hand on the back of my neck, his thumb brushing the hair at my nape. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

That was March. Now it's May, and the wallpaper samples are spread across my kitchen table at the cottage. Thomas has opinions about wainscoting. I have opinions about light fixtures. We've spent three Saturday afternoons at the hardware store in Greenfield, arguing amiably about drawer pulls.

The bell above the door jingles. Becca Torres's mother comes in, the one who runs the knitting circle at the library. She waves at me. I wave back. A man with a golden retriever follows her, and the dog's tail sweeps a low shelf, nearly knocking over a stack of bookmarks. Thomas leans over the counter to hand the man a

biscuit for the dog. He keeps them in a jar now, next to the espresso machine. The dog takes it gently, tail still wagging.

This is my life. This ordinary Tuesday morning, full of small kindnesses and familiar faces. I spent so many years chasing the next flight, the next byline, the next city skyline, and none of it ever felt like *this*. None of it ever felt like something I could hold onto.

Thomas finishes his shift at noon. Emily takes over the counter, and he walks over to my table, untying his apron. His hair is slightly damp at the temples from the steam. The scar above his eyebrow catches the light.

"You've been staring at a blank screen for an hour," he says.

"I've been thinking."

"Dangerous."

"Productive, actually." I close the laptop and slide it into my bag. "I'm working on a new piece. About what happens after you stop running."

His expression shifts. Something flickers in his eyes, recognition or memory or both. He reaches for my hand, and I give it to him without thinking. His palm is warm and dry and callused from the espresso machine.

My fingers fit between his like they've been doing it for years.

"How's it going?" he asks. "The piece."

"Slowly. I keep getting distracted."

"By what?"

"By everything." I gesture at the shop, the windows, the town beyond. "By how much I want to stay here. By how strange it is to want that."

He doesn't say anything. He just holds my hand. Thomas has learned, over these months, that sometimes I need to talk my way through a feeling before I understand it. He waits.

"I used to think belonging somewhere meant giving up," I say. "Like if I stopped moving, I'd be admitting defeat. Settling. Becoming the kind of person who never left her hometown."

"And now?"

"Now I think leaving was the easy part. Staying—building something, letting people know you, letting them *keep* knowing you—that's harder. That's braver."

Thomas lifts my hand and presses his mouth to my knuckles. It's a quick gesture, almost casual, but I feel it all the way up my arm. The woman at the next table smiles into her paperback.

"Emily invited us to the town picnic," I say. "Next Saturday. At the bandstand."

"I know. She mentioned it."

"Are we going?"

He hesitates. It's a small hesitation, barely a breath, but I notice it. Thomas has been better about letting people in. He's let *me* in, completely, in ways I'm not sure either of us expected. But the town events, the crowded gatherings, the easy social rhythms that Emily navigates without thinking—those are still harder for him.

"We don't have to," I say.

"No, I want to." He says it firmly, like he's decided something. "I want to go. With you."

"Okay."

"Okay." He squeezes my hand and lets go. "I'm going to grab lunch. Want me to bring you something from the diner?"

"Darlene's rhubarb pie. Emily says she needs test subjects."

"Brave of you."

"I've faced worse."

He laughs. The sound moves through the shop, and Mrs. Gable, emerging from her office with a stack of invoices, glances up and smiles. She's wearing a brooch today, a small silver bird with a chip of turquoise for an eye. I've never seen it before. I wonder if it belonged to someone. I wonder if she'll ever tell me.

Thomas leaves. The bell jingles. I sit at my table for another minute, watching the light shift across the floorboards, and then I get up and walk to the counter where Emily is wiping down the espresso machine.

"Hey," I say. "About what you said earlier. About wanting to write."

She looks up. Her glasses are slightly fogged from the steam.

"The historical society newsletter always needs contributors. Margaret was just complaining last week that no one under sixty submits anything. You could start there."

Emily's hands still on the cloth. "You think?"

"I know. You've read more books than anyone in this town. You know the stories. You just need to tell them."

She's quiet for a moment. Then she nods, a small, private nod, like she's tucking the idea away somewhere safe. "Maybe I will."

"Good."

"Good," she echoes, and her smile this time is real and full and uncomplicated.

I leave her to the espresso machine and wander toward the travel section. The teenagers have moved on. The shelf is tidy, the spines aligned. I run my finger along them—Morocco, Japan, Portugal, New Zealand. Places I've been. Places I might go someday, when the travel writing calls again. But the thought doesn't pull at me the way it used to. It's a gentle curiosity now, not a hunger. Not an escape hatch.

Mrs. Gable appears beside me. She moves quietly for a woman her age. The silver bird glints at her collar.

"You look content," she says.

"I am."

"It suits you." She studies the travel shelf, her sharp eyes moving over the titles. "I've been meaning to ask. The apartment—have you two made any decisions?"

"We're looking at paint samples next week."

"Paint samples." She says it like the words taste of something sweet. "I remember choosing paint with my husband. We argued for three days about the kitchen. He wanted yellow. I wanted blue. We compromised on green."

"What happened to him?" I ask. The question comes out before I can stop it. Mrs. Gable rarely talks about her husband. I know he died, years ago, but I don't know how. I don't know much about her life before the bookstore.

She's quiet for a long moment. "He got sick," she says finally. "It was quick. Too quick for arguments about paint." She touches the brooch. "This was his mother's. I found it in a box last week, while I was clearing out the storage room for you two. I'd forgotten I had it."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's a good thing, clearing out old boxes. Making room." She looks at me, and her gaze is steady and knowing. "You've made room here, Sarah. For yourself. For Thomas. For the life you're building. I'm

glad."

My throat tightens. I don't trust myself to speak.

Mrs. Gable pats my arm once, brisk, and walks back toward her office. The silver bird catches the light and then disappears into the shadows of the hallway.

I stand in the travel section for a while longer. The afternoon sun has moved across the floor, and the shop is quieter now. The lunch rush has passed. Emily is shelving books in the fiction section. Through the window, I can see the maple trees on Main Street, their leaves full and green, the way they are every spring. The way they will be every spring, long after I'm gone, long after all of us are gone. The thought doesn't frighten me. It feels like an invitation.

Thomas returns with a white pastry box and two coffees from the diner. He finds me by the window.

"Darlene says the pie is experimental," he says. "She also says if you don't like it, you're not allowed to tell her. You're supposed to lie."

"I can do that."

"Can you? You're a terrible liar."

"I'm an excellent liar. I just choose not to."

He grins. "Sure."

We sit at my table. He opens the box. The pie is golden and steaming and smells like summer. I take a bite. It's good. It's better than good. Darlene has outdone herself.

"So," Thomas says, after a moment. "Paint samples next week."

"Paint samples next week."

"And after that?"

"After that, we pick colors. And then we paint. And then we move in." I say it simply, like it's the most natural thing in the world. Like it's not the biggest decision I've ever made.

Thomas reaches across the table and takes my hand again. His thumb moves over my knuckles. "I never thought I'd have this," he says. "After Claire. After Boston. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life making coffee and keeping my head down and never letting anyone close enough to hurt me."

"And now?"

"Now I'm arguing about drawer pulls with a woman who writes about bandstands and makes me laugh and isn't

afraid of my past." He looks at me. His blue eyes are steady. "I'm not running anymore, Sarah. I'm done."

"Me too."

We sit there, holding hands across the table, while the afternoon light fills the shop and the pie cools between us and somewhere in the fiction section Emily hums a song I don't recognize. The radiator clanks. A customer laughs. The bell above the door jingles, and someone new walks in, and the town keeps turning, the way it always has, the way it always will.

I'm home.

The word settles into me like a stone dropping into still water. Ripples moving outward. Touching everything.

I pick up my fork and take another bite of pie.