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The Nest

Written by Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney

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THE NEST

'I couldn't stop reading or caring about the juicy and dysfunctional Plumb family'
AMY POEHLER





CYNTHIA D'APRIX SWEENEY

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For my family: my parents, Roger and Theresa;
my sister, Laura; and my brothers, Richard and Tony—
who all love nothing more than a good story, well told.

There was always this dichotomy: what to keep up,
what to change.

—WILLIAM TREVOR, "THE PIANO TUNER'S WIVES"

That's how I knew this story would break my heart
When you wrote it
That's how I knew this story would break my heart

—AIMEE MANN, *THE FORGOTTEN ARM*

PROLOGUE

As the rest of the guests wandered the deck of the beach club under an early-evening midsummer sky, taking pinched, appraising sips of their cocktails to gauge if the bartenders were using the top-shelf stuff and balancing tiny crab cakes on paper napkins while saying appropriate things about how they'd really lucked out with the weather because the humidity would be back tomorrow, or murmuring inappropriate things about the bride's snug satin dress, wondering if the spilling cleavage was due to bad tailoring or poor taste (a *look* as their own daughters might say) or an unexpected weight gain, winking and making tired jokes about exchanging toasters for diapers, Leo Plumb left his cousin's wedding with one of the waitresses.

Leo had been avoiding his wife, Victoria, who was barely speaking to him and his sister Beatrice who wouldn't stop speaking to him—rambling on and on about getting together for Thanksgiving. *Thanksgiving*. In July. Leo hadn't spent a holiday with his family in twenty years, since the mid-'90s if he was remembering correctly; he wasn't in the mood to start now.

Cranked and on the hunt for the rumored empty outdoor bar, Leo first spotted Matilda Rodriguez carrying a tray of champagne glasses. She moved through the crowd with a lambent glow—partly because the setting sun was bathing the eastern end of Long Island an indecent pink, partly because of the truly excellent cocaine wreaking havoc with Leo's synapses. The bubbles rising and falling on Matilda's tray felt like an ecstatic summons, an invitation meant just for him. Her sturdy black hair was pulled away from the wide planes of her face into a serviceable knot; she was all inky eyes and full red lips. Leo watched the elegant weave of her hips as she threaded her way through the wedding guests, the now-empty tray held high above her head like a torch. He grabbed a martini from a passing waiter and followed her through the swinging stainless-steel doors into the kitchen.

IT WOULD SEEM TO MATILDA (nineteen, aspiring singer, diffident waitress) that one minute she'd been passing champagne to seventy-five members of the extended Plumb family and their closest friends and the next she was barreling toward the Long Island Sound in Leo's brand-new leased Porsche, her hand down the front of his too-tight linen trousers, the fat of her thumb inexpertly working the underside of his penis.

Matilda had resisted when Leo first pulled her into a side pantry, his fingers cuffing her wrists while he pelted her with questions: *Who*

are you? Where did you come from? What else do you do? Are you a model? An actress? Do you know you're beautiful?

Matilda knew what Leo wanted; she was propositioned at these events all the time, but usually by much younger men—or ludicrously older men, *ancient*—with their arsenal of lame pickup lines and vaguely bigoted attempts at flattery. (She was constantly being called J. Lo in spite of looking nothing like her; her parents were Mexican, not Puerto Rican.) Even in this moneyed crowd, Leo was unreasonably handsome, a word she was quite certain she'd never employed for someone whose attention she was almost enjoying. She might think *hot,* she might think *cute* or maybe even *gorgeous,* but *handsome*? The boys she knew hadn't grown into handsome yet. Matilda found herself staring up at Leo's face trying to determine which variables added up to handsome. Like her, he had dark eyes, dark hair, a strong brow. But where his features were angular and sharp, hers were round and soft. On television he would play someone distinguished—a surgeon maybe, and she would be the terminally ill patient begging for a cure.

Through the pantry door she could hear the band—orchestra, really, there had to be at least sixteen pieces—playing the usual wedding fare. Leo grabbed her hands and pulled her into a little two-step. He sang close to her ear, above the beat, his voice pleasantly lively and rich. "*Someday, when I'm awfully low, when the world is cold, I will dah-dah-dum just thinking of you, and the way you look tonight*."

Matilda shook her head and laughed a little, pulled away. His attention was unnerving, but it also made something deep within her thrum. And fending off Leo in the pantry was marginally more interesting than wrapping asparagus with prosciutto in the kitchen, which was what she was supposed to be doing. When she shyly told him

she wanted to be a singer, he immediately offered that he had friends at Columbia Records, friends who were always keen to discover new talent. He moved in again and if she was alarmed when he stumbled a little and seemed to need to keep a palm on the wall to maintain balance, her worry evaporated when he asked if she had a demo, something of hers they could listen to in his car.

"Because if I like it," Leo said, taking Matilda's slender fingers in his, "I'd want to get on it right away. Help you get it to the right people."

AS LEO DEFTLY MANEUVERED MATILDA past the parking valet, she glanced back at the kitchen door. Her cousin Fernando had gotten her this job, and he would be furious if he found out she'd just up and left. But Leo had said *Columbia Records*. He'd said, *Always looking for new talent*. When did she ever get opportunities like this? She would only be gone for a little bit, just long enough to make a good impression.

"Mariah was discovered by Tommy Mottola when she was a waitress," she said, half joking, half trying to justify her behavior.

"Is that right?" Leo hustled her toward his car, scanning the windows of the beach club above the parking lot. It was possible that Victoria could see him from the side terrace where everyone was gathering and quite probable she'd already noticed his absence and was stalking the grounds looking for him. Furious.

Matilda stopped at the car door and slipped off her black-canvas work shoes. She took a pair of silvery stilettos from a worn plastic shopping bag.

"You really don't need to change shoes for this," Leo said, resisting the urge to put his hands around her tiny waist right then and there in plain sight of everyone.

"But we're getting a drink, right?" Matilda said.

Had Leo said something to her about a drink? A drink was not possible. Everyone in his tiny hometown knew him, his family, his mother, his wife. He finished off his martini and threw the empty glass into the bushes. "If the lady wants a drink, we'll find the lady a drink," Leo said.

Matilda stepped into the sandals and gently slid one slender metallic strap over the swell of her left heel, then her right. She straightened, now eye level with Leo. "I hate wearing flats," she said, tugging her fitted white blouse a little lower. "They make me feel flat all over." Leo practically pushed Matilda into the front seat, out of sight, safely behind the tinted glass.

SITTING IN THE FRONT SEAT OF THE CAR, Matilda was stunned to hear her tinny, nasal voice coming through the car's obscenely high-quality speakers. She sounded so different on her sister's ancient Dell. So much better.

As Leo listened, he tapped his hand against the steering wheel. His wedding ring glinted in the car's interior light. Married was most assuredly against Matilda's rules. She could see Leo struggling to summon an interest in her voice, searching for something flattering to say.

"I have better recordings. I must have downloaded the wrong version," Matilda said. She could feel her ears flush with shame. Leo was staring out the window. "I better get back," she said, reaching for the door handle.

"Don't," Leo said, placing his hand on her leg. She resisted the impulse to pull away and sat up a little straighter, her mind racing. What did she have to sustain his attention? She hated waitressing, but Fernando was going to *kill* her for disappearing during dinner

service. Leo was boldly staring at her chest. She looked down at her lap and spotted a small stain on her black trousers. She scraped at the spot of balsamic vinaigrette with a fingernail; she'd mixed gallons of it. Everyone inside was probably plating the mesclun and grilled shrimp now, squeezing the dressing from bottles around the edge of each plate into a pattern that was supposed to approximate waves, the kind a child would draw to indicate a sea. "I'd like to see the ocean," she said, quietly.

And then, so slowly she wasn't sure what was happening at first, Leo took her hand in his (for a foolish moment she thought he was going to kiss it, like a character in one of her mother's telenovela shows) and placed it on his lap. And she would always remember this part, how he never stopped looking at her. He didn't close his eyes or lean his head back or lunge in for a sloppy kiss or fumble with the buttons on her blouse; he looked hard and long into her eyes. He *saw* her.

She could feel him respond beneath her hand and it was thrilling. As Leo held her gaze, she applied a little pressure with her fingers and the balance of power in the car abruptly shifted in her favor. "I thought we were going to see the ocean," she said, wanting to get out of sight of the kitchen. He grinned and put the car into reverse. She had his pants unzipped before his seat belt was fully fastened.

YOU COULDN'T BLAME LEO for the rapidity of his climax. His wife had cut him off weeks earlier, after she caught him fondling a babysitter in the back corridor of a friend's summerhouse. Driving toward the water, Leo hoped the combination of booze, cocaine, and Wellbutrin would stall his response, but when Matilda's hand tightened with resolve, he knew everything was happening too fast. He closed his eyes for a second—just a second—to collect himself, to stop

the intoxicating image of her hand, her chipped blue fingernails, moving up and down. Leo never even saw the SUV barreling down Ocean Avenue, coming from the right, perpendicular to their car. Didn't realize until it was too late that the screech he heard wasn't Matilda's voice coming from the sound system, but something else entirely.

Neither of them even had time to scream.

PART ONE

SNOWTOBER

CHAPTER ONE

Because the three Plumbs had agreed on the phone the previous evening that they should not drink in front of their brother Leo, they were all—unbeknownst to one another—sitting in separate bars in and around Grand Central, savoring a furtive cocktail before lunch.

It was a strange kind of autumn afternoon. Two days earlier, a nor'easter had roared up the mid-Atlantic coast, colliding with a cold front pushing east from Ohio and an arctic mass dipping down from Canada. The resulting storm had dropped a record-breaking amount of snow in some places, blanketing towns from Pennsylvania to Maine with a freakishly early winter. In the small commuter town thirty miles north of Manhattan where Melody Plumb lived, most of the

trees were still shouldering their autumn foliage, and many had been destroyed or damaged by the snow and ice. The streets were littered with fallen limbs, power was still out in some towns, the mayor was talking about canceling Halloween.

In spite of the lingering cold and spotty power outages, Melody's train ride into Manhattan was uneventful. She was settled in at the lobby bar of the Hyatt Hotel on Forty-Second Street where she knew she wouldn't run into her brother or sister; she'd suggested the hotel restaurant for lunch instead of their usual gathering spot, Grand Central's Oyster Bar, and had been mocked by Jack and Beatrice, the Hyatt not landing on their list of venues deemed acceptable by some arcane criteria she had zero interest in decoding. She refused to feel inferior to those two anymore, refused to be diminished because she didn't share their veneration for everything old Manhattan.

Sitting at a table near the soaring windows on the upper level of the hotel's massive lobby (which was, she had to admit, completely unwelcoming—too big and gray and modern, some awful kind of sculpture made of steel tubing lurked overhead, she could hear Jack's and Bea's pointed ridicule in absentia; she was relieved they weren't there), Melody ordered the least expensive glass of white wine (*twelve* dollars, more than she would spend on an entire bottle at home) and hoped the bartender had a generous pour.

The weather had remained unseasonably cold since the storm, but the sun was finally breaking through and the temperatures beginning to rise. The piles of snow at every Midtown crosswalk were rapidly melting into unnavigable puddles of slush and ice. Melody watched a particularly inelegant woman try to leap over the standing water and miss by inches, her bright red ballet flat landing squarely in the water, which had to be frigid, and filthy. Melody would have

loved a delicate pair of shoes like those and she would have known better than to wear them on a day like today.

She felt a twinge of anxiety as she thought of her daughters heading uptown and having to navigate the treacherous street corners. She took a sip of her wine (so-so), removed her phone from her pocket, and opened her favorite app, the one Nora called Stalkerville. She hit the "find" button and waited for the map to load and for the dots that represented her sixteen-year-old twins to materialize on the screen.

Melody couldn't believe the miracle of a handheld device that allowed her to track Nora's and Louisa's precise whereabouts as long as they had their phones. And they were teenagers; they *always* had their phones. As the map started to appear, she felt the familiar panicky palpitations until the tiny, blue pulsating circles and the word *Found!* popped up at the top of the screen, showing the girls exactly where they were supposed to be, at the SAT tutoring center uptown.

They'd been taking the weekend classes for over a month, and usually Melody tracked their morning progress from her kitchen table, watching the blue dots slowly glide north from Grand Central according to her meticulous directions: From the train station, they should take the Madison Avenue bus to Fifty-Ninth Street where they would disembark and walk west to the tutoring center on Sixty-Third just off Columbus. They were *not* to walk along the park side, but were supposed to walk on the south side of the street, passing by the parade of uniformed doormen, who would hear them scream for help if they were in trouble. They were strictly forbidden from entering Central Park or deviating from their route. Melody put the fear of God into them every week, filling their heads with stories of girls being snatched or lost, forced into prostitution or murdered and dumped in the river.

"The Upper West Side is not exactly Calcutta," her husband, Walter, would gently argue. But she got scared. The thought of them wandering the city without her protecting their flank made her heart thud, her palms sweat. They were sweating now. When they'd all disembarked at Grand Central that morning, she hadn't wanted to let them go. On a Saturday, the terminal was full with tourists checking guidebooks and train schedules and trying to find the Whispering Gallery. She'd kissed them good-bye and had watched until she could no longer see the backs of their heads—one blonde, the other brunette. They didn't look like visitors; there was nothing tentative about how they moved through the crowd. They looked like they belonged to the city, which filled Melody with dread. She wanted them to belong to *her,* to stop getting older. They didn't confide every last thought or desire or worry anymore; she didn't know their hearts and minds the way she used to. Melody knew that letting them grow and go was the proper order of life. She wanted them to be strong and independent and happy—more than anything she wanted them to be *happy*—but that she no longer had a fix on their inner workings made her light-headed. If she couldn't be sure how they were moving through the world, she could at least *watch* them move through the world, right there in the palm of her hand. She could at least have that.

"Leo's never paying you back," Walter had said as she was leaving for the train station. "You're all dreaming, wasting your time."

Though Melody feared he was right, she had to believe he wasn't. They'd borrowed a lot of money to buy their house, a tiny but historic building on one of their town's most beautiful streets, only to watch the economy collapse and property values sink. The fluctuating interest rate was about to rise on the mortgage they already couldn't afford. With little equity in the house, they couldn't refinance. College

was approaching and they had next to nothing in the bank; she'd been counting on The Nest.

Out on the street, Melody watched people tug off their gloves and unwind scarves, lift their faces to the sun. She felt a tiny surge of satisfaction knowing that she could spend the entire afternoon indoors if she wanted. The main reason Melody loved the bar at the Hyatt was because she could access it through an underpopulated, nondescript hallway connecting the hotel to Grand Central. When it was time for lunch, she'd return to the terminal through her secret corridor and head downstairs to the Oyster Bar. She would spend hours in New York City and not have to step one sensibly shod foot onto pavement, could entirely avoid breathing the Manhattan air, which she always pictured as rife with gray particulate. During her and Walt's brief stint living in Upper (upper) Manhattan where the twins were born, she'd waged a ferocious, losing battle with the city's soot. No matter how many times she wiped the woodwork with a dampened cloth, the flecks of black would reappear, sometimes within hours. Minus any verifiable source, the residue was worrisome to her. It felt like a physical manifestation of the city's decay, all the teeming masses being worn down to grimy, gray window dust.

She caught sight of another woman across the room holding a wineglass, and it took a moment for her to recognize her own reflection. Her hair was blonder than usual—she'd chosen a lighter shade at the drugstore and hoped the color would soften the elongated nose and strong chin both she and her sister, Beatrice, had inherited from their father's New England ancestors. Somehow, the strong features that worked in Bea's favor (*Madam X,* Leo used to call Bea, after the Sargent portrait) just made Melody look unintentionally dour. She particularly resented her face around Halloween. One year when the girls were little and they were out shopping for costumes, Nora

had pointed to an advertisement featuring a witch—not an excessively ugly one, no warts or green face or rotten teeth but still, a *witch*—standing over a boiling cauldron and had said, "Look! It's Mommy!"

Melody picked her bar bill up from the table and handed it to the waiter with a credit card. *He's never paying you back,* Walt had said. *Oh yes he is,* thought Melody. There was no way that one night of Leo's stupidity, his debauchery, was going to ruin her daughters' future, not when they'd worked so hard, not when she'd pushed them to dream big. They were *not* going to community college.

Melody looked at the map on her phone again. There was another private reason she loved the blue dots with their animated ripples so much; they reminded her of the very first ultrasound where she and Walt had seen twin heartbeats, two misshapen grayish shadows thumping arrhythmically deep inside her pelvis.

Two for the price of one, the cheerful technician had told them as Walt gripped her hand and they both stared at the screen and then at each other and grinned like the starry naifs they were. She remembered thinking in that moment: *It won't ever get better than this*. And in some ways she'd been right, had known even then she would never feel so capable, so stalwart a protector once she pushed those vulnerable, beating hearts out into the world.

The waiter was coming toward her now with a worried look on his face. She sighed and opened her wallet again. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, handing her the Visa she'd hoped had a little more juice on it, "but this was declined."

"It's okay," Melody said, digging out the secret card she'd activated without telling Walt; he would kill her if he knew. Just as he'd kill her if he found out that even though the SAT place in the city was cheaper than the suburban private tutor she'd wanted to hire, it was still twice as much as she'd admitted, which was why

she needed the extra card. "I meant to give you this one." She watched the waiter back at his station as he swiped, both of them holding perfectly still and only exhaling when the machine started spitting out a receipt.

I like our life, Walt had said to her that morning, pulling her close. *I like* you. *Can't you pretend—just a little—to like me, too?* He smiled as he said it, but she knew he sometimes worried. She had relaxed then into his reassuring girth, breathed in his comforting scent—soap and freshly laundered shirt and spearmint gum. She'd closed her eyes and pictured Nora and Louisa, lovely and lithe, clothed in satiny caps and gowns on a leafy quad in a quaint New England town, the morning sun illuminating their eager faces, the future unfurling ahead of them like an undulating bolt of silk. They were so smart and beautiful and honest and kind. She wanted them to have everything—the chances she'd never had, the opportunities she'd promised. *I do like you, Walter,* she'd mumbled into his shoulder. *I like you so much. It's me I hate.*

AT THE OPPOSITE END OF GRAND CENTRAL, up a carpeted flight of stairs and through the glass doors that said CAMPBELL APARTMENT, Jack Plumb was sending his drink back because he believed the mint hadn't really been muddled. "It was just dumped in there as if it were a garnish, not an *ingredient,*" he told the waitress.

Jack was sitting with his partner of two decades and legal husband of nearly seven weeks. He was confident the other Plumbs wouldn't know about this place, which was the former office of a 1920s tycoon, restored and reimagined as a high-end cocktail bar. Beatrice might, but it wasn't her kind of spot. Too staid. Too expensive. There was a dress code. At times the bar could be annoyingly full of commuters who were in mercifully short supply on this Saturday afternoon.

"Version 2.0," Walker said as the waitress placed the remade drink in front of Jack.

Jack took a sip. "It's fine," he said.

"Sorry for your trouble," Walker said to the waitress.

"Yes," Jack said as the waitress walked away, under his breath but loud enough for Walker to hear, "terribly sorry for making you do your job."

"She's just delivering the drinks. She's not making them." Walker kept his voice amiable. Jack was in a mood. "Why don't you take a nice generous sip of that and try to relax."

Jack picked a piece of mint from his glass and chewed on it for a second. "I'm curious," he said, "is telling someone to relax ever helpful? It's like saying 'breathe' to someone who is hyperventilating or 'swallow' to a person who's choking. It's a completely useless admonition."

"I wasn't admonishing, I was suggesting."

"It's like saying, 'Whatever you do, don't think about a pink elephant.'"

"I get it," Walker said. "How about *I* relax and you do what you want."

"Thank you."

"I am happy to go to this lunch with you if it helps."

"So you've said. About a thousand times." Trying to provoke Walker was mean and pointless, but Jack was trying anyway because he knew that snapping at Walker would briefly loosen the spiraling knot of fury at his core. And he *had* considered inviting Walker to lunch. His family preferred Walker's company anyway; who didn't? Walker with his rumbling laugh and kind face and bottomless bonhomie. He was like a clean-shaven, slightly trimmer, gay Santa Claus.

But Jack couldn't invite Walker because he hadn't told the other Plumbs yet about his early September wedding to Walker, the wedding to which they hadn't been invited because Jack wanted the day to be perfect and perfect for Jack meant Plumb-free. He did not want to listen to Bea's worries about Leo's accident or hear Melody's lumbering husband telling everyone who might listen that his name was Walter-not-Walker. (That Jack and Melody had chosen partners with almost the exact same name was something that still rankled both of them, decades on.)

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," Jack finally said.

Walker shrugged. "It's fine, love."

"I'm sorry I'm being an asshole." Jack rotated his neck, listening for the alarming but satisfying little pop that had recently appeared. God, he was getting old. Six years until fifty and who knew what fresh horrors that decade had in store for his slender-but-softening physique, his already-fraying memory, his alarmingly thinning hair. He gave Walker a feeble smile. "I'll be better after lunch."

"Whatever happens at lunch, we'll be fine. It will all be *fine*."

Jack slumped deeper into the leather club chair and proceeded to crack the knuckles on each hand, a sound he knew Walker loathed. Of course Walker thought everything would be *fine*. Walker didn't know anything about Jack's financial straits (another reason Jack didn't want him at lunch, in case the opportunity arose to tell Leo exactly how much the little escapade on the back roads of Long Island was costing him). Their retirement account had taken a terrible hit in 2008. They'd rented the same apartment on West Street since they'd been together. Jack's small antique shop in the West Village had never been hugely profitable, but in recent years he felt lucky to break even. Walker was an attorney, a solo practitioner, and had always been the wage earner in their partnership. Their one solid

investment was a modest but cherished summer place on the North Fork that Jack had been borrowing against, secretly. He'd been counting on The Nest, not only to pay off the home equity line of credit but because it was the one thing he had to offer Walker as a contribution to their future. He didn't believe for a second that Leo was broke. And he didn't care. He just wanted what he was owed.

Jack and Leo were brothers but they weren't friends. They rarely spoke. Walker would sometimes push ("you don't give up on family"), but Jack had worked hard to distance himself from the Plumbs, especially Leo. In Leo's company, Jack felt like a lesser version of his older brother. Not as intelligent, interesting, or successful, an identity that had attached to him in high school and had never completely gone away. At the beginning of ninth grade, some of Leo's friends had christened Jack *Leo Lite* and the denigrating name stuck, even after Leo graduated. His first month at college, Jack had run into someone from his hometown who had reflexively greeted him by saying, "Hey, Lite. What's up?" Jack had nearly slugged him.

The door to the bar opened and a group of tourists barged in, bringing in a gust of air too cold for October. One woman was showing everyone her soaking wet shoe, a cheap ballet flat in a tacky shade of red. "It's completely ruined," she was saying to her companions.

"Silver linings," Jack said to Walker, nodding to indicate the shoe.

"You probably shouldn't be late." Walker lifted his wrist, presenting the watch that had been a wedding gift from Jack, a rare Cartier tank from the '40s in perfect condition. It had cost a small fortune; Walker had no idea. Just another thing to resent about Leo's fuckup, how now Jack couldn't help but mentally affix a huge neon price sticker to everything they owned, regretting briefly every single purchase of the last year, *years,* including all the not-insignificant expenses surrounding their otherwise idyllic wedding.

"I love this watch," Walker said, and the tenderness in his voice made Jack want to fling his glass against the opposite brick wall. He could almost feel the sweet relief that would flood in as the leaded crystal smashed into a million tiny pieces. Instead, he stood and placed the glass back on the table, hard.

"Don't let them rile you," Walker said, placing a reassuring hand on Jack's arm. "Just listen to what Leo has to say and then we'll talk."

"Will do." Jack buttoned his coat and headed down the stairs and out the door onto Vanderbilt Avenue. He needed a little fresh air before lunch; maybe he'd take a walk around the block. As he muscled his way through the sluggish weekend crowds, he heard someone calling his name. He turned and it took him a minute to recognize the woman in the beret, grinning madly above a pink-and-orange hand-knit scarf, waving and calling after him. He stood and watched her approach and in spite of himself, he smiled. Beatrice.

BEATRICE PLUMB WAS A REGULAR AT MURPHY'S, one of the commuter pubs that lined the short stretch of Forty-Third Street perpendicular to Grand Central Station. Bea was friendly with the owner, Garrie, an old friend of Tuck's from Ireland. Tuck approved of how Garrie pulled a pint and of how when the bar was quiet, Garrie would sing in his light and reedy tenor—not the usual touristy fare, "Danny Boy" or "Wild Rover," but from his repertoire of Irish rebel songs—"Come Out Ye Black and Tans" or "The Ballad of Ballinamore." Garrie had been one of the first to show up at Bea's door after Tuck died. He'd taken a fifth of Jameson's from his coat pocket and poured them each a glass. "To Tuck," he'd said solemnly. "May the road rise up to meet him." Sometimes, in the right light, Bea thought Garrie was handsome. Sometimes, she thought he had a little crush on her, but she didn't want to find out—he felt too close to Tuck.

"You're on the early side today," Garrie said when she arrived a little before noon.

"Family lunch. I'll take that coffee with a splash." Garrie uncorked the Jameson's and poured a generous amount into the mug before adding coffee. The sun was bright and low enough in the cloudless sky that it briefly blinded Bea as she sat in her favorite spot, next to the small front window. She stood and moved the rickety barstool into the shade and away from the door. It felt more like January than October. The room smelled like furnace and dirty mop and beer. "Aroma of the gods," Tuck would say. He loved nothing more than a dimly lit bar on a sunny afternoon. The jukebox started up and Rosemary Clooney and Bing Crosby were singing "Baby, It's Cold Outside." Bea and Garrie exchanged a smirk. People were so reassuringly unimaginative.

Bea was eager to see Leo but also nervous. He hadn't taken any of her calls at rehab. He was probably mad at all of them. She wondered how he would look. The last time she'd seen him, the night in the hospital, they'd been stitching up his lacerated chin and he'd looked wan and petrified. For months before the accident he'd looked terrible: bloated and tired and dangerously bored.

Bea worried today's lunch was going to be confrontational. Jack and Melody were becoming increasingly unhinged about the situation with The Nest and she assumed they were both coming prepared to stake out their respective plots of neediness. What Bea needed from Leo was not her primary concern. Today, she wanted to keep her ordinarily disagreeable siblings somewhat agreeable, if only for one afternoon, just long enough to get Leo to—well, she didn't know what exactly. Put some kind of plan in place that would placate Jack and Melody for a bit and give Leo enough breathing room so that he wouldn't completely shut them down—or flee.

She could feel the whiskey loosening her limbs, taking the edge off her nerves. She lifted her bag from the back of the barstool. Just feeling the heft of it gave her a little thrill. Bea was a writer. (*Used* to be a writer? Was a writer who—until very recently—had stopped writing? She never knew how to think about herself.) Sometimes, not often anymore, but occasionally at the literary magazine where she worked, someone would recognize her name. *Beatrice Plumb? The writer?* the conversation would optimistically begin. She knew the sequence by now, the happy glimmer of recognition and then the confused brow, the person trying to summon a recent memory of her work, anything other than her early long-ago stories. After a decade of practice, she knew how to head off the inevitable. She was armed with a fistful of diversionary dead-end replies about her long-awaited novel: a well-worn self-deprecating joke about writing too slowly, how if she amortized her advance over the years, it became an hourly wage best counted in half-pennies; a feigned superstition over talking about unfinished work; amused exasperation at her ongoing *perfectionism*.

From her oversized canvas bag she pulled out a deep brown leather satchel, one Leo had spotted while roaming around the Portobello Road Market in London years ago when she was in college and had starting writing in earnest. He gave it to her for her birthday. From the early 1900s, it was the size of a large notebook and looked like a miniature briefcase with its small handle and leather straps, like something someone might have carried around Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century. She'd loved it and had thought of it as her lucky bag until it seemed all the luck she'd once enjoyed vanished. Weeks ago, she'd found the satchel on an upper shelf of a closet and took it to a local shoe repair to have one of the straps mended. They'd cleaned and polished the leather and the case looked almost

new, with just the right patina of age and use, as if it had housed years of successful manuscripts. She undid the straps and opened the flap, taking out the stack of pages covered with her loopy handwriting. Bea had written more in the past few months than she had in the past few years.

And what she was writing was really good.

And she felt horrible.

YEARS AGO, when she was newly out of graduate school, Leo had persuaded her to work with him on the staff of a magazine he'd helped launch back when starting a magazine wasn't pure folly. *SpeakEasy* was smart and irreverent enough to be slightly scandalous, which made it an instant hit with the insular world of the New York media, the precise community it ruthlessly mocked. Leo wrote a column every month, media news peppered with salacious gossip that freely ridiculed the city's old guard, rife with inherited money and nepotism and ludicrously insular. The column made him a little bit famous and a whole lot disliked. The magazine folded after only a few years, but almost everyone from the original staff had gone on to bigger media ventures or bestselling novels or other highly respected literary pursuits.

For a long time, Leo had been the major success story. He'd corralled some of the younger staff to start an online version of *SpeakEasy* from his tiny apartment. He kept the snide voice and expanded the scope, targeting all his favorite objectionable people and industries, growing the business from one site to seventeen in the space of fifteen months. Only three years later, Leo and his partner sold their tiny empire to a media conglomerate for a small fortune.

Bea still missed the early *SpeakEasy* magazine days. The office was like a raucous summer camp where all the kids were smart

and funny and got your jokes and could hold their booze. Back then, it had been Leo who'd pushed her to finish those early stories. It had been Leo who'd stayed up late dissecting her paragraphs, making everything better and tighter and funnier. It had been Leo who'd passed along her first story to *SpeakEasy*'s fiction editor (and her current boss, Paul Underwood) for its inaugural short story issue: "New York's Newest Voices: Who You *Should* Be Reading." It had been Leo who'd used the photo of her on the magazine's cover (with the very *SpeakEasy* caption: "The editor's sister wrote our favorite story, get over it"). That picture of Bea still popped up to accompany the occasional commemorative piece about *SpeakEasy* ("Where are they now?") or the group of young, female writers, including Bea, that some journalist had infuriatingly dubbed "The Glitterary Girls." The photo had been taken on Mott Street in Chinatown in front of a window of gleaming Peking ducks hanging from silver hooks, their still-attached heads all facing the same direction. Bea was wearing a bright yellow dress with a billowing skirt and holding a lacquered green parasol painted with tiny pink and white peonies over one shoulder. The long braids she still wore were a deep auburn then, pinned up at her neck. Chin lowered, eyes closed, profile bathed by the late-afternoon August sun—she resembled a modern-day annunciation. The photo was on the back flap of her first (only) book. For years, the green parasol had hung from the ceiling above her bed. She still had that yellow dress somewhere.

BEA MOTIONED TO GARRIE and he came over with more coffee and placed the bottle of Jameson's next to her cup. She saw him eye her notes and then quickly look away. He'd overheard enough of her whining to Tuck over the years about the novel that never appeared

to know better than to ask her about work, which made her feel even more pathetic, if that was even possible.

Leo had loved—and published—her first story because it was about *him*. The character she called Archie was a thinly disguised version of a young Leo, a funny, self-absorbed, caustic Lothario. *The Paris Review* published the second Archie story. The third was in *The New Yorker*. Then she landed an agent—Leo's friend Stephanie who was also just starting out and who secured a two-book deal for so much money that Bea felt faint and had to sit in Stephanie's office and breathe into a paper bag. Her story collection (the highlight of which, the critics agreed, were the three Archie stories—"delectably wry," "hilarious and smart," "whether you find yourself rooting for or against Archie, you'll be powerless to resist his dubious charms") sold *quietly*.

"It's fine," Stephanie told her then. "This is all groundwork for the novel."

Bea wondered if Stephanie and Leo were in touch anymore, if Stephanie even knew what was going on. The last time Bea spoke to Stephanie was well over a year ago during an uncomfortable lunch downtown. "Let's meet somewhere quiet," Stephanie had e-mailed, alerting Bea to the difficult but not surprising conversation to come about her long-delayed, laboriously overworked novel.

"I can see the effort that went into this draft," Stephanie had said (generously—they both knew not a lot of effort had gone into the draft in quite some time). "And while there's much to admire here—"

"Oh, God." Bea couldn't believe she was hearing the stock phrase she'd employed so many times when she couldn't think of a single thing to admire about someone's prose. "Please don't *much-to-admire* me. Please. Just say what you have to say."

"You're right. I'm sorry." Stephanie looked frustrated and almost angry. She looked older, too, Bea was surprised to note, but then she supposed they both did. Stephanie had fiddled with a sugar packet, tearing it a little at one corner and then folding the end and placing it on her saucer. "Okay, here it is. Everything I loved about your stories, their wit and ingenuity and surprise—everything that worked in those pages—" Stephanie broke off again and now she just looked confused. "I can't find any of it in these pages."

The conversation had plummeted from there.

"Are you breaking up with me?" Bea had finally said, trying to joke and lighten the mood.

"Yes," Stephanie said, wanting to leave no doubt as to where she and Bea stood. "I'm very sorry, but yes."

"I want my novel to be *big*," Bea told Stephanie and Leo the night they celebrated her book deal, a long, boozy evening when her ebullience was so uncorrupted that she could shift a room's atmosphere when she moved through, like a weather front.

"That's my job," Stephanie had said. "You just write it."

"I'm talking about the canvas. I want it to be sweeping. *Necessary.* I want to play a little, experiment with structure." Bea waved at their waiter and ordered another bottle of champagne. Leo lit a cigar.

"Experimenting can be good," Stephanie said, tentatively.

Bea was very drunk and very happy and she'd leaned back against the banquette and put her feet up on a chair, took Leo's cigar and blew three smoke rings and watched them float to the ceiling, coughing a little.

"But no more Archie," Leo had said, abruptly. "We're retiring Archie, right?"

Bea had been surprised. She hadn't been planning more Archie stories but she hadn't thought of them as *retired* either. Looking at

Leo across the table, clearing her throat and trying to focus her vision through the smoke and champagne and those tiny spoonfuls of coke in the bathroom some hours ago, she thought: *yes*. What was that Bible verse? Time to leave childish things behind?

"Yes," she'd found herself saying. "No more Archie." She'd been decisive.

"Good," he said.

"You're not that interesting, anyway." She handed him back his cigar.

"Not anymore he isn't," Stephanie said, and Bea had pretended not to notice Stephanie's fingers moving higher on Leo's leg and disappearing beneath the linen tablecloth.

How many pages written since then? How many discarded? Too many to think about. Thousands. The novel was big all right. Five hundred and seventy-four pages of big. She never wanted to look at it again.

She poured a little more Jameson's into her cup, not bothering with the coffee now, and looked again at the new pages nobody had seen or even knew existed. It wasn't an Archie story. It *wasn't*. But it had energy and motion, the same lightness of language that had come so easily to her all those years ago and then had seemed to vanish overnight, as if she'd somehow unlearned a vital skill in her sleep—how to tie her shoes or ride a bike or snap her fingers—and then couldn't figure out how to get it back.

Stephanie had left the door the tiniest bit ajar at their last meeting—if you have something new to show me, she had said, *really new,* maybe we can talk. But Bea would have to show the pages to Leo first. Probably. Maybe. Maybe not.

"When are we going to read about *your* life," he'd said, a little testily, after she published the final Archie story, the one where she'd

veered a little too close to his less desirable, more predatory qualities. Well, here she was. Using her life. How dare he object? Leo owed her. Especially after the night in the hospital. What happened last July had also happened to her. It was her life, too.

NORA AND LOUISA WERE WALKING along Central Park West, hand in hand, winded from running the three blocks from the SAT classroom, breathless with anticipation. "Here we go," Nora said, squeezing Louisa's hand. "Straight to a certain death or sexual servitude or both."

Louisa laughed but she was nervous. Ditching SAT prep had started as a joke. "We could leave our phones in our lockers and just take off," Louisa had said to Nora after one excruciating session. "The only person who cares if we're here is Mom." Louisa knew by the look on Nora's face that she'd unwittingly put something inevitable into motion. They both hated the classes. The tutor who ran their group seemed barely older than they were and never took attendance or remembered anyone's name or seemed to care who did what. "This is largely self-directed," she'd say, sounding bored and uninspired while staring out a window that faced Columbus Avenue, looking as if her most fervent wish was to leap outside and stroll back into her precious weekend. "You get out of it what you put into it."

"You're a genius," Nora had said to Louisa. "Let's do it!"

"I was kidding. Mom and Dad are paying for this."

"Everything is in the book!" Nora'd pulled out the enormous SAT guide. "They paid for this book. All that tutor does is read from the chapter and make us do the exercises. We can work on the train and at home. It's not even that hard. We have *another year* before applying anywhere. We're *juniors*."

Louisa was tempted but nervous. She agreed the classes were

lame, but she felt guilty. Something was up at home concerning money—there was always something up concerning money, there was never enough money—but this time seemed different and possibly more dire. Her parents spent a lot of time heatedly whispering and had even taken their discussion to the freezing and snowy yard the night before. But she knew once Nora set her mind to something that it was just a matter of time before it happened.

"Think of how beautiful the park will be today with the snow," Nora said, petitioning the second they were out from under their mother's watchful eye. "Snow in the city is evanescent. See? I just used an SAT word. Come on. Today's the perfect day."

Nobody stopped them when they bolted out of the building through a side door and ran down the street expecting to hear their names called at any second. They buried their cell phones deep in a locker in case their mother checked their location on Stalkerville (and she was their mother; she *always* checked their location).

Louisa hesitated. Melody's admonitions about Central Park and its dark pathways full of nefarious men wanting vaguely disturbing and dangerous things genuinely frightened her. But Nora wanted to find a hot dog vendor and the carousel and Belvedere Castle and other things they'd heard about but never seen. She'd downloaded and printed a map before they left home. "We'll stick to the main paths today," she said, unfolding the map and pointing to the spot marked "Strawberry Fields Memorial."

"Let's start here."

LEO PLUMB WAS LOST. He was not ordinarily an uptown guy and what he'd thought was a shortcut through Central Park had led him into an area he didn't recognize. It didn't help that the park was like a disaster area after the snowstorm. The snow and ice that had settled

over the still-leafy trees had perilously weighed down the branches, destroying or damaging countless trees. Many of the park's walking paths were like obstacle courses, slippery and littered with debris. A massive cleanup was under way, and the sound of chain saws reverberated from every direction. Some areas were closed off with police tape, necessitating circuitous detours; Leo was completely turned around.

He looked up at the sky, trying to spot the distinctive peaks and gables of the Dakota on the park's west flank and take a bearing, but from where he was standing he could only see taller, unfamiliar buildings. Leo was running late for his appointment, the one he'd scheduled by phone the day he left rehab, to meet his old friend Rico at the Strawberry Fields Memorial. He had to find his way to higher ground. He used to know some trick about figuring out where he was in the park, something about numbers at the base of the cast-iron lampposts. He walked over to the nearest one. Yes! A small metal plaque affixed to the base was engraved with four numbers: 6107. Did that mean he was only at Sixty-First Street? But didn't the "07" indicate something, too? East side or west side or smack in the damn middle? Fuck Olmsted and his meandering faux-bucolic pathways. He shoved his hands in his pockets and started walking in a direction that felt like he was heading west.

"IT'S COOL, I GUESS," Louisa said, staring down at the black-and-white mosaic on the ground with the word *IMAGINE* at the center. She'd pictured something very different, with an image of John Lennon maybe. Or Strawberries. Or Fields.

Nora was bouncing on her toes, because she was excited and because it was cold. "Let's head into the park. Look at this place. It's full of people and families. The boathouse is right down that hill to the left."

Nora was right. The park didn't feel dangerous at all. It felt lively and bright. "It's downright ebullient," Louisa said, summoning another SAT word. "Lead the way."

HURRYING AS QUICKLY AS HE COULD MANAGE given the scrim of ice coating the pavement, Leo finally came to a path he recognized. He could see the Dakota now. The path was ostensibly closed, blocked off with police tape, and beyond the tape an enormous broken branch of an old elm was swaying dangerously a few feet above the ground. He ducked under the tape and started to lightly jog up the walkway. It was steeper than it looked and the soles of his expensive shoes were paper-thin. As he maneuvered around some fallen limbs, giving wide berth to the elm, he slipped on a long, nearly invisible frozen puddle that cracked under his weight and before he could catch himself, both legs went out from under him and he landed on his backside. Hard.

"Crap," he said to a flock of sparrows twittering maniacally in the surrounding bushes. Leo stayed prone for a minute. He was sweating heavily even though his extremities were freezing. Above, the vivid blue sky belied the approaching winter; it was a spring sky, he thought, a sky full of promise. He almost wanted to close his eyes and forget about his meeting. (*Meeting?* He could hear the voice of his rehab counselor in his ear, her derisive tone, her familiar snort. *Let's call things by their real name, Leo. It's a drug buy.*)

As he sat up, he heard a commotion up the path. Two teenaged girls rounded the corner, heading downhill. Their heads were bent close; one was animated, talking quickly and gesticulating, the other was shaking her head and frowning. Leo liked something about the way the girls kept leaning into each other as they walked, almost as if they were tethered at the shoulder or elbow. The blonde looked

up, noticed Leo sitting in the middle of the icy walk, and froze. Leo smiled to reassure them, gave a little wave.

"Careful," he called out. "It's treacherous down here."

The blonde looked alarmed and grabbed her friend who was staring at Leo with—was he imagining this?—recognition. The three of them faced off for a moment, and then the blonde grabbed the brunette's hand and both girls turned and hurried up the path.

"Hey," Leo yelled. "I come in peace!"

The girls moved faster, holding on to each other's arms for balance.

FOR A MINUTE, it seemed to Nora and Louisa that Melody had arranged Leo's nearly mystical appearance, had planted him there to say: *See? See what trouble lurks in the park? See how lucky you are that I'm your mother?* They were always asking about Melody's siblings, the siblings who lived in the city and seemed so interesting and exotic, especially their uncle Leo whose picture would sometimes be in the Sunday Styles section with Victoria, their glamorous aunt. (Louisa had tried calling her Aunt Victoria once at a rare family gathering and couldn't tell whether the woman wanted to laugh or spit at her.) Melody looked pained when the girls would point out the photos, her face clouding with a mix of disapproval and disappointment. Her expression made the girls feel so bad they stopped mentioning the pictures, hiding them instead in a Tupperware container in their shared closet. Sometimes they'd ask their father about Leo who would only say, "He's always been perfectly nice to me. Not much of a family man."

And here he was. Leo. Flailing about like an upended turtle. ("He wasn't *flailing,*" Nora said, dismissing Louisa's attempts to describe the odd moment while they were heading home on the train later.

"He was trying to get up. It was icy." But Louisa was firm, Melody-like; newly out of rehab, she insisted, Leo should not have been in the park. He was supposed to be meeting his siblings for lunch!) At the top of the path they stopped and hid behind a tree trunk to spy on Leo.

"It's totally him," Louisa said.

"Should we say something?" Nora asked.

Louisa hesitated. She wanted to approach Leo, too, but thought they shouldn't. "He'll tell Mom," she said. Nora nodded, mouth drawn tight, disappointed. They both held still, barely breathing, and watched Leo for a few minutes. He stood and brushed off his pants. He sat on a large boulder. "What is he doing?" Nora whispered as Leo stared up at the sky. She wished they were a normal family. She wished she could run down the path, waving, and he'd smile and laugh and they could spend the day together. Instead, here they were, cowering behind a tree. They didn't have all the details of his trip to rehab, but they knew there was some kind of accident and that it was bad and involved drugs. "Who does blow anymore?" Louisa had heard her mother say to their father one night last summer.

"He might be buying drugs," Louisa said, looking at Nora, worried. "Why else would he be all the way up here right before lunch?"

LEO SIGHED AND HOISTED HIMSELF UP, brushing twigs and dirt off his pants. He sat on a nearby rock, assessing the damage to his scraped palms. Something nagged at him, something about the girls. He'd really spooked them. He assumed his fall was inelegant, but couldn't imagine that he looked dangerous. Why had they been so spooked? Kids probably weren't allowed anywhere in the park without a parent these days—not even teens, not even boys. Those girls were probably already looking for a cop.

Dammit, Leo thought. What if they *were* looking for a cop? What if they thought he was drunk or worse and gave his description to the police who were patrolling for him right now? He couldn't be caught with drugs. His lawyer had been crystal clear: *Keep your nose clean until the divorce decree comes down. No travel. No suspicious spending. No trouble.* Leo stood and headed toward the sound of traffic. At the top of the path, he turned a corner and finally knew exactly where he was. Central Park West was straight ahead. He could hail a taxi and go directly to Grand Central and not be late for lunch. If he made a right, he'd be at Strawberry Fields within two or three minutes.

He hesitated. Above him, an ear-splitting screech. He looked up to see three enormous crows, perched on one of the few trees that had already dropped its leaves. They were all squawking at once, as if they were arguing about his next move. Directly beneath, in the midst of the stark and barren branches and at the base of a forked limb, a mud-brown leafy mass. A nest. Jesus.

Leo checked the time and started walking.