

## PROLOGUE

*SHE WATCHED. THAT was her gift. To disappear into the black, sink into the shadows behind and between. That's where you really saw things for what they were, when people revealed their true natures. Everyone was on broadcast these days, thrusting out versions of themselves, cropped and filtered for public consumption. Everyone putting on the "show of me." It was when people were alone, unobserved, that the mask came off.*

*She'd been watching him for a while. The mask he wore was slipping.*

*He, too, stood in the shadows of the street, a hulking darkness. She'd followed him as he drove, circling like a predator, then finding a place for his car under the trees. He'd parked, then sat as the night wound on and inside lights went out, one by one. Finally, he'd stepped out of his vehicle, closed the door quietly, and slipped across the street. Now he waited. What was he doing?*

*Since she'd been following him the last few weeks, she'd seen him push his children on the swings in the park, visit a strip club in the middle of the day, drink himself stupid with his buddies viewing a game at a*

sports bar. She'd watched as he'd helped a young mother with a toddler and baby in a carriage carry her groceries from her car into her house.

Once, he'd picked up a woman in a local bar. Then, out in the parking lot, they romped like animals in his car. Later, he went to the grocery store and picked up food for his family, his cart piled high with ice cream and Goldfish crackers, things his kids liked.

*What was he up to now?*

*The observer only sees, never interferes. Still, tonight she felt the tingle of bad possibilities. She waited in the cool night, patient and still.*

*The clicking of heels echoed, a brisk staccato up the deserted street. She felt a little pulse of dread. Was there no one else around? No one else glancing out their window? No. She was the only one. Sometimes didn't it seem like people didn't see anymore? They didn't look out. They looked down, at that device in their hands. Or in, mesmerized by the movie of past and future, desires and fears, always playing on the screen in their minds.*

*The figure of the young woman was slim, erect, confident. She marched up the street, sure-footed, hands in her pockets, tote over her shoulder. When he moved out of the shadows and blocked her path, the young woman stopped short, backed up a step or two. He reached for her, as if to take her hand, but she wrapped her arms around her middle.*

*There were words she couldn't hear, an exchange. Sharp at first, then softer. On the air, far away, they sounded like calling birds. What was he doing? Fear was a cold finger up her spine.*

*He moved to embrace the girl, and she shrank away. But he moved in anyway. In the night, he was just a looming specter. His bulk swallowed her tiny form, and together in a kind of dance they moved toward the door, at first jerking, awkward. Then, she seemed to give in, soften into him. She let them both inside. And then the street was silent again.*

*She stood frozen, unsure of what she'd seen. Later, when she realized what he'd done, who he truly was under the mask, she'd hate herself for staying rooted, hiding in the shadows, only watching. She'd tell herself that she didn't know then. She didn't know that beneath the mask, he was a monster.*



# ONE

Selena

**S**ELENA LOVED THE liminal spaces. Those precious slivers of time between the roles she played in her life.

She missed the 5:40 train because her client meeting ran long, knowing before she even left the conference room table that there was no way she would be home in time for dinner with her husband Graham and their two maniac boys, Stephen and Oliver. The wild hours afterward—showers, pajamas, random horseplay, vicious but brief sibling battles, television maybe if either of them could sit still a minute—that concluded in story time would have to unfold without her. Selena didn't often work late; she made a point to be home on time. Chaotic as their evenings often were, that was the best part of her day.

But when she *did* miss the train that night—she didn't even bother trying to get to the station—it created a space that hadn't been there before. Just a little over two hours between the 5:40, which she normally took, and the 7:45, which she intended to catch after finishing up a few things at the office.

In that gap, she could feel herself expand. She wasn't work-

ing. She wasn't mothering. She just was. She could think. And truth be told, Selena did have some things she needed to think about. These things were a white noise in the back of her mind.

She slipped out of the cab she'd taken back to the office, into the cool autumn evening. The noise of the city washed over her, the manic rush of people on their way home after a long day. Then she stepped into the hush of the quiet lobby, with its marble floors and gleaming walls. Selena nodded to the doorman who knew her, then swiped her card through the gates. Up the elevator alone.

Here her heart started thumping, mouth going dry. Her bag was too heavy, the tote pulling down on her tight shoulder muscles. She hadn't missed the train on purpose; she really hadn't wanted to cut the client off as he went on and on.

But.

The office was empty. The literary agency had a small staff; most of them people with families. Many of the parents left before school pickup, then worked at home in the afternoons. Beth, her boss, also her lifelong best friend, had things set up like that so that people could work well and take care of their families—imagine that. It was the rare humane workplace.

She didn't bother flipping on the light in her office, enjoying the glittering downtown view through her big window. A rush of heat to her cheeks as she dropped her bag. She shifted off her jacket and sat in front of the computer and took a deep breath before opening the lid on her laptop.

It was after 6:15 now. The boys would have had their dinner. If Selena knew their nanny, Geneva, and the efficiency with which she ran the show, Oliver and Stephen would also be showered and in jammies. She probably had them settled in front of the television already.

Selena leaned back in her ergonomic chair, felt its pleasant tilt.

She hadn't hidden the camera, precisely. Geneva had been made aware of cameras in the home—one upstairs, one down.

Selena had simply moved the one from the boys' bedroom, and told neither Graham nor Geneva about it.

She paused another second. Her desk was cluttered with framed pictures of the boys and Graham, drawings from school, a ceramic owl Oliver had made at art camp. She picked up the glazed misshapen thing; he'd carved his name in the clay bottom. She touched the ridges of the wobbly O, the backward e. Somewhere she heard a vacuum cleaner running.

Her wedding picture—where her smile beamed, and Graham was dashing in his classic tux. He'd whispered to her while the photographer snapped away—dirty things, funny things. Then: *This is the best day of my life*. His breath in her ear, his arms around her. Her whole body tingled with joy, with desire. Nearly ten years ago now. God, it was a heartbeat, a blink, a single breath drawn and released.

She put the photo down. Then, she clicked on the app that would allow her to watch on her laptop the video feed from the camera she had placed in the boys' playroom.

It took a moment for the image to load.

When it did, she was not surprised by what she saw.

Graham, her husband, was fucking Geneva, her nanny, on the activity rug that Selena and Graham had carefully selected together at IKEA.

The volume was down, so she was spared their grunting and moaning.

When had she started to suspect? About two weeks ago. She happened to catch a glance between Graham and Geneva. Something that small, a millisecond, a microexpression.

No, she'd thought. *Surely not*.

But she'd moved the bedroom camera to the playroom.

This was the second time she'd watched them. A weird calm came over her, a kind of apathetic distance from the whole thing.

Geneva wasn't *that hot*, Selena thought, as she watched the young woman who had shiny, wheat-colored hair, and flushed

cheeks. Selena leaned closer to the screen, to see the girl more clearly. Attractive, certainly. But not *much* more so than Selena.

Okay. The other woman was a bit younger—but only by a few years. Maybe there was a softness to her that Selena lacked, a freshness. But she was nothing special. In fact, Geneva's just-slightly-above-average looks were a point that Selena had taken into consideration when hiring her as a nanny. Geneva was a reasonably attractive, smart, personable career childcare professional with a long list of glowing references. She was no bombshell. No blushing twentysomething with glossed lips and inappropriately placed tattoos she would later regret. Most women, Selena included, knew better than to bring some nubile hottie into her home on a regular basis. It just wasn't good business.

Besides, Geneva was *known* to Selena—coveted, in fact. They'd met on the playground during Selena's first year home with the boys. Work, the commute, the race to pick up from preschool, the balancing act that never quite balanced. It had worn her to a nub. She and her husband Graham decided that she should stay home for a time—indefinitely. They could afford that—Graham made good money. There wouldn't be Range Rovers and trips to Tahoe every spring break. But they would be fine.

Selena had *loved* the way Geneva was with the Tucker boys, Ryan and Chad. She was sweet but firm, prepared but not anal. The boys listened to her. *Eyes on me*, she'd say brightly, and so it was. Geneva wasn't like the other nannies Selena observed at the park—millennials staring at their phones while their charges ran amok or stared at devices of their own. Geneva chased, pushed swings, played hide-and-seek.

And, you know, she was not *that* hot.

Lovely features—a button nose and full lips, dark, heavily lashed doe eyes, buxom but just the tiniest bit—pleasantly—plump. Broad in the beam, as her father used to say. In a nice way, the way of strong women built for physical labor. Selena

was long and slim, a genetic boon for which she was grateful because god knows she didn't have the time anymore to work for it.

Now, she turned up the volume a little, listened to them groaning. Did it sound—forced?

Selena remembered how she and Geneva had chatted almost daily. Selena's boys—Oliver and Stephen—loved her. *Is Geneva going to be there?* Oliver, her older, sometimes asked as they were headed to the park. *Probably*, Selena would answer, wishing that she had someone like Geneva, even just part-time. Someone with whom she felt good about leaving her children. But she was happy enough to be home. She didn't miss her publicity job. She'd never had that *drive to accomplish* that so many of her friends seemed to have. She just wasn't wired that way. She liked working—the independence of it, the comradery, the satisfaction of doing something well. The money. But it had never defined her.

Graham: "Oh, yeah. That's so good."

She bumped the volume down again. Picked up one of the framed pictures of the boys, holding it up so that it blocked the screen, and gazed into their flushed, joyful faces.

Motherhood defined Selena in a way that work hadn't, the idea that she was there for her children—that she cooked their meals and kept their house, their schedules, their doctor appointments and haircuts. That she was there on car line, at parent-teacher conferences, school Halloween parties. It wasn't sexy. It wasn't always easy. There wasn't a ton of cultural praise for the role, not really. But she found a level of satisfaction in it that she hadn't found elsewhere.

Then Graham unexpectedly—well, did anyone ever expect it?—lost his job. Not his fault, really. Publishing was shrinking, and his big salary was hard to justify in a flailing self-help imprint. That very same week, over cocktails, Selena's good friend Beth serendipitously offered her a huge job—a licensing director position at Beth's literary agency. Selena's salary would be more than Graham's, plus bonuses. Of course, there would have to be

a nanny. Because Graham, well, he wasn't exactly hardwired for caregiving. *And finding a job is a full-time job, babe.*

So, it felt like kismet when during a chat at the park—the very next day, when Selena was grappling for solutions to their problem—Geneva told Selena that she was about to lose *her* job. Mrs. Tucker wanted to be home for a couple of years, she said.

When things were easy like that, it meant you were *in the flow*, didn't it? Isn't that what they said these days? It made it easy for Selena to go back to work. It wasn't necessarily what she wanted. But you did what you had to do, right? Graham would find another job. It wasn't forever—though the money was nice.

The way the camera was positioned, Selena had the best view of Geneva—who apparently liked to be on top. Was it Selena's imagination? Geneva didn't seem that into it. Though from the look on her face and the movement of her lips, she was surely making all the appropriate noises.

On the other video feed from the downstairs camera, the boys were slack-jawed in front of *Trollhunters*. They were both scrubbed clean, fed, and in their jammies, waiting for Selena.

Geneva was faultless on that count, which was odd to note in a moment like this. But Selena had really appreciated that Geneva wasn't one of those nannies that tried to be the mommy. As soon as Selena returned home in the evenings, Geneva took her proper place, eagerly leaving as soon as she could, sometimes before Selena even came back downstairs from changing. The house was always clean, the boys were usually calm-ish—as calm as boys five and seven could ever be. But they weren't wild like they were when Graham was at the helm. On the rare occasions when Graham had the kids for the day, they'd be filthy, overstimulated, out of routine—desperate for order and a way to calm themselves. Graham thought he was one of them, acted more like a corrupting older sibling than a parent.

Like now. As he boned the nanny in the playroom while his young sons watched television downstairs.



Why wasn't she angrier about this?

It had been a buzz in the back of her head since the first time she'd watched them three days ago. A barely audible thrum, something she pushed away and pushed back, down, down, down. Why wasn't she weeping with anger, the sting of betrayal, jealousy? Why hadn't she raced home after the first discovery, raging, and tossed him out, fired Geneva? That's what anyone would do.

But Selena was only aware of a kind of numbness that had settled after the first time, a mean, heartless apathy. But no. Beneath that numb layer inside was something else.

Now, Geneva had her head back in pleasure. Graham wore that helpless look he had right before he was about to climax; he kind of lifted his eyebrows a little, lids closed the way violin players did sometimes when they were rapt in their music. Selena realized she was clutching the arms of her chair so tightly that her hands ached.

She was distantly aware of another feeling, one she deeply pressed down for a good long time, long before this. At some point after the birth of their second child, Selena had started to dislike her husband. Not all the time. But with shocking intensity—the way he interrupted her when she was talking, hovered over her in the kitchen micromanaging, the way he claimed to share the housework when he didn't. At all. Surely it was true of all couples who had been together for a long time. Then he lost his job—sort of gleefully, it must be said.

*Oh, well, I was looking for a change. And you said you were missing work.*

Had she said that? She didn't think so, since she hadn't been missing work.

At some point after that, when she'd come home to find him in the same athletic pants two days in a row, or when she checked the browser history on the computer and couldn't find a shred of evidence that he'd been looking for a job at all, she

started to hate him a little. Then more. That svelte and charming man in the tux, the one who made her laugh and shiver with pleasure, he seemed like someone from a dream she could barely remember.

Now, as she leaned in to turn up the volume again and heard him moan beneath Geneva, the depth and scope of her hatred was primal. She understood for the first time in her life how people might kill each other—married people who once loved with passion and devotion, who once cried happy tears at the altar, and went on a magnificent honeymoon, conceived beautiful children, built a lovely life.

That thing lurking inside her, it was pounding to get out. She could hear it. But she couldn't quite *feel* it.

She'd been on autopilot with Graham, going through the motions, rebuffing his advances. If he'd noticed her distance, he hadn't said anything. The truth was, it wasn't the first time he'd cheated. But she thought they'd moved past it. There'd been counseling, tearful promises. She'd—foolishly it seemed—forgiven him and allowed herself to trust him again.

"Graham."

The voice startled Selena, snapped her back to the present moment.

Geneva had climbed off Selena's husband, already pulled her skirt down. Both times there had been hasty dressing afterward, averted eyes and frowning faces. At least they had the decency not to lie around after sex, not to *luxuriate* on the playroom floor.

"This has to stop," said Geneva. Selena heard the notes of shame, regret. Good. Good for you, Geneva!

Graham had pulled up his pants, sat on the couch and dropped his head into his hands.

"I know," he said, voice muffled.

"You have a nice family. A beautiful life. And this is—fucked," Geneva said, her face flushed.

*Oh, Geneva, thought Selena crazily, please don't quit.*

"I think I should give notice," said Geneva.

Graham looked up, stricken. "God, no," he said. "Don't do that."

Selena laughed out loud. No, it wasn't love. He wasn't afraid of losing the lovely young Geneva. He was *terrified* that he would have to be the primary caregiver for Stephen and Oliver while he "looked for another job."

"Selena relies on you," he said. "She appreciates you *so much*."

Geneva let out a little laugh, which made Selena smile, too, before she caught herself. How could Selena still *like* the woman who she'd just watched fuck her husband? She must be losing her grip. That's what working motherhood did to you; it robbed you of your sanity.

"I doubt very much that she'd appreciate *this*," Geneva said.

"No," said Graham. He was pale with shame, rubbing at his jaw. He looked up and, with a strange rush of relief, for a second Selena saw him—her husband, her best friend, the father of her children. He was still there. He wasn't a fiction she'd created.

"Then, look," said Geneva. She wrapped her arms around her middle, started moving toward the door. "You need to be around less. You need to find a job."

"Okay," he said. His hair was wild; it looked like he hadn't shaved in days.

What did Geneva see in him? Truly? At least he and Selena had a history; their love affair had been epic, their travels full of adventure, their home life quite lovely. His infidelities, prior to this one, had been relatively minor. That's what she'd told herself anyway—not affairs exactly. He'd been a decent husband until recently, a provider. He was her best friend, the person she wanted to share everything with first. Funny. Charming. Smart. Even now, in this ugly moment, she wished she could call him to talk about her monstrous husband who was fucking the nanny. He'd certainly know what to do.

"It's not a good idea for men to be home," Geneva went on. "I've seen it a lot in recent years. It's just—a bad idea usually."

“Yeah,” he said again, sounding ever more dejected. Poor Geneva. She didn’t know she would have to be Graham’s nanny, too.

Selena slammed the lid on her laptop closed with more force than she’d intended, slipped it into the case, stuffed the case into her bag. She shouldered on her dark wool jacket, feeling a churning in her stomach.

She *was* angry, hurt, betrayed—she knew that. But it was dormant, lava churning in a deep chasm within her, pressure building. She’d always been this way, the surface calm, the depths rumbling. She pressed things down, away—until she couldn’t. The eruptions were epic.

By the time she’d reached the street, a pall had settled over her again. The gray numbness. The city was a crush. She pushed her way through the crowded streets to the subway, then through the bustling station to the platform, just catching her commuter train home.

She walked through the cars as the train hissed, seemed about to pull from the station, then stopped.

There. A seat beside a young woman, who, for a moment, looked almost familiar. She had straight black hair, mocha eyes, a slight smile on red lips. Svelte, stylish—even from a distance Selena instantly liked her. Seeing Selena move toward her, the other woman lifted her tote to make room. And Selena sank into the space beside her issuing what must have been a telling sigh. She clutched her *People* magazine in her hand. All she wanted to do was lose herself in those fluffy, glossy pages for the next forty minutes, a blessed escape from her problems.

“Rough day?” asked the stranger. Her expression—a half smile on full lips, a glint in her dark eyes—said that she knew it all. That she had been there. That she was in on the joke, whatever it was.

Selena half laughed. “You have no idea.”



## TWO

Anne

IT HAD BEEN a mistake from the beginning and Anne certainly knew that. You don't sleep with your boss. It's really one of the things mothers should teach their daughters. Chew your food carefully. Look both ways before you cross the street. Don't fuck your direct supervisor no matter how hot, rich, or charming he may happen to be. Not that Anne's mother had taught her a single useful thing.

Anyway, here she was. Again. Taking it from behind, over the couch in her boss's corner office with those expansive city views. The world was a field of lights spread wide around them. She tried to enjoy it. But, as was often the case, she just kind of floated above herself. She made all the right noises, though. She knew how to fake it.

"Oh my god, Anne. You're so hot."

He pressed himself in deep, moaning.

When he'd first come on to her, she thought he was kidding—or not thinking clearly. They'd flown together to DC to take an important client who was considering leaving the

investment firm out to dinner. In the cab on the way back to the hotel—while Hugh was *on the phone* with his wife—he put his hand on Anne’s leg. He wasn’t even looking at Anne when he did it, so for a moment she wondered if it was just absent-mindedness. He was like that sometimes, a little loopy. Overly affectionate, familiar. Forgetful.

His hand moved up her thigh. Anne sat very still. Like a prey animal. Hugh ended the call and she expected him to jerk his hand back.

*Oh! I’m so sorry, Anne*, she thought he’d say, aghast at his careless behavior.

But no. His hand moved higher.

“Am I misreading signals?” he said, voice low.

Stop. What most people would be thinking: *Poor Anne! Afraid for her job, she submits to this predator.*

What Anne was thinking: *How can I use this to my advantage?* She really *had been* just trying to do her job well, sort of. But it seemed that Pop was right, as he had been about so many things. If you weren’t running a game, someone was running one on you.

Had she subconsciously been putting out signals? Possibly. Yes. Maybe Pop was right about that, too. You don’t get to stop being what you are, even when you try.

They made out like prom dates in the cab, comported themselves appropriately as they walked through the lobby of the Ritz. He pressed against her at the door to her hotel room. She was glad she was wearing sexy underwear, had shaved her legs.

She’d given Hugh—with his salt-and-pepper hair, sinewy muscles, flat abs—the ride of his life that night. And many nights since. He liked her on top. He was a considerate lover, always asking: *Is this good? Are you okay?* Confessional: *Kate and I—we’ve been married a long time. We both have—appetites.* She couldn’t care less about his marriage.

Anne didn’t actually believe in the things other people seemed

to value so highly. Fidelity—really? Were you supposed to just want one person your whole life? Marriage. Was there ever anything more set up to fail, to disappoint, to erode? Come on. They were animals. Every last one of them rutting, feral beasts. Men. Women. All of society was held together by gossamer-thin, totally arbitrary laws and mores that were always shifting and changing no matter how people clung. They were all just barely in line.

Anne neither expected nor encouraged Hugh to fall in love. In fact, she spoke very little. She listened, made all the right affirming noises. If he noticed that she had told him almost nothing about herself, it didn't come up. But fall in love with Anne he did. And things were getting complicated.

Now, finished and holding her around the waist, Hugh was crying a little. His body weight was pinning her down. He often got emotional after they made love. She didn't mind him most of the time. But the whole crying thing—it was such a turnoff. She pushed against him and he let her up. She tugged down her skirt, and he pulled her into an embrace.

She held him for a while, then wiped his eyes, kissed his tears away. Because she knew that's what he wanted. She had a special gift for that, knowing what people wanted—really wanted deep down—and giving them that thing for a while. And that was why Hugh—why anyone—fell in love. Because he loved getting the thing he wanted, even if he didn't know what that was.

When he moved away finally, she stared at her ghostly reflection in the dark window, wiped at her smeared lipstick.

"I'm going to leave her," Hugh said. He flung himself on one of the plush sofas. He was long and elegant; his clothes impeccable, bespoke, made from the finest fabrics. Tonight, his silk tie was loose, pressed cotton shirt was wilted, black wool suit pants still looking crisp. Garments, all garments—even just his tennis whites—hung beautifully on his fit body.

She smiled, moved to sit beside him. He kissed her, salty and sweet.

“It’s time. I can’t do this anymore,” he went on.

This wasn’t the first time he’d said this. Last time, when she’d tried to discourage him, he’d held her wrists too hard when she tried to leave. There had been something bright and hard in his eyes—desperation. She didn’t want him to get clingy tonight. Emotional.

“Okay,” she said, running her fingers through his hair. “Yeah.”

Because that’s what he wanted to hear, needed to hear. If you didn’t give people what they wanted, they became angry. Or they pulled away. And then the game was harder or lost altogether.

“We’ll go away,” he said, tracing a finger along her jaw. Because of course they’d both lose their jobs. Hugh’s wife, Kate, owned and ran the investment firm, had inherited the company from her legendary father. Her brothers were on the board. They’d never liked Hugh (this was one of his favorite pillow talk tirades, how Kate’s brothers didn’t respect him). “We’ll take a long trip abroad and figure out what comes next. Clean slate for both of us. Would you like that?”

“Of course,” she said. “That would be wonderful.”

Anne liked her job; when she’d applied and interviewed, she honestly wanted to work at the firm. Numbers made a kind of sense to her, investment a kind of union of logic and magic. Client work was a bit of a game, wasn’t it—convincing people to part with their cash on the promise that you could make them more? She also respected and admired her boss—her lover’s wife—Kate. A powerful, intelligent woman.

Maybe Anne should have thought about all of that before she submitted to Hugh’s advances. He wasn’t the power player; she’d miscalculated, or not run the numbers at all. She made mistakes like that sometimes, let the game run *her*. Pop thought it was a



form of self-sabotage. *Sometimes, sweetie, I think your heart's not quite in it.* Maybe he was right.

"Ugh," said Hugh, pulling away, glancing at his watch. "I'm late. I have to change and meet Kate at the fundraiser."

She rose and walked the expanse of his office, got his tux from the closet, and laid it across the back of the couch. Another stunning item, heavy and silken. She ran her fingers lovingly along the lapel. He rose, and she helped him dress, hanging his other clothes, putting them back in the closet. She did his tie. In his heart, he was a little boy. He wanted to be attended to, cared for. Maybe everyone wanted that.

"You look wonderful," she said, kissing him. "Have fun tonight."

He looked at her long, eyes filling again.

"Soon," he said, "this charade can end."

She put a gentle hand to his cheek, smiled as sweetly as she could muster and started to move from the room.

"Anne," he said, grabbing for her hand. "I love you."

She'd never said it back. She'd said things like *me, too* or she'd send him the heart-eyed emoji in response to a text. Sometimes she just blew him a kiss. He hadn't seemed to notice, or his pride was too enormous to ask her why she never said it, or if she loved him. But mainly, she thought it was because Hugh only saw and heard what he wanted to.

She unlaced her fingers and blew him a kiss. "Good night, Hugh."

His phone rang, and he watched her as he answered.

"I'm coming, darling," he said, averting his eyes, moving away. "Just had to finish up with a client."

She left him, his voice following her down the hall.

In her office, she gathered her things, a strange knot in the pit of her stomach. She sensed that her luck was about to run out here. She couldn't say why. Just a feeling that things were unsustainable—that it wasn't going to be as easy to leave Kate as

he thought, that on some level he didn't really want to, that once things reached critical mass, she'd be out of a job. Of course, it wouldn't be a total loss. She'd make sure of that.

There was a loneliness, a hollow feeling that took hold at the end. She wished she could call Pop, that he could talk her through it. Instead her phone pinged. The message there annoyed her.

This is wrong, it said. I don't want to do this anymore.

Just stay the course, she wrote back. It's too late to back out now.

Funny how that worked. At the critical moment, she had to give the advice she needed herself. The student becomes the teacher. No doubt, Pop would be pleased.

Anne glanced at the phone. The little dots pulsed, then disappeared. The girl, younger, greener, would do what she was told. She always had. So far.

Anne looked at her watch, imbued with a bit of energy. If she hustled, she could just make it.



## THREE

Selena

AS SELENA WAS settling into her seat next to the other woman, the train just died on the track, emitting a defeated groan. The lights went dark, then came back up. She waited.

*Please, she thought.*

If the train left the station now, she could still make it home to see the boys before they were asleep. She glanced at her seat-mate, who was staring out the window. All she could see was the curtain of her glossy black hair, the edge of her elegant profile. Did they know each other? she wondered again.

Selena texted Graham, the cheating bastard:

Train delayed!

Ugh, he wrote back. Nanny gone. I'll start bedtime. Boys waiting for you. Love you!

She loved how he didn't use Geneva's name. Hadn't she read

something about that? Distancing. Like: I never had sexual relations with *that woman*.

His text sounded repentant, didn't it? It was the exclamation mark, a thing he rarely used. All editors hate the exclamation point; it's a cheat. The dialogue should speak for itself. But, in texting, it communicated warmth, enthusiasm, brightness—something. If he'd resorted to it, he must feel like a monster. He *was* a monster.

Love you, she texted back reluctantly. No exclamation point.

But she did. Always had, all their years together. He made her laugh. He knew just how to rub her shoulders. He was strong; he handled the business of their lives, chopped firewood, did the landscaping. He had been, in many ways, a good husband. And she did love him. Odd. Because she also hated him with equal passion. That rumble inside. That volcanic mix of sadness, anger, love. Villages would be reduced to ash when it finally erupted.

Selena looked out the window.

Black.

All she could see was the faint reflection of the other woman's face in the glass. There were only a few other people in the car now. Many had gotten up and left to find alternative transport, she guessed. Selena could have moved to another seat, so that they each had a section to themselves. But was that rude?

Her face.

What was it?

The other woman's cheekbones were high and pronounced. Her dark eyes an abyss. There was a sensual shape to her mouth, something almost sweetly crooked. She was about to make polite conversation when the other woman spoke. A whisper, something Selena didn't hear at first. When she later would look back on this first encounter, she tried to find reasons for what happened next.

Maybe it was just one of those strange, deep connections that

take you by surprise like falling in love. Or was it that delay, the darkened car, the powerlessness of waiting?

Sometimes it just happened that way with women, an instant intimacy. Selena had experienced it a number of times. You just look at each other—and you *know*. The journey from girlhood to womanhood, the hopes and dreams they all share, how life rarely delivers, and, even if it does, how it's never quite what you expected. There's no glass slipper, no Prince Charming. That princess updo, it hurts after a while, your hair pulled too taut, the pins too sharp. The disappointments, the dawning of reality. And, yes, all the good things too—real love, true friendship, the birth of children. You just look into her eyes, and you know the path, the journey, all the hills and valleys, the cosmic joke of it.

The other woman spoke again.

“Did you ever do something you really regretted?”

It was almost a whisper. Maybe she was just talking to herself—which Selena did all the time. Whole conversations in the shower.

*Who were you talking to?* Oliver, her oldest, the curious one, wanted to know the other night.

*Myself*, she told him.

*That's weird.*

At least she could be sure someone was listening, engaged. Often, she had excellent advice for herself in the shower, as if there was a little therapist in her head, one who had all the answers.

“Yes,” Selena said now. “Of course.”

Oh, there were so many things, stretching back as far as childhood. She regretted not inviting Marty Jasper to her fifth-grade birthday party; Marty was an odd kid, not always nice, and everyone avoided her. They weren't friends, but Selena should have invited her to be kind. She regretted losing her virginity on a dare, then losing her best friend because of it. There were some one-night stands in college that were risky, almost dangerous.

She had regrets (lots) about her ex-boyfriend Will, the one everyone thought she would marry. She should have tried harder to breastfeed; now her kids were finicky eaters because of that probably. Or maybe not. Who knew? There were other things. She could fill a book with her lists of regrets.

"I'm sleeping with my boss," said the other woman.

"Oh," said Selena, surprised but somehow not. "That one."

Just last year her good friend Leona had slept with *her* boss—both of them married; what a mess.

"If I break up with him," the other woman went on, "I think it could get very ugly. He wants to leave his wife for me."

"Oh," said Selena, leaning in. She felt a kind of salacious glee, a delightful escape from her own drama.

"His wife owns the company," she said. "Where we both work."

"Hmm," said Selena, nodding. She wasn't sure what else to say. It happened sometimes, didn't it? You just needed to confess? It was all too much to hold in; you couldn't tell the people closest to you for a million reasons. That's why people spilled their guts to the bartender, the hairdresser, right?

Sometimes a stranger was the safest place in your life.

The other woman turned to look at her in the dim of the broken-down car. She lifted a hand to her mouth, her eyes going wide.

"I'm sorry!" she said. "Why did I just tell you that?"

"Obviously," said Selena, feeling motherly and knowing, "you needed to talk."

Selena knew how that felt. She hadn't told a single soul about Graham. Not her mother, not her sister, not Beth. It was a stone in her gut, an acidic ache in her throat. What a relief it would be to release it. But how could she tell anyone? Her marriage—*Graham and Selena*—it was the fairy tale, the love-at-first-sight, happily-ever-after. It was the envy of—everyone. Now, they

were just like everyone else—pitifully flawed, broken—possibly beyond repair.

The train sat, and Selena felt the crush of despair, the dark outside deepening, the stillness of the train expanding.

“I’m Martha,” said the other woman, offering her hand.

“Selena,” she said, taking it. Martha’s hand was cool, delicate, but her grip firm.

Martha started rifling through her bag, retrieving two minibar-sized bottles of vodka. She handed one to Selena, who took it with a smile. It reminded her of her best friend and boss, Beth, who hoarded mini-bottles of everything—booze, shampoo, moisturizer, hand sanitizer, mouthwash. She’d load up at hotels, stashing the take in her suitcase, her tote. Chances were if you needed anything, needle and thread, a comb, mouthwash, lotion, Beth had it somewhere in the giant bag she hauled with her everywhere.

Martha cracked open the tiny bottle and, after a moment of hesitation, Selena did the same.

“To making a shitty day a little better,” said Martha. They clinked bottles, Selena looking out for a conductor. You weren’t supposed to drink on the train, were you? She felt the little tingle of glee she always felt when she was breaking a rule.

“Cheers,” she said.

The vodka was warm, a slick down her throat, heat on her cheeks. Another sip and she felt a welcome lightness. The train stayed still and dark. Some of the other passengers were talking quietly on their phones. The man across from them was sleeping, his head resting on his rolled-up jacket.

Selena felt her phone ring in her pocket and fished it out. FaceTime.

“I have to get this,” she said. Martha nodded, reached for the bottle, and Selena handed it to her to hold.

She answered the call to see her boys crowding to get both

their faces on the screen. She lowered the volume, rose and walked to the space between the bathrooms.

"Mom," said Oliver. "Where are you?"

"I'm stuck on the train, buddy," she said, voice low. "So sorry. Did you guys read a story?"

"Dad read *The Boy with Too Many Toys*," he said.

"Again," chimed in Stephen.

Graham was not the preferred story time parent. He didn't read with the requisite enthusiasm, only read one book, which *he* chose, no negotiation. Whereas Selena was in there for an hour, letting each boy pick a book, then often lying on the floor a while as they drifted off. Sometimes she fell asleep in there, too, and Graham had to retrieve her.

"I'll come in and give you guys a kiss as soon as I get home," she said. "I hope it won't be much longer."

She looked around again for a sign of the conductor, or someone to ask. But there was no one. What *was* the fucking hold up?

Stephen, blond, two front teeth missing, started talking about how a boy in school cut his own bangs with scissors and had to go home he was crying so hard. Oliver hadn't liked his snack, and could he have raisins tomorrow. Finally, Graham cut in.

"Okay, guys," he said. "Time for bed."

He took the phone as the boys protested, then yelled in unison: "Love you, Mom!"

"Love you, boys!" she said. "Be home soon."

"What about me?" said Graham. Now it was his face on the phone. Dark eyes, stubble, his crooked nose (broken in a football game, never healed quite right), hair tousled. That smile, devilish, rakish. "Do you love *me*?"

"I do," she said, trying to sound light. "You know I do."

She tried to block out the image of Geneva on top of him, but it came unbidden. It was, in fact, on an ugly loop in her brain, a television on in another room, a song she heard through the



wall. There was an unpleasant squeeze on her heart. He must have seen it on her face.

He frowned. "What is it?"

"I should go," she said.

"Okay," he answered, rubbing his eyes, then looking back at her. "Keep me posted."

He was oblivious, no idea what she'd witnessed. And what was more, if she hadn't seen it, there was nothing in his demeanor that would suggest anything off. He was exactly as he always was—tone, expression, body language. What did that mean? That it was nothing to him; that he'd forgotten all about it? Or that he was such an accomplished liar and cheater that he was able to bury any feeling of guilt or regret. For a moment, on the screen, he looked like a stranger.

"Graham."

"Yeah?"

"If there's laundry in the washing machine, will you put it in the dryer?"

He rolled his eyes like it was the most gargantuan task in the world. "Yeah. Okay."

She ended the call without another word, his face freezing on the screen, then disappearing into nothing.

Selena returned to her seat, sitting heavily, and Martha handed her back her little bottle. She took another big swig.

"Sounds like you have a nice family," said Martha. She lifted a palm. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

"I'm very lucky," said Selena.

Because that's what you were supposed to say, right? *We're so blessed. I'm filled with gratitude.*

It was true; she did think that most days. Until she moved the nanny cam.

Her mother had warned Selena—carefully, gently, as was her way—after the Vegas incident: *He'll do it again, honey. Cheaters keep cheating.*

But Selena hadn't listened. Graham was *nothing* like her father, she reasoned, who'd had affair after affair. Her mother, Cora, had stayed in the marriage, enduring, she said, for the sake of Selena and her sister, Marisol.

But that was her *parents*. Selena's situation with Graham was different; the first incident wasn't an affair—exactly. They'd had therapy. It was just—not the same. That's what she'd told herself then, anyway.

"So, what are you going to do?" asked Selena, eager for the distraction from her own life. "About your boss."

Martha shrugged, shifted back so that they could see each other better, weren't just sitting side by side staring at the back of the seat in front of them. Her eyes—heavily lashed, lightly shadowed, almost almond-shaped—were searing, hypnotic.

"Don't you ever just wish your problems would take care of themselves?" Martha said with a sigh.

"Wouldn't that be nice?" asked Selena. She glanced at her bottle to find that it was almost empty. That had gone down fast. She felt looser, her shoulders less tense.

"Like maybe he'd just lose interest in me, you know?" she said. "Meet someone else."

Something about the words hit Selena the wrong way, and she felt all the sadness she'd tamped down rise up. When the tears came, she couldn't stop them. The nanny, of all people! What a cliché!

"Oh, no," said Martha, looking stricken. "What did I say?"

"I'm sorry," Selena managed, fishing tissues out of her bag and wiping at her eyes.

"Tell me," said Martha. "Since we're playing true confessions."

And, without thinking it through, she did. She told this stranger on the train how she *suspected* that her husband was sleeping with the nanny, while she was working late to support their family. She omitted how she'd watched the video—TMI.

Because wasn't that too weird, that she'd watched? Twice. And still hadn't done anything about it.

"I'm sorry," Selena said again when she was done. "Why did I just tell you that?"

"Obviously," said Martha with the same kind smile Selena had tried to offer her earlier, "you needed to tell *someone*."

Martha produced another little bottle of Grey Goose. Her manicure, bloodred, was perfect—her fingers slender and white, no rings. As Selena cracked the bottle open and took a sip, she noticed the other woman staring at her diamond engagement ring. (Women often did. It was huge.) It felt good to let it all out. She'd put the weight of it down for a while.

"But you don't know for sure?" asked Martha.

Selena shook her head.

"Do you have reason to doubt him?" she asked.

"No," said Selena. "It's just a feeling."

"Well," Martha lifted her little bottle and they clinked again. "I hope you're wrong. And if you're not, I hope he gets what he deserves."

She offered the final sentence with a devilish smile, but something inside Selena went a little cold. What did he deserve? What did anyone deserve?

"Men," said Martha when Selena stayed silent. "They're so flawed, so broken, aren't they? They've screwed up the whole world."

The other woman's tone had gone dark, her eyes a bit distant. "All they do is create damage."

Selena felt the bizarre impulse to defend all men, even Graham. After all, she had two boys of her own. But it died in her throat. It was true, wasn't it? In some sense—war, climate change, genocide, cults, pedophilia, rape, murder, most crime in general—men were responsible for a good portion of the world's ills. They'd been running amok for millennia.

“Don’t you ever just wish your problems would take care of themselves?” Martha asked again. “No effort on your part?”

But problems didn’t solve themselves. And suddenly it occurred to Selena that Martha was *the other woman*, sleeping with someone’s husband. A woman who owned the company where Martha worked, who was probably as trusting of her husband and her employee as Selena had been. Earning a living, supporting her family, while her husband fucked the first pretty girl to come along.

“How would *your* problem be solved?” asked Selena, dabbing at her eyes.

“Today I was thinking it would be great if he just—died,” she said with a wicked smile. “Car accident, heart attack, random street crime. Then I could just keep my job, no one the wiser.”

Martha laughed a little, a sweet, girlish sound, then took another delicate sip from her little bottle. She was just kidding, of course. Wasn’t she? Selena shifted away slightly, clutching her bag to her middle.

“And I’d never be so stupid again,” Martha went on. “I wouldn’t be so afraid for my job that I’d submit to some predator’s advances.”

Was that how Geneva felt? Selena wondered. Had Graham come on to her, and she’d submitted because she was afraid to lose her job? It definitely didn’t seem that way. But there were always layers, weren’t there? Graham *was* in a power position. Selena knew that Geneva *did* struggle to make ends meet, couldn’t afford not to work, even for a short time.

The lights flickered and the train jerked forward. Selena felt a surge of hope. But then nothing.

“There was a blockage on the track,” came the conductor’s voice, carrying over the speaker system. The man beside them jerked awake and looked around, confused, sat up and checked his phone. “It’s been cleared, and we should be on our way shortly. We apologize for the inconvenience.”

The man gathered his case and walked to the other car.

“And how would *your* problem be solved?” asked Martha. Her stare was intense, and Selena felt almost pinned by it.

She tried for a wry smile.

Single women, they just didn’t get it yet, all the complicated layers of a marriage, of a life with children, all the sacrifices and compromises you made daily so that everything worked.

*My problem can’t be solved*, thought Selena.

Divorce her husband, become a single mother with the kids gone every other weekend and holiday? Or stick it out? Fire Geneva, a girl the boys both loved, and try to find a reason that was palatable to them, that didn’t shame Selena and ruin her husband in the eyes of their kids? Then quit her job and live off savings until Graham found another position and went back to work. Confront him, couples’ counseling, maybe find a new way forward. There was no solution that didn’t introduce a whole host of new problems. Problems she frankly just didn’t have the energy to solve.

“Maybe she’ll *disappear*,” said Martha. “And you can just pretend it never happened.”

Her voice, it slithered like a snake, was a whisper in the dark.

When Selena looked into Martha’s eyes, it was like staring into space, cold and distant, empty. The vodka was making Selena feel a little sick.

What *if* Geneva just didn’t turn up for work one day? Disappeared. Graham would pick up the pace on his job hunt big time, Selena bet, if he was full-on with the kids. Maybe Selena *could* just pretend it never happened. It would be so much easier. For a second, it seemed possible. Her mother, after all, had done it for decades to keep her family intact.

But no. She couldn’t. She couldn’t unsee what she’d seen, unknown what she now knew about her husband. She wasn’t like her mother. She couldn’t just stand by for the sake of the children. Could she?

The train came to life then, lights coming on, lurching forward. Nauseated, heart racing a little, Selena started to gather her things.

"Yeah," Selena said, managing a thin laugh. "I don't think I could get that lucky."

"You never know." Martha twisted a strand of her dark, silky hair. "Bad things happen all the time."

Selena moved over to the seat on the other side of the aisle.

"I'll spread out," she said as Martha watched with a polite smile. "Give you some space."

Martha nodded, pulled her tote up off the ground.

"Thanks for the drink," Selena said when she'd settled. "And for listening."

"Thank *you*," said Martha. "I feel better. I think I know what to do."

"Sometimes we just need an ear."

"And a little push in the right direction."

What did she mean by that? Selena didn't really want to know. Something about the conversation, the other woman's tone, the vodka, had her feeling uneasy, and very much wanting the conversation to end. Why had she told this stranger about herself? Something so personal?

She opened her magazine and started flipping through the glossy pages of impossibly slim bodies, flawless faces, enviable lives. When she looked over at Martha again, she seemed to have nodded off. As the train neared her station, Selena gathered her things, but the other woman didn't stir. She slipped off as quietly as she could, not saying goodbye, not looking back, hoping that they wouldn't meet again.