

EVERY  
NOTE  
PLAYED

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*Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?*

—Rumi

## PROLOGUE

Richard is playing the second movement of Schumann's *Fantasie in C Major*, op. 17, the final piece of his solo recital at the Adrienne Arsht Center in Miami. The concert hall is sold-out, yet the energy here doesn't feel full. This venue doesn't carry the prestige or intimidating pressure of Lincoln Center or the Royal Albert Hall. Maybe that's it. This recital is no big deal.

Without a conductor or orchestra behind him, all audience eyes are on him. He prefers this. He loves possessing their undivided attention, the adrenaline rush of being the star. Playing solo is his version of skydiving.

But this entire night, he's noticed that he's playing on top of the notes, not inside them. His thoughts are drifting elsewhere, to the steak dinner he's going to eat back at the

hotel, to the self-conscious examination of his imperfect posture, criticizing the flatness of his performance, aware of himself instead of losing himself.

He's technically flawless. Not many pianists alive today could traverse this demandingly fast and complex section without error. He normally loves playing this piece, especially the bombastic chords of the second movement, its power and grandiosity. Yet, he's not emotionally connected to any of it.

He trusts that most, if not all, of the people in the audience aren't sophisticated enough to hear the difference. Hell, most people have probably never even heard Schumann's *Fantasie in C Major*, op. 17. It forever breaks his heart that millions listen to Justin Bieber all day long and will live and die without ever hearing Schumann or Liszt or Chopin.

*Being married is more than wearing a ring* comes to mind. Karina said this to him some years ago. Tonight, he's just wearing the ring. He's mailing it in, and he's not sure why. He'll get through this last piece and have another chance here tomorrow night before flying out to LA. Five more weeks of this tour. It'll be summer by the time he gets home. Good. He loves summer in Boston.

He plays the final phrasing of the third-movement adagio, and the notes are gentle, solemn, hopeful. He's often moved to tears at this point, a permeable conduit for this exquisite expression of tender vulnerability, but tonight he's unaffected. He doesn't feel hopeful.

He plays the final note, and the sound lingers on the stage before dissipating, floating away. A moment of quiet

stillness hangs in the hall, and then the bubble is punctured by applause. Richard stands and faces the audience. He hinges at the waist, his fingers grazing the bottom of his tuxedo jacket, bowing. The people rise to their feet. The houselights are up a bit now, and he can see their faces, smiling, enthusiastic, appreciating him, in awe of him. He bows again.

He is loved by everyone.

And no one.

ONE YEAR LATER

## CHAPTER ONE

If Karina had grown up fifteen kilometers down the road in either direction north or south, in Gliwice or Bytom instead of Zabrze, her whole life would be different. Even as a child, she never doubted this. Location matters in destiny as much as it does in real estate.

In Gliwice, it was every girl's birthright to take ballet. The ballet teacher there was Miss Gosia, a former celebrated prima ballerina for the Polish National Ballet prior to Russian martial law, and because of this, it was considered a perk to raise daughters in otherwise grim Gliwice, an unrivaled privilege that every young girl would have access to such an accomplished teacher. These girls grew up wearing leotards and buns and tulle-spun hopes of pirouetting their way out of Gliwice someday. Without

knowing specifically what has become of the girls who grew up in Gliwice, she's sure that most, if not all, remain firmly anchored where they began and are now school-teachers or miners' wives whose unrequited ballerina dreams have been passed on to their daughters, the next generation of Miss Gosia's students.

If Karina had grown up in Gliwice, she would most certainly not have become a ballerina. She has horrible feet, wide, clumsy flippers with virtually no arch, a sturdy frame cast on a long torso and short legs, a body built more for milking cows than for *pas de bourrée*. She would never have been Miss Gosia's star pupil. Karina's parents would have put an end to bartering valuable coal and eggs for ballet lessons long before pointe shoes. Had her life started in Gliwice, she'd still be in Gliwice.

The girls down the road in Bytom had no ballet lessons. The children in Bytom had the Catholic Church. The boys were groomed for the priesthood, the girls the convent. Karina might have become a nun had she grown up in Bytom. Her parents would've been so proud. Maybe her life would be content and honorable had she chosen God.

But her life was never really a choice. She grew up in Zabrze, and in Zabrze lived Mr. Borowitz, the town's piano teacher. He didn't have a prestigious pedigree like Miss Gosia's or a professional studio. Lessons were taught in his living room, which reeked of cat piss, yellowing books, and cigarettes. But Mr. Borowitz was a fine teacher. He was dedicated, stern but encouraging, and most important, he taught every one of his pupils to play Chopin.



In Poland, Chopin is as revered as Pope John Paul II and God. Poland's Holy Trinity.

Karina wasn't born with the lithe body of a ballerina, but she was graced with the strong arms and long fingers of a pianist. She still remembers her first lesson with Mr. Borowitz. She was five. The glossy keys, the immediacy of pleasing sound, the story of the notes told by her fingers. She took to it instantly. Unlike most children, she never had to be ordered to practice. Quite the opposite, she had to be told to stop. *Stop playing, and do your homework. Stop playing, and set the dinner table. Stop playing, it's time for bed.* She couldn't resist playing. She still can't.

Ultimately, piano became her ticket out of oppressive Poland, to Curtis and America and everything after. *Everything* after. That single decision—to learn piano—set everything that was to follow in motion, the ball in her life's Rube Goldberg machine. She wouldn't be here, right now, attending Hannah Chu's graduation party, had she never played piano.

She parks her Honda behind a Mercedes, the last in a conga line of cars along the side of the road at least three blocks from Hannah's house, assuming this is the closest she'll get. She checks the clock on the dash. She's a half hour late. Good. She'll make a brief appearance, offer her congratulations, and leave.

Her heels click against the street as she walks, a human metronome, and her thoughts continue in pace with this rhythm. Without piano, she would never have met Richard. What would her life be like had she never met him? How many hours has she spent indulging in this fantasy?

If added up, the hours would accumulate into days and weeks, possibly more. More time wasted. What could've been. What will never be.

Maybe she would've been satisfied had she never left her home country to pursue piano. She'd still be living with her parents, sleeping in her childhood bedroom. Or she'd be married to a boring man from Zabrze, a coal miner who earns a hard but respectable living, and she'd be a homemaker, raising their five children. Both wretched scenarios appeal to her now for a commonality she hates to acknowledge: a lack of loneliness.

Or what if she had attended Eastman instead of Curtis? She almost did. That single, arbitrary choice. She would never have met Richard. She would never have taken a step back, assuming with the arrogant and immortal optimism of a twenty-five-year-old that she'd have another chance, that the Wheel of Fortune's spin would once again tick to a stop with its almighty arrow pointing directly at her. She'd waited years for another turn. Sometimes life gives you only one.

But then, if she'd never met Richard, their daughter, Grace, wouldn't be here. Karina imagines an alternative reality in which her only daughter was never conceived and catches herself enjoying the variation almost to the point of wishing for it. She scolds herself, ashamed for allowing such a horrible thought. She loves Grace more than anything else. But the truth is, having Grace was another critical, fork-in-the-road, Gliwice-versus-Bytom-versus-Zabrze moment. *Left* brought Grace and tied Karina to Richard, the rope tight around her neck like a

leash or a noose, depending on the day, for the next seventeen years. *Right* was the path not chosen. Who knows where that might've led?

Regret shadows her every step, a dog at her heels, as she now follows the winding stone path into the Chu family's backyard. Hannah was accepted to Notre Dame, her first choice. Another piano student off to college. Hannah won't continue with piano there. Like most of Karina's students, Hannah took lessons because she wanted to add "plays piano" to her college application. The parents have the same motive, often exponentially more intense and unapologetic. So Hannah went through the motions, and their weekly half hour together was a soulless chore for both student and teacher.

A rare few of Karina's students authentically like playing, and a couple even have talent and potential, but none of them love it enough to pursue it. You have to love it. She can't blame them. These kids are all overscheduled, stressed-out, and too focused on getting into "the best" college to allow the nourishment passion needs to grow. A flower doesn't blossom from a seed without the persistent love of sun and water.

But Hannah isn't just one of Karina's piano students. Hannah was Grace's closest friend from the age of six through middle school. Playdates, sleepovers, Girl Scouts, soccer, trips to the mall and the movies—for most of Grace's childhood, Hannah was like a younger sister. When Grace moved up to the high school and Hannah remained in middle school, the girls migrated naturally into older and younger social circles. There was never a falling-out.

Instead, the friends endured a passive drifting on calm currents to separate but neighboring islands. They visited from time to time.

Hannah's graduation milestone shouldn't mean much to Karina, but it feels monumental, as if she's sustaining a bigger loss than another matriculated piano student. It trips the switch of memories from this time last year, and it's the end of Grace's childhood all over again. Karina leaves her card for Hannah on the gift table and sighs.

Even though Hannah's at the far end of the expansive backyard, Karina spots her straightaway, standing on the edge of the diving board, laughing, a line of wet girls and boys behind her, mostly boys in the pool, cheering her name, goading her to do something. Karina waits to see what it will be. Hannah launches into the air and cannonballs into the water, splashing the parents gathered near the pool. The parents complain, wiping water from their arms and faces, but they're smiling. It's a hot day, and the momentary spray probably felt refreshing. Karina notices Hannah's mom, Pam, among them.

Now that Hannah is moving to Indiana, Karina assumes she won't see Pam at all anymore. They stopped their Thursday-night wine dates some time ago, not long after Grace started high school. Over the past couple of years, their friendship dwindled to the handful of unfulfilling moments before or after Hannah's weekly piano lesson. Tasked with shuttling her three kids to and from a dizzying schedule of extracurricular activities all over town, Pam was often too rushed to even come inside and

waited for Hannah in her running car. Karina waved to her from the front door every Tuesday at 5:30 as Pam pulled away.

Karina almost didn't come today. She feels self-conscious about showing up alone. Naturally introverted, she'd been extremely private about her marriage and even more shut-in about her divorce. Assuming Richard didn't air their dirty laundry either, and that's a safe bet, no one knows the details. So the gossip mill scripted the drama it wasn't supplied. Someone has to be right, and someone has to be wrong. Based on the hushed stares, vanished chitchat, and pulled plastic smiles, Karina knows how she's been cast.

The women in particular sympathize with him. Of course they do. They paint him as a sainted celebrity. He deserves to be with someone more elegant, someone who appreciates how extraordinary he is, someone more his equal. They assume she's jealous of his accomplishments, resentful of his acclaim, bitter about his fame. She's nothing but a rinky-dink suburban piano teacher instructing disinterested sixteen-year-olds on how to play Chopin. She clearly doesn't have the self-esteem to be the wife of such a great man.

They don't know. They don't know a damn thing.

Grace just finished her freshman year at the University of Chicago. Karina had anticipated that Grace would be home for the summer by now and would be at Hannah's party, but Grace decided to stay on campus through the summer, interning on a project with her math professor. Something about statistics. Karina's proud of her

daughter for being selected for the internship and thinks it's a great opportunity, and yet, there's that pang in Karina's stomach, the familiar letdown. Grace could've chosen to come home, to spend the summer with her mother, but she didn't. Karina knows it's ridiculous to feel slighted, forsaken even, but her emotions sit on the throne of her intellect. This is how she's built, and like any castle, her foundational stones aren't easily rearranged.

Her divorce became absolute in September of Grace's senior year, and exactly one year later, Grace moved a thousand miles away. First Richard left. Then Grace. Karina wonders when she'll get used to the silence in her home, the emptiness, the memories that hang in each room as real as the artwork on the walls. She misses her daughter's voice chatting on the phone; her giggling girlfriends; her shoes in every room; her hair elastics, towels, and clothes on the floor; the lights left on. She misses her daughter.

She does not miss Richard. When he moved out, his absence felt more like a new presence than a subtraction. The sweet calm that took up residence after he left filled more space than his human form and colossal ego ever did. She did not miss him then or now.

But going to these kinds of family events alone, without a husband, tilts her off-balance as if she were one cheek atop a two-legged stool. So in that sense, she misses him. For the stability. She's forty-five and divorced. Single. In Poland, she'd be considered a disgrace. But she's been in America now for over half her life. Her situation is

common in this secular culture and imposes no shame. Yet, she feels ashamed. You can take the girl out of Poland, but you can't take Poland out of the girl.

Not recognizing any of the other parents, she takes a deep breath and begins the long, awkward walk alone over to Pam. Karina spent an absurdly long time getting ready for this party. Which dress, which shoes, which earrings? She blew out her hair. She even got a manicure yesterday. For what? It's not as if she's trying to impress Hannah or Pam or any of the parents. And it's not as if there will be any single men here, not that she's looking for a man anyway.

She knows why. She'll be damned if anyone here looks at her and thinks, *Poor Karina. Her life's a mess, and she looks it, too.* The other reason is Richard. Pam and Scott Chu are his friends, too. Richard was probably invited. She could've asked Pam if Richard was on the guest list—not that it mattered, just to be forewarned—but she chickened out.

So there it is, the stomach-turning possibility that he might be here, and the even more putrid thought that he might show up with the latest skinny little twentysomething tart hanging on his arm and every self-important word. Karina rubs her lips together, making sure her lipstick hasn't clumped.

Her eyes poke around the yard. He's not standing with Pam and the cluster of parents by the pool house. Karina scans the pool, the grilling island, the lawn. She doesn't see him.

She arrives at the pool house and inserts herself into

the circle of Pam and Scott and other parents. Their voices instantly drop, their eyes conspiring. Time pauses.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Karina asks.

The circle looks to Pam.

“Um . . .” Pam hesitates. “We were just talking about Richard.”

“Oh?” Karina waits, her heart bracing for something humiliating. No one says a word. “What about him?”

“He canceled his tour.”

“Oh.” This isn’t earth-shattering news. He’s canceled gigs and touring dates before. Once, he couldn’t stand the conductor and refused to set foot onstage with him. Another time, Richard had to be replaced last minute because he got drunk at an airport bar and missed his flight. She wonders what reason he has this time. But Pam and Scott and the others stare at her with grave expressions, as if she should have something more compassionate to say on the subject.

Her stomach floods with emotion, her inner streets crowding fast as a fervent protest stands upon its soapbox in her center, outraged that she has to deal with this, that Pam especially can’t be more sensitive to her. Richard’s canceled tour isn’t her concern. She divorced him. His life isn’t her problem anymore.

“You really don’t know?” asks Pam.

They all wait for her answer, lips shut, bodies still, an audience engrossed in watching a play.

“What? What, is he dying or something?”

A nervous half-laugh escapes her, and the sound finds no harmony. She searches the circle of parents for connec-



tion, even if the comment was slightly inappropriate, for someone to forgive her a bit of dark humor. But everyone either looks horrified or away. Everyone but Pam. Her eyes betray a reluctant nod.

“Karina, he has ALS.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Richard lies in bed awake, satisfied by a full night's sleep, his eyes alert and unblinking, staring vaguely at a curled slice of peeling paint on the vaulted ceiling directly above him. He can feel it coming, an invisible presence creeping, like ions charged and buzzing in the air before an approaching electrical storm, and all he can do is lie still and wait for it to pass through him.

He's in his own bedroom when he should be waking up in the Mandarin Oriental in New York City. He was supposed to play a solo recital at David Geffen Hall at Lincoln Center last night. He loves Lincoln Center. The almost-three-thousand-seat venue had been sold-out for months. If he were at the Mandarin, he'd be about ready to order breakfast. Possibly for two.

But he's not at the Mandarin in New York, and he's not in the company of a lovely woman. He's alone in his bed in his condo on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. And even though he's hungry, he waits.

Trevor, his agent, sent out a press release canceling his tour, claiming tendinitis. Richard can't understand the point of publicizing this misleading information. They bite the bullet now or they bite the bullet later. Either way, the barrel of the gun stays firmly pointed at Richard's head. True, he first assumed he was dealing with tendinitis, a frustratingly inconvenient but common injury that would heal with rest and physical therapy. He'd been so frustrated with taking even a few weeks away from the piano, worried about what it would do to his playing. That was seven months and a lifetime ago. What he wouldn't give to have tendinitis.

It's possible his agent is still in denial. Richard is scheduled to play with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the fall. Trevor hasn't canceled this gig yet, just in case Richard is somehow better by then. Richard gets it. Even now, six months after his diagnosis, he still can't fully wrap his mind around what he has, what's going to happen. Many times in any given day, when he's reading or drinking a cup of coffee, he's symptom-free. He'll feel totally normal, and he'll either forget that the past several months have happened, or a confident rebellion rises.

The neurologist was wrong. It's a virus. A pinched nerve. Lyme disease. Tendinitis. A temporary problem, and now it's resolved. Nothing's wrong.

And then his right hand won't keep time when playing

Rachmaninoff's Prelude in G-sharp Minor, chasing and not catching the tempo. Or he'll drop his half-full cup of coffee because it's too heavy. Or he doesn't have the strength to manage the fingernail clipper. He looks down at the grotesquely long fingernails of his left hand, the neatly trimmed nails of his right.

This is not a temporary problem.

He will not be playing in Chicago in the fall.

He's naked, has always slept in the nude. All those years next to Karina in her high-necked flannel pajamas and kneesocks. He tries to picture her naked but can only imagine the other women. This would normally arouse him, and he'd welcome the pleasant distraction of masturbation right now, but the dreadful anticipation of what's coming has him anxious, and his dick lies limp and still like the rest of him.

His body heat has created a cozy cocoon beneath the covers, a stark contrast to the uninviting temperature of his bedroom. He braces for the shocking sharpness of cold air against his skin as he whips the sheet and comforter off his body. He wants to see it when it comes.

His eyes scrutinize the length of his arms, each knuckle of each finger, especially the index and middle fingers of his right hand. He evaluates his chest and stomach for irregularities amid the rise and fall of his breathing. He drops his gaze to his legs, his toes; his senses heightened and ready, a hunter scanning for a flash of white fur.

He waits, his body a pot of water on the stove, the setting dialed to high. It's only a matter of time. A watched pot will eventually boil. Of course, he hopes it won't come.

But also, perversely, he lies there welcoming it, its familiarity dancing through his body.

The first bubble breaks the surface, a pop in his left calf. It vibrates there for a few seconds, the opening act, then jumps to his right quadriceps, just above the knee. Then the pad at the base of his right thumb flickers. Over and over and over.

He can't bear to witness this one in particular, this spasm in his dominant thumb, yet he cannot look away. He silently pleads with it, this microscopic enemy within. By sheer coincidence, for he knows he possesses no power over its intentions, it leaves his hand, tunneling in the space between his skin and fascia like a mouse burrowing within the walls of a house, and invades his right biceps next. Then his bottom lip. These rapid, fluttering seizures ripple from one part of his body to another in rapid succession, a roiling boil.

Sometimes, the twitching lingers in one place. Yesterday, it got stuck in a quarter-size segment of his right triceps, contracting in intermittent, repetitive pulses for several hours. It set up shop there, obsessed there, fell in love and couldn't move on, and he panicked that it would never stop.

Yet he knows with absolute certainty that it will stop. At some point, the twitching in every single muscle group—in his arms, his legs, his mouth, his diaphragm—will stop forever, and so he should embrace the twitching. Be grateful for it. The twitching means his muscles are still there, still capable of responding.

For now.

His motor neurons are being poisoned by a cocktail of toxins, the recipe unknown to his doctor and every scientist on the planet, and his entire motor neuron system is in a death spiral. His neurons are dying, and the muscles they feed are literally starving for input. Every twitch is a muscle stammering, gasping, begging to be saved.

They can't be saved.

But they aren't dead yet. Like the fuel light in his car that alerts him when he's low on gas, these fasciculations are an early-warning system. As he lies naked and cold on his bed, he starts doing math. Assuming he has about two gallons left in the tank when his fuel light is triggered and that his BMW conservatively does twenty-two miles per gallon in the city, he could go forty-four more miles before running out of gas. He imagines this scenario. The last drop of gas used. The engine gears ground to a halt. Seized. The car stopped. Dead.

The right side of his bottom lip twitches. Without understanding the biology, he wonders how much muscle fuel remains in his body and wishes the twitching could be enumerated.

How many miles does he have left?

## CHAPTER THREE

As Karina walks a little over five blocks to Commonwealth Avenue, she's barely aware of her surroundings—sparrows nibbling on crumbs of a dropped muffin beneath a park bench; a fierce dragon tattoo covering the bare chest of a skateboarder; the aggressive whirl of the board's wheels as he whizzes by her; a young Asian couple strolling hip to hip, hand in hand; a breeze perfumed with cigarette smoke; a baby wailing in a stroller; a dog barking; the alternating choreography of cars and pedestrians at every intersection. Instead, her attention is held inward.

Her heart races faster than required for her walking pace, making her anxious. Or maybe, likely, she was anxious first, and her heart rate responded. She speeds up in an effort to synchronize her external action with her inner

physiology, which only makes her feel as if she were rushing, late. She checks her watch, which is utterly unnecessary. She can't be early or late when he doesn't know she's coming.

She's worked up a sweat. Stopped at the next corner, waiting for a WALK signal, she pulls a tissue from her purse, reaches under her shirt, and blots her armpits. She digs around for another tissue but can't find one. She wipes her forehead and nose with her hands.

She arrives at Richard's address and stops at the base of the stairs, looking up to the fourth-floor windows. Behind her, the spires of Trinity Church and the sheer vertical glass of the John Hancock building rise above the rooftops of the brownstones on the other side of Comm Ave. He has a lovely view.

This street in the Back Bay is especially posh, housing Boston's Brahmins, cousins to their neighbors on Beacon Hill. Richard lives on the same block as many of Boston's elegant and elite—the president of BioGO, a Massachusetts General Hospital surgeon, the fourth-generation owner of a two-hundred-year-old art gallery on Newbury Street. Richard makes decent money, exceptional for a pianist, but this address is way out of his league, probably his version of a midlife crisis, his shiny red Porsche. He must be mortgaged to the hilt.

She hasn't seen him since Grace's high school graduation, over a year ago now. And she's never been here. Well, she's driven by twice before, both times at night, both times ostensibly to avoid traffic, purposefully rerouting from her preferred course home from downtown Boston,



slowing to a crawl just long enough to avoid instigating honks from behind her, barely long enough to capture a quick blur of high ceilings and a nonspecific golden glow of a home inhabited.

She resents that Richard got to be the one to move out, to start over, fresh in a new place. Memories of him haunt her in every room of their once-shared home, the rare good as unsettling as the common bad. She replaced their mattress and their dinnerware. She removed their framed wedding picture from the living-room wall and hung a pretty mirror there instead. It doesn't matter. She's exactly where he left her, still living in their house, his energetic impression left behind like a red-wine stain on a white blouse. Even washed a thousand times, that brown spot is never coming out.

She could move, especially now that Grace has gone off to college. But where would she go? And do what? Her stubbornness, that impenetrable bedrock of her personality, refuses to give these questions actual consideration beyond calling them nonsense. So she stays put, frozen in the three-bedroom colonial museum of her devastated marriage.

Grace already had her license when Karina and Richard separated, so she was able to drive herself over to her father's "house." His bachelor pad. Karina walks up the stairs to the front door of his brownstone, and her mouth goes sour. At the top step, her stomach matches the taste in her mouth, and the word *sicken* grabs the microphone of her inner monologue. She feels sick. But she's not sick, she reminds herself. Richard is.

The sour in her stomach turns, fermenting. Why is she here? To say or do what? Offer pity, sympathy, help? To see how bad off he is with her own eyes, the same reason drivers rubberneck when passing the site of an accident—to get a good look at the wreckage before moving along?

What will he look like? She has no reference point other than Stephen Hawking. A hand puppet with no hand in the body, paralyzed, emaciated, unable to breathe without a machine, his limbs, torso, and head positioned in a wheelchair like a little girl's floppy, cotton-limbed rag doll, his voice computer generated. Is that what Richard will look like?

He might not even be home. Maybe he's in a hospital. She should've called first. Calling somehow seemed scarier than drumming up the nerve to show up at his front door unannounced. Part of her believes that she caused his illness, even though she knows that such thinking is narcissistically absurd. How many times has she wished him dead? Now he's dying, and she's a despicable, hellbound, horrible woman for ever wishing such a thing, and worse, for having derived sick pleasure from it.

She stands before the doorbell, torn between following through and turning around, passionate counterpoints creating a quagmire of indecision, pushing and pulling her from within. If she were the gambling kind, she'd put her money on leaving. She breaks through her inertia and rings the bell, surprising herself.

"Hello?" asks Richard's voice over the intercom speaker.

Karina's heart beats in her tight, acidic throat. "It's Karina."

She tucks her hair behind her ears and pulls at her bra strap, which is sticking uncomfortably to her sweaty body. She waits for him to buzz her in, but nothing happens. Opaque white curtains cover the windows in the door, making it impossible to see if anyone is coming. Then she hears footsteps. The door opens.

Richard says nothing. She waits for him to look stunned that she's here, but that doesn't happen. Instead his face is motionless but for his eyes, which hint at a smile, not exactly happy to see her, but satisfied, right about something, and her heart in her throat already knows that this visit was a disastrous idea. He continues to say nothing and she says nothing, and this nonverbal game of chicken probably takes up two seconds, but it stretches out in agonizing slow motion beyond the boundaries of space and time.

"I should've called."

"Come on in."

As she follows him up the three flights, she studies his footing, assured and steady and normal. His left hand slides along the banister, and although it never loses contact, the banister doesn't appear to be assisting him. It's not a handicapped railing. From behind, he looks perfectly healthy.

It was a rumor.

She is a fool.

Inside his condo, he leads her to the kitchen, dark wood and black counters and stainless steel, modern and

masculine. He offers her a seat on a stool at the island, overlooking the living room—his Steinway grand, a brown leather couch, the Oriental carpet from their den, a laptop computer on a desk by the window, a bookcase—sparse and tidy and singularly focused. Very Richard.

An army of at least two dozen bottles of wine stands at attention on the kitchen counter, an uncorked neck and a puddle of red at the bottom of a goblet in front of him. He loves wine, likes to fancy himself a connoisseur, but typically indulges in a special selection only after a performance or in celebration of an achievement or a holiday or at least with dinner. It's not even noon on a Wednesday.

"These were from the cellar. This 2000 Château Mouton Rothschild is exquisite." He pulls a glass from a cabinet. "Join me?"

"No, thanks."

"This"—he waves his hand back and forth in the air between them—"unexpected visit or whatever it is needs alcohol, don't you think?"

"Should you be drinking so much?"

He laughs. "I'm not tackling all of these today. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow."

He grabs a beautiful black bottle with a golden sheep embossed on it, already open, and pours her a generous glass, ignoring her answer. She sips, then smiles out of obligation, unimpressed.

He laughs again. "You still have the discriminating palette of a farm animal."

It's true. She can't discern the difference between an

expensive bottle of Mouton and a jug of Gallo, nor does she care, and both traits have always driven Richard mad. And true to patronizing form, he's essentially just called her a stupid pig. Karina clenches her teeth, biting back the comment that will leave her mouth if she opens it and the urge to throw \$100 worth of his precious wine in his face.

He swirls, smells, sips, closes his eyes, waits, swallows, and licks his lips. He opens his eyes and mouth and looks at her as if he's just had an orgasm or seen God.

"How can you not appreciate this? The timing is perfect. Taste it again. Smell the cherries?"

She tries another sip. It's okay. She doesn't smell cherries. "I can't remember the last time we shared a bottle of wine."

"Four years ago, November. I was just home from Japan, wrecked from the flights. You made *golabki*, and we drank a bottle of Châteaux Margaux."

She stares at him, surprised and intrigued. She has no memory of this evening, so readily and fondly retrieved by Richard, and wonders if it simply wasn't significant enough to her to hold on to or if the memory faded, crowded out by too many other experiences that didn't jibe. Funny how the story of their lives can be an entirely different genre depending on the narrator.

They lock eyes. His look a bit older than she remembers. Or not older. Sadder. And his face looks more defined. Although he's always been thin, he's definitely lost weight. And he's grown a beard.

"I see you've stopped shaving."

"Trying something new. You like it?"

“No.”

He grins and takes another sip of wine. He taps the rim of his glass with his finger and says nothing, and she can't figure out whether he's deciding which of her buttons to push or showing restraint. Restraint would be new.

“So you canceled your tour.”

“How did you hear?”

“The *Globe* said it was tendinitis.”

“So is that why you're here, to check on my tendinitis?”

He's baiting her, asking her to spell it out, to say the three letters, and her apprehensive heart beats too fast again. She brings the goblet to her lips, avoiding his question and her answer, swallowing a mouthful of wine along with her real reason for being here.

“I used to think you sometimes canceled for the attention.”

“Karina, I'm abandoning several thousand people over the next three weeks who were all planning on spending an entire evening paying attention to me. Canceling is the opposite of calling attention.”

Again, they lock eyes, and the energy exchanged is somewhere between an intimate connection and a showdown.

“Of course, it did get your attention.” He smiles.

He sticks his nose into his goblet and inhales, then drains the remaining gulp. He looks over the bottles on the counter and pulls a soldier from the back row. He fits the hood of the opener over the top of the neck and begins to twist, but he keeps losing his grip before making any progress. He lifts the opener off the bottle and examines

the top, rubbing it with his finger. He wipes his hand on his pants, as if it had been wet.

“These hard-wax-capsule corks are a bitch to open.”

He repositions the opener and tries and tries, but his fingers keep slipping and have no command over the twisting mechanism. Without thinking much of it, she’s about to offer to do it for him when he stops and hurls the bottle opener across the room. Karina ducks reflexively, even though she was never in danger from the object’s trajectory.

“There it is,” he accuses her. “That’s what you came to see, yes?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know.”

“You happy now?”

“No.”

“That’s why you came here. To see me humiliated like this.”

“No.”

“I can’t play anymore, not well enough, and I won’t be able to ever again. That’s why my tour was canceled, Karina. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“No.”

She stares into his eyes, and standing squarely in the windows of his rage is pure terror.

“Then why are you here?”

“I thought it was the right thing to do.”

“Look at you, suddenly a model Catholic, concerned about right and wrong. With all due respect, my dear, you wouldn’t know right from wrong if it fucked you up the ass.”

She shakes her head, sickened by him, disgusted with herself for not knowing better. She stands. “I didn’t come here to be abused by you.”

“Oh, there you go, carting out that word. No one’s abusing you. Stop using that word. You’ve brainwashed Grace. This is why she won’t talk to me.”

“Don’t blame me for that. If she’s not talking to you, maybe it’s because you’re a prick.”

“Or maybe it’s because her mother is a vindictive bitch.”

Karina takes the bottle he couldn’t open by the neck and smashes it against the edge of the counter. She drops the broken bottleneck and steps away from the expanding puddle of wine on the floor.

“That one smells like cherries,” she says, her voice shaking.

“Leave. Right now.”

“I’m sorry I ever came here.”

She slams the door behind her and runs down the three flights as if she were being chased. She had such good intentions. How did that go so wrong?

How did it all go so wrong?

Rage and grief assault her from all sides, and her legs suddenly feel loosened and drained, powerless to continue. She sits on the top step of the front stoop, facing the beautiful view—the joggers on Comm Ave., the pigeons in the park, the spires of Trinity Church, and the blue glass of the Hancock—not caring who sees or hears her, and sobs.