CHAPTER 1

The Shelf at the Back

I thought the worst part would be the night he left. It was the following Thursday, when I bought two lemons out of habit and stood in my kitchen holding the second one.

Page left inside a cookbook, April

The radiator at Turnabout Books knocked three times at 7:40 every morning, and Evelyn Hart had learned to take it as a greeting. She called it Gerald. Gerald had come with the building, along with a tin ceiling, a front window that fogged in September for reasons no one could explain, and a floor that sloped so gently toward the back wall that a dropped pencil would roll all the way to the poetry section if you let it. She had let it, more than once, for the pleasure of watching.

"Morning, Gerald," she said, and put her coffee down beside the till.

It was a Wednesday in the middle of September, which meant donations. On Tuesdays Tess ran the floor while Evelyn did the accounts upstairs, and anything people dropped through the side door landed in a wooden bin by the stockroom. On Wednesdays Evelyn went through the bin with a mug and a pencil. It was her favorite hour of the week, and she would have been embarrassed to say so.

The shop was a little over five months old. Most of it was ordinary: used paperbacks by the front window, a table of new releases she

could not really afford to stock, a children's corner with a rug the color of oatmeal, a rack of cards that sold better than the books did. But the back wall was different. Her father had built it, back when he was still building things, as a floor-to-ceiling unit of oak with deep shelves and a ladder on a rail. He had made it for a house that never got built. Evelyn had hauled it out of his workshop after the funeral and into her own life, and it had taken three men and a borrowed trailer to do it.

Above the third shelf, in her own careful lettering, hung a card.

> *HOW THE SHELF WORKS.*
>
> *Take a book. Leave a book. Tuck in a page about a heartbreak of yours: what happened, what helped, what did not. No names. No addresses. Nobody here will read your page aloud. Pages left on this shelf belong to the shelf.*

People called it the Heartbreak Shelf, although she had never written that anywhere. Tess said it was the only business in Wrenfield that ran on sadness and still lost money.

The idea had come out of the worst year of Evelyn's life. After Graham left, she had read everything she could find that promised to explain what she felt, and almost none of it helped. The one thing that did was a battered used paperback she had bought for a dollar in a thrift shop, with a stranger's pencil in the margins. Beside a paragraph about mourning, somebody had written *Yes.* Beside a different one, *Oh, honey.* Beside a third, in a different hand, *This part is a lie, it gets better slower than he says.* She had carried that book around for a month like a hot water bottle. She had not met a single one of the people who had written in it, and she had never felt so accompanied.

So she had opened a bookshop where every book came with a stranger's honest sentence, or a page of them. It was not a plan a bank would have loved, and the bank had not loved it, and she had gotten the loan anyway because the loan officer's sister had just been through a divorce.

Evelyn sat on the low stool by the bin and began to work through it. A gardening book, no page, which she scolded in her head. Three paperback thrillers with the dust of a cottage shelf. A cookbook with a gravy stain and a short, furious note about someone's brother-in-law. A boxed set of condensed novels from a decade when everyone had apparently agreed to read in a hurry. She checked each page for last names and phone numbers, because that was her job, and then she set the books on the cart for the Shelf.

At the bottom of the bin, under the condensed novels, lay a slim book with a gray spine. *Salt Orchard*, poems by Imogen Farrow. The spine had never been cracked. When she opened the cover, she saw that the front endpaper was gone. Someone had cut it out along the gutter with a blade, neatly, the way a surgeon would take a stitch. It left a clean edge and a small white absence where a name might once have been.

Folded in thirds inside the book was a page torn from a small yellow notebook, the kind with a waterproof cover that people took into the rain. The handwriting was small and upright. The date at the bottom was written in capitals, and the sevens in it had a little bar through the middle, like the sevens on old train timetables.

She read it standing up, which she did not remember doing.

> *The inspection manual says a crack you can see is already old.*
> *The damage starts where you cannot look, under the surface,*

years before anything shows. I wish someone had written the manual for people.

My wife's name was in the front of this book. I took it out. I am not going to write it here. She left four years ago and since then I have been walking around the outside of it, checking the same joints and finding them sound, and not going in.

I plan to leave her books on this shelf one at a time. I do not know if that counts as letting go. It is at least moving them.

If you are reading this because something of yours has cracked, I am sorry. Look at it. That is the only advice I have, and I am not sure I follow it myself.

TUESDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER

Evelyn read it again, slowly, for names. There were no names. She read it a third time, for the semicolons she had thought she'd seen, and found that she had not seen any; the sentences had simply been built so well that she had expected them. It was ridiculous to feel proud of a stranger's punctuation. She felt it anyway.

He walks around the outside of it. She sat back down on the stool. For eleven years she had been paid to notice when a sentence did what its writer meant it to do, and this one had gone straight through her coat.

The rule of the Shelf was that nobody read a page aloud. She had never promised that nobody read a page, and in the four months since she had opened, she had read nearly all of them. She told herself it was quality control. It was closer to the truth to say that the pages kept her company. The woman who had written about the lemons, a retired dentist who had pinned a note to a cookbook in April, had once come back to the shop and bought a birthday

card from the rack. Evelyn had wanted to tell her that she knew about the second lemon. She had said, "That will be four ninety-five."

She did not know who the man with the sevens was. She knew he cut the name out of the books before he gave them away, and that the book was in good condition, and that he thought of the Shelf as a place where things were moved. Beyond that, she knew only the quality of his attention, which she could have picked out of a lineup.

She put the page back where she had found it. She stood *Salt Orchard* on the cart with the others, and then she took it off the cart and held it against her chest for a moment, feeling foolish, before she carried it to the back wall herself.

The shelf at eye level was usually reserved for the books people took first. She slid the gray book into the empty space between a collection of sonnets and a biography of a lighthouse keeper. The note stuck out of the top like a bookmark. Anyone who needed it would see it. The only trouble was that she was fairly sure she needed it, and the rule was *take a book, leave a book*, and she had not left one in over a year.

The bell over the door rang. It was the mail carrier, a cheerful man named Pete, who put a single envelope on the counter with the expression of someone delivering a casserole to a house where nobody has died yet.