CHAPTER 1

The Seat Beside Him

Lily Calloway had one rule about Friday trains: board early, speak to no one, and arrive home with her sanity folded neatly in her bag.

She had broken the rule in February, during a blizzard, and she had been paying for it ever since in the nicest possible way.

That Friday had been the kind of day that made her suspect the universe kept a ledger on her. At the studio, a woman had arrived with a wedding certificate from 1958 that her late husband had used, at some point, as a coaster. The ring was in the paper like a signature. Lily had spent six hours coaxing it out with a poultice and a patience she did not entirely feel, and when the woman came to collect it she had cried, which made Lily cry, which made the receptionist hand them both a box of tissues with the flat expression of someone who had seen this before and charged for it.

So she was tired when she climbed to the upper level of the last car on the 5:47 out of Union Station. She was tired in her hands, mostly. Her hands were the part of her that did the talking.

He was already there.

Walter Ashby Finch sat in the window seat of the last double seat on the upper level, the one beside the stairwell, with his grey felt

hat on his knee and his walnut cane hooked over the armrest like a question mark. He was eighty-four. He wore a tweed jacket with leather elbows that had been replaced at least once by someone who cared and once by someone who did not. When he saw her, he did what he did every Friday. He lifted the hat an inch off his knee, as if the hat were the one greeting her, and he were only the person carrying it.

“Miss Calloway,” he said. “You’re late.”

“I’m eleven minutes early.”

“Then the train’s late, and I’m taking it personally.”

She sat in the aisle seat and put her bag at her feet. The seat was still warm, which meant the previous passenger had been a person and not a draft. Around them the car filled in the usual way, with a sound like a large animal settling for sleep. Laptops unfolded. Somebody’s phone played a podcast about sourdough. Two seats ahead, a man in a suit was conducting a negotiation with his own earbuds.

The train slid out of Union with the faint sigh it always gave, as though leaving were an effort it had agreed to for Lily’s sake.

“Now,” Walter said. “Where did I leave off?”

“You didn’t leave off. Last week you told me about the time you tried to prove a cow was standing on a property line.”

“Ah. The cow. That was a Tuesday.” He settled back. “No, I think I’ll skip the cow. I had something for you today. I’ve been saving it.”

“A cow story you’ve been saving.”

“A better one.” He smiled with half his face, which was how he smiled when he knew he was about to be charming and intended to enjoy being caught. “Have you ever been in a boat with someone you were furious with?”

“I grew up with a canoe and a father,” Lily said. “So yes.”

“Then you’ll understand.”

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She had met him in February, and it had not been a meeting so much as a collision with weather.

That was the night the lake decided it was a different kind of weather system and sent the whole city home in the dark. The 5:47 had been cancelled, the 6:17 delayed, and by the time the 6:34 limped into the platform, three trains’ worth of people had compressed themselves into one. Lily had walked through the car with her bag held against her chest like a shield, looking for any seat at all, and found only the last one, at the back, next to an old man in a hat.

The hat was on the seat. He looked at her, and at the hat, and at the crowd, and then he picked it up and put it on his knee with the unhurried air of a man moving a chess piece he had been meaning to give up.

“It isn’t reserved,” he said.

She had sat. They hadn’t spoken until Port Credit, which was when he asked if she knew why the train always slowed down there. She did not. He told her it was because a surveyor in 1855 had drawn a curve badly, and the railway had been apologizing to the ground ever since.

That was it. A fact about a curve. She had gotten off at Oakville thinking about it, and the next Friday she had looked for him, and she told herself it was the curve.

By March she had stopped telling herself anything.

He was a retired land surveyor, which meant he had spent fifty-one years standing in fields telling people exactly where they were wrong. He said this was why he was such good company. “I’ve learned to deliver bad news,” he said, “in a way people can walk away from. Mostly by giving them a sandwich first.”

He had a wife. Had had a wife. Lily didn’t know the tense yet, in those first weeks, because he talked about Nell the way other people talked about weather they were still standing in.

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“We were in a rowboat,” Walter said.

“Of course you were.”

“On a lake north of Haliburton, in the summer of 1969. We had been married four years. I had been offered a post with the Ministry in Sudbury, a good one, with a pension and a little brass nameplate for the door. Nell didn’t want to go. She’d just started teaching music at the high school, and she had eleven students who could play ‘Greensleeves’ without wincing, and she considered that a kind of sacred trust.”

“Sounds fair.”

“It was entirely fair. I hated it.” He leaned toward Lily, and the train swayed, and the cane slid off the armrest. He caught it without looking. “Do you know what I wanted? I wanted her to say, Walter,

you're right, let's go. I wanted that more than I wanted the job. I wanted it the way you want the last word. And she wouldn't give it to me, and she wouldn't fight dirty, which was worse. She just kept saying, quite calmly, that she understood why I wanted it and she still wasn't going."

"That sounds infuriating."

"It was an education." He looked out the window, where the lake showed itself between warehouses, a grey band like something that had been left out on a counter. "So there we are in the middle of this lake. We'd rented the boat for the afternoon, a green thing that smelled of old fish and good intentions. And we're arguing. And I, who am a reasonable man, find I can no longer make my points sitting down."

"No."

"I stood up."

"Walter."

"I stood up in a rowboat, Miss Calloway, in front of my wife, to explain the value of a pension." He said it with enormous dignity. "And she, hearing this, stood up too. Because she was not going to be argued down from a seated position. She was five foot three, and she stood in that boat like a woman who had been told the ground was hers."

Lily had her hand over her mouth. "The boat."

"The boat began to have opinions."