

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Sorry to trouble you was how the note began, which is such a great opener. Please, trouble me! Trouble me! I've been waiting my whole life to be troubled by a note like this.

Sorry to trouble you but it looked like someone was using a telephoto lens to take pictures through your windows from the street. If it was someone you know, then sorry for the misunderstanding, if not, though, I got the make/model/license of their vehicle.

Brian (from next door)
and his phone number

You don't really need a telephoto lens because we have giant windows in front with no curtains. Sometimes I pause before coming inside and watch Harris and Sam innocently going about their business. Harris mutely explaining something to Sam, or lifting Sam into the air. I feel such tenderness toward them. *Try to remember this feeling*, I say to myself. *They are the same people up close as they are from here.*

We all immediately knew which neighbor Brian was. The FBI neighbor. If there's one thing we've learned from Brian it's that being in the FBI is not a secret like the CIA. He wears his (bulletproof?) FBI vest with the letters FBI on it way more than could possibly be required. It's

like if someone on the Dodgers wore his uniform to water the lawn. All the neighbors would be like, We get it, dude, you're on the Dodgers.

So the first thing Harris did after I read the note aloud was scoff that of course the FBI neighbor had "caught" someone with a "telephoto lens." And the second thing Harris did was nothing. He was busy and didn't think it was worth pursuing.

"It's a little creepy, though, right?"

"People take pictures of everything these days," he said, walking out of the room.

"Do you think I should call him, though?"

But Harris didn't hear me.

"Call who?" said Sam.

I stood holding the note with that funny little abandoned feeling one gets a million times a day in a domestic setting. I could have cried, but why? It's not like I need to dish with my husband about every little thing; that's what friends are for. Harris and I are more formal, like two diplomats who aren't sure if the other one has poisoned our drink. Forever thirsty but forever wanting the other one to take the first sip.

You go.

No, you go ahead!

No, please, after you.

This sort of walking on eggshells might sound stressful, but I was pretty sure we would have the last laugh. When everyone else was sick to death of each other we'd be just breaking through, having our honeymoon. Probably in our sixties.

My friend Cassie says Love you! every time she gets off the phone with her husband. Whenever I overhear this I'm completely mortified for her.

But I do love him, she says.

You were *just* talking about how miserable and stuck you felt.

Then she kind of laughs as if it's all out of her hands. I don't expect her to be honest with her husband but at least come clean with me! Other people's relationships never make any sense. Once I got my best friend,

Jordi, to record a casual conversation between her wife and her. Jordi is a brilliant sculptor who can convincingly theorize about anything, but in this conversation she barely said a word while her wife ranted about the idiocy of a popular TV show. Only occasionally would Jordi murmur a question; mostly she just giggled at the things Mel said. I thought she might be embarrassed, but she wasn't.

"I love how sure of herself Mel is. I love opinionated people. Like you."

This was so flattering that I instantly warmed up to their dynamic.

"That show really is flawed," I said. "Mel nailed it."

My friends are always obliging me with ephemera like this—screenshots of sexts, emails to their mothers—because I'm forever wanting to know what it feels like to be other people. What were we all doing? What the hell was going on here on Earth? Of course none of these artifacts really amounted to anything; it was like trying to grab smoke by its handle. What handle?

I put the neighbor's note on my desk. I was busy, too, but I always have time to worry. In fact, I think I had already been worrying about someone using a telephoto lens to take pictures through our windows when the note arrived. Worrying is the wrong word—more like *hoping*. I hoped this was happening and had been happening since my birth, or something along these lines. If not this man through the windows, then God, or my parents, or my real parents, who are actually just my parents, or the real me, who has been waiting for the right moment to take over, tap me out. Just please let there be someone who cares enough to watch over me. It took me two days to call Brian the neighbor because I was busy savoring my position, like when a crush finally texts back and you want to enjoy having the ball in your court for a while.

"It feels funny to call someone who lives right next door," I said. "I could have just opened the window."

"I'm not at home right now."

"Okay."

He said the man had parked around the corner and that he had not photographed any other homes.

"He may have just been admiring your house," Brian suggested.

I didn't like that. I mean, it's a nice house, but come on. I didn't spend the last two days not calling because our house is nice.

"I'm a bit of a public figure," I said, going a little heavy on the false modesty. False modesty is one of those things that's hard to go easy on, like squirting whipped cream from a can. He said that's why he was concerned, because of my notoriety. I humbly replied, "Well, thank you, it's really so nice to know you're keeping your eye on things."

"It's *literally* my job," Brian said.

"*Right*," I said, snapping out of it. I'm not a household name. I won't go into the tedious specifics of what I do, but picture a woman who had success in several mediums at a young age and has continued very steadily, always circling her central concerns in a sort of ecstatic fugue state with the confidence that comes from knowing there is no other path—her whole life will be this single conversation with God. God might be the wrong word for it. The Universe. The Undernetting. I work in our converted garage. One leg of my desk is shorter than the others and every day for the past fifteen years I've meant to wedge something under it, but every day my work is too urgent—I'm perpetually at a crucial turning point; everything is forever about to be revealed. At five o'clock I have to consciously dial myself down before reentering the house, like astronaut Buzz Aldrin preparing to unload the dishwasher immediately after returning from the moon. Don't talk about the moon, I remind myself. Ask everyone how *their* day was.

Brian the neighbor wondered if I knew anyone who wanted to buy a truck.

"It's a 2013 F-150. I'm moving and getting rid of most of my stuff."

"Oh! Where are you moving?"

"Can't disclose my next location," Brian said, and I apologized for asking.

"I guess a lot of things in your life need to be top secret."

"Yeah," he said in a soft voice. "I loved this neighborhood, though. All the trees and the way the coyotes howl at night."

"I love that, too. There's so many of them! Dozens, it sounds like."

"More."

"Hundreds, you think?"

"Yeah."

We fell silent and I didn't want to be the one to break the silence—it seemed like he, as an FBI agent, would know when it had been enough. But it just went on and on until I began smiling to myself, slightly grimacing from the awkwardness, and still it continued so the nervousness passed and now I thought of the silence as something we were doing together, like a jam session, and then that feeling ended and I grew inexplicably, overwhelmingly sad. My eyes welled up and when the silence finally broke it was because I made a sniffing sound and he said *Yeah* again, with resignation. Then, as if nothing had happened (and in fact nothing had), he went back to talking about the guy with the telephoto lens.

"I got his license plate number just to be safe. I can text it to you when I get home."

"Absolutely," I said. "That'd be great."

I knew better than to tell Harris about this exchange. He would raise his eyebrows and smile with exhaustion. What, *you* having a strangely intimate interaction with a stranger? How can this be?

I try to keep most of myself neatly contained off-site. In the home I focus on turning the wheel of the household so we can enjoy a smooth, healthy life without disaster or illness. This involves perpetual planning. For example, I cook seven waffles for Sam every weekend, filled with extra eggs, to be toasted quickly for high-protein breakfasts all week. But such forethought can feel labored, no fun—so I try to balance it out with something spontaneous, maybe an invented breakfast game or a surprising waffle topping. Harris would say mostly I just try to control

everything. Who is right? We both are, but I admire Harris's old-world stoicism. He even dresses in an old-timey way, like a stonemason or some kind of tradesman. *Salt of the earth* is a phrase someone might apply to him, whereas no one would ever say I'm salt of the earth. Not that I'm a bad person, but of the two of us I'm definitely worse. Often I'm literally biting my tongue—holding it gently between my teeth—and counting to fifty. By then the urge to say something unnecessary has usually passed.

I was in bed when Brian texted me about the telephotographer's car.

| It was a black Subaru hatchback, license plate number 6GPX752.

Thank you! I wrote.

| No problem. Let me know if you're interested in having the plates run. I can't do it but I can connect you with someone who can. For your notes: One white or Asian male, average to above average height, slightly paunchy, with a beard. He was there around 4 pm on Saturday.

Saturday. I got out of bed and looked at the calendar on my computer. (This is the kind of thing you can do easily if you don't share a bed with your husband. He snores, I'm a light sleeper.) On Saturday at three o'clock Harris had driven Sam to a playdate, so at four I had been alone. That's right—I had dutifully called my parents, but they weren't home so I began texting friends in New York about my upcoming visit; I had just turned forty-five and this trip was my gift to myself. I was going to see plays and art and stay in a nice hotel instead of with friends, which normally would feel like a waste of money, but I'd gotten a surprise check—a whiskey company had licensed a sentence I'd written years ago for a new global print campaign. It was a sentence about hand jobs, but out of context it could also apply to whiskey. Twenty grand.

Jordi thought it was important that I spend this money unwisely. Whiskey come, whiskey go.

"Is that what you'd do?"

"No, I'd use it to quit FTC and do my art full-time." FTC is an ad

agency. I immediately offered Jordi the money—It's a grant! I said. But she put a hand on each of my shoulders and looked me in the eyes.

"Think. What do you want most in the world?" she said, shaking me in a way that made me giggle.

"Uhhh . . . a good idea for my next project?"

"So do the opposite of what you'd normally do. Spend on beauty!"

Sculptors think beauty is a major theme, not a trifling indulgence. How lucky am I, right? To have a best friend like that?

I had booked a room at the Carlyle and then, on Saturday at four o'clock I had sent naked selfies to all my New York friends. We regularly send these, along with pictures of our kids and pets—it's just part of keeping in touch these days. I remembered that it had been hard to get the angle right and this was slightly disturbing. It didn't used to be this difficult to get a decent naked selfie. Maybe the quality of the light was changing; global warming.

I climbed back into bed and texted Brian the neighbor.

| How would I run the plates if that was something I wanted to do?

While I waited for his reply I touched myself, imagining the paunchy, bearded photographer jerking off in his black Subaru hatchback, my naked body glowing on his tiny camera screen. I came twice, the second time to a clapping noise, his paunch slapping my stomach. I wiped my fingers on my T-shirt and checked my phone.

| Call Tim Yoon (323) 555-5151. He's a retired cop/detective. He'd probably be willing to run the plates for a fee

It was too late to call so I texted and fell asleep imagining Tim Yoon running the plates.

Yoon as in noon. He ran toward the afternoon sun. Yoon as in yawn. Ran toward the sun and yawned at the edge of the Earth. Then came pounding back, a round white dinner plate in each hand.

"Shall I keep running these?" Yoon yelled as he neared.

“Yes, don’t stop. Can you run them forever?”

“I can try,” he panted as he sprinted past me. I watched him sink below the horizon, then I turned and faced west, waiting for him to circle the globe and reappear.

It took Tim Yoon many months to call me back and by that time I’d already figured out who the telephotographer was.

CHAPTER 2

Originally I had planned to get to New York the normal way, fly there, but then Harris and I had gotten into an odd conversation with another couple at a party. Our friend Sonja said she loved to drive; she missed having the time to drive across the country. And Harris said, Well, that figures.

What do you mean? we all said. Harris just shrugged, took a sip of his drink. He doesn't talk much at parties. He hangs back, not needing anything from anyone, which of course draws people toward him. I've watched him move from room to room, running in slow motion from a crowd that is unconsciously chasing him.

"Why does that figure?" Sonja said, smiling. She wasn't going to let this go. And maybe because it was her, so charming with her Auckland accent and big breasts, Harris suddenly laid out a fully formed theory.

"Well, in life there are Parkers and there are Drivers," he began. "Drivers are able to maintain awareness and engagement even when life is boring. They don't need applause for every little thing—they can get joy from petting a dog or hanging out with their kid and that's enough. This kind of person can do cross-country drives." He took a sip of his drink. Dogs were a hot-button topic for us. Harris and Sam wanted one; I was ambivalent about pets in general. Are we totally sure about the domestication of animals? Will we not look back on this as a kind of

slavery? But how to get out of it now when the world is so populated with dogs and cats that can't fend for themselves? It's not humane to just release them. It would have to be a group decision: No more pets after this. This is the last round of them. But that was never going to happen, even if everyone agreed with me, and literally no one did. Being anti-pet (pro-animal!) was one of my least winning qualities.

"Parkers, on the other hand"—and he looked at me—"need a discrete task that seems impossible, something that takes every bit of focus and for which they might receive applause. 'Bravo,' someone might say after they fit the car into an especially tight spot. 'Amazing.' The rest of the time they're bored and fundamentally kind of . . ." he looked at the ceiling, trying to think of the right word, "*disappointed*. A Parker can't drive across the country. But Parkers are good in emergencies," he added. "They like to save the day."

"I'm definitely a Parker," said Sonja's husband. "I love to save the day."

"Wait, *parking* is exciting?" said Sonja. "That seems counterintuitive. Wouldn't driving—"

"Think about it, hon, you have to get the angle just right—"

"Okay, but are Drivers boring? I don't want to be the boring, dependable kind of person."

"No, not at all," said Harris. "Drivers can have a good time more easily. That's not boring."

"I want to be a Parker," Sonja said, pouting.

"Too late," Harris said. "You can't switch."

At this point I peeled away from the conversation. Message received. Harris and Sonja were grounded, easygoing, people who liked to pet dogs and have sex whenever. And I was a Parker. What he called disappointed was really just depressed. I'd been a little blue recently, not a lot of fun around the house. Not like Sonja. I watched the two of them chatting—his barrel chest and graying black curls somehow looked boyish and his level of animation was totally unfamiliar to me, I guess she brought that out in him. It wasn't jealousy exactly; being a third wheel is

my native state. Sometimes Harris will seem to have rapport with a waitress or a cashier and I immediately cede to them as a couple—I internally step aside and give my place to the other woman, just for a few seconds, until the transaction is over.

There was a small group of people dancing in the living room. I moved discreetly at first, getting my bearings, then the beat took hold and I let my vision blur. I fucked the air. All my limbs were in motion, making shapes that felt brand-new. My skirt was tight, my top was sheer, my heels were high. The people around me were nodding and smiling; I couldn't tell if they were embarrassed for me or actually impressed. The host's father looked me up and down and winked—he was in his eighties. Was that how old a person had to be to think I was hot these days? I moved deeper into the crowd, shut my eyes, and slid side to side, shoulder first, like I was protecting stolen loot. Now I added a fist like a brawler, punching. I made figure eights with my ass at what felt like an incredible speed while holding my hands straight up in the air like I'd just made a goal. When I eventually opened my eyes I saw Harris across the room, watching. I could tell from his face that he thought I was being “unnecessarily provocative.” Or maybe I was projecting my parents onto him—that's more something my mom would say—but he's always leaned a bit traditional. On our second date I began revealing my peep show past the same way I always did, like a verbal striptease, until I noticed his face kind of shutting down. At which point I immediately began reversing the story, narratively *putting my clothes back on*, as it were, and minimizing the whole thing—a youthful misstep! Ancient history!

Now he touched two fingers to his forehead and I did the same, relieved. We'd done this saluting thing the first time we ever laid eyes on each other and across many crowded rooms ever since. *There you are*. He didn't look away. Dancers kept moving between us, but he held on for a moment longer, we both did. I smiled a little but this wasn't really about happiness; it hit below fleeting feelings. At this slight remove all our formality falls away, revealing a mutual and steadfast devotion so tender

I could have cried right there on the dance floor. Sure, he's good-looking, unflappable, insightful, but none of that would mean anything without this strange, almost pious, loyalty between us. Now we both knew to turn away. Other couples might have crossed the room toward each other and kissed, but we understood the feeling would disappear if we got too close. It's some kind of Greek tragedy, us, but not all told.

I wandered off the dance floor and into the master bathroom, washing my hands with the host's facial cleanser. Of course it wasn't too late to switch from Parker to Driver—anyone with a driver's license could drive across the country. I could see myself pulling up in to the driveway with dusty tires, Sam running to greet me and Harris just standing in the doorway. He'd salute and I'd salute, but this time I'd walk into his arms, knowing I was finally home in a way I'd never been before.

By morning the idea had taken hold. Why fly to New York when I could drive and finally become the sort of chill, grounded woman I'd always wanted to be? This could be the turning point of my life. If I lived to be ninety I was halfway through. Or if you thought of it as two lives, then I was at the very start of my second life. I imagined a vision quest-style journey involving a cave, a cliff, a crystal, maybe a labyrinth and a golden ring.

"I've driven across the country," said Jordi. "It's not that great."

"It's not supposed to be! Is a silent meditation retreat 'great'? Do people hike the Pacific Crest Trail because it's 'great'? And this is even higher stakes because if my mind wanders too far I'll crash and die."

"Oh god, don't say that."

"But my mind won't wander! I'll be totally present all the way there and all the way back. And for the rest of my life I'll tell people about this cross-country drive I did when I was forty-five. That's when I finally learned to just be myself."

Of course I was always myself with Jordi; she knew I meant be myself *at home*. All the time.

Harris had found an old foldout map of the United States and was tracing his finger across it. "If you take the southern route you can go through New Mexico and spend the night in Las Cruces." I was holding a plastic hairbrush and trying to focus on all the red and blue squiggles, but my eyes bounced off them.

"Couldn't I just put New York City into my Google Maps?"

"But there are different ways to go. Different routes."

He said I should take an extra week so the drive wouldn't eat into my New York days.

"Really? That's more than two weeks without you guys." I had never been apart from Sam for that long. Each time they ran past us I tried to hand them the hairbrush; surely at seven one could be the steward of one's own tangly hair.

"Well, you don't want to drive for a week and then just turn around and come home. You should really take three weeks to make it worth your while."

"*Three* weeks? No, that would definitely be too long apart." He was being generous because I had done a lot of parenting recently while he worked with his twenty-seven-year-old protégée, Caro. Is protégée the right word? Ingenue, whatever. He's a record producer, which is actually ideal—there's no competition between us but he knows what an artistic soul needs. Early on I called her Caroline; Caro felt too intimate, like a pet name.

("Only the press calls her Caroline," Harris had said.)

("That's fine. I don't mind being like the press.")

But it wasn't just that he owed me childcare; Harris doesn't have a lot of conflicted feelings vis-à-vis the domestic sphere. I didn't either until we had a baby. Harris and I were just two workaholics, fairly equal. Without a child I could dance across the sexism of my era, whereas becoming a mother shoved my face right down into it. A latent bias, internalized by both of us, suddenly leapt forth in parenthood. It was now

obvious that Harris was openly rewarded for each thing he did while I was quietly shamed for the same things. There was no way to fight back against this, no one to point a finger at, because it came from everywhere. Even walking around my own house I felt haunted, flush with guilt about every single thing I did or didn't do. Harris couldn't see the haunting and this was the worst part: to be living with someone who fundamentally didn't believe me and was really, really sick of having to pretend to empathize—or else be the bad guy! In his own home! How infuriating for him. And how infuriating to be the wife and not other women who could enjoy how terrific he was. How painful for both of us, especially given that we were modern, creative types used to living in our dreams of the future. But a baby exists only in the present, the historical, geographic, economic present. With a baby one could no longer be cute and coy about capitalism—money was time, time was everything. We could have skipped lightly across all this by not becoming parents; it never really had to come to a head. On the other hand, sometimes it's good when things come to a head. And then eventually, one day: pop.

Harris was using a highlighter directly on the map and telling me I could always decide later to stay a few extra days.

"That's the great thing about driving; you can play it by ear." He could be generous like this for the reasons I just explained. Not me! I always wanted him back right on the dot—extended trips, school holidays, a child being too sick to go to school, these things run a chill down the spines of working mothers whose freedom is so precarious to begin with. Still, I loved this about Harris, how he always encouraged me to stay longer and have fun. I reminded him I had to be back by the fifteenth anyway. Of course, he said; obviously.

Everyone knew my meeting with Arkanda was on the fifteenth. Arkanda's not her real name. She's a world-famous pop star you've heard of. Not just famous but deeply beloved. A while back my manager, Liza, received a phone call from her people. Arkanda wanted to meet with me in Malibu at the end of April to discuss a potential project and they would let us know the details by April twentieth. All my friends were baffled by

this turn of events, almost too baffled. Why, why, why would *Arkanda* want to work with *you*, they puzzled aloud. When I suggested that maybe it had something to do with my creative output they said things like *I mean, right, who knows, it could be that*. Arkanda's level of fame shifted the scale such that my work was not more notable than Cassie's work, as a graphic designer for a hot sauce company, or Destiny's work, managing an inherited apartment complex. And by choosing me Arkanda had, by extension, chosen all my friends; everyone was waiting for the end of April. *Potential project*. Of course it might be nothing, something akin to writing an essay or interviewing her. Even directing a video wouldn't be life-changing, though of course I would happily do any of these things, what a lark! But if we were to really *collaborate*, spend time together, make a shared world—an album, the lyrics, the videos, the art direction—a total creative mind meld that then entered the culture at a scale I could never reach alone . . . I splurged on a new blouse for the twentieth: silk with a deep V neckline. On the nineteenth her people called to move the meeting to early June, then the fall, then sometime around the new year, and this pushing of the date had gone on and on and on. Just when my friends and I were starting to lose hope, we were given a new date, the fifteenth, in Malibu again, at a restaurant called Geoffrey's, and something we'd never had before: a *time*. Three o'clock.

"What if my car breaks down or something?"

"One way or another you'll get to Malibu by three o'clock on the fifteenth," said Harris. And it went without saying that if Arkanda wanted me to collaborate with her we would adjust our lives to make this possible. Even Harris is a fan of Arkanda's, and not ironically, either. He would kill to produce one of her songs (which made it extra sweet that she had chosen *me*). Maybe we were both bluffing about this cross-country drive, knowing that I would ultimately back down and fly.

"Don't you worry for my safety?" I said.

"That's why I'm helping you map out your route," said Harris with his eyes on the computer. "There are definitely better and worse places to stop." He was reading a Reddit thread about queer-friendly towns and

hotels, reasoning that these would be safer for a woman traveling alone. But he was confident that the trip would be good for me, for my blues, and he had faith that I would be okay. When I go out the door he always says, “Have fun!” At first I took this to mean that he really didn’t care very much about me, if this was all the fear he had for my safety.

My dad always sent my mom off with a screed of warnings, reminding her of how fundamentally incapable she was of everything she was about to do. He did this for her own protection, to keep her on her toes and give her a fighting chance at survival because anything could happen at any time, even at home. For example, his mother, my grandma Esther, had jumped out the window of her New York City apartment building when she was fifty-five. No warning except she had recently been lamenting all her gray hairs.

“She couldn’t bear to see her looks go,” my dad always says with the same incredulous tone. Who killed herself for such a shallow reason? “And her hair was jet-black anyway—not a gray hair in sight!”

She was probably dyeing it, I always think, but I don’t say this because I don’t want my dad to suspect I dye my hair or that I’m like her. Harris was printing out a map of the route he recommended.

“Why would I need this when I have my phone?” I said, staring at the line across the upper half of the United States.

“What if your phone dies?”

I pinned the map above my desk in the garage, next to the note from the neighbor. If the telephotographer came back when I was driving across the country he wouldn’t be able to find me with his long lens; he’d have to make do with the old pictures.