

Tinderbox

AN EXCERPT

ONE

1

Myra cradles the phone to her ear as she gives the *yes* that she knows even now, this April Saturday morning, should be a *no*. Her *yes* is not even a *yes*, since Adam, her fragile second child—acrophobic, claustrophobic, equinophobic screenwriter of grade-B Westerns—is too avoidant to make a request, though the request is so clearly implied, it might as well be granted words.

"Rachida's head was still in Morocco when she chose dermatology," Adam says in the mumbly voice that has followed him from childhood, muffled now by the scraggly beard he grew at thirty with the hope of no longer being mistaken for a teen. "There, so many diseases present with the skin, dermatology is frontline medicine. Here, in Detroit, with her office in a shopping mall, she feels like a glorified aesthetician. She rolls her eyes when her patients complain about pimples. She scowls when they ask for Botox."

Pools of gold light spill onto the dining terrace, where Myra has spent the past hour planting terra-cotta pots that by summer will be filled with blooming thyme, Kirby cucumbers, and grape tomatoes sweet as cherries. The loamy scent of potting soil wafts through the open sliding doors into the kitchen of the Manhattan brownstone where she lives alone and keeps her psychotherapy office as she pieces together that her chronically angry Moroccan-Jewish dermatologist daughter-in-law has accepted a one-year respecialization fellowship in primary care at a hospital less than a mile away.

"They offered us housing in the medical student high rises. A junior four on the nineteenth floor..."

Adam's voice trails off as banks of gleaming elevators he would never enter fill Myra's mind—and then the image of her six-year-old grandson, Omar, trudging on his sturdy little legs behind his panting father up flight after flight of stairs.

2

Caro studies Myra's long smooth forearms. Is there a cosmic lesson to be learned in this second year of the new millennium from her mother's effortless beauty? Does Beauty, outraged by her mother's indifference, seek her out?

It is Sunday, their weekly dinner at the Amsterdam Avenue macrobiotic place, neither of them

vegetarian but neither with a taste for trendier restaurants. Caro spears a wedge of organic yam as her mother places her chopsticks on her plate and folds her hands.

"Adam called yesterday. Rachida is going to do her fellowship here. They'll be coming at the end of June, as soon as Omar finishes school."

There is a twinge of discomfort as Caro recognizes that neither Adam nor Rachida has phoned to tell her, a reminder of the excessive reserve she has felt with them since their marriage. A problem, Caro thinks, rooted in confusion over Rachida, not really about loyalties, though it is hard to trace where those lie, but rather about who knows whom best—Caro having met Rachida first, at Rachida's parents' home in Essaouira, which Adam, afraid to fly, has never seen.

"Great," Caro murmurs, the word hollow even to her own ears. But why would she not mean it? Even if they have drifted apart, she loves her brother, her little brother, as she still thinks of him, despite there being only two years between them. Her greater ease at making a way in the world—her Harvard degree and semester abroad, with Adam unable to leave the city for college; her big job, with Adam still scraping by—has so long been the warp and woof of their lives, it has left no room for poisonous rivalry. And how could there be after all those years of Adam's fears and phobias: elevators, which complicated considerably their childhood in New York City, and airplanes, which required their mother to escort them by train each March to visit their cardiologist father installed in his fantasy casita outside of Tucson, and horses, of which their father and his second wife had kept six. The annual battle between their father and Adam over Adam's refusal to ride until the wrangler hired to teach Adam sat their father down and said, *Doc, you know how to listen to a heart, but me, I know horses and how people and horses get along, and one thing you can't do is force a human to ride a horse, which is what you're trying to do with that boy of yours.*

Her mother passes her fingers through her gunmetal hair, cut in a blunt downtown way that makes the color look more chosen than fated. "They're going to live with me for the year."

Caro holds herself very still in an effort not to react, not to blurt out anything, but it is useless. Her brows knit together, a habit since childhood. Then, her mother would smooth the flat of her hand over Caro's broad forehead, inheritance from a line of Jewish peasant women with faces round as cabbages that somehow skipped over her and Adam's sculpted visages. "Poor Caro," her mother once whispered, "fated to be the most sensible of us all," as though in Caro's features her personality is sealed.

"The housing they offered Rachida is on the nineteenth floor. Obviously impossible for Adam. With only Rachida's fellowship salary and the pittance he got for the option on his last screenplay, they'd have to live in Yonkers or Queens. Where would Omar go to school?"

"Where's he going to go if he lives with you? Even if they could afford private school, it's too late to

apply."

Her mother takes a long drink from her glass of triple-filtered water. She fixes her cornflower-blue eyes on Caro's chocolate-brown ones. "I was thinking that with your school connections you could find them something."

Caro sighs.

"I'll handle the tuition."

Had anyone asked her, she would not have agreed that she is the most sensible of them all. The least squeaky wheel, yes, but not the most sensible. Built like the field hockey player she once was—short, stocky, and a little bowlegged, she has been slender only once in her life: the semester she spent in Paris that rolled into the summer she met Rachida and her family in Essaouira. Now she lives alone, with not so much as a goldfish, the 120 children at the East Harlem preschool where she is the director quite enough company for her, thank you.

"Where will you put them?"

Her mother produces a pale green sheet of paper torn from one of the steno pads in which she keeps her patient notes, a pad for each patient, each tucked like children's jackets in their assigned slots inside the rolltop desk she locks every night. Under each slot is a label marked with the patient's appointment time: 8:45, 9:30, 10:15, 11:00. Then, in the afternoon, 2:30, 3:15, 4:00, and 4:45. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Not until Caro graduated from college and returned to New York did she understand that not all therapists keep the same schedule every day and don't see patients on Wednesdays—not to mention, write every morning from five to eight, walk every noon hour around the reservoir, or take up, as her mother had at the age of fifty, the piano.

On the paper, her mother has sketched her four-story house in cross section. In the front fourth-floor room, down the hall from her mother's own room in the back, in what had been Adam's room, there is an *O* for what Caro assumes will be Omar's room. On the third floor, in Caro's old room with the branches from the neighbors' backyard tree nearly touching the window, there is *A&R*, in what apparently will be Adam and Rachida's room.

"In here," her mother points to the front third-floor room they had called the TV room and that now houses her grand piano, "Adam can set up a desk. I'm never there during the day."

The parlor level—with the roll-armed couch that once belonged to her mother's parents and the cream Corbusier swivel chairs and black Barcelona chairs her parents bought when her father got his first job after his residency, in the front by the bay windows filled with the southern light—appears unchanged. Separating the seating and kitchen areas is the weathered farm table her mother found in an antique store in the Bronx before catalogue furniture companies began selling knock-off versions. At the back

is the kitchen with the soapstone counters and the dining deck that looks out over the garden her mother created from a patch of torn-up concrete.

The entrance to the garden is through her mother's ground-floor office, the French doors sketched ajar, as she keeps them when the weather is warm. Summers, on the side table next to the patient chair, a vase of heritage roses sits by the tissue box. Next to the waiting room is a tiny bedroom and miniature bath, which the architect who designed the space called the au pair's suite, the necessity of which he had insisted, and which her mother has sporadically rented to a graduate student.

Caro studies the sketch. She can find no holes in her mother's plan. All she knows is that her mouth has gone dry and her mind has drifted to the pint of Chunky Monkey ice cream she will buy on her way home.

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