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*Amy Stuart*

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## TUESDAY

four days earlier

Clare is the first to descend from the bus. At once she can sense the ocean nearby, the cool saltiness in the air. She checks her phone. 7:00 p.m. The sky is already a deep pink, these early September days shorter. The bus driver tugs her bag from the undercarriage and drops it at her feet.

“Which way to the ocean?” Clare asks him.

“Way down the hill.”

Lune Bay. A coastal enclave within commuting distance of two cities, this bus depot on its outskirts. On the last stretch of the drive, Clare had been struck by the inclines, the highway zigzagging, the brakes on the bus squealing with the effort to maintain its speed. The earth here feels tilted, the landscape pouring into an ocean she can't yet see. *A beautiful spot*, Detective Somers had called it, as if Clare were arriving here on vacation and not to search for a man disappeared.

The bus station is crowded with lone travelers. A fierce stench greets Clare when she opens the door to the women's bathroom. In the tight stall Clare hangs her backpack on the back of the door and straddles her duffel bag. She struggles out of her clothes and into a clean shirt and jeans. She emerges from the stall to see an older woman leaning into the sink, eyes wildly meeting her own reflection. The woman is empty-handed, no purse or bag in sight, and dressed in a parka far too warm even for this cooler weather. Her gaze darts to Clare.

“I'd like you to leave,” she says.

“Excuse me?”

Something adjusts in the woman's face, a snap to focus. She smiles. “Long trip?”

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“Not really,” Clare says.

“Coming or going?”

“Both,” Clare answers.

The woman grimaces. Clare won't engage any further. Back in the terminal travelers shuffle like zombies, eyes up at the blinking arrival and departure screens, searching for direction. Clare finds an empty row of benches and scans the terminal for the rental car kiosk. She will have to hope that the false identification she and Detective Somers secured passes muster. Clare pulls her cell phone from her backpack and thumbs in the number from memory. Somers answers after one ring.

“You're there,” Somers says, no greeting.

“Just arrived. I'm at the bus terminal. About to rent a car. You're sure the ID will work?”

“That's police-grade fake ID,” Somers says. “It better work. Ready to get started?”

“Yes,” Clare says, forcing the word. “Yes.”

The familiarity of Somers's voice offers Clare some comfort. Hollis Somers, the police detective she'd met working on her last case as a private investigator. Somers, the detective who'd come up with police funds to hire Clare to travel to Lune Bay and look for Malcolm. Somers has yet to offer any explanation on how she's able to pay Clare, and Clare hasn't asked. The money is a means to an end; she is here to find Malcolm. Clare holds a finger to her other ear to block out the din.

“You know Malcolm better than anyone,” Somers says. “You're the best person to find him. You know that, right?”

Clare doesn't answer. She withdraws the case folder from her backpack, all its contents neatly printed and ordered, color coded. This, her third missing persons case. Two cases worked

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with Malcolm Boon and now this one on her own, searching for Malcolm, the very man who hired her to do missing persons investigations. Whatever of Malcolm's past Somers had been able to glean, his secrets and lies, Clare has them all curated into one file. It's been eight days since Malcolm Boon bid Clare goodbye before their last case was even solved, disappearing himself, fearful of the past catching up to him. It's been six days since Clare left High River at the conclusion of that case. Six days since Detective Somers handed her Malcolm's file and encouraged her to head to Lune Bay to begin the search.

"Listen," Somers says after a long pause. "You know what you need to do. You're good at this work."

Am I? Clare thinks.

"You know you are," Somers adds, as if reading Clare's mind. "Start at the beginning. Turn over stones until you find the rot. Just please don't risk your life."

"Yeah," Clare says, rapping her fingers over the folder.

"We're working together on this. I'm not far away." Working together. Clare distrusts that notion now. Working together, and yet Clare is here alone. On both their previous cases Malcolm had said the same thing—*we're working together*—and yet Clare had both times been the lone foot soldier while Malcolm observed from afar.

"I still don't totally get why you're giving this case to me," Clare says.

"Because you helped me on the last case," Somers says. "We've gone over this. You need closure on this guy. Now it's my turn to help you. Okay?"

"Okay," Clare says.

"What do you need?" Somers asks.

"Nothing. Give me a day to get my bearings. I'll touch base with you tomorrow."

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“You going to follow our plan?”

“Yes,” Clare says, a lie.

“Remember. No huge risks.”

“I should go.” Clare’s tone is curter than she means it to be. “I just need to get my bearings.”<sup>f P k</sup>“Right,” Somers says. “Keep me posted.”

Clare ends the call without a goodbye. In the folder is a map marked with the places Clare is supposed to go, the landmarks of Malcolm’s former life, the whereabouts of those who knew him, who knew his wife, Zoe Westman, herself missing for well over a year, a case unsolved and abandoned by this city’s law enforcement. *Go to the police first*, Somers told Clare. *Find the detective assigned to the case*. Of course Somers would insist on a police-first approach, one detective certain that her fellow officers should be the best source of help. In only two cases, Clare has learned that’s not always true.

At the bus station’s ticket counter, the woman from the bathroom yells at the agent. Across the row from Clare, another woman cries, her body slumped against a stroller where a young boy sleeps. She looks at Clare, her eyes filled with anguish, fear. Behind the woman, a poster reads TRAVEL INTO FALL!

Fall, the last season that ties to her home. This time last year Clare was still in her home with her husband, Jason, enduring his wrath, plotting her escape. When fall ends it will be a year since she left him, since she escaped her marriage. Every season after that will no longer mark her first year away. Clare, a missing woman herself. A missing woman who now searches for missing women. *What are you running from?* Clare could ask the woman crying on the bench. *Who are you running from?* Instead Clare stands and dusts herself off, walking past the woman without looking her way. By now Clare knows better than to absorb someone else’s pain.

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At the rental car counter, Clare presents her identification and secures the rental without incident. The clerk leads her to a small parking lot and a car only big enough for Clare, her duffel bag in the hatchback, and her backpack on the passenger seat. Clare turns the ignition, then sits in the quiet of the car to catch her breath. Her body's wounds emit a constant dull ache. She will check in to the hotel later. First, she will drive to Malcolm's marital home.

Clare reverses out of the parking space and onto the wide road. The outskirts of Lune Bay look like any other town, box stores and fast-food restaurants. But as Clare descends towards the water, the real Lune Bay begins to form. Modern houses perched on hills to catch any ocean view, winding streets book-ended by coffee shops and bakeries. Zoe's father, Jack Westman, was the developer who upgraded this once humble village to a suburban utopia. Clare follows the pings of the car's GPS until she lands on a road ablaze in sunset light. She pulls over and looks westward. And there she sees it, where the road drops away: the straight line of the ocean, a ball of sun hovering just over its horizon. The shock of colors takes Clare aback. A town hovering on the edge of the sea. She lowers the car window and inhales, the texture of the salt air still so novel to her. Clare could almost laugh at the fact that this sunset makes her angry, its beauty like an affront. What is she angry at? Jason? A husband so vicious he gave her no choice but to run? Malcolm? The man who lured her into investigation work, then abandoned her? All Clare knows is that these days the anger simmers below the surface always, its cause and its targets indecipherable. Clare takes another deep breath. Focus.

You can do this, she thinks. You are good at this work. You have a plan.

She taps at the GPS again. Northshore Drive. Two miles from here through the center of Lune Bay and then along a cliffside road. This strange city, home to Malcolm before Clare knew him. Can she conjure what his life might have been like here before his wife disappeared? The

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network they would have built, the connections to his wife Zoe's family, the Westmans. A family name tied to Lune Bay at every corner, but tied murkily to crime too, bribes and shady dealings, Jack Westman's murder five years ago, and then Zoe's disappearance three years later. Can Clare fathom Malcolm's panic after the police pegged him as the only viable suspect in his wife's disappearance? A panic that led him to flee Lune Bay too.

*You are the best person to find him, Somers said. You know him better than anyone.*

No, I don't, Clare thinks now. All she has is a plan. The plan is to be detached, assertive, to reconstruct Malcolm's world as she searches for him. There is a gentle flip in Clare's chest, her heart's way of warning her.

The GPS pings and Clare makes a sharp turn down a winding residential street. The lots are large, houses hidden behind brick walls or wrought iron fences lined with tall shrubs. In the space between two houses, Clare catches a quick sight of the water. The ocean is too close. Here, you could just wander off a cliff and never be seen again.

Northshore Drive. Clare slows at each house, peering out the windshield to read the numbers. She reaches the dead end and sees it, two silver digits nailed to a tall tree. 28. The house itself must be down the hill. Clare parks and yanks the emergency brake.

The light has faded still. Clare sits in silence for a moment. No. There is no time to think. She retrieves her gun from her backpack before stuffing the bag into the passenger footwell. Clare checks the weapon, then tucks it into the belt of her jeans, the cool metal a familiar comfort against her skin. When she opens the car door she is struck by the coolness of the air.

The driveway follows a steep incline to a wrought iron gate marked with an *H*. Malcolm Hayes. Malcolm Boon's real name.

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The gate is unlocked. Clare passes through and turns the last corner. The house is perched on a rocky hillside. She can hear the ocean though she cannot see it, the shifting hum of crashing waves. In the photographs from news stories this house had looked much different. The Glass Box, it was called. An architectural marvel that glowed against its backdrop. A home built by Malcolm Hayes and his wife, Zoe Westman, only a year before she went missing. The last place anyone from Lune Bay saw either of them alive. Clare straightens up and takes a deep breath. *Start at the beginning*, Somers said to her. For Clare, the beginning is not with the police officers investigating this case. The beginning is here.