DRIVING THE DODGE OVER FIFTY

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The first time I met Declan, on the twenty-third floor of Boston's State Street Bank Building, I saw words above his head—words that looked like the lighted headlines that gird the New York Times Tower—and I *read* them. The words were in capital letters that spit and fizzled, neon-like: "THIS GUY IS TROUBLE. STAY AWAY."

I was only twenty-two. I didn't know about trouble. It was 1980.

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A year earlier I had graduated from a reasonably good university only five miles from my parents' house in New Jersey, where I had always lived. Since graduation, I had ushered at a local theater, sliced cheese at a deli, and groomed horses, and now that it had opened for the season, I was working at the local amusement pier, making cotton candy and frozen lemonade. One day I had just returned from an afternoon shift at the pier, my fingers sticky with dried pink spun sugar, when my older sister's best friend from childhood, Annie, called my parents' phone and asked for me. Annie lived in Allston, Massachusetts, a working-class neighborhood east of Harvard Square and southwest of Boston proper. She said her boyfriend had moved out and asked if I wanted to be her new roommate. I surprised myself by saying yes.

I'd been in Boston once, in 1972, when I was fourteen. Annie didn't live there then, but my sister, Vivian, did, before she took off for Santa Cruz. A twenty-year-old college student, Vivian was studying math and statistics. My sister and I had never been especially close—my family was reserved, even with each other. But during that visit Vivian talked to me about her love for her boyfriend and her yearning for a job that would make the world a better place. I didn't respond in kind because I didn't yet know what I yearned for. As always, I was reticent with her, but I was glad that she hadn't been reticent with me.

During my visit, the city had mirrored the possibility of hopes and dreams that I might someday hold. I remembered standing outside my sister's brownstone apartment on a warm May morn-

ing, watching the Coolidge Corner trolley head toward us from the west; I remembered the screech of the wheels against the curved track, the trolley's metallic green side bright against the background of ginkgo trees and red brick row houses across Beacon Street. Behind me, the yellow marigolds in a bay-window box caught the sun, and a passing breeze brought with it the hissing smell of spent electricity, hot off the trolley's overhead lines. Ever since that moment, I had wanted to live in Boston—or Brookline, or Cambridge, or any one of the old Boston neighborhoods that I found both redolent of history and bustling with life.

After Annie's phone call, it took me three days to gather enough courage to tell my parents that I planned to move and to ask if I could borrow the old family car—permanently. Throughout my college years at home, I'd been driving the 1966 Dodge station wagon, still the apple of my father's eye. The car was green, solid, and long. That particular model, the Polara, was possibly the greenest, the most solid, and the longest station wagon ever built. My dad allowed me to drive the Dodge around our hometown; taking the car to a different state, however, was another matter altogether.

After my dad reluctantly agreed to relinquish the car, he was going to do everything he could to ensure that the Polara was properly maintained while it was out from under his watchful eye. On the morning before my departure, he called me to our driveway, opened the hood of the Dodge, and handed me a pen and a graphed engineer's pad.

"Is this a test?" I asked him, with dread.

He focused his blue eyes on mine and ran one hand back across his thinning gray hair. "Actually, Paige, now that I think about it—yes, it is a test. It's a test of character. Owning a car is a serious responsibility."

I wrote that down. For the next ninety minutes my father leaned over the open hood and pointed at various parts of the engine, staring intently at me as he explained the mechanics of the carburetor, the purpose of the spark plugs, the movement of the pistons.

An inventor of transistorized devices and computer functions, my dad was as comfortable with the engine of a car as he was with math and physics. His comfort with the engine was in inverse proportion to his comfort with me. I sometimes wondered if he ever felt lonely inside his immense intelligence, unable to share the intricacies of his ideas with anyone, his mind doomed to be disappointed by mankind, in general, and by his youngest daughter, in particular.

As I took copious notes, I thought: I'm not going to be able to do this.

He described the sound a fan belt makes when it's loose. Raising his glasses to his forehead, he leaned closer to the engine and examined whether the belt was, in fact, tight enough. My eyes wandered toward our house. My mother, at the open kitchen window, was washing dishes. The comforting sound of running water and plates gently clinking against each other carried across the cool spring air. My mother had once told me that when I was five she'd overheard my dad explaining the theory of electromagnetism to me, and she had stopped him. Part of me wished she would stop him now.

My dad unhooked the metal rod from the hood's underside, laid it horizontally, and snapped it into place. With two hands he lowered the heavy hood and let it fall with a thud. He wiped his palms together briskly. "Now for that test."

My heart dropped like a dead weight.

He quizzed me on all the details we'd gone over, but I couldn't remember any of them. And my notes were no help. Most of what I'd written was indecipherable—obscure words and half sentences: "Combustion," "Pistons, 4 moving," "Slide stick out from," "Remember to" and then a blank space, and "Under no circumstances" at the top of an empty page.

When I answered the seventh question incorrectly, he lifted his chin, almost stoically, crossed his arms, and sighed, "Ah, yes."

He must have been thinking: Ah, yes. I had forgotten that this child of mine is such an idiot.

"When is it, again, that you intend to leave for Boston?" he asked.

I looked around at the familiar tall locusts in our backyard. The wind stirred, and the trees' barely budding branches knocked against each other, sending out the scent of their white pollen blossoms. I loved these trees. I loved this town. I loved my parents. I wanted so badly to not be here anymore. "Tomorrow."

His smile tightened as if he were reassuring himself that everything would be fine in spite of my abysmal capabilities. "Well, I suppose this is the best we are going to do." He sounded deeply disappointed.

I felt flat and inept, embarrassed that his efforts had been wasted. "Thanks for your help, Dad." I just hoped the car would carry me to Boston and that I wouldn't destroy it in the process.

The Dodge Polara was an integral part of my parents' world. No trade-in models for them—they held onto a car much longer than other families in our neighborhood would, not so much out of thriftiness as out of an appreciation for what good fortune

and hard work had brought them. From the South, my parents were traditional, modest, and prudent. They went to church every Sunday. They didn't go to parties. I didn't go to parties either. It wasn't that they forbade me—but I intuitively knew that I was held to a higher standard than other kids my age. I was expected to not fail at anything. The disillusion and distress my parents would feel if I were to get into a scrape or make a fool of myself would be too much for them to bear—and too much for me to bear. My sister had ended up on the other end of their disapproval. Since I didn't even know what she had done wrong, I wasn't taking any chances: I just had to be perfect.

We lived a peaceful life. My parents assumed that I would not disturb that quietude and that I was content with a tranquil life as well. I had acquiesced to their assumption.

My dad was watching me.

"Are you sure it's sensible to move all that distance away?" he asked, his voice inflecting downward as if implying an answer in the negative.

Doubt overcame me, as it always did whenever he questioned my intentions. Of course it wasn't sensible. Didn't he know that?

I nodded, despite my trepidation.

"Well, all right, then, Sweet Pea." He gave me an extra key to the car. "I guess it's all part of growing up. You do what you need to do."

I felt relieved that he hadn't noticed my instant of inner wavering.

"The main thing to remember is to drive defensively."

"Okay, Dad."

"Anticipate danger."

"Okay, Dad."

"And don't drive the car over fifty miles per hour. If you do—"

"I won't, Dad," I interrupted him. I couldn't listen to another word of advice.

He looked tired and unsettled. It had been a long session. I hoped he didn't think that I was ungrateful.

"I'll call you when I get to Boston," I offered.

"Perhaps you could call me from the road at the halfway point to let me know how you're doing."

I said I would. I just had to figure out where the halfway point would be.

* * *

The next morning, I filled the old Dodge with most of my possessions and my cat. As I was about to leave, my mother, slight of figure and still sprightly at sixty, jogged to the car holding a brass table lamp from our living room. She'd wrapped it in newspaper.

"Your father and I have entirely too many lamps," she said, handing it to me through the open passenger window. "You can use this more than we can."

I thanked her and placed it on the floor of the front seat. It would look nice on my little desk, which was now on its side in the back of the Dodge. She'd also loaned me a small bureau of my aunt's.

"Thanks, Mom. And thank Dad too." It was odd that my father wasn't seeing me off—strange that he wasn't checking my headlights and turn signals one last time. "Where is he?"

She looked at me through the window. "Sweetheart, you know your father isn't good at goodbyes."

He couldn't bear to see the Dodge go. I felt guilty that I was taking the car away from him. And then I felt a pang of guilt that I, too, was leaving him.

My mother pressed her palms over the rolled-down glass of the door. "Paige, your dad worries about the long trip, the car—all the variables, as he says, on the open road." Despite her slender frame, I felt the solid anchoring weight of her presence. "But I worry about other things more."

I waited to hear what the other things were, but she didn't say. She opened her mouth but closed it again and stepped back from the car. "Remember to polish that good dresser of your Aunt Eleanor's. Lemon polish only."

"I will, Mom." I found this odd—the bureau had been in the basement collecting dust. I hadn't known it was so important to her. I'd really have to be careful with it.

We said our goodbyes. I put the car in drive. Before I lifted my foot from the brake, my mother was at the passenger window again.

"Paige, if you see Vivian, tell her we love her."

She walked away before I could answer her, but I wouldn't have known what to say anyway. My sister was in California, not Massachusetts. The last time I'd seen her was the fall after I'd visited her in Boston, when she had brought her boyfriend home to New Jersey. In the morning after their first night at our parents' house, I was in my room at my desk when I heard a sound like a hawk's call and realized it was Vivian's voice, high-pitched as if she were crying out or yelling. No one yelled or cried in our house, ever—and it frightened me. I heard the back door slam.

Through the window, I saw Vivian jump into the passenger seat of her boyfriend's car. They drove away. For the rest of the decade, she barely contacted my parents or me. I was sure that the fight she had with my parents must have had something to do with that boyfriend. Years ago, though, I'd made myself stop thinking about it.

In the rearview mirror, as I steered down the driveway, I saw my mother wave and then clasp her hand over her mouth. Again I felt guilty—I was leaving my mom too. As I turned onto the main road, though, I tried to put my feelings aside. I had to concentrate on driving.

I set out for Boston. Two stapled pages of directions were taped to the dashboard. My hands gripped the wheel so tightly that my palms were red when I pulled over at a rest area north of the Tappan Zee Bridge. After Hartford, Connecticut, I left Interstate 84 to eat lunch and to call my dad from a payphone, as I had promised. It took me forty minutes to find my way back to the highway. Throughout the 365-mile trip, I kept glancing at the speedometer, careful to drive no faster than 49 miles per hour. At one point on Route 86 my heart leapt into my throat when I glanced down and saw the speedometer needle at 51, but I instantly eased my foot off the gas and brought the needle lower. My cat yowled for seven hours.

Finally, just south of Boston, I left the Mass Pike at the exit Annie had told me to take. At the two landmarks that she had specified—a Merit gas station and a market whose huge hand-painted sign advertised frogs' legs, I turned left off of Cambridge Street. Two blocks farther, I spotted the three-story pale green house at 349 North Harvard. Annie was standing in the yard in the light of the setting sun. I had called her the night before and had told her when to expect me, but I was late. I hoped she hadn't been waiting for hours, but she looked as if she had. Her hands were stuffed into the pockets of a long cardigan, and her eyes were fixed at the point where my car would likely appear. She smiled—she must have seen me behind the wheel, or maybe she recognized the old Dodge. She pushed her big glasses higher on her nose, lifted one hand, and waved her fingers in greeting.

As a child I had adored her. She had always made me laugh. She could do tricks, like rolling her eyeballs back into her head so that only the whites of her eyes showed. And her singing voice—she made her living as a music teacher—had an astounding range that allowed her to suddenly drop from a primly angelic high note to a preposterously low one: one of the silly things she did that had made me, as a six-year-old, admire her so.

Annie directed me to park on a side street. I hadn't seen her since she'd moved out of state when she and Vivian were high school freshmen, but she looked exactly as I remembered. At twenty-eight, still self-conscious of her height, she slouched as she had when she was younger. Everything about her was high—her forehead, her cheekbones, her arched brows over her large-lidded eyes. Her dark brown hair flipped upward in curls from behind two flat tortoise-shell clips and also from elsewhere on her head, so she looked as if she were sprouting wings. Beautiful in an unconventional way, she had the slow awkward grace of a camel.

When I got out of the car, Annie gave me a hug and then stepped back, holding my hands. "Look at you—you're all grown up! And your hair is curly!"

"I wear it a little longer now than when I was a kid," I said.

"Well, it's still that same nice chestnut brown." Her smile spread slowly across her face. "You look pretty."

I thought it was kind of Annie to say, though I didn't believe her.

Annie grasped the lamp and a suitcase, and I picked up the cat carrier. I followed her to her third-floor apartment. When I freed my cat, she ran past Annie's big tabby and, with a quick hiss, fled in a black blur into the hall closet.

"She'll be all right in there for now," said Annie.

We had lugged almost everything—including that unwieldy dresser of my Aunt Eleanor's—up the stairs and into my room when, before I even knew I was crying, tears began to run down my face. Even though I was happy to see Annie again, I missed everything familiar in my life. Dusk fell, and so did my spirits. How could I stay in this city where I'd never lived before and where I knew no one but Annie?

"Annie, I'm sorry, but I think I want to go home." I couldn't believe I was saying this after driving hundreds of miles, but my dad had been right—it had not been sensible to move such a great distance away.

Annie crinkled her brows in empathy. "Are you sure?"

I nodded, feeling defeated.

"Well, okay, if that's what you want, Paige. I understand." She lifted a book-filled milk crate and started downstairs with it. I grabbed a suitcase and followed her.

We carried about half of my possessions to the car. As I was placing the brass lamp that my mother had given me back onto the floor of the front seat, I hesitated. My mother, I imagined, was as torn about my moving as my father was—and as torn as I,

obviously, was as well. I had envisioned that lamp on my desk in my new apartment—a place where I might make decisions about my life.

It was dark now. Annie was heading across the lawn to go to the apartment for more of my things. I was still holding the lamp.

"Annie," I called to her.

She stopped.

"I want to stay."

She returned to the car, smiling. "Okay, Paige. That's good." She didn't make fun of me or complain. She took the lamp and walked with it into the darkness toward the lighted front porch of the house: my new home.

* * *

My room was between Annie's room and the kitchen. We arranged an extra bed of Annie's, Aunt Eleanor's dresser, and a bookcase around the wood-floored room. I pushed the little desk to where it would catch the outside light. I unwrapped the brass lamp and placed it on the desk.

When I woke the next day in my first apartment, I saw the sky from my bed. The western-facing window was open. Through the screen, I smelled hot butter on a grill—someone cooking eggs in an apartment below? A catbird cried, just like at home, but then I heard the roar of an engine. I threw back the covers and rushed to the window in time to see a yellow and white bus passing the house, traveling along North Harvard Street and leaving a trail of exhaust. Smelling the acrid fumes reminded me of that moment long ago waiting for the trolley. I was living in a city for the first time. I felt alive and a little frightened but excited about my new life, whatever it might be.

* * *

Whatever this new life might be, a job had to be part of it. Now that I'd made my choice—I was sure I wasn't going to repack the car and return to New Jersey—I decided I'd try for an office job in downtown Boston.

I knew nothing about offices. I didn't even own a suit. I'd always been industrious in high school and in college, though, so I figured the suit didn't matter as much as diligence and a professional attitude.

I bought a *Boston Globe* at the frog legs' market, combed through the Help Wanted ads, and circled a few jobs I thought I

had a chance of getting. I had to make more money than I'd ever made before. My half of the rent was $159 a month.

I had three interviews on three consecutive days; I drove the Dodge to each one. Storrow Drive each time was a nightmare. I was carefully driving at forty-nine miles per hour, but every car on the road seemed to tailgate me like an Imperial Star Fighter, swinging left and then right before flying past within inches of my driver's side mirror. Every now and then I'd catch a glimpse of the green Esplanade and the Charles River, but I was too nervous about driving to enjoy the view.

On Wednesday, at an interview in an office near Boston Common, I sat across the desk from a man in a worn three-piece suit who puffed a cigar as he recounted what my duties would be as his secretary. One of the duties would be to take his shoes to be shined once a week. He placed the burning cigar in an ashtray. Leaning forward, he folded his hands and set his solemn, lens-enlarged eyes on me. "Basically what we deal with here," he said through a haze of smoke, "are *nuts* and *screws*."

I tried to model his solemnity. "Oooooh." I dragged out the vowel. "How interesting." I left as quickly as I could.

Back in the apartment, I found Annie sitting cross-legged on her bed, her hand dipping into a box of Oreos. She was working half-days and seemed to spend a lot of time eating cookies. I supposed she could tell from my face that I hadn't found the job of my dreams.

"No luck?"

I let my attaché case—as old as the Dodge, and also from my dad—drop to the quilt and reached into the cookie box. "No."

Annie lifted a pad of paper from the bed. "Your dad called. He wanted me to remind you of three things."

"Oh, no. I'm sure I've done something wrong with the car already." I sighed. "What did he say?"

Annie read from the paper. "One. Check oil. Two. Check distributor cap." She glanced at me. "He says he showed you how to do that. And three. Don't drive the car over fifty miles per hour."

"I'm not going to."

Annie tore off the sheet of paper from the pad and handed it to me. "And he told me one more thing that I didn't have to write down."

"What was that?"

"He loves you and he misses you."

I felt a rush of warmth. It was nice to hear that my dad had said that. I realized I'd never been away before so that he could miss me. Maybe he missed me more than he missed the Dodge.

"So, did you meet any cute men today?" Annie asked.

A cute man was the last thing I needed. "That's not what I'm here for," I told Annie. "I'm not here to meet men. I just want a job. I want to pay my half of the rent."

"I understand, Paige." She reached for another cookie.

* * *

On Thursday, at an insurance agency in South Boston, the receptionist gave me a typing test. She placed a three-page contract on a stand by a typewriter and told me I had five minutes to replicate it. Three minutes or so after the start bell, I moved my eyes from the contract to the sheet in the typewriter: I hadn't typed a single recognizable word. My fingers had been on the wrong keys. I walked out to ask the receptionist if I might begin the test again, but she wasn't at her desk. I returned to the room, sat down, and continued typing as fast as I could. When the bell rang, I winced at the typed sheet. At least this time I'd typed several real words. The receptionist strode in and pulled the paper from the typewriter. I slipped out of my chair. I didn't wait for her to speak. "Thank you for your time," I said, and left.

When I arrived at the apartment, Annie was staring out the kitchen door, which opened onto the wooden deck and fire escape. She looked like a dog at a fence.

"You okay, Annie?"

"Paige, would you please get that apple that rolled out onto the deck?"

"Sure, but why can't…"

"I'm sort of afraid of heights."

I was surprised. Annie always seemed so calm. I had thought she was fearless. I walked past her onto the wooden platform, dipped to retrieve the apple from where it lay near the edge of the three-story drop, and walked inside again.

"Thanks so much, Paige." She shuddered as I handed it to her. "Vivian tried to help me get over my fear. At least now I can stand here at the sink with that deck door open."

It was the first time Annie had mentioned my sister. Part of me wanted to ask if she knew what had happened with Vivian, but part of me didn't want to know. I didn't ask. "Maybe we could work on that some more. When I was a kid I taught my gerbil to climb a ladder."

"Thanks, Paige. It's worth a shot." Running cold water over the apple's striated red and green surface, she squinted at me, in anticipation of bad news. "So, no luck again today, I guess?" Her big glasses slid down her nose.

"No." My cat padded into the kitchen to greet me. "I don't know, Annie. I don't seem particularly qualified to do anything." I wondered whether that cigar-smoking man might have offered me the position if I had shown more enthusiasm about nuts and screws. I picked up the cat and pulled the deck door shut.

"Your cat was scratching her claws on that nice dresser of yours today."

"Oh, no," I sighed, chagrined. "That's the one thing that my mother was worried about—that I'd damage that dresser! And now it's probably ruined."

Annie set the apple on a wooden cutting board. "Well, it's just a dresser, Paige. I'm sure your mother worries about other things more."

How odd—my mother had made a similar comment. I thought she had been worried about the furniture, but maybe she'd been concerned about something else? Maybe it was me my mother was worried about? On occasion my parents spoke cryptically. Like the time when I was thirteen and my father said, "Paige, you've reached an age when you might want to learn certain facts of life. There's a book with a black cover in the upstairs den that you could read if you're so inclined." For years I didn't look for the book. I was sure my parents would be more likely to approve of me if I wasn't so inclined. And after Vivian left I wanted to *prove* to them that I wasn't so inclined. I never went on dates. I never talked about boys or young men.

Annie sliced the apple in quarters. Her face brightened. "Well, did you meet any cute guys today?"

Had Annie read my mind? "No, I didn't—and I don't want to. Look at all the trouble it caused when Vivian met a cute guy."

She handed me a slice of the apple. "Okay, Paige."

* * *

My third interview was on Friday, for a proofreading position at a law firm near the waterfront. I had been an English major in college, so it seemed kind of logical—the proofreading, I mean, not the waterfront.

I first met with Sally, the word-processing department manager, who was, as she said, a transplant from the Cornhusker State, so as we chatted I kept picturing stalks of corn being dug up from one field and planted in another.

"We'll have to give you a test," said Sally.

My heart began to pound—this would be my third test in a week.

She handed me three pages of double-spaced type.

"Mark anything you think is a typo. You have ten minutes. You can stay here in my office." She handed me a pencil and checked her watch. "Okay, go." She walked out the door.

I hated tests. "M-E-M-O-R-A-N-D-I-U-M" was written across the top of the first page.

Paige, I told myself. Concentrate. I circled the "-I" and wrote, "Remove."

As I began to read, I relaxed. The page was filled with typos. My pencil flew—circling words, crossing out letters, and writing correct spellings in the margin. The first three letters of one word were italic and the last three were boldface. I circled the word and wrote, "All italic or all bold or neither?" A blank space appeared in the middle of a sentence on the second page. I wrote, "Close this space." The margins on the third page were justified, unlike the margins on the first and second pages. I marked that too. This was fun, like picking off aliens in the Space Invaders game on the amusement pier back home.

Sally returned to the office. "All done?"

"Yes," I said, surprised that I actually was. What a difference from the typing test yesterday!

Wobbling in her red high heels, Sally led me through a carpeted hallway lined with portraits and seascapes to the office of the personnel manager, Mary Lacey, a pleasant woman who seemed to be around forty. Mary Lacey took my résumé from Sally, shook my hand, and offered me a seat.

The opposite wall of the office was all glass—I could see only the tops of other buildings and a powder blue sky. Mary Lacey, neat in her pressed pink suit, sat down behind the austere desk and scanned my meager résumé, all the while fingering one of her small gold drop earrings. The yellow morning sun hit the white stone facade of the tall building across the street; a shaft of light angled from the east across the gray carpet and fell on Mary Lacey's short auburn hair. The sounds of the street below were muted, as if the outside world didn't exist.

"A degree in English! Perfect!" She fluffed her chiffon scarf. "So, what books have you been reading?"

"Well, last week I finished *As I Lay Dying* by Faulkner."

"Faulkner's always an upbeat choice—ha, ha," she laughed. "You're young. One day when you're older like me, you suddenly won't be able to read anything depressing anymore."

I knew I would never get tired of depressing books, but I didn't say that to Mary Lacey. We talked about other authors, Boston, and proofreading until a knock sounded on the door

and Sally appeared with my test in hand. She gave Mary Lacey a thumbs-up sign and left.

Mary Lacey said she thought I'd be a good fit at the firm and asked if I could begin working on Monday.

I said yes. I had a job!

"Wonderful! Welcome to Stover and Baird." She reached across the desk to shake my hand, stood, and gestured toward the hallway. "We'll do the paperwork on Monday. For now I'll just introduce you to the other proofreaders." With a wink, she opened the door. I liked her. I liked this place.

We walked down an undecorated hall, past the word-processing department and past the mailroom to the proofreaders' office. The office was about the same size as Mary Lacey's, but instead of one big window, there was none; instead of one big orderly desk, there were four cluttered smaller ones, in pairs, each pair pushed together and facing each other on either side of the room. Books, stacks of paper, and tea canisters stuffed with pencils and pens were scattered on every surface. At the farthest desk, seated behind a vase filled with several rulers fanned like flower stems, was a young woman with olive skin, glossed lips, and dark narrow brows. She had been smoothing her hair with a curling iron, which she quickly dropped into the open desk drawer as soon as we walked in. Her hair on the unstyled side stuck out horizontally.

Mary Lacey pretended not to notice. "Paige, these are two of your fellow proofreaders, Stephanie and Mason. This is Paige."

As we greeted each other, I wondered—where was this other person, Mason? Then I saw him—he was unfolding himself from a contorted position on the floor.

He cleared his throat. "Pardon me. Just trying to adjust my back." He took a step toward me and extended his hand. Tall and skinny, he had a dough-white face and small, black recessed eyes that reminded me of raisins. His head was capped with a thick tuft of cinnamon-colored hair.

Stephanie and Mason. I said their names to myself. I'd be seeing them every day.

Mary Lacey glanced around the office. "Where is Declan?" she asked. A line appeared on her smooth forehead.

"Sorry—am I late for my scene?" said a melodic male voice behind me.

I turned around to the doorway to see a startlingly handsome young man. He was short, but his slim gray suit fit him perfectly; a folded *Boston Globe* was tucked under his arm, and he carried a small paper bag. He laughed, apparently at what he'd just said, and then he quickly bit his lip and lowered his eyes—sapphire

blue and long-lashed. His smile deepened his vertical dimples. He had an angular jaw and blond wavy hair. And, of course, for a brief moment in time, those ominous words, sizzling with phosphorescence, pulsed above his head: STAY AWAY.

I had no intention of getting close to Declan.

* * *

"Hi, Annie," I called out when I walked in the door that afternoon. Annie was playing the upright piano in the hall, her big tabby cat standing on her lap so that she had to keep tilting her head first left and then right to see the sheet music around the cat's meandering tail. At the end of a measure, she stopped playing and looked at me.

"You got a job," she announced.

She must have guessed it from the expression on my face. I explained how well I had done on the test and how, maybe, I was even cut out for proofreading.

"I'll be able to pay half the rent, Annie. I'll be able to stay in Boston."

"I'm so happy for you, Paige."

"I'm happy too." As soon as I felt happiness, though, doubt clenched me, as it often would when I wanted so badly for something to work out. "What if I can't do the job? What if I fail?"

Annie shrugged her shoulders and waved a hand at me. "So maybe you make a mistake now and then. So what? That doesn't mean you've failed. Everybody makes mistakes."

That made sense. Her words calmed me. "Thanks." My cat appeared in the doorway of my room. I reached down to pet her.

"So, I guess you didn't meet any cute guys today."

I thought of Declan—his sapphire eyes and his dimpled smile. "No," I said.

Annie looked at me, her fingers poised over the piano keys. "That's okay. Like you said, that's not what you're looking for."

"That's right." I scooped my cat into my arms. "I'm certainly not looking for anything like that."

"You know, if you ever did meet somebody you thought was cute, we could talk about it."

I didn't know what to say.

Her smile implied that she knew me better than I knew myself. I was glad she didn't ask me any more questions. She turned back to the piano and began playing at the next measure.

In my room I dug through one of my unpacked boxes. I pulled out the book with the black cover that my dad had mentioned

when I was thirteen and that I'd taken from the upstairs den a few days ago, before I'd left my parents' house. I wasn't ready to look at it yet, but I placed it on the middle shelf of my bookcase within easy reach.

The piano had been silent awhile when Annie appeared at my door. She was holding a small package wrapped in blue tissue paper and tied with a shiny blue ribbon.

"It's from your sister."

I felt a jolt of excitement—my sister! I reached for the package but quickly withdrew my hand. Annie knew what had caused the rift between Vivian and my parents. I finally felt I needed to know too.

"Why did my parents and Vivian have that fight? What did she do wrong?"

Annie smiled kindly, as if she felt sorry for me. "Oh, Paige, your sister didn't do anything wrong. Your parents didn't do anything wrong either. Things just happen. Vivian needed some distance."

From what? From me? "How did she know I was moving here?"

Annie exhaled. "She was the one who suggested I call you."

I looked at the package. The shape of the ribbon looked so familiar—it was crimped and askew, the way Vivian always tied a bow.

"When Vivian left, you were a child," said Annie. "Now that you're an adult, you might see what happened between her and your parents differently."

I reached out again and took the box.

Annie handed me a slip of paper with a phone number on it. "She wants to talk to you. You can use the telephone in the kitchen any time you want."

"Thanks." My voice was trembling.

I placed the package and the slip of paper on the shelf next to the book with the black cover.

Annie returned to the piano. I sat at my desk, my lamp unlit, looking out the window as the sun descended behind the maples that lined the yard. I left my desk and lay on my bed, my mind racing with thoughts about Vivian, the new job, and the people I'd met at the office, lingering a moment on Declan. Exhausted, I fell asleep.

I slept deeply and dreamed of the fizzling letters encircling Declan's blond head. Although the headlines were still cautioning STAY AWAY, after every few flashes the words transmuted as if polarized and, instead of warning, beckoned: COME TO ME.

I woke with a start, disturbed. I walked down the hall to talk

to Annie, but her door was closed and it was quiet inside, so I thought she must already be asleep. I returned to my room and stood in front of the bookshelf. The black book would still have to wait, but I picked up the pretty blue package and untied the ribbon. I opened the box, pulled aside the white tissue paper, and saw a carved wooden sailboat. Its halyard leaned forward, and the burnished pine mainsail curved out as if in a full wind. A wooden wave curled over the boat's bow.

The carved ketch brought back a memory I often pushed away. The boat was just like the one that Vivian and her boyfriend, Thomas—I remembered his name—had taken me sailing in when I visited Boston. As he held the tiller and steered us out onto the Charles, Thomas told me how an oyster forms a pearl and how a cuttlefish can change color to match its environment. I loved the sound of his voice. The shadow from the sail fluttered across his face, and his gentle eyes squinted against the bright sunlight. I remembered hoping that someday I'd find a boyfriend like him. Vivian leaned against the other side of the boat, her arms outstretched, her hands cupping the boat's rim. Her long blonde hair blew in the breeze as she smiled at us. I'd never seen her look so happy.

The gift from my sister was beautiful. It was perfect.

I gripped the boat and felt a fierce anguish at her abandoning me all those years ago.

I looked at the clock on my desk—it was eleven, but it was eight in the evening in California.

When I first heard Vivian's voice I burst into tears, and I didn't even care that crying was something my family never did.

"Paige, is that you?"

I gulped air, catching my breath. "Yes."

"Oh, Paige, I'm so happy to hear you. I've wanted to talk to you for so long—"

I couldn't help but blurt out my pain. "Why did you leave me? How could you abandon me like that?" Hurt and enraged, I barely knew my own voice—it reminded me of Vivian's high-pitched, birdlike cry that night she fought with Mom and Dad before she and Thomas fled.

"I *did* abandon you," said Vivian. "And I'm so, so sorry. I understand your anger and you have every right to be angry."

She sounded steady and strong. I felt her strength fighting to calm me, but I wasn't letting it yet. "Why did you leave?" I asked again.

"I left because I was trying to save myself. It was the only thing I could do." She told me how she had felt swallowed up

by the family, afraid to try anything new, afraid of love, always striving to be perfect—and how, in leaving and staying away, she finally gave herself permission to live her own life.

As when Annie said it was okay to make a mistake, her words reached me. I was still angry and hurt, but I was beginning to understand her.

And then I talked, and she listened. Though bruised and aching and raw, I felt loved, and somehow because of the rawness, the love felt all the more real.

She sighed—her version of Dad's "Ah, yes."

"What?" I asked her.

"I was never as strong as you, Paige."

"Strong! Me? I don't know what you mean."

"You're there in Boston, aren't you? You made your decision, and you got there of your own accord."

"Well, and the Dodge," I said. But maybe she had a point. "You were strong enough to leave too."

"Yes, but maybe not in the optimal way." She told me how Mom and Dad had disapproved of her relationship with Thomas because, according to them, she was too young to be so seriously involved with a man. They said she would ruin her life—and she didn't know how to explain to them that she would be fine. And she was fine. It had been hard, she said, but now she was more than fine. She had worked her way through college in California—she'd majored in marine biology—and she and Thomas had become research technicians at a marine lab. Her job was making the world a better place. And she was still living with Thomas. Though they sometimes had their differences, they loved, encouraged, and supported each other. She was living her dream.

I was so happy for her, and I told her so. I told her about my new job and about how much I liked Annie and Boston. She said she was happy for me.

There was a lull in the conversation for a moment or two—a comfortable silence between sisters. I took a breath. "I met a cute guy today, Vivian," I said.

In the pause before she spoke I could almost hear her surprise. "That's wonderful!"

I felt my heart tighten. "I don't think it's wonderful. I think he's trouble." I twisted the phone cord while I waited for her response.

"Maybe he's trouble and maybe he isn't," said Vivian. "Feeling attracted to someone can be scary. Anything can be scary at first."

Her words were like balm. She didn't reject my fear—she accepted it.

"And trouble isn't always a bad thing, either. Sometimes we

have to get into a little trouble to start living. Life can be messy." She laughed. "I should know!"

I laughed too. It was good to laugh with my sister.

"On the other hand," she said, "maybe your intuition is speaking to you, and you really do need to listen to it. You don't know yet. But you don't have to rush into anything. And just remember—from now on, I'll be here for you."

I was so happy I had my sister back.

I remembered what Mom had asked me to tell Vivian if I talked to her.

"Mom and Dad love you, Viv."

And then it was Vivian's turn to cry. "I'll call them soon, Paige. I promise."

As we said our goodbyes, I saw the sky getting lighter outside. We had talked all night.

I made myself coffee and a fried egg sandwich. I ate at the table in front of the open window, feeling the breeze that moved the branches of the maples.

I had ventured out on my own and found my sister. My parents loved me. I had a new home. And I even had a job. I was so glad I'd decided to unpack the car again that first night here. I was so glad I'd stayed.

I went outside and slipped into the old Dodge. The Polara felt solid and strong as I drove it down North Harvard, turned left onto Cambridge Street, and crossed the Charles. It was early Saturday morning, and there was no traffic. I steered onto Memorial Drive, along the water's north edge.

The wide river reflected the pink sky of sunrise. The sails of a dozen boats were bright against the dark silhouette of Boston on the far shore. That long-ago day in the sailboat, I had loved seeing Vivian so happy. I believed now that I could be that happy too.

The morning felt fresh and electrically charged as I propelled the Polara forward. I rolled down the windows, and the reedy river air rushed in. I glanced at the speedometer and caught my breath when I saw that it read fifty-one miles per hour. I exhaled and pressed my foot to the gas, gently urging the needle up higher—fifty-two, fifty-four, fifty-six. The car didn't explode. The engine didn't spontaneously combust. And neither did I.

I eased the car down to fifty and patted the dashboard. My dad wasn't the only one who loved this Dodge.

And my sister wasn't the only one finding her own road. I would find my own road too. And I wouldn't let fear stop me. Capital letters might dance on the heads of angels and devils alike, but, in time, I would learn to tell the difference.