THE KEEPER'S QUARTERS

A play
By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

© 2026 by Craig Houk
1325 Taylor Street NW, APT 2
Washington, DC 20011
617-515-1838
houk1969@gmail.com

Synopsis

Desperate to overcome a crippling creative drought, celebrated horror novelist Evelyn Wray retreats to the long-abandoned keeper's quarters of a historic Maine lighthouse she has impulsively purchased. Hoping to write one final great novel, Evelyn clashes with her sharp-tongued literary agent Nora over money, legacy, and relevance, while forming an uneasy rapport with Thomas, the local cable technician, and Deputy Sam Chadborn, a devoted fan who shares the lighthouse's grim legend of a keeper and his wife whose fatal fall from the tower may not have been an accident. As strange occurrences multiply, locked doors, shifting objects, unexplained lights, dizzy spells, missing time, and a mysterious clockwork crank tied to the old story, Evelyn begins to lose her grip on the boundaries between memory, performance, authorship, and haunting. In a space built to cast light into darkness, she confronts the possibility that the terror she has spent decades writing about is no longer confined to the page, and that creating one final great work may require a far more devastating sacrifice than she ever imagined.

Characters

EVELYN "EVY" WRAY (Female, 40s), a well-established novelist, any race.
  Also plays ALMA FRICHET, married to Warner Frichet, an emerging painter.
  Also plays MYSTERIOUS WOMAN.
THOMAS "TOM" MCKAY (Male, 30s), a cable technician, any race.
  Also plays FREDERICK "FREDDIE" BOOTHBY, a local art dealer.
NORA COLLINS (Female, 50s), Evelyn's literary agent, any race.
  Also plays ENID PHILBRICK, a respected art collector and curator.
SAMUEL "SAM" CHADBORN (Male, 40s), a local deputy sheriff, any race.
  Also plays WARNER FRICHET, a dedicated but short-sighted lighthouse keeper.

EVY'S MOTHER (Female, 60s – prerecorded)
EVY'S FATHER (Male, 60s – prerecorded)
EVY'S PUBLICIST (Female, 40s – prerecorded)
EVY'S NYC BOYFRIEND (Male, 40s – prerecorded)
NEWSCASTER (Any gender, any age – prerecorded)

Setting

An historic town in Maine. The keeper's quarters, attached to an old lighthouse, and vacant for years. The interior is essentially one large room: a humble living area anchored by a wood-burning stove; a simple dining table; a compact kitchen; a modest sleeping alcove; and a plain desk with a single chair. A narrow closet is tucked into a corner. One door leads to the bathroom. Another, the front door, opens to the outside. An archway leads off to the lighthouse tower.

Time

Present.

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ACT ONE

Fall. Early afternoon.

(The house is currently unoccupied and quiet. Voices drift in suddenly from off.)

EVY

Careful coming down from there.

TOM

What's that now?

EVY

I said be careful on the ladder. I'm worried you're gonna fall.

TOM

Oh! Right. I appreciate it, but I do this all the time. I'll be fine.

EVY

I can hold it for you.

TOM

No, no. Don't worry about it. She's steady enough. Just maybe give me a little room. Last thing I need is you getting hurt. Liability and all that.

EVY

Of course. Right. If you're sure.

TOM

I'm sure. Tell you what. Why don't you head inside? I'll be right in.

EVY

Oh! Alright. And, uh… thank you for doing this.

TOM

If I didn't, I'd probably lose my job, so…

EVY

Fair enough.

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TOM

I'll be in shortly.

EVY

Got it.

(Evy enters the house, grabs her laptop from a bag, and sets it on the desk. She connects it to the monitor and plugs in the charger. A spark shoots from the outlet, startling her. Tom enters.)

TOM

Everything alright in here?

EVY

Yeah. I… I think so. The outlet just… sparked a little.

TOM

Old place like this, that happens. I could take a look at the wiring if you want.

EVY

You can?

TOM

Well, not today, but I could swing back soon. Just got one more thing to finish up here first.

(Tom moves to the closet and slips inside.)

EVY

You from around here originally? I mean, with the accent, I figured you were from Maine at least. But maybe not this part of it?

TOM

(Off.)

Born and raised up north. Bangor. Been down here a few years now.

EVY

It's beautiful here.

TOM

(Off.)

Maine's beautiful most everywhere, I suppose.

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EVY

Then why leave Bangor?

TOM

(Off.)

Wouldn't say I left it exactly. Just figured there might be a little more opportunity down this way. More cosmopolitan, relatively speaking. I'm a single fellow, too. Thought it might be nice meeting women I hadn't known since grammar school. Mostly, I just wanted a change of pace. Nothing more to it than that.

EVY

Sorry. I didn't mean to pry.

TOM

(Off.)

No, you're all right. Afraid there's just not much to tell. Wish I had something more interesting for you, but my life's been a fairly simple one.

(The closet door closes softly.)

EVY

Sounds kind of nice, actually. Hey, can I get you anything? I haven't got much at the moment, but maybe a glass of water? Hello?

(No response. The house falls completely still. Evy crosses cautiously toward the closet and reaches for the handle. The door suddenly swings open.)

TOM

Alright!

(Evy is startled.)

EVY

Jesus!

TOM

Oh, shit. Sorry. You okay?

EVY

Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. You… you just startled me.

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TOM

I truly am sorry about that.

EVY

No, it's all right. Really.

TOM

You sure? You need a minute?

EVY

No. No, I'm good.

TOM

Alright then. Uh… so, here's what I did. I put a box in that closet there. That's where your modem and router will sit. Ran a shielded cable from the utility pole up to your roofline. Drilled through the barge board, brought it down the wall, and into that box. Now that pole is a good ways from the house; turned out to be a little over three hundred feet in fact. And at that distance you can't just let the cable hang, or it'll sag and get damaged. So, I set a temporary post about halfway out and ran the cable through an eye hook to keep the span tight. Now when I say temporary, what I mean is I can recommend a guy who could come out to put in a proper pole; set it in concrete at the right height and be done with it. That'd be extra, of course.

EVY

I see. Well, money's not too much of an issue. Who do you recommend?

TOM

Local guy. Easygoing enough. Answers to the name Thomas McKay.

EVY

Thomas McKay?

TOM

You can call me Tom if you like.

EVY

You?

TOM

Well, I'm not just the cable guy. I do a little bit of everything around here.

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EVY

Convenient. All right; you're hired. When can you start?

TOM

Oh, uh… Well, I can swing back in a couple of days. Won't take long. About an hour to get the pole into the ground, a few hours for the concrete to set. Though I think it makes sense to wait at least a day before I shift the cable to the new post, just to be safe. Forecast looks pretty good, so no storms or high winds to worry about this week.

EVY

You sound like you know what you're doing.

TOM

I'll also take a look at the wiring while I'm here. These old lighthouses weren't built with electricity in mind, and it's probably been a long time since it's been put in, so much of what's here isn't likely up to code.

EVY

I expect you're right.

(Silence.)

TOM

Mind if I ask you something?

EVY

Uh… No.

TOM

Did you buy this place?

EVY

I won it… at an auction… but yes, I mean, I did pay for it… I… I bought it.

TOM

I thought so. Well, if money's really not too much of a concern, you might have the utilities come out and do a service drop. Then you wouldn't have to rely on that generator out there for power.

EVY

A very good idea, except… while I do own the property, I'm not keeping it.

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TOM

You're not?

EVY

I'm planning to hang onto it for about a year or so, then I'm turning it over to the town as a donation.

TOM

You don't say.

EVY

The local preservation committee's had their eye on it for some time now. I think it might have some historical value, so I'm just gonna leave it to the experts to restore it and then figure out what to do with it after that. No point running a power line now if that money can be put to better use later. I can get by on a generator. The internet, on the other hand… that's what I need sorted right now.

TOM

Fair enough. And speaking of which… you're all set. The cable's hooked into the modem. Everything's plugged in. You'll have Wi-Fi for whatever you're using. It comes with a default password; I wrote it down for you…

(He hands her a piece of paper.)

… I'd recommend changing it when you get a chance. Need me to show you?

EVY

Uh, no. I think I can manage that myself.

TOM

I have full confidence in you.

EVY

You're too kind.

TOM

Oh, and the network name is capital K, lowercase P-R-S, capital Q, lowercase R-T-R-S. I should've written that down as well.

EVY

No, it's fine. I can remember that. And it's very cute, by the way.

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TOM

Yeah, I thought the same thing.

(He pulls out a form and a pen.)

Alright then. So, if you don't mind, I just need your initials here, and your signature and date here. The total amount, along with an itemized list of the work I've completed, is detailed in this section here.

EVY

Got it.

(She takes the pen, adds her initials, signs and dates the form, then hands it all back to Thomas.)

And there you go.

TOM

Well, it's been a pleasure doing business with you…

(He looks at the form.)

Darlene.

EVY

Evelyn.

TOM

Sorry?

EVY

Uh… That's not my name on the form there.

TOM

Huh. Well, I guess somebody made a mistake then.

EVY

No, no. No one made a mistake. That's… that's the name I gave them.

TOM

Darlene?

EVY

Yeah.

PERUSAL

TOM

Come to think of it, you don't strike me as a Darlene.

EVY

That's because I'm not. I'm Evelyn.

TOM

Any particular reason you put "Darlene" on the form?

EVY

I'd rather not say.

TOM

Fair enough. Though you're the one brought it up… Evelyn.

EVY

You can call me Evy.

TOM

Right. Well, doesn't really matter what your name is, I expect, long as the check clears.

EVY

Which reminds me. I'll be paying in cash. Hang on.

(She grabs a wallet, pulls some cash from it, and hands it to Tom.)

Keep the change.

TOM

Much obliged. You know, you're not the first person who's come up here looking to disappear. Easy place for it, if that's your mind.

EVY

Noted.

TOM

(A quiet moment passes.)

Alright, well, I'm gonna get outta your hair before this gets… worse. It's already gotten a little awkward here, and I don't handle awkward all that well. Best I just make my escape now, I expect.

PERUSAL

EVY

Probably wise.

(An uneasy moment passes before Thomas nods and then quickly exits out the front door.)

See you in a couple of days!

(He's gone. Evy moves to the desk, opens her laptop, and powers it on. As she waits for it to boot up, a light in the tower comes on. Evy enters a password to unlock the laptop and waits as it loads. A dining chair shifts, as if bumped. Evy glances over, dismisses it, and returns her focus to the laptop. A car horn honks outside. As she heads for the front door, a light comes on in the bathroom. As soon as she exits the house, the bathroom door closes slowly.)

Is that you, Nora?

NORA

In the flesh.

EVY

Didn't recognize the car. Is it new?

NORA

I got it in the divorce.

EVY

Oh, yeah? Which one?

NORA

Very funny.

EVY

Why don't you pull up a little closer?

NORA

I can't.

EVY

Why not? There's plenty of room. You're gonna twist your ankle walking over here in those ridiculous shoes.

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NORA

I'm stuck.

EVY

What do you mean you're stuck?

NORA

The car's stuck. I must've run over something because it won't move in either direction.

EVY

Oh, jeez. Okay, hang on. I'll grab you a pair of sneakers. What size are you?

NORA

I'd rather not say.

EVY

Oh, for Pete's sake, Nora. If it helps, I'm a size eight.

NORA

Right. Well, unless you're hiding a clown somewhere in that house, I guess I'll risk it in these heels.

EVY

Good God. Okay. I'll come get you. And I'll look under the car while I'm at it. I can't imagine what you ran over. And honestly, who shows up to an old lighthouse in a pencil skirt and heels?

NORA

Your literary agent, that's who.

(The bathroom door swings open, and the light inside turns off. A few seconds pass before the front door, which Evy left open, closes. A moment later, the chair shifts back into position. Then the light in the tower goes out. Nora approaches the front door. She calls back to Evy, who has managed to move the car forward.)

Is it all right if I–?

EVY

What?

NORA

Is it all right if I go in?

PERUSAL

EVY

Of course. Sorry, I thought I left the door open.

(Nora tries the handle. The door doesn't budge. Evy has arrived at the door.)

What're you doing?

NORA

It's locked.

EVY

It shouldn't be.

(Nora tries again. The door doesn't budge.)

NORA

Well, it is.

EVY

Okay, well, maybe it's stuck. Move over.

(Evy tries the handle, and the door swings open easily.)

After you.

(They enter. Nora sets down her tote and removes her coat, glancing around in horror.)

NORA

Oh, Evy. Look at this place. No offense, but it's… it's filthy. And old. Like my first husband.

(She gives her coat to Evy, who places it on a hook.)

EVY

Are you okay?

NORA

I'm worried about you, if that's what you're asking.

EVY

That's not what I meant. There was nothing under your car. I pulled it forward without any trouble.

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NORA

So what? So, I've never been great with a stick shift. And, as a matter of fact, on the way here I – what do you call it – I popped the clutch on the highway. Went from seventy-five to thirty in a matter of seconds. Nearly caused a pileup.

EVY

Jesus.

NORA

Relax. Everyone was fine. I got off with a warning. No harm done.

EVY

And the door?

NORA

What about it?

(Evy stares at Nora.)

Oh, come on, Evy. Maybe I pushed when I should've pulled. And anyway, I'm used to people opening doors for me…

EVY

Of course.

NORA

… I am fully in command of my faculties, thank you very much. Which brings us to the real question: are you? Because honestly, I think you've gone off the deep end. This whole thing was a bad idea from the start. And now that I'm here, and I see exactly what you've gotten yourself into… I don't even know what else to say except… well, I told you so.

EVY

You'd have said that no matter what.

NORA

That's not fair. I always give you the benefit of the doubt. And yes, you've done some very strange things before, but this? This tops them all. I mean, I suppose I understand the appeal for you. What horror novelist wouldn't want to disappear into a crumbling gothic lighthouse at the edge of civilization? Still, this is too much, Evy. You think this is what you need, but it isn't.

(Silence.)

PERUSAL

EVY

Where are you staying?

NORA

Staying?

EVY

I assume you booked something nearby. I passed a couple of boutique hotels on my way in.

NORA

You seem very eager to get rid of me.

EVY

I'm only asking because you obviously can't stay here.

NORA

Obviously.

EVY

So?

NORA

I'll be in town for the week. Sightseeing, shopping. Apparently, something's going on because the only room I could get was a standard with a queen bed. Not that it matters. I'm here for you, of course. I'll give you the next five days to yourself, and then we can reconvene and talk things through. And by then, hopefully, I'll have managed to talk you out of this nonsense.

(Silence.)

EVY

You're wrong.

NORA

About what?

EVY

About what I need right now.

NORA

I'm not saying you don't need inspiration, Evy. Every artist does. I just don't understand why it had to be this. You pulled yourself out of New York and dropped yourself into the middle of nowhere. It just doesn't make any sense to me.

PERUSAL

EVY

I've spent most of my life writing about fear…

NORA

Okay, Evy, let's not–

EVY

… About the idea that there's always something out there in the dark waiting for you. Something that gets inside your head and won't let go until it breaks you…

NORA

Evy, please–

EVY

… And my readers felt that, Nora.

(Nora relents.)

But lately… I don't know. I sit down to write and there's just nothing there. Like whatever part of me that used to know how to do this is just… gone. And yeah, maybe that sounds dramatic, but when writing's been your whole life for almost thirty years, losing that feels a little like losing yourself.

NORA

Congrats. You've discovered writer's block.

EVY

The ideas are gone, Nora. You understand? Gone. So, yeah. Maybe this looks crazy from the outside. But I needed to get away from everything familiar. I needed someplace isolated. Somewhere uncomfortable. Somewhere that didn't feel safe. Because horror's never really been about monsters for me. It's about the uncertainty. That feeling that something's wrong even when you can't explain why. And this place has that feeling. It kind of gets under your skin. You know? So, if I'm gonna write one last book, it can't come from comfort. It has to cost me something. Maybe everything. Otherwise, what's the point?

(Silence.)

NORA

You have any wine? A Buccella cabernet sauvignon would be nice.

EVY

I'm barely even settled in yet, Nora.

PERUSAL

NORA

Right. I think I have a bottle of Stag's Leap in my tote.

(She opens her tote and pulls out the bottle.)

EVY

Were you listening to anything I just said?

NORA

Of course. That's why I asked for wine.

EVY

You don't find it odd that you're asking for wine when you've already brought your own? And not even one you intended as a housewarming gift?

(Nora's coat slips from the hook.)

NORA

Housewarming? Did you… did you just see that? First the car, then the door, now this. And you call this a housewarming?

(Evy picks up the coat and drapes it over a chair. Nora digs through her purse and produces a wine key.)

Alright. Well, at least I can open the bottle. Please tell me you have stemware.

EVY

I have a coffee mug and a juice glass.

NORA

Needs must when the devil drives.

(As Nora opens the wine, Evy retrieves the coffee mug and a juice glass, perhaps giving them a quick rinse before bringing them to Nora. Nora opens the wine and pours for them both during the following.)

Okay, so tell me, Evy…

EVY

Mm-hm.

NORA

…What are you actually risking?

PERUSAL

EVY

What do you mean?

NORA

What're you sacrificing?

EVY

Where are you going with this, Nora?

NORA

You talk as if this is some sort of last stand. Like your career is on life support and this is your final, desperate attempt to shock yourself back into relevance. Fine. I get that you feel like you're running out of time and that you're banking on isolation to somehow produce one final best seller. But if it doesn't work, if you come out of this with no book, then what? What's the worst-case scenario? You're still obscenely wealthy. You're still the queen of horror. Your books have been adapted, re-adapted, and they'll continue being adapted long after you're gone. So, tell me. What do you actually stand to lose? Because from where I'm sitting, it sounds to me like you have no idea how little you're actually gambling compared to how grand you're making this all sound. And frankly it's a little tone-deaf but mostly it's obnoxious.

(She hands Evy wine in the coffee mug.)

EVY

Jesus, Nora.

NORA

Spare me the outrage, Evy.

EVY

You really came all this way just to tell me that? A phone call would've done it. A text, even.

NORA

Where's the fun in that?

EVY

Okay. Fine. Let's just strip all of it away then. Forget the money, the fame, the success. Let's just say I'm a writer who loves to write. Not because of what it gets me, but because it's the thing that's made me happiest for most of my life. I was that weird little goth kid from the beginning, Nora. The one reading books about ghosts and serial killers, drawing creepy pictures, scribbling dark little stories on whatever I could find, and handing them to anyone willing to read them. Staying up too late watching horror movies with my mother. You know, my parents could've tried to steer me away from all that dark shit, but they didn't. They saw something in it. In me. They let me explore it. Encouraged it, even. I like telling stories. I like entertaining people. And

PERUSAL

maybe sometimes something deeper slips in there too. Something a person didn't even realize they were carrying around until they saw it reflected back at them. That part means something to me, of course it does, but the real joy has always been the writing itself. And if I don't have that anymore… if I can't do this anymore… then I honestly don't know who I'm supposed to be without it. I just… I just want to fucking write, Nora. I need somewhere for it to go.

(Silence.)

And in case you've forgotten, this supposedly grand, dramatic, ego-driven scheme you think I've cooked up is actually gonna help you too. You do realize that, right?

NORA

So, you've said.

EVY

Something's shifted. I can feel it. And I can't do this alone. I can't lean on my reputation anymore.

NORA

You certainly had no problem leaning on your reputation when you pitched *An Unkind Woman* to Dry Point Press without even telling me, even though it's literally my job to handle pitches on your behalf. Or when you shut me out of the rights negotiations for *The Girl Under the Cypress Tree*.

EVY

Frankly, you're not very popular at Dry Point; they wouldn't even take a meeting with me unless I guaranteed you'd be kept out of it. And Galinsky happens to be a friend of mine, as you know.

NORA

I see.

EVY

You and I are friends too, Nora.

NORA

Are we?

EVY

Of course, we are. And we're business partners… of sorts. Sometimes the lines get blurred, and yeah, that can lead to bad decisions. But in the end, we share the same goal, right? I get to create the work I care about, and you make money, which is… what you care about.

NORA

Okay. Okay. So, you're not gonna change your mind then.

PERUSAL

EVY

You know I'm not.

(Silence.)

NORA

Thirty percent. That's what I need for this / book.

EVY

/ Thirty? Nora, that's twice your / usual cut.

NORA

/ I do all the legwork. I set up the meetings, negotiate the rights and advances, and I read every contract line by line. I protect you from bad deals. And I handle the promotions: signings, events, social media, interviews… Thirty percent isn't arbitrary, Evy. It covers the risk, the hustle, and the expertise. I don't just peddle your manuscript; I make sure it lands. I am at every meeting, on every call, solving every problem before it ever becomes your problem. I carry the risk of this project the way you carry the risk of writing it. Because if this book tanks, my credibility takes the hit too. And let me be clear: I don't hand your work to just anyone. Not because you know them, not because you like them. I work with the people I choose to work with, the people I know can deliver. And you? Your job is simple: write the best goddamn book you've ever written. Can you manage that?

EVY

I can manage that, yes.

NORA

Good. I'll have an agreement drawn up. In the meantime, we'll toast to it.

(She raises her juice glass of wine.)

Cheers.

(Evy hesitates but then raises her coffee mug of wine.)

EVY

Cheers.

(They drink.)

NORA

So… I see you've already been making friends up here. Getting a little cozy with the locals it seems.

PERUSAL

EVY

Who are you talking about?

NORA

The good-looking man. The one I passed on my way up the drive. Red pickup.

EVY

What? No. That was just the internet guy; he was setting up my Wi-Fi. Jesus, Nora, do you really think I have nothing better to do with my time? I'm not here to get laid.

NORA

Of course you're not. But if it happens, it happens. I mean, he did seem a little young for you, but why completely rule it out?

EVY

I think I'll survive.

NORA

A year is a very long time, Evy. You're really planning to spend every minute of every day hunched over your keyboard? You know, because I can think of far better things to do while I'm hunched over.

EVY

You are profoundly unwell. And it's irrelevant anyway because he's clearly not interested. And honestly, I'm not even sure I'm interested. Beneath all that rugged blue-collar nonsense, he's actually kind of a nerd. Sweet, I suppose. But awkward. Very, very awkward.

NORA

Is he coming back?

EVY

He has other things to handle for me, yes.

NORA

Ohhh. Other things to handle. Then I guess we'll see.

EVY

Alright. That's enough.

NORA

For now, at least. Why don't we just put a pin in it.

PERUSAL

EVY

No. There will be no pins. Nothing is being pinned, thank you very much.

NORA

The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

EVY

Please don't quote Shakespeare at me; it's overplayed.

(A clockwork crank falls from the lighthouse tower and hits the floor. Both women are startled.)

NORA

By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.

EVY

I wonder that you will still be talking.

(Evy moves to the crank and picks it up.)

NORA

What is it?

EVY

It's a… I don't know… Some kind of handle, maybe a… crank?

NORA

For what?

EVY

I'm not sure. But I plan to find out.

(Evy lowers her head, breathes in deeply and then exhales.)

NORA

You alright?

EVY

I just got really dizzy. And hot. Like, aggressively hot.

NORA

Do you need to sit down?

PERUSAL

EVY

Mm-hm.

NORA

Okay, uh… how about over here?

(Nora guides Evy to the bed. Evy sits.)

Give me that. Before you hurt yourself.

(She takes the crank from Evy and sets it down nearby.)

I'm gonna get you a glass of water.

(Nora rinses the juice glass, fills it with water, and then brings it to Evy during the following.)

EVY

I don't know what's wrong with me?

NORA

How're you sleeping?

EVY

Not great.

NORA

I'm not surprised. Anxiety about the book. And you've certainly been moody, that's for sure.

EVY

What the hell's that supposed to mean?

NORA

You're all over the place.

EVY

What's your point?

NORA

Welcome to perimenopause, my dear.

PERUSAL

EVY

Fuck you. This is not perimenopause. I think I'm just overtired and maybe a little dehydrated. I might even be coming down with something.

NORA

You're having a hot flash.

EVY

No. No way. I'm far too young for that.

NORA

You're almost fifty.

EVY

If you're rounding up, I suppose.

(Nora hands Evy the glass of water.)

NORA

Here, drink this.

(Evy takes the glass of water.)

Do you have an ice pack?

EVY

No. There's… there's no ice.

NORA

Alright. And what about a washcloth?

EVY

There's a hand towel in the bathroom. Just through that door.

NORA

(As Nora heads to the bathroom.)

Okay, so, listen. I'm gonna soak the towel in some cold water. You'll just need to hold it against your neck or your wrists; that'll cool you down faster.

EVY

Okay.

PERUSAL

NORA

I'll be right back. Don't move.

EVY

I'm not going anywhere.

(Nora moves into the bathroom, leaving the door slightly open, and turns on the light. Evy grows visibly overheated and unsteady. She fans herself; her breathing gets heavier. She suddenly gives in and lies down on the bed. There is a strange shift in lighting as the house darkens, except for the bathroom light, which stays on. A quietness settles over the house. Suddenly, a flashlight shines through a window. It scans across various windows as it moves about the exterior of the house. Evy stirs, then slowly sits upright, alert.)

Nora?

(She gets out of bed and starts for the bathroom. As she reaches the bathroom door…)

Nora?

(A beam of light from the flashlight outside cuts across her face. She turns toward it.)

Hello? Hello? Who's out there?

(The flashlight pivots from Evy toward the front door. Evy remembers the crank and grabs it. She then moves to the front door. A sudden, loud knock on the door startles her. She raises the cranks as she moves closer to the door. Another loud knock.)

I have a gun.

SAM

(Off.)

Oh, jeez. Well, I sure hope not.

EVY

I'm sorry, what?

SAM

(Off.)

I said I sure hope you don't have a gun.

PERUSAL

EVY

Well… I do.

SAM

(Off.)

Alright then. That's, uh… that's not ideal. So, here's what I'd like you to do. I'd like you to just set it down somewhere, maybe a good distance away from you. Then unlock the door and we'll talk this through.

EVY

Are you out of your goddamn mind? I am not opening that door. You need to leave. Right now. Or I'm calling the police.

SAM

(Off.)

Well, that'd be me. Deputy Sam Chadborn. Tell you what… I'll hold my badge up to the window so you can see I'm official.

(He turns his flashlight to another window and moves to it. Evy edges cautiously toward the same window, crank still raised. Suddenly, Sam presses his badge against the glass. Startled, Evy steps back but then moves in again to inspect the badge.)

You know that's not a gun you're holding there, right?

EVY

What?

SAM

(Off.)

You said you had a gun. But that thing there? That's very much not a gun. So, what do you say, huh? You gonna let me in?

(She lowers the crank and sighs.)

EVY

I'm opening the door.

SAM

(Off.)

Much obliged.

PERUSAL

(She turns on a light and then moves to the front door and opens it, revealing Sam.)

Evening.

EVY

What can I do for you, Deputy…?

SAM

Chad / born.

EVY

/ Chadborn.

SAM

Please. Sam's fine.

EVY

Sam.

SAM

So… I got a call from one of the locals. Older fella. Calls in fairly regular. Always worried about something that usually turns out to be not much of anything. Anyway, he mentioned he'd driven past the lighthouse a couple times, saw some lights on, some activity, and asked if someone might check it out. I knew the place had been sold, but honestly, I figured it'd still be sitting empty. Didn't expect to find somebody actually living out here. Looks more condemned than cozy, if I'm honest.

EVY

Well, I'm here. And it's mostly fine. And for the record, I happen to own the place.

SAM

Well, I'll be damned. So, you're the one who bought it at auction.

EVY

That's right.

SAM

Huh. I'd heard talk the town might turn it into a visitor center. Maybe a museum or something like that. Never crossed my mind somebody'd actually live here though. I mean, folks are glad someone wants to preserve the place. But living in it? Well… that takes some commitment.

PERUSAL

EVY

It's only temporary. And I suppose it doesn't hurt that I can keep an eye on the place while I go about my business.

SAM

I see. And what sort of business might that be?

EVY

It's not important. Honestly, the fewer people who know, the better.

SAM

You know, you're saying that to a man whose whole job is poking into other folks' business. But I can take a hint. And it looks like we cleared up our little mystery here anyway. I will say this though… I'm glad somebody's preserving the place. She's a beautiful old structure.

EVY

She is.

(Silence.)

SAM

Alright then. You have yourself a good night.

(He turns to go.)

EVY

I've heard it's haunted.

(Sam turns to her with a smile.)

SAM

That's what folks say. Of course, that's only if you believe in that sort of thing.

EVY

I believe in a good story.

SAM

Then I suppose you might be curious.

EVY

I might be.

PERUSAL

SAM

Alright then. Well, I can tell you what happened here but be warned. Some stories have a way of sticking with you. And sometimes they follow you into your dreams.

EVY

Why don't you have a seat, Sam? I have wine. How does a glass of Stag's Leap sound? It's all I've got.

SAM

Hm. Alright. I think I'll go with the Stag's Leap then.

EVY

Good choice. Sit wherever you like.

(Sam sits. Evy crosses to the cupboard, opens it, and takes out two proper wine glasses. She grabs the bottle of Stag's Leap and joins Sam, pouring them each a glass.)

I'm ready when you are.

SAM

Alright then. So… back in the late 1800s, a man by the name of Warner Frichet took over as the lighthouse keeper here. He moved in with his wife, Alma, and they expected to eventually have a couple of kids, so that maybe they could one day help out, possibly carry on what'd been started. But children never came. Warner blamed Alma for it, though really, nobody knew if she couldn't have children or if the problem was his. Either way, he couldn't let it go. Over time, his frustration grew, and folks began to say he changed, became mean-spirited. This lighthouse was his whole world. Every day he'd fuel the lamp, clean the lens, wind the clockwork, whatever it took to keep that light going. He also took very good care of these quarters and the grounds around it. He kept detailed records, made sure supplies were stocked, and sometimes he'd show visitors around. And Warner wanted Alma right there with him, working side by side. Not just living together but sharing the daily grind. To him, that's what a real marriage was. But Alma wasn't cut out for it. She was an artist, and she painted whenever she got the chance: seascapes, the cliffs, even the lighthouse itself. Helping with the maintenance made her feel like she was giving up the one thing that really mattered to her. Oh, and they argued about it all the time. He said she wasn't doing her part; she insisted he cared more for this lighthouse than for her. Neither one would back down. Then, one day, a letter arrived; one that Warner intercepted. It was from an influential art dealer and curator who had seen a few of Alma's paintings at a local shop in town and was interested in her work. The letter made mention of her talent and her unique style and floated the idea of an exhibition where her paintings could be shown with other up-and-coming artists. And of course, Warner read that as a threat, as proof that the world beyond the lighthouse might be calling her away from him. If she left, even if it was meant to be for a short

PERUSAL

time, he feared she might never come back. And that's what broke him. So, one night, Warner told Alma he needed help raising the weights back up so he could get the light turning again. Said he was feeling a little weak and needed an extra set of hands. Alma wasn't exactly excited about climbing the tower – it'd been ages since she'd gone up there – but she went anyway, following him up that spiral staircase and into the watch room. Now, what actually occurred from that point on has been the subject of years of speculation and debate. No one could ever really come to an agreement on the exact circumstances. What is known is that Warner was never charged with any wrongdoing, and he continued to run the lighthouse until one day he just… vanished.

(Silence.)

EVY

So, what happened?

SAM

What do you mean?

EVY

Up there. In the watch room.

SAM

Oh, yeah. Well, it depends. Which version do you want?

EVY

The darkest one.

SAM

Okay. Well, some folks think Alma found that letter tucked away and decided to slip something extra into Warner's dinner that night, which would explain why he later said he wasn't feeling well. She knew he'd need her help tending to that lantern. Others, though, believe it was Warner who feigned illness, knowing Alma would feel obligated to come up and assist him. It didn't really matter which version was true. Either way, things escalated, tempers flared, and the argument turned physical. At some point, Warner got his hands on the crank–

EVY

(She retrieves the crank.)

This crank.

PERUSAL

SAM

(Sam takes it and inspects it.)

Well, I'll be… that just might be the very one. Anyway, it seems Warner got his hands on it and swung it at Alma, but he missed, sending her scrambling backward, where she slipped and tumbled down the stairs. Or maybe it was Alma who grabbed the crank, swung it at Warner and lost her footing instead. Whichever way it happened, Alma ended up dead at the bottom of that staircase over there. No sign that she was pushed or struck. Just an unfortunate accident.

EVY

And which version do you believe?

SAM

Neither.

EVY

Neither?

SAM

Well, I mean, the Frichets were real people, of course, and they did take care of this lighthouse for many years. And the way folks tell it, Warner did have a reputation for being a little standoffish but not mean exactly. Just quiet. Alma, though… people seemed to like her a lot. From what I understand, she did paint quite a bit, and folks around town would buy her work now and then. Some people even claim they've spotted her paintings still hanging in old taverns and furniture shops nearby.

EVY

I see.

SAM

You seem disappointed.

EVY

Very much the opposite.

SAM

Good. So, maybe you could use it then.

EVY

Use it how?

PERUSAL

SAM

In one of your books.

(Silence.)

Truth be told… I'm a pretty big fan, Miss Wray. You remember that little collection you put out a few years back? Those leather-bound booklets, detectives' notes from your novels. Scribbles, half-finished thoughts, things they noticed while they were working a case. I carry one around most days. Don't know why I'm asking, of course you remember it. Anyway, my favorite is Roy Tibbits. From the Clap of Thunder series. Just a hell of a character. And, well, if it wouldn't be too much trouble… would you mind signing it?

EVY

Uh… sure. Of course.

SAM

Oh, that's… well, that's just great. Thank you.

(He pulls a leather-bound booklet out of his jacket pocket and offers it to Evy.)

EVY

Is my signature okay, or would you like it personal–?

SAM

Personalized… if it's not too much trouble.

EVY

Not at all.

(Evy takes the booklet from Sam and goes to her desk. Sam follows, still holding the crank. She sits, picks up a pen, and prepares to sign.)

SAM

So… this is where it happens, huh?

EVY

Where what happens?

SAM

Your next book. Right here. This desk. That computer. This lighthouse. That's why you're out here, isn't it?

(Evy smiles and then signs the booklet, reading aloud as she writes.)

PERUSAL

EVY

"To Sam Chadborn: Detective Roy Tibbits has nothing on you."

(She hands the booklet back to Sam.)

There you go.

SAM

Incredible. Thank you.

EVY

(Eying the crank in his hand.)

Sam…

SAM

Yeah?

EVY

That… that stays here.

(Sam glances down, realizing he's still holding it.)

SAM

Oh. Well, I'll be. I didn't even realize I was still holding it.

EVY

I mean, technically it belongs to me. But more importantly it belongs to this house. And you know… it might even be some kind of artifact.

SAM

I expect it is. Here you go.

(He hands her the crank, and she places it on the desk.)

Well… I think it's about time I got out of your hair.

(He starts toward the front door. Evy follows him.)

EVY

Back home to the wife and kids.

PERUSAL

SAM

Oh, jeez. I wish. Never had much luck in the love department. No, I've still got my shift to finish. Late one. But yeah… other than that, it's just me at home.

EVY

I'm sorry. That sounded flippant. I didn't mean it that way at all.

SAM

No, no. Don't you worry about it. Happens a lot.

EVY

I still feel awful.

SAM

Don't. I take no offense. You have yourself a good night, alright? And if you need anything out here, anything at all, you just give me a call.

(He hands her a business card.)

EVY

Thank you, Sam.

SAM

My pleasure.

(He exits. Evy remains still for a moment. She's slightly disoriented, unsettled by the sense that time isn't moving the way it should. After a moment, she pulls herself together, reaches for her cellphone, taps the screen, and plays the following.)

MOM

(Voicemail.)

Hi sweetheart. Just checking in. Your father says to remind you that storms make good writing weather, though I'm not sure he's ever actually written anything besides a strongly worded letter to the condo board about the neighbor's wind chimes. Which, admittedly, could've used some aggressive editing. Anyway, we love you. Call when you can.

DAD

(Voicemail.)

Hey, kiddo. Your mother's worried because you haven't answered in a few days, so now I'm officially worried too, which means you've managed to upset the natural order of things. Listen,

PERUSAL

I know when you get into a book you tend to disappear for a while. And while we're happy that you might be writing again, we're a little worried. Just give us a ring when you get the chance. Proud of you. Always.

PUBLICIST

(Voicemail.)

Evy, hi. It's Claire. People are starting to ask questions, and Dry Point would really love literally anything I can tease about a possible new book. Also, one of the trades ran a piece saying you've either retired or "gone fully recluse," so congratulations on that becoming your brand. And Nora's being mysteriously evasive, which usually means she knows something I don't. If you're writing, great. If you're spiraling, slightly less great. Either way, call me back.

EVY'S NEW YORK BOYFRIEND

(Voicemail.)

Hey. Uh… it's Daniel. Listen, I know we were keeping things casual, but you kind of dropped off the face of the earth, you know? Not sure where you are. Maybe you're just not interested anymore. I keep hoping I'll bump into you on the street or catch you over at The Odeon. Anyway, just calling to make sure you're still alive. Which, wow… hearing myself say that out loud, I realize is probably not the smoothest message to leave a horror writer. So… uh… alright. Call me if you want. Or don't. Bye.

(Evy taps her phone. She then pours herself another glass of Stag's Leap, crosses to her desk, and settles into the chair, preparing to write. She pauses, takes a deep breath, and logs onto her computer. She opens a blank document, studies the empty page for a moment, then begins to type… slowly at first, then faster as she finds her stride. Time passes. The lights subtly shift, suggesting either its progression or its distortion. At last, Tom enters from the bathroom, carrying a wet hand towel.)

TOM

Maybe a little ice in this'll help some?

EVY

(Still typing.)

Oh. Thank you. That's a great idea. There's some in the kitchen.

(Tom gets some ice, puts it in the towel, and brings it to Evy during the following.)

PERUSAL

TOM

Sorry you're feeling rough. Seems a little early for the flu, but with a fever, who knows.

EVY

It's not the flu.

TOM

Alright then, Dr. Wray. So, what is it then?

EVY

I'd rather not say. But don't worry, it's not contagious.

TOM

Good to know. Hey, so, the, uh… the concrete's fully set up out there. Solid as it's gonna get. Moved the cable over to the new pole. Swapped out some of the wiring in here too. Ran what I could through the walls without tearing anything up.

EVY

What do I / owe you?

TOM

/ What're you working on there?

EVY

(She looks up from her computer.)

Hm? Oh. This?

TOM

That the next one? The big masterpiece?

EVY

Masterpiece? God, no. All I can really hope for is that it's better than the ones that came before it.

TOM

How many have there been?

EVY

Well, if, uh… I suppose if we're just counting novels… sixty-seven.

PERUSAL

TOM

Sixty-seven? You serious? That's… what do they call it… prolific.

EVY

God, I hate that word. 'Prolific.' People throw it around like it automatically means something good. Like if somebody pumps out three books in a year everybody's supposed to jump to their feet and applaud. "Wow. So prolific." Yeah? Or maybe they just don't know when to stop. Because making a lot of stuff? That's easy. Honestly, I think almost anybody could do it if they lowered their standards enough. You can crank out book after book after book, but if most of it's forgettable, then who gives a damn? That's not prolific. That's just filling shelves. To me, the work has to hold up. That's the difference. Your tenth book still surprises people. Your twentieth still has something to say. You're not just repeating yourself because you found a formula that sells. And that part's hard. A hell of a lot harder than people think. It's knowing when something's bad even when everybody around you tells you it's fine. It's throwing pages out and then starting over. It's working when you're exhausted and not letting yourself get lazy just because you could probably get away with it. And yeah, of course talent matters. But not that tortured-artist bullshit. I mean real talent. Earned talent. Taste. Instinct. The kind you build over years until you know almost immediately when something lands and when it doesn't. That's prolific to me. Not just making a lot of work but making a lot of good work. That's rare.

(Silence.)

TOM

Are you prolific?

EVY

Not especially. I just happen to be admired by a handful of very influential people who insist I'm a genius, which only proves they aren't.

(Tom laughs.)

What?

TOM

You're a funny lady.

EVY

I wasn't trying to be.

TOM

I guess that's why it's funny.

EVY

And don't call me "lady."

PERUSAL

TOM

Alright then. My mistake.

EVY

I'm a woman.

TOM

And a funny one at that.

EVY

And don't call me "funny" like it's some kind of compliment.

TOM

Wasn't aware it wasn't.

EVY

When men call women "funny," they're usually implying she's quaint. Diminished. Amusing.

TOM

Now hold on a second. That isn't what I meant.

EVY

Then either you're provoking me or your testing me.

TOM

Pretty sure I'm doing neither.

EVY

I thought you said you didn't like things getting awkward.

TOM

I don't.

EVY

Then tread lightly because you're getting very close.

TOM

Close to what? Is that a warning?

EVY

No. Just… an observation.

PERUSAL

(Silence.)

TOM

You wanna know what I think?

EVY

Not particularly.

TOM

I think you hide behind all that talk: standards, discipline, saying you're not all that prolific when everything about you says otherwise. You're complicated. Maybe even a little weird. Little hard to get a read on. I kind of like that, truth be told. I work with live wires. Been around enough of them to know one when I see it. And you? You're charged, no doubt about it. Nothing you do is halfway. Even your hot flashes come with a whole damn lecture attached…

EVY

Careful.

TOM

…You're pretty sharp. A little intimidating too.

EVY

Intimidating?

TOM

The way you look at me. Like you're deciding whether I've earned a spot in one of your books.

EVY

Maybe I am.

TOM

So, am I doomed?

EVY

Undecided.

TOM

Well, if you're gonna write me, at least let me help you with the details.

EVY

Such as?

PERUSAL

TOM

For starters… I didn't come back today just to check on the concrete.

EVY

No?

TOM

No.

EVY

Then why did you come back?

TOM

Because I believed you when you said you wanted to feel something that cost you.

EVY

I never said that. I mean, yes… yes, I did say that. Just not to you.

(Tom steps a little closer.)

What're you doing?

TOM

What any sensible rugged blue-collar nerd would do. I'm gonna kiss you.

(Evy kisses him instead. He responds immediately, and they kiss with urgency, intensifying as they move toward the bed. Their movement is clumsy, bumping into furniture and fumbling as they remove a few items of clothing. The lighting shifts to a subtly surreal state, then gradually fades into night. The window near the desk rattles, blows open, and then shuts abruptly on its own. The front door slowly opens by itself and then slams closed, causing a small box on a kitchen shelf to tip over and spill its contents into a pan. Inside the woodstove, the logs shift slightly. The load door closes on its own, and a fire ignites, burning brightly for a short period before extinguishing. The stage returns to darkness. Silence as the lighting gradually transitions to morning. A knock at the front door.)

NORA

(Off.)

Evy? Evy are you here?

(Nora tries the handle and pulls on it a couple of times.)

Goddamnit.

PERUSAL

(She stops and then remembers to push on the door. It swings open.)

Right. Push, not pull.

(She calls out.)

Evy!

(Evy jolts upright in bed, groggy and disoriented.)

EVY

Nora?

NORA

In the flesh.

(Evy reaches for a robe or shirt, pulling it around herself as she gets out of bed.)

EVY

What the hell are you doing? You can't just walk in here.

NORA

The door was unlocked.

EVY

An unlocked door is not an invitation to let yourself in.

NORA

You're not alone.

EVY

What?

NORA

(She looks toward the bed.)

I spy with my little eye…

EVY

You need to go.

PERUSAL

NORA

Oh, come on. We're adults. It's fine. I came to bring you into town for brunch. Your friend can join us if he wants. Or she. I mean, we are in Maine, after all.

EVY

You could've texted. Or called.

NORA

Please. You wouldn't have answered. Or you would've agreed to meet me and then not shown up. So, I decided to come get you and drag you out of this lugubrious lantern.

(Sam – not Tom – sits up in bed.)

SAM

Well, I've got the day off, so I'd be happy to join you ladies for brunch.

NORA

Deputy Chadborn.

SAM

Ms. Collins.

EVY

This cannot be.

NORA

Truth is truth to the end of reckoning.

SAM

The thief doth fear each bush an officer. I know a little Shakespeare myself.

EVY

Thief? What do you mean, thief? Nora, what did you do?

SAM

Oh, nothing too serious. Just a small misunderstanding mixed with a bit of absent-mindedness over at the Filigree Folly. Cozy little jewelry shop in town. Run by Gus and Charlie Watson. Nice fellas.

NORA

Adorable couple. Anyway, I tried on this beautiful bracelet to see how it looked, got a little distracted, and somehow wandered out of the store with it still on my wrist.

PERUSAL

SAM

Honest mistake. Happens more often than folks like to admit.

NORA

In my defense, the place was absolutely packed with shiny things: rings, cameos, brooches, pendants, pins. Everywhere I turned, something sparkled. I didn't know where to look, let alone what to choose. So, I thought I'd step out for a quick lunch, clear my head, make a decision… and then, of course, head right back.

SAM

Which is where I joined Ms. Collins.

EVY

At the shop.

SAM

No. At the restaurant.

NORA

Much to my surprise.

SAM

Official business, of course.

NORA

Though we had a perfectly nice meal anyway.

SAM

We sure did. That is, once we got past the whole "ma'am, you seem to have wandered out of Filigree Folly with unpaid merchandise" matter.

NORA

Just a little snag in our budding friendship.

EVY

Amazing.

SAM

Anyway… maybe I should get dressed and wash up. Mind if I use your bathroom?

PERUSAL

EVY

You know where it is.

(Sam gathers his clothes and exits to the bathroom. Nora removes her earrings and slips them into her tote as Evy watches, disapproving.)

What has gotten into you?

NORA

Never mind that. Just get yourself ready. Wear something nice, and a little makeup wouldn't hurt. If people hear a celebrity's in town, it could help us out. Stir up a little interest in the book.

EVY

That's exactly what I don't want. Not right now, anyway. I'm not leaving this house. If you're hungry, I can make you something.

NORA

Oh, splendid idea. Let's see what we've got.

(Nora moves to the refrigerator and opens it.)

Okay, well, unless you've developed a taste for mildew, I'm afraid you have no food.

EVY

There must be something in there we can use.

NORA

No eggs. No yogurt. No fruit. Nothing that ever remotely resembled a living creature.

(She rummages through the refrigerator.)

Let's see… Oh! Some possibly expired creamer… half a lemon… a jar of what might be mustard… and something I dearly hope is soup but strongly resembles a container of bird excrement.

(She opens the freezer.)

Ah! Ice! I thought you said you didn't have ice.

EVY

There wasn't any.

NORA

Well, there is now, which means this house clearly intends for us to at least have a drink.

PERUSAL

EVY

It's ten in the morning, Nora.

NORA

Brunch was invented by wealthy people to make drinking at an otherwise unforgivable hour seem respectable.

(She closes the freezer and begins opening cupboards.)

Now then, where would a woman hiding from the world stash the prosecco?

EVY

I don't have prosecco.

NORA

I see you now at least have proper wine glasses. Do you have champagne?

EVY

No.

NORA

Vodka? Tomato juice? Any kind of juice?

EVY

No.

NORA

Good Lord, Evy. What exactly are you living on? How are you hydrating? Surely even hermits require electrolytes.

EVY

I have coffee and oatmeal.

(She moves toward the small kitchen shelf and stove where the tipped box and pan sit. She picks up the pan and peers inside.)

At least I think this is oatmeal.

NORA

(Having followed Evy.)

I've never seen oatmeal that color.

(She notices the tipped box.)

PERUSAL

Ah. Here we go.

(She takes the box from the shelf.)

Oh, dear.

EVY

What? What is it?

NORA

Brunch has seemingly taken a very dark turn, Evy…

(She turns the box toward Evy.)

… This appears to be rat poison.

EVY

Rat poison?

NORA

(Reading.)

"Guaranteed to rid your home of rats and mice."

EVY

Does it mention literary agents?

NORA

You should be so lucky. And for the record, if you're planning to off me with poison, you'd have more success with a lobster frittata than with oatmeal.

(Sam enters from the bathroom.)

SAM

How're things going out here?

EVY

We're doing alright. Except… listen, Tom–

NORA

Sam.

EVY

Sorry, what?

PERUSAL

SAM

I'm Sam.

EVY

Deputy Chadborn.

SAM

Yeah, but Sam's fine.

EVY

Where's your shirt?

SAM

Good question.

(He spots it on or near the desk.)

There it is.

(As he does, he notices the crank on the desk and tucks it just behind his belt.)

NORA

Alright, that's enough stalling. Let's go, Evy.

EVY

No. As a matter of fact, I'd like the two of you to leave.

NORA

Sam, would you mind giving us a minute?

SAM

Sure thing. I'll be right outside.

(Sam exits through the front door.)

EVY

I need space, Nora.

NORA

I've given you space. And frankly, how much more space do you need? You have this lighthouse all to yourself. All the way out here. And an entire ocean just outside that window there.

PERUSAL

EVY

And I need time. You said you'd give me at least five days to start writing, to get inspired, to find my footing, before we checked in again. And I'd really appreciate it if you didn't feel the need to check on me anyway. You know, because it really pisses me off.

NORA

I gave you seven days. Seven. And that was more than three months ago.

EVY

What? Three months ago? No. No, that's not right. You're messing with me.

NORA

Am I? You might want to take another look at our latest contract.

EVY

I haven't even had a chance to read it yet.

NORA

That's odd. Because you signed it.

EVY

No, I didn't. I haven't signed anything. I haven't even seen it.

NORA

Well, I certainly wouldn't recommend signing a contract without reading it first. Though, at this point, whether you read it or not is irrelevant.

EVY

There is no contract, Nora. I haven't seen a contract.

NORA

You're wrong. Promotional obligations… at my discretion. Appearances. Interviews. Signings. Whenever I decide, within reason. And I'd say brunch falls well within reason. All you have to do is sit there and smile, Evy. Enjoy something nice to eat, maybe have a drink or two. And if someone happens to recognize you and it creates a little buzz, all the better.

EVY

Show me the goddamn contract, Nora.

NORA

Check your email.

PERUSAL

EVY

I want to see the original hard copy.

NORA

There isn't one. No one does hard-copy contracts anymore.

(Evy seethes for a moment, then suddenly crosses to her computer. She manipulates the keyboard, pulling up her email and searching for the message with the signed contract. She scans it with trepidation, occasionally glancing at Nora with disdain, her eyes finally widening as she sees that she has indeed signed it.)

EVY

Nora…

NORA

And the date. Did you notice the date you signed it?

(Evy looks again at the document.)

EVY

I… I don't understand. I mean… it doesn't seem possible.

NORA

Well, it sounds like you're finally getting what you came here for. A classic be careful what you wish for, though I know how much you despise aphorisms. Almost as much as you despise Shakespeare. So, here's my advice: pull yourself together, clear out whatever ghosts you've managed to stir up in this place and then get back to the job you signed up for: finishing the book. Because if memory serves, that little detail is spelled out quite clearly in the contract as well. Which means you can skip brunch today. And don't worry. Whether or not Sam is the kiss-and-tell type, I promise I won't press him too hard for details about last night. I'll see you soon, Evy.

(Nora exits through the front door. Off.)

Looks like it's just you and me for lunch, Sam. Evy prefers not to be disturbed. Though one might argue she already is.

(Evy stands quietly for a moment. She then takes the Stag's Leap, kept just out of Nora's sight in the previous scene and somehow always full, along with a wine glass. She pours herself a drink, takes a sip, and sits at her desk to write. The lights slowly shift to dusk as she continues. Suddenly, raised voices are heard arguing in the tower above. Evy stops writing, rises, and moves cautiously to the spiral staircase, pausing to listen.)

PERUSAL

NOTE: The following dialogue does not need to be fully intelligible. It should feel heated and tense, with clear emotional stakes even if some words are indistinct. Think of voices cutting through static on an old radio. The voices, performed by the actor playing Evy if recorded or by Nora if live, and the actor playing Sam, may sound distant or hollow to emphasize atmosphere and intensity over clarity.

WARNER

Easy now. The teeth are catching. Hear it? Keep the line straight, Alma. If it slips, the sea comes up through the floorboards.

ALMA

Then let it. I am tired of feeding oil to a star that has never once looked at me.

WARNER

The weight must fall clean. The lens turns or it does not. There is no poetry in it.

ALMA

No. Only circling. Always circling. Like a gull with one eye stitched shut.

WARNER

Ships depend upon this light. Men out there with nothing beneath them but black water and God's bad temper.

ALMA

And so, the tower eats us alive to keep them safe.

WARNER

Your paintings have filled your head with vapor.

ALMA

They are the only proof I have that my hands belong to me.

WARNER

Your hands belong to the work.

ALMA

The work. The lamp. The brass. The clock inside the wall ticking itself hollow. You speak of this tower as if it were a church.

WARNER

Mind yourself.

PERUSAL

ALMA

I have minded myself nearly into dust.

WARNER

That letter has turned you strange.

ALMA

You read it like a thief.

WARNER

It came beneath my roof.

ALMA

It came bearing my name.

WARNER

It came like rot.

ALMA

You fear it because it opened a window.

WARNER

I fear nothing. Watch the drum.

ALMA

It groans like a living thing.

WARNER

The brake is slipping. Hold it steady.

ALMA

Perhaps the light wishes to die. Every night it swings its great blind eye across the water searching for souls to keep company with. I know the feeling.

WARNER

Enough. Give me the crank.

ALMA

No.

PERUSAL

WARNER

Alma–

ALMA

Suppose the dark came just once. Suppose every ship was forced to drift by its own miserable instinct. Suppose the sea swallowed this whole machine bolt by bolt. Would you mourn me then, Warner, or only the lantern.

WARNER

Do not test me.

ALMA

Then do not cage me.

(Silence. Evy stands there quietly, listening, expecting more, but none comes. After a moment, she draws a breath and ascends the spiral staircase, disappearing into the tower above. The lights shift in their usual strange way, then dim to near darkness. A barely visible human form suddenly falls from above, striking the floor below. End of Act 1.)

PERUSAL

ACT TWO

Continuous from Act 1, though now set fully in the late 1800s. Dusk.

(Complete silence. The lighting has returned to a natural state, no longer heightened or surreal. The desk is gone, in its place, a stool and an easel. A painting rests there, covered in a large muslin cloth and turned away from the audience. The body at the foot of the stairs is Warner. Alma descends the staircase, stepping carefully around him without touching him.)

ALMA

Warner? Warner?

(She stops and looks around the room. She considers moving the body but then decides against it. She crosses to the closet, grabs a coat, and pulls it on as she heads for the front door. The door sticks when she tries it. She works it a moment until it gives, opening to reveal FREDERICK BOOTHBY and ENID PHILBRICK on the other side, Freddie just about to knock.)

FREDDIE

Alma Frichet. Where are you off to in such a hurry? Did you not receive my note?

ALMA

Mister Boothby.

FREDDIE

Please… Freddie.

ALMA

Yes, of course. Freddie. I'm sorry. My husband handles the correspondence. It's possible he didn't pass it along; he keeps himself quite busy with things about the lighthouse, as you can imagine.

FREDDIE

Of course. Then forgive me for arriving unannounced. Miss Philbrick has come up from Boston especially to meet you. And to see your work.

ALMA

Miss Philbrick?

FREDDIE

Yes. She's closely acquainted with Isabella Stewart Gardner. I imagine you've heard the name.

PERUSAL

ALMA

Oh. Well, yes, of course. I have indeed. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Philbrick.

ENID

Enid, please. I may spend my time among society, but I'm not much for formality. It's tiring.

ALMA

I imagine so. Well, as you can see from the state of things here, we don't get out much. We live simply. And on very little.

ENID

Many artists of some renown have begun with far less. There's no fault in it. If anything, it lends a certain… authenticity to the work.

ALMA

Authenticity. Yes. I suppose that's one way of putting it.

FREDDIE

Miss Philbrick has a keen eye for such things. She wouldn't have made the journey otherwise.

ENID

No, I wouldn't. I've learned it's rarely the grand studios that hold the most interest. It's places like this. Where something is still… developing.

ALMA

Then I hope it does not disappoint. I've had little formal training. Only what I've managed on my own time.

ENID

May we come in? I should very much like to see some of your work, though it seems we've caught you on your way out?

ALMA

No. No, that can wait. Yes. Please, do come in. I have a painting just here I can show you.

FREDDIE

Excellent.

(Alma ushers them in and steers them straight to the easel, making sure they don't catch sight of Warner's body. She hovers awkwardly beside the painting as Enid and Freddie wait.)

PERUSAL

ENID

Do you mind?

ALMA

Oh. Right. Of course. I'll just–

(She pulls the muslin cloth off and, thinking quickly, takes it and drapes it over Warner's body as Enid and Freddie scrutinize the painting.)

ENID

Hm.

FREDDIE

Ah.

(Alma joins them.)

ENID

I must say, Alma… I've come a long distance on very little certainty. Only Freddie's assurances, and the two rather modest studies he was kind enough to send me, which hinted at a sensitivity not yet shaped into anything fixed. But this… this is more difficult. At first glance, one is tempted to call it faithful. The hand is steady, the eye attentive, everything appears to be where it ought to be. And yet, the longer one looks, the less it behaves. It begins to slip. Not away from reality, exactly, but out from under it. There's a kind of insistence in it. As though the subject has been pressed too far, seen too closely, and in that closeness, something has shifted. Not enough to name, but enough to be felt. It does not flatter what it observes. Nor does it condemn it. It simply presents it until the presentation itself becomes questionable. I find myself looking for the place where it resolves, where it settles into something familiar. But it refuses that comfort. One could argue it lacks restraint. That it goes further than is necessary. And yet… stopping short would have been the safer choice.

(Silence.)

ALMA

You're disappointed. I'm sorry.

ENID

On the contrary. It's exceptional. I should like to see more.

FREDDIE

Where is your husband, by the way?

ENID

Why do you ask her that, Freddie?

PERUSAL

FREDDIE

Only that he may wish to be present for this. He might have a view of things we ought to hear or concerns we should address.

ENID

Nonsense. This is not his work. It's Alma's. And I suspect he does rather more than handle the correspondence that comes to the house. Likely he decides what reaches her at all.

FREDDIE

Perhaps. Though a household tends to run more smoothly when certain courtesies are observed.

ENID

Courtesy is one thing. Permission is another. I have no interest in confusing the two.

ALMA

He's… he's not here just now.

FREDDIE

I see.

ENID

All the better. Then we may speak plainly. You must show me the rest. Everything you've kept back. Sketches, studies… whatever you have. Especially what you were not intending anyone to see.

ALMA

I'm not certain there's much worth–

ENID

There is. I can tell there is. Work like this does not arrive alone. May we?

ALMA

Everything else is in the boathouse.

ENID

The boathouse?

ALMA

That's where Warner asked me to store them. He felt they cluttered the house and wanted them out of the way.

PERUSAL

ENID

They'll be ruined out there. The damp air, the salt, the shifts in temperature, insects, rodents… It's entirely reckless.

FREDDIE

Perhaps we should have a look before the sun sets.

ENID

Yes. Immediately. Whatever remains, we must see it as it is before it's lost entirely, and determine what, if anything, may still be preserved. How long have they been out there?

ALMA

Weeks. Months. As soon as I finish one, Warner removes it from the house.

ENID

And they've been out there that long? Unprotected?

ALMA

It seemed easier.

ENID

Easier for whom? No Matter. Come. We shouldn't waste another moment.

(She starts off.)

Freddie.

FREDDIE

Right behind you.

(Enid exits. Freddie lingers a moment, noticing the muslin cloth on the floor.)

Alma?

ALMA

Yes?

FREDDIE

What's this here? Are you working on a sculpture of some sort? It seems rather a departure from your other work.

PERUSAL

ALMA

No, no. Nothing of the sort. Just dirty linens. Another household chore I've yet to tend to.

FREDDIE

Linens.

ALMA

Yes. Just that.

FREDDIE

Of course.

ALMA

(Gesturing to the door.)

After you.

(Freddie hesitates, then gives a small nod and exits. Alma lingers a beat behind him before following, leaving the door ajar. A quiet moment passes. Then the "body" twitches beneath the cloth, followed by a series of awkward, increasingly impatient wiggles until he manages to sit bolt upright, the cloth still draped over him like a bedsheet ghost. He rises, shuffles blindly around, nearly tripping over himself as he tries to pull the cloth off and only succeeds in tangling it further. He lurches toward the door just as it swings shut on its own. He walks straight into it with a dull thud, winces, and collapses backward in a heap, the cloth settling back over him as if nothing happened. Evy appears from the bathroom and spots the body on the floor. We have returned to present time, morning.)

EVY

What the hell are you doing, Sam?

SAM

(Still under the cloth.)

I… I don't rightly know.

(She spots the easel and the painting.)

EVY

And what's this? Where's my desk? My computer?

PERUSAL

SAM

(Still under the cloth.)

Wish I could tell you, but I don't know.

EVY

That's not an answer. You were out here. Alone. And all of this… wasn't here. Certainly not five minutes ago.

SAM

(Still under the cloth.)

Doesn't look any different to me, though I don't exactly have the best vantage point from here.

EVY

Do you mean to tell me you're trapped under a… what is that? A bedsheet?

SAM

(Still under the cloth.)

If it is, it's got a mighty low thread count.

(Evy moves to Sam and pulls the cloth off him.)

EVY

What are you wearing?

(Sam gets up off the floor. He's dressed in late-1800s lighthouse keeper's work clothes: overalls, a long-sleeved shirt, worn boots.)

SAM

You're asking a lot of questions of a man who just lost a battle with a whole mess of fabric.

(A knock at the door.)

EVY

What!?

TOM

(Off.)

Uhhhhh… It's Tom.

PERUSAL

SAM

(Calling out.)

Is that Thomas McKay?

TOM

(Off.)

Last I checked.

SAM

(To Evy.)

Well, I'll be damned. So that's the Tom you were talking about. Guess I've got myself some competition then. He's good-looking, I'll give him that. And I got a few years on him, sure, but I reckon I can still hold my own.

EVY

This isn't a competition. You understand that, right? And if it were, neither of you would qualify.

TOM

(Off.)

Would you mind opening the door? I've got my hands full.

(Eveyln moves to the front door and opens it.)

Much obliged.

(Tom enters, carrying Evy's laptop and a brand-new monitor. Evy closes the door behind him.)

EVY

What's all this?

TOM

(Setting everything down on the kitchen table.)

Your laptop. And a new monitor. Monitor's on me. I'll have to charge you for the work, though.

EVY

Now, hold on / just a damn minute.

PERUSAL

TOM

(He starts to set things up. Re: the laptop.)

/ This thing was a bit of a mess, Evy. No offense. Malware piled on top of malware. I ran a full scan twice: first pass took care of the big stuff, second pass caught what was tucked away out of sight. Cleared the junk, shut down a whole mess of background nonsense that was chewing through your memory. Trimmed up your startup, too. Got your OS updated; you were a few patches behind, holes big enough to float a lobster skiff through. That's all buttoned up now. Couple drivers were just about ready to give out, especially the graphics one. That flicker you kept seeing? That was it giving up the ghost. I wiped it and put in a clean install.

(Taps the monitor.)

This ought to help. Picture's sharper, easier on the eyes. And don't worry; I didn't go nosing through your files. Not my business. Kept to the bones of it, just got things running the way they should. Starts quicker now. Runs smoother. Connection ought to hold steady. Truth be told, that's about as clean as she's gonna get without swapping parts or replacing her outright. Anyway… you asked me to fix it. So, I fixed it.

(To Sam.)

How you doing, Deputy Chadborn?

SAM

Doing just fine. And you, Tom?

TOM

Can't complain. Staying out of trouble, for the most part.

SAM

Glad to hear it. Been a while since I've had to bring you in. What was that again? Drunk and disorderly?

TOM

No, no. I wasn't drunk. But I did hit the fella. Put his jaw ought of place. So… just the disorderly, I guess.

EVY

Are we all caught up, gentlemen?

(Nora pushes the front door open.)

NORA

Success!

PERUSAL

EVY

Oh God No.

NORA

I'm always a sight for sore eyes, Evy.

EVY

I'd rather have ocular herpes, Nora.

NORA

I must say that this little shift you've been going through has done wonders for your demeanor, my dear.

(She notices the painting.)

Oh. There it is.

(She moves to it.)

It's beautiful. Really. And you've got it in a great spot. Listen, you should have this appraised; it could be worth quite a bit. Tom's already pulled the others out of the boathouse, packed them up, and moved them to the old oil house.

EVY

He's done what?

NORA

Relax. They're perfectly safe, and still very much on the property.

TOM

Wasn't much trouble. Just figured they'd be better off someplace dry.

NORA

Honestly, Evy, I think you might be sitting on a small fortune. You really should have someone take a look–

EVY

Alright, just stop. All of you. For one second, stop talking and listen to me. Because it feels like I've wandered into the middle of some fever dream. And maybe I sound like a lunatic saying that, but at least I'm aware enough to question it, which is more than I can say for the rest of you. I didn't come all the way out here to get dragged into other people's nonsense. None of this was part of the plan. I came here to work. To focus. To strip everything down and get something real out of it. And instead, I've got… what? Claudius over here and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern over there, all three of you acting like there isn't something deeply strange going on in this

PERUSAL

house. Like I'm not supposed to notice that I'm being kept off balance. And why? Actually, you know what? Never mind. I don't even care why anymore. I'm done pretending this is charming or quirky or remotely acceptable. I don't need company, I don't need commentary, and I definitely don't need whatever this is. So let me be completely clear: I want to be left alone. Because none of this matters to me. Not compared to what I came here to do. And if that sounds cold or rude, fine. At least it's honest.

(Silence.)

NORA

You're right, Evy. You do sound like a lunatic. Though I appreciate the Shakespeare reference. That said… I have been pushing you a little too hard. The book is what matters right now. Everything else can wait… the artwork included. It's safe. For the moment. Just remember it's yours. So, don't be too quick to hand it over.

EVY

Which reminds me of something else I wasn't ready to hand over. The crank. Where is it? Because it was right here. On the desk. I put it there. I know I did. So, which one of you took it?

SAM

Uh… That'd be me.

NORA

You little devil, Sam.

TOM

Not exactly what folks might expect from someone in your line of work, Sam.

SAM

Well, like I say… happens more often than folks like to admit. I didn't take it for the money or anything like that. Just thought it'd fit nicely alongside my collection of detective mysteries. More of a keepsake than anything else. I'll get it back to you right away, Evy.

TOM

And for what it's worth, I really was just trying to help. With the computer, the artwork, all of it. Didn't mean to upset you. Just figured you had enough on your plate already. Sorry, Evy.

EVY

Everyone out. Now.

(Sam and Tom exit. Nora lingers.)

PERUSAL

NORA

Now that the boys are gone, let me be clear about something. I know you, Evy. Better than almost anyone. Which is why this whole "everyone's conspiring against me" thing doesn't entirely convince me. Maybe you're restless because the work isn't coming. Irritable, suspicious, stuck in your own head after too much time alone out here, trying to force something into existence that simply isn't there. Or maybe it's something else. I've seen you like this before. The intensity. The fixation. The way you circle around ideas before you're ready to admit you've found something. There's energy there again. Focus, even. It's the most alive I've seen you in years. Which makes me wonder if all this anger and paranoia and talk about people keeping you off balance is really about Sam and Tom, or me, for that matter, at all. Or if you already know the book is working and you're laying the groundwork to keep it away from me. Because if there really is something here, I know exactly what you'll do next. You'll bury it. Protect it. Convince yourself nobody deserves access to it before it's finished, including me. And maybe I'm wrong. Maybe there's nothing there at all. But I don't think so. And neither do you.

(Silence.)

Either way, just finish the goddamn book. Then we can both get the hell out of here.

(She exits, leaving the door open. Evy tries to compose herself. She sees her phone, looks at it.)

EVY

(Quietly, exasperated.)

All these fucking messages.

(She taps the screen and plays the following.)

MOM

(Voicemail.)

Evy, honey, it's Mom again. Your father and I stopped by your apartment today. It looked like you packed a bag and took some clothes, which honestly was a relief because at least it means you meant to go somewhere. But sweetheart, you've been gone awhile now. No calls, no texts, nothing. Your father thinks maybe you just needed to get away, but… I don't know. And Evy… I didn't tell your father this because I didn't want to upset him more, but your medication was still in the bathroom cabinet. I know you don't like when I worry about this stuff, but after this long… it scares me to think maybe you just stopped taking it. Please just call us, sweetheart. You don't have to explain anything. Just let us know you're alright.

(Without warning, the door slams shut. Blackout. The darkness lingers, then gives way as lights return uneven and surreal, time slipping forward and backward, stuttering out of sequence. Evy sits at her desk, typing furiously. Around her, the house begins to shift as doors open and close, windows lift and slam, lights flicker on and off. Furniture moves. Objects slide, tip, and fall as the space rearranges itself in contained, mounting

PERUSAL

chaos, never fully breaking, but never still. At long last, everything suddenly goes quiet. Darkness again. When lights come up, Evy, the computer and monitor are gone. We have returned to the late 1800s. Warner's body is on the floor under the cloth. The door opens as Freddie enters followed by Enid.)

ENID

Why do you insist upon arguing with me? Go back to the boathouse, bring Alma out, and get her in here.

FREDDIE

She's restrained well enough, and I would rather settle this first than risk her overhearing something she oughtn't. I'll bring her in once we've decided how to proceed.

ENID

Very well. But she cannot have simply vanished, and we cannot afford to behave as though she has. The last thing we need is a prolonged inquiry… searching, digging, questions leading to more questions until someone begins looking where they ought not. We must give them no cause. Look at this place. It speaks for itself. The tower, that narrow staircase. It would not take much. A misstep. A fall. People would accept that easily enough. Or better still, her husband. I have heard enough to know his nature. Demanding. Suspicious. Always watching her, always imagining things. It would not be difficult to believe he finally lost patience. Called her up there on some errand, waited until her back was turned, and then the slightest start, the smallest push, and down she went. It is simple. And it would hold.

FREDDIE

And what if it were the other way round?

ENID

In what sense?

FREDDIE

What if Alma lost patience with him? It is plain enough he stands between her and her freedom, the freedom to pursue her artwork as it ought to be pursued. And there she is, on the very edge of something real. You have seen it yourself. Her paintings are remarkable. I did not exaggerate. And yet she is meant to remain here, in this place, cold and damp, shut away from everything, only to watch it all pass her by. What if she could bear it no longer? What if, in a moment of anger, she followed him up the tower, with no plan, only carried by the force of it, to confront him or perhaps to plead her case. And then, in a moment of poor judgment, she struck him. Not to kill, perhaps, only to make a point. But he falls, misses his footing on the stairs, and that is the end of it.

ENID

Ridiculous.

PERUSAL

FREDDIE

Is it? What if it has already happened, Enid?

ENID

What do you mean?

FREDDIE

Come and see.

(He leads her to Warner. He lifts the cloth just enough to reveal the body. Enid takes it in, startled, but contained.)

ENID

How did I miss this?

FREDDIE

I very nearly did myself.

ENID

This complicates things.

FREDDIE

No. It improves them. We intended an accident, a fall within the house. Quiet. Contained. Now we have something better. Better than questionable. Now we have cause. A dead husband. A dissatisfied wife alone with him. No witnesses. No clear account. And, most importantly, no need for invention.

ENID

So, we abandon the original plan?

FREDDIE

No. We refine it. We leave him exactly as he is, untouched, unmoved, so that when he is found, the question is not what happened…

ENID

… But how, and why. The focus shifts to Alma.

FREDDIE

Precisely. Except she will not be available to answer for it. So, we proceed, not as planned but with adjustments. Not a fall from the stairs but from the cliffs. More decisive. A woman in grief. Overcome. Knowing she will be implicated. She goes out… and does not return.

PERUSAL

ENID

Regret. Despair. Finality.

FREDDIE

And no one left to contradict it.

ENID

You are certain this will read cleanly?

FREDDIE

Cleaner than anything we could have staged inside these walls.

ENID

Except…

FREDDIE

Except what?

ENID

What if she is carried out to sea? We are left again with her disappearance, and risk a deeper investigation.

FREDDIE

Fair point. I'll drop her onto a talus slope. High enough that the water won't carry her off, and where she can be plainly seen from above. Her body easily recovered.

ENID

Good. It's settled, then. Fetch her and take her straight to the cliff. I have no desire to witness it. Do what must be done, then return quickly. I'll remain here.

FREDDIE

At once.

(Freddie exits. Enid crosses to the window and looks out toward the cliffs. She lingers for a moment, still and contemplative. Then she turns and moves to the painting, studying it quietly.)

ENID

Exquisite.

(Behind her, the shrouded body stirs. It rises, more controlled now, more deliberate, again taking on the silhouette of a bedsheet ghost. It steadies

PERUSAL

itself, then moves silently to a position just behind Enid. The figure lifts its hand and slowly pulls the cloth away, revealing Warner with the crank in his grasp. He raises it above Enid's head. A crack of thunder. A flash of lightning. Complete darkness. In that darkness, heavy rain pours down outside as the lights slowly shift, returning to the present day, near sundown. Enid and Warner are gone. The laptop and monitor have reappeared. The painting remains. The rain continues as the front door opens, revealing Evy returning from checking on the generator, which has failed. She carries a wet umbrella, which she pauses to shake off and set by the door before moving further inside. She moves around the house, lighting candles or perhaps lanterns. Her cellphone rings. Lights rise on Tom, on his phone, as Evy answers hers.)

EVY

Hello?

TOM

Evy. I'm glad I caught you. You alright out there?

EVY

The power's out, the generator's dead, and this house sounds like it's about to tear itself loose and go over the cliff. Other than that, I'm fine. So, make it quick. I'm down to whatever charge I've got left on my phone.

TOM

Yeah, I figured the storm would knock things out sooner or later. I was gonna come get you, but there's no chance I'm getting my truck up there tonight. The roads around here are a mess clear through.

EVY

Is that normal?

TOM

Mud season.

EVY

Mud season?

TOM

Spring thaw. The ground gives way all at once. Makes getting around difficult, depending on where you're headed.

PERUSAL

EVY

Spring?

TOM

Nearly Spring. Came early this year. Listen. Best thing you can do is hunker down. I'll swap my tires, wait for the rain to ease up some, then I'll come get you.

EVY

I appreciate it, but I'll manage. Honestly, I don't want you here. I don't want anybody here.

TOM

Yeah. I gathered that. But I'm coming anyway. You can argue with me when I get there. And before you hang up… I wanted to say I'm sorry again. For butting in. You're right. I crossed a line. That said, I need you to hear me out. Alright? Because I did something.

EVY

What kind of something?

TOM

I locked down your manuscript.

EVY

You did what?

TOM

I put a block on it. That file is yours and yours alone. The new monitor I set up has a built-in camera with facial recognition. Between that and your password, nobody's getting in but you. Nobody. Not even me. That document stays locked unless you open it.

EVY

Why would you do that?

TOM

Because I had a bad feeling.

EVY

About what?

PERUSAL

TOM

I don't know. Maybe it's nothing. But when I was setting everything up, I noticed a few things that didn't sit right. Access logs that made no sense. Security settings being messed with. Could be harmless. Could be some automated process running in the background–

EVY

My God, Tom, I cannot deal this tech talk right now. And you're the only person who's had access to my computer, so forgive me if this all sounds like complete bullshit.

TOM

I know how it sounds. I do. But I'm telling you, somebody's been trying to get in there.

EVY

You've been trying to get in there. You've already been in there.

TOM

Evy, you're not listening to me. I'm talking about the book. Somebody wants it.

EVY

I've heard enough. Now, you listen to me. I don't want you coming out here. I don't want your help. I want you to leave me the fuck alone.

TOM

I'm trying to keep you ahead of whatever this is. That's all. And listen… one more thing. You should probably check the news. Quickest way is to just search your name… and "gone "missing."

(The call drops. Tom is gone.)

EVY

Missing? Tom?

(The front door blows open. Evy moves quickly to close it and lock it. As she turns away from the door, there comes a loud knock on it.)

Jesus. Who is it?

SAM

(Off.)

It's Sam.

PERUSAL

EVY

Sam? What are you doing out here? How'd you even make it up the drive?

SAM

(Off.)

Mind if I come in a minute? Got that crank with me. Figured I'd return it proper.

EVY

Now's not a good time, Sam. You can leave it on the step. I'll get it later.

SAM

(Off.)

It's coming down pretty good out here. Wind's picking up, too.

EVY

Right. Well… I mean, you made it all the way here, didn't you? I'm sure you'll make it all the way back. I expect you're used to getting around in this kind of weather.

SAM

(Off.)

Ordinarily, yeah. But I don't have my cruiser; I'm off duty. Car's stuck in the mud about halfway down. Had to walk the rest.

EVY

Shit. You know, you're putting me in a really tough spot here, Sam.

SAM

(Off.)

You're right. You're right. I'm sorry. I'll just set it here on the doorstep. Might be I can rig something up. Get enough traction to ease her out.

EVY

Oh. Okay. Good. That's… well, that's good to hear. Thank you. And be careful.

SAM

(Off.)

Sure thing.

PERUSAL

(A soft clink as the crank is set down. Footsteps retreat. Evy stands still, listening. Something about it doesn't sit right. She moves to the door but doesn't open it. Hesitates. Then she unlocks it and opens it.)

EVY

Sam?

(She spots the crank on the doorstep and picks it up. She looks out into the rain.)

Sam!

SAM

(Off.)

Yeah?

EVY

You might as well come in. Dry off a minute.

SAM

(Off.)

You sure?

(Evy doesn't answer right away. She looks down at the crank, turns it once in her hand.)

EVY

Yeah. I'm sure.

(She steps back inside, leaving the door open, the crank still in her hand. Sam appears in the doorway. Raincoat. Hat. Something like a vintage lighthouse keeper's raingear.)

SAM

Much obliged.

(He closes the door behind him.)

Early for this kind of weather.

EVY

So, I've heard.

PERUSAL

SAM

(Indicating his coat and hat.)

You mind if I…?

EVY

No. Of course not.

(He removes the coat and hat, hangs them on a hook. Beneath he is dressed plainly.)

Power's out. I can light a fire if you like, but I'm running a little warm as it is. Seems to be the norm lately.

SAM

I'm good. I'll head out once the rain lets up some. Just wanted to make sure I got that back to you. And I am sorry… for taking it. Not my finest moment. Can't say I'd blame you for not trusting me.

EVY

I don't know who to trust anymore.

SAM

Yeah. I get that. Feels like everybody's a little turned around these days. Truth sounds made up, made-up things start feeling true. Hard to tell one from the other anymore.

EVY

Right.

(Silence.)

Seems you've been spending a fair amount of time with Nora over the last… however long it's been.

SAM

Oh. Well, I wouldn't say a fair amount. We've crossed paths a few times. Drinks, meals, a walk or two around town. We don't get many people like her up here. Been a bit of an eye-opener.

EVY

I'm sure it has. Truth is, I'm a little worried about her.

SAM

How do you mean?

PERUSAL

EVY

I'm starting to think she might be having some trouble. Money trouble.

SAM

Oh. Well. I don't know if I'd go that far. And it's not really my place to speculate on somebody else's situation. I try not to pry.

EVY

It's your job to pry.

SAM

Fair enough. Still feels different when it's somebody you've gotten to know a little. And Nora and me… we haven't exactly had those kinds of conversations.

EVY

Do you want to earn back my trust?

SAM

I'd like you to trust me, sure. It's just… you're asking me to speak on things I can't say for certain. I don't much like putting words in people's mouths. That's a line I don't want to cross.

EVY

And yet you crossed a line with me.

SAM

Fair point.

EVY

If you tell me what you know, not what you can prove, just what you know… I think that'd go a long way.

(Silence.)

SAM

She's mentioned the divorces a few times. Usually like it's a joke, but I get the sense there's something underneath it. Doesn't sound like any of it ended especially clean. And that hotel situation… she keeps saying all the nicer places in town were booked up. Ended up in some smaller room with a queen bed. Nothing fancy.

EVY

That's what she told me.

PERUSAL

SAM

This time of year, though, the town's usually pretty quiet. Hard to imagine all the nicer places being booked up. I mean, it could be true. I'm just saying, it struck me as a little odd. And she does spend money pretty freely. Usually insists on paying. Orders whatever she wants like money's no object.

EVY

And the bracelet?

SAM

Could've been a mistake. But she wasn't rattled. Not the way most people would be.

EVY

No. She wouldn't be.

SAM

And she talks about you quite a bit. About the book. Whether it's coming together. What happens if it doesn't.

EVY

She's my agent.

SAM

Sure. And maybe that's all it is. I'm just saying, seems like she's got a lot riding on how that book turns out. More than she's letting on, maybe. But that's only my impression, Evy. I couldn't tell you anything more than that.

(Silence.)

EVY

And what's been going on with you?

SAM

I don't know what the hell's been going on with me. I haven't felt like myself in a while now. Something's off. I've been getting these stretches where things… slip. Like I'm there, but not really there. I'll say things, do things, and then it's like I come to and I'm already past it. And it's not just forgetting. It's… incorrect. Like the pieces don't line up the way they should. Time moves funny. People, connections… they don't sit right. It's like something else is steering for a bit. Borrowing me. Then it passes. Just like that. And everything feels normal again. Quiet. Easy. So, I tell myself it's nothing. Don't dig into it, Sam. Don't go looking for answers you're not gonna like. Just let it go. Keep moving.

PERUSAL

(The sun is gone now. A sudden sound from above, something drops, clattering. Evy and Sam both turn toward the staircase. Sam lifts a finger to his lips, signaling for Evy to stay quiet.)

Alright. So, listen. I think I'm gonna head out now. Looks like the rain's let up some. I'm sure I've got something in the trunk to get that car out of that mud.

(He shakes his head slightly.)

I could take a look at that generator before I go, though. If you want. Don't like the idea of you out here alone without power.

EVY

Oh. Uh… no. I checked it already. Nothing we can do right now.

SAM

Right.

EVY

Sam?

SAM

Yeah?

EVY

When I said I wanted to trust you… I meant it.

(She hands the crank to him. He takes it.)

SAM

Yeah. So, uh… So, I'll be off then.

EVY

Thank you, Sam. For everything.

(Sam gives a nod and moves towards the front door. Evy follows, a step behind. He opens the front door.)

SAM

Lock up behind me. And sit tight. You'll be alright.

(He steps aside, takes his hat and coat from the hook, and slips into the bathroom. The door closes just shy of a latch.)

PERUSAL

EVY

(Calling out.)

Be careful walking! And drive safe!

(She shuts the front door. The latch clicks. She then turns the deadbolt, letting it sound. Evy stands there, listening. Then faintly from above, movement. Nora appears on the staircase, muddy shoes in hand, and starts down. Her legs are covered in mud as well.)

NORA

You've got those two men / right where you want them, don't you?

EVY

(Performing but believably startled.)

/ Good God, Nora. What the hell are you doing up there?

NORA

I've recently mastered opening doors on my own. Or perhaps I came with the house. Consider me the only elegant fixture here.

EVY

I can live without elegance.

NORA

Of course you can. You've always treated it like something you could pick up or discard depending on the mood you were in. Though I suppose that's true of most things in your life.

EVY

You know, this really is something else, Nora. Even for you. So, listen. I think it's time we end this properly, alright? Civilly. Just tell me what it is you want from me. Because I honestly don't know what you're capable of anymore. And right now, you're scaring the shit out of me.

NORA

Please. That's exactly what you came here for. At least that's what you've been saying. And you're almost there, Evy. That's the strange part with you. Things seem to arrange themselves around you, even when they shouldn't. You started out with practically nothing, just this weird little kid scribbling in notebooks, seeing things nobody else seemed to see. And people responded to it. Readers, editors, critics… whoever crossed your path, they recognized something. And yes, of course you worked for it; I know you did. But still… doors just kept swinging open. Risks taken that should've ruined you became the very things people admired you for. Most people spend their whole lives trying to force something into existence. A career. A voice. Relevance. But you… you trust the impulse; no matter how reckless it looks from the

PERUSAL

outside. You let it pull you somewhere, and somehow that's always been enough. You disappear into a crumbling lighthouse because you're terrified you've lost whatever made you special, and suddenly there's a story waiting for you here. A mystery. A dead woman. Paintings hidden away. Every loose thread leading exactly where you need it to. And maybe that's luck. I honestly don't know anymore. But I don't think so. I think you've always had instincts other people don't. Even before anyone knew your name. You move toward things before the rest of us can even see them clearly, and somehow the world keeps answering back. And you keep finding a way to turn it into something people can't look away from.

EVY

So what? I worked with what I had. Isn't that what everyone does, or is supposed to do? But you… somewhere along the way you decided that being behind the work meant you could never truly belong to it. And I don't understand why. You've spent your entire life finding people with something unique inside them and helping bring it into the world. You did that for me. You've protected it, shaped it, fought for it, kept it alive long enough for other people to find themselves in it. That matters, Nora. More than you let yourself believe. But none of it has ever been enough for you because your name isn't the one on the cover or the award. So instead, you keep placing yourself off to the side, acting as though something was taken from you, when really you just refuse to see your own hand in any of it. That isn't my fault. It has nothing to do with me. So maybe stop acting like you were condemned to the shadows when you're the one who chose to be there.

(Nora moves toward Evy, who bristles slightly, but she passes her and goes straight to the painting. Evy follows Nora.)

Is that it? Is that what you want? The artwork? Because it doesn't belong to you. Any more than I belong to you. And it doesn't belong to me. It belongs to this house. To Alma.

(Nora stares intently at the artwork. Evy crosses to the front door, unlocks it and opens it.)

It's time for you to go, Nora.

NORA

I've ruined these heels. And this skirt.

EVY

They can be replaced.

NORA

I'm not even sure how I got here anymore. Or whether I'm supposed to leave at all. Any thoughts, Evy? Because you really have written yourself into a corner this time.

PERUSAL

EVY

No. No, I haven't. That's not possible. Because what I have is a gift. And it's the only thing that's ever truly been mine. I've taken care of it. I've protected it. I've given my whole life over to it. After everything I've done for it, it owes me this.

NORA

No, Evy. You took it for granted. And then you broke it.

(Eyes fixed on the artwork.)

Exquisite.

(Suddenly Sam, dressed as Warner, or perhaps Warner himself, who can say, emerges from the bathroom and moves swiftly toward Nora, the crank raised in his hand. Just as he reaches her, Nora turns and swings the heel of one of her shoes into him. The front door slams shut. The lights go out. In the darkness…)

NEWSCASTER

(Voiceover.)

Authorities in this small coastal Maine town are investigating after two bodies were believed to have fallen from the cliffs near the historic lighthouse property visible behind me. Officials have confirmed the recovery of an adult male at the scene, while search efforts continue for a woman authorities believe also fell sometime earlier. Investigators remain extremely tight-lipped, though unconfirmed reports suggest the missing woman may be a figure of notable celebrity, something authorities have thus far refused to address publicly. State police and local officials remain on site, and residents are being asked to avoid the area as the investigation continues.

(A quiet moment passes. Then, slowly, the lights return. We are back in the late 1800s. Alma stands over Warner, the crank in her hand. Enid remains near the painting. Freddie struggles with the front door. It will not open. He pounds against it.)

FREDDIE

(Off.)

Enid? Enid? Alma's run off.

ENID

She's here with me, Freddie.

FREDDIE

(Off.)

Open the door.

PERUSAL

ENID

I am quite all right. We both are.

FREDDIE

(Off.)

I should be in there with you.

ENID

We have seen what comes of men involving themselves in women's affairs, have we not, Alma?

(Freddie rattles the handle and pounds upon the door again.)

Stay where you are, Freddie. Better still, go take the air. I can manage matters here myself.

FREDDIE

(Off.)

Enid.

ENID

Please do as I ask.

(Freddie goes.)

ALMA

Warner?

ENID

Leave him. All he's done was cling to this house, to his rules, to that small bit of authority he imagined it gave him. He thought stubbornness alone could hold back time. But it cannot. His days here were numbered long before tonight. This life, this post, this tower… it was already slipping away from him. And soon enough there shall be no place left for men like him at all. They will be replaced by something colder, if such a thing is even possible. Something without feeling altogether. And when that day comes, very little of them will remain.

ALMA

Freddie whispering in my ear from afar. Filling my head with grand ideas. You both saw a woman shut away from the world and thought her easy to persuade. Tell her she is gifted, tell her she was meant for something greater, and she will follow where you lead. That was your plan.

ENID

No.

PERUSAL

ALMA

No? Then what was it? Money? Did you mean to make something from us? You have chosen a poor house for that. There is nothing here worth taking.

ENID

There is. But it is not you, Alma. It is the work. You are talented. More than talented. You are extraordinary.

ALMA

I am needed here. I am his wife.

ENID

Do you still not understand? It was never you I wanted. It was your work.

ALMA

But without me, you have none of it.

ENID

You are nobody, Alma.

(Re: Warner.)

Certainly of no use to him in the way he measures such things. Have you any notion what you have created? The sheer volume of it? What it might command, in the proper hands? I never truly needed you. I am already known. Already respected. An artist in my own right. Doors already open to me that would never open to you. All I need do is put my name to your work. My hand resembles yours closely enough that no one would ever question it. And truthfully… you are the finer painter. Far finer. But that scarcely matters. Talent alone is rarely enough in this world. All I need is to convince the right people that I have come into my own. That my work has matured. That I am ready to be shown properly, in the finest galleries, before the sort of people who decide such things.

ALMA

And you believe I have no say in the matter?

ENID

(Re: the crank.)

Be mindful of what you are holding in your hand. And think carefully on what follows after. You have already gone too far to turn back now.

(Warner stirs and moans.)

PERUSAL

ALMA

Warner?

ENID

Think on it, Alma. He is a very simple man with very simple needs. He has but two things in this world. This lighthouse… and you. And all his life, he has chosen the former over the latter.

(Warner slowly sits up. He is badly injured and not fully aware of what has happened. Enid has somehow slipped into the shadows.)

WARNER

Alma.

ALMA

I'm here.

WARNER

I'm hurt.

ALMA

I can see that. But it's over now. It's time to mend. For both of us to mend.

WARNER

I did what I had to do. To protect what was mine.

ALMA

Yes. You protected it. And I'll carry what you've done with me to the very end.

WARNER

You speak strangely tonight.

ALMA

Do I? I'm just tired, Warner. Tired of fighting you. Tired of fighting this place. But tonight feels different somehow. Quieter. Like something's finally come to rest.

(Warner rises but with difficulty. Alma helps him.)

Easy now.

WARNER

The ringing won't stop. Maybe I should sit.

PERUSAL

ALMA

No. No, if you sit, I worry you may not get back up again. Just stay standing with me a moment longer.

(She steadies him. He leans into her.)

WARNER

You stayed.

ALMA

Where else would I go?

WARNER

You could've run.

ALMA

And leave you here alone? After everything? No.

WARNER

You understand now, don't you?

ALMA

I understand you love this place.

WARNER

I do. It's all I have. And I think… I think it's enough. I need to lie down.

ALMA

Of course. But now is not the time, my dear. Your head. You may be concussed. Sleep would not serve you, not just now.

WARNER

The room… won't hold still.

ALMA

Then don't trust it. Trust me. I think it best we step outside. What do you say? It's a fine night. The fresh air, the cool breeze… it will do you good.

(She moves to the door, then turns back toward him, offering her hand.)

WARNER

A walk then?

PERUSAL

ALMA

Yes. Come along.

(She unlocks the door and eases it open. Warner follows her. After a moment's hesitation, he takes her hand.)

Careful on the steps now. Lean on me if you need to.

WARNER

I never thought I'd see you gentle with me again.

ALMA

Just a short walk. Then you can rest.

WARNER

Of course. I'll stay strong. Where are we going?

ALMA

Oh… I thought perhaps the cliffs. The view is beautiful from there this time of night.

(They exit. A stillness settles over the room. After a moment, Enid appears from the shadows and turns again to the painting. As she studies it, she begins removing the modest garments of the late 1800s, revealing beneath them a modern skirt and blouse. She fixes her hair. Freddie, now Thomas, appears in the doorway. He is sharply dressed in a modern jacket and trousers, his hair neatly groomed, bearing almost no resemblance to the awkward cable technician we have come to know. He carries a pair of heels, which he hands to Enid, now Nora, who slips them on. Thomas drags an armchair center stage. Nora sits. Thomas turns the painting around. It is not a painting at all, but a book cover: The Keeper's Wife. By Nora Collins.)

THOMAS

Good evening, everyone, and thank you for coming. Tonight's author has spent many years behind the scenes helping shape the work of some truly celebrated novelists, entrusted with manuscripts that would eventually find their way into countless homes and, in many cases, onto the silver screen. Fortunately for all of us, she has finally stepped into the spotlight herself and decided it was time to tell a story of her own. *The Keeper's Wife* is her first novel, though you would never know it from reading it. It has already found a remarkable number of readers, and I think that's because it understands something unsettling and true about ambition, reinvention, relevance, and the stories people tell themselves to believe their lives still hold meaning and purpose. Please welcome Nora Collins.

PERUSAL

NORA

Thank you, Thomas.

(Turning to the audience.)

And good evening.

(She reads from her book.)

They did not rush.

The lighthouse stood behind them like something that had outlived its purpose, its great glass eye dark, its bones creaking as the wind pressed against it. Alma closed the door with care, a small kindness to the place that had brought her so much pain. She and Warner stood side by side, facing the open stretch of land that led to the cliffs. The wind came stronger now, sliding along the ground, curling around them, tugging at Alma's skirt and lifting a loose strand of her hair across her cheek. They started walking, the path narrow and worn, pressed into the earth by years of use, mostly his. Alma walked slightly behind at first, then beside him, their steps settling into an easy rhythm. The sea, somewhere beyond the rise, made its slow, endless sound, and the silence between them carried weight, the kind that settled in the chest.

The ground sloped upward, then leveled as they neared the cliffs. Grass gave way to bare earth and stone, the wind steady at their backs. Alma glanced toward the horizon, where sea met sky in a clean line. "Hard to imagine living anywhere else," he said. Alma's brow tightened. "No need to imagine it," she replied. They reached the edge, the tide churning white against the dark below. Warner took one step closer while Alma stopped a few feet back. The wind pressed harder, flattening their clothes and filling their ears. "You ever think about what might have been?" she asked. Warner shifted his weight. "No." "Neither do I," she said, though it sounded less certain than she intended.

The wind gusted, and Warner adjusted his stance, one foot edging, then correcting. Loose stones shifted near the lip. Alma noticed but said nothing at first. "Careful," she said at last. "It's loose there." He nodded, distracted. "I've got it." But he was not looking down. He was looking out. The wind surged again. His heel slipped. Alma's hand lifted, not quite reaching him, or perhaps it did. It was hard to say after. It happened quickly. The next step faltered. The stone rolled. His balance tipped, just enough. Then the wind came again, stronger. A hand might have caught him. A word might have anchored him. But there was only the sea and the narrow space between them, and in that space something seemed to hesitate, just long enough. Warner's foot slid. His body followed. For an instant he hovered, caught between correction and surrender, and then he was gone.

Not with a cry, just a sudden absence where he had been, his form dropping out of sight beyond the edge, swallowed by the dark below. Alma stood very still, the wind pressing against her as if urging her forward, as if asking her to look. She did not, not right away. Instead, she stared at the empty space where he had stood. When she finally stepped closer, slowly and carefully, the cliff offered nothing back. No movement, no shape, only the churn of water far below and the fading echo of something that might once have been a man.

PERUSAL

She stepped back from the edge slowly, then turned toward the lighthouse, as though something inside still waited for her there, some unfinished business between herself and Enid and Freddie. She walked with determination several yards in that direction before stopping short. Only then did it become clear she had merely been putting distance between herself and the cliff. She turned back. The wind pressed hard against her as she drew one long breath, then rushed forward, her arms loosening slightly as the earth vanished beneath her, not like someone intending to fall, but someone expecting, however impossibly, to fly.

(As the sound of the ocean surf swells, the lights fade slowly into a tight spot on Nora. A mysterious woman emerges from the shadows. Nora turns. The woman steps forward and holds out a book into the light: Nora's novel.)

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Would you mind signing this for me?

NORA

Of course. And who should I make it out to?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Darlene.

(Nora hesitates, studying the woman more closely. Blackout. End of play.)

PERUSAL