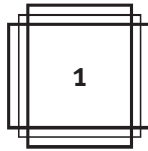


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The day that Mother told me about the telegram, I had thirty days left to live.

As I peered out of my bedroom window that morning, I spotted her stumbling over the unevenness of our sprawling land, a waif-like figure dressed all in grey. Despite the modern style of dresses becoming ever shorter, Mother preferred to glide through the house in long, sweeping creations, and her beaded hemline was trailing in the mud outside.

Mother's erratic gait unnerved me – something was wrong. I turned from the window and threw myself into trousers, a button-down shirt and a pair of brogues that were the first to hand. With as much speed as I could muster, I galloped out of my bedroom on to the landing. Here on the top floor, the rooms formed a ring: Father's study, which had not been opened since he left; my little brother Nick's bedroom, which he kept neat and uncluttered, his teddy bears arranged in a tidy row; and the empty bedrooms, the ones we didn't talk about.

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When Father first came into money, he'd bought this prime real estate on Long Island and designed the towering mansion himself. Each floor of Pitch House was smaller than the one below, like a wedding cake. The first floor was the largest of the three, built around a central circular unit that looked like the base of a theatre in the round. The eastern wing formed a squat single-storey block with a sloping roof that met the bottom of the second storey of the central piece. It held the servants' quarters and the kitchen, and led on to a square of cobblestones reminiscent of English country houses. The western wing flew off as a long corridor two storeys high, with large Gothic windows; its top floor was purpose-built to house my father's strange and unusual objects of interest – his 'Collection', as he'd called it. Outside, our land rolled for miles, circled by pitch pines like a dark halo. Finally, at the north-eastern corner there was the memorial garden – which was, I realized, where Mother was heading.

I rattled down the flights of stairs, startling our housekeeper, Miss Price, who was polishing the telephone in the entrance hall. She knocked the receiver off its stand with a dreadful clatter. I must have really made her jump – Miss Price had worked for our family since before I was born, and she didn't become chief of staff by being prone to accidents.

'Mister Felix, there was a telegram ...' she began, her voice strained.

Telegrams had never brought us good news. I gave Miss Price a quick wave of acknowledgement and hurried on. It was rude, but it was clear my mother needed me urgently.

I hastened to follow Mother's weaving path outside. The awful chill in the air took my breath away.

As I entered the memorial garden, the grief I'd come to know well ached once again. Some families hide their tragedy. Ours commissioned the finest engraved marble stones.

You see, once upon a time, I had four brothers. Three of them had been laid to rest. I mourned them, and at the same time I mourned my own future – because I knew, deep in my soul, that I would be next. The stones were a perpetual reminder that I used to be one of five that roamed these halls. Each with fine chestnut hair and a stocky build. A matching set.

I found Mother standing by George's stone, one hand resting on the smooth marble. Her other hand gripped an envelope, ragged where it had been ripped open like a slit throat. Whatever the insides contained, they had clearly unsettled Mother. She didn't turn to look at me as I approached.

'I miss them so much,' she said.

No explanation was needed. My stomach rolled at the acknowledgement of them. I missed them too. My grief had a strange timeless quality about it – no matter that it had been *years* now, remembering them could make the loss feel so raw and intense all over again.

Mother turned, and our eyes met. I got an uneasy feeling, as though she were seeing a shadow of my brothers flickering behind my eyes. It was as if she were looking at me, but seeing them, or an echo of them.

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I placed my hand on Mother's shoulder. She had a bird-like quality about her: tight skin, frail arms, always trembling. *Had* she always trembled, or had that come with the loss, with the war, and the small white pills she'd been given to help her sleep?

'Felix . . . your father is coming home,' she said, interrupting my thoughts.

There was a sudden roaring in my ears.

'I'm sorry, what did you say?'

I was certain I must have heard her wrong. There was no way that Father could be coming home. He'd been gone for so long. *Too* long. It had been years; he was badly injured in the war; he was languishing in a sanatorium in England . . .

'It's true. Your father . . . they're sending him home at last.'

I'll never forget the way she looked in that moment – one perfect sunshine-blond curl lacquered to the middle of her forehead, her lipstick slightly smeared, and her eyelashes clumped together. More make-up doesn't always mean more beautiful. Her lips were still moving, and I was aware that the shapes her mouth was making and the noises that were coming out were supposed to mean something, but the words themselves refused to take form. How could it be true, after what we'd been through?

In the time before our tragedy, my parents used to host incredible parties that I could hear into the early hours of the morning. My older brothers used to stay up, playing cards, and sometimes I'd join in. But on occasion the

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music from the gramophone was so loud that nobody heard baby Nick crying in his nursery, and I was the only one who knew how to soothe him, lifting him up on to my shoulder. Mother and Father would spend those nights dancing wildly, laughing raucously and, at the most liquor-soaked parties, arguing intensely. That was how it was between them – every emotion, positive or negative, deeply felt.

But then George died. Followed by the twins, Scott and Luke. I'd gone from being part of a team of brothers to there only being me and little Nick left. And, all the while, war had begun to rage in Europe – a far-off, distant thing at first, and then a terrifying atrocity.

Father became angry at anything he deemed frivolous, whereas Mother, wracked with grief, only seemed to want the music louder, the drinks faster, the arguments more extreme. It was an explosion waiting to happen.

'How can we live like this? It's all so inconsequential!' I heard him bellow at Mother one night when they thought I'd gone to bed.

'I don't know how to live without them,' Mother sobbed in return.

It wasn't long after that he'd packed a bag and gone to volunteer for the war effort, training to transport wounded men from the front, although he'd never had a jot of military experience. Shock rippled out through our social circles – everybody thought it was a heroic choice, but they couldn't understand why he would make it when he didn't need to. Nick was only three – too little to retain any

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memories of Father. I learned that even the people who are supposed to care most for you can leave, and do.

And Mother? From that day on, Mother lived as if she were already widowed.

But Father didn't die.

Then we celebrated Armistice Day, and still he didn't come home.

Next came the telegram. I can still picture it, draped over Mother's arm as she lay, stupefied, an empty bottle nestled in the crook of her arm like a baby.

*A serious injury to the face . . .*

We'd never been told what that meant. He had been shipped from France to a sanatorium in England with a specialist doctor. That was all we knew. The message had been unsettling in its vagueness.

Back in the memorial garden, Mother lifted the envelope containing her latest life-changing missive. It flapped in the wind. 'I know him coming home will be a shock. But I have to tell you . . . I had the letter from his doctor a little while,' she admitted.

I immediately struggled to contain my sense of betrayal. We told each other everything, didn't we? How could she keep something like this from me?

'How long?'

Guilt flickered across her face. 'A week or so. And then this morning I got this – confirmation that the ship is docking tomorrow. I have to collect him from the port in the morning.'

*'Tomorrow?'*

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‘I should have told you sooner, I know, but I’ve been so worried about you.’

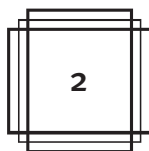
Mother needed me to respond, but I was like an actor who had forgotten his lines. I looked around, and it was like seeing everything through a layer of frosted glass. Every breath was hard to catch, as though something were stuck in my throat and blocking my windpipe. I couldn’t focus my eyes any more. This was compounded by a painful sensitivity in my chest, as if somebody had reached in and gripped my heart and was squeezing, squeezing.

*I’m dying*, I thought. *I’m dying of shock*. And then that was all I could think.

*I’m dying, I’m dying, I’m dying.*

Because I thought I knew what it was to be frightened, but now I was sure my heart was going to stop, and then Mother’s voice started to go all shrill and desperate, and I knew that she needed me, but I still couldn’t catch my breath, and then time went fluid and odd, and I staggered towards her, as though I’d lost all control of my limbs, and I was so certain that I was dying, and my heart ran away with itself, and I’d never felt so clumsy before, and I tripped over the edge of George’s memorial stone, and my feet went out from underneath me, and everything rolled upward as I fell and went black when my head hit the marble.





Our family had long been defined by what we'd lost. Tragedy lingered in the graveyard on our land, it lurked in the family portrait that showed a family of seven, and – more sensationally than either of these – it was written in all the tabloid articles about us. They hedged around the unlikelihood of three tragic accidents striking the same family, managing to just swerve direct accusations that Father didn't want his sons to reach the age of inheritance.

My father's story fascinated the press – he had grown up in the poorest part of Brooklyn, been sent out to work at thirteen in the same factory where he saw his own father die in a terrible fire, choking on black smoke as he made sure his son got out first. As a boy, his meagre salary was swallowed up trying to help his mother keep a roof over their heads. And then . . . he moved on to working on the railways and went hungry to put a week's earnings into making a clever investment in steel that paid off. Eventually, he was able to open his own factory, and his investments continued to yield returns.

He was affluent when he married Mother, but not extravagantly rich. It was a marriage of love, not financial

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gain – she had an old aristocratic name and had lived a life filled with the trappings of privilege. But when her parents passed away, it was revealed that they'd been hiding some significant debts, and all that remained of their once-great fortune was a crumbling house.

None of us knew exactly which smart move turned Father into a multimillionaire, but when it happened it happened fast.

George was toddling, and the twins were just babies. It took two years to build Pitch House, and I was born there.

At first, Father was Alfred Ashe, *rags-to-riches steel magnate*. Then he became Alfred Ashe, *tragic patriarch*.

Five sons, three of them dead. Three horrible, grisly accidents, each on their eighteenth birthday.

George was first. When I was twelve years old, I watched him die. I was wearing my favourite yellow shirt that Mother would later tell Miss Price to burn in the fireplace; by the end of the day, it was soaked with blood.

The heat of the sun had been thick. It had been a struggle to keep my hair from sticking to my forehead, a layer of sweat forming faster than I could wipe it away.

I was round the back of the house by the servants' quarters. The door was open, leading on to the square of cobblestones ringed off by a large iron fence topped with slender spearheads. I was following George, who had already told me to go away and stop pestering him, but I was bored.

George was clambering up the side of the servants' quarters, where the view over our land was spectacular, shoving his feet into the grooves of the brick and hoisting

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himself up by clutching on to the top of the window frame. He moved like a spider with swift and darting limbs that froze for a moment to plan their next placement. I was in awe of him. He was irritated by me. He always seemed so bold, so fearless . . . And the harder my parents tried to rein him in, the more George struggled for freedom.

Besides it being his birthday, the day had been important in another way. A lawyer had come to the house with a large bundle of papers. My eldest brother was going to be ‘heavily encouraged’ to begin working at Father’s factory, with a view to learning from the bottom up. Father said it was important that George understood the hard labour that his employees went through, like Father had done, otherwise they’d never respect him. George said he’d rather die.

As George hoisted himself up on to the angled roof, I felt giddy with vicarious joy. He was making a stand, carving out the life he wanted for himself. I longed to be like him. He lifted his foot, got purchase on the slate tile as I called out to him.

‘George!’

My shout caught him by surprise. His head flicked over his shoulder in my direction, and his raised foot lost its grip on the slate. He scrambled, wildly attempting to find solid footing. When he stabilized, he smirked at me and pulled himself up to standing. ‘Unshakable!’ he declared.

It emboldened him, the slip and the recovery. He took a couple of steps across, lightly, like a dancer. There was the screech of the slate tile losing its grip, and his leg shot out a with it. The tile skittered to the ground and smashed, and when George fell that is what I was watching, imagining

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Father's anger at the pieces of shattered slate coming to rest in the grooves between the cobbles.

When I looked up, I saw how George had fallen. It was perfectly, impossibly unlucky. Landing backwards on the fence, looking up to the sky. He was pierced through his neck and through his shoulder, and the rest of his body hung limp from the two spearheads that held him in place, feet hovering a foot above the ground. George gasped a little, and twitched, and then went very still. I tried to get him down. I was still trying to get him down when the servants came running from the kitchen, and Father's screams tore through the yard.

The memory has become as ingrained in the deep part of my brain as my two times table or the lullaby Mother sang to me as a baby. It is often the first thing I see in my mind's eye when I wake of a morning, even now.

And there is one more thing about the way that George died. Something else I turn over and over in my mind when I have the strength to think of it. After he took his final breath, a wisp of midnight vapour unwound from between his lips. It sparked, as though it held stars inside. It weaved through the air and then dispersed into nothing.

I never told anyone about that part.

Everyone said it was a tragic accident. Real bad luck. But then the twins died the following year, and it didn't seem like it was just luck any more.

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Scott's greatest treasure was his horses. He spent day after day out on the land, tending to them. Never mind that Father employed a groom: Scott insisted on learning everything he could and wasn't afraid of getting his hands dirty, even mucking out the stables and shoeing the horses. On the morning of the birthday he shared with Luke, he went out for a ride – just like he always did.

Only that morning his horse flung him and his poor head was crushed beneath the hoof he'd shod so carefully.

I was in the drawing room with Luke when Mother sent our butler, Mr Reed, a stiff rake of a man, to tell us. Luke let out a strangled noise. Turned out they'd been arguing. The last words he'd said to Scott were sharp and cruel. He sped away from the house in his roadster and was pierced through the chest by the steering-wheel column when he crashed it minutes later.

They died an hour apart, a perfect mirror of the day they were born – Scott first, Luke second. There was no eighteenth birthday party.

Father scrapped the car and shot the horse. As if it made any difference at all.

After that, I drew some conclusions: this was more than a terrible, awful coincidence. Something was killing the boys in our family. The creeping fear of it grew over time, like mould – a dark thought here, a sleepless night there – until it took over my life so completely that I found myself unable to function. The mounting dread had won when it made the idea of attending school become untenable and terrifying. It won again when it convinced me I was

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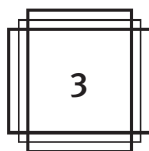
worthless and caused me to push the ones I loved the most away. Like Lois . . . Until, finally, fearfulness became as much a part of me as my short build and my hazel eyes.

Fear became a curse on my life.

But it was worse than that – *more* than that. I knew – without knowing how – that whatever was happening went beyond paranoia.

My brothers and I were truly cursed. Cursed to die before we could inherit the fortune our father had strived to build.

And if there really was a curse that killed the young men of our family on their eighteenth birthday, then I would be its next victim.



When I regained consciousness, I had been placed in the sunroom, a parlour at the back of the house with large glass panes looking out on to the riotous colour of a wildflower garden. Two large mirrors hung at angles reflected the garden view and encouraged the light to flutter around like a caged bird.

Mother crouched in front of me, flapping like a moth. In her panic, her dress had been hitched up about her knees, the gunmetal satin puddling. She brought her face very close to mine, studying my eyes like a particularly eager lepidopterist inspecting a butterfly that might vanish.

‘Felix darling, are you all right?’

My throat was dry, and my head was thumping, and there was thick crusted blood around my nose and on the side of my head. The intricate beading of the chaise longue dug into me. I pulled myself to a sitting position, and my stomach swirled. Just past Mother, my tutor, Geoffrey, stood, coming into focus like a photograph. As if he could read my mind, he reached for a glass of water and held it to my lips. I gulped greedily, as though I’d been lost in a

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desert. My pallid face was reflected back in the shiny buttons of his waistcoat.

‘Do you think we need to call the doctor?’ Mother murmured. ‘He hit his head.’

They both stared at me.

‘How do you feel?’ Geoffrey asked, worrying at the arm of his gold spectacles and the place where it rubbed behind his ear.

I raised my hand to my head. There was a blunt ache pulsing through my temple. I pinched the bridge of my nose, and the pressure seemed to release the pain, or at least distract from it. ‘I think I just need to rest.’

‘What happened, darling?’ Mother asked.

*The worst, most intense fear I’ve ever known.*

I floundered around for a way to explain. ‘I don’t know. I thought my heart was just going to stop.’

Mother glanced sideways at Geoffrey. ‘Do you think there’s something wrong with his heart?’

‘No, I don’t think it’s his heart.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Felix, I think it might be time to give the talking cure a try,’ he said very gently.

‘No.’ That was my default response whenever the topic of the talking cure was raised.

Geoffrey had been encouraging me to visit a psychotherapist ever since he started tutoring me. Mother had pulled me out of school after the ‘funny turn’ I’d had in the summer, and she’d asked Geoffrey to keep up with my lessons at home. He was Mother’s confidant, her closest friend since childhood.

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Geoffrey Garton was ‘old money’ and a scholar who had retired from his glittering academic career at forty when he came into his inheritance. He was an excellent tutor, patient and methodical. He maintained his family’s mansion in the Hamptons, but he’d taken up an unassuming lakeside house just a short walk from Pitch House. If you asked him, he would have said the real estate was too good to miss, but I knew – well, everyone knew – it was to be close to Mother.

He was also genuinely concerned about me. Geoffrey had researched as much as he could about being gripped by a crushing fear with no immediate threat. It was, he assured me, a medical condition, and he’d been adamant that the ‘talking cure’ was the solution. It was a new treatment for a condition few understood.

I could see the potential it had to help. Talking might help me to unravel the mess of threads in my mind that tangled me up in anxious knots. But I’d also heard this sort of thing called hysteria, a woman’s malady. Or, worse, I’d heard it called madness.

*Do you really want documented evidence of your instability? Sure, it starts with talking, but what if it cascades into other treatments . . . ?*

My mind threw up images of a fizzing electrical cap designed to fry my brain. Geoffrey wasn’t the only one conducting research.

Besides. What was the point in trying to ‘cure’ me if I was doomed to die anyway?

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‘I’ve sourced a specialist in New York,’ Geoffrey continued. ‘Without help, I’m concerned that you’re only going to get worse.’

Lois would have told me to start the talking cure. She thought psychotherapy was a new and fascinating science. But what did it matter what she thought of anything any more?

I was surprised to see Mother was nodding along. ‘It might be for the best,’ she said, picking at her nail bed and unable to look me in the eye as she said it. She had previously been reluctant too. She was paranoid about how it would appear, what people would say.

But then she’d never seen my fear in action as severely as this before now.

‘I understand it’s a huge shock, your father coming home like this, Felix. I’m sorry it’s unsettled you so much.’

‘He’s really coming home?’ I still couldn’t quite believe it.

Mother nodded and picked up the envelope from the side table. ‘It’s signed by Doctor Leery, who has been treating him at the sanatorium in England. They’ve done all they can, and it’s time for him to be reunited with us.’

It seemed impossible to create an image of what life would be like with my father. It wouldn’t just slip back to the way it was before. We’d changed too much. Mother had become so fragile, seeking solace in a bottle; Nick was unrecognizable from the chubby little toddler that had been left behind; and I’d been reduced to a bundle of nerves.

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Father had been gone a very long time.

How had *he* changed in the time he'd been away? I'd heard of soldiers returning from the war struck with a new propensity for violence and a raging temper, others still who were catatonic and tormented by their inner worlds. What version of Father would be coming home?

And that was without even considering his physical injuries . . .

'Did the doctor say anything about what he's like now?'

Mother cleared her throat and read from the letter. '*It is important for you to know that Alfred's injuries are life-changing, and you should be prepared to find him different from how you remember him.*'

'What does that mean?' I asked, quivering and panicky.

Mother shook her head and gave a defeated shrug. Geoffrey placed a steadying hand on her shoulder as she began to sob.

I tried to remember Father's face the way it had been, and found that time had blurred the image. The most recent photograph I had of him was in a copy of the gossip rag *Disclosed*, which had often liked to follow him and Mother – the new-money multimillionaire and the failed tennis star. They were always good for a story, and they sold magazines. They'd been arguing outside a restaurant and were photographed by a journalist. In the picture, Father had his arms up around his head in exasperation, anger splashed across his face. That was not the memory I wanted to hold on to.

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‘I really think it would be best if you had the opportunity to talk this through with a professional,’ Geoffrey said. ‘Doctor Albass has a fantastic reputation.’

It seemed a particular cruelty that the one thing that might help me required me to open myself up to an awful vulnerability. I would have to be brave to allow someone a glimpse inside my mind.

My thoughts had become a dreadful form of torture, and it was exhausting. I tried to keep them all locked away in the deepest, darkest hiding place inside me . . . But I had reached my capacity, like a cupboard filled to bursting. It might be futile – but it might also be a relief to let it all spill out, to release the badness out of me like the yellow viscosity of a lanced boil.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I’ll talk to her.’

Mother looked up as fast as a whip crack. She and Geoffrey exchanged a glance I couldn’t read.

‘Thank you, Felix. I’ll book you an appointment,’ Geoffrey said. ‘And maybe . . . maybe we should pause your lessons for a while.’

I realized he was trembling. Had Mother kept Father’s return a secret from him too? He must have known that there would be no place for him in a home that held my father, even though, in Mother’s darkest times, it was with Geoffrey that she’d seemed bright again.

I felt heavy with the knowledge that Father was on a ship, waiting to disembark and be dropped into our lives again like an explosive device. I had tried to keep things together the best I could in his absence. Looking at the

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fragility of us all, perhaps I didn't do a good enough job. I did try, though.

The one thing I always could do well was look after Nick. Whereas Mother frustrated him and became frazzled herself, I'd become an expert on my little brother and communicating in the way he needed. It took patience, but I'd learned that, where Nick was concerned, it was no use leaving room for interpretation or assumption.

Pitch House was a large place, teeming with busy household staff. Nick always managed to find nooks to hide in and projects to keep him occupied, which, in his more unsettled moments, might be rearranging an entire shelf of the library by the first word of the first sentence, or unpicking the hem of a curtain stitch by stitch.

As I left the sunroom to begin searching for my little brother, I practically bumped into Lydia, one of the maids, who immediately pretended to look busy sweeping. I knew she had been listening at the door – that's how she was. I felt sick at what she might have overheard. Lydia had been caught talking to a reporter at the gate once. She'd said she hadn't known who he was, but I had my doubts about that. The following week she was wearing a new pair of shoes. Any other maid would have been fired on the spot, but Lydia's grandmother had been Mother's nanny, and as such there was a loyalty that had kept her in our employ – though I wasn't sure Mother would be as forgiving again.

I started my search in a methodical way, testing the door handle that led down underground to the wine cellar

and the armoury. When I found it locked, as it should be, I ducked my head in the music room. It lay empty, the piano inside cutting a lonely figure in the centre of the room, surrounded by chairs where an audience of ghosts waited for a performance that would never come. None of us had ever learned to play. Father had once told me that a music room was a necessary feature of a mansion, but, sadly for him, none of us had a musical note in our body.

I eventually found Nick curled up like a cat in a great armchair in the reading room, poring over the diaries of a botanist recounting an expedition to Haiti. Unlike most of Nick's short-lived passions, this one had yet to burn out. I truly hoped one day he'd get to go on the adventures he craved. We really ought to have been thinking about getting him into a school – at seven years old it was long overdue. And yet we'd had so much else to think about, to worry about, that Mother had resisted sending him to the boarding school the rest of us went to, perpetually saving the decision for another time, a better time . . . that hadn't yet arrived.

'Nick,' I said, and he looked up from his book. His eyes went all round, like someone had lassoed the moon and its reflection from the sea and poured both into his face. 'I've got something to tell you. Our father is coming home tomorrow.'

'Okay,' he said, returning his gaze to an illustration of a delicate stem with a vivid orange bloom at the top.

His blunt reaction didn't surprise me. Even if he wouldn't look me in the eye, I could tell that his mind was still turning over the new information, clicking away on it like clockwork.

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I hovered. I wanted to be on hand for the moment when it sank in, and he needed me.

‘I know what you’re going to say next,’ Nick said.

‘You do?’ I couldn’t help but feel the smile crawl over my lips.

‘You’re going to tell me that everything will be okay, but I don’t believe you.’ Nick turned the page.

My smile fell away.

‘Okay. Well, do you have any questions? About Father, I mean?’

Nick’s hand lay on the book, but he wasn’t looking at the pages any longer. He was staring into some middle distance. Thinking.

‘Do you think Father remembers me?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ I said gently. ‘He’s missed you.’

Nick’s forehead creased into a knitted furrow that hurt my heart. I’d tried to keep him from pain, from worry. My little brother was like a ball of wool that’s been unwound and wrapped back together too tightly – I didn’t know where to start trying to unravel him. When he got distressed, he got more anxious to keep things in perfect order. He began to chew at the corner of his mouth, and the skin started to look sore.

‘Hey,’ I said, knocking his chin. ‘Don’t do that – you’ll hurt yourself.’

Nick flinched.

‘Hey.’ I got down on my knees, trying to look him right in the eye. He wouldn’t meet my gaze at all, staring

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someplace over my shoulder instead. 'I know you don't want to hear this, but it really is going to be okay.'

Nick needed me to be calm, authoritative, brave; I wished those qualities came more naturally to me, but I could attempt to wear them for my little brother.

He shivered a little, as though somebody had walked over his grave.

'I mean it,' I said. 'It's not going to change things.'

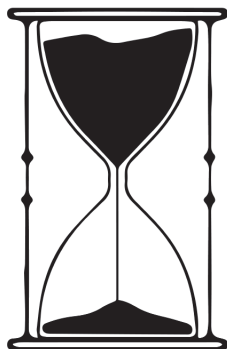
'It's going to change everything,' Nick said quietly, and all I could do was squeeze his shoulder because I wasn't convincing myself with my spiel, let alone him.



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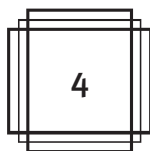
13 NOVEMBER 1920

TWENTY-NINE DAYS LEFT



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The following morning, Nick refused to get out of bed. In the end, that felt the safest place to leave him, tucked beneath his quilt with a book. Our chauffeur, Harold, brought around the black Model T Ford while I waited for Mother. When she appeared, she was dressed in a more understated way than I had expected.

I was used to glittering jewels and heavy make-up being her armour to face the world. Instead, she looked familiar; she looked like home. She had swept her hair back and pinned it in place with an elegant clip. A navy pleated coat with big gold buttons and a belt tied around her waist fought away the chill, but her ankles were bare, peeping out from a dress that grazed the top of her navy heels. I recognized them as a pair my father surprised her with one Christmas. She was so delighted with them, it almost made up for the explosive argument they'd had the evening before.

The veneer slipped the second we got into the vehicle. Prohibition be damned, Mother plucked out a brushed-silver flask from her coat. Gin, from the floral scent on her

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breath. Her knee jittered up and down, and I wondered if I'd be holding her hair back by the end of the day again.

On the drive to the port, we sat in silence, ruminating separately.

Father had become such an abstract concept to me, not a real flesh-and-bones person who was about to rejoin our lives. The thing to understand is that we didn't lose him all at once: we lost him piece by piece. A bit on the day he left in his uniform, a bit when we received the telegram about his injury, a bit when we were told he'd been admitted to a sanatorium, a bit on the anniversary of his confinement there . . . This was the man who had raised me, and yet I felt like I'd lost any sense of who he was. It was Father who had ignited my love of collecting, it was Father who taught me the satisfaction of a good puzzle and the art of cryptography, and it was Father who had been the architect of my life until he left. And yet I could not conjure any idea of how he would slot back into our family.

When Harold opened the car door for us, Mother thanked him, then linked her arm through mine, and we pushed through bustling crowds to take our place at the railings. A heavy fog was rolling over the sea in the distance.

'I don't know how to feel,' Mother said.

I had nothing to offer her by way of reassurance, but there was comfort in knowing that we were both the same in that moment: a little lost.

The ship was smaller than I'd expected. A team of burly workers dressed in a uniform of white shirt and dungarees secured the gangway down to the quayside where we were

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waiting. They reminded me of a troupe of dancers, each one tracing their steps, interweaving with ropes and tying knots.

As the passengers began making their way from the ship down the gangway, an anxious roiling started up in my belly. There was a great hubbub of reunions and delight all around me, but I didn't feel part of the moment that everybody else was experiencing. Instead, there was just a deep dread that dragged at my insides.

When the crowds had cleared, the gangway was hauled over to a different door lower down on the boat for those in steerage. I was struck with a sudden horror, imagining Father cramped up with the other passengers for a week, sleeping in bunk beds, no privacy and the stench of unwashed bodies. Even so, I reflected, steerage must have seemed the height of luxury after what he'd experienced in the trenches.

A new stream of passengers came down the gangway. I strained on tiptoes, as if that would make any difference to being able to see him sooner.

'Who are you waiting for?' asked a man with a thick Boston accent.

'My husband,' Mother replied, her voice shaking just a little. Unless you knew her, you wouldn't have noticed it.

I turned and appraised the questioner – he didn't look much older than me. I took in his inquisitive eyes, the smartly starched collar of his shirt . . . and the notebook in his hand, pencil hovering.

'War veteran? I heard this liner was bringing back some of those who were being treated at a sanatorium in England.'

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