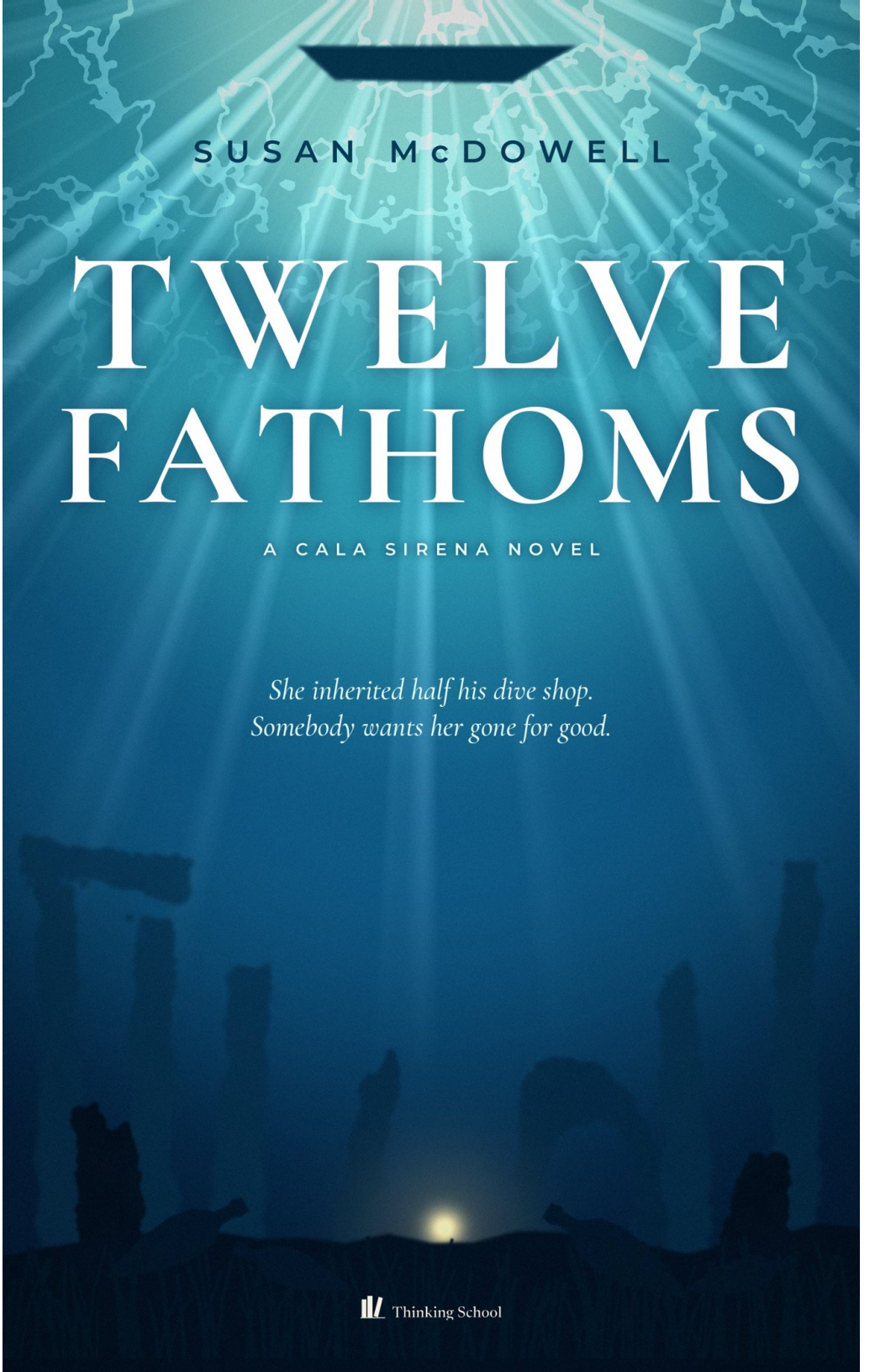

SUSAN McDOWELL
TWELVE FATHOMS
A CALA SIRENA NOVEL
She inherited half his dive shop.
Somebody wants her gone for good.
Thinking School

TWELVE FATHOMS

A Cala Sirena Novel

SUSAN McDOWELL

Thinking School

Twelve Fathoms

First published by Thinking School, 2026

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This is a work of fiction. Cala Sirena, its people, its wreck and its bar are invented. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or to real events is coincidental. Real institutions are mentioned for setting only.

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First edition

Thinking School

For everyone who is still waiting to be asked.

Never hold your breath.

— the first rule of diving

PART ONE

GIANT STRIDE

The giant stride is the simplest way into deep water. You look at the horizon, not at your feet, and you step off.

I

TESS

The Half I Don't Own

THE SUITCASE LOST its second wheel on the cobblestones outside the church, which meant I arrived at my inheritance dragging forty-one pounds of Boston behind me like a body.

I had a plan (I always have a plan), and this one fit on an index card in three lines: *Sign. Sell. Leave.* Seventy-two hours, door to door, with four hours allowed for the notary, two for the bank, and one, generously, for feelings.

Cala Sirena had not read my index card.

It was the kind of village that looks retouched: white houses stacked up a hillside like sugar cubes somebody had been careless with, blue shutters, and bougainvillea in a shade of pink I would have flagged in a catalogue as *later restoration*. Below it all, a bay so clear that the fishing boats seemed to hang in the air above their own shadows. Eleven in the morning on the last Monday of May, and the light was already doing something expensive to the water.

I am not a water person. I want that on the record early.

The bus driver had pointed me east with his chin and said something that ended in *drassana*, so I dragged the suitcase east. Past a bar with a mermaid painted on its awning. Past a gallery with one perfect amphora in the window and no price tag, which in my professional ex-

perience means *if you have to ask*. Past old men on a bench who watched me the way people watch weather.

The road ran out under a headland. There was a stone boathouse there, older than my country, with a slipway running down into the bay and a wooden boat propped on stands like a patient. A hand-painted sign hung across the big doors.

MARLOWE & SERRAT

BUSSEIG · DIVING · DRASSANA

I stood there longer than the index card allowed.

Twenty-three years. He left when I was seven for what he called a season, and the season had turned into this: a sign with our name on it in a country I had never seen, in letters he had probably painted himself. He had terrible handwriting and beautiful lettering. I'd forgotten that. I wished I had gone on forgetting it.

There was a man on a ladder in front of the sign.

I took in three things in order, which is how I take in everything: the ladder, resting directly against the M of MARLOWE; the orbital sander; and the fact that the M was already half gone, a pale ghost of itself, while the man leaned in to take care of the A.

"Excuse me," I said.

The sander whined. Sawdust drifted down and settled in my hair, on my blazer, on the one good pair of shoes I had left. He hadn't heard me. He was tall, in a faded T-shirt gone thin at the shoulders, and he had the kind of forearms you get from doing things, not from deciding to have forearms. His hair was black and needed cutting. He worked like someone removing a stain.

"Excuse me." Louder. Then, in the Spanish I had been rehearsing since Logan: "*Perdone. Busco al señor Serrat.*"

The sander stopped.

He looked down. Dark eyes, a nose that had been broken once and set by someone in a hurry, three days of beard. He took in the blazer, the laptop bag, the dead suitcase. He did not appear to enjoy any of it.

"He's dead," he said. In English.

"I'm sorry?"

"Senyor Serrat. My father. Six years." He blew dust off the ghost of the A. "If you want his son, you are also out of luck. We're closed."

"It's Monday. It's eleven."

"We are closed to you."

I have been condescended to by men in much better suits. I set the suitcase upright, which took two tries because of the wheels, and gave him the smile I used to give consignors who swore their grandmother's Etruscan vase had been in the family since the war. Which war, they never said.

"You don't know who I am."

"Blazer. Computer. You came on the bus because the rental office in Figueres closes for lunch and you did not know this." He started down the ladder. "You are from the people in Barcelona who want to turn my yard into forty moorings and a cocktail bar. They sent a woman this time. That's new. The answer is still no. Tell Senyor Camps I said to go and fry asparagus."

"To go and what?"

"It's an expression." He reached the ground. Up close he was taller, and he smelled like cedar dust and salt, and he looked at me with total, restful dislike. "It means leave."

"I don't work for anyone in Barcelona. As of March I don't work for anyone at all." It came out before I could stop it, which was unlike me. I blamed the jet lag and the sawdust. "I'm looking for Jordi Serrat because a notary named Ribot wrote to tell me he's my business partner. So unless there are two of you, you must be the half I don't own."

Something happened in his face. Not surprise. It was more as if he'd been braced for a wave and it had finally arrived, and it was exactly as cold as he'd thought it would be.

He looked at my eyes. Then, strangely, at my feet. I had my weight on my left leg, the way I always stand, the way that gave me a bad hip by twenty-five.

"Theresa," he said.

Nobody calls me that. "Tess."

"You're late."

"The notary said any time this—"

"Six months late." He wiped his hands on a rag, slowly, each finger. "The funeral was in November. There was a place for you in the front. My grandmother saved it with her handbag. The whole Mass, a handbag, where the American's daughter should be." He tossed the rag onto the ladder. "So. You were not there for that. But for the money you came on the bus. Good. Now I know who I'm talking to."

It landed. I want to say it didn't, but I've promised myself to keep an honest ledger, and it landed right under the ribs. Because he wasn't wrong about the funeral, and because he had no idea how wrong he was about everything else, and I was not going to explain twenty-three years to a stranger with sawdust on his eyelashes.

"I found out he was dead in April," I said. "From a law firm. In a letter with my name spelled wrong. So you'll forgive me if I missed the handbag."

A beat. One.

"April," he said.

"I wasn't on his emergency contact list. I checked. I wasn't on any of his lists." I picked up the laptop bag. "Is there somewhere I can put my things, Mr. Serrat, or is the whole building closed to me?"

He didn't answer. He was looking past me, up at the half-erased sign, with an expression I couldn't read and didn't want to. Then he bent, picked up my suitcase by the handle as if it weighed nothing, registered the missing wheels, and for one second something almost human crossed his face.

"You dragged this from the plaça?"

"I had a schedule."

"*Mare de Déu.*" He turned toward a flight of stone steps on the side of the boathouse. "Upstairs. His flat. It's yours now, I suppose. Half the dust is mine."

I followed him. I'd like to say I followed with dignity, but the steps were steep and I was watching the suitcase swing from his hand as if it were a lunch box, and thinking, uncharitably, that he was the kind of man who had never once been asked to show his work.

The door at the top was painted the same blue as the shutters. He unlocked it, pushed it open, and stood back.

I got as far as the threshold.

The first thing I saw was a refrigerator, and on the refrigerator, held by a magnet shaped like a fish, a school photograph of a gap-toothed girl in a Red Sox cap. Me. Second grade. The last one he'd have had.

The second thing I saw was a large gray bird in a large cage by the window, who turned his head sideways, fixed me with one pale, ancient eye, and screamed in my father's voice:

"*TESSIE! Check your gauges, Tessie!*"

I hadn't heard that voice in fourteen years. I hadn't heard that name in twenty-three.

My knees did something that wasn't on the index card.

2

JORDI

The Half That Costs Money

SHE DID NOT fall. I'll give her that.

She put one hand flat on the doorframe, the way you steady yourself on a gunwale, and she stood there in her city shoes while the bird shouted her name at her. Three times. Admiral always does things in threes.

I should have warned her about the bird.

I'd had six months to think about what I would say to Tom Marlowe's daughter, and I'd got good at it. I had speeches. I gave them at night to the compressor. In all of them she was taller, and colder, and she did not have his eyes. Nobody told me about the eyes. Gray-green, like the bay before weather, and set a little too wide. Tom used to look at a sky with those eyes and tell you the wind an hour before it came.

She was looking at a parrot with them and losing.

"He's a recording," I said. "Don't take it personal. He says *idiot* to me forty times a day."

"That's his voice."

"Yes."

"That's exactly his voice."

"African greys do this. He had thirty years to practice." I set the dead suitcase inside the door. "He says other things. Coffee. The weather. Some words you can't say on the radio."

"He said *Tessie*."

I didn't answer that. What could I say? That the bird said it every evening when the light went orange, because every evening Tom sat by that window with a glass of bad wine and talked to a photograph on a refrigerator? That I'd lived across the landing for two years and heard it through the wall?

It wasn't mine to hand her. And she'd come for the money.

That's what I told myself. I held on to it. It was a good, solid thing to hold.

"Bathroom there. The water takes a minute. Don't use the left burner, it leaks." I put the key on the table. "The notary is tomorrow at twelve. Above the pharmacy."

"Mr. Serrat."

"Jordi. Nobody here is mister. We'd never finish a sentence."

"Jordi." She said it right, the first time, soft on the J. She'd practiced. That annoyed me too. "The sign. You were taking his name off."

"I was taking it off before the summer clients come and ask to dive with Captain Marlowe. I'm tired of telling them."

It was true. It was maybe sixty percent of the truth.

She nodded slowly, like someone initialing a page. Then she straightened her jacket, and she folded herself back up. Chin, shoulders, the little professional smile. It was like watching someone coil a line. Neat. Fast. A lot of practice.

"Then I'll make this easy for both of us," she said. "I'm not here to run a dive shop. I don't dive. I don't swim well. I get seasick on the Charlestown ferry, and it's a ten-minute ride. I intend to sell my half as quickly as the law allows and go home, and then you can sand whatever you like."

"Sell it to who?"

"Whoever's buying."

"There is only one buyer." My own voice went flat. "Forty moorings and a cocktail bar."

"Then they'll want your half too, and you'll do very well."

"I am not selling my half."

"That's your right. Mine's the other one."

We looked at each other. Behind her, in the cage, Admiral cracked a sunflower seed and said, with great tenderness, "*Idiot.*"

Her mouth twitched. Only the left side. She killed it fast, but I saw.

"See," I said. "Forty times a day."

I went down the steps before I could see anything else.



The yard was where I'd left it. Compressor. Racks. Nineteen tanks that needed a visual inspection, and a client's outboard in pieces on the bench. Bills in the shoebox under the till. My father ran the place out of a shoebox, and Tom ran it out of the same shoebox, and I'm a traditional man.

I stood in the doorway and looked up at the sign.

M RLOWE & SERRAT. I'd stopped at a stupid place. It looked like a tooth knocked out.

Here is the part I hadn't said to her. I started sanding in November, the week after the funeral, and I got as far as the top of the M and climbed down. I did the same thing in January. And March. Today was only the day I didn't climb down, because Iker called at eight to say the daughter's plane had landed, and I needed to be doing something with my hands that looked like not caring.

My phone buzzed. I knew who it was before I looked.

"She's here," I said.

"I know she's here. I'm watching your grandmother's bar discuss her shoes." Iker Zabala had a voice like a man reading you your rights in bed, slow and pleased with itself. "Well? Is she a criminal mastermind?"

"She has a suitcase with no wheels and she thought the buses run at lunch."

"That's what a mastermind would want you to think."

"Iker."

"I'm joking. Mostly." A chair scraped on his end, and he took a breath before he moved. He hates that I hear it. "Listen. I'm serious now. Harcourt and Vane, Boston. Lot two-one-two, last October. Roman wine amphora, private Swiss collection, a very beautiful set of papers. The paperwork for that sale went through the provenance department. Her department. Then she leaves the company in March, nobody will say why, and in May she arrives in the one village on this coast where those jars come out of the water. Tell me that's nothing."

"Her father died here."

"Her father she didn't speak to. Her father who she didn't bury." His voice had gone gentle, which was worse. "I'm not saying she's in it, *nano*. I'm saying the judge wants to know. So do I. And so do you, if you'd think about it."

I looked at the ceiling. Up there, a floorboard creaked. One step, then another, slow. She was walking around his rooms.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Be yourself. Be rude, be suspicious, hate tourists. It's perfect cover. You were born for this." A pause. "Just notice things. Who she calls. Who comes to see her. If she goes into his papers, what she takes. Thursday at the breakwater, same as always."

"I'm a mechanic, Iker. I'm not Guardia Civil anymore."

"No," he agreed. "You're the only person in Cala Sirena who has a key to her door."

He hung up. He always gets the last word. It's the one thing I let him have.



She came down at four with a list.

An actual list, on a card. She wanted the Wi-Fi password, the location of a cash machine, and "the company's books for the last three fiscal years, if that's convenient."

"The books."

"Ledgers. Accounts. Tax filings. I'd like to know what I'm selling."

I went to the till, took out the shoebox, and set it on the counter in front of her.

She looked at it for a long time.

"That's a shoebox," she said.

"Size forty-four. My father's. There are two more in the back. Older years."

"There are *receipts* in this shoebox. Loose."

"Not loose. There's a system."

"What's the system?"

"New ones go on top."

She put two fingers on the lid as if testing whether it was hot. Then she lifted out the first handful, and something happened that I didn't expect. Her face changed. The little smile went away, and what was under it was better. Sharper. She started sorting. Fuel, air fills, the chandlery in Roses, a fine from the port authority I'd forgotten about. She made four piles in thirty seconds without seeming to decide to. Her hands were quick and exact, and she turned each paper to the light to read the date.

She did it the way Tom checked a regulator.

I didn't like that. I didn't like that at all.

"This is from 2023," she said. "This is from last week. They were touching."

"They're both fuel."

"Mr. Serrat—"

"Jordi."

"*Jordi.* I'm going to say this once, with love, as someone who found a forged export license inside a hatbox. This is not a system. This is a cry for help."

"The yard has been here since 1911."

"And I'm amazed. Truly." She squared the piles. "Do you know what your half is worth? Not the building. The business. Do you know if it made money last year?"

"We ate."

"That's not an answer, that's a fact about lunch."

I folded my arms. She folded hers. She came up to my collarbone and she was not, as far as I could see, afraid of anything on dry land.

"Listen to me, Boston." It came out of nowhere, the name, and it suited her so well that I kept it. "Tomorrow the notary will read you a paper. It'll say you own half of this. Half the boathouse, half the slip, half the debt. But a yard isn't a paper. My great-grandfather built that slipway with stone he carried on his back from the quarry at the Punta. Your father rebuilt the roof with me in a tramuntana that took the tiles off the church. You'll forgive me if I don't hand the books to the first blazer that comes on the bus."

"You just handed me the books."

"I handed you a shoebox."

"That *is* the books. That's the tragedy." She tucked the box under her arm like a football. "And for the record? I didn't come here to take anything from you. I came to take what's mine and get out of your way. You're the one who makes that sound like robbery."

"You're the half that costs money," I said. "It's not personal."

"Funny," she said. "It feels personal."

She went back up the steps with my father's shoebox. The blue door shut. Not a slam. She wasn't a slammer. She closed it the way you close a file.

I worked on the outboard until dark, and I did not look up at the window. At eleven I locked the yard, climbed the same steps, and went in at my own door across the landing. Eight meters from hers. The walls in that building are a hundred years old and thick as a fort, but the landing carries sound, and through it came the sound of her moving, and the bird muttering the forecast, and then nothing.

At two in the morning her light was still on.

At ten past two her door opened, and her steps went down toward the water.

I told myself it was nothing. Jet lag. People walk.

I was still telling myself that at twenty to three, when Admiral began to scream. Not her name this time. A word Tom had taught him as a joke, years ago, for the gulls that came in the window after the bread.

"*THIEF! THIEF! THIEF!*"

3

TESS

Inventory

FOR THE RECORD, I didn't go down to the water to have a moment. I went because it was two in the morning in my father's kitchen, and I had been cataloguing.

It's what I do when I can't feel my way through a thing. I make an inventory.

Item: one enamel coffee pot, blue, chipped at the spout. Item: fourteen paperback Westerns in English, spines broken. Item: one barometer, brass, working. Item: reading glasses, three pairs, all cheap, distributed around the flat as though he could never remember where he'd left his eyes. Item: a calendar from a marine supply company, still open to November.

Nobody had turned the page. The fourteenth had a small X on it, in pencil, and a note in the lettering I'd know anywhere: *F — dusk — alone.*

I didn't know what it meant. I knew what day it was. The law firm's letter had been very precise about the date.

Item: one photograph on one refrigerator.

I hadn't touched that one. I'd made coffee around it.

The flat was two rooms and a galley kitchen, with a ceiling of old beams and a window that framed the whole bay, and it was cleaner than

I expected. Someone had been watering the geraniums on the sill; someone had been feeding the bird, who, after his opening number, had sulked for an hour with his back to me and then said, "Barometer's dropping," in a perfectly reasonable tone, as if we'd agreed to start over.

There was a bookcase of logbooks. Dozens of them, hardbound, the same green cloth, each with a year inked on the spine. 1998. 2004. 2019. A whole shelf in a row. I ran my finger along them and didn't pull one out. I told myself that was professionalism. You don't handle the collection until the paperwork is signed.

It wasn't professionalism.

At two I gave up, put my blazer on over my pajamas because it was the only warm thing I'd packed, and went down the stone steps. I had my phone in my hand. In my laptop bag upstairs, in the zip pocket where I'd carried it for seven months, was an envelope with a Spanish stamp. It was addressed to me at Harcourt & Vane, in terrible handwriting, and I had never opened it.

I want to be precise about that. It came in October. I knew the handwriting. I put it in a drawer.

In November he died. I didn't know. I found out in April and took the letter out of the drawer and put it in my bag, and I had moved it from bag to bag ever since, like a thing I was planning to return to a store.

The mole was a hundred yards of old stone. I walked to the end and stood with the dark water moving on both sides. It didn't lap. It breathed. There were lights across the bay, and one green light at the harbor mouth, and so many stars that it looked like a clerical error.

I thought about a man with a handbag-shaped hole beside him at a funeral. No, that wasn't right. The handbag was the grandmother's. The hole was mine.

You came on the bus for the money.

Well, yes. I had eleven thousand dollars in legal bills, a reference from my last employer that said, in effect, *do not let her near the silver*, a

studio apartment in Somerville that I could cover until August, and a mother in Providence who kept saying *come home, honey,* by which she meant a twin bed and a lifetime supply of being right about my father. Money wasn't a character flaw. It was a number, and my number was bad.

But I hadn't come only for the money, and the worst part was that the man with the sander would never believe that, because I could not have told him what else I came for.

I stayed maybe twenty minutes. I got cold. I walked back.

I heard the bird from the bottom of the steps.

I ran. I'm not built for running in a blazer and pajama bottoms, but I took those steps two at a time, and when I reached the landing the blue door was standing wide open and the light I'd left on was off.

I stopped. Every true-crime podcast I have ever listened to stopped with me.

"*THIEF!*" Admiral shrieked, in the dark, flapping. "*THIEF! Coffee, Jordi! THIEF!*"

The other door on the landing banged open so hard it bounced.

He came out barefoot, in a pair of shorts and nothing else, holding a long wooden pole with a brass hook on the end. He looked from the open door to me and back again in about a quarter of a second, and then he put one arm straight out across my chest, like a gate, without touching me.

"Stay."

"I'm not a spaniel."

"*Stay*, Boston."

He went in. A switch clicked and the light came on. He moved through the rooms, fast and quiet; a cupboard door opened, then the bathroom door. Then silence, and then one flat, short word in Catalan that I didn't need translated.

"It's clear," he called. "Come. Don't touch anything."

I came.

Someone had gone through my father's flat like a customs inspection with a grudge. The kitchen drawers were pulled out and upended. The mattress was half off the bed. The fourteen Westerns were on the floor, face down, splayed open. My suitcase had been emptied onto the tiles, and my underwear was distributed across the room with a thoroughness I took personally. My laptop bag was unzipped.

I went for the bag first. The laptop was there. My passport was there. My wallet, with its forty euros and its maxed-out Visa. I unzipped the inside pocket with fingers that weren't quite steady.

The letter was there.

I sat down on the arm of the sofa. It was sit or fall.

"What did they take?" He was standing in the middle of the room with the boat hook, turning slowly, looking at everything. He looked at it the way I look at a consignment. In order. Top to bottom. "Money? Computer?"

"Nothing. Everything's here."

"Check again."

"I'm telling you, I had four things worth stealing and they're all in this bag. They didn't even take the—" I stopped. "They weren't looking for anything of mine."

He'd stopped turning. He was facing the bookcase.

I saw it a second after he did. Maybe because I'd run my finger along that shelf two hours ago, and my finger remembered. Green cloth spines, in a row, in order. 2019. 2020. 2021. 2022. 2023.

Then a gap, two books wide. Then nothing.

"He kept a log every year," Jordi said. His voice had changed. It was quiet and level. I would learn that this was what he sounded like when something was wrong. "Every dive, since before I was born. He was up to last November."

"They took 2024 and 2025."

"Yes."

"Who breaks into a flat, ignores a laptop, and steals a dead man's diary?"

He didn't answer. In his cage, the parrot was smoothing his feathers down, one by one, with a look of ruffled dignity. I had a sudden clear thought, the kind you get at three in the morning when you're too tired to stop them.

Whoever did this had been waiting. Not for the flat to be empty. The flat had been empty for six months. They'd been waiting for *me.* For someone to come and open it up and turn on a light.

"Your door wasn't forced," Jordi said. He was crouched at the lock. The muscles in his back moved under brown skin when he tilted his head, and I noted this, and filed it under *irrelevant*. "Did you lock it?"

"I—" I tried to remember. I'd gone down the steps with my phone. "I pulled it shut."

"It doesn't lock when you pull. You have to turn the key." He stood. "It's all right. You didn't know. Nobody locks here. Until tonight nobody had a reason."

It was the first almost-kind thing he'd said to me, and he said it to the doorframe.

"You should put a shirt on," I said. "If we're calling the police."

He looked down at himself as if he'd forgotten he had a chest. Then he looked at me, in my blazer and my pajamas with the little lobsters on them. For a second, the corner of his mouth did the thing mine had done at the bird.

"Lobsters," he said.

"They were a gift."

"From an enemy?"

"From my mother. So, yes, in a way." I pulled the blazer closed. My hands had started shaking in earnest now, with all that delayed adrenaline coming in, and I pushed them under my arms so he wouldn't see. He saw. He saw everything. It was extremely annoying.

He leaned the boat hook against the wall. He picked the mattress up off the floor with one hand and put it back on the bed. He righted a chair. He was touching things, I noticed, after telling me not to.