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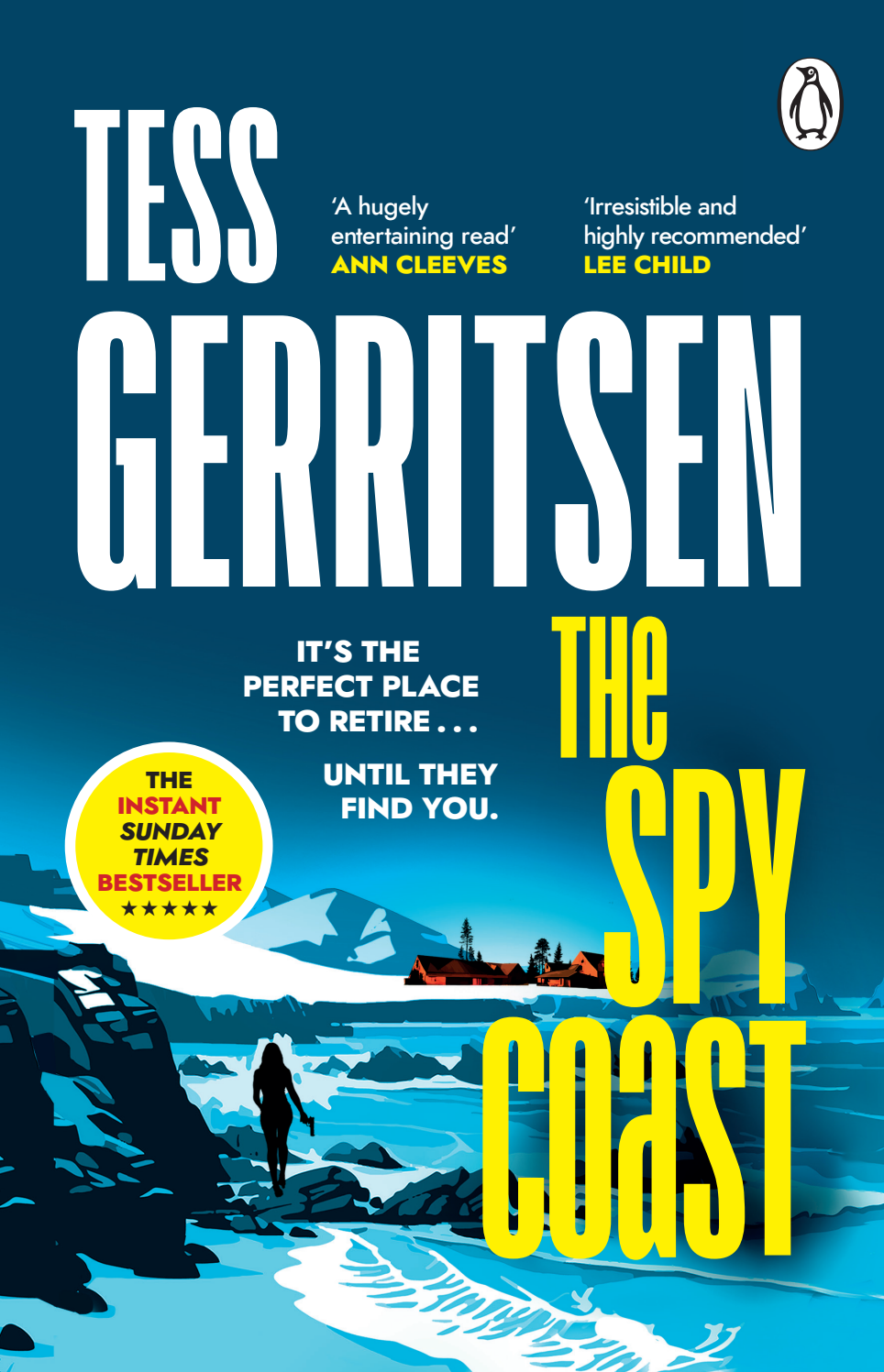

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To Will

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CHAPTER 1

DIANA

Paris, ten days ago

She used to be the golden girl. *How things have changed,* she thought, staring in the mirror. Her hair, once artfully streaked with sun-kissed highlights, was now what could only be described as dead-mouse brown. It was the most unobtrusive shade of hair color she could find on the shelves at the Monoprix, where she'd gone shopping after a neighbor mentioned that a man had been asking about her. That was the first clue that something might be amiss, that someone was asking about her, although there could have been a completely innocent explanation. He might have been an admirer, or a man trying to make a delivery, but she did not want to be caught unprepared, so she'd headed across town to a Monoprix in the third arrondissement, a neighborhood where no one knew her, and she'd bought hair color and eyeglasses. These were items she should always have kept

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on hand, but over the years she'd grown complacent. Careless.

She studied herself as a brunette and decided that the new hair color was not enough. She picked up scissors and began to cut, ravaging her €300 hairstyle by L'Atelier Blanc. Every snip of the scissors was like another slash to the fabric of her new life, a life she'd so carefully curated. As handful after handful of freshly cut hair slithered onto the bathroom tiles, she kept snipping, her regret soon turning to rage. Everything she'd planned, everything she'd risked, was now all for nothing, but that was the way of the world. No matter how clever you think you are, there is always someone cleverer, and that was her mistake: not considering the possibility that she could be outsmarted. For too many years, *she* had been the smartest person in the room, the one who was always two steps ahead and could outmaneuver anyone else on the team. The secret to success was to not let the rules get in your way, an approach that others didn't always appreciate. Yes, mistakes were occasionally made. Yes, blood was sometimes unnecessarily spilled. She'd made enemies along the way, and some of her colleagues now despised her, but thanks to her efforts, the mission was always accomplished. That's what had made her the golden girl.

Until now. *Snip*.

She studied her reflection, this time with a cool and critical eye. In the ten minutes it had taken her to chop off her prized locks, she had gone through all the stages of grief for her lost life. Denial, anger,

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depression. Now she'd reached the stage of acceptance, and she was ready to move on, to shed the carcass of the old Diana and breathe into existence a new Diana. No longer the golden girl but someone seasoned by experience into tempered steel. She would survive this too.

She swept all her fallen hair into a trash bag and threw in the empty box of hair dye as well. She had no time to sterilize the place, so she'd leave behind traces galore of her presence here, but that could not be helped. She only hoped that the Paris police would rely on their typical sexist instincts to assume that the woman who'd lived in this apartment, the woman who was now missing, had been abducted. A victim, not a perpetrator.

She put on glasses and tousled her newly cropped hair into a messy swirl. It was merely a light disguise, but it should be enough to throw off any neighbors she might encounter on the way out. She tied off the trash bag and carried it out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, where she retrieved her go bag. What a shame she'd have to abandon all her beautiful shoes and dresses, but she needed to travel light, and leaving behind a closetful of designer fashions would make her disappearance look all the more involuntary. So would leaving behind the art she'd collected over the years, after her bank accounts had bloomed: the antique Chinese vases, the Chagall painting, the two-thousand-year-old Roman bust. She'd miss them all, but sacrifices had to be made if she was to survive.

Carrying her go bag and the trash bag with the hair

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clippings, she walked out of her bedroom and into the living room. There she gave another sigh of regret. Unsightly blood spatters stained her leather sofa and arced across the wall where the Chagall hung, like an abstract extension of the painting itself. Crumpled beneath the Chagall was the source of that blood. The man had been the first attacker through her door, so he was also the first one she'd dispatched. He was just your typical manly man whose hours at the gym had paid off in bulging biceps but not in brains. This was not how he'd expected the day would end for him, and he'd died with a look of surprise on his face, probably never expecting it would be a woman to take him down.

He must have been badly informed about his target.

She heard a whisper of a breath behind her and turned to look at the second man. He lay at the edge of her precious Persian carpet, his blood seeping into the intricate pattern of vines and tulips. To her surprise, he was still alive.

She walked over to him and nudged his shoulder with her shoe.

His eyes flickered open. He stared up at her and fumbled for his weapon, but she'd already kicked it out of his reach, and all he could do was flap his hand on the floor like a dying fish splashing in its own blood.

"Qui t'a envoyé?" she asked.

His hand flapped more frantically. The bullet she'd fired into his neck must have damaged his spine, and his movements were spastic, his arm jerking robotically.

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Maybe he didn't understand French. She repeated her question, this time in Russian: *Who sent you?*

She didn't see any glint of comprehension in his eyes. Either he was fading too fast for his brain to function, or he did not understand, both of which made this worrisome. She could deal with the Russians, but if someone else had sent these men, that would present a problem.

"Who is trying to kill me?" she asked, this time in English. "Tell me, and I'll let you live."

His arm stopped flopping. He had fallen still, but she saw comprehension in his eyes. He'd understood the question. He also understood that it really didn't matter if he told her the truth; either way, he was a dead man.

She heard men's voices in the hallway outside her apartment. Had they sent others as backup? She'd delayed too long, and there was no time left to interrogate this one. She aimed her suppressor and fired two bullets into his head. *Nighty night.*

It took her only seconds to scramble out the window and onto the fire escape. Her last glimpse of her apartment was bittersweet. Here she'd found a measure of happiness and enjoyed the well-earned fruits of her labors. Now the place was a slaughterhouse, with the blood of two nameless men polluting her walls.

She dropped down from the fire escape into the alley below. At 11:00 p.m., the streets of Paris were still lively, and she easily slipped in among the pedestrians strolling down the busy avenue. She heard a police siren in the distance, moving closer, but did not

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quicken her pace. It was too soon; the sirens had nothing to do with her.

Five blocks away, she tossed the trash bag into a restaurant dumpster and kept walking, the go bag slung over her shoulder. It held what she needed for the moment, and she was not without other resources. She had more than enough to start over.

But first, she had to find out who wanted her dead. Unfortunately, it was a multiple-choice question. She had assumed it was the Russians, but now she wasn't sure. When you piss off multiple factions, you end up with multiple enemies, each with his or her own talent for mayhem. The question was, how had her name been leaked? And why, after sixteen years, were they coming after her?

If they knew her name, then they must know about the others as well. The past, it seemed, was about to catch up with them all.

So much for a comfortable retirement. It was time to go back to work.

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CHAPTER 2

MAGGIE

Purity, Maine, now

Something has died here.

I stand in my field, staring down at the evidence of slaughter in the snow. The killer dragged the victim through fresh powder, and even though snow continues to fall in a silent tumble of flakes, it has not yet covered the killer's tracks, or the grooves carved by the dead carcass as it was pulled toward the woods. I see a smear of blood and scattered feathers and clumps of black down trembling in the wind. It's what's left of one of my favorite Araucanas, which I prized for her reliable production of pretty blue eggs. Although death is merely a pinpoint in the larger circle of life, and I have seen it many times before, this particular loss hits me hard and I sigh, sending my breath swirling into the cold.

I glance through the chicken fence at what's left of my flock, which is now down to three dozen chickens,

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barely two-thirds of the original fifty chicks I nurtured last spring. It's been only two hours since I opened their coop door and released them for the day, and in that brief window of time, the predator moved in. I have one last rooster, the only one who's survived repeated eagle attacks and raccoon depredations, and he now struts the enclosure, all his tail feathers intact, looking unalarmed by the loss of yet another of his harem. What a useless cock.

So many of them are.

As I rise back to my feet, a flicker of movement catches my eye, and I stare at the woods looming beyond the chicken fence. The trees are mostly oak and maple, with a few sorry spruces struggling in the shade of their overpowering neighbors. Almost hidden in the underbrush is a pair of eyes, and they are watching me. For a moment we simply stare at each other, two enemies facing off across a snowy battlefield.

Slowly I move away from my mobile henhouse. I make no sudden movements, utter no sound.

My enemy watches me the whole time.

Frozen grass crunches beneath my boots as I ease toward my Kubota RTV. Quietly I swing open the door and reach in for my rifle, which is tucked in behind the seats. It is always kept loaded, so I don't need to waste time scooping up ammo and sliding in bullets. I swing the barrel around, toward the trees, and take aim.

My shot cracks, loud as thunder. Startled crows rise from the trees and frantically flap into the sky, and

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my squawking chickens make a panicked dash for the safety of their henhouse. I lower the rifle and squint at the trees, scanning the underbrush.

Nothing moves.

I drive my RTV across the field to the edge of the woods and climb out. The underbrush is thick with brambles, and the snow hides a layer of dead leaves and dried twigs. Every step I take sets off an explosive snap. I have not yet spotted any blood, but I'm certain I will find it because you always know—somehow you can feel it in your bones—when your bullet hits its mark. At last I see the proof that my aim was true: a blood-spattered bed of leaves. The mangled carcass of my Araucana hen lies abandoned where the killer dropped it.

I wade deeper through the underbrush, pushing aside branches that snag my trousers and claw at my face. I know it is here somewhere, if not dead, then gravely injured. It has managed to flee farther than I expected, but I keep pushing ahead, the steam from my breath spiraling away. Once I could have sprinted through these woods, even with a heavy rucksack on my back, but I am not the woman I once was. My joints have been worn down by punishing use and the inexorable passage of time, and a hard landing from a parachute drop left me with a surgically pinned ankle that aches whenever the temperature drops or the barometer falls. My ankle is aching now. Aging is a cruel process. It has stiffened my knees, lacquered my once-black hair with silver, and deepened the grooves

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in my face. But my vision is still sharp, and I haven't lost my ability to read the landscape, to interpret the clues in the snow. I crouch down over a paw print and note the speckle of blood on the leaves.

The animal is suffering. That is my fault.

I haul myself back to my feet. My knees and hips protest, unlike the days when I could launch myself out of a cramped sports car and take off at a sprint. I tramp through a patch of blackberry bushes and emerge into a clearing, and there I finally locate my nemesis, lying motionless in the snow. A female. She looks healthy and well nourished, and her thick fur is a lustrous red. Her mouth hangs open, revealing razor teeth and jaws powerful enough to slice into a chicken's throat and snap its neck. My bullet hit her squarely in the chest, and I am surprised she made it this far before she collapsed. I prod the body with my boot, just to confirm she's dead. While this particular problem has been solved, taking the fox's life gives me no sense of satisfaction. When I heave out a breath, my sigh is the sound of regret.

At sixty years old, I have amassed more than my share of them.

The fur is too valuable to abandon here in the woods, so I grab the fox by its tail. She's been eating well, dining on my chickens, and she's so heavy I have to half drag her out of the woods, her body carving a trench through dead leaves and snow. I lift her up and roll her into the bed of my Kubota, and the carcass lands with a sad thump. While I have no use for the pelt, I know someone who'll be delighted to have it.

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I climb into the Kubota and drive across the field, to my neighbor's house.

Luther Yount likes his coffee burned, and I can smell it from his driveway as I climb out of the RTV. From here, I can see across the snow-covered field to my own farmhouse, which stands on a knoll beyond a colonnade of handsome sugar maples. Mine is not a grand house, but it's solid enough, built in 1830, according to the real estate agent who sold it to me. I know her information is correct, because I tracked down the original deed for Blackberry Farm. I believe only what I can confirm for myself. My home has unobstructed views in every direction, and if someone is approaching, I will see them, especially on a clear winter morning, when the landscape is stark and white.

I hear the lowing of a cow and the squawk of chickens. A set of small boot prints track through the snow, heading from Luther's cabin toward the barn. His fourteen-year-old granddaughter, Callie, must be in there, tending to her animals, as she does every morning.

I thump up the porch steps and knock. Luther opens the door, and I inhale the skunky scent of coffee that's been left too long on the stove. He fills the doorway, a white-bearded Santa in a red plaid shirt and suspenders, and he's wheezing from the woodsmoke and the perpetually dusty state of his cabin.

"Why, good morning, Miss Maggie," he says.

"Good morning. I've brought a gift for you and Callie."

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"What's the occasion?"

"No occasion. I just thought you'd find some use for it. It's in the Kubota."

He doesn't bother to pull on a coat, instead stepping outside in his wool shirt and blue jeans and bog boots. He follows me to the RTV and gives a murmur of admiration as he looks down at the dead fox and then strokes its fur.

"She's a real beaut. So that's the gunshot I heard this morning. You take her down with one bullet?"

"She still managed to run fifty yards into the woods."

"She's probably the same one who took out two of Callie's hens. Good job."

"Still, it's a shame. The fox was just trying to make a living."

"Aren't we all?"

"I thought you could use the pelt."

"You sure you don't want to keep it? It's a nice one."

"And you'll know exactly what to do with it."

He reaches into the truck bed and hauls out the carcass. The effort makes him wheeze more loudly. "Come on in," he says, cradling the dead animal like a grandchild. "I just poured myself some coffee."

"Um, thanks. But no."

"Then at least let me send you home with some fresh milk."

That I definitely welcome. The milk from Callie's grass-fed Jersey cow is unlike anything I'd tasted before I moved to Maine, rich and sweet enough to be worth the risk of drinking it unpasteurized. I follow

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him into his home, where he drops the fox carcass on a bench. The poorly insulated cabin is only marginally warmer inside than it is outside, even with the heat from the woodstove, so I leave my coat on, but Luther seems perfectly comfortable in just his shirt and jeans. I don't want his coffee, but he sets two mugs on the kitchen table anyway. It would be rude to refuse the invitation.

I sit down.

Luther slides a pitcher of cream to me. He knows the way I like my coffee—or at least the only way I can tolerate his coffee—and he also knows I can't resist the cream from Callie's cow. In the two years since I moved onto the adjoining property, he's no doubt gleaned a number of details about me. He knows that I turn off my lights every night around 10:00 p.m., that I'm up early to feed and water my chickens. He knows I'm a novice at tapping maple trees, that I mostly keep to myself, and that I don't throw loud parties. And today he's learned I'm a decent shot. There's still a lot about me that he doesn't know, things I've never told him. Things I will never tell him. I'm grateful he's not the kind of man who asks too many questions. I value a neighbor who's discreet.

I do know a great deal about Luther Yount, though. It's not hard to pick up the essence of the man just by looking around his home. His bookshelves are handmade, as is the rough-hewn kitchen table, and bundles of dried thyme and oregano, both cut from his home garden, hang from the overhead beam. He also has books—lots and lots of books, about a confoundingly

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wide range of subjects, from particle physics to animal husbandry. Some of the textbooks bear his name as author, evidence of Luther Yount's previous incarnation as a professor of mechanical engineering, before he resigned from the faculty of MIT. Before he left behind academics and the city of Boston, and perhaps a few personal demons as well, to remake himself as this disheveled but happy farmer. I know all this about him not because he's told me, but because I delved thoroughly into his background, as I did with all my nearby neighbors, before I bought Blackberry Farm.

Luther passed inspection. That's why I feel perfectly at ease sitting at his kitchen table and sipping his coffee.

Boots thump onto the porch, and the door swings open, admitting a blast of cold air along with fourteen-year-old Callie. Luther is homeschooling her, and as a result, Callie is charmingly feral in ways that make her both wiser yet more naive than other girls her age. Like her grandfather, she's serenely disheveled, her barn coat streaked with dirt and stray chicken feathers trapped in her brown hair. She carries in two baskets of freshly collected eggs, which she sets down on the kitchen counter. Her face is so flushed from the cold that her cheeks look as if they've been slapped.

"Hey, Maggie!" she says as she hangs up her coat.

"Look what she brought us," Luther says.

Callie looks at the dead fox lying on the bench and runs her hand across the fur. She shows no hesitation, no squeamishness. She's been living with Luther for

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most of her life, ever since her mother died of a heroin overdose in Boston, and life on this farm has taught her to be unsurprised by death.

"Ooh. It still feels warm," she says.

"I brought it straight over," I say. "Thought you and your grandpa could make something nice with it."

She beams at me in delight. "The fur's so beautiful. Thank you, Maggie! Do you think there's enough to make a hat?"

"I'd say so," says Luther.

"Do you know how to make one, Grandpa?"

"We'll look it up, figure it out together. Can't let something that pretty go to waste, eh?"

"I'd like to see how you do it, Luther," I say.

"Want to see how I skin it too?"

"No, I already know how to do that."

"Do you?" He laughs. "You always manage to surprise me, Miss Maggie."

Callie sets the egg baskets in the sink. With the tap running, she begins spot-cleaning the eggs with a rag so they'll look pristine in their cartons. At the local co-op, they'll sell for seven bucks a dozen, which is a bargain for free-range organic eggs, considering the labor and feed and the perpetual battles with bobcats and foxes and raccoons. Not that Luther and Callie depend on egg sales for their livelihood, because Luther has a sizable investment account. It's another little detail about him that I managed to unearth. These are Callie's chickens and Callie's earnings, and she is already a fine businesswoman. I've never met a

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fourteen-year-old who can so efficiently slaughter and gut an old layer hen.

"It's sad you had to shoot her, but I've lost too many of my hens too," Callie says.

"Some other predator will just move in," Luther says. "Way of the world."

Callie looks at me. "How many did you lose?"

"Half a dozen just this past week. The fox took one of my Araucanas this morning."

"Maybe I should get some Araucanas. Customers seem to like those blue eggs. I could probably charge more for them."

Luther grunts. "Blue eggs, brown eggs. They all taste the same."

"Well, I should probably get going," I say, and stand up.

"So soon?" says Callie. "You hardly got a chance to visit."

It's a rare fourteen-year-old who craves conversations with a woman my age, but Callie is an unusual girl. She is so at ease in the company of adults that I sometimes forget how young she is.

"When your grandpa gets around to sewing that fox hat, I'll be back," I say.

"And I'll make chicken and dumplings for dinner."

"Then I'll most certainly be back."

Luther gulps down the rest of his coffee and rises to his feet as well. "Wait, let me get that milk I promised you." He opens the refrigerator, setting off the musical clink of glass milk bottles on the shelves inside. "If it weren't for these blasted health regulations, we

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could sell our milk off the farm stand. Just sit back and collect the money."

Money that he doesn't need. Some people like to flaunt their wealth, but Luther seems embarrassed by his. Or maybe it's a tactic for self-preservation, hiding what others might want to take from you. He takes out four glass bottles of milk, each topped by a thick layer of cream, and sets them in a paper bag. "Next time someone drops by your house, Maggie, let 'em have a taste of this. Then you send 'em straight over here to buy more. A strictly private sale, of course. Keep the state of Maine out of our hair."

I'm already at the door with my prized milk when I register what he's just said to me. I turn back to him. "What do you mean, *next* time?"

"Didn't someone come by to see you yesterday?"

"No."

"Humph." He looks at Callie. "Maybe you heard wrong."

"Heard what wrong?" I ask.

"There was a lady at the post office," says Callie. "I was picking up our mail when I heard her ask the postmaster how to get to Blackberry Farm. She told him she was a friend of yours."

"What did she look like? Young, old? What color was her hair?"

My rapid-fire questions seem to take Callie aback. "Um, she was young, I guess. And really pretty. I didn't see her hair because she was wearing a hat. And a nice down jacket. A blue one."

"You didn't tell her how to find my place, did you?"

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"No, but Greg at the PO told her. Is something wrong?"

I don't know the answer. I stand there by their open door, holding my bag of milk bottles, the cold air sweeping in past me. "I wasn't expecting anyone. I don't like surprises, that's all," I say, and walk out of their cabin.

Is something wrong?

The question still unsettles me when I later drive into town to pick up supplies. Who is asking for directions to my farm? The query could be perfectly innocent, asked by someone in search of the previous owner, unaware that the woman passed away three years ago at age eighty-eight. She was, by all accounts, legendary for her sharp wit and her bad temper. My kind of woman. That *would* be the logical reason for a visitor to ask about Blackberry Farm, because there's no reason for anyone to come looking for me here. In the two years I've lived in Purity, Maine, nobody has.

I want to keep it that way.

In town, I make my usual rounds: to the feedstore, the post office, the grocery store. These are all places where I easily blend in with other silver-haired women, all of us bundled up in our winter jackets and scarves. Like them, I seldom draw a glance of interest. Old age confers anonymity, which makes it the most effective disguise of all.

In the village grocery store, I go unnoticed as I wheel my cart up and down the narrow aisles, picking up oatmeal and flour, potatoes and onions. Eggs, at least, I will never have to buy. The liquor selection in

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this little town is pitiful, but they do carry two different brands of single-malt scotch, and even though neither is particularly to my taste, I buy a bottle anyway. I am trying to preserve my supply of thirty-year Longmorn, and I do not know when I'll be able to find another source for it. Any whisky is better than no whisky.

As I stand in line waiting to pay for the groceries, I could be mistaken for just another farmer or housewife or retired teacher. For years, I taught myself not to stand out, not to draw attention, and now it comes effortlessly, which is both sad and also a relief. Sometimes I miss the days when I was noticed, the days when I wore short skirts and spike heels and could feel men's gazes on my body.

The checkout clerk rings me up, then does a double take when she sees my tab. "That'll be, um—wow. Two hundred ten dollars." She looks up at me, as if expecting me to dispute it, but I don't. It's because of the whisky. It's not even my favorite, but some things in life count as necessities.

I pay the bill and carry the bags outside. I'm loading them into my pickup when I glimpse Ben Diamond, wearing his usual black leather jacket. He's walking into the Marigold, the café across the street. If anyone in this town has his fingers to the wind, it's Ben. He might know who's been asking about me.

I cross the street and follow Ben into the Marigold.

I immediately spot him sitting with Declan Rose in a corner booth. As usual, both men sit facing the entrance, a habit they cannot shake, even in retirement.

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Declan looks like the history professor he used to be, with his tweed jacket and his handsome lion's mane of hair. At sixty-eight, his once-black hair is half-silver, but it's still as thick as it was when I met him, nearly four decades ago. Unlike the professorial Declan, Ben Diamond looks vaguely menacing, with his shaved head and black leather jacket. It takes innate command presence to pull off a look like that at age seventy-three, but Ben still has it. As I walk toward their booth, they both look up.

"Ah, Maggie! Join us," says Declan.

"Haven't seen you in a while. What've you been up to?" Ben asks.

I slide into their booth. "I had a fox problem to deal with."

"I'm guessing the fox is now deceased."

"As of this morning." I look up as the waitress passes by. "Coffee, please, Janine."

"Menu?" she asks.

"Not today, thanks."

Ben is studying me. Reading faces is a talent of his, and he must sense there's a purpose to my joining them today. I wait until Janine is out of earshot before I ask the men my question.

"Who's been looking for me?"

"Is someone looking for you?" Declan says.

"There was a woman, someone new in town. I heard she was in the post office yesterday, asking how to find Blackberry Farm."

The men glance at each other, then at me.

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"News to me, Maggie," says Ben.

Janine brings my coffee. It's weak, but at least it's not burned like Luther's. We wait until she walks away before we speak again. It's just force of habit for us. The reason the men always choose this booth is because it feels like a safely isolated outpost, far from inquisitive ears.

"Are you worried about this?" Declan asks.

"I don't know if I should be."

"Did she ask for you by name? Or just the farm's name?"

"Only the farm. It may mean nothing. How would she know I'm the one who lives there?"

"They can find out anything if they really want to."

We pause as two customers get up from their table and walk past us, toward the cashier. The silence gives me a chance to consider Declan's words. *If they really want to.* That's what I count on these days, that I'm not worth the trouble to track down. There are always bigger fish to fry, and I'm just a small fish. Or maybe a medium-size fish. Why go to the effort of tracking down a woman who doesn't want to be found? Over the sixteen years since my retirement, I've slowly let down my guard. Now I'm so accustomed to being a small-town chicken farmer that I've started to believe that's all I am. The way Ben's just a retired salesman for hotel supplies, and Declan's just a retired history professor. We know the truth, but we keep each other's secrets, because we each have our own to guard.

There's safety in mutual blackmail.

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"We'll put our ears to the ground," says Ben. "Find out who this woman is."

"I'd appreciate it, thank you." I put down two dollars for the coffee.

Declan says, "Are you coming to tonight's book group? It's been two months since you last attended. We miss you."

"Which book are you discussing?"

"*The Travels of Ibn Battutah*. Ingrid chose it," says Ben.

"I've already read that one."

"Then you can give us the CliffsNotes," says Declan, "because Ben and I haven't done our homework. We're meeting at Ingrid and Lloyd's house tonight. Six o'clock, martinis. With a few of those under our belts, maybe we can skip over discussing the book and get straight to the local gossip instead. Can we count you in?"

"I'll think about it."

"That's no kind of answer," Ben growls. He's trying to bully me into attending. I've always wondered how well that gangster persona worked for him when he was in the field. He's certainly never scared me.

"Okay, I'll be there," I say.

"And I'll make sure your favorite vodka's on ice," says Declan.

"Belvedere."

Declan laughs. "Really, Mags. Do you think I'd forget that detail?"

Of course he knows my preferred vodka. Inside Declan's handsome head of hair is a brain for details

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and a talent for foreign languages that's allowed him to master seven. I gave up at three.

Back in my truck, I drive home across back roads that are bumpy with frost heaves, through a black-and-white landscape of bare trees and snow-covered fields. This is not where I saw myself landing at the end of my life. I grew up in a place of dust and heat and blindingly bright summers, and my first winter in Maine was a challenge. I learned how to split firewood and drive on ice and thaw frozen pipes, and I learned that one is never too old to adapt. When I was young and imagined the setting for a perfect retirement, I dreamed it would be a hilltop villa in Koh Samui, or a tree house on the Osa Peninsula, where I would be serenaded by birds and howler monkeys. These were places I knew and loved, places that, in the end, I could not flee to.

Because that's where they would expect me to be. Being predictable is always the first mistake.

An alarm beeps on my phone.

I glance down at the screen, and what I see makes me hit the brakes. I pull off to the side of the road and stare at the images. It's the video feed from my security system. Someone has just entered my house.

I could call the local police to respond, but they'd certainly ask questions, which I may not want to answer. Purity's police department is manned by only six full-time officers, and up till now, I haven't had any reason to interact with them. I want to keep it that way, even if it means I have to deal with this on my own.

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I pull back onto the road.

My pulse has kicked into a quick gallop by the time I drive past the colonnade of sugar maple trees and pull up in front of my farmhouse. For a moment, I remain in my truck as I eye the porch. Nothing looks out of the ordinary. The front door is closed, and my snow shovel is where I left it, leaning against the stack of firewood. The intruder wants to lull me into believing everything is fine.

So that's how I will play it.

I climb out of the truck and carry the sack of potatoes and the chicken feed up to the porch. There I drop them, letting them land with a loud thump. As I pull out my house keys, every nerve feels exquisitely fine tuned, magnifying every sensation. The rustle of the tree branches, the kiss of the cold wind on my cheek.

I notice that the filament on my doorjamb has been broken.

It's such a primitive tactic in this electronic age of home surveillance, but digital systems can fail, or they can be hacked. Over the last few months I have grown careless, not always bothering to press that filament, as fine as a spiderweb, into place, but what I heard in Luther's house this morning made me resume this precaution.

I unlock the door and nudge it open with my boot, and the mudroom comes into view. My shoes are lined up under the bench, my coats hanging on the hooks. The floor is grainy with tracked-in sand and dirt. So

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far, everything looks normal. To my left is the living room. I glance through the doorway and see the sofa, the wing chairs, the stacked firewood by the hearth. No intruder in sight.

I turn right and step into the kitchen, avoiding the floorboard that invariably creaks. I see my coffee cup and breakfast dishes in the sink, grapefruit rinds in the compost bucket. Spilled granules of sugar sparkle on the table. All is as I left it, except for one thing: the scent of an unfamiliar shampoo.

That troublesome floorboard creaks behind me. I turn and face the intruder.

She is young and lithe, and she moves with the easy grace of an athlete. Early thirties, with straight black hair and blunt bangs, dark eyes, Slavic cheekbones. She seems remarkably unruffled, despite the fact the barrel of my Walther, which I've been carrying ever since my conversation with Callie this morning, is now pointed at her chest.

"Hello, Maggie Bird," she says.

"I don't believe we've met."

"Why did you choose that particular name?"

"Why not?"

"Let me guess. Bird, as in 'free as a bird'?"

"A girl can dream."

She pulls out a chair. Sits down at my kitchen table and casually brushes aside the sugar granules I spilled at breakfast, seeming not to care that I'm one trigger-pull from blowing her away. "There's really no need for that," she says, nodding at my Walther.

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"I'll decide that. Right now, I'm looking at someone who entered my house, uninvited. I have no idea who you are, or why you're here."

"Please, call me Bianca."

"Real or alias?"

"Does it matter?"

"The police will need a name for the corpse."

"Oh, please. I'm here because we have a problem. And we could use your help."

I regard her for a moment, taking in the relaxed shoulders and the long lean legs, now lazily crossed. She's not even looking at me; instead, she's casually picking at a hangnail.

I sit down across from her and set my Walther on the table.

She glances at the gun. "Yes, I can understand why you might feel the need for that. You have a reputation for not trusting people."

"I have a reputation?"

"That's why they sent me. They thought you'd consider a woman to be less threatening."

"If you know anything at all about me, then you also know I'm no longer in the game. I'm a chicken farmer. I like being a chicken farmer."

There's not even a twitch of a smile on her lips. She has no sense of humor but is all business, a woman on a mission. The Agency has clearly stepped up its recruiting game since I worked for them.

"I don't know why they sent you," I say. "But now that you've seen me, you know I'm no longer in my

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prime, and I'm also rusty. I'm not interested in doing any more work for them."

"There'd be a paycheck for you."

"I have all the money I need."

"It could be substantial."

I frown. "Really? That doesn't sound like my cheap Uncle Sam."

"This assignment will have special significance for you."

"Still not interested." I rise from the chair, and even though getting up that quickly makes my knee twinge, I'm too proud to let her hear me groan or see me grimace. "I'll walk you out now. Tell them that the next time they send someone to talk to me, have that person knock on my door, like any normal visitor would."

"Diana Ward has dropped off the radar."

I go still. For a moment I just stare at her, trying to read her face, but all I see is cool perfection and an utterly expressionless face.

"Alive or dead?" I ask.

"We don't know."

"Last seen where?"

"Physically? Bangkok, a week ago. Since then, she's vanished, and her cell phone has gone silent."

"She's been retired for years. Left the Agency soon after I did. Why do you care where she is now?"

"We're concerned about her well-being. Actually, we're concerned about everyone who was involved with Operation Cyrano."

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I can't hide my reaction to hearing those two words. I feel the shock of it reverberate through my bones, as powerful as a concussion blast. "Why is this coming up now?"

"There was a recent breach of the Agency's automated information services. That unauthorized access set off an alert, but the only file the intruder accessed was the one for Operation Cyrano."

"That op was sixteen years ago."

"And the information remains classified, for the safety of everyone involved. But now, I'm afraid your names may have been leaked, and that's why we're tracking you all down, to check on your welfare. To see if you're in need of help. I must say, I never expected you to end up in a place like *this*." She looks around at my pine table, at the hanging rack of cast-iron pans. Outside it's started to snow, and fat flakes swirl beyond the window, the kind of snow that's a delight to walk in. Bianca doesn't look like a woman who delights in snowflakes.

"As you can see, I'm settled in here, and I have a new name," I tell her. "I'm perfectly safe."

"But Diana may be in trouble."

"Diana in trouble?" I laugh. "Yeah, that's a given. But she's a survivor, and she's perfectly capable of looking out for herself. Now, if that's all you came to ask, it's time for you to leave." I go to the front door and yank it open. Despite the cold air rushing in, I hold it open, waiting for my unwanted visitor to walk out.

Bianca finally steps onto the porch, then turns to

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look at me. “Help us find her, Maggie. You must know where she’s gone. You worked together.”

“Sixteen years ago.”

“Still, you probably know her better than anyone.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I probably do. That’s why I don’t give a fuck what happens to her,” I say, and I close the door in her face.

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CHAPTER 3

JO

Some men just need a good stabbing, thought Jo Thibodeau as she watched the paramedics load Jimmy Kiely's stretcher into the ambulance. He'd almost certainly survive his wounds, and depending on one's point of view, that was either a good thing or a bad thing. A good thing, because his wife, Megan, wouldn't have to face a murder charge. A bad thing, because it meant Jimmy would be back to make Megan's miserable life even more miserable, forcing Jo and her officers to intervene once again in this couple's never-ending drama. Even in a town as small as Purity, there was always drama, sometimes behind closed doors where no one else could hear the sobs or the fists thudding into flesh. Sometimes those private dramas spilled out into the open, and neighbors who'd seen the black eyes and perpetually closed drapes would nod and say to each other: *We knew this would happen someday.*

Tonight it did happen, and a dozen of those neighbors now stood in the parking lot of the Whale Spout

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pub, listening to Jimmy yell threats from the back of the ambulance, shouts that were loud enough to be heard over the music that was blaring from the bar.

"Just you wait, bitch! Wait till I get home!"

Too bad the knife had missed Jimmy's lungs.

"You're gonna be sorry! Just you wait!"

Lights flashing, the ambulance drove away, and Jo let out a sigh, exhaling a cloud of steam in the frigid air. The crowd in the bar's parking lot made no move to disperse because this was the most exciting thing that had happened in Purity since Fernald Hobbs suffered a stroke behind the wheel of his pickup and rolled straight through the boatyard and into the harbor. Even though it was fifteen degrees tonight and starting to snow again, they stood staring as though mesmerized by the rack lights of the two patrol cars. When you grow up in Maine, fifteen degrees is a balmy night for February.

"Please go home, folks!" Jo called out. "There's nothing to see here."

"He had it coming, Jo!" Dorothy French yelled.

"That's for a jury to decide. Now please, head on home before you all get frostbite. The bar's closed for the night."

With the town's only winter drinking establishment shut down for the evening, maybe the rest of the night would be quiet. Unless someone took the road too fast and skidded into a snowbank, or someone's toddler unlocked a door and wandered out of the house. For a cop, cold weather complicated everything from accidents to lost kids. Throw in a bad case of cabin

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fever, a couple with pent-up rage and too much to drink, and you got—

Well, you got what happened here tonight at the Whale Spout.

She walked into the bar and stamped the snow off her boots. After coming in straight from the cold, it felt like a hothouse inside, the heat cranked up to at least seventy-five. What a waste of energy. Jo looked at the bar, where she'd worked for a few summers pouring wine and shaking cocktails for the hordes from away, sunburned tourists who'd said her little seaside village was *quaint* and asked what folks did here in the winter. *Well, this is what we do here,* she thought. *We gain weight and drink too much and get on each other's nerves.* She inhaled the yeasty scent of beer and thought how good a frosty glass of Sea Dog ale would taste right now, but that would have to wait. She unzipped her jacket, peeled off her gloves and wool cap, and focused on the reason she was here: the young woman slumped at a table in the corner, with an officer standing guard beside her.

Megan Kiely had certainly seen better days. In high school, she'd been one of the most popular girls in school, a spirited redhead with a laugh you could hear from the other end of the cross-country field. Her hair was still red, and she still had a killer figure, but at only thirty-two years old, she'd had the laughter sucked right out of her, leaving behind this sad husk of a woman.

"Hey, Megan," said Jo, loud enough to be heard over the thumping music.

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Megan looked up and said, listlessly: "Hey, Jo."

Jo said to her officer, "Mike, you want to give us some space? And shut off that god-awful music, will you?"

She waited for Mike to go behind the bar and turn off the speakers. Blessed silence, at last. As she sat down at the table across from Megan, she felt something sticky on the table surface, and looked down to see there was blood smeared on the heel of her hand. It had to be the asshole's blood, because Megan didn't appear to have any open wounds, only a swollen right eye, which was going to turn into one hell of a shiner by tomorrow.

"So. Shall we talk about it?" Jo asked.

"No."

"You know we have to."

"Yeah." Megan sighed. "I know."

Jo reached for a paper napkin from the dispenser and wiped the blood off her hand. "What happened?"

"He hit me."

"Where?"

"My face."

"I mean, where did it happen?"

"At home. I don't even remember what set him off. Oh yeah, it's 'cause I was late getting back from my mom's house. He punched me and I walked out. Came here, thinking I'd just wait it out till he calmed down. But he followed me. Barreled right in and came at me while I was sitting at the counter. I guess I just—just reacted. Grabbed a steak knife as I was backing away. I don't remember doing it. I just know he started

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screaming and there was blood, and somehow, I was holding the knife."

Jo looked at Mike, who said: "It's been bagged. And we got half a dozen witnesses who saw her do it." He shrugged. "Straightforward."

Except it wasn't. The part about a wife stabbing her husband might be straightforward enough, but what came before that was a sad and convoluted tale about a woman who'd fallen in love too young, married too young. Gotten trapped too young.

"I'm going to jail, aren't I?" whispered Megan.

"For tonight, yes. Till your lawyer can sort things out in the morning."

"And then?"

"There are extenuating circumstances. I know it, and most folks in town know it."

Megan nodded and gave a sad laugh. "I'm kind of looking forward to jail. It'd be like a little vacation, you know? I could sleep nice and sound and not have to worry that Jimmy might—"

"Megan, it doesn't have to be this way."

"But it is." She looked at Jo. "It just is."

"Then *change* it. Tell Jimmy to fuck off."

Megan's mouth tilted up in a half smile. "Yeah, that's just what you *would* say. Same old Jo Thibodeau, not afraid of anything. You haven't changed a whit since high school." She shook her head. "What're *you* still doing in this town, anyway? You could've gotten out. You could be living anywhere. Someplace warm, like Florida."

"Don't like the heat."

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