

The
**SECOND CHANCE
CINEMA**



THEA WEISS

ATRIA BOOKS

NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI



An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

For more than 100 years, Simon & Schuster has championed authors and the stories they create. By respecting the copyright of an author's intellectual property, you enable Simon & Schuster and the author to continue publishing exceptional books for years to come. We thank you for supporting the author's copyright by purchasing an authorized edition of this book.

No amount of this book may be reproduced or stored in any format, nor may it be uploaded to any website, database, language-learning model, or other repository, retrieval, or artificial intelligence system without express permission. All rights reserved. Inquiries may be directed to Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020 or permissions@simonandschuster.com.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2025 by Written by Thea, LLC

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Atria Books
Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas,
New York, NY 10020.

First Atria Books hardcover edition October 2025

ATRIA BOOKS and colophon are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, LLC

Simon & Schuster strongly believes in freedom of expression and stands against censorship in all its forms. For more information, visit BooksBelong.com.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025001599

ISBN 978-1-6680-8040-5
ISBN 978-1-6682-1371-1 (int exp)
ISBN 978-1-6680-8042-9 (ebook)

*For Chris, who inspired me to write a book,
and Maeve, who inspired me to send it out*

OPENING CREDITS

It was on Lucas's birthday, when he was least expecting it, that his first love made an appearance inside the home he now shared with his girlfriend, Stephanie.

"Well, open it!" Stephanie said, handing him a gift. Under the wrapping paper was a hardcover coral book with the title spelled out in bright yellow script: *The Compendium of Forgotten Things*. Lucas thumbed it open. The pages held a collection of places that had almost faded away. One story featured a pinball bar in a lost desert town; the next, a miniature museum devoted to antique postcards. The style of the writing was familiar. "What is this?" Lucas asked.

"It's by a new author," Stephanie said. "Ellie Marshall?"

Needles pricked Lucas's palms as his hands flew to the back flap. Ellie grinned at him above her author bio, wearing gold earrings shaped like tiny castles. God, she was beaming. The havoc she'd caused in his life had served her well.

"Like it?"

"Yeah." He tried to sound casual. "Yes. Yeah. Yes." He needed to ground himself. No good would come from revisiting the way Ellie had broken up with him—or the way she hadn't, rather. One moment, he'd rented a roller rink to throw her an 1980s-themed birthday party. The next morning, she slipped away. All of her was gone so easily—the citrus and herb smell of her sheets, her unbelievable writing that she read to him with her stomach pressed against her chair, and the scattering of matchboxes she never used because she liked candles conceptually but didn't trust

herself around them. As he skimmed the pages, one of the lines stopped him in his tracks.

“A first love is about finding yourself,” it read. “A second love is about sharing the self you found with someone new.” His frustrated sigh came out too loud.

“Are you okay?” Stephanie asked. A rainbow stretched across her cheek from the early-afternoon light.

“I’m great,” Lucas lied. The book was heavy in his lap, a frozen steel anchor. He wrapped his arm around Stephanie. She was the one who had helped him find himself, not Ellie. *Ellie*. Lucas had tried to forget Ellie. He’d done his best, at least.

Until today.

How was it that Ellie still got to him so many years later? And then, there was that irritating part about the first and second loves. Ellie was writing about Lucas without knowing it. She’d played such a big part in his story. Would he even take up a page of hers?



1

The first thing Ellie noticed about the bar was the friendly, cur-sive logo that invited a singsong voice: *Finn's!* The second thing Ellie noticed was the unfortunate piece of paper tacked beneath that logo: a FOR SALE sign. She forced her shoulders not to sink. The image of the heartbroken owner and all the cast-off patrons had to be set aside. She had made it here in time. She could still do something.

“Special place, isn’t it?” the bartender asked once she’d settled in. A brass spoon swirled through her bourbon, and then he slid the glass over. The first sip of the old-fashioned sizzled on her tongue. “It’s been in the family a long time.”

Special wasn’t a good enough word. Finn’s was extraordinary. The shoebox-shaped lounge held forty people, tops. It had been lovingly crafted from wood slats that were painted a forest green. Warm light was decanted inside frosted globe pendants, and a vinyl player spun jazz records from another era. Behind her, candles on small marble tables illuminated the only art on the walls: watercolor paintings of sailors who looked like they’d just gotten lucky. It was a place someone would have to hear about, mid-whisper, to find. Already, Ellie could feel her heart beating faster. Her body melted into the worn leather stool, ready to stake its claim.

“You don’t have to worry,” Ellie told him. “Finn’s isn’t going anywhere.”

“What’s the plan?” the bartender wanted to know. His long, lean frame pressed toward her. He adjusted suspenders that weren’t part of a uniform.

“The plan is . . . magic,” she said, with a sarcastic finger twinkle.

Ellie’s work wasn’t magic, though. She simply wrote about forgotten places that were set to close down, which usually kept that exact thing from happening. Many had lauded her “the bar whisperer” or “the restaurant heroine,” but these flatteries gave her too much credit. The stories wrote themselves if she listened. So, she let her eyes flutter closed and dropped into the patchwork of conversation around her. Muffled rain fell outside the glass, adding a soft layer to Billie Holiday getting gutsy. Right as she took out her notebook to jot down the word *belonging*, a new voice was in her ear.

“Hey,” it said.

A man had taken the stool to her right. He was a couple years younger than she was, or maybe just more optimistic. Dark, curly hair framed rosy, round cheeks—was he blushing? He looked midwestern sweet, like the sort of person who would laugh at a joke even if it weren’t funny to avoid hurting the other person’s feelings. While Ellie had to admit he was good-looking, he wasn’t her usual type. She went for wildcards. Recently, there had been Jonathan, the tattoo-artist-slash-bass-player, and Clay, who led daredevil rock-climbing trips in Sedona. This man, whoever he was, had the tame air of a school crossing guard. And yet, she felt herself lean in his direction.

“I’m Drake,” he offered, with a wave.

“Ellie.”

“Ellie. I didn’t mean to interrupt.” He pointed at her open notebook. She closed the cover.

“Not interrupting.”

“You’re writing”—Drake scratched the stubble on his chin—“let me guess, a steamy vampire thing.” His dimples were hard at work.

“It’s not vampires.” Ellie bit her maraschino garnish off its stem. She could almost hear one of her mother’s compliment-insults about her being a bold woman. Italics on the *bold*.

“Oh. Uh. Zombies, then?” Drake fidgeted with his hands. He wasn’t shy, but a little nervous, maybe. Definitely nervous. Not the type to approach women at bars. Fiercely loyal. An unspoiled only child. Ellie was assuming things based on his body language and a faded denim jacket that most people would’ve discarded by now. She was also avoiding answering questions about her work. After becoming successful, it was alienating to tell people what she did.

“Life’s more interesting with an element of mystery,” she said. “Isn’t it?”

Drake shook his head no. “Yeah, I would not call myself a mystery lover. I’m a creature of habit. I want to know what I’m getting into,” he admitted. “That’s why I eat at the same three restaurants and get drinks right here.”

Ellie pushed back on her stool. “The same three places? What’s that all about?”

Drake scooted toward her, and their arms grazed. Both glanced at where they touched, but neither of them pulled back. “Well, when you’ve found a good thing,” he said, so close to her face, “why not stick with it?”

Ellie’s laugh caught in her throat. It wasn’t funny, but surprising, as he was essentially arguing against the very principle that inspired her work. She needed a sip of her drink. “Because,” Ellie said, letting herself get animated, “somewhere out there could be a great thing. The best thing. And by going to all the same places again and again, you’re missing out.”

Drake tapped the dividing line between their arms. “And if you’re always looking for something else, you might not score a birthday party invite from your waiter at Taste of Hong Kong.”

There was a weird streak to him Ellie hadn’t seen coming. She liked it. “Your waiter invited you to his birthday party?”

“Yeah. Yeah. But I didn’t go.” Drake grabbed his drink and played with his too-long hair. Ellie also liked that he needed a haircut, she decided. She liked his goofy shirt, too, which she noticed when he draped his jean jacket on the back of his stool. On it, a dinosaur and its prehistoric friends squatted, mid-song, by a raging bonfire. “I didn’t go for long, I mean,” Drake said. “Just played some shuffleboard.” Their knees brushed under the bar. “Now, please let me off the hook, and tell me what you’re writing.”

Ellie gave in and explained that she was basically life support for hidden gems. “A career nostalgic, if you will.” She discovered incredible offbeat locations—from restaurants to dance halls—that were in danger of closing. Then, she helped revive them by writing their stories. The whole time she spoke, Drake’s eyes stayed glued on her. Ellie admitted she had written a book but downplayed it by saying it was a “coffee-table book,” and when she mentioned her television show, she referred to it as a documentary.

“So, you write about these places and make them all cool again?”

“No,” Ellie said. “It’s not like that. The places I write about were always cool. I capture the feeling of being there. I paint the whole picture, but I try not to embellish it. I love every part of my subjects, flaws and all.” This was the most she’d talked about work in a long time. “Anyway, people want to find these places. They just need to be pointed in the right direction.”

“Aha.” He chuckled. “So, I was right about the zombies.” He sat up a little, proud of himself. “Because you make old things undead.” Drake’s hand knocked on the wooden bar. Ellie was drawn to his lifelines. She wondered how fast those hands could tear fabric and undo buttons.

When Drake got up to go to the bathroom, the voice of doubt in Ellie’s head wondered if he would come back. She wanted him to come back. That was new. Last week, she’d crawled down her

date's fire escape to avoid a conversation about breakfast. Drake was different. Behind his ice-blue eyes and devotion to three restaurants, Ellie sensed a vibrant inner world. What if he slipped away without getting her number? She willed him to return, and he did, smelling like a pine forest, which made her suspect he'd put on cologne for her.

"Maybe not *all* mysteries are bad," he decided as he slid back onto the stool next to her. "I mean, there is Nancy Drew."

"The books?"

"The dog." Drake took another sip of beer. "Mine, my dog."

"You named your dog after a fictional teenage spy?"

"Not exactly. She had the name when I adopted her."

"Does it suit her? Nancy Drew?"

Drake shrugged. "Sort of," he said. "She's a golden, on the older side, with a habit of eating things that aren't really food," he explained. "She also seems to be aging in reverse."

As they nursed another drink, Ellie learned that Drake loved building homes and wanted to start his own construction business. He was drawn to the way a family would move into a space and share so many important moments within its walls. Maybe that was the result of a happy childhood, he admitted. "But that wasn't what you asked." He tsked and cracked his knuckles. "You asked what I do *now*, which is project manage identical new-build homes that most families will live in for about two to three years before moving somewhere better. Homes without a legacy, I call them. I kind of hate it. That was too honest, wasn't it?"

"You know, you sound fairly nostalgic yourself," Ellie gleaned.

"Me?" he asked. "No. It's the opposite. I'm a dreamer, and I'm always looking forward. I see a blank wall and think about how a dad is going to measure their kid getting taller there. In the future."

Ellie was trying to pinpoint what she liked so much about Drake when the bartender came back. "Have you saved this place

yet?” he asked, setting their checks down. Finn’s was closing for the night. Drake swooped up both checks before Ellie could make a move.

“Still working on it,” she said.

He walked away without acknowledging the comment.

“I think Sam’s jealous,” Drake noticed.

“Why?”

“Because I got to have drinks with you.” His grin was so genuine. God, he was cute; she was doomed.

“That’s such a line.”

“Nah. It can’t be a line if it’s true,” he told her. “A squiggle, maybe.” Drake signed for the checks and asked if he could walk her home. Ellie glanced out the window. The overcast sky looked like it had a personal vendetta against them. “I’ve got an umbrella,” he said, reading her mind. Ellie’s apartment was more of a train ride away, but she agreed to a long walk.

It was brisk for a late-spring night. Without words, Drake pulled his jean jacket off and slid it over her shoulders. Outside, he expanded his trusty umbrella and held it above them. “Hey, thanks for letting me walk with you. I’m enjoying trying to solve *The Case of the Girl at the Bar*.”

Ellie nudged him as they started down the sidewalk, letting some of the rain into their bubble. “Sounds like you’ve read some *Nancy Drew*.”

“Of course I have. Who hasn’t?” Drake wrapped his arm around her and drew her in close. All the lights in her body turned on, brightening rooms Ellie hadn’t known existed.

What Ellie liked about Drake, she decided, was this. He was a beer guy without being a sports guy, a denim guy without being a horse guy. A definitive Pisces. He’d felt guilty for a second when he mentioned outmaneuvering the bartender, his level of empathy unwavering even when he was the victor. His voice went up an octave when he mentioned *Nancy Drew*. Drake had been

invested in her work without being threatened by it, or worse, wanting to use it as some small ladder for himself.

Mostly, she could picture sitting in comfortable silence for hours at a time in bed with him.

She was getting ahead of herself.

Ellie had slipped up that night, she knew. She needed to focus on the story, and she'd barely spoken to anyone else at the bar. But maybe Drake was the story. Maybe the hook about Finn's was what had happened naturally: it was the type of place where a woman could meet the last good single guy out there. It was cheesy, and Ellie was no romantic. This reminder made her do what she did best, the long-practiced art of self-sabotage.

"What's wrong with you, anyway?" Ellie asked.

"Come on." Drake's hand found her back. He was getting—slightly—bolder. "What kind of a question is that, 'what's wrong with me'?"

"You just seem kind of perfect," she said, gesturing for them to turn onto the street that eventually led to her apartment. Drake followed her lead.

"I was thinking the same thing. So, what's wrong with you—"

"Seriously, though. What's your baggage?" Ellie caught a glimpse of them reflected in the glass window of a wine store. They looked great together. It wasn't too much of a stretch to think that maybe this would be their wine store one day. She'd ask Drake to run out and buy a bottle while she stayed home and botched the dinner. "Wouldn't that be refreshing? If we just spilled all our secrets, right here, right now?"

"Yeah, I guess," Drake agreed. "But see . . ." His tongue clicked against the roof of his mouth. "I don't have any baggage."

Ellie rolled her eyes. "Everybody has baggage."

"Okay fine, maybe, mine is more like a carry-on," Drake said. "It's a nice travel backpack. Practical, compact."

They were only a few blocks from Ellie's apartment when she

started into the intersection. A walk signal hadn't lit up yet, but there were no cars on either side and no sound of wheels sloshing through the rain. The storm had turned the streets into a private city just for them.

"Aren't you going to—" Drake stood alone on the curb.

"I looked both ways." Ellie was already halfway across the street. The rain had slowed, but it was still coming down. "Why wait for the light when you can look for yourself?"

"Well, I've been told I play it safe," Drake said, following her footsteps with slight hesitation. "In fact . . ." The shelter of the umbrella found her again. "I even had to psych myself up to suggest a walk. I don't normally walk at night, especially in the rain. But, you know. Umbrella. And also, I wanted to keep talking to you."

Ellie grinned. "Well, thanks for not leaving me to drown, Mary Poppins."

The urge to invite Drake up to her apartment was strong, but whatever was happening here was meant to aerate. Besides, Ellie couldn't remember what kind of clothing Rorschach would be waiting for them on the floor.

"Thanks for the walk," Ellie said. A curtain of rain fell between them as she stepped back.

"Yeah," Drake told her. "Well, now I know where you live. Wow. That sounded creepy. I just meant I should probably get your number, too."

"*Probably* get my number?"

"Just playing it safe again."

"Oh, come on, Drake. I talked to you for three hours at a bar and walked with you for what would've been a three-minute ride home." Ellie held out her hand. Drake reached to grab it. "Your phone," she chuckled. "I was asking for your phone."

"Right." He pulled his cell phone out and handed it over, stepping closer to shield her from the storm again as she typed her

number in and assigned it a playful name he read aloud. “The Girl at the Bar.” He nodded.

Ellie kissed his cheek. “Good night, Drake.”

She could feel him watching her as she splashed through a few rain puddles and greeted a neighbor who was always walking her dog at an inopportune time. Ellie pretended to look for new mail, even though she already had earlier that day, to feel him there a second longer, his eyes on her.

The next morning, Ellie sat on her balcony with a half-finished crossword. A sound jolted her out of her thoughts as she struggled to figure out six down, “a powerful attraction.” The sound was a text.

Guess I’ll see you soon, jacket thief, it read. Drake’s jacket was sitting inside the sliding glass door. It dangled from the back of her dining chair as if it had always existed there, waiting to be worn again.

Magnet, Ellie scribbled into the crossword squares before responding, *How do you feel about Mexican food?*

I feel good about it if it’s tonight, Drake replied.

Then: *Sorry. That was forward*. Ellie could almost hear his throat clearing between the messages. She tossed her legs up on the chair opposite her and waited for another response. A cardinal flitted down onto the balcony, splashing its feathers in a puddle.

Then: *Let me rephrase. Are you and my jacket free for dinner?*

Ellie hesitated. Drake liked the version of her he had seen last night. This was the best version of Ellie—the version that had been practiced and refined over the years to create a certain impression. This Ellie was fun and carefree and kept the dark parts tucked away—the parts of herself that, if revealed, might send Drake running.

Ellie tried to set those parts aside a little longer. Despite the conversation she'd started about baggage the night before, he didn't need to find out her whole story yet.

Yes, she typed, looking over at his jacket as if it might weigh in on everything that would follow. *We're free tonight.*

2

2.5 YEARS LATER

It's not that your new stuff is bad," Nolan told her, trimming the leaves of the *Pothos* plants that lined his black onyx desk. "I don't want you to think I'm saying that. Lately, though, your writing . . ." Ellie willed him to set the pruning scissors down, but he continued to twirl them in the style of an old-west gunslinger. "Lately, it's just been okay."

Okay.

Nolan had played the statement off casually, but Ellie knew it was the reason for their chat. Months ago, they had met at a matcha bar, and he asked to hear about her new projects. After reading those projects, he'd suggested a catchup at his office to share "a few thoughts." Now, his smile attempted to ease the blow of her newfound okay-ness.

The smile almost worked. Nolan was the distinguished caliber of handsome she would never go for; he smelled like a high-end casino and dressed in traditional British menswear despite a growing collection of modern office furniture. In the five years Nolan had been her agent, his black hair had been overtaken with gray, he'd become a father to a feisty toddler, and he'd gotten annoying about wine. All differences aside, Ellie trusted Nolan's opinions on her career. He was the only person who was honest about her television show being a flop before it launched.

“Look,” Nolan said, “you’re going to break through this funk.” He tossed the scissors down and they clattered onto the Noguchi coffee table. “You just need to knock on some new doors and hunt down your voice.”

He made finding her voice sound violent.

Nolan sank into an oddly shaped Scandinavian chair and crossed his hands over his knee. He reminded her of an actor playing a therapist. “It’s all too comfortable right now,” he said. “It’s your passion that’s missing.” Ellie let her mind wander off to the weather, her dinner plans, and hypothetical desserts she would never bake, before she asked the inevitable.

“When was the last time the stories worked?”

Nolan looked at the floor. So rarely did he lose his *je ne sais quoi*, but he truly hated direct confrontation, Ellie knew. “The piece about Finn’s Bar,” he finally admitted. “That was the last really good one.”

So, two years ago. Two and a half, actually.

Ellie’s recent pieces should’ve been electric. A music shop that once sold a keyboard to Carole King and an ice cream store with flavors named after the owner’s family history both had potential. The fact that those places ended up closing was on her. She felt the weight of their failure, the suffocating responsibility of not being able to do something for the five, soon to be six, businesses that shuttered since she’d written about them. Soon, their legacy would be left behind, traded for pour-over coffee shops or food halls with generic, chipper names: The Hello Factory. Shindig Food Community. So much for her magic gift of sparking revivals. Ellie had a streak of bad luck she couldn’t seem to shake.

Nolan seemed to pick up on her defeat. “Just find something you’re obsessed with,” he suggested. “Unhealthy obsession’s a good look on you.”

.....

Ellie, the text she received in the parking lot said. *I hope you're well*. She unlocked the car and tossed her purse onto the passenger seat. The message had the cadence of a stranger, but it was from her father. *Naomi said we should send an engagement gift*—and he added the gift emoji there—*but we're not sure what you're like*.

What you're like, Ellie read again. The typo was an understatement. Since her engagement months earlier, her best friend, Jen, had thrown a lively karaoke celebration for their friends, and her mom had offered to plan a more formal engagement party. This text, however, was only the second wedding-related peep she had heard from her dad.

Ellie didn't want a gift from him or the stepmom she'd met a handful of times. An occasional check-in about the wedding would've been nice, though. She had shared the news over email, since her dad couldn't be reached by phone, which removed all the warmth and excitement from the announcement and turned it hollow. He'd replied with a simple "Congratulations." As usual, there weren't any follow-up questions. There was no offer to help.

Even small interactions with her family reminded Ellie that her special day could never be normal. Recently, she had woken up from a nightmare that every chair on her side of the aisle would be empty. Because just as the text had accidentally given away, these days, they barely knew her at all.

As she pulled out of the parking garage and crunched over the remnants of fall leaves, she decided to go to the only place that would put her at ease and cast her family drama from her mind. All Novel Things was the perfect little bookstore, with shelves that were huddled too close together, a free tea station, and nooks that invited the reader to stay a while. Finding her own book there and imagining the other shelves and mantels it lived on in readers' homes was a sacred experience for Ellie. She

had started this ritual when all those first reviews came out for her TV show, calling it “pretentious and removed.”

Today, though, her book wasn’t in its usual spot.

“Hi,” she said to the bookseller at the front desk. She’d never seen him there before. “Can you help me find a book? It’s *The Compendium of Forgotten Things*.”

“We used to have that one,” he told her. “I don’t think we stock it anymore.”

“Since when?” Ellie asked. She’d missed the memo on this news. There had been several copies of her book when she last visited a few weeks earlier.

The bookseller shrugged. “We’re a curated shop. We don’t really carry a lot of coffee-table books anymore.” He said it like she was asking for a BeDazzler, not a book.

“It’s not exactly a coffee-table—”

The bookseller repeated that it was a “curated” store. Ellie started to hate the word she’d used so often herself. “Coffee-table sales must really be down, huh?” she asked.

“Not really,” he said without looking at her.

“Well then,” Ellie lamented, watching him check the price on a kid’s embroidery kit. She must’ve looked silly to him. What did he think of her vintage, 1970s ocean-blue sweater with bell sleeves? He was wearing silver hoop earrings and a stylish cropped vest. He had a mullet. She needed to relearn what was trendy. The word *trendy* wasn’t it. “People need something to set on their coffee table, right?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Minimalism is in. You know, less clutter.”

Clutter.

The places she loved most were now considered clutter. What if she had to watch them—slowly and excruciatingly—turn off their lights one by one? What if she’d given them a little bit of hope only to have it taken away? Ellie feared what it meant for them, and her, to become irrelevant.

.....

Ellie tried not to show Drake how heartbroken she was when she came home that evening. She adored their new, old home. Their blue-gray house was snuggier than most Queen Anne styles and was “completely falling apart,” as Drake put it. Despite his assessment, she could tell he secretly loved all the home improvement projects it required, the storied architecture, and the wraparound front porch where she often found him sitting in the mornings before work. When they first toured the house, he insisted it would be difficult to find modern hardware to go with a structure built in the early 1900s. Still, he surprised her by suggesting they place an offer on it a few days later. Ellie thought the house looked like a castle, the curved windows in her office, the high tower with a spired roof.

Drake waved at Ellie when she walked inside. The phone was curled under his neck as he unpacked a box of glassware. Three months into the unpacking, they still had random boxes waiting to be opened. Ellie enjoyed the intentional process of holding each item to discover where it wanted to live. Drake was eager to put everything in its place as quickly as possible.

“No, Mom.” He chuckled. “It’s not called *haunting*. It’s *ghosting*.” He looked at Ellie and pretended to take a sip out of a pint glass before setting it on the floor. “Because they’re two separate things. Haunt is what a ghost does. Ghost is when a living person stops responding.” These simple moments Ellie sometimes caught between Drake and his parents on the phone—snippets of him explaining modern pop culture or engaging in nonsensical debates—underlined what she was missing in her own family. “Anyway, I’ve got to go, Mom,” he said. “Ellie is home.”

Drake turned the television off as Ellie set her things down. He’d been watching a home improvement show in the background. Ellie liked to tease him about his habit of working off the

clock. It was research, he said. He felt like the hosts, with their magnetic personalities and chemistry, were his old friends. “Are you okay?” he asked, seeming to detect her bad mood.

“According to Nolan I am,” she said, flinging herself into the Ellie-shaped spot on the couch. Nancy hopped up and set a wet nose on her denim miniskirt. Ellie rubbed her stomach to accentuate the point she was about to make. “I’m super hungry.” Then, “Can we go out?”

“Sure, yeah.” Drake got up and refilled Nancy’s water bowl in anticipation of leaving. “How about The Garlic Bread Place?”

Ellie wanted to go somewhere different today, somewhere special. She debated telling him about her bad meeting, how her favorite bookstore no longer sold her work, and how the result of these things meant more places she loved might close for good. The facts, when strung together, sounded like the start of a bad stand-up routine. She decided against sharing them. There was no reason to ruin a perfectly good date night with Drake.

“We always go to The Garlic Bread Place,” Ellie said. “Let’s try something different tonight.”

3

Ellie and Drake did not try something different that night; they went to The Garlic Bread Place. By the time they started looking up new restaurants, they were too hungry to choose another option. Ellie ordered the same Eggplant Parmigiana at their usual four-top with a white plastic tablecloth. What had happened to her? She was supposed to be in the field of rare discovery. This repeat eggplant business had to be part of the problem.

“Bring wine, too,” she begged the young, pretty waitress. “You can bring a bottle out. Your pick.”

The waitress glanced up from her square yellow pad and moved closer. “Don’t I know you?”

Drake brightened. He was eager to brag. “She has a book,” he gushed. “And a show! *The Compendium of Forgotten Things*—”

“It’s not a big deal. You probably just know me because we come here a lot,” Ellie deflected.

Recognition spread across the waitress’s face. Slight recognition. It was minuscule. “Right!” she said. “Oh, wow. I loved your show.”

The same Dean Martin playlist Ellie had memorized refreshed another loop. “There’s no way you loved my show,” Ellie said. When Drake gave her a look, she realized she had been rude. “I just meant, you’ve probably not seen it,” she added, which certainly made things worse. “It’s hard to find the show on streaming. There’s actually a rip-off of *The Goonies* that appears when

you type it in.” A warning flashed in Drake’s eyes as he started to stress eat the bread that came before the garlic bread.

“I’m going to put the order in,” the waitress said, backing away from the table. She attempted a smile that came out twisted.

Drake gave Ellie a second to pull herself together. Then, he leaned over the table and said the right thing. “People can love you and your work. You know?” His hands reached out for hers. “You’re pretty damn lovable. Even though figuring you out takes a little sleuthing.”

The timing of this line landed perfectly with the gift he handed her next. Ellie tore open the newspaper-covered package to find a hardcover Nancy Drew book. The title had been crossed out and replaced with *The Case of the Girl at the Bar*, which was the same title as her story about Finn’s that he’d framed and hung on the wall of their living room.

“Thank you,” Ellie said. “Thanks. I’m pretty lucky I get to marry you.” She brushed Drake’s hair out of his face. The waitress dropped off their wine and the garlic bread Drake had ordered, then scurried away before she could be pulled back into their conversation.

“Yeah, about that,” Drake said, tearing off a piece of the hot bread and popping it in his mouth. “Are you sure you want to marry me?” It was a joke, of course. “I mean, a renowned writer like yourself, a television-show host, *and* a goddamn detective.” He pulled his hands away and slammed them on the table for emphasis. The condiments jumped.

“Yes,” Ellie told him. She opened the book. Inside its cover, Drake had occasionally crossed out the name *Nancy* and replaced it with *Ellie* in his youthful scrawl. Her engagement ring sparkled on her finger as she navigated the pages. Drake had managed to find the exact ring she would’ve chosen for herself. It was an oval, teal sapphire that reminded Ellie of a doorknob to a beautiful place—feminine, but not flashy, with tiny diamonds set on each

side of the stone. Drake's gifts showed he was listening. Even a few dates in, he'd given her a vintage music box with a spinning dancer inside that reminded her of one she had growing up.

"Of course, I want to marry you," Ellie added.

If she was being honest with herself, that was the only thing she was sure about.

"Well, that's a relief. That wedding photographer I just hired is going to be expensive. I was channeling Milburn Pennybags when I sent the check."

"Milburn—"

"Mr. Monopoly. Get with it."

Ellie laughed. She noted the relief on Drake's face. He'd managed to alleviate her frustration or at least put a bandage on it. He kept the conversation silly while they ate their food, performing a classic tarantella dance on the table with his fingers. The eggplant was perfect, and every bite made Ellie's mouth water more. Sometimes, familiar and comfortable things were nice, she had learned when they moved in together. Familiarity could look like a movie night routine or a bedtime ritual of reading in shared silence. She didn't blame Drake for the way she'd fallen into patterns. It was her role to shake things up and drag them to new places. Now, she sensed, it was time for her to do it again.

"How about a walk?" Ellie suggested after the check came, along with a complimentary tiramisu. Ellie wondered if the free dessert was on account of her being recognized, the weird energy, or something else entirely.

"Where were you thinking?" Drake asked. He split the dessert in half and took a bite. "I can disappear this dessert and we can get another one. We could go to The Gelato Fairy? Or that French bakery around the corner. What's it called?"

Ellie reached her fork out for her portion of the tiramisu. "Let's just get a little lost," she said.

His eyes narrowed. "You know how I feel about being lost."

“Not *lost* lost.” She knew by now that *lost* was a frightening word to Drake. “What I meant was,” she said, “let’s just see where this night takes us.”

Ellie felt the tension of the evening melt away as she and Drake traced the neck of the city. They paused to admire the neon signs that bloomed in the window of a palm-reader shop. Drake didn’t smoke but mused that, if he did, he’d want to look like the hipster with pompadour hair they passed nursing a cigar. Ellie held her hand out to spin Drake when she heard a saxophone pouring from the window of a high loft. This night was giving her the adventure she’d craved.

“What was all that about, at the restaurant?” Drake finally ventured to ask. “With the waitress?”

Ellie pulled her jacket tighter. “I’m sorry. It sounded rude as soon as it came out. But I’m fine.”

“Okay. Well, you didn’t seem fine,” he said.

Here was the picking apart Ellie loathed. She had allowed Drake into her thoughts and life more than she’d thought was possible. She’d told him everything that happened with her parents, and most of what happened with her brother, Ben. She’d even mentioned that she had struggled to commit in past relationships. But right now, she didn’t want to open the scary vault of the day and take stock of her mental cobwebs. If she pried herself open, her pain might all tumble out and refuse to disappear. Drake was everything to her, but sometimes she wondered if she’d be able to give him enough of herself—the intimacy and vulnerability he deserved.

Drake paused to get his bearings. Ellie swore she could hear his thoughts. They didn’t walk without aim anymore, and they’d never walked this far from the car. “I’m thinking we should head back,” he suggested. “It’s getting kind of late.”

“No.” Ellie urged them forward. “I want to keep going.”

“All right. Well, while we walk, you can tell me what you’re feeling. You don’t have to bottle it all up, you know.” He squeezed her into him, maybe to coerce a confession.

Ellie led them through the main square of Chinatown, around a few corners, and onto a new street filled with a row of boutiques. Windows housed oven mitts midwave, needle-felted snowmen, and boxes wrapped in quirky patterned paper. It was only the last weekend of October, but Big Christmas was on a mission to start the holidays earlier every year. Luckily, Ellie still had a few weeks before her mom’s five-course dinner happened—and her dad’s grain-free cookies arrived by mail.

“It was just a bad day,” Ellie said, finally filling the silence. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure. Okay. Like what?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me about work?”

“Work?” Drake sighed. “Work is . . . boring.”

He was always saying: “Work is boring.” For someone who pushed her to open up, Drake also stored parts of himself she couldn’t access. He was sentimental and romantic, unafraid to cry when moved. His disappointments, though, were kept to himself.

“Pretty street, isn’t it?” Drake asked. He was nodding to the trees and shops spread out in front of them. A cold gust made the branches shiver. It *was* a pretty street, but Ellie noticed something unusual ahead of them. A small gap was set between two of the stores, outlined by a brick archway. Ellie moved toward the opening.

“Ellie?” Drake asked, following behind her.

The doorway led to an alley. The opening in the brick marked the beginning of an adorable little alley that would’ve been so easy to walk right by. A fog hovered above the steps. Pastel-hued storefronts on each side of the cobblestones were lit by the glow of lampposts fit for casual strolls and Gene Kelly spins. The alley

felt much more like a film set than a real place in a big city. Ellie expected someone to leap out and call “Cut!” but the quaint detour remained silent.

A static fluttered around her, the knowingness of a place drawing her closer. This was how it always happened when she was on the brink of discovery. A building, or a bar, or a haunted taqueria would summon her and become an entry in *The Compendium of Forgotten Things*. Finally—yes, finally—it was about to happen again.

Beyond a sprinkling of cafés and bakeries, a sleepy Irish pub, and an ice cream shop, with a rose-colored awning, called Mae’s Famous Scoops, the storefronts were empty. Their footsteps echoed up the walkway. The streetlamps flickered out one by one until Ellie and Drake were left standing in the near dark.

“Well? You ready to head back?” Drake asked.

Ellie wasn’t ready. Drake had missed something up ahead, but to be fair, she almost missed it herself. Faint light glazed the cobblestones at the very top of the alley. Drake threw his hand above his eyes and squinted. “What is that?”

The light grew brighter as they moved toward it and came upon the thing Ellie would’ve most wanted to be in this place. They were standing at the entrance of a glamorous vintage movie palace. A circular gold ticket booth adorned with Greek gods and goddesses, her old friends Poseidon and Artemis and Ares, made the first impression, and a marquee lined with flickering, Broadway-style bulbs spelled out the title of a film she’d never heard of before. Ellie turned her hands into binoculars against the cold glass doors of the cinema.

She gasped at what was inside. Luxurious red carpet led the way to twin stairwells that curled up both sides of the lobby like ribbons on a gift. Clinging to the rounded ceiling was an enormous chandelier. It was as elegant as an opera house—one of those fantastic cinemas that were nearly obsolete.