Chapter 1: Blood Will Tell

The building was a converted strip-mall space, long and low-ceilinged, with exposed ductwork painted matte black to look intentional. Free weights occupied the back third, separated from the cardio floor by a low partition. Along the far wall, a row of machines faced a motivational mural of a stylized runner in silhouette with arms raised, and above it someone had stenciled the word FORWARD in a font that was trying very hard. Someone had added a small question mark after it in black marker. The gym staff had never bothered to remove it.

Around five-thirty, the after-work crowd materialized. A man in the corner wore large headphones. Two women near the stretching mats conducted what appeared to be a business meeting between sets. The college-aged kid on the pull-down machine was on the phone the whole time without once touching the bar. Trevor, who staffed the front desk, carried the mild, helpful energy of someone not surprised by anything.

Cassidy Hollis preferred the treadmill fourth from the left in the middle row, close enough to the window that she could see the parking lot and the slip of evening sky above the big-box stores across the street, but far enough from the ceiling-mounted televisions that reading the captions required effort.

Cass catalogued it all in her first week there. To her the gym was known topography, useful precisely because its predictable features required no navigation. She came there to move within controlled parameters and go home.

Tonight she set the pace deliberately slow.

Maren hesitated at the door, studying Cass to see which version of her friend showed up today. Then she crossed the cardio floor, stepped onto the treadmill beside Cass, set the belt to a walk and glanced at the machine beside her.

“That’s not your speed,” Maren said.

“It’s a speed.”

“It’s my grandmother’s speed. My grandmother has a hip replacement.”

Maren’s expressive face made her a poor candidate for any game requiring a poker component. She wore that face now.

“How bad was it?”

“Mild.”

"How mild?"

"I went to Dr. Farris. He ran the panel. Everything was within my normal range." Cass kept her eyes on the parking lot beyond the window. "It wasn't a thing."

What complicated it slightly was that Farris had asked her to come into his office.

"Cass, you went to Farris?"

"I go to Farris periodically."

"The rhabdo markers," Maren said. "Within range meaning what, exactly?"

"Meaning elevated but not alarming; consistent with mild overexertion. Meaning," Cass said, "what they always mean when I miscalculate."

"What did you miscalculate?"

"A run last Tuesday. It was hot. I didn't adjust." She paused. "I'm fine."

"You're at my grandmother's speed."

"I'm being sensible."

"You're never sensible. That's one of your defining characteristics." Maren went quiet, arms folded tight across her chest.

"So Farris ran the panel. And?"

"And he called."

"To say everything was fine."

"To say he wanted to go over the results. In person."

Maren's belt kept moving. For a while neither of them spoke. Machines whirred, music came from the overhead speakers, and near the free weights someone was doing something inadvisable with a barbell, clanging it in a steady rhythm.

"When did he call?" Maren said.

"Tuesday."

"Cass. It's Thursday."

"I'm aware of what day it is."

Maren abandoned any pretense of her own workout and was simply walking beside Cass matching her step for step, arms swinging, clearly prepared to do this until closing. "Dr. Farris called you last year. Remember? You were in the middle of that logo project. He called to say everything looked fine. He didn't ask you to come in."

"I remember."

"So this is different."

"It's probably a calibration issue. The hemoglobin electrophoresis is sensitive to handling, to temperature, to what equipment the lab is running that month. He added it to the panel this time because my red count has been trending up, and if the result came back unusual it's most likely a processing artifact." She paused. "I looked it up."

"Of course you did."

"I'm not concerned."

"I know you're not concerned. That's the part that concerns me." Maren stepped off the moving belt with a practiced sideways step and turned to face her. "Cass. Doctors say 'in person' when they don't want to say the thing on a voicemail."

"Doctors say 'in person' when they want a copay."

"Call him tomorrow. First thing."

"I'll call him this week."

"First thing tomorrow. I will text you at nine a.m. and you will not ignore me, because I will drive to your apartment and stand outside, and your dog will hear me and bark and you'll have to come to the door."

The corner of Cass's mouth moved. "Gus would absolutely sell me out." Gus was a Jack Russell terrier, small and wiry, white with brown patches, with ears that never settled on a direction.

Maren tilted her head and smiled. "He totally would. He has no loyalty, that dog. I know, because I give him treats."

"You're not supposed to give him treats. He has a weight problem."

"Call Farris," Maren said. "Promise me."

Cass looked at her. Maren had been pushing her since a studio critique in 2016, where Cass presented three weeks of work with her arms folded and her eyes on the back wall, and Maren sat beside her afterward and said, straight out, that it mattered and that was fine and did Cass want to get dinner. Cass said she wasn't hungry. They went to dinner anyway. Cass owed her a lot of dinners by now.

"I promise," she said.

Maren's gaze moved briefly to somewhere over Cass's shoulder. "The man on the rowing machine has been looking over here for ten minutes, incidentally."

Cass didn't turn around. "The flywheel on that machine is out of alignment. He's probably trying to locate the noise."

"That's your read."

"It's the most probable one."

Maren looked at her and said nothing.

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By six-fifteen she was in her car, gym bag on the passenger seat, the early October dusk already coming on over the parking lot. The drive home was twenty minutes if the lights cooperated, which they did not. She took Oak Mill to Braemore and sat through the left-turn signal twice, engine idling, thinking about Farris.

A careful man, he annotated charts in small, deliberate handwriting, checked a number twice before phoning it in, and never called anything conclusive until the second test agreed. He had called once last year, and once texted her on a Saturday to say a medication interaction she'd asked about was a non-issue. Asking patients to come in was not, in her experience, something he did.

The light changed. She turned.

Gus heard her on the stairs. She could always tell from the pause. Two seconds passed between her key in the lock and the low, urgent whine that built steadily as she opened the door. He pressed against her legs with the intensity of an animal that had spent nine hours alone and intended to document it thoroughly.

"I know," she told him. "I know, I know."

She crouched and let him say everything he needed to say, which took approximately forty-five seconds, then fed him and stood at the kitchen counter watching him eat with the uncomplicated enthusiasm he brought to all things. Gus settled under the table with a sigh of profound satisfaction.

Her bag went down. The laptop opened beside it. Farris's number came up in her contacts, and she looked at it for a moment before switching to her calendar, clicking through to Friday morning, and, after a brief internal argument she did not entirely win, opening a new event. Call Dr. Farris. 9:00 a.m.

She sat back. All the same, he had said *in person.*

Cass closed the laptop and went to start dinner. She did not look at the calendar again, but she thought about it anyway.

The lab technician who processed Cass's hemoglobin electrophoresis ran the sample three times before flagging it. Standard protocols required only one run. No one mentioned the additional runs to Cass, and no one would.

Chapter 2: The Unremarkable Girl

The book cover project went wrong on Monday. Cass saw it slowly, over the course of the morning, with eyes she had spent years training to catch what others missed. The typeface and image were both fine. The relationship between them was the problem, a tension she introduced on purpose and then over-corrected, so that what should have felt unresolved now felt merely uncomfortable.

She pushed back from her desk and studied it from a distance, a trick that sometimes worked and sometimes only gave her a longer view of the same mistake. Her apartment doubled as her studio, a concession to practicality she had made years ago and declined to examine. The desk occupied the alcove off the living room, positioned to catch the north light in the mornings, surrounded by the controlled accumulation of someone who worked with images for a living and had opinions about how things were arranged. She kept only reference books she actually used, and nothing went on the small corkboard unless she had put it there on purpose. Gus was asleep under the desk with his chin on her foot.

She nudged the text to the left and looked at it again. Better. Still not right. Better. Somewhere in the next hour a right version existed, if she didn't force it. Sometimes that was even true.

The client was a small press out of Asheville that published literary fiction and the occasional essay collection and paid on time, which placed them in a category Cass valued considerably. Three years of working together had produced a professional trust neither party examined too closely for fear of accidentally breaking it.

She nudged the type back, looked at it for a moment, and left it there.

Her phone buzzed on the desk. It was a text from Maren asking if she was coming to the gym. Cass typed back, yes.

The appointment with Dr. Farris was on Tuesday. She put it on the calendar immediately after calling, before she could talk herself out of it. The call itself was brief. Farris thanked her for getting back to him, confirmed the time, and said he'd have the full results pulled up when she came in. Nothing reassuring, nothing alarming. The call left her approximately where she had started, mildly curious and otherwise occupied.

She adjusted the main text back to the right and studied it for a long time.

Right. That was right.

She saved the file and went to get her gym bag.

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Maren noted Cass's speed before she even stepped on the belt.

"Back to normal," she said, and tapped the console twice.

"I told you it was mild."

"You tell me everything is mild. Last spring you described a kidney stone as an administrative inconvenience."

"It was resolved."

"Callously and without mercy, from what I understand." Maren settled into her own pace. "Farris?"

"Tuesday."

"Good." She jabbed the incline button. Then, after a moment, she added, "Are you worried?"

Cass kept her eyes on the parking lot. "I'm not concerned."

"I know." Maren paused. "Do you ever wonder if it comes from your father's side?"

Cass considered the question about her father briefly and without serious concern.

"I'm just saying. Genetically speaking. If there's something unusual in your blood and it doesn't come from your mother, it has to come from somewhere."

"Or it's a spontaneous variant. Or it's from her side and she's never been tested. There are explanations that don't require speculation about a person I know nothing about."

"I know things about him," Maren said.

"You have theories about him. Those are different."

"Well-developed theories. There's a distinction." Her belt hummed beneath her. "My current leading candidate is a visiting academic. Someone passing through. Your mother was working at the university library, wasn't she?"

"She was a librarian at an elementary school."

"Right. But she could have met someone from the university. A professor. Someone brilliant and unavailable who swept through and left before either of them understood what happened."

"Or he was just a person and it didn't work out and she moved on."

"That's so flat."

"Not everything is a story, Maren."

"Everything is a story. You're a graphic designer, you should understand narrative."

"What I understand," Cass said, "is that some narratives aren't worth the excavation." She increased speed slightly. "I made my peace with not knowing a long time ago. Mysteries are only interesting if you need them to be."

Maren looked at herself in the mirror with an expression that meant she had a follow-up question she decided not to ask.

"Fair enough," she said, and turned back to the window.

They ran in silence. Neither of them minded. After a moment, Maren said, "You do the same thing with people. You decide whether they're worth the excavation before you've even looked."

"I make considered assessments."

"Fast ones." She said it without emphasis. "From the outside the result looks the same."

Cass didn't answer.

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Her mom, Paula, called at eight-forty. She had waited until after her book club wrapped up, which meant the call was not entirely casual.

"I was just thinking about you," she said, in a tone suggesting the thought had occupied her for more than an evening. Her voice dropped half a step and slowed, pitched to make Cass feel she was the one being listened to.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Good, actually. I went to the gym tonight."

"Back to the gym. That's good." A slight pause. "So the episode last week wasn't too bad?"

"Mild. I went to Farris, he ran the panel, everything was within range."

"Good," Paula said. "And he was happy with everything he saw?"

Something in the phrasing was slightly off, though Cass couldn't have said exactly how. Happy was not a word she associated with Farris, who communicated satisfaction through the absence of additional questions.

"He wants me to come in next Tuesday to go over the full results."

"In person?"

"He added a hemoglobin workup to the panel. He probably just wants to walk through it."

"Of course," Paula said. "That makes sense."

She said it in exactly the right tone. Twenty-eight years had taught Cass the difference between things Paula said naturally and things Paula said in exactly the right tone, and the difference was subtle enough that for most of those years she had put it down to nothing.

"How's the book club?" Cass asked.

The conversation shifted, and Paula let it shift. She described the novel, three sisters and a house in Portugal, that everyone found either devastating or tedious with very little middle ground, then described Margaret Ohlsson's opinions about it in a slightly exasperated tone she reserved for Margaret Ohlsson specifically. Cass listened and ate the rest of her dinner standing at the kitchen counter. Gus sat nearby at an angle that suggested he was not begging, technically, while also making clear that he was available.

"Are you eating?" Paula said.

"Yes."

"Something real?"

"I made pasta."

"With what?"

"With pasta."

"Cassidy."

"Vegetables were involved at some point in the process."

Paula made a short sound down her nose, half laugh, half something else.

"Let me know what Farris says on Tuesday."

"I will."

"And call me if you need anything before then."

"I'm fine, Mom."

"I know you are," Paula said. "Call me anyway."

After she hung up, Cass stood for a moment with her phone in her hand. Gus regarded her with a focused, patient expression.

"Go to bed," she told him.

He went with great dignity to his corner. Cass rinsed her plate and turned off the kitchen light, and did not think about the concern in her mother's voice. Farris was thorough. Paula was attentive. These were facts about two people she had known for most of her life, and they explained everything they needed to explain.

She went to bed, slept fine, and almost entirely believed it.

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Paula held Cassidy's blood results for forty-eight hours. Farris's office called her as next of kin when the lab flagged the sample for the second time, and asked, carefully, whether anyone on Cassidy's father's side ever had reason to be tested. Paula said she didn't know. She asked them not to mention the call to Cass, and they respected her wishes.