

CHAPTER 1

Sorry to trouble you was how the note began, which is such a great opener. Please, trouble me! Trouble me! I've been waiting my whole life to be troubled by a note like this.

Sorry to trouble you but it looked like someone was using a telephoto lens to take pictures through your windows from the street. If it was someone you know, then sorry for the misunderstanding, if not, though, I got the make/model/license of their vehicle.

Brian (from next door)
and his phone number

You don't really need a telephoto lens because we have giant windows in front with no curtains. Sometimes I pause before coming inside and watch Harris and Sam innocently going about their business. Harris mutely explaining something to Sam, or lifting Sam into the air. I feel such tenderness toward them. *Try to remember this feeling*, I say to myself. *They are the same people up close as they are from here.*

We all immediately knew which neighbor Brian was. The FBI

neighbor. If there's one thing we've learned from Brian it's that being in the FBI is not a secret like the CIA. He wears his (bullet-proof?) FBI vest with the letters FBI on it way more than could possibly be required. It's like if someone on the Dodgers wore his uniform to water the lawn. All the neighbors would be like, We get it, dude, you're on the Dodgers.

So the first thing Harris did after I read the note aloud was scoff that of course the FBI neighbor had "caught" someone with a "telephoto lens." And the second thing Harris did was nothing. He was busy and didn't think it was worth pursuing.

"It's a little creepy, though, right?"

"People take pictures of everything these days," he said, walking out of the room.

"Do you think I should call him, though?"

But Harris didn't hear me.

"Call who?" said Sam.

I stood holding the note with that funny little abandoned feeling one gets a million times a day in a domestic setting. I could have cried, but why? It's not like I need to dish with my husband about every little thing; that's what friends are for. Harris and I are more formal, like two diplomats who aren't sure if the other one has poisoned our drink. Forever thirsty but forever wanting the other one to take the first sip.

You go.

No, you go ahead!

No, please, after you.

This sort of walking on eggshells might sound stressful, but I was pretty sure we would have the last laugh. When everyone

else was sick to death of each other we'd be just breaking through, having our honeymoon. Probably in our sixties.

My friend Cassie says Love you! every time she gets off the phone with her husband. Whenever I overhear this I'm completely mortified for her.

But I do love him, she says.

You were *just* talking about how miserable and stuck you felt.

Then she kind of laughs as if it's all out of her hands. I don't expect her to be honest with her husband but at least come clean with me! Other people's relationships never make any sense. Once I got my best friend, Jordi, to record a casual conversation between her wife and her. Jordi is a brilliant sculptor who can convincingly theorize about anything, but in this conversation she barely said a word while her wife ranted about the idiocy of a popular TV show. Only occasionally would Jordi murmur a question; mostly she just giggled at the things Mel said. I thought she might be embarrassed, but she wasn't.

"I love how sure of herself Mel is. I love opinionated people. Like you."

This was so flattering that I instantly warmed up to their dynamic.

"That show really is flawed," I said. "Mel nailed it."

My friends are always obliging me with ephemera like this—screenshots of sexts, emails to their mothers—because I'm forever wanting to know what it feels like to be other people. What were we all doing? What the hell was going on here on Earth? Of course none of these artifacts really amounted to anything; it was like trying to grab smoke by its handle. What handle?

I put the neighbor's note on my desk. I was busy, too, but I always have time to worry. In fact, I think I had already been worrying about someone using a telephoto lens to take pictures through our windows when the note arrived. Worrying is the wrong word—more like *hoping*. I hoped this was happening and had been happening since my birth, or something along these lines. If not this man through the windows, then God, or my parents, or my real parents, who are actually just my parents, or the real me, who has been waiting for the right moment to take over, tap me out. Just please let there be someone who cares enough to watch over me. It took me two days to call Brian the neighbor because I was busy savoring my position, like when a crush finally texts back and you want to enjoy having the ball in your court for a while.

"It feels funny to call someone who lives right next door," I said. "I could have just opened the window."

"I'm not at home right now."

"Okay."

He said the man had parked around the corner and that he had not photographed any other homes.

"He may have just been admiring your house," Brian suggested.

I didn't like that. I mean, it's a nice house, but come on. I didn't spend the last two days not calling because our house is nice.

"I'm a bit of a public figure," I said, going a little heavy on the false modesty. False modesty is one of those things that's hard to go easy on, like squirting whipped cream from a can. He said that's why he was concerned, because of my notoriety. I humbly

replied, "Well, thank you, it's really so nice to know you're keeping your eye on things."

"It's *literally* my job," Brian said.

"*Right*," I said, snapping out of it. I'm not a household name. I won't go into the tedious specifics of what I do, but picture a woman who had success in several mediums at a young age and has continued very steadily, always circling her central concerns in a sort of ecstatic fugue state with the confidence that comes from knowing there is no other path—her whole life will be this single conversation with God. God might be the wrong word for it. The Universe. The Undernetting. I work in our converted garage. One leg of my desk is shorter than the others and every day for the past fifteen years I've meant to wedge something under it, but every day my work is too urgent—I'm perpetually at a crucial turning point; everything is forever about to be revealed. At five o'clock I have to consciously dial myself down before reentering the house, like astronaut Buzz Aldrin preparing to unload the dishwasher immediately after returning from the moon. Don't talk about the moon, I remind myself. Ask everyone how *their* day was.

Brian the neighbor wondered if I knew anyone who wanted to buy a truck.

"It's a 2013 F-150. I'm moving and getting rid of most of my stuff."

"Oh! Where are you moving?"

"Can't disclose my next location," Brian said, and I apologized for asking.

"I guess a lot of things in your life need to be top secret."

"Yeah," he said in a soft voice. "I loved this neighborhood, though. All the trees and the way the coyotes howl at night."

"I love that, too. There's so many of them! Dozens, it sounds like."

"More."

"Hundreds, you think?"

"Yeah."

We fell silent and I didn't want to be the one to break the silence—it seemed like he, as an FBI agent, would know when it had been enough. But it just went on and on until I began smiling to myself, slightly grimacing from the awkwardness, and still it continued so the nervousness passed and now I thought of the silence as something we were doing together, like a jam session, and then that feeling ended and I grew inexplicably, overwhelmingly sad. My eyes welled up and when the silence finally broke it was because I made a sniffing sound and he said *Yeah* again, with resignation. Then, as if nothing had happened (and in fact nothing had), he went back to talking about the guy with the telephoto lens.

"I got his license plate number just to be safe. I can text it to you when I get home."

"Absolutely," I said. "That'd be great."

I knew better than to tell Harris about this exchange. He would raise his eyebrows and smile with exhaustion. What, *you* having a strangely intimate interaction with a stranger? How can this be?

I try to keep most of myself neatly contained off-site. In the home I focus on turning the wheel of the household so we can enjoy a smooth, healthy life without disaster or illness. This involves

perpetual planning. For example, I cook seven waffles for Sam every weekend, filled with extra eggs, to be toasted quickly for high-protein breakfasts all week. But such forethought can feel labored, no fun—so I try to balance it out with something spontaneous, maybe an invented breakfast game or a surprising waffle topping. Harris would say mostly I just try to control everything. Who is right? We both are, but I admire Harris's old-world stoicism. He even dresses in an old-timey way, like a stonemason or some kind of tradesman. *Salt of the earth* is a phrase someone might apply to him, whereas no one would ever say I'm salt of the earth. Not that I'm a bad person, but of the two of us I'm definitely worse. Often I'm literally biting my tongue—holding it gently between my teeth—and counting to fifty. By then the urge to say something unnecessary has usually passed.

I was in bed when Brian texted me about the telephotographer's car.

| It was a black Subaru hatchback, license plate number 6GPX752.

Thank you! I wrote.

| No problem. Let me know if you're interested in having the plates run. I can't do it but I can connect you with someone who can. For your notes: One white or Asian male, average to above average height, slightly paunchy, with a beard. He was there around 4 pm on Saturday.

Saturday. I got out of bed and looked at the calendar on my computer. (This is the kind of thing you can do easily if you don't share a bed with your husband. He snores, I'm a light sleeper.) On Saturday at three o'clock Harris had driven Sam to a playdate,

so at four I had been alone. That's right—I had dutifully called my parents, but they weren't home so I began texting friends in New York about my upcoming visit; I had just turned forty-five and this trip was my gift to myself. I was going to see plays and art and stay in a nice hotel instead of with friends, which normally would feel like a waste of money, but I'd gotten a surprise check—a whiskey company had licensed a sentence I'd written years ago for a new global print campaign. It was a sentence about hand jobs, but out of context it could also apply to whiskey. Twenty grand.

Jordi thought it was important that I spend this money unwisely. Whiskey come, whiskey go.

"Is that what you'd do?"

"No, I'd use it to quit FTC and do my art full-time." FTC is an ad agency. I immediately offered Jordi the money—It's a grant! I said. But she put a hand on each of my shoulders and looked me in the eyes.

"Think. What do you want most in the world?" she said, shaking me in a way that made me giggle.

"Uhhh . . . a good idea for my next project?"

"So do the opposite of what you'd normally do. Spend on beauty!"

Sculptors think beauty is a major theme, not a trifling indulgence. How lucky am I, right? To have a best friend like that?

I had booked a room at the Carlyle and then, on Saturday at four o'clock I had sent naked selfies to all my New York friends. We regularly send these, along with pictures of our kids and pets—it's just part of keeping in touch these days. I remembered that it had been hard to get the angle right and this was slightly

disturbing. It didn't used to be this difficult to get a decent naked selfie. Maybe the quality of the light was changing; global warming.

I climbed back into bed and texted Brian the neighbor.

| How would I run the plates if that was something I wanted to do?

While I waited for his reply I touched myself, imagining the paunchy, bearded photographer jerking off in his black Subaru hatchback, my naked body glowing on his tiny camera screen. I came twice, the second time to a clapping noise, his paunch slapping my stomach. I wiped my fingers on my T-shirt and checked my phone.

| Call Tim Yoon (323) 555-5151. He's a retired cop/detective. He'd probably be willing to run the plates for a fee

It was too late to call so I texted and fell asleep imagining Tim Yoon running the plates.

Yoon as in noon. He ran toward the afternoon sun. Yoon as in yawn. Ran toward the sun and yawned at the edge of the Earth. Then came pounding back, a round white dinner plate in each hand.

"Shall I keep running these?" Yoon yelled as he neared.

"Yes, don't stop. Can you run them forever?"

"I can try," he panted as he sprinted past me. I watched him sink below the horizon, then I turned and faced west, waiting for him to circle the globe and reappear.

It took Tim Yoon many months to call me back and by that time I'd already figured out who the telephotographer was.