

Moles

"Yoo-hoo!"

Cries had come all night long, tangling Catherine in awful dreams: mice with preternaturally long tails or babies who were all limbs. Now it was morning, undeniable gray pushing through the shutter slats, and the sound wasn't a cry at all but repetitive, insistent, sing-song. The phone, ringing on and off? She needed to get up, unplug it.

"Yoo-hoo! Anyone home?"

That wasn't a cry but a voice. The lady from next door — that's how she introduced herself, once Catherine had pulled the covers around herself like a robe and stumbled to the front door — wore red lipstick, too bright for early morning, and a yellow fleece sweat suit. Her cotton-candy-colored hair looked shellacked next to pale slack skin. Bright blue eyes seemed too alert as they peered past Catherine into Alex's living room. Her cat, disappeared for almost a week now, had Catherine seen it? "A calico, but" — the woman stepped forward as if to share a confidence — "the most exotic patterning."

"I just got in last night." Catherine clasped the covers snugly at her neck. "I haven't seen a thing."

The neighbor's eyes narrowed. "I thought I heard a car pull in rather late."

"I'm a friend of Alex's, staying for a while."

The neighbor leaned against the door jamb and lowered her voice. "It'll be nice to have company. One gets spooked, you know, living next to an empty house."

Catherine didn't want to be anyone's company. "I'll keep an eye out for your cat," she said, and shut the door. From the window, she watched the woman walk away. Drops from last night's rain fell from the eaves onto grass so green it hurt to look at it. The sodden faces of purple and white pansies drooped toward black soil. Broad, lime-green leaves shone with wet. Birds were singing, birds Catherine couldn't see. There was no point getting back in bed. Her mind was wide awake, and it wasn't letting go.

The phone rang for real as Catherine unpacked her bag. Pajama clothes, Ben called them: loose drawstring pants, oversized cotton sweaters, baggy turtlenecks and woolen socks. In the kitchen, she lifted the lids on the canisters—Sugar, Flour, Tea, Salt, all empty. She went outside. The damp grass felt good prickling her bare feet. The garden stunned her: One tree's branches looked painted, they were so glossy red, and at its base flowers blinked blue and red and cream.

She found a narrow-necked jar in a kitchen cupboard and filled it with water. The phone rang again, and she pulled the cord from the jack. She put on the kettle. Already, the flowers looked duller than they had outside. In a jar backlit by sun pouring through the window, they looked pretty enough, but so what? A jar, some flowers, a shaft of light. And then, through the window, something moved, a pale flash against the grass. The mist had burned off.

The kettle whistled, and when she turned back toward the window after pouring, there sat the cat, tail twitching.

Catherine poured her coffee and carried the cup outside. The cat took off toward the front porch, where a white-blooming vine tangled in the lattice covering a crawl space behind the steps. Catherine followed, and just beyond the broad-leafed plant, the lawn gave way. She tripped and spilled the coffee, scalding the edge of her foot.

Columbine, the pointy-petaled flower was called. The broad leaves belonged to hydrangea. And the others: coral bells and love-in-a-mist and potato vine, their delicate and tiny stems so different from the hardy thick stalks on the tulips and carnations Ben brought home from the corner store. Those never drooped, even after all the petals fell off and the vase water went brown and rank.

Alex had written a list, folded it into an envelope with the key he'd pushed across the table at her over lunch two days earlier. "It's yours," he'd said. "Go."

"Ben and I are fine."

He held up his hand, didn't need to hear about it. "Stay all month if you want. Gary and I won't be there until May. Occupation would do the place good." And then he stood and bent to kiss Catherine's cheek, said he had a meeting in ten. The kind of meeting she used to be part of until she took early maternity leave and never went back.

She'd told Ben about Alex's offer as they cleaned up after dinner. He'd said nothing but continued sharpening the knives, even those they hadn't used. The set of his shoulders as he struck blade against stone made her sad—all his care and effort, so precise, seemed point-

less—and then petulant.

"I'm going," she announced. "I need to get away."

His back to her, he slid a knife carefully into its slot. "OK, if that's what you want."

She reached out to grab him, to ask him to stop being so understanding, but when he turned around at her touch, she couldn't bear what she saw in his face. He'd stopped bringing work home from the office, as though she were too fragile for him to risk any distraction. One Saturday, she'd walked into the bathroom to find him reading the newspaper, which he'd dropped with a look on his face as though she'd caught him with another woman.

"I'm not leaving you."

He made a soft sound—half snort, half sob. In their fifteen years together, they'd never spent more than four days apart. Until six weeks ago, she'd never wanted to. "These things happen," the doctor had said. "Perfectly normal, no cause for alarm." But since the wet blood waking her in the middle of the night, Ben calling the doctor and bundling her in towels and carrying her to the car, she hadn't been able to get past the conviction of what, in her folly, she'd allowed the past five years to suspend. Meeting Ben, falling in love with Ben, marrying Ben—it all had been a silly dream, a false promise that loss was done with her. Her mother had died when she was eight, her father when she was nineteen. At first, the creature slung within her belly, feeding off her, had seemed a usurper, a stranger—until one queasy morning as she'd lifted her head to look in the mirror and seen, looking back at her, her father's face and, rushing up to touch it, her mother's fluttering hands.

"You're in shock," Ben had told her, the nurses had told her, the doctor had told her, everyone had told her. But it didn't feel like shock; it felt like illusion scraped away to show what had been there all along.

*A few ground rules, Alex had written at the top of the list, a sketched trowel to underscore the pun. The list detailed garden needs, most of which were on hiatus during the rainy season, but would she please keep an eye on the Chinese dogwood in front of the porch? A number was given for Ed, the tree man, and directions to the local grocery and hardware store. Alex had drawn a flashlight and written *Under kitchen sink! Just in case! And at the bottom, underlined: Avoid Mrs. Ritchie next door (if you can)!**

Catherine stayed wrapped in the bed covers all afternoon, reading *Sunset garden guides* and eating stale crackers she found in a cupboard. The sky cleared, then grayed again with steady rain. She heated a can