three daughters

a novel

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for ethan, benjamin, maya, molly,

zev, and arlo

three daughters

one

THE DRIVER OF THE DODGE CARAVAN gave Shoshanna the finger, gesticulating furiously through his windshield like the villain in a silent movie.

You couldn't blame the guy. She was a horrific sight—a wild-eyed middle-aged virago in a mud-splattered coat racing across the Henry Hudson Parkway to snatch a piece of paper from the pavement. She rammed the paper into her pocket and ran back to the shoulder of the road, unflustered by her close call, then dropped to her haunches and studied the oncoming traffic. That was the nerve-racking part, waiting for the right conditions, the perfect moment to lunge. A station wagon roared past, revving up the wind. In its wake, a momentary lull, an open space, plenty of time to sprint out, snatch up another scrap, and fly back to her redoubt at the edge of the highway before the next car rounding the bend in the distance could reach her. She'd timed it perfectly, her road dance.

Wait. Run. Retreat.

Wait. Run. Retreat.

Shoshanna might have passed for a litter-phobic environmentalist but for her periodically emptying her overstuffed pockets onto the back seat of her Volvo and smoothing each bedraggled sheet with the tenderness

of a poet saving love letters from the flames. The salvage from the highway was, however, unromantic—the tattered remains of her Filofax, which, despite manifestly hazardous working conditions, she'd succeeded over the course of the afternoon in repossessing piece by piece. More surprising to her than the virtuosity of her performance was the fact that it was necessary at all. That she herself had triggered this paper chase, this anarchy in the afternoon, made no sense. Such things happened to other people, not to the archenemy of disorder, the ultra-organized Shoshanna Wasserman Safer, for whom chaos was anathema and mindfulness next to godliness. Losing track of something as important as her Filofax was consistent with neither her sense of self nor the profession she practiced with a rare blend of doggedness and delight. Shoshanna made a living straightening out other people's messes. She systematized, organized, solved problems, averted crises. Keeping Things Under Control was both her obsession and her job. She tamed the wildness, knowing better than most how quickly chaos can overtake one's life when given the slightest opportunity.

Thirty years ago, on a California beach, she'd seen a joyful day turn tragic simply because she and her best friend had not been paying attention. The Evil Eye—that stalker for whom human contentment is an affront and bliss an incitement to riot—had leapt into the breach and the worst had happened. Ever since, she'd been keeping an eye on the Eye, studying its wily ways, noting how effortlessly it could transform a carefree walk in the woods into a deadly struggle against nature, a marshmallow roast into a conflagration, or a healthy pregnancy into a nightmare of loss. She knew its habits: laughter was its lure, pleasure its call to action, good fortune its invitation to havoc. The Eye could sneak up from behind and give a person a hard shove into chaos as easily as a car might stray across the white line on this highway. Because she understood this, Shoshanna had become a stalker of the stalker, guarding against the fall of its shadow across her path, tuned to its footsteps in the dark.

This compulsion, she'd learned to her dismay, she shared with Charles Lindbergh. The renowned aviator, WASP avatar and Nazi sym-

pathizer, was hardly the soul mate she'd have chosen had she not read in his daughter's memoir that he was "ever on the alert for dangers, though the dangers were unspecified. 'It's the unforseen . . .' he would warn us. 'It's always the unforeseen.'" Shoshanna Safer had become a watchdog of the unforeseen, an expert on preventable chaos, and because nothing dire had happened in her orbit since that desolating day on the California beach, she'd come to believe that the only force capable of defeating her was divine whimsy—a flash flood, a letter bomb, the freak accident like the one that sent a construction crane plummeting forty stories to land on her neighbor's leg. Random strikes were beyond her capacity to predict or prevent. But today's accident couldn't be blamed on God's caprice or the stalker. This was a mess of her own making.

Wait. Run. Retreat.

Whirling on and off the highway, scavenging pages, she struggled to reconstruct how she'd lost track of the datebook in the first place. Remembered having it at the breakfast table that morning when she'd flipped through it in search of a free weekend. (She and Daniel had been trying to get away togther since New Year's.) And when she went downstairs to her office, coffee cup in one hand, datebook in the other, always a two-fisted journey. (Running a business from the garden floor of their brownstone had greatly increased her productivity once she'd figured out how to keep work and family separate, with the help of the Filofax.) Had it when she'd called her cousin Warren to congratulate him on his promotion (thanks to the reminder her secretary, Fiona, London's gift to a Jewish compulsive, had written in the 10 a.m. slot). And when she'd grabbed a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich at her desk and a dollop of strawberry jam dripped on today's page—Wednesday, February 17, 1999. Ash Wednesday. The day she lost control. The day order turned to ashes.

Could have left the book behind on her desk, its sticky spot drying in the sun; but no, she remembered it lying on the passenger seat exactly where it belonged, open to the route directions Fiona had clipped to the calendar page to facilitate the drive to Riverdale. The new client had been waiting on his porch when Shoshanna swung into his driveway.

Blue jeans, cashmere V-neck the color of moss, moccasins with no socks, though it was about 30 degrees out. His jeans, she'd noted, were pressed. An ashy smudge marked the center of his forehead. Perversely, it reminded Shoshanna of the Star of David her sister Rachel wore on a chain around her neck as proudly as if it were the Croix de Guerre. Rachel's trademarks were the Jewish star and the double strand of pearls she wore virtually every day of her life, though the pearls came off now and then—say at the beach or on the treadmill—while the Magen David never left her chest. Shoshanna, discomfited by public displays of religion, had a mezuzah tacked to her doorpost, but that was it. Why stir up the anti-Semites? The smudge on the client's face seemed to shout "Catholic! Catholic!" and she'd wondered if her naked forehead was shouting back "Jew! Jew!"

In his wood-paneled study, Venetian blinds sliced the winter sun into gauzy slats. Dust motes floated lazily on bars of afternoon light. Fresh-squeezed orange juice glowed in crystal goblets. A woman notices when a man does something like that. Then again, after years of monitoring the stalker, Shoshanna noticed everything. She'd registered how neat he was, how orderly, and his study even more so. Tidy stacks of magazines squared off on the coffee table like troops on review. Diverse interests—*Time* in one pile, *Men's Health* in another, *The New York Review of Books, Travel & Leisure, Foreign Affairs*. A pyramid of green apples rose from a wooden bowl. Beside an upholstered wing chair stood a small table bearing a phone and a notepad with the words *Milk, Eggs, Brillo, Post Office* written in a fine hand. Clearly, he wasn't one of those newly divorced men who need help stocking their pantries, a task she'd been called upon to perform more than once. So what *did* he want her to do? Test-drive his Viagra?

"Retired this year. Widowed. Wanna join a gym," he'd announced in a flat staccato, and handed her a sheet headed *Health Clubs*. "Check these out, would you? And be exacting." He wanted her to evaluate six local gyms—compare their facilities (state-of-the-art equipment? climbing wall? pool?) and their classes (varied? crowded? good hours?); interview personal trainers (low-key? hyper? motivating body types?);

survey the locker rooms (clean carpets? thick towels? wide lockers?); and sample the fruit smoothies.

"Details under each category, please," he'd added, pointing to his ruled columns. "I'll review your findings and join the best one. Clear?"

"Yes, sir!" She'd felt an impulse to salute.

He'd risen from his chair, a client after her own heart, a man who knew when to end a meeting. (If hell existed, Shoshanna was sure it would turn out to be a meeting.) Still in the moss sweater, no coat, he had accompanied her out to the Volvo, and as they'd stood there on the passenger side, she'd extended her hand and said, "Looking forward to working with you." Stock line, only this time she'd meant it. Being spectacularly sedentary, she might even shape up on his dime. "So, when do you need this?"

"How's six weeks hence?"

Hence? Who'd he think he was—Alistair Cooke? She'd flipped the pages of the Filofax to March 31 and, bracing the book against her fender, had written *Health club report due* (in perfect penmanship, in case he was watching). She was about to open the passenger door and toss the Filofax on the front seat as usual, the way she *always* did, when he'd tugged at her arm like an excited kid.

"Hey! Before you go, come see the view."

Shoshanna had interrupted herself mid-gesture and—because she always indulged her clients—set the book on the car roof, and followed the man around to the back of his house, where a wide lawn, pock-marked with old snow, sloped to the banks of the Hudson River. Dried poufs of hydrangea blossoms clung to bare branches. Tall pines swayed with the breeze. It was hard to believe they were only minutes from Times Square; the Edenic hush, the water gleaming like molten glass in the glow of the late-afternoon sun. Even the dour outlines of New Jersey seemed incandescent.

"Nice, huh?" he'd asked, his pale eyes watering. He'd wiped his face with his sleeve. The mossy sweater came away streaked with ash. The mark on his forehead had faded to a ghost image in shadowy taupe; he was a neat man with a dirty face. He was thinking of his wife, he said,

the sunsets he now had to watch without her. Something throbbed in Shoshanna's throat. A presentiment that her beloved Daniel would die someday, most likely before she did, and she would be alone.

"Amazing! And to think we're in the Bronx!" she'd said quickly, blotting out the thought.

"Riverdale," he'd corrected. As they ambled back to her car, the man began reminiscing about his wife, how she brought out hot cider in a thermos for their winter sunsets, how the light played on her face, how she died eighteen months after they learned she had a brain tumor. Shoshanna, fearing the chaos of her own empathy, finessed a gentle farewell, hastily jumped behind the wheel, and took off, never noticing the Filofax on the roof on the passenger side. After all these years, the stalker had found its opening and pounced.

Squatting now at the edge of the highway waiting for her next dash, she could imagine what must have happened. The datebook, heavy in its leather binder, had stayed put as the car snaked through Riverdale's quiet, tree-lined streets. But once she'd pulled onto the highway and picked up speed, the wind had whipped open its cover and sheared through its pages, carrying away her telephone directory in the downdrafts of winter, ripping her calendar from its rings, sheet by sheet, the way old movies show the passage of time, yanking attachments from their staples and paper clips. In minutes, the tidiness of a lifetime was torn from its moorings and set adrift.

She could visualize all that now, after the fact, but hours ago, when she'd first started driving home from Riverdale with her new work assignment and a slice of the widower's sorrow, she hadn't known anything was amiss until her cell phone rang.

"Hi, Mom. Any chance you could babysit Saturday night?" Nelly always cut to the chase, a habit that doubtless contributed to her competence as a horseback-riding instructor, though it made for rather perfunctory conversation.

"Love to, Nell. One sec, I'll see if we're free." She'd reached for the Filofax and had nearly run off the road when the seat beside her yielded only upholstery buttons and a flaccid safety strap. Impossible. It had to be there. It was *always* there. The minute she got in the car, reflexively, even before turning the key in the ignition, she would prop the datebook on the passenger seat like a companion riding shotgun. Where else could it be? "Call you back, Nell," she'd gulped into the phone and hit the Off button before her daughter could ask what was wrong.

A signpost announced FOR EMERGENCIES ONLY. Surely a missing Filofax qualifies. She'd piloted the car into the rest stop and searched the floor, between the seats, the gearshift well, the rear seat, even the glove compartment, though the bulging book couldn't have fit in on a bet. She'd rummaged in her satchel for the organizer's familiar contours, then, ever more frantically, combed each crevice of the car a second time. Coming up empty, she'd burst into tears. Ten miles from home, yet she'd felt cosmically dislocated, as if she'd lost her footing on the planet. Her gravitational pull, her grounding, the finely meshed gears of her life, depended on her Filofax. The fat black book was the curator of her commitments, the repository of every appointment, address, phone, and fax number, plus an uncountable number of items she'd clipped, wedged, shoved, stapled, tucked, or pressed between its scuffed leather covers—not just credit cards and business cards but restaurant reviews, expense slips, snapshots, theater tickets, fabric swatches, poems, aphorisms, and a zillion memory joggers. Shoshanna's much-admired capacity to remember not only her friends' birthdays and anniversaries but their food allergies, wine preferences, favorite flowers, kids' names, the gifts she'd given them in the past, and the food they'd eaten at her dinner table (so she wouldn't duplicate a menu) had been made possible by the record-keeping systems in her Filofax. She'd never bothered to memorize her schedule; that's what the calendar section was for. It told her what she had to do, where she had to go, what she had to look forward to, or dread. Without it, she couldn't function. Without it, her nexts would be nevers. Clients would be waiting for

projects she'd forgotten were due. There would be empty seats in concert halls, angry hosts at dinner parties. She would disappoint, offend, irritate. Great chunks of her life would vanish; her time would be ungovernable, her world would turn upside down. Without it, she wouldn't show up in her own future.

Energized by a billowing panic, she'd gunned the Volvo out of the rest stop and retraced her route to where she'd first entered the highway and there had found the stuff of her life blanketing the southbound lanes like the after-trash of a ticker-tape parade. Everything was everywhere: calendar pages and address sheets tattooed by tire marks, flapping against the concrete divider, lodged in the slush, impaled on bare branches, snared by the chain-link fence. A wedding invitation plastered to a speed-limit sign like a Lost Dog notice. A memo wrapped around a lamppost. Receipts fluttering in the brush. The asphalt looked like a hundred bulletin boards run over by a Mack truck.

At first, she'd just stared, her mouth dry as wool, until she'd reminded herself that this was a problem and she was a problem-solver, and if she could clean up other people's messes, she ought to be able to clean up her own. She would "accentuate the positive," as the old song had it, "and eliminate the negative." And there were plenty of positives—things to be grateful for—another hour of daylight, no rain, no snow, warm clothes, sturdy rubber-soled shoes, no appointments for the rest of the afternoon. Her plan took shape. She would begin with the easy stuff, the detritus caught in the shrubs and trees. Walking along the shoulder of the road, she picked up everything she could reach, loaded her pockets, then ran to the Volvo and dumped her gleanings on the back seat. No sweat so far, except that this simple harvest took longer than she'd anticipated and the sun was sinking fast. Next phase: on-site research. She'd studied the flow of vehicles, calculating how long it took most drivers to travel from the bend in the road where they first came into view to the spot where her quarry lay. Though the cars bore down like buffalo, they seemed less menacing once she'd noticed that, like cattle, they often traveled in herds, with enough space in between for her to

scoot out, grab a sheet or two from the pavement, and zoom back to the shoulder before the next batch barreled toward her, horns blaring.

Wait (for the spaces).

Run (and seize a page or two or three).

Retreat (even faster).

Her first foray was as terrifying as a sky diver's maiden jump, but once she was back on the sidelines with spoils in hand, the adrenaline rush sent her down to her haunches again, ready for the next sprint. Fear gave way to pride as she perfected her routine, spurred by thoughts of what remained amid the roadkill. The twenty-five-year-old newspaper clipping announcing the engagement of Shoshanna Wasserman and Daniel Safer, her version of a rabbit's foot. The Bloomingdale's gift certificate her sister Rachel had given her for Hanukkah that she'd had no time to spend. A "Buy Ten, Get One Free" card from Starbucks with eight holes punched out. Her father's letter.

When it arrived a week ago, she'd stuck the aerogram in the inside flap of the Filofax and left it there moldering, for the news that Sam Wasserman would be coming to New York was not without its complications. Since he'd made aliyah in 1987, he'd been back only once, in '90, when Shoshanna and Rachel talked him into flying home to celebrate his eightieth birthday.

"Home is Jerusalem," he'd objected, but he came nonetheless and thoroughly enjoyed the fuss made over him by his family, who, after three years, had forgotten his sullen side—the frequently harsh critic, the brooding silences—and remembered only the sweet Sam.

"Dear Shoshie," he'd written in his shaky hand,

Given your oft-stated and presumably still-fond memories of my visit to New York nine years ago, you'll be pleased to learn that another important occasion seems to justify my journeying to the States. I've been asked to accept a Lifetime Achievement Award from Rodeph Tzedek. High time, too. I was beginning to wonder if my 30 years with the shul added up to a hill of beans. But now that

they've seen fit to remember their old rabbi and give me this honor, I'm sure as hell going to take it. Though I'm writing this letter in February and won't be arriving until next December, I wanted to give you fair notice, because I'm told the last weekend of this year is going to be a big megillah due to the millennium. Since people seem to be making plans very far in advance, I'm asking you now to save the date: Friday night, December 31. I'm hoping everyone—and I mean everyone, *including the* great-*grandkids—will come and share my* BIG NIGHT. *Until then,*

Shalom and love.
Your Dad.

Shoshanna knew he didn't really mean *everyone*. Nothing was that simple in the Wasserman family, starting with the fact that Sam had three daughters—Rachel, Leah, and Shoshanna—one of whom hadn't spoken to him for nearly thirty-five years, and the other two, to their enduring frustration, had no idea why. Whatever its cause, the cataclysm that blew Sam and Leah apart had left behind nothing but a tense, truculent silence, and the clear message that Shoshanna and Rachel were not to broach the subject with either party. But lately, maybe because she was facing her fiftieth birthday and suffering new intimations of mortality, Shoshanna had become determined to help her father and sister heal their breach before it was too late. For their sakes, of course, but also to assuage her own guilt, the years having convinced her that she must have contributed *something* to their estrangement, perhaps just by being born. ("As a pawn can change a chess game, a baby can change a life." The aphorism was clipped to one of the Filofax pages that hadn't turned up yet on the highway.)

Since the family's Leah Problem was said to date back to the year after Shoshanna's birth, she could only assume that she had been at least a partial cause of her sister's discontent, just as her sister was, in some unspoken sense, the source of the unrest Shoshanna felt within herself. Even when everything in her life was humming along, Shoshanna's personal Leah Problem disrupted the harmony she craved. Motivated by

that vague disquiet, the fixer of brokenness hoped to mastermind a cease-fire between her father and his exiled daughter—and, by reconciling them, to bring about her own relief. At eighty-nine, Sam had to know this trip could be his last. But, like his adopted country, he wasn't the type to make a unilateral peace move. If he and Leah were ever going to reconcile, someone—namely Shoshanna—would have to broker their reunion, find a way to engineer it without raising the hackles of a proud old man or setting off the choleric Leah, or, for that matter, infuriating their third sister, Rachel, who had received the identical letter from their father (Xeroxed) and saw no reason, as she put it, "to stir up stagnant waters." Unsentimental, pragmatic, at peace with the status quo, Rachel dismissed the notion of a pre-millennial reconciliation as hopeless.

"Give it up," she'd told Shoshanna. "They're both old mules. They'll never change."

But Shoshanna was sure Sam's upcoming visit could lead to a rapprochement if only she could figure out how to get the process rolling. Maybe emotional blackmail—she'd tell her father the present she wanted most for her fiftieth birthday was a truce between him and Leah; beg him to make the first move. Maybe give him an ultimatum: "Invite Leah to your award night, or I won't come." ("Don't do me any favors," he'd say. "Stay home." Then what would she do?) Or maybe approach it the other way—tell Leah about the letter and ask *her* to take the initiative, or at least be open-minded if Sam reaches out. Guilt-trip *her* with the birthday present request. Or maybe leave both of them out of it and cook up something that would bring them together once Sam arrived in New York. In other words, trick them into wanting to make up. Ruminating on her options, Shoshanna had stirred up stagnant waters of her own and, thoroughly confused, had shoved Sam's letter in the Filofax along with everything else that mattered. And now it was gone, swallowed by the wind.

Wait (the wind was growing colder by the minute). *Run* (scoop up Blockbuster video card, one theater ticket—where was the other?—two bedraggled "D" pages from her phone directory). *Retreat.* Shoshanna hiked up her coat collar, trudged to the Volvo, and emptied her pockets