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‘Menace and mendacity vie with the mundane in this skilfully told tale about ambition and grief and envy. A wealthy, smarmy nephew; an aging midlist writer charged with his care; two daughters; the long Vermont winter – what could go wrong? *A Flaw in the Design* is an impressive debut. Cue the sequel’

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‘This suspenseful debut novel keeps the reader on tenterhooks in a fearful family drama. Oh, this demands a sequel!’

Christine Schutt, author of *Pure Hollywood*

‘Nathan Oates’ debut *A Flaw in the Design* is not only a deep dive into the things that can rock the cradle of a family, but also an absolute page-turner. I read it in a single sitting’

Miranda Cowley Heller, author of *The Paper Palace*

**A FLAW
IN THE
DESIGN**

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NATHAN OATES



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For Amy, Sylvie, and Baxter

Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme.

—Vladimir Nabokov, “Signs and Symbols”

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JANUARY 2018

THERE WAS STILL TIME TO TURN AND WALK OUT, PRETEND HE'D never come. The screen, perched on a pillar near baggage claim, listed the New York flight as arrived. Gate 3. Any minute, passengers would come down the escalator in front of him. But right now, he could leave. Escape before his nephew spotted him. Concoct some excuse to tell Molly: The flight was canceled; no, he wasn't answering his phone. Weird, right? Well, maybe tomorrow. Except no, not really. After all, he was the boy's guardian, and they'd track him down. Or the boy would find his own way to their house and that'd be worse, because then he'd know how much Gil feared him. Hated him. Which was the wrong way to think. He should stop. He couldn't stop.

A loosely strung crowd came down the escalator, hurrying through the nearly empty terminal to claim spots at the baggage carousel. Already it was too late. There he was: Matthew, in a short black down coat that was too light for the Vermont winter, a bright white shirt beneath; hair styled in a swoosh; on his face a smirk,

the slightest turn of his lips, familiar enough to bring loathing into Gil's throat.

He'd known that the boy would look different after all this time, but he wasn't prepared for this. Once a lanky kid, he was now over six feet, a couple of inches taller than Gil. Matthew stepped around an old man who fumbled with a coat and a rolling bag, bored annoyance moving over his face, as if this was routine, as if he was a young businessman sent from the city to check on some far-flung investment.

Gil waved, and in the acknowledging tilt of Matthew's head he caught a glimpse of his sister. Sharon. Who was dead. Who'd left him this. Her son.

"Well, hello, welcome," Gil said, opening his arms, but the boy stepped back, as if he didn't recognize this gesture, or the man behind it. "How was the flight?"

"The flight?" Matthew said, frowning at the darkened check-in kiosks, the empty car rental desks, the snow blowing in streaks across the asphalt outside, his dopey uncle in his black parka and clumpy winter boots. "I guess it was like most flights. Fine, in that I don't remember anything about it."

"That's great," Gil said. "Do you have any bags?" He pointed at the crowd staring forlornly at the unmoving gray belt.

"Nope. All set," Matthew said, tugging at his shoulder strap.

Should Gil offer to carry it? But the bag was small and easily managed, as if the boy was only here for a weekend. Matthew gave him an indifferent squint, knowing he must wait to be led, though the dynamics that subordinated him to this person were clearly a miscarriage of justice, given their true stations in life. Or Gil was just being a dickhead. Maybe Matthew was standoffish because he felt awkward: coming to live with his uncle he hadn't seen in years. That might explain the constricted approximation of a smile. He expected Gil, the adult, to take the lead.

"I'm parked just there in short term," Gil said, turning toward glass doors that held their reflections—blurred and broken by the

mounded snow at the curb, the flash of passing headlights—which might've been a tableau from New York. A homeless man (Gil), begging from an annoyed young banker (Matthew).

“You might want to zip up. It’s pretty cold,” Gil said.

“I’ll probably survive,” Matthew said, as the glass panes slid apart and freezing air gusted into the terminal.

Waiting for a cab to roll through the crosswalk, Gil caught another glimpse of his sister. The boy had Sharon’s profile, the high arch of her cheeks, flushed now with the cold, her gray-blue eyes. Like it or not, Matthew was family, his only nephew, so he should try to see as the boy must: a salt-streaked SUV parked at the curb, the pickup area otherwise empty, a single cop car parked across the way leaking a wisp of exhaust, the lights sharpened in the gusting cold that cut through his coat. A provincial airport in the frozen, depopulated north, where he’d been sent to live among strangers.

Okay, Gil had fucked up the greeting. But he could do better. All of them, Molly, the girls, they could all make this kid feel welcome after what he’d suffered. Except Gil couldn’t help noting, as he pointed the way to the Subaru, that Matthew didn’t seem in the least upset. Annoyed. Put out. But not sad. Not destroyed, as any kid should be after losing both parents less than a month ago.

An accident on Sixth Avenue. Their sports car smashed nearly flat by a stolen delivery truck. The driver had fled the scene, escaping down into the subway. In that moment, Matthew had been orphaned, though only just. He was seventeen. By all appearances an adult. Except not in the eyes of the law, which was why he was here in Vermont, at least until he turned eighteen over the summer and, a few weeks later, went off to college.

Gil and Molly and their girls had flown to New York for the joint funeral and to make the arrangements for Matthew to come under their care. They’d stayed at Sharon’s apartment on the Upper East Side—December in New York, a huge Christmas tree in the apartment’s living room, decorated in a way that seemed clearly done by some professional, silver snowflakes and delicate glass balls,

white lights—but to their surprise Matthew hadn't been there, not when they'd arrived or at any point after. The family lawyer explained that Matthew would be staying with friends, as that was most comfortable for him in this difficult time. This same lawyer had called after Sharon's accident to inform them that, per the will, they were now Matthew's guardians. Before Gil and Molly had had kids, back when they'd lived in Brooklyn, Sharon had asked if they'd be the boy's godparents. They'd attended the baptism at the Trinity Church near Wall Street, had held the squalling baby, but after the near-total break between the families, Gil had assumed his sister would appoint someone else, a friend from her world, or maybe Niles's parents, who'd retired to Edinburgh, Scotland. Apparently not. Whether this was an oversight, something his sister had stopped thinking about once Matthew was no longer little, or a gesture of familial connection, Gil had no idea. Molly was sure the latter was more likely. People like Niles and Sharon, with real money and assets, didn't pop off a will and leave it untended. If she was right—and of course she was—even after all the acrimony and bitterness of the past six years, Sharon had entrusted them with her only child.

They'd assumed Matthew would attend the funeral, which had been crowded with people from the boy's private school and Niles's investment bank. The men—tall with carefully short hair to obscure their balding, or with expensively maintained styles that looked improbable at their age—shook hands stiffly, heads drawn back, as if remembering an untoward detail Niles had told them about his brother-in-law. A writer, wasn't he? A professor? Didn't they live out in the woods? Maine?

Vermont, he'd corrected, and they nodded to indicate there was no difference. Not New York. Not business. So, not real. Their wives were sculpted and frighteningly thin, with faces that had been tightened and injected so many times they would never again truly smile.

Gil had long scorned his sister's world, but he knew this was

partly jealousy. Sure, they were soulless devils, but they had millions of dollars, massive uptown apartments, and lavish vacation homes. The men were math wizards who'd turned to currency trading and market manipulations instead of, say, astronomy or medicine. The women held MBAs, JDs, MDs, and PhDs, but few of them worked. They'd given up their careers for the luxury more easily accessed through a powerful husband. Gil told himself he didn't want any of that. This had, of course, not been on offer: High finance didn't seek out mathematically illiterate fiction writers. So he was safe.

With the service about to start he'd asked a woman whose son was in Matthew's class if she knew where he was.

"Oh, I don't think Matthew's going to make it today," the woman with knife blade cheekbones said. *Today*. As if this was another bit of the routine, soccer practice, or the school play.

"We haven't seen him yet. Is he doing okay? I thought he'd come," Gil said, knowing he sounded pathetic.

"Don't you have his number?" the woman asked, incredulous, apparently not having realized how low on the evolutionary ladder this "person" actually was.

"I've left messages, of course," Gil said. But she'd already turned away, arms out to hug a woman who might've been cast from the same golden mold.

These women were protecting Matthew, shielding him from Gil and Molly. And why shouldn't they? Surely they knew more about the boy than he did. In fact he knew almost nothing, other than what could be gleaned from his sister's annual holiday letters. Even when things were at their worst between them he'd read those. They'd been his last link to her wit, and he'd always found in them glimpses of the young, sarcastic Sharon flickering through. The Sharon of his childhood was otherwise erased, absorbed into this new life as a rich wife.

He backed out of the parking spot and paid for his hour at the booth, feeling sure Matthew noticed the dollar Gil passed across to the bundled and hooded attendant. Not twelve, or eighteen, or

whatever it would've been in New York. Here in Hicksville. Among the barbarians who weren't sure how this whole money thing worked.

"Are you hungry?" Gil said. "Molly's making lasagna."

"Sure," Matthew said with a shake of his head, as if this was the stupidest question he'd ever heard. "Everyone likes lasagna, don't they?"

Gil didn't know how to respond, so he snorted stupidly, as if it'd been a joke, a witty bit of repartee.

Usually he took the back roads out of Burlington, but I-89 was faster. Then, as he steered down the ramp onto the highway, he thought the interstate, with its trucks and traffic, might remind Matthew of his parents' death, but the boy went on sneering—no, that could just be his normal expression—at the strip malls and suburban apartment buildings, all crusted with ice and snow.

"It's great that you'll be able to finish high school from up here," Gil said.

"I guess," Matthew said, his face still turned to the window. He reached out two fingers and touched the glass so halos of fog spread around them.

The headmaster of Herbert, the boy's Manhattan private school, had explained in a call last week that Matthew would complete his remaining schoolwork through email correspondence with his teachers. Matthew was, the headmaster had said in a posh English accent, *significantly* advanced in all subjects, so it would be no problem, under these tragic circumstances. There was also the possibility Matthew might take a class or two at Essex College, where Gil taught. The headmaster was looking into it.

Matthew spoke without prompting. "Senior year's a bit of a joke at Herbert. I was going to be breaking my back in Ethics and Yoga, so I won't be missing much."

"Well, that's good," Gil said.

"I took a class at Columbia in the fall, actually. I'm pretty much graduated as it is."

“We’ll take you back down for graduation,” Gil said quickly.

Matthew recoiled, as if walking through a piss-soaked hallway. “Oh, no thanks. That won’t be necessary.”

“I thought you might—”

“Yes, I know. I know, and thanks. But I’m fine. It’s nice to get away, actually. That school’s kind of a suffocating snake pit.”

Gil glanced quickly over from the snow-streaked highway, but Matthew looked by all evidence sincere. Maybe it was true. Maybe he hated New York. Maybe he was an unhappy young man and not the spoiled jerk Gil had assumed.

“And all this is pretty nice,” Matthew said, gesturing at the landscape, the mountains dark blue in the day’s last light. “No suffocating up here, right?”

“You’d be surprised,” Gil said. “Wait till it snows. And then snows again.”

“Yeah, well, I mean, I can definitely see why you left New York,” Matthew said, though now the road dipped and there was nothing but the sludge-darkened snow beside the highway, and beyond, bare trees and lumpy frozen fields.

“If you can hold out until May, all this is worth it,” Gil said with a flicker of guilt. Matthew had never once been up here to visit them. They’d never extended an invitation. Though Matthew had surely spent plenty of time at luxury resorts and sprawling estates, second or third homes of rich New Yorkers in Stowe or Killington.

“I bet,” Matthew eventually said, after a pause so long Gil almost forgot what it referred to. *The summer. Vermont being pretty. Of course.*

Soon they’d be home. Soon Molly would be there to take over. There wouldn’t always be this awkward tension with the boy. He’d just arrived. Everything was bound, with time, to get easier. And better. Everything would get better soon.

2

GIL LOVED HIS HOUSE UNRESERVEDLY, HAD SINCE FIRST SEEING it when he'd come up from New York twelve years ago. With its steep black roof and the low extension off the original farmhouse opening onto a patio at the edge of a field, it was the kind of place he'd fantasized about when he'd persuaded Molly to leave the city. They'd used the inheritance he received after his mother's death to pay off what turned out to be a disconcerting heap of grad school debt, with enough left over for a down payment. Vermont was expensive, but nothing compared to New York, right? Despite drifting almost immediately back into debt—the roof needed repairing, the town tax assessments went up—they'd managed to settle in. He'd gotten a few adjunct sections at Essex and had turned that, after a few years and the publication of his second novel, into a lecturer line, and finally into a permanent position, eventually with tenure. Like most people, they scraped by, but this was their land, and this was their beautiful home.

Of course, there were times he complained—driving through blizzards at night, or when the driveway turned to a sheet of ice,

or when hunters strayed down the hillside—but that was healthy. You shouldn't love everything about the place you live. Most people, he knew, loved almost nothing about where they lived, other than its familiarity.

The frozen gravel of the drive crackled under the tires as he turned in through the gap in the stone wall. Matthew stared blankly at the trees—Gil's trees, now—as he had since they'd turned off the highway. Nerves, surely. That accounted for the boy's affectless expression. Not because he was unimpressed.

The front door opened, a spill of warm yellow light onto the icy drive, and Molly, in black jeans and a long denim shirt, hurried down the blue stone steps and up to the car to hug Matthew. She'd been as worried about Matthew's arrival as Gil, but she hid it well now, wrapping the boy in an embrace. As if she loved him. As if she wanted nothing more than to take care of him. The girls, Ingrid and Chloe, lingered back on the steps, nodding tentative hellos.

What did the boy see in this house that Gil and Molly loved so much, this place where he woke feeling lucky: to have such a home, such a wife, two bright, determined daughters? Gil knew his vision of the world was distorted by his love for it. Maybe the boy saw it as familiar bourgeois banality. Predictable and sad, made sadder by Gil's outsized exultation. But Matthew was seventeen. Wasn't everything to be scorned at seventeen? Hadn't Gil done the same? And how could the boy possibly see the house as a home, a place of warmth and tenderness, when he'd been shipped up here like luggage?

Molly, smiling and lovely, short brown hair blown about her face by the wind, rubbed Matthew's arm and said, "Let's get inside. It's freezing."

Elroy was waiting by the door and he leapt up at Matthew with his dopey golden retriever grin. Gil expected the boy to recoil—Sharon had never had a dog—but instead he knelt quickly beside the delighted animal and rubbed his flanks and tousled his head

until Elroy collapsed in a heap and rolled over to show everyone his bright white belly.

Gil squeezed past, trying not to feel what he knew was a ridiculous stab of jealousy. His dog! A traitor at the first opportunity.

“Are you hungry? Dinner’s almost ready,” Molly said, stepping out of her boots.

“Yeah, it smells good,” Matthew said.

“But first let me show you your room,” Molly said, putting her hand back on Matthew’s arm. As if he needed careful tending. As if he was an orphan.

While the rest of them, including Elroy, went up to Matthew’s room—formerly Gil’s office—Ingrid followed her father to the kitchen. She leaned against the island, glasses sliding down her narrow nose, hair bunching on the hood of her sweatshirt.

“Well, he’s here,” Gil said, opening the fridge and considering whether it was okay to pull out a Heady Topper. Would that look like he needed a beer? The truth was he did. He really needed one. But Ingrid was watching.

She frowned down at her bulky wool socks, into which she’d tucked her jeans. He shouldn’t have said that, as if it was a problem, some long-dreaded event. Even if it was. But his eleven-year-old daughter knew this was wrong. She had, as the cliché went, an old soul. Though it didn’t strike him as *old*, exactly, just *better*. More finely attuned to others. She made friends easily, she was appropriately, but not excessively, wounded by the preteen betrayals in her set of girls. Like friendships, school was easy for her, and though she never complained, he worried that the local public schools might be insufficiently challenging. He didn’t think she was a genius, exactly, but she did have something of the word’s original meaning: an attendant spirit present from birth.

“Yeah, he’s here,” Ingrid said, with a tone Gil couldn’t quite read, if there was in fact anything to read into it.

They’d talked with Ingrid about Matthew coming to live with them, though Gil had preferred the phrase “to stay with us.” A

temporary situation. Not permanent. Not even close. But they'd wanted to know how she felt about the possibility. Ingrid had said, of course, *It's fine. He's our cousin. He's family.* She was a good girl, generous, maybe to a fault. Could it be that she was actually terrified to have him here? How could she not be? But she was braver than Gil. And there was also the possibility she'd reframed the events at the pool in Montauk in such a way as to make them more palatable. In order to move on with her life. He and Molly had talked to her about it, probably too much at first, and eventually she'd begged them to stop. And possibly, afterward, she'd bottled her feelings up, stuffed them away in the dark.

"So, he's not going to school, right?" Ingrid said, putting her fingers on the cutlery drawer and easing it out and back so it snicked shut, a habit she'd had since she was a toddler, despite numerous pinched pinkies.

"I think the plan is for him to do it online. Or at Essex. I'm not sure."

"That's good, I guess."

"It's only for a few months," he said, which ended up sounding mean, he was sure. As if having Matthew there was a chore. Unpleasant. Which it was. Both, actually.

"Does he seem sad?" she said. "About his parents?"

"Of course," he said. "I'm sure he's sad."

Elroy's nails clicked wildly as he raced down the stairs, followed by Molly, Matthew, and Chloe.

"Laundry's in the basement," Molly said. "But you can leave it in the bathroom hamper. That's what the girls do."

"Oh, no," Matthew said, as they came into the kitchen, "I can do it. Mom always sent it out. Now I can learn a useful life skill."

Elroy half-jumped up to nuzzle his hand, then leaned against Matthew's legs, apparently in love.

"Well," Molly said, "I can show you the machines later, if you want."

"Perfect," Matthew said.

A moment of silence followed. Elroy let out a contented groan. “Anyone hungry?” Gil said.

“Sure,” Matthew said. “I forgot to get lunch.” He’d taken off his black coat but still looked formally dressed in his crisp white shirt and gray wool pants. Even his socks, dark blue with white shapes, maybe stars, were elegant. In comparison, Gil was a schlub in his baggy khaki pants and heavy sweater pushed up from his wrists.

“Lasagna,” Molly said as she went to the stove, picking her oven mitts up off the counter. “I hope that’s okay. You’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

“Vegan, actually,” Matthew said. Molly looked back in surprise and the young man shook his head. “No, sorry, kidding. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“A couple of my friends are vegans,” Chloe said. Gil’s older daughter was mostly hidden in the doorway. She was fifteen, just a couple of years younger than Matthew, but she seemed like a different generation, innocent and unknowing. Her hair, thick and wavy like her sister’s, brown and touched with hints of red, was pulled up in a high ponytail. She wore a bright green sweater, leggings, and the same bunched wool socks as her sister. “But I think they mostly do it to be skinny.”

“Well, that’s the only reason that makes sense,” Matthew said.

Chloe blushed and clung to the doorframe, as if otherwise she might collapse. She was nervous too, but unlike Ingrid she had a tendency to try to rush into the face of whatever worried her, to try to transform it with her goodwill and energy. That, hopefully, was what accounted for the flirtatious smile on her face now. Gil should say something. Release the strain. He had no idea how to do that.

“Why don’t you guys go to the table?” Molly said, lifting the lasagna out of the oven. “I’m going to let this settle and we’ll start with some salad.”

The table was set as if for a dinner party, with placemats and cloth napkins. A bottle of wine was open beside Gil’s plate. Should he offer Matthew some? He was seventeen, but it was hard to be-

lieve the boy didn't drink. Still, this was Gil's house. And it might be weird for Ingrid and Chloe.

Molly brought the salad to the table and there were a few strained seconds, the scraping of the wooden tongs against the bowl, the clink of forks on plates, the whisper of ice against glass as Ingrid sipped her water.

"So," Gil said. "Where'd you end up applying to college?"

As soon as the words came out they sounded wrong. He might as well have asked, *When are you going to leave and let us get back to our lives?*

Matthew squinted at his salad, as if taking a moment to process this rudeness. "Well. I applied to Yale. My parents basically forced me. And I was supposed to apply to a bunch of other places, Brown and Princeton, and this whole list they came up with at Herbert. But I missed some of those deadlines. For obvious reasons."

The way he said it, glibly, as if it was a faux pas—*Can you believe my parents did that?*—clouded Gil's head.

"I was actually thinking maybe I'd stay on at Essex," Matthew added, as if this was an obvious choice, barely worth mentioning.

When Matthew focused on his plate, Molly flicked Gil a look of surprise and accusation. As if he'd known and had been hiding it. But why *shouldn't* the boy want to stay up here? Except for all the obvious differences between Yale and Essex. What were those differences? Maybe your classmates weren't as rich at Essex. Fewer had attended fancy boarding schools. Fewer were destined for vice presidencies in their parents' companies after graduation. But Matthew could probably learn as much at Essex as he could at the "best" universities. Isn't that what Gil believed? Elite universities were research facilities for corporations and prestige factories. Matthew already had ample connections and enough money to last several opulent lifetimes. Maybe he wanted to get away from all that, toward something he saw as more, well, authentic.

"Well, at least you'll get to try it out first," Gil said. "Your headmaster mentioned you might take some classes this semester."

“What classes?” Chloe said. It was the first thing either of the girls had said since coming to the table and there was an awkward pause, as if a child had interrupted the adults.

“Oh, I don’t know, I think I have to get permission,” Matthew said.

Gil should’ve followed this up, carried the conversation, but he let a puddle of quiet spread over the table.

“Chloe,” Molly said, saving them, “tell Dad about debate.”

And for a moment normalcy returned. His daughter told him about her victory, about the strategies they’d learned, her voice rising with excitement. Across the table, Matthew slumped in his seat, relieved to have the focus off him. While Chloe went point by point through her arguments in favor of school busing, Matthew leaned over his plate and ran a hand along his jaw. With a shake of his head, he picked up his fork and scooped a bite of salad. No matter how much he tried, Gil couldn’t see anything of the boy he remembered. Nothing of the child he’d feared and dreaded spending time with. The child who’d nearly ruined his life, had definitely ruined his relationship with Sharon, had broken for good Gil’s first family.

After dinner, Matthew said he was worn out and went up to the guest room. Probably, naturally, he wanted some time to himself, to text with friends, post on Instagram, or Snapchat, or whatever. That’s what kids did and Matthew was a kid. A sophisticated, urbane kid. But just a child.

Molly helped Gil with the dishes and, recognizing his distraction, filled him in on Chloe’s ongoing tiff with her best friend, Lily. Lily had been acting out ever since her father had moved out, which was understandable, though her coping mechanism seemed to be acting cruel toward her friends. Gil let Molly take the lead in advice for the girls, since his general approach involved little more than saying fuck it and cutting the person loose. Not great advice

unless you were a misanthrope, which, thankfully, wasn't a trait he'd passed on.

When they went up to bed, the light in the boy's room appeared to be off. He could've been awake in there, on his phone, but Gil knew he couldn't stay silent all night, needed to vent. Molly settled down next to him in bed, glasses on. She leaned over to kiss his forehead and whispered, "Well, he's here."

"He sure is," Gil said. She knew what he needed.

"And how many days is eight months?" she said, pulling off her glasses and rubbing her eyes. Exhausted from pretending to be happy Matthew was here.

After the funeral, the lawyer had called—how could that have been only a few weeks ago?—to inform them that as the boy's guardians they should begin to plan for Matthew to come and live with them in Vermont. Before Gil could say anything, the lawyer had added that as guardians, they would receive a monthly allowance to offset any expenses associated with the boy's care. Sharon and Niles had stipulated that the amount be generous enough to maintain the lifestyle to which Matthew was accustomed. As such, they would receive ten thousand dollars a month for as long as the boy was in their home, and when Matthew went to college, the amount would be one thousand a month until the boy reached the age of twenty-one. This allowance, the lawyer had explained, was unusually generous, and should be taken as a sign of Sharon and Niles's gratitude.

Ten thousand dollars a month. Every month. For eight months. For food, and clothes, but what else? They'd always managed to pay their bills each month, though just barely, and it had seemed likely they might be in debt until they died, especially once the girls went to college. But now they could be free of all that. A fresh slate. They could even, maybe, contribute to the girls' college funds, in which the initial deposits of five hundred dollars each still wallowed. If they took Matthew in, they'd be free, in a way.

But of course there were concerns beyond money. What if the

boy was a lunatic? Based on what they knew of him, that was a real possibility. And how would the girls feel about it? Would they feel safe in their own home? Would they resent their parents, who, in a way, had chosen money over their comfort and happiness?

After a week of talking it over with Molly, he'd called the lawyer with questions. As soon as Gil had stammered out his concerns, the lawyer had set about shaming him. Of course, they weren't *compelled* to take Matthew. That said, Sharon and Niles had clearly hoped they would. After all, he was Sharon's brother. Her only remaining family. He was, in addition, the boy's godfather, was he not? And hadn't he agreed to be the boy's guardian? Yes, all that was true, but they'd agreed back when the boy was an infant, seventeen years ago. His sister had appointed a backup, right? After a pause redolent with disappointment, the lawyer said, yes, there was a contingency: Niles's parents. But they lived in Scotland and were in their late seventies. Matthew's grandfather was in poor health, and it was likely he'd soon need heart surgery. Gil must've noticed they hadn't attended the funeral? But if indeed Gil was unwilling to honor his sister's wishes, the lawyer supposed he could, in a pinch, see what else might be done.

After another night of fretting, he and Molly agreed: They'd take him. What if something had happened to them instead of Sharon? Wouldn't they have hoped that she, the only family they had left close to their own ages, would have cared for the girls? And so wouldn't they be hypocrites to turn him away? Gil called the lawyer back the next day. Fine, okay. Send him up. The lawyer said he was pleased to hear they would fulfill their commitments and his secretary would be sending along the boy's flight information, as well as bank forms for the allowance.

"At least he seems completely different," Molly said, flipping her pillow and settling her head down. "I mean, compared to when we saw him in Montauk."

"He does, yeah," he said. She was right: Matthew was quiet, polite, even if his privilege simmered just beneath the surface. But

the old Matthew, the one they'd known, was lurking in there somewhere. Right?

"And he's handling it pretty well," Molly said.

"I mean, I guess. I guess I just thought he'd be more, I don't know. Sad? Grieving? Or maybe a little, I don't know, scared, disoriented? I mean, his parents. But he—"

"He's a teenager," she said. "His parents died. As far as we know, he's a troubled kid. I'm sure he's upset, but honestly, Gil, my main concern is that we just get through this. You and me and the girls. Make it to July. That's the goal. Right?"

"You're right. We can do it. We'll be fine."

She leaned across again and kissed his cheek, then rolled away to read. He stared at the pages of the novel he was teaching next week but couldn't bring the words into focus. His attention kept sliding back to the boy just down the hall. Gil strained to hear something, even just a cough or the click of the door closing, but other than the rustle as Molly turned a page, the house was silent.

3

HIS FIRST IMPULSE WHEN HE WOKE AT DAWN WAS TO CHECK ON the girls: a panic familiar from when they were babies, afraid they might've died in the night while he'd selfishly slept. But of course, as then, they were fine. Ingrid was twisted in her sheets, and he opened Chloe's door a crack to peek in at her, face visible above the comforter, crumpled in concentrated sleep. Matthew's door at the end of the hallway was open. The boy's bag was tucked beneath the bed, the sheets were straightened, a glass of water on the nightstand. In a half-sleeping daze Gil felt a brief, ridiculous swell of hope that the boy was, somehow, inexplicably, simply gone, and so they were already, unexpectedly, free.

Matthew wasn't in the kitchen, or the living room. It was just after seven thirty, only a faint dusting of light above the crooked line of black trees. Gil pushed Start on the coffeemaker. Well, they'd survived the night. Except where was Elroy? He usually slept on his dog bed in Gil and Molly's room, and he was always up with the earliest riser.

"Elroy," Gil whispered, whistling low, but this didn't bring the