

One

As he scrubbed one sock in the day's supply of well water, noting that his stitches had not held and the hole in the toe had reopened, he considered once again the problem of the One Hundred Things, as he had every day, every hour of every day, for the past three years.

The wash bucket was a Thing, as was the work shirt he'd just scrubbed, as were the boxers. He knew some minimalists counted all of their clothing as one Thing, but not the serious ones. So the shirt and jeans and boxers he was wearing right now were three more Things, and the windbreaker slung over the post behind him was a fourth. Those were simple. Socks, though—socks were more complicated, drawing him into the tricky land of plurals and singulars and naming, where the line between reason and rationalization was the disputed border in nothing less than a war for his soul.

That battle had raged ever since he resolved to pare his possessions down to the One Hundred. His books, he had decided then, were not One Library, they were dozens and dozens of Things, so he donated them all to a home for indigent seniors and bought a Kindle. But the pins and needles and tiny spools of polyester and the needle threader—they were fairly elements of One Sewing Kit. Those choices were the stuff of certainty and easy conscience, true to the organizing principle of his life and the purpose of his days, the slim reed he'd grasped during the worst of times, the redemptive positive he'd built on a simple catechism of negatives:

Don't want, don't acquire, don't require.

Don't affect.

Don't hurt.

Ah, but socks. Back when he was whittling down his final list, struggling to find eight more Things he could live without, he decided, not without guilt, that his four industrial-strength boot socks were Two Things, not Four, that a pair of socks was *a* pair of socks, rather than a *pair* of socks, just as a pair of boxers was not in fact a pair. That decision helped him get down to the One Hundred, but it still gnawed at him some days.

Today was one of those days, what with one sock almost beyond repair yet its mate still good and sturdy. He could take out his iPhone, that indispensable Thing, and order another pair, but that would leave him with two untenable choices: either worsen the planet's landfill problem by throwing a perfectly good sock into the black trash bin (not one of the Hundred Things, since it belonged to Riverside County) and dragging it down the dirt road, or hang on to the good sock to couple with one of his others when *its* mate wore out—which in the meantime would leave him stuck with a hundred and first Thing, so that was no choice at all.

Maybe if he biked into Idyllwild, he could buy a pair there and find a Goodwill center and donate the good sock. But in his heart he knew that would be phony solace, that someone else would just throw the widow sock in the garbage. The very thought reminded him that when the socks originally arrived he had read on the label that they were ten percent something called polypropylene.

Such were the problems on Charlie Waldo's mind when he heard the tires in the distance, turning off the asphalt and onto the dirt road that serviced his twelve acres of wooded mountainside.

Nobody but Rico the mail carrier had been on Waldo's property in the years since he'd moved here, and that only when a package wouldn't fit in the roadside box. He tried to remember whether the last time had been just over or just under a year ago, when Waldo had ordered a sack of feed for his chickens. He realized that was the last time he had spoken to anyone aloud, and he wondered whether he'd have to talk to Rico now, or whether a polite thank-you nod would be enough.

Then he worried what the mailman might be carrying, because the last thing Waldo needed was a

Thing.

A cloud of dust blew into the clearing ahead of the mail truck, obscuring for a moment that it wasn't a mail truck at all but a sleek Porsche 911, metallic blue. Waldo absently dropped the holey sock into the wash bucket and stood to watch the coupe approach, squinting into the sun. The Porsche pulled to a stop thirty feet away, but he had to shield his eyes from the blowing dirt and the gleam, so he recognized her first by her voice.

“Jesus, Waldo.”

When he did see her face, he realized that he hadn't thought about his own appearance in a very long time—a mirror was one of the last Things he'd shucked to get down to One Hundred—so he could only imagine what three years without a haircut or shave must have done to him.

And here was head-turning Lorena, who had to be thirty now, standing in front of him in the swirling dust in a leather jacket and ankle boots and designer jeans, thick black hair still past her shoulders, taking off her oversize designer sunglasses and shaking her head slowly with a cool smirk, as if none of it had ever happened, as if Waldo had never felt compelled to break his own heart by breaking hers.

She said it again: “Jesus, Waldo.” Only now she was walking past him, past his pond, to his miniature cabin. It was just sixteen feet by eight, like some playhouse imitation of a folk Victorian, seated at the edge of a forest, straight out of a fairy tale but for the solar panels and satellite dish. “You live in this? Seriously?”

“The average American h—” His voice broke, unfamiliar to itself. He tried again. “The average American home puts out eighteen tons of greenhouse gases per year. A hundred twenty-eight square feet is enough for anyone.”

“You got plumbing?”

“I harvest rainwater.”

“In California?”

“And there’s a spring if I need it.”

“Damn.” She looked the house up and down. “Well, if anyone’s hard-ass enough to put himself through this shit . . .” She let the thought hang there and started inside uninvited.

“Hey!” He trotted after her.

Waldo had to wait in the doorway while she inspected the tiny space, a normal home ingeniously compacted to the size of a freshman dorm room, the wood unfinished, the shelves shallow, the walls crammed with cookware and cutlery and any other of the Hundred Things that could be hung. The kitchen was a two-burner stove set atop a waist-high closet with a small fridge and toaster oven, all squeezed next to a tiny sink fed by a ceramic water jug.

“My new place, I got a walk-in closet bigger than this. What’s up here?” Lorena started up a ladder to a tiny loft.

“That’s where I sleep.” Waldo knew she’d note the folded blanket; even though he never had company, only neatness and precision made life in this space tolerable, and he was as unforgiving about housekeeping as about all other aspects of his life.

Still on the ladder, Lorena twisted and took in the whole tiny room. “Where’s all your stuff?”

“I’ve divested. Got myself down to a hundred things. You’d be amazed what you can live without.”

“Like a badge?” Waldo took the poke without response. She pressed. “You got a gun, at least?” He shook his head. “Jesus, Waldo.” She climbed down and continued her inspection. “I see you still got a MacBook. Guess you could’ve answered an email.” Before he could find an answer, she asked, “How much land this mansion sitting on?”

“Almost twelve acres.”

“Show it to me.”

She followed him outside and into the trees. Waldo, pulling on his windbreaker, tromped through the woods he knew so well he could manage in the dark, so shaken in the presence of another, even her, maybe especially her, that he pulled way ahead, incognizant of her struggle through the underbrush in three-inch heels. “The agency’s grown,” she said, having to raise her voice. “I’ve got three ops full-time, three more freelance. You surprised?”

“Not even a little.” It was a compliment, but it rang as something else, as a conversation ender, all the more so when Waldo picked up his pace, extending his lead in silence. He didn’t want to make conversation, didn’t know how anymore. It felt wrong; it felt cheap. Anyway, he was allowed to be a bad host. He hadn’t invited her. He hadn’t invited anyone. That was the point.

When she spoke next he wasn’t sure he heard her correctly—she was far behind now, and it seemed too random. It sounded like she said, “Alastair Pinch.” He knew the name, of course, which he’d been seeing every day online in the headlines of the *L.A. Times*. But Waldo stayed away from those kinds of stories.

“Alastair Pinch?” she repeated, a little louder, and added, “The actor?”

“Who killed his wife.”

“I guess you *use* that MacBook.” She continued. “Maybe he killed her, maybe he didn’t. Even he doesn’t know—he’s a blackout drunk.”

She’s on a case, Waldo thought, and wants help. But why would she need it? She’s talented, she’s got ops, she sure as hell can’t be looking for his connections at the LAPD anymore. Unless she’s not really looking for help, unless the help was an excuse to come. Either way, he wasn’t interested. He walked even faster.

“Could you slow down?” she called. He stopped and turned. She resumed her pitch as she closed the gap. “His network’s got a lot riding on him. They hired a lawyer: Fontella Davis.”

“Fontella Davis. So he did kill her.”

“It means the money’s serious. And they’re looking to hire a PI. This gig would jump me to the majors. Problem is, nobody’s giving *me* that shot: woman, my age, midsize agency. *But . . .* if I could deliver the famous Charlie Waldo to work it *with* me . . .” She smiled at him. “You know these Hollywood types: always want to put a big name in it.”

So that was it: she was here to make a business proposition, with the added benefit of showing Waldo that she’d survived and then some, that she was a success, and so completely over him that she could even handle working side by side. He realized he was glad for her on both counts. But he didn’t want her getting the idea he wanted her here, so all he said was, “I’m retired.”

“From the force. Lot of ex-cops go PI. You’d be investigating a murder. What’s the difference who signs the check?”

Waldo started walking again, this time dragging a little so she could keep up. “Difference is, cop’s job is get the bad guy. PI’s job is get the bad guy *off*.”

“Unless he isn’t the bad guy. You don’t even have to put in for a license; you can work under mine.” A sharp light, a reflection, cut through the trees. “What is that?”

She walked straight toward the light, ahead of Waldo now, into a clearing, where she found the elephant, a modernist sculpture of sheet metal, anomalously placed in the middle of nowhere. Lorena circled it, studying, then turned to Waldo for an explanation.

“They say an artist owned this land in the seventies.” He laid a hand on the elephant’s gleaming flank. “It’s why I bought the property, actually. It spoke to me.”

Lorena looked him straight in the eye, her lip curling into that sly, lopsided grin of hers, the one that said she knew everything about him and that started him thinking about some other things he’d gone without. She said, “Oh, I know why it spoke to you.” She ran the fingers of one hand suggestively along

the elephant's upturned trunk, never breaking eye contact. Waldo, nonplussed, wondered if her flirting was obtuse or if he was simply way out of practice. As if she could tell he needed the help, she explained. "One of those times we were supposedly 'broken up,' I was coming out of the art museum on Wilshire with a date and ran into you?" Waldo shook his head like he couldn't recall what she was talking about, even though he did. Lorena had ditched the guy on the spot and she and Waldo had all but run to the back seat of his truck in the parking garage. "Yeah," she said now, taunting, "try and play like you don't remember."

"What does that have to do with this?"

"The parking garage was right next to the La Brea Tar Pits. By the mammoths."

She started back into the woods, pleased with herself.

She'd ruffled him, the way only Lorena could. It had been a long time since he'd felt that, and he didn't like it. "Wait, wait, wait." Now he was the one scrambling to keep up with her. "First of all, this isn't a mammoth; it's an elephant. Second, are you saying I bought this property because I had some subconscious sexual memory prompted by this sculpture—"

"—which you walked me straight to, the minute I came to visit you—"

"—*uninvited*."

"Wasn't Detective Waldo's first rule, 'There are no accidents'?" She kept walking.

He stopped, flummoxed, then started after her, insisting, "It's not a mammoth."

As they walked in silence back toward Waldo's cabin, side by side now, he didn't have to look at her to know she held on to that self-satisfied look the whole way. It was rattling and it was comfortable, which was worse. He wanted her to leave.

When they reached the clearing, she stopped walking and finally spoke. "So, this case: we'll go eighty-twenty, yours."

He knew he wouldn't take the deal but couldn't resist asking, "Why would you do that?"

"Because this is the biggest thing since O.J. It'll totally blow me up. And I've got too much marital. I want to branch out."

Waldo shook his head. "What would I even do with the money?"

"Buy a nicer hundred things."

"Pass."

She stood close to him, and Waldo wondered if she expected him to kiss her. He hoped not. He broke the moment and walked toward her car.

"You got any friends up here?" she asked. "You go into town? Anything?" Waldo shifted his weight, wondering what else he could do to hurry her into her car and back down the mountain. But she kept talking. "Lydell was a long time ago, Waldo. You don't have to keep punishing yourself. You don't have to live like this."

It pushed a button and his anger flashed, seeing her with her Porsche, everything he hated about the world, everything he'd rejected, and the words were out of his mouth before he had a chance to think about them. "*You don't have to live like that.*"

It was as if he'd slapped her. "Fuck, you expect me to *apologize*?" she said. "I grew up *poor*—for *real* poor, not with goddamn solar panels. So now I'm on Rodeo, I see a pair of suede D&Gs, and I can drop a five-spot without even blinking? That is a moment of religious affirmation. That is God saying, 'Lorena Nascimento, *it is all good.*'"

He softened, even felt himself smiling for the first time since he'd moved up here. She smiled back. "Come on, Waldo. Let me pull you back into the real world. Just for a couple weeks. We'll have some laughs. And, hey—could be my guy *didn't* do it. You crack this one and keep him out of prison—maybe that'll even things out a little."

She'd meant well, but it was another misstep, bringing back for him everything that had gone so wrong. His smile disappeared.

"Hey," she said, trying to bring him back, "it was worth a try, right? Give me a hug at least," and she was in his arms before he could say no.

It took Waldo a moment to surrender to the embrace. But they fit, like they always had, and it was just like it used to be except it wasn't.

She said, "You ghosted me, Waldo."

He said, "I ghosted everybody."

"I know."

"It was a bad time."

She squeezed him tighter. After a moment she said, "You're skinny. But you smell better than you look."

"You're lucky—it was shower day."

She chuckled. So did he. She turned her face up to his. There was no doubt now: she did want him to kiss her. Seeing that, he was overwhelmed by a desire powerful and familiar, the desire to be left alone. So he said, "I *do* have to live like this."

She let go of him, stepped back and sighed, she registering the rejection and he registering what this visit had taught him: that whatever each of them might still be, together they would never again be young.

"You got a bathroom, at least, before I drive back to L.A.?"

Waldo, knowing she wouldn't like it, told her, "It's kind of in the shower." She frowned but started for the cabin anyway, so he got more specific. "It's a composting toilet—after you go, you take some sawdust and spread it on top . . ."

She stopped. "There's a gas station in Idyllwild." She got into her Porsche, made a broken U, pulled up beside him and rolled down her window. "You can't stay up here forever, Waldo."

"No?" he said. "Why not?"

"Same reason you and I kept hooking back up," she said. "Unfinished business is a bitch."

With that, she finally left him alone. Waldo watched Lorena disappear behind the trees and the dust, realizing how much he wished she had stayed.