

NETTIE

Nettie was almost as still as her husband. The difference was that she had a gun in her hand.

She had tried to shoot him cleanly, aiming at his chest, but he'd grabbed at her so quickly that she was thrown off balance. The first shot merely grazed his arm, but the second pierced his cheek, bounced off bone, and she hoped, was buried in his brain.

She'd stopped him with that one.

She knew she should drop the gun, move, walk away, call someone, and explain the circumstances before the cops came. Shit, she was almost a cop—"heroes behind the wall" as they called corrections officers—and yet she couldn't see a way past her shaking hands. The gun was heavier than she remembered. Maybe that was it.

She looked down at Roger's lifeless body. It was curled into itself, lumpy and leaden, the terry cloth bathrobe askew, and for a moment, she almost ached for him. But no, she recalled her cracked teeth, the twisted arms, the nights without knowing if he might tromp through the house or look through her pockets

for signs of anything he could pin on her. This was the man who charged with his fists every time he suspected a prisoner had come on to her.

Sit down, be calm, take a breath, she told herself. *The worst is over.*

She couldn't budge.

She wanted to feel something. Where was the sorrow over taking a man's life, the pain that fueled grief? Prisoners called it "endless remorse." Some felt "flooded with shame." That was what they talked to her about every day.

She looked around the room trying to anchor her eyes on something that might help her understand this numbness, this nothingness tinged with a smattering of relief, and landed on the unopened anniversary cards perched on the glass table. Roger had chosen this particular morning to wail on her, today of all days, their anniversary.

She felt the red heat welling up in her throat, the familiar fury that she so often squelched. For some reason, she thought of how they'd planned to eat out tonight. "No fuss, no muss," he'd said before bed. She'd laughed because he used that same expression when they first married.

"You've got it wrong, sweetie," she'd told him. "It's 'No muss, no fuss.'" The phrase had become shorthand for *I love you*, the kind of code that long-lived couples share.

And then, she suddenly began to sob.

There was banging, banging on the outside door. The tears were hard and angry, but she couldn't drop the gun. She felt fixed in place, as if she'd taken root in their living room. She remembered the night before, how gently Roger had cradled her face when he kissed her before the morning had closed in like hands around her neck.

The revelation came to her as an officer burst through the door.

“It was either him or me,” she said aloud.

“Claudia, where am I going?” Her head felt as if she’d been hit by a hammer.

“Can’t discuss the plans.” The officer took a sharp right.

Claudia had pried the gun out of Nettie’s hand while she sobbed, and she’d stroked her back as if Nettie was a small child, soothing her. Nettie was appreciative of that simple kindness. “Don’t say anything until your lawyer gets there,” Claudia had said out of the side of her mouth. Nettie had no idea where “there” was or who her lawyer might be.

“Can I get my phone call?”

“When we get to the police station. Or did you forget that, sweetums?”

Nettie had known Claudia before she and Roger bounced out of the police academy. Claudia was the daughter of a cop, born and raised in Lowell. She was a tiny thing, even smaller than Nettie, and her makeup was impeccable, as was the black chignon at the nape of her neck. She’d been one of the brightest in the Lowell Police force, an Asian-American recognized for helping to free undocumented immigrants kidnapped by gangs. *Straight arrow*, thought Nettie, noticing how Claudia kept her hat on in the car. Roger liked her. Walked the blue line.

“Give me a clue where we’ll be headed. Just a clue?”

“You’ll be held somewhere, babycakes.”

Claudia could hedge all she wanted, but no matter where Nettie slept tonight, she knew she would undoubtedly end up in the Awaiting Trial unit at the women’s prison in Essex. Merrimack Correctional Institution was the worst prison in Massachusetts, the one where no officer wanted to work. The

women were needy and always up to something, or so Roger had told her.

“How ‘bout an aspirin? I have one in my purse.”

“Not happening.” Claudia stifled a guffaw.

“My head is pounding. Can you at least crack the window?”

The car jerked around a corner. Nettie tried to lean back against the seat. The darkened car window obscured some of her view.

“I guess that dump in Dedham takes women.”

“Apparently there’s always room for you at the inn, especially if you shoot someone.” Claudia slammed on the brakes. “Motherfucker,” she yelled at the truck in front of her.

Nettie shifted in her seat—the cuffs made it difficult not to lurch forward with Claudia’s erratic driving—and wondered why her brain felt so foggy. “I bet those cells smell to high heaven.” Nettie wished she could rub her temples. That always helped. Or talk to her paralegal sister who thought she knew everything about the court system.

She’d known the other arresting officer, too, Nettie thought as she again peered out the darkened window, a bird-like guy who’d “uttered around Roger, measuring this and that before he took o# with his samples. Did the cops have any idea that Roger wasn’t the Mr. Easy-Going who’d gone through the academy?

They drove up to the local police station. She shuffled in, eying too many cops she knew as she was searched and fingerprinted, rather carelessly questioned for the police report, and forced to swallow the humiliation of a mug shot.

“It’s just a domestic violence case,” an unfamiliar guy said to another after he assessed her bruises. The officer, his feet up on a desk, drank coffee out of a mug that said, “Stay Safe &

Don't Crime." Nearby, his buddy was asleep with a newspaper over his eyes.

This was not the saving lives scenario she had once imagined when she "first wanted to work for law and order. Then, she had dreamed of righting wrongs, making communities safer, and helping those who'd lost their way.

"Now," said Claudia, handing her the phone.

"Claire?" she said as soon as her sister answered. Nettie shouted at her to turn off the radio. "I'm arrested, Claire." The noise in the background was deafening. She didn't bother to say that her head was pounding and she couldn't exactly tell her what happened.

"What the fuck? What the serious fuck?" Claire always went from shock to anger in a split second.

"Roger. I shot him."

Claire screamed into her ear.

"I need a lawyer." Her head wouldn't let up.

"Isabelle Archer is the only lawyer who can prove you killed that son of a bitch in self-defense. I'll call her."

Some cop nearby then ripped the phone away, announcing time was up. The phone went dead. But Nettie couldn't let go. Claire, who labeled her "Lillebit" when she was a kid, hosted their tea parties and babysat after Pops ditched them.

Claire.

Tears flooded her and Nettie had no idea why.

Within minutes, she was cuffed again and they were back on the road. Nettie recognized that they were heading towards the

highway. Trees in full bloom and narrow streets gave way to well-worn roads. She sat ruminating in the overheated car. She saw Roger's face on the floor, his eyes permanently shut. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach, and she clutched the seat in front of her so she would not get sick. Cars whizzed by beyond the tinted window.

"Claudia, I'm a hell of a better corrections officer than I was a police trainee," Nettie began to yammer, ungluing herself from the silence. "I know you probably won't believe me—"

"Let me stop you right there, Missy. I can't have you discussing the crime. That means what you did, where we're going, what's gonna happen, none of it."

Nettie laughed. In fact, she laughed so loud that Claudia swerved a bit, the car wagging back and forth across the median.

"I just want to remind you how Roger and I left the academy."

"Not something I need to remember."

"It was ... it *is* funny. Almost as ridiculous as when Dotson got canned. Remember that? He hit on an arrestee just after he moved into an apartment with that dirty cop who was a known dealer." She craned her neck to see Claudia's facial expression in the mirror. "Remember?"

"Nope," she said, tight as ever.

Nettie couldn't stop herself from blathering. "Roger never passed the exam; I know I would have; but while he was !unking out, I bungled it all, stopping for Chinese food, messing up with the GPS. . ."

"TMI! TMI!" Claudia shrieked as the car came to another screeching stop at a light.

"Damn, Claudia, who taught you how to drive?"

"I'm going to have to ask you not to call me Claudia. Officer Rhee will be just \$ne. And I am not interested in you telling me

anything, not one more word about your past. Understand?" Claudia glared at her in the rearview mirror.

Nettie knew she should be embarrassed for sharing personal details with the cop who'd arrested her. But she wasn't. She wanted Claudia to know she had a life, was a CO, wasn't just a criminal. She asked again if she could possibly have an aspirin, but Claudia stared at her, shaking her head.

"Not all of us disobey commands," Claudia said snippily.

Nettie sank back into the clammy car seat and forced herself not to think about Roger. Still, she felt the gun in her hand, continually shocked by the memory of his bent body on the floor. She vacillated between relief and post adrenaline shakes. But mostly, she felt bleak, as if some part of her humanity had died.

They pulled into Merrimack Correctional at least seven hours after she'd left her home.

"Christ," Nettie said aloud, staring at the brick and stone. She realized she would never again go back to the life she had in Salem.

By the time she got through the entry process, had her hair deloused, her nails cut, her jewelry but her wedding ring put into little plastic bags, faced a shower with women officers aware of her every move, and put on a jumpsuit, she could hardly bear the guards smirking at her. The stench of vomit loomed nearby.

"Hey, maybe you'll get sent to protective custody. At least for the first few weeks," a fat-faced man in familiar blues snickered.

"Yeah, as if we had protection in custody," croaked a lanky one with a bald head that smelled of cologne. "But after your trial, they'll keep you there until no one gives a shit about you anymore."

“Or maybe,” the fat-faced man continued, “it’ll take three years until you get to trial.”

“Meanwhile, you’ll just wait with all the other losers since no one will care what happens to you,” the lanky one added. And then they high-fived each other.

Nettie tried with all her strength to tune them out. She didn’t know these officers, but she knew these kinds of guards were trouble—ones who’d been at the job too long, ones in it for the money and the pension. The bored kind who chose the desk over the tier, or those who lorded power over prisoners. Plus, she had a sneaking suspicion one of them had known her husband and had already warned them all about her. She’d always tried to be a rock for the men, but here she was, tables turned. No one was going to be a rock for her. The reversal of it all made her hateful. And hate left a sour taste in her mouth.

She was escorted to the holding cell by a gloved CO. Prisoners in the area called out to her, cracking jokes about the officer who “couldn’t get enough of prison” or the bitch that “bitch-slapped her man.” How deadly it had been at Leominster when a CO was incarcerated, and the thought of *these women* let loose on her made her heart race.

She was uncuffed at the door to a room that was more cramped than she remembered, with two cots only three feet apart, a small desk, closet, stainless steel toilet bowl and sink. The bed smelled like wet canvas, and the mattress was wrapped in blue plastic. Luckily, the other woman in her cell seemed too zonked out to ask questions or insult her.

The TV blared in the dayroom: “Trigger woman Antoinette Murphy, white, 38, was arrested for murder after police found her husband dead in their Salem home.” Then, a clanging sound, as someone in some control tower locked her cell door. She knew from Leominster that officers could use

keys or open doors from “the bubble” with a press of a button. Whenever they wanted.

She found the blanket, gray and thin, pulling it over her as tight as possible, and rested her head on a so-called pillow. She’d been given a toothbrush, paste, deodorant, and a bar of soap. She felt as if she was half-alive.

She had no idea what time it was, but she managed to doze on and on. It was dark and humid, and heavy metal doors occasionally squeaked open and closed. A smell of unwashed bodies mixed with loneliness seeped into her cell. She tried to ignore her roommate’s moans, but the woman was only three feet away.

Pieces of the morning began to come back to her. Nettie felt terror clutch in her throat. She saw herself holding the gun, but it was as if her memory was fragmented, chunks here and there having fallen off a cliff.

What happened this morning?

She did remember waking up, which now seemed like weeks ago, and rolling over to feel the warmth from Roger’s back and shoulders. She felt longing for him, even now, drifting in and out of consciousness—how easy it had been to forget the pain when she rubbed up against him.

He always loved early mornings.

Often, he would apologize in the morning, and sometimes, he’d go out and get them breakfast, toting bags of eggs on English muffins from Red’s. Sometimes, they’d have sex, and he’d be gentle, nuzzling himself between her breasts, or just using his hand to pleasure her. Sometimes, he kissed her eyes when she woke up.

A phone rang, didn’t it?

Roger had always insisted they keep a phone by her side of the bed. This morning he'd yelled at her to answer it. "Honey, it's nothing, just a crank call," she'd said, wanting it to be so. But he had seized the cell phone, reaching across her body.

Someone had been trying to reach me.

She watched his face grow dark, listening to something. She had watched him, carefully touching his leg, trying to recapture the mood. But he threw the phone across the room. Then the ranting had escalated, and it was crucial that she stay hidden, out of his way.

What did Roger know?

She didn't dare ask what upset him. But she guessed the pharmacy had called. However, she kept her mouth shut. She withdrew under the covers, careful not to move, while he leapt out of bed and headed for the bathroom. There'd been the sound of something hitting the wall, or maybe reverberating off the tub. There was Roger's string of profanity. She lay there as he ransacked a cabinet.

When the noise had stopped, she tiptoed to the bathroom door where she'd said, "Honey, I know you're upset, but can we just sit down together and talk?" It was at that moment that he pushed open the door angrily.

This was as much as her mind wanted to remember.